

'Nitmiluk': Song-sites and Strategies for Aboriginal Empowerment

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The word Nitmiluk signifies, in physical space, a series of spectacular gorges and chasms which stretch for 12 kilometres down the Katherine River in Australia's Northern Territory, approximately 30 kilometres north of the present town of Katherine. As a symbolic feature in the natural landscape, Nitmiluk also reflects divergent histories of conquest, colonialism, and more recently, indigenous rights struggles. For the Jawoyn people who are traditional owners of Nitmiluk, it continues to form a nexus of cultural and spiritual practices, and has become central to political strategies towards self-determination and economic independence. The traditional country of the Jawoyn surrounds the series of sites known collectively as Nitmiluk, and covers a vast expanse of what is now known as the Top End of the Northern Territory. More recently, as the Jawoyn develop models of community management for their lands, the sites delineated by these boundaries have become known collectively as the Jawoyn *nation*.

In this paper, I aim to complement Peter Dunbar-Hall's account (see pages 155-160) of the song 'Nitmiluk' by Blekbala Mujik, by providing a reading of Nitmiluk, as a physical site central to the process of an indigenous (re)construction of post-colonial space. This involves situating Nitmiluk as the point of intersection of several threads of cultural and political discourse, in particular the current material practices of the Jawoyn's representative organisation, which has sought to assert its own presence in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory, and achieve a resolution to the competing claims of indigenous and non-indigenous jurisdictions. In this sense, I hope to provide a context for the song, and point to the role that popular music texts can play as mediators of geopolitical conflict, as expressions of material empowerment strategies.

Nitmiluk was, and continues to be, a central component of Jawoyn tradition and 'law'—a sovereignty delineated over land through complex and holistic systems of responsibility and social organisation for thousands of years prior to European invasion. In Jawoyn mythology, creation beings including the *Bolong* (Rainbow Serpent) and *Barraya* (Kookaburra) have continuously occupied the gorges which make up Nitmiluk, inscribing the country with physical features, social responsibilities and cultural meaning during the period known as *Burr* (roughly translated as 'the Dreaming')¹. The Jawoyn naming of the gorge (and many other sites throughout the area) is attributed to a particular Burr-figure, *Nabilil*, who 'camped at the entrance to the Katherine Gorge where he heard the song of the cicada (*Nitmi* in Jawoyn language) and called this place Nitmiluk' (Jawoyn Association, 1993a:5). Traditional songs and dances that communicate these stories continue to be practised as part of Jawoyn oral culture—as exercises in naming and owning. More recently, this same musical practice of naming and owning a site in a song has re-surfaced in Aboriginal rock music. Blekbala Mujik's 'Nitmiluk' can be interpreted in this way.

Nonetheless, the spectacular geomorphological features of Nitmiluk did not escape

the colonising gaze of non-indigenous settlers and authorities during the twentieth century. The expansion of pastoralism and the explosion of mining activities that followed the discovery of gold at Pine Creek during the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line had tragic consequences for Aboriginal groups. Jawoyn indigenous sovereignty over traditional territory was disregarded in the often violent process of asserting European sovereignty over land. Jawoyn people no longer had free access and mobility over their country, pastoral stock polluted water sources, and traditional lands became populated by strangers. Jawoyn people were, by the turn of the century, 'experiencing the violence and culture shock of colonisation' (Jawoyn Association 1993a, p. 9).

Colonial histories by non-indigenous writers as recently as the 1980s reflect the denial of the Jawoyn and other local indigenous voices (such as the Wardaman, and later, Warlpiri), consequently mapping these physical sites for the purpose of legitimising English rule. According to Peter Forrest (1985:6) in his glaringly one-sided trajectory of pastoral expansion in the Katherine region, 'the survey, construction and operation of the telegraph line brought people to the Territory. Alfred Giles, pioneer of Springvale, was one of the first' (emphasis added). The conspicuous absence of local indigenous peoples from these narratives, and from the maps which served to legitimate colonial rule at the time, stems from the naming practices of frontier settlers and planners. Sites such as Nitmiluk, and Wurliwurliyn-jang (now covered by the Katherine Town Council chambers) were overwritten with European names: Wurliwurliyn-jang became contained within the town known as 'the Katherine' or 'Kathrhyn²', with its militaristic parallel streets ('First Street', 'Second Street', 'Third Street' and so on), whilst Nitmiluk became 'Katherine Gorge' (Odgen, 1989).

