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## **Australian Aboriginal Oral Traditions**

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### *1. Aboriginal Oral Traditions A History of Research and Scholarship<sup>1</sup>*

The makers of Australian songs, or of the combined songs and dances, are the poets, or bards, of the tribes, and are held in great esteem. Their names are known in the neighboring tribes, and their songs are carried from tribe to tribe, until the very meaning of the words is lost, as well as the original source of the song. It is hard to say how far and how long such a song may travel in the course of time over the Australian continent. (Howitt 1904:414)

In 1988 non-Aboriginal Australians will celebrate two hundred years' occupation of a country which had previously been home to an Aboriginal population of about 300,000 people. They probably spoke more than two hundred different languages and most individuals were multilingual (Dixon 1980). They had a rich culture, whose traditions were centrally concerned with the celebration of three basic types of religious ritual-rites of fertility, initiation, and death (Maddock 1982:105-57). In many parts of Australia, particularly in the south where white settlement was earliest and densest, Aboriginal traditional life has largely disappeared, although the memory of it has been passed down the generations. Nowadays all Aborigines, even in the most traditional parts of the north, such as Arnhem Land, are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the Australian version of Western culture, and must preserve their own traditions by a combination of holding strategies. Thus in 1988 many Aboriginal Australians will be inclined to mourn the Bicentenary with its reminder to them of all

they have lost.

The importance of song and dance to Aboriginal people is apparent through the diaries and journals of the early settlers. They quickly perceived that people travelled great distances to learn new songs, for which they almost certainly paid in various trade goods (Backhouse 1837:14, quoted in Threlkeld 1974:I, 76; Roth 1902:20; Howitt 1904:413-14); they feted and honored talented songmen and -women (Threlkeld 1974:I, 58-59; Grey 1841:300-4) and their theatrical performances, usually carried out at night by the dramatic lighting of a full moon and flickering camp fires, impressed many writers and artists (Kerr forthcoming). The Port Jackson Aborigines' term *carib-berie* (Hunter 1793:143-45) which passed into English as *corroboree*, quickly entered the language as a term for such performances which combined song, dance, and visual display. Edward John Eyre (1845:233-34) likened Aboriginal corroborees to European theater, but the songs which accompanied these performances were not generally received with much understanding. They were considered lugubrious, repetitious, discordant, barbarous, and heathen.

It was difficult for Europeans of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and indeed remains so for many still today, to appreciate that Aboriginal hunter-gatherers, whose material culture seemed to them so primitive, had a sophisticated artistic life, not to speak of one of the most complex systems of social organization in the world and a religious life to which the older and more privileged members of society devoted a great deal of their time. Nineteenth-century views of the superiority of the white to the black races undoubtedly led to assumptions of the inferiority of Aboriginal culture which prevented all but a few early observers from even conceiving there was anything of interest in Aboriginal oral tradition, let alone trying to record it. In addition, the Christian desire to suppress heathenism did not encourage the recording of a pagan culture.

The forms of Aboriginal religion and the beliefs which early investigators could learn about from their Aboriginal informants were so different from their own Christian notions of religious beliefs and observance that they could not readily accede to the idea that they were religious in character. Threlkeld, who conducted a mission to the Aborigines of the Hunter Valley of New South Wales between 1824 and 1859, articulated a common view, even though his writings evince a good deal of sympathy for.

Aboriginal society: “The Aborigines of New Holland, in this part of the Colony, have no priesthood, no altar, no sacrifice, not any religious service, strictly so called; their superstitious observances can scarcely be designated as divine rites, being only mysterious works of darkness, revellings and such like. Nevertheless, they are not left without some instinctive feeling of dependence on the great ‘Unknown Being’” (1974:I, 62). Since the accepted forms, the temples, and the institutionalized priesthood which seemed a hallmark of most religions were absent, Threlkeld could not help feeling that many an Aboriginal religious ceremony which he reported in detail in his *Reminiscences* had the appearance of a sport rather than of a religious observance (1974:I, 53). The absence of dogma compatible with Christianity and other known religions was also an obstacle to taking Aboriginal religion seriously, as was the often “obscene” content of Aboriginal myth. Heinrich Meyer (1846:11-12) voiced a common opinion in his short ethnography of the Aborigines of the Encounter Bay tribe of South Australia:

. . . The moon is also [i.e., as well as the sun] a woman, and not particularly chaste. She stays a long time with the men, and from the effects of her intercourse with them she becomes very thin and wastes away to a mere skeleton. When in this state Nurrunderi [a creator being] orders her to be driven away. She flies, and is secreted for some time, but is employed all the time in seeking roots which are so nourishing that in a short time she appears again, and fills out and becomes fat rapidly.

. . . They do not appear to have any story of the origin of the world; but nearly all animals they suppose anciently to have been men who performed great prodigies, and at last transformed themselves into different kinds of animals and stones!

Nevertheless, even in the early days of the settlement, and throughout the nineteenth century, curious, observant, and relatively unprejudiced individuals in all parts of Australia wrote down descriptions of Aboriginal ceremonies, recorded versions of Aboriginal myths and tales and sometimes gave the texts and even occasionally the musical scores of songs (Howitt 1904:419-25; Torrance and Howitt 1887; cf. A. Moyle 1977; Petrie 1904:25 and

28). These accounts are of very uneven quality and almost invariably in an educated English prose style. In most cases of texts taken down in the period up to about 1930, there is no attempt to record the way in which the Aboriginal narrators spoke to the collector, whether in an Aboriginal language or in non-standard English or a mixture of both. They are really résumés or free reworkings of the material. Thus the works of early collectors reproduce the substance of the narratives but probably not a great deal of the form or style. As an example, I quote a brief North Queensland story printed by W. E. Roth (1902:8) as an example of what he called “imaginative games.” Roth was an educated man, a scientist and, at the time of recording, Northern Protector of Aboriginals. He entitled the story *The Lady Scored* (Princess Charlotte Bay):

Mother tortoise, one hot afternoon, feeling very thirsty went to get some water, but not being able to find any, asked her lord and master where it was. He was a selfish beast and told her he had drunk it all. This, however, was a lie, for he was keeping it safe under each armpit in store for the dry season. She also had her suspicions and threw a lighted fire stick at him: this made him raise his arms in astonishment when—down fell the water, and she quenched her thirst.

There is no reason to doubt the veracity of Roth’s account, and it is generally recognized that his ethnographies are of high quality; moreover, he lived among Aborigines for quite a long period of time. However, much in the tale of the creature who withholds water from others, a theme that occurs in many Aboriginal repertoires, is mediated by Roth’s slightly supercilious, detached tone and authorial commentary which come through in the title, the phrases “mother tortoise,” “her lord and master,” and “a selfish beast” and in the omniscient “This, however, was a lie” and “She also had her suspicions.” Although one could no longer prove it, one’s knowledge of Aboriginal storytelling styles would suggest that these elements were the ethnographer’s additions to the tale as it was told to him.

Even in early ethnographies, by contrast, we often find that the texts of Aboriginal songs are reproduced, sometimes with a glossary and a free English translation. This is probably because song texts of individual verses of Aboriginal songs are usually quite

short and also because they are naturally rather allusive, so that a commentary and translation were necessary to convey their gist to an educated Anglo-Australian readership (see, among others, Grey 1841:307-12; Howitt 1904:414-25). An early example of the recording of Aboriginal song and an attempt to convey something of its poetic power was Mrs. Eliza Hamilton Dunlop's publications in a variety of local newspapers in the late 1830s and 1840s. Her husband was a police magistrate and protector of Aborigines at Wollombi and Macdonald River in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales and she was the first Australian poet to attempt versions of Aboriginal songs (E. Dunlop 1981). I quote one verse of what she calls "Nature Poetry" together with the translation and gloss, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October 1848:

Nung-Ngunun  
 Nge a runba wonung bulkirra umbilinto bulwarra;  
 Pital burra kultan wirripang buntao  
 Our home is the gibber-gunyah,  
     Where hill joins hill on high;  
 Where the turruma and berrambo,  
     Like sleeping serpents lie;  
 And the rushing of wings, as the wargas pass,  
 Sweeps the wallaby's print from the glistening grass.

She glosses Gibber-gunyah as "Cave in the rock," Turruma and Berrambo as "war arms" and "Wanga" as "a species of pigeon."

