Learning from Experience: Returning Music to Circulation in Local Communities

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Introduction

In the 21st Century it is easy to make early recordings widely available to the general public. Digitize them and post them to an Internet site and some people will find them. But if the objective is to make them available to the communities where they were recorded, that may not be a suitable approach. Furthermore, ethical and legal considerations sometimes require that recordings not be made available to a general public. During the past 30 years, ethnomusicologists have discovered that repatriation is not as easy as we initially thought it would be. But Ethnomusicologists and others involved in returning early recordings to communities are also getting better at ensuring that recordings are returned in such a way that community members know about them and can use them as they wish. We have also gathered information on how successful repatriation can benefit individuals and communities as they use the returned recordings to revive or transform local musical traditions. This paper argues that the most successful repatriation projects are those where local community groups or individual community members are actively involved in all stages of the process. Since I am unfamiliar with early Chinese recordings or previous repatriation efforts in China, this paper will cite experiences from other parts of the world. Instead, I suggest that lessons can be learned for the future by examining earlier repatriation projects.

I use two terms in this paper that require clarification. I use the term "repatriation" to describe the process of returning recordings to the individuals and communities who were originally recorded for them to use as they wish. It is not an ideal term, as I discuss below, but it is the most commonly used one. I also use the word "community," which is also hard to define. By "community" I mean to refer to individual members of groups and also to groups that are identified by themselves as a group. In some traditions an individual performer is the appropriate person to receive the copies; in other traditions a family, clan, locality, or ethnic group might be more appropriate recipients. To avoid naming every possibility each time I refer to the recipients of repatriated recordings, I use the word "community" for all those possibilities and others that might prove to be appropriate.

This paper begins with a discussion of some of the limitations of what can be returned to communities, then discuss three examples of ways they have been returned, and finally make some suggestions based on the earlier sections.

What is being repatriated?

When communities are contacted to collaborate with other organizations in locating, obtaining, and returning early recordings to them, it is important to advise them that what will be returned will be incomplete recordings only of some of their earlier traditions. This is because audio recordings are shaped by the perspectives of the person doing the recording about what to record, as Gisa Jähnichen observed in one of our discussions during the workshop, and the technology used, the quality of the storage of the recordings, and decisions made about their preservation, cataloguing, and digitization.

Miguel Garcia suggests that archived recordings are not "sets of objects" but rather "discursive knowledge" shaped by multi-sourced, fragmentary, and unfinished discourses (Garcia 2017:11; see also Zeitlyn 2012). Sometimes the very things the community hopes will be returned were never recorded, or only partially recorded. Early recordings could only capture a few minutes of sound, while the performances often lasted for hours or days. Only recently, with digital equipment and teamwork, is it possible to record very long events. But even so, decisions about where to place the microphones or video camera will shape (and limit) the recording of an event. Sometimes errors in cataloging and storage result in an inability to find and identify the recording. The essay by Don Niles in this volume describes how peoples in Papua New Guinea were recorded by visitors of different nationalities under different colonial administrations and how difficult it was to locate some of them.

The earliest sounds that can be repatriated were recorded on wax cylinders using an Edison phonograph. The first ethnographic field recording was probably made by Harvard University Anthropologist J. Walter Fewkes among the Passamaquoddy Indians in Maine, USA, on 13 March 1890. Many thousand more field recordings were made around the world using cylinder technology in the ensuing decades by anthropologists, folklorists, missionaries, explorers, and travelers. But cylinders could only record two or three minutes at a time, and could not capture quiet sounds or those at a distance from the recording horn. Later technologies slowly improved the sound quality and length of recordings, but field recordings rapidly increased after 1945 with the development of battery-operated reel-to-reel tape recorders. Today almost anyone can make a high-quality recording on a smartphone, but essential contextual information required for later use of those recordings is usually completely absent.

