Nyungar of Southwestern Australia and Flinders: A Dialogue on Using Nyungar Intelligence to Better Understand Coastal Exploration

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ABSTRACT | Methods used to investigate the history of mapping the coastal areas of Australia have relied heavily on the journals, diaries, ship’s logs, maps, and other accounts of European mariners available in the archival record. Although these records give some details of the part played by local Indigenous peoples, such texts by themselves are a far from reliable way to arrive at authoritative conclusions about Indigenous influence in coastal exploration. Taking the form of a dialogue, this article revisits archival material concerned with coastal exploration along the southern areas of what is now Western Australia from a fresh perspective, drawing out instances where the Nyungar took “center stage” and where mariners’ perceptions were shaped by their interest in the Nyungar and Nyungar knowledge. It draws upon Nyungar methods for “reading” the history of contact along the southern coast, incorporating oral accounts, knowledge of the Nyungar language, and Nyungar place-names to “talk back” to the old texts.

KEYWORDS | Aboriginal, history, Flinders, Nyungar, exploration

Nyungar moort (family) has an extended history of offering kaatitj (knowledge) about our boodjar (country), offering local sources of daatj (meat), mereny (plant food), kep (water), karla (fire), kornt (shelter), kwop wiern (spiritual goodness). Nyungar accounts and wedjela or nyidiyang (European) diaries, journals, and other historical documents demonstrate that Nyungar (local Aboriginal people, also spelled “Noongar”) were critically important to early encounters along the coast of southwestern Australia (see Haebich 1988; Hodson 1993; Pope 1993). This began even before European mariners set foot on land, with the Nyungar presence signaling sites of strategic importance. In this article, we will revisit some of the historical accounts of early contact along the southwestern coast of Australia, drawing out
instances where the Nyungar were important in shaping the experience of British mariners.

In particular, we will focus on Nyungar contact with the expedition led by Captain Matthew Flinders in 1801. We will also extend the way in which these early texts are interpreted by “talking back” to the old voices through the adoption of what we will call “Nyungar hermeneutic methods.” Most of those who turn their attention to European maritime contact with the Nyungar rely exclusively on archival material as their sources. For his part, however, Paul Carter (1987) has focused on “spatial history,” relying on a breadth of material—with language at its center—to question fixed assumptions about the past. Rebe Taylor (2002) has vividly reconstructed the cross-cultural history of Kangaroo Island by reflecting on oral, literary, and visual, as well as archival, evidence. And Nyungar author Kim Scott (2010) has even employed historical fiction to offer alternate perspectives on early Nyungar-British relationships.

In addition to applying elements of these methodologies, we will enter into conversations with the past, inspired by how the “old people” (Nyungar Elders who have passed down their practices) read the country, listen to it speak, and assess what has happened. The style and methods we have adopted are therefore somewhat unconventional. We have drawn on the knowledge gained from cultural experiences: Nyungar nyin (being Nyungar), kaadijdjiny Nyungar maya waang (learning to speak the language), and kaadijdjiny Nyungar-mokiny (thinking like a Nyungar or interpreting the “evidence” using Nyungar ways of thinking). We have also drawn on the oral accounts of other Nyungar as well as material from the written historical record. At times, we will playfully imagine what might have happened using the lenses of the present. Although some Western-trained historians might question the evidentiary strength of this approach, what is important here is that we are trying to move into and out of Nyungar and non-Nyungar traditions and history making.

_Djinanginy Nyungar: Looking for the Presence of Nyungar_

Let us start with a story from _koora_ (a long time ago). The Nyungar remembered their stories by singing them. Some stories are also included in the colonial record. When the Nyungar first realized that the big ships carried people, they wondered who these people were. Some kept their distance while they checked things out. Others were intrigued since the newcomers did not seem to have _yorga_ (women) or _koorlangar_ (children) with them. Some were frightened and ran and hid because they had seen American sealers who were cruel and did bad things to Nyungar moort (relatives).
Others invited the visitors into their country as they had done for “outsiders” for many generations—it was their role to help those who were *dwankabət, miyalbət, kaat warra—nyoorn!* (blind, deaf, and crazy—poor things!).

Captain Matthew Flinders was the first official European envoy to interact with the Nyungar. He came in summer (December 1801–January 1802). Captain George Vancouver had come in early spring (September 1791), when fewer Nyungar would have been in the vicinity. A routine practice of early coastal explorers was to note the presence of Nyungar. From the ocean side, smoke and any sightings of Nyungar were carefully noted in journals, and land parties painstakingly recorded all evidence of Nyungar material culture. Signs of Nyungar represented signs of life. Water, stocks of fresh meat, and intelligence were all valuable commodities. Set ashore at King George Sound on Sunday, 2 October 1791, Vancouver found a small shallow stream of excellent water: “On tracing its meanders through a copse, it brought us to a deserted village of the natives, amidst the trees, on nearly a level spot of ground, consisting of about two dozen miserable huts, mostly of the same fashion and dimensions with that before described” (qtd. in Bartlett 1938, 44). Indeed, Sylvia Hallam (1979, 66) claims that, from the earliest of coastal explorations, signs of Nyungar use of the country were instrumental in leading coastal explorers to freshwater and good land.

Like other commanders of his time, Flinders was careful about landing and sending parties ashore. This is understandable given his lack of knowledge of the coast and what he perceived as the inhospitality of the country and its inhabitants. But this did not stop him from seeking out signs of Nyungar; indeed, his expedition had been instructed to take careful note of signs of fire so that evidence of Nyungar habitation could be recorded (Flinders [1814] 2000, 51). While exploring in the King George Sound area in December 1801, Flinders observed that there were many “smokes on the coast” (qtd. in Hallam 1979, 115) and that “marks of the country being inhabited were found everywhere” (qtd. in Hallam 1979, 21).

Coastal explorers also sought out Nyungar fishing practices since there was much to be gained from knowledge of their use of fish stocks. In one instance, while exploring Oyster Harbour, Vancouver’s party came upon several fish weirs, some constructed with loose stones, others with sticks and stumps of wood (Bartlett 1938, 44). Flinders’s party likewise sought out Nyungar fish traps and remarked on the “plentifulness” of fish caught. Later explorers, including French navigator Louis de Freycinet and his men, consumed more oysters than they could manage (Bloomfield 2012, 118).

Imagine what the Nyungar must have thought watching the very conspicuous *wam* (strangers) come their way and prepare to explore their
boodjar or land. Without doubt, the Nyungar would have had enough warning to make themselves scarce and likely would have remained hidden and observed these wam while giving each other instructions like

_Balai! Baal koorliny nidja. Ngala mordak nyin ba djinang baal, unna?_

Look out! Here they come. We’ll go and hide in the bush and watch them, eh?

This might have been followed by the whispering of questions such as

_Natjal baalap djinang nitja boodjar? Natj baalap kaadidjiny? Natj baalap ngardanginy?_

What are they looking at this ground for? What are they thinking about? What are they after?

Or, as Tom Bennell (1993, 23–24) tells us:

_They used to say ngala maam, ngangk h'an maam, mother h'an father see, balap nyinanginy nidja wardan, thas Fremantle sea, barl balap djinangany, wardany nidja wadjela yaarl koorliny, in the boat see, they seen 'em come on the boat. . . . Red Coat fullahs, h'an' they used to go from 'ere, h'an' when they got off the boat from 'ere, they went through from Fremantle._

_Djinang Wam: Looking for the Strangers_

At the same time, it is likely that the Nyungar were keeping an eye out for visitors. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, around the time Flinders arrived, young Nyungar men who were unattached are likely to have been sent to stay at lookout places near the entrance to King George Sound to keep an eye out for whales and small whaling vessels (Shellam 2009; Scott 2010). It is likely that they had been told about Vancouver’s visit in 1791 and seen American whalers like Captains Thomas Denis of the _Kingston_ and Christopher Dickson of the _Elligood_, who visited in August 1800 (Shellam 2009, 17). And it is highly likely that the Nyungar understood the difference between the crews of the formally sanctioned English expeditions of Vancouver and Flinders and the raggedy and multicultural crews of the American whalers. They certainly would have been able to see that Flinders’s vessel was much larger and his crew more formally attired and more disciplined (Flinders [1814] 2000, 46–55). There is some evidence that
the earlier meetings with the American visitors were not at all pleasant and involved harsh treatment (Scott 2010). There is certainly good evidence from elsewhere that whalers and sealers were brutal in their treatment of Aboriginal women (Merry 2003).

When on the evening of 8 December 1801 or by the following day they spotted Matthew Flinders’s ship, the Investigator, entering King George Sound, they would have been very excited and would have immediately set about letting others know. It is also possible that Nyungar to the west had already warned them. According to Flinders’s journal, Nyungar had set signal fires earlier on the 8th to the west of Albany. They might have said:


Hey, hey, hey, look out! On the water, hither coming, lots and lots of strangers. Brother! My brother! Hurry up and make fire. The old man sitting over there across from us will see our smoke rising.

Whether through fire or voice, it is likely that they were keen to go and get the older Nyungar men who had earlier told them stories about the arrival of Vancouver ten years before (Flinders [1814] 2000, 47–48). Given the size of the strangers’ vessels, the slowness of their arrival, and their unfamiliarity with the terrain, it certainly would have been much easier for the Nyungar to spot the newcomers than vice versa. Indeed, evidence from elsewhere (see Reynolds 1982) tells us that the first response of the Nyungar would have been to keep themselves hidden while they observed and studied the strangers.

**Nyungar Kaitijin: Studying Nyungar**

Many of coastal explorations of the south coast were also driven by the Enlightenment desire to further scientific knowledge; the explorers also saw the southwest as being rich in intellectual resources. The region presented tremendous opportunities and challenges to those who were motivated to extend knowledge and fill remaining gaps in relation to science and the study of “man.” The west coast was considered pristine. Unlike Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia, it remained largely unaffected and unspoiled by international commerce, trade, politics, and Enlightenment thinking. Scientists saw the region as one where they could carry out fieldwork examining and describing places and people that were “only slightly, if at all, affected by the expansion of Europe” (Marchant 1988, 70–71).
The French commander Bruny D’Entrecasteaux was one of the first charged with the scientific exploration of the southwest coast of Australia. The instructions given to D’Entrecasteaux were very clear: he was to comprehensively survey the coast on land and sea, to make a detailed study both of the variety of natural resources, assessing their potential for agricultural and other commercial use, and of the culture and life of the people who inhabited the region (Marchant 1982, 81). The scientist under his command was botanist Claude Antoine Gaspard Riche, who was interested not only in gathering and studying new plant specimens but also in making contact with the Nyungar.

We first hear of Riche when he was sent ashore from the Espérance. Upon seeing campfires in the distance, he headed toward them, seeking out the Nyungar who he supposed must have been in the area. Unfortunately, however, the smoke he saw was much farther than he had initially imagined and he became lost (Marchant 1982, 98). Although we can see from his attempts that the study of the south coast Nyungar was of considerable importance to him, like so many other Europeans, Riche was unsuccessful in making much of it; indeed, he left the area without making direct contact. Nevertheless, his conclusion that the Nyungar were a unique species of human that could live on salt water and on special types of nourishment was taken seriously, commented on, and investigated by subsequent French exploratory missions (Marchant 1982, 99–100).

Imagine what the Nyungar must have thought if they heard Riche talking about them as people who drank salt water. It is rather a bizarre conclusion, particularly if it were based on his deduction that, since he could find no freshwater, the Nyungar must be capable of surviving on salt water. It’s a little like me (author Collard) saying to you that, because I haven’t seen you sitting on the toilet, you must be a special breed of human being that doesn’t shit. The Nyungar might have looked at the strangers and said:


Oh, those poor strange fellas. They have traveled far without freshwater. They must be really thirsty all the time from being out on the sea. Maybe they’ve been drinking that seawater!

In the late eighteenth century, the French government was especially supportive of the Enlightenment project and scientific exploration of places like the southwest of Australia. Indeed, Napoleon Bonaparte’s support for the study of lifestyles and customs of the Aboriginal people was central to his
personal approval for Nicolas Thomas Baudin’s trip to the west Australian coast (Jacob and Vellios 1987, 98). As a consequence, Baudin recruited scientists among whom were those deeply interested in the scientific study of the lives and cultures of Indigenous people. He instructed them not only to study, keep records, and collect samples in a variety of different fields such as astronomy, geography, mineralogy, and botany, as well as other branches of natural history, but also to make an exhaustive study of the physical and “moral conditions” of the Indigenous people living in the western part of Australia. Not surprisingly, the records of Baudin’s voyage contain a wealth of information about the physical features, life, material culture, and diet of the Nyungar (Marchant 1982, 116–17). Indeed, according to Leslie Marchant (1982, 115–16):

The comprehensive orders given to [Baudin’s] naturalists in this regard represent a turning point in the study of man which occurred in France as a result of the revolution, and resulted in the foundation of scientific anthropology, which soon took a place alongside archaeology in the general effort being made to explain the origin and nature of the human race.

Matthew Flinders was also strongly influenced by the newfound European desire for science and discovery of knowledge. In 1801, using Vancouver’s charts to guide him, Flinders found King George Sound, where he stayed a month, studying the landscape, observing, drawing plants and animals, and making contact with and recording his observations about the Nyungar (Flinders [1814] 2000, 46–55). He and Baudin shared a similar interest in the “study of man” and in making careful observations about the lives, conditions, and physical features of local people. It was with the last of these areas of study that Flinders’s scientists appeared to be most fascinated. Indeed, today it may even seem bizarre the extent to which members of his crew were taken by what they called the “manliness” of the Nyungar (Brown, qtd. in Flinders [1814] 2000, 51).

We Nyungar have always thought that wedjela have projected their wam or strangeness onto us and tended to show us their own hand pretty readily. Since they arrived, wedjela have had this strange fascination with nudity and sexuality. Part of the explorers’ obsession was a fear of the Nyungar as dirty, uncivilized, barbaric, and sexually promiscuous. This is pretty funny when you consider what people like Flinders’s naturalist, Robert Brown, seemed to be drawn to. He was keen on measuring the size of our old fellas’ bits: bellies, lips, arms and legs, nose, eyebrows, scars, penises and testicles. But, then again, I suppose the old Nyungar would have been pretty
keen on checking the wedjela’s bits out, too. All those uniforms hiding everything, especially the bits that matter. But it seems that Flinders’s mob wasn’t that shy. Indeed, according to Brown ([1801–1805] 2001, 97), when the old Nyungar who met them early on showed himself to be “inquisitive” and “anxious to ascertain the sex of several persons,” he was “indulg’d.”

The Nyungar might have been thinking:


Who are these strangers? I see nothing. . . Are they men? Are they women? Are they without male bits?

Mr. Brown seemed pretty impressed when he met the Nyungar, saying, “One man with whom we had communication, was admired for his manly behavior” (qtd. in Flinders [1814] 2000, 51). Now I can only guess what he was talking about here.

Although he didn’t get the ruler out, Brown ([1801–1805 2001, 97) had this to say: “Their parts of generation of moderate size. The preputium entire and moderately large. Their testicles rather under than full sized.” He then went on to say that these old fellas wouldn’t allow the wam to follow them. I bet Sigmund Freud would have something to say about how the English spent so much of their time checking out these old blokes. At the time, the Nyungar must have found it very amusing and confusing watching these kaat warra (crazy) fellas sniffing around. They would have been perplexed at the strange behavior of people who were so obsessed with learning about the Nyungar that they carefully checked out their bits. Some Nyungar might have watched and said:

*Karnya, djoo! Kaat warra wam baalap djinang Nyungar mert wa? Nyoor, baalap mert wer yoitch djinang baalap karnarn kaat warra unna?*

Oh, shame! Those crazy strangers are staring at us, eh? Poor fellas, to be doing this they must be truly crazy, right?

*Nadjal baal djinang yoitch wer mert wa? Natj baalap kaadijiny nidja? Baal yoowarl koorl ba ngany boorpiny boorpiny baal miyal, unna.*

Why is he looking at us like this? What do they mean by doing this? They better not get too close, wonder if that bloke’s got a working-with-children card?
NyungarBidiyar Koorliny: Nyungar Leading Explorations

The European mariners and scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who followed Dutch routes along the west coast of Australia expressed much excitement not only at seeing the unique vegetation and landscape but also at seeing Nyungar for the first time (Appleyard and Manford 1979, 27). Zoologist François Péron accompanied French explorer Nicolas Baudin aboard the Géographe to survey southwestern Australia earlier in 1801, a few months before Flinders and the Investigator would arrive. Taken ashore in a small boat, the eager Péron (qtd. in Marchant 1982, 132) explained:

As soon as the boat landed us, I ran towards the interior in search of the natives with whom I had a strong desire to be acquainted. In vain I explored the forests, following the print of their footsteps. . . . All my endeavours were useless and after three hours fatiguing walk I returned to the sea shore where I found my companions waiting for me, and rather alarmed by my absence.

On Monday, 14 December, Brown ([1801–1805] 2001, 96) continued his search:

After breakfast went on shore and observing smoke at the head of the harbour walkd to it . . . when we reached the place where the fire had been we found it just extinguishd. No shells or other mark of the natives having been there. But in a few minutes we saw on the beach one man who advanced towards us loudly hollowing at short intervals in a very particular manner. After coming within 100 yards of us he turned off the beach, repeating as before with some variation his exclamations from the accompanying gesture we suppose was intended to prevent our nearer approach. . . . As we continued to advance still nearer he began to set fire to the long grass which soon began to blaze with violence. At the same time we heard some voices among the bushes and soon we observed several other natives, most probably a family consisting of men, women and children. . . . The same man who had formerly acted as centinel [sic] to the party continued to watch us at considerable distance.

That brave Nyungar, facing off against these strange people as his family hid in the brush, might have been shouting, “Warra! Warra! Warra!,” warning the intruders to retreat, as some of the Swan River Nyungar did later (Collard and Palmer 2008). He would have displayed a mastery of
fire common to Aboriginal people elsewhere, using it as a deterrent or even a weapon to alter the path of the intrepid explorers and thereby influencing the terrain they would record and map. Later on, he would have reported back:


I saw real strange people! I said, “Keep away!” I lit grass on fire, made lots of smoke and they took off. I stalked them, but they weren’t angry. They dropped their stuff on the ground. It’s still sitting over there, you can go see it.

Reading Brown’s account of the exchange, it is easy to miss the significance of the Nyungar man’s influence. He may have been simply defending his family from strangers, but in changing the path of the intruders, he could well have also steered them away from an important site, freshwater source, or any number of natural resources that perhaps needed protecting from interlopers. There is certainly good evidence that this Nyungar was taking seriously his cultural obligations of keeping the visitors safe. Anthony J. Brown (2008, 168) tells us that, according to one of the party, the Nyungar knocked a poisonous snake out of the hand of a seaman to protect him from danger. The use of fire and other knowledge of the country to redirect the movements of the wam (outsiders) and keep them safe shows us the subtle but nonetheless important way that Nyungar knowledge of the country played in shaping the direction of those exploring, surveying, and mapping it.

Of course, records of the knowledge gained from Nyungar were made and themselves became critical for later coastal explorations. The intelligence gathered by Vancouver from Nyungar was used by Flinders, who added to it and in turn provided source material for later maritime explorations such as those by Nicolas Baudin, Phillip King, and Jules Dumont d’Urville (see Shellam 2009). In the years after this earliest of encounters, many reports exist of the Nyungar’s willingness to lead wam to their freshwater supplies. In February 1837, while traveling through the York region of southwestern Australia on an exploratory trip from King George Sound to Perth, British surveyor Alfred Hillman and his party were directed by eight unnamed Nyungar to a spring when they were in quite desperate need of water (Markey 1976, 8). In 1829, only three years after the initial garrison had been established in King George Sound, Mokare, an Albany Nyungar,
guided a party under Hillman's leadership to inspect country sixty miles north of the small settlement (Hallam 1983, 138).

The colonists quickly learned the value of this kind of knowledge and made it a priority to seek it out. These wam were shown Nyungar biidi or roads and paths, kaarlap or camping places, the best hunting grounds, and ngama or water holes. There is also evidence that colonists were able to survive and stay healthy in more isolated regions because they drew on Nyungar medicinal knowledge. For example, the knowledge that sap from the marri (Red Gum) has medicinal qualities was gained very early on from the Nyungar. Marri sap can be used by those with a sore throat. You mix the crushed powder of the sap with water and then gargle it. The sap acts as a disinfectant. It can also be used to relieve the pain of toothache if applied in the same way. Koorbal mindich or stomachaches can be cured like this, too. Early wam who suffered from dysentery because of poor water quality saw Nyungar using marri sap powder in this way. They followed the Nyungar example and found it worked. Nyungar also provided tanned kangaroo skins to make water bags for excursions into dry areas; they put the gum from the marri on the kangaroo skins to make them both pliable and water-proof. The wam took up these ideas; they also learned about other uses of plants from the Nyungar (CALM 1998). This information was to become as important to the colonists as it had been for the Nyungar.

**Noitch Nyidyang Keninyin: The Dead Man Dance**

On 8 December 1801, Captain Matthew Flinders, R.N., brought the HMS Investigator to anchor in King George Sound, in present-day Western Australia. On 12 December, the ship entered Princess Royal Harbour, on which the city of Albany now stands. Her captain and crew surveyed the sound, its islands and possible harbors, and collected wood and freshwater, while the naturalists studied the plant and marine life. Flinders ([1814] 2000, 54) noted:

> On the 30th, our wooding and the watering of the ship were completed. . . . Our friends, the natives, continued to visit us. . . . I ordered the party of marines on shore, to be exercised in their presence.

> The red coats and white crossed belts were greatly admired, having some resemblance to the Nyungar’s own manner of ornamenting themselves; and the drum, but particularly the fife, excited their astonishment; but when they saw these beautiful red-and-white men, with their bright muskets, drawn up in a line, they absolutely screamed with delight; nor were their wild gestures and vociferations
to be silenced, but by commencing the exercise, to which they paid the most earnest and silent attention. Several of them moved their hands, involuntarily, according to the motions; and the old man placed himself at the end of the rank, with a short staff in his hand, which he shouldered, presented, grounded, as did the marines their muskets, without, I believe, knowing what he did. Before firing, the Indians [sic] were made acquainted with what was going to take place; so that the volleys did not excite much terror.

Robert Brown ([1801–1805] 2001, 104, 105) also had some important observations to make:

Landed after breakfast at the observatory. 4 of the natives had come down to the tents. One of them three had been there the first day. The fourth [was] a young man who had not us before seen. The marines exercise fird several vollies. The natives especially the old man attentively watch[ed] their motions & with a rude stick attempt[ed] to imitate them, not terrified by the explosions [but] much pleased with the red jackets & cross belts of the soldiers.

The old man and the middle aged stout man with a name we sup-posed was Warena allowd themselves, especially the latter, to be measured with the greatest patience tho it took up nearly an hour. Mr [William] Westal[l] shewd Warena his own figure w[hic]ch he had drawn. He appeared pleasd & bared his body to the waist that Mr W[estall] might be able to finish his work. They appear[ed] to clearly to understand our wishes to know the names for the dif-ferent parts of the body & one of them unaskd began to run over them. We aquird the names of several parts pretty accurately, the orthography [, however,] not wholly to be depended on: Cat—Head, Collit—Breast, Nillok—Cheek, Taa—Mouth or lips, Warrat—Neck, Gur—Arm, Matt—Leg, Twang—Ears, Mite—Penis, Menel—Eye, Wurrit—Cloak of kangaroo skin

As Carter (1992) has discussed, the military drill performance, though unlike most in the Aboriginal performance repertoire, would have been considered a suitable piece to share with these Nyungar men in keeping with established Australian musical and performance traditions of visiting regional groups sharing in song and dance. Henry Reynolds (1982) speculates that many Aboriginal groups would have had advance knowledge about the power and magic of firearms via songs and stories about
contact with wedjela in various regions, knowledge exchanged along established trade routes and kin networks. This would explain the numerous incidents recorded in which Aboriginal people seeing Europeans for the first time would display interest in, rather than fear of, muskets and, later, handguns.

It is likely that senior Nyungar, such as older people who may have remembered seeing Vancouver, stout and friendly Warena (mentioned by Flinders), and the protective father whom Brown first encountered had brought their young countrymen to meet these strange people. It is possible that they took some comfort in the knowledge that these wam meant no harm. The British continued to follow Nyungar rules of diplomacy by trying to learn the local language, which the Nyungar men would have ably facilitated. Acting as models to be sketched and measured would seem to have been a novel experience, but one not entirely unlike the waiting involved in the process of “painting up” for ceremony. Since the exchange of cloaks between different regional groups was a common Nyungar diplomatic practice, the men would have been understandably excited in anticipation of exchanging their kangaroo skin cloaks for the bright red uniforms. They might have said to each other:

Wam, baalap keniny noitj-mokiny. Karnarn wam keniny.

These strangers dance like stiff dead people. We’ve never seen that before.

Baalap mirdar kwoak kwop djinang . . .

Still, their red coats are so nice to look at . . .

Aliwa, baalapang kaarlmaata worlak yaakiny. Yeyi, bindari-mokiny maya waaliny.

Look, they’re raising their fire-sticks to the sky. Now, a thundering noise is shouting out.

More than one hundred years later, this event was recounted by the writer Daisy Bates (1904–1912, qtd. in White 1980, 35) as a Nyungar named Nebinyan had described it to her:

They made a dance of the visit and parade. . . . I got all this from the only old man left, a grandson born about 1830 or 40. He saw the
dance as a boy and taught it as a man. He covered his torso with red and put white pipeclay across the red and did with his club what he had seen his fathers and grandfathers do as the bayonets were exercised. Nebinyan died in 1908 a very old man and he could tell me all the history of the visit—its importance made it a sacred dance and memory.

Although Bates did not transcribe the song that must have accompanied the dance, we can imagine the kind of things that may have been sung. Research shows that Nyungar in past centuries incorporated words from English into their compositions (Bracknell 2014a, 2014b). The song could have been something like:

*Mamang-koort-ngat wam keniny*
By the harbor, strangers dancing
*Wam keniny*
Strangers dancing
*Noitj-mokiny boorn-mokiny*
Like the dead, like trees
*Mirdar daardar mirdar daardar*
Red ocher, white pipeclay, red ocher, white pipeclay
*Boolwool kaarlmaat maya waaliny*
Magic/secret/sneaky fire stick cries out
*Boom! Boom! Boom*

**Conclusion**

We can see that the Nyungar were of immense importance to Flinders and others exploring the southwest coast of Australia. They helped identify key strategic points (where freshwater, cover from the weather, and natural resources such as fish were to be found) through their presence and signals. And the perception that the Nyungar represented a source of knowledge of the history of “man” was of immense importance, particularly to the Enlightenment project. As Edward Said might have explained, the physical and cultural difference of the Nyungar became important as markers of their otherness and helped with the formation of modern ideas about what it means to be European. In Flinders’s case, the Nyungar provided practical insights into how to go about trade, exchange, and information sharing. This was to become critical to the mapping and exploration of Australia over the next two hundred years. Through rich oral traditions, Nyungar helped add to the body of information we have about place-names, resources, labor, economic enterprise, and the use of space.
Some Nyungar were not frightened by the wam. They would have said, “Baalap djanga ba baalap ngalang moort. We must go and meet our relations and networks.” They would have taken the wam to their karla or home fires and said, “Noonookat ngalang moort. You are our relations. You must dat nyin dwonk-kaadadj or listen and learn important things about our boodjar or land.” The Nyungar would have showed the wam their boodjar, and they would have waanginy or talked to them, telling them important things. They would have said, “Kaya, ngalang moort. Yes, our family. Noonookat koorliny noonookat karla. You have all come home. Ngalang koort kwop. Our hearts are happy.” And they would also have said, “Boorda noonookat kwop waanginy, noonook boola kaditj-kadak. Later you will be good speakers and understand much because we have introduced you to Nyungar ways.”

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DAVID PALMER teaches Community Development in the School of Arts at Murdoch University in Western Australia. He also spends much of his time “tracking along” with Aboriginal community-controlled organizations, helping them reflect on their work and tell their story. He has written about groups that draw heavily upon Indigenous language, cultural immersion, song, dance, and the arts and about the importance of intergenerational transmission knowledge. He lives in Fremantle with his partner and two lads.

WORKS CITED


Nyungar of Southwestern Australia and Flinders 15