Aboriginal oral tales are extant in a large variety of sources, from the early years of the white colony until the mid-1920s. During this period collectors were by and large amateurs, and even the semi-professionals such as Daisy Bates (1912-34), who corresponded with the English folklorist Andrew Lang, had no formal training in recording variant versions of tales and no formally taught linguistic skills. The following illustrates Bates' style of tale-telling. She is careful to include a number of Aboriginal key words, with English glosses in brackets, and capitalizes the names of supernatural beings to indicate their status. She also makes the narrative proceed largely by means of dialogue, so that her style appears less remote from Aboriginal tale-telling habits than does Roth's text, quoted earlier. The tale appeared in a weekly newspaper, *The Australasian* (September 2, 1922, p. 517) in a piece entitled "Springtime at Ooldea":

Jupiter was once a man who had a head only, no body.

Katta (head) “travelled about,” and one day he met two waddi (men) Maalu and Kulbir (two species of Kangaroo). They were very frightened when they saw a head, with no body, moving along towards them; but they gave Katta some of their food, and when he had eaten, he said: “Your spears and spearthrowers and clubs are no good; leave them with me and I will make them good.” The young waddi left their weapons near Katta and went away, and by and by when they returned, they found splendid weapons of kurrugu (acacia), which Katta had made for them. While they were looking at their new weapons, they heard a great shouting, and looking up they saw a number of waddi running towards them to kill them. Katta heard the men coming, and his head moved along the ground towards them, and when he came up to them all the waddi fell down and died.

Then Katta said to the two young waddi, “Put me in Wanbanida’s kardal” (marsupial’s tunnel or hole in the ground), and the waddi did so, and by and by, when Katta went up into gaddina (sky), Maalu and Kulbir went there too. Now all men of the maalu and kulbir totem can make good kajji (spears), jurding (clubs) and miro (spearthrowers) of kurrugu wood, and they can look at Katta in “nying-u” (cold time) and not be any more afraid of him.

Many of the early collectors recorded their findings in newspapers, in private diaries and journals of discovery. After the first Chair of Anthropology was established at the University of Sydney in 1926 and held by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, many tales appeared in professional ethnographies and descriptions of ritual. A great deal of material lies unpublished in libraries and perhaps in private collections. In contrast to the situation in North America where there has been, since Boas and Sapir, a strong emphasis on the collection of Amerindian texts and interest in folklore *per se*, there have never been professional folklorists (in the North American sense of the term) at work in Australia. Ironically, although some general knowledge of the corpus of Aboriginal myths and tales reached the northern hemisphere via the writings of authors such as Sigmund Freud (1919), Emile Durkheim (1915),

and Arnold van Gennep (1906), only Geza Róheim actually conducted field work in Australia. The others drew on material at second hand. A short history of folklore collection in Australia is to be found in Waterman (1979), Tonkinson (1976) and Greenway (1961).

In the period between the 1920s and the 1960s, most recording of Aboriginal oral traditions was carried out by social anthropologists as a by-product of their field research into social structures and religious rites. There were also a few linguists at work, mostly amateurs, with the exception of Gerhardt Laves who did not publish his work (see Part 3) and Arthur Capell, who was Reader in Linguistics at Sydney University and for some twenty years the only teacher of Aboriginal linguistics in an Australian university. Other individual researchers, such as Norman Tindale and Theodore Strehlow, both in Adelaide, recorded Aboriginal myths, tales, and song texts. However, Strehlow's most important work in this field, *Songs of Central Australia*, was not published until 1971. A number of texts were recorded during this period, particularly in the journal *Oceania* (1930-) and in the *Oceania Monographs* and *Linguistic Monographs Series*. One must mention particularly the work of the anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt, who produced a substantial number of texts of Aboriginal oral genres both within anthropological works (e.g., 1942-45, 1951) and separately (R. Berndt 1951, 1952, 1976a and b; C. Berndt 1952-54, 1970). Between them, they have made a highly significant collection of texts, which they are now preparing for systematic analysis (see Part 3).

In the field of linguistics, it was not generally until the 1960s, and particularly in the 70s and 80s, that Aboriginal oral texts have been recorded using morpheme-by-morpheme glosses of indigenous languages and with attention also being paid to the communicative functions of these texts. There are many extant grammars of Aboriginal languages that also contain texts, and linguists are now taking up questions concerning the character of Aboriginal oral discourse which should very soon produce greater depth of information in this field (see Part 3). It was also about the same time, or a little earlier, that the first significant analysis of Aboriginal music began with the work of Alice Moyle, Trevor Jones, and Catherine Ellis. Interest in Aboriginal music and dance went back to the early ethnographers, and subsequently scholars like E. T. Davies made a substantial contribution, but the late 50s

and early 60s was the time when musicological research could first utilize the advantages of the battery-powered tape recorder in a field situation. It is significant that Jones (1956) and Ellis (1958 and 1964), at least, did their first research on the audio-visual collections of Elkin and Strehlow, respectively. The question of the importance of audio-visual technology in the recording of Aboriginal oral tradition will be taken up in Part 2.

### *The Nature of Aboriginal Oral Tradition*

Among Aborigines themselves the most important oral genres are those of song and dance, especially in their relationship to ritual. A man, and in some parts of Australia a woman, who is a ritual leader and expert in some aspect of ceremonial, usually song, has great prestige in his or her community which comes through control of knowledge and the forms in which knowledge is encoded. In Arnhem Land ritual is referred to in Aboriginal English as “Sunday business” and a ritual entrepreneur is a “businessman.” This usage accurately reflects one important aspect of the Aborigines’ own conceptualization of their oral traditions: songs, dances, icons, and even whole ceremonies are sacred and often secret, but they are commodities nonetheless which are owned by clans, executed by other clans who stand in a managerial relationship to the owners (Barker 1975-76), and sometimes exchanged with other groups in return for rights to perform an alien song or dance or in return for desired trade-goods and ceremonial artifacts (Thomson 1949, Roth 1902:144, Akerman 1980).

As the earliest observers realized when they took the word *corroboree* into the English language, the essence of much Aboriginal tradition lies in its multi-media nature. Together song, dance, and the painting of totemic icons or the construction of ritual grounds give expression through art to Aboriginal performers’ conceptualization of totemic beings. These powers are considered to have been active during a period known as The Dreaming when enduring shapes of the world were made. Totemic beings may be world-creative powers of a transcendental nature, such as the Baiamai of South Eastern Aboriginal groups or the Rainbow Serpent known through much of Northern Australia (Maddock 1982:107-17). The transcendental powers are characteristically represented as being immanent at initiatory rites, where the idiom

