

University of Missouri, St. Louis

IRL @ UMSL

Undergraduate Research Symposium

UMSL Undergraduate Works

June 2022

A New Life for UMSL's African Instrument Collection

Brandon Elliott
bety4@umsystem.edu

Shane Devine
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Kieth Stephens
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/urs>



Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elliott, Brandon; Devine, Shane; and Stephens, Kieth, "A New Life for UMSL's African Instrument Collection" (2022). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 119.

Available at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/urs/119>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the UMSL Undergraduate Works at IRL @ UMSL. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of IRL @ UMSL. For more information, please contact marvinh@umsl.edu.

A New Life for UMSL's African Instrument Collection

Shane Devine

Brandon Elliott

Keith Stephens

Abstract

How should a collection of West African musical instruments - currently in the possession of an eliminated Anthropology department at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) - be properly conserved, repaired if needed, and should they be displayed, stored, or donated to another home? The collection, located in the entry foyer of 501 Clark Hall on the UMSL campus, consists of eleven West African drums, three stringed instruments, and one lamellophone. Our team seeks to answer this question to preserve the musical culture of the peoples associated with these instruments. It is important to protect these instruments from degradation or misuse -- In the United States, where a large proportion of the population is descended from West Africans, they are part of the national heritage and have the opportunity to serve as powerful educational tools. The research methodologies will include online and library research to determine the cultural background of the instruments, their relative value, rarity, and the cost of repairs and transport; policy research into relevant UMSL policies and best practices in the relevant areas of preservation; semi-structured interviews of the items' donor and of area experts; photography of the instruments and visual research to assist identification; and analysis of the aesthetics, condition, and playability of each instrument. This research will result in a catalogue of the instruments, and will allow our team to make an informed recommendation to the University as to where and how the items should be stored, maintained, and/or best put to use.

No Simple Noisemakers

The instruments in UMSL's collection are integral pieces of the West African socio-musical framework, some of them representing ancient traditions and others more recent popular cultural trends. All are quite present in contemporary music and dance practices throughout that vast region. The djembe, for example, of which there are five in UMSL's collection, is a phenomenally popular instrument worldwide, and certainly the most widespread in West Africa (Price, 2013). Outside of their native context, and especially in the United States where, by way of the Atlantic slave-trade West African music has been so wholly influential to the development of national popular music styles (such as rock and roll, funk, blues, R&B, afrobeat, reggae, jazz, and many others), these instruments have the potential to serve as powerful educational tools — either as functional instruments or museum pieces. In the United States, early music education is heavily focused on European music theory and history, despite the fact that a huge proportion of the country's population is descended from West Africa. Suffice to say, West African instruments are indeed a part of the American national heritage, and should be represented as such.

In the United States, there is an increasing call to de-exotify West African music and integrate it into school curricula (Branstetter, 2015; Banks, 2010). The growing popularity of West African drum and dance workshops over the last several decades sets a necessary precedent for this to happen (Price, 2013). Such workshops make it possible for non-western notions of rhythm, song form, storytelling, communication, and dance to be disseminated among a diverse western population, as well as for cultural parallels to be drawn. Functional, authentic

West African drums are essential to the quality and continued existence of these workshops. These instruments are no simple noisemakers - they are imbued with the cultural values, histories, and aesthetic principles of the ethnic groups that created them. It is important, then, that the instruments that our team evaluates as playable and fit to use are given that opportunity, and those that are not in playable condition are thoughtfully preserved for public display in an environment where their virtues are made visible and translatable.

Introduction of the Client and the Problem

State clearly that it's to aid the former faculty of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology and the Dean of Arts & Sciences as they decide how to dissolve the department and its assets.

With the elimination of UMSL's anthropology department, the future of this collection of West African instruments is uncertain. There is currently no plan in place for how the instruments should be treated, conserved, or to whom they should be granted new ownership, nor is there any existing catalogue detailing the history, playing techniques, cultural significance, condition, or estimated value of each instrument. This leaves the instruments vulnerable to misuse, improper storage, and misidentification. The report produced by our research will provide both an informed recommendation as to how the collection should be treated and a comprehensive catalogue of the collection. Whether the instruments ultimately remain in the possession of the University or are donated elsewhere, our report should set a necessary precedent for the treatment, conservation, and, importantly, the use of historical or contemporary African and other non-western musical instruments housed on the premises.

Engagement of anthropologists in this area

The work of Robert Barclay will be referenced frequently in our research. Barclay is a historical musical instrument conservator and authoritative voice on ethical issues inherent to the practice. He has written two books on the topic: *The Care of Historic Musical Instruments* (Barclay, 1997) and *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments* (2004).

A number of the instruments in UMSL's collection (djembe, dundunba, kora) are attributable to the Malinke/Mandinka ethnic group of West Africa. Eric Charry, Professor of Music at Wesleyan, has written perhaps the most comprehensive book on Malinke/Mandinka music-culture called *Mande Music* (Charry, 2001).

