The musical bow is a bowstring instrument that has existed for thousands of years as part of many cultures in Southern Africa. This study will provide the historical context of a specific culture’s musical bow, the uhadi, in order to give a better description of its significance in South Africa because it also forms a part of musical cultures in many different parts of the world, for example in the form of the Chinese musical bow, the erhu.

In this study I will begin by exploring the musical bow’s use in the Xhosa cultural realm, and examine its significance in terms of its aesthetic and traditional uses during ceremonial performances such as the ceremony for girls’ rites of passage known as Intonjane – a process whereby all girls who have been well-behaved in the sense of not having children out of wedlock are welcomed into womanhood. In addition, I will focus on its historical background, heritage, and cultural significance.

The Xhosa community of the Eastern Cape (the amaXhosa) forms part of the Nguni people living in South Africa and its culture is known for the emergence of the bow instrument. The Xhosa ethnic groups are differentiated from other groups in terms of culture and customs in that they are proud that they originate in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. According to UNESCO, the ability to collect, document and record allows music and similar forms created in earlier centuries to be made available as archival material for future use.

Accordingly, UNESCO defined intangible heritage as: All forms of traditional and popular folk culture, i.e. collective works originating in a given community and based on tradition. These creations are transmitted orally, or by gesture, and are modified over a period of time through a process of collective recreation. They include oral traditions, customs, language, music, dance, rituals, festivities, traditional medicine and pharmacopoeia, the culinary arts and all kinds of special skill connected with the material aspects of culture, such as tools and the habitat. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 165)

This investigation will propose and attempt to demonstrate the significance of the different kinds of Xhosa musical bow functions. Professor David Dargie (2007) states that

the musical instruments of the Xhosa are not unique because of the existence of similar instruments in other South African cultures such as the Zulu, Swati, Venda but the most important instruments are the musical bows, especially uhadi.

Gareth Walwyn defines in detail the significance of the uhadi Xhosa musical instrument.

The uhadi is ‘a traditional instrument of the Amakhosa people of our region, this overtone instrument creates the musical scale which forms the basis of much of their music. It consists of a light-weight single brass string bow having a resonator
gourd tightly attached with a wide mouth facing away from the string. The bow is held in the left hand, string facing away from the player in a manner which allows the string to be pinched to give a note a full tone higher than the open string. The string is struck with a thin stick or reed, and the distance between the gourd and the player’s chest varied until the resonating frequency matches one of the overtones in the string vibration. By changing the fundamental pitch and by varying the resonating frequency, a musical scale is built up. It is a challenging, but very rewarding instrument to learn to play, and offers a fascinating insight into an aspect of music rarely appreciated by Western musicians. AMI uhadi feature a tuning peg which allows easier tuning to other instruments and is more reliable at holding the pitch than traditional methods. (Walwyn 2009)

According to Kirby (1934:194)) most of the stringed instruments are played by the Pondo, Tembu and Xhosa but the uhadi is played by women and girls when they are feeling lonely, but generally after the evening meals, and rarely in the day-time. It is used for accompanying the voice, and the player sits while performing. The musical bows in the Southern Nguni cultures are quite similar and are only different by name and are played in a slightly different manner.

On the other hand, the Chinese erhu is a significant kind of musical bow that has existed for over a thousand years.

This study aims to discover alternative ways of displaying and presenting the musical bow instruments in a museum space as a means of creating more exposure as well as creating ways of reviving and preserving the instrument.

While these indigenous instruments are unlikely to be on display but are part of the permanent collections of museums, they also raise the question as to what significant reason and purpose the museum has for collecting the instruments if they are not to be displayed regularly for the public.

The notion of intangible heritage introduces and relates to the issue of how bow musical instruments are preserved and therefore form part of the history that is transmitted from one generation to another. The collection of traditional musical instruments is an aspect of art that emerged before apartheid times that is slowly becoming unknown because of less popularity and exposure. Museums such as the African Drum Museum and the Adler Museum play a critical role in collecting and displaying the musical bows, which in turn defines what kind of cultural objects they are. The museum is able to differentiate between ‘art’ and ‘craft’, while bows could also be presented as utilitarian objects used for the production of sound and/or music without emphasizing their visual features.

