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Welcome to the Peoples of the Mountains and the Sea: Evaluating an Inaugural Indigenous Cultural Festival

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Articles

Introduction

Festivals, according to Chris Gibson and John Connell, are like “glue”, temporarily sticking together various stakeholders, economic transactions, and networks (9). Australia’s First Nations peoples see festivals as an opportunity to display cultural vitality (Henry 586), and to challenge a history which has rendered them absent (587). The 2017 Australia Council for the Arts *Showcasing Creativity* report indicates that performing arts by First Nations peoples are under-represented in Australia’s mainstream venues and festivals (1). Large Aboriginal cultural festivals have long thrived in Australia’s northern half, but have been under-developed in the south. Each regional happening develops a *cultural landscape* connected to a long and intimate relationship with the natural environment.

The Far South East coast and mountainous hinterland of New South Wales is rich in pristine landscapes that ground the Yuin and Monaro Nations to *Country* as the Monaroo Bobberrer Gadu (Peoples of the Mountains and the Sea). This article highlights cross-sector interaction between Koori and mainstream organisations in producing the [Giyyong](#) (Guy-Yoong/Welcoming) Festival. This, the first large festival to be held within the Yuin Nation, took place on Aboriginal-owned land at Jigamy, via Eden, on 22 September 2018.

Emerging regional artists joined national headline acts, most notably No Fixed Address (one of the earliest Aboriginal bands to break into the Australian mainstream music industry), and hip-hop artist Baker Boy (Danzal Baker, Young Australian of the Year 2019). The festival 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.

We offer dual understandings of the Giiyong Festival: the viewpoints of a male Yuin Elder wedded to an Australian woman of European descent. We acknowledge, and rely upon, key information, statistics, and photographs provided by the staff of South East Arts including Andrew Gray (General Manager), Jasmin Williams (Aboriginal Creative and Cultural Engagement Officer and Giiyong Festival Project Manager), and Kate Howarth (Screen Industry Development Officer). We are also grateful to Wiradjuri woman Alison Simpson (Program Manager at Twofold Aboriginal Corporation) for valuable feedback. As community leaders from First Nations and non-First Nations backgrounds, Simpson and Williams complement each other's talents for empowering Indigenous communities. They plan a 2020 follow-up event on the basis of the huge success of the 2018 festival.

The case study is informed by our personal involvement with community. Since the general population barely comprehends the number and diversity of Australia's Indigenous 'nations', the burgeoning Indigenous festival movement encourages First Nations and non-First Nations peoples alike to openly and confidently refer to the places they live in according to Indigenous names, practices, histories, and knowledge. 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 the Indigenous 'Countries' (represented by David Horton's wall map of 1996) come to the foreground. We reason that, in terms of 'regionality,' the festival's expressions of "the agency of country" (Slater 141) differ vastly from the centre-periphery structure and logic of the Australian colony. There is no fixed centre to the mutual exchange of knowledge, culture, and experience in Aboriginal Australia. The broader implication of this article is that Indigenous cultural festivals allow First Nations peoples cultures—in moments of time—to assume precedence, that is to 'stitch' back together the notion of a continent made up of hundreds of countries, as against the exploitative structure of 'hub and region' colonial Australia.

Festival Concepts and Contexts

Howard Becker observed that cultural production results from an interplay between the person of the *artist* and a multitude of *support personnel* whose work is not frequently studied: "It is through this network of cooperation that the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be" (1). In assisting arts and culture throughout the Bega Valley, Eurobodalla, and Snowy Monaro, South East Arts delivers positive achievements in the Aboriginal arts and cultural sector. Their outcomes are significant in the light of the dispossession, segregation, and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal Australians. Michael Young, assisted by Indigenous authors Ellen Mundy and Debbie Mundy, recorded how Delegate Reserve residents relocating to the coast were faced with



having their lives controlled by a Wallaga Lake Reserve manager or with life on the fringes of the towns in shacks (2–3). But as discovered in the records, “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” (3–4).

