The links between safeguarding language and safeguarding musical heritage

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ABSTRACT

Like other forms of intangible heritage, traditional music cultures have been adversely affected by the major economic, social, and technological shifts of recent decades. The resultant changes in musical contexts, function, prestige, and modes of transmission have jeopardised the vitality and viability of many musical genres. Efforts to actively support the sustainability of endangered music heritage are developing, often in the context of the emerging field of 'applied ethno-musicology'. The more established field of language maintenance has conceptual, theoretical, and pragmatic parallels with safeguarding music, and these synergies are arguably of great importance to the swift development of effective mechanisms for supporting viable and vibrant music cultures. This paper identifies areas where the maintenance of a language holds the potential to inform pathways towards sustaining endangered musical heritage, and explores one of them in depth – the tension between documenting endangered languages and attempting to revitalise them.

Introduction

Arguably more than at any other point in history, recent decades have seen vast changes at a global level. Urbanisation, international tourism, mass media, and the advance of worldwide information networks are just a few of the factors that have led to deep and rapid economic, social and environmental transformations. In the case of music cultures, the shifts resulting from recent global change have sometimes resulted in new forms of creativity which enrich the musical health of the community, or enrich the genre itself (Kartomi and Blum 1994). A case in point is Finnish folk music, which since

the revival movement of the late 1960s has drawn on music genres as diverse as tango, West African *tama* and *sabar* drumming, Irish fiddle music and Saami *joiks*, re-contextualising all of them within the soundscapes of 'new' folk music (Ramnarine, 2003).

In other instances, however, the viability of music genres is compromised by the impact of global change. The precarious situation of the Tongan choreographed sung speech tradition, *lakalaka*, is partly attributable to the influence (and especially for younger people, the pull and the prestige) of European and Asian cultures (Kaeppler 2004). Open international borders and the ubiquity of new technologies and mass media add to the likelihood of small music cultures like *lakalaka* being displaced by more dominant ones – most saliently by western pop music (Mundy 2001). The increasingly widespread use of the internet, while it can facilitate the distribution and dissemination of music, raises significant issues with regard to copyright, intellectual property, artists' rights, and fair trade (World Intellectual Property Organisation 2009). In turn, trade liberalisation agreements may affect the right of governments to specifically support local music cultures (Letts 2003). Environmental factors also impact on culture: rising sea levels threaten the very existence of the Polynesian atoll, Takū, jeopardising simultaneously many aspects of its rich cultural heritage (Moyle 2007).

In addition to these external forces that may threaten a music culture, internal forces also play a role, though they too are often intimately linked with factors commonly attributed to 'globalisation'. As population drift to urban centres occurs, the cultural function and context of music is challenged. The urban settlement of traditionally nomadic Mongolian herding communities, for example, and the resulting loss of cultural and ritual contexts, was a primary reason for the atrophy of the string fiddle culture, *morin khurr* (UNESCO 2009). Similarly, entire sets of Maori songs (such as paddling songs and food-bearing songs) disappeared when they became functionally redundant due to changing ways of life (McLean 1996). Changes in modes of learning and teaching music, as when a traditional genre begins to be taught in a formal institution, may not prove viable for various reasons (Schippers 2005). Inter-generational transmission processes are weakened, performance contexts eliminated and prestige compromised. Where these shifts happen, musical heritage is placed in jeopardy.

Reasons to strengthen the vitality and viability of threatened music cultures are compelling. As with other intangible manifestations of culture, each music culture manifests a unique expression of what it is to be human, and for this reason alone the loss of a music culture is a loss to human heritage. Music, like language, dance, theatre, and other cultural forms, plays an important role in defining and building individual and collective identity; it strengthens social cohesion, both within and across cultures, it holds the potential to contribute to economic growth and it aids intercultural understanding and



Figure 1
Traditional musicians take part in a parade at Uyuni, Bolivia. Photo: Szymon Kochanski.



