

## **‘For our mother’s song we sing’: Yanyuwa Aboriginal women’s narratives of experience, memory and emotion<sup>1</sup>**

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The voices of Jemima Wuwarlu Miller, Nancy Yukuwal McDinny and Rachel Muyurkulmanya McDinny<sup>2</sup> rise up into the clear night sky, their faces occasionally made visible by the flickering flames, smiling and laughing. The moment is thick with nostalgia, memory and emotion as they tell stories and sing. It is July 1994, the evening quiet is upon us, and we are sitting around a campfire at an outstation called Wandangula, near Borroloola, in the remote region of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory. Jemima, Nancy and Rachel are sharing with me, my husband’s mother and her mother, a repertoire of songs called *a-nguyulnguyul*.<sup>3</sup> Songs which speak about traditional land, romantic liaisons between men and women, funny or amusing events are all considered to belong to this genre because they are ‘funny, clever or tricky’ enough to draw an emotional response from the people who perform or listen to them. Jemima explains to us that tonight, ‘for our mother’s song we sing’, and in doing so she invokes the presence of her mother Nora Jalirduma, remembers the experiences they shared, and links the interpersonal, social and cultural lifeworlds of them across time.

King tells us that ‘There are moments when memory seems to return us to a past unchanged by the passing of time’<sup>4</sup> and as I hear Jemima speak these words, I too find myself caught up in the emotion of remembering. It is only recently that I have met Hilda Jarman Muir, my husband’s maternal grandmother. Strongly identifying today as a Yanyuwa woman, Hilda was forcibly removed from her family in 1928 as part of the official State and Commonwealth assimilation policy and taken to Kahlin Compound in Darwin. Memories of her mother Polly Manankurra, and a place called Manankurra where she spent her childhood, enabled Hilda to remake contact with her Yanyuwa family after decades of separation (Muir). The Yanyuwa name I have been given is a-Yakibijirna, a female name associated with the country of Manankurra, located on the coast approximately 100km east of Borroloola. My Yanyuwa name specifically reflects the strong and intimate personal relationship I have with senior female *ngimirringki* (boss for father’s country) of that place: the recognised song performer Eileen McDinny Manankurmara (Jemima’s sister, Nancy and Rachel’s mother), Hilda’s role as *jungkayi* (guardian or policeman of mother’s country), and her relationship to me as my husband’s maternal grandmother. As Jemima continues to sing I am struck by the narrative this *a-nguyulnguyul* song tells of the time and place in which Polly Manankurra’s lived, the injustice that Hilda was never able to experience this lifeworld alongside her mother. Yet I am also struck by the promise that the recreation of these songs holds for Hilda to remember a past which was taken from her and bring it close to her present sense of self, identity and reality.

In this context, the power of song to invoke and represent moments of the past in the present is highlighted (9). As Henderson suggests, ‘music is affective because songs contain sensate memories of other songs, other selves, other moments’.<sup>5</sup> Magowan affirms this notion when she writes that ‘[m]emories, then, do not begin with the utterance of song, or end with the completion of it as resonance, as song is not a finite or complete process. It is a moment of utterance, a moment of recognition, a glimpse of invoking things past as a fragment of the present, where memories persist’.<sup>6</sup> The act of remembering through song then is also an act of recreating, that is, ‘narrating one’s own lifeworld and those of others, shaping a sense of

personhood, obligation and affiliation' (42). In this paper I explore the *a-nguyulnguyul* genre of indigenous Australian song composed and performed by women from the Yanyuwa Aboriginal community at Borroloola in the Northern Territory of Australia as a life narrative, through a discussion of past and present composers and performers of this genre. I will examine the way that *a-nguyulnguyul* songs are composed, the themes of song texts, and the meaning of these songs when they shift from text to action. Rather than a review of literature about Aboriginal women's song performance, I draw upon the interactions, relationships and experiences I have had with Yanyuwa women as an ethnomusicological researcher and family member over the past ten years. In doing so, I emphasise the central role *a-nguyulnguyul* songs play in creating a continuity between past and present, connecting female relatives through time, affirming a strong sense of Yanyuwa women's individual and collective identity through a retelling of women's life experiences, and opening up a space for new rememberings and identities as Yanyuwa women to emerge.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Locating Borroloola historically, socially and musically*

