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Tabi tools for change: approaching the solo public songs of the west Pilbara

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Abstract

Colonisation, industrialisation and new policies have brought massive changes to the lives and languages of Indigenous peoples in the west Pilbara region through the twentieth century. Solo-performed songs, composed and performed by Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi, Palyku, Martuthunira, Kurrama, Nyiyaparli, Banyjima, Yinhawangka, Kariyarra, Nyamal and Ngarla speakers, provide a window into these histories of change, upheaval and innovation. This paper presents a preliminary account of the thematic content and musical style of Tabi songs that were composed and/or performed by Robert Churnside (Dowding's maternal grandfather) in the 1950s and 60s. Transcribed by linguist Carl Georg von Brandenstein (Brandenstein 1975), the song lyrics composed by Churnside and his associates record experiences of the emerging industries, new forms of transportation and travel, infrastructure and people in his and neighbouring countries, and present an intriguing insight into a region and period of musical innovation. The paper considers the ways in which Tabi songs, and legacy records of them, are used as tools to manage environmental change.

Introduction

The west Pilbara region of Western Australia has a rich heritage of solo (e.g., Tabi, Jawi, Barrgabi and Yirraru) and group-performed (e.g., Kunangu and Jarraru) public song traditions composed and performed by Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi, Palyku, Martuthunira, Kurrama, Nyiyaparli, Banyjima, Yinhawangka, Kariyarra, Nyamal and Ngarla peoples. These songs record events and responses to events that shaped the past and present-day linguistic, cultural, economic and geographical landscapes of a region that, since exponential industrial growth from the 1950s onwards, has become known as 'the engine room of the [Australian] nation' (Walker et al 2012). While these public song traditions thrived from the 1940s to the 1970s in the social contexts of reserves, towns, missions and stock camps, today they are critically endangered like many of the Indigenous performance traditions of Australia and the world (see Marett 2010, ICTM-ANZ 2011). The loss of these songs has significant

ramifications for local, regional, national and world societies.

Fortunately numerous collections created in the 1950s–60s record performances of west Pilbara public songs and are today held in archives. A number of studies provide insight into how Indigenous communities and individuals adapted to new economies and government policies in the region (e.g., Wilson 1980, Edmunds 1989, 2013, Holcombe 2010). We have little understanding however of how people experienced these events in their day-to-day lives. The public song genres, legacy records of them, and contemporary knowledge and practice, provide an insight these histories.

'Hearing histories of the western Pilbara: an interdisciplinary study of Indigenous songs composed in the Pilbara region of Western Australia in the twentieth century and technologies to sustain them into the future' is a three-year project that has received funding from the Australian Research Council to investigate and

record knowledge attached to the public songs of the west Pilbara via both legacy and new recordings. Drawing on a project team with expertise in ethnomusicology (Treloyn), linguistics (Nicholas Thieberger), history (Jebb), anthropology and digital humanities (Dowding and Kimberly Christen), and incorporating Indigenous and international research perspectives, the project will also develop and test new technologies for the management of research data about these traditions in order to maximize the benefits of research for understanding the significance of songs for society and for the sustainment of the songs of the west Pilbara and other regions into the future.

This paper will first summarise the subject matter of song texts that were composed and/or performed by Ngarluma composer and singer Robert Churnside (Dowding's maternal grandfather) in the 1950s and 60s. The second part of this paper will present preliminary musical analyses of the solo genre *Tabi* to begin to understand how composers and singers of the day used musical innovation and creativity as tools to manage and negotiate their changing cultural, linguistic and economic environments. The final part of the paper will show how members of the Ngarluma community today are using Churnside's song recordings and negotiating a new digital environment to learn and strengthen the *Tabi* tradition.

Hearing Histories in *Tabi*: the subject matter of song texts

Colonisation, industrialisation and new policies in the 1950s to 1970s, brought massive changes to the lives of Indigenous peoples in the western Pilbara. People from multiple language groups were pushed or moved towards centres such as Roebourne (Edmunds 1989, 2013). As a result, linguistic diversity and other cultural practices were negatively impacted. However, while some practices were oppressed, others, including public song genres, thrived. A substantial body of legacy recordings from the west Pilbara collected in this period exists in the collections of Carl Georg von Brandenstein (1960s), Geoffrey and Alix O'Grady (1950s), and Michael Burns (1980s), with smaller samples by Joyce Hudson (1959-65), Helmut Petri (1960), Ian McConochie (1961), Kevin McKelson (1965-1972), Alice Moyle (1963-1964), and Peter Dalton (1960s). Anecdotal evidence and the abundance of legacy recordings, most held in the archives of Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), indicate that public genres of the west Pilbara enjoyed a period of creative 'efflorescence'

similar to that observed elsewhere in the same period in the northeast Kimberley (Redmond & Skyring 2010) and the Daly-Fitzmaurice (Barwick 2011) as Indigenous peoples created and innovated musical traditions to adapt to changing social environments.

