

A MUSICAL INTERLUDE

STEPHEN A. WILD

IN HIS ACCOUNT of the first four years of settlement at Sydney Cove, Captain John Hunter describes an Aboriginal *carib-berie*, calling it 'a dance'. This is probably the origin of the word 'corroboree'. What especially impressed Hunter was a leg quiver, a movement that later observers also saw as a central feature of Aboriginal dance. He wrote:

One of the most striking of the principal beauties of their dancing was that of placing their feet very wide apart, and, by an extraordinary exertion of the muscles of the thighs and legs, moving the knees in a trembling and very surprizing manner, such as none of us could imitate ...

The word 'corroboree' may be used for the total complex of dance, song, the body decorations of the performers, the objects they used, the sounds of musical instruments, the body movements, shouts and calls of the dancers, the involvement of non-singers and non-dancers, the spatial arrangements of all participants, the skilful use of lighting and other theatrical techniques. These elements, when taken together, can have a powerful effect on those privileged to witness them. Divorced from each other, they lose much of their impact.

The whole complex of songs, myths and dances provides the meaning of a ceremonial performance. Even in Aboriginal society, only a few people share the deep knowledge and experience of religion and ritual that enables them to appreciate the songs fully. Others, nevertheless, can appreciate the theatrical brilliance and subtleties hidden beneath the performers' exuberance and skill.

Aboriginal music is essentially a vocal artform. Each verse consists of a limited number of words with many different meanings. The rhythmic relationships between the words and the accompanying musical instruments are constantly shifting and varied. The words themselves are usually related to myths about the Dreaming, ancestors or totemic beings. The lyrics alone, however, do not convey complete myths, and the words often refer only obliquely to the meaning of the dances that accompany them.





Dancing figures painted in a rock shelter near Oenpelli, NT. The man at the top is blowing a didgeridu, the one below him appears to be beating song sticks. From C.P. Mountford (ed), *Records of the American-Australian scientific expedition to Arnhem Land, vol 1, 1956, 147.*

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Seated man playing a didgeridu, with a man holding a pair of clapsticks, facing him. Paintings from Cannon Hill, western Arnhem Land.

G. CHALOUPEK



Carrobooree on the banks of the Murray by J.S. Prout, probably painted in the 1840s. Objects held by the dancers include sticks, a palyertatta (a pair of sticks crossed and wound around with thread in a diamond shape) and a long spear topped with a bunch of feathers. On the right of the scene is a seated man holding a pair of song sticks; on the left is a woman beating what is probably a skin bundle.

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The musical presentation of Aboriginal lyrics varies across the continent. In north-central Arnhem Land a singer can draw on a repertoire of musical and textual phrases that belong to a single subject, representing a totemic being such as the White Cockatoo. As he sings a verse of the White Cockatoo song, he chooses a particular sequence of musical and textual phrases. No two verses ever have the same sequence.

The singer is constrained by certain conventions. Some phrases are used only for beginnings of verses; others only for middles and ends. A refrain must be inserted at a certain point in each verse. Sometimes two or three singers perform the same subject simultaneously, although each performs a different sequence of phrases.

They listen carefully to each other so that they can sing the refrain together. After the singers have judged that enough verses of one subject have been performed, they move on to another subject, with its own separate repertoire of phrases. Different subjects linked by common mythological themes form a song series, which is usually named and which belongs to a particular clan or group of clans.

In central Australia, musical presentations differ markedly from those in north-central Arnhem Land. Singing is typically in large groups, so the lyrics need to be fixed. A song series usually has a single melody for all verses and a single totemic subject. Each verse is usually sung several times before the singers move on to the next verse. There is considerable variation in the matching of melody



In this watercolour by Henry Darcy, the dancers perform as a united group. The man beating sticks is the singer.
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and lyrics. A verse may begin on any word of the text, and the text is then repeated until the melody is completed. The melody may also be lengthened or shortened, resulting in a different number of text repetitions from one performance of a verse to another. A song leader, who is a senior owner of the song series, begins each verse, chooses the word in the text on which to begin and decides when to begin singing a new verse.

