

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl? (Which Knowledge Path Will We Travel?)

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Nyungar worldviews, theories or ideologies have existed for over 40,000 years, and, in that time, *Nyungar* have occupied, controlled and managed the south-west of Western Australia.¹ *Nyungar* is the generic name that describes our people whose ancestors originally occupied and continue to occupy the whole South West. The word *Nyungar* means people or person and is not gender specific.²

Despite our long history and our constant presence, *Nyungar* experiences and achievements are underrepresented in the historiography of the South West. Various writers have critiqued the minimal recognition of *Nyungar*, *Murri* and *Koori* ideology and theories within social science.³ Calls from Indigenous Australians for historical works reflecting their experiences and concerns are mirrored globally in countries such as New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and Canada. For example, Mason Durie wrote of the Maori reclaiming their histories through their writing.⁴

In this article, we touch on some of the significant differences in history as it is told or written by *Nyungar* and as it is told or written by *wedjela* (a *Nyungar* rendition of the term 'white fellow').⁵ In thinking about doing research, and

1 S. Hallam, 'The First Western Australians', in C.T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia*, Nedlands (WA), 1981, pp. 35-71.

2 Noongar-English Dictionary, in A. Mountford and L. Collard, *Nidja Noongar Boodjar Noonook Nyininy (This is Noongar Country You are Sitting In)*, Perth, 2000.

3 J. Sabbioni, 'I Hate Working for White People', *Hecate*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1993, pp. 7-29; C. Choo, *Aboriginal Child Poverty*, Melbourne, 1990; M. Langton, 'Urbanising Aborigines: The Social Scientists' Great Deception', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1981, pp. 16-22; S. Muecke, 'Body, Inscription, Epistemology; Knowing Aboriginal Text', in E.S. Nelson (ed.), *Connections: Essays in Black Literature*, Canberra, 1988, pp. 41-52; I. Keen, *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*, Canberra, 1988; M. Narogin, *Writing From the Fringe*, Melbourne, 1990.

4 Mason Durie, *Te Mana, Te Kawanatanga: The Politics of Maori Self-Determination*, Auckland, 1998.

5 Much of the text in this article originally formed part of *Nidja Beiliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyininy: A Nyungar Interpretive History of the use of Boodjar (country) in the vicinity of Murdoch University*, Murdoch, 2004 (<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/multimedia/nyungar/menu9.htm>). That report was co-authored by Len Collard, Sandra Harben and Dr Rosemary van den Berg. In drawing on it, we acknowledge Rosemary's contribution. See also Rosemary van den Berg, 'The changing years: the Pinjarra experience', M.A. thesis, Curtin University of Technology,

asking others to think more deeply about their research and writing, we also point to ways in which *wedjela* history might reflect more *Nyungar* experiences and concerns.⁶

Indigenous accounts of history are pertinent to issues of responsibility and obligations of cultural integrity, especially for those of us whose ties to this land pre-date the arrival of Europeans. As *Whadjuck/Balardong Nyungar* writing this article, we have carried out our responsibility by acknowledging the variety and importance of our own regional and political identity.

Wedjela will continue to write history from their own theoretical positions and from their own personal and political perspectives. It is important, however, that they remember that Indigenous people have long been spoken and written about in their absence, and often in ways that are reliant on old colonial tropes, clichés, and prescriptive and simplistic claims.⁷ We recognise that few *wedjela* historians now use the older biased sources uncritically but we also believe that there is still room for improvement.⁸

History as an interpretive exercise, as much as an account of past events, is well accepted. With regard to the history of Australia since colonisation, both its interpretation and formal documentation have been, for the most part, the province of non-Aboriginal people. Until fairly recently, many of those people have overlooked the great diversity of regional Aboriginal societies and cultural terminologies. This diversity was acknowledged and mapped more than three decades ago when Norman Tindale identified as many as 500 Indigenous geopolitical language societies across Australia.⁹ The ready availability of his data and other more recent works make it unacceptable for historians and other social scientists to ignore the variety and importance of regional identities in Aboriginal and Islander Australian societies.

Of the 500 language groups identified by Tindale, twelve belong to *Nyungar boodjar* (country or land). The twelve geopolitical language groups within *Nyungar* are *Balardong*, *Juat*, *Kaneang*, *Koreng*, *Minang*, *Njakinjaki*, *Pibelmen*,

1995; Len Collard, 'An Analysis of Nyungar Influence in South West Western Australia', M.A. thesis, Murdoch University, 1996.

- 6 In writing this paper, we are grateful for comments and editorial assistance provided by Cathie Clement and for helpful feedback from the anonymous reader.
- 7 For a discussion of the history of the impact of colonial discourse on Indigenous policy, see Neville Green, *Broken Spears: Aborigines and Europeans in the southwest of Australia*, Cottesloe (WA), 1984; Anna Haebich, *For their own good: Aborigines and government in the southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940*, Nedlands, 1988; and her subsequent work, *Broken circles: fragmenting indigenous families 1800-2000*, Fremantle, 2000.
- 8 Some of the *wedjela* writers cited in this paper have long recognised *Nyungar* experiences and achievements. Sylvia Hallam, Anna Haebich, Neville Green and Lois Tilbrook all come into that category. More recently, some of the entities that commission historical work have begun to recognise *Nyungar* experiences and achievements. For instance, Gingin Land Conservation Committee recently undertook a study to remedy the 'absence of Nyungar voices' in the local history of the Gingin Shire. Conversely, other historical works continue to focus on the experiences and achievements of prominent *wedjelas*. Such works include *A city for all seasons: the story of Melville* (W.S. Cooper and G. McDonald, 1989) and *Claremont: a history* (G. Bolton and J. Gregory, 1999).
- 9 Norman B. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, Berkeley (California), 1974.

Pindjarup, Wardandi, Whadjuck, Wilman, and Wudjari.¹⁰ Some of the other regional identities in Western Australia include *Wongi* or *Wongki*, which is the generic name of the Aboriginal people from the Eastern Goldfields region.¹¹ *Yamatji* is the generic name of the Aboriginal people in the Murchison and Gascoyne areas of the mid-west of the state, while in the north-west, in what is known as the Pilbara, are peoples who refer to themselves as *Mulba* or *Marlba* and the *Martu* or *Mardu*.¹² Further north, in the Kimberley region, are Aboriginal people who are identified by their respective groups like the *Yawuru* of Broome, the *Kwini* of Kalumburu, and *Ngarinyin* around Derby, to name a few. There are also many more groups throughout the Kimberley who insist on identifying themselves by their traditional names.¹³ They are not identified as one group like the *Nyungar*, *Wongi* or *Yamatji*.

By using the Tindale map,¹⁴ we were able to identify the specific geographical and linguistic groups within our own *Nyungar boodjar* (country) such as the *Balardong*, *Koreng* or *Kaneang* groups. This method is a useful tool for other researchers who may be interested in the geography of other Indigenous peoples of Australia such as, *Koori*, *Mulba*, *Murri*, *Nunga*, *Pallawah* or *Wyba*. In our opinion, this focus on specific geographical and linguistic groups could well challenge the continuous generic use of the term 'Aborigine'.

