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History, Memory and Music: The Repatriation of Digital Audio to Yolngu Communities  
or  
Memory as Metadata

Peter G. Toner

Metadata, as is well known, is data about data. It is certainly possible to develop a much more elaborate definition, and others are in a much better position to do so than I am. For my purposes, I would like to strip back the definition of metadata to its essential core, and that is data about data.

In particular, though, I have two kinds of data in mind. The reference data are digitized audio recordings made in northeast Arnhem Land between the mid-1920s and the early 1980s—but they could in practice be any kind of digitized cultural heritage. The metadata which refer to these recordings are people's memories—memories about the singers, about the ethnomusicologists or anthropologists who produced them, about the recording sessions, or about the musical past more generally. In my research I have always been interested in memory, and its contrasts with history, but to think of memory as metadata is an important way of linking the concerns of Yolngu traditional owners with those of archivists, and to foreground the prospects and challenges of repatriation in a digital age.

I should acknowledge from the outset that thinking of memory as metadata has been partially inspired by the “Software Tools for Indigenous Knowledge Management” developed by Jane Hunter and her colleagues at DSTC. If memory was always a key interest in this research, it was the idea of metadata annotations of the kind developed by DSTC being attached to digital objects that has clarified the link between memory and the digital domain—although the issues for Yolngu custodians have yet to be worked out (<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2003/papers/hunter/hunter.html>).

*Some Thoughts on Memory*

“Memories of the past are, like all common-sense forms, strangely composite constructions, resembling a kind of geology, the selective sedimentation of past traces” (Johnson & Dawson 1998, 78). So wrote the members of the so-called “Popular Memory Group” at the University of Birmingham, and all scholars who have worked in fields related to oral history can relate to this idea. The field of history, almost always tied as it is to written sources and literate cultures, maintains a semblance of fixity and objectivity that typically eludes the way the past is depicted in oral traditions, although it is obvious that a statement is not more true simply because it is written down for posterity. History and memory, then, are often contrasted as separate epistemological domains.

So, if memory is unique, what can we say about it? One key feature noted by many is that memory is a term which relates not only to the past, but to the relationship between past and present (ibid.). As Ronald Grele has written of the work of the oral historian: “All history is selection and the basis of selection is our current concern” (Grele 1985, 251). He goes on to write:

Vast ideological apparatuses conspire to impose upon us a “correct” vision of our history and in this way our memories are shaped, reawakened, dulled, distorted or forgotten. But it is also the way they are sharpened, honed, kept alive, and used and argued about (ibid.).

So a vital feature of memory is that it is shaped by present-day concerns, but that it equally shapes our perceptions of the present. But if the ideology of the present can exert such a heavy hand over memory, then that begs the question of truthfulness in memory: how do we measure the truth or falsity of memory and, more importantly, why should we? If memory is heavily conditioned by the concerns of the present, then questions of truth and falsity may be put to one side or dismissed altogether, except in so far as they shed a light on the contemporary situation of the person remembering. In other words,

at least for an anthropologist, the truth content of what is said about the past can be less important than how what someone says about the past should be interpreted in terms of present-day social concerns. As Elizabeth Tonkin has noted: “Trying to reconstruct ‘what really happened’ in the distant past is a tiny proportion of historical action and discourse in any community” (Tonkin 1992, 121). Or, to quote Ronald Grele: “We are not testers of memory or recall. We do not go into the field to test how much an informant knows of an event or how good his or her recall is...[W]e want to know what the events under discussion meant to those who recall them (Grele 1985, 249).

An excellent example of this aspect of memory in the Australian Aboriginal context is provided by Howard and Frances Morphy in their examination of the “myths” of Ngalakan history in the Roper River valley in the Northern Territory, where they write that “the integration of the past within the consciousness of the present” is precisely the way in which “history enters, in an active way, the system of social reproduction” (Morphy & Morphy 1984, 460). The Morphys are interested in examining contemporary Ngalakan perceptions of the past which are used as a framework for understanding the relationship between past and present, in particular the differences between Ngalakan people as they are today and as they were before European contact (*ibid.*). They note that Ngalakan memories of past events may contain “forgotten” omissions and “transformed” remembrances, as well as memories that are demonstrably false; these features usually result in the memories being rejected as data on factual grounds, which ignores the complex ways in which memories are used in everyday discourse (*ibid.*, 461-2). As the Morphys write, Ngalakan memories:

...are not “recollections of times past” but part of present understandings of the past that need bear no relation to what actually happened or was. History is important to our analysis not as a record of events but as a means of understanding how the relationship between the past and present has been continuously reconstructed and how the myths about the past fit the conditions of the present (*ibid.*, 462).

