Dancing with the Devil (Spirit): How Audiovisual Collections Reveal and Enact Social and Political Agency in Dance and Song (A Case from the Kimberley)

Abstract: Legacy data pertaining to song and dance has complex and immeasurable value to Indigenous communities across several domains. Over the past decade, projects of repatriation and return have thus flourished both within Australia and globally, as has scholarship addressing the processes, methods and results of such initiatives (Barwick, L. J., Green, and P. Vaarzon-Morel, eds. 2020. Archival Returns. Sydney and Honolulu: Sydney University Press and University of Hawai’i Press; Gunderson, F., R. C. Lancefield, and B. Woods. 2019. The Oxford Handbook of Musical Repatriation. New York: Oxford University Press). Uses of legacy recordings by Ngarinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal practitioners of the dance-song genre known as Junba from the Kimberley region of north-west Australia for the purposes of revitalising the tradition with repertoire and increasing participation have been previously discussed (e.g., Treloyn, S., M. D. Martin, and R. G. Charles. 2019. “Moving Songs: Repatriating Audiovisual Recordings of Aboriginal Australian Dance and Song (Kimberley Region, Northwestern Australia).” In The Oxford Handbook of Musical Repatriation, edited by F. Gunderson, R. C. Lancefield, and B. Woods, 591–606. New York: Oxford University Press). This paper, co-authored by two cultural custodians of practice and repertories of the dance-song genre known as Junba and an outsider ethnomusicologist, considers social and political agency through performance in relation to legacy recordings. The paper finds that legacy recordings of song and dance practice can throw light on political and social agendas of past performances, while creative reuse of frameworks and materials derived from legacy recordings of song and dance can support contemporary practitioners to express their own social and political agency today. The paper also suggests that attention to the social and political agency of cultural custodians is an important part of the work of archives, particularly where barriers to accessing legacy recordings remain.

Keywords: legacy data, ethnomusicology, music endangerment, Australian Indigenous music, access and archives

1 Introduction

Over the past decade scholarship on the topic of repatriation of music recordings has flourished, both within Australia and globally (e.g., Barwick, Green, and Vaarzon-Morel 2020; Gunderson, Lancefield, and Woods 2019), Legacy data pertaining to song and dance has complex and immeasurable value across several domains to many Indigenous people and societies. These domains include but are not limited to: education institutions and educational resources; land claims; establishing regional archives, museums and knowledge centres; and revitalisation and reclamation of song and associated creative expression such as language, dance, song and visual arts. Projects of repatriation, return, access and dissemination may be complicated by a range of factors (see Treloyn and Emberly 2013; also Treloyn and Dowding 2017), but they may also render multiple and multilayered benefits for individuals, groups and regions. Due to the roles that musical and linguistic diversity play for humanity and global societies (Evans 2010; Marett 2010), this benefit applies now and into the future.

Legacy recordings of historical practice and of discussions about historical practice serve a particular role in
community-led projects to recover repertory and elements of musical and dance style. Uses of legacy recordings of song and dance for these purposes by Ngarrinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal practitioners of the dance-song genre known as Junba in the Kimberley region of northern Australia have been previously discussed (e.g., Treloyn, Martin, and Charles 2019). This paper, co-authored by two cultural custodians of practices and repertoires of the dance-song genre known as Junba (Rona Goonginda Charles and Pete Myadooma O’Connor) with ethnomusicologist (Treloyn), considers social and political agency through performance in relation to legacy recordings. Legacy recordings of discussions of past song and dance practice can throw light on political and social agendas of past performances, while creative reuse of frameworks and materials derived from legacy recordings of song and dance can support contemporary practitioners to express their own social and political agency today.

The paper addresses creative practice associated with a Junba dance-song that is attributed to the late Worrorra composer Watty (Watson) Ngerdu. Referred to variously as the “Winjama,” “Biyoogoyoogoo,” “Captain Cook,” or “Schooner,” Junba, this dance-song (hereafter referred to in this paper as “Winjama”) was likely composed in the late 1950s or early 1960s at Old Mowanjum, a Presbyterian mission community established in 1956 for Ngarrinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal peoples who had been displaced by campaigns to depopulate the region of Indigenous peoples, the pastoral (cattle industry) and subsequent mission projects. The earliest record of the dance-song can be found in the collections of anthropologist Peter Lucich, which contain an audio recording of “Watty” (presumably Watty Ngerdu) singing the song (Lucich 1963a, “Song Cycles from Mowanjum”), as well as a photograph of a totem (a large object carried by dancers that celebrates ancestors and Country) that was likely used in the dance (Lucich 1963b, “Photo Number 22350”).

In 2019 the authors with further custodians of Junba practice accessed the records in the Lucich collections detailed above. Neither record is accompanied by detailed contextual information. However, identification was made possible by material in another collection recorded in 2002 by the Ngarrinyin Elder (and expert on Junba histories and practice) the late Mr. Paddy Neowarra (pronounced Nya-warra) with Treloyn, then a doctoral student. During four sessions Mr. Neowarra gave detailed and additive accounts of the Winjama Junba, including elaborations on the meaning of the words and aspects of melody and rhythm of a particular Junba song, associated dance totem and choreography, as well as his own recollection of dancing it at Old Mowanjum alongside family members (Neowarra and Treloyn 2002a, “MD200203”, and 2002b, “MD200206”; Neowarra et al. 2002a, “DAT200215”, and 2002b, “DAT200216”). Drawing upon Mr Neowarra’s sessions, alongside the audio recording and photograph in Lucich’s collections, Charles, O’Connor and other cultural custodians relaunched the Winjama Junba in the Mowanjum Community in 2021.

