'Wire Yard': a song from near Lake Eyre

Luise Hercus and Grace Koch

Introduction

Sally White was not the kind of scholar who sits with pencil poised and recorder on, expecting to be told all the answers. She was always a quiet observer, unobtrusive and helping people with whatever they were doing. She got to know the people of the Lake Eyre Basin very well, and made a deep impression on the brilliant and highly traditional Mick McLean, the last Wangkangurru man born and brought up in the Simpson Desert. Although she was not old at the time, he always referred to her affectionately as 'old Charlie' ('Charlie' is the closest a Wangkangurru speaker can get to pronouncing 'Sally'). She came on the first trip we made with him, in 1966 to Arabana country, where he wanted to show us some sites for the Rain History. On the way north we stopped for lunch at a now defunct roadhouse in Copley, a small township which was the home of many Adnyamathanha Flinders Ranges people. While we were ordering, Sally, usually the last person to say anything hasty, suddenly exclaimed 'Good God! That is a w..!' and there indeed, on display, was a tea towel with a large picture of a ritual string cross. Mick McLean was deeply shocked to hear that secret-sacred word and to see the tea-towel, but he always admired Sally for her attitude and her knowledge — and for the speed with which she caused that tea-towel to disappear. After that, on the many occasions when he wanted to mention this type of sacred object he always referred to it as 'you know that thing old Charlie said'. The following text was recorded by another Wangkangurru man who esteemed Sally, Leslie Russell.

When the last Wangkangurru people left the desert in 1900–01 they brought with them a full knowledge of their own traditions and language. Those who left the desert on the eastern side went to the nearest stations, Cowarie and Karlamurina, and many then went to Birdsville or to the Killalpaninna Mission on the Cooper. They were not overwhelmed by all the new things that they saw, and for at least two generations maintained their traditional knowledge, their ability to make songs in the language about some of these new things, and their sense of humour. In this environment a song cycle was composed at Killalpaninna dealing with contemporary events and places. A number of people must have been involved in the composition of this song cycle, including Leslie Russell *Wanga-pula* 'Two Mornings', who with his older cousin Jimmy *Wanga-mirri* 'Many Mornings' was the last to be able to sing it. It was called *Kudnarri*, 'the floodplain of the Cooper'. This was mainly in Diyari. Peter Austin (1978) has recorded and analysed a number of the Diyari verses, there are some comments from Tamsin Donaldson (1979) and there is a study of just one verse (Hercus and Koch 1998).

Map of the Wire Yard, Lake Eyre Basin, South Australia

There was however also a section that was not in Diyari but in Wangkangurru, with verses that were attributed to a spirit, the *Warranha*. This Wangkangurru section was apparently the work of one author, an old Wangkangurru man who lived at Killalpaninna in the first decade of this century. Jimmy and Leslie sang some of the songs together, but the verses about the *Warranha* were sung by Leslie Russell alone, as Jimmy happened to be away at the time (tape 700, at Marree, May 1975). Mick McLean (Wangkangurru) and Alice Oldfield (Kuyani) were present; Alice knew the song and the locations.

The *Warranha* comes to Wire Yard

The *Warranha* was a mysterious giant who was said to live on an island in Lake Eyre North. All the other inhabitants of the island were women. The *Warranha* travelled over the Lake and the vicinity moving around with the whirlwind — he rose up into the sky covered by the whirlwind: only his eyebrows were visible, he was therefore usually referred to as *Winti-pilpa*, 'Only Eyebrows'. He hunted for dingoes and nobody else was allowed to touch them anywhere near the Lake (Hercus 1971). In this song the Wangkangurru author imagines that the *Warranha* in his journeys has suddenly seen the new building at Cannatulkaninna Station, usually known as Wire Yard.

Two Frenchmen, the brothers Jean and Baptiste de Pierre, bought Cannatulkaninna from the Bosworths in 1906 — it was part of the large area of land that the Bos-

worths had owned, including Muloorina. The de Pierres held it till 1913 when they sold out to the Killalpaninna Mission (Bonython 1971: 39).

