MYSTERY AND CHANGE*

> Discoursed with Mr. Hooke about the nature of sounds, and he did make me understand the nature of musicall sounds made by strings, mighty prettily; and told me that having come to a certain number of vibrations proper to make any tone, he is able to tell how many strokes a fly makes with her wings (those flies that hum in their flying) by the note that it answers to in musique during their flying. That, I suppose, is a little too much refined; but his discourse in general of sound was mighty fine.

> The Diary of Samuel Pepys, 8th August 1666.

> 'Only disconnect' would surely be sage advice to the systematizer faced with the temptations of Australia.

> Peter Worsley (1967:156).

Introduction

Ethnomusicology in Australia is now clearly in a phase of rapidly building on the careful work of those who placed their main emphasis on close descriptions and essentially musicological analyses of Aboriginal songs in previous decades. Scholars are complementing those narrower studies with investigations of relationships between music and the wider context of Aboriginal culture (although see R. Brendt, 1951, for an early example of such investigation).

This development has not been unique to ethnomusicology. In recent years more linguists, for example, have worked to place knowledge of languages in a similarly broader context, and students of material culture are being weaned from objects onto subjects (see, e.g., Jones & Sutton, 1986). The reason for the Pepys quotation, however, is that in spite of this shift towards what might be described as a deeper and more balanced approach, I take the view that there are always good reasons for some continuance of narrow and formalist studies of cultural expression, even if many of our public find them "a little too much refined".

In this paper, however, I am not concerned with the formal properties of Aboriginal music, but with relations between that music and its cultural context -- hence the quotation from Peter Worsley. I discuss a variety of mismatching relationships between the meaning of Aboriginal songs, the language of their words and the property interests of people who have certain customary rights in those songs. These can be more technically described as cases of 'non-isomorphism'. By that I mean that the religious import of songs, places, myths and ceremonies cannot always be found to be neatly mapped onto, or reflective of, the rights, interests and obligations which define Aboriginal social groups. That they so often can be may give rise to the expectation that they 'normally' are, and that non-conforming cases are 'exceptions'.

In the non-conforming cases, for example, people rightfully sing songs about other peoples' lands, they sing of their own lands in other peoples' languages, they name their own children using song-words which refer to other peoples' sacred sites, and so on. These examples cannot be explained away by appealing to an unanalyzed 'looseness' in the system, or to the vaguenesses of 'borrowing' or some 'ethic of generosity'. A tighter, more functional logic seems to be at work.

My suggestion as to why these apparent anomalies persist so widely amounts to this: both the so-called anomalies and the expected isomorphisms form a whole. This whole is constituted by social action and cultural ideology, but these are themselves characterised by a constant dialectical tension between power and autonomy, and between order and disorder.[1] The expression of this dialectic in Aboriginal musical culture allows both inevitable and desired changes in relations between individuals, groups, natural resources and religious symbols to proceed, not only in a reasonably controlled way, but also in a way which prevents the loss of a sacred and reverential attitude to relationships with land. It has other justifications as well.

The rationality of the entire system explains the apparent irrationality of some of its parts. A system too transparently systematic would be too accessible. Mystery is in the hands of the few. Those who control mystery control change, as well as the status quo.

Furthermore, cultural forms regularly persist beyond the circumstances which give rise to them. An artistic or religious tradition may appear to have a life of its own (cf. Durkheim 1915:423-4). Yet, one can argue that apparently independent life itself may be shown to have great usefulness for its practitioners beyond the private spiritual, psychological and aesthetic experiences it offers them as individuals. These private experiences, nevertheless, must always find a place in explanations of the vitality of public cultural expressions.

In the next two sections I discuss these points by citing relevant cases from the literature and from my own fieldwork, focussing on songs.

REGULARITIES

In his important paper "Songs, ceremonies and sites: the Agharringa case", Richard Moyle (1983:66) summarises relationships between musical ownership and land ownership among the Alyawarra of Central Australia as follows:

> There are people who are said to own songs; it is to such people that others in a community go for permission when they want to sing the songs.

> The people who own the songs also own the ceremonies in which the songs feature. (There is no category of Alyawarra song which has no associated ceremony.)

