

Nebinyan's songs: an Aboriginal whaler of south-west Western Australia

Martin Gibbs

Nebinyan was in his seventies when he met the ethnographer Daisy Bates in 1908. A renowned Nyungar songman of the Mineng people, whose country included the shores of Two Peoples Bay on the south coast of Western Australia, he had been moved in old age to the Government Settlement at Katanning, where their meeting took place. Their conversations ranged over the various details of traditional life in which Bates was most interested, but as night fell Nebinyan chose to recall his youth and perform for Bates a song cycle based on his work as a whaler on the south coast of Western Australia, in the 1860s.

In the recitative which dealt with Nebinyan's whaling experiences, the whole gamut of native feeling appeared to be expressed: the sorrow of Nebin, as he saw his fire (home) recede further and further away; the stealthy gliding over the water towards the resting whale, the sharp look out, the growing excitement as the huge fish was approached; the great seas that threatened to swamp the whale boat; the swift and sure harpooning; the final surrender of the whale; the triumphant towing back to ship or beach, and the great rejoicing over the whale feast – each of these formed a song in itself, and the actions peculiar to each stage were faithfully rendered. Many portions of the song which had become familiar through frequent recital were chorused by male listeners, who kept a murmuring accompaniment throughout the recital, these choruses encouraging the chief singer and urging him on to fresh efforts by the favour thus shown to his compositions. The words of the song were merely the names applied by the natives to the details connected with whaling, but the actions accompanying the recitative illustrated the whole proceeding. These recitals, which were however not very frequent, often continued until the small hours of the morning, singers and audience being often contentedly droned to sleep by the continuous reiteration.¹

Sadly, Bates did not record the words of the songs, the 'mere names' used to describe the whaling process, nor do her notes contain any further information on Nebinyan's career on the sea, or any further mention of Aboriginal whalers.

While Bates' published and unpublished works document a number of contact period songs from various Nyungar men and women, usually in more detail than she afforded Nebinyan's whaling cycle, her obvious focus was on salvaging information on

¹ Bates 1985: 342.

traditional life and activities. Consequently, she rarely explored the significance of these narratives as other than pathos for what she perceived as the plight of the Nyungar people being diminished by forced interaction with Europeans. However, the few tantalising sentences of her description suggest that Nebinyan's choice of performance was far from random, but carried clear messages of a largely forgotten history of Aboriginal-European collaboration, as well as a story of participation and successful negotiation for personal power in changing circumstances. In the following discussion, we will trace the significance of Nebinyan's song.

Nebinyan the whaler

This paper is not the first time that the life and works of Nebinyan the songman have been documented in *Aboriginal History*. In 1980 historian and anthropologist Isobel White analysed the significance of another of Nebinyan's performances, also recorded by Daisy Bates during the 1908 visit to the Katanning camp.² That research is discussed in relation to the current study in a later section. However, White's paper also outlines Nebinyan's basic biographical details, which in this context suggest the circumstances in which he encountered whalers and whaling.

While White's research indicates some uncertainty as to the exact year of Nebinyan's birth, it is likely that he was born at Two Peoples Bay sometime around 1840.³ The bay is located only 25km east of King George Sound where, from the turn of the 19th century, increasing numbers of European vessels had been calling for wood and water. Contact between the Mineng and these travellers had generally been hospitable and of sufficient frequency for visitors of the 1820s to remark on the relative indifference of the Aboriginal inhabitants to the appearance and activities of Europeans.⁴

By 1826 the British government had decided to establish a small military settlement at King George Sound in order to secure the south coast against French claims. In 1829 this outpost, known as Fredrickstown and later Albany, was declared open for free colonists, coinciding with the establishment of a second settlement at the Swan River (Perth), situated several hundred kilometres away on the west coast. However, the early promises of agricultural potential and prosperity for both regions quickly proved to be false, bringing an abrupt halt to the early flow of migrants and capital. With neither minerals nor other export items readily apparent, the twin colonies spent the next decade under the threat of collapse.

One consequence of the near-abortive state of the colonies was that the European populations remained small. In particular, the greater region around the southern settlement, inclusive of Two Peoples Bay, numbered less than 300 white residents for most of the period from 1826 until 1850. During this period the diplomacy of the Mineng, exhibited in their earlier contact with short-term European visitors, extended to their dealings with the permanent settlers. Such was the close relationship that developed between the two groups that historian Neville Green has characterised it as a 'friendly frontier'.⁵

