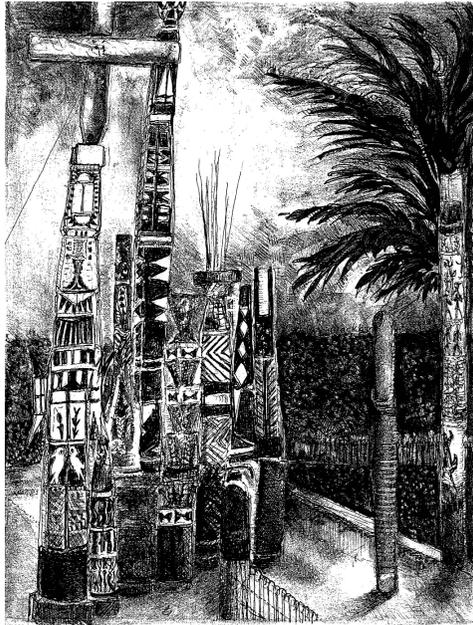
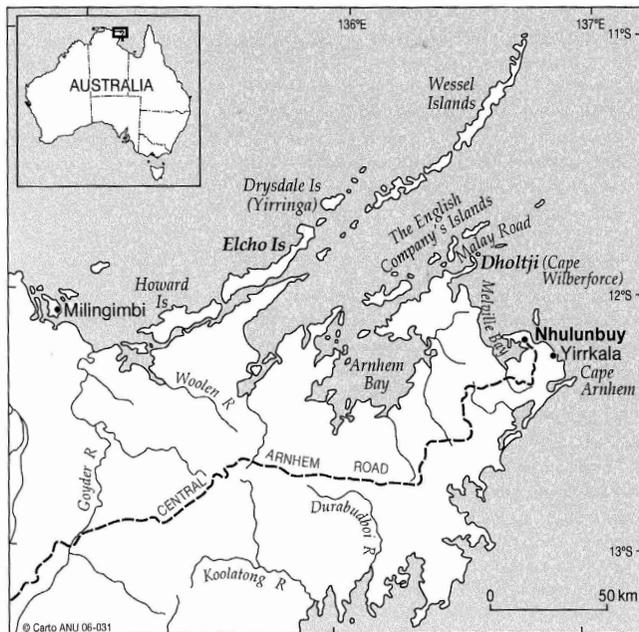


# BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Essays in Honour of the Visionary Aboriginal Elder  
David Burrumarra M.B.E.

Ian S. McIntosh PhD





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Illustrations by Julia Blackburn



## Preface

For over twenty-five years, Dr. Ian McIntosh, an anthropologist born in Australia but now long-based in the United States, has been a meticulous chronicler of the life and writings of David Burrumarra, M.B.E. (1917-1994), long his close friend and colleague. From 1986, they had worked together in the enclave of Elcho Island, in north-east Arnhem Land, in Australia's Northern Territory, on cultural and community projects, as well as on serious and time deep research. Already in the year of Burrumarra's death, McIntosh recounted some of their contacts in a finely wrought and illuminating composition, *The Whale and the Cross: Conversations with David Burrumarra, M.B.E.*, (1994). Since then, he has treated us to a stream of his own ever insightful and eminently readable essays, while also returning to present further perspectives on his friend and the latter's culture that remain both fresh and perceptive, fascinating and significant, despite the passage of the years.

As I have had occasion to comment in the journal *Australian Folklore*, and as Senator Bob Collins had stressed in his Foreword to *The Whale and the Cross*, it is also the case that McIntosh's close and sensitive reporting... "will ensure that the impact of David's life and personality can be better appreciated by the wider Australian audience and that his very considerable achievements... in race relations and the promotion of Aboriginal culture will take their appropriate place."

The 1994 text, excerpts of which appear in this volume, presents the reader with two large and interpretive contextual blocks:

Part I: 'Setting the Scene,' this covering the subject's life to 1945; and

Part II, 'The Man, his World View and Political Philosophies,' – this last including discussion of his sharply recalled mentors, several of them anthropologists and missionaries; and these references are each annotated closely with his own comments on their several roles as leaders, and / or significance in instructing him in matters concerned with mythology, law, Yolngu (Aboriginal) languages, ecology and a multitude of other spheres of recollection and knowledge.

The text also discussed in its engaging and luminous fashion: other significant events, ceremonies, and sacred places in north-east Arnhem Land, the role of leaders, the way to a good life, - as well as his hindsight reflections on eight non-Aborigines impacting on his life, notably regional administrators, teachers and various insightful anthropologists in the field there. All this material makes it clear to us that Burrumarra was, as Senator Collins had stressed

...both a traditional Yolngu and a man trying to bridge the gulf between the worlds of the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal Australian.

What is so striking, even in 1986, - and so on from that time - , is that Burrumarra had retained his rich and complex Arnhem Land inheritance and his distinctive Warramiri clan culture, these alongside his later Christian beliefs. The now proffered text stresses that this retention of personal identity and of his and his people's, heritage was the first great theme of his life, the others, even more controversially, being:

- his attempts to gain proper recognition for Aboriginal rights – and so for their proper place, and dignity, within the wider Australian community; and
- his wish that Aborigines achieve a level of wealth comparable to that of other Australians by taking advantage of the great natural bounty and wealth of both the land and the sea.

One of the fascinating aspects of this early McIntosh tribute volume - as it is of the present reflective collection - is the considerable power of Burrumarra's intellect, and his almost total recall, including: informants telling him when but a child of Macassan (Indonesian) trepangers working the coast; his own life aboard a Japanese pearling boat as a teenager; and of his being taken to the mission station at Milingimbi after the death of his father. The flowing text also offers us deeply significant details of: his work with several styles of Methodist missionaries, his becoming one of the first primary school teachers at Yirrkala, his assistance to the RAAF in wartime, his post as the first Village Council figure. Similarly we have a series of vignettes of his time as Secretary at the Galiwin'ku mission, of his experience as a pearl diver, or even of his total commitment to learning to type, - and these are all remarkable, and, apparently, calmly deemed possible and duly attained, even as he had progressed to more unexpected acts like leading the 'Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land' - this last at Elcho Island.

In 1978, he had, most meritoriously, been awarded an MBE for services to Aboriginal community development, to all forms of education, and to the attaining so successfully of a better and more informed anthropology of his people. Perhaps there was no Yolngu leader of the twentieth century better deserving for his acknowledgement of 'country' (one's familial land), or of ceremony, and ritual, or for encouraging those responsible for maintaining so respectfully their patrilineal inheritance.

Apart from his working closely with a number of well-known Australian anthropologists, Burrumarra was always highly articulate in his accounts of: his father and his older kinsmen (the 'real professors') in their dealings with the Macassans; and, also, with the Japanese in the pre-war period. Enduring relations with trepang fishermen from South Sulawesi, and their people's profound contribution to Yolngu mythology, are particularly well recorded in a segment in the present text's eighth chapter which our attentive field worker nicely entitles 'A Treaty with the Macassans? Burrumarra and the Dholtji Ideal.' The Yirritja moiety (or half) of

Yolngu society, for which Burrumarra was primary spokesperson, places great emphasis on the Dreaming entity Birrinydji, the ‘Murngin’ (Murrnginy) hero of iron, who represents the foundation of all narratives that speak to a wish for a harmonious pattern of relations between Yolngu and outsiders. Birrinydji was central to Burrumarra’s bridge-building philosophy and his search for equality and justice.

As elsewhere in Australia, these sacred narratives of the Dreaming (or ‘Wanggarr’ as it is known in north-east Arnhem Land) have given opportunity for ceremonial storytelling, music, dance, song and art, all of which is recorded meticulously in this text, especially in the two essays describing what McIntosh calls the ‘totemic embrace’. Above all, Burrumarra’s main concern was for the dynamic and proud survival of the Yolngu clans in Arnhem Land, and that along with the assured future for Yolngu Matha, the Aboriginal languages. As he had made clear to his friend on many occasions, the clans feel and enact their ownership of land, the customary ceremony, ritual, and the performance of the traditional, the continued existence of which is integral to their inner being. Poignant indeed is the early account of the dream—seemingly given by supernatural / divine favour to McIntosh — of the great museum in which were ‘all Burrumarra’s sacred possessions’, and the times when Burrumarra remembered this vision and pondered deeply on its significance so many years later.

Another feature of the whole is Burrumarra’s status as a much needed – and energetic – leader and myth-maker. The visionary matter in this text reminds the reader of McIntosh’s earlier thesis, *The Bricoleur at Work: Warrang (Dingo) Mythology in the Yirritja Moiety of North-east Arnhem Land* (1992). McIntosh’s researches, conducted over nearly three decades, have been particularly concerned with Burrumarra as such a *bricoleur*, seeking to adapt his clan’s cultural inheritance, focusing and directing the thoughts of its present and future members in particular ways. In a real sense, of course, McIntosh, like Burrumarra, is such a bricoleur, and I now wish to quote the ‘Abstract’ that he put at the front of his 1992 text –

...the bricoleur... manipulate[s] his or her cultural heritage to suit any situation. In constructing statements of law in myth, the bricoleur helps to focus the thoughts and actions of clan members along specific desired paths... As an object to think with, the Dingo (Warrang) comes into play where there is a need to mediate problems of an inter-group nature... representing the problems, or bringing about their resolution... In the bricoleur’s hands, the dog has been put to work to form alliances between clans... [and] currently it is an element in a treaty proposal designed to being about a reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Clearly the achievements of our bricoleur, Burrumarra, and their intermeshing significance, alike, were only to be fully understood by our non-Aboriginal investigator after several decades of thought, of fieldwork, and then of appropriate action. The spirit of his departed friend is strongly present in these ten luminous

chapters, particularly when writing on the nature of necessary otherness. However, the writer had not come quickly to this convincing synthesis of his materials, but, rather, he was slowly becoming more aware of its aspects, as is indicated by the unfolding pattern of the sections' publication.

Hence there came about the greater level of coherence and significance to the recorder's accounts, in short the understanding of such an assemblage – for this process is the finest sort of myth criticism, offering it as an evolving discipline and an organic and powerful religious experience. Consider, for example, the offerings in Chapter 9 of this text, in particular 'Captain Cook: Nangingburra's Special Rock' in which our writer has a personal encounter with the numinous, or the astonishing 'A Journey to Heaven: Burrumarra's Return to Gulirra,' where the Warramiri leader, near death, bids a final farewell to his spiritual home.

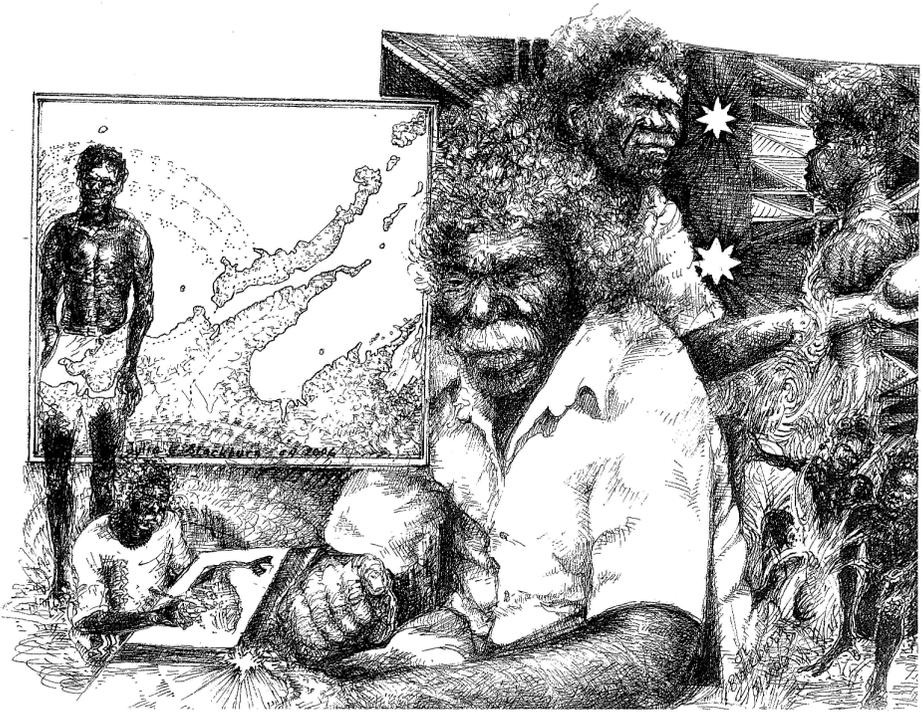
Surely, this new synthesis and ordering – and one building on the early and more formal, and perhaps traditional and distanced anthropological field visits of Lloyd Warner, and of Ronald and Catherine Berndt – has allowed Ian McIntosh to bring together what is a form of *Festschrift*, this one presented to the spirit of the region's fine visionary long after his passing. And it is also to be seen as a magnificent cultural synthesis for all Australians, in particular, of insights, of belated understandings, of the inherited and so to-be-retained, the Christian / mental climate of Elcho Island; a *satura lanx* (or mixed dish) of the traditional, official / governmental, the performing, and so the therapeutic for all who come to the feast.

Arguably, indeed, Burrumarra had spoken for all the south west Pacific, in his appeal for tolerance of racial / social difference, for the recognition of the layers of meaningful heritage, in his distaste for war, and in his global perspectives as to personal responsibility for all forms of conservation.

In my reading of the now assembled text, Ian McIntosh has created the strong bones of a national epic which must appeal far beyond the lands of its formal enunciator and exemplar. It is one of the documents that should be known afar throughout Australia, since it is epic – a great ode for the nation, one from the people and about the people - in the best tradition of such writing and mellow and lifelong scholarship. The whole is both surprisingly fresh, modest, and extraordinarily appropriate.

The culture of the south west Pacific region is in debt to this quiet pair, the original bricoleur, and his reflective younger friend and so sensitive and so long dedicated chronicler.

Prof. John S. Ryan, Editor, *Australian Folklore*, School of Humanities, University of New England.



## CHAPTER 1

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### *Introduction*

The Yolngu (Aboriginal) leader David Burrumarra M.B.E. of Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) was my friend and mentor and from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s we enjoyed the liveliest of conversations. The highlights of these were documented in 1994 in a book-length biographical essay entitled *The Whale and the Cross*, as well as in my doctoral thesis, and in over twenty peer-reviewed academic papers.

A tall stately figure, a diplomat and staunch advocate of Aboriginal rights, Burrumarra had a considerable impact on the way north-east Arnhem Land communities developed in the mid- to late twentieth century. An unforgettable personality, he made himself known to some of the leading politicians of his day, including two Prime Ministers, Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, and two Governor Generals, Bill Hayden and Zelman Cowen.

Of his early days in political life, Burrumarra had many anecdotes. He happily remembered the time in the 1960s when Yolngu clans received the right to vote. An election was coming up and visitors to Elcho Island were encouraging people to vote for the Country Party. Burrumarra was very excited about this but wondered what country they were talking about. He said:

The land is for Yolngu. We are the real Country Party. Only we can speak for the land. They must be talking about us!

Burrumarra was often cryptic in his pronouncements. Friends and family alike would often accuse him of speaking 'back-to-front' or in riddles; tropes of all varieties. This style of talking and teaching defined and was cherished by his Warramiri clan. Even today, some new insight or revelation accompanies every reread of my field notes, which are like a treasure trove of profound and mystical utterances.

Burrumarra's preference, always, was to ask rather than answer and, like most others of his generation, there was a real yearning for new knowledge and fresh interpretations of old truths. When considering the words and deeds of his predecessors in response to a question from me, for example, Burrumarra would sometimes hang his head low, seeking guidance from the land itself. "Perhaps that is what the old people meant," he would whisper. "Perhaps that is what they were trying to tell me." Occasionally no more would be said.

I recall a speech that he gave at the local church at Elcho Island in the late 1980s. He had not made any public speeches for some time owing to ill health. When the Yolngu Minister asked if anyone wanted to address the group, Burrumarra raised his walking stick and made the slow trek to the front of the hall.

The church was packed with hundreds of people, including crying children, and chatting teenagers, the entire scene enlivened by the occasional dog fight. Burrumarra stood in front of the congregation and, like a trained dramatic actor, looked at everyone in silence for some minutes until the tension became overwhelming. Then for over ten minutes he berated the audience in his own Waramiri language and when he had finished everyone clapped heartily.

The following day, curious to know what others had thought of this speech, I asked one woman what Burrumarra had said. She replied that she did not really know what he had been talking about. I inquired whether she was familiar with his dialect and she said that she was, but that he was hard to understand as he spoke “upside down, like the way they used to in the old days.”

Burrumarra had been described as arrogant, pedantic, a great teacher and a kind and generous man by various people. To those he liked he was polite, a careful listener, a clear speaker in both English and in Yolngu languages, and convivial company. To those lower in his estimation he could be abrasive and short tempered. He was both a good friend and a feared enemy, a contemplative seeker of truth and a great story teller.

While some Elcho Islanders had no patience for Burrumarra’s distinct brand of logic, I was endlessly fascinated by his extraordinary intellect and Delphic pronouncements. Through the Yolngu kinship system into which I was adopted, Burrumarra would call me Mori (father) even though I was forty years his junior. Through an alternate line of descent, I called him grandfather or simply ‘Djolpa’ (old man). He would also call me bukudjulngi or friend. Our extended conversations over those years included one stint of daily meetings for nearly two years during the writing of *The Whale and the Cross* and there was much for me to reflect upon. Some topics were enthusiastically shared, while others inspired quietude and even melancholy. At one telling moment, he said to me:

There are so many stories from our history bukudjulngi, and I’d like to tell you them all but how can I, they are my backbone. I’ll have to take them with me.

Burrumarra considered himself to be Australia’s first Aboriginal anthropologist and he jealously guarded an old copy of Clyde Kluckholm’s classic text *Mirror for Man* which had been gifted to him by famed Australian anthropologist Ronald Berndt in the 1950s. This was also to be my introduction to anthropological theory.

Some nights after spending hours deep in discussion with Burrumarra I would have the strangest dreams which Burrumarra would always insist on hearing. Once I dreamed of the sacred site at Cape Wessel, a place of major cultural and personal interest to him. An unmanned lighthouse is situated on the headland. I dreamed I saw a great museum beside the lighthouse and inside it were all of Burrumarra’s sacred possessions, of which he had told me about. In the dream he led

me to the door and beckoned me to enter but I held back. “What’s in there is yours and for your Mala (clan),” I said. I could not go in. Burrumarra was very taken by this and said that I had listened to him well and that I could be a spokesman for this ‘law’. He referred to this dream on many occasions, even when I had long forgotten it.

One of my dreams did cause concern. I dreamt I was skin-diving when I heard Burrumarra’s voice. When I turned to look for Burrumarra, all I could see was a large shiny white fish unlike any other. The following day I was not sure if I should tell him as dreams are believed to be premonitions and I did not want to shock him. As he was old and frail the dream could be interpreted as a sign that he was about to enter the spirit world. I thought about it for a while and decided to tell him. He was shocked. He said, “You are getting very close to my sacred information.”

# # #

Words like statesman or visionary spring to mind when I recall Burrumarra’s status within the Yolngu realm. In Yolngu matha (languages), Elcho Islanders would refer to him as a bunggawa or leader. This is a word drawn from the centuries-long contact between Yolngu and Indonesian fishermen and traders from the sea port of Makassar in Sulawesi. It means the captain of the fleet - the one who gives the orders and to whom all defer. Yolngu would also describe him as being ‘Murrnginyha’, which is a much more complex concept. Its deeper meaning, as I detail below, is a key to understanding Burrumarra’s world view. It is also essential for an appreciation of his political agenda as described in the various chapters of this book.

Among Burrumarra’s Warramiri clan there is a deeply held conviction that the relationships that were forged between Yolngu and the very earliest seafaring Indonesians, known as the Bayini or pre-Macassans, represented a ‘high water mark’ in terms of mutual respect and coexistence. The two intermarrying moieties (or halves) of Yolngu society, Dhuwa and Yirritja, find harmony in an intricate net of social relations, and such was the case, also, in the ‘golden age’ at the dawn of time when Yolngu and these first visitors danced together on the beaches of north-east Arnhem Land. Burrumarra would ask why there was not that same sense of connectedness between black and white Australians.

This connectedness of Yolngu and others was demonstrated most spectacularly in 1988 with the Northern Territory Museum’s recreation of the voyage of Macassan trepangers from Sulawesi to Australia. The *Haiti Marege*, a traditional Macassan prau crewed by Macassans and under the direction of historian Peter Spillett, was met at Elcho Island by Yolngu men doing dances associated with these early visitors. Burrumarra and I were there on the beach and we witnessed the Macassans being welcomed home to Arnhem Land as if they were family members returning after a long absence.

Burrumarra was the foremost authority for the mythology and law associated with this early ‘pre-Macassan’ period. The various Yirritja moiety clans associated with these traditional beliefs are known as the Murrnginy (or Murrngin) collective. Interestingly, Murrnginy was the label that the American anthropologist Lloyd Warner used in the 1920s to describe all the Aborigines of north-east Arnhem Land. In ‘outside’ parlance, this word Murrnginy refers to the process of iron-making, or the sparks that fly when the hammer strikes the anvil. But in Burrumarra’s understanding, Murrnginy also meant the ‘iron-age’, and to be called Murrnginyha, as he was by his contemporaries, was to be designated as a standard-bearer for all the possibilities and promises of the new world symbolized by the use of iron technology that was introduced by pre-Macassans and Macassans. The manufacture of iron tools was a distinguishing feature of the oral history and mythology of the peoples of north-east Arnhem Land. Nowhere else in Aboriginal Australia do indigenous legends speak of the transformation of ‘red rock’ (or haematite) into tools of iron, like knives, axes, and anchors. So it was an apt label for the Yolngu collective.

While today the people refer to themselves as Yolngu, the word Murrnginy remains of considerable importance. Its deeper meaning relates to beliefs and practices associated with a Dreaming entity named Birrinydji, the king and iron-maker who is embodied in the land itself at various Arnhem Land sacred sites, and who was responsible for drawing outsiders on to the coast at the dawn of time. Iron is a Birrinydji totem, and songs and ceremonies associated with this Dreaming entity are among the more sacred and thought-provoking within the Yolngu corpus. Birrinydji’s law emerged from ancient and long-lasting contacts between Aborigines and non-Aborigines and is still evident today in the decorated flags and masts that dot north-east Arnhem Land communities and in related ceremonial practices. In short, this law of the ‘Murrnginy’ was one of cautious acceptance of the world beyond Australia. The Yolngu made sacred the idea of gleaning the very best of the outside world in order to make their own world stronger. But they also placed a taboo on any actions or decisions that would compromise the peoples’ rights or that would result in the usurping of their powers by the other. This law, these sanctions, and sacred aspects was central to Burrumarra’s political agenda, and also his life’s work in community development.

In the broader sense, then, this word Murrnginyha defined Burrumarra as being dedicated to helping build new lives for the Yolngu in the modern world, while not losing touch with their identity or origins. The ‘iron-man’ Burrumarra was the leading advocate and spokesperson for this Dreaming-inspired new dawning.

# # #

By the late 1980s, Burrumarra’s great learning was largely inaccessible and in some cases incomprehensible to many of his younger ‘countrymen’. He believed that it was because mission-born Yolngu were no longer living off the land and for

the land. Other priorities had entered their lives obscuring the deeper meaning of the cherished religious practice known as ‘totemism’ in the academic literature. As a staunch supporter of ‘two laws’, both Aboriginal and Christian, Burrumarra was saddened by the considerable gulf that now existed between his inherited wisdom and the emerging world views of the new generations.

In working hand in hand, one of our agreed upon goals was to create an avenue for reconnecting contemporary populations with the philosophies that had sustained the Yolngu since time immemorial. Burrumarra was most anxious that the legacy of the great Yolngu thinkers not be allowed to disappear ‘beneath the ground’ but rather continue to inspire and animate new lives, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. And it was a great privilege for me to have the opportunity to contribute to this worthy effort.

In the introduction to *The Whale and the Cross* I wrote about how Yolngu community members at Elcho Island also felt a strong sense of commitment to preserving Burrumarra’s intellectual and bridge-building legacy.

In November 1993 a commemorative ceremony was organized by Yolngu leaders in his honour in the presence of Balanda (non-Aboriginal) government and church officials. The form of the celebration was a traditional Ngaara ceremony, one that had not been performed in over 40 years. It was a parting gesture to Burrumarra to highlight the positive changes that had occurred in the lives of Yolngu, changes that he had helped to bring about.

In the associated speeches, the head of the Wangurri clan, a man that Burrumarra had helped to raise, said to the assembled group of over 1000, “We will lift this man up on high. It is right that we should do this.” Other Yolngu leaders spoke of how Burrumarra had helped to open people’s eyes to a new way of living and how his life had to be studied by young and old, and black and white, so there could be peace and harmony in the world.

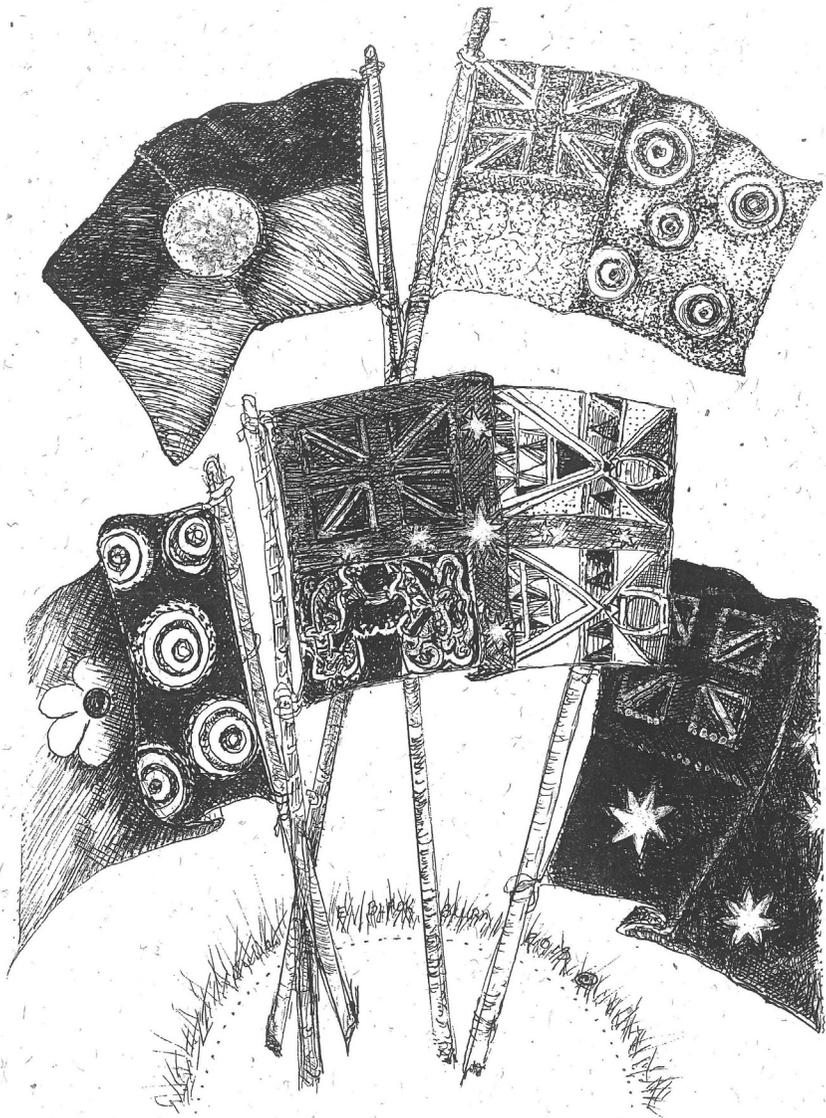
It is in this same spirit that I offer up this series of vignettes that I have written over the past twenty years. My heartfelt wish is to provide the reader with a glimpse into the life and thinking of a great Australian at what was a critical turning point in both Yolngu and Australian history.

# # #

The format of the book is as follows: Each chapter brings together a series of previously published academic papers that draw heavily on Burrumarra’s input, as well as excerpts from Burrumarra’s biography *The Whale and the Cross* and from the book *Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming* which was based on my doctoral thesis. Each chapter has been edited for consistency and thematic content. As far as possible, redundancies have been removed.

The initial focus in Chapter 2 is on Burrumarra’s philosophy on the need for a treaty in Australia. I describe his theory of ‘membership and remembrance’ (or adoption of non-Aborigines into the Yolngu realm and vice versa) as a mechanism

for pursuing Yolngu rights on the national stage. This is followed in Chapter 3 by a series of biographical essays spanning his younger days on Elcho Island and Yirrkala. Chapter 4 examines Burrumarra's Warramiri clan beliefs which are tied to the sea, and I highlight his lifelong pursuit of Yolngu sea rights. I also describe the concept of the 'totemic embrace', that special bond that exists between Yolngu and various totemic species for which they have ritual and spiritual authority. Chapter 5 discusses the place of the dingo in Yolngu mythology, especially in narratives of contact with Macassan trepang fishermen from Indonesia. Then, in four segments, Chapter 6 discusses Burrumarra's role in the extraordinary Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land of 1957, a decisive event in north-east Arnhem Land religion and politics. Burrumarra was the driving force in this attempt to integrate Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion. Chapter 7 examines the manner in which the Yolngu engaged with the very first outsiders on the coast, known as 'whale hunters', a category that includes the Sama-Bajau or Sea Gypsies. Later visitors included Islamic peoples, and also those with the technical skills to transform the 'red rock' (haematite) of the coast into tools of iron. The Dreaming entities Birinydji and Bayini, believed to be the foundation of these intercultural connections, are examined in detail. In Chapter 8, the question of whether treaties were signed between Yolngu and outsiders, in particular the Macassans, is examined. In Chapter 9, I explore, in three essays, reflections on various Warramiri sacred sites – Naningburra, Unbirri, and Gulirra. Finally, in Chapter 10, I introduce the story behind the finding by a WW2 serviceman of 700-900 year old African coins on the Wesel Islands. Burrumarra and I speculated that the coins were talisman carried by a shipwrecked Indonesian sailor who lived out his life with the Yolngu in the mid-to late-1800s. Appendix 1 contains a list of Burrumarra's mentors who he described to me as his "real professors." Appendix 2 is a short autobiographical essay written by Burrumarra in 1977 that describes the 'coral reef' origins of the Warramiri clan. Called 'Oceanal Man', it strongly reflects his sea-focused identity. In an exploration of rapprochement inspired by Burrumarra's philosophy of 'membership and remembrance', Appendix 3 asks Australians the question, "When will we know we are reconciled?"



*Philosophy*

**2:1 Writing *The Whale and the Cross***

*In Burrumarra's recounting of his life, three themes predominated. The first was his desire to achieve a reconciliation of Yolngu and Christian beliefs. The second was the attempt to find recognition for Yolngu rights within the wider Australian community. The third theme was his wish for Yolngu to achieve a level of wealth comparable to that of other Australians by taking advantage of the great potential of the land and sea, through fishing, mining and tourism ventures. All three of these ambitions, in their own ways, were controversial, and it was Burrumarra's intention that they all be highlighted in 'The Whale and the Cross'.*

# # #

I first met Burrumarra when he was already aged. I had read of him in various books and heard many people speak of him. One anthropologist in Brisbane had talked to me of a 'magic man' at Elcho Island who was able to fly. Burrumarra was the man to whom he was referring. Later, when I quizzed Burrumarra about this he said:

When I was young before the time of the mission, I could fly. All I'd have to do was think about a place and I would be there. The flying man goes from headland to headland in search of ideas and special words, like abracadabra, words connecting the mind with the heart. When I came to the mission some Yolngu wanted to show me how I could increase this power through magic and I lost it all. I couldn't fly anymore.

Burrumarra in 1987 was on the fringe of his own society. It is often said that anthropological informants look for recognition in outsiders when it is not forthcoming in their own society. With Burrumarra this was not entirely the case. He had been the Chairman of the Mala Leaders Council since its foundation. He had received an M.B.E. for services to the Yolngu community and enjoyed a position of authority throughout north-east Arnhem Land. However, there remained one area about which he remained profoundly dissatisfied. This was the lack of equality between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. The politics of the day centred on promoting separate development, perhaps as a reaction against the policies of assimilation of the 1960s and 1970s. For Burrumarra the idea of separate development was intolerable. White and black people had to live and work together, he argued. They could both share in the riches of the land and sea if the traditional laws of the country were acknowledged.

Burrumarra's continuing passion for integration alienated him from some members of the younger generation at Elcho Island and political activists in southern states. The rapid changes of government policy with regard to Aborigines from one year to the next, the inconsistencies relating to mining and exploration on Yolngu land, and the false hopes that a treaty would be enacted, all seemed to sabotage what Burrumarra had been working for. It embittered him and isolated him from his own people.

Apart from missionaries and government authorities, Burrumarra believed that anthropologists were the only ones interested in listening to the people and he held out much hope that they would be able to help facilitate change for the better. While Burrumarra once proudly boasted about his friendship with leading Australian anthropologists, and actively encouraged their work in Arnhem Land, his views on all such specialists soured in the late 1970s. Often pressured by scholars, he had grown tired of their continual presence, claiming they took up the valuable time of the people, taking them away from their families and other responsibilities. He saw them as miners, "Digging away at the souls of the people."

In a letter to the late Prof. R M Berndt at the University of Western Australia in 1988, Burrumarra famously wrote:

Aboriginal people are like a huge boil. The anthropologist wants to squeeze it to get everything out. What they don't realise is that when they squeeze us with their questions, we all feel pain.

### **Writing the text**

Burrumarra provided information on his own terms. Researchers who wanted Burrumarra to talk at length into a tape recorder on a subject of their choosing were wasting their time. He would not cooperate unless it was in his interest or the interests of Yolngu society to do so. He would question the motives of a researcher at length and ask for an exorbitant sum for his time. Consequently, I never attempted anything like this.

In me, Burrumarra saw an opportunity to bring his political ideas to a wider audience. He initiated all the discussions on which these essays were based. Only on relatively few occasions did I visit his house for the purposes of this work. I therefore dealt only with those subjects he wished to discuss. The resulting text was therefore selective and incomplete. Two of the main people in his life, his wife, Lawuk, and his long-time associate, pioneering missionary Harold Shepherdson, receive almost no mention, and I can provide no explanation for this. He read the final edited manuscript of *The Whale and the Cross*.

### **Conversations and visions**

In the book *Notable Australians: the Pictorial Who's Who* (Barnier, 1978) Burrumarra listed 'talking' as one of his favourite pastimes. The art of conversation is

a prized possession in Yolngu society and talking with Burrumarra was like a chess game according to his children.

I remember asking Burrumarra where his skills of conversation had come from. He answered that his teachers were all great speakers and that they would fill him with strength and he would understand immediately. And then in a logic all of his own, he added:

These skills and others come from above. They fall like leaves from the tree of paradise. Skills of speech, of strength, of intellect, of sexual prowess. They come to us in differing quantities. Some are good and some not good.

Burrumarra took great pride in the way he framed his sentences. I watched visitors to Elcho Island meeting him for the first time being transfixed by his powerful charisma and vision. His usual greeting to someone he did not know was, “Welcome to paradise.”

English was his second language and perhaps it was his unusual choice of words which impressed. His speech had a surprising and unpredictable quality, but the meaning was always there, even if not immediately apparent.

Our conversations over the years have dealt with the most delicate and profound reminiscences of his life as well as the most trivial and even banal incidents. It was often hard to separate them. I remember asking him what were the happiest moments of his life and he objected to the question. I asked him about the time when his first son was born when he and his wife travelled to the Wessel Islands for the delivery, wasn't he happy then? “That was for him, for his life,” he answered. I asked about his days with Wonggu, the so-called ‘King of Arnhem Land,’ and Fred Gray, the English trepanger, a time of which he always spoke fondly, and he said he didn't know what I was getting at. “With the good there is always sadness mixed in. It's never been just one or the other.”

There were times when communication was a problem and it often led to amusing situations. For example, natural phenomena like rainbows and water spouts have complex mythology associated with them. Burrumarra always said one had to learn to read the country: “You must listen to the sea, to the land, the trees and the wind and know what they are saying.” I recall once we were sitting on the cliffs at Elcho Island looking out to sea. There was a white line of foam on the water several miles long. Amazed at the sight, I asked Burrumarra about its mythological significance, thinking it may be associated with the whale and he said, “It's mud, stirred up by the tide and rushing water.”

## **2:2 Finding Common Ground**

Australia, a country long divided over the question of race and indigenous rights, still harbors unfortunate stereotypes about ‘timeless’ indigenous peoples living in the ‘dreamtime’ who need to wake up. And while some Yolngu will strategically essentialize their cultures in a timeless fashion, playing up on this

typesetting as the world's oldest living culture in order to advance an agenda of justice and reconciliation, Burrumarra was not one of them.

Burrumarra's priority was to empower the younger generations to embrace a long-held and Dreaming-inspired vision of building vibrant modern Yolngu communities with all the amenities of similar-sized Australian towns. Elcho Islanders were more than capable of achieving this goal, he argued, and instilling within them the necessary motivation was his driving passion.

And yet negotiating the many contrary forces in search of a true interest convergence – bridging the economic gap between white and black Australians and finding common ground on the question of rights - was never an easy task. Anthropologist Ronald Berndt detailed one intriguing story from the 1940s at Yirrkala to highlight the challenges for Yolngu of living simultaneously in two worlds. A whirlwind coming from the sea had totally destroyed Burrumarra's house leaving others nearby standing. The Yolngu said this was because Burrumarra had been neglecting the ceremonial life, while the missionaries said it was because he was straying too far from God.

Burrumarra's Warramiri clan was fortunate in that its land was never forcibly taken by the colonizer as was the case in other parts of Australia. The only exception was bauxite mining on sacred sites in Melville Bay but it hardly compares with the wholesale destruction of Aboriginal society that occurred elsewhere. Burrumarra's views on national Aboriginal land rights however, have a familiar ring. In a book called *My Mother the Land* published by the Christian Action Group at Elcho Island, Burrumarra said:

The word conquer is a very hard word, but it is a very true one... Why is it that Aborigines always have to bow down and accept with their eyes shut what the white man tells them is good for them even when we are supposed to be equal? Because in one way or another the word conquer is still there... all political parties are in danger of losing elections if they do not have Aboriginal support, and support will go to the party that has the best land rights policies and records. Yolngu people are only just now becoming aware of their voting power... The Government and Yolngu must look at each other face to face. They should stand on the desire of the Yolngu people.

Essential to Burrumarra's vision of a prosperous and empowered future for Yolngu was the signing of a treaty that spelled out the rights of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Only then, Burrumarra believed, could all Australians walk proudly over the land as one.

## 2:3 Seeking Equality

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

In the 1978 edition of *Notable Australians: The Pictorial Who's Who* Burrumarra said:

My role has been to mediate between the people of Arnhem Land and the newcomers, including missionary teachers, anthropologists and other scholars. While most Aboriginal cultures have faded out rapidly before the advance of European culture, my life's ambition is to see that knowledge of my own Warramiri and related cultures is preserved as far as possible. (Barnier, 1978, p. 205)

As part of his daily schedule, Burrumarra supervised the 'business' life of his clan, made arrangements for major ceremonies, initiations, and funerals, resolved family disputes, arranged marriages, and maintained good relations between the clans. At the same time he raised his own family and looked to their physical and spiritual needs.

Burrumarra was intimately involved with non-Aborigines in his mission work, in settlement schools, as a trepang diver, a consultant for many of Australia's leading anthropologists, and as a Government spokesman for Aboriginal welfare and voting rights. He was also involved in private enterprise. He put his hand to prospecting and, in the late 1950s, had a small private pearling business. He was probably the first Aboriginal man in north-east Arnhem Land to own a typewriter. The missionary Harold Shepherdson had bought one for him in Darwin with money Burrumarra had saved. For a small fee, Burrumarra would type various pieces of correspondence for customers. The novelty of Burrumarra at work on the typewriter had quite an impact on the Yolngu community. The people used to gather around him as he typed and would watch intently as his hands moved over the keyboard. Some would whisper, "...that Burrumarra, he knows everything," while others, he said, even his closest friends, would roar with laughter at the sight of him.

It was Burrumarra's work as Chairman of the Elcho Island Mala Leaders Council that gave him the greatest public exposure. Prior to this time he had been Secretary of the Elcho Island Village Council, an advisory body to the Methodist Mission. The Mala Leaders Council was a body that he himself had helped to establish. All issues affecting the community or surrounding areas were to be addressed by the members.

In his capacity as chairman of this council, Burrumarra would make speeches, open new community facilities, and welcome visiting dignitaries. The following quote is from a speech he gave at the opening of the Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) training centre in 1981. The speech is important as it encapsulates Burrumarra's philosophy on both development and education. It is reproduced in full from the *Top End News* (5 June, 1981):

On behalf of the people of this island... I thank you for coming to this small dot on the world map... The people I represent as Chairman of the Mala Leaders are looking forward to equality, especially here in the Northern Territory. After all a healthy government should listen to the views not only of the now present white population but also to the Yolngu people who have

lived for many more centuries in this land of ours. It is necessary for the government not only to look through one of the glasses of its binoculars. It should look through both eyepieces so that it can see the whole picture before it, in the correct dimensions.

It is not sufficient to recognise the fact that we as Aboriginal people have lived here for longer than any white man knew of the existence of this great Australian land. We desire this government to act on this recognition. According to our tradition we as Aborigines have owned this land from its very beginning. Only last year we, here in Galiwin'ku produced a small booklet entitled *My Mother the Land*. I can warmly recommend it to any of you who has not already taken notice of its contents.

Under the existing laws of the country the government owns the land. We do not desire to enter into disputes about these laws, we only desire the government to respect our traditions of the land, to recognise our values of the land.

As Yolngu we can and will have to learn a lot from the Balanda, but then as Yolngu we can also share with the Balanda our knowledge and traditions. We should try to educate each other, so that both races can learn from the other. We do not subscribe to the one way street ideas, we both offer each other knowledge and values. We have to educate each other.

We do not desire the significance of our race to be destroyed, we want it to be kept alive. Not only as a people but also in the values of the land, our sacred land and our sacred sites. In a way we are really asking you as a government to give us... self-administration especially here in Arnhem Land but maybe even in Darwin.

You are all here now in the base of Arnhem Land for the opening of this training centre. We can all admire the buildings, the setting and so on ... What we really should see however is the fact that here is an opportunity to learn, a chance to educate ourselves, a chance to develop ourselves to cope with new opportunities, with in fact a different way of life.

I said before Galiwin'ku is only a dot on the world map. Arnhem Land is something more than a dot... nevertheless it is a block of land which has been set aside by the government as an Aboriginal reserve. We value this gesture by the government. We can use it, we can treasure it.

In this Northern Territory we represent, as Yolngu, a significant slice of the population... Would it be strange then if we requested the government to look really hard at the Administrators post to be occupied in the future by a tribal leader of the Yolngu? Especially here in the NT where so many of the original population are still living on...

We have as occupants of this vast land of Australia, both Balanda and Yolngu, come a long way together. Of course we can both start pointing the finger at each other and say - yes, he has got a lot to learn yet. I only want to say we both have got a lot to learn from each other. And as we all know the

best way to overcome this problem has always been and always will be to start with ourselves. We know we have to learn as well. Good examples always find followers. Thank you.

## 2:4 A Treaty for Australia?

*Australian anthropologist A.P. Elkin once remarked that all named features of the Aboriginal landscape attributed to the work of totemic beings could be considered as monuments to the designs of individuals over an immensity of time. Burrumarra's vision for building modern Yolngu communities, with the treaty as the foundation, was drawn from his reflections upon the Dreaming. He was quick to acknowledge, however, that this vision was the product of generations of Murrnginy thinkers.*

# # #

At Elcho Island in the 1980s there was a growing disquiet within Yolngu circles about Burrumarra's optimistic vision of a united Australia. Many Yolngu saw themselves as a poor and disadvantaged segment of the Australian population living on the fringes and without a voice. While Burrumarra desired a document that would enshrine the rights and responsibilities of indigenous peoples as a precondition for improving their lot, other Yolngu aspired to a separate and sovereign Aboriginal nation in Arnhem Land. Burrumarra was deeply troubled by such thinking because overall the people did not know which path to follow: the government line, the mission path, or the traditional life.

Noted structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss coined the term 'bricoleur' for a special category of intellectuals, individuals or groups of people, who could fashion meaningful statements in myth in order to resolve the contradictions inherent in an ever-changing world. Burrumarra was a bricoleur par excellence.

In 1989, Burrumarra and his two brothers, Liwukang and Wulanybuma, created a blue-print for a vision of blending the very best of Yolngu and Balanda worlds in order to create communities that replicated an inherited vision of the paradise that once existed on their lands. Lethaby (1891) speaks of how the great planners in human history have all aspired to build the 'earthly tabernacle' in the image of the 'heavenly temple'. This too was Burrumarra's ambition.

As part of this plan, a large traditional Yolngu painting of a new flag for Australia was created as the basis for deliberation on the need for a treaty between Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

Private meetings were held with clan leaders from around the region where Burrumarra revealed the design and explained its significance. Some of the images had never previously been publicly displayed and they provoked much attention.

In a colour leaflet entitled *Dhawal'yuwa Yuwalku: The Search for Truth*, the Warramiri leader made a public call for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to construct a series of new Australian flags incorporating sacred symbols which would unite black and white peoples under their traditional laws. The idea was that in the

future, Australia would have not one but many national flags, each containing Indigenous symbols relevant to the area in which it was flying. For instance if one was in Sydney, the flag might incorporate images of the rainbow serpent and dolphin or other designs, reflecting the law (or Dreaming) in that area. The common thing with all the Australian flags would be that the sacred symbol of Great Britain, the Union Jack, would appear in the upper left hand corner, as in the current Australian flag.

Burrumarra argued that the uniting of the symbols in a common design would be symbolic of a wider coming together. Respective histories would be united and people could walk the land as equals.

While perhaps overly idealistic and impractical, the deeper meaning of this action was conveyed in a press release dated 15 December 1989 when Burrumarra said:

Aborigines own the continent of Australia. This has, and always will be. Some two hundred years ago strangers declared war on the Aboriginal owners and the strangers won, but the land did not recognise it.

These newcomers came from a place far away yet now their descendants call themselves the owners of the land. This is wrong! The newcomers have no right to say this. They are still strangers to the land and they have always behaved as strangers to the Aborigines. The newcomers do not honour the land and do not belong to it.

The planting of the Union Jack in...Sydney... by Captain Cook marks the start of a war against the Aboriginal people, and the present Australian flag is a symbol of this... We cannot forget this. The Union Jack is a memorial to those who died in defense of their land...

In World War Two Australian Armed Forces died in defense of the land of Australia, just as Aborigines had done throughout the history of contact with the newcomers. It is my belief that we should now both belong to the land.

Yet Aborigines and the newcomers are still strangers to each other. I am a stranger to white law and the land has always seen Europeans as outsiders. But the war between black and white is nearly over. We are just about in a position to use both of our eyes to look at each other. In the past, it has always been with one eye - looking at each other sideways with much suspicion. Why can't we live together on equal terms?

The Federal Government is always saying, we will give you land rights or sea rights. I can't understand this talk. We remain the owners of the land and the sea. We have never relinquished the traditional ties we have with the land, but are now prepared to make concessions so we can both live together with pride in this wonderful country...

The Federal Government has talked about a treaty or compact without any real commitment. I feel that to recognise each and every aspect of the country by the laws by which it exists is much more than a treaty between people. It is a show of respect to the land. The Warramiri Treaty proposal is

a step towards a time when white and black can all live with pride in their community and their country.

The Warramiri treaty painting was donated by Burrumarra to the University of New South Wales Law School through the intervention of his close friend, cross-cultural psychiatrist Dr. John Cawte, on the understanding that it would be on permanent display. From Burrumarra's perspective, it was hoped that non-Aboriginal intellectuals would be encouraged to learn what the country, both the land and the sea, meant to Yolngu. In this way, he believed, they would come to an understanding of the need for a treaty in Australia.

## **2:5 The Treaty's Traditional Dimension**

In Australia in the 1980s there had been a major push to change the national flag in line with a desire to see Australia become a republic by the year 2001, the centenary of Australia's Federation. The Warramiri proposal was only indirectly linked to this. In a press release in 1979, for example, Burrumarra said:

There are those who respect Aboriginal people and their law, who want to see the Aboriginal people be trained and take their place in the running and government of the country. On the other hand there are those who have no respect for Aboriginal ways. Such a division is within each of the main political parties in Australia.

The Whitlam era saw a raising of the Aboriginal people to a level previously unknown. There was an expectation that the Aboriginal people would achieve a status that existed in pre-white days, when we were masters of our own destiny. Since the Whitlam years the status of the Aboriginal people has gone down. Certainly the money is still forthcoming, but it is giving without listening. There is no sense of partnership, no real respect for the Aboriginal law and feelings. We believe that all things dealing with mining, fishing, forestry or other occupations, which effect the Aboriginal people, should be discussed between Balanda and Yolngu. This is the proper way to do things for Australia...

We Aborigines call ourselves citizens of Australia since assimilation in 1962 when we signed ourselves into the book of Australia. Yet we are not fully connected with the important things. Our standard should be in Parliament House where the law is made; in the law courts where it is carried out, and in the hospitals where the miracles of healing are done. In all these places we should be equal.

In his biography Burrumarra spoke of the Warramiri Flag Treaty proposal as being the culmination of the 1957 Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land in which there had been a reconciliation of Christian and Yolngu beliefs in the form of a monument or memorial. (See Chapter 6) One sacred post amongst many others in the memorial incorporated a Christian cross symbolizing the fact that various leaders were now following two laws, i.e. traditional Yolngu law and the Bible.

In the same way, the Warramiri Flag Treaty was about such a merging of laws in ways which were consistent with the past.

We should have done this in 1957. [The Adjustment Movement] was never really finished. Now it's time to finish what we started. In 1957 we brought out the honourable [sacred objects] of the Yolngu people. Now it is time to bring out the honourable [sacred objects] of the [non-Aborigines], the flag. (McIntosh 1994, p. 15)

Such statements by Burrumarra were deliberately cryptic because he was touching upon sacred themes. Apart from the distribution of the aforementioned colour brochure and several press releases, public information was limited. What he would share, however, was the widespread Yolngu belief that at the beginning of time the Yolngu possessed the wealth of the Other (including both Indonesian traders and Europeans), but through misadventure, this was lost. In the Warramiri Treaty Flag, the Dreaming entity known as Birrinydji is shown as the foundation of the Union Jack. This was done deliberately. In a Dreaming-inspired vision of the past, Birrinydji had brought great wealth and prosperity to Yolngu. The Union Jack was "...all the same as Birrinydji's flag," Burrumarra said. It represents the same idea, but with one major difference. "Birrinydji was for the Yolngu," he said. "The Union Jack symbolises the taking of the land and ignoring Aboriginal rights," Burrumarra said. There is a desire however, to "...bring the Union Jack on side." Birrinydji's flag is associated with the concept of honouring partnerships, whereas the Union Jack is not, but should be, Burrumarra added.

To that end, Burrumarra saw a need for new laws that would confirm the respective rights of Yolngu and Balanda. He said:

Today, people live as one group. Black can marry white and vice versa. This is part of the lesson of the Treaty. We are different today than before. We live by a new law. Our histories have merged. The law of the past was we do not mix. Outsiders tried to steal the women and steal the land. We would lose everything. But we can share the future if there is equality. We ask the Governor General, Can we be equal in your eyes?

## **2:6 Dealing with Outsiders: The Process of Adoption**

(Originally published in: McIntosh IS 2000, *Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming. Warramiri Yolngu and the Quest for Equality*, Cultural Survival Series on Ethnicity and Change, Allyn and Bacon, Boston. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Reproduced by permission of Pearson Education Inc. Upper Saddle River, N.J.)

*Jewish theologian Martin Buber in 'Paths in Utopia' (1949) argues that as a people come to a deeper understanding of the sacred core of their religious tradition, their attention is drawn outwards to the world around them, to larger levels of membership, where their work lies. This is because it is only beyond their immediate circle that the authority and*

*authenticity of the core is proven. This principle underscored Burrumarra's advocacy for Aboriginal reconciliation. Yolngu and Balanda could only reach their full potential by working in harmony, and by acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of each other. In South Africa, Desmond Tutu called this philosophy 'ubuntu'. Burrumarra called it 'membership and remembrance'. This was a philosophy of adoption: blacks into white worlds and whites into black worlds, each affirming the rightful place of the other. Adoption was both a bridge into the world of the non-Aborigine and also a means of affirming local authority.*

# # #

In an intercultural setting, Yolngu assert their rights as land owners in a number of ways, primarily through the intervention of regional land councils and in the law courts. However, Yolngu culture also provides an avenue for adapting to non-Aboriginal lifeways and for encouraging non-Aborigines to adapt to Yolngu ways. In a practice promoted by Burrumarra, certain influential Balanda (non-Aborigines) are adopted into a Yolngu family and groomed to work on behalf of Yolngu in their dealings with the outside world. Adoption affirms the self-worth of the adopter and the importance of the Yolngu cultural inheritance. It is often achieved simply through the recital of a story of traditional significance, revealing a sacred site, or the gift of a Yolngu name. Yolngu acknowledge the importance of non-Aboriginal brokerage. Adoption is a very serious process and a declaration to the outside world that Yolngu are a force to be reckoned with. As Collmann (1988, p. 235) argues, if Aborigines are to control non-Aborigines at all, they must try and bind them within the boundaries of Aboriginal society.

### **Adoption into the Yolngu world**

Those willing to spend extended periods on Elcho Island will find the Yolngu to be very accommodating. A visitor who remains for a few months or longer, if accepted by the community, may be offered a place in the moiety, the clan, and kinship system and, in some cases, will be given a Yolngu personal name. Up until that time, however, the visitor remains a stranger, feeling very alone even in the midst of a bustling community. If the visitor is given a kinship title, for example as a brother to a Yolngu man, then all people that man calls brother, which includes his father's brother's sons, will also call him by the title of 'wawa' or brother. Suddenly a world opens up, and everyone knows who the visitor really is, and the only barrier to communication is that determined by the kinship system itself. For example, the visitor must avoid 'poison' relatives. People classified as mother-in-law or her brothers, and the mother-in-law's mother, will refer to the adoptee as 'gurrung' and shun all contact. The only time a gurrung is permitted to show affection for a person of the 'wrong skin' is upon the death of the 'poisoned' one. The gurrung will direct funeral proceedings and handle the body of the deceased when others must keep at a respectful distance.

Once accepted into a Yolngu family, the visitor is treated as a child who has to be shown the way forward. But one advances quickly through 'adolescence' to adulthood, where there are certain obligations and responsibilities to fulfill. Yolngu

adopt Balanda into their clan for a whole range of reasons. Having a Balanda friend means having access to a world apart from the one of their birth, a place that they can travel to and learn about, for there is much curiosity about life in the larger cities of Australia and overseas. The adoptee is expected to discharge a number of functions, such as defender of the Yolngu when impersonal government agencies are threatening some aspect of their life, for example cutting off a pension check; or mediator, when there is a need to speak with a doctor about an illness; or driver, for transportation to and from the airport or to a favourite hunting ground.

Through adoption, Yolngu wish to have others understand and affirm the importance of their way of life and values. Expanding the Yolngu ties of kinship is viewed as a ready means of achieving this. The more authority that the adoptee wields in the non-Aboriginal world, the higher their status in the Yolngu world. A fighter for Yolngu rights, a church leader, or a medical specialist is considered a person of great standing in the Yolngu community, and is treated accordingly. There is sometimes even competition among rival Yolngu families to adopt a Balanda newcomer of status.

### **Official visits**

On any particular day, public servants and contractors arrive at the airport on Elcho Island on regularly scheduled 12-seater Cessnas. They are representatives of various state and local government agencies, parole officers, education and health department professionals, and so on. Such visits are not coordinated and Yolngu are often overwhelmed with meetings. A class of full-time negotiators is emerging in the community to handle the situation – typically council members or older unemployed Yolngu men and women. Overnight visitors to the island are housed in a fenced-off compound away from the major community living areas.

The fact-finding missions of public servants rarely have an impact on Yolngu lives, and Yolngu know it. They resent the fact that the ‘Aboriginal industry’ employs far more non-Aborigines than Indigenous Australians. Many Yolngu see the whole exercise of ‘consultation’ as a waste of their time and money. Funding set aside for work in Aboriginal Affairs is money that Yolngu ‘allow’ public servants to administer on their behalf. It is if they are silent and largely unwilling partners in the enterprise. Yolngu permit entry by the public servant, approve the writing of a report they will never see, and live in vain hope of seeing the end of this continued nuisance, or ‘humbug’ as it is called.

Yolngu enforce their rules with subtlety. They understand that the rights they enjoy under non-Aboriginal law, such as the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, are intended to mimic the powers they once held under Yolngu law. Under traditional Rom (law), people are loathe to create a situation of disharmony, and in the case of an outsider, they would rather turn a blind eye to minor breaches of etiquette, dismissing it as ignorance, than create a scene. When a public servant tries to wield power over and above that which Yolngu bestow, sterner action is required. The occasional visitor does not always understand and may be resentful if traditional law is applied and they are punished more harshly and banished from the community.

## Reconciling with the Other

The world has come to Galiwin'ku in recent years in the form of overseas delegations, politicians, and rock musicians. In 1991, the Sisters of Charity from Canaan in Germany paid a visit to Elcho Island. According to the Order's head, Mother Baselea, they were on a mission of reconciliation. The previous year the Sisters had been to Israel and, on behalf of Germanic peoples, apologised to Jews for the Holocaust. In Australia, it was their intention to apologise to the Aborigines (and all Indigenous peoples) for the crimes of whites, and they chose Elcho Island as the site of their ritual performance. In a small ceremony by the sea, the sisters prayed for forgiveness, and, in a spirit of reconciliation, the Yolngu minister, Rev. Mowanydjil, also asked for absolution. Yolngu carry with them very bad feelings towards the Balanda, the Minister said, and their desire was to let this bitterness go.

Apart from meetings of a religious order, there are the occasional visits of politicians of national standing, such as the Governor General, the Queen's representative in Australia, or the Prime Minister. Proceedings are somewhat different in such cases. When Yolngu greet outsiders on a spiritual plane, Christianity provides the framework for coming together. Politicians, however, need to be reminded that in this part of Arnhem Land, they must not only pray the way that Yolngu do, but also follow Yolngu law. There was such a case in February 1988 when Australia's Prime Minister John Howard made a rare trip to Arnhem Land on his way to Papua New Guinea and Malaysia for official visits. As I describe, Yolngu were at pains to impress upon the national leader that reconciliation had both a political and a religious dimension.

A newspaper report dated February 28, 1998, in *The Australian* was headlined 'Secret political business in the Top End.' It read:

John Howard took part in a secret Aboriginal ceremony on remote Elcho Island emerging with a self-declared deeper understanding of the ritual and culture of thousands of years of Indigenous tradition. Making his first trip to an Aboriginal community after two years as Prime Minister, Mr. Howard was greeted by Elcho Island people with generous hospitality. As part of his special greeting, Mr. Howard was taken to a secret place and was treated to a ceremony that lasted for more than half an hour. In accordance with custom, he had to remove his shoes and sit on the ground. In light rain, Mr. Howard emerged bedecked in orange feathers. As a final step in the process, Mr. Howard placed the feathered item on a ceremonial pole.

I doubt that the Prime Minister knew the meaning of the ceremony in which he participated. The act of taking the leader of the Australian government through a sacred ceremony harks back to the days of the historic Gove land rights case of 1969 when Yolngu leaders at Yirrkala showed Justice Blackburn sacred images and objects in an attempt to impress upon him that Yolngu were the landowners and they had to be consulted on the matter of mining. While Blackburn was sympathetic, he stood by an interpretation of Australian law that affirmed 'terra nullius'

(or ‘the land without people’) and this view continued to hold sway until overruled by the Mabo High Court judgement of the early 1990s. Until that time, the Crown was deemed to be the owner of all Yolngu land.

Repeating history, Prime Minister Howard told reporters at the conclusion of his visit to Elcho Island that while he was deeply touched by the Yolngu ceremonies he had witnessed, it had not changed his fundamental views on the government’s limited native title land rights laws.

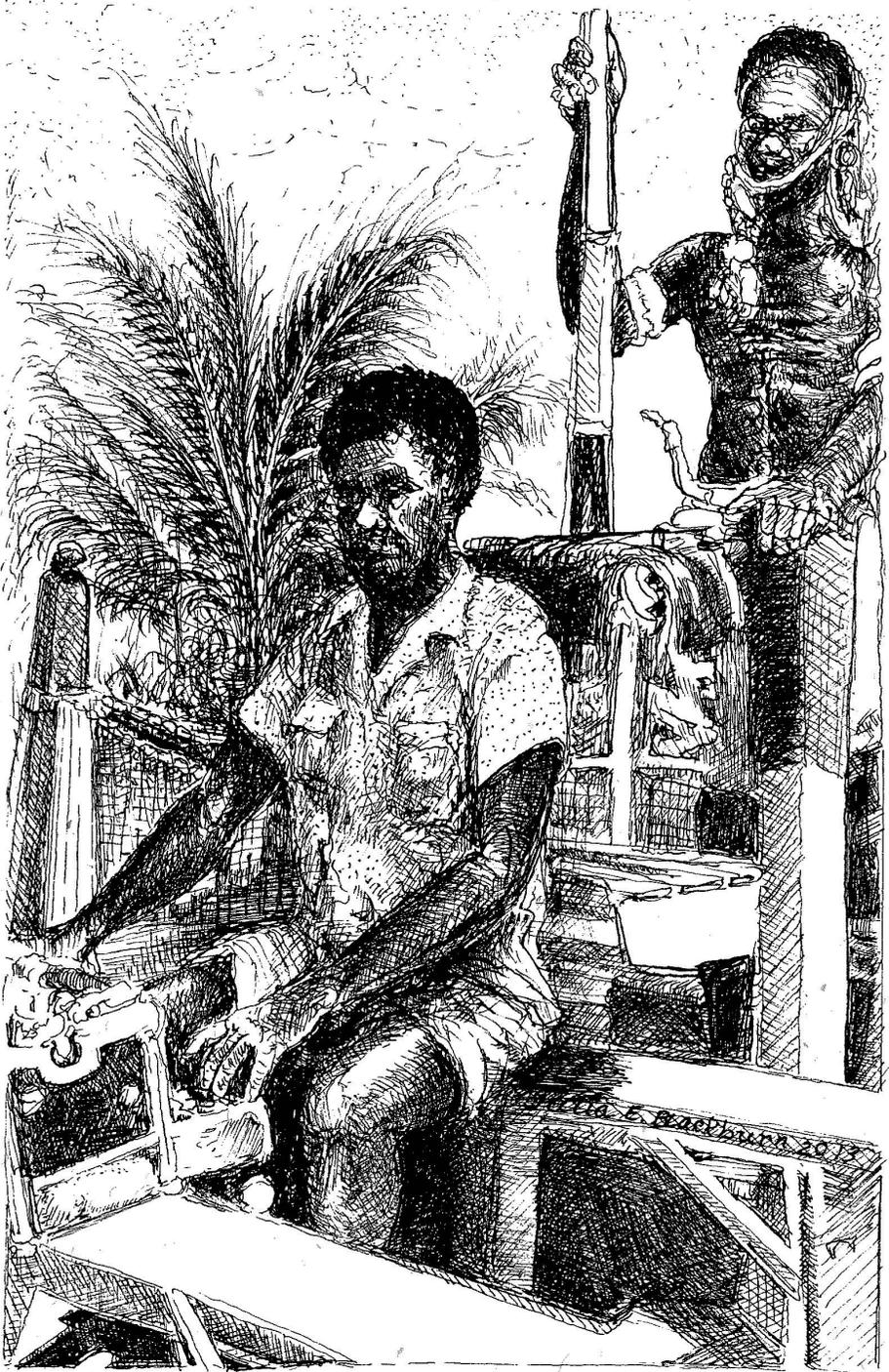
However the Yolngu had an agenda more wide ranging in scope than was superficially apparent. By showing the Prime Minister the sacred site of the clans and bringing him into the inner sanctum of their ceremonial life, Yolngu honoured him in ways that only traditional leaders are sometimes honoured. By displaying such respect, the Yolngu expected to also be shown respect as landowners, as occurs when people are adopted into a family and clan. Indeed, as part of the Prime Minister’s tour of nearby Yirrkala, the national leader was greeted by rows of ceremonially dressed men carrying spears and covered in white ochre, and he was presented with a petition for Yolngu customary law to be recognized by Australian law.

For Yolngu, the aim of the ‘process’ referred to by the journalist was the creation of a new sense of community, one in which there was an acknowledgement by government of Yolngu traditions and aspirations – and of making the future coincide with visions of how things were in an idealized past. This process, which Burrumarra called ‘membership and remembrance’, was in large measure a product of his own contemplation on the Warramiri heritage, and probably his most significant legacy in Arnhem Land.

The Prime Minister was very moved by his visit to Yolngu lands. *The Australian* newspaper (February 28, 1998) reported that he said:

I have never experienced anything like that before. I have always respected Aboriginal culture. But until today I don’t think I had understood the depth of feeling the Indigenous people have in relation to their culture.

But there was to be no Damascus-like conversion on land rights, the report said. The generosity of spirit at Elcho Island and Yirrkala had impressed him but he still believed there was a generosity of spirit on both sides and that a fair compromise had to be found between the needs and interests of pastoralists, miners, and Aborigines across Australia.



*Early Days*

**3:1 A Glimpse Into The Past**

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

**B**urrumarra was born into the Warramiri clan, sea people of the English Company's Islands of Australia's Northern Territory. His homeland was Dholtji on Cape Wilberforce. He was one of fifteen children from the same father.

The British explorer Matthew Flinders had called his Warramiri territory the 'Malay Road' because of the large number of Indonesian vessels sighted there during his voyage across the north coast in 1803. He named Burrumarra's islands after the 'venerable gentlemen' of the English East India Company.

Mission records say Burrumarra was born in the bush around 1917 in the dry season. Many years later the Methodists at Elcho Island would call his birth place the 'Bible Camp'. To the Yolngu it was Wadangayu, a special place for an allied clan, the Gupapuyngu.

Burrumarra's mother's mother (or Maari) named him after an 'inside' or sacred word for the skeleton of the large white tailed stingray. Another Maari called him Wurrthunbuy, a special bay on Yirringa (Drysdale Island) to the north of Elcho Island. A more distant relative called him Djumidjumi, a ceremonial name for the squid. His father called him Raymarrka, the white cloud. The missionary Rev. Keith Wale christened the young Burrumarra and gave him the name David, after the Biblical character King David.

With his wife Lawuk of the Galpu clan (deceased 1980), Burrumarra raised seven children - sons Leku, Yumbulul, Mangutu and Manda, and daughters Lambu, Rrapu and Mulwanany.

**History in Brief**

**1917 -1927**

# Of his origins, Burrumarra said that a 'mermaid' spirit from a coral reef near Truant Island in the English Company's Islands, came to his mother and his father had a special dream. Shortly afterwards he was born into the Warramiri clan (and language group) and the Budalpudal Mala (sub-group). He said that this reef spirit has always protected him, even in times of greatest danger. It was his 'marr', his strength and desire.

# By the age of ten, like other children, Burrumarra was bilingual in both his father's Warramiri language and his mother's Brarrngu language. At this time, he was learning traditional skills and knowledge so he could survive on the land and the sea. He travelled to many places by dugout sailing canoe with his family. His initiation was at Dhokirr, a jungle area on Marchinbar in the Wessel Islands.

# His childhood memories centred on tribal law. He witnessed the ritual killing of a man at Gulumari on Elcho Island and was horrified, but he knew there was no place for anarchy. Life was hard and everyone had to work together. "Discipline is a road maker," he said. "We make a road for everyone's survival."

# He witnessed an attack on a Japanese pearling boat in the Wessel Islands by members of his family and also a peace-making ceremony, a makarrata, at Wadangayu for the noted 'Galka' (sorcerer), Burrpurr.

