THE INTEGRATION OF MUSIC AND BELIEF IN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CULTURE

Helen E. Payne

Stanner, in his lecture entitled "Some Aspects of Aboriginal Religion", which constituted the Charles Strong Memorial Lecture delivered to the combined A.A.S.R.-A.N.Z.S.T.S. conferences conducted in Adelaide in 1976, stated concerning the religious significance of ritual performance in Australian Aboriginal society :

> There was also an explicit comprehension that the continuance of life depended upon a power or powers external to men and beyond them. One is tempted to say that the rites were 'religious' in the measure in which, implicitly or explicity, they acknowledged that dependence.
>
> (Stanner 1976:27)

While this paper, in essence, will support Stanner's statement, it will contend that a temptation to call "rites" religious is but a weak assertion of the very deep religious significance attached to, and inherent in, their performance in the traditional situation.

A ritual performance consists of the simultaneous presentation of many features. This paper will examine one of these features, namely musical form or song at an in-depth level, in order to show that both the meaning attributed to and structure of ritual performance has deep religious significance for the trained listener.

In this examination focus will be placed on the Western Desert area where the author has conducted ethnomusicological research amongst Pitjantjatjara-speaking people. These people who are inhabitants of communities situated at Amata, Ernabella, Fregon and Indulkana in the north-west of South Australia (see Figure 1), have proved patient teachers, imparting to the author a great deal of the information contained in this paper.

In the Western Desert, as in other areas of Australia, traditional song performance is influencial in eliciting desired non-musical results for performers. That these results may be very vast in their variation is testified to by the existence of a large number of song types. These include, for example: songs to control the natural environment, on which Aboriginal man traditionally depends for his livelihood and regards as very sacred; songs to control health including both curing

songs and songs which may be sung to inflict ill-health and pain; songs to control love, to lure a desired partner and so on.[1]

The ability of a song performance to bring about desired non-musical results for its performers, lies in its power to draw on supernatural forces left at certain points within the physical environment by the sacred ancestors, during the dreamtime.[2]

This period, considered to be the "beginning of time" when initially only a bare earth and sky were present, was the time when the ancestors on awakening from their slumbers commenced the wanderings which resulted in the creation and population of the physical environment.

Each ancestor or ancestral group was responsible for the creation of a particular feature (animate or inanimate) of the environment which along with his human offspring, shared his life essence and spirit: a concept expressed as totemism.

At the completion of the dreamtime the ancestors resumed eternal sleep. Before they did so however, they taught their human offspring a song. Munn (in Reay 1964:91ff) states that this song first appeared to the ancestor as a dream before he set off on his journey. It informed him of the events to come and he enacted it before departing.

The song, which gives a full account of the ancestor's dreamtime wanderings and creations, depicts the ancestor in two forms. Sometimes it records him wandering in the form of and having the life essence of his human offspring, while at other times in the form of and having the life essence of the particular feature of the natural environment which he created. For example, the song of the kangaroo ancestor depicts the ancestor sometimes as wondering in the form of and having the life essence of the kangaroo, while at other times in the form of and having the life essence of his human offspring.

Contained within the structural components of the song are the ancestor's aural "identification markings" (Munn in Reay 1964:87). It is on correct presentation of these markings simultaneously with the corresponding visual "identification markings" contained in the accompanying dance step and artistic design in a ritual performance that the supernatural power of the ancestor becomes available to perform the important extra-musical functions intended by the rite (Ellis et al 1975).

Such a performance, intended to summon forth the ancestral presence, is given at the sacred ancestral site(s) to which it is geographically connected by way of the ancestral path. This means that if an ancestor travelled extensively across the continent, his song, in following his path, may pass through several language or dialect regions. In such a case it is the "identification markings" of the ancestor contained within the song structure, that remain consistent from group

to group. Other technical features may alter, as each group places its own style on the ritual material (Ellis et al 1975).

As a performance of song can be very potent in the results it calls forth, and these can be used for either good or evil, strict control is maintained within a group as to who may have knowledge of and participate in song performance. A system of exclusion operates whereby the most senior, respected members of the group take the greatest responsibility in performance.

