Reviewing, reconstructing and reinterpreting ethnographic data on musical instruments in archives and museums

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To realise its function as a sound-producing device, a musical instrument requires the intimate touch of players, whose absence becomes all the more keenly felt when they depart and the music they played is lost. Accordingly, a historical musical instrument of this sort, especially one played at a former imperial court, becomes the perfect metaphor for the inevitable vanishing of the past; yet as a fragile physical object that has survived against all odds it is also a perfect metonym for the resilience of the past and a symbol of cultural and national continuity. (Zeitlin 2009, 397)

Considering a centuries-long journey and the ultimate survival of the pear-shaped Little Hulei, a two-string plucked instrument called huqin in 8th century China, Zeitlin references the instrument as an object and sound producing device. In her article, she explores its ties to players, its repertoires and its embodiment of history, which can encompass both a sense of loss and evidence of – and potential for – cultural resilience. It is surprising how easy it is to relate Zeitlin’s discussions about a highly

valued, finely made musical instrument to other instruments that may not have been made for longevity, connected to well-documented dynasties, or produced in long-established instrument workshops. Over the centuries, musical instruments have travelled along trading routes, with touring performers, with musicians experiencing forced or voluntary migration, and due to the actions of collectors representing museums, archives, academic disciplines, or building personal collections. During the travels of a musical instrument from place to place, or from one time period to another, as object, image, document or memory, it takes on new meanings. At the same time, the instrument leaves behind a trail that includes a heritage community with historical, emotional, and conceptual connections to it as object and source for musical sound.

Musical instruments, and ethnographic documentation about production and use, retain valuable historical, social and environmental data, even when kept outside source communities in storage or on display in archives, museums and private collections. In traditional archival and museum practice, musical instruments have been preserved and presented as objects with geographic tags, measurements, and identifying names and numbers in accordance with organology, the academic study of musical instruments that for generations has framed an approach to their collection, storage, research, and display. As objects defined primarily by their descriptions, dimensions, classification and sounds, the wealth of information about their social lives is absent. Musical sounds, photographs, drawings, narrative information and interpretative material preserved in archives, while often products of an earlier scholarly era, in fact are rich resources that can animate musical instruments so that they can be used in current and future research and shared with source communities. Expanding our view of instruments at the collection and documentation level, and maintaining broad awareness of their social lives, will contribute to recovering relationships between people and instruments, and between instruments and the social and geophysical environments they came from. This will play a significant role in reframing local community members’ relationships to historical practices and scholarly connections to music.

This chapter focuses on musical instrument-related data produced by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists during scholarly fieldwork.
and deposited in archival and museum collections. Representing topics ranging from overviews of musical practices to detailed studies of individual musical instrument types, research materials are preserved in audio and video recordings with supporting documentation, in fieldnotes and diaries providing contextual information about music and social life, and in acquired musical instruments and instrument parts. Left in the care of archivists and curators, many unaware of their value to local community members (the donors and their relatives) and to current scholarship, some musical instrument information may be inadequately identified and indexed, or even overlooked. An essential difference between musical instrument collections made by collectors and those by ethnographers relates to the quantity and type of documentation gathered in support of their collections. Of particular note is the data on human–object relationships and on social and cultural production typically found in ethnographic data. How can ethnographic materials gathered during an earlier scholarly era be connected to contemporary musical instrument research? And what actions are needed in order to share documentation on musical instruments with both source community members and scholars?

The multi-format collections of ethnomusicologist John Blacking at the University of Western Australia and Queen’s University, Belfast present useful examples of the importance of providing better access to musical instrument information. Resources drawn from the archives can be used to illustrate how musical recordings and descriptive and visual information about musical instrument design and function, as well as production and use, have the potential to contribute to knowledge about cultural, economic and ecological vulnerabilities, adaptation, and resilience through their sounds, images, and stories.\(^1\) The internationally recognised ethnomusicologist John Blacking spent 15 years based in South Africa (1954–69) where he worked at the International Library of African Music and studied, then taught, at the University of the Wit-

