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Sound recordings as *maruy* among the Aborigines of the Daly region of north west Australia

Allan Marett

Belyuen community *Bangany Wangga*: a local digital music archive

In 2001, Linda Barwick and I, with the assistance of a small grant from the Northern Territory Library and Information Service (NTLIS), worked with the Belyuen community, a group of about 300 Aboriginal people living on the Cox Peninsula near Darwin, to set up a digital-audio work station in the offices of Belyuen Community Government Council. The location of Belyuen is shown in Map 1.
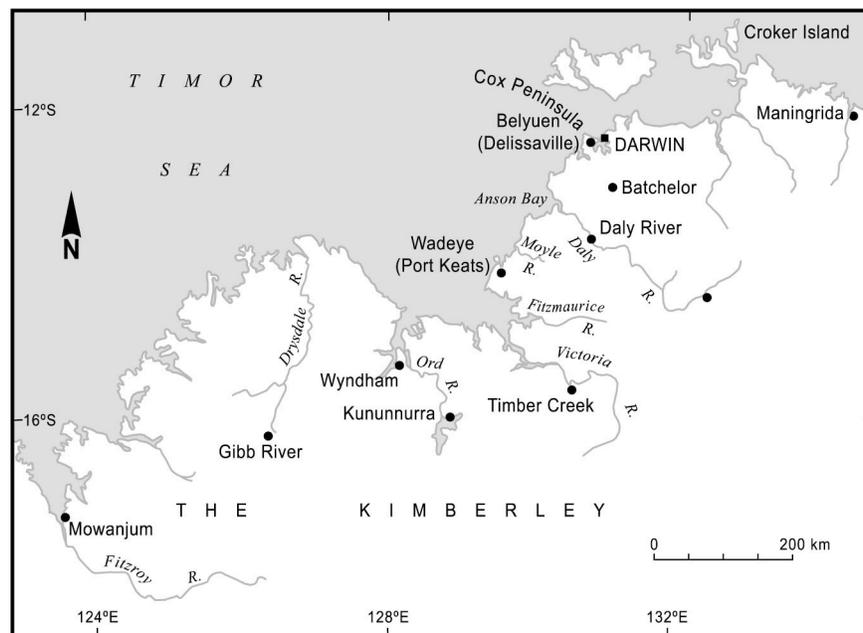
Map 1: The Kimberley and the Western Top End.

This small musical archive comprises an iMac running iTunes, onto which have been loaded some 400 sound files representing individual song items that have been recorded in the community in the period from 1943 to 2001. For safety, the data is stored on both an internal and an external hard drive and CD copies have been deposited at the NTLIS. The computer is attached to a Sony CD/Cassette player that allows cassette and CD copies of material on the computer to be made for authorised members of the community. At present all members of the community are authorised to receive copies of any songs in the archive,

