10 *Finding* **laka** *for* **burdal**: *Song revitalisation at Mornington Island over the past 40 years*

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Abstract

The Lardil song tradition known as *burdal* has never really been lost. However, its history is not necessarily an unbroken linear narrative. There have been times when some songs have been 'forgotten', only to come back though dreams at a later date. This timelessness, or the idea that songs can be re-dreamed unpredictably at any time, is seen as an ongoing confirmation of the veracity and power of important stories.

The authors have been closely involved in the maintenance and revitalisation of *burdal* and other song traditions at Mornington Island over several decades. This article is written from our collective experience in collaboration with four generations of Lardil songmen and women, and incorporates reflections on past practices and contemporary situations. We break down the myth of songs being handed down from a 'misty ancient past', and look instead at key issues of song ownership, creation, authenticity and sustainability in a modern context.

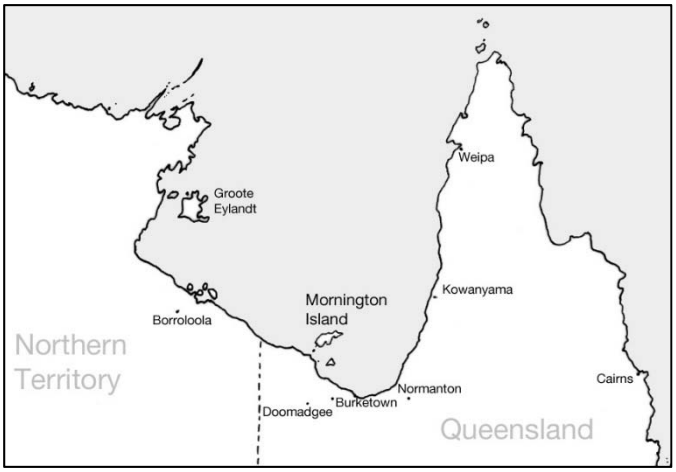
Lardil concepts of *burdal* 'song', *laka* 'way' and *mirndiyan* 'dreaming' are explored, and song practices of recent times considered in terms of cultural shift and commercialisation of song culture. A description of conscious attempts at recording and revival activities is given, including archive repatriation, 'culture camps', touring and mentoring programs. We also discuss various methods of archiving and cataloguing song material and what has worked best in different circumstances. We conclude by identifying possible strategies for the future.

Keywords: Mornington Island; Lardil songs; burdal; dreaming songs

1 Introduction

Lardil people are the traditional owners of Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Lardil language is part of the language family known as Tangkic, which includes Gangalidda (of the neighbouring mainland) and Kayardild (of nearby Bentinck Island), and could be considered critically endangered. Descendants of many other traditional owner groups also live at Mornington Island, which has a population of about 1100, of which around 900 identify as Aboriginal. Most people on Mornington Island these days speak as their first language a creole that, while largely

English-lexified, also utilises many Lardil words and phrases, and has a sound system and intonation pattern similar to Lardil and other Australian languages.



Map 10.1: Geographical location of Mornington Island

Lardil people have always had links with other mainland and coastal communities, especially to the west, where most traditional stories are said to have come from. By the 1860s there were sizeable non-Indigenous populations in Burketown and nearby Sweers Island, and in 1914 the first Presbyterian mission was established on Mornington Island. The mission went through a number of identifiable eras, with varying levels of control over the cultural lives of Lardil and mainland Aboriginal people, until its closure in the 1970s. Between 1944 and 1952, a particularly strict regime was in place, characterised by extreme repression of traditional cultural practices, including song and dance.

A concept persists in Australia of Aboriginal songs originating in time immemorial and being passed down from generation to generation unchanged. This belief has been exploited at times by Lardil people and promoters; for example, in a 1972 Sydney newspaper advertisement, 'Authentic legend and corroboree dances. See ancient and unchanged tribal legend performed. See the Brolga and the Honeybee dance with Australia's most authentic portrayal from the Lardil tribe'.[1] Although there are some valid elements in this stereotype, overall it is not a true picture of the dynamic process by means of which Lardil songs come into being, belong to people and place, and are collaboratively worked to create performance.

Many remote communities in Australia retain cultural knowledge and skills deriving from traditional performance practices. This knowledge is closely integrated with social structure and relationships to land, both of which have been seriously affected by colonisation. Survival has been a matter of ongoing resistance and adaptation, as a response to the continuing nature of colonisation (see Cleary 2006:2).