### **1930-1932**

# Following the death of his father, his cousin Andrew Birindjawuy took him to the newly established Methodist settlement at Milingimbi to continue his education. Birindjawuy had been a mission worker for some time and was a close associate of Burrumarra's father. Theodore Webb was the missionary in charge of the station.

# Burrumarra recalled when the missionary Harold Shepherdson, who was later to establish the Elcho Island mission in 1942, first arrived at Milingimbi. In the Shepherdson College Year Book (1970, p. 1) Burrumarra said:

I still can remember back in the early days when the mission boat brought the flour from Darwin to Milingimbi... When you used to tip the flour out we used to run and ask for the bag and you used to say, "Can't you children wait till the proper time, let me work."

# After a short period at Milingimbi, Burrumarra continued to travel in northeast Arnhem Land with his brothers and other relatives. He described himself as strong but irresponsible, always getting into trouble. He participated in ceremonies and fulfilled other clan obligations with the assistance of his extended family.

# At this time Burrumarra met senior ceremonial leaders who kept a close eye on him out of respect for his father and mother. Burrumarra's mother was one of the last members of the Brarrngu people of Rarragala in the Wessel Islands. Most of the others had died out in the nineteenth century as a result of inter-clan warfare and from a 'scratching illness,' possibly smallpox, introduced by the Macassan trepangers from Sulawesi in Indonesia.

### **1933-1936**

# In the early 1930s, Burrumarra worked as a shell cleaner and deck hand on the Japanese pearl boat, the Tubumaro. The captain of the boat was the diver Yamasuro, who spent many years fishing in Northern Territory waters prior to

World War Two. Burrumarra worked for only two months. The captain had picked him up at Galiwin'ku saying, "You look like you're strong and intelligent." There was no pay, only rice, Burrumarra said. Banya, a Liyagawumirr man from Elcho Island, was with him. They worked in the vicinity of Moorooonga Island, which is still a rich source of pearls today.

# Not long after this, Burrumarra travelled with missionaries Wilbur Chaseling and Harold Shepherdson to choose a new mission site to service the north-eastern tip of Arnhem Land. Andrew Birindjawuy, missionary Webb's close associate, suggested that Burrumarra go as he had experience in the area.

# Burrumarra travelled with Galpagalpa (Djambarrpuyngu clan), and Wili Walalipa (Golumala clan) who was the captain of the mission boat. On the trip, Burrumarra met some of the Mala leaders who had been at his initiation many years before, men such as Mawulan of the Rirratjingu clan, and Mungurrawuy of the Gumatj clan. The meeting was significant. The area of Yirrkala, now nearby the modern town of Gove (Nhulunbuy), became the site of the new Methodist community.

# Burrumarra stayed at the Yirrkala mission for a short period. He worked with the Rev. Clyde Toft as a domestic servant and kitchen hand. He was a close associate of the missionary Kolinio, a Fijian who spent most of his life working for the people of Arnhem Land. Burrumarra lived with Wonggu, who was a most formidable leader. Wonggu was often referred to by Yolngu as the 'King of Arnhem Land' because of his strength as a leader and the fact that he had over twenty wives. Of this time, Burrumarra said:

Wonggu kept a close watch on me because he had known my father. I had to eat and sleep and hunt only with him, or his family, when I was young. We did not discuss madayin (sacred things). He said to me, "I know the story of Dholtji but I can't tell you. You must look after that yourself. Don't show the Warramiri madayin to anyone. The knowledge of a clan is not for others to take." He did not want me to live the way he had done. He was a very powerful man and was not afraid of death. When I left him, he said to me, "Don't follow my example. Don't take what you've seen here with you." He was a real friend. He gave me a safe life.

# In the 1930s Burrumarra befriended the anthropologist Donald Thomson, later to become Professor of Anthropology and Zoology at the University of Melbourne, and also the noted zoologist, Dr. Charles Barrett, who wrote a number of books on the tropical north. Burrumarra had learnt to speak eight languages by this time.

# Like all others at the mission, Burrumarra was significantly moved by missionary Wilbur Chaseling's actions in shaping and erecting a fifteen metre high wooden cross, made from local swamp timber, on the headland at Yirrkala, and calling it madayin (or sacred). There were great discussions going on about traditional law and Christianity and the desired relationship between the two.

# In 1935/36, Burrumarra spent a year with the English trepanger and beachcomber, Fred Gray, as a diver at Matamata, Port Bradshaw, Blue Mud Bay and Groote Eylandt. Fred was later to establish the Aboriginal community of Umbakumba on Groote Eylandt.

## 1937-46

# Burrumarra's traditional education continued at higher levels as clan leaders introduced him to deeper meanings of the Dreaming (See Appendix). He spent a further year with Fred Gray at Groote Eylandt in 1938 and then returned to Yirrkala as one of the first primary school teachers.

# In the 1940s Burrumarra met the well known Australian anthropologists, Ronald and Catherine Berndt. Burrumarra became a close friend of theirs and also an informant. Burrumarra also managed his own private workforce which he contracted out for specific tasks. Berndt (1962, p. 71) describes a specific instance. Burrumarra had taken the Berndts' firewood for his own and offered to replace it. He says:

Characteristically, he did not do the actual work himself. Instead, wearing his pith helmet as protection from the heat of the winter sunshine, he supervised the efforts of a little gang of men who toiled for a day to collect us a great heap of wood... When we protested that there was no necessity for all this, they replied that Burrumarra was paying them for it, they were really doing it for him.

# At Yirrkala during the World War 2, Burrumarra supervised the Yolngu workers constructing the Gove airport. He was also involved in coastal surveillance between Yirrkala and Elcho Island on the look-out for the Japanese. Missionary Harold Shepherdson had actively encouraged Yolngu men and women to return to their homelands for the duration of the war. He had said that it was safer there as the people could hide in the jungle or in caves if bombing started. The mission vessel Larrpan was made available to transport Yolngu to remote locations right across northeast Arnhem Land. Yolngu in their day-to-day management of the land and sea would be on the lookout for unwelcome visitors. (Shepherdson, 1981)

# In the 1940s, Burrumarra was also associated with Clara, one of the supposed 'lost white women of Arnhem Land'. Following the death of her husband, Clara became Burrumarra's first wife. Clara had gained a degree of fame in the 1930s. There had been a shipwreck off Arnhem Land in the 1890s. The thirty or more women on board were heading for Darwin where their husbands awaited them. Despite extensive searches they were never seen again. Clara was once thought to have been one of those women due to her light skin colour, but the anthropologist Donald Thomson said that this was definitely not the case. She was from Borroloola. Thomson (1946, p. 20) writes:

In the same camp [as Wonggu] was a woman known by her European name of Clara. In the many misleading stories which have been told... this woman has often been reported to be a half-caste, and to her has been attributed, quite wrongly, the placing of much of the trouble and many of the massacres which had occurred [e.g. the killing of Japanese at Caledon Bay in 1933 and of Constable McColl and others in eastern Arnhem Land in 1935]. Clara was in fact a harmless... full blooded Aboriginal woman; a member of the Mara tribe of the Roper River area who had been taken on a beche-de-mer lugger many years before to Caledon Bay. The boat was attacked and Clara and her child were taken captive. The presence of this woman and her little stock of English probably gave rise to the legend, which still persists, of the existence in this remote country of white women survivors of the ill-fated steamer Douglas Mawson which foundered with all hands in a cyclone many years ago, somewhere in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

# Clara died shortly after Burrumarra left for Elcho Island after the war. He maintained links with the Mara (Marinbala) clan attributing the pleasant cool breezes from the south to the thoughtful actions of their clan leaders in the manipulation of ritual objects. Burrumarra had intentions of passing on the Warramiri bandirra (flag) dance to them in memory of Clara.

# Burrumarra returned to Elcho Island at the request of his close relative, the Wangurri leader Batangga, to help the missionary Harold Shepherdson in the building of the mission station. Lawuk, one of the many wives of Batangga, was 'given' to Burrumarra.

## 1947-56

# Burrumarra was the first Village Council Secretary at Elcho Island. He worked closely with Church authorities and was involved at senior levels with traditional Yolngu ceremony and law. "We believed in both ways," he said of this time. He travelled extensively with Harold Shepherdson in his homemade aeroplane to small outstations throughout the region.

# The Elcho Island School commenced in 1949 with twelve pupils under the direction of Mrs Shepherdson. Burrumarra, then Community Liaison Officer, was the first Yolngu teaching assistant, supervising correspondence lessons. In the Year Book (1970, p. 1) Burrumarra recalls:

I remember Elcho Island's first school, started by Mrs Shepherdson, under a tree. You gave me a job to teach my own people with the Gupapuyngu language. Just after that, Bapa [Harold Shepherdson] built a small school room.

# In the 1950s Burrumarra worked as a pearl diver. He used to dive in depths of twelve and thirteen fathoms and once won a diving competition to find the biggest pearl shell. The Welfare Department provided him with a boat so he could start his own pearling business.

## 1957-60

# Along with Batangga, then leader of the community at Galiwin'ku, Burrumarra was the instigator of the Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land. This movement was made famous in the award winning anthropological essay by Ronald Berndt (1962). Later Burrumarra established the Mala Leaders Council. Its function was to protect Yolngu law and "...bring black and white people together," and also promote Yolngu management of their own affairs. As Chairman of this body, Burrumarra attempted to abolish the 'promised' system of marriage. As Shepherdson (1981, p. 23) says:

Burrumarra brought in some reforms such as the termination of the system of promising daughters, they were to be free to choose their own partners. The reforms did not last long because there was too much opposition from the older men.

## 1960s

# In the 1960s Burrumarra was involved in negotiations to stop mining at Gove, travelling to Darwin for the land rights case. Yolngu were powerless to prevent the Nabalco mine going ahead and they resorted to symbolic gestures in order to demonstrate and reaffirm to themselves their proper place as land owners. With Mungurawuy and Mawulan, then community leaders at Yirrkala, Burrumarra cut down a 'foreign tree' that was growing at the sacred area at Cape Arnhem. Burrumarra said:

The tree was making us say yes to the Balanda all the time for things like mining. The stump of the tree helps us to remember we are the landowners.

# Burrumarra assisted with the promotion of Aboriginal voting rights and travelled widely to places such as Mount Isa, Canberra and Sydney. He was recommended to the government for this work by the missionary Harold Shepherdson and various government people, such as Harry Giese. "In those days," Burrumarra said, "...they used to tell us what to do."

# Burrumarra was also involved in the outstation movement and the establishment of the Lake Evella (Gapuwiyak) Aboriginal community.

# Burrumarra was present both at the official opening of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra, and the Anthropology Research Museum (now known as the Berndt Museum of Anthropology) at the University of Western Australia in Perth.

## 1970s

# In 1970 at the completion of the new school buildings at Elcho Island, Burrumarra spoke to a gathering of visiting dignitaries, including Rev. C. F. Gribble, General Secretary of the Methodist Overseas Mission, and Rev. G. Symons, Chairman of the North Australia District of the same body, and paid tribute to the work of Mr. and Mrs. Shepherdson. He spoke of how the local school had grown

from a little gathering under a tree, to a shed, and now there were five buildings with twenty three teachers and ten teaching assistants. Burrumarra said: “We want your name on this school as a way to say thank you to you, we are proud to have Shepherdson College.” (Year Book 1970, p. 1) One of the five buildings was named after Burrumarra.

# Supporting the introduction of the school bilingual program at Elcho Island in 1973, Burrumarra said, was one of the most significant things he had done in his life.

# In 1978 Burrumarra was awarded an M.B.E. by the Governor General, Sir Zelman Cowen at a ceremony at Elcho Island for services to community development, education, and anthropology. He was recommended by the Rev. Wilbur Chaseling and Harold Shepherdson. The ceremony was attended by the Member for Arnhem, Bob Collins, N.T. Secretary of the Department of Education, Jim Gallacher, Head of the N.T. Welfare Department, Harry Giese, and Senator McCarthy. Participating dignitaries were dressed in sacred Warramiri whale/lightning costumes designed especially for the event by Burrumarra.

### **1988-1993**

# To coincide with Australia’s bicentenary celebrations, Burrumarra designed a Warramiri flag as part of a national treaty proposal by his clan. It is now on permanent display at the University of New South Wales.

# In 1993 Prof John Cawte, an intercultural psychiatrist and long-time friend of Burrumarra, exhibited Warramiri paintings donated to the University of New South Wales and published the book *The Universe of the Warramiri*, at Burrumarra’s request. Cawte said it was the Warramiri leader’s wish that Aboriginal paintings should hang in all Australian and State Government buildings, and all those places where decisions were being made about Yolngu land.

### **3:2 Elcho Island in the 1920s: Burrumarra Reminisces**

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

Life for the young in the days before the mission was largely carefree and Burrumarra had very fond memories of the Elcho Island of his childhood. He reminisced:

Wadangayu, the place where I was born, is in Gupapuyngu-Lialanmirr territory. This story is from before the time of the mission and Batju, a Gupapuyngu-Birkkili man, a close friend of the Warrarniri, was the spokesman for that country.

With the agreement of the Gupapuyngu, we would stay between two and five months, and then go back to our country at Yiringa or other

places... The dry season was the best time; raakay (water chestnuts) could be found in the huge billabong there. Water was sometimes a problem as the year went on. We'd look after those wells and not allow any rubbish in them. In the jungle we could find water as well.

At daybreak we would collect firewood before setting out. We went in groups of about ten or so. Ten would go for goanna, ten for bandicoot or possum, ten for raakay, ten for fish or stingray, and if we had a canoe, for turtle. We would be out for two or three hours, until we had enough food. We would eat any time. If we caught a big trevally or turtle, this was for everyone. A smaller fish would be enough for just two or three people.

At night, with our stomachs full of lots of different foods, we would sing songs and also perhaps have discussions before sleep. People would talk about the hunt, what they would do tomorrow, where we could go or not go because sacred things were there.

If we had a lot of food and came back early we would still spend our time doing constructive things. Sometimes we would find our girlfriends in the bush, but this often led to trouble. Life wasn't always easy, but it was free. It was a free life.

If we were visiting another clan, like at Wadangayu, all our camp dogs would follow us from our country. Sometimes this caused problems, for the dog doesn't know about right or wrong, and might bark at a baby and then up would come trouble. I had a great dog once. I called him by a sacred whale name and someone killed him. When he died we made bunggul djama (ceremony) and then maridjama (fight).

Sometimes our family would go to other places on business if a ceremony started up, or we might get a message that five turtles had been caught at Yirringa and they needed help to eat it all. It would last perhaps four days but not six before going bad. So off we'd go.

## **Strife between the clans**

Life was not always so idyllic. Burrumarra recalls a time of great strife between the clans. Most warfare, Burrumarra said, was about either women or sacred matters, or both. The following is an account from the late 1920s. He said:

The Dhuwa leader had two promised wives at Galiwin'ku, but when he went to claim them, they had gone with a man from another clan, who was within his rights, as he was also the right skin for those girls.

The Dhuwa leader was a very strong and formidable opponent. He was very angry. Single handedly, he ordered all the people out of Galiwin'ku, about forty all told, on threat of death.

That one man could do this has always amazed Burrumarra. This was the man who had initiated Burrumarra and had led the mortuary ceremony for his father.

No-one could stand up to him. He said to the people of Galiwin'ku as they ran, "If you can't fit your women in your canoes, they can swim or you can leave them and the canoes here for me." The people who had always lived at this place fled for their lives to Mooroonga Island, some 80 kilometres away.

The Dhuwa leader's people were living with the Warramiri at Yirringa at that time. My father had died. He would never have approved of that sort of behaviour.

It was not right for those men to fight. They called each other brother. It was against the rangga (sacred law). To talk through these problems was the law of the day but those men never met to reconcile their differences.

The Dhuwa leader drowned not long afterwards in an accident at Bremer Island near Yirrkala. The bitterness surrounding this disagreement was to last many years.

At the time of this incident, Burrumarra and his brothers were returning from Mooroonga Island to Yirringa. He recalls:

At Mooroonga I had met Motuwuy, the last of the Yalukal people of Elcho Island. They are whale people, just like us. He could have had as many wives as he wanted but he had no children and was already old. We were on the way back to Yirringa when we started to hear the stories of what had happened at Galiwin'ku. We had about 120 kilometres to travel. It was not our business, but we were very frightened. If a Wangurri or Warramiri man had been speared then we might have thought they might get us too, but still we were scared.

In crossing from Howard Island to Elcho Island, Burrumarra swam the three kilometres with the aid of a pandanus log and the in-coming tide, a feat that would not even be considered today, but which was commonplace then.

We were very thirsty and wanted to drink from the wells, but my elder brother said no. There might be an ambush. We had to push on. The trip took us three days. At night we lit no fires and could hardly sleep. We hunted along the way but most of the food we caught we had to throw back as there was no time to cook it. We survived without water almost for all of that time. The final swim between Gawa and Yirringa took several hours but at last we were home.

### **3:3 Life in the Yirrkala Region in the 1930s**

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

In 1935, Burrumarra, on Andrew Birindjaway's recommendation, went with the missionaries of Milingimbi to locate the site of a new mission. The Methodist

Church was expanding its activities and the whole of the north-east corner of Arnhem Land was at that time an unexplored wilderness. Missionary Theodore Webb was leading the search and settled upon an area known as Yirrkala. He wrote (1935a, p. 8):

This situation is delightfully picturesque and uplifting. A lovely little stream, fresh right to the mouth, enters a shallow bay, sheltered by a high rocky point from the prevailing winds.

On Sunday morning, 22 September 1935, the first Christian service was held at the new community of Yirrkala and the purpose of the mission was explained to a gathering of twenty-five Yolngu, including Burrumarra. The atmosphere was positive with people keen to see the project started. Webb (1935a, p. 8) wrote:

Some of the [Yolngu] indicated their intention of going down as far as Port Bradshaw and Caledon Bay, and others across to Arnhem Bay and Cape Wilberforce, for the purpose of bringing the various coastal groups together at Yirrkala.

Of the early days, missionary-in-residence Wilbur Chaseling (1957, p. 14) said:

Many small hordes came to Yirrkala within a few weeks of our arrival and set up their camps on the beach. We offered employment in clearing the ground and cultivating and planting crops. Payment in the form of flour and tobacco was made for all work done ... and later in the form of food grown on the station.

Burrumarra had previously lived for some time in this area and knew it well. He had also worked as a diver with English trepanger Fred Gray. The following quote is from Theodore Webb and describes Burrumarra's former work place:

Rounding Macnamara Island we headed up Caledon Bay and at six o'clock came to anchor off Mr. Gray's trepanging camp... No more convincing demonstration of the essential tribal unity of these scattered hordes could be found than in the personnel of that group on the shore at Caledon Bay, for there were representatives of clans from west of the Goyder River, from Howard Island, Elcho Island, from Buckingham Bay, Cape Wilberforce, from south of Arnhem Bay, east of Arnhem Bay, Melville Bay, Cape Arnhem, Caledon Bay and south of Cape Gray. [There was Demala, Burrumarra, Galpagalpa, Murupula, Banyurnnyurr, Binjarrpuma, Bunungu etc.]

The evening I spent with Mr. Gray and his companions giving them some little news of the outside world and listening to the story of their experiences, while my boys sat with the local men talking, laughing, singing and enjoying themselves in the way these Aboriginals love to do. (Webb, 1935b, p. 5)

Burrumarra had impressed Fred Gray. In an interview that I conducted with him in Darwin in 1989, Mr. Gray said that Burrumarra was one of “nature’s gentlemen” and “one of the nicest young men that worked with him in the early days.” Burrumarra went by the name of Wurrthunbuy at that time. Of Burrumarra, Mr Gray said:

He was a very intelligent young man. He had an answer for everything.

Whilst working on Groote Eylandt, he stayed very close to Fred. Burrumarra remembers:

The Mamarika people at Ambukambu (Umbakumba) were followers of the whale, like us. The headman there knew about Dholtji and knew what an important place it was. He told his people to watch after me and said he also would stay close to me to hear what I had to say. He wanted to give me money and wives. I told him that my older brother Nyambi was the leader of the Warramiri and only he could accept these things. I thought too that it might get me into trouble. I said to Mr Gray, “I want to stay with you, there’s too many young girls here,” and he understood.

Burrumarra worked for Gray again in 1938, and on his return to Yirrkala he formed a very close friendship with the missionaries. Chaseling (1957, p. 35) writes:

Burrumarra was our interpreter and spent a lot of time with us, and one day, when he went ‘walkabout’, a ghost hid his dinner. He had found a nest of turtle eggs and covered them with sand whilst he went for oysters. On his return it seemed that some of the eggs had disappeared, and when he had searched in vain for Yolngu footprints he naturally concluded that some ‘mali’ (spirit) had been at work. Two weeks later he heard that a relative had died, and thereupon concluded that the mali of the dead relative had taken the eggs to show that he was a spirit and no longer in the flesh.

In those early years of the mission, Burrumarra taught Chaseling to speak a Yolngu language while he learnt to speak English fluently. Chaseling (1957, p. 50) writes:

[Yolngu] are born linguists. Youths amuse themselves by conversing in some little known dialect. Old Wonggu occasionally introduced a Macassan sentence into ordinary conversation... using this dialect learnt 50 years previously from East India traders.

Burrumarra’s dedication to the missionaries and the mission was unquestioning. He recalled one time when he and four others, in a canoe built by Mawulan, paddled 150 kilometres from Yirrkala to Milingimbi to get medical help for Chaseling. It took one week to get there, he said, and two weeks to get back. Chaseling was suffering from acute appendicitis and the missionary Harold Thornell (1986, p. 49) recorded the event:

I explained the position to the Aborigines and called for five men to carry a message across by sea to Milingimbi for help. There was no lack of volunteers for the dangerous mission. I wrote a message for the wireless operator at Milingimbi and another to Dr Clyde Fenton, the Flying Doctor... The dug-out canoe set off... As it was the cyclone season, those men [including Burrumarra] had to battle through heavy seas in their tiny craft... conditions of near-nightmare proportions... Burrumarra was Chaseling's constant travelling companion.

The following passage relates a further time when Chaseling's life was saved by the Yolngu of Yirrkala. It is told here first by Burrumarra in his own words in 1991, and then by Chaseling from his book *Yulengor: Nomads of Arnhem Land*. Burrumarra said:

Chaseling, Djirin [Wonggu's son] and I were on our way to Cape Arnhem to see a sick woman. On the way, off Miles Island, the boat's petrol blew up. Djirin was unharmed. He jumped straight into the water. My arm was badly burnt. It was white and the skin was hanging off. My legs too were burnt. We were in the water for about three hours, swimming. The sea was rough and the wind strong. A canoe came from Shady Beach. It was Mili [Milirrpum]. Other Yolngu came to us. When I got to the beach the wind and the effects of the petrol on my body was very painful. Mawulan and others carried me to the mission. Mungurrawuy was so sad to see me this way, he was crying.

The next day the Government steamboat took me and Mr Chaseling to Darwin. The trip took about one week. The boat doctor also helped me. I was in hospital for one week. It was my first trip to Darwin. For the first time I saw black and white people working together, helping, and living with one another, Yolngu and policeman, Yolngu and the welfare people. It made me happy. They were even drinking together, although I never drank myself.

Chaseling (1957, p. 107) recalls the same event:

Early one morning two [Yolngu] left with me on a launch to take medical aid to a horde [hunting group] about thirty miles from Yirrkala. Shortly afterwards the engine gave trouble, and after I had set this right a spark escaped from the magneto cable and ignited petrol fumes in the cabin and exploded the fuel. In a few minutes the boat was hopelessly ablaze from stem to stem and we had to dive overboard to extinguish the flames on our limbs and clothing. We were then about a mile from a small rocky island and started to swim towards it, but my knees were badly burnt and I was floundering badly. The boys then closed in and told me to put a hand on either of their shoulders and in this way, helped me ashore. One boy was uninjured

and swam the channel to the mainland for a canoe in which we hoped to make our way home. Whilst he was away, the other [Burrumarra] regaled me with stories of several fatal shark attacks, and casually remarked that while I had been tinkering with the engine, they had watched a twelve foot shark cruising round the launch...

I took Burrumarra to Darwin for medical treatment and after a few days I brought him from hospital. He attracted some attention by his awkward gait, and another nomad waved his hands and looked questioningly toward us, till Burrumarra answered him with laughter and further hand movements. He told me he had just been asked if he had been drinking whisky and where had he got it?

Reflecting on the experience, Chaseling (1957, p. 107) wrote:

Aboriginal courage is of the highest order and their loyalty and devotion are above question.

### **Burrumarra renounces magic**

At the time of the mission Burrumarra and many others of his generation decided that the use of magic was wrong and they would not be involved with it. He said that the good things that a clan possesses could so easily be used for the wrong purposes. The following story is one he related to missionary Chaseling (1957, p. 115):

An old gnarled tree in the Wessel Islands [at Rrunhawu] shelters the spirits of octopuses and peculiar rock formations near Cotton Island are also octopus spirit centres. If a nomad wishes to harm another he visits either site and instructs a spirit octopus to enter the victim's body, in an invisible form, or to change into a fish which the victim will catch and eat to his destruction.

Two men from Arnhem Bay were killed in the course of a long feud, so their mother went to an octopus centre [in Warramiri land]... She told the octopus spirit to travel into enemy territory and there change into a large shell-back turtle, to float near the shore, and to remain inactive till caught and eaten: "And when they eat you, you kill them," she said.

And Burrumarra said that it happened that way. At Port Bradshaw, several women and children died when they ate the turtle without paying attention to the poison glands.

### **A walk in the wilderness**

The following story is from Burrumarra's days as a 'house boy' at Yirrkala in 1938. The author, zoologist Charles Barrett, wrote a number of books and articles on the tropics. He had asked Burrumarra to lead a long walk from Yirrkala to

Melville Bay, a distance of some thirty miles. Barrett was looking for new species of insects and shells for Australian museums. It was a tough journey over a faint walking track. On the way back, Barrett was convinced Burrumarra was lost. He wrote:

Only one of my companions spoke English, Burrumarra, who had been a mission boy for several years. Burrumarra knew the track which runs across the corner of Arnhem Land, a pathway worn by the traffic of naked feet, centuries ago. He assured me our adventure would end all right. It was only a little walkabout for him. My doubts though, were justified [at one point], for the boys couldn't agree about direction. Burrumarra climbed a ridge; the other boy kept straight on...

"All right, when we find track, Burrumarra? Where's that pad [path]... you're bushed again," I asked.

Burrumarra pointed to the ground. I looked down; then a bit sheepishly at the boy. We had been following the pad for half a mile. I hadn't noticed the faint way over the ironstone rubble and through dry grass.

"How the devil do you boys find your way about in this country?" I inquired.

Burrumarra drew himself up, tapped the side of his head and grinned; "Whitefellow big fool in the bush; blackfellow think." (Barrett, 1941, p. 84)

Burrumarra said that 'whitefellows' are still fools in the bush today.

On their return to Yirrkala after a long day, Barrett, exhausted and in pain from the journey, said he would not walk such a distance for all the ants and shells in Arnhem Land. He presented Burrumarra with a brand new naga (sarong) and a promised pipe. He says that Burrumarra stuck into a fold [of tobacco] and went about his houseboy duties cheerfully, as if their 'little' adventure had been a holiday outing for him. (Barrett, 1941, p. 84)

### **The last great makarrata**

A makarrata is a peace making ceremony. After someone has been murdered, the aggrieved party's family usually demands retribution. The accused runs before a group of men armed with spears that have their tips removed so they won't seriously injure their target. On completion, a spear is usually thrust through the leg of the accused. This was sometimes, but not always, the end of the matter.

This story is about one such makarrata involving a man from the Yirritja moiety. Burrumarra said:

I will not say his name because he has many children and they might get upset. My purpose is to show the law in action as it was at this time.

This man was a notorious figure in Arnhem Land. He had a reputation as being a treacherous killer. He was, however, a friend of many visiting scientists. At one time, he was an associate of the anthropologist Donald Thomson. He and Burrumarra had worked as divers for Fred Gray. Several of his paintings appear in Australian State art galleries.

Burrumarra said:

I saw lots of makarrata when I was young. They were very common. I saw them at Milingimbi, at Wadangayu, and at Yirrkala. The last really big one that I saw was at Caledon Bay. After this time, the makarrata was just like a fight.

I was in my early twenties and very strong at that time. I had been living with Wonggu, the 'king' of the Balamomo at Yirrkala, and had worked for Fred Gray. This was after the time when the bunggawa Dakiyarr [Tuckiar, Wonggu's son], had been killed by police in Darwin. Yolngu law was very strong then, and there was bad feelings towards the Balanda and Balanda law.

This Yirritja man had been on the run from both Yolngu and Balanda. No-one could catch him. He would kill a man here, then go off somewhere else and kill again. He would steal both women and madayin. He was big trouble for both Dhuwa and Yirritja clans. The Wangurri leader Harry Makarrwola and I both called him 'brother'. The Balanda policemen Bill Harney and Ted Robertson had both tried to catch him, but they couldn't.

He had killed a man of the Balamomo people, Wonggu's clan, and a makarrata was to be held. This was at Caledon Bay. Fred Gray was asked by Wonggu to be there. He thought Gray's presence might help stop the trouble spreading. He took photographs of the ceremony.

It was a big gathering. I saw so many spears aimed against my 'brother' that it made me feel sorry for him. They all threw their spears but none hit. He was too good; too quick. At the end of the makarrata a Marrakulu Yolngu put a spear through his thigh.

Wonggu was still not satisfied. Two of his sons, Djirin and Dangatji demanded that he show Wonggu sacred paintings belonging to his mother's clan. They wanted to shame him. In those days, as now, these were the most precious things. Only fully initiated men were allowed to see them and then only if the leader agreed. He told me afterwards how ashamed he was. I said nothing to him.

The makarrata had little effect however. Straight away he stole a young girl and was on the run. I told my older brother Nyambi. He believed it was just a matter of time before this man was speared to death. He could be killed for any of his crimes; for showing the madayin, for stealing a woman, or for killing a man.

Word got back to Harry Makarrwola at Milingimbi. Harry had friends all through north-east Arnhem Land. He sent the message out to them. "All who know me and know Dhalingbuy (the Wangurri sacred area) listen. Don't kill him. Just stop him and stop the stories about him spreading."

This didn't work either. Harry, and the man's closest relatives and other Yirritja leaders set a trap for him. During ceremonial business to which he was invited, he was not permitted to eat the sacred warraga (cycad) bread of the Yirritja moiety. This stopped him.

We are talking about his honour; honour for business, honour for living. He should have been a bungawa (leader) but he killed and lied too much. When the leaders refused to allow him to eat the cycad he could not reply to them. They did not want to hear his voice. They were ashamed. His actions had caused much worry and sadness for them all. That man died at an old age at Elcho Island. We don't know if it was the work of a galka (sorcerer) or not.

### 3:4 World War 2 Stories

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

Burrumarra's wartime contribution included the supervision of Yolngu building the Gove airstrip, coastal surveillance between Gove and Elcho Island, and delivering the mail to the missions by dug-out canoe. Burrumarra was not paid for his military work. He survived on a small mission wage and rations.

All of the major settlements, including Mililingimbi and the Wessel Islands, were bombed by the Japanese. Perhaps the most dramatic incident that took place during the Second World War was the bombing of the patrol boat HMAS Patricia Cam by the Japanese off the Wessel Islands and the capture and later execution of the then head of the Methodist Overseas Mission, Len Kentish, in Dobo in the Aru Islands. A number of Yolngu men from Mililingimbi, Elcho Island and Yirrkala were on board the boat at the time and most were killed.

Two of the men had been sent from Yirrkala to Elcho Island to pick up mail for the missionary Harold Thornell. They had paddled their dug-out canoe, collected the mail, and then accepted an offer of a return trip to Yirrkala on the 'Pat Cam'.

When news got back to Yirrkala of the deaths of the Yolngu there was great mourning. Missionary Thornell was held responsible for the deaths for had he not sent them to Elcho Island they would not have died. He wrote:

(Djirin) and a young native called [Burrumarra] slipped away from the camp unnoticed and came to see me. For days past, they explained, there had been meetings in the camp against me. I had caused the deaths of the two members of the clan because I had sent them to collect my mail from Elcho Island... I was profoundly grateful for the warning, especially as I knew [Djirin] and [Burrumarra] had risked their own lives to deliver it. But now I had more than possible Japanese invaders to worry about: the greatest threat now came from among those I had regarded as friends. (Thornell, 1986, p. 143)

There were a number of attempts on Thornell's life, so Djirin and Burrumarra both took turns at keeping watch over the mission house during the night.

After several weeks, when the men ceased their vigil, Thornell knew the time of danger had passed.

A large contingent of Allied forces were based at Yirrkala during the war and the time is looked back upon by Yolngu in a favourable light. Burrumarra's war-time friend, Alan Stark, had not seen or heard of him since 1943. In correspondence with the author (7 October, 1991), Stark said of Burrumarra:

He was the senior man of the mission which provided the RAAF with assistance on 321 Radar. He was quiet, conservative and abhorred liquor, no doubt as a result of mission training. I recall the time he turned his head away during one of our evening meetings when an airman breathed a liquor breath on him... Burrumarra loved to talk to us and he would frequently come to our tent at night when we were off duty and talk for hours on all kinds of subjects. Burrumarra knew about Sydney, Melbourne and Broken Hill and said one day he would visit them all... He was cool under pressure and followed the religious teachings of Kolinio Naulago, [who assisted at the Yirrkala mission]. We sometimes visited the church at the mission. One Sunday with a visiting minister taking the service and with Burrumarra translating for the local people, a group of Aborigines from other parts, Caledon Bay I think, caused trouble. A quarrel began and spears were thrown but the service continued without interruption. Burrumarra continued translating as though nothing was happening. I think the two or three airmen present were more concerned. It all happened in the middle of a prayer but nothing was to interrupt the prayer.

Burrumarra remembered these days well. He had never been a drinker and despised those who used alcohol. The abuse of it, he believed, was the greatest of all threats to Yolngu. In these early times, he saw how it affected his people. He would see them coming back from Darwin intoxicated and hear the disturbing talk of their exploits. Their sorry tales disgusted and shocked him. So strict has Burrumarra been in his life that even the suggestion of him even tasting beer offended him.

While Burrumarra was away at Yirrkala, the majority of his family continued to live at Nangingburra, at the northern extremity of Elcho Island where they were involved in one of the more famous rescues of Australian servicemen in distress.

There was no mission at Elcho Island at that time. In 1923, one had been established, but because of the presence of a mining company, the Northern Australia Petroleum Company, the Methodist Church decided to relocate their station at Milingimbi, 80 kilometres away to the west.

In 1942 a RAAF pilot, George Booth and two others, crash landed his plane in Arnhem Bay whilst on a mission from Batchelor airfield to Groote Eylandt. It took them thirty-three days to reach the safety of Milingimbi mission. They had struggled for many days in a flimsy canoe made of sections of the crashed plane and by the time they reached the northern tip of Elcho Island with still a long sea passage ahead, they feared for the worst. On arriving at a place called Nangingburra, Booth (1988, p. 79) was later to write:

“Hey look!” Frank shouted. We shaded our eyes and peered into the distance. Unmistakably, perhaps a mile along the beach we saw him, a lone Aboriginal striding purposefully in our direction... “He looks seven feet tall ... No, he has a baby on his shoulders.”

“He’s not carrying spears, but I think he has a tomahawk ... doesn’t wear any clothes.” [The women as well as the men wore only a small piece of paperbark suspended from the waist] He walked up to us quite calmly as though meeting two white people was an everyday occurrence. He came to a halt and waited expectantly.

This was Mattjuwi, one of Burrumarra’s older brothers. The greeting was a joyful one and a short celebration followed. After getting to know one another and discovering with horror that there was no mission settlement on Elcho Island, the crew asked if Mattjuwi could take them to Milingimbi. Offered a substantial reward of goods from the mission store, Mattjuwi agreed. Of the Warramirri leader, Booth (1988, p. 83-85) wrote:

[Mattjuwi] was slightly built, deep chested but with surprisingly spindly legs. He stood and moved with a dignity that is difficult to describe. Certainly, I had never before seen an Aboriginal so confident and manly and I suppose he had an air of superiority, even nobility, which derived from total control of his environment. We knew instantly he would save us...

[Mattjuwi] and six men of his tribe arrived with bundles of food wrapped in paperbark ... Not since our encounter with a sea bird had our gastric juices flowed so freely. We were ravenous and ate until nothing remained...

[It rained that night and] they set about making us a shelter... Around a semi-circle, they thrust spears into the ground at intervals of about half a metre. These were pushed inwards and tied at the top. Cross vines were entwined, and, working from the bottom, they covered the framework with large sheets of paperbark. Next, they scraped out the wet sand and finally, lit a fire near the opening... Smoke drove off hordes of mosquitoes. We were cosy and dry... As we tried to sleep, we wondered why these people should be so extraordinarily kind and considerate.

Of Burrumarra’s brothers, Booth (1988, p. 86) wrote:

[Naymbi], the eldest...was deep chested and powerfully built... it was he who had issued the orders at the canoe launching. He boasted proudly that he had been “...drunk longa Darwin.” His knowledge of pidgin was excellent and he recognized most of the coins we showed him... [Wathi] was a thin, sickly leper... [Gawirrin] seemed to find fun in everything. His mastery of pidgin was very limited. He was the tribe’s number one hunter. We watched in awe as he speared fish from a rocking canoe. [Balwutjmi] was a loner... he never hunted with the men; they simply ignored his existence.

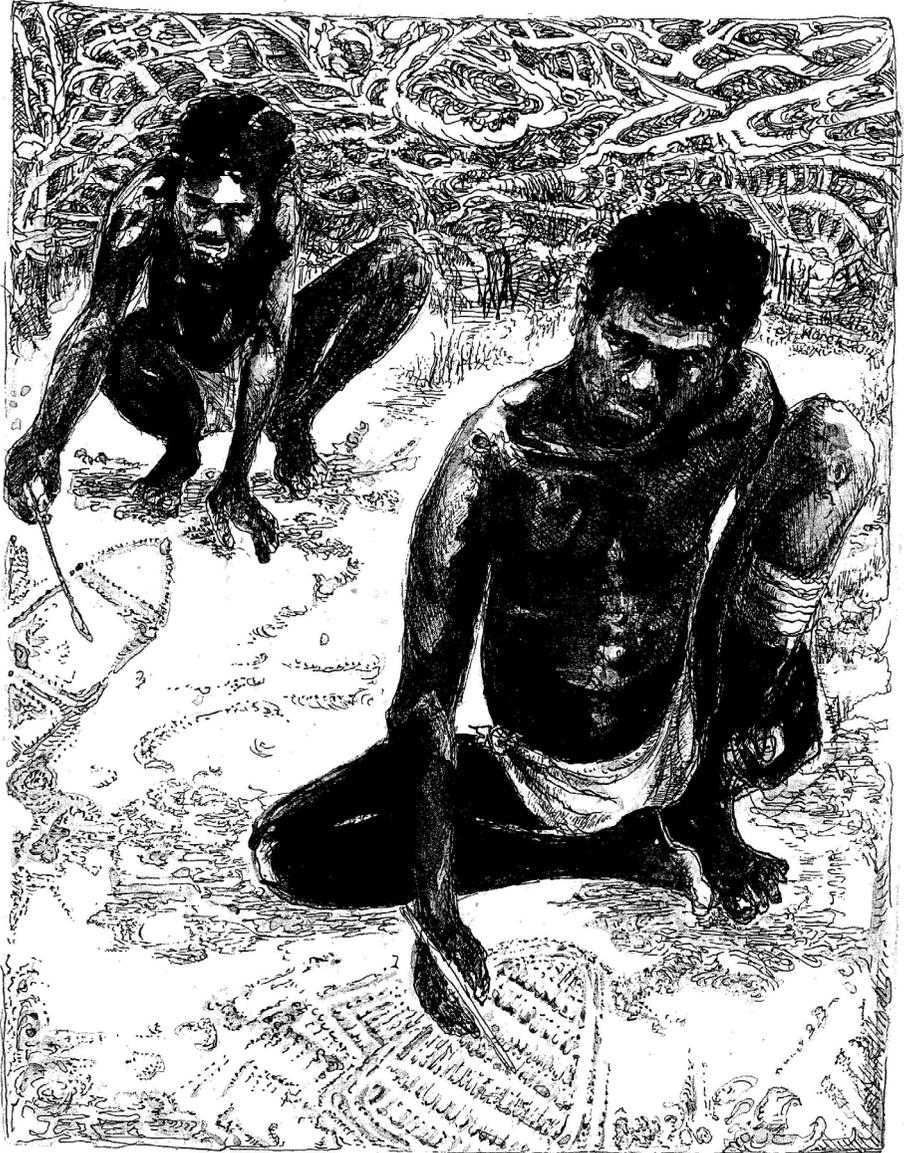
Of the diet, Booth (1988:90) wrote:

By the end of the second day with the Aborigines we sampled almost the entire Arnhem menu. We had guzzled on yams, cor cor [bush honey]... fish, shark and stingray ... oysters, crabs, and shellfish... but there were many other delicacies to sample. A dozen eggs made a royal banquet... the discovery of a turtles nest was a grand occasion.

The soldiers owed their lives to Burrumarra's brothers who paddled the crew to Milingimbi in a newly made dugout canoe.

Booth and his men were very grateful. In the press write-up of the story in 1942, the Yolngu barely rated a mention, much to the disappointment of the Air Force men. This was partly Booth's reason for writing his book which was called *33 Days*.

Booth returned to Elcho Island in 1989 to meet some of the family who had helped him. He did not know that the fuselage off the Gannet that he had transformed into a raft in order to escape Arnhem Bay, was still on the island.



*Beliefs***4:1 Introducing the Warramiri**

In terms of population, about 300 Yolngu identify themselves as Warramiri. This represents a substantial increase from pre-mission days when anthropologist Lloyd Warner, traversing the area in the late 1920s, suggested that average clan numbers were around fifty, though fluctuating constantly as a result of inter-clan warfare.

The word Warramiri means ‘high red cloud’ and there are two branches of this clan. There is Burrumarra’s Warramiri-Budalpudal branch, whose major Dreaming sites are at Dholtji on Cape Wilberforce, and the English Company’s Islands, and there is the Warramiri-Mandjikay branch, which is linked to Matamata and Gawa.

In the living memory of senior Warramiri, there used to be other branches of the Warramiri including the Wuduymung, the Guku-Warramiri, and the Girkir (Rika). Other groups are also known to have existed in the past and there are references to them in Warramiri personal names. How and why these various branches became extinct is a mystery.

The term Warramiri also refers to a language spoken by clan members. From the Pama-Nyungan group of languages, the Warramiri language is not widely spoken today and, unlike many of the other Yolngu languages, has not been the subject of detailed linguistic studies. Apart from senior men and women, who are themselves multilingual, most of the younger Warramiri speak Djambarrpuynu, the lingua franca at Elcho Island. Djambarrpuynu is the language taught in the school’s bilingual program.

For coastal and island Aboriginal people throughout Australia, the traditional estate does not end at the shoreline. Dreaming tracks flow out over the seas forming a binding link to the land. And yet Aboriginal title, for the most part, extends only as far as the low water mark. The Warramiri Dreaming is centred on the open sea and coral reef and, in his lifetime, Burrumarra was a major advocate of sea rights.

All Warramiri claim a common ancestry through shared beliefs in certain totemic sea species, most notably the whale, octopus, and cuttlefish. Elders possess ritual objects (or rangga) linked to these totems. Unity within the Warramiri clan is also strengthened by the fact that since the 1960s, a majority of members use the surname ‘Bukulatjpi’, which was the name of an historical Warramiri leader.

Warramiri country lies to the north and east of the settlement of Galiwin’ku, where a majority of clan members now live. Warramiri also live at the other coastal communities of Milingimbi and Yirrkala, and at outstations at the northern tip of Elcho Island, including Gawa and Banthula.

Warramiri homelands on the English Company's Islands are uninhabited and infrequently visited, although discussions are continuing within the clan to make Dholtji a large settlement with 'many fine houses' as Yolngu oral history suggests was once the case.

## 4:2 Sea Dreamings and Human Rights

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

On the importance of Yolngu beliefs and practices, Burrumarra said that there were three broad principles drawn from his lifelong learning that he emphasized when talking with youth. He said these words first in his own language then translated them for me into English.

Nguwatjuma djama bunggul ga manikay Dholtji wu ga nhunguway.

*Do the ceremony properly for your homeland and for yourself.*

Marngi iya ngayiwu ga ngunguway.

*Understand the land and everything on it so you can manage it properly.*

Marngi iya nhunguway djamawu ga bunggayawinyawu djinal Dholtji ga Australia'wu.

*When you are a bunggawa [leader] you will stand up and do the business properly for your homeland and Australia.*

"This is the real human rights," Burrumarra said.

Burrumarra's early life was distinguished by the study of the Dreaming through the songs and ceremonies of his 'sea country', with a strong focus on the totemic whale and octopus. He said:

We live close on that law. We sing Nyayum Djangu Manda (I am the octopus), and in our life we ask ourselves, "Why are we doing this bunggul [ceremony]? Who are we doing it for?" Our leaders direct our learning in these matters.

Burrumarra's education into the 'business life' of the clan began with his initiation and being shown sacred objects (rangga), especially the flag rangga, for the first time. The leader would explain its meaning on one level but, as Burrumarra said, real understanding would not come until later, after much discussion, reflection and experience. As a young man however, he could walk proudly over his land knowing he was an integral part of it.

He was initiated at Dhokirr on the Wessel Islands in the late 1920s. His oldest brother Djarrambi was in charge of the proceedings. It was a memorable time, and he recalled some details:

I was initiated in the jungle behind Rrunhawu at the same time as Danggalang, the last man of the Brarrngu clan. Like everyone else, I was scared. Visitors came by canoe from many places. I am from the sea. I was told about the whale, octopus, squid, flag, boat, knife and the anchor [Dreamings]. These are the most important things to us Warramiri. A Dhuwa moiety leader Dick Marik'ngu led the bandirra (flag) ceremony, one of our most important ones. After his part, my older brother Djarrambi took over.

In the early 1930s Burrumarra travelled widely and made many contacts. Of his early training, he particularly remembered the bunggawa (leader) Bambang, his father's older brother:

We were preparing for a bunggul (ceremony) at Dholtji. Bambang was staring at me and I was frightened. He said, "When you do the bunggul you are holding Dholtji for yourself. You can call yourself an owner." Mungurrawuy also said that to me when I was younger. He said, "The bandirra [flag] bunggul is for Dholtji. Do it properly." I'll never forget those men.

When I was about sixteen, an older Warramirri man who I called gathu (son), cut [vertical] lines in both of my shoulders as a sign of gurrutu [kinship]. This was because one day I would have children. This was to remind me of my responsibilities as a parent. [The young are carried sideways on a man's shoulder] It was his gift to me and I thank him for that.

### **Burrumarra's Belief**

Warramiri beliefs are centred on Dholtji and the islands of the English Company's group. Of these places, Burrumarra said:

We have many islands, more than thirty, and some are far out to sea. They are quiet places to sit and think about the organisation of the world. If you go there all the answers to your questions will come to you. It is a study area. It's like a mountain with Warramiri names on it. So we must climb it. We have no option, and when we get to the top we can see far in all directions.

Before we are born, our spirit comes from the sea to our mother. For a Warramiri, this 'marr' or power comes from the reef. This place has a wish for us, and it gives it only to the right person. It is a blessing from that place, and on that person's death it goes back.

For Burrumarra the home of this spirit was a reef at Truant Island, the home of the mermaid.

The spirit of the sea has been with me all my life... That's why I've lived so long. It has protected me. I can call on her at any time and she is with me...

Burrumarra said that the most important Warramiri totems are the whale and the octopus:

There is something in the mind of the whale which is also in ours. Our mind and body are enriched when we know the whale or octopus story, even a small part of it. When the water is hot and the land dry, the whale often beaches itself. It is like communion with the land, a blessing. It's like if a Navy person gives you Navy things you can say I am part of the navy. When you eat food from the land and sea, are you a part of it? When I follow the law of the whale and do the actions of the bunggul for it only, not the kangaroo or boomerang, I can say I am living for the whale. When we do the dance we are holding ourselves to the land. We bring honour to it. When we all line up, we are the whale. It moves when we move. We worship ourselves really.

When it comes to beliefs, Burrumarra says the Yolngu have doubts just like everybody else.

The Warramiri and Gumatj used to say that when someone dies, the soul goes on the back of the whale to the island of Badu but I don't believe it. I do the actions of the bunggul, but I don't follow it.

I believe in both ways, the traditional and the Christian life, but we have so many questions. That's why we talk and discuss meanings. We search for the purpose of life in our history and in the land itself. And now we have the Bible as well.

### **4:3 Yolngu Sea Rights in Manbuynga ga Rulyapa (Arafura Sea) and the Indonesian Connection**

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In October 1994, Yolngu at Elcho Island held a press conference and made a televised call for an Indigenous marine protection strategy for Northern Territory coastal waters between Maningrida and Numbulwar and to the north to the Australian-Indonesian international boundary. In this zone, the Yolngu said, were "...sacred Aboriginal totems, song cycles, ceremonies and the pathways of creational beings." The aim of the call was to initiate discussion on the need to combine both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge in the management of the Arafura Sea, which the Yolngu call 'Manbuynga ga Rulyapa' and for Aboriginal people to progressively reassume responsibility for various levels of management of the area, based on their customary laws.

The word Manbuynga refers to Yirritja moiety waters, and Rulyapa to Dhuwa moiety waters. The steering committee (Ginytjirrang Mala) established

to represent Yolngu interests in Manbuynga ga Rulyapa included members of a range of groups from both of these moieties, including the Wangurri, Gumatj, Dhalwangu, Gupapuyngu, Ritharrngu, Djambarrpuyngu and Galpu clans. Only two groups have dreamings exclusively from the sea, namely the Yirritja moiety Warramiri (Budalpudal) clan, and the Dhuwa moiety Djambarrpuyngu (Wutjara) clan. Representatives of these acted as spokespersons for the Yolngu as a whole.

A draft proposal was released by the Ginytjirrang Mala (1994) at the press conference, and the following recommendations were put forward:

- Australian maps should refer to the Arafura Sea as Manbuynga ga Rulyapa
- The Australian Government should consult with Yolngu about their interests in the sea
- A bilateral co-management arrangement with Indonesia should be pursued by the Australian government and Yolngu
- The marine strategy should be based on Yolngu management principles
- The government should recognize Yolngu sea laws
- Yolngu should set minimum safety standards for ships traversing Manbuynga ga Rulyapa
- Yolngu should own and operate their own fishing enterprises, and
- Mining proposals for the sea should proceed according to Yolngu law.

It was suggested that if the call was ignored, the Yolngu would attempt to claim the entire Arafura Sea under the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA), and force the Northern Territory Government to the negotiating table.

This paper provides one perspective on Yolngu rights to the coral reef, the sea floor, and open sea, north into what is now Indonesia. It is from the Manbuynga or Yirritja moiety viewpoint and drawn from the beliefs of the immediate past leader of the Warramiri clan, David Burrumarra M.B.E. The Indigenous Marine Protection Strategy was launched at his funeral for it was his lifelong wish that Yolngu rights to the sea be acknowledged by Australian and Northern Territory authorities. Burrumarra believed that Yolngu should not only be consulted in matters to do with the sea, but also play an active role in the management of sea resources.

### **Burrumarra and the Sea**

Burrumarra never used European terms such as ‘ownership’ when describing his relationship with the sea. He spoke instead about ‘holding’ the sea through ‘marr’, which Thomson (1975) equated with ‘mana’, which is defined as personal power distinct from the physical. Marr is that feeling of confidence or certainty with regard to one’s belief and purpose in life and is directly linked to the possession of sacred objects and knowledge associated with particular tracts of country, including the sea. (See also Keen 1995, p. 512)

When pushed on the question of ownership, Burrumarra said that the Yolngu were custodians of laws associated with the ‘real owners’ of Manbuynga ga Rulyapa, the totemic whale and octopus creational entities. Non-Aboriginal Australians had no say at this level and were viewed as strangers or interlopers in the eyes of these ancestral beings. It was Burrumarra’s firmly held belief that Yolngu never relinquished their traditional rights to Europeans following colonisation. Neither were such rights forfeited to Macassan (Bugis, Macassarese, and Sama Bajau) fishermen who had been visiting north-east Arnhem Land up to one hundred years before the arrival of the English.

The reality of the world however is that Yolngu are often powerlessness in their dealings with the non-Aboriginal Other. In discussions with government authorities, Burrumarra tried to encourage the view that any business involving the sea should go through the Yolngu, that is, it should be a matter of consultation and negotiation. He saw a need for some form of alliance or partnership so that sea resources could be protected for the enjoyment of future generations of Australians. His call was largely ignored.

Burrumarra’s feelings on belief in the sea were summed up in his often quoted view that “What gold is to the land, the whale is to the sea.” With such a statement, Burrumarra signalled the fact that the Yolngu approach to the sea was of a different order to that of Balanda (non-Aborigines). At one level, Yolngu interest was seen to be of a spiritual order, whereas Balanda interest was considered to be primarily economic. At another level, the material and social benefits that Balanda enjoy as a result of the exploitation of Yolngu land in the form of mining, were seen to have their equivalent in ritual practice associated with Yolngu belief in the whale. The ‘highest’ of sea totems and most redolent with meaning, the whale was the foundation of the wealth of sea people, Burrumarra believed. These stories were ‘too expensive’ to talk about in any detail in anything other than a ceremonial setting.

The Mirrinyungu (whale) was understood to be a symbol of both local and universal significance. It is a product of the salt water itself and the movement of the tide is indicative of the movement of the ancestral whale being. The Warramiri associate themselves with all places that this ancestral being travels to and, as I detail later, it is a Dreaming entity that is understood to connect coastal peoples in northern Australia and Indonesia and beyond.

Reconciling Burrumarra’s description of his Warramiri sea heritage with the anthropological literature on the Yolngu is no easy task. This is primarily because of the land-based focus in descriptions of the legacy of the major Yolngu moiety ancestral beings Lany’tjun and Djang’kawu. At first glance, the Warramiri, as a sea people, appear to be something of an anomaly. For instance, when the Yirritja moiety was originally formed, each Yirritja collective was allotted land, totems, ceremonies, and ceremonial objects by Lany’tjun or one of his emissaries (see Berndt and Berndt, 1975). Yet according to Burrumarra, his branch of the Warramiri have nothing from Lany’tjun in their history.

While he sometimes contradicted himself, Burrumarra stressed that the Warramiri came from the sea and Lany'tjun and other related moiety ancestral figures are not linked to this domain. Lany'tjun is associated with totems from the land and the coastal fringe, but the Warramiri heritage centres on the deep water and the law here is centred upon the creational figure Ngulwardo, the 'old man' or 'king' of the sea. Ngulwardo is the Dreaming entity responsible for the emergence of various Yirritja sea creatures and also Warramiri humans. Cawte (1993, p. 20-1) describes Ngulwardo's form thus:

The God of the Reef... [Ngulwardo] ... is formed like a man, but... senses like a fish through currents deep in the sea, currents from far-off places.

Ngulwardo is the ocean floor bedrock and coral reef, and various sea totems are under its direction. Burrumarra's private collection of paintings included one of Ngulwardo. He was depicted as an aged man with fishing lines (with shell hooks) in each hand, catching the Warramiri totem Yarrwadi or Queenfish.

The boundary between salt and freshwater is the meeting place of the two major branches of Yirritja moiety law. Burrumarra described the difference between the domains in this way:

What is the difference in taste between the barramundi [representing Lany'tjun] and the mullet [representing Ngulwardo]? One comes from the creek and the other from the open sea. Where does this difference come from?

Most Warramiri totems have a mediating role between these spheres of influence; that is, between the land and coastal fringe and the open sea. For example, there is the story of how the barramundi wanted to travel out to the islands off the coast and the deep water, but was prevented from entering Ngulwardo's territory by Warramiri totems. As Warner (1969, p. 34) reports:

In the days... when totems walked the earth as men... Barramundi came from the Wangurri country and tried to go on through to the other clans, but the whale and crayfish totems prevented him; in his efforts to force his way through, he smashed himself into many pieces which flew for many miles and landed in the territories of the other totemic clans in his phratry group [that is, Wangurri, Guyamilili, Wolkara etc] and made their totemic water holes.

Lany'tjun has no direct role in Ngulwardo's territory. Lany'tjun's law terminates on the coast and the two bodies of law are completely separate, except for the fact that Ngulwardo is also Yirritja.

### **The transformations of Ngulwardo**

Ngulwardo communicates directly with the Warramiri as they travel by canoe or swim in deep water or over coral reefs and also, indirectly, through an intermediary, the totemic being Marryalyan (see Cawte, 1993). This Dreaming being works in a 'laboratory' (to use Burrumarra's terminology) under the coral

reef, transforming itself into the various Yirritja creatures that inhabit the seas, such as the Limin (squid), Manda (octopus), Mardi (crayfish), Nyunyul (cuttlefish), Matjurr (flying fox) and also the Luthay, the mystical sea/land/sky snake. Marryalyan is also deemed to be the force which drives the seasons, initiating and terminating the 'Wet' and the 'Dry'. (Cawte, p. 1993: 74)

While manifestations of Ngulwardo and Marryalyan are land creating beings in their own right, their influence is understood to extend well out to sea. The Manda (octopus totem), for instance, is linked to various islands in the English Company's group and also to the Wessel Islands. It is considered to be the guardian of the sea and can stretch out its tentacles well over the horizon in order to bring relief to those in distress.

Sacred octopus sites are located both in waters on the Arnhem Land coast and up to a hundred kilometres to the north of the Wessel Islands, according to Burrumarra. In a similar way, the Matjurr (flying fox), also a transformation of Marryalyan, is linked to sites on the Australian mainland and to reefs off the southern coast of Irian Jaya. Flying foxes are said to travel to the north each year to this land of plenty where they get fat.

### **Mirrinyungu - the whale**

For Burrumarra, the whale was the primary Warramiri totem. Though the whale's bones were said to come from the coral reef, which linked it with Ngulwardo, and it was Yirritja, which linked it with Lany'tjun, the whale was not associated in a creational sense to either of these. As Burrumarra reported, it was a product of the sea itself. It was salt water given physical form, a symbol of the sea. (Warner 1969, p. 353) Its beaching was said to be a blessing for the land. When Yolngu followed this law alone and not the law of the land, Burrumarra said, they could call themselves Nyomba, meaning "...living for the whale, living for the sea."

The Mirrinyungu is associated with the creation of various tracts of land, and also reefs off Cape Wilberforce, Cape Wessel and Cape Arnhem. References to the actions of the totemic whale ancestor appear in numerous contexts in the anthropological literature. In a discussion of the Yirritja Ngaara ceremony, Warner (1969, p. 350) describes how Yolngu performers go through the motions of whales copulating.

There are also myths of creation associated with the beaching of a whale in Munyuku clan territory, stories of how the dugong got its tail from the whale, of Yolngu being swallowed by the whale and being regurgitated as white men (Groger-Wurm, 1973, p. 127), and so on. Warner (1969, p. 350) also notes that the whale is associated with the Yirritja moiety land of the dead, carrying the spirit of the Warramiri dead on their backs to that place.

Most interestingly, there are also a considerable number of narratives that suggest early contacts between Yolngu and Sama Bajau (Sea Gypsies), who Burrumarra

referred to as whale hunters. For example, he relates stories of a hunting party being towed onto the Arnhem Land coast by a harpooned whale; dark-skinned people mysteriously arriving on the coast and living with Yolngu; joint ownership of sea laws with these visitors, and ceremonies held in common on the beaches of Cape Wilberforce, and the Wessel Islands, in Warramiri territory.

### **North into Indonesia**

For the purposes of investigating the Yolngu claim that they have interests far out to sea, in some cases in areas which in all probability are now a part of Indonesia, Burrumarra focused not only on the 'timeless' totemic beliefs of Ngulwardo and Marryalyan, but also on stories of shared belief in the whale and octopus by the Yolngu and the 'whale hunters', and narratives associated with other waves of contact.

Undoubtedly, certain aspects of Warramiri law were created, transformed or extended as a result of the regular journeys that clan members made with Macassans between Arnhem Land, Sulawesi and other Indonesian ports in proto-historic times. One could easily imagine that travel to the north would facilitate the extension of existing ideas and, on return to Arnhem Land, in collaboration with others, new perspectives on the Yolngu Dreamings would emerge. As Watson and Chambers (1989) suggest, the making of maps by European cartographers is part of a process of appropriation of the lands of others. In a similar way, as Yolngu travelled to new places, they too brought various sites and experiences into the framework of their own law, within the supposedly unchanging tradition of the Dreaming.

Despite the fact that Burrumarra never travelled north to Indonesia himself, he was able to pass on to the current generation of Warramiri leaders extensive information about this ongoing association of Yolngu with sites in the open sea in the waters off Arnhem Land in Manbuynga ga Rulyapa. The Warramiri repertoire includes references to vast numbers of reefs and shoals associated with the travels of the mythical whale, octopus, flying fox, and the 'whale hunters'. Stories concerning the latter are the most numerous and are of three broad types:

- Historical episodes of external contact and ceremonial exchange
- Narratives associated with the creation of sacred Warramiri emblems, sites and practices, and
- Stories of the Yirritja moiety 'land of the dead'

The fact that the Yolngu stress that there was a sense of partnership in law with these traditional 'whale hunters' in the distant past has implications in terms of the claim by Yolngu for recognition of rights to reefs and shoals in Manbuynga ga Rulyapa. Some sites in Australian coastal waters are said to be held by the Warramiri through laws that they associate with the whale hunters, but this does not

mean that the whale hunters own these sites. The Warramiri assert their own rights in relation to other Yolngu clans via this law.

A quite different situation arises with regard to sites some hundreds of kilometres off the Australian coast. Several of these were deemed to be the joint responsibility of Yolngu and the whale hunters, but it was Burrumarra's feeling that in the absence of the latter, the Yolngu alone speak for those places. Sites associated with the Yirritja moiety 'land of the dead', by their very nature, are difficult to locate in space and time. At various points, Burrumarra stressed that Yolngu had travelled with the whale hunters to these places in the past, but at other times he said that if one went looking for them now, one would not find them. Both the people and places, he said, were now only to be found in dreams. Yet some are well-known localities, like Layilayi (a small island off Macassar), and Danimba (Tanimbar), or Warru (Aru), in eastern Indonesia's Maluku province. There are literally hundreds of names for the 'land of the dead', which Burrumarra said could be isolated beaches, small islands or reefs, or collections of islands.

### **Managing the sea**

It was Burrumarra's view that management of sites in the sea associated with Warramiri sea totems and laws was once the joint responsibility of both Yolngu and the whale hunters. The presence of Macassans, Japanese and Europeans posed a threat to the maintenance of these laws. With the whale hunters there was a feeling of brotherhood, a sense of shared ownership of law, but from 'different sides'. This is the law that the Yolngu now bring to public attention in the call for an indigenous marine protection strategy. Yolngu customary rights need to be acknowledged, Burrumarra said, and there should be a partnership in management of the sea between all the stakeholders, including Yolngu, the Australian and Northern Territory Governments, and the peoples of Indonesia. It was so in the past, Burrumarra said, and it must be so in the future.

## **4:4 The Totemic Embrace: Belonging and Otherness in the Australian Bush**

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### **Abstract**

*Is there a place in hunter-gatherer imaginations for the concept of species ownership? Analysis of the sacred bond (or 'totemic embrace') between certain Yolngu clans in Australia's Northern Territory and almost 600 species of plants, animals, birds, and fish - including species deemed the joint responsibility of both Yolngu and Balanda - would suggest that there is not. What Yolngu enjoy is something more subtle and enduring than mere ownership. In the words of the late Warramiri elder David Burrumarra, "...the challenge is to live for the totem, not just to make a living from it."*

At a 1995 Darwin-based conference on Ecology and Politics sponsored by an Aboriginal representative body, the topic of the ownership of natural species inspired an enthusiastic discussion. One Yolngu man from the remote coastal community of Galiwin'ku told the audience that his name honoured the spirit of the magpie goose. Another speaker, from Gunbalanya (near Kakadu National Park), said that she was the caretaker of a major magpie goose site, a striking stony hill covered in ancient rock art. Still another Yolngu, from Ramangining in central Arnhem Land, revealed that he was the custodian of magpie goose songs and dances. In their own ways, all three were closely identified with the totemic entity represented by this ever-popular Top End bird. A Northern Territory government conference attendee interjected at this stage and, quite bluntly, said that he didn't care what anyone believed, because the Crown owned the magpie goose. The conversation came to a standstill and the session ended.

Claude Levi-Strauss' ground-breaking scholarship in the 1960s dismissed the 'totemic illusion', instituting in its place a new paradigm in which totems were considered 'good to think with' and not just good to eat. However, hunter-gatherers' enduring relationships with totemic emblems, both animate and inanimate, remain something of an enigma. As Levi-Strauss (1969) admitted, when a Kalahari Bushman says that the life of an elephant is a man's life, or an Australian Aboriginal says that the life of an owl is the life of a woman, it was not at all clear what is being said.

Juliet Clutton-Brook in her 1989 book *The Walking Larder* reminds us that what separates hunting and herding peoples is the concept of ownership of species. So this paper looks beyond the limitations of the 'herder' mentality of domesticating, controlling or otherwise managing human interactions with flora and fauna. Drawing upon an extensive list of totemic affiliations of various Yolngu clans compiled by the author in consultation with the late Warramiri elder David Burrumarra, I provide insight into one of totemism's more elusive (and intricately complicated) concepts - the 'totemic embrace' - that sacred bond of oneness that arises between peoples who share a totemic emblem and who honor a common totemic ancestor. An analysis of totems considered the joint responsibility of both Yolngu and visiting fishermen from Indonesia in pre-colonial days provides the opportunity for me to ask: Was there ever a place in the Yolngu worldview for the concept of species ownership?

## **The project**

In the late 1980s, armed with John Rudder's (1977) *Introduction to Yolngu Science*, I recorded the totemic significance of the vast majority of birds, fish, trees, plants and animals found in north-east Arnhem Land, 592 species in all. Legendary Yolngu anthropologist and philosopher David Burrumarra, M.B.E., then in his early 70s, was my guide and advisor. Initially, I was to explore how the universe of natural phenomena was divided between Yolngu clans and then to document

the complex relationships between my adoptive Wangurri clan and his Warramiri clan, and the natural world.

The information which Burrumarra and I assembled had a decidedly Warramiri and Wangurri flavour in that detail was strongest for clans that were intimately related as ‘brother,’ ‘grandchild’ or ‘grandparent,’ or others for whom the Warramiri and Wangurri would traditionally marry. Broadly, one might say that Burrumarra was confident with his knowledge of the Dreaming from south of Port Bradshaw in the Gulf of Carpentaria and west along the Arnhem Land coast to Milingimbi; the entire Yolngu (Murrnginy) block.

The Arnhem Bay-based Wangurri clan is the primary custodian for over forty-nine totems, including the cycad, mangrove worm, and reef heron, and it has a secondary or joint interest in a further fifty totems, such as the dugong and barramundi. Burrumarra’s Warramiri clan, by contrast, is associated with the English Company’s Islands and forty-five totems including all varieties of whale, as well as the octopus, hawksbill turtle, cuttlefish, crayfish and pearl shell. These, and fifty-six other species of joint interest, give the Warramiri its unique identity.

Soon after commencing work on the totem list I discovered that a considerable number of totems were affiliated with both Aborigines and non-Aborigines. In the 1920s, American anthropologist Lloyd Warner (1958) noted that bamboo, the canoe, mast, red cloud, and the Wurramu (spirit of the dead) all linked the Warramiri and other Yolngu who had been at the forefront of contact with Macassans, trepang fishermen from Sulawesi in central Indonesia who worked the Arnhem Land coast from the mid-1700s until 1907. There was no suggestion on the part of Warner, however, that such totems also linked Yolngu and Macassans in a perceived totemic embrace. Trepang collection, processing and sale was Australia’s first international industry, and Burrumarra’s father (considered by Macassans to be the last ‘Rajah of Melville Bay’) and other elders before him had been instrumental in the success of the venture. Shedding light on the Warramiri clan’s relationship with the visitors became an important objective in the analysis.

