

Piotr Cichocki

ORCID: 0000-0003-0999-477X

University of Warsaw

Towards the Problematization of an Audio Document: An Experiment in Cooperative Recordings

Abstract: The anthropological critique of modernity regards the notion of documentation as a practice through which objectification is constructed. According to this critique, a recording is not a representation of a social or natural environment, but the process of the (re)construction of social relations through technological means. To illustrate this theoretical consideration, I discuss the recordings of *vimbuz*a ceremonies in northern Malawi. The recordings were produced in cooperation with local communities and individuals. Subsequently, some of them were later published. Over the course of the project, it was crucial to strive for a continuous, yet remote, involvement of the people recorded.

Keywords: ethnology, fieldwork, anthropology, mass media, technological innovations, technology, sound studies, Africa, Malawi, music production

The day before the recording of the ceremony, the *vimbuz*a (singular: *chimbuz*a) Doctor (or *sing'anga*) Kanuska talked about the spirits that were involved in this religious or perhaps medical practice. The doctor did not categorize them precisely, but rather demonstrated how certain steps, driven by the spirits, enabled her to understand that she or her patient was possessed by *virombo*, *vyanusi*, *mizimu* or *vimbuz*a. Afterwards she announced that at the upcoming recorded ceremony, the spirits would manifest themselves in the exact order in which she had just presented. During the night ritual, the temple was crowded with people. Kanuska, surrounded by a group of clapping and singing acolytes, swayed and jumped with her eyes shut. I had rather been under the impression that the process of possession was about freeing oneself from the control of social norms, but no speculation could have been more wrong. The *sing'anga* performed, as her drummers did, in the order that had been presented the previous day. This revealed that the recording would capture a complex social practice rather than a supposedly spontaneous, almost natural happening. This sensitive relationship between possession and di-

recting questioned the opposition between the two ideal, if not imaginary, types: of “uncontrollable possession” and a “staged recording session.”

In the case of my work on recording *vimbuza* ceremonies, the relation between sensitivity and control was twofold. On the one hand, as described in the vignette above, this tension manifested itself in the subtle ways in which sound functions in the social milieus that form the context for the recording. On the other, it also demonstrates how a social process might become vulnerable when recorded and thus objectified for the sake of documentation. The social process is docile, while the technology operates in a relentless way. In the dynamics of a social happening, technology performs a silencing, skipping and selecting. Moreover, features of the technological performance arise not only from the characteristics of recording technology (and how it stimulates and sustains the power relations in which ethnographers are entangled), but also the social dynamics that set it in motion. In this process, subtle, unarticulated ways of exercising control over the recorded environment are crucial. Conversely, the problematization of silencing and selecting can open up the possibility to enable — and thus to hear — the equally subtle manifestation of social processes within the recording.

In this article, I examine how researchers can support this sensitivity. The aim is to enrich documentation, which can amplify the sound of what is barely audible. I argue that recording the silenced social world and transforming it into a different type of data (embodied social action is turned into sound waves) should involve participation, cooperation, and ethnographic perspective. In this paper, I analyze the practices of documentation and archiving as reverse and obverse, which is why they are discussed in mutual correspondence. Field recording (documenting) is the first stage of archiving, because it transforms social reality into a distinct form of record-keeping. The text opens with a commentary on the relationship between the social environment and the documentation process. Later on, I move on to discuss a specific type of documentation, i.e., audio recordings. The second part describes a particular field recording method that brought to the fore what was usually obscured in the documentation process. Modern recording practices are grounded in a specific historical and social context, and thus I begin by presenting their place in the structural inequalities established through colonialism. This problematization serves as the starting point for the analysis of methods presented in the following sections of this article.

Documenting Social Worlds

Two tensions determine the character of field recordings. The first one is between what is silenced (omitted, unregistered) and what is captured, reconfigured, and transmitted. The second one is related to the relationship between the social

and the technological. These tensions underlie the practices related to modern documentation and archiving, which include field recordings. Technology plays a crucial role in these practices by defining their forms. However, this role does not mean that social relations are simply subservient to technology. Rather, technology plays an important, though ambiguous, part in complex relationship configurations that, for want of a better notion, can be defined as a social role. In this paper, I discuss how religious, technological and interpersonal relations affect the recording processes. Relations, according to Marilyn Strathern, are abstracts of the social potential that “make[s] artifacts out of persons.”¹ I argue that recording is shaped and defined as an artefact² through relations. In fact, any “document” or “recording” responds to the roles given to them through relationality. These roles define the ability to represent what is being documented, or to hide (silence) parts of it.

Reflecting on the limitations of recording makes a significant difference in “traditional-modern”³ documentation. The work of the first modern ethnographic sound capturers (and their “traditional-modern” followers) was based on a firm belief in the transparency of their own methods and the objectivity of the process. They were certain that they register reality in an untouched, but simplified way. However, as demonstrated by the anthropological critiques of modernity, documentation, in both social and technological contexts, corresponds to the hidden work of the authority. These documentary practices generated seemingly independent narratives that were in fact interwoven in colonial systems of meanings. As a result, the documented phenomena were in equal measure both represented and obscured.

