A LACK OF PARALLELISM BETWEEN SONG AND DANCE, SINGER AND DANCER, IN TWO FORMS OF ABORIGINAL PERFORMANCE

> ... individuals represent themselves in more or less heightened ways ... While they may exhibit some of the features of their eponymous animal species, they dance as men -- or, perhaps more accurately, as spirits, or as revealing their own spiritual essence ...
>
> John von Sturmer

This paper attempts to discover whether von Sturmer's notion (1987:69) of a disjunction -- a lack of parallelism -- between song and dance, singer and dancer in Aboriginal societies of the Western Cape York Peninsula (hereafter, WCYP) can also be applied to those societies in Central Australia whose music and ceremonies have been closely researched: societies such as the Pitjantjatjara and Andagarinja (mainly by C. Ellis, 1969, 1970, 1984), the Aranda (T.G.H. Strehlow, 1947), the Pintupi (by R. Moyle, 1979) and the Warlbiri (by S. Wild, 1977, 1984 and 1987).

The phrase "disjunction or a lack of parallelism between song and dance, singer and dancer" needs clarification. Von Sturmer (1988:11) has used it in the sense that dances in WCYP are more marked forms than are songs; there are fewer dance forms than song forms, and far fewer dance performances than song performances. Dances are marked forms, says von Sturmer,[1] because there is a sense in which the dances are "more important" than singing -- they are valued in a different way.

Dancing is a way of giving people a clear, unambiguous social identity, and success or failure in dance performance is crucial in determining the success or failure of the performer as the 'boss' of the dance and the political leader of his community. This is probably what accounts for the scarcity of dance performances, and for the extreme reluctance of the dancer to perform unless all conditions are right, and he can be reasonably assured of a successful performance. Moreover, many WCYP dances are closed; that is, ownership of and participation in the dances are restricted to initiated males of high-ranking birth order and correct family relationships.

Far fewer restrictions surround song performances, and very few restrictions exist regarding who can or cannot sing and which

songs can be sung.2   Also, song performance can exist
independently of dance performances, but the reverse (dances
existing without songs) is unusual; it is almost never the case,
except in Winchinam dances (see infra, p.143).   Even the most
powerful songs, said to have been transmitted from the original
creator beings, are not necessarily controlled by the owners of
the land sites to which they refer, nor are they conceived of
totemically.3   Furthermore, the position of the singer is far
more ambivalent than that of the dancer: singers tend to be
people with no clear-cut social identity in terms of kam waya and
awu4 and their status and prestige seems to depend on their
prowess and ability to sing.

Kin relationships are important structural features of WCYP
life.   The expression of these relationships in dances is visible
through the medium of gestures on the part of the dancers.5
These are most obviously used by women (who usually take the role
of supporting dancers), and kin signs can refer to any man
dancing, or they can indicate individual relationships to the
boss of the dance.   It is, however, performance virtuosity which
seems to stand out among the men as the principal criterion of
status and political prestige.

What von Sturmer implies is that the lack of parallelism
between song and dance is an encoding of a societal set of
values.   Access to knowledge and power, as expressed in the
dances, is in the hands of the boss of the dance.   Only a boss
has access to the dances; the community does not.   Only a boss
has the right to determine if a dance will take place, which
dance will take place and when.   The community is totally
dependent on the power of these bosses. The relationship is an
uneasy one with regard to dance, based on conflict.   There is a
constant tension between dependency and autonomy, with the
powerful figure required to demonstrate, every now and then, his
supremacy through the medium of virtuoso performance.   This does
not happen with songs, which are much less restricted in
performance and, with few exceptions, can be sung by almost
anyone in the community, regardless of their social status or
sex.

In order to ask the question, "can a similar type of social
relationship be said to be encoded in Central Australian songs
and dances?", it is necessary to examine the underlying structure
of the societies of which they are the symbols and to "... look
beyond the signifier to the signified" (Williams, 1987:27).   Of
great importance to Central Australian tribes is their
relationship to their totemic ancestors.   Strehlow, in writing
about the Northern Aranda, notes that:

The story of his own totemic ancestor is to the native the account of his own doings at the beginning of time, at the dim dawn of life, when the world as he knows it now was being shaped and moulded by all-powerful hands (1947:30-31).

In the surrounding landscape are natural features which are constant reminders to Aborigines of the story of their ancestors, who were the creators of these landmarks, whether they are mountains, water-holes, rocks or clumps of trees. It explains the tremendous affinity that the Aranda and other Central Australian Aboriginals have for their ancestral sites and their birth places.