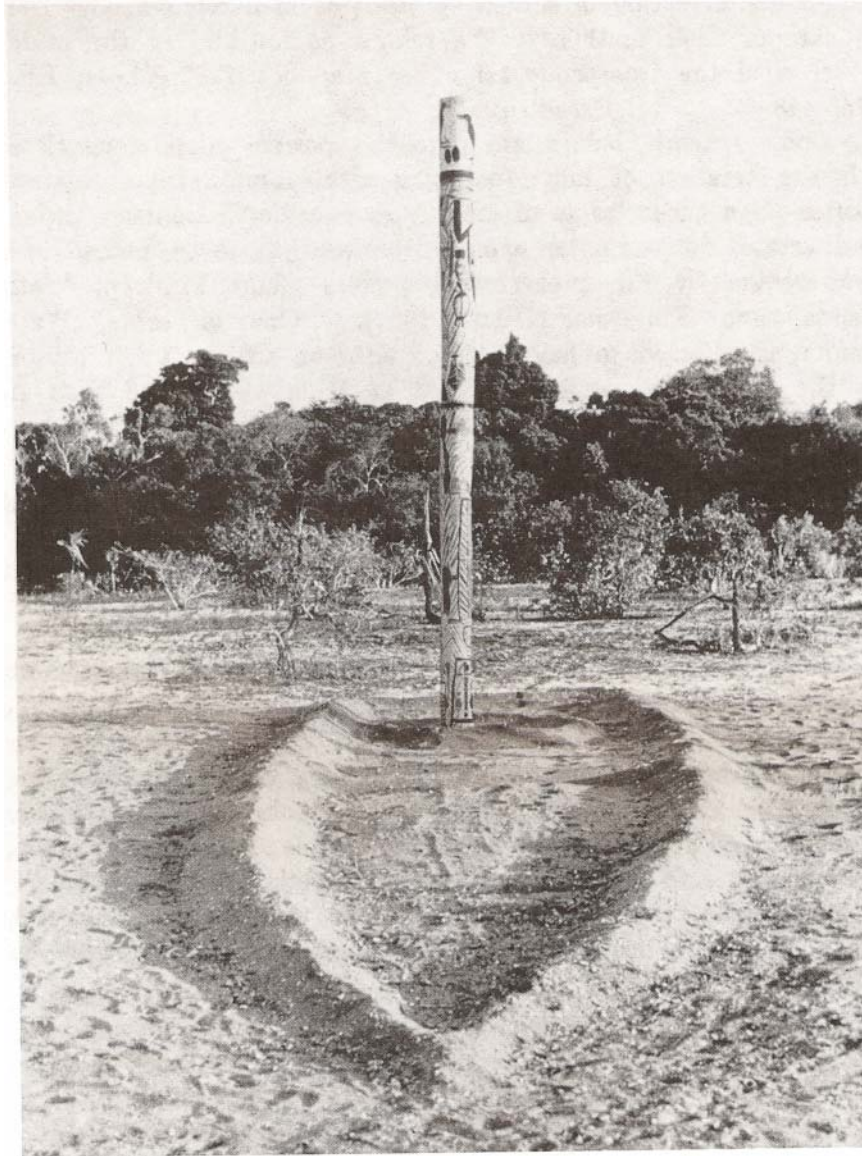


of human procreation is turned on itself as men remove boys from the care of their mothers to be reborn as initiates in the sacred mysteries of the transcendental cults (Maddock 1982:121-41; Hiatt 1975b:143-62; R. M. Berndt 1951).

Some totemic beings are parochial powers, closely associated with the creation of individual clan estates and striking natural features upon those tracts of land. On one North Central Arnhem Land estate, for example, named Djunawunya, seven named sites were created by the supernatural powers Giant Fishtrap, Water Goanna, and Kingfisher (Hiatt 1982). One of these, Water Goanna, is believed to have created sites on various other estates, but the other creators are localized at Djunawunya and thus are important symbols of identity for Djunawunya people. Fishtrap, for example, is regularly drawn as a sand sculpture at Djunawunya mortuary ceremonies. The celebration of parochial totems in song, dance, and visual media is particularly important in mortuary ceremonies, for it is through mortuary rites rather than through any specific genre of personal eulogy that a dead individual is acclaimed.<sup>2</sup>

I have stated that I believe Aborigines have traditionally regarded song and dance as the high forms of their culture and there is ample evidence for this. Such an assertion raises the question of the status of story-telling among traditional Aboriginal communities and the relationship between spoken and sung genres. There is no doubt that Aboriginal people value story-telling. Constance Petrie's report of her father's experiences in the 1840s as he accompanied a group of Aborigines to the Blackall Ranges in search of Bonyi nuts strikes a true note to anyone who has experience of Aboriginal camp life:

After the camp fires were made and breakwinds of bushes put up as a protection from the night, the party all had something to eat, then gathered comfortably round the fires, and settled themselves ready for some good old yarns, till sleep would claim them for his own. Tales were told of what forefathers did, how wonderful some of them were in hunting and killing game, also in fighting. The blacks have lively imaginations of what happened years ago, and some of the incidents they remembered of their big fights, etc., were truly marvellous! They are also born mimics, and my father has often felt sore with laughing at the way they would



After the climax of a *largan* mortuary rite, the hollow log ossuary Badurra, covered the totemic icons, stands inside a sand sculpture of Angadjadjia, the giant Fishtrap, at Djunawunya, North-Central Arnhem Land.

Photo: Peter Barker

take off people, and strut about, and imitate all sorts of animals (Petrie 1904:12).

On the other hand, Roth was probably right when he made the following assessment of the status of “fables and stories” in North Queensland:

The light in which such stories are regarded varies markedly in different districts. In the N. W.-Central areas, the women, and those men who are “lazy” —i.e., those who are always loafing around the camps—are the best hands at telling them: an individual in the full vigour of mental and bodily physique looks upon it as womanish and childish, almost derogatory, to know anything concerning them, and will almost invariably refer to his gin when any such matters are enquired of. At Princess Charlotte Bay (east coast), on the other hand, it was the men who prided themselves on spinning these yarns, and many a night I have spent in the camps listening to their narration, each tale being interpreted for my benefit (1902:7).

It was presumably one such process of interpretation and reworking which has given us *The Lady Scored*, quoted above.

There is good evidence that many Aboriginal communities have special forms for enculturating children (C. Berndt 1952-54; Lucich 1969; C. and A. Ellis 1970; Kartomi 1970 and 1984), while others have nothing that one might specifically call children’s literature or song (Hamilton 1981:114).<sup>3</sup> The function of story-telling in traditional communities is probably best considered as partly existing in its own right, and partly as an adjunct to forms of the high culture, notably songs. The esoteric nature of most Aboriginal song has made the development of spoken texts which interpret the song to various audiences well-nigh inevitable. Donaldson (1984:248) has rightly observed that “the less a song’s language is understood, the more prominent become accounts of what the song is about.” She was writing about dying Aboriginal traditions in present-day New South Wales, but the proposition holds true for Aboriginal cultures in a more healthy state as well. The repertoire of recorded Aboriginal tales, in which we find many narratives of wandering creator beings and the sites they created, and tales of supernatural beings who have human as well as animal characteristics, corresponds to the repertoire of sacred song and

dance, and almost certainly acts as a sort of *Begleitprosa* to it.

Aboriginal songs, whether sacred or secular, are characteristically allusive and often very short. In cases where songs accompany ritual, each song verse is brief but either it is repeated many times, as in Central Australia, or variants using a finite corpus of song words are improvised by the singers, as in Central and Eastern Arnhem Land. In some cases, as when a song accompanies ritual imported from another part of the country, the audiences may understand little of the referential meaning of individual song words (Roth 1902:144; Keen 1977; Donaldson 1979), and in most Aboriginal communities the language of song is different from that of everyday discourse, sometimes markedly so. This difference is achieved by several means, including the addition of syllables to words of the everyday language, phonological changes, such as metathesis, possibly the use of archaisms (Alpher 1976), and morphological simplification, but above all by the use of a special lexis. As an example, I quote the opening lines of a song I have recorded from the song series Djambidj owned by Anbarra people from North Central Arnhem Land. The subject is the totemic being Djodja, Marsupial Mouse:

djodja wambarg nganaiei	Marsupial Mouse eats wild honey
djodja wambarg nganaiei	Marsupial Mouse eats wild honey
wana-wanamurna rrumadaiei	enormous [mouse] with prominent teeth.. .
	(Clunies Ross and Wild 1982:34)

In this brief section, only the word *djodja*, name of the spirit being, occurs in Burarra, the spoken language of the singers. *Wambarg* corresponds to *wama*, the Burarra word for wild honey, while *ngana* is the everyday word for mouth, here given euphonic syllabic additions. In the third line *wana-wanamurna*, glossed as “enormous,” has its everyday cognate in Burarra *wana*, “big.” As for *rrumada* (*rrumadaiei*), I do not know a Burarra equivalent.

Not only the recondite vocabulary but also the polysemous nature of individual key words in Aboriginal song makes interpretative glossing inevitable. In a society in which knowledge is not free for all, but must be dearly bought, control over the process of interpretation traditionally belonged to senior men and women, particularly the former. Sacred knowledge was imparted to young men gradually over the span of their lives, though it was recognized that some were more gifted and creative than others

(Hale 1984). In some societies initiands had to speak in a special kind of antonymous language while they were being inducted into the religious mysteries (Howitt 1904:ch. 9; Hale 1971). Even songs that belong to the genre of occasional verse and which are not centrally connected with religious rites often need to be interpreted on more than one level. Donaldson (1979:79-81) published a text composed by a young Arnhem Land singer, David Marrputja Munung-gurr, which has to be interpreted on two levels: it appears to be a naturalistic description of pelicans feeding on fish, but to those in the know there is an exophoric reference to a Toyota truck also called "Pelican" for which "scooping up water" means getting stuck in the mud.

