

ABORIGINAL SINGING AND NOTIONS OF POWER*

Perhaps universally, songs are thought to be imbued with power: the power 'to move', the power to take people outside themselves, the power to enchant or ensorcel. This is true, too, of Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal ethnography is full of descriptions about how people can be sung to death; how lightning can be summoned up and directed at people; about how songs can be used to make rain, or to stop it; or create fires or extinguish them; assist hunters in the pursuit of game; keep snakes at bay; attract sexual partners; and even, in one case, assist a condemned prisoner escape Fremantle Jail (Roe, 1983:[1]-17). Songs have more domestic powers, too: to heal, to calm, to soothe, to lull to slumber. Why should this be so?

If the Aboriginal literature is full of descriptions about song powers, there is a good deal of it which suggests that ownership or control of the capacity to perform songs is highly desired, even a route to personal power. Strehlow (1971:677) writes:

As long as the old order lasted . . . the aboriginal songs had been treated with veneration. They were regarded as the greatest treasures any man could aspire to. They took the place of private wealth in the aboriginal communities. To own a large number of songs meant supreme social prestige for any man.

He continues:

. . . The men held in universal esteem, who had been invested with the power of making life and death decisions while sitting in the council of elders, were not the physically most powerful men or the most experienced hunters in that community, but the local ceremonial chiefs who had learned all there was to be known of the sacred songs and ritual in their area. Physical strength and hunting prowess merely made it easier for a man to provide the gifts and meat with which to 'soften' or 'loosen' the resisting aged guardians of the traditional mysteries, so that they would pass on their secrets to him.

It would be very easy to proceed from these remarks to the sorts of arguments presented, for example, by John Bern (1979) that the male initiation cults were simply devices for maintaining the subjugation of young men by old men. The former would have to hand over part of the product of their economic labour, and refrain from sexual relations with young women, in order to gain access to ritual capital. Songs in the way Strehlow describes them could be conceived as oppressive and

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exploitative; as well as maintaining the hegemony of a ruling class of old men. There are a number of writers who would share this view, though they might put it in other terms. Tonkinson presented a paper in 1983 at the Australian National University in which he talked of economic relations being inscribed in and dependent on the religious life. If, however, access to songs and other ritual items is a route to power, how does it work? The literature is very weak on this point. Strehlow, for example, argues that it has to do with the capacity to reproduce exactly the songs left by the ancestors. How this works as a mechanism is never explained. It is the sort of explanation which I might expect to receive myself in the field -- if I pressed hard enough. But it does not really tell us a great deal -- at least not unless we penetrate the theory which underlies it.

In the discussion thus far it appears that we have been using the term power to refer to two different things. The first has to do with the power of songs/singing to produce certain effects; that is, we have been referring to a capacity or a potential. The second has to do with the linkage between ownership/control of songs and what we might call personal power, that is, power conceived of as something with which individuals are imbued by virtue of possession/ownership/control of something, or by evincing a certain quality or qualities. Is there a sense in which these two apparently different conceptualisations of power can be linked or brought together? If so there would be the possibility of drawing and treating together the two issues which we have already enunciated.

The simplest answer would be to suggest that individuals who control/own/possess songs are enabled, by that fact, to produce (control, 'own') the effects which it is within the power of songs to produce. There are several problems with this apparently straightforward formulation. Firstly, it fails to specify what the nature of the control/ownership/possession is -- and whether it can be equated with or must be distinguished from simply a capacity to perform. Secondly, the notion of 'capacity to perform' must be further analysed: can it be viewed exclusively as the vocal and other bodily-technical capacities to perform this or that song; or should it be perceived as well in terms of questions of legitimacy or authorisation: who can sing what, in what circumstances, and on the basis of what principles of legitimation or authorisation? Thirdly, is there any necessary linkage between 'ownership'/'control' and capacity to perform -- or might the former simply consist of an individual's right to determine that this or that song will only be performed in circumstances which he or she chooses to specify or endorse, and to claim proprietorship over whatever effects are produced? This raises questions about how to theorise, explain, understand the production of effects -- and from two points of view: both from within and from outside the society in question. And not just production of effects in general, abstracting forms, but in their concreteness and particularity. Fourthly, the above formulation seems to privilege the power of songs -- as producers of effects -- against the power of the owners/controllers and/or performers. Indeed, the power of the latter is made dependent

on the former. The questions we have just posed may be thought to 'equalize' the relationship somewhat; but the question remains: Is it the song which allows the controller/owner and/or performer to produce the effects, or is it the power which is seen to be vested in the controller and/or performer which allows the song to produce its effects? In short, to put the matter crudely, is it the singer or the song?