Typically, the verses of a series follow the track of a totemic being's travels. These tracks often traverse many clan territories and each clan shares ownership of the series. Sharing a song series creates spiritual bonds between clans.

Aboriginal music uses a limited number of instrument types. No truly melodic instrument is present to compete with the vocal melody and obscure the words. Aboriginal musical instruments are essentially rhythmic in purpose and consist mainly of percussion. Even the well-known didgeridoo, a wooden trumpet indigenous to the northern third of the continent, produces only two pitches and in some traditions only one. Its main purpose is to produce rhythmic accompaniment and a drone rather than a melody.

A variety of percussion instruments is employed across Australia. Paired boomerangs, one held in each hand, are clapped and tapped together in various rhythms and are used in many places to accompany singing. Simple clapsticks (also known as songsticks) are widespread. A notched rasp is used in the Kimberleys. The membrane drum is played only in Cape York Peninsula, where the musical practices of Torres Strait Islanders and Papuans have been influential. In Cape York Peninsula seed-pod rattles are carried by dancers. In southeastern Australia, women struck possum skin pads that were placed on their laps and sometimes stretched

tightly across the knees. Men and women clap their hands, slap their laps and buttocks and stamp their feet. In central Australia a heavy stick is held with both hands at one end and struck violently on the ground in rhythmic strokes. Dancers in all areas commonly have boughs of eucalyptus foliage tied to their legs to produce an abrasive rustling sound in rhythm with the dance.

VERSES FROM CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Transcribed and translated by S.A. Wild

YURRAMPI YILPINJI (HONEY ANT MEN'S LOVE MAGIC SONGS)

1 *mangitilyitilyi ngarriwangkalyarra* (repeated)

Honey Ants listening

winanji ngayutirpitiirpi (repeated)

ready all together

Honey Ants listen for people [who may present a danger] [before] being ready [to go hunting] together.

2 *namanitirpitiirpi rrinnyurpi* (repeated)

small red bird brings back

namirrarirra ralininyurpi (repeated)

goes, travels affected by love magic

Affected by love magic, the woman goes [to her paramour with] the small red bird [sent as messenger].

PURLAPA YARLA (MEN'S AND WOMEN'S YAM SONGS)

1 *manjanamanja lumpukarrinya* (repeated)

mulga a stand of

tiljanka wayawayala (repeated)

ridge ?

A stand of mulga [from which the Yam ancestor makes sacred boards] [occurs near] a [limestone] ridge [at a yam ancestral site in the area called Yumurrpa].

2 *lipangka pimtikipirtila yirranunyanu* (repeated)

body decoration lined up standing

wurkcalimpirili ngayingpirili (repeated)

like bloodwood trees name of spirit being

The decorated bodies [of the dancers], [with sacred objects] standing [on their heads], are lined up like bloodwood trees, *ngayingpirili* [in the lead].

YAWULYU YANGKIRRI (WOMEN'S EMU SONGS)

1 *lakarrpara wurrututu wanirri wurrututu*

tree sp. ran rockhole ran

Emu ran [towards] the rockhole [where there is/past] a tree.

2 *mungkumungkurpa nganika karnanganjalu*

? yellow seeds ate emu

Emu ate ? yellow seeds.



Painted figures in a cave at Mt Grenfell, western New South Wales. Two groups are facing each other, and many of the participants appear to be holding sticks or boomerangs in each hand. Although often interpreted as a battle, this scene is more likely to be a corroboree.

