Digitizing Indigenous Sounds

Cultural activists & local music in the age of Memorex

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Contents

Consumerism, the ineluctable allure of the foreign, and mass telecommunications have made the ostensibly traditional cultural products of indigenous peoples available to a much wider global audience. Paradoxically, this affords indigenous peoples (and ethnic minorities) with both opportunities and great risks. New technologies like the Internet and the digitization of information provide indigenous peoples and those living at the margins of nation-states with an opportunity to advance public acknowledgement of alternative cultural practices and distinctive worldviews. This can legitimize indigenous peoples' struggles for cultural autonomy by providing the subaltern with a forum for the mobilization of public support. However, increased global access to the cultural products of indigenous peoples also carries great risks for the continued cultural survival of local systems of knowledge, including what is often described as "traditional" or "local" music.

Building Community & Reproducing Local Music

Long before the establishment of a global network of electronic media, intellectuals were grappling with the moral and political implications of mechanically reproducing creativity. In this classic text on the ethics of reproduction, Walter Benjamin (1968) asserts that even the most perfect art reproduction lacks an aura — "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Few, I think, would argue that recorded music is superior to live musical performances — no matter what Memorex...[1] declares. But in spite of this romantic appeal to authenticity, the world has seen a massive increase in access to and distribution of digital information. Music is now more commonly experienced as a recording than as a live performance. (Seeger, 1997) Recorded music is enjoyed everyday by billions of people, and as a result, cultural practices predicated on localized knowledge systems are being undermined by the pervasive and homogenizing corporate culture business. (Maybury-Lewis, 1997; Novick, 1997).

As an overtly public yet deeply personal medium, song is dependent on collective memory and resolve for its continued performance. Commodification has invariably facilitated the mass consumption of diverse musical genres, but the process tends to leave the vital, participatory aspects of cultural performances in the hands of specialists and the corporate arbiters of fashion. What Steven Leuthold (1998) calls music's "local immediacy" is forfeited in the interest of commerce. To maximize profits, the corporate culture industry restricts copying and other uses of music, which ostensibly abridges creativity. Similarly, the commodification of indigenous ceremonial objects and cultural products and the appropriation of customary practices through the lan-

[1] Associated with high fidelity and a slogan made famous when Ella Fitzgerald first shattered glass with her voice recorded on audiotape, Memorex... is one of the most recognized names in consumer goods. With its corporate slogan "is it live?...or is it..." Memorex... skillfully markets the ambiguities of reproducing authenticity.

guage of possessive individualism pose the danger of cultural dissolution. (Coombe, 1998)The digital revolution has added to the dangers of cultural appropriation as local, collectively held knowledge now has the potential to be electronically recorded, decontextualized, marketed or accessed in ways that undermine the creative integrity or cultural dignity of the producers.

Music represents a special case of the threat to indigenous peoples as its fate is intimately tied to the broader challenges facing linguistic diversity (see Luisa Maffi's article in this issue). The threat is both to linguistic diversity and to local cultural traditions and industries, which have become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of cultural imperialism — the growing hegemony of the English language and the U.S. entertainment business, which, along with weapons and food, represents one of our most profitable "national" exports (Jameson, 2000). With the growing emergence of the global cultural economy, local musical styles have seen an increased marginalization by Peru's commercial radio and music establishment, often in favor of Western pop and rock styles with their infectiously melodic electric instrumentation. Over the past quarter of a century, the widespread introduction of portable radios and cassette players has led to the rapid diffusion of national and international music throughout rural Peru. Internet cafés, televisions and VCRs connect peri-urban and urban Peru with the rest of the world. Longing for the promises of modernity, younger people across the country are now vigorously embracing new musical rhythms — such as glossy techno-pop, modern Latin American dance music or salsa, rock, and rap — instead of the traditional musical forms that have sustained the cultural vitality and distinctiveness of their parents and grandparents' communities for generations. On the other hand, aspects of Peruvian music are also making their way to a wider world audience, thanks in part to migration, cultural tourism, the popular music industry, and the growing appeal of Worldbeat music.