Another issue needs to be aired, too. Already words are being pushed beyond their limits, and reveal their approximately, provisional character in the face of the issues which they have been asked to confront. Certainly we cannot take as unproblematic the concepts we have been forced to avail ourselves of -- songs, ownership, control, possession, proprietorship, power, and so on. Nor are we here, in this paper, to investigate except by devious and roundabout ways what the equivalent concepts might be in the Aboriginal case. The Aboriginal case? There is none -- or in fact not one; only many.

Also, might we not already distort the phenomena we wish to investigate by setting forth propositions of the sort: songs are powerful; or, old men are powerful? Might it not be that, from the perspective of particular people or classes of people in particular societies (in this case, Aboriginal societies), certain songs are more 'powerful' than others; or that certain persons are more 'powerful' than others? I introduce these remarks as a caution, and to signal a matter for investigation. What follows provides an indication rather than prescriptive directions about how it might be formulated and pursued. It would be all to the good were we able to claim that there was general agreement in the society under investigation about the status or attributes of particular song forms or particular categories of persons -- or were we able to accede to claims made from within a society about these apparently agreed attributions. While we might be perturbed by the positing of some transcendental Subject which these operations seem to entail, we would be able to proceed as if there were some general system of classification within the society which pursued, as it were, and imposed its own logic. Our task would be to investigate that logic; yet beyond that, to explain how it was that a particular logic managed to impose itself. Under what conditions could this come to pass and maintain itself? What are the dynamics of its operation? Or, more precisely, if we can agree that this logic is being played out at the level of the symbolic, within orders of classification, how do these relate to social dynamics -- process, practice, performance?

These questions and issues set out the terrain of this inquiry, but not entirely. There remains perhaps the most central of the issues: what is the status of song as discourse, as a particular form of vocalisation? And how does it relate to other non-discursive practices, notably dance? These questions and issues are addressed in relation to a particular Aboriginal society, the Kugu-nganhcharra of Western Cape York Peninsula (WCYP). For the purposes of this paper the ethnographic present is 1969-1974 -- the period of my most intensive fieldwork among these people.

The 200 or so Kugu-nganhcharra are a divided people -- and in a multiplicity of senses. First, they reside in two European-style settlements: One the Presbyterian mission at Aurukun which lies eighty or more kilometres to the north of their traditional countries;¹ and at Edward River, a government settlement and former Anglican mission located to the south of their countries. They are also divided between 'top-side' and 'bottom-side' peoples: those whose estates ('countries') are located along the mostly permanent fresh-water streams of the inland or eastern sector of the Kugu-nganhcharra land base, and those whose estates are located along the coast or the seasonally-inundated coastal plain in the western sector of the land base.

These gross divisions provide important bases of personal identification. Less obviously they provide broad frameworks through which group processes and interactions may be understood. In the case of present residential arrangements we find reflected a positive trace, as it were, of deep-seated antagonisms and conflicts -- deep-seated in the dual senses of structurally profound and, as far as one can judge, historically deep. Thus the migrations north to Aurukun and south to Edward River were not to be seen simply or even principally as reflecting a more or less geographical division between more or less discrete northern and southern sectors of the Kugu-nganhcharra population. Rather, they reflected more strictly political considerations -- having to do with the rivalry between the leadership of the "Christmas Creek mob" based on Waalang and the leadership of the "Holroyd mob" based on Thaa'kungadha.²

The 'top-end'/'bottom-side' division has primarily to do with matters of land-tenure and residence -- and, because of grossly different environments which responded in very different ways to the marked seasonality of the annual cycle, with very different economies, band composition/residential strategies, and rates of social change. The 'top-enders' could stand not totally but somewhat aloof from the rather insistent politicking of the coastal people. Estates inland were relatively stable; but on the coast they were subject to segmentation, and struggles for control, particularly of key sites. One outcome is that, in terms of what is now rather unfashionably called "totemic organisation", clan (or, often, because of the high rate of segmentation, clan-segment) identifications are, as I phrase it, 'out-of-phase': there is a lack of coincidence between kam waya and awu (identifications with sites);³ while inland the two forms of identification are 'in-phase'. For example, people who identify (with) emu as their kam waya will also have, within their estate, an awu or site associated with emu. Thus kam waya and awu constitute two series the elements of which are conterminous. For the coastal people this is rarely the case. The coastal-inland dichotomy then serves to order two very different forms of social organisation. The coastal system of personal identifications, and the sets of distinctions and linkages which are set up on the basis of them, at the interpersonal level, is complex and very much 'in history'; the inland system is, by contrast, relatively simple, orderly, and apparently 'outside history'.

