8. Conclusion

[T]he history of music, and of culture in general, consists not merely of the evolution of overtly new genres and styles, but of the rearticulation of extant idioms to respond to new social circumstances. (Manuel 1994:277)

The Duna live in a physical environment of steep slopes (mei konenia) that are sometimes difficult to traverse. A stick of bamboo (sola) used as a prop goes a long way in assisting a struggling traveller. Similarly, the Duna live in a social and cultural environment of steep slopes, where the path on which they walk can be precarious and unpredictable. Songs, like the stick of bamboo, assist the Duna in picking their way over this terrain by providing a forum for them to process change as it is experienced, in relation to what is already known.

The change that the Duna have experienced, and continue to experience, is enormous, with colonisation occurring relatively recently—less than 50 years ago—followed by an intense period of missionisation, then a rapid move to independence and the subsequent departure of Europeans almost as quickly as they came. If social change is expressed and experienced through music then there should be little wonder that such change for the Duna would be manifest in an outpouring of song.

The number and variety of musical examples that have been presented here are testimony to the importance of music, and song in particular, in Duna lives. They are also testimony to Duna cultural resilience and creativity in the face of this extraordinary and rapid social change. This research has provided a wide-ranging account of Duna musical practice, describing song, instrumental music and music accompanied by dance. Although it has been as inclusive as possible regarding the various genres of Duna music, the focus has been on Duna song. It is through the examination of Duna song that the argument for continuity can be most clearly seen, and thus it is on the analysis of songs that this research is based.

In Chapter 1, I engaged with some of the recent thinking in contemporary anthropology regarding debates about binary oppositions, hybridity, the individual person and processes of translation and documentation of oral traditions. Taking a step back from the ethnography at hand for a moment, we could ask: what can we contribute to these anthropological debates by focusing on music and on cultural production? In that same chapter, I cited
Bohlman (1992:132): ‘Musical ethnography should represent the musical moment, the creator of that moment, and the indigenous meaning of that moment.’ My own research has moved between musical ethnography and an anthropology of music, the latter of which ‘brings to the study of music the concepts, methods, and concerns of anthropology’ in order to consider ‘the way music is a part of culture and social life’ (Seeger 1987:xiii). An anthropology of music contextualises the musical moment, explaining what its place is in a historically situated socio-cultural trajectory. In doing this, it can be seen that the musical moment is multiply determined by relatively autonomous components such as the musical tools available and the dynamics of the social situation, and that these musical moments are components of events that are always enacted as part of a value-creation process—asserting identity, modernity, attachment to place, religion, tension and desire. The outcomes of musical ethnography are enriched when considered in conjunction with this anthropological approach.

In the light of Manuel’s observation in the above epigraph, this publication has shown both how existing Duna song genres have responded to change and how more recently introduced genres can be seen to continue aspects of these more established forms of musical creativity. After the world of Duna ancestral music was described in Chapter 2, the next chapter explained the exogenous origins of new Duna music and demonstrated to the reader—through the first individual song analyses of the book—two of the most essential concepts of continuity in Duna song creation across the spectrum of styles: textual innovation and melodic recycling. It was shown that new compositions, for the church or for secular purposes, often take as their material pre-existing melodies—a process that is the essence of ancestral song composition as it was defined in Chapter 2. These songs also show the high level of importance that is placed on creativity in text, utilising the features of parallelism and word substitution, all of which is consistent with ancestral genres.

In Chapter 4, I took the specific ethnographic example of Wakili Akuri’s death to reveal laments as a platform for intense creativity, and how one singer in particular composed her laments in a number of styles but with a marked continuity of text structure, content and melodic contour. The Duna’s intimate and complex relationship to land was described in the next chapter, and we saw how continuity is apparent in the way Duna people sing about place, especially in the continued use of kēiyaka across genres, in the way land could be praised or denigrated in order to attract a lover and in how people sang about their movements through the landscape. Chapter 6 revealed how Duna ancestral genres of yekia, selepa and khene ipakana can be sung with modified texts for new contexts such as contemporary
politics, visiting white women and new forms of recreation—a perfect example of what Manuel describes regarding extant idioms. The chapter explored new courting practices, especially the guitar as a kind of substitute for the ancestral alima, played to woo a woman, and the disco as the new courting house or yekianđa. One of the functions of courting songs, that of eliciting sympathy, was shown to continue across the spectrum of song, and continuity regarding particular listener reactions to songs—namely, self-mutilation and suicide—was also discussed.

