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Bamboo Flutes, Music Shift, and the End of Groove in an East Sepik Community

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Abstract
Having adapted sociolinguistic survey tools to investigate the downward trajectory of traditional musics in a Sepik community, I now look into Charles Keil's concept of groove as a way of showing what is being lost with the disappearance of this and other indigenous musics.

Keywords: music shift, groove, Keil, Alamblak, ethnomusicology, East Sepik, endangered traditions, bamboo flutes, sociolinguistics

Introduction[1]

In the past two decades, the international academic community has become increasingly concerned about the loss of the world's languages and cultural traditions. In language, this can be traced back at least as far as Joshua Fishman's seminal 1991 book, Reversing Language Shift, and also to Michael Krauss's infamous prediction that 90% of the world's languages will no longer be spoken in 100 years (Krauss 1992).[2] Language and cultural extinction has captivated the imaginations of majority-language people all over the world.

In my own research I've looked for connections between endangered-languages concepts and other cultural traditions, especially music.[3] The first step was simply proving that traditional music styles really are shifting in favour of newer "global" musics. This was my core question in fieldwork with the Alamblak people of the East Sepik Province from 2003 to 2006, and in other publications I've presented my findings (Coulter 2007; Coulter 2011). Table 1 shows the Graded Music Shift Scale (GMSS), which I created as a music-focused adaptation of Lewis and Simons's Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)—itself a revision of Fishman's original GIDS (Lewis and Simons 2010; Fishman

[1] I presented a version of this paper at the Annual Conference of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea, at the National Library in Port Moresby, September 25, 2013. As always, I appreciated the scholarly camaraderie among conference participants and am grateful for the feedback and conversation following my presentation.
[2] More recently tempered to 60-80% of the world's languages (Krauss 2007).
[3] Other research investigating similar questions of musical endangerment includes: Grant 2012; Harris 2012; Hill and Bithell 2013; Saurman 2012; and the Sustainable Futures project at Griffith University (http://musecology.griffith.edu.au/).

1991). As I placed Alamblak musics on the GMSS, I was startled by just how quickly and how extensively traditional music knowledge was disappearing among the Alamblak, with most traditional musical forms at Level 5 or weaker. This shift downward was occurring even before other imported musics were fully integrated into daily life and ritual. In the second part of this article I'll present more conclusions from that research, specifically about a bamboo flute performance in the Alamblak.

Table 1. Graded Music Shift Scale

EGIDS level	GMSS level	Label	Description	Movement considerations
0	1	**International**	A music reaches this level when an international "community of practice" forms around it. Ideally, international participation in this music will include performance as well as consumer consumption.	*Movement upward:*N/A *Movement downward:* Any number of factors could contrive to move this music downward, but that doesn't have to mean it is weakening in the home community.
1, 2	2	**National or regional**	The music's reputation grows beyond the home community. Community members may receive financial or other support from the regional or national level. People outside the home community learn to perform the music, and the performance becomes iconic of the region or nation. Though not the ultimate goal of music revitalization, it can increase confidence in the home community. The music's high profile might open doors for community development in other domains.	*Movement upward:* If an international community of practice would be beneficial to the home community, explore options for wider exposure and participation. *Movement downward:* There may be a fine line between this level and Level 5, especially if the music becomes relegated to certain regional or national functions.
6a	3	**Vigorous**	This is the pivotal level for music vitality. In this level, oral transmission and largely traditional contexts of education are intact and functioning. People have sufficient opportunities for performance and young people are learning by observation, participation, and appropriate educational contexts. A music can exist comfortably at this level without needing to move higher.	*Movement upward:* Continue fostering the growth of music through varied contexts, recording, and documentation. Be open to new innovations basesd on older styles. Consider whether higher level support (GMSS Levels 1 and 2) would practically benefit the community and the music. *Movement downward:* Assumptions that the music is now perpetually stable could blind community members to changes as they happen, eventually causing downward movement.

