# BUILDING THE FIRST ARCHIVE OF WAMIN MUSIC AND LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

Between 2022 and 2023, collaborative research with Ewamian Aboriginal Elders and musicians in Far North Queensland, Australia, resulted in the first-ever recorded documentation of the ancestral Wamin language and its musical traditions. With no prior recordings or documentation available, it was nearly impossible for Ewamian community members to access information about their linguistic and musical heritage. Over this period, more than 21 hours of audio and 4 hours of video were archived, along with 74 images and approximately 50 pages of fieldnotes. These materials include newly composed songs in the Wamin language, recorded brainstorming sessions, songwriting and studio sessions, as well as community workshops, interviews and reactions. The archive continues to grow, with files being uploaded and preserved at the time of writing through the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC). These newly created records, developed in collaboration with Ewamian community members, form a foundational resource of Ewamian cultural content. This article outlines the project's process of returning Ewamian language and music to Ewamian people, enabling them to engage with their cultural heritage on their own terms, now and into the future.

**Keywords:** Indigenous music; language revitalization; PARADISEC; Australia; Wamin

## Introduction

My doctoral research investigated the role music can play in language revitalisation, focusing on Wamin, a sleeping[2] Aboriginal language of Far North Queensland's Ewamian people[3] (Koumoulas 2025). Through a case study on developing music-based tools for Wamin revival,[4] this research also explored the largely untapped potential of the didjeridu[5] as a language learning resource, drawing on the expertise and commitment of Ewamian Elder David Bindi Hudson, an accomplished didjeridu performer dedicated to reawakening his ancestral language and preserving Ewamian cultural heritage. The project culminated in the creation of the first dedicated archive for Ewamian people, a digital resource bringing together Wamin songs, language materials, cultural practices and traditions; and a means of connecting Ewamian community members, forming a powerful foundation for Ewamian cultural renewal.

This article begins with a discussion of the historical context of Aboriginal language and cultural erosion, followed by Ewamian Elder David Bindi Hudson's collaboration in the

1 Markos Koumoulas is an ethnomusicologist, composer, and recent PhD graduate of the University of Sydney. His research focuses on Indigenous music and language revitalisation. Working with the Ewamian Aboriginal people of northeast Australia, he has composed and recorded songs in the sleeping Wamin language, explored the didjeridu's potential as a tool for language learning, and created the Wamin Songs Archive.

2 In reference to the level of endangerment of an Aboriginal language, "sleeping" is preferred over "extinct" or "dead", as languages can be revived.

3 Ewamian people are indigenous to the Savannah Gulf region of Far North Queensland. Their ancestral lands cover an area of 28,671 square kilometres of the Shire of Etheridge, at the base of Cape York Peninsula. This area includes the towns of Mount Surprise, Georgetown, Einasleigh, and Forsayth.

4 Ewamian refers to the Aboriginal people whereas Wamin refers to the Ewamian ancestral language.

5 A traditional Aboriginal wind instrument made from naturally hollowed-out eucalyptus.

project and relevant research on the importance of revitalising Aboriginal songs and languages. The research components of the project, which have been documented and archived at the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC), are then presented, followed by an overview of the Wamin Songs Archive, including examples of how materials are displayed, accessed, and curated. The article concludes with an account of the ongoing process of building the archive and plans for its future expansion.

## Aboriginal Languages and Cultural Loss

Since the onset of the colonisation of Australia in 1788, over two-thirds of Australia's Aboriginal languages have been lost (Smith 1990, cited in Gale 2023, 738). Sivak et al. (2019, 2) report that "linguicide" or language killing is a direct consequence of colonisation, as English colonists suppressed Aboriginal languages and acculturated Aboriginal people to Western culture, values and ways of life. Generations of Indigenous peoples were dispossessed and forced to relocate from their homelands, referred to as "Country" by Australian Aboriginal people.[6] Displaced communities were resettled on missions, reservations or forcibly placed into informal settlements on the fringes of Australian towns and cities. Colonial settlers appropriated Aboriginal lands, dispossessing Aboriginal peoples of Country and the spiritual and cultural life rooted in it. Ceremonies, an integral component of Aboriginal spirituality and identity, were no longer performed on traditional lands. Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families and put in missions or government settlements up until 1971 (Barney and Mackinlay 2010, 4).