Their analysis goes on to investigate Ngalakan views of “wild blackfellows”, a view of Aboriginality derived from European discourses of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century contact period when the region was being developed for cattle stations. It is an image which was taken up by the Ngalakan who were living on stations to define their own position vis-à-vis the invading Europeans, during a so-called “golden age” between 1920 and 1950 when employment and provisions for these Ngalakan were guaranteed and relations with Europeans were generally harmonious. During this “golden age”, Ngalakan memories of the past generated a category of “wild blackfellows” which presented a contrast between their pre-contact past and their “golden age” present, and their recollections of frontier conflict were filtered through this category (ibid., 472-3). To quote the Morphys again:

By projecting hostilities between white and black back to the mythical era of the “wild blackfellow”, it enhanced the harmony of the relations of mutual dependence between Aborigine and non-Aborigine that characterised the “Golden Age” (ibid., 476).

In the contemporary context of Aboriginal land rights, by contrast, present-day Ngalakan memories can reconnect to their pre-contact identities in a positive rather than negative light (ibid., 476-7)—in fact, definitions of “traditional owners” in land rights legislation almost demand it. So, we can see that the issue of memory is centrally implicated in the ways in which people view their past in terms of their present and future, and this is surely the case for all of us, not just Aboriginal people.

Another important feature of memory is that it is conditioned by the context of the telling, for of course I am referring here not to people’s private memories, but to the ones that they share, in particular with me in the course of my research. Dennis Tedlock has written perceptively about recordings of oral narrative performances:

Even if the mythographer keeps absolutely silent throughout the time of recording—a feat the natives will not necessarily consider meritorious—there must sooner or later come the jagged sound of the charges a machine leaves on a tape when someone turns it off. This final zap serves to remind us that the

mythographer was one of the parties to the events recorded and that the storyteller may have subtly shaped some passages with more than the native audience in mind (Tedlock 1983, 11).

This principle certainly applies in any ethnographic situation, and we would do well always to bear in mind that our very elicitation of memories itself shapes those memories—or at least their articulation—in subtle ways. As Grele notes, when we ask people to reflect on their past we ask them to step outside of themselves, to make their lives “anthropologically strange” (Grelle 1985, 252).

And it is not only the anthropologist whose intervention may affect the telling of memory, but also the presence of an audience and the fact the reminiscence may itself constitute a performance. Reminiscences cannot help but to be marked in some way by those present for the occasion—the content may be self-consciously adapted to nurture relations with those present, and the form may involve a dialogue with others who may be called upon to confirm one point or another. The speaker may pay close attention to the reactions of those around him or her and adjust his or her recollections accordingly (Tonkin 1992, 38).

Additionally, it has been noted that the genre of a narrative performance “*mediates* narrator and audiences, as well as narrators and narrations” (ibid., 54), and that genres function as a means for a speaker and an audience to agree on what sort of interpretation is to be made of a narrative (ibid., 51). Elizabeth Tonkin writes that “a generic perspective on autobiographical accounts indicates recognisable and therefore repeated features of organisational structuring and content” and also notes perceptively that “tellers may choose a pattern which will construct a satisfying sense of self, and which may even re-order events so as to overcome otherwise uncomfortable discrepancies” (ibid., 58). Genres of reminiscence, then, may themselves have an impact on what is remembered and how it is presented.

A third, related, point about memory is its thoroughly social nature—like any social activity, memory is created in a dialogical setting with others, and that sense of mutual

construction needs to be fully fleshed out. Intuitively and anecdotally, we can all think of examples of memories we have of our own childhoods which must certainly have been heavily mediated by the articulated memories of our parents—our own memories are clarified through the lens of family folklore. Samuel Schragger has written that he developed a sense that people “were drawing their recollections from one another” (Schragger 1998, 284) and that “accounts begin and evolve in the course of social life and come to listeners, researchers, and readers bearing the imprint of earlier interactions” (ibid., 285). Tonkin has also stressed the inherently social features of memory:

People do not need discursive accounts to represent themselves as historical entities. Insofar as their memorisations create the sense of a past—even when there is no coherent stream of narrative but only of disparate individual recollections—they contribute to the experience of group identity *now*. They help to constitute the social, which has communicative as well as institutional aspects. This is to say more than “history is propagandist”, which has always been well understood. It is to claim that people are thinking historically if they recognise themselves as part of a group and that this thought is action which helps them to be one...And since “the social” is not a seamless robe but even where least institutionalised a very complicated interaction of practices, it follows that these practices re-enact, modify, deny and conserve “pastness” as both lived experience and mode of understanding, differently for individual members of any community (Tonkin 1992, 111).

