

Special Section: Western Australian Aboriginal History

Kooral Dwonk-katitjiny (listening to the past): Aboriginal language, songs and history in south-western Australia

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Noongar, the Aboriginal peoples of south-west Australia, have observed and interacted with Europeans since before the dawn of the nineteenth century.¹ Historians have long relied on expedition journals and the diaries of colonists for constructing interpretations of south-west Australian frontier history.² More recent work in this area emphasises oral histories and the perspectives of contemporary Noongar.³ Focusing on the region known today as the City of Albany in Western Australia, Tiffany Shellam has briefly considered Noongar language as a means by which to determine something of the motivations of certain Aboriginal people engaged in early contact with the British and French.⁴ Clearly, any interpretation of what people may have been thinking can be only enhanced when underpinned by an understanding of how they use language. Indeed, a language such as Noongar, which carries very little evidence of the inclusion of other languages, could be considered to 'represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history'.⁵

The bulk of Noongar language material recorded in the nineteenth century comprises wordlists and place names, rather than full texts. However, the few existing records of Noongar songs composed through the nineteenth century offer unique perspectives from the 'other side' of the south-west frontier. This is particularly significant because song is generally considered central to Aboriginal historical and cultural practices across Australia⁶ and because many Aboriginal songs were composed in response to rapid changes associated with the arrival of Europeans and colonisation.⁷ However, Noongar-language songs

1 Collard and Palmer 2008.

2 Hallam 1983. See also Reynolds 1980; Green 1984.

3 Scott and Brown 2005. See also Collard and Palmer 2008; Colbung 1995.

4 Bracknell 2012.

5 Crystal 2000: 38.

6 Ellis 1985. See also Stubington 2007.

7 Donaldson 1979. See also von Brandenstein and Thomas 1974; Goddard 1934; Gummow 1994.

have been overlooked in previous studies of Aboriginal music, which have predominantly concentrated on central and northern Australia.⁸ This paper will review and examine historical literature around Noongar songs from south-west Western Australia and attempt to position song composition and performance as a primary means by which Noongar dealt with change while maintaining cultural heritage and identity.

The Noongar research context

Aboriginal people of the south-west of Western Australia use the term Noongar (Nyungar, Noongar, Nyoongar, Nyungah, Nungar, Njunga etc) to describe themselves, their language and 'as an adjective describing their country, their way of life and other features of their culture'.⁹ Noongar *boodjar*, or land, lies in the south-west corner of Western Australia, extending westward from Cape Arid National Park on the south coast, moving in a north-western arc up to just south of Geraldton on the west coast.¹⁰ This *boodjar* includes metropolitan centres known today as the City of Perth, the City of Bunbury and the City of Albany. Up to 14 distinct Noongar language dialects have been acknowledged,¹¹ although the increased mobility of Noongar in recent decades is considered by some to have resulted in a gradual linguistic homogenisation.¹² While Noongar language is presently regarded as endangered,¹³ more than 30,000 people identify themselves as belonging to the Noongar language group and some individuals and families in the south-west of Western Australia still converse and sing in Noongar language today.¹⁴

Aboriginal people in the south-west have weathered a history of dispossession, colonisation and institutionalised cultural denigration;¹⁵ hence, a sense of ownership of Noongar language is extremely important to both collective and individual Noongar identity. I am one of many people descended from Noongar, specifically the first people of Western Australia's south coast between Bremer Bay and Cape Arid. Different writers have variously named the Noongar language dialect of this area as *Koreng*, *Wudjari*,¹⁶ *Ngokgurring*¹⁷ and *Kwetjman*.¹⁸ My cultural elders refer to their specific Noongar clan as *Wirlomin*, which literally translates to 'curlew-like'.¹⁹

8 Bracknell 2013.

9 Douglas 1976: 5.

10 Collard and Bracknell 2012. See also Collard and Harben 2010.

11 Tindale 1974.

12 Dench 1995.

13 AIATSIS and FATSIL 2005.

14 SWALSC 2009.

15 Haebich 2000. See also Green 1984.

16 Tindale 1974: 142.

17 Taylor 1886: 392.

18 Douglas 1976: 6.

19 Scott and Brown 2005.

I mention this not because of a belief that mere membership of a particular 'ethnic' group necessarily grants privileged knowledge. Indeed, the historian Inga Clendinnen has argued that 'the cherished stories of a particular ethnic, religious or national group (do not) have a truth status equal or superior to post-Enlightenment historians' criteria for evidence and probability'.²⁰ Nevertheless, although not conceding any special insights on account of a person's Indigenous heritage, Clendinnen does clearly demarcate boundaries for non-Indigenous researchers investigating Indigenous history, closing off anything outside of the colonial archives at the same time as emphasising the centrality of that source as a site for contestation.