There are a number of traditional Lardil song genres: *kujika* and *marndar* are men's (initiation) ceremony songs; *jarada* belong to a different men's ceremony associated with 'love magic'; *jawala* are funeral songs; and *wankabel* are women's hunting songs. There are also other song types that could be used for healing, birthing, and singing the weather. The *burdal* songs that are the focus of this chapter are public 'corroboree' songs, usually accompanied by dance. They are performed outside of any ceremonial context, although there can be crossovers with other genres in both meaning and musical style. *Burdal* come to people in dreams and may then have the accompanying *laka* ('dance') negotiated by the dreamer's group.

[1] Advertisement for a performance at the Sydney Town Hall as part of the Waratah Festival, 1972 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, 23 September 1972, p. 30: https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/119743490/ [accessed 22 October 2017]).

The loss and revival of men's ceremony practices, including *kujika* and *marndar* songs, is an important story in itself, but one that is outside the scope of the present chapter.[2] Nonetheless, it is worth noting, in this context, the close relationship that Lardil songmen have with other Gulf communities, especially the Yanyuwa people of Borroloola, through ceremony and stories. The Yanyuwa song traditions, summarised by Bradley and Mackinlay (2000), have much in common with those at Mornington Island, except that Lardil *burdal* (currently over 160 distinct songs dreamt by at least 40 individuals) are always received through dreams.

Within the *burdal* genre there are two subclasses: *kirdi burdal* ('small burdal'), fun dances that children are encouraged to participate in; and *mutha burdal* ('big burdal'), which relate important stories and are danced by adults at the end of an evening of dance (see Memmott 1979:112). Most *burdal* are danced by both men and women (with defined roles), although there are a handful that are for either just men or just women to dance. While *burdal* can be dreamt by either men or women, the public singers for *burdal* are always men.

The term *laka* in Lardil has a complex range of meanings. Its most general English gloss would be something like 'way', as in the 'way to do something'. But it also has a deeper sense as 'the way you conduct yourself'. The late Kenneth Jacob composed a Lardil motto for the local school, *Thaldi bana merri kuba laka*, roughly calquable as 'Come and listen (learn) good-way'. In the context of dance, *laka* simply refers to the movements made by dancers, and the verb *layiwurri* means 'to find *laka'*. It is used to refer to the process of dance creation, as described in the account by Nancy Wilson that begins the next section.

An important distinction can be made between the passive way in which songs are received in dreams and the active process of 'finding' or developing an appropriate dance to go with the song. This need for active development applies even when the dream contained elements of dance. Putting song and dance together in waking reality is still a collaborative process between songmen and dancers.

2 Dreaming of songs

Nancy Wilson recorded the following account of events from the 1940s:

> We used to go out bush for holidays . . . our camps round about each other. And when I go to bed now I can hear person singing . . . singing in his sleep. It's a dream, like, his dream . . . he might have two or three lines of that song what he dream. And he get up in the early morning and he sing . . . then he might forget couple of lines. He ask them other mates bla him now, 'Hey, youfella bin hear me singing last night?' They said, 'Yeah'. 'Ah, what this song, what this line here, this *burdal*, this part here, now? I singim two line, and what that other line I singim?' . . . That other man say, 'Well, you bin sing like that'. Alright, he putim in that third line bla that song. And he might put in the fourth line. So that song mightbe got four lines of song . . . Another lot come sing from nother end of their camp . . . them ladies they sit down sing too, with them men . . . Alright they sing, sing, sing.
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> Alright, when that song finish, they might have something to eat . . . then this boss fella now what bin dream the dance, he singout now, '*Thaldi* now, we go *layiwurri'*. That mean, 'we get up, we go now, make up this song what I bin dream last night.' So they all get up and they go long way from the camp . . . just the men themselves . . . And they sit down now, 'Where *laka* now?'. That mean, 'Where's the action now? Any action?'. 'Yeah'. One man might get up, do his action . . . they agree with it. Then another man get up, action. Mightbe they disagree, they don't wantim . . . They ask,

[2] For further discussion of the revival of men's ceremony at Mornington Island, see Paul Memmott's recently published account (2016).

> 'Well, what that meaning of that dance?'. Well, he must be for either bird, or fish, or . . . bushfire . . . or mightbe shake-a-leg . . . So that corroboree go on and on. They agree with it then. That's how they get their dance (in Nancarrow 1999:65-6).

