

Endangered Songs and Endangered Languages

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Abstract

It is widely reported in Australia and elsewhere that songs are considered by culture bearers to be the “crown jewels” of endangered cultural heritages whose knowledge systems have hitherto been maintained without the aid of writing. It is precisely these specialised repertoires of our intangible cultural heritage that are most endangered, even in a comparatively healthy language. Only the older members of the community tend to have full command of the poetics of song, even in cases where the language continues to be spoken by younger people. Taking a number of case studies from Australian repertoires of public song (*wangga*, *yawulyu*, *lirrga*, and *junba*), we explore some of the characteristics of song language and the need to extend language documentation to include musical and other dimensions of song performances. Productive engagements between researchers, performers and communities in documenting songs can lead to revitalisation of interest and their renewed circulation in contemporary media and contexts.

Introduction

In August 2002, the Garma Symposium on Indigenous Music and Performance, a meeting of senior Indigenous intellectuals and non-Indigenous academics, issued a statement that both confirmed the high value placed on song (and its associated dance) and drew attention to the precarious status of these forms. The fact that this Symposium was held at Gove in North East Arnhem Land, a relatively healthy area for language and one of the most active centres of traditional performance in Australia, adds weight to the statement.

If these matters are pressing here, how much more pressing must be the situation elsewhere in Australia?

Songs, dances and ceremonial performances form the core of Yolngu and other Indigenous cultures in Australia. It is through song, dance and associated ceremony that Indigenous people sustain their cultures and maintain the Law and a sense of self within the world. Performance traditions are the foundation of social and personal wellbeing, and with the ever-increasing loss of these traditions, the toll grows every year. The preservation of performance traditions is therefore one of the highest priorities for Indigenous people.

Indigenous songs should also be a deeply valued part of the Australian cultural heritage. They represent the great classical music of this land. These ancient musical traditions were once everywhere in Australia, and now survive as living traditions only in several regions. Many of these are now in danger of being lost forever. Indigenous performances are one of our most rich and beautiful forms of artistic expression, and yet they remain unheard and invisible within the national cultural heritage.

Without immediate action many Indigenous music and dance traditions are in danger of extinction with potentially destructive consequences for the fabric of Indigenous society and culture.

The recording and documenting of the remaining traditions is a matter of the highest priority both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Many of our foremost composers and singers have already passed away leaving little or no record. (Garma Statement on Indigenous Music and Performance 2002)

To close the Garma Symposium, Mandawuy Yunupingu and Witiyana Marika performed, without further comment, two *djatpangarri* songs—“Gapu” (a song about the tide) and “Cora” (a song about an eponymous supply ship).

For those who knew, there was a special poignancy about this performance, because these two songs had both been “lost”, and then recovered as a direct result of recordings made in the 1950s being repatriated to the Yirrkala community (see Stubington, 1987). In an article written in 1994, Stubington and Dunbar-Hall record the following:

In 1989, Stubington was assisting with the establishment of a Tape Archive and associated catalogue at the Literature Production Centre at the Yirrkala Community School. Among the recordings being newly re-circulated at Yirrkala at that time were several of *djatpangarri*, in particular, those recorded by R.A. Waterman [in 1952-53]. Mandawuy Yunupingu came in to the Literature Production Centre often during the establishment of the Tape Archive and was delighted to be reminded of the *djatpangarri* performances and to hear them again. He commented at the time that he could do something with them (Stubington & Dunbar-Hall, 1994: 255).

