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THE WORLD OF COCOS MALAY MUSIC AND DANCE: A DOCUMENTARY FILM ON PERFORMING ARTS IN THE COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS

Click this link [The World of Cocos Malay Music and Dance](#) to view the documentary.

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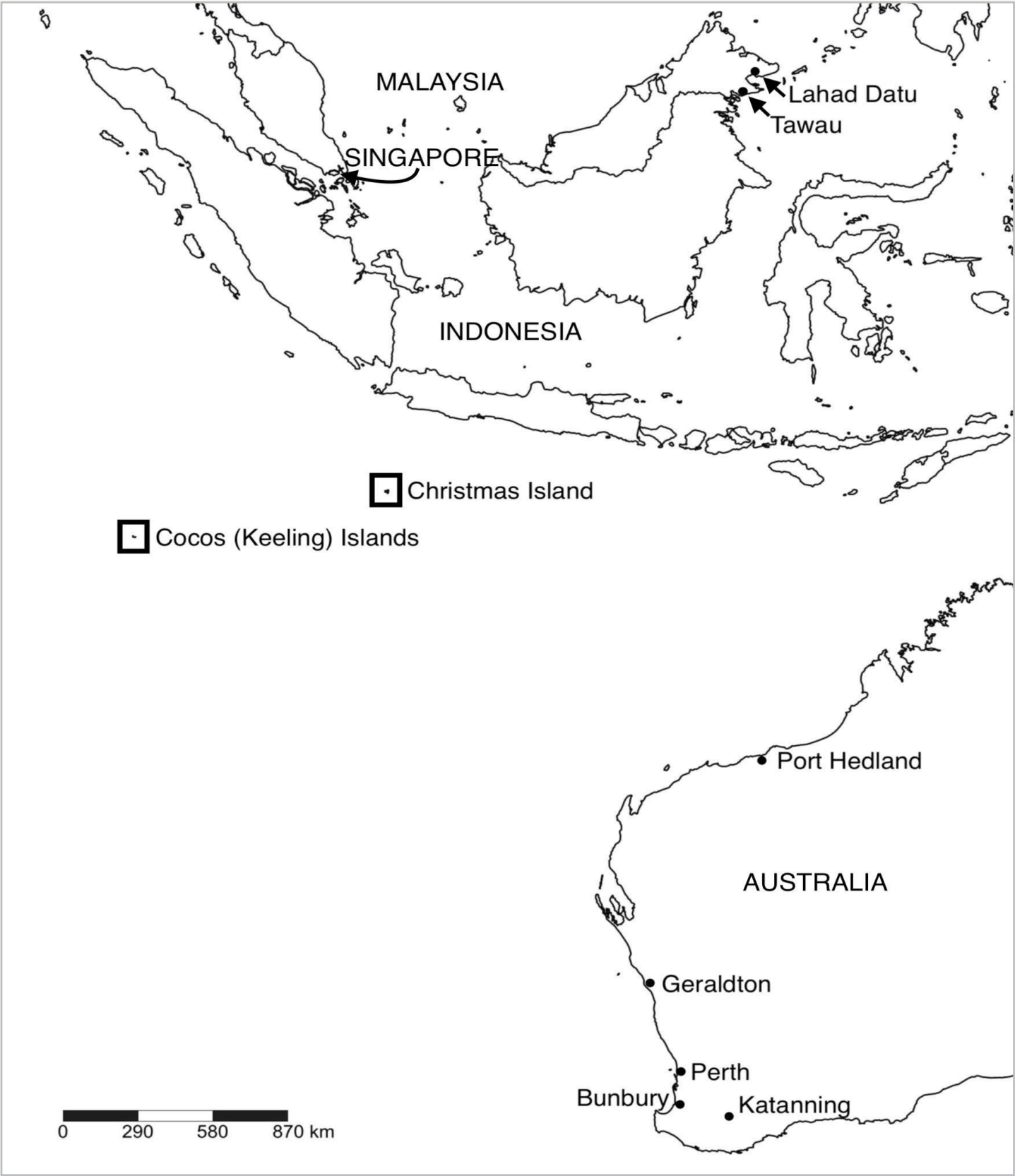

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The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, in the eastern Indian Ocean ([Map 1](#)), became the home of one of the world's most isolated communities from 1826¹. When the Scottish trader Alexander Hare arrived that year with a retinue of 98 enslaved Malay-speaking people (the majority of whom originated from diverse parts of the Malay Archipelago, along with several people from southern Africa) he attempted to create a society in which he ruled as autocrat, and even established a harem ([Bunce 1988: 39–46, 133](#)). This scheme was frustrated by the arrival of his former colleague and rival John Clunies Ross in 1827, as well as the inspections by British visitors who reported on the abuses taking place ([Ackrill 1984](#)). Clunies Ross gradually took control of the islands, established a social contract with the population (who became known as Cocos Malays) and from 1834 initiated a quasi-feudal regime, resembling in some aspects a traditional Malay state ([Hunt 1989: 1](#)). He and his descendants controlled the islands for five generations, until 1978².

