

2 *Thabi returns: the use of digital resources to recirculate and revitalise Thabi songs in the west Pilbara*

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Abstract

Thabi is a public genre of song that records events and experiences that shaped the linguistic, cultural, economic and geographical landscapes of the west Pilbara region in the twentieth century. The genre, and its equivalents in neighbouring languages, thrived in the 1930s to the 1960s in the social contexts of reserves, towns, missions, and stock and strike camps. However, today it is endangered, and there are only a few elders who recall songs. Over the last 10 years, members of a younger generation have sought to revive the tradition through preserving elders' knowledge and instigating performances. They have also been active in recovering recordings from archives and repatriating them to the contemporary family members of past singers, as well as circulating them in digital formats. The sense of urgency from younger men and women, as they begin to consider the potential consequences of losing these songs and the ability to perform them, has coincided with an explosion in connectivity through mobile devices, as more people are able to afford smartphones and tablets. This paper explores the repatriation and recirculation of digital recordings of Thabi in the west Pilbara, and the use of current archival tools and online platforms to maintain and transfer Aboriginal song heritage across generations. Specifically, it describes the early stages of a project to revitalise Thabi songs from two different perspectives: that of a musicologist; and that of a member of the Ngarluma and broader Ngarda-ngarli (west Pilbara) cultural heritage community.

Keywords: revitalisation, singing, song, Thabi, Pilbara, digital cultural heritage, repatriation

Introduction

Thabi (Ngarluma language) and its equivalents – *Jawi* (Yindjibarndi language), *Yirraru* (Ngarla language), *Dyabi* or *Jabi* (Nyamal and Kariyarra language) and *Nyirrbu* (Niyiyaparli language), henceforth *Thabi* for the purposes of this paper – is a public genre of song, sung by one or two singers without dance accompaniment. The genre is indigenous to the west Pilbara region, and is held by members of the Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi, Palyku, Martuthunira, Kurrama, Niyiyaparli, Banyjima, Yinhawangka, Kariyarra, Nyamal and Ngarla language groups – collectively referred to as Ngarda-

ngarli.¹ Anecdotal reports, legacy recordings held in the archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), the spread of the genre, and the quantity and subject matter of the songs themselves, suggest that the Thabi genre thrived from at least the 1930s to the 1960s. Elders who lived on the outskirts of the port town of Roebourne recall regular Friday night gatherings, where composers (also known as ‘fiddlers’) would sing and share newly composed songs and those they had learned from others. The genre was shared widely and heard as far north as the Kimberley. Collections by Geoffrey O’Grady (1950s), Carl von Brandenstein (1960s), Helmut Petri (1960), Alice Moyle (1968), and Michael Burns (1980s), amongst others, indicate that some 500 unique songs were in circulation in the era.

Evidently, Thabi thrived in an era of massive cultural, social, linguistic and economic change, as the pastoral and mining industries boomed in the west Pilbara in the early to mid twentieth century. This musical response to social change is reminiscent of the way in which the Walakhanda Wangga repertory and the Djanba genre were created in Port Keats (Wadeye) in the 1950s and 60s, respectively, to accommodate the social changes brought by the new mission (Marett 2007, Barwick 2011). It also brings to mind a cultural boom – or ‘efflorescence’ – that occurred in the Kimberley in the 1940s (Redmond & Skyring 2010) and 1970s (Akerman 1979), and in the broader Aboriginal art scene from the 1970s (Altman 2005), as Indigenous peoples created innovative forms of artistic expression to adapt to changing economic and social environments. By the 1990s, however, possibly due to social changes that limited opportunities to practise and the availability of new entertainment technologies, Thabi had become endangered, with only a few elders recalling songs and performing rarely.

Interest in the Thabi legacy has increased over the last 10 years, via the circulation of archival recordings and the initiatives of emerging leaders, who have sought to revive and revitalise Thabi practice. These include one of the present authors, Dowding (through research and development), and his nephew Patrick Churnside (through research and performance). As a result, the song genre is making something of a comeback. Both emerging elders and younger people are utilising legacy recordings of Thabi to learn songs. Basil Snook, son of Nyamal singer Topsy Fazeldene, for example, has learnt and begun to perform a song about the Marble Bar to Port Hedland train line, recorded by Fazeldene with linguist Carl von Brandenstein in 1964 (Jebb and Marmion 2015). In the stage production *Hip bone sticking out*, Patrick Churnside sang one of his great-grandfather’s Thabi songs, using legacy recordings to support his mastery of the tradition, and most recently performed the show *Tjaabi*, made up entirely of Thabi songs.²

