

Nitmiluk: An Aboriginal Rock Song about a Place

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Blekbala Mujik, from Barunga in south-west Arnhem Land, is one of a number of Aboriginal rock groups to achieve success in the last decade, a period of marked increase in the recognition accorded to Aboriginal performers, artists and writers. The reasons for this increase in recognition are numerous and varied, among them government and media policies, the availability of recorded, film and print material by and about Aborigines, and the activities of media organisations which specialise in the recording and distribution of indigenous music. Chief among these is the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) based in Alice Springs, NT, the company responsible for Blekbala Mujik's recordings.

Aboriginal rock music is diffuse and difficult to discuss as an entity. Like any music it is multifaceted, and reflects the diversity of the cultures in which it originates. Despite this, some writers identify trends in its aesthetic stance. Chief among these is the use of music for protest (Breen 1994). Such a view, however, ignores more prevalent uses of music by Aboriginal rock musicians, among them: for educating the broader listening public about Aboriginal cultures, needs and agendas (Yunupingu 1990); acting as an expression of localised Aboriginalities (Stubington and Dunbar-Hall 1994, Dunbar-Hall 1997b) recording and reviving Aboriginal languages under threat of extinction (National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1996); and in public celebrations of events in Aboriginal life. Ostensibly it is as the last of these that 'Nitmiluk' can be classified, and this is made explicit in a CAAMA press release about the song's creators:

'Nitmiluk' ... is the traditional place name for Katherine Gorge National Park handed back to the Jawoyn people in September 1989...The band were asked by the owners to write some music to help celebrate the hand-back (undated).

The selection of hand-back of land as the topic of songs by Aboriginal rock groups is an indication of the importance of land to Aboriginal communities, the significance of hand-back, and also the continuing role of music as a means of recording and celebrating events. However, study of the musical and textual profiles of 'Nitmiluk' reveals that there is more to the song than the commemoration in its lyrics of the hand-back of land to its owners. In the reading of the song presented here, 'Nitmiluk' is seen as a statement, through references to land, of identity, and linked to this, agendas of Jawoyn cultural revival and self determination.

Blekbala Mujik

To date Blekbala Mujik (Kriol = black fella music) has issued five albums. As a repertoire, the songs on these albums address topics pertinent both to aspects of Australian pan-Aboriginality (for example, Aboriginal identity in general) and to local communities of the Jawoyn speaking area (for example, songs about local events). In its music

and text, 'Nitmiluk' reflects this ability to signify on different levels of Aboriginal reference, exhibiting characteristics common to the music of numerous Aboriginal rock groups across Australia, as well as some specific to Jawoyn and neighbouring cultures. As an example of Aboriginal rock music in the widest sense, 'Nitmiluk' employs the integration of two types of music: an opening traditional section of west Arnhem Land song with didjeridu and clapsticks accompaniment gives way to a rock section performed with electrified guitars and drumkit. The readily identifiable musical differences between traditional and rock sections of the song are further delineated by the use of different languages for each: the traditional section is sung in an unidentified Aboriginal language, the rock section in English. The presence in the lyrics of the rock section of words from Aboriginal English and an unidentified Aboriginal language emphasise on a smaller scale the larger multilingual nature of the song. Such multilingualism, a facet of Aboriginal life, is not uncommon in Aboriginal songs and can be observed in the music of other Aboriginal rock groups.

The diachronic use of two styles of music, a feature of music by Aboriginal groups such as Yothu Yindi (see Stubington and Dunbar-Hall 1994) occurs alongside a synchronic use when the descending melody of the framing traditional sections is heard as the basis of the melody of the rock section. This integration of traditional musical material with contemporary musical context and performance medium links 'Nitmiluk' with the repertoires of many central and northern Australian Aboriginal performers. Another way that this is achieved is through the song's use of a country-and-western feel.