This tiny coral atoll of 27 islands ([Map 2](#)), making up around 14 square kilometres of land, was annexed by the British Empire in 1857. Under the rule of the Clunies Ross family (whose surname became hyphenated in the early twentieth century), contact with the outside world was limited and restricted, although always reliant on supplies imported from abroad (especially Singapore and Jakarta). The Cocos Malay community was based on Home Island, while people from elsewhere lived on other islands. Today non-Cocos-Malay residents live mostly on West Island, where the airstrip is located. A Cable and Wireless Station operated on Direction Island from 1901 to 1966 and there were military settlements on other islands in times of war. The industry of Cocos was copra, and each workday Cocos Malays gathered coconuts for processing and export. Besides 'nutting', a range of other professions and trades, such as carpentry and blacksmithing, existed for the maintenance and sustenance of a small and isolated society ([Linford 2009: 84–90](#)). Shortly before the end of British administration, the population of the islands was diminished considerably as the Clunies-Ross estate embarked on a controversial program of sending many Cocos Malay families to North Borneo (Tawau and Lahad Datu), Singapore, and Christmas Island in 1949–1951, claiming that the finances of estate could not support the number of people present on the islands ([Hunt 1989: 116–27](#)).



Map 1. Location of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean, and other sites of the Cocos Malay diaspora mentioned in this article. Made by David R. M. Irving with SimpleMappr (www.simplemappr.net).





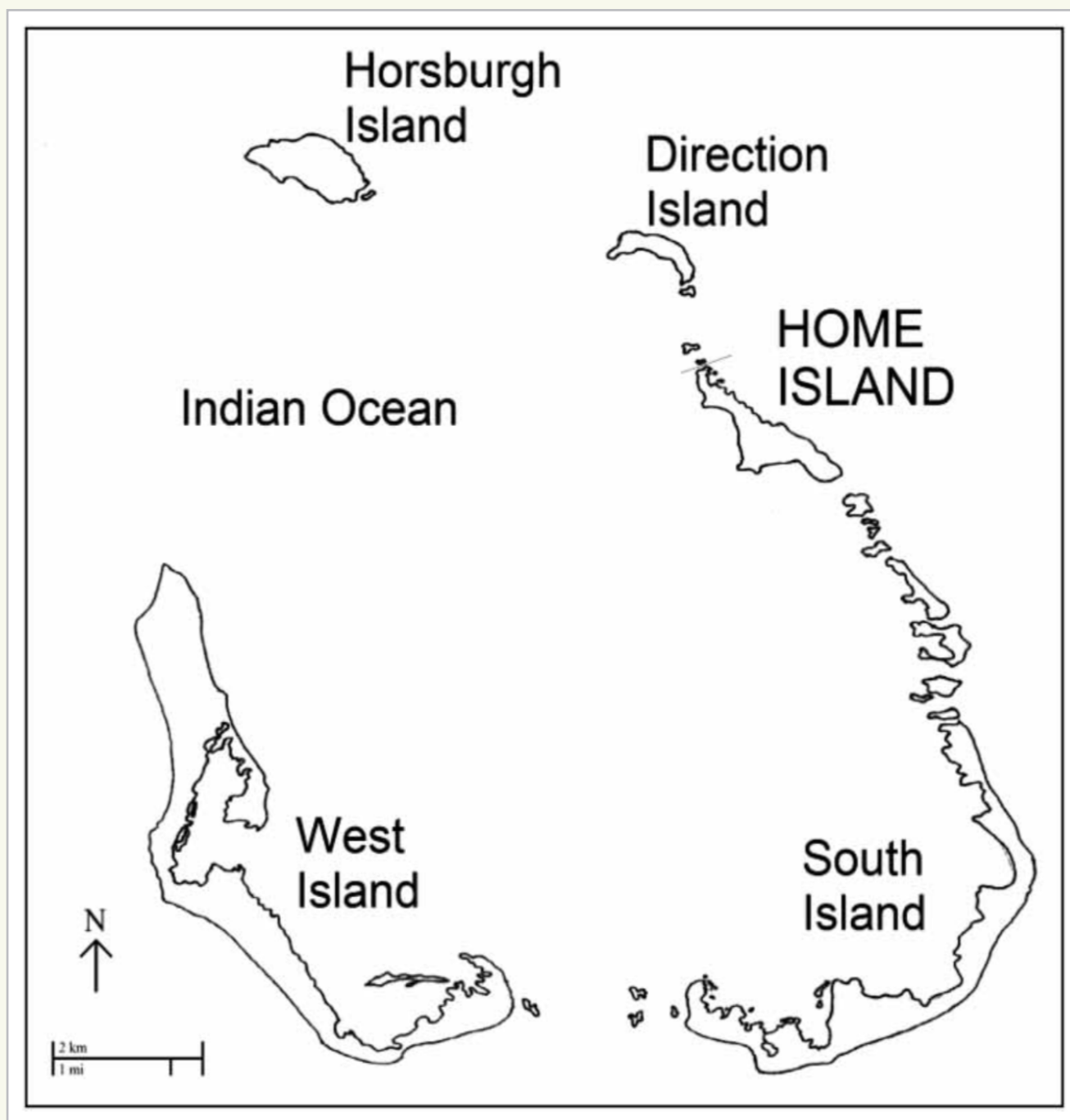
Following the transfer of sovereignty of Cocos from the United Kingdom to Australia in 1955, the rule of the Clunies-Rosses continued unchecked until allegations of slavery led to a major intervention by the Australian government and the United Nations from the 1970s ([Hunt 1989: 152–81](#); [Linford 2009: 169–214](#)). From the time of the first arrival of Hare and Clunies Ross on the islands with their Malay entourages, and as further Malay workers were brought to the islands, questions had been raised by outsiders as to the status of these people: were they slaves, indentured workers, or did the situation defy usual categorisations? What is clear, however, is that the total control of the islands' owners over the lives of the community extended to the Cocos Malays' education, health, and right to leave or enter the territory, as well as the minting of a local currency which could be used only to buy goods at the estate's own store. With the election of the government of Gough Whitlam in December 1972 and federal support for the United Nations' policies of decolonisation and self-determination for a number of territories around the world, change was imminent ([Hunt 1989: 156](#); [Linford 2009: 169–92](#)). In the following years many Cocos Malay families moved to Western Australia. The Australian government purchased the islands from John Cecil Clunies-Ross in 1978 for \$6.25 million, and in 1984 the islanders voted in a UN-supervised Act of Self-Determination to become integrated with Australia³.

