

Fire, Water and Land in Indigenous Australia



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Acknowledgments to the Traditional Owners and Custodians

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians across the land on which we conducted work. We pay our respects to the Elders of all languages referred to in this work, both past and present.

Acknowledgments

The impetus for this book comes from the proclamation of 2019 as the Year of Indigenous Languages. The editors thank all the Indigenous people who were involved directly and indirectly in the process of making this book. We would like to acknowledge their work, support and dedication. We are very grateful that many people shared knowledge on their language and culture with us. Discussion on these chosen topics has been challenging at times but it is rewarding in that it promotes understanding of Indigenous views which are often seen as opposing western scientific views. This book is the tangible product of close and long-standing collaborations between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous researchers over the years. We would like to thank all the contributors for the insights they offer in their respective fields and for their co-operation. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to our colleagues Dr. Bentley James, Dr. Doug Marmion, Dr. Knut Olawsky and Prof. Jacky Troy who encouraged us and gave us their support. We are very grateful to the editing team: Mareike Plenk, Anja Steger, Thomas Batchelor, Sandra Ringsmut and Kathrin Brandt. We also thank the reviewers who ensured the academic quality of the contributions.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>Marie Carla D. Adone and Melanie A. Brück</i>	
Saltwater Burning.....	5
<i>Glenn James and Bentley James</i>	
“Country Services People, not People Service Country”	33
<i>Anthony Kerr</i>	
The Role of Land, Fire and Water in the Kurna Cultural and Linguistic Renaissance	43
<i>Rob Amery and Katrina Karlapina Power</i>	
“Cultural Burning: The Way Forward for Healthy Landscapes”	66
<i>Anthony Kerr</i>	
“Caring for dat land..., as mob bin teik keya of dat Kantri longtaim”	81
<i>Marie Carla D. Adone, Thomas Batchelor, Rozanne Bilminga, Melanie A. Brück, Bryan Gallagher and Jimmy Paddy</i>	
River(s) of Resistance	98
<i>David Kern</i>	
The Contributors.....	114

Introduction

Marie Carla D. Adone and Melanie A. Brück

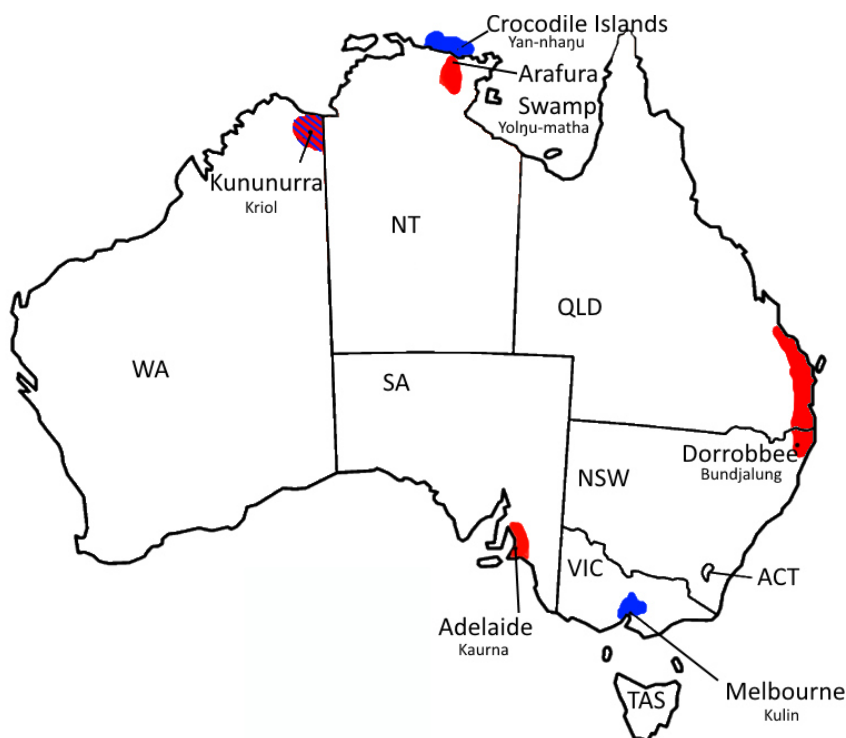
The year 2019 has been proclaimed the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The main aim was to raise awareness on the fact that Indigenous languages are disappearing as well as the need to promote, preserve, and save these languages. Furthermore, measures were taken both at the national and international levels with the collaboration of a number of agencies to improve the situation. Australia has been identified to have “experienced the greatest and most rapid loss of languages over the last century” (Koch and Nordlinger 2014: 4). Of the approximately 250 or more languages spoken in 1788, only 15 to 18 are transmitted to the next generation of children as first languages. The remaining 100 or so languages have a small number of elderly speakers (Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014). As language and culture are closely intertwined, the disappearance of Indigenous languages also results in the disappearance of Indigenous Knowledge.

One of the three major pillars of the Centre for Australian Studies (henceforth CAS) at the University of Cologne rests on Indigenous Studies. The Centre sees itself as an agency which promotes studies on Indigenous languages and knowledge in Australia among others, with a special interest on the issue of language endangerment and loss. As such, this book should be regarded as a contribution of the CAS to celebrate the International Year of Indigenous Languages. It raises awareness, promotes and supports work on Indigenous matters.

In this respect, this publication highlights the richness of Indigenous linguistic and cultural Knowledge by focusing on three themes vital to life: Fire, Water and Land. These themes are deeply connected to each other in the ecological Knowledge systems of Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, humans and nature are interconnected. Human beings are seen as part of the ecosystems and cannot be fully grasped or managed if separated from it. This view is implicit in the Indigenous concept of *Country*. By focussing on the role played by fire, water and land in Indigenous Australia we aim to achieve a better understanding of the complex nature of the interconnectedness between humans and nature which is reflected

in a broad array of cultural practices (e.g. environmental conservation, cultural governance, language revitalisation programmes, and documentation of sacred sites).

In this book we compiled six papers. Four of these papers are articles providing an overview of either one of the three themes or the three themes together. These contributions come from different angles including anthropology, linguistics, literary and cultural studies and geography. In addition, there are two interviews with two leading Indigenous leaders who represent the Indigenous voice on these themes.



Map 1: Location of Indigenous language groups represented in the contributions of this book.

In their article titled **Saltwater Burning**, Glenn James and Bentley James take a close look at the Yan-nhaŋu speaking Yolŋu people. They are the traditional owners of the Crocodile Islands in Australia's Northern Territory. For eons, with the changing seasonal winds, Yan-nhaŋu and kinsmen would travel the islands, visiting and refreshing ancestral powers in sacred sites, gathering seasonally available resources, and burning the country. As the colonial state and society encroach and the old people die this remarkable inheritance is at risk. Today, young people ask "how can we 'know' when all those who know are gone?" Through the vision of elder Laurie Baymarrwanga they provide a glimpse of how the Yan-nhaŋu approach to 'caring for their country' is embedded in ancestral connection, language, ritual and song - how burning saltwater country resonates with ancestral essence and yet is increasingly driven by

an emerging vision and economy of modern land and sea management. Amidst the manifest benefits of resourcing access to and management of sea country lays a tension with the continuity of Yan-nhaŋu life. Can this movement simultaneously offer the tools and means to help define the concerns of inevitable loss and assist Yan-nhaŋu sea managers bring those values, unique to their identity, with them into the challenging future?

In his interview with Otto Bulmaniya entitled **“Country Services People, not People Service Country”** Anthony Kerr and Otto discuss fire management. In late November 2017 Anthony met with Otto Bulmaniya Campion, a senior Traditional Owner and a senior Gurruwilling Ranger at Ramingining. A decade before Otto had introduced Anthony to Arnhem Land and they have collaborated ever since on various natural resource management projects. Otto who has been heavily involved in fire management in the Arafura Swamp region for many years, discusses in the interview some of the major land management and cultural challenges that he faces.

In the paper entitled **“The Role of Land, Fire and Water in the Kurna Cultural and Linguistic Renaissance”** Rob Amery, and Katrina Karlapina Power discuss the case of the Kurna people of Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains in South Australia. Their language bore the brunt of colonisation in 1836. Within just 25 years Kurna ceased to be spoken on an everyday basis as a result of a dramatic plummeting of the population and shift to English. Kurna was documented soon after colonisation by two German missionaries. Their records reveal the importance of land, fire and water to Kurna existence. These three elements not only provided the basics of life, but were highly significant spiritually. Furthermore, fire was used to shape the land which ensured a plentiful supply of game into the future. Kurna is now undergoing a linguistic and cultural renaissance where contemporary people are turning back to their roots and are seeking justice and redress. Within this context Kurna people seek recognition of their rights to land and water, whilst fire is playing an increasingly important ceremonial role. Many young Kurna men have taught themselves the art of making fire by rubbing sticks together. Fire and smoke have re-emerged as important elements within funerals, return of human remains, cleansing rituals, welcomes and other forms of public performance.

In the interview entitled **“Cultural Burning: The Way Forward for Healthy Landscapes”** Anthony Kerr talks to Oliver Costello. Oliver Costello is a Bundjalung man, and leads the Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation, which builds on the Firesticks Initiative he co-

founded in 2009 while completing university and the Centre for Sustainability Leadership Fellowship Program. In the interview Anthony and Oliver discuss the case of the Dorrobeebe Grass Reserve where some burning was planned. Oliver also talks about his life and the route into fire management that he chose to take. One of the highlights in this interview is the discussion of Indigenous Knowledge of fire practices and its implementation combined with other governance systems.

In the paper **“Caring for dat land..., as mob bin teik keya of dat Kantri longtaim”:** **Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Reflected in Kununurra Kriol** Marie Carla D. Adone, Thomas Batchelor, Rozanne Bilminga, Melanie A. Brück, Bryan Gallagher and Jimmy Paddy discuss how Indigenous Knowledge on the environment is reflected in Kununurra Kriol. In the Kununurra area of northern Western Australia, the Miriwoong people, similar to other Indigenous groups over the continent, have been caring for the land they have been living on for thousands of years. Since the arrival of Europeans on Miriwoong country in the 19th century, however, colonial pressures have resulted in a gradual loss of the traditional Miriwoong language in the community. In its place, Kriol has arisen as the common lingua franca between Miriwoong community members in the Kununurra area. Whilst very few people speak the traditional Miriwoong language today, its role as the substrate language in the genesis of the local Kriol language is undeniable. This is witnessed not only in the lexicon but also in the cultural practices of the Miriwoong people.

The last paper entitled **River(s) of Resistance – Narratives of Water and struggles for “ex-colonialism” in the Work of Tony Birch** is written by David Kern. In this paper Kern explores the narrative figurations of water in the work of Indigenous Australian writer, scholar and environmental activist Tony Birch. Offering a close-reading of selected aspects of his second novel *Ghost River* (2015), he analyses how water can be understood as both a site as well as agent of resistance, and he theorises how Tony Birch’s novel is an excellent case in point of narrative fiction as an exit strategy from colonialism. What matters greatly in a time called the Anthropocene, he suggests, is the question of inter-personal relationships and issues of relationality in general. For this reason, he explores how relationship-based decolonisation methodology and theory can be brought into productive conversation with *Ghost River*. He concludes by ways of reflecting about the importance of place in general and water in particular, in the context of decolonisation as a recovery and the formation of equitable relationships.

Saltwater Burning

Glenn James and Bentley James

Dhābiya naṅapuluma dhul'miyama waṅgalaṅa limalama?

Wanhaba, ṅupanaba romnha! (Baymarrwaṅa 1999)

'Why do we burn saltwater country? It's the law!' (James 1999)

1. Saltwater burning

The Yan-nhaṅu speaking Yolṅu¹ people are the traditional owners of the seas and islands of the Crocodile Islands of Castlereagh Bay in North East Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. Since sea levels reached their present height between 5,000 to 8,000 years ago, these islands and the reefs, shoals and surrounding saltwater country are the ancestral home of the Yan-nhaṅu people. Below the seas this land has been the ancestral home to these people for 65,000 years. Known as saltwater people, the Yan-nhaṅu people speak the Yan-nhaṅu language their ancestors bestowed to them on their travels around the coasts, across the sea and the islands. As the ancestors travelled, they created and named special places in the Yan-nhaṅu language. This country is known as saltwater country. These special named places and sacred sites contain the spiritual essence and power of the ancestors. These places share the names, ancestral substance and metaphysical constituents of the people of the islands, a provenance bestowing an indissoluble bond and responsibility to care for kin and country. It is this bond that compels the people to burn the woodlands and coastal areas of their saltwater country in harmony with ancestral laws.

This remarkable inheritance is at risk. With the changing seasonal winds, the Yan-nhaṅu and their Yolṅu kinsmen would travel around this country visiting and refreshing the

¹ Yolṅu (Yolngu) is a term used by Yolṅu people and researchers since the 1960s to describe the Indigenous people of North East Arnhem Land speaking languages called collectively Yolṅu-Matha (literally 'people's tongue') and refers to a population of some 7,000 people. Earlier anthropological literature has referred to these people as the Yorngnar (Wilkins 1924), Murngin (Warner 1937), the Wulamba (Berndt 1951, 1952, 1955) and the Miwuyt (Shapiro 1981). According to Schebeck (1968), the term Yolṅu was introduced into the linguistics literature by O'Grady et al. (1966).

ancestral powers in sacred sites while gathering the rare and seasonally available resources that bless the land. This pattern of inter-island travel diminished after the coming of the mission. With the cessation of this pattern of seasonal travel and burning, beginning a century ago, the knowledge of managing their island estates began to be forgotten with the passing of older generations. Priceless ancestrally inherited knowledge arising from uncounted generations of intimate coexistence with the islands and marine environment is all but lost to current generations and to the world. This story offers a perspective on the current struggle to reclaim/rebuild this sacred knowledge and modes of intergenerational transmission.

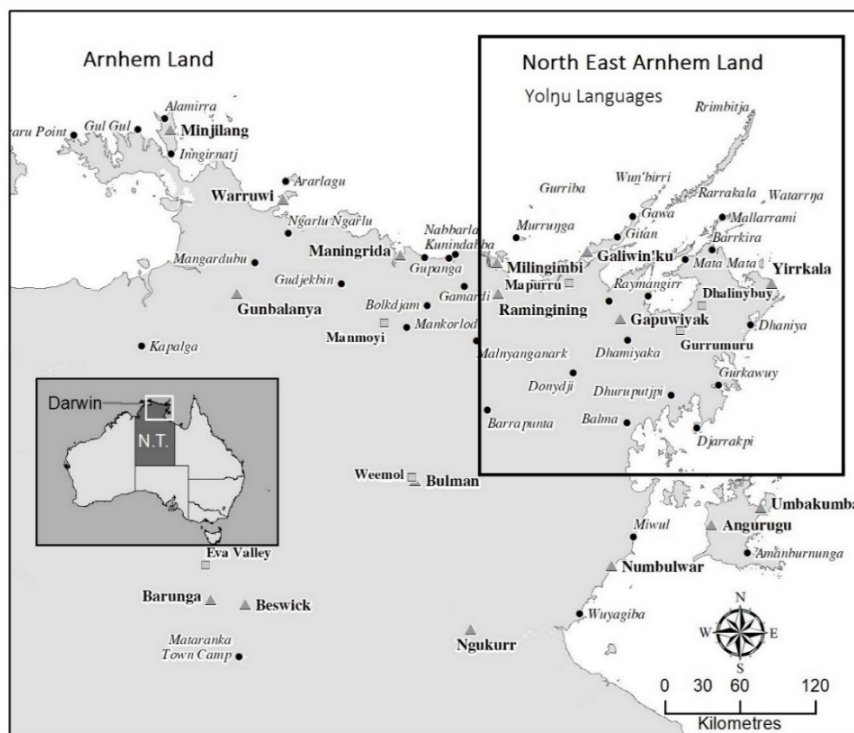
Today young people ask, “how can we ‘know’ when all those with unique knowledge have passed?” Capturing this provincial challenge requires at least a glimpse of pre-contact life on the Crocodile Islands and a picture of resilience in the life of the people of the Crocodile Islands as they struggle to recreate the pattern of inter-island travel and burning of the Yan-nhaṅu ancestors. We seek to reveal what ‘caring for country’ and for the spirits of country might mean, through stories, by retelling stories that we have collected from the people of the Crocodile Islands in their Yan-nhaṅu language and in the more widely used Yolṅu-Matha language of North East Arnhem Land. In particular, we focus on one very special Yan-nhaṅu woman’s mission to give children back knowledge of their country and the language of their ancestors. In the vision and virtue of Laurie Baymarrwaṅa we find hope for the future. A vision of revivifying elemental links with the ancestral essences of the country, embedded in songs, stories and language, heard on the voice of the wind, in the songs of the birds, in the seasonal revisitation of spirits of country.

We then describe local management tools developed by a new generation of contemporary land managers to pick up the threads of traditional fire regimes and retain the metaphysical drivers of burning saltwater country. This work is critical as the number of old people who are still alive to inform this process are declining quickly with the relentless march of the settler state and the impact of its priorities in the production and movement of global capital – in particular the so called neo-liberal state.

