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A FESTIVAL OF SONG
Developing social capital and safeguarding
Australian Aboriginal culture through
authentic performance

Candace Kruger

Introduction

The preservation of performance traditions is one of the highest priorities for Indigenous people, as it is through song, dance and associated ceremony that Indigenous people maintain lore and a sense of self within the world. Without immediate action, many Indigenous music and dance traditions are in danger of extinction.

(Yunupingu, Langton & Marett 2002)

An appropriate and effective vehicle for facilitating the ongoing preservation and future development of Indigenous performance traditions is the festival. Historically, festivals around the globe have been utilised as vehicles to preserve, maintain and/or showcase Indigenous performance, knowledges and culture while concomitantly facilitating the development of social capital traditions (Whitford & Dunn 2014). Similarly, authentic Indigenous song taught to children and performed at festivals (among other events) is highly charged with cultural capital (Johnson 2012), and through participation, engagement and trust in what they learn, as a collective group, Aboriginal jarjum (children) provide community with local cultural knowledge when they perform.

This chapter presents a case study focussing on the extent to which the Yugambeh Language and Song Project (YLSP), in the Yugambeh language region (Gold Coast, Logan and Scenic Rim local government boundaries of South-East Queensland, Australia, Yugambeh 2015), highlighting the Yugambeh Youth Choir (YYC) – an Australian Aboriginal youth choir – facilitates the development of social capital and safeguards Aboriginal culture through performances at festivals and events, including National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week events, National Reconciliation Week events and, in particular, the Yugambeh Mobo (tomorrow) Festival.

Corroboree (a time to gather for singing, dancing and storytelling).

The Yugambeh Mobo Festival is an annual community festival developed and staged by the Yugambeh Museum, Language and Heritage Research Centre, situated in Beenleigh, Queensland, Australia. The museum was formally opened in 1995 and is one of twenty-three
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Indigenous Languages and Arts Program Language Centres supported by the Australian Government (Department of Communications and the Arts, Australian Government 2017).

The Yugambeh Mobo Festival is the Gold Coast’s largest celebration of Aboriginal culture and is hosted annually during Reconciliation Week (27 May–3 June). By nature, Indigenous cultural expression is fluid, and therefore community festival programming requires flexibility and adaptation over time. The Yugambeh Mobo Festival, activated in 2014, is one such example, a continuation of previous Yugambeh Festivals and events adapted from other events, i.e. The Drumley Walk. Yugambeh Mobo is a free event showcasing stories, music, song, dance and art as an expression of living Aboriginal culture based on traditional language and stories. The formation of the Yugambeh Mobo Festival experience is aimed at encouraging all Australians to become part of the cultural and educational exchange that is vital for Indigenous legacy (Yugambeh Museum, 2016).

Historically, Yugambeh Elders have always maintained language, lore and story both formally and informally within community (Best & Barlow 1997). The idea of the festival, where local community celebrates a shared experience and the public participates in the experience (South Australian Tourism Commission 1997), is not new to Indigenous communities of South-East Queensland. Arcodia and Robb (2000) acknowledged that festivals have emanated from cultural traditions and as such are a vehicle to demonstrate cultural traditions to non-Indigenous communities. In this case, Yugambeh Mobo Festival acts as the agent for the way Aboriginal communities have always preserved and celebrated their own culture.

Yugambeh people are descendants of Yarberri. In Yugambeh legend he is known as Jabreen. Jabreen created his homeland by forming the mountains, the river systems and the flora and fauna. Jabreen created the site known as Jebbribillum (bora ground) when he came out of the water onto the land. As he picked up his fighting waddy (club), the land and water formed into the shape of a rocky outcrop (little Burleigh). This was the site where the people gathered to learn and to share the resources created by Jabreen. The corroboree held at this site became known as the Bora (sacred ground) and symbolised the ignition of life. Through the ceremony, people learned to care for the land and their role was to preserve its integrity.

(O’Connor 1993)

Bora rings are a network of significant places for Aboriginal people. They are found within the region of Maryborough, Queensland extending south to northern New South Wales (Michael 2016) and are culturally significant sites which have provided a tangible framework for the structuring of social and cultural interaction. Knowledge of important places fosters and strengthens the ties to place, knowledge, language and the formation of cultural identity (Satterthwait & Heather 1987) and empowers traditional owners to be socially and culturally connected within their own community.

