

## **Review of Moyle's *Alyawarra Music: Songs and Society in a Central Australian Community***

Richard M. Moyle. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Press. 1986. iii + 271 pp. + 45 rpm recording, hardcover.

Woodrow W. Denham  
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates  
9 March 2002

**Introduction** Alyawarra music is central to all of Alyawarra life and I thank Moyle for providing this introduction to it.

Moyle's research dealt exclusively with members of Ahrunga Country living at Amaroo Station approximately 160 km. northeast of my research site at MacDonald Downs Station, and he conducted most of his fieldwork there between October 1977 and December 1978, about six years after my fieldwork in 1971-72. I worked with many of the people with whom Moyle worked, but my group contained a broader representation of Countries reaching from Alice Springs, northward to Warrabri Settlement on the Stuart Highway, and eastward to Lake Nash Station on the Queensland border. Consequently my sample of people and music are larger than his, while my focus is considerably less sharp than his. In this discussion, I am concerned with the organization, the argument and the ethnographic content of his book, and deal specifically with its applicability to the music I recorded with the Alyawarra.

**Organization and Argument** The organization of the book should be its least problematic aspect, but in this case it is the most problematic. The chapters into which Moyle divides the material are entirely appropriate but the organization of the material within the earlier chapters verges on the chaotic. Furthermore, the glossary and index are seriously incomplete. So when I realize while reading a subsequent chapter that I saw something important in a previous chapter and go back to re-read it, I can't find it. That happens over and over in the book, and is most exasperating. But to compensate, I have pulled apart each chapter line by line and reassembled it in an order that makes sense to me. I don't think that was the author's intention, but it has two major implications. 1) If you *are not* seriously interested in his topic, you probably won't get much out of the book and can safely disregard it. 2) If you *are* seriously interested in it and are willing to devote a lot of effort to understanding it, you will learn much. Like a shoebox crammed full of old photographs in no particular order, it is jam packed with fascinating information.

Chapters 1-10 are strictly descriptive, chapters 11-12 contain inductive generalizations about Alyawarra music, and Chapter 13 contains brief comparisons of Alyawarra music with that of other Central Australian societies. Aside from Chapter 11, the book is not heavy on theory. As Moyle rightly notes, little was known about the subject at the time of his research and writing, so his primary problem was to figure out what the questions should be, with answers to come later.

With those caveats out of the way, I turn now to Moyle's descriptions. I'm not a musicologist, but I do know the Alyawarra well and virtually everything he says about them rings true. That covers a great deal that I saw and heard but failed to comprehend because my background and the foci of my research were elsewhere.

**Alyawarra Music Categories** I am especially pleased with Moyle's fine-grained description of Ahrunga Country, including his classification and mapping of Ahrunga Dreaming sites. Likewise, his discussion of social relationships among people and Dreamings is valuable if somewhat unsystematic in places.

But the real test of a book lies in the ways in which it works for the reader, and this one has done an important job in helping me to organize my thoughts and data concerning Alyawarra music categories. I have taken some liberties with Moyle's comments to make them reflect my own experiences with the Alyawarra at Gurlanda Camp, MacDonald Downs Station, but all things considered, I think he got it right.

*Access Restrictions* One categorization scheme deals with who performs and hears the music. The Alyawarra restrict access to some of their music, art and oral literature. Generally speaking restrictions are based on sex and social maturity. Sex is a fairly obvious criterion, but social maturity is somewhat more problematic. Speaking specifically of males, the most conspicuous change in social maturity occurs when a boy is "made" into a man, i.e., when he is initiated. Finer shades of maturity among males derive from the amount of Dreamtime training a man has received. A young initiated man is not yet ready to see and hear some of the things for which older men are responsible.

In theory the restrictions probably constitute a finely graded continuum from most public to most secret, but for Moyle's purposes and mine the following three points on the continuum are sufficient: Public, Private and Secret.