The *Budget Macquarie Dictionary* defines 'Aborigine' as 'one of a race of tribal peoples, the earliest known to live in Australia' or (generally) 'people living in a country or place from earliest known times'.¹⁵ Another definition developed by the Commonwealth Government situates people in a network of Aboriginal kinship and affinity, and not by appearance, stating that an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander person 'is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal'.¹⁶

10 *ibid*.

11 See, for example, Carolyn Wadley Dowley, *Through silent country*, Fremantle, 2000; William L. Grayden, *A nomad was our guide: the story of a journey through the land of the Wongi, the Central Desert of Australia*, 1953, South Perth, 2002.

12 See, for example, Bryan Clark, *Yamatji: Aboriginal Memories of the Gascoyne*, Carlisle (WA), 1992; Rosemary Van den Berg, *No Options No Choice! The Moore River Experience: my father, Thomas Corbett, an Aboriginal half-caste*, Broome (WA), 1994, pp. 10-11; Robert Tonkinson, *The Mardu Aborigines: Living the Dream in Australia's Desert* (c. 1978), Fort Worth (Texas), 2nd ed. 1991; Anne Brewster, Angelina O'Neill and Rosemary van den Berg (eds), *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*, Fremantle, 2000.

13 See, for example, Patricia M. Torres, 'Magarra-gudany, The Devilman who has a Tail – A Yawuru Story', in *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*, pp. 21-2; Ambrose Chalarimeri, 'My Country Oomarrri', in *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*, pp. 75-80; and David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive*, Broome, 1993, 2nd ed., 2001; Lynette Rodriguez, 'Walk Tall, Walk Straight and Look the World in the Eye: The Story of Richard Shadforth', in S. Morgan, T. Mia and B. Kwaymullina (eds), *Speaking from the Heart: stories of life, family and country*, Fremantle, 2007, pp. 240-60.

14 Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*.

15 *Budget Macquarie Dictionary*, Melbourne, 3rd ed., 1998.

16 Commonwealth of Australia, *Defining Aboriginality in Australia*, Canberra, 2003, p. 1, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/Pubs/CIB/2002-03/03cib10.pdf>, accessed 29 October 2008. See also John McCorquodale, 'The Legal Classification of Race in Australia', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1986, pp. 7-24.

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

The term 'Aborigine' does not tell us anything about the regional diversity of Indigenous Australians, it tells us even less about the richness of each of our own culture, language and geopolitical systems. It simply tells us that we are 'the original peoples of Australia'.

The issue of identity is central to Indigenous people. To describe the *Koori, Nyungar, Mulba, Murri, Nunga, Pallawah, Wongi or Wyba* as Aborigines or Indigenous Australians denies us our own diversity and identity within our own theoretical and applied epistemology. *Nyungar* and other Indigenous peoples need to write history from their own theoretical positions. It is no longer acceptable to ignore our own ideologies and condone the colonial models of the Aborigine. Yet, despite our critical perspective on using the term Aborigine, we cannot at times avoid using the terminology 'Indigenous Australians' or 'Aborigine'. The best we can do is try to minimise its use wherever possible, and then use it only in a general sense when describing the Indigenous people as 'a whole'.

Nyungar boodjar, moort and katitjin – Nyungar land, people and knowledge

One of the significant differences in the writing of *Nyungar* history and *wedjela* history was identified by 'Keeper of the Stories', Tom Bennell (1908-1989) in 1978. He said:

... the *Nyungars* never call it Western Australia. *Ngulla boodjar* [our land], they call, this *ngulla boodjar*, ... *nitcha ngulla koorl Nyinniny* ... [This is our ground we came and sat upon.]¹⁷

Nyungar boodjar (country) lies in the south-western corner of Western Australia. It extends eastward of Esperance (*Wudjari*) moving in an arc to the north-west close to the small wheat-belt town of Nyoongah (*Njakinjaki*) and west-north-west towards Coorow (*Juat*) south of Geraldton across to the west coast. These are the general boundaries of the *boodjar* where all *Nyungar moort* (family) have *boodjar* or geographical land and *moort* or family regional affiliations.¹⁸

According to the 'Keeper of the Stories', the phenomenon known as the *Waakal* or *Nyungar* Rainbow Serpent created the shape of the *boodjar* and *Nyungar* and gave foundation to the meaning of life, 'tha's a *Nyungar* story many years

17 Tom Bennell, Interview, 1978, Tape 2 of 2, Side B, OH356, Battye Library. A partial transcript, produced in 2002, is available but it should be noted that the transcript covers only the segments that were of relevance to work being done at that time.

18 For an overview and bibliography of the work of published *Nyungar* writers up to 1992, see Robyn McCarron, 'Noongar Language and Literature', in Michèle Drouart (ed.), *Postcolonial Fictions: Proceedings of the SPACLALS Triennial Conference 1992*, Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Number 36 (1993), <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/36/McCarron.html>, accessed 4 February 2009.

ago'.¹⁹ The *katitjin* (knowledge) given to *Nyungar* by the *Waakal* included all things connected to our *boodjar*. Of the six seasons in the *Nyungar* world, four were used for fishing, hunting and gathering, one for law and ceremony and the other one, the *nyittiny* – cold times for new home fires or camping grounds. The *Waakal* gave us our knowledge about the sacred sites such as *Boyagin* Rock, *Mandikan*, *Karta Koomba* (the hill in Kings Park), *Pinjarra*, *Mundaring*, *Walwalyalup* (Mt Bakewell at York), *Waakal Mia* (snakes' home in vicinity of Mosman Park), and the *Darbal Yiragan* (Perth waters of the Swan River), and our relationship to them. *Waakal* gave us our knowledge about *Nyungar* and our relationships, responsibilities and obligations to one another.

To place our *boodjar* in a more global perspective, carbon dating indicates that *Nyungar* were on their *boodjar* 28,000 years before sheep were domesticated or systematic harvesting of wheat developed in the Middle East.²⁰ *Nyungar* oral histories recount how the Australian mainland once included the *bidjigurdu* (islands), specifically Rottneest, Carnac and Garden islands (known in *Nyungar* as *Wadjemup*, *Ngooloomayup* and *Meeandip*, respectively). The joining *boodjar* was covered with trees until a great fire split the ground asunder, allowing the sea to rush in. This event was caused by a volcanic eruption or earthquake and is estimated to have occurred 20,000 years ago, thereby creating the current coastline formation.²¹

Prior to 1829, the *boodjar* surrounding the *Beelya* (Swan River) was divided up into four sections, each owned by different family groups. The *Nyungar boordier* (leaders) of these *boodjar* divisions are relatively well known. *Yellagonga* was to the north of the river on the coastal side, while on the eastern side lay *Weeip's* domain. In the southeast *boodjar* around the Swan River, lay *Munday's* territory. Finally, in the southwest *boodjar*, *Midgegooroo* and his *moort* lived.²²

Fish and other marine life were plentiful in the *wardan* (sea), the *darbal* (estuary), *beelya* (rivers), and *pinja* (swamps) all along this coastal strip. According to *Pindjarup* oral historian, Joe Walley,

The *Pindjarup Nyungar* used to follow the lakes or water chain from *Pinjarra*, right through where *Murdoch University* now stands, to *Walyalup* or *Fremantle*. It was a seasonal run for the *Nyungar*, from *Pinjarra* to *Ravenswood*, past *Lake Gorgorup*, *Black Lake*, *Pagononi's Swamp*, *Hansley Swamp* and *Warriup Swamp* and past *Thompson's Lake*.²³

Then the *Pindjarup Nyungar* made their way along the pads past *Bibra Lake* and *North Lake*, *Mandogalup Lake* and *Booragoon Lake*. All this area teemed with bird and marine life like fish, turtle, swamp hens, gilgies, ducks and swans.

19 Thomas Bennell, *Kura*, compiled by Glenys Collard, Bunbury, 1991, revised ed., 1993, p. 3.

20 Green, *Broken Spears*, p. 5; Sylvia J. Hallam 'An Archaeological Survey of the Perth Area, Western Australia: A Progress Report on Art, Artefacts, Dates and Demography', *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter*, 3, 1972.

21 Hallam, 'The First Western Australians', pp. 37-8; Green, *Broken Spears*, p. 6.

22 Green, *Broken Spears*, p. 50.

23 Joe Walley, Oral Interview, 2002, transcribed in 2002. Arrangements are being made to provide library access to the recording and the transcript.

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

Between the Murray River and the Swan River, *Nyungar* followed the seasonal food chain and lived a healthy and leisurely lifestyle, much like those who lived around the Swan River region and other parts of *Nyungar* territory in the south-west.²⁴

Despite the false inference that *Nyungar* culture died out soon after colonisation, many *Nyungar* continue to enjoy much of their *boodjar* (country), *moort* (family), *katitjin* (knowledge) and *wangkiny* (language). Many *Nyungar*, be they *Whadjuck*, *Balardong*, *Pindjarup* or *Minang*, continue to access areas such as those around estuary waters for sustenance, knowledge, spiritual renewal and practise distinctly cultural forms or business matters.²⁵ Further, each local language group is subdivisible again into specific *moort* (family members) with ownership and/or access rights to specific *boodjar* within the larger *Nyungar* area. Thus the cities of Perth and Fremantle exist within the *Whadjuck boodjar*.

Sharing the *Nyungar katitjin* (knowledge)

Nyungar all over the land know and understand the theoretical and applied tenets of *boodjar*, *moort* and *katitjin*. When the great *Waakal* created the *boodjar*, he ensured that there was *wirrin* (spirits) to look after the land and all that it encompassed. Some places such as waterholes or rocks, rivers, trees or plants were created as sacred sites and hold *wirrin*, both *warra* (bad) and *quop* (good). *Nyungar* are the holders and keepers of the *katitjin* of these places. The *Nyungar* were also given *koorndan* (respect) and *kaarnya* (commonsense) by the *Waakal*, so that we could abide by the principles and law of looking after the *boodjar* and everything in it.

The *Waakal* also gave us our *katitjin* about the *wirrin* (spirits) in our *boodjar*, and about *wirrin* and *moort* in the cycle of life. Some *Nyungar* people were given *boolyada* (magical powers) to heal or kill and to protect all things sacred created by the *Waakal*.

In numerous research projects *Nyungar maam* (men) and *yorga* (women) from our *boodjar* share stories, which are in keeping with our *Nyungar* oral tradition. They are active participants in these projects, and we are very grateful and say “*kaya noonar quopadar wangkiny ngulla katich nitcha*” or “yes you are very good speakers we understand this. You are also the Keepers of the Stories

24 J.E. Hammond, *Winjan's People: The Story of the South-West Australian Aborigines* (1933), Carlisle (WA), 1980, pp. 16-20; Cathy Drake and Shona Kennealy, *Recollections of the Beeljar Wetlands*, Melville (WA), 1995, pp. 6-7; Fred Collard, Oral Interview, 2002, transcribed in 2002. Arrangements are being made to provide library access to the recording and the transcript.

25 Richard Walley, Oral Interview, 2002; Joe Walley, Oral Interview, 2002; Sealin Garlett, Oral Interview, 2002; Janet Hayden, Oral Interview, 2002; Dorothy Winmar, Oral Interview, 2002. All interviews transcribed in 2002. Arrangements are being made to provide library access to the recordings and the transcripts. See also R. Eggington, *Kyana: Nyoongah Corroboree, Perth 1991-1993: In Unity and Strength*, Perth, 1993; Lois Tilbrook, *Nyungar tradition: glimpses of Aborigines of South-Western Australia, 1829-1914*, Nedlands (WA), 1983; and *Bennell v Western Australia* [2006] FCA 1243 (19 September 2006), http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/federal_ct/2006/1243.html, accessed 23 January 2009.

and custodians of such ancient (*Nyungar*) *katitjins* or knowledges.” Their oral histories are evidence of the connection of the theory and the practical application of *katitjin* (knowledge) of the Cosmology – the *Waakal*, creator of The Trilogy – *boodjar*, *moort* and *katitjin* which is the foundation of the *Nyungar* ‘meaning of life’.

Whadjuck/Balardong Dorothy Winmar tells us about the *jimbar* (spirit), early *karla* (camp sites) and communication, and then her *moort* (family).

When the *wedjelas* first came here, the *Nyungars* lived on the top of Kings Park and they saw the ship coming in. Grandmother said they thought it was the spirit of their people coming back and they were scared of what was coming back, that they were ghosts. But then they learnt that they were another sort of people, white people and then they got used to seeing them and talking to them. Another time, another little ship came in with a barge on it and the barge came out with a horse on it.

The Aborigines [*Nyungar*] had never seen a horse before. My grandmother [*maybe great grandmother?] was a little girl and she ran and climbed up the tree. She was scared because she thought the monster was coming to eat her up... Yes, they thought it was a *jennark* because they used to tell stories about the *jimbars* [spirits] in those days. The *jimbar* had a big mouth and used to bite the black people and eat them up... The *jimbar* was like a dinosaur, as big as a dinosaur... Before the white men came out, a lot of these big hills or rocks were very useful to Aborigines, because they used to get up on top of the rock and send smoke signals to let the one mob know what was going on to another tribe. They would make a big fire and when the other people on some other rock saw it, they would tell them they saw their fire and then they would go down and meet each other. They might tell each other news, like, if an old elder died and they wanted to gather around. They were very significant sites; the rocks, waterholes or *gnamma* holes where they drink from, and where all the kangaroos live. They would make their home around there for a while.

I lived around the Merredin, Bruce Rock, Corrigin area for a while, but Brookton was always my dad’s home, but I never lived there... Yes, these were the places they [the *Nyungars*] went to [when they left the Swan River area]. A lot of places there. I suppose they couldn’t understand why the white man was chasing them around. When the white men treated them bad, were cruel to them, they used to burn the white man’s crops. They set light to the crops full of wheat. A lot of them would end up in jail at Rottnest Island.²⁶

Knowledge of *Nyungar boodjar* has been told to *Nyungar koorlongka* (children) by *Nyungar* custodians and is well supported by other forms of documented evidence collected by *wedjela* since their earliest visits to the area. *Nyungar* might say of these accounts: *nidja Nyungar boodjar nguny wangkingy* or this is our *Nyungar* land and stories.

In 1833, only four years after the ‘*wam wedjela, koorl barminyiny our moort and dombariny ngulla boodjar* – or the strange white people came and killed our relations and took over our country’, Robert Menli Lyon wrote this statement of

26 Winmar, Oral Interview, 2002.

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

Nyungar: 'I have reason to believe that their history and geography are handed down from generation to generation orally ...'²⁷

Wangkiny (language, talking, speaking or telling)

Wangkiny is the *Nyungar* word for talking, speaking or telling depending on the context in which the communication is being given. Language variations occur amongst the *Balardong*, *Juat*, *Kaneang*, *Koreng*, *Minang*, *Njakinjaki*, *Pibelman*, *Pindjarup*, *Wardandi*, *Whadjuck*, *Wilman* and *Wudjari* in the southwest of Western Australia.²⁸ There are even variations in the spelling of the generic word that describes our people, e.g. *Nyungar*, *Noongar*, *Nyoongar* and *Nyoongah*. This variation reflects both regional dialect differences as well as an attempt by individual groups to retain a sense of independence and difference within modern Australian society. We acknowledge that these factors have made writing our *Nyungar* language somewhat difficult at times.

The variations in spelling do not stop *Nyungar* history and writing demonstrating the continuing significance and power of our *Nyungar wangkiny* (language). It is through the *wangkiny* of *ngulla moort* (our family) that the stories of *Nyungar* creation, mythologies, religion and *boodjar* (country) have been handed down through our oral history. Our access to *Nyungar* knowledges has been primarily through our *moort* and this oral history has been fundamental to the writing of the history of *Nyungar*.

Nyungar language is evident in place names, suburbs, trees and animals found throughout the South West. Many of the place names were recorded by Bates, Grey and others but many have also been handed down through *Nyungar* oral history. Bates even suggested that the original place names were far more attractive than the English names that were given to the townships. With regard to *Yamatji* country, she wrote:

There are several native names belonging to the locality in and around Yalgoo that could be used instead of Yalgoo. Warrambo, the native name for Mt. Magnet, is far superior to its English name, and there can be no question as to Yalamurra being a more pleasant sounding term than 'Peak Hill' and Maduwiri than 'Horseshoe'.²⁹

Bates mentioned other place names to demonstrate the different sounds and use of language. Some of those in the southern *Nyungar* country were:

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- 27 Robert Menli Lyon, 'A Glance at the Manners, and Language of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia; With a Short Vocabulary', *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, March/April 1833, cited in Neville Green (ed.), *Nyungar – The People: Aboriginal Customs in the South West of Australia*, North Perth, 1979, pp. 148-80, p. 156.
 - 28 Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*; Wilfred H. Douglas, *The Aboriginal Languages of the South West of Australia*, Canberra, 1976, p. 8.
 - 29 Daisy Bates, 'Aboriginal Nomenclature', 1912, in Daisy Bates, *Aboriginal Perth and Bibbulmun Biographies and Legends*, edited by P.J. Bridge, Victoria Park (WA), 1992, pp. 20-7, p. 24. See also Battye Library, PR342.

Baalerungup—Mr Moir’s coast station (north of Salt River, Southern District) ... Ye’rangutting—near Esperance. Baa’lung’up—Thomas River (south coast). Man’doobur-nup—Frenchman’s Peak or hill near Esperance ... Jabdail—centre of Ravensthorpe township. Kaagubin—near Mt Stirling (Kaagup—spirit babies, Kaagubin—place where spirit babies abide).³⁰

History, Cartography and Cultural Differences

At this stage, it is prudent to elaborate on notions of history making, recording and cartography in relation to cultural differences. The history of Australia’s south-west is a discourse that has been recorded predominantly by non-Aboriginal people, reflecting their personal and political perspective. On a personal level, the colonists were influenced by economic and religious beliefs that precluded insights into the corresponding structures of Indigenous society. Politically, many factors coalesced to reinforce their moral and legal legitimacy of appropriating someone else’s land, thereby justifying the deployment of the British military on *Nyungar boodjar* (country) and the re-allocation of land title to the colonists’ networks. In addition, it legitimated in the mind of the *wedjela* at least that the imposition of a European-style political economy and legal systems upon the *Nyungar* and other indigenous peoples across Australia ‘was for the Natives’ own good’.

Recording history with an Indigenous content in this milieu meant producing a narrative that systematically edited and mediated both events and explanations in light of a European aesthetic. In other words, the British colonists placed their own *wedjela* interpretations and agendas on *Nyungar boodjar* (country), *moort* (family or relations) and *katitjin* (knowledge).

For *Nyungar*, any one place may be called different names by different people at different times of the year according to who is using it, and for what purpose. For example, some *Nyungar* refer to Kings Park as *Karra katta* (the hill of the spiders), *Yongariny* (place for catching kangaroo), *Geenunginy Bo* (the place for looking a long way), and *Karlkarniny* (by fire place sitting). All of these place names are equally correct – it depends on the context in which they are being used, and by whom. By accepting the more limited European cartographic conventions, we run the risk of misrepresenting or making too simple our understanding of *Nyungar* sites and land use. *Wedjela* researchers and writers could enhance their comprehension of *Nyungar* activities by checking whether the *Nyungar* words used in printed histories and other records have meanings other than the ones indicated in those sources.

European cartographic conventions and systems of boundary-making are not directly or easily transferable into *Nyungar* systems of naming and land use. European maps are usually set out in such a way as to imply that places have fixed names over time, that one place has only one ‘true’ name and that people share a consensus of meaning about one place. Those with

30 *ibid.*, p. 25.

even a basic understanding of *Nyungar* systems of reading and speaking about *boodjar* (country) would immediately recognise that introduced cartographic conventions, in and of themselves, are inadequate analytical tools for talking about *Nyungar* names and land use.

Western cartographic conventions reflect the importance of making boundaries to function as markers to exclude others and demonstrate individual ownership and control. For *Nyungar*, talking about one place as if it exists in isolation is akin to talking about people as if they exist in isolation from their community. Women and men may have different uses for the same place, or several events may have occurred in a place, resulting in it having several names. Also if the name is descriptive, for example dark or black water, the same name might occur in several places – wherever dark water is found. Thus, *boodjar* is a more dynamic entity for *Nyungar* than for *wedjela*. This accounts for some of the difficulty in interpreting colonial *wedjela* accounts of the region. In addition, it exemplifies how a *Nyungar* interpretation of history and place can differ quite markedly from a *wedjela* interpretation.³¹

Constructing a *Nyungar* interpretive history demands a disruption of colonial discourse with a concomitant acknowledgement that it, too, will be a partial account mediated by past and present interpretations. Projects need to utilise the theoretical and applied knowledges of *Nyungar* oral historians as well as material originating from non-*Nyungar* and non-Aboriginal people. Where older material is drawn upon, it may be prudent to ask how much reliance can be placed on that material in the light of changing attitudes and the increasing availability of *Nyungar* writing, oral history and language vocabularies. By constructing a *Nyungar* interpretive history it ensures that we do not, like the older-style non-Indigenous and non-*Nyungar* writers, suffer the consequences of blindly adopting western history and cartographic conventions which can easily lead us into talking about *Nyungar* and *Nyungar* languages, land uses and cultural lifestyles as if they no longer exist. Older official reports and other written texts almost always refer to *Nyungar* cultural forms, *Nyungar* land use and *Nyungar* names in the past tense. We suspect this reflects the way older histories and official records focus most attention on *Nyungar* and land use prior to colonisation and have largely ignored the use of *boodjar* (country) by *Nyungar* since 1829.

Finally, while we would like to believe everything in *Nyungar* oral history, we acknowledge the need to have had more than one person talk about a matter. It is crucial that we acknowledge that our conclusions are provisional, open to criticism and seen as one theory or set of stories rather than the definitive and fixed true story. Like *wedjela*, *Nyungar* also sometimes differ in their interpretation of events. Respect should be accorded to people who may have a different story to tell.

31 See, for example, Green (ed.), *Nyungar – The People*, pp. 172-6; Len Collard and Dave Palmer, 'Nidja Goorandalup! Noonookurt Nyinning Nyungar Boodjar: A Nyungar Interpretive History of the Use of Boodjar (Country) in the Vicinity of the University of Western Australia', Centre for Aboriginal Studies, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, 1998.

Djanga koorling – early contact with wedjelas

Research of early colonisation (1829-1850) requires detailed attention, primarily because of the profound presence of *Nyungar* voices in the majority of stories detailing this period in Western Australia's history. Those voices reveal *Nyungar* land use, *Nyungar* knowledge of the natural environment, and *Nyungar* comprehension of colonisation.

In the story of early contact told by *Whadjuck/Balardong* Dorothy Winmar, reference is made to *Nyungar* believing that the first *wedjela* they saw were spirits or ghosts.³² Similar accounts exist elsewhere. Daisy Bates, for example, recorded that when the *wedjela* arrived on the big *beelya* (later named the Swan River), the *Nyungar* thought that they were the returned spirits of their dead ancestors, hence they were referred to as the *djanga* or spirits.³³ The *Nyungar* place where the spirit of the deceased *Nyungar* went when they passed away was *Kur-an-up*. It was 'over the sea', where the *djangas* came from – spirits of the dead *Nyungar* people.³⁴

In other early South West colonial history, a Dutch crew from the vessel *Elburgh* sighted three *Nyungar* wearing *yongka booka* (kangaroo skins cloaks) near Cape Leeuwin in 1659.³⁵ When another Dutch crew landed on our shores in 1696/1697, *Nyungar* had *karla* (camp sites) in and around the *beelya* (Swan River). Captained by Willem de Vlamingh, they briefly explored the areas now known as Cottesloe, Fremantle (*Walyalup*) and Freshwater Bay – literally *gahbi* (water) and *djikap* (fresh) in *Nyungar* – and found multiple *karla* (home fires) of our *moort* (family), although those people declined to reveal themselves.³⁶ However, our theory is that *Nyungar* watched the Dutch sailors and other mariners from the cover of the bush. They chose not to reveal themselves to the *djanga* (spirits) as they may well have been fearful of this unknown presence or phenomenon. In the *Nyungar* world all phenomena were created by the *Waakal* and were known to *Nyungar* through our mythologies. Such events were totally strange and needed close scrutiny.

The *Nyungar* may well have observed the strangers' ill-fated gastronomic incursion with the *boyi* (zamia nuts) when Captain de Vlamingh's crew ate the nuts without adopting the *Nyungar* practice of first neutralising the poison, thus incurring significant illness.³⁷ That event occurred while the strangers were exploring *Nyungar boodjar* (the people's land) on the *beelya* (Swan River).

It was just over one hundred and thirty years later that the *djanga* began making their presence felt in the southern region of *Nyungar boodjar* in *Minang* country now known as King George Sound at Albany. Before that time, however,

32 Winmar, Oral Interview, 2002.

33 Bates, *Aboriginal Perth*, pp. 5-6.

34 *ibid.*, p. 6.

35 Neville Green, 'Aborigines and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century', in *A New History of Western Australia*, Nedlands, 1981, p. 73.

36 Green (ed.), *Nyungar – The People*, p. 141. See also Peter Veth, Peter Sutton and Margo Neale (eds), *Strangers on the shore: early coastal contacts in Australia*, Canberra, 2008.

37 Green, *Broken Spears*, p. 29.

George Vancouver began the process of British colonisation by claiming that region in the name of King George III in 1791. Vancouver had arrived in the winter and made a brief stop. While cutting timber from the surrounding bush, he came upon a deserted *Minang karla* (campsite or home fire). The people had moved from it, going further inland for the winter. Shortly before Vancouver departed, he placed gifts within the largest *mia mia* (hut) 'as reparation for the timber he had removed'.³⁸ By leaving these gifts, Vancouver was acknowledging the fact that *Nyungar* own the land.

The *Minang Nyungar* were welcoming hosts when Matthew Flinders arrived aboard the *Investigator* in the summer of 1801. Exchange of various items between the *Nyungar* and the British, in addition to daily visits to the beach by *Minang Nyungar* to watch the visitors, cemented a respectful relationship between the two parties.³⁹ Captain Phillip Parker King experienced similarly cordial treatment when he visited the area on three occasions between 1818 and 1822. Captain King earned the hospitality of the *Minang Nyungar* hosts by respecting their wishes for the visitors not to have contact with *Nyungar yorga* (women) and *koolangka* (children).⁴⁰

Although French presence in *Nyungar boodjar* was felt during these exploratory years, it was not until 1829 that the British formally claimed the western portion of Australia as part of the British colonies of New Holland. Some sources tie the claim to Major George Lockyer's establishment of a garrison at King George Sound but others portray the garrison as 'a New South Wales outpost'.⁴¹

The precise numbers of *Whadjuck Nyungar* living around the Swan River region and its surrounds prior to *wedjela* invasion and settlement is unknown. However, early approximation suggests that *Whadjuck Nyungar boodjar* would have been able to sustain large population sizes compared to many other areas on the continent. Bates mentions Governor Stirling's census indicating that around 1,500 *Nyungar* lived in the 'metropolitan area',⁴² but other ethno-historical sources imply that this estimate is exaggerated. Armstrong believed that there were nearly 700 *Nyungar* in the area in 1836.⁴³ Hammond mentions seeing around 300 *Nyungar* gathered at just one site (Bailup) for a corroboree, and 'as many as two hundred on the march' at other times.⁴⁴ Drawing on those sources and others, Hallam puts a conservative estimate of around 400 *Nyungar* living in the general Perth surrounds at the time of colonisation.⁴⁵ However, contrary to what many of the early colonists imagined, the number of *Nyungar*

38 Green, 'Aborigines and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century', p. 74.

39 Green, *Broken Spears*, pp. 32-3.

40 Green, 'Aborigines and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century', p. 75.

41 J.S. Batty, *Western Australia: A History from its Discovery to the Inauguration of the Commonwealth* (1924), Nedlands, 1978, p. 61; and Donald S. Garden, *Albany: A Panorama of the Sound from 1827*, West Melbourne, 1977, pp. 10-21.

42 Bates, *Aboriginal Perth*, p. 7.

43 F. Armstrong, 'Manners and Habits of the Aborigines of Western Australia', *Perth Gazette*, 12 November 1836, p. 797, cited in Hallam, 'The First Western Australians', p. 67.

