



REFLECTION ARTICLE

Reflections on Creative Responses to Archival Collections in PARADISEC

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Abstract

The Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) is a digital archive of some of the many small cultures and languages of the world, particularly from the Pacific region. The article reflects on a collaborative outreach project involving the creative response of a group of Papua New Guinean people to archival collections held in PARADISEC. The project demonstrates how reciprocity, long-term relationships and the valuing of Indigenous knowledge holders can invigorate cultural practices, adding value and meaning to the archive. This connects to the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration themes and contributes to an ethical space of engagement, encounter, respect, negotiation and collaboration.

Keywords: *Indigenous archives; Indigenous protocols and archives; Indigenous-led archival practice; Tandanya declaration.*

This reflection is based on a conversation between the authors about a collaborative project involving the PNG Peroveta Singers of Canberra and PARADISEC (the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures).¹ We discuss how the recording and documentation of the creative response of the Peroveta singers to archival materials held in PARADISEC demonstrates the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration's themes, in particular 'Recognition and Identity' and 'Research and Access'.

PARADISEC is a digital archive of records of some of the many small cultures and languages of the world, particularly from the Pacific region. As well as implementing international standards of archiving to safeguard music and language recordings, the team at PARADISEC has initiated a range of outreach programs to maximise the findability, accessibility and usability of these recordings for speaker communities and researchers. An example is the Toksave: Culture Talks podcast, a series of interviews with people who have cultural and personal connections to collections in the PARADISEC archive. Co-produced by the authors, the podcast is not just about broadcasting the final product; it demonstrates a process that aims to amplify and prioritise the voices of Indigenous collaborators.

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The PNG Peroveta Singers of Canberra, formed in 1999, is a collective diaspora community initiative led by Deveni Temu. The members are predominantly from Central Province, Papua New Guinea, living in the regions of Canberra, ACT and Queanbeyan, NSW. Peroveta is a unique type of singing, also known as Prophet Songs, adopted in the Southern Region provinces of Papua New Guinea. Peroveta is a combination of Biblical scriptures, missionary histories and local customs set in traditional choral music sung with soaring and interweaving parts. The Canberra group's motivation is to maintain culture, music and language whilst abroad by sharing and performing Peroveta songs and traditional Sene² dance items, connecting the members to people and places where they come from in their homeland.

Co-author Steven Gagau connected with the Peroveta singers through the group coordinator, Temu. As an Indigenous Tolai of the Gunantuna people of New Britain Island in Papua New Guinea, Gagau has networks across Pasifika and Wantok communities, demonstrating his insider-outsider perspective as an Indigenous man working within an archival institution. Temu also worked in this space as the Pacific Collections Librarian at the Australian National University. He worked with Gagau and PARADISEC Sydney director Amanda Harris on the True Echoes project in collaboration with the British Library.³ We interviewed Temu about this project for the Toksave podcast in 2022.⁴ Then in 2023, we found two collections containing Peroveta songs in the PARADISEC archive: the MG1 collection⁵, recorded in the late 1950s and 1960s by Murray Groves and the IC1 collection⁶, consisting of recordings made by Ian Campbell in Tubuseria Village, Central Province, in 1969. Upon Gagau's initiative, we contacted Temu to share the recordings with him and plan an episode of the podcast.

The Peroveta singers engaged with the materials and requested to respond with song and dance, including interpretations of some of the songs on the recordings as well as a journey through the different Peroveta and Sene styles and the histories they tell of the Southern region of Papua New Guinea. The resulting project encompassed two podcast episodes, two films of song and dance, a PDF songbook with transcriptions and translations, a blog post, a co-authored journal article and an archival collection of these materials.⁷ This initiative from the community group broadened the scope of engagement and collaboration to a more creative and dynamic output. It added value and impact to archival enrichment and supported cultural continuity, language revitalisation and the transmission of song and dance traditions.