In my view the sacred world of the Australians in 1788 – the world of mind and spirit, none of it written but stored in landscape, artefact, dance and story – is closed to us outsiders.²¹

Interestingly, some information *inside* the archives concerning south-west Western Australia is naturally impenetrable to 'outsiders' by virtue of it being written in Noongar language and having emerged from Noongar oral tradition. A Noongar researcher may not have special access to the thoughts of their ancestors simply by virtue of descent, but a researcher with an understanding of Noongar language and song would certainly have the capacity to divine more evidentiary data from the archives. Carter convincingly describes how early colonial observers failed to understand the significance of Aboriginal language, song and performance.²² Contemporary scholars relying exclusively on written records, without cultural or linguistic understanding of Aboriginal subjects of those records, risk a similar fate.

Understanding songs in the archives

Literature written by early colonists and audio recordings held in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) archives from south-west Western Australia illustrate the importance of song in Noongar society as a means by which a Noongar person continuously articulates connections to country and kin.²³ In recent decades, ethnomusicologists have investigated the ways in which music is central in the construction and maintenance of individual and collective identities.²⁴ Similarly, and in research relating to the act of 'musicking',²⁵ Small notes that performer(s) and audience collectively create relationships that enable the articulation of individual and group identity/identities. Consequently, Frith explains that notions of identity are lived and enacted through music, a process that facilitates the maintenance

20 Clendinnen 2003: 40.

21 Clendinnen 2003: 5.

22 Carter 1992.

23 Bracknell 2013.

24 Frith 1996. See also Small 1998; Stokes 1994a.

25 Small 1998: 10–13.

of self and allows for group membership.²⁶ By constructing boundaries between groups, music also constructs, shapes and preserves ethnic identities.²⁷ In research pertaining to ethnicity and music in Ireland, Stokes observes that migrants assert their ethnic difference through music, which provides a link to some other country of origin.²⁸ However, Australian Indigenous music demonstrates unbroken continuity of connection to country, as Magowan and Neuenfeldt explain in their study focusing on Indigenous performance in Arnhem Land and the Torres Strait Islands, '[i]n local contexts, singers ... present identity and belonging as emergent from local and regional senses of place and personhood'.²⁹ Historical evidence demonstrates how Noongar have used song to this end in the past.³⁰ The association of song with regional Indigenous identity is also reflected in contemporary Noongar literature.³¹ Furthermore, audio recordings of Noongar singers from the 1960s and 1970s held in the AIATSIS archives serve to illustrate a significant degree of cultural continuity in what have been hostile colonial circumstances.³²

Noongar song, country and identity

Early colonial writers convey the importance of vocal music in the lives of Noongar people.³³ Some writers transcribed Noongar song lyrics,³⁴ albeit with inconsistent orthographies and questionable translations. Additionally, nineteenth-century examples of musical notation from the south-west of Western Australia exist.³⁵ These historical accounts, combined with more recent insights from Noongar people, help to form an analytical context for the place and function of traditional song in Noongar culture. Comparison and analysis of these various sources confirm that song was central to Noongar communication and expression. These accounts note that both men and women composed and performed these songs.³⁶ While some Noongar songs were performed by groups and accompanied by dance, others were sung as solo vocal pieces.³⁷ Historical and personal experiences are also documented in Noongar song, and there is evidence that highly regarded specialist composers documented information in song to ensure that it would be transmitted to future generations.³⁸ Finally,

