

# DOCUMENTING THE IMPACT OF RECONNECTING AUDIOVISUAL CULTURAL HERITAGE MATERIAL IN THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

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This paper discusses the archival practice of digital reconnection of early sound recordings in the country of origin, through a case study of the reconnection of Nepalese recordings from the British Library to the Music Museum of Nepal [2012-2017]. It considers the value that recordings hold as a primary source for research and cultural engagement and the significance of knowledge exchange facilitated by this process of reconnection to both culture bearers and academic communities. The research employed the use of ‘observational film’ as part of the methodology to study the impact of reconnection, this paper therefore includes both text and a short film allowing the viewer to reflect independently on the issues raised by this process.

## UNESCO

In 2011 UNESCO awarded cultural heritage status to the wax cylinder collections of ethnographic recordings at The British Library by adding them to the ‘memory of the world’ register<sup>1</sup>. One of the main reasons given in support of the nomination was related to the value of these recordings as a primary source material:

“Some of these recordings represent the earliest extant sources for research into those cultures, captured in the most vivid format available at the time, unmediated by foreign textual interpretation”.<sup>2</sup>

This value attributed to early ethnographic sound recordings is one that provides the basis for continued research related to audio-visual material. The medium itself provides a document that can be re-examined from many different perspectives to discover new layers of meaning. Yet perhaps more importantly the relevance of these recordings to the communities who feature in them has also changed. This is evident in the enquiries from researchers in the countries of origin wishing to access copies of sound recordings held in the British Library.

Digitisation has produced new opportunities to circulate these recordings and with this the potential to discover new and significant information through new levels of accessibility and metadata sharing. Developing access and discoverability is a challenge that archives have responded to predominantly through increasing access to recordings and associated metadata online: encountering issues of ownership and copyright law whilst developing best practice for dealing with cultural sensitivities [ref. WIPO].<sup>3</sup> However the main digital pathways created through the internet remain of limited use to those outside the western hemisphere. In response the World and Traditional Music section at the British Library has tried different methods to increase access and engagement for people across the world to the recordings held in the archive. One such method is the practice of ‘digital reconnection’.

This paper reports on the ‘digital reconnection’ project initiated by the Music Museum of Nepal, which

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<sup>1</sup> Memory of the world register, accessible via <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-4/historic-ethnographic-recordings-1898-1951-at-the-british-library/>. Last accessed 15 December, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Nomination form for wax cylinders, accessible via [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination\\_forms/Uk%20ethnographic.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination_forms/Uk%20ethnographic.pdf) Last accessed 15 December, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> [ftp://ftp.wipo.int/pub/library/ebooks/wipopublications/wipo\\_pub\\_758efs.pdf](ftp://ftp.wipo.int/pub/library/ebooks/wipopublications/wipo_pub_758efs.pdf), see UNESCO PUBLICATION No. CLT/CIC/98/1, ISBN 92-805-0755-9, UNESCO 1998. WIPO PUBLICATION No. 758(EIF/S) ISBN 92-805-0755-9 WIPO1998. Reprinted 2001.

provides an ideal model for future reconnection projects illustrated by the reciprocal nature of knowledge exchange. The accompanying film contemplates the potential impact of reconnecting people with recordings through outreach engagement in the country of origin. Together they consider the importance of early sound recordings, for researchers and source communities, for the understanding of history.

## WHAT IS 'DIGITAL RECONNECTION'?

As archives move towards releasing more objects online, the **value** of the digital copy might be seen to have transformed the recording from a unique object to **own** to something that has a greater value as a source of **exchange**. Given the non-commercial nature of this exchange, the greatest value these recordings can be exchanged for is arguably **knowledge**.

Digital reconnection as proposed in this paper – starts with an agreement and the deposit in a physical institution of a digital copy of a collection that we hold in our archives in the British Library in London. While understanding that digital pathways have limited access for much of the global community, this proposal begins from the recommendation that there is a need to deposit copies, usually as access audio files such as mp3s, in physical institutions in countries where internet availability is limited. This is just the first stage of the 'reconnection' process.