Figure 2
Norwegian Saami singer Mari Boine, who performed in connection with the launch of the *International Year of the World's Indigenous People* in 1992. Photo: UN/John Isaac.

co-operation (Letts 2006, Mundy 2001). Additionally, the inextricable link between music and other forms of intangible cultural heritage means that a loss of musical heritage may have wider repercussions for cultural vitality at large: it may also mean the loss of the unique language contained in song, for example, or of related theatre or dance forms.

Language – like music, a distinctive intangible manifestation and expression of culture – is impacted by similar forces within the global and local environment. The homogenising influence and pressure of the mass media on minority languages, for example, is a concern reflected in UNESCO's *Draft recommendation on the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace* (2001). When cultures come into contact with each other, whether through the mass media, tourism, travel, shifting demographics, or in other ways, speakers of a minority language may opt to shift to a more dominant one, attracted by new job opportunities or other promises of increased status in the community (Ladefoged 1992).

For other speech communities (or individuals), the shift to another language may not be a choice at all. Language shift may be driven by hegemonic or paternalistic attitudes towards minority or indigenous languages, such as the recent governmental policy enforcing school children in the Northern Territory (Australia) to speak English for the majority of the school day – a policy that threatens to break the already-weak transmission processes of some of the local Aboriginal languages. In extreme cases of cultural dominance, a 'superior' culture may intentionally act to annihilate a subordinate one. One such case of attempted 'linguicide' was the indigenous *Saami* language, which as late as the 1970s was banned in some schools in Finland as the 'language of the devil' (Ramnarine 2003, p.182).

With such a multitude of internal and external forces acting on smaller languages, the scale of the threat to their viability is egregious: of the 6,000-7,000 languages worldwide, linguists usually estimate that around half may be lost within the century (e.g. Krauss 1992). Concern about the urgency and the enormity of the task of addressing this grim predicament was agitated in the early 1990s by several landmark articles in the journal *Language* (foremost among them, Hale et al. 1992). Academic research into the global language crisis quickly gave rise to practical initiatives committed to documenting and revitalising threatened languages. Since then, the study of 'language maintenance' has led

to a considerable range of practical and theoretical approaches to reversing processes of endangerment. There are several examples of success, albeit to varying degrees. The Welsh language has in recent times gained significant strength in certain domains, due in part to bilingual education and increased political and cultural awareness of the language (Welsh Assembly Government 2003). Language loss has also been arrested in the case of Maori in New Zealand, though natural inter-generational transmission is yet to be restored (Spolsky 2003, p. 571), and speaker numbers of the highly threatened indigenous Hawaiian language have grown since the implementation of safeguarding measures in the 1970s (Hinton & Hale 2001, pp. 129-178). For some linguists, Hebrew is the only unmitigated example of a revitalised language (see Fishman 1991).

Beginning with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), numerous conventions, declarations, and treaties developed by international bodies amply demonstrate the widespread concern about protecting and promoting endangered intangible cultural heritage. In 2003 the great majority of the almost 200 Member States ratified the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the first UNESCO treaty that specifically underscores the importance of such heritage. Various other international instruments recommend means by which to promote, protect or safeguard cultures, or to protect rights of indigenous and minority peoples with regard to the use of their language and culture: the *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (United Nations High Commission for Human Rights 1966); the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* (UNESCO 1989); the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (UNESCO, 2005) and the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations High Commission for Human Rights 2007). While there is no such instrument relating specifically to music, several international agreements deal explicitly with languages, including the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (United Nations High Commission for Human Rights 1992) and the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (Assembly of the World Conference on Linguistic Rights 1996). Increasingly, the importance of the 'First Voice '– the voice of the very carriers and custodians of cultural heritage – has been recognised in and through these instruments, and in the general discourse surrounding safeguarding intangible heritage (Galla 2008).

