

33 *Playing songs can be dangerous*

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"It's just like mucking around at school and changing the words."
(Louise McClatchy, of Supergirly, p.32 in *The Australian Way*,
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1. Introduction¹

A genre of song and dance in Cape York Peninsula is the *malgarri*, or 'playabout corroboree'. The songs accompany 'shake-a-leg' dancing. They are melodically and rhythmically traditional and use a mixture of languages that, although now including English, is thoroughly traditional. *Malgarri* are secular and performed for entertainment; many include an element of comedy.² In this paper, we trace what we have been able to make out of the history of one of the more widely performed of these comic song-dance skits, 'Manager' or '*Mari Manager*'.³ Our analysis takes as its focal point the version of 'Manager' that both of us have heard performed live, that of Claude Wilkie. We take it that Claude's is a development from an earlier one recorded in a variety of versions, and we ask what it is that he did to it and speculate on why he did so.

¹ Thanks to AIATSIS and the recorders of the songs mentioned below for making the tapes available; to Linda Barwick, Myfany Turpin, and John von Sturmer for musicological advice (although they are not responsible for our errors of notation); to Grace Koch for keying in the musical notation; to Viv Sinnammon, Gary Drewien, and John Clark for sharing information and interpretations; to Gavan Breen for proofreading and for allowing us to use his Kokiny materials; and to Henry Andrew, Pindi (deceased December 2000), Billy Thomas, and George Lawrence for their recent performance of 'Manager'. Of these performers, Billy Thomas deserves special mention as an active promoter of the preservation of traditional Aboriginal performance modes.

² The comic song is mentioned in some of the earliest anthropological literature on the indigenous cultures of Australia (Howitt 1996[1904]:413, 424).

³ A thorough account of creations of this type would of course make extensive use of motion-picture or video recordings. We are in regard to 'Manager' unfortunately limited to the audio record alone.

Claude (Kalq Pothalnhonl 'bundles up spears') left his country near Kowanyama (formerly known as Mitchell River Mission; see Map 1 in Sutton, this volume), Cape York Peninsula, at an early age and travelled on boats and worked on pastoral stations around Cape York and the Torres Straits. A native speaker of Yir-Yoront and the other Kowanyama languages Koko-Bera and Uw-Oykangand (Kunjen), on his own account he learned to speak thirteen languages. He earned high respect for his work in the pearling lugger industry (V. Sinnamon, pers. comm.). A breaker of rules and accomplished buffoon, Claude would have struck a chord with Ken Hale, with his love of language, music, travel, humour, and the underdog.

In his later years, during the 1970s, Claude gained notoriety for his performances in official 'corroborees' at Kowanyama, performing a series of dances and songs some of which satirised those official dignitaries being honoured. These burlesques were a form of low-key resistance to the institutional framework of the Mitchell River Mission and the subsequent Queensland-managed reserve. The official subjects of his humour were generally unaware of the joke, although the community would erupt with laughter.

'Manager' is generally performed as one of a short suite of dances. We know it from eight recorded performances (and versions). These (identified by AIATSIS tape archive number where appropriate) are by Billy Flower (A412, recorded at Lockhart River by LaMont West in 1961), Paddy Stumpy (A1222, recorded at Bloomfield River Mission by Hank Hershberger in 1964), Michael Webb (A1903, recorded at Mareeba by Peter Sutton in 1970), an unidentified singer at Wrotham Park (A2601, recorded by Alice Moyle in 1966), Peter Flying Fox (recorded at Wrotham Park by Moyle in 1966 and published as Moyle 1988 [1981]), and Claude Wilkie (recorded at Kowanyama by Barry Alpher in 1966). These performers either identify themselves as Olgolo (south-central Cape York Peninsula) or come from the fringes of Olgolo country. The chronological order of the recordings should not be taken as a reflection of the order of development of the versions. The song is at least one lifetime old: Tommy George (of whom more below), a pensioner now living in Laura, recalled having heard 'Manager' as a child and mimed an old man stooped with one hand on his back.

We are aware of two other noteworthy renditions of 'Manager', though we do not provide transcriptions or analyses of these here. The first is that of Michael (Mick) Richards, recorded in Charters Towers by Gavan Breen in 1972 (AIATSIS archive tape A2547) and associated with Delta Downs and Neumayer Valley, where Mr Richards had worked. These stations are close to Normanton and quite far to the southwest of the other places where the song was recorded.⁴ The second additional 'Manager' was performed at Kowanyama in September 2000 by Henry Andrew (Garrell), with accompaniment by Billy Thomas, Pindi, and George Lawrence, and recorded by Alpher. It differs from all previously recorded versions and shows that 'Manager' is alive and well in Cape York Peninsula.