The Kugu-nganhcharra repertoire of songs, dances, and ceremonial/mythic complexes is rich. People identify at least 15 traditions: wanam, kunalam/anychalam, munka, panycha korr'am/panycha pinpanam, wungga a'e, pidhalam, thaa'dyam, pilam, nganycha monkgom, pucha, ambanham, winychinam, inyji, ma'a-akam and malpa/malgarri.

I do not propose dealing with each of these traditions in detail.⁴ Of them wanam is the most vigorous; indeed, it is seen as both the symbol and the expression of Kugu-nganhcharra identity. It involves a major initiation-type ceremony located at Thaa'kungadha, at the mouth of the Holroyd River, through which all adult Kugu-nganhcharra men had passed -- with the exception of some of those from the lower Kendall River who defined themselves primarily in terms of the pucha tradition. Its mythological underpinnings tell of the travels of two brothers -- the Kaa'ungken brothers -- who, according to some versions, travelled southwards from the Love River across the Kendall River and Thuuk River. As they threw their boomerangs they cleared the coastal plain. After stealing a string of fish they continued southwards until they reached Wallaby Island at the mouth of the Mitchell River. Plagues of mosquitoes inspired them to return northwards to the more salubrious environment of the Holroyd River. They disposed of the rotting fish in the Chapman River; but re-gathered them when they came back to life. After various encounters, findings and misadventures they finally arrived at Thaa'kungadha, the longed-for home; and it is here that they left the ceremonial ground, wanam-awu.

The status of songs and singers within this ceremonial/mythic complex requires comment. There is universal acknowledgment of the two most important and technically able singers: one is drawn from a coastal estate from the Christmas Creek region; the other from an inland estate located along the Holroyd River. There is nothing within their estate affiliations which would allow us to predict their centrality as the most honoured and -- from the point of view of dance performances -- desired performers; nor can one demonstrate any ready point of identification between them and the Kaa'ungken brothers who created and transmitted the songs in the first place. Yet they see themselves as bearers of song traditions which they have acquired at the knee, as it were, of previous celebrated singers. There is a direct line of transmission, but it would be impossible to predict its specific character on the basis of any simple rule, for example, of transmission from father to son, or father's father to son's son, or mother's brother to daughter's son. To become a celebrated singer one had to have the opportunity for consistent exposure to the most active exponents, a desire to learn, and talent. While it could be argued that the Kugu-nganhcharra sustained more than two traditions of wanam singing, they themselves generally talked in terms of only two -- noting, moreover, their distinctive vocal and other characteristics. Despite these differences and the strong element of rivalry which operated between them, the principal bearers of these two traditions could and very often did perform together.

While the celebrated singers are honoured and much in demand, there are no restrictions on who can or cannot sing -- or even, with one exception, on the circumstances in which one can sing. The singing is not confined to ceremonial contexts. The exception is that songs may be subject to injunctions against performance after particular deaths have occurred. The circumstances in which this issue came to some prominence during my fieldwork are sufficiently ambiguous to defy precise analysis of the bases of the injunction. Did it apply only to those songs which related specifically to the estate of the deceased, or to the whole corpus of wanam songs? Did it apply specifically to the song which accompanied the dance with which the old man had been especially associated? Did it have to do with the fact that he was the senior man of the estate which was said -- but not without contestation by certain Christmas Creek rivals -- to embrace wanam-awu? All these factors were probably involved -- and more. In the event the injunction was lifted at the instigation of the principal Christmas Creek rival, in collaboration with one of the principal singers. This was a very rare collaboration, for despite the fact that the latter was also from Christmas Creek, indeed a close agnate (father's younger brother) and clansman, he was in the great pattern of rivalries, normally aligned with the Holroyd River faction.