European settlers to the South-East Queensland region wrote several accounts of their experiences through memoirs and press articles about Aboriginal bora ceremonies and corroboree gatherings in which music, dance and storytelling formed a fundamental part of the ceremony and effectively broke down cross-cultural obstacles because both Aboriginal communities and European settlers were invited to attend (Hanlon 1951). As such, contributing memoirs and recordings from settlers were the first phase of safeguarding South-East Queensland Aboriginal culture through the shared experience of public corroboree, arguably also the humble beginnings of festival and the development of social capital within the region (Pardy 1991).
The Yugambeh Mobo Festival, through its fundamental structure, intrinsically provides the vehicle for the sharing of local Indigenous resources and knowledge. Yugambeh Mobo is an event generated for local Indigenous community, where non-Indigenous community can share in local cultural experiences and where opportunity is created for a common social purpose. The YYC is one example of a conceptualised idea created by me (a local Kombumerri and Ngughi woman), from the opportunity provided by the social and cultural objectives of the Yugambeh Mobo Festival.

Ngulli nabai yarrabil (we begin to sing).

Koen’s (2009) view that an outward-looking orientation results from an aspiration to do work of value, import and benefit to others underpins the principle aspirations of the YYC; teach, learn and connect. The YYC is the first Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) youth choir of its kind where urban indigenous youth aged 5–25 years can learn to yarrabil (sing) in Yugambeh Aboriginal language, whilst learning Yugambeh language and culture. The YYC has grown significantly, from 10 participants at their first performance at the Yugambeh Mobo Festival 2014 to nearly 50 regular participants at Yugambeh Mobo 2016.

Yugambeh Mobo is the choirs’ nabei (to begin to play) and can be accredited as the place which directly increased community awareness of jarjum singing heritage language. The Yugambeh Mobo Festival, whilst providing the opportunity for jarjum to perform songs of the region in the traditional Yugambeh language and tell the gaureima (story) of each songline, has provided substantial networking opportunities for the YYC.

From humble beginnings, with just a desire to learn and share Yugambeh language songs with Yugambeh family, this unique Australian Aboriginal choral group has grown to regularly perform for Indigenous community, local community and the broader community of South-East Queensland and are always warmly received. Their distinct ability to transmit cultural knowledge by singing Yugambeh language alive for the community and at festivals is highly sought after, and therefore the group perform approximately twice per month.

These performance opportunities have also meant that Yugambeh jarjum have been able to meet and talk to the Governor General of Australia, Sir Peter Cosgrove; High Court and Supreme Court Justices; Federal, State and local politicians; sporting and cultural identities; university educators; and business and community leaders. Through performance and conversation with community leaders, choir participants have come to understand that Yugambeh culture becomes visible when they perform and that through choir performativity, choir teaches community about local Aboriginal culture.

In 2016, 38 members of the YYC, aged 5–18 years, additionally participated in the YLSP, an investigation into the effects of participation in an Aboriginal language choir for urban indigenous children. Five themes were identified as being of benefit to the participants, including youth leadership, well-being (including self-efficacy), language acquisition, identity and Aboriginality, and sociocultural capital (Kruger 2017).

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the power of the festival can be viewed as a communication vehicle for the development of social capital and as a vehicle for safeguarding culture. Thus, the chapter will discuss the final theme, developing social capital and safeguarding Australian Aboriginal culture through authentic performance at festivals and events.

Methodology

The YLSP followed the systemic development of knowing and knowledge principles of participatory action research (PAR) as outlined by Reason and Bradbury (2008). In this research, the use of PAR involved the examination of action and reflection, and theory and practice, and through participation with others it facilitated the pursuit of practical solutions.
for the flourishing of individual persons and communities. For further details on this, see Kruger (2017). Additionally, in consideration of Rigney’s (1999) earlier work on Indigenist methodology where Indigenous voices are privileged within research, Yugambeh language words were incorporated throughout the project and can be seen in this chapter as italicised words followed by the English meaning the first time the word appears.

Migunn Yugambeh (what it means to know Yugambeh), from the jarjum perspective was observed and recorded through the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Utilising a number of methods ensured validity to the emerging themes and credibility of the information given by the participants, and allowed for greater versatility when working with children (Creswell 2009). To do this surveys, wula bora (to give or share in a gathering at a significant space) sessions, interviews, video observation and personal reflections were utilised to stimulate evidence from participants.