Mr. Ngerdu’s Winjama Junba, as told by Mr. Neowarra, tells a complex story that realigns historical events and figures. According to Mr. Neowarra, the dance and song refers to the arrival of British “Captain Cook” on the territories of Indigenous peoples on the Australian continent: arriving by boat on the sea, an agula (a type of spirit frequently referenced in the Kimberley that acts as a trickster and sometimes referred to as a “devil” spirit) pulled Cook to shore using a buyu (a cord with radar-like and magnetic properties that is used by agula spirits). In elaborating on the story of the dance-song, Mr. Neowarra, who himself had danced the totem at Old Mowanjum, also explained that Cook, pulled by the buyu, entered Indigenous land without permission, killed Yagan (a Waadju Noongar man, son of Midgegooroo) and his people, to take over the territory.

Mr. Neowarra’s account of the Winjama Junba is complex on several grounds. Lieutenant James Cook (known as “Captain Cook”), referenced by Mr. Neowarra, arrived in the Eora Nation (at a place now known as Port Jackson) in 1770 whereupon he claimed the eastern part of the continent for the British Crown. Cook never physically landed on the western coast of Australia. The western coast was claimed for Britain in 1829 by Captain Charles Fremantle, preceded by the arrival of Major Edmund Lockyer and Captain James Stirling.

This fact noted, the spectre of Cook reached across the continent well before the 1960s when the Winjama Junba was performed: as O’Connor has elsewhere noted, “word [about Cook’s arrival] travelled really fast through Australia” (O’Connor, cited in Parke 2021). The use of the figure of Cook in Indigenous arts and politics as a symbol of colonialism, British law and the phenomenon of the presence of foreign people and laws of British origin on Indigenous land has been elsewhere considered, in relation to the Kimberley and broader northern Australia (Kolig 1979, 2017; Rose 2010; Tucker 1994). Anthropologist Erich Kolig observed that by the 1970s the appearance of the historical figure of “Captain Cook” in social and political discourse in the west Kimberley was not unusual as “an
attempt to fuse the European-dominated political reality with a more traditional comprehension of the world and its causalities” (Kolig 2017, 403) and as a symbol of colonialism in enacting economic and political agencies (Kolig 1979). Cook has been used as a symbol in these contexts and others with great nuance and as incisive critique of historical and contemporary Australian society.

Notably, Cook has been cited by another Junba jumanjuman (composer), Alec Wirrijangu (Ngarinyin), in a Junba repertory that was likely first performed at Munja government mission to audiences of Indigenous, non-Indigenous and possibly United States armed forces service people stationed in the region during World War 2. Last performed in the 1990s, the Junba song-series known as “the Captain Cook Junba” explicitly references the cruel violence of early settlers of the region, with dancers appearing with a buyu (rope) around their necks, representing the way in which Indigenous peoples were chained and made to walk vast distances in various campaigns of displacement. As anthropologist Anthony Redmond notes, this Junba and particularly the reference to Cook “served as a covert instrument for political action against the very pastoralists who had inducted men like Wirrijangu into mostly unpaid labour (Redmond 2008, 79–84).

Paradoxically, despite this rich history of social critique through reference to Cook in social and creative discourse for many decades, author Charles points out that in classrooms in the Kimberley through to at least the 1980s, Cook was valorised as a hero and discoverer of the continent: we were taught “a really good story about Captain Cook; how he was a highest explorer all over the world.” The absurdity of this version of history—which denied the presence of so many First Nations peoples prior to Cook’s arrival, and valorised colonisation in the face of injustice and suffering—is highlighted in Wirrijangu’s Junba in the way that the actions of Cook are presented as a comedy (see Redmond 2008).

A further complexity lies in the reference to the history of colonisation and the figure of Yagan in Mr. Neowarra’s account. The Noongar Country of Yagan is many nations and some 3000 km distant from the west Kimberley region where Mr. Ngerdu composed the dance-song. Mr. Neowarra’s account may reflect a widespread but disproven view that Noongar peoples were almost eliminated in the early days of colonisation. As Noongar ethnomusicologist Clint Bracknell has noted, over 30,000 people identify as Noongar today, making it one of the largest Aboriginal cultural groups in Western Australia today (Bracknell 2020).

There is no known historical link between the dance-song and Yagan (known however to have been a singer; see Bracknell 2014, 98) or Noongar people or place. Indeed, in one session Mr. Neowarra referenced Sydney, rather than Perth, as the site of the story attached to the song. The reference to Yagan in Mr. Neowarra’s account however is not surprising. It is common for Junba dance-songs to include accounts of people, places and historical events that occurred far away from the location where the work was composed and through a local Kimberley lens. For example, beyond Yagan and Cook in Mr. Ngerdu’s song, Wirrijangu’s Junba also references both Cook and General Douglas Macarthur of the United States armed forces (Redmond 2008). Multiple repertories include dance-songs about Cyclone Tracy, which in 1974 decimated the city of Darwin (far beyond the eastern limits of the Kimberley). Another Junba dance-song describes soldiers marching with rifles while grenades explode in the Sino-Japanese War (Lommel 1997). O’Connor notes of the reference to Yagan in Mr. Neowarra’s account of the Winjama Junba, “This was a big event that occurred down south, and just like when we have big events up here in the Kimberley that mark the first times of colonisation, we have a dance for it. Junba was like television for our Old People.” Pertinent to Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba, Yagan is widely acknowledged as a symbol of Indigenous resistance through much of Australia, akin to Jandamarra, a resistance hero from the Bunuba Nation in the Kimberley (see Green 1984). Yagan was murdered by settlers in 1833 and his head was transported to England, later repatriated to Noongar people and Country in 1997 (Fforde 2002). As a symbol of resistance for people through Western Australia and elsewhere, it is not surprising that Yagan would be referenced in Mr. Ngerdu’s song or in Mr. Neowarra’s elaboration on the meaning of a song, particularly in the context of 1960s west Kimberley where there was an incipient movement for Indigenous peoples’ rights.