2. White 1980: 38.

3. White 1980: 38.

4. Green 1983; Ferguson 1987.

5. Green 1983: 68.

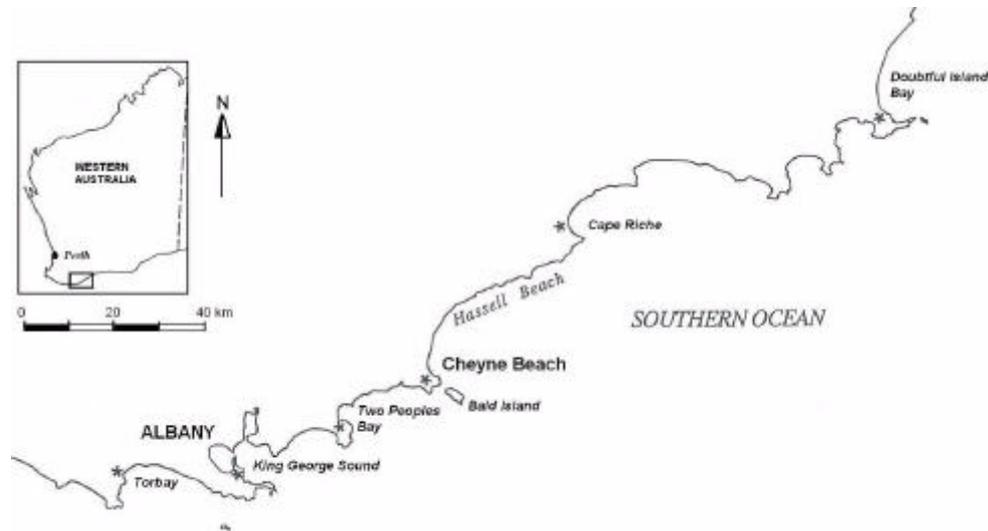


Figure 1: Whaling stations in Mineng country 1836–1879

While some of the colonists struggled to develop an agricultural industry, others began to look back to the sea and particularly at the Right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) and Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) which migrated along the coasts each winter. At this time whale oil was a major source of lighting oil and lubricant, while the baleen from whales' mouths served as the flexible material in items ranging from corset stays to coach springs. Whaling was a significant international industry and by the 1830s east coast Australian settlements had already profited from starting their own fisheries. American and French whaleships were starting to cruise along the Western Australian coast, enraging the colonists by taking what the latter felt was rightly a British resource. Although various proposals were made by Perth and Albany-based colonists to start a shore-based whaling industry, the financial situation of the small western settlements was so dire that it took nearly seven years before local merchants could scrape together sufficient funds to equip even a small whaling station.⁶

In the winter of 1836 an Albany merchant by the name of Thomas Sherratt was finally able to form a small whaling party on the shores of Doubtful Island Bay, located approximately 150km north-east of Albany. Little is known of this operation, other than a vague report that it had caught several whales and that the crews were said to include two Aboriginal women and one boy.⁷ The fortunes of the Western Australian whaling parties fluctuated through the late 1830s, although small seasonal shore stations were established progressively in various bays including, in 1842, at Two Peoples Bay.⁸ Many of Nebinyan's earliest childhood memories would therefore have been of the

⁶ Gibbs 1996.

⁷ *Perth Gazette* 24 December 1836.

⁸ Gibbs 1996: 423.

shore whalers camped each winter on the beaches of his home, as well as the foreign whaleships who still called into the bay for wood and water.⁹

Prior to the whaling era, Nyungar people, including the Mineng, had traditionally consumed whale meat only on an opportunistic basis when animals stranded on the beach or carcasses washed ashore. When this vast bounty of meat became available, it acted as a trigger mechanism for nearby groups to gather and feast.¹⁰ Meat was roasted or eaten raw and the people rubbed blubber on to their bodies. There was a festive air to the week-long gatherings.¹¹ Since whale was only accessible infrequently, exploitation by Europeans did not impinge upon the traditional Nyungar subsistence base. Conversely, when the shore whalers began regularly hauling carcasses back to the beach for processing, Aboriginal people flocked to the stations to spend the several months of the whaling season camped nearby to take advantage of the available meat.¹²

In contrast to so many contact situations, there are no documented accounts of violence or particular unrest associated with the operation of whaling along the south-west coast. Henry Reynolds has noted that maritime industries such as whaling were 'probably less disruptive of Aboriginal life than either mining or pastoralism' and fitted easily into the accustomed pattern of Aboriginal seasonal coastal use.¹³ The Western Australian whaling stations were small, seasonally occupied and normally required only a limited area of land for the tryworks and several other domestic and storage buildings. Although some ground might be cleared for gardens or to pasture small herds of livestock for supplies, this was generally limited to the immediate vicinity of the station and did not result in large-scale alienation of land and water sources that was the cause of so much frontier conflict. Since the whalers were only interested in the blubber and baleen, the uneconomic portions such as the meat were made available for consumption. This undoubtedly encouraged tolerant if not amicable relations between the people of the two cultures.

Although whaling did not impose upon traditional resources, Green has identified its consequences for coastal Nyungar groups.