26 Frith 1996: 110–111.

27 Stokes 1994a: 7.

28 Stokes 1994b: 114.

29 Magowan and Neuenfeldt 2005: 5.

30 Bates 1985; Green 1979.

31 Wallam, Kelly and MacDonald 2004. See also Scott and Brown 2005; Scott and Woods 2011; Scott 1999.

32 Bracknell 2013.

33 Moore 1935. See also Hassell 1975; Green 1979; Hammond 1933; King 1827.

34 Bates 1985. See also Calvert 1894.

35 See also Smyth 1878; Calvert 1894.

36 Bates 1985. See also Hassell 1975.

37 Green 1979.

38 Gibbs 2003. See also White 1980.

although some Noongar songs have travelled and been shared with or taught to other Aboriginal groups as forms of entertainment,³⁹ Noongar songs can also *belong* to certain places.⁴⁰

In 1821, while visiting the place now known as the City of Albany, Phillip Parker King witnesses and described a lengthy conversation in ‘song’ between Noongar people.⁴¹ Similarly, in the same southern location in 1831, Colonial Surgeon Isaac Scott Nind explained that ‘when in conversation, [Noongar] not unfrequently break out into a kind of chant, in which they relate such occurrences as at the moment interest them’. This implies that the Noongar language was sung as much as it was spoken, before going on to suggest some Noongar songs had arisen in an extemporaneous manner.⁴² Further north in the Swan River Colony (later to become the City of Perth), Scotsman Robert Meni Lyon characterised each Noongar individual as a ‘bard’, explaining, ‘[t]heir evenings are generally spent around their fires, singing or rather chanting their poetic compositions. I have reason to believe that their history and geography are handed down from generation to generation orally in verse’.⁴³ Taken from early colonial writings pertaining to the south-west of Western Australia, the above examples point to the existence of an Indigenous culture in which song is central to communication in everyday life.

This did not necessarily change with the arrival of colonists. In 1830, and after noticing an early example of English language song being co-opted into this communicative practice in Albany, Commander Collet Barker writes about one Noongar individual named Mokare singing in the soldiers’ quarters:

It was rather late when Talwyn [Mokare’s brother] came in and Mokare surprised me by addressing him, with ‘Where have you been a’ the [day]’, attempting at the same time the air of the Scotch song. He immediately after began telling the other a long story about Wannewar, chiefly in recitative a style they seem to adopt whenever they have anything interesting to relate.⁴⁴

This example shows Mokare using a Scottish song to make a functional statement before continuing to address his brother using ‘sung’ or ‘chanted’ Noongar language. This cross-culturally dextrous act also indicates to colonists that Mokare is familiar with *their* songs, no doubt something of importance in such a routinely musical culture.

While the previously cited historical examples involve the actions of Noongar men, evidence indicates that Noongar women also regularly sang and composed vocal music. Nind describes how ‘women more frequently sing by themselves,

39 Hassell 1975.

40 Bates 1985.

41 King 1827: 126.

42 Nind and Brown 1831: 47.

43 Lyon 1833: 52.

44 Green and Mulvaney 1992: 281.

and their songs are not always decent: they are also said by the men to be very fluent in abuse; and their oratory, as interpreted to us, was sufficiently *piquante*'.⁴⁵ However, suggesting that women's songs had far broader functions, an article in 1833 describes Noongar 'women encouraging them [the Noongar men] by their songs'.⁴⁶ Similarly, the son of an early pastoralist, Bussell, writes: 'I was intimate with the aborigines of the South-West from my earliest infancy. Black nurses sang me to sleep with Aboriginal songs when I was a child'.⁴⁷ Additionally, Bates transcribes lyrics for ancestral songs, compositions arising from dreams, and laments that were performed by women and men, which indicates that song writing was not necessarily a gender-exclusive practice.⁴⁸ While some scholars have been particularly interested in researching secret or restricted Aboriginal songs of various regions,⁴⁹ it appears that while gender-distinct or otherwise privileged south-west songs exist, a great deal of vocal music was shared openly, and a range of Noongar individuals composed, performed, taught and shared songs within their public musical traditions.