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\(^1\) The data for this study is largely drawn from the University of Western Australia John Blacking Collection housed in the Callaway Centre in the School of Music, where the author worked from January to December 2013. The author has also examined the John Blacking Collection at Queen’s University in Belfast and many of the issues noted are shared by both collections.
watersrand. During his tenure in Africa he collected music and musical instrument data in South Africa, Zambia, Uganda and Mozambique. The historical data in the Blacking archives represent documentation primarily from the period 1955–65, yet these resources can be effectively used for contemporary research as well. Archivists and museum personnel, in conjunction with scholars in ethnomusicology and other music-related disciplines, can make materials available so that younger scholars might use them in conjunction with newer ethnomusicological approaches. This includes social advocacy projects and research that engages community members in discussions about musical production and instrument making. Practical and interpretive information compiled by ethnographers such as Blacking, housed in archival and museum collections, offers knowledge for the source communities and provides opportunities for data sharing among all peoples impacted by cultural and material loss.

Ethnographic information on musical instruments

Most published ethnographic research conducted by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists is backed by an abundance of field data. Using publications to identify collections with musical instrument data can be difficult, though. While many ethnographic studies that focus on musical practices have been published during the last 60 years, in-depth ethnomusicological studies that concentrate on musical instrument production and use are surprisingly scant. At the same time, field data compiled by ethnomusicologists since the mid-20th century, now housed in archives and personal collections around the world, demonstrate that ethnographers amass considerable information about musical instrument production and use during their research.

2 During the period that Blacking was in Africa, Zambia was known as Northern Rhodesia and Mozambique was Portuguese East Africa.
3 For example, recordings with documentation held in the British Library Sound Archive (London) show in-depth evidence of musical instrument use in Uganda from the 1940s through the 1990s in collections by ethnomusicologists Klaus Wachsmann, Kenneth Gourlay and Peter Cooke. Similar examples can be found in other national archives holding music-based collections such as the Archive of
collected may include instrument tuning systems, playing styles, musical repertoires, as well as musical instrument construction and materials use. In addition, ethnomusicological queries also offer information on human–object relationships, such as between musical instruments and players, ritual construction and use of instruments, and the role of instruments in identity formation.

The cultural study and the social life of musical instruments represent two key areas that frame new research methods driven especially by scholars redefining and redesigning relationships to musical instruments. In 2001, Dawe encouraged the museum community to

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engage more ethnographically when he challenged readers of the *Galpin Society Journal* to shift away from older organological approaches to view musical instrument study more broadly, arguing that musical instruments are ‘objects existing at the intersection of material, social and cultural worlds’ increasingly entangled in transnational industries and engaged in political activities (Dawe 2001, 220). Dawe notes musical instruments ‘are one way in which cultural and social identity (a sense of self in relation to others, making sense of one’s place in the order of things) is constructed and maintained’ (Dawe 2011, 195). 6 Eliot Bates reflects this in his 2013 article on musical instruments when he explores their social lives as independent objects encouraging object–object as well as human–object social relationships to be valued in ethnographic research on musical instruments (Bates 2012, 364). Both Dawe and Bates express concern about the loss of agency experienced by instruments in museum collections, expressed by Bates when he refers to museums as ‘mausoleums, places for the display of the musically dead, with organologists acting as morticians, preparing dead instrument bodies for preservation and display’ (Bates 2013, 365). 7

Musical instruments are not only trapped in museum collections; instruments and their contextual data are hidden, and sometimes imprisoned, in archives. Most musical instrument collections in museums are developed and maintained for historical preservation and for display, and their archives do not support musical ‘objects’ with the in-depth contextualisation valued in ethnographic research. Even museums that hire ethnomusicologists to provide documentation typically

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6 Calling for a more holistic approach to instrument study, Dawe encourages archivists, museum professionals and scholars to utilise ideas and theories from diverse academic disciplines. He says, ‘As sites of meaning construction, musical instruments are embodiments of cultural based belief and value systems, as artistic and scientific legacy, a part of the political economy attuned by, or the outcome of, a range of associated ideas, concepts and practical skills’ (Dawe 2011, 195).