The revitalisation of Thabi today is happening in a new period characterised by rapid environmental change and easy access to digital technologies that enable the recording, repatriation and circulation of song performances. There has also been an explosion in connectivity via devices such as phones, tablets, televisions and car radios. Ngarda-ngarli peoples are rapidly connecting to a range of online environments through mobile platforms, and there is an increasingly robust mobile infrastructure in both smaller communities, including Roebourne, Wickham, Wakathurni, Bellary, and Mingullathardoo, as well as the larger regional centres, such as Karratha and Port Hedland. In many of these Aboriginal communities there is a younger generation of people who use digital technologies daily. Their usage extends to accessing and sharing recordings of Thabi and other songs.

There is growing interest in the ways in which singers and song communities use and respond to new technologies. Most recently, for example, Barwick (2017:169-170) has shown how the dissemination and use of song recordings in Wadeye has:

¹ A map indicating the locations of Pilbara language groups and families referred to in this chapter can be viewed on the website of the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, ‘Pilbara Language Families’: <http://ap-southeast-2.static.modjula.com/wangkamaya/1Iwn9hqSzqG.jpg> [accessed 7 March 2017].

² ‘Songs from the Pilbara – a living culture, a spectacle under the stars’, <http://yijalayala.bighart.org/tjaabi/> [accessed 5 March 2017].

allowed a democratization of the means of making music, even a dispersal of the original social power and authority of the mob system, and possibly, a deprofessionalization of music making within the community. At the same time the funeral songs contribute to a strengthening of family and internal clan networks, and to a strengthening of relationships with institutions and outsiders who control the means of production of the songs.

The research project in which the authors are currently engaged seeks to examine the ways in which singers, songs, and song communities have responded to the environmental changes of their times, both in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s and today. The present chapter provides some details of the groundwork for this study. The chapter is in two parts. The first gives a brief introduction to the Thabi genre. In the second, Dowding contributes a first-person account of his experience as a member of the cultural heritage community, his discovery of Thabi recordings in a national archive, and his experience of returning these to his communities of elders and peers in a digital format.

Brief introduction to Thabi (Treloyn)

The Thabi genre (and its equivalents held by the various Ngarda-ngarli groups) has the following basic characteristics, which distinguish it from other song types performed in the west Pilbara and more widely:

- Performances are public, and there are no restrictions, whether by age or gender, on who may sing or hear songs.
- Songs are performed by a solo singer, or sometimes two singers.
- Singers accompany themselves with a rasp-like instrument that produces a scraping sound or, less frequently, with paired boomerangs.
- Songs are not accompanied by dance.
- The conventions of compositional structure are comparatively open. Songs may be through-composed, strophic, or cyclical; melodic, text and rhythmic patterns may be cyclical or non-repeating, coterminous or non-coterminous; and texts may be set isorhythmically or not.
- Songs may refer to contemporary events and experiences, as well as to ancestral beings and places.

These characteristics distinguish Thabi from other genres performed and held by Ngarda-ngarli peoples, such as Gunangu and Barlgabi. These are sometimes restricted by gender and age (or life stage); are performed by groups of singers; are accompanied only by paired boomerangs (with the occasional addition of clapping and lap-slapping); are accompanied by dance; and typically exhibit a Central Australian style that features cyclically repeating non-coterminous melodic, rhythmic, and textual units, and the isorhythmic performance of text. While these group genres are performed by both Ngarda-ngarli and Marlba (the collective term for peoples of the east Pilbara), our preliminary data suggest that Thabi and its equivalents are composed and performed for the most part only by Ngarda-ngarli.

From the collections of Brandenstein, O'Grady and others, and also from stories and explanations provided by elders, it is clear that Thabi songs proliferated among Ngarda-ngarli in the 1950s and 60s and were also shared to the north. For example, in 1967 Brandenstein recorded Ngarluma singer Robert Churnside (Dowding's maternal grandfather) singing the Thabi song 'Goodbye Mandabullangana'³, attributed to the Kariyarra composer Maabin (Brandenstein and Thomas 1974:13, 64). Both Petri (in 1960) and Moyle (in 1968) recorded this same song at La Grange mission (now Bidyadanga), on the edge of the Kimberley, sung by a Karajarri man, Bronco (Moyle 1978:15). On Moyle's expedition in 1968, she recorded at least four different Thabi songs (as 'Dyabi') at La

³ We use here the names that Brandenstein assigned to songs in *Taruru* (1974).