Few anthropologists who have worked in Aboriginal contexts would have difficulty with the view that the most powerful songs, from an Aboriginal perspective, are those which have been transmitted from the original creator beings. The circumstances of their ownership are often encapsulated in myth to the extent that the songs are often tied to particular localities, and ownership of the songs is linked with ownership of the sites with which these songs are associated. Singing of such songs is not uncommonly described as 'singing country'.⁵

In WCYP, the songs which have mythological underpinnings refer to places -- as they do, say, in the Aranda case -- but there is no clear evidence that they thereby come under the control or ownership of those people who control those sites. In the case of the wanam songs they are, as we have noted, said to have been left by the traveller heroes. The latter are not conceived of totemically; and they are not linked with any particular clan. As they travelled about the country they taught the songs which they created on the basis of their adventures and misadventures to the people they encountered. There is some ambiguity about the mechanism: it is uncertain whether they taught each song as it was created to the residential group they next encountered,⁶ or whether all the teaching occurred at once, at the ceremonial ground where they finished their travels, taught the ceremonies, and died. Even this is unclear for, in all the ceremonies I have witnessed, the travellers have appeared in spirit form -- and the question must remain, then, whether the ceremonies as re-enacted and taught now were taught by the living men, or by them as spirits, or in both human and spirit form.

I mention these matters simply because they point to some structural difficulties in the accounts given of how the songs were created and transmitted -- and also a methodological difficulty. Presumably I could have tried to pin people down on such difficulties -- and if I have the opportunity to carry out further fieldwork on these questions, I shall no doubt attempt to do so. However, my suspicion is that I would get as many different accounts as I had respondents. They might acknowledge the apparent ambiguities and confusions, or, more likely, they would be puzzled by my apparent failure to understand what was going on. In short, I may already have enough information at my disposal to sort out what is going on.

Let me reiterate that the major singers are song specialists; they sing for all ceremonies; they may or may not have close links with the sites at which the ceremonies are performed; and, as I have recorded elsewhere, they may sing obscene or scurrilous (non-ceremonial) songs (von Sturmer, 1978:389) about the vanity and pretensions of the ceremonial bosses, and, by implication, of the ceremonies themselves. This is not to say that the songs are closely guarded or that the singers have some special delegation from (nominal) owners and sing them on appropriate occasions for suitable reimbursement. There are, in fact, no material rewards; and no restrictions on who can sing what. Women sing songs which, when expressed in dance, are strictly forbidden to them; but they may themselves dance to them in open or unrestricted contexts ... or sing for male dancers in similar contexts. In short, songs are less restricted than dances. And they may be considered less powerful. Certainly, and I make this only as an observation, while the great dancers perform with conviction and occasionally abandon, the great singers are remarkably impassive, and punctuate their singing and boomerang-clapping with a succession of stage directions to the dancers: where they should move, cues as to when they will resume a particular song segment, cues as to when a particular dance segment should begin, and so on. Dancers, too, it should be noted, are closely linked with country -- and the performers will, where possible (making a very sweeping generalisation), own the sites at which the event recorded in the dance occurred. I have commented elsewhere (von Sturmer, 1983) on this disjunction or lack of parallelism between song and dance, singer and dancer: which is all the more curious in that the creative travellers created and taught both the songs and the dances. Why is this? It is now time to turn to the spirit world.

While singing is controlled, dancing can be uncontrolled; singing seeks to regulate; dancing can de-regulate. Let me explain with reference to Figure 1: when someone dies there is, after about a week, a special ceremony, called "sending the spirit". Depending on where the death has occurred the owner of the country, or one or two singers associated with that general region, will sing a song associated with that place (or region). Then another singer will take over, singing the country (or region) next in the direction of the deceased's homeland; and so on until, by following the sequence of songs, they reach the deceased's estate. This progression is marked out physically, for all the people assembled gradually move in the direction as indicated by the singing. Finally, on reaching the deceased's estate, the singing abruptly stops; the people assembled look around for a sign of the

spirit, which when seen, is instructed to go to this or that site in the deceased's estate.

For example, a death occurs on the Kendall River. A local senior man (pama manu thayan) sings a pucha song; and then another. Progressively other singers take over the singing -- each singing songs from their country, progressively southwards until they reach the appropriate site (at Waalang). The songs need not belong to the one tradition -- which may have consequences for the re-mythologisation of the landscape, and the significance of songs when sung in actual ceremonies. In short, this performance -- taken as a totality -- may mark out a segment (or the totality) of an existing "dreaming track" (not a WCYP concept, but descriptively useful in this context); or it may generate a new dreaming track. These remarks are, of course, largely speculative -- but they do suggest some ways in which myth and history may play off each other.