### **Collecting the data**

The totem catalogue project entailed not just simply linking natural species and clan names. It involved identifying relevant songs and ceremonies, finding out whether Yolngu made representations of the totem in wood or stone, and collecting miscellaneous anecdotal information, like when a blossoming bush signals that a stingray is ‘fat’ and suitable for hunting. It was a task without end, a project for the long Arnhem Land ‘Wet Season’.

Much of the work took place at that special time known by Yolngu as Walung or twilight, when the sky is a deep blue and stars are beginning to appear, one after another, wherever one looks. So clear is the sky in north-east Arnhem Land that stars could be seen right to the horizon, with each sending its own unique trail of light across the waters. Walung is usually a time for quiet

contemplation and thinking about the past. A question from me about the cuttlefish's unique healing properties, for example, would send Burrumarra hurtling backwards in time to a special islet in the Malay Road, a place where he had not set foot for fifty years. There, his now long-deceased brother would be instructing him on the singular qualities of the 'doctor-fish'.

Almost every totem mentioned would evoke a similar sentimental response. Even the freshwater mussel (Djarrwit) stirred great memories. Following the death of his father in the 1920s, Burrumarra went to live for a brief period with the formidable Djapu (Balamomo) leader Wonggu. Burrumarra recalled with great fondness his days with the fearless warrior and he could visualize Wonggu singing for the mussel. He had also been shown a sacred image made by Wonggu in the totem's honor.

Quite frequently the cultural divide between Burrumarra and I would make communication problematic. If one was not living in harmony with nature then clarity of meaning was next to impossible to achieve. And the times were changing. On one occasion during my stay at Galiwin'ku, a Yolngu Minister of the Uniting Church chastised his flock for their pagan and anachronistic faith in totems. With gusto, he mocked the totemic embrace that the Yolngu hold so dear, saying that if you were swimming in the sea and a shark appeared, it would not matter that it was your 'mother'. It was still going to eat you. The crowd was unimpressed with the sermon and remained largely silent. Sharks are too important to too many people for too many reasons to be dismissed in such a cavalier fashion. Burrumarra told me that an offence such as this would have been punishable by death in the days before the mission.

Given the new priorities in their lives, even Burrumarra's children did not really appreciate the mystical concept of Nyomba, or "living for the whale" or for any other totem revered by a clan. From his earliest years Burrumarra knew the whale creational stories and could sing the whale songs, but he did not know what it all meant until he saw his cousin Malngi (from the Birrkili clan) performing the whale dance. Malngi's passionate display was unforgettable. In Burrumarra's eyes, this man was the whale.

I had my own strategies for eliciting meaning. I once asked Burrumarra to look into a mirror and tell me what he saw. He described an octopus, and when I protested, his insistence was total. There were no doubts. The only reason I could not notice any resemblance to an eight-legged sea creature he said, half-jokingly, was my own ethnocentrism! When I protested saying that he did not look like an octopus, drawing one of these eight legged creatures in the sand, he insisted that he did, and that he could prove it. "Just ask that sea gull woman over there, or that dolphin boy. They will tell you." So I asked him what exactly was an octopus and he said: "It is that part of the man that swims around the coral reef." "And what is a man," I asked? "It is that part of the octopus that walks on the land singing octopus songs."

## Dhuwa and Yirritja

Anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis (1992) made detailed studies of societies that divide their world into halves or moieties, where social life involves an elaborate exchange between the two sides and there is a constant striving for the ideal of equilibrium and harmony. Much has been written on the functional interdependence of the Yolngu moieties (named Dhuwa and Yirritja) and the presumption is that all living and non-living things are divided equally between these two halves. The fundamental oppositions in human experience (life/death, day/night, male/female etc) are seen as part of the whole tissue of oppositions that make up the cosmic scheme of things.

The original prescription for the allocation of totems to moieties and clans came from the Dreaming entities Djang'kawu (for Dhuwa) and Lany'tjun (for Yirritja). They provided the organizing principles for moiety and clan operation and cooperation. To each clan they allocated specific totems (as well as names, songs, ceremonies, and ritual objects) reflecting their unique home environments, and then gave joint responsibility for other totems (and associated Dreaming laws) as a mechanism for the promotion of unity in diversity. Some totems, like the Yirritja white cockatoo (Lorrpu) and Dhuwa black cockatoo (Ngatili), and the Dhuwa sun and the Yirritja moon, are emblematic of the yin-yang division of the known Yolngu universe. However, a closer examination of the totem catalogue reveals some deviation from this norm. While the white cockatoo is a primary symbol for the entire Yirritja moiety, the Dhuwa moiety Rirratjingu clan also honours this bird (which they call Yimayngura) with totally different songs, stories, and ceremonies.

Certain other totems are markers for ceremonies sacred to both Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties. The Olive Python (Wititj), for example, is synonymous with the Gunapipi (or rainbow serpent ritual), as is the catfish or 'circumcision fish' (Galpan) with the Djungawun initiation rite. Both Yirritja and Dhuwa clans have songs and ceremonies (and names) for the spirit-imbued Banyan tree. Rain sites, too, are found on Warramiri (Yirritja) and Djambarrpuyngyu (Dhuwa) homelands. The dingo, as well, is considered Dhuwa on Dhuwa lands, and Yirritja on Yirritja lands. Different species sometimes perform the same function across the moieties. The white and black sea eagle (Darrpunangu) comes for the spirit of the dead when a Yirritja a person passes away. In the equivalent Dhuwa moiety narrative, the jungle bird Wiritj will be found by the spirit of the deceased.

Of the nearly 600 species Burrumarra and I reviewed, approximately 10% had neither a moiety nor clan affiliation. In some cases, the totems were of minimal economic importance, like the grasshopper (Detj) or wasp (Barral), but in other cases they were of major practical importance, like the medicinal Miliwa tree (for eye drops), or cottonwood tree (Gulu). In some cases, the custodial clan had become extinct and the process of adoption of its unique bundle of totems by a related group had not been completed. The coral trout fitted into this category.

This fish was sacred to the Brarrngu clan of the Wessel Islands, Burrumarra's mother's clan, a group that became extinct in the early twentieth century.

Yolngu study of the natural world provides instructions for everyday living: A bird called the Djululu, for instance, likes to come and sit by the fire, in a clear place, where it searches for the Mendung (snail). This bird had a lesson for the Yolngu according to Burrumarra. It is "Dhuwa eats Yirritja", and vice versa, reflecting the operation of the Yolngu social structure (i.e. Dhuwa marries Yirritja). Lessons come in all varieties. The magpie goose (Gurrumatji), for example, teaches Yolngu about the dangers of gluttony. The Gurrumatji is affiliated with the Dhuwa moiety Djambarrpuynngu clan and it likes to eat the Yirritja moiety water chestnut or raakay, but the goose (including the undigested raakay within it) is food for all Yolngu. "People go crazy like they're drunk with a fat Gurrumatji," Burrumarra observed, and this is a "...warning on behaviour."

### **Code of honour**

Drawing upon the authority granted them by the totemic ancestors, Yolngu elders over the vastness of time have established a multitude of totemic collaborations between clans within the moieties. Each of these is perceived to have its origin in the Dreaming, even though in living memory Burrumarra's father was instrumental in building a number of totemic alliances, for instance between the Warramiri and Golpa clans through the reef fish Gukuwal. This partnership facilitated the marriage of the children of Golpa mothers to Warramiri sons, and the repopulation of the Wessel Islands following the devastating smallpox epidemics of the late 1800s.

Clan affiliations are commemorated by the sharing of stories, the production and exchange of ritual objects, or the performance of ceremonies. Parties to the 'embrace' consider themselves to be of 'one blood', bound by a code of honour that is evidenced in an habitus, an acquired disposition to cooperate with the will of the totem. Reciprocity, in the form of systems of exchange of women, food, labor and services, and also hospitality, is at the heart of the relationship. This is the very essence of the code.

### **White man, black man**

Anthropologist Ian Keen (1990) describes how the Yolngu draw upon the attributes of totems from ecologically discrete areas to construct their world-views. Songlines link the various ecosystems from the desert country, to the forest, mangroves, and open sea. According to Keen, Yolngu are therefore able to ensure access to a variety of resources over the course of years, as fortunes fluctuate with changing weather patterns, droughts, and other occurrences. But in a major oversight, Keen does not consider one of the most significant source of resources for Yolngu for the past several hundred years, that of the visiting Indonesian fishermen who brought with them tobacco, alcohol, iron tools, cloth, and other articles of trade. Surely there would be a plethora of totemic pathways

linking the territories of Yolngu from the interior and Yolngu working in close cooperation with Macassans? Keen's omission is symptomatic of much Arnhem Land scholarship where there has been a tendency to focus on the traditional and ignore the sorts of transformations that have been taking place in Yolngu lifeways to accommodate the Other.

Lloyd Warner's red cloud, mast, and bamboo totems were understood by Yolngu to be held jointly with Macassans. They were emblems relating to the Dreaming entities Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha who are understood to have enticed foreigners onto north-east Arnhem Land shores at the beginning of time. Stories, ceremonies and rangga relating to these Dreamings shaped many of the new clan alliances that arose with the Macassan presence. To give one example, the trepangers brought with them the Tamarind tree (Djambang) which now flourishes at the old beach encampments. This tree is sacred to the Birrkili clan (along with the Hammerhead shark, Torres Strait pigeon, and green sawfish) but other Yirritja groups, like Burrumarra's Warramiri clan, also consider it a part of their milieu. The Tamarind links both the Yolngu and Macassans in a special bond, a code of honour, as with totemic clan alliances. Longutja (Hardy Island) in Arnhem Bay is the heartland for the Birrkili. It is also known as 'Bapa Djambang', and the entire island is infused by the spirit of the Dreaming entity (Birrinydji) and is the foundation of the Tamarind 'totemic embrace'.

The study of publicly recorded Yolngu myths of encounter, however, even from places like Longutja, paints a picture of relations with the Other that is uniformly unharmonious. There appears to be no place for outsiders in the Yolngu world view. Totems repel the visitors' every advance. Well known are the adventures of the myth-hero dingo and its rejection of Macassans, but other totems (the scrub fowl, honey bee, sawfish, and the trepang itself), confirm the pattern of mythical rejection. Ken Maddock (1988), in a structural analysis of myth variations of the Yolngu-Macassan encounter, argued that there is no parity in the exchange relationship or even the potential for rapprochement. There also appears to be no interest on the part of Yolngu. The symbol for the white man in Yolngu sign language is the arms crossed across the chest in the manner of the Yirritja moiety flying fox (Little Reddish Fruit Bat, or Mattjurr), but this is also the sign for imprisonment and death, Burrumarra told me.

The works of other anthropologists in the Top End seem to confirm this picture. Basil Sansom (2001), in a review of Darwin region myths, equates the 'white man' with rotten fish and he reports that there was no Dreaming significance in 'white' trade goods like sugar in pre-mission and mission days and therefore no call to reciprocity on the part of Aborigines. Non-Aborigines lived outside of the Law. And yet when I questioned Burrumarra about custodianship of those species held in common with the Other, an 'inside' truth was revealed. When Burrumarra spoke about the whale and octopus, for example, he listed a number of caretaker clans, both extant (Warramiri, Gumatj) and extinct (Lamamirri, Girkirri, Yalukal)

but then added that the real keepers of the law were the people of the north from the fabled lands of Badu, the land of the Yirritja dead. So many songs and stories speak of how, in days beyond memory, these hunters (Papayili, Wuramala etc) used to live just over the horizon, coming ashore to interact with Yolngu during the 'Wet Season'. They were black like the Yolngu and spoken of as brothers. Each would follow the totemic laws that united them in their own specific ways, whether in their ritual hunting, killing and eating of the whale or, for the Yolngu, with manikay (song), clapsticks, and yidaki (didgeridoo). Historical research has located these 'sea gypsies' in the vicinity of Makassar, Timor, and the Sulu Sea, between Sulawesi and the Philippines. They worked as forward scouts and also divers (and probably emissaries) for the Macassans in the early years of the trepang trade.

Yolngu traditions of diplomacy are embedded in the narratives of the totemic embrace. Recorded Yolngu history distinguishes various waves of encounter with the Other in terms of a transition in color of visitors from black in the first instance, to gold, yellow, and finally white. With this change in colour came a change in the nature of the relationship. Black visitors were co-custodians of totems, the followers of 'one law' and there was full reciprocity between them and Yolngu. The 'totemic embrace' embodies an ideal of cooperation, and these 'whale-hunters' were considered part of the Yolngu kinship system. They were people of honour. Subsequent, lighter-skinned visitors to Arnhem Land obviously had different attitudes towards the Yolngu (and the totemic embrace) and were summarily rejected by Yolngu totems, as evidenced in well-recorded myths of encounter. But the potential was always there for the building of long-term partnerships in which both parties could benefit, so long as each honoured the principles of the Dreamings that united them.

In an 1854 speech, American Indian Chief Seattle of Puget Sound warned about the loneliness of spirit that would beset humanity with the forced extinction of species. Today the lessons of sustainability and belonging of First Peoples are at a premium. In the case of the Yolngu, one lesson that emerges from the study of the 'totemic embrace' is that there has never been a concept of species ownership. Rather, the relationships enjoyed by Yolngu are far more subtle and enduring. There are perceived obligations on all sides of the 'totemic embrace' for the relationship is considered a reciprocal one. History shows us that there is a place for the Other on Australia's totemic shores but a precondition is clearly spelled out. In Burrumarra's words, non-Aborigines must live for the totem, not just make a living from it.

#### **4:5 The Totemic Embrace (2): A Sacred Lens, a Vision of Wholeness**

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 2006, 'The Totemic Embrace (2): A sacred lens, a vision of wholeness,' *Australian Folklore*, vol. 21, pp. 72-81)

##### **Abstract**

*What sort of education can deliver an appreciation for the 'totemic embrace', that magical spiritual relationship that binds peoples and natural species in celebration of the*

*ground beneath one's feet as the very center of the universe? In this paper, I look at one pedagogical strategy employed by the late Yolngu leader David Burrumarra of Elcho Island; facilitating an understanding of the sacred by Aborigines and non-Aborigines alike through an understanding of Motj. In Burrumarra's pantheistic philosophy, a solitary unconnected unit of perception (a word, sound, or thing) is transformed into a towering edifice of meaning when considered as a lens upon the world.*

### **An extraordinary conversation**

I cannot presume to be able to represent comprehensively Burrumarra's views on the Dreaming because what he shared with me was but a small-subset of his great learning. And there was always, day by day, the question of the degree to which my own interpretations were on a par with his revelations. The task was made more challenging for the simple reason that he never spoke of the 'Dreaming'. During the public phase of a Gunapipi (rainbow serpent) ceremony that we both attended, I remember that Burrumarra criticized my use of that term by drawing attention to the red ochre, symbolic of blood, covering our bodies. He was adamant that we were not honouring a dream, or something associated with the distant past. In Burrumarra's understanding, not only was the serpent real, but, at that moment, we were both inescapably connected to it.

Previous in-depth discussions with anthropologists Donald Thomson and Ronald Berndt, and missionaries such as Yirrkala's Wilbur Chaseling and Elcho Island's Harold Shepherdson, had certainly coloured the way Burrumarra referred to the sacred. When clan-members in full ceremonial dress gathered on their own land to celebrate a totemic ancestor, Burrumarra said that they were that ancestor, and the object of self-veneration.

Received wisdom in anthropology speaks of a clear division between the Dreamtime (or Wangarr, as the Yolngu call it) when ancestral beings roamed the world, and the here and now when their transformed bodies give shape to the landscape. In the Yolngu context, anthropologist Franca Tamasari (2000) says:

In the staging of ceremonies the ancestral footprints are followed - retraced by embodying the ancestral power of trajectory, movement and naming - in the songs, dances, designs, and sand sculptures.

And yet when Burrumarra spoke of the object of spiritual and ceremonial practice, the relationship between the past and the present was framed somewhat differently. Rather than empowerment through replication or mimicry, emphasis was placed on achieving communion or 'oneness' with the totemic ancestor. I refer to this relationship as the 'totemic embrace'.

Advocates of phenomenology (who describe conscious experience without reference to the question of whether what is experienced is objectively real), or pantheism (where God is all, and all is God) would delight in the way Burrumarra perceived and experienced 'things'. He said that at the 'beginning of time' there had indeed been a great transformation; those creative beings who gave

form and purpose to the world are perceived by Yolngu today as so many disjointed parts. He once said that the creators had broken everything up into manageable chunks to make it easier for people to work or think with. And what makes human beings so special is their capacity to recognize or conceive of the original totemic ‘wholeness’, and also devise complete stories that provide answers to all of our questions. Like the Lakota Indian concept of ‘Mitakuye Oyasin’ (or ‘all my relations’), Burrumarra’s worldview championed the sacred connectedness of all things.

Historian and philosopher Walter Ong (1982) argued that there are profound differences in thinking between oral cultures, those that do not have a system of writing, and chirographic (i.e. writing) cultures. Burrumarra’s philosophy ran counter to this view. Burrumarra could see striking similarities, for example, between the way some Yolngu and non-Yolngu consider their religions. Christians might look to a book (bible), a symbol (cross), saints, the Holy Ghost, miracles, mountaintops or buildings with steeples and, of course, to humans themselves (who are created in God’s image) when considering the phenomenon of God. Similarly, when Burrumarra contemplated his totemic origins it was ‘bits and pieces’ that directed his thinking towards the unfathomable whole. The ‘cuttlefish island’ that we see emerging from the Arafura Sea near Cape Wilberforce, Burrumarra said, was not the totemic ancestor. It was a “...part of its wish.” And so was the cuttlefish swimming in the sea, and also his fellow Warramiri clan members. All shared a “oneness of spirit” with this Wangarr or Dreaming entity. Yolngu celebrated this awareness in ceremony and song and by living in particular ways towards the country and to each other.

Ethnographic writings provide us with only the barest of glimpses of these ancestral entities from Yolngu totemic imaginations. John Rudder (1993) shows how the landscape of one of the Wessel Islands mirrors the physical features of a gargantuan shark entity. Howard Morphy (1984), likewise, describes the homeland of the Madarrpa people as the crocodile’s nest to which the spirit of a Yolngu would return upon death. Similarly, it was the flapping of the mighty wings of the original duck (Muthali) at the dawn of time that created the great cliffs and channels of the Warramiri clan’s English Company’s Islands. Yolngu are apt to consider proof of the existence of these Dreaming entities by the mere fact that human beings, members of clans nourished by the ‘totemic embrace’ also exist.

### **The power of the spoken and unspoken**

My conversations with Burrumarra often centered on his sea-based Warramiri clan totems (the octopus, whale, pearl, and cuttlefish), and how their essence was locked within the land and seascape’s distinctive natural forms, in ritual objects and artistic patterns, and also in particular words, sacred words, that were surrounded by intense secrecy. Use of these ‘big’ or ‘likan’ names was restricted to ceremonies, because they do more than represent the aforementioned unknown and unknowable totemic whole. Like the other traces of the

Wangarr entities that we perceive in the here and now, words are an integral part of the entities themselves; it is their sacred voice, and a vital part of their legacy or gift to humankind.

To mention a sacred word out of context was anathema to Burrumarra. He had learned this lesson in his teenage years in the late 1920s, following the death of his father. At an important ritual being conducted by his elder relative Harry Makarrwola from the Wangurri clan he had committed the serious faux pas of speaking aloud and out of turn the ‘inside’ names for the whale. Without the sympathetic Makarrwola’s intervention, Burrumarra would have paid with his life that day. Even though he was an owner of this ‘inside’ knowledge, it was an inexcusable error of judgment.

Only on one occasion did Burrumarra knowingly utter sacred words to me. It was those very same words that had caused him grief sixty years earlier. Now I do not know if it was the way he said them or the words themselves, but their sound upon my ear was quite unforgettable. We were alone along the cliff tops but he didn’t shout them as he might have done in a ritual. It was more like an intense deafening whisper.

In all the years we worked together he had never spoken in that tone of voice and I was more than surprised. I did not know how to respond and remember feeling that if these words were so powerful in themselves and commanded such respect, imagine how much more is the totemic ancestor itself. And then I realized that this was probably the lesson for that day’s discussion. When we talked about things for which I had very little comprehension, a certain degree of humility was required. We were dealing with momentous events that had been the mainstay of his people for millennia. And it was Burrumarra’s profound desire and hope that Australians would acknowledge this great legacy in appropriate ways, like in land and sea rights, and the treaty. Had I got his message?

### **The sacred lens of Motj**

Little more would ever be said about that interaction because it was the big picture that occupied Burrumarra’s time and energy. Knowledge at that minute level of detail, he once said, was not in my best interests. It could cause me more harm than good. So when conveying his understanding of the Dreaming, Burrumarra would do so by reference to the very special theory of Motj; his ‘telescope’ to the cosmos. Anthropologist Ian Keen (1994) referred to Motj (or Muij), as the most powerful and dangerous of the ancestral Dreamings, the great Olive Python (Wititj) or ‘rainbow serpent’. For Burrumarra, however, Motj was also a much broader concept. Motj referred to that special link between the natural and spiritual worlds, between the seen and the unseen. It was the very essence of the sacred and as essential to our earthly existence as water to life. After all, Motj was the “...source of all things.” It was Burrumarra’s word for God.

In one memorable conversation, Burrumarra said:

Motj is a word used only by the marrangitj... the healer. The Warramiri marrangitj would speak to Motj in all its dimensions. Motj directs our thinking to a purpose. We speak to the wind, clouds, and the earth, and Motj speaks to us through them. Motj is all the ceremonial beliefs, our cultural traditions. What is a person without Motj? Motj is between nothing and yes, nowhere and truth... Motj manifestations (like the Bible, Cross, flying fox, or cuttlefish) help us to see, to believe. They make the creation stories real. We Warramiri draw life from many sources: the Christian Church; the [whale, octopus] and so on. Who we are comes from Motj.

Keen's olive python was merely one such lens, albeit a potent one, but there were many others; all the aforementioned 'bits and pieces' that make up the 'totemic whole'. A word, a footprint, a bird's song, even a flash of lightning, can be an opportunity for learning about the world. Burrumarra then continued:

When the lightning strikes in the middle of the ocean... the whale rises to the surface... and throws water from its head to the heavens. It has that light in [it].

Warramiri Yolngu would seek this 'light' during their lifetimes and, according to Burrumarra, there were three stages in finding the 'truth'. The first was knowing (i.e. with parables and also revelations during circumcision and from being present at major public rituals). Then, after a significant period, came believing, when one followed the law, participated in the life of the clan, and began a family of one's own. Finally, and it was not guaranteed, there was understanding borne of experience and reflection. When speaking the 'whale' language, singing for the surfacing whale, or moving one's body in unison with others in imitation of copulating whales, one has a foretaste of that 'oneness' or union that represents true understanding; the high-point of an individual's quest for enlightenment and peace.

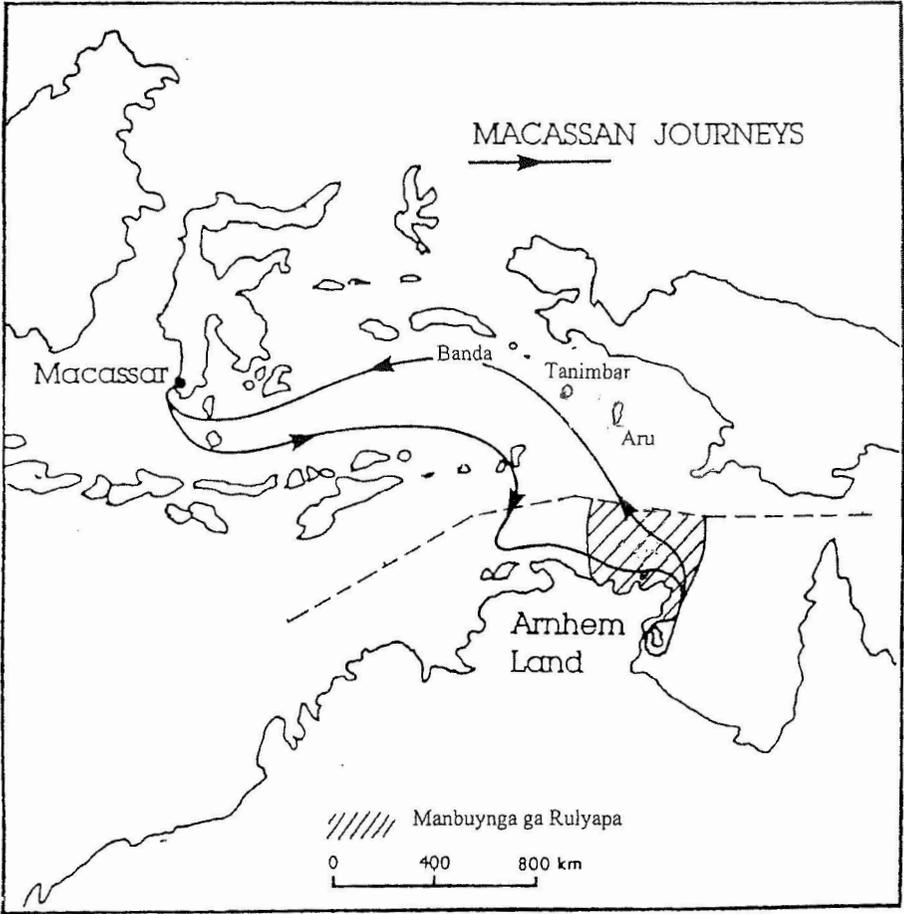
Burrumarra was particularly concerned that non-Aborigines should see traditional Aboriginal religion through such an Aboriginal lens, for:

Our white glasses show us God [only] in a particular way ... Without [our Biblical] glasses would we see God in our image ... or would God look different? Would he look like the natural world?

### **From the mountain-top**

Burrumarra would speak admiringly of his homelands in the English Company's Islands as being like a 'mountain', a solitary, grand edifice. It was a quiet place for meditation and for considering the order of the world. From the top, you could see far in all directions, because (like Isaac Newton) you were standing on the shoulders of those 'giants' who had come before. And as I look through my field notes and consider Burrumarra's intellectual legacy, I too can appreciate that mighty edifice.

My learned colleague always stressed the need for a whole vision and a complete story, and from the mountain-top, this always seemed like a possibility. But in the latter period of his life, as he scanned the horizon and considered contemporary relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, all he could perceive was unfinished business and incomplete stories. Doubt threatened from all sides. Where was the vision for a future Australia that encompassed all peoples, where justice and reconciliation prevailed? Burrumarra would usually draw strength from contemplating the world from upon high, but slowly, and over time, he was overcome with weariness. There was so much work to be done to make the world whole once again. It is sad that the profound ideas of this gentle philosopher remain of such little consequence to those hard pragmatists in power who have contrary ideas for what it means to live in a just and equitable society.



*Dingo*

**5:1 The Dog and the Myth Maker: Macassans and Aborigines in North-East Arnhem Land**

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One of the most well known myths from northern Australia centres on the exploits of the totemic Dog Djuranydjura and its meetings with Macassans. One of the reasons why the myth has attracted so much attention is its unique subject matter. There are very few narratives which deal with the visiting trepang fishermen. The most curious feature of the story, however, is the absolute refusal of the Dog to be influenced by the Macassan's wealth, or their willingness to share it with Yolngu.

In Yolngu society, before anything new is accepted into common usage, it must first find expression within the mythology of a clan. A major outcome of Yolngu contacts with Macassans in real life was an influx of introduced goods. This being so, how could trade in Macassan goods have proceeded if the totem rejected the idea at a level of myth? The purpose of this paper is to explore the contradiction that this myth presents to the listener.

# # #

The Djuranydjura story was first recorded in the 1920's by the American anthropologist, Lloyd Warner, and then subsequently by many other researchers right up to the 1990's. It appears not to have changed significantly over the years. While the story is 'owned' by one clan, the Gupapuyngu, similar stories are found throughout north-east Arnhem Land. The Djuranydjura story, is, however, the best known.

The following is an abridged version, adapted from Warner (1958, p.536):

When the Macassans arrived at Howard Island and started to build their houses, Djuranydjura came down to meet them. The Macassar man said, "I will give you matches." The Dog was excited, but said, "I use fire sticks. It takes longer but that's the way I do it." The Macassar man offered the Dog rice, but he rejected it saying that he had plenty of bush food to eat and did not need any more. The Macassar man offered the Dog tobacco, tomahawks and canoes, all the things that his people had, but the Dog said, "No, I don't

want them.” The Macassar man said, “Why do you act like this?” The Dog replied, “I want you to be a Macassar man. I am a black man. If I get all these things I will become a white man and you will become a black man.” So the Macassar man packed up his house and went away, and the Dog went back to his home. Later, on trying to cross from Howard to Elcho Island in his bark canoe, the sea rose and Djuranydjura’s canoe sank. It can be seen today among the rocks of the Strait. When people look at this rock today they are able to think about why the black man has so little and the Macassar man and the white man have so much. Djuranydjura had rejected these things at the beginning of time.

In the many published versions of this story, other details emerge. Djuranydjura is a black male Dog, and represents the ‘law’ of the Gupapuyngu people. He speaks the Gupapuyngu language and is related through kinship to other peoples, clans, lands and totems in the region. His mythical actions have an impact on the landscape, and he is sometimes referred to as the land owner, or a representative of the land. At other times, he is seen to be on an errand of Yolngu leaders. The end of the story is always the same, however. Macassans and Yolngu part company with no exchange of gifts and no alliance. Each party has their own land, their own food sources, and their own ways of doing things.

In one version, at the end of the narrative, the Macassans see a fire burning in the west and are concerned for the well-being of their countrymen, and they depart. In still another, following the departure of the visitors, the Dog sees clouds of smoke coming from the land of its grandparents in Warramiri clan territory, at the northern tip of Elcho Island, and it heads off across the straits to visit them. In all cases in which a bark canoe is mentioned, it sinks.

It is interesting to note that at the site where Djuranydjura rejected the visitors, there was no trepaning. No Macassan camps were established in this area, for the actions of the totem provided the law that people also followed. The island as a whole was known by Macassans as Marege Siki. ‘Marege’ was the term for Arnhem Land, and ‘Siki’ means danger. One aged trepanger, reminiscing in the 1970s, said that if the Macassans tried to land at Marege Siki, the Yolngu would spear them.

We are left up in the air in these versions of the myth. While Djuranydjura seems to feel remorse at the inadequacies of its own technology, Gupapuyngu law has not been compromised by the encounter. The question remains however, how did the myth maker get around this impasse? The Gupapuyngu did not allow Macassan boats to land in their territory, and yet they still had access to trade goods, as did all clans in north-east Arnhem Land. An equally puzzling question is why this story is still as popular today as it was seventy years ago?

The answer is not to be found in ‘outside’ or public versions of the myth, but rather in ‘inside’ versions, where the myth maker sends the totemic Dog on an entirely new journey, away from its clan territory. It undergoes a transformation

and accepts goods from the visitors under certain conditions. The interplay of 'inside' and 'outside' versions shows how the myth maker simultaneously allows for the introduction of Macassan goods while promoting Yolngu autonomy.

The rationale for the transformation of the Dog in the hands of the myth maker is located in complex mythology which sees both Macassans and their goods as having originated in Arnhem Land. This mythology centres on the Dreaming entities, Bayini, the female, and Birrinydji, the male. By a twist of fate at the beginning of time, the riches that should belong to Yolngu have been denied them. Now only whites and Macassans know how to access power in a new world. As owners of the land, and observers of this law, the Yolngu should be in possession of this new wealth. So in history, Macassans were seen as merely the vehicle for bringing to Yolngu what was really their own. As one Yolngu leader said to me, "Macassan business and talk is nothing. All things come from Birrinydji."

Let us now turn to the 'inside' versions of the Djuranydjura story to see the myth maker at work.

In one 'inside' version described by John Rudder (1993), Djuranydjura travels from Howard Island to the northern tip of Elcho Island where it eats whale meat, and in the process forms an alliance with the Warramiri clan. There is no mention of Macassans or Macassan goods. Other details are also obscure. In its travels, the Dog's sex has changed from male to female, as has her language, from Gupapuyngu to Warramiri. In another version, the eating of whale meat is equated with the acceptance of goods from the whale-hunting Macassan 'Captain'. This is a crucial detail. Although I heard the 'inside' version on a number of occasions, only once was this detail explained. I tell the story in full, as told to me by the Warramiri leader, David Burrumarra.

### **Djuranydjura at Nangingburra, Elcho Island**

At her master's command, Djuranydjura, a white female dog, set out for Nangingburra, on Elcho Island. There was a smell in the air, one that she had never smelt before. When she started, she spoke the Gupapuyngu language, but half way, her language changed. She was now speaking Warramiri just like those Gupapuyngu people of Nangingburra do today. When she reached that place, she saw a whale in the shallow waters. It had been cut up by Macassan men using their long knives. She tasted some of the rotting meat and saw that there was a new law in the land. It was Birrinydji's law. Djuranydjura was offered some gifts by the Macassans and she accepted necklaces, armbands, fishing hooks and a basket, but said to the Macassan man, "I'll take these but only because you want me to. They still belong to you." The meeting of the Dog and the Macassans was the basis of a lasting friendship. It was a law for the intermarriage of Yolngu and Macassans. That's the way they made it. That is why Djuranydjura was a white female dog. The

friendship between the parties was like the attraction of a man to a woman. Djuranydjura had to be a woman because a man travelling to another country would be carrying sacred objects with him. Djuranydjura was not. The Macassan Captain was turned to stone and you can see him there. Djuranydjura turned to stone too. She sits on the beach with her brother Bawal. You can also see the line in the water where the whale is.

The transformations that have taken place between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ versions give the story a whole new significance. David Burrumarra explained this in some detail:

#### 1. The dog totem

In north-east Arnhem Land, the Dog is a symbol of anti-social behaviour. In choosing the Dog as the chief character, the myth maker is making a comment on the threat to Yolngu law posed by the Macassans. People will know the law of the land is to reject them and to reject what they stand for, i.e. being ‘outside the law’. The rejection of the visitors is also an anti-social act, inviting the use of such a symbol. The transformation of the Dog in ‘inside’ versions, and its acceptance of gifts does not transform its image. It remains a symbol of defiance in the face of outside intrusion. Both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ versions complement each other.

#### 2. The eating of the whale

The Gupapuyngu people are represented by the dog, a land symbol, and the Warramiri are represented by the whale, a sea symbol. The eating of the whale meat is symbolic of an alliance between these clans through the mythology of Birrinydji. For the Gupapuyngu, acceptance of the new law means that the groups are now linked in a powerful alliance which brings benefits to both. In all alliances, there is a transfer of sacred items. While the Gupapuyngu were not prepared to enter into any arrangements with the Macassans, they would do so with the Warramiri, the owners of Birrinydji mythology. The sacred transfer, in this case, included replicas of the items given by the Macassan to the Dog. These are now held jointly by the two clans.

#### 3. Djuranydjura’s colour

Colour is only mentioned in a few versions of the ‘outside’ stories, and in all cases, Djuranydjura is black. In the ‘inside’ story, Djuranydjura is white. The white/black opposition is a guide, Burrumarra says, to understanding the narrative. The colour black indicates non-compliance with white Macassans. ‘White’ reflects the partnership between the Warramiri clan and Macassans through Birrinydji mythology, and the Gupapuyngu clan’s acceptance of Birrinydji’s laws.

#### 4. Sex

As with colour, the sex of Djuranydjura is rarely mentioned in the ‘outside’ versions. It is presumed to be male, but there is some uncertainty about this. In the ‘inside’ story, however, Djuranydjura is female. Burrumarra says the colour and sex of the Dog symbolises the friendship between Yolngu and Macassans. He says the black/white, male/female transformations were a mandate for the intermarriage of

the two groups, although he was not sure if this ever occurred. The Dog and the Macassan were united by a common colour - white. The Dog is female and the Macassan male. Opposites come together as a sign of reconciliation.

#### 5. Language

Half way through its journey, Djuranydjura's language changed from Gupapuyngu to Warramiri. The Gupapuyngu people of Nangingburra speak the Warramiri language today because of Djuranydjura's actions. In this way, the myth is seen as an account of why they do not speak their own tongue, and proof of their rights to the land through Birrinydji mythology.

#### 6. Transformation of the land and the law

When the Dog reached the Warramiri camp and ate the whale meat she simultaneously accepted the laws of Birrinydji. Djuranydjura turned to stone. As a Warramiri site, the Dog is linked to all other bodies of myth in that territory. As Burrumarra said, "She could never go home again." The 'inside' version therefore has a dual focus. There are links to the Warramiri through the whale, but also access to Macassan goods through Birrinydji mythology.

### Conclusion

In the manipulation of the Dog symbol, the myth maker has provided a framework for dealings with Macassans. Established law is not compromised, for in the interplay of 'inside' and 'outside' variations, Macassans are permitted to land in selected areas, and trade in their goods is achieved not through direct contacts, but through an alliance with another Yolngu clan.

Throughout Arnhem Land, these 'trade routes' suggested by Thomson (1949), were formed through similar alliances on the basis of travels of totemic dogs. In this way, Yolngu considered themselves to be in some ways in control of what was happening on their land. The Djuranydjura story is therefore an expression of what Rudder (1993) has termed 'changelessness in change' in Yolngu cosmology.

The situation today provides an understanding of why the Dog story is still popular. New ideas are being introduced on all sides, but the lesson from Djuranydjura is that Yolngu must direct change in their lives, in their own ways. People continue to tell with pride the story of the Dog's rejection of the visitors, and his reliance on his own technology and food sources. The 'inside' version is no less wondrous, and provides a vision of a future in which Yolngu will have all the riches of the 'whites' but on their own terms.

### 5:2 A Totem to Think With: The Dingo, Trade Routes and Yolngu Foreign Policy

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 2006, 'Why Umbulka killed its master. Aboriginal reconciliation and the Australian wild dog,' In *A Communion of Subjects. Animals in religion, science and ethics*, eds P Waldau & K Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 360-372)

During his voyages of exploration along Australia's east coast in 1770, Captain James Cook made mention in his diaries that Aborigines often ignored his presence, desired none of his many gifts, and would not give up anything of their own to him. This image of Aboriginal self-sufficiency and total disinterest in the new is characteristic of many narratives of first contact. Although they are far removed in time and space from the Cook encounters, Yolngu narratives describing first contact with Macassan fisherman, who visited northern Australia from the mid-1700s in search of trepang, suggest a similar self-sufficiency and defiance.

Unlike the fleeting appearance of explorers like Captain Cook, the Macassan presence was an annual occurrence and of up to three months' duration. With imaginative flair the Arnhem Land mythmaker chose the wild dog or dingo as the instrument with which to negotiate the encounter. Narratives featuring the dingo became the basis of trade routes for the transfer of introduced items such as iron, cloth, tobacco, and alcohol, from the coast to the interior, making all Yolngu beneficiaries of contact. These 'outside' or public, narratives were an integral part of what I describe as a Yolngu 'foreign policy' regarding these uninvited outsiders - a policy or law that enabled the narrator to ascribe a place for the intruders within Yolngu cosmology without compromising the sanctity of cherished beliefs associated with the Wangarr (or Dreaming).

One of the foundations of this 'foreign policy' is the myth of the dingo's origins in this period of turmoil. It murders and partially consumes its Yolngu masters and then retreats into the wilderness. According to variations of this 'starter' myth, when Macassans first appeared all along the Arnhem Land coast, the wild dog was first on the scene to investigate. These meeting places are often sacred sites, and the related narratives are celebrated in ceremony and song. Why? The hidden message of the 'starter' and its many variations presents the listener not only with a commentary on the culture/nature, human/animal divide, but also a blueprint for future dealings with non-Aborigines. The mythmaker, while taking an uncompromising stand in relation to Yolngu rights, used the dog symbol in myth to lay a foundation for a reconciliation between ethnicities. Yolngu would not lose sight of essential truths, like the fact that they were the land owners, and the visitors were unceremonious exploiters of the land's resources. However they could be partners and share in the wealth of the land and benefit from each other's presence so long as they both acknowledged each other's humanity. This involved rejecting those types of behavior more characteristic of the wild dog, a message as relevant today as during the unruly days of first encounter.

### **Canis lupus dingo**

Dingo myths in Aboriginal Australia, at one level, reinforce a view of wild dogs prevalent in popular literature for example in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* or Edward Albee's *A Zoo Story*. The dingo inhabits two worlds simultaneously; the natural and the supernatural, the culturally constructed cosmos and the untamed wilderness. Despite the potential for domestication when young,

the dingo's natural inclination is to be wild and anarchic, and in myth, this free agent is seen as a threat to the social order. While superficially recognizable as canine, the dingo (*Canis lupus dingo*) is biologically distinct. Similar in size to the German Shepherd, it has a short-haired coat that ranges in color from tan, to black with white spots, to white. The dingo has a bushy tail, strong claws, and an angular head with erect ears. It is an opportunistic carnivore, hunting mainly at night. While preferring to eat mammals, it is also known to feed on birds, reptiles, and insects. Dingoes have clearly defined home territories, though parts of this may be shared with other dogs. It breeds only once a year, the female giving birth to three or four pups. (Breckwoldt, 1988)

The dingo's origins are a mystery. About four thousand years ago, this relative of the semi-wild dogs of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea appeared in Australia. It eradicated the Thylacine, the zebra-striped native dog, and today is regarded as a pest of significant proportion. The world's largest fence keeps this merciless predator out of the 'civilized' settled areas and away from the sheep stations of eastern Australia.

Unlike the domestic dog, the dingo appears to be a trickster. In Aboriginal myths and legends it shares some of the characteristics of the Chinese monkey and the North American coyote and rabbit, but any other resemblance to the classical trickster figure is illusory. Carl Jung (1972) saw tricksters as primordial figures transcending humankind's conceptual boundaries, moving freely between the worlds of gods and humans and playing tricks on both. But the dingo, in the words of one Aboriginal elder, is a "fully fledged lawman." It institutes Dreaming laws but also breaks them. In some parts of the continent it is considered the ultimate destroyer, disrupting the status quo and bringing disarray to human affairs. At least one group credits it with the origin of death. (See Kolig, 1978)

For Australia's indigenous peoples, the dingo is a totem of great importance as it provides a reference point for Aboriginal customs and social structure. Somewhat like other tricksters, the dingo's behavior suggests alternate ways of being that, if implemented, would subvert the desired order of things. The dog mates indiscriminately, kills for pleasure, and does not share its food. It makes its own camp and follows its own rules - and yet, when young, the pup hankers for human company and is completely dependent upon its Aboriginal masters. Like a child, it is given a name, a kinship label (son, daughter, etc.), and a place in the family. But when the pup grows up it deserts its human family. In some areas of Aboriginal Australia, young men are referred to as wild dogs before they are initiated; during this period they know nothing of the sacred laws by which humans must live. To operate in society they must learn to act according to cultural expectations. The dingo is therefore a powerful symbol for moderation in behavior at both individual and group levels. According to anthropologist Debbie Bird Rose (1992), "...the dingo makes us human."

## Dogs and the moiety framework of trade

In northeast Arnhem Land, dualism defines the Yolngu universe. Each person is born into a patrilineal and exogamous landowning clan that forms an integral part of one of two intermarrying moieties, namely Dhuwa or Yirritja. The small subset of myths referred to here are drawn solely from the Yirritja moiety as this was the moiety responsible for the development of the policy in relation to outsiders and all things new.

Moiety solidarity rests on the acknowledgement of the interrelationships established between the moieties and clans by Djang'kawu and Lany'tjun, the founding ancestral entities. According to anthropologist Nancy Williams (1986), one particular relationship stands out above all others and it is that between the Maari and the Gutharra (the 'maternal grandmother' and 'grandchild' clans). The relationship is enshrined in numerous songs, dances, and narratives reflecting the movement of totems across the land and seascape at the beginning of time. Gutharra clans have certain rights over their Maari's sacred totemic designs, and they have the strongest claim to succession if their Maari's clan becomes extinct.

David Turner (1978) argues that Aborigines have spread themselves over the landscape in such a way that their respective estates are, to a degree, resource specific, thereby ensuring the establishment of bonds with owners of other estates if their economic needs are to be met. And during the days of first contact, those Yolngu groups in close contact with Macassan trepangers took on a very prominent role within the moiety. Inland clans established or reaffirmed ties with those coastal groups who had opened their lands to resource exploitation by outsiders so as to ensure access to additional highly desirable trade resources. And it was along these pathways formed between Gutharra and Maari clans that the dingo was to travel. In so doing, the dog was to facilitate the flow of trade goods from the coastline to the interior. And because Dhuwa and Yirritja are intermarrying moieties, all peoples had access to the trade that was opened up by the dingo.

### The 'starter' myth

Three Wangurri 'dog-men' Umbulka, Martingarr, and Djarrk, are hot and unhappy. There is no wind. They meet a Warramiri 'dog-man' Bulunha, who invites them to his country at Cape Wilberforce where cool winds blow year round courtesy of their Maari, the Golpa from the north in the Wessel Islands. On their return to Wangurri territory, the Wangurri 'dog-men' eat rats until their stomachs are full and they begin to growl. A Wangurri man and woman, seeing the 'dog-men', ask them why they are growling. Had they been to Warramiri lands, and seen the calamity unfolding there in the interactions of white and black? The 'dog-men' urinate on the feet of their masters, then bite them to death, burying their partially consumed bodies in a shallow grave creating a sacred totemic emblem. They then retreat to the hinterland, meeting up with a Dhalwangu 'dog-

man' called Lupana. Upon hearing the sound of a man chopping wood, they retreat further into the hinterland, shunning all contact with humanity, becoming the wild dingoes we know today.

In this 'starter' myth, adapted from Lloyd Warner's (1958) account, the dog was chosen by the mythmaker as the most appropriate symbol for describing the vast array of anti-social and other responses to first contact. Why are the dogs bellicose, afraid of contact with humans, and unhappy with their lot? What did they see in Warramiri lands that changed their lives and that created the anti-social entity we know as the dingo?

An examination of other dingo narratives helps to draw out the underlying significance of the 'starter', providing some insight into the purpose of Yolngu in creating, telling, and retelling such a narrative. Consider, for example, the following highlighted Yirritja moiety myths:

1. A wild dog, of similar disposition to Umbulka and his peers, desires contact with the Macassan visitors. He wants them to stay in his country in order to bring to his people the benefits of contact, but as a dog he lacks the necessary social skills and is ineffectual in building an alliance. [Reflects the dingo's timidity and asociality]
2. Another dog lives a life of abundance and is prepared to share the bounty of his land with the outsiders if they are hungry. [Reflects the fact that the dingo will, on occasion, share its food]
3. Certain dogs are fed cooked whale meat by the visitors and they ravenously devour it. They want more, the entire raw whale carcass, a desire that leads to their demise. [Reflects the dingoes' greed, lack of self-control, and often murderous intent]
4. A pack of dogs live a traditional lifestyle but in isolation, according to the laws of old, refusing the use any modern conveniences. Visitors to their land must abandon all the trappings of the new world. [The dingo is viewed as a culture bearer that is capable of the same loyalty to its origins as displayed by humans]
5. One dog travels aboard a visitor's boat, and the captain gives it the name of a sacred totem; he then kills the captain for this breach of etiquette and retreats into the wilderness to become a wild dingo. [Paralleling the Umbulka origin narrative, it reminds us of how humans and dogs are interchangeable in narratives]
6. At the beginning of time, Yolngu are white and rich, and Macassans black and poor. One dog at Cape Wilberforce refuses to parley with Macassans and speaks rudely to them and, as a consequence, all Yolngu are now black and poor, while Macassans are white and rich. [Reflects upon the decisive nature of contact between the dingo and Macassans for future generations]

Reading history from these narratives, it is apparent that some Yolngu rejected the Macassans, some tried to live with them, and some attempts at alliance building were made but shattered by perceived antisocial behavior from one or both parties. Some acted as if Macassans did not exist, clinging to the life of old, while others were overcome with desire for introduced goods and nearly self-destructed. None could totally ignore the visitor's presence. In a majority of cases, Yolngu (portraying themselves as dogs in myth) became discontent with their lot in the wake of contact.

How then were the Yolngu to account, cosmologically speaking, for their sudden great interest in, and dependency upon, all the new ideas and technologies (iron manufacture, pottery, cloth), and the concomitant threats to social cohesion and leadership?

In all the dog narratives that I examined there is a general movement of the dingo from the inland to the sea, from its homeland to that of its maternal grandmother's clan (its Maari). The simplest reading of the myths is that these were the very first trade routes. From out of the disorder came order: trading networks were established to facilitate the movement of trade goods from the sea to the interior along lines of established sacred alliances. But there is a deeper message in these journeys that continues to inform Yolngu reflections on contact with outsiders, and the best narrative to describe the evolving 'foreign policy' is the well-recorded myth of a dingo called Djuranydjura.

### **The transformation of Djuranydjura**

The best developed contact narratives emerging from the Umbulka 'starter' involve the meeting at Howard Island of Indonesian whale hunters, possibly Macassans, and the black male dog Djuranydjura, in which the totem rejects all of the visitor's gifts. But in a variation on this theme of rejection, the same dog, now white and female, travels to its Maari's country on neighbouring Elcho Island and cautiously, even reluctantly, accepts a necklace and a fishing line from the Macassan Captain.

This interaction, especially the colour and sex change, is strongly suggestive of the idea that trade between Macassans and Yolngu was facilitated by women; sexual favors being granted in return for highly desired trade goods. But today Yolngu merely say that this narrative was a mandate for collaboration and perhaps intermarriage.

The sacred alliance of Gutharra and Maari was reaffirmed through the travels of the antisocial dog and a pathway was created for the movement of goods. The Yolngu of Howard Island, even though they rejected the visitors, now had access to Macassan goods without compromising their integrity or the decisions they had made concerning intercultural contact.

This pattern of local rejection, and then acceptance of the Other in the Maari's territory repeats itself in many other Arnhem Land localities, although the

narratives are not so well documented. In one case Macassans are rejected by honey bees in Gupapuyngu territory and a dog, Wananda, then travels to the land of its Maari on Elcho Island, where it accepts dugong meat from the visitors. In another case, the Mildjingi dog Gurumul travels from the interior to the sea, where it fails to engage successfully in trade relations with Macassans. Its alter ego, Gurarinja, however, undertakes the same journey and successfully enters into a partnership with its Maari, the Warramiri. Finally, there is the story of the rejection by Yolngu of Macassans at Dholtji by the insolent dog Bol'lili, but with the simultaneous acceptance of visitors by the dingo Bulunha at nearby Cape Wilberforce. This initial public rejection of outsiders and, later, guarded acceptance of them, forms the basis of trade routes.

In the aforementioned dog stories, the dingo journeys to the land of a related Yirritja clan which is associated with the Dreaming entity Birrinydji. It is drawn to the sea by a new smell, a fire burning (a reference to people in distress), a desire for a cool breeze, etc. In some cases, a 'road' is explicitly mentioned, or a 'rope', or 'line of vision' joining the clans from some high vantage point. While in several cases the threat posed by the presence of the visitors is of paramount significance, in a majority of cases, trade is the desired outcome of a renewed alliance between Maari and Gutharra clans. In some cases an alliance is formed directly with the Macassans, or a pathway is created for both Yolngu and Balanda to travel upon. In others, a partnership is desired but not activated. In some cases, the Macassans and their boats may be referred to in a metaphorical sense as whales. The consumption of whale or dugong meat is the equivalent of acceptance of Macassan trade goods, or a mandate for a trading alliance, even intermarriage. A fundamental precondition of any partnership, however, is made clear in a number of the narratives. Yolngu, though newly dependent upon Macassans' goods for their livelihoods, would not accept a subservient or dog-status in relation to these visitors. If treated in such a manner, they would become like Umbulka and kill their 'masters.'

At the beginning of time (and in the Macassan period) a sharp division was created by Umbulka between humans and animals, Yolngu and wild dogs. Yolngu are social beings, their 'wild' nature concealed by the constraints of culture. What Umbulka witnessed in Warramiri lands was the near total collapse of the clan following first contact. The dog became infected with anger and resentment, and came to personify the collective madness of the period. It made a sacred emblem of the human body, forever affirming the truth of a human being's sociable nature. In so doing, Umbulka created a higher form of being, a human being, and called it 'Master.' Humanity is a sacred construct that is constantly under threat but can never be lost or forfeited if one affirms the sanctity of life. This is why the anti-social dog is so sacred to Yolngu.

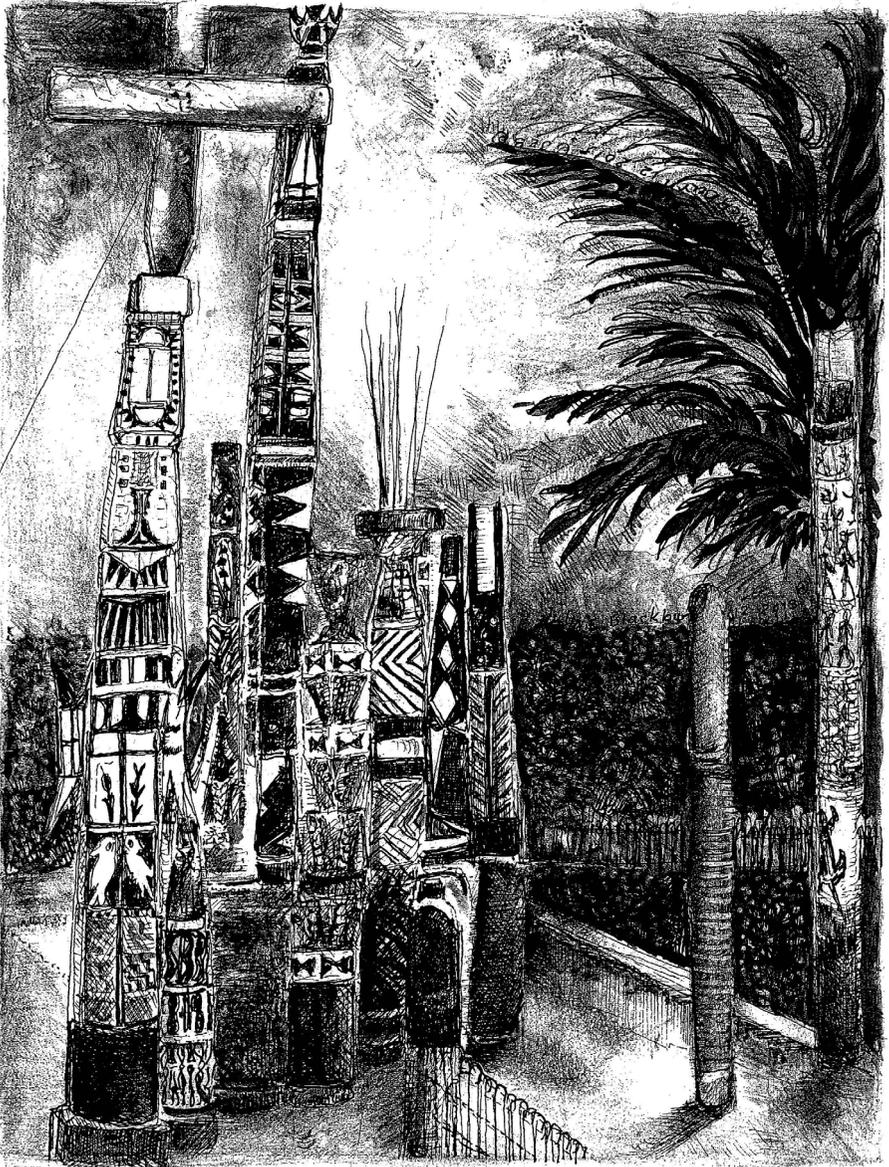
## Conclusion

The Umbulka narrative was the 'starter' for a whole series of myths that would allow Yolngu to understand the proper place of outsiders in their world.

Umbulka killed its master in order to remind everyone that Yolngu are human beings and would behave accordingly, even when challenged by the presence of outsiders whose behavior all too often resembled that of a wild dog. People recall, upon hearing these stories, that Yolngu responses to encounters were often dog-like, as they drove the visitors from the coast and into the sea. The message is a simple one. Umbulka created the social being known as the Yolngu. It makes humans sacred and itself profane in the process. This fundamental distinction between animality and humanity underlies all the dingo narratives and still guides Yolngu thought regarding the nature of intercultural relations.

The implication is that in Arnhem Land, there was no wild dog, no dingo, until the 'white' Macassan came to Australian shores. There were no human beings either. In Warramiri territory, the dog Umbulka witnessed the sudden and dramatic breakdown of a society; the rapid destruction of a culture tormented from within and without, and a people fleeing from the scene of chaos. The wild dog is a product of intercultural mayhem, and at night the Warramiri say you can hear the dingoes crying for how the Yolngu have suffered. The white man had become part of their lives but so too had the wild dog, and the two became inseparable in myth.

Today, a great deal of emphasis is placed by Australian governments upon the concept of reconciliation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. But Arnhemlanders often complain that they are being treated by federal and state bureaucrats like dogs rather than human beings. The anti-social behavior of non-Aborigines in trying to steal the land and its resources relegates them to the antisocial canine category. Reconciliation, from the perspective of this great totemic legacy, begins when each party treats the other as sacred entities, as human beings, and not as wild and cultureless animals. This is the essence of the Yolngu foreign policy. The trade that once flowed along the pathways created by the wild dog no longer flows. But the foreign policy determined by Yolngu thinkers is as relevant today as in the first days of the often turbulent encounters between Yolngu and others.



*Adjustments*

**6:1 An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land**

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrumarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin.)

“It was right and also wrong, easy and hard. We knew things would not be the same again. We felt good about it, good but sorry.” (David Burrumarra to Ian McIntosh, 1991).

The collection of carved and painted wooden posts on the beach at Elcho Island has a special place in the history of Yolngu art and politics. Spoken of as the ‘memorial’, it was the culmination of a movement by Arnhem Landers to reconcile aspects of their own culture with developments that were taking place on Yolngu land, but which were outside their immediate control. As Morphy (1988, p. 257) says, it was particularly good evidence of Yolngu:

...reflecting on aspects of their religious practice in order to develop effective ways of acting in a post-colonial situation.

What made the 1957 movement unique was that it represented an across-the-board break with the past. The sacred wooden posts (or rangga) represent and embody the ancestral spirits in a form where people can manipulate them in ceremonies. They are therefore treated with the utmost reverence as they signify land and sea ownership for the clan members who control them. They had never been publicly revealed before.

The posts bear the emblems of many clans and though they have deteriorated considerably since 1957, they were so striking that even in 1989, thirty-two years after the memorial was erected, John Mulvaney of the Australian Institute of the Humanities said the memorial was of major significance and should be included in the Register of the Australian National Estate. Anthropologist Ronald Berndt (pers. com. 1989) said it was very sad to see it go that way since if it had been refurbished it could have been a unique historical symbol of the Elcho Island settlement.

The Adjustment Movement has been analysed by many social scientists with Burridge’s (1971, p. 172) brief outline perhaps being the most extraordinary. He classified it as a millenarian or chiliastic movement, and wrote:

It is run by a particularly lively prophet-secretary [Burrumarra]. Negotiations with the political regime are handled in an orderly way through joint meetings and the exchange of letters. The prophet-secretary conducts his business with his own typewriter.

Berndt's text on the event, which he called *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*, was the most comprehensive account of the times and in an abridged form it won the Royal Anthropological Institute Wellcome Medal for 1958. The major relevance of this account is that it shows that the movement was not limited to Elcho Island. Rather, it was an expression of the feelings of Yolngu leaders throughout north-east Arnhem Land.

Of the Movement and its beginnings, Berndt (1962, p. 23) wrote that Burrumarra had called out for Yirrkala representatives to be present during the public showing of the rangga emblems at Elcho Island. He quoted Burrumarra:

We explained everything [to the visitors] but received no answer from them. We did not force them to talk... when the next night came, Batangga called them all for a second time. They replied that had found the new way... they had brought the old time and connected it to the new time... and would give a full answer in a week's time.

To me, Burrumarra added:

We had talked to the Yolngu as far away as Numbulwar and Milingimbi... When the Mala leaders assembled at Elcho Island Batangga spoke to them. He said, "I know how you are all feeling." He knew they were sad and frightened, wanting to hold back, but after he had spoken they all agreed. All kept some rangga hidden however. We couldn't bring them all out. Some had to stay in the bush.

And so the memorial was erected, a striking collection of the most sacred objects from both the Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties. "There was no ceremony," Burrumarra said. "We just brought them out and sat back."

The reaction of the people throughout the region was extreme. Berndt (1962, p. 23) recorded the view of some of the Yirrkala men:

As soon as the rangga were shown the people went mad. They became silly with rangga. Mr. Shepherdson tried to stop them but Burrumarra was too strong. Everybody blames Burrumarra. As soon as we heard [about] this new custom all of us at Yirrkala were very worried and we still are.

In 1991, Harold Shepherdson had this to say of the movement in a letter to me, looking back after more than thirty years:

The Elcho Island Yolngu inaugurated the movement and were of course encouraged by me. Burrumarra had quite a lot to do with it, he was the chief spokesman... These rangga would not normally be shown in the open. To me

it was a great step. It was linked with the headmen agreeing together not to have ceremonies that conflicted with what they understood of Christian values. Yolngu in other areas predicted dire consequences because of the movement. I don't remember any reaction from the Church as it only concerned Elcho at the time. The movement held for many years but lately many Yolngu have turned back. The above is what I remember of it. I can see it all happening in my mind's eye.

Burrumarra remembered it well too. There was pandemonium. Women and children who would normally be killed for viewing the rangga ran into the bush. The following is a quote from Burrumarra (in Berndt, 1962, p. 67):

The women were frightened at first, some went away to Milingimbi, others hurried to the mainland. At first they wouldn't agree to look. It took a month before they returned and two months before they became used to the sight of the rangga... some women started saving up flour and food to pay the men for showing them the rangga.

So one asks, why did Burrumarra and the other leaders do it? As Berndt (1962, p. 37) says, the leaders considered themselves as having a mythological warrant to institute change. Nevertheless, it certainly had no precedent in Arnhem Land, and in order to find an answer we need to look at what was happening in the region in the years leading up to 1957.

Berndt (1962, p. 39) says that Burrumarra had expressed the feeling of being caught between the contrary pressures of mission and traditional life. Consequently he was more ready to query if not to criticise than might otherwise have been the case.

Burrumarra, restless and unsatisfied, not taken quite seriously by his countrymen in spite (or because) of his parade of learning, was successful in enlisting the interest of Batangga and Willy, with their more solid reputation resting not just on mission-based authority but also on their high status in the sphere of traditional religion... Burrumarra's energetic prodding, his infectious concern... led them to join forces with him. (Berndt 1962, p. 93)

In his early life as a mission worker, Burrumarra was driven by the desire for both black and white people to live as equals. He said to me:

I was learning about Christianity. I knew the Yolngu had to develop the skills of the Balanda and take control of their lives. I dreamed of us working as doctors and lawyers, but all the same time maintaining the land, making it stronger.

Berndt adds that Burrumarra had:

...for some time been thinking vaguely about the problem of adjusting or bringing together traditional Aboriginal and introduced ways in order to

achieve the maximum benefit from the latter... On the one hand he wanted change from outside with greater rapidity. On the other hand he did not want them to overwhelm his own society and culture... If this loss of identity were to be avoided then some re-orientation of traditional life would be necessary. (1962, p. 39)

In 1946 Burrumarra returned to Elcho Island from Yirrkala to assist his cousin Batangga and missionary Harold Shepherdson in building the settlement. He became a church leader, delivering sermons and prayers and acting as an interpreter for the community. His intelligence and energy made him a favourite of clan leaders. He spent long hours in discussions with them about the future of the mission. As the years went by, however, he began to feel frustrated. Yolngu were coming in from the remoter areas but progress was slow and Yolngu had little control over development. Burrumarra said:

The Balanda think for us... we can manage all the available jobs... The people just [need to] open their brain in order to see how the Balanda are living. We want a big school [so children] can learn what the Europeans have brought us... so we can learn things for ourselves. (Berndt, 1962, p. 79)

There remained a threat of clan warfare also. There were unending arguments among men over land, rangga and women. "There was little freedom," Burrumarra said. "There were many clans and too many secrets. Suspicion was draining the people of their energy."

John Cawte (1994), in his work *The Universe of the Warramiri*, says that the 1940s and 1950s at Elcho Island were turbulent years and he recalled missionary Harold Shepherdson's feelings as the community grew into a confederacy of clans:

[It] was frightening... to live side by side with other clans who may often have been foes, amid deadly grievances from feuds that were still alive in memory. It was even more challenging to try to match Yolngu religion against Christianity, suddenly dominant everywhere. (Cawte, 1993, p. 16)

Berndt (1962, p. 39) says events came to a head after the visits of the American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948 (led by Charles Mountford) and of Dr. Richard Waterman and his wife to Yirrkala in 1952. Berndt (1962, p. 40) quotes Burrumarra:

They took pictures of our sacred ceremonies and rangga and we got excited. Why do they do this? We understand when Warner, Thomson and the Berndts were here. But why do they come again and again to study us? They take photographs of sacred things and show them to all the people throughout Australia and other places... we got a shock. We're not supposed to show these rangga to just anybody ... All this made us think... then we saw a film at the Elcho Church. It was from the American-Australian Expedition and it showed the sacred ceremonies and emblems. And everybody saw it... We've

got no power to hide [these rangga]; they are taking away our possessions. Are we to lose all this? Our most precious possessions, our rangga! We have nothing else; this is really our only wealth. (1962, p. 40)

All these influences as well as the unnatural situation of having all the clans together in one setting led Burrumarra to believe events were leading towards anarchy. Burrumarra said:

We must have rules in common... what the tribe thinks right we must follow. But the people are always going contrary. They have an argument about fish but it is not long before that point is forgotten and they jump into an argument about women or rangga, and so Arnhem Land is turned upside down... Trouble came up... we had [makarrata] but people didn't take much notice... Here were people with the same rangga, the same songs and they were jealous of one another... calling each other [mulkuru or stranger]; saying "You don't belong to this, you go away. I'll cut you off from the [clan]." And all this happened just because the bunggawa (leader) did not stand firm... because the people were not taught properly... [Lany'tjun] and [Djang'kawu] were good leaders but the people didn't follow what they taught at the beginning. The people lost themselves. (Berndt, 1962, p. 73)

Some people suggested the movement was something akin to a cargo cult in which the Yolngu, in return for showing their most precious belongings expected great riches. In communication with me, Burrumarra rejected this saying:

It was a sign to the world that we owned the land. We didn't expect anything in return. We didn't do it for money. We did it for our own lives and for the future. We believed if the Yolngu could adapt the old with the new we could lead more bountiful lives. We were building up the community... Some anthropologists say the movement was a failure, but how? We Yolngu are believers in the spirit world. Killing was going on and it had to stop. The killings started because someone was stepping over the 'marriage line' or the 'rangga line'. We wanted more freedom in this area.

The presence of rangga in the open, Burrumarra believed, was enough to hold society together. He said:

By putting the rangga in an open area, people would have to behave. They couldn't kill because the rangga were there. In the sacred ceremonies, the men would make these rangga. At this time we would sit around and share the damper [Warraga] and discuss any differences between us. Any problems would be brought up then and there, in front of the rangga and it would be finished, and never brought up again. With the rangga from all the clans on display, everyone had to be on guard, behaving according to the proper laws of the Mala.

The movement was both spiritual and political in nature. The leaders were trying to encourage legal recognition of the principles that underlay Yolngu religion, though it was only much later, with the production of the Warramiri Flag Treaty proposal in 1988, that the political nature of the movement was freely discussed.

That the Yolngu leaders were blending Yolngu and Christian values is undisputed. The motto of the movement was agreed to by all. It read, “Dhuwala limuru yurru gurrupan godkala” which Burrumarra translated as: “We give ourselves and our rangga to God.” He continued:

Each person had to dedicate their lives to God, to come forward and say it. This did not mean we forget the past or that the Balanda can do what they like. This is the Yolngu saying to the Balanda, this is the level that we can come together.