2. The Crocodile Islands

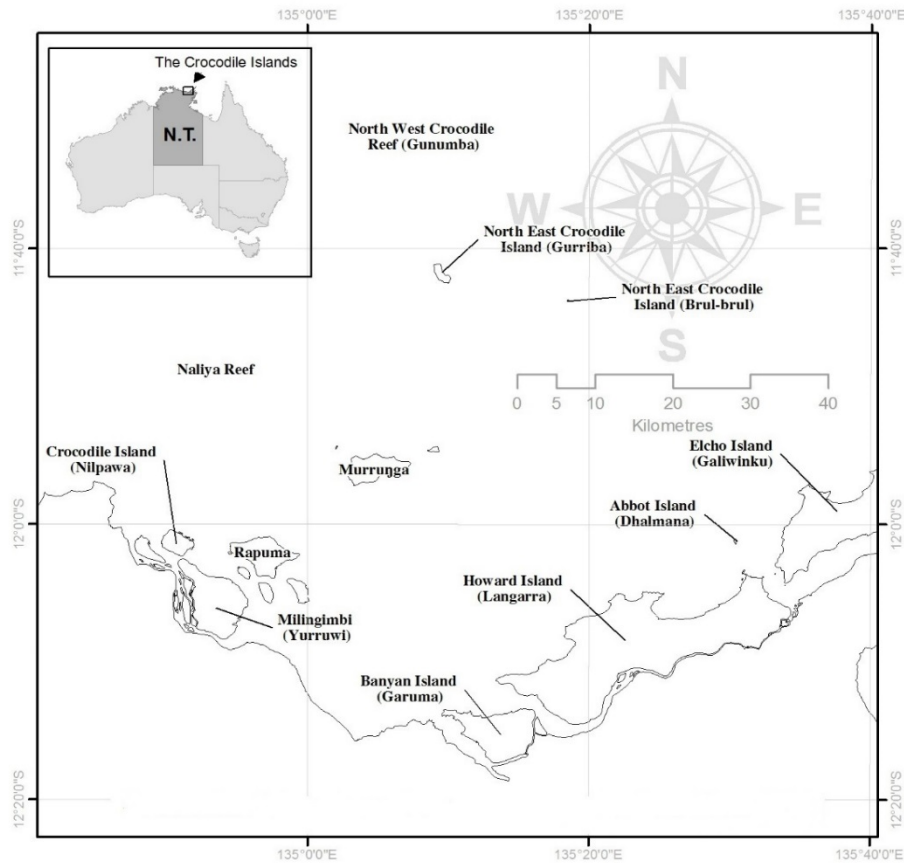
2.1. Where are the Crocodile Islands?

The Crocodile Islands are found at the most westerly edge of the Yolŋu language enclave (see Maps 1 and 2 below). At the beginning of last century, the coming of the Milingimbi Methodist Overseas Mission (MOM) heralded the Australian Settler State's first formal physical occupation of Yolŋu country. Map 1 illustrates the extent of Arnhem Land and the major ex-mission communities and smaller homelands within the area in which Yolŋu languages are spoken. The Crocodile Islands region (Map 2) is in the North East part of greater Arnhem Land, an area of approximately fifty thousand square kilometres, and is the home to some eighty different languages (Cole 1979: 26).



Map 1: Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia (James and Watkinson 2019).

The sea is focal to the Yan-nhanŋu way of life, as a physical space and a mental map inscribed with ancestral meaning. The exclusively marine geography of their estates, structured patterns of ritual, travel and the metaphysical drivers of what we might call marine resource management, were all but wiped out with the coming of the mission. In more recent times the familiar mechanisms of settler dispossession, of extraction, of lawful re-possession of land and marine resources, of humanitarian aid by state intervention, of Responsibility to Protect, have increased the destructive burden of the colonial legacy.



Map 2: Crocodile Islands and surrounding Arafura Sea, Northern Territory, Australia (James and Watkinson 1999, 2019).

The Yolŋu are comprised of about 60 or so clans or *bäpurru* and related language varieties forming a discrete linguistic community.² This Yolŋu area encapsulates over one hundred distinct homelands, areas of deep spiritual attachment to the Yolŋu people who live there. The link between language, people and land is of fundamental ontological significance in understanding the roots of Yolŋu, and therefore Yan-nhaŋu language affiliations. It is this language affiliation to land and kin that gives a fuller appreciation of contemporary attachment to sea country and life on the homelands, and the desire to burn the country.

² Yolŋu languages described in Lowe (1957) are Dhuwala, Dhaŋu (Schebeck 1976), Gälpu (Wood 1978), Golpa (Zorc 1978) Ritharrŋu (Heath 1980), Djapu (Morphy 1983), Djinan and Djinba (Waters 1989), Djambarrpuynju (Wilkinson 1991), Wangurri (McLellan 1992), Gupapuyŋu (Christie 1993, 2001), Nhangu (Kabisch-Lindenlaub 2017) and Yan-nhaŋu (James 1999, 2009, 2015, James et al. 2003 and Baymarrwaŋa and James 2014).

2.2. Yan-nhaṅu: people of the Crocodile Islands

The Yan-nhaṅu people are the traditional owners of the Crocodile Islands. Geographically speaking the Yan-nhaṅu language is the western-most of seven distinct and mutually unintelligible socio-linguistic varieties of the Yolṅu language family (Schebeck 1968: 10-11, Waters 1989, Zorc 1986, cf. Christie 2001). Yolṅu people speak a language they call Yolṅu-Matha, a Pama-Nyungan language which forms a discrete enclave surrounded by prefixing non-Pama-Nyungan languages. Yan-nhaṅu is one of some seven Yolṅu languages and has been described as a central and southern sub-group of the Northern Nhaṅu Yolṅu language (Schebeck 1968). Much has been written about the Yolṅu and their languages since Sir Hubert Wilkins gathered the first stories from Milingimbi in 1922. Milingimbi is the largest of the Inner Crocodile Islands on the sea country of the Yan-nhaṅu speaking people. From In 1926 to 1929 anthropologist Lloyd W. Warner collected the first comprehensive ethnography of the Yolṅu people on the Crocodile Islands.

Yan-nhaṅu language is a distinct language, but closely related to the northern Nhaṅu-mi language variety of the Wessel Islands.³ For the Yan-nhaṅu, the ancestral endowment of marine and island sites, and their language is a fundamental dimension of their identity. This endowment at once distinguishes them from, and simultaneously incorporates them, into the body of their Yolṅu kin from surrounding *bäpurru*, with mainland estates and languages. Yan-nhaṅu people are made up of six *bäpurru*. Yan-nhaṅu clans or *bäpurru* are divided equally into two moieties, *Dhuwa* or *Yirritja* (see Table 1 below). According to the Yan-nhaṅu everything in the universe is divided into two kinds. These halves or moieties are nominated *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja*.⁴ The three *Dhuwa bäpurru*⁵ – Gamalaṅga, Mälarra and Gurryindi⁶ – and the three *Yirritja bäpurru* – Walamaṅu, Biṅḍarra and Ṇurruwulu – are known as, and refer to themselves as, *Mariṅa*, ‘people of the sea’ (James et al. 2003, James 2009, Baymarrwaṅa and James 2014).

³ For a more complete explanation see James 2009: 170-179; Baymarrwaṅa and James 2014: 532-538.

⁴ *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja* are two halves, or moieties, of the Yolṅu system of thought that divides the world into two categories, classifying every aspect of the physical and spiritual world. These moieties are characterised by complementary reciprocal relations understood to create the fundamental conditions for fertility and life.

⁵ The term clan is now usually replaced by the term *bäpurru* as it denotes a more complex meaning closer to Yolṅu conceptions. *Bäpurru* have been described as complex, multilayered, focal social categories with a common identity, existing in shared ancestral essences (see Keen 1978, 1994, 1995, Toner 2001).

⁶ Malarra, Mälarra, Maḷarra, also known as the Mälarra/Guṅbirritji/Murruṅun, have been misnamed the Yan-nhaṅu. Yan-nhaṅu is a language name, there is no (clan) *bäpurru* called the Yan-nhaṅu, this is the name of the language inherited and spoken by the Mälarra, despite ongoing confusion by contemporary researchers (James et al. 2003, James 2009, Baymarrwaṅa and James 2014).

YAN-NHAŃU BÄPURRU (CLANS)	MOIETY
WalamaŃu	Yirritja
Ńurruwulu	Yirritja
BiŃdarra	Yirritja
Gurryindi	Dhuwa
Małarra	Dhuwa
Gamałanġa	Dhuwa

Table 1: Yan-nhaŃu *Bäpurru* and Moieties (BaymarrwaŃa and James 2014: 26).

There are close to 200 Yan-nhaŃu people. Most live in and around the communities of Maningrida, Milingimbi, Galiwin'ku and on the surrounding homelands such as Murrunga, Rapuma and Yilan.⁷ There continues to be some discontinuity in the wider reference works on Yan-nhaŃu language and group identity and organisation. Two schools of thought have emerged. One school may best be described as the Yan-nhaŃu school; this includes the Yan-nhaŃu people and their description of themselves, in their language, as reproduced by James (1999, 2009, 2015, James et al. 2003, 2019). The other might best be characterised as the outsider's view, that is, external reports about Yan-nhaŃu people. Those without the benefit of speaking Yan-nhaŃu, elide for various reasons the significant sensitivity of *bäpurru* identification with language and continue to muddle the model (BaymarrwaŃa and James 2014). Yan-nhaŃu language was not recorded by the Yan-nhaŃu and James until 1993 (James 1999). Confusion about Yan-nhaŃu group and language identity are common with the exception of Schebeck (1968).⁸ Ill-advised earlier misrecognition has continued to be reproduced by more recent researchers (Christie 2001, Kabisch-Lindenlaub 2017). Yan-nhaŃu people discourage such inaccuracy considering it disrespectful. It is well understood that for YolŃu people correct recognition, definition and differentiation of proper names, language, place and *bäpurru* is critical to distinguishing groups, spiritual identity, and of the highest ritual, political and economic significance. Group identity is fundamentally a question of

⁷ In the Australian Indigenous context homelands are small communities where a number of families from various but related clans coexist, and where life, ritual and what we might not inaccurately call work, are organized around the management of land/sea country, concern for kinship, ancestral connections and local languages.

⁸ For example, Jennison (1927), Radcliffe-Brown (1930), Warner (1937), Tindale (1940), Capell (1942), Berndt and Berndt (1951), Berndt (1955).

ancestral bequest and spiritual inheritance. In this depiction we have deployed a more sensitive ethno-linguistic approach in favour of a finer grained and nuanced explication.

From a Yan-nhanju perspective their distinctive language and associated world view is an inviolable part of their spiritual, social and language identity. The coordinates of this identity emerge from, and harmonise with, an ancestrally inherited, kin-based view of the world – a view that rests on enduring links to a pre-existing network of ancestral sites, associated spiritual entities and the residues of their essences and power in their sea country (Morphy 2008, James 2015). The notions of universal kinship and an ancestral geography provide a key to talking about Yolju groups. Kinship patterns and an ancestrally inherited ontological frame of reference underwrite shared practices between people from different groups, speaking different languages. Within this space, Yolju kin living on Yan-nhanju sites share their community and practices on the seas and sites of the Crocodile Islands bequeathed by the Yan-nhanju ancestors.

3. Wind, water and fire: seasons of inter-island voyaging

Yan-nhanju mythology is full of seafarers who braved huge crocodiles and a pantheon of marine hazards on their journeys between the islands. These ancestral journeys were enacted on buoyant devices like the floating log, *wuduku*, and the insubstantial paper bark raft, *djutu*. These smaller craft were rarely used for longer voyages, as truly gigantic crocodiles of six meters were and are still present. Donald Thomson (1937), who travelled to the outer islands in 1935, reports the construction of more robust canoes made of eucalyptus tree bark called *dirrka* at Murrunga Island, capable of carrying ten people at a time. These *dirrka* canoes were made by sewing together layers of bark in a method called *barrwan-mindapumaway* and were up to four meters long. Thomson (1937) writes of their sea-worthiness and speed over rough water:

... the biggest of all are made at Moorooonga [Murrunga] (yana:ngo matta, Yiritja, and Mandjikai malla) of two sheets of bark sewn together and in these the natives make journeys to Rabuma [Rapuma] and other islands of the Crocodile group, as well as to the mainland.

(Thomson fieldnotes, 7/1/1937 File No. 115)

A smaller bark canoe called the *gal-gal* was associated with travel over shorter distances between the islands and the transport of marine resources. These two types of ancestrally bequeathed bark canoe designs are quite distinct from the hollow log or dugout canoe (*lipa-lipa*) of Macassan origin.

3.1. Winds and seasons of the Crocodile Islands

The reckoning of the seasons and their winds is at the heart of island time. Knowledge of the seasonal availability of local resources is captured in the expression *manutji bulthanaway* (literally, ‘quality of telling the eye’) (see also Christie 1993). This way of seeing describes how attributes such as the flowering times of certain trees or the characteristic winds of a season may signify the availability or ripeness of resources on distant islands. The songs of the winds contain the knowledge of the world, the knowledge they impart, and these variable seasonal winds themselves are still of great significance to the timely execution of inter-island travel, to fishing, burning and the collection of marine resources generally.⁹

Table 2 shows an adapted seasonal calendar from the Murrunga School that outlines the relationship between seasons and named wind directions on the outer islands.

	Month	Season	Wind direction	Wind name
1	March–May	<i>Migawarr</i>	Gentle south-east	<i>Djalataŋ</i>
2	May–June–July	<i>Dharratharramirr</i>	Strong east	<i>Bulwunu</i>
3	August–September	<i>Rrarranhdharr</i>	North west	<i>Bärra</i>
4	October–December	<i>Dhuluḍur’</i>	North	<i>Lungurrma</i>
5	January–February	<i>Bärra’mirr</i>	West	<i>Bärra</i>
6	February–March	<i>Mayaltha</i>	Gentle north east	<i>Dhimurru</i>

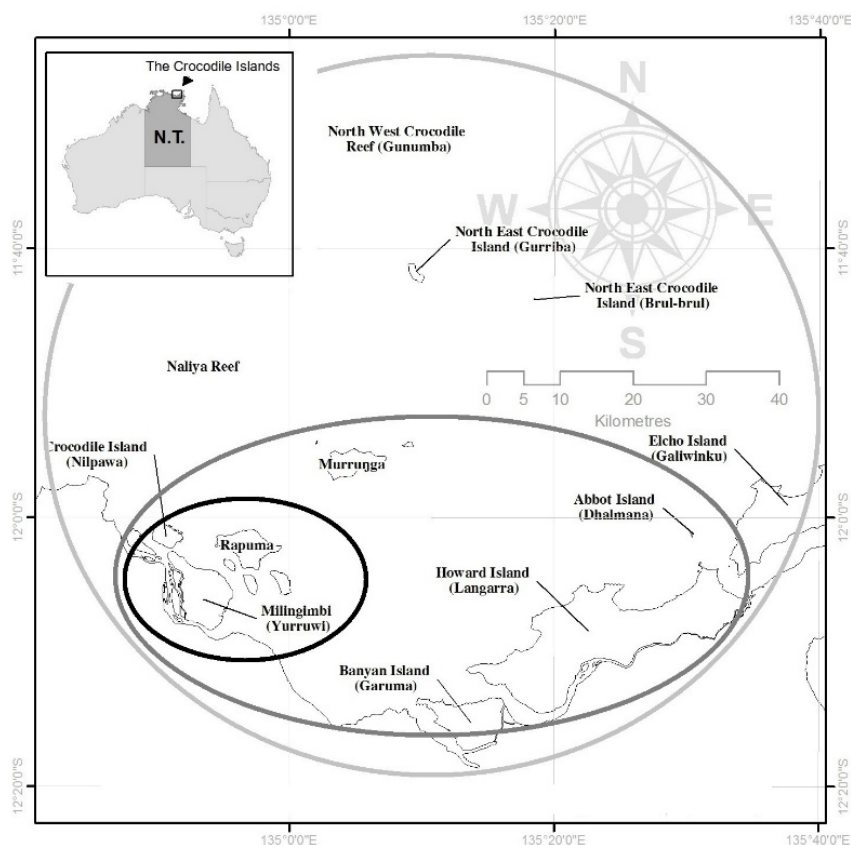
Table 2: Seasonal wind names (James 1997).

In the past the season of *dhuluḍur’* was known as ‘the hungry time’ on the mainland as it is the height of the wet season and there was a scarcity of many food types during the heavy rains. *Rrarranhdharr* is ‘the hot time’. People refer to this time colloquially as *luku ga nhära* which literally translates to ‘feet on fire’. *Rrarranhdharr* is the time that Yolŋu from all over the region would customarily congregate at the largest of the inner Crocodile Islands,

⁹ The names of the cardinal points are loan words in Yolŋu languages derived from the Makassans. For example, South is called *selatang* by the Makassarese and a closely homophonous *djalataŋ* by the Yolŋu. North in Makassarese is *utara*, said *lungurrma* in Yan-nhaŋu; West is *barrat* in Makassarese and *bärra* in Yolŋu languages. Lastly, East, *Timor* in Makassarese, becomes *dimurru* in Yolŋu-Matha (see also Walker and Zorc 1981, Urry and Walsh 1981).