These stories about totemic ancestors form the mythological underpinnings of the Central Australian life, just as they do in WCYP, and they are embodied in song and danced performance. Traditional songs and dances are also said to have been created in the 'Tjukurpa' (Dreaming), a time which is an ever-present reality for the participants and an eternal source of creative power. This power can be tapped by the correct performance of such songs.

Within the clan, people can be either owners of songs, by way of patrilineal descent, or managers, by way of matrilineal descent. Length of residency may also entitle a person to access to a site and its songs, especially in the case of women who, because of marriage, are required to relocate to their husband's sites. Thus, everybody in the clan has rights to certain songlines that are related to their particular ancestral site, either as owners or as managers, and these responsibilities are taken just as seriously as their kin relationships.

Community rights and responsibilities (and also political power) seem to be distributed more equitably within Central Australian clans than in WCYP; as a result, the huge gap that exists in CY between the all-powerful 'big man' and the community dependent on him seems to be less great between clan heads and members in Central Australia.

Eligibility to perform in closed ceremonies is restricted to those initiated people of senior years, of either sex, who have spent many years learning the secret rituals, the meanings of song verses and details concerning secret designs and sacred objects. In contrast to the almost universal exclusion of women from secret WCYP rituals,6 women in Central Australia have always had and continue to have quite strong ceremonial lives of their own. Thus, closed ceremonies exist that are 'women's business', and others are designated as 'men's business'. In some large-scale open ceremonies, both sexes perform songs and dances, many of which incorporate a core of secret ceremonials for either sex.

Secrecy and exclusivity are striking features of Aboriginal attitudes toward dancing and such ceremonial rites as circumcision, initiation and burial. This means that some songs, dances and ceremonies can only be performed or witnessed by those who have the right to know the meaning of the ritual being performed. The manner by way of initiation or by possessing rights as owners or managers in which rules of secrecy and exclusivity are applied sometimes presents conflicting situations.

In Central Australia, there are rigidly secret songs and semi-secret ones. Ellis (1988:289) has noted the difficulty faced by researchers with songlines that are wide-ranging and encompass a number of sacred sites, and which may contain small songs that are secret in some areas but not in others. Also, the same songline, with the same melodic contour and some of the same verse/texts may be used for an open ceremony and for both the men's and women's secret versions of the same songline. The constant overlapping and interlocking of open and secret material in Warlbiri and Pitjantjatjara ritual is somewhat different from the extensively restrictive practices of the Cape York Kugunganhcharra peoples and indicates, I think, a different kind of social structure.

For example, let us look at some of the ways in which space is organised within the dances. Ellis has described Central Australian songlines as being "at one and the same time musical works and maps" (1988:287), which agrees with Williams' assertion that their dances are "... spatially organised by the paradigmatic features of Dreaming tracks" (1987:9). Also, Ellis describes a secret dance performance by Andagaringa women (witnessed at Port Augusta in 1963) which relates the travels of the Two Grub Sisters (1970:103-4). The two dancers begin their performance by marking tracks on the ground with a stick as they dance. These are said to be the ancestral Dreaming tracks of the Two Grub Sisters, and they are said to lead to the ancestral site and thus to the source of power. Once the power has been invoked, the end of the dance is marked by the obliteration of those tracks, in order to conceal the whereabouts of the sacred site and objects and to protect its latent power from misuse.

On the other hand, WCYP wanam dance's use of space indicates a different conceptual orientation and a certain basic need on the part of the members of the community to compete with each other for access to the best estates, and/or to positions of status and prestige. Indeed, the story of the Two Kaa'ungken Brothers includes their travels from estate to estate and describes the events that occur in each of these places via the medium of song and dance. Their adventures basically involve

conflicts between the two brothers; the separations and comings-together, followed by more conflict, in an almost never-ending cycle. It would not be unreasonable to substitute the Christmas Creek mob and the Holroyd mob for the two Kaa'ungken Brothers and their jockeying for favoured sites and estates. The Wallaby Dance illustrates just this sort of manoeuvring, when, after the two lines of wallaby dancers have passed through the legs of the two leader/hunters in an enactment of a kind of death/rebirth ritual, the last wallaby refuses to do likewise. It is then that the two leaders and the other dancers close in around the last wallaby in a dense, tightly-packed circle. Von Sturmer takes the view that the last wallaby is the representation of the Kugu-uthu mob, and the two bosses (the hunters in the dance) are fighting over who will be the host for this mob. The dance abruptly ends after the formation of the dense circle, and the dancers disperse.7 In a sense, it is the last wallaby who ends up controlling the performance, since it is about him that prior events occur in the space internal to the dance. As it is only a member of the Kugu-uthu mob who can be the last wallaby, once again, it would not be unreasonable to substitute the totem of this clan for the last wallaby and the circle of milling dancers for the community, dependent on the power of the 'bosses' to dispense special favours. Instead of the two lines of dancers led by the two hunters, who close in around the last wallaby, let us substitute them for opposing clans constantly jockeying for favoured sites in an on-going conflict. The abrupt end of the dance could be viewed as a representation of the fact that no group successfully wins favours and that the general social conflict in the community as a whole remains unresolved.