One striking sculpture in the memorial was a Wangurri clan rangga and it had a cross built in the top. Berndt (1962, p. 60) wrote:

The Christian cross at the apex of the rangga is ‘Batangga’s believing’. In his own words helped by Burrumarra, [he said that he had been] leaning on the old laws. But in 1951 [when his older brother Makarrwola died] he changed himself and he also changed Genesis to follow Christian fellowship... He kept the rangga, but the Bible was there too ... so he has combined both ways, so that he can put all of his children in school to become missionaries.

A view held by some of the elders was that stories from Yolngu history were like stories from the Old Testament. Lany’tjun and Djang’kawu, the principal Dreaming entities of the moieties, were to be considered as the prophets from those books, Burrumarra said.

For probably ten years or more following the display of the rangga Burrumarra lived in fear of reprisals. He said he wasn’t afraid for himself, but for his family and Batangga’s family. Some Yolngu resented the movement and blamed Burrumarra, for he was the youngest and most outspoken of the leaders. On at least two occasions he was threatened with death. He said to me:

People would come in from the mainland. They’d want me to go hunting with them, but I’d tell them, “If I go with you I’ll never come back,” and they would stand over me and laugh, a terrible mocking laugh, ha, ha, ha, which I can still hear in my ears. Others would insult me saying, “You know everything about all the clans, all the songs, even love magic, but we can teach you some things, come with us.” But I wouldn’t go. I stayed close to my family, Batangga, and Nyambi and hunted only in my country. At the time of my greatest fears, the spirits of the reef were with me, even though I did wrong in showing the rangga. They came to me and saved my life. And those who were against me, they’re all gone now and I’m still here.

Burrumarra and I visited the site of the memorial in 1989. He stood back and remembered, but said nothing. It was rapidly decaying and in a few years only the inscribed concrete slab which Burrumarra had erected will remain. "That's alright," he said.

The Adjustment Movement was wrong but we had to do it. I know I was brain-washed by the missionaries and there is no pleasure on looking back on it, but it served its purpose.

Burrumarra's religious views were unchanged. He said:

I believe in both ways. We can't lose either, but there are doubts on both sides. What do you do when your mother or your brother dies? What will come up? Yidaki (didgeridoo), bilma (clapsticks), manikay (song), and bunggul (dance). This is what we had to do. We had to do what was right for them. People today don't know which line to follow, the mission line, government line, or the rangga line. We cannot follow our own desires. This is wrong. This idea has been put there by someone else for their purpose. Each clan has its own idea of right and wrong. In our life we must find truth and put it in one bundle, see wrong and put it in another bundle. We must follow the law and the family. I say to the people: "If you're a Christian then be a Christian, or if you follow the rangga, then follow it."

Today at Elcho Island western materialism is making strong inroads and there is growing pressure to reject old beliefs entirely. The Church, which now has its own Yolngu minister, has become a venue for the mocking of older spiritual beliefs. The minister might say in a sermon, "God does not crawl around on his belly like a snake." For Burrumarra this is all right and not all right. He said to me:

I can't change what I believe and they can't force change in the community. In the Adjustment Movement when we brought those rangga out, that was the finish. We wouldn't make them anymore. [Now] they want to bring out more rangga. They came and asked me and I agreed but I still feel sad. Batangga's son brought out the Wangurri fighting stick rangga. This is what sustained the Wangurri Yolngu in the past. But God is much more than these wooden objects. God sustains the people today. This is the way we have to follow now. But in years to come you'll find all the people living as one group and they'll be crying because they've got no rangga. But who's to blame?

I asked Burrumarra if the ceremonies connected with them would still be performed and he said:

No, of course not. It would be like a football match. Nothing more. How could we do the bunggul? It would be meaningless.

In the thirty years since the movement, very little has been said about it. It was analysed by religious authorities and anthropologists but the Yolngu remained

quiet. Then in March, 1990, at the tenth annual Christian Revival at Elcho Island, the movement and all that it stood for came under scrutiny. It had taken that long for the community to be able to talk openly about what had transpired. During the evening, Yolngu ministers Mawandjil Garrawirritja and Djiniyini Gondarra called the founders of the movement, Harry Makarrwola and Batangga, saints. Mawandjil, addressing the crowd gathered at the Elcho Island hall, said:

There is one man left from that time, only one that God will take soon, but has kept alive so he could remind us and show us the way. His name is Burrumarra. Stand up for us.

A walking stick appeared on high from the centre of the crowd. Burrumarra stood up, nearly fell backwards and looked straight ahead facing the cross. He had some recognition at last.

In his life Burrumarra and members of his generation had tried to balance the spiritual values of the land with Church teachings, and with the political needs and aspirations of his generation. Burrumarra's final words describing why he instigated the Adjustment Movement were simply, "So we could be here in the future." And as a consequence, contemporary Elcho Island society has a freedom today that is not apparent in other Arnhem Land communities. This is the legacy of his work and of the movement itself.

## **6:2 Anthropology, Self-determination and Aboriginal Belief in the Christian God**

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### **Abstract**

*Over the past forty years the Yolngu of Galiwin'ku have successfully incorporated Christianity into their cosmology. However, a Uniting Church report characterises members of this same community as being overwhelmed with feelings of inferiority and powerlessness and unable to function within structures established by Balanda (non-Aborigines). This chapter contrasts the ways in which Christianity has helped break down the separation between Yolngu and Balanda with its role as a structure for explicit discourse on cross-cultural relations and inequality. While some Elcho Islanders see anthropologists as people who listen in order to work for Aborigines, Yolngu Christians see them and other scientists as attempting to undermine Yolngu belief in the Christian God. They are seen as degrading a spiritual movement which has its foundation in the Dreaming and as posing a potential threat to the momentum of Yolngu directed change in the community.*

### **Introduction**

The year 1992 was the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the community of Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) by the Methodist Overseas Mission (Uniting

Church). While missionaries departed from the community in the mid-1970s, the Yolngu population is still coming to terms with the mission experience. On at least five separate occasions between 1987 and 1992, announcements were made by Yolngu ministers of the Uniting Church and others over the public address system to the effect that island residents should not listen to anthropologists or other scientists. Anthropologists, in league with Satan, were accused by the clergy of belittling or reducing Yolngu spirituality to some sort of aberration. The vehemence of the oration indicated that some raw nerve had been touched.

The following anecdotes highlight the internal community debate.

1. A Yolngu minister told the congregation about a discussion he had with a non-Aboriginal anthropology student. The student was saying how rich Yolngu culture was and how non-Aborigines had no culture whatsoever. The minister replied to the youth, “You must be crazy. Look at the way we are living. It is you Balanda who have everything. We Yolngu have nothing.”
2. Another Yolngu minister spoke to a gathering of senior men about his wish to see the Gunapipi, a major regional ceremony, banned from Elcho Island. While he was dismayed about the amount of interest being shown in the ceremony by Balanda, his major complaint was the association of the Gunapipi serpent with the creator. He intended to enter the ceremony in order to “...confront this devil.”
3. There had been a spate of illness at Galiwin’ku and a public announcement was made by a Church minister to the effect that people should not keep asking for Balanda medicine because medicine alone would not save them. Illness was the result of a failure to follow God’s law and people needed to pray for forgiveness of their sins as the first stage of the healing process.
4. A senior non-Aboriginal public servant from the Northern Territory Education Department expressed concern at the growing interest by Yolngu in Christianity. At a teachers meeting at Galiwin’ku he questioned the value of pouring so much money into what was problematically called ‘preserving Aboriginal culture’. In the future, he suggested, when culture classes were held in the school, all that would be taught would be Genesis.

There are countless other incidents that could be referred to which suggest a perceived connection between past missionary activity and present-day intrusive anthropological research. Were both anthropologists and missionaries guilty of the same sort of manipulation of people’s feelings of self-worth and notions of dignity? Were Yolngu Christians fearful of being depicted as somehow inauthentic or not real Yolngu by visiting academics? Keen (1994, p. 256) says that in recent times Yolngu

have tended to favour universalistic religious forms which unite groups and moieties. Christianity has helped overcome the traditional separation of clans and of men and women and provided a bridge between Balanda and Yolngu. Such a re-configuration reflects the changing life circumstances of Yolngu, now living in central communities and participating in regional economies. Is the anthropologist, by placing so much interest on tradition, seen as a potential threat to this re-configuration?

In an investigation of the quest for self-determination and Yolngu belief in the Christian God, I examine the anxiety some people feel about being the subject of anthropological inquiry. This chapter provides a snapshot of the inter-relationship between traditional beliefs, Christianity, and the role of the visiting anthropologist at Galiwin'ku from the point of view of the author, an adopted member of the Wangurri clan. It is based on a personal experience of over seven years at this community and in particular, upon discussions with the late David Burrumarra from the period 1987 to 1994. Throughout his life, Burrumarra was a major source of information for scholars of traditional Yolngu religion but he was also a significant player in attempts at reconciling the new way (i.e. Christianity).

Burrumarra considered himself to be Australia's first Aboriginal anthropologist and he had particular views on their role in communities. He saw the anthropologist as being a person who worked for and with Yolngu to help them regain what had been lost in the transition from autonomous living in the 'bush' to self-imposed wardship in the mission. One task of the anthropologist was to reestablish Yolngu pride in the richness of their cultural heritage. This was in an environment, however, where Christian authorities stressed that all people were equal in the eyes of God but where Yolngu self-esteem was low and expectations high that in the future, Yolngu would once again have control over their lives. Belief in God was the way in which this would be achieved.

### **Christianity and Mystification**

Insight into the significance of the statements of the Yolngu clergy regarding anthropologists is to be found in a 1994 report examining ways to address the social and other problems faced by Yolngu in the communities of Galiwin'ku and Ramingining. Submitted to the Northern Territory Office of Aboriginal Development by the Aboriginal Resource and Development Service (ARDS), this was not the work of an anthropologist, but rather, of Uniting Church employees with long experience in the region and close personal ties with Yolngu communities.

In the study, entitled *Cross-Cultural Awareness Education for Aboriginal People*, a picture was presented of Yolngu as being totally mystified by the 'white man's' law and unable to function within structures established by non-Aborigines. They used the term mystification from Paulo Freire (1973) to refer to the way in which a group of people is bewildered and trapped in dependency and overwhelmed with feelings of inferiority and powerlessness.

The consultation process for this project, conducted over six months in 1994, sparked great interest and attracted considerable local Yolngu support. For

many Yolngu it was a breakthrough. On the one hand it was the first major attempt by Balanda authorities to come to an understanding of Yolngu concerns. On the other, there was a perception that the secret knowledge or magic that underlay Balanda success in the world was to be revealed to them. Using the terminology of Freire, the report labels such understandings as characteristic of situations where one group of people comes to find itself being completely dominated by others. This is because events and forces shaping people's lives are not understood intellectually. People are fatalistic and dependent on those in authority. They conform to an image of themselves superimposed by the other culture.

In these circumstances, Yolngu feel inferior, unintelligent and are perceived as being followers of a way of life that is illegitimate according to Balanda thinking. The ARDS report looked at ways of confronting this state of intellectual marginalism, and the solution proposed was to institute a series of training programs which would explain how the Balanda world functions by using Yolngu concepts and understandings.

One unusual aspect of the ARDS analysis was that the subject of Christianity did not come up at all and yet the thrust of the report was open criticism of mission insensitivity to Yolngu aspirations. The report nevertheless had the full-scale support of the Yolngu clergy.

The report was also relevant in terms of a recent debate on the representation of racial issues (see Cowlishaw, 1993; Lattas, 1993; Morris, 1989). I suggest that the sensitivity some Yolngu feel towards anthropological inquiry is not merely a matter of Yolngu having little or no say in setting the anthropologist's agenda or that some Yolngu unquestionably accept the Freire model as an explanation of their powerlessness. Rather, I believe it is linked to what Lattas (1993) refers to as the attempt by white intellectuals operating in Aboriginal studies to police the cultural practices through which Aborigines produce themselves. He says:

Aborigines have become the focus of a gaze which analyses, questions, and problematises [Aboriginal] resistances and even their identities. Determining the boundaries of Aboriginal authenticity has become the pre-occupation of some European intellectuals whose concern with situating the culture of Aborigines is at the expense of acknowledging the positioning power of their own cultural practices. (Lattas, 1993, p. 240)

In this chapter, what Elcho Islanders say on the subject of their belief will be viewed in the light of Gillian Cowlishaw's (1993) argument about oppositional culture i.e. that the logic of Aboriginal cultural forms can be understood in part through their dialectical relationship with more powerful cultural forms. In many parts of Australia, she says, cultural reproduction occurs in a context of opposition, as Aborigines attempt to establish an arena of dignity independent of the judgments of the wider society.

At Galiwin'ku, I suggest, this arena revolves around the Church and Yolngu belief in the Christian God. Within this arena, there is open resentment about the

fact that Yolngu have made virtually no impact on the Balanda world, whereas Yolngu have needed to make substantial changes in their way of life to accommodate others.

My objective is to speculate on the underlying significance of the ministers' condemnation of anthropology and I am not looking for simple answers. Any examination of the growing interest in Christian beliefs and practices at Galiwin'ku must tackle the intellectual marginalisation and powerlessness Galiwin'ku Yolngu are experiencing in their lives. I aim to give insight into the dynamics of community life as people contest and argue about issues relating to religion, and concomitantly, race relations and politics, as they frame their lives in relation to non-Aborigines.

### **Christianity at Galiwin'ku**

North-east Arnhem Land is a region that has seen extensive contacts with non-Aborigines over many centuries, including visits by a number of ethnic groups, in particular Macassans (Bugis, Macassarese, and Sama-Bajau) from what is now Indonesia, as well as Dutch and English explorers and Japanese fishermen.

The earliest knowledge of Christianity, some Elcho Islanders say, came via contact with Macassan trepangers who had been visiting northern Australian shores in search of the sea slug (trepang) since the mid-1700s (see Macknight, 1976). According to Buthimang, a senior member of the Wangurri clan at Galiwin'ku, his grandfather was told by a visiting Indonesian fisherman of a man in the sky, on a wooden cross:

The Macassans did not know who he was, but they told us that he was good, and that he was coming our way and that we should keep our eye out for him. (pers. comm. 1988)

There was also a story, Buthimang said, that there were two types of Balanda. One had a gun and the other a book (i.e. the Bible), and only the latter could be trusted.

The Yolngu were spared the worst aspects of European colonisation owing to their remote location. The unsuitability of much of the land for cattle, local resistance to this industry, and also the establishment of the Arnhem Land Reserve in the late 1920s, saw Yolngu living in relative isolation prior to the Second World War. Only missionaries, Japanese pearlers, European beachcombers, and anthropologists were in regular contact with Indigenous populations.

The movement of Yolngu onto missions was largely voluntary. Methodist Church policy towards Aborigines here was less punitive and autocratic than that enforced in other areas of Australia. (Keen, 1994, p. 26-27) The dormitory system was employed for only a short period and people were not forced to speak English or curtail their involvement in ceremonial life. Yet in going from a 'bush' life to the mission there was a transition from inter-clan connections and autonomy to isolation and dependency in central communities, a point made very strongly in the ARDS report.

Before 1962, Aborigines in the Northern Territory had no voting rights. They were wards of the state with the mission superintendent being the legal guardian of the people. His word was law and, according to the ARDS report, dictatorial rule was all that the Yolngu knew of the Balanda world.

In 1974, in line with changing policies in Aboriginal Affairs, the Methodist Overseas Mission withdrew from the Galiwin'ku community, but Yolngu were completely unprepared for it. Those living on missions had become a dependent people (ARDS, 1994). Since 1974 however, Yolngu have taken on an increasing role in the administration of settlement and Church affairs. Today the township of Galiwin'ku has a population of over 1000 people and it is regarded by many of its Yolngu residents as a stronghold of the Christian faith.

### **What does the world know of Galiwin'ku?**

The outside observer of happenings at Elcho Island might be aware that over the past forty years there have been on-going attempts by Yolngu to reconcile Christianity and Yolngu beliefs. They might also know that Galiwin'ku has been the setting for landmark Aboriginal Christian movements such as the 'Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land' and the 'Christian Revival'. These have been commented on by many anthropologists and the analyses have tended to focus on 1. The quest for Aboriginal self-determination in an environment where land and sea rights were under threat from non-Aboriginal interests (e.g. Berndt, 1962; Maddock, 1972; Morphy, 1983). 2. The question of Yolngu identity and culture, and 3. The concept of 'changelessness in change' as a central tenet of the Yolngu approach to religion (Bos 1988a & 1988b; Rudder, 1993).

A number of ex-missionaries have also produced articles and books on their experiences on Elcho Island and neighbouring communities, (e.g. Chaseling, 1957; Guy, 1991; McKenzie, 1976; Webb, 1938), and the relationship between missionaries and Yolngu, more often than not, is described in paternalistic terms. While the assistance of 'good natives' is acknowledged, mission 'in-mates', on the whole, are regarded as being totally reliant on the newcomers and one has the impression that missionaries believed that they saved Yolngu from themselves. While some Yolngu agree with this position, it is largely an unfashionable view.

In many accounts it is implied that missionaries would suffer Yolngu keeping aspects of the 'old' culture alive so long as Christianity was to become a universal law that transcended all others. Take the following account from missionary Wilbur Chaseling's exploits at Yirrkala in the early 1930s. With the aid of local workers, including David Burrumarra, Chaseling shaped and erected a fifteen metre high wooden cross, made from local swamp timber, on the headland at Yirrkala, and called it a madayin. Madayin, like rangga, is a Yolngu word for sacred objects usually kept out of the public eye, and in his account, Chaseling is talking with the local people about his controversial action.

[Un-named Yolngu] “Bapa [Father], why are we digging the pit?”  
[Chaseling] “We are going to erect a [madayin] sacred totem pole.” Incredulously the men paused from their digging.  
[Yolngu] “A [madayin]? But if we put it here on the headland the women and children will see it.”  
[Chaseling] “Yes, this is the Jesus-totem. It is the biggest totem of all. Everyone can look at it and... think of Him. It is His Mark. We call it His Cross.”  
(Chaseling, 1941, p. 7)

This exchange suggests that inroads were made by missionaries through attempts at syncretism. Yet the cross was erected atop a Yolngu sacred site (pers. comm. Burrumarra 1988) which suggests that Yolngu themselves were a party to attempts to promote the Christian idea more widely.

### **The Contemporary Scene**

The process of reconciling traditional Yolngu beliefs and practices and Biblical teachings was accelerated following the departure of Methodist missionaries in the 1970s. Island residents understood that the major struggle was to allow a place for Christianity but also to establish a sense of continuity with the past. How this was to be achieved remains the subject of continuing discussion on the island. Minister Dr. Djiniyini Gondarra, for instance, advocated the maintenance of traditions while following Christian beliefs and practices. Minister Mawunydjil Garrawiritja disagreed and saw a complete break from the past as being a necessary step forward for the Yolngu so that in the future, all people will be united in Christ.

In Sunday sermons attended by Yolngu and non-Aborigines alike, many of the Yolngu preachers deemed it necessary to justify their belief in Christ. In a sermon in July 1992 Mawunydjil asked the congregation, “When did the Good News first come to Arnhem Land?” Some people said it came with the missionaries but then the Minister said, “But God has always been here, preparing our minds and bodies for the message.” Minister Rronang Garrawurra (1982), in a similar way, wrote:

Before the white man came, God revealed Himself, to show that He is God. He chose our ancestors and showed them how to make a law. This was passed on from generation to generation until now. We remember our sacred areas because of this. (Garrawurra, 1982, p. 4)

One Yolngu lay preacher justified her belief in historical terms. She said that it was the decision of her father and grandfather that her family follow a particular line. These were people who had an intimate knowledge of traditional matters and they made the new law for all to follow. Another lay preacher said that belief in the word of God had released the Yolngu peoples from a dark and brutal past and he viewed Christianity in terms of social justice. He said that it was only by following this path that inequalities between Yolngu and Balanda would be resolved. Still others viewed Christ as a manifestation of certain Yolngu mythological beings. The Warramiri

leader David Burrumarra said that the followers of the ancestral being Birrinydji, for example, should be Christians, and that Walitha'walitha (Allah) was one and the same as the Christian God. In many cases, such perspectives follow clan lines. Despite an overall agreement on the fact that many of the people at Elcho Island follow one God, the community is split on the way they understand the relationship between their own cultural inheritance and Christianity.

For commentators such as Bos (1988a; 1988b) and Rudder (1993), it is this maneuvering, this redefining of Yolngu law in response to the new in ways which achieve 'changelessness in change' which is of major anthropological interest. But as the ARDS report and the public statements of ministers suggest, the tradition of Christianity allows for a commentary on cross-cultural political issues. While Uniting Church ministers and lay preachers at Elcho Island may be divided on theological issues they agree on one thing, and that is that belief in the Christian God does not mean that Yolngu become Balanda. Burrumarra exclaimed in one meeting of Church elders that Yolngu needed to keep their culture strong otherwise it would not be possible for them to say no to a mining company if it wanted to operate in Arnhem Land. Only by stressing differences could Yolngu maintain their status as spokespersons for the land. This gives the impression, of course, that traditional Yolngu belief is merely instrumental, but the situation is far more complex than this.

### **Confronting Marginalization**

Yolngu identity at Galiwin'ku is framed in part in terms of belief in the Christian God but Christianity is also a structure for the expression of ideas on what should be the appropriate relationship between Yolngu and Balanda in Australia. But to what extent has it provided an avenue for confronting the intellectual marginalisation that has come in the wake of the mission experience? To answer this, I look in detail at the work of the Warramiri leader David Burrumarra who had a substantial input into the staging of the 1957 Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land, the 1978 Christian Revival, and the performance of a 'totemic' Ngaara ritual in 1993.

#### *The Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*

The Adjustment Movement, one of the most significant and controversial events in recent north-east Arnhem Land history, was an attempt at reconciling Christianity and traditional Yolngu belief (Beckett, 1993, p. 679-680; Berndt, 1962; Borsboom, 1992, p.15-16; Bos, 1988a & 1988b; Keen, 1994, p. 277-278; Maddock, 1972, p. 1-3; Morphy, 1983, p. 110-113; Rudder, 1993, p. 74-75). While there was far from universal agreement by senior Yolngu, sacred madayin representing groups from across the region were revealed for public scrutiny for the first time, altering their character irrevocably for future generations. Not all the madayin were revealed however, a point which various commentators use as evidence that Yolngu were at least in part, leaving their options open.

The Adjustment Movement represented an across the board break with the past and Berndt (1962, p. 39) firmly placed the initial stirring for the movement with Burrumarra, who was then forty years of age. It was he who convinced the more established Yolngu leaders at Elcho Island to join the movement and reveal their madayin.

While the Adjustment Movement is now viewed in terms of key individuals i.e. Batangga of the Wangurri clan, Burrumarra of the Warramiri clan, and Walalipa and Mayamaya of the Golumala and Djambarrpuynngu clans, at the time it was seen to be under the leadership of one man. As Berndt (1962, p. 41) explained, the people were lifting up Batangga to lead all community groups, presumably in line with an image of Yolngu as followers of one God. There was thus a conscious attempt at redefining social organisation. The Yolngu were to be a single unified block of clans and Christianity was being put forward as legitimising such unity. Christianity was being presented as a belief that transcended all others but this was not at the expense of clan beliefs.

Some commentators have dismissed the Adjustment Movement as a failure because the social reforms Burrumarra tried to implement as part of the process of reconciling beliefs were unsuccessful. He desired an end to the 'promise system' of marriage and wished to introduce monogamy in line with missionary teachings but there was too much opposition from older men (Shepherdson, 1981, p. 23). Also, if one looks at the movement in terms of Burrumarra's attempt to set up negotiations with the government over a number of demands, including claims for compensation in the form of community services and recognition of Aboriginal rights (Morphy, 1983, p. 111), then the movement was as Maddock (1972, p. 2) says, "deluded or misguided." The community of Galiwin'ku was remote and just one of many Aboriginal settlements across the Top End and as the ex-Elcho Island missionary Harold Shepherdson says, the effects of the movement were primarily local (pers. comm. 1990).

It was only a matter of years after the memorial was erected that mining operations commenced in Nhulunbuy (Gove) with the rights and wishes of the Yolngu people being largely ignored. It was as if the promise of the Adjustment Movement would not be fulfilled. But to call the movement a failure on these grounds alone is inaccurate as it is not how many of the people of Elcho Island now remember it. Within Yolngu Christian circles it was a momentous occasion.

### *The Elcho Island Christian Revival*

The next landmark event in the reconciliation of traditional and Christian beliefs at Elcho Island was the Christian Revival of 1978 when, as Rudder (1993, p. 72) suggests, the Holy Spirit came to Galiwin'ku. This was a time of prophesies and visions. In one documented case, a Yolngu fisherman, Djaymila, diving in the waters around Elcho Island found a rock at the bottom of the sea in the shape of Australia in fulfilment of a prophesy by the Wangurri clan leader Buthimang. This rock was seen to be evidence of a time to come when all the peoples of Australia

would be united in Christ and the place of Yolngu in that future would be paramount.

This period is commemorated each year in a Revival weekend in March with visitors coming from all over the country to celebrate and worship. Prior to 1978, despite the Adjustment Movement, only a small percentage of community members were baptised Christians and there were few regular Church goers (Rudder, 1993, p. 53). Leading up to and following the Revival, however, prayer meetings became a regular nightly occurrence and a majority of island residents were involved (Buthimang pers. comm. 1990).

Rudder (1993, pp. 73-74) says that in many ways the 1978 event at Galiwin'ku was viewed as the 'second' Revival. The first was the Adjustment Movement. It was the sons and daughters of the major figures of the 1957 movement who were now promoting belief in Christianity. Wuyatiwuy and Rrurambu, sons of Batangga of the Wangurri clan, and Djiniyini Gondarra, the son of Walalipa of the Golumala clan, were the chief instigators, along with Djilipa and Bunbatju of the Liyagawumirr clan.

In the wake of the revival, some Galiwin'ku Christian leaders saw themselves as having a mandate to bring Christianity to the rest of Australia. Known outside Arnhem Land as the 'Black Crusade', Yolngu from Galiwin'ku travelled throughout the outback spreading the 'Good News' (see Bos, 1988a; Keen, 1994, p. 285). I was present at a Christian Festival in Alice Springs in 1991, for instance, when an Aboriginal elder praised the efforts of visiting Elcho Islanders for they had transformed his homeland in the outback from an Old Testament 'valley of dry bones' into a living community. He said that when the Elcho Island evangelist Rrurambu and his team came to his settlement there was not a single 'living' thing there. All the people were spiritually dead, but then they found 'a new way' and life returned to the valley.

The growing trend at Galiwin'ku at this time was to associate Biblical characters with the major Yolngu ancestral beings, Djang'kawu and Lany'tjun, and to see Christianity as the foundation of the Yolngu way of life. Keen (1994, p. 284) for example said:

Leaders likened wangarr such as Djang'kawu to Adam and Eve or to Moses... some Christian symbols were decorated with lorikeet feathers like other sacred objects... songs were similar in form to manikay [Yolngu song]... baptism was modelled on the bukulup washing ceremony.

As my involvement in the Yolngu community of Galiwin'ku was mainly with Wangurri and Warramiri men, my knowledge of the Revival movement is biased. My reading of events from this time suggests that there was far from universal agreement on this development just as there had been considerable indecision on the part of certain Yolngu at the time of the Adjustment Movement.

In contrast to Wangurri clan involvement, senior Warramiri leaders did not play a significant part in the Revival. While sympathetic, Burrumarra stood by the original Adjustment Movement position in which both traditional Yolngu beliefs

and Christianity would be held side by side. Neither would have precedence. The Revival position was for Christianity to be the one and only law in the community and there was little public discussion on the important ways in which older beliefs were still relevant in people's lives, even though it appears to have been a subject on many people's minds (pers. comm. Roy Marika, 1990; Timothy Buthimang, 1990). As Keen (1994, p. 285) said:

[Some] Yolngu...were... hoping that religious arguments would lead the white community to understand their point of view and bind them in a way that arguments solely related to the wangarr ancestors would not.

Despite attempts by some Yolngu to play it down, a largely unspoken concern in the community was that Christianity did pose a threat to identity. Buthimang, the Wangurri and Christian leader, said that he feared that in the future there would only be one clan at Elcho Island, the Christian clan. Laws at family, clan and moiety levels determine links to country, inter-group relations and marriage procedures, and this was at risk if one law dominated all others. Looming in the minds of Yolngu was the threat of chaos that would accompany the loss of authority by leaders. So while the alignment of Christianity with Yolngu traditions in the Revival was supported by Burrumarra, he also stood by the Adjustment Movement position of laws overlapping and entwining in important ways, but with neither having precedence.

#### *The Wangurri/Warramiri Ngaara Ceremony*

One of the most influential events in reconciling Christianity with the legacy of Arnhem Land ancestral beings, at least from the perspective of certain Wangurri and Warramiri leaders, came with the performance of a Ngaara ceremony at Galin'ku in December 1993. This ceremony has been well documented in the literature. (e.g. Keen, 1978; Warner, 1969) The Warramiri/Wangurri variation deals with the founding actions of the moiety ancestral being Lany'tjun and his emissaries. It is described by Elcho Islanders as being about the history of the world and one's place in it.

While other clans had held their Ngaara ceremonies, the Wangurri and Warramiri had not staged their version since before the Adjustment Movement, with Burrumarra stressing that while the ceremony remained of the utmost significance, he was worried that it was no longer relevant given the way people were living.

In 1957 the sacred madayin had been brought out but there was no ceremony or public statement on its significance. Berndt's (1962) text that was published some years later was geared mainly towards a non-Aboriginal audience. The performance of the Ngaara ceremony in 1993 was to be the culmination of the Adjustment Movement, various community leaders said. It was to be a final statement on the vexed question of what was to be the relationship between traditional law and Christianity.

As nominal head of both the Wangurri and Warramiri clans, Burrumarra's direction was final in terms of whether or not the Ngaara ceremony could be held. He personally doubted that there would be much support and complained that the time never seemed to be right. The Wangurri leader, Dayngumbu, for instance, was a 'born again' Christian, desiring a clean break from the past. Buthimang however believed the ancestral being Lany'tjun to have been an emissary of Jesus, and when he delivered Christian sermons, he often wore the sacred madayin associated with this Yirritja moiety ancestor. Still other Wangurri leaders had different ideas. Warramiri clan leaders, likewise, were largely scattered in terms of residence and belief. Liwukang and Wulanybuma of the Warramiri clan, for example, saw madayin as the Yolngu 'Bible' whereas Burrumarra saw a place for both beliefs in the Yolngu way of life.

Burrumarra told me that it would be pointless to hold a Ngaara ceremony if the real power in people's lives i.e. the Government and Christianity, were not represented. It would be nothing more than a mockery of sacred traditions (McIntosh, 1994, p. xvii). Just as the madayin revealed in the Adjustment Movement were never to be made again, so too the ceremonies would not be performed. "It would be like a football match ...It would be meaningless." (Burrumarra in McIntosh 1994, p. 111) Younger leaders however were starting to complain that they did not know what to tell the young about the past or how to explain the relationship between various Yolngu groups. There was concern that no policy had been agreed to by all on the reconciliation of the old and the new.

In late 1993 a compromise was reached and the ceremony commenced. A Cross was positioned in the sacred ceremonial ground, just as a cross had been placed on one of Lany'tjun's rangga in the Adjustment Movement. At the end of Lany'tjun's dances each day, the performers would bow their heads in prayer. While the Ngaara is said to be about Lany'tjun "...holding the country" on behalf of the Yolngu, the new addition was Lany'tjun "...praying to God for the people." (Dayngumbu pers. comm. 1993) As in the Adjustment Movement, the message was that for some Warramiri and Wangurri clan members, there could no longer be any mention of the heritage of Lany'tjun without reference to Christianity. Yolngu were first and foremost Christians, but their identity as Yolngu was inextricably linked to their moiety, clan, and family history.

### **Anthropology and Yolngu self-determination**

As the work of Beckett (1993) and Keen (1994, p. 301) suggests, the reconciliation of old and new beliefs implies both a desire by residents for unity and equality with the dominating Other (both in the spiritual and physical sense), and also simultaneously, a desire for recognition that Yolngu hold a privileged place in relation to the land and sea. At the 1992 Elcho Island Revival, which coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the community of Galiwin'ku, a series of events occurred which brought into focus the local significance of this

process of alignment. Present at the weekend celebrations were many of the missionaries from the early days. It was a moving, though at times, controversial reunion. For instance, in a short play presented for the entertainment of the visitors, Dr Djiniyini Gondarra dressed as a missionary and acted out his memories of the food rationing days of the 1940s and 1950s. He wore a large hat and carried a stick. In a booming voice, he told the Yolngu men to line up for their rations, which in this case was a cup of flour, a cup of molasses and some tobacco. One by one he admonished the men for either not coming to Church or not working hard enough during the week and on this basis, distributed or withheld rations. The Yolngu in the audience were delighted with the performance and roared with laughter. The missionaries looked on quietly, apparently unsure of how to respond.

Of particular note were the evening prayer meetings led by the local congregation. On the opening Friday night, Dr. Gondarra called for the old missionaries to come forward and to pray the way the Yolngu now do, following a charismatic style. Of the hundreds of visitors, no-one came forward. On the second night, only Harold Shepherdson, the Elcho Island pioneer and a few others joined in the circle of prayer. On the Sunday, the last day of the Revival, the Minister berated the audience, saying:

In the old days we followed you. We kept our heads down because we were ashamed. Now we walk with our heads up and we look at you in the eye and say [that] we can be brothers and sisters together. You must pray the way that we do. Come forward.

Virtually all the visitors came forward, joining hands with the Yolngu congregation. Burrumarra often said that when one is on Yolngu land, one must do things the way the land owners do, otherwise there is trouble. This was true in the past and being a fundamentalist Christian does not alter this fact.

Yet if we accept the findings of the ARDS report, Galiwin'ku Yolngu feel unable to function adequately within alien power structures within the community. Yolngu lives are to a significant degree being directed by non-Aboriginal interests and influences and many Galiwin'ku residents resent this. Few Yolngu are employed in meaningful jobs. Most live in overcrowded houses and are almost totally reliant on government hand-outs. They often despair at their inability to take advantage of the wealth of their homelands, as Balanda are seen to do.

In earlier times, Burrumarra encouraged the work of anthropologists for he saw them as people who listened to, and worked for, Yolngu. They were seen as agents facilitating change for the better in Yolngu lives. They would help the people reclaim their status as spokespersons for country. By the 1970s, following the Gove land rights case, Burrumarra's views on all such 'specialists' had soured.

While I rarely heard any derogatory comments about the activities of mission workers, suspicion surrounded the work of anthropologists. Some of the scholars that have worked in north-east Arnhem Land have been adopted into a family and clan

group. Morphy (1983, p. 114; 1991, p. 98) says that such adoption into the Yolngu kinship system, and the revealing of knowledge to Balanda generally, is a means of having outsiders affirm the value of sacred traditions and Yolngu rights to them. But in the Galiwin'ku case, tradition includes Christianity and if the discussions leading up to the Wangurri/Warramiri Ngaara are a guide, many people are unsure of how to respond to requests for anthropological data from visiting scientists.

For Burrumarra, one's credibility as a spokesperson for the law is often judged in terms of what has been published in the anthropologist's account and the potential is there for any variation to be looked on with suspicion or viewed as culture loss by Yolngu and Balanda alike. In elaborating this point, Burrumarra said that the participant observer often hears in discussions with Elcho Islanders a request for clarification as to what level one is speaking on. For instance it might be on the 'government line', the 'mission line', or the 'Yolngu line'. If it is the latter, there are numerous other levels to choose from, depending on whether one wishes to discuss matters of a public or 'outside' nature. If 'inside' themes are to be discussed, at what level of 'membership', i.e. family, clan, or moiety.

In most cases in 'inside' discussions, people will speak only of their own clan interests; often a groups' 'inside' information will not be discussed unless prior arrangements have been made with leaders of other groups. More often than not, it is from the 'inside' level that the anthropologist seeks ethnographic data. But in a community such as Galiwin'ku, where people are attempting to forge an island identity free of clan divisions, providing 'inside' information poses a problem. The new 'inside' story for many Galiwin'ku residents is that Jesus is the foundation of the Yolngu way of life.

Christianity provides an avenue for both reflecting on Yolngu identity, and also confronting the intellectual marginalisation and powerlessness that many residents feel. When Burrumarra spoke of this new religion for instance, he made reference to an over-riding system of law, the framework where black and white Australians could live together as one people. From this standpoint, he saw anthropologists as posing a potential threat to the momentum of Yolngu directed change in the community. But this was not Burrumarra's only objection. They were also making people think about a time when they lived by the law and were masters of their own destiny. Such reflection made the people feel sorry if not guilty for what they had become and resentful at the way they were living.

## **Conclusion**

According to Cowlishaw (1993), the logic of Aboriginal cultural forms, such as Yolngu belief in the Christian God, can be understood in part through their dialectical relationship with more powerful cultural forms. It is necessary therefore to look at Christianity not just in terms of the 'universal truth' that all people are one in the body and blood of Christ but in the ways in which Galiwin'ku Yolngu are confronting powerlessness and mystification via this belief. The aim of this

chapter has been to reflect on the comments of the Yolngu clergy on anthropologists, and in so doing, present a perspective on the relationship between Christianity and a 'timeless' Yolngu identity. The local view is that there is little respect among Balanda for Yolngu understandings or ways of doing things, and yet Yolngu have needed to make substantial changes in their own ways to accommodate Balanda ideas and structures.

In examining Elcho Island history over the past forty years, two separate though related ideas have been considered:

1. The reconciliation of Christianity and traditional Yolngu beliefs has been achieved by Yolngu at Galiwin'ku in such a way that God is seen to have always been in the land, influencing Yolngu lives and traditions. This overarching pan-Yolngu belief provides the spiritual framework whereby black and white Australians can live together, in harmony, following one law.
2. Totally mystified by Balanda law and unable to function in structures established by outsiders for outsiders, there is growing confidence on the part of Elcho Islanders that they can confront their situation of powerlessness and perceived inferiority as a means of regaining control of their lives.

The perception by Yolngu ministers of the Galiwin'ku parish is that anthropologists are agents of Satan. Their work is seen to be at odds with the momentum of Yolngu-inspired change in the community. In the 1950s this momentum of change involved the release of sacred/secret information as a means of affirming Yolngu interests in country and there was an expectation that people would be compensated by Balanda for revealing their most treasured possessions. From the 1970s to the 1990s, with little recognition of Yolngu self-determination, we now see accelerated efforts by Yolngu at determining the nature and intercultural significance of their belief in the Christian God and also considerable local support for training programs designed to educate Yolngu people in the ways of the Balanda world. Yolngu want access to that secret knowledge long denied them by missionaries and government workers which has kept the Balanda rich and Elcho Islanders poor all these years.

The imbalance in status and wealth between Yolngu and Balanda and the documented view that Yolngu feel themselves to have little or no effective means of altering their situation is perceived by some Church ministers to be exacerbated by the impact of intrusive anthropological research by outsiders. Is it because Yolngu are not in a position to determine what the world knows of them or that they are not content to be the subject of endless speculation on the part of the Other?

In the Ngaara ceremony, Burrumarra said that the dancers ask themselves, "...why are we dancing and who are we dancing for?" In a similar way, the com-

ments by Yolngu ministers on anthropology reflect a similar concern. They seem to be asking whether they are to be forever bound in a state of dependency upon the non-Aboriginal Other as followers of timeless and perhaps out-dated traditions perpetuated, in some cases, merely in response to non-Aboriginal interests. The debate is continuing at Galiwin'ku.

### **6.3 Missing the Revolution! Negotiating disclosure on the Pre-Macassans (Bayini) in North-East Arnhem Land**

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 2011, 'Missing the Revolution! Negotiating disclosure on the pre-Macassans (Bayini) in north-east Arnhem Land,' in *Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition*, ANU E-Press, Canberra, pp. 337-354)

By their own admission, members of Charles Mountford's 1948 American Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land were motivated by a search for the primitive. It is no surprise then that the published records show a singular lack of awareness of the sorts of debate raging within Yolngu circles at that time. So-called missionized Yolngu, for example, were engaged in a major discussion about whether Christianity was an expression of the Dreaming and thus culturally mandated or whether God gave Yolngu the Dreaming as some missionaries insisted.

While the expedition's point of entry into Aboriginal Australia was through the Christian missions, the focus was salvage anthropology, so it is not clear whether Mountford was even aware of this discourse taking place at the highest levels in Yolngu society.

In this chapter, I examine what was lost and what was gained by taking such a tack, and not addressing the very real issues at play in Yolngu lives. Specifically, I examine Yolngu disclosure relating to ethnographic material 'hunted and gathered' by expedition members in north-east Arnhem Land pertaining to a curious then-unknown (and supposed) group of Asian seafarers known as the Bayini (or Baiini, the pre-Macassans) who were followers of Allah. I then review the changes in disclosure on the Bayini over time for the light it throws on the changing nature of relations between Yolngu and Balanda, a subject that was not considered an Expedition research priority.

In the literature of north-east Arnhem Land the identity of pre-Macassans as an historical phenomenon has always been something of a conundrum. In Yolngu circles, the mystery was also very real, occupying an important place in their cosmology. The Bayini were ancestors of the Yolngu and the carriers of the sacred law of the 'white man'. All visitors to Arnhem Land since the beginning of time, including random and unplanned Indonesian visitors, explorers, tramping Macassans, Japanese pearl divers and Europeans of all descriptions, were explainable through the prism of Bayini narratives. There were no other narratives in the Yol-

ngu domain that provided an explanation for the origin, purpose and legacy of the presence of the other in Arnhem Land. But much more, these narratives were concerned, at a fundamental level, with Yolngu lives and Yolngu futures in a world that was increasingly being dominated by outsiders.

However in the 1930s and 1940s, a major transition was taking place in Yolngu perceptions of their past. Given the increased exposure of Yolngu to non-Aborigines, including missionaries, anthropologists, and military personnel (during the Second World War), a decision was made by elders to send the Bayini 'inside' into the non-accessible realm of the sacred and to restrict access to interpretations that might somehow appear to privilege the place of outsiders on Yolngu land. After all, the ancestors of the Yolngu, the Bayini, were white and all-powerful. How easy would it have been for the present-day non-Aborigines to assert some mythical connection to the land and further usurp Yolngu authority, as certainly happened in other parts of Australia when non-Aborigines perpetuated the notion that they, as whites, were the Aboriginal deceased come back to life to reclaim their rightful heritage.

I will argue, then, that an understanding of the significance of Mountford's Bayini paintings and myths is not possible without reference to the broader struggle of Yolngu for their rights to the land and sea, and their ability to practice the religion of their choice in a manner of their choosing. By not engaging with mission Yolngu on their efforts to integrate the traditional (including Islamic-inspired beliefs) and the modern, and of ending the great disparity in wealth between black and white, the Expedition missed a chance to document what was a remarkably dynamic period of Yolngu-directed change.

It might be argued that the team members were not in any one location long enough to elicit the detailed information on the Bayini, but I would counter with the assertion that if Yolngu Christianity had been taken seriously, and the people treated with the respect that was due to them, then the mystery of the Bayini would not have been a mystery at all.

### **The shock of disclosure**

If the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land appears today as a mere footnote in the history of northern Australia, it is a footnote that nonetheless still packs a punch. Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Expedition is the revolution that Ronald Berndt described in his ground-breaking monograph as an *Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*. A radical transformation was taking place in Yolngu lives from Milingimbi to Yirrkala and it was sparked, claimed Yolngu leader David Burrumarra, by the shock that followed the disclosure on film of certain sacred works of Yolngu art collected by Expedition members.

Yolngu at the Elcho Island mission had been searching for a way of satisfactorily adjusting or bringing together the very best of Yolngu and western ways of living without compromising the integrity of their own society and culture. According to Burrumarra, as reported by Berndt (1962), there was a strong sense

that people were lost between two worlds and things came to a head in the wake of the visits of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition. Yolngu took the unprecedented step of publicly revealing their sacred objects, creating a memorial to a way of life that was changing forever at a fundamental level. Yolngu would now follow two laws, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. They would be Christian in a Yolngu world and Yolngu in a Christian world, with each informing the other in an arrangement that Burrumarra would call 'membership and remembrance'. While anthropologists like Mountford were busily documenting a moiety and clan-based identity for Yolngu, a new pan-Yolngu Christian social order was being constructed, one that was inclusive of selected adopted outsider non-Aborigines.

The Arnhem Land Expedition was not in itself the cause of this revolution but the public presentation of sacred images on film at Elcho Island was certainly a contributing factor. Members of the Expedition, I imagine, would have viewed this as an entirely unanticipated consequence of their scholarly activity. Anthropologically speaking they were on a search and rescue operation and had no interest in the ruminations of 'mission boys' like Burrumarra or the status of the Yolngu embrace of Christianity.

But team leader Charles Mountford did have a strong interest in the history and legacy of Yolngu contact with Macassans. These Moslem traders from the entrepot of Makassar in South Sulawesi had been visiting northern Australia and interacting with Yolngu from at least the mid-1700s. They were in search of *beche de mer* in what is described as Australia's first international export industry. The legacy of this extended contact was substantial. (See Macknight, 2008, p. 137) A considerable number of Yolngu rituals feature references to the artifacts of trade like canoes, anchors and flags, as well as life in south-east Asian seaports, and the notion of a high god called 'Allah' (or *Walitha'walitha*). Pioneering anthropologist Lloyd Warner documented some of these rituals during fieldwork in the late 1920s. By the 1940s, however, Yolngu were guarded in their responses to Mountford's questioning on such rituals, especially those connected with Islam, as evidenced in the largely cryptic information on what was described as the mysterious group of traders who had supposedly preceded the Macassan trepangers. These visitors, called the Bayini, were unknown to the literature prior to the 1940s.

There was a fundamental difference in the stories being told about these pre-Macassans and the Macassan trepangers. The former had a sacred or 'hidden' dimension; the concealment of details of the Bayini beyond the fleeting references to their building of boats, making pottery, growing rice, or weaving, speaks to an entirely different level of significance to these stories beyond the historical. The latter narratives were of a more mundane nature, telling of a long history of the trepang trade and interaction with the visitors with both its positive and negative aspects.

In the 1940s it was not a simple matter of the Yolngu strategically forgetting anachronistic traditions or those in conflict with Christianity (or Islam) in order to facilitate the growth of the Christian mission, though this was certainly encouraged. Those sacred narratives, described by Burrumarra as his backbone, spoke to Yolngu feelings of self-worth and dignity at a time when their material poverty was most pronounced and where missionaries promoted guilt and shame as a tool for Christian conversion. In the terminology of James Scott (1990), a ‘hidden transcript’ concealed from the prying eyes of anthropologists those secrets that dealt with the increasingly problematic place of uninvited whites. Anthropologists were, by the very nature of their practice, determined to unlock every secret that Yolngu possessed, but the Bayini narratives were not to be available for analysis.

Scott was of the view that all subaltern or subordinate peoples resist domination in similar ways, never consenting to an inferior status. He uses the term ‘public transcript’ to describe open interactions between the oppressor and the oppressed, and ‘hidden transcript’ for the critique of power that goes on offstage and out of sight of power holders. In this chapter, rather than uncovering what must remain hidden, I review what lies beneath the surface of those public interactions, when the Mountford team was in search of ethnographic minutiae, and in which the oppressed appear to accept their domination and happily oblige the whims of the oppressor.

While I was not privy to the details of the ‘hidden narrative’, the late David Burrumarra of Elcho Island was convinced that I understood its nature and purpose. It was at the very heart of our extended conversations on the history of black-white relations in Arnhem Land.

Burrumarra showed great interest in my attempts to decipher the deeper significance of the Bayini narratives. Volume after volume of field notes on every aspect of this legacy in song, dance, contact sites, personal names, totemic emblems, artifacts, occupations, and so on, represent merely an outer layer of significance. If I wanted to really comprehend the Bayini, Burrumarra said, “Look at the way I act.” His lifelong battles to secure a better life for Yolngu, the endless fight in support of sea and land rights, were all central to an understanding of the Bayini. The meaning of the stories and of the ‘hidden transcript’ was embodied in the very nature of these daily unequal public transactions between Yolngu and outsiders.

### **The history of disclosure**

Towards the end of his life, Burrumarra would reveal much regarding the way in which Bayini narratives were withheld by his generation not only from anthropologists and historians but also younger members of the Yolngu community. On a number of occasions he told me that the narratives were “...too big, too complicated, and too sad” to be shared. A clean break from the past was required in the interests of building new, strong and vibrant Christian communities.

But Burrumarra also stressed a deeper reason for nondisclosure and that was the power imbalance that existed between black and white Australians, and which is a central theme in the Bayini narratives. As far back as the 1920s, Burrumarra's close relative Harry Makarrwola, who was the chief informant for pioneering anthropologist Lloyd Warner, was struggling with what to disclose on this topic. While there is no mention of pre-Macassans or Bayini in Warner's published account, there is a strong suggestion from his data that there existed in private Yolngu discourse some overarching belief associated with the power and prestige of the Other, a power that was believed to rightfully belong to the Yolngu. Specifically, the notion of a 'Dreaming Macassan' appears to provide the nucleus for Yolngu thoughts on the origin and purpose of all non-Aborigines, but in particular Macassan trepangers, and then later, Japanese and Europeans. This Dreaming entity (which encapsulates all the Bayini narratives) would provide an understanding of who these people were and why were they on Yolngu land, and answer questions such as: Why did Yolngu work for the Macassans, and not the other way around? What must have gone wrong at the beginning of time for the influence of these outsiders to be so all-pervasive?

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, anthropologists Charles Mountford and Ronald and Catherine Berndt would make no reference to the existence of such a Dreaming entity. A significant change was taking place in the nature of Yolngu accounts, a shifting in emphasis from a Dreaming perspective with respect to Macassans to a focus on the perceived historical nature of both pre-Macassan and Macassan visitation, the former emerging at the dawn of time. The concept of the 'Bayini' was born; the very choice of words indicative of the presence of a 'hidden transcript'. Bayini is a word that means woman – a golden-skinned woman associated with the Dreaming Macassan. As Burrumarra once said to me, in his conversations with Balanda, he and his peers would emphasize the exploits of Bayini women, revealing only those accounts that were suitable for Yolngu women and anthropologists to hear.

Right up to the late 1980s, nothing substantial was added to the scholarship on the Bayini, despite the presence of a considerable number of anthropologists and many pages of published scholarship. The Macassan trepanging past had been definitively recorded by historian Campbell Macknight and for many scholars the book had closed on this avenue of inquiry. The Bayini, in Macknight's (1976) classic work, are dismissed simply as a reflection of Yolngu experiences in south-east Asia transposed on to Arnhem Land shores. Macknight says that the idea of things which properly belong overseas has been transferred to familiar places in order to integrate this knowledge into the spatially oriented framework of Yolngu thought. Importantly, he also says that the Bayini stories are a most remarkable instance of the need to distinguish between the account of the past current in a society and the actual events of the past. With little or no data on the pan-Yolngu significance of the Bayini, it was impossible for Macknight to reach a more substantial conclusion.

Even by his own admission, Macknight's field references to the Bayini are obscure to the point of incomprehensibility. Burrumarra, for example, told him (in the wake of the Apollo moon landing) that the Bayini came from the moon! (Campbell Macknight, field notes, 27 June 1967)

The very noticeable absence of anthropological references to the Bayini post-Mountford and the Berndts is most curious because even today the principle distinguishing feature of north-east Arnhem Land communities is the presence of artifacts connected with the Dreaming Macassan i.e. the ubiquitous flagpole and flag, and the mast complete with rigging stationed in the center of homelands – all of which signal the presence of the Dreaming Macassan and his 'replacements', a people that Yolngu in the 1940s called the Bayini. They are understood to have sung certain Yolngu lands into existence and then laid down on the sand to rest.

While the Dreaming Macassan is most closely associated with a number of Yirritja moiety clans including the Warramiri, Gumatj, and Dhalwangu, all Yolngu in north-east Arnhem Land claim descent from the Bayini through their mothers. And yet anthropologists, denied any meaningful access to these narratives, have given their readers the impression that there is no significance to these artifacts beyond their obvious, if obscure, historical connections, which is exactly as the Yolngu desired.

### **Comparing transactions**

When art works (and their associated commentaries) were presented to Mountford and other Expedition members in 1948, the Yolngu had no idea what would become of them. Trust was implied as the transaction was being conducted in a controlled setting: a Christian mission. But there was little to no consideration given for how Yolngu might feel about the reproduction of their works in books or film and there was certainly a lack of sensitivity on issues of ownership with regard to items of cultural significance. Expedition anthropologists were a long way, for example, from the ideal of 'stranger and friend' championed by Hortense Powdermaker (1966). The concept of participant-observation was not well developed at this stage, and prior informed consent was certainly not central to the Expedition's methodology. Just a year after the Mountford Expedition, Ronald and Catherine Berndt's collection of sacred Bayini sculptures, for example, was displayed in a David Jones retail outlet in 1949 to a bemused shopping public. (Gray, 2009)

According to Art Gallery of New South Wales curator J. Jones, Mountford's approach to collecting artwork and the related narratives was unorthodox. Said Mountford of his method (in Jones n.d.):

[I would] ask the men to make bark paintings for me, seldom suggesting a subject. At the end of each day, the artists bought their work to my tent, related the associated myth, and explained the meanings of the designs.

Team member Frederick D McCarthy, as reported by Jones, was openly critical of this approach, saying:

...at dusk or thereabouts he [Mountford] got [the Aboriginal artists] together near his tent... and hammered the interpretation out of them, sometimes in a friendly way, at others [in a] bullying style... His data is not the product of spontaneous work on the part of the native but has been got from a short-term 'pounding' of the informants.

We know that the Yolngu artists were paid for their work with tobacco, food, and sometimes coins, in a transaction reminiscent of that with missionaries, when the amount of sustenance granted or withheld was based on how dutifully the Yolngu had completed their assigned tasks.

Given the material poverty of mission residents, cooperating with Mountford was undoubtedly an attractive idea. And while disclosure of certain Dreaming-related themes by Yolngu was thorough, Mountford's bullying on the subject of the Bayini resulted in a curious collection of images and an even more enigmatic text; a perplexing picture of the past that has inspired wild speculation on the part of scholars who would follow him. One scholar would argue for example, that the Bayini were Chinese – members of Zheng He's voyages of discovery in the 1400s – a suggestion that has no merit.

In the 1940s Yolngu were willing to freely share images of the Bayini and Macassans with Balanda but the narratives they released were restricted and a product of considerable community discussion and negotiation.

If we compare the Mountford transactions to similar ones occurring forty years later in north-east Arnhem Land, the role of the community in determining the extent of disclosure and concealment is readily apparent.

In the mid-1980s, Yolngu at Elcho Island would welcome, for example, the visits of Ramangining art advisor and scholar John Mundine. With cheque book in hand, he would stand on top of the Council office stairs in company with various Yolngu elders (and in front of a considerable Yolngu crowd) as various art objects were presented to him for sale. In consultation with those gathered, he would make his decisions on whether to purchase the item and what level of compensation would be offered. Were the pandanus mats and dilly bags of sufficient quality? Was the art work suitable for public release and distribution? Every so often a sacred painting would be presented for sale and the decision to proceed (or not) was often in the hands of certain selected members of the assembled body of Yolngu.

Very occasionally a painting would appear that was inappropriate for general viewing or sale, and on more than one occasion, on the orders of elders like Burrumarra, it was buried in the sand at some undisclosed location or sent to the waterhole's murky depths; the artist publicly shamed.

One can only imagine, then, the sorts of discussions that were taking place in the camps at Yirrkala and Milingimbi during the visits of Expedition members in the 1940s. What could be shared with outsiders, and what would remain untold, and why? What new interpretations of old stories were required in order to

negotiate the changing nature of their world in ways that promoted their interests as Yolngu?

### **The context of disclosure**

One example of the challenge of disclosure for Yolngu was evident when in the late 1980s Burrumarra described to me the nature of the ‘public transcript’ pertaining to the history of contact between Yolngu and outsiders (as opposed to the ‘hidden transcript’). In the ‘public transcript’, Macassans and Yolngu might share certain rituals, there might be examples of Yolngu being paid by Macassans for access to their resources, and details might be provided of some close personal relationships that developed along the Australian coast and also in Makassar. But for Yolngu, Macassans were still the Other. In these elaborate oral history narratives, we see the physical traces of the once prominent Macassan trepang industry: tamarind trees, stone lines, and broken pieces of pottery lining the shores of north-east Arnhem Land. In the ‘hidden transcript’, by contrast, the Bayini are center stage, and they are not the Other. They are Yolngu but with a language that comes from a place far away to the north of Australia. In these stories there is no reference to trepang because the Bayini were not trepangers. They were the bringers of the law to the Yolngu.

According to Burrumarra, the ‘public transcript’ itself also sends a very powerful message about the problematic history of cross-cultural encounters. He described to me various waves of foreign visitation to Arnhem Land and emphasized the changing skin colour of groups over the vast passage of time. The earliest visitors were black and they lived as Yolngu, respecting Yolngu laws. Reciprocity was a feature of their relationship with the Aboriginal land owners. They were the ones, for example, who cared for the souls of the Yirritja moiety dead in a paradise believed to exist somewhere to the northeast of Arnhem Land in place called Badu or Nalkuma, a subject covered in considerable detail in Mountford’s Expedition report.

Next, in this ‘historical’ perspective, came the gold-coloured Bayini who introduced new laws and technology to the Yolngu, and their impact was both profound and troubled. According to Burrumarra they were deficient in passing on their advanced skills to Yolngu leading to all manner of chaos and despair.

Finally there were light-skinned Macassan trepangers, Japanese pearlers, and then Europeans. The visitors in each new wave were ever lighter in skin colour, a transition that correlates with declining interest in reciprocity and respect for Yolngu.

The important thing to remember, said Burrumarra, was that the Dreaming Macassan had drawn forth all of these seafarers, both black and white and everything in between, onto the Arnhem Land coast by the strength of its marr (or desire) for the Yolngu and their future. This entity introduced Yolngu, in varying stages, to a new world of material riches and opportunity but also, ultimately, to the inequality and dispossession that Yolngu were experiencing in their daily lives.

Speaking truth to power, as Scott (1990) says, always has a utopian ring to it because it is so rarely practiced. How could the Yolngu share this 'public' story with Mountford or others? Like the 'hidden transcript', it was essentially a critique of the failure of those non-Aborigines who held dominion over Yolngu lives to value their history, laws and traditions. So what we therefore find in the Expedition report is a very detailed account in bark and narrative of the first wave of visitation, those people who ultimately care for the Yolngu in the 'land of the dead', but very scant information on all the other waves of visitors, in particular, the Bayini.

### **The Christian dimension**

One of the most significant constraints on disclosure by Yolngu in Mountford's day was whether or not the narratives to be shared with Expedition anthropologists were consistent with, or had been superseded by (or absorbed into) Christian teachings. Mountford's record, as mentioned, reveals a very significant amount of information on the Yirritja moiety 'land of the dead' so this topic was obviously unproblematic in terms of Yolngu disclosure; Biblical narratives took precedence in describing the nature of the soul's journey to paradise. Publicly revealing such details could only help to ensure the consignment of this belief to the past. Burrumarra, for example, would openly speak of how skeptical he had been, even as a youth, about the stories he had heard from his older brother of a whale carrying the soul of the dead on its back to an unknown place called Badu. He was intrigued by these stories, but acknowledged that they had little bearing on his life or the lives of other mission Yolngu.

The partial and confused stories of the Bayini that were told to Mountford however, were not so easily consigned to the past. One can see in hindsight that the jumbled mix of myth and history was sending forth a strong message that they were, at the very least, in conflict with the Christian message.

One must recall that this was a time when the foundational Dreaming entities for the two Yolngu moieties (Dhuwa and Yirritja) were being recast as Old Testament prophets, a process that was to be speeded up following the Adjustment Movement. The significance of the God-figure 'Allah' that Yolngu had learned about through more than a hundred years of interaction with Indonesians was also being reconsidered and reconfigured. Mission elder Harry Makarrwola in the 1950s, for example, would speak of Allah in the new scheme of adjustment thinking as a messenger of the God of Christians. Even at Elcho Island today, some Yirritja moiety funerary rites invoke the will of Allah but they will inevitably be followed by Christian prayers and hymns, which is evidence of the continued existence of a 'hidden transcript'.

This transition in interpretations with regard to the Bayini was a subject of serious debate in the 1940s right across north-east Arnhem Land, but it was not a mere response to the desires of Christian missionaries. The Elcho Island Church, for example, is built on a sacred site associated with the totemic eagle's nest, and the decision to locate this structure there was made by missionaries and Yolngu alike.

Into the walls of the church were placed special rocks associated with the moiety deities, so the message was very clear: while Yolngu were now part of the greater Christian body, the law of the land was integral to their understanding of the new ways. As if in confirmation of this 'eternal truth', it is said that one of the stone bilma (or clap stick rangga) placed in the church wall, by its own volition, miraculously replicated itself in the landscape. As it was removed from the ground another moved upwards to replace it, a powerful statement for Yolngu of Burrumarra's concept of 'membership and remembrance' i.e. that the new was grounded in the old, and that the old would never vanish entirely from the world.

### **A startling disclosure**

The most startling disclosure regarding the Dreaming Macassan (and the Bayini) came in 1988 at the hands of Burrumarra when he revealed for the first time an image of this deity. This painting was not created for sale, but rather it was viewed by him as an extension of the Adjustment Movement 'revolution'; the final act of what had begun in the 1950s. In the spirit of Aboriginal reconciliation, Burrumarra had wanted a new flag (or series of flags) for Australia in which the most significant Dreaming elements of the land on which the flag was being flown would be represented alongside non-Aboriginal symbols like the Union Jack. For his clan, the Warramiri, the most significant symbols were the octopus, the whale, and the Dreaming Macassan (Birrinydji).

In Burrumarra's view, in the wake of the Adjustment Movement, Yolngu were still relying too much on the 'hidden transcript'. Apart from the Dreaming Macassan and Bayini narratives, all other major beliefs had been fully disclosed and documented at great length by anthropologists. An increasingly anachronistic body of law, the time for the Dreaming Macassan's disclosure had arrived according to Burrumarra. His rationale was twofold. He wanted to remind his fellow Yolngu that white wealth came from Yolngu land, and also that Christianity was not the white man's religion at all. Indigenous Christianity had a long history, based as it was on a foundation that included generations of contact with Islam. It was a Yolngu religion, for the Yolngu were Birrinydji's people, and the followers of Birrinydji were Christian.

But Burrumarra's desire for disclosure was met with considerable opposition. Many Yolngu wanted this Dreaming entity to remain concealed from white eyes. For Burrumarra, Christianity was an expression of the will of the Dreaming Macassan. For others, however, it was also of continuing relevance in shaping private discourse (and negotiating relations) between black and white Australians. It was not something that could be freely shared in the public domain.

Very soon after the release of the Birrinydji image on the Warramiri clan flag, and with Burrumarra's permission, the Dhalwangu clan produced an image of Birrinydji on a sign board at their outstation airstrip at Gurrumuru. And within a very short period of time, entirely new interpretations of the Birrinydji and Bayini legacy began to emerge across Arnhem Land.

In Burrumarra's narrative (also reflected in the account of Makarrwola to anthropologist Lloyd Warner in the 1920s), Yolngu at one time believed themselves to have been white, rich and all-powerful. But as I describe in detail elsewhere in this volume, when the Dreaming Macassan left Arnhem Land after his creational exploits at the beginning of time, Yolngu became black and poor. In the newly emerging Dhalwangu account, however, Birrinydji never left Arnhem Land, and the Bayini have been reinstated as a pre-Macassan presence whose real purpose is not, and perhaps never will be open to the prying eyes of the Other.

### **Reflections on disclosure**

When considering the legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition is not enough to simply reflect on lost opportunities. A longer-term view of disclosure regarding the Bayini sheds light on the ways in which Yolngu were transforming their worlds in unique ways – under the guidance of missionaries to be sure – but in ways that reflected their own specific interests and concerns. The Expedition's salvage focus made it blind to these transitions, but their presence, in hindsight, actually played into the hands of people like Burrumarra who had a strong integrationist mindset.

So complete today is the apparent transition from a mythological to a historical perspective with regards to the pre-Macassan and Macassan past that the significance of the former 'hidden transcript' seems to be lost in time. But such a conclusion is problematic at best, given the rapid re-working of the Dreaming Macassan legacy in the late 1980s.

Mountford's bullying was never going to elicit a nuanced account of this fabled past. For Yolngu to share exhaustive information on the Bayini in 1948 would have been difficult at best, and perhaps also compromising. As Burrumarra detailed in his discussions with Ronald Berndt in the Adjustment Movement, the Yolngu were seeking to extract the very best from the non-Aboriginal world in order to strengthen their own society. And in a political environment where there was an enormous disparity in power between whites and blacks, to suggest to outsiders that they might actually hold some privileged place in Yolngu cosmology (because the Bayini were light-coloured), would have been counterproductive if past experience from the rest of Australia guides our thinking.

Further, beliefs associated with the Bayini are fluid, not static. Both the public and hidden 'transcripts' exhibit considerable complexity. The challenge for Expedition anthropologists to salvage ethnographic data regarding pre-Macassans was very considerable, but in order to find answers to their questions, they should have also looked to the future, not just the past. If they had taken Yolngu Christianity seriously and not prioritized the search for the primitive, the dynamism of Yolngu religion and the multi-faceted role it plays in Yolngu lives in the intercultural arena would surely have been showcased. They would have seen how actively the Yolngu were trying to make their vision of the future coincide with an idyllic

image of the past embedded in some of the Bayini narratives; stories of black and white people living and working together in peace and harmony, sharing equally in the resources of the land and sea.

In their search for a romantic past, the Mountford team missed the revolution taking place before their eyes.

#### **6:4 Personal Names and the Negotiation of Change: Reconsidering Arnhem Land's Adjustment Movement**

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Both before and after the momentous Adjustment Movement that occurred in Arnhem Land in 1957, Yolngu living in certain Northern Territory missions were able to satisfy the demand for extra personal names caused by an exploding population. From the songs of the Dreaming entity Birrinydji, they drew names from words such as Manunu (ship's anchor), Mattjuwi (mast), or Lati (sword). Anthropologist Lloyd Warner (1969, p. 457) first reported this practice during fieldwork in the late 1920s, but attached little significance to it.

The origins of the Birrinydji Dreaming lay in contact, from at least the 1700s onwards, between Yolngu and seafarers visiting from areas north of Australia, including the Sama-Bajau, trepang-fishing Macassans, and Japanese. Birrinydji provided the Yolngu with a conceptual framework for dealing with the Other. The Yolngu, as custodians of the sacred laws of Birrinydji, sought recognition as 'members' in a world that included non-Aborigines.

The trend in naming is examined here in the light of the following: new ethnographic data linking Birrinydji with the mythological warrant of Yolngu leaders to institute change; Levi-Strauss's analysis of the significance of the Aboriginal prohibition on the use of names of the dead; and the concepts of mimesis and alterity. My goal is to shed light on one aspect of a movement that was itself a unique response to European colonisation. Within a period of social upheaval, Yolngu at the Elcho Island mission would change 'Genesis' (a term sometimes used by elders to refer to the Dreaming) by publicly revealing their sacred objects (rangga) and secure a place for Christianity alongside the Dreaming. A study of Birrinydji names permits further consideration of the motives underlying this radical adjustment. I explain how a particular interpretation of the Birrinydji legacy (a 'policy' championed by the instigators of the Adjustment Movement, David Burumarra and his elder relative Batangga) drew support from Yolngu leaders, both male and female, and became a springboard for community revitalisation.