Milingimbi. This gathering in *Rrarranhdharr* is what Warner called the “shellfish and ceremony season” (Warner 1937: 4). This is when kin would prepare for the larger regional rituals of fertility and the more important local rituals of replenishment associated with the growing clouds of the mounting humidity. During the ceremonial season large numbers of kin would assemble to gather and share in the abundant shellfish *ṅä’kanyu* (*Anadarra granosa*) and ritual cycad bread *ṅathu* (*Cycas media*) while practicing the most sacred of regional and local ceremonies (ibid.).

Cessation of seasonal travel to the most distant islands was dictated by strong wind. Conversely, the gentle seasonal winds of *mayaltha* and *midawarr* coincide with an abundance of available marine resources on the outer islands. The following Map 3 describes the winds and extent of cyclical travel around the islands circumscribed according to seasonal wind patterns.



Map 3: Seasons of inter-island travel (James 1997).

Travel was restricted to the inner islands in the season *rrarranhdharr* (August-October) and *dhuluḍur'* (October-November) by strong northerly winds. In *bärramirr* (December-January) strong westerly and *dharratharramirri* (May-July) strong easterly winds respectively did not permit travel to the most distant islands. In *mayaltha* (February-March) and *midawarr* (March-April) travel throughout the entire domain was possible. This system of travel and land and sea management was disrupted by the coming of the MOM Mission to Milingimbi.

4. Smoke on the water

4.1. Burn down the mission

The arrival of the mission to Milingimbi in 1921 brought conflict between the land-owning Yan-nhaṅu and distant Yolṅu kin. These mainland kin from distant groups migrated from their *bäpurru* estates in the east to live permanently at the mission and access its resources. As mentioned, this influx of mainland kin created the need for a commonly understood code of communications between members of *bäpurru* speaking some seven different languages. These circumstances saw the creation of a new amalgamated linguistic style or inter-language. This inter-language was called Yolṅu-Matha and linguistically resembles most closely two *dhuwal/dhuwala* related *bäpurru* languages, Djambarrpuyṅu (*Dhuwa* moiety) and Gupapuyṅu (*Yirrijta* moiety).¹⁰ The large number of these people comprising a considerable portion of the new community polity, came to dominate affairs on the Yan-nhaṅu Island of Milingimbi. Mission routines, away from the father's *bäpurru* estates, began to undermine the former significance of the father's *bäpurru* language inheritances (Devlin 1986). Subsequently the Yan-nhaṅu language declined to the point of near extinction. Today there are only ten to fifteen full speakers of Yan-nhaṅu left, living with their kin in ex-mission communities and homelands.

Yan-nhaṅu people lost control over their affairs on country. Kin from mainland estates came to control community resources, language patterns, ceremonial and political power and associated connubial benefits. A significant consequence was that kin from mainland groups took control of brokerage roles and transmission of knowledge about Yolṅu people between Yolṅu society and *Balanda* (non-Yolṅu) researchers. This brokerage was understandably

¹⁰ *Dhuwa* and *Yirrijta* are two halves, or moieties, of the Yolṅu system of thought that divide the world into two categories, classifying every aspect of the physical and spiritual world. These moieties are characterised by complementary reciprocal relations understood to create the fundamental conditions for life.

politically partisan and *bäpurru*-centric in character. The conditions of the mission and the control of brokerage roles are the basis of much that has been written by outsiders on the subject of the Yan-nhañu. For all practical purposes they lost control over their estates to mainland kin more in-line with mission conventions.

In summary then, Yolñu kin from mainland estates continue to live on Yan-nhañu country and recite their *bäpurru*-centric stories, highlighting similarity and difference. For the Yan-nhañu this similarity and difference is important for their survival. For the Yan-nhañu, as for Yolñu people now separated from their ancestral homes, language provides an important signifier of difference, but more importantly, it establishes an ontological link between their identity, ancestors and the sites of their estates. That is, language is understood to be elementally and inviolably connected to the ancestors that made the sites in a group's country. This site-based linguistic ontology has profound implications for orientation, for frames of reference, furnishing the coordinates situating people in the linguistic, social and geographical relationships of society, and links to their land.

A century after the coming of the mission it is still possible to hear stories of the way the winds would govern the planning of the seasonal round of island resource usage by speaking to members of an older generation. But there is nothing quite like the direct account of someone who has lived and experienced it tooth and bone to drive home the necessities and dangers of a life totally dependent on the sea.



Figure 1: Laurie Baymarrwaña (1917-2014) at Murrunga Island, with permission by Salome Harris (2006).

Born on Murrunga Island, Laurie Baymarrwaṅa (1917-2014) (see Figure 1 above) did not speak English, but her stories were impressive tales of high drama and narrow escapes. She survived generations of her kinsmen, the coming of the white man, internecine clan warfare, the decline of her kinsman through sorcery and sickness and WWII. She continued living day to day on the islands that she loved. She recounts her experience as a youth travelling throughout the islands by canoe to access seasonally available resources and burn the country.

4.2. A fire in the heart

The following story, recorded by the late Laurie Baymarrwaṅa at Murrunga, describes a time governed by the seasonal round of inter-island travel, the lure of ripening fruits and the cyclical reoccurrence of marine resources emerging with the changing seasons:

Following the law: burning saltwater country

Binmunu wanha napuluma bayṅu ṅuṅupanba rom ṅatjiliya ṅumuru burthala waṅgalaṅa. Napuluma bayṅu ṅupanba rom ṅatjiliyaṅumuru. Binmunu wanha napuluma bayṅu ṅupanba rom ṅatjiliyaṅumuru. Djatalkurru burrthala gurrku waṅgalaṅa limalama malaṅuyirri. Gakulukuyirri buyumuyumayirr burrthala gurrku waṅgalaṅa bulungitjyunayirri. Burrthala murru girriyanba gurrku waṅgalaṅa bulungitjmiyama. Burrthala murru girriyanba gurrku murru girriyanba yutama. Burrthala gurrku girriyanba yutama bupaitjgu minibi yinika. Burrthala gurrku girriyanba yutama mulumugu bupaitjgu murru ṅarrkugu. Binmunu wanha napuluma bayṅu ṅupanba rom ṅatjiliyaṅumuru.

(Baymarrwaṅa 2007)

‘Burning saltwater following the law. As always, we continue to look after our country as is the law. Burning clears our country of obstructions. Burning clears the country and makes it open and healthy. Burning helps with the reproduction of the food plants. Through it new food plants are created and new food comes into existence. Burning makes fresh leaves and grass appear. Fire brings the new grass that is the food that grows the wallaby. We always follow the law of the old people in our burning practice. The wind tells you when the right time to burn arrives. The wind tells us when is the right time to burn at Milingimbi at two times, firstly in the early period, May through to August and October to November. The seasonal winds tell the rangers the right time to travel to Murrunga for burning.’

(James 2007)

When talking to Yolṅu about how fire is used to make resources more prolific, predictable and convenient on the islands people often use words like *rom*, ‘law’; *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja*, ‘moiety’; *maḍayin*, ‘sacred’; *waṅarr*, ‘ancestor creator’; and *manikay*, ‘songs’. These words tell us of the fundamental ontological logic underlying conceptual schemes by which people live their lives. These words and the concepts they signify are the metaphysical drivers for burning on Yan-nhaṅu country, for burning saltwater.

People's world view reaches beyond simple biophysical necessity to include this metaphysical element, a necessity that has its own reason. The danger is that simple attempts to pick the functional eyes out of a holistic system degrade and distort its completeness. This paper works to refocus attention on the holistic local approach to this important aspect of sustainable land and sea management. The Crocodile Islands Rangers were created by the Yan-nhaŋu landowners to enhance livelihood opportunities and the intergenerational transmission of a distinctive local ecological knowledge on the coastal islands of the Crocodile group. In his recent land-mark research on Indigenous fire management Bill Gammage (2011) declares that right across Indigenous Australian universal law enforced the maintenance of the estate. These ongoing laws in concert with historical, economic and biophysical conditions surrounding indigenous remote residence on the Crocodile Islands are the powerful forces behind this land and sea management work and the motivation for this research.

Walimiri ŋumuŋku: Seasons of burning

Djiniku six (lurrkun ga lurrkun) walirr ŋumuŋku; Miḍawarr, Dharratharramirri, Rrarranhdharr, Dhuluḍur' Bärra'mirri Mayaltha. Watay dhuptana bultunha rangernha bulthara gurru buluŋgitj walimirinha dhulmiyamagu.

(Baymarrwaŋa 2007)

'The seasons change. There are six main seasons here: *Miḍawarr, Dharratharramirri, Rrarranhdharr, Dhuluḍur', Bärramirr* and *Mayaltha*. The seasonal winds tell the rangers when to burn.'

(James 2007)

The translation of stories of Laurie Baymarrwaŋa, of the country into English is presented in as straightforward a manner as possible but it is unable to account adequately for the implicit knowledge inhering in so much of what is said in the elliptical and minimalist conventions of Yan-nhaŋu. Given this inadequacy, the English text is rendered with a view to changing the meaning of the original text as little as possible while remaining true to the intention of the speakers. The text is divided into the following stories as they were provided by the traditional owners and custodians of the Crocodile Islands and the significance of this order was understood to be related to the working of local ancestral laws. These rare Yan-nhaŋu stories about burning start, as is conventional, by invoking the law and then following the law in burning practices. The topics of the wind as a signifier of memories about the ancestors and ways of doing things is followed by the birds of the fire and the seasons of change that invoke the metaphysical relationships that underlie the everyday practical use of fire as an environmental management tool.

The material presented here suggests the seasonal round of inter-island travel that was characteristic of and shaped by the recent history of the Yan-nhaṅu as they managed and tended the resources of their marine environment. This pattern of movement through the seasons and islands was interrupted by the coming of the missions in 1921 to Yurruwi. Since that time the pattern of burning on the outer islands has been slightly modified. Taking this into account those who remember the early days say that the spirits of the islands have continued to look after the wealth of their natural endowment even in their absences. With the spirits (*ḡurrungabu*) in mind, the people of the Crocodile Islands have talked about and recorded in stories the yearly burning of their saltwater country in their language for the first time.

Binmunu wanha napuluma bayṅu ḡupanba rom ḡatjiliyaṅumuru: Burning with the law

Binmunu wanha yana bayṅu garrana bilyanaṅurranha ga nhama wangala Nhunu gurru rom ḡupanaba burthalagu dhulmiyamagu. Rulka dhungulyun babalaway. Walirrimi dukuyu ḡumunku rangersgu djamagu dhulmiyamagu bayṅu mana nyininha Milingimbi. Binmunu wanha yana bayṅu garrana bilyanaṅurranha ga nhama wangala ga buyumuyirr gurru wangalaṅa bulungitjyunyirri. Rangeryu gurru ḡupan ḡatjiliyaṅu mitji rom.

(Baymarrwaṅa 2007)

‘Always watching the country and listening to the winds you must follow the knowledge of the ancestral spirits when you burn. Don’t burn anytime or anywhere but with the law. These are signs of the seasonal times for the rangers to follow in their burning as they care for the island of Milingimbi. Each day they travel around their country to keep it well, watching the country and listening to the winds. The rangers will care for and follow the law of the old people of the spirits.’

(James 2007)

What is significant about the story of fire as a tool of Indigenous ecological management on the islands, even more than the fact that it has never before been recorded, is its rarity, that is, there are no fire traditions collected in Australian ethnography about islands in this part of the world. The unique Indigenous ecological knowledge of the marine based Yan-nhaṅu language speaking groups of the Crocodile Islands has only recently come to light (James 2009). Nevertheless, the material collected during this project about the metaphysical aspects of fire use is consistent with descriptions and accounts of fire usage by groups in Arnhem Land living in coastal and savannah environments collected over the last one hundred years (see also Thomson 1949, Jones 1975, 1980, Haynes 1991, Russell-Smith et al. 2018). One of the major differences apparent with those in inland situations, and on the savannahs, is their emphasis on land-based game (kangaroos) fire drives, given their diets reflect a focus on land-based foods they are substantially meat eaters (Jones 1980). Recent estimates in such inland

circumstances on homelands in the NT describe some 80 percent protein from land-based hunting (Altman 1987). For Yan-nhaṅu people the focus is on protein derived from marine sources and consequently the motivation of burning is more closely aligned with the reproduction of vegetable food, forests, fruits and grass resources.

The variety of ecological habitats and associated biological diversity of the various islands have allowed people to profitably move from island to island in a seasonal round of resource use. There is now ample ethnographic evidence to show that the people inhabiting the Crocodile Islands up until sometime after the mission were able to sustain their seasonal round of hunting and gathering. The season organisation of inter-islands travel by people around their marine estate to access resources and manage their ecosystems is reflected in the pattern of movement between island homelands today. As mentioned, it would be inappropriate to focus all our attention on the simple biophysical drivers without an account of the fundamental ontological basis for reproduction of Yan-nhaṅu society and the transforming conduct of its environmental relations. The reproduction of ways linked to the marine environment entailing a suite of social, linguistic and metaphysical beliefs linked to place. Given that the sea is focal to their lives, it provides an arena for daily activity that is filled with memories, stories and names, names that are linked in an essential way to the parts of life that make up a distinct Yan-nhaṅu experience. For Yan-nhaṅu, young and old, the language of the ancestors is a conduit for profound connection with place. Continuing residence on their sea country and on their homelands has played a part in strengthening Yan-nhaṅu identity and their metaphysical links to their islands:

Nalumaya: Winds of memory

Nalumaya (mayaltha time) dhuptana gurrku gayana warguguyana manha limalama ṅurrungabo. Nalumaya dhuptana gurrku gayana dhäbiya ṅalima yindi mitji ga]tumu bulungitjirri ga guya luthana. Nalumaya dhuptana gurrku gayana wangalana dhulmiyama. Lira ṅanka dhuptana marragalbiyanay ga marradumbarramaw gurrku dhulmiyama mulmu dhambaninj burthara dhakal nhanku Gurriba. Lima nhama gurrmirringugu ṅawurrku lima nhambaka wangalana gurrku dhulmiyama mulmu dhambaninj. Gurrmirriṅu manikay... 'ṅ arraku (manikay) binwanha ...da ...da...gurrtha gurr ku gama, buthara nhaṅu butharanhara nhaṅu...runu - runu dhakal dhakal dhapanyina...' Gurrmirriṅu ṅanhi gurrku Gamalanga nhaṅu djawyun bayku (ṅunha) Gurribali gurrtha gama buthara runu-runu nyena dhakal-dhakal murru. Gamalanga mulmu dhambaninj burthara dhakal nhan'ku.

(Baymarrwanja 2007)

'When the wind called Njalumaya blows we remember the ways of those who went before. When Njalumaya blows it makes us remember how the old people used to prepare the fish traps and shepherd the fish into them. It reminds us to burn the country. When lira njan'ka. (another wind) blows the Gurrmirriṅu lights a grass fire at Gurriba. When we see this smoke, it reminds us that we must light up the country. Baymarrwaṅa sings the following song. 'He as always, the Gurrmirriṅu.... lights his fire on the islands...this tells us of the people of the islands...tells of the Gurrmirriṅu people. This story belonging to the Gamalanga (Dhuwa Clan of the Yan-nhaṅu people) people is the story of how the Gurrmirriṅu lights up the grass called dhambaṅaniṅ on the island of Gurriba each year.'

(James 2007)

At the most fundamental level Yan-nhaṅu local knowledge refers to understandings, skills and philosophies linked to locality-based cultural complexes encompassing language and rituals designed to enhance their relations with their ecological environments:

Warrakan dharrthayana: Birds sing of fire

Mälarra Bungalata dhu waṅa baykamunu ga dhula ga Galiwin'ku, nhaṅu ga nhanku Galiwin'ku, gurrtha ga Bungalata balayma nam-bu. Manikaygu Mälarragu bungalata ga gurrtha, Gamalanga nhamunu bulthun dhambaṅaniṅ. Walamaṅuy dharrthayana Gurrutjuṅunha nhani ṅupana ṅawurrku. Dililili dharrthayana djinimunu dharratharramirr mananha rika dhupthun barrathalayaṅu rulkaba dhulmiyamaba. Walipṅa gunanha walirrimi dukulu mananha bultun rangersgu nhamburru ga nhali runu dabakthunli mana dhulmiyamagu.

(Baymarrwaṅa 2007)

'For the Mälarra (Dhuwa Clan of the Yan-nhaṅu people) in the season when the white breasted wood swallow returns (*Midawarr yindi*- May) she flies around in the smoke over there at Galiwin'ku and here at Murrunga. They sing with their Mari (MMM groups) the Gamalanga and the Gurryindi, they sing together the story of the grass fire of the Gurrmirriṅu. The Walamaṅu (Yirritja Clan of the Yan-nhaṅu speaking people) sing of the brown hawk who follows the smoke on the islands. At Murrunga the magpie lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) *dililili* sings in the morning. At Murrunga at the beginning of *Dharratharramirr*, *dililili* tells a story of the wind called *rika* (cold westerly blowing off *Dhamangurra*). When he sings this song the *rika* blows. The meaning of the song is 'do not burn now at Murrunga. This is not the wind to burn with at Murrunga'. The wind and the seasons tell the rangers which islands to visit and burn and when.'

