

# Significance and Methodological Deliberations on Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology

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**Abstract:** The formal inception of ethnomusicology can be attributed to the release of *On the Musical Scales of Various Nations* in 1885, a work penned by Alexander John Ellis (1814 - 1890), and the origins of fieldwork in this discipline can be traced back to that time. Given the pivotal role of fieldwork in ethnomusicology, over the past century and more, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and scholars from diverse fields both in China and abroad have engaged in reflections, discussions, and even heated debates concerning the methodological issues in ethnomusicology, which underscores the significance of fieldwork. The first part of this paper primarily outlines the history and scope of fieldwork. The second part delves into the methodological considerations of fieldwork from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The third part explores the importance and implications of fieldwork for ethnomusicology.

**Keywords:** Fieldwork; methodology; significance.

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## 1. What is "Fieldwork"

Fieldwork refers to "observing people in their natural settings; discovering them in their own environments, engaging with them in a role that is acceptable to them and allows for close observation of certain aspects of their behavior, and then reporting one's observations in a manner beneficial to the social sciences and harmless to the observed individuals" (Hughes, 1960).

### 1.1. The History of Fieldwork

Between the late 19th century and the 1930s, two significant advancements substantially bolstered the capacity for objective analysis within comparative musicology (the field that later evolved into ethnomusicology). These were the invention of the phonograph by Thomas Alva Edison in 1877 and the development of the cent-based pitch and interval measurement system by the Englishman, Alexander Ellis. The use of machines indeed provided convenient research conditions for scholars. However, as a result, scholars rarely conducted fieldwork themselves. Instead, they relied on field collections such as recordings made by missionaries and ethnographers, conducting analyses and music research experiments based on these materials. This approach was dubbed "armchair analysis". For instance, Carl Stumpf and his student M. von Hornbostel rarely engaged in fieldwork personally. At that time, fieldwork was regarded as a means of collecting data for laboratory research. The main characteristics of fieldwork during this period were the intensive collection of musical repertoires and the beginning attention paid to their cultural backgrounds. Yet, for over two decades thereafter, the primary task of fieldwork was to record and analyze music through recordings.

In the late 1950s, two opposing academic theoretical viewpoints emerged in Western ethnomusicology: the "anthropological" school represented by Alan P. Merriam and the "musicological" school represented by Mantle Hood. Alan P. Merriam believed that fieldwork should not merely involve recording and analyzing music but should also understand music within the context of human behavior (Merriam, 1964). Meanwhile, Mantle Hood and his group of musicologists,

rather than disregarding "the study of music in culture", placed great emphasis on the actual study and performance of music. They mandated that ethnomusicologists should acquire the ability to perform music from diverse foreign cultures, aiming to attain a state of "bi-musicality", thus forming an experiential fieldwork model. It was from this period that ethnomusicology began to emphasize the participation of researchers. Between the 1970s and 1980s, these two factions gradually merged.

Since the 1980s, ethnomusicology has not only focused on music as a product but has paid more attention to the study of "processes". It is more interested in the "ways" things develop rather than the "states" they are in. This also reflects that the diachronic perspective has become dominant in ethnomusicology in recent years.

### 1.2. The Scope of Fieldwork

From a synchronic perspective, the research scope of ethnomusicology encompasses the world's music, making the field extremely broad and diverse. Early ethnomusicologists were enthusiastic about studying foreign oral and traditional ethnic music. For example, M. Schneider pointed out in 1957 that the first aim of ethnomusicology, whether normal or not, was to conduct comparative studies on the characteristics of music in regions outside Europe. Since the 1990s, the boundaries of fieldwork have been mostly determined by research topics. "Fieldwork can range from remote ethnic minorities in South America, Africa, South Asia, and inland Southeast Asia to modernized, Westernized urban musical life, popular music, and the music industry. The field can be a geographical or linguistic region; an ethnic group (which may be widely dispersed); a village, town, suburb, or city; a desert or jungle; a tropical rainforest, or the Arctic tundra" [1].

From a diachronic perspective, the fieldwork of ethnomusicology can be divided into present-day fieldwork and historical fieldwork. Present-day fieldwork refers to the existing broad spectrum of world music mentioned from the synchronic perspective above, which can also be called spatial fieldwork. Historical fieldwork, or temporal fieldwork, is impossible to enter directly since history has vanished with time. However, "tracing history from the present-day

fieldwork and the historical traces left on the field is both possible and feasible" [2]. Western ethnomusicologists have only realized in the past three decades that they should not only focus on the present but also pay attention to historical contexts. This realization has given rise to the new concept of "historical ethnomusicology".

## 2. Methodology of Fieldwork

In the chapter titled "Fieldwork" within her book *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*, Helen Myers makes the following observation: "When working in cultures lacking written records, ethnomusicologists must rely on well - designed methods to investigate oral histories. In cultures with a written tradition of music theory, fieldworkers must study historical materials, elicit statements from informants about musical practices, and then compare these textual materials with oral accounts through daily observations of musical behavior". This indicates that whether working in the former or the latter type of culture, methods are indispensable in fieldwork. The most fundamental goal of fieldwork is to gain a thorough understanding of the cultural background of music in the field and obtain authentic and reliable primary data. In order to accomplish this objective, it is necessary to tackle a range of both theoretical and practical challenges.

