

"That didjeridu has sent them mad"

Murray Garde with Peter Danaja et Tom Djelkwarrngi Wood

*'Ngabin-nang Balanda birri-buhmeng, minj njale man-dule karrmeninj makka djal dule-yak "no meaning". Mako **konda beh ngad** ngarri-karrme minj bedberre walem-beh, la Balanda ngandi-nang ngadberre wanjh ngandi-ngund-jikang ngadberre bedda. Ngad mako ngarri -karrme mulil ken, djabbi, kun-borrk, daluk mararradj man-dule-ken. Ngadberre mako reykurrrmeninj minj bedberre walem-beh. Balanda but birri-mey mako but bale ka-yime bu kabirri- bengan. Bu kabirri-wernhbekkan man-dule ngarri-wayini kare wanjh kabirri-bengan.'*

Tom Djelkwarrngi Wood speaking in the Kuninjku language

'I've seen non-Aboriginal people blowing, and the way they play there's no tune, no song and no meaning. The didjeridu is ours, from here and it does not belong to Aboriginal people from the south or non-Aboriginal people who have seen us and tried to copy us We use the didjeridu in celebrations such as circumcision ceremonies, for dancing and for love songs. The didjeridu placed itself here for us Non-Aboriginal people have also tried to take hold of the didjeridu but they just don't seem to be able to understand it. Maybe if they listen properly to us singing then they might understand.'

Traditional music is still an important part of everyday cultural expression in Arnhem Land and within Aboriginal communities here it remains a popular and widely accepted art form. Aboriginal visual arts are now firmly accepted as an important part of the multicultural contemporary art scene in Australia , no longer valued only for their ethnographic significance. The classical music of Arnhem Land awaits similar acceptance. The northern Australian Aboriginal musical instrument known in English as the didjeridu is enjoying world-wide popularity, it has been caught up in the wave of interest in the new musical genre known as 'world music', adopted as a mystical icon by New Age movements, its mastery displayed as a proud badge of identity by Aboriginal men all over Australia. However, wider interest in the didjeridu as it is played in classical Aboriginal musical performance has not yet followed the attention it receives in invented non- traditional and non-Aboriginal contexts. In fact many Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land regard the widespread reinterpretation and cultural appropriation of the didjeridu as simplistic nonsense at best and, at worst, as an exploitative appropriation.

It needs to be recognised that the didjeridu belongs to a specific Aboriginal cultural bloc from the Top End of Australia and, in reality, only marks the cultural identity of these particular peoples. The didjeridu fad has become a monster out of control in the eyes of many of its traditional custodians. Many see a need for

some sort of intervention so that this important piece of material culture remains in the control of its rightful owners.

Emphatically, such statements should not give the impression that Arnhem Land musicians totally reject the popularisation of the didjeridu, particularly in its use throughout Aboriginal Australia. Their real concerns are that the cultural ownership of the instrument should be properly acknowledged and respected, and that new forms of unaccompanied performance that are outside the instrument's traditional cultural mode are not promoted as authentic classical didjeridu music.

You will rarely, if ever, hear classical didjeridu-accompanied songs on Indigenous music shows on radio or television. Apart from the music's intellectual and linguistic inaccessibility for outsiders, traditional Arnhem Land music (at least to the ears of those who ignore it) does not have the 'hip' appeal that is a necessary prerequisite for commercial promotion.

The exception to this is the traditional music tracks on various records by the famous Yirrkala (Arnhem Land) band, Yothu Yindi. In taking Yolngu music to the world, Yothu Yindi has demonstrated that there is indeed great potential interest in classical Aboriginal music and that it can be enjoyed side by side with more modern popular music styles.

Maningrida Arts and Culture is an artists' co-operative based in Maningrida, Arnhem Land . We have been addressing some of these problems by co-ordinating a traditional music recording project [1] that seeks to record professionally and to document the numerous song and music genres in central and western Arnhem Land .