When a performance of song is intended to call forth the ancestral presence and power, only the most senior, respected members of the group who are totemically linked as descendants to the ancestor, may participate in and witness such a performance. Usually this group of performers is of the same sex — there being men's and women's songs in the traditional situation. It is this select group of descendants who alone know and understand the full significance of their ancestor's song.

One of the members of this performance group will own the song. This means that he or she will hold sole performance rights over it (Ellis 1964:20). It is the owner's responsibility to ensure that a performance of the song is always carried out in such a manner as to be pleasing to the ancestor; for it is said that the ancestor likes hearing his song performed and if pleased is more benevolent to his performers. Should a faulty performance occur, the ancestor's wrath may be incurred. As this can be very potent and adversely affect an entire community, great care is taken to avoid mistakes in performance. Should they occur despite the painstaking care of the performers, the offender(s) is punished in order to appease the ancestor. In pre-Christian times it is recorded that this punishment would have entailed instant death for the offender, but nowadays, it is less severe. Nonetheless, an error in performance still remains a very grave offence (Strehlow 1971:349).

If for some reason an owner of a song is unable to carry out his or her duties, he may elect a leader to take his place. However, this leader is still responsible to the owner for all his instructions. Ownership rights are only transferred at time of death, or when the owner becomes too old to carry out the duties annexed to the position. The rights are then transferred to another member of the group whom the owner has usually been training in the performance practice of his song for some time (Ellis 1964:20).

An owner of a song may only hold performance rights over that section of the song which relates to the wanderings of the ancestor within his group's geographic locality. Once the song moves out of this area, it becomes the property of a member of the group into whose territory it has crossed. Performers from one locality may witness performances of continuing sections of their song given by performers

from other localities, but may not themselves participate in, or hold ownership rights over these sections.

A performance of song can be presented at several levels. It can be performed to call forth the ancestor's presence and power, or it may be performed publicly for example around the campfire at night. In this latter type of performance, a contracted form of the song is generally presented, omitting the secret, powerful sections (Ellis et al 1975). Members of both sexes and all age-groups may witness this type of performance and, at the invitation of the owner or song leader, can participate in its singing. This type of performance is often given principally for the benefit of the children, for whom it serves as a story, telling them about their ancestors and the events that took place in the beginning of time.

The paper will now examine song structure to show how it conveys a message of deep religious significance for the trained listener. One component of Western Desert song structure, namely that concerning the melodic line and intervallic structure, will be further examined to show how significant information is encoded in song.

Western Desert song structure is dependent on the overlay of a number of short repeated patterns. These occur in each of its component parts viz: melody, rhythmically-shaped text and beating-stick accompaniment (Ellis et al 1975; Payne 1974).

For analytical purposes this overlaying structure may be divided into smaller units, which shall be termed verses. Each verse is usually sung several times in succession, with a short pause occurring between each repeat. The resultant structure may be similar to the following illustration: verse 1; pause; verse 1 repeat; pause; verse 1 repeat; pause; verse 2; etc.

As each verse contains one piece of information complete in itself, it is through the singing of successive verses that the story is unfolded (Strehlow 1955). If the story is a long one, there will be many hundreds of verses to be sung before the song in completed. This means that a full ceremonial performance of the song will extend through several successive days and/or nights, and may continue in this manner for weeks, depending on the number of verses to be sung. As mentioned earlier when the song is sung publicly a contracted form of it is usually presented.

During a performance of a song, the same verse may appear at several non-adjacent points in the song. However, its significance in relation to the story being unfolded will change with each of its appearances (Ellis 1969:5; Payne 1974). For example, at one time the verse may refer to a waterhole in a nearby locality, at another to a waterhole in a different locality. For the untrained listener this often

subtle change in meaning can only be gathered from an explanation of the song.

However, just like the performance of a song, an explanation can be given at several levels, ranging from the very sacred, through to the children's story. In obtaining an explanation, it will depend on the age, sex and knowledgeable status of all those present at the giving of the explanation as to which level is revealed to the enquirer (Ellis 1969:5; Payne 1974).