all of which are public and many of which belong to the *wangga* song-genre. It is a low cost local archive with few associated rights issues.[1]
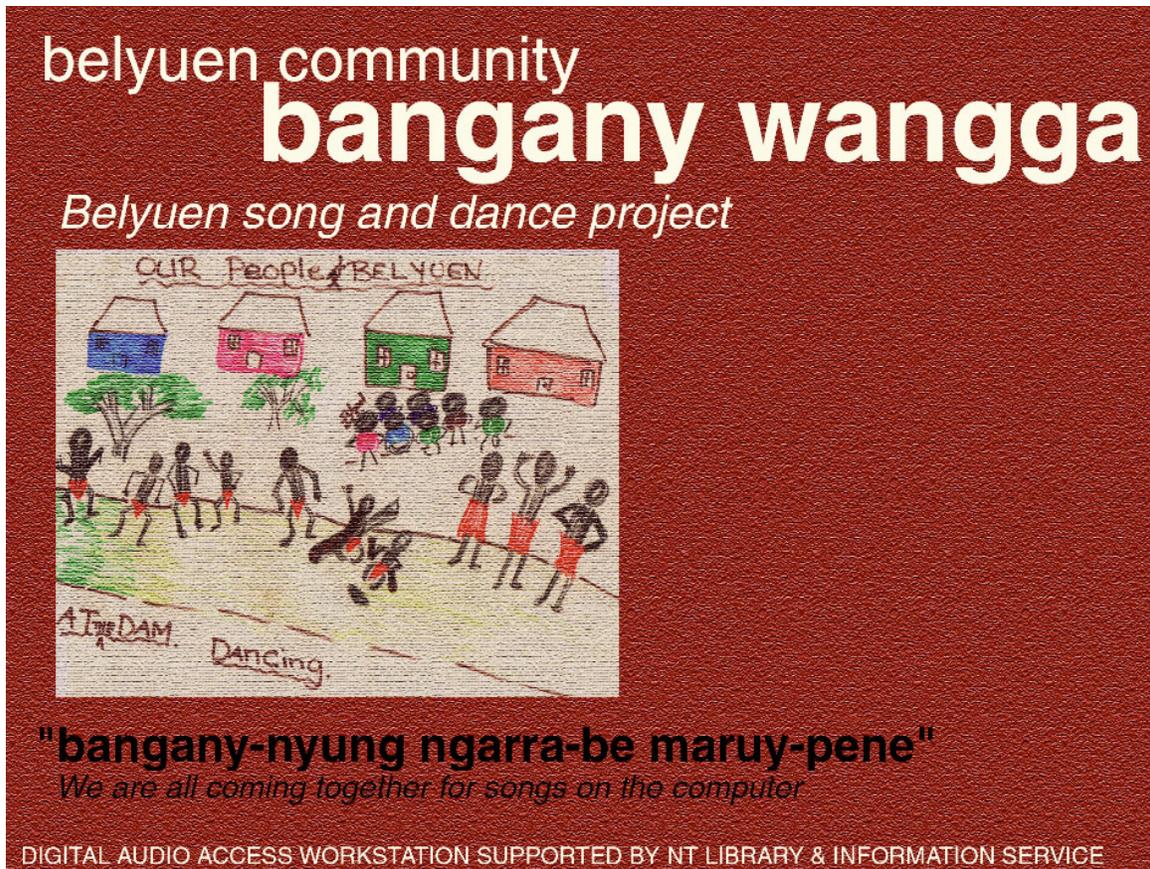

Illustration 1: the screen saver of the Belyuen Community *Bangany Wangga* archive.

The formal title of the archive is: "Belyuen community *Bangany Wangga*." *Bangany* means "song"; *wangga* is the name of the genre to which most of the songs in the archive belong. A screen saver, based on a drawing made by children from the local community school states: *bangany-nyung ngarra-be maruy-pene*: "We are all coming together for songs on the

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[1] The archive is not, however, without its problems. Because the Belyuen community does not have a branch of the NTLIS, there are no staff dedicated to maintaining or running the facility. At present the archive relies on the goodwill of Council staff and one of the health workers to keep it functioning, and it is not uncommon for more pressing demands to limit the amount of time they can give to the archive. Technical help is given on a voluntary basis by Michael Hohnan of Skinnyfish Records, who keeps an eye on the archive when he visits the community to conduct adult education courses. The long term viability of local digital archives such as that at Belyuen—which are currently springing up in Aboriginal communities across Northern Australia—will ultimately depend, however, on the provision of training and the employment of dedicated staff to maintain and run them.

computer."*²* *Maruy*, the word used here for "computer," is also used for recordings, photographs, films and shadows, but a more primary meaning is "baby spirit" or "conception agent."

Povinelli describes the process by which women are impregnated by *maruy* as follows:

> At Belyuen *maroi* are said to "catch" people hunting, camping and travelling through the countryside. … As people go along, a *maroi* hears them or smells their sweat, then manifests itself as a food … a woman unintentionally eats the *maroi*. It then creates a child, in the process marking the foetus with a birth anomaly (Povinelli 1995: 140).