Glen Yankurdda from Mumeka, Arnhem Land , playing the mako. Photo: Murray Garde



Djunkidj Ngindjalakku cuts a hollow young tree for a didgeridu. Photo: Murray Garde

There is a great demand for recordings of classical/traditional music amongst north Australian Aboriginal communities. For some time now, Maningrida Arts and Culture has been meeting this demand through its traditional music recording distribution program and through the organisation's internet site. [2]

To discuss the use of the didgeridu in its original geographical and traditional context need not be considered an exercise in old-fashioned anthropological or ethno-musicological fascination. However, those who are benefiting from the appropriation and exploitation of this instrument may not like a definition of the didgeridu as the cultural property of specific Aboriginal people from the Top End of Australia.

The way Arnhem Land and Top End Aboriginal musicians play the didgeridu contrasts with both non-traditional or quasi-traditional uses of the instrument by Aboriginal people outside of the Top End, and with its use by non-Aboriginal musicians in contemporary popular music, world music and what might be described as 'New Age' contexts (we realise that these might not be very discrete categories).

In Arnhem Land, the didgeridu is never used as a solo instrument except in some song genres where it may feature in a brief introduction, before clapsticks and singing commence, and in other short interludes at set places in a song. Although an accomplished didgeridu player may sometimes play solo for the purpose of demonstrating a particular rhythm to someone else, this is never done in classical performance.

There is amazing cultural diversity across Aboriginal Australia, with each of the many language groups having distinct local heritages in visual arts, music, ritual, kinship, material culture and forms of land-ownership. Having suffered the rupture of cultural practices through colonisation, many Aboriginal groups are now rediscovering and reviving aspects of their local heritage with the assistance of museum archives, historical documents and photographic collections rather than simply borrowing the art styles and material cultures of other Aboriginal groups. The revival of rainforest shield-painting in North Queensland is but one good example.

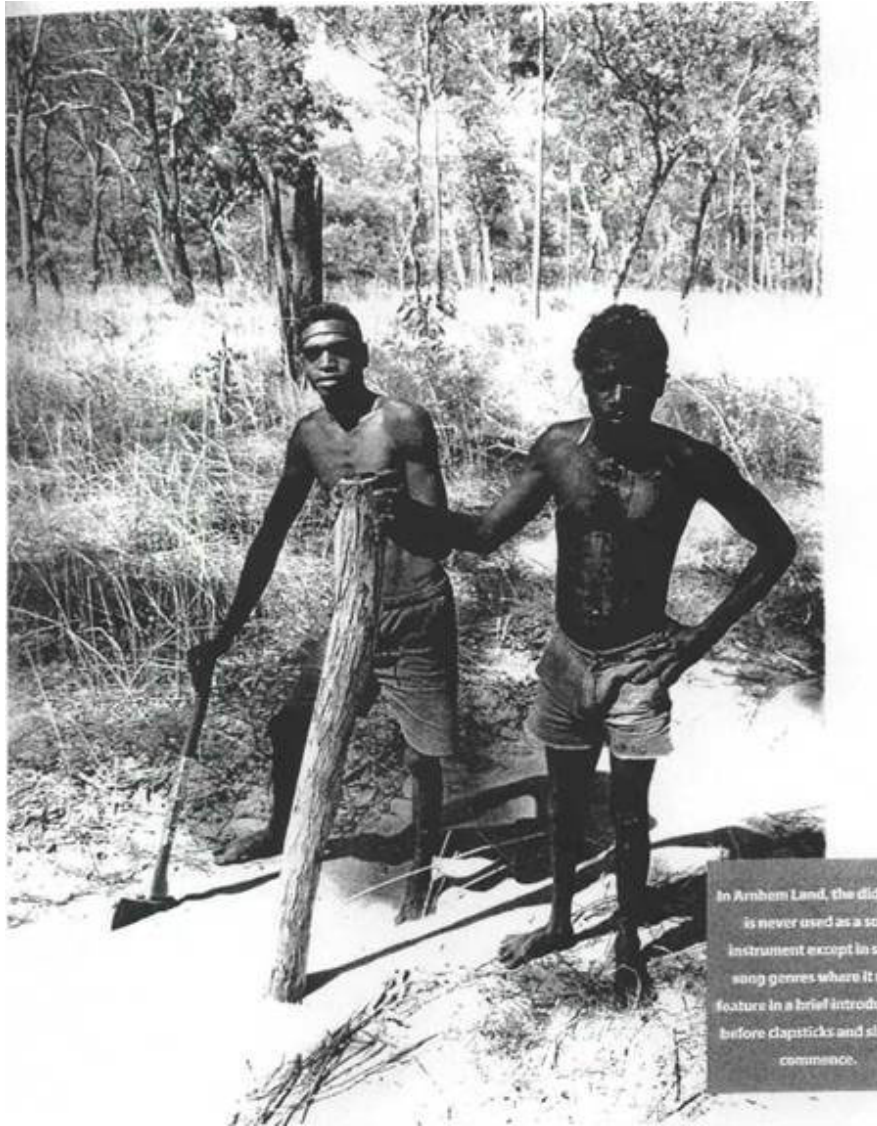
The didjeridu's transformation from its Arnhem Land origins to global icon status has brought misunderstanding and distortion of traditional ideas about the instrument's role as song accompaniment. Aboriginal people in southern parts of Australia who have recently adopted the didjeridu often regard it as part of a pan-Aboriginal material culture and have also adopted some of the distortions promoted in New Age ideology.