The early colonial experience at and around Nitmiluk demonstrates the centrality of naming and mapping practices in acts of dispossession, in perpetuating the 'terra nullius' philosophy that underwrote British sovereignty over Australia; rendering landscapes 'empty' of competing indigenous meaning (cf. Jacobs, 1993; Harley, 1988; Huggan, 1989).

More recently, Nitmiluk has been central to attempts by indigenous people to re-claim these colonised spaces. This includes the part it has played within strategies to re-claim land tenure within Australian land rights mechanisms (the *Jawoyn (Katherine Area) Land Claim*), formal projects to build up indigenous employment and training opportunities (through the Jawoyn Association), and its figurative/symbolic role within more qualitative cultural expressions of local artists and performers, notably musicians such as Blekbala Mujik.

In this context, popular music, alongside other media such as art, dance and literature, forms a site of expression and empowerment alongside conventional political arenas. Perhaps more effectively than formal political avenues, indigenous musicians are able to promote mainstream engagement with themes of indigeneity as part of holistic cross-cultural strategies. Accordingly, the sites of expression constructed through music (and their fields of interpreted meaning) remain fluid, sensitive to shifts in government policy (such as the current federal government's turn towards limiting, rather than extending, recognition of indigenous rights) and the wider atmosphere of Australian racial issues. In this sense, music also provides a sphere in which wider issues of social and political change can be understood (Leyshon et al, 1995; Kong, 1995; Lipsitz, 1994).

Indigenous organisations such as the Jawoyn Association continue to provide challenges to the geography of the nation-state with demands for new, fluid spaces of co-

existence, such as on National Park land and pastoral lease-holdings. As this occurs, indigenous popular musicians (and other artists) are becoming increasingly important mediators in the surrounding national 'mediascape', writing and singing about 'Aboriginal methods for melding the disparate worlds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians' (Neuenfeldt, 1993, page 1; cf. Appadurai, 1990; see Langton, 1993 and Michaels, 1994 for an examination of indigenous interventions in the production of television and video footage about, and by, indigenous communities).

The socio-political concerns of these song writers and performers are articulated in ways which symbolically re-claim space; inscribe markers of indigeneity upon a popular cultural landscape; and delineate material empowerment strategies. In the same way, the cultural expressions of Aboriginal identity and place within Blekbala Mujik's songs that Peter Dunbar-Hall discussed, are reflected materially in the strategies and practices of the Jawoyn Association. Indeed, the song 'Nitmiluk' was first performed in public on 10 September 1989, at the handback ceremony of the site to its traditional owners, as a commemoration of the Jawoyn's successful land rights claim. In this way, Blekbala Mujik have mobilised the Jawoyn's diverse strategies to signify, re-map, and gain influence over, their traditional lands.

The geopolitical significance of 'Nitmiluk' must be appreciated in the context of Indigenous land rights struggles in Australia which accelerated during the 1980s. Under land rights legislation passed by the Commonwealth Government in respect to the Northern Territory³, Jawoyn traditional owners submitted, on 31 March 1978, the *Katherine Area Land Claim* over a wide stretch of their homelands, including Nitmiluk. Despite the stated intentions of traditional owners not to exclude non-Jawoyn people's access to Nitmiluk in the event of a successful land handback, the *Katherine Area Land Claim* was met with fierce opposition from the local non-Indigenous population (Jawoyn Association, 1993a). The amplification of intense racism, fears of separatism and exclusion in the non-Aboriginal community, particularly in the township of Katherine itself, was no doubt exacerbated by the lengthy process of deliberation (initial hearings were not held with the Aboriginal Land Commissioner until 1983-84).

Within this time opposition to the land claim was being articulated through both 'formal' and 'intimidatory' means. The incumbent Northern Territory Government actively opposed the claim, supporting the funding of oppositional challenges in the court of the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, whilst the then speaker of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly at the time led a street rally against land rights (Northern Territory Parliamentary Record, 16 May, 1989, 6056; Jawoyn Association, 1993b). Concurrently, the Katherine Town Council attempted to re-invoke the formalising cartographic strategies of the colonial enterprise to halt the claims process. In response to the claim for Nitmiluk, the size of the town's official town boundaries were expanded from 33 square kilometres to nearly 4,700 square kilometres, thereby incorporating Nitmiluk into its own territorial domain, and potentially nullifying indigenous land rights⁴. This act was later rejected by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner as an unnecessary expansion of the town's boundaries.