Displacement from Country has profoundly impacted Aboriginal peoples' languages, musical traditions, Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity. Aboriginal languages carry knowledge of songs, traditions, ceremonies and sacred lands that are integral to Aboriginal society (Beckett 2022; Daniels and Sterzuk 2022; Hinton et al. 2018; Mackinlay 2008; Ringel 2022); when a language is endangered or lost, this relationship to Country and identity is fractured.

Ewamian people have suffered effects of colonisation on language and culture comparable to those experienced by the majority of Australian Aboriginal people. Knowledge of the Wamin language and Ewamian cultural practices is severely limited, and there are no documented instances of songs or musical traditions. The majority of Ewamian people have never heard Wamin spoken, nor have they heard traditional songs or witnessed Ewamian dances, leaving many feeling disconnected from their Aboriginal culture and Country (Koumoulas 2025).

## Collaboration with David Bindi Hudson

Ewamian Elder David Bindi Hudson serves as co-director and advisor on this research project. His standing in the community and his expertise in didjeridu performance have made his networks across the Ewamian nation pivotal to this research. An internationally renowned musician, composer and artist, he has released many songs and albums featuring the didjeridu and performed at cultural festivals and workshops worldwide, with several film, television and documentary appearances. He has described himself as a "global messenger" whose work in the Ewamian community is based on "the hope that I can encourage and empower my people that many things are possible" (Hudson

6 Country refers to the traditional lands of Aboriginal communities. Country incorporates beliefs about Aboriginal family, identity, land, language, cultural and spiritual practices. Aboriginal people consider Country to be a living entity and a major source of their identity.

2017). He has been an advocate and spokesperson for his community, working to ensure that Ewamian language and cultural needs remain at the centre of this research.

My professional relationship with David began in 2017 when I communicated with him regarding the creation of didjeridu notation for my Master's thesis, which led to an invitation to meet him in person in Cairns, Australia. My thesis, *Didgeridoo Notation* (Koumoulas 2019), introduced a symbolic notation system for the didjeridu, enabling composers to incorporate the instrument into written scores.

Our relationship continued beyond the completion of the thesis, and through ongoing conversations I came to understand David's deep conviction that Ewamian people must have both access to and the means of preserving their cultural heritage. From these discussions, the idea to reawaken Wamin arose, ultimately leading to my pursuit of doctoral studies at the University of Sydney and my relocation to Cairns, Australia. Over a year of fieldwork there, from March 2022 to March 2023, I was based among a large Ewamian population, many of whom also live in the neighbouring towns of Mareeba and Kuranda. My work with David Bindi Hudson continues, and it is his hope that the resources created through this project will provide the momentum for further initiatives to revitalise Wamin and Ewamian culture.

## Revitalisation of Aboriginal Songs and Languages

Aboriginal songs and languages are bound up with Indigenous ways of knowing: the knowledge a community holds and passes down through its language, song, and connection to Country (Grant 2014; Mackinlay 2008; Patrick et al. 2017; Wafer and Turpin 2017; Walsh 2007). When communities are displaced from Country, they lose access to that knowledge. Bracknell (2020, 26) argues that the trauma of this generational displacement makes reviving language and song traditions an "empowering process" vital to the survival of Aboriginal communities. Wafer and Turpin (2017, 27) affirm that the aim of music revitalisation initiatives is "not just for the sake of the music itself, but rather as a means of renewing and re-activating relationships with Country".

Songs can both document the linguistic features of a language and contribute to its revitalisation through the creation of new vocabulary. Echeverria and Sparling (2024) argue that songs serve as a valuable tool for corpus planning, capturing pronunciation and spelling variations while also encompassing a broader vocabulary range than spoken language alone. The authors further suggest that songs may be retained longer than speech, functioning as a kind of oral dictionary for language communities. Songs are also a useful tool for learning vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, as their repetitive nature helps language learners recognise word patterns and practise elements such as intonation and stress (Echeverria and Sparling 2024, 4–5).

## Research Components

This research project comprises several components, the outputs of which are progressively being organised into a centralised, publicly accessible repository lodged at PARADISEC, including audio and video recordings, images and annotated fieldnotes with transcriptions. These components are described in detail in the sections below.

