



RESOURCE 8 - Miago's Songs - BACKGROUND HISTORY

Miago lived with George Grey for a number of months and shared his knowledge of Noongar culture which Grey has shared in his journals of 'Two Expedition of Discovery, in 1837, 38 & 39'

See below Grey's interpretation on the purposes of songs

'Is a native afraid, he sings himself full of courage; in fact under all circumstances he finds aid and comfort from a song. Their songs are therefore naturally varied in their form; but they are all concise and convey in the simplest manner the most moving ideas: by a song or wild chant composed under the excitement of the moment the women irritate the men to acts of vengeance;

Miago's songs, like many intermediaries working with Explorers, were thought to be improvised, unpracticed and unrehearsed. They were certainly sung for a purpose.

Clint Bracknell, who has researched Miago's story and supported this Songs project to its fruition, believes song is central to the very existence of Noongar culture and communication in everyday life'.

Clint has recently highlighted the gendered nature of Noongar songs. For example, in this era, women's songs had particular functions, which included encouraging their countrymen to fight. Other women's songs expressed maternal instincts of concern for their children who were travelling in foreign country

The background for Miago's songs may have been because he was the first Noongar man from his people to travel so far north on the Beagle, so he was singing for courage. It also seems to have been a normal practice for consent to be given from his community to travel and as guides distanced themselves from communities this caused distress. There seems to have been a community fear in south west of the 'big fellas' of the north as Miago called them - also known as the Waylo.

Stokes records that on the return journey...

'Miago ... was as anxious as any one on board for the sight of his native land. He would stand gazing steadily and in silence over the sea, and then sometimes, perceiving that I watched him, say to me 'Miago sing, by and by northern men wind jump up': then would he station himself for hours at the lee-gangway, and chant to some imaginary deity an incantation or prayer to change the opposing wind'

Grey records Miago's

'It is very rarely that any remarkable circumstance occurs but songs are composed in order to perpetuate the remembrance of it. For example, when Miago, the first native who ever quitted Perth, was taken away in H.M. surveying vessel Beagle in 1838, the following song was composed by a native and was constantly sung by his mother (at least so she says) during his absence, and it has ever since been a great favourite':



NOONGAR SONGS TO LEARN

Let's practice the words NOW

Ship bal win-jal bat-tar-dal gool-an-eeen,
Ship bal win-jal bat-tar-dal gool-an-eeen.
etc. etc. etc. etc.

Listen to their meaning

Whither is that lone ship wandering,
Whither is that lone ship wandering,
etc. etc. etc. etc.

Listen to the recordings to provide rhythm and beat to sing to

Again, on Miago's safe return, the song given below was composed by a native after he had heard Miago recount his adventures:

Kan-de maar-o, kan-de maar-a-lo,
Tsail-o mar-ra, tsail-o mar-ra-lo.
etc. etc. etc. etc.

Unsteadily shifts the wind-o, unsteadily shifts the wind-o,
The sails-o handle, the sails-o handle-ho

To introduce knowledge of Aboriginal rhythm and which instruments were used to accompany the songs that Grey has heard, he writes in his journal again

'The only accompaniment to their songs used in the southern parts of the continent is the clapping of hands or the beating of a short round stick against the flat board with which they throw their spears; in this latter case the rounded stick is held in its centre, between the fingers and thumb of the right hand, and its ends are alternately struck against the flat board in such a manner as to produce a rude kind of music, in time to the air they are singing. Although this appears to be so very simple an instrument it requires some practice to beat the time accurately, and by young men who desire to have the reputation of being exquisites this is considered to be a very necessary accomplishment.'

Referencing:

Grey, George 2006 [c. 1841], *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia, During the Years 1837, 1838 and 39, in Two Volumes*, vol. 1 and vol. 2, The Echo Library, Middlesex.

Shellam, Tiffany 2018, 'Miago & The Great Northern Men: Indigenous Histories from In-between' <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n4260/pdf/ch08.pdf>

Stokes, John Lort 1969 [c. 1846], *Discoveries in Australia; With an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of the Beagle in the Years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*, T. and W. Boone, London (Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia).