

Repatriation of Song Materials to Support Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge about Language in the Kimberley Region of Northwest Australia

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Abstract

Increasing interest in the repatriation of song recordings to cultural heritage communities has opened up new possibilities for archives, researchers and local individual, community and organizational stakeholders in recent years. In Australia, repatriation has emerged as a core activity of many, if not all, current ethnomusicological research on Aboriginal song traditions and, as song is a register of language, is an interest of many linguists and community-based language centres. There are numerous published reports that describe the use of repatriated recordings in cultural heritage communities to articulate identity, to demonstrate continuity of tradition, and to recover and revive repertoires of song and language. To date, however, there has been very little attention to the precise ways in which this happens, or to the ambiguities that permeate the use of historical recordings to sustain flexible and context-driven musical systems (and the language material that they carry). This paper will examine the repatriation and dissemination of ethnomusicological records (audio, video recordings and associated metadata) in a collaborative song maintenance project based in the Kimberley region of northwest Australia. In doing so, we seek to better understand how repatriation activities can contribute to sustaining endangered practices and knowledges by supporting intergenerational cooperation

Résumé

L'intérêt croissant pour le rapatriement des enregistrements de chansons vers les communautés culturelles a ouvert récemment de nouvelles possibilités pour les archives, les chercheurs, les individus et autres parties prenantes au niveau local. En Australie, le rapatriement est devenu l'activité principale de presque toute la recherche ethnomusicologique sur les traditions de chansons autochtones et, puisqu'une chanson est un registre de langue, a suscité l'intérêt d'un grand nombre de linguistes et des centres de langues communautaires. Il existe de nombreux rapports publiés qui décrivent l'utilisation d'enregistrements rapatriés dans les communautés de patrimoine culturel pour en articuler l'identité, démontrer la continuité de la tradition, et récupérer et relancer les répertoires de la chanson et de la langue. À ce jour, cependant, on a porté peu d'attention à la manière dont cela se produit, ou aux ambiguïtés qui imprègnent l'utilisation d'historique des enregistrements pour soutenir des systèmes musicaux flexibles dirigés par le contexte (et la matière linguistique qu'ils véhiculent). Cet article examine le rapatriement et la diffusion d'enregistrements ethnomusicologiques (enregistrements audio, vidéo et métadonnées associées) dans un projet collaboratif de maintien des chansons situé dans la région de Kimberley au nord-ouest de l'Australie. Ce faisant, nous cherchons à mieux comprendre comment les activités de rapatriement peuvent contribuer à soutenir, via la coopération intergénérationnelle, des pratiques et des connaissances en voie de disparition.

Introduction

Since the 1980s repatriation of recordings to communities of origin has emerged as a growing preoccupation of cultural heritage stakeholders, ethnomusicologists, and the collecting institutions in which their recordings and data are held. In Australia, repatriation has emerged as a core activity of many, if not all, current ethnomusicological research on Australian Aboriginal song traditions and, as songs are rich records of cultural, ecological, historical and linguistic knowledge, is also an interest of many community-based arts, culture and language centres, anthropologists, and linguists. A range of factors have

motivated this, including: concern to engage in research guided by reciprocity, social justice and cultural equity (Barwick & Thieberger, 2006; Lancefield, 1998; Niles, 2004); as a response to community requests and aspirations (Lobley & Jirotko; Seeger, 1986); as a method of dialogic research, also allowing the research to document new meaning and knowledge about traditions (Toner, 2003); and, in order to help revive traditions (Kahunde, 2012; Marett & Barwick, 2003) and support efforts to sustain and safeguard endangered intangible cultural heritages. There are numerous published reports that describe the positive impact of repatriated recordings in cultural heritage communities in Australia and elsewhere: providing materials of

significance to individuals, groups, and communities (Hilder, 2012; Kahunde, 2012; Niles, 2004); for education programs (Marett et al., 2006; Niles, 2004); to demonstrate continuity of tradition (Marett & Barwick, 2003; Moyle, 1992; Toner, 2003);⁴ to articulate identity in relation to kin and Country (Toner 2003, 9); as a learning tool (Marett & Barwick 2003, 146); and, enabling listeners to regain control over cultural property and its replication (Toner 2003, 10).⁵

