

MARETT, ALLAN, LINDA BARWICK, and LYSBETH FORD. 2013. *For the sake of a song: Wangga songmen and their repertoires*. Sydney: Sydney University Press. 436pp. ISBN: 978-192-08-9975-2.

Reviewed by RICHARD MOYLE, *University of Auckland and Griffith University*

This is a substantial work, undoubtably the most detailed examination of individual Aboriginal songs linked through a group of individual singers' repertoires that I have read. The book encompasses all known recordings—around 150—from the repertoires of four Beilyuen and two Wadeye songmen from the Daly region of Australia's northwest over the past 35 years or so, which is surely a tour de force for any single song genre, and unique in the history of Aboriginal music studies. The book is probably a first for Aboriginal music research, both quantifying and codifying the performative output of these songmen. Complementing Marett's earlier study of the technical elements of *wangga* songs, itself "primarily a study of music" (Marett 2005: 12-13), the present work examines how the six songmen have chosen to arrange and present those elements.

Much music research is replete with borders, which can reduce music itself—as product—to hierarchical relationships and separate it into intricately coded, rigid categories. In contrast with the early decades of ethnomusicology—which tended to focus on the isolated sound component and generated statistical arrays of melodic, rhythmic, tonal and structural detail for individual songs or community repertoires—much subsequent research directed focus more to music-making as a process, and unsurprisingly incorporated the roles and the personalities of practitioners. Unusually, this present work combines elements of these two foci.

Linguist Lysbeth Ford notes (p. 65) that "the speech communities that produced *wangga* are no longer viable" and that the languages represented in the lyrics are considered 'severely endangered,' none having more than a dozen fluent speakers, which suggests that her extended linguistic work with her informants may be a timely but final retrieval of detailed information. Within the main section of the book, Ford examines the linguistic content of the songs, providing interlinear text phrases for each one, the results confirming that, although they are not as mnemonic as, say, in Central Australia, they nonetheless contain a sequence of key words, sometimes including non-lexical constructions, which an audience must link sequentially and then enlarge imaginatively with reference to the song's origin (if known) in order to reconstruct the intended meaning. One surmises, however, that, given the relatively small size of each songman's repertoire and performance frequency over many years, the linguistic contents come to hold few surprises for an audience. Four pages of tables (pp. 17-20) usefully instruct the reader how to read the song words and understand the abbreviated morpheme-by-morpheme glosses.

Having a primary focus on musical output, the book of course does not directly address language documentation or conservation, but because the music takes the form of songs, it contains considerable information on the ways in which a group of specialist singers use language. As in other parts of the continent, the song words contain a mix, unpredictable in its details but standard as a principle, of everyday words, specialist or archaic terms

not generally understood, and vocables (which some listeners may understand as ghost language, since *wangga* songs are considered as originating from the ghosts of the dead). Adding complexity to individual songs are the practices of deliberate changes to words as an act of deference to the relationship such words may have to another songman, variability of the sequence of text phrases, abbreviation of text phrases, and use of double entendre when referring to restricted topics. Ford presents such material in a clear and meticulous manner.

Focusing on the music itself, Marett and Barwick build on Marett's 2005 study, identifying five rhythmic modes of song accompaniment, some with subtypes, and they include their identification for each text phrase of each song, and then their significance in terms of those classifications. If the songmen themselves, or indeed audience members generally, were invited to discuss the structure of their songs and styles of accompaniment, the book gives no clue, and the reader can only guess why particular rhythms are used, or are temporarily suspended. Occasional reference is also made to melodic modes by which each songman idiosyncratically organizes pitch sequences.

When the authors speak of a songman's 'preference' for a particular tempo or beating pattern—e.g.: "...the great variability in rhythmic mode we can observe in Muluk's repertory is perhaps in part attributable to his preference for moderate and slow rhythmic modes..." (p. 62)—they appear to be referring to a statistical phenomenon rather than an articulated opinion. And yet, is there reason to suppose that the specialist performers and their audiences either do not hold opinions on these intangible artifacts of their own culture, or are prevented in some way from articulating those views? The authors refer to one composition which is "the most popular and enduring song of the Walakndha *wangga* repertory" (p. 307), indicating the existence of a clear aesthetic preference, but no reason for its appeal is provided. (Marett does, however, offer a hypothesis in his earlier work (2005: 113).)

Similarly, is there reason to believe that there exists no indigenous vocabulary relating to the *wangga* songs and their mode of performance? Although the Aboriginal singing voice permeates the book, the spoken voice is almost entirely absent. The authors have described in great detail the 'what,' but not the 'why.' Admittedly, 'why' questions can be difficult to phrase meaningfully to one's informants when working within a foreign language or within Aboriginal English, but it seems odd that the authors' long association with the featured singers and communities has not identified an indigenous aesthetic or even an articulated perspective. Indeed, some comments are more reflective of the book's authors than of their subject, e.g.: "Various features...remind us of Wurrpen's 1961 performance" (p. 248). And I am perplexed at one Eurocentric perspective in examining *wangga* melodies: "We cannot know now what the significance was of using the major (rather than the dorian) mode melody" (p.407). It is unclear how the reader's understanding of *wangga* is aided by such a remark, even after reading Marett's earlier work (e.g.: 2005: 117ff.). A sharp contrast thus emerges between the authors' close and enduring association with the two Aboriginal communities and their apparent perceptual distance from the music itself.

A reader wanting to peruse the entire volume will need linguistic, musical and ethnographic expertise. More than 300 of its 436 pages comprise song texts, interlinear glosses, translations and identification of rhythmic modes—material more suited for reference purposes than continuous reading. Usefully, each song examined can be heard online, where the contents of the linguistic and musical analysis in the book are duplicated, but without the multiplicity of fonts, typefaces and sizes which characterize the print form for each song. One might reasonably assume that the individual repertoires of the six songmen

would contain a mix of shared and unique features, and indeed the authors confirm this with respect to melodies, accompanying rhythms and the linguistic contents of individual songs and repertoires. Tabulations quantifying differences among the singers—tempo, accompaniment rhythm, melody—summarize such findings, and the presentation of such detail undiverted by interpretation, theory or conclusions confirms the book as a consultative resource and one, with respect to *wangga*, without equal.

Thanks to Marett, Barwick and Ford, we know more about the Daly region's music and song language than most other areas in Aboriginal Australia. The frequent references to the authors' earlier publications, especially Marett's 2005 book, whose photographs are duplicated in the present work, firmly anchor this present work in their ongoing research program. Indeed, they constitute companion volumes. The establishment of Sydney University Press' series, *The Indigenous Music of Australia*, suggests that even more of their publications may ensue. I hope so. Having allowed the Aboriginal singing voice to reveal the richness and complexity of the *wangga* repertoire, the challenge now is to allow the Aboriginal spoken voice to expound on the genre's cultural appeal and significance.

REFERENCES

- Marett, Allan. 2005. *Songs, dreamings, and ghosts: The wangga of North Australia*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Richard Moyle
r.moyle@auckland.ac.nz