Many local non-Aboriginal residents developed their own racist strategies, including the formation of anti-land rights lobby groups such as 'Rights for Whites', and the adornment of suburban front gardens along the local highway to Nitmiluk with mocking 'sacred sites' signs (Crough, 1993). A survey of local residents in 1983, conducted by the Katherine Town Council, captures the extent of the sensitivity surrounding the *Katherine Area Land Claim* at the time. Over 60% of local respondents voiced opposition to the potential for Jawoyn ownership of Nitmiluk. Consequently, the conflict

surrounding Nitmiluk was emblematic of wider political struggles concerning the rights of Indigenous peoples in the Australian polity.

The actual hearings for the Jawoyn land claim were also drawn out, with the final Land Commissioner's report, recommending the return of Nitmiluk to traditional owners, not being released until 1988. Less than half of the original area claimed (approximately 5,000 square kilometres), was recommended for handback. However, the 2,032 square kilometres to be handed back did include Nitmiluk and surrounding areas, allowing the Jawoyn, through the Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation, to negotiate with the Northern Territory's Conservation Commission the terms of a lease-back arrangement and management plan for their traditional country. This would become a financial and symbolic platform for the development of the Jawoyn's formal strategies for self-determination and economic independence, captured in the use of the phrase 'Rebuilding the Jawoyn Nation'.

Given these circumstances, the performance of the song 'Nitmiluk' by Blekbala Mujik at the handback ceremony on 10 September 1989, signifies much more than a general affirmation of Aboriginal cultural identity and connections to place (which a text-based analysis suggests in the first instance). The themes of sharing country, reconciliation and pride in land in the song react to a tangible set of local circumstances, challenging the mis-informed narratives of exclusion and economic ruin which dominated opposition to the Jawoyn land claim throughout the hearings process. The song declares the Jawoyn's intention to rejoice in the return of traditional lands, whilst retaining access for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations to the National Park for recreational purposes. Whilst many of the song's themes can be seen as expressions of pan-Aboriginality, they have another layer of meaning, given the background of racism and division which preceded their land rights victory. As Blekbala Mujik sing 'This land's for you/This land's for me/Take pride, it is yours, it is ours', they are simultaneously answering local critics of Aboriginal land rights who appeal to narratives of separatism, and pointing to further directions which Jawoyn empowerment and regional development strategies could take. The performance of the song at the handback ceremony under the banner 'Mam-gun Munggy-wun lerr-nyarrang Nitmiluk' ('Sharing Our Country'), occurred at a significant moment in Indigenous struggles, and at a turning point in local relations between the Jawoyn and non-Aboriginal residents of the Katherine region.

Since the handback of Nitmiluk, the Jawoyn Association has been involved in a range of initiatives that have grown out of Nitmiluk's return. The Association has signed a Nitmiluk Tours joint venture with local tourist operators, providing community income and securing control over potential employment opportunities for the Jawoyn (Pritchard and Gibson, 1996). This principle also underwrote the Mt Todd Agreement between the Jawoyn, resource developer Zapopan and two levels of government as part of a holistic land and employment package designed to secure regional economic development. Nitmiluk continues to be a central part of the Jawoyn's strategies for empowerment and autonomy from government welfare funding.

The most recent development in Jawoyn politics is the formation of strategies to 'Rebuild the Jawoyn Nation', which also capitalise on the tangible gains secured through the hand-back and management of Nitmiluk National Park, and capture again the theme of 'sharing our country' which pervades Blekbala Mujik's recordings. By the use of the term 'Jawoyn nation', the Association aims to crystallise the broad spectrum of its political claims and assertions of Indigenous rights. 'Nation' is used in a multi-valent sense, to represent a people, a language, and areas of traditional country

(Gibson, 1995), and to suggest the rights of the Jawoyn to 'care for country' in a region in which they are greatly outnumbered by both the non-Aboriginal population and by the diversity of other Aboriginal groups.

The term 'Jawoyn nation' does not, however, represent Jawoyn claims for a 'separate nationhood' in a western political sense. The Jawoyn are suggesting a concept of sovereignty which recognises their rights without implying a monopolistic sense of land ownership.

