

TO SING THEIR VOICES ETERNAL

Why we need a national recording project for Indigenous performance in Australia



Djangbirrkpuy Yunupingu, Neparrnga Gumbula, Munggulla Gaykamangu, Baltha Gaykamangu and Mong-gunu Gumbula recording at Djiliwirri [Photograph, Aaron Corn, 2004]

Voices of Eternity

The creek-side glade in which we sit is humid yet cooled by a light breeze. It shelters us from the early afternoon sun as the pure glassy water of the creek flows peacefully behind the musicians before me and the towering sacred *mayku* (paperbark tree) behind them. Their ensemble is clear, deliberate and beautifully nuanced as it reverberates through my headphones. Seconds stretch into hours on the display of my digital audio recorder. My own awareness of time stretches with them and I lose myself in the delicately-intertwined voices of the singers. Their melismatic lines gracefully permute around the ideal of a singular melody above the anchoring rhythms of their unison *bilma* (paired sticks) and *yidaki* (didjeridu) accompanist.

The performance that reaches me through microphone, recorder and headphones resonates with the environment surrounding us. The birds, the wind, the insects and the water are as much a part of the living ensemble I hear as the musicians themselves. The songs they perform are not just songs from any place or time. They are *manikay* (songs) from this place: from the glade in which we sit, from the creek that runs by it, and from the forest, hills, lagoons and wetlands that surround it.

The musicians' songs are their own—passed in unbroken inheritance from the original ancestors who shaped, observed, named and populated the Yolngu homelands of NE Arnhem Land in northern Australia; yet the music I hear echoes with every generation of people who have ever sat here. The musicians would later tell me that they could feel the hairs of their napes standing as the ancestors who remain eternally present and sentient in country observed their performance from the creek behind. Following ancestral precedent in this way is not only a way of communing with these eternal ancestors and sharing in their intelligence but of upholding their law through the ceremonial performance of *manikay*.

The country in which we sit is called Djiliwirri and it is the sacred capital of the Gupapuyngu: the Yolngu clan into which I am adopted. The four singers are my adoptive fathers—Baltha Gaykamangu, Neparrnga Gumbula, Munggulla Gaykamangu and Dhamanydji Gaykamangu—and their *yidaki* accompanist, Gutayi Dhamarrandji, is a son of their sister. We have been drawn here by these Elders to explore and record fine details

of the holistic relationships between language, songs, dances, designs, ceremonies, people and country held by the Gupapuyngu Yolngu using cutting-edge digital audio, video, photography, GPS-mapping and data-storage technologies.

Inspiration for this family initiative, called the Gupapuyngu Legacy, comes from the singers' prolific father, Djäwa, who passed away in 1983 having served as leader of the Yolngu community at Milinginbi for four decades. Having been photographed by W. Lloyd Warner and T. T. Webb in 1926, Djäwa features in the earliest archived records of Yolngu culture following the establishment of the first mission to the Yolngu at Milinginbi in 1922. He was later photographed by Donald Thomson in 1937, recorded singing *manikay* by Alice Moyle in 1962 and filmed leading a ceremony by Cecil Holmes in 1963. Yet, despite his prominence in the archived record of Arnhem Land, only a small fraction of the law that he spent his entire life upholding was recorded.

Those records that Djäwa did leave behind for his descendants are highly valued. His children, now Elders themselves, have been inspired by his paintings to re-introduce forgotten elements of hereditary design to their own ceremonial and commercial work. The delicate nuances of *manikay* recorded by Moyle and passages of ceremony filmed by Holmes have been similarly re-integrated into routine ceremonial practice as well as professional performances at premier events such as the Garma Festival of Traditional Culture and WOMADelaide.

The contemporary Gupapuyngu ambition is to build on this legacy to create a comprehensive record of all hereditary names, songs, dances and designs and their relationships to ceremonies, people and country. Here at Djilwirri in August 2005, we work towards this ambition. We make the first comprehensive recordings of Gupapuyngu *manikay*, plot the country's sacred sites using GPS technology for the very first time, and film Elders' interpretations of these sites and their sacred links to hereditary law.