This critique of the documentation process has been profoundly influenced by the thought of Michel Foucault. The oeuvre of this French archaeologist of knowledge is an extended exploration of the production of truth (veridiction), reconstructing the various modalities on which it inevitably depends.⁴ The claim of objectivity is dependent on the particular context that enables the process of veridiction. Foucault explains under what conditions and with what effects a veridiction is exercised.⁵ In the Foucauldian optic, it would be critical to analyze how the archiving and standardization of the technical process are intrinsic to the modality of document production and to the way in which objectivity is constructed.

¹ M. Strathern, *Learning to See in Melanesia: Four Lectures Given in the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, 1993–2008*, London 2003, p. 179.

² Inspired by Strathern, I define the artefact as an object created through a social process.

³ I use this notion to address the attachment to modern methods of control and power that are not subjected to decolonizing reflection. This cultural position makes it possible to purely document “what is real” and “what really happens.”

⁴ M. Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, trans. G. Burchell, Houndmills–New York 2008, p. 238.

⁵ M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, trans. G. Burchell, Houndmills–New York 2010, p. 36.

This mechanism was nowhere more explicit than in colonized territories. In this context, documentation was institutionally objectified through hegemonic methods of knowledge production. In the colonial situation, documentation and archiving approached social reality in search of exoticism and used the resources of hegemonic power in the process of its representation. Modern representations transformed elements of social life in order to inscribe them into the new colonial rhetoric. For example, the documentation produced for colonial archives was described by Ann Stoler as “the supreme technology of the [...] imperial state.”⁶ According to Stoler, archives (or rather “archiving as a process”⁷) are monuments of the colonial state, or more broadly, of any particular type of power that validates an archive. The questioning of archives involves investigating “what political forces, social cues, and moral virtues produce qualified knowledges that, in turn, disqualified other ways of knowing.”⁸ Drawing upon Stoler, I see the practice of documentation (including the audio recording) as the production of archives *in situ* and in real time.

This reflection allows us to recognize colonial and post-colonial documentations as answers to questions posed by a power that transformed societies through documentation. Documents (and thus also recordings) are therefore not so much a reflection of documented phenomena, as “the fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern” that, as I will demonstrate below, is accomplished through technological interventions. Moreover, these modalities of registration are not only characteristic of 19th-century empires, but are also continued by today’s various agendas of power: both local nation states and neoliberal structures, which use documentation in their projects of epistemological management, can serve as examples of this process.

The “historical turn” represented by Michel Foucault and currently by Ann Stoler called into question the objectivity of documentation, which now functions only as an ideal. Likewise, the non-interference of sound recording can be viewed as a construct of certain power relations. The relations between power and documentation can be observed through the recording technologies that inform both the documentation process and the recording of social practices. These relations are, however, hardly noticeable without an ethnographic sensibility. Technology and social relations are intertwined and their mutual influence in the process of documentation is not transparent. It is worth noting that this process is subject to the limitations imposed on the documented environment. In effect, the nature of the documentation process is that of an obscured hierarchy.

⁶ A.L. Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form,” *Archival Science* 2, 2002, p. 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Technologies of Obscured Power

The problematization of these two aspects redefines recording, which can no longer be seen as a representation of a particular social or natural environment, but rather as the process of the construction of an object and its subsequent re-construction in other, probably more dominant, networks of social relations.⁹ Along the same line of thinking, we understand the act of audio recording not as the documentation of the sound layer of an environment or an event, but as a consequence of a sound location within an environment¹⁰ and the positionality of researchers in relation to the social environment that they aim to record. It should be remembered that the practice of field recordings also involved the production of the subjects of ethnographic field research, that is allegedly weak and endangered indigenous communities (or rather their language and their culture).¹¹ It took place within unequal relations, which undoubtedly influences the way these relationships are practised today.

At the moment of recording, it is a combination of the technical dimension and social relations that determine what is recorded and what is muted, and what remains silent or hidden to the recording person. In this process, social relations are inseparable from the technical dimension. This nexus manifests itself through the most mundane aspects of recording practice: the price of the equipment, its parameters and the skills acquired by the user. Moreover, the social is visibly enmeshed with the technological in aspects such as the power to arrange the recording situation and the means of social control to be exercised over it. Hence, control over the recording environment, the equipment, and the recordings are essential to this process. In effect, these are the relations, although inaudible as such, that determine what is recorded.

The conditions of sound recording were discussed in the groundbreaking ethnography of a South African music studio written by Louise Meintjes. She described the “technological mystification” that masks the process by which “technology and technological expertise is differently accessible [...] on the basis

⁹ The understanding of the “social” in this article relies upon the perspective described by Bruno Latour. The social includes not only human relations but also all the connections through which various types of non-human agents affect an extended network (see B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford–New York 2005).

¹⁰ The critique of this approach corresponds with the understanding of sound and soundscape proposed by Timothy Ingold (“Against Soundscape,” [in:] *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, ed. A. Carlyle, Paris 2007, pp. 10–13), who thinks about sound in terms of embodiment, rather than as an autonomous layer of the environment.

¹¹ B. Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology*, Minneapolis–London 2014, pp. x–xii; J. Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham 2003, pp. 313–316.

of social class and color.”¹² Meintjes sees that technological practices “emerge from and embed the experiences of the political configuration of the material world of the studio and of the post-colonial world within which the studio is situated.”¹³ Therefore, these practices are the “articulation of position” in the post-colonial context. Meintjes demonstrates how competencies, tastes, and hierarchies in a musical society form the multi-layered cooperation of non-verbally communicating people: musicians, producers, arrangers, soloists, and many more. The final effect of recording — a file or a CD — represents the social relations between them. However, the recording is a highly “compressed” effect of these negotiations, where the differences and discrepancies are heard symbolically rather than directly.