These motivations and outcomes, together with requests from cultural heritage stakeholders, underpin the use of repatriation as a key tool in a collaborative project that seeks to identify and test strategies to sustain the Junba dance-song genre, indigenous to large area of the Kimberley region in Australia. In this paper we seek to reflect on the role of recordings and the process of making new recordings in supporting intergenerational knowledge transmission about and around Junba songs from the perspective of a member of the cultural heritage community, Ngarinyin/Nyikina community leader and teacher Rona Googninda Charles, an emerging teacher Sherika Nulgit, and ethnomusicologist Sally Treloyn. In addition to their community roles, both Charles and Nulgit are Research Assistants at The University of Melbourne where Treloyn is a Postdoctoral Fellow. Before describing the project in more detail, it is first necessary to provide some background to the geographical and cultural region in which the project has taken place, to the Junba dance-song tradition, and to the project itself.

Background: region, language, and people

The Kimberley region of northwest Australia covers over 420,000 square kilometres. Over 30 language groups are indigenous to the region.⁶ A significant inland portion of the Kimberley region is recognized as Wilinggin – country to which the language Ungarinyin, with dialects Guwidj, Wilawila, Wolyamidi, and Wurla, is indigenous. Elders with full knowledge of Ungarinyin also have knowledge of neighbouring languages, such as Wunambal and Worrorra, and dialects. From the late 1800s onwards the increased imposition of people and industries not indigenous to region had a significant impact on Ungarinyin language and today, while there

⁴ One of the earliest discussions of this topic in Australia comes from the 1988 Colloquium at which Stephen Wild discussed how repatriated recordings can be ‘evidence and symbols of cultural identity, an identity which may have radically altered in the intervening years but which nevertheless asserts a measure of continuity with the past, that they are a people with a continuous and continuing history’ (Wild, 1992).

⁵ These are summarized with more detail in (Treloyn & Emberly, in press).

⁶ See <http://www.klrc.org.au/languages>, map accessed 23 July 2013

are a handful of ‘full’ speakers of Ungarinyin, almost all people speak English, Aboriginal English, or a Kriol.

Wilinggin is made up of some 68 *dambun* (clan countries), each of which is represented by a totemic plant, animal or place. Each *dambun*, to which people trace patrilineal ties, is also identified as one of two moieties: *ornod* (‘bone’, often referred to as the ancestral hero *Wodoi*, the Spotted Nightjar), or *amarlad* (‘dust’ or ‘dirt’, often referred to as *Jun.gun*, after the ancestral hero the Owllet Nightjar). The land of each of the 68 *dambun* of Wilinggin is inhabited by particular named ancestral creative spirits, known as *Wanjina*, and other spirits, such as *burrunguma* (the spirits of deceased people). The natural resources and health of each *dambun* are managed by families that descend from these spirits. A kinship system that guides the relationships between people also guides relationships between *dambun*, and individual and collective identities are defined by one’s *dambun*, its *Wanjina*, plants and animals.

The origin of all living things is also embedded in an ancestral creative being and power known as *Wunggurr*, a creative force that is particularly intensely present in waterholes. People are born from these waterholes, which are located close to *Wanjina* spirits that leave themselves painted on cave walls. People are born when baby spirits attached to fish or animals are hunted or eaten by their prospective parents. Through a person’s life they keep themselves, their *Wunggurr* place, and their *Wanjina* healthy and in death their bones are traditionally returned to the cave in which their *Wanjina* resides.