In order to understand how people at Belyuen conceive of recordings and the digital archive, we need to understand how these apparently separate domains—human conception, sound recording, recorded image and shadow—are related. It is clear that all these meanings of *maruy* have to do with appearance or image. In local usage *maruy*, which denotes the aspect of being that appears in the world from moment to moment, is contrasted with permanent or eternal realms of existence, which in Batjamalh are referred to as *durlk*, and in most other Daly languages as *ngirrwat*.*³* The *maruy* aspect of being is that which is subject to change. As the Conception dreaming becomes a baby, as the baby becomes a child, as the boy becomes a man, or the girl a young women, as the young man becomes a marriageable man, as the old man or woman passes away and becomes a ghost, it is the *maruy* that is transformed. In the Daly region, a number of these transformations—in particular the transformation of girls into women, of boys into men, of the Living into the Dead—are marked by ceremony.

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² The screen saver was designed by Linda Barwick working with members of the community.
³ For a more detailed explanation of the relationship between *maruy* and *durlk/ngirrwat* see Marett in press, chapter 1.

Illustration 2: Men dancing as *maruy* at a ceremony at the Belyuen waterhole.

The songs and dances performed at these ceremonies emanate from, and invoke the presence of *maruy* in the form of ghosts.[4] That is to say, songs are given to songmen by ghosts, who sing to the songman in dream. In ceremony, singers reproduce this ghost-given song, while dancers perform as ghosts (see Illustration 2). Moreover, when as in Illustration 2 a person's appearance is reproduced in a photograph (or on film or video), or when the sound of their voice is played back from tape, this too is seen or heard as a manifestation of the person's *maruy*, and as such it has a certain power.

At this point I would like to return to the screen saver, for there is more to be teased out of it. The kids' picture shows people dancing at "the dam," which is the everyday name given to the Belyuen waterhole from which the community itself takes its name. Belyuen is a powerful Dreaming site created by the cosmogonic Rainbow Serpent ancestor and it is a site at which a number of other important Dreamings also reside. Belyuen is now regarded as the main Conception Dreaming site for the community. As Povinelli states, "Although a score

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[4] At Belyuen, the word *maruy* is also often used to refer ghosts—the disembodied manifestation of the Dead in the world—even through there are other, more semantically bounded, words for ghost such as *wunymalang* in Batjamalh and *ngutj* or *nguwatj* in other Daly languages.

of Belyuen residents have *maroi* from sites around the Cox Peninsula, older Belyuen men and women state that the local Aboriginal children now 'come from Belyuen' itself" (Povinelli 1993: 165).

The Belyuen waterhole—the dam—is not only the main source of *maruy,* it is also traditionally a site of significant ceremonial action, of the type seen in Illustration 2. In the puberty rites, for example, both boys and girls are bathed in the waterhole as part of the ceremonial progress. Among the songs most frequently sung on ceremonial occasions is one composed by the late Tommy Barrtjap. This song, which is nowadays performed mainly by Barrtjap's son, Kenny Burrenjuck, has the text:[5]

> *Bangany-nyung ngaya, bangany-nyung nga-bindja-ya.*
> *Bangany-nyung ngaya, bangany-nyung nga-bindja-ya.*
> *Yagarra nga-bindja-ngami yagarra.*
>
> I'm singing for the sake of a song.
> I'm singing for the sake of a song.
> Oh, I'm singing, oh!

The slightly elliptical phrase, "I'm singing for the sake of a song," sung to Barrtjap in dream by his song-giving ghost, has, in the context of the song-giving process, the implied meaning, "I'm singing for the sake of [giving you] a song." When the song is reproduced in a ceremonial context, however, the text attracts a slightly different meaning: "I'm singing for the sake of [performing] this song." (Marett in press: chapter 2). One text-line thus serves two purposes, and in doing so draws attention to ontological parallels between the process of song-creation and song-performance.