This said, it is important to note that there is currently no record known to the authors in which the composer Mr. Ngerdu himself elaborates on the meaning of the Winjama Junba. It is possible that Mr. Neowarra’s elaboration provided in 2002, based on his own recollections of practice and life at Old Mowanjum, reflects an interpretation added to the dance-song when it was performed in a particular period of social and historical resistance. Charles notes that the words of the song may contain references to places in the vicinity of Munja in Ngarinyin Country, from which the sea and passing vessels could be seen. That the words of a Junba song are multivalent and interpretation dynamic is typical, however. It speaks to the role of Junba dance-song and records of Junba in recording and enacting creative agencies of peoples in different parts of the Kimberley and in different periods of time.
This paper is focused on the local meaning of Mr. Ngerdu’s dance-song in Old Mowanjum in the 1960s and early 1970s, as revealed by Mr. Neowarra’s account, and in Mowanjum today, as presented by Charles and O’Connor. The authors do not seek to trace historical links between Mr. Ngerdu’s dance-song and Yagan or Noongar dance-song practices, nor do we claim that any such links exist. Such a study would be appropriately undertaken by or with Noongar dance-song custodians and cultural stewards. Rather, following an account of Mr. Neowarra’s documentation of the dance-song in the first part of the paper, the second part of the paper attends to the histories of the Kimberley that are revealed by his discussions of Mr. Ngerdu’s dance-song, especially Mr. Neowarra’s repeated observation that the song, dance and meaning are “a bit different.” Through this lens, the paper seeks to understand how and in what form creative practitioners of the past used Junba to enact social and political agencies in the Kimberley.

The third part of the paper describes and discusses a 2021 presentation of Mr. Ngerdu’s dance-song at the Mowanjum Festival, an annual celebration of cultural practice for the people of Mowanjum, linked communities and non-Indigenous visitors. Accounts by Charles and O’Connor, two current practitioners of Junba who drew upon Mr. Neowarra’s records and those of Mr. Ngerdu in Lucich’s collections to relaunch the Junba after a likely pause of 50–60 years, consider the new choreography of the dance in relation to contemporary social and political contexts. Describing a “dance with the devil” of the continuing forces and impacts of colonisation, and a “dance with the agula (spirit)” using the sometimes malevolent and sometimes beneficent buya rope, these accounts provide insight into the ways that access to legacy records support the enactment of creative agencies by practitioners today.

In the final part and conclusion to the paper, we consider different forms of this dance with the devil: the fraught process of attempting to discover and access archival records; and the no less fraught processes of collaboration between cultural custodians and outsider researchers in projects of recording, repatriation, revitalisation and documentation, of which this co-authored paper is one instance. In doing so, we suggest that attention to the social and political agency of cultural custodians is an important part of the work of archives, particularly where barriers to accessing legacy recordings remain.

2 “It’s a Bit Different This One”: Paddy Neowarra’s Discussion of Watty Ngerdu’s Junba Dance-Song

In February 2002, while documenting the shape and design of various objects used for dance in Junba, Ngarinyin elder Paddy Neowarra recalled a song as follows:

This other one, Captain Cook one, that schooner, he a bit different from this lot. He like this [draws] … We used to dance this one now, schooner. This one here [sings] biyoogooyoogoo warndi Winjama riga warndi biyoogooyoogoo. (Neowarra, in Neowarra and Treloyn 2002a, “MD200203”)

The song was composed by the Worrorra songman of the Ongorrngo clan Watty Ngerdu, while residing either in the new mission community of Old Mowanjum in the late 1950s or early 1960s, or in Country around Munja, a government-run mission and cattle station on Anawudgarri Ngarinyin Country at Walcott Inlet, or at Pantijan on the Sale River. Old Mowanjum was established in 1956 as a home for Worrorra, Wunambal and Ngarinyin peoples from various Countries in the northern Kimberley region (Jebb 2008). Mr. Neowarra explained that this song was a part of the set of Junba composed by Mr. Ngerdu, known as Gulai Darra and Wanalarri, which otherwise consists of approximately 50 dance-songs (see Treloyn 2006). The song is likely in Worrorra language possibly with a mixture of some Ungarinyin language, both languages that share some lexicon and, along with Wunambal, belong to the same language family (Worrornran).

Mr. Neowarra explained that the song includes the names of a sea vessel called “Winjama” (presumably referring to a type of sailing vessel, “windjammer”), as well as the word “riga”, possibly a localised form of the name of Yagan, the Whadjuk Noongar resistance hero from the southwest of the Australian continent.