In this context, singing has quite clearly the power to attract the spirit. This makes sense of the banning of songs closely associated with the deceased immediately after death, and for some time to come: not only because they remind people of the deceased (another aspect of song power I shall not deal with here), but because they can, in a quite mechanical way, bring the spirit into the camp. (In fact, one can suggest that the two explanations are the same: being reminded can itself be interpreted as indicating the presence of the spirit.)

K	1, 2	-----
T	3	-----
H	4, 5, 6	-----
W	7, 8	-----
B		-----

Key: K - Kendall River; T - Thuuk River; H - Holroyd River;
W - Waalang (Christmas Creek); B - Breakfast Creek. The
numbers refer to the sequence of songs as performed.

SENDING THE SPIRIT

Fig. 1

Why should the spirit be sent away? New spirits are considered frightening and erratic, therefore dangerous. At another level of explanation it could be suggested that the presence of a spirit in an estate other than its own could provide the basis of a future claim by descendants of the deceased to the site where the death had occurred (cf. claims reported from elsewhere in Australia based on birthplace or conception site; of these, birthplace is a potential basis of claim in WCYP); or it might be interpreted that the owners of the site had acquired control over that spirit, and therefore over its power.

The power of spirits includes their power to control things. Old spirits who are considered benign and helpful can control the environment: one 'demonstration' of their powers is their capacity to frighten or disperse the species located at this or that so-called increase site (agu awu Kenhthan). More simply, they can put game in your path; or inform you when you are in danger.

At this point we can begin to understand the power of songs among the Aranda (as described by Strehlow). Songs have the power or capacity to call the spirits into the presence of the song; and the spirits have the power to manipulate the environment. (In fact, only the spirits have the power to manipulate the environment, though human actions can regulate or invoke -- not always in a benign fashion -- the actions of the spirits). We have not explained why the songs have the power to call spirits into their presence; or why the spirits have the power to manipulate the environment. But the mechanical aspect of these operations is not hard to grasp.

While (old) spirits are protective to their living kin, they are inimical or dangerous to strangers. Newcomers must be introduced to the spirits; and the procedure involves a living person who is deemed to be familiar to the spirits calling out to them and rubbing his or her smell on the newcomer, and blowing into their hair. This makes them recognizable.

In the ceremonies, the initiates are dealt with as newcomers. They need protection, say the old men, from the power of the dance. And the procedure for protecting them is the same -- with some variations (see below) depending on the ceremony (see the film, "Lockhart Dance Festival", for this). Note here that it is the power of the dance which is referred to: the song may have been heard many times before, but it is the power of the dance which is marked out for special attention. In the terms that we have already used, the song invokes the spirit; the dance demonstrates its presence.

In WCYP, singing is not the only way that spirits can be summoned, as we have already noted. Spirits can also be spoken to -- albeit in the special calling voice that people use when addressing each other over long distances. They can also appear in dreams. Whatever the medium, the spirits are located at a distance. This distance can be conceived of in various terms -- geographical, visual, temporal, hierarchical (that is, in terms of status or celebrity). We can also talk about a distance in consciousness.

One of the major points I wish to make here is a simple Durkheimian one: there is a relationship between the forms of "distance" -- as I have called it -- and forms of social organisation. We have already noted some of the dimensions of the differences to be drawn between coastal and inland social organisation; and it is possible to distinguish between ceremonies of a coastal sort -- which do not involve straightforward totemic identifications (either at the level of kam waya or awu) -- and ceremonies of an inland sort which do.

The full argument cannot be presented here, but ceremonies of what I shall call the inland variety summon the spirit in a quite straightforward fashion, which does not involve singing. For some time I laboured under the illusion that ceremonies of this sort had become impoverished and had lost their songs. However, this did not account for the fact that participants in these songless ceremonies were quite able to sing in the coastal ceremonies. A simpler and more enlightening explanation is available: that these songless ceremonies involve a shorter distance between the spirit and the performer. If one need only speak to one's kin, one has but to call out to one's kin who are now deceased. In ceremonies of the inland sort the spirit performer is simply called forth (with rhythmic foot-stamping, clapping, and throaty grunting). It seems that there is an absolute identity between the dancer and the spirit at once represented and invoked. In this case there is also some variation in the "underarm procedure" -- the initiates rub the body of the dancer (rubbing is on the stomach, that is, proximate to where the spirit is said to reside). It is as though the dancer is revealed for what he already is. The mystery is a simple one. The world of spirits is linked with the inner spirit, which, itself, is made manifest. The dancing is intense; but highly constrained and revelatory, like a series of freeze frames. If there are material representations of the spirit being, they are carefully identified with the dancers. It seems to me that in these performances the ontological/existential distance between spirit being and person (performer) is short, indeed obliterated.