It was sandhill country and is now part of Etadurna Station. The de Pierres built a tin house when they bought the lease. Eric Bonython gives a brief account of what this house was like in the early 1920s when it was an outstation of Killalpaninna, then owned by Lance and Beryl Powell (Bonython 1971: 88). It was situated opposite a high and long sandhill:

When Lance went west to their outstation, Cannatulkaninna (or Wire Yard as it was often called) for an extended period, Beryl sometimes accompanied him. The small, unlined iron house was alternately hot and cold to extremes according to the weather and most unpleasant. More dingoes seemed to congregate there than anywhere else on the station. Several times the mill and pump broke down completely and Lance strove desperately to remedy the fault while the cattle stood around the empty trough.

The house was probably not very different when it was new, some 15 years earlier when the song was composed. Aboriginal people were well acquainted with the place: Ben Murray and his brother Ern worked for the Frenchmen at Wire Yard in conditions of virtual slavery described by him in Austin et al. (1988), and it was certainly not a happy place. The de Pierres were trying to establish a sheep station in an area which was utterly unsuitable: apart from this one erratic well there was no permanent fresh water and dingoes were always present. The enterprise was doomed to failure like many similar ventures.

The Wangkangurru man who composed the song must have seen this house when it was first built, in 1906 or not long after. Through the eyes of the Warranha, without saying anything directly, he hints at the futility of some of the activities of white settlers. This is a well-known literary genre, where through the eyes of an outsider an author wonders at a situation: the Wangkangurru author has in fact reinvented the genre that is best known through the *Lettres Persanes* (1721), where the famous French author Montesquieu criticises conditions in France through the puzzled comments of an imaginary visitor from Persia.

The following is the text of Leslie Russell's recital, including his explanations and comments, which were interspersed between the verses; these comments were in Wangkangurru and English. Wangkangurru words are given in italics, and translations and editorial comments are in brackets.

Text. Leslie Russell singing and explaining

Verse 1

<i>Winti-pilp-nai</i>	(Only Eyebrows
<i>Winti-pilp-na ya</i>	Only Eyebrows indeed
<i>Pilpapilp-li katyírnda ya</i>	He turns his brow indeed
<i>Pilpapilp-li katyírn</i>	He turns his brow
<i>Winti-pilp-nai</i>	Only Eyebrows
<i>Winti-pilp-na ya</i>	Only Eyebrows
<i>Pilpapilpa-li katyírnda ya</i>	He turns his brow indeed
<i>Pilpapilpa-li katyírnda</i>	He turns his brow
<i>Winti-pilpa</i>	Only Eyebrows)

Comments

Mathapurda Winti-pil-panha he is the man from Lake Eyre, he stops there, *Warranha* I sing, I haven't got many. I sing his station all that like his home, that old woman Alice, look you know like.

(Old Man *Winti-pilpa*, 'Only Eyebrows', he is the man from Lake Eyre. He lives there. I am singing the song of the *Warranha*, but I don't know all the verses. I am singing about the country that is his domain, his home. Old Alice here probably knows all about it.)

Tharka-kanha nhanhi-rnda Winti-pilpa-ru, 'Ah new house!' *warli marra nhanhi-rnda!*

(*Winti-pilpa* stood there and then he saw it: 'Ah, a new house!' He saw the new house!)

Verse 2

Pantu ilé pilyp-rnda
Pantu ilé pilyp-rnda ya
Méle kunmé kunmére ya
Méle kunmé kunmé

(Like a saltlake it shines
 Like a saltlake it shines indeed
 But the clouds are truly in a haze
 But the clouds are in a haze)

(It is shiny like a saltlake, although it is a cloudy day.)

Repeat verse 2

Comments

This is Wire Yard eh! he is looking he is coming from Lake Eyre, I've never seen a house like this before in this place!

Alice. Leslie is singing *Warranha* ha ha

Leslie. *Pantu wili pilyparnda, warli marra..* (Like a saltlake it shines, the new house.)

Cloudy you know open, you call'm *mili kunmi kunmiri* You hear'm I sing again ...

You know rain you see cloud like haze *kunurduku*, that is what it means

(The verse was then turned around and repeated)

It's all Wangkangurru.

