

# Folk Literature: "Song 1" from *The Djanggawul Song Cycle* by Ronald M. Berndt - Australian Aboriginal Song

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## Abstract

Folk literature refers to the traditional stories, songs, proverbs, myths, legends, riddles, and ballads that are passed down orally from one generation to another. It is a collective expression of the values, beliefs, customs, and imagination of a community. Since it is rooted in oral tradition, folk literature often exists in multiple versions, shaped by storytellers and audiences over time.

Folk literature of Australia reflects the diverse cultural traditions, beliefs, and experiences of its people. At its core, it draws heavily from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oral traditions, which are among the oldest continuous storytelling practices in the world, dating back over 60,000 years. These stories, often called the Dreamtime or Dreaming narratives, explain the origins of the land, the creation of animals, plants, rivers, and mountains, as well as moral and social laws for living.

*The Djanggawul Song Cycle* is a significant collection of nearly 188 songs that detail the voyages of three ancestral figures: the sisters, 'Bildjiwuraroiju' and 'Miralaidj' and their brother, 'Djanggawul.'

These songs describe how the existence of their community came into being, the establishment of social order, and the relationship between the land, people, and spiritual forces. "Song 1" from *The Djanggawul Cycle* is not a single work of poem. It is a part of a ritual chant in Yolngu language, recorded and translated by Ronald M. Berndt.

The ancestral beings of this Song Cycle - two sisters and one brother journey towards Arnhem Land from Bralgu. The entire Song Cycle is all about the mythological tradition of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land. The three great ancestral beings came from an island in the east (Bralgu) and traveled across Arnhem Land. They brought fertility to the land, creating plants, animals, and waterholes.

They established law and custom, giving people ceremonies, kinship structures, and sacred knowledge. They named places and left behind sacred objects, songs, and rituals. The entire Song Cycle often deal with birth and fertility, making it both sacred and symbolic of life's generative forces.

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Folk Literature aims to preserve cultural integrity and heritage in addition to teaching moral values. Folk literature usually features common people, animals, supernatural beings, and heroes, making it simple, imaginative, and closely tied to the life of ordinary people.

In short, folk literature is the voice of the people, reflecting their joys, fears, struggles, and wisdom through timeless stories and traditions.

Alongside Indigenous traditions, Australian folk literature also includes tales, ballads, songs, and legends that emerged during the colonial period. Stories of bushrangers, gold miners, convicts, and settlers became part of a unique folk culture, often celebrating resilience, humour, and survival in the harsh landscapes of the Australia.

Together, these oral and written traditions form a rich body of folk literature that preserves the wisdom of Indigenous cultures while also reflecting the struggles, hopes, and identity of colonial and modern Australia.

Australia got its independence on 1 January 1901. Six Australian Colonies were given autonomy and allowed to govern on their own as part of the Commonwealth of Australia. Australia comes under the constitutional monarchy. 'Constitutional' because the Commonwealth of Australia was established with a written constitution, and 'monarchy' because Australia's Head of state was Queen Victoria during that period.

Aboriginal Australians inhabited the continent for about 65,000 years even before the arrival of Dutch explorers in the early 17th century. Dutch people named it 'New Holland.' In 1770, the eastern half of Australia was claimed by Britain. The colonizers settled through penal transportation to the colony of New South Wales from 26 January 1788, this became Australia's National Day. During the 1850s Gold Rush, most of the continent was explored. On 1 January 1901, the six colonies forming the Commonwealth of Australia were federated. Since then Australia maintains a steady democratic liberal political system that functions as a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy, consisting of six states and ten territories.

Aboriginal Australian culture is one of the earliest civilisations on earth. Indigenous Australians have a rich oral culture with authentic spiritual values. They show reverence for their land and have profound faith in their Dreamtime stories. NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee. Its origins can be traced to the emergence of Aboriginal groups in the 1920's which sought to increase awareness in the wider community of the status and treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

The Djanggawul Song Cycle portrays the stories of the Aboriginal ancestral beings and their journeys. It particularly defines the origin, growth cultural practices and significance of Yolngu Clan. It is studied in the context of postcolonial literature. The Yolngu people currently live primarily in the north-east Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory, Australia. This vast area, also known as Miwatj, is the traditional home to the many different Yolngu clans and contains significant cultural history.