It is important to realise that the whaling season was between May and September, the period when traditionally the Aborigines moved inland to hunt kangaroos and escape the heavy coastal rains. The whaling industry, therefore, must have had a marked effect on the economy of the Nyungar. When commercial whaling ventures failed or suffered a period of recession, the Aborigines were forced to rely upon traditional food harvests and returned inland across the areas where cattle were already replacing the kangaroo.¹⁴

As Green indicates, for local Indigenous people the advantages presented by whaling to some extent off-set the increasing alienation of traditional lands and resources, especially during the 1840s, when renewed European immigration to the west coast settlements saw increasing population growth and expansion. The regular

9. Haley 1948: 51.

10. Gibbs 1987: 47.

11. *Perth Gazette* 14 January 1837; Grey 1841: 276; Shann 1926: 96; Meagher 1974: 23.

12. eg Stokes 1846: 227.

13. Reynolds 1982: 175.

14. Green 1983: 184.

presence of Aboriginal men and women around the whaling stations, combined with local labour shortages which continued for several decades more, presented an opportunity for both groups.

Aboriginal whalers

It is difficult to know exactly when Nyungar first found their way on to the colonial whaling crews. The 1836 report of two Aboriginal women and a boy working at Doubtful Island Bay is unsubstantiated but cannot be completely discounted, as Aboriginal women had been working as crew on sealing boats elsewhere on the south coast.¹⁵ The first consistent reports of Aboriginal whalers emerged from both the south and west coasts in 1848.¹⁶

How the working relationship originally developed is unknown, although it may well have been that Aboriginal men and women had initially provided labour in return for access to whale meat. What is significant is that in the reports of the 1848 season at least some of the Aboriginal crew on the south coast were receiving payments equal to those of the non-Aboriginal crew, at a time when Aboriginal workers' wages in other colonial industries were far below those of their European counterparts. This bounty was redistributed amongst the community based on traditional norms.

One of these [men] had a full lay [payment] due to him. When they were settled with he distributed bags of flour, sugar, blankets, tobacco, knives ... amongst his friends. The black ladies now declare they will accept no husbands except they will go whaling.¹⁷

Whether or not this last threat had an effect is considered below, but suffice to say that by 1850 there were at least nine Aboriginal men employed on the Albany whaling parties.¹⁸ In that season, with the two stations requiring a total complement of between 24 and 28 men, the Aboriginal labourers comprised 30% or more of the workforce on the south coast.

On the west coast, with its higher density of European population, Aboriginal whalers received notably lower payments than the south coast crews. An 1850 report from the Bunbury station states that Jack Crow, an Aboriginal man working as an oarsman, was receiving three meals a day, a payment of 2 shillings and sixpence as soon as a whale was grounded and a further sum of 20 shillings (£1) at the termination of the season.¹⁹ This contrasts sharply with the more highly paid Aboriginal workers from Cheyne Beach, 70km east of Albany, who in the following year returned to Albany carrying lays (payments based upon a pre-determined percentage share of the profits) of £15 each.²⁰

15. *Perth Gazette* 24 December 1836; Nairn-Clarke 1842.

16. Seymour 4 September 1848; *Inquirer* 29 November 1848.

17. *Inquirer* 29 November 1848.

18. *Inquirer* 4 December 1850.

19. *Inquirer* 29 May 1850.

20. *Inquirer* 25 November 1851.

Table 1: Registered Aboriginal whalers

| Name (alternatives) | First/last known years | Stations | Position |
|---|------------------------|---|--------------|
| West Coast | | | |
| Bungor | 1858 | Pt Gregory & Castle Rock | boat hand |
| Bunyart | 1856 | Fremantle | boat hand |
| Jack Crow | 1850 | Bunbury | boat hand |
| Thomas Jincup | 1862 | Bunbury | boat hand |
| South Coast | | | |
| Bobby Candyup | 1875 | 'East coast' | - |
| Cockellet | 1863 | Barker Bay | boat hand |
| Jack Hansome (alt. Ansum, Hansom, Handson, Hanson) | 1861-1878 | Torbay, Middle Island, Doubtful Island Bay, Cheynes Beach, 'East Coast' | boat steerer |
| Jack Hardy | 1861-1877 | Barker Bay, Cheynes Beach, Doubtful Island Bay, 'East Coast' | boat hand |
| Tommy King (alt. Jimmy King) | 1867-1872 | Cheynes Beach, Cape Riche, 'East Coast' | boat hand |
| Mullipert | 1878 | 'East Coast' | boat hand |
| Billy Nadingbert | 1861 | Cheynes Beach | boat steerer |
| Nebinyan (alt. Nepenyan, Nebin, Boney, Bonaparte) | 1862-1877 | Middle Island, Doubtful Island Bay, Cheynes Beach, 'East Coast' | boat hand |
| Bobby Noneran (alt. Nornaran) | 1861-1863 | Torbay, Barker Bay | boat hand |
| Rattler Nuterwert, (alt. Rattler, Nutermut) | 1861-1875 | Torbay, Middle Island, Doubtful Island Bay, Cheynes Beach, 'East Coast' | boat hand |
| Dicky Taylor (alt. Dickey) | 1861-1875 | Torbay, Middle Island, Cheynes Beach, Doubtful Island Bay, 'East Coast' | boat hand |
| Source: <i>Western Australian Government Gazette</i> | | | |