The motto of the screen saver echoes this text-line. Rather than: "I'm singing for the sake of a song" we have: "For the sake of a song, we are coming together at the computer" (*bangany-nyung ngarra-be maruy-pene*). By echoing the words of the song, the screen saver draws attention to yet another parallel, namely that between the ontology of song creation and performance on the one hand, and that of song reproduction by mechanical means on the other. As a senior Aboriginal man from Kununurra (see Map 1) recently put it: "When you

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[5] This and other Batjamalh song texts in this paper have been collected and translated with the linguistic assistance of Lysbeth Ford.

put that CD in a computer, what comes up is exactly the same as what is sung into the head of the songman when he is given the song in a dream by that spirit."

The role of recording collections in research: anxieties about sample size.

The abstract originally submitted for this paper stated:

This paper reflects on a set of anxieties concerning the relationship between living traditions of song and dance and the body of audio recordings of these traditions that have been generated in the course of my research. To what extent can the recordings be considered representative of the performance tradition and what role do they play in my research methodology? What are the best ways to make these recordings available to the communities from which they emanated?

It seems almost inevitable that we should use our recordings as a lens through which to view aspects of a musical culture, and that the imperfection of the lens should cause us concern. But how do our Indigenous interlocutors regard the recordings? How are they framed within their culture? To what extent does an understanding of these matters free us from our anxieties?

The literature on Australian Aboriginal songs contains many studies—particularly of Central Australian song—that are underpinned by impressively large quantities of data, a fact that is often foregrounded. Take, for example, Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia.* At the very outset, in the second paragraph of the book, he states: "During the period 1932-60 I gathered four thousand two hundred and seventy aboriginal verses" (Strehlow 1971: xiv).[6]

Following in this tradition, Richard Moyle too stresses the size of his sample. In *Songs of the Pintupi* he shows, both in his table of recording and in the notes on the back cover, that the concepts arising from his musical analysis have been "tested against a recorded sample of over 3000 songs" (Richard Moyle 1971: 75, rear cover); and in *Alyawarra Music* he presents data showing that he recorded over 5000 song items of which he transcribed a very high proportion—70% in the case of the repertories that formed the main focus of his study (Richard Moyle 1986: 153).

Examples of studies based on a large sample of recordings may also be found for northern Australian music. These include Elkin and Jones 1958, Alice Moyle 1974, Stubington 1978 and Anderson 1992. To focus on the last of these, in his study of the Central Arnhem Land clan song (*manikay/bunggurl*) series, Murlarra, Anderson draws on a

body of recordings made by him over an 18 month period supplemented by a number of archival recordings.

> While previous research that focussed on one song series has not been based on a large number of recordings, I have based my musical analysis on multiple recordings, reflecting some historical depth, and made in different circumstances such as elicited and non-elicited, danced and non-danced, ceremonial and non-ceremonial performances. … The major part of the analysis is based on nine recordings of the Murlarra series performed without men's dancing, comprising 542 song items. (Anderson 1992: 40)

By basing his analysis on a significantly greater amount of data than previous researchers, Anderson was able to demonstrate that in Central Arnhem Land clan song, certain aspects of form—for example the length of internal sections of a song verse—have a remarkable stability from performance to performance and over relatively long periods of time. This contrasts with the findings of earlier researchers such as Elkin and Jones, LaMont West, Clunies Ross and Wild, and Clunies Ross and Mundrugmundrug, all of whom emphasise what appears, on the basis of a small amount of data analysed, to be a high degree of variability.

In rejecting an emphasis on the variability of Arnhem Land clan song in earlier studies Anderson suggests that the perception of variability found in earlier work may be a function of the small sample used by the researchers.

The methodology adopted by Clunies Ross and Wild in their preliminary analysis of the songs has two main aspects. The first is that fairly limited amounts of performance data are considered. Since their conclusions are based on small samples of the music, they must be tested against more data before being regarded as conclusive (Anderson 1992: 35, 378).