6b	4	**Threatened**	The first level that hints at downward movement, toward endangerment. Music is still performed, but changes are becoming noticeable: diminishing performance contexts, more time given to more recent introductions, more rural-urban movement.	*Movement upward:* Foster more intentional contexts for passing on knowledge. Consider incorporating local music education into the schools. *Movement downward:* Lack of specific goal-setting for the future of this style may endanger it.
N/A	5	**Locked**	The music is known by more people than just the grandparent generation, but its performance is restricted to tourist shows or other contexts that are not integrated into the everyday life of the community. The performance repertoire is fixed and nothing new is being added to it. Participation, creative freedom, and grooving decline noticeably.	*Movement upward:* Find new and existing contexts for this music. Record and document. Encourage educational contexts and new contributions to the repertoire. *Movement downward:* This music is vulnerable to the loss of the performance context, or competition for time and effort of practitioners.
7, 8	6	**Shifting**	The grandparent generation is proficient in this music, but fewer contexts exist for passing it on to younger people. Possibly the younger people do not express interest (or are perceived that way by their parents and grandparents). The music is not dead or endangered at this level, and can be revitalized, but signs point to downward movement and likely endangerment.	*Movement upward:* Facilitate performances of this music. Create contexts in which the older practitioners can interact with interested younger people. Record and document. *Movement downward:* If the tradition is not documented, and younger people have few opportunities to learn, then further endangerment is likely.
9	7	**Dormant**	Functional contexts for performance are gone, but recordings and other ethnographic description exist. A community could re-acquaint itself with the music, but its rebirth would likely be something different than what it was.	*Movement upward:* Look at documentation with community members and discuss why the music is no longer performed. Find out if anyone is able to create anything in this style, or if elements of this style have been adapted into other music systems. *Movement downward:* Only if documentation is lost or destroyed.
10	8	**Extinct**	No one in the community is capable of creating or performing in this style. Probably no performance has occurred in the lifetime of anyone currently living. No documentation exists. This is rarer, as most musics grow into other styles, or stylistic elements are perpetuated in related styles. But people may be able to name music styles, genres, instruments, or ensembles that they have never actually heard.	*Movement upward:* Not very hopeful. Record whatever information is available. Encouraging conversation about this lost music may cause people to think more about other weakening musics. *Movement downward:* N/A

Having shown the quantitative shifting of traditional musics in one community—and, by extension and from personal observation, I have no reason to assume a much different trajectory in many other places—my next research step is to look into the qualitative question: what is lost when a musical style disappears? That's a question that some people ask about the loss of languages, and likely even more people would wonder why particular music styles matter. A first answer is that just as a language best expresses what a particular community needs to communicate and the way it most effectively communicates it, a music style is peculiarly adapted to the life and ritual of the community in which it originated and developed. In other writing (Coulter 2007) I've tried to directly adapt the reasoning about the value of languages—such as David Crystal's four reasons why people should care about language death (Crystal 2000)—and this is useful in thinking about other cultural traditions. But I also find that such adaptation only goes so far. There are differences between language and music that keep some distance between them for large-scale theory-making.

What's lost: groove

In this article, instead of bringing something from sociolinguistics into ethnomusicology, I'm reversing the process: starting with an idea from ethnomusicology that may benefit sociolinguistics. That idea is groove. In ethnomusicology the concept of groove is most closely associated with Charles Keil. I enjoy Keil's gleeful, exuberant, child-like joy when he writes about our basic human need to find both individual and community identity through moving, singing, dancing, playing, generally making a joyful noise together. This is the essence of groove for Keil: that we were born to do this, to be in motion and noisy together, and as much as we inhibit that—for example, by forcing stillness in children's educational contexts—we lose part of our full-bodied humanity.

Keil echoes or anticipates many of the main ideas often found in texts about language endangerment. In Nettle and Romaine's Vanishing Voices, for example, the authors explain their concept of "biolinguistic diversity," whereby loss in one domain affects the well-being of other domains (Nettle and Romaine 2000). Loss of language necessarily harms holistic health for the world generally. Keil echoes this and expands the picture to speak not only of language but of participation generally: "I also believe," he says, "we need more of this participatory consciousness if we are to get back into ecological synchrony with ourselves and with the natural world. . . . Participation is the opposite of alienation from nature, from

society, from the body, from labor, and is therefore worth holding onto wherever we can still find some of it" (Keil and Feld 2005, 97-98). Here again, the crux of the issue is not language or music or dance or painting; it is the basic idea of participation, including all of those activities and behaviors, and more.

