

FEELING, MOTION AND ATTENTION IN THE DISPLAY OF EMOTIONS IN  
YOLNGU LAW, SONG AND DANCE PERFORMANCE.

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The dance is not sacrificed to what it represents. The spectator grasps its movements and figures as obedient to another logic, which may be inspired by the music but belongs no more to the music than to the narrative subject (Dufrenne 1973:76).

In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces ... "Not to render the visible, but to render visible" (Deleuze:2003:56).

This article aims at elaborating some interpretations of ceremonial dance performed by Yolngu people of Northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia and bringing to the fore affect, emotions and attention as the main principles of Yolngu cosmogony, cosmology and epistemology that, with notable exceptions (Magowan 2007; Deger 2006; De Donatis 2010) have been neglected in the anthropological literature<sup>1</sup>.

Affect as a modality of knowledge through which an agent encounters and relates to another agent, both animate and inanimate, is central in many contexts of Yolngu life: in kinship relationships that are established and continuously negotiated in everyday life around the residential group's fireashes (*ganu'* or *lirrawi*, Tamisari 2006:29; Myers 1986:103ff), in the consubstantial connection between a person and a place, in the urges that motivate ancestral cosmogonic actions, and in particular, in the re-actualisation of these actions through the performance of songs, dances and paintings.

In what follows I will consider the affective dimensions that emerge from the song narratives I gathered while working on the transcriptions of a song cycle, and, turning my attention to the ways in which dance brings to the fore affect in encountering others, both

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the authors who have dedicated attention to affect and emotion in Australian Indigenous everyday life and ritual are; Myers 1979 and 1986; von Sturmer 1987; Rose 2000; Biddle 1997; Samson 2002; Bradley 2010).

human and non human, I argue that the Law (*rom*) must be felt in order to be respected and applied. In dance performance, the centrality of affect is also encapsulated in the complex Yolngu notion of “*ma:rr*”, a feeling that encompasses knowledge and experience, intellect and perception, the dead and the living, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the everyday and the numinous, the self and the other. As I argued elsewhere (Tamisari 2005:182), if we focus on the meaning of movements we miss, not only the dance and its expression of anger, compassion, belonging and love for kin and country but also the inventiveness and creativity brought to bear in regenerating the social. If, as Yolngu say, there is no Law without participation in ritual performance it is necessary to explore the nature of this participation. From this perspective I propose that, while the song texts suggestively evoke perceptions and emotions in the process of knowing everything in the environment, it is the dance that generates a surplus of meaning by which the expressed overflows the represented. Dance, I argue, is a modality by which performer and spectator enter into a reciprocal commerce, a mutual resonance, both with the supernatural world and each other, where they affect and are affected, a dimension that “can be analysed insofar as it escapes analysis” (Dufrenne 1973:329). While, as in the case of the work of art, the expression of a ritual performance is usually grasped in a single act and in its totality (ibid. 26), “analysis can seek the elements which ...are particularly expressive” (ibid.327) in themselves or which constitute a setting to expression. Building on von Sturmer’s (1987:71) insightful observations on the power of songs and dances, I suggest that while the song invokes and summons the ancestral being’s power, the dance not only “demonstrates its presence” but, through the enacting of specific emotions, brings both performers and spectators to an uplifting and up-lifted mode of attention. Without using the term expression, von Sturmer (ibid.:74) concludes by pointing out that we should thus start investigating how the techniques and content of songs and dances “come together for the creation of ... [an] intense meaning, overflowing with conviction”.

In Yolngu ceremonies (*bunggul*) how emotions are evoked in the songs and displayed in gendered-specific ways in the dances. Together these performative modes constitute two crucial elements that make ritual “work”. The term “work” I use is apposite as Yolngu language does not only refer to singing and dancing as work in the expressions “song work” (*manikay djaama*) and “dance work” (*bunggul djaama*), but it also points to the specific physical quality of this work. The term for “song” (*manikay*) indicates the

production of “throat noise” (literally *mani* and *kay* respectively) and the term for “dancing” (*bunnngul*) refers to the movement of the “knees” (*bun* derives from *bon* and *bunkumu*).

## THE LAW

The term “Law” in English or *rom* in Yolngu languages is often used to refer to a body of juridical, social and moral rules as well as appropriate practices deriving from the cosmogonic actions performed by ancestral beings in their travels as they criss-crossed the region. As in other parts of Indigenous Australia, in Yolngu cosmology, land has always existed, but it was originally empty, shapeless and nameless. The landscape people inhabit was shaped into its present form by ancestral beings (*wangarr*) who roamed through the sky, above and below and on the surface of the earth, in the depths and shallows of the sea and along the rivers, thus shaping everything into existence in the geographic and climatic environment through processes which fuse corporeal transformation and the act of naming, act and word, event and language. This is not a creation *ex nihilo* but a process of *morphopoiesis*, a generation of forms that are brought to presence, a doing through shaping and movement, a form that manifests itself (Tamisari 1999; 2004). Along their travels, ancestral beings also gave life to humans to whom they assigned specific territories, and taught the correct everyday and ceremonial practices (*rom*). All these rules established by ancestral actions – as well as the re-enactment of these ancestral events in songs, dances and designs – constitute the secret/sacred Law (*rom* or *madayin*) as well as an affirmation and evidence of land ownership that each group must observe, has the right and duty to take care of, manage and transfer to the next generation<sup>2</sup>.