Grange: ‘Goodbye Mandabulu [Mandabullangana]’ and ‘From this side of De Grey River’, sung by Karajarri singer Tommy Dodd; and ‘Aeroplane’, ‘Verandah’ and ‘The windmill at Wallanie plains’ by Bronco⁴, Possum, and Andy. Apart from ‘Goodbye Mandabulu’, we are yet to investigate the provenance of the La Grange songs. However, notes on Moyle’s La Grange recordings suggest that a substantial amount of text may be in Nyangumarta, which is spoken to the north of the Ngardangarli languages, along with Karajarri and Mangala.⁵

Moyle also recorded Dyabi further north in Broome (west Kimberley), including two songs sung by Yindjibarndi (Ngarda-ngarli) singer Henry Edwards: ‘Aeroplane or Spitfire’ and ‘Pearling lugger’, said to be in Karajarri, along with songs by two more singers, at least one of whom, Tommy Edgar, was Karajarri.⁶ The other singer is listed as ‘Paddy Rowe Djaguwan’, who, according to Moyle’s notes, is also Karajarri. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether this is Nyikina elder Paddy Roe, or Yawuru elder Paddy Djiagween (elsewhere recorded by Moyle as ‘Paddy Djaguwin’) or a different singer.⁷ If the singer is either Roe or Djiagween, this is the first recorded instance of a Thabi song sung by a speaker from the west Kimberley. (Yawuru and Nyikina are both west Kimberley languages.)

While the uptake of Thabi by singers in the Kimberley is yet to be explored, the memories of Ngarinyin elders provide substantial detail of the spread and performance of Thabi in the northern Kimberley. Ngarinyin and Wunambal song custodian Matthew Dembal Martin recalls that, when he was a teenager in the 1960s, old singers from the Pilbara working as stockmen sang ‘Jabi Jabi’ (as Thabi is known amongst elder Ngarinyin), at both the Derby leprosarium known as Bungarun and at Kimberley Downs Station in Ngarinyin country.⁸ A Karajarri man at Bungarun, known as Old Man Sugar, sang Jabi Jabi and accompanied himself with a tin, scraping it with a stick. While Jabi Jabi is not sung by Ngarinyin today, Martin relates how Ngarinyin man Campbell Allenbrae (born 1922, now deceased) brought Jabi Jabi from Anna Plains Station (Nyangumarta and Karajarri country) into the Kimberley, singing it as far north as Karunjie Station.

There are two major print collections of Thabi texts: Brandenstein and Thomas (1974), which includes transcriptions and translations of 65 Thabi songs; and Brown, Geytenbeek and Murray (2003), which does the same for 68 Yirraru songs. This selection from the broader repertoire provides an indication of the wide range of topics that song texts in the genre address. In Brandenstein and Thomas, these range over:

- descriptions of natural phenomena and animals; e.g. ‘Waves’⁹, in Ngarluma, by Dougall-Kudjardikudjardi (1974:10), and ‘Stonefish’, in Nyiyaparli, by Piniingu (1974:28)
- scenes from the pastoral and mining industries; e.g. ‘Cattle loading’, in Nyiyaparli, by Gordon Mackay-Wama (1974:14), and ‘Gold-fever’, in Yindjibarndi, by Cobbin Dale (1974:5)
- the police; e.g. ‘Policeman’, in Nyiyaparli and Nyamal, by Piniingu 1974:26)
- gambling; e.g. ‘Card money’, in Nyiyaparli, by Piniingu (1974:27)
- horse racing; e.g. ‘To the Roebourne races’, in Yindjibarndi, by Ned Tjinabii (1974:39)

⁴ Bronco is also listed as the singer of ‘Goodbye Mandabulu’ in the recording made by Petri at La Grange in 1960.

⁵ This note, entitled ‘Source 220 Djabi songs recorded at La Grange, 1968’, is held at AIATSIS (Moyle_A07-002673_supplementary2.pdf).

⁶ Tommy Edgar, a Karajarri elder who lived in Broome and had close social and ceremonial ties to Yawuru (Glowczeski 1998:208), was recorded by Alice Moyle singing ‘Shell divers’, composed by Sandy Wigarangu in Karajarri (Moyle_A07-002678_supplementary2.pdf, p.12).

⁷ Glowczeski (1998:208) identifies Paddy Djiagween as one of the singers recorded by Moyle, but it is unclear if this applies to the Dyabi in the Moyle collection.