In spite of the increased international awareness of the urgent need to address the large-scale threats to intangible cultural heritage as demonstrated by these various instruments, and by contrast with the efforts towards language maintenance, there has been comparatively little rigorous international research or



Figure 3
The public awareness of the global threat to endangered languages and other forms of intangible cultural heritage is increasing. Photo: *margoc*

activism relating to endangered musical heritage. Effective models and processes for safeguarding music cultures – whether through documentation, revitalisation initiatives, cultural policy improvement, development of learning and teaching resources or other means – are yet to be developed. Ethno-musicologist Anthony Seeger observes:

> [Safeguarding music cultures] *is a process I think we talk about, but I don't think that it's been systematically studied to the extent that we can say, 'Well, this is going to work' . . . . Instead we are reinventing the wheel every time we face a community that's trying to preserve its own traditions. . . . I think we could do better.* (in Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre [QCRC] 2008b)

To this end, the five-year research project *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: Towards an Ecology of Musical Diversity* was launched in 2009. Led by Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (Griffith University, Brisbane) in collaboration with the International Music Council (Paris), the Music Council of Australia (Sydney), the World Music & Dance Centre (Rotterdam), and five other universities around the world, the project aims to improve understanding of the dynamics surrounding the vitality and viability of music cultures. Detailed case studies from around the world aim to inform the development of tools to support vibrant music cultures. These tools include a model to identify and describe the factors affecting sustainability of music genres and an online resource to help communities address challenges to sustainability on their own terms (QCRC 2008a). While projects like *Sustainable Futures* promise to make significant in-roads into supporting communities in safeguarding their musical heritage, I argue in this paper that such research could potentially be both expedited and improved by drawing on experience in the field of language maintenance.

Discourse among socio-linguists about key ethical issues relating to maintaining endangered languages exemplifies how that discipline may hold valuable insights for the preservation and promotion of endangered musical heritage. Strikingly, not all linguists agree that safeguarding an endangered language is always the best – or even the right – thing to do. Mufwene (2002), for instance, observes that when a population shifts from using one language to another, it does so for good (often socio-economic) reasons; therefore, he says, it may be morally questionable to try to preserve a language 'artificially' outside of the context in which it flourished naturally. Other linguists query whether (or how) fieldworkers should become actively involved in the endangered language communities they research (Ladefoged 1992; Mühlhäusler 1996). Still others ask the question: 'Who has veto over the tradition?'(Thieberger 2002), or for that matter, query how to go about safeguarding it (Romaine 2007). One particularly vibrant discussion in the socio-linguistic literature relates to the wisdom of prioritising documentation of an endangered language over and above initiatives to restore its use within the community (e.g. Dixon 1997; Reyhner et al. 1999; Romaine 2007; Newman 1998), and another subject of much enquiry, and some embarrassment, is the all-too-frequent inefficacy of attempts to revitalise languages (e.g. Newman 1998, 2003; Spolsky 2005; Grenoble and Whaley 2006).

These and similar discourses should be of the greatest interest to those engaged in safeguarding endangered musical heritage. The correlations are strong. What exactly should be safeguarded of a traditional music culture? Who has the final word on what to safeguard, and how to do so? Should documentation be prioritised over revitalisation? In which circumstances is it ethical for ethno-musicologists to intervene in self-regulating processes of the global music eco-system? What are the roles and the duties of the ethno-musicological safeguarding activist? Why do safeguarding approaches fail? Questions like these, stimulated by interdisciplinary comparisons, underscore the potential for the relatively mature field of language maintenance to yield valuable insights into the sorts of issues ethno-musicologists are likely to face as they begin to address the wide-scale endangerment of musical heritage systematically.

The remainder of this article centres on one realm in which language maintenance holds synergy with theoretical and practical approaches to safeguarding endangered music cultures. It essentially explores the question - how should efforts to revitalise endangered linguistic or musical heritage be positioned in relation to efforts to document it, and how can discourse from language maintenance inform that positioning for music?

Documentation or revitalisation?