We are joined in these endeavours by family young and old who flocked to Djilwirri to share in the experience of rediscovering this deeply remote pristine homeland. For some, and especially the young, it is their very first visit and the records we make here will travel with them through life as lasting reminders of their forebears' knowledge. These young people will one day inherit the heavy burden of sustaining their traditions into the future. Their direct personal connections to the records made here by their Elders will be a ready source of strength and sustenance on which

they can draw in this endeavour. Also joining us are colleagues from Museum Victoria and the Australian National University who remind us of the family's past with records made by Thomson in the 1930s and Ian Keen in the 1970s. Our own records of our time at Djilwirri will contribute to this material legacy. From the earliest photograph by Thomson to the youngest person at Djilwirri, the entire material record encompassed by this excursion spans eight decades and six generations.

Challenges and Strategies

Djilwirri is but one country amid thousands across remote Australia worthy of this treatment. The Gupapuyngu are but one of sixty-odd Yolngu clans while the Yolngu of NE Arnhem Land are themselves but one of dozens of Indigenous peoples who continue to speak traditional Australian languages. With not one of these languages spoken by more than 10,000 people, all are considered endangered by international standards. The various song and dance traditions such as *manikay* that continue to be practised alongside these languages are similarly challenged. The traditional economies that sustained these traditions throughout most of Australia a century ago are now all but gone through mission, state and commercial interventions making it increasingly difficult and expensive, in monetary terms, for many families to access remote homelands.

The repeated threat of state funding cuts to remote Indigenous communities makes this situation seem even more dire. Among the numerous Elders from across Arnhem Land with whom I work, there are genuine concerns that it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain those song and dance traditions that remain current. The final attrition of these traditions is something that none of them wish to witness in their lifetimes. Their loss would herald the disappearance of some of the finest esoteric performance traditions in the world and render vast bodies of living classical knowledge about the Australian continent, not to mention the human condition itself, forever inaccessible. All that would remain would be the transnational cult of the singerless didjeridu: a fetishised simulacrum of Australian 'Indigeneity' that is ubiquitous to commercials, souvenir stands, busking precincts and concert halls worldwide yet exists nowhere amid the diverse regionalised performance traditions that once flourished throughout Australia.

To the Elders with whom I work, such losses—such breaches of their ancestral covenant—are unconscionable. To lose their living performance traditions is to lose the functional logic through which ancestral

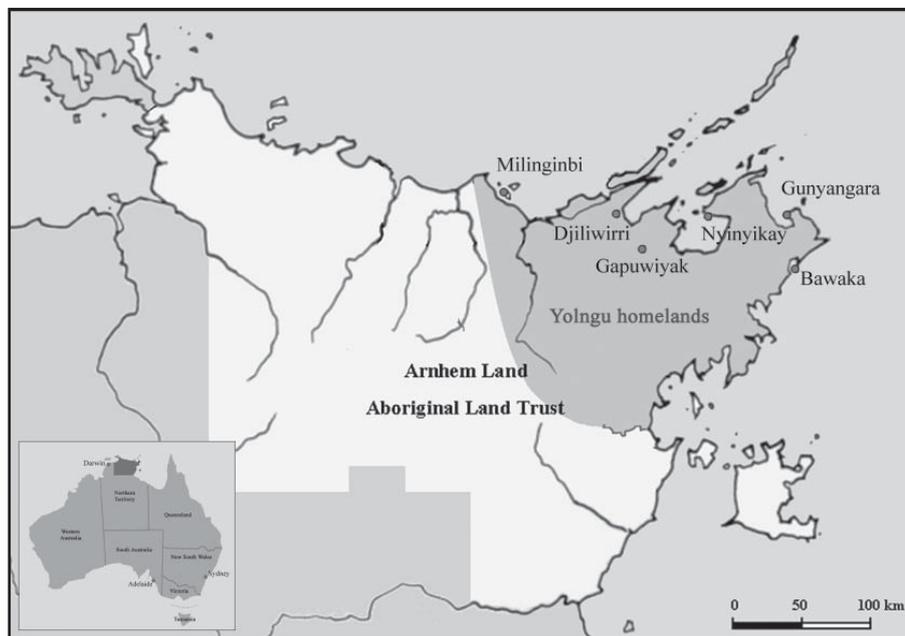
law is exercised and the human experience is sanctified. Their efforts to sustain these unique traditions amid the underlying fiscal poverty of remote Australia, economic and political pressures from without, and personal pressures from within are nothing short of heroic. In Arnhem Land alone, the density of discrete performance traditions and repertoires within them remains very high and the effort required to comprehensively record, document and archive them all can seem insurmountable.

