Ethnomusicological approaches to conducting research among remote cultures before the 1950s relied on theoretical assumptions about social evolution and the impact of foreign cultures, particularly Europeans, on the otherwise “untainted” peoples of the world. Borrowing from anthropological research, which argued that there were stages of culture that people progressed through, this method encouraged the study of so-called primitive cultures in isolated areas, as these societies had the best evidence of beliefs, practices, and “survivals” from ancient times—survivals that had remained unchanged for generations. Laura Boulton, the itinerant ethnomusicologist, commented, “In recording only one song, you can sometimes pick up more about the traditions and beliefs, laws, and ideas and customs that have motivated the thinking and behavior of peoples from earliest times, than you could learn in weeks, maybe months, by the old method of question and answer” (n.d.: 5). Similar to many other cultural researchers, Boulton made her career searching the world for traditions, ceremonies, and expressive arts that were close to disappearing, but which held keys to primordial ways of life and represented early forms of human culture.

Beginning with the work of Franz Boas, scholars questioned the racist and ethnocentric views that there were stages of culture through which people could progress or regress. In 1936, George Herzog, who often corresponded with Boulton, wrote, “primitive musical forms cannot be taken either as the primordial forms of musical development, or as the spontaneous self-expression of a ‘primitive mind’.” (1936:3). Among later scholars, this notion was further pushed to see music as a more dynamic, individual creation that could also represent the ideas, concerns, and beliefs of an entire community (Nettl 1954). More recently, scholars observed the many voices that can be involved in a musical performance, which reveal, “the power of spontaneous joint performance to co-articulate personal and collective biography and memory” (Feld and Fox 1991:43). The progression of intellectual thought regarding music, particularly that from remote areas of the world, has moved from analyzing songs as collective forces of ancient traditions to deconstructing music as individual and collective expressions of experience that can be both spontaneous and historically significant.

Considering recent theoretical approaches to studying culture, how should scholars view the abundance of music recorded in the past and which now rests in various archives? Should they dismiss these materials because of the now dismissed theoretical approaches and methods used in making the recordings? Or, do these recordings continue to offer ways of understanding local communities? I argue that these early recordings continue to offer valuable information about political and social perspectives of individuals and communities when this material is connected with the context of their recording, the historical period in which they were made, and a dynamic perspective of song performance. Songs that were viewed as unchanging sonorities passed down through generations are more usefully interpreted as dynamic performances.
of often politically and socially charged moments. This argument does not dismiss the possibility that these songs reflect ideas passed down through generations. Yet, there is little means to comprehend the historical dimensions of these songs before they were recorded. Instead, early recordings are more usefully examined as reflections of individual performers and community politics within the context of daily life at the time they were made.

To support this argument, I examine recordings made by Laura Boulton among the Ovimbundu peoples in November and December 1947 in the towns of Chileso, Chilembo, Dondi, Galangue, and Bailundu located on or near the Bié Plateau. These recordings range from church hymns and American spirituals to work and secret society songs. All of the recordings were made on a Presto “J” recorder that made grooves in sixteen inch, 78rpm discs. Unlike the cylinders recorded on Boulton’s 1931 Angola trip, most of the 1947 disc recordings have clear sound due to advancements in technology.

In her Angola research, Boulton relied on missionaries or colonial administrators to gain access to local communities. For instance, the American Mission Board assisted her in Dondi, while the missionaries Sam Coles and his wife Bertha Terry helped in Galangue. Richard (Dick) Webb and his wife Elizabeth facilitated her research in the towns Bailundu and Chileso. Colonial administrators also assisted her in gaining access to communities, even ones that had restricted access.

The presence of missionaries and colonial administrators raises questions about the legitimacy of her recordings and the means with which she gained access to hundreds of songs. The ethnomusicologist David McAllester, perhaps too harshly, commented that Boulton’s approach to research was more of a predator than a student (1969:1005), particularly in the way that she sought songs by relying on foreigners rather than local informants. Yet, in her own writing, Boulton appears more naïve and wonderstruck by the people she worked with rather than someone trying to aggressively manipulate local communities. This may be in part due to her view that traditions are resilient in the face of outside forces and unlikely to change in the presence of powerful figures. According to this view,
terflies” (1930:105). Her work as an assistant kept her away from focusing on music, and her 1929 and 1930 expeditions illustrate a secluded detachment from local people though an obvious fascination with them. In much of her early writing, she comments on the intelligence of African peoples who have, “developed philosophies that teach us serene living and arts that bring new inspiration to our western world” (1939:77 and 1932:8).