The second stage of the reconnection process begins the revitalisation of those recordings through the elicitation of new knowledge related to the recordings. As the word **connection** suggests, this marks the beginning of a reciprocal relationship with a clear aim to develop pathways to knowledge. Engaging with communities whose rich cultural heritage provides a resource for scholars and communities worldwide allows archives to reconnect communities with their cultural heritage both in the home and diaspora communities. The possibility for resulting knowledge exchange heralds a new era in 'understanding cultures' through augmented documentation of archival material by indigenous cultures.

The British Library's identity is aligned with the understanding that it provides access to the World's Knowledge – therefore representation in the annals of the Library ensure those cultures are given equal weight for the traditions they represent and ensures access to researchers and diaspora communities, on-site at the British Library. The initial exchange of documentation sets the scene for a successful collaboration and it is important to establish the fact that through this collaboration the indigenous perspective on cultural heritage is communicated to the rest of the world through the British Library online catalogue.

## GUIDELINES FOR RECONNECTION

The relationship between the British Library and the institute facilitating the reconnection project is therefore a key to the reconnection process, as Dr Janet Topp Fargion states: "The aim of reconnection is to make contents of collections available for educational purposes to 'cultural heritage communities', wherever they are in the world whose traditions and performances are represented on carriers or in files held at the BL. The aim is to collaborate with an institution with good reach within the community so that recordings do not languish on shelves / servers. This may be a museum, teaching institution, or library / archive for example. In some cases, recordings may be given to individuals who are conducting research within the community based on the recordings or who has particularly strong connections with the community and can act as a 'broker' between the individual and the BL." (Topp Fargion, 2017).

## WHY PHYSICAL AND NOT JUST ONLINE?

The reality of internet availability outside of the Western hemisphere results in 'accessibility for all' being in reality for only a very few. By making a digital copy available in the country of origin the potential for source communities to access these recordings increases. By connecting with the

communities whose cultures are documented the potential to learn more about the indigenous perspective on the content is enabled.

In the case of ethnographic recordings which need consultation with ‘cultural heritage’ communities over issues of sensitivity and suitability, collaboration is an essential part of any process which may lead to dissemination of recordings.

The advantages of developing relationships within a country increase the potential for further engagement to develop interaction and outreach with archival materials and to facilitate reciprocal knowledge exchange. The role of ‘engagement’ in the reconnection process can have a significant impact in terms of sustainability of musical expressions (Titon, 2009).

## HISTORICAL PREMISE FOR ‘RECONNECTING MATERIAL’

The practice of ‘reconnecting’ collections is in no way a new concept. Throughout its history the British Library has operated a ‘donor copy’ element of the ‘Transcription request form’ to cater for family members requesting copies of recordings featuring artists or interviewees. The larger scale requests for copies of entire collections by communities as featured in the case of the ‘Torres Straits Island’ cylinders (McLiven, 2017) and the Ugandan Makerere University (Nannyonga-Tamusuza & Weintraub 2012) are just two to quote from a list that is continually added to. These large-scale requests present new opportunities for collaboration between international institutions and archives in the pursuit of knowledge exchange and engagement.

## CASE STUDY: A MUSIC MUSEUM OF NEPAL

In 2011 the Music Museum of Nepal (MMN) contacted the World and Traditional Music section looking for recordings of Nepalese material in British Library collections. They were particularly interested in filmed footage and sound recordings made by the Dutch ethnomusicologist Dr Arnold Adriaan Bake in British Library collection C52, who recorded in Nepal in the 1930’s and again in the 1950’s.

Arnold Adriaan Bake [1899-1963], was a Dutch ethnomusicologist noted as a primary pioneer of the discipline and one of the foremost international academic experts on South Asian music. His recordings on wax cylinder, tefi-band, reel-to-reel tape and silent films from successive field trips, were made throughout South Asia with principle studies in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka, in 1925-29, 1931-34, 1937-46 and 1955-6. Bake’s recordings document religious music found throughout South Asia, where he recorded festivals, weddings, funerals, religious practices and recitations. Arnold Bake created a unique document of the religious music of Nepal through his films of the annual festivals which was where he found many of the musicians he would record for his research. In his films he also represented a changing culture and built landscape that would in part vanish in the earthquakes of 1933.