Notwithstanding these observations, with the decentralization of technology, the role of recording has been extended beyond that of mere dominance. Leslie Gay Jr. has observed that “new technological configurations offer prospects for redistributions of power.”¹⁴ Through these redistributions, technologies can enable both decolonizing practices as well as a consolidation of the colonial control. In this analysis, the technological also merges with the social. In considering this emancipatory potential, new configurations do not have to mean more detailed parameters or a technologically constructed sense of immersion. On the contrary, such an enhancement of quality may simply be related to the needs of the modern consumer, that is, the need for more in-depth simulations of the real sonic and visual spaces.

By presenting the example of recordings that I produced in Malawi, I hypothesize about a perspective of work that is an experiment in an emancipatory approach. At the same time, I believe that these recordings do not introduce a model, but rather give example in a discussion about power relations within the technology. This perspective reflects on the possibility of being more open to relational work than technological innovations. My motivation was an attempt to redefine the cultural position of recordings across the disjunction between the recording site and its network of dissemination. As some scholars note, relations between places are crucial in the post-colonial world.¹⁵ My work seeks to redefine both social relations and technology. The practice of redefining always has an open-ended form and a probing character. Therefore, the procedures described below have a situational and indeterminate quality.

¹² L. Meintjes, *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*, Durham 2003, p. 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁴ L.C. Gay, Jr., “Acting Up, Talking Tech: New York Rock Musicians and Their Metaphors of Technology,” *Ethnomusicology* 42, 1998, p. 87.

¹⁵ S.H. Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, 2000, pp. 23–45.

Vimbuzas as Social Practices and Recorded Tracks

My work with people practising *vimbuzas* ceremonies in northern Malawi was accompanied by reflection about the complex nexus of power and documentation. *Vimbuzas* are performative practices that cross European domains of medicine, religion, music, and politics. In terms of medicine, this practice is centred around possessed “African doctors” (or *sing’anga* or prophets, *ntchimi*). *Sing’anga* communicate with the *vimbuzas* spirits through dance, and some of them in dreams.¹⁶ Having seen the truth revealed by the spirits, doctors are able to prophesize about the reasons for their patients’ diseases. The *vimbuzas* spirits also inform doctors about the bush plants that ought to be used for the preparation of medicines. The diagnosis of patients’ diseases always has to relate to the cause, which is mostly either bewitchment or possession by one or many kinds of spirits.

Perhaps in pre-colonial times, spirits were so evidently present in everyday life that the practices of communicating with them did not need to be classified as a specific sphere of “religion.” For non-religious rationalists, *vimbuzas* may be seen as religion because it deals with non-material beings that affect people’s lives, and therefore defines social reality beyond rationality. Modern Christians sometimes refer to *vimbuzas* as a local pagan religion or, more often, a satanic cult. However, some of its aspects do not differ much from what can be seen in Malawian churches. For instance, the tithes that are an essential part of Christian services in Malawi are also paid to the spirits at *vimbuzas* temples. Likewise, the *vimbuzas* ritual has the solemn character of crossing the line between life and death. In this sense, it can be described as a religious practice, although one should remember that for many participants it is an integral part of the everyday world and for others, a disease caused by the spirits.

When using Western categories to classify *vimbuzas*, it is also important to note that it combines elements of music and dance. Most *vimbuzas* ceremonies include individual dances performed by possessed persons to the accompaniment of a drum ensemble.¹⁷ During several hours of dance sessions, choirs of a dozen or so people sing songs which constitute a distinct type of music reminiscent of local church songs. Moreover, for many young inhabitants of the countryside, where *vimbuzas* ceremonies are predominantly practised, rituals are a form of entertainment, or even, as Malawian anthropologist Allister Munthali wrote in his memoir, an excuse “to be out of the house at night with [their] girlfriends” and without

¹⁶ B. Soko, *Vimbuzas: The Healing Dance of Northern Malawi*, Zomba 2014.

¹⁷ According to participants, the relation between drumming and dance is the opposite of accompaniment. As I was told, drummers mark footsteps made by the spirits.

their parents.¹⁸ *Vimbuza* can also be viewed as a phenomenon of micro-politics. The practice of revealing names of witches (along with some traditionally performed medical practices, such as abortion with herbal medicines) is illegal as a result of the century-old Anti-Witchcraft Act. As I mentioned earlier, most Christian churches have tried to suppress *vimbuza*. In these conditions, *vimbuza* doctors are sometimes regarded as quasi-political representatives of the rural communities against politicians and businessmen who are often viewed as the clients of evil magicians. In this context, *vimbuza* can be understood as spiritual warfare against evil powers, witches, and vampires. Paradoxically, many Christian churches attributed similar evil powers to *vimbuza*.

It is worth noting that in 2007 *vimbuza* were inscribed on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage in the category of medical practice. However, as demonstrated by Lisa Gilman, this barely affected the local practice of the cult.¹⁹ It is true that in a few towns of the Northern Region *vimbuza* are sometimes performed as a presentation of local culture at political rallies or, less frequently, for tourists. However, it is believed that these performances do not involve the spirits. Nevertheless, *vimbuza* continue to be commonly practised in villages, where their main role is to communicate with the spirits.