In a public report on cultural diversity, UNESCO distils two core approaches to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The first consists of *collecting, recording and archiving it*, and the second involves *conserving it in living form and ensuring its transmission to future generations* (2002). In the report where this distinction is made, UNESCO makes no value judgements about each of these approaches, nor do they suggest an appropriate balance between the two. Yet the UNESCO cultural diversity report reminds the reader that:

> *'tradition' and 'heritage' suggests constancy, immutability and inflexibility. In actual fact, local knowledge is subject to a continuous process of reassessment, renewal and expansion. Each generation forges the cognitive tools and understandings required to live in a rapidly evolving world by tempering the knowledge of its forefathers with personal experience and opportunities. . . . Blending new ways with old enables indigenous communities to uphold their unique ways of life, identities, values and world views.* (UNESCO 2002)

This passage brings into relief a tension relating to the perceived best approach for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, including languages and music cultures. *Collecting, recording, and archiving* language or music can arguably be an end in itself: namely, the preservation of that heritage (cf. Stubington 1987). Admittedly, these documentary activities can fortuitously work in favour of revitalisation, for example by stimulating performance practice, raising prestige, or renewing community interest. Yet by its very nature, documentation yields outcomes that are fossilisations of the music or language they represent. A recording per se, for instance, does not change to reflect adaptations and innovations in a living tradition, musical or linguistic. Given the limitations of financial, human, and material resources, as well as the urgency of the situation, the question arises: where should the primary emphasis of language and music safeguarding approaches lie – on documentation or on revitalisation?

Although the Western interest in documenting the traditional music of minority peoples dates back well before the early twentieth century, it was around that time that a scholarly (and sometimes paternalistic) interest in preserving music became a focus of ethno-musicological research, in turn bringing to the fore a disciplinary concentration on documentation. Indeed, its early decades:

> *ethnomusicology was dominated by the desire to preserve the disappearing music of non-Western cultures . . . and by the establishment of systems of description and analysis that would make possible a worldview of music based on comparative study. Preservation led to attention to field research, with emphasis on recording. . . . The desire to preserve also led to the development of transcription as a major technique and activity.* (Nettl 2003)



Figure 4
Australian Aboriginal children at DanceSite, Alice Springs, which each year brings together indigenous people from remote communities across Australia to celebrate their intangible heritage. Photo: Rusty Stewart.

The ethno-musicological remit to *collect, record and archive* continues to feature in both research and practical initiatives relating to indigenous and minority music cultures. The vision of the *National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia,* for example, is *to systematically record and document the unique and endangered performance traditions of Indigenous Australia* (Corn 2007), and the *Plateau Music Project* based in Xining City, China, documents local endangered music cultures by making recordings, and then disseminating digitised copies through repatriation and archiving (Bum and Roche 2009).

The growth in recent years of the sub-discipline, 'documentary linguistics', demonstrates that documentation takes a prominent place in work on endangered languages too (e.g. Austin 2003-2009; Himmelmann 1998). Academic research in the area has gone hand-in-hand with practical approaches to safeguarding that place the values of documentation at the fore. One example is the *Vanishing Voices of the Great Andamanese* project, which has lately focused on collecting knowledge of the linguistic situation of those people in order to create a trilingual dictionary of the language (Jha 2009). Another regional initiative is the Centre for Endangered Languages Documentation (CELD), founded in 2009 at the Papua State University in Manokwari, Indonesia, with the primary aim of working with Papuan speech communities *to document their languages and cultures* (Centre for Endangered Language Documentation 2009).

Underlining the ongoing and important role of documentation and archiving in safeguarding both languages and music cultures is the range of archives falling under the umbrella of the Digital Endangered Languages and Musics Archives Network (DELEMAN nd.). These include, among others, prominent national and international archives such as the Archive of Maori and Pacific Music (AMPM) housed at the University of Auckland; the indigenous language and music archives of the University of California, Berkeley; the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) and the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. DISMARC (Discovering Music Archives), partly funded by the European Commission, is another meta-archive that aims to play a role in the collection, preservation, and dissemination of cultural heritage; it encompasses over 30,000 audio recordings (DISMARC 2009).