⁸ Personal communication, Matthew Dembal Martin, March 2017.

⁹ We use here the names of both individuals and songs as they are transcribed by Brandenstein (1974).

- transport; e.g. ‘The truck’, in Nyiyaparli, by Dingo George (1974:5)
- the impact of development on the landscape; e.g. ‘Development’, in Kariyarra and Ngarluma, by Tjabi (1974:34).

There are also references to historical events, such as the bombing of Broome in World War 2 (‘Air raid on Broome’, in Kariyarra, by Billy Thomas-Wombi, 1974:29).

The books by Brandenstein (1974) and Brown et al. (2003) are both furnished with glosses and translations, as well as detailed contextual notes on the songs. There are also references to Thabi in an honours thesis by Anthony McCardell (1970), which provides an analysis of a selection of the recordings in the Brandenstein collection. This became a source of the musical notes and transcriptions in *Taruru* (Brandenstein and Thomas 1974). Alice Moyle (1977, 1978) also provides brief descriptions of Thabi, in addition to unpublished textual analyses that include transcriptions by Nora Kerr, held by AIATSIS.¹⁰

In spite of this comparatively ample body of earlier work, a substantial amount of analysis is still needed to create an accurate picture of the place of Thabi in the stylistic landscape of Australian Aboriginal music. Given the genre’s proximity to the Western Desert, we might expect Thabi to display the typical characteristics of the Central Australian style, such as cyclical texts performed isorhythmically, and cyclical melodies with which the text has an independent relationship. But in fact the majority of texts are distinctly non-cyclical in structure. A preliminary examination of Thabi suggests that, as in the Wangga genre from further north, text and melody are for the most part coterminous and strophic, with clear alignment of melodic and textual boundaries. However, where the text displays a cyclical repetition pattern, typically at the beginning of a song performance, there may be some independence between melodic and textual units, as in Central Australian style song. Preliminary observations of melodic form suggest that melody may also operate as an identifiable signature of the owner and composer of a song (see also McCardell 1970:40), which is again reminiscent of Wangga.

The use of a rasp idiophone that the singer holds and scrapes with a smaller stick to accompany their singing is unique in Australia. The instrument – referred to as a *mirrimba* or *walbarra* in Ngarluma – occurs in a number of forms. Moyle provides a photo of an elder singer cradling a notched stick along his inner forearm, with a small stick held against it (Moyle 1977:5), suggesting that the instrument may be purpose-built for the genre. However, both Moyle and elders today tell how a spear-thrower with notches carved into it and scraped with a stick was also commonly used. Many variants are described in the notes accompanying the archival recordings, including the use of a comb, a metal file, serrated knives, and tobacco tins.

Innovation and individual creativity in the composition and performance of Thabi are evidenced by variations in instrument use as well as in text, rhythm, melody, semantic content, and performance practice. In performances of the train song (see Jebb and Marmion 2015), the tempo of the rasp accompaniment (in Fazeldene’s performance) and of the vocal rhythm and metre (in Piniingu¹¹ Donald Norman’s unaccompanied performance) features a distinctive slowing down as the train finally comes to a stop.¹² Gordon Lockyer, recorded by Michael Burns, accompanies himself with a guitar.¹³ Tunes are equally innovative, featuring descending patterns as well as melodic contours that have what McCardell (1970:40) described as a ‘central climax’. Thomas suggests that some tunes are ‘slightly reminiscent’ of European folksong and one tune has a ‘Spanish-style’ melody (Thomas, in Brandenstein and Thomas 1974, unpag.).

Based on preliminary descriptions of the musical system as well as studies that consider the use of musical systems to respond to social change, we hypothesise that clues as to how composers used Thabi to manage the changing social environments of the 1930s to the 1960s can be found in these instances of musical innovation and creativity. In the current project we will draw on the historical

¹⁰ Supplementary print material held with the audio collection at AIATSIS:

MOYLE_A07-002673_supplementary2.pdf, MOYLE_A07-002678_supplementary1.pdf, MOYLE_A07-002678_supplementary2.pdf.

¹¹ Elsewhere transcribed by Brandenstein as Piniingu.

¹² Carl von Brandenstein C05-0017578: 00:13:19 – c.00:24:00.

¹³ Michael Burns M01-016161: 00:25:38 – c.00:27:00.

practices recorded in the collections of Brandenstein, O'Grady, Moyle and others, and the living knowledge of elders today, to identify and describe how Thabi composers and singers used music throughout that period. Our aim will be to understand the resilience of the Thabi musical system itself, and how this musical system played a role in the resilience of song custodians.