A case study: Alamblak *yahrim*

To keep this discussion focused on actual music in real life, I now present details from a case study of an Alamblak bamboo flute genre called *yahrim*. I know that in doing so I risk transgressing what Keil himself has written elsewhere: "Studying culture, calling things 'cultural' and writing about them, turns living practices into civilized products and is 'part of the problem' much of the time" (Keil and Feld 2005, 228). This is part of Keil's warning against turning cultural, community-centric performance into a civilized commodity, with all attendant concerns about profits, individual private property, and personal rights. However, in this case I am bringing in a "cultural" performance context not to lock it away in a museum case or to divorce it from its community context, but to maintain a focus on an actual participatory event.

Ensembles of bamboo flutes are found throughout Papua New Guinea. The Alamblak *yahrim*—named for Yahrir, the man credited with originating this style—exhibits some characteristics that are typical of many ensembles in the country. The origin story tells of a couple of women who discovered the possibility of sound production through bamboo when they pulled bamboo tubes out of the river while fishing. Alamblak women used the flutes for their own entertainments until men discovered their musicking and took the flutes away from them. From that time, the flutes were hidden in the men's house, kept secret from women, and used as part of male initiation. Men told women that the sounds of the flutes were the voices of spirits, and the women were not to see, touch, or play the flutes. This kind of origin story about flutes is common not only throughout PNG, but also even in other countries.[4] And so for an unknown number of generations the bamboo flutes lived in the Alamblak men's houses. Young men learned to play the flutes as part of their initiation.

[4] One example is from the men's flute music of the Kuikuro people of Southern Amazonia (Franchetta and Montagnani 2010).

But after the introduction of Christianity in the 1960s, newly Christian Alamblak people began questioning a number of their traditional practices, especially regarding spiritual beliefs. As their faith in a single, omnipotent god deepened and matured, they felt uncomfortable with the former dependence on a pantheon of spirits. The men's initiation was an obvious and potent symbol of those beliefs. Rather than recontextualizing the men's house initiation to align with the new Christian belief system, Alamblak people decided to end initiation altogether. The last initiation took place in the early 1970s. With the dismantling of the men's houses, the flutes were brought out into the open for all to see. By the time of my fieldwork these changes had been in place for 30 years—recent enough that many men still remembered the way things used to be, but distant enough that a generation had grown up without the men's house or initiation. In those years, the tradition has changed and, predictably, some things have been lost. I'll explain the tradition as I learned and experienced it, briefly show its weakening trajectory, and then discuss what may have been lost, especially with reference to what is important to Keil in any tradition.

Yahrim structure: organological and organizational

The *yahrim* ensemble consists of flutes of five different lengths. The longest flute (*duger*) is about one meter long; each flute's interior diameter is 4-5 centimeters wide. Other details are in Table 2. The flutes are transverse, with one hole cut into the side near a stopped end of each flute. The player holds the flute—cradling it in the crook of one arm, in the case of *duger*—covers the sides of the hole with the index fingers, and blows across the hole (between the index fingertips) to set the air in motion. The three longest flutes—*duger*, *tohant*, and *bramiat*—each play one fundamental pitch and also overblow to an octave above that pitch. The two shortest flutes—*hasmdawot* and *yantwat*—each play only a single pitch.

Table 2. *Yahrim* flute details

Flute name	Pitch	Kinship relationship
duger	F#/F#'	husband/father
tohant	B/B'	first wife
bramiat	G#/G#'	second wife
hasmdawot	D#	first child
yantwat	F#'	second child

Most of the *yahrim* performances I saw while living with the Alamblak took place outdoors, in a *haus win*,[5] at night—beginning by about nine o'clock in the evening, and continuing, ideally, until dawn. Performance requires at least one player on each of the flutes, but the preference is for at least a couple of each kind of flute in the ensemble. This is now difficult to achieve, because so few men still perform, or have ever learned, the repertoire. On some occasions, even when people in the village planned a *yahrim* evening, it did not happen simply because not enough players could be found to make a satisfyingly large ensemble. Some initiated men, whether or not they remain active in *yahrim* performance, own a set of flutes: usually more than one of each length, stored in a tied bundle in the rafters of their *haus win* or house (Figure 1). Finding a set of flutes to use for an evening's performance was never a problem. But the end of initiations may someday endanger the availability of instruments as well as the number capable players. Traditionally, only an initiated man may construct a new set of flutes; so without more initiated men it is unclear who will make new flutes when the current sets deteriorate.