The issue of indigenous rights to digital cultural property, especially with the spread of new reproductive electronic technologies, has yet to be adequately resolved. There are scores of examples where indigenous music and imagery continue to appear without permission in movies and on web sites, CDs, and the airwaves. While new technologies underpinning global interconnectedness encourage social and cultural transformations which can lead to the fragmentation of community, they can also enhance collective memory, promote cultural awareness, and facilitate cultural preservation efforts. Older technologies like print media are usually not suitable for the curation of oral-based performative genres. In contrast, newer technologies, such as online databases and CDs, provide promising curatorial alternatives, particularly for cultural activists interested in celebrating oral expressive forms such as music, stories, and ritual chants. CDs can combine high fidelity audio recordings with multi-media to provide audiences with "accurate, contextualized presentations of linguistic and cultural knowledge." (Zimmerman, Zimmerman, & Bruguier, 2000) For cultural activists, novel technologies like CD burners and the Internet can be an important means to revalorize local, customary systems of knowledge much in the same way that older communicative technologies, such

as radio, continue to be fundamental to the articulation of local community identities, concerns and aspirations.

Digital Vibes & Cultural Activists

No single style of music expresses indigenousness in Peru, a pluri-ethnic nation-state which boasts prodigiously diverse indigenous and transcultural musical and creative arts heritages. Countless indigenous cultural traditions flourished millennia before the arrival of the Spanish and the emergence and zenith of the Incan empire. The colonial encounter signaled a fundamental realignment in local ways of life, including the way music was created, performed and appreciated. Starting in the sixteenth century, the Spanish attempted to suppress indigenous expressive forms, including music, song and dance. Their efforts were unsuccessful. They did, however, manage to introduce their own cultural practices, including instruments from Europe such as mandolins, harps and violins. African slaves brought their percussive traditions and rich oral cultures. Under the sway of nineteenth century liberals looking to modernize, brass instruments associated with Western military bands became part of the Peruvian musical inventory. The wealth of transformations and incorporation of non-Andean aspects includes the famous scissor-dancers — reflecting mediaeval Spanish imagery — of Ayacucho and Huancavelica, and the pervasive use of saxophones in the Mantaro valley, a byproduct of local participation in military bands. (Rowe & Schelling, 1991; Romero, 1993) After centuries of transcultural blending, music thrives in Peru as a rich mix of sounds, instruments, performative genres and musical styles. While the economic viability of the corporate music industry is reliant on encryption technologies and intellectual property regimes celebrating individual authorship, indigenous peoples are obliged to rely on alternative strategies for cultural survival, including collaborative partnerships with cultural activists. Intellectual property debates in Peru tend to emphasize rights to biogenetic resources (see for instance, Indecopi, 2000), though there are numerous efforts under way to conserve and revalorize local, expressive traditions of indigenous societies.

Embracing both old and new communications technologies, many of these efforts can be labeled a sort of cultural activism: they self-consciously utilize the production of media and other expressive forms as means for not only nurturing local and indigenous communities, but also as a means to transform them through a sort of "strategic cultural conservatism." (Ginsburg, 2000) In this regard, two particular initiatives are noteworthy: the Lima-based Center for Andean Ethnomusicology (CAE), and the Iquitos-based radio project directed by the human rights NGO partnership, APRI-Minga. The work at the CAE is important because of its leadership role in the systematic documentation of the expressive cultures of Peru's contemporary in-

digenous peoples, while APRI-Minga's innovative radio project provides culturally sensitive, locally-based programming to rural Amazonian communities.[2]

The Center for Andean Ethnomusicology

With support from the Ford Foundation, the Center for Andean Ethnomusicology (Centro de Etnomusicología Andina, formerly the Archivo de Música Tradicional Andina) was established in 1985 at the Riva-Agüero Institute of Peru's Catholic University. Its primary mission is to document, conserve and promote research on Andean musical traditions. Through extensive ethnographic research, members of the Lima-based CAE have audio-visually documented Andean and coastal Peruvian music through its main cultural contexts — festivals, rituals and dances.

The CAE has long-term research experience in many regions of Andean and Coastal Peru (including the Mantaro valley (Junin), Cajamarca, the Colca Valley, Cusco, Lambayeque, Puno, Callejón de Huayalas, Canta, Huarochiri, Piura, Ayachucho, Apurimac and Huancavelica). Representing Peru's diverse musical expressions, the Center's holdings include more than 10,000 items. Hundreds of hours of primary video recordings, an ample slide collection, and thousands of audio tapes, including important recordings made by José María Arguedas, one of Peru's most important indigenista intellectuals, are represented. CAE staff members have produced 9 albums in Spanish and a series of CDs in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution's Folkways Recordings. The CAE is a major repository of field recordings of the music and performative dimensions of social life. Its unrivaled collections include important recordings of diverse life-cycle rites, house buildings, brandings, Saints' festivals, communal agrarian work sessions and times of enjoyment, herding, carnival, and documentation of elaborate dances, like the Danza de los Turcos (the Dance of the Turks), as well as the costumed theatrical performances accompanying the celebration of the Virgin of Carmen.

