

The Language of *Kun-borrk* in Western Arnhem Land



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Introduction to *Kun-borrk*¹

Kun-borrk is a genre of individually owned songs accompanied by didjeridu and clapsticks performed in the western Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory. A repertoire of songs belonging to a particular songman will also be associated with a particular dance style, which may or may not accompany the performance of the songs.

Individually owned songs in various forms across Aboriginal Australia have been examined by anthropologists such as Catherine H. Berndt and Ronald M. Berndt, and musicologists Allan Marett, Linda Barwick, Ray Keogh, Alice Moyle, Richard Moyle, Sally Treloyn and Elizabeth Mackinlay.² *Kun-borrk* has received little recent attention in the musicological and ethnographic literature and as my

1. The spelling '*kun-borrk*' (which has also appeared in the literature as 'Gunborg' or 'Gunborrg') is in the Standard Kunwinjku Orthography used in Kunwinjku and Kuninjku (Eastern Kunwinjku) literacy and vernacular language programs in operation at Kunbarlanja (Oenpelli) and Maningrida. There is one difference between this standard orthography and what appears here, namely my use of hyphens after noun class prefixes and pronominal prefixes on verbs. Kunwinjku (or 'Gunwinggu' in Ronald Berndt's work) is one of six dialects, which collectively I am calling 'Bininj Kun-wok' meaning 'people's language', in the same way that linguists have coined the term 'Yolngu Matha' as a collective term for the many mutually intelligible Yolngu dialects of north-east Arnhem Land.

2. Ronald M. Berndt, 'Other Creatures in Human Guise and Vice Versa: A Dilemma in Understanding', in *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, *et al.* (Sydney: Oceania Publications, The University of Sydney, 1987), 168–91; Catherine H. Berndt, *Women's Changing Ceremonies in Northern Australia* (Paris: L'Homme, Hermann et Cie., 1950); Elizabeth Mackinlay, 'For Our Mother's Song We Sing: Yanyuwa Women Performers and Composers of a-Nguyul-Nguyul' (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1998); Elizabeth Mackinlay, 'Men Don't Talk Much Any More': The Changing Status of Women in Society and Possible Implications for Yanyuwa Women as Keepers, Composers and Performers of a-Nguyulnguyul', *Context* 12 (1996), 45–50; Allan Marett, *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); Allan Marett, 'Ghostly Voices: Some Observations on Song-Creation, Ceremony and Being in Northwest Australia', *Oceania* 71/1 (2000), 18–29; Allan Marett, 'Wangga: Socially Powerful Songs?' *The World of Music* 36/1 (1992), 67–81; Allan Marett, 'Variability and Stability in Wangga Songs of Northwest Australia', in *Music and Dance in Aboriginal Australia and the South Pacific: The Effects of Documentation on the Living Tradition*, ed. Alice M. Moyle (Sydney: Oceania Publications, University of Sydney, 1992), 194–213; Allan Marett and Linda Barwick, *Bunggridj-Bunggridj: Wangga Songs by Alan Maralung, Northern Australia* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways CD SF40430, 1993); Linda Barwick, 'Song as an Indigenous Art', in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Margo Neale and Sylvia Kleinert (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 328–35; Papulu Apparrkari Aboriginal Language and Culture Centre and Linda Barwick, *Yawulyu Mungamunga: Dreaming Songs of Warumungu Women, Tennant Creek, Central Australia* (Sydney: Festival Records D139686, 2000); Linda Barwick, 'Tempo Bands, Metre and Rhythmic Mode in Marri Ngarr "Church Lirrnga" Songs', *Australasian Music Research* 7 (2003), 67–83; Ray Keogh, 'Nurlu Songs from the West Kimberley: An Introduction', *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1989), 2–11; Sally Treloyn, 'Scotty Martin's Jadmi Junba: A Song Series from the Kimberley Region of Northwest Australia', *Oceania* 73/3 (2003), 208–20; Richard M. Moyle, Balgo: *The Musical Life of a Desert Community* (Nedlands, Western Australia: Callaway International Resource Centre for Music Education, 1997); Alice M. Moyle, 'North Australian Music: A Taxonomic Approach to the Study of Aboriginal Song Performances' (PhD thesis, Monash University, 1974).

interest in *kun-borrk* is primarily from an ethnography of speaking perspective, I will focus in this discussion not only on song-texts, but also on how Aboriginal people in western Arnhem Land talk about *kun-borrk* songs and song composition, singing, music and the meaning of song-texts. Much of this discussion is based on transcriptions and English translations of texts provided by songmen in the Kuninjku (Eastern Kunwinjku) dialect of Bininj Kun-wok.

A particular focus of this study is the oblique or indeterminate nature of song-text meaning. While Australian song-texts in general have been the subject of a variety of studies,³ song gloss opacity of Australian language song words has received considerable attention in the literature and has been mostly associated with the song-texts of esoteric religious music.⁴ In much of this discussion, song-text obscurity is usually associated with the nature of the esoteric religious topics that are the main song subjects. Sutton observes that song-text obscurity arises from a number of causes including what Strehlow describes as a form of lexical specialization designed to deal with particularly esoteric subject matter.⁵ Issues of community politics are also relevant:

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.⁶

If this indeed is the case, then how is it that the texts of *kun-borrk* songs, which are usually secular in nature and often dealing with common everyday human experiences, can retain what I propose is such a characteristic vagueness and inaccessibility in contextual meaning? I suggest that reliance on esoteric ceremonial subject matter is not the only strategy for the creation and control of artistic mystery. The *kun-borrk* song genre allows particularly creative and gifted composer-performers to obtain high status in Aboriginal society, recognized by all as special individuals who not only attain prestige for themselves but also for the families and wider groups with which they associate. In the process of song composition a gifted *kun-borrk* songman will employ deliberate ambiguity, vagueness and highly indirect reference to otherwise publicly available cultural information about everyday human behaviour. Such lack of clarity need not necessarily be related to the degree of esotericism in a song subject. Referential indeterminacy and ambiguity are not just characteristics of *kun-borrk* song-texts but can also be

3. Ray Keogh, 'The Nature and Interpretation of Aboriginal Song Texts', in *Studies in Kimberley Languages in Honour of Howard Coate*, ed. William McGregor (München and Newcastle: Lincom Europa, 1996), 255–64; R. M. W. Dixon and Grace Koch, *Dyirbal Song Poetry* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996); Lysbeth Ford, 'Marri Ngarr Lirrga Songs: A Linguistic Analysis', *Musicology Australia* 28 (2005–6), 26–58.

4. T. G. H. Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971); Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *Sexual Behavior in Western Arnhem Land* (New York: Viking, 1951); A. P. Elkin and Trevor Jones, *Arnhem Land Music (North Australia)* (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 1958); Ian Keen, 'Ambiguity in Yolngu Religious Language', *Canberra Anthropology* 1 (1977), 33–50; Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Structure of Arnhem Land Song Poetry', *Oceania* 49/2 (1978), 128–56; Francesca Merlan, 'Catfish and Alligator: Totemic Songs of the Western Roper River, Northern Territory', in *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, *et al.* (Sydney: Oceania Publications, The University of Sydney, 1987), 143–67; Peter Sutton, 'Mystery and Change', in *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, *et al.* (Sydney: Oceania Publications, The University of Sydney, 1987), 77–96.

5. Sutton, 'Mystery and Change', 89; Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*, 126–8, 718–9.

6. *Ibid.*, 89.

features of discourse and face to face interaction in general, not only in western Arnhem Land but probably throughout Aboriginal Australia.⁷ Francesca Merlan has made similar claims based on a study of the opacity of totemic song-texts from the Western Roper River region, which employ non-ordinary esoteric language resulting in intentional ambiguity or multi-level meanings.⁸ The following examination of *kun-borrk* song language shows how indirection and referential ambiguity are at work in songs of much less esoteric and religious import.

Unlike the totemic song genres of cult ceremonies in Arnhem Land, *kun-borrk* songs concentrate more on the episodic minutiae of human emotions, conflicts, suspicions, interpersonal relationships and physical human movements. *Kun-borrk* song-texts do not fit the stereotype of the popularized notion of 'songlines' with individual songs relating to tracts of land or sites along a route taken by ancestral creation heroes. The texts rarely say anything about individual places (although for an exception see Example 8 below) and, aside from a small number of songs in a special unknown spirit or animal language, the song-texts are usually in the language of the songman owner with the literal translatability being completely transparent (although the contextual meaning may appear allusive). Lamont West writing about *kun-borrk* songs in 1964 made the same observations:

In western Arnhem Land there is either a very high translatability of song texts or none at all. If translatable, the song is usually in the same language as the singer's own ordinary conversation. If not, the song is allegedly in 'Ghost language' with no apparent formal analogues in any Western or Central Arnhem Land spoken language.⁹

Performance Context

The topics of *kun-borrk* song-texts also have little to do with ceremonies and rituals; nor do they recount the details of major regional myths although they may be set within the general context of mythologies with which an individual songman may identify. Despite this lack of match between song-text subjects and ritual, *kun-borrk* songs and dances are nonetheless performed in both ceremonial and non-ceremonial contexts, with ceremonial contexts being of three types: circumcisions, mortuary rituals and ceremonies of diplomacy and gift exchange. The most important diplomacy ceremony employing *kun-borrk* song and dance, still performed today in western Arnhem Land, is the *mamurrng* ceremony. *Mamurrng* involves the performance of *kun-borrk* songs and the presentation of a sacred decorated staff to another group of people, usually of another language community. The ceremony involves late afternoon and evening performances of *kun-borrk* song and dance, which continue daily for up to three weeks and culminate in the presentation of the *mamurrng* staff. Similar in ritual function to the *Marrajiri* or

7. Murray Garde, 'Social Deixis in Biniñ Kun-Wok Conversation (An Ethnography of Speaking of the Biniñ Kun-Wok Dialects of Western Arnhem Land)' (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2002).

8. Merlan, 'Catfish and Alligator', 143-67.

9. Lamont West, 'Ms 2331. Esoteric Dalabon Sketch Dictionary', *MS 2331. Esoteric Dalabon Sketch Dictionary* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1964), vi.



Figure 1 Dancers from Minjilang present a decorated Mamurrng staff to their hosts at Maningrida in the final stages of the Mamurrng ceremony. Photograph by Murray Garde, 2005.