Situated approximately nine hundred and seventy kilometres southeast of Darwin and eight kilometres inland from the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Australia, I first visited the small town of Borroloola ten years ago as part of my doctoral research in ethnomusicology. Borroloola today is home to four different Aboriginal cultural groups – Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Mara and Kudanji peoples – all of whom were rounded up and forcibly placed there through various colonial presences and policies from the 1930s onwards.<sup>8</sup> The majority of songs, dances and ceremonies performed at Borroloola today are in Yanyuwa language and it is with people who identify primarily as Yanyuwa people that I have worked most closely. Yanyuwa people know this country as *Burrulula*, the language name for a lagoon complex on Rumburriya semi-moiety country associated with the Mountain Kangaroo Dreaming approximately 0.1km north of the centre of town.<sup>9</sup> Much of Yanyuwa traditional country includes the Sir Edward Pellew Islands and adjacent coastal regions and Yanyuwa people often using the complex term *li-anthawirriyarra* (literally 'people whose spirit belongs to the sea') as a marker of their social identity as kin to the island country. In contrast, a white narrative about this place constructs Borroloola as a rough, remote settlement with a 'wild west' style history of violence and crime (146), a 'resort for all the scum of Northern Australia'.<sup>10</sup> (Carment 17), complete with its own eccentric personalities, yet paradoxically a fishing paradise and attractive stopover for dry season tourists. Native title rights have not been granted at Borroloola – it is an open town – and although only approximately 20 percent of the population, white government workers, tourists, miners and cattle hands maintain an enormous position of power and privilege there. Like many other remote Aboriginal communities, Borroloola suffers from the much reported health statistics of Indigenous Australia, including high instances of diabetes, renal failure, heart problems, and disease related to poor nutrition. Alcohol and substance abuse are alarmingly high as are the instances of family violence against women, children and, increasingly, men. There are few if any employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and housing conditions remain, at best of third world standard. Not surprisingly, age expectancy is low for both men and women, suicide among young people is increasing, and there is at least one death a month from any number of the issues listed above.

It is against this backdrop of uneasy history, uncomfortable race relations and uncertain futures that Yanyuwa performance today, and more specifically women's and men's social and musical

roles, must be understood. When I first started working with Yanyuwa people in 1994, there were at least ten senior songmen alive – men whose authority, power and status rested in their ability to know and enact their knowledge of country through performance of *kujika* (Yanyuwa Dreaming song) and related ceremonies. Those ceremonies in which men play the central singing role (for example, *a-Marndiwa* associated with the first initiation of young boys and the *Yalkawarru* funerary rites) were ongoing. In 2004 there remains one Yanyuwa man who can sing these ancestral songs. *Yalkawarru* has not been performed since 1994 and there have been no initiation ceremonies for young boys since 2002. In contrast, there are many Yanyuwa women – both senior and younger female performers – who actively perform songs and dances which loosely fall into the categories of both public dancing and the most restricted genres of women’s ceremony. An example of this is the June 2004 Women’s Law and Culture meeting held at Borrooloola. Funded by the Central Land Council, this meeting was attended by four hundred women from across the Northern Territory and at least forty Aboriginal women from Borrooloola danced. Sitting down with other women, spending time together sharing stories and singing long into the night away from the humbug of town is an incredibly empowering experience. These moments provide important opportunities for Yanyuwa women to negotiate, maintain, and perform the knowledges which sustain them as women individually, socially, politically, spiritually and culturally. As a genre which performs a socially and culturally powerful narrative of Yanyuwa women’s life experiences, *a-nguyulnguyul* plays an important role in these contexts and the focus of this paper now turns more directly to this ‘funny, clever and tricky’ Yanyuwa women’s performance genre.

