

## TWO ABORIGINAL ORAL TEXTS FROM ARNHEM LAND, NORTH AUSTRALIA

### 1. *The Creation of Balpildja Swamp*

By Frank Gurrmanamana, transcribed and translated by  
Margaret Clunies Ross

Frank Gurrmanamana told me this story in July 1975 as an explanatory gloss on a series of *mardaian* song verses. These verses are the “outside” or non-secret version of the “inside” *mardaian* songs performed at Arnhem Land rituals of the same name, known in Eastern Arnhem Land as *ngärra* (Warner 1958; Elkin 1972; Keen 1978; Elkin and Jones 1958). The word *mardaian* means “sacred” or “holy.”

The conceptual and social world of Aboriginal Arnhem Landers is divided into two halves or moieties, named Dua and Yirritja, and *mardaian* ceremonies of these two moieties each celebrate a different set of supernatural beings. Gurrmanamana belongs to the Dua moiety (called Djowunga in his own language, Burarra) and many of this moiety’s *mardaian* songs celebrate the creative acts of a primeval old woman named Modj who, in the Dreamtime, went about the lands of the Anbarra clans of the Blyth River region, forming many of the natural features of the landscape like creeks and billabongs. As she walked, burdened with the dilly bags in which she carried her belongings, she leaned heavily on her stick, moving it backwards and forwards, uttering words and calls which men now repeat in their *mardaian* rituals. Her creative acts are the subject of a Dua *mardaian* dance, known from North Central to North Eastern Arnhem Land. In the east, Dua clans ascribe similar creative acts to the Wawilag or the Djang’kawu sisters.

The *mardaian* verses Gurrmanamana sang and explained to me formed part of a *larrgan* mortuary ceremony held at Kopanga Beach, on the left bank of the mouth of the Blyth River. For the most part *manikay* or clan songs (see Text 2) form the liturgical accompaniment to mortuary rites, but, at their most sacred

moments, *mardaian* songs are sung in their “outside” versions, as women and children may sometimes be present or within earshot. *Mardaian* singing usually accompanies the crushing and red-ochring of the dead person’s bones and the burial of a hollow log ossuary at the finale of some mortuary rituals (Clunies Ross and Hiatt 1977). It was on such an occasion that Gurrmanamana and his fellow singer Malkorda sang *mardaian* verses about Modj and I recorded them. About a week later I played them back to Gurrmanamana on one tape recorder and got him to explain their meaning on another. At certain points, as here in his account of the creation of Balpildja, he embarked on an extensive narrative.

Balpildja swamp, also known as Balpanarra, lies about eight kilometers from the Arnhem Land coast and some twelve kilometers southwest of Kopanga Beach (Meehan 1982:27, 33, and 41). It is a very important economic and ritual site for the Anbarra (“river mouth”) people, and the archeological evidence suggests this has been so for a long time. Here grow a variety of important foods, such as water lilies and the spike rush *Eleocharis*. There is also an abundance of ducks and geese. Balpildja is shared by a consortium of clans from both the coastal and inland regions of the area and is often the site of Kunapipi initiation rites. The story of its creation is thus of considerable significance in the religious and economic life of the Anbarra.

1. gu-ngurridji-nga djin-djami-na  
3sg/- call far F intr-carry far  
gun past on head past  
1. she called out [as she] carried her swag,
2. djin-ya-na dji-bami-na  
F intr-say- far F intr-carry far  
past on head past  
2. she spoke [as she] carried her burden;
3. bulupurr djin-djami-na  
dilly bags, F intr-carry on far  
gun-cl. head past  
3. she carried dilly bags on her head
4. arrapa ‘in-birin-gi-na *too much* bulupurr  
and F intr -carry far dilly bags, gun-cl.  
suspended from past  
head

