

Songspirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines

by Gay'wu Group of Women

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Review by Ann McGrath
The Australian National University

It is not very often a book comes along that I cannot stop quoting. Indeed, in writing this review, rather than interpreting the book in an academic style review, I was tempted to simply share appealing excerpts. Though it would be difficult to choose which ones, for there are so many.

Compiled by women about the region we know today as north-eastern Arnhem Land in northern Australia, *Songspirals* is a poetic exploration of Indigenous women's ontologies. The nuances are so subtle and complex that I had mistakenly presumed that the non-Indigenous women of the collective were linguists drawing upon a rich knowledge of Yolngu vocabulary. Rather, they are three geographers. The other five women are Yolngu women generously willing to share their deep wisdom: Laklak Burarrwanga, Djawundil Maymuru and sisters Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs and Banbapuy Ganambarr.

Gay'wu means dilly bag, and the authors see the book as a place to keep important stories and memories, a container of cherished knowledge. In the telling of these stories, the authors are preparing, weaving and making Gay'wu. They compare it to the information represented in a painting and ceremony. The knowledge is familial, intimate, handed down from beloved kin.

This book is divided into five major songspirals or stories. There's Wuymirri the Whale; Wukun, the gathering of the clouds; Guwak, the messenger bird; Wiritj, settling of the serpent; and Gong-gurtha, keeper of the fire. It ends with the wind.

In each section, ancient narratives are told in multisensory flashes of immediacy. In the telling, the stories become immanent in the present time, the everyday that the Gay'wu group currently inhabit. Yet, the concepts and the stories stretch out into a conceptualisation of eternal time, or another time dimension altogether, understandings of which the group is at pains to share with a wider audience through numerous patient expositions.

So what are 'Songspirals'? They explain: 'Songspirals are a university for us. They are a map of understandings' (p. 33) and a 'map of Country. We are seeing Country as we fly over it ... we fly ... like a bird ... The vision of the ground from above, the landscape we travel past; our mind is like Google Maps, we see all through the song' (p. 31). The song itself *takes you* to Country. If you are walking, it will find you the shortest route. It will connect the route with the stars. This is 'a story, a big story' (p. 16).

The Gay'wu open with Wuymirri, the story of whales and a great body of water (p. 16). It is ancestral and biographical, inspired by a much-loved elder who is about to pass away. She sees and experiences these stories, she is a character in them; she knows where her journey will take her and it will involve the ocean and the spirit forces within it. Wuymurri is a big whale story, but it involves a boat journey where the women feature 'as whales and as ourselves' (p. 16).

The process of sharing wisdom is intimate, autobiographical and emotional: 'As we sing, as we cry milkarri, we tell a story. We tell of the contours of the land, the contours of ourselves' (p. 31). They talk of tears that flow because the meanings are so deep; it is reciprocal – the land cries for her people and the people for the land (p. xxii).

This book reveals an encyclopaedic knowledge of a northern environment. As saltwater people, the Yolngu know water – they explain its many descriptors for tides, currents, muddy, clear, deep and shallow water, salt and fresh (p. 17). They are drawn to the Garma concept, the name given to the annual festival at Yirrkala; Garma means the people of the salt water and the fresh water mixing from far and wide. In turn, they use it as a metaphor that stands for two knowledges mixing and mingling (p. 17).

The Gay'wu collective step back from the Western concept of authorship. They explain: 'Country is the keeper of the knowledge we share with you. Country gives the knowledge for this book. It guides us and teaches us. Country has awareness, it is not just a backdrop. It knows and is part of us' (p. xxii). Interestingly, as yet another indication of their holistic ontology, the term Gay'wu stands for the name of the authors and for the book's contents.

To summarise, if you want to learn about Aboriginal ways of loving and honouring their land, Country and kin, paying careful attention to the wise words contained in this book will be an education you won't forget, for it is potentially transformative. The telling is dramatic, lyrical and awe-inspiring. It contains myriad important and sustaining concepts, stories and reflections. In these grim times, it will enable you to have renewed faith in the beauty and offerings of the world.

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