'morning star poles' of central and north-east Arnhem Land,¹⁰ the *mamurrng* is a decorated thin staff of about a metre in length, bound with painted string and with hundreds of strands of looped string along its length with a totemic emblem hanging from a decorated cord at one end (see Figure 1). At the completion of the ceremony, the two groups, performers/presenters and the recipients then exchange

10. A. P. (Adrianus Petrus) Borsboom, *Maradjiri, a Modern Ritual Complex in Arnhem Land, North Australia* (Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit, 1978); Lester Hiatt, 'Rom in Arnhem Land', in *Rom: An Aboriginal Ritual of Diplomacy*, ed. Stephen A. Wild (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986), 3–14; Stephen A. Wild, *Rom: An Aboriginal Ritual of Diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986).

large amounts of food and store goods such as flour, sugar, tea, bedding, tarpaulins, knives, cassette players and other similar camping and consumer goods.

Non-ritual performances of *kun-borrk* songs often include informal camp entertainment at night and also a range of community celebrations such as the opening of new buildings and community facilities, graduation ceremonies at educational institutions and cultural programs at schools. Some Arnhem Land rock bands have also incorporated *kun-borrk* song and dance into their stage acts.¹¹ A number of western and southern Arnhem Land traditional dance groups have, over the past ten years, also performed *kun-borrk* overseas as far afield as Germany, France, the United States and Japan.

Musically, *kun-borrk* songs are usually performed by one clapstick-playing songman and a single didjeridu player. There is sometimes a second clapstick player who may sometimes also sing the main vocal melody. For some songs, the second singer and clapstick player is essential, especially when the main songman himself performs a solo dance, which is sometimes the case with *kun-borrk*. Songs commence with didjeridu and clapstick introductions before the singing. At the completion of the vocal section each song finishes with an instrumental coda of clapsticks and didjeridu. Often, the didjeridu will finish a few beats before the end of the song and the clapsticks alone mark the ending. An individual song is usually repeated a number of times. In some *kun-borrk* song sets the didjeridu will sometimes drop out for a beat to mark the end of a song item, which is to be immediately repeated. At this stage, further research is required to determine which *kun-borrk* song sets in western Arnhem Land display this feature and what function it performs.

***Kun-borrk* and the Biniñ Kun-wok Dialects**

The name *kun-borrk* literally means 'dance' and is composed of the neuter and abstract noun class prefix *kun-* and the stem *-borrk*, the latter also being formative in other Kunwinjku words such the verbs *-borrkke* 'to dance' and *-borrkkirri* 'to frolic'. *Kun-borrk* is also the term used throughout western and central Arnhem Land to denote the genre of music and accompanying dance presently discussed. It is also used to make a distinction from the other main song and music genre used in Arnhem Land known as *bunggurl*. *Bunggurl*, also referred to as the *manikay* tradition, extends regionally from the Blyth River in north-central Arnhem Land to the Gulf of Carpentaria. *Manikay* are grouped in clan-owned series, with each series being composed of a set number of subjects, which are in turn composed of a number of song items sung in a particular order.¹² *Kun-borrk* songs, on the other hand, are owned by the songmen who compose them as individuals rather than clans; and, unlike *manikay*, a *kun-borrk* song set or repertoire can have new songs added to it and old ones deleted as the songman-composer chooses. The perfor-

11. The rock band Nabarlek, based at Manmoyi outstation on the Mann River in Western Arnhem Land, have adapted traditional *kun-borrk* song-texts from a song set known as *namomoyak* (sung by Dangbon/Kune songman, the late David Karlbuma) into new rock music songs with some traditional song melodies also being incorporated. Another rock band Blekbala Mujik from Southern Arnhem Land introduce some of their contemporary songs with traditional *kun-borrk* songs of the *bongolinj-bongolinj* sub-genre.

12. This order is not fixed, but is dependent on a number of contextual factors, such as the nature of the ritual in which they are being performed and the participants in the ceremony.

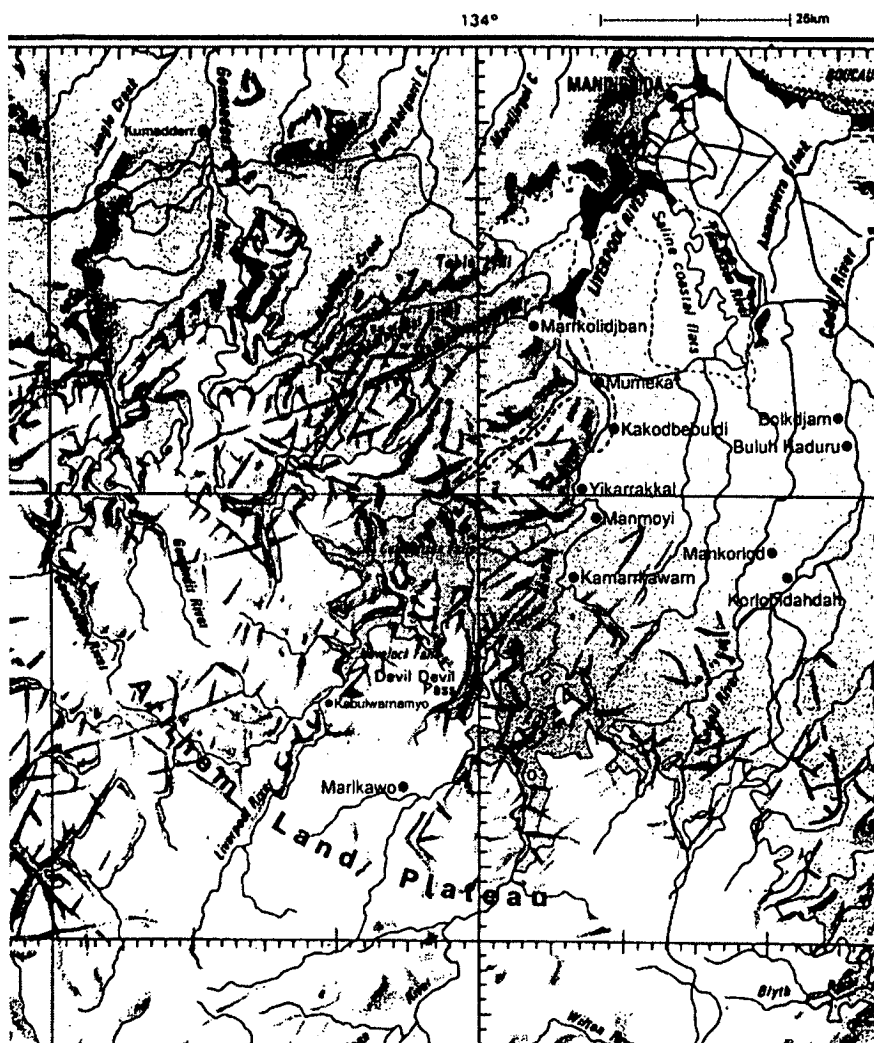


Figure 2
Map showing western Arnhem Land and a selection of Biniŋ Kun-wok speaking communities

mance order of the song subjects is not important, although a number of song items of the same subject tend to be sung together before a new subject is sung.

Other structural differences between *bunggurl* and *kun-borrk* music relate to the use of the didjeridu accompaniment. One of the more obvious differences is that didjeridu used for *bunggurl* music makes use of the hooted overblown tone, whereas in *kun-borrk* music the overblown tone is completely absent. *Kun-borrk* genre didjeridus tend to be physically shorter than those used for *bunggurl* and therefore the pitch is higher, which makes it more difficult to produce the overblown or hooted tone.

As *kun-borrk* song sets are individually owned, it is important that some mention is made of the leading exponents of *kun-borrk* today in western Arnhem Land.¹³ The *kun-borrk* song-texts I will examine in some detail here are part of the

13. I am grateful to those *kun-borrk* songmen and composers who shared with me their music and their insights into the creative process. I would especially like to thank Kevin Djimarr, the late David Karlbuma, the late Les Mirrikkurriya, Owen Yalandja and Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek A.O.

respective repertoires of two Kuninjku (Eastern Kunwinjku) songmen, Kevin Djimarr and Owen Yalandja, who both live in the Mann and Liverpool Rivers district of western Arnhem Land.

Kuninjku is one of six mutually intelligible dialects constituting a dialect chain referred to collectively here as 'Bininj Kun-wok' which means literally 'people's language'.¹⁴ Bininj Kun-wok dialects are spoken from Kakadu National Park in the west to Pine Creek and Manyallaluk (Eva Valley) in the south, and as far east as the Cadell River region near Maningrida (see Figure 2). Other language groups who perform *kun-borrk* songs include the Rembarrnga, Dalabon/Dangbon and the Jawoyn.¹⁵

Early References to *Kun-borrk* and Neighbouring Song Genres

Kun-borrk songs were first discussed by Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt in 1951 under the term 'gossip songs', and by A. P. Elkin in 1953, who used the terms 'Gunbalanya or Gunborg'.¹⁶ Ronald M. Berndt usually referred to the *kun-borrk* songs he documented as 'gossip' songs and discusses such songs in the context of his study of sexual behaviour in western Arnhem Land:

Erotic expression took several forms, including a number of stories that adults found hilariously funny; but the most popular at that time were what I have called 'Gossip songs' . . . Their favourite topic was sweetheart relationships, but they were interested in husbands and wives too. Some were sentimental but many emphasised quite heavily the physical aspects of sex. No esoteric significance was implied; and most of the songs were direct, outspoken, and ostensibly served to stimulate erotic feelings. Each song, complete in itself, referred to a specific event. Also, each song concerned actual persons who were not named: each encapsulated, as it were, a small interpersonal situation.¹⁷

Placing aside the speculation that the Berndts may have had a special fascination with the cross-cultural study of erotica,¹⁸ it may also have been possible that most of the *kun-borrk* songs Ronald Berndt was exposed to at Kunbarlanja (Oenpelli or 'Gunbalanya') in the 1940s and 1950s were those with erotic content. Kunbarlanja was, after all, a typical Christian mission with staff who no doubt disapproved of some aspects of Aboriginal attitudes to interpersonal relationships and sexual behaviour. The popularization of *kun-borrk* 'gossip' songs may have been one means of circumventing missionary control over traditional Aboriginal morality. Also, Berndt himself comments on the shifting popularity of different song sets owned by different songmen, which 'varied in popularity at any given time'.¹⁹ As

14. Nicholas Evans has published a wide collection of linguistic material on Bininj Kun-wok (also spelt 'Bininj Gun-wok' in the Gun-djeihmi dialect orthography) including a two volume descriptive grammar. See Nicholas Evans, *Bininj Gun-Wok: A Pan-Dialectal Grammar of Mayali, Kunwinjku and Kune* (Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 2003).