The unique history of these islands is the necessary context to understand the ways in which the Clunies-Ross family, members of which intermarried with the Cocos Malays in several generations, shaped and influenced cultural life in this small and remote community. Some aspects of Scottish music and dance were absorbed into the performing arts of the Muslim Malay population, and hybrid Malay-Scottish practices are upheld by a small number of the Cocos Malays and their diaspora today. *Biola* (fiddles) play Scottish jigs in a local style that is usually double-stopped throughout ([Irving 2019](#)), and adults and children dance many types of Scottish reels. These practices coexist with numerous types of instrumental music and dance apparently of Malay and Javanese origin ([McCallum forthcoming](#)). Within the Cocos Malay community, there is an awareness of the Scottish dimension in local culture, although this is generally seen as the heritage of the former ruling family: it is considered to be separate from the increasing adherence of local culture to broad standards of Malayness and Islamic culture, which are often seen through the lens of Malaysian culture and moves towards Islamic (Sunni) orthodoxy. Today, due to increasing contact with Malaysia and Indonesia as well as mainland Australia, and regular intermarriage with the Cocos Malay diaspora in Sabah, Malaysia, there have been new waves of external cultural influence (on marriage migration in the Cocos Malay community, see [Winarnita and Herriman 2012](#)). However, these new waves of cultural influence and assimilation with broader patterns of mainstream Malayness or Australian culture, as well as increasing adherence to mainstream Sunni viewpoints on the performing arts by many, have also led to the erosion of some traditional performance practices ([McCallum 2020: 7–8](#)). The latter is keenly regretted by some members of the community but accepted by others. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands thus present a case study of music and migration that involves cultural impact from both the colonial and Malay Muslim dimensions of the contact zone, and requires us to think in a nuanced way about cultural identity and musical change. They have a number of commonalities with other small island societies in which similar processes of musical hybridisation and cultural transition have taken place⁴.

In 2015 and 2016 we videorecorded performances of music and dance for the festival of *Hari Raya*, during fieldwork on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. We also visited the Cocos Malay community in Katanning, Western Australia, for the celebration in 2016 of *Maulud Nabi* (the Birthday of the Prophet), and Jenny McCallum returned for the local council's multicultural festival Harmony Day in 2017. Combined with research into archival footage and ethnographic interviews in Malay and English, we produced a documentary film that records a range of living traditions and practices in the communities of Home Island and Katanning, two core centres of Cocos Malay culture today. [The World of Cocos Malay Music and Dance](#) seeks to uncover the history of transplanted traditions of music and dance in conditions of colonialism, explore evidence of cultural hybridity within a relatively recent example of a plantation society, and investigate the ways in which music and dance reflect the processes of cultural and political transitions in a small postcolonial community. It focuses on the role of music and dance in maintaining cultural identity in the face of changing political context. Although integration with Australia was formalised through Self-Determination in 1984, the presence of the Cocos Malay community on the islands since 1826 (a permanent settlement pre-dating colonial Perth, Melbourne or Adelaide) means that it now takes pride of place as the oldest continuously established Muslim community in any Australian territory. The documentary thus makes an emphasis on issues of religious and cultural identity, and long-distance connections across the ocean.



Map 2. The Cocos (Keeling) Island atoll. Map by Joanne Byrne. Used by permission.



Contexts, Research Methods and Conceptual Framework

Since the late nineteenth century, colonial reports, natural histories, political histories, and studies of Cocos Malay culture and language have surveyed and documented a range of ritual practices that have been accessible to outside observers. Some were made on the basis of short visits (e.g. the official colonial reports) while others were compiled over the course of long periods of engagement with the community⁵. The islands have been the subject of a small number of documentaries and journalistic features since the 1970s, but these films have focused predominantly on political and natural history⁶. Access by researchers to Cocos has not been straightforward, because there was no tourism until the 1990s and to travel there was (and remains) expensive. Some researchers who have worked on Cocos Malay culture have resided there under the auspices of government work or teaching in the education system⁷. There were no specifically



ethnomusicological studies of Cocos Malay performing arts until the present project, although a one-page summary of these traditions was published in the *Currency Companion to Music & Dance in Australia* (Anthony 2003: 150). The film thus aims to address in part the ethnomusicological lacuna of studies on Cocos Malay music and dance. It also seeks to mediate between written descriptions and archival-based histories, Cocos Malays' own stories of their community, and audiovisual evidence of certain current and past practices.

Presentation of our research findings in video format has a number of advantages over more traditional written formats. First, audiovisual recordings have the strongest descriptive power for musical genres for which there is no tradition of notation and for which the performance context and dance elements are central. Also, while there is a strong element of authorship in a documentary of this kind, the video format goes some way towards representing the community in their own words, as a byproduct also putting the Cocos Malay dialect on record. Finally, the documentary format, with the final product published in an open access journal and freely available online, is more accessible and therefore more likely to be of benefit to the Cocos Malay and broader Malay communities themselves.

In this project we sought to document and examine contemporary practices of music and dance and to explore how they are connected to living traditions in other parts of the Malay world. We discovered that the current decade is a crucial and apposite time for ethnographic work to be carried out, because many unique traditions are not being passed on to younger generations. Through archival research, in Canberra and London, we attempted to trace the development of the islands' musical culture both diachronically and synchronically, by means of the analysis of text, image, sound recordings, video recordings. In the project as a whole, we wanted to address the following questions:

- How were Malay practices of music and dance transplanted to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands?
- How did these practices respond to conditions of isolation and influences from waves of migrants (Javanese convicts and indentured labourers)?
- How did the Clunies-Ross family influence and contribute to the development of hybrid Scottish-Malay practices?
- What kind of cultural identity does the Cocos Malay community project to Australia, the Malay World, and to themselves?
- How do they respond to and interact with standards of Malayness projected from the Malay World?

All of these questions informed our approaches to interviews and interpretation of responses, as well as analysis of archival data.

[This documentary](#) is a product of ethnographic research with Cocos Malay communities over a total of approximately 12 weeks. During this time we stayed with the community, joined in with activities and sought to develop a well-rounded experience and understanding of community life. It was not practical to reside longer in the islands, since most of the year is quiet in this small community, with a great deal of performing arts activity condensed into specific periods. For the making of this documentary we requested permission from community leaders to record public performances, in line with ethics clearance from the University of Melbourne. We also approached individuals with requests to interview them about their experiences of performing arts culture on the islands, asking them about continuities and changes in the community's culture over time. We used excerpts from these interviews as part of an overarching narrative that frames the presentation of performances, and to contextualise, explain, and interpret practices of music and dance. The oral histories thus generated intersect with other archival photo and video evidence integrated into the film. We encountered a certain gender disparity in the participation of individuals: the men of the community were more willing than women to speak on the record about their experiences, even though women communicated with a fluent Malay-speaking researcher of the same gender off camera. We recognised, however, that the public articulation of political and historical views in this community is a discursive domain traditionally dominated by men, at least in public contexts. We were also invited to witness private family ceremonies involving Islamic religious sound, but owing to the intimacy of these events, we did not include them. We acknowledge that our access to the community can only present some sides of the story, but we chose to focus specifically on the dimensions of cultural expression that are publicly visible.

The tiny size of the community (around 400 people on Home Island, although this number swells for religious festivals and family events such as weddings) and the ageing demographic (children are sent to mainland Australia for the last two years of secondary school and



many of them stay there for further study or employment) means that there are numerous practical considerations for music researchers to take into account. Relatively little music and dance in a public setting (that is, outside the mosque or homes) occurs on a week-by-week basis. There is, however, a consistent cycle of sound-art practices associated with daily prayer and the annual calendar of Islamic religious observances. The *azan* (call to prayer) and Qur'anic recitations occur daily, while drumming and the singing of *ziki*⁸ (remembrance of the Prophet) are frequently heard. People listen to *nasyid* (popular devotional song) in live performance or, more frequently, recordings, and recite *doa* (prayers) in private or in heightened voice. Weddings bring the community together with the full range of genres often being performed, and celebrations for circumcision or thanksgiving for a baby's birth give occasion for religious musical expression. During the month of Ramadan the making of music or listening to music falls off, in a time of fasting and restraint, but public and private celebratory life suddenly come to a peak at the time of the annual week-long *Hari Raya* celebrations for the Islamic festival of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan.

Islam has always been an important part of the life of the islands ([Bunce 1988: 68–87](#)). In common with many parts of the Malay world, the practice of Islam on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands included many syncretic features and links with animist observances. Since the middle of the twentieth century, increased contact with more orthodox forms of Sunni Islam — mediated through Singapore and Christmas Island and more recently Malaysia — has led to religious reforms on the islands. Daily prayers (*solat*) and the call to prayer (*azan*) have been established as daily practices. In fact, Cocos is one of the few places in the Commonwealth of Australia where loudspeakers are used to publicly broadcast the call to prayer. There has been a gradual move away from syncretism to more orthodox Sunni Islam, which is manifest in a variety of ways. Beginning in 1986, Cocos Malays began to undertake the *Haji* pilgrimage ([Bunce 1988: 83](#)) and Cocos Malays have gone to Malaysia and other parts of the Islamic world to study theology. In the 1990s, Cocos Malay women started wearing the *tudung* (headscarf). In 2015, a new large single mosque was completed to replace three separate mosques and to combine their congregations into one. The turn to more standardised forms of Malay Islamic practice has also resulted in the abandonment of older syncretic traditions as well as various forms of music and dance where men and women dance together.

Cocos Malay Performing Arts Genres

The film presents snapshots of a performance culture in transition. It is important to note that the relatively small number of tourists on the atoll means that there has been almost no packaging of performance traditions for outsiders. In 1988, Pauline Bunce — a teacher on Home Island who developed a deep knowledge of Cocos Malay culture and language over an extensive period — made a submission to an Australian Government committee (for an enquiry into tourism in the Indian Ocean Territories) expressing her concern over the possible impact of proposed tourism ventures on Cocos Malay culture. Whilst one of the thirteen submissions to the committee for the same enquiry was made by Cocos Malays (i.e. the submission by the Cocos (Keeling) Islands Council, whose chairman at the time was Parson bin Yapat), Bunce's document makes specific mention of performing arts. Cocos Malay views on the potential impact of tourism on performing arts are difficult to ascertain from the written records of this government enquiry, but it appears that Bunce's representations had an effect. She acknowledged, in her submission, that the packaging of performances for tourist shows could disembed traditional practices from their ritual contexts and symbolic frameworks, thus diminishing their symbolic import in their original cultural contexts:

When elements of local tradition (eg. dances) are 'packaged' for tourists, they run the risk of losing their integral part in the broader culture.

Dances, costumes, legends, arts and crafts run the risk of losing their intimate connection with the family or community events to which they are traditionally linked.

The Cocos Melenggok dance, for example, is only performed at marriage-times⁹. If it is performed week-in and week-out, will the same young men be interested in offering [sic] their time to dance it again at each other's weddings?

In December 1984 there were two weddings within a fortnight. Even then the young men took on a 'here we go again' attitude to dressing up and performing for the second couple.

In the face of dozens of tourists clicking cameras, will people not start to embellish upon or tailor such dances to hold the audience's attention? ([Bunce 1991: 126](#))



Bunce's submission and the subsequent discussion of these issues between the Standing Committee on Tourism and Ms Bunce highlighted the potential of tourist shows to undermine and decontextualise traditional practices: one government official pointed out that this pattern had occurred in the Pacific while another acknowledged the important place of performing arts in the cosmological frameworks of the Cocos Malay community ([Australian Government House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment 1989: 115](#)). Ultimately, no program of large-scale tourism was developed on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, and up to the time of COVID-19, a relatively small number of tourists arrived each year (although numbers are seasonal, the number of visitors for the year ending in mid-2019 could be averaged out to 48 per week)¹⁰. Tourists stay predominantly on West Island, where the majority of visitors' accommodation is located.