The final point to be made about memory is its connection to physical objects, which I will extend to audio recordings below. Oral historians have noted how a person’s recall can be stimulated through the introduction of an object, such as an old photograph, a tool, or a document (Tonkin 1992, 94; Grele 1985, 250). Roslyn Poignant demonstrates this powerfully in a book examining the return of her husband’s photographs to the Aboriginal community of Maningrida 40 years after they had been taken. Poignant notes the photograph’s ability to mediate the experience of “recovering identities of younger selves and relatives” (Poignant 1996, 8), to act as an extension of traditional oral narrative in the hands of a knowledgeable elder (ibid.), to alter cultural practices concerning death

(*ibid.*, 10), to make genealogies visible (*ibid.*, 12), and to stimulate both cultural renewal and cultural change (*ibid.*, 13). Like Proust's famous madeleine, the link between objects and memories can be very strong.

*Yolngu Memories of Repatriated Recordings*

Memory is an essential element of Yolngu knowledge of the world, and carries with it great authority. As Nancy Williams and Daymbalipu Mununggurr have written:

...all the information that is necessary or important for individuals to carry on the business of everyday life as well as the most sacred religious knowledge and performance of the rich body of ceremony, is stored in Yolngu memory (1989, 80).

My current research has involved the digitization and repatriation of hundreds of hours of recordings of Yolngu music back to the communities in which those recordings were made. From my perspective, Yolngu memories are essential data for the complete documentation of the recordings, not only for the standard Dublin Core-style kinds of metadata (<http://dublincore.org/>), but also for an expanded notion of metadata which includes a whole range of layered commentaries by traditional owners about the significance of the recordings in the present cultural context. If we are to make the concept of data about data relevant to traditional Aboriginal owners—who are themselves archivists of their own orally-transmitted cultural heritage—then we must strive to include categories of metadata, like memory, which have relevance in Aboriginal systems of knowledge management.

What were the kinds of memories elicited through my current research? Yolngu expressed a wide range of memories and interpretations through listening to the old recordings, which can be tentatively grouped into a number of categories.

## Memory and Kinship

For many people, the first way of articulating memories was through the expression of kinship relations between the (mostly) deceased singers and those present listening to the recordings. This was done, I think, for a number of reasons: to establish authority over the recording through a demonstration of kinship with the singer in question; to educate younger listeners about their ancestors, whom most would not have known personally; and to help orient me to the social network in question.

Listening sessions were continually punctuated by expressions of kinship to the singers on the recordings. “That’s my father” or “he’s my uncle” were frequently-heard utterances as I played one recording after another, along with a dozen other specific Yolngu kinship terms. These identifications were then inevitably extended to include others who were present: “he’s my father, but this lady called him uncle, and he was this little boy’s grandfather”. With some prompting from me, many genealogies were generated as a means of linking up the voices of the deceased with a contemporary audience. Working in a digital domain, with hundreds of hours of recordings available on a hard drive wired up with external speakers, I was able to take requests rather easily, with people asking if I had any recordings by specific singers who were related to particular audience members.

It is worth noting that people were not only interested in hearing singers connected to them through the paternal line, although of course many were. People often asked to hear their mothers, mother’s brothers, mother’s fathers, mother’s mothers, and mother’s mother’s brothers; these are all important relations in Yolngu society, and frequent requests to hear people in these relations tends to undermine the common anthropological conception that Yolngu social action is motivated primarily by membership in patrilineal “clans”. Yolngu have a multiplicity of overlapping social identities (cf. Toner 2003), and these were articulated frequently through engaging with archival recordings.

The establishment of a clear genealogical connection to a singer, particularly a relation of father-son (*malu-gathu*) or mother's mother's brother-sister's daughter's son (*märi-gutharra*), was sometimes part of an assertion of authority over a recording. To demonstrate carefully that one is the oldest son (*gathu*) of a singer on a recording, or a senior sister's daughter's son (*gutharra*) or daughter's son (*waku*) could be a key part of a broader assertion that one has rights not only to hear the recording, but to control access to the recording by others. This was particularly the case for recordings of a restricted nature in which potential sensitivities were high, but was hardly ever the case for recordings of public songs. Assertions of authority on the basis of kinship over repatriated audio recordings fit in seamlessly with Yolngu processes of knowledge management and transmission, and there is a clear continuity between the management of repatriated cultural heritage and the management of contemporary ritual life: both are based on the foundation of Yolngu ancestral law (*rom*).

#### Nostalgia for a Golden Age

Many Yolngu memories in regard to the old recordings were set within a discourse of nostalgia for a cultural “golden age” of previous generations. The term is mine, but it reflects a frequently-articulated sentiment that the fathers and grandfathers, and mothers and grandmothers, of the current generation of adults set a very high precedent for ritual performance that current generations attempt to emulate in their own performances. Singing and dancing in previous generations was done in a style which is difficult to match today. My research collaborators in Gapuwiyak used to recall how their fathers used to perform some of their most culturally-important dances, such as *yiki* (knife) and *gawangalkemirr* (stingray), in such a highly energetic, tough, and dangerous way that participants were often injured by cuts from swords and spears used in the dances—the “proper” way to perform the dances for these song subjects was to recreate their inherent sense of danger and menace.

Similar sentiments were expressed in listening to the repatriated recordings of their fathers and grandfathers. People used expressions such as *dhapirrk* to indicate the “straight” or “proper” performance styles evident in the recordings. Other glosses on the

expression included “exactly what it is”, “can’t make mistakes”, “thumbs up” – all indicating enthusiastic approval and enjoyment. The corollary of this expression, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, was that contemporary performances did not necessarily achieve the same level of performative competence. Another similar expression was *yidaki djambatj* (didjeridu expert), attributed to a small number of players with knowledge of the correct style, the proper way to play, rather than today’s “rock and roll” *yidaki* style.

Other expressions of nostalgia were more clearly emotional. The Yolngu term *gumurr-djararrk* was glossed as meaning “poor fellow” or “poor thing” and was used to refer to clever or knowledgeable people who were now, sadly, gone (cf. Williams and Mununggurr 1989, 80). One senior woman in Milingimbi, listening to a recording of a deceased relative and famous singer, exclaimed things like “*Way! Ngayi dardar’yun ga walngana!*” (Wow! He is singing; he’s alive!) and “*Walalkay! Ngayi wanbaka nhina? Garray marrkapmirri!*” (Wow, look at him/ hear him! Where is he sitting? Dear Jesus!) to figuratively articulate the powerful sense of evocation associated with the recordings. The recordings were almost always met with humour tinged with sadness, although occasionally people shed tears upon hearing the singing of certain individuals—not because they had died recently, but because of what their voices represent: a fondly-remembered past. One man in Galiwin’ku, after listening to a variety of recordings, asked me rhetorically: “Dhamilingu, why did they die, those old people? They were very wise. They should still be here—maybe they’re still alive here somewhere.”

Another interesting manifestation of nostalgia was a focus of attention on particular singers of renown, who seemed to represent all of the dreams, aspirations, and reminiscences of a group. Singers like Mutpu, Gitjapuy, Walumarri, and Djäwa were not only recognised as the ancestors of particular individuals, but as key representatives of the whole group (*bäpurru*) and signifiers of that group’s identity. It intrigued me that certain individuals that I have known for years, when presented with an unearthed recording of their own father, thanked me politely before turning their attention to a recording of one of these key individuals. An interesting extension of this focus on key individuals was the assertion that their singing style has been maintained by one of their

descendants, even in some cases where those descendants could not possibly have learned to sing from the singer in question. There is a sense here that something of a singer's musical essence is embodied in contemporary individuals, and that listeners can hear that old singer in their descendant's performance.

Sometimes people expressed a sense of wonder at being able to hear the voices of their ancestors again after so long. One man equated hearing the old recordings to picking up an old radio signal or telegraph signal, a faint trace out of the past; another man said upon hearing wax cylinder recordings made in the mid-1920s that it was like stepping into a time machine. Interestingly, both men have been very involved in technological innovations and the Yolngu employment of new media in music and broadcasting.

#### Musical Change and Continuity

The topic of musical change and continuity was frequently discussed amongst listeners to the old recordings. As mentioned above, people often commented on the "proper" older style of didjeridu playing, which contrasts significantly with today's faster and more elaborate "rock-and-roll" style. Listeners frequently commented on the musical styles of the old recordings in ways which suggested both change and continuity.

Although some people initially commented that today's music is the same as the music of the past, upon close and repeated listening most acknowledged that some changes had occurred. Interestingly, Yolngu almost always stated that the words of the songs have not changed. The only concessions to textual changes that I ever heard were posited in the context of people saying that they wanted to improve their own singing by a close attention to the words used by previous generations. For the most part, though, people were adamant that the words of songs are the same today as they were in the past, and in this sense they conform to the authority of tradition noted by Nancy Williams and Daymbalipu Mununggurr (*ibid.*, 78).