2. Peter Flying Fox's and related versions

Peter Flying Fox, an Olgolo man (deceased ca. 1970), performed the recorded 'Manager' in the suite 'Dunbar Load', 'Fish Hawk', and 'Manager'. According to his statement in the

⁴ Alpher came across this rendition unexpectedly while working on Breen's Kokiny language materials in connection with another project. The presence of this song on the Kokiny tape suggests the existence of other archived but uncatalogued versions.

recording, the song originally belongs to the place Laura (see also Moyle 1966:8), just outside of Olgolo country and not far from Wrotham Park. We set out his version first because of its accessibility to the tape-buying public and because it gives us a first access to what we believe is the song's original concept. Musical notation of this (Figure 1) and of Claude Wilkie's rendition (Figure 2) is provided here to show that the songs differ not only in verbal content but also in melody, rhythm, and phrasing. The notation is 'broad', to be understood in the same sense as in 'broad phonetic'.⁵ The notation of these songs is truncated ('etc.'), and notation of renditions by other singers is omitted, because of space limitations, but there is much of analytical interest in the "etc." and in the other renditions, which differ melodically and otherwise in striking ways.

Sung:⁶ *Ey a menedja, menedji—wulpala w' menedji—ngi*
Mari mari mari—ngi
Mari mari mari—
Menedja u' menedji—wulpala wu' [breath] -dji—
Wulpala wu menedji—'ngi
Mari mari mari—
Menedja wu mene-

Spoken, businesslike but friendly conversational voices, same singer doing both voices, with the rhythm continued:

[A:] *Where he bullock?*
[B:] *Nother side of creek. Okay?*
[A:] *Okay, goodbye. Bullock nother side.*
[B:] *Right?*
[A:] *(H)ooray.*

Sung: *O—ulpala ulpala uwv menedja, menedji—*

Spoken:

[A:] *Okay, where the bullock[s]?*
[B:] *Nother side. Nother side of bullock [sic, for 'creek']*
[A:] *Ooray. Good-bye.*

Falsetto: *ku#*

Aside, spoken: "Thas belong Laurie." [very obscure on the tape]

⁵ Among the features of great interest that we gloss over here are (in Claude Wilkie's performance) certain melodic and rhythmic intricacies, the latter including entrances to some lines slightly before the beat. As for the pronunciation of the words, Linda Barwick points out to us that Claude says something like *waypala* in the first run-through and then *whitefella*, with an *f*, in the repeat, and that this difference needs to be taken into account in a complete characterisation of the irony in the song. These and other subtleties we leave for a later treatment.

⁶ The right single-quote mark (apostrophe) represents the singer's glottal catch (punctuating an extended sung vowel); (*w*)*ulpala* 'old fellow'; *mari* 'Aboriginal person' has a glide alternating with a retroflex flap (*mardi*); *menedja* and *menedji* are 'manager'. *Okay* 'okay' in one instance is our construal (possibly our misconstrual) of an utterance with a possible medial glide *r* transcribed as *ooray*! 'hooray' by Moyle (1966:10); in later lines it is clearly *ooray*.

Sung: *O:ungug ulpala ul menedji—
ngi mardi mardi mardi—*

Spoken:

[B:] *Goodday!*

[A:] *Goodday. Where the bullock?*

[B:] *Nother side of creek.*

[A:] *Okay.*

Falsetto: *ku* [57 sec]

Aside, spoken: "That song's Laura." [very obscure on the tape]

The song concerns an Aboriginal cattle manager, or head stockman in the current speech of the area. That this is the *mari* in question is clear from another recording, that of Michael Webb in 1970, who introduces the song (which he characterises as 'belonging to Lamalama') with the spoken explanation, "This's a boy, been managing, a station. Coloured boy; he—he—he reckon he's a gentleman." Here there is laughter on the tape. The lines then run:⁷

*'e mardi mardi mari
mardi mardiiyi / mardi mardi* [repeated]
manidja manidja [3 times] *la
manidja manidja*

and continue (with some words we are not able to gloss but which apparently do not include *wulpala* 'oldfella') [1 min 8 sec]. 'Mari Manager' in Paddy Stumpy's rendition gives the same information:

*mari' mari mari
mari' mari ga'
manidja manidja ga'*

Spoken: "That—*bama* [Aboriginal person]."

