

Preface

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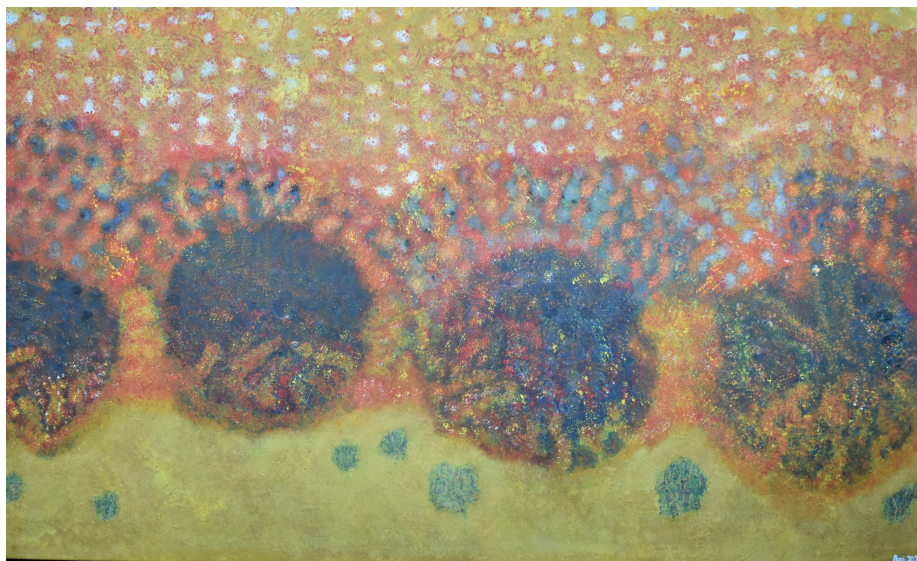


Figure 1. Pilu Fire Painting 2025 - Yimin pilu ga woewoe kayyama, by Payi Linda Ford. Description: It is difficult for an English translation to encompass the full complexity of what is described in my language Mak Mak Marranunggu, the language for Kurrindju Country. Within the fire painting, the pilu 'men' perform songs and dance at multiple levels that point to the contextual heritage of Country. The pilu are performing inside the black circles, spot fires started by the akarrk 'falcon'. Both living and non-living pilu are embodied within an ever-changing environmental habitat, where, building on symbiotic connections, their survival is reliant on their ability to adapt to climate and environmental changes. Ecological understanding links all the pilu who sing up the fire: the whistling kite, chicken hawk and others, including us humans who whistle up the fire and manage it. The fire nourishes this dense web of mutual relationality, enabling it to grow and flourish, building on the ability of both living and non-living entities to perform and listen deeply. The renewal can create new life after it's been sung and danced into existence.

There's a quiet kind of pressure that comes with being seen as a young Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu cultural custodian. It is a gift to be one of the inheritors of a rich culture, passed down through generations. A culture that continued through interruption by colonisation, as well as the ongoing disruptions of a modern world. Yet, as I grow older and my Elders pass down more knowledge of our sites, songs, ceremonies, rituals, performances and dances, I feel the weight of that knowledge. It is a weight that I am still growing strong enough to carry. The responsibilities of a cultural custodian become a weight that you grow to meet, as my Elders did before me. You're expected to speak, to sing, to remember and to represent your culture, languages and songs. Underneath the weight of that is family, clan and kinship. We perform our rituals, performances, songs, ceremonies and dances from a place of relationality, connection, feeling and continuation. It is a thread that ties us to one another in the present, just as it binds us to our pilu, ancestral spirits of our Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu Country, of the past and the generations of Mak Mak in the future. Our songs connect us all and carry us through, a cultural heart beating across time and space.