Little systematic attention has so far been paid to either emic or etic classifications of Aboriginal traditional genres, with the exception of the writings of Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1962, rpt. 1982:53-55; 1964:198-216 and 326-47; C. Berndt 1973, rpt. 1978:72-90). Their classifications tend to place greater stress on the use to which oral traditions are put in Aboriginal society than on the form, style, or content of the given material. The problems inherent in this approach have been outlined by Hiatt (1975a:1-3). One of the major criteria of the Berndts' classification system is whether the text serves a secret-sacred or a secular purpose. Here the system immediately runs into trouble with texts of the "same" tale that appear in both secular and sacred contexts, or, as Aborigines say, where we have an "outside" version of an "inside" myth. It has yet to be determined whether there are major formal or conceptual differences between the two versions in such cases, but most evidence to hand suggests that the differences lie more with the interpretations brought to bear on basically similar material and not with structural changes to the material itself. However, the criterion of use or performance context does have some role in determining Aboriginal oral genres, as do formal and cognitive criteria. Thus the Arnhem Land genre of *manikay* (clan song) is distinguished from other named genres in the region by its conventional performance contexts as well as by its form and subject matter.

Aboriginal communities in different parts of Australia have had a considerable variety of distinct oral genres. There have been some differences in the range of genres practiced by individual groups. Many communities had whetting songs, often sung by women (Grey 1841:309-16; Howitt 1904:345-46), and other

formalized incitements to battle which frequently included insults and obscenities (Roth 1902:16 and 21-22). Haviland (1979a:33) reports a special sort of extemporaneous song from Hopevale in Queensland, called *ganhil*, which allowed people to praise or abuse others with impunity. The formal accompaniments to many kinds of tournament or inter-tribal warfare are now almost defunct, no doubt partly owing to white suppression of violence outside the European law. One has the impression from ethnographies, however, that they were once an important tradition. Sorcerers' songs are reported from a wide area, and especially from Central and Southern Australia, where "clever men" played a central part in the religious and social life (Elkin 1977). Songs concerned with love magic and the ensorcelment of a desired lover are widespread (R. Berndt 1976a and b; R. Moyle 1979:20-25), as are what the Berndts called "gossip songs," usually complaints about sexual infidelity and the jealousy it arouses in the forsaken lover. An example of the type is Djalbarniwi's song, translated by Catherine Berndt in Hall (1981:209).

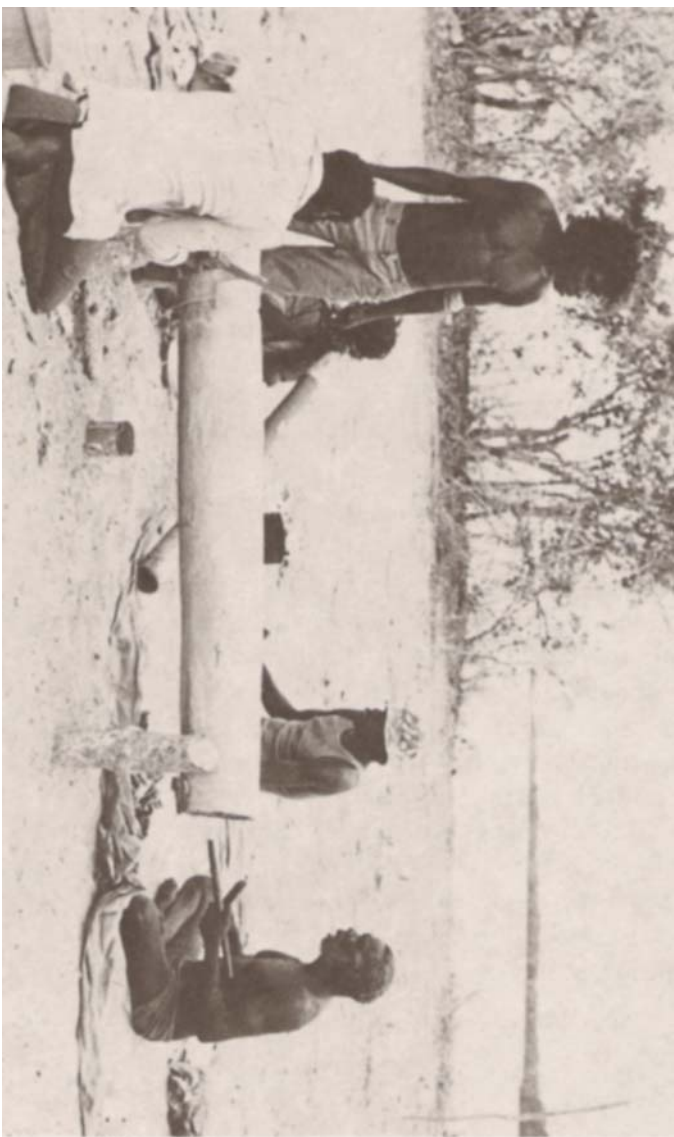
Other common genres include "playabout" and other comic songs, lullabies, and curing songs. In many Aboriginal traditions there are numerous examples of occasional verse, made by an individual composer to commemorate a striking event. The inspiration for such compositions is often said to come to the singer in a dream-vision in which an ancestor or Dreamtime being gives him the idea for the new creation. A good example of an occasional song is Paddy Biran's Song, translated from Girramay by R. M. W. Dixon (Hall 1981:375-76; Dixon 1980:57-58), of which this is the first part:

Nga . . . now then  
 mist which lies across the country  
 a bulldozer nosing into Guymay-ningbi  
 the place becoming cleared  
 mist which lies across the country  
 a bulldozer nosing into Guymay-ningbi  
 dynamite which exploded . . .

The song laments the desecration of traditional sites sacred to the Girramaygan people by an American pastoral company, using bulldozers and dynamite. The mist hanging over the country is conceived as the land's reaction to its despoliation.

At the other end of the continuum from occasional song is





*Manikay* clan songs accompany every stage in the preparation of a hollow log ossuary. Here Frank Gurramamana (right), with clap sticks, sings the song “Hollow Log” from Djambidi, while the as yet unpainted log is being carved with a special *berper* ridge. The location is Kopanga, Blyth River, Arnhem Land.

Photo: L. R. Hiatt

that which is tied to ritual performance. Here we find a great wealth of genres, connected principally with increase rituals, initiation, and death. These include not only the songs used on such occasions but the ritual choruses and invocations that accompany them. Apart from the work that has already been published on men's and women's secret cults, it will probably not be possible to publish material relating to these genres for the foreseeable future, as Aborigines have made it clear that they do not want such knowledge disseminated. Some of the most beautiful published texts from these genres were recorded by T. G. H. Strehlow in his *Songs of Central Australia* (1971). Here are two verses from the Northern Aranda Bandicoot Song of Ilbálintja which refer to the Bandicoot ancestor and the ceremonial ground painting, executed in blood and eagles' down, which represents the primeval Ilbálintja soak on the ritual ground:

Lo, his knees, firm, hard, and strong;  
 Lo, his knees, hard as white quartz!  
 Lo, the great sire of the painted ground;  
 Lo, his limbs, firm, hard, and strong!

(Strehlow 1971:135)

In this survey of Aboriginal oral traditions, I have deliberately confined myself to those which have something to do with the human voice, though I have included dance, for it never occurs without song. I have therefore left many important Aboriginal cultural forms out of account. Those which deserve a brief mention here are the visual arts, which traditionally were often executed during rituals, and those communicative arts which are marked by the absence of language. I refer to sign language, which is extremely well developed among Aboriginal people (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1978; Kendon 1980 and forthcoming) and is often used to communicate when speaking would be inappropriate, as, for example, during a hunting expedition.

## 2. *Field Work*

There is no part of Australia in which field research into Aboriginal oral traditions has not been carried out, though there may well be some communities whose songs, dances, and tales have not been recorded. Two very important technological developments



have made it possible within the last twenty-five years to document aspects of Aboriginal traditions that could not have been recorded before. These are the portable battery-powered tape recorder and the portable sound-synchronous camera which can be used away from main power supplies. This allows a fieldworker to be independent of the facilities of towns, missions, and government settlements. In recent years Super 8 film and video facilities have given the researcher even greater resources.