#### *Yanyuwa women and a-nguyulnguyul composition* <sup>11</sup>

It is not known exactly how many female *a-nguyulnguyul* composers there are today or how many there may have been in the past. Based on conversations with current composers and with anthropologist/linguist John Bradley, it has been possible to identify fourteen female composers in a creation period of approximately fifty years, dating from the 1930s. Interestingly, these women are closely related to each other as mothers, sisters, and daughters, although nine of this group of fourteen are now deceased. The social relationships which exist between female composers in Yanyuwa culture are important and elucidate patterns of social relations which permeate the composition process. First, female composers stand in the kinship relation of sister, daughter and/or mother to each other. Second, because kinship relationships are based on the affiliation of each composer to a specific unnamed moiety, semi-moiety and subsection affiliation, these social relations, by extension, provide guidance for connections and rights to areas of country and performance practice. The group of past women composers includes Bella Marrajabu Charlie, Clara Johnson, Darby Muluwamarra, Harriet Mambalwarka Johnson, Ida Ningana, Judy Marrangawi Timothy, Maggie Bukundu, Nora Jalirduma and Suzanne Jujana. Many of these women had passed away by the time I arrived at Borrooloola but their songs are always included and considered integral to any performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* today. At present there are five active female composers at Borrooloola. These women are Annie Karrakayn Isaac, Dinah Marrangawi Norman, Eileen Manankurmarra McDinny, Jemima Wuwarlu Miller and Thelma Walwamara Douglas.

Central to understanding female socio-musical actions and interactions in Yanyuwa culture, including the relationships and roles between song composers and performers, is the Yanyuwa concept of ‘song partners’. As I have discussed extensively elsewhere, Yanyuwa women refer to

those with whom they perform and compose *a-nguyulnguyul* and other song types as *yinda a-ngatha mara* (translated as ‘you are my close friend and my most necessary companion’), *kundiyarra* (a more archaic form of the common term *li-manmanmarrawarra* which refers to cross-cousin pairs who may help each other out) or song partners. For women to be *kundiyarra*, they must stand in a particular kinship relationship to one another. A woman may be a song partner with another if she relates to her as sister, sister-in-law, paternal grandmother, maternal grandmother, daughter’s-daughter (granddaughter) or cross-cousin (commonly mother’s brother’s daughter) to that particular woman. Further, it is evident that *kundiyarra* are related according to generational division. For example, a woman cannot be a song partner with her daughter or mother, but can be a song partner with women from her own generation, or from the generations to which her grandmother and granddaughter belong.<sup>12</sup>

The phrases used by Yanyuwa women to describe *kundiyarra* suggest intimate female bonding and personal closeness. As I have come to understand *kundiyarra*, it is a framework which provides women with an essential guide to female socio-musical interaction. As I have noted elsewhere, *kundiyarra* provides direct information to women on the protocols and processes they need to follow to correctly sing, dance and perform ceremony.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, *kundiyarra* directs the way that each woman will paint up, who will paint her and what kinds of body designs she will wear. *Kundiyarra* tells each performer which song verses she can dance to, that she may only dance with her partners and also guides her movements as her feet step across the ground. Knowing who your *kundiyarra* are lets women know how they should interact in performance and also about proper ways of relating to each other as female relatives. Unlike relationships with women of your mother’s and daughter’s generation, these relationships are often extremely close. In the truest sense of the term, song partners are most necessary companions who walk through life together, sharing deeply held thoughts and feelings, teaching and giving advice, nurturing and caring for each other through the change from young girl into woman, wife and mother.

#### *Singing the song inside and outside: The process of a-nguyulnguyul composition*

The Yanyuwa expression *wakarama* (literally translated as ‘finding the song’) serves as a good starting point to explain how Yanyuwa women create *a-nguyulnguyul*. The way that I am about to explain *wakarama* appears very formulaic – in practice it is not quite this formal but there is a definite progression through three stages of creativity. The first stage of *a-nguyulnguyul* composition by women begins when an event causes an emotional response in someone in the community. The individual concerned then ‘finds the song’. Bradley writes that ‘there is a sense in which the song has its own life and a perceptive person will feel the song and develop it into a public composition’.<sup>14</sup> The Yanyuwa composer, having found the song, then sings the song inside herself. This process forms the second stage of composition and in Yanyuwa terms is expressed as *jumba-yinbayi* for men and *janyumba-yinbayi* for women.