By performing “Gapu” and “Cora” at the end of our symposium, Mandawuy, with a single stroke, cut through the dichotomy between preservation and revitalisation, and enacted an intimate connection between the preservation and recording of songs and their continuity in living tradition that has existed for several decades in various regions of Aboriginal Australia. One of the other things Mandawuy did with these songs also cut through a false dichotomy—that between traditional and contemporary performance. Melodic and textual elements shared by those old *djatpangarri* also turn up in Yothu Yindi’s resistance anthem, “Treaty” (Yothu Yindi, 1992), perhaps the most famous of all Aboriginal popular songs. Stubington and Dunbar-Hall comment:

Considering the adaptability of the *djatpangarri* melody to different texts, it would not be inappropriate to consider "Treaty" as a *djatpangarri*, one that presents "the same melodic pattern" in traditional and contemporary musical styles. Like "Comic", "Beyarmak" and "Cora" [all famous *djatpangarri* songs], "Treaty" is topical (Stubington & Dunbar-Hall 1994: 257).

Stubington and Dunbar-Hall suggest that the Aboriginal text section of "Treaty" might be untranslatable nonsense words, but as Corn shows in his recent thesis on Arnhem Land popular music, these Aboriginal texts connect the song to *djatpangarri* at least as strongly as melody: "You dance *djatpangarri*, that's better/You keep dancing, you improvise, you keep going, wow!/ You dance *djatpangarri*, that's good/My dear Kutjuk [moiety subsection]" (Corn 2002, v.2: 85). This is doubtless not the only instance in the literature on Aboriginal song where meaningful text in an Aboriginal language has been mistaken for nonsense words.

Djatpangarri were characterised by Waterman as "the 'playing' or 'fun' song [which] has the function of providing entertainment" (Waterman, 1955/1971: 170); and this description of the songs as "fun" songs that deal with contemporary topics has been confirmed by other commentators such as Alice Moyle (1974: 17). Other songs in Aboriginal culture, however, play a far more serious role by articulated fundamental cosmological truths, which are enacted in song, dance and other ritual acts in ceremony. In many cases, particularly in Central Australia, there may be restrictions on who can perform and hear such songs, and we do not intend to discuss here any songs to which secrecy attaches. But it is not only restricted songs that articulate deep and fundamental truths. The remainder of this paper will deal with five case studies drawn from our recent work on public song traditions in northern and north central Australia.

Maurice Ngulkur's Wangga

Wangga is a genre of didjeridu-accompanied song that is received in dream by specialist songmen, and which is indigenous to the Daly region of north Australia. The late Maurice Tjakurl Ngulkur from the community of Wadeye sang a *wangga* song about the Sea Breeze Dreaming, Tjerri, which includes the following text in Marri Ammu language.

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>karra mana tjerri</i> | <i>kagandja kinyi-ni kavulh</i> |
| 'Oh, brother Sea Breeze' | 'He is eternally manifesting himself right here and now' |

Figure 1: Part of the text of the *wangga* song, "Tjerri" as sung by Maurice Ngulkur.¹

T. G. H. Strehlow maintained that the core meaning of *altjira*, the Aranda (Arrernte) term for the Dreaming, is

¹Recorded by Allan Marett, 1998. Text transcription and translation with the assistance of Lysbeth Ford, Maurice Ngulkur and Marie Long.

"that which derives from ... the eternal, uncreated, springing out of itself," or that which has "sprung out of its own eternity" (Strehlow, 1971: 614; see also Swain, 1993: 21). The way the Murrinh-patha at Wadeye spoke to W. E. H. Stanner about the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming (*Kunmanggurr*) resonates with the definition of *altjira* recorded by Strehlow. Kunmanggurr was said to be a *kardu bangambitj*, a "self-finding" person (that is, "self-creating and self-subsistent") (Stanner, 1989: 249).

The self-manifesting and eternally active nature of the Dreaming, for which Ngulkur used the term *ngirrwat* (common to several Daly languages, including Marri Ammu), is vividly articulated in his song. Here the idea of self-manifestation is expressed in the verb *kinyi-ni* which combines the third person singular form of the intransitive verb "he moves" or "he is active" (*kinyi*) with the third-person masculine reflexive suffix (*ni*) to mean "he makes himself active." The notion of the Dreaming springing out of the eternal is carried by the auxiliary verb *kavulh*, literally "he lies" but here meaning, "he has done it forever." The idea that this eternal activity occurs in the present moment is expressed in the word *kagandja*, meaning "right here and now." We thus translate the text: "The Sea Breeze Dreaming is manifesting himself right here and now, just as he has for all eternity." This is a clear articulation of what has been referred to as "the Ancestral Present" (Dussart, 2000: 85).