In seeking to redress their cultural loss, some Aboriginal people in southern and more settled parts of Australia have turned to the didjeridu as a potent symbol of Aboriginal culture. However, in this appropriation from the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land and surrounding areas, this borrowing has often occurred in a way that has distorted the didjeridu's original cultural and artistic context.

The New Age obsession with the instrument has only added to these misapprehensions. Overall, the didjeridu's new popularity has served to undermine appreciation of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures in favour of a false concept of a homogenous pan-Aboriginal identity - where the cultural property of unique individual Aboriginal groups is up for grabs by anyone.

The concern among musicians in western and central Arnhem Land is not so much with who should play the didjeridu or how it might be played by outsiders, but rather with the lack of awareness and acknowledgement of the instrument's origins; the lack of equal attention to the masterpieces of traditional song composers and performers; and the lack of appreciation of the brilliant complexity of didjeridu playing in traditional song accompaniment.

In the classical Aboriginal music of Arnhem Land it is the songman (and, in the Gulf region, also songwoman) who earns kudos as the main focus of artistic attention, not the didjeridu player, who is there principally to accompany the singer.



Kennedy Yiddunu and Djungkidj Ngindjalakku with a Eucalyptus terodonta trunk suitable for a didgeridu. Photo: Murray Garde



Rock paintings at Yayminji of didgeridu player and dancers. Painted by Jacky Bun Karniyal. Copyright the artist. Photo: Murray Garde

The new global didjeridu fad, however, has focused on a simplistic extraction of the didjeridu as a decontextualised novelty. This denies traditional Aboriginal songmen and women any recognition of their position, which can be described in UNESCO World Heritage terms as 'bearers of important intangible cultural property'. [3]

In Maningrida, the didjeridu is not used in the most secret and sacred ceremonies still held in this central Arnhem Land region. Rather, it is regarded as a secular instrument used most commonly in songs performed for two main types of public ceremony. These are marrajiri diplomacy or exchange ceremonies, and at funerals and in some mortuary rituals. [4]

For some language groups further north in Arnhem Land, didjeridu-accompanied songs are also performed during significant 'rites of passage' such as circumcision ceremonies. Many community events, too, are celebrated with traditional music, such as at the inauguration of new buildings, college graduation ceremonies and special school functions.

In all these ceremonies the didjeridu accompanies clan-specific song-sets or series, which the didjeridu player must know intimately. Nearly all Aboriginal boys in Maningrida can play the instrument by the time they are twelve or thirteen. Some go on to accompany their songman relatives and, if they show interest and exceptional talent, they are encouraged to develop their skills.

