

# Indexing traditional African musical instruments

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Outlines the procedures involved in indexing collections of traditional musical instruments, highlighting the particular problems of language and cultural context.

## Introduction

The University of South Africa has two musical instrument collections which contain traditional African musical instruments. The Unisa Music Instrument Collection (UMIC), housed in the Unisa Library, includes instruments from Asia, Europe and Africa. The African instruments are predominantly drums, sansas, ivory horns and musical bows. The purpose of this collection is to supplement and enhance the activities of the Department of Musicology, the Unisa Transnet Music Foundation and the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology. The other collection is housed in the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology on the main campus in Pretoria.

There are two differences between the collections.

- The UMIC collection represent Africa as a whole while the focus of the anthropological collection is mainly South Africa, and Southern Africa to a lesser extent.
- The UMIC instruments are exhibited as kinds of musical instrument only; that is, they are not exhibited as a group of African musical instruments but are distributed so that drums are placed with all other drums, and so on. But in the anthropological collection they are exhibited in a cultural context, so that a particular instrument or group of instruments is exhibited together with the beadwork, costumes, utensils, arts and crafts, etc. of a specific ethnic group. The aim is to preserve the physical instrument as well as the information (oral history) connected to it.

Since both collections may be used for research, teaching, exhibitions, performances, publications, and so on, they need to be described (documented/catalogued) and indexed for information retrieval purposes. In both instances the Inmagic DB/Textworks system (textbase software with integrated image management) is used to organize the information. Apart from bibliographic detail, provision is also made for subject access and photographic images. Sound does not form part of this system and therefore sound recordings are stored separately. At this point in time the two databases are not integrated. The two collections are being described according to similar but different data structures (due to the focus of each collection), but they can access and search each other's database.

## Preparation for information retrieval

Three elements influence the preparation for information retrieval, namely *physical* (instruments themselves), *visual* (photographic images) and *audio* (sound). These elements are necessary for optimum information retrieval as well as for identification purposes. Once an instrument is received, its physical

condition is scrutinized for possible cleaning and/or restoration. Its completeness is also established. A colour photograph is taken for scanning into the system as well as for the administrative file. Other normal administrative activities are carried out, such as assigning an accession number, notation in an accessions register, etc. Only then can the instrument be catalogued and indexed. At this stage, sound recordings of each instrument have not yet been made. However, according to the use policy — 'use' in this context refers to playing the instrument for research or performance purposes — the researcher or performer must provide a sound recording to the Unisa Library.

## Indexing

Establishing the correct indexing terms requires a team effort. In the first place it is the responsibility of the collector (at the time of collecting the instrument) to find out what the particular instrument is called. This name is then compared to other similar names already in the database. If an instrument is not actively collected but is donated, identification may be difficult if no one recognizes it, if there are no other instruments of the same kind already in the collection, or if it is not accompanied by documentation. The indexer then has to consult various sources such as books (which almost always contain photographs), catalogues or indexes of other collections in the country, or an anthropologist or African music expert. In many cases instruments are readily identified — as to the specific kind of instrument — but the ethnic group or area from which it originates cannot always be established. Such a situation implies that the database is constantly updated with new information about the existing collection.

The following points are considered when indexing.

### *Indigenous (vernacular) names*

These names are used for indexing. Sometimes the same instrument has more than one name. For example, if it is played by both men and women, the one played by men will be named differently from the one played by women. If an instrument is used in a certain ceremony, it will have one name in the context of the ceremony, but if it is also used for entertainment, it will have another name. A specific instrument is described and indexed in the context of a particular group, but it has to be linked to other instruments of the same type and with different names. During a search in this field, the system collocates all names for the same instrument.

### *Regional variations*

Many ethnic groups make and play the same or similar instruments but name them differently. The names are not only different because of the different languages involved, but what

one ethnic group may name a whistle, another might call a flute. This calls for careful indexing, otherwise confusion may result.

#### *Spelling variations*

Spelling variations for the names of instruments often occur within the same language and must be taken into account when indexing and creating the necessary cross-references. The indexer must also keep in mind that compilers of sources on African musical instruments use their own preferred spellings.

#### *English-language terms*

These are used for all instruments (both databases are in English). These are mainly popular or 'less official' musical terms; for example, 'musical bow', 'drum', 'flute', 'horn', 'violin', and so forth. At the same time *international terminology* is also used, such as 'chordophones', 'membranophones', 'aerophones' and 'idiophones'.