Sung: *'æ mari mari mari*

and so on (much of which we are unable to gloss) [about 5 min], including the earliest recorded introduction of 'whitefella': *'e ga manidja / 'a waypala la 'ulpala* 'whitefella, oldfella', this collocation repeated many times. We take this to expand on "he reckon he's a gentleman": he is behaving like a white man. The same collocation occurs in the unidentified singer's version recorded by Moyle in 1966, in the form of parallel lines: after

*menvdjaw menvdji ow
whitefella menvdji ng
mari mari mari ngow
mari mari mari ya
waytfala waytpala dbuuu ngu
waytfela* [laughter in the audience]

there is *menedja wu menedji / wulpala wu menedji*, and so on [1 min 38 sec].

⁷ Here *mardi* 'Aboriginal person' has a retroflex flap in most tokens and a glide in a few. The terms *boy* and *wulman* 'old man' can in this English variety refer to the same person.

e a me - ne - dja me - ne - dji

wul - pa - la wu? me - ne - dji - 'ngi

ma - ri ma - ri ma - ri - ngi ma - ri ma - ri ma - ri

me - ne - dja - u' me - ne - dji wul - pa - la wu' dji

wul - pa - la wu me - ne - dji ngi

ma ri ma - ri ma ri

me ne - dja - u me - ne Spoken
Where he bullock

Spoken
Where he bullock 'nother side a creek okay okay

goodbye Bullock nother side Rey ey O - ray

'O wul - pa - la ul - pa - la u - wa me - ne - dja me -

ni - dji ho - ray Spoken
Where the bullock (etc.)

Figure 1: 'Mari Manager'; Peter Flying Fox's rendition, 1966.
Notation by Grace Koch from Alpher transcript; pitch approximate.

Billy Flower's 1961 rendition is on an almost inaudible recording in which only the words *mari mari mari* are recognisable.

What is present in Peter Flying Fox's version and absent from the others described above is the spoken interlude *Gday, gday, where my cattle?* etc. However, something like this is shouted by the other participants during the unidentified Wrotham Park man's rendition (Moyle's 1966 tape, A2601), and the singer adds, after Moyle's questioning, "Stockman, where he's ridin about he's 'Where the where the where the cattle?' He's 'Oh, they're over there across the swamp over there.' Or 'In the paddock', Y'know like that."

3. Song transmission as creativity

Creativity in language transmission in the generative-grammarians tradition is generally taken to be part and parcel of the process of learning. Learners (most typically small children) come to know the grammatical rules by which the sentences of a language are produced through a series of inferences and hypotheses made from the often fragmentary and imperfect data (utterances) presented by the speakers around them, together with the external circumstances under which the utterances took place. Because the inferred rules do not necessarily match those by which the original utterances were produced, the resulting language can differ slightly from that of the parental generation. The process of resynthesising the language is said to be one of creation (as are the processes of uttering a new sentence and of understanding, i.e. resynthesising, a new sentence uttered by another person). It is this notion of creativity that Ken Hale applied in his analysis of the transmission of Arrernte songs from one generation to the next and to speakers of Warlpiri (Hale 1984). A related creativity characterises the work of transcription and notation of a song of this type on paper, involving as it does acquisition of the ability to perform a reasonable approximation to the song before it can be clear what in fact one has been hearing all along (rhythm calibrated against melody and words). Note that creativity in the 'resynthesis' sense does *not* consist in the mechanical playing-out of an algorithm, but rather in the use, reuse, and modification of algorithms to produce a match or near-match to something in experience.

In the transition from the Wrotham Park to the Kowanyama version of "Manager", however, we find creativity in a rather more familiar sense: the deliberate changing of words to add a further satirical edge. We attribute this development (rightly or wrongly) to Claude Wilkie. In the 1966 recording, it is performed in the suite 'Rooster' (of which more below), 'Eagle' (same as the Wrotham Park 'Fish Hawk'), 'Cattle Manager', 'Sugarbag', and 'Fighting Bulls'. For our putative chronology of creation we have no other evidence than Claude's personality and the song-texts themselves, and we build conjecturally on these. Wrotham Park is far inland from Kowanyama on the Mitchell River, on the eastern fringe of Olgolo language territory, but very much within the round of cattle stations at which Kowanyama people worked and within the area from which people went, willingly or unwillingly, to live at Mitchell River Mission.

4. Claude Wilkie's 'Manager'

*Manager, manager, whitefella manager,
Manager, manager, whitefella manager,
Manager, mana-*

*is, in peremptory voice: G'day, g'day, where my cattle, in the paddock? Alright,
I'll get on, make my dinner, hokay?*

[repeats; roughly 1 min 12 sec]

Flour drum

me - ne-dja me - ne - dja way - pe-la me - ne - dja - e

me - ne-dja me - ne-dja - e way - pe-la me - ne-dja e me - ne-dja

me - ne

Spoken:
G'day, g'day, where my cattle,
in the paddock? All right, I'll get on,
make my dinner

Hokay? ku

e me-ne - dja me - ne-dja e me-ne - dja me - ne-dja-o (etc.)