At the same time, the Malawian music industry, dominated by Presbyterian and Pentecostal gospel and urban styles like hip hop and dancehall, completely ostracized *vimbuza*. Even indirect inspirations from the rhythm and dance are not used. We won't find any *vimbuza* albums on the international music market, probably due to the peripheral position of Malawi (Wambali Mkandawire, an internationally acclaimed musician from the Northern Region who performed a fusion of afro-jazz and *vimbuza* beats, was an exception). The few recordings that were available publicly on YouTube documented "secular" ceremonies — some of them were recorded by tourists and a few were part of genuine ethnographic documentations. All these videos tend to only sketchily represent the type of subjectivity that is most relevant to the participants of ceremonies, namely, the subjectivity of the diviner.

However, despite the complicated relation with the church, state, and market, *vimbuza* is still not recognized in terms of modern epistemologies. The most accurate explanation of *vimbuza* is the one that considers local ways of experiencing and understanding it: one that could represent these ceremonies as complex systems of social relations. These systems assemble people, objects, and the spirits.

Taking all this into consideration, I found the field recordings of *vimbuza* profoundly problematic. The complexity of this socio-spiritual nexus could hardly be represented through the acousmatic aspect of the recordings. In the social reality

¹⁸ A. Munthali, "Doing Fieldwork at Home: Some Personal Experiences among the Tumbuka of Northern Malawi," *African Anthropologist* 8, 2001, p. 130, <https://doi.org/10.4314/aa.v8i2.23107>.

¹⁹ L. Gilman, "Demonic or Cultural Treasure? Local Perspectives on Vimbuza, Intangible Cultural Heritage, and UNESCO in Malawi," *Journal of Folklore Research: An International Journal of Folklore and Ethnomusicology* 52, 2015, pp. 199–216.

of *vimbuz*a practice, sound is inseparably connected with the dance steps and gestures of people, or, according to the participants, the spirits. By transforming *vimbuz*a into an audio recording this complexity is severely reduced. The recording preserves only a few aspects of the original event that most powerfully evoke it for its participants. However, in order to produce a multi-layered representation of *vimbuz*a, I decided to experiment with the method of participant observation (which is the foundation of the ethnographic method) to deepen and “thicken” the recording.

The recording of *vimbuz*a was part of a complex research practice that combined several methods and media. It was conducted between 2016 and 2019 with a number of doctors and their antagonists from Christian churches in the Northern Region. In an attempt to register subtle and blurred aspects of relations, I delved into ethnography as a modality of representation of all those in-between movements that cannot be documented by other devices and methods. This in-between space would otherwise be filled with the imaginary depictions characteristic of isolated listeners and readers. This additional interpretation was even more significant, as many of the *vimbuz*a recordings were published and further disseminated.²⁰

Below, I describe the characteristics of my practice that employed the distinction proposed by Ingold in an attentive rather than intentional way.²¹ I proposed an extended method of representation that should evoke the social in sound and the audible in the social. The components of documentation present the process of transition from a recording location to a recontextualized artefact. I assume that the meanings inherent in the event could be articulated only by intertwining many layers of this ritual practice. The recordings sought to embrace not only a historically contextualized custom, but also a practice that is experienced and conceptualized in categories relevant to my interlocutors. Last but not least, the tracks were an acousmatic sound that became recontextualized through varied technological representations.

For the most part, the specific methodology of *vimbuz*a recording was not the implementation of any previous plan, but rather a situational action performed in cooperation with the participants of the recordings.²² In considering the overall recording process, I describe five steps aimed towards an ethnographic re-contextualization of documentation:

1. Participation in the world of *vimbuz*a.
2. Acquiring knowledge about *vimbuz*a through ethnographic interviews.

²⁰ Doctor Kanuska Group, *Mutende Mizimu: Vimbuz*a from Mzimba North, Warsaw 2020 (CD).

²¹ T. Ingold, “Thinking through the Cello,” [in:] *Thinking in the World: A Reader*, eds. J. Bennett, M. Zournazi, London–New York 2019, p. 202.

²² In another text, I defined more elaborately the recording as a “situational event.” P. Cichocki, “Ethnography/Listening/Recording: Sound Environments of the Malawian North and Beyond,” *Ethnologia Polona* 39, 2018, pp. 109–126, <https://doi.org/10.23858/EthP39.2018.007>.

3. The use of the ethnofiction method in cooperation with participants of *vimbuza*.

4. Working within the social and material environment.

5. Post-production in line with the principles developed over the course of the recording process.

The above remarks can therefore by no means be regarded as a “guide,” but rather as a chronicle of steps (obviously with some mis-steps too). Some of them were partially anticipated, but most simply emerged from the context.