J.P. WHITE

Aborigines perform music and dance on many different occasions. Public entertainments, often involving several local groups, are usually performed near the general living area of a camp and are attended by everyone. Music and dance play an important part in initiation and death rites, which are often performed in secluded areas. Songs and dances of initiation are often known and performed only by the initiated. Magical ceremonies are performed for weather control, curing, sorcery and sexual excitement. Special training is usually required for performing



Corrobaree, South Australia, by H. Glover, watercolour 1849. The central figure, standing in front of the dancing group, is the singer with his paired sticks. Several seated women are beating their hands either on their cloak-covered laps or on skin bundles.

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A Coroboree or native war dance at Durhambah on the banks of the upper Manning, New England, watercolour by Henry Darcy (date unknown). The dance performance is framed by two large tree trunks. The grouping of solo dancer and chorus suggests an enactment of some kind. A standing man beats two large sticks.

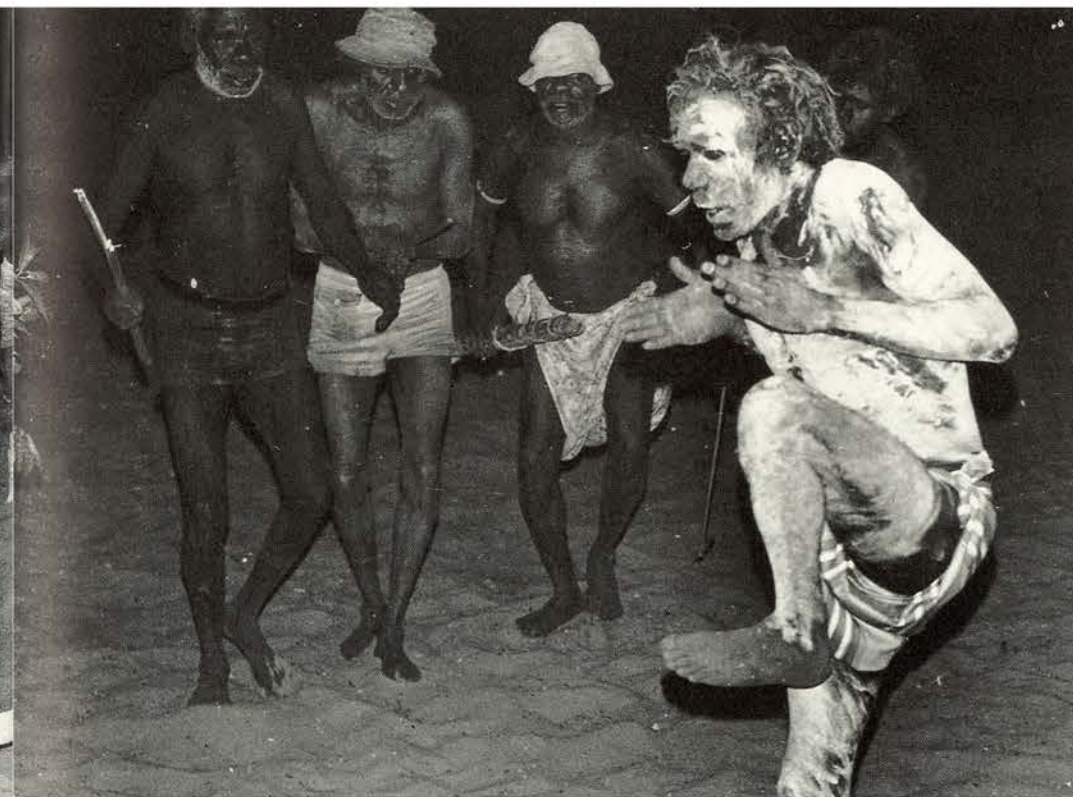
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Men dancing in north-central Arnhem Land.

Right. A renowned dancer dances the White Cockatoo. Despite modern props, the dance and its function are traditional.

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES, LR. HIATT



magical songs, and knowledge of them is jealously guarded. Some ceremonies in which songs and dances are performed are widely distributed over a region, passing from one group to another. They constitute a kind of regional cult.