Before this sort of equipment became generally available in Australia, roughly in the period between 1960 and 1965, most texts had to be taken down by dictation (Clunies Ross 1983a:19-20) and film was divorced from "living sound." In spite of the limitations imposed by early audio-visual equipment, the history of sound recording and ethnographic film-making in Australia has been a distinguished one, and includes such early pioneers as A. C. Haddon and W. Baldwin Spencer (Dunlop 1979; Mulvaney and Calaby 1985:195-200), as well as A. P. Elkin. It continues to be distinguished today with the films of Roger Sandall, Ian Dunlop, Judith and David MacDougall, and Kim McKenzie.

Those wishing to conduct field work at present among Aboriginal people must seek permission from the groups among whom they want to work, either from relevant individuals or from Aboriginal councils or other governing bodies. They are obliged to explain the nature of the proposed research and its possible benefit for Aborigines to the people with whom they wish to work. Most intending fieldworkers apply for advice on field conditions to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra.<sup>4</sup> They may also apply for grants of money for field work, which are awarded on a competitive basis by the Council of the Institute after review by specialist subject committees and its research committee. The Institute is a statutory government body whose major concern is to promote research into all aspects of Aboriginal culture. It has a specialist library and archive of written material, photographs, tape, and film. Several staff members are appointed to coordinate research being carried out in the field and to advise intending field workers. There are also specialist research officers in some subject areas, including ethnomusicology. Since its inception in 1964, the Institute has played a leading role in guiding and initiating research in Aboriginal Studies.

As I have included mention of much ongoing research into Aboriginal oral traditions in Part 3 of this article, I shall here

confine myself to stating that field research in all parts of Australia is still likely to record much information about Aboriginal traditions, even among people in densely settled areas of the south who are popularly thought to have lost their culture. Much valuable work is being conducted in the south as well as in the more obviously traditional north of the continent. Hercus' two-volume work on the languages and traditions of Victoria (1969) is a fine example of such salvage work and, more recently, Tamsin Donaldson (1985) has made a study of how the old systems of social nomenclature among Aborigines from Western New South Wales have been carried selectively into the present. She is also working on the implications for Aborigines of changing from speaking an Aboriginal language to speaking English (forthcoming a) and editing a Wayilwan vernacular version of a text to be found in English in Mrs. K. Langloh Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales* (1897). A comparable study of the inter-generational transmission of knowledge among Nyungar people from the South West of Western Australia is being carried out for a doctoral dissertation by Patricia Baines at the University of Western Australia. I quote a summary description from her supervisor, Basil Sansom: "Her work shows that each Nyungan family possesses a corpus of tradition, that Nyungan story telling belongs to genres and that stories are owned while their telling is governed by rules about closeness of relationships and so on."

### 3. *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Present Trends and Future Directions*

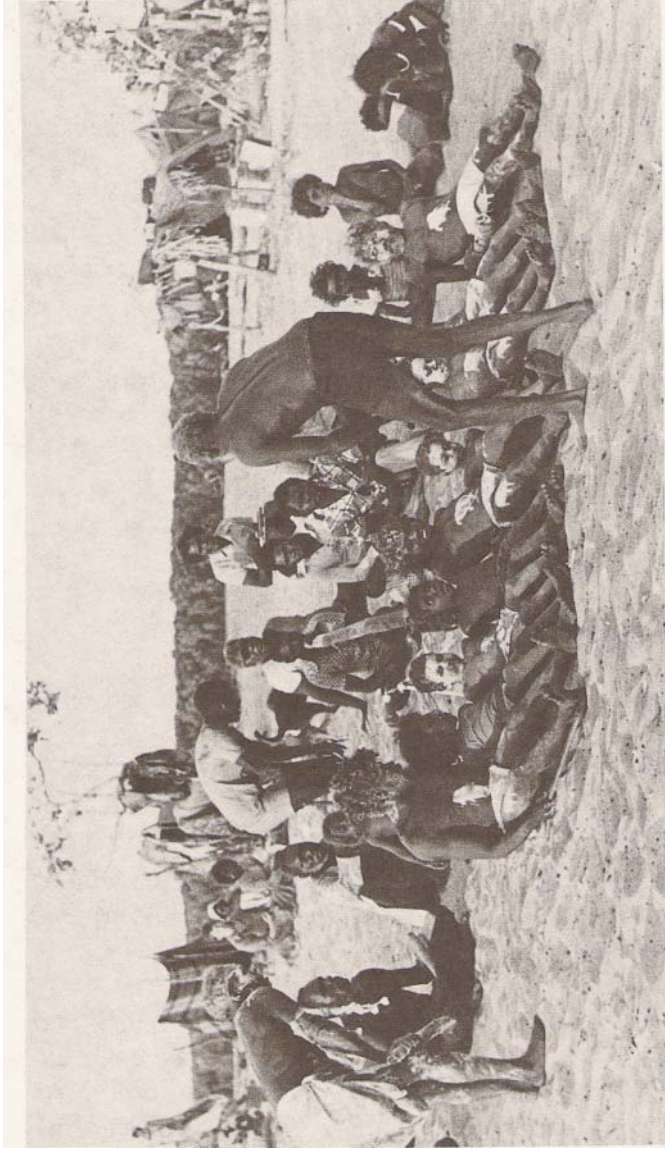
In recent years, work on the recording and analysis of Aboriginal oral traditions has been distinguished by its greater sophistication and by closer attention to the circumstances of the texts' production. I include under the latter heading a concern for orally-generated texts as discourse produced by and to some extent for Aboriginal people. Aborigines have begun to speak with their own voices, both in their own writings or oral histories (among others, Mirritji 1976; West 1984; Davis and Hodge 1985; Miller 1985) and in the "joint efforts" of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaborators in text production (Shaw and Sullivan 1983; Roe 1983; Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 1984; Muecke, Rumsey, and Wirrunmara forthcoming). The journal *Aboriginal History* (1977-)

has done a great deal to promote such collaborative texts. This same new egalitarianism is to be found in the production of film. Not only are there now Aboriginal film-makers who are recording their people's traditions (Barker 1983; Bostock 1980), but schemes conceived by traditional Aborigines and put into effect by them in association with non-Aboriginal film-makers and scholars have produced some interesting film documents. One such is *Waiting for Harry* (McKenzie et al. 1980), which explores the ritual politics of a mortuary ceremony as well as providing a record of the songs, dances, and icons of several North Central Arnhem Land clans. Towards the end of the film, Frank Gurrmanamana, the senior clansman whose idea it was to film the mortuary ceremony, clearly indicates how he sees film as an important medium for disseminating his culture:

wuro man-ngaipa <i>picture</i> mangabo	but this [is] my picture man-ngaipa
<i>picture</i> mangabo	this [is] my film,
wana	an important one,
wuro ngaipa ng-gunata nguweya	and I stand here to speak:
rarrak ngudjindjira gunata	the paintings [on this coffin]
ngabitamirra nguworkia gun-ngaipa	belong to me. They were
	laid down by the gods
	and I have always
	followed them.
. . . gun-ngaipa gubiriyinabara	. . . men will see these
	[paintings] of mine,
mitpe gunigipa nganana	just as I have seen theirs
man-nga djinabeiya	everywhere.

(*Waiting for Harry*, Camera Roll 99)

Aboriginal texts produced in present circumstances may be in Aboriginal languages, including Aboriginal creoles, in Aboriginal English, in Standard Australian English, or in varying mixtures of these. There may also be accompanying film, painting, or other visual illustration of the non-verbal components of Aboriginal oral performances. There is a zeal to reproduce as much as one can, using non-oral media, of a particular performance or performances. But herein lies a dilemma; do we strive for authenticity by reproducing as much detail as possible and so risk alienating the non-specialist reader? Or do we recognize the quicksilver nature of oral performance and practice a discerning selectivity? Should one produce archival versions of oral performances, which could be said



During the extensive preparations for Arnhem Land mortuary rites, there are opportunities to pass on traditions to the young and to have a good time. Song and dance are the main vehicles of instruction. Here Gurrmanamana (back to camera) instructs a group of young boys in the Wardagurdog dance (Spangled Grunter, a freshwater fish) from Djambidj. Many of the dancers have the fish painted on their chests and thighs.

