

DIGITAL COMMUNITY ARCHIVES FOR VERNACULAR MUSICS: CASES FROM INDIA¹⁸

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Archives, Derrida tells us, are a notion, a malleable genre.¹⁹ The word has been used to signify varied assemblages of people, spaces, bureaucracies, and technologies, engaged in identifying and preserving documents of history and memory.²⁰ With digital technologies, this malleability is remarkably amplified as the notion has expanded from closed collections associated with authority to decentralized ones that allow for variable access. In recent times, archives have been called upon to accomplish a wide range of conceptual work. They manifest equally frequently as curated projects, as accidental accumulations, as retroactive identifications, and as nascent ideas. They describe institutions, collections, websites, embodied repertoires, and popular memories. The proliferation of digital technologies for documentation and dissemination in the past decade has resulted in the emergence of new kinds of informal practices of vernacular music archiving among cultural heritage communities.

This article draws upon ethnographic research in small towns in north India with local small-scale initiatives to archive oral vernacular musics—musics described as folk and tribal. It explores the varied ways in which digital audiovisual archives of vernacular musics may materialize and circulate in the present day. Such community-based initiatives present curious alternatives to formal audiovisual archives, emerging through located relationships between people, musics, and technologies. My concern is with tracing the evolving relationships between communities, archivists, and musics through the mediation of digital technologies, examining how contextual technological practices may contribute to archival forms. Methodologically, my approach is informed by actor-network theories²¹ that view both human and non-human actors as agentic participants in social constitutions. Such an approach is especially productive in understanding how material changes associated with new technologies are integrally linked to social practices. Further, I suggest that such archives may be fruitfully viewed as gestures of community members towards claiming multivalent subjectivities—as cultural mediators and as technological experts. Archiving functions in these contexts as an aspirational practice²²—a mode of reification of precariously located vernacular identities and the coalescence of communities through technological modes around the notion of music in particular, and culture in general.

1. Cultural heritage communities and archives: changing relationships

The term 'archive' most recognizably invokes notions of formal institutions, often associated with authority and entrusted with the task of preserving official documents of history. As an institutional practice, the audiovisual archiving of vernacular musics cannot be separated from histories of colonial regimes and ethnological documentation of colonial people as a mode of governance. Globally in the past few decades, formal audiovisual archives, along with other kinds of cultural institutions, have actively begun to develop more equitable models that attempt to repair the violence in such histories. Discourse on equitable archiving has encouraged archives with holdings of vernacular musics to collaborate with cultural heritage communities in various man-

18 This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2011–2012 in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra in India. The research was supported by the European Research Council funded project Music, Digitisation, Mediation: Towards Interdisciplinary Music Studies at the University of Oxford and headed by Professor Georgina Bom.

19 Jacques Derrida, *Archives Fever*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

20 Marlene Manoff, "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines," in *Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 4:1, 9–25, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

21 John Law and John Hassard, *Actor Network Theory and After*, (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 1999).

22 Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information is Alive*, (Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2003).

ners: repatriating archival holdings, developing new collections, and developing new modes of dissemination, among other manners. Digital technologies for replication and dissemination are fundamental to the development of such new models.²³

Simultaneous to such attempts on behalf of institution-based archives, technologies for documentation and dissemination have also stimulated informal and dispersed activities among vernacular communities. I refer to such initiatives as community archives. In contrast to a neutral stance assumed by official archives, such initiatives often express a deeply subjective, emic relationship to the musics. That is, those engaged in building the archives believe that they are insiders among the people who customarily practice and patronize the music: that they are archiving their own music. A second idea implicit in the model of the community archive is that the contents of the archive may be located and shared among members of the community whose music is being archived; that is, they intend as much to be archives of the community as for the community. (To what extent they realize both claims, is a question for another day.)

Such community archives that were part of my research were based in two distinct musical regions in northern India: Rajasthan—a region renowned nationally and internationally through its vernacular culture including the musical practices of hereditary practitioners; and the Adivasi (tribal) region at the cusp of the two states of Gujarat and Maharashtra where oral culture is closely linked to tribal identities in the context of gradual erosion of tribal languages. In spite of their self-proclamation as insiders, the initiatives were often part of national and transnational networks of influence, demonstrating a spectrum of relationships between archivists and musics. For the cultural organization Lokayan Sansthan in the small city of Bikaner in north Rajasthan, the impetus to archive local musics was partly rooted in its collaboration with a metropolitan media project, the transnationally connected Kabir Project based in Bangalore. Given the Kabir Project's interest in mystical music, Lokayan's recent work focused largely on documenting such practices from the Bikaner region. The Manganiar Lok Sangeet Sansthan in the tourist town of Jaisalmer was established by Khete Khan, himself a Manganiar musician. The Manganiars are a widely known hereditary musician community in northwest Rajasthan, having been extensively researched and documented by national and international scholars. For Khete Khan, his institution was an explicit attempt to present the music and cultural forms of his community from an emic perspective. At the same time, however, the institution was part of the Archives and Community Partnership program conducted by the New Delhi-based Archive and Research Center for Ethnomusicology from whom it received technological and institutional support. The archive at the Adivasi Academy in the small village of Tejgadh in Gujarat was part of its museum centered on regional tribal cultures. The museum-archive was shaped by complex non-local influences, most crucially, the vision of its founder, language scholar Dr. Ganesh Devy, and the participation of professional vocalist Prachi Dublay who helped to collect and then transcribed the tribal songs. At the same time, it was developed with an explicit philosophy of reclaiming a tribal voice that had been silenced by colonial and postcolonial histories. The music collection was being developed and managed, quite autonomously, by Naran, Vikesh, and Neepa—three members of the tribal Rathwa community, all of whom had completed diploma courses in Museum Studies offered at the academy.