The choir is also guided by my principle purpose, to action change for my community and to build ‘cultural capital’ (Jeannotte 2003) within my community, where the YYC is an applied ethnomusicological endeavour to begin to action such change. To engage jarjum I combine learning the skill of singing and having ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’, with learning language through song as a methodology for preservation. Grant’s (2012) theory that grassroots community choir initiatives, which safeguard language, should utilise various methodologies for preservation, supports my principle purpose and methodology. Therefore, when teaching the YYC, I follow a combination of the following two principles: rehearsals that teach culture and language which safeguards our culture, and rehearsals that prepare performance material to build cultural capital in community.

I acknowledge that younger jarjum do not necessarily distinguish between these methods because I teach that learning is a way to know and knowledge should be passed on. I say, ‘Once you have learnt these songs you can share them with anyone’, and then jarjum will tell me when they have passed culture on and to whom they have shared it with. However, the older jarjum are beginning to understand the concepts of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘performativity’ through the choir’s artistic intent. Their thoughts on ‘cultural capital’, ‘preserving language’ and ‘sharing culture’ are evidenced in the following sections.

Social cultural capital

The YYC is an arts activity in community. At the most rudimentary level this arts activity engages, teaches and passes on Aboriginal language and culture through song. Jeannotte (2003) reported that the arts have a positive effect on social cohesion; they promote intercultural understanding, empower communities, regenerate neighbourhoods, encourage active communities and celebrate local culture and tradition.

The members of the choir participate when they want to and when they (and their parents) are available. Not every member performs at every performance; it is always optional, but at least 20–30 members perform regularly and participants of the YLSP had performed in a minimum of five festivals and/or events by the end of the research period.

Ruhanen and Whitford (2012) found that Indigenous groups who performed at Indigenous festivals increased their sociocultural benefits as they became recognised components of their community development. Independently, during the time of this research, jarjum from the choir were individually invited to perform at various events within the local community, including performances at their schools. YYC jarjum are becoming recognised components of their community development; they are now known as Indigenous youth who celebrate local culture and promote intercultural understanding.
Importantly, Child A (17+) understands the notion of promoting intercultural understanding. In the following interview excerpt he surmised he will be happy when schools in the area learn about Yugambeh language and sing the songs.

CANDACE: So we tried our first days of Christmas and it was all giggly and funny, but you’ve taken a song that belongs to the world and put our own spin and language on it, so what did you think of that?

CHILD A: I think it’s quite awesome… oh (he gets excited) it’s like, I can’t explain, it’s just pretty awesome how we just like (he does some animal actions that we do with the song) and with that number counting and stuff (he refers to singing the 12 days of Christmas counting the numbers in Yugambeh language) that will probably be used in schools around our Mob area.

CANDACE: Our region, yes.

CHILD A: It’s gonna be helpful for the future and showing people like, showing that there’s actually a language out there, it’s amazing.

(Child A, interview, 30 October 2016)

Child B (8–10) transmits culture with others at school, she creates performances, including her S-Factor performance, and she shares that she celebrates local culture and tradition at school. Through choir, Child B has learnt how to perform and share knowledge, song, language and tradition. In the following interview, we can see how she additionally shares that her happiness in sharing is transmitted to others and consequently she is building cultural capital in community.

I am doing a performance at school in the S-Factor (school competition). I’m doing a traditional eagle dance with my brother and sister; we are doing a story about two eagles. I move my arms to show me catching fish and flying away. Then I begin to flap my wings. I use this dance to tell stories like I would in choir. I like sharing culture. I take Mum’s possum skins to school, rattle sticks, boomerangs, I chose to take them. I showed and did the ‘night bird dreaming story’ to my class, I don’t think I did well, but my class said they have never heard something more wonderful and I think I should be happy for what I have because this song is about not being selfish. I sing songs and do dances to my friends and class. I’m making them feel happy and giving them a different culture that they didn’t know.

(Child B, interview, 15 October 2016)

Recently we gained two new choir members. These new participants are not through their parents seeking a community connection, but rather through the recommendation of choir parents and jarjum actively seeking others in community to join them. The jarjum are recruiting other Indigenous jarjum that they know to strengthen social cohesion. Child C (11–13) likes the idea of new people joining choir ‘because the more people join the bigger the choir gets’. She tells me that she ‘lets others know that she is in choir’ and she happily assists the building of the community because she ‘wants to meet more Aboriginal kids in my area’.