The CAE is currently taking the lead in the development of a network of sound archives (Red de Archivos Sonoros Andinos). Future Center plans include expansion into Amazonia and the other Andean Republics, particularly Ecuador and Bolivia. To this end, the Center recently entered into collaborative partnership with the Institute for Otavaleno Anthropology in Ecuador (IOA) for the establishment of the Andean sound archives. Archival collections of this nature are very important, given how sound recordings have contributed to the survival, revitalization and defense of local cultural traditions elsewhere, such as in the United States and Australia (Seeger, 1997a).

[2] Luisa Maffi's article in this issue further discusses the necessity of a bilateral approach to protection of indigenous language and culture. She stresses the need for both language preservation and maintenance.

Amazonian Peoples' Resources Initiative (APRI) Radio Education Project

Cultural activism is also apparent in regional media projects, such as APRI's radio education project. Established in 1995, the Amazonian Peoples' Resources Initiative is a human rights organization working with indigenous and rural communities in the Peruvian Amazon. (Dean & McKinley, 1997) In local partnership with Minga-Peru, a community-based women's health and development organization, APRI disseminates culturally appropriate reproductive health education through radio broadcasts aired throughout Loreto, Peru's largest Amazonian department. For the past three years, APRI-Minga has broadcast a radio program, ¡Bienvenida Salud!, three evenings a week for 25 minutes to an audience of more than 800,000. Through a lively mix of "socio-dramas" (mini soap operas), testimonials, interviews and local music, ¡Bienvenida Salud! Engages the audience with health themes, human rights matters, and cultural revalorization issues. In light of Loreto's poorly developed transport and communications infrastructure and its dispersed residential pattern, an effective education and community empowerment strategy depends on radio as a primary means of communication and social mobilization. In much of the third world, radio broadcasts messages of modernity, though this often exacerbates local people's sense of acute detachment from its usual promises of elusive happiness. In contrast, APRI-Minga's radio project reflects a pragmatic and culturally responsive, participatory approach to revivifying culture, community wellbeing, and individual self-esteem.

Throughout rural Loreto, audiences rely on the radio not only for crucial information and news, but also to dispatch greetings, address community concerns, and to air personal grievances. In response to low levels of literacy, APRI-Minga has created a network of community-based correspondents who record testimonials, stories, and music, and send in local news reports. APRI-Minga receives dozens of letters each week from radio program listeners, and tapes numerous interviews and musical performances during regular visits to rural communities throughout Loreto. Letters come from communities located as much as two weeks away by river travel. The production staff at ¡Bienvenida Salud! Uses the letters, taped testimonials and interviews as a basis for selecting program themes. (Dean, Elías, McKinley & Saul, 2000) In this way, APRI-Minga's radio program plays a critical role in disseminating culturally sensitive health information in an entertaining format, utilizing dramatic and local musical forms to encourage involvement in community welfare.

By inserting their own narratives and expressive forms into the national and regional "mediascapes" (Apadurai, 1990), local Amazonian communities have begun to see radio broadcasts as a means for furthering social and political transformation. Unlike commercial radio, which tends to undermine local cultural traditions, APRI-Minga's broadcasts are self-consciously using media to assist members of widely scattered communities to maintain and strengthen cultural ties. The potential for cultural revi-

talization is particularly significant among the numerically large Cocama-Cocamilla communities of Loreto, who have historically been encouraged to deny their cultural heritage. A combination of local programming, an extensive network of community correspondents, and a production staff responsive to local community issues has meant that APRI-Minga has been remarkably successful in educating the public on matters of health and human rights through radio broadcasts of narratives and tape recorded music that emphasizes local cultural themes, traditions, and interpretations of history.

Conclusion

In light of the digital revolution and the global cultural economy that now threatens to make the romantic notion of authorship redundant, is it naïve to believe that indigenous peoples' intellectual rights can be respected, let alone adequately defined? (Boyle, 1997) However one responds to this question, what is clear amid globalization is that cultural and political claims for sovereignty are integral to indigenous peoples' struggles for autonomy. (Dean, 1999) Invariably, access to digital information transforms customary systems of knowledge, and intergenerational systems of authority and power. How then can indigenous peoples respond to those forms of cultural appropriation that seriously compromise their capacity to determine their own futures. How should digital information be curated? And how do we develop culturally appropriate mechanisms for equitable sharing of local systems of knowledge in ways that ensure intergenerational, cultural continuity? The issues involved are complex, and the repercussions profound, for what is at stake is the cultural survival of indigenous peoples. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of the spoken and sung word.

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