In Western Desert song the melodic line of a verse consists of a series of descents which conclude on a tonic (see Figure 2). The tonic may be defined as the note having both the longest duration in the performance and occurring the most frequently (Ellis 1964:346; Payne 1974).

Analysis by Payne (1974) and Ellis (1964) has shown that this descent is always made via a series of main notes so that the resultant pattern may appear similar to that shown in Figure 3. The example shown in this figure is taken from Payne's (1974) analysis of the Western Desert *Nyi Nyi* Song. Further analysis of this song showed that all the verses analysed (approximately 50) conformed to one or the other of two descent patterns. These are shown in Figure 4.

Within these descent patterns there was a very definite and intricate structure which served to call forth for the trained listener, the presence of the ancestor in the song. This structural pattern was contained in the ornamented melodic line of all the analysed verses of the song. It was known as *inma mayu* by the Pitjantjatjara-speaking people and constituted for them the 'flavour' (≡ *mayu*) or 'melody' (≡ *inma*) identifying the ancestor in the song.

Its presence in the *Nyi Nyi* song, from which the above examples were drawn, caused some trained listeners on hearing the song, to exclaim to the author that they could "touch, reach out, feel and smell the ancestor as though he were there right in front of them" (Payne 1974). It might be concluded therefore that the sounds resultant from the presence of such an "identification mark" in the song, held profound emotional and spiritual significance for the trained listener.

In conclusion it may be stated that both the meaning and structure of traditional song performance holds deep religious significance for the trained listener. The use of the term "trained" implies in this sense that the person has undergone the physical and mental ordeals (for example, in the case of the male: initiation) necessary to prove worthiness and readiness to receive sacred information contained in traditional song. Those of the group who pass these tests and whose continuing behaviour and conduct serve to please the elders of the group, go on to progressively receive more of the sacred information. Ultimately they may themselves become the song owners and religious leaders of their

group: an acquisition which represents the highest attainable goal of traditional life and is only granted in old age (Strehlow 1955). The privileged few who attain this goal usually command a position of deep respect within their group, serving as the spiritual leaders, maintaining and continuing the sacred traditions of their ancestors.

Might it not be questioned then whether the powerful, religiously removed position of these knowledgeable religious leaders and song owners in the traditional situation is not equatable with similar positions held by the religious leaders of the so-called "great" religions of the world; for example with the positions accorded the *gurus* of the Indic traditions? Does not so-called "tribal" religion of this kind, rank equally with these "great" religions and, if so, is indeed the use of the term "tribal" justified — carrying with it, as it does in this sense, the connotation of being other than "great"?

University of Queensland

Footnotes

[1] cf Ellis 1964:5; 1969:19. Strehlow 1955:40; 1971:239ff gives a detailed listing of the extra-musical functions of song.

[2] Information concerning the dreamtime is widely documented in writings on Australian Aboriginal culture.