Yolngu people say that the ancestral being have “established the Law” (*rom nhirrpan*, the latter term literally means “to plant” or “to pierce”), a process in which the Law is not only manifested in visible marks (*djalkiri*), but also a frame in which each person, group and object acquires a specific position and role, purpose, use and function within the intricate network of socio-political relationships. *Djalkiri* or *luku*, literally ‘foot’, and by extension, ‘footprint’ and ‘step’, – also translated in English by “foundation of Law and Culture” – refers to all visible marks left by the ancestral beings, such as named

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<sup>2</sup> Yolngu society is divided in two patrimoieties (*dhuwa* and *yirritja*) comprising several patrilineal groups who own well defined territories and share the same language.

places and landscape features (*wa:nga*), kinship relationships among groups derived from their positioning across the land (*gurrutu*), language as narratives which recount the actions and journeys of ancestral beings (*dha:wu*), and personal (*ya:ku*) and bone names (*bundurr and likan*)<sup>3</sup>. In addition, *djalkiri* also refers to the correct manner of doing things: hunting and gathering techniques, processing of food, the making and use of tools, marriage rules, and the performance of paintings (*dhulang*), songs and dances (*manikay* and *bunggul* respectively; Marika-Muninguritj 1991). Yolngu people thus talk of “kinship law” (*gurrutu rom*), “song law” (*manikay rom*), “dance/ceremony law” (*bunggul rom*), “death law” (*mokuy rom*), “circumcision law” (*dhapi rom*). They also talk, for example, of “the law of the seagull” (*djararak rom*) indicating how seagull deposits its eggs, and how these must be gathered (“the seagull’s eggs gathering law”, *djararak mapu maram rom*), and, in general, how each place shaped by an ancestral being and owned by a group must be approached and accessed by people (the law of place, *wa:nga rom*)<sup>4</sup>. The image of ancestral journeys that dominates Yolngu cosmogony implies two types of connections contained in the notion of footprint. On the one hand, each place where an ancestral being stopped along his/her trajectory established a “bodily connection” (Stanner 1979:135), a consubstantiality, or “interanimation” (Basso 1996:55) between

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<sup>3</sup> For these groups names known as “elbow names” (*likan*) and “knee names” (*bundurr*, from *bon*, knee), I propose the collective gloss of “bone names”. As major articulations of the body, elbow and knee names express the sharing of bony substance between people, place and ancestral bodies transformed into landscape features and constitute one of the title deed to their land (Tamisari 2004, Morphy 1991:187-189; Keen 1994:71).

<sup>4</sup> Yolngu people do not stress an opposition between living and non-living things, although these terms are used and this distinction is made, but talk of places, plants, animals and other people in terms of having law (*rommirr*) and non-having Law (*rommirriw*), having or not having a mutual relationship to them as kin through affect as well as in terms sharing essence and identity. The attribution of the qualities of law, mainly recognised through names and naming and articulated by moral and aesthetic criteria, is context-dependent and continuously negotiated according to circumstances. In order to capture the flexibility of this form of classification that cross-cuts other forms of ethno classifications, we suggest that the passage between ‘having’ and ‘not having law’ (*romirr*) would be better understood as an oscillation between the “vital” and the “supervital”. This expression does not set up binary oppositions but it aims to capture how boundaries between humans and non-humans, living and non living things, being inside and outside the social, within and beyond morality, are blurred and yet can be endlessly (re)drawn according to context, a process which stresses the extent to which the relationships among people, places and animals are negotiated. (Tamisari and Bradley 2005:242).

ancestral and human body, land, person and name at egocentric and sociocentric levels. On the other, the definition and singularity of each “foot” (*luku*) or footprint (*djalkiri*) as a unique, unrepeatably interanimation of these elements, can only be considered in relation to other visible marks, footprints and steps (places, names, actions, land-owning groups) that trace the ancestral beings’ temporal and spatial trajectory across the land. Each footprint thus constitutes a phase or stage of a journey that identifies at once the uniqueness and autonomy of each place, “action-feature” (Mundine 2000:100), and group or person yet, it draws a connection among them, it renders them part of the same entity and dependent from each other<sup>5</sup>. The image of the journey is here better rendered as a “site-path flux” (Munn 1973:137), or a rhythmic cadence marking pauses and movement, that, in connecting everything along its trajectory, unifies yet differentiates each group’s ownership of and responsibility for the land and associated sacra. As Yolngu people often state, each group’s land, language, names, songs, dances and paintings are connected and similar as they refer to the actions performed by a single ancestral being along its journey. However, they are also distinct and different as each place is characterised by unique actions, names and events. In other words, ancestral journeying establishes an open-ended network of relationships among groups and territories that can be navigated in everyday and ritual contexts, bringing to the fore, and privileging some connections over others according to the needs and demands of specific socio-political circumstances. It is in the execution of songs, dances and paintings that each group and individual can stress their unity or plurality, their closeness or distance, magnifying or eliminating differences in melody, language, song texts, dance movements and choreographies. Referring to these differences within the unitary frame of an ancestral journey, Yolngu people often said to me: “we are together”, “on the same line” (*dha:mapanmirr*), “we share” (*da:manarr*) the same songs, dances and sacred objects, however “we are different”, we are “separate” (*ga:na ga:na*). All groups whose territories are placed along the same ancestral journey, or “string”, are “the same but different”, literally “one and many” (*wangany ga dharrwa*), “together but alone” (*rrambangi ga ga:na*), “close but far apart” (*galki ga barrkuwatj*, (cf. Keen 1994:44ff; Rudder 1993:30-31). In addition to the distribution, connection and the negotiation to land ownership among groups, the image of the footprint brings to the fore another crucial aspect of Yolngu Law. As I argued elsewhere (Tamisari 1998), *djalkiri* stresses that the efficacy of each ancestral and human

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<sup>5</sup> Djon Mundine (2000:100) uses “action-feature” to refer to the visual embodiment of ancestral events in Yolngu bark painting.

manifestations resides in its “visibility”: a becoming world and form that can be known only by being seen, heard, smelled, touched, experienced and lived. Visibility must thus be intended in terms of perception and affect, a modality of knowledge that goes beyond the ‘prosaic’ or ‘profane’ sense of vision and speaks of one’s bodily participation in the world<sup>6</sup>. Following Merleau-Ponty, I suggest that visibility is a-being-there, the intertwining of body and world, a complex reciprocal experiential relationship, a sensual participation of people with the sentient ancestral bodies who are in and on the land, and with everything else in the environment. Each place constituting Yolngu sentient country can thus be best described as an “event” or a “happening” that requires participation and activation both through being there and through performance in order to be known, understood and reproduced. As Casey (1996:26-27, original emphasis) succinctly puts it:

... a place is something for which we continually have to discover or invent new forms of understanding, new concepts in the literal way of “grasping-together”. A place is more an *event* than a *thing* to be assimilated to known categories. ... Rather than being a definite sort of thing – for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social – a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only *are* but they *happen*. (And it is because they happen that they lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or a story).