15. Lamont West noted in 1964 that the Dalabon, Mayali and Kunei (or Kune) language groups were associated with the performance of *kun-borrk* ('Gunborg') songs. Mayali and Kune are both Bininj Kun-wok dialects. West, 'Ms 2331. Esoteric Dalabon Sketch Dictionary', v.

16. Berndt and Berndt, *Sexual Behavior in Western Arnhem Land*; A.P. Elkin, 'Arnhem Land Music', *Oceania* 24/2 (1953), 86.

17. Ronald M. Berndt, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1976), xiv.

18. See Ibid.; Berndt and Berndt, *Sexual Behavior in Western Arnhem Land*; Ronald M. Berndt, *Kunapipi* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1951); Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, 'Erotic Stimulation in Western Arnhem Land Songs', *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences* 4 (1949).

19. Ronald M. Berndt, 'Other Creatures in Human Guise and Vice Versa', 171.

kun-borrk songs are very much centred on the creative and performance skills of an individual songman, the range of song topics can vary greatly over extended periods of time as individual songmen and their preferred song topics gain or wane in popularity after the death of the songman. It is possible that a popular songman or songmen living in the Kunbarlanja region at the time of the Berndts' research into song had specialized in composing and performing songs with overt erotic themes. However, in my ten years of recording *kun-borrk* songs from across western and central Arnhem Land I can only conclude that the gossip and sexual relationship topics of *kun-borrk* songs are today at least only one of many different topics or song subjects and that, contrary to what Berndt found, the texts of *kun-borrk* songs are, despite the use of everyday language, usually highly vague and indirect rather than 'direct and outspoken'. Berndt does make it clear, however, that although he uses the label 'gossip' to describe songs about interpersonal affairs, 'they also include other matters, such as current events, domestic topics, attachment to land, travel and so forth'.²⁰ I will in turn concede that many *kun-borrk* song-texts are intentionally ambiguous in meaning and romantic or erotic readings of otherwise innocuous subjects are sometimes possible.²¹

As mentioned above, Elkin also recorded the use of the generic term '*gunborg*' (an English orthographic equivalent of Bininj Kun-wok '*kun-borrk*') which he terminologically equates with the topographic eponym 'Gunbalanya', and notes:

Likewise, with regard to texts; those of ballad and 'gossip' songs (Gunbalanya or Gunborg) are brief, each consisting of a few words, the inference of which listeners will know. [footnote continues] . . . Titles given to the same series or groups of songs sometimes vary according to time and place. These gossip and love songs are called Gunbalanya because they come from the Oenpelli people at Gunbalanya lagoon. But the stony tableland tribe to the south call them Gunborg. A few years ago the songs from there were called Lira by the Roper River people.²²

The term '*lira*' recorded by Elkin is probably related to the term *lirrga*, which seems to be another term for *kun-borrk* used to the south-east of the *kun-borrk* region.²³ Apart from *bunggurl* and *kun-borrk* there is another major non-secret genre of didjeridu-accompanied songs in the Top End, namely *wangga*, which has been described in detail in various publications by Marett:

Wangga are individually-owned dance songs accompanied by didjeridu and performed publicly in both ceremonial and non-ceremonial contexts by Aboriginal people of north-west Australia. The major centres of the *wangga* tradition are the country in the vicinity of the Moyle and Daly Rivers, the Barunga area and the eastern Kimberleys, although performances may be encountered in other areas of Northern Australia . . . *Wangga* are normally sung by one or two men accompanying themselves on clapsticks while another performer plays the didjeridu . . . *Wangga* are conceived in dreams from spirits, although in some cases singers claim to have composed songs without spirit intervention.²⁴

It appears that *wangga* are in many respects similar to *kun-borrk* songs although there are differences in melodic structures and dance, which I will not explore here.

20. Ibid., 172.

21. Classic gossip songs are still being composed and performed in western Arnhem Land. For a recent example from Iwaidja language songmen at Minjilang (Croker Island) see Linda Barwick, *et al.*, *Jurtbirrk Love Songs of Northwestern Arnhem Land* (Batchelor, Northern Territory: Batchelor Press, 2005).

22. Elkin, 'Arnhem Land Music', *Oceania* 24/2, 86.

23. Marett and Barwick, *Bungguridj-Bungguridj*, 2.

24. Ibid.

Song and Dance Vocabulary

The generic verb *-borrkke* in Bininj Kun-wok refers to any kind of dancing. The kind of dancing performed for *kun-borrk* music is usually characterized across the *kun-borrk* musical region by men's energetic single foot-stomping which is said to be in the manner of *mimih* spirits, the shy and slender mischievous rock spirits that inhabit the rocky environment of the Arnhem Land plateau. And in imitating the *mimih*, *bininj* 'humans' use a style of body paint decoration consisting of a white clay splatter design known as *bedjekbedjek* used only in *kun-borrk* dance performances. Clapsticks and the didjeridu may also be decorated with this design.

To refer to men's *kun-borrk* dancing the term *ngarri-melme* is used which literally means 'we stamp our feet [in *kun-borrk* dance fashion]'. The word is also used in the sense of 'tread on, place foot on an object'. While the men perform their foot stomping *mimih* dancing, a line of women may accompany the dances of the men. The women's dance movements are much more subtle with gentle to-and-fro swinging of the hands and arms and the shuffling of one foot pivoted on the front near the toes. In Bininj Kun-wok this style of dancing is called *ngarri-njarlme* 'we swing our arms from side to side (with bent elbows)' and is sometimes the subject matter of the text of *kun-borrk* song sets.

The term most commonly used for an individual song item in Bininj Kun-wok is *man-dule* or *duleno*. In the Dalabon language the term is also *duluno* (except for the vowel change) as in Example 1 below:

Example 1

Kurlundudjyi lorrkkon-kun duluno kahyidjnjan.

'The ox-eye herring has got a song in the lorrkkon ceremony'.

The other term used in both Bininj Kun-wok dialects and in Dalabon is the term *man-karre/karreno*, which is polysemous, also meaning 'lower leg, shin'. I have in fact heard Kriol speakers refer to a group of *kun-borrk* song items as a 'leg'. *Man-karre/karreno* has a further range of senses in both Bininj Kun-wok and Dalabon meaning 'law, ceremony, manner, custom and culture'. This leg-law polysemy appears to be widespread throughout the region where *kun-borrk* is an important musical tradition.²⁵

There are a number of terms for singing in Bininj Kun-wok that are song-type specific. A general term for any form of singing is *ngarri-wayini* 'we sing', and this is the term used for *kun-borrk* songs:

Example 2

Man-dule nuye ka-wayini.

'He is singing his own songs'.

The term *ngarri-kadjung* (literally 'we follow') is used for the chanting of non-public songs used in cult ceremonies. A variation of this word *ngarri-wandakadjung* applies to the singing of songs in the *lorrkkon* hollow log ossuary ceremony. The Bininj Kun-wok word *kodjno* is again polysemous, meaning both 'head' and 'song melody/tune'; although the basis for such polysemy is not clear.

25. For further discussion of body metaphors in relation to song see also Steven Knopoff, 'Yuta Manikay: Juxtaposition of Ancestral and Contemporary Elements in the Performances of Yolngu Clan Songs', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 24 (1992), 138-53.

Kun-borrk Song Set Names

I have chosen the name 'song set' as the most appropriate collective term for an individual *kun-borrk* songman's repertoire in preference to the term 'song series' or 'song cycle', which tend to suggest obligatory sequential performance of songs in a set, which is not the case with *kun-borrk*.²⁶ A set of *kun-borrk* songs in a songman's repertoire is usually named after one of the more salient song subjects within the set. This does not mean that all of the song subjects within the named set are of the same subject as the set name. A songman may have a set of songs predominantly focused on one subject and over the years new subjects may be added, but the established name of the song set usually remains. There are also examples in western Arnhem Land of *kun-borrk* song sets being named after the songman who composed and performed them. An example of such eponymy from the Maningrida region is the *kun-borrk* song set called Kaddikkaddik, named after a Kunibidji songman who died in the early 1980s.

As *kun-borrk* song sets are composed and owned by individual songmen, it is difficult to discuss *kun-borrk* song without mentioning the songmen who have become popular as performers in the various communities throughout western Arnhem Land and in other Aboriginal communities around the southern end of the Arnhem Land plateau region just east of Katherine. The best known and most popular *kun-borrk* songs and dances centred around the region of Beswick, Bulman, Barunga and surrounding outstations are known as *bongolinj-bongolinj*. This term, the name of a spirit being, appears to be a *kun-borrk* sub-genre which involves fast moving and exciting men's foot-stomping dance with dancers wearing elaborate feather-tasselled dancing belts traditionally made from human hair and known in Rembarrnga, Dalabon and Bininj Kun-wok as *bokngarru*. The greatest exponent of *bongolinj-bongolinj* was the Dalabon songman Djoli Laywanga, who died in 1998.²⁷ Other songmen have composed song sets within the *bongolinj-bongolinj* tradition and have given them labels based on the main song subjects. One such songman was a Rembarrnga man, Les Mirrikkurriya, who died in 1995. Mirrikkurriya's song set *man-ngalinj* was named after a small plant with an edible tuber (*Ipomoea velutina*).²⁸

A number of other *kun-borrk* song sets in western Arnhem Land are also named after plants with long climbing vines and edible tubers. Kuninjku (Eastern Kunwinjku) songman Kevin Djimarr from Mumeka on the Mann River has a song repertoire that others refer to as *wurrurrumi*, named after the climbing monsoon forest vine *Tinospora smilacina*. Mirrikkurriya's song set *man-ngalinj*, which includes songs about the particular plant already mentioned (*Ipomoea velutina*),

26. For a discussion of the use of 'set' rather than 'series' for *wangga* (another Aboriginal song genre from northern Australia), see Marett and Barwick, *Bunggridj-Bunggridj*, 8.