I also advance the proposition that naming at the time of the Adjustment Movement had a purpose beyond the traditional honouring of ancestor (totem),

origins (family), and place (homeland). It is generally accepted that a chosen name will exert a positive influence on the life of the child and enable the full expression of his or her potential as an individual and community member. Purpose-driven naming in this instance reflected the wish of Yolngu for a rapprochement with non-Aborigines and a return to a 'golden era' described so poignantly in Birrinydji narratives. Birrinydji names would help direct the name-giver's and bearer's thoughts to the task of building a pan-Yolngu community in a Christian world - one in which they would be integral players. These personal names would help to give direction for a generation, and then slowly lose their meaning as the interpretation of Birrinydji's law (or 'policy') that infused them with magical potency (marr) became increasingly irrelevant in modern cosmopolitan townships.

### **The adjustment movement in retrospect**

The manner in which Aborigines wrap change in a conservative blanket is a topic of long-standing interest in Australian anthropology. Ronald Berndt's (1962) award-winning text *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land*, for example, inspired a welter of commentaries on the way that a stereotypical cold society can effectively disguise rich traditions of revelation and innovation (e.g., see BurrIDGE, 1971; Morphy, 1983; Bos, 1988; Borsboom, 1992; Rudder, 1993; Mulvaney 1989).

In August 1957, before a gathering of elders from across Arnhem Land, Yolngu at Elcho Island erected a memorial to certain former beliefs and practices, a stunning collection of carved and painted wooden rangga representing the Dreamings (Wangarr) of every north-east Arnhem Land clan. One rangga was enjoined with a Christian cross signalling the shift in status of Dreaming entities from all-powerful mythological beings to prophets. Never before had these sacred emblems been exposed to the gaze of women, children, or non-Aborigines, but no public statement was released proclaiming that 'Genesis' was changed, or that Christianity was now integral to a pan-Yolngu identity. It was self-evident.

Adjustments were now under way in the living arrangements of Yolngu to facilitate the changes the leaders wished to implement. Methodist missions would grow into thriving settlements with infrastructure equivalent to that of comparably sized Australian towns (Berndt 1962, p. 80). Coinage would replace barter as the means of exchange. Monogamy was to be practiced, child betrothals were to be restricted, and traditional sanctions like thigh-spearing discontinued. Mixed marriages between Yolngu and Balanda were now theoretically possible. Sites of significance, like those associated with the rainbow serpent, were to be acknowledged as markers of a group's territorial identity but no longer considered sacred. The Gunapipi ceremony, which commemorates the rainbow serpent's creative exploits, was banned from Elcho Island. Of particular interest for this chapter, the Yolngu would retain their native personal names and use the vernacular in the school and Church. They could also utter the names of the dead after shorter

periods; previously, the name of a deceased person would not re-circulate for perhaps two to three generations, if at all.

To the outside world, Yolngu motives for adjusting were shrouded in mystery. While for Methodist missionaries it was an answer to prayers (McIntosh 1994, p. 105), Berndt's (1962) study suggests that Yolngu were provoked to action by a sense of outrage at the 'theft' of their most precious possessions (their *rangga*) by Europeans (including anthropologists), and a general erosion of their sovereign rights as the twentieth century wore on. Within the new community, growing tension among clans living together for the first time was also a major factor.

There had been many inducements for Yolngu to take up residence in Christian missions in the 1920s and 1930s, notably as a refuge from intertribal warfare and the depredations of colonisers (Warner 1969, p. 146). Tobacco, sugar, and other processed foods were an added attraction, as they had been in the 1700s and 1800s, when settlements grew up around the areas frequented by Macassan fishermen, who fished for *beche de mer* (or *trepang*) along the north coast until the trade was terminated by government authorities in 1907. Indeed, Berndt (1962, p. 13) says that the visits of Indonesian, and then Japanese, trepangers had set the scene for the Adjustment Movement.

In the 1940s, the Yolngu were uncommitted to a future in the budding townships (Berndt 1970, p. 32). Mission supplies supplemented hunting and gathering, but the situation was in flux. Corrugated-iron sheds were replacing the older windbreaks and humpies, and with a sedentary life came a slew of new concerns; for instance, the necessity of reconciling basic notions of what was right and proper behaviour in a setting where group values were colliding. David Burrumarra told me that when word spread about how a young girl had been spared to death by her father for catching the briefest glimpse of a sacred object, there was a sense of outrage. The ways of old, including the death penalty, were considered incompatible with the future that Yolngu leaders envisaged for the people. This and other similar incidents were to be a trip-wire leading the Yolngu to uncover publicly their major sacred objects - a decisive step that would permanently change their world.

The consensus among academics was that the Adjustment Movement was a bold but ultimately naive attempt by Yolngu to affirm their rights in the face of outside intrusion (Maddock, 1972, p. 2). Some even likened it to a cargo cult (BurrIDGE 1971, p. 172). But the long-term goal of Yolngu was to free themselves from the paternalistic grasp of missionaries and determine the nature of their political, religious, and ethnic futures in partnership with the Other (Berndt 1962, p. 87). A necessary step was revealing (and thus) demystifying the secret/sacred underpinnings of their former religious life, thus freeing them to create the new communities they desired, incorporating the best in Indigenous and non-Indigenous lifestyles.

Yolngu elders had changed the Dreaming to accommodate the unlimited possibilities of a new world. Berndt (1962, p. 39) quotes Burrumarra as saying that the wealth of nations would be theirs because of the sacrifice they had been forced

to make in revealing their *rangga*. Reciprocity would surely be the key feature of all future interactions between Yolngu and Balanda. They would coexist under the Christian banner, but on Yolngu terms.

### **The Yolngu and the Other**

In Yolngu cosmology, Wangarr or Dreaming entities, including the founding moiety ancestors Djang'kawu and Lany'tjun, created the cosmos, the Yolngu themselves, their distinctive languages, cultures and ritual practices, and artistic forms. The pre-existing world lacked organising principles and was filled with chaos. Djang'kawu and Lany'tjun inspired a vision (or wish) for a good life for the Yolngu, instituting, amongst other things, the system of exogamy and, within and between totemic groups, notions of kinship and reciprocity.

The founding narratives, however, are silent on the existence of peoples other than Yolngu or worlds beyond north-east Arnhem Land. Morphy and Jones (1979, p. 9) and also Williams (1986, p. 28) write that the Yolngu understood the historical Macassans to have been prefigured by Dreaming Macassans and were manifestations of them. Berndt and Berndt (1954, p. 33) refer to these Dreaming Macassans as the Bayini and describe them as mythological entities contemporaneous with Lany'tjun and Djang'kawu.

In the early twentieth century, all outsiders venturing onto the coast, including European missionaries and miners, were considered by certain Yirritja Yolngu as manifestations of Birrinydji rather than a Dreaming Macassan. Bayini was an 'outside' word used to describe the earliest manifestations of Birrinydji, but not Birrinydji himself. Some Yolngu take offence at the suggestion that Birrinydji was a Dreaming Macassan, for he was the progenitor of both Balanda (Macassans and Europeans) and Yolngu. Bayini was Birrinydji's wife, the ancestor of all followers of Birrinydji's law, male and female, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Both Warner (1932, p. 493) and the Berndts (1989, p. 417) linked non-Aborigines with Birrinydji's Yirritja moiety.

The narratives of Birrinydji, systematised in the first instance by the Warramiri clan leader, Bukulatjpi (Mcintosh 2000, p. 56), framed the way in which certain Yirritja Yolngu were to understand and react to non-Aborigines. This mythical all-conquering sea captain and king-figure would bring wealth and prestige to the followers of his law. Birrinydji's vision included Yolngu membership in his new world blessed with many riches. This yearning for the good life was shared by members of the Warramiri, Dhalwangu, Birrkili, Lamamirri, Gumatj, and Wanguurri clans, referred to here as Birrinydji's Mala or the Murrnginy (Murngin) collective.

### **The mythological warrant**

Berndt (1962, p. 37) said that Yolngu leaders had a mythological warrant to institute change during the Adjustment Movement. Morphy (1983, p. 257), likewise, argued that the Movement provided strong evidence of Yolngu reflecting on

aspects of their religious practice in order to develop effective ways of acting in a colonial situation. Berndt (1962, p. 88) also remarked that the leaders made no direct appeal to supernatural authority to substantiate their actions or to bolster their position. However, new evidence presented in this chapter suggests otherwise. The mythological warrant for action was the status of Burrumarra and Batangga as Yirritja moiety members, but the 'policy' of Birrinydji (as Burrumarra referred to it) is what informed their decision-making.

Burrumarra had been an outstanding student of Yolngu law (Berndt, 1962, p. 93; Cawte, 1993; McIntosh, 1994), who worked with many famed non-Aboriginal academics. His older relative from the Wangurri clan, Harry Makarrwola (who was raised by Burrumarra's father), was the major informant for anthropologist Lloyd Warner in the 1920s. Burrumarra's knowledge of Birrinydji was unparalleled. With great pride, he would describe the wisdom of the Yolngu and how his perspective on Birrinydji arose from many sources. He also drew inspiration from his personal experience aboard a Japanese pearling boat in the 1920s, contact with Air Force personnel during World War II, and the stories recounted by his brothers, Domi and Djalatjirri, of their visit to Makassar at the turn of the twentieth century.

Burrumarra's perspective on Birrinydji is at the forefront of this analysis because he was a primary custodian of Birrinydji's law, and during the Adjustment Movement his was the most influential interpretation of its significance. Few Yolngu would challenge him or his self-assigned role as the Adjustment Movement's 'agitator' (Berndt 1962, p. 93) and lively 'prophet-secretary'. (Burridge 1971, p. 172) With the backing of more established Dhuwa and Yirritja elders (in particular, the Elcho Island 'headman' Batangga of the Wangurri clan, and Wili Walalipa of the Dhuwa moiety Golumala clan), Burrumarra's policy helped guide an entire generation.

In the 1980s, during my research, Warramiri elders Liwukang and Wulanybuma, corroborated the details of Burrumarra's policy for adjustment, but the intercultural significance of the Birrinydji names discussed here was not widely appreciated by the younger generation. Thirty years after the Adjustment Movement, the songs and dances of Birrinydji would still be performed in Yolngu communities to honour the storied Yirritja landscape, but Birrinydji himself had become something of an anachronism. Most Yolngu no longer believed, for instance, that the essence of Birrinydji was the minerals of the earth from which Europeans drew their wealth. Many personal and place names gleaned from contact with Macassans in distant times were, in the late 1980s, viewed simply loan words. (see Warner 1969, p. 457)

Only in old age did Burrumarra speak openly about the Adjustment Movement as the culmination of many years of discussions within Yolngu circles regarding Birrinydji and the desired nature of Yolngu relationships with non-Aboriginal Australians.

Soon after the missionaries arrived in Arnhem Land, Yirritja moiety leaders realised that their ideas about the visitors' origins and purpose were not reciprocated, so they decided to keep the stories of Birrinydji to themselves. With the realisation that the missionaries were in Arnhem Land to stay, the followers of Birrinydji exercised their prerogative in settling upon the terms for rapprochement. As Burrumarra recalled:

There was great confusion when Europeans first came to Arnhem Land... When the mission started at Milingimbi, the Dhuwa peoples said that the Yirritja clans would be the ones to deal with the whites, all the [Birrinydji] peoples, for we believed the mission was [Birrinydji's] wish for us... part of his plan for the country. The wish had come true. The Balanda had returned bringing many things. All the old Wangurri and Warramiri Yolngu felt this way. But the missionaries said they came from another source – God - so we couldn't bring [Birrinydji] up. We couldn't say that they were wrong... couldn't tell them that they had been in Arnhem Land all along [and that they were Birrinydji's replacements just like us]. They might believe that they were the real land owners.

By 1957, the year of the adjustment, a reconciliatory strategy based on Birrinydji was in place. The trend in naming in Burrumarra's and Batangga's Yirritja moiety echoed this development and was a calculated attempt by name-givers to direct the thinking of clan members towards the movement's goals. Yolngu nicknames drawn from contact with seafarers from the north of Australia 50-200 years earlier (Warner 1969, p. 457) were now primary and secondary Yolngu names, prominent in all the coastal Yirritja clans, and being spread throughout the rest of the moiety through traditional name-bestowal practices.

Since naming provides a sense of membership for the name-bearer, the emphasis on Birrinydji names in the tumultuous 1950s promoted the idea of Yolngu membership in a new world order. An entirely different operating principle (that Burrumarra called 'membership and remembrance') was in place and it stressed the equality of both Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

### **The Birrinydji legacy**

The principal Birrinydji narrative, as told by Burrumarra, bears a striking resemblance to the major moiety epics. The story of Djang'kawu (Dhuwa), for example, describes the irrevocable loss of the sacred power of women to men at the beginning of time. With Birrinydji, Yolngu lose their material wealth and prestige to Macassans and Europeans. The Lany'tjun story (Yirritja) describes the rescue of a suffering people by their barramundi (fish) hero, Lany'tjun, who brings new life to the people with his technological know-how and ceremonial innovations, and unites the clans with his great wisdom. Yet the Yolngu become jealous and kill him, and now constantly try to recapture the essence of his teachings and the harmony he promised.

Likewise, Birrinydji is understood to have brought great wealth to Arnhem Land, transforming small seaside campsites into flourishing entrepôts with many fine houses and peoples from all nations whom he called the Murrnginy. All manner of occupations were practised in this Dreaming-inspired vision of life in Arnhem Land at the dawn of time, from pottery making to rice production, to fishing and pearling, and iron manufacture. However, a ‘fire’ then came to the Yolngu, and Birrinydji’s ‘replacements’ (as Burrumarra referred to all visitors) either left or were driven away by the Dreaming entity Walitha’walitha, also known as Allah.

In an ‘outside’ or public rendition of this narrative, senior Yolngu recall the well-documented myth of the dingoes’ rejection of the Macassan’s gifts, thus condemning Yolngu to impoverished lives (Warner, 1958, p. 536; Berndt and Berndt, 1989, p. 418). Other Yolngu speak openly about how Yolngu self-destructed or were annihilated by the Macassans at Dholtji (in Warramiri territory) at some point in the trepanning era. In the narratives of Birrinydji, the Yolngu are left to fend for themselves and find a way to realise Birrinydji’s plan for the good life. Numerous sites in the coastal Yirritja landscape speak to their sense of betrayal, isolation, and loss.

As with other moiety Dreamings, Birrinydji gave his qualities not only to the Yolngu and the early Indonesian boat captains who frequented the Australian coast but also to many living creatures, like the Dhakulaniny (a bird with a tail like an axe), the Garrunganiny (a fish with fins like the sails of a boat), and the Ngarawuti (a fish with Birrinydji’s knife on its tail). The whale (Mirrinyungu) is an ‘outside’ reference to Birrinydji’s sailing canoe. Natural features of the land- and seascapes, like the great rocky ‘anchor chain’ at Dholtji, also owe their form to Birrinydji’s intervention.

Like Lany’tjun and Djang’kawu, Birrinydji inspired a great legacy in song, dance, painting, and sculpture, so that the Yolngu might honour him, and seek the joy of his inheritance. Almost every community and outstation in north-east Arnhem Land has tell-tale signs of Birrinydji’s influence, like the ubiquitous bamboo flagpoles and flags (see Warner 1969, p. 458). Yet for 30 years Burrumarra remained tight-lipped about Birrinydji in public circles. This Dreaming entity was “...like a blanket over the land. Everything came under him”, Burrumarra said. Birrinydji was the unseen power from which colonisers drew to take Yolngu land and to control Yolngu lives.

The presence of the Methodist Church in Arnhem Land had completely altered the living arrangements of Yolngu. The adjustment instigators often remarked that the mission environment, particularly at Elcho Island in the 1950s, was reminiscent of the former trading entrepôts created by Birrinydji’s replacements, both the Bayini and Macassans. With mounting outside influence there was a growing sense of abundance, but the people became bitter and lethargic as their dependence upon mission supplies grew. The church superintendent (and responsible government agent) held total authority over his voluntary ‘inmates’. Rations

of flour, molasses, and tobacco were distributed to Yolngu residents upon satisfactory completion of a week's work, and if their behaviour met an acceptable standard. Yolngu held high hopes for the future of the mission, but they needed to take control of their lives.

Increasingly apparent at this time were personal names referring to Birrinydji's mighty material wealth: his boats, iron, glassware, swords, clothing, musical instruments, tobacco, and alcohol. There were personal names for his symbols, like the anchor, mast, and flag; for the skills he passed on to his workers, such as iron and pottery manufacture or rice cultivation; for Birrinydji's rule of law, the chain of command on his sea-craft, the making of a leader, the concepts of trade and money, and his notion of justice. Everywhere Birrinydji went, the people offered him tribute, bowing down before him, and this is reflected in personal names. There are words for how at first the Yolngu prospered under Birrinydji's tutelage, but then suffered grievously. In fact, with the names, we run the full gamut from an imagined good life of material excess inspired by contact with Macassans, to the devastation wrought when people began to lose their way. Jealousy, greed, and hatred had flourished in the lawless settlements that grew up along the coastline where the clans gathered to work and barter with the Indonesian visitors when they fished for trepang, and many names refer to this fall from grace.

Burrumarra said that he was always convinced of the relevance of Birrinydji in charting a way forward for the people; countless lessons from the past helped them negotiate the challenges of community life in the mid-twentieth century.

To facilitate the return to a 'golden age' and the fulfilment of Birrinydji's wish, the Yirritja moiety ancestor Lany'tjun, a Christ-like figure in the eyes of the adjustment instigators, was reborn as an Old Testament prophet. According to Burrumarra, when Lany'tjun walked the earth, it was to prepare the Yolngu for the Christian message. Walitha'walitha's (or Allah's) message was the same as the Christian message, and to prevent confusion, this Dreaming entity was reconfigured as an angel. "We are Murrnginy," Burrumarra said. "We believe in God."

### **Purpose-driven naming**

While there has been scholarly treatment of Macassan loan words in Yolngu languages (Walker, 1988; Walker and Zorc, 1981) and the 'lost Macassar' language of northern Australia (Urry and Walsh, 1981), there has been no discussion of the significance of Macassan loan words being used as personal names since Warner (1969, p. 457) raised the issue of this practice. According to Warner, in the 1920s, just 20 years after the end of the Macassan trepang industry, almost all the Yolngu between Arnhem Bay and Milingimbi had 'Malay' (Macassan) personal as well as Yolngu names.

The first recorded evidence of the transcription of Yolngu names occurred on 5 February 1803, when British seaman Matthew Flinders was anchored in north-east Arnhem Land during the first circumnavigation of Australia. Botanist Robert

Brown (1801-1805), when interviewing a group of Yolngu, created a word list that included various body parts (nose, eyes, lips, sexual organs, etc.), items of material culture (bracelet, waist-band, necklace), certain animal and plant species and their edibility (kangaroo, oyster, eucalyptus), words for rainbow, moon, sea, and so on, and a short list of personal names.

In 2001, I presented Brown's word list to a party of Elcho Islanders who represented groups from the vicinity of 'Arnhem South Bay'. Most of the words were recognisable, but it was the small collection of personal names that attracted the most attention. The expectation of the group was that, 200 years ago, the body of personal names available would identify timeless anchor points of the Dreaming as well as important totemic clan alliances. In seeking evidence of purpose-driven naming, however, the assembled Galpu, Gumatj, and Wangurri Yolngu were disappointed; the personal names on the list were largely incomprehensible.

These Yolngu understood that present-day naming patterns would probably be different because the pool of names to be drawn upon has been in steady decline since the Adjustment Movement. Nowadays, people are being named more and more after deceased members of their own lineages. In addition, group surnames that were introduced in the 1960s to facilitate bureaucratic processes are being tacked onto Christian names, giving rise to virtually anonymous labels such as John Dhamarrandji or Jim Dhurrkay. While nicknames referring to a person's physical attributes are very common, 'rubbish' names that simply sound good but have no meaning are also appearing in increasing number as primary names.

Traditional Yolngu names are drawn from Dreaming song cycles and refer to the entities and sites that commemorate them. Dhuwa names make reference to, and honour, almost all things associated with the Dhuwa universe - animate, inanimate, terrestrial, aquatic, heavenly, or spiritual - as do Yirritja moiety names. There are notable exceptions, of course, with Yolngu rarely being named after the 'outside' or public terms for creational entities, general categories of things like birrimbirr (spirit) or guya (fish), or non-moiety specific totems like the warrang (dingo), which is Dhuwa on Dhuwa land and Yirritja on Yirritja land. Many names emanate from a single Wangarr and each binds the name-holder to both the ancestor and others similarly linked to it.

Thomson (1946), in a case study from Cape York, shows how a single totem can inspire a wealth of personal names, allowing a place for all clan members within the body of a law. He explains how the numerous body parts, motion, and other attributes of the barramundi give rise to a wide range of personal names. One can also see evidence of this striving for total representation of the totem in all its complexity in Yolngu naming. Birrinydji's sailing ships, for instance, are described down to the finest detail in personal names, as are sailing manoeuvres - Bathathaki (preparing to drop anchor), Dakan (a boat adrift after raising the anchor) - including the condition of the air, Gunaygunay (dead calm) and so on.

With Birrinydji's names, the individual is linked to a totality that includes the entire non-Aboriginal world, its history, structure, and function, as understood by Yolngu. Bearers of a Birrinydji name will at some point ponder their place in this totality and be inspired to reflect upon the state of present-day membership of blacks in a white world, and vice versa.

All Yolngu are given at least two names, by their father, father's sister, and/or mother's mother. Rarely do any two Yolngu have or use the same primary name, though it is a common practice to name people after their mother's mother's brother or father's father. Only one name is in use at any time, the primary name, and it is set aside for an indefinite period upon the death of someone bearing that or a similar name. The deceased are called *mokuy* or *bapurru*, and a person with the same name will begin to use a secondary name or another that was formerly kept private. The use of personal names is carefully moderated, and Yolngu do not, as a rule, refer to each other by them; in fact, it can be construed as an insult to call people by their name. Yolngu try to avoid saying theirs. They will often use a Christian name (John, Ruth) if asked to identify themselves to an outsider. Kinship terms, for example, mother, father, brother, sister, are the preferred terms of address. On occasion, a subsection term is used, but it is less personal. Kinship terms express a reciprocal relationship and serve to classify and group relatives together on the basis of social obligations. Likewise, personal names furnish the pattern for regulating social behaviour by drawing upon the authority of the Dreaming.

The Elcho Islanders who were reviewing Brown's list of names soon noticed that several names were variations of words drawn from sacred song cycles of both moieties and could no longer be considered as personal names. Discussion then came to a halt, because there are strong taboos on speaking the names of the deceased, lest they call the spirits of the dead into the world of the living, a most undesirable prospect.

Levi-Strauss (1966, p. 161-216), in his analysis of naming prohibitions, asserts that the commonly observed practice of prohibition on the use of names of the deceased in traditional societies could not have been born of a fear of ghosts. The Australian Aborigines have an inordinate consumption of personal names, he notes, and then asks how it is that these groups, often with populations in the thousands, are able to fabricate enough new ones to perpetuate the naming system. Given the roughly constant rates of birth and death, the pool of names would rapidly diminish. Levi-Strauss argues that the fear of speaking the name of the dead has been grafted on to a well-adjusted and cyclical scheme for the movement of names from profane to sacred language, where they are reserved for ritual. Here, they progressively lose their public meaning, for sacred language is largely incomprehensible to the uninitiated. He says that sanctified common nouns are then used to construct proper names. Sacred language is made up of words that have become taboo, and from this sacred realm are coined words for

the needs of everyday or profane communication. New words come into circulation just as old ones are withdrawn from it.

With the rapid population growth in Arnhem Land in the 1950s, the need for names had reached critical levels. In the Yirritja moiety, terms drawn from the Birrinydji song cycles provided a ready source and filled a number of needs simultaneously. According to Maybury-Lewis (1984, p. 7), systems of dual organisation, as in the Dhuwa/Yirritja relationship, should be conceived of as an ideology of equilibrium derived from a theory of universal cosmic harmony, stemming from the interaction of opposing principles that dialectically establish the balance of things. Naming, according to Maybury-Lewis, plays an integral part in this harmonising process. The naming tactic of leaders at the time of the Adjustment was, I contend, part of a search for cosmic harmony in a world where Yolngu disadvantage and marginalisation were becoming ever more apparent. The movement of 'outside' words drawn from everyday contact with Macassans from the 1700s to the 'inside' or sacred language of Birrinydji songs, and then to the 'outside' once again in a new form (as personal names), was a mechanism for the restoration of harmony. Names for Yirritja youth would still be drawn from all the bodies of law relevant to the child, such as Lany'tjun, the whale, kangaroo, mangrove worm, and so on, but increasingly each child would have either a primary or a secondary name drawn from the Birrinydji corpus.

A critical function of names is the part they play in the transmission of ceremonial roles and relationships over time, linking the past, present, and future. (Lave 1979, p. 31) According to Rosaldo (1984, p. 19), however, anthropology's conventional wisdom stresses names as classifiers, slighting their use in cultural performances. He called for interpretation in relation to contexts of usage and qualities of interaction. Apart from inspiring a sense of individual pride and self-worth as part of a new community of believers, Birrinydji names would also provide Yolngu with a referential map of the social structural landscape of the colonial encounter. While Burrumarra was never explicit on this point, in my view the naming process would motivate the name-givers to shape the quality of social interactions with the encroaching Other in accord with Birrinydji's utopian vision of coexistence, in a manner reminiscent of the ways clans relate within the moiety. Names newly released from the sacred realm were bursting with magical potency and would help to guide a generation in their dealings with the Other and then, with the passing of the name-bearers and the implementation of the adjustment goals, gradually lose their meaning as the policy that underlined their special significance became irrelevant. The void would be filled with Christian teachings, and fresh policies would inform a potential source of new personal names.

### **The names of Birrinydji**

Ronald Berndt recorded many of the songs of Birrinydji in the 1940s, placing them under the headings of Bayini, Macassan, and Badu, which reflected the

still commonly held view that there were waves of contact prior to the arrival of Europeans (Berndt 1962, p. 36). Ethnomusicologist Peter Toner (2000) also made extensive recordings of Birrinydji songs from the Dhalwangu repertoire in the 1990s. Many personal names referred to in this paper, as defined by Burrumarra, can be found in the transcriptions of the songs.

Through the lens of the Yirritja moiety policy, the many terms for the mast (Banunyndji, Mattjuwi, Mawaundjil), flag (Bamanbirra, Bandipandi, Bandirra), and anchor (Yanding, Manunu), which are all personal names, recall Birrinydji's most sacred legacy. They refer to standing firm in the law and not straying from one's beliefs. (Burrumarra pers. comm. 1989) The anchor holds the Yolngu to their land, just as the mast should not break, even in the strongest of winds. In other words, the Yolngu will never be subservient or driven from their land by outsiders, as happened in the times of 'fire'.

In 1988, there were over 400 Yolngu personal names of Macassan derivation in circulation that were drawn from the songs of Birrinydji. There were probably a similar number that had been removed from public service because someone had died, or that had remained private to the owner. There was also evidence of the transfer of Birrinydji meanings to more traditional, but similar-sounding names.

All names reviewed in this paper honour a person's relationship with Birrinydji and the land of coastal Yirritja peoples, but when viewed through the lens of 'policy' they fit into two broad categories: descriptions of Utopia, the dawn of time when all Birrinydji's 'replacements' danced together on Arnhem Land shores; and a fallen realm, a forsaken people, as Yolngu became divided by misadventure into categories like black and white, rich and poor, law-abiding or lawless.

Macassan, Japanese, or European personal names were considered separately from the Birrinydji pool when I collected these data in the 1980s. This was part of a Yolngu strategy to separate the Macassan history that non-Aboriginal academics were intent on fully describing, from sacred narratives 'beyond history' associated with the Dreaming. Through this mechanism, the unquestionable authority of Birrinydji was confirmed.

A number of Yolngu names do, however, memorialise distinguished Macassans like Daeng Tompo (Danygumbu) and Bungulumbu. Some names were bestowed by Macassan leaders on Yolngu headmen. (Warner 1969, p. 457) Burrumarra's father, for example, was named Daymangu by the head of a trepanning fleet. Macassan names were sometimes given by a captain to his Yolngu workers. Garrawangu is one example, whose meaning is unknown but may be a pejorative. If particular non-Aborigines made a lasting impression, their names might be handed down to Yolngu children. Buthimang (Budiman) was a shipwrecked Indonesian sailor who spent a considerable part of his life on the Wessel Islands as an adopted member of a Yolngu family. His name was passed down through the generations, as were the names he gave to certain Warramiri totems, like the whale, which he called Markurri (Wangurri elder Buthimang pers. comm. 1988). The

lone survivor of the 1932 Yolngu attack on a Japanese trepanging vessel in eastern Arnhem Land was Kinju (or Ginyimu), whose name has also been passed down to honour his heroic overland journey to safety. He returned to Arnhem Land in the 1960s and met his namesake. (Fred Gray pers. comm. 1988)

### **Descriptions of utopia**

The many Yolngu song cycles influenced by the presence of Indonesians describe in glowing detail the exotic life of a southern Asian seaport. (Berndt 1965, p. 2) In Yolngu imaginations, however, many of the ports depicted, like Kampung Maluku or Jamaluna (which are the Yolngu personal names Gampumuluku and Djamaluna), are also sites on the Arnhem Land coast. At a place called Banjarri on Cape Wilberforce, the Birrinydji narratives describe how a large city was built that attracted many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Banguya (Nangingburra) refers to another city or entrepot on the northern tip of Elcho Island that was willed into existence by Birrinydji. Dholtji was like a 'Mecca', according to Warramiri elder Liwukang, and was the major base for Birrinydji's activity in Warramiri territory. Among the older generation, it was strongly believed that manufacturing industries thrived at this coastal settlement and also at the inland village of Gurrumurru in Dhalwangu territory, where Birrinydji is also known as Gumbaniya (a personal name drawn from a term for the Dutch East India Company). A great many names refer to a variety of skills the people mastered. Yolngu often travelled aboard Macassan praus and would have witnessed tradesmen and women at work in places now identified by personal names like Djakapurra (Singapore), Warru (Aru), and Djupandawuy (Ujung Pandang or Makassar). Elcho Islanders in the late 1980s were adamant, however, that these personal names describe their ancestors at work in Arnhem Land manufacturing iron, pottery, and cloth. Batingarra, for example, makes swords, and Birririapi is his furnace. Mawunggi is a dress maker, as is Datiyalan. Daymatharra is a cook, while Djalinda and Galanini make cloth in the Dela, or sewing centre, and they all sing as they work (Gelung).

Iron and red, white, and yellow pottery were understood to have been manufactured by Yolngu from red rock and clay freely available along the shoreline. (Berndt and Berndt, 1947) Stone houses (Balapathu) were built, as well as those with timber frames (Bununga or Dhangatja), iron roofing (Djarrikang), and nails. Dhundhana described an area at Dholtji and Gurrumurru that was thoroughly cleaned; here, the many inhabitants had planted trees and flowers. 'Rice fields' are still identifiable at specific localities in Yirritja territories, though different plant species now grow in the former paddies.

There was a hierarchy of command in Birrinydji's settlements. Tall men carrying swords, with long beards and moustaches (Bulutju), assembled on the beaches in military style, Dhawuyuma (which also means new or 'flash'), to honour their Garandalu or king. The first and greatest of these was a man called

Luki, but there were many others whom Yolngu celebrate in personal names. As noted above, Yirritja Yolngu in the 1950s referred to these men collectively in somewhat cryptic fashion as the Bayini (Berndt and Berndt 1954, p. 33), to reinforce the idea of a common ancestry with Yolngu and to distinguish them from the later, less respected Macassan trepangers. There are names for the admiral of Birrinydji's fleet (Lela), the captain of Birrinydji's boat (Djammangi), the leader of land-based troops (Djarrambi), and also spiritual leaders. Yolngu and the visitors performed certain ceremonies together, such as Rrondhu, when they sat on either side of a detached mast and sang. Similarly, Djambayang (from the Indonesian Semayang or Islamic prayer; Macknight, 1972, p. 296) united white and black alike. Both of these ceremonies are still performed today, typically at funerals.

Personal names make reference to law and order in the settlements. There is a word for the election of a high official ('Uluanang' in Macassarese becomes Wulukang for the Yolngu, the making of a headman by the king). A policeman is Upata in old Macassarese and Wupatha in Yolngu matha. The prisoner's lockup is known as Dharrunggu in both languages.

Names recall the era of trade (called Gumanadah) and the items that were traded (Marthakal). The names of certain trade goods are borrowed directly from the Macassan source: such as Bayung (umbrella), Batjukarri (mouth organ), Bininydjirri (bow and arrow), Djarrami (mirror), Garranydji (tomahawk), Landhamu (lantern), Yurranydjil (guitar). The name Raywala Bakitju (one of anthropologist Donald Thomson's informants in the 1940s) refers to the collective wealth and prosperity of the people blessed by Birrinydji. (Burrumarra pers. comm. 1989) Several names are slightly changed from the Macassan original, like Rrotha for Roti (bread) or Yandhing for Rranding (anchor).

### **A fallen realm, a forsaken people**

There is a clear-cut division in the pool of names between the bounteous world and life devoid of Birrinydji's material wealth, power, or influence. The scenario of abundance and scarcity appears throughout all categories of personal names, one of the most compelling examples being names associated with tobacco: Lapurru (tobacco block), Djandju (pipe), Dhaykamalu (matches), smoke from cigarettes (Djopani), or issuing from the struck match (Waraliny). In 'outside' Birrinydji myths, the dingo Djuranydjura rejects the offer of matches and tobacco (and other trade goods) from the Macassans. Despite being amazed by the 'fire of the match' (Bunguyul, Diwayan), the dog follows tradition and continues to use his fire sticks, a reference to the fact that the bounty of Birrinydji and the modern world he represents would always elude it.

During a century or two of contact with Macassans, Yolngu trade routes facilitating the movement of introduced goods emerged along the paths forged by the mythical dingoes. Some Yolngu became addicted to tobacco (and opium),

especially the variety described as ‘old, black, and strong’ (Barrupu), and personal names describe the cravings of addicts. Djotja cries out loud for tobacco, fumbles with an empty matchbox (Galina), and then sings and dances for joy when receiving her fix. In the Birrinydji dances for tobacco, the deranged addict is run through with the sword, but this is not apparent in the words of the songs. It is an ‘inside’ or concealed detail of law. References to a bottle of alcohol (Djaturre) and an empty one drifting ashore (Daynggina) also speak to inadequacy, addiction, and misconduct, culminating in anarchy.

In the Murrnginy era (‘the time of hatred between black and white’), the spirit of the dead (Wurramu) descended upon the population, turning them away from a law-abiding life, and there are many names describing this period of decline and disintegration. Elsewhere in this volume, I describe Balulu, Balala, and Bakurra as robbers, liars, and double-crossers; Bawurramu is the ‘head and wishes’ of the killers in Birrinydji’s day. Djeki, the name of a ruler of Dholtji, means ‘Birrinydji killing someone’. We also see the murderer Gayinydingu in action. He is quick to pick up Birrinydji’s knives to kill a friend or foe. In this time of mayhem, we see men using perfume (Lamundja, Bonga) to attract women of the wrong ‘skin’ (or kin group) and vice versa; but then Walitha’walitha (Allah) intervenes on behalf of the Yolngu and Birrinydji’s ‘replacements’ are expelled from Arnhem Land.

There are personal names that direct the thinking of Yolngu to the higher plane of Walitha’walitha (Allah), like Bati (from the Macassarese ‘Passe’), which means that Yolngu and others are united in worship. There is Latjparrk (and Bukulatjpi), which refers to a light that draws the mind to the heavens, and Ganimbirngu, which in the Birrinydji tradition means the unity of the heavens, earth and sea. Murrayilyil is a name for a rich abode in heaven filled with grass, fresh water and fruits of all descriptions, and is reminiscent of the Islamic paradise garden. Paradise is also described as an ‘island of the dead’, a mythical place to the north of Arnhem Land called Badu. Sama Bajau (the ‘black’ whale hunters Dhurridjini, Wuramala, Papayili, and Gelurru, who accompanied the Macassans) direct the souls of the Yolngu dead to this special place, whose many personal names include Mutilnga and Nalkuma.

### **Mimesis, alterity, and naming**

Understanding the meaning of the presence of the Other has obviously been a work in progress for Yolngu ever since the first outsiders appeared centuries ago. For non-Aborigines, academic attention has focused on the history of Macassan trepanning and there has been relatively little work on historicities described in Whitehead (2003) as the cultural proclivities that have led to a certain kind of historical consciousness within which the histories of contact are meaningful.

An impressive number of contact stories accumulated in Yolngu imaginations over the millennia remain in circulation. According to Burrumarra, from at

least the time of the ancestral Warramiri leader, Bukulatjpi, these narratives ‘came under’ Birrinydji. All visitors were his replacements; their form and purpose determined by him. From the mission period onwards, Yolngu were aware of a disjunction between their views and those of Westerners regarding historicities and the views of the past they engendered. The Yolngu response was to promote a Western face in discussions with anthropologists and historians about the past, referring to Birrinydji only by reference to his replacements, actual historical peoples beginning with the Bayini who were spoken of as forerunners of Macassans.

The theoretical devices of mimesis and alterity, and the discussion by Tausig (1993) on the magical power of representation, allow for an appreciation of Yolngu naming practices in the contact period and beyond. Yolngu belief in a shared ancestry with a people who enjoyed a wealth that they desired but lacked, led them to conclude that such wealth must at one time have been theirs. They would seek that wealth once more via appeal to the supernatural power they believed underpinned the visitors’ success. In the Macassan and early mission eras, the Yolngu experienced an otherness (alterity), attempted to acquire what was lost through the adoption of certain alien practices and foreign names (mimicry), and sought examples in the behaviour of the seafarers to confirm the reality of their ‘historical’ perspectives. Bayini leaders like Luki or Djammangi, for example, were understood to have spread honour throughout Arnhem Land. Burrumarra claimed them in his family tree. With the Macassan replacements, however, there were only rare glimpses of the world that Yolngu imagined from the beginning of time. They were very unlike the idealised hero figures that came before and brought Birrinydji’s ‘membership’. These replacements, like the later-arriving Japanese fishermen and European colonists, “...only wanted to take things away,” Burrumarra said, and they would often be driven from the coast (Warner 1969, p. 459; McIntosh 1994, p. 21). In fact, Berndt (1962, p. 82) reports how proud the Yolngu were of their fierce reputation. As early as 1803, a Macassan captain had warned explorer Matthew Flinders of the treachery of the Aborigines in Burrumarra’s English Company’s Islands, having been speared by them not long previously.

Birrinydji names, like others, are a form of identification, a label that distinguishes one person from the next while linking them in special ways. They also characterise a person as a culture-bearer and landowner and are an entry point for one’s learning about the world and everything in it. At a deeper level, these names are a gift that introduces the Yolngu to qualities such as caring and sharing that emanate from rangga (like Birrinydji’s mast and flag). Ownership of rangga, like those displayed in the Adjustment Movement memorial, symbolise membership in a totem-defined collective that, in the case of Birrinydji, includes all peoples of the world.

When Yolngu are given a Birrinydji name, the bestowers are reinforcing the idea that a sense of partnership was lacking in their relationship with other ‘replacements’, like the Macassans and Europeans. Yirritja Yolngu were Birrinydji’s people, the true followers of his law, and should be respected as such, for all came from the ‘one source’. (Burrumarra pers. comm. 1989) Names like Baraytjuna or Bathijawa (saluting Birrinydji’s flag) honour Birrinydji’s wish for unity and prosperity. A name like Mattjuwi (the mast) recalls the policy of standing firm in the law, bending with the wind but not breaking. A name like Balulu (a Yolngu killing his relative and spreading chaos) reminds the bearer of the time of ‘fire’ and of the need to learn from the past in the search for the good life.

### **A new policy for new times**

The law of Birrinydji stresses harmony as a pre-condition for prosperity, and Yolngu impoverishment was understood to be a product of years of misadventure and abuse at the hands of visitors. The ‘inside’ narrative that Burrumarra isolated as being central to the emergence of the inherited Birrinydji policy of open hostility towards outsiders centres on the historical emergence of a new people on Arnhem Land shores, born of the interaction of blacks and whites during the Murrnginy era. As Burrumarra said:

Arnhem Land history is like this... the families of the enemy settlers had grown up. There were lots of wives and children, and then finally the troubles came. This is what happened... the taking of the land and the people by the enemy. Yolngu clans lived lawless lives under Balanda (European or Macassan) thinking, without any tradition except that of the enemy... We took Birrinydji’s law as our own and it made us strong. In Birrinydji’s dances, he is asking the Yolngu, “Where are the Yolngu women? Where are the Yolngu children?” We must keep collecting them for our purpose, not that of the enemy Balanda.

This ‘no mixing’ policy enabled the Yolngu to withstand the impact of outsiders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, said Burrumarra. They would not fall prey to the outsider’s seductive influence or lose their way. Indeed, Warner (1969, p. 459) refers to the Yolngu “insistence on the faithfulness of wives” in the 1920s, and how non-Aborigines attempting to have sexual relations with Yolngu women would be killed. Survival depended on maintaining this interpretation of Birrinydji’s policy, and strength lay in numbers, Burrumarra said.

The participating Adjustment Movement leaders were children of this ‘policy’, but in the hands of Burrumarra and Batangga it was completely transformed. No longer would the Yolngu believe that their fortunes had been forever dashed by the misdeeds of their ancestors or the crimes of Macassans and Europeans. The newly envisioned pathway was to work towards the realisation of a ‘remembered’ ideal of coexistence and material abundance. A 1958 sermon by

Batangga revealed how the new policy was strengthening both European and Yolngu, lifting them up, so that they would help and guide one another. (Berndt 1962, p. 77)

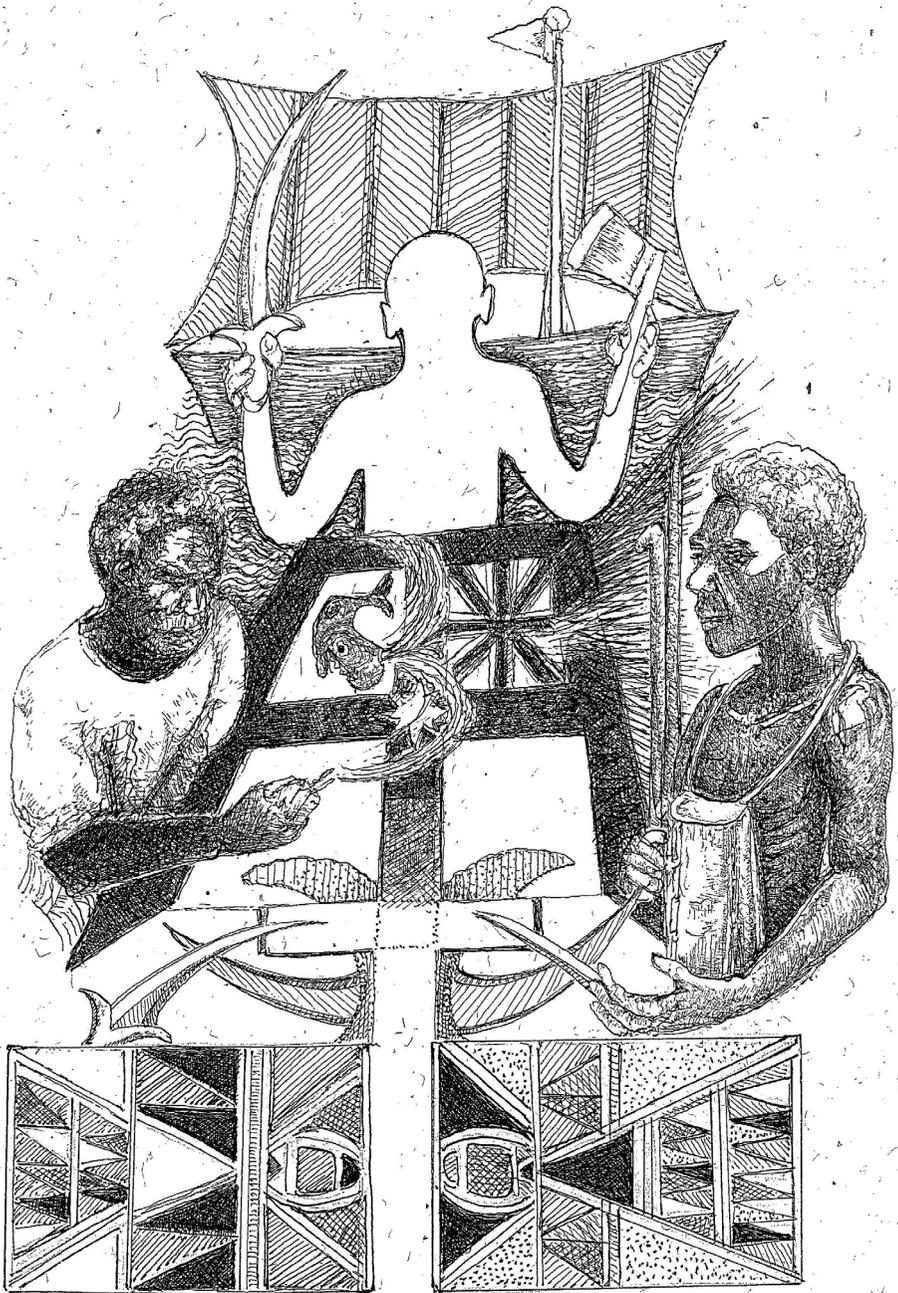
Burrumarra's understanding of the policy pre- and post-1957, as described to me in the late 1980s, can be summarised as follows:

- (a) Yolngu are human beings, not dogs (pre-1957). Yolngu seek equality in the eyes of the Other (1980s);
- (b) A supreme being (Walitha'walitha or Allah) reigns over the Yolngu, protecting them from harm (pre-1957). The Christian mission was Birrinydji's wish for the people (1980s);
- (c) White wealth comes from black land (pre-1957). Each needs the other to survive and thrive (1980s);
- (d) Yolngu for Yolngu and Balanda for Balanda. There is no mixing (pre-1957). Yolngu would find a place for the Other in their lives (1980s);
- (e) Everything came under Birrinydji (pre-1957). Birrinydji's conquering spirit was incompatible with Christianity and the Yolngu would "...bury his swords in the sand" as a precondition for rapprochement (1980s).

When all the sacred posts were on display in the Adjustment Movement, Yolngu and Balanda could begin to see themselves as brothers and sisters, united in a common vision. The cross on top of a rangga in the centre of the memorial acknowledged that all Dreamings would henceforth be seen through the lens of a Christian 'policy'. In the past, displaying Birrinydji's mast and the flag on Arnhem Land beaches probably sent a similar message to Macassans. Since they were 'one people' from 'one source', Yolngu rights should be respected. "When they see the flag flying, they will confer with their brothers, the Yolngu, to see what laws are there," Burrumarra said.

For Burrumarra, the Adjustment Movement signalled the end of the old inherited policy describing the disturbing history of contact between Yolngu and Indonesians, Japanese, and Europeans. It was to be set aside and replaced by a simple and powerful statement of reconciliatory intent. "We are Murrnginy. We believe in God." Disharmony had been a precondition for the existence of Birrinydji's policy; harmony would be a precondition for its rescission. The community leaders were now creating a foundation upon which to build a new life and, to foment this change, a memorial was created for those ways of thinking that had formerly sustained the people. The emphasis now was on building happy, healthy, and energetic lives as Yolngu, and abandoning the burden of bitterness towards the Other. Personal names, that all-important entry point for learning about one's place in the world, were to play an integral, if subtle, role in this remarkable period of transformation.

When Yolngu gifted themselves personal names drawn from the period of Macassan contact, they were doing more than meeting the naming needs of an exploding population; they were facilitating the changing of 'Genesis'. As part of the far-ranging adjustment in lifestyle and belief, the pool of Birrinydji names would steadily diminish with the passing of a generation, and new policies would give rise to new priorities in personal naming. In utilising the power of taboo, Yolngu found a mechanism for revitalising the sacred and, with the promise of a golden age to come, restoring harmony to the universe.



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*Encountering the Other***7:1 Whale Hunters and Sama-Bajau in North Australian Aboriginal Mythology**

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 1995, 'Maluku Totem Hunters and Sama-Bajau in North Australian Aboriginal Mythology?' *Australian Folklore*, vol. 10, pp. 50-60)

Very little is known about early contacts between what we now know as Australia and the island chain of Indonesia. Archaeological studies have focused more on the ancient migrations of the ancestors of today's Indigenous Australians as long as 50,000 years ago and, more recently, on the exploits of Macassan trepang fishermen from the mid 1700s.

A study of Yolngu mythology, in particular from the Warramiri clan, provides evidence of other visitors to the Australian coast prior to the advent of Macassans. In all probability these people were from the Maluku Province of eastern Indonesia, but also included Sama-Bajau (Sea Gypsies) who live throughout the Indonesian archipelago as well as Malaysia and the Philippines. Yolngu narratives refer to waves of visitation by these 'whale, dugong and turtle hunters', known collectively as Gelurru, Wuramala, and Bapayili, and other names. Yolngu insist that these peoples were among the first outsiders on the Arnhem Land coast.

The most interesting references to the existence of these visitors comes from Aboriginal rock paintings from both the Torres Strait and Groote Eylandt. In caves on Booby Island, in far north Queensland, are sets of boat images which Ron Coleman of the Queensland Museum (pers. comm. 1994) considers to be stylistically similar to the Lanong of the Sulu Sea region, between the Philippines and Borneo. The use of such craft was not restricted to the Sama-Bajau of this area but extended as far as the Aru Islands in eastern Maluku Province.

On Chasm Island, just north of Groote Eylandt in north-east Arnhem Land, a member of Matthew Flinders' 1803 voyage of discovery recorded a number of rock art hunting scenes, including one in which thirty-four people are shown in a canoe, and ten harpoon lines lead to a dugong's body. Of course, the possibility that the painting represents reflections of early Macassan contacts cannot be discounted, but the size and shape of the canoe does not resemble the trepanging praus. If anything, the long distance sailing canoes Kora-kora or Bhelang of Central Maluku, or the much more common Lipa-lipa, or dug-out sailing canoe, are a closer match.

There are grounds for speculation that these paintings refer to these very same people who feature so prominently in Yolngu mythology. Yolngu songs, for

example, describe the long-nosed canoes in which men stand as they paddle. There are also ceremonies, often associated with Yirritja moiety funerals, in which up to sixty people in two lines mimic the paddling actions of the whale and dugong hunters in their canoes. The oars that are used in such ceremonies double as hunting spears, having a carved wooden barb at one end. Of note is the fact that Yolngu do not use this type of spear when hunting dugong, and there are few records of Macassan trepangers being involved in the hunt for these mammals.

The most comprehensive reports to date on the subject of whale, dugong or turtle hunters in this region come from the writings of Ronald Berndt (1948), but even then he was undecided about whether the visitors were from the Torres Strait or eastern Indonesia. The leader of the Warramiri clan, David Burrumarra, was adamant, however, that they came from a north-easterly direction, whereas the Macassans had come from the north-west. These early visitors were followers of Allah, and were also said to be the ceremonial 'owners' of the laws associated with the whale and the octopus. Their boats were called 'Djulpan', and in some instances, 'Lambu', apparently distinguishing them from the Mitjiang or Marthangay of the Macassans, although Lambu is a type of craft associated with southern Sulawesi. Of particular note is the fact that the visitors were black and, apart from their having dug-out sailing canoes, knives and tobacco, were seen as being equal, 'one', or 'brothers' of the Yolngu. As Burrumarra said:

What the whale hunter does with the spear, we do with the manikay, bilma, and yidaki (song, clapsticks, and didgeridoo).

Each in their own way was responsible for the maintenance of the laws of the whale and the octopus.

Myths associated with these hunters will be analysed under three headings. The first are those narratives which link them with the creation of Yolngu clan emblems and also with particular whale and dugong sites along the Arnhem Land coastline. The second group of narratives includes those in which totemic forces reject the visitors. In these stories there are references to trepang and they may coincide with early Macassan encounters. The third group, the most well developed, are those in which the whale hunters are seen to be in an alliance with Yolngu, and are agents in the movement of the souls of Yolngu dead from the Australian coast to some unknown 'land of the dead' in the north, known by a number of terms, including Badu, Banda, Nalkuma, and Mutilnga. It is from here, also, that 'spirit children' come to the Yolngu, through the agency of sea totems.

### **Totem hunters on the Australian coast**

Comparing and contrasting whale hunter stories provides us with clear evidence of how original myths, not involving outsiders, have become the basis of a number of variations on a theme. 'Starting' narratives are numerous. A foundational Wangurri clan narrative, for example, tells of the association of the dugong, the Evening Star (Venus), and the moon. A related narrative tells of how

a group of Yolngu hunters went out to sea and captured a taboo fish. As a consequence they were sucked up into the heavens (Badurru) by a waterspout. Today they can be seen as the belt of the constellation Orion. Trails of stars represent their fishing lines with the fish still attached. The nearby Pleiades is their baling shell.

What is of significance is that the terms used for the boats, for harpoons, and so many other items in these stories, are also those used in relation to the technology of the first visitors. Thus when a canoe was towed onto the Arnhem Land coast by a harpooned whale at the beginning of time, or mysteriously arrived in other locations, it is said to have come down from the heavens. These boats were known as the Djulpan (the canoe in the 'Orion' story) and, in associated hunter myths, it is also the Djulpan which takes the souls of the dead to the paradise in the north. These early visitors are not linked to Macassar or even Indonesia. They were 'universal travellers' according to Burrumarra, who had come from the Milky Way (Badurru) to Yolngu lands.

### **Wuramala and the whale**

The first category of whale hunter stories involves the mythical ancestor, Wuramala. One narrative, for example, is centred on Cape Arnhem (Nanydjaka). As I was told it, a Yolngu named Yumbulul had travelled to this place and left his canoe there. This is now a sacred rock in the sea. Yumbulul was transformed into a whale and he then traversed the icy waters to the north of the Wessel Islands where he was hunted and caught by Wuramala. The whale was too big so Wuramala cut it up and put the pieces into his canoe. Later, he ate the whale meat. When Wuramala looked back towards the coast, he saw great clouds in the sky. The whale had sucked in water and when it exhaled through its blowhole, the spray had risen up to form clouds, now depicted as a sacred emblem of various coastal clan groups like the Warramiri. In Yolngu paintings, this Wessel Island site is depicted as the spine of the whale. The place where Yumbulul had originally left his canoe is known by the Indonesian words Ujung Duru (Wutjungduru), and it is understood to be a totemic centre for the 'people of the north'. For Yolngu, this rock is also symbolic of the whale. It rises and falls with the changing tides.

### **Myths of rejection**

The second group of myths relating to totem hunting outsiders are those stories in which the seas resist the efforts of the visitors to procure sea produce. The contest between the totemic dugong at Cape Arnhem and the spirits from the islands of the north is one of many examples recorded by Charles Mountford (1956-64). Here, two dugong are being pursued. As the visitors are about to spear them, a storm develops, allowing them to escape. Related stories tell of how the whale blew up smoke and fire to destroy its enemies, or how the stingray stirred up the water, making it smokey so the hunters could not see it.

There are also narratives which contain obvious references to the Macassan trepanging industry in the Cape Arnhem/Port Bradshaw area. The hawksbill turtle (Guwarrtji), for example, whose shell was in great demand as a trade item, creates heavy seas which drown all those who intrude on its domain. Of particular note also is the story of how the trepang was transformed from a sluggish, bottom dwelling creature into a fearless monster which could shoot up streams of water in order to destroy passing canoes. (see Mountford, 1956-64, p. 332)

### **Nalkuma: The land of the dead**

The paradise to the north, the home of the whale hunters, was known by Yolngu as the 'land of the dead'. In this group of narratives, hunters come down on their regular visits to collect the souls of the Yolngu dead, and to catch food for them.

Charles Mountford (1956-64, p. 329) says that when the bones of the dead are in the coffin, the spirit departs. Guided by the call of the scrub fowl, it makes its way to the jungle north of Port Bradshaw. Female spirits assist in the travel. They take the spirit to the headman of Nalkuma, who gives him two paddles and shows him how to make a wooden canoe, called 'Djulpan', so that he can make his way. When he is ready, the other spirit hunters give the deceased two seed pods which serve as a passport. They are asked for these when they arrive at Nalkuma.

In anticipation of the arrival of the spirits of the dead, the people of the north (in the land of the dead) paddle to Cape Arnhem and other localities to capture a dugong as food for a welcoming ceremony. Others light grass fires to guide the spirits on. When they arrive, all the people have assembled on the beach, old friends meet them and they eat the fresh dugong. Later they perform their favourite ceremonies and they are helped to make camp. All of this stirs dust which rises to form large clouds. Yolngu back on the mainland, when seeing this, know that the dead have arrived and the time of mourning is over. (Mountford, 1956-64, pp. 329-331)

In Nalkuma, everyone is happy, good tempered and healthy. The weather is fine, and there is plenty of food. The people sit in the sun, talk, and sing. The seas are still and perfect for hunting. Tobacco is in abundant supply and there are many fruit trees supplying all that one might need.

### **The visitors in oral history**

Looking at the stories in an historical light, the visitors from Badu (or Nalkuma) were said by Burrumarra to be just like the Yolngu. They were identified by a range of names including Wuramala, Dhurritjini, Bapayili, Gelurru, Duri-Duri and Garrmali, and so on. In their place of origin lived the Gulthana, the cooks of the whale and dugong, and the Djamulapu, the eaters of the whale meat. All of these hunters had come to Arnhem Land for many, many years, and even today are said to be just over the horizon, ready to come in during the rainy season (i.e. the usual time when Macassan trepangers visited).

Although Yolngu are said to have travelled with the whale hunters as far as the Wessel Islands, detailed knowledge of them is limited. They were long time associates of the Warramiri clan, in particular, but were also very timid. The Warramiri and the Wuramala were said to share 'one ceremony', a reference to them both being linked by the sacred laws of the whale. Burrumarra referred to these laws as 'Nyomba' which meant "...living for the whale." This word is linguistically similar to the Sama-Bajau expression 'Umboh' which describes the sea laws followed by the Sea Gypsies of the southern Philippines. (Bottignolo 1995) Burrumarra, in private discussions, said that he hoped that they still knew those laws and rituals today.

Senior Yolngu like Burrumarra were adamant that whale hunters came to Arnhem Land prior to the Macassan trepangers. Ronald Berndt (1954) for instance quotes an informant as saying the Wuramala were real people that had been on the coast, but that they are referred to as 'spirit people' now. Lloyd Warner (1969, p. 410) also reports an informant as saying:

We do not know where [the home of the hunters] is. We only sing [for them] that way because the old people did.

Burrumarra added to this saying:

From Mutilnga [Nalkuma or Badu] come canoes, coconuts and winds. Those people send it. We see the canoe and we know where it comes from. Real men made this canoe. It comes from a real place. To Mutilnga go the souls of Yolngu. We are 'company' with them. Real men look after the souls, not spirit men. Bapayili are real men. Our souls go there.

Apart from their actual existence, it was the qualities of the visitors, as observed by Yolngu that were of greatest interest. Their seafaring skills were a sign of great ritual knowledge. For instance, Burrumarra said:

The sea is not for Yolngu, it is for the whale. We are friends of the whale, dugong and dolphin... The whale hunter is for our whale places... We honour the whale. The whale hunter is more on the whale than us so we can call them bunggawa [leaders]. Wuramala, Gelurru, Dhurritjini and Bapayili had a business to do. We can't interfere with that. We want them to be in charge of that business. We are not bunggawa like them. We do not have the same skills... But we are of one mind with them. We call them brother. The skills and knowledge they have to catch the whale from close up when the whale is above the water... makes them managers. Their business is honourable. We are linked to their business and they to ours... They follow the law of cutting the whale. It must be done according to the rule otherwise there is trouble... They are followers of Allah. In the teeming sea life they see a mirror reflection of him. Allah is the giver of bread to the people. The seafood is their bread. They believe in him. They were 'company' for us in ancient times and are a part of Warramiri madayin [sacred realm], like the cuttle fish, diamond fish [Malara], squid and

octopus. The Warramiri collected all these things from near and far for the centre of Dholtji. The Warramiri mind has collected these.

While Berndt says that the foundation of the hunter myths lies with the very first items of flotsam and jetsam that arrived on the coast from the north, informants in the 1940s gave the impression that the mythology was associated with Torres Strait, and indeed, knowledge of an island called Badu in the Torres Strait may well have influenced this. Torres Strait missionaries were based in north-east Arnhem Land in the early years of the 20th century. The link between the expressions Badu (the island paradise, as well as the Torres Strait island) and Badurru (the heavens above) cannot be discounted. The two terms are often used in conjunction when Yolngu speak of the 'land of the dead', but it is not the Torres Strait that is being invoked. This allows for speculation that the idea of a heavenly paradise to the north of Arnhem Land was displaced in the early years of Christian missions.

One fact that hints at the identity of the visitors is that the Dhurritjini (Turijene), one of the 'spirit hunters', and Djamulapu, the 'eaters' of the whale meat are known groups of Sama-Bajau (Sea Gypsies). The Dhurritjini lived in the vicinity of Makassar in the seventeenth century and were later associated with Macassan trepang expeditions to Australia. The Djamulapu (Djamamapun), on the other hand, are a Sama-Bajau group now dwelling in the Sulu Sea, between Sulawesi, Borneo and the Philippines. There are, however, no records of them in Australia and so no definite conclusions can be reached that confirm or deny that these groups were the ones associated with Arnhem Land whale hunting oral traditions.

The only known localities where traditional whale hunting is still performed in Indonesia are in the seas to the east of Flores, in the Solar Islands, and records from the seventeenth century suggest that even then they were the only systematic hunters of the whale known to Dutch authorities. (see Weber, 1902, pp. 89-93) These coastal peoples claim descent from South Sulawesi and may be related to 'Badu' populations, but there do not appear to be any immediate links either in place names or in hunting terminology with the visitors who came to Arnhem Land, although there is some degree of similarity in boat design between their craft and the images in the cave paintings of Groote Eylandt.

The lands of the whale hunters, as stated, are referred to as 'islands of the north' or the 'land of the dead' and there are dozens of alternate names for this place which informants say may refer to countries, islands, or even isolated beaches. A few names are recognisable as actual localities, i.e. Warru (Aru, in either Maluku or Sumatra) and Danimba (Tanimbar), but apart from these and others in the vicinity of Macassar (i.e. Samaluna - Djamaluna, and Layilayi), they are difficult to identify.

One of the reported 'islands of the north' is Banda. Other similar names are Bandayil, Bandaynga and Bandawee, but the meanings differ and may have been used differently in various myths. Thus Bandawee is said to be a place in the north

associated with Nalkuma signifying the ownership of traditional Aboriginal information. Bandaynga on the other hand means ‘where the big people come from’, i.e. ceremonial leaders. Banda, likewise, Burrumarra said, is a very rich place. A Warramiri ancestral being, Birrinydji, is reputed to have left something there, and to have blessed it, giving it great wealth and lots of ‘things’. It can hardly be a coincidence that Banda in local Maluku tradition, is also said to have been a blessed place, for it was the home of the rare and valuable spices of nutmeg and mace (Abdurachman, 1978, p. 164), and the subject of attention by foreign traders, in particular the Arabs, for more than a thousand years.

## Conclusion

The emerging view from a study of Yolngu whale, dugong and turtle hunter narratives is that Woramala, Bapayili, Gelurru, and so on, represent fleeting contacts by sea hunters from eastern Indonesia over a vast period of time. Initial myth variations may reflect the accidental visits of Tanimbar, Kai or Aru Islanders who had been blown off course or shipwrecked, events which are not uncommon today. One might imagine that as long as people have had boats they would have been arriving on the coast for any number of reasons, whether it be forced, or accidental, as when a harpooned whale towed a sailing canoe onto the shore, or as part of exploratory voyages. Ronald Berndt (1954) speaks of some early castaways being killed and others living out their lives with Yolngu populations. The range of narratives discussed here suggests that they are all variations on a pre-existing theme which has been added to over the centuries in the light of changing realities. What they show most strongly is that Yolngu oral history paints a very complex picture of the past, and that the current focus on Macassan trepangers as the one and only group with whom Yolngu were associated prior to European contact is perhaps short-sighted.

## 7:2 Yolngu Iron Technology and the Dreaming

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 1997, ‘The Birrinydji Legacy: Aborigines, Macassans and Mining in North-east Arnhem Land,’ *Aboriginal History*, vol. 21, pp. 70-89) Reprinted as: McIntosh IS 2004, ‘The Iron Furnace of Birrinydji,’ in *Mining and Indigenous Lifeworlds in Australia and Papua New Guinea*, eds A Rumsey & J Wiener, Sean Kingston Publishing, Oxon, pp. 12-30)

According to their oral history, since time immemorial Yolngu have transformed the coastal red rock outcrops (haematite) into iron tools. In a Warramiri clan perspective, this is an ancient practice inspired by a Dreaming entity known as Birrinydji. For David Burrumarra, Birrinydji is the king, the boat captain and blacksmith. He is at once the minerals of the land, and the land itself, and Yolngu are born in his image and ceremonially enact his will. Yet Birrinydji represents the

technology and power possessed today by Balanda (non-Aborigines), and not Yolngu. The perception is that following the days when Indonesian fishermen from Macassar frequented the northern coast, Balanda became wealthy at the expense of Yolngu by exploiting the resources of the Yolngu domain. In an analysis of Yolngu oral history and the Birrinydji narratives, I will provide an account for the widely varying attitudes of Yolngu towards mining and exploration in northern Australia.

### **Contemporary Arnhem Land**

The geographic focus of this chapter is the Yolngu community of Galiwin'ku and also the homeland of Dholtji, both more than 400 kilometres east of the Northern Territory capital of Darwin. The largest settlement in north-east Arnhem Land, Galiwin'ku was established in 1942 by the Methodist Overseas Mission. The community is home to approximately 1500 out of a total Yolngu population of 5000. Dholtji, by contrast, is a small outstation on Cape Wilberforce that is visited only by a few family groups during the dry season.

The traditional owners of Galiwin'ku and Dholtji are land owners in the eyes of Australian law. Land rights came into the national spotlight in the 1960s when Yolngu living at Yirrkala tried to prevent the mining company Nabalco from desecrating their homeland in the search for bauxite. As is well documented (Williams, 1986), the Supreme Court judgment was that while Yolngu belonged to the land, it did not belong to them. The court did not recognise community or group land interests and the decision was that Aboriginal property rights had been wiped out with the assertion of sovereignty by the British in 1788.

This decision prompted the establishment of a commission of inquiry into granting land rights to Aborigines in the Northern Territory. This led to the enactment of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976, and the formation of land councils to pursue land claims on behalf of traditional Aboriginal land owners and to take a liaison role with regard to development proposals.

Aborigines, who make up 25% of the Northern Territory population, now own over 50% of its land mass. The form of title is inalienable or 'Aboriginal Freehold'. Yolngu hold title not just for themselves but for future generations. The land cannot be sold or given away.

### **Introducing Birrinydji**

For at least 150 years, fishermen from southern Sulawesi, the Macassans, made annual voyages to the Arnhem Land coast in search of the exotic delicacy, trepang, which they would sell to the Chinese. The Warramiri clan once had a pivotal role in mediating relations with Macassans. In a process that was to be echoed elsewhere in Australia by European colonists, Macassans bestowed the title of king (Rajah) on certain Yolngu elders who would act as their brokers. In turn, these leaders would regulate trade in highly desired foreign goods with inland Yolngu clans (See Thomson, 1949). The last Rajah of Dholtji and Melville Bay was Ganimbirngu (Macknight,

1979) who was the father of David Burrumarra, the immediate past Warramiri leader. Dholtji was near the place where Matthew Flinders encountered the Macassan fleet in 1803 and where great festivities are described as taking place on shore as up to sixty praus and a thousand men reconnoitred prior to their return to Sulawesi (Berndt and Berndt, 1954). Following the departure of the Macassans in 1907 and the establishment of missions in north-east Arnhem Land in the 1920s, Dholtji became all but deserted.