> The songs in the ceremonies have texts which relate to events and people from the Dreamtime (altjirra); in every case, these events were localised at specific, named sites, most of which are known to present-day Alyawarra. The ceremony-owners also own the particular sites associated with each Dreamtime myth.

> Collections of such myths owned by members of the same patriline cover tracts of land which those members claim as theirs. In short, those who own the songs own the land.

Moyle then details relationships of this sort for a particular Alyawarra estate. He does, however, qualify this summary in at least three ways in the paper:

(1) Some men have presiding control over songs to which their personal land-related links are not the equal of those of other men (1983:70);

(2) In some cases Dreaming tracks begin or end in Alyawarra country but the Alyawarra themselves have no ceremonial control over these dreamings or their associated myths (1983:73); and

(3) Alyawarra men may perform ceremonies detailing Dreaming tracks in country as far away as that of the Luridja, tracing their course into Alyawarra country (1983:81).

This third exception seems partly a mirror image of the second, since Kaytej men, for example, may alone control ceremonies for Dreamings travelling in Alyawarra country (1983:79).

Moyle's picture of song-land relationships in part bears a very close similarity to that which I found in the Murranji Track area in north-central Australia (Sutton, 1983; Sutton, Coltheart and McGrath, 1983), where the language groups involved are Mudbura and Djingili.

But there, as also in western Cape York Peninsula (Sutton, 1978), certain major departures from systems otherwise resembling Moyle's summary of Alyawarra song-land relationships must be accounted for. I suggest that these are not 'exceptions' so much as just 'the other side of the coin'. These cases are discussed below.

ANOMALIES

Song Performance Rights, Site Rights

Men whose countries lie on and near the great Storm Bird[2] Dreaming track which runs south from the upper Roper River system into Central Australia perform the songs associated with this track. When they do so, they start with songs relating to Manjurnkan, a site close to Elsey Station. This is well to the north of their own present territorial spectrum, and few if any of them have ever seen this site. They do not negotiate the right 'to sing from there'; they have and exercise that right. A long series of songs traces the mythological travels and activities of Storm Bird from there to Murranji Bore, some hundreds of kilometres to the south, and then on into Warumungu and other desert lands.

Somewhat similarly, in western Cape York Peninsula, men of the Cape Keerweer area regularly perform a ceremony known as Apalach, in the course of which they trace the travels and activities of two men, the Pungk-Apalach, as they move south from the Archer-Love River area as far as the Kendal River and (one of them) a short distance north again. Clans which belong to the Apalach regional ceremonial confederation indeed have estates in the northern three-quarters of the lands covered in the song series, but not in the Kendall River area. They are not required to go and consult Kendall River men when they wish to sing of the Kendall River sites which figure in Apalach.

Such examples can be multiplied, and here I simply point out the lack of strict fit between the land rights of the rightful performers and the lands celebrated in the song series they rightfully perform.

Song-based Personal Names, Site Rights

Personal Aboriginal names in the Murranji Track area, as in some other parts of Aboriginal Australia, are often phrases from sacred songs which are identified specifically with sites on Dreaming tracks. They are sometimes drawn from a track which defines the named person's own country, or from elsewhere on a track which at some point passes through their country. An apparent anomaly is that a number of such names come from songs which do not fall into these categories -- that is, some people have names which refer, via songs, to sites they do not control or have special interests in, in any immediately obvious sense.

Language of Song, Language of Site Custodians, Language of Song Owners

Returning to the Apalach example, it is notable that there is no strict identification of the language of a song with the language of a clan whose site is being celebrated in that song. Some ten named languages are or were in the recent past represented among the Apalach clans and some nine such names are offered as identification of the languages of the Apalach songs (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: APALACH SONGS (WESTERN CAPE YORK PENINSULA)