In such deeply poetic contexts, non-verbal performative aspects such as dance may be felt to articulate truths more directly than words. During discussions of the meaning of the expression *kinyi-ni*, a leading *wangga* dancer stood up and danced its meaning. By rotating a cloth held in his hand (traditionally a goose wing would be used for this action) he performed in that place and in that moment the self-manifesting nature of the Tjerri's wind activity. As the breeze hit our faces we witnessed right there and then how Sea Breeze has manifested throughout eternity.

In assessing the importance of songs such as this—which in our abstract we referred to as the "crown jewels" of endangered cultural heritages—we only have to ask ourselves what, at a pinch, would we wish to preserve from our own heritages of song were they to become as threatened as Ngulkur's language, Marri Ammu, which, in 2003, has only two fluent speakers left?

Remembering that in traditional Aboriginal contexts all poetry is sung, our minds might turn to Shakespeare, Milton or Blake, or in music to the great choral works of Bach or the songs of Schubert. Whatever you personally answer, the question is likely to open up an appreciation of the deep tragedy involved in the loss of poetics in any culture. In Aboriginal culture the loss is particularly great: songs not only embody eternal truths about the nature of the world and one's place in it, but may also function as legal texts analogous to title deeds to land, and as economic items of the highest value. And when these things are lost, it is not just a loss for the

individual language communities, but for the whole of humankind.

Marett, who worked closely with Ngulkur over a number of years, fears that his twelve songs, eleven of which he inherited from an earlier singer, Charlie Brinken, may have now passed into oblivion following his death in 2001. His only hope is that one of the younger singers at Wadeye, Colin Warambu Ferguson, who has been teaching himself the songs from a CD Marett gave him, will revive at least some of the songs in the future. But Ferguson has great responsibilities to three other *wangga* traditions, including two repertoires in his own language Marritjevin: namely the Walakandha *wangga* repertory; the repertory of his "father" (father's brother) Billy Mandji; and the songs of the Wadjiginy singer Bobby Lambudju Lane. It is to this latter repertory of songs that we will now turn.

Bobby Lambudju Lane's *Wangga*

Repertoires are particularly badly affected when, as was the case with Bobby Lane, a songman dies relatively young (in this case at the age of 53) and unexpectedly. Of the thirteen songs that Bobby Lane was singing in the last few years of his life, Marett has heard only four performed by Ferguson, and one other performed by another singer. While this may not be the full extent of what has survived, it is clear that there has been a massive shrinkage of repertory.

It is particularly significant, in the context of this paper, that Ferguson, a Marritjevin man, is from a quite different language group from Lane. Lane's language Batjamalh, while from the same Daly group of languages, is significantly different from Marritjevin, particularly in the poetics of its song language. The relationship between song languages and spoken language affiliation is not necessarily straightforward.

Indeed, the preservation of songs across language groups is not uncommon, particularly because it was not uncommon for songs to be passed through the maternal line when patrilineal transmission was not possible. Bobby Lane's *wangga* repertory is a particularly good instance of this. When Lane's Wadjiginy "fathers" (his father's brothers) died, he was too young to take on their songs, and so the songs were passed to a father's sister's daughter's husband, the Emmiyangal songman Nym Mun.gi. Mun.gi later passed on these songs, as well as his own repertory, to Lane. This pattern of transmission is reflected in the texts of the songs themselves. The text of the song "Karra-ve" has one line in Emmi (Mun.gi's language), one line in Batjamalh (Lane's language) and one line in ghost language—that is, in the form that it was sung to the composer by the Wunymalang ghosts who are the primary source of songs for Wadjiginy songmen. In fact, all three lines would have been in ghost language at the time the song was given to the songman from the spirit world, and it is the composer—possibly Bobby Lane himself—who "turned over" the language into forms that are intelligible to the living.