Over the course of several sessions with Treloyn, Mr. Neowarra provided insights into the lyrics, rhythmic and melodic features of the song, as well as the dance, which he himself had performed at Old Mowanjum. Each time he shared his reflections on the song, he preceded or followed his comment with a reflective refrain: “It’s a bit different, this one.” Mr. Neowarra’s explanation of the song and dance meaning, and observations about their performance, will be discussed below.
2.1 Song Lyrics

The song comprises one verse, consisting of two short phrases referred to as “legs.” The first leg comprises two words, *biyoogooyoogoo warndi*, and the second leg comprises three, *winjama riga warndi*. These are performed in an A (*biyoogooyoogoo warndi*) B (*winjama riga warndi*) pattern, repeated over and over by the singers throughout a performance. Mr. Ngerdu, who recorded the song in 1963 with anthropologist Peter Lucich, began each repetition of the verse with the third word in leg B *warndi*, a common practice in Junba relating to conventions that guide the fit between melody and lyrics (Treloyn 2007). The cycling of the legs is interrupted only at the beginning of new cycles in the melody when the singers jump to *warndi* in leg B again (see “Song Rhythm and Tune” below). This interruption and recommencement of the verse is a common feature of Junba and one which distinguishes it from cyclical musical systems from the southern Kimberley, desert regions and central Australia (Treloyn 2017).

Also common to Junba, the construction of the legs demonstrates minimal variation (Treloyn 2007), where the complex verb *warndi* (translated by Neowarra as “*he did it*” or “*moving*”) occurs in a regular place in each leg. The lyrics in Mr. Ngerdu’s performance of the song, recorded by Lucich in 1963 (Ngerdu, recorded in Lucich 1963a, “Song Cycles from Mowanjum”), are presented in Figure 1.

With regards to the meaning of the lyrics, Mr. Neowarra provided two complementary translations, summarised in Figure 2. In the first, as Mr. Neowarra first recalled the song, he described how the song references the approach and arrival of Captain Cook on Indigenous land possibly near Perth (thus Noongar Country, in the southeast of the continent of Australia) in a boat called Winjama, presumably from the English “windjammer.” The boat is moving along “*warndi*” propelled by the blowing wind “*riga*” (possibly also a derivation of the English “rigging”):

> That’s that Captain Cook. Biyoogooyoogoo, that’s mean, that’s the boat that been coming in that Country now. … When he came in, might be in Perth. Where he came in first? [Treloyn suggests Sydney] … Winjama, that boat called Winjama. Winjama riga. Riga that’s like a wind been blow that thing here, you know making it run without an engine, sailing away, something like that. Warndi, that when he bin moving you know [sings] ….Winjama that boat now, name of the boat (Neowarra, in Neowarra and Treloyn 2002b, “MD200206”)

In another session, Neowarra provided further translation and elaboration of the song:

> Looks like he [is] meaning [the] other way around, in that meaning of it. … Yeah, that Winjama [has] been coming along, you know. Buyu been pull him along, just like a devil tempting Captain Cook to get inside there, without a permission from someone else what own the Country. That what it mean[s] in that Junba now. … *Warndi* means that that he did, did. … *Buyu* mean[s] pull him, you know, that *agula* been pull[ing] him to

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**Figure 1:** Transcription of song text
“*biyoogooyoogoo warndi winjama riga warndi*” composed by Watty Ngerdu, as sung by the composer (Lucich 1963a “Song Cycles from Mowanjum”). Transcription by Sally Treloyn and Rona Goonginda Charles.

**Figure 2:** Two translations by Paddy Neowarra of Watty Ngerdu’s song.
tempt him to do that. [Winjama is the] boat. Riga … Reyigen. To kill Reyigen or to kill all his people what been in that Country now, Reyigen gang. Then they been take over. … Got a buyu you know, tell him to do that, that’s what it means (Neowarra, in Neowarra et al. 2002a, “DAT200215”).

Here, Mr. Neowarra again begins by explaining that Winjama is the name of the boat, and that the song refers to Captain Cook. However, he then comments: “Looks like the meaning other way around in that meaning of it” (Neowarra, in Neowarra et al. 2002a, “DAT200215”). While there is some ambiguity as to what Mr. Neowarra meant by this statement, it is possible that he was referring to the ways in which the song provides an account of the early encounters between the British and Noongar that depart from the historical record. In Mr. Neowarra’s account, the song presents as an agent in the colonial encounter an agula “devil spirit” armed with a buyu (sung as “biyoogoooyogoo” and described by Elders as a cord or rope that is radar-like, magnetic and glowing, and that is used both to lead people to get lost or even die, as well as to enable the transmission of songs from the spirit world to living composers). As Mr. Neowarra explains, according to the song the agula pulled Cook with the buyu and tempted and told him to kill Reyigen (sung as “riga,” previously glossed as “wind blowing” and later identified as Yagan) and Reyigen’s gang (people), and take over. 

However, as Charles explains, “Captain Cook was the main agula because he was the first. He opened the gateway for everyone else to explore. Proper agula spirit, devil spirit.” This adds a new layer (or, in Mr Neowarra’s words, “other ways around in that meaning”) to the history of British colonisation of Australia, which rested on what legal scholar Larissa Behrendt has described as “a legal fiction” described as terra nullius, where “Aboriginal people [were treated] as though they were invisible and had no sovereign rights to land, water other resources or to self-governance or sovereignty” (Behrendt 2007, 104).

2.2 Song Rhythm and Tune

Turning to rhythmic elements of the song, it is relevant here to note that Junba comprises two primary rhythmic elements: the rhythmic pattern with which the legs are sung, and the rhythm of the percussion accompaniment (clapping and clapsticks) which coincides with the rhythmic elements of the dance. In each of his sessions, Mr. Neowarra accompanied himself by tapping on the table at which he and Treloyn were sitting. In a danced performance, this would have been an accompaniment of straight borndorra (clapsticks) and body percussion (clapping and possibly lap slapping). Contrasting the duple vocal rhythm in this song, the accompaniment rhythm is a swung, compound meter (short-long, short-long and so on, where the long duration is twice the length of the short duration). The vocal rhythm and accompaniment rhythm together form a polymetric (two or four against three) rhythmic mode. This pattern is isorhythmic: that is, each repetition is performed with the same rhythmic setting.