Performances of traditional genres by Cocos Malays are usually made for the community itself and remain largely part of their ritual and cultural contexts: at present, weddings and the Hari Raya festival are by far the biggest outlets for the traditional performing arts. As mentioned previously, the performances on Home Island documented in the film (with the exception of those in Katanning) were all recorded during the week of celebrations following Hari Raya (Eid al-Fitr). During this week, relatives living abroad return to visit, large communal meals are prepared, family *kenduri* (ceremonies) are held and every evening a group holds a performance of one or more genres of performing art. In recent years it has seemed that Hari Raya is felt to be a good opportunity to practise, perform and therefore maintain performing arts genres, some of which are historically more closely linked to other occasions. Of the genres we observed in performance at Hari Raya, *rudat* ([Fig. 1](#)) is traditionally practised for circumcisions, *melenggok* ([Fig. 2](#)) for weddings and *dansa set* ([Fig. 3](#)) for New Year. This loosening of the traditional calendar reveals a culture which is evolving and the enthusiasm of the tradition bearers to maintain these genres.

Within this focus on the Hari Raya celebrations, [The World of Cocos Malay Music and Dance](#) examines performance genres grouped according to themes: Islamic traditions, more recently arrived genres for celebrations, and finally the traditional Scottish- and Javanese-influenced performing arts. The opening sequence examines Islamic religious sound practices that demonstrate recent Cocos Malay reintegration with the Islamic world, as well as distinctive practices that have been maintained locally. The heart of the film deals with the practice of 'Scottish dancing' by Cocos Malays, as observed during Hari Raya celebrations. The performance of this specific genre is perhaps a unique phenomenon in the Malay world although it is reportedly shared by diasporic Cocos Malay communities in Sabah, Malaysia. This section aims to unravel the complex circumstances in which Scottish dance forms were embraced as an intergenerational practice in the islands. An explanation provided by Nek Su (Ramnie bin Mokta)¹¹, who teaches Scottish dancing to children, offers new insights into understanding the hybrid nature of colonial culture in this former plantation society. Importantly, Nek Su draws attention to the difference between *dansa set*, the Scottish country dancing taught by the Clunies-Rosses from the 1950s using recorded music, and the much older *dansa Cocos*, which are also group formation dances but which use *biola* accompaniment and are felt by islanders to be a Cocos Malay rather than a Scottish tradition.

A discussion of the New Year (*Nuyar*) practices at Oceania House (*rumah besar*), the home of the Clunies-Ross family, reveals a fascinating annual event in which the whole community of Home Island came together. From 1 to 31 December each year, John Cecil Clunies-Ross (the last hereditary owner of the islands) and his wife Daphne taught dancing every evening after people had finished collecting coconuts or doing other work. Every year there was new dancing and new music, and the music was provided by a gramophone (LPs): the dances are still performed to a tape recording of this original LP, now lost. While the Clunies-Ross children did not usually take part, John Cecil and his wife did. Informants in the film recall the singing and playing of the melody of *Auld Lang Syne* and the fact that the dances continued until six o'clock in the morning. The narrative then focuses on the *biola* (violin) tradition on the islands: combining aspects of Malay and Scottish aesthetic sensibilities, this is a living art form, albeit with a decreasing number of (elderly) practitioners. Three senior *biola* players are interviewed here: Nek Yusri (Zainal bin Wallie), Nek Haji Bail (Alpan bin Puria), and Nek Mazlan (Colin bin Puria). This section includes discussion of a recent initiative of the local council to revitalise this tradition by supporting violin lessons, and an adult student, Nek Sumilla (Dennis bin Mokta), is interviewed. Theatrical performances and connections with the diasporic community in Katanning are also surveyed. [Table 1](#) gives an outline of performing arts genres presented in the film.



Figure 1. Members of the Cocos Malay community performing *rudat* at the Hari Raya Idul Fitri (Eid al-Fitr) Islamic New Year celebration in 2015 on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Photograph by David R. M. Irving and Jenny McCallum.



Figure 2. Cocos Malay men (Nek Su (Ramnie bin Mokta) and a young student) performing *melenggok* at Hari Raya 2015 on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Photograph by David R. M. Irving and Jenny McCallum





Figure 3. Cocos Malay children performing *dansa set* at Hari Raya 2015 on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Photograph by David R. M. Irving and Jenny McCallum.