In 1988, eighty years after the end of the Macassan era, David Burrumarra promoted the view amongst those who would listen that mining on his land at Dholtji would help restore wealth and status to Yolngu - a wealth and status that had been usurped firstly by itinerant voyagers from Sulawesi and then later by white colonists. For the aging Yolngu leader there were no doubts. Mining was a part of his clan history and it was an avenue to the good life. Since time immemorial, coastal haematite outcrops had been transformed into iron-bladed tools by Yolngu working under the guidance and inspiration of the Dreaming entity Birrinydji. Burrumarra sought a return to this 'golden era'.

Under provisions of the Land Rights Act, Aborigines must respond to requests for meetings with potential developers not less than every five years. In 1988, as with previous negotiations, Burrumarra's pro-mining position remained unchanged though he lacked support from many members of his own clan. The destruction of sacred sites in the vicinity of the Nabalco bauxite mine and smelter in Gove (Nhulunbuy) was still fresh in people's minds, even twenty years on.

While close family did not question Burrumarra's authority as the spokesperson for the clan or for Birrinydji, some Yolngu saw him as attempting to sell off the country to the Balanda for his own personal gain. Others saw his views on the past as obscure and anachronistic and they objected to mining exploration, even while acknowledging that the land in question was sacred to the memory of a 'timeless' partnership that was once deemed to have existed between Yolngu and Balanda through Birrinydji. As Burrumarra said to me:

Birrinydji had the mind of a Balanda... but his law is for all, not just for brown or white, but black as well and all the people of the world. Birrinydji was the king just like my father was king. My father was also a servant. When he looks in the mirror he sees Birrinydji, but also the whale and the octopus. The Warramiri honour all three.

Warramiri oral history tells a tale of first contact and a history of race relations that is at odds with contemporary historical accounts of the Macassan era. This chapter revolves around discussions with Burrumarra and other members of the Yirritja moiety on the history of iron-making. It examines the relevance of this history in the way that Yolngu are responding to requests for access to their country by mining companies.

## **Burrumarra's dream**

In the weeks following a 'yes' decision to mining at a Northern Land Council meeting held at Galiwin'ku to discuss the possibility of exploration in the vicinity of his outstation at Dholtji, Burrumarra had a dream which sparked considerable discussion. In the dream Burrumarra's younger brothers were clearing land for an airstrip at this ceremonial centre for Birrinydji. In complying with Burrumarra's wish, the brothers were planning to make Dholtji the large settlement it had been both prior to and during the Macassan era.

The brothers had nearly finished the airstrip when their bulldozer was halted by an obstacle. It was a huge gold nugget. "This must belong to Birrinydji," they thought, and went off to get their older brother. The Warramiri leader stared at the find and understood that the wealth of the white men could be theirs once again, and he reflected on the past. Birrinydji was the rich minerals of the earth, the transformed haematite, the source of the technology that made foreigners wealthy and allowed them to dominate Yolngu. He bent down to pick up the prize and, as he lifted it and held it in his arms, Birrinydji, Burrumarra's Aboriginality and his Dreaming, went into the ground and out of his life. He had the wealth of the Balanda and that was all that he had. To savage the earth for its 'spirit', as in mining, was to lose one's identity and become like the Balanda. By resisting the temptation one would maintain one's Aboriginality but also one's poverty.

## **Theoretical overview**

Maurice Bloch (1977) referred to a distinction between systems by which we know the world in a practical sense, and systems by which we accommodate history and keep the law. This was equated with Marx's distinction between ideology and knowledge. For the Warramiri there is knowledge of the Macassan past that pertains to everyday communication. Just recently, for example, a course on Macassan history was introduced into Arnhem Land schools. Then there is knowledge of Macassans applicable to ritual communication among elders in a ceremonial setting. For the Warramiri, Birrinydji is understood to come from the land of the Warramiri and to have drawn all outsiders to Arnhem Land by the strength of his 'mar' or desire for them. 'Outside' (or public) and 'inside' (sacred or esoteric) are apt labels for this distinction.

According to Bloch, anthropological analysis must take into account the changing meaning of the past in the present. Answers to questions such as: what is known about Macassans, what is possible to know, and who has the right to speak on this subject, reflect the interaction of emic and etic perspectives. The ancestral being Birrinydji is constituted in the ever-changing relations between Yolngu and others, and Yolngu decision making with regard to mining reflects the ever-changing understanding of this Dreaming in the here and now.

In the 1960s, Warramiri Yolngu worked with historians charting Macassan sites along the Arnhem Land coast. The subject of Birrinydji was not raised and

one of the reasons was that ‘inside’ truths and prevailing ‘outside’ information did not address the same questions, and some Yolngu wanted to keep it that way. For Burrumarra, only the Birrinydji narrative was seen to provide answers to questions such as: What brought the Macassans to Arnhem Land? Why do some Yolngu Dreamings refer to ancestral figures in the image of the Macassan? Why do some Yolngu have a ceremony for iron and not others? Burrumarra did not know that in the 1700s, Sea Gypsies were scouting for the Macassans – seeking out new areas for exchange and exploitation. Similarly Yolngu were also not privy to the political events in Southern Sulawesi in the 17th century, when the Dutch, in league with the Bugis, took Macassar by force and changed the nature of sea trade in the Indonesian archipelago. What they did know was that Macassans were white and rich and Yolngu were black and poor, and Yolngu had to work for the visitors to get what they wanted in the way of trade goods.

Easy access to iron since the advent of the mission at Galiwin’ku in 1942 has resulted in a change of status for Birrinydji. As a foundational story for clans such as the Warramiri, can it simply vanish into obscurity? Following Sahlins (1981), existing interpretations are seen to be put at risk by Burrumarra’s interpretations and public statements. Sahlins says that just as history is culturally ordered, so too are cultural schemes historical. We take risks with our understandings, and as a result, culture is historically altered in action.

For the Yolngu, everything that exists has an ‘inside’ equivalent which always appears to be unfolding before one’s eyes. This was central to Burrumarra’s understanding of the need for mining. Yolngu history speaks of this potential that is yet to be realised, and he was testing the waters. Burrumarra believed the time was right for mining, but was uncertain of the extent of support for his interpretations of the significance of Birrinydji. Burrumarra’s appeals to the Dreaming were based on a desire for an end to the poverty which for so long positioned Yolngu on the margins of non-Aboriginal society, and transform those feelings of open resentment that Yolngu felt towards Balanda. The question was how, in giving his account of Birrinydji, did Burrumarra hope to make the future coincide with his vision of the past? And what was to become of Birrinydji in the process?

Throughout north-east Arnhem Land the Yolngu differ in their opinion of the significance of the Birrinydji legacy. While Dhalwangu and Gumatj clan members treasure their detailed knowledge of his songs and ceremonies, and carefully maintain Birrinydji sites in the landscape, they are not able or willing to speak about the related myths or narrative. The Warramiri, on the other hand, have elaborate stories, but they have always been cautious about revealing them.

### **Iron use in north-east Arnhem Land**

There are no records of Aboriginal iron-making in precolonial Australia and similarly only scant references to the mythological significance of iron to Aboriginal populations in the early years of European settlement. Historian Henry

Reynolds (1990, p. 48) shows that some groups had terminology for the various products of the blacksmith's trade and had forged iron weapons while the metal was hot. He also says that there was an early and widespread adoption of the use of iron by Aborigines following contact with Macassans, though Warner (1969) suggests that the use of metal by Yolngu may have preceded the arrival of Macassans. Wooden planks with nails attached would have been continually floating onto the coast from the north and north-west and might have been extracted and used as fish hooks.

A major outcome of the Macassan period was an appreciation of iron's unique qualities and it became a highly prized item of trade. (Macknight, 1972, p. 305; Warner, 1969, p. 450) Particularly valued items were the tomahawk and knife, the detachable harpoon head, shovel nose metal spear and the small metal bowl used in long wooden smoking pipes. According to Thomson (1975, p. 31), the Yolngu were good at working in metal, making fine spear heads by beating out cold odds and ends of scrap metal and rigging screws, but there is no suggestion that such techniques were passed on as a result of contact with Indonesians. He writes:

[Yolngu]... made fish hooks and even knives from the nails and other fragments of iron that they salvaged from planks of driftwood, or iron from water tanks and trepang boilers of wrecked ships. One of their most enterprising ventures in quest of iron occurred in Melville Bay where the Royal Air Force had anchored drums to serve as mooring buoys for... flying boats which had to refuel there. The [Yolngu], alive to the value of this iron within their reach, cut the drums adrift, beached them and cut them up into sheets of iron to be beaten into spears.

Just as there are no records of Yolngu mining and smelting ironstone, there are also no records of Macassans making iron tools on the Australian coast, although they definitely had an interest in prospecting. George Earl was stationed at Port Essington in the early 1890s and conducted a regular trade with the Macassan trepangers. He says that in the vicinity of Elcho Island and Arnhem Bay:

...the coast is apparently the termination of a granite range, and is said by the Macassars to abound in minerals, among which they mention tin, but... appears to me to be antimony-ore which will yield perhaps two-thirds of its weight in metal. (Earl, 1842, p. 141)

Searcy traversed the coastline in the late 1800s and also mentions this interest by Macassans. At a trepang smoke house in Melville Bay he:

...found specimens of quartz and ironstone, in one of which a speck of gold could be distinctly seen... There was also a stack of manganese, which commodity for some reason the Malays [Macassans] took to Macassar. (Macknight, 1976, p. 44)

Elcho Island was also a source of red pigment for the Macassans, but their interest in this material is unclear. According to Burrumarra it could have been one of two types. Macknight (pers. comm. 1989) said that Burrumarra had suggested that this red clay was perhaps that which Yolngu collect from nearby Howard Island. Called Miku, it is dug out from a cleared area known as Gulpulu, burnt on the fire and then applied to the body in preparation for ceremonies. The alternative was the Dhuwa moiety red rock Rratjpa, which is the source material associated with Yirritja moiety iron production. This red laterite is found in abundance in the cliffs at Galiwin'ku adjoining an old Macassan trepang site. It is haematite (70% iron) (Dana 1949, p. 484), a variety of iron ore used not only in the production of steel, but also commercially in the production of red paint.

Could Arnhem Land have been a source of raw material for local and overseas iron production? Macknight's detailed study of the Macassan trepang industry has shown that the visitors usually spent not more than a week or two in any location, but there are various recordings of visitors having to spend extended periods after being shipwrecked or failing to catch the trade winds in time for their return journey to Sulawesi. In normal circumstances however, as Macknight (1972, p. 309) says, it would be most unusual during a voyage of this character. Yet one could certainly imagine the types of situations where iron-making might have become a necessity, say, for example, if the anchor was lost at sea or if nails were required to repair the praus and there were no other craft in the vicinity to lend assistance.

The process of iron manufacture does not require elaborate machinery. Any place where raw materials are available will suffice. In fact, techniques which might have been practiced in Arnhem Land in the past are still carried on throughout eastern Indonesia today. As Reid (1983, p. 19) says:

The characteristic Southeast Asian bellows - two vertical tubes with pistons lined with chicken-feathers, pumped by an apprentice sitting above them - is everywhere still in use. The remaining equipment is very basic - anvil, various hammers, a cutting wedge, tongs, scraper, and a bamboo full of water for tempering the steel.

Harrison and O'Connor (1969, p. 313) describe the process in more detail. They write:

A furnace simply consisted of a sort of circular pit, three or four feet in diameter, dug in compact earth... The pit was connected with a circular hole above... through which the smelters subsequently added supplies of charcoal... After igniting the charcoal they closed the mouth of the pit by means of earth to keep back the heat and... to melt the ore. They then allowed the molten metal to flow out by tapping the lower part of the furnace and the slag was separated.

Macassans may well have made iron on the Arnhem Land coast and Yolngu of Burrumarra's clan either witnessed this, or participated in its production. The

many Yolngu who travelled to Makassar during the 150 years of the trepang trade would also undoubtedly have come across the industry. Burrumarra, drawing on his knowledge of the iron-making process from oral history and the songs of Birrinydji, for example, said:

Birrinydji used the red rock from the beach, not bauxite, that's only for [the Gunapipi ritual]. [The red rock is] called Rratjpa and comes from Djang'kawu [a Dhuwa moiety ancestral figure]. At Cape Wilberforce they call it Mirrki, red sand of the sunrise. Red rock is intelligence for all mankind, the source of wealth and power of Balanda and Yolngu - from it comes all the technology - axes, knives and hammers.

While the 'red rock' is linked to Dhuwa moiety ancestral and totemic themes, Birrinydji is of the Yirritja moiety. When the raw material is transformed by fire it enters a new domain separate from its former associations. Thus while in the Dhuwa moiety there are many myths about Rratjpa, none is associated with iron production.

Details of iron-making are recorded not only in oral history and mythology but also in art, song and in the personal names of Yirritja Yolngu. In the Warramiri clan alone, more than 20% of the registered first names of clan members are drawn from the Birrinydji theme; in other coastal Yirritja clan groups, the figure is less but averages over 10%. Cawte (1993, p. 44) details one song about knife manufacture in his book on the Warramiri. In this and related songs, the singer identifies himself with the technology of Birrinydji as well as the manufacturing process. It goes thus:

Ngayum djangu latimi *I am the blade*  
Ngayum djangu djidami *I am the handle*  
Ngayum djangu wambalmi *I am the long knife*  
Ngayum djangu butumi *I am the wood for a handle*  
Ngayum djangu rrawarra *I am the steel template*

Berndt (1949, p. 221) also refers to Warramiri ceremonies associated with iron-making. He says that the Gwolwunbuma, Lil'garun, Mararaguma, and Djandyaralguma, are connected with the shovel-nosed iron-bladed spear, the knife, and the axe. Elkin (1953, p. 91), in one of his Warramiri recordings, likewise says that:

The song of the anvil describes vividly the darting of sparks and the 'cry' or resounding noise when the heated iron is struck with the hammer.

Burrumarra said that all of these songs were from Birrinydji and were related generally to the idea of white and black men working together, for the legacy of this Dreaming entity is centred on the concept of a partnership between peoples under the one law.

## Myth and history

In the 1940s, the Berndts found pottery fragments at a Macassan trepanning site at Port Bradshaw in north-east Arnhem Land. (Berndt & Berndt 1947) Yolngu informants stated that such pots had been made by them from local ant hill in the pre-Macassan past. Songs recorded by the Berndts talk of this production. According to Yolngu oral history, pottery making was a woman's job and it was the gift of Birrinydji's wife, Bayini, to her historical female counterparts, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The same was the case for both cloth manufacture and weaving. Rice production, likewise, was carried out by Yolngu women in Gumatj, Dhalwangu and Warramiri clan territories. (Berndt and Berndt, 1954, p. 37; Mountford, 1956-64, p. 295) Informants can still point out the old paddy fields which today are usually associated with large fresh water billabongs. The rice has turned into raakay, the water chestnut, another significant Yirritja moiety totem. But there was, and remains, considerable variation in Yolngu accounts of this 'pre-Macassan' period because they entail a paradox. Stories stress Yolngu wealth and self-sufficiency but also their subsequent loss in relation to outsiders. As the Berndts (1954, p. 38) suggest, Yolngu did not desire to imitate the Bayini, preferring their own way of life and, while the two groups coexisted, they did not seem to be willing to learn from each other. The Bayini, they say, kept the secret of weaving to themselves.

In contrast to the occupations and technologies of the female ancestral being Bayini, the mining and smelting of iron ore was work for men, and Birrinydji, the 'man of iron', instructed Yolngu in this trade. According to elders, references to the making of iron are thus wrongly attributed to the Macassan era. They say this production occurred in the pre-Macassan or Murrnginy period, the golden age of Birrinydji. According to Burrumarra:

Macassans had Birrinydji in common with Arnhem Land but the spirit of Birrinydji is Dholtji. All things came to the Warramiri from Birrinydji and then to other clans.

Just as a totem represents the outward form of a Dreaming being, a Macassan bunggawa (boat captain) by the name of Luki appears to provide a visual image of what Birrinydji is like. Otherwise, Birrinydji is indistinguishable from other Dreaming figures. Sacred rangga that represent his legacy are the basis of extensive clan alliances within the Yirritja moiety. Numerous totemic species such as the swordfish, angel fish (with fins like the sails of a boat) or even the Gawukal, a bird with a tail resembling an axe, owe their form to his intervention, and Birrinydji is associated with specific tracts of country belonging to the Warramiri, Dhalwangu and Gumatj clans.

All that is known of the Birrinydji Dreaming has been passed down to the present through many hands and interpretive processes. The 19th century Warramiri leader Bukulatjpi, for instance, is credited with 'doing the thinking' and uncovering the truth about Birrinydji and the Macassans. Living in the mid-

1800s, he was the first to do Birrinydji's dance and pass on its meaning to others. Successive Warramiri leaders Yamaliny, Lela, Bambang and Ganimbirngu were all 'frontmen' or brokers for the Macassans. They all had Macassan names, were followers of this new law and were staunch defenders of their lands against unwelcome intruders. Ganimbirngu's son, David Burrumarra, was born ten years after the end of the trepang era. For Burrumarra, the Birrinydji Dreaming was to become the means for both understanding the wider world and a strategy for survival within it.

In present-day understandings, Burrumarra's legacy is Birrinydji's. Through his interpretations, this Dreaming narrative became a foundation for Warramiri belief in Christianity, the moral basis of land and sea claims, and the rationale for a treaty or pact of reconciliation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

### **The dilemma of mining**

Stanner (1984) says that for Aborigines the present is determined by the past. There is a complete subordination of history to the ideology of the Dreaming. Burrumarra would have agreed. To follow the law and realise a pre-ordained future, mining must occur, but it had to be on Yolngu terms. But then there is the legacy of other creational figures such as Lany'tjun, the founder of the Yirritja moiety. Each Yirritja Yolngu clan was ascribed certain territories by Lany'tjun to care for. So there is a tension here, and this was evident in Burrumarra's dream. For many Yolngu, mining is not an option, and the very idea of non-Aboriginal companies drilling on Yolngu land evokes a deep bitterness, especially in the Gove area. Some see Birrinydji, and consequently their Aboriginality, as being vulnerable to such desecration. For example when satellite mining exploration photos were taken in the Gapuwiyak area in the late 1980s, without Yolngu consent, Birrinydji was seen in the shadows running from the camera. This fear of mining by Yolngu people is well documented. In relation to a painting of Birrinydji with the metal tools of his trade, Cawte (1993, p. 68) says:

Warramiri contemplating Birrinydji are supposed to ponder why their 'iron age' was lost... Does an iron age destroy itself because mining violates the earth?

While Burrumarra linked the extraction of bauxite and the production of alumina at the Nabalco plant at Gove with Birrinydji's iron-making, he was against the mine because of a failure on the part of developers to consult with Yolngu. Yet as far back as the 1950s, Burrumarra and other Yolngu leaders had tried to negotiate mining deals for the extraction of bauxite from the Wessel Islands. In the plan that was envisaged, Yolngu would have a controlling interest in the project and there was a guarantee that no sacred sites would be interfered with. The negotiations entered into with missionaries and others predated by over twenty years the Aboriginal Land Rights Act and the powers it grants to the Yolngu.

The Warramiri leader was also involved in discussions leading to the establishment of land councils in the Northern Territory. For him, such representative bodies were, in part, the realisation of Birrinydji's plan for Yolngu. Here was an organization

funded by non-Aborigines whose charter was to act in ways conducive to Yolngu interests, hinting at the time when both whites and blacks were followers of the one law. The implication of course is that Birrinydji only exists so long as there are divisions in material well-being between cultural groups. From Burrumarra's perspective, mining should be allowed on Yolngu land but only as long as Balanda respect Yolngu wishes, listen to the land owners and share equally in all proceeds. Many Yolngu make their decision about mining on the basis of this Dreaming precept.

In the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal Land Rights Act gives Aborigines the power of veto over development. In the case of mining exploration at Dholtji in 1988, while Burrumarra's dream did not change his feelings on pushing ahead with the project, his family marked off so much of the exploration zone as sacred and 'no go' areas that it was not feasible for the company to proceed. In 1996, two years after Burrumarra's death, the Warramiri leader Wulukang said 'no' to mining even though a majority of Burrumarra's family were now in favour of opening up their land. The country was too sacred.

For a range of reasons, many connected to his own family history, Burrumarra's answer for his own country was always 'yes', though the history of race relations in north-east Arnhem Land worked against his wish. The people, as a whole, usually say 'no'. Past bitter experience with mining companies, as well as damage to sacred sites, environmental pollution, and the social impacts of royalty payments, all weigh heavily on people's minds when mining decisions are being made. But at the very least, the 'fact' of iron-making on remote Arnhem Land beaches provides an alternative to the sharply contrasting views that to say 'yes' to mining means selling out one's inheritance (as when Birrinydji went into the ground), while saying 'no' results in the maintenance of isolation and poverty. For Burrumarra, mining on Yolngu terms would mean one could be wealthy and simultaneously maintain one's sense of identity and power. To him, this was the legacy of Birrinydji.

## **Conclusion**

The sequence of events implicit in an 'inside' reading of the Macassan past provides Yolngu with guidelines for attaining a desired future, progressively, in the here and now. The essential ingredients are the acknowledgement of land and sea rights and the rebuilding of ties of reciprocity. Bakhtin (1981, p. 147) speaks of such a perspective as historical inversion. History is something yet to be achieved. Myths about paradise, a golden or heroic age, or an ancient truth which are in no way a part of the past, can only be realised in the future. Oral traditions relating to Birrinydji represent a potential, a dream of how things should be if the law is followed.

In the scenario presented here, Burrumarra brings to the fore a perspective on the past which is considered anachronistic by many. Burrumarra professed certainty, but his dream indicated otherwise. Yolngu throughout north-east Arnhem Land no longer believe that the technology of whites comes from a Yolngu Dreaming and that to enjoy material prosperity, one has to follow the law of Birrinydji

and hence go through clans such as the Warrarniri to obtain highly prized items of trade. The significance of Birrinydji is being reexamined, but to what end?

Proclamations by Burrumarra on Birrinydji reflect the group leader's conceptions of Warramiri social identity - where they have come from and where they should be going as a people. Warramiri history is an ideology that links Yolngu, Macassans, and other non-Aborigines, and provides a commentary on present day lifestyles and the status of relationships. Rather than a passive device for classifying historical events, the Birrinydji narrative is a program for orienting social, political, ritual, and other forms of historical action. (Turner 1988, p. 23) For Burrumarra, the proclamation of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act and the growing influence and affluence of Yolngu in Australia has created the circumstances whereby mining can and should occur. That the two go together - a social environment of reconciliation and the willingness of mining companies to enter into negotiations with Yolngu - is seen to be a part of Birrinydji's plan. It is the realisation of the Dreaming in the here and now. History will then have achieved its potential.

### **7:3 Islam and Australia's Aborigines? A Perspective from North-East Arnhem Land**

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In 1996, a group of Yolngu dancers from Elcho Island traveled to Makassar to perform a mortuary ritual associated with the Dreaming entity Walitha'walitha (Allah). Known as the Wurramu, this ritual and song cycle was believed by Yolngu to be shared with the people of Makassar, though it had never previously been performed outside of Arnhem Land. The performance was designed to reunite these old trading partners, but the ceremony itself embodied a paradox. According to senior Yolngu, the songs and dances are sacred. On an 'outside' level they are about the new world introduced to Yolngu in pre-colonial times, but on an 'inside' level, they focus on the deaths that occurred as a consequence of first contact. The 'inside' meaning of the ritual relates to the passage of the soul of the deceased to a heavenly paradise above, the abode of the God of Islam.

Despite a significant interest across a range of disciplines in the annual voyages of Macassan trepanners, the question of Yolngu-Macassan relations and the consequent changes brought about in Yolngu society and cosmology as a result of this contact remains largely unexamined. In the field of social anthropology, the detailed reports of Ronald and Catherine Berndt have not been seriously debated, and much of the data they collected in the 1940s remains unpublished. Thus a

statement such as that of anthropologist Peter Worsley (1955, p. 5) that the important religious ceremonies of north-east Arnhem Land were all shot through with Macassarese influences, remains largely unexplained.

Apart from linguistic work, recent detailed descriptions of Yolngu cosmology and systems of knowledge omit or play down the significance of subjects which are an obvious legacy of the Macassan presence. Similarly, historical and archaeological studies have focused on what might be termed 'hard evidence'. Yolngu perspectives, couched as they are in myth, have received little attention.

In this chapter I look at one aspect of this diverse legacy – Islamic references in Yolngu mythology and ritual. The aim is twofold. First, it is to investigate the ways in which aspects of Islam have been creatively adapted by the Yolngu. Second, it is to show how a ritual associated with introduced 'law' is relevant in terms of reactivating what is perceived to be a historical partnership between peoples long separated by time and circumstance.

The Wurramu ritual which was taken to Makassar is still performed regularly, especially during funerals. Reference has been made to it in the anthropological literature as far back as the 1930s. Yet to date there has been no attempts to analyse its significance and published details are obscure. The ritual sequence is referred to as the Wurramu 'Collection', 'Crook' or 'Stealing Man' song cycle. From the 'outside', all that is known is that it exhibits external influences, was possibly copied from Macassans, and is associated with spirit possession and death.

Today many Elcho Islanders look back upon the Macassan era with great fondness, but the Wurramu ceremony tells a completely different story. While agreeing with the assertion that the myths of encounter need to be understood in terms of the ethnographic present, I contend that Burrumarra's views on Walitha'walitha and of the Wurramu ritual allow for speculation on the nature of early contacts between Yolngu and Macassans in the trepanging era.

According to Burrumarra, the performance of the Wurramu ceremony allowed Yolngu to see themselves as being part of a network of peoples united by a single law i.e. that of Walitha'walitha, but simultaneously, it was also a conceptual weapon in struggles against domination by outsiders. Burrumarra's account of the Macassan past, as seen through the Allah narrative, dwelt on the lack of equality between Yolngu and outsiders, particularly in terms of material wealth. The Wurramu ritual, he said, dwelt on the anti-social consequences of the presence of outsiders. In their dealings with both Macassans and European Australians, Yolngu wished to regain their lost status. Such an ambition was implicit in performances of the Wurramu ceremony, Burrumarra said.

So in 1996 we had a situation in which a particular ritual, once the vehicle for the transmission of sacred knowledge about the place of Yolngu in a world dominated by Macassans, was being used to facilitate a reunion with non-Aborigines in an environment in which the power imbalance had been overturned. In order to explore this view, I will first give an overview of what has been written on

the subject of Islam in eastern Indonesia and northern Australia, and then give a detailed account of Burrumarra's views on Allah and the place of Islam in Yolngu understandings on the nature of the Macassan past. Following this, I look at reports of the Wurramu ritual from the literature and compare these with contemporary accounts of its significance. In the conclusion, Burrumarra's historical and spiritual perspective is contrasted with the almost contradictory way that this ritual was put forward in a public show of intercultural unity. I also show how readily Yolngu were able to manipulate sacred truths about the past in order to accommodate the new.

# # #

In Indonesia, the spread of Islam followed the seafaring routes taken by Moslem traders from Arabia, Persia and India. As Tjandrasamita (1978, p. 149) notes, while their main objective was trade, their next was religious conversion. They would acquire power in an area, recruit religious preachers from among local populations, build mosques, and encourage the immigration of other Moslems.

Though Islam had been in the East Indies since perhaps as early as the seventh century, it only expanded rapidly in the sixteenth century. As Schrieke (1957, p. 233) says, "It is... impossible to understand [this rapid expansion]... unless one takes into account the antagonism between the Moslem traders and the Portuguese." Not only was Islam a means of providing a united front against the colonizers, the new religion sought to embrace converts into the faith by synthesizing the Islamic creed with existing beliefs. There was no compulsion to abandon older beliefs. (Meilink-Roelofs, 1970, p. 154) From as early as 1511, wealthy Moslem traders were being expelled from Portuguese held territories and were forced to settle in other centres of the faith such as Aceh, Johor, Banten, Ternate, and Makassar, all of which became great religious centres and trading ports.

Anthony Reid (1983, p. 117) says that the rise of Makassar, in particular, was a phenomenon unequalled in Indonesian history. From uncertain origins around 1500, in a little over one hundred years, the kingdom had risen to a position of political and economic dominance. Len Andaya (1981, p. 1) says that the adoption of Islam by Gowa (in Makassar) in 1603 was instrumental in this. By 1700, very little of the original Macassan origin beliefs were known or followed. Islam had become the religion of the people. As Tony Swain (1993, p. 102) says:

...very little is published on pre-Islamic beliefs. According to an eye-witness account... the Macassans, who had then belonged to an Islamic Kingdom for 120 years, had defaced all the footsteps of the ancient religion, for fear the people should again return to idolatry. The author could learn little of the old ceremonies and beliefs save vague notions of the complementary duality of heaven and earth giving rise to life.

Gowa leaders saw it as their religious duty to bring the new religion to their neighbours, by conquest if need be, leading to the subjugation of all southern

Sulawesi and the islands east of Lombok, as far as Aru and Kei. It is possible that such missions extended as far as north-east Arnhem Land but there is no documentation for pre-1700 Islamic settlements. One needs to treat with caution the view of Dalrymple in the 1760s, for example, that Aborigines of New Holland (Australia) were 'Mohammedans'. Campbell Macknight (1972, p. 293) suggests that this may merely be a reference to the fact that Aborigines in some areas were circumcised.

The earliest records of the activities of Islamic peoples on the Australian coast are in the Macassan trepanning era. Berndt and Berndt (1954, p. 46) for instance say that Imams accompanied the praus to Australia, and they record an Aboriginal informant saying that:

... when the mast of a prau was erected, as it prepared to set out on the journey to another settlement or to return to the Celebes [Sulawesi], a prayer-man would climb the mast and chant (Djelawar). Or at sunset, the prayer-man would emerge from his hut and bow towards the west, repeating the name of Allah. This prayer-man, whom the Aborigines called a 'sick-man', buwagerul, was known as Deingarau or sometimes as Baleidjaka. He would move his head from side to side; then, holding it with one hand, he would seize with the other the post of his hut, and look towards the sunset, saying: "ama!" Then he would bow his head to the ground, calling out "[Walitha'walitha]."

The earliest reference to Yolngu ceremonies relating to Allah is from Lloyd Warner (1969, p. 420), who completed fieldwork in the 1920s. This is a reference to a mortuary ceremony, part of the Wurramu song cycle, which Warner said was performed when the mast of a Macasan boat had broken or a man was about to die. He writes:

[During the funeral]... two or more men pick up the dead body and move it up and down as though they were lifting a mast. The chorus sings "Oh-a-ha-la" while the mast is laid down. When it is picked up again they sing "O-O-O-O-a-ha-la! A-ha-la! A-ha-la!"

Two men stand over the [dead] body, each with one hand over his face and one hand thrust out straight over 'the mast'. The first two men continue to move the 'mast' up and down... two other men dance as though they were pulling on ropes that raise the mast. Two men in unison say, "Si-li-la-mo-hamo ha-mo-sil-li-li, Si-li-nai-yu ma-u-lai (They are asking for something in the clouds or maybe it is in the moon) Ra-bin-a-la la ha-ma-ha-ma. (They are asking for something from that man god who lives in the moon) Ser-ri makas-si Be-la-bel-la, Daung."

The 'man god' A-ha-la is Walitha'walitha according to Burrumarra. The lifting of the body, as described in this quote, ceased at the beginning of the mission period at Elcho Island in the 1940s. Today in the Wurramu ceremony, either the

coffin is lifted and moved as though it were a mast, or men simply mimic the action of lifting the body. The last few words of this song were not translated by Warner's informants, but 'serrimakasi' (terima kasih) means 'thank you' in Bahasa Indonesian. Burrumarra was unsure of the full meaning of 'Be-la be-la Daung' but said to me that it was related to the idea of the "...humble one being held on high and then coming down to the dust again."

The only other reference to Islam is in relation to Sama-Bajau fishermen who accompanied Macassan trepangers on their voyages to Australia. Burrumarra referred to them as 'whale hunters' or 'whale killers' and said:

Wuramala, Gelurru, Dhurritjini, and Bapayili are followers of the Walitha'walitha.... In the teeming sea life they see a mirror reflection of [him]. Allah is the giver of bread to the people. The seafood is their bread. They believe in him. (McIntosh, 1995)

So in the literature we have observations of Macassans performing Islamic rites, knowledge that people other than Macassans also followed Walitha'walitha, and Yolngu ceremonies relating to Allah, but how they all come together is unclear. Yet even with such a small amount of data, one is able to speculate on similarities between the Wurramu ritual and recorded beliefs and practices associated with situations where Indigenous peoples have sought to come to terms with the power and material wealth of peoples who had come to dominate them.

In Aboriginal Australia, the All-Father beliefs of New South Wales and Victoria, 'Captain Cook' narratives of northern Australia, and also the Mulunga and Djinimin-Jesus cults of central and Western Australia, are perhaps the best known examples of this genre. Such beliefs, Erich Kolig (1992, p. 29) says, are part of a search by Aborigines for a new power stratagem necessary to cope with the breakdown in the status quo that accompanied contact with Europeans. In all cases, the perceived source of power of the 'Other' has become embedded in Aboriginal traditions as a means of affirming identity and rights in relation to the newcomers.

But just as the nature of relations between Yolngu and others has changed over time, so too has the nature of the beliefs associated with the existence and presence of the Other on Yolngu land. This makes analysis and comparative work somewhat difficult. For instance, a Christian mission was established at Galiwin'ku in 1942 and, as both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors have documented, there has been a major reshuffling of traditional Yolngu beliefs to allow for a place for Christianity. Walitha'walitha or Allah, in 1992, was referred to by Burrumarra and other senior Warramiri leaders as an "...angel of [the Christian] god," and while there was some overlap in meanings between the two, statements of belief in Walitha'walitha as a separate entity have all but disappeared from public use.

Yet while Elcho Island today is nominally a Christian community, this has not resulted in any change to the view that Yolngu have a privileged place in terms of the land. So while Christianity is a vehicle for the coming together of black and

white Australians, it is also the means by which Yolngu assert their rights as human beings and their dignity and autonomy as land owners. I suggest that this was also the case with belief in Walitha'walitha in the past. Yolngu utilized and transformed the teachings of Islamic missionaries and observations of their practices in the creation of an ancestral being which displays many of the characteristics of the Islamic god. This is the underlying theme of the Wurramu ritual, which I describe later.

# # #

The accepted picture of the Yolngu-Macassan past is that the visitors and Yolngu coexisted largely in peace and harmony, and while there was some impact on Yolngu ceremonial practices, no significant changes took place in the Yolngu way of life.

The fact that the trepang industry lasted 150 years seems to support the view that some form of agreement was reached between the parties over access to land and sea resources, but there is little evidence for this. For instance, the most detailed records of the trepang era are from the latter stages of the industry, that is, from the 1890s onwards, and they paint a picture of mistrust and violence as a feature of life in the trepang camps. (See Searcy, 1909 & 1911)

In an account based on experience at Groote Eylandt, Peter Worsley (1955) says that Aborigines today make judgements about Macassans by comparing what is remembered of their visits with present day relationships with Europeans. The Macassans would arrive on the coast each December with the trade winds, departing in early April when the winds began to blow from the south east. Aborigines saw the regular visits as posing no threat to their rights as landowners and, on this basis, Worsley suggests that many people now view the heroic times of trade and travel to and from Makassar aboard the sailing vessels as a sort of golden era. For the younger generation at Elcho Island this is also the case.

Burrumarra and other Yolngu leaders had no direct experience with Macassans and Islam themselves, and some of what they know may have been acquired in recent times. The knowledge that the leaders possess of the Macassan era comes from the stories handed down over the past 150 years, but primarily, Burrumarra said, from reflections upon the words in the song cycles.

In Burrumarra's 'inside' interpretations of the Macassan past, Walitha'walitha plays an all-important role. While most adults at Elcho Island know that Islam is the religion of the Macassans, only some older informants appear to be aware of the Walitha'walitha-Allah link. More commonly, Walitha'walitha is seen as a 'personal familiar' for certain Yirritja men and women. John Rudder (1993), for example, quotes one informant as saying:

[Walitha'walitha] are children on Yirritja shoulder, something like Timor or Macassar magic.

Of its physical appearance, informants said to me that this 'personal familiar' Walitha'walitha was male, young, and had no hair. A lot of people said that it was very small, not more than half a metre high, while others said that it could fit in

one's pocket. In some cases, Walitha'walitha is said to wear white cloth from head to foot and to call the Yolngu 'owner' Bapa (father).

In describing Walitha'walitha, one Yolngu said that these little creatures were the 'magic children of Balanda'. They send a message through the pillow to Yolngu if someone has died. All agreed that a person has Walitha'walitha with them at all times as a guide and protector, and these beings are owned by specific individuals, and they are passed on to family members upon death, on the instruction of the owner.

The 'personal familiar' side of Walitha'walitha belief is but one aspect of this complex being. According to Warramiri clan members, it is also a universal entity that looks down on Yirritja lands from the heavens above. It is associated with certain healing rituals in which the left hand is used to remove pain from the sufferer, and has a number of totemic affiliations. It is linked to the whale, to the red clouds of the sunset (Walung or Djapana), the turtle egg (a symbol of sharing), the bow and arrow (Bininydjirri), and the Bunaka or Ganarri tree from which the bow and arrow was made. (Note also that this last item of technology was not used by Yolngu, but they would have seen it during their travels in Indonesia or in contact with visiting Macassans)

Walitha'walitha's significance was understood by Burrumarra to be all-embracing. It represents intelligence and a high order of living. He said:

Yolngu have two bosses, Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha. Each limits the other. Walitha'walitha is Allah. He dwells on top. If it is not the holy spirit, it is an angel of god. Walitha'walitha tells us of right and wrong. It's sort of a sixth sense. It can judge a situation. It tells you what is going on in people's minds, like a warning.

Of the Walitha'walitha belief, Burrumarra added:

The Earth is full of bad. In the Garamat (heaven) is good and bad. When we die we go to on top, to a world of beautiful things, colours, and the bad spirit comes down. All goes up. The shooting star give us this message that someone is to die and the bad is coming down. Walitha'walitha will have his pleasure in the spirit of the dead.

Where is that place? It is on top. The flag flies there for us. We call this place Murrayilyil, the paradise. But there will be a time in the future when all the heavenly things will come to the Earth and it will be one.

At another time, he said:

We do not know what happens after death or where the paradise of lovely things is. There was much discussion about this in the past. All we know is the bunggul (ceremony). It is about honour. Walitha'walitha is concerned with truth. He has been appointed to us for this. He helps when something is wrong. He advises of danger, and gives a warning on behaviour. When a

person dies, the spirit is dealt with, so it is gone, at peace. If death was caused by new situations, guns, knives or if it was caused by the Grokman, then we give it something extra [i.e. a Wurramu post will be constructed].

According to Burrumarra, Walitha'walitha came down to Warramiri land (or was sent by god) as his role was to "...judge the judgements" of the Yolngu and to protect them from wrong for at that time, both in the Macassan era and, in Burrumarra's understanding, at the beginning of time, the people were killing themselves:

People were marrying into the wrong Mala. Bad was coming up, mocking the people. So Walitha'walitha came down to sort it all out.

# # #

Burrumarra said that the initial effects of Macassan contact were devastating and the outcome was represented in the mythology of the Wurramu or Grokman, which is comprehensible only in terms of Walitha'walitha. To come to an understanding of Burrumarra's perspective, we need to look critically at the view that the fundamental nature of Yolngu society was not changed by contact with Macassans. It is true but trivial to say that Yolngu came to an understanding that there were other peoples in the world and that these peoples followed different laws. What we need to appreciate is the ways in which first contact was rationalized by Yolngu, and how it impacted their cosmology and lifeways.

There was an immense power imbalance between Yolngu and others, and contact with this technologically advanced population from Makassar turned the Yolngu world 'upside down', in Burrumarra's words. One only needs to imagine the situation where several boats, each carrying perhaps thirty men, landed on an isolated beach where a few Yolngu were camped. A typical dwelling area would have had a population of maybe two senior men, their wives and children, as well as various affines and the aged. The Yolngu were totally outnumbered. In addition, the visitors had possessions which were greatly desired – sailing canoes allowing for long-distance sea travel along the coast, cloth, knives, metal axes, and most significantly, alcohol and tobacco. For Yolngu thinkers it would have undoubtedly led to speculation as to why Yolngu had to work for the Macassans in order to secure the things they wanted, and why, in many ways, they were beginning to see themselves as being impoverished in relation to, even dependent upon, the newcomers. As a consequence, previously unchallenged understandings about the cosmos would have come into question, as must have the Yolngu leaders' authority to direct, through ceremonial means, the affairs of the world.

If we look to similar happenings from around the world, it might have led to a view that the people themselves must have done something wrong at the beginning of time and were living out the consequences of their actions. The end result was that a particular series of historical events came to be seen as having their foundation in the Dreaming or creational era.

Thus while the origin of beliefs in Walitha'walitha and the Wurramu date from what Burrumarra termed the Murrnginy era, a period of great struggles between white and black at the 'beginning of time', it was probably in the late 1700s or early 1800s. In Burrumarra's understanding, in these times of 'fire', people would fight among themselves and even kill one another, as well as Macassans, in order to get the things that they wanted, and jealousy, greed, and hatred reached dramatic proportions. While there is no explicit talk of visitors killing Yolngu, it can be assumed in some cases. On the whole, however, the atrocities were said to have been perpetrated by law-breakers and their victims were described in the same way, both white and black. These were 'military' times, Burrumarra said, and a period of unsurpassed instability.

Insight into the atrocities comes from detailed Yolngu knowledge of Macassan weaponry, and what it could do to a person. Berndt and Berndt (1954, p. 47), for example, give descriptions of knives such as the Djaking or Kris which were used for stabbing, and other specialty items used for decapitation or for tearing open the stomach for the removal of entrails.

In a headlong desire for material gain, Burrumarra said that Yolngu would forget gurrutu (kinship), forget ceremonial obligations, and indeed, who they were. The 'spirit of the dead' was said to land on them from above and take control of their mind and body. Known as the Wurramu or Grokman, this evil force would turn them away from an orderly existence.

A definition of a Grokman, Burrumarra said, was when "...a lie became truth, and truth a lie." These were times of mayhem, and it is my understanding, following discussions with Burrumarra, that the disruptive forces tearing society apart became personified in a range of Dreaming-inspired 'evil' templates. Thus we have the liar or double-crosser spirit, the robber, and the murderer. These 'crooks', as the Berndts referred to them, were said to be based around the activities of real people who had lived in Yolngu territory in the past. There were:

Balala – "greedy, a double-crosser"

Baluka – "robber"

Balulu – "double-crosser, a killer, a bad person"

Bakurra – "a Grokamn, sometimes female"

Bawurramu – "murderer"

Buwakurru – "a Wurramu, perhaps a Grokman, perhaps not"

Djukutjuku – "capable of any crime, will steal money, boat, clothes, a husband or wife"

Gayingdingu – "murderer, a Grokman"

Manaanggan – "a Grokman, a robber"

The chief of them all was Bawurramu, who represented the "...head and wishes of the people in Birrinydji's time... the chief Grokman and the head of the dirty business," Burrumarra said.

Walker (1988, pp. 32-33) says that the majority of these words are variations of the Macassarese words pangurra and palakka, which both mean robber and thief. Manaanggan, on the other hand, is drawn from the expression menangkan, a Macassarese word meaning to help to win.

The types of problems introduced into Yolngu lives in this period were not restricted to the Macassan era. They are an ongoing consequence of Yolngu contact with outsiders.

Today, the Wurramu or Grokman is roughly equated with the Devil or evil, and Walitha'walitha is associated with the Christian god, and many of the stories of the latter bodies of law have become entwined.

Burrumarra, in the following quote, showed how the Grokam or 'spirit of the dead' worked, and still works today, as he described the role of Walitha'walitha in restoring order. He said:

Bakurra tries to make peace. He is a Warramiri, Gumatj, Wangurri, Dhalwangu or Birrkili Yolngu, only Yirritja. He sees Balulu, the killer, doing the wrong thing and he intercepts. He sees his countrymen with knife and gun wounds and becomes a Grokman himself. He kills Balulu. The Wurramu enters people, changes them, making them break laws and spread disorder and hatred. Yolngu can be Balulu or Bakurra. There is no other meaning for these words. It is Walitha'walitha's job to take the bad memory out of Yolngu... to take all the robbers and crooks away with him. To remove this bad spirit can take years. The person with the Grokman in him is a real burden to a community. Walitha'walitha sorts out the bad, makes them good, brings them into line. He brings to that person the spirit of the nation, for the nation, only. He brings unity.

The turmoil brought about by deception, theft or murder, is an ever-present threat to social harmony and is depicted not only in the narratives of the Grokman, but in the related ceremonies of the Wurramu 'crook', 'stealing' or 'collection' man, which as Berndt and Berndt (1954) say, came under the general heading of Walitha'walitha.

A carved post representing the Wurramu described above was often constructed in the performance of the Wurramu ceremony. It is placed on the grave and acts as both a marker and, as Burrumarra said:

...it focuses evil into one place only and [following the performance of the ceremony] it is gone, perhaps to another Wurramu somewhere else.

Donald Thomson (1949, p. 61) says the post represents the spirit of the dead, and it guards the grave with the great knives that it brandishes. Berndt and Berndt (1989, p. 214) contend that such sculptures are of foreign origin. They write:

The [Wurramu] figures... are known as [Bakurra] (the female variety) or more generally as [Walitha'walitha]. They came from Macassar in the Celebes [Sulawesi]. The [Wurramu] is a 'crook', 'collection', or 'stealing' man.

The [carved Wurramu] figure... is possibly derived from following customs relating to Macassan burials, as told by Aborigines who had witnessed such incidents during their visits to the East Indies Islands, and as witnessed on the Australian mainland.

Some variations of these sculptures include the head and shoulders of a man or woman, and Macknight (1976, p. 314) says that such examples have no equivalent in Macassan sculpture. He suggests that they represent a reworking of an introduced theme, and that one must look to Yolngu beliefs rather than to Indonesia for a deeper understanding of their significance.

Burrumarra, in his account of the meaning of these artefacts, said that:

People may have a dream about the dead and then this post, with the head of Bawurramu. It represents life on Earth, for this is where the Grokman are... Only on top can changes be made... As a burial post, people remember the dead, what they had, what they did, and what they were capable of. The Wurramu completed things, closed it up, settled matters.

Of the markings on the Wurramu post, he said:

We never tell anyone about the meaning of the markings. It is too big, too sacred. It represents the belief of the Warramiri before the coming of Christianity. Wurramu is for big ideas, and goes into the grave with the skeleton, and then we say goodbye.

Though representing a Grokman or killer, the Wurramu post is simultaneously an image of the highest things, Burrumarra said. It is at once symbolic of Bakurra, the 'crook', and of salvation in Walitha'walitha.

On the construction of Wurramu posts, Burrumarra said that they had to be made of wood so that they could fade away with time:

Walitha'walitha is not of this world, but the heavens, in the Garamat. The Wurramu stands for that law. Wurramu is not rock. That does not go away. They could not be of stone for this is associated with Lany'tjun and the whale and so on. Wurramu is in the image of Walitha'walitha. Its form is Birriny-dji but its purpose is Walitha'walitha.

The possession of a body of law such as that encompassed by Walitha'walitha and the Wurramu shows how readily the Yolngu negotiated change. As Burrumarra said:

In those days we said that if heaven has this wish for us, if it wants it this way, then we must follow it.

In other areas there was no salvation. A number of Dhuwa and Yirritja groups, including the Yalukal and Girrkirr (Rika) of Elcho Island, and the Wurrambil Golpa of the Wessels, all closely related to the Warramiri, died out early in the twentieth century and it is said that the "Grokman mob got them." Lessons

from the Yirritja moiety and the Warramiri clan in particular were therefore seen to provide an understanding of what was happening to the Yolngu as a whole from the Macassan period onwards.

# # #

The most significant underlying feature of the 1996 dance exchange with the Macassans was the fact that one of the Wurramu rituals, which is sometimes performed in Yirritja moiety funerals, was first performed by the early Macassans for the Yolngu dead at Cape Wilberforce, in Warramiri territory, at some unknown point in the past. It was during the Murrnginy era, Burrumarra said, and hundreds of Yolngu had lost their lives, and the Wurramu ritual was performed by the visitors as a tribute to them in memory of their historical partnership. Burrumarra, reflecting on this sacred memory said that the Yolngu "...took this as their standard." The Macassans had sympathetically looked upon the fate of his people and the upheaval that came in the wake of the Indonesian presence. Burrumarra said that the ceremony was seen to be part of the 'code of honour' of Birrinydji, and an indication that Yolngu and Macassans really were followers of the one law, that of Walitha'walitha.

While Berndt and Berndt (1954) acknowledge that this ceremony is owned by certain Yirritja clans who had first contact with the visitors, they have not associated Walitha'walitha with Allah or acknowledged a possible Yolngu re-working of an introduced theme. They see it as a direct borrowing. Yet, as Burrumarra said, even though the Wurramu dance is directly linked to the presence of early Macassans, it comes from Birrinydji, who would do the Wurramu bunggul and warn everyone not to fool around and be serious. When the mast was up and the flag flying, he would do the Djambayang dance.

What the Yolngu leaders took to Makassar was a modified and shortened version of the Wurramu mortuary ritual, which has been described in the literature in some detail. The Berndts (in Elkin, Berndt and Berndt 1950, p. 55), who witnessed this ceremony in the 1940s, say for instance:

The actual ceremony takes place during the daytime in the main camp. The marker of the Wurramu [post] has attached to its shoulders long Yirritja bird-feathered strings... As most traditionally designed Wurramu are carved without arms, these strings represent the arms... When the object and its feathers are being sung by the artist... word spreads that the 'crook' man [Grokman] is coming, and there is great excitement. People in the camp know what the songs mean, and run to hide their clothing, spears... and tobacco; for Wurramu is a 'stealing' man, ready to pick up anything lying around... When every camp has been visited, all the objects the Wurramu has taken are piled up in the middle of the camp. The figure itself is firmly planted in the ground... and then the artist [and] his companions... begin to sing part of the Macassan song cycle. They sing of the Wurramu, of the Macassan wharfs,

of the rice fields, money, the making of iron, the cutting of timber, the making of proas, of women gathering lily roots... and the like. All the colourful life of an East Indian town is related in these poetic Aboriginal songs which are composed on traditional lines by Aborigines who in earlier days travelled to the northern islands.

In another article, Berndt and Berndt (1954, p. 61) describe the Macassan ritual from which they say the Aboriginal 'collection' variation was based. They write:

When a Macassan dies, a djira grave yard is made, and a hole dug in the ground. After the burial, the officiating Macassan sings; the others wait quietly, and when he has finished they all reply djilaji! djilaji! Then the Wurramu post is placed on the grave; it is carved to represent the dead man, and symbolises his spirit. All the Macassans dance for him in a special way, bending forward in a ring with their [backs] to the post, eyes closed and heads bowed. They then open their eyes and sing; and this continues for several hours.

The sequence of songs identified by Warramiri and Gumatj clan leaders that were shared with the Macassans in 1996 was as follows:

1. Wurramu [Walitha'walitha] – spirit of the dead
2. Nganadji – alcohol
3. Yiki – knife
4. Djagura – boxing with the hands and Lanytja, boxing with the feet
5. Warraliny – smoke from tobacco or opium pipes
6. Djarrung – calico, flag
7. Wayathul – the cry of the scrub fowl
8. Lunggurma – north wind
9. Djapana – red cloud, the abode of Walitha'walitha

The words of the songs are a complex mix of Yolngu matha and 'old' Macassan, and are not easily accessible. They are composed of an 'inside' language and keys to deeper understanding are given as a privilege by older to younger men in ritual settings. Having myself witnessed the ceremony on a number of occasions, it is apparent that the dances are of external origin, resembling in form and movement those dances associated with south-east Asia. They are also quite dramatic and depict, among other things, the slaughter of men and women by the sword. Some depict men rubbing their hands together preparing a cigarette, others have men engaged in a drunken brawl while still attempting to manage complex arm and leg dance movements, much to the amusement of onlookers.

In their (1954) text, *Arnhem Land: Its History and Its People* the Berndts included a charcoal drawing of the Wurramu ceremony they witnessed. They did not, however, comment in any detail about its significance. Burrumarra said that the Wurramu bunggul is about one's life and who it belongs to:

There are a lot of songs about sailing, eating, cooking; all come under Birrinydji. It represents the land of each Mala. These dances come under the sword, but Walitha'walitha overlooks the whole procedure. Walitha'walitha is there, on top, looking out to see who killed one of our people. The law is a life for a life. One person dies because of another.

The dead spirit after the Grokman has killed them can still be a Grokman. The dead can still harm the Yolngu. The Wurramu bunggul finishes this with Walitha'walitha's help. Walitha'walitha will deliver the bad ones to god. Remove them all from where they should not be. He collects the good and the bad. This is the meaning of the 'collection' bunggul. The bunggul is about the passage of the soul to heaven, the rich place. When the lifestyle is followed and problems arise, the answers will come down from above. When the Wurramu bunggul is done properly, Walitha'walitha will reveal advanced knowledge of understanding and purpose to the headman.

Burrumarra said that these dances were very powerful:

We thought that when we first saw the bunggawa [Macassan leader] do them. We wanted it for ourselves. In Birrinydji's ceremony the flag is planted. This is the way the law is carried. The flag represents honour and unity of the Yolngu under Birrinydji and for Birrinydji. When the flag flies it symbolises that unity, that oneness that the bunggawa achieved for us. There can be happiness, peace and riches, and a long life for the Yolngu.

Today the Yolngu perform these same dances and when the flag is raised, it is said that the bunggawa (in this case the leader of the Warramiri clan), achieves oneness. This is cryptic, but by all accounts the ceremony is about an idealized unity between all peoples through their joint association with a particular body of law, that is, Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha, but it is also concerned with salvation. Disruptive forces had torn Yolngu lives apart and adherence to Walitha'walitha's law brought the promise of a return to the status quo and, in train, dreams of an idyllic future in the hereafter. Burrumarra said that the purpose of the bunggul was to show people's desire for Walitha'walitha. He said that in the old days, everyone wanted this communication with god, but lamented that this was not the case today.

# # #

While inspiration for the trip to Makassar came from outside Yolngu circles, Yolngu interest in the project was strong. In 1988, a traditional wooden prau was constructed in South Sulawesi and sailed to northern Australia as part of the Australian bicentennial celebrations. Impromptu Yolngu dances drawn from the Birrinydji corpus that were performed on the beach at Galiwin'ku were a strong indication of interest for the project. Also, Yolngu groups had been regular visitors to Makassar since the mid-1980s.

However, to take a ceremonial sequence associated with Yirritja moiety funerals and turn it into a spectacle designed to reunite people is curious. It is especially so because of the Islamic connections, for most Yolngu at Elcho Island identify themselves as Christian. Yet many details of the Wurramu and Walitha'walitha beliefs are not widely known, and Burrumarra freely admitted that they were concealed by his generation as a means of promoting Christianity. The two religions were seen to be close to one another and the possibility of confusion was considerable.

While the younger generation may be idealizing contact, as Peter Worsley's findings suggest, this is not the case for the older generation of Yolngu. There was also no evidence of hero worship, as Donald Thomson's account suggested. Even though the dancing actions in the Wurramu ritual are known to have been inspired by those performed by Macassans in the past, there is no suggestions that Macassans own the laws on which these dances are based. Burrumarra clearly stated that the deeper significance of this body of law is for the Yolngu and any suggestion that Birrinydji originated with or was affiliated solely with the Macassans was denied. Indeed, Burrumarra said that the Wurramu ceremony was as much about local rights in relation to the Other as it was about the passage of the soul to the afterworld. He said:

When you are in someone else's country, you must do things the way they do them. If not, you are in danger. Birrinydji's Wurramu dance is a danger one. It is about people going to other places where they don't belong.

A good indicator of the separation of Macassans and Yolngu in terms of 'inside' views on the law that unites them, comes from interpretations of the significance of a separate song series known as Wathi Katika, which was also acquired from the Macassans. According to Burrumarra the songs refer to black and white people working together to pull up the sails and the mast but he insisted that there is "...no law here. Macassan talk and action is cheap!" By contrast, the Warramiri clan owns the 'inside' Birrinydji dances, including the Djambayang, Lil'gerun and Lengu, which refer to a similar theme. These rituals are also about black and white men working together, pulling on the boat's anchor rope and slackening off, and then pulling hard once again, etc. Similarities aside, one is 'inside' law and the other is not. As Burrumarra said, "We are soldiers for Birrinydji. We are not soldiers for trepang!" Walitha'walitha, he said, was only present when Birrinydji's bunggul was performed. Macassan songs and ceremonies do not have the same spiritual content.

The Wurramu bunggul appears to have both 'inside' and 'outside' aspects. It is symbolic of an historical association with the Other but it also embodies a paradox. The songs and sites of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha are about a partnership in law between Yolngu and Macassans, but they also function to affirm Yolngu identity and rights in relation to the Other.

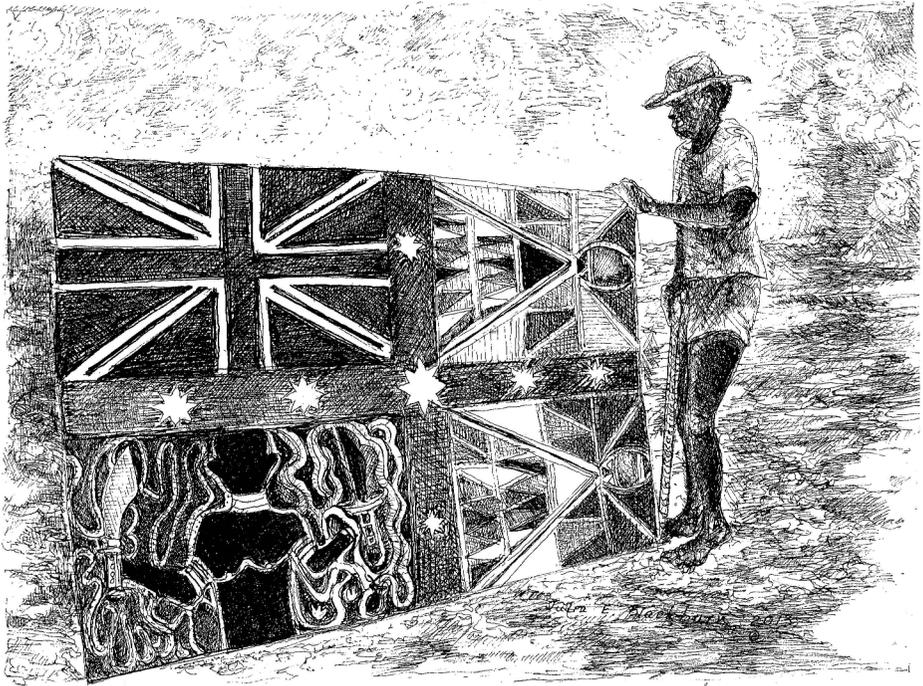
Despite the recorded fact that relations between Yolngu and Macassans deteriorated considerably in the late nineteenth century, Yolngu at Elcho Island looked forward with great excitement to this reunion with their old trading partners in Makassar in 1996. As Burrumarra had said:

We don't know for how long the Macassans have been coming here. They are a part of our history and we are in theirs.

Yolngu understood that laws bound the groups as one but the extent to which they were reciprocated was unclear. Macassan history over the past 300 years has been turbulent and it is unknown if they still possess the old rituals which they once shared with Yolngu. This was but one reason for the interest in the project from the Macassan side.

So while there is definitely evidence of Islamic influence in Yolngu belief in *Walitha'walitha* and in aspects of the *Wurramu* ritual, it is not appropriate to say that Yolngu in north-east Arnhem Land were or are followers of Islam. Rather, they absorbed and creatively adapted aspects of Islam to suit their own needs. *Walitha'walitha* is but one body of law among many others in the Yolngu repertoire.

Past belief in *Walitha'walitha* allowed the Yolngu to deal with the social upheaval that had come in the wake of contact with the trepangers. In the 1990s, this same law was the basis for a secular exchange with Macassans. A historical association of long duration was celebrated. The Islamic component was not highlighted and the negative aspects of contact were downplayed. All references to the use of alcohol as a trade item were removed. The fact that these two peoples shared the one ceremony was highlighted as a means of reviving relations, and the stage is now set for many more collaborative ventures.



**8:1 The Ship's Mast: The Legacy of the Macassan Presence in Northern Australia**

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 1999, 'The Ship's Mast. The legacy of the Macassan Presence in Northern Australia,' *The Beagle. Records of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory*, vol. 15, pp. 155-165)

The foremost authority on the history of trepanning in Aboriginal Australia, Campbell Macknight, argues that while the influence of Macassans on Aboriginal people was quite extensive, it did not transform the fundamental basis of their societies. (Macknight 1972, p. 316 & 1986, p. 71) This minimalist conclusion was open to review, however, with Macknight (1986, pp. 71-72) calling for further research into:

1. The effects on Aborigines of the thoughts and practices of Macassans, both in Arnhem Land and during their sojourns in various Asian ports
2. How particular elements of Macassan culture have been localized by Aboriginal groups, taking on new meaning in vastly different social and economic contexts
3. How the memory of the trepang industry has been transformed and put to use in north Australian politics

These three research topics have guided my extended examination of Yolngu accounts of the trepang industry and in this chapter, I focus attention on one item of material culture, the sacred Yolngu mast and flag, in order to shed more light on the above.

On remote beaches and isolated headlands, in the middle of bustling Arnhem Land settlements, in cemeteries or at places where rituals have been held, one will notice tall bamboo poles with strips of cloth attached. In the major communities one also encounters a variation on this theme - a replica of a ship's mast - a flagpole complete with elaborately decorated hand-painted flags. Both of these items of Yolngu material culture refer to the Wangarr (or Dreaming) entities Birinydji and Walitha'walitha. The bamboo pole and flag is associated with funerary rites and at the cemetery at Galiwin'ku there are perhaps a hundred in various stages of dilapidation. The ship's mast, by contrast, is associated with clan leaders of the Warramiri, Dhalwangu and Gumatj clans. Most commonly they are located at places where these influential elders deliberated the politics of the day. The mast

stands at least three metres high and is painted with distinctive black, white, yellow and red triangles, associating it with the Yirritja moiety. At Galiwin'ku, the Warramiri mast is located where a former Warramiri leader once lived. A Gumatj mast stands alongside the grave of a deceased Gumatj elder.

The mast and flag, I argue, is the most significant and enduring material legacy of contact with Macassan trepangers who ventured onto the northern Australian coast from the mid-1700 until the early twentieth century, and a symbol of the laws that united Yolngu and these outsiders.

I use the word 'Macassan' in this chapter in reference to trepang fishermen including the Bugis, Boutonese, Sama-Bajau and others from the Sultanates of Gowa and Tallo sailing out of the port of Makassar. The crews of these Australia-bound fishing vessels also included men from Tanimbar, Kai, Timor and Papua. My use of the word Macassan follows Yolngu usage and refers to all Indonesians associated with the industry.

In the ethnographic record, an interpretation of the significance of the ship's mast (and pole) recorded by the anthropologist Lloyd Warner in the 1920s has been repeated verbatim by scholars. The mast and flag, it is reported, symbolizes the departure of the soul of a deceased Yolngu who is to sail away to the mythical land of the dead, just as the Macassan prau would depart for Macassar at the end of each trepanging season. My research has shown that this is but a small 'outside' fragment of the true significance of the mast and flag in the worldview of members of clans like the Warramiri.

All Yolngu have some memory of Macassans through stories passed down from generation to generation, but in the 1980s it was only David Burrumarra who could speak the truth of this past as it was known from the 'inside. Other senior Yolngu men and women would defer to his interpretations.

Warramiri oral history details the gift in 1906 of a mast and flag to Burrumarra's father by Daeng Rangka, the last Macassan captain to visit Arnhem Land. For Yolngu this was interpreted as the reenactment of a Dreaming incident whereby the ancestral being Birrinydji planted his flag at Dholtji at the beginning of time. Daeng Rangka's mast was to replace an old decaying one at the Warramiri homeland, which itself was a replica of a large metal pole which had once stood on that same site in Birrinydji's day. Described as being like a chimney associated with iron smelting, the mast stood for Birrinydji's law, or the new world order imposed on Yolngu following first contact - an order that turned the Yolngu world upside down. According to David Burrumarra, visitors to Arnhem Land over the ages, on seeing Birrinydji's flag flying on the beach, would recognize an ally, and know that the Yolngu were custodians of laws that united them from times past.

When anthropologists encountered Birrinydji ceremonies in the first half of the twentieth century they witnessed, in the bodily movements of performers, a powerful demonstration of Yolngu authority as owners of land. When Yolngu recreate the planting of the mast and assert Birrinydji's dominion over the land,

they swirl Birrinydji's swords overhead, and do a quick-step as if propelling Birrinydji's boat through a torrid sea. As Burrumarra advised, the purpose of the ceremony is to "...show the Yolngu," that is, to make it apparent that the Yolngu have an important ceremonial role to play in maintaining a law from which ostensibly whites also draw their power.

Burrumarra would say that "...the mast and flag is the way the law is carried," which suggests that they were perhaps placed on Arnhem Land shores in a way that is reminiscent of the conquering English hoisting the Union Jack in Sydney Harbour 1788, but it is not straight forward. Burrumarra said that Macassans visiting Arnhem Land shores would have acknowledged the old mast and flag at Dholtji, which had then been in Warramiri possession for generations, and would have conferred with the Yolngu about their plans.

What were these laws that united Yolngu and Macassans and is there any evidence in Sulawesi for similar mast-flag beliefs?

Given the rapid rise of Makassar as a major centre of the Islamic faith in the early 1500s, and the Islamization of all of South Sulawesi, it is not surprising that today there is scant evidence of ceremonial mast and flag beliefs and practices comparable to those found in north-east Arnhem Land. In East Timor, however, Elizabeth Traube (1986) has recorded narratives which are somewhat similar in that the flagpole is a paramount symbol in discussions pertaining to colonization. For the Mambai tribe, for example, the mast and flag tell the story of a lost brotherhood or unity between indigenous 'black' Timorese and 'white' Europeans. The return of the young brother in the form of the colonial Portuguese was a mixed blessing for the elder brother (Indigenous Timorese), who remained. The mast and flag is a metaphor for complimentary governance, describing a division between temporal power (Portuguese flag) and spiritual authority (Timorese pole). The recorded narratives describe the tension between affirmation of the colonial order and the moral condemnation of Portuguese rulers who disregarded or were ignorant of the real significance of this tradition.

The Arnhem Land mast and flag, from the perspective of Burrumarra and other members of the Warramiri clan, has a very similar significance and thus speaks strongly to the idea of how the momentous historical events unfolding in Indonesia in the 1500s were first interpreted by Macassans (and Timorese) and then adopted by Yolngu in ways relevant to their own religious framework.

For Yolngu, the mast refers specifically to the body of the all-conquering Dreaming figure named Birrinydji. The origin of this word is from a term for the colonial Portuguese ('Franks'). Birrinydji is also known by Yolngu as Gombaniya which is a Bahasa Indonesian term for the Dutch East India Company. The flag, by contrast, is symbolic of the realm of Walitha'walitha, a Yolngu Dreaming entity in the image of Allah, and of the continued life of deceased Yolngu in a heavenly paradise.

Michael Taussig (1993), in his text, *Mimesis and Alterity*, speaks of the magical power of replication, the image affected by what it is an image of, wherein the

representation shares in or takes power from the represented. In terms of the narratives pertaining to the ship's mast, we see Yolngu being conversant with sacred laws considered to underpin non-Aboriginal wealth and influence. The Dreaming figure Birrinydji (guided by Walitha'walitha or Allah) is believed to have sanctioned the emerging relations between Yolngu and newcomers, including Japanese and Europeans. Birrinydji would bring the Yolngu up-to-date, Burrumarra advised, but over time things went wrong. Addiction to the products of trade engendered bitterness and relegated Yolngu to a position of dependency. Their rightful status as land owners was threatened until Walitha'walitha (Allah) intervened to save the people.