27. In his 1962 field notes, the linguist Lamont West makes a reference to the popularity of Djoli Laywanga's *bongolinj-bongolinj* performances in comparison to *wangga* performances of the songman Barney Alan Maralung, stating '[Maralung] rarely performed in 1961-62 and his cycle of songs seems to be less popular at Beswick than the Bungalin-bungalin dream-composed Gunborg style cycle of his rival Jolly Laywanga'. See Lamont West, 'Working Notes, Dubbings, Sign Language Research, with Terminal Report 1960-1962', MS 2456. *Notes, Dubbings and Vocabularies Relating to Research in Arnhem Land, Cape York and Torres Strait, 1960-1965* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1974), 108. See also Marett and Barwick, *Bunggridj-Bunggridj*, 7.

28. Mirrikkurriya told me that his song set *man-ngalinj* was within the *bongolinj-bongolinj* tradition. The accompanying dances are identical to those performed for other *bongolinj-bongolinj* song sets such as those owned by individuals living at Beswick, Bulman, Wimol and Barunga east of Katherine.

also includes individual songs about other small plants with edible tubers: *mand-jay*, a song about the bush food plant *Hypoxis marginata*; *man-bulubbi*, a song about the bush food plant *Eriosema chinensis*; *badjdjo*, a song about the bush food plant *Microstema tuberosum*; and *mandjimurr*, another song about the *Ipomoea velutina* plant, but of a larger variety that grows around the Borlkdjam district in the Balngarra clan estate south of Maningrida. Another *kun-borrk* song set, which is centred around Kunbarlanja (Oenpelli) at present, is called *karrbarda* 'long yam' (*Dioscorea transversa*) and is owned and performed by two brothers, Bruce and Barndanj Nabekeyo.

A family of Dalabon and Kune speaking brothers of the Barabba clan from the upper Cadell River district share a *kun-borrk* song set inherited from their father Mandarrk, the famed stone tool maker, artist and 'clever man'. The song set is called *namomoyak*, named after protean ancestral spirit beings. This song set also includes songs about small herbaceous plants with edible tubers. The subject of one of these songs is the plant *Decaschistia byrnesii*, called *anyong* in the Kundedjnjenghmi dialect of Bininj Kun-wok spoken in the upper Mann and Liverpool Rivers district of the Arnhem Land plateau. The text of the song is as follows:

Example 3

An-yong an-yong an-yong an-yong
an-yong an-yong an-yong an-yong
an-marrewala an-marrewala an-marrelaklak.

Kundedjnjenghmi speaker Lofty Bardayal explains the words of the song in the following text:

Aneke ngan-me that an-yong now, an-marrewala, an-marrelaklak, an-yong, an-burre bu, that ngan-me bonj nuye mimih, sweet one, sweet potato, kaluk manu nungan balanda mak marnbom but nungan mak anih an-yong anbu budjken (bush) nuye mimih, same way, or mimih ngarri-ngun or bininj, karri-ngun, an-kuken, proper budjwan nawu proper an-kare. Bu karri-wilkdeng, karri-kukdjalkmang, bonj arri-dong, arri-yime kunbeno, that proper good one, an-mak anbu.

That *an-yong* is food, and the names *an-marrawala* and *an-marrelaklak* are also names for that *Decaschistia byrnesii* tuber which is also called *an-burre* [in other Bininj Kun-wok dialects]. It is the food of *mimih* spirits and tastes good, somewhat like a sweet potato, which you white people have, but the *an-yong* is a food from the bush, which *mimih* spirits eat or Aboriginal people eat also. It is a well-known important food from the bush from long ago. If we cook it in the ashes, cut it up and then pound it, it tastes very good.

The language of *kun-borrk* songs is usually the same as that used in everyday speech. This song, however, provides an example of special song names, in the form of *an-marrawala*, for the food tuber *Decaschistia byrnesii*. The name *an-yong* is also quite marked in that it is the special stone country dialect (Kundedjnjenghmi) name for the tuber, which Bardayal notes is 'the one called *an-burre*' in other dialects. The small hairy roots of the *an-yong* plant are said to resemble in miniature the enormous aerial roots of the Banyan fig (*Ficus virens*) and the song word *an-marrelaklak* is glossed as 'aerial roots of the Banyan fig'. The small tuber therefore has metaphoric and ritual associations with the Banyan fig tree. This provides us with an example of the kind of 'figurative association' or multi-level meaning previously discussed by Clunies Ross and Keen for Arnhem Land song words, and

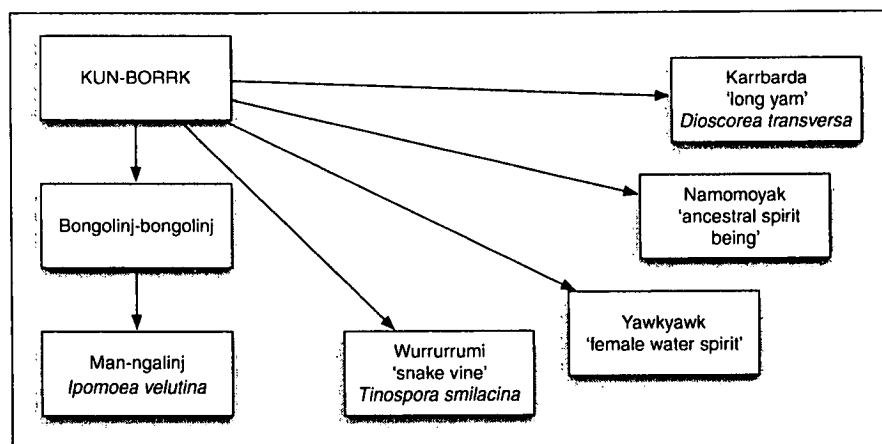


Figure 3 A selection of kun-borrk song repertoire names

by Merlan and Sutton for other parts of Aboriginal Australia.²⁹ In the present example, however, we do not have as great a distinction between exoteric and esoteric meanings, because the subject matter and performance context is here more secular in nature than in the kind of material of greater religious import discussed by the authors mentioned above.

Based on the above terminology, some of the more well-known *kun-borrk* song and dance sets that are being performed today or in the past ten years can be represented in Figure 3.³⁰

Kun-borrk Song Conception

There are three ways that *kun-borrk* songs are conceived. Firstly they can be composed in the normal manner by a songman. In Bininj Kun-wok the verb for song composition is a transitive verb *-bakke* which also means 'to break (an object)'. In Example 4 below, the *yawurrinj* 'young men' are the object of the verb, which is translated into English as 'he composed a song about them'.³¹

Example 4

<i>Djimarr</i>	<i>ben-bakke-ng</i>	<i>yawurrinj</i>	<i>man-dule</i>	<i>bedberre.</i>
prop.n.	3sg/3pl.P-break-PP	young.men	III-song	for.them

'Djimarr composed a song [about] the young men'.

29. Clunies Ross, 'The Structure of Arnhem Land Song Poetry' 128–56; Keen, 'Ambiguity in Yolngu Religious Language', 33–50; Merlan, 'Catfish and Alligator', 143–67; Sutton, 'Mystery and Change', 77–96.

30. Many of these sets, and indeed melodies specific to groups of songs in these sets, are associated with individual composers, some of whom pass the songs and their distinctive melodies on to the next generation of singers. This subject requires further research.

31. The following interlinear abbreviations are used: prop.n. 'proper noun'; sg 'singular' (also m 'minimal'); pl 'plural'; 12 'first and second person subject'; IGN 'ignorative'; IMP 'imperative'; I, II, III 'noun classes'; a 'augmented'; ua 'unit augmented'; NP 'non-past'; P 'past'; PP 'past perfective'; 3>1 'third person subject acting on first person object'; counterfact 'counterfactual particle'.

To compose a song based on one's own experiences uses the reflexive of the verb:

Example 5

Nungan bakkerrinj Darwin birri-wam, wanjh birri-bawong mayahmayahmeng.

'He composed it (a song) about himself when they went to Darwin and they abandoned him and he became lost'.

As the above example reveals, composers sometimes create songs about their own experiences. In the late 1980s, Rembarrnga songman Les Mirrikkurriya led his troupe of *bongolinj-bongolinj* dancers to Elcho Island to perform at a circumcision ceremony. During the visit, Mirrikkurriya composed the following 'gossip' song, which consists of the following simple text:

Example 6

Yim-kolukolung, ngam-kolukolung.

'You come down (to the river), I will come down (to the river)'.

The literal meaning is clear but the contextual meaning is vague.³² However, for those who have access to the contextual meaning, it is well known that excursions to distant places are seen as opportunities by young men and women for romance and secret rendezvous. The song-text represents one such communication between a young man and his girlfriend during the Elcho Island ceremony. The tryst incident between the two later became the subject of much gossip and good-humoured teasing. Another example involves Kuninjku songman Kevin Djimarr's composition about an excursion to Darwin when a number of companions deserted him and he become lost for some days in the suburbs of Darwin:

Example 7

Konda nuk ngandi-bawong

nga-mayahmayahme nga-mayahmayahme nga-mayahmayahme.

'They must have deserted me
now I am confused and lost, confused and lost, confused and lost'.

Kun-borrk songs are also incorporated into a songman's set by inheriting them from one's father. Songman Kevin Djimarr has a number of songs in his repertoire that he states were sung by his father Anchor Kulunba who died in 1996. The text of one such song is about two hills near Kunbarlanja called Injbirr and Arrkuluk. In former times, the Eastern Kunwinjku walked regularly from the Mann and Liverpool Rivers to the mission at Kunbarlanja, and the two rocky outcrops of Injbirr and Arrkuluk were clearly visible towards the end of the one hundred and fifty kilometre walk:

Example 8

Injbirr kam-dolhme

Arrkuluk kam-dolhme

kumekke nga-rerrkan.

kayayay.

'Injbirr rises up

Arrkuluk rises up

that's where I will go and stay.

kayayay [vocal]'.³³

32. Contextual vagueness of song-texts is not uncommon in Australian Aboriginal song. For further discussion of this see Tamsin Donaldson, 'Translating Oral Literature: Aboriginal Song Texts', *Aboriginal History* 3 (1979), 62-83.