The use of country music sounds has been recognised by various writers as one of the stylistic mainstays of contemporary Aboriginal popular music (Breen 1989, 1994, Castles 1992, Mudrooroo, 1997). Numerous reasons are given for this, among them familiarity with the style from its appearance on the playlists of rural radio stations, and thus exposure of it to Aboriginal listeners, or the fact that in their lyrics country songs reflect the lifestyle of workers on the land. Mudrooroo explains this link between Aboriginal country working conditions and country music in his explanation of the popularity of the style:

country and western (hillbilly) songs in time replaced most indigenous secular song structures. This was because the subject matter reflected the new Indigenous lifestyle: horses and cattle, drinking, gambling, the outsider as hero, a nomadic existence, country-orientation, wronged love, fighting and fucking—the whole gamut of an itinerant life in the stockman/cowboy ideotones. (111)

More relevant to the present discussion is the possibility that the topics of country songs, which often express emotions about family and land, appeal to Aboriginal cultural sensibilities and thus the style, through a form of semiotic linkage, has been subsumed into Aboriginal musical life as an expression of relationships to land. Certainly it is not difficult to find country style songs by Aboriginal musicians which in their lyrics express closeness to, love of and responsibility for land.

A further characteristic of 'Nitmiluk' found in much Aboriginal rock music is the inclusion in the song's inner rock section of didjeridu and clapsticks as members of the rock group lineup. In this section both instruments seem aligned with the instruments of the drumkit and thus integrated into the rhythmic profile of the song through a one bar repeated pattern which constitutes the basis of the song's accompaniment. In Aboriginal rock music, the instrument called 'didjeridu' is used throughout Australia and has assumed an identity as a marker of musical Aboriginality (Neuenfeldt 1997).

This nationwide use of the instrument is relatively recent and is in contrast to its traditional areas of use, those above a line drawn across the continent from Broome in West Australia to Ingham in Queensland (see A Moyle 1974, Stubington 1979). Concomitant with this geographic diffusion of the instrument has been a widening of its musical uses as it transfers from traditional to rock contexts (Dunbar-Hall 1997a). In its various uses of the didjeridu 'Nitmiluk' demonstrates ways the instrument moves between these different musical settings and refers both to specific Jawoyn musical cultures and to contemporary Aboriginal cultures on a national scale.

These four aspects of 'Nitmiluk' (presence and integration of traditional and rock musics; multilingualism; influence of country-and-western style; and the use of clapsticks and didjeridu as rock instruments) may be responsible for giving the song an Aboriginal 'feel' and may assist in creating relevance of the song for Aboriginal listeners. A fifth aspect of the song, its topic, is also one used by many Aboriginal rock groups, but it is here that more specific references to Jawoyn land, culture and identity are made.

The appearance of specific places and place in general as the topics of Aboriginal rock songs can be directly linked to Aboriginal perceptions of and feelings for land and land ownership, and to a role of music in Aboriginal cultural expression. Land, ownership of it, and relationships to it are central to Aboriginal identity, and the naming of places in songs, both traditional and contemporary, is a significant means of the construction and expression of that identity. Descriptions of the role of song in the expression of land ownership, and therefore of individual and group identity, are found throughout the literature on Aboriginal traditional music (for example, R. Moyle 1986) and in the literature of Aboriginal land claims. For example, in relation to land claims, Davis and Prescott mention music in their discussion of Jawoyn legal action to regain ownership of an area to the north of Nitmiluk:

in support of their claim to traditional ownership of land in the South Alligator Valley the Jawoyn described events which took place in the creative epoch whereby ancestral beings identified with the Jawoyn travelled across the landscape and performed activities which have become synonymous with particular localities ... It is common within Aboriginal tradition to define the limits of territory through the spatial properties of events which are described by reference to location names in song cycles. These song cycles are often sung in the course of ceremonies to accompany dances which re-enact the events performed by the ancestral beings ... (1992, 73)

It would not be implausible to suggest that this aesthetic of Aboriginal traditional song and the practices listed by Davis and Prescott continue in contemporary musical expression and can be seen at work in 'Nitmiluk.'

The Aboriginal significance of land in general, and of specific sites, is associated with a complex of related concepts which can be identified in 'Nitmiluk.' This complex links a location with the ancestral beings who created it and/or performed activities there in the Dreamtime, with language(s) spoken in the area, with the people and events of the past and those who live there today or have rights to ownership.