Verse 3

M-nkarra pul-re ya
M-nkarra pul-re
ThuRa washamayíra ya
ThuRa washamayíra!
 Repeat

(The two girls indeed
 The two girls
 Truly they are washing the door
 They are washing the door!)

Commentary

He is looking from the top of the sandhill and he see these women,

Rumanga-na pularu thuRa washamaru

(Inside the room they were washing the door.)

Ulyurla-pularu roomanga pularu warliri thu thuRana nhaRu ku-thi thuRa washamayingura

(The two women are inside the room, and the two of them are right there washing the door).

Verse 3a

R·manga-na pul-re ya

(Inside the room truly the two of them

R·manga-na pul-re

Inside the room the two of them

ThuRa washamayíra ya

They are washing the door indeed

thuRawashamayíra!

They are washing the door!)

Verse 4

Thíyaluríre withíyalur-ya

(What is this, how is it?

Nhurpa-nhurpayíra

It makes a loud rasping sound

Nhurpa-nhurpaye

It makes a loud rasping sound

Thíyaluríre

What is this?

Thíyalur-re

What is it?

Nhurpa-nhurpayíra

It makes a loud rasping sound

Nhurpa-nhurpaye

It makes a loud rasping sound

Thíyalu

What is this?)

Commentary

It's a song about two people sawing wood with a 'hacksaw', a cross-cut saw two man work one in each way,

sawamarnda maka, maka warpinangkangura, mathapurda-pula tharkangura sawamarnda akarda, ilinha pidlara

(They were sawing wood, there was wood lying about, two men stood there sawing, that is what this verse is about.)

Verse 5

P·Ratyírina manéra

(The light of a fire truly draws me close

P·Ratyirina manéra ya

The light of a fire draws me close

Kurpalpurunha pirdara ya

A magpie dives down, yes

Kurpalpurunha pirdara

A magpie dives down

P·Ratyírina manéra

The light of a fire draws me close

PaRatyirina manéra

The light of a fire draws me close

Kurpalpuruna pirdara ya

A magpie dives down

Kurpalpuruna pirdara

A magpie dives down)

Maka paRatyiri anha manira, him looking at it again from the top of a sandhill, *mudlu yaraparu*, *nhanhinangkarda*. *Ukaru mathapurdaru nhanhinangkarda mudlu yaraparu*, old Warranha

(The light of a fire draws me towards it, and a magpie dives down (towards it), that is what he says when he is still looking down from the top of a sandhill, that old man is looking down from the top of a sandhill, old Warranha)

Wadlhu nguyunga, *ukakunha* country, he come from there, he turn back from there, *uka thikarna nguranga ukakunhanga* Lake Eyre

(It all happened in that one place (Wire Yard), which was in the Warranha's country. The Warranha ultimately turned back and went back to his camp, in Lake Eyre.)

Verse 6

Lha:mpa kutira: kya	(They bring out a lamp indeed
Pa:Ratyirina mane:ra	The light draws me close
Pa:Ratyirina mane:	The light draws me
Lha:mpa kutira:	They bring out a lamp
Lha:mpa kutira: ya	They bring out a lamp indeed
Pa:Ratyirina mane:ra	The light draws me close
Pa:Ratyirina mane:ra	The light draws me close
Lha:mpa kutir	They bring out a lamp)

The verse is then turned around as follows:

Pa:Ratyirina mane:ra	(The light draws me close
Pa:Ratyirina mane:	The light draws me close
Lha:mpa kutira: ya	They bring out a lamp)
etc	

Commentary

Two Frenchman been on that place like

pularu wirrarna, *warli nyurdu tyirkatyirkalhuku*.

(They bought the place and they also got ready the house).

I wouldn't know (anything further), that old woman know, I am only a baby! (compared to her).

Lhampa kutira, *lhampa pularu kutira*, *nhutimaRa* two Frenchman owner of that place, Wire Yard

(They brought out a lamp, the two of them, that pair of brothers, the two Frenchmen who owned that place, Wire Yard.)