7 Similarly, Dawe says, ‘like animals in a zoo or pinned butterflies in specimen drawers, musical instruments in collections and displays are out of place’ (2011, 222).
support limited field journeys to gather display-focused information on objects and their relationships to the people that play them. Ethnographic archives in university, public and personal collections, on the other hand, sometimes accumulate papers, recordings, images, and even instruments from ethnographers and other collectors who have spent extended periods in the field. Ethnographers, frequently seeking answers to multiple research questions, rarely are able to fully complete documentation projects and their multi-format collections are seldom well organised. Overburdened archivists are not in a position to devote time or skilled personnel, such as subject specialists, to find connections among all the data that would benefit scholarly research today. Most importantly, incomplete and poorly organised musical instrument data limits its association with local peoples and landscapes who might provide in-depth understanding of an instrument’s history and use, and limits opportunities to initiate and maintain relationships with those most invested in the objects: source community members.

**John Blacking and musical instrument study**

The ethnographic materials on music and dance in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s amassed by John Blacking and preserved in two university collections are focused on his work in southern and eastern Africa. The largest collections include audio, visual and manuscript data on music collected in South Africa, especially among the Venda, between 1956 and 1958, in the Valley Tonga and Nsenga in Zambia in 1957 and 1961 respectively, and from diverse groups in Uganda during a series of weekend field excursions in 1965.\(^8\) The most in-depth information on

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8 Educated at King’s College, Cambridge, Musée de l’Homme in Paris, and the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, John Blacking conducted fieldwork with support from various African and European institutions and organisations. His research on Venda children’s music and dance practices and on initiation ceremonies are his most widely known African studies. Blacking was expelled from South Africa in 1969 and joined the faculty at Queen’s University, Belfast, where he remained until his death in 1990. The John Blacking Collection, representing the contents of his home office, is housed in the Callaway Centre, University of Western Australia. The collection comprising the contents of his
music in Africa is on Venda practices, reflecting the 22 months Blacking spent in the field with Venda communities. Blacking began his studies in Africa working at the International Library of African Music with Hugh Tracey, a collector with a particular interest in documenting musical instruments and instrumental performance. Conducting research more independently by mid-1956, some of Blacking’s collecting continued to replicate, complement, and contribute to Tracey’s, at least through 1957. Blacking continued his own fieldwork during the following years with an ear and eye for music, dance, as well as material culture, including musical instruments. Considering images, diary entries, film clips, and written research, Blacking’s interests revolved around specific instrument types in all the regions of Africa in which he worked. His fieldnotes reference musical bows, xylophones and lamellaphones, end- and side-blown flutes, side-blown horns, and drums. He provided descriptive data on instruments, their names, tunings and note naming conventions, construction processes and materials used, makers’ names, repertoires, and he completed aural and visual documents on performance practice, in different quantities depending on the specific social and research circumstance. Blacking also occasionally took the time to record detailed information on processes connected to building and tuning instruments. The data exemplifies information that is hidden away in institutional and private collections, university office is held at Queen’s University, Belfast, in the School of History and Anthropology.

9 In addition, Blacking also took other short field excursions in Africa. His collection of recordings and images includes documentation of Chopi music in the southern coastal areas of Mozambique, Venda, Pedi, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, and Tsonga music in Limpopo and KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, Valley Tonga and Nsenga performance in the Zambezi River valley and Petauke districts of Zambia, and music of indigenous groups in Uganda collected during a series of weekend field excursions to record Ganda, Adhola, Acholi, Toro, Kiga, and Karamajong music.

10 For example, Blacking went to visit Valley Tonga musicians in Gwembe, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia at the time) and produced a documented set of recordings, possibly in conjunction with Hugh Tracey’s work. Tracey travelled to the same region several months later and produced another related set of recordings (some of Tracey’s documentation for these recordings is housed at the University of Western Australia).
difficult to access by contemporary researchers, who are unaware of its depth and breadth, and generally completely unknown to source communities. It also demonstrates that there are areas where collections would benefit from follow-up work in order to compile more complete records on cultural production and tell a more comprehensive tale about a particular practice, or a musical instrument and its life experience.