This training requires performance in ceremonies and on other less formal occasions in order to learn the vast repertoires of didjeridu patterns for the various genres of songs. Each song requires a particular breathing pattern to create the distinct rhythm. These breathing and rhythmic patterns make the playing of the didjeridu much more than mere droning without technical or compositional constraints.

The rhythmic effects created by a combination of breathing and technical elements play a set structural role in the performance of the didjeridu part in song. In fact, one of the most important technical elements in classifying didjeridu playing styles in Arnhem Land is the presence or absence of higher-pitched overblown tones or overblown hooting sounds.

These parts and acceptable variations of them must be learned in detail by the didjeridu player in order to accompany the songman correctly. Arnhem Land didjeridu players never just drone away unaccompanied and without rhythmic structure in the manner of outsiders. It would also be unthinkable for there to be more than one didjeridu player at a time during song accompaniment.



Rexie Bamgadja Wood, Mimih Spirits Performing 'Kunborrk' (c. 1994). 100 cm x 40 cm high approx., ochres with PVC fixative on bark. The Mimih spirits are attributed with introducing the mako to the people of north-east Arnhem Land . Copyright the artist.

The new didjeridu mythology

Beliefs have developed about the didjeridu which are not found among its original owners. These ideas emphasise the didjeridu's sacred status and have endowed it with a mystic spirituality never held by its traditional cultures.

An example involves the well-known gender debate about whether women are 'allowed' to play the didjeridu. While women in the Maningrida region do not play the didjeridu this is not because of some strict taboo but simply because didjeridu playing is not viewed as a usual female activity. In parts of the Gulf of Carpentaria, such as near Borroloola, and in some places in the Kimberley region of Top End Western Australia , Aboriginal women do in fact play didjeridu in traditional music and some have been quite famous for it. Despite this, some Aboriginal people in southern parts of Australia now hold to a taboo on women playing the didjeridu for more recently developed spiritual reasons [Barwick 1997: 95], Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land do not share such a view of the didjeridu as a highly sacred and spiritual object - the sounds of which, in New Age mythologies, are even claimed to heal the sick [Neuenfeldt, 1998: 73-102].

Although amused and intrigued by such claims, the Aboriginal contributors to this article dismiss them as nonsense, unheard of in their experience. As to the new non-classical styles of playing the instrument, they remark that this is what is hereabouts commonly known as 'Balanda airplane-noise style'. [5]

The most obvious stylistic feature of the new non-Arnhem Land didjeridu playing is that it is structureless, unaccompanied droning with lots of vocalisation. Most Maningrida Aboriginal people find the Balanda airplane-noise style of playing to be generally boring and lacking skill - although occasionally hysterically funny.

People often remark on the glaring absence of singing in most of it, especially that of the New Age 'ambient' genre.

By describing the way the didjeridu is used in western and central Arnhem Land we are not stating disapproval by Arnhem Land musicians of all other ways of playing. The problem arises when these newly developed styles are promoted as 'the way Aboriginal people play the didjeridu'.

There are many accomplished non-traditional didjeridu players who have developed innovative and complex new ways of playing the didjeridu whilst still recognising that such innovations are not related to traditional modes of playing.

The didjeridu music of Charlie McMahon is a good example. McMahon has said: 'There are some things that no matter how long you stay in the bush, you're never going to get if you haven't been brought up with certain Aboriginal traditions' [Homan, 1997],

Some recording companies and producers have realised that the New Age reinterpretation of Aboriginal culture is commercially advantageous and, in attempting to 'authorise' their recording projects, have used Aboriginal musicians from areas where the didjeridu is not a traditional instrument and who do not play in the classical style. Unsavoury arguments based on issues of race are sometimes used in defence of music recorded in these circumstances when it is subjected to criticism.

Other commercially ambitious didjeridu players or self-styled didjeridu teachers often make claims of having been taught 'by Arnhem Land masters' (such as on teach-yourself-didjeridu instructional videos) or make some other connection to what is considered 'authentic' or 'legitimate' in Aboriginal culture. All the videos teach is the simplistic style of solo *ad lib* droning, which bears no relation to the didjeridu playing used to accompany singing in Arnhem Land music.