### 1. Wamin Language Learning and Documentation

While the main research objective was to revitalise Wamin through music, a considerable portion of the work focused on learning and teaching Wamin to participating musicians as well as creating new vocabulary. This preparatory work was a precursor to writing and recording songs in Wamin. The current information on the Wamin language draws

primarily from a series of workshops, beginning in 2017, with the Ewamian Aboriginal People Corporation, led by linguist Cassy Nancarrow. The workshop participants produced a wordlist consisting of 135 vocabulary items and minimal guidelines for pronunciation and grammatical structures. In 2022, David Bindi Hudson and I subsequently worked with Cassy Nancarrow to learn the Wamin language and to receive input for the writing of Wamin songs. These sessions also included creating new Wamin words based on the existing wordlist, expanding vocabulary for concepts absent from the wordlist but needed for the song lyrics. For example, we coined the word, *galba-dandji* (*galba*, "river"; *dandji*, "fire") for "lava", which was needed to describe how the "rainbow serpent", an Ewamian creation being, formed the lava tubes at Undara Volcanic National Park, located in Ewamian Country. Notably, the participating Ewamian musicians in the recording of the songs had never heard Wamin before. Therefore, several workshops were organised to teach Wamin vocabulary and pronunciation.

**2. Writing and Recording Wamin Songs**

The writing of Wamin songs followed from the language workshops, with participants actively engaging with the language, its pronunciation and structure, while also fostering a sense of collective ownership of the revitalisation process. Together with David Bindi Hudson, Cassy Nancarrow and Aboriginal artist Jedess Hudson, Wamin songs were evaluated and refined for vocabulary as well as pronunciation and grammatical accuracy.

David's vision was to reimagine and create "traditional" Wamin music, based on his extensive knowledge and experience of broader Aboriginal performance practices.[7] As with the Wamin language, the specific musical practices of Ewamian ancestors are unknown to living community members. The inspiration for the songs comes from traditional Ewamian stories, and the resulting songs reflect Ewamian life and culture. The newly written Wamin songs tell stories about specific locations and events in Ewamian Country, the history of the Ewamian people and the trauma of Ewamian people's displacement from Country. The songs reference creation stories, focusing on the role of animals in Ewamian spirituality and the healing effects of local flora. It was also important to David that the sounds produced on the didjeridu, which accompanied many of the songs, express the knowledge in Ewamian stories.[8] The selection of rhythm, melody and lyrical context for the songs was influenced by the content of Ewamian stories. For example, a song narrating the journey of a mother kangaroo and her baby joey across Ewamian Country included didjeridu rhythmic accents mimicking the kangaroos' hopping.

The resulting *Wamin Songs* album was recorded at Pegasus Studios in Cairns, Australia, with additional collaboration from music producer Nigel Pegrum. Participants included two Cairns-based Indigenous performing artists, Carl Fourmile (Yidiny) and Linton Schrieber (Gunggandji), along with David's nephew and niece, Richard Bing Jr. (Ewamian/Djabugay) and T'Emma Bing (Ewamian/Djabugay).[9] The first versions of the songs were presented at a final collaborative workshop with Nigel Pegrum in September 2022, after which a series of recording, editing, and mixing sessions took place. The selection and recording of original Wamin songs were finalised later that year, with the album released in January 2023. In total, the album consists of ten newly composed songs written in

7 Traditional in this sense refers to the "classical" Aboriginal song genre, consisting of instrumentation such as voice, didjeridu, and clapsticks.
8 As mentioned in the introduction, one major initiative of this research project was to investigate the language-based capacities of the didjeridu.
9 The terms in parentheses following participants' names refer to their Aboriginal nation affiliations.

the Wamin language, along with five didjeridu solo pieces from David's previous albums, which were renamed with Wamin titles.

**3. Community Engagement**

The Ewamian people's efforts to revitalise their language and culture are still in early stages, and this research project represents one contribution within that broader process. David Bindi Hudson set its central approach: prioritising Ewamian ways of knowing through the writing and recording of songs that carry cultural and historical knowledge. Creating and recording these songs has generated enthusiasm and strengthened community support for reviving Wamin language and culture, borne out through ongoing discussions, reporting and feedback. To ensure accountability to the Ewamian people (AIATSIS 2020) and keep the project community-driven, all creative work and its execution was approved by David, who arranged meetings, workshops and interviews to consult the community and present the research outputs to them.