Once she has sung the song within herself, the composer may then consult as part of the third stage of composition with another person or people, who will assist with working out the final form of the song. Rachel Muyurrkulmanyua McDinny, a Yanyuwa/Garrwa woman, explained to me that a group of Yanyuwa women sit down and talk about the song, and decide for example how it will start and finish in musical and textual terms.<sup>15</sup> The process is a negotiated one where group comments and creativity are called upon during this revision stage to alter, change and/or refine the song for public performance. There may be some arguments between the women

during this stage of the compositional process regarding for example, the appropriateness of word combinations in song text. Rachel further highlighted that in the composition of new songs, including *a-nguyulnguyul*, the text is first decided upon by the composer.<sup>16</sup> The rhythmic pattern is largely dictated by the syllabic rhythm of the song text. Second, musical elements are added, followed lastly by the addition of accompanying dance movements. The melodic shape is already known by composers and the process of composition involves fitting the appropriate song text onto an already existing melody. Yanyuwa women then test the new song to see how well the three elements of text, rhythm and melody combine. If the blend of the three essential components is considered to be acceptable the new song is performed unchanged, but often individual words in the text are altered to ensure that the right *ngalki* is achieved.<sup>17</sup> Once the group is satisfied that the new song is suitable, it is performed and the composer is now ‘acting outside her/himself’ in public performance.

In the present-day context, Yanyuwa women make songs about places, people and inter-gender relations based upon real-life accounts of everyday experiences. *A-nguyulnguyul* composition occurs as a result of inspiration and such inspiration may arise if a composition is requested. Nancy Ningana McDinny, a prominent member of the Yanyuwa/Garrwa community at Borroloola, explained that the *a-nguyulnguyul* songs regularly performed today were composed about the old people by the “old people”, for instance, her grandmother and her mother’s sisters. Nancy described the process of *a-nguyulnguyul* composition in the following way:

They’s old lady like my grandmother used to make up this song up and when she used to look at them [men and women playing out relationships], and these girls used to go and ask her too, “Hey! Old lady! Can you sing this song about me and my boyfriend?”, “Yeah I’ll make this song up about you and your boyfriend.” She’s really good old lady. She made song up for me too...<sup>18</sup>

From the above it may be inferred then that although the composition of *a-nguyulnguyul* may take place as an inspired composer responds to a social event that she experiences, composition may also occur upon request – in this instance, the request coming from a girl who wanted a song to be made especially for her and her boyfriend.

#### *A-nguyulnguyul song texts*

During my first visit to Borroloola in 1994, I was privileged to be able to record and document many hours of song performance. The first musicologist to turn a detailed gaze to performance in this region of Aboriginal Australia, I went into the field with the broad aim of documenting everything and anything that was made available to me and requested of me by Yanyuwa performers. Upon return to my office I was faced with the daunting task of sifting through hours of recordings to draw out some kind of focus for my doctoral research. On the tapes out of the field, as in the field during singing sessions, the prominence of *a-nguyulnguyul* in Yanyuwa performance practice today could not be ignored. The memories, nostalgia and emotion invoked by performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* meant that they were a favourite and these songs have since been described to me by Yanyuwa people amongst their top ten hits of contemporary song performance.

Aside from their unique melodic and rhythmic structure, one of the identifying features of *a-nguyulnguyul* songs is the text. *A-nguyulnguyul* song texts are composed in everyday Yanyuwa language, reflect the way in which the language is spoken. The themes of song texts tell us something important about the way that Yanyuwa women construct meaning about, and read significance into, their lives. Three main types of song text themes are clearly identifiable: romantic relations; relationship with country; and hunting and gathering. I have identified a fourth type as ‘other’. The manifestation of these four themes in actual song texts varies greatly. The common and essential element is the ability of each type of theme to bring about a passionate response in performers, composers and audience. I will now briefly discuss each theme through analysis of specific texts.