Each time Mr. Neowarra discussed the swung accompaniment pattern, he noted that it had a “different sound” or a “different way of sound.” There are several ways to understand Mr Neowarra’s commentary on difference here. The swung pattern is used nowhere else in Mr. Ngerdu’s repertory (as Mr. Neowarra pointed out). In this context, Mr. Neowarra’s note regarding the difference of the pattern may simply refer to it being rare. Importantly, however, the swung pattern is used elsewhere, specifically in the Junba repertoires of other Worrorra composers: Sam Woolagoodja (as Mr. Maline, accompanying Neowarra on one occasion, pointed out) and Alan Balhangu (Neowarra et al. 2002b, “DAT200216”), who was Mr. Ngerdu’s cousin-brother who gave him songs in dreams. While the pattern is unusual in the context of the primarily Ngarinyin corpus of Junba with which Mr. Neowarra was an expert, it is not unusual in Worrorra Junba, also referred to as “Saltwater Junba” after the coastal location of Worrorra Country.

Mr. Neowarra also attributed the difference of the swung pattern to Cook (“He got a different sound, he only go like that [tapping the swung, compound accompaniment]. That’s the Captain Cook” [Neowarra, in Neowarra and Treloyn 2002b, “MD200206”]) and the boat:

Paddy Neowarra: He got a different way of sound, like that, he go. [Tapping the swung, slow rhythm]

Sally Treloyn: How did he get that different sound?

Paddy Neowarra: I don’t know, that’s the boat. (Neowarra, in Neowarra et al. 2002a, “DAT200215”)

The significance of these attributions was not further explored with Mr. Neowarra, though it was Treloyn’s understanding at the time that he may have been referring to the rocking rhythm of the boat. That aside, it is notable that Worrorra are renowned for their saltwater Country and
seafaring histories, with many songs describing sea life, coastal locations, vessels such as canoes and rafts and travel by sea. Given that the pattern occurs only in Worrorra “Saltwater” Junba repertoires, it follows that Neowarra would attribute the difference of the rhythm to the boat associated with Cook.

As with the text and rhythm, Neowarra observes that the tune of the song is “different” in some way. He described the contour of the tune as follows: “It’s only lying straight out, you know, little bit drop, and up, going down” (Neowarra, in Neowarra et al. 2002b, “DAT200216”). This observation is reflected in transcriptions of Mr. Neowarra’s performances, which, with some variation, begin on the fourth degree, descend through the minor third and briefly the second, before reaching the tonic. There is a brief rise to the third, before resting on the tonic for the remainder of the melodic cycle. This contour repeats in the second melodic cycle, and Mr. Ngerdu’s own performance follows the same basic contour. This melodic contour is distinctive amongst Mr. Ngerdu’s repertory in several ways, not least that almost all of the other songs in Mr. Ngerdu’s repertory have a range of an octave or more. Moreover, while all feature gradually descending melodic cycles that rest on the tonic, there is a significantly greater portion of time spent in the upper range of the contour (see Treloyn 2014, 2017, for extended discussions of melodic contour in this style of Junba).

Our penultimate discussion on the song went as follows:

Sally Treloyn: What do you reckon it got that different tune from? How did it have a different tune?

Paddy Neowarra: Well I don’t know that might be all up to that Reyigen. Reyigen, in Perth, yeah. We should ask him what you call, what you call, you know, Ken Colbung, he know history about that you know he in Perth … I met him in Canberra. (Neowarra, in Neowarra et al. 2002a, “DAT200215”)

Here, Mr. Neowarra mused that the origin of the tune and its distinctive shape might be attributed to the spirit of Yagan: “That might be all up to that Reyigen, Reyigen, in Perth.” This proposition is presented in a common frame of Junba composition, that it is often the spirits of people referenced in songs that are responsible for the conception of the song, usually visiting the composer in a dream whereupon the song and dance is transmitted (Treloyn 2006). Mr. Neowarra indicates that on this topic one should defer to Noongar authority, citing Ken Colbung (now deceased), a Noongar leader, activist, and the first Aboriginal chair of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra. Mr. Neowarra, Mr. Maline, Mr. Wama and other senior Ngarinyin elders had met Colbung, who was instrumental in the repatriation of Yagan’s remains from Britain, in Canberra and in Perth.

2.3 Dance

It was in a video-recorded session (Neowarra and Treloyn 2002a, “MD20020203”) in which Mr. Neowarra drew and discussed a range of objects used for Junba dancing in various repertoires that he first recalled and described the dance-song that is the subject of this paper. In this session, Mr. Neowarra had just finished a detailed illustration and discussion of a dance totem referred to in Ngarinyin as ornorr-jirri, characterised by a tall, vertical centre pole, with five cross beams, around which coloured wool (and prior to that string made from natural fibres and dyed with red, yellow and white ochre and black charcoal) is woven. A sixth horizontal beam is attached, which the dancer uses to hold the totem behind their shoulders, so that the structure rises above their heads.