(James 2007)

At Murrunga the morning wind is said to carry the voices of the ancestors. These ancestral voices speak the language of the Crocodile Islands. These voices and the songs, sites, words and names they speak are understood to have been endowed to people by the *waṅarr*. These *waṅarr* are said to have bestowed in their creation the possessory rights to a group's estates signified by the ownership of the *maḍayin*. The *maḍayin* are the special sacred things that belong to the group, such as *raṅga* 'religious icons', *miny'tji* 'paintings', *manikay* 'songs', *bunḡul* 'dances', *yakarra* 'names', and *bunḡhurr* 'ritually significant names of the sites and places of the estate' (see also Keen 1978: 41, Williams 1986: 37, Morphy 1984: 17). Crucially, the ownership of a group's *yan* language, is also believed to be endowed by the *waṅarr*

ancestors. What links these aspects of a group's property is not only their putative bequest by their particular *wanarr*, but the underlying notion of shared ancestral essences. These shared ancestral essences are the key to understanding the underlying logic of language as an emblem of group identity and of profound ancestral links to kin and country.

For the Yan-nhaŋu, identification with a particular *wanarr*, expressed in terms of (among other things) *yakarra* 'names', *bunḍhurr* 'ritually significant words' and *yan* 'language', establish the collective rights of Yan-nhaŋu patri-groups to their land and sea. Yan-nhaŋu language and names are thought to be derived from, and are in effect embodiments of the ancestral beings, and the actions that these words represent: words contain ancestral essence (Munn 1973, Keen 1978: 183, 185-186; Morphy 1991: 103). Consequently, a connection between a particular language variety and place is conceived of in fundamentally spiritual links. The expression of these links is found in the everyday practices and expressions of the people of the islands. When people are asked what language the sea is speaking, they always answer: *Napuluma rathanu djingamurriyun Yan-nhanumuru*, 'Our sea speaks Yan-nhaŋu'. The sound of the sea can be heard everywhere over the islands.

The continuation of seasonal island visitation and burning the saltwater reinvigorates the symbols and practices known as 'following in the footsteps of the ancestors', *dhurrukunju garana baynu rumrumthana garayw*. This is how we remake the world with practices handed down by the ancestors: revivifying and reinvigorating ancestral essences with the spirits of country. These encounters with place and the invisible 'spirits' as present and significant social actors of the islands produce a powerful experience of identification with the named places and ancestral sites of the Crocodile Islands. This is at the heart of burning the saltwater.

5. Regrowth

5.1. New tools: new times

The Yan-nhaŋu language is the repository of and vehicle for the transmission and preservation of customary Indigenous knowledge connected to their marine and island environments. People whose lives depend on the environment are governed by an interest in caring for their natural world. So too do their languages capture a deep understanding of the practical and everyday aspects of their land and sea scape, seasonal winds and variations and the biological diversity of their world.

There are changes over time with the intergenerational transmission of local knowledge. This knowledge locked in the Yan-nhaṅu language is a critical part of living on country and provides positive engagement with land management activities. Living on country emphasises interrelations of language, environment, ecological and socio-cultural understanding. Local knowledge is integral to this locality based cultural complex encompassing language, ritual and social life, systems of classifications and natural resources management practices using fire. But today government funding of rangers gets them out on country. 'Rangering' and burning country has become a 'business', a business called caring for country, a business that attracts modest dollars that support and sustain on country activities. Local reasons and ways of caring for country can be and are routinely compromised by the business of 'funder values'. How do land managers (rangers or others) recognise and strengthen their ancestral connections and local knowledge when the old people are nearly finished up, nearly gone? How can they direct their ranger and other programs with the values/knowledge that they are losing with their old people? As the wise old people die, they lose thousands of generations of local knowledge that is utterly irreplaceable. How can they keep track of whether their rangers or Indigenous Land Management (ILM) activities are going the way they want, under the influence of external money, state regulations and external measures of success, etc.?

For the Crocodile Islands Rangers, the purpose of burning saltwater country is in large part a continuation of the metaphysics and traditions of burning. Although the genesis of Indigenous ranger groups in north Australia has been driven by senior customary estate owners, they are increasingly influenced by funding, administration and employment arising elsewhere. In these new circumstances innovative training prerogatives can simultaneously improve the reach, effectiveness and sustainability of ranger group activity at the same time as presenting challenges to some of the core drivers for looking after country, including metaphysical drivers. Ranger groups are evolving at the little understood nexus of remote Indigenous lifespace, and engagement with an emerging environmental management industry.

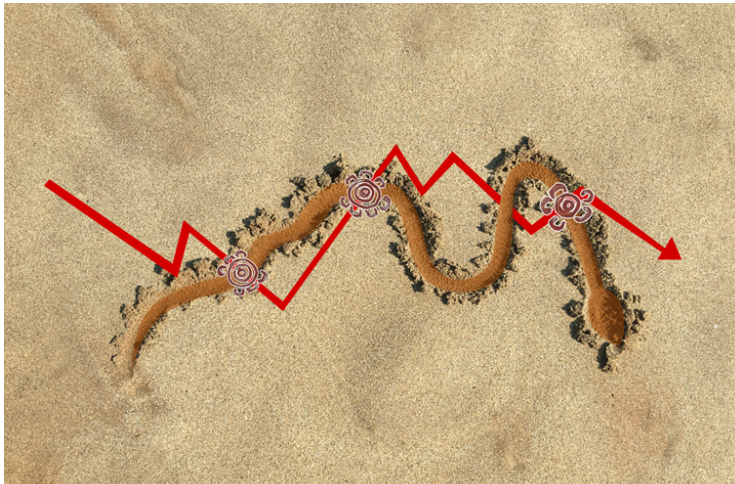


Figure 2 speaks to misalignment of “*Biluru* Aboriginal people, *Larakia* language and *Beragud* (non-Aboriginal people) who don’t see the world in the same way, but where our interests overlap there is opportunity to build relationships that can deliver mutual benefit. We must seek and make the most of those opportunities without losing sight of who we are. This takes recognition and trust” (James et al. 2018: 137).

Figure 2: Where paths meet – two ways, one future (Duwun Tony Lee, Birrimilanga Nadine Lee, Ian Lee, Glenn James 2019).

In the projection of cultural futures, familial care of customary lands and seas is a key element. Amongst the broad spectrum of non-Indigenous agencies supporting the ranger movement this tends to be more narrowly defined as land management. Its evident value and extraordinary success arguably only result from agency recognition and (re)definition of some common interests – for example between ‘caring for country’¹¹ and land management, in relation to employment and training, well-being, traditional fire use, and Green House Gas emissions abatement.

Interested elements of the state, having been convinced in their own terms of certain outcomes from Indigenous fire management, have adapted and adopted a new language around what it is that some innovative Aboriginal groups are doing with fire out bush, and more so, through that inviting language choose to provide money, administration, markets, etc. to support ‘fire management’ activities. The new industry is now able to identify ‘co-benefits’ from Indigenous fire management like biodiversity outcomes, jobs and training. There is a natural tendency for younger Indigenous rangers to buy into and become skilled in this language, because it does describe a transformative movement with benefits to remote people that mirror those identified by the State. Significantly, it has been and is an extraordinary and mutually beneficial movement, an alignment of interests, increasingly enticing Australian and international NGOs to provide support to create the biophysical and humane benefits.

¹¹ A phrase coined by Dean Yibarbuk, consultant and Nawarddeken traditional owner and senior custodian in West Arnhem Land.

Although in a general sense this renaissance of looking after country with fire resonates and brings joy to pivotal Yan-nhaṅu elders, it is not their language of what is going on that propels the new industry. Tensions in ways of seeing exist – a new ‘power language’, bereft of the metaphysics of the unique Yan-nhaṅu life world, is now marking the landscape and feeding the Yan-nhaṅu and Yolṅu families. Local drivers, uniquely Yan-nhaṅu, are key to the future cultural integrity of Yan-nhaṅu working in this space. They need not be lost amongst the valuable synergies being explored here by Yan-nhaṅu and the State alike. How are they to be kept track of and form the basis of future decision/direction making as older people pass on?

This conversation has been maturing for a number of years across remote Australia. With direct guidance and input from senior Aboriginal land owners, rangers and homelands residents, a framework evolved that may offer a means to address this general tension in contemporary land management. This is not a solution per se, but an offering for those who recognise emerging discontinuities for them in the transformative ways their life space is being (re-)rendered. The framework cannot be a solution in itself, but it offers a practical perspective on purposefully navigating change and continuity, equally informed by senior Yan-nhaṅu responsible for the creation (but not the long-term development) of the Crocodile Island Ranger group.

5.2. Keeping track

The following is a brief description of a local management toolkit, designed with Indigenous custodians of the land and sea who are looking back to core local values to steer and strengthen their country management enterprise.

After working through this toolkit you will have a monitoring, evaluation and decision making system that;

1. Keeps track of important local values
2. Uses local information collected about those values
3. Lets you know and tell others about how well you are looking after the things you and they value
4. Reports back to inform local enterprise decision makers

Figure 3: Keeping Track – a toolkit for monitoring and decision-making based on local values (James 2017).

Indigenous land managers and non-Indigenous people are often involved in environmental management work for mutually desired outcomes (for example, conservation and employment) but from different foundational perspectives (e.g. for strengthening traditional ownership values compared to abating greenhouse gas). Yet it is often non-Indigenous environmental and enterprise outcomes which are given priority, that are the focus of ‘external’ project investment and support and are used as the key measures of success. Local values may be recognised but are often seen as co-benefits and rarely prioritised as fundamental measures of success. This toolkit seeks to help focus local management back onto local core values and provide better balance in keeping track of them for decision-making. The framework works on the principles of free, prior and informed engagement and decision-making, using locally collected data about self-defined interests to inform decisions.

The approach of this toolkit is to guide the group/facilitator through a series of seven workshop sessions to tailor a project monitoring and evaluation system (including all activities and tools) which, importantly, focuses on measuring indicators of success based on traditional owner/custodian values (including metaphysical values). When complete and implemented, the local framework should empower Indigenous enterprise owners to emphasise local values in their decision making, giving confidence to balance donor, market and other ‘outside’ interests and values in the way they manage enterprise. The toolkit can be adapted and applied to a broad range of natural resource management or other development activities focussing explicitly on traditional owner and local group values as measures of success. This is an asset-based approach to the process, which becomes the core of the whole framework as it is built through the following sessions (James 2017).

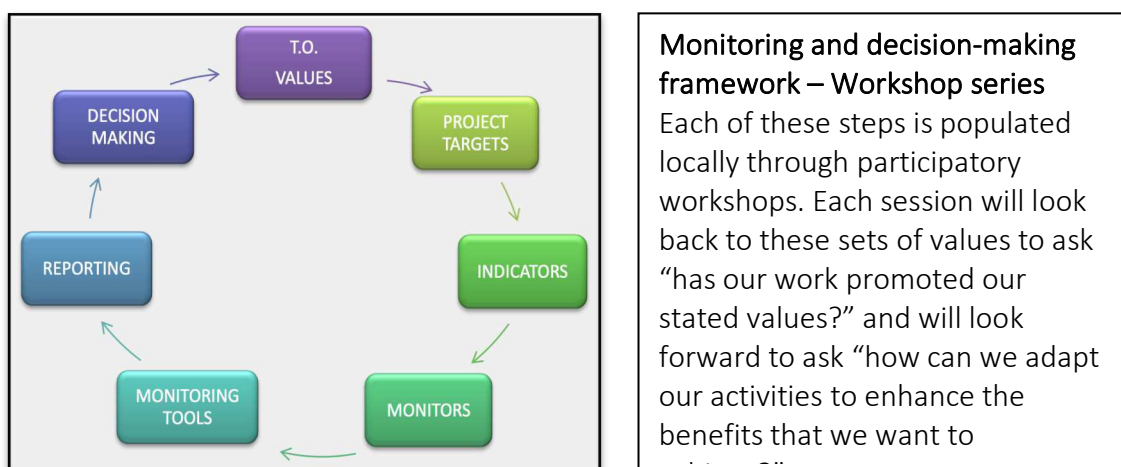


Figure 4: Keeping Track – a toolkit for monitoring and decision-making based on local values (North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance Ltd., 2017, Darwin).

As mentioned, a local framework should empower Indigenous enterprise owners to emphasise local values. The values we have collectively arrived at are grouped into five broad areas: Connection, Identity, Knowledge, Power, and Seasonality. These value sets are not definitive but resonate with Indigenous land managers and so can be interpreted locally. They are considered important types of value to be maintained and enhanced. People give distinct local meaning to these value sets (particularly in cross-cultural, e.g. business settings), can use them in goal setting and can measure and monitor their condition. A brief translation of the intention of these five broad areas follows:

- ***Connection***

Connection is often expressed in terms of one's place in networks of kin, by implication also to specific inherited customary land estates. This establishes obligations and responsibilities, protocols governing relationships in local and even wider networks of people and country. Social organisation and rules for behaviour for example, depend on such connectivity. Competence with and respect for this inherently valuable purpose is by extension a highly valued asset in effective relationships building with non-Indigenous society and is of measurable value.

- ***Identity***

Identity is a value with many and varied qualities, but often expressed in relation to one's own language, ancestry, 'dreamings', affiliation to country and community etc. which in turn underpins confidence and authority to act, locally and in wider society. It has significant purchase when considering individual, (language) group and wider Indigenous character.

- ***Knowledge/skill***

Local and traditional knowledge systems enable effective management of land and sea country, connecting the physical, social and spiritual world. This knowledge foundation generates confidence to take on 'western style' knowledge and skill, enhancing adaptive capacity to, for example, participate in the wider contemporary economy. This value set increasingly embodies knowledge and skill with introduced languages, technologies and processes, for example.

- ***Power/empowerment***

The extent to which Aboriginal people feel able to draw on spiritual affiliation; apply customary, local and acquired knowledge to decision-making; and to manage their interests locally and further afield is a common expression of empowerment and authority. This may also manifest in effective decision-making practice in contemporary organisations.

- ***Seasonality***

Knowledge of and synchronicity with the land and its seasonal cycles is a strong expression of health and adaptability of Indigenous societies. The dominant influence of seasonal patterns and processes on life is reflected in social and spiritual systems that have grown up, explain it and work with it. This governs many activities in Yolŋu life today but is also often confounded by other logics of time use, change and response.

The above categories of value are not exhaustive nor in-expendable. They are the product of discussions with Traditional Owners of land and sea country right across remote central and northern Australia over more than a decade. Concerns about loss of language and culture are of course pervasive, reflecting multitudinous impacts of colonialism in Australia, and importantly they have found expression through the critical eye of older people in the new cooperative development of the Indigenous ranger movement and perhaps in particular its trajectory into commercial income through ecosystem services.

6. Echoes

These unique and site-based ways of knowing, as demonstrated by Yan-nhaŋu elders, such as Laurie Baymarrwaŋa, are the foundation for (culturally) appropriate and (historically) sustainable livelihoods in the ancestral landscape. Many of the conditions imposed upon and insinuated into Yan-nhaŋu life by the colonial state have eroded cultural, knowledge and livelihood systems. Subjugation of local authority and social order under manifold layers of disjointed externally driven and prosecuted governance agendas (State and Church) have all but stripped away the ability of senior Yolŋu to affect their community's futures with the values that have defined them for time immemorial.

Power within the (arguably) polyarchic liberal state remains to some degree responsive to social change and degradation, to strategically sustain itself. The extraordinary resilience and creativity of Indigenous peoples have at times opened opportunities and convinced contemporary governments of the benefits of acting on moments of common interest. Some of these initiatives are hard fought in courts of law (for example Native Title and Land Rights), some in the wider social consciousness (like the right to vote), some aligned with other social movements (such as the Indigenous ranger movement playing to environmental concerns) and others perhaps a useful combination.

What drives and enables Indigenous people to achieve a level of beneficial outcome in these highly politicised, complex, inequitable and challenging initiatives are, again, their defining cultural characteristics and interests. Various, Indigenous language, knowledge and customary country provide the foundation for new initiatives – complementary or at least palatable to state interests. Yan-nhaṅu, like others, have used initiatives like their ‘land and sea management’ enterprise to bring to the centre of community a reaffirmation of the status of elders, modes and ways of knowing, and to enrich the vitality and dynamism of knowledge systems, supporting livelihoods, values and well-being.