Various types of ceremony are intended to manage conflicts. There are ceremonies for resolving disputes between individuals, conducting diplomacy between groups, making peace and preparing for war. Again there are regional variations, though music and dance are almost always central to them. Some songs and dances are performed on more than one kind of occasion or in more than one kind of ceremony. In north-central Arnhem Land the same song series may be used for public entertainment, death ceremonies and ritual diplomacy between groups.

Performances usually occur at night in a cleared area. The performers prepare behind trees and bushes and appear in elaborate body decorations and headdresses. Fires are placed so that the light flickers to best effect. In southeastern Australia women often provided the musical component of a public entertainment, seated with possum skin pads on their laps or with sticks to strike on the ground to accompany their singing. A master of ceremonies directed the male dancers, who were arrayed in straight or curved lines that sometimes moved in opposite directions. One or two soloists danced more vigorously in front of the group. In central Australia, dancing provides the main opportunity for performances by individuals. Singing is largely a group affair. In north-central Arnhem Land a specialist 'songman' holds and transmits the repertoire of songs, his contribution usually being matched by that of a renowned dancer.

Throughout Aboriginal Australia there are occasions when women and men have complementary performance roles. In most areas the members of each sex also perform their own exclusive ceremonies. In central Australia men and women each perform with members of the opposite sex excluded to varying degrees. In boys' initiation ceremonies, for example, men sing while women dance for part of the ceremony, while in other parts the sexes are strictly segregated. In love-magic ceremonies, however, sexual exclusiveness is complete. In north-central Arnhem Land singing is a male prerogative, except for women's 'crying songs' performed after a death and at the subsequent funeral ceremonies. Dancing is performed by both sexes, although men's and women's dances, often in the same ceremony, differ markedly from each other. The Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst islands near Darwin have the most sexually integrated ceremonies of all traditional Aboriginal societies, presumably partly because they are separated from mainland Aboriginal customs.

