

Creating comprehensive, relevant records of Wägilak *manikay*: the ancestral records of Andy Peters and Benjamin Wilfred¹

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Project summary

The project aim is to create integrated records of Wägilak *manikay* and its associated dances, stories, texts and relations to sites on country. The research makes use of new recording technologies (such as portable multi-track recording equipment) to make recordings which are more comprehensive, relevant records for the future. Alongside comprehensive archival material including audio, video, images, recorded narratives and song texts, a story book and CD of the Wagilak song narratives was produced.

Benjamin Wilfred and Andy Peters, as ceremonial leaders for the Wägilak, directly shaped and informed this research. Other project advisors included ceremonial leaders, dancer and singers, and primary holders of knowledge for exegesis and transcription.

Project aims

- To create a comprehensive record of Wägilak *manikay* (public song) which addresses some of the limitations of current recording practices, and to assist the Yugul Mangi Council, Ngukurr, in following through with their expressed desire of recording the songs held by Andy Peters for safekeeping. The records created are for direct community repatriation through accessible media and the Ngukurr Language Centre. Material will be deposited with the AIATSIS archives.
- The creation of the following (inter-referenced/indexed) recordings and documentation:
 - Audio recordings of Wägilak song series

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- Documentation of the previously undocumented song language in the luku (root) *manikay* series
- Sketches/maps of country made with the traditional owners
- The attribution of particular songs with particular coordinates on country, and annotated digital images of country
- Recording of dance footage (men and women) of the songs
- Recorded stories and transcriptions of song texts
- Recorded elicitations and expanded commentaries of songs, dances, designs and country; recorded biographies of place
- To incorporate the transcribed stories, song texts, and designs into a basic story book, to be accompanied by appropriate recordings of the songs on CD.
- To examine the benefits and disadvantages of the new approaches taken to creating cultural records, and report these findings in papers and conference presentations.
- To use elements of the above records to create material directly incorporated into *Crossing Roper Bar* (Australian Art Orchestra) performances and workshops given on Yolŋu culture. This was undertaken in consultation with both musical directors, Benjamin Wilfred and Paul Grabowsky, and consisted of:
 - Appropriate projections of images of country/designs/footage of dance/fragments of transcriptions, correlating directly with the songs performed
 - Comprehensive program notes relating to the individual songs, and their related dance, designs and country.
- To use the recorded material and process of creating these records, to develop my PhD research on heritage and effective history.

Background

Wägilak, the Dhuwa dialect of Ritharrngu, is an endangered language (AUSTLANG code N104). The 2004 NILS² estimates that there are 66 speakers of Ritharrngu. The language as a whole is given the endangerment rating of 0 – no longer fully spoken. There is no comprehensive documentation of Wägilak song, especially from the hereditary estate of Andy Peters. There are no (known) transcriptions of Wägilak song language and recorded material is limited to minimal, although valuable, archived material, predominantly from the collections of Bernhard Schebeck (Wägilak narrative only, no songs) (1966), Jeffrey Heath (about 40 song items) (1974-76) and Greg Dickson (limited bunŋul items) (2006).

Increasing the variety and comprehensiveness of the records we make increases the possibilities for those records to be relevant and contemporaneous with every present. Constantly realigning our record creation towards Indigenous epistemologies and ideas of cultural records (e.g. the land is a record of song), is also of fundamental import, as these recorded iterations of culture will become the applications through which the future experience of meanings—cultural transmission to subsequent generations—will take place.

² National Indigenous Language Survey.

The recent commercial production of multi-track field recorders represents a significant development to be embraced by those undertaking field-recording. Many possibilities open up: the analysis of the word selection made by individuals; thorough analysis of the non-linear poetics of song texts; an audio record which is multi-faceted and through which the level of individual voices can be easily manipulated for analysis, or the extraction of individual voices – a more comprehensive record for the future.

My interest in eliciting explanations and annotations of the songs, dances and designs recorded, is an attempt to address one of the basic shortfalls of records and their interpretation: no-one can intercede if reified culture, which is detached from the individuals who express it, succumbs to intentional or unintentional misinterpretations in the future. Such commentaries would allow the created record to be imbued with authority, but simultaneously, through their pointing toward a complex of deeper, layered meanings, question any future interpretations of the record which claim immutable authority.

Research methods and techniques

Set up for audio recording at either Njilipidji or accessible country nearby, as deemed appropriate by Benjamin Wilfred. Record a full luku-*manikay* series for each of the repertoire sets owned by traditional owners. Talk through the way in which to best create a record of something which has so many possible permutations.

Approach to recording:

- 8-track stereo recording; one microphone for yidäki and separate dynamic microphones for individual voices (ZOOM R16 field recorder or similar). Audio processing and mastering to be done in Ngukurr.
- Simultaneous 'whole group' recording with stereo condenser microphone.
- The creation of comprehensive time-code/audition sheets during recording.