The dreaming of songs is regarded by Lardil people as a gift from deceased ancestors, *karnanganmenda* 'sky people'[3], various 'unseen people', or the *mirndiyan* associated with story places on country. The Lardil term *mirndiyan* is usually translated into English as 'dreaming', but also incorporates the senses of 'story' and 'totem' (see McKnight 1999:229). *Mirndiyan* are the underlying stories associated with place that can make themselves known through dreams. The experience of stories emerging thus unexpectedly is an ongoing confirmation of their timeless veracity and power, even though the actual representations of story through *burdal* are situated in time as well as place.

The same song may be dreamt by two different people. Fred Jarrarr explained how a story spirit first gave Fred's classificatory son Kenny Roughsey a song in a dream, which Kenny forgot upon waking. Fred then dreamt the same song the following night, remembered it, and a dance was made to go with it.

> One song, that bla walba[4]. Well mefla bin go that time from here, [...] Mefla bin go round ... to that story now, there where they stand up la water, that Maarnbil story. That man from Sydney Island, Warambay[5], bin follow mefla right up langa Meekiyan. Then that fella gaveim [the song to] this fella. Everything e bin dream about e bin loseim again, then I bin dreamim that night . . . This song no more from olden time, this one bin dream from this time . . . if e bin only song from olden time, mightbe forget about all thatun, mifella. This song, alright, from this time (Jarrarr 1975).

He goes on to describe how they subsequently performed the *walba* song with its paddle dance on tour in the Gold Coast, Brisbane and Sydney, even transporting a full *walba* and paddles down from Mornington Island for the purpose.

Jarrarr's recount implies that songs can exist independently of individual memory, and that the forgetting of songs is no barrier to their appearance in dreams at later times. This concurs with a broader Lardil experience of *mirndiyan* existing independently of the knowledge of individuals. For example, it has been reported (e.g. by Lindsay Roughsey in Memmott (1979:213) and by Cecil Goodman (pers. com. 2013)) that much of the Lardil story of *Thuwathu* 'Rainbow Serpent' was lost during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a time of great upheaval in the southern Gulf – as in other parts of Australia (see Trigger 1992). Knowledge of the *Thuwathu* story and associated songs was re-dreamt by Sandy Goodman and Paddy Marmies in the 1930s, bringing the *Thuwathu* story back into the consciousness of Lardil people. Further *Thuwathu* songs have subsequently been dreamt by several other men, mostly in the 1940s to 1960s, but also a handful in the 1970s and one in the 1980s.

Lardil songmen have on occasion dreamt new songs when travelling outside Mornington Island. These songs are regarded by the songmen as belonging to the country where they are dreamt, and are not necessarily meant for Lardil people. On one such occasion, songman Stanley Chong was with a group that detoured to Jenolan Caves, near Sydney. He and most of the other Lardil people waited near the mouth of the cave while some went inside. That night he was staying in a flat in Bondi, with the rest of the group, and dreamt the song of the Rainbow Serpent, who came down through the cave and swirled around the pool in front. Stanley recalled that the song was sung for him by old men sitting around the waterhole and then translated into his own language (Cleary 1984:51).

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[3] There is an account of analogous Yanyuwa sky people in Mackinlay and Bradley (2003). These authors present a detailed account of Yanyuwa man Jerry Brown Rrawajinda's reception of a song from the Ngabaya Spirit Man of the sky. This story is familiar to Lardil songmen also.

[4] A *walba* is a bark raft. The words of the song begin *yakinba rangu biyara rama*.

[5] *Warambay* was a black stingray and warrior.

Following this experience, several songmen expressed the intention of putting a dance together for the new song when they returned to Mornington Island. That process did not ever happen, however. No recordings were made, and, as far as the authors know, no one can now remember how the song went. Resources and equipment were very limited in those years, so this event just remains as a story. There were other cases, involving different songmen, where songs were dreamt outside Lardil country; for example, at Robinvale, on the Murray River, and at a dingo story site on a beach south of Adelaide. On one occasion, Lardil songman Kenneth Jacob dreamt a red kangaroo song after visiting Morialta Falls, near Adelaide. In the following days we returned to the falls to film him singing the song *in situ*. The footage and the song were passed on to the local Kaurna people, as they were regarded as the true owners of the story.