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FIGURE 1

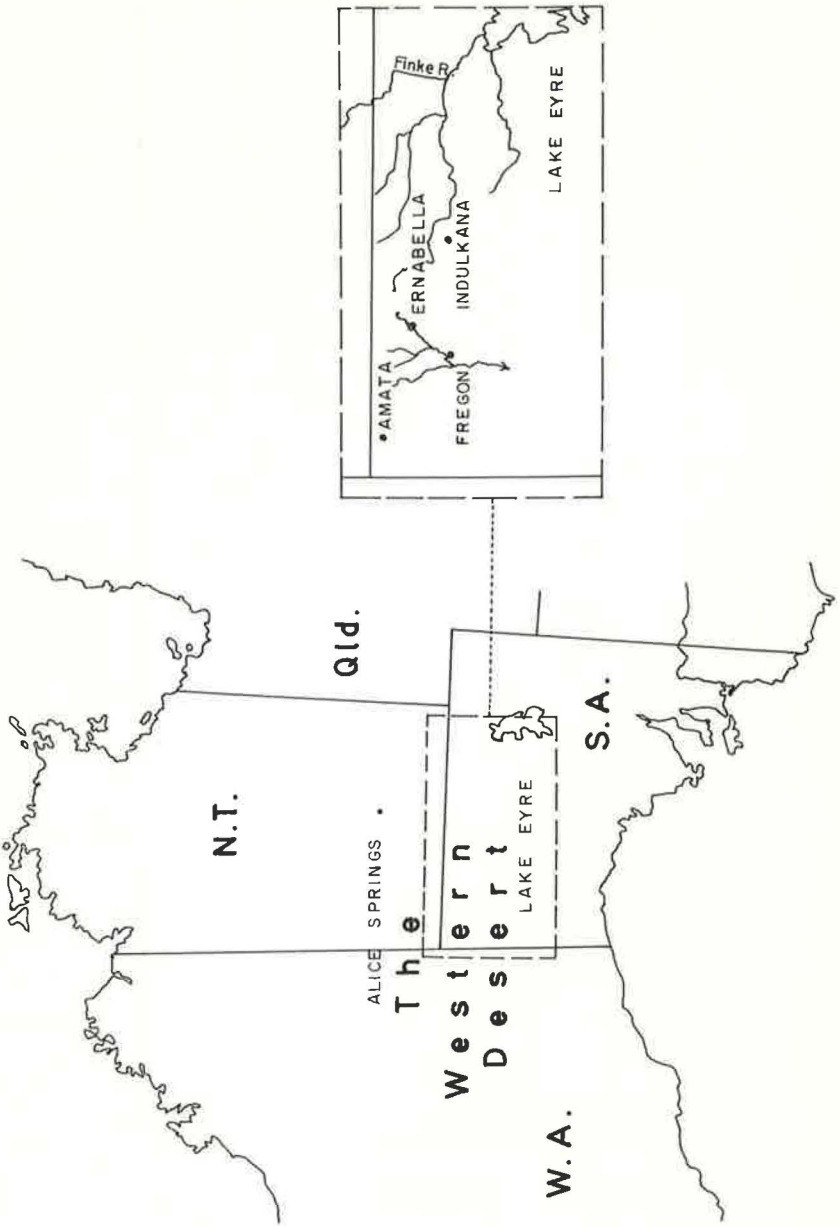
Finke R.
LAKE EYRE
ERNABELLA
INDULKANA
AMATA
FREGON
Qld.
N.T.
S.A.
W.A.
ALICE SPRINGS
The Western Desert
LAKE EYRE