Boulton’s work tended to repeat three generalizations about African peoples—generalizations that guided much of her research methods throughout her career. The first is that she viewed African music as a “language of the emotions” (n.d.:2). Through much of her writing and lectures, Boulton discussed the effect that African rhythms had on any listener, African or European, and the way sounds transformed people’s emotional states. Second, Boulton frequently repeated the statement “from morning till night, from the cradle to the grave,” a comment on the ubiquity of music in the activities of people with whom she worked. She would support this statement with descriptions of young children dancing and playing drums; the pounding of grains in mortars and pestles early in the morning; and the sacred and ceremonial music that accompanied any event. In 1937, she wrote in the journal *Man* that music is, “so interwoven with his [the African’s] work, his play, and his social and religious life that we can make only an artificial separation in order to regard his music as an artistic expression apart from its role in the life of the people. The African negroes, perhaps more than any other people in the world, have filled their lives with song. Beginning with birth and ending with death, there is a song for every activity, for every occasion, and whether he is sharpening his knife or paddling his canoe, or making a sacrifice to his gods, he does it to the rhythm of his song. (130).

The view that African music was emotional and connected to every activity creates questionable readings of local communities. Boulton rarely spent more than a day recording in a specific area. She traded goods and resources, such as salt, for the opportunity to record. Groups essentially lined up at specific locations and waited for the opportunity to perform for her. Due to this temporary transactional relationship, it would have been impossible for Boulton to comprehend the role music played in the performers’ daily lives. To say that music was either ubiquitous or emotional would have required far more research.

The approach that most informed her lectures, articles, book, and methodology was her view of African songs as a form of historical archiving in which she documented music and cultures that were disappearing. In a lecture, she opined:

> By virtue of their simplicity and spontaneity and because they deal with the realities of tribal experience, they live forever. The youths learn from the elders through these age-old songs. The cultural attainments of the group are thus passed on through the centuries. Philosophies, theories, and practical information by this means become the communal inheritance” (1939:78).

Boulton later augmented this view by arguing that these traditions, passed on through the centuries, were at risk of being lost. In her article, “I Search for Ancient Music,” Boulton worried that, “In the most remote corners of primitive lands, old people are dying and taking their songs with them; everywhere young people are discard old cultures in their eagerness to assimilate to new” (1963:15). The combination of pressing cultural changes from radio, records, and other media formats and the death of many elders made Boulton believe in the importance of preserving centuries-old traditions that informed scholars about the life of primitive peoples.

Problematically, however, the moments she recorded lack necessary contextualization. Boulton rarely conducted interviews and relied on interpreters to explain the meaning of a dance or song. Her notes often fail to mention key elements, such as names of performers, reasons for performance, and interactions with the performer, which are needed to make sense of the songs and the context of performance.

Despite the limitations in research methods, Boulton’s recordings are impressive for the quality of the sound and the diversity of the songs recorded. Though the songs only represent brief encounters
between the musicians and Boulton, they offer insight into the ways people in various communities related to the world around them. Themes such as colonization, slavery, conflict, and the loss of land, permeate songs from almost every community she worked with in Angola. The songs also illustrate the fractured state of local communities as people confronted different perspectives over how best to adapt to the economic, political, and social changes taking place. In the next two sections, I use songs recorded among the Ovimbundu as a means to explore conflict and resistance during the late 1940s. Though these songs only offer glimpses into life at this time, they help flesh out changes taking place in Angola; changes that Boulton tended to ignore, yet which marked a precipitous end to the kingdoms of Ovimbundu and the rise of more anti-colonial practices.

**Kapalandanda wa Lilala (“Kapalandanda Cried”)**

In 1931, Boulton recorded music among the Ovimbundu as part of her Pulitzer Angola Expedition. In Dondi, she recorded a song titled “Kapalandanda wa Lila” (“Kapalandanda Cried”). Kapalandanda refers to the name of a boy and the song repeats a refrain about him weeping for his country. Boulton notes that it is a caravan song about homesickness sung by Ovimbundu traders who were far from home (1969:81). In many songs at this time, Ovimbundu or specific kingdoms in the region were referred to by the term ofeka, which translates as country. Thus, the song is about being far from home and crying to return to one’s country. Sixteen years later, on November 15, 1947, Boulton again recorded this song, this time in Galangue. Over the next few weeks, she would record the song four more times in three different areas, showing the popularity of this lyric among the Ovimbundu.