Figure 1. A bundle of flutes hanging in a haus win.

[5] A structure with a *morota* (palm-thatch) roof and no walls, usually with benches built around the perimeter, just underneath the edge of the roof. Literally 'wind house,' because people rest there during the day and feel the cool breeze.

The structure of the instruments themselves is key to understanding their sonic organization, as well as showing the importance of family relationships in Alamblak culture. Each flute (other than *duger*, which seems to be unaffiliated) also represents a clan affiliation: *tohant*, *hasmdawot*, and *yantwat* are from the *kafinji* (pig) clan, and *bramiat* is a member of the *tekioh* (crocodile) clan. The *yahrim* songs are categorized by the flute that starts the song. So *duger* owns a set of songs, and likewise with each of the other flutes (*hasmdawot* and *yantwat* share a set). A complete performance includes songs from each flute's set. Each set includes a range of topics, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Topics of yahrim songs. (numbers are percentages of that flute's repertoire)

flute / topic	*duger*	*tohant*	*bramiat*	*hasmdawot and yantwat*
animals	21	34	14	31
nature	5	19	14	3
people	5	19	31	26
places	11	3	5	20
mythology	16	0	9	0
technology	11	3	5	5
celebrations	31	22	22	15

Each flute also represents a specific family member: father/husband, first wife, second wife, and two children. Songs in the *yahrim* repertoire are built on harmony within these family relationships. When people explained the songs to me, they always used family terms: "First the man starts, then the first wife replies, then the second wife cuts in, and the children start in." *Yahrim* performance requires all family members (flutes) working together to create a complete melody. Since each flute only plays one pitch, melodies are built through an interlocking process of all flutes working together.

From a macro-level perspective, each *yahrim* song contains several distinct sections. It begins with an introduction, started by the flute that owns that song. Gradually the other flutes start in with their parts of the interlocking melody, and once all the parts are aligned, what I call the A section—the first section with the full melody—has begun (Figure 2; musical example 1). At some point while playing the A section, the longer three flutes jump up to the higher octave, and the melody continues but with the upper octaves being played. This is what I call the B section (Figure 3; musical example 2). Then after repetitions of the B section, one of the players drops back down to the lower octave, the other players follow, and the A section returns. This switch between A and B can happen repeatedly throughout the duration of the

song.