It was in response to such challenges that the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia (NRPIPA) was conceived during the first Symposium on Indigenous Performance at Gunyangara in NE Arnhem Land in August 2002. Convened by Mandawuy Yunupingu, Allan Marett and Marcia Langton, the Symposium was funded by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation (YYF) as part of the fourth Garma Festival of Traditional Culture. It was attended by Indigenous Elders and performers from throughout northern Australia and Papua New Guinea as well as scholars with interests in their performance traditions.

Through our gathering at Gunyangara, we explored an array of possibilities for understanding, recording and disseminating Indigenous performance traditions including live performance and analysis, transcribing and translating song lyrics, re-setting traditional materials in new media, learning and performing and traditional dance, and archival solutions. At the symposium's end, we unanimously resolved that a National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia should be established to:

- ensure that the performance traditions of as many Indigenous performers as possible are held for future generations;
- support the establishment of community archives with storage and retrieval systems that will facilitate the repatriation of digital materials to Indigenous communities;
- publish well-documented and readily-accessible recordings of Indigenous performance repertoires; and
- create new education and employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians. (Marett, Langton & Yunupingu 2002)

The NRPIPA was officially launched by Mandawuy Yunupingu and Jack Thompson at the sixth Garma Festival of Traditional Culture following the third Symposium on Indigenous Performance in August 2004. Its guiding aims are detailed in the Statement on Indigenous Performance which begins with this preamble.



Songs, dances and ceremonial performances form the core of Yolngu and other Indigenous cultures in Australia. It is through song, dance and associated ceremony that Indigenous people sustain their cultures and maintain the Law and a sense of self within the world. Performance traditions are the foundation of social and personal well-being, and with the ever-increasing loss of these traditions, the toll grows every year. The preservation of performance traditions is therefore one of the highest priorities for Indigenous people.

Indigenous songs should also be a deeply valued part of the Australian cultural heritage. They represent the great classical music of this land. These ancient musical traditions were once everywhere in Australia, and now survive as living traditions only in several regions. Many of these are now in danger of being lost forever. Indigenous performances are one of our most rich and beautiful forms of artistic expression, and yet they remain unheard and invisible within the national cultural heritage. Without immediate action many Indigenous music and dance traditions are in danger of extinction with potentially destructive consequences for the fabric of Indigenous society and culture. (Marett, Langton & Yunupingu 2002)

In 2005, two NRPIPA pilot studies were conducted to test and refine strategies devised

during our three initial Symposia on Indigenous Performance in 2002, 2003 and 2004. The first, *Planning for Sustainability*, was in the form of a Linkage Project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) between our core research team—Allan Marett, Marcia Langton, Linda Barwick and myself—and Mandawuy Yunupingu, Witiyana Marika and Alan James of YF. The series of consultative meetings with Indigenous stakeholders and potential partner organisations convened through this study determined that the NRPIPA should:

- be informed by international best practice;
- draw on new technologies in ways that invert conventional relationships between performers, researchers and archivists;
- be driven by local priorities within Indigenous communities rather than the agendas of visiting researchers; and
- aim to empower Indigenous communities by providing new leadership opportunities through its field-recording and documentation operations. (Marett et al. 2006: 86)

It was also determined that primary responsibility for the management of all archived data and rights information collected under the project's auspices should reside with local agencies such as the recently-established Indigenous Knowledge Centres of the Northern Territory with support from key partner organisations such as the Northern Territory Library (NTL). Undertakings were made by the NTL, AIATSIS and the National Library of Australia (NLA) to collaborate in

developing a national archiving infrastructure for the NRPIPA. The NTL and Charles Darwin University (CDU) also committed to working together with Indigenous communities in tailoring training programs to meet the project's overarching recording, documenting and archiving aims (Marett et al. 2006: 86–87).