From this perspective, the song texts and structure do not simply retrace ancestral journeys that connect groups and territories along their trajectories, nor do dance movements merely represent ancestral actions in and on the land. In addition to the interplay of the senses clearly expressed in Yolngu languages, kinesthesia, or “movement itself as a way of knowing” or “dimension of movement knowledge” (Sklar 2000:70) is central to Yolngu Law and ritual<sup>7</sup>. It is in the song texts and especially the execution of the dances and choreographies that the interanimation of people with place is most powerfully evoked, presenced and lived-in.

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<sup>6</sup> I adopt the term of “visibility” that Merleau-Ponty (1964:166) elaborates in referring to paintings: Painting as celebration of visibility “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a ‘muscular sense’ in order to possess the voluminosity of the world”.

<sup>7</sup> The Yolngu terms for the five senses disclose an interplay and present an interesting synaesthesia in the Yolngu verb ‘to experience’. While the terms ‘to see’ (*nha:ma*), ‘to hear’ (*nga:ma*), ‘to smell’ (*nhuman*), ‘to touch’ (*ngayathama*) and ‘to taste’ (*dha:kay - ngamngamdhun* literally, *dha:-kay*, ‘mouth-noise’, *ngamngamdhun*, ‘hear’) suggest they are etymologically related, more significantly, ‘to experience’ is rendered with an expression which links taste with hearing (*dha:kay nga:ma*, literally ‘to hear a taste’). The term *dha:kay-ngama* can also refer to visceral feelings and is used to describe a woman’s physical symptoms just before and during labour.

Participation in ceremony is an activity that demonstrates people's acknowledgement and respect of the Law. Non-participation is often noted and condemned as not "having any Law" as in the following warning pronounced by the man responsible for the funerary ceremony (*djungaya* ZS of the deceased) to a few people belonging to the deceased's patrilineal group who were not dancing: "What's the matter with those people? Haven't they got any Law?" (*Bayngu bunggul walalang, rommirriw ga ninha*").

## ALONG THE SONG ROUTES

Yolngu songs retrace the trajectory (*dhukarr*) of ancestral beings' journeys and recount their cosmogonic actions belonging to each group. During a funerary ceremony, for instance, the songs retrace a journey transporting the deceased's "bone-soul" (*birrinbir*), the ancestral part of the person, to her "bone land" (*ngaraka*), that is, her patrilineal territory from which she has originated before birth (see Morphy 1984). In what follows, I will summarise the content of a song owned by a Djambarrpuynu group of the dhuwa moiety performed on the occasion of a funeral and transcribed in full. The song traces a journey along the Flinders Peninsula coast by describing ancestral beings' sequential meetings and interactions. The summary of the ancestral events described in the song texts aims at bringing to the fore the feelings that motivate ancestral beings' actions, and then, how these feelings mark specific ceremonial phases determining their efficacy. The precision of the trajectory retraced in the song text is ensured by the repetition of place names where each event happened<sup>8</sup>.

Yolngu songs are constituted by short music and text units from one to three minutes in length interrupted by a short pause. According to context, every unit can be repeated several times, elaborating some of the elements and details of the ancestral action described. The duration of a song retracing an ancestral journey from the beginning to the end, can vary from forty to sixty minutes on average, depending on a series of circumstantial factors: the coordination with other ancestral paths retraced in the songs of other groups participating in the ceremony, the requirements of some ceremonial phases which may require to advance faster or slowly along the journey,

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<sup>8</sup> Yolngu toponyms refers directly to specific bodily transformation (metamorphosis, imprinting and externalisation) that have shaped specific landscape features (Tamisari 1998; 2004).

and the need to highlight and elaborate the details of a specific ancestral action rather than others. Yolngu musicians and people distinguish two forms of song: a main or “big” song (*yindi* or *ringgitj*, literally body) and a “small” one (*wana*, literally arm). The former is accompanied by a “big” (*yindi*) or “dangerous” (*madakarritj*) dance, while the latter is performed for a “small” (*nyumukuniny*) and “compassionate” (*gurrupurungu*) dance. The italics in the numbered song unit summaries below serve to highlight all the terms, verbs and expressions referring to feelings and sense perception that characterise each ancestral event. The summary of each song unit is followed by a brief comment on the onomatopoeic and kinesiopoeic features of sound, language, and the corresponding dance movements. I use the term ‘kinesiopoeic’ to refer to all nouns, names and expressions that evoke the type of movement, rather than sound, associated with the thing or action designated (Tamisari 2002:96-98).

Given the general secret/sacred nature of the different types of Yolngu names, the association they evoke, the power they summon, the authority they confer and the emotive response they might arouse when they are pronounced, throughout this paper I will omit them by inserting the generic terms, the initials followed by an asterisk (\*) or, whenever necessary, by glossing them in English. The ancestral actors interacting in the songs are capitalised.

### **The Djambarrpuyngu song along the coast of Flinders Peninsula, dhuwa moiety.**

- 1) Clouds (*wukun*, generic, *bulunu* proper name): rising from the east over Ng\*, the land of the Djambarrpuyngu people, a *menacing* cloud *looms* on the horizon and talks to the people who are observing it from the coast. The dark line underneath the cloud is full of rain, wind and arrowroots.

**Music and dance:** Emitting long sounds increasing in intensity and volume, the didgeridoo evokes the slow, *threatening* and inexorable approach of the clouds announcing the monsoon season<sup>9</sup>. The text chanted in this opening song at the start of this journey includes the place names where this event happened, and the proper names of the cloud and arrowroot. Usually there is no public dance accompanying this song.

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<sup>9</sup> Known with the Yolngu term *yidaki*, the didgeridoo – a wind musical instrument made of a branch of eucalyptus that has been naturally emptied by termites – originates from the Arnhem Land region and is associated with ancestral cosmogonic action of a few groups belonging to the yirritja moiety.