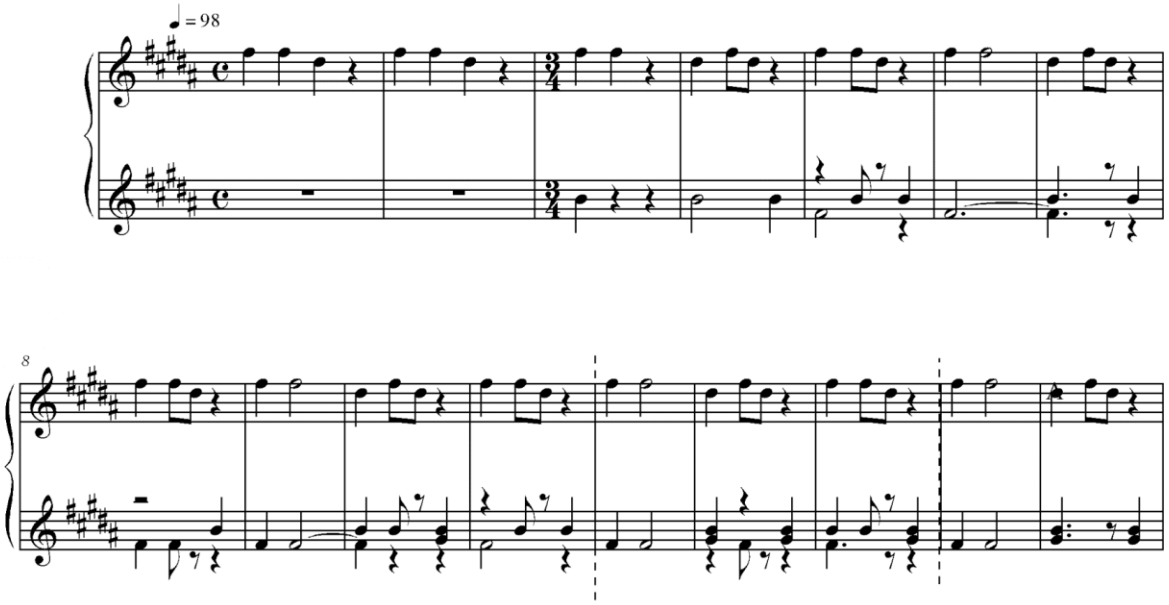

Figure 2. Introduction and beginning of A section ("Junction of Karawari and Bugapmeri Rivers")

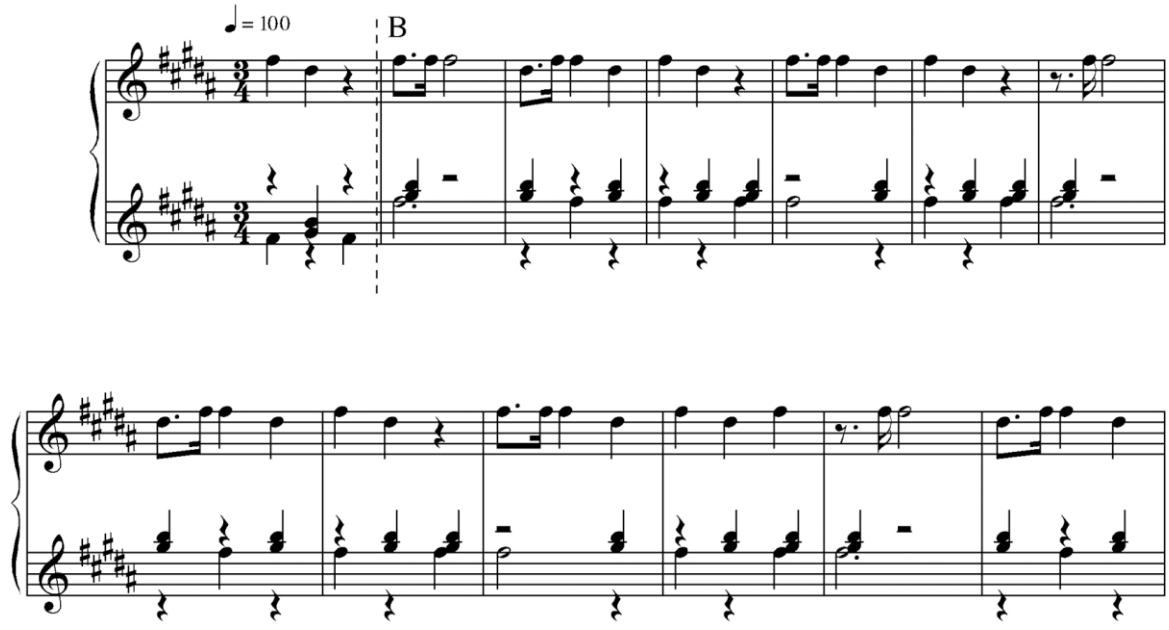

Figure 3. Change to B section ("Yaur")