4. and was heavily burdened with dilly bags.
5. murla gu-ma-nga  
walking 3sg/gun -get far  
stick, man-cl. past
5. She got her walking stick
6. arrap' djin-djarlakarrldji-nga dji-bo-na Balpildja  
and F intr-walk along far F intro.-go- far Balpildja  
path past past
6. and walked along the path to Balpildja.
7. gun-gata Balpildja gun-elingga gu-ma-nga Balpildja  
gun- that Balpildja gun- name 3sg/-get far Balpildja  
cl. one cl. gun past
7. That Balpildja got its name.
8. Ngun-yuna ngu-ni ngu-barra ngu-worki-ya  
I-lying lsg-be 1sg-fut. lsg-do reflexive  
here part. habitually
8. "Here where I am I will always make my home."
9. djin-yaraki-dja  
F intr-sit far  
down past
9. She made camp,
10. bulupurr gu-wanyagi-ra  
dilly bags, 3sg/ -hang up far  
gun-cl. gun past
10. she hung up her dilly bags;
11. djin-yaraki-dja gu-mannga  
F intr-sit far in-jungle,  
down past dense vegetation, gun-cl.
11. she made camp in the jungle,
12. 'in-yuna  
she-lying here
12. here where she was,
13. gu-mannga 'in-yuna  
in-jungle, she-lying here  
gun-cl.
13. in the jungle where she was,

14. 'in-yuna-ga  
she-lying here-dem.  
emphatic
14. in this very place.
15. ngu-yinda-barra ngu-ni  
1sg.-do/say -fut. 1sg.-be  
thus part.
15. "I will be doing this,
16. ngu-yinda-barra  
1sg.-do/say-fut.  
thus part.
16. this is what I'll say:  
17. Murlula  
marrabindjak  
yauwurri-yauwurr-ya  
djaparnmala  
marragarlei-garlei  
gananyirda a."<sup>1</sup>
18. djin-yini-nga  
F intr-do far past  
thus
18. She did thus:
19. ei ei a gitpwo<sup>2</sup>
20. djin-yini-nga  
F intr-do far past
20. That's what she did,
21. djin-guna  
she- that  
one
21. that one,
22. wana  
big, important,  
adj.
22. important one,
23. bambai *ol'guman*  
old  
woman,  
djin-cl.
23. old woman,

24. Modj  
24. Modj.

### Abbreviations and Notes

#### *Abbreviations and method of transcription*

The numbered phrases, into which the text is divided, are determined by Gurrmanamana's breath breaks.

Burarra has four noun classes, which are usually marked by the prefixes *an-* (for most masculine gender referents), *djin-* (for most feminine gender referents), *man-* (vegetable foods, man-made objects) and *gun-* (other naturally occurring objects). The class of nouns and some other parts of speech is indicated in the text by means of the appropriate prefix. Nouns are not marked for number. In the case of verbs, the first element is either an intransitive personal prefix (in this text F intr = feminine [*djin-cl.*] intransitive) or a transitive prefix which encodes the subject-direct object relationship. Thus the prefix *gu* denotes a third person singular subject and a *gun-* class direct object. The middle element of Burarra verbs is the lexical element, while the final element usually indicates tense, in this case the far past. Futurity is indicated by the invariant particle *-barra*.

### Notes

1. This is a verse of the Modj *mardaian* song which Gurrmanamana sang at this point in his narration. It is impossible to provide a continuous translation, but each song word is glossed here.

*murlulu*: name of an avatar of Modj, also to be found in the place-name *Murlula-djin-djirrapa*, "Murlula lives here," a location on Balpildja. Murlula's eye can be found in the form of a stone, groups of Murlula can sometimes be seen. Members of the clan Wordeia, who own the site, can tell these beings to go away or people will see them and be ashamed (L.R. Hiatt, unpublished field notes, 1958-60). Keen (1978:39-40) notes that *murlulu* is the name for sandalwood among the Yolngu further east and also for the canoes used by the Djang'kawu sisters and for a *mardaian* sacred object which is a transformation of the canoe.

*marrabindjak*: another name for Modj

*yauwurri-yauwurr*: a) another name for Modj; b) *rrauwa atjula*, “her camp,” which she made at Balpildja

*djaparnmala*: gloss as for *yauwurri-yauwurr*

*marragarla* (var. *-garles*)-*garla*: another site created by Modj; a billabong, “lily place” and paperbark swamp. The word also occurs in the Brolga song of the *manikay* series Goyulan, as the habitation of Brolga.