Today, new technologies, such as computers, media libraries, CDs, USB sticks, mobile phones, and so on, are also part of the environment in which Thabi is being practised and revitalised. In the second part of this chapter, Dowding gives an account of the role played by new technologies in the revitalisation of Thabi.

Thabi returns (Dowding)

I am an Aboriginal man with connections to the Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi communities in the Pilbara region. I follow the Ngarluma family line, as does my mother. In 2006 I completed a Bachelor of Arts (History/Anthropology) at Sydney University, and my family asked me to return to our community in the Pilbara to work in our newly-formed Native Title body, the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation.¹⁴ This body was formed by the Ngarluma community to hold the rights and interests granted by their Native Title Determination (February 2005). Our small corporation had humble beginnings: our directors, who were elected representatives of the Ngarluma community, convened meetings in borrowed rooms and worked hard to manage the affairs of a Native Title organisation. By the end of 2005 the corporation had rented an office in the main street of Roebourne and grown in its capabilities, but it desperately needed staff to administer and run the office. I obliged, and left Sydney to work in the Pilbara.

My official job title at the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation (NAC) was Culture and Communications Officer, but my roles varied from day to day. Our language group was a relatively early beneficiary of the Native Title determination, but was slower to develop than the corporation itself. There were few models to emulate. Most days the corporation office was frequented by Ngarluma community members and elders, who enjoyed conversations about their culture and their language. But there were few resources about culture and language in our premises, apart from the extensive federal court documents compiled for Native Title proceedings. So I began to engage in the creation of digital material to fulfil this need. We began working with the local language centre to make Ngarluma language-learning films. We also developed wordlists for early childhood learning and began to create maps of Country.¹⁵

I began searching the internet for any mention of the Ngarluma language and stumbled across a reference to my maternal grandfather, Bob Churnside (who had passed away in August 1977), in a text called *Taruru: Aboriginal song poetry of the Pilbara* (Brandenstein and Thomas 1974). I bought a copy of the text on amazon.com, and, when it arrived, I showed it to elders, who talked about my grandfather as a great singer of Thabi songs. I knew we had ceremonial songs that were talked about amongst initiated men, but I had only a shallow understanding of the Thabi tradition. As I continued to ask questions about these songs, however, I began to realise that this non-ceremonial, or public, genre of music was highly endangered and gradually slipping away from our community. The

¹⁴ When a determination recognising native title is made, the *Native Title Act* 1993 of the Commonwealth of Australia requires that native title holders (traditional owners whose native title interests in their country have been recognised by the determination) must establish a corporation to represent them. These organisations are known as Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs), but become Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBCs) when they are registered with the National Native Title Tribunal (NNTT). While RNTBC is the correct name for these organisations, they are most commonly known as PBCs.

¹⁵ Relevant publications include the *Ngarluma-English dictionary* (Port Hedland: Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, 2008); *We are the Ngarluma people* (DVD) (Roebourne: Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation, 2008); *Learning Ngarluma kinship names* (DVD) (Roebourne: Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation, 2008).

Ngarluma community did not perform this music regularly, and forums for the performance of Thabi had shrunk over the last few years to very limited public displays.

The initial discovery of the *Taruru* text led me to a search of the online catalogue of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) archive in Canberra. The archive holds legacy recordings noted in Brandenstein's text, and I found many references to my maternal grandfather. In 2006, while in Canberra for a conference, I decided on the spur of the moment to go to the archive and see if I could obtain a copy of the recordings I had discovered. Once inside, I explained my family connection to Brandenstein's field tapes to the archive staff. In particular, I spoke about my grandfather and my desire to hear his recordings. The archive staff efficiently helped me to find a variety of resources that related to Roebourne and Thabi. The Brandenstein audio collection was of most interest to me, as the audition sheets, prepared by Grace Koch, included many entries that referred to my grandfather singing Thabi and, in some cases, explaining the songs in English.

It was an emotional experience, as I sat in the AIATSIS listening room, to hear my grandfather's voice and listen to the Thabi songs he composed. I was filled with pride and I marvelled at his creativity. His explanations of the songs in English touched me profoundly, as I spoke no Ngarluma at this point. I remember feeling that my grandfather had specifically left these recordings for me and the rest of our family to hold, as a legacy of his creative work, and as a vivid auditory display of his love for the cultural traditions of which he was so obviously a master. I spent hours listening through the collection, matching the recordings to the audition sheets, making notes on which tapes I would request. When I had finished, I asked the archivist for copies of the specific tapes, and was told I could not have copies until certain permissions were granted.