Step 1: Participation in the World of *Vimbuza*

During the research and recording process, my cultural position was complex. On the one hand, I was an ethnographer of European descent, who was associated with the dubious position of Polish academia in global hierarchies of knowledge power. I often emphasized the reason for my presence in Malawi not to mislead my interlocutors who rather expected a white person to be associated with an aid organization, a church or some other international agenda. However, my role extended far beyond that of the ethnographer. In particular, after the recording I became a publisher, who understood the economically and socially marginalized position of my collaborators. Moreover, I tried to meet the demands of economic rights raised by many people with whom I worked. Therefore, I proposed a form of cooperation in which the proceeds from record sales would go to them. The proposition was met with enthusiasm.²³

Furthermore, I also worked as a sound engineer during the ceremonies: I focused on gain and trim levels, microphone set-up, and so on. I attempted to reconcile these two roles and find the right balance between technical activities and participation in social relations through conversations and co-presence. Participation also involved reciprocity, which meant that the participants of the *vimbuza* also redefined my role in the process. The consequence of this reciprocity was a radical renegotiation of distance between me and the social reality.

My evolving relationship with the *vimbuza* community led by Doctor Kanuska perfectly illustrates how my role changed over time... When we got acquainted and I expressed a desire to research *vimbuza* and produce recordings, Kanuska said that I should also dance during the ceremony. She added that I might be bewitched. After my performance, during which I mimicked the movements of dancers I observed earlier, Kanuska came up with a diagnosis, claiming that I had the spirit of an ancestor and that I am allowed “to help people in Poland.” I did not reject this view, respecting the right of my interlocutors to define me as a human being and an ethnographer. From then on, the conversations and recordings changed their character. Although the interviews remained ethnographic in nature,

²³ The proceeds from sales are successively transferred to representatives of the groups.

they also included interpretations of the recordings and discussions encouraging me to adopt the role of the *sing'anga*. I was expected to understand the relations with the spirits and learn about various kinds of plants that had medicinal properties. Just like other doctors, Kanuska enjoyed a central position and unquestionable spiritual authority in the world of *vimbuza*. Therefore, her recognition changed my role from that of a random white person (with all the political consequences of the nexus of racial discourses, capital, political hegemony, and other factors) to a person related to the world of *vimbuza*. My new role profoundly affected the recording process. Most performers were aware of my engagement, so they defined the situation of recording differently than a performance for a white person from the government or a tourist.

An important role in this approach was played by mediators, who guided me through meetings with the *sing'anga*. An indirect relationship is generally a crucial element of spirit possession cults, but also plays a key role in witchcraft, traditional medicine, and even in everyday communication. This indirectness had usually manifested itself in the polite mode of conversations. However, more important ways of establishing a relationship included bonds of blood, sexual substances, and gifts that complemented and conditioned the relationship with the *vimbuza* spirits. Such exchanges aimed to engage new, indirect persons in the *vimbuza* relationships. While doing my research, I was supported by a couple of friends/translators/gatekeepers, with whom I got acquainted during my visits to gospel music studios in Mzuzu, the regional capital of Malawi. These friends not only accompanied me during my stays at temples, but also often initiated contacts with *sing'anga*. For instance, Peter Kaunda, whom I met when he was a local band singer and worked as a teacher in an elementary school, supported me during my stay at Kanuska's temple, not far from his workplace. Another *vimbuza* doctor, Amaliya, was the aunt of another friend of mine from Mzuzu. Precious was a devout follower of the Pentecostal Church, who several years earlier had forced his mother to stop practising *vimbuza* by destroying her drums. He told me about Amaliya, and we visited her house located several dozen kilometres away from the city. Despite his negative attitude towards local religious practices, during our stay he performed gestures of familiarity and affection, but also demonstrated a commitment to the recording, which we considered a shared project. As he appeared in two (or more) roles (as a nephew and researcher), I became involved in a double relationship with *vimbuza* doctors and their spirits. I was already not only an ethnographer, but also a person defined by their own socio-economic privileges, who wanted to support economic and political rights of *vimbuza* by promoting the musical craftsmanship of *vimbuza* drummers. In this way, I entered the circle of kins (as the relationship with the *vimbuza* spirits was considered in terms of kinship).

Thus, the complex character of the encounter with the *vimbuza* world opened up different kinds of subjectivity to emerge during the production of recordings.

Hence, the representation of *vimbuza* required an in-depth “loyalty” that arose not only from ethnographic evaluation, but also from commitment to relatives. Obviously, any claims that I was indigenous to that world or had a comprehensive knowledge would be a pretentious misapprehension. I was a *vimbuza* adept, but due to political and social distinction I had a profoundly different status. The (relative) whiteness of my skin, inscribed in post-colonial hierarchies, played an ambiguous role here. By way of example: after one of the interviews, Peter Kaunda (the aforementioned school teacher) expressed his interest in my project and mentioned that he would probably continue it after my return home. Later on, however, he suggested that *sing’anga* agreed to be recorded “because of the skin colour.” By this he commented on my privileged position. If he asked, they would answer with a dismissal: “What do you want? I don’t have time for this right now.” These words should be understood as a further problematization and not a simple explanation. Undoubtedly, my encounters did not suspend the power relations inherited from colonialism or entangled in the social practice of the post-colonial state. However, the relationships I was involved in were rather embedded in a world with many points of reference, such as those of “anti-state” and “anti-modern” *vimbuza* spirits.

Step 2: Acquiring Knowledge about *Vimbuza* through Ethnographic Interviews

Following the example of Vincent Caldarola, for whom close communication with persons being photographed is a vital complement to his ethnographic photography, I also conducted a series of open interviews with members of the community and wrote extensive field notes.²⁴ The interviews were repeated. Usually, I had conversations with the *sing’anga* or her drummer before and after recording. A few days after the ceremony, we listened to several dozen recorded fragments with Kanuska, her students, and the drummers, who were her sons. In these interviews, I did not limit their preferences in terms of comments, asking such open questions as: “What is it that you have just performed? What do we hear?” Their responses enabled a shift towards the interpretation of the recording as understood by the people involved in the performance. Among other things, these conversations helped me to come up with a categorization of *vimbuza* performances, since during ceremonies particular dances appeared to be flowing like streams. It was easy for the performers to indicate the transitions between one invocation and another.