The Djanggawul Song Cycle is a collection of 188 songs that details on the beginning of life, creation, and vegetation in the North Eastern territory of Arnhem Land. These songs depict the relationship between

the people, land, and spiritual forces. It depicts three ancestral figures: two sisters - Bildjiwuraroiju is elder, Miralaidj is younger and one brother - Djanggawul who journeyed from Bralgu to the North Eastern territory, Arnhem Land.

The Djanggawul Song Cycle is one of sacred pieces of Aboriginal oral literature. It narrates how the Djanggawul siblings reached Arnhem Land bringing fertility, establishing sacred laws and conducting ceremonies. These songs got transmitted orally through songs, performances and chants during rituals and ceremonies.

The Djanggawul Cycle was translated by the anthropologist, Ronald M. Berndt in his book, *Djanggawul: An Aboriginal Religious Cult of North-Eastern Arnhem Land* (1952), which provides translated songs and interpretations. The Djanggawul Song Cycle is central to the spirituality, cultural memory and identity of the Yolngu Clan.

"Song 1" sets the tone of creation and journey, introducing the sacred mission of the Djanggawul siblings. This song details their journey across the sea. The song is sung in first person by the titular character, Djanggawul. He describes their experience as they paddle wearily throughout the night. Until they witness the "Morning Star" guided by the "Dancing Spirit People" who send them "Rain" as well. These people are nevertheless the very ancestors of these siblings.

Djanggawul thanks his ancestral people for guiding them by showing them their path with the "Morning Star." It is through his narration we get to know his other two sisters who paddle along with him. He describes the rough waves, the splashing of the sea water, the salty taste of the water, the movement of their butt muscles as they put in their effort in moving the canoe across the sea. The women make a reference to their Ngainmara mat, a symbolic womb referring to their power of fertility as the 'Goddesses of Fertility.' These sisters were considered as the source of human life, because it was from the wombs of the two sisters that the first Aboriginal people came. This is represented through their 'Dilly bags' carrying Rangas and Totems (sacred painted artefacts or emblems.)

These Ancestral sisters carried sacred Dilly bags containing rangas and totems as they created the landscape and established the law, connecting the bags to the stories of origin. "Song 2" continues with their journey towards Arnhem Land. They now witness the sea creatures that sail along with their canoe. The Turtle features highly as a totem in Yolngu art. Even the turtle carries its Dilly bag referring to its Uterus/Womb. These Songs are filled with symbolic imagery of fertility and creation. They set out toward Arnhem Land, where they establish sacred traditions. The canoe demonstrates the vehicle of cultural transmission—how laws, fertility, traditions are carried to the land.

'The Mulka Mission' established in 2007 protects and preserves Yolngu cultural history and knowledge in Northeast Arnhem Land which gets passed on to generations. They protect their past, present and the future under the leadership of community members.

However, "Song 1" from the Djanggawul Song Cycle is a part of a ritual chant in Yolngu language, that was recorded and translated by Berndt. The chant emphasizes creation, fertility, and the sacred power of land and women. Because it is Indigenous sacred material, it is not freely available in full text outside the book, due to cultural restrictions.

"Song 1" is a fragment from Berndt's English translation — the actual song is much longer and in Yolngu language. The Djanggawul Song is authentic folk tradition — a sacred oral song performed in

ceremony, not adapted for literature. The Yolngu use song as a living tradition — to pass on spiritual law, history, and identity..Yolngu people live their myth through sacred song.

Folk traditions influence literature, culture, and identity. It shows how folk traditions differ across cultures.

In the 21st century, the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land continue their traditional practices and cultural identity; while also engaging with modern society, focusing on youth development through initiatives like culture camps that promote traditional language, skills, and leadership.

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