*gananyirda*: another name for Modj, but an aspect of her being particularly associated by the Anbarra with the estates of *Mardang-adjirra* and *Gurridjarra-adjirra* on the eastern side of the Blyth River, which are linked through the creator *Garnbalaitj*, red-collared lorikeet. *Gananyirda* also connotes the slow dance and calls of the creator Modj, and human imitations of her behavior in *mardaian* ritual (cf. Elkin 1972:261-62 and his comments there on the Rembarnga word *ganinjarda*, which is probably a variant of the same term). Keen (1978:39-41) records that in the Milingimbi area *ganinyidi* refers to the Djang’kawu sisters’ digging stick, with which they created freshwater springs in various places and dug up yams and shell fish.

2. This ritual call is part of the *mardaian* liturgy among Dua clans in Arnhem Land. It seems here to be represented as Modj’s vocalization as, with great effort, she uses her digging stick to create features of the landscape.

## 2. *A Ngalilak (White Cockatoo) Song-verse from the Clan Song Series Djambidj*

Sung by Frank Malkorda, text transcribed and translated  
by Margaret Clunies Ross with musical notations  
by Stephen A. Wild. Copyist Margaret Gummow.

This song-verse was recorded by Peter Barker during the filming of a mortuary ceremony at Djunawunya on the Arnhem Land coast in July, 1978. Djunawunya is a few miles west of the mouth of the Blyth River. The film, *Waiting for Harry*, was shot and directed by Kim McKenzie. This particular Cockatoo song and its accompanying dance appear on Camera Roll 39 of the

*Waiting for Harry* footage and are accessible in the film archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Ngalilak (Little Corella, *Cacatua sanguinea*) is one of the twenty-one subjects of the *manikay* or clan song series known as Djambidj by the Anbarra people of North Central Arnhem Land and their neighbors (Clunies Ross and Wild 1982). Djambidj is one of many *manikay* owned by Aboriginal clans of Central and Eastern Arnhem Land. Each *manikay* celebrates a different collection of parochial totems; Djambidj, for instance, includes Crow, Wild Honey, Shark, and North-West Monsoon, to name a few others besides Cockatoo. These songs accompany several kinds of ritual, especially mortuary rites, but may also be sung for entertainment around the evening camp fires. Dances, performed by both women and men, often accompany Djambidj singing, as is the case with the item notated here. When *manikay* song and dance are performed together, the product is called *bunggul*.

The texts of *manikay* are difficult, if not impossible, to translate word for word. They provide a kind of epitome of the totemic being celebrated, focusing on its sacred names, its dwelling places, and sometimes on minute details of its biological behavior. There is often a mythological connection between several song subjects of a given series, as there is in Djambidj between White Cockatoo and Hollow Log Coffin. The Cockatoo song mentions the names of two wells at Barragulawa and Ngaldjipa which Cockatoo inhabits; Cockatoo and a spirit *didjeridu* named Mangabupidja created Barragulawa. There in the upland forest Cockatoo and other totems such as Crow and Hollow Log gather to sing and dance Djambidj. Cockatoo plays Mangabupidja while Crow sings and plays clapsticks. These mythological allusions in the song exist alongside references to the behavior proper to the natural species of the bird in question.

The accompanying notation of a Cockatoo verse shows how a Djambidj singer deploys a number of textual and melodic phrases, with frequent repetitions and variations, within a set verse structure. The basic structure consists of a short introduction, often with burden syllables, followed by a second part comprising a number of sections (marked here A to G) separated by breath breaks. When accompanied by dance, as here, the Cockatoo verse-form ends with a short refrain (R), followed by a short terminating figure (T). When there is no dance accompaniment the singers add a third part, an unaccompanied vocal coda, which

gives an opportunity for individual virtuosity in the recitative. The first line of the notation gives the melody, while below come the clapstick rhythms (sts), text, *didjeridu* hoot patterns (dj), and ritual calls (r.c.) given out by the male dancers, in that order. The patterns of the ritual calls, sticks, and *didjeridu* are subject-specific within Djambidj. Beside the notation, I give the text of the Cockatoo verse on its own, together with a glossary of the textual phrases.