Junba

Wellbeing of country and people

In addition to taking care of the physical condition of one’s *dambun*, *Wanjina* painting(s) and *Wunggurr* places, the wellbeing of place and people is also ensured by dreaming, composing, singing, dancing, teaching and learning Junba – a genre of dance-song that is indigenous to Wilinggin, along with neighbouring countries. Junba (with sub-genres Jadmi and Jerregorl), also known as ‘Corroboree’ and ‘Culture’, is performed in public as opposed to ‘Law’ or otherwise restricted contexts and Ngarinyin people use it to bond together, welcome *ngulmud* ‘strangers’ to Country, and to strengthen individual, family and community identities.

||: Wanali - rri wa yamowul ya - mowul yamowul gambani/a :||

x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		clapsticks
		o		o		o		o		o			clapping

Figure 1. Wanalirri (Composed by Wati Ngyerdu and passed to Ngarinyin 1950s-60s)

Junba is considered to be essential to the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of Country, individuals and families. The following explanation by expert elder Ngarinyin/Wunambal Junba singer Matthew Dembal Martin illustrates this:

As you're dancing, you're stamping on the ground, you're waking up the spirit. [As] you're singing, and you're hitting this then [striking clapsticks], that echo goes everywhere. Especially up there, it's hill country you know. Big mob of hills everywhere. You see the echo, you see the spirit comes up when they listen to the sound ... when the spirit comes up you'll see everything, like fruit, bush fruit and everything is healthy. Every time they bear fruits, healthy fruits. You get a sugarbag [honey], healthy sugarbag. You kill something, kangaroo, fat. Crocodile, turtle, everything we eat is healthy. It's healthy like the tree, the water. The water don't run dry, it's like a Wunggurr – the Rainbow Serpent boss for Wunggurr water. ... It makes Country healthy. Fresh food, bush tucker, healthy growth. The Wunggurr waters – where people come from - keep alive. ... When they [the dancers] listen to this [the clapsticks], it's just like they hitting their bone. The spirit hitting their bone, they [the young dancers] get strong. Strong bone. That's why you see them kids real happy and thing. They're not looking sad, they're looking forward for dancing or anything, they'll do anything. Now the bone, that ornor, is strong to do anything, dance. They can run all day too if they want to. ... They have the Country and for themselves they feel strong, they not weak. The spirit, the singing, the dancing, that makes them healthy. It's always been there.

(Treloyn & Martin, 2012).

Junba song texts

In addition to dancing and striking clapsticks, the texts of Junba songs also play an important role in strengthening bonds between people, Country and spirits. Each Junba repertory comprises some 20-35 distinct song texts, each of which is set to the same basic melodic pattern. Each song comprises a relatively short string of words and utterances that the singers repeat over and over to the conclusion of the accompanying dance. The songs follow a typically Central Australia style, wherein the text is performed isorhythmically. That is, every time it is repeated it has an identical

syllabic rhythmic setting, as indicated in Figure 1. The text is accompanied by the regular beating of clapsticks performed by the *jumanjuman* ('maker' of the song and songleader) and clapping by the rest of the singing ensemble (*ngalanyba-birri*).⁷

The text of this song refers to the important *Wanjina* located at Gibb River Station named Wanalirri. Wanalirri is considered to be the 'boss *Wanjina*' who sent all other *Wanjina* to their Countries – he is emblematic of not only the *dambun* of the Gibb River area, but also in some contexts symbolizes all of Wilinggin and is a central figure for all Ngarinyin children. The story of Wanalirri, which tells of two children teasing a small owl and an ensuing flood that caused the ground to become boggy (*yamowul yamowul yamowul*) and led to the deaths of many of the first people is one learnt all children. When one asks a Ngarinyin child what is their favourite Junba song, this is the song that they sing.

In the dance that accompanies this song, the dancer carries on his shoulders a painting of Wanalirri on a dance-board known as a 'totem' or *waringgi*. As he dances over the dance ground towards the singers and audience, the *Wanjina* and Country in which he is embedded is animated through the body of the dancer. This kind of animation of Country and spirits through performance is also enacted in the construction and performance of Junba song texts. As has been noted elsewhere (Treloyn, 2007), songs typically commence by naming an important place or ancestral being. In this case Wanalirri is named. In singing these lyrics, the repeated line-initial placement of the name of the *Wanjina* 'Wanalirri' mobilizes the spirit, pulling it forwards. The text, which remains fixed from performance to performance, together with the fixed rhythmic setting make up the *ornod* or 'bone' of the Junba. This is also considered to be the bone of the spirits and Country that both composed and are animated by the singing. The stomping of the dancer, synchronized with the clapping, and the textual/rhythmic *ornod* bone of song, Country and spirit, is at once the sound of the living performers, as well as that of the *Wanjina* as it moved over country forming the landscape and laws. Correct performance melodic

⁷ For a detailed account of Junba song texts see (Treloyn, 2006a, 2009).