2. Vernacular music archiving in local technological contexts

In addition to their local commitments and wider connections, what crucially shaped these archives, however, was the particular techno-social fabric peculiar to small

23 See Anthony Seeger, "New Technology Requires New Collaborations: Changing Ourselves to Better Shape the Future," in *Musicality Australia* 27:1, 2004, 94–110, or Caroline Landau and Janet Topp-Fargion, "We Are All Archivists Now: Towards a More Equitable Ethnomusicology," in *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 21:2, 2012, 125–140.

towns and villages in most parts of India. Small-scale local initiatives for archiving vernacular musics had emerged in spurts in the 1980s along with the popularity of cassette technologies that allowed for decentralized recording. In the past decade, the ubiquity of digital technologies in these contexts for music recording, consumption, and dissemination had provided a new impetus. Integral to the technological practices were electric breakdowns, technological delays, cheap digital media devices, and grey music economies—a context that Ravi Sundaram²⁴ describes as ‘recycled’ or ‘pirate’ electronic modernity, and that is akin to Brian Larkin’s²⁵ discussions of the fractured access to technological infrastructures in Nigeria. Digital music consumption appeared primarily in the form of cheap multimedia devices that have rapidly pervaded India in the past decade: mobile phones, memory cards, USB drives, and mp3 players. The modes of music circulation were largely through a grey economy centered on digital music downloads and through informal exchange of music between consumers. The music that circulated on these cheap devices was predominantly commercial music produced in mainstream Hindi and local vernacular music industries, but also increasingly, informally-made recordings of local live music concerts.

Such local technological contexts inflected the small-scale and resource-scarce character of the archives that emerged. Archivist Marlene Manoff²⁶ points out that the ease of collecting and organizing information that digital technologies offer is in itself an incentive to archive. The apparent affordances of technologies, however, are always embedded in the sociality of their usage. For the archivists in my narrative, their archives consisted of recordings made on inexpensive audio recorders and camcorders and stored, often with minimal annotations, on computer hard discs and external hard drives. Such documentation, moreover, was integrally linked to its decentralized dissemination through offline and online modes. Indeed, the possibility to introduce the digital files into informal networks of music circulation was imagined as a key component of the archiving assemblages. For instance in 2012, the archive in Tejgadh produced a set of CDs of selected tribal songs from their collection. Vikesh, one of the archivists, explained that they had handed some sets to drivers of shared shuttle vehicles in the region, presumably to be played in the vehicles as they transported passengers. He also expressed hope that regional vendors of digital music would rip these CDs and thus circulate the music in wider networks of local grey economy and non-economic exchanges. In Bikaner, there was an additional hope that such archiving could be partly translated into commercial projects produced in the vernacular music studios, allowing for live music repertoires to enter local markets for commercial popular musics.

The centrality of sharing to archival imaginaries of community archivists was predicated necessarily on unclear notions about ownership over vernacular musics and their recordings. Debates in recent years about the proprietary nature of vernacular musics (as representative of intangible cultural heritage) center on varied conceptions of their status: their perception as heritage and hence part of a public domain; their invocation as cultural property and hence owned by customary communities of practice; and their inclusion within legal regimes as the intellectual property of individual performers. Archives are often at the cusps of these questions as they grapple with providing access to what is regarded as heritage while also respecting the intellectual property rights of communities and performers. If several established archives that I encountered during research attempted to address questions of copyrights in archival recordings, awareness and concern of legal aspects were minimal in informal initiatives. This particular stance threw into sharp relief varied conceptions of the nature of proprietary relationships in traditional cultural forms.

24 Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*, (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2009).

25 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

26 Marlene Manoff, "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines."

Especially among community archivists, local live music traditions were viewed as embedded in customary social structures. In all three locations of my research, archivists expressed that the vernacular musics being documented belonged as much to the performers as to the community as a whole—including archivists. Performers were variedly remunerated for their recordings; however, archival recordings of vernacular musics were not seen as within copyright regimes that ensured performers' rights over replication and circulation. Further, in one instance, the archivists also accessed local gray markets to search for informally (and often illegally) made recordings of live music concerts to be included in their archive. The inadvertent disregard for intellectual property considerations, while it clashed with legal regimes, reflected both the 'recycled' technological imaginary that I discuss in the previous section as well as oral knowledge practices that rely on circulation as a mode of preservation. Such unregulated circulation under the pretext of community ownership also assumed a social homogeneity that conflated local hierarchies.