Having completed this detailed drawing, Neowarra stated: “This other one, the Captain Cook one, he is a bit different,” and proceeded to draw the totem for the dance for the song (his illustration is pictured below in Figure 3). As he drew, he noted key elements: the centre beam; the relative lengths of the horizontal beams; the short vertical sticks that were sized such that, when woven with wool, gave the impression of curved sails of the Winjama (windjammer/schooner) (see rounded shapes on either side of the centre beam); the outer lines of wool that ran from the peak of the centre beam to the bottom left and bottom right ends of the lowest beam; and, finally the lowest beam, that was added so that dancers could hold the totem behind their shoulders. Mr. Neowarra also explained that four of these totems were used in dance, two positioned on the left of the dance ground, and two on the right:

That’s the schooner, boat, the one that I was drawing here. Captain Cook… They [are] all like that, four of them, two [on the] other side, two [on the] other side. (Neowarra, in Neowarra and Treloyn 2002b, “MD200206”)

Mr. Neowarra’s description and illustration was based on his vivid memory of the totem, which he himself had carried as a dancer in performances in Old Mowanjum alongside his brother-in-law, father-in-law and one other (Neowarra and Treloyn 2002a, “MD200203”). The
“different” elements of the totem were those that made it resemble a mast with sails, departing from the more uniform ornorr-jirri typically used for Worrorra and Ngarinyin Junba.

As with all Junba featuring totems, the dancers would commence the dance at the back of the dance ground, emerging from behind a screen made from tree branches. As the song begins, they would move forwards, towards the singers and audience sitting at the front of the dance ground. Mr. Neowarra’s detailed description and illustration of the totem and choreography accompanied by the song as described above, would give the impression of one (or more) sea vessels with multiple masts, moving and swaying across the dance ground towards the singers. Indeed, while the identity of the dance is unclear, a silent video from the 1960s attributed to missionary Nevin Vawser shows totems very similar to that illustrated by Mr. Neowarra being carried, swaying, by dancers (Aborigines and Overseas Missions Department, Vawser, and Burton 1969).

3 Watty Ngerdu’s Junba in the 1950s–1960s

As Mr. Neowarra commented, the story told by him of Mr. Ngerdu’s dance-song differs from the historical accounts, and its lyrics and other musical elements and dance differ from the rest of Mr. Ngerdu’s repertory and many characteristics of Junba in general. To appreciate the historical significance of Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba, the archival record and Mr. Neowarra’s commentary on difference, it is necessary to further consider the social and political history of the region between the 1950s and the 1970s, the period during which the song was performed and likely composed.

Between 1954 and 1956 Ngarinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal families living at Munja and Wotjulum, and prior to that Munja and Kumnunya, resettled in Mowanjum, a new community on Nyikina country, purchased by the Presbyterian Church alongside a nearby pastoral lease.

On the one hand, people at Mowanjum experienced new rights and freedoms. Reflections shared by Elders who resided in Mowanjum in this period describe access to work and paid wages, uncommon in the region at the time. There were also relatively high levels of literacy in cultural practices, which the Mowanjum Community attributes to being able to continue cultural practices such as Junba in the early mission years in Kumnunya (Jebb 2008, 93). The many Junba repertories composed in the period by residents—together with performances by visiting groups, other ceremonial forms such as Wolungarri and Wurrganyin and personal genres such as Wudu—populated a vibrant cultural life in the community. The oral histories provided by Ngarinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal Elders in 2000–2002, alongside recordings by Lucich (1963a) and Alice Moyle (1968a, “Songs from” and 1968b, “Recordings of”), demonstrate that Junba thrived in this period, with new repertoire—including Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba—being dreamt and composed.

During the same period, access to national and global news increased, with new proximity to the towns of Derby and Broome, and the presence of outsiders, who ranged from mission staff to contractors and visiting academics (such as Lucich from the University of Western Australia, 1963; John McCaffery from the United States, 1964; and others). New audiences for Junba also emerged. By 1959, dancers from Mowanjum were performing Junba at the annual Derby Boab Festival, for majority non-Indigenous audiences, led by Watty Ngerdu and fellow Worrorra composer Sam Woolagoodja (McKenzie 1969). The period gave rise to a dance group led by Albert Barunga, Watty Ngerdu and Kharki (Cocky) Wootchingoor (Wootchingoor), which, supported by Mary Selsmark and the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation newly established by the Australian Council for the Arts, toured to Parkerville near Perth in 1971, with 24 participants (Mowanjum Art and
As reported by Albert Barunga, discrimination was acute in the day-to-day life of Mowanjum, through limitations imposed on self-governance, unequal wages, being disallowed to vote and no or limited access to key services in town (Barunga and Edwards 1976). By 1959 the community entered an era of resistance to paternalism and pushed for recognition of Indigenous rights (see McKenzie 1969), well before recognition of Indigenous rights federally. Many community leaders from the three groups, Ngarinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal, led this movement. Their efforts were further progressed with the presence of the Ecumenical Institute from Chicago in Mowanjum in 1971 and 1972 with an agenda of Indigenous self-determination (Ecumenical Institute 1967–2000, 19–27). The Ecumenical Institute reports that several forces contributed to it’s departure from Mowanjum, one of which was opposition to Indigenous leadership and self-determination from the non-Indigenous population of the nearby town of Derby.

It was during this period—a period of freedom and resistance, but also continued discrimination—that Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba was performed. The use of Captain Cook is particularly relevant in this regard. On the one hand, as observed by Kolig, by 1979, Cook was used in multiple circumstances in the west Kimberley as “an attempt to fuse the European-dominated political reality with a more traditional comprehension of the world and its causalities” (Kolig 2017, 403). On the other hand, Cook was valorised by Western systems. Charles, who went to school in the Kimberley and later Perth in the 1970s and 1980s, recalls how she was taught about Cook in terms of his achievements as an explorer and navigator, including for discovery Australia. Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba, we see a comprehension of the incomprehensible: the arrival, violence and taking over of Indigenous people and land by outsiders. This colonisation continued to affect 1950s-60s Mowanjum, where cultural resurgence and recognition co-existed with continued paternalism and denial of rights within the mission and in the larger non-Indigenous societal context.