The majority of *a-nguyulnguyul* compositions have as their theme gender relations and romantic relationships between women and men. This can be further subdivided into seven subcategories to provide a more in depth analysis of relations: leaving; trying to attract member of opposite sex; jealousy; elopement; thinking about a relationship or lover; crying for someone; and sexual trysts.

The following song text example illustrates well the way in which relations between women and men are expressed in *a-nguyulnguyul*:

<b>Yanyuwa song text</b>	<b>Free translation</b>
<i>Yalayka barratha ngali wingka-yani</i>	Come on! Hurry up Mum! We two are going!
<i>narrinja katha-rramba wulkanala</i>	I am crying, we two will look at each other!

Composed by Nora Jalirduma, ‘Hurry Up Mum!’ describes how a young girl cries out to her mother ‘Come on! Hurry up Mum! Hurry up! Let’s go quickly so that I can see my boyfriend while we are walking along! I’m going to cry for him from a distance!’ The young girl can see her boyfriend from a distance and she cries for him, the lovers too ashamed to meet one another in public.

Characters in *a-nguyulnguyul* song texts are real rather than fictional people, yet the language of *a-nguyulnguyul* song texts is characteristically opaque and never includes personal names. Nevertheless, specific individuals are alluded to and each person present at a performance is aware of whom the song refers by the nature of the event detailed in the song text. While the theme of a song text remains fixed, the omission of personal names in song texts means that the actual identity of the character as understood by listeners may change according to factors of performance context, such as the presence or absence of particular singers and the identity of the interpreter.

Song texts also include primary characters (those directly mentioned and the main focus of the song text) and secondary characters (usually not referred to in the song text but tacitly implied). Character types may also be grouped according to their physical form, that is, human, natural phenomena (for example, animals, topographical features, geographical areas) and man-made

objects (for example, a canoe, a necklace, an aeroplane). A song text may have more than one character type while primary and secondary characters may be of the same physical form.

References to time occur in the form of a specific periodicity, (for example, two days, two months or two years) or, more broadly, a Yanyuwa defined historical era (such as, ‘cattle times’, ‘land rights times’ or ‘tourist times’). For example, the *a-nguyulnguyul* song ‘With Hobble Straps and Chains’ refers indirectly to ‘cattle times’ by describing hobble straps and chains in segment one of the song text. The hobble straps and chains are the ‘tools’ of a stockman and they hang from the man’s shoulders as he walks to the stockyards:

**Yanyuwa song text**

*kumba-yirrkanyirrkān*  
*ngambala yiku*  
*alarramanthawu*

**Free translation**

Hobble straps and chains  
Hanging from his shoulders  
We desire him<sup>19</sup>

References to place occur as spatial images (for example, a reference to a specific place or tract of land) and directional markers (for instance, to the east, southwards or from the north). ‘A Tangled Harpoon Rope’ composed by Maggie Bukundu and Judy Marrangawi is a good example of an *a-nguyulnguyul* song directly referencing country. Maggie Bukundu and Judy Marrangawi were two Yanyuwa women renowned for their composition partnership, and the many *a-kuriija* songs they composed about hunting, wildlife and their unique relationship with their beloved island country. In this example a reference to country occurs by naming the canoe that the man hunts in. Canoes, when made, are usually named after the locality where they were constructed and the canoe mentioned in this song text was made at Jikanji on the Upper McArthur River:

**Yanyuwa song text**

*ma-budijbudij ma-wangarrantha*  
*mankurru wu-Jikanjimara*

**Free translation**

The coiled harpoon rope is tangled  
The rope belonging to her the canoe Jikanji  
(46-47)

Similarly, the following song often described as *a-nguyulnguyul* composed by them called ‘Angry Terns’ refers to white seagulls or terns and remembers the hunting activities of women as they gathered tern eggs on the islet of Yinijini.

**Yanyuwa song text**

*Jinyamba wunkulma kiwa-wani*  
*Jarranymantharra Yinijinili*

**Free translation**

With wings outstretched the terns returned  
Screeching in anger for their eggs at Yinijini  
(64-65)

In this song, the composers describe how the terns become angry with the women stealing their eggs, crying out ‘Leave my daughter! Leave my eggs!’<sup>20</sup> ‘Angry Terns’ makes reference to a specific locality and meaning is added through a detailed description of the behaviour of the species of birds which inhabit that place as they react to the actions of humans. The information

encoded within this song is multi-vocal and embodies knowledge about the role women play in the fabric of social life based upon available economic resources, and their own sense of identification with those resources and the island country.