| |
|--|
| <i>karra-ve kan-ya verver rtedi ka-ya-nhthi</i> [Emmi] |
| 'a cool breeze is forever blowing on my back' |

| |
|---|
| <i>karra-ve kak-ung-bende badjalarr</i> [Batjamalh] |
| '[I'm] going to North Peron Island forever' |

| |
|---|
| <i>ribene ribene</i> ["ghost language"] |
| [the words of the ghost] |

Figure 2: Text of Bobby Lane's song "Karra-ve".²

In Australia, it is not uncommon for songs to use a mixture of languages, including languages that may or may not be spoken by the singers, or languages of the Dead that are not spoken by humans, as well as utterances that may be "non-linguistic" (eg. wordless articulations of the melody). These observations apply as much to old songs handed down over generations as to newly composed songs. In some cases, songs have been recorded whose language is no longer known in the community and hence unclassifiable. While the linguistic affiliation of the singer(s) must always be given due weight, in documenting and archiving songs there may be a need for complex descriptions of the language used.

Because song texts may include old words, poetic language, or grammatical constructions that are uncommon or no longer in everyday use, documentation and analysis of song texts may add important rich dimensions to language documentation projects otherwise based only on spoken language. Song language is often highly cryptic, and dense with allusions to significant places, stories and people. It is important to take the time to get the songs and the stories straight. Group work that includes both elders and young people can simultaneously ensure that the recordings are properly looked after and help the younger generation to have a say in how their intangible cultural heritage will be organised and accessed in the future.

Yawulyu Mungamunga songs

An example of a community-initiated song documentation project is the *Yawulyu Mungamunga* CD, published by Festival Records in 2000 (Papulu Appar-kari, 2000). *Yawulyu* is a genre of women's songs widespread throughout Central Australia, and this particular *yawulyu* song series deals with the travels of the Mungamunga women, Dreaming beings who roam the country around Tennant Creek in northern Central Australia, and who gave the songs to humans.

The twenty-three songs on this recording were especially selected for CD publication by senior women from Tennant Creek, and recorded by Barwick in 1996 and 1997. The CD booklet, compiled with the assistance

² Recorded by Allan Marett in 1986. Text transcriptions, translations and analysis in collaboration with Lysbeth Ford, Esther Barandjak, Audrey Lippo, Ruby Yarrowin, Linda Barwick, and the late Agnes Lippo (song 2, Marett, Barwick and Ford, 2001).

of Jane Simpson and Papulu Apparr-kari as well as the performers themselves, includes the text and a brief explanation of each song, approved by the performers in consultation with other senior women with interests in the series, as well as information about Warumungu language and country, the 'skin' system (*puntu*), Papulu Apparr-kari, and stories about the Mungamunga women and the creation of the songs. Copyright in the published CD is owned and controlled by Papulu Apparr-kari Aboriginal Language and Culture Centre, Tennant Creek.

These songs were first dreamed by two women of the Nappangarti skin group about seventy years ago and are now held by a senior woman of the Nappanangka skin group, who has also dreamed a number of new songs herself to add to the series. This senior woman, KF Nappanangka, is one of the most fluent speakers of Warumungu language. While she has strong ties to Warumungu country through birth, residence and ceremony, her own language group affiliation is Warlpiri (a neighbouring language to the west of Tennant Creek). Because of this, she has told Barwick that she is looking after these Warumungu songs until a younger Warumungu woman is ready to take over as song leader (a situation analogous to Nym Mung's custodianship of Batjamalh songs for Bobby Lane). Texts of two songs dreamed by Nappanangka (songs 20 and 21 on the *Yawulyu Mungamunga* CD, see Figure 3) reflect something of the complexities of her lifelong relationship with the Mungamunga series.

