

5. Digitizing collections of musical instruments in Africa

The PRIMA Project

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In 2013–2014 the Musical Instruments Museum (mim) in Brussels worked with Musée de la Musique (MMO) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and the Musée Panafricain de la Musique (MPM) in Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo, to build digital inventories of their musical instrument collections. The purpose of this digitization campaign has been to provide a more complete view of musical world heritage by incorporating not only African instruments but also the African terminology that describes these instruments, into international research databases. The cooperative digitization work has helped bring attention to valuable but not easily accessible collections. Both the musical patrimony held in African museums and the metadata they provide are proving to be valuable sources for understanding musical world heritage.

In November 2013 and July 2014 digital inventories were made in situ of the collections of respectively the Musée de la Musique (MMO) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and the Musée Panafricain de la Musique (MPM) in Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo. The inventories were published online in February 2015, thus providing an opportunity for users worldwide to discover a segment of musical heritage otherwise

not easily accessible.¹ The publication was the outcome of a close collaboration between both the African museums and the Brussels Musical Instruments Museum (mim), focusing on the continuous exchange of information and know-how in the fields of (ethno)musicology, restoration and conservation, musical heritage, linguistics and digital collections management.

The network

The campaigns took place in the frame of a network between both the African museums and the mim, formalized in 2012 in the PRIMA project (Projet de Réseau International des Instruments de Musique Africains), funded by the Science Policy Department of the Belgian government.² The objective of the network project is to contribute to the valorization and conservation of African musical cultural heritage, to the awareness of its importance on both local and global levels, and possibly to the quality of ethnomusicological metadata in western collections. Digitizing collections in Africa enables access to music patrimony assembled and kept by African museum collaborators, storage of rich metadata those collaborators have provided and creation of a shared platform of information.

The MMO, inaugurated in 1999 as an offspring of the Ouagadougou Musée National, is a dynamic museum focusing on dissemination of Burkinabe patrimony through exhibitions and workshops for children (Fig. 1).³ Efforts are being made to considerably improve the conditions of conservation. The museum houses 232 musical instruments, which have been gathered since the early 1960s, in order to offer a survey of

¹ For the online publication of the Brazzaville and Ouagadougou collections, see www.carmenis.be/eMuseumPlus?service=WebAss&url=Partner/Partner.html&contentType=text/html and www.mimo-international.com.

² See www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/Call/ESF_Res_2015_en.stm. The International Networking of the Federal Scientific Institutions programme aims at offering a framework for structured cooperation with research institutions in the non-profit sector in the BRICS countries, Vietnam and the countries of Africa. The African representatives of the PRIMA project are Jean-Paul Koudougou, mentioned above; Dr Honoré Mobonda, director of the MPM, scientific director of FESPAM; Jacqueline Babindamana, museum assistant of the MPM.

³ See <http://ouaga-ca-bouge.net/Musee-de-la-Musique-la-musique;www.burkinafaso-cotedazur.org/musee-musique>. In April 2016 two of the Ouagadougou collaborators, Raso Ouilli and Abel Badolo, were sent to the mim in Brussels for a month's observation training in the Education Department.



FIGURE 1. Musée de la Musique, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, November 2013. © mim

musical culture in Burkina Faso. As of 2017, 26 out of the 60 populations of Burkina Faso are represented. Instruments are collected mainly during missions in the country, during which data on builders, musicians, terminology, localization, population and function are carefully assembled.⁴ A central register lists the objects with their metadata.

The MPM in Brazzaville has a collection of 188 instruments from all over Africa (Fig. 2). In 1976 the initiative was taken by several African ministers of culture to organize a biennial African music festival (FESPAM), hosted by the Republic of the Congo. One of the objectives of the festival was to create a museum in charge of the conservation and promotion of African musical instruments. It was said that “the constitutive elements of African musical patrimony were threatened with disappearance and deterioration” and that “action was needed” (Kouloufoua, 2012, p. 23). Shortly after the founding of the museum in 2000, national missions took place, aimed at collecting items from the 73 different ethnic groups. At the biennial FESPAM, delegates of participating African countries continue to donate instruments that are representative of their culture. A card-index system contains information on makers, users (musicians), sellers, terminology, function, dates and places. However, due to a difficult organizational situation and unfavourable conservation circumstances, this unique and valuable heritage is under threat.