More specifically, Cook has been used as a symbol of colonialism in enacting creative, economic and political agencies (Kolig 1979). In many ways, Mr. Ngerdu’s dance-song, in concert with other songs from his own repertory, and those of Woolagoodja and Wirrijangu, heralded a new era in which Indigenous leaders promoted a resurgence of Junba and performed versions of Australian history that foregrounded Indigenous experience and voice for local and national audiences. As explained by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, artists such as Hobbles Danayarri from the Yarralin community in the Victoria River District (neighbouring the Kimberley) also cite Cook in stories, to tell, to inform and to teach audiences about relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Rose 2010). In Junba we see creative, economic and political agencies and teaching about relationships enacted in composition and performance. From a distance, we can perceive these agencies through the recollections and elaborations on the meaning and significance of dance-songs shared by Elders such as Mr. Neowarra, who were present and themselves performed with agency at the time. Via Mr. Neowarra’s sessions in 2002, we gain some insight into the agency of Mr. Ngerdu and his collaborating peers in the 1950s-60s, as enacted in storytelling, in lyrics, in dance, in rhythm and in tunes, that are “a bit different.”

4 Dancing with the Devil: Enacting Social and Political Agency in 2021

In his 2002 sessions, Mr. Neowarra noted that he would like to make Mr. Ngerdu’s Winjama totem one day, and to perform the Junba again perhaps in Sydney or Perth (Neowarra and Treloyn 2002a, “MD200203”). While Mr. Neowarra passed away in 2015, the Junba was performed in the Kimberley in 2021 at the annual Mowanjum Festival. To restage the Junba, leading practitioners of Junba, including two of the co-authors of the paper Charles and O’Connor, drew upon information provided in Mr. Neowarra’s description and elaboration of the dance and song and performance, and the photo of the dance totem taken in Mowanjum in 1963 by Lucich.

Echoing Mr. Neowarra’s refrain that Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba is “a little bit different,” the choreography of the dance that is performed today is a little bit different to that which Mr. Neowarra described. As described above, Mr. Neowarra described a choreography where four dancers, each carrying a Winjama totem, danced in a line on the dance ground, two on one side of the centre and two on the other. In the dance performed today, choreographers and performers present several of the elements described by Mr. Neowarra (the boat, the agula, and the buyu). The photograph in Figure 4 taken at the 2021 Mowanjum Festival performance shows an agula (represented by dancers wearing masks that are typical of other agula dances) holding a buyu, pulling the Winjama totem towards the singers and audience. A second agula dancer also performs the same action, and both agula dancers are accompanied by an older woman dancing behind them.
Whereas Mr. Neowarra’s account reveals records of social and political agency in the archive, first-hand accounts by Charles and O’Connor of the choreography of the 2021 dance provide insights into the ways that creative and political agency is enacted with archival records in contemporary performance.

Charles provides a first-hand discussion of the significance of the new choreography, as follows:

In bringing the story back, I didn’t just look at it in terms of the violence in the early days of British colonisation and the racism faced by people in the Kimberley in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. I also looked at how we are still performing Junba to take control of bringing the songs back. This song is very important because it talks about the history around that.

There is the European history, but also the song is still alive and going. And we are still strong. We will keep going with the song. But also, we are still facing what happened earlier; what Mr. Neowarra was looking at, about what happened then when the British arrived, and what was happening in the early days of Mowanjum, it is still happening today. We are still talking to government about changes: whether it is negotiating to try and stop Country from being damaged by mining; where we have Native Title rights but not the right to say “no”; or whether it be trying to secure housing. We are not on the same level as all Australia. We have less opportunity. But we are still going, still carrying the message.

One of the ways we do this with Junba is with the buyu. The buyu is very powerful, he (the buyu) will pull, pull, pull. It is not always a bad thing. Our composer Scotty Nyalgodi Martin talked about the buyu in his stories about his Junba, that the buyu is the power of the dancers and the song. It is a really strong and good thing, helping to keep the song and story going so that it never be lost. That’s how he talks about his buyu. The buyu is used by spirits and composers to get their songs in dreams. Mr. Ngerdu was a composer the same as Nyalgodi. They were both jumanjuman – master composers. When that spirit gave them songs, the songs are powerful. They are meant to tell a story, a powerful story. The buyu is also pulling me to keep going with the Junba.

I was taught in school in the 70s and 80s a really good story about Captain Cook (a story that celebrated Cook), how he was the highest explorer all over the world. But we use our dance to show what was really happening then, and what is probably still happening today. We have been dancing with the agula since the explorers came in and we are dancing with it still today. In the dance that we do for Mr. Ngerdu’s Junba, the buyu is to pull the audience at the Festival and who hear[s] about the Junba to see the real story. It is a very powerful thing.

O’Connor shares his experience as choreographer and dancer using archival sources to inform the dance:

You listen to the story put down by the Old People and what it means, and you try and interpret that into a dance. The last time the dance was done was back in the 1960s. Not being able to see the dance firsthand, just listening to the story, we are trying to envision the movements that they would have used in the way we do our own Junba. We try and interpret that story through the dance.

When I do the dance, it is showing something that is foreign, that we are not used to. We have to mimic the way the ship would come on the shore. This is what people would have seen when the ships came into shore. Any ship uses a lot of rope. The agula in this dance, he threw the rope to bring the ship in. That’s what I am trying to show them in the dance, the way that a boat slowly rolls into shore, as it gets shallower and shallower, as the boat gets closer, and then eventually the ship will pull up because it gets too shallow for it. But I am also showing how strong the buyu that the agula threw is. When the ship throws its anchor down, the rope has to be strong. That’s where Aunty Rona talks about the buyu being strong. The stronger the buyu, it won’t break, it will come in.