FIGURE 2

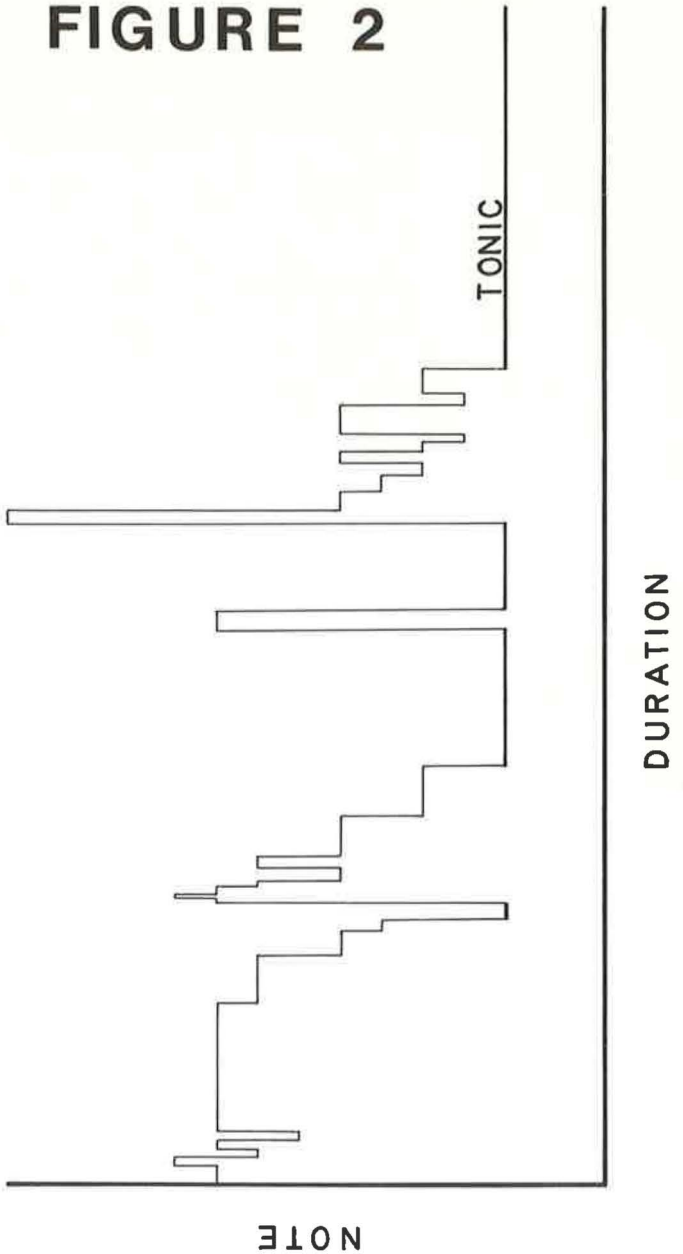

FIGURE 3

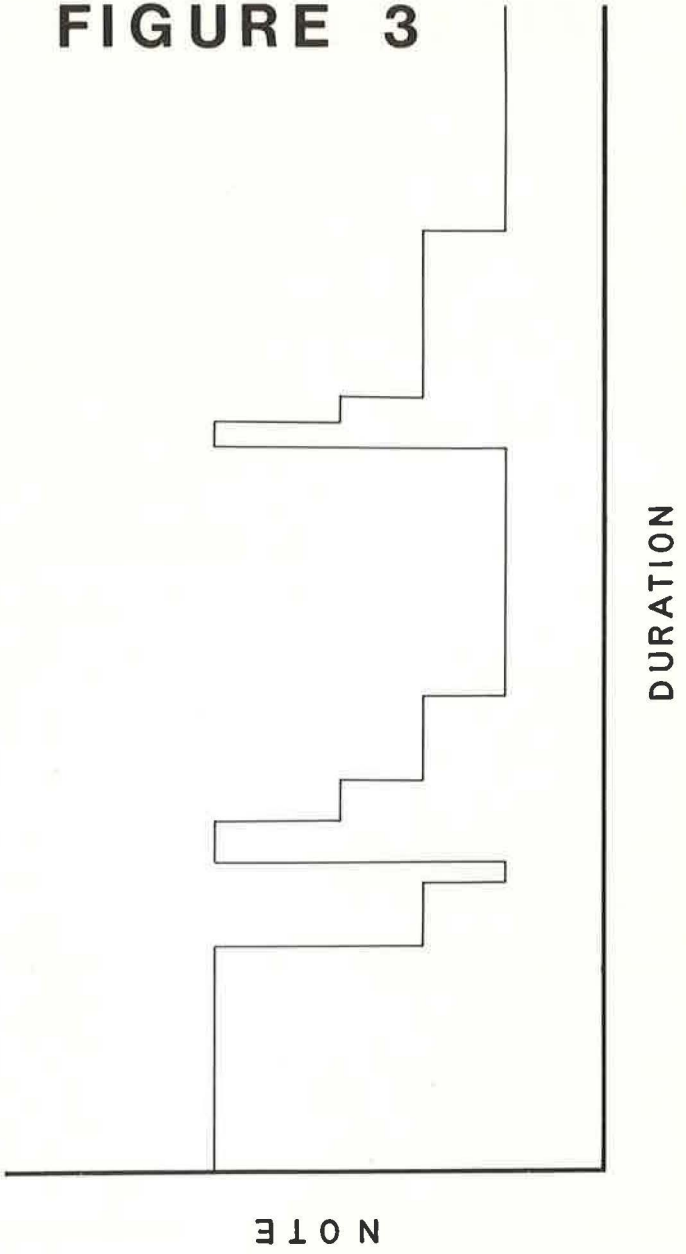

FIGURE 4