CONCLUSION

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands are geographically isolated and yet thoroughly integrated in multiple economic, social, linguistic, and religious networks. The frequent traffic to, from, and through the islands means that people, ideas, and objects are constantly in circulation and contribute to an ever-evolving set of cultural practices. Cocos Malays maintain a cultural distinctiveness ([McCallum 2020](#)) at the same time as integrating within mainstream Malay practices emanating from the Malay world, and, particularly for younger generations, mainstream Australian culture. They engage with the very heart of the Islamic world, joining members of the global Muslim community (*ummah*) for the undertaking of the *Hajj* pilgrimage. The relatively rapid cultural changes over the course of three generations, in the transition from a feudalistic plantation society to a modern democratic society, has brought about substantial shifts in performing arts, although many of the more senior members of the community still practise some of traditional genres dating from the period of the Clunies-Ross regime. These are simultaneously viewed from multiple perspectives: as legacies of an oppressive past, or distractions from religious piety, or symbols of cultural uniqueness. Future avenues for research will undoubtedly include further work with the Cocos Malay diaspora in Sabah, Malaysia (descendants of the emigrés from Home Island, who were moved to Sabah in 1949–1951) as well as the Cocos Malay diaspora in mainland Australia (based in Perth, Port Hedland, Geraldton, Bunbury and especially Katanning), to see how music and dance mediate in the articulation of a specific cultural identity that links people to numerous political, cultural, and religious frameworks of meaning. Cocos Malay music and dance is a veritable world of practice and meaning.

Table 1. Cocos Malay performing arts genres depicted in the film

Genre	Time	Description
<i>Pantun</i>	00:10	Poetic verses (usually quatrains) sung to traditional melodies
<i>Azan</i>	00:51	The Islamic call to prayer
<i>Nasip</i>	01:49	With <i>doa</i> (prayers) chanted simultaneously, in the context of a <i>kenduri</i> (ceremony of thanksgiving)
<i>Zikir</i>	03:15	Devotional genre (Remembrance of the Prophet), which can be sung individually or collectively, usually accompanied by percussion
<i>Rudat</i>	05:25	Seated dance; <i>zikir</i> are performed to accompany this genre
<i>Lagu</i>	05:59	Generic term for song or musical piece; serves as popular dance music
<i>Nasyid</i>	06:38	Islamic devotional song, accompanied here by guitar and tuned percussion
<i>Joget</i>	07:03	Malaysian-style dance, performed by women to recorded music
<i>Silat</i>	08:12	Martial arts dance genre, performed to ward off malevolent spirits (video only, from 1954; no original recorded sound)
<i>Melenggok</i>	08:32	A traditional Cocos Malay dance genre, usually performed for weddings, by two men with scarves (video only, from 1954; no original recorded sound)
<i>Selong</i>	08:34	A traditional Cocos Malay dance performed by male-female couples, stepping backward and forward (video only, from 1954; no original recorded sound)
<i>Dansa set</i>	09:10	Traditional Scottish country dancing adopted by the Cocos Malays
<i>Bangsawan</i>	16:28	Malay folk theatre
<i>Dansa Cocos</i>	20:15	Traditional Cocos dance accompanied by <i>biola</i> (violin)
<i>Dansa Cocos (biola only)</i>	22:43	Demonstration of <i>biola</i> accompaniment for traditional Cocos dance
<i>Zikir</i>	27:48	Rehearsal of <i>zikir</i> in Katanning, Western Australia, accompanied by <i>rebana</i> , <i>kompang</i> , and <i>gendang</i>
<i>Zikir (procession)</i>	28:35	<i>Zikir</i> in procession, on the occasion of Harmony Day in Katanning, Western Australia
<i>Rudat</i>	28:51	<i>Rudat</i> in rehearsal (Katanning) then performance (Home Island, Cocos)

ENDNOTES

1. The islands were uninhabited until that point, although there had been a report of a brief occupation by marooned sailors in 1825 ([Bunce 1988: 39](#)).
2. The second and third heads of the family married Javanese and Cocos Malay wives respectively, and the family integrated with the Cocos Malay community to a significant degree in the late nineteenth century, but then increased distinction from them in the twentieth. See Irving ([forthcoming](#)).
3. This is a brief overview of some key events in the history of Cocos. The literature on the social and political history of the islands is, however, extensive: for detailed studies, see Brockman ([1981](#)), Bunce ([1988](#)), Dutt ([1981](#)), Gibson-Hill ([1947, 1952](#)), Hunt ([1989](#)), Linford ([2009](#)).
4. See, for example, case studies of Takuu (Papua New Guinea), Madagascar, Crete, Cuba, Jindo (South Korea), Ibiza, the Torres Strait Islands, Trinidad, Zanzibar, and islands associated with the United Kingdom (the Channel Islands and the Hebrides) in Dawe ([2004](#)), studies of Norfolk and Pitcairn Islands in Hayward ([2006](#)), Marie-Galante (French Antilles) in Emoff ([2009](#)) and Carriacou (Grenada) in Miller ([2005](#)).
5. See, for instance, Wood-Jones ([1912: 45–56](#)) and Gibson-Hill ([1947: 170–4](#)).
6. These include *Islands of Conflict* ([TVW 7 1976](#)) and *Kampung Katanning* ([Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1976](#)).