As such, bow instruments have been categorized or labelled as objects or ‘art and crafts’ in Museum Africa, but the distinction between art and craft has been historically quiet complex. Hemp et al. (2005: 12) comment that amongst many definitions crafts are strictly made from certain identified materials for the enhancement of beauty, and only made by hand through advanced skills. According to a worksheet produced by the Education Division of the South African National Gallery (n.d.), when something is made for use by a specific person in the arts world, it is said to be a ‘craft’ because it is usually using techniques that are self-taught and are regarded as a natural gift. In other words, the majority of the makers are taught by their loved ones a skill which is passed on from generation to generation, or a person discovers this skill on
their own.

In 1996 the then minister of arts and culture, Dr B.S Ngubane, claimed that

[c]rafts are a traditional form of artistic expression that tends to be community-based. As such crafts are in an ideal position to play a vital role in the nurturing of national identity, while affirming cultural diversity and, perhaps most importantly, contributing to the general social and economic development of South Africa. (DAC 1996: n.p.)

Craft objects can also veer towards design, with the designer deciding on the purpose of an object and then choosing the appropriate material. Craft can also be defined as how material and technique are chosen first before the object is made. According to Hemp et al. (2005: 12), ‘In an African context, there is really no distinction between “art” and “craft”’. In other words African art is not categorized differently but is rather seen and appreciated in the same way as craft.

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I recently discovered the labelling of indigenous musical instruments as ‘utensils’ in a museum and this practice will be questioned and evaluated in this research study. As it is, musical instruments are placed in glass cabinets and shelves. This is an important aspect of labelling because it invokes traditions based on anthropological readings of this type of display.

In the study ‘Influences on Museum Practice’ (Reeves & Woollard 2006: 7) it is stated that the access to these instruments in museum collections has created an opportunity for scholars to have available information and resources to conduct research as well as the ability to use some of the instruments.

Furthermore, the representation of indigenous musical instruments is defined using the term *democratizing culture* that refers to ‘public accessibility of culture, through price, location and education; there should be no barriers to prevent individuals participating in culture, as the UN declaration of human rights states’ (Reeves & Woollard 2006: 7). This therefore states that democratizing culture is a process of ‘freedom’ in its own sense. Any individual such as a research scholar or an audience member visiting the museum has the right to their cultural desires or curiosity with no restrictions.

This study was instigated by the world’s first International Bow Conference that was held earlier this year at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.¹ This conference was intended to honour the music of the bow, the instruments’ existence around the world, the musical bow performers as well as the various research panel participants who displayed their work aimed at preserving the historical significance of the musical bow. During one of the presentations, Professor David Dargie placed emphasis on the fact that musical bows are ‘sadly becoming a disappearing species’ (Dargie 2016). He argues that the instruments are not given enough platforms for performance, and as it is, a large number of the youth today are not aware of their existence.

According to musicologist and historian Percival R. Kirby ‘the stringed instrument appears to have originated, directly or indirectly, from the bow of the hunter’ (1934: 193). In other words, the ability to use the hunting bow created the opportunity to play the bow as a musical

¹ The conference took place in Durban on 24–27th February 2016.
instrument because of the process of using a similar bow to the hunter’s bow, and because the sound it makes when the arrow is released created a musical effect.

The Khoisan people as hunters created the hunting bow which influenced the later existence of the musical bow that became one of the discoveries of South African cultures such as the amaXhosa. Furthermore, Kirby quotes Balfour on the discovery of the string bow as an instrument.

Balfour has pointed out ‘writers of all ages have drawn attention to the musical note emitted by the bow-string when released in shooting, and dwell upon the delight which is afforded to the archer’s ear’, and there can be no doubt that such delight was shared by those of the South African peoples who used the bow. (Kirby 1934: 193)

Museum collections of indigenous musical instruments appear to be the main form of being able to identify these musical instruments and learn more about them within the museum. While that is the case, the instrument is not attributed to a specific instrument maker but is classified within the framework of a specific ethnic group as presented in a museum’s display.