#### *The meaning of indigenous names*

This also plays a role in the naming of instruments. Sometimes the name does not describe what kind of instrument it is and cannot be translated into an English music term. The English terms for naming instruments are not always descriptive enough to express the name of a particular instrument. One cannot merely translate the indigenous terms into English since the result will often not be a term for an instrument — indigenous names mostly have symbolic meanings or are descriptive. For example, a certain drum only has the name 'big cow'; others are named after animal noises, trees or plants; and some simply named 'the chief's drum', the 'rain-making drum' or 'the signal drum'. All the different names are considered when indexing; for example, 'drums', 'membranophones', 'big cow', 'moradu' (vernacular for 'big cow'), 'ingungu' (named after the snort of the gnu), 'Moropa' (named after the Marula tree), 'Isiguba' (meaning gourd or calabash), 'chief's drums', 'rain-making drums' and 'signal drums'. The indexer has to do extensive research before an instrument is satisfactorily described and indexed.

#### **Problems**

The indexing of a traditional musical instrument collection is not only hampered by the fact that the indexer might have little or no knowledge of certain indigenous languages, but also by factors such as the following.

#### *Lack of sources*

If printed sources, the anthropologist or the African music expert cannot help, the only authority left is the spokesperson from whom the instrument was collected. He must be trusted to impart the correct information about the name(s), making, playing and use of the instrument. If you are lucky, he will perform and a sound recording can be made. This of course refers to active collecting.

#### *Oral tradition*

Many aspects of traditional instruments have never been recorded. Information is handed down from generation to generation orally. Some information is also not to be imparted to foreigners. Again, the spokesperson or ethnic group has to be consulted, and secret information respected.

#### *Lack of authority files*

There is no standard national indexing system for African musical instruments that can be applied; therefore a system has

to be developed while indexing the collections. Standard indexing practices are adhered to as far as possible. An authority file for the indigenous names should emerge from the two indexing efforts and might form the basis of an indexing system for this kind of instrument in Southern Africa. There are quite a number of useful published sources but there is seldom agreement about the exact spelling or correct name. The same applies to other African musical instrument collections (private or institutional) in the country.

#### *Many languages*

Apart from the main language divisions in South Africa — that is, Venda, Tsonga, Pedi, Basotho, Sotho/Tswana, Nguni (North and South Ndebele, Swazi, Zulu, Xhosa), there are also many regional variations or dialects within these groups. If Namibia and the wider Southern Africa are included, many more are added. The University of South Africa has a large African languages department but, as can be expected, all African languages cannot be represented. In many cases, the data field for vernacular names has to be left vacant.

#### *Integration of databases and database formats*

As already mentioned, the two databases at Unisa are not integrated. One of the reasons for this is that the Library collection includes Asian and European instruments. In addition, although the same software is used, the data structures for the two collections differ because of the difference in focus. Other collections in the country, if they are computerized, use different or incompatible software, or they are in card catalogue format.

#### *'Hybrid' instruments*

Some instruments cannot be placed into a certain group since they have characteristics of more than one instrument. It is also difficult to name them. They form groups of their own, such as the *gora* (a bow which is plucked) or the *ramkie* (which is a kind of violin-guitar).

#### **Grouping of instruments**

There are various groupings of African musical instruments. The one presented here is developmental, or from the simple to the complex:

- Rattles and clappers
- Drums
- Xylophones and sansas
- Bull-roarers and spinning disks
- Horns and trumpets
- Whistles, flutes and vibrating reeds
- Goras*
- Stringed instruments
- Violins and the *ramkie*
- European instruments played by ethnic groups

These groups are not all represented in both collections. As can be seen from the list, *gora* and *ramkie* cannot be translated into English. In the description field, however, they can be described in detail. One of the above groups is illustrated further below (please note that the list is not complete).

#### *Naming of drums*

- BT** Drums
- Membranophones
- Percussion instruments

- Untuned instruments
- RT** Ceremonial drums
- Cylinder drums
- Friction drums
- Goblet drums
- Signal drums
- Single-headed drums
- Talking drums
- Triple-headed drums
- Two-headed drums
- NT** *ingqongqo* (Xhosa)
- ingungu* (Zulu)
- intambula* (Swazi)
- isigubu* (Zulu)
- mantshomane* (Tsonga)
- moropa* (Pedi)
- moshupiane* (Pedi)
- munshintshi* (Tsonga)
- murumba* (Venda)
- ngoma* (Venda)
- ongoma* (Herero)

#### Other aspects regarding drums

There are also other aspects of drums that must be considered when describing or indexing them.