3 Touring and public performance

Gordon Watt made the following observations in an interview with the authors:

> When we first go out [on tour in the late 1960s] . . . can't be frightened of people, even children. You got to face them when you dancing. You can't be dancing with you head down all the time, nothing. You feel a lot better when you doing something, dancing . . . thats bin how I feeling when I first dance . . . I just love it. Some week we mightbe do two or three schools in one day . . . I feel really tired, but we had to do it . . . it's our culture. We gotta keep the culture going (Watt, 18 July 2012).

Lardil songmen and dancers first performed to mainstream Australian audiences in 1965. Because of the remote island location of the community, substantial organising and expense were involved then, as now, in travelling to mainland urban centres to perform. The first tours were facilitated by mission administration in conjunction with festival organisers and entrepreneurs. From about 1973 Lardil people became more involved in the organisation of touring activities, and in 1977 incorporated into Woomera Aboriginal Corporation (henceforth referred to here are 'Woomera'[6]) with the joint aims of sharing culture through touring and reviving culture on Mornington Island. Over the next 25 years, more than 120 tours were conducted in almost every part of Australia. As well, there were in excess of 20 international tours.

In response to the availability of funding and a burgeoning 'market' in mainland Australia, touring proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s. It steadily expanded so that by the late 1990s over 150 individuals left the island in any one year for periods of four to eight weeks, mostly in the form of educational performances in schools, but also in the context of folkloric festivals and, occasionally, staged theatre performances. One effect of this process was daily exposure to and practice of songs. Because touring involved such intense and organised routines it proved to be an excellent learning time. Some experienced dancers were able to reskill as emerging singers, and some younger people were mentored by older songmen, allowing them to step up as singers in the context of a focus on youth-only performances.

There was sufficient flexibility in the touring schedules that new singers could practice before live audiences. Nonetheless, while there were many men on tour who took on a singing role from time to time, it was always recognised that the source of authority lay with a small number of the elder songmen. Between these men there were many tensions over issues such as ownership of particular *burdal*, performance rights, and creative or conservative interpretations of song meanings. These frictions created the potential for rivalry and jealousy (Memmott 1979:197). Family politics and differences in style have played a role in fostering and/or stifling the developing talent of younger performers.

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[6] In 2010 Woomera had a name change to Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation ('Mirndiyan Gununa').

One effect of national and international touring and public performance was a growing awareness of the issues surrounding 'authenticity'. Casey (2011:60) uses the term 'epistemic violence' to describe the separation of Aboriginal performance practices into 'authentic' and 'contaminated'. She argues that 'authenticity' in some schools of thought, especially those deriving from Durkheim, is improperly reserved for ritual and ceremony, but that such a division does not take account of cultural contexts and historical performance practices, and may lead to the impression that 'authentic' practices are static and unchanging 'museum-pieces'. Casey's argument also has relevance to the epistemic division implied by the often used terms 'traditional' and 'contemporary'.

The realities of working cross-culturally immediately require some artistic compromises, but these are not intrinsically incompatible with the 'authentic' or 'traditional' cultural practices, such as song dreaming and *layiwurri* (described above), which have always incorporated the elements of creativity and dynamism.

Lardil *burdal* are regarded as being primarily owned by the person who dreams them. However, there is a complex, broader web of ownership based on factors such as the family of the dreamer, the people who helped remember the song and 'find' the dance, and the country to which the story or meaning of the *burdal* belongs. Even more broadly, there is a strong sense of ownership today by Lardil people of the entire *burdal* repertoire, and, to a degree, sharing is encouraged within the Mornington Island community.

The main concern for Lardil people has been the use of the songs by other, non-Lardil, Aboriginal people. This has occurred on a number of occasions, and in some cases can be traced back to 'permission' being granted by a Lardil individual to an external group to use a particular song and/or dance. Some of these cases occurred through programs organised by Woomera, but others involved Lardil individuals who were engaged to teach and perform throughout the mainland.

Such acts of bestowing cultural rights however hold little validity back in the community. They are generally regarded as theft, and provoke outrage. Despite the depth of feeling, such affronts are nevertheless dealt with by quiet diplomacy, to bring about a cessation of the offending activity. Approaches are made on a personal level, sometimes by an intermediary, and usually result in immediate redress, with word spreading through Aboriginal networks. Reputations are important enough for protocol to be enforced. Nonetheless, Lardil people see vigilance as important, to protect both the integrity of original song words and the connection of song to people and country.