Photo: L. R. Hiatt

to correspond to diplomatic editions of manuscripts in a written culture, while issuing critical editions for public consumption? One answer to the problem of producing texts for a diverse readership of specialists and non-specialists in Aboriginal culture is to do what Ronald Berndt did with his *Love Songs of Arnhem Land* and *Three Faces of Love* (both 1976), and that was to issue a scholarly and a popular version of the same material, but publication difficulties and sheer cost often preclude such a course.

The desire to retain many features of an Aboriginal text which were often suppressed or ignored by earlier scholars is occasioned by the conviction that Aboriginal discourse is primarily dramatic and should therefore be presented in such a way that it can be re-performed. Most Aboriginal prose texts can be seen as either monologue or dialogue or mixtures of these two forms, and they often advance narrative by means of conversational exchanges between the dramatis personae. Recent publications have therefore drawn on the written conventions of European drama and poetry to present the oral-dramatic character of Aboriginal discourse and include in the text the names of participant speakers, stage directions, and other paralinguistic features, setting out the basic collocational units of discourse as discrete lines (Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 1984; Muecke, Rumsey, and Wirrunmara forthcoming). In a manner similar to the Amerindianist texts produced by Tedlock (e.g., 1983) and others, but independently evolved (Muecke 1982; Muecke, Rumsey, and Wirrunmara forthcoming; Clunies Ross 1983b:11), lines are defined as stretches of speech bounded at each end by significant pauses. As a footnote to recent practice, the first Aboriginal texts to have been recorded by a trained linguist (Laves 1929) are written wholly in dialogue form with "stage directions" and names of characters indicated by Laves himself. These interesting manuscripts of two Northern New South Wales myths have not yet been published, though Hiatt (1985) prints an English translation of the shorter of the two. A major study of Laves' papers is at present being undertaken in Chicago by Mark Francillon and is supported by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

The present concern to reproduce the speaking or singing Aboriginal voice and all its paralinguistic accompaniments calls for renewed scrutiny of our methods of transcription, editing, and, in some cases, translation of texts. Donaldson (1979) has identified the necessity of providing extensive documentation of Aboriginal

oral texts as one of the main difficulties involved in making them accessible to non-specialists. This requirement challenges those of us who want accuracy as well as readability in a text. Many readers will probably not want to be bothered with stage directions and non-standard English. Aboriginal texts in Aboriginal languages or in an English that is too far removed from standard forms for easy comprehension also require three parallel lines of text, or have conventionally received such treatment by linguists: first a phonemic transcript of the Aboriginal language text, then an interlinear or morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, and finally a standard English translation.

The problems which confront those who produce written texts of spoken Aboriginal discourse are not generally as complex as those involved in presenting comprehensible texts of Aboriginal performances that include song, dance, and other kinaesthetic acts. As it is characteristic of much Aboriginal performance to use several media simultaneously, it is necessary to devise a means of notating the several media both individually and in concert. Whatever system is used, the final result of the analysis should be comprehensible to both the interested layman and the specialist. Again, as with texts of spoken discourse, one can make different kinds of transcription for different kinds of readers, and texts may be accompanied by tapes or discs and film or video.

As an example of present undertakings in this field, I cite several publications of my own in conjunction with the ethnomusicologist Stephen Wild. We have published information in several different ways about Djambidj, the North Central Arnhem Land song series that we are investigating in collaboration with two of its Aboriginal singers, Frank Gurrmanamana and Frank Malkorda. We have produced a book to accompany a recorded performance of Djambidj which includes the text of a complete performance occasion with accompanying English translation, as well as several chapters of anthropological, musicological, and biographical background to the series and the singers (Clunies Ross and Wild 1982). We have also developed what we call "performance profiles of song verses," which enable those who cannot read music or dance notations to understand the interaction of vocal melody, instrumental accompaniment, dance, and ritual calls in Djambidj performances (Clunies Ross and Wild 1984). At present we are engaged in a more detailed study of a representative sample of verses from all twenty-one of the totemic



song subjects that comprise this song series, taken from a variety of performance contexts. In the publication that results, we will be aiming to construct a "score" that expresses all the performance elements, including the dance notated according to the Benesh system by Andrée Grau and Margot McCallum. However, we still intend our results to be comprehensible to a non-specialist readership via performance profiles, verbal summary, and tape recordings.

The Anbarra people, with whom we and several other scholars work, have also been resourceful in making their culture accessible to outsiders. In late 1982, for example, at their initiative, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra played host to a group of twenty Anbarra men and women from the Maningrida area of Arnhem Land. They presented a Rom ceremony, a ritual of traditional diplomacy, and performed songs and dances from the Djambidj and Goyulan (Morning Star) song series. One singer from each of these series had painted a set of bark paintings within which almost every subject of each song series was represented visually. Thus the large audience who attended the Rom ceremony had both visual and auditory representation of the totemic beings celebrated in several different art forms. The embryonic Museum of Australia has now bought the entire collection of bark paintings and collaborated with the Institute in the production of a book recording this performance (Wild 1986). Hence it will be accessible to many people remote in time and space from the occasion of its original enactment.

The recent emphasis on the performative dimension of Aboriginal oral traditions has resulted in increased interest in several neglected areas of research. The most thoroughly neglected field has undoubtedly been that of Aboriginal dance, partly because of the technological difficulties mentioned in Section 2, and partly because there have been no choreologists with anthropological training working in Australia. There are at present no courses in dance ethnography at Australian universities, although the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies has tried various means of promoting this area of study. To date, only three dissertations have been produced on Aboriginal dance alone (Quisenberry 1973 in Arnhem Land; Grau 1983 among the Tiwi; and Llinos-Jones 1984 on Warlpiri women's dance); none of these studies were carried out by Australians. It is to be hoped that new initiatives by the Institute to establish dance ethnography at Australian



Women have their own dance movements for every *manikay* song subject. Nancy Bandeiama (in the hat) leads a group of young girls around the evening camp fires at Kopanga while they delicately “throw the sand.”

Photo: L. R. Hiatt



universities will enable Australian researchers to investigate all the Aboriginal performing arts, including dance, in their cultural context.<sup>5</sup>

The scholarly neglect of Aboriginal dance is particularly unfortunate because it is a tradition of major importance to the people themselves and an art form of great distinctiveness and dramatic force. Many kinds of Aboriginal dance still thrive. The traditional dances of Southern Australian Aborigines have largely disappeared, except to the extent that they have been recorded in the journals and illustrations of early explorers and other observers and live on in the memories of an older generation of Aborigines. Extant dance styles range from the experimental works of the Aboriginal-Islander Dance Theatre based in Sydney to traditional ritual dances performed in their homelands by Aboriginal dancers. In recent years small troupes of semi-professional performers from Northern Australia, including singers, dancers, and instrumentalists, have had considerable success touring in both Australia and abroad. Not only are new performance contexts being sought out by Aborigines, but new song and dance forms are arising in many parts of Aboriginal Australia. To give one example from Cape York Peninsula, the island dance style that Queensland Aborigines first learned from Pacific Islanders is now being used in conjunction with song to commemorate notable events in local communities or to encode social commentary. Black and Koch (1983) have notated and recorded the words of several island-style lyrics, including "Magnificent Hotel," composed to commemorate the opening of a beer canteen in 1977:

Magnificent Hotel, standing open with honey,  
 Standing on the heaps of feathers;  
 We stand here in long lines,  
 We drink honey out of baler shells.

(Black and Koch 1983: 167-68)<sup>6</sup>

There are several major areas of research into Aboriginal dance and theatrical performance generally that need investigation now and in the future. First, we need more dance ethnographies carried out by choreologists with anthropological training; then we need studies of the nexus between music and dance, a subject first investigated in Australia by Alice Moyle (1972) and Stephen Wild (1975). From this follows the investigation of the cueing that passes between musicians and dancers in Aboriginal theatrical

performance. Donaldson (forthcoming b) has made some persuasive deductions about the formal means whereby singers give directions to dancers in the now almost defunct performance traditions of Ngiyampaa speakers from Western New South Wales, and Gummow is investigating comparable systems among the Bandjalang singers of the North East of New South Wales, while Clunies Ross and Wild (1984) have analyzed a still vigorous song and dance tradition from North Central Arnhem Land.