Two of the drums in the collection, atumpan, are from the Akan ethnic group of Ghana. Information on Akan music can be found in Roger Vetter's liner notes to *Rhythms of Life, Songs of Wisdom: Akan Music from Ghana, West Africa* (Vetter, 1996), a compilation of Akan field recordings recorded by Vetter and produced by Smithsonian Folkways. Vetter is a Professor of ethnomusicology at Grinnell College. There is also *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana* (Nketia, 1963) by famed Ghanaian ethnomusicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia.

A wide range of information on West African music culture, theory, and history can be found in both the *Black Music Research Journal*, as well as the *African Music* journal, which has been published by the International Library of African Music since the 1950's.

Research methods

The collection

The collection consists of 11 West African drums (five djembe, two atumpan, two tama, one pellet drum, and one dundunba), three stringed instruments (two kora and one pluriarc), and one mbira (a kind of “thumb piano” or lamellophone). They are displayed in the entry foyer of 501 Clark Hall on the UMSL campus. One of the two kora, the pluriarc, and the mbira are displayed in a glass case, while the rest of the instruments are openly displayed in various places around the room, on top of bookcases, shelves, on the floor, etc.

1. Library and Internet research

Creation of the Catalogue

We created an inventory of the items in the university’s possession, consisting of the quantity of artifacts and the artifacts name, condition, size, use, country or region of origin, and age. By gathering this information in a database we were able to define the size of the collection as well as which items are display or use ready and which may need to be repaired to become ready for use or display. Each item was also given an identifying number which will assist in finding specific pieces for research and transport.

We chose these identifiers for categorization and cataloging to also identify patterns and groups among the instruments. This is important because this will allow not only a way of determining a theme for display but also to determine which items to display and how they may be used. These themes will assist in the processes of finding a home for the items and determine which instruments should remain together in the event of the collection being separated. This is especially true based on the country or region of origin, age of the items, and their condition. These are common factors in determining if the instruments can still be physically played or displayed.

Archival Research

Archival research will be used to identify the artifacts. There will also be research conducted into the UMSL records to gather information on when UMSL took possession of the artifacts, from whom they received them, and additional information concerning their procurement. A variety of websites and printed sources will be used to not only identify the use and type of instruments that are in the collection but also give context to the instruments such as sound and method of play. Literature on African instruments will be consulted to identify the appropriate vernacular names of the instruments as well as their place of origin.

2. Policy research

Policy research is to be conducted to determine the policies, protocols, and guidelines that the university has in place concerning donated collections such as this one. This is a crucial part of the research as it will determine whether the instruments must remain in the possession of the university and who may need to be consulted in their relocation either inside or outside of the university. This research provides the guidelines on how the university views their collections and what steps need to be taken and who needs to give approvals concerning the future of the items.

3. Semi-Structured interviews

The research team will conduct semi-structured interviews with several experts. The donor of the instruments, Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris will be interviewed to gather information on how the items were acquired as well as background and identification of the pieces. Lewis-Harris is a retired UMSL professor and former Director of the now-discontinued Connecting Human Origin and Cultural Diversity Program (CHOCD). When in operation, the instruments were used in CHOCD programming. Matthew Henry, a professor of percussion and

director of percussion ensembles at UMSL will also be interviewed. Henry specializes in non-Western percussion and West African styles in particular.

4. Visual research

The team will use photography to assist with the research methods. Photos of the items were taken to assist with identification of the items as well as to document their condition. This is also helpful to determine which pieces need to be repaired and what extent the repairs need to be. The photographs also assist with documentation of the items to create the catalog, especially those items which may not be able to be used or displayed or may become separated from the current collection.

5. Analysis of artifacts

Musical instruments are distinct in the realm of cultural artifacts – they are at once functional tools used in artmaking and are themselves works of art. Herein lies the dilemma at the heart of our research and in musical instrument conservation in general – should a given instrument be restored for *use* (and thus irrevocably altered) or conserved for *display*? The answer is not always clear and is often derived on a case-by-case basis. Bearing this in mind, each instrument in UMSL's collection is in need of assessment based on its own unique condition, as some may be suitable for functional restoration and others may not. In so doing, our team aims to mitigate any possible misuse of the instruments.

Each instruments' size, design, material, artwork, and condition will be analyzed, evaluated, and recorded. Morphological analysis of each artifact is crucial to creating an accurate catalog of the items and documenting their condition and appearance. Analyzing the construction material, design, and artwork not only allows for proper identification but also provides a cultural context

to each artifact. This method is needed to determine the proper identification, handling, care, and displaying of the instruments.

Ethics

During this research the team abided by the code of ethics put forth by the University of Missouri-St. Louis as well as the American Anthropological Association. The research was conducted in an open and legal manner. Those who were interviewed were done so in a respectful and responsible way with agreement and understanding. This is in compliance with the American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics section IIIB which states, “Anthropologists have a responsibility to be both honest and transparent with all stakeholders about the nature and intent of their research” (American Anthropological Association 2009, 3). The team remained unbiased in the approach to the research and made all attempts to keep ethnocentricity to a minimum. The team fully disclosed the goal of the project as well as their intent and made all attempts to remain transparent. The objects themselves were treated with respect and dignity. This respect continued beyond the material item into the culture and the people they have been involved with. This includes the donor, the craftsman, the musicians, and their cultures.