In both the fields of socio-linguistics and ethno-musicology, then, documentation takes a valued place. In fact, some linguists believe unequivocally that description and documentation is their most urgent task (Dixon 1997; Newman 1998). Newman, for example, argues that it is documentary linguists who hold the potential to make a real difference in the urgent and difficult cause of safeguarding endangered languages. He bemoans that their time is too frequently sapped by



Figure 5
Traditional aural transmission of the endangered north-Vietnamese vocal genre *ca tru* , recently inscribed on UNESCO's list of *Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urgent Need of Safeguarding* . Photo: Huib Schippers



Figure 6
Descendance Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islanders Dance Theatre, *Indigenous people Honouring the Past, Presence and Future* 17 May 2006. Photo: UN/Mark Garten.

linguistic social work:

> *Resources that could have been used for the basic linguistic description of a goodly number of endangered languages have been devoted to what are in reality ethnic awareness/cultural heritage projects.* (1998)

Meshing the 'social goal' of language preservation or revitalisation and the 'scientific goal' of documentation, he argues, is not only unproductive but also potentially harmful, since practical initiatives drain funding and human resources from the important task of documentation.

This, then, is one discourse within the field of language maintenance that holds strong potential to inform approaches to safeguarding musical heritage. The relevance to music safeguarding of the acute tension between language documentation and revitalisation is accentuated when Newman's ethos is juxtaposed with that of the emerging field of 'applied ethno-musicology', which uses research outcomes to benefit the cultures under study (International Council for Traditional Music 2008). There is a striking resemblance between the *linguistic social work* Newman inveighs against – including activities like assisting with language programmes, preparing resources, and copying tapes – and those advocated by some applied ethno-musicologists as representing a level of collaborative reciprocity between researchers and researched: activities like making, packaging, re-mastering, and releasing recordings; promoting local performers overseas and providing various advocacy and professional advice services (Hayward 2005). In arguing that linguists should prioritise documentation over revitalisation, Newman asserts that when language maintenance is made *socially relevant*, it has *more 'sex appeal' than pure linguistics and thus is bound to seduce well-meaning scholars, especially when the appeal is accompanied by money* (1998). If this is true, the dubious honour of seductive sex appeal may be attributed not only to Hayward's *culturally engaged* approach to research but indeed to the entire discipline of applied ethno-musicology whose very cornerstone is the socially relevant application of its research.

Despite the vehemence of Newman and other linguists in advocating documentation and its attendant activities of recording, transcription, description and archiving, this approach to safeguarding cultural heritage is often not sufficient for the maintenance of a living, vital tradition. In Romaine's words:

> *Grammars and dictionaries are artificial environments for languages. . . . Focusing on documentation in books is like concentrating our efforts on preserving the spotted owl by building a museum where we can display stuffed owls but doing nothing to preserve the bird in its natural habitat or guarantee that it can reproduce itself.* (2007)

This sentiment is echoed in the following historical example of an endangered language:

> *To be sure, the deliverance of Manx from near-extinction was aided by the stoic efforts of language enthusiasts, who preserved the voices and conversations of the native speakers on tape in the 1930s and 1940s. But the real saviours of Manx were the men and women who kept the language alive prior to the renewed interest of some government agencies and officials in the Manx language and culture in the 1980s and 1990s* (Abley 2004 in Wilson 2008)

On these grounds – that documentation arguably involves *transferring knowledge from a speaker's head to an archive which fossilizes the language* (Reyhner et al. 1999) *and renders speakers almost unnecessary* (Bowern & James in press) – some linguists argue that revitalisation should, in fact, take precedence.