While the initial intention may have been to express homesickness, the 1947 versions are less about being away from home than losing one’s country all together. Each version conveys this alteration of meaning. In Galangue, the soloist sings, “Kapalandanda wa lila, wa lilila ofeka yavo” [“He cried for the loss of their country”]. The change from someone singing about his country to someone lamenting the loss of their country is significant, for it shows general feeling of loss among an entire group of citizens. Subsequent stanzas accuse a “rich fat man” of killing cattle. Here the meaning is less clear, yet has possible reference to the loss of land and resources to colonial officials.

Boulton’s research in Angola coincided with a number of changes taking place in the region, the most prominent being the push by the Portuguese to improve agricultural productivity in the country. Sam Coles, a missionary in Galangue, taught locals to work in farming and other ways of using area lands (Labode 2000). Linda Heywood writes, “Coles’ communities came to the attention of Portuguese officials, who in 1946 exempted one village from forced labour services, because every man in the place had a plough, and they were beginning to get carts to carry their goods to market” (Heywood 1987:367). Boulton arrived the year after this exemption, and the version of “Kapalandanda wa Lila” recorded in Galangue may have been alluding to the economic and social changes taking place in the region.

In Dondi, Boulton recorded a version of “Kapalandanda wa Lila” that more sharply critiques the plight of the Ovimbundu [Example 1]. The song begins the same way as the Galangue version, but has subsequent verses that address concepts of resistance, loyalty, and history. The verse positions the soloist and the chorus of singers as establishing criteria for standards in Dondi; anyone who does not resist must leave since it is the country of kings. Even though most local leaders had been weakened by colonial policies, the song refers to the royal past and the need for people to stand up for their history and to take action against injustices.

The popularity of “Kapalandanda wa Lila,” accompanied by themes of resistance and change, coincides with the formation of networks between villages in Ovimbundu. These networks emerged from the teaching of North American missionaries, particularly those that encouraged democracy and self-help. As Linda Heywood argues, these teachings displaced other belief systems and served as the “groundswell” in the struggle against the Portuguese (1998:161). Several resistance movements initially formed under churches that created networks in Ovimbundu to assist in mission operations. The Council of Evangelical Churches, for instance,
became a pan-Ovimbundu umbrella organization, bringing together more than 100,000 people in the region, and providing education and healthcare to members (Collelo 1991). These organizations gave rise to future leaders, such as Jonas Savimbi, a teenager during Boulton’s visit, who would later lead the resistance organization UNITA that fought a long civil war against the MPLA-PT.

Songs, such as “Kapalandanda wa Lila,” therefore, foreshadow anti-colonial efforts that would take place in the region. It was a song heard in several areas of Ovimbundu during the late 1940s, and signified a sense of national loss and turmoil. Of course, resistance efforts had long occurred throughout Angola (see Pélissier 1977), yet, the relative economic autonomy of the Ovimbundu before the 1930s had allowed them to remain removed from many conflicts occurring in the country.

References


Hambly, Wilfred D. 1932. “Spiritual Beliefs of the Ovimbundu of Angola.” Open Court 46.


Notes

1 I am grateful to the staff at the Archives of Traditional Music in Bloomington, Indiana for assisting me in finding aural and textual documents that form the basis of this article.

2 While Dondi and Galangue (Ngalangi) appear on maps of the time, Bailundu typically refers to a kingdom rather than a town and is therefore labeled more of as a region. Boulton, however, mentions a specific place that she visits, which was near the West Central Africa Mission of the American Board. The location of Chillembo remains unclear, though it is listed on some records as a place where artifacts were collected by missionaries. Also, Boulton lists the Mbundu as a group in these areas. Mbundu typically refers to people who live near Luanda between the Dunde and Kwanza rivers, though Mbundu may have been used as a term by some missionaries in referring to the Ovimbundu (the term is also used by ethnographic atlases, see Holden and Mace 2003). Nonetheless, for clarity, I use the term Ovimbundu to refer to those who Boulton recorded in 1947 and Umbanda to refer to their language.

3 This song is on tape number EC 11095.14, accession number 92-317-F, at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music.

4 UNITA stands for União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola or National Union for the Total Independence of Angola. MPLA-PT are the initials for Movimiento Popular da Libertação de Angola - Partido de Trabalho (Popular Liberation Movement of Angola-Labour Party).