Figure 2: 'Manager'; Claude Wilkie's rendition, 1966.
Notation by Grace Koch from Alpher transcript; pitch approximate.

Here Claude has, it would appear, omitted the *mari* from the picture; the manager is a white man and a rather overbearing one. In all the difficulties of interpretation this song has presented, no listener has understood the manager to be nonwhite. If the manager is an oldfella, there is no mention of it here. We take these differences from the songs discussed above to be Claude's own refashioning, both elaborating and simplifying the content to suit a new context. Other interpretations, made at this distance of 34 years, are something of a free-for-all. In both repeats, the phrase rendered here as *I'll get on* is a bit obscure on the tape, and a number of different readings have been offered.⁸ Are one or two speakers represented in the spoken lines? Who cooks whose dinner anyway? Because the song is a secular one, in the sense that (so far as we know) there is no Manager Story (Dreaming) and it is not tied to an identifiable site, there are no apparent constraints on construal, no apparent tradition for readily rendering a thing like this understandable after years have elapsed. One contemporary Kowanyama listener, a Yirrk-Mel speaker who had known Claude, offered, in Yirrk-Mel, the explication that the manager was speaking to him, praising him for having worked hard all day putting up fences, to build a paddock. Although freedom of, and difficulties with, interpretation do occur with other genres of Aboriginal art—songs, for example, and rock painting and engraving (Linda Barwick, pers. comm.), in the nonsacred realm and especially in overlapping Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains, this freedom seems to be expanded (as it is in Western Desert Aboriginal art, for example).

All interpreters, white and black, think the song is funny. Most whites need their arms twisted to listen to these words in an unfamiliar dialect, however, and the success of the covertly satirical performance before a mixed audience in the 1960s would seem to have depended on this and the general noise level. What does seem clear is that Claude Wilkie in this version has changed the words and sharpened the edge.

A further version of 'Manager' is known from a slightly later period at Kowanyama. This too is Claude's. The words cited here are from the personal memory of members of the audiences of performances between 1976 and 1978 with, to the best of our knowledge, no taped version to check for the exact words, rhythm, and melody.

Sung:

Gubment man, gubment man, whitefella government maaan

Spoken:

C'mere c'mere c'mere; get away, get away, get away

[danced, with great deal of handshaking]

This version takes the satire on the behaviour of the "whitefella manager" out of the station and onto the reserve, and hardens the political edge. One of these performances in (mid-1978) took place when Government officials and politicians from Canberra and Brisbane (including the senior Aboriginal politician, Senator Neville Bonner) were overnighing on the way to visit the communities of Aurukun and Mornington Island, at the time embroiled in a Federal-State dispute over the management of the communities, with threats of Federal intervention (which were never realised; the state of Queensland won). Claude's performance

⁸ *I'll git on—make my dinner; I'll sit home eat my dinner; Ah, get home, make my dinner; I'll git home make my dinner; I'll get home and make my dinner; Oray, I'm gonna go make my dinner; I'll sit home make my dinner; I go and have dinner; I go and have a dinner.* Alpher and one other North American listener hear *Out the door, make my dinner*, or something like it; although this reading would be consistent with Claude's outrageous turn of mind, all other listeners firmly reject it on phonetic grounds.

of 'Manager' spoke to a community perception that Government actions were contradictory and inconsistent, giving Aboriginal communities the opportunity for self-management and then taking that opportunity away.

Another of Claude's star turns, "Rooster", was performed at official occasions with zeal and energy, the song punctuated by the crowing of a rooster and the dance with strutting marches and flapping wings. There is little doubt that this number was meant to be funny from its first creation, though it was quite simply a matter of a rooster and no more. Claude made satire of it in the act of performing it before a visiting official audience rather than a local group. The creativity was in the performance in context (the songs before and after it, together with the audience) and not in changed content. Government dignitaries (the roosters) in their shorts and long socks watched from their steel folding chairs at the dance-ground in front of the Kowanyama hotel. These honorees saw, we presume, what they wanted to see, as the community audience laughed helplessly.