For Yanyuwa women, the song texts of *a-nguyulnguyul* emphasise both country and kin relationships, and often reflect gender roles and the nature of romantic relations in Yanyuwa society. The main characters in women's song texts are always human but other minor characters used may be human, man-made objects and/or natural phenomena. Women refer freely to specific historical eras and events. Occasionally women do speak directly about a relationship with country through the description of activities associated with country. The recurrent theme in women's *a-nguyulnguyul*, however, is romantic relations. Women express their views on the nature of gender relations in Yanyuwa society by explicitly referring to their feelings about men in each individual song verse.

Women's *a-nguyulnguyul* song texts reveal the role that women play as both mothers and women in the social fabric of Yanyuwa culture. The *a-nguyulnguyul* song texts of Yanyuwa women thus reflect this dual responsibility of 'growing up people' and 'growing up country'.<sup>21</sup> Despite the diminishing role of Yanyuwa men in the performance and composition of *a-nguyulnguyul* today, Yanyuwa women continue to keep alive the memory of men's experiences of the island country documented in their song texts by including these songs in performance. In this way Yanyuwa women ensure that the shared history and past documented in all *a-nguyulnguyul* song texts continue to reflect a collective Yanyuwa identity. In parallel development with dramatic social change and the resulting inactivity in performance by Yanyuwa men, the themes of *a-nguyulnguyul* song texts composed in more recent times have become strongly related to women's activities and interests.<sup>22</sup>

### **Performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* by Yanyuwa women**

For Yanyuwa women performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* provides a platform for the assertion of individual identity as a relational concept. Yanyuwa women reinforce their individual, group and gender identity through communication and interaction with others through *a-nguyulnguyul* performance. Performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* helps Yanyuwa women assert their individual status in relation to others around them. Factors such as age, kinship affiliation, social knowledge and musical experiences are important determinants of status and in the context of *a-nguyulnguyul* performance. This status in turn endows each Yanyuwa woman with varying degrees of power and authority.

On a group level, the value of *a-nguyulnguyul* performances for the female participants is that these songs are concerned with social affairs, and personal and shared experiences which are important to them both as individuals and as a group. There is a sense that the continued group performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* helps 'with the continuation of personal history amidst what many Yanyuwa people may feel is fast becoming an impersonal world' (634). Each Yanyuwa woman performing *a-nguyulnguyul* identifies with the symbols of this social and musical space and in doing so, becomes an integral member of the group.

Becoming a member of the group for Yanyuwa women means taking on an identity as an individual, social, and sexual being. To illustrate the way *a-nguyulnguyul* performance may be



used as negotiation of Yanyuwa women's sexual identity and social power, I would like to focus on one particular *a-nguyulnguyul* composition, 'Lady Dances Wearing Bra', which was composed by Nora Jalirduma, possibly in the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> Referring to this song, Nancy, Rachel and their elder sister Myra Rory commented:

She was really young body, dressed herself up she put this bra on . . . and she want to make her tummy look really tight... all the boys could look at her how good she is "Oh she's very beautiful!"<sup>24</sup>

They explain that the song is about a young Yanyuwa woman who dances while wearing a bra for the first time. The bra changes the shape of the dancer's breasts and body, making her beautiful and hence more desirable to the male admirer.