By contrast, in ceremonies where singing is used to bring forth the spirit, we may postulate that the distance is greater, or can be greater. To put it another way, the first set of ceremonies posits identity as actuality; the second set posits and from time to time demonstrates the possibility of identity. The first provide a context of demonstration; the second provides a context of discovery. In wanam (and related ceremonies), valued performances are those in which the dancer is possessed, uncontrolled, in a frenzy; and, when the valued moment happens, the participants feel they are in the presence of the traveller heroes themselves. It is they who have been summoned into their presence -- beyond narrow clan affiliations, bosses for all the people. The great dancers are seen as their reincarnation, quite explicitly so. Their presence is demonstrated by the brilliance and conviction of the performance.

It can also be demonstrated by the capacity of those deemed to be possessed (that is, to be in possession of their true identity) to introduce new dances. I never observed the creation of new songs, and there was no stated tradition of dreaming them. Both songs and dances were said to be immutable, to have been there, as people said, "from the start". However, dances were created; and the contexts in which they could be performed were radically altered. (Some of the changes which have occurred with these shifts in context have been documented in film over the past 25 years; and others I was able to observe -- because sometimes innovations were made with startling rapidity.)

We have already noted that history inserted itself in a more insistent fashion on the coast than inland. Among the Kugu-nganhcharra (and other WCYP) coastal groups prominent men did arise who occupied a pre-eminent status and exerted powerful influence at a regional level. The suggestion I offer here is that where political structures, in response to historical material forces, transcend considerations of clan (or estate) identity, there will be dance and song specialisation which reflects these structures. Or, to put it in other terms, a performance virtuosity in ritual contexts will reflect and legitimate supremacy in the political arena. This is not to say that clan or other identities will be rendered superfluous or invisible -- an argument which cannot be pursued in detail here. And it leaves unanswered why dances are the marked form over songs.⁷

We can make these points: that there was always a surplus of songs over dances; and that dances associated with song traditions required singing for their performance, but that the songs could be performed and maintained independently.

The implications of these remarks are that the maintenance of dances was always more problematic than the maintenance of songs, though of course we would need to build the technical difficulty of the songs into our analysis. It seems to me that song traditions that require high technique will require song specialists. Songs were more stable than dances -- or, at least, the frequency and continuity of their performance would present the illusion of stability. Dance performances, being more infrequent and performed in highly restricted contexts, were a more marked form than song performances. Song specialists had the opportunity to demonstrate their skill at almost any time; yet the dance specialists -- those who, by their skill and brilliance, could demonstrate the actuality of possession -- had few opportunities. And even when the opportunities arose it could be a very hit-and-miss affair. Success was a sure-fire route to power; though, in my own view, it was highly dependent on structural features that I am not going into here (See von Sturmer, 1978). When the opportunity was taken up it had a miraculous quality.

In sociological terms power is treated in coercive terms: the capacity of an individual to impose his will on another against that other person's will. It seems to me that this approach may well assist in the identification of the structural features which allow some people, in this or that society, to dominate others. In this case it has to do with control over strategic sites -- and the forces and principles which allow and legitimate that control. But it seems to me, too, that intuitively we have another sense of power: there are events which have a definitional quality. They define or re-define the position of social actors vis-a-vis each other, and give those relationships the appearance of a necessary quality. Some people also have that definitional quality: they define people's being in relation to themselves and to each other. It might be objected that this is simply another form of coercion; but if so it avoids the necessity to invoke a notion of a desiring will, on the one hand, and a resisting will, on the other. All parties may bring their desires to the defining event.