Oral histories embedded in recorded song lyrics can provide valuable insight into how people managed these new social, economic and cultural environments. A selection of published song texts transcribed and translated by von Brandenstein (Brandenstein & Thomas 1974), include copious literal and figurative references to emerging industries, new forms of transportation and associated infrastructure, to peoples from elsewhere in Australia and Asia, and to other nationally significant events such as air surveillance and raids during World War Two (see similar events in 100 Yirraru texts translated by Brown and Geytenbeek (2003)).

A preliminary overview of the song material included in a selection of songs from just one of the available collections—that of von Brandenstein—indicates the rich thematic and historical content, and linguistic diversity of public song practice in centres such as Port Hedland and Roebourne in the mid twentieth century. Von Brandenstein's 1974 text contains four songs that were composed by Churnside, covering topics such as a thoroughbred horse race ('Racehorses', von Brandenstein 1975, p2), a fire ('What Albert Did', *Ibid.*, p2), the place Narnuna ('Mount Satirist Station', p1), and a Kurrugu bird ('Bird's Call', p2). Other songs performed by Churnside, but composed by others refer to such subjects as a pilot ('White Engine Against Black Magic' in Nyamal, composed by Lando-Naddi (d. 1934), p12), aeroplanes (e.g., 'Aeroplane, Miracle in the Sky' in Nyamal, composed by Lando-Naddi (d. 1934), p10), an air raid during World War 2 ('Air Raid on Broome' in Kariyarra composed by Billy Thomas-Wombi, p29), and various places, people, and animals (such as 'Crows' in Kariyarra, composed by Tjarndai, p38).

As well as recording key facts about historical events associated with these places, transportation, and people, composers also recorded their personal experiences and responses to these happenings. For example, von Brandenstein's translation suggests that in 'Racehorses' the composer Churnside describes not only the lining up of racehorses but also the sensation of his own heart beating in anticipation as one of the riders (see p56). In Thomas-Wombi's song about the air raid, von

Brandenstein's translation refers to a feeling of fear at seeing seven aeroplanes approach (see p74).

Hearing Histories in Tabi: musical style

As well as recording historical events through the construction of texts, public song genres in the west Pilbara have been used as tools to actively manage and adapt to the changing social, economic and cultural environment through intellectual artistic practice. It is widely established that musical innovation and creativity are tools to manage and negotiate personal and group identity in a changing world (e.g., Nettl 1983, Sutton 1987, Barwick 2011). We have some understanding of the role of musical practice and innovation in managing social change elsewhere in Australia. Barwick (2011), for example, shows that in the mission community of Port Keats (now Wadeye) in the Daly-Fitzmaurice in the 1960s, clans created a new variegated song genre as a strategy to negotiate the new cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of their community (Ibid, 335). Marett (2007) shows how songmen in the community of Wadeye deliberately simplified their musical system in order to support and encourage participation from a more culturally and linguistically diverse body of dancers. Treloyn (2014) considers the extent to which variegation of musical form permeates the transmission of song repertoires and styles between the Daly region and the Kimberley, supporting the efflorescence of trade and industry that connected the regions from the 1940s (or earlier) onwards.

Insofar as peoples of the west Pilbara experienced a turbulent period of social, linguistic and economic and industrial upheaval through twentieth century, we might expect that song traditions of the time may similarly display evidence of innovation to accommodate environmental change. In order to approach the study of such artistry, the musical style of the song genre must first be considered, along with its relationship to that of neighbouring genres. There is a long tradition of analysis of the musical traditions of Australia. From the sweeping comparative analysis of northern Australian styles undertaken by Alice Moyle in the 1970s (Moyle 1974) to more recent comparisons of Kimberley and Daly-Fitzmaurice genres (e.g., Treloyn 2006, Barwick 2011, Treloyn 2014) a picture of the musical landscape of Australia has emerged wherein the characteristically isorhythmic and cyclical forms of Central Australia give way to increasingly more strophic, through-composed

and rhythmically modal compositions and musical systems in the far north of the continent. While numerous studies have addressed the Desert regions and various parts of northern Australia, to date there has been negligible attention to the Pilbara region. With the exception of preliminary observations of Tabi (also known as Dyabi, Jabi, Thaabi) by Alice Moyle (1974) and Antony McCardell (1970), little is known of the musical style of the Pilbara region. The second part of this paper will present preliminary musical analyses of the Ngarluma solo genre Tabi.