Kanuska and her associates explained to me the meaning of songs by focusing on verbal messages and the way these messages operate (i.e., urging witches to stop

²⁴ V.J. Caldarola, “Visual Contexts: A Photographic Research Method in Anthropology,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 11, 1985, pp. 3–53.

the assault on innocent people). They translated the lines of songs and told me that these were prayers or spells used for specific purposes or with particular spiritual inspiration. This message-centric approach was largely in line with what I observed among contemporary electronic musicians in Malawi, regardless of whether they performed gospel or secular urban music. All musicians (except for producers, whose creative output was described in categories of craftsmanship) wanted their work to communicate a certain message: to the audience, their kins, beloved, and very often, to God. While noting this resemblance, it is also important to note that the addressees of *vimbuza* songs could vary. The songs I recorded were addressed to the spirits (“Come spirits, let me see what is hidden”), to God (the distinction between the *vimbuza* spirits and the Holy Spirit was blurred for many *sing’anga*), or — negatively — to witches (e.g., the demand: “Stop doing evil”).

This characteristic reveals *vimbuza* as a system of relationships in which songs enable communication between different domains that are invisibly connected by sound. However, it does not mean that the essence of *vimbuza* is textual. Rather, it demonstrates that words had important work to do within social relations. For instance, I was involved in the narratives not just as a researcher, but also as an adept. Kanuska, viewing me as being on my way to becoming a *vimbuza* doctor, taught me about the importance of individual songs, focusing on those which serve to prophesy the patient’s disease. Commenting on one of these songs, she emphasized that it was the most significant invocation that would support my practice in Poland. Thus, the interviews functioned not merely as a source of information about the verses, but also as a way of thickening the experience of the music as felt and understood by various parties. It might be said that the emergence of knowledge resulted primarily from relations, rather than from a traditionally understood notion of documentation.

Step 3: The Use of the Ethnofiction Method in Cooperation with Participants of *Vimbuza*

The dynamics of the recording process was driven by the tension between “sensitivity” and aspects of control. Clearly, a white European in Malawi who could handle audio recording technology (a Sound Device interface with a small arsenal of microphones and cables) embodied the modalities of post-colonial control. While self-reflecting about distance, I began to experiment with loosening control over the recording situation, or rather sharing it with other participants. Firstly, I fully accepted the authority of the *sing’anga*. Taking this into account, I conformed to the course of *vimbuza* events and limited my interventions to the moments of non-action, for example in order to deploy cabling. I did not change or comment on the usual location of performers in the *thempili*, but sought to manipulate the set-up and parameters of the microphones.

Furthermore, my local companions worked not only as a “technical team,” but also as producers who brought their own vision and ideas especially to photography and video shooting. As I mentioned earlier, the relationship of these companions with *vimbuz*a was ambiguous and was far from being professionally distant. They were cousins or neighbours of *sing’anga* or had participated in ceremonies before starting to reflect on the cult as a negative phenomenon. It was, therefore, difficult to unambiguously define their cultural position, as it merged the local spiritual world of *vimbuz*a with that of global electronic media to which I was attached.

My associates developed their technical skills earlier in a range of commercial, mostly religious, projects related to music, including video clips, photo sessions or song production. But, like the majority of Malawian media producers, they had no formal training. They learned their skills through hands-on experience and training in the studios owned by older professionals. However, it was not my intention to evaluate their competence according to Western standards: I was much more interested in how they utilized their cultural and technical means to present the local phenomenon with which they were ambiguously related. For example, Precious Mphande, a partner from the Unity Media Studio, took a small digital camera on a trip to his aunt Amaliya’s to document *vimbuz*a dances and other activities. This happened after I had presented my research objectives to him in an interview, and he, in response, started to explore those aspects of *vimbuz*a that were of interest to him. So it was Precious’s initiative to prepare the extensive video documentation to develop the project.

During the ceremonies, Precious operated the camera in a way that I would probably have found invasive if I were filming. He took close-ups of his aunt in a trance, lighting her face. He also filmed her adepts during moments of convulsions that I might consider disturbing if I were to present them as proof of an inquisitive ethnographic gaze. However, those who were possessed didn’t seem to be intimidated by the camera.²⁵ In this way, Precious had a considerable influence on the recording environment. My body techniques were based on discreetness and non-interference (of course, as a white person who was perceived as endowed with greater economic or cultural agency, I interfered by my mere presence) in the movements around me. I stood aside, controlled volume levels, watched closely, took notes and reacted, even danced when asked to. It was Precious who placed the technology at the centre of events. But, even if he might be considered a member of the “research team,” his methods should not be judged as methodologically incorrect. In fact, his mediating performance centre of the happenings stood in opposition to the attempts to disguise the documentation process.

²⁵ According to Jean Rouch’s observations, the camera might have features related to the state of trance (J. Rouch, S. Feld, *Ciné-Ethnography*, Visible Evidence 13, Minneapolis 2003).