Repertory	Number of Songs					
	Kalumburu Festival	Mowanjum Festival				
	1985	2001	2010	2011	2012	2013
Laurie Utemorra	4					
Sam Woolagoodya		7	4	3	4	5
Wati Ngeyrdu	5	2	4	5	4	4
Scotty Martin	6	4	1			3
Jeffrey Manggoladmora						2
No. of Songs	15	13	9	8	8	14
No. of Repertories	3	3	3	2	2	4

Table 1. Junba Repertories and Number of Songs performed by Ngarinyin and Worrorra at Festivals between 1985 and 2013.

and rhythmic performance of texts is said to be like a generator that lights up Country.

The state of the Junba tradition

The importance of Junba is clear. However, like the state of Ungarinyin language, Junba songs are also highly endangered. It has previously been estimated that since the early 1900s some 1500-2000 Junba songs would have been in existence (Treloyn and Emberly, 2013). In research conducted between 2000-2002 some 455 were recalled. Today, with the loss of many song-holding elders, only up to 20-30 are regularly performed, indicating a significant rate of attrition. Some indication of the attrition of Junba repertories is provided in Table 1. Which repertories, dance-songs and the number of songs performed on any one occasion depends on many cultural, economic and logistical factors. However the table below indicates a general decrease in the number of songs and repertories performed at Community festivals by Ngarinyin (and their Worrorra neighbours) for which recordings are available, between 1985 and 2012.

The handful of senior elders that perform Junba songs and have knowledge of many more, not presently performed, are treasured. The significance that Junba has for its cultural heritage stakeholders as outlined above, in hand with its state of endangerment, underpins a project that sets out to identify strategies to sustain Junba into the future. It is to this that we will now turn.

The Junba Project

The 'Junba Project', as it is known in the Kimberley, has the full title 'Strategies for Preserving and Sustaining Aboriginal Australian Song and Dance in the Modern World: the Mowanjum and Fitzroy River valley communities of Western Australia' (LP0990650). It is a three-year project that is supported by the Australian Research Council under the Linkage Projects scheme.

Under this scheme university-based researchers collaborate with industry partners, in this case the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre (MACC) and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC), to develop and carry out a project that uses research to address problems faced by the given industry. In this case, MACC and KALACC sought to use research to identify and test new strategies to support local efforts to maintain and strengthen the Junba dance-song tradition. Using a participatory action research framework we developed a three-year project to investigate ways in which the repatriation, recording, documentation and dissemination (RRDD) of records of Junba could help support the tradition. Two key principals have guided this:

1. That it is necessary to use RRDD to support and increase opportunities for (rather than bypass) intergenerational knowledge transmission around Junba.
2. That it is necessary to nurture Junba related RRDD activities into the day-to-day operation of ongoing, already sustainable programs, such as local Art and Culture Centres, local cultural and land advisory structures, and Indigenous land conservation Ranger programs.

The key activities of the project based in Wilinggin, which are still in progress, are briefly outlined below.

Teaching and Learning on Country

The project has coordinated a range of activities between 2011 and 2013, referred to as 'Junba Camps', 'Picnics' and 'Practices', that are aimed at providing opportunities for children, young people and adults to teach and learn Junba singing and dancing. These have been led by Matthew Dembal Martin, senior elder and songwoman Pansy Nulgit, and the authors of this paper in collaboration with the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre and supported and guided traditional owners of

the Country on which the activities took place. Elders determined that the first Junba Camp should be in the heart of Wilinggin, some 300 kilometres away from the nearest town of Derby where many of the participants were based. The location was guided by: a desire to keep children focused and free of distractions; by a view that it is easier for children to understand a song and remember it if they see and experience the places and ancestral stories that are learning about; and, because learning on country is considered to be not only a good way to learn, free of distractions, but also the right way to learn, in the company of the spirits that inhabit place. Martin has explained: ‘spirits need to be with you to learn, you need their power’, ‘if you don’t walk on country, it dies, it needs kids to be out on it’: kids and country gets ‘happy and healthy’.