Various colonial writers have documented the dances they observed accompanying Noongar vocal music.⁵⁰ Typifying colonial attitudes of the era, the naturalist Charles Darwin describes Noongar dancers he witnessed in March 1836 on the south coast of Western Australia as 'a group of naked figures ... all moving in hideous harmony'.⁵¹ Performances of song and dance took place especially in instances when neighbouring groups visited, 'matrimonial engagements' needed organising, or decisions needed to be made about moving within 'territory'.⁵² Additionally, Hammond notes that Noongar people 'used to hold many small corroborees in the warm weather for their amusement and to pass away the evening'.⁵³ Then, as now, the word 'corroboree' refers to a public performance of song and dance and is considered to be the anglicised version of a word meaning 'dance' in Dharuk, an Aboriginal language from a region west of Sydney, New South Wales.⁵⁴

Noongar performances of this kind could be organised and performed spontaneously for colonists, sometimes with clear intents and purposes. G. F. Moore describes how in 1935, guided and accompanied by a Noongar group, he undertook a journey to look for suitable pastoral land. Upon reaching a particularly fertile area, some Noongar entertained him with a 'corrobberry':

The several figures did not differ materially from those which were familiar to us, but the words which accompanied each change contained strong allusions to passing events; so much so, that I am led to believe

45 Nind and Brown 1831: 47.

46 *Perth Gazette*, 19 October 1833: 166.

47 Bussell 1937: 5.

48 Bates 1985.

49 Berndt 1965. See also Bates 1985; Elkin 1964.

50 Hammond 1933. See also Moore 1935; Bates 1985.

51 Darwin 1845: 450–451.

52 Hammond 1933: 49.

53 Hammond 1933: 53.

54 Stubington 2007: 228.

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these ceremonials are to them as important as eras, and serve the purpose of historic records. It had been told to them, that Mr. Lennard and myself had grants here, and were likely to form establishments on our respective grounds. This was alluded to in one of their songs, and was expressed to the following effect: 'That the fires of Dyandala and Millendon (the names of our places on the Swan River) would soon be removed to Coonarup; that we should have plenty of wheat, and they would have plenty of bread'.⁵⁵

The younger Noongar, both male and female, appeared to regard this performance with some interest, but the old people, perhaps in despair over the newly developing frontier economy and social order, paid little or no attention to the performance. Nonetheless, Moore recorded an example of Noongar adapting performance traditions to suit their interests and set up terms of reciprocity in a rapidly changing context.

From his observations in the early 1900s, Nelson also describes Noongar man Fred McGill staging Aboriginal music and dance performances for the entertainment of non-Aboriginal people around the shire of Esperance, Western Australia.⁵⁶ This practice extended across the southern coast to Albany, where Noongar people also performed traditional songs in public, more than a century after colonisation. The following notice appeared in on the first page of the Advertising section in the *Albany Advertiser* in 1930:

Natives Corroboree

Natives Yorkshire Bob and Moses Wybung wish to notify their friends that a Native Corroboree will be held on Parade Street Reserve at 7pm to-night.

Work with the natives, like our white brethren, has been scarce, and we much appreciate the "Albany Advertiser" in publishing this brief note for us free of cost.

Roll up! Roll up! And bring your spare coppers and sixpences to help us.⁵⁷

Yorkshire Bob and Moses Wybung were among the knowledgeable informants Gerhard Laves spoke to in the 1930s when conducting the first study of Noongar language by a trained linguist.⁵⁸ A century after the establishment of a colony at Albany, their performance and fluency in Noongar language is substantial evidence of cultural, linguistic and musical continuity in the region despite the ongoing pressures of colonisation. Enhancing the indication of continuity in the

55 Moore 1935.

56 Nelson 1913: 9–10.

57 *Albany Advertiser*, 30 December 1930: 1.

58 Henderson et al 2006.

south-west of Western Australia, senior Noongar men in this century remember occasions during which Noongar from various regions gathered, away from the towns, to sing and dance together in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁹

While public group performances demonstrate Noongar song associated with dance, a variety of sources also indicate the existence of a parallel solo, 'ballad' tradition. A mining engineer working in the south of Western Australia in the late 1800s writes that '[a]ny remarkable circumstance which occurs, is ... perpetuated in a ballad'.⁶⁰ In an essay entitled 'The Aborigines of Western Australia', he retells Sir George Grey's account of how, when a Noongar man – Miago – departed to accompany the crew of the HMS *Beagle* on an expedition in 1838, a relative composed a song which his mother constantly sang during her son's absence.⁶¹ Moreover, according to 'Interpreter to the Natives' Francis Armstrong's account of 1836, the composition of songs was competitive amongst the different Noongar groups, 'there appears to be some rivalry, each tribe exchanging the effusions of its "balladmongers" for those of its neighbours'.⁶² Armstrong's choice of the term 'balladmonger' could be intended as derogatory, but could also speak to a tradition of Noongar narrative song poetry perpetuated by 'songmen'.⁶³