The mim in Brussels, founded in 1877, holds a rich collection of musical instruments from all over the world. African instruments were among the first pieces to enter the museum. In past years it acquired important know-how on digitizing data on musical instruments. All its 9,848 objects have been published with their metadata in the online catalogue of the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH), of which the mim is part. The mim is also a member of the

⁴ Unfortunately most of the original inventory cards have disappeared. It is assumed they were accidentally burned during a clean-up.

consortium of the international digitization project of MIMO (Musical Instrument Museums Online), funded by the European Commission, which gives access to the musical instrument collections of museums in Europe, Asia and Africa.⁵ The PRIMA project closely collaborates with the MIMO project, following the international guidelines set out by MIMO on the level of classification, object names and criteria for photographic digitization and publishing its results on the MIMO portal.

African instruments and musical world heritage

The main rationale of the digitization campaigns in Africa is to provide a more complete view on musical world heritage. African lutes, fiddles, lyres, harps, flutes, xylophones, lamellophones and drums offer fascinating insights in the making, history and acoustics of musical instruments. There is a spectacular range and diversity of African musical instruments, including instruments quite unique in appearance and conception, such as the bow lute and the lamellophone, which have no real equivalent outside Africa. The mim collection alone counts 220 different types of African instruments. Recent research has disclosed that no less than 35 categories of fiddles exist in sub-Saharan musical praxis, African bowed instruments hardly ever having played a substantial role in ethnomusicological studies (Hulshof, 2013).

Africa has long been the site of various forms of cultural contact with Asia and Europe, resulting in the assimilation and adaptation of ‘foreign’ instruments, such as the one-string fiddle and possibly the xylophone, and in the material presence of many western musical instruments in modern Africa (Agawu, 2003, p. 5). But African instruments also influenced the development of other instruments. A famous example is the West African spike lute, taken along by black slaves when they were shipped to the New World from the seventeenth century onwards. It was the predecessor of the banjo, musical icon of deep southern American heritage (see Jägfors, 2004; Pestcoe and Adams, forthcoming; Willaert, forthcoming). A century before, another West African spike lute developed into the *hajhuj* of the Gnawa, the Moroccan brotherhood whose members are descendants of black slaves transported from West Africa during the Arab trans-Saharan slave trade (Goodman-Singh, 2002). Among other well-known examples are the Brazilian *berimbau* musical bow, agogo bells, and marimba xylophone, inherited directly from the Africans.

African instruments played an important, albeit thankless, role in nineteenth-century organology dominated by

⁵ See www.mimo-international.com.



FIGURE 2. Musée Panafricain de la Musique, Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, July 2014. Exhibition room during inventory work. © mim

evolutionist thinking. African instruments were thought to mirror the embryonic state of many European instruments, to be surviving fossils of a remote past. For example, the African arched harp was said to help to demonstrate the gradual progress of a rudimentary musical bow to a highly perfected and sophisticated western harp; it bore witness to what harps looked like at the very beginning of civilization (Engel, 1874, p. 5). Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841–1924), the first curator of the Musée Instrumental of Brussels, suggested that

as it is impossible to discover species representing the origins of European manufacture of musical instruments, [one has] to procure instruments of populations where civilization has remained at a standstill. In Africa one can find the origin of all our instruments in an entirely primitive state.⁶

It should be noted that as late as 1954 Percival Kirby's article on 'primitive music' in the *Grove's dictionary* abounded with examples from Africa; there one could encounter 'the musical practices of prehistoric man' (Kirby, 1954, cited in Agawu, 2003, p. 26).

However, renowned pioneers in nineteenth-century organology such as Mahillon, appreciated the acoustical particularities of specific African instruments more than their 'historical' value. Discussing a Congolese harp-zither he acquired in 1888, Mahillon discerned "an intuition for acoustic laws" in African instrument makers, "who have augmented the sonority of the instrument by fixing a hollow calabash just beneath the bridge in the middle of the stick".⁷ He discovered that the Congolese flute inv. 1835 of his collection, made of the top of an elephant tusk, "is an

application of an acoustical principle which is neglected nowadays, notwithstanding its extreme importance": a conical tube, closed at the small end, acoustically behaves like an open cylindrical tube.⁸ He was impressed by the sonority of the balafon, with its calabashes under each lamella and its vibrating spider cocoons covering the small opening in each calabash, leading, he said, to a very charming effect and to be recommended to any European builder of xylophones (Mahillon 1880, vol. II, pp. 60–61; Mahillon 1882, p. 285). Mahillon did not consider African instruments objects to be exposed purely because of some aesthetic, exotic value – as for instance did happen with the famous Mangbetu harps in many western museums. In Mahillon's opinion, African instruments were vital to a scientific, representative and authoritative collection of musical instruments because of their intrinsic organological value.