KF Nappanangka told Barwick that the Mungamunga women gave these songs to her while she was asleep, and her daughter Nakkamarra heard her singing them in her sleep. In KF's dream the Mungamunga women told her to sing a mulga tree both ways, in Warumungu and Warlpiri languages. Barwick was told that these songs refer to a particular dry mulga tree situated north of Tennant Creek, in a women's area where men are traditionally not allowed to go.

Song 20:
Mixed Warumungu (WRU) and Mungamunga language (*MM*)

| <i>wakiriji</i> | <i>larrarna</i> | <i>wakiriji</i> | <i>larra(na)</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| mulga [WRU] | [unglossed *MM*] | mulga [WRU] | [unglossed *MM*] |
| | | | |

[repeated]

| <i>mangkkuru</i> | <i>larrarna</i> | <i>mangkkuru</i> | <i>larra(na)</i> |
|------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| black-soil plain [WRU] | [unglossed *MM*] | black-soil plain [WRU] | [unglossed *MM*] |
| | | | |

[repeated]

Song 21:
Mixed Warlpiri (WLP) and Mungamunga language (*MM*)

| <i>wartiji</i> | <i>larrarna</i> | <i>wartiji</i> | <i>larra</i> |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| mulga tree [WLP] | [unglossed *MM*] | | [unglossed *MM*] |
| | | | |

[repeated]

| <i>Ngurrku- ngurrku</i> | <i>larrarna</i> | <i>Ngurrku- ngurrku</i> | <i>larra</i> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| [placename] | [un- glossed *MM*] | [placename] | [un- glossed *MM*] |
| | | | |

[repeated]

Figure 3: Texts and rhythms of *Yawulyu Mungamunga* songs 20 and 21.³

In song 20, the Warumungu words *wakiriji* 'mulga' and *mangkkuru* 'black-soil plain' occur, along with the unglossed word *larrarna* (sometimes shortened to *larra*), which Barwick was told is used just in song, and is "really in Mungamunga language" though still classified as Warumungu. The same word occurs in a similar position in several other Mungamunga songs.

Treeless black-soil plains define the northeastern part of Warumungu country, while mulga trees grow everywhere else, particularly in the south (p.c. Jane Simpson). The word *wakiriji* 'mulga' thus functions two ways: to define that part of Warumungu country, and also to refer to the particular mulga tree associated with women's ceremony. Similarly, *mangkkuru* both defines an area of Warumungu country, and also evokes the Mungamunga women, who came from that direction.

The first line of the second song (song 21 on the CD) refers to the same dried-up mulga tree, this time using the Warlpiri word *wartiji* 'mulga'. Mulga trees grow widely in the part of Warlpiri country near Tennant Creek. *Ngurrkungurrku* is the name of a hill near the old Telegraph Station north of Tennant Creek, particularly significant for KF because she grew up around that area. As children, she and her sister ran away to Ngurrkungurrku to escape the policemen who came to the old Telegraph Station to take children away. This escape enabled them to carry on their knowledge of language, culture and ceremony, and eventually, to become leaders for Mungamunga ceremony today.

Rhythmic notation placed under the text in Figure 3 helps to show how textual and rhythmic structure

³Recorded by Linda Barwick in 1997. Text transcriptions and translations assisted by Jane Simpson and Rosemary Plummer Narrurlu. Rhythmic transcriptions by Linda Barwick.

highlights the thematic parallels within and between the two songs. The first song can be read as emphasising the Warumungu ancestral landscape, while the second song, in naming the same mulga tree in Warlpiri language and linking it with a nearby place of particular significance in KF's own personal history, suggests the role of ongoing experience and change in keeping the ancestral landscape alive. These two aspects, the ancestral and the temporal, are tied up between the two songs through structural parallel (in occupying the same position in the textual structure) and through their regular alternation with Mungamunga language words, words of Dreaming beings who formed that ancestral landscape and who also continue to interact with humans today. Each word in each text occupies exactly two 3/8 beats. It is worth noting that this 3/8 metre and the complex repetition pattern of the text cycle (AABB) occur in no other recorded Mungamunga song, further marking Napanangka's contribution to the series.