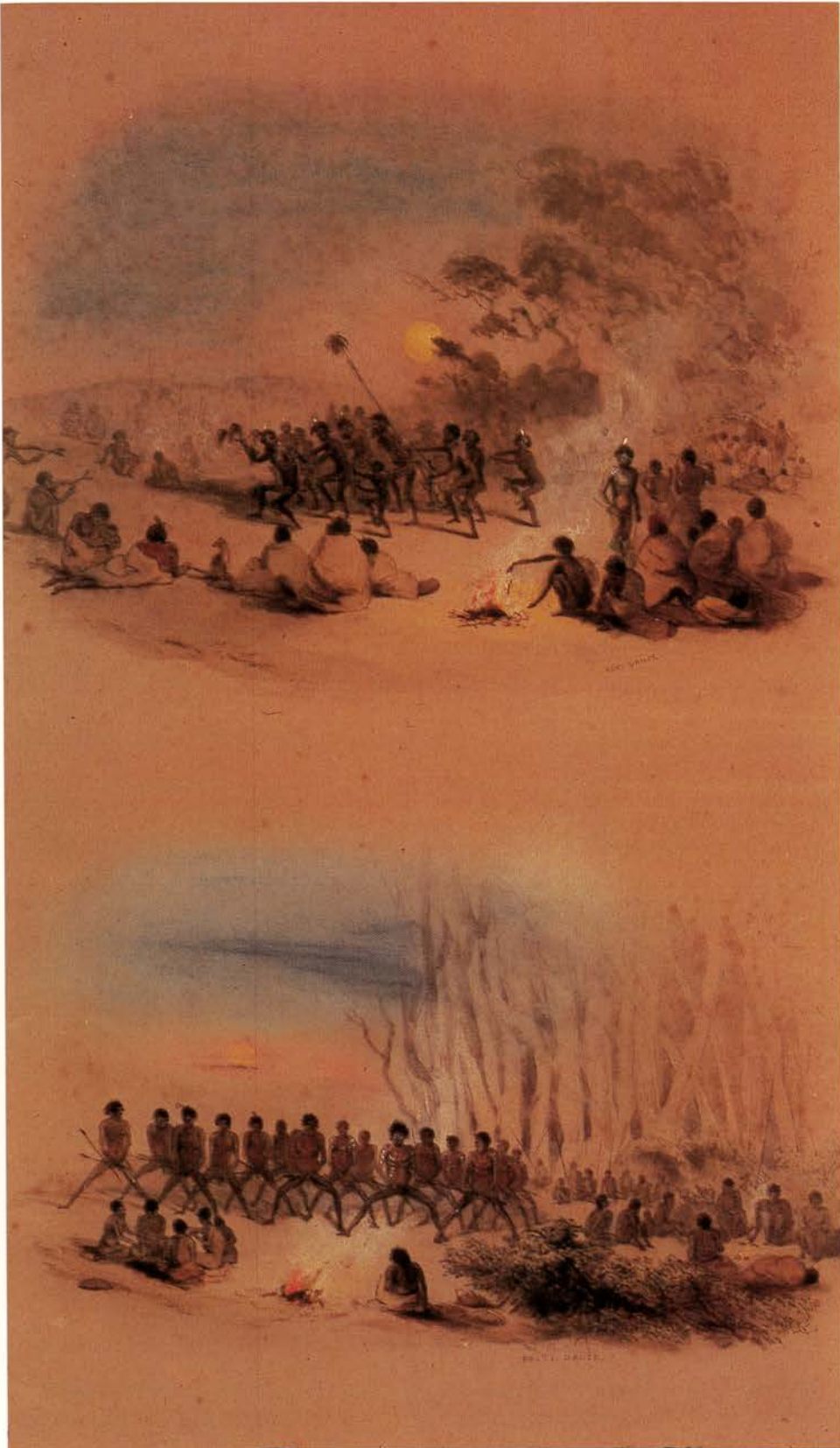
Whatever the particular tradition, music and dance are central to traditional Aboriginal life. They form the core of religious ritual and provide much of the community's aesthetic and recreational activity. Everywhere, opportunities occur for individual display of dancing and singing, and every community has favourite performers whose fame may spread to many neighbouring communities. Rarely do Aborigines enjoy life as much as when there is singing and dancing.

Left.
Man in left foreground beats
an accompaniment on a
shield.

Centre.
Dancing crouched, instructed
by ritual managers.

Right.
Preparing for a sitting dance.
S.A. WILD





Dances from South Australia, painted by G.F. Angas in the 1840s.

Top.

The Kuri dance. Bunches of leaves are tied above the knee.

Bottom.

The Palti dance. Dancers in ranks of straight lines.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM.

WHITE COCKATOO

PART 1

{	FG	<i>de-de-de de-de de de</i> (chants announcement of theme)	
{	FM:	<i>Manania, dgorindjirra, 'djei, mangaba dgorindjirra milalmibara.</i> That what's-its-name, didjeridu, is out in the upland forest, and it's about to (?) resound.	
FG }			{(continues chanted announcement of theme)
FM }			{ <i>de-de de de de de de</i>

PART 2

FM	1	<i>wang-gurnga guiya</i>	Cockatoo named Wang-gurnga,
FM,FG	2	<i>wang-gurnga guiya</i>	Cockatoo named Wang-gurnga
FM,FG	3	<i>gulob' arraidja</i>	gorges Himself on seeds and grasses until He hiccoughs,
FM,FG	4	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i> ,
FM,FG	5	<i>maningala rarei</i>	
FM,FG	6	<i>djambara burradjarina</i>	lives at His waterhole in the upland forest,
FM,FG	7	<i>gulob' arraidja</i>	gorges Himself on seeds and grasses until He hiccoughs,
FM,FG	8	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i>
FM,FG	9	<i>maningala rarei</i>	
FM,FG	10	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at His home Ngaldjiba.
FM	11	<i>blairiber laridja</i>	He feeds on corms and dry grass seeds,
FM,FG	12	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba
FM,FG	13	<i>ngwar-ngwar laridja</i>	[where] He dances,
FM,FG	14	<i>garabag mbenei</i>	ascends and plays didjeridu,
FG	15	<i>blairiber laridja</i>	feeds on corms and dry grass seeds,
FM,FG	16	<i>a garabag mbenei</i>	ascends and plays didjeridu
FM,FG	17	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba,
FM,FG	18	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky
FM,FG	19	<i>ngwair ngwair</i> (refrain)	calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i> (refrain)
FM,FG	20	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba,
FM,FG	21	<i>blairiber laridjam</i>	feeds on corms and dry grass seeds.