The notion of musicians in African culture is that they are always singing collectively as this is one entity of blackness; performance with traditional instruments by an individual player through praise songs has been overlooked; therefore no individual player is classified as a potential instrument maker (this is what Western ethnographic studies have as a mythology about a particular kind of Africa) – however among the amaXhosa there is already a lineage of bow instrument players and praise songs.

In that light, some alternative ways to present displays would be to have regular thematic exhibitions of such instruments as well as representing the bow musical instruments outside cabinets and shelves, with an attempt being made to give the instruments a platform in the museum where the makers of a particular musical bow instrument are acknowledged. This is problematic, because it means that specific artists are not receiving the accreditation they deserve in order to promote themselves as a brand. In other words, as these are museum traditional instruments of the past that are not easy to find, some visitors may have an interest in knowing how to purchase one or, if this is not possible, how to obtain a custom-made musical bow. This can be done through approaching and communicating with the traditional musical bow creator.

The study by Reeves and Woollard also defines another term, cultural democracy, that is ‘the desire for every culture to be respected equally without hierarchy’ (2006: 8). This means that, museums and their employees, as institutions of cultural power, are expected to provide factual and accurate information and images about the different cultures they represent.

The display of the ‘other’ such as indigenous musical instruments, appears to have an unrecognized role in and around the museum but is known to be part of the permanent collection with regard to the labelling of the musical bow in Museum Africa. An advocacy of more display of the indigenous musical instruments is an alternative that can add significance to the value of the musical instruments for future purposes.

This interrogation of how the bow musical instrument is displayed will be questioned by viewing the way it is represented in the Museum Africa collection of Johannesburg, which

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2 ‘Other’ – a term used to define a cultural representation unfamiliar to a museum’s familiar display.
consists of a collection of traditional musical instruments and exhibitions such as the exhibition of the bow musical instruments that was held at the International Bow Conference earlier this year. Some case studies of museum exhibitions that have had traditional music instruments such as the uhadi as the main focus will be reviewed. In that light, the significance of this research report is to discover whether the viewer is able to identify the musical bow as not just an object, utensil and/or arts and craft but also as a musical instrument identified differently in a museum space.

**Literature review**

Museums are not only houses of objects but also houses for a knowledge base – another form of a library. They therefore have the potential to be repositories of knowledge relating to indigenous knowledge systems and their significance to society. As such different interests lead to different career choices, such as studies focusing on music and the access to indigenous musical instruments which allow scholars to expand information about the instruments, thereby allowing growth in academia.

The Xhosa musical bow is then an identification of a culture’s significant value in South Africa. The essence of knowing other aspects apart from its musical characteristics also contributes to the heritage of not only the people that appreciate the instrument but to South African heritage and cultural appreciation. Herwitz states that *heritage is for my purposes, the granting to something that is finished (that has been completed in me) a second life in book, museum, site of memory, grand pronouncement or ritual, using the institutions and instruments of script, museum, university, court, and the rest.* (Herwitz 2015: 42)

In other words, heritage is something of the past that has been finished, made to be in a particular sense, but is also able to be relevant to the present or future, is not easily changed or improved but is referred to as what we call a preserved history.

**Methodology**

This study will be conducted through a variety of interviews that concern museums such as Museum Africa and artists such as Mantombi Matotiyana, a female musician who still performs using the musical bow instrument. The museum has commonly displayed, as mentioned earlier, musical bow instruments as arts and crafts or – my recent discovery – as utensils. It is a bit unclear and in fact surprising to have discovered a musical instrument to be referenced as a utensil, which in general is something usually used in a kitchen. In most cases today, musical instruments are in the storeroom as part of the museum’s permanent collection and are hardly displayed. This will be investigated through interviews with the museum personnel to discover the reasons for this. An overview case study of Museum Africa’s exhibitions that have focused on traditional instruments including the bow instrument will be the main feature of this study.

Furthermore, Kirby argued that ‘there are no specialist makers, though men make the instruments for the women, who are usually the players’ (1934: 201). In that light, this study will further investigate whether or not the men are still the makers, and whether a specific name is given to the musical bow maker.
References