In addition to sounds and information, recordings contain performances of music and speech that are usually owned or controlled by some person, group, or type of being (animals, spirits, etc.). These rights, whether they be local practices or national legislation, cannot be separated from the materials and should not be ignored. Sometimes there are a variety of rights over a recording, including those of the performers, a larger group that controls what is performed and when, the person doing the recording, the institution where it is housed, and national legislation. Among the Suyá/Kĩsêdjê, an Indigenous group in Brazil, animals may compose the song, which is taught to a group of men by someone who can hear the animal singing it. The men perform the song during a ceremony that they must get permission to hold from one of the male ceremonial moieties. The song itself cannot be copyrighted under Brazilian national legislation which does not have an individual human creator. In addition, the Suyá/Kĩsêdjê have asked that their music not be posted on the Internet (unless they are doing it). When someone records a performance, the sounds are transferred to a recording device, but very often the rights related to the recording are not transferred with the sound. Repatriation, therefore, requires careful attention to rights. In most cases the rights to recordings should be repatriated along with the recordings themselves, so the communities can decide how they should be used.

Despite all their shortcomings, early recordings can be very useful to the communities to which they are returned. In 1983 we sent the Fox Indians copies of recordings at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music. They used the copies to re-learn some forgotten songs and performed a ceremony they had been unable to perform before receiving the recordings. The significance of anthropological recordings of the songs and stories of the Indigenous peoples of Australia was transformed when the detailed songs describing the Indigenous settlement of territories were allowed as evidence in court cases to prove their right to native land claims. The songs had always been deeply meaningful to the local communities, but they also came to assist them obtain land they had lost to settlers after the arrival of Europeans. Sometimes even a commercial CD can have an impact on people: one woman born in Jamaica wrote to me at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings thanking us for releasing one of the

compact discs we published, writing, “Until I heard your CD on Maroon music of Jamaica I didn’t know I had a culture!”

How old should a recording be to be repatriated? A quick answer is that “anything recorded before today” may be significant to the community recorded and therefore important to them. In fact, however, most communities give greater value to the earliest recordings possible, on which they can hear performances they never heard themselves. But more recent recordings can also be meaningful.

Four Experiments in Repatriation

I. A large, 15-year repatriation project was begun in 1979 by the United States Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center and special staff hired to assist. The plan was to make copies of the approximately 8,000 wax cylinders of American Indian songs, language, and other subjects and return them to their originating communities. The process was very carefully planned. A modern machine was constructed to copy them. Folklorists and advisors developed elaborate plans for repatriation. The copies were returned to the Tribal Councils of each Tribe, as required by law, by well-prepared and teams. Reported in several publications and a series of catalogues, we can learn some lessons from that project.

Project participant Judith Gray wrote an excellent, concise, description of the project and the challenges they anticipated for returning the very earliest recordings of the groups to them and those they did not expect (Gray 1996). One of the challenges, she reports, was that the recordings included sacred materials that the contemporary communities would not allow to be recorded. Another was that the collections were haphazard—the original researchers could only record for two or three minutes and they often recorded examples of many different genres rather than whole performances of a single one. A third challenge was that, by the requirements of the treaties between the United States government and the Indigenous peoples and related policies, the Library of Congress could only return the recordings to the elected Tribal Council for each group. These people were not necessarily the ones who would be most interested in the recordings. But there was another aspect that is worth considering: sound quality.

How has the dissemination of Cylinder Project materials turned out? Not surprisingly, the answers are not simple. Almost everyone we have contacted was enthusiastic at first about the potential benefits of having the early recordings back in their communities. However, community members sometimes suspected hidden costs or “strings” would be attached to the gift. Also, sometimes their enthusiasm waned when members of the community actually heard the recordings. Cylinder recordings do not gain charm and patina like old photographs do. Furthermore, some individuals cherished the hope that certain specific songs and narratives were recorded, only to be disappointed to discover that such recordings did not exist (Gray 1996:6-7).

Sometimes the recordings were just left on a shelf in an office and later were lost. In other cases, the recordings were welcomed and used to revive musical traditions and to stimulate educational use and the revival of languages. Since the project returned recordings to many different Indigenous groups, Gray is in a good position to describe the range of reactions to their efforts to undertake an ethical, culturally sensitive, and effective return. “Whether cylinder recordings have a role to play in contemporary Indian lives is a matter for Indian people and communities alone to decide. Such matters cannot be settled by outsiders, nor can the impact of dissemination efforts be measured in the short run (Gray 1996:7). Are early recordings always gratefully received and actively used by the communities that receive them? The results of the Federal Cylinder Project demonstrate that for a variety of reasons they may not be.