According to some *kun-borrk* song composers however, the most common form of song conception is through supernatural inspiration, either through dreams or by direct observation of spirits singing the songs.³³ Not all *kun-borrk* songmen can receive new songs in this manner. In order to be able to do this, a songman must have some degree of 'cleverness' or supernatural ability called *man-kordang*. *Kun-borrk* songman †David Karlbuma, who sang a song set known as *namomoyak*, told me that he received his songs from his father who was a 'clever man' or *na-kordang*, but he himself does not compose new songs based on supernatural revelation by spirit beings or ghosts known in Bininj Kun-wok as *wayarra*. Most of Kevin Djimarr's songs, however, are conceived from spirit revelation. In the following narrative, Djimarr, a well known clever man or *na-kordang* in the Maningrida region, explains how this once occurred:

Ngayi nga-wam njamed, djenj yi-bengkan nawu nga-rranjbom njamed nga-rranjbuyi bad ngadjdjelek en nga-bidbom ngah-barndi kure kun-dulk, ngah-barndi nga-rranjbom.
'I went fishing once and you know I was spearing those whatyacallit, salmon-tailed catfish, and I climbed up this tree and stayed up there and I speared them'.

Wanjh yi-bengkan bu kondah, five o'clock nga-rranjbom nga-koluy nga-koluy wanjh nga-wam, nga-wa:m, . . . Kungorobu nga-wam.
'And you know around about five o'clock when I was spearing [the fish] I climbed down and I walked off . . . I went to Kungorobu billabong'.

Nga-wam nga-bekkan, wayini 'Ngarre miwurrbbu ngardbakan ngarr-ngun'.
'I walked along and I heard [someone] singing "Let's go into the mangroves and eat mud mussels"'.
'

Yimarnek nga-yimeng laik ngad bininj bad nakka nani. Nga-bekkan, namek bale minj ngabin-nayi because too many ngamed . . . man-ngarre. 'Ngarre ngardbakan ngarr-ngun. Bu ngarre nga-bekkan yi-berleyhberleyhme ngayeman nga-berleyhberleyh' nga-bekkan bi-marneyimeng.

'It was as if it was me saying it, just like humans, but it was them. I could hear but not see because it was thick monsoon vine forest, too much . . . vine forest. "Let's go and eat mud mussels. If we go and I hear you smashing the shells then I myself will smash the shells," I heard one tell another'.

Nga-wam nga-wam wanjh nga-nang, larrk ka-yime konda na-ngale, somebody wokdiwokdi bad spirit wayarra wokdi. Yoh kumekke.
'I kept walking along and I looked, but there was nothing and I wondered who it was. Somebody was talking but it was the *wayarra* spirits. Yeah they were there'.

Nga-wam ngayeman nga-wayini, 'Ngarre miwurrbbu ngardbakan ngarr-ngun' nga-wayini . . . yoh manekke.
'And so I went off and I sang it myself, "Let's go to the mangroves and eat mud mussels," I sang . . . yeah like that'.

Nga-wam nga-wam [nga-] bekkang, one more nga-wam, nga-wam nga-bekkan njamed, dongohdoy 'dak dak dak'. Hey nga-bekkan 'yi-korkmiyakmen bukkann yim-warrwarrme', bi-marneyimeng. 'Hey, nakka na-ngale' nga-yimeng. Might be same one wayarra nga-yimeng. Namekke wayini wayarra nga-bekkan, boyen nga-wam try nga-yimeng nga-wayini. 'Nga-bekkan yi-korkmiyakmen bukkann nuk ngam-warrwarrme', yoh nga-wayini. Laik nga-rrahkendoy kure kodjkurlu.

33. See also Marett, 'Ghostly Voices: Some Observations on Song-Creation, Ceremony and Being in Northwest Australia', 18-29.

'I kept going back there [to Kungorobu billabong] and one other time I went there I heard [someone] hitting something "chop chop chop." Hey! and I heard, "when you finish chopping you wade over there," someone said [to someone else]. "Hey, who is that?" I said. It might be the same *wayarra* spirit I thought. But what I heard were *wayarra* spirits singing and some time later I tried then to sing these songs, "When I hear you have finished chopping I might wade over there to where you are," yeah I sang that. I committed it to memory'.

Djimarr is explaining here that it was his overhearing of *wayarra* spirits singing that led him to return home and practise singing what he had heard. This is slightly different to the notion of songmen who receive their songs from a spirit-familiar who is closely associated with an individual songman's spiritual experiences, especially relating to dreams.³⁴ There is no doubt that some *kun-borrk* songmen in western Arnhem Land receive songs from spirit-familiars as Berndt describes:

In western Arnhem Land there were and are quite a large number of song men (not, in this case, song-women) who claimed to have such spirit-familiars and were responsible for a considerable repertoire of song-cycles (or series), which varied in popularity at any given time. In the usual procedure, a song-man receives his composition through the medium of a dream in which his familiar sings and acts out the song or songs while simultaneously revealing the meanings.³⁵

In Djimarr's case however, the process is slightly different, in that he describes the song conception experience as something that occurs when he is awake and usually alone in the bush. I asked him about the conception of songs in dreams from spirit-familiars and received the following comment:

MG: *Nga-bekkan mak bu yika laik man-kordang, nawu bininj nawu man-kordangyi, ka-yo and ka-bukirribun, wayarra ka-kurrme man-dule, yidok?*
'I've heard also that "clever men," people who are *na-kordang* [with special supernatural powers] will sleep and dream and *wayarra* spirits will come and place a song [into the dream], is that right?'

KDj: *Larrk, sometime mak ka-yo, nawu njamed bu ka-karrme kun-kodj nawu good dreamer eh . . . wanjh ka-mang easy way or sometime nawu man-kordang ka-karrme ka-djaleni ka-bekkan him spirit ka-wayini yoh.*
'No, well sometimes he might sleep, and if he has a good head for dreaming, eh . . . well, it will be easy for him to get the songs or sometimes if he has supernatural power well as he goes about [awake] he will hear a spirit singing yeah'.

In western Arnhem Land, *man-kordang* power is experienced or possessed in degrees. Some people relate how they occasionally have supernatural experiences, which they explain in terms of partial *man-kordang* ability. Kevin Djimarr is recognized in his own community as being someone who possesses a fuller degree of *man-kordang* talent. He is described by everyone as *na-kordang* or *na-kordangyi* 'a man with supernatural ability'. In the above comment about song conception it is my understanding that Djimarr is confirming his method of song conception as the standard and authoritative manner in which a songman can receive songs. Receiving songs in dreams is what 'good dreamers' do.

34. See, for example, Marett, *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia* and Marett and Barwick, *Bunggridj-Bunggridj*. However, song creation based on the overhearing of spirits is not unique to this part of Australia. For a similar example in eastern Australia see Margaret Gummow, 'Songs from the Bundjalung and Gidabal Areas of South-Eastern Australia' (PhD thesis, The University of Sydney, 1992), 106-12.

35. Berndt, 'Other Creatures in Human Guise and Vice Versa', 171.

Features of Song-texts from the Djimarr Repertoire

The songs Djimarr heard being sung by *wayarra* at Kungorobu are now a well-known subject in his repertoire. Kungorobu, as Djimarr describes above, is an area of thick vine forest near mangroves on the bank of the Liverpool River. Reference to mangroves appears in the song-texts, and this group of songs is usually sung together in performance. The texts of three of these songs are as follows:

Example 9

Ngarre mi-wurrrbbu ngarr-ni [repeated four times]³⁶
ka-wolewolehmen ngarr-wokyibidbidun
 'Let's [you and I] go and sit in the mangroves
 late in the afternoon, our voices will rise up echoing'.

Example 10

Ngarre mi-wurrrbbu ngardbakan ngarr-ngun [repeated four times]
nga-bekkan yi-berleyhberleyhme
ngayaman nga-berleyhberleyhme
 'Let's go into the mangroves and eat mudshell
 when I hear you smashing open the shells
 I will then smash open the shells'.

Example 11

Yingan kurebeh yi-kolkmen ngayaman kondabeh nga-kolkme [repeated]
nga-bekkan yi-kolkmiyakmen
bukkan ngam-warrwarrme.
 'You chop over on that side, I will chop on this side [of a creek]
 when I hear you have stopped chopping
 I will come wading over'.

Although these songs do not make it clear who the participants are, Djimarr claims that it is *wayarra* who are the actors in the text. The sorts of activities sung about are of course exactly the kind of activities that humans engage in, which brings to mind Ronald Berndt's phrase 'Other creatures in human guise and vice versa'.³⁷ Many of Djimarr's songs about *wayarra* spirits are really the disguised activities and experiences of humans. Sometimes the texts clearly tell of actions that are particular to the profane *wayarra* spirits, who are human in form but mischievous, potentially dangerous and often vulgar in their behaviour. Consider the following song:

Example 12

Ngudda ngayi njale ngarr-ngun [repeated]
kayayay
kam-barrhbubarrhbun
njorda ngarr-ngun [these two lines repeated]
kayayay [and so forth]
 'What will you and I eat?
kayayay [vocable]
 When the sun rises
 we will eat snot'.
kayayay'.

36. As I have heard several performances of this song over a number of years, I would claim that the repetition here is fixed, as it is structurally significant to the music.

37. Berndt, 'Other Creatures in Human Guise and Vice Versa', 168-91.

Djimarr's commentary concerning this text is: *Wayarra minj ka-ngun man-me, ka-ngun njorda la ka-nudbanj wayarra* ('Wayarra don't eat food, they eat snot and they stink').

Other songs that detail the specific behaviour of *wayarra* in Djimarr's repertoire include those concerning *wayarra* that live amongst the stands of wet season spear-grass called *man-bedje* in Bininj Kun-wok. *Wayarra* are said to count or individually point out the nodes along the stem of the grass, holding the stem in one hand and with the other pointing and saying *konda ka-bard, konda ka-bard, konda ka-bard* 'here's a node, here's a node, here's a node', and when they reach the top of the stem they finish with the phrase *kondanj ka-nganjboke* 'here the head is seeding', as in the following two songs (see Examples 13 and 14). The second, according to Djimarr, involves one *wayarra* spirit trying to cheer up another by suggesting they emerge from their tree hollow to count speargrass nodes:

Example 13

Konda ka-bard [repeated four times]
kumekke kumekke ka-bard [repeated]
konda ka-bard konda ka-nganjboke.
 'Here is a node
 there, and there is another node
 here is a node and here it is coming into seed'.