Musical analysis

Although the Warranha song verses are part of the Kudnarri song series, the musical structure differs considerably from the rest of the series. Unlike the Rain series from the

neighbouring Lake Mirranponga Ponguna, where analysis shows that the same song performed by several men from different regions can still be recognisable as one song (Hercus and Koch 1995: 114–19), the Warranha songs are really a separate set of musical reflections, almost a sort of trope, inserted into the Kudnarri series. All six verses of the Warranha maintain a strict musical and rhythmic framework. The analysis will compare the Kudnarri verse about Blanche Ned as sung by Jimmy and Leslie Russell (Hercus and Koch 1996: 144–47) and two of the verses of the Warranha as sung by Leslie Russell (see musical notation, next page).

Melodic structure

Both the Warranha and the Kudnarri have different pitch ranges. The Warranha encompasses a perfect fifth while the Kudnarri only includes a minor third.

The six verses of the Warranha all use the same melody, which works as a set of four musical phrases that are shown on the notation as numbers above the staff at the beginning of each phrase. The texts of the two Warranha verses are sung through twice while the Kudnarri verse is sung three times.

Warranha songs display a small range of one or two notes in the first musical phrase while the second phrase ascends to the highest notes of the song and descends to the lowest, which functions as a tonic. The third phrase rises again, undulating between two adjacent pitches, descending to the tonic and repeats the tonic throughout the last phrase. Verse 1 holds strictly to this pattern within a minor key while verse 2 vacillates between the use of an A flat and an A natural in phrases 1 and 3. This vacillation, plus an occasional ornamental note and/or a stepwise or melodic leap to the final sounding of the tonic in the third phrase, are the only variations that happen within the melodies of all six verses. In contrast, the Kudnarri song simply descends to the tonic for the last two phrases.

A distinctive feature of the Warranha songs is the setting-off of the first phrase from the second by a brief rest. This does not appear in the Kudnarri song, which continues straight through until the end of the text. The Warranha first and second phrases repeat the same text, but they work together as a musical question and answer. The melody of the first phrase either repeats or vacillates between two of the highest pitches, then pauses at this point of tension, or 'question'. The second phrase begins on the highest note of the song and descends to the tonic, coming to a musical 'resting point' or 'answer'. Verse 4 actually poses a question in the first two phrases in relation to wondering about the strange sound of a hacksaw: 'What is this? How is it?'

Rhythmic structure

The Warranha text lines follow a pattern of a pair of repeated lines followed by another pair of repeated lines, or AABB. The Kudnarri includes three text lines, only repeating the last one, or ABCC. Last lines of all three songs may include a few syllables or more of the first line as the song tapers off.

Both the Warranha and the Kudnarri songs are isorhythmic in structure, but the isorhythmic units vary in complexity. Aside from the occasional musical ornament, Warranha songs use only two note values which stand in a ratio of 1:2, shown as crotchets and quavers, whereas the Kudnarri units employ some dotted figures.

Song about Blanche Ned

Sung by Jimmy and Leslie Russell in 1968

A 2076B, 08:24 (Song item 8)

Note: All musical phrases marked by bar lines. Numbers for musical phrases are shown by numbers the first time through.

The Warrana (verse 1)

AIATSIS Archive tape 4307 track B, 19:19

Sung by Leslie Russell

Win - ti - pil - pa - nai Win - ti - pil - pa - nai - ya

pil - pa - pil - pa - li ka - tyirn - da ya pil - pa - pil - pa - li ka - tyirn

Win - ti - pil - pa - nai Win - ti - pil - pa - nai - ya

pil - pa - pil - pa - li ka tyirn - da ya pil - pa - pil - pa - li - ka - tyirn - da ya win - ti - pil

The musical score for 'The Warrana (verse 1)' is written on four staves. The first staff contains two measures of music, each starting with a '1' above the staff. The second staff contains two measures, each starting with a '4' above the staff. The third staff contains two measures, each starting with a '1' above the staff. The fourth staff contains two measures, each starting with a '4' above the staff. The lyrics are written below the staves, aligned with the notes.