On the other hand, such claims to belonging also rendered community archives as sites of contestation where investments in musics were negotiated. For instance, the case of the archive for Manganiars in Jaisalmer: Khete Khan aimed to build a repository of emic knowledge that would be locally available, recording interviews with master musicians, music lessons, and religious ceremonies. Through the archive, he attempted to claim agency over the knowledge about the Manganiar community; the success of his archive, however, was difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, Khete Khan's technical and research skills were limited in developing an archive that could be used effectively as a resource; given his limited literacy in English, managing and organizing the digital files on his computer were a challenge. On the other hand, not all Manganiar musicians appeared to agree with his conviction about a community archive. Rather, for most Manganiar musicians, it was easier to accept an external institution as a central archival space. Further, I heard elsewhere that Khete Khan's access to technologies, and his claim to cultural expertise had led to his partial marginalization within the community.

3. Technologies and new subjectivities

Amidst such complexities, for Khete Khan and other archivists, the practice of archiving was a personally meaningful project. This meaning laid partly in the potential to share and disseminate holdings through the platform of the Internet. Within an expanding archival imaginary, parts of the collections in all three initiatives were being developed as curated online archives. Given their wider national associations, such intentions of addressing online audiences were not surprising. However, it also begged the question of what such online circulation may accomplish for archivists. Arjun Appadurai has stated: "[Electronic] archives viewed as active and interactive tools for the construction of sustainable identities are important vehicles for building the capacity to aspire among those groups who need it most."²⁷ I suggest that in presenting music archives online, archivists aspired to assert vernacular identities centered in the idea of culture as well as to connect with an (imagined) digital community of sympathetic and interested audiences. In the process, the practice of archiving served as a performative assertion of their location as cultural mediators between local communities and wider audiences and as global digital subjects.

Nowhere was this point more poignantly demonstrated as in the case of the Adivasi Academy archive in Tejgadh. Academy founder, Dr. Ganesh Devy, has described the condition of tribal communities in the region through the metaphor of aphasia, a neurological disorder that causes loss of speech and language skills.²⁸ According to him, the loss of languages and oral culture has resulted in tribal communities being rendered, literally, speechless. The recording of sound in these regions in such political context represents a

27 Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information is Alive*, (Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2003), 25.

28 Ganesh Devy, *A Nomad Called Thief: Reflections on Adivasi Silence*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006).

conquering of this aphasia—a recovery of communicative abilities. Circulating and sharing the recordings outside the community completes the communicative act. For archivists at the academy, providing access to the music through online modes and thereby acquainting the world with the uniqueness of tribal culture was vital to archiving. It was an assertion of cultural identities marginalized from mainstream society—identities around which a larger political community may coalesce.²⁹ However, as important as the possibility for self-representation in this context was the direct engagement with technologies as a mode of acquiring coevalness with mainstream society. Archiving, here, emerged as a multivalent practice that served not only to achieve the immediate goal of music documentation but also to redress inequities perceived by cultural heritage communities through technological modes.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to lay out the forms of community archives for vernacular musics through ethnographic research with a range of such initiatives in India. The emergence of such grassroots archives, I suggest, is embedded in the technologies that are part of local socialities. The notional nature of the archive that I refer to at the beginning of the paper entails a multiplicity of manners in which they may materialize; the specific manners of materialization are contingent upon local meanings of technologies. The technocultures of community archives present strong contrasts with those of most formal institutions that often aspire to standardization in preservation technologies as well as institutional policies for access and dissemination. On the other hand, as is evident in the three initiatives that I discuss, given the possibility to maintain music collections simultaneously in multiple places, more established archives may connect with community-based initiatives in search of collaborative partnerships.

Such dispersed initiatives, however, beg another key question: how, within predominantly normative conceptions of archiving, may one understand intersections between musical investments, technological practices, and the crafting of new subjectivities? This question needs to be answered crucially with the recognition that the kinds of grassroots archives that I discuss are responses to colonial and neo-colonial histories of the very practice of archiving. Indeed, the community archivists I met often aimed to reclaim the possibility to self-represent their musics and cultures. In the vein of Appadurai's implication in connecting archives to the capacity of communities to aspire, I suggest that the production of community archives for vernacular musics is perhaps less about material aspects of archives management—collection, preservation, and dissemination—as it is about the generative roles that archiving may play in communities.

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²⁹ Rosemay Coombe, "Possessing Culture: Political Economies of Community Subjects and Their Properties," in *Ownership and Appropriation*, Veronica Strang and Mark Busse, eds., (Berg: Oxford and New York, 2011).

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