Informed by some excellent and sophisticated recent repatriation projects undertaken in Australia, ethnomusicologists and linguists have acquired a good deal of expertise in repatriating recordings to indigenous peoples. There are some specific features about the oral traditions of Indigenous peoples that may not be as common elsewhere, including complex issues of ownership and secrecy. It is important, therefore, to consider other kinds of repatriation projects when planning to return early recordings to communities in China. One example comes from Bali, in Indonesia.

II. American ethnomusicologist Edward Herbst developed a collaborative repatriation project with Indonesian artists and scholars that was quite different from the return of Indigenous music in North America and Australia. He encountered a very different set of challenges in his extensive and collaborative repatriation project of 1920s and 1930s audio recordings and silent films of music and dance of Bali, Indonesia. For over fifteen years Herbst has worked with Balinese musicians, singers, dancers, and scholars to find the rare early commercial and field recordings. Then they sought to research, understand, document, explain, restore, and repatriate the recordings.

Herbst raised the money to fund the project and negotiated contracts with CD companies and publishers. After extensive searches over a period of years in archives and private collections the group was able to locate 111 musical examples, 150 archival photographs, and 5 hours of previously unavailable silent films of the music and dance of Bali before 1940. The recordings were important because they were completely unavailable in Bali and because they predated major changes in Balinese society and performing arts caused by World War II, Indonesian independence, and the coup that brought Suharto to power in 1966. In addition to finding the materials, Herbst and his colleagues searched Bali for surviving musicians and dancers who could identify who was in the photographs and films and tell them more about the recordings. The project discovered microtonal singing techniques that had been completely lost as well as other surprising changes in performance practice. The dissemination efforts have included CDs with notes in English, a series in Indonesian, and a website. The project led to the revival of some performance styles and some new compositions using the earlier styles. The project's impact continues through lectures and projects at Bali's performing arts academy. Much of the success of this project has been due to the long-term collaboration among its Indonesian members and Edward Herbst, whose linguistic fluency and many years of association with his Indonesian colleagues made contributed to the project's success (Herbst 2017).

III. Not all recordings require the kind of collaborative approaches used by Edward Herbst or the carefully planned repatriation of the Library of Congress Federal Cylinder Project. Sometimes recordings can be "repatriated" in a way that does not target any single group. When older commercial recordings are being returned to circulation for a national audience, it may be enough to organize them thoughtfully, digitize them carefully, catalogue them, and then post them online and publicize their availability. Most commercial recordings do not contain secret or restricted material, but they are usually tightly controlled by for-profit companies.

Under U.S. copyright law, most of the commercially published music is not available for display or unrestricted download. An exception to this are the commercial recordings released by Thomas Edison, whose recording company was founded in 1888 and went bankrupt in 1929. One of the largest popular music repatriation projects in the United States is located at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) Cylinder Audio Archive (http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/). They acquired rare commercial cylinders produced by the Edison company and legally posted them online for free access and download. The site provides an excellent search screen and index (http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/browse.php). They post a new cylinder every day for visitors to listen to, encouraging visitors to return to the page regularly. They solicit donations of new wax cylinders for digitizing and posting. Millions of people have visited site to listen to old, scratchy, recordings of once-popular or very

obscure genres of commercially published music. The website's huge popularity was unexpected. The more than 11,000 digitized recordings there include everything from jazz, ragtime, and waltzes to laughing songs and whistling. "What sets the USBC collection apart, said [project director David] Seubert, is its international scope and emphasis on collecting all types of music and sound" [instead of just ethnographic recordings] (Jozuka 2015:4). Seubert reported that he received emails from young musicians who listen to these recordings and have discovered a whole new world. The popularity of this University website is testimony to the adage: if you put it online, people will use it.