The interpretation of these songs we have sketched here only begins to tease out the wealth of associations and cultural meanings embedded within these two seemingly simple texts. Barwick has discussed the aesthetic qualities of song texts at length elsewhere (for example in Barwick, 2000, and in Barwick, 1999). One point to which we want to give more attention here is the extent to which meaning is carried by aspects of the expressive performance that are not susceptible to traditional linguistic analysis. What we might call musical structures—melody and rhythm—are just two of these. Others are gesture, dance action (see for example our earlier discussion of dance as a means to explicate text), spatial orientation and proxemics as well as visual markings on the body, ritual objects and the dance ground.

Marri Ngarr *lirrga* songs

Taking musical structure as an example of this capacity of song performance to challenge the boundaries of the linguistic domain, let us demonstrate how musical considerations can shape text, and how an appreciation of extra-linguistic dimensions of text can explain linguistic variation. The examples we will be using are from a large repertory of didjeridu-accompanied Marri Ngarr *lirrga* songs composed and recorded by a group of singers whose traditional country lies to the northeast of the community of Wadeye (Port Keats, NT). This particular set, comprising some ninety-seven songs, is known as "Muyil *lirrga*".

Song 1

| | | |
|-------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| <i>wuyi</i> | <i>karrver-pingi</i> | <i>kwani-ga</i> |
| country | daylight-now | 3MIN.S.R walk-FOC |

'dawn may be breaking in Country now!'

| | |
|------------|-------------------|
| <i>awu</i> | <i>munimenhmi</i> |
| NCL 'meat' | birds (generic) |

'birds'

| | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| <i>kindji-murriny</i> | <i>na</i> | <i>Wangnenggi</i> |
| 3AUG.A.R say-call | LOC | [placename] |

'they call out at Wangnenggi'

Song 2

| | | | | |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|
| <i>wuyi</i> | <i>karrver-pingi</i> | <i>kwani</i> | <i>wuyi</i> | <i>karrver</i> |
| country | daylight-now | 3MIN .S.R walk | country | daylight |

'daylight comes to country now, daylight'

| | | |
|------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>awu</i> | <i>munimenhmi</i> | <i>kindji-murriny</i> |
| NCL 'meat' | bird (generic) | 3AUG.A.R say-call |

'birds call out'

| | | | | |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------------|
| <i>wuyi</i> | <i>karrver-pingi</i> | <i>kwani</i> | <i>wuyi</i> | <i>karrver-ga</i> |
| country | daylight-now | 3MIN .S.R walk | country | daylight-FOC |

'daylight comes to country now, daylight!'

Figure 4: Texts of two Muyil *lirrga* songs, performed by Pius Luckan and Clement Tchimburrur.⁴

The two songs are clearly related: the only textual element that is not shared by both songs is the phrase *na Wangnenggi* 'at [the place] Wangnenggi', which appears in song 1 but not song 2. But what are we to make of the repetition of the words *wuyi karrver* 'country daylight' at the beginning and end of lines 1 and 3 of song 2? What motivates the separation of *awu munimenhmi* 'birds' from its verb form *kindji-murriny* 'they call out' in lines 2 and 3 of song 1? And why does song 2 repeat line 1 at line 3, with the addition of the enclitic *-ga* (indicating focus)?