#### Sets of drums

A set of drums is always kept and used together. The Venda have a set which they call *The herd* and it consists of five drums ranging from the biggest to the smallest, each with its own name: *moradu*, *pau*, *maditsi*, *todiane* and *bo-pampane*. This set is used in secret ceremonies such as divination.

#### Number of players

A single drum may have one player or more than one; or, more than one drum can play together. Sometimes drummers take turns on the same drum, or each on a different drum.

#### Method of playing

The hands are mostly used, but sticks and beaters are also applied. A kind of pommel is also made of a ball of leather at the end of a stick. Drums stand on the ground and if the drum is high, the player also stands; it can also be straddled; held between the knees with the player in a sitting position; carried under the arm or around the neck on a thong. The size and number of heads (membranes) prescribe the playing position (see Fig. 1).

#### Gender of players

Certain drums are only played by either men or women, boys or girls. The boys do not play the drums of the men, nor do the girls play the drums of the women. Each has his/her own type of drum. Here also arises the problem of variations of the same kind of drum, with the accompanying different names.

#### Societal position of the player

The chief has his own drum and will not share it with others. The same goes for the *inyanga* or *sangoma*. In most ethnic groups the oldest woman has a very special position — she also has her own drum.

#### Other

The shield and spear of the warrior may be used like a drum (by beating with the spear on the shield which is made of stiff, hard



Fig. 1 A three-headed drum

animal skin). It is of course not meant to be a musical instrument. Likewise, the bow and arrow of the San is used like a musical bow (by stroking the bowstring with the arrow shaft).

#### Data fields

The following data fields are used for the UMIC collection:

- Accession number
- Name
- Classification (group)
- Vernacular
- Culture group
- Culture group place
- Material
- Colour
- Measurement (length or height)
- Description
- Use method
- Purpose
- Acquisition method
- Person
- Condition
- Completeness
- Authority
- Storage
- Date received
- Date accessioned
- Date documented

All these fields can be searched. UMIC has an executive committee which has compiled a documentation manual (for the above fields) and a policy document which include the collecting policy, the conservation policy, and conditions for loan and use.

The Museum collection uses more or less the same data fields, but has the following additional fields:

- Made by
- Measurements

length, width, height, diameter  
Weight  
Technique  
Treatment (restoration)  
Educational value (school children; ethical)  
Research potential  
Decoration  
Cross reference  
relational (costume)  
documentational (sources & documents)

## Conclusion

The Inmagic DB/Textworks system automatically creates indexes based on certain fields marked for machine indexing when creating the data structure. These indexes help the searcher to locate certain related information but do not show the relationships between terms or the links created. It is merely an alphabetical list of terms. By using certain utilities, the index can be printed or copied on disk in 'correct' index format.

All the fields in the data structures that may be searched must contain information in a standardized form. Words from these fields may be selected to become indexing terms; thus during the description phase possible indexing terms must be kept in mind. The best indexer for this task should have a mixture of anthropological, musical and information professional (e.g. librarian, cataloguer) background, as well as a good measure of museological knowledge.

In conclusion, it must be mentioned that these collections have an important research value, not only for South Africans but also for researchers from the rest of Africa or from abroad. The collections are still growing and more work has to be done — especially on the authority files.

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# Broadcasting on indexing

## Douglas Matthews

In the week beginning 21 June 1999 the BBC broadcast a series of five afternoon programmes on indexes and indexing, conducted by Christopher Bigsby of the University of East Anglia. Several months earlier I had been asked by the prospective producer of the series for some suggestions when she was drafting her scheme for submission, and so I was pleased when she telephoned me to say that her proposal had been agreed and the series was to be broadcast on Radio 4. She then asked whether I would be willing to take part in one of the programmes, which would take the form of a discussion between a biographer and an indexer. Although I have very little experience of broadcasting it seemed a good opportunity to raise the profile of our modest profession, and I consented. I was then asked to suggest an author with whom I had recently worked, and my nomination of Richard Holmes, the biographer of Coleridge, was eagerly accepted.

As with most radio these days, the broadcast was not live, but recorded, and not in a London studio but in the private house of Malcolm Bradbury, the novelist, who also participated because