- 2) Rain (*waltjan*, generic): rain starts falling *far away* on the small choppy waves and into the sea. Out in the open sea, Rain changes its direction, and, approaching the coast, finally pours inland. Advancing in a compact line, the heavy rain *changes* the colour of the sea surface and brings a *chilly* breeze that makes one *cold*.

**Music and dance:** Rain is perceived through its threatening advance that obscures the light, and the chill it brings to one's skin. However this is a sign that announces the return of the monsoon season when the Polynesian arrowroot and other food resources will grow again. This is a "small" song that is performed mostly by women moving to a fast tempo. The arms are bent in front of the face and the hands, one opposite the other, are repeatedly bent up and down at the fingers to represent the relentless falling of the rain.

- 3) Due to the strong winds and the heavy rain, the seawater starts rising forming big and *violent* waves crowned by white foam. The waves run after and hit each other in the middle of a raging storm breaking off pieces of driftwood that keep on spinning around. The ancestral being Stone (*gunda*, generic) stands *firm*, *impassive and tenacious* against their strength.

**Music and dance:** The violence of the waves is evoked through the execution of the "big" song that accompanies the chanting of the most sacred Yolngu toponyms and groups' names (*likan* and *bundurr*). This song is usually not danced, by either women or men in public contexts. The proper names of the Stone ancestor referring to its determination and bravery in facing and resisting the assault from the waves are chanted at the end of this song unit. Towards the end of the song text the pieces of driftwood are briefly mentioned as they appear in the waves. This ancestral being will be the subject of a later song unit (see number 9 below).

- 4) Calm water (*mutitj* and *wappurar gapu*, generic): Slowly receding, the seawater becomes calm, and the waves start dancing *happily* as they reach the coast (*dhalirr girritjinan* or *bongwangan*). The water is now lying flat at Ba\*, Way\* and Ng\*. The water becomes calm also in the open sea. When the water is calm several molluscs come up to the Stone and *change* its colour.

**Music and dance:** The waves are dancing because they are happy to reach the coast. Here the term for "dancing" is interesting as it compares the little waves to "talking knees" (*bonwangan*). This expression is used to praise the skilful execution of a performer who has finally embodied the knowledge of an ancestral event through dancing

(Tamisari 2000:278). The song form is secondary and is accompanied by a “small” dance mainly performed by women. The fast tempo of the dance expresses the waves’ happiness and the dance presences their bobbing up and down: the hands cupped upwards at waist level are raised and lowered following the fast beat.

- 5) Porpoise (*guykarri*, generic): lapped by water in the open sea, the shiny black skin of the Porpoise emerges to the surface and starts throwing herself on her side, crying her *sadness* and *homesickness* for the homeland she has left behind. She comes up to the water surface and she talks through her “mouth”.

**Music and dance:** The ancestral being Porpoise is crying because she is worrying and homesick (*warrguyun*) for the place she comes from. When she finds herself in the calm waters she carries on but she would like to go back to where she started her journey. The sounds and several onomatopoeic words evoke her throwing movements and her sobbing. In addition a particular use of the drone pipe reproduces the sound of the spurting of water, namely her “talking” from her nostrils. This is a big song whose significance and emotional impact is performed by women who, from a kneeling or standing position, throw themselves onto the ground on both sides for the entire duration of the song to express their distress (*warrguyun*), pain and loss in mourning.

- 6) Seagull (*djarrak*, generic) flies flapping its wings (*burrurun burrurunba*) far away in the open sea. It is looking up at the dark clouds rising over Djambarrpuyngu land over May\*. Its breast wet with rain, its flight as *powerful* as the rain (*ganydjarr waltjanmirr*), it glides over the water while carrying some grass in its beak. Seagull is following Porpoise but arriving too late it only dips its beak into the water. It sings “*Brr, djrrk, djrrk*” and talks; it dives into the water and *gets wet*.

**Music and dance:** This song describing Seagull in flight through the rain can be executed in both the big and small song forms. The impersonal pronoun “it” is used to reflect the fact that, according to context, Seagull can be either male and female. In the small song version, the dance is performed separately by men and women; a piece of wood - held with both hands in front of the hips and moved up and down perpendicular to the ground - represents the beak of the seagull holding the grass to take back to its nest, as well as diving into the water. It is interesting to note that, as it was explained to me, the term “*burrurun burrurunba*” does not reproduce the sound of the seagull’s flapping wings, but evokes the seagull’s powerful linear flight. Here as with other many words used in Yolngu songs it would be more appropriate to talk

about kineseopic nouns and names because these evoke the quality of ancestral movement, either linear, as in this case, or a particular gesture or bodily position. In the big song version, during the most important ceremonial phases, this dance is performed in a choreography (see below) and focuses on the feeding and nurturing role of the Mother Seagull. Usually performed by the members of the deceased's mother group (*ngandipulu*, or *yindi*, literally “big”), the men dancers crouch down, and arm raised, emit the sounds of the baby seagulls in the nest<sup>10</sup>. One dancer evokes mother Seagull's love and care by running back and forth to the nest to feed her babies with her beak and eventually lead them onto their first flight. The baby seagull/dancers stand up and follow mother Seagull around the dance ground. It is said that, at this point, the ancestral route retraced by the song can take alternative courses either towards the land or towards the sea. In this version, the song continues recounting several ancestral beings' interactions along the way leading to the open sea, towards the Wessel Islands.

- 7) Diamond Fish (*milika*’, generic, Diamond Trevally, *Alectis indicata*). The fish jumps *happily* (*girritjirr*) over and across (*budapthun*) the calm sea water. Inside the water it is lying flat on his side next to Stone (see above). He keeps on lying flat in the water and jumping out of the water (*manbilmanbil*, *lurrulurru*, *budapbudap*). The shining Long Tom (*linydjingu* or *marrawa*’, generic) is following Diamond Fish cutting through the current inside the *shimmering*, calm and *clear* water. The Long Tom is a trouble-maker (*marimonuk*).

