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Category: Ethnography and Areal Anthologies

Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia

By Allan Marett. 2005. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. 320 pages.
ISBN: 0819566179 (hard cover), 0819566187 (soft cover).

[Review length: 574 words]

The culmination of nearly twenty years of ethnomusicological research among the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly region of northwest Australia (Marri-tjevin and Marri-ammu), this exemplary work extends and deepens our understanding of Aboriginal traditional song, while going a long way toward closing the gap between our scant knowledge of Aboriginal musical arts and our abundant knowledge of Aboriginal painting. Marett's focus is the Wangga songs and dances that periodically body forth or bring back into being the life-ways and Law of the "ancestral dead," the Walakandha. The grounding thematic is death and regeneration, and Marett's task is to show how this dialectic plays out both musically and socially, mythologically and contemporaneously. This analytical reach carries Marett's work far beyond abstract ethnomusicological analysis, and his in-depth contextualizations of musical events keep faith with the Wangga composers themselves who expect every performance to simultaneously honor the ancestors and speak to the needs of the living.

Marett begins his monograph with an ancestral story in order to demonstrate how a myth connects with a sacred geography, figures in contemporary paintings on canvas or board, and finds expression in Wangga songs. His careful analysis enables us to actually see this complex interplay between prosody, melody, and specific narrative events. Subsequent analysis shows how social relations between Wangga singers and dancers are also implicated, and how the music is one element in a process that draws together the dead and the living and affirms the continuity of people and country. This merging of identities, Marett shows, also comes from the co-participation of both spirits and living persons in song composition, since it is in dreams that the Dreaming becomes manifest, and in the body-mind of people in the here and now that predecessors are brought back into being. Marett's meticulous explorations of the ways in which ghosts and ancestors "give" songs to songmen and the germ of a recovered song is elaborated in preparation for performance are truly edifying. Nothing is static or timeless. In the intersubjective and collaborative space between the living and dead, images, melodies and metres are constantly being worked upon or manipulated to get them "straight," to make them ring true.

"Truth," however, is only ostensibly a correspondence to the past.

For what is vitally important is that musical conventions actively recreate rather than blindly recapitulate received notions of identity and belonging. Certain melodies and rhythmical patterns have the potential to bring to mind specific places and specific congeries of relationship, but the realization of this potentiality depends on the knowledge, skill and judgment of practiced performers. Marett's detailed transcriptions and notations of both music and dancers' movements enable us to see precisely how this re-realization of knowledge is accomplished in several repertoires of Wangga songs. Since songs travel widely in the course of ceremonial exchange and the scattering of people, Marett devotes his final chapter to a comparative study of Wangga in areas as far afield as the Kimberleys and Arnhem Land.

My only criticism of this labor of love is that the publishers (who are to be congratulated for including an audio CD with the book) took so little care with the cover design and binding. That such an impressive book should literally fall apart in one's hands only makes one more keenly aware of the painstaking work of Aboriginal songmen in keeping their ancestral world alive, and of their devoted student who learned to read their country through song.

Review by: Michael Jackson, Harvard Divinity School

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