In Chapter 7, there was less discussion of musical continuity and more discussion of change and the potential (and reality) of loss. I showed that there is little concern expressed by the Duna regarding a loss of ancestral musical traditions. This is in contrast with many other cultural groups around the world, including other Melanesian groups—for example, those of New Caledonia and Vanuatu, where the indigenous people continue to speak of the need to maintain what they identify as ‘kastom’ (Ammann 2001). Such a lack of preservationist rhetoric could be interpreted in two ways: there is no perceived loss of tradition or the Duna simply do not care if there is. I would like to propose an alternative interpretation of this situation, however, in the light of the analysis presented here: as it is obvious that some ancestral musical genres are not practised at all anymore, and most are not practised in their original context, a lack of rhetoric of loss suggests in itself that there is a certain continuity at play, whether the Duna are conscious of it or not.

Such continuity should not be surprising; after all, all cultural practices occur in an already existing cultural setting and relate to ideas and values that have gone before. It would be convenient to conceive of Duna music of indigenous and exogenous origin as two opposing forms of expression, but this is simplistic and ultimately misleading. In order to understand, and ultimately to respect, Duna contemporary song composition, it must be viewed in all its complexity, with its relations to the past and to the present.

I have argued against setting up dichotomies of the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ in music, and in doing so I have highlighted indigenous agency in creative forms of expression. It is hoped that this approach to music research will provide inspiration for a new way of viewing other musical cultures that might have a similar colonial or exogenous history to the Duna. This in turn should assist in elevating the status of what is often classified as ‘popular music’ and dismissed as insignificant.

As this is the first study of Duna music of its kind, more research is needed in order for all the issues surrounding Duna musical practice to be fully
explored. In particular, a study into gender and contemporary song would yield valuable insights into Duna human relations and the changing dynamics between male and female spheres of being. For example, 30 years ago it was reported that ‘Duna women do not really sing at all’ (Modjeska 1977:332); however, my research has revealed a plethora of songs created and sung by women—many of which were clearly inspired by exogenous music. Duna women’s participation in new cultural spheres such as the church could be facilitating a new era of expression for them, musically and otherwise, and research into this area of Duna life would be very rewarding.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz (1973:29) wrote: ‘Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete.’ And in Herndon’s (1993:78) words, ‘there is no definitive truth; we can only aspire to see a bit more clearly’. I acknowledge that this account is by no means the only way to see Duna music in all its variety; but I do hope that it will have contributed significantly to a clearer understanding of present musical practices.

As evoked in the title, ‘Steep Slopes’, the Duna exist in a very unstable present. The introduction of a monetary economy connected to wage labour means that the organisation of performance often requires cash, as I have shown with Sane Noma’s comments on the revival of the *haroli palena* and in my discussion of the Duna’s participation in cultural shows, where culture combines with tourism. The development of a formal system of education shows a shift in the value-creation process regarding learning: it is now accepted that certain things, if they are of value, should be taught in schools (by people who in turn receive monetary payment for their services). While this desire for an engagement with a monetary economy—and the world it represents—surges ahead, ironically in reality many Duna people’s engagement with this external world seems to be retreating, as they sing of being isolated and without essential services. There is at the moment no clear trajectory for the Duna but rather a strong sense of being somewhere ‘in the middle’, as Jeremiah Piero described it. In such a context, the recursive and reflexive dimension of cultural process comes to the fore, and in this space the possibilities for finding a ‘balance’ can be explored through creative means. We cannot tell how Duna music will shape itself in the future. We can only imagine that their music will be as vital and as vivid as their songs of today.
Figure 8. A picture of continuity, 1964.

Photo by David Hook