The emphasis on variation [in the work of Elkin and Jones (1958), La Mont West, (1962) Clunies Ross and Wild (1986) and Clunies Ross and Mundrugmundrug (1988) may be a function of both the failure to quantify variability and the limited amount of data from the

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[6] Of course, the vast majority of these were not in the form of audio recordings but in the form of written notes.

'same song' analysed. The former emphasises variability because lack of quantification prevents small variation (which may be regarded as a mark of stability) being distinguished from large variation. The latter emphasises variability because a small number of variable songs is unable to show the stability that might occur across a larger sample (Anderson 1992: 378).

While recognising the value of basing studies on large amounts of data, and the dangers of drawing conclusions on the basis on insufficient data, we need at the same time to be aware that there are many valuable studies of Aboriginal song that out of necessity are based on relatively small amounts of data. This may result from a tradition being in decline, or from ceremonial life being on the wane or from the priorities and circumstances of the fieldwork.

Elkin and Jones's classic study, *Arnhem Land Music* is based on fieldwork undertaken in 1949 and 1952 as part of an expedition that also encompassed research in the fields of cultural and physical anthropology, linguistics and archaeology—that is, music was only one of its focuses (Elkin and Jones 1958: 1).[7] While the range of music recorded by Elkin is extraordinary, the body of material recorded for some individual genres is relatively limited. Nonetheless, the breadth of his coverage means that his collection remains an essential resource for anyone conducting research in Arnhem Land to the present day.

I have recently undertaken a comparison of 14 recordings of the song "Dadja gadja bangany-nye-ve." Five were made by Elkin in 1952, when the singer was Jimmy Bandak; two were made by Maddock in 1964, when the singer was Laurence Wurrpen (a Belyuen man living at Barunga); one was made by me in 1988 when the singer was Bandak's "son",

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[7] Elkin describes the motivations and collection practices of the two expeditions upon which *Arnhem Land Music* is based as follows:
During anthropological field work visits to Arnhem Land, 1946-48, I was very impressed by the variety and vitality of the Aborigines' chanting and dancing. Therefore, since the improvement and mobility of recording instruments made faithful results possible in out of the way places, I organised "expeditions" in 1949 and 1952, under the auspices of the University of Sydney, to make recordings there, as well to continue other anthropological research … Of course much besides recording music was accomplished on these "expedition". (Elkin and Jones 1958: 1).
Elkin goes on to list cultural and physical anthropology, linguistics and archeology as other fields in which research was undertaken (Elkin and Jones 1958: 1). His modus operandi was to base the expedition in one or two main locations—in 1949 this was the (short-lived) Government Aboriginal Settlement at Tandangal and at Mainoru Station; in 1952 his base locations included the successor of Tandangal, Beswick Creek (now know as Barunga, and before that Bamyili), as well as Mainoru and Delissaville (now known as Belyuen).

Tommy Barrtjap (Barandjak); and the remainder were made by me in 1997 when the singer was Bandak's grandson and Barrtjap's son, Kenny Burrendjuck. This analysis allowed me to show how little change had occurred in the transmission of this song over three generations and almost half a century. Without Elkin's recordings, the historical depth of this study would not have been possible.

The power of the single recording

Such longitudinal studies are not possible, however, when you only have a single recording of a song, which is the case with another of the songs from Barrtjap's repertory, "Yagarra Nedja Tjine Rak-pe." I'd like to focus on this example in order to show two things:

1) the power of the single song-recording, both for the home community and the researcher;

2) that the power of the recording lies, at least partly, in the fact that it is imbued with the qualities of *maruy*, both in the sense of the song having originally been the utterance of a *maruy* ghost, and in the sense that the recordings partake of the nature of *maruy*.

When the song-giving *maruy* appeared in Barrtjap's dreams, he sang in *maruy* language. Barrtjap translated some of this *maruy* language into human language—in this case Batjamalh—but he usually retained some text in *maruy* language. Keeping text in *maruy* language is a useful device, since it allows singers, who are the only ones who can understand *maruy* language, to control interpretation, and to vary the meanings attributed to the text as and when necessary.