We believe that the collaboration between PARADISEC and the Peroveta group demonstrates ways of implementing the themes of the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration. We address theme #3 'Recognition and Identity' from the cultural perspective of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. We recognise that Indigenous peoples and communities are experts in their own culture and knowledge expressed through oral traditions such as storytelling, song and dance for intergenerational transmission. Through interviews, creative performance, film production and written publication, the voices of the community members of the Peroveta group were amplified as active collaborators who were able to negotiate the form of their expression of knowledge and response to archival recordings.

In addressing theme #4 'Research and Access', we refer to the model of the archival loop we developed at PARADISEC to represent changes in archival practices.⁸ This model illustrates how qualities of reciprocity, long-term relationships and the valuing of Indigenous knowledge holders can create a flow of information, output and benefits moving between researchers and speaker communities. Its central pillars are prioritising Indigenous voices, connecting and reconnecting, building relationships and enlivening the archive.

The next section is an edited transcription of the discussion between the co-authors as we reflect on the collaborative project. We chose a conversational approach for the body of this article to prioritise Indigenous ways of communicating, through yarning, using culturally appropriate processes to engage with Indigenous voices.⁹ It also demonstrates

the importance we place on reflection, discussion and re-evaluation of our collaborative practices in the archive.

Kell:

Steven, how would you connect the project with the Peroveta singers of Canberra to the Tandanya theme of 'Recognition and Identity'?

Gagau:

This is part of our community outreach, bridging the archive to the communities. The identity of what's in the archive has been acknowledged and we reached out to the community to connect them to the archive. In that way we recognise the cultural heritage in the archive, the identity of a community in the archive, a diaspora community in Australia, who have responded to the archival materials through song.

Kell:

How does their response recognise alternative ways of expressing and transmitting cultural knowledge?

Gagau:

That's the strength I see because of our oral traditions. Rather than relying on written documentation, the ways that we are going about connecting Indigenous communities is through engaging and interacting in person and expression via performance and songs. I think it's up to us researchers who coordinate to put that into documentation practice. This is a strong aspect of connecting communities, recognising they have the cultural knowledge and making sure we tap into this. The right way to approach the process of outreach is engaging community members and letting them express their response as they want to. It can develop to things like co-authoring, enriching metadata and new archival collections.

Kell:

I felt, as an outsider, because I'm not from PNG and I'm not an Indigenous person, that facilitating the recording contributed my audio engineering skills to enable Elders to have a voice to express in their way. Steven, you sit both as an insider, as a Tolai man and as an outsider coming from an archival institution. How do you feel in your role and how does this relate to the Tandanya theme of 'Research and Access'?

Gagau:

As you'll notice in our partnership in these projects, I always step back because I must reflect the insider perspective. I'm coming in partly as an outsider, whereas I'm also an insider. I let the outsider perspective in, with how to document, promote or disseminate Indigenous perspectives and practices. But from an insider perspective, I let the Elders and their direct knowledge express it. I consolidate or add to it rather than trying to represent them in their space. They see me as representing Indigenous points of view in the space of academia or research. As an insider outsider, I mediate the colonisers' narratives. I'm in that space and I understand what that is, so I act as a bridge all the time, always mediating, always talking on their behalf. You'll see in my approach and how I always step back. The reason for that

is out of respect for the communities who have the knowledge, and I want to let them show it. It's up to us to translate and transmit it with sensitivity and appropriateness.

Kell:

Working with you, I find it's a safer space for me as an outsider, to have you there as a guide and to watch how you interact and communicate. When we went to Canberra, I hadn't met the Peroveta group before, apart from Deveni Temu who is, like you, an insider outsider in the GLAM sector research space. Having you two there as guides, interpreting language and interpreting protocols, showing me how to act around people. It was powerful and made the process more meaningful.

Gagau:

I appreciate outsiders who have an open mind. I don't think people in the past always had respectful practices. I've heard of researchers staying in villages and acting in their way rather than respecting local cultural ways. I think it's education and awareness that researchers need to consider, not coming in and imposing on people. Let Indigenous people control the narrative and express their points of view how they want. The researcher should ride with it and interpret it according to how the community people see life and the cultures they are in and how to disseminate knowledge to the next generation. What matters is how to recognise Indigenous voices.