Early in the twentieth century several museums were founded in Central, East and South Africa. They all originated on the instigation of western colonizers, and were meant for western visitors.⁹ It must be noted that most objects of worth were taken away to be put on display in western museums. The idea of keeping African patrimony for African people seems to have not occurred. Still today, even in the eyes of some Africans, museum visits remain a foreign affair. It is telling that Jean-Paul Koudougou, former curator of the MMO and current director of the Musée National in Ouagadougou, relates how an African museum visitor still may receive the comment from his compatriots: "that one, he thinks he is white".¹⁰ However, since political independence, patrimony has become an important vehicle

⁶ Mahillon, 1878, p. ii: "Dans l'impossibilité de retrouver les spécimens de l'enfance de la facture européenne, [on doit] se procurer les instruments des peuples où la civilisation est restée stationnaire. Là, en effet, se retrouve l'origine de tous nos instruments: en Afrique, à l'état tout à fait primitif". See also Willaert (2012, pp. 69–70).

⁷ Mahillon (1895, p. 309): "voici une très curieuse harpe des Pahouins... extrêmement ingénieuse dans sa fabrication rudimentaire... Et, chose curieuse, qui dénoterait chez ces indigènes une certaine intuition des lois de l'acoustique, on a augmenté la sonorité de l'instrument en le fixant, par son milieu, au-dessus d'unealebasse creuse qui forme boîte de résonance". See also his description of the instrument in Mahillon (1893, vol. II, inv. 872).

⁸ Mahillon (1893, vol. III, inv. 1835): "Ce qui ajoute à l'intérêt de l'instrument, c'est qu'il nous offre l'application d'un principe dont la science acoustique s'est peu occupé jusqu'à aujourd'hui malgré son extrême importance: un tuyau conique fermé au sommet du cône et agissant, par suite, lorsqu'il est mis en vibration à sa partie large ouverte, absolument comme un tuyau ouvert de même longueur".

⁹ E.g. the Uganda Museum originated in 1908 from collections assembled by the British District Commissioners; the National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi was started by the East Africa and Uganda Natural History Society in London in 1909. For a short overview of the early African museums and their founders, see www.britannica.com/topic/history-398827#ref608916.

¹⁰ Information from Jean-Paul Koudougou, during the first workshop of the PRIMA project in Brussels, June 2013.

for the Africans to anchor their cultural, intellectual and social identities. Neither the pan-African collection in Brazzaville nor the collection in Ouagadougou holds instruments imported from western countries. While African museums as such are in concept western-inspired institutions, their emergence being the result of the encounter with Europe, they focus on African traditional patrimony. The inventories do not include European violins, trumpets, clarinets, oboes, saxophones and pianos. True, limited resources may account for the absence of European harpsichords and organs, but even the western guitar, ever present in modern African music, does not feature in the collections of Ouagadougou and Brazzaville.

Many collections in Africa, however, remain hidden from the rest of the world. The means for widespread valorization and dissemination policies are not always available. Musical heritage in several African countries falls prey to neglect. Most local governments do consider musical heritage an attractive advertisement of African identity, but they do not always feel the need to support heritage projects financially. Consequently, the main sources of access to African patrimony are still to be found in western collections. Being selected by western collectors, however, the representative value of these collections may be questioned; objects have often been chosen for their aesthetic value and/or their exotic 'otherness'. Moreover, information on ethnomusicological objects in western museums is often incomplete and biased. According to Kofi Agawu, a renowned Ghanaian musicologist, "even material objects like musical instruments, which seem to have an objective, measurable existence, and which can therefore be described more or less accurately, betray ways of naming that the [western] researcher brings to his or her work. To describe a drum as a 'membranophone' is to use a term that Africans do not normally use" (Agawu, 2003, p. 44). Detailed information on local names, builders, musicians, places and dates is most often lacking in western displays. This leaves many of the African objects in an isolated situation, closed up in their old colonial status of static, 'primitive', dusty, nameless and alienating objects. To provide correct and full data on local names, places, dates, makers and populations is crucial for a respectful approach to ethnographic objects.