44 Hammond, *Winjan's People*, 1980, pp. 23, 25.

45 Hallam, 'The First Western Australians', pp. 66-7.

living in the area was not large by European standards and the region was able to sustain the people and their lifestyle.

The scene was set for colonisation of *Nyungar boodjar* (country) around the *Beelya* (Swan River) when Captain James Stirling arrived at the mouth of the *Beelya* aboard the *Success* in 1827. Later Stirling went up-river and found that *Whadjuck Nyungar* at Claise Brook (later part of East Perth) were less welcoming than their *Minang Nyungar* counterparts in the Albany region. However, Stirling received a more cordial welcome further up-river when a group of around thirty *Whadjuck Nyungar* followed the boat to the area around Jane's Brook and exchanged *gidgee* or spears and *kylie* or boomerang with the crew for clothing and freshly-killed swans.⁴⁶ This would have been simply a matter of courtesy or diplomacy.

Significantly, in 1829, Captain Fremantle arrived at Woodman's Point, about seven kilometres south of the mouth of the Swan River and started exploring. He later wrote:

We rowed up the river a considerable distance & saw & heard natives on both sides who halloa'd to us very loud and appeared to cry out, "*warra, warra*" ...⁴⁷

After camping overnight at Rous Point, at the mouth of the *Beelya*, Captain Fremantle explored the southern shore. He noted that:

I had not proceeded far before I heard the yelling of the black fellows (as Jack calls them) and [leaving the boat] we gained the top of the hill where we saw a Native with a firebrand in one hand & two spears in the other, shouting, "*Warra*" "*Warra*" & pointing to the shore where the boat was, desiring us to go away.⁴⁸

'*Warra*' in *Nyungar* means 'no good' or 'bad'. *Nyungar* endeavours to stop British colonisation were the beginning of conflict on *Nyungar boodjar* (country).⁴⁹ In May 1829, on behalf of the British crown, Captain Fremantle formally, but illegally, annexed the Swan River Colony.⁵⁰ In June, sixty-nine colonists arrived aboard the *Parmelia* under Captain James Stirling (later to become Governor of the small colony) and, by December of the same year, there were 652 British settlers recorded in the colony.⁵¹ *Nyungar moort* (family) of *boordier* (leader) *Midgegooroo* moved to *Karlup* (now known as Lake Monger), three kilometres to the north of their traditional *beelya karla* (river camping grounds) around the *Darbal Beelya* (estuary in the river). As the *wedjela* settlement grew,

46 Green, 'Aborigines and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century', p. 77.

47 Sir C. H. Fremantle, *Diary and Letters of Admiral Sir C. H. Fremantle, G.C.B., Relating to the Founding of the Colony of Western Australia, 1829*, edited by Lord Cottesloe (1928), Fremantle, 1979, pp. 36-7.

48 *ibid.*, p. 41.

49 A good range of source material relevant to the conflict can be found in *Nyungah Land: Records of Invasion and Theft of Aboriginal Land on the Swan River 1829 - 1850*, which was compiled by Bevan Carter and others and published by the Swan Valley Nyungah Community in c. 2006 as the first volume in the Black History Series.

50 Sylvia J. Hallam and Lois Tilbrook (eds), *The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*, vol. 8, p. xiv.

51 *ibid.*

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

More [Nyungar] Aboriginal groups were displaced, their access to accustomed food resources was hindered, and staple crops were spoilt by the activities of these newcomers. On the Murray River, soldiers broke down fish traps in the river, and fired on the Aborigines who later approached the barracks...⁵²

By 1831, *Nyungar* were 'collecting rent' from the *wedjela* farms and flourmills that were illegally occupying our *boodjar* and the attacks on our *Nyungar moort* by *wedjelas* became a regular occurrence. As invasion, exploration and colonisation extended further into *Nyungar boodjar*, many of the *Nyungar* tried to protect our *boodjar* from *wedjela* intrusion, but to no avail. In *Nyungar* written histories and oral traditions, 'Keepers of the Stories' such as Tom Bennell relate the experiences of our *Nyungar moort* when the British 'redcoats' arrived to colonise the *Beelya* (Swan River). He shares a story handed down to him:

h'an' these whasnames
see these Nyungars
talkin' 'bout this place
down 'ere
ahh what they call h'it again
Mounts Bay un'it (Swan Brewery)
well they talkin' 'bout that place
Nyungars

Well
I know that Nyungar run
they told me years h'an' years ago
that place was there (pause)
two 'undred
to one 'undred h'an' fifty years
before the white fullahs come 'ere
they knew all that run
Nyungars did
I bin talkin' to that ol' fullah
they father bin 'live
when the white fullahs come (hand moving circular)
from over there (pointing)
still 'live like

Ol' man Bennell h'an' h'em seen
they used to say
ngala maam
ngangk h'an maam
mother h'an father see
balap nyinanginy nidja wardarn
thas Fremantle sea
baal balap djinanginy
wardany nidja wadjela yaarl kurliny
in the boat see
they seen 'em come on the boat

52 *ibid.*

they all *bardang kurlangany*
 from there
 Yaarl kurliny Nyungars
Kurl baminy see
 Killin' 'em
 shootin' 'em
 cuttin' they throat
 knockin' they 'eads off h'an' all
 see thas what they bin doin'
 h'an' this never bin said
 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
 Karlkarniny
 they used to call that sandhill in
 Kings Park
 Karlkarniny
 thas from there
 from *Karlkarniny*
balap kurlangany nidja marlap
 up the sea this way (pointing)
 Bunbury
 Collie
 right up through there
 they bin killin'
 killin' Nyungars
 all the way through there see
 but none of thas bin said
 Well ol' Felix [Bennell] (pause)
 h'an' I forgot this ol' fullahs name
 h'it's that long ago
 h'it's over seventy years ago [1918]
 they bin tellin' me all these things
 h'an' stories
 they learnt me
 all that
 right through that way
 thas 'ow lot a Nyungars
nidja ngalak nyinalang
 see thas us people
 'ere the *wadjelas*
 people *baminy*
 fathers
 mothers
 they killed 'em see
 thas 'ow they got us (mixed blood)
 Thas 'ow there's no back relations
 well thas 'ow I know.⁵³

53 Bennell, *Kura*, pp. 23-4.

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

In the older *wedjela* history books, these deeds are written as 'glorious battles'. Our *Nyungar* oral histories, combined with the pen, now give an entirely different view of the slaughter and terrorism imposed on *Nyungar* by the colonising people. *Nyungar* tried to defend the *dombariny* ('take-over') of our *boodjar* as patriots against the *wedjela* invaders.

When the colonists took up land on *Midgegooroo* and his *moort's boodjar*, the *Whadjuck Nyungar* found themselves at odds with the *wam* (strange new people) who looked like their *djanga* (dead relations). In May 1832, three years after the arrival of the invaders, William Shenton, who owned the flourmill at South Perth, observed that 'no one has any idea of the real number of natives destroyed by the settlers'.⁵⁴ In commenting on the depletion in game including kangaroos, waterfowl and other birds, he noted that:

... the natives had lost their hunting grounds and 'been driven from their usual haunts and fisheries' and could not approach a river without danger, as European grants now lined the banks.⁵⁵

Shenton even went so far as to suggest that, because the Aborigines (*Nyungar*) were reacting to the loss of their lands and food resources, they should be removed to Rottnest Island (*Wedjemup*). He thought they could be allowed to pursue their traditional ways there.⁵⁶ In looking at such writing now, the reactions of *Midgegooroo* and his *moort* should be interpreted as patriotic resistance to the loss of resources, terrain and kin to European usurpation.