Mythic References	Sites	Language of clan owning the site	Language of song words
Scale Mullet	Thoekal (Love R.) (part of 2 clan estates)	Formerly Ay/Pa, now partially un-resolved, plus Mn	Nr
Whale	Kooewk-aw	Formerly Ay, now unresolved	Ay
Magpie Goose	Yaat	Nr	?Nr
Salmon	?	Nr	Mn
Woven Bag	?	Nr	Nr
Crocodile	?	Nr	?Nr
Emu Hunter	Waarang	Ep (?formerly)	Ep
Thu'a Spear	Kuntara-than	Mn	Nr
Hammerhead Shark	Kuntara-than	Mn	"all different languages mixed"
Barramundi	Yelka-thachiyang	?	Nr
Naked Woman	Uuk-mungk	?	Mn
Naked Man	South of Um-thunhth	?Mn	Mn
Children	near Kuntanangk	In	Nr/Mn
Sandy Point	south of Kendall R. mouth	Uw	Mn
Kuntar Tree	Mengany	Mn	Mn
Shovel Shark	Okanycha-thonangam	?	"Mn/Nn etc. mixed"

Abbreviations:

Ay = Wik-Ayangench (i.e., Andjingith),
In = Wik-Iinychany,   Ke = Wik-Keyangan,
Mn = Wik-Mungkan,   Nn = Wik-Ngathan,
                         Pa = Wik-Paach.

Ep = Wik-Ep,
Mm = Kugu-Mumirh,
Nr = Wik-Ngatharr,

Speakers of each language sing songs in all the other languages as well as their own. But in only six out of sixteen songs on which I have the requisite data does the language of the song match that of the site's primary custodians. In two cases the song's language is identified tentatively as 'perhaps'; in one case the language is said to be Y and Z 'mixed' (Y and Z are very different languages) and in two cases the language is said to be 'all different languages mixed' or 'Z, P, Q, R etc. languages mixed'. I also noticed there was in fact often some reluctance to identify the language of these sacred songs, a reluctance completely absent in the case of the secular Island-style songs composed and sung in the region.[3]

Strehlow (1971:198-9) discusses something similar for Central Australia. He found that prose words (i.e. everyday words) from other languages are used as poetic synonyms in songs, and also that:

> Often whole couplets have been composed in a language different from that spoken normally by the singers. The mingling of two different languages in certain Central Australian songs does not seriously inconvenience the natives whose property they are (because of their bilingualism).

Other examples of this phenomenon can be found elsewhere (e.g., western New South Wales, Donaldson, 1984:247-8). For this reason I question the uncritical use of language-based titles such as 'Wik-Mungkan music' or 'Aranda Music'. Even if such categories occur in Aboriginal discourse, this simply means that they must be treated as important elements for analysis, not substituted for analysis.

The common feature of the cases dealt with in this section might be described as an apparent contrast between part of the cultural content of a song and the cultural identification of its primary custodians.

Song Word Stability, Song Gloss Instability

The words of Aboriginal songs are described in the literature as ranging from being, at the one extreme, fairly transparently drawn from everyday speech but often with minor poetic modifications and grammatical simplifications, to being marked by what, at the other extreme, Strehlow called "The curse of absolute unintelligibility" (1971:202-3). In between there are cases of foreign or mixed languages (e.g. Berndt, 1951:86; Strehlow, 1971:200; Donaldson, 1979:75); assertions that archaic[4] poetic or obsolete synonyms are being employed (e.g. R. Berndt, 1976; 44; Strehlow, 1971:Part Two); and statements to the effect that, while words may be glossed, the glosses are often generalised to a whole verse rather than being word-specific (e.g. Strehlow, 1971: 195). Glosses may vary a good deal between Aboriginal exponents, and may also vary over time (e.g. R. Berndt, 1951:87; Elkin, 1974:292).[5] In some cases a song appears to have been transmitted over a long distance and modified both in form and interpretation so that variants co-exist (e.g. Berndt, 1951:86; Meggitt, 1966:27). Some glosses are more esoteric than others, so that a single song may be interpreted at more than one level (e.g. Berndt, 1951:88). Several writers stress the essential point that songs may have both great formal stability and unstable glosses.[6]

Song Word References, Myth References

Strehlow (1971:146-63) presents detailed evidence of contrasts between mythic narratives and songs in their treatment of identical subject matter in Central Australia:

> The prose myth gives a coherent story of a legendary totemic ancestor (or group of ancestors) from the time of his (or their) birth to the time of his (or their) final falling asleep. It lists all the places he visited in his wanderings and lays down the route of his travels with high geographical accuracy. For the trails of the ancestors fix the totems and totemic centres of their present-day human reincarnations, thereby assigning to them their proper inalienable legal rights in native society (1971:146-7).