One of the key issues for researchers or source community members who might benefit from one or both of the John Blacking Collections is that detailed information on musical instruments in his audio recordings, fieldnotes and images has not been well indexed. In fact, neither Blacking nor institutional personnel recognise that in order for musical instruments to have agency, and more importantly in order for the instruments to communicate effectively back to their heritage places, they need to be offered a voice: to be given a chance to be both heard and contextualised. Once connections are made between written accounts and musical sounds, the opportunities for using more fully contextualised recordings, and for connecting with communities, increase considerably.12

Sociality of musical instruments

Blacking offers descriptive data as well as social information on musical instruments in his fieldnotes and publications. He demonstrates that during his research in South Africa, Zambia and Uganda, musical instruments were well integrated in the social lives of each community he studied. Indeed, his notes also provide evidence that instruments had social lives of their own and were engaged in both human and object relationships (Bates 2013). Blacking’s documentation on Venda tshikona

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11 Some of Blacking’s descriptive information on these processes reflects the published ethnographic report produced by John Merriam on Bala drum-making in 1969 based on fieldwork in 1959 and 1960 (Merriam 1969). Blacking completed his fieldwork a few years before Merriam did.
12 Some indexing was completed at the University of Western Australia archive in 2013.
practices offers an example of how instruments were integrated into social life and carried social power. *Tshikona* is a dance form in which performers play the single-note *nanga* (pipe or flute) in hocket style (individual flutes, each playing a single note, contribute alternately to a shared melody). Blacking called *tshikona* the ‘national dance’ of the Venda (1973); Kruger later explored its relationship to both social ritual and local politics (2007). The social lives of the bamboo *nanga* and the *khwatha* (side-blown animal horn) are illustrated in narrative information recorded in a diary identified with one of Blacking’s translators, Alfred Tshibalanganda. The diary documents preparations for a *bepha* (musical expedition in which youth visit neighbouring communities and engage in *tshikona* competition). The narrated story features roles for *nanga* and *khwatha* as well as *ngoma* drums.

The narrator recounts *bepha* preparation and performance in 1954 in the Gaba district of Limpopo (South Africa). Local children trained for *tshikona*, and to earn an opportunity for *bepha*, by playing the flute and dancing as they laboured each day for the local chief. In one passage, when the headman managing their activities commended the children for dancing nicely, the narrator wrote, ‘When we boys heard that, flutes were blown in such a way that if possible they can crack.’ This expression of their excitement established the *nanga* and bamboo as extensions of their bodies and emotions, and expressed an independent relationship of the bamboo to its environment; that of the human–object relationship between the breath and the bamboo, and the object–object relationship between the bamboo and its environment. Both human and non-human entities (performer and *nanga/bamboo*) contributed to that event. While rehearsing *tshikona*, *nanga* playing by the youth was essential to the performance of *tshikona*, but it was the sound of the *khwatha* that called their attention, and they were directed by the *khwatha* to stop their *nanga* playing and pay attention when there was news to share. When the children asked the headman at what time they needed to return to work in the morning, ‘He said the *khwatha* will tell you. I will blow it.’ In the morning ‘we heard the

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13 See Blacking’s ‘Musical expeditions of the Venda’ (Blacking 1962) for more information on the *bepha* tradition. The *bepha* diary discussed in this section is unsigned, but it is likely that Alfred Tshibalanganda is the author.
sound of khwatha, but before the khwatha blower came to us, we started dancing our tshikona. The narrative shows musicians and musical instruments ascribed specific social roles which are reinforced by their presence and sounds at work parties and other bepha preparations, at rehearsals and at tshikona performances. They are actors in social networks with agency that is expressed through the intersections of sound, substance, performance and social position.

Musical instrument makers, agency and action

Blacking documented musical instrument making in different locations, naming builders, drawing and diagramming instruments, and providing written information on processes and transmission of knowledge. Working with the Valley Tonga in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in 1957, Blacking noted details on building specific instruments, especially mutetule and nenda flutes (obsolete by 1957), the kalumbu musical bow, nkolenkole xylophone, and nyele antelope horns. His fieldnotes offer information on some construction techniques, and he names woods and other materials used and sometimes provides step-by-step construction procedures. Figure 6.1 shows Blacking’s notation of the process one instrument maker used to build a four-key nkolenkole xylophone using wood of the musigili (Natal mahogany tree) and mwingili (white raisin bush) trees. In addition to musigili woods, he noted that the maker used mukonzo (Triplochiton zambesiacus or Zambezi-oak), mukololo (Lonchocarpus capassa or rain-tree) or mutondo wood.