What seems to me to be the significant feature of Kugu-nganhcharra ceremonial life is that it places definitional people in defined and definitional events. Their definitional quality is embedded in and demonstrated through performances. These performances mark out moments in time which stand in memory and which people strive to reproduce from time to time through a combination of bodily and group techniques. The appearance of the miraculous through possession (and disorder) asserts the necessity of the imputed order -- and it is clearly in the interests of the powerful to be possessed; but more than that it is demanded of them.

This paper represents an appeal for proper weight and attention to be paid to performances. This goes beyond a conventional sociological-style analysis of the sort: X1 (from Clan X) danced the Y dance with his MB-S (Y3) from Clan Y which owns the neighbouring estate; or D held her breast to mark her relationship with Z, her son, who danced the A3 dance. Such information is indispensable. However, the meaning of performances cannot be reduced to the mechanical playing out or enactment of sign systems. One could exhaust the signs and yet know that there is an "over-and-above". Here the body speaks -- directly, and in its totality. It is an essential task to develop a methodology for examining performances in themselves -- and in relation to other performances (both of the same and other sorts), and as engaged in and played out in different social/material conditions.

The hazard otherwise is that we are likely to re-assert the artificialising of Aboriginal social and cultural life; invite Aborigines to participate in illegitimate -- from their point of view -- performance contexts; make the spirit subservient to the (recording) machine; and deny ourselves the possibility of ever understanding how the techniques and content of song, and the techniques and content of dance, come together for the creation of such intense meaning, overflowing with conviction.

John von Sturmer

NOTES

1. The Kugu-nganhcharra used this English term to refer principally but not always narrowly to what anthropologists, following Stanner (1965), customarily refer to as their estate.
2. This discussion hardly does justice to what are in fact a whole complex of processes and disputes. These latter tend to "condense" around the figures of the two dominant men who, between them, controlled these very important sites. Such group processes and antagonisms could be expressed, not just symbolically but in the most concrete terms, as conflicts between these two men and members of their immediate families, especially close agnates. See von Sturmer (1978) for detailed discussion, especially chapter 11, and for map (p.423). r and R in the orthography used there (explained on pp.30-31) are here written rr and r respectively.
3. The distinction cannot be drawn quite as sharply as this, in fact. Identification with sites also involves an identification with ancestral human figures; but in the case of kam waya the identification with a particular site -- though this is often, perhaps most often, entailed, but as a second order phenomenon.
4. For a comprehensive if not exhaustive treatment of these traditions, see von Sturmer (1978, especially chapter 10).
5. I do not recall hearing this precise expression in WCYP, despite the fact that the relation between "songs" and "country" is demonstrably strong. Songs refer to and therefore, at least in this sense, are linked with particular sites. Moreover, once at Aurukun, in the early 1970s, when I played a tape-recording of songs recorded while I was camped with a small band at a site within the general Kugu-nganhcharra "country", a large group of Kugu-nganhcharra speakers gathered to listen. They were moved to tears, making repeated statements of the sort: "It makes me think of home"; or, "It makes me think of those old people". The strong nostalgia had undoubtedly to do with memories of particular sites and particular people, but the power of the songs to bring forth these memories had little to do with their formal linkage with particular sites, and more to do with their performances over the years in a whole variety of social contexts. The nostalgia, and thus the songs' frame of reference, was diffuse rather than focussed.
6. This raises the vexed question of clan versus band. If the mythic travellers encountered bands, one might expect ownership to be vested in them. However, I know of no case where ownership is conceived in those terms. Clans are more usually conceived of as owners of ritual property -- and explanation for this might be sought in the fact that they are enduring -- perhaps the enduring groups par excellence. In WCYP songs associated with such sites are likely to call to mind, in the most immediate sense, these personal rather than categorical (for example clan) associations.

7. We should not let this remark go by without taking up Strehlow's point about the exact reproduction of songs: one thing exact reproduction would do is obliterate history -- it would bring the past into direct communion with the present and vice versa. Songs are perhaps better machines for suppressing time -- to take up Lévi-Strauss's famous formulation -- for on the face of it songs are no more strictly reproducible than dances, even though both are machines of self-reproduction (since they are more or less rigidly pre-coded performances). Both allow a degree of recognisable (and thus illusory) reproduction -- thus they call the past into the present; but to the extent that they both allow for the spontaneous, the accidental, and the idiosyncratic they allow the reworking of the past by the present. In this respect, I would argue, at least provisionally, solo (or highly specialised/differentiated) performances generate and thus have the capacity to reflect more rapid changes than group performances.

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