PART 3

FM,FG	22	<i>blairiber laridja</i>	He feeds on corms and dry grass seeds—	
FM }	23	{	<i>molo-moleiya</i>	since He was born He has grown bigger and bigger—
FG }			<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i>
FM,FG	24	<i>djambara burradjarina</i>	lives at His waterhole in the upland forest,	
FM,FG	25	<i>blairiber laridja</i>	feeds on corms and dry grass seeds,	
FM }	26	{	<i>garabag mbenam</i>	ascends and plays didjeridu;
FG }			<i>wang-gurnga guiya</i>	Cockatoo named Wang-gurnga

FG	27	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba
FG	28	<i>ngwar-ngwar worriam</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i>

PART 1

FG	}	{	de de de-de-de de de ————— de de de dem
FM			de-de de-de de-de-dem de-de-dem

PART 2

FM,FG	1	<i>rarridjinga guiya</i>	Cockatoo eats the corms of the <i>rarridja</i> grass,
FM,FG	2	<i>rarridjinga guiya</i>	eats <i>rarridja</i> ;
FM,FG	3	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at His home Ngaldjiba
FM,FG	4	<i>maningala rarei</i>	
FM,FG	5	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i> ,
FM,FG	6	<i>gulob' arraidja</i>	gorges Himself on seeds and grasses until He hiccoughs,
FM,FG	7	<i>djambara burradjarina</i>	lives at His waterhole in the upland forest,
FM,FG	8	<i>gulob' arraidja</i>	gorges Himself on seeds and grasses until He hiccoughs,
FM,FG	9	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i>
FM,FG	10	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba;
FM	11	<i>rarridjinga</i>	He eats the corms of the <i>rarridja</i> grass,
FM,FG	12	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i>
FM	13	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba
FM	14	<i>gulob' arraidja</i>	He gorges Himself on seeds and grasses until He hiccoughs,
FM	15	<i>garambag mbenei</i>	ascends and plays didjeridu,
FM	16	<i>(yeliliba guiya)</i>	([Small Fish] goes walkabout out to sea)
FM	17	<i>ngwar-ngwar worria</i>	dances and leaps slowly in the sky calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i>
FM,FG	18	<i>ngwair ngwair</i> (refrain)	calling <i>ngwair ngwair</i> (refrain)
FM,FG	19	<i>ngaldjiba guiya</i>	at Ngaldjiba.
FM,FG	20	<i>(yeliliba rdabjam)</i>	(Lauwlowa goes walkabout out to sea)

PART 3

FM		<i>de-de de-de de</i>	
FM	21	<i>blairiber laridja</i>	He feeds on corms and dry grass seeds,
FM	22	<i>djambara burradjarina</i>	lives at His waterhole in the upland forest
FM	23	<i>garambag mbenam</i>	where He ascends and plays didjeridu.

Two verses of 'White Cockatoo' from north-central Arnhem Land. The singers are Frank Malkorda (FM) and Frank Gurrmanamana (FG). Transcribed and translated by M. Clunies Ross.



*A striking engraving of a male figure and a female figure
from West Head in the Kuring-gai language area.*

J. KOHEN