**Music and dance:** This song has a small song form with a very fast tempo. Despite this, however, the dance re-enacting the fight between the Diamond Fish and Long Tom transforms this song into a “dangerous dance”. A twenty centimetre long twig is held in the right hand and moved up and down on the inside of the left forearm. Both men and women, dancing in two separate groups, represent the fish jumping energetically up over the water. The aggression and rage leading to the fight is represented by a dance choreography performed only by men. Divided into two lines, facing each other, the men dancers swap places jumping and “crossing over” the space between them, as the verb *budapthun*, in fact, indicates. In the refrain Diamond Fish is described as a “jumping” and “swerving fish” (respectively *budap गया* and *mambil गया*) and “he who knocks down”

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<sup>10</sup> The expression *yothu-yindi* (literally “child-big one”, i.e. mother) refers to the M-ZS relationship between groups which articulates the management and negotiation of property rights and duties in land and sacra.

(*daltal guya*). The fight with Long Tom is apparently caused by Long Tom's aggressive character (*marimonuk*).

Today the dance is performed by men with spear throwers, but in the past, men used to throw spears at each other. In turn, one of the dancers playing Long Tom would throw a spear and the other man dancing as Diamond Fish would avoid it by swerving or breaking it with his upper arm. The root of the term *daltal* (i.e. *dal*), in fact means "to knock down" and "to break". This used to be a "dangerous dance" (*madakarritj bunggul*) that sometimes ended in men suffering from minor wounds if the spears were not avoided. Clearly the dance emphasises not only men's skills in hunting and fighting, but the characteristic traits of male identity such as aggression and fearlessness.

- 8) Flatback turtle (*garriwa*, generic): Turtle comes up to the sea surface with the *bulunu* cloud over her back. She *feels* the rain over her back and she dives under against the clear current towards the open sea. She talks to her shadow who is following her, she *cries* and *worries* (*warrguyun*) about where to go. She is carrying a dillybag and she leaves the trace of her trajectory behind her (*wayawu*).

**Music and dance:** This small song form describes all actions of the Flatback Turtle. The drone pipe sounds reproduce her lament expressing her distress; in fact she worries about where she can reach the coast to deposit her eggs. Several kinesiopoeic terms reproduce the wake Turtle leaves on the surface of the sea. Turtle carries a dillybag, an object typical of women's gathering activities. Turtle's shadow represents the presence of the deceased's person; it is for her the women mourn. Performed mainly by women, the dance reproduces the swimming and the wake the turtle leaves behind. Facing down at the level of the hips, the hands are moved up and down while the dancer advances shuffling so to leave a track that reproduce the fin marks the turtle leaves on the ground between the water and their nest. Shuffling becomes good dancing when each forward-moving foot "throw sand (*munatha djalkthun*) over the other and by displacing it a trail of marks is imprinted in the ground (Tamisari 2000:277). By "stamping" or "imprinting" the ground (*dhurrparam*), the dancers contribute to transforming the ceremonial space into the ancestral landscape. It is interesting to note that the term referring to men's different stepping (*baldhurr'yun*) derives from *baldhurr* (footprint) and is used to mean "to leave a mark with the foot" (Tamisari 2000:277).

- 9) Driftwood (*wuduku*, generic): spun around and transported by the calm water, Driftwood passes many places along the coast. Covered in salt, they float

*aimlessly* on the water dancing up and down in the waves. The water hits them and makes them jump (*dawu pudat*). They keep on floating and become *tired and silent* (*da:ngultji*, literally, mouth dark) because they have become waterlogged. Transported by the current, they transform themselves into canoes. Up and down the waves they talk to each other: “Look, another piece of wood/canoe that hits the waves”.

**Music and dance:** Pieces of Driftwood are floating on the waves at many places along the coast, and as canoes they talk to each other about the places they have left behind and the places ahead, but without ever stopping. As in other cases, each time a place name is mentioned by an ancestral being along her journey, it usually becomes her destination. Driftwood’s endless motion, without a destination, aim, or pause, is the central theme of this song. Pushed incessantly by the waves, Driftwood becomes tired, silent and distressed. This is a small song characterised by a very fast tempo, and the dance, performed by both men and women in two separate groups, is “compassionate” (*gurrupurungu*). The onomatopoeic and kinesiopoeic expression *dawu pudat*, in the refrain, well captures the incessant bobbing movement of Driftwood being struck and transported by the waves. The term *dawu* reproduces the sound of the water hitting the pieces of wood, while the term *pudat*, as the song text explains, reproduces “its floating dance on the surface of the calm waters” (*wayngali mutitjkurr*). In the dance, a twig is moved up and down at hip level, horizontal to the ground, just as the pieces of driftwood float on the waves.

10) Sooty Oyster Catcher (*gadaka*, generic) is flying over the sea crying in a loud and *piercing* call. Its voice is so loud that it is carried for a long way. The bird disappears, but through his sobbing, his voice continues by itself until it reaches the clouds. The Oyster Catcher *worries* (*warrguyun*) and *cries* (*ngathi*) for the pieces of driftwood as, pushed relentlessly by the waves, they cannot find a place to stop. The bird’s language is sent towards and becomes the clouds.

**Music and dance:** The Oyster Catcher worries and cries feeling compassion for Driftwood’s predicament. The image of words being contained and thus forming the clouds is a recurrent one in all dhuwa and yirritja songs. In turns, these words/clouds keep on travelling to the end of the song trajectory (see below). This is a “small” song characterised by a tempo that becomes increasingly fast. In two separate groups, men and women dancers reproduce the bird’s flight: bent at the elbow, both arms are moved “as a wing”, in and out on both sides of the body.

- 11) The clouds separate (*wukun malawukthuna* or *manddinan*): Clouds separate and the words transformed into clouds *think* and *worry* about reaching all the places owned by each subgroups composing the Djambarrpuyngu group. The clouds/word gather together on the territory of each subgroup and from each place they separate to return to where they originated and belong.