The compromising factors in doing a deal for state and other financial support can be described as the extent to which external agents have controlling interests in the organisational structure and its activities through reporting criteria and obligations, research, regulation, partnership responsibilities, accounting, training etc. Navigating agency agendas and requirements has also insinuated a new language of value into looking after ancestral country. The extent to which a Yan-nhaṅu metaphysics drives the activities of the rangers (and therefore the quality of the outcomes) has been of concern to elders like Baymarrwaṅa since the initiative began – perhaps ironically at her instigation and with her early financial support. Is this a growing contradiction between invigorating Yan-nhaṅu culture in the holistic life space of their traditional lands through a contemporary State-sponsored political economy? Will the somewhat remarkable success of this Yan-nhaṅu ranger enterprise with its synergies with Yan-nhaṅu culture over-shadow Baymarrwaṅa’s prerogatives for language and cultural education renewal? For revivification of the spiritual links between kin and the spirits of country?

The ontological shift and new power language associated with ‘environmental management’ offers great rewards and penetrating challenges to Yan-nhaṅu ‘law’. With new

generations coming into this kind of opportunity and their 'old people' rapidly disappearing, new approaches and new tools may be warranted to help new generations of leaders maintain a critical eye on what may otherwise be an unquestioned movement of Yan-nhaṅu livelihood and well-being into the political economy of the State. Change is inevitable and not to be too harshly pre-judged from the 'outside'. A level of continuity is essential to Yan-nhaṅu and other Indigenous Australians because such value criteria as connection to country, identity through language and ancestry, authority to direct the future, unique knowledge, symbiosis with seasonal change, define them and give them surety and presence in an otherwise fickle and opportunistic society.

In a world bereft of magic, these magnificent trees of connection between earth and sky, people and place, kin and country continue to re-create the knowledge of the ancestors. Knowledge of ancestral essences in country, embedded in songs, stories and language, heard on the voice of the wind, in the songs of the birds, in the seasonal revisitation of spirits of country. Knowledge so intangible, indiscernible and elusive, at once powerful and precarious. Invisible to the scientific myopic of the modern world, irretrievable, inestimable wisdom linked to place, who can perpetuate this metaphysical jewel but Yan-nhaṅu themselves.

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“Country Services People, not People Service Country”

Anthony Kerr

Interview with Otto Bulmaniya Champion

30th November 2017, Ramingining

In late November 2017 Anthony caught up with Otto Bulmaniya Champion, a senior Traditional Owner and a senior Gurruwilling Ranger at Ramingining. A decade previously Otto had introduced Anthony to Arnhem Land and they have collaborated ever since on various natural resource management projects. Otto has been heavily involved in fire management in the Arafura Swamp region for many years and in this interview talked about some of the land management and cultural challenges that he faces.

My name is Otto Champion or Bulmaniya, they call me, and I'm a Rembarrnga fella. My outstation is about 70 kilometres south south-west of Ramingining. We are here at the ranger base in the Ramingining community where I am working and I'm a senior ranger looking after land management program. But mainly my role is looking after fire and looking at how my countrymen, *Bi-ngong* ('blackfellas'), manage fire. Before I talk about new thing, I want to share with you a little bit of a story of how we can act with fire. Fire is big stuff for us, in holding our knowledge, clan structure, our lives, fire for marriage in proper way, fire keeps us warm in cold weather. Fire, we also use him for cooking. For us fire is a tool for everything, 'looking after country' or 'caring for country' is the backbone for everything. When I was a little boy I didn't do training to light fire. I started from small.



Figure 1: Otto Champion.

Who taught you?

Well, it was my grandmother, my grandfather, my mother and my father. I saw them doing it and sometimes they were worried for me. “Him a bit dangerous” they would say, if I was burning the wrong way. But they could watch and see how I built up knowledge for lighting up grass. When I was young, we didn’t have any matches, old man used to carry a fire stick, and it was really strict not to play with it. Because the firestick was too hard to light when wet season, we didn’t have matches and it was hard to make fire so we had to protect it.

Did you ever get into trouble for playing around with it? Were there serious consequences?

I never played with the fire stick, I could only play with lighting up fire from campfire and use little firesticks to light them up and use them to play little games.

Up here in the north, we have two special tree species, woollybutt (*Eucalyptus miniata*) and stringy bark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*). Woollybutt indicates that there are two seasons, wet season and a dry season, because the bark goes half way up and the top half of

the tree is smooth. Stringy bark was used to do Kangaroo fire drives. We carried like a torch. You can only use that bark during early dry season, you know, May, June, July, August you can still use. That's the knowledge for what fire does for our lives, it keeps us from bad things.

We do other smoke ceremonies. We do small ones in every funeral ceremony. We sing and smoke the houses of where dead bodies used to live, and then we wait for the rain to clean up all the sweat for caring for that old man, or even young people when we lose them. Then after the wet season gone we wait for this early fire coming. Every season we have to burn, why we burn that is because we have got to smoke bad spirits and bring good spirits.

If we get right way fire and do it properly, then we get rewarded for doing right way fire, like we can see a lot of flowering indicators for early dry season, we are getting more bird sounds, honey, then we know our fire is a good early fire or a cool fire.

The fire stick, was it always alight?

Well, there is a big story there, which goes into how we look at ourselves, when we say *Ngala Dakku*, it means mother and child. Or when we say *NyarraWalkkur* – father and son. We always pass that knowledge on because, fire is in the middle husband and wife sit in the campfire. They got married and they are watching their kids play around the campfire. When they grow up they have two-ways responsibility looking after father's country and looking after mother's country. That is the structure of kinship that has existed from the very beginning from our ancestors' time, walking and burning and recording what was there, what was important.

So, with *Bi-ngong* eyes, we see good and bad, *Yirritja* and *Duwah*. We see fire and rain, we see everything in male and female. Fire is our lives, we get married, initiation ceremony, we have to do a fire ceremony before we go out and do a big hunting drive. Now we can see landscapes changing because traditional knowledge is not there anymore, because people walk off our land and leave country empty. Then unmanaged fire comes through, a lot of fuel building up. Then recently some elders are worrying about it, saying that we are killing tucker for animals plus we are making bad fires for big weather for cyclones.

I remember in 1974 we were in Malnyangarnak outstation, camping out there and hunting and gathering. We saw a big storm coming, which turned out to be cyclone Tracey, which hit Darwin. We were lucky, my grandmother and my father found a little safe place to make a bark shelter. We had no steel and iron at that time, but we survived. The wind went

over, we could see the floodwaters and rocks rolling down. Big mob water coming down, rocks falling like a landslide. I didn't know, but to Old Man, my father, who had been watching them they used to do good fire and make sure talk to country in his life. So, from fire, we want to keep that Old Man's spirit and message alive to make sure we let them know that we are coming. So, every clan is burning, we are not telling other clans not to burn this, unless when it comes to *Warlirr*, which is like really hot weather in August and September. We see some of the red flowers which indicates that there is about to be some really hot fires or that fire now is pregnant. We say *Wolh galangang*, which means fire is hot now and can chase you. If we do it early, that fire is going to be a good cold fire which means safety for animals, plants and people and for breathing smoke. Because early fire we get some herbs, grass, vines and scrub, leaf we got bush medicine there. So, from burning early, it's a good medicine for our country and ourselves.

How often would country be burned in the old days?

People have been burning country for all time. Burning country for next year. Maybe depends on following the hunting cycle. If one area dries up, then we would move to the billabong area or another area and that is the cycle. By doing that, we used to follow tucker and we would burn as we went to make a path or to look for sugar bag. I've seen an old lady who was smart, we used to walk and burn in the cold times for safety, so it was better for kids to walk and there were less burning logs. But in Wakawilk (underground fires, including peat fires), you can see those burning logs. Even one week old, underneath they are still hot. That is when my grandmother and father used to tell me, "Don't step on that, that one is still burning".

Marluwurru, or in my mother's language, *Yekke*, means early dry season when him foggy, dew, May to July. This is the time when we do early burning. When we walk and burn, the smoke from that bush tucker and bush medicine cleanses us. So, for us, we are not scared for fire because every year we have to do hunting and gathering, but we are also doing other stuff like smoking ourselves, healing.

30 or 40 years ago, traditional fire management started to change. Government changed policy. As soon as we got that homeland movement, we started to see permanent houses, roads and airport. And doing only a little bit of *Wulken* (short trips to country), going hunting and come back.

So, before the Homeland movement there was more of a nomadic lifestyle?

In the dry season, they used to go and follow all the good grass, the good, fat, healthy animals. Then when it came to August to September, the hot weather, we used to leave that fire and save some of the grass for ceremony, or some of the grass for smaller wallaby drives in cool areas. But our whole hunting calendar started to change. I've been thinking that no wonder people are not walking in hot sun and getting burned. They used to control the body temperature. While him cool, you go out and make big fire, they used to say, but when coming to hot weather, leave that fire and do other hunting and gathering. Like poisoning fish or making fish traps on creek sides. So, we would follow the seasons like that.

So, since the Homelands movement, it created what I call, "easy food". But at that time we had government doing a lot of tucker runs to the remote outstations and providing rations, and collecting bark for paintings. No money at that time. There used to be purchase orders and they would give us knives, matches, axes, tea, sugar, a couple of sheets and small blankets. We couldn't carry big blankets, too much weight. That's been really good life, just going out on country camping. Then when the first storms come, then we used to come back in that same top part escarpment and collect yams and look at what bush tucker resulted from our early fires.

How has fire management changed since the 70's, are there bigger wildfires?

I think for some areas it changed because there were no people on country. The only help that country gets is from rangers. We go out and help burning on country. Slowly with our carbon program we have been able to reconnect to our traditional burning, get back out on country and recognise our own people, our own TOs. Their full-time jobs in the 60's and 70's was their role to keep looking after fire because it was their responsibility to look after the country for their grandkids and to feed them.

That has changed, some of the open woodland is now shrub land and some of the open flat country has become grassland. My grandmother and grandfather were very smart and would keep these open areas clear from wattles and acacias and other shrubs. Some areas we walk past I can see all these long stringy barks (30 cm round) or sometimes long tall skinny ones. That area has got double feel, so tree itself adjusts its growth to survive and is aware of the coming fire season. That tree protects himself, grows to survive and puts up enough bark to protect from fire, double feel. The country has changed. Pig and buffalo, soil

disturbance, new plants now grow and take over stringy bark, woollybutt and bloodwood. In my time, back in the 70's I would see it more open, really good soil, no damage.

Do grassy weeds affect the fires here?

Yes, I think now in the Arafura swamp we got *Olive hymenachne* and other weeds that make big mob smoke. We have mission grass and Gamba grass in our own town and that can change the fire behaviour, compared to the cane grass and spear grass in my time. They was the only grasses I would see back when I was young, *Yirritja* grass and *Duwah* grass, which would tell us when dry season was coming.

Gamba grass is still green in the early dry and also in the hot season. When it is the wet season it goes dry and then wet season fire, we shouldn't be burning like that. And of course dry lightning or sometimes we get penalty from our old people. They say, "You mob are burning the wrong way and making big storms around this time of year". We scared when we see the big storm because right way fire knowledge, him fading away.

Arnhem Land Fire Agreement (ALFA) seems to be growing and a lot of communities and ranger groups are involved. Is this bringing back good fire?

This new program under ALFA, we heard old people worrying about wildfires, now for a couple of years. We have started to bring good fire management back through that carbon program. We are still thinking that we are all Yolngu mob, how come we are separating Yolngu rangers and landowners on the ground? People started to twist their minds a little bit with talk of firestick farming as if somebody owned and farmed all these trees. That's the new stuff. But if we look back to how fires used to be managed in the past the right way, the money that we get from it should be split equally between Traditional Owners' walking back on country. They can do cultural part and rangers can do a little bit fire by doing that report so that they can get carbon money. I think that scientists, rangers and conservationists should recognise the fact that Traditional Owners have a full-time job and should be getting paid for the burning they are doing on country.

So, who gets the carbon money?

Most goes to rangers because they do a lot of work aerial burning with the helicopters, matches, fuel, equipment, but at the end of the day nothing for the Traditional Owners who are still out there doing fire work with us. They don't get recognised for looking after their country.

Through our company, Arafura Swamp Ranger Aboriginal Corporation (ASRAC), we are looking after six or seven satellite bases. We are already getting Commonwealth Government money for Working on Country (WOC) wages and operations. The money we are making through carbon we want to put that back to homelands and give people employment, training, equipment and services. You know proper roads, proper houses, storage for tucker so they can have plenty of fire to go out bush with because a lot of the bush tucker has gone because feral animals eat it. So, we have got to have money to help family do fire work.

Our people are professionals, they are teachers and should be getting full money and should be getting full time wages during the few months of the early dry season for fire work. Then we need to find more money for transfer of knowledge because we must follow that hunting cycle which should fit in to that land management cycle. In my time, when we used to see our burning and other clans burning, we used to walk across their fires and see what would grow, what would come back. We would be doing monitoring and evaluation, the proper way, respecting everything. Country services people. What I mean by Country servicing people is, if people start walking through or managing country at the wrong time according to *Balandar* (European) calendar, that country can kill you. If wrong people burning country at wrong time, then everyone loses. But, if people walk through the country at the right time, aware of the signs, the country cleanses you. When it gets too hot, the sun tells you to stop.

Now from this smoke money, before anybody goes off and burns, let's put \$40,000 aside for helicopter and do it 'efficient way'. But hang on, this 'efficient way', you are taking jobs of people on ground who could do the same work. So, take this money and give it to these people so they can walk on the ground and do the burning our way. Not through the scientific methodology for carbon money. We want to be on country. We don't worry too much about the carbon money and penalties for burning after the 1st of August to fulfil that carbon methodology. We want to be happy and healthy on country.

I think that it is rush-rush, which doesn't give much opportunity to involve all TOs and communities. I think that other clan groups should be coming to fire season planning meetings. But we only budget for our own ranger travel when we get that carbon money, not including TOs. That is the argument that I want to take forward. Bushfires NT are saying that it is Yolngu responsibility as it is their land. Building that communication makes you talk to your neighbours like pastoral mob. We want to see everyone talking, so that they do firebreaks then when my fire goes onto his property I can't get the blame because he has got his firebreaks set up already.

The way it was?

The way it was! Clans would do their own areas and then send letter stick and bark torch which served as an invitation to another clan to come and hunt and gather and eat and come together and make a plan for next year's fire. The messenger, the runner, would go to this tribe and say, "I've been sent by the owner of the neighbouring land to invite you to come, how many hunters, how many families, how many spears. Let's go and have a big Kangaroo game". This was like a sports game. The bark torch was like an Olympic torch and the winners would get a big mob of Kangaroos and everyone would win. Or, if we lost, the fire or the kangaroo would be the winner. The sport competition would be between people, kangaroo and fire. If we were smart enough to escape from the fire, Kangaroo would always win. My dad used to study animals, and would say, "For my safety, I will follow that Kangaroo, because he knows the way to safety". When he's jumping and singing that song to make calm that fire, it then jumps over the fire. Some of that Kangaroo fire drive areas are restricted, they are not happening anymore because they are dangerous.

There was one old man, he had 20 sons and one way rock wall that was used to run a big kangaroo fire drive. All the hunters inside, they were hunting. Some of them would escape but this one son went missing. He killed a big mob of kangaroo, maybe 10 or 15 kangaroo, but the fire trapped him. When cooking them family and brothers with the father one, he could hear large sound from that young man. Him try to escape and climb up a tree, but fire came up behind him and bang! Then this old man was worrying saying, "My son is missing, my son is missing". Then they followed a wedged-tailed eagle that was flying around and then found that body. That old man found his son with all the dead kangaroos that he had killed. So, he built up a platform for the dead body and the kangaroos and left them there. It was a really

sad day for that old man. That’s why some kangaroo fire drives can be dangerous. When we educate our kids, we tell them not to go inside the fire when doing a kangaroo fire drive. That happened when my father was a young man.

What does the future hold for Yolngu and fire management?

Moving forward, we want to protect our country from other people’s wrong way fires. We want to be equal like any government crown land or private property. If someone burns then they should get a penalty or go to court because they are burning an asset. So, for us, we should have that proper law enforcement power so that if people do wrong burning him should be held responsible. Maybe we should measure how much this area got burned, he should pay back with something else to this clan, or replant some bush tucker. We are dealing with a lot of hard people, sometimes they tell us not to burn in certain areas because they have businesses running there. But we are TOs, we can go and burn! That part we are still fixing. Paying a fine for burning our country or going to court relates to Yolngu law, because in the old days, there would have been a death penalty. If someone burned another man’s country, that bloke would be followed and they would get rid of him. Or they used to wait until ceremony, that was the time that they used to catch him and give payback. Serious stuff. Now we can’t push our law because Balanda law him watching us. If we start doing that we would get locked up in gaol.