Once the *Wamin Songs* album was completed, the recordings were presented to David's family and Ewamian community members, whose reactions are in the process of being archived in PARADISEC. I participated in the presentations in Kuranda, Mareeba and Cairns in February and March 2023, and the visit to Kuranda was among the most memorable experiences of the research project. David's extended family, spanning generations, gathered to hear the album. David spoke of his vision to awaken Wamin from its sleep, and the family's response was deeply emotional, one of joy but also of reflection. They spoke of Ewamian Country and their identity, and of the sadness of often feeling disconnected from their culture, particularly acute among the younger family members. David's Auntie Flo, whom David describes as the oldest living person of Ewamian descent, was especially moved. Hearing the Wamin songs, she recounted the trauma of being displaced as a child to the Mona Mona Mission.[10] With her consent, her account was recorded for the archive. As with all personal accounts, it was first presented to her for acknowledgement and comments before being uploaded.

**4. Didjeridu Notation**

The project also produced an Ewamian didjeridu notation system as a teaching and learning tool. The notation draws on visual representations of the words that underlie Ewamian didjeridu rhythms. Workshops and collaborative sessions with David Bindi Hudson and Jedess Hudson were recorded, documenting both the creative process and the community's involvement. Transcriptions of each recorded song, in both staff notation and Ewamian notation, will also be uploaded to PARADISEC.

David first proposed the creation of an Ewamian didjeridu notation in 2017, when I consulted him for my Master's thesis. He hoped a notation accessible without staff-reading would let Ewamian students learn an instrument deeply connected to their culture. In a series of workshops in Cairns in February 2023, David, Jedess Hudson and I developed the notation from traditional Ewamian art and cultural symbols, building a system that serves both as a teaching tool and as an extension of Ewamian artistic expression. Figure 1 provides an example of the notation.

10 Mona Mona Mission was a settlement established by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1913 some 30 kilometres from Cairns, Australia. Aboriginal residents were obliged to adopt Christian teachings, and the practice of traditional customs and languages was actively discouraged, which contributed to the decline and eventual disappearance of Wamin as a spoken language. Documented accounts describe overcrowded living conditions, insufficient food, clothing and bedding, and inadequate healthcare (Koumoulas 2025, 71).

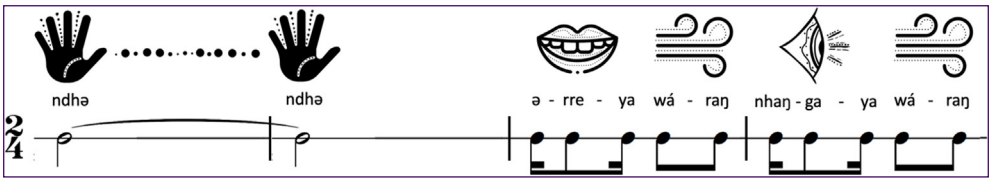


Figure 1. An excerpt of Ewamian didjeridu notation symbols (top line), with associated Wamin vocabulary (middle line) and staff notation (bottom line) (Koumoulas 2025).

Jedess, who had attended the Wamin language workshop with Cassy Nancarrow, was familiar with the songwriting process and contributed feedback throughout. She took part in analysing the written songs, listening to the recordings and selecting images that best represented the Wamin vocabulary.

## PARADISEC

The Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC)[11] is a digital archive dedicated to preserving materials related to endangered languages and cultures, particularly from the Pacific region, Australia and Southeast Asia. PARADISEC was founded in 2003 and is maintained by the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University, with funding support from the Australian Research Council. It provides a secure platform for storing audio, video, images and textual data, supporting the long-term preservation and accessibility of materials for researchers and community members. Sharing materials with communities, institutions and researchers, PARADISEC plays a vital role in safeguarding endangered languages and cultures and supporting community revitalisation efforts.