From the 1970s, Woomera tried to establish a protocol with other Aboriginal performers, such as students from the Aboriginal/Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), to limit the performance of Lardil song and dance to occasions where a Mornington Island performer was involved. At first the protocols were followed, but in more recent times this has not always been the case. Songs and dances easily become trade products, and guidelines are not always easily enforced in situations of scattered leadership. Protocols are still evolving, to deal with the complexity of situations that have been created by ongoing historical developments (see Cleary 2006).

Lardil song culture has been exposed to potential appropriation not just by travel but also by the commercial availability of song recordings. In 1985 a recording project by Woomera created cassette tapes of *burdal* songs for distribution in the community and for giving away as special gifts on tour.[7] These recordings were subsequently made into a CD (Cleary 1993) that was produced and distributed commercially (as *Budal Lardil*), with a contract giving royalties back to Woomera on behalf of the performers. Ironically, the existence of this CD later created a crisis that led to more intense scrutiny and research into song protocols and intellectual rights. In 1998 it was discovered that songs from *Budal Lardil* were being distributed in Europe on compilation CDs, without any connection back to Mornington Island. Legal action eventually resolved this matter, but it took two years and resulted in a heightened awareness that appropriation of songs could be happening at any time.

This was not the first time a commercial recording of Lardil *burdal* had been produced. In 1966 W&G Records released an LP recorded by George Kransky and coordinated by the Reverend Douglas Belcher. In 1977 the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) released a compilation tape that included recordings of *burdal* made by Alice Moyle. While we are not aware

[7] Recordings of some *kujika, wankabel* and other sacred songs were also made at the time, but these recordings were never publicly available.

that these recordings involved any misappropriation of songs, their existence, in an absence of clear protocols around ownership, is seen as a potential risk.

4 Archives and records

In 1992, Peter Cleary and Sam Pilot began collating information about Lardil songs in a typed document they called a 'songs register', arranged as a set of different fields. These included a Lardil name for the song; an English name; the 'country' the song belonged to; the 'owners/dreamers'; a rough transcript of the song text; and a summary of the 'meaning'. At that time the document's main purpose was to inform the development of presentation material to explain *burdal* for a non-Lardil audience. This was a creative process involving both songmen and lead dancers, who decided which *burdal* they were going to perform and what was to be said (and not said) about each item.

A few performers rotated in the role of 'presenter', and gradually particular ways of explaining the meanings of dance and story became routine. These explanations were repeated many times on tours that lasted for weeks. Such ways of presenting *burdal* were created in a cross-cultural setting, but made their way back into Mornington Island culture through school classes taught by performers back from tour.

From the late 1990s, the songs register also played a role in documenting ownership of songs for copyright discussions, as discussed above. The committee of the Woomera organisation saw the need to create a more formal and thoroughly researched register of songs, which was accomplished with the help of an AIATSIS research grant. The first task was to access documentation of *burdal* from archival collections, such as that of Paul Memmott, at the Aboriginal Data Archive. Memmott had audio recordings and a card file of Lardil songs, similar in form to the Woomera register (see Memmott 1979:520 for an example layout). Much of the information on Memmott's cards was able to be matched with contemporarily known songs. Other archival material sourced from AIATSIS included recordings of Lardil songs by Tindale (1960, 1963), Trezise (1965), Moyle (1966), Woolston (1966), and Keen (1969-70). Many of these recordings contained invaluable commentary on and discussion of song origins and associations.

A photocopied book was produced containing a page or two on each of about 90 *burdal*. Overall it was similar to the original 'songs register', but with the innovation of a multi-sourced commentary. This acknowledged a multiplicity of interpretations and historical points of view, as recorded from dancers and songmen at different times. All the elder songmen were given copies. The organisation kept some, but it was clear that songmen did not want the book or its contents made more widely available.

This book became the basis for a number of 'culture camps'. These began in 1997, with up to 100 participants over three days at a time. People sat around cassette players listening, discussing and remembering *burdal* from their own childhood. These journeys of discovery in the daytime further unfolded in the evenings, when old songs and dances were reconstructed. Some of these resurrected *burdal* later made their way into public performance back in Gununa or out on tour.

Over the next few years this research continued, both formally and informally. It involved further archival work and more interviews with songmen, which revealed many more *burdal* than had previously been documented. As a result, instead of just aiming to collect and document extant recordings, we also began to make new recordings of all known songs. In many cases this required a significant amount of practice and teaching by the elder songmen, which contributed to the momentum for several more camps.