7. For example, studies by John Hunt (1989), Tony Lapsley (1983), Alistair Welsh (2015), and Pauline Bunce (1988) were initially made possible through their employment on the islands by the Australian Government and the Government of Western Australia.
8. The Cocos Malays and their contacts in Malaysia and Indonesia use the name *zikir* to refer to the recital in call-and-response format of lines from the *Surat Zikir* accompanied by frame drums as seen in this film. However, the terminology varies regionally across the Malay world and this genre can sometimes be called *maharban*.
9. We saw it performed on Home Island in the week-long Hari Raya celebrations and also at a house in Katanning in a private setting, as a demonstration of the dance to us.
10. A government fact sheet from July 2019 reports that the approximate number of visitors for 2018–2019 (presumably referring to the Australian financial year, which runs from 1 July to 30 June) was 2,488. See Australian Government: Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (2019a). An official government document published in March 2019 states the aim of growing annual tourist numbers ('not including visiting friends and relatives') to 2,500 by 2024. By the year 2030, it aims for the islands to have '100 additional tourist beds' and increase annual tourist numbers to 3,500. See Indian Ocean Territories Regional Development Organisation (2019: 43). Although the approximate number of 2,500 visitors in 2018–2019 (before the outbreak of COVID-19) averages out to approximately 48 per week, tourism on the islands is seasonal. A description of tourist numbers from 2018 states: 'Tourism on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands is seasonal, with the July to September 2018 quarter recording large numbers of kite and wind surfers (924 over the quarter compared to 619 in the January to March 2018). Most accommodation is on West Island, limiting tourists' ability to experience the Home Island culture. Development of accommodation on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands is constrained by lack of insurance and high costs of construction.' See Australian Government: Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (2019b).
11. Members of the Cocos Malay community have two names: their birth name ([given name], son/daughter of [father's name]), and the name that they take at the birth of their first child (teknonym). The teknonym changes again at the birth of their first grandchild. See Herriman (2014).

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ABSTRACT

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, located halfway between Perth and Sri Lanka and part of Australia's Indian Ocean Territories, are home to around 400 Cocos Malays and 150 others. Uninhabited until 1826, the islands became a coconut plantation controlled by the Scottish Clunies-Ross family and worked by Malay labourers from 1827 until 1978. In this isolated community there arose a unique and distinctive set of cultural practices, which drew from Malay, Javanese, and (some) Scottish influences. The rhythms of Cocos Malay life involve regular musicking and Islamic religious ritual: on specific occasions, including the week-long celebrations following Hari Raya (*Eid al-Fitr*), the birthday of the Prophet (*Maulud Nabi*), and weddings, the community comes together for festive public performances. This film and article present an ethnomusicological survey of Cocos Malay music and dance, based on fieldwork conducted in 2015 and 2016 during the festivities for Hari Raya. Among the genres presented and discussed are: *zikir* (remembrance of the Prophet), *joget* (popular Malaysian dance), *nasyid* (devotional songs), Scottish reels with Scottish dance music, traditional Cocos Malay dance with *biola* (violin), *silat* (a martial art), *rudat* (seated dance) with percussion, and *bangsawan* (popular theatre). Interviews explore the Cocos Malay *biola* tradition and projects for its revitalisation, and memories of music and dance for the *Nuyar* (New Year's Eve) party that was held in the house of the Clunies-Ross family until the 1990s. The history and modern-day practice of Scottish dancing within this Malay Muslim community form a major focus of the narrative.

Keywords: Cocos (Keeling) Islands; Indian Ocean musics; Cocos Malay music and dance; Islamic religious sound; *azan*; *nasyid*; *Zikir*; Cocos Malay drumming; *Joget*; *Silat*; *Melenggok*; *Selong*; Scottish dancing; *Bangsawan*; Hybridity; Cocos Malay *biola* (violin)



PARTICIPANTS IN DOCUMENTARY

Nek Amansha (Cree bin Haig OAM)

Haji Adam (Rabuhu bin Anthony)

Tanakal (Home Island rebana group)

Nek Shafiq (Zarol bin Alpan)

The Cocos Band

Adults and children of the Cocos Malay Community of Home Island

Nek Su (Ramnie bin Mokta)

Nek Yusri (Zainal bin Wallie)

Nek Haji Bail (Alpan bin Puria)

Nek Mazlan (Colin bin Puria)

Johnny Clunies-Ross

Nek Sumilla (Dennis bin Mokta)

Patah Tumbuh Hilang Berganti (Katanning rebana group)

Alep Mydie

Adults and children from the Cocos Malay Community of Katanning

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PERMISSIONS

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