Nebinyan's songs

The ethnographer Daisy Bates describes the musical activities of one such Noongar songman from the Albany-Tambellup region named Nebinyan.⁶⁴ Nebinyan, who was reported to be over the age of 80 at the time of his death in 1910,⁶⁵ was 'chief songmaker of his tribe and [composer of] many melodies which have become established as tribal ditties'.⁶⁶ Despite such praise, Bates transcribes just a few lines of lyrics from Nebinyan's many song texts, with no accompanying musical notation and only records simple accounts of his performances.

White describes Nebinyan performing a piece for Bates in the very early twentieth century.⁶⁷ This performance had been handed down to Nebinyan from his grandfather, who was among four Noongar men who witnessed a military drill performed by soldiers under the order of British Captain Matthew Flinders of the HMS *Investigator* on 30 December 1801 when visiting the area now known today as the City of Albany. While dissimilar from most Aboriginal performance repertoire, the military drill may have been considered by these Noongar men

59 Wallam, Kelly and MacDonald 2004; McCabe 2004; Minitier and McCabe 2001, 'Interview with Lomas Roberts', Unpublished audio recording, Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project Archive, Perth.

60 Calvert 1894: 34.

61 Calvert 1894: 34.

62 Armstrong 1836.

63 Elkin 1964.

64 White 1980. See also Gibbs 2003.

65 White 1980: 38.

66 Bates 1985: 342.

67 White 1980.

as in keeping with established Australian Aboriginal traditions of sharing song and dance between visiting regional groups. As Carter explains, 'the corroboree was an Aboriginal counterpart to Flinders's military spectacle: a contact ritual, put on, not simply to entertain, but to mediate events'.⁶⁸

Accounts by both Flinders and his botanist, Robert Brown, reflect the small Noongar audience's attentiveness and interest in what must have been a strange spectacle, but one oddly congruous with their expectations of a foreign party visiting their territory. Brown states, 'The natives especially the old man attentively watch[ed] their motions & with a rude stick attempt[ed] to imitate them, not terrified by the explosions [but] much pleased with the red jackets & cross belts of the soldiers'.⁶⁹ Adding detail, Flinders recorded,

[T]he drum, but particularly the fife, excited their astonishment; but when they saw these beautiful red-and-white men, with their bright muskets, drawn up in a line, they absolutely screamed with delight; nor were their wild gestures and vociferations to be silenced, but by commencing the exercise, to which they paid the most earnest and silent attention. Several of them moved their hands, involuntarily, according to the motions; and the old man placed himself at the end of the rank, with a short staff in his hand, which he shouldered, presented, grounded, as did the marines their muskets, without, I believe, knowing what he did.⁷⁰

By referring to involuntarily movement and unconscious imitation, Flinders strips the Noongar of agency in this situation. As White notes, an impression of the drill was incorporated into Noongar performance traditions to be passed on to future generations and mark the occasion in the collective regional history. For the resulting inherited piece, Nebinyan painted his body with red ochre and white pipe-clay in the style of a military uniform to perform the song, which had survived in his family for over a century.⁷¹

White suggests the performance created by Noongar after witnessing the drill would have been considered sacred because of the widespread early-nineteenth-century Aboriginal Australian belief that the British were returned spirits of the dead, and therefore associated with the highly significant ancestors in Aboriginal creation stories.⁷² While Bates' published account also makes this tenuous connection,⁷³ the elevation of this performance to 'sacredness' is questionable. Nebinyan freely shared the performance with Bates at a public gathering, thereby signalling its un-restricted nature. Furthermore, Aboriginal belief of the British as returned spirits is not mentioned in the most detailed early colonial records from the Albany region.⁷⁴ In fact, Mokare, the Aboriginal friend of Captain Collet

68 Carter 1992: 164–165.

69 Brown et al 2001: 104.

70 Flinders 1814: 60–61.

71 White 1980.

72 White 1980.

73 Bates 1992: 5.

74 Green and Mulvaney 1992. See also Nind and Brown 1831.

Barker, at Albany in January 1830, quite clearly distinguishes between spirits of the dead and the British, while emphasising the mutual misunderstanding of spiritual concepts between Noongar and newcomers, as documented in Barker's journal:

[I e]ndeavoured to learn what their ideas were of a future state, but could not clearly make out if they believed in it. He said something about 'Quaylite',

when black fellow die, repeating in a shrill voice 'Cuylite, Cuylite, Cuylite', something in the way I have witnessed children imitate the speaking of a ghost. He laughed heartily at my being unable to understand what he meant, finishing a long attempt at explanation by saying 'Captain Twang poit' (does not hear, does not understand.) Then drawing my attention- 'Captain-Sunday-Book- paper' (alluding to our Church Service on Sundays). 'Black fellows twang poit. Now-Cuylite Cuylite-White fellow twangpoit'.⁷⁵

North of Albany, in the neighbouring Swan River Colony (known today as the City of Perth), apparent local Noongar faith in the idea that the British were returned dead relatives was shaken within a few years of initial colonisation.⁷⁶ Even at the time in which these beliefs were being observed, Sir George Grey perceptively explains:

[Noongar] never having an idea of quitting their own land, cannot imagine others doing it; — and thus when they see white people suddenly appear in their country, and settling themselves down in particular spots, they imagine they must have formed an attachment to this land in some other state of existence; and hence conclude the settlers were at one period black men, and their own relations.⁷⁷

With hindsight, the historical phenomenon of 'claiming' colonists as returned dead relatives may be viewed as a conciliatory overture and part of a sophisticated attempt to integrate newcomers into existing Noongar kin networks while simultaneously establishing reciprocal social and economic obligations.

In fact, the view that Australian Aboriginal people actually considered invaders to be 'ghosts' or 'spirits' was dismissed at the turn of the twentieth century for being both 'absurd' and 'wide of the truth'.⁷⁸ Tony Swain explains:

Certainly there may have been initial perceptual errors on both sides of the frontier but, like the European ethnoclassification of Aborigines with subhuman species, the identification of whites with deceased relatives was a *conceptual* equation.⁷⁹

75 Green and Mulvaney 1992: 250.

76 Reynolds 1982: 35–36.

77 Grey 1841: 302–303.

78 Roth 1903: 16.

79 Swain 1993: 122.

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Even considering the generosity and inclusiveness of this construct, if it did indeed exist in the region known today as Albany, the arrival of the *Investigator* did not carry the same significance as creation events from the ancestral past. The visit of Flinders and his crew certainly deserved a place in regional history, but the performance commemorating this occasion was perhaps not 'sacred' or even that exceptional, especially when evidence suggests some Noongar carried responsibilities to document a variety of their experiences in song.

In light of this, historian Martin Gibbs investigates a separate whaling song series Nebinyan performed for Bates.⁸⁰ While he inherited his grandfather's performance about the military drill, Nebinyan also draws inspiration from his own experiences of working as a whaler for 39 years, along the south coast from Albany to Esperance, and also along the west coast, as the basis of his own compositions.⁸¹ Nebinyan continues his ancestors' tradition of documenting history in performance and, in doing so, adds to the collective history of his people. Reporting on her experiences coordinating a showcase of Aboriginal performers at the Perth Carnival in 1910, Bates writes of Nebinyan:

[H]e is the custodian of all dance and other songs, of many of which he was the composer, taking the subjects from his whaling or hunting experiences... Nebinyan sang of the hunting of the tammas into the swamps, the 'Ngoongar baaming dow'uk' (natives beating their clubs to frighten the tammas into the benjer-swamp); and then the gathering and the feasting afterwards. He sang of the whales he pursued, and how they took him farther and farther away from his Kal (fire). Then the harpooning and final death of the whale. The great seas that beat upon the Leeuwin and Southern Coast were also alluded to in song and recitative. One of his whaling songs ran thus:

Gab'booroo goom'bara

Kar'rai in na jee'rrung'a

Goom'ba war'rin, goom'ba war'rin

Jee'runga goom'ba warrin

Goom'ba warrin.