The campaigns

The first PRIMA digitization campaign took place in the MMO from 10 to 21 November 2013, the second one in the MPM from 31 July to 13 August 2014. While the first campaign was efficiently organized by the local partners (Fig. 3–4), the second faced organizational difficulties. In the absence of a working room within the building of the MPM, a photo studio was established outside, daily set up and broken down (see below).

All restoration and encoding tasks took place in the open air, with temperatures up to 30 °C and biting insects all around (Fig. 5–6). Notwithstanding the unusual working conditions, the collection was successfully digitized.

Both collections were encoded with metadata stemming from the existing manuscript inventories. The collection management system (CMS) of the mim (Museum Plus, from Zetcom) has been used as a metadata model. About 40 record fields have been encoded for each object, including data on inventory numbers, object names, production (author, culture, date, place), acquisition (actor, date, place, way of acquisition, price), use (musician, culture, place, date), local function, classification, dimensions, materials used, inscriptions, current localization, state of conservation of the object and inventory sources. All the African records are integrated in the mim CMS, as 'external collections' of partners. It is a dynamic inventory, regularly updated with new information provided by the African partners, and the data of the online catalogue, carmentis.be, are renewed frequently.

Documentary Photography

The photographs taken were aimed at objectively documenting the physical appearance (construction and materials) of the instruments in the two collections.¹¹ It was not the purpose to make artistic, sensual or 'in situ' contextualized images. As we did not know the conditions under which we would be photographing, we prepared for all eventualities. We took two cameras (a Nikon D300 and a D200); three lenses (a wide-angle zoom Nikon 17–35 mm, a medium-range zoom Nikon 24–120 mm and a fixed-angle Nikon 105 mm macro); black, neutral grey and white rolls of background paper and stands for hanging the paper; two Broncolor studio flash lights (miniplus C200) and their adjustable stands with soft box and spot light attachments; stands with a cross bar (and nylon fishing line of various diameters) for instruments that required suspension; and various clamps. In addition, we brought the usual material to be found in a photo bag: electronic light meter, grey scale and colour scale charts, and various filters, including a polarising filter to limit the reflections of shiny instruments, as well as numerous memory cards. Taking two cameras was important, not only to have one as a backup, but also to avoid having to change lenses in possible dusty conditions, which would risk dirtying the digital sensor chip.

Under the conditions in Brazzaville photographing outside provided the best possibilities of light and offered space for a good working distance from the subject. However, there were inconveniences, including changing light, wind and

¹¹ I would like to thank Simon Egan, photographer of the Brazzaville campaign, for providing me with the information for this section.



FIGURE 3. Conservation and restoration work at the Musée de la Musique, Ouagadougou, November 2013. © mim



FIGURE 4. Photo studio at the Musée de la Musique, Ouagadougou, November 2012. © mim

sand flies. The natural daylight was supplemented by our studio flash lights.

We used the MIMO digitization standard as our guide to photographing.¹² Instruments, after superficial cleaning, were presented to the photographer in groups determined by type and size. This minimized the need to modify the lighting. We took a minimum of two views per instrument (usually many more). Although we had different colour backgrounds, we only used white, which was an extra-large roll (3.2 m), essential for the long pygmy drums. Instruments that are obviously 'grounded', such as certain types of drums, were placed on the paper. Those that are held, such as side-blown horns, were suspended in a position as close to the playing position as possible. Photos were transferred from the memory cards to a computer (and to an external hard drive) after each shoot (that is, before lunch and each evening). The images were checked to make sure they were in focus and that each instrument

was sufficiently documented. After returning to Belgium, we 'lightly' treated the images in Lightroom 2.7 and Photoshop CS5. Treatment mostly comprised removing fishing lines and stains to the background papers.

The results

The results of both the campaigns in Brazzaville and Ouagadougou are manifold:

- There is worldwide access to the complete collections of the MMO and the MPM. New navigation possibilities in the RMAH online catalogue enable easy consultation. The new African data are also harvested by the international MIMO network, where they are published in eight languages (see fn1).
- A total of 129 new African keywords have been added to the thesaurus of the RMAH online catalogue and to the MIMO thesaurus. Most of the newly added object names do not appear in authoritative reference works such as *The Grove dictionary of musical instruments* (Libin, 2014).
- The actors' list of both databases will be augmented with nearly 100 new names of African makers, collectors, musicians, donors and sellers.
- Insight has grown into the priorities of African museum professionals, including the provision of correct and extensive information on African cultural artefacts in western museums.
- Worldwide publication of the objects of the concerned collections with photos and detailed metadata will lead to better protection against theft and loss.
- The success of conservation (preservation, storage display) practices can be evaluated as the condition of each instrument is documented at a particular point in time.