It is difficult to determine exactly how many Aboriginal men worked in the colonial whaling industry. Between the 1850s and 1870s some whaling masters published lists of their workers in the *Western Australian Government Gazette* as a means of invoking the *Master and Servant Act* to prevent disobedience or desertion of crew. Table 1 lists the Aboriginal men employed on the south and west coasts, providing some idea of the earliest and latest known dates of crew registration, and the stations on which they were employed. It is highly probable that other Aboriginal whalers have not been identified as such because of their use of European aliases, or because they worked with whaling masters who did not register their crews.

From the historical records available, the Aboriginal whalers working on the south-west coasts all appear to have been Nyungar, with the one exception of a man

brought from Tasmania.²¹ There is no sign of the coercion, kidnapping and displacement of Aboriginal crewmembers that characterised later maritime industries such as pearling and *beche de mer*, which operated on the northern Australian coasts.²²

This was the era of *Moby Dick*, with men in rowed whaleboats pursuing their prey with hand-thrown harpoons. Table 1 shows that most Aboriginal men worked as boat hands or pulling hands, who assisted in rowing the whaleboats and in other general station duties. Billy Nadingbert and Jack Hansome are listed as boat steerers, a skilled position in a whaling crew and one that attracted a higher wage. The registrations also demonstrate that some of the Aboriginal whalers worked on the south coast for nearly twenty years, with contemporary reports indicating that many were highly respected for their skills.²³ In the off-season, Aboriginal men also manned the whaleboat that was used by the pilot service in Albany.²⁴

William Whitecar, an American whaler who published an account of a cruise along the Western Australian coast in the late 1850s, commented on some of the skills and abilities of the Aboriginal whalers he encountered.

These people are remarkable for accuracy of vision and keen scent – for the former quality they are occasionally carried out by whale ships, for the purpose of looking out from the masthead, and I have been told by those who were ship-mates with them, that they could discern a spout or sail at as great a distance with the naked eye, as a practiced hand could with a glass.²⁵

Whitecar's comment is supported by an anecdote from the Cheyne Beach shore station, referring to Aboriginal whaler Jack Hardy's ability to clearly see whales and features invisible to the other lookouts.²⁶

Nyungar men were sometimes employed on foreign whaling vessels. For instance, in 1848 an exploration party investigating around Cape Riche, to the east of Albany, encountered a Nyungar man who claimed to have been to Sydney and Hobart aboard a French whaler.²⁷ In 1890, the writer Henry Lawson passed through Albany and recorded meeting an elderly Aboriginal man, possibly the same person, who had spent two years aboard a French whaler and was fluent in the language.²⁸

The fact that pelagic whaling vessels often contained an ethnically and racially diverse crew may explain both the ready incorporation of Aboriginal men on to the colonial shore crews and the relatively equitable payment that they received. However, we know almost nothing about the life of Aboriginal whalers on the Western Australian shore stations, including whether they were housed in separate quarters from their non-Aboriginal colleagues, as was the case on eastern Australian stations such as Two-fold Bay.²⁹ One exception is a rare surviving anecdote from the 1860s, when a cook,

21. *Western Mail* 10 February 1927.

22. Green 1981: 104; Loos 1982: 126-159.

23. McKail 1927.

24. Chapman 1979: 40.

25. Whitecar 1860: 83.

26. *Western Mail* 10 February 1927.

27. *Perth Gazette* 29 July 1848.

28. Lawson 1899.

29. Davidson 1988.

newly arrived at the Cheynes Beach station, refused to serve a cup of tea to an Aboriginal whaler named Tommy King, saying that he did not sign on to 'wait on niggers'.

Tommy: 'Then put up your dukes.'

Cook: 'I'll knock you down with the fire bar. Do you think I'd dirty my hands fighting a blackfellow?'

Tommy: 'You white-livered cow! You're afraid!'

Cook: 'I'm afraid of no nigger.'

Tommy: 'Then that's right, come out and have a few rounds for fun.'

Captain Thomas, hearing strong language and high words, came on the scene.

'What's the matter, Tommy?'