As of 2026, the archive houses 673 collections in its catalog, representing over 1,370 languages. Researchers, linguists and other contributors submit materials to PARADISEC, including language recordings, oral histories, songs and other documentation. These materials are organised into collections in which each item represents a documented event or session, potentially containing multiple files in various formats such as audio and video recordings, images and written documentation. Items in the collection are accompanied by metadata based on international standards, ensuring that materials are discoverable and accessible to researchers and communities.

## The Wamin Songs Archive

As of April 2026, the Wamin Songs Archive consists of 15 items, comprising 21 hours of audio, 4 hours of video, 74 images and approximately 50 pages of fieldnotes. Figure 2 shows the landing page of the collection as it appears in PARADISEC. The collection carries the unique identifier MK1, where MK represents the initials of the collector, Markos Koumoulas, and 1 denotes the sequential collection number. The landing page presents the collection's descriptive and technical metadata, including the collection's URL and DOI, collector, languages, dates and file formats. A map shows the geographical region where Wamin was originally spoken. Access conditions, a suggested citation and the option to download or view the collection's metadata are provided. The page also contains a list with links to the 15 items in the collection.

11 PARADISEC. https://www.paradisec.org.au. Accessed 14 January 2026.

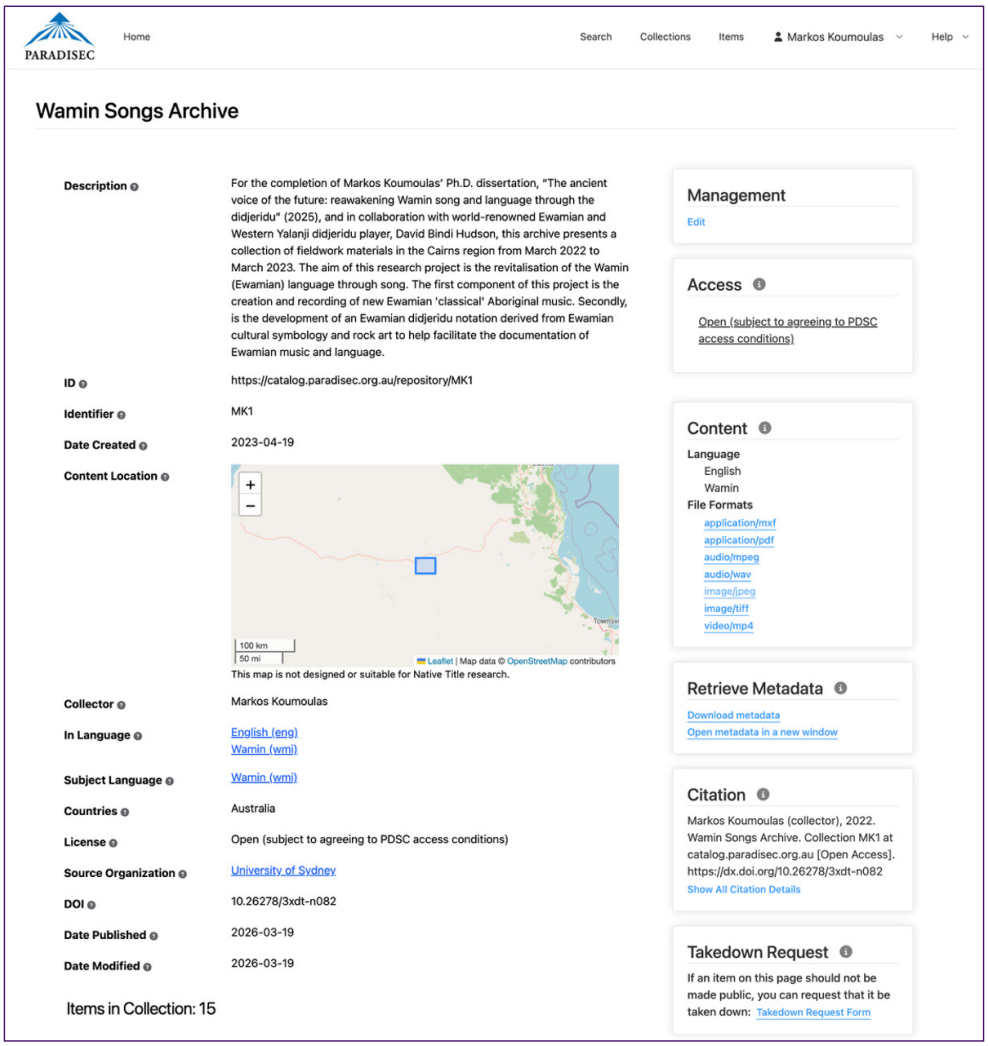


Figure 2. The collection page of the Wamin Songs Archive on PARADISEC. https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/repository/MK1.