A	wang-gurnga	guiya	wang-gurnga	guiya	gulob'arraidja	ngwar-ngwar	
						larrya	
			maningala	rarei	njaldjiba		
B	djamburr	budjarinya	blairiber	larrya	garrarra-garrarra		
C	ngwar-ngwar	larrya	blairiber	larrya	djamburr	budjarinya	
			ngaldjiba	guiya	garambag	mbana	
D	yeliliba	guiya	ngwar-ngwar	larrya	garrarra-garrarra	rradjinga	guiya
				blairiber	larrya		
E.	ga-garrarra	rradjinga	guiya				
F	ngaldjiba	guiya	ngwar-ngwar	worria	djamburr	budjarinya	
			blairiber	larrya	ngwar-ngwar	worria	maningala
							rarei
			rradjinga	guiya	gulguinga	guiya	
G	ngwar-ngwar	worria	yirpelainbelain	rradjinga	guiya	ngaldjiba	guiya
R	ngwairg	ngwairg	T	gulgulngam			

### *Glossary*

*wang-gurnga guiya*: *wang-gurnga* is an alternative name for White Cockatoo; *guiya*, which occupies the second part of many Cockatoo textual phrases, has no ascertainable meaning.

*gulob'arraidja*: this phrase refers to Cockatoo's feeding behavior; he gorges himself on grass seeds and then makes a sort of hiccupping belch.

*ngwar-ngwar larrya* and *ngwar-ngwar worria*: the second element of these two phrases refers to Cockatoo's dancing and leaping in the sky; in the Cockatoo dance two male lead dancers imitate this behavior with special high leaps (*djangalk*). This is illustrated in photo no. 5 in my accompanying article.

*Ngwar-ngwar* is echoic, as is the refrain *ngwairg ngwairg*, of Cockatoo's cry.



*maningala rarei*: my informant, Frank Gurrmanamana, could not give a meaning to this phrase.

*ngaldjiba (guiya)*: the name of one of the two wells in the upland forest behind Cape Stewart, east of the Blyth River, where Cockatoo has his home.

*djamburr budjarinya*: a waterhole in the upland forest, Cockatoo's home.

*blairiber larrya*: Cockatoo's food of corms and dry grass seeds.

*garrarra-garrarra*: Cockatoo's crest feathers.

*garambag mbana*: *garambag* is the word for *didjeridu* in Yanyango, a Yolngu language spoken to the east of Cape Stewart; the reference is to the totemic *didjeridu*, Mangabupidja. *mbana* is glossed as "he takes it up" (to play it).

*yeliliba guiya*: meaning unknown.

*rradjinga guiya*: one of Cockatoo's foods, the grass *rraridja*, *Eleocharis* sp., Fam. Cyperaceae.

*gulguinga (guiya)*: Gulgulnga is the name of the place of Cockatoo's birth.

*yirpelainbelain*: meaning unknown.

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W.L. Warner. *A Black Civilization*. Chicago: Harper and Brothers.

CR 39, Item 10: Ngalilag  
Actual Pitch: = B

**I**  
INTRO  
sts  
text  
dum de de de de de de de

**II**  
A  
sts  
text  
n.c.  
wang-gurnga/guiya/ wang-gurnga/guiya/ gulob/ g rraidja/ nguar-nguar/larrya/  
sts  
text  
maningala/rarei / ngaldjiba/

**B**  
sts  
text  
n.c.  
djamburr/budjarinya/ blairiber/larrya/ garrarra/garrarra/

**C**  
sts  
text  
n.c.  
nguar-nguar/larrya/blairiber/larrya/djamburr/budjarinya/ ngaldjiba/guiya / garambag/mbanca

**D**  
sts  
text  
n.c.  
yeli li ba/guiya/ nguar-nguar/larrya/garrarra/garrarra/ rradjinga/guiya/ blairiber/larrya/

**E**  
sts  
text  
n.c.  
?ga-garrarra / rradjinga/ guiya/

**F**  
 sts  
 text  
 r.c.

ngaldjiba/guiya/ ngwarngwar/worria/djanburr/budjarinya/blairiber/larriya/

**G**  
 sts  
 text  
 r.c.

ngwarngwar/worria/ naningala/rarei/ rradjinga/guiya/ gulgulnga/guiya/

**G**  
 sts  
 text  
 r.c.

ngwarngwar/worria/ yirpelainbelain/ rradjinga/guiya/ ngaldjiba/guiya/

**RT**  
 sts  
 text  
 r.c.

ngwair/ngwair/ gulgulngam/

(vi)