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14 This is possibly the instrument Tracey called chikorekore.
15 Trichilia emetic.
16 Grewia flavescens. Reynolds also notes the wood is used for axe handles and drum sticks (Reynolds 1968).
17 This information is reproduced as noted in Blacking’s field notebook. He demonstrates his interest in the amount of time it took to complete work, referring in his notes to time (recorded as four-digit numbers) and to the actual time it took to complete tasks.
Jeremiah brings 4 pieces of musigili - lengths 64.2 (diam 7.4-8.0) 62.8 (6.4-7.4), 55.6 (6.5-7.1), 55.0 (5.0-5.6) 0930

1. Takes the longest piece
2. Holds it up vertically on a block & cuts down the inside edge with an axe (mbezyo), taking off bark & making almost sl sl [straight] edge.
3. Then he hammers the bark with the wooden haft of the axe. Removes bark.
4. Holds wood, inside edge upwards. Begins to cut down into the wood, to make a triangle 'trough'.
5. Turns wood round, cuts other side & easens out the cut wood. His general technique is to hack - edge out, hack - edge out.
6. Triangular slit now cut
7. 0950 Begins pointng ends.
8. 0955. Lays aside piece with ends partly pointed.
9. Begins hammering bark of 2nd piece 0956
10. Tears off bark 0957, but has to rehammer some parts, as the bark will not come of readily.
11. 0958 Begins cutting down inside edge. He laid it on his knees to test for fell & for symmetry.
12. Begins cutting triangular trough. He strikes with the axe in short sharp strokes from a height of about 1 ft - 1 ft 6".
13. 1003 Tears off rough piece & begins second cut deeper.
14. 1005 Tears off second piece & begins vertical slicing of triangular trough. Alternates this with horizontal cutting.
15. 1006 Begins pointing ends. Also pays more attention to the triangular trough.
16. 1009 ½ Lays 2nd slat aside.
17. 1010 Take 3rd piece of wood (i.e. 55.6 length) & begins hacking straight edge on inside.
18. 1011 Hammers the bark & tears it off.
19. 1012 ½ Returns to inside edge & begins Δ trough
20. 1015 ½ Tears off first piece. Continues hacking. He hacks down into the apex of the Δ & either eases with the axe blade away from him or towards him, depending on side of triangle he is working. Lays on legs for feel.
21. 1018 ¼ Begins hacking corner, 1'30"
22. 1020 2nd corner Occasional pause as he works to look up and say something. 1'15"
23. 1021 ½ - Begins hacking inside edge of smallest piece
24. 1022 ¼ - Begins hammering bark with haft, 57" - completed.
25. 1024 - Returns to back sl. edge, & begins hacking out Δ trough, and pulls out strip 2'34"
26. 1027 - Continue on Δ trough (NB there is always 2nd cut, digging deeper than the 1st cut) After 2'30" he begins the vertical shaving of the sides of the Δ 3'45" whole process.
27. 1030 ½ Begins pointing one end. Complete 2'19" (NB a little conversation)
28. 1033 Begins pointing other end. 1'12"
29. 1034 General touch up & test for tune, including a little repointing 55"
30. 1035 Laid last slat aside & said 'Finish.'

We go to look at musigili tree & then cut 2 beaters from musigili.
Then Jeremiah tests out the keys for sound & arranges them on his knees in the order 4, 3, 2, 1 - 4 being nearest J's body.

Always carves biggest key first & smallest last. The four keys came from 4 branches. Can be cut from one branch if there is a sufficiently long one.

Figure 6.1 Excerpt from John Blacking's dairy entry on Jeremiah Tshisoa's nkolenkole making (continues next image).
Systematic information on materials and their sources is useful for current scholars but, more importantly, the narrative information recorded by Blacking for this instrument and others is of greatest potential value to the communities he studied, especially those who may no longer have access to knowledge about constructing some of their valued historical instruments.

Ecological data and asset protection

Ethnographers studying instrument production and use during their research have often focused on performance practice and on social, political and economic issues related to production and use. Sometimes simple questions regarding the specific materials used for building instruments are neglected. It is fortunate that Blacking had a particular interest in naming woods and skins for the instruments.18 His field documents note names of resonant woods, plants, valued skins and other materials, offering researchers and local community members a more complete description of a musical object’s identity. This information can also be a source for measuring ecosystem health, including environmental degradation and loss. Knowledge of issues identified with

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18 Among his papers are notebooks (housed at Queen’s University, Belfast) detailing trees in the Magidi region of Limpopo during the mid-1950s.
local ecologies can even contribute to an explanation for the loss of, or change in, musical instrument practices.