The goal of the Twofold Aboriginal Corporation is to create an inclusive place where Aboriginal people of the Twofold Bay Region can be proud of their heritage, connect with the local economy, and create a real future for their children. When Simpson told Williams of the Twofold Aboriginal Corporation’s and Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council’s dream of housing a large cultural festival at Jigamy, Williams rigorously consulted local Indigenous organisations to build a shared sense of community ownership of the event. She promoted the festival as “a rare opportunity in our region to learn about Aboriginal culture and have access to a huge program of Aboriginal musicians, dancers, visual artists, authors, academics, storytellers, cooks, poets, creative producers, and films” (McKnight).

‘Uncle Ossie’ Cruse of Eden envisaged that the welcoming event would enliven the longstanding caring and sharing ethos of the Yuin-Monaro people. Uncle Ossie was instrumental in establishing Jigamy’s majestic Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu Keeping Place with the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council in 1994. Built brick by brick by Indigenous workers, it is a centre for the teaching and celebration of Aboriginal culture, and for the preservation of artefacts. It represents the local community's determination to find their own solutions for “[bridging the gap](#)” by creating education and employment opportunities. The centre is also the gateway to the [Bundian Way](#), the first Aboriginal pathway to be listed on the NSW State Heritage Register.

Festival Lead-Up Events

Eden’s Indigenous students learn a revived South Coast language at Primary and Secondary School. In 2015, Uncle Ossie vitally informed their input into *The Black Ducks*, a hip-hop song filmed in Eden by [Desert Pea Media](#). A notable event boosting Koori musical socialisation was a *Giiyong Grow the Music* spectacle 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. Eden Marine High School students co-directed the film [Scars](#) as part of a programme of events with South East Arts and the Giiyong Festival 2018. The [Eden Place Project](#) and [Campbell Page](#) also create links between in- and out-of-school activities. Eden’s Indigenous students thus perform confidently at [NAIDOC Week](#) celebrations and at various festivals.

Preparation and Personnel

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 Aboriginal Corporation staff. They galvanised over 100 volunteers to enhance the unique features of Jigamy, while Uncle Ossie slashed fields of bushes to prepare copious



parking space. The festival site was spatially focused around two large stages dedicated to the memory of two strong supporters of cultural creativity: Aunty Doris Kirby, and Aunty Liddy Stewart (Image 1).



Image 1: Uncle Ossie Cruse Welcomes Festival-Goers to Country on the Aunty Liddy Stewart Stage. Image Credit: David Rogers for South East Arts, Reproduction Courtesy of South East Arts.

Cultural festivals are peaceful weapons in a continuing ontological political contest (Slater 144). In a panel discussion, Uncle Ossie explained and defended the *Makarrata*: the call for a [First Nations Voice](#) to be enshrined in the Constitution.

Williams also contracted artists with a view to capturing the past and present achievements of Aboriginal [music](#). Apart from her brilliant centrepiece acts No Fixed Address and Baker Boy, she attracted Pitjantjatjara singer Frank Yamma (Image 2), Yorta Yorta singer/songwriter Benny Walker, the Central Desert Docker River Band, and Jessie Lloyd's nostalgic Mission Songs Project. These stellar acts were joined by Wallaga Lake performers Robbie Bundle, Warren Foster, and Alison Walker as well as Nathan Lygon (Eden), Chelsy Atkins (Pambula), Gabadoo (Bermagui), and Drifting Doolgahls (Nowra). Stage presentations were technologically transformed by the live broadcast of acts on large screens surrounding the platforms.





Image 2: Singer-Songwriter Frank Yamma Performs at Giiyong Festival 2018. Image Credit: David Rogers for South East Arts, Reproduction Courtesy of South East Arts.

Giiyong Music and Dance

Music and dance form the staple components of Indigenous festivals: a reflection on the cultural strength of ancient ceremony. Hundreds of Yuin-Monaro people once attended great corroborees on Mumbulla Mountain (Horton 1235), and oral history recorded by Janet Mathews evidences ceremonies at Fishy Flats, Eden, in the 1850s. Today's highly regarded community musicians and dancers perform the social arrangements of direct communication, sometimes including their children on stage as apprentices. But artists are still negotiating the power structures through which they experience *belonging* and *detachment* in the representation of their musical identity.