Between the years 1832 to 1834, there was turmoil for our *Nyungar moort* in the Swan River colony, as the invaders illegally annexed more and more of our *boodjar*. It was during this time that clashes between the *Nyungar boodjar boordier* (landowners) and the colonisers were becoming more frequent.⁵⁷

It came to a head on 29 October 1834 when many *Pindjarup Nyungar* were killed in the so-called 'Battle of Pinjarra' where the town of Pinjarra is now situated. The term now used by the *Pindjarup Nyungar* is the Massacre of Pinjarra. Those killings turned the tide of *Nyungar* resistance to colonial invasion around the Swan River and Murray River regions.⁵⁸

Further inland, areas like York were to feel the force of colonisation in 1836

54 Hallam and Tilbrook (eds), *The Bicentennial Dictionary*, vol. 8, pp. 209-10, citing CSR 22/171.

55 *ibid.*

56 *ibid.* p. xv, citing CSR 22/171.

57 Bennell, *Kura*, pp. 23-4.

58 R.F. Cooper, 'Battle of Pinjarra', 1967, Battye Library PR6603; 'Encounter with the Natives in the Pinjarra District, On the Banks of the Murray', *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 1 November 1834, pp. 382-3; 'Murray River', *Perth Gazette*, 8 November 1834, p. 385; 'Death of Captain Ellis, Principal Superintendent of the Corps of Mounted Police', *Perth Gazette*, 15 November 1834, p. 390; John Septimus Roe, 'Extracts from Registered Field Book No. 3, containing surveys in the districts Perth, Murray, etc., 1834-1839, Battye Library; Len Collard and Dave Palmer, 'Nidja Boodjar Binjarup Nyungar, Kura, Yeye, Boorda': The Gcalyut Research and Training Project, Fremantle, 1996; Natalie Contos, in conjunction with Theo A. Kearing and the Murray District Aboriginal Association and Len Collard and Dave Palmer, 'Pinjarra Massacre Site Research and Development Project: report for stage 1, Pinjarra, [1998], held by Battye Library as Q 994.12/PIN.

and 1837.⁵⁹ By 1840, most of the military-based warfare and fighting was over for the *Nyungar* of the South West.⁶⁰ They continued to be subjected to ongoing colonial land theft, which is yet to be resolved. 'Keeper of the Stories' Tom Bennell's comments reflect upon this issue:

Boodjar - that is the dirt

Boodjar wam - that is somebody come from another country.

Barl yaarl koorliny ngulla boodjar nyininy - that means he comes and sits on his ground.

Noonook want to *wort koorliny*

Nitcha not *noonar boodjar* - you want to *noonook karla koorliny* - that means he wants to go back home to his own home.

Noonar boodjar wam [Stranger where is your country?]

Wedjela durrigar bomunggur - that means come from overseas.

Nitcha you want to koorlaniny ngulla boodjar [*Nyungar* says you want to come here and take ours]

Koorl buranginy

Nitcha ngulla got nothing *boodjar*, [coming and taking this our country from us]

Uart, boodjar, uart, yeye ngulla. [None, land, none today, us]

Wedjela wort dombariny - See that means the whites took their [*Nyungar*] country.⁶¹

The *Nyungar* oral histories contrast with much of the information that colonists recorded in official documents and personal correspondence about the lives and personalities of our people. A lot of the information from these oral histories has been put into print, both in transcripts and in books, in the past thirty years and is readily accessible. Some of that material is mentioned in this article, either in the text or the footnotes. Other items can be located by means that include checking the many State Library of Western Australia's subjects that commence with 'Aboriginal Australians Western Australia', for example 'Aboriginal Australians Western Australia Interviews', and such other subjects as 'Australian Literature Aboriginal Australian Authors'.⁶²

In the early part of the colonial period in the south-west of Australia (1829-1850), most of the *wedjela* writers were male. Their writings focused on *Nyungar maam* (men), and even those 'best placed' to record the doings of *Nyungar yorga* (women who have had children) and *yok* (women without children) seldom did so. Sir George Grey, who was an 'officer, explorer, then Resident

59 Hallam and Tilbrook (eds), *The Bicentennial Dictionary*, vol. 8, p. xvi, citing CSR 55/12.

60 *ibid.*, pp. xvi-xvii.

61 Bennell, Interview, 1978, Tape 1 of 2, Side A.

62 Examples include Jack Davis & Bob Hodge (eds), *Aboriginal writing today: papers from the first National Conference of Aboriginal Writers, held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983*, Canberra, 1985, and Alice Nannup, Lauren Marsh and Stephen Kinnane, *When the pelican laughed*, South Fremantle, 1992.

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

Magistrate, Albany (1839-41)' was a 'notable exception' in that regard.⁶³ Other writers included:

Captain T.T. Ellis of the 63rd Regiment Mounted Police, Superintendent of Native Tribes (1832-34); F.F. Armstrong, Native Interpreter (1835-39) and Chief Interpreter, Schoolmaster and Moral Superintendent to Natives (1840-c.1872); G.F. Moore, bachelor farmer, lawyer, explorer and Advocate General (1829-41); Robert Menli Lyons, bachelor farmer and moral crusader (1830-34); Alexander Collie, bachelor Colonial Surgeon (1829-35).⁶⁴

The need for reliance on the work of these *wedjela* writers has lessened as the availability of the *Nyungar* oral histories has increased. Scholars now have access to a significant amount of material that does not reflect the preconceptions of the British colonists. Importantly, the oral histories also offset the relative dearth of colonists' narratives concerning *Nyungar yorga* (women) and their role as *boodjar boordier* (owners and persons of influence).

Nyungar Yok/Yorga (women or females) and Koorlongka (children)

The scarcity of narratives about *Nyungar yok* and *yorga* (women) in accounts of early colonisation calls for attention to be paid to their role as *boodjar boordier* (owners and persons of influence). Nearly all references place *Nyungar yok/yorga* in the role of food gatherers but fail to recognise their contribution in maintaining the economic and social well-being of *Nyungar* society. Lois Tilbrook comments on this and she writes:

... Charles Symmons, Chief Protector of Aborigines, repeating Armstrong's census in 1840, identified tracts of land as belonging to both men and women, so that, for example, Monday [also spelt *Munday*] and his wives Bugup and Kogan are described as 'owning' one tract of land, Yallagonga [also spelt *Yellagonga*], his wives Windan and Yangan, his sons Elal and Dua (or Dower), and daughters Daleer, Gargap and Morap, as 'owning' another. The groupings are still under male heads, but the difference between Symmons and Armstrong is that the former lists wives along with husbands, sisters together with brothers, as people in whom rights, be they ownership or access, are vested. For both men and women, the mechanisms of marriage and descent are working here, but the two are confused and the rules not enunciated, although women's proprietary rights to land are not in doubt.⁶⁵

Nyungar yorga were clearly landowners with property rights despite the rarity of such documentation by other colonists.⁶⁶ Thus *Nyungar yorga* were *boordier* (leaders) alongside *Nyungar maam* (men). They also had their special areas for women's business. According to *Balardong / Whadjuck* Sealin Garlett, Kings Park

63 Lois Tilbrook, 'A Question of Access: Women, Marriage and Land Ownership in South-Western Australia', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1986, pp. 99-116, p. 99.