In brief, the main activities that the children were engaged in involved collecting white ochre, called *ornmal*, and other items, such as the bark of particular trees, required for dance. In doing they practiced skills and acquired knowledge and were told about the ancestral creative beings that put the materials in the earth, about how their grandparents, great and great great grandparents, had collected materials just as they were, and about how, when they paint each other, they are painting the powerful creative essence of the earth onto their bodies. They also practiced ‘brightening’ dance items in order to bring the places and ancestral beings painted on them back to life. In the course of these activities, elders told stories about the ancestral beings and places that created these materials, the laws they set in place about sharing, getting on with your neighbours, and treating people and animals with kindness and respect.

With regard to singing, children were encouraged to repeat words, to clap together, to think about their relationships with the places that were named in the songs that were sung, and to think about the histories of the places that were named in songs. The songs that were chosen foreground particular places and stories, and, as Martin has since explained, for the *marra* or ‘bright light’ power embedded in them to clear the children’s minds, help them focus, and to give them and the country from which they born, on which they are learning, good health and power.

On the last night of the camp, the kids were guided through dance. Special emphasis was placed on the relationships between individuals and the places that they carry into the world. Boys were selected to carry dance items relevant to their family identity and girls were selected to support these boys, again in relation to their family connections with place. There was also focused attention on intergenerational engagement and support on the dance ground, with more than 4 or 5 generations involved. These opportunities to support and guide younger people, and for young people to emulate their elders, and in doing so connect with the family and the country that gives them life, is considered to be key to the importance of Junba for wellbeing.

Engagement, exploration and documentation through recording, transcription of song texts, photography and digital storytelling

An innovative addition to the traditional mode of teaching and learning on Country in these Junba Camps has been supplying children with tools to negotiate the challenge of directly questioning their elders. Cameras have been used by children and the elders that they are recording to divert attention from the embarrassment of direct questioning, creating an intellectual space for intergenerational knowledge sharing. With increasing confidence in these techniques, children have recorded interviews with elders, as well as other teenagers, staff of the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre, and other project members.

Elder teachers also actively complement lessons with repatriated audio and video recordings of past performances, mediated by their own narration and discussion. Martin explains how the introduction of DVDs continues a traditional model of multimodal learning:

[I] tell kids about the DVD. In the old days the old people didn’t do that, because there was no DVD. We would see it in the show. ‘We got it from the story to the dancing part of it. [The reason is], you got to be told first the story, and when he come to the show time, you can see it clear, dancing and music playing and when they singing. That’s like the real thing in the dancing and you think back to the story, so you can easily pick it up from there. Especially the young people. Good for the imagination. Just like when you read a book and see it later on. It makes them think and when it comes to real time [when the kids dance] it comes out clear in their mind now, they can see that thing. In the dancing. They think I hear that song, I can dance it now. And they can hear that song when they [are] singing. When it comes to dancing they know the tune, they know when to stop, when to go. They know how it goes from the spirit.

Martin himself has used repatriated recordings (namely of Jeffrey Manggoladmora’s Junba recorded by Lesley Reilly in Kalumburu in 1974) to ‘tune to’ his ears to songs that he had been asked to perform. He performed numerous at a festival in Kalumburu in August 2012, and two, in tribute to a dancer who had recently passed away, at the 2013 Mowanjum Festival. This technique has also been taken up by a small group of Ngarinyin teenagers who reside in Perth, some 2500 kilometres south of the Kimberley. Having provided the boys with footage of a Junba performance made in 1997 by ethnomusicologist Linda Barwick, they watched the video repeatedly in the lead up to the 2013 Mowanjum Festival.

Most recently the project coordinated a week of iMovie workshops, hosted by the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre, aimed at ages 4 – 15 wherein the participants completed ‘mini Junba documentaries’. In the course of these activities, emerging cultural leaders in their 20s,

such as Sherika Nulgit, guided their children and young relatives through the creative process. In doing this they encouraged children to reflect on, document and extend their knowledge of Junba through the selection and editing of both repatriated archival and new photos, video and audio recordings, and interviews, at the same time as extending their own knowledge of Junba. Elders such as Rona Charles, and senior elders such as Pansy Nulgit and Matthew Martin attended to help the children devise questions and advise on cultural protocols. Project t-shirts and prizes, coupled with emphasis on short achievable creative goals (the aim was to complete a 2 minute video), supported participation of people from the ages of 4 through to late 70s.