**Music and dance:** The song text mention all the public names (*likan* and *bundurr*), literally “elbow names” and knee names, of the subgroups which are united in the larger Djambarrpuyngu group entity yet they are different and distinct. The song focuses on the way in which Oyster Catcher is anxious that his words now transformed into clouds can reach all Djambarrpuyngu people, a powerful image to stress the connection and similarity yet the autonomy and difference of all Djambarrpuyngu subgroups. The Djambarrpuyngu language comes from the Oyster Catcher but the names distributed by the ancestral beings are distinct for each subgroup. As the clouds gather and separate, the Djambarrpuyngu language is a single entity but contains different names and words belonging to each subgroup. In Rita Gukulurruwuy’s words, who explained this song text to me:

The Djambarrpuyngu language is one but their words, through this bird, are different (*wangany matha Djambarrpuyngu ga dhiyang walalang dha:ruk ga barrkuwatj*). It was the bird who taught them. Now it is the Yolngu people who talk to each other across the clouds. They are all close (*galki*), they are on one line<sup>11</sup>.

The dance is performed by men and women dancing in separate groups. The Oyster Catcher’s call going up to the clouds is reproduced by the right hand, palm down, moving up and down from the dancer’s mouth to slightly above her head.

As emerges from the narrative of this song, the texts do not simply describe how ancestral beings have shaped everything animate and inanimate, thus making it visible through processes of morphopoiesis in fusing bodily transformations with the act of naming. Nor do songs serve simply to retrace the path (*dhukarr*) that ancestral beings have travelled, thus establishing connections between groups, individuals and land articulating right and duties in land ownership. The onomatopoeic words and sounds and, especially, a several kinesiopoetic terms that evoke and describe the quality of ancestral movement, emphasise a wide range of feelings, sense perceptions and sentiments that

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that the term for “different” means, literally, “far away” or “distant” (*barrkuwatj*). Other terms for different are “one” (*wangany*), and “alone” (*gana*). See above section on “The Law”.

characterise and often motivate their actions: homesickness, compassion, aggression, physical exhaustion, care, love and happiness. Explaining and driving ancestral beings' cosmogonic actions, feeling and emotions express a humanity that allows to "extract further meanings" (Berndt 1987:170).

## **TO FEEL THE LAW**

Compassion, distress, fatigue or joy are often contrasted to feelings of energy, strength, rage or courage. In these songs, for instance, the joy of Diamond Fish who is light-heartedly darting in and out of the waves is counterposed to Long Tom's aggressive nature. The violence and roar of the waves in the storm is placed against the firmness, fearlessness and obstinacy of Stone who resists them. The disorientation and listlessness of Driftwood adrift in the sea is opposed to the energy and determination of Seagull's flight, who challenges the storm in order to take some grass to his/her nest. The stillness of the calm sea water is shattered by the Oyster Catcher's loud call who, deeply moved, cries for Driftwood's endless and aimless wandering. The mourning sadness of Turtle and the homesickness of Porpoise are played out against the thinking clouds-turned-into-words on their way to the territory of each subgroup where they belong. Reproducing similar contrasts, other songs of both moieties, describe, for instance, the rage, the courage but also the impotence and pain of the Shark Ancestor who, fatally wounded to death and drained of blood, wants revenge; cunning Mouse who tells lies and brings Barramundi and Dog to fight each other in a deadly struggle. Many songs also elaborate the malice of seduction, the eagerness and lust of sexual desire (Berndt 1952). In addition, the song texts describe in full detail how the environment is perceived through all the senses: the rain that makes one cold, the sound of the rain on Turtle's carapace, the sea water lapping Purpoise's shiny black skin, the first monsoon rain that obscures the sky and changes the colour of the sea, the shimmering of Diamond Fish through the transparent water, the changing colours of Stone being covered by molluscs, Seagull's nourishing beak, the sound of the waves, and their bright white foam. Other recurrent senses through which the world is perceived in other songs include: the whistling of the wind through the casuarina trees, the taste of turtle blood, the enfolding reddish light of the sunset, the lightness of a butterfly's wings, the flash of lightning, the roaring of thunder, but also the smell of decomposition, and the appearance of festering boils. Songs describe a world that is known through sensory experience and feelings, a way of

knowing that changes the observer and the observed, the subject and the object, the sentient and the sensible, the dancers and the spectator. It implies an epistemology that does not separate cognition and affect, language and body, content and performance, representation and expression (Tamisari 2005:177).

It is significant that in the song texts as well as in everyday language, the verb “to think” (*guyanga*) and “to worry about” (*liya wanddirr*, literally “head run” and also *warrguyun*) are used interchangeably to indicate the indivisibility of feeling and thinking (Wikan 1991:285, 1992:463). Ancestral beings “think” and “worry about” the place they have just left, about the place they will reach and the actions that they will perform along their journeys. In the open sea, Turtle thinks about the place where she will deposit her eggs, and having nominated it in her lament, she arrives there; Seagull cries aloud her apprehension for her babies, and Sooty Oyster Catcher is moved by compassion towards the pieces of Driftwood/Canoes being relentlessly driven by the waves<sup>12</sup>. In another song of the yirritja moiety, the text recounts how Barramundi, swimming downstream, “thinks” of the dam that he will build at the estuary. The “cleverness” of ancestral beings is referred to as “*dalatj*” a term that derives from “*dal*” meaning strong, hard, difficult and “*djambatj*” meaning expert, sharp, smart and crafty. It implies an awareness, intention and sensibility that pre-exists the performing of an action. The cleverness of Ancestral Beings’ is not limited to their knowledge and wisdom, but includes also their desire and determination. The term *djambatj*, for instance is used to refer to the skills of a good hunter, someone who is always successful; someone who is not only able “to see and follow the traces” (*dhinthun wayawu*) of a wounded animal, but possesses qualities such as decisiveness, dexterity, discipline and great determination or drive to catch the animal (Tamisari and Milmilany 2003:7).