So in one symbolic complex – the mast and flag - there are references to an unchanging Dreaming from which power may be ritually drawn, images of dependency upon, and domination by, outsiders, and redemption through belief in an All-Being held in common with outsiders.

The extent to which this Dreaming narrative remains of relevance in the intercultural arena is best understood in the light of Francesca Merlan's (1998) discussion of continuity and change from a southern Arnhem Land perspective. She argues that the shift in Government policy towards Aborigines from one of assimilation to self-determination, from the imposition upon Aborigines of alien values to seeking to elicit from them fixed ideas concerning tradition, has engendered imitation or mimesis on the part of the present generation. In short, Merlan says that representations of Aborigines made most powerfully by non-Aborigines have come to affect who and what Aborigines consider themselves to be. But does not the reverse also apply? Can the revelation by Yolngu of sacred narratives which incorporate representations of non-Aborigines (as in the myths of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha) be considered a strategy for positively influencing the course of intercultural relations in favor of the Yolngu?

In the 1980s, Victoria River Aborigines believed that by telling the world about their complex history of representations of non-Aborigines as immoral and imperialistic (as being like 'Captain Cook'), non-Aborigines would learn that they were morally bound to live up to an ideal envisioned in the Dreaming narratives. (Rose, 1992) Similarly, in north-east Arnhem Land, followers of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha anticipated a time to come when non-Aborigines would understand the full significance of traditional Yolngu belief and learn to live by the precepts of Yolngu law. From a Warramiri standpoint, lessons from the mast and flag permeate discussions about human rights and a proposed treaty between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, for they speak to a deeply held belief that non-Aborigines could never totally dominate Yolngu because white and black were united in a belief in God - symbolized by the flag. If there was to be reconciliation in Australia, non-Aborigines would have to acknowledge (and remember) that their power and influence over Yolngu came from a Yolngu Dreaming - that symbolized by the mast.

## 8:2 A Treaty with the Macassans? Burrumarra and the Dholtj Ideal

(Originally published as two separate papers, now combined here: 1. McIntosh IS 2006, 'A Treaty with the Macassans? Burrumarra and the Dholtj Ideal,' *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 153-72) 2. McIntosh IS 2008, 'Pre-Macassans at Dholtji? Exploring one of north-east Arnhem Land's great conundrums, in *Strangers on the Shore. Early Coastal Contacts in Australia*, eds P Veth, P Sutton, & M Neale, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, pp.165-180)

"I have not told you the story of Dholtji. The whole story. But maybe you already know it. Look at the way I act." (David Burrumarra to Ian McIntosh, Elcho Island, 1989)

### Abstract

*From my lengthy conversations with Burrumarra in the 1980s, it was evident that the memory of prolonged contact with visitors from south-east Asia was influencing the ways that Yolngu were fighting for sea rights, mineral rights, and a treaty with non-Aborigines. Burrumarra's priority in those years was in bridging the gap between Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion and building strong modern indigenous communities that integrated the best from both Yolngu and Balanda worlds. The signing of a treaty was integral to his vision. In this chapter, I examine David Burrumarra's claim that ceremonies linked to a Dreaming Macassan (Birrinydji) united Yolngu and the very earliest visitors to Arnhem Land. Could these partnerships be considered treaties? To answer this question, I examine the societal collapse and dispersal of Burrumarra's Warramiri clan at Dholtji in the 1800s as a consequence of the Macassan encounter. For Burrumarra, the memory of a former golden age of partnership was instrumental in facilitating clan resurgence at a new locale, Elcho Island, in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The Yolngu vision of intercultural diplomacy is based on the notion of these original treaties: It mirrors the fundamental principle of intermarrying moieties, bringing together the very best from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds, and is as relevant today as during the heyday of the trepangers.*

### Treaties or sacred alliances?

In the late 1970s, the Aboriginal Treaty Committee called upon the Australian Federal Government to recognise the status and rights of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in a treaty or covenant. An advertisement in the National Times (25 August, p. 13) declared that it was time to "...strike away the past and make a just settlement together."

Following a lengthy period of consultation, the National Aboriginal Conference endorsed the Yolngu notion of 'makarrata' for such a settlement. Makarrata was a peace-making ceremony that called for a male lawbreaker to run the gauntlet between lines of spear-throwing men. If he survived, a stone blade was thrust into his thigh as a signal that hostilities had ended. Even as a metaphor, however, the idea

of makarrata never caught on at a national level (Rowse 1999). It conjured up the image of ongoing warfare between Aborigines and non-Aborigines and this was in conflict with the prevailing view that Australia was peacefully settled, and not taken by conquest.

Despite the disbanding of both the Aboriginal Treaty Committee and the National Aboriginal Conference in the 1980s, scholarly debate continues to surround the call for a treaty in Australia (see, for example, Brennan et al. 2005; the ATNS Database Project; the 2002 Murdoch University Database of Treaty-Advancing Reconciliation). Whether or not the First Australians entered into negotiated settlements with Indonesian fishermen in pre-colonial times has received some attention in this debate. For several authors, including Langton and Palmer (2004), it is supposed that treaties were a feature of this enduring relationship, but the evidence so far presented is limited and unpersuasive.

The British coloniser felt no compelling need to negotiate treaties with Aborigines. Indeed, as early as 1837, official British policy expressly recommended against officially negotiated treaties as being inevitably unequal and disadvantageous to the indigenous side. (Robert Reece pers. comm. 2005) Was the situation different with the Macassans?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a treaty as a contract between two or more states, relating to peace, truce, alliance, commerce or other international relation. It is also the document embodying such a contract, one that is formally signed by plenipotentiaries appointed by the government of each state. According to Williams (1997), however, a treaty need not necessarily be committed to paper to be nevertheless still formal, recognised and respected. When there is a convergence of interests for the realisation of certain goals, and terms have been negotiated and are mutually binding (as in a confederacy or between moieties), the parties can be said to be bound by principles of honour and trust. (Pitt-Rivers 1966) In the great history of indigenous diplomacy, for example, Native Americans can speak of smoking a peace pipe, burying the hatchet, linking arms together, eating from the one bowl with one spoon, clearing a path of all obstacles to peace, the gift of wampum and so on as examples of sacred alliances or 'treaties'. (Williams 1997, p. 36) Iroquois could also draw inspiration from the Great Law of Peace or the Covenant Chain as the foundation of bonds of trust with constituent tribes and also newcomers that should have lasted for ever.

If the Great Spirit or Master of Breath had ordained that non-Indians would flourish on the land bestowed upon the First Peoples, then it was right that the Indians would at least consider the ways in which they might live together and respect each other's collective inheritance. (Williams 1997)

Yolngu elder, the late David Burrumarra, rarely used the word 'treaty'. Rather, he would speak movingly of sacred alliances that were a feature of a golden age of partnership at the 'beginning of time' with the very earliest of the Indonesian visitors, whom he called the Bayini and also the whale-hunting Wuramala. Unparalleled material wealth and prestige is believed to have been the

hallmark of this golden age. Burrumarra described the visitors as being of ‘one blood’ or close relatives. All drew inspiration from a single source, the Dreaming Macassan known as Birrinydji. Narratives pertaining to the Bayini and Wuramala loomed large in my discussions with Burrumarra between 1986 and 1993 on whether Yolngu sea rights and control over mineral-rich lands should be enshrined in a nationwide document of reconciliation. Here, I critically review the legacy of these early Macassans in search of treaties.

### **The past in the present**

In 1988, Warramiri elders requested a sacred site survey of their homeland at Dholji as a protective measure against mining activities, illegal fishing, and tourism operations. The Northern Territory Sacred Sites Authority’s response was immediate. Major Dreaming sites including the place of Birrinydji, the king, were identified and recorded in the register of sacred places. Sign boards warning the general public to keep out were dispatched by barge to the nearest landing site, but they were never erected on Dholtji’s deserted windswept beaches. The elders were torn between the need to protect sites, and yet not draw public attention to them. The Birrinydji sign board, for example, was last seen being used by custodians as a convenient flat surface for the making of damper or ‘sand bread’.

Then leader of the Warramiri clan, the late David Burrumarra MBE, was concerned about revealing too much about Dholtji, but he also believed that the message of the Cape Wilberforce’s past and its relevance for the present was too important to remain hidden. And yet a great conundrum lay at the heart of the Dholtji story, making revelation that much more contentious. The Cape was understood by Yolngu to be the living embodiment of Birrinydji, the Dreaming Macassan, and Birrinydji was white, though he could change his skin colour at will. The Warramiri believed that white men – Birinydji’s ‘replacements’ and the ancestors of Yolngu - were the very first inhabitants of Arnhem Land’s north-eastern tip.

The identity of these tall bearded men who sang the Yolngu land into existence is unknown. According to Burrumarra, since they shared the ‘one ceremony’ honouring Dholtji, they were like brothers regardless of their skin colour. Yolngu oral history describes their colourful sarongs, distinctive hats shaped like the tail of a whale, and how they sailed under a red and blue striped flag. Their songs and dances are a treasured part of the Yolngu cultural heritage.

Whether real or imagined, this ‘memory’ of past alliances was central to Burrumarra’s sense of self and it continues to be celebrated by Yolngu as both an ancient ‘truth’ and an ideal that guides cross-cultural interaction and expectations.

### **Decline and resurgence**

While Macknight (1976) provides an in-depth examination of the economics of the Macassan trepang industry (which flourished on the north Australian coastline

from the 1700s until closed on order of government authorities in 1907), our knowledge of interactions with Yolngu remains superficial. Russel's (2004) detailed but incomplete survey of the relevant literature reveals an unfortunate jumble of shreds and patches. Summations like that of Mulvaney and Kamminga (1999, p. 419), for example, who state that the ahistorical world view of the Aborigines rapidly assimilated this 'mundane' historical episode until it was represented by modern Aborigines as a golden age, are quite misleading, especially in the Yolngu context. Recorded without reference to Indigenous visions of law, these shreds and patches shed little light on how Yolngu negotiated the endless possibilities of the frontier or how they established working relationships with Macassans that were sometimes of long duration.

Patterns of Aboriginal-Macassan encounter across the vast Arnhem Land and Kimberly coastlines were far from uniform, especially given the numbers of peoples and the timeframe involved, but trepanging was a lucrative business (Macknight, 1976; Sutherland 2000) and Macassans certainly had an interest in building stable relationships with Yolngu. Each cultural group would have sought to act on its own long-held cultural traditions in establishing partnerships, but, if there were negotiated settlements, what form did they take?

The Arnhem Land literature contains a number of references to transactions between Yolngu and Macassans (including the bestowal of foreign names upon Yolngu) and some writers speak of alliance building in unproblematic terms. (see Mitchell 2000, p. 185) A common practice was for Yolngu leaders to be endowed with the title of Rajah in order to facilitate communication and interaction. (Keen, 2004, p. 307) Macassans would pay tribute to senior Yolngu custodians for the right to fish (Thomson, 1949, p. 51) and, at times, for the trepang itself. (Berndt & Berndt 1954, p. 44) Mulvaney (1989) recounts a remembered exchange by a Macassan of alcohol and tobacco for turtle-shell and pearls, and other records describe Yolngu receipt of axes, calico, rice, syrup, knives, etc. Burrumarra, likewise, spoke of his father and uncles stockpiling turtle and pearl shell at Truant Island in the English Company's Islands for the purposes of such trade, which was called mali'yun. This practice probably originated with Macassan contact, but it is just one dimension of a vastly more complex relationship.

An under-reported consequence of Macassan contact is the extinction of Yolngu clans and the dispersal of others brought about by introduced diseases like small-pox and internecine conflict arising from the shock of the new. The most infamous case occurred at the great entrepot of Dholtji in Burrumarra's Warramiri territory at some point in the early to mid-1800s. Here, in what some Yolngu describe as 'Mecca', many clans would gather at the large settlement for the purposes of trade or to work for the Macassans. The gathered clans were known as the Murrnginy, the people of the 'iron age'. It is uncertain just how long Dholtji flourished but the story of its decline is still remembered by elders at Elcho Island and elsewhere. It is largely a non-topic of conversation for the impacted groups, so bitter is the memory of those

days. While members of the Galpu clan, whose homeland lies adjacent to Dholtji, spoke openly about the massacre of Yolngu at the hands of the trepangers, Burrumarra alone would talk of the violence of Yolngu towards each other, and the continuing sensitivity of this memory across the region.

Under the shade of a spreading Buyama tree at Dholtji, hundreds of Yolngu lie buried beneath a small circular mound and a depression surrounded by bamboo masts, tattered flags and long knives. The dead included members of many Dhuwa and Yirritja clans. While this burial site bears no resemblance to Macassan graves identified and excavated by Campbell Macknight in western Arnhem Land (Macknight & Thorne, 1968), the Yolngu acknowledge its Macassan origins. In Burrumarra's reckoning, this mass grave was built by Macassans to honour the memory of their Yolngu trading partners who had been killed, self-destructed, or died as a result of introduced diseases, in the wake of contact with the trepang fishermen. The long knives that surround the grave site are periodically replaced as they rust away, and new flags are erected. The last time I am aware of this happening was the late 1970s, undertaken by the late Warramiri elder Wulanybuma and a group of young clan members. The ceremony that the Macassans performed for the deceased back in the mid-1800s is still enacted today when a Warramiri or related clan member dies.

Despite working closely with Burrumarra over many years, I was never told the 'whole' story of what happened at Dholtji. Rather, he suggested that insight into the nature of the golden age was evident not only in the ceremonies of the Dreaming Macassan, but in the action agenda of his generation, and all those who came before, as they searched for just and equitable relationships with the all-powerful stranger in their midst. Burrumarra suggested that I examine actual historical events, the decimation and dispersal at Dholtji, and then clan resurgence at Elcho Island, in seeking evidence for Dreaming-sanctioned coexistence. The facts, as I understood them, are as follows:

1. From at least the mid-1800s, Yolngu from the Murrnginy collective from Dholtji and surrounding areas began moving westwards to Elcho Island and neighbouring islands to rebuild their lives. Caretakers were left at Cape Wilberforce, the English Company's Islands, and Mata-Mata. Dholtji itself was abandoned.
2. The movement west was to culminate in the 1920s with Yolngu joining Methodist missions first at Elcho Island and then at Milingimbi. Galpu clan members would travel much further west, to the Goulburn Island mission, for sanctuary and clan consolidation. Well before the mission presence in Arnhem Land, however, Warramiri and other Yolngu were taking refuge at Elcho Island and Drysdale Island (Yirringa) in the lands of related clans who had not survived the Macassan encounter. While still mobile throughout the region in dug-out sailing canoes acquired from the Macassans, the

plan of these newly dispersed peoples, said Burrumarra, was to restore their numbers by activating alliances with clans from around the region and, when strong enough (and the memory of their former demise had faded), reoccupy their original homelands as a stronger people.

To the outside observer it might appear curious that people who had suffered so grievously at the hands of Macassans would resettle in the 1800s at a location that was then a focal point for the Macassan trepang industry. For three to four months of the year and sometimes longer, Macassans blanketed Elcho Island plying their trade. One might presume that Yolngu would withdraw from areas frequented by foreigners, and this was certainly the case for some. The majority of the dispersed Murrnginy, however, would apparently foresee a bountiful future for themselves only in partnership with the stranger.

### **The Dholtji Ideal**

Certain sacred sites in north-east Arnhem Land are recognized as epicentres for powerful Dreamings, like Mirarrmina for the Rainbow Serpent (Olive Python or Witiŋ) located on Liyagalawumirr land. The most significant place for Dreamings associated with the Macassans is Dholtji, in Burrumarra's Warramiri territory.

As a place name, Dholtji refers both to the entirety of Cape Wilberforce and also a specific site near its base. Dholtji has many names of Macassan derivation, including Ujung Tana, Ujung Djalatjirri and Manunu, among others. The word Dholtji itself means 'gift' and may be of Portuguese derivation. In Burrumarra's understanding, Dholtji was the gift of Birrinydji. This Dreaming entity buried something beneath the sands on the Cape that promised a long and prosperous life for the followers of his law, and power over their enemies - whether white or black.

Today, a camp site, or 'regional headquarters', is maintained at Dholtji for the infrequent visits of the Warramiri custodians. It is located on top of a low wide dune fringed with Casuarina trees adjacent to a white sandy beach which faces north to Cotton Island in the English Company's Island group. The camp extends back to a paperbark swamp where a water bore and pump are located. Non-Aboriginal visitors to Dholtji, as well as the uninitiated, are escorted wherever they go, and are asked to always keep their backs to the jungle area behind the beach. Their vision is to be directed out to sea to the 'Malay Road', named by Matthew Flinders because of the large number of Macassan (or Malay) praus he had seen traversing those waters.

Just near the camp site, an extraordinary line of sedimentary slabs standing three metres in height - the 'anchor chain' of Birrinydji's boat in Warramiri mythology - protrudes east from the coast into the sea. At low tide this line of slabs is visible for over 500 metres, but according to Warramiri elders it continues along the sea floor parallel to the Cape for many kilometres until it curves away and terminates at a small offshore island. According to Berndt and Berndt (1954), Macassans

would honour with prayer and tribute such conspicuous navigational hazards.

At its north-eastern extremity, Cape Wilberforce consists of steep cliffs and a rocky headland. Here, at a major barramundi Dreaming site, fresh water from Arnhem Bay is believed to flow underground into the sea, mixing with salt water and symbolically uniting the 'saltwater' Warramiri with the 'freshwater' Yirritja moiety peoples to the south. On the headland is a site commemorating the dingo Bulunha, and a nearby island is associated with an important Warramiri sea-based totem, the cuttlefish. Elsewhere on the Cape there is 'sickness country' and Macassan trepanging bays, which both represent a low rung in the site significance hierarchy. There is also one area where the creators did nothing at all. It bears the imprint of no Dreaming entities.

Even though no one has lived at Dholtji in any permanent fashion for a considerable period, in the late 1980s the place was still alive with the memory - real or imagined - of a rich and celebrated past. Warramiri, Gumatj and Wangurri elders, for example, all contributed vivid word pictures of Dholtji from its pre-Macassan glory and Macassan days when it attracted Yolngu and outsiders from far and wide.

There may be little solid proof for the existence of such a rich and vibrant settlement on Arnhem Land shores, but there are certainly some tantalising clues that something very significant occurred at Dholtji. The name 'Birrinydji', for instance, is a variation of a word for the white man found throughout the former colonised world. In the Middle Ages, Crusaders referred to the so-called infidel Muslims as 'Saracens'. Infidel Crusaders, in a similar way, were known to Muslims as Al-frani or the Franks (French or European). Wherever the Portuguese were most active in the 1500s and 1600s, variations of the term for these crusading freebooters are still current: Birrinydji is just one. Others include Parrangi, Feringghi, Feranji, Fo-Lang-ki, and so on.

Actual historical occurrences at Dholtji might be traced if only the records were available from Portuguese and Dutch sources. Explorer Abel Tasman rounded Cape Wilberforce in 1644 and anchored nearby but only a composite map of his and earlier Dutch discoveries remains in existence (Sharp, 1968, p. 88). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that Sama-Bajau (Sea Gypsies) who owed allegiance to the King of Gowa in Makassar may have been in contact with Warramiri from as far back as the mid-1600s. Without a written history of their own, however, Yolngu can rely only upon their understanding of the land and its natural features, their ownership and participation in ceremonies, stories handed down over time, and of course current realities, with which to make sense of where they came from and who they interacted with in the past. "The voice of the white man and the black man is in our ears at Dholtji," Burrumarra would say when contemplating the all-powerful message of unity written there in iron, stone, and wood.

He added:

Birrinydji was like a blanket over the land ... Everything came under him... Two thousand years ago, people came to our land. They had a job to do. They wanted to make the land and the people strong. It was at Birrinydji's command

that they came. Birrinydji was very rich and had many things. He was an iron-maker. [His wife]... made clothing, planted rice, and directed Yolngu women in this... Visitors to Dholtji had settlements all along Cape Wilberforce. There were thousands of people, men, women and children ... When we followed Birrinydji's law we prospered. But then things started to go wrong. We wanted only good but bad came too... We turned our back on the laws of Birrinydji and we lost everything... We don't like to bring it up. Today... we have only [Birrinydji's] song and the ceremony but we have lost the ability to make iron. But if we follow this law, maybe these things will come to us again.

### **Australia-wide Context**

Australia's early historical record has few examples where positive encounters between Aborigines and non-Aborigines engendered a reconciliatory message that has been handed down to the present in the form of ceremonies and sacred narratives. Tales of rejection tend to predominate in the memories of the living. At Cape Keerweer in Cape York, for example, the defeat or retreat of Dutch explorers following a bloody shoot-out is a celebrated legend of Aboriginal people (Sutton, 1988), as is the rejection of Captain Cook's trinkets and rock-like sea biscuits by New South Wales Aboriginal people (Maddock, 1980). Aboriginal groups were self-sufficient, desiring nothing from the outsider. But this is not the message of Dholtji.

The south-west corner of Western Australia provides a rare and celebrated instance of harmonious interaction that had lasting consequences. In King George Sound, explorers and early colonists owed the success of their missions to Nyungar traditions of diplomacy and hospitality. In 1803, Matthew Flinders had his marines perform a military salute to honour the Nyungar for their assistance over a three-week rest period (White, 1980). For at least half a century or longer, the Nyungar would enact a variation of this ceremony, with Aboriginal men assembled in rows, military-style, with white pipe clay and red crosses painted on their chests, with sticks as guns - mimicking the 'redcoats'. By the early 1900s, however, this branch of the Nyungar clan had become extinct, victims of colonial expansion from the Swan River penal settlement and introduced diseases. That a three-week cross-cultural encounter could inspire a Nyungar ceremony that presumably upheld the principles of reciprocity to guide Nyungar expectations in their dealings with the Europeans is striking. Imagine, then, what must have happened at Dholtji where many such rituals are celebrated by Yolngu.

Warramiri renewal at Elcho Island from the mid to late-1800s onwards was a major topic of my conversations with Burrumarra because the building of new lives in cooperation with the stranger was inspired by memories of Dholtji's former greatness. Elcho Island in the mission period (1940s- 1970s) and beyond, with its multitude of clan groups from around the region, and also non-Aborigines from many walks of life, was to be modelled on the former 'paradise' of Dholtji, Burrumarra said. The principle of 'membership and remembrance', part of the Dholtji

legacy, would bind all these peoples as one.

### **Dholtji in recorded history**

A search of the literature reveals little of Dholtji's history. An 1829 journal entry by Commandant Barker of the British settlement at Raffles Bay alludes to the Yolngu as "good blacks" as opposed to the Cobourg Peninsula's more volatile populations. (see Mulvaney & Green, 1992, p. 140) A Macassan captain named Pamoomo, in conversation with the commandant, had mentioned how these Aborigines often travelled with him to Macassar and how they 'wore clothes, spoke a little Malay dialect... and never stole from them'. They kept roosters, and would supply the fishermen with turtle meat and help gather wood and water. Men, women, and children would come on board the praus before they came to anchor, and were 'useful as sailors'. The report says that as many as 100 Yolngu had travelled to Macassar and several were then living there. (Mulvaney & Green 1992, p. 140) And yet, just a quarter of a century earlier, the Macassan fleet commander Pobasso warned the British explorer Matthew Flinders about the treachery of Yolngu. (Macknight, 1976)

The text *Arnhem Land: Its History and its People* (Berndt & Berndt, 1954) provides the most detailed oral historical accounts of foreign visitation in north-east Arnhem Land. Following consultations with elders like Burrumarra in the 1940s and 1950s, Ronald and Catherine Berndt described discrete stages of contact between the Yolngu and others, with relationships of parity in the very earliest days with people they called the Bayini and also whale hunters (Wuramala). Indeed, Berndt and Berndt suggest that these very first visitors were to the Yolngu just representatives of another clan not greatly dissimilar to their own and they carried out a trade with them as they would any other.

Local natives brought in pearls, tortoise shell and other natural products that the Indonesians wanted, and were given in exchange East Indies currency, introduced foods such as rice and sweetmeats, or cloth, knives, and tobacco. (Berndt & Berndt, 1954, p. 16)

In the first phase of contact, perhaps the mid-1700s (before the Macassans would extend their operations into western Arnhem Land or the Gulf of Carpentaria), the Warramiri homeland of Dholtji (or Ujung Djaltjirri) was the 'last point', the final meeting place for the Macassans prior to their homeward journey on the south-west winds. (Berndt & Berndt, 1954, p. 22)

Here, in the sheltered waters behind Cape Wilberforce [Dholtji], the praus assembled, their cargoes were checked and they held a great ceremony of farewell... they played musical instruments, let off fireworks, and the Aboriginal employees joined in the dancing and singing: These most colourful of ceremonies were equated with 'Christmas Day' by mission-based Aborigines in the 1940s. (Berndt & Berndt, 1954, p. 46)

For Burrumarra, these ceremonies were associated with the Dreaming Macassan Birrinydji.

In the second phase of contact, however, there was a steady decline in the quality of relations, with only rare glimpses of the sorts of partnerships that had apparently once been forged. The success of the trepang trade had attracted an increasing number of outsiders from a diversity of backgrounds and declining resources led to practices not conducive to fruitful collaboration. Women had played a major role as intermediaries in the formative years in cementing a timeless vision of partnership (the Dholtji ideal) but this was to change with the introduction of intoxicating liquor.

In the old days... trading partnerships... involved reciprocal obligations and created classificatory ties of kinship, including the gift of women as an extension of tribal custom and goodwill. But liquor led to prostitution, violent quarrels and deep resentment. (Berndt & Berndt, 1954, p. 46)

At places like Dholtji, it led to utter devastation.

### **Rebuilding lives on Elcho Island**

I have not been able to pinpoint a beginning date for the subsequent migration westwards for Dholtji-based populations, for Burrumarra was unable to provide any clarity. A tremendous gap exists between descriptions of events linked to the 'beginning of time', and when Lela, Burrumarra's father's father's brother, and others surveyed the deserted lands to the west of the English Company's Islands. From genealogies collected by the author and stories handed down to the present about clan leaders like Bukulatjpi, who lived through or just after the 'time of fire', my estimate for the migration is the mid-1800s.

Mitchell (2000) suggests that the devastating impact of Macassan-introduced smallpox in the Cobourg Peninsula area, some several hundred kilometres to the west of Elcho Island, was a driving force in alliance building for surviving Bininj (Aborigines). He reports that women and children were the worst hit, and male Bininj took measures to reduce the conflict arising from a shortage of marriage partners through an accelerated trade in introduced goods with clans from the west Arnhem Land interior. Drastic population decline at Dholtji, perhaps also connected with a smallpox epidemic, was the principal motive in the movement of Murrnginy Yolngu to Elcho Island and surrounds. Burrumarra said that a new base was needed well away from the 'war zone' in which to rebuild lives. Trade with the Macassans, as in the Cobourg region, would be vital to cementing relationships with the inland Yolngu clans, and re-establishing clan numbers.

Burrumarra's Warramiri clan took up residence at the northern extremity of Elcho Island and the nearby island of Yirringa (Drysdale Island) on the lands of the closely related Yirritja clans like the Girrkirr and Yalukal 'whale people' who were by then all but extinct. The north-west coast of Elcho Island and Yirringa offered few of the species of trepang that Macassans desired and yet these new Warramiri

bases were home to a significant array of sacred sites associated with the Dreaming Macassan and were considered to be reservoirs of his spiritual power, just like Dholtji. In ceremony and song, the Warramiri would celebrate this Dreaming entity from whence all of the Macassans' wealth was believed to originate. Actual Macassans were fishing just a few kilometres away, but places connected to the Dreaming Macassan were the nuclei for the Yolngu migrants because of the timeless message of Yolngu empowerment and equality they conveyed.

Murrnginy clans like the Birrkili and the Wangurri assumed responsibility for further depopulated stretches of Elcho Island and, along with Burramarra's Warramiri clan, began the process of renewing the totemic alliances of their predecessors, and initiating new ones, with island and mainland clans, including the Gupapuyngu, Ritharrngu, Liyagawumirr, Wolkara and Mildjingi.

Donald Thomson's introductory examination of Macassan-inspired Yolngu 'exchange networks' identifies the Mildjingi clan, for example, as being recipients of Gumurr Muwadhak (tobacco, glass, steel, belts and so on) from migrating groups like the Warramiri. The Mildjingi would transfer these exotic foreign goods to their trading partners to the west, away from the direction in which they originated. (Thomson 1949, p. 68) In return, items of trade drawn from their own territories and beyond would be sent to the islands. More significantly, however, this new line of communication provided the basis for the female children of women from groups like the Mildjingi, Ritharrngu and Wolkara to become wives for Warramiri men. In the Yolngu kinship system, these clans called the Warramiri Maari (or mother's mother), and the accepted protocol for wife bestowal follows such lines; that is, ideally a man will marry his mother's mother's brother's daughter's daughter.

In their move westward from Dholtji, the Warramiri had also surveyed the Yirritja moiety Golpa lands on the Wessel Islands as a possible base because of totemic octopus and whale links to the land and sea there, as only a few scattered Golpa remained. The Warramiri called the Wessel Island-based Golpa clan their Maari, and the female children of Warramiri women could now become wives for them. Trade in Macassan goods was therefore a driving force in regional clan regeneration.

The anthropological study of transactions between clans reminds us that what is transmitted also contains something of the identity of the transmitter. Paton (1994), who has studied the contemporary exchange of stone blades from the Northern Territory interior for bamboo and red cloth from the north-west coast, argues that information of an indispensable kind is exchanged with the goods, from the mundane to highly sophisticated stories dealing with the creation of the cosmos. So what messages were Warramiri Yolngu transmitting to inland kin in introduced steel knives and axes (and other Macassan goods) and receiving back in the form of stone blades or other items?

Insight is provided through the study of 'myths of inheritance' (Morphy 1990) that project these alliances into the ancestral past. The Warramiri-Golpa

connection, for example, was authorised by Burrumarra's father through the exchange of knowledge and ritual objects associated with a reef fish known as Gukuwal. Morphy (1990, p. 17) says that transferred sacra contain part of the vital force and authority of the Dreaming. In this case it was Birrinydji, and Burrumara said that references to this new relationship are still evident in the personal names of Golpa and Warramiri clan members. Likewise, anthropologist Donald Thomson's main informant in the 1940s, the late Rraywala Bakitju (of the Mildjingi clan), had a name drawn from the Dreaming Macassan that was a gift of the Warramiri. Similarly, Mandjikay artist Papayili, has a Warramiri name drawn from the new relationship of the period. The former is a reference to the material wealth of the Indonesian visitors while the latter is an alternative name for the whale-hunting Wuramala and both speak to the legacy of Birrinydji and the notion of Dreaming-sanctioned partnership.

### **Problematic coexistence**

Burrumarra said that the very notion of an innovative Yirritja moiety and conservative Dhuwa moiety, so well documented in the region's anthropological literature, is a legacy of the Dreaming Macassan. This moiety characteristic, an outward-looking future-directed orientation to the world, is an essential part of the inherited Dholtji narrative. And yet recorded myth relating to Yolngu-Macassan encounter from across north-east Arnhem Land describes how difficult it was for the parties to coexist on equitable terms.

According to Burrumarra, the expectation of the Warramiri in rebuilding their lives at Elcho Island was for a relationship with Macassans based on reciprocity, but in the latter stages of the trepang industry, there was no end to disputes over the theft or mistreatment of women, and the failure to provide adequate compensation for access to land and waters. A narrative I heard on several occasions from members of the Liyagawumirr clan at Elcho Island, apparently from the late 1800s, speaks to the troubled nature of intercultural relations. My version builds on an account recorded by Read and Read (1991, p. 16):

At Gaparr, near the trepanging site of Gambinamirr (or Ujung Lamuru to the Macassans), the crew of a Macassan prau was massacred by Yolngu for destroying a sacred Dhuwa moiety Morning Star feathered string in order to repair a fishing net. In retaliation, the remainder of the flotilla rallied at Ngalumara (Salalabu to the Macassans) on the southern tip of Elcho Island with the intention of exterminating all the Elcho Island peoples. Two Liyagawumirr men (with the Macassan names Kayu Lompo and Kayu Sati), in an extraordinary show of bravery, buried themselves in the sand up to their waists and called upon the Macassans to execute them for their crime, for they would not run from their land like so many others before them. A young Macassan boy, long adopted by the Yolngu following a shipwreck, intervened on behalf of his Yolngu relatives. The Captain, impressed by the

young boy's story, ordered a stay on the execution, taking Kayu Lompo and Kayu Sati into custody in Makassar for a year.

In Burrumarra's understanding, Birrinydji provided an 'anchor' for the Murrnginy, holding them to the land and the law. The trepangers could never 'conquer their spirit'. As with the Warramiri of Burrumarra's day, an entire generation longed for a future golden age when peace and harmony would again be the cornerstone of their relationships with non-Aborigines.

### **Remembering the Macassans**

By the late 1980s, a mere handful of narratives set the scene for public discussions regarding past relationships with Macassans. Apart from the famous story of the dingo Djuranydjura who rejected all the gifts of the Macassans, the following narrative was popular in Elcho Island classrooms during 'culture hour'. Burrumarra's older relative Domi from the Wangurri clan had travelled to Macassar aboard one of the trepanging praus in the late 1800s and was the source of this account:

A special rock associated with the Dreaming entity Djambuwal (the Thunderman) was stolen from a Yolngu campsite in Melville Bay in Rirratjingu country by a Macassan captain named Daeng Rangka. He wanted a souvenir from his time in Australia. On the voyage home, just as his sailing ship passed Melville Island and was heading out to sea, a terrible storm blew up. The boat was on the point of capsizing when the Captain remembered the rock and had it heaved overboard. Immediately, the storm subsided.

These days, the Djuranydjura and Djambuwal narratives may be all that the young know about Macassans and it is important for them to hear from elders that Yolngu are self-reliant, needing nothing of the outside world. Yolngu law is for Yolngu alone. They will chase from their shores anyone who tries to impose some other way of life or law upon them.

Members of the migrating Murrnginy clans, however, would also learn, in the fullness of time, the 'inside' story of Dholtji and how Yolngu and Macassans were really 'one people' long separated by time and circumstance. They would seek a new model of partnership with non-Aborigines emphasising a common sense of belonging and purpose. In 1989, for example, Burrumarra would draw inspiration from the Dholtji ideal in his flag-treaty proposal to Australia's governor general. Masts and flags were sometimes gifted to Dholtji Yolngu by Macassans in a symbolic gesture of partnership, and Burrumarra would use these as well as a vehicle for expressing his wish for justice and reconciliation in Australia.

### **A treaty with the Macassans?**

In north-east Arnhem Land, those special narratives associated with the non-Aboriginal stranger are a product of a history that reflects declining levels of reciprocity with each subsequent generation of visitors. They also highlight the

breakdown of former perceived relationships of parity when Yolngu and Macassans lived side by side. One reason posited by Burrumarra for this transition was that "...the love was lost between the people." (pers. comm. 1989) Honour is the foundation of the Yolngu social world and individuals and clans are honour-bound to play their part in 'holding up the universe'. As Pitt-Rivers (1966, p. 22) defines it, honour provides a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his or her aspiration to personify them. It implies not merely an habitual preference for a given mode of conduct, but the entitlement to a certain treatment in return. But reciprocity was not always a feature of relationships with Macassans.

Burrumarra implored me not to question him too much about what happened at Dholtji in the 'time of fire', but suggested instead that I look for answers to my questions at the way he and his forebears acted in their dealings with non-Aborigines. Burrumarra's message of the past was wrapped within a vision of partnership called 'membership and remembrance', by which he meant the peaceful coexistence of blacks in a white world and whites in a black world. When each party respected and honoured that which was most sacred to the other, and recognised that strength lay in unity, we have a mental image of what Dholtji represents in the Warramiri worldview.

During the Macassan era and also the mission period that followed (1920s-1970s), Yolngu like Burrumarra would seek to confirm the truth of the Dholtji ideal in the actions and beliefs of non-Aborigines. When outsiders behaved in a manner that was in accord with moiety preconditions for harmony, then the truth and ongoing relevance of the inherited message of Dreaming-sanctioned coexistence was affirmed.

Is there evidence of treaty-like arrangements between Yolngu and Macassans? Or was Burrumarra's vision of the past largely based on the notion of historical inversion, an ancient 'truth' that is in no way a part of the past and that can be realized only in future relationships with non-Aborigines? Even with the speculative history presented here, the answer is yes, and the examples cited may well have been the authority that the early Macassans drew upon to work the Australian coastline. For Yolngu, however, the narratives of the Dreaming Macassan and the moiety framework were the ultimate point of reference for interactions with Macassans, and the final word on what was desired in terms of relationships. Perhaps only briefly, at the very beginning of the trade, at places like Dholtji, did the Macassans respect Yolngu law. As the treaty debate in Australia once again gathers momentum and concepts such as 'mutual obligation' and 'shared responsibility' are openly debated in the context of 'history wars', Dholtji, Burrumarra would have argued, has a lesson for us all.



*Sacred Places*

**9:1 ‘Captain Cook’: Nangingburra’s Special Rock**

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Just behind the sand dunes at Nangingburra on the far northwestern tip of Elcho Island in north-east Arnhem Land, amidst a shallow almost impenetrable vine jungle stands a special rock that commands the scene. Its shape and positioning is a product of human intervention but the identity of the ancient landscapers is unknown. Approximately 1.5 meters high, this slim sandstone monolith with a cap of brain coral forms part of a network of similar rocks spread throughout Yolngu territories. Positioned in the north-west extremities of certain islands, promontories and peninsulas, these rocks are suggestive of a rich history of foreign visitation. In the vicinity of one in the nearby Wessel Islands, a WW2 serviceman uncovered five 700-900 year old coins from the Sultanate of Kilwa (near Zanzibar in present day Tanzania), and a handful of Dutch coins from around the 1700s.

Were they navigational aids or territorial markers? Gravestones for lost Portuguese seafarers? Yolngu, inspired by the mystery of the place, will not rule out these possibilities. They say that sites like Nangingburra make you look to the sea, but also connect what lies beneath with the heavens above. They are for contemplation, I was told.

A mapping exercise conducted in the 1960s by anthropologist Ronald Berndt made reference to Nangingburra, and in personal correspondence (June, 1988) Berndt noted the existence of what he called a Gareï or ‘God’ rock located there. Yolngu at Elcho Island say that the monolith directs their thinking to a higher purpose, and in this chapter I explore its various Indonesian, Islamic and other references in order to speculate on origins.

I first encountered the ‘God rock’ in 1989 when the sandy track connecting to the site was still not open to the public. My membership, through adoption, of a clan affiliated with the landowners gave me access for hunting purposes, but even then there was some hesitation on the part of permission-givers. This was a dangerous place for outsiders. Only in the company of Yolngu families could my safety be guaranteed.

I was sitting in the open back of a Toyota 4WD when I caught sight of the rock. At a distance of more than 20 metres our ‘eyes’ met and I felt the rock reach out and embrace me. No one was surprised that I was overwhelmed by the experience. This was a sacred site. The spirit of the place had touched me.

Interestingly, my journey to Nangingburra from Galiwin'ku, the only township on Elcho Island, took an hour longer than usual and yet there were no stops en route and the Yolngu driver seemed to be traveling as fast as he could. The slow-down evoked little curiosity or displeasure, except from the young, for the traditional owners (the Birrkili and Daygurrurr clans) understand that the rock can reduce the speed of a vehicle to check for newcomers entering its domain. As we neared the site one landowner drew sweat from under his arm and rubbed it on my arm so that the rock would know me and hopefully welcome my presence.

Today, Yolngu use the colloquial expression 'Cook' to describe this rock and others like it across Arnhem Land. The area in which it stands is Bambalngur, "the place of the law of the Captain". While there are some legends linking this area with little people with red skin (who live underground but seek the company of Yolngu elders in quieter moments), the Captain's skin color is not black, red, or white but, rather, all colors. Yolngu speak of him as a living, conquering spirit, a tall male entity whose authority is unquestionable. Yolngu, when in the Captain's presence, exercise great caution, and some become uncharacteristically timid: 'Captain Cook' is understood to hold power over their destiny. They will not chop wood near him nor speak loudly lest he be disturbed and dispatch them with his gun or with one mighty slash of an iron blade. "You can hear his swishing swords in the bushes in the dead of night", one landowner said to me. Visiting Yolngu gently rub the rock and ask in hushed tones for plenty in the hunt. That day we wanted fish, stingray and mud crabs.

Nangingburra is considered by its Yolngu owners to be an ancient landing site, the place of first encounter with the other, and thus the reference to the explorer James Cook, who never charted this part of the Australian coast. The rock looks out to sea towards the Indonesian archipelago, from whence many outsiders came to Arnhem Land in pre-colonial days riding the monsoon trade winds that blow in the latter part of the year. The best known of these visitors were the Moslem Macassans who fished for trepang out of the Indonesian port of Makassar from the mid-1700s until Australian authorities prohibited their participation in the industry in 1907.

Much has been written about the history of Macassan fishermen in northern Australia but not nearly enough about the way in which Yolngu have made sense of the presence of these and other visitors. The number of contact stories accumulated by the Yolngu over the millennia and still in circulation is impressive, including those that describe white individuals drifting ashore and living out their lives in Yolngu communities, of Yolngu being swallowed by whales and being regurgitated as white men, and of white men with 'hats of mirror' landing on Arnhem Land shores, and so on. Nangingburra abounds with such narratives, in particular those where the sailing canoe of the visitors, the Djulpan, links a whole range of peoples, including Yolngu hunters sent into exile in the Milky Way for a breach of fishing taboos, 'universal travelers' from the heavens above who share their magic

with Yolngu, and lastly, the whale hunting custodians of the Yolngu land of the dead. These hunters live on the sea, just over the horizon from Nangingburra, coming ashore only during the rainy season (November to March) to visit and trade with the Yolngu. In the literature, these people are known as the Sama Bajau or Sea Gypsies, and they also worked as forward scouts and divers for the Macassan trepangers.

Macassans loom large in Yolngu mythology and, in particular, in the well-documented myths of how a dingo called Djuranydjura was offered matches by an archetypal Macassan Captain but rejected them, condemning his Yolngu masters to material poverty. This is the same Captain represented by the rock at Nangingburra. He had wanted to share his great wealth with Yolngu and for them to join the many nations of the world that paid him tribute, but the dingo's answer was final. The Djuranydjura rock sits on the beach at Nangingburra as well, just nearby Captain, also looking out to sea.

In the immediate vicinity of the Captain and along the beach at Nangingburra, are other significant sites and more raised rocks. A distinctive sand hill called Dundingur Bungawangurr bears the imprint of the buttocks of the Captain. Almost adjoining the monolith are small sandstone slabs representing the Captain's pipe and swords. Nangingburra's wide beach is called Narraka Mitjiangurr, or the 'bones of the boat'. The Captain's stone house (or Balapathu), is said to be concealed within the large scrubfowl mounds in the vine-entangled sand dunes and also within the off-shore coral reef. Yolngu dances for tobacco, alcohol, the axe and knife, representing all the various trade goods that Yolngu could acquire from Macassans, are linked to Nangingburra. Yolngu personal names commemorate this proto-historic landscape.

During anthropological fieldwork at Elcho Island, John Rudder (pers. comm.1989) misinterpreted the 'Cook' site as being a reference to a Macassan cooking area, but along the shore at Nangingburra there are none of the telltale signs of olden day Macassan camps. A mile to the north-east is a place called Gawa, the name referring to the boilers that the Indonesians used to cook their catch. But even at Gawa there is an absence of the particular red-fleshed mangrove trees used in the preparation of trepang. There are no remnant tamarind trees or stone lines, and no pottery or glass litters the shoreline as in other Arnhem Land trepang processing centers.

It may be that the coastline has receded in the past 200 years, exacerbated by the cutting of mangroves in the building of a harbour, but interestingly, Yolngu are adamant that Nangingburra is not a Macassan site. Rather, it is the Captain's domain, and the Captain draws his authority from the Dreaming, not any Macassan trepanger. In 'inside' or restricted language Cook is also known as Birrinydji, an all-powerful creational entity.

The Captain's hat of brain coral was fitted many generations ago and the Warramiri Yolngu site caretakers replaced it in 1976. In 'outside' or public language

it represents the collective conscience of the Yolngu people. On the 'inside' it is a Dreaming entity that the Yolngu call Walitha'walitha or Allah, to whom the Captain is answerable. The crew of the Macassan praus had included prayer-men who would conduct rituals to ensure the success of a voyage. Plates of food would be lowered to the bottom of the sea to placate the spirits in turbulent waters and, in a ceremony that Yolngu still perform today, they would hold fast to the boat's mast and beg the paradise-dwelling Allah for relief from distress and safe passage to their ultimate destination.

At Nangingburra, Yolngu meditate on the ways of the world and what was lost and gained in those early negotiations between seafarers and the mythological dingo, which represents the anti-social spirit of a people threatened by the seductive influence of outsiders. Yolngu elder David Burrumarra was proud of the dingo's recalcitrance. Yolngu had been highly desirous of the visitor's trade goods but would not accept them if it meant losing their integrity as a people. Rather than falling prey to the controlling authority of Macassans they would seek material abundance and restore harmony to the universe by ceremonial means. They would appeal to the supernatural power underpinning the power of the visitors, represented by the rock. Yolngu would also call upon a higher authority, Allah, for the fortitude needed to withstand the shock of the new. Birrinydji's desire was to bring to Yolngu the good life, but it had to be on Yolngu terms, not those of Macassans or Europeans. These people had used the Captain's powers against the Yolngu and tried to bring them under foreign control, but the dog would have no part of it.

Sometime in the early 1990s, the fresh water spring situated near the base of the monolith dried up and the Djuranydjura dog rock split in half. The timeless relationship between them now came under review. Had the Captain's spirit also departed? Was the presence of the Other on Yolngu land no longer perceived as a threat to Yolngu futures? Yolngu at Elcho Island were now living in settled Christian communities enjoying a level of material comfort equivalent to that of many non-Aborigines. They were the landowners and largely in control of their destiny. Soon, perhaps, the rock would sink beneath the surface and out of their lives, one elder speculated. Yolngu from the mainland (from where Djuranydjura the dingo had originally journeyed), visited Nangingburra to collect the broken pieces of the dog rock for burial in its homeland, but the request was denied by the site caretakers. The voice of a changing landscape had been expressed but the jury - the collective will of the people - was still out.

Did the Yolngu construct the monolith to represent both Birrinydji's prestige and conquering spirit, and also Allah, their hope of recovery and resurgence? All that the Yolngu will say is that the rock was at one time an expression of their dreams for the future. If it was the work of human beings, which they doubt, Yolngu will say it was Cook's men, both Yolngu and the visitors, who erected it. Their purpose was to honour, and to draw bounty from, the land. Nangingburra's Captain rock and its sister rocks across north-east Arnhem Land, are an extraordinary

legacy of a complex period of interactions in a period that Yolngu describe as the 'dawn of time'. It was just yesterday and a thousand years ago.

## 9:2 Unbirri's Pre-Macassan Legacy, or How the Yolngu Became Black

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The news would have spread rapidly. Around camp fires across Arnhem Land, Yolngu of all ages would have been speaking in hushed tones about developments at Unbirri (or Stephen Island), a small island north of Elcho Island. A light-skinned baby girl had made her appearance in the world. She was not an albino, an extreme rarity in Aboriginal Australia, but rather a light-brown or golden colour that did not darken in the days immediately after her birth, as is the norm. Her name was Bayini.

This historical episode, now couched in myth, was described to me as occurring at the dawn of time. It was the cause of much deliberation. The 'Momo', the baby's paternal grandmother, rubbed the baby's skin with the bark of the Gutu tree which grew along the shoreline at Unbirri. It is black in color like the people. After all, she believed that you need such a skin color to be called a Yolngu (or human being). The application of the bark, along with the action of the sun, was understood to be sufficient to transform the baby into a person of appropriate skin colouring. But it wasn't.

In this chapter I analyse the significance of this pre-Macassan story told to me by David Burrumarra. My goal is to draw some conclusions on why the story was shared, and to speculate on its meaning in terms of contemporary relations between Yolngu and outsiders. A secondary goal is to show how some Yolngu view the history and legacy of trepanning not just through the narrow lens of tamarind trees, pottery shards and the years 1780-1907, but, rather, through an entirely different and sacred lens.

### Conception beliefs under scrutiny

The study of Yolngu conception beliefs throws some light on how this new arrival may have been perceived at Unbirri and, indeed, beyond. Anthropologists originally thought that Aboriginal people were ignorant about the role of sexual intercourse in reproduction but now we know that this view was incorrect. For Yolngu, like most other indigenous Australians, spiritual explanations of conception exist separately and override more mundane physiological explanations. Yolngu believe that spirit children exist independently in the environment, especially in sacred waterholes associated with a clan's totems. Spirit children go in search of mothers, and mothers in search of them. But according to Merlan (1986) marriage, Australia-wide, was an institution orchestrated and controlled by Aboriginal men,

with female sexual maturity being attributed to the actions of men and also ritual. When it comes to conception, the father may be visited in a dream by one of these child spirits which he then directs to the mother, or there might be an unusual occurrence while hunting that he will link to 'finding a child'. The Yolngu word Gayi, a personal name, sums up this male-centered belief. At one level it means, "In the image of the father," but it also represents the 'face of the land,' that close bond that exists between people as a whole and totemic spirits.

With a cyclical understanding of the passing of time, Yolngu would envision a world in which there was an eternal balance between the temporal and the non-temporal, the physical and the spiritual, but now that timeless order was thrown into doubt. The arrival of the new child, who was not in the image of the Yolngu father, signaled to the elders that there was a new order in the universe, a new law in the land, and a new principle guiding human interaction. And they seemed to have little or no control over it.

### **In search of meaning**

Making sense of this occurrence obviously exercised the minds of Yolngu over many generations. In the past, Burrumarra said that Yolngu would ask:

Was Bayini autochthonous, a product or outgrowth of the land? Or had a Dreaming entity deposited Bayini there? If so, he asked, what was her message?

There was much speculation. By the 1980s there was an emerging consensus. In conversation with me, Yolngu elders would discuss the significance of Unbirri in the context of reconciliation in Australia, as I will explain.

There is no mention of Macassans in this Bayini narrative. No mention either of trepang. Rather, the emphasis in the telling was on the evidence that it provided for the existence of a Dreaming entity, previously undetected, but now made visible in part by the emergence, and look, of this child. This Dreaming entity was understood to hold sway over peoples of all descriptions, black and white, living both in Arnhem Land and elsewhere, and it was the force behind all that was new and entering Yolngu lives.

The place where the Bayini arose from the earth is known as Gutungur, where a Gutu tree once grew. In the 1980s a small outstation was built at Unbirri (Stephen's Island) by a Yolngu elder whose Christian name, by no coincidence, was Stephen. Yolngu would travel to Unbirri to consider the legacy of Bayini. People of many clans trace their origins to her, and all Yolngu, without exception, to the Dreaming entity that brought her forth into the world. Regina Ganter (2006), in her book 'Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia' quotes the Gumatj leader Mattjuwi who says that all Yolngu are descended from Macassans. What he is actually referring to is not just his own personal connections to a Macassan lineage, but to the Bayini legacy as a whole.

## **Bayini's law at Unbirri**

Yolngu law at Unbirri was very strict. Bayini was a product of the new world entering Yolngu lives but Burrumarra said "...she lived for the black people." In what appears to be a contradiction, Burrumarra would say "Yolngu for Yolngu and Makassar for Makassar. We do not mix. This Bayini's law." And Bayini's Yolngu descendants at Unbirri and the neighboring island of Yirringa (Drysdale Island) jealously guarded their homeland and inheritance.

Across north-east Arnhem Land there are many myths of first encounter in which the question of how Yolngu might react to the presence of the Other is discussed. In a majority of narratives, the bricoleur or myth-maker uses the dingo as the central character. In narratives from Yirringa for example, the mythical canines use only traditional technology – bark canoes and stone axes – and nothing from the visitors. The message seemed to be that the Yolngu would not be overrun by the new, losing control of their lands and bodies as the influence of newcomers steadily grew. And yet even with this self-imposed regimen of seclusion, the Yolngu land owners of Unbirri and Yirringa, relatives of today's Warramiri traditional owners, became extinct in the 1800s in part as a consequence of diseases and upheaval following contact with Macassans.

In the 1980s, visitors to the region would often avoid the use of non-traditional material culture. Even though Bayini herself represented all things new, her law, in this instance meant no metal cooking pots, no axes, knives, or any other such items. Baler shells were preferred for carrying water for this was the law at Yirringa.

On a hunting trip with Yolngu friends and family to Yirringa in the late 1980s I witnessed this practice firsthand. Our five boats were anchored offshore in a wide semi-circle. Some members of the party waded ashore to make fires while others ventured into the swampy hinterland where their hunting dogs were let loose to chase out goanna. It was an extraordinary scene as the dogs, the men and the women, working together, herded dozens of the scurrying lizards onto the beach and into the water, where Yolngu were waiting knee deep in the water with wooden clubs to kill them. After a memorable feast, we left the island, never once using modern technology. I remember how the elders joked as they made fire without matches, to the delight of the children.

## **Bukulatjpi and cognitive dissonance**

What can we deduce from the contradiction at the heart of the Bayini narrative? In Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, drawn from his book *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger et al, 1958), the conflict or tension between established beliefs and new information leads to a disequilibrium which motivates people to reduce or eliminate the contradictions and justify a new stance through what is called adaptive preference formation. Burrumarra was aware of this term cognitive dissonance. He had spent many days with world-renowned clinical

psychologists and psychiatrists, including Dr John Money, most famous for his work on infant sex assignment in cases where the sexual identity of newborns was not apparent. In relation to the uncertainties and dissonance of those early days of contact Burrumarra simply said that his ancestor, a Warramiri leader from the mid-1800s named Bukulatjpi, dealt with the disequilibrium by “...picking up the swords and doing the dance.”

Burumarra was referring here to the many ceremonies, some integrating flags and swords, that were understood to be held in common by Yolngu, pre-Macassans, and Macassans. “There were no doubts,” Burrumarra said. Bukulatjpi’s actions and the thinking behind them, variously interpreted, became the basis of an enduring Yolngu law that emphasized pride in one’s Yolngu heritage, and also a pan-Yolngu sense of resistance to unwelcome outside intrusion.

Bukatjpi’s significance to the Yolngu as a whole became evident when, in the 1960s, the lives of Arnhem Landers were becoming increasingly bound by the administrative procedures of the Commonwealth Government. Yolngu were required to have a surname and the labels Burarrwanga, Yunupingu, Dhamarrandji, Dhurrkay, Marika, and so on, were adopted by clan leaders. Each of the aforementioned names has a profound meaning. The Warramiri clan chose the surname of their forefather, Bukulatjpi, a man who was credited by Burrumarra and others with “doing the thinking” with regards to the pre-Macassan Bayini.

Bayini narratives drawn from sacred sites across north-east Arnhem Land are centre stage for at least five Yirritja clans: the Warramiri, Wangurri, Birrkili, Dhalwangu, and Gumatj and also a number of now extinct groups, such as the Lamamirri and Yalukal. While there is considerable variation in the Bayini narratives, the essential elements are the same and they all derive, for the most part, from Bukulatjpi, and then through multiple hands and interpretive processes down to the present. Bukulatjpi died at Melville Bay near Nhulunbuy at a sacred place now occupied by an aluminum processing plant. The irony was not lost on Yolngu who look to the Bayini narratives for inspiration in their fight for the recognition of their individual and collective rights in a world in which they have become increasingly marginalized.

### **Bayini’s people**

From my discussions with Burrumarra, I gathered that Bukulatjpi had lived at the very end of the heyday of the pre-Macassans in what we might now construe as the first stage of Macassan visitation. Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1954) wrote about distinct periods of foreign contact in north-east Arnhem Land. In Warramiri oral history, there is a long gap, of many generations before the second wave of visitors to the Warramiri homeland. The Macassan fishermen had ventured into the Gulf of Carpentaria as far to the south and east as Mornington Island in Queensland. When they returned to Warramiri territory Burrumarra said that they were of a different mindset. They were now trepangers.

Thus we see the differentiation between the two categories of outsiders in the Yolngu world view: Bayini and Macassan. One was considered to be on sacred business and the other profane.

Bayini narratives from other parts of north-east Arnhem Land identify key pre-Macassan leaders, like Luki, Lela, and Leku. We know something of their religion, personalities, leadership qualities and also the hierarchical structure of their society. Luki, for example, was described to me as a saintly figure who "...lived for the Yolngu." Members of the Yirritja moiety today are named after these Bayini *bunggawa* (leaders) but they also have personal names drawn from the professions practiced by the Bayini on Arnhem Land shores, like boat builder, iron-maker, rice-grower, and cloth weaver. We also know the names of the Bayini boats, like the *Matjala* with its tripod-mast, which was one of the very first, according to Burrumarra. In Yolngu languages, *Matjala* means the most precious of things; a great treasure. But it was also the name of this Indonesian sea craft, giving some idea of how these first visitors were viewed by Yolngu. These leaders and their professions, like the memory of the baby at Unbirri, are cherished. As Burrumarra said, "They are my backbone."

In that period of hiatus between the departure of the Bayini and the arrival of trepangers, *Bukulatjpi* - who knew the songs and ceremonies of the early visitors - began to dance for the creational entity that had inspired the partnership of pre-Macassans and Yolngu. He danced with long knives, symbols of that deity, moving his arms and legs in the fashion of these early *bunggawa* bringing into alignment the world views of both peoples. In north-east Arnhem Land today you will see those same ceremonies performed with all their dazzling references to other worlds: samurai swords, dances with flags and long-barreled smoking pipes, prayer calls to Allah, and references to south-east Asian ports like *Djakapura* (Singapore), *Djumaynga* (Macassar), and *Banda*. These songs evoke the rich and diverse world of which Yolngu were now a part. Burrumarra stressed that these dances, now performed in public non-ceremonial settings, are not in celebration of Macassans. Rather, they are celebrating the Dreaming entity believed to be shared by pre-Macassans, Macassans, and Yolngu.

### **The colour of affluence and poverty**

Cognitive dissonance must have reached profound levels with the arrival of the Bayini child at Unbirri. Before the coming of pre-Macassans and Macassans there was probably no differentiation between people on the basis of skin colour. Black was the colour of humanity. But according to Burrumarra, with the arrival of the Bayini child, colour came to take on a new meaning for Yolngu. They began to think that perhaps in the distant past all people had been the colour of this baby, and that some cataclysm had brought about the change. In the 1980s, this was a foundational belief of all Bayini-inspired Murrnginy clans. This colour-consciousness came hand in hand with an awareness that white was the colour of affluence

and influence and black was the colour poverty and subservience. As in Bill Stan-ner's (1966) depiction of the Dreaming and Aboriginal lifeworlds as being "...a joyous thing with maggots at the centre," the Yolngu myth-maker Bukulatjpi, his peers and those who followed, understood that something had gone wrong at the beginning of time, the departure of the early visitors being equated with the withdrawal of this new deity from Yolngu land and lives, and the impoverishment of Yolngu. The Yolngu would dance for this departed deity for they believed that only in tandem with the other followers of this Dreaming could they restore harmony to the universe.

### **The paradise to come**

Now this belief in Bayini did not mean that the Yolngu wanted to become white once again. Rather, the story of skin colour and identity emerging from Unbirri became the foundation for a struggle to regain what was believed to have been lost at the beginning of time; taking back control of the world. The Bayini child, according to Burrumarra, had this wish for Yolngu.

The continuing sacredness of Unbirri is a reminder to Yolngu that the proper order of the universe – now in disorder – will one day be remedied. In the mind of Warramiri leaders like Bukulatjpi and Burrumarra, Bayini speaks to Yolngu about this paradise to come.

So the 'inside' message of the Bayini heritage, then, is one of defiance in the face of outside intrusion by Macassans, Japanese and Europeans. As Yothu Yindi member, the late Mandawuy Yunupingu (and former student of David Burrumarra) sings in his popular 1988 album 'Homeland Movement', the Yolngu might be living in the mainstream, but they should not be fooled by the Balanda ways. And in classic film clips like 'Djapana' (Sunset Dreaming) and 'Treaty,' Yunupingu dances the traditional movements of the Bayini rituals and calls for justice and reconciliation in Australia.

The real legacy of the extended Macassan encounter, which endures today, is embodied not just in tamarind trees and lines of stone that once supported cooking pots, or even in the fascinating rock art associated with visitation. It lies also in the stories of the Bayini at places like Unbirri and elsewhere in north-east Arnhem Land. Many of these are restricted places of contemplation where the identity of Yolngu is affirmed and their authority as land owners is recharged. I believe that this is why Burrumarra shared his story with me. The Bayini narratives are what he described in his Warramiri language as a "yindi dhawu" and "yindi rom." Big stories and a big law.

### **9:3 A Journey to Heaven: Burrumarra's Return to Gulirra**

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 2010, 'A Journey to Heaven: Burrumarra's Return to Gulirra,' *Australian Folklore* vol. 25, pp. 113-123)

## Abstract

*David Burrumarra died at Elcho Island on October 21, 1994 at the age of 77. This chapter covers the events and discussions surrounding the elderly Burrumarra's return to what had been his childhood paradise in order to die there. It addresses the differences between the mythic power of the place and the reality of its present appearance. Burrumarra's reaction, and then his decision, opens the way for a reconfiguring and then reinforcement of the myths.*

# # #

This is a story of a journey. A journey by a Yolngu elder to a childhood paradise. An island storied in myth and legend though long abandoned as a consequence of time and troubles. But as a noted anthropologist once said, "Aboriginal sacred sites don't get decommissioned". Even if the people are gone and their language has been 'sent to the ground', the place still resonates with power and majesty.

No-one understood this better than Burrumarra, the great north-east Arnhem Land Yolngu leader. And for him, this sacred, deserted island was called Gulirra, an island in the English Company's group named by Matthew Flinders during his circumnavigation of Australia. Flinders had named Gulirra 'Truant Island' as it was separated from the rest of the island chain by a considerable gap of open water. It stood alone: proud, defiant, magical!

So cherished were Burrumarra's memories of his youth at Gulirra (well before the establishment of the Methodist mission on the mainland) that the place seemed to have no equal in his deliberations.

## The whale island

For Burrumarra's Warramiri clan, Gulirra was a 'whale island' associated with the whale Dreaming, 'dreaming' being the term that is often applied to describe the specificities of Yolngu religion. In Warramiri belief, Gulirra is where the whale got its distinctive tail. The dugong was also bequeathed such a tail at the dawn of time, but this 'smaller cousin' was sent to live in the mangrove-laden coastline belonging to the Mandjikay clans. The deep waters off Truant belonged only to the whale and to the whale people like the Warramiri.

Burrumarra was quite explicit to me in defining the totemic whale's significance in his life. At a personal level he would say: "There is something in the mind of the whale which is also in ours." And in an intercultural setting, he would add "What gold is to the land, the whale is to the sea," giving dimension to the real wealth that his clan possessed. At the nearby city of Nhulunbuy (Gove), bauxite miners had desecrated sites of special significance to his clan, but Burrumarra, in philosophical mode, would claim that the spiritual wealth of his people was more than a match for all the material wealth that could be gleaned from the soil.

Gulirra was also linked to a group of mythical indigenous whale hunters, whose task it was to deliver the souls of the deceased of Burrumarra's clan to the land of the dead somewhere to the north and east of that island.

### **Then and now**

And in this story it is 1992, and Burrumarra is dying. He was thinking of the world to come. The paradise.

Now in Yolngu mythology there is a curious complexity with regards to such beliefs. Does the soul go to reside in the sacred water hole of the clan, traveling there on the back of the whale, or in the tow of the fabled whale hunters who dwell somewhere in the remote islands to the north of Australia, as clan lore dictates? One of Burrumarra's famous maxims states that:

When a man lifts a spear to kill another, or an old person is about to die, a spirit will come from this place to a mother.

This young child spirit will emerge from the sacred well and appear in the mind of the father in its totemic form in a dream. That baby might be a fish, a whale, or some other species affiliated with the clan. There is always this universal balance. People come from the land and return to it upon death. And for Warramiri clan members, Truant Island was central to this vision of origins and destiny, and so of immortality. But also current in Yolngu society were stories of the paradise garden of Islam, a belief in heaven gleaned from those Macassan trepang fishermen who had long frequented the Arafura coastline.

When the Macassans came to Gulirra, Burrumarra's father would greet them with the pearls and turtle shell that his family members had gathered over the previous year, and these would be traded for tobacco, cloth, and iron tools. Sometimes a dugout canoe that the Macassans had used in procuring trepang would be gifted to the Yolngu at the end of the season. Gulirra was a place for such transactions as it was one of the last ports of call for the visitors prior to their long voyage back to Indonesia.

Thus there was ample opportunity for extended discussion between Yolngu and the visitors on deeper issues, like the intricacies of Islam, for Yolngu were adept at language learning and had a great interest in the numinous and all matters connected to the afterworld. Indeed, many hundreds of Indonesian words are still in common use in Yolngu languages, some of which indicate significant Islamic influences. When thinking of the Macassan legacy, and the people of old, in a quiet voice Burrumarra would say: "We have this idea of heaven," and it was drawn from the followers of Allah.

Burrumarra was also a staunch Christian. As a young man in the 1930s, he had worked with missionaries in establishing the Methodist settlement of Yirrkala directly to the south of Gulirra. For Burrumarra, the notion of heaven in both Islamic and Christian faiths was similar. Before the coming of the Christians, his understanding was that:

When we die we go to a place on top, to a world of beautiful things, an island, a garden...where our life is bountiful. But there will be a time in the future when all the heavenly things will come to the earth and it will be one.

For him, heaven was the richest of all possible places. But where was this place? Was it the 'land of the dead' to the north of Australia, from where the mythical whale hunters originated? Or was it in the sky above the Warramiri territory, in the high red clouds that gave their name to his clan? Or was it surrounding the sacred well on Gulirra?

Wherever this place was, in the land of the dead everyone was happy, good tempered and healthy. The weather was fine and there was always plenty of food. The people would sit in the sun, talk to old friends, and sing their favourite songs. There was no shortage of tobacco. The seas were still and perfect for hunting turtle and stingray.

One of the most distinctive features of Yolngu communities across north-east Arnhem Land is the sight of so many colorful flags set upon large bamboo poles. These pieces of cloth commemorate the dead and make reference to the heavenly place where the soul of the dead now resides.

When pondering the fate of the soul, Burrumarra admitted that the Yolngu really did not know what happened after death or where this paradise was located. "All we know is the bunggul [ceremony]," he said. There were whale dances, whale hunter rituals, Islamic ceremonies, and Christian hymns and blessings. Of all of these, the whale hunter stories were most precious to him. The fabled hunters named Papayili, Wuramala, Turijene, Gelurru, and others make their voyage from the land of the dead in their long canoes to collect the Warramiri souls. They are black like the Yolngu and they share a common belief system with the Warramiri and Gumatj. Their relationship is one of reciprocity. Yolngu send their souls to the north and, in return, the whale hunters send south various items of flotsam and jetsam, like coconuts and canoes, and also cooling breezes. In contemporary renditions of these whale hunter narratives, larger ships – even imaginary battleships – are the mode of transportation for the Yolngu spirits of the dead in their journey to the heavenly paradise. One of Burrumarra's more notable idiosyncracies was his great fondness for the Australian Navy, and especially for the large aircraft carriers that he imagined (and prayed) would take his soul to the world that is to come.

But Burrumarra was keeping his options open on all possible eventualities. He had a year at most to live. Not longer. And at his home community on Elcho Island, plans were already being made for his funeral. In one memorable encounter, members of the Wangurri clan had offered to paint totemic designs of Burrumarra's clan on his chest in preparation for the voyage of his soul, but Burrumarra was not yet ready for that journey. In a fashion all of his own, he told the men to "Go paint it on yourselves!"

## The last wish

There was one thing Burrumarra still wanted to do before he died. One last wish. He wanted to visit his homeland at Gulirra one more time. The waters of Truant Island are teeming with sealife, and he wanted to eat again the turtle eggs, the black-lipped oysters, and rock lobster. For many years Burrumarra had been a staunch advocate for the full recognition by government authorities of Yolngu rights to their lands and waters. And if you don't exercise your rights to visit and enjoy, to hunt and gather, and otherwise exploit the riches of your homeland, can you really call yourself a traditional owner?