Set up a bungul (dance) area with fixed video camera/s (from 2 angles simultaneously, if possible) and an audio playback device. Play the recorded luku-*manikay* series whilst filming the dance; the high-quality 8-track audio to be synchronised with the video. This allows dancers from Ngukurr who did not travel to Njilipidji, to take part. It also allows the singers to record audio commentary about the dances (as they will not be singing), and the vocal interjections of the dancers themselves. This could be completed over the course of a few part-days (does not wear out the dancers).

Correlate all the material collected with an inter-referential index.

Research outcomes

I have successfully created a comprehensive record of Wägilak song using a variety of media and methods. I have achieved the following research outcomes:

- Addressed concerns for the safeguarding of *manikay* song and its ceremonial practice by the Wägilak clan in Ngukurr, in the capacity of the proposed research project.
- Provided access to copies of all my material to the participants in the research project and wider community at Ngukurr.
- Created comprehensive audio recordings of the Wägilak song series belonging to Andy Peters and Benjamin Wilfred, incorporating the aims and methodologies set out in the grant application, with a focus on developing innovative approaches to recording technologies and methods.
- Created directly-related records of dance (audio-visual), song text elicitation, transcriptions, narratives, biographies of place, annotated photographs and maps, commentaries and oral histories. As stated in my interim report, my focus on achieving transcriptions and translations of song texts was modified to incorporate the recording of aural elicitations of song texts.
- Basic training in digital audio recording practices given to two young men in Ngukurr, over a number of sessions during 2011. The recording equipment purchased by the Yugul Mangi Council at my request has continued to be used by community for recording projects. Daniel Wilfred continues to make his own digital recordings of *manikay* with the equipment I taught him to use, and stores these recordings at the Ngukurr Language Centre. Daniel Wilfred assisted me in all recording sessions with the microphone setup and placement, the setting of levels, aural identification on tracks, and adjustment of levels during production and preparation of the recording environment. Local bands have also begun to use the equipment for recording albums.
- The creation of a basic story book incorporating transcriptions of song texts. This book was distributed to children of all the families involved in the project, as well as the Ngukurr Language Centre. The story book included professional photographs of Benjamin and Daniel Wilfred by Tobias Titz, introductory instructions and narratives recorded at Ngilipidji (ancestral homeland) by elder Andy Peters, images of Ngilipidji, illustrations of the basic and public narrative of the *manikay* series. The story book follows the songs and corresponding tracks on the (abridged) recording created as a part of this project.
- Demonstrated and ongoing contribution to symposium discussions and conference presentations, especially under the umbrella of the National Recording Project. These presentations have concerned recording methods, technical possibilities and challenges of implementing my methodology. Presentations were given at: the 2011 AIATSIS conference, *Young and Old: Connecting Generations*; the 2011 *Symposium of the National Recording Project* in Darwin; 2011 *ANU School of Music Graduate Symposium*; 2012 National Centre for Indigenous Studies *fieldwork report seminar*. In November 2012, I presented on Wägilak song and my research at Homerton College, Cambridge University.
- Practical and high-profile incorporation of research material into the Australian Art Orchestra's *Crossing Roper Bar*, a musical collaboration with Daniel and Benjam Wilfred. My program notes, incorporating song text and narrative transcriptions, have been used in high-profile public performances. Images I have created have been projected on stage during performances. I have provided Art Orchestra members with comprehensive recordings of Wägilak *manikay* and given advice on Wägilak song during rehearsals and workshops. In November 2012, I travelled with Benjamin, David and Daniel Wilfred to present at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the London Jazz Festival and Cambridge Museum.

- A number of public presentations have been facilitated on the periphery of *Crossing Roper Bar*. Presentations have been given at the Australian National Academy of Music, on Radio National's *The Music Show*, and at both The Australian National University and Monash University. Further, I have incorporated my research findings and recordings into lectures on *manikay* and ethnomusicology given in 2011 and 2012 at ANU, as a part of the undergraduate course *Indigenous Music and Media*. In 2012, Daniel Wilfred, Benjamin Wilfred and I have a presentation to an Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience workshop with year 9 students.

Community reports

- CDs of *manikay* distributed to those involved in the project and their families and the Yugul Mangi council.
- Copious prints of photographs taken during this project given to all participants.
- Storybook and accompanying CD distributed to those involved in the project and their families.
- Audio recordings and storybook deposited with the Ngukurr Language Centre for archive and community access.
- Daniel and Benjamin Wilfred provided with access to any recordings or images I have made for use at their request in the Crossing Roper Bar collaboration and presentations/workshops given on *manikay* song – especially images of Ngilipidji.
- Access to audio recording equipment obtained for this grant and purchased by the Yugul Mangi council, stored in Ngukurr.