Blacking’s detailed fieldnotes on xylophones and on lamellaphones (which he called ‘hand pianos’) frequently listed woods used for the bars and soundboards. For the Venda mbila mutondo xylophone the resonant wild teak wood (kiaat in Afrikaans),\(^{19}\) called mutondo in Venda, was the only wood used for the bars.\(^{20}\) While Blacking recorded a few performances on film and tape and took photos of the mbila mutondo, the instrument was rare even in the 1950s. In contrast, Blacking recorded a number of mbila dza madeza and mbira tshipai lamellaphone\(^{21}\) performances and provided detailed diagrams, tunings, and note names for the instruments in his notebooks (see Figure 6.2). The wood preferred for the soundboard for this instrument was also mutondo.\(^{22}\) Even during the period that Blacking was in the field in South Africa the government had restricted the use of this popular wood, probably due to its vulnerability to overharvesting for timber. In a 1956 diary entry he noted that ‘people can be arrested if found with a piece of mutondo’.

Similarly, Blacking noted that the Venda nanga flutes used for tshikona were made from the stem of musununu or bindura bamboo,\(^{23}\) a species that has been difficult for local residents to source for several generations. Blacking reported that the bamboo was grown in a ‘sacred grove’ in the eastern region of the province (Byron 1995, 136) and was ‘cut exclusively by the male members of one family’ (Blacking 1967, 20).

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19 *Pterocarpus angolensis*.
20 Information on the instrument is preserved in Blacking’s images of performance and instrument making as well as recordings and film clips; it was rare even in the 1950s. Between 1956 and 1965, Blacking made recordings of mbila mutondo duets in just two days in the field (in 1956 and 1957), with six pieces and five performers represented.
21 The mbila dza madeza and mbila tshipai had keys typically made from locally sourced metal, such as bicycle spokes. For the mbila dza madeza, resonance for the instrument was frequently provided by an added large gourd or paraffin tin (often with attached shells or bottlecaps).
22 He recorded other woods used as well, including muzere, suringa, muvanghu, minesenga, mutokota, and muvangazi. Blacking noted that the same kind of wood was also used by the Valley Tonga in Zambia for their lamellaphones.
23 *Oxytenanthera abyssinica*.  

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Figure 6.2 John Blacking diary excerpt on mbila madeza.
Figure 6.3 Venda *tshikona* performer uses a pram handle to replace the *nanga* flute during a performance, c. 1957. Photo by John Blacking.
In fact, in the early 1960s Blacking reported that the flutes in the urban areas were made of materials such as metal tubing, hosepipe, curtain rods and pram handles (see Figure 6.3). While he did not specify the reason, this was likely due to limited access in the cities to the valued bamboo.

Musical instruments are not only entangled in relationships with musicians; their materials are intertwined with people who have uses for them outside of music, sometimes restricting access by instrument makers. Increasingly, resonant woods are of interest to international industries, leading to species degradation and loss. Community protection of assets as a strategy to address both social, cultural, economic and ecological needs and the consumption and trade of natural resources has been documented in various regions of southern and eastern Africa (Shackleton and Shackleton 2001; Ipara et al. 2005). Among the Venda in South Africa, the mutondo tree not only offers a valued musical wood, but is also used for woodcarving (Shackleton 2005) and has links to spiritual healing (Mugovhani 2009, 52). Mugovhani also reports that the bark of the muonze tree used for mbila mutondo mallets is also valued for traditional medicine (2009). And the Venda protection of bamboo for nanga flutes through their social systems, documented by Blacking in his fieldnotes and by other researchers (Kruger 2007), demonstrates community protection of assets even as national and provincial government practices, and increasingly international industries, are placing people and their cultural assets in jeopardy. Addressing one such issue directly, Blacking quoted a Venda resident in an undated diary entry: ‘Who is going to look after the reed flute grove if people are moved by the government?’ Blacking then commented him-

24 In Kenya, clan-based collective conservation of plants and animal life has occurred due to their connections to medicinal, religious, or other socio-cultural events (Ipara et al. 2005, 650).
25 Spyrostachys africana.
26 Similarly, the kichipichipi tree (Erythrina abyssinica), that Alan Merriam noted was the highly valued source for making drums among the Bala in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, continues to be used in central and east Africa for drums and harps, but it has also been used for medicinal purposes. In Kenya communities conserve this tree due to its sacred status. Today in western Uganda it is one of the key plants used to treat HIV/AIDS patients (Tabuti et al. 2010).
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self, ‘People have already been moved in other places and they are afraid that the same will happen here.’