At that moment it felt insulting to be told I would not be able to take a copy of those recordings without someone else's consent. In hindsight, I can see the predicament of the archive, and as my experience in this field grows, I too face the complex challenges of individuals wanting access to and copies of audio and video that I record. But at the time I felt deflated and angry at being unable to have copies of my grandfather's songs immediately, particularly after the feelings I had experienced while listening to the tapes. I did a lot of explaining to the archival staff about my connection to the person on the tapes, and they seemed to be sympathetic. Nonetheless, they maintained that there were protocols around access, that this collection contained culturally restricted information, and that there were multiple language groups and individuals singing on the tape. This meant that there were multiple layers of bureaucratic processes that needed to be dealt with before copies could be created.

Determined not to go home empty handed, I asked to see a manager and continued to plead for a copy of the specific tapes that featured my grandfather's songs. The manager had obviously had this experience before. Although he had some discretionary powers to allow community members to access recordings, he was still hesitant. There were additional complexities with this collection in particular. Brandenstein had died a number of years earlier and left the decisions about access to a family member, who for some reason, I understood, rarely granted it. My argument was then to assert cultural rights to these recordings, by virtue of being an heir (as the maternal grandson of Bob Churnside). However, I could see the difficult position of the manager. The manager suggested that a community copy of the material could be provided if I had written permission from the Native Title group. Fortunately, the NAC was able to confirm my identity and gave this permission for me to obtain copies of the tapes. All it took was a phone call and a fax to gain the required authority from the NAC chief executive officer. The archive then agreed to make community access copies, to which I, as a member of the community, would also have access. As it would take a week, I had to be content with the knowledge that the recordings would make it back to the Pilbara by the time I came home from the conference. On my return, a box of recordings on compact discs arrived at the NAC office in Roebourne, and I began to listen – with elders, who were immensely enthusiastic about their contents.

I think very fondly of this time. It seems to me, on reflection, that it marked a turning point – one that had a real and direct impact on the cultural continuity of our small language community. Ngarluma is a very endangered language, with less than 20 fluent speakers. The recordings created enthusiasm for many initiatives, in particular the recirculation of legacy recordings to encourage

revitalisation of our language. I have always harboured hopes that the recordings would also activate a rejuvenation of the songs themselves, but this did not happen immediately. It came about through a slower process that evolved over a number of years of listening and talking about the recordings. What was occurring in the initial stages was a sense of reclamation, for things that were lost and had now found their way back home.

Over the years from 2006 to the present I observed elders listening to these recordings many times. The intimacy of their encounters with the songs varied greatly, but on the occasions that I watched their reactions I was always struck by the evocative power that the songs seemed to have for them. My own experiences were similar. Many times I would be listening attentively to the words of the song, but also to the very fine detail captured by the microphone, such as the murmur of a child in the company of the singer, the accidental rattle of an object near the performer, the barking of a dog, the sound of a performer shuffling uncomfortably while being interviewed. All these small details of the recordings gave colour and a vividness to the image of my grandfather that was conjured in my mind. Subtle noises on the recordings – not just the songs – created a sense of context in my imagination. They filled in details around the song and the stories. The context would then be mulled over with my own family: we would ask ‘Who is that kid in the background?’ or ‘He must be sitting on the veranda’. There is power in this process. These legacy recordings became more than just the audio files of songs; they promoted social relatedness and connectedness across time. In my case, the recordings gave a feeling of connectedness to an elder I never met; a relatedness conjured internally to support the intergenerational transfer of knowledge from my grandfather to me.

As the initial euphoria of listening to the recordings wore off, the mechanics of community access to the tapes began to raise challenges. We encountered particular problems with the format and content of the recordings. For instance, the CDs contained hour-long files, each of which included the contents of a complete side of a source tape. To facilitate playback, I transferred these files into iTunes, still as hour-long tracks. The elders would ask me to play just the Ngarluma songs (as distinct from the songs in other languages that were also contained in the file). The first problem was that we were unable to locate the Ngarluma content from the file names. These followed a standard archive convention (e.g. C02-CVB-FT00045¹⁶) that meant very little to us. So, in order to find the particular Ngarluma content, we had to scan through the long audio files, trying to locate the singers or speakers of Ngarluma. The audition sheets provided some help, as they listed the time codes and typically the singer of each song item. This allowed us to skip to items that matched the elders’ listening preferences. Elders would always sit and wait patiently for me to scroll through the hour-long tracks to the right spots in the recordings. Usually the time code on the archives’ digitised copy was somewhat different to the time noted on the audition sheets, so there was always a delay in finding specific singers. This was always the major request, and it required visually scanning the audition sheets to find the name and timecode, finding the correct track, then navigating to the timecode, and finally locating the exact spot where the singer we were seeking started their performance.