Among others, the factors which contribute to Aboriginal identity combine the physical (a site) with the spiritual (the Dreamtime), and the past with the present to represent group and individual identity in a symbiotic relationship. The overlappings of these simultaneous levels of reference and their potential composite meaning(s) are difficult to unravel, and attempts by non-Aboriginal writers to represent them can

only begin to explain them. An analysis of the ideas presented in 'Nitmiluk' demonstrates how elements of place, history, language, and ownership are linked in a musical statement about a site, this statement itself acting as a signifier of identity and the implications of that identity in current policies of Jawoyn cultural revival. It should also be borne in mind that *singing about a place* is *singing a place*; that by performing a song about a place, the events of the past through which that place was created or altered are recreated in the present, and through the performance of an Aboriginal rock song about a place that place is in a state of continual (re)creation. In this case 'Nitmiluk' connotes the coming into existence of Nitmiluk at the same time that it references the gorge's more recent past of dispossession and reclamation. In this way the song not only writes an Aboriginal Dreamtime history, but makes references to colonial attitudes and activities in relation to Aboriginal land. Levels of past and present on which the song relies can be read into it not only through these textual references, but also in the song's use of distinct musical styles, while the dependence of the present and the past on each other can be heard in ways these musical styles interact throughout the song.

The text of the rock section of 'Nitmiluk' is:

Verse 1

In the beginning

There was nothing on this land

An echo came from the past

Gandayala breathed the fire of life [Dreamtime figure]

Whistling sounds were heard

Bolong made the waters flow [Dreamtime figure]

In the distance land formations stirred

It turned into life

Chorus

Nitmiluk! Nitmiluk!

You're the father of the land

Break the chains and help to set me free

Nitmiluk! Nitmiluk!

You're there for one and all for one

We honour you—we depart in harmony

Verse 2

Mungana's taken you [Aboriginal English = white man]

There was nothin' we could do

A fight took place in court

It seemed that we had won

The bunggul's been revived [traditional song & dance]

People praise your mighty name

A jury gave the answer

You're free for everyone

Chorus

Nitmiluk! Nitmiluk! ...

Verse 3

*Forgive the white man
They're our brothers and our sisters
Let's join hands together
Share one earth forever
Teach the young our culture
Be happy and be peaceful
This land's for you
This land's for me
Take pride, it is yours, it is ours*

Chorus

Nitmiluk! Nitmiluk! ...

The three verses present a 'storyline' reducible to: creation of Nitmiluk—dispossession—land rights claim/court action—return of land and cultural revival—hopes for the future. The specific events/factors of this storyline are the elements which combine to create the nexus of associations through which land ownership and identity are expressed. These elements, their exemplifications and locations within 'Nitmiluk' can be tabulated as:

Element location	Example Nitmiluk	Location in song chorus
Dreamtime beings	Gandayala Bolong	v1 v1
past	creation of site dispossession land claim	v1 v2 v3
present	return of land (1989)/ownership position of land in reconciliation	end v2 v3

'Nitmiluk' can be read on a number of levels. As an Aboriginal rock song in the broadest sense it exhibits characteristics which can be heard in the music of other Aboriginal rock bands. On a more specifically local level, it draws on musical features of west Arnhem Land song. Its lyrics address a topic common to many Aboriginal songs, that of land, but through its description of events in the Nitmiluk site and their subsequent history in the 1980s, 'Nitmiluk' is a statement of local identity.

Interpretation of 'Nitmiluk' as a means of stating Jawoyn identity and relationships to land is based on the understanding that song is a continuing site of conceptualisation and debate, and a means of expressing belief and perpetuating knowledge in Aboriginal cultures. In this song interactions between place, mob, and language, and past, present and future, which underpin potential meaning creation in Aboriginal cultural artefacts, can be found in the identification of explicit references in the song's lyrics, and implicit references in factors they signify.

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Recordings

Nitmiluk! Blekbala Mujik. CAAMA 209. 1990.

Video

Nganampa Rock-n-Roll. CAAMA V 298.