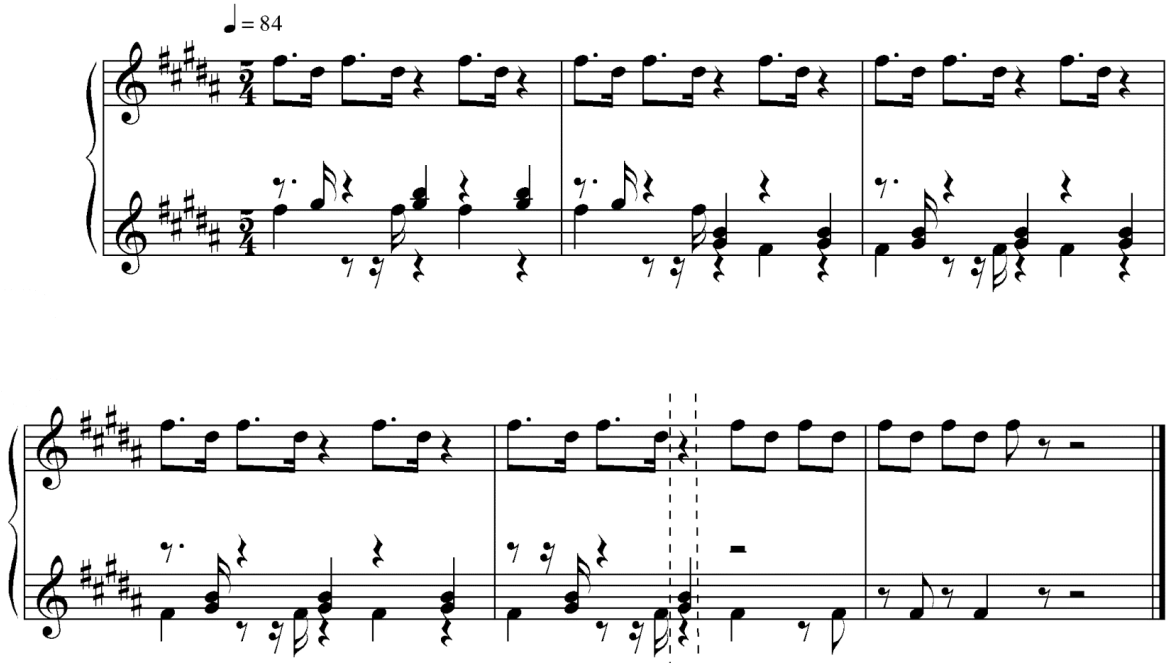

Figure 4. Closing section ("*Fakmir*")

Figure 5. The marching tread of feet during *yahrim* performance.

When a player feels the time has come to end the song, he makes a loud stamp with his foot, initiating a brief closing section with alternating notes between *hasmdawot* and *yantwat* (Figures 4; musical example 3).

Movement during a *yahrim* performance centers on the men playing the flutes. They are organized in two groups, facing each other. While they play, one group steps forward and the other group steps back, and after a few steps they change directions. This back-and-forth movement

continues through the whole song. This slightly heavy step is especially resonant and impressive on a thin *limbum* (bark) floor, and players all agree that it feels and sounds better to play indoors on a floor that shakes and bends under their heavy tread. The player who wants to end the song makes a dramatic stomp with one foot, which cues the closing section, when the players stop the dance (Figure 5). While the men are playing and moving, women can dance around the performance space. The women's dance is standing in place and shaking the hips to move the grass skirts.

Figure 6. *Yahrim* performance groups facing each other.

Music shift: assessing change in *yahrim*

One of my research objectives for this fieldwork was adapting tools from sociolinguistic survey and language endangerment analysis for looking at music and other artistic traditions. I conducted a survey to gauge music knowledge, asking two sets of questions to about 10% of the total Alamblak population. The results of the Alamblak music survey looked dire, especially for *yahrim*. Table 4 shows combined survey results for *yahrim* and for introduced (Western) musical styles. It shows that almost all Alamblak men played *yahrim* a couple of generations ago, but by 2006 fewer than 20% did. Introduced musics—mostly Western pop- or guitar-based styles—were of course virtually unknown a few generations ago, but are now steadily rising. However, even though these styles are gaining strength it may still be some time before such a high percentage of Alamblak people are comfortable performing in those styles, and even then the performance context itself is different, not just a simple substitution for what used to be included in a *yahrim* evening.