Public music is performed in the presence of males and females of all degrees of social maturity. Much of the music that is performed during male initiation ceremonies falls into this category. Performances of these public songs may feature singing by men with women and children constituting the audience, or singing by men and dancing by women and girls. In either event, everyone in the community is present and most are participants.

Private music is performed by either males or females, and adult members of the opposite sex are not present at these performances. Sometimes small boys are present when men perform private music, and often both small boys and small girls participate when women perform private music. This music commonly is performed within or adjacent to camps where multiple families live, and members of the opposite sex and all degrees of social maturity may be in the camp and free to hear the music even though they are technically absent from the performances.

Secret music certainly is performed by adult males isolated from all women and children, and perhaps by adult females as well but I am not qualified to speak to this point. Men's secret music includes some of the most dramatic parts of initiation ceremonies and some of the most

esoteric teachings about the Dreamtime that are reserved for men who have been initiated and have successfully completed their early training. Minimally secret music may be performed at an *agiewa* or men's business camp located away from the nearest residential camp and outside the hearing range of others, while maximally secret music may be performed at isolated dance grounds that are designated as strictly off limits to women and children, with unauthorized intruders running the risk of capital punishment.

*Musical Genre* Another categorization scheme deals with musical genre. While working at MacDonald Downs Station, I heard examples of most of the musical genre that Moyle found at Amaroo Station, but I did not record their names or attempt to analyze what I heard. Here I summarize Moyle's list of categories and frequencies of occurrence (Moyle 1986:153, Figure 37) to provide an overview of music at Amaroo. Frequency of occurrence refers to the number of acts of singing of each genre that Moyle recorded. The precise relationship between the composition of Moyle's sample and the composition of everything that the Alyawarra sang while Moyle was there is unknown, but as order of magnitude estimates of the way the Alyawarra allocate their effort and time to the various genre, Moyle's numbers are at least plausible. I suspect (hope) that the table applies reasonably well - but not precisely - to my experiences at MacDonald Downs.

Row #	Genre	Description	Performers	Access	Frequency of Occurrence	
					Number	Percent
1	Apulha	Initiation	Men + Women	Public	1390	23.9
2	Apulha Restricted (a-e)	Initiation	Men	Secret	2033	34.9
3	Ngirtilingkwa	Dreaming instructions	Men	Private or Secret	217	3.7
4	Mwaltja	Dreaming instructions	Men	Private	117	2.0
5	Wantjirra	Songs using music sticks	Men	?	477	8.2
6	Itminta	Songs using music sticks	Men	?	192	3.3
7	Restricted (f-g)	Main increase ceremony	Men	Secret	464	8.0
8	Ltarta	"Show tunes"	Men	Public	48	1.0
9	Awulya	"Women's ceremonies"	Women	Private	884	15.2
10	Awulya (men's)	Campfire Songs	Men	Private	n/a	n/a
11	Ngirtilingkwa (modified)	Child's Coroboree	Men + women	Public	n/a	n/a
				<b>Total</b>	5822	100.2

Augmented list of music genre and relative frequency of occurrence of each at Amaroo Station 1977-79. See text; based on Moyle (1986:153).

The following briefly summarizes my perceptions of music in each genre at MacDonald Downs:

1-2 *Apulha* Initiation music is a huge genre that contains numerous sub-genre. The public sub-genre that Moyle describes are easily recognizable at MacDonald. Moyle's Restricted (a-e) sub-genre probably correspond to the secret music I heard at MacDonald Downs, but Moyle's descriptions are deliberately too uninformative for me to recognize anything.

3 *Ngirtilingkwa* and 4 *Mwaltja* The distinction that Moyle makes between these two categories is too fine for me to handle. The Dreamtime teaching genre *Ngirtilingkwa* (I heard the word differently: *angerdelungwa*) may contain a broader range of stylistic variation than Moyle suggests, but his sample was quite small. I didn't hear anything that I can recognize many years later as belonging to the *mwaltja* genre, but that may say more about me than it does about the Alyawarra. I probably would have heard *Mwaltja* as a sub-genre of *Ngirtilingkwa* since both are used in the same way.

