

LOCALISATION AND LOCAL SONG REPERTOIRE ON NORFOLK ISLAND

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Introduction

This paper examines two allied processes of musical development, localisation and local origination, with particular regard to small island cultures, and Norfolk Island as the focal study. Localisation is a familiar global practice. It involves either the modification of material adopted from external sources and/or the creation of specific local contexts and significance(s) for its performance. The local origination of material is more straightforward and exists in various relations to the former. It can be induced by localisation of prior material, can occur side by side with localisation, or else can happen in reaction to patterns of localisation. The precise nature of these processes and their interaction varies from community to community.

Localisation is a descriptive rather than analytical term. Put simply, if pre-existent materials are modified in a local context, they can be viewed as having been localised. This characterisation includes a range of phenomena. With regard to songs that have primarily circulated orally (ie without fixed written or recorded referent texts), it can be argued that these predominantly exist *as* a series of contemporisations or localisations. Here then, local differences—which we might now understand as localisation—should not so much be gauged against single referent texts as against all other varieties. Where a song has a more stable reference text (ie a printed or recorded version) that it can be seen to have adhered to in various contexts, localisation can occur in two main ways. One is ‘accidental’, in that versions that may have been recalled and/or repeated ‘wrongly’ through oral transmission subsequently stabilise into a distinct local version. The second (and clearest) form of localisation occurs when a text bears obvious signs of local modification. The principal types of modification in such songs comprise variations to melodic lines (and/or their common delivery), metre and/or lyrics. With regard to the latter, the insertion of local references is one of the clearest markers of localisation. As this brief discussion of these characteristics should serve to indicate, the processes of localisation and local origination form something of a spectrum between simple acquisitions of pre-existent material through to the origination of new repertoire.

It is common for research—particularly that conducted by outsiders—to fix on the production of original material (and the most obviously marked modifications of pre-existent texts) as key markers of community originality and thus identity (or, at least,

identity as it is indicated by difference). The logic goes that if a community can be seen to have produced definite innovations to its received culture, it can be understood to have unique attributes; and, if such innovations are dramatic and/or continuing, this can be seen as a sign of cultural vitality (with, implicitly, the converse also the case).

Islands are particularly prone to the kind of imagination and agendas I have just outlined. As Godfrey Baldacchino argues, it is tempting (for the outsider) to “embrace an island as something that is finite, that may be encapsulated by human strategy, design or desire” (2005:247) when, in fact, even the remotest islands can be seen to be marked more by the:

confluence and juxtaposition of the understanding of local and global realities, or interior and exterior references of meaning, of having roots at home while also deploying routes away. (ibid:248)

Many researchers will recognise the set of assumptions about the value of local difference I have outlined, the manner in which they reflect research agendas, and the prominence the researcher gives to promoting particular aspects of what they ‘find’ and analyse. Here, it is the signs of difference and uniqueness that are often deemed the most important (rather than the interrogation of the system of thought and expectation behind such a value system). As may be apparent, the ideas presented in this paper are informed by a researcher’s meditation on processes and results of research. In my particular case, this opening framework has been one that draws on my extended work on the music history of Norfolk and Pitcairn islands since 1998 (see Hayward, 2006).

Norfolk Island: Culture, Music and Song

Norfolk Island is 1440 kilometres east of Brisbane and 1120 kilometres north west of the New Zealand city of Auckland. It was unpopulated at the time of European arrival in the Pacific, although there is evidence of Polynesian settlement in the pre-colonial era (in the form of plantain trees and adzes). The British first used the island as a penal colony until it was evacuated in 1855 to make way for the relocation of the descendants of mutineers from the HMAS *Bounty* from Pitcairn Island. Today, following a steady trickle of immigration from outside, Pitcairn descendants form about one third of the island’s population, the others being mainly of Australian and New Zealand descent. Many of the *Bounty* descendants are bilingual, speaking English and a mixture of 17th-Century English and Tahitian usually referred to as ‘Norfolk’ (pronounced *Norf*’k).

When I first arrived on Norfolk Island in 1999, I had a particular set of anticipations. These were, firstly, that the island would have a tradition of singing a range of English-language vernacular songs learnt from mariners and other 19th-Century contacts that would have continued into the 20th Century, and would possibly be known and/or still performed by older islanders. Secondly, I anticipated that there would be a distinct, but related, tradition of Norfolk Island-language songs. These perceptions were based on my previous knowledge of song cultures in other remote ocean island communities, such as Tristan da Cunha, and other Western Pacific areas, such as the Whitsunday archipelago and the Torres Strait.

While my research quickly uncovered a modern tradition of local original songs that dated from the 1980s, I initially attributed my failure to locate and identify earlier vernacular songs to the reluctance of islanders to volunteer information on their cultural history to an outsider, and/or inadequate historical records of past usage. But a growing realisation that the traditions I had imagined were not part of Norfolk's cultural history and heritage caused me to reflect why and to look for different threads and fragments.