The ethical dilemmas were at a minimum during this research, though two main dilemmas were present. The first was that of ethnocentricity. These instruments were made by individuals from a different culture and on a different continent. The team consists of American college students in the twentieth century. We had to keep that in consideration when researching and understanding these items and the people who made them. This dilemma is present in most studies which are conducted on people and cultures which are not the same as the researchers and are not unique to this study.

The second ethical dilemma is ensuring that the items are properly cared for and studied without causing offense or issues. The researchers had to make sure that legal and ethical standards were followed when determining if the items should be repaired, used, and displayed. This also affected how and where the items should be displayed. Dilemmas could occur if the items are considered sacred, should not be repaired, or actively used. Additional dilemmas could arise concerning if only certain groups should be allowed to possess, display, or use the items, such as cultural organizations, peoples, or institutions. Maintaining respect for all involved is of the utmost importance and ensuring the ethical treatment of the items and the cultures are crucial.

These ethical issues were kept to a minimum by the team through the respect for the cultures and the material artifacts themselves. The team used the American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics section IIIA as their guide for treating the people and cultures with respect and working towards their long-term conservation of the instruments themselves (American Anthropological Association 2009, 2).

Bibliography

- American Anthropological Association. 2009. "Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association". *2009 AAA Code of Ethics*. Accessed March 20, 2022.
<http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/FileDownloads/pdfs/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/AAA-Ethics-Code-2009.pdf>.
- American Institute for Conservation. 1994. "Code of Ethics." *American Institute of Conservation*.
<https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/code-of-ethics>.
- Banks, Ojeya. 2010. "Critical Postcolonial Dance Pedagogy: The Relevance of West African Dance Education in the United States." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 41 (1):18-34. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.umsl.edu/stable/40732205?seq=6>.
- Barclay, Robert. 1997. *The Care of Historic Musical Instruments*. Canadian Conservation Institute and the Museums & Galleries Commission.
https://cimcim.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/01/The_Care_of_Historic_Musical_Instruments_small.pdf.
- . 2004. *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments: Display Case or Concert Hall?*. London: Earthscan.
- Blench, Roger. 2009. *A Guide to the Musical Instruments of Cameroun*.
<http://www.rogerblench.info/Ethnomusicology/Papers/Africa/Cameroun/Cameroun%20musical%20instruments%20book.pdf>.
- Branstetter, Dyan. 2015. "West African Drumming for Elementary Classroom Teachers." The Institute for Arts Integration.
<https://artsintegration.com/2015/10/27/west-african-drumming-for-elementary-classroom-teachers/>.
- Charry, Eric. 2000. "A Guide to the Jembe." Last modified October 14, 2000.
<https://echarry.web.wesleyan.edu/jembearticle/article.html>.
- . 2001. *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Price, Tanya. 2013. "Rhythms of Culture: Djembe and African Memory in African-American Cultural Traditions." *Black Music Research Journal*, 33, No. 2: 227-247.
https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.umsl.edu/stable/pdf/10.5406/blacmusiresej.33.2.0227.pdf?refregid=excelsior%3A539c6bbbedc272ac69c977c21f4682a38&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=.
- Nketia, Joseph Hanson Kwabena. 1964. *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*. Edinburgh: University of Ghana.

Vetter, Roger. 1994. *Rhythms of Life, Songs of Wisdom: Akan Music from Ghana, West Africa*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways.

Appendix

Photographs and names of instruments



Tama



Pluriarc



Kora (1 of 2)



Mbira



Pellet drum



Atumpan



Dundunba



Djembe

Sample Interview Questions

Matthew Henry - Professor of Music, UMSL

- Can you give us any information about the history of this collection at UMSL?
- Could you identify the ethnic group associated with each of these instruments?
- Can you speak to the cultural importance of each instrument to their respective ethnic groups?
- Can you determine the relative age of each instrument?
- Can you speak to the relevance of each instrument in contemporary West African culture?
- Can you speak to the relevance of these instruments in contemporary American culture?
- Could you demonstrate how each drum is played? What rhythms are typically associated with each drum?
- Can you assess the condition of each instrument? Do any appear to need repairs? Refurbishing? If so, what is the extent of the work needed? Are there experts in the area that do this kind of work?
- Which of these instruments do you think are fit to play and why? Which do you think are not?
- Having assessed these instruments, in your professional opinion, how would you recommend they best be put to use?

Jackie Lewis-Harris - Associate Prof/Director Connecting Human Origin and Cultural Diversity, UMSL

- Could you tell us your role in UMSL's acquisition of the African instruments ?
- Can you give a little background on the instruments themselves?
- Are they all from the same country and/or groups of people?
- What do feel is the educational and cultural importance of the instruments?
- How would you recommend they best be put to use?