The mystery is resolved to a certain extent when we realise that the two songs are manifestations of the same song subject in two different rhythmic modes. Song 1 is in triple metre accompanied by slow clapstick beating at around 70 beats per minute, while song 2 is in quadruple metre accompanied by moderate tempo clapstick beating at around 95 beats per minute. If we consider the texts with their accompanying rhythm, we can see that some of the textual differences between the two songs are apparently motivated by the exigencies of their respective rhythmic modes.

As shown in Figure 5, each song has three lines of text, consisting of four clapstick beats per line, with the final syllable in each line being prolonged to the duration of at least one full clapstick beat. The third and final line in each song text is extended even more, by drawing out the final syllable to the duration of an additional three to six beats. The greater number of syllables per line in song 2 is accounted for by the greater number of 'slots' offered by the quadruple metre (4x3=12) as compared to the triple metre (3x3=9).

⁴ Recorded by Allan Marett in 1998. Text transcriptions by Lysbeth Ford, Allan Marett and Linda Barwick, with analysis by Lysbeth Ford in collaboration with Pius Luckan, Clement Tchimburrur, John Nama, Jeannie Jongmin, Mary Jongmin, Marie Long.

Song 1

| | | |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| <i>wuyi karr-</i> | <i>ver-pingi</i> | <i>kwani-ga</i> |
| | | |

'dawn may be breaking in Country now!'

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| <i>awu mu-</i> | <i>nimenhmi</i> |
| | |

'birds'

| | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| <i>kindji-mu-</i> | <i>rriny na Wang-</i> | <i>nenggi</i> |
| | | |

'they call out at Wangnenggi'

Song 2

| | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>wuyi karrver</i> | <i>-pingi kwani</i> | <i>wuyi karrver</i> |
| | | |

'daylight comes to country now, daylight'

| | | |
|------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| <i>awu muni-</i> | <i>menhmi</i> | <i>kindji-murriny</i> |
| | | |

'birds call out'

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------|
| <i>wuyi karrver</i> | <i>-pingi kwani</i> | <i>wuyi karrver</i> | <i>-ga</i> |
| | | | |

'daylight comes to country now, daylight!'

Figure 5: Rhythmic structure of two Muyil lirrga song texts, aligning beating accompaniment in their two rhythmic modes, *kiyirri* 'slow' (triple metre, 70 bpm) and *titir kindjerryit* 'moderate' (literally, 'clapsticks drag') (quadruple metre, 95 bpm).

Comparing song 2 to the base text song 1, we can see that vacant metrical slots are filled by:

- repeating textual material from earlier in the line (*wuyi karrver*, in lines 1 and 3);
- adding or dropping optional parts of speech (e.g. the focalising enclitic *-ga*, which disappears from the end of line 1, but reappears at the end of line 3);
- rearranging text words between lines (*awu munimenhmi* of line 2 of song 2 'borrows back' the verb *kindji-murriny* from line 3).

In the latter case, we can also account for the disappearance of the adverbial *na Wangnenggi*, because there are not enough free metrical slots in line 2 of song 2 to accommodate it (*awu munimenhmi kindji-murriny na Wangnenggi* would be fourteen syllables, but the quadruple metre offers a maximum of twelve potential slots). Further hypothesising that *na Wangnenggi*, having lost its verb to line 2, cannot stand alone in line 3, we suggest that the vacant line 3 is filled by repeating the text of line 1, with the addition of *-ga* to accommodate the text-final prolongation.

We hope that detailed examination of this example has convinced you that musical analysis is not only useful, but occasionally entirely necessary, in full documentation of song texts. In the case of Marri Ngarr *lirrga* songs, two of the main composers, the late Pius Luckan and his brother Clement Tchinburrur, were keen to discuss these musical matters with us, not only demonstrating numerous examples of the musical and consequent linguistic permutations stemming from setting the 'same' song text in different rhythmic modes, but also giving Marri Ngarr terms for the rhythmic modes, and demonstrating their relationship with different dance styles.