Figure 3 lists the 15 items in the collection. Each item ID consists of the collection identifier followed by the date of the recording session, so that MK1-20221005 denotes a session recorded on 5 October 2022. Each item has a descriptive title following its unique identifier (e.g., "Third day recording Wamin songs feat. Carl Fourmile and Linton Schrieber"). Each item is hyperlinked to a dedicated item page where associated media files and documentation can be accessed.

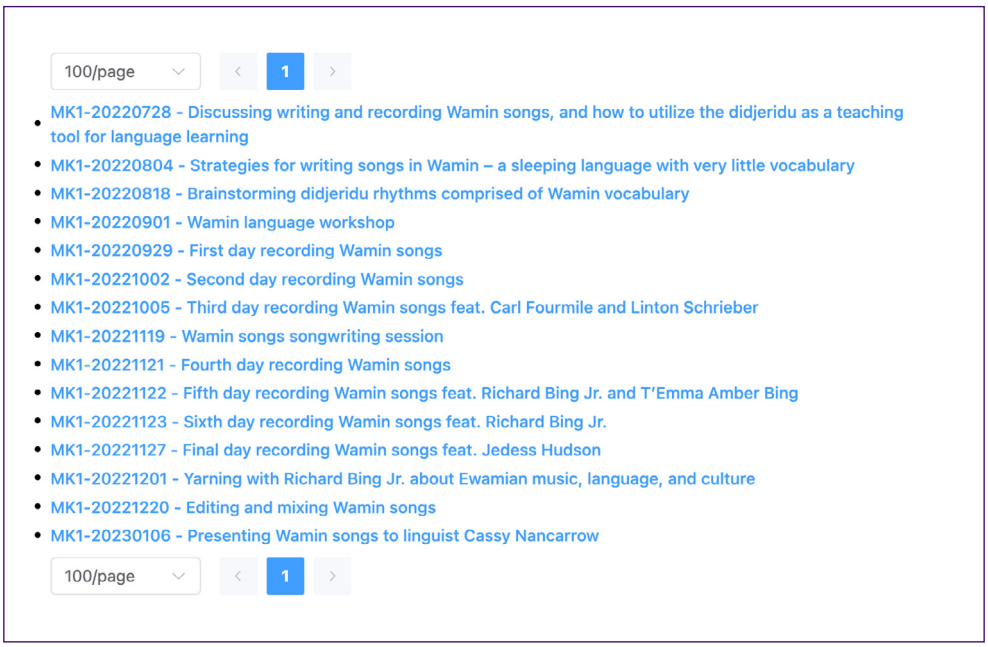


Figure 3. The item listings of the Wamin Songs Archive. https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/repository/MK1.

Within a single item, files are organised by topic, each representing a specific activity within a given session. For example, item MK1-20221005, documenting the third day of recording Wamin songs, contains topics including a pre-recording discussion, a full session audio recording, a brainstorming session for the song "Kukul-gu", and separate recordings of vocals, percussion and didjeridu. Within each topic, individual files are numbered sequentially as tracks. The final element of the filename indicates the file format: MP3, WAV, MP4, MXF, JPG, TIF or PDF. Figure 4 illustrates this naming convention with a complete filename example.

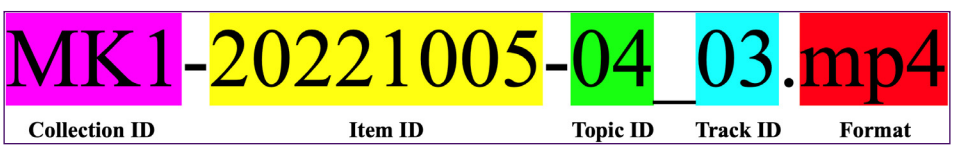


Figure 4. The structure of a file name from the Wamin Songs Archive.