Example 14

Ngad nawu mirrad ngarri-yo ngarrayi man-bedje ngarr-bard-robrokmeninj. [repeated four times]
Yimarnek ngarr-nayinj
nganbokemeninj ngarr-durndeyi
ngarr-ngimeninj.
 'We who live in the *man-barlmardi* tree hollows should go and count speargrass nodes.
 If we see that
 the grass is coming into seed we should return
 and we should go back inside'.

Other songs involve interaction between *wayarra* and humans, although this is not made explicit in the text. Rather, as in almost all *kun-borrk* song-texts, reference to participants is usually made only by obligatory pronominal prefixes on verb roots that have no given antecedents, resulting in indefinite readings of the participants:

Example 15

<i>Bene-wam</i>	<i>bene-madj-djirridjbo-m</i>	<i>beneh-ni</i> [repeated 4 times]
3uaP-go	3ua-clothing/containers-wash-PP	3ua-sit/be
'They both went to sit and do washing'		
<i>Bene-bekka-ng</i>	<i>birri-kayhme-ng</i>	
3ua-hear-PP	3a-call.out.-PP	
'They heard them calling out'		
<i>Bene-kele-lobme-ng.</i>		
3ua-fear-run-PP		
'They both ran off in fear'.		

The background contextual information needed to make referential sense of this text is only available from the songman himself. I have never heard a *kun-borrk* songman initiate an exegetical discussion relating to songs such as these, and when I have asked others (apart from the songman) for their opinions about who is being referred to, a typical response is an appeal to authority:

Example 16

Kare! Wardi Balang yi-djarwa, nungka ka-bengkan.

'I'm not sure! Why don't you ask Djimarr, he knows'.

Djimarr did eventually explain for me the background information relating to this song. The referents are *wayarra* spirits who went to do some washing on the Tomkinson River flood plain at a place called Mimanjarr. Djimarr says they could have been washing skins of their bodies, which *wayarra* can remove and carry around like a blanket. Suddenly they heard someone calling out, most likely humans, and so they ran off in fear.

Other songs remain referentially vague due to use of complex kinship terminology such as that of the tri-relational *kun-derbi* system, which is a set of social deictic terms which in a single lexical item (underlined in Example 17 below) encode the relationships between a speaker, addressee and another referent.

Example 17

Ngune-re Ngalmadienge mandjarduk ngune-rikan [repeated]

ngune-rikan Ngalmadienge

nangaleh nuye.

Na-kakkak nuye

ngune-re ngune-mang

ngunem-kan ngune-won

ngune-won ka-baye

'You go with your (Z)C [who is my MM] and go and get red apple fruit'³⁸

go and get it with your (Z)C [who is my MM]

whose is it?

It is your MMB's [and my MB's]

you both go and get it

bring it here and give it to him

give it to him to bite'.

Because *kun-derbi* terms are 'shifters' (that is, their pragmatic interpretation depends on the context of utterance), we can have little idea who the participants are in this song-text, which provides little contextual information.³⁹ The complexity of relationships between participants referred to is such that without access to background information outside of that provided only by the song-text, those listening to the song would not bother making the sort of pragmatic deductions required. This was confirmed by asking other people (apart from the songman) about the meaning of the song, which resulted in responses similar to that mentioned above ('go and ask Djimarr, it's his song, he'll be able to explain it'). Such a song-text in Kuninjku is also very difficult to translate into English without the resulting language sounding like the unpoetic and clumsy 'translationese' of structuralist kinship anthropology.

As mentioned above, Djimarr's song set is often referred to by other Aboriginal people in his family or by neighbours as *wurrurrumi* 'snake vine' (*Tinospora smilacina*). Many of the songs on this subject have now been replaced by newer compositions on different subjects and the only *wurrurrumi* theme song I have recorded in the past ten years is the following:

38. M 'mother'; F 'father'; B 'brother'; Z 'sister'; C 'child'.

39. Roman Jakobson, *Shifters, Verbal Categories and the Russian Verb* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Russian Language Project, 1957).

Example 18

Wurrurrumi yi-karrmen nga-karrme [repeated four times]

nga-bekkan yi-wernhdurkme

wardi nuk kan-wanjyirdebke.

'You hold the snake vine and I will hold it

I can feel you pulling it too forcefully

maybe you will dislocate my shoulder'.

This song is sometimes acted out in the Mamurrng ceremony, in a dance in which dancers are said to imitate the actions of *wayarra* by using a long rope representing the *wurrurrumi* 'snake vine' decorated with feather 'leaves', which dancers pull back and forth.

The first line of this song also illustrates some departure from normal Bininj Kun-wok phrase structure in that we could normally expect some kind of conjunction between *yi-karrme* 'you hold it (IMP)' and *nga-karrme* 'I hold it' along the lines of Example 19:

Example 19

Yi-karrme-n ngayi mak nga-karrme

2m-hold-IMP 1m also 1m-hold

'You hold it and I hold it too'.

In this case it may be that the paratactic apposition of the two verbal constructions *yi-karrmen nga-karrme* is forced by musical elements such as metre. Djimarr provided me with an example of the importance of how metre can govern choice of textual elements as in the following song:

Example 20

Kayi-marnedokmerrokme kabene-re [repeated]

kabene-re. [repeated four times]

Med kondanj yi-rrin / nga-rlobme ngaben-nan [repeated]

ngam-borledborledme ngam-dangmarrhmang

ngam-wayudwayudme

'They both walk along [and] he moves ahead for her

they both walk along.

Wait, you stay here / I will run and watch them

I'll circle around, I'll open the door

and I'll wave [to you]'.

A pair of lovers (*wayarra* spirits) go to organize a tryst. The male goes first to a place where he knows there is a *man-barlmardi* tree with a big hollow (the home of other *wayarra*). He goes ahead to check that there are no people around and says to his girlfriend that if there is no one, he'll turn around and wave for her to come over. He doesn't have to open a door as the song suggests (*ngam-dangmarrhmang* 'I open the door'), but according to Djimarr he put this word in because four extra syllables were required by the metre of the song.⁴⁰ *Man-barlmardi, kun-dulk minj ka-karrme door* 'Man-barlmardi trees don't have doors/entrance covers', says Djimarr. Another unusual feature of this song is that the text changes from third person to first person. This is a shift from songman as commentator on the actants' movements to use of first person direct speech *nga-rlobme nga-ben-nan* 'I'll run off and watch them'. Typical human behaviour disguised as the conduct of *wayarra* is

40. What is required here is a musicological analysis of the metrical requirements of the song style. This article focuses on song-texts, but future planned research on *kun-borrk* promises to extend my analysis here, through collaboration with musicologists.

easily pragmatically decoded by the audience as being exactly that, but such a disguise provides the songman with the defence of not directly commenting on any particular individual's behaviour or making the tactless mistake of being too direct and consequently overly risqué. It is also safer to obtain pleasure from deriding the incorrigible behaviour of profane spirits rather than that of people, especially if there are individuals in the audience who are known to behave in similar ways to the characters in the song-texts. The following song is a further example, and in the commentary given by Djimarr he makes it quite clear that these songs provide entertainment value by commenting on human behaviour in the guise of *wayarra* mischief.

Example 21

Ka-yibodmerokkarokkan kabene-re [repeated]

ka-yibodmerokkarokkan.

kabene-nidberren

kabene-di.

'She stands hiding behind his back as they walk along together

she stands hiding behind his back.

They have stopped in their tracks

they are both standing there'.

One male *wayarra* walks with his girlfriend hiding behind his back. They stop to listen for others in case they might be found out. As Djimarr explains, *Yiman ngad bininj, nungka wayarra mararradj ka-karrme warriidj* 'Just like people, *wayarra* spirits have secret lovers too'.

Other Unusual Features of *Kun-borrk* Song Language

Other departures from normal Bininj Kun-wok everyday language involve a continuum of differences from unusual but highly expressive lexical items (but still standard Bininj Kun-wok), to the insertion of an unknown spirit language phrase in the midst of ordinary language, through to songs completely in an unknown spirit language (as noted by West above). In the totemic songs of the Western Roper region, Merlan makes some similar observations:

It is noteworthy that song texts reveal some otherwise little-used words, a somewhat rarified vocabulary in which such movements, sounds etc. are expressed; and also, that detailed explication of song-texts (requested by myself) always called forth an unusually rich vocabulary as singers attempted to elaborate on what verses signified or suggested to them.⁴¹

Likewise, Marett discusses a similar mixing of spirit and human language in the *wangga* songs of the Daly River region of northern Australia.⁴²

Consider the following song by Djimarr, which includes a few unusual items of vocabulary:

41. Merlan, 'Catfish and Alligator', 149.

42. Marett, 'Ghostly Voices', 18-29.

Example 22

Kurebeh yi-kolkmen kondabeh nga-kolkmen [repeated three times]

ka-djorrhyirdebme nga-burribawon

ngun-bardkarlangrderdme.

'You chop with your axe on this side and I'll chop on the other side
the head of the axe flies off, I swerve to avoid it
it chops into your kneecap'.

This song, according to Djimarr, is about two women collecting *man-kung* 'sugar bag/wild honey' from a hive in a tree, and includes some unusual vocabulary relating to the use of axes (as does the song-text in Example 7), such as *-kolkmen* (in the first line) instead of *-rderdme* (which appears in the last line). Also, when speaking about the head of an axe flying off its handle, Kuninjku dialect speakers (at least) usually use the term *-djorrdolkan* instead of the less common *-djor-rhyirdebme* as in this text. Another example of rare items of vocabulary in song-texts is the following from Kuninjku songman Owen Yalandja, which includes unusual expressive terms of bereavement (underlined) felt by a woman at the departure of her lover:⁴³

Example 23

Nga-berrekalkdorren nga-berrekalkdorren

nuk ngan-marnewam

nga-wirlenguneng nga-wirlewarrengdi

nga-kebnguneng nuk nga-kebdokebdorren.