Kell:

So many of the episodes of the Toksave podcast are initiated by yourself within community, through people you know. The episodes with the Peroveta group started that way. Then they kind of turned around when Deveni and the group were saying, 'Oh we want to do this, we want to record our songs and dances'. This was new. It wasn't just a podcast interview but became more than that, including video production and a new archival collection. To be flexible and say, 'Okay, this is what the participants want to do' and go with that. The product is more powerful and resulted in a whole new collection in PARADISEC with transcriptions and a songbook that they made. It was relevant and engaging.

Gagau:

One positive aspect is that Deveni is an insider outsider too. It was such a good balance because I've come in from podcast production, and Deveni was within the cultural group. He understood what needed to be done. The narrative that we were trying to promote was with him already. My job was easier because he was the language speaker, and he knew the group over many years. It was through Deveni and his trust in us that we could work with them that the project evolved. Without Deveni, and his insider outsider relationship, it would not have happened, and we wouldn't have reached this stage. I think it's important that Indigenous researchers or practitioners like us must always act as a bridge.

Kell:

We recorded the choir and gave flash drives to every member containing their recordings and those from the archival collections relevant to their group. We also gave a presentation about how to access the collection at a community event. What is the importance of opening access for communities like this?

Gagau:

Firstly, it's letting people know about recordings of their culture and history, raising awareness of resources like archives and how to use them. Secondly, it's about engagement. People will engage more if they have a glimpse or knowledge of 'Oh, these things are about me and my identity, my culture'. If we hadn't done this project, the community members may not have heard about the collections in PARADISEC. It was an educational process showing how we can all work together to bridge the gap and connect. It's rediscovering too and we find an emotional kind of interaction. We also saw as an outcome of this project an increase in the numbers in the Peroveta group. To me that is an impact showing that we are engaging with people and contributing to revitalisation in an evolving world of practices.

Kell:

The Toksave podcast helps to make archival materials findable. Without outreach projects like this, how would people hear about archives and access them if it's outside their world? We work with people and it's like 'here are the recordings, listen to them', and we know that they go away and talk to their family and community about them. The next thing is that they're on the publicly broadcast podcast.

Gagau:

Findability and accessibility are very relevant points. For example, I recently received an email from somebody who found PARADISEC after listening to the podcast episode about the MW6 collection¹⁰ [A collection of music recordings and interviews about music in Rabaul, Gazelle Peninsula, East New Britain Province and New Guinea Islands Region recorded in the 1990s by Michael Webb, particularly relevant to Steven Gagau as coming from his cultural background]. This person had looked up the archive and identified various videos and songs in the collection, showing how people can discover the archive through outreach. In this case, he responded to the podcast and the collection with comments such as 'that was my grandfather, that's my uncle in the video'. He knew who was singing what, the names of people and places, enriching our knowledge and metadata of the collection. I found we had common connections from back home. I know his village, and he had heard of me. I also contacted the researcher, Michael Webb. That's how we share and create trust within the archive for the Pasifika community. I feel like I am in the right place to support this big picture.

Kell:

So many times, I've seen you in action, Steven, where we meet people and straight away you start connecting on cultural, language, country, and family levels. It creates the trust that is necessary in working with Indigenous communities. I'd like you to just talk a little bit about the four pillars that you developed when talking about community and cultural engagement in outreach programs such as the Toksave podcast and the episodes with the Peroveta group.

Gagau:

At PARADISEC we've developed this archival loop, representing community collaboration. It's about engagement and cultural exchanges that we need to feature as part of our archival work. It's time to really empower Indigenous voices. Archival materials need to be connected back to where they come from, where they belong. Otherwise, there's a missing

link. In the case of Deveni and the Peroveta group, we connected cultural materials to a group related to ownership and identity of what's in the archive. That connected to another layer of people who are now joining the choir, attending these events. These outreach projects involve people as part of this big picture. We are looping what's in the archive to the communities and bringing that back into the archive again as a collection or a contribution or a response to the way they think, feel and connect with the archive.