Authorised users can access individual content files by clicking the “View” button beside each listing; audio, video and images can then be previewed or downloaded. Figure 5 provides an example of a file page.

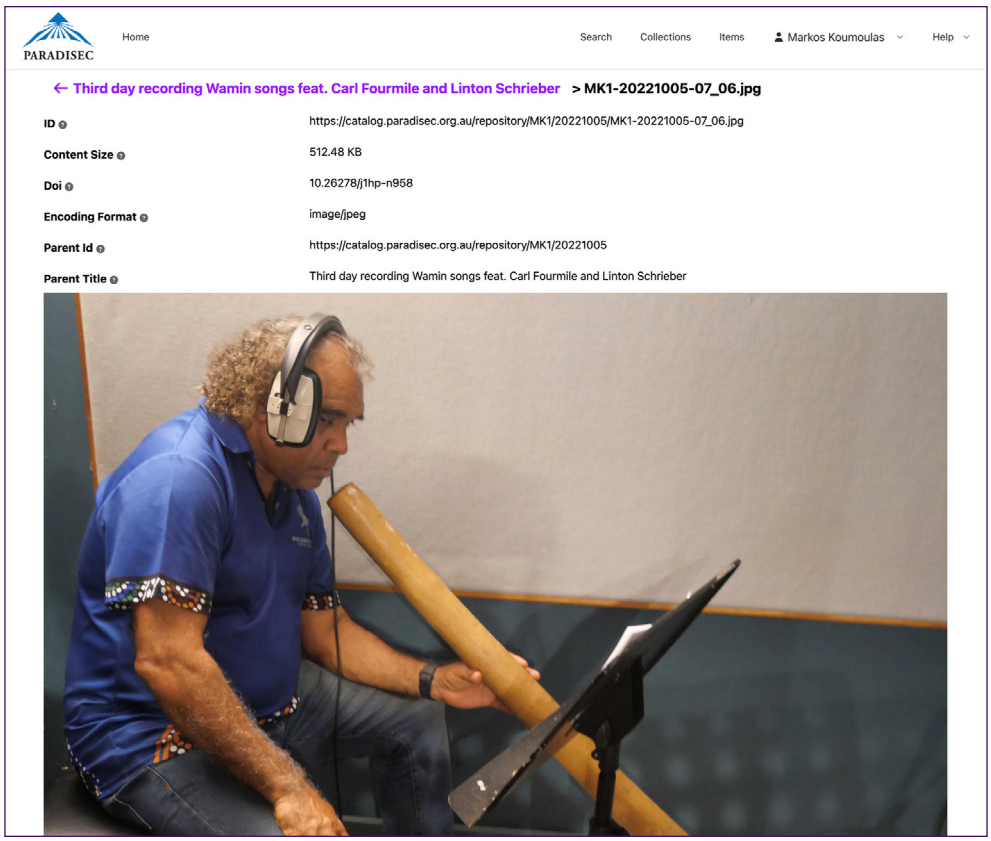


Figure 5. Screenshot of image file MK1-20221005-07_06 featuring David Bindi Hudson with his didjeridu in the recording studio. https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/repository/MK1/20221005/MK1-20221005-07_06.jpg.

## Ongoing Expansion of the PARADISEC Collection

As of April 2026, the archive primarily documents the process and creation of the ten-song *Wamin Songs* album. The final recordings have not yet been made publicly available, as David’s intention is for Ewamian community members to hear them for the first time through in-person workshops on Ewamian Country. Early previews shared with David’s relatives sparked shared stories and cultural reflections, as described earlier in this article. Several items corresponding to the remaining research components are currently being finalised for addition to the collection, including recordings of community engagement activities such as interviews and discussions with Ewamian people about cultural memories, their reactions to the revitalisation initiative, and the impact of language and cultural loss on Ewamian identity. The collection will also be expanded to include instructional resources and demonstrations for learning the Ewamian didjeridu notation.

## YouTube

To facilitate use of the *Wamin Songs* album in workshops, the songs were uploaded to a dedicated YouTube channel as unlisted videos.[12] Each song was uploaded separately, accompanied by a description of the song's story and the meaning of its lyrics. The videos feature closed captions displaying the Wamin lyrics alongside their English translations (Figure 6), allowing workshop participants to follow and sing along.