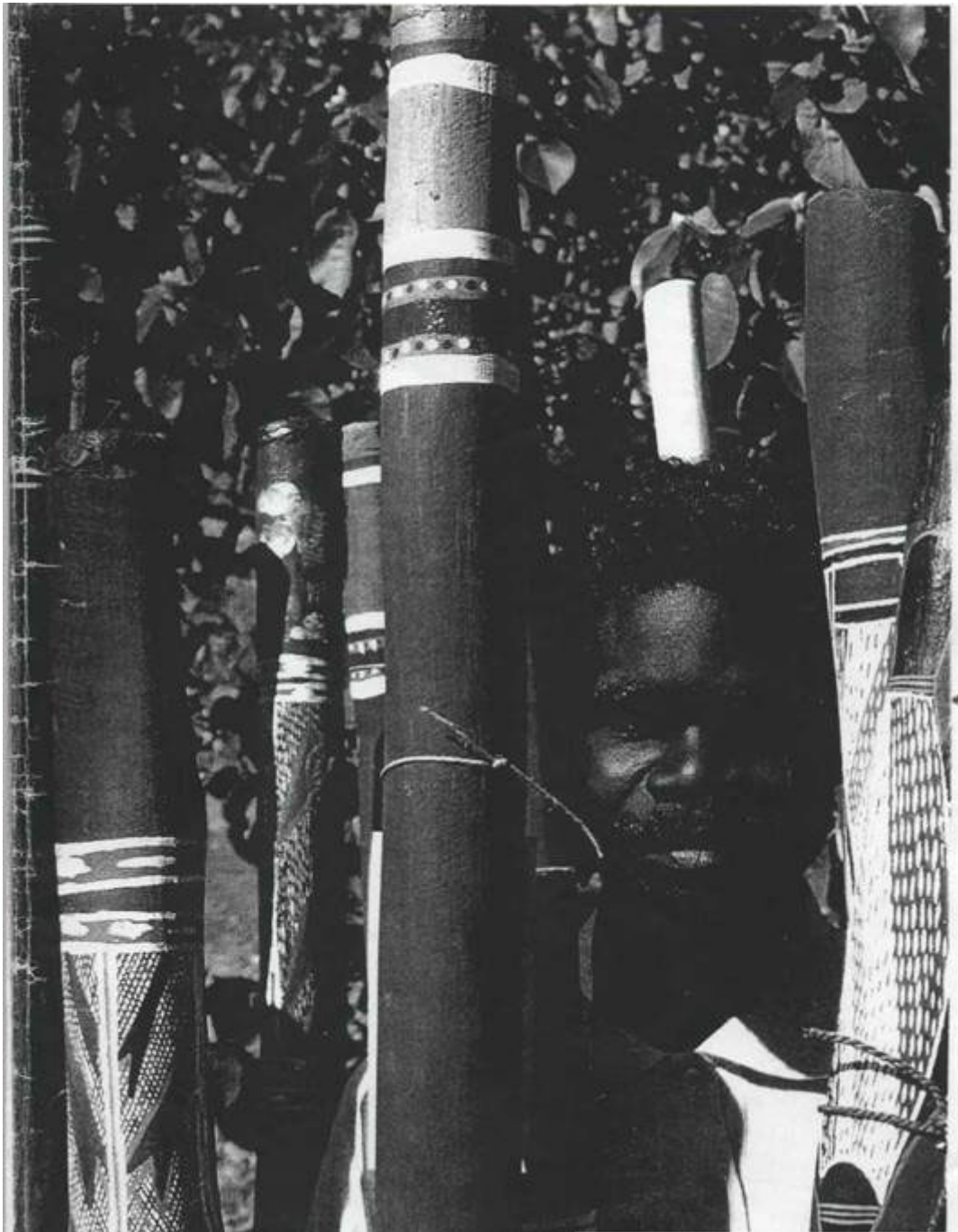
Once again, the view of many Arnhem Land musicians is that the new styles of didjeridu playing are not necessarily bad or wrong in themselves, but that they should not be promoted as, or confused with, traditional didjeridu music.