The place of ethnomusicologists in cultural preservation and continuation has always stood out to me. As I grow into deeper responsibilities to lead the next generations in ceremonies as my Elders watch on, I feel my gratitude for the place ethnomusicology has in the cultural life of my clan. I have access to conversations, songs and writings recorded by ethnomusicologists alongside my Elders and pilu before them. All these recorded materials have been archived in culturally safe sites and shared with our clan by ethnomusicologists in partnership with my Elders. As I grow older, the responsibilities of culture have landed on my shoulders. I have often reflected on how grateful I am for the wisdom of my Elders. They have collaborated with ethnomusicologists to develop these materials for the preservation and conservation of our Aboriginal knowledge. The researchers who have worked with the Finnis-Daly region Wangga, Lirrga and Djanba songmen and women who carry the songlines to which I belong have supported my journey through their work. These materials have helped me to ensure that the rich cultural life I grew up within continues for the younger Rak Mak Mak clan members I now support. The past decades of work undertaken in deep partnership have ensured that the ceremonies I remember, ceremonies imbued with family, strength and knowledge, are able to continue in our cultural practice. Songs

and ceremonies don't sit quietly in archives; they move, have emotion, they feel anger, they sweat, they cry, they live in bodies, echo in the land and reverberate through time. They do this just as the *nangga nangga*, clapsticks, awaken the land and the *kitthurr*, "pulling," of the *kenbi*, *didjeridoo*, trembles through the Country and into the essences of our being in our *mirr* and *ngirr-wat*.

In the world we walk now, and in the ever-developing future, it can be hard to know how to hold everything at once. Cultural life and life in town. Our songs, dances and ceremonies carry the soul of our people and culture. Music and dance in these contexts are not just a thing of enjoyment, although they can be deeply soul-nourishing. It is not music as entertainment, but as ceremony, as medicine. In the work of those who've gathered in this book, and in the careful, respectful work of many ethnomusicologists across these lands and seas, I see a form of companionship, echoed by my own experiences. This work is a kind of holding, not of our culture itself, but instead functions as an extension of our own capacity to have the space to keep carrying it through time. The works of those in this book have been done with honour, intention and, most importantly, with proper as well as respectful relationships. These songs, stories and the knowledge within them are not just inherited but alive.

It is a delicate balance to hold the inheritance of the longest living culture alongside modernity. Yet, songs are how we remember and carry forward the voices of our people and lands. They are also how we respond to the complexities of what it is to be an Indigenous person today. I often think about the shape of memory in my life. It does not always come as words in English or in my languages, *Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu* and *Marrathiyel*. It is a rich nuance of the sounds of my Country as well as ceremony. Sometimes my memories are a beat, the way *nangga nangga* ring in between the *thilk*, *paperbark*, or in the *manyirr*, sand, kicked up underneath the feet of men at a ceremony. It is in watching one of my Elders tap their knee in time with a rhythm they are not singing aloud, yet I know which song is playing in their head. It is in the movements of a toddler dancing to our ceremony songs, or the joy of a baby clapping perfectly on beat, eyes wide as they take in the sights of a ceremony. Songs and ceremony help us feel Country even when we're far from it, too. It is when we sit in a hospice as our Elders pass on and play them the songs recorded by ethnomusicologists of

our ceremonies. They help us speak when language hasn't yet returned to our mouths in times of mourning. They let us mourn what is gone and celebrate what still dances within us, springing forward new beginnings. As I age and take on more responsibilities, it has been both humbling and terrifying. Yet, through the wisdom of my Elders, I have learnt how to move between oral histories and archives; performing my own dance between the sands of a ceremony ground and the digital.

This book reminds us of Indigenous music's future and present. These ceremonies are not a historical curiosity. They are an ongoing relational force and an expression of sovereignty, survival and deep-time intelligence. It is ecological, embodied, political, redemptive and joyful. It bends and grows. It calls back. It answers forward. To be young and Indigenous today is to live at the intersection of responsibility and revival. Yet, it has been through the hands of our Elders and through the work of those who walk alongside them with care, such as ethnomusicologists, that the path ahead is lit with more than just pressure. It's lit with possibility. May this collection be part of that light.

About the author

Emily Tyaemaen Ford is a Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu woman. Emily's country is Kurrindju in the Finnis River and Reynold River region, approximately 140km South-West of Darwin in the Northern Territory, Australia. Emily speaks both her traditional languages, Marranunggu and Marrihiyel. Emily has a background in research, communications, community engagement, corporate governance and political advisory work. Emily's focus throughout her work has been supporting Indigenous knowledge, languages, cosmology and practice. Through her research work, she has presented to audiences locally, nationally and internationally. Emily has an ongoing commitment to supporting her community through caring for Country and culture.