One thing that I did expect to find, and found in abundance, was a tradition of Christian hymn singing. I soon realised that—in the late 20th Century at least—there was a small body of hymns that were regarded as locally significant in that their performance signified and stood for a local Christian identity and (on an island that continues to represent itself as heavily Christianised) for Norfolk Island itself. Illustrating the key role of Pitcairn ancestry in anchoring Norfolk identity, these were often termed 'The Pitcairn Hymns' (Hayward, 2006:118-132). By the 1990s, the core group of these hymns comprised two musical settings of Bible passages composed in the mid 1800s by British Pitcairn settler and community leader George Hunn Nobbs with Pitcairner Driver Christian: *The Pitcairn Anthem* and *Gethsemane*. Also in the core group of hymns include four US hymns introduced to Norfolk in the late 1800s: *Let the Lower Lights be Burning*, *In the Sweet by and by*, *Ship of Fame* and *Ahava*.

In interviews, many of the locals patient enough to respond to my insistent search for local 'folk songs' tended to argue one or either of two points. The first was that the combined conservatism and religiosity of the original Pitcairn settlers of Norfolk acted to block new secular song repertoire. This explanation accorded with similar arguments made by Norwegian researcher Peter Munch to explain what he characterised as "the absence of endemic songs" on the South Atlantic island community of Tristan da Cunha in the mid 20th Century, after some 130 years of settlement, namely that the absence was "clearly related to the general conservative and traditional character of the community, which in turn is a result of its high degree of isolation" (1970:36).

The second point local discussants made is that the Pitcairn hymn repertoire in many ways filled the function of a vernacular repertoire. While initially sceptical of this (since I had not heard of a similar phenomenon elsewhere), my repeated experience at hearing these hymns sung in various social and family contexts led me to accept this point, particularly in combination with observations such as the following, made by a regular visitor to a local drinking establishment named Paradise in the 1960s and 1970s:

When everybody had had a few drinks, if there was no other music playing, someone would start up singing a hymn, sometimes on their own or other people would join in and afterwards they'd get straight back to whatever they were doing—talking and drinking, and fighting sometimes too. . . . And this could happen several times in an evening with no one batting an eyelid. All quite normal—for here, at least.

In an interview in 1999, local linguist Alice Buffett described impromptu performances (such as those described above) in terms of islanders wishing to express a depth of emotional feeling through one of the cultural forms closest to their hearts. In terms of

localisation, the processes of selection of the (current) core hymn repertoire over a century are obscure, but represent a distinct local action in themselves. The style of performance of the songs and the manner in which this has become normalised as a tradition, is another obvious localisation.

Although diligent research eventually recovered a scattered group of original island songs from the late 1800s to immediate post World War II period (which had not lodged in continuing performance repertoire, and largely been forgotten) (see Hayward, 2006:169-177), the most obvious markers of island originality in song that I encountered were those new Norfolk-language (and Norfolk themed English-language) compositions that emerged in the mid 1980s through the work of Don Christian-Reynolds, Susan Pedel, Aline Snell and Steggles LeCren, and again in the late 1990s and early 2000s through the work of George 'Toofie' Christian, Allison Ryves and Kath King (ibid:156-161, 177-208).

In contrast to the slow—and ever modifying—'organic' accretion of performance styles, repertoire and context for the Norfolk hymns, the body of new songs produced in the 1980s and early 1990s represented a conscious, reactive response to socio-cultural change occasioned by modernity, the Australian Government's attempt to remove the island's semi-autonomy, and the allied perception that Norfolk's language and traditional ways of life were under threat. One particular boost for the origination of a body of contemporary songs was a Norfolk-language song contest in 1984, organised by a new pro-autonomy lobby group, the Society of Pitcairn Descendants, which was won by Don Christian-Reynolds' *Norfolk es Auwas Hoem*.

As a result of this contest, and a more general sense of timeliness for such an enterprise, a body of about a dozen songs entered the island's vernacular repertoire around this time, and were performed at social gatherings and at official performances by Norfolk troupes. While these lack the overt Christian association that gives the hymns much of their resonance (even in secular performance contexts), they can be seen to have a ceremonial and heritage role as expressions of 'Norfolkness'.

A new body of songs emerged in the 1990s that were less socially 'dispersed' and, consequently, more closely associated with their singer-songwriter originators than the earlier work discussed above. However, their motivations were similar, both Kath King and George 'Toofie' Christian consciously seeking to preserve and maintain Norfolk language, social history and folklore, and Allison Ryves, who moved to Norfolk in 1980 from the US, seeking—in some of her songs, at least—to establish her own place in and perceptions of the island in English-language songs.

There are now five CDs by island singer-songwriters available, with another on its way—a surprising amount for an island of Norfolk's size (population c1800). The volume of CDs attests to the particular character of Norfolk Island culture around the cusp of the 21st Century. Although it is too early to see whether these songs will be adopted as social performance items (in a similar manner to earlier songs), they do serve a new cultural communicative function through their dispersal on CD to the island community and relatives overseas, and their radio airplay locally, in Australia and

internationally. So now, in the early 21st Century, we have situation where a long-existent localised core repertoire and practice of hymn singing sits alongside a more recent corpus of locally originated songs as a dual testament to Norfolk Island's cultural difference (from its 'owner' nation-state of Australia), its vitality (as a living, developing culture) and its adaptability and resilience.