Melody, rhythm, tempo, timbre, and instrumental style, in contrast, had all been subject to some degree of change. Some people stated that their own group's musical styles have

not changed, but that those of other groups have; others were critical of their own group's current musical practice and discussed the changes in detail. Contemporary musical performances were sometimes characterised as “rough”, in contrast to the older, “sweeter” singing of their fathers and grandfathers. Many people stated that they thought that melodies today were generally higher and tempos faster than they were in previous generations. One knowledgeable man told me that not only were songs performed lower and slower in the past, but that the articulation of words was also more slow and deliberate, in a style that was closer to the style of women's *milgarri* singing, a form of keening. He went on to state that today's singers use a higher tune and a faster tempo because this style has more appeal for dancers, as the tempo is better “for their knees” (for dancing), and that if singers sing at a slow tempo people won't dance. Juxtaposing recordings of his own group from the early 1960s with others made in the mid-1970s, he said that you could already hear musical changes starting to creep in, a process which has continued into the present generation. However, he was careful to note that Yolngu musical change was no different to musical change in Western classical, jazz, or popular music, and even drew an analogy between the shift in audio recording from analog to digital.

### Memory and Embodiment

The final point I would like to make about Yolngu memories elicited through hearing the old recordings is that memory is frequently an embodied phenomenon. Yolngu did not only sit quietly and reflectively when they listened to the old recordings—although many did—but sometimes adopted a physically active response that was an important aspect of their recollection. It was not uncommon for women, and sometimes men, to get up and perform the appropriate dance in accompaniment to the songs being played, or more commonly to perform the hand movements of the dance. Similarly, tapping along to a clapstick accompaniment or singing along to the words of a song was also a common response.

One quite specific embodiment was a hand gesture—a quick, flat-palmed, lateral cutting motion—which was very often used by listeners (principally young men) when they

heard a particular sung phrase on an old recording; the gesture was often used along with the term *dhapirrk* (“proper”, “straight”). This gesture, which I’m sure has quite deeply-layered meanings, is above all an indication of enthusiasm and admiration for a singer’s virtuosity and an indication of “proper” musical practice.

I mentioned above that certain contemporary singers were widely acknowledged to have their father’s or grandfather’s voice and singing style, which is itself a way in which memory and embodiment are linked. These individuals are also said to share physical characteristics in addition to musical ones: they may look the same, or walk the same, or in some cases may be developing their father’s distinctive white hair. Joe Neparrnga once told me that, when he and his brothers are singing in a serious ritual context, they use their father Djäwa’s voice—not imitating it, but rather Djäwa *sings through them*, as Ngarritjngarritj, their grandfather, had himself sung through Djäwa.

And we should not forget that the most significant ways in which memories may be embodied may also be the most private. Surely laughter and tears are among the most powerful ways in which memories take physical shape. And I will not soon forget the Dhalwangu elder Gawirriṅ Gumana, after listening to recordings of his father Birrikitji, walking away softly humming their group’s sacred tune under his breath.

### *Memory and Metadata*

I would like to conclude by linking these reflections on memory back to the theme of metadata. I believe that Yolngu memories about archival recordings should be crucial components of our documentation of those recordings. It is obvious that the fundamental categories of metadata schemes like Dublin Core are based on Western systems of knowledge management. As archives work increasingly with indigenous communities on the repatriation of digitized cultural heritage materials, with a clear aim of local knowledge management, we must expand the categories of metadata to include culturally-significant styles and types of knowledge.

It is not my intention here to set up a strict dichotomy between *our* metadata and *their* metadata. Indigenous cultures are highly adaptable and many Yolngu people have the requisite computer literacy to work within established metadata formats. Indeed, it has been my experience that the metadata already associated with an audio file—date of recording, place of recording, occasion, language, and lists of singers—frequently act as a valuable trigger for memory. Reading out a list of names or informing an audience about the performative context as indicated in the documentation can enable that audience to situate itself with regard to a recording that they may not have heard for a great many years, or indeed may never have heard.

What I am arguing for is a recognition that memory also has a reciprocal impact on metadata. Incomplete or non-existent documentation of recordings can be greatly improved if we take into account local expertise, interpretation, and recollection, a form of metadata value-adding that a number of archives are moving toward. With the development of software which is designed to recognize and respect indigenous forms of knowledge management, we can devise means of increasing the value of collections for both archives and local communities.

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