64 *ibid.*

65 Tilbrook, 'A Question of Access', pp. 103-4.

66 *ibid.*, p. 104.

was a ceremonial place for women, and *Nyungar maam* (men) respected this right.⁶⁷

Nyungar yok/yorga were important to the relations between *Nyungar* groups from different areas. They played a pivotal part in many ceremonies, including welcoming individuals to their *moort* (family) lands.⁶⁸ Their forging of new *moort* alliances with other *wam* (strange) *Nyungar* was also central to the procreation of *koorlongka* (children) and the acquisition of access rights through marriage.⁶⁹

Nyungar yok/yorga took substantial responsibility for *Nyungar* day-to-day life. They took responsibility for most of the care and *katitjin* (knowledge) of the *koorlongka* (children and babies). Through the harvesting of vegetables and roots to the hunting of small animals, they contributed greatly to their families' dietary variety, thereby sustaining the overall health of the community. They constructed their *mia mia* (shelter), made their *booka* (cloaks) and *choota* (bags) from the *yongka* (kangaroo) pelts, and they spun fur and hair for rope used for a variety of purposes. The women usually had two *choota* (bags); one to carry the very young *koorlongka*, and the other for food and items collected during the day's work. When necessary, *yok* would carry tools for the *maam* (men).⁷⁰

Yet, when we go to one of the early *wedjela* interpretation from which this sort of information about *Nyungar yok/yorga* comes, we read:

Women are the mere slaves of the men, obliged to watch and attend their movements, and to carry all their property, as well as the young children, in bags at their back. They must construct the hut, make the fire, provide roots for themselves, and give a share to their husband, whilst he does not always share his game with them.⁷¹

This is another instance where *wedjela*-biased male perspectives have distorted the oral traditions of the *Nyungar* insofar as *Nyungar yok/yorga* were not 'mere slaves of the men', but were *boordier* or 'bosses' in their own right.

As Catherine Berndt remarked,

... European observers imposed their own models on what they saw or heard, highlighting some aspects at the expense of others. In these models, the status of Aboriginal women was distorted, and their positive role was barely recognised.⁷²

67 Garlett, Oral Interview, 2002.

68 Tilbrook, 'A Question of Access', pp. 100-3.

69 *ibid.* pp. 107-12.

70 Hammond, *Winjan's People*, pp. 25, 30-2, 39, 56; and G. F. Moore, *A Descriptive Vocabulary of The Language in Common Use Amongst the Aborigines of Western Australia; with Copious Meanings, Embodying much Interesting Information Regarding the Habits, Manners, and Customs of the Natives, and the Natural History of the Country*, London, 1842, p. 110, Moore's entry for the word *Yago* (a woman). A copy of this work is available on Google Books (<http://books.google.com/books>).

71 Moore, *A Descriptive Vocabulary*, p. 110.

72 Dr C.H. Berndt, 'Women as Outsiders: A Partial Parallel', *Aboriginal News*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1973, pp. 7-8 and 21, p. 8.

Nartj Katitj Bidi Ngulluckiny Koorl?

Additionally, men assigned by the colonial government to positions which brought them into close and regular contact with the *Nyungar* were further predisposed to relate a gender-biased account because of *Nyungar* cultural norms wherein men usually deal with men. Thus *Nyungar* men were more likely than *Nyungar* women to approach male colonists and vice versa. *Nyungar* men actively discouraged contact between Europeans and *yorga*, when the former began arriving in the southwest.⁷³ Consequently, due to the reporting bias of the colonising Europeans and the tendency for *yorga* (women) and *koorlongka* (children) to maintain their distance from *wam* (strangers), information regarding female *Nyungar boordier* at the time of colonisation was comparatively scant.⁷⁴ However, we do know that *Nyungar yok* were interacting with the *wam* (strange) Europeans because there were many children being born from relationships between the two. The 'Keeper of the Stories' *Yelakitj* tell us about the *Nyungar* kids becoming fairer or of a cross-cultural issue:

Norp all koorlongka durrigar durrigar [children getting white] that is a *wedjela koorlongka* [a white kid] *durrigar durrigar koorlongka koorlongka warra* [white kids, white kids no good] - that means all kids are getting white, black women running with the white men.

Nyungar woman's [are asked] *noonook winjaliny koorliny* [where are you going?] *koorlong getting durrigar now* [kids getting white]. She would sit down and have a bit of a cry for a while and then say, I'm all right.⁷⁵

In keeping with the matrilineal heritage of *koorlongka* (children), *Nyungar* accepted the 'fair' children.

The contribution of *Nyungar yok/yorga* (women or females) continues to be diverse and substantial. *Nyungar* oral historians are testimony to our assertion that *Nyungar yok/yorga* continue to be powerful economic and social *boordier* (leaders), nurturers of family and kin, social practitioners of *Nyungar* theory and keepers of the *katitjin* (knowledge). There is also a symbolic affiliation between creation sites and *katitjin* and the role of *yok/yorga*.

Conclusion

In the traditions of Indigenous cultures globally, oral histories continue through local language groups and, in our specific case, through the *Nyungar* of south western Australia, be they *Balardong*, *Wilman*, *Juat*, *Pindjarup*, *Whadjuck* or other oral historians. Oral histories will continue ad infinitum and will continue to be spoken and recorded by *Nyungar*, *Nunga*, *Murri*, *Koori*, *Wongi*, and the many other indigenous peoples globally. The involvement of non-Indigenous people in this process will also continue to evolve. Globally, Aboriginal oral histories will continue to have a profound influence on all our generations to come and

73 Green, 'Aborigines and White Settlers', p. 75.

74 Tilbrook, 'A Question of Access', pp. 99-100.

75 Bennell, Interview, 1978, Tape 1 of 2, Side A.

they will be the eternal link to *Nyungar* and other Aboriginal people's selves, our knowledges, countries, languages, identities, heritages, cultures, and ways of knowing.

The existence of these oral histories, and their increasing availability in print and on video, TV and websites provide ample opportunity for history to reflect *Nyungar* experiences and concerns, including those of *Nyungar yok/yorga* (women) as *boodjar yorga boordier* (owners and persons of influence). It is time to acknowledge the slaughter, terrorism and displacement imposed on *Nyungar* by the colonising people. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that *Nyungar* continue to enjoy much of their *boodjar* (country), *moort* (family), *katitjin* (knowledge) and *wangkiny* (language) and, therefore, that they have a place in *wedjela* versions of contemporary as well as early history. It is also important, and not just for *Nyungar* and other Indigenous peoples, that *wedjela* history locally and globally makes more effort to recognise the variety and importance of regional and world identities in Aboriginal and Islander Australian societies.