Due to his work, the research became public, socially recognized, and shared by all those who participated in this event. Thanks to the contribution made by Precious, our endeavour came to be perceived not as a foreign agent's procedure, but rather as a relational practice.

This renegotiation of control and direction was inspired by the methodology of Jean Rouch, Damoure Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia, and other Nigerian actors who co-produced a number of films (the best examples here being *Moi, un noir*, *Jaguar* and *Human Pyramide*) of the ethnofiction genre. The ethnofiction film meant a radical re-working of ethnographic film, because it redefined the relations between the subject and object of direction. The films by DaLaRou (an anagram from Damoure, Lam and Rouch) are characterized by Paul Henley as semi-fictional narratives without a script, co-authored by the ethnographer-artist and the subjects of his studies.²⁶ The actors, who were completely aware of the camera, improvised their own daily life or their fantasies, doing and saying whatever they considered appropriate, adequate, or important.

Sławomir Sikora²⁷ and Johannes Sjöberg²⁸ both point out, each in their own terms, that ethnofiction is fundamentally a domain of improvisation. Rouch assumed that it is impossible to reflect everyday life, so improvisation enabled individuals to fully perform their own existence, not only as evidence, but also as creation. According to Henley, the domain of Rouch's ethno-fiction is not the fact of life, but rather the provocation of reality through which that reality emerges.²⁹

Researchers interested in this method emphasize that ethnofictions interplay with idiosyncratic characters and attitudes.³⁰ In terms of my research and recording project, I consider that the reshuffling of roles within the production process impacted significantly the ways in which the participants created and expressed their subjectivities. This situation also generates a power struggle over who is allowed to create representations. Thanks to the ability to show, act, and express, not limited by the authoritarian director-ethnographer, the project took on the character of a field recording. As a result, control over the documentation process became relativized and decentralized.

²⁶ P. Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*, Chicago–London 2009, pp. 314, 352.

²⁷ S. Sikora, *Film i paradoksy wizualności: praktykowanie antropologii*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 146–150.

²⁸ J. Sjöberg, "Ethnofiction: Drama as a Creative Research Practice in Ethnographic Film," *Journal of Media Practice* 9, 2008, pp. 229–242.

²⁹ P. Henley, op. cit., p. 81.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

Step 4: Working within the Social and Material Environment

The comparison between studio and field recordings reveals another aspect of control that results from the nexus of the technical and social contexts of the documentation project. Producers and recorders usually combine these two methods, working with more or less advanced recording technologies in more or less open environments. There are many examples of such mixed projects in which the studio environment is similar to the field, whereby elements of studio control are organized in a “natural” environment or vice versa. To give an example from Malawi, one of my interlocutors, a broadcasting producer from the Catholic radio Tigabane, carried out an original project of recording rural choirs. In order to do so, he arranged mobile studios in the villages, usually in the open air, with self-made windshields constructed from *vitenje* (local cloth).

I adopted a different method that minimizes technical intervention in the recording situation. I wanted to adapt to the actual circumstances, especially in terms of the material environment. *Vimbuza* ceremonies were performed in small temples built of mud bricks, thatched roofs, and tree-trunk pillars. After being informed about the positions of the drummers, dancers and singers, I tried to rethink the set-up of the two microphones before the ceremony. I installed the stereophonic microphone under the ceiling, and discreetly held the dynamic microphone at right angles and pointed it towards the main drum skin, or asked one of the young people assisting the ceremony to do this. The cables were deployed in a way that reduces visibility. I worked without tripods that were difficult to transport to the mountain villages. I also avoided other visual or material elements that could stand out during the recording process.

My goal was to achieve the best possible sound quality with minimal physical control over the recording situation. The aim was to enter the area of performance only in a way that would be affiliated with the movements of the *sing'anga* or her associates. During the ceremony, the movements of my body were responsive to the actions of the other participants. For example, I was included in the performance when dancers greeted me with a bow (a similar act was addressed to any person who enjoyed authority, but at the same time it also reflected a perception of my higher status). When the *sing'anga* or possessed dancers made a bow to me, I responded by returning the bow on the dusty floor. Also, I joined others to pay respect to the *sing'anga*. Other instances of my physical involvement concerned situations when I was asked to dance. At these moments, I asked the friends who assisted me, or anyone who had enough self-confidence to hold the recording tools. All the technical, bodily, and social aspects of my adjustment to the new

circumstances involved an encounter in a predefined social environment that favoured materially embedded perception rather than full comprehension.³¹

However, it should be added that the recording of a ceremony concerns a situation perceived differently by various people. This applies to both the spatial aspect of the ritual and the purpose. According to what they told me in the interviews following the ceremonies, in terms of the spatiality, possessed people felt like as they were present in two different places at the same time. They saw spirits or nothing at all (when the spirit “rose up” in their body and took complete control, they saw plants in the bush). This non-Euclidean combined space characterized by unusual acoustic principles could not be captured with microphones or even imagined by a non-possessed person. However, it could be metaphorically suggested through the juxtaposition of elements in the final post-production process (which I will talk about in the next section).