Young elders such as Sherika Nulgit have also taken on the task of transcribing Junba texts with elder singers, including her grandmother, after brief sessions addressing questions of orthography. She records and reviews these sessions. In doing this Sherika has observed that she has gained greater awareness of the sound of words in Junba texts and what she is required to do with her mouth and tongue to both articulate these words and to sing with the same tone and pitch as her grandmother. She considers that the process also strengthens the bond between her and her grandmother, giving both 'good liyan' – a feeling of connectedness with family and Country.

Discovery, repatriation and dissemination of existing records of junba

Key to the multimedia activities that we have developed has been the dissemination and availability of audio and video recordings that have been repatriated to the cultural heritage community in the course of the project. In addition to materials held by Treloyn, and by the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre, a week-long research trip to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra in 2012 enabled participants, again across generations (ages 23 – late 70s), to seek, discover, and research recordings dating back to the 1960s with a view to obtaining digital copies. Highlighting the potential of these materials to stimulate and support Junba, a photo of a Junba dance about a plane crash, taken by a Community visitor (Wayne Masters) in the 1960s, together with recordings and text transcriptions made by Treloyn in 2002, was used in the lead up to the most recent Mowanjum Festival to revive and return the dance-song to the living repertory. This dance, along with those revived by the teenagers in Perth following their study of Barwick's video, and practice sessions, were performed. As a result of these activities, while the years between 1985 and 2012 indicate a gradual loss of dance-songs from the performed canon of Junba, in 2013 we see a marked increase in items performed. As indicated in Table 1, whereas only 2 repertoires and 8 songs were performed in 2012, 4 repertoires and 14 songs were performed in 2013.

Conclusion

The revival of dance-song items in the recent Festival, led by elders such as Matthew Martin and supported by teachers such as Rona Charles, and emerging teachers such as Sherika Nulgit, is clearly also led by teenagers whose initiative in learning from DVDs, participating in activities on country, multimedia activities, and taking on roles of teachers to younger children, has been essential to increased intergenerational engagement around Junba. The interest of young parents such as Sherika, in guiding their children through iMovie projects and documenting their own children's activities in Junba Camps builds participation in practices and teaching and learning opportunities. Viewed in this way it appears that the use of recordings, both repatriated and new, and related community-led activities of researching and documentation play a valuable role in supporting the inclusion and agency of young members of the Community to engage with their elders to learn and to carry their traditions into the future. At present the interest of the young people in dance appears to be driving the increase in items at festival and it is hoped that, through continued activities, that participation in singing will also increase.

Finally, in course of the project the core project team has developed and delivered reports and presentations, such as this paper. The outcome of this has been that insight from the cultural heritage community of the value of the project activities is included in the research results, and this collaborative analysis and reflection informs ongoing research, increasing its relevance and impact. We look forward to continuing this into the future and better understanding how to achieve and foster collaborations between researchers and cultural heritage stakeholders to support community agendas and research outcomes.

Several scholars have warned of the potential of recordings to 'freeze' or otherwise harm the song traditions that we otherwise seek to sustain, referring to the reifying effect of recording technologies that freeze otherwise effervescent sound (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006) and the interplay between re-introduced renditions of songs, the ease with which digital recordings can be disseminated, and cultural protocols and laws that govern access, transmission, ownership and management of songs. As has been noted elsewhere (Treloyn and Emberly, in press), such complications have led many to consider the ethical complexities of repatriation (Hennessy, 2010; Lancefield, 1998; Moyle, 1992). At the same time repatriation can have clear benefits for reviving dance-song traditions and, as a response to Community requests, is a matter of justice and equity. In the Junba Project recordings have enabled collaboration, reflection, and creation of physical and intellectual spaces for generations to exchange knowledge around Junba in a manner that, preliminary results suggest, can help to sustain the tradition into the future.

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