5 *Wantjirra* and 6 *Itmint*a I heard and recorded a good bit of men's music accompanied by music sticks. Moyle says these genre do not belong to Ahrunga Country, so he classified them as "foreign" and did not focus much of his attention on analyzing them. I have no reason to doubt his conclusions for Ahrunga Country, but at MacDonald Downs I heard such music as one of many variations on the *Ngirtilingkwa* genre.

In other words, as a naïve layman treading in an alien area of expertise, I probably would have folded *Ngirtilingkwa*, *Mwaltja*, *Wantjirra* and *Itmint*a into a single category of Dreamtime teaching music. All of it is performed primarily at the *agiewa* or business camp well away from the residential camp and all of it has the same basic use in teaching young men about their Dreamings.

7 *Restricted* (f-g) Again Moyle provides only a very superficial description of this secret increase ceremony music. I too missed the 1971 ceremony to which Moyle refers, so to the best of my knowledge I failed to hear any of the music in this genre.

8 *Ltarta* Moyle heard the "show music" that defines this genre at public performances for visitors at Warrabri Settlement. I heard nothing that resembled the genre at MacDonald Downs.

9 *Awulya* (female) Moyle uses this term to refer to "women's ceremonies" and says the genre does not include specific references to the Dreamtime. At MacDonald Downs, I heard and recorded music that seems to match both Moyle's description of the genre and his recording of it that appears on the 45 rpm record included with his book. However, at least some of the music I recorded dealt specifically with Dingo Dreaming at Warrabri Settlement. Maybe what I heard does not belong in Moyle's awulya genre, or maybe the awulya genre can encompass women's songs that deal explicitly with Dreamings. Since Moyle uncovered only two representatives of this genre, I suspect that the category definition needs to be refined. All of the music I heard in this category was performed at an *alugera* within Gurlanda camp or at a temporary location corresponding to a men's *Agiewa* located just outside the main residential camp; hence it was private but not secret. Dancing around a pair of decorated poles standing up in the ground commonly occurred in conjunction with singing these songs.

*10 "Awulya" (male)* Next, to accommodate much of what I heard and recorded at MacDonald Downs, I must add another category of men's music to Moyle's list. All of the male music genre that Moyle describes are used in initiations (*apulha*), instructions (*ngirtilingkwa*) and increase activities, with the exception of *Ltarta* which I did not hear at MacDonald Downs. My proposed addition to Moyle's list can be described best as a male equivalent of the women's *Awulya* whose definition has been expanded to encompass songs that deal explicitly with Dreamings. In fact, most of the music I recorded at MacDonald Downs falls into this category.

The supplementary category that I propose here might be described colloquially as "campfire music", the kind of music that groups of men sing in the evening while sitting around the campfire at the ngundy, beating the rhythm with music sticks or boomerangs or metal cups, often belting out the music with great gusto. Since the performances occur at the ngundy, women and children are absent, but anyone with ears can hear the music from anywhere in the camp. The performances are private but definitely are not secret.

*11 Child's Coroboree* Finally I must add a category based on only two experiences that do not seem to fit anywhere else. The label I use here is the one I received from the performers. Both examples were very brief ceremonies held at dusk, and each was performed to introduce a small child to its own Dreaming. One dealt with Dingo and Kangaroo, the other dealt with a small Lizard. In each case the ceremony was held in the middle of the residential camp, the music was performed by several men in conjunction with a fleeting ritual drama concerning the Dreaming. The music sounded like that which I associate with Moyle's *Ngirtilingkwa* genre, which ordinarily is performed by men in private, but in each *Child's Coroboree* a large number of women and children actively participated.

**Conclusion** Some of Moyle's technical discussion goes right over my head, his detailed analyses of individual songs often leave me both cold and baffled, and his jargon is not my jargon. But I found his book to be a powerful tool for understanding much that engulfed and puzzled me in the field, and for that I am grateful.