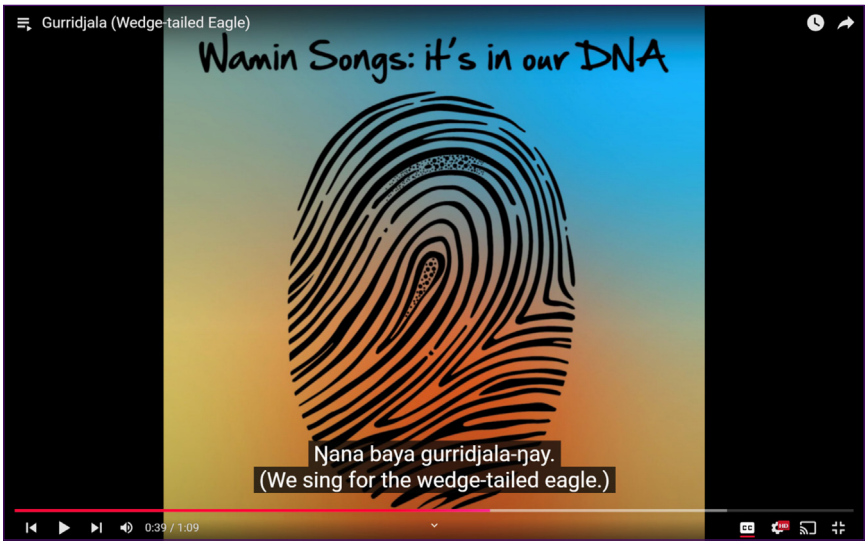


Figure 6. Screenshot of the song "Gurridjala" on YouTube with closed-captioned lyrics in Wamin and English.

## Goals for the Future

A primary goal for the Wamin Songs Archive is to deepen community involvement by inviting Ewamian members to actively contribute to the archive. Editing permissions would be extended to select community members, allowing them to add and update content. Currently, such permissions are limited to me and PARADISEC Project Coordinator, Nicholas Ward. Future plans include conducting archiving workshops for the Ewamian community, focusing on digital archiving techniques including metadata creation and data management, enabling community members to take an active role in maintaining and expanding the archive.

Engaging younger Ewamian community members is a particular priority, as building archiving skills among younger generations helps ensure the long-term stewardship of Ewamian linguistic and cultural heritage. This aligns with PARADISEC's commitment to collaboration, where local knowledge holders contribute to and control access to their materials. Strengthening community ownership of the archive also enhances its value as a resource for researchers and broader audiences interested in Indigenous language revitalisation.

12 As of April 2026, the videos are reserved for use in Ewamian community workshops.

Through funding from the University of Sydney's Postgraduate Research Support Scheme, a dedicated website is being built to host selected materials related to the revitalisation of Wamin language and music traditions.[13] While the website is currently under construction, it is designed to be accessible to general audiences and will feature key materials for learning the Wamin language, including instructional videos on how to sing the songs and play associated didjeridu rhythms. Additionally, it will serve as a platform to premiere a short documentary film showcasing the efforts and progress in revitalising Wamin music and language. Meanwhile, PARADISEC serves as an archive for all recordings and documentation from the fieldwork and the creation of the *Wamin Songs* album.

## Conclusion

PARADISEC has played a significant role in preserving and providing access to the newly created resources at the heart of this project. The writing and recording of Wamin songs was the foundational initiative, providing both a means of engaging the Ewamian community with their ancestral language and a body of material for the archive. The community's profound response to hearing Wamin for the first time through these songs speaks to the power of music to reconnect people with their language and culture.

The Wamin Songs Archive represents an important step towards Ewamian people's ownership of and access to their cultural heritage. The songs have motivated community members to engage with their ancestral language, cultural traditions and Country, and the archive ensures that these materials remain preserved and available for ongoing community access and development. While this initiative is specific to the Ewamian community, its approach, combining music-based language revitalisation with digital archiving, offers a model that may be applicable to other Aboriginal language revitalisation efforts in Australia and to Indigenous communities globally, particularly where institutional support from archives such as PARADISEC is available.

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