Leading on from the study of the relationship between song and dance, we need to investigate the ways in which these two media form the backbone of lengthy rituals, both the secret rituals of initiation conducted by men and in some places by women, and other, more public rites, such as mortuary ceremonies. Almost no work has been done on what one might call the grammar of ritual, though one can think of Elkin's monographs on two Arnhem Land rituals, Maraian and Yabuduruwa (both 1961, rpt. 1972) as early examples of the kind. My own and Stephen Wild's work, taken in conjunction with the film *Waiting for Harry*, in both its public and archival versions, take up a number of issues having to do with the liturgy of ritual, and the recent monograph *Journey to the Crocodile's Nest* (Morphy 1984), which accompanies the film *Madarrpa Funeral At Gurka'wuy* (Dunlop et al. 1979), provides a close anthropological commentary on a long film of an Eastern Arnhem Land mortuary ceremony.

Finally, a survey needs to be carried out of all the existing literature on and illustrations of Aboriginal dance, and a coherent overview produced. There are many close descriptions of theatrical performances in the works of nineteenth-century writers which require collation and comparison with what we know of existing traditions. As an example of the kind, I include a vivid description by George French Angas (1847:63) of dances performed by Aborigines from the Lakes Alexandrina and Albert region of South Australia:

We encamped one day at Bonney's water-holes, and in the evening the lake natives performed some singular dances. One, the dance of the frogs, consisted of a number of men painted and armed with wirris, which they beat together, singing all the time; then, squatting on the ground, they leaped along one after another in circles, imitating the actions and movements of a frog. In another dance they go through the performance of

hunting the emu; one man imitating the voice of the bird. Their last amusement was that of sitting cross-legged round a fire, in a circle, singing and beating time with spears and wirris; suddenly they all stretched out their right arms as if pointing to some unseen object, displayed their teeth, and rolled their eyes in a dreadful manner, and then jumped on their feet with a shout that echoed for miles through the stillness of the night.

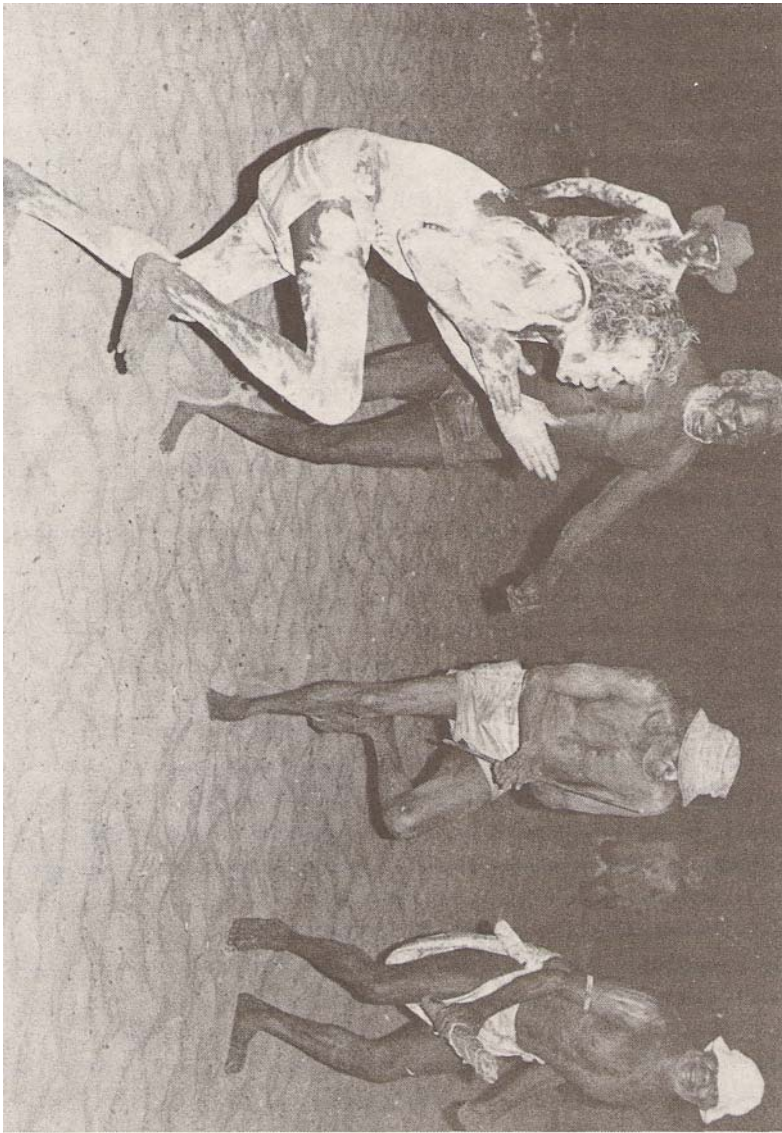
If we now turn to the state of the art of recording Aboriginal spoken texts, there are a number of new developments to report. It is recognized that we need to record more texts, for the Australian repertoire is minuscule by comparison, say, with that of the North American Indian or the African traditions. We need texts whose circumstances of production have not unduly restricted and normalized the data (Heath 1982). There is also a growing collaboration between scholars in several fields who recognize that the holism of Aboriginal traditions can only be matched by cooperation between specialists or by specialists extending themselves into fields of study other than those for which they were originally trained.

Widespread interest during recent decades in the "ethnography of speaking" has focused on the communicative functions of formal linguistic systems. Important work in the Aboriginal field has come from this approach (Sutton 1978; Von Sturmer 1981; Liberman 1982a and b; Heath, Merlan, and Rumsey 1982; Sansom 1980) and more can be expected. Special speech styles have received renewed attention in the last two decades (Dixon 1971; Haviland 1979b and Rumsey 1982 on mother-in-law language and avoidance styles; Heath, Merlan, and Rumsey 1982 and Merlan 1982 on the languages of kinship; Laughren 1984 on baby talk) and one can expect that a finer definition of genres of Aboriginal discourse will also result from the recording and analysis of "naturally occurring" speech and song. Genres to be investigated include the harangue, the politico-religious oration, the eulogy, and the self-presentation of Aborigines in land-claim cases, which have become a significant forum for Aboriginal talk in the 1970s and 80s. Another subject that requires investigation is the nature of the relationship between prose narratives of myths and songs which refer to the same material in a more allusive way.

Investigations of Aboriginal traditional genres will require their

closer definition in terms of form and content and the more specific characterization of such dimensions as vocal timbre, gesture, performance occasion, focus among linguistic components, syntactic resources, and stylistic features such as repetition and emphatic lengthening of syllables. The indigenous classification of genres by Aborigines themselves needs much further work, in the fields of spoken discourse, song, and dance. It is clear that some areas of linguistic and stylistic research need to be explored further than they have been up to now in order to facilitate the analysis of Aboriginal discourse genres. Although since the 1960s many Aboriginal languages have been well researched in the areas of phonology and morphology, there needs to be more intensive investigation of some aspects of Aboriginal syntax if the subtleties of discourse are to be understood. The resources of Aboriginal languages in the area of hypotaxis need further investigation (cf. Merlan 1983:136), as do factors which effect cohesion. The topic of the relationship between direct and indirect discourse is due for close scrutiny, given that in many Aboriginal languages there is no formal distinction between the two modes.<sup>7</sup> Lexicography is another field that should see advances in the near future (Austin 1983), for many languages that now have good grammars written for them still lack good dictionaries. The comprehension and enjoyment of texts is obviously impossible without the depth of understanding afforded by a discriminating glossary.

This brings me to the important subject of the aesthetic value of Aboriginal oral tradition, first for Aborigines themselves, and then for non-Aboriginal audiences, and how it may best be conveyed. Here we must distinguish what is important in their linguistic and performative ideology for Aborigines themselves and what emerges, usually via a translation or commentary, as aesthetically valuable to a wider audience. There is no fast division between these two audiences and the demands they make on texts; moreover, it should be possible to isolate the essential aspects of their being from the texts themselves. Rumsey (1986) suggests, for example, that the implication of the lack of formal distinction between direct and indirect discourse in Aboriginal languages may be that Aboriginal linguistic ideology focuses on interpersonal meaning rather than ideational or referential meaning as the essential aspect of talk. Many scholars have observed the marked difference between the high value Western cultures place on referential meaning and the apparently low value accorded to it



Aboriginal men's dances are usually more vigorous than the women's. Here a group of senior men, led by Michael Maragulbiana, perform Ngallilag (White Cockatoo) from Djambidj at Kopanga, Blyth River.