You can buy a didjeridu in nearly every tourist souvenir shop across Australia . It is our experience that most didjeridus are made by non-Aboriginal people and that an instrument from Arnhem Land or other parts of northern Australia where the didjeridu is traditionally used is difficult to come by in the shops.

The commercialisation and exploitation of the didjeridu is also having a detrimental effect on the environment. Areas of tropical savanna where suitable species of eucalypts can be found are being targeted by factory didjeridu producers with little thought given to the impact or ethics of mass harvesting so many young trees.

In one common harvesting technique, used near Catherine in the Northern Territory , people drive a large semi-trailer loaded with all-terrain four-wheel motorcycles into a tropical savanna habitat. The bikes are unloaded and ridden off to illegally harvest didjeridu trees. The trees are cut down and, if hollow and

of use, they are collected. If not they are simply left to rot. At the end of the day thousands of didjeridu trees are loaded, ready for manufacturing and sale to tourists, backpackers and others who will be deceived into believing they are buying a genuine piece of Aboriginal material culture (if indeed this is what they are intending to purchase).



Josephat Carter, an arts worker at Maningrida Arts and Culture, prepares didjeridus for gallery display. Photo: Murray Garde

Distribution of the didjeridu

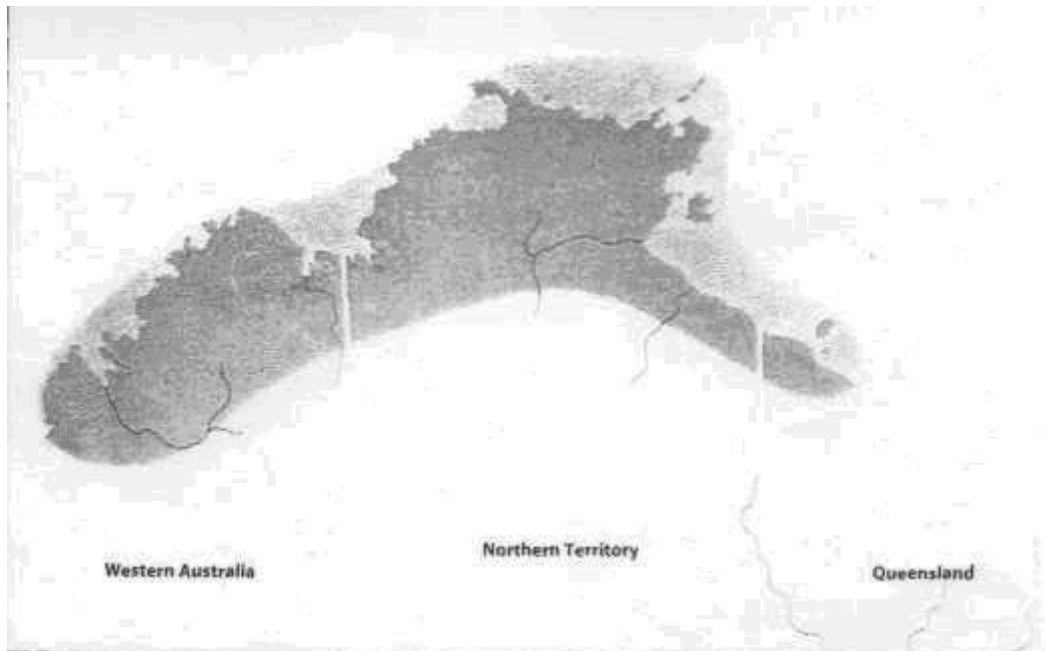
Alice Moyle, one of Australia 's foremost ethnomusicologists, delineated the distribution of the traditional use of the didjeridu to the Top End of the Northern Territory , west into a small part of the Kimberley in Western Australia and east to just beyond the Northern Territory border in the Gulf of Carpentaria region of Queensland [Moyle, 1981:321]. The didjeridu is not used much further south than the Katherine region in the Northern Territory .