Text

In classifying the style of song texts in Aboriginal Australian song it is usual to look to patterns of repetition. Central Australian song genres tend to display a relatively short structure, where the text comprises one or more distinct text-lines in the form A, AB, AAB, AABB, for example. These texts are performed cyclically throughout the performance of the song: a text with the form A, for example, would be repeated AAAAA and so on; a text with the form AABB, would be performed AABBAABBAABB and so on. By contrast, song genres from northern Australia, such as Wangga and Lirrga from the Daly region, while sometimes containing cyclical elements, are fundamentally non-cyclical, taking more of a verse-structure such as AAAAAB [break] AAAAAB [break], for example, where the cycling of the text is interrupted by both a new segment of text (B), and an instrumental break (see Barwick 2011). On first glance, it appears that Tabi songs, like Wangga, feature fundamentally non-cyclical, verse-like song text structures. 'The Crows', for example, the Tabi in Kariyarra performed by Churnside attributed to the composer Tjarndai, comprises six distinct text-lines as set out in Figure 1. Churnside performs these in the sequence: ABABCDCDCDEF.

ngalataianna pannina kudii ngaunguru (A)
lurking sat bone seeing-for
they lurk and sit till they see a bone

pilanmannaba takanna (B)
snatched it-which got it
What they can get, they grab

palakuru pala kardi?iriba pannigu (C)
they one-way sit
They hang around, eyeing something off

Tinatingala juurra-mangulaba mirrunggu (D)
Feet-hopping-in noon-at-when beak
Hopping about in the sun

palakuru pala waarnarraba warngga “kaa” (E)
they crowing-is voice “kaa”
Conversing: “Kaa kaa kaa.”

warnda murrumurru tanbatirriiba wurdangga (F)
tree branch thick-getting-is top-on
Then it's up to the back of a branch. One after another-
what a crowd.

Figure 1. Text-lines in 'The Crows' (composed by Tjarn dai, performed by Robert Churnside, 1 September 1964). Transcription, translation and gloss of 'The Crows' by von Brandenstein (von Brandenstein & Thomas 1974: 38, 80).

The Nyamal Train Song (see Jebb & Marmion in this volume), performed by Topsy Fazeldene, exemplifies a longer, more complex structure, comprising multiple verses that convey the journey of the train, each containing substantial unique material and a degree of reiterative repetition (see Jebb 2014). While a comprehensive survey of all Tabi in the archival collection will need to be conducted, it appears that the genre as a whole exhibits a non-cyclical, verse-like structure, distinguished from the dominant cyclical style prevalent through the adjacent Western Desert region (see McCardell 1970) and to the east into Central Australia (see Treloyn 2006).

Rhythmic setting of text

When approaching the style of song texts in Aboriginal Australian song, it is also usual to look to the rhythmic setting of the texts. In the first instance, the most distinctive element of Tabi is the common use of a rasp or scraper (*mirrimba* in Ngarluma) with which the

singer accompanies him or herself. This may be a spear-thrower, which has a serrated edge, a comb, or tobacco tin, or a similar scraping device.

Looking more closely, it is widely documented that songs from Central Australian and into the Western Desert are performed isorhythmically. That is, every repetition of a song text has an identical duration and identical rhythmic setting (with the exception of melisma). This distinguishes Central Australian style songs (from the Western Desert) from genres further to the north such as Wangga, which are not isorhythmic: the rhythmic setting of a text line varies in some cases from iteration to iteration. While a larger sample will need to be examined, it appears that in Tabi, where song texts do include an element of repeated or cyclical text, it is performed isorhythmically.

Melodic setting of text

When approaching the style of song texts in Aboriginal Australian song, it is also usual to look at their melodic setting. Substantial analysis describes the cyclical nature of melody in Central Australia and the Western Desert, with each song performance comprising a descent from a high pitch to a low pitch, sometimes terraced and/or repeated at the same or a lower octave. What distinguishes Central Australian songs from northern styles, however is the relationship between text and melody. In Central Australian style, the text and melodic cycles are somewhat independent and non-coterminous: each melodic cycle may be performed with a different segment of text, and vice versa. By contrast, in northern Australia, text and melody is coterminous and strophic, with each verse clearly aligned with a complete melodic segment. A preliminary examination of Tabi suggests that, like Wangga, 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. In Churnside's performance of 'The Crows' for example (see Figure 1), new melodic cycles commence at 'ngalataianna pannina (They lurk and sit)' (A text-line), at 'kudii ngaunguru (till they see a bone)' (mid way through A text line) and 'inatingala (Hopping about...)'.