Mechanisms such as the Mt Todd Agreement have since been incorporated into local indigenous strategies in ways which reflect the 'multiple sovereignty' approach, attempting to ensure Indigenous title and influence over land, yet concurrently accommodating non-Indigenous interests in land. These approaches have become more influential since the 1992 'Mabo' decision, and recent legal victories such as the High Court's December 1996 decision in favour of Wik and Thayorre traditional owners in Cape York, Queensland, who were able to prove the co-existence of indigenous title to land with current non-Indigenous pastoral leases. The 'multiple sovereignty' approach developed by the Jawoyn, whilst not commensurate with the political desires of all Aboriginal associations (for example, the Aboriginal Provisional Government), is being considered as one way of securing indigenous interests in land, while avoiding the hysterical fears of separatism which have prompted some conservative politicians to suggest the total extinguishment of some native title rights (see Gibson, 1997 and Meyers (ed), 1997 for examples of the growth of negotiated agreements in Australia).

The discourse of indigenous nationhood is extended by the Jawoyn Association in their community development strategies through the use of symbols of Aboriginality on the covers of reports, letterheads, and policy documents; these motifs also appear on cassette covers released by Blekbala Mujik. The official letterheads and reports of the Jawoyn Association feature a depiction of the *Bolong* of Nitmiluk and *Nitmi* (cicadas), the same images used as the cassette cover for Blekbala Mujik's *Nitmiluk*. This design on the cover of *Rebuilding the Jawoyn Nation* and *Nitmiluk* can be read as reacting to dispossession and alienation under Australian colonial rule. These symbols of nationhood, a type of localised 'flag', assert more explicitly (geo)politicised formations identity, that contextualise indigenous empowerment strategies in a sub-national political landscape where Aboriginal sovereignty has no current legal recognition.

The symbols themselves represent the continued role of tradition in contemporary land naming and owning practices. This particular depiction of the *Bolong* was created by a Jawoyn artist who has since passed away, however the image remains in the public domain as an emblem of the Jawoyn Association's activities. The use of particular cultural icons to denote national identity sustains links to the use of Pan-African imagery since the 1970s in many black American and Caribbean music traditions. The use of the symbols of the Ethiopian flag—the lion and red, green and gold colours—in the music and culture of reggae and Rastafarian Jamaica provides a precedent to the use of the *Bolong* and *Nitmi* image, with its brown, black and gold motifs (cf. Campbell, 1985)⁵. The colours and iconography of reggae's pan-Africanism denote resistance to a Babylonian, capitalist/slavery history, and the Jawoyn and Blekbala Mujik symbols can be read with similar diasporic overtones. With *Nitmiluk*, this sense of a nation within nation is voiced through music.

The construction of Jawoyn nationhood and the narratives of survival and celebration in the song 'Nitmiluk' represent significant attempts to generate new post-colonial space. Themes that resonate throughout these formal political and popular

cultural texts involve going beyond the strict individualistic undercurrents of western land ownership, and are concerned with re-inscribing space with indigenous meaning. The song 'Nitmiluk', alongside other activities such as the Barunga Sports and Cultural Festival held annually on Jawoyn land, is part of this process of re-inscribing indigeneity on the landscape of the Katherine region (cf. Dunbar-Hall, 1997). The physical space of Nitmiluk therefore occupies a focal point of various meanings: through music, in formal political strategies of indigenous nationhood, and as a contrast to non-Aboriginal cartographic representations of 'reality'. With Blekbala Mujik's 'Nitmiluk' then, to sing the song is in a sense to re-sing the place.

Notes

1. The Burr figures and stories alluded to here are documented in a publication of the Jawoyn Association (Jawoyn Association, 1993a) which is not restricted to any particular audience. They make up part of the publicly-available information about Jawoyn culture approved by Jawoyn people.
2. 'Katherine' was named in 1862 by the explorer John McDouall Stuart after the daughter of his patron, James Chambers.
3. The Commonwealth retains power to legislate for land tenure in Territories of Australia, but not for the States (e.g. Victoria, Western Australia) due to the constitutional entrenchment of the States' primary sovereign rights. Consequently, the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (Northern Territory) 1976 only covered lands in the Northern Territory.
4. Under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (Northern Territory) 1976, only vacant Crown land, not expressly put aside by governments for future use, can be claimed by traditional owners.
5. The music of Jamaican reggae, and attendant Rastafarian imagery is also widely popular throughout indigenous communities in the Top End of the Northern Territory. In this sense the parallels between Blekbala Mujik's use of the *Bolong* and *Nitmi* imagery and pan-African iconography are not merely incidental.

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