### **The notion of *ma:rr*: feeling, desire**

The “Law of the Dance” (*bunggul rom*) and “the Law of the Songs” (*manikay rom*) reside in the act of “holding the Law” (*rom ngayatham*), namely the very act of performance, both in the distribution of rights and duties, in the negotiation of authority through competition and in the way the Law is re-enacted correctly and most importantly

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<sup>12</sup> Women songs called “crying” (*ngathi*) and “tears” (*milkarri*) are the most complex expression of loss, pain and distress (*warrguyun*) in mourning. See Magowan 2007:84ff for a detailed ethnography and interpretation of this practice.



experienced. While what is represented and manifested brings the ancestral events to presence in a unique socio-political synthesis, it is how these representations are performed, and in particular, the feelings they convey and the attention they demand of the performers and participants alike, that gives form and life to that presence. “On the level of presence everything is given but nothing is known” (Dufrenne 1973: 338) and for this reason the meaning of the dance-event cannot limit itself to the body nor to the notion of “embodiment” of ancestral presence despite the immediacy and potency of its appearing. Beyond the symbolism of the gestures, what these mean in themselves, and beyond the limits of the body, a higher meaning is produced.

This is evident in the Yolngu notion of *ma:rr* and in particular in the practice of *wama:rrkanhe* I discussed at some length elsewhere (Tamisari 2000:280ff). The notion of *ma:r* does not only refer to “ancestral power”, but is first and foremost a “feeling of affection”, a “desiring”, “yearning” which refers to people’s innermost feelings of love, care, compassion for their country and relatives (cf. Thomson 1975:5) as well as to concealed desires which are not expressed verbally but are felt and met, silent wishes that, as I was told, “make things happen” (in English).

Equivalent to *ngayangu* (from *ngoy* meaning “inside” and “underneath”), the seat of emotions located in the stomach, *ma:rr* “is the living, pulsating part of man” (ibid:6, n.16).

In the context of performance, this notion, embedded in the expression “*wa-ma:r-kanhe*” (you have *ma:rr*) is pronounced by a spectator in appreciation of an unexpectedly spectacular dance performance through which a dancer “saw” the inner feelings of the spectator (*ma:rr nhama*). As the dancer dared to “see” and affect the innermost feelings of the spectator, the spectator responds to this invasion by proffering a “compliment” (the expression *wama:rrkanhe*) which, in turn, has the capacity of affecting the dancer by challenging his/her well-being. If the dancer does not satisfy the requests for money or objects that go with the compliment, she or he might fall ill or even die. It is clear that here what performance expresses goes beyond representation, presence and the body, and establishes a “secret commerce” or even a “mutual possession” between the performer and the spectator (Dufrenne 1973:56). In Yolngu terms, it is an encounter between the inner feelings (*ma:rr*) of the dancer and of the person who pays the “compliment”. It is important to clarify that what transforms a dance into a spectacular performance which has the power to affect

others – and in turn lays open the performer to be affected by others – is not merely a skilful and technically flawless execution meeting the many aesthetic criteria of Yolngu dancing, such as the rhythm and energy of the stepping, the inclination of the body, and the marks a dancers leaves on the ground. As Dufrenne (1973:478-9, my emphasis) notes for art, aesthetic criteria and overall technique are general qualities, and although they are indispensable, it is how technique is surpassed and put to use in a *singular* way by an artist or performer that “surprises and possesses us”. What I want to argue is that, in Yolngu dancing, it is not a question of excelling in dance technique as such, but is a matter of how technique “serves expression”: how a dancer through technique displays his own interiority (*ma:rr*) and demands total attention. This leads me back to the nature of sense perception and feeling characterising the participation in ritual performance. Both the song texts, as illustrated above, and the representation of specific feelings in dance performance have a poetic function aimed at making “sense as immanent to sound” (Dufrenne 1987, 121; see also Barthes 1985, 271, 259) and “imitat[ing] the object they refer to and conjuring up its presence instead of being merely representational” (Dufrenne 1987, 123). In other words, drawing from Barthes (1985: 271), it is the “voluptuous pleasure of the signifier-sounds” – the “shimmering” (ibid: 259) of language, or the pathic quality of words (Straus 1966:4) together with the kinesthetic aspects of dance that the Law is experienced and particular effects reached in ritual performance. Here the kinesthetic aspects of Yolngu dance and language are not only somatic modes of attention intended as “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 1993:138), but, as Sklar (2000:72 my emphasis) suggests, “[t]o attend in a somatic mode is to apprehend, as *felt experience*, the kinetic dynamics inherent in movements, images and sounds” (see also Potter 2008:449-450). Yolngu dance performance does not simply contain and orchestrate “the ballet, singing and poetry ... and the visual arts of painting, engraving, moulding or building up of objects and ... carvings” (Elkin and C & R Berndt 1950:5), but, most significantly, through the dynamic inherent in movement, images and sound, produces a “surplus of meaning by which the expressed overflows the represented” (Dufrenne 1973:141 and 189-10). “All performances, no doubt, embody ‘statements’ about being-in-the-world; and ritual performances are the most determinative of discourses” (von Sturmer 1987:74). One

of the ways in which this surplus of meaning is produced beyond embodiment and presence is through the expression of feelings in dance performance.

#### THE DISPLAY OF THE SELF: THE DIVISION OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

As the song texts clearly show in Yolngu cosmogonies male ancestors are often described as dangerous, aggressive and fierce, while ancestresses are nurturing, anxious and compassionate. Yolngu dance performances reflect this emotional division of labour in gendered performative ways (Magowan 2007:71).

What is crucial is not the meaning of the movements, which are often so subtle as to be almost imperceptible, nor, I would suggest, the ancestral actions described in the songs, but the tension of the gestures, the contraction of the muscles, the stillness of posture and the intensity of concentration. In dancing immobility is often more expressive than motion, it is a “movement towards” (Dufrenne 1973:280). Immobility demands total attention, and, as a promise of self, it signifies beyond representation and presence:

We could almost say that immobility magnifies this movement by fixing and suspending it ... Similarly, the plastic tableau formed for an instant by a dancer is also the apotheosis of a movement, the summation of a movement which has just unfolded, and the call to another movement which will be pursued until a perfect cadence is achieved. Immobility is an unfolding of meaning ... it is an affirmation of the self, it is a “movement [which] strives towards the other and yet is constitutive of the self” (Dufrenne 1973, 280-281).

