

# Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The wangga of north Australia

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Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts: The wangga of north Australia

Allan Marett 2005

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Since 1986, Allan Marett has journeyed off and on to the towns of Wadeye (Port Keats) and Belyuen in the Daly River region of northwestern Australia to learn to sing, dance to, love, and understand the deep cultural significance of an Aboriginal song genre called wangga. Wangga do many things for the Marri-tjevin, Marri-ammu, and Wadjiginy peoples who sing them. They bring together the world of the living and dead in two contexts: the giving of songs by the ancestors in the dreams of songmen, and mortuary and circumcision ceremonies. For the first two groups, they are exchanged in ceremonies with two other groups, the owners of the song genres lirrnga and dhanba, in a reciprocal social arrangement, invented in the 1950s, that keeps peace among these three groups. They connect the singers to the land and to the Dreamings that gave birth to the land. They create a sense of social solidarity among the Marri-tjevin when sung and danced in vigorous unison during ceremonies. Finally, they are a source of aesthetic enjoyment and creativity in the moment of their performance.

In this book, probably the first scholarly book on Australian Aboriginal music published in the United States, Marett tries to occupy a middle ground between older traditions of musical scholarship in Australia and New Zealand that focus almost exclusively on detailed descriptions of musical structures, and newer trends in the US that focus almost exclusively on understanding the meaning of music and musical performance with precious little or even no attention to musical features and details. (There are, of course, important exceptions to these stereotypes.) In that academic middle-earth, a place where I believe ethnomusicologists should live in order to do their most compelling work, he provides what, by the standards of American ethnomusicology, are extraordinarily detailed musicological and textual analyses of a selection of specific songs (28 are on the

accompanying audio CD) that illustrate general trends within four repertoires of wangga, analyses that should contribute significantly to previous scholarship on Aboriginal song. At the same time he extends that scholarship by using his analyses to read the social and cultural significance of the structural details he uncovers. Given the specialised nature of music-analytic language and notation, Marett's detailed approach to musical structure puts a somewhat unenviable narrative burden on him compared to, I would imagine, an analysis of meaning in the figurative details of Aboriginal paintings.

For anyone seeking simply to appreciate the structural principles of wangga song, there is plenty of detail. The overall formal structure in the alternation of instrumental and sung sections; melodic rhythms, sectioning, modality, and the descending shape of melodic lines; and the rhythmic modes created by the combination of tempo with clapstick, song, and didjeridu rhythms are all elucidated clearly and in all of their many variants. Although these descriptions and analyses make up the bulk of the narrative, the author's goal is to link these structures to the social and cultural meanings they express.

Marett manages to find meaning in a remarkable number of musical structures at least partly because he was able to observe their performance in such a wide range of places and contexts: not only in Wadeye close to the Dreaming sites of the spirits who gave the songs but in Belyuen far from those sites; not only in the Daly River region but in Barunga and the Kimberley, where the meanings had been lost for the most part; not only by groups of singers performing ceremonies but by individuals who no longer sang for ceremonies.

We learn, for example, that songs received in dreams are fixed in form when they are sung often in ceremonies, whereas when they are sung mainly by the individual who dreamed them, those individuals experiment with the formal structure of the song at every performance. In Belyuen, where the songs are given by the ghosts of deceased ancestors, singers like the highly respected Tommy Barrtjap are expected to imitate the vocal quality of their teachers (p.69).

By singing the words of the dead, in the voice of the dead, the songman brought into ritual space not only his own voice but the voices of his ancestors. The dancers, dancing as ghosts, assisted in closing the gap between the worlds of the living and the dead and allowed the dead woman's spirit to depart in peace.

Through the process of association, 'melody has enormous power to signify relationships between people, their Dreamings, and their country' (p.80). Through iconicity, 'clapstick beating often signifies the footsteps or the gait of an ancestor' (p.80). Unison dance and unison singing signify group solidarity, especially when large groups from different language families get together. Music and dance elements have 'clear intrinsic associations [that] form the semiotic bedrock on which signification rests' (p.110).

Meanings can also arise in specific performances, not just from these structural pillars. For example, in one repertoire, two pentatonic modes (C Eb F G Bb and C D F G A) are associated with the coast and an inland site, respectively. When performers from these two places come together, the social and musical tension is resolved in the interest of

solidarity by performing the heptatonic combination of these two local modes (C D Eb F G A Bb). Among the Marri-tjevin, the variety that could once be heard in clapstick patterns has been eliminated so that a few can 'function as key markers of a group identity' (p.133).

In one case, he 'unpack[s]' (p.152) the social meanings contained in a performance by the songman Ngulkur from the Marri-ammu group for the three leading Marri-tjevin songmen. For his song he appropriates a Marri-tjevin text and combines it with the most famous Marriammu melody. This expresses the close reciprocal ties between these groups. He intensifies these links by performing the song first in the rhythmic mode of the Marri-ammu and then in one of used by the Marri-tjevin. When the text and melody don't fit, he alters the melody, expressing his respect for Marri-tjevin traditions. The Marri-tjevin singers didn't object to his appropriation of their text, another sign of their close reciprocal relationships.

Marett demonstrates a remarkable engagement with and sympathy for this culture and the ceremonial singing that enacts and sustains it. Flying over a landscape he can now interpret in line with Aboriginal ways of thinking, he writes (p.233):

What I see now is a living entity, country that is alive and which throws into life many different phenomena--birds, rain, and fire --as well as the many different orders of being: humans, ancestral spirits, mermaids, ghosts, little people, not to mention language and song ... I have learned about this country through the medium of songs.

'I count myself extremely fortunate' (p.235). Of a text that brings the country to life, he writes, 'The surprise and delight felt by the ancestral dead at the return of their living descendants ... is almost palpable' (p.138). Given the elliptical and descriptive nature of these texts, this could only have been written by someone deeply steeped in this tradition.

Although the richness of the analysis, the detail of the musical description, the interpretation of meaning in music, and the depth of involvement and commitment to this culture are exemplary, American readers of this work will probably miss some basic ethnography, some of which would presumably be familiar to an Australian readership. What does the landscape look like apart from rivers and beaches? What grows there and how hilly or flat is it? What does 'the small Marri-tjevin outstation' look like (p.235)? How many people live there and in Wadeye and Belyuen, and what do they do for living? Is there a difference between towns and outstations in the conduct of ordinary and ceremonial life? What sort of social problems and economic issues do they deal with when not engaged in ceremonies and dreaming about songs? What kinds of lives do the songmen, whom Marett admirably names and credits for their creativity, lead? How does a mortuary ceremony unfold in time? Without this kind of ethnographic detail, the copious analyses and ingenious readings of meaning float oddly disconnected from what one can only imagine are the social, economic, and political realities that, in addition to a rich cosmology, also produce these wonderful songs.

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