¹² See www.mimo-international.com/documents/MIMO_Digitisation_Standard_v3.pdf.



FIGURE 5. Conservation and restoration work at the Musée Panafricain de la Musique, Brazzaville, August 2014. © mim

- The enlarged public character of the collections has put their need for adequate local management and safeguard on the local agenda. Especially in Brazzaville, the publication of the collection and the ample press attention for the campaign has confronted the management with the necessity of a healthy physical environment for their collections.
- Since all objects were taken out of the depots, the teams of both museums have used the opportunity to clean up and reorganize their storage rooms (Fig. 7).
- Digital archives have been formed. Should the collections physically disappear, source material will remain available.
- The project was well received. The digitization campaigns in Ouagadougou and Brazzaville attracted substantial attention in the local press (Compaore, 2015; Haro, 2015; *La Semaine*, 2014). When their collections went online, the African project partners reacted with enthusiasm, pride and emotion.

Challenges for further research and valorization

The inventories and their new vocabularies open paths for further valorization and research. The challenge exists in embedding instruments in a semantically, socially and (ethno)music-historically correct context, uniting as many metadata from different resources as possible, and in bringing these datasets together from local to global data structures without loss of meaning.

A better insight into the terminology, and more specifically the etymological characteristics of African instruments, will help to disclose the functions of the instruments within the community and the relationships between them. Correct local object name data improve the valorization of the collections. According to Agawu, placing our western terms and semantic data “in a wider pool of descriptive terms... might enhance its usefulness [and comprehension] and lessen its alienating effect” (Agawu, 2003, p. 44). Local names may include morphological and acoustical information and express perceptions of music and musical instruments, which previously remain hidden for researchers not familiar with the concerned languages. What is now called a ‘local’ name for an instrument is seldom merely the ‘translation’ in the local language. Examples abound. *Gangongo* is the Moosé word for ‘drum’; it does not refer to some exotic kind of Burkinabe drum used in a specific ‘ethnological’ context.¹³ Throughout West Africa the many terms employed to denote fiddles in local languages may most commonly be translated as ‘to rub’, referring to the way sound is generated (DjeDje, 2008, p. 28). The Gulmantché term *kowodigo silga* means ‘fiddle of the magpie’, referring to the specific timbre of this fiddle from the Gulmantché in Burkina Faso.¹⁴

¹³ Information obtained from Jean-Paul Koudougou and museum agent Emmanuel Bayala during the Ouagadougou campaign.

¹⁴ Information obtained from Jean-Paul Koudougou during the Ouagadougou campaign.



FIGURE 6. Photo studio at the Musée Panafricain de la Musique, Brazzaville, August 2014. © mim

The *mvoumvouri* is a horn of the Kongo–Bembe people in Congo–Brazzaville, *mvouri* meaning ‘antelope’, of whose horn the instrument is made.¹⁵ The *muyemba* lamellophone of the Chokwe people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola has two rows of plucked tongues, which also function as the hairstyle of the figure engraved on the wooden board; the traditional hairstyle of Chokwe women is called *uyemba* (Fig. 8) (Ganseman, 2008, p. 17).

We need to find ways to present the logics and similarities in terminology of musical instruments rather than confirming presupposed differences due to foreign-sounding labels. Making these connections will help musical

patrimony held in African museums, and the metadata they provide, to become wealthy sources for further research, and it will help broaden musical world heritage. Sharing information between African and western researchers, museum agents, musicians and instrument builders, and publishing it, is essential.

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¹⁵ Information obtained from Honoré Mobonda during the Brazzaville campaign.



FIGURE 7. Before, during and after the reorganization of the depot. Musée Panafricain de la Musique, Brazzaville, August 2014. © mim

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FIGURE 8. The muyemba lamellophone of the Chokwe people. © coll. F. and F. Boulanger-Bouhière, Brussels; photo: Simon Egan

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