Of the Emianga Myth and its song he wrote:

> The song, though it contains no geographical information by way of place-names, does give a few scenic details. Very few of the place-names mentioned in the myth have found their way into the songs (1971:158-77).

> The myth must tell a coherent and intelligible story which fits in with the scenery of the countryside. It must also fit in with other myths and recognise the ceremonial rights of totemic centres belonging to other clans (1971:159).

Mythic narratives, as Strehlow says, explain the formation of sacred objects, for example, but:

> The song ignores explanatory episodes of this type. Its verses refer almost exclusively to those actions of the ancestors that have either a ceremonial or magical value (1971:160, emphasis added).

Richard Moyle found with the Alyawarra that:

> While spoken accounts of the same myth may vary their points of emphasis or even omit particular sections, the song texts are considered inviolate, and their contents the highest order of proof to which one may have recourse (1983:92).

Margaret Clunies Ross (1982a:5) describes the song words of north central Arnhem Land as 'highly allusive', and although myth telling is also often allusive it is I think generally true in Australia that mythic references in songs are far more oblique than in the words of spoken narratives. A myth will tend to specify who was doing what at what place, although clues as to the identity of the personage or the precise name of the place are often more obscure in the telling than expected by the ethnographer.

Songs are usually even more cryptic. A song will very frequently refer simply to some aspect of the action of the mythical being, or perhaps the scent of the vegetation of the place, or the prevailing weather at the time of the event, but without tying any of these explicitly to both particular beings and sites all at once. The latter is usually done, if at all, by the participants using everyday language in a narrative or comment.

This contrast facilitates the often recorded practice of a single ceremony or song being matched to rather different myths or myth variants by different people. Meggitt says that:

> In the opinion of the Walbiri, totemic myths and songs are inseparable. . . .There (sic) songs therefore serve as mnemonic aids and are particularly useful in this respect when myths are long and detailed. In turn the myths fill out the content of the somewhat cryptic song series so that, ideally, there is a perfect isomorphism between songs and myth incidents. . . .Thus Roheim (1934:84ff) states that the Aboriginal prose myth has a précis of songs, the songs reproduce episodes of the myth, and the sequence of songs is the sequence of ancestral wanderings (i.e. Dreaming tracks from site to site). Similarly, Berndt (1951:17, 89) notes that the northern Big Sunday songs are key patterns that suggest ideas and are not detailed accounts of events or topics; but he also says that in northeast Arnhem Land the song and ceremonial sequences are not necessarily the same. Among the Walbiri, ideally they should be, but in fact there may be a considerable and apparently unnoticed divergence (1966:25).

The same kind of divergence was found at Port Keats by W.E.H. Stanner in the 1930s. Stanner studied a ceremony and its associated mythology and found that, although "we have the natural expectation that the two will fit together", in fact "the myth and the rite do not match each other . . . in all particulars" (1966:42). Stanner emphasised that (1966:51) "What one is thus studying is a moment in the development of cult". He did not, however, subscribe to the view that such developments were "merely changes or movements over time" but instead asserted that the key processes were "developments from one state or situation or condition to another, such that new and old belong to the same order but are qualitatively distinct, the old not yet quite annulled and the new not quite familiar. The developments are also attained through a train or sequence of opposed acts or operations". And Stanner concluded that "We thus seem required to characterize the sequence as "dialectical'" (1964:52).

DISCUSSION

I suggest that the apparently anomalous relationships between cultural forms discussed above derive part of their vitality in Aboriginal culture from their very status as anomalies. They facilitate

competition, co-operation, social control, and ordered territorial
change; and they do so by rubbing against simple isomorphic and easily
'readable' relationships between sets of people, symbols and resources.
It is the dialectical interplay of both regularities and irregularities
which constitutes the system.