'This white-livered cow refused to give me a cup of tea, me who went to a mission school, and is too cowardly to come out and have a few rounds even for fun: the cow.'

Captain Thomas then told the cook that he was engaged to cook for the men, and that he was to treat the crews, white men and natives, alike, or leave the job.³⁰

Captain John Thomas, the most highly respected of the south coast whaling masters, regularly employed Aboriginal men as crew and is responsible for many of the registrations listed in Table 1. In 1862, in the same period as the incident mentioned above, Thomas registered Nebinyan as a pulling hand to work on his late-season station at Middle Island, far eastward near the Great Australian Bight. At this time, Nebinyan would have been in his early twenties, although he may well have worked previously. Thomas' main station at Cheyne Beach was only 20km east of Two Peoples Bay and well within the boundaries of Mineng country. As the Two Peoples Bay station itself had operated for only a few years in the early 1840s, it is quite likely that Nebinyan's family had taken to spending their winters enjoying the whale meat bounty at the Cheyne Beach station, established in 1846. Employment on Thomas' crews was then an easy step for a fit young Aboriginal man.

Table 2: Nebinyan's whaling career

| Year | Station | Position | Station manager |
|---|---------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| 1862 | Middle Island | boat hand | Thomas J |
| 1863 | Doubtful Island Bay | boat hand | McKenzie H |
| 1866 | Cheyne Beach | boat hand | Thomas J |
| 1867 | Cheyne Beach | boat hand | Thomas J |
| 1871 | 'East Coast' | boat hand | Sherratt T |
| 1877 | Cheyne Beach | boat hand | Bruce JR & Bruce J |
| Source: <i>Western Australian Government Gazette</i> | | | |

Nebinyan (sometimes listed as Bonaparte or Boney presumably because of the homonym with Napoleon), worked for Captain Thomas and several other whaling sta-

³⁰. McKail 1927: 23.

tions on the south coast over the next 16 years. From the crew registrations listed in Table 2, it is difficult to know whether Nebinyan worked as a whaler only every few years, or if this is simply a reflection of an erratic reporting process. One tantalising hint is that in 1910, when Daisy Bates took Nebinyan to the Perth Carnival as part of a contingent of Nyungar singers, she commented that he had not visited Perth 'since the whaling days'.³¹ It is possible that an already skilled whaler could have worked on the west coast for a time, although no supporting evidence for his employment has been located. The last record of Nebinyan's whaling career is in 1877, the final year that Cheyne Beach operated and only two years before the traditional open-boat whaling industry ended in Western Australia. By this time, Nebinyan would have been in his late thirties, having spent most of his life either observing or participating in shore whaling.

Nebinyan's songs

It is a great loss that, unlike so many other Nyungar songs that Bates recorded in full, she only described her impression of Nebinyan's whaling cycle (see citation in the introduction). A fuller accounting of the 'mere names' and the individual steps which Nebinyan identified within the whaling process would have been an invaluable insight into Aboriginal perceptions of an early European industry. However, from Bates' description, Nebinyan's whaling song cycle appears to be an accurate depiction of mid-19th century whaling operations, intermingled with the emotions and excitement of a young man on a great adventure.

All whale hunts began with a lookout sighting whales and signalling to the seven-man whaleboats to row in pursuit. The first part of the song, speaking of Nebinyan's 'sorrow' as the shoreline recedes, hints at the tensions and fear of the chase to come, not the least because Nyungar did not traditionally use watercraft and the open ocean therefore represented an unfamiliar and potentially terrifying environment. As many other Nyungar songs speak of the anger of the seas along the south coast, to move across them was obviously a courageous act.³²

The 'stealthy gliding' towards the whale reflects the careful process of rowing with minimal noise to avoid startling the quarry into flight. The 'swift and sure harpooning' and the 'great seas' suggest the frenzy of a whale attempting to escape, with the eventual 'final surrender' as the exhausted leviathan slowed and stopped, allowing the whaleboat to draw close and deliver the mortal blow with a sharp lance. The 'triumphant' hunters would then have to attach the whale to the boat and undertake the gruelling task of towing the carcass, sometimes for miles, back to the shore for processing. Once secured, the blubber would be cut (flensed) from the carcass and thrown into large iron cauldrons (trypots) where the oil was rendered out. However, it is a particularly Nyungar point of view that Nebinyan's story ends not with an accounting of the value of the oil, but with the 'great rejoicing of the whale feast', which certainly was not part of the recognised process, at least for Europeans.

Despite being part of a European industrial activity, it would appear that Nebinyan translated his experiences aboard the whaleboats into the form of a traditional

³¹. Bates 1910.