Even the sections of texts which are in human language tend to be elliptical, and/or ambiguous, and this gives the singer additional interpretative authority and scope.

The text of "Yagarra Nedja Tjine Rak-pe" presented below is fairly typical. The first line is in human language and the second (apart from the expletive *yagarra*) is in *maruy* language. Two different interpretations have been given for the Batjamalh text in the first line, and these hang on ambiguities inherent in the word *rak* , which means both "patrilineally inherited ancestral county" and "camp".

yagarra	nedja	tjine	rak-	pe
Oh	son	where	patri-country/camp	ever

Oh son, wherever is my camp/where is my eternal patricountry

yagarra	*rama*	*rama*	*gama*
SW	SW	SW	SW

(*maruy* language).

Not long prior to his death in 1993, Barrtjap told me that this song refers to "my place ... my country long way back" by which he meant country that has belonged to him, to his father, and his father's fathers since time immemorial. When asked the name of the country he replied, Djakaldja, Barakbana (South Peron Island), Barrabumalh and Djedjekana. All these places lie in the general vicinity of the Daly Mouth, that is in his ancestral patri-country.[8]

While I was in Belyuen in 2002, however, Barrtjap's widow, Esther Burrenjuck gave a significantly different interpretation of this text, namely, that it had been given to Barrtjap by the *maruy* ghost of his mother when she returned to the family camp near Milik, on the west of the Cox Peninsula, and found it deserted.

The tension between the two interpretations draws us to matters of recent history, namely, the way in which songs and their interpretations have become intimately tied up with the experience of Belyuen people engaged in the longest-running land claim in Australian history. The Kenbi land claim made under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act over much of the Cox Peninsula and the adjacent islands was formally lodged in 1979, and not finally resolved until 2000. During this more than twenty-year period, there was ongoing and unsettling contestation of the rights of Daly people living at Belyuen to continuing rights of residence on the Cox Peninsula.

Povinelli accounts for seemingly contradictory statements, of which the two explanations of "Yagarra Nedja Tjine Rak-pe," are examples, as follows:

> Belyuen families were forced to confront their origins and remember where they came from [namely, from country in the vicinity of the Daly River mouth] because the traditional process by which secondary rights [to residency on the Cox Peninsula]—derived from land use and prompted by colonial disruptions to regional Aboriginal

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[8] The relative positions of the Belyuen and the Daly Mouth can be seen from Map 1: because I do not have the required permissions, I have not indicated the exact position of the places mentioned by Barrtjap.

life—are transformed into primary rites [or rights to permanent residence] was interrupted prematurely by the Kenbi Land Claim (1993, 134).

Barrtjap's statements concerning the connection of his songs to his estates on the Daly derive from the fact that he needed to continue to assert his ownership of country that he had inherited through his father not only because that was his right, but also because it represented a fall-back position should he and his family lose their rights to live, hunt and perform ceremony for the country around Belyuen. Following the favorable resolution of the case in 2002, however, his widow was able to give a more domestic interpretation that emphasized the family's long-standing residence on the Cox Peninsula, in which she now has rights to continue living, foraging and performing ceremony.

Song shares with *maruy* the quality of ephemerality. This, combined with the opacity and multivalency of the texts of *wangga* songs, allows interpretation to shift in order to accommodate, and indeed mediate, change, particularly when songs are performed in ceremony, where they are the bellows of white hot ceremonial performances with the power to effect social alchemy.

Moreover, each playing of a recording, that is, each appearance in the world of a singer's voice, is a manifestation of his *maruy*, and each playing has agency in the world. The power of the single recording lies in its potential agency within unimagined and unimaginable ways of being in the world— unimaginable just to us, but also to those in the communities that produced and look after them. Intrinsically songs and recordings, like babies, are resources for an unforeseeable future. If our collaborations with indigenous communities are to accommodate the world views of both groups, we need to bring to the relationship not just our own research agendas but also a preparedness to reconceive recorded documents and to accommodate their role in local tradition.

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