Through an agreement with the Music Museum of Nepal the British Library deposited digital copies of Nepalese material in the Museum: **Wax cylinder recordings (digital file: 72 mp3), 16mm film copies (digital file: 37.mov), Reel-to-reel (digital file: 96 mp3).**

The existing documentation for some of the material was sparse in places, sometimes confusing, yet with painstaking effort they honoured the exchange by returning new detailed documentation to the British Library which has now been added to the Sound and Moving Image catalogue (SAMI). They identified festivals and rituals which had disappeared, those that were rarely performed such as the Maruni dance and highlighted where material would be considered to be culturally sensitive, e.g. in the films of carya - sacred and secret tantric hand gestures - which Bake was able to access through his privileged position as a foreign interlocutor.



**FIGURE 1: Screenshot from 16mm film copies (digital file: 37.mov) from the Nepal Music Museum.**

As a result of the success of the exchange, The British Library in collaboration with the Music Museum of Nepal developed a research project to investigate the impact of the repatriation of digital copies in 2012 of the

Arnold Bake collection of Nepalese music, (audio and visual) recordings on the Nepalese communities it sought to document in 1934, and 1955-56. Using film as a means to investigate the ‘impact of repatriation’; the resulting footage provides a record of the results which question the changing role of archives in the transmission of heritage documents of performance and cultural tradition.

The research was conducted in two stages:

**Stage 1: The first stage investigated the role of the collaborative institution and the nature of its engagement activities, in order to establish the ability of the institution to facilitate ‘reconnection’ on a national scale and the relevance of cultural heritage material.** Research was conducted with the support of the Music Museum of Nepal, in November – December 2014, using observational film techniques and fieldwork as a methodology to determine the following:

1. Relevance of cultural traditions in contemporary Nepalese Society: comparing Bake archive footage with contemporary footage of Nepalese calendrical events
2. Examples of access, reuse and dissemination of archival materials through engagement activities of Music Museum of Nepal at MMN [on-site educational activities, and use of archive material in the MMN by researchers accessing their own traditions documented by foreign interlocutors]
3. Outreach via the International Folk Music film festival, hosted by the NMM
4. Local versus International collaboration – knowledge exchange

The results of this research provide the basis for the written element of this report.

**Stage 2: The second stage investigated the impact of returning footage of a tradition documented by Bake in the 50’s directly to a community where a similar tradition has since ceased. Furthermore, exploring issues of copyright and circulation of cultural images circulated through**

**the web.** Research was conducted with the support of the Music Museum of Nepal, March-April 2017, using observational film techniques and fieldwork as a methodology to determine the following:

1. The impact of copyright laws on circulation of material [value – knowledge exchange]
2. The perception of communities on access [value – commodification of content]
3. The impact of sharing material from different communities within one country [physical] and www [digital]
4. The importance of reciprocal relationships between large institutions and local archives [exchange]
5. The impact of reconnecting – visibility for indigenous knowledge [status – recognition – privacy]

The results from the second trip produced results which can be seen in the film which accompanies this paper. As with any research and particularly that where observational film methods are used, other issues became

apparent during the course of the research. Certainly, national disasters such as the earthquake that hit Nepal in 2015 could not have been anticipated nor the subsequent blockade and fuel embargo but they threw into focus the value of ‘collaboration’ between national and international archives; the issue of ‘sustainability’ of exchange institutions and the lifecycle of digital items in the public realm.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEPAL MUSIC MUSEUM

The Music Museum of Nepal grew from a private collection of Nepali folk musical instruments started by Ram Prasad Kadel in 1995 which formed the foundations for The Nepali Folk Musical Instrument Museum (NFMIM) which was registered as a charity with the Nepal Government in 1997. In 2007 the collection was renamed as the Music Museum of Nepal and installed in premises at Tripureshwor Mahadev Temple where it remains today. “The Museum now holds a collection of 650 distinct Nepali folk musical Instruments. Over the years we have broadened our scope to encompass the rediscovery, conservation and promotion of the entire spectrum of Nepal’s traditional musical heritage.” (Nepal Music Museum, 2017).