The Yanyuwa song text and English free translation of 'Lady Dances Wearing Bra' are shown below:

**Yanyuwa song text**

*karnamba-yaya anka nya nanda-wunhan*

*ka-rrinhu yabi waykaliya nanda-wurdu*

**English free translation**

She dances so straight and her breasts are upright

Her stomach is beautiful and flat

In performance of this song, Yanyuwa women assert and confirm a specific image of themselves.<sup>25</sup> It represents a contemporary interpretation of their feminine beauty and hence their sexual identity. Nora's song illustrates present-day Yanyuwa perceptions of the ideal woman and their identity as women which are then acted out in performance of this *a-nguyulnguyul* composition. A Yanyuwa woman wears a bra, dances and is defined by herself and others as beautiful. Her beauty is heightened through performance and becomes a signifier of her desirability as a sexual partner. This was illustrated by Nancy when she laughs and says that 'all the boys could look at her how good she is!' Her sexuality is now on display.<sup>26</sup>

Today, all Yanyuwa women wear bras during public performance. The women are not ashamed to publicly dance bare-breasted but say that wearing a bra is much more comfortable and hence more enjoyable for them. Some modesty is displayed, but usually this relates to the condition of the bra. By the time Nora composed this song, she had given birth to a number of children and it is reasonable to assume that wearing a bra would have been more comfortable. Yanyuwa women at Borroloola do not wear bras outside the context of musical performance very often, suggesting that bras are not viewed as an everyday necessity. Nora's song documents a moment in time when a woman first danced wearing a bra. The sexual identity portrayed in the song is transformed into the performance arena and also into women's perception of individual and group identity. The very fact that at some point in time Yanyuwa women decided to wear bras during both restricted and unrestricted dancing is a sign that they were also prepared to make authoritative decisions about public presentation of their bodies. Yanyuwa women today proudly profess that they *choose* to wear bras - the Welfare Branch did not *force* this feminine attire upon them. This implicitly asserts the notion that Yanyuwa women were sufficiently in control of their bodies and hence of their sexuality and, further, that no amount of European contact and

government intervention was going to change Yanyuwa women's perception of that control. In this sense then, the bra acts as a symbol of personal and social power in musical performance.<sup>27</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have shown how *a-nguyulnguyul* narratives represent the central way in which Yanyuwa women can identify with the past while embracing, expressing and reaffirming a present and future identity. In this respect, this contemporary body of song literature performs a vital role in maintaining continuity of cultural expression. *A-nguyulnguyul* are songs which hold socially powerful knowledge and the performance of *a-nguyulnguyul* allows Yanyuwa women to fulfil a nurturing role by offering a means to provide love, care and power to each other, and to the country that surrounds them. For me as an outsider walking into and through Yanyuwa culture, listening and watching *a-nguyulnguyul* performance was the primary means for me to begin to build relationships with women, to share stories of joy and pain, to laugh until we cried over lost and found loves, and to understand the centrality of song to Yanyuwa women's lifeworlds. Through performance and composition of *a-nguyulnguyul*, Yanyuwa women gather together as a group, create a musical documentation of their lives, understand what it means to be a Yanyuwa woman through reflection and remembering of the past in the present, and thereby foster a distinctly female form of expression and musical identity. In this context music is crucial to the 'creation and re-creation of the emotional qualities of experience in the maintenance of a living tradition'<sup>28</sup> and in practice then, *a-nguyulnguyul* performance provokes a remembered and remembering body of individual and community memory<sup>29</sup> which in times of rapid social change, allows Yanyuwa women to use music and kinship as a sustaining ideal and continue to maintain a matrilineal tradition that leads back into the past and forward into the future.

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<sup>2</sup> The names of Yanyuwa people are presented here in their fullest form (e.g., first name, Aboriginal name, last name; or first name, Aboriginal name) and then referred to subsequently by first name only.

<sup>3</sup> I am greatly indebted to my colleague and friend at the university of Queensland, linguist and anthropologist Dr John Bradley for his assistance in the translation and interpretation of Yanyuwa terms included here. All song language and song text translations were provided him and unless specifically referenced to his published work should be considered personal communication.

<sup>4</sup> King, Nicola. *Memory, Narrative and Identity: Remembering the Self*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000: 2.