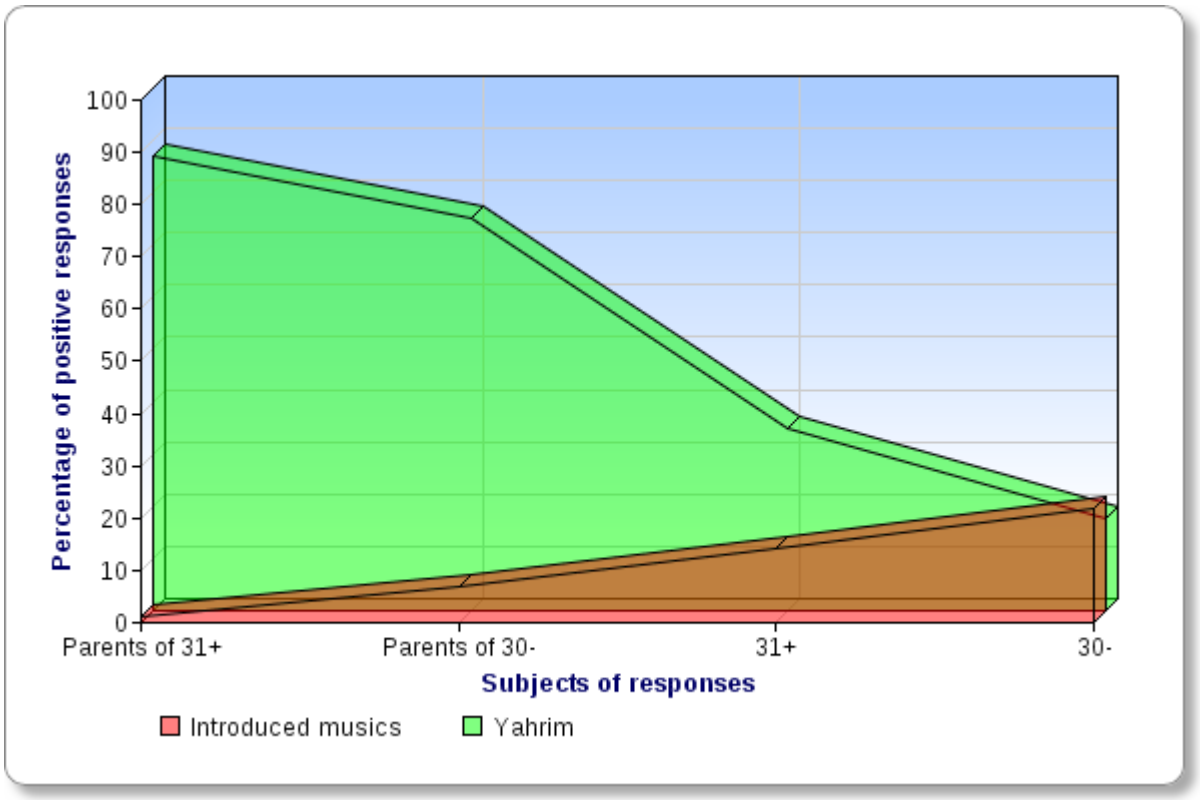

Table 4. Results of Alamblak music survey, showing decline of *yahrim* and increase of introduced musical styles.

I left the Alamblak area in the middle of 2006. When I next returned, in January 2008, I of course asked about music performances, and I was particularly interested to learn how much *yahrim* they had played while I had been away. The men I was talking with thought back, tried hard to remember the last *yahrim* evening, and eventually (to my dismay) they affirmed that they hadn't played *yahrim* at all since the last time I had been there with them: almost two years without a single performance! My feeble efforts at rekindling the interest and revitalizing a dying style seemed to have been for nothing, and I don't have any indications that the situation has changed much in the several years since.

What is lost with a disappearing music: some considerations

So what I'm asking now is: What has been lost with the ending of bamboo flute music among the Alamblak? Here I bring Charles Keil back into the story, because I know he shares my disappointment at the loss of a community music event.

The first, and probably most significant, thing that has been lost is a performance context in which men, women, and children could gather together and spend an evening creating a performance. The men played flutes, the women danced, often food was shared at midnight, people had conversations and told stories and jokes; but it's not any one of those single elements that is the most important. It is the electric combination of all of them into an event that affirms the human creative impulse and the best of community life. That event is gone. What the Alamblak people have traded it for is a Western pop-based musical style that tends to be based on an elite minority of "performers," with a clear separation between performer and audience. I hope that these musical styles are reinterpreted by the Alamblak into a more participatory event, but the further they pursue dreams of pop stardom as their musical ideal, the more distance they'll put between themselves and the true community musicking of their past.