³². Bates 1985: 337.

hunting narrative.³³ Each song in the cycle represented a different stage in the hunting process, describing in word and action the nature of the quarry and the technique of the hunter(s) in stalking and killing the prey.³⁴ In Bates' descriptions of other forms of Nyungar hunting dances, she stresses that such technical details were of considerable interest to spectators:

As no two natives hunt alike, the methods of each are noted by spectators and performers, in order that some fresh hint may be taken in the mode of ... stalking.³⁵

There was no larger quarry than a whale. Yet, because of the demise of the whaling industry, Nebinyan's songs described an experience that was no longer accessible to the younger men of the Katanning camp, leaving his feats, in effect, unchallenged.

Although Bates was often privy to men's secret and sacred ceremonies, the open location and range of audience present at Nebinyan's performance clearly indicates that this was an informal and non-sacred 'camp song'. Berndt described such open performances as 'imaginative and inventive dancing and songs composed to translate for public enjoyment, if not information, contemporary events of everyday living'.³⁶ Contact situations 'depicting and interpreting the changed circumstances in which Aborigines found themselves', were a common theme, with remembrances of cross-cultural encounters and events sometimes enduring for many decades.³⁷ Nebinyan's whaling experiences were at least 30 years in the past by the time he performed in 1908, but were obviously well known favourites of his audience. During the same visit Nebinyan also performed for Bates the 'Kooranup' (heaven) dance, which appears to have descended from Nebinyan's grandfather's observation of a drill performed by marines from Matthew Flinders' vessel when it landed near Albany in 1801. Isobel White has analysed this performance and its significance.³⁸ Nebinyan's repertoire of performances was effectively a living compendium of Mineng contact experiences with Europeans.

Although Nebinyan's composition is the most comprehensively described, there are tantalising allusions to other instances of how Nyungar transformed encounters with the whaling industry into ceremony, song and ritual. The earliest reported example is from the late 1850s, several years after a small whaling station had opened at Port Gregory, 550km north of Perth. A European traveller camped near the Murchison River, 50km north of the station, recorded a dance being performed by Aboriginal men which 'imitated the killing of a whale as witnessed at Port Gregory, with an effigy made of bushes representing the whale'.³⁹ The use of such a large prop for the hunting performance is reminiscent of an instance recorded by Ronald Berndt at the Victoria River (NT) during the 1940s, where dancers employed a four-metre long 'crocodile' of paper-bark bound with twine as part of a their dance.⁴⁰

33. Bates 1985: 324.

34. Bates 1985: 327.

35. Bates 1985: 327.

36. Berndt & Berndt 1981: 387.

37. Berndt & Berndt 1981: 386.

38. White 1980.

39. Oldfield 1865: 256.

40. Berndt & Berndt 1981: 385.

Nyilgee, an elderly woman who had grown up in the Busselton area close to where a whaling station had once operated, sang to Bates of dreams in which she balanced and danced upon the back of a whale.⁴¹ Nyilgee also stated that in the southwest there had once been a whale totem, although the last of the totem kin (*mammang borungur*) had disappeared forty years earlier (c.1870s) 'with the departure of the whales'.⁴² Of the limited information Bates was able to collect concerning this group, she noted with some interest that stranded whales could be freely eaten by the *mammang borungur*, apparently without the dire consequences normally associated with the consumption of one's totem animal. Bates also reported in her notes that the 'whale totem men (*borlooloo galn'ga*) of the nor'west' had also 'died out', but provides no further information on their location or nature.⁴³ It is likely that in this instance, 'northwest' refers to the region of Roebourne and the Dampier Archipelago, an area where Bates spent some time, which was also closely associated with early foreign and colonial whaling activity.⁴⁴

It is interesting to speculate upon the correlation between the reported time of decline of the totem groups and the known cessation of whaling activity in both regions in the late 1870s. By extension, it raises the possibility that whales may have been adopted as totem animals as a consequence of the commencement of the whaling industry and the role of the whales within the post-contact economy and life of Aboriginal groups. Similar post-contact 'dreamings' and totems, sometimes involving objects of European manufacture, have been noted elsewhere.⁴⁵

Conclusion – Nebinyan the whaler: 'contact' as opportunity

Daisy Bates saw contact between Aboriginal and European populations as an ultimately destructive process and as such contextualised the contact era songs she recorded as a form of elegy for what she felt was a dying culture. In doing so, she overlooked the capacity of the Nyungar to exploit new opportunities and experiences to enhance and transform traditional systems and personal status.

At the broadest level, whaling provided the coastal Nyungar communities with a new set of economic resources. In the earlier years of the industry Nyungar chose to forego traditional seasonal movement towards inland hunting grounds, in favour of exploiting the by-products of whaling activity. In later years, as land alienation increased and consequently destroyed traditional resources or denied Aboriginal people access, whale meat provided Nyungar with an alternative source of subsistence. However, far greater benefits were to be accrued from personal and more intimate associations with the whaling industry.

