

Time to Turn South: Establishing a Major Aboriginal Cultural Festival in the Far South East Region of New South Wales

Robin Ryan
Edith Cowan University, Australia

I pay my respect to Elders past, present and emerging of the Ngunnawal people, on whose unseated land we meet today. This paper honours and values the contribution of First Nations Peoples to Australian cultural life.

The attendance of First Nations Peoples at Australian Aboriginal cultural festivals has emerged as a 21st century sociocultural norm. Large Aboriginal festivals significantly benefit the educational, political, and socio-economic landscape of contemporary Indigenous life, while contributing to learning and human development across the life-span. The provision of culturally relevant festivals for less privileged population groups has become a worldwide phenomenon (Iwasaki 233) that is particularly relevant in Australia, where the effects of colonial plunder have not been satisfactorily addressed.

According to Rosita Henry, First Nations Peoples view festivals as an opportunity to display cultural vitality (586), and to challenge a history which had rendered them absent (587). To balance knowledge of Northern Australia's thriving Aboriginal festival movement, this paper documents the first largescale Aboriginal cultural festival to be held within South Eastern Australia. The inaugural Giiyong Festival took place on Aboriginal land at Jigamy, Broadwater via Eden, New South Wales (NSW) on 22 September 2018.

The *cultural landscape* within which the festival developed connects to a long, intimate relationship with the coast and mountainous hinterland that grounds the shared Yuin and Monaro Nations to *country* as the Monaroo Bobberrer Gadu: "The Peoples of the Mountains and the Sea." In the Indigenous South Coast language, the festival slogan Giiyong Monaroo Djadjambeen means *Welcome People Laughing*. I speak as an Australian woman of European descent, wedded to "Uncle Ossie" Cruse of Eden, Senior Thaua (Tharwa) Elder of the Yuin Nation. This paper is partly informed by our recent co-authored article, "Welcome to the Peoples of the Mountains and the Sea" (Ryan and Cruse, 2019).

Having instigated the establishment of Jigamy's majestic Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu Keeping Place (<http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/07/09/4270480.htm>) in 1994, Uncle Ossie was hopeful that the welcoming event would strengthen the caring and sharing ethos of the Yuin-Monaro people. Norman Tindale estimated that the Thaua once ranged north from Green Cape to Merimbula and west to the scarp of the Dividing Range. Their hordes comprised Katungal (coastal people) and Baianbal (forest people) who associated with Bemerigal (mountain people of the Ngarigo Nation).

The general Australian population barely comprehends the number and diversity of the island-continent's Indigenous Nations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia is made up of many distinct groups (Horton, 1996 wall map). The cultures of each continue to be expressed in dynamic and contemporary ways. Lisa Slater conceptualises Northern Australia's burgeoning festival movement as territorialising the State and non-Indigenous peoples into an alternative sociality (142). Building on Slater's insight, Ryan and Cruse (<https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/1535>) reasoned that the burgeoning Aboriginal festival movement encourages First Nations – and non-First Nations people alike – to openly refer to the places they live in according to their Indigenous names. Consequently, in the mental image of a map of the island-continent, the straight lines and names of state borders *fade* as the colours of First Nations Peoples' "countries" come to the fore. The Giiyong Festival's varied expressions of "the agency of country" (after Slater 141) thus differ vastly from the centre-periphery structure of the Australian colony. There is no fixed centre to the mutual exchange of culture and experience within Aboriginal Australia.

Developed via cross-sector interaction between Koori and mainstream organisations, the Giiyong Festival was advertised as "a Family Friendly, Alcohol & Drug Free, All Ages Event." Regional artists joined the national headline acts *No Fixed Address* – one of the earliest Aboriginal bands to break into the mainstream – and Northern Territory hip-hop artist *Baker Boy*: Young Australian of the Year 2019.

Focusing on the development of Indigenous youth, I explain how the festival's mix of traditional and contemporary popular Aboriginal musics fuelled fresh turns and exchanges of First Nations knowledge, culture, and experience. Governed by the centre-periphery relations stemming from colonial displacement, Aboriginal popular songs are heavily characterised by themes of protest over land rights, stolen children, and deaths-in-custody. These flags of resistance challenge and disturb White Australia. Remnant cultural elements in contemporary popular genres include the use of language in texts, and the distinctive sound of didjeridu and clapsticks.

Chris Gibson and John Connell liken festivals to *glue* (9), as they temporarily stick together various stakeholders, economic transactions, and networks. The festival at Jigamy followed five years of sustained community preparation by South East Arts in association with Grow the Music; Twofold Aboriginal Corporation; the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council, and its Elders. South East Arts delivers positive achievements in the Aboriginal arts and cultural sector throughout the Bega Valley, Eurobodalla, and Snowy Monaro regions. I acknowledge key information and statistics provided by General Manager Andrew Gray, Giiyong Festival project manager Jasmin Williams, and Screen Industry Development Officer Kate Howarth.

Wiradjuri woman and Twofold Aboriginal Corporation Program Manager Alison Simpson kindly provided feedback. The Corporation strives to assist the Aboriginal people of Eden's Twofold Bay Region to be proud of their heritage, connect with the local economy, and create a real future for their children. As Young et al (2-4) discovered in the records of the Monaro people who moved to the coast:

Their retention of traditional beliefs, values and customs, reveal that the accommodation they were forced to make with the Europeans did not mean they had surrendered. The proof of this is the persistence of their belief in the value of their culture.

After Simpson told Williams of the corporation's dream to house a large cultural festival at Jigamy, Williams consulted local Indigenous organisations to build a shared sense of community ownership of the event. Momentum built as each new donation arrived, enabling Williams to invite more performers (Giiyong Festival Report, 2; Williams, personal interview, 28 March 2019).

In an interview with journalist Albert McKnight on 17 September 2018, Williams promoted the festival as "a rare opportunity in our region to learn about Aboriginal culture and have access to a huge programme of Aboriginal musicians, dancers, visual artists, authors, academics, storytellers, cooks, poets, creative producers, and films." Three days later, on 20 September 2018, singer-songwriter Chelsy Atkins enthused to journalist Rachel Mounsey (1): "We will be sharing and listening to each other, accepting and honouring the past, and making the most of the now, which will ensure a great future."

Eden's Indigenous students learn a revived South Coast language. In March 2015, Uncle Ossie vitally informed their creation of *The Black Ducks* hip-hop song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fbJNHAdbkg#action=share>). The staff of Desert Pea Media (www.desertpeamedia.com) equipped the students to create the item's narrative structure. Under the musical direction of Joel ('Roc West') Westlake, the narrative filmed on location developed into a popular YouTube item.

As a lead-up event to the festival, a *Giiyong Grow the Music* spectacle was performed at Jigamy on 28 October 2017. Grow the Music – co-founded by Lizzy Rutten and Emily White – specialises in mentoring Indigenous artists in remote areas using digital recording equipment (<https://growthemusic.org>). With their guidance, Eden Marine High School students co-directed the film *Scars* as part of a programme of events with South East Arts and Giiyong Festival 2018 (<https://vimeo.com/242504483>).

An early decision was made to allow free entry to the Giiyong Festival in order to attract a maximum number of Indigenous families. The prospect necessitated in-kind support from Twofold staff, who assisted South East Arts in galvanising over 100 volunteers to enhance Jigamy's unique features. Their cooperative enthusiasm supports Howard Becker's observation that cultural production results from an interplay between the person of the *artist*, and a multitude of *support personnel* (1).

The festival site was spatially focused around two large stages dedicated to the memory of Elders Aunty Doris Kirby and Aunty Liddy Stewart, two strong supporters of cultural activities. In the opening panel discussion, Uncle Ossie Cruse explained the *Makarrata*: the call for a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution (https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF). In its advocacy for Indigenous sovereignty, the conversation typified Slater's observation that cultural festivals are "peaceful weapons in a continuing ontological political contest" (144).

Williams contracted artists with view to capturing the past and present achievements of Aboriginal music. Apart from her centrepiece acts No Fixed Address and Baker Boy, she attracted Pitjantjatjara singer-songwriter Frank Yamma; Yorta Yorta singer-songwriter Benny Walker; the Central Desert Docker River Band; and Jessie

Lloyd’s Mission Songs Project. These national acts were joined by Far South East coastal performers including Robbie Bundle, Warren Foster, Gabadoo, Chelsy Atkins, and Nathan Lygon.

It reflects on the cultural strength of ancient ceremony that music and dance form the staple components of Indigenous festivals. Hundreds of Yuin-Monaro people once attended great corroborees on Mumbulla Mountain (Horton 1235). Evidence also exists for ceremonies being held at Fishy Flats, Eden, in the 1850s (Mathews, archival cassette). In traditional performance, there is no concept of an audience-performer division. The ethnomusicologists Yeoh and Turpin note that “everyone is generally expected to be involved in music” (102). Festivals represent a *new context* for reflecting the interrelation of performer and tradition. Today’s highly regarded community musicians and dancers perform the social arrangements of direct communication, often including their children in their on-stage acts.

Youth gain positive identities from participating alongside national headline acts – a lateral form of learning that can propel talented individuals into performing careers. The One Mob Dreaming Choir of Indigenous students from three local schools were a popular festival feature, along with Eden Marine High School soloists Nikai Stewart and Nikea Brooks, and the Duurunu Miru Dance Group, led by Nathan Lygon (Plate 1). These youngsters exhibited the roots of their culture in a deep and touching way. As Nathan Lygon (personal interview, 20 May 2019) explains:

Dance provides us with a platform, an opportunity to share our stories, our culture, and our way of being. It demonstrates a beautiful positivity—a feeling of connection, celebration, and inclusion. The community needs it. And our young people need a “space” in which they can grow into the knowledge and practices of their culture. The festival also helped the wider community to learn more about these dimensions.



Plate 1: Eden’s Duurunu Miru Dance Group, led by Nathan Lygon.
Image by David Rogers, courtesy South East Arts, Bega, New South Wales.

Music and dance were complemented by art exhibitions mounted inside the Keeping Place, and bush cooking on the edge of Lake Pambula. Yarn-ups, poetry, and readings featured throughout the day. Cultural workshops in the Bunaan Ring (corroboree dance circle) included “Didjeridu with acclaimed exponent Mark Atkins.” I was privileged to participate in Uncle Ossie’s “Gum Leaf Playing” workshop by describing how the Yuin used this quirky cultural practice to entertain early settlers before forming the legendary Wallaga Lake Gumleaf Band in the 1920s (Ryan 28). As the South East coastal custodian of this unique musical practice, Uncle Ossie performed leaf tunes and led a workshop.

In demarcating musical style from what is *uncool*, the hip-hop items manifested connections between musical expression, cultural representation, and contemporary political positioning. Large screens surrounding the Aunty Liddy Stewart Stage technologically enhanced the presentation of acts with live broadcasts. Gabadoo (a young man from Bermagui discovered at Wallaga Lake by Grow the Music) channelled his emotions with affective moments of *flow* and *groove*. In his theory of the “affecting presence of music,” Steven Feld (237, cited in Ian Maxwell 11) conceptualised *getting into the groove* as “a feelingful participation, or positive physical and emotional attachment.” For Maxwell, the meaningfulness of hip-hop emerges “within the tension between... the unfolding performativity of feelingful bodies, and... attempts to bring those experiences into discourse”(19).

Discourses of pride emerge when Indigenous Australian youth participate in hip-hop at festivals (Bartleet). Working across rap, dance, acting, and graffiti, Baker Boy (aka Danzal Baker) has achieved mainstream success rapping in the Yolngu Matha language. He tours Australia extensively, inspiring Indigenous youth to embrace their culture and take up leadership positions.

The drones launched above the Jigamy carpark established a numerical figure close on 6,000 festival attendees, a third of whom were Indigenous. Extra teenagers arrived in time for Baker Boy’s evening performance, revealing the typical youthful audience composition associated with the hip-hop craze. The youth’s corporeal engagement with the massed body of consumers exemplified a co-created accomplishment of a collective of listeners, responding to *what it is* to which they are listening, in a particular context of listening (after Maxwell 8).

The Giiyong Festival gained huge cultural capital. Feedback gleaned from artists, sponsors, supporters, volunteers, and audiences reflected on how – from the moment the day began – the spirit of so many performers and consumers gathered in one place, took over. The success of any festival depends on its reception, for as Myers (59) suggests, “It is the audience who create the response to performance, and if the *right chemistry* is achieved, the performers react and excel in their presentation.” On 24 September 2018, *Bega District News* journalist Albert McKnight described the event as “incredibly beautiful.”

Williams (personal interview, 28 March 2019) reported of this “giant exercise in the breaking down of walls,” that some performers signed contracts for the first time, and that all met their contracts professionally. Baker Boy and No Fixed Address keep in touch with South East Arts; local artists are performing further afield; and an awareness, recognition, and economic impact has been created for Jigamy, the Giiyong Festival, and Eden respectively. Having proved their leadership capacity and financial self-sufficiency, South East Arts were endorsed by the Board in June 2019 to perpetuate the Giiyong Festival biennially. Gray and Williams (personal interview, 28 March 2019) envisage handing over festival management to Twofold Aboriginal Corporation by 2024.

The festival’s richness emanated from multiple exchanges of cultural practice and knowledge expressed in collective public space. These contributed to a reimagining of a First Nations Peoples’ map, while local meanings of identity and community testified to the *resilience* of the Yuin-Monaro people. In contributing to the high political stakes in the national drive towards Constitutional Recognition of Australia’s Indigenous Peoples, the event privileged the performing arts as an *engine*: a peaceful – yet powerful truth-telling means – for dealing with the State. It also evidenced the positive effects of the popular arts cultures on the musical life of Eden’s Indigenous youth. It took years of preparation and a vast network of cooperating people to ensure the success of this first South Eastern Australian Aboriginal festival, but in the words of Simpson (email, 9 April 2019):

“Having almost double the population of Eden attend highlights that this event was long overdue.”

Works Cited

- Bartleet, Brydie-Leigh. "‘Pride in Self, Pride in Community, Pride in Culture’: The Role of Stylin’ Up in Fostering Indigenous Community and Identity." *The Festivalization of Culture*. Eds. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward. Ashgate, 2014, pp. 69–85.
- Becker, Howard. *Art Worlds*. 25th Anniversary Edition. U of California Press, 2008.
- Brown, Bill. "The Monaroo Bubberer [Bobberer] Gudu Keeping Place: a Symbol of Aboriginal Self-determination." ABC South East NSW, 9 July 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/07/09/4270480.htm>. Accessed 20 May 2019. Desert Pea Media. "The Black Ducks – ‘People of the Mountains and the Sea.’" *YouTube*, uploaded March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fbJNHAdbkq>.
- Feld, Steven. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. 2nd ed. U of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.
- Gibson, Chris, and John Connell. *Music Festivals and Regional Development in Australia*. Ashgate, 2012.
- Grow the Music. "Scars," co-directed by Eden Marine High School students with GTM filmmaker Tim Burke. *Vimeo*, uploaded 2017, <https://vimeo.com/242504483>.
- Henry, Rosita. "Festivals." *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*. Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 586–87.
- Horton, David R. "Yuin." *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*. Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994. p.1235.
- . *Aboriginal Australia Wall Map compiled by David Horton*. Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996.
- Iwasaki, Yoshitaka. "Leisure and Quality of Life in an International and Multicultural Context: What are Major Pathways Linking Leisure to Quality of Life?" *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 82, no. 2, June 2007, pp. 233–64.
- Mathews, Janet. *Albert Thomas Mentions the Leaf Bands That Used to Play in the Old Days*. Cassette recorded at Wreck Bay, NSW, 9 July 1964, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. LAA1013.
- Maxwell, Ian. "Music as a Cultural System: Sensibility and Interpretation." *Context: Journal of Music Research*, vol. 31, 2006. https://cpb-ap-se2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.unimelb.edu.au/dist/6/184/files/2016/09/31_Maxwell-ut9z4p.pdf.
- McKnight, Albert. "Giiyong Festival the First of its Kind in Yuin Nation." *Bega District News*, 17 Sept. 2018, <https://www.begadistrictnews.com.au/story/5649214/giiyong-festival-the-first-of-its-kind-in-yuin-nation/?cs=7523#slide=2>.
- . "Giiyong Festival Celebrates Diverse, Enduring Cultures." *Bega District News*, 24 Sept. 2018, <https://www.begadistrictnews.com.au/story/5662590/giiyong-festival-celebrates-diverse-enduring-cultures-photos-videos/>.
- Mounsey, Rachel. "Women to Inspire at Giiyong Gala." *Eden Magnet*, 20 Sept. 2018, edenmagnet.com.au.
- Myers, Doug. "The Fifth Festival of Pacific Arts." *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 1, 1989, pp. 59–62.
- Ryan, Robin. "And We Marched to the Tune of the Gumleaf band'... but to Whose Tune Did We March?" *Popular Music: Commemoration, Commodification and Communication, Proceedings of the 2004 IASPM Australia New Zealand Conference, held in conjunction with the Symposium of the International Musicological Society, 11-16 July 2004*. Ed. Denis Crowley, IASPM Australia New Zealand branch, 2005, pp. 21–40.
- Ryan, Robin and Uncle Ossie Cruse. "Welcome to The Peoples of the Mountains and the Sea: Evaluating an Inaugural Indigenous Cultural Festival." *M/C Journal*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1535>.
- Slater, Lisa. "Sovereign Bodies: Australian Indigenous Cultural Festivals and Flourishing Lifeworlds." *The Festivalization of Culture*. Eds. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 131–46.
- South East Arts. Giiyong Festival Report, Bega NSW, Nov. 2018.
- Tindale, Norman. *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits and Proper Names*. Australian National University, 1974.
- Yeoh, Calista and Myfany Turpin. "An Aboriginal Women's Song from Arrwek, Central Australia." *Musicology Australia*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2018, pp. 101–26.
- Young, Michael, with Ellen & Debbie Mundy. *The Aboriginal People of the Monaro: A Documentary History*. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2000.