If him leasing on Aboriginal land, you have to have permission, you have to have permits. It’s a risk for us because they need to have a Land Use Agreement, or Section 19 agreement¹ for bringing in carbon money. But when we hearing other mobs saying, “That’s your fire, that’s your responsibility”. They are getting it wrong, there should be a joint responsibility. The tenant needs to work with the landlord. If Yolngu land is private property, can we make this bit clearer please? You should have to pay if you steal something or if you burn on that land without permission. So, we have been talking to a lot of contractors, and a lot of government employees. When Yolngu go to the city, we are scared because we don’t want to get caught up with the police. We can’t do the wrong thing and burn there. We can’t go and break into peoples’ private properties. There are signs and people have guns. If we try

¹ The Northern Land Council section 19 Land Use Agreement process gives Traditional Owners an opportunity to consider, develop terms and conditions and the right to consent to or reject business or commercial proposals on their land and seas (see also <https://www.nlc.org.au/our-land-sea/aboriginal-land-legislation>).

to use the same system here and protect our land, we get Balanda law. So, we want to put up our signage saying that if you come on to my country and do the wrong thing, there will be consequences. We have been trusting white people for a long time to do the right thing but many come and run amok on our country. Now we should be strong. From our land management and conservation courses, we want to get that law enforcement power and make people aware to leave certain things for bush people. This is our country, don't burn him.

So, everything is changing and we want to see more countrymen doing it. We, as rangers are just the middlemen. We want to help to protect. But there will always be risk. That's when it comes down to the fact that if you don't listen to me, I'll go and run amok by burning without proper knowledge or authority for that country. Now Yolngu are getting ideas from other areas, they are getting different style. They are stealing buffalo over there. "I'll go and steal pig from here", an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Really, we want to make sure we get that law enforcement power and make sure that we don't get off the track. We don't want to hear government say that roads through here are public roads. They are private roads because no one is servicing them. Sometimes we get caught up from police on our private roads. So, educating more people about using fire the right way means no stealing, no swearing, no begging. You have to listen when someone is telling. Don't stare. Eat a little bit. That's all related to life and respect. Here, fire is related to life and respect. Here, country services people, not people services country.

The Role of Land, Fire and Water in the Kurna Cultural and Linguistic Renaissance

Rob Amery and Katrina Karlapina Power

1. Introduction

As is the case in other Australian Indigenous societies, land, water and fire were fundamental to Kurna life. The land provided food and sustenance in the form of plants and animals, and materials for manufacturing artefacts. Freshwater was needed for drinking and bathing and was also where mussels, yabbies, freshwater crayfish and smaller fish are found, whilst the sea also provided a bountiful supply of fish. Fire provided warmth at night and heat for cooking and manufacturing tools and weapons. The use of land, water and fire were intimately intertwined and also played an important role in the spiritual life of the Kurna people.

Kurna is the language Indigenous to the Adelaide Plains in South Australia, which has for the last three decades been undergoing a renaissance. The Kurna people bore the brunt of colonisation in South Australia in 1836 such that the language ceased to be spoken on an everyday basis by the early 1860s, less than three decades post-colonisation. This was largely a result of the plummeting population brought about by the introduction of diseases including smallpox, influenza and typhoid (Amery 2016: 74-78, Amery 2018: 422-424).

Fortunately, the Kurna language was reasonably well-documented in that brief period by two German missionaries, Clamor Schürmann and Christian Teichelmann, who were sent out to South Australia by the newly formed Dresden Mission Society. They published a 2,000-word vocabulary, sketch grammar and phraseology with 200 Kurna sentences with English translations (Teichelmann and Schürmann 1840, henceforth T&S). Teichelmann continued working on the language culminating in a sizable unpublished manuscript with additional words and numerous phrase and sentence examples (Teichelmann 1857, henceforth TMs).

This article is structured as follows. Amery first looks at Kurna notions of land, fire and water as evidenced in historical sources followed by an analysis of their respective roles within the Kurna linguistic and cultural renaissance over the last three decades. Then, Power provides a first-hand personal account as a Kurna *Ngangkipurka* ('senior Kurna woman') of the use and importance of land, fire and water within her own community. Both Amery and Power have been centrally involved in this linguistic and cultural renaissance since its beginnings, Amery as a non-Indigenous linguist working collaboratively in partnership with Kurna people, and Power as an artist and Kurna media/language worker. As such, the two writers of this paper provide two complementary positions.

2. Land

Land was of central importance, not only for its bountiful riches to support life, but it was also central to Kurna identity as we shall see. The land was carefully managed with fire (see Gammage 2011), such that many colonists arriving in 1836 observed that the land resembled an English park. Gammage (2012: 17, 19) observes:

[T]rees and bushes are densest on crests, so were burnt variably. To flourish in this way, the hills need fire every three to four years to thin wattle and eucalypt saplings, kangaroo and similar grasses prefer fire about every three, and Drooping Sheoak, the foreground tree [in Light's painting], seven to ten fire-free years to seed. So at least three fire regimes, plus others for the coastal scrub, made this land. Fire regimes were distinct, repeated, and integrated with neighbours to maintain particular plant and animal habitats.

The land was deliberately shaped by these fire regimes to provide fresh and luxuriant growth of grass for kangaroos to graze with adjacent belts of trees for shelter for kangaroos and for concealment for hunters. Burning off was carefully rotated as Gammage explains above in order to maintain the balance between burnt areas, fresh grass growth, mature growth, isolated shade trees and forest cover.

The land also supplied ochres of various colours which were important in ceremonies for adorning the body, producing designs on shields and for healing. Important terms are *karko* [RS¹ *karrku*] "red ochre with which the natives paint their bodies" (T&S: 9); *milte* [RS *milthi*] "red ochre; the same as *karko*" (T&S: 23); *pureta* "loins; reins; kidneys". *Karko pureta*

¹ Revised Spelling (RS) was adopted in 2010. All current Kurna language resources produced by Kurna Warra Pintyanthi (KWP) and Kurna Warra Karrpanthi (KWK) appear in RS. For the purposes of this paper original spelling in italics is retained alongside of RS.

[RS *karrku purdita*] “a smooth oval stone used for preparing the red ochre” (T&S: 41); *yernbanna* [RS *yarnpana*] “a species of red ochre, brought from the far North, with which the face and other parts of the body are painted” (T&S: 61) and *yärnbanna* “purple coloured ochre” (TMs); *ngarru* [RS *ngaru*] “any white substance; as white ochre, chalk, lime, &c.” (T&S: 32). Ochres were a sought after substance and were traded with neighbouring groups and even those much further afield. Claypans were used to cure skins which were pegged out to dry (see *babandi*, T&S: 1).

In addition to *yerta* [RS *yarta*] ‘earth, land; soil; country’, Teichelmann and Schürmann (1840) documented the culturally important word *pangkarra*, defining it in an encyclopaedic way:

[A] district or tract of country belonging to an individual, which he inherits from his father. *Ngarraitya paru aityo pangkarrila*, there is abundance of game in my country. As each *pangkarra* has its peculiar name, many of the owners take that as their proper name, with the addition of the term *burka*; for instance, *Mulleakiburka* (Tam O’Shanter), *Mullawirraburka* (King John), *Kalyoburka*, *Karkulyaburka*, *Tindoburka*, &c.

(T&S: 36)

As this entry indicates, one means for naming a person, was after the tract of land for which that individual was owner or custodian. So, for instance, Murlawirrapurka, known to the colonists as ‘King John’ was owner/custodian for Murlawirra (lit. ‘dry forest’), a tract of land in the Willunga foothills on the edge of the Aldinga Plains to the south of Adelaide. This naming practice signals the importance of the relationship that Kurna people had with the land. Teichelmann (1857) goes on to define *pangkarra* as ‘country, district, fatherland’. Teichelmann (1841: 6-7) elaborates further:

[E]ach tribe has a certain district of the country as a property received by their forefathers, the boundaries of which were fixed, according to their narration, by them; therefore, no tribe is allowed to live on the district of another one, except as occasional visitors, and they think themselves more entitled to the support of Europeans, living, or having settled upon their district, than any other Native of a distant tribe. Whenever this rule is trespassed a fight is the consequence; thence partly so many fights which take place about the town, as soon as different tribes are assembled.

This word was recorded as *Punggára* by William Wyatt, Protector of Aborigines as a placename, amongst others, in the Weera districts north of Adelaide, thus missing its significance entirely. Other observers failed to record the word at all. However, Teichelmann and Schürmann’s recording of the word *pangkarra* was a clear challenge to the terra nullius doctrine, upon which British colonisation of Australia was founded.

Fast forward to the 21st century, in 2003 Jeff Grosset, a winemaker from the Clare Valley in the north of Kurna country, spoke about the term *pangkarra* in his address to the inaugural New South Wales Press Club. Grosset claimed *pangkarra* as Australia's answer to the French term *terroir*:

Terroir is the French word for what some have known in Australia for thousands of years as pangkarra. Pangkarra is an Aboriginal word used by the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains. It is a word that, like *terroir*, represents a concept that has no English translation but encompasses the characteristics of a specific place – the climate, sunshine, rain, geology and the soil-water relations. About the closest we can get in English is to refer to the site, but even that doesn't really cover the major components of *terroir* – or pangkarra – being the soil and the local topography. In essence, a wine has a certain taste not just because of the variety and vineyard management, but because of its place. People who say, "this is my place, I belong here" are more likely to grasp the concept than people who say, "this is my place, this belongs to me."

(Jeff Grosset quoted in Allen 2013)

Allen himself goes on to say:

[W]inemakers have often used Aboriginal words to name their vineyards, wineries, regions and brands, and the use of Aboriginal imagery – from 'dot paintings' to Yellow Tail marsupials – is also widespread on wine labels. But here Grosset was travelling beyond the words and the images to engage with an ancient Aboriginal worldview, and by doing so was suggesting a new, profound and unique way of thinking about *terroir* in Australia.

(Allen 2013)

In our view, Grosset is ignoring the essential component of the meaning of *pangkarra* (that the land is inherited through the father's line) and is travelling way beyond the meaning of the word when he begins to impute notions of climate, geology and characteristics of the soil. Whilst Grosset probably makes a valid point about belonging to country, he has supplied these additional connotations about soil type, climate and weather himself. These have not come from an oral tradition. The term *pangkarra* is only known from the writings of Teichelmann and Schürmann (1840) above. There is a fine line between cultural misappropriation and cultural and linguistic renaissance.

The body is often used as a metaphor for the landscape. English refers to headwaters, the foot of a mountain, the eye of storm, hurricane or cyclone and so on. Occasionally, as in Aboriginal languages, the body part is also used to refer to the landform itself in English as in the Sydney Heads (referring to two raised rocky headlands two kilometres apart at the entrance to Sydney Harbour). Aboriginal languages are known for their frequent use of body metaphors where, as in the last English example above, the body part itself is also used as the term for the landform itself. Body parts in Kurna too are extended to refer to landforms, such as *warltu* 'neck' extended to 'valley', *mudlha* 'nose' extended to 'point; peninsula, cape'

giving rise to Mudlhangga, the name for Le Fevre Peninsula near Port Adelaide. The two highest peaks Mount Lofty and Mount Bonython rising above the Adelaide Plains in the adjacent Mount Lofty Ranges are referred to as *Yuridla* 'two ears' (from which the present day town of Uraidla derives its name) whilst the spaces either side of Mount Lofty are the *pikudla* 'two eyebrows' (from which the small town of Piccadilly derives its name) (Amery 2002: 169-170).

3. Fire in the historical record

Fire was also essential for Kurna society to flourish and impinged on most aspects of life. *Kardla/karla* 'fire' was produced with a *kuru* 'fire-making apparatus' consisting of two pieces of the yakka tree. The two sticks, one held horizontal with the feet and the other vertical and inserted into a small hole in the horizontal piece. The two were rubbed together to produce intense heat from friction (Stephens 1889: 492). Fire was also transported from one place to another with *karla purtultu* 'firesticks'. Fire was used for both *kampanthi* 'roasting' food directly on the fire and *kanyanthi* 'cooking food in an earth oven', where *kanya* 'rock' being heated up in a hot fire serves as the agent of cooking with the food having been covered by bark and/or leaves with a layer of earth on top to hold the heat in (T&S: 7-8).

Fire was not only important as a source of energy for cooking and warmth. It was an important tool for hunting by moving game towards a trap or net (Cawthorne 1844: 18-19), or for smoking animals from their holes. It was used to harden and straighten spears, shields and other tools and weapons. It was an agent both for healing and cleansing and for working sorcery (ibid.: 29). Fire also kept malevolent spirits (*kuinyo*) at bay during the night. According to the Protector of Aborigines:

They believe in the existence of a being whom they designate *Kuinyo*, a monster having the appearance of a black. He is said to have the power of flying through air, or passing subterraneously [sic] from one place to another. His approach is more frequent in the night, when the fires have gone out, and to guard against him they are frequently stirred to cause them to burn brightly.

(Matthew Moorhouse 1843 in Foster 1990: 59)

Fire was also an important part of initiation and other ceremonies including funerals and ash was important in mourning rituals (Amery and Rigney 2006: 36-38).

A good range of Kurna terms were recorded within the domain of fire. For instance, *tumpu* is material used to produce smoke, while the verb *tumpunthi* derived from *tumpu* meant 'to smoke, as a possum out of its hole; to suffocate with smoke' while *tumpu*

mankunthi (lit. 'to get *tumpu*') meant 'to smoke meat' (TMs *tumbondi*). The *paapa tumpu* is called 'the bundle of burning incense which after the rite [of circumcision] is performed is thrown into the water' (TMs *bappa tumbo*). Interestingly, the Kurna verb *parranthi* means both 'to kindle a fire' and 'to marry', no doubt underlining the importance of fire in the marriage ceremony and that fire is at the centre of the home. *Kardla/karla* 'fire' occurs frequently in the limited number of Kurna sentences that were recorded as in *garla burta burtaingko, baûngatto, manyarendaii*, 'Let the fire blaze, I will trim it, I am cold.' (TMs *bauondi*). With the coming of Europeans, *kardla* 'fire' gained new usages as in *tipukardla* 'gunpowder; matches' being a compound of *kardla* 'fire' plus *tipu* 'spark' (T&S: 47).

4. The role of water in Kurna life

Kurna life as we know it from the historical record was centred on Karrawirra Pari (the River Torrens) which runs through the heart of the city of Adelaide. Interestingly, the River Torrens is regarded as a reflection of Wardlipari [lit. 'house/hut river'] (the Milky Way) where the bright stars on the edge of the Milky Way were thought to be the campfires on the side of the river (Teichelmann 1841: 8, Clarke 1990: 5).

A second river, Ngangkipari (lit. 'female river'), as the name suggests was a designated women's site important in fertility. Ivarityi, the celebrated 'last speaker' of the Kurna language, said that Ngangkipari was a "place of refuge for women and children during tribal wars" (Black 1920: 83). See Schultz (2017) for a complete account of the meaning of and associations with this name.

The importance of water underlies the fact that Kurna society, like other Aboriginal societies had their *manya partana* 'rain-makers' (TMs: *manya*).and the Kurna language has a verb *manya mankunthi* 'to produce rain' (TMs: *mankondi*).

There are 35 references to 'water' in Teichelmann (1857) and unsurprisingly most of these references are to mundane aspects of daily life such as drawing water from the well, pouring water, wringing or squeezing out water etc.

5. The intervening years

The few remaining Kurna people were removed from their lands in the mid-nineteenth century. Children attending the Native School Establishment in Kintore Avenue (located in the centre of the city of Adelaide) were sent to Poonindie Mission in Barngarla country on Eyre Peninsula in 1850. Others withdrew to nearby country towns such as Cleland and Kangarilla. Most people of Kurna descent eventually ended up at Point Pearce Mission on Yorke Peninsula in Narungga country or at Raukkan (Point Macleay Mission) in Ngarrindjeri country on Lake Alexandrina (Amery 2018: 424). In their absence, the population of Adelaide grew rapidly. A good portion of Kurna lands were subject to urban development in the greater Adelaide Metropolitan area. Much of their lands to the north and south of the metropolitan area were cleared and became farmland, whilst the hills were no longer subject to the Kurna fire regimes and became overgrown with dense bush that is now subject to hot, intense, destructive bushfires. The carefully tended Kurna landscape was utterly changed forever. Within just a few years of colonisation, the River Torrens upon which the Kurna depended, was polluted with effluent from tanneries established on its banks. Fallen trees and debris were cleared from the river bed which resulted in erosion and a much deeper faster flowing stream when it rained heavily (Gammage 2012: 20).

6. Kurna linguistic and cultural renaissance

Land, water and fire are constant and central themes in the Kurna linguistic and cultural renaissance which has been at the forefront of language revival efforts in Australia. The hallmark of this revival is the speeches of welcome to and acknowledgement of Kurna land.

The typical Kurna welcome speech begins:

Marni naa pudni Kurna yarta-ana. Kurna miyurna yaitya mathanya Wama Tarntanyaku.
 ‘Welcome to Kurna land. Kurna people are the Indigenous owners/custodians of the Adelaide Plains.’

A typical acknowledgement might begin:

Ngadlu tampinthe, ngadlu Kurna yartangka inparrinthe. Kurna miyurna yaitya mathanya Wama Tarntanyaku.
 ‘We acknowledge (that) we are meeting on Kurna land. Kurna people are the Indigenous owners/custodians of the Adelaide Plains.’

Whatever form the welcome or acknowledgement speech takes, recognition of Kurna land is always front and centre (personal observation; Amery 2016: 210-213, see also The University of Adelaide 2019).