Kell:

That's right. We first connected with Deveni through the True Echoes project. Building on that, the next time we said we wanted to interview him about Peroveta, he had more confidence in the relationship with PARADISEC. With this stronger relationship, the project could become more ambitious, and he felt confident to tell us what the group wanted to do.

Gagau:

That's right. We're talking about people to people. Not people to technology, but people to people enlivening the archive. PARADISEC founder Linda Barwick speaks about 'turning the archive upside down'.¹¹ I think we are in a process of doing that now. We are bridging through the archival loop so that whatever has been taken from community and from the cultural knowledge owners, we are returning and reconnecting. For me, preservation for the long-term, safeguarding is so important. And now it is time for institutions like PARADISEC to connect back to communities. Everybody's part of this big jigsaw puzzle. It's about enlivening the archives for the benefit of everybody through bridging to where the materials come from.

Kell:

I think of reels in boxes. Cassettes in their little cases. Physical objects that silently hold sound. When you digitise them and give access to people, it's a different thing. That's when you hear the voices and wake things up. It is an amazing process. Archives such as PARADISEC play a big role in that. But without the community, without insiders like yourself, those materials would not have the meaning they do.

Gagau:

We are all learning together on this journey of safeguarding and preserving. We need to translate, transform and transfer what we are safeguarding to make it enlivened, to make it known to people who need to know and to open access to them. It's a partnership of institutions like archives, libraries or museums, and communities. It's always important to have an insider perspective, an Indigenous perspective. That's why I connect to institutions, why I work within the archive, because I can make connections, find archival materials and help place them appropriately where they belong. I think that's our role here, I feel excited about it and believe we are contributing to the bigger, greater good of society.

The Tandanya Adelaide Declaration is a call for action to reflect on our roles and positions and work towards reimagining the archive to decolonise archival practices and embrace Indigenous approaches to preserving and transmitting knowledge. Through this conversation, we discussed how the recording and documentation of stories and songs of the PNG Peroveta Singers of Canberra demonstrate themes of the Tandanya-Adelaide declaration.

Including Indigenous voices in descriptions of archival collections, as well as the collaborative production of a range of outputs, contributes to recognising Indigenous social authority, cultural knowledge and identity. This connects to the theme #3 'Recognition and Identity'. Gagau reflected that through his positioning as an Indigenous 'insider-outsider' in the archival space, he can mediate between European and Indigenous ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge, addressing the theme #4 'Research and Access'. Gagau was able to work closely with the Peroveta group, empowering them to decide upon the form of their response to the IC1 and MG1 archival collections, enabling their members to participate and share their knowledge of language, place, and history through song and dance on their own initiative. Community engagement programs such as the Toksave: Culture Talks podcast demonstrate the archival loop model where long-term relationships, reciprocity and prioritising Indigenous voices can lead to greater accessibility and control over archival materials for Indigenous communities.

Notes on contributors

Steven Gagau is a cultural consultant, researcher and archivist with the University of Sydney. He is an Indigenous Tolai (Gunantuna) man from Papua New Guinea based at the Sydney office of PARADISEC. He works on metadata enrichment of Melanesian Pacific collections and is involved in a range of community access projects reconnecting people and communities to Oceanic cultures and histories. He develops strategies for community-led engagement, cultural outreach projects and relationships with archives, museums and libraries that hold materials of Pacific culture, language, music and history in the Oceania region.

Steven undertakes collaborative projects connecting diaspora speaker communities with institutions like Sydney University Chau Chak Wing Museum, Australian Museum, Museums Victoria, British Library with exhibitions and sound archives and advocacy Indigenous data management.

Steven co-produces the PARADISEC podcast 'Toksave – Culture Talks' with Jodie Kell and co-authored publications, including recently the British Library 'True Echoes' Project with 2024 book chapter 'Dispersed sound archives and diaspora communities: Reconnecting with old recordings from Hula village, Papua New Guinea', in Thieberger et al (eds.) *Keeping time: Dialogues on music and archives in honour of Linda Barwick* and community collaboration article in 2025 'Archived sound and creative engagements with Papua New Guinean cultural heritage in Australia'.