Linking sounds and musical instruments

Blacking’s field recordings include sounds from a wide range of musical instruments in South Africa, Zambia and Uganda. Recordings and notes on performances demonstrate his interest in repertoire, but instrument tunings and brief discussions about musical compositions and musical events are also preserved in recordings. His audio recordings of Nsenga music in 1961 show an ongoing interest in the kalimba lamellaphone, among other instruments.27 Recordings include compositions and tunings for specific instruments. Fieldnotes offer drawings of the kalimba with other detailed descriptive information (see Figure 6.4). Blacking did publish an article using this research, but it draws from only some of the collected information now preserved in the archives (Blacking 1961). Blacking also notated and recorded tunings for Venda flutes. In the archives, recordings and fieldnotes are located in separate files and there is currently no link between information on sound and musical instruments used in a performance. Similarly, a group of flutes that Blacking collected, probably in the mid-1950s, is housed in the University of Western Australia archives. The flutes are unlabelled and are not linked to documentation of any kind. This makes it difficult to identify a potentially significant relationship between the object (instruments) and the references in Blacking’s fieldnotes on the flutes.

Linking audio and descriptive information, including images and drawings, that address playing style, repertoire and other aspects of performance practice, connects an instrument to social life. It also indi-

27 It is important to note that Hugh Tracey had a particular interest in lamellaphones in Africa and completed instrument collections and research on the instrument-type, especially in southern regions of the continent. His son Andrew Tracey carried on his work and completed a number of publications on musical instruments, including one on African lamellaphone history, “The original African mbira?” (Tracey 1972).
Individualises sound and provides agency for music, musician, maker and instrument by making clear connections between audio recordings and particular instruments by specific makers or performances by named musicians.

Collaborative documentation on musical instruments

When collecting musical instrument information is not the primary goal of a research expedition, instrument-related data is generally incomplete. In some cases, Blacking’s notes on music and musical instruments are brief, providing valuable but fragmented pieces of information. During a short visit to Nabweyo near Namasale in Uganda in 1965 Blacking recorded Lango musicians Laban Okao and his son playing six tuned drums (myel bul) that Okao had carved himself (see Figure 6.5). In his notes, Blacking revealed that Okao learned the instrument-making craft from his older brother, who in turn had learned from his mother’s brother. While Blacking did not specify the woods used, he did note that the double-headed drums were covered on the top with antelope skin and on the bottom with crocodile. 

The drum songs (also called myel bul) accompany Lango ikoce dance events, especially around harvest time.

Scholars who have conducted more in-depth research on Lango music in Uganda have recorded information about this relatively rare drum-chime (Cooke 1999; Wachsmann 1965), although their documents offer little additional information on the instrument’s construction. Combining fragments of information from different ethnographers who may have gathered contextual information during the same period will inevitably offer more in-depth understanding of each instrument and its social scenes.

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28 He also noted that a single-headed drum, atimo, was covered with monitor lizard skin.
29 The British Museum holds a set of drums attributed to the Lango people, collected in 1915. The accompanying annotations note that the drums were made of yago wood (Kigelia africana), known in English as the sausage tree (Acquisition number: Af1915,0309.4). The information is available online at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research.aspx.
Figure 6.4 John Blacking’s 1961 diary entry on a 13-note Nsenga kalimba found near Petauke, Zambia.
Conclusion: animating archives and museum collections, making connections