Photo: L. R. Hiatt

in much Aboriginal song, where sometimes restricted understanding is regarded as a positive good (Keen 1977; Donaldson 1979:75; Harris 1980:114; Clunies Ross 1983a:23). By contrast, polysemy is a very significant characteristic of Aboriginal song texts, which is why the Aboriginal intellectual elite of older men (and sometimes older women) have an important part to play in providing informal or formal *scholia* on these texts to novices and, nowadays, to outside scholars.

It is important that the aesthetic value of Aboriginal oral traditions, what one might call their literary conventions, be made apparent to the general public. Two groups within this wider audience have a special purchase on Aboriginal traditions: non-traditional Aborigines who want to understand and identify with their traditional culture and perhaps adapt it to their own ends; and non-Aboriginal writers, artists, and musicians, mostly Australian, who see Aboriginal culture as an important resource for the creation of a distinctively Australian aesthetic. Several recent anthologies of Australian poetry, for example, contain a selection of translations from Aboriginal traditional songs (Hall 1981; Murray forthcoming) which have excited many literary people who have not previously had much acquaintance with Aboriginal culture. I am told that Ronald Berndt's translation of the Wonguri-Mandjigai song of the moon-bone (Hall 1981:13-19, first published in 1948) is much admired.

It is very difficult, as things stand, for anyone, scholar or layman, to gain an overall impression of the nature and extent of Aboriginal oral tradition. I observed earlier that there have never been any fully professional folklorists in Australia and hence there exists no systematic collection of Aboriginal texts, except for that of van Gennep (1906), which is not comprehensive. However, there is a remarkable wealth of material available in a diversity of sources going well back into the nineteenth century. What is now badly needed is a systematic catalogue and typology of the corpus of Aboriginal oral tales and songs, so that the extent and nature of Aboriginal traditions can be made known. There are several indications that this process of review and classification has begun. Patricia Waterman (personal communication) has had her dissertation, "A Tale-Type Index of Australian Aboriginal Oral Narratives" (University of California/Berkeley, 1979) accepted for publication by Folklore Fellows Communications of Helsinki and this should provide an excellent foundation for the task. Ronald



and Catherine Berndt, who for over forty years have been recording Aboriginal oral traditions all over Australia, are presently working on an Australia-wide study of Aboriginal mythology. They report (personal communication) that this is to be a study in which "the basic material has been taken from our field note books covering virtually all the major areas in which we have worked. In short, it is myth in context, with individual and general comparative analysis." Variants will be recorded, including versions of the "same" myth by male and female narrators. Once the process of classification is underway, we can expect analysis of the structures of Aboriginal oral narrative and song, which is a field in which almost no work has yet been done.

In the near future we can look forward to a considerable increase in the publication of Aboriginal texts of all kinds, as linguists turn from the writing of grammars to the production of texts and dictionaries, and as the study of Aboriginal music broadens to include the analysis of song texts and whole rituals in their performance contexts. As signs of the times, the journal *Aboriginal History* is about to bring out an issue devoted to Aboriginal texts, and at a symposium on Aboriginal songs held in Canberra in May, 1984 there was a lively exchange among linguists, anthropologists, and musicologists on the subject of present issues in song research. The conference organizers, Tamsin Donaldson, Stephen Wild, and I, hope to publish the papers delivered at this symposium as a book in the near future. In response to my request for information about ongoing research for this survey, I have received details of text-editing projects from many people. As an example, I learned from Peter Austin of LaTrobe University of texts that he and Bernhard Schebeck have in preparation from Aboriginal people of Western Australia and South Australia. Luise Hercus is preparing several texts from the Simpson Desert area. Other communications have been incorporated into the body of this survey.

To sum up the present state of the study of Aboriginal oral traditions, one must admit that much has yet to be done to make them accessible to the world at large. In many respects, Aboriginal studies lag behind the study of oral traditions in other cultures, although present investigators are busy with a wide range of first-rate projects in this field. There are good reasons for the lag; one is the very nature of Aboriginal artistic traditions, which are difficult to detach from the general fabric of religious and social

life; another is their often esoteric, if not secret, character. I also suspect that the absence from what I have called the Aboriginal high culture of genres readily recognizable as the equivalents of important Western European literary forms may have had a lot to do with the relative slowness with which Aboriginal oral traditions were accepted by scholars and the general public as art forms worthy of study. There are no indigenous long narrative song types, though some texts recorded by R. M. Berndt (e.g., 1948) appear to be an exception to this generalization; nor are there genres corresponding to the epic or heroic lay of Western European traditions. The riddle and the genre of praise-poetry are likewise absent.

The climate of intellectual life in the Australian universities and the absence from them of certain disciplines have undoubtedly affected the way in which Aboriginal oral traditions were recorded and the people who have recorded them. Many of the best earlier collectors were not academics and, if they were, their primary training was likely to have been in fields other than folklore, oral literature, musicology, or linguistics. Fully fledged linguistics departments arrived very late on the Australian university campuses, and the Australian departments of anthropology mostly followed the British model and on the whole did not prepare their students very well for the collection of texts. There are no folklore departments in universities in Australia and, until recently, ethnomusicology was not strong. At the time of writing this essay, there is no course available in ethnochoreology at any Australian university. Nevertheless, often on an informal level, courses are being mounted which bridge departmental barriers and scholars are becoming more eclectic in their attempts to record Aboriginal oral traditions. Aborigines are themselves playing an active part in recording their traditions and making them known more widely. There is no doubt that a combination of intellectual curiosity and ethnic pride will make Aboriginal oral traditions much better known in the near future.

University of Sydney

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to many people for help in compiling this review; to the following who sent me information about their current research: Peter Austin,



Catherine and Ronald Berndt, Tamsin Donaldson, Luise Hercus, Les Hiatt, Stephen Muecke, Alan Rumsey and Basil Sansom; to Stephen Wild for details of two theses on Aboriginal dance; to Les Murray for information on his forthcoming anthology of Australian verse; and to Bernard Martin for supplying me with a sample from Daisy Bates' tale collection and for general discussions on the setting out of the paper.

<sup>2</sup>The exception here seems to be North Queensland, where special songs about the dead were composed, according to Roth (1902:21). John von Sturmer, who has also worked in Cape York, has reported on various ways in which one can more or less directly praise the dead. Elsewhere, it seems that taboos on naming the dead preclude the development of genres in their honor.

<sup>3</sup>Although Hamilton writes that she might have missed the importance of story-telling to Anbarra children, Les Hiatt and I have worked among the same people and we have never witnessed or heard of any such genres. I have often seen children playing at performing adult genres; groups of boys practicing singing, clapping sticks, and playing the didjeridu while the "kid mob" dances. Girls of any age, even toddlers, are encouraged to dance in camp.

<sup>4</sup>The Institute's address is: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, G.P.O. Box 553, Canberra, A.C.T. 2601, Australia. Intending fieldworkers should write to the Research Director in the first instance or to the Librarian for archival matters.

<sup>5</sup>The University of Sydney instituted an undergraduate course in the Aboriginal Performing Arts in 1984 with this objective in mind. It is based in the Music Department but taught by a consortium of academics from the Departments of Anthropology, English, Fine Arts, Linguistics, and Music. Murdoch University runs a course on Aboriginal oral literature; the chairman is Jack Davis and the deputy chairman Colin Johnson. Catherine Berndt is honorary adviser.

<sup>6</sup>The honey referred to here means beer, no doubt likened to wild honey on account of its color and probably its precious, intoxicating properties. Black and Koch give a slightly different explanation and compare beer to commercially produced honey. Traditionally, however, wild honey could sometimes be fermented and the "hot" parts of the "sugar bag" or wild honey comb were reserved for senior men. The line "Standing on heaps of feathers" refers to the fact that the canteen was built on the site of an old earth-oven used to cook plains turkey and wallaby.

<sup>7</sup>This subject is certain to be discussed at a symposium on Aboriginal discourse scheduled for May, 1986 at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies' next biennial meeting.

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