Jodie Kell is an audio engineer who manages the Sydney office of PARADISEC. She is interested in the reformulation of archival workflow to increase accessibility, findability and reusability to archival resources. Jodie has recently completed her PhD researching the role of women in music making in West Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, working with and managing the all-women's rock band Ripple Effect Band, in which she plays lead guitar.

In her work at PARADISEC, Jodie is currently involved in the Language Data Commons of Australia (LDaCA) an integrated national infrastructure that supports language research, with a particular interest in small community-based archives in remote communities in Northern Australia. She works on the *Yawulyu mardukuja-patu-kurlangu: Warlpiri Digital Space*, supporting access to archival materials for intergenerational knowledge transmission. She also co-produces the Toksave: Culture Talks podcast with Steven Gagau, a series of interviews with people who have personal and cultural connections with the PARADISEC archive.

Notes

1. Deveni Temu and the PNG Peroveta Singers of Canberra have checked and given their approval for the authors to discuss the collaborative work in this article.
2. Sene is a word used by most coastal village communities in the Central Province to refer to ancient and traditional folk songs and dances before pre-contact or European arrival to the region.
3. For more information about this project see: Amanda Harris, Steven Gagau, Deveni Temu, Roge Kila and Gulea Kila, 2024 'Dispersed Sound Archives and Diaspora Communities – A Case Study of Reconnecting with Old Recordings from Hula Village PNG', in Nick Thieberger, Amanda Harris, Sally Treloyn and Myfany Turpin (eds.), *Keeping Time: Dialogues on Music and Archives in Honour of Linda Barwick*, Sydney University Press, 2024, pp. 101–119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.21226518.15>
4. Toksave: Culture Talks podcast Episode 11, available at: <https://www.paradisec.org.au/toksav-podcast/>, accessed 22 April 2026.
5. Murray Groves (collector), *Audio Recordings 1957–1973*, Collection MG1, 1957, available at: <https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/>, accessed 22 April 2026.
6. Ian Campbell (collector), *Tubusereia, Papua New Guinea Dance and Church Music, December 1969*, Collection IC1, 1969, available at: <https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/>, accessed 22 April 2026.
7. The podcast episodes are available at: <https://www.paradisec.org.au/toksav-podcast/>, accessed 22 April 2026.
The films are available on the PARADISEC YouTube channel available at: <https://youtu.be/lxU-WlgGhmsE?si=SbRslxFTBnnf4Clb>, accessed 22 April 2026 and https://youtu.be/RmMBPvu_BWU?si=bsc_2lYAyrC8jgv, accessed 22 April 2026.
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The songbook and all recordings are available in the PC2 collection available at: <https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/>, accessed 22 April 2026.
8. Amanda Harris, Steven Gagau, Jodie Kell, Nick Thieberger and Nick Ward, 'Making Meaning of Historical Papua New Guinea Recordings', *International Journal of Digital Curation*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, pp. 136–149. <https://doi.org/10.2218/ijdc.v14i1.598>
9. Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng'andu, 'Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research', *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, pp. 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcis.v3i1.57>, and Melissa Walker, Bronwyn Fredericks, Kyly Mills and Debra Anderson, "'Yarning" as a Method for Community-Based Health Research with Indigenous Women: The Indigenous Women's Wellness Research Program', *Health Care for Women International*, vol. 35, no. 10, 2014, pp. 1216–1226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2013.815754>
10. Michael Webb (collector), Ray Sheridan (speaker), Steven Gagau (data_inputter) and Michael Webb (interviewer), *Interview with Ray Sheridan, Paramatta, NSW*, MPEG/WAV, 1992, MW6-005 available at: catalog.paradisec.org.au. <https://doi.org/10.26278/E56Z-HB34>
11. Linda Barwick, 'Turning It All Upside Down ... Imagining a Distributed Digital Audiovisual Archive', *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2004, pp. 253–263. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lc/19.3.253>