The eventual integration of Aboriginal men (and possibly women) into the whaling crews might be seen from the perspective of the European industrialists as addressing labour shortages by exploiting Indigenous people's skills. However, the reverse is to consider what it provided for the Aboriginal youths who decided to participate. There

41. Bates nd.a: 36.

42. Bates 1985: 197.

43. Bates nd.b.

44. Gara 1983.

45. Mulvaney 1989: 27-28.

has long been recognition by historians and anthropologists that in contact situations, young Aboriginal men and women were quick to grasp opportunities to exploit new skills and economic resources to gain advantage within, or in some cases to side-step, traditional hierarchies.⁴⁶ In Aboriginal societies, power was mostly held by a gerontocracy that controlled privileged ritual knowledge as well as access to wives. Young men were denied marriage partners until their twenties and the attainment of higher levels of initiation, bestowed by the senior men, while girls were betrothed to far older partners. However, in the contact situation, a command of English could create for a young person a privileged and powerful role as intermediary between colonists and elders and consequently open opportunities for personal advancement.⁴⁷ In industrial situations, European appointed leadership roles such as 'head stockman' or 'boat steerer' not only potentially placed young men in command of their traditional superiors, but were invariably reinforced by increased payments and access to consumer items. Such appointments could create alternative or parallel power structures within post-contact communities.⁴⁸

For young Aboriginal whalers, such as Nebinyan, there were several potential rewards. First was the kudos of returning to shore after a successful hunt, combined with providing the mass of whale meat that would facilitate a feast. Second, the 'lay' payment would allow the purchase and distribution of considerable largesse to the community, which as noted above resulted in women declaring that 'they will accept no husbands except they will go whaling' – an avenue potentially unavailable to men who were older and otherwise more eligible for matrimony in principle.⁴⁹ Third, as in the examples cited above, promotion to a role such as 'boat steerer' created further seniority by potentially placing the Aboriginal whaler in command over both Aboriginal and white workers. Finally, the historical record attests that success as a whaler also created an avenue for acknowledgment, respect and economic standing within the European community.

For Nebinyan, whaling provided one further opportunity. In her notes, Bates honours him as the 'chief songmaker of his tribe and [composer of] many melodies which have become established as tribal ditties'.⁵⁰ Bates would have understood the implications of granting such an accolade. The fact that Nebinyan had received songs and dances such as the Kooranup from his grandfather indicates that he had probably inherited this position.⁵¹ However, to accrue status a 'songman' not only had to be able to perform well known songs, dances and ceremonies, but also create their own series.⁵² The novel experience of whaling provided Nebinyan with material to translate into song and dance, and consequently further facilitated his rise in standing within the traditional structure of Mineng Nyungar society.

46. eg Reynolds 1982: 131; Sharp 1952.

47. Kaberry 1939: 33; Sharp 1952; Reynolds 1982: 131; Harrison 2002: 365.

48. Harrison 2003.

49. *Inquirer* 29 November 1848.

50. Bates 1985: 342.

51. Elkin 1964: 295.

52. Stubington 1979: 15.

Having spent his life as a performer and knowing how to play his audience, Nebinyan's decision to sing his whaling cycle that night was almost certainly a carefully considered choice to send several messages, not just to Daisy Bates, but to the Katanning Camp as a whole. Despite advanced age, his songs reminded them of his past prowess as a hunter and his ability to provide for his community. Framed within the processes of a post-contact industry, he recalled successful associations, negotiations and status within the European community. By gathering to listen and urge him on, the audience acknowledged his continuing mastery as a respected songman. Many decades after he last rowed in a crew and received payment for a successful whale hunt, Nebinyan's whaling experiences continued to ensure him status.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Rodney Harrison and David Roe for their insights into post-contact Aboriginal entrepreneurial activity. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, Rosita Henry for providing references and Melissa Carter for listening to various versions of the story.

References

- Bates, Daisy 1910, 'Native shepherding: an experience of the Perth Carnival', in *Western Mail*, Perth, WA, 12 February.
- 1985, *The native tribes of Western Australia*, Isobel White (ed), National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- nd.a, Manuscript notes and typescripts, Battye Library, 1212A, Box 748, Section XI, 3a.1.
- nd.b, National Library of Australia, MS 365 18/124.
- Berndt, Ronald and Catherine Berndt 1981, *The world of the first Australians*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Chapman, Barbara 1979, *The colonial eye: a topographical and artistic record of the life and landscape of Western Australia 1798-1914*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.
- Davidson, Rene (compiler) 1988, *Whalemen of Twofold Bay: historical photographs*, Rene Davidson, Eden, NSW.
- Elkin, AP 1964, *The Australian Aborigines: how to understand them*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Ferguson, William 1987, 'Mokare's Domain', in *Australians to 1788*, DJ Mulvaney and J White (eds), Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney: 120-42.
- Gara, Tom 1983, 'The Flying Foam massacre: an incident on the northwest frontier, Western Australia', in *Archaeology at ANZAAS 1983*, ed M Smith, Anthropology Department, Western Australian Museum, Perth: 86-94.
- Gibbs, Martin 1987, 'Aboriginal gatherings in southwest Western Australia: an ethno-historical study', BSc Hons Thesis, Centre for Prehistory, University of Western Australia, Perth.
- 1996, 'The historical archaeology of shore based whaling in Western Australia, 1836-1879', PhD thesis, Centre for Archaeology, University of Western Australia, Perth.