'I strike my chest in sadness

maybe he has left me

I feel sadness at the departure of one I have affection for, I feel bad at his departure

I feel affection for him and I am striking my face in sadness'.

The text of the next song (Example 24) consists of ordinary language except for the final line *kala kala bukmo*, which is in a spirit language spoken by *wayarra*. According to Djimarr's commentary, when humans are cooking bandicoots, the *wayarra* nearby in the dark smell the fur being cooked and the strong smell 'pierces the nose' as a pleasant smell. The meaning of the spirit language term *kala kala bukmo* is interpreted by Djimarr as *nga-koynguneng* in ordinary Kuninjku, which means 'oh how delicious'.

Example 24

Kure yok nga-mudnomeng nga-bekkan ka-mudbanj [repeated 4 times]

nga-bekkan ngan-kebyameng

kala kala bukmo.

'There, near the bandicoot I can smell its fur cooking

I can smell it, the smell has pierced my nose

oh how delicious'.

As mentioned, some songs are completely in an unknown language and are sometimes unintelligible to all including the songman. An example is the following:

43. These terms are unusual in the sense that they are not in common usage and are more formal in nature.

Example 25

Djabba nguringuri
madba kurrána
djabba nguringuri
madba kurrána
djabba nguringuri
*madba kurrána.*⁴⁴

Djimarr's commentary on this song is that it is in the language of the *djabbo*, the northern spotted quoll (*Dasyurus hallucatus*), and that humans do not know this language. However, it is still considered a 'ghost language'. *Wayarra* spirits are closely associated with quolls. For Bininj Kun-wok speakers, quolls are associated with death and profane spirits. The sign-language hand-signal for the quoll is the same as that used for *wayarra*, which is the same again for death (the fingers held in a claw shape). This is because in Bininj Kun-wok mythology the ancestral quoll and moon-beings fought with each other over the fate of humanity. The moon argued that humans should die and be reborn each month in a cycle, whilst the quoll said that humans should die once only and remain dead. The two could not resolve their differences and so the moon left to enter the sky where he could practise his preference for being renewed each month and the quoll remained on earth to impose his preference on all living things.

Example 26

Kunga kunga kungaye
kunga kunga kungaye
kunga kunga kungaye.
 [this set of 3 lines repeated 4 times]

This song is also in the unknown quoll/ghost language. The quoll is said to sing this song as it walks along. Djimarr's comments are as follows:

Djabbo wayarra bedberre. Ngad bininj duruk karri-karrme la wayarra djabbo kabirri-karrme. Bedda wayarra kabirri-karrme na-marnde. Nga-bek kang nga-wam nga-yabwurdni Manbulukarri, nga-djadmudni.

'The quoll belongs to *wayarra*. We humans have dogs but *wayarra* have quolls.

Wayarra have malevolent spirits. I heard this song when I went to Manbulukarri (a vine jungle on the Liverpool River) when I was young, before I was married'.

A third song in a spirit language from Djimarr's repertoire is as follows:

Example 27

Manbak kurrána kayalimarra.
manbak kurrána kayalimarra.
manbak kurrána kayalimarra.
 [this set of 3 lines repeated 3 times]

Unlike the previous two spirit language songs, this song is also in a 'ghost language' but the meaning is known, as Djimarr explains:

Minj dabbarrabbolk birri-wayiniwirrinj. Ngayi nga-wam Manbulukarri, nga-bek kang wayarra birri-wayini. Nga-wam nga-durndi kure Mumeka nga-djawam Wamud ngan-marneyimeng nakka kun-wok wayarra bedberre.

44. In the Iwaidja language of north-west Arnhem Land, the word *kurrána* means 'moon', which, interestingly, is the subject of this song. I have marked stress on the penultimate syllable because this is not the usual stress pattern in Bininj Kun-wok, which in this case would normally be expected on the initial syllable.

'The old people didn't sing this song. I went to Manbulukarri and heard ghosts singing this song. I went back to Mumeka [where Djimarr was living] and I asked my father who told me that it was the language of ghosts'.

According to Djimarr's father, Anchor Kulunba (who was also a well known *na-kordang* or 'clever man'), the text of this *wayarra* 'ghost' language song can be given a Kuninjku translation *nga-re kure man-ngarre nga-ni*, which in English is 'I will go to dwell in the monsoon vine thicket'. As in all three of the above 'ghost language' songs, the phonotactics of the language are consistent with that of Bininj Kunwok. However, the words in the last song have a different stress assignment pattern to normal Bininj Kunwok, both when enunciated in text elicitation, and during song performance.

Kun-borrk Songs by Owen Yalandja

Owen Yalandja is another Kuninjku *kun-borrk* songman from the Tomkinson River district south of Maningrida. Yalandja performs songs that were given to him by his father Crusoe Kuningbal, who died in 1984. Kuningbal was well known in western Arnhem Land as a songman and some of his song-texts were recorded by Elkin.⁴⁵

Within a songman's repertoire, some songs are designated as *man-kare* 'old', such as those handed down from older generations, while others are *man-kerrnge* 'new', which include those recently composed or conceived by the songman. After the death of a songman, no one will perform his songs for a number of years. During the mortuary rites after a songman's death, the *kun-borrk* songs of the deceased songman are treated like other personal possessions and must be treated with the smoke of ironwood leaves. This is achieved by another person singing the songs into the smoke of a mortuary fire. This ritual is called *man-dule ka-rung* 'the songs burn' or *kabirri-dulemardadabkinje* 'they cleanse the songs with iron wood smoke'. Some songs will eventually be sung again if the dead songman has a son who is interested in singing, otherwise the songs are no longer performed. In Yalandja's case, all of the songs in his repertoire are those handed down from his father Crusoe Kuningbal.

One of Kuningbal's songs which has not been performed since his death is his composition about fireflies, of which Elkin made an audio recording. The song-text as Elkin transcribed it with his incorrect English gloss is as follows:

Example 28a

'jugu jugu gabili 'biligan bebme garulg
bush-fire flame spreads 'comes out' tree'⁴⁶

With one of Kuningbal's sons, Timothy Wulanjbirr, I listened to the Elkin recording and together we transcribed and translated the song (using standard Kunwinjku orthography):

45. A. P. Elkin, 'Arnhem Land Music', *Oceania* 25/1-2 (1954), 78-9.

46. *Ibid.*, 78.

Example 28b

Yukkuyukkuh kabirlihbirlikan
yukkuyukkuh kabirlihbirlikan
ka-rrulkbēlme ka-rrulkbēlme ka-rrulkbēlme.

'The firefly carries light
the firefly carries light
it attaches onto trees, it attaches onto trees, it attaches onto trees'.

Some of Kuningbal's songs have made it into his son Yalandja's repertoire, such as the following, which is nearly always performed as an opening song:

Example 29

Karri-djohdjongburrimen
karri-berlkarrmerrimen. [these 2 lines repeated]
Konda nuk konda karri-dangimen
karri-wayudwayudme
kabirrim-wayudwayudme
karri-kuk-koluhkolung
karri-ngardmowelebwelebme

'Let us put on our adornments
let us take each other by the arm.
Maybe we shall stand here
Let's wave our hands
they will wave to us
let us lower our bodies
and sway our hips back and forth'.

Yalandja is a member of the Dankorlo clan, whose major totem includes *yawkyawk* 'young female water spirits'. Yalandja claims many of his songs are about the affairs of *yawkyawk* beings, and the song set is usually referred to as *yawkyawk*. Dancers who perform during the singing of these songs sometimes paint images of mermaids on their chests, because it is believed that *yawkyawk* spirit beings can transmutate into fish-tailed beings when they enter the water. Like the songs of Kevin Djimarr, Yalandja's *kun-borrk* songs include a number of songs with romantic themes (similar to Djimarr's Example 20 above), and just as Djimarr's songs are human affairs in the guise of *wayarra* behaviour, so too do the songs in the *yawkyawk* set present human behaviour as that of *yawkyawk*.

Songs in Yalandja's set are characteristically vague, and often provide no contextual information. They are also very brief and almost haiku-like in their poetic focus on a simple event, human emotion or physical movement:

Example 30

Nakka nuk kuk-mak kam-re
nga-rraddunduluburren.
'Maybe it is that handsome man coming
I pierce my leg all over'.

Yalandja's interpretation of Example 30 is of a woman seeing a lover return from long away. Thinking perhaps he had died, she grabs her digging stick and repeatedly stabs her leg in a traditional display of emotion. The following four songs by Yalandja (Examples 31-4) illustrate the brevity and vagueness typical of the *yawkyawk* repertoire:

Example 31

Ngudda nuk yi-rrolkka ngarre [repeated]

2sg IGN 2sg-get.upIMP 12go

'Get up, let's go for a walk shall we'.

Kay ay ay aay [vocalable]

In the following song, one *yawkyawk* speaks to another. There is no other information known about the context:

Example 32

Kan-[w]o ngarrewoneng

ngane-dabkendong ngane-ni.

'Give [some] to us both

we'll stay here and fill it'.

Yalandja's explanation is the following: two *yawkyawk* ask someone for *man-kung* 'wild honey'. The vagueness of this text includes no information about the object of the transitive verb 'give', nor about the participants, the nature of the container being filled or the motivation for the proposition expressed. The text and associated ellipsis are at times very much like the utterances of everyday conversation. It is as though a segment of a conversation has been lifted out of its original context and dumped into a song set. An audience might be able to pragmatically fill in the gaps, especially if the song has been recently composed about an event about which people have some knowledge. Some *kun-borrk* songs, however, are sung by the sons and grandsons of their composers and as the generations pass, the original contextual meanings, indirect as they were originally, become increasingly inaccessible. As Yalandja indicated, *yawkyawk* water spirits are known for their food collecting activities and their carrying of containers such as string bags and woven dilly bags. A scenario could be constructed whereby two women ask one of their kin for a share of whatever food has been successfully collected.

The following two songs are similarly vague with no contextual information being given in the text, or known by the songman:

Example 33

Ngal-kobbanj yi-rrolkka

yi-rrolkka ngarre

'Old woman, get up

get up, let's go'.

A son talks to his mother, 'Mother, get up let's go'.