The group of listeners expanded as community interest increased, and this is when the format of the files became increasingly problematic. Some of the files contained restricted men’s business, either in the form of songs or conversations, mixed in with public material. In a few cases the audition sheets carried warnings of restricted content. But in other cases the recordist was not aware that the material was restricted or sensitive, so the audition sheets did not indicate when and where this content occurred. In one particular instance, very early after receiving the CDs, I sat with a group of elders listening. In a small, personal group it was easy to respond quickly to elders’ comments about sensitive material and to skip the content promptly if required. On this particular day a group of elders came through the office door to join the listening session. As the singer in the recording was belting out many Thabi songs in a row, I went out of the room to make cups of tea for the new arrivals and left the recording running. When I returned, restricted material was being played, and

¹⁶ The naming convention translates to ‘Collection 02, Carl Von Brandenstein, Field Tape Number 45’.

the ladies present were very unhappy. The men were too, and asked for the recording to be stopped. This abruptly ended the listening for the day.

Instances like this served to create a degree of community apprehension around listening to the archival recordings, and the setback occurred largely as a result of my inexperience, combined with my enthusiasm for sharing the material and for making the archival file formats accessible. Soon after this incident, elders made it clear that we would need a process for sorting and separating restricted materials from those that were appropriate for a general audience, such as Thabi. We agreed that the senior men would sit and listen to each individual CD, to create a record of which ones contained restricted information. Once a CD was marked 'restricted', it was physically put into a box and held under lock and key in my office.

It was not just ceremonial information that we classified as restricted, but also stories recorded about controversial past events. In one instance we were listening to a recording of elders telling stories, and the two senior men present looked sternly at one another, one of them shaking his head. When I asked them what was being discussed, they said that the recording needed to be locked up, and no one was to listen: the elder on the recording was discussing the exploits of *mabarngarda* ('witchdoctors'). They had realised that some of these recordings contained highly sensitive information.

Once these initial audition sessions were completed and the restricted data separated, the road became clearer for others to listen again. I used the application Audacity to 'cut' the hour-long files into smaller tracks and remove restricted data from the longer file. I also went through and cut single tracks for each song item. To these I gave preliminary names, such as '1_BOBCHURNSIDE_OLDCROW_K', indicating the position of the song item in the recording, the name of the singer, a rough title for the song, and a code indicating what language the song was being sung in. In this case, it was the first song item on the CD, and it was Bob Churnside singing a song about an old crow in the Kariyarra language (K).

I recall that much of my time in the office in this period was spent playing these tracks and creating CDs for people to play in their cars and at home. Once it became known in the Ngarluma community that we had a small collection of Thabi songs, it quickly sparked a lot of interest. Many different elders came to sit and listen, to laugh, to sing or to just enjoy the sound of their own elders' voices. It struck me often that these recordings were worth more than gold to the current generation of elders. They seemed to leave the present troubles of the town and find themselves back in an era that they described as a time of great cultural strength, when their own elders held definitive cultural knowledge and were never afraid to perform it.

As the Thabi iTunes collection grew, a small group of younger people (mainly late 20s up to mid 30s) came to get copies of songs. We began to receive requests for iPods to be filled and USB sticks to be loaded. Only from elders did I get requests to make CDs – the younger generation had already moved on to new media forms. I found that splitting the audio in the larger hour-long files into smaller track files made it more appealing to listeners. This packaged the material in the familiar formats of .mp3 and .wav that were compatible with the devices they used on a day-to-day basis. These devices displayed the titles for each track, indicating the song and the artist's name, which enabled the legacy recordings to be more easily located among the other genres, such as pop, country and rap music. In these early years people began to listen to Thabi songs in many places outside of the corporation offices. In private homes, USB sticks loaded with songs were plugged into the DVD player or the side of the TV, bringing Thabi into the lounge room. In cars, USB sticks were plugged directly into the car radio. Track names displayed on the console allowed easy selection. Numerous times a car full of young men would drive past and I would hear Thabi songs being played.