The Warrana (verse 2)

AIATSIS Archive Tape 4307 Track B, 23:03

Sung by Leslie Russell

Pan - tu i - le pily - par nda Parn - tu i - le pily - parn - da ya

me - le kun - me kun - me - re ya me - le kun - me - kun - me ya

parn - tu i - le pily parn - da Parn - tu i - le pily parn - da ya

me - le kun - me kun me - re ya me - re kun - me kun - me - re ya - pu

The musical score for 'The Warrana (verse 2)' is written on four staves. The first staff contains two measures, each starting with a '1' above the staff. The second staff contains two measures, each starting with a '4' above the staff. The third staff contains two measures, each starting with a '1' above the staff. The fourth staff contains two measures, each starting with a '4' above the staff. The lyrics are written below the staves, aligned with the notes.

Addition of syllables happens systematically throughout each Warranha verse. The syllable 'ya' appears between all phrases except for the first and the last. The first phrase is emphasised by the rest instead of using the 'ya'. This syllable nearly always comes on the tonic note, but it may appear as a sort of 'kick off' on a higher pitch at the start of the second performance of the text, as can be seen in Example 2. The Kudnarri song used the syllables 'nge-ra' for all phrases but the first, differing from the Warranha in using them at the very end of the song. Thus for the Warranha, the syllable served as an internal connecting device between the phrases whereas the Kudnarri used 'nge-ra' both within and at the end of the song.

Both examples of the Warranha exhibit two distinct metrical patterns with the insertion of one bar of compound meter wherever the 'ya' appears. Example 1 maintains a duple meter while Example 2 tends towards a triple meter. If time signatures were inserted in the examples, Example 1 shows bars of $2/4$ meter while Example 2 has $6/8$ bars. Wherever the 'ya' appears, the meter changes to a bar of $5/8$, which is longer than a $2/4$ bar but shorter than a $6/8$ bar. It is not possible to compare metrical changes between verses of the Kudnarri series at this time because only one verse has been examined.

Conclusion

Many years after this song was composed, in 1950, Eric Bonython accompanied by Ern Murray, who had been made to work at Wire Yard soon after the advent of the Frenchmen, tried to find the remains of the old station. Bonython describes this (1971: 172). They got to the same dune where the Warranha was said to have been sitting:

We climbed on an isolated sand dune that was smothering some trees. We had no idea where we were. To our surprise on the other side of it was the remains of a galvanised iron water tank. Ern kept muttering to himself like a man in a dream. 'I can't believe it' he kept saying. Before us, vanishing in the distance, lay the wreckage of Cannatulkaninna station homestead, strewn far and wide over a mile, blown by the great sandstorms of the drought years... Two galvanised iron walls of the house had fallen flat and were nearly buried, but everything else seemed to have blown away. The well was full of sand and Ern said a dam had vanished too. As if to mock the efforts of man, a few desert flowers bloomed upon the sand. They were the only ones we saw.

The Warranha was vindicated.

This song gives a glimpse of the way in which Aboriginal traditions were formed: the events of 1906 were still remembered in song as if they had happened yesterday and this would probably have continued, but there was no younger person to whom Leslie Russell could pass on the verses of the Warranha. History has proved right the unspoken comments of the author on the futility of the shiny metal house and the activities that went on there.

Apart from its historical interest the Wire Yard song is of mythological significance. The Warranha was very real to the people of the Lake Eyre basin: he was a mythical being, always present in the area around the lake. He was not quite of the stature of a totemic Ancestor, in that groups of people did not identify with him, but individuals did. He was somehow an Ancestor in the making. This shows the lively flexibility of the

mythology of the Lake Eyre basin. It contrasts with what: T.G.H. Strehlow (1947: 6) describes as the tyranny of the past in Aranda traditions:

It is almost certain that native myths ceased to be invented many centuries ago. The chants, the legends and the ceremonies which we record today mark the consummation of the creative efforts of a distant, long-past age.

Because they were not shrouded in quite the same degree of sanctity and secrecy the myths and chants of the Lake Eyre Basin represent a continuous tradition that was constantly evolving. The fact that there could be a humorous, yet reflective song about the Warranha in a modern setting is a lively illustration of this.

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- Strehlow, 1947 NBmissing: if not supplied, delete reference and quotation sourced from him?