Cultural traditions remain an extremely relevant part of Nepalese society. This can be observed in daily rituals and festivities that punctuate the Nepalese calendar. The Music Museum of Nepal (MMN) takes an active role in engaging with both the local community and international researchers, including the following activities:

- Musical training classes for both adults and children.
- Regular concerts e.g. featuring rare instruments or music of a particular area
- Publication of books, training manuals, audio CDs and DVDs
- The audiovisual recording of instrument makers, traditional musicians, singers, and dancers.
- Development of the museum as a facilitated, sophisticated musical resource centre with a comprehensive, archive, data base and library of video and audio recordings, books and manuscripts and music scores for the use of students and researcher workers.
- Providing study bursaries for talented young musicians.
- Forming international links with music institutions in other countries.
- Promoting music festivals and playing competitions in many districts of Nepal.
- The public exhibition of rare instruments at festivals and the demonstration of playing techniques.

The NMM also initiated the International Folk Music Film Festival in 2011 which continues to screen international films about Traditional Music and Culture and includes a programme specifically featuring Nepalese musical traditions and archive films about Nepalese cultural heritage (Film Festival NMM. 2014).



**FIGURE 2a and 2b: Scenes from the Film Festival of the NMM, 2014.**

The physical engagement with community and intergenerational national and international audiences at the Museum and the festival validated the role of the ‘local’ archive as an integral part in the ‘reconnection’ process.

## COLLABORATION

In developing partnerships between institutions, great and small, there is a need to define a joint purpose and aim. For the collaboration between the BL and the MMN, the primary goal was knowledge exchange. We supplied copies of material documenting Nepalese cultural heritage and they reciprocated with in depth detail about rituals and traditions that featured in the recordings and footage. The network of academics and practitioners who support the Music Museum of Nepal provide a rich resource for authentication of documentation and metadata relating to recordings. Including international academics alongside Nepalese academics and practitioners, the ability to cross reference with experts in Nepal provides a form of authentication beyond the scope of British Library internal resources. The information base includes people whose knowledge of these rituals proliferate their daily lives. The value of the personal account often described as ‘auto-ethnography’ has long been heralded in the Oral History section in the Sound Archive as a valued perspective on historical events. This form of authentication adds value to the resource. The documentation from the MMN was added to the British Library catalogue for Sound and Moving Image (SAMI) which is continually harvested and added to PRIMO the online catalogue accessed by anyone landing on the British Library website. This is the true advantage of ‘knowledge exchange’. Something that is reciprocal not flowing in a single direction. A genuine example of the British Library’s aim: *to work with partners around the world to advance knowledge and mutual understanding.*

The relationship between the British Library Sound Archive and the Music Museum of Nepal is one of symbiosis, each party brings something unique to the collaboration and through their cooperation new knowledge can evolve. Each institution enables different types of engagement with communities whilst continuing to observe the fundamental roles of an archive – operating as PROTECTOR / PRESERVER / STEWARD and ADVOCATE, providing sites where researchers and communities can access cultural heritage documents in all formats.



**FIGURE 3: Physical reconnection (picture by courtesy of Nepal Music Museum).**

The position of each party remains clear. The British Library continues to protect the cylinders in its environmentally controlled basements with high security. Therefore the original artefacts are in no way compromised. The responsibility that is bestowed in the exchange is towards the digital artefact and the contents therein.

During the course of communication about the collections the Music Museum discussed their own video and audio collections which were in need of digitisation and we advised them to apply for an Endangered Archives Programme grant. Their application for a pilot project was successful and the return path of indigenous materials created in Nepal for Nepalese by Nepalese began.

## IMPACT

The second part of this research investigated the impact of returning footage of a tradition documented by Arnold Bake in the 1950's directly to a community where a similar tradition has since ceased. The ritual was identified as part of the documentation process by the Music Museum of Nepal of the films by Dr Arnold Adriaan Bake [1899-1963]. This one short section of footage and parallel audio called the Shati Ghantu (Sati Ghatu) featured two small girls dancing slowly with their eyes closed in some form of a trance (Tingey, 1997).