At this time, I had become a virtual custodian of the tapes, which led to the playing out of a small power dynamic. The computer with the iTunes catalogue was mine, it was located in my office, and I used it daily for all my other administrative tasks. If people wanted copies of recordings, they had to ask me. Initially this situation made sense to me, as we were housed within the walls of the NAC, and one of my designated roles was to generate cultural resources for our community. But the perception emerging in the community – that I had power over the catalogue of songs – could not be denied. It became clear that I needed to ensure the community viewed the corporation as the place

that held and distributed these songs, not me as an individual. Later I bought a public computer and set it up in the foyer, so that people became free of the obligation to ask me for copies.

Today there exists a small group of younger Ngarluma men (including myself) and women who retain their interest in Thabi, and they have all had access to the original song catalogue we created at the NAC. There were some other recordings of Ngarluma songs circulating before the development of the NAC digital collection, but these were usually on cassette tape, created by individuals in the community who used tape recorders for the purpose. It seems to me that the digital format helped the proliferation of the Thabi songs. Moreover, the splitting of long archival recordings into separate tracks marked a new way for community members to access, navigate and select recordings. The ability to pick a specific composer and then download their songs onto a USB stick emerged as a vital part of the revitalisation of some composers' work. The examples are not numerous, but one particular young Ngarluma man, my nephew Patrick Churnside, has taken it upon himself to learn and sing his own great-grandfather's songs. He still performs today, in a variety of spaces and for wide variety of audiences; for example, during cultural tours for tourists, welcome to Country ceremonies, cultural awareness training sessions for mining and industry, NAIDOC week celebrations, various opening events for buildings and galleries, and a play that celebrates a Ngarluma Thabi composer. While this is a very positive result, founded on the community's possession of Thabi recordings, it is just one contribution to the objective of strengthening and revitalising the tradition in the broader Ngarluma community. How are we proceed from here in order to realise this aspiration?

As we begin 2017, there has been a major shift in my own thinking about the potential of the technology. In this chapter I have recalled my past experiences with the community's adaptation to new technologies: from reel-to-reel tape to cassette, then to digital platforms such as iTunes, and more recently to more mobile devices like iPods and USBs. The major innovation in recent years has been the smartphone that incorporates a music player (such as the iTunes application on iPhone). But even this is starting to seem out-dated, as services like Apple Beats and Spotify change the landscape of music listening.

To overcome the hurdles we have had in the past, we are beginning to explore a new format for streaming archival material. The Thabi genre seems to be suited to the new streaming platforms, as the songs are public and short in length (rarely longer than 2–3 minutes long), and the identification of composers and singers makes the process for sorting the songs much like the one used in mainstream music libraries hosted on platforms like Spotify. But the major consideration is that there exists a community of younger Ngarluma men and women who are already engaged with such streaming platforms. These are the same sorts of community members who drove the initial move from tape to USB and iPods, and today they drive the demand for the newer types of digital platform. The challenge is again laid before our community to ensure that the latest technology does not alter our traditions and our cultural values beyond recognition but rather enhances and strengthens them. Any innovations must support the resolve of our elders to achieve the revitalisation of Thabi.

Conclusion

There is an established body of research on the ways in which singers and song communities in Australia have used their musical systems to adapt to changing social environments. Our own preliminary research suggests that singers of Thabi in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s used that genre in the same way, as a means of responding to a range of novel environmental factors in the west Pilbara, including war, working conditions, new modes of transport, new settlements and new industries. Our ongoing research seeks to examine how the descendants of these singers are, today, revitalising the Thabi genre through the recirculation of their forebears' songs in order to adapt and respond to the new environments – social and digital – of the twenty-first century.

The case study provided by Dowding illuminates the process that communities go through when they access audio archives of their cultural heritage. It demonstrates the power of auditioning

recordings for elders and younger generations alike, and the intimacy of the intergenerational knowledge transmission that this listening stimulates. It also shows how digital formats can be edited, and enhanced with metadata, to support cultural sensitivities and at the same time facilitate access to the material on personal mobile devices, car radios and in homes. In addition, Dowding's account makes clear how much care must be taken when auditioning unedited archival recordings. While the jarring experience of hearing sensitive material in an hour-long file led to community apprehension and a temporary halt to listening, responsive editing and the development of metadata enabled elders to restrict access to some material and users to select and listen to public materials via their personal devices. This made ongoing access possible and supported the beginnings of a revitalisation of the tradition. The intention now is to develop ways to feed the new metadata back to the archive, for ongoing use by Ngarluma and the broader audiences of Thabi.

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