About Songspirals

Aboriginal Australian cultures are the oldest living cultures on earth and at the heart of Aboriginal cultures is song. These ancient narratives of landscape have often been described as a means of navigating across vast distances without a map, but they are much, much more than this. Songspirals are sung by Aboriginal people to awaken Country, to make and remake the life-giving connections between people and place. Songspirals are radically different ways of understanding the relationship people can have with the landscape.

For Yolngu people from North East Arnhem Land, women and men play different roles in bringing songlines to life, yet the vast majority of what has been published is about men’s place in songlines. Songspirals is a rare opportunity for outsiders to experience Aboriginal women’s role in crying the songlines in a very authentic and direct form.

Judges’ Report

The promise of this beautiful book is in the title: Songspirals. These spirals unfold as the reader is invited into stories of family, land and culture, and the responsibilities of the Gay’wu group of women. This is storytelling that comes with obligation and by its nature has to be told in spirals, providing a glimpse into a profound way of learning about country, culture and family.

Developing a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture is finally being acknowledged as an important way of saving not only our landscapes but our people. As you read through each spiral you hear the women saying, ‘I will tell you this...now I will tell you this...and now, because you know this important part of the story, you can now know this other story.’
We want you to come with us on our journey, our journey of songspirals. Songspirals are the essence of people in this land, the essence of every clan. We belong to the land and it belongs to us. We sing to the land, sing about the land. We are that land. It sings to us.

Songspirals are often called songlines or song cycles. In this book, we call them songspirals as they spiral out and spiral in, they go up and down, round and round, forever. They are a line within a cycle. They are infinite. They spiral, connecting and remaking. They twist and turn, they move and loop. This is like all our songs. Our songs are not a straight line. They do not move in one direction through time and space. They are a map we follow through Country as they connect to other clans. Everything is connected, layered with beauty. Each time we sing our songspirals we learn more, go deeper, spiral in and spiral out.

We invite you to read this book to find out more about songspirals, and particularly about milkarri. We Yolŋu women from North East Arnhem Land in
northern Australia, we cry the songspirals, we keen the songspirals—this is what we call milkarri. Only women keen milkarri. Milkarri is an ancient song, an ancient poem, a map, a ceremony and a guide, but it is more than all this too. Milkarri is a very powerful thing in Yolŋu life.

When we sing through the tears of milkarri, it comes from deep inside us. We feel the song and let it flow. Milkarri is a chant, a soft tremulous voice deep with emotion, sometimes grief, sometimes joy, pierced with loss and pain, often all of these and more. It is hard to translate the concept of milkarri into English and so we are writing this book to explain it to you.

...
Of the place between sunrise and sunset I sing,
Where the whales swim with open mouths, scooping water, filtering fish;
A pod of whales, flipping and jumping, playing and roaming;
A gathering of many people;
For that I sing towards Rrawulwul, the place where the whales are feeding.
I sing for those people, the ones far away.

We sing of special places, particular places. Nothing is abstract or general. Of the place between sunrise and sunset we sing, of the way of Baway. The way of Baway is a place to the south of Yirrkala, between Groote Eylandt, an island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the mainland. It is a region between sunrise and sunset where there is nothing except the ocean. We talk of all of Arnhem Land, our Country, with care and attention. While Baway is the middle, Miwatj is the head and these are the people of the sunrise, and Yanjara, in the middle of Arnhem Land, is the tail, the
sunrise.

The whales surface and play, circling, breaching. The whale hits the surface of the water with its tail. This is the path for the whale.

As we share with you about the place between sunrise and sunset, where the whales swim with open mouths, we are sharing a version of Wuymirri that Mum did at a funeral, for her grandson who passed away. She was the first Gutharra, because she was the eldest child. She has líya-ŋārra’mirr; this means knowledge inside the head, and Mum had that knowledge.

As Mum was doing milkarri for her grandson, it is he who is singing as he is paddling that journey. It is the paddler singing the song, but the paddler is looking through Mum’s eyes and she is singing. She is the eyes of the paddler; it could be in the past or in the future, but it is also the grandson who has passed away, in spirit, so Mum is guiding him along. It is the perspective of the ancestral being.

We use first person and say, ‘I am now seeing . . . ’ as it is more respectful. It does not impose the story
on another person or assume anything of them. If we used second person, saying, ‘You are seeing a whale’, it would be less respectful, as it is telling someone what to do. To say ‘I am seeing’ invites others who understand and follow Yolŋu Law to sing the journey, to be that person too.

When a woman cries milkarri, everyone stops what they are doing. Milkarri is what is happening. The person listening to that milkarri can put their own father in that boat and visualise their father or sister or anyone who has passed away, paddling that journey. When it comes time for a person to pass away, they themselves will have already travelled that journey many times. They took the journey accompanying loved ones who had passed. Now it is their turn and others will accompany them.

When we sing, we are with them, we are part of it. We don’t usually see our self but we see the land. Perhaps we are beside or underneath, or flying above them, accompanying them. We are in another dimension. The time is now, when we sing. We go to that dimension. It is the milkarri. The milkarri is so
strong, we cry and sob, it takes the body, it transforms. The dead person is there, almost like a hologram, an avatar. It’s that spirit’s journey. We can see it in our mind, yet it is real. That is why people join in, why they cry: they can see it.

... We sing whales swimming with their mouths open, scooping water, filtering fish. We have travelled with them, as them. Now we are part of a pod, flipping and jumping, playing and roaming, feeling the water on our skin. As we play, we know the places. We sing Dhawulwulyun, over there, where the whales or the manta rays are feeding, diving with their mouths open, going down. As we sing, we are connecting, remaking, and when we arrive at a place we sing towards the next place, connecting with it, remaking it. Forever.

The way of Dhawulwuļ, where the whales are feeding, where there is krill, where the clouds sit on the horizon. Rrawulwulyun is in the distance, far away where the people are. There are so many of them. So many people at that place, a group of
people. We sing for those people, thinking of those people. The ones far away, visualising them.

At the same time Rrawulwulun is also an action. The action of the whales when they open their mouths and filter the water to get the fish. The whales are there, flipping, jumping, playing and roaming on their journey. It is the water going into the air from the whale’s spout that makes the cloud, the clouds on the horizon that show the whale’s journey. Sometimes we paint the whale with triangles, the clouds on the horizon.

As we sing, as we cry milkarri, we tell a story. We tell of the contours of the land, the contours of ourselves. Songspirals are a map of Country. We are seeing Country as we fly over it. When we sing or hear milkarri, we fly. We see our self flying through the land, like a bird. We see our soul, sand, land, soil, the grass. The vision of the ground from above, the landscape we travel past; our mind is like Google Maps, we see all through the song.

When we do or hear milkarri, we travel through Country, the song takes us there. We see
everything—the soil, the rocks, the leaves, the sea, bäru (the crocodile) making a nest, lightning, everything. The songspirals tell us where everything is, the best place to get fish, to get a spear, gara. They tell us where not to go and where best to go. They describe where the ganguri (yams) and other root crops are, where you can find fresh water, where you can find the kangaroo, the emu. Sometimes milkarri tells us where special areas are. This is the map they make for us, the map of Yolŋu people. Songspirals describe everything, so that you see it, you know where it is, you could go there and gather it. Songspirals are a route. Songspirals walk through the land. Songspirals tell you which is the shortest route, which is the longest, one place to another. Songspirals weave Country together. Songspirals are our foundation.

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