Stanner (1966:164-5) opposed the hypothesis that Murinbata society
or culture was a 'unified system' or an 'organic' or 'integrated whole'.
He contended that "in Murinbata life there were only workings towards
system and transient captures of unity", and that the society was
characterised by "the struggle between circumstance and principle,
identity and relation, [and] independence and interdependence".
Without questioning this view, which I think is true of traditional
Aboriginal society as a whole, I wish to emphasise that contradictions
may themselves be systematic and integral to a society's means of self
maintenance.[7] Ambiguity and indeterminacy are 'normal' characteristics
of human cultures (Harris, 1969:582-9), and, like contradictions, they
seem to encounter a somewhat reluctant acceptance by system-oriented
anthropologists.

In order to shed some light on the above claims, it would be useful
if we could test some minor hypotheses which flow from them.

Let us consider, for example, the proposition that rights in songs
which, so to speak, 'cross into other peoples' territories', facilitate
among other things the gradual flow of politically and ceremonially
successful people toward areas of greater economic resources than those
possessed by their immediate forebears. In Moyle's Alyawarra data
(1983), it is notable that while many Dreamings enter or leave Agharringa
country on the north or west, only a few link it to the south, and
there are hardly any links at all on the east. It is perhaps undesirable
sandhill country. To the north, for example, are the relatively well-
favoured Kaytej lands. Such a Dreaming pattern, while underpinning the
political and economic status quo, also provides ample scope for a
religious mechanism of succession to better country.

I have documented such a mechanism operating in the Murranji Track
area. There, certain people from a very arid semi-desert background
were in the early 1980s actively pursuing a ceremonial complex which
links them north to the region of the richer (and now, better-serviced
Birdum/Warloch Ponds area of the upper Roper River system. To the
north-west are people of a similar background whose ceremonial emphasis
is very much on Dreamings which link them to the Victoria River basin
and its well-favoured coast. In these and other cases (e.g. western
Cape York Peninsula) the direction taken by the Dreaming (and hence
that of the site/song sequence) in the cult complex facilitating succession
is away from, not towards, the direction of land of greatest desirability.
Identifying themselves with such a Dreaming, as men may do in the
Murranji case, and speaking of it in the first person, it is thus
possible for them to say: "I come from there". Claims of origin
always have the potential to become claims of possession. Moves of
this kind are taking place in the region.

Mervyn Meggitt (1962:288-9) and Stephen Wild (1971:115-7, 129-30) have documented a similar process whereby Warlpiri people were in the 1950s and 1960s establishing 'ritual validation' of a northward move into 'traditional Gurindji country' (Wild, ibid.). Other examples are provided for Docker River by Woenne (1977:62), for Mount Margaret by Stanton (1983), for Yandeearra by Palmer (1983), and for Balgo by Myers (1986:43, 60). (I do not have sufficient data on the song series involved in a wide spread of cases to test whether or not the direction in which the Dreamings move along their tracks is generally an important factor in succession). These are cases of post-contact migration but there is no real evidence that greatly innovative religious principles are being invoked by the Aboriginal people concerned.

Now let us consider another minor hypothesis, which is that song gloss instability and obscurity are deliberate devices used in the control of religious ideology by its masters. It is still necessary to take issue with the view that the obscurity and specialisation of song words, and the changeableness of song meanings, rest mainly on what might be called an 'accidental' basis. By that I mean an appeal to some kind of inherent gerontocratic conservatism and to processes of gradual unconscious historical development.

Strehlow goes part way towards avoiding this stereotypical explanation when he says (1971:197) that the "atmosphere of religious secrecy which envelops the native songs" stands in the way of translation of song words, and he points out that younger men are actively discouraged from asking questions about song meanings (1971: 197-8).

At one point Strehlow (1971:126-8) says that sacred song words needed to be esoteric so as to mask them in the same way ritual celebrants disguised themselves when impersonating supernatural beings, in order to avoid sacrilege. He also says that "Central Australian aboriginal verse was . . . largely the handmaiden of religion; and religious formulae and magic charms have always gained much of their air of mystery, venerability, and authority from their dark and archaic language" (1971:718). But he contrasts this form of obscurity, springing "almost entirely from [the poetry's] highly specialised vocabulary", with what he calls "deliberate acts of interference with the normal structure of English sentences" that have given rise to much of the obscurity of modern English poems (1971:718-9, emphasis added).