Our Old People created the Junba. Now I am re-choreographing it to retell the same story but give it a meaning so that people can see the dance, listen to the song and listen to the story, and have more understanding and respect of events that occurred and that continue today. When Aboriginal people tried to make a statement back in those days they used to get beaten, bashed and flogged, just for standing up for who they are. Everything that

Figure 4: The Winjama Junba totem carried by Pete Myadooma O’Connor at the 2021 Mowanjum Festival. Photograph by Charlotte Dickie. Copyright Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre. Used with permission. Cultural protocols guide the use of this illustration and the object represented.
they were facing, today we are still facing but in a different way. This violence is in films that speak about us “dying out”; that statement used to frustrate me a lot. It hasn’t changed, it is still there.

Generational knowledge has been passed down through these songs, dances and Junbas, and, using the same mentality that they had, I continue to do it today. My grandfather is Samson Morlumbun. Watty Ngerdu is my great great grandfather, and I have his bush name Myadooma, after his father as well, following that line. I am following him as a composer and my grandfathers as dancers. Keeping Culture strong, keeping kids in line. Also keeping gadiya and almara [terms to refer to non-Indigenous people] on Country in line, in my work with the rangers where I have brought Culture back in and where it is important that we use Culture as our strongpoint. That buyu is that continuous thing. I did my first Junba at 16 and since then I haven’t stopped, and I think it was because of the buyu, and the ancestors that have grabbed hold of me and haven’t let me go because they want me to continue to keep going with it. It keeps growing my passion. It is not something you can switch off. That’s where these songs and stories come into play. When we do Festival, we show that we haven’t died out, as documentaries said we would. We still have our ceremony, we still have our stories, and we still have our painting.

Talking is just a word, and a lot of people when listening to certain words can misinterpret them, causing one word to have a lot of meanings. When you listen to or see Junba it is a lot of language. You get the language through the song and then you have the body language, how the dancers are telling the story with their body and with the totem, how they carry the totem. The certain way that they move is telling a story. It is a language of where you’re sitting and how you look at it. If you are sitting from a point of view of “no I’m not interested” then you aren’t going to see the story. But if you open your mind to what the story is about to tell you, then you will realise and understand and respect what Junba can do for you, what it can show you and what you can learn from it. Talking is just words, but when you do Junba it’s like the saying that actions speak louder than words.

5 Conclusion

Drawing on commentary provided by an Elder practitioner in 2002 and historical context, this paper has provided insights into a dance-song that was composed and performed in an Indigenous community in north-western Australia in the 1960s and that enacted social and political agencies by evoking figures of colonial violence and Indigenous resistance. The paper has also provided insights, offered by authors who are members of the source community, into how the 2002 recordings have supported the enactment of renewed social and political agencies through performance in recent years. Taking up the story told by Paddy Neowarra in 2002 of Watty Ngerdu’s Junba, the contexts of coloniality and resistance in which it was conceived and performed in the 1950s and/or 1960s, and the social and political contexts in which performers today live, we have framed this enactment of agency as a “dance with the devil.” Here the “devil” might be the agula (a devilish, trickster spirit, commonly referenced in Kimberley stories, dance-song, and social lives), as well as the face of colonisation (“Captain Cook”) and the continued forces of colonialism that discriminate against Indigenous people. The “dance” is entangled in the pull of a buyu – a device associated not only with danger, as in the account of an agula tempting Cook to the shore, thus bringing about death, but also with the strength and persistence of cultural practice.

The story of the dance-song described in this paper exemplifies one of many cases around the world, in which legacy recordings provide a window into historical experiences of particular social and political moments in time, and into the roles that creative artists and arts play in navigating society through these moments. This example also shows that such windows often require the pulling back of a curtain. In this case, the significance of the dance-song recorded in 1963 was revealed via knowledge of and subsequent access to discussions recorded in a collection in 2002. Likewise, the existence of the dance-song in contemporary practice today has been enabled by the linking of these two collections.

In closing this paper, it would be remiss not to note that barriers to accessing collections remain for community-based researchers, practitioners and other cultural custodians, and that these are entangled with histories of colonialism such that revitalisation projects might sometimes be characterised as another kind of “dance with the devil.” In the present case, the items in the 2002 collection were accessible because Treloyn, who recorded them, had a recollection of the sessions, and had copies on hand. The audio recording of Mr. Ngerdu singing the song in the 1963 collection, just 65 s within 16 h, was detectable by Treloyn only because she held technology to scan for sung content efficiently and was able to immediately recognise one segment resembling Mr. Neowarra’s rendition. To be able to use one’s knowledge of collections and song traditions to support community-led recovery of practice as an outsider ethnomusicologist in this way is personally rewarding, but also edifying. The situation ultimately points towards the persistent inequity in access to research collections, so that Treloyn, an outsider/non-Indigenous researcher, has had access to knowledges of Junba, archives and collections with relative ease, whereas insider/community researchers have not (Treloyn and Charles 2021). Furthermore, it points towards the complicity of research in the continued fragility
of collections: not their physical or digital state, but the fragility rendered when knowledge about links between and within collections remains tacit, and when links between collections and current communities of practice remain unexplored. As Charles says, “We have been dancing with the agula since the explorers came in and we are dancing with it still today.” In many ways the case of discovery, access and revitalisation presented in this paper, and this paper itself, represent such a dance. The social and political agency of cultural custodians is an important part of the work of archives, particularly where barriers to accessing legacy recordings remain.

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