If I ended this brief historical-academic analysis at this point I could provide an affirmative and upbeat conclusion appropriate to the celebration of Norfolk culture that ran through the 2nd International Conference on Small Island Cultures (2006) at which this paper was first presented—and there would be substantial grounds for this. But as an advocate of the approach that I described in the Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Small Island Cultures as 'culturally engaged research and facilitation' (Hayward, 2005), a cautionary discussion is merited.

Vital Practices

Research on the history of other small island cultures has shown that small population bases and the potential to be dazzled by various waves of modernity and global connectivity can move cultures from positions of energetic local expression at one generational/decade point to positions of passive consumption of non-local forms a short time later. A key element in such patterns is generational rupture along lines of preferred cultural practices. The lesson seems to be that any local and/or small island culture wishing to maintain distinct aspects of local identity amid times of change and various phases of globalism needs to expend thought and effort into—variously—how to ensure generational interest in such a project; how to provide opportunities and incentives for new generational engagements; and how to forge new, modern local identities (rather than retreat to defensive anti-Modernism and/or the museumification of aspects of local culture; see McKay, 1994).

This is a tougher project than it might sound. In discussion with several of the island songwriters, I have voiced the fact that four out of five are aged over 45 and working in musical styles that do not immediately connect to those of teenagers and 20- to 30-year-olds. In 1999 and again in 2001, I raised the suggestion with various islanders that it would be worth running rap/hiphop workshops for young islanders to encourage them to express themselves within a more contemporary genre. I received very cold responses to this suggestion on the grounds that rap/hiphop is seen as 'unmusical', profane and actively anti-social. I did not make any headway with my arguments about how each generation resists and distrusts new styles. Here, I felt the steel trap of conservatism that Munch observed on Tristan da Cunha clamping down and drawing a line in the sand of modernity which Norfolk identity should not cross. Respecting the right of others to disagree, I decided not to push the suggestion any further.

If anything, my continued research work over the last few years has strengthened my opinion on the issue of generational updating and, indeed, one recent experience suggested to me the possibilities that might be available. On my last research visit to the island, I walked down to Bomboras beach. Just back from the foreshore were a group of mid teenage boys, one of whom stopped me and suggested that I should not go

swimming since the sharks were very aggressive that day. Aware of the long tradition of teasing tourists—which they took me for—I stopped, smiled and said that I would risk it. This led to one boy speaking in a very stylised form of Norfolk—a ‘youth slang’—and visually enacting with his hands a shark attack on a swimmer. Laughter and various overlapping comments and remarks followed, which continued as the boys shouted cautions and jibes (in mixed Norfolk and English) as I walked off. While there was a (deliberately) confrontational ‘edge’ to the interaction, I was—in the perverse manner that researchers can be—heartened by this encounter.

Here was ‘living language’, with evident pleasure being taken in phraseology, interaction, overlapping speech and jibing. Here was ‘organic’ ‘rap’ in action and, what’s more, it represented a generational continuation of previous local practice. Interviewed in 2002 about how vernacular songs were first developed in the 1970s and 1980s, Alice Buffett described processes of private song generation (of texts deliberately not performed outside small groups). When referring to Eileen Snell’s song writing, Buffett stated:

This is playing around . . . see you and Stegs and people get together around and they’ll throw in a clause or a sentence or part [of] a sentence and laugh and defy anyone else to say anything good. In a small community you daren’t—you know [repeat these things in public]—with a name or anything like that.

Eileen and Alice are now recognised figures in island life—cultural ‘elders’ accorded respect for their contributions to the community—while their earlier ‘disrespectful’ practices have been recontextualised by time and processes of heritage. Like their early ‘joshing’, the verbal antics of the youths at Bomboras are unlikely to be circulated more widely or fixed in song or verse, but it does show that there are vital forms of autonomous and organic culture that could be channelled and explored by local activists and policy makers interested in developing new forms and outlets for cultural maintenance and succession.

Conclusion

The astute reader who has followed the argument to this point will be aware that a degree of elision has occurred. Having identified the localisation of an imported hymn repertoire as a key musical marker and expression of local musical identity, I do not speculate as to whether such localisations of current repertoire may be taking place (or, may subsequently occur). Similarly, I have not speculated whether these may—like the hymns—obviate the necessity of new local songs being created to express facets of contemporary life. These points need addressing. While it is unviable to dismiss such a scenario out of hand, the most salient aspect is a contextual one. The hymns were gradually localised through a long-term repetition within a socially endorsed performance context that had weekly (and sub-weekly) patterns of performance—traditional Christian church services. For better or worse, this institution is far less prominent in late 20th-/early 21st-Century island life than it once was. There is nothing even vaguely comparable through which sustained performance repetition can lead (quasi-‘organically’, as it were) to repertoire localisation. While it may be that some

current (or future) musical genre may originate material that might be ‘Norfolkised’ (to the extent that it signals that localisation as its identity marker), there is little evidence that this might be imminent or viable. In this context, new local origination of song material is most likely to communicate distinct aspects of local identity to the island itself and to outside communities.

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