Jarjum particularly understand and are able to reason, that after a festival performance or event such as the Gold Coast Show and NAIDOC celebrations, how they have shared culture with others and how members of the community can then pass cultural knowledge on.

When participants were asked if they ‘liked sharing Aboriginal songs with others’, all participants answered ‘Yes’ and shared their reasons.
Some jarjum are just happy to share culture:

‘Because I can share my culture with other people’,
‘I like my culture and I like sharing it and teaching to others’.

Others recognise that it is a teaching moment:

‘I like teaching my culture to other people’,
‘I get a chance to teach others about my language and share my culture’.

And some understand that the community recognise and appreciate the culture that has been shared:

‘Because it makes us more visible, I can show them what the land used to be’;
‘So people can know who we really are and belong to’;
‘If other people learn language, the language will survive’;
‘It helps you and others learn more about the Yugambeh language’;
‘Because I can share our language, because sometimes they can tell other people’,
‘Because other people aren’t Aboriginal’.

Overwhelmingly jarjum understand that when they perform at a festival or event they become teachers of culture. For them this is through the tradition of singing traditional and contemporary song in traditional language. They will become the yarrabilgin (songmen) and yarrabilgingunn (songwomen) of their community. Child D (8–10) directly articulated this concept:

I’m sharing the lost language with other people who don’t know the language and I’m telling them stories that they wouldn’t hear anywhere else.

(Child D, interview, 16 October 2016)

Along similar lines to Johnsons’s (2012) claim that projects that look at language and identity are highly charged with cultural capital, the YYC, as a collective group, have become teachers of Yugambeh language and culture in their region and beyond. Through participation, engagement and trust in what they do, jarjum concomitantly provide community with local knowledge when they perform locally and local knowledge to a wider audience when they perform outside their region at events, festivals or live on media outlets.

Child E (17+) already understands he teaches culture. He stated that he needs to ‘have an interest in my culture, because we perform culture. I need to know what I am singing about; I have a responsibility to know what it is I am sharing with others’. And he demonstrates a deeper understanding that through choir performativity ‘this choir teaches community about the local Aboriginal culture, to share with others’.

Child F (14–16) had a similar understanding and reflected that sometimes choir performs at ceremony which is aimed to engage people of any culture.

During NAIDOC week, the choir performed at one of the ceremonies held at the Burleigh RSL [bora ground]. The theme for this year was song lines and I was asked to speak about what song lines has meant to me, particularly after joining the choir when it started in 2014. The ceremony aimed to engage people not only of Aboriginal or Torres
Strait Islander descent, but of any culture. It was a big turn out with many people of many different cultures attending, which filled me with pride to express the significance of song lines in my life and my culture.

(Child F, participant reflection, 19 July 2016)

On the basis of the evidence from jarjum who regularly perform traditional Indigenous language through song at festivals and events, the YYC can claim that participation in an urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s and youth choir assists children and youth to build a community, to support each other through this community and to become invested in each other’s lives. Concomitantly, the Yugambeh community is building a secure and safe environment for jarjum enriched with social and cultural capital through the communal activity of jarjum learning and singing heritage language. Jarjum provide confirmatory evidence that performativity of Indigenous cultural knowledge crosses cultural barriers and builds social capital within community.

Safeguarding culture

The group and I have evolved continuously and concurrently through the opportunities that are presented to us. The knowledge that is gained by learning language through song leads to a deeper understanding of culture, and as the jarjum mature or become curious they ask more in-depth questions. An example of this curiosity and thirst for cultural knowledge was demonstrated in Child G (11–13) and Child H (8–10) wula bora (interview) session. They asked for some cultural explanations:

CHILD H: Can I ask you something?
CANDACE: Yes.
CHILD G: How come the Bora ring, we can’t go in it?

(There is a section of the wula bora session here that has been intentionally left out of the transcript as it contains culturally sensitive material. The girls and I have a discussion about Bora ring ceremony and the Bora ring that we attend for celebration and ceremony at Burleigh Heads, QLD).