- Green, Neville 1981, 'Aborigines and white settlers in the nineteenth century', in *A new history of Western Australia*, C Stannage (ed), University of WA Press, Nedlands, Perth: 72-123.
- 1983, 'King George Sound: the friendly frontier', in *Archaeology at ANZAAS 1983*, M Smith (ed), Anthropology Department, Western Australian Museum, Perth: 68-74.
- Grey, George 1841, *Journals of expeditions of discovery in north-west and Western Australia during the years 1837, 38 and 39*, T & W Boone, London.
- Haley, Nelson 1948, *Whale hunt: the narrative of a voyage by Nelson Cole Haley, harpooner in the ship Charles W Morgan, 1849-1853*, Washburn, New York.
- Harrison, Rodney 2002, 'Archaeology and the colonial encounter: Kimberley spear-points, cultural identity and masculinity in the north of Australia', *Journal of Social Archaeology* 2(3): 352-377.
- 2003, 'Ngarranggani/ngamungamu/jalanijarra [Dream time, old time, this time]: "lost places", recursiveness and hybridity at Old Lamboo pastoral station, south-east Kimberley, Western Australia', PhD thesis, Centre for Archaeology, University of Western Australia, Perth.
- Inquirer* 1840-1855 *The Inquirer: a Western Australian journal of politics and literature*, Perth, WA.
- Kaberry, Phyllis 1939, *Aboriginal woman: sacred and profane*, George Routledge, London.
- Lawson, Henry 1899, 'The golden nineties', reproduced in *First impressions: Albany: travellers' tales 1791-1901*, compiled by D Sellick, Western Australian Museum, Perth, 1997: 189-205.
- Loos, Noel 1982, *Invasion and resistance: Aboriginal-European relations on the North Queensland frontier 1861-1897*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.
- McKail, NW 1927, 'Walks with yesterday: Albany reminiscences no 1-16', *Western Mail*, 27 January - 21 April, Perth, WA. Manuscript version with some minor additions at Battye Library accession 1393A (c 1923).
- Meagher, Sara 1974, 'The food resources of the Aborigines of the southwest of Western Australia', *Records of the Western Australian Museum* 3: 14-65.
- Mulvaney, DJ 1989, *Encounters in place: outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606-1985*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- Nairn-Clarke, W 1842, 'Remarks respecting the islands on the coast of SW Australia', *Inquirer: a Western Australian journal of politics and literature*, Francis Lochee, Perth, WA, 10 September, 8 October.
- Oldfield, Augustus 1865, 'On the Aborigines of Australia', *Transactions of the Ethnological Society*, 3, published for the Ethnological Society by John Murray, London: 215-297.
- Perth Gazette*, *Perth Gazette and Western Australian journal*, Charles Macfaull, Perth, WA.
- Reynolds, Henry 1982, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria.
- Seymour, Frederick 1848, 'Castle Rock diary of Frederick William Seymour', unpublished manuscript, Battye Library Manuscript, Accession* 2838A/2.
- Shann, EOG 1926, *Cattle chosen: the story of the first group settlement in Western Australia, 1829 to 1841*, Oxford University Press, London.

- Sharp, L 1952, 'Steel axes for stone age Australians', in *Human problems in technological change, a casebook*, EH Spicer (ed), Russell Sage Foundation, New York: 69-90.
- Stokes, John Lort 1846, *Discoveries in Australia: with an account of the coasts and rivers explored and surveyed during the voyage of HMS Beagle, in the years 1837-43*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide.
- Stubington, Jill 1979, 'North Australian Aboriginal music', in *Australian Aboriginal music*, J Isaacs (ed), Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney: 7-19.
- Western Mail 1927, *The Western Mail newspaper*, West Australian Newspapers, Perth.
- White, Isobel 1980, 'The birth and death of a ceremony', *Aboriginal History* 4: 33-42.
- Whitecar, William 1860, *Four years aboard the whaleship: embracing cruises in the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian and Antarctic Oceans in the years 1855, '6, '7, '8, '9*, J & B Lippincott & Company, Philadelphia.