These aspects usually render a dance execution particularly powerful both for the dancer and the spectator and, as in the context of funerary rituals, characterise the climaxes of the ceremony determining its success and efficacy. However, it is the nature of this participation that is crucial: the ‘how’ and not the ‘what’ of performance, namely the way in which meaning is “created during the performance, evoked ...in the negotiation between the principal performers and the participants”, and especially when “they share its action and intensity” (Shieffelin 1985:722).

It is this intensity of a dancer rather than her physical skills and technique, that is greatly valued and recognised by all in terms of a reflection and legitimation of the performer’s supremacy in the political arena (von Sturmer 1987:73). It is the expression of women’s care, love, pain and compassion, as in the Porpoise self-injury/dance and of men’s anger, courage and fierceness in mourning, as in the Long Tom fight/dance, that allows the performer to show one’s interiority; and, in reaching

the spectator's inner being takes performance to a different level of intensity. In her detailed ethnography on Yolngu funeral rituals, Magowan (2007:note 2, p.71) uses the expression "performative emotions "to show how Yolngu are affected by performance and how they structure their performances in order to achieve particular effects". Performative emotions are considered as "a key structuring device in ritual since they are very real consequences of emotional transformation and experience for participants". As Magowan rightly points out, however, the ways in which emotions are "channelled in gendered-performative ways ... do not simply describe emotive states of being but [how] feelings are manifest and transformed in their display". It is through the expression of emotions that both men and women can revel into display and, by demanding full attention, render a ritual successful and efficacious.

Note that the division of emotional labour in the ritualisation of emotions is not equivalent to saying that women do not feel anger and men do not feel compassion, care and love for their deceased and living relatives. The self-injury of women involves a desperate rage that is often unleashed against any person who tries to restrain their acts. Similarly, men may often be brought to tears and self-injury at several stages of the ceremony. In addition, it is often the initial suggestive and austere ringing of the clapsticks in the men's big songs which move and makes everybody "worry".

The ritualisation of these emotions offers a field, or a setting, which allows male and female performers to display their selves and through the attention they demand they affect others and take the performance to a different level of up-lifting and up-lifted intensity. In performance, this feeling (*ma:rr*) is a mode of attention and not a mere sentiment as such, it is a form of transformation and constitution of self and other. In Dufrenne's (1973:377) words: "I must make myself conform to what feeling reveals to me and thus match its depth with my own. That is why, through feeling, I myself am put into question".

While anger and grief are no doubt contagious and indeed completely dominate particular phases of funeral ceremonies, they are also contained. Women's self-injury does not lead to self-destruction and male anger does not often – though it does occur – escalate into a fight. Although it is crucial to show one's grief, a sense of loss and love for the deceased and his/her living relatives through the distress displayed in acts of self-injury and in the rage of anger, or alternatively in many other ways people are expected to participate in a mortuary ceremony, the success of a ceremony does not depend on the representation of the emotions staged in this way. In other words, the more intense and charged the

emotions the more successful the dance-event. As “expression clings to what is represented”, the ritualisation of particular emotions, “signifies beyond the represented” (Dufrenne 1973:315). The emotions of grief and anger are means and not ends to expression.

Feeling (*ma:rr*) is the participation, “the secret commerce”, established between ancestral being, performer and spectator through dance and song. It is feeling that establishes an inner communication, a mutual resonance between the depths of the dancer, the ancestral being she is dancing, and the inner being of the spectator. It is in this way that feeling opens the self up, makes one receptive not only to emotions but to knowledge. As far as *ma:rr* changes the quality of one’s attention – a real sub/jection of the self both to ancestral presence and to the other participants with all the sociophysical transformations and consequences this submission implies (Tamisari 2000) – this feeling is intelligent and intellectual, a way of learning, of transferring and negotiating the Law through perception and experience. The learning of the Law is an intellectual process, which must be, nevertheless, literally absorbed through one’s body. It is in this way that “feeling revives this knowledge which in turn renders feeling intelligent” (Dufrenne 1973: 471). In Yolngu terms, we can say that it is feeling (*ma:rr*) which activates knowledge and in turn, knowledge that is grounded in the experience, engagement and commitment of the self through the other, both ancestral and human. Rather than emotion itself, it is affecting the other and being affected – an “interanimation” changing the knower and the known –that should be understood as a particular modality of knowledge generating meaning.

It is clear that the notion of *ma:rr* in performance stresses that feeling, as a mode of attention is at the basis of intersubjectivity, the way in which, however, the other does not exist simply in term of one’s aims or intentions, but also in terms of the transformation of one’s self (Dufrenne 1973:394 fn). It is in art and in ritual that intentionality is not merely being conscious of something, but a being subjected to, not an intention towards but a participation and association with, a “being alongside with”, an “intersubjective mutuality of being” (Stasch 2009:132): an intimacy which strengthens as well as makes one vulnerable (cf. von Sturmer 2001:104; de Monticelli 1998:181-182; Jackson 1998:10).

If it is through feeling and in particular its way of affecting others and being affected that political statements of authority are asserted and legitimated. Knowledgeable men and women have the prerogative of being the conduit for this knowledge and they exercise this by being able to express it through a display of their unique interiority:

knowledge and feeling. The singularity of a dancer's affiliations, real or potential as in the case of a claim to authority, is accompanied by the executions of songs and dances, but can only be matched and fully realised politically and socially by the imposing singularity of one's display of inner self, more than the self, a depth which acquires/projects an extraordinary quality. It is this singularity, the essential individuality of the performer which produces several effects by means of affecting or up-lifting others and be, in turn, affected or up-lifted by others. This singularity does not stop at bringing to life the uniqueness of the knowledge implicit in symbolic representation, that, in funerary ceremonies, is to disclose the social world of the deceased and to reassess the political identities that revolve around him/her. Neither is it limited to embodying cosmogonic events through recomposing their visual, musical and the movement dimensions at ceremonial climaxes. In putting both representation and technique to the service of a higher meaning, the singularity radiating from displays of the self in performance does not merely "render the visible" (Deleuze 2003:56). Beyond presence and the body it is "the logic of sensation" that creates meaning by rendering "invisible forces visible" (Ibid.:58).

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