What Strehlow seems to be saying here, cumulatively, is that the obscurity of Aboriginal songs is basically a matter of lexical specialisation and gradual processes of change and diffusion. The obscurity caused in these ways survives because it is advantageous to those in charge and serves as a device for avoiding sacrilege, as well as because the songs are believed to be unchanging and are thus clung to.

For many, no doubt, clinging to obfuscation may well be an unreflective duty. For some, I suggest, obscurities are devices deliberately maintained, recreated and fostered. Mystification is critical to the control of change. And change, in this case, means not merely musical change, but changes in political power and economic opportunities.[8]

Strehlow did, however, say that "the diction of Central Australian verse belongs consciously to a realm of its own" (1971:207, emphasis added). Going perhaps a little further, Margaret Clunies Ross suggests, for north central Arnhem Land, the possibility that "grammatically built-in ambiguity has been deliberately cultivated" in song language there (1982b:15, emphasis added). More generally, she says of Aboriginal song words that "clarity and precision on the semantic level seems often deliberately eschewed, the more so the more esoteric the subject matter" (1983:23, emphasis added). Such attempts to suggest rational and creative motivations, rather than mere adherence to the practices of the past, are supported by increasing evidence which allows more of the ethnographic facts to be explained.

Spencer and Gillen (1938:11-15) appear to have been somewhat ambivalent on this question of change. On the one hand, they say that "As amongst all savage tribes the Australian native is bound hand and foot by custom. What his fathers did before him that he must do. If during the performance of a ceremony his ancestors painted a white line across the forehead, that line he must paint". On the other hand, they then spend several pages explaining how certain able and influential men introduce changes "in face of the rigid conservatism of the native". They confess, though, that they have "no definite proof" of "the actual introduction by this means of any fundamental change of custom".

Meggitt found among the Warlpiri (1966:27-28) that one had to make a distinction between an Aboriginal tradition that songs do not change, and the kind of change one can actually document, such as the replacement of songs containing stylised phrases which have been used as names by recently deceased people. Worsley (1967:148-50) has documented the composition of new totemic songs on Groote Eylandt. Replacement, modification and invention certainly occur, and I question Moyle's assertion (1983:92) that "there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Alyawarra claims that the songs are as they always have been". A truly unchanging musical tradition would have had far-ranging destructive effects on a tradition Aboriginal community. An evolving musical tradition in such a society is not merely decorative but essential.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have suggested that one must resist the temptation to represent neatly matching or aligned cultural forms as 'the system' and thus to treat anomalous relations between such forms as 'exceptions'. I argue that while it is true that a song, its language medium, and its site and totemic referents, are often very neatly matched with the language, owned sites and totemic affiliations of the song's various

owners/singers, there are plenty of examples where they are not. Song
glosses vary with time, place and interpreter, and at a single place
and time may contradict the narrative version of the same myth. Where
such anomalies are perceived to exist, attempts may be made by Aborigines
to tidy up the system or bring it up to date (e.g. so that site rights
match ceremonial rights or vice versa). Frequently, however, no such
attempt is made, and divergences may continue "apparently unnoticed"
(Meggitt, 1966:25).

If one is bold enough to confront Aboriginal people with such
apparent anomalies, one is usually met with the answer that this is how
it was left to us by 'the old people', or by mythical beings. This is
a rational response, rather than merely a fobbing-off of the need to
explain. An appeal to the ancestors is, among other things, the
expression of a desire to place decision-making of this order beyond
mere personal or mundane whim.

If the ceremonial and mythical orders change far less quickly
than demographic and political fortunes would seem to require, this
should not be surprising. Just as there is a significant gap between
the caste structure and the organisation of power and resources in
Indian society (Dumont, 1972), so Aboriginal symbolic traditions
centred on the identities, territories, and histories of human beings
have strands which seem to follow a trajectory of their own, resistant
to the destabilising effects of instant or popular manipulation, and
thus semi-independent of the political and demographic realities.
Accidentalist explanations of such 'uncorrected anomalies' and semi-
detached traditions to a significant extent miss the point. Aboriginal
musical culture is socially and ideologically constituted, not merely
by knowledge, power and order, but by the interaction of these with
innocence, ignorance, exclusion and disorder. Anomaly, paradox,
contradiction and mystery are central devices of such a system.