A second thing that's lost is a context for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. For Fishman and sociolinguistics, this is the most important factor in revitalization. For Keil and ethnomusicology, I think it would come after the community participatory groove event—though education is certainly one aspect of what happens as part of groove. *Yahrim* performances brought the generations together in a safe learning environment. The knowledge that was passed on was not only technical information about producing sounds together on the flutes, but also understanding about social relationships and

behaviors, a variety of speech acts, gender relations, hospitality, and cultural history. This was education in a face-to-face, laughing, sweating, working, intense, natural context.

Young children enjoyed a rare privilege during the few years that *yahrim* was removed from the men's house and brought into the public sphere. They were given access to a performance that was once kept far away from the very young, and in these performances they were allowed to experience the sights and sounds that only come through growing up Alamblak. They could watch any aspects of the performance, imitate their elders, talk with each other, and be silly and joyful—all while enjoying the coolness of the Sepik evenings. The urbanized, industrialized, over-televised world is beginning to realize how much of this it has lost, and it is sad to see communities like the Alamblak giving it up in pursuit of the seemingly more tangible goods of global connectedness.

The weakening of *yahrim* is related to the Alamblak Christians' desire to put away former traditional practices that they viewed as contrary to their Christian faith. Ironically, the void left by *yahrim* evenings is increasingly being filled by generator-powered, pop-fuelled all-night dance parties—which, aside from privileging non-local music, seem to foster anonymity rather than community and which sometimes lead to illicit activities committed by Alamblak youth. These are vices that never seemed to be a part of the open, public, community gatherings around *yahrim*. The contemporary dance parties primarily include only the youth, excluding the elders.

What we may be left with is what Keil ranks lowest in importance among musical elements: structure, syntax, writing. I can explain *yahrim*, but I don't really play it, and I can't create it anew. Community has diminished as civilization has increased. "Music," says Keil, "is not so much about abstract emotions and meanings, reason, cause and effect, logic, but rather about motions, dance, global and contradictory feelings . . . it's about getting down and into the groove, everyone creating socially from the bottom up" (Keil 1995, 1).

What we lose in having *yahrim* only on the printed page is one of Keil's primary "goods": participatory discrepancies. The notes on the page give more of a sense of how I transcribe music than how it actually sounded and felt to be a part of it; audio and video recordings are better, but still not the same as being in the performance. Keil identifies participatory discrepancies as the many little ways that music is not perfect or ideal. The best orchestra can never be exactly together; the best jazz and rock groups are exactly those that are most stylishly not-together. "Music," says Keil, "to be personally involving and socially valuable,

must be 'out of time' and 'out of tune'" (Keil 1987, 275). These imperfections, these discrepancies, are at the heart of groove. It's difficult to convey that on a printed page; the written version certainly doesn't provide the same kind of happiness as the actual performance does.

Conclusion

What is the answer to such a bleak report? I believe the international interest in language and cultural endangerment needs to convert into understandable information that goes directly to the minority communities who will make the ultimate decisions. I appreciate the interest that UNESCO and other funding organizations have taken in documentation and revitalization projects around the world, but loss of groove is not something that will be fixed with money and well-written grant proposals. Local stakeholders must understand what is at stake and that they are making decisions about their cultural futures even if they don't realize it. For Papua New Guinea, news articles daily show us that this is the time for community to rise up and guide people toward a healthy, full, grooving future. Music is one part of this and the children of PNG deserve ample opportunities for learning, moving, and grooving.

For those of us majority-language people who are on the outside looking in, we need to be willing to let go of ideas of the right and wrong way for any community to groove. I deeply wish that *yahrim* would be what the Alamblak people need it to be for their fullest creative, artistic expression. But I must let go of how I see things and accept that *yahrim* may disappear, and perhaps pop songs will fill that important gap. Maybe the Alamblak church will see a renewed interest in hymn-singing and together rise to new levels of competency and enjoyment in that area. Possibly a new hybridized musical style is just over the horizon waiting for its day to be celebrated.

N.B. This PDF contains embedded audio files; not every PDF viewer will be able to access that content. If that is the case, please use the links below:

Musical example 1: https://db.tt/rxV5nDyG

Musical example 2: https://db.tt/ipiucfx3

Musical example 3: https://db.tt/JxBibPCW

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