Example 34

Nga-kolung nga-lobme

ngaben-yawan.

'I'll go down and run

I'll search for them'.

Other songs need not be so brief, such as the following song about an incessantly angry woman who complains about how she thinks she is going to be attacked by an unspecified referent (Example 35). The song-text sets a context, minimal as it may be, in the first two lines, and then introduces the direct speech of the angry woman in the second section (Example 35, lines 3 to 8):

Example 35

1. *Ngale nuk ngal-dang-warre*
II-this maybe II-mouth-bad
2. *ka-rrahme ka-wokdi* [repeated twice]
3mNP-be.hostileNP 3mNP-speak
3. *Yimarnek man-kole*
counterfact. III-spear
4. *man-kole ka-ma-ng*
III-spear 3m-get-NP
5. *Kun-dulk kun-dulk ka-ma-ng*
III-stick III-stick 3mNP-get-NP
6. *ngan-djurd-bakke*
3>1-neck-breakNP
7. *Ngan-bo-m konda nuk ngan-bo-m*
3>1-hit-PP here maybe 3>1-hit-PP
8. *konda nuk nga-kuk-yo.*
here maybe 1m-body-lieNP

'Here she is that bad-mouthed woman
who is throwing a tantrum.
"Maybe it's a spear,
he's getting a spear.
A stick, he's going to get a stick,
he's going to break my neck.
He struck me here, bashed me,
maybe my body will end up lying here"'.
'

This song is unusual in that the text provides a greater than usual amount of information, which allows us to make some inference as to referential identity of actants in the text. Lines 1 and 2, referring to *ngale . . . ngal-dangwarre* 'this bad mouthed woman', must be attributed to someone other than the person uttering lines 3 to 8, which is the dramatized direct speech of the bad-mouthed woman. This can be inferred from the fact that lines 3 to 8 are an example of the angry 'bad-mouthed' speech referred to in lines 1 and 2. The third person subject in lines 3 to 8 however is non-referential: that is, the identity of the person to whom the violent behaviour is attributed is not made explicit. The Kuninjku audience who listen to these songs tend to construct their own referential frameworks for making referential sense of song-texts such as these. One person I asked said lines 1 and 2 were the comments of a man, and 3 to 8 are the angry woman. Upon asking for further details such as 'Who is she angry with?' or 'Is the man her husband?' the reply was *Wardi yi-djarwa Yalandja!* 'Try and ask Yalandja!'

Kun-borrk song-texts, as we have seen in the above texts, often suspend participant identification totally, but song-texts are not everyday discourse and as special artful forms of communicative practice they are intentionally designed so that listeners are not able to easily identify referents. In some respects, it doesn't matter whether or not the audience can make sense of the text. As commentators on the song-texts have remarked, the full context is known only by the songman and much of the entertainment value is derived from speculating about the meaning of the song.

Although Yalandja does not compose new songs himself he has become the recognized custodian of his father's song set, and his reputation as a songman is based very much on his musical interpretations of his father's songs. Those songs that were compositions based on a real life event or observation of someone's behaviour can eventually be attributed to or compared with the behaviour of *yawkyawk* spirit beings when the original contextual meaning is lost. Yalandja discusses the conception of his father's *yawkyawk* song set in the following narrative:

Kodjbukirriyoy bukirri, wayiniwirrinj mandule manbu man-kerrnge, man-kerrnge marnbuyi duleno, ba wayiniwirrinj.

'He dreamt when he was asleep, and he used to sing those new songs which he made [from those dreams].

Yawkyawk birri-wayini man-dule birri-yimeng 'mani yi-wayinin!'; wanjh wayiniwirrinj. Nga-bekkanng kureh wayihwayiniwirrinj ngayemanali.

'The yawkyawk spirits sang songs and said "You sing these songs!", and so he would sing them then. I heard how he used to sing and so now I sing them'.

Ngayi minj nga-bukirribun larrk. Bedda yika laik bin-bakkemeninj nungan bin-nayi . . . bukurri en wayiniwirrinj.

'I don't dream [to conceive songs] no. But he [my father] would also compose songs himself about other people he had seen . . . he would [conceive the song in a] dream and then sing'.

Yawkyawk kuronj kabirri-yo birri-buyika, birri-buyika kuberrk. Yika ngalberddjenj, yika dengebininj. Kabirri-kayhme yi-bin-bekkan bad ngun-kodjborledke yi-mayahme wardi. Ngudda yi-yime yimarnek kabirri-yime yi-yime bininj ka-kayhme ngad [wurru?].

'Some of the *yawkyawk* spirits live in the water and others live on the land. Some have fish tails and others have feet like humans. They can call out and when you hear them they can affect your mind and you can become confused. You'll think that it is actually people calling out to us'.

Wantaim bukirribom duleno manebu nga-wayiniwirrinj bad nga-barwong. Nungan maitbi bekkang bakkerrinj man-buyika bu bukirribuyi bi-woy, bi-woyi, 'mane yi-wayini'. All kind wayiniwirrinj.

'I used to sing some of the songs that he dreamt about but I've left those songs now. Sometimes he would compose a song about himself and other times he would dream and be given [a song], "You sing this," [he would be told in the dream]. He used to sing songs of all kinds [that is, those he composed himself as well as those he conceived in dreams].

This version of *kun-borrk* song conception differs from that of Djimarr above, in that it is the totemic beings associated with Kuningbal's Dankorlo clan who are the source of spiritually conceived songs. The *wayarra* spirits in Djimarr's account of song conception are not particularly associated with his Kurulk clan identity. The Dankorlo clan, on the other hand, are strongly associated with *yawkyawk* spirituality. The major Dankorlo outstation is located next to a ritually important *yawkyawk djang* 'mermaid sacred site'. Yalandja is also an accomplished wood sculptor who is engaged full-time in the carving of giant wooden mermaid-like *yawkyawk* spirit carvings for the art and craft market.

The above narrative also reveals a manner of song conception quite different from that of Djimarr, in that Kuningbal received inspiration for his songs in dreams in which *yawkyawk* spirits would provide the song-text and tell him to sing it. By contrast, Djimarr's account of a supernatural encounter involved spying on

spirit beings engaged in singing and then returning to camp and imitating what he had witnessed.

Concluding Remarks

For individually owned song genres in western Arnhem Land the role of songman becomes central in any discussion of *kun-borrk* song-texts. It is the songman who is responsible for the creation of these songs, their interpretation and performance. Clan-owned song series such as those within the *bunggurl* genre in central and north-eastern Arnhem Land may be performed by a number of songmen, who will have learned to sing over a long period of time from their youth. Learning to sing clan-owned songs involves the imitation of one's older relatives as they sing a series of totemically significant songs that are believed to be of great antiquity and supernatural origin. A *kun-borrk* songman, however, must be a special individual, often someone with exceptional *man-kordang* or 'spiritual cleverness', who is able to compose his own songs, perform those of his father (if indeed his father was also a songman), and be able to conceive songs by supernatural means. This requires a greater level of creativity than does the singing of clan-owned songs, and more of an emphasis on solo performance.⁴⁷

The sense of mystery associated with the totemic songs of clan-owned song series in Arnhem Land stems from the knowledge that the song-texts were originally uttered by ancestral dreaming beings, and therefore the opaque meanings of the songs represent an extraordinary communicative practice. If the relationship between mystery and authority in Aboriginal song as described by Sutton holds true throughout a variety of different song types throughout Australia, then *kun-borrk* songs have upheld this principle in a different way.⁴⁸ Because the language of *kun-borrk* songs is transparent (at least at the literal level), it is participant reference and other contextual information relating to the encapsulated 'interpersonal event' that have been mystified and disguised.⁴⁹ Berndt also comments on this referential indeterminacy of 'Gunwinggu gossip songs' and states that as far as the texts are concerned, 'the messages they convey are relatively straightforward, except that they do not state who the participants in any one song really are'.⁵⁰ The authority of the *kun-borrk* songman is established not so much through an ability to disambiguate multiple song-text meanings, but rather through the manner in which a songman has conceived or obtained ownership of a song. To have undergone some personal esoteric experience with spirit beings provides the songman with the kind of status and authority associated with being *na-kordang*. I have heard many young Bininj Kun-wok people proudly describing the supernatural abilities of their older relatives who are songmen or *na-kordang* of renown and who have in their adventures communed with spiritual beings, slaughtered dangerous mythical animals or ridden on

47. Nevertheless, Hale describes the process by which young Centralian Aboriginal people learn to sing the couplets of sacred songs as an intellectual undertaking that involves considerable creativity or 'recreativity'. See Kenneth L. Hale, 'Remarks on Creativity in Aboriginal Verse', in *Problems and Solutions: Occasional Essays in Musicology Presented to Alice M. Moyle*, ed. Jamie C. Kassler and Jill Stubington (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1984), 260.

48. Sutton, 'Mystery and Change', 77-96.

49. Berndt, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, xiv.

50. Berndt, 'Other Creatureskin Human Guise and Vice Versa', 172.

the backs of rainbow serpents, driving them to safely distant water holes away from places where people need to camp, hunt or swim.

The Aboriginal English translation of this term *na-kordang* as 'clever man' further suggests one way in which an authoritative position or extraordinary status is perceived in Aboriginal societies characterized by Keen's notion of an 'economy of religious knowledge'.⁵¹ To have extraordinary access to a spiritual world which most people do not is equated with 'cleverness'. In this case it is the process by which a *kun-borrk* songman has come to be in ownership of his songs that provides social status. This contrasts with the situation for other parts of Aboriginal Australia whereby the opacity of totemic song-texts creates ambiguities and it is only those in positions of power who control religious knowledge who are able to pronounce authoritative interpretations of such textual opacity.⁵²

The rich song traditions of Aboriginal Australia still remain largely inaccessible to wider audiences outside of the regions where these songs are composed and performed. Aboriginal languages have very small speech communities, typically in the hundreds or a few thousand speakers, and with the much-lamented loss of Australia's Aboriginal linguistic diversity we are also witnessing the loss of culturally important artistic traditions.⁵³ *Kun-borrk* songmen are keepers of intangible cultural property and heritage. They are rare individuals with exceptional artistic abilities. The documentation of these endangered artistic traditions deserves further attention and resources.

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