Gulirra was Burrumarra's island and he wanted to be there again, to breathe in its air, sit on its mighty sand hills, and stare out, dream-like to the northern horizon. But those weren't the only reasons, or even the main ones.

For Burrumarra, Gulirra was not just sacred for the whale. It was sacred also to other Dreaming entities and spirits whose imprint lies at the very heart of the Warramiri clan, giving it a distinctive identity, focus, and passion. And there was one spirit, in particular, above all others, that defined Burrumarra's life. To this spirit he owed more than he could express. It was a mermaid spirit. When called upon, this special spiritual entity had come from the island and protected Burrumarra throughout his life, even when he admitted to misconduct, like breaching tribal etiquette, which he said he did on a number of occasions as a young adult, and also during the infamous 'Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land', when he facilitated the public revealing of sacred paraphernalia as a means of building bridges between Yolngu and Balanda communities. When the most deadly of sorcerers were out for Burrumarra's blood, the mermaid formed a shield around him that no magic 'sting-ray barb of death' could penetrate.

Burrumarra wanted to visit Truant Island one last time before he died to say goodbye to her.

This is a story about visiting paradise.

But the wish of the old man was causing a hullabaloo. Yolngu were not prepared to take the risk of transporting him such a long way from his home base at Elcho Island, about 100 kilometres to the south-west of Gulirra. There were no facilities at all on this remote Warramiri outpost. No-one had lived there on any permanent basis for over a hundred years. What if he got sick? Who would look after him? As there is no airstrip at Gulirra, a longish sea voyage would be necessary and there might be storms and rough seas; anything could happen. The journey alone could kill him. There was also the fear that, if Burrumarra was to go to Gulirra, he might not want to come back. He could be very stubborn. But Burrumarra had his heart set on this trip and he would not let up about it.

In this story of the eternal present, I agree to take him.

## **And so to Gulirra**

I wanted to see Gulirra myself. We didn't sneak out, but we didn't tell too many people either. His extended family might have tried to dissuade or physically restrain us.

During our long conversations over the years, the subject of Truant Island was often raised. He had not been there for fifty years, but if he closed his eyes he could see every headland and beach. So I myself had developed a very detailed picture of Gulirra's clear water bays and coral reefs. And I knew about the mermaid!

When he spoke about Gulirra, Burrumarra would often drift back in time to the days when he and his brothers were visiting. He would circumnavigate the island in his memory and at each totemic site he would wait until he could hear the name of the place come from the mouth of one of his relatives. "Lukimi!" he would say in an excited tone. "That's where we camped. The long white sandy beach." In this manner, we mapped the entire island in absentia. Very rarely did he need to consult with someone else about place names.

## **The return**

This is a true story.

I arranged a flight to Gove for Burrumarra, and from there we would immediately board a yacht that a dentist friend of mine owned. A nurse and a Yolngu health worker from Elcho Island would accompany us for the entire journey. The outward passage would take the good part of a day depending on the winds.

I remember it all so clearly. There was no wind on the journey out of Melville Bay (near Nhulunbuy) and we had to motor most of the way north and the fumes from the engine were making us all feel quite ill. One by one we took turns at being seasick, while Burrumarra sat alone at the rear of the boat in deep contemplation. Then he too succumbed and we all had the horrors when we saw him lean over the side of the boat and empty the contents of his stomach with one giant heave.

I had always been impressed by the way in which Burrumarra was able to convey a depth of meaning about the sacred realm without direct reference to the sacred. He was always careful in the wording of his pronouncements. And he would rather ask a question than give an answer. He was also most concerned that the thinking be done by the listener. He wasn't going to give away any secrets. He was a lifelong learner and the door was always open to new knowledge, and for new interpretations of old knowledge. At any given moment, he would be posing questions to us all, impossible questions about the meaning of life, but now he was completely silent.

Then everything changed as we lost sight of Cape Wilberforce, and Gulirra became visible on the distant horizon. There was such a feeling of anticipation, and the excitement grew even more as we rounded the eastern tip of the island. Burrumarra was beginning to open up.

What were we seeing in those complex rock formations along the headland? What was their totemic significance? Was that an eagle rock? Was that a beached whale or a partially submerged stony platform?

Burrumarra told us that we would have to wait to learn about this paradise from the comfort of our anchorage. We would have to be patient. He would only give us snippets at this stage. But as we approached our destination point at Lukimi, we were struck dumb. What we saw was unbelievable. Unpredictable. Unacceptable.

Lukimi, a site closed to outsiders, was packed with non-Aboriginal picnickers from Nhulunbuy who were lazing on the beach, swimming in the cool clear waters, drinking from their yellow, blue, white and green beer cans, as if this were a public resort. But what was even more astonishing was that the crew of a sizeable navy vessel, anchored well off the beach, was there as well, playing volleyball in the midst of the noisy partying masses.

### **Withdrawal?**

This was Aboriginal land and Burrumarra was the land owner under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act of 1976. None of these people had permits from the land owner. They were all trespassing! What was meant to be a quiet retreat for deep reflection was not off to a good start. These people knew nothing about this place or its historic or sacred significance, and their presence was an affront to Burrumarra.

Once we had landed, Burrumarra promptly sent me over to tell them all to leave. Their loud beer party antics on the beach of his ancestors was repugnant to Burrumarra and, indeed, to us all. They paid no attention to me. I had a few words to the leading officer of the naval shore party and I asked that he come and give greetings and pay respect to the Warramiri leader, which he did. When the sun went down and all the interlopers had departed to their vessels, we made our camp. Burrumarra slept a long way from the rest of us, for we too, were something of a disturbance to him. We talked too much, he said. Silence was what was called for now.

Apart from the obvious surprise, the presence of the Navy vessel off the sacred beach was of striking significance to Burrumarra. In his belief system, as I mentioned, upon death, the soul of the Warramiri is transported to the land of the dead in a canoe paddled by mythical whale hunters. But in modern times, it was not uncommon for the Warramiri to speak about how the soul would travel aboard a great ship – an invisible battleship – that is always at anchor just off the coast, but over the horizon. And we all knew this story. We could not help but wonder if Burrumarra was thinking that this was the boat of his destiny. It was such an ominous sight to see this huge battle craft just off the tiny island, especially at night with its lights ablaze against a dark sky. Had it come to Truant Island for Burrumarra's soul? The timing seemed extraordinary. At first light when we noticed that the ship had departed we were exuberant to find Burrumarra still alive and kicking!

## **This is a story of farewell**

At the end of the second day, Burrumarra alerted us to what we all feared the most. He had no wish to return to Elcho Island and wanted to be left at Gulirra to die. He said:

If you knew that heaven existed and you had a chance to go there, wouldn't you want to stay forever? How could you go back? Why would you want to?

In Burrumarra's mind, Truant Island was heaven and he didn't want to go home. He said to me:

If heaven has this wish for us, if it wants it this way, then we must follow it.

And so began a long conversation that began with me stressing that at this time of his life he needed to be around his family, and not just around those of us who were indulging him in this last wish. But he was not interested in our pleas. He was preparing himself for the end. Nothing I could say would change his mind on that second day. Even the prospect of the arrival, next weekend, of another marauding band of party-goers from the mining town and the outrageous piles of beer cans that they left littering the beach, would dissuade him.

The third day passed without any change. I brought him fish that I had caught, but few words were exchanged. But then that night, when the sun had set and a sudden darkness descended upon us, he began to speak in a different way than previously. It had been an exceedingly hot October day, but now there was a welcome cool sea breeze. Burrumarra was in no hurry to sleep, nor was I. He was smoking, or so I thought. Only the glowing ember of his cigarette was visible.

Occasionally I would make idle conversation but there was no response. At one point I noticed that the cigarette was not in his mouth. Rather, he was staring at the burning tobacco leaves, considering how his desire for a smoke was controlling him. He was not in charge of his life – this cigarette was – and it was mocking him. He would tolerate it no longer. That night, under a starry sky on Truant Island, Burrumarra quit smoking. "Enough," was his final word on the subject.

The connection between his decision on smoking and staying on the island to die or departing for home is anyone's guess, but on that third night, Burrumarra's mind had changed. "It is over," he said. We left Gulirra the next morning for the return trip to Nhulunbuy. And at Burrumarra's request, the dentist (our captain) carried him to the dinghy for the row out to the yacht's anchorage. He was too weak to walk.

Not much was said on the homeward journey. As Truant Island disappeared under the horizon, Burrumarra said in a soft voice: "Goodbye old friend." And with that, we sailed on, a hearty breeze this time ensuring our trip was swift and eventless.

# # #

Burrumarra lived for another two years after this journey. And at his funeral, as expected, a great sadness descended upon the entire community. Hundreds of people from all the Yolngu clans were in attendance, coming from far and wide to pay their respects to the old man. Government, public service and military personnel were also in attendance, for he was a person of considerable stature.

As anticipated, the ceremonial component of the proceedings included all manner of references to the afterlife. There were whale songs and rituals for the whale hunters, ceremonies associated with Allah and the paradise garden of the hereafter, and also many Christian hymns and blessings.

But amidst all the sorrow, word started to spread first from among the traditional singers and musicians – and then to all the gathered mourners – that a large Navy aircraft carrier was anchored off Elcho Island, just over the horizon, ready to take the old man's spirit to the 'land of the dead', to the sacred well on Truant Island.

The thought alone, so mysterious and impossible, created a spark of exhilaration that filled everyone's hearts with a sense of wonder. It was only right that the aircraft carrier be out there, and that it take him to his spiritual home. The sacred waterhole at Gulirra was where his spirit had come from, and to there it would return. And a new life would emerge from that same source, in due course, and the eternal balance of all things would be restored. Happiness would return to the community.

And so the funeral songs continued. Not dirges by any means. Rather, these were mighty stirring songs of old about the collaborative effort of both Macassans and Yolngu, white and black, needed to raise the ship's mast and set the sails. The singers might have been thinking of Burrumarra's aircraft carrier, but they were singing about a Macassan prau; the wind filling the expansive cloth, and the flags atop the mast, yellow, blue, and red, dancing themselves in the steady breeze, as the spirit sea craft headed outwards on its journey to the land of the dead.

But in this complex vision inspired by the singers, Truant Island is a mythical place. It exists only in our dreams. It floats timelessly in a clear blue sea to the north-east in a place that cannot be accessed by ordinary mortals. It remains unsullied by the drunken antics of the more unsympathetic among us.



*African Coins in Arnhem Land*

**10:1 Life and Death on the Wessel Islands: The Case of Australia's Mysterious African Coin Cache**

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 2013, 'Life and death on the Wessel Islands: The case of Australia's mysterious African coin cache,' *Australian Folklore*, vol. 27, pp. 9-26)

**Introduction**

This is a detective story par excellence but one, alas, with very few clues.

The setting is Australia's remote northern coastline. The year is 1945 and the war in the Pacific is in full swing. A soldier stationed at Jensen Bay on the Wessel Islands finds a handful of coins, some of which he later learns originate from the medieval Swahili Sultanate of Kilwa on the east coast of Africa in what is now Tanzania. These Kilwa coins date from the 1100s to the 1300s CE.

Was an Arab dhow or a Portuguese shipwreck implicated? Marooned Indonesian sailors? There was no immediate evidence of this, though Aboriginal folklore certainly suggests that the possibility was real. Aborigines from this region, known as the Yolngu, even today speak of a hidden cave in the long abandoned Wessel Islands that is filled with boundless treasure; doubloons and weaponry of ancient era. Sadly, the African copper coins in question, and four Dutch 'doits' found in the same locality, have no bullion value. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Kilwa was the most powerful port on the East African coast and the coins bear the names of Sultans who ruled over Kilwa, and also Pemba, the Mafia Islands, Comoros, and Zanzibar, before its sacking by the Portuguese in 1505. One coin, for example, bears the inscription 'Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan (May he be happy) Trusting with the Master of Bounties' (He is glorious). As curiosity items, therefore, the coins have few parallels in Australian history, and in archaeological terms, they are priceless.

In this chapter I will describe the circumstances of the coin find, discuss their origins, analyze the range of peoples identified in Yolngu oral history who might be implicated in our detective story, and then compare this list with details from the literature on foreign exploration and exploitation of the Arnhem Land coast. I then present one possible scenario (out of many potential scenarios) to describe what may have occurred on the Wessels leading up to the deposit of the coins on a sandy creek bank in what is now a deserted stretch of Australian wilderness.

My focus will be on the life and death of one Indonesian man named Buthimang (Budiman in the language of the archipelago) who, as a shipwreck survivor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spent many years in north-east Arnhem Land living with his Yolngu hosts. I speculate that the coins were once in his possession. He perished under mysterious circumstances in his declining years in the late 1800s at a site near where the coins were found.

### **The Wessels, north-east Arnhem Land**

The ‘Wessels’ are a 120km long chain of islands that were ‘discovered’ by Captain Jan Carstenszoon of the Dutch East India Company in his ship the ‘Arnhem’ in 1623, although on his charts they are known as the Islands of Speult. These same islands are shown but not named on Abel Tasman’s 1644 map. The English explorer Matthew Flinders writes of some charts showing the chain as one large island called ‘Wessel’s Eylandt’ and he endorsed this place-name in his mapping of the northern coast of Australia in 1802-3.

The Wessels form a great arc north from Arnhem Land’s Napier Peninsula towards Papua New Guinea. The island chain features rugged sandstone plateaus, rocky cliffs and beautiful long beaches and sandy bays, as well as extensive areas of native grassland, eucalypt woodlands, paperback forests and mangroves. For months at a time the islands are buffeted by the north-west winds from Timor, Tanimbar and Aru and from time immemorial they would have acted as a type of barrier, or a great catching mitt, for all the Arafura Sea traffic blown south of their intended course.

Apart from north-east Arnhem Land, there are but a few places on the Australian continent that have such historic importance in terms of Aboriginal first encounters. Apart from Port Jackson (Sydney), the most well-known, of course, is Adventure Bay on Bruny Island in Tasmania, home to Truganini, the ‘last of the Tasmanians,’ which welcomed voyagers and scientists like Captain James Cook, William Bligh, Nicolas Baudin and Bruni D’entrecasteaux, among others. Then there is King George Sound, Albany, in Western Australia, which was a rendezvous point for noted explorers like George Vancouver, Phillip Parker King and Dumont d’Urville.

North east Arnhem Land is included in this list not just for the many visits by Dutch explorers like Abel Tasman, and the extensive contact between Yolngu and Makassar-based trepang fisherman from Sulawesi, but because of an earlier episode of contact that has not garnered the enthusiastic attention that it should have had.

When the Dutch defeated the Gowa fleet from Makassar in 1667, legend describes the retreat of these Indonesians to the northern Australian coast where they discovered the trepang that they would harvest a hundred years later. In Campbell Macknight’s 1976 text, *The Voyage to Marege*, one of the last trepangers on the coast said that this sojourn was in north-east Arnhem Land

and it lasted upwards of twenty years but details are few. Yolngu oral history, on the other hand, describes in impressive detail the many fine houses that were constructed on Australian shores, the boat-building, iron-furnaces, and pottery manufacture. My research indicates that the most likely candidate for the location of this settlement is a place called Dholtji on Cape Wilberforce. Other smaller reconnaissance bases associated with the Gowa settlement were located in the Wessel Islands, which is just to the north-west of Dholtji. It is therefore not unusual to expect that items of a special historical character would be found in the vicinity of the coin find in Jensen Bay, where there is a large and permanent water supply.

### **The Kilwa and Dutch coins**

The circumstances of the coin find are not in dispute. In 1945, during World War 2, the late Morry Isenberg of the 312 Radar Unit was stationed at Marchinbar Island, in the northern part of the Wessels chain. This was a forward warning station against Japanese aircraft, surface vessels and submarines threatening northern Australia. Isenberg would spend his spare time fishing and bushwalking:

One day, whilst fishing, he saw four green circular objects lying in the sand, about one metre below the high water mark. He picked them up...and poked around in an area of about four square metres, finding five more. Having no interest in coins at the time, he...put [them] in an airtight match tin; this went into his kit bag and returned with him to [the mainland]. (Mira 1993, p. 2)

In 1979, Isenberg rediscovered the coins, cleaned them, and sought help in their identification. Through a series of hands the coins came into the possession of noted coin expert William Mira, who could easily identify the four V.O.C. coins (i.e. from the Dutch East India Company), with one dating back to 1690. For the other coins, however, he relied upon the diagnosis of specialists in numismatics from Brisbane (R. Domrow) and the British Museum (N. M. Lowick) in confirming an East African connection. They were then donated to the precursor of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, where today they lie in storage away from the public eye.

The two most curious findings of Mira and the others was the good condition of the old African coins and also the fact that only two such coins had ever been found outside of East Africa, and that was from an excavation in Oman, and also in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe. They were all intrigued as to how five such coins found their way to the Australian Outback.

William Mira contacted me in the 1990s in the hope that I might be able to arrange for an excavation of the Wessels site. He had obtained detailed site maps from Isenberg and others who had been based at the radar station and he was confident that a shipwreck or two was involved and that a trove of some description was awaiting discovery.

At that time I was based at Elcho Island, the most southerly of the Wessels chain of islands. I was undertaking studies in anthropology with a focus on the history of contact between Yolngu and outsiders. I had also been adopted into a Yolngu clan with a very close association with the Wessel Islands.

Within a very short time, following discussions with clan elder David Burrumarra, I was able to locate the site of the coin find as a creek just south of Jensen Bay known by the Yolngu as Djinjan. Yet, despite the widespread interest arising from academic papers on the coins by Mira (1983 & 1993) and also Freeman-Grenville (1994) I was unable at that time to attract funding for an archaeological survey.

Considerable work has been done in Australia with regards to the many Dutch shipwrecks along the Western Australian coast where the history of voyaging across the Indian Ocean via the 'Roaring Forties' is well documented. Great scepticism, however, surrounds the idea of a 'secret' Portuguese discovery of Australia despite the fact that they had major bases of operations in Timor and Ambon just to the north of Australia. They also had taken possession of the port of Kilwa in the 1500s so the possibility that they are implicated in the coin find appears very real.

An ancient trade route that linked East Africa and Arabia, Persia, India, China, and the Moluccas, home to the fabled spice islands of Ternate, Ambon and Banda in eastern Indonesia was in place well before the days of the marauding Portuguese 'freebooters'. In the 1500s, for example, the Portuguese writer Tome Pires in *The Suma Oriental*, speaks of the port of Malacca in what is now Malaysia having trade agents and resident merchants from as far afield as Cairo, Aden, and Kilwa so the possibility of a 'secret' Persian, Arabian, Gudjerati or other connection to Australia is also a distinct possibility.

Morry Isenberg found nine coins in all, and the fact that the five Kilwa coins were found in association with 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch coins strongly suggests that they were deposited together at this later, rather than the earlier, dates. The latest Dutch coin is from the 1780s, a date associated with the beginning of the Macassan trepang industry.

The trepang trade began in earnest in northern Australia in the mid-1700s, but not later than the 1780s. (Macknight, 2011) Each year up to several thousand fishermen from the port of Makassar would venture forth from South Sulawesi in a number of fishing vessels. In partnership with Aboriginal peoples from West Arnhem Land all the way through to the southern reaches of the Gulf of Carpentaria, they would fish for the sea cucumber, a delicacy favoured by the Chinese.

Curiously, however, the Wessels are not known for trepang and there is no evidence yet uncovered that Macassans set up any processing camps on the islands. The telltale signs, namely tamarind trees, long stone lines that held cooking pots and glass and pottery fragments, are absent. However, as mentioned, there is a large permanent watering place in Jensen Bay, a fresh water lagoon, so it may well have been a reconnoitering point for the fleet. The coins were found in the general vicinity of the lagoon, at the mouth of a creek.

In the 1960s, Dutch coins were uncovered during archaeological excavations by Campbell Macknight at a number of Macassan trepang camps across Arnhem Land, but no other Islamic or African coins have ever been found. These Dutch 'doits' were minted in the timeframe of 1742 to 1840 in Utrecht and Dordrecht in the Netherlands and in Batavia/Surabaya in Indonesia, but all were meant for the Asia trade. The Dutch coins found in the Wessels Islands, by contrast, were much older, over 100 years in several cases (dating from 1690-1784) and they originated from Zeeland, Gelderland and the Bishopric of Liege.

Were the Wessel Island coins linked to the period of first contact between Macassan fishermen and Yolngu in the 1780s?

### **Coins as gifts?**

In John Webber's famous drawing from 1777, Captain James Cook, on his second voyage of discovery, is bestowing a medal upon a Tasmanian Aboriginal while a group of about 20 others look on. These 'Otaheti' (Resolution and Adventure) medals, were emblazoned with a portrait of King George 3 and, as with the Kilwa coins, included some words about the nature of the ruler's prowess, i.e. King of Great Britain, France, Ireland etc. These medals had been created upon the orders of Sir Joseph Banks and the idea was to distribute them freely among all the Indigenous populations encountered in the Pacific. Lane (2009) makes the argument that such medals or coins were among the earliest gifts given by Europeans to Aborigines and that they functioned as both an attempt at fostering good relations and also in support of a territorial claim as discoverers of the land in question.

On January 28, 1777, Cook's ships the Resolution and the Adventure were anchored in Adventure Bay and a party was sent to collect water and timber. Eight 'native' men and a boy were presented with the medals in what might have been considered by Aborigines as payment for their resources. The following day Cook went ashore and distributed more gifts, including iron tools, beads, medals and fish hooks, which he believed were received with 'some satisfaction.' (Lane 2009) In an earlier visit to Adventure Bay, the explorer Tobias Furneaux raided a deserted Aboriginal camp for items of material culture like spears and bags, and placed in return gun flints, medals, and a few nails, in the first instance of a form of exchange between Aborigines and outsiders in this part of the world. (See Lane, 1992)

Were coins or medals also gifted to the Yolngu of the Wessel Islands? If the trepang industry was just underway in 1780, as Campbell Macknight (2011) now suggests, then the vintage of the coin finds on the Wessel Islands is consistent with the idea of a first encounter gift, either from Europeans or Macassan fishermen or others. Were antique coins from Kilwa, perhaps in circulation in Makassar, also gifted to the Yolngu in order to freely access the water and other resources to be found at Jensen Bay?

In *The Life of Captain Matthew Flinders*, Ernest Scott describes the range of items that the explorer of northern Australia had in his possession and which were to be shared with the natives. Scott writes:

In addition to plentiful supplies and special provision for a large store of water, the Investigator carried an interesting assortment of gauds, nick-nacks, trifles, to serve as presents to native peoples with whom it was desired to cultivate friendly relations. The list included useful articles as well as glittering toys... Flinders carried for this purpose 500 pocket-knives, 500 looking-glasses, 100 combs, 200 strings of blue, red, white and yellow beads, 100 pairs of ear-rings, 200 finger rings, 1000 yards of blue and red gartering, 100 red caps, 100 small blankets, 100 yards of thin red baize, 100 yards of coloured linen, 1000 needles, five pounds of red thread, 200 files, 100 shoemakers' knives, 300 pairs of scissors, 100 hammers, 50 axes, 300 hatchets, a quantity of other samples of ironmongery, a number of medals with King George's head imprinted upon them, and some new copper coins.

The reference to the copper coins is of particular interest. Were they Dutch doits? Flinders had never visited Makassar but he may possibly have had access to Dutch coinage, though any link to Kilwa is tenuous.

The literature indicates that trepangers would gift the Yolngu items like mirrors, cloth, necklaces, knives, axes, and dugout canoes, as well as alcohol and tobacco, in payment for their labour. (Macknight, 1976) They would also trade their pearls, turtle shell and cypress for such items. The fact that a number of coins have been found at former Macassan trepang sites suggests that they too were either the product of gifting or barter. But such coins may also have been the personal property of Yolngu who had made the voyage to Makassar and worked there for their board and upkeep prior to their return to Australia. They may also have been paid in doits for specific tasks and returned with these as a memento of their adventures.

Could the Kilwa coins have been minted outside of Kilwa, perhaps in the Islamic ports of south-east Asia as curiosity items or even as talisman? Were they then acquired by Yolngu for their perceived magical powers? Macassan sailors who undertook a reenactment of the trepanging voyage to Australia in 1988 all carried with them such special objects or talismans for good luck. I was given one of these talisman by a crew member. He told me of how superstitious the crew was, and how they needed help in dealing with the unpredictable and potentially deadly forces of nature they would encounter almost on a daily basis. As mentioned previously, we know that in the 1500s Kilwa trade agents were operating in nearby Malacca, so it is very possible that these agents were also in communication with the Macassans. Was Makassar, then, the source of both the doits and the Kilwa coins?

Or were these coins the spoils of a looted shipwreck? Matthew Flinders recorded evidence of a Macassan shipwreck in the Wessels in 1803 and the *Encyclopedia of Australian Shipwrecks* indicates that the Northern Territory coast is littered with wrecks, both from the days of the Macassans right through to World War 2 and Cyclone Tracey. The causes were many, including ‘Malay’ pirate attacks in Indonesian waters, most notably with the 1825 loss of the *Lady Nelson*, but more often the shipwrecks were the product of uncharted reefs and tropical storms. Some of the more famous on record are:

- The 1888 wreck of the ‘*Annie Millicent*’ after being stranded on an unidentified reef with the loss of all crew.
- In 1897 when a cyclone destroyed 9 of 29 pearling boats at anchor in Darwin Harbour.

The possibility of a shipwreck or shipwrecks in the vicinity of the coin find site in Jensen Bay is high, especially given the dangerous rips and tides, unidentified reefs, the imposing rocky cliffs, and the frequent and powerful cyclones and tropical storms. Then there is also the treacherous ‘hole in the wall’, a very narrow natural passageway through two of the islands lined with graffiti of sailors going back to the 19th century.

As we look back in time, the range and variety of outsiders in Arnhem Land who were in contact with Yolngu is quite extensive. In the 1920 and 1930s, for example, there were oil miners at Elcho Island and European-run cattle stations just inland. Japanese pearl-ers and trepangers were at work off the coast. They hired Yolngu as deckhands, as did the English beachcomber Fred Gray from his camp in the Malay Road and also Caledon Bay.

If we go further back to the mid- to late-1800s, we see Indonesians on the coast in considerable numbers. For the most part, these were trepang fishermen sailing out of the port of Makassar. Some captains were known to Yolngu by name, and were affiliated with particular clans, like Daeng Rangka and Daeng Sarro. Their sojourn would last upwards of three to four months, and include a range of Arnhem Land bases, whose introduced place-names persist into the present, like Lipabandria, or Ujung Tana. Some Macassan fishermen would stay for an entire year or even longer and make preparations for future seasons.

When relations between Yolngu and Macassans were at their height, both parties would have found value in this semi-permanent habitation arrangement. Yolngu strongly desired the products of trade and such longer-term visitors would be expected to act as brokers for Yolngu in their negotiations. It would also have been advantageous for Macassans to become more thoroughly acquainted with their Yolngu trading partners, their languages and cultures, and to acquire insider knowledge of the land and seascape. It must be recognized, also, that some Yolngu had become addicted to the opium-laced tobacco and alcohol that were often used

in transactions as payment for services rendered in the procurement of trepang, and this led, gradually, to a downward spiral in relations, culminating in murder and deception aplenty.

In the latter years of the trade, the much-loved Macassan captain Daeng Rangka stooped to the kidnapping of a young Yolngu woman but this may have been facilitated by illicit trade in alcohol. This woman never returned to Australia. It was only in the 1980s that Yolngu from Elcho Island and Yirrkala traveled to Makassar to meet with her great-grandchildren, their long lost relatives. (Cooke, 1987)

A man called Buthimang (Budiman), known to have lived in the Wessels in the 1800s, was one of those Macassan intermediaries, although he appears to not have been in the employ of any Macassan captains. It is not known where he came from, as Macassan crews included peoples from a range of eastern Indonesian islands. As stated, incorporating outsiders into Yolngu society in the mid- to late 1800s would have provided a window into a new world that potentially held many benefits, and also a possible ally in times of need. They might also be able to procure those goods they were becoming increasingly dependent upon, like sailing canoes, cloth, and metals.

I will return to Buthimang's story later. First we will look further back in time to consider the full range of peoples of non-Yolngu origins who found themselves in the vicinity of the Wessels, and who may be implicated in the Wessels coin cache.

### **Outsiders in Yolngu oral history and mythology**

The Yolngu developed a very elaborate mythology describing the reasons behind the presence of non-Yolngu in their midst, and also strict laws on how they should interact with them. For example, the Yolngu imbued the idea of gleaning the very best of the outside world to make their own world stronger, a sacred one. But allowing outsiders to unduly influence their social and cultural values was taboo and resisted at all cost. This law, these sanctions, and their sacred dimensions, remain a part of the living history of the Yolngu.

From within the Yolngu historical lens, a range of visitors are identifiable, including:

1. Eastern Indonesians who were accidentally blown southwards in storms. Their funerary canoes, burned from the inside, occasionally drift onto Arnhem Land shores. Yolngu would refer to these people to the north as 'universal travelers'. Their sailing canoes were known as Djulpan, a reference to the stars of Orion's belt which is a canoe in Yolngu mythology.
2. Traditional whale and dugong hunters (or Sea Gypsies) who have group names that are traceable even today to various parts of the

Indonesian archipelago. While the Turijene, Papayili, and Gelurru feature in Yolngu myths about the ‘land of the dead’ they are also said to be real people who have been in Arnhem Land. Research indicates that they also worked for Macassans as divers.

3. Yolngu recall in considerable detail the names of specific leaders from a period which may be associated with the Gowa Arnhem Land settlement of 1667.
4. Yolngu oral history makes reference to men with hats of ‘mirror’ landing on the coast, a probable reference to armour, which is suggestive of the Portuguese.
5. Finally, the landscape includes references to specific individuals whose presence is recorded in Yolngu songs and stories but whose provenance is unknown. Just north of Elcho Island, for example, is a reef known as Djiturrk Wangayin, meaning “Djiturrk cries out.” It was here that an Indonesian fishermen named Djiturrk caught his foot in the reef and drowned with the rising tide. Yolngu who knew him, lived with him, traded with him, and heard his cries for help, could do nothing. This place remains off-limits for fishing today, especially for non-Aborigines.

There are many other named outsiders in Yolngu oral history, people like Buthimang, who lived and died on the Australian coastline. Did the coins belong to one of them? Looking back over this list, it seems possible.

The Gowa settlement predates the earliest Dutch coin found in the Wessels, so that would seem to rule it out. The earliest visitors, the Sea Gypsies and traditional fishermen from Tanimbar or Aru lived by the fruits of their own labors and barter, and probably would have had little interest in coins, unless of course they were talisman. The Portuguese, as with Captain Cook and Flinders, were also engaged in the distribution of trinkets in their dealings with Indigenous peoples and they had a direct link to Kilwa, having sacked it in the 1500s. It is doubtful, however, that armoured people were interested in presenting gifts of coins or building relations with Indigenous peoples. Linked to the above ‘Portuguese narrative’ is a site in the English Company’s Islands called Marak which is associated with gunfire, a sure indicator of problematic relations.

Objects with a special value for the Yolngu, like wooden or stone representations of Dreaming entities, are often deposited in caves well away from living areas, or in sacred fresh water sources. The coins in question were found in an eroding creek bank just below the high water mark, suggesting a secular rather than a sacred significance, and that they were of value more to the possessor than to the clan as a whole.

The proximity of the African and Dutch coins when found by Isenberg speaks to the probability that they were deposited together, i.e. part of one and the same collection, and that they perhaps belonged to a single individual Yolngu or outsider, and were not the product of both Portuguese and Macassan offerings.

## The fate of Buthimang

The single most critical factor in considering the history of the Wessel Islands in the late 1700s or the 1800s, when the coins appear to have been deposited, is the devastation of the Yolngu clans that took place at this time. Campbell (2002), in her book *Invisible Invaders*, has documented the spread of small pox from Makassar to Australia, and there was no place harder hit than the Wessels. Yolngu oral history describes a terrible scratching sickness that eventually led to the complete depopulation of the lower Wessels chain and the destruction of many clans.

The mid-1800s, when Buthimang was living on the Wessels was a time of enormous transition. Death for the Yolngu is always attributable to some cause. It is rarely considered natural, except in the case of the very elderly. However, even then, accusations might arise about the sinister influence of some miscreant or sorcerer from a neighbouring island. Buthimang himself may have been a carrier of the 'scratching disease', or have had immunity, which might easily have given rise to suspicion or even hatred of him.

My source for information on the life and death of Buthimang was the late David Burrumarra M.B.E, one the last great leaders of Arnhem Land. His traditional lands included the Wessel Islands, his mother being the last surviving member of the clan from Raragala Island. Burrumarra did not know a lot about Buthimang other than a few key details, such as the fact that he was a survivor of a shipwreck and that he lived with the Yolngu of the Wessels for the remainder of what appears to have been a long life.

According to Campbell Macknight, the foremost authority on the history of contact between Aborigines and Macassans, the name Buthimang is derived from the Javanese (rather than the Makassarese) name Budiman. In his text *The Voyage to Marege*, Macknight identifies a captain called Boodieman from the records of an 1829 voyage to Arnhem Land. The name is also a regular adjective meaning wise, prudent or sensible. It is most probable that there were a number of trepangers with this name on the Australian coast over the duration of the trade.

There are many shipwreck stories in Yolngu oral history, involving both outsiders and Yolngu. In the 1930s, one Warramiri clan member, a relative of Burrumarra, capsized his sailing canoe and survived when the tides carried him to the distant Timorese shore. He ended up in a small village where he married a Timorese woman and raised a large family. These were the days before passports. Even if he could communicate in the local language, the country of his origin, 'Australia', was probably not a word in his vocabulary. He knew no English. Only a scattered few Malay words gleaned from his earlier contact with the Macassans would have enhanced his chances of survival.

Buthimang, likewise, would have relied initially on the Malay/Macassan trading languages in order to get by in his early years on the Wessels. However, while he was adopted into a Yolngu clan, the Golpa, he did not marry a Yolngu woman and had no children, which may have been one reason for his long life.

Other outsiders from later periods who interfered with the Yolngu women were very quickly dispatched. Japanese pearlers in the 1930s, for example, were often attacked and killed for this reason, most notably in Caledon Bay, but also on the Wessels. By all accounts, Buthimang was an integral part of the Wessels Yolngu community.

David Burrumarra also knew that Buthimang did not return to Makassar or other Asian ports even though he probably had ample opportunity to do so. At that time, many Yolngu would make the journey to Makassar with the trepang fishermen. It was not unusual for Macassan crew members to die en route to Australia or Makassar, either lost overboard in storms, or killed in disputes along the coast, so Yolngu were often welcomed aboard in their stead. At the end of the trepang industry in 1907, there were many Yolngu still living in Makassar but their fate remains unknown.

Buthimang was an exemplary character according to Burrumarra. He was well-liked, to the extent that his name has been handed down through the generations to the present. A member of the Wangurri clan at Elcho Island bears his name today. This man's father, Batangga, had been a great mediator in the early days of the mission presence in north-east Arnhem Land. Batangga was Burrumarra's older cousin, and he speculated that by giving his son the name of Buthimang, he was perhaps sending a message that his Indonesian predecessor from the Wessels possessed these same skills in mediation, a quality that he wanted to see in his new child.

Buthimang is also remembered for the names he gave to sacred totems, and whale songs that he wrote and performed around the campfires on Marchinbar Island. I learned from the contemporary (Yolngu) Buthimang that these songs were still known and sung in the 1980s, more than a hundred years on, when I lived at Elcho Island.

As I mentioned, Buthimang's fate is inseparable from the events unfolding as a consequence of the spread of small pox throughout the Wessels chain. There would have been a growing sense of desperation among the Yolngu who were powerless to effect any stay on its advance. People were increasingly facing a dilemma; their desire for the new was irreversible, even while it seemed to be killing them.

In this period of chaos, there was a lingering question about Buthimang's position within Yolngu society. Was he really a friend or was he the source of the curse afflicting the people and therefore a foe? The word Yolngu means human, but at a deeper level, it also means a person who respects and follows Yolngu law and customs. Buthimang was such a person. He had been adopted into the Golpa clan even though he took no part in their sacred ceremonies. He knew, at the very least, to stay clear when these were being held. But then people began to ask what would happen when Buthimang died. Would he be given the full ceremonial burial of his adopted clan or some variation thereof? In Burrumarra's view, at least one person was not prepared to see him buried in the time-honored fashion of the Dreaming

and that person made a preemptive strike with a spear through Buthimang's heart. In this time of confusion and anguish, Buthimang's body was dumped at sea. There was outrage from Buthimang's Yolngu friends and adopted family for he was deeply loved. The mourning process continued for weeks. The identity of his killer was never revealed.

By the early twentieth century, the Wessels was a deserted wilderness. And it was a place of taboo – off-limits to all because of the sadness and pain associated with the destruction of Yolngu life there. All that remained for related Yolngu clans were the memories of the sacred places and Dreaming 'songlines', including noted rock art sites and megaliths, important places linked to the early Gowa presence, individual and Yolngu names that have been handed down to the present, as well as the stories of life-long friends like Buthimang.

### **Explaining the coins**

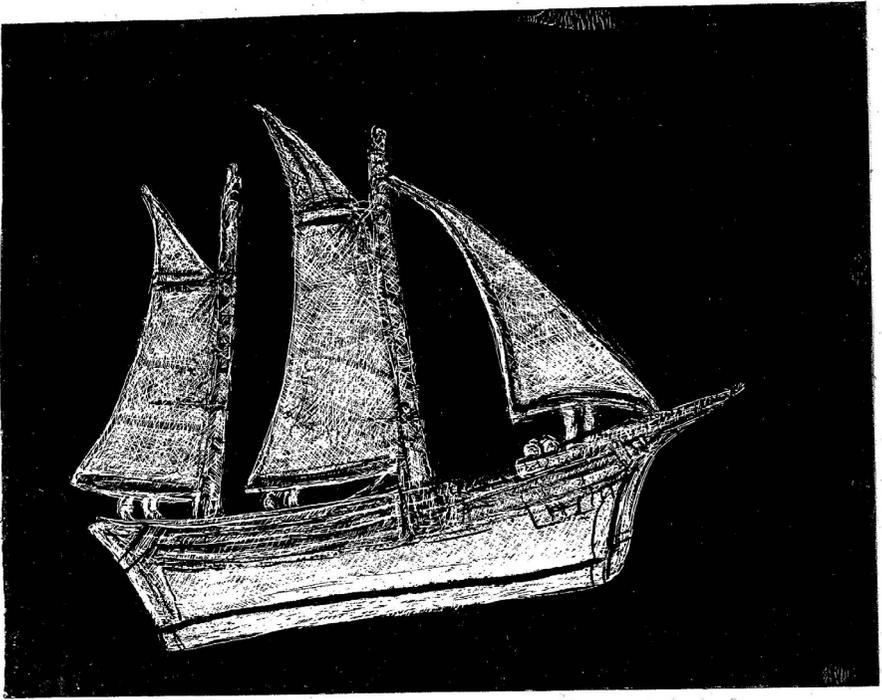
If we consider our initial question of the discovery of rare African coins in terms of a chain of events, then the argument for the involvement of Kilwa traders and also the Portuguese is quite compelling. The Kilwa-Oman-Gudjerat-Malacca-Moluccas sea route was well established by the 1500s and probably for many hundreds of years prior to that. With the advent of Macassan trepanging and their trade with China in this sea delicacy beginning in the 1700s, the link between Africa and north Australia does not seem so extraordinary. Indeed, the likelihood of planned or unplanned exploration, visitation or wreckage on the Wessels is easily envisioned.

My personal view, however, is that the Kilwa and Dutch coins were probably introduced by sailors from Makassar to the Wessels in the first wave of trepanging and exploration in the 1780s. They would have been given as gifts to the owners of the fresh water lagoon in Jensen Bay on Marchinbar Island. This place would have been a very desirable rendezvous point for the Macassan fleet either upon entry to or departing from Arnhem Land. The coins, and whatever other gifts were bestowed upon the Yolngu, may have been perceived as payment for access to their land and resources. The Macassans would have hoped that it would cement a relationship that would last many years. While it is possible that the coins were gifted by the Portuguese to Yolngu at this very same place but many years earlier, this seems unlikely given the fact that the coastline is unstable and has changed, even in the seventy years since the coins were found during World War 2.

The coins would have had little practical value for the Yolngu. Apart from those who had traveled to Makassar on the sailing ships, their meaning would have been all but incomprehensible, and their utilitarian worth, minimal. Some Yolngu clans with highly developed and extensive bodies of law surrounding the meaning of the presence of outsiders may have placed some special importance on the coins as talisman, or as evidence of the power and influence of the Dutch, who they called *Compania* ('The company' i.e Dutch East India Company). But the location of the coins does not bear out this hypothesis.

Did the Yolngu give Buthimang these coins in recognition that to him, and him alone, they had some ritual significance? If the Yolngu believed that such objects were imbued with a power over which they had no ritual authority, they would either dispose of them or try to ensure that they were in the right hands. In the words of old, “Render under Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” In the Yolngu worldview, clans are responsible for maintaining or ‘holding up’ their unique part of the universe through ceremony and living in a particular way towards the land and sea. Buthimang may have been viewed as a person who also had such a role to play, as the outsider within.

The western coastline of the Wessels is very exposed and cyclones are not uncommon during the dry season. Any structures that the Yolngu might have possessed in the 1800s when Buthimang lived there would have been swept away by such a storm. When inclement weather threatened, the Yolngu would take refuge in the caves that surround the fresh water lagoon. Buthimang, too, would have lost his shack along with whatever possessions he had not secreted away. Some of these artifacts would be recovered 100 years later when a lone soldier, undertaking routine surveillance at his Wessels outpost, would accidentally come across them on that same creek where Buthimang used to fish.



*Burrunarra's Mentors*

(Originally published in McIntosh IS 1994, *The Whale and the Cross. Conversations with David Burrunarra M.B.E.*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin)

Burrunarra's education was guided by over thirty mentors. Of them, he said:

No-one can question what I know or what I believe. It is the truth according to the most learned Yolngu in Arnhem Land. They were real professors. They taught me all I know... My professors were men for the world, both Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties. They would tell me about Warramiri belief and also of their own country and law. They were politicians for the rangga [sacred objects]. They followed the law all their life. They lived and died by it. It is from them that I learned the truth about the world.

The following list of men and women, both Yolngu and Balanda, includes a note on their kinship relationship to Burrunarra, their clan affiliation, and the place where the teaching took place. Sentences in italics are direct quotes from Burrunarra.

1. **Ganibirngu, father (Mori), Warramiri clan: Dholtji and the Wessel Islands.**  
*He taught me of Birrinydji, Walitha'walitha and the boat and anchor mythology. He said, "The anchor is from Dholtji alone, not from anywhere else." He didn't want to tell me because I was too young and might do the wrong thing and tell everyone, but as he was ready to die, he did tell me.*
2. **Bambung, father's brother (Mori), Warramiri clan: Dholtji.**  
*He told me about the land and madayin law, marriage law, dancing law and belief law.*
3. **Marik'ngu, grandfather (Ngathi), Galpu clan: Yirringa.**  
Marik'ngu initiated Burrunarra near Rrunhawu in the Wessel Islands and taught him about the Ngaara ceremony for the Warramiri. *He taught me turtle hunting skills.*
4. **Makarrwola, cousin-brother (Wawa), Wangurri clan: Elcho Island and Milingimbi.**  
*He was my educational leader. He taught me the deeper levels of the Ngaara and also Christianity. He helped me to learn Yolngu languages, and explained why we needed to bring all the Mala (clans) together. He also taught me of Lany'tjun and Birrinydji.*

5. **Birindjawuy, cousin-brother (Wawa), Gupapuyngu-Birrkili clan: Milingimbi.**  
*Following the death of my father he taught me about the Warramiri law, especially the whale, so that it would not be taken over by other clans. He also taught me about Christianity.*
6. **Nyambi, grandmother's brother (Maari), Golpa-Mandjikay clan: Wessel Islands.**  
Nyambi taught Burrumarra about the Grok'man and Manungan mythology.
7. **Nyambi, brother (Wawa), Warramiri clan: Elcho Island.**  
*It is not right for a close brother to teach another because of competition between the two but Nyambi said to me, "If you break the law, the law will break you." He taught me about the political life of a clan, its sacred business dealings, and how to manage Warramiri rangga.*
8. **Yilkari, Botiy and Ginygadam, grandmother's brothers (Ngathi), Dambu-galuwumirr clan: Milingimbi.**  
*They were close in belief to my mother's clan, the Brarrngu. They taught me the Djungawun ceremony so that I could initiate my sisters' children. Also I learnt about the Gunapipi ceremony from them.*
9. **Batju, cousin-brother (Wawa), Gupapuyngu-Birrkili clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He taught me about the place of Nangingburra at Elcho Island and what it means.*
10. **Demala, grandmother's brother (Maari), Gupapuyngu-Daygurrurr clan, and Malnggi, cousin-brother (Wawa), Gupapuyngu-Birrkili clan: Milingimbi.**  
*They taught me leadership laws and about Yirringa and the Wessel Islands' whale dance and song. They sought me out. I don't know why they wanted to tell me this. They had been doing the business of Gurumul, a Golpa man. He lived at Yirringa and Marchinbar and was looking after the sacred things there. To see Malnggi doing the whale dance, you could understand its meaning straight away, he did it so well.*
11. **Djawa, nephew (Gurrung), Gupapuyngu-Daygurrurr clan: Milingimbi.**  
*He taught me about the land, tribal people, and the clan leaders - what they are for and what they can do for the people.*
12. **Batangga, cousin-brother (Wawa), Wangurri clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He taught me about the octopus, whale, Marryalyan and Christianity. He opened my eyes to many of the more complex ideas.*

13. **Banburruwuy (also known as Mischell), brother-in-law (Dhuway), Liyagawumirr clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He taught me the Djungawun ceremony and showed me how to lead a good life.*
14. **Dhungala, brother-in-law (Dhuway), Liyagawumirr clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He told me about stone spear making. The law for both Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties.*
15. **Nalcartie, grandmother's brother (Ngathi), Djambarrpuyngu clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He taught me about Warramiri thought, the octopus, whale, Ngulwardo and Marryalyan.*
16. **Djumbola, uncle (Ngapipi), Djambarrpuyngu clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He taught me about behavioural standards. As my father Ganimbirngu had died, he kept a close eye on me.*
17. **Barratjuna, uncle (Mori), Gumatj-Burarrwanga clan: Dholtji.**  
*He taught me about the duck rangga of Wigram Island and the Gomolo (sea bird), and about Dholtji, its history, who it is for, and about Mata-mata.*
18. **Wonggu, brother-in-law (Dhuway), Djapu clan: Yirrkala.**  
*Wonggu kept a close watch on me because he had known my father... He was a real friend. He gave me a safe life.*
19. **Mungurrawuy, grandmother's brother (Maari), Gumatj clan: Yirrkala.**  
*He taught me about behaviour also and not to lose what you've got. We had many discussions about Dholtji. He told me that Cape Arnhem and Port Bradshaw both come under Dholtji. He taught me about bark paintings saying, "...you can use this design but not this one." He showed me octopus, whale, and Ngulwardo paintings and told me about Lanytjun and Gumatj stories.*
20. **Mawulan, nephew (Waku), Rirratjingu clan: Yirrkala.**  
*He married my father's sister (mukul papa). Their child was Wandjuk Marika who later became a Mala leader. Mawulan was very thankful for his son, and so instead of just being friends, he said, "I can give you deeper information on Dholtji, Marchinbar, Yirringa, Cape Arnhem and Port Bradshaw". He also told me about Djang'kawu, but because it's for Dhuwa people, not much.*
21. **Manimba, uncle (Ngapipi), Ngayamil clan: Yirrkala.**  
Manimba taught Burrumarra Warramiri madayin designs and stories.
22. **Birrikidji, uncle (Mori), Dhalwangu clan: Yirrkala.**  
*He told me about the knife and Birrinydji situation at Gurrumurru and how it relates to Warramiri belief.*

23. **Djarrambi, brother (Wawa), Warramiri clan: Yirringa, Marchinbar and Dholtji.**  
*He was the oldest son of Ganimbirngu and it was his responsibility to tell us what had to be done. He taught me about Dholtji, Cape Arnhem, Port Bradshaw, Galupa and so on.*
24. **Motuwuy, grandfather (Maari), Yalukal clan: Mooroonga Island.**  
*He was the last man of the Yalukal people. He taught me about the whale.*
25. **Walalipa, nephew (Waku), Golumala clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He told me that Djang'kawu was for Dhuwa people and not to touch anything Dhuwa.*
26. **Bandulu, grandfather (Ngathi), Marrakulu clan: Yirrkala.**  
Bandulu taught the Djungawun ceremony to Burrumarra.
27. **Djingulul, uncle (Maralkur), Golpa-Mandjikay clan: Wessel Islands.**  
*He taught me whale design and stories, the madayin aspects of the reef fish Narawili, Wanarrpa and Gukuwal, and also of the kangaroo and Mandjikay madayin.*
28. **Daymbali, nephew (Gathu), Warramiri-Mandjikay clan: Elcho Island.**  
*He told me of the gurrtha (fire) rangga and that it is not for Gumatj only, but at Matamata too. He also taught me about the dugong and dog stories, and for Nangingburra and the diving duck.*
29. **Barrwitj, cousin-brother (Wawa), Ritharngu clan: Milingimbi.**  
Barrwitj taught Burrumarra about the muthali (duck), Lany'tjun, and also for Donydji, and its connections to the Warramiri clan.
30. **Domi, cousin (Wawa), Wangurri clan: Elcho Island.**  
*Domi taught me that if you 'humbug' for miyalk (woman) or rangga or do the wrong thing towards Dholtji or Dhalingbuy, then big trouble will come for my leaders.*
31. **Munyu, uncle (Ngapipi), Galpu clan: Elcho Island.**  
*Listen when the leader gives you a job or any position. Keep it. It will be your power for entry into important discussions and other matters.*
32. **Banambirr, grandmother (Maari), Gupapuyngu-Birrkili clan: Milingimbi.**  
*She said to me, "Don't run away from Yirringa. Keep it. Don't lose it. Don't let others mix its rangga with theirs."*
33. **Wanambiwuy, mother (Nyandi), Brarrngu clan: Elcho Island.**  
*She said to me "Don't sell things from Yirringa."*
34. **Bamatja, aunt (Mukul Papa), Warramiri clan: Yirrkala.**  
*She used to talk about Warramiri beliefs daily. She said, "Don't run away or hide yourself. Stand up."*

35. **Harold Shepherdson, missionary at Elcho Island.**  
*'Sheppy' said to Burrumarra "Don't lie to God or to the people. God knows."*
36. **Theodore Webb, missionary at Milingimbi.**  
*Webb had come from the devil in the time of war, and changed himself. He said to me, "If you're a Christian, then be a Christian. Leave the madayin."*
37. **Reverend Ellemor missionary at Milingimbi.**  
*He said to me, "Don't steal things from others, including women."*
38. **Wilbur Chaseling, missionary at Yirrkala.**  
*He showed me the meaning of the cross, its madayin aspects and the meaning of the mission.*
39. **Fred Gray, English trepanger and beachcomber at MataMata, Caledon Bay and Groote Eylandt.**  
*He said to me "Become wise and the people will respect you. Seek intelligence."*
40. **Donald Thomson, Australian anthropologist: Elcho Island.**  
*He taught me about how we could be friends with the Balanda.*
41. **Professor Ronald Berndt, Australian anthropologist: Elcho Island.**  
*Professor Berndt said to me "Be a Yolngu for Australia."*
42. **Emeritus Prof J Cawte: Elcho Island.**  
*He was a close friend who taught me about the medical world.*



## APPENDIX 2

### *'Oceanal Man: An Aboriginal View of Himself' by David Burrumarra*

(Reproduced with permission from the *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, vol 1, no. 3, 1977).

*Burrumarra was known by his Arnhem Land contemporaries as the father of Aboriginal sea rights, and in this paper he provides the reader with an intimate glimpse into what it means to be an 'oceanal man.'*

**W**hat my father told me as a boy makes me the man that I am. My father told me the historical genesis of the Warramiri clan. I am as grateful to him as I am for the Warramiri country of Dholtji and our thirty-four islands.

The students at the university accept the 'meritship' of the professor when the professor gives an important lecture. When the students in the class accept that knowledge, the students become as himself. In the same way I am *in: in* because I have listened to the lecture from my father on genesis.

When I was eight or nine and living on the islands, my father began to teach me because he knew that his time was coming. You can say that nobody knows, that we can never tell when our time is coming. But my father knew and before he finished from this place he wanted me to know how we began and how we were created in the beginning.

People in the Dholtji area, from either side of the Pobasso Straits (Malay Road), come from the sea. There is another story for the inland peoples, how their forefathers were created by the Wawilak Sisters and the Djang'kawu that Professor Ronald Berndt wrote about. But we saltwater people are split off and our creation is different.

My father told me that we started our life from the coral reef. This coral, known as Ngulwardo, was alive before it changed itself into rock. It was the first form of life. At this time our two great ancestral spirits were in these parts, and they were thinking about creating human beings. Birrinydji was the head authority for the land, he of the knife law and the sword law, who held the power, and his servant or worker for the sea was Marryalyan, who was the flesh-maker or image-changer. It was Marryalyan who changed all forms – sea, cloud, rainbow, and now he had the task of making human beings from the sea.

Birrinydji and Marryalyan wanted to make a man in the sea but they realized that the oceanal human has nowhere to get the bones from the floor of the ocean. They thought hard about the skeleton and decided that they could get it from the coral which resembles bone.

So in the genesis of the earth's creatures, the coral was shaped into a skeleton and the human shape was called Ngulwardo. But now the flesh, which means the meat and the blood, had to go into and around the skeleton, including the heart and other organs. So Marryalyan added meat to the bones. And now there was this oceanal man living in the sea and he was called Rambila – the Squid-Man.

Rambila was different from ordinary men in two ways. His lungs were different because he did not breathe air. He got his refreshment of wind from the salt water. His brain was also different. He had a different feeling condition and his thoughts were older and wiser. Rambila, the oceanal man, used to think, looking at his hand, that this was not enough protection. "I cannot be safe from my enemies. I need other hands in able for me to rise and sink rapidly in the water or to pull myself under a rock or to hold firm against the tide and currents of the reef."

Hearing about the trouble the oceanal man was having, Marryalyan came to the rescue. He brought Rambila a changed image with new and longer hands. He grew longer arms and became Manda, the Octopus-Man.

So Ngulwardo the coral man became Rambila the Squid-Man who became Manda the Octopus-Man. The next step was for Manda to become a man on the dry land. So the water form of Manda changed into a land-going form of Manda ready for this important step in the evolution of man from the sea.

I told you that Marryalyan was the flesh-giver for the Warramiri – the image-maker. He is the servant of Birrinydji who is the authority for these clans at Dholtji, Gurrumurru and Marchinbar. But beyond them, managing affairs for all the Yirritja clans all over Arnhem Land is Lany'tjun. So Lany'tjun sent a man and a woman into the Dholtji homelands. They walked and lived and loved together and soon they were having a baby. When Marryalyan noticed this he sent the spirit of his flesh of the second or land-going form of Manda and of Rambila to this young mother so that the baby became a special salt water kind, which was the first Warramiri child. This happened in the beginning and continues to happen at the present time.

I am a Warramiri. Everything that I have is not my own but comes from those three, and also the whale. I have these spirits in me. I have the oceanal man in me. I have their honour and they are my madayin, my revered ancestors.

My father told me the story of the beginning of the world, how men were created from the sea, how the flesh was served to the coral and the spirits of all were sent by Marryalyan to the child in the woman. So Marryalyan is the father of the Warramiri. He served them with spirits and he is the basis of our strong law and the 'fleshness' of the human. The Warramiri has been created and developed from the sea and the seashore.

My flesh and my body are a mixture of oceanal elements and land elements, mixed together by the ancestors Birrinydji and Marryalyan. If you understand this much about the Warramiri, you understand enough to go on with the story. If you don't recognize that we have the oceanal man within us, you will have a hard time with my opinions. We are what we believe.



*Excerpts from ‘When will we know we are reconciled?’*

(Originally published as: McIntosh IS 2000, ‘When will we know we are reconciled?’ *Anthropology Today*, vol. 16, no.5, pp. 3-11.)

Mistrust and mutual accusations of betrayal and obstruction are the distinguishing characteristics of the present relationship between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Australia...Expressions of Aboriginal interest in, or understandings of, the reconciliation process, have rarely appeared in the popular media, with the exception of expressions that critics claim are a never-ending series of unrealistic demands.

This paper explores a possible avenue for consultation and negotiation based upon a growing and influential international movement advocating alliances and partnerships between indigenous peoples and states. In the anthropological literature, Laura Nader (2000) refers to such accommodations as harmony ideologies. In her study of ethnographies of the New World, Africa and the Pacific, Nader concludes that the imposition of harmonic dispute resolution methodologies by colonists as a tool for pacification and control has resulted in the adoption of harmony strategizing by indigenous peoples as a necessary measure for the maintenance of their of their cultural integrity and the regaining of sovereignty. In Australia, the reconciliation agenda is clearly based on the notion of trading justice for harmony; a coercive consensus built around the premise that indigenous Australians, as advocates of a harmony ideology, have historically and will in the future, demonstrate a willingness to compromise and find common ground...

In this paper, following a general introduction to the topic of reconciliation in Australia, I present two extraordinary people, one expatriate Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal from the United Kingdom, in order to examine harmony strategizing among indigenous peoples, and also comment on its usefulness as a way of viewing Australia’s reconciliatory strivings...

**A new era of forgiveness**

We live in an era of forgiveness. Whether apologizing is a diplomatic tactic designed to stave off long overdue litigation, or whether there are genuine feelings of remorse and a desire to set the record straight and make amends through reparations is uncertain... Even though the voice of the Australian government imparts the message that non-Aboriginals should not feel guilt for the

atrocities committed by their ancestors, a majority appear to believe, within this global momentum for reform, that it is time to do the right thing...

A 'fair go' for all is Australia's national motto and many Australians are motivated to pursue a socially just society. However in 1999, Ron Brunton and Gary Johns published a booklet entitled *Reconciliation: What does it mean?* which cast doubt on the reconciliation agenda. They claimed to speak on behalf of the silent majority when they said that authorities should accept the fact that Aborigines and non-Aborigines are already reconciled and that, should the outcome of the reconciliatory push be a consensus regarding a treaty, there is no surviving pan-Aboriginal collective with which non-Aborigines could reconcile. To Brunton and Johns there exists only a motley collection of scattered tribes and individuals, few of whom are traditionally oriented, deserving, at best, of only limited temporary assistance. The rest have been well and truly compensated for the losses incurred as a result of colonization and need now to make a go of their lives on the same terms as the non-Aboriginal majority...

But Brunton and Johns gloss over a key topic at the heart of the impasse, i.e. the so far little examined and unfortunate confusion of objectives – Aborigines seeking 'justice before reconciliation', and non-Aborigines seeking a national identity for themselves as people who enjoy their privileged status in relation to the land, often at the expense of the First Australians...

It is the meeting point of these two competing notions of reconciliation that merits further exploration, and the following anecdotes challenge the stereotypical thinking that currently hinders the reconciliation process.

### **Introducing Chief Doctor Robert Roberts**

*More than stunned. I was beside myself. The Australian anthropologist on a five-year stint as managing director of Cultural Survival Inc., a Massachusetts-based Indigenous peoples' advocacy NGO, meets his subject on foreign soil; not in a traveling Aboriginal cultural exposition, or networking with Indigenous leaders at a UN forum in New York or Geneva, but running a highly successful 'love' bakery/restaurant in my new abode: Main Street, USA. Appearing to be in his 40s, definitely Aboriginal but perhaps with some South Sea Islander (Kanak) heritage, Chief Doctor Robert Roberts speaks with an American accent with a hint of Australian and Spanish, and mumbles incomprehensively the details of his homeland and clan affiliation.*

*The published claim of Roberts is that 33 scientists worked on his bread and bagel formula (which contains secret Aboriginal ingredients); that Australian chili chowder is an Aussie staple; and that he fled tribal warfare in New South Wales for Europe in his youth in the 1950s. A life-threatening / life-changing experience occurred in the early 1990s while he was mining for gold and diamonds in Venezuela (or on his sacred country at an unnamed site in the Outback, as reported in the Malden Observer, 14 February 2000). Following a cave collapse, he was unconscious*

for four and a half days before being rescued; an accident that turned him from a lucrative career in neurosurgery in the UK and Holland to bagel manufacture. Awakening from his coma, he had a vision of love bagels and pizza as the means for bringing peace to the world – and Main Street USA was where he would begin his crusade. In his vision from God, the central hole of the bagel signifies that “we have a hole in our hearts until it is filled with love.”

The many inconsistencies in his story-telling were puzzling. Perhaps he was taken from Australia at a very early age as part of the Stolen Generation, and has never been back. He would not say. It was obvious, however, that he was cashing in on the Australia-craze sweeping the US. The images so frequently presented on cable television: the exotic Outback, the mystical Dreaming of the Aborigines, and so on, have created a fictional space that exists only in advertising, and it is here that the bagel entrepreneur finds his identity and livelihood.

As a person who has spent over twenty years working and living with Aboriginal Australians – teaching in jail, preparing documents for deliberation in sea and land rights claims, promoting the Aboriginalization of the Outback health care system, implementing bilingual and dialect programs in Aboriginal schools – my experiences all lead me to view my bagel-selling compatriot in a particular light.

In contemporary Australia, the anthropologist, for better or worse, has a legitimizing role as far as Aborigines are concerned. Almost by definition, members of the profession interpret and authenticate or at least justify ‘Aboriginality’ in the public eye, and in more cases than not, pursue the recognition of the rights of those who they write about, and to whom they owe their careers. From the anthropologist’s standpoint it is considered perhaps as a symbiotic relationship, but from the Aboriginal perspective it is, of course, more ambiguous.

Confronted with the bageler, I am non-plussed. I watch him ordering his American staff around, welcoming his international guests with great aplomb, and writing cheques to the local charities which he generously supports. My reaction, of course, says a lot about me. He did not fit any established stereotype that I might have about Aborigines. It was immediately obvious that there was no place for the anthropologist in the bagel-maker’s life except as a customer and perhaps as a friend – a realization that spoke to me about what needs to happen as a consequence of the reconciliation process in Australia. At the very least, as individuals, we must confront and address our conditioned thinking about the other and our self-assigned role in their ‘rescue’.

The ‘love’ bagel maker is an individual, but he claims membership in an Aboriginal collective, not at a community level, but in the international marketplace, outside of the politics of Indigenous representation. He promotes the idea of Aborigines not as the ‘white man’s burden’ but as Australians who remember and honour their heritage – even if it is only a memory – and from afar he actively strives to ensure that they have their rights upheld by the Australian majority as a condition of their continued membership in society at large.

## Introducing Northern Ireland Druid Keith Payne

*In the early 1990s, a spiritual advisor to the Rolling Stones, a Burren-based Druid by the name of Keith Payne, makes a diversion to the Northern Territory while the band completes its Australian and New Zealand tour. Keith has a job to do, one that he should have done many years earlier. In the early 1970s, while undertaking his Druidic trials – walking the ley lines from East Anglia to Cornwall – he finds himself atop Glastonbury Tor at the time of the Equinox. Crouched in the meditative pose of the Buddha, he awaits the first light and divine inspiration. Notepads and drawing materials are handy. As he opens his eyes he looks down not upon the ruins of the Glastonbury Abbey or the rolling Mendip Hills, but, rather, his field of vision is completely occupied with the head and shoulders of an Australian Aboriginal man – none other than David Burrumarra M.B.E. of Galiwin'ku.*

*In his vision, the Druid is instructed in Aboriginal law by the elder and to him are revealed the sacred designs, objects, and totems of Burrumarra's Warramiri clan that lie deep beneath the earth and in the sea. The Druid had no prior experience in Aboriginal Australia, or Australia for that matter, and his limited international connections at that time were insufficient in seeking out the real-life identity of his newly-found spiritual guide. Over the years the talking image of Burrumarra reappeared to him on several occasions, but none so powerfully as that first day.*

*Shortly after Burrumarra's death in 1994, the year Payne joined the Rolling Stones on their Down Under tour, once again he was visited by his Aboriginal advisor.*

*Payne's search this time alerted him to Burrumarra's obituary in The Australian and other writings of mine, and through me, he requested an audience with Burrumarra's immediate family. I was not in a position to say that he was a fraud – he didn't care if I believed him or not – and he was not really sure what would come from a meeting with the relatives, or that he should even follow through with his unusual quest.*

*Though the family were at first as skeptical of the newcomer as I was, they were intrigued by his story, and openly welcomed him into their homes. One of Burrumarra's sons, reflecting on the extraordinary level of knowledge that Keith had of Warramiri traditional culture, believed that upon Burrumarra's death, the old man's spirit must have gone to the Druid, who was now to promote Aboriginal law in the international realm. Another son was impressed by the fact that this communication between an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal had transcended all the ugly politics and racism that plagues intercultural relations, saying "That's the way things must be in the future if there is to be reconciliation." Here was a foreigner responding to the importance of Burrumarra's great learning, appreciating that its significance rises above local or national squabbles with what the family describe as a profound message for humanity.*

## Conclusion

In both of these scenarios we are introduced to the notions of adoption, membership, and harmony. Roberts presents to society at large an essentialized Aboriginal self far removed from the gaze of a judgmental non-Aboriginal com-

munity. Not a victim, but a successful businessman with a unique public relations campaign, Roberts encourages his customers to support the Aboriginal cause. Payne, likewise, brings together diverse collectives, but this time at the level of the sacred. Such alignments, or models of reconciliation, are based on the supposition that we are dealing with collectives that can adopt outsiders in order to promote their own economic or spiritual agendas, and also uphold the worth of the adoptee's community of origin. For Roberts, all people are honorary indigenous people, when and if they buy his bagels and spread words of love and harmony. Galiwin'ku Aborigines adopted Payne on the understanding that he honours clan traditions, and in full knowledge that his presence provides an opening into the world of the Druid. Can there be any pretense to reconciliation without such mutually beneficial adoptive strategies? If we apply such logic to Australia at large, will a rapprochement promote Aboriginal self-worth and self-reliance as members of a supportive adoptive community, and vice versa?

At Galiwin'ku, David Burrumarra would refer to this 'adoption' strategy as 'membership and remembrance.' It is a strategy that is reflected in the local nomenclature. *Yolngu* and *Balanda* are the words most commonly used to denote Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but they have other meanings. A non-Aboriginal adoptee in the Aboriginal realm is sometimes referred to as a *Yolngu*, for the word means 'person'. *Balanda*, from this perspective, refers to one who is ignorant of Aboriginal law and who lives outside of Aboriginal kinship circles. Reconciliation then, for many residents of Galiwin'ku, will be achieved when there is no longer a term like *Balanda*. Australians will all be *Yolngu* – people who recognize and honour Aboriginal law.

The case studies involving Dr Roberts and Druid Payne, when viewed in the light of the harmony strategies of various indigenous peoples worldwide and in the Australian Outback, undermine Brunton and John's argument that non-Aborigines should not bother to try and resolve their need to seek redemption for the sins of their ancestors and should simply reject as unnecessary the majority of Aborigines' demands. Their image of reconciliation is closely aligned with that of the Australian government, i.e. a false notion in which the oppressors stress 'moving ahead with our lives', without giving proper consideration to restorative and remedial measures...

Reconciliation is about creating a new pan-Australian identity in which Aborigines and non-Aborigines are equals. It is about creating a new society that honours its indigenous and its non-indigenous heritages and provides justice and equity for all... It therefore behooves Australians, young and old, to remember and facilitate each other's membership by whatever means it takes. At present, all we have is an unnavigable quagmire of ignorance which is driving a wedge of misunderstanding between us.

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