- <sup>5</sup> Henderson, David. 'Emotion, Devotion, Lingering and Longing in Some Nepali Songs'. *Ethnomusicology* 40.3 (1996): 449.
- <sup>6</sup> Magowan, Fiona. 'Crying to remember: Reproducing personhood and community'. *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001: 60.
- <sup>7</sup> The act of writing this paper has been for me in and of itself a process of remembering and recreating. The original text for this paper was drawn from various sections of my PhD thesis in ethnomusicology which I completed in 1998. Looking back in on myself as author I almost see a person I do not recognise – my writing style and way of theorising my research has changed and deepened as have my relationships with Yanyuwa people. Thus there is a tension between my past and present self in this text which at times is difficult to reconcile.
- <sup>8</sup> See Baker, Richard. *Land is Life: Continuity through Change for the Yanyuwa from the Northern Territory of Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999, and Finlay, Betty. 'We Aboriginal People Never Had a Boss'. *Aboriginal Islander Message* 31 March/April (1982): 7-8
- <sup>9</sup> Bradley, John, with Jean Kirton and the Yanyuwa community. *Yanyuwa Wuka. Language from Yanyuwa Country. A Yanyuwa Dictionary and Cultural Resource*. Unpublished document, 1992: 146.
- <sup>10</sup> Carment, David. 'The Heritage of Borroloola'. *Heritage Australia* 6.3 (1987): 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Although Yanyuwa men do not compose *a-nguyulnguyul* songs today, in the past many were known for their prowess as composers.
- <sup>12</sup> Mackinlay, Elizabeth. 'Maintaining Grandmothers' Law: Female Song Partners in Yanyuwa Culture'. *Musicology Australia* 23 (2000): 76-98.
- <sup>13</sup> ---. 'The personal is political is musical'. *Aesthetics and Experience in Music Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, in press.
- <sup>14</sup> Bradley, John. 'Some Yanyuwa Songs'. *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and Other Aboriginal Song Poems*. St.Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994: 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Pers. com. R. McDinny 1994.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> The Yanyuwa term *ngalki* refers to the essence which marks individual identity, for example, the scent of a flower, and the smell of an animal, the taste of food, the tune of a song or the sweat from a person's armpit. See Kirton, Jean, and Nero Timothy. 'Yanyuwa concepts relating to "skin"'. *Oceania* 47.2 (1977): 320-322, for a full discussion of this term.
- <sup>18</sup> Pers. com. N. McDinny 1994.
- <sup>19</sup> Bradley, 'Some Yanyuwa Songs', 62-63.
- <sup>20</sup> Pers. com. E. McDinny and Miller 1995.
- <sup>21</sup> Many people speak about the concept of 'growing up country' (for example, see Toyne, Phillip, and Daniel Vachon. *Growing Up the Country: The Pitjantjatjara struggle for their land*. Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1984; Bell, Diane. *Daughters of the Dreaming*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983)
- <sup>22</sup> Bradley, *Yanyuwa Wuka*, 634
- <sup>23</sup> This date is arrived at given the impact that both World War Two and government Welfare officers would have had on Nora and her peers in terms of dress. Bras and other so-called more appropriate types of European clothing were given to Yanyuwa people during the assimilation policy of the 1950s in an attempt to rid them of their 'native' ways.
- <sup>24</sup> Pers. com. N. McDinny, R. McDinny and Rory 1994.
- <sup>25</sup> Whenever this song was performed, all participants would laugh and imitate the image presented in the song as it was performed. Yanyuwa women laughed when explaining this song just as groups of women giggle amongst themselves for example, when speaking about members of the opposite sex or discussing matters relating to sex and sexual relations.
- <sup>26</sup> See McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*. Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991: 8, and Koskoff, Ellen. 'An Introduction to Women, Music and Culture'. *Women and Music in Cross Cultural Perspective*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987: 6, for theoretical discussion of the relationship between women, music identity and sexuality.
- <sup>27</sup> See Cooke, Kaz. *Real Gorgeous: The Truth about Body and Beauty*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994: 5, and Faludi, Susan. *Backlash*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1992: 99, for interesting discussions on the bra in Western society.
- <sup>28</sup> Coplan, David. 'Ethnomusicology and the Meaning of Tradition'. *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991: 45.

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<sup>29</sup> Henderson, David. 'Emotion, Devotion, Lingering and Longing in Some Nepali Songs'. *Ethnomusicology* 40.3 (1996): 441.