The second pilot study conducted towards the NRPIPA in 2005 was *Documenting the Realisation of Indigenous Performance Traditions on Country*. It was funded with a University of Sydney Research and Development Grant secured by Allan Marett and myself, and entailed a series of excursions to remote homelands across Arnhem Land to trial, under harsh field conditions, digital recording and documentation processes for potential use in the NRPIPA. In addition to the invaluable insights that we gained to the new possibilities for best practice using digital technologies in the field, these excursions facilitated comprehensive recordings of previously-unrecorded song series of the *manikay* and *kunborrk* traditions in collaboration with local Elders and performers (Marett et al. 2006: 87).

Given the vast scope of the many living Indigenous performance repertoires in Australia yet to be recorded, other studies that have become affiliated with the NRPIPA since its inception include:

- *Preserving Australia's Endangered Heritages: Murrinhpatha Song at Wadeye*, an ARC Discovery-Project involving Linda Barwick, Allan Marett, and linguists Michael Walsh, Nicholas Reid, Lysbeth Ford and Joe Blythe;
- *When the Waters Will Be One: Indigenous Performance Traditions at the New Frontier of Inter-Cultural Discourse in Arnhem Land*, an ARC Discovery Project led by myself in conjunction with Marcia Langton;
- *Yiwarruj, Yinyman, Radbiyi Ida Mali: Iwaidja and Other Endangered Languages of the Cobourg Peninsula (Australia) in Their Cultural Context*, a Volkswagen Endangered Languages Project led by linguists Nicholas Evans and Hans-Jürgen Sasse in conjunction with Linda Barwick, Bruce Birch and Joy Williams;
- *Jaminjungun and Eastern Ngumpin: A Documentation of the Linguistic and Cultural Knowledge of Speakers in a Multilingual Setting in the Victoria River District, Northern Australia*, a Volkswagen Endangered Languages Project led by linguists Eva Schultze-Berndt and Patrick McConnell in conjunction with Allan Marett and Linda Barwick; and
- *The Place of Song in Warlpiri Culture*, an ARC Linkage Project led by anthropologist

Nicolas Peterson and linguist Mary Laughren (Marett et al. 2006: 87–88);

■ *Birrkili Dalkarra: Knowledge Mapping of Birrkili Performance Traditions and the Yingapungapu Public Ceremonial Complex in the Revitalisation of Birrkili Yolngu Law*, a University of Sydney Research and Development Project led by myself and Yolngu Elder Djangirrawuy Garawirtja; and

■ *Elder Assessments of Early Material Culture Collections from Arnhem Land and Contemporary Access Needs to Them among Their Source Communities*, an ARC Discovery Project led by Yolngu Elder Neparrnga Gumbula in conjunction with myself.

Finding Ways Forward

A truly robust NRPIPA will require longer-term development of essential infrastructural needs. National and regional advisory boards are required to coordinate the planning and prioritisation of individual recording and documentation operations while a national and regionalised infrastructure for archiving collected materials is essential to their ongoing access among source communities and other potential users. However, on a more fundamental level, the NRPIPA will wither completely without continuing input from healthy, cohesive and economically stable Indigenous communities throughout remote Australia where the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations can continue organically with reinforcement from the archival records that are generated.

A growing factor in such bids for cultural survival among remote Indigenous communities is outreach to new audiences, patrons and support networks for their song and dance traditions. Among the key successes of the Garma Festival of Traditional Culture has been to draw international attention to the Indigenous performance traditions of remote Australia through its focal programme of daily ceremony as well as its parallel support for the Symposium on Indigenous Performance and the NRPIPA (YF 2006). This premier event has also spawned a new wave of family-operated micro-tourism initiatives on deeply-remote homeland centres such as Bawaka and Nyinyikay where visitors are offered immersive cultural experiences in which traditional Yolngu song and dance are integral.

Creative exchanges between prolific Australian musicians and gifted traditional performers such as the Australian Art Orchestra's current collaborative work with the Ngukurr community in SE Arnhem Land also contributes to raising the international profile of Australia's Indigenous performance traditions

and the generation of new appreciation networks for these traditions in their own right (Australian Art Orchestra 2006. See Music Forum Vol. 13 No. 1). Although professional performance opportunities for traditional Indigenous performers outside their remote regions of origin remain extremely limited, there is growing evidence that international audiences are hungry to experience them firsthand.