5. Linguistic and other context: 'Fishhawk'

Although nonsacred, malgarri songs can be drawn from religiously significant material. Such is 'Fishhawk', another number in the suites recorded by Moyle (1966:27) and Alpher and recorded again from Tommy George of Laura by Alpher in April 2000. Its reincarnations over time and from one side of the Peninsula to the other carry the subject of creativity into the mysterious area of the generation of new melodic and rhythmic sequences, for which no generative principle at present suggests itself.⁹

'Fishhawk' is an important story belonging to an Olgolo place on the upper Coleman River. Moyle (1966:27) gives as the song's owner Jimmy Koolatah. Peter Flying Fox's 1966 rendition went: [Spoken:] *Kang kang kang kang*; [Sung:] *Aw Minya ngaw nga nga ngaw i ngau'u ngi-nya / A ngay ngaw minya-u ngangka ngi-nya-u 'i / Nya nga nya nga minya / Kang, kang, kang, kang*. The name of the fishhawk (white-bellied sea-eagle, *Haliaeetus leucogaster*) in many of the languages of the area is imitative of its call, conventionally *kang kang kang* . . . , hence Olgolo *inh-kangkang*, Pakanh *minh-kangkang*, etc. It is audible in the song lines cited above as *minya kangkang* and *inya kangkang*. The song is generally in a rhythm of one strong beat followed by three weak ones.

In 2000 Tommy George, a Kuku-Thaypan (Aghu-Laya) and Olgolo speaker, gave the Fishhawk song as follows (both before and after hearing a playback of the 1966 recordings): [Sung:] *Minyu-ngu kangkaaa, minyu-ngu kangkaaa, minyu-ngu kangkaaa*; [Spoken, falsetto:] *rrrrrr*; [ordinary voice:] *kang, kang, kang, kang!* [several repeats]. The rhythm here is one strong beat followed by two weak ones, very different in effect from the preceding. The sense of the lines is clear, with *minyu* for the more usual *minya* 'animal'; Mr George volunteered that the *-ngu* is added to "carry on" the line. The language is not contemporary Olgolo (in which the generic *inh* 'animal' does not retain the initial *m* of Proto-Paman **minya*), and it is certainly not Kuku-Thaypan, which turns up instead in Claude Wilkie's

⁹ This is creativity in the 'how-did-Schubert-ever-think-of-that-melody' sense. It is our hope, perhaps a forlorn one in this age of artificial intelligence, that no algorithm to 'create' in this way can, in principle, be developed.

1966 rendition: [Sung:] *Aaaa, tjalpa le kang-ka kang-ka kang-ka kang-ka / minha le kang-ka kaN-e kaN-e kangka-e kang-ka kangka-le kangka kaN-e kaN / minha-le kang-ka kang;* [Spoken, falsetto:] *prrrr*; [normal:] *kang, kang, kang, kang;* [several repeats, with variations].¹⁰

Here the rhythm is one strong beat followed by three weak ones, with syncopation effected by placement of the first syllable of important words at the beginning of a rhythm group on a shortened (eighth) note, with the second syllable given prominence on a following eighth note tied to a quarter note or eighth-note sequence (i.e. lengthened) beginning on the second beat: *tjalpa*, *kangka*, and *minha* are treated this way. The word *minha* 'animal' (generic) is the reflex in a number of phonologically conservative languages of the area of Proto-Paman *minya, but Tommy George identified *tjalpa* as Kuku-Thaypan *thilwa*, in full generic-specific compound form *nhye-thilwa* 'fishhawk', with *minya regularly continued as *nhye*.

Who created what? There is little that can be said at present as to how these variations came about, other than that in the last version we hear Claude on his travels. Kuku-Thaypan country lies on the middle reaches of the Morehead River and Saltwater Creek, some 200 km eastwards as the crow flies from his Yir-Yoront homeland. To be considered along with this fact is the near certainty that all of the singers whose renditions are reported on here knew each other at a maximum remove of one. Peter Flying Fox is recorded as having lived at Kowanyama. Billy Flower, encountered by Monty West in 1961 at Lockhart River, was helped to escape from Palm Island by Kowanyama's Jack Bruno (Ngerr-Thuy). Cape York Peninsula is a huge area but a small world.

6. Coda

Who created what, but also for what purpose? The creativity of the singers, and the adaptability of the song, is shown in its changing applications. At one point 'Manager' is used to poke fun at the Aboriginal manager who considered himself "a gentleman", or a cut above his fellow stockman. No doubt this was a real, though at present unidentified, person. Later the same song is used to strong theatrical effect in satirising non-Aboriginal managers. The irony would not have been lost on an Aboriginal audience. The process of resynthesising the art for different contexts is one of creation (developing a new twist on an old thought, developing the song for a different context).

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¹⁰ Capital *N* in the transcription is a diacritic for nasalisation of the preceding vowel.

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