The analogy with safeguarding music cultures is clear: no matter how comprehensive, the documentation of a music culture, that does not ensure its ongoing vitality. *Recordings themselves don't constitute a tradition* (Moyle, in QCRC 2008b). Lundström reflects:

> *The classic way of doing it* [helping a music culture survive] *is preserving, recording, archiving, preserving, re-creating it in such an authentic way as possible .... But actually I have come to believe more and more that to preserve music is more to preserve people who make that music, and make people continue on* [with] *it, and change it.* (in QCRC 2008b)

Revitalisation, then, is arguably key to ensuring the ongoing vitality and viability of endangered linguistic and musical heritage. But in some ways, documentation and revitalisation are two sides of the same coin. 'Revitalisationists' cannot resolutely denounce documentation since the latter can play an important role in restoring the vitality of musical and linguistic heritage. Outcomes of documentation projects, such as recordings, or the very projects themselves, can play a powerful role in raising the prestige of a language or musical tradition within a community which in turn leads to renewed interest in it. Often, good documentation is needed to create good teaching resources; where teachers themselves are scarce, recordings can play a supplementary role (Schippers 2007). Recognising these potential functions of documentation in revitalisation, Moyle draws attention to the role of the 'First Voice' in the case of the Polynesian outlier Takū:

> *We've got, say, a hundred and fifty hours of audio recordings, sixty hours of videos, many thousands of photographs to document a whole variety of activities [from the music culture of Takû]. But whether all of this is sufficient enough for any kind of cultural survival or revival or . . . recontextualisation will depend ultimately not on those materials but on the value that Takû people themselves ascribe to them in years to come.* (in QCRC 2008b)

Socio-linguists have acknowledged that in some circumstances the revitalisation of endangered languages may be neither a desirable goal – for example, in certain repressive political climates – or a feasible one, such as when the state of endangerment is so severe that expectations of revitalisation are unrealistic (Walsh 2005; Thieberger 2002). The same is almost certainly true of music cultures. In such cases, documentation may become the priority. Considerations like these indicate that for endangered music cultures as well as languages, the appropriate balance between documentation and revitalisation ultimately depends on circumstances, and that case-by-case approaches to safeguarding are essential. Romaine's ideology regarding the whole quandary of approach, then, is arguably as true for musical heritage as for linguistic heritage:

> *There is no one-size-fits-all solution for revitalization and preservation. The immediate need is to identify and stabilize languages* [and music cultures] *under threat so that they can be transmitted to the next generation in as many of their functions as possible. This means assessing which functions are crucial to intergenerational transmission and have a reasonable chance of successful revival and continuation. Every group must decide what can best be done realistically for a particular language* [or music culture] *at a particular time.* (Romaine 2007)

Final words

In this paper, I propose that key issues in maintaining endangered languages may hold significant relevance for safeguarding musical heritage. The 'documentation-versus-revitalisation' quandary within socio-linguistic

discourse, and the host of issues it raises with regard to the ethics and efficacy of safeguarding, is one of many potential areas of strong synergy with safeguarding musical heritage. Given that socio-linguistic research and practice into safeguarding is further advanced than ethno-musicological efforts, it is both logical and sensible to ask what applied ethno-musicology might learn from its more mature correlate.

The comment by Seeger cited earlier *we are reinventing the wheel every time we face a community that's trying to preserve its own traditions.... I think we could do better* (in QCRC 2008b) refers to a problem of approach *within* the discipline of ethno-musicology. The implication, perhaps, is that ethno-musicologists would do well to develop a systematic, standardised framework for helping communities to improve the viability of their music cultures, which could be used as a tool across a range of global contexts and circumstances. This challenge is embraced by the *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures* project mentioned earlier in this paper.

A 're-invention of the wheel', though, is not only inefficient *within* each field of intangible cultural heritage, but also *for* each field. Developing music safeguarding approaches from scratch is not an optimal way to tackle an urgent and important task. The extensive literature on language endangerment and maintenance indicates it would be eminently useful to draw on the experience, discourse, successes and failures of socio-linguists when developing approaches for the protection and promotion of endangered musical heritage. To do so may prove a judicious step towards helping communities maintain vibrant and sustainable music cultures.

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