As for the purpose of the rituals, the registration seemed to combine the elements of economic exchange, ethnography, music, and entertainment. There was also an element of curiosity in the motivation of spectators who came to see an unusual white person or a possessed person. Doctor Kanuska acknowledged the medical and spiritual aspects of the spirits. For her and the other dancers, the situation involved a meeting with the invisible spirits. Moreover, these participants should not be defined as artists, but as men possessed by their ancestors. This ambiguity demonstrates that *vimbuza* are complex systems of social relations based on respect for the spirits, doctors, visitors, and people abroad who may listen to the recording. In these systems, sound was associated with steps, invocations, and gestures of respect. They were not audible directly through the audio recordings. Therefore, in order to elucidate these senses, appropriate actions had to be taken at the final stage of the production.

Step 5: Post-Production in Line with the Principles Developed over the Course of the Recording Process

Several months later, in my home studio, I was working on the mix and finalization of the recordings for publication. I had field notes and transcriptions of interviews lying around my computer. In parallel windows, I opened pictures taken by Precious, Andy, Peter, and me. During the production process, I had to constantly refer to these variously preserved fragments, and to my embodied memory. Therefore, it was crucial to maintain the continuous, yet remote, involvement

³¹ A.L. Dalsgård, “Nogami na ziemi. Rola ciała w etnografii przedtekstowej,” *Teksty Drugie* 1, 2017, pp. 154–172.

of the people recorded. In order to do so, I communicated with a few *vimbuza* people who had smartphones with the WhatsApp application. I sent them demo versions, asking for explanations of contexts I could not understand. I had to deal with the saturation of information and overcome the isolation of the production process. I concentrated my efforts on both enhancing and contextualizing the sound. I mixed and edited the tracks in a way that highlighted, according to my knowledge, the most important features.

By way of example, when mixing the recordings, I emphasized sounds that my *vimbuza* associates referred to during the performances and interviews. As a result, the vibration of the main drum was significantly enhanced as compared to the way it sounded on the raw tracks. It was suggested to me that this sound plays a central role in provoking the moment of possession.

Another example concerns the structure of the *vimbuza* ceremonies, which smoothly transitioned from one invocation to another: motifs recurred and overlapped with one another, or were interrupted by comments or laughter from performers and spectators. This torn time structure contradicted the apparent solemnity of the possession cult. Thus, listening to the entire recording without cuts would be irritating to people who did not participate in it. When editing the recordings, I sought to keep the songs that played a particularly significant role and marked the crucial moments of the ceremony. The final assemblage of recordings was arranged in such a way as to recreate the course of the ritual. The recording opens with a choral introduction, then slowly culminates into the moment of the highest possession and ends with vigil songs that usually closed ceremonies with hours of singing. The intuition of how to set the tracklist was a result of long conversations and was based on the experience I gained through my repeated participation in *vimbuza*.

I wanted the liner notes to provide context for the production. While preparing the content, I approached the non-European local music not as a cultural phenomenon, but as a performance of particular groups of people entangled in networks of relationships. Therefore, the CD notes explained *vimbuza* not as a regional tradition, but rather narrated these ceremonies in terms proposed by the possessed people and drummers. I described how Kanuska began to dance *vimbuza* decades ago and added insights about the meaning and effectiveness of particular songs. The aim of the text was to look at *vimbuza* ceremonies through the eyes of their participants, not from a distance. Photographs and graphic effects were used similarly, displaying elements particularly important in ceremonial practice, such as crosses, and also the gestures of dancers.

Conclusions

The production of the *vimbuza* recording, which after publishing came to be inserted into online databases and archives, was an aggregation of many social meanings of the registration, edition and distribution of recordings. This audio document appeared in public merging a scientific aspect and features of a musical recording, while also having some features of *vimbuza* as local practices. *Vimbuza*, just like the circulation of audio recordings in digital archives, are about establishing relationships.

As with the ceremonial gifts given to the spirits by humans — and vice-versa — the *vimbuza* album mediated between two social worlds: the one where the songs were recorded and the one where they were distributed. In this new virtual space, the sounds, images, and words of *vimbuza* have been re-assembled for listeners in order for them to imprecisely imagine what *vimbuza* meant for the participants of these ceremonies. To be more specific, the recording became an artefact that is recontextualized in distinct social spaces. However, any direct connection between the two milieus is impossible. Instead, these links are mediated through the infrastructures of the music industry or academia, but also through the use of imagination, editing, and other means, and by intermediaries, such as ethnographers and producers. In this article, I outlined a situational, relational, and performative method that aimed to establish a reflexive connection between these worlds. Therefore, a fundamental question arises: what is the outcome of the recording? One possible answer is: they should not induce a desire to possess, but rather construct a relationship that searches for its own shape beyond colonial patterns. Perhaps the relation could mimic a *vimbuza affinity*. Could an exact imitation of these steps guarantee a successful documentation project? Of course not: because the terms of “success” hardly make any sense here; any “guarantee” is a misconception; and the general problematization of documentation and recording is a starting point and an overall summary of this process. Instead, my contribution is to draw readers’ attention to the problem that each document represents a transformation of experiences between different social spaces. Most importantly, the consecutive steps of this transformation should be reflexive.

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Piotr Cichocki, PhD — researcher, lecturer, musician, producer and publisher. He holds the position of adjunct professor in the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw. Among his recent works are writings on the “Ethnographic Ear” and sound production in Malawian music studios, ethnographic audio-papers and radioplays, last but not least the intermedia exhibition “Cargo/(im)materiality.”

piotrcichocki81@gmail.com