(Gabbooroo goombara, big water; goomba warrin, great seas; jeerunga, going north.) The recitative or song was always commenced by Nebinyan alone, the others only joining in the chorus, so to speak, or keeping up a sort of murmuring accompaniment throughout the melody.⁸²

80 Gibbs 2003.

81 Bates 1910: 45.

82 Bates 1910: 45.

Bates' handwritten notes appear to include a few more lines from Nebinyan's whaling song cycle, particularly the phrase 'geetj booroo mamang',⁸³ referring to *geetj* (spear) and *mamang* (whale). These notes also reveal Nebinyan as the composer of a song about the sound of the drums played by a Salvation Army band, providing further evidence that Noongar singers, especially Nebinyan, incorporated a range of contemporary experiences as subject matter for new compositions. In research on Aboriginal music from other regions, Stubington explains that to accrue status as a 'songman', one must be able to perform well-known existing songs and, most importantly, also be able to create new songs.⁸⁴ Hence, the fact that Nebinyan inherited his grandfather's song leads Gibbs to suggest that Nebinyan also inherited his position as a 'songman'.⁸⁵ In light of this, Calvert and Armstrong refer to Noongar 'poets' and 'composers', accolades perhaps similar to that of 'songmen', sharing songs with neighbouring groups.⁸⁶

Travelling songs

A detailed illustration of how southern Noongar songs were shared among Noongar is provided by Ethel Hassell's account from the 1870s, published a century later. Hassell was the first British woman to live in the Jerramungup region, just east of Albany in the south-west of Western Australia, and wrote extensively on her interactions with local Noongar. Hassell describes Tooting, a Noongar 'songman' visiting Jerramungup. This 'poet' brought a 'new song and dance' to the region and taught it to local Noongar.⁸⁷ Invited to observe the first performance of the song and accompanying dance, Hassell notes that both men and women sang at the occasion and goes on to explain that this new song, generating substantial interest among local Noongar, was a comic piece about a large kangaroo attempting to find shelter from the rain under a small tree.⁸⁸ In light of this, and the other previous examples, it is clear that Noongar songs cover a wide range of topics; some relate to historical events, while others are purely for entertainment purposes.

While some songs have been shared between Noongar, other Aboriginal groups, and even with colonists, Bates writes that many 'are entirely local and are not sung outside the tribe which composed them. Most of the sea coast tribes have their own songs of the sea, which they will often sing in the quiet of their own camps'.⁸⁹ Corroborating this point, contemporary Noongar Elder Hazel Brown remembers songs for whales, dolphins, gropers and salmon associated with specific areas along the southern coast of Western Australia.⁹⁰ Daisy Bates transcribed over 60 separate Noongar song texts at beginning of the twentieth

83 Bates 1904–1912 Papers, MS 365, JS Battye Library of Western Australian History, Perth.

84 Stubington 1979: 15.

85 Gibbs 2003: 12; Elkin 1964: 295.

86 Calvert 1894: 33. See also Green 1979: 204.

87 Hassell 1975: 36–39.

88 Hassell 1975: 39–40.

89 Bates 1985: 335.

90 Scott and Brown 2005: 29–32.

century, some of which are sung by informants on field recordings from the 1960s and 1970s.⁹¹ The disparate locations in which these songs were recorded clearly show movement of songs across the south-west region. The time between Bates' transcriptions and the audio recordings taking place emphasises the continuing importance of song in Noongar communicative culture and in the maintenance of Noongar identity throughout the twentieth century and no doubt, into the future.

Conclusion

Scholars contemplating the interplay between Noongar and newcomers on the south-west Australian frontier have often relied exclusively on the written testimony of colonists to interpret past events and motivations and been unable to appreciate the utterances of the Aboriginal subjects in those documents. Noongar language and songs in the archives provide additional sources through which we may gain a deeper understanding of the early colonial period and the south-west today. Colonial observers often oversimplified Aboriginal concepts and failed to understand the significance of Aboriginal language-use and performance.⁹² Whilst historians have taken steps to engage with archival Noongar language and song as a means by which to determine something of the motivations of people in the past, some of this work would benefit from greater linguistic, cultural and social familiarity.⁹³ The involvement of contemporary Noongar in this research is valuable not just because of linguistic skill or inherited knowledge, but possibly as part of helping to maintain the transmission and consolidation of Noongar heritage. Over two centuries, a variety of dynamic composition and performance practices have mediated events and been integral to the independent preservation and transmission of history, culture and identity among Noongar in the south-west of Western Australia. Engaging with this sophisticated and enduring, though sometimes fragile, tradition may be key to generating new insights from archival records.

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