By way of contrast, in the String Dance, space is used in a linear fashion to represent the various levels of the social hierarchy. Thus, the representatives of fish sites dance forward in single file; each dancer holds onto the string in a specified order. The first and last fish on the line are always represented by a 'big man', and the dancers in between signify actual territorial sites. It is believed that the order of closeness to the 'big man' represents the level of social status of that dancer within the clan. Once again, there is the notion of dependency on a leader, and dependency for identity, albeit not always an equal dependency, for some community members are more dependent than others.

Of significance is von Sturmer's assertion that whilst traditional wanam songs are said to "invoke the spirit", it is "... the power of the dance [which] demonstrates its [spirit] presence" (1987:71). This power can be dangerous to strangers who must be protected by being rubbed with the under-arm smell of the boss of the dance. These dances are revelatory by nature and very intense. Indeed, a valued and successful performance is one

where the dancer is possessed, in a kind of 'frenzy' and apparently out of control, so that the participants feel that they are indeed in the presence of the mythical traveller-heroes.

In Central Australia, however, it is the power of the Song which releases the forces of production and reproduction, which are necessary to ensure the harmony, well-being and the fertility of the clan and their estate (Payne, 1984:266). By 'song' is meant not only music, vocal text and other musical components that are usually associated with songs, but also dancing and such extra-musical features as body painting of secret symbols and the display of ritual objects. According to Ellis, singing can only occur when the totality of all musical and extra-musical events meets certain structural requirements and occurs correctly and simultaneously (1984:152). At that moment, the singer calls on the creative power of the Dreaming by 'naming' the ancestral Beings, which then releases the forces of change. What is important is the intricate interlocking and overlapping of all the elements of the ceremonial in order to achieve the desired result. In the Andagarinja women's secret Emu Ceremony, Ellis notes the dancers only appeared when the painting of the correct design on their bodies was complete (1970:184). At this point, the singers were told to lower their eyes so as not to look at the dancers until dancing, song and design could be presented simultaneously. The song for the painting verses could no longer be sung, and the song for the dance could not be sung independently of the dance. The dancers often come out to the dancing area with bodies and painting covered and head bowed and stay curled up, hidden, until the first moment of singing. At that moment, they simultaneously stand, discard the covering, reveal their painted bodies, and begin to dance (Ellis, 1984:183).

Interlocking of material is done in various ways: for instance, use is made of cyclical processes in textual repetition in the songs. Texts are overlapped and repeated when the repetitive cycle must be broken for a breath, melody and texts are interlocked, and Ellis notes that no two structural features of a song verse change simultaneously unless to act as a musical marker (1984:183). In the Emu Ceremony, overlap occurs also when a song verse describing a particular dance is placed just before the performance of that dance. The dance that follows is the representation of the story described in the preceding song verse, thus providing continuity of performance. Overlap occurs by the accompaniment of that dance by a verse of a totally different meaning to the dance and to the meaning indicated by the body designs and the previous verse. Also, whilst dance verses tended to be accompanied by a distinctive rhythmic pattern, no such distinction was made in the melodic contour, which was the same as for purely sung verses. However, different

melodic contours are used to distinguish verses used to accompany body-painting sessions (Ellis, 1970:131-169, Part II).

Another example of interlocking of ceremonial material can be seen in some of the Warlbiri rituals, in which male managers (Kurdungurlu) dance in a generalized travelling style that is usually performed by women, all the while imitating women's cries. Wild believes that this expresses "the opposition and complementarity of men's and women's roles", the fertile and nurturing role of women, and it "satisfies men's need to symbolically appropriate women's procreative powers" (1977-8:21).

Such overlapping and interconnections of material in Central Australian ceremonies suggests that no one element is powerful on its own and in its own right, but depends on the other elements in order for the successful revelation of the power of the song to occur. Ceremonies and dances are the responsibility of the entire community, who take great pride in the successful execution of the elaborate body painting and secret designs and in the successful performance of songs and dances. It is the harmonious interlocking of all the elements of a ceremony that is considered all important. At a deeper level, it is a reflection of the harmonious interdependence of all the elements that make up a Central Australian social group; of bosses and managers, of men and women, of totemic ancestral beings and ancestral sites. It is harmony and interdependence on all levels that appears to be crucial to the well-being of the clan in Central Australia.