The Kurna cultural renaissance began with the formation of the Tjilbruke Track Committee, which itself grew out of the Tjilbruke Monuments Committee established in 1971 by non-Aboriginal persons, mostly based at the South Australian Museum, who wanted to pay tribute to the Indigenous people who formerly occupied the Adelaide Plains. On becoming aware that there were still people who actively identified with the Adelaide Plains people, Georgina Yambo Williams was recruited in 1980 and appointed as Project Officer. They documented the Tjilbruke Dreaming Trail that ran from Warriparinga in the southern suburbs located in the inner Adelaide Metropolitan area down to Cape Jervis at the southern extremity of Kurna country (Amery 2016: 9-13). The Tjilbruke story (Tindale 1987) concerns the death of a young man Kulultuwi, killed for killing an emu on Tarntanya country. As the emu was the totem of the Tarntanya clan, it was against the law to kill them in the Tarntanya estate. The ancestor collected the body of his nephew Kulultuwi, wrapped it up in paperbark and carried it down the coast. The story tells of the creation of fresh water springs along the coast, everywhere that Tjilbruke stopped to cry over the dead body of his nephew Kulultuwi as he carried it towards the south. The Kurna Heritage Committee (KHC) grew out of the Tjilbruke Track Committee, later becoming the Kurna Aboriginal Community and Heritage Association (KACHA) in the mid-1980s. The main focus for KACHA was the protection of these freshwater springs, which had in some cases been destroyed and damaged as a result of urbanisation and development (Amery 2016: 10).

In 2000 the Kurna people lodged a native title claim under the Native Title Act over their lands on the Adelaide Plains. Finally, after 18 years on 21 March 2018, Kurna people were recognised as native title holders for at least some of their lands in and around Adelaide. Native title rights were conferred over 17 parcels of land in over 7,000 square kilometres of land. Importantly, the Kurna Peoples Determination Area includes the greater Adelaide Metropolitan Area and surrounding townships to the north, east and south, the very heart of Kurna country, though there are still significant portions of Kurna land, both to the north and south that lie beyond the Determination Area. Further to this, the Determination Area extends some three miles into the sea (p.c. Lewis O'Brien, 2 October 2019).

The Kurna Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA), the first to apply to any capital city in Australia, affects 27 local councils. According to the terms of the ILUA:

the nature and extent of the native title rights and interests in the Native Title Land are rights to use and enjoy those lands and waters, being:

- (a) the right of access to the land and waters;
- (b) the right to live on, use and enjoy the land and waters including for ceremonial purposes;
- (c) the right to take, use enjoy, share and exchange the resources of the land and waters including by fishing, hunting and gathering; but excluding those resources referred to in item 1 of Schedule 4;
- (d) the right to conduct funerals and burials on the land and waters.
- (e) the right to maintain and protect places of importance under traditional laws, customs and practices on the land and waters;
- (f) the right to teach on the land and waters; and
- (g) the right to be accompanied on the land and waters by those people who, though not Kurna persons, are
 - (i) spouses of Kurna persons; or
 - (ii) people required by the traditional laws and customs for the performance of ceremonies or cultural activities.

(Federal Court of Australia, 2018)

The first public art work to feature incorporation of the Kurna language, the Yerrakartarta installation outside the Hyatt Hotel on North Terrace, concerned the recognition of Kurna land. In addition to the Kurna name *Yerrakartarta* 'at random', the text *Kurna yerta. Natta atto nanga; yakko atto bukki nakki* appeared on a brass plaque without translation. The phrases *Natta atto nanga; yakko atto bukki nakki* 'Now I know (or understand) it; formerly I did not know' was taken directly from Teichelmann and Schürmann (1840: 67) whilst the words *Kurna yerta* 'Kurna land' were added in front.

Some years later, Kurna text was incorporated into the artwork outside the main entrance to the Adelaide Festival Theatre, again celebrating the importance of land in the words *Yertarra padnima, taingiwiltanendadlu* 'When we walk the land, we become strong'. The Kurna Placenames website² (n.d.) features a similar expression in *Pulthunari payama, ngadlu yarta tampinthe* 'When we understand the place names, we recognise the land'. Research into Kurna placenames, initially by Amery (2002, Amery and Williams 2002, Amery and Bucksin 2014) and more recently by Chester Schultz (2017) who has undertaken painstaking comprehensive research producing essays up to forty pages in length on each individual placename. Schultz is preparing a major work *Feet on the Fleurieu* for publication.

² Chester Schultz's placenames research is financed by a Commonwealth Government grant to KWP and his essays are published on the KWP website (<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/kwp>).

Recognition of original Kurna placenames through the South Australian state government's dual naming legislation and the Kurna naming of previously un-named features is an important contributor to the Kurna cultural renaissance. Karrawirra Pari (River Torrens) was officially recognised in November 2001 (Amery and Williams 2002: 263). Kurna naming of the city parks and squares (see *ibid.*: 261-264, 268-272) were recognised progressively over a period of some years.

7. The role of fire

Some time ago Karl Winda Telfer perfected the art of making fire in the traditional way by rubbing sticks together with the heat produced by the friction being used to ignite fibre harvested from the yakka tree (*Xanthorrhoea*). In 2002, Peter Sellars Artistic Director of the Festival of Adelaide appointed Karl as Aboriginal Associate Director who co-created and directed Kurna Palti Meyunna for the opening ceremony as part of the Festival of Adelaide, where he orchestrated a spectacular fire ceremony in Tarntanyangga/Victoria Square in the heart of Adelaide. Karl also demonstrated the art of fire-making at a reception/dinner in Bissendorf, Niedersachsen that was hosted by the local Schürmann family for a small Indigenous Australian delegation visiting Germany on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the formation of the Dresden Mission Society. This event generated some coverage in the local newspaper at the time (personal observation, 2011).

The art of making fire with yakka firesticks is now practised by at least twenty young Kurna men (p.c. Jack Kanya Buckskin, Sept. 2019) including members of the three Kurna dance troupes, Paitya, Taikurtinna and Kuma Kaaru. In the 2019 Kurna Summer School offered by the University of Adelaide, another young Kurna man enrolled in the course, James Tylor, demonstrated the skill to other students whilst on excursion at Warriparinga (personal observation, Jan. 2019).

Smoking ceremonies have been carried out from time to time, especially on the occasion of return of human remains from overseas institutions³. In August 2018 the remains of two Kurna people were returned from Sweden and re-buried in the coastal Tennyson

³ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a practice of sending human remains to the United Kingdom, Europe and the Americas as 'scientific exhibits' to supply museums and satisfy the curiosity of anatomists and phrenologists (Creative Spirits 2019). Many graves in Adelaide were robbed, notably by Dr. William Ramsay-Smith (Elmslie and Nance 1988).

Dunes near Port Adelaide in a moving smoking ceremony conducted by Kurna Elder Fred Agius and in August 2019 (Marsh 2019), whilst another eleven sets of human remains returned from the United Kingdom were laid to rest at the Kingston Reserve in the southwestern Adelaide Metropolitan area (Sutton 2019). Similarly, a smoking ceremony was held on the occasion of the return of a Kurna shield to the South Australian Museum. Smoking ceremonies have also been carried out in hospitals following the death of Kurna people and for the cleansing of other sites such as rooms at Relationships Australia. The old Port Adelaide Courthouse, the scene of harsh penalties imposed on many Nungas, was cleansed prior to its conversion into the Port Adelaide Tourist Information Centre (p.c. Lewis O'Brien, Sept. 2019).

Smoking has also been a very important part of many welcome ceremonies. One memorable occasion was the opening of the Tarnanthi Festival/Exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia on 9 October 2015 when the late Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith danced ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating through the smoke (personal observation).

Local government is often at the interface between the Kurna community and the public at large through their reconciliation action plans. A number of local councils act as the point of contact for the public to book a range of services offered by Kurna people. Five Kurna individuals are currently listed on the Port Adelaide Enfield Council Kurna Register (2018) as offering a Smoking Ceremony. They are Uncle Lewis O'Brien, Karl Winda Telfer, Mickey Kumatpi Marrutya O'Brien, Katrina Karlapina Power and Jack Kanya Buckskin. Kuma Kaaru (Jack Kanya Buckskin) and the Paitya Dance Group (Karl Telfer) are listed on the register maintained by Adelaide City Council (2015) as offering smoking ceremonies.

The Australia Day Council of South Australia (n.d.) provides the following information about the smoking ceremony on its website:

Smoking ceremonies are an ancient custom among Aboriginal Australians in which native plants are burnt to produce smoke and acknowledge the ancestors and pay respect to the land and sea of country. The smoke is believed to have healing and cleansing properties. Australia Day 2020 the day will begin with a Smoking Ceremony.

The aim of the ceremony is to begin the day with a sincere acknowledgement to Aboriginal people from the Adelaide region. The ceremony will entail a range of gestures of, cleansing, hope and well being of our past, present and our future.

In 1999 Kurna woman Georgina Yambo Williams initiated a friendship fire circle at Warriparinga every month on the cycle of the full moon where all were invited to sit around the fire and share stories and so on. The Warriparinga friendship fire attracted up to 150

people at times and served as a catalyst for local protest movements against planned development activities, such as the construction of the Ansett call centre that impinged on Kurna land at Warriparinga. The fire lit in May 2004 was allowed to burn for several days and served as the focus for a suite of events during Reconciliation Week, including a farewell ceremony to outgoing City of Marion Mayor, Colin Haines (Pieris 2016: 127).

8. Kurna funeral protocols

During a series of workshops held in 2000 to develop terms and expressions for use by caregivers with babies and young children, participants raised a desire to be able to conduct funerals in the Kurna language. Subsequent research was carried out into Kurna funeral practices (Amery and Rigney 2006). We discovered that fire played a very important role in Kurna funerals. The funeral procession was led by the *ngarrakuinyu*, a man walking stooped holding a bundle of burning sticks close to his ear. Following the interment of the body, a fire was lit at one end of the grave and kept burning for nearly a fortnight (Adams 1902: 9).



Figure 1: Photo of Gadlabarti as the Ngarrakuinyu. Courtesy of Nici Cumpston.

Following the death of our beloved Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith in July 2017, his son, Jamie Ngungana Ilyaitpina Yidakipina Goldsmith kept a fire burning in his backyard until the funeral took place. Members of the Kurna community, friends and acquaintances would drop in bringing firewood, sharing memories and passing on their condolences. In this case the funeral was not held for some considerable time following the death. Old people told me (Power) of sitting with bodies for days on the mission and using water on bodies and making fires in preparation for burial. So this was fully in keeping with past practices handed down to us by our ancestors.

Fire was also an important element in the funeral service and internment of the body at Bukiyana (Point Pearce). Gadlabarti himself posed as the *ngarrakuinyu* or *ngarrakupa* 'a man carrying in both his hands a piece of burnt wood at a native funeral; he holds it close to his ears, walking in a stooping posture' in photos taken by Nici Cumpston in order to illustrate the Kurna funeral protocols book (Amery and Rigney 2006: 12). Some weeks after the funeral, Kurna Elder, Fred Agius, conducted a smoking ceremony with Gadlabarti's work colleagues and senior staff in the Faculty of Arts and School of Humanities. This ceremony was held in the courtyard outside the Schultz Building at the University of Adelaide where Gadlabarti used to work.

Now let's hear the personal reflections on the meaning and significance of land, fire and water from a senior Kurna woman who is centrally involved in the Kurna cultural and linguistic renaissance. Power speaks from lived experience as a key member of her community.

9. A Kurna woman's perspective (by Karlapina Power)

Ngai Ngari Karlapina 'my name is Karlapina'. Karlapina means 'The Lover of Fire' and my daughter's name is Tipu 'spark'. South Australian genealogical records of my family (Kartinyeri 1985: 216) cite me as the first child in seven generations not born on a mission and whilst my mother and grandmothers were born on missions their identity as Kurna is as solid as mine.

9.1. Land

Kurna people were forcibly removed from Adelaide's newly established colonial 'Free State' and relocated to geographically-isolated rural and remote missions in 1850. Predominantly to Barngala (Poonindie); Narungga (Yorke Peninsula) and Ngarrindjeri (Point McLeay) lands. There are multi-storied elements and players in this Kurna cultural and linguistic renaissance. I choose to re-claim the voices and the footsteps of all the Kurna women who walked, sang and danced on country before me.

While we remain centred in an extended kinship system this historical mixing of various language groups on various missions shapes our own sense of 'belonging' to country and will influence our chosen burial site. Like the umbilical cord between mother and baby we universally recognise the land as our Mother. We are born from her and we are returned to her in death.

The prohibition of Kurna language limited our ability to share our 'traditional' oral stories, in fact making it near impossible, and yet the sacredness of land, fire and water remains a given for our young. Land, fire and water are as sacred as the air that Kurna people breathe.

9.2. Water

Like fire, water is a symbol of re-birth and cleansing in life and in death.

Take our identity as salt- or freshwater people, for example. While Kurna land is home to both fresh and saltwater, my late mother, grandmother and great-grandmother all identified as saltwater people which speaks to their respect for the land on which they lived. They were all born by the sea on the mission on Yorke Peninsula but shared stories of my and their own connectedness to Karrawirra Pari (River Torrens). As much of my early childhood was spent on and around the river and most of my teenage and adult years near the sea at Yartapuulti (Port Adelaide), I identify as a freshwater woman.

I wrote a poem 'The Land is My Mother' shortly after the death of my own mother in which I celebrate the nexus between the land, water and kin. I recited this poem at the dawn service on ANZAC Day in 2017:

THE LAND IS MY MOTHER

The land is my Mother
I shall not want;
She maketh me lie down,
In sacred soil, on sacred ground.
She leadeth me beside the hills and the mountains,
the rivers and the seas. She restoreth my Spirit.
Ye though I shall walk through the valley
of the shadow of invasion,
I will fear no evil,
for my Mother is with me.
Her Womb and her Breast they comfort me.
She created a circle in the presence of my enemies
and she anointed my head with ochre and with leaves.
My coolamon runneth over.
For her love and her kindness, shall follow me
for all the days of my life.
And now I will dwell in her Womb forever,
The wonderful, glorious land,
The Land that is my Mother.
I am not asleep; I am not dead;
I am alive and awake in my Dreaming.

By Katrina Karlapina Power, February 2010.

I was taught young that Aboriginal men and women are equal. I see the mainstream lost in the patriarchy. We understand the land is our mother. We come from her in life and are returned to her in death. I want old ways of Kurna mourning to live again and I wanted new generations, male and female, to fully honour the Grandmothers, the Mothers and Daughters in any funerary practices on country and/or in churches. There is more to us and our stories than just fathers, sons and holy spirits. I re-framed Psalm 23 as a dedication to my late mother in 2009 and it has been recited at national events and funerals, both black and white.

In 2017 we suffered the loss of two prominent Kurna language warriors, the first being Ngarrpadla (Auntie) Alitya Wallara Rigney, the first principal of Kurna Plains School and co-founder of Kurna Warra Pintyanthi. A newly formed Kurna singing choir including Gadlabarti and both authors, along with other Kurna and non-Aboriginal people sang the well-loved hymns *The Old Rugged Cross* and *Until We Meet Again* in Kurna in Bonython Hall at the University of Adelaide in a state memorial service. Sadly, only a month later Gadlabarti (discussed earlier) suddenly passed away.

9.3. Cultural and linguistic renaissance

I am a multi-identified Kurna woman with a basic human right to cultural creativity and artistic expression. Exercising this license in the pursuit of Kurna language reclamation and application of traditional practices is critical in the quest for individual, local and national healing.

In my formative years I referred to myself as a Kurna/Narungga/Ngarrindjeri woman which reflected both blood line and respect for the 'mission lands' where the women before me were born, lived, and honoured.

I have greater clarity and will use creative license in the pursuit of and application of traditional practices as tools to protect against Aboriginal suicide, incarceration and to keep Aboriginal children at school and out of welfare's reach. Today most courts cite engaging with an "Aboriginal Cultural Mentor Program" as a condition of release for most adult and juvenile prisoners with stories of intergenerational child removal.

Both fire and water are used in birth; death; marriage and initiation ceremonies with gender determining the roles that mourners and revellers respectively play.

Now as a grandmother I have clarity and although smoking ceremonies are predominantly the domain of men, we are now seeing more ceremonies jointly undertaken with women and men.

9.4. Reclaiming gender equity

I was witness to and was raised around Aboriginal men who cited women as the strength in the camp but that balance has been corrupted as a consequence of invasion, oppression and patriarchal-dominant institutional practices.

Aboriginal gender equity is seen in the separation of women's and men's business including access to sacred sites. It's also in the hunting and collection of food sources and native plants used for medicinal purposes and in the types of tools and materials used for tool making and adornments worn for ceremonial and everyday purposes.

While whole group smoking ceremonies were historically the domain of men, we are seeing a resurgence of gender equity with smoking ceremonies now jointly conducted in Government and non-government organisations; private homes; hospitals and courts (personal experience).