The Shati Ghantu - a dance in remembrance of Queen Ambawati and King Pashramu; Queen Ambawati committed Sati (cremated herself on her King's funeral pyre). This dance takes place over several days (5 -7), beginning on the Chandi Purnima (full moon) of the month of Baisak (May approximately). It takes place in many parts of Nepal and is mainly perpetuated by Gurung, Magar, Dura, Kusunda, Kumal and Tamang ethnic groups. The dancers perform in a trance induced by a mantra. There are three different varieties of Ghantu,

Sati Ghantu, Kusunda Ghantu (variation with less ritual performed by the Kusunda ethnic group) and Baramase Ghantu (based on the same story but without ritual and only for entertainment). Notes provided by Music Museum of Nepal.



**FIGURE 4: Screenshot from the film: Shati Ghantu – a woman’s tale. (picture by courtesy of Nepal Music Museum).**

This story begins in the rural village of Jugedi some 50 miles west of Kathmandu in the Terai region of Nepal. The village is located along the main route from Kathmandu to Chitwan, the Narayangadh-Muglin road. The village is clustered around the road whose sound provides the rhythm throughout the day. When traffic thunders through, the sound dominates the village, but as the traffic subsides the soundscape is one of rural village life, with goats and cockerel, a small smattering of tea shops and a local school. The villagers are of mixed ethnicities including the Gurung community which used to practice Shati Ghantu.

The Music Museum of Nepal filmed the Shati Ghantu ritual here 9 years ago for the Music Museum archives. The villagers stopped performing the ritual about 6 years ago now but the Gurus and Ghatusaris still live in the village. In 2017 I returned to the village with Ram Prasad Kadel of the Music Museum of Nepal to screen the footage from the 1950s to an invited assembly of former Ghatusaris and village elders. We interviewed a female Guru Lalashree and a male Guru Suk Bahur about the ritual. Since the tradition was no longer practiced it was not possible to film the musical performance. Instead I was allowed to film the preparations for the ritual including the dressing of three ghatusaris.

The film focuses on the role of the women in the ritual, including the dressers, performers and community elders. The cultural knowledge is shared across genders and is part of a wider calendrical ritual tied to the rice harvest. However, the impact on the female community members and their role in society is significant.

The film focused on the following themes:

1. Impact of modernisation on village life - the road, education
2. The importance of the tradition to the girls, the community
3. Gender – traditional roles, learning through repetition
4. Power – copyright. Whose image is it anyway? The selfie generation has to be made aware.
5. Revitalisation of traditions (through sharing of archive material): continuation of Gurung tradition (in diverse community as a matter of cultural identity)

I have presented this paper and film together to illustrate the ability of the audiovisual image to reveal meanings that go beyond the limits of text. The results are for the viewer to discern.

The Music Museum of Nepal gave me immense support throughout both the research trips. Ram Prasad Kadel and Norma Blackstock, members of the Music Museum of Nepal, musicians and performers in Nepal gave access with unending generosity. For this I am truly grateful.



## LESSONS LEARNED

**Collaboration:** The unfortunate events in Nepal in 2015-2016 underlined the value of collaboration between local and international Archives. The British Libraries stewardship of the original recordings kept the heritage documents of performance and cultural tradition stable and discoverable to the communities who are rediscovering their heritage. It is in partnership with local institutions through knowledge exchange these recordings take on new meaning, new life and their legacy begins again....

**Knowledge exchange:** In order to create a truly just and balanced society and to develop a greater understanding of each other, the exchange of knowledge and ideas is a necessity. By reconnecting, originating communities' indigenous knowledge enters the field of study to enable other cultures to learn about Traditional Knowledge beliefs and perceptions and TK holders acquire a fair representation in the pantheon of cultural traditions, leading to the furthering of understanding of human nature.

**Engagement:** In June 2017 the villagers of Jugedi contacted the Music Museum of Nepal to let them know that this year they had decided to begin the Sati Ghatu ritual again. This was not for the purposes of any outsider documenting the event but for the community.

**The importance of access to historic material we can conclude:** For reasons of history – cultural, imperial, mercantile – our collection is perhaps the most international of its kind anywhere in the world, with rare or unique items reflecting all major language groups and faith traditions. **We have both growing opportunity and growing responsibility to use the potential of digital to increase access for people across the world to the intellectual heritage that we safeguard.**

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## **AUDIOVISUAL SUPPLEMENT**

**AEMR-EJ02-Isobel Clouter ex1**