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NOTES

1. The concept of dialectics has played a major role in the history of social theory, especially since Marx (see Swingewood, 1975: 11-32; Murphy, 1972). "...As a result of the dialectic aspects of Marx's scheme, dysfunctional ingredients are not only accommodated, but assigned a central role as system-changing variables. Such variables are functional in a diachronic sense, since they are responsible for the emergence of a new adaptive system out of the old" (Harris, 1969:235).

2. This bird, known as Storm Bird in the English of the area, is the Channel-Billed Cuckoo, Scythrops novae hollandiae, and is known in Mudbura as Kurrawkurrawka, and in Djingulu (the language of the Djingili) as Kurrakurriji. See further Sutton, 1983: Sutton, Coltheart & McGrath, 1983. When writing languages' names and — quoting material in them I follow my sources' spellings, except where speakers of the language concerned now have their own preferred practical orthography (e.g. Warlpiri). For material in languages of western Cape York, I use the practical orthography described in Sutton (1978:234-42).

3. Not only the language but also the individual composer of an 'Island-dance' song is identified, as is the case further south at Kowanyama (see Alpher, 1976:79). Such songs are far more politically neutral and less potentially divisive than those concerned with clans and sites. The creation of sacred songs in Australia is generally attributed to Dreamings or totemic ancestors rather than to particular people (e.g. Strehlow, 1971:126, 244). I regard this 'distancing' as an essential reason also for the use of non-language-specific song language.

4. I question recourse to the term 'archaic' in the absence of proper historical-linguistic argumentation. As far as I am aware, only one scholar has demonstrated true linguistic archaism in Australian songs (Alpher, 1976, on Yir Yoront songs, Cape York Peninsula). Strehlow's suppositions about Aranda archaisms (1971:200) are not exemplified by reconstructed roots or attested sound change rules. See also Donaldson (1979:76).

5. Contemporaneous gloss instability sometimes makes the term 'translation' a misnomer (e.g. see Borsboom, 1978:185-6).

6. This may vary between types of song. Berndt (1976:47), for example, contrasts the possibly high retention of the same words in imported Djarada songs in north-east Arnhem Land with the level of personal innovation in the wording of the more indigenous cycles.

7. Contradictions are seldom damaging to religious belief, and perhaps have the opposite effect. Ernest Gellner (1968:257-8) says that one of the characteristics of successful ideologies is that they include "a great absurdity, a violent intellectual resistance-generating offensiveness" at some point. "The swallowing of an absurdity is, in the acceptance of an ideology, what a painful rite de passage is in joining a tribal group -- the act of commitment, the investment of emotional capital which ensures that one does not leave it too easily. . . .it is only essential that, at the beginning, and perhaps in some measure always, [the intellectually offensive characteristics] should be difficult to accept." Cf. also Bateson, 1973, especially pp. 113-4).

8. Cf. Stanner, 1966:168-9: In point of fact, "the tradition was constantly adapted to new sacra and new distribution of values, and political force was used to impose and maintain such assimilations. In that situation the appeal to an authoritative ground had its conveniences for those who guarded and interpreted the tradition and, as I have shown, the custodians used their positions repressively, on occasions abusively. But a cynical evaluation of those facts would not be warranted. This was not a society in which political institutions had separated. There was no intellectual detachment from beliefs: 'believing' was not itself a test of religiosity; and fanaticism had not developed concerning particular formations of belief -- indeed, there could be no fanaticism since apparently dispute about the mysteries did not occur. If one can speak of an 'innocent' authoritarianism, this was it." Here, Stanner was writing of the Murinbata of Port Keats, but his statements seem to me true of traditional Aboriginal religion generally.

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Margaret Clunies Ross, Tamsin Donaldson and Stephen A. Wild

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