It is timely to consider how musical instrument data collected by ethnographers can be made more useful, especially to promote cultural and ecological sustainability in heritage communities, but also for scholarly research and education. Institutions and individuals housing musical instruments and their documentation have opportunities to share information more widely, effectively and creatively. This knowledge, now separated from source communities, once part of lively musical practices that were well integrated into the social, cultural, economic and ecological landscape, can become part of a contemporary discourse on musical instruments and their social lives. The instruments – their materials, playing styles, relationships to performers and to the landscape – are represented in archival images, diagrams, local stories, film clips, sounds and in the instruments themselves. Together they can contrib-
ute to an ongoing dialogue about music, sociality, and the physical environment within local communities, about instruments and social meaning and the complexity of materiality in our understanding of musical performance in scholarly realms. With histories in local environments, they tell tales about human and non-human entities and relationships, including the health of local economies and ecologies. For ethnomusicologists and musicologists who have embraced new organological approaches, musical instruments are not just objects to be measured and classified. Structurally and socially they are the result of decision making by individuals and social groups over time, reflecting social relationships in the workshop and performance spaces and representing social and economic patterns in production (Dawe 2011; Connor 2013). Instruments are also ‘vibrant matter’, things made of substances that respond to the environment independently, with lives as objects that have changed over time (Bennett 2010). They exhibit an association with their own materials, the people who make and play them, and the sounds that emerge from their strings, air columns, membranes and woods (Bates 2013; Roda 2013).

Some of the current scholarly ethnomusicological fieldwork that focuses on a musical instrument as a social and cultural entity, with materials that play multiple roles in communities, will ultimately be deposited in archives or museums. Making plans for managing this influx of new musical information is critical. The John Blacking Collection, and its links to makers and designs, repertoires and socio-ecological issues, demonstrates that even historical ethnographic material can be a resource for beginning a process of identifying key sources of information on musical instruments in our archives and developing strategies for making it more accessible. Cultural geographers Dwyer and Davies refer to ‘animating’ archives as a process of engaging with their ‘material and documentary properties’ through collaborative work, especially in creative collaborations between artists and material culture (Dwyer and Davies 2010, 89). This artistic action between objects and people that animates archival data can be applied to musical instruments and their documentation. An historical instrument without the musician that made or played it, and the community that supported it, is of limited use to scholarship or to the instrument. Musicians from a source community can still enliven it, though, and need
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to be given the opportunity to do so. Similarly, recorded data in connection with musical instrument study – the sounds, measurements, materials, tunings and structures, as well as beliefs and behaviours – can provide opportunities for source communities to connect with the musical information in their current lives, in their own way.

When local musicians and musical instrument makers work with archivists, curators and ethnomusicologists to develop models for information management and sharing, the proactive and collaborative archiving processes revitalise the collections even as they embrace the unique characteristics and needs identified with musical instrument practices (Landau and Fargion 2012; Vallier 2010). Creatively constructed community-driven knowledge management, shared digitally (Srinivasan 2004) or face-to-face (Lobley 2011), offers opportunities for scholars, archivists and source communities to benefit during the process. In 2007 and 2008, Lobley explored animation of sound archives connected to Hugh Tracey’s work in Africa, especially to consider the long-term value of archived sound recordings and how they can benefit the local communities they were drawn from. Taking the sounds to the communities and giving individuals and groups opportunities to establish their own ways of responding to and utilising the musical information offers new ideas for management, promotion and interpretation of audio data (Lobley 2011, 2012). In the same way, ethnographic materials tied to musical instruments, including sound files, but also drawings, diagrams, images, film footage and narrative information, involve local communities with rights to and interests in the materials held outside of their reach, and can be valuable sources for them as they (re)consider their own heritage.

Returning to Zeitlin and the plucked lute in China referenced at the beginning of this chapter, musical instruments offer opportunities for reconstructing histories and for contributing to a sense of continuity in relation to cultural and national identity, as tangible objects that embody knowledge, memory and ‘ownership’ of a practice that may no longer be in place, yet remains in the cultural memory of a community. Ethnographic process and the information that is gathered during fieldwork can offer in-depth knowledge that may be useful to researchers and source community members even long after the musical traditions represented have been supplanted by new ones. As Lobley shows
so effectively, local community responses to archival data once caught up in colonialist institutions can be unexpected, and, within the same community, range from indifference to complete engagement (Lobley 2011). It is critical that archivists and others managing musical data provide opportunities for collaboration and creative animation of musical instruments and their documentation, currently hidden away in archives and museum collections.

Works cited