During my time as a narrative therapist with Relationships Australia (2006-2014) the late Gardlabarti and I jointly conducted a private smoking ceremony of its premises before allowing people to enter. We painted ourselves up with ochre and used eucalyptus leaves for dual purposes – one private the other public. I followed his lead, by stooping as we darted between spaces and intermittent silence. To the beat of clapsticks and we started together and then moved individually to either side of the room with Gardlabarti continually blowing and stoking the fire as I used the branches of eucalyptus to touching windows; walls; desks and air. We each covered each other's tracks and met again in the middle where we honoured the Kurna Ancestors and all other spirits, both past and present who stories were born from their time in this space.

We then moved outside with a coolamon⁴ filled with individual eucalyptus leaves inviting participants to each gather one leaf with no explanation. Gardlabarti remained outside and together we offered the welcome to country.

⁴ A coolamon is a wooden carrying dish used to separate seed from chaff and to carry foodstuffs and babies. The word coolamon is now part of mainstream Australian English.

I then alone made my way back inside the building as he played the didgeridoo and motioned gatherers my way. I was standing grounded and centred with an empty coolamon inviting each participant to place their leaf in it as in a gesture born from traditional practice seeking right of entry and acknowledging their own presence on this our sacred land.

9.5. Kurna funeral protocols

As discussed earlier, in August 2018 the skeletal remains of two Kurna men were finally repatriated from Sweden for reburial. Robbed from their graves with the date 1864 etched on their skulls, there were days-long preparation for re-burial including the lighting of a fire to mark their return to Australia's capital, Canberra where a delegation of Kurna people accompanied their transit from Canberra to Tennyson. A sleep on country on a dune-filled beach site 12kms from Adelaide city followed on the eve of their re-interment at Tennyson. The next morning I jointly participated in another smoking ceremony with male elders, Fred Agius and Moogy Sumner to welcome these two old men home to finally rest where they belonged. The fire was kept burning constantly despite wet weather.

Unrivalled social and economic disadvantage has radically impacted on Kurna funerary practices particularly for those wanting to be buried on Kurna land. The economic inability of Kurna to 'buy back' our stolen land and pay funeral expenses often results in long delays between death and internment. Continuing intergenerational trauma and unresolved grief has silenced the traditional wailing that was so familiar to me as a child. Low life expectancy and an escalating youth suicide takes us on an unwelcome funeral carousel ride means we are riding on life's unjust funeral carousel on a weekly basis. What remains familiar is the huge number of poverty stricken mourners who travel long distances to participate in funeral ceremonies. Some Kurna will choose to be buried on the missions on which their ancestors were forced to relocate in order to remain connected to kin. Others will choose to be buried on the land with which they have reconnected and now identify with.



Figure 2: Katrina Karlapina Power and Uncle Fred Agius at Tennyson Dunes. Courtesy of Sia Duff, *Adelaide Review*.

10. Conclusion (by Rob Amery and Karlapina Power)

Land, water and fire are the basis of Aboriginal life. Their ample representation in both vocabulary and exemplar sentences in the somewhat limited historical record of the Kurna language points to their centrality. Kurna people have long fought for recognition of the rights to and ownership of land, and water. Following a long period of total exclusion from their lands, in recent years Kurna people have met with some success, first with an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) with local government and then recognition by the Federal Court in 2018 to at least some of their lands.

Along with the Kurna language and dance performance, fire has played a major role in the Kurna cultural renaissance through the re-learning of the traditional art of making fire through the use of a fire drill igniting the dry flower of the yakka plant which still grows on the Adelaide Plains. The use of fire to produce smoke for cleansing rituals and as part of many welcome ceremonies is now an important element of Kurna ceremonial life.

Land, water and fire once again play major roles in Kurna society, despite the fact that people live very different lives now in the 21st century, compared to their lives in the 19th century where fire provided warmth, light, energy for cooking, manufacturing artefacts, smoke for flushing possums out of their holes and so on. Fire, like the use of Kurna language itself plays a more emblematic, rather than functional role for Kurna people alive today. Kurna people are seeking new ways to reconnect with their ancestors and traditions. Gaining rights to land and recognition as the original land owners and custodians is fundamental. Protection of traditional sources of fresh water is an ongoing concern and fire brings people together.

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“Cultural Burning: The Way Forward for Healthy Landscapes”

Anthony Kerr

Interview with Oliver Costello

23rd July 2017, Dunoon, NSW

Oliver Costello, a Bundjalung man, leads the Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation, which builds on the Firesticks Initiative he co-founded in 2009 while completing university and the Centre for Sustainability Leadership Fellowship Program. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education and Community Management at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). He is deputy chair of the Northern Rivers Fire and Biodiversity Consortium, a Visiting Fellow at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, UTS and a founding Director of the Jagun Alliance Aboriginal Corporation. In July 2017, Anthony was invited to a burn at the Dorrobee Grass Reserve where some burning was planned.

First of all, I would like to acknowledge country and pay my respects to elders, past, present and future and the land here.

My name is Oliver Costello, I'm a Bundjalung man. I was born in Byron Bay and grew up to the east of here near Clunes. During my childhood, I spent a lot of time around this country here and then moved back up this way as an adult. The land we're on is Widjabul /Wiyabul country, of the broader Bundjalung peoples. The actual location where we are sitting is the Dorrobee Grass Reserve, Dunoon. It is one of the rare bits of native grassland in this area. In the past, this country was dominated by rainforests and woodland interspersed with lowland and upland grassland areas. We are sitting in one of the upland grassland areas. Following European colonisation, this type of country was often the first that settlers moved into because they were open and obviously had grass which was good for the livestock. Much of this area was logged for timber and cleared for farming, so we are lucky that this little bit of land has retained most of its original landscape features.



Figure 1: Oliver Costello about to light a fire on the Dorrobee Grass Reserve, NSW.

What inspired you to take the route into cultural fire management?

In my childhood around Clunes, I developed a real appreciation for country, hunting and catching fish, which I suppose is common for kids that grow up in the country. My parents split up before I was born, my father was Aboriginal, a Bundjalung man and although I kept in contact, he was absent in a physical sense mostly as I was growing up. My mother was strong about identity, she would reinforce the fact that I was Bundjalung. This was strengthened by aunts and uncles who lived around Lismore. Growing up, I understood that being Aboriginal was my identity and so I would associate with the Aboriginal community. I returned to Lismore and hung out with Aboriginal kids more through high school and started to learn more about identity and what that means. In teenage life, I had some troubled years with all sorts of family stuff going on and the repercussions of a dysfunctional social environment. I became quite disillusioned because I had developed a sense of purpose as a young person

around wanting to see good things happen in life for me and for my family. But I went through this turmoil and had to start challenging a lot of social norms, things that I didn't really relate to as a kid such as drinking and smoking and that sort of stuff and then suddenly I was in those cycles myself. I saw a lot of violence, a lot of drug abuse, sometimes protecting those close to me from those things and sometimes being part of it. I started to wonder what it was all for. This resulted in some fairly heavy states of depression. I took on a lot of responsibility at an early age having to look after my brothers and sister at times and then dealing with these challenging mental health states. I went from being a really good worker to then wondering what I was working for. People thought I was fairly intelligent, but I did lack some basic literacy skills and had learning difficulties, I had a very difficult education experience. Then when I tried to enter the workforce I ended up working as a gardener, handyman, labourer, and in kitchens. All the while I am thinking, "What happened to that purpose in life?". I really struggled with that for a while and realised that I had to overcome that hurdle. I had a couple of unsuccessful cracks at it but then met a great girl, built a relationship which gave me more confidence, my brothers and sisters grew up a bit and became more independent and so I could focus a bit on my own development.

My mother married an old man from Arnhem Land and brought him back to NSW. This happened during one of my states of depression. He had been born and grew up in the bush and had a huge amount of cultural knowledge. He was saying that he needed help to get back out on country because he felt that his people had lost their way. He was an artist and a song man and had been brought up to look after the land and he and his family had largely stopped doing that because there had been major disruptions to their way of life. The land that he spoke for was remote and getting out there to manage it was quite a challenge. We talked about the challenges. This was just what I needed at the time as I was looking for purpose in my life and so my motivation grew. We started discussing the social and economic development models that could support the desired outcome, such as, "How is it possible to get the resources to support family to get back on country". That's what really got me thinking. I was living in the Blue Mountains and I could see the dysfunction of how the land was being managed and started mulling these ideas around in my head. A few years later the old man returned to Arnhem Land and then suddenly passed away, well before his time like many of his generation.

In 2008, I got into University at the second attempt and started a degree in Adult Education and Community Management at UTS, which involved, educating, lecturing, governance and how to set up organisations and that sort of stuff. I didn't really know what it was about or where it would lead to at first, but that was all I could really get into. I got a tutor to help with the reading and writing. At University I developed many positive relationships with staff and students, I got a job at the library, I became the Indigenous Officer at the Student Association. Developing all these relationships really built up my confidence. The studies I was doing helped me redirect my focus towards the work that I wanted to do, but the pathway still wasn't quite clear as I wanted to be more involved with people and on country stuff.

I was on a steep learning curve and started working on cultural fire and knowledge projects, and practice and community development. In 2009, I completed the Centre for Sustainability Leadership (CSL) fellowship program and was the first Aboriginal person to do it in its first year in Sydney. A researcher in the Jumbunna Research Unit named Jason De Santolo was a bit of a mentor to me and asked me to come and work on a research/media project with him. I was the Koori/Goorie research assistant and helped with the research, planning and engagement on the project. The project involved a case study on a Landalive project with Gandangara Aboriginal Land Council who were managing a regeneration team on a large block of bushland they owned surrounded by development near Lucas heights in Menai, NSW. This was when I met and started to collaborate with Victor Steffensen, Clément Girault and Jacqueline Gothe. Victor was in the project team and as we were walking, he exclaimed, “This country needs to burn”, and then all of a sudden things that I had been thinking about for years started to come into focus because this was the same way I was trying to go. We started to discuss ways in which to do it, how to address the cultural and planning protocols, government regulations etc. We started talking to the rangers about it and although no burning took place on that day, it was the beginning of a conversation which revolved around how to build the cultural protocols back into areas where the cultural links had long been absent, where people did not feel confident, due to the politics and authority and where many are in conflict about fire knowledge and practice, i.e. does it still exist, who owns it, how to revive or share it.

The week Victor and I meet, I made sure he was invited in to talk about his work at the CSL workshop and he just blew people away. In the CSL program I had to do a project and this is how the original 'Firesticks' project was started.

'Firesticks' is about looking at traditional knowledge and practice around fire but also building on message sticks, around how to build knowledge processes that have these cultural protocols embedded in them. People would traditionally have a message stick and/or ceremony which would be the way people moved about outside their country through song-lines and pathways, this was how knowledge was exchanged and stories shared. 'Firesticks' is not all about burning country, it's about these cultural learning pathways.

The challenge is, "How do you unlock that cultural process in people and then connect with others and build healthy cultures around communities and projects"? All throughout Australia, this cultural governance structure existed. It was and still is needed to maintain kinship and lore. There were people that were really strong and would help bring that strength to their family and community and then be able to connect with all these other communities and landscapes and have all these roles and responsibilities through these broad landscapes and the song-lines that weaved through the country. So, 'Firesticks' is really about trying to build that connection again, understand that people have these important roles and responsibilities and we need to support each other to maintain and enhance them.

Often in contemporary landscapes and identities we don't know what our responsibilities and connections are anymore, but we have to work out what they are, because that is the key to being able to manage a healthy community and a healthy country. In traditional culture, those roles and responsibilities change from when you are a kid, to when you are a young adult, to being an older person, a parent, a senior person, an elder and hopefully an elder of elders, they're all transitions. They are not necessarily about time, or age, they are about knowledge and practice. That's the key process, that's the cultural learning pathway, it's being able to have the connections within yourself to be able to learn from country, but also being able to engage and learn from people so you can connect and find the information that is needed at the time.

So, how do you build a process for that? It's really hard because western systems have built their own processes and their own governance structures so we are always struggling in this sort of interface between being certified/approved and having a degree or permit, or, knowing stuff that someone has taught you and which you are now applying and adapting as

you learn. It is valued in a different way. Knowledge is what is driving your understanding of something, it doesn't come from a book. So, we get caught up in that all the time. It's about having the experiences with elders and mentors, not something you tick off in a text book or an exam. So much of that learning and empowerment can only happen on country. Being told a story off country doesn't make as much sense to the story as being there and doing it. When you are there you can see the mountains, see the trees and plants and taste the food, touch the ground, practice the ways, you are living it. There is a big challenge there because so many of the learning processes that people are being pushed into, they are not learning through knowing first hand, they are learning through being told things and we believe these things. Many of these things that we are being told and believing are simply not true. The same applies to fire management. A lot of the stuff we are seeing happen on country is wrong for that land. People think that it is the right way because that was what they were taught, but they don't know how to read or see country through a cultural values lens. We have been showing people a different way of seeing country and now when they start to see country this way it can be really distressing for them, particularly when they are working for agencies in these environments and have to keep doing the same unhealthy management.

Now they have two different stories going on in their heads. And one of those stories is things that they know now, they can actually see the fact that the trees are dying back or in the wrong country and the canopy is all scorched and that the land is not healthy. Before when all they were doing was reducing the fuel they were saying, "Ahh yeah, we got rid of all of the leaves and sticks and the trees are now growing back." You can see in the landscape now that many different trees are dying or disturbing other species because of inappropriate fire regimes. Some of these trees are hundreds or even thousands of years old so they shouldn't die from fire. It's because people don't know the land, they don't know what healthy country looks like, they don't know how to apply the right knowledge and practice to that land. It's not really their fault, it's what they were taught, and those teachers believed in what they were trying to teach, but they seldom had the right knowledge holders to pass that stuff on to them, because too many of the people did not and still do not listen to country or elders.

One of the traps about knowledge is that when you think you know something you tend to become less attentive and stop questioning and are therefore less attuned to change. The old people teach that you don't own that knowledge, it has merely been passed on to

you so you better keep paying attention because knowledge will keep coming to you, and it will keep coming to you. That is why you need to pay attention to the land, because the land keeps changing just like you, we are connected.

Old people were in landscapes that changed over thousands of years, their knowledge systems were attuned to change. It might seem like a long time, but people were living and surviving in those landscapes, the knowledge systems were changing, so, you can't just say, "this is the way that my grandfather did it, so I am going to do it the same way". The way your grandfather did it was his way and he taught you knowledge of country which needs to be applied to the current situation. We hear people talking about how the climate and the weather systems are changing, and how they are changing much faster than the natural processes that happened over much longer time periods. You know, a lot of the old coastline of this country is now far out in the sea, and there are stories about sacred sites and areas that are now under water. There are trees that people are saying is the dominant tree species in a particular location, but they weren't necessarily there before, it wasn't their country before they came here. Our old people in some places were part of that change and they are part of the reason why things came and went, but who's managing it now?

There are a whole heap of programs taught in educational institutions and workplaces to do that work but this style of teaching doesn't take into account the basic principles of country, about relationships and kinship of plants and animals and how you maintain healthy systems that include people. It's too polarised, you know? It's suggested that if it's native it's good, if it's introduced it's bad, but that's not how country works.

There are things that come into country that become a good part of country if they follow the lore of that land. You have to be able to understand what those lores are and the kinship in order to maintain a healthy system. That's where things can come in and be beneficial, useful, a food source and a totem are symbolic in ways and it's really hard for people to understand that because the rate of change is much different. Take the black bean tree for example, *Bugam* we call it locally. I am working with scientists that think that it is originally from Cape York due to genetic mapping, but it is an important part of Bundjalung culture and practice. Things can come and things can go but it's really about the relationships and impact on country that matters.

That's a key cultural protocol about people too and is one of the things that upsets me so much in the fire space. We are trying to set out these cultural processes based on the lore

of the land. If you come into someone's country, you listen and you pay attention. You don't take up all the light, you don't take up all the air and water, you offer what you can to help contribute to that system. Often in the fire space, what we see is people with really good intentions coming in and taking over. They become that weed or invasive species in our fire stories. They really don't understand what we are trying to do. We want to make it work with everyone, we want to make a space for all things that can have positive impact. That's what healthy country does, it makes a space somewhere in the landscape for things that find positive connection there. It might not be in this place, or that place, but it might be in another place over there. That's the importance of those roles and responsibilities, knowing how everyone finds a place to have a positive impact. For example, there are many beautiful flowers that have been introduced and are actually invasive species. Well, that's all right, they can belong in gardens, or be edible, there can be a place for them in the landscape, but not in another country where they are going to take over and trash the story of that country.

There are many well-meaning people from government agencies or researchers from universities who come in and take over. They say that they are helping, it's often not intentional, but they just take. It might be our knowledge, it might be our story or our energy. They take to meet their targets, tick their boxes, get their promotions or meet whatever agenda it is that they have. It's happening all over the world, people often become colonisers and lose the ability to be givers. It's hard for us not to be sceptical because we see them trample all over us and our country, they are not paying attention, they are saying that they know about things. They are disrespecting country, in a similar way that people get treated, or not acknowledged, this happens all the time.