In 2005, I collaborated with the Aboriginal Artists' Agency in touring the Yalakun Dancers from Gapuwiyak to Malaysia and France where their performances filled theatres in Kuala Lumpur and at the Cité de la Musique in Paris. At WOMADelaide in 2006, I joined the Gupapuyngu Dancers from Milinginbi, led by Neparrnga Gumbula, in presenting audiences with immersive opportunities to dance that blurred the line between spectacle and spectator in a way that paralleled traditional ceremonial settings. These immensely popular performances enjoyed high participation and, by all accounts, left audiences with a very real sense of the vitality to be experienced through Australia's Indigenous song and dance traditions. Neparrnga Gumbula's leadership in such cultural survival initiatives, and lasting impact on the interpretation and management of world heritage collections of Yolngu material culture will be recognised with his honorary receipt of the Doctor of Music from the University of Sydney in 2007.

While the Yalakun and Gupapuyngu Dancers deliberately capitalise on the stunning pageantry of traditional dance, broader appreciation and critical acclaim for the musicians who lead them is also gaining momentum. In 2005, *Jurtbirrk Love Songs of Northwestern Arnhem Land* (Minyimak et al. 2005), compiled by Linda Barwick, Bruce Birch and Joy Williams, won prizes for Best Traditional Album and Best Album Design at the Northern Territory Music Awards. This album includes extensive performer biographies, community histories, linguistic and musical analyses, musical transcriptions and song translations to explore the beauty and artistry of the *jurtbirrk* tradition. In 2005, *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia* by Allan Marett, the first book in history to offer a detailed exploration of any single Indigenous Australian song tradition, was met with widespread critical acclaim and, in 2006, was awarded the prestigious Stanner Award by AIATSIS. As products of rigorous scholarship and technical standards, both works offer models for outcomes from the NRPIPA that will continue to raise international awareness about Australia's Indigenous performance traditions.

Unfinished Business

I am drawn back to the creek-side glade at Djilwirri where I sit with my adoptive kin. The sacred *mayku* (paperbark tree) there towers over us as their mesmerising ensemble floods my headphone-clad ears. As I lose all sense of time, I wonder how I came to be here: how someone with an unexceptional suburban upbringing and a conservatorium training in music could have made this unpredictable journey. The thought fades with the realisation that I am here in the midst of eternity. Its voices emanate from the lips of the four brothers, their living descendants, who sing before me with their backs to the *mayku* and the creek flowing behind it. Could their lips be the last through which these songs, these ancestral inheritances, pass? I can no more entertain this eventuality than the musicians before me or the ancestors who observe us from the creek behind.

All the while, the seconds glide by silently with every sound captured. The sun hangs low as we finish recording the *manikay* series of the day. Copying, mastering, transcription, translation and archiving are all to follow but my focus lies elsewhere. I think about the dozen or so other Elders, some of them very old, who have approached me about recording their own repertoires. I have already been away from home on fieldwork more weeks of this year than not but, still, there is so much work to be done. Both demand and the stakes are inescapably high.

References

- Australian Art Orchestra. 2006. 'Crossing Roper Bar'. www.aao.com.au/in_the_pipeline/breaking_the_sound_barrier.
- Allan Marett. 2005. *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Allan Marett, Marcia Langton and Mandawuy Yunupingu. 2002. 'Garma Statement on Indigenous Performance'. www.garma.telstra.com/pdfs/2002forum/music_statement.pdf.
- Allan Marett, Mandawuy Yunupingu, Marcia Langton, Neparrnga Gumbula, Linda Barwick and Aaron Corn. 2006. 'The National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia: Year One in Review'. *Backing Our Creativity-Research, Policy, Practice: National Education and the Arts Symposium Proceedings*. 84-90.
- David Minyimak, et al. 2005. *Jurtbirrk Love Songs of Northwestern Arnhem Land*. Comp. Linda Barwick, Bruce Birch and Joy Williams. Batchelor: Batchelor Press.
- Yothu Yindi Foundation. 2006. *Garma Festival*. www.garma.telstra.com

Dr Aaron Corn is an ARC Australian Post-Doctoral Fellow in Music at the University of Sydney. He contributes to numerous research projects on Indigenous Australian performance and digital archiving including the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia. He has worked closely on cultural survival initiatives with Indigenous communities in Arnhem Land for a decade.