Other ethnomusicologists such as Jill Stubington [1979:18] confirm that the origins of the didjeridu are in Arnhem Land, with reports of further diffusion continuing recently as far west as the Nyangumarta people south of Broome in Western Australia. Stubington states that the didjeridu can be found as far east as Doomadgee, just over the Northern Territory border into Queensland, due south of Mornington Island.

The didjeridu was not traditionally used on Cape York, in the Central Desert regions or other southern parts of Australia . Claims to the contrary are usually based on commercial motivations that deny Arnhem Land and other Top End traditional owners of the 'didjeridu any control over their own cultural heritage.

You can best find didjeridus crafted by Aboriginal artisans from Arnhem Land and the Katherine region at Aboriginal co-operative art centres that use traditional materials such as natural ochres and native beeswax in the manufacturing process. A traditional Aboriginal didjeridu artisan will check for hollowness of a tree without killing it and they harvest only a very small number of trees on any one occasion.

Purchasing a didjeridu from an Arnhem Land or Top End Aboriginal arts co-operative means that the money will be returned to Top End Aboriginal artists, who are the cultural property owners of the didjeridu. This will ultimately assist in cultural maintenance and employment of Aboriginal people. Genuinely knowledgeable retailers of didjeridus can point out the markers of an authentic Arnhem Land instrument, especially in regard to painted designs and the beeswax on the mouthpiece. Arnhem Land artisans use native beeswax called cerumen (by entomologists) collected from the hives of the native stingless bee of the *Trigona* species.



Distribution of the didgeridu in Australia [adapted from Moyle 1981: 321].

The authors

Murray Garde is cultural research officer at Maningrida Arts and Culture, an Aboriginal arts and cultural co-operative based in Maningrida, central-north Arnhem Land, Peter Danaja and Tom Djelkwarrngi Wood are Aboriginal heritage officers at Maningrida Arts and Culture and assist in the management of Djida Arts and Culture. Thanks to Chips Mackinolty for his assistance in the genesis of this article.

Notes

- [1] *This project has been financially supported by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIA TSIS].*
- [2] *www.bu.aust.~maningrida/welcome.html*
- [3] *We would go as far as to propose some traditional Aboriginal songmen and women as custodians of cultural property which falls within the definition of such property used as criteria for the inclusion of cultural property in the World Heritage List, ie that which is 'directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance' (extract from the UNE5C0 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage). This means that New Age didjeridu fadism and other unethical cultural appropriation of the didjeridu threatens the living treasure status and World Heritage values of traditional Aboriginal performing artists.*
- [4] *Diplomacy and exchange rituals of Arnhem Land are often known by the Yolngu word Rom - meaning Law- especially in anthropological works.*
- [5] *Balanda is the northern Arnhem Land term for 'European/white person' - evidence of pre-colonial interaction with Macassan fishermen and traders, to whom the word meant 'Hollander '. Balanda is still the Indonesian term for Europeans.*

Naming rights

The acclaimed north-east Arnhem Land rock band Yothu Yindi have contributed much to the popularisation of the didjeridu outside Arnhem Land . Many north-east Arnhem Land language call the didjeridu 'yirdaki', a name that has become quite world known further afield. In Arnhem Land and in other parts of northern Australia where the didjeridu is used, however, each language has a different name for the instrument.

Maningrida, a coastal Aboriginal community in north-center Arnhem Land , is a highly multilingual community with some either languages indigenous to the region. All of these language group have their own musical genres and song

series in which different kinds of didgeridus are used as instruments of accompaniment. The linguistic diversity of the area is reflected in the various names used for the didgeridu. The following list shows the names for the instrument in the various Maningrida region languages:

Kunwinjku, Kune, Kuninjku - mako (pronounced 'margo')

Rembarrnga - liddung, djalubbu

Burarra, Gun-nartpa - ngorla

Dangbon, Dalabon - morlo

Djinang, Wurlaki - wuyimbarl

Ndjebbana (the language of the Kunib'dji people) - ngalidjbinja

Nakkara - ngunebobanja

Gurrgoni - mudburuja

Gundjeihmi (and also Kune) – morle

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