While a substantial amount of analysis is yet to be done to create an accurate picture of the place of Tabi and its

cognates in the stylistic landscape of Australian Aboriginal music, the brief glance provided here reveals some intriguing clues. We might expect Tabi, as proximate as it is to the Western Desert to display the pervading characteristics of the Central Australian style: cyclical texts, performed isorhythmically, and cyclical melodies, with which text has an independent relationship. However, while elements of rhythmic setting and melodic setting gesture towards this regional style (see also McCardell 1970, 40), the texts are distinctly non-cyclical in structure. Coupled with this, the genre features the distinctive rasp accompaniment, unique to this genre.

Digital Environments of Tabi

The snapshot of Tabi song texts and how they are performed provided in the preceding sections of this paper, begin to paint a picture of the ways in which Tabi were used as tools to manage the changing cultural, linguistic and industrial environment of the Pilbara in the twentieth century. Today, the families of the Tabi composers and singers are negotiating a new wave of environmental change: changes in the technological environment brought by an explosion in connectivity via mobile devices, as more people are able to afford smartphones and tablets to explore the internet. Aboriginal people are rapidly connecting to a range of online environments through mobile platforms and through increasingly robust mobile infrastructure in both smaller communities (including Roebourne, Wickham, Wakathurni, Bellary, and Mingullatharndoom) as well as and the larger regional centres such as Karratha and Port Hedland. Within many of these Aboriginal communities there exists a younger generation of people who use digital technologies daily. This usage extends to accessing and sharing recordings of Tabi and other songs.

The use of digital technologies to support the learning of songs is one echoed elsewhere in Australia and beyond. There are numerous anecdotal and documented cases of songs being revived and styles revitalized through access to legacy recordings (e.g., Marett & Barwick 2003, Treloyn, Charles & Nulgit 2013). In the Pilbara, access to the recordings of von Brandenstein has led to the emergence of a new singer of the Tabi tradition who, learning from the recordings, performed

at the 2014 NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) celebrations in Roebourne.

However, as has been pointed out elsewhere (see Wild 1992, Knopoff 2004, Treloyn & Emberly 2013) the use of recordings to transmit knowledge about song and song performance gives rise to a raft of issues stemming from: the inherent tendency of recordings to distort or freeze otherwise fluid musical and linguistic traditions; and, the cultural value attached to these time capsule-like records from the past, which are easily treated as authoritative versions. As a tradition such as Tabi becomes more endangered, and recordings are increasingly used as the primary source for learning, the risk of recordings to freeze is, arguably, increased. Insofar as digital technologies are increasingly used to support learning, recordings seemingly support a potentially dramatic departure from the modes of face-to-face intergenerational knowledge transmission with which Tabi has been sustained through the twentieth century and earlier.

Anecdotally, there is a generational gap in the west Pilbara, between ‘digital natives’ (those people born during the rise of digital mobile technologies) and ‘digital immigrants’ (those born before the advent of digital mobile technologies).¹ Based on his life and work as a member of the west Pilbara community, Dowding has observed that digital natives within Pilbara communities are becoming increasingly hungry for digital access to cultural content. However, the Senior Elders, who hold the cultural knowledge, are unfamiliar with the new technologies and, as a result, shy away from utilising them for the teaching of cultural traditions. Given the risks of new technologies, which increase not only the aforementioned risk of distortion and freezing, but also increase the risk of losing control over access and management due to the easy replication and sharing of digital objects, the concerns of these Elders is well-founded. This new technological environment, and the range of benefits, risks, and concerns that circulate in it have guided the aims of a ‘Hearing Histories of the Western Pilbara’ (DP150100094) that seeks to create an online resource that will provide sustainable access to Tabi knowledge, histories, and artistic expressions.

Conclusion

Existing studies provide a picture of the rich musical heritage of Australia, how the changing environment of

¹ See Prensky (2001).

Australia since the beginning of colonisation has impacted Indigenous artistic practices and how composers, singers and their communities have used artistic practices to manage social, cultural, linguistic, economic and environmental change. While numerous studies have addressed the Desert regions and various parts of northern Australia, to date there has been little attention to the Pilbara region – a region that has undergone perhaps the most rapid industrial change in Australia's history. The Tabi genre, recorded in substantial legacy collections and still remembered by Elders today, provides a unique insight into the histories of the west Pilbara. Through a preliminary summary of the thematic content of songs composed and/or performed by Ngarluma songman Robert Churnside, musical analysis of the Tabi style, and consideration of the new digital environments in which Tabi songs are transmitted and learnt, this paper has made a preliminary step towards understanding how composers and singers of the past and present use Tabi songs as tools to negotiate their changing linguistic, cultural, social, economic and technological environments.

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