① Youth gain positive identities from participating alongside national headline acts—a form of learning that propels talented individuals into performing careers. The One Mob Dreaming Choir of Koori students from three local schools were a popular feature (Image

3), as were Eden Marine student soloists Nikai Stewart, and Nikea Brooks. Grow the Music in particular has enabled these youngsters to exhibit the roots of their culture in a deep and touching way that contributes to their life-long learning and development.



Image 3: The One Mob Dreaming Choir, Directed by Corinne Gibbons (L) and Chelsy Atkins (R). Image Credit: David Rogers for South East Arts, Reproduction Courtesy of South East Arts.

Brydie-Leigh Bartleet describes how discourses of pride emerge when Indigenous Australian youth participate in hip-hop. At the Giiyong Festival the relationship between musical expression, cultural representation, and political positioning shone through the songs of Baker Boy and Gabadooli (Image 4). Channelling emotions into song, they led young audiences to engage with contemporary themes of Indigeneity. The drones launched above the carpark established a numerical figure close on 6,000 attendees, a third of whom were Indigenous. Extra teenagers arrived in time for Baker Boy's evening performance (Williams), revealing the typical youthful audience composition associated with the hip-hop craze (Image 5).



Image 4: Bermagui Resident Gabadoo Performs Hip-Hop at the Giiyong Festival. Image Credit: David Rogers for South East Arts, Reproduced Courtesy South East Arts.



Image 5: A Youthful Audience Enjoys Baker Boy's Giiyong Festival Performance. Image

Credit: David Rogers for South East Arts, Reproduced Courtesy South East Arts.

Wallaga Lake's traditional Gulaga Dancers were joined by Bermagui's Gadhu Dancers, Eden's Duurunu Miru Dancers, and Narooma's Djaadjawan Dancers. Sharon Mason founded [Djaadjawan Dancers](#) in 2015. Their cultural practice connects to the environment and Mingagia (Mother Earth). At their festival tent, dancers explained how they gather natural resources from Walbanja Country to hand-make traditional dance outfits, accessories, and craft. They collect nuts, seeds, and bark from the bush, body paint from ancient ochre pits, shells from beaches, and bird feathers from fresh roadkill.

Duurunu Miru dancer/didjeriduist Nathan Lygon elaborates on the functions of the Far South East Coast dance performance tradition:

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. (n.p.)

While music and dance were at the heart of the festival, other traditional skills were included, for example the exhibitions mounted inside the Keeping Place featured a large number of visual artists. Traditional bush cooking took place near Lake Pambula, and yarn-ups, poetry, and readings were featured throughout the day. Cultural demonstrations in the Bunaan Ring (the Yuin name for a corroboree circle) included 'Gum Leaf Playing.' Robin Ryan explained how the Yuin's use of cultural elements to entertain settlers (Cameron 79) led to the formation of the Wallaga Lake Gum Leaf Band. As the local custodian of this unique musical practice, Uncle Ossie performed items and conducted a workshop for numerous adults and children.

Festival Feedback and Future Planning

The Giiyong Festival gained huge Indigenous 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 festival's success depended on its reception, for as Myers 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" (59). The *Bega District News*, of 24 September 2018, described the "incredibly beautiful event" (n.p.), while Simpson enthused to the authors:

I believe that the amount of people who came through the gates to attend the Giiyong Festival was a testament to the wider need and want for Aboriginal culture. Having almost double the population of Eden attend also highlights that this event



was long overdue. (n.p.)