Not every repatriation project goes smoothly, and we can learn from mistakes as well as successes. An example of how even a well-intentioned person can make mistakes in a repatriation projects comes from my own experience. In 2003, the Indigenous community I have done research on in Brazil since 1971, known earlier the Suyá and now as the Kĩsêdjê, told me they were setting up a culture center to collect recordings and photographs of everyone who made them since 1959, the year they made peace with Brazilians. As the person who had the largest collection of recordings, I agreed to supply them with digital copies of what I had. I did not think it through as a "repatriation project." But I should have. I returned both public performances and private interviews and discussions to the whole community. I sent all the recordings to their archive, instead of sending the different interviews to the people I had talked with. When listeners heard what other people I interviewed said, they were surprised and upset that they had said different things and thought the others were wrong. This led to criticism of some community members that I had not anticipated. In another case, when the elders heard an error in their performance of a ceremonial song that was not perceived at the time, they were very concerned. They thought that the bad luck they had suffered for years afterward was due to their mistakes. This led to their feeling guilt they would never have felt if they had not heard the recording later. There were other problems too. Although I translated the supporting documentation into Portuguese, I organized it by CD-R number. When they converted the CD-Rs to MP3 files, all the descriptive information was unusable because there was no physical item to refer to. That made it very difficult to find specific items in their database. Another problem I had not anticipated was that not all members of the community felt able to access the recordings because of kinship relations with the archivist. The Suyá/Kĩsêdjê can never speak to or even look directly at certain relatives, which makes it very difficult to ask for a copy of a recording. In sum, I would have benefitted from what we have learned since about successful repatriation projects, and what we discussed in our workshop in Shanghai, before I organized the photos and recordings to return to the Suyá/Kĩsêdjê. Despite my mistakes, however, the materials I sent were greatly appreciated and are being used in educational projects, school curricula, videos, and for leisure listening.

Some general observations about successful repatriation projects

This paper suggests that there is no single way to return old recordings to the communities where they were recorded. But it does suggest answers to the three points raised in the letter on invitation to the International Workshop on Repatriation for which this paper was originally prepared.

1. Sound recordings can be important to members of the communities to whom they have been returned or repatriated. They do not always have a strong impact, however, and the results may take years to appear. Despite this unpredictability, there is clear evidence that the return of early recordings can be beneficial to individuals and communities.
2. The word "repatriation" is not a very satisfactory word for what is being done when music is returned to the individuals and communities who were originally recorded. Repatriation implies sending music from one country to another. But often the return is within a country, or even within a local community. The word "repatriation" is frequently used in all cases of return, but

it may not be the best word for the process. Janet Topp Fargion, at the British Library, has said she prefers the expression "returning recordings to circulation" over "repatriation" (Topp Fargion 2016). At the workshop, Professor Xiao Mei said she preferred the term "bringing the recordings home," which is also a useful phrase and seems to allocate agency to those obtaining the recordings. Both phrases refer to a process without implications of nationality. The act of "returning the sounds to circulation" "at home" leaves it up to individuals and groups in a community whether and how to make use of them.

3. On the basis of the cases with which I am familiar, the return of early recordings is most successful if there are individuals or groups in the receiving community interested in the return of the recordings. The process works best when they are involved in planning and the method of return. Scholars and applied ethnomusicologists can help find the recordings, raise funds, and get them digitized. They can also suggest methods for return and dissemination based on their comparative knowledge of other cases. But community members are best at managing the return and use of the recordings. They know the significance of the recordings and can assist in their use. Sometimes the scholars and institutions are members of the local communities, but even in this case they need to consult the wider population of performers and audiences for the music before the return. Returns are usually less successful when planned and undertaken unilaterally.

4. In addition to those three points, it is important to note that the beneficiaries of repatriation may include the institutions or individuals that held the materials returned. When recordings are returned to communities knowledgeable about them, it is often possible to obtain much more information about what was recorded than was provided when the original recordings were made. Members of communities may be able to translate the lyrics and describe the type of event the recording was made at, providing a needed additional perspective on the recordings. In some cases, they may even want to contribute additional recordings to improve the archival collections (see Seeger and Chaudhuri 2015). This is one reason I have been so insistent on the collaborative nature of repatriation – everyone's knowledge may be increased through the process.

To conclude, I hope this paper will have convinced readers that studying different kinds of repatriation projects can help in considering how to return old Chinese recordings to their original communities. Examining the success and failures of other approaches can help to avoid some of the worst problems encountered elsewhere and allow project designers to build on the successful elements of other projects. Ethnomusicologists and other specialists have a role to play in drawing generalizations from the diverse experiments with repatriation that are being undertaken in different countries today and with different methods employed in them. It is important to keep talking with one another, and learning from our successes and (we hope only occasional) failures.

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