### 2.1. Theoretical Aspects

The "participant observation" method established by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 - 1942), a representative figure of the British functionalist school of anthropology, has become the paradigm of anthropological fieldwork methods for over half a century. The theoretical frameworks proposed by Merriam, namely "the study of music in culture" and Hood's concept of "bi-musicality" have gradually converged over time. Issues such as status, role, observation, experience, understanding, and interpretation continue to attract the attention of anthropologists and music anthropologists [3]. The "emic-etic" and "insider-outsider" theories, which originated from linguistics and anthropology, bear a direct connection to the methodology employed in fieldwork and have emerged as significant areas of focus within the discipline of ethnomusicology.

#### 2.1.1. Emic - Etic

"How music is used is emic, while the study of music's functions is etic" (Alan P. Merriam, 1964). Both those who use music and those who study its functions are human beings, and they can even be the same person. In such cases, researchers are required to switch between emic and etic perspectives.

#### 2.1.2. Insider - Outsider

The roles of insider and outsider are not fixed but can interchangeably shift. According to the American linguist K. L. Pike, "Just as an outsider can acquire the ability to behave in a manner akin to an insider, an insider can also learn to analyze situations from an outsider's perspective". The notions of "emic-etic" and "insider-outsider" represent two closely intertwined pairs, where neither holds supremacy over the other; rather, they complement each other. When embarking on fieldwork, researchers ought to amalgamate these two concepts to foster a thorough and all-encompassing theoretical comprehension.

### 2.2. Practical Aspects

The American ethnomusicologist Nettle believes that there

are no objective norms or work instructions for ethnomusicological fieldwork, which is a highly personalized research endeavor.

Indeed, every fieldwork experience is unique. Even if the location, informants, and interviewers are the same, the time factor makes a difference. Just as the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously declared, "One can never step into the same river twice," in a similar vein, researchers can never re-enter the same field of study in an identical manner. The conditions of fieldwork are highly variable. For example, different survey results may be obtained simply due to the informant's different moods. This requires researchers to accumulate experience in each fieldwork practice. However, this does not mean that theoretical methods of fieldwork are meaningless. On the contrary, researchers' previous fieldwork experiences can be transformed into current theoretical methods. For example, there exist four distinct levels or degrees of participation methods in research: the complete participant, the participant acting as an observer, the observer functioning as a participant, and the complete observer. There are also various investigation methods such as residential experience, extensive surveys, focused investigations, and follow - up investigations. Even specific methods for data collection, field note - taking, recording, photography, and videography can be drawn from the achievements of previous fieldworkers. Researchers should fully absorb and apply these previous fieldwork experiences and use them as theoretical guidance for their own fieldwork practices, integrating theory and practice.

## 3. The Significance of Fieldwork

"Fieldwork is also the stage in ethnomusicological research that is most prone to criticism. It is the eyewitness report and the foundation on which all research results depend. It is the greatest obstacle that ethnomusicology has to overcome, and this is precisely where its greatest charm lies. Numerous scholars are first attracted to this discipline through the allure and magic of fieldwork" (Helen Myers).

Fieldwork is like a battlefield. "Victory in a hundred battles is assured only when one knows both oneself and the enemy". Just as the situation in a war is ever - changing, many factors in the field are unpredictable. "Armchair analysis" separates researchers from the subjective reality of the field. Instead of investigating the actual situation, researchers only analyze recordings and are confined to certain patterns. Such research is inevitably one - sided and limited. Having only theory without practice is like a swan without wings; no matter how lofty its aspirations are, it can only sigh in despair. Researchers who are detached from fieldwork are like Kuo Zhao, a general in ancient China who only knew how to talk about military strategies on paper and ultimately failed.

Fieldwork is a prerequisite for ethnomusicological research. It is "the hallmark that tests many social sciences, including anthropology and ethnomusicology" (Helen Myers). It is of such great importance. As the Chinese ethnomusicologist Yibing Xue states in his article "On the Field at Home: Chinese Topics in Ethnomusicological Fieldwork": To complete a writing task, one must first collect data. Throughout the data collection phase, researchers can achieve an authentic understanding and objective assessment of the research subjects' music and culture by immersing themselves deeply in the community, becoming familiar with their musical traditions, and experiencing their cultural practices firsthand. In this context, fieldwork stands as an

indispensable cornerstone of the research process—one that researchers cannot bypass. It serves as one of the three foundational pillars of ethnomusicology, embodying practical engagement and functioning as the ultimate criterion for validating the accuracy of theoretical knowledge.

#### 4. Conclusion

Stepping into the field is akin to immersing oneself in an unfamiliar society. It is only natural that people already existing within a society may feel resistant to outsiders, and this resistance poses a major challenge for researchers. While conducting fieldwork, researchers are obligated to rigorously observe and demonstrate unwavering respect for the customs, taboos, and cultural traditions of the interviewees, ensuring that their interests are never compromised or violated. Moreover, to bridge the gap between researchers and interviewees, there are no fixed theories to serve as a ready-made guide, nor are there any effortless and convenient specific methods. The most effective approach lies in the investment of patience, sincerity, kindness, and time.

Mr. Yibing Xue holds the view that "The success of fieldwork largely hinges on the establishment of intimate social relationships". Beyond building good interpersonal relationships, what else should we pay attention to? It is crucial to break free from the researcher's own limited mental framework/way of thinking. In different fields, the air is fresh, and even when revisiting the same field repeatedly, the air remains fresh. However, we often habitually confine ourselves to a narrow space, imprisoned by prescribed rules

and regulations. Whether entering a new field or revisiting a previous one, it is akin to repeatedly inhaling the carbon dioxide exhaled by ourselves or others, leading to a sense of intellectual suffocation. In reality, as long as we step out of that enclosed space, we can breathe in the fresh air freely and invigoratingly. Sometimes, success and failure are separated by just a single step.

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