One is therefore led to the conclusion that it is this interlocking mechanism of song and dance in Central Australian ceremonies that precludes the notion of a disjunction or a lack of parallelism between the two. Although some secret songs are considered to be powerful enough to call forth the power of the ancestral spirits, dances in Central Australia are not considered to be able to achieve this. It is the successful combining of song and dance in an elaborate ritual that is considered necessary to invoke the power of the ancestor. Nevertheless, of the two genres, only song can be performed independently of dance, and Central Australian tribes refer themselves to the 'power of the song' that must be revered.

In contrast, Cape York songs and dances show a certain degree of fragmentation and little evidence of interlocking structures between the two. Von Sturmer8 has noted that Winchinam dances are performed without song or accompanying beats, only with ritual calls and grunts, and von Sturmer says that if an underlying rhythm exists, it is imperceptible according to Western perceptions of rhythmic coherence.

Von Sturmer has also said about the Frill-Necked Lizard Dance,9 which has no myth to account for its existence, that the accompanying verse has nothing to do with the two <u>Kaa-ungken</u> brothers. While this may be a deliberate obscuring of the deeper meanings inherent in the performance, it is also entirely possible that the dance was conceived of for its own sake, as a manifestation of its owner's power and as an independent entity in its own right.

Lack of parallelism and compatibility appear also to affect the status of relations between the boss of the dance and the singer, so that the elevated status of dance over song might be said to symbolise the elevated status of men over women and of the 'big man' over the community. The elevated status of dance is no doubt due to the belief in WCYP communities that, in dancing, the dancer does not merely <u>invoke</u> the power of the ancestor, as occurs in song, but that <u>he</u> is the ancestor. This accounts for the high level of esteem accorded to the boss of the dance by the whole community. The relative scarcity of dance forms over the proliferation of songs has its counterpart in the political dominance of the few over the many, with the 'right to know' firmly in the hands of those powerful few.

These are only a few of the interpretations that could be made about the social and religious implications underlying the disjunction between song and dance in WCYP. It does appear that this disjunction does not extend to Central Australia or that, if it does, its existence would be probably of minor significance to the social and religious structures in that area.

If it is true that "... dances provide us with encapsulations of ontological facts" (Williams, 1987:27), then it is not enough to view Aboriginal song and danced forms only as cultural texts of their societies; rather, one must be aware of what the meaning and substance of the rituals are. They have deep religious and political significance for the people who own and perform them; therefore, they must be seen to function as semantic 'signifiers', which encode the set of values of that society.

One must therefore conclude from the material surveyed to date and the evidence so far presented that the disjunction between song and dance in WCYP is significant in that it must be seen as the embodiment of a state of constant tension and conflict in that society; of elements formerly considered to be central and vital to the continuing existence of traditional social and religious values of that society, now in danger of disintegration and extinction.

One must also conclude that there is no evidence to suggest that this disjunction extends to traditional Central Australian societies. Rather, this apparent lack of disjunction between song and dance in Central Australia indicates a society which is seeking to survive by overlapping and interlocking its social and religious structures in such a way that all vital elements function together harmoniously for the benefit of the whole.

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NOTES

1. Von Sturmer in a personal communication following a lecture on 24 October, 1988.

2. The exceptions to this are injunctions which may be imposed on songs and performances after the death of particular persons.

3. I am aware of the issues surrounding the term 'totem' in social anthropology, but this is not the place to enter into discussion of them. I have used the terms that the ethnographers whom I cite use.

4. Von Sturmer describes "kam waya" as a totemic relationship of people to people within a clan, and "awu" as the relationship of people to a place or a site.

5. These gestures are not really part of the dances' vocabulary, although they are used in the dance. They are a separate system of signs to indicate kin relations which are used in many contexts in everyday life.

6. Women sometimes sing songs which, when expressed in dance, are strictly forbidden to them; however, they may themselves dance to these songs in open and unrestricted contexts. They may also sing for male dancers in similar contexts. However, although some women may have some knowledge of closed rituals, they are not permitted to participate in or witness these secret ceremonial performances. Furthermore, men steadfastly refuse to acknowledge that some women might have somehow got access to such knowledge. Access to restricted ceremonies is only given to adult initiated males, and in some cases, such males must be of high-ranking birth order, and with the right family relationships.

7. Von Sturmer in a personal communication during a lecture on 24 October, 1988.

8. Von Sturmer in a personal communication during a lecture on 24 October, 1988.

9. Von Sturmer, in a lecture on 25 October, 1988, concerning the appearance of the Frill-necked Lizard Dance in the Film of the Lockhart Dance Festival, 1974, AIAS Canberra, Australia.

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