Scotty Nyalgodi Martin's *jadmi junba* songs

The fruitfulness of musical discussions with composers and performers has been borne out in many different contexts throughout our fieldwork in Australia. Our final example is drawn from the repertory of the Ngarinyin songman Scotty Nyalgodi Martin, one of the most renowned living composers in the Kimberley area. He has just released a major CD through Undercover Music, containing two sets of public dance songs in the *jadmi junba* and *jarragorl* genres. Martin composed the songs at various times over the past 30 years.

Martin himself provided the explanations for his songs, which were transcribed by Barwick and included along with other explanatory information in the booklet accompanying the CD. Barwick made the recordings in 1998, but has not yet had an opportunity to work with a linguist to further analyse and translate the song texts. The song we have chosen here, like several others we have already discussed in this paper, embodies both ancestral and contemporary themes, and makes connections between different languages and countries (see Figure 6).

In conversation with Barwick, Scotty Martin explained that he had received the song in a dream, in which a spirit from Malinjunu (a place in Umbulgari country to the south of Ngarinyin country) was singing out to call another mob of spirits down from Yawurlyawurl country in the Cockburn Range area to the north.

| Sung text | Scotty Martin's explanation |
|---|--|
| <i>gura winya gala winya Malinjunu geyi buma</i> [repeated] | 'Gura means the country, you have a look at that country; Malinjunu geyi buma - that's that Malinjunu, that's that country itself. That's in Umbulgari country, that spirit was belong to Malinjunu. <i>geyi buma</i> —you sing out. |
| <i>Yawurlyawurl gala winya Malinjunu geyi buma</i> [repeated] | <i>Yawurlyawurl</i> , that's the one part of ah, that Wyndham area, that connect onto that one song. In a dream that spirit was singing out to that country. |

Figure 6: Sung text and explanation of one song from Scotty Nyalgodi Martin's *jadmi junba* series.⁵

Martin wishes his songs to reach out to an international audience, and has actively pursued their publication and documentation. At the same time he has been an active participant in the Ngarinyin Aboriginal Corporation's recent efforts to revitalise the *junba* performing tradition by providing regular occasions for young people to participate in performances (funded in part through the Australia Council for the Arts). Like so many of the performers we have had the privilege of working with, Martin takes seriously his responsibility as a holder of tradition to make sure it is passed on to future generations in appropriate forms to ensure its appreciation and continuing relevance.

Conclusion

We intend that this presentation, and the songs embedded within it, will serve as a call for greater appreciation of the rich and significant heritage of Australian songs and a greater engagement with issues to do with their preservation and revitalisation. Senior holders of Indigenous knowledge throughout Australia have repeatedly indicated that the recording and preservation of song repertoires is one of their highest priorities. In responding to these calls, both linguists and musicologists have a role to play and it would be a tragedy if narrow disciplinary interests were to get in the way of what is an urgent and vital imperative.

Of the seven major *wangga* songmen that Marett began working with in the late nineteen eighties, none are now alive. What has happened to those repertoires? In the best case scenario—where a songman such as Tommy Barrtjap was able to transmit his songs to his son according to traditional models—around half of the repertoire survives. The more common situation is for

less than a quarter of the repertoire to survive, and in the worst cases—as in the case of Maurice Ngulkur or Alan Maralung—no songs at all have survived the death of the songman.

The motivations for this work are many, issues of national and international heritage being in the forefront of these. But for us, as for most Indigenous performers, it is the well-documented capacity of recordings to facilitate revitalisation of traditions that are the most compelling. It is stating the obvious to say that time is short, but in this case it must be said. With no action right now, a substantial proportion—perhaps even most—of Australia's traditions of oral sung poetry will be lost forever.

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⁵ Recorded by Linda Barwick. Explanation by Scotty Nyalgodi Martin, Song 17 on *Jadmi Junba* CD (Martin, 2003). Transcriptions (song text and explanation) by Linda Barwick.

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