(Wula bora session, 7 September 2016)

Although not formally part of the research (Kruger 2017), just like the jarjum, when community hear us and see us perform at festivals and events they also want to know more. The choir members, parents and myself are often asked questions after a performance by community members, or comments are made to us such as ‘I didn’t know any of this information’, ‘I really liked hearing the children sing and learning about the region’ and ‘Thank you for sharing your culture with us’. Comments about YYC performances are also made on community social media or news media websites where the choir has featured. Community bystanders leave remarks such as ‘beautiful’, ‘enjoyed it’, ‘well done’, ‘I wish we had always combined cultures’, ‘I loved hearing Aboriginal language’, ‘deadly and proud’ and ‘this performance makes me proud too’.

These community experiences have additionally evolved the choir into a commodity with its own identity; essentially the choir performs for community. Importantly however, the choir is not a ‘product’ nor should we become subject to labels such as ‘cultural cringe’; the YYC is simply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jarjum learning Yugambeh Aboriginal culture and sharing it authentically with community.
Grant’s (2012, p. 110) view on safeguarding culture through music is ‘that the odds of successfully safeguarding music might be higher than of language, perhaps because of music’s greater ability to recontextualise or its greater commercial potential’. Therefore, it is with Grant’s contextual view on safeguarding music and commercial potential in mind that I develop a similar claim to acknowledge how our commodity works in our community. Jarjum are sustaining and safeguarding their music traditions, in addition to their language, through choral performativity which communicates culture to the community.

On this topic, I was able to share my thoughts with Pat Hession, ABC Radio 630 North Queensland, on the 3rd of June 2016 in Townsville, prior to the 2016 QLD Reconciliation Award Ceremony, where the YYC was named the 2016 winner of the Queensland Reconciliation Award – Community Division. Pat and I discussed the themes of safeguarding music and tradition, commercial product and sharing culture with community:

PAT: I know when I’ve travelled overseas, I’ve seen people doing traditional performances and I’ve thought ‘there’s a bit of cultural cringe in there’. I’m worried that people are putting on a show rather than giving me an authentic interpretation of what their culture means to them.

CANDACE: ‘Authentic’ is an interesting word. We are working with urban children who are demonstrating living culture, so for us it is about sharing the stories. You’ll see kids hop up and sing and we’re actually telling the tales of our area and it may not be exactly what someone expects to see, but it is what we do. So we use our voices and we sing, and the kids have beautiful voices and I’m training them to sing well, correctly as well and to sing in harmony and we’re just doing our ‘thing’. And our ‘thing’ is to share our story in community.

(ABC Radio 630 North Queensland interview, 3 June 2016)

Pat Hession’s question about the perception of authenticity by an audience was surprising as I had not considered that an audience would view the choir as disingenuous. Adverse thoughts about a living culture choir or the practice of learning culture do not assist the safeguarding of language or culture. The choir’s experiences to this point have not demonstrated that there is negativity surrounding urban jarjum learning Yugambeh tradition; rather it has been the opposite. The YYC’s body of experience has demonstrated acceptance, popularity and community pride alongside an eagerness for more. These results are based along similar lines to Arcodia and Whitford’s (2006) findings where performances in community, particularly festivals, encourage participation, create and maintain cultural activities, and facilitate the development of social capital, which develops in a positive environment.

Concluding thoughts

Knowledge of Aboriginal language and cultural practice is vital for the survival of Australian Indigenous cultural heritage. The YLSP validates the power of the festival as a communication vehicle for the development of social capital and as a vehicle for safeguarding culture. Additionally, it demonstrates the necessity for other Australian Indigenous communities to engage their children and youth in living culture practice because jarjum enjoy learning their culture through the method of song and active participation.

The YYC is one ongoing endeavour to girebbah (wake up) Aboriginal language in the Yugambeh language region of South-East Queensland, Australia. The evidence gathered from the YLSP demonstrated how performances at festivals by an Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander children’s language choir can safeguard heritage language and culture while concomitantly building social cultural capital (among other things) within an Indigenous community. It is critically important then that other Indigenous communities become empowered and begin to consider similar programmes for their ḟarjum.

Thus, further action and in particular research is required to discover and facilitate ongoing learning of Australian Indigenous song material resources for many Indigenous communities. Additionally, future research must investigate further development of Indigenous community identity and engagement through performativity at festivals such as the Yugambeh Mobo Festival. Finally, there is also an opportunity to explore and gain a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which Indigenous language, song and cultural practices can also act as an effective communication vehicle for the ongoing, sustainable development of sociocultural legacy for community.

References


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