Williams reported that the whole festival was “a giant exercise in the breaking down of walls. Some signed contracts for the first time, and all met their contracts professionally. National artists Baker Boy and No Fixed Address now keep in touch with us regularly” (Williams). Williams also expressed her delight that local artists are performing further afield this year, and that an awareness, recognition, and economic impact has been created for Jigamy, the Giiyong Festival, and Eden respectively:

We believe that not only celebrating, but *elevating* these artists and Aboriginal culture, is one of the most important things South East Arts can do for the overall arts sector in the region. This work benefits artists, the economy and cultural tourism of the region. Most importantly it feeds our collective spirit, educates us, and creates a much richer place to live. (Giiyong Festival Report 1)

Howarth received 150 responses to her post-event survey. All respondents felt welcome, included, and willing to attend another festival. One commented, “not even one piece of rubbish on the ground.” Vanessa Milton, ABC Open Producer for South East NSW, wrote: “Down to the tiniest detail it was so obvious that you understood the community, the audience, the performers and how to bring everyone together. What a coup to pull off this event, and what a gift to our region” (Giiyong Festival Report 4).

The total running cost for the event was \$257,533, including \$209,606 in government grants from local, state, and federal agencies. Major donor Create NSW Regional Partnerships funded over \$100,000, and State Aboriginal Affairs gave \$6,000. Key corporate sponsors included Bendigo Bank, Snowy Hydro and Waterway Constructions, Local Land Services Bega, and the Eden Fisherman’s Club. Funding covered artists’ fees, staging, the hiring of toilets, and multiple generators, including delivery costs. South East Arts were satisfied with the funding amount: each time a new donation arrived they were able to invite more performers (Giiyong Festival Report 2; Gray; Williams).

South East Arts now need to prove they have the leadership capacity, financial self-sufficiency, and material resources to produce another festival. They are planning 2020 will be similar to 2018, provided Twofold Aboriginal Corporation can provide extra support. Since South East Arts exists to service a wider area of NSW, they envisage that by 2024, they would hand over the festival to Twofold Aboriginal Corporation (Gray; Williams). Forthcoming festivals will not rotate around other venues because the Giiyong concept was developed Indigenously at Jigamy, and “Jigamy has the vibe” (Williams). Uncle Ossie insists that the Yuin-Monaro feel comfortable being connected to Country that once had a traditional campsite on the east side.

Evaluation and Conclusion



Although ostensibly intended for entertainment, large Aboriginal festivals significantly

benefit the educational, political, and socio-economic landscape of contemporary Indigenous life. The cultural outpourings and dissemination of knowledges at the 2018 Giiyong Festival testified to the resilience of the Yuin-Monaro people. In contributing to the processes of Reconciliation and Recognition, the event privileged the performing arts as a peaceful—yet powerful truth-telling means—for dealing with the state. Performers representing the cultures of far-flung ancestral lands contributed to the reimagining of a First Nations people's map representing hundreds of 'Countries.'

It would be beneficial for the Far South East region to perpetuate the Giiyong Festival. It energised all those involved. But it took years of preparation and a vast network of cooperating people to create the feeling which made the 2018 festival unique. Uncle Ossie now sees aspects of the old sharing culture of his people springing back to life to mould the quality of life for families. Furthermore, the popular arts cultures are enhancing the quality of life for Eden youth. As the cross-sector efforts of stakeholders and volunteers so amply proved, a family-friendly, drug and alcohol-free event of the magnitude of the Giiyong Festival injects new growth into an Aboriginal arts industry designed for the future creative landscape of the whole South East region.

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Robin Ryan is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer attached to the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University. In the field of applied cross-cultural research she has co-authored several articles, and co-contributed to *Collaborative Ethnomusicology: New Approaches to Music Research between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians* (Lyrebird Press, 2014). Robin's findings also appear in the award-winning volume *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* (Routledge, 2016). She currently resides in Eden, New South Wales.

Uncle Ossie Cruse

Uncle Ossie Cruse MBE, AM is the Senior Elder of Thaua Country, part of the Yuin Monaro Nation in Far South East New South Wales. Having worked for over half a century defending their values in regional, national, and global spheres, Uncle Ossie was the subject of the *Australian Story* episode "The Peacemaker." He continues to advise government in the wake of the First Nations National Constitutional Convention held at Uluru, Northern Territory, in 2017.

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