In 2002 the software program FileMaker Pro was chosen as a database platform, because of its ability to allow many-to-many relationships between songs and recordings. An iTunes library was also used to organise digitised recordings referred to in the FileMaker database. This method was dropped after a year or so, because of difficulties with maintaining the iTunes library in the face of computer upgrades and crashes. Informally, however, dancer Renee Wilson, in her organisational role, continued to use iTunes, as a means of organising song recordings on her MP3 player. She was

able to make use of these easily accessible and portable recordings on numerous occasions, in rehearsal and performance, as a memory-jogger for elder songmen.

When a further update of the song book was printed in 2007, it included around 150 songs. Some songmen did look at the book from time to time, and were aware of the information in it (as all had contributed to various degrees), but they have not used it directly as a resource for learning songs. Listening to recordings and singing along with elder songmen has been a much more effective learning strategy, although the document is still valued as a reference point.

In 2012 the Mirndiyan Gununa Corporation began using the Ara Irititja digital archive program[8] (now known as 'Keeping Culture') to archive photographs, slides, film and audio material. This database is arranged around digital 'artefacts', which facilitates a focus on sound and video recordings. Some custom modifications were made to allow the FileMaker song data to be transferred across. Currently, both the FileMaker and Keeping Culture platforms are being maintained. They include over 160 *burdal* and 70 other songs, many performed on multiple recordings. Nonetheless, further work could be done to make the information accessible and usable in the community.

5 Cultural revival at Mornington Island

> The old people . . . taught us the songs and dances we must learn to keep strong with; to stay part of us and of our dreaming and our land. Without that we cannot live.
>
> – Larry Lanley, *The problem of preserving traditional values in a changing cultural context* (1978)

The first contemporary dance festival was held at Mornington Island in 1979, as a public affirmation and rekindling of cultural identity and pride. At that time there were at least 20 elder songmen with the knowledge and skills to lead dance performance. Around nine of these men were recognised as dreamers of songs. Over the following three decades the numbers dwindled, especially the number of *muyinda* – elder men with knowledge and experience dating from the period before colonial incursions. Currently at Mornington Island there is one songman in his 70s, two in their 40s, one in his 30s and four in their 20s. There are other men (and women) who have a passive knowledge or latent ability to sing some songs, but those just enumerated are recognised as the main people who sing for public events. It is worth considering the reasons for the generational gaps in this list.

From the late 1950s, after a period of mission-led suppression, a cultural revival of sorts began. From then until the early 2000s, the role of songman was left to those men who were already at the time regarded as 'experts', and younger men were not encouraged or supported to take on apprentice roles. For instance, the four men now in their 40s and 50s were all dancers for many years, relying on increasingly elderly senior men to sing for them. Although the transition from dancer to songman was probably a 'traditional' pathway, it was not automatic. More recently it has been recognised that, without intervention, there might come a time when there are no expert songmen left in the community. So these men have been given explicit support to learn from their elders.

The loss of key songman Ian James in 2002 was further impetus for a mentoring program at Mornington Island. In this case, Cecil Goodman, Gordon Watt and Kenneth Jacob were assigned as mentors for younger men in their 30s. The program was intended to address not just the obvious matter of a decline in songman numbers, but also issues around 'elitism'. These had begun to arise from the professional touring program. At its most general, the aim of the program was to broaden the skill base out beyond a handful of people. The mentoring arrangement was relatively informal. Mentees were given access to recordings of songs on CD for private study and sat next to elder songmen at rehearsals and performances.

Around the same time, some songmen and dance leaders were engaged to give regular dance lessons in the primary school. One or two boys would be chosen by the songmen to sit beside them. When there were spare boomerangs, these 'apprentices' would play along. Otherwise they would

[8] See http://www.irititja.com/ [accessed 9 April 2017].

clap in time. This was the first deliberate effort to mentor boys as future songmen, even though at first they were only expected to keep the rhythm. Today, many years later, some of those same boys have become the main songmen in the community.

There are a number of technical challenges young songmen face in learning to sing *burdal* songs with the level of skill required for public performance. A knowledge of spoken Lardil is only partially adequate for recognising terms in the language of *burdal* songs, and their meanings are, to an extent, open to interpretation (see Nancarrow 1999, 2010). Some words are specific 'song words', some are borrowed from neighbouring languages, and others are regarded as the language of 'unseen people'. There are also differences between different songmen in pronunciation, rhythm and placement of text. It can also be a challenge if there are too few participants at rehearsals. Sometimes the singers are required to dance, so the task of keeping the song words and rhythm going falls to one or two people. The singers also need to respond to the dancers. It is up to the *wijungu* ('lead dancer') to signal a change, or to 'break' the dance, and the songmen have to follow.

In addition, singers need to adjust the quality of their voice when singing for dancers. While a quiet voice is sufficient for individual or small group singing practice, a 'belting register' (Henrich 2006) is necessary for projecting over the noise of dancers and in large spaces. Maintaining the rhythm of boomerangs and/or clapsticks can be another challenge, especially when this is different to the rhythm of the song text. All of these skills must be managed simultaneously.

The most recent dance festivals at Mornington Island, in 2012 and 2013, provided an updated overview of cultural maintenance in the Lardil community. The few previous years were marked by a notable lack of community dance activity and organised (funded) touring projects. In 2012, only two elder songmen performed (Cleary 2012), and by 2013 both of these men were unavailable due to illness. This was a crisis point, and it was uncertain whether the festival could take place at all. A week before the planned opening night of the 2013 festival, people gathered in the dance ground with the intention of practising. Six men had come forward to sing and, equipped with boomerangs and clapsticks, they sat in a line ready. Elders sat on the side. It was about 5pm, after a long hot day, and nobody could find their voice. It took a painful 90 minutes before the six could find a rhythm together and their voices became stronger and resonant. The sun had set and more and more people came in to dance. Eventually more than 60 people were on their feet. Nobody wanted to stop, and keys had to be found to switch on the floodlight. The 90 minutes of waiting had been an essential part of the process, which led to a successful festival the following week.

Even more recently, in April 2015, a group of young men recreated the dance for a jabiru *burdal* that had not been danced for at least 50 years. There were two main catalysts: an approaching book launch at the school; and the uncovering of a recording from 1976 of songmen singing and discussing the song. Over two days, the young men got together with elder songmen and dancers who helped interpret the Lardil language on the recording and assist with the *layiwurri* process. One of the eldest men remembered seeing the dance as a boy. His memories of the jabiru *laka* were incorporated, but the final result was a collaboratively created choreography. The *burdal* was performed with dance on the third day of practice, to an audience of about 300 people.

6 Conclusions: expectations for cultural survival

> They still need to sit with me.
>
> – Cecil Goodman (pers. com. 2015)

There are many factors in contemporary life that work both for and against the maintenance of song culture. One of these is that dance events are often commissioned by non-Lardil stakeholders, who control the financial rewards. Cultural and commercial values are competing in the community all the time. The role of money cannot be ignored in strategies for song maintenance, and yet, alone, it cannot sustain the culture. Similarly, access to archival sources can be invaluable if combined with

effective ways of organising the material and sharing it with the right people, but it is not an end in itself. Beyond locating and repatriating this material lies the more onerous task of using it in such a way that it will have an ongoing life in the community. This has been and still is a great challenge.

In the end, no amount of organisational structuring of projects and activities will replace an individual's commitment to a face-to-face teaching relationship with an elder songman. Underlying this learning of songs there can be a revitalisation of the ability to dream songs and 'bring them out' as *burdal*. A song may be given to anyone, but the receiver must feel that it is right and proper to bring that knowledge into the public domain, either themselves as a singer or by passing the song on to recognised songmen. This is an inner, personal responsibility, but is also one requiring sanction from the community. This is not an organisational matter, because the support has to be expressed communally.

It is time to reflect on the rising generation, in whose hands the future of the culture is held. In spite of fears of cultural loss within the Lardil community, it is a measure of success that there are now a number of young songmen. They, and the families who support and encourage them, create and maintain the social fabric in which the song culture may survive.

We are writing this article not long after the funeral of one of our elder songmen. Many young men came forward at the ceremony, to sing and dance and pay him respect. There remains after him only one other songman over 60, whose words we have quoted above as an epigraph to this section. He was in hospital at the time he spoke them He has lived through all those disrupted years of religious indoctrination, 'grog wars'[9] and the many family and social upheavals that have gripped the community. He is well aware of his own limitations, in terms of his ability to pass on everything the rising generation needs to know about the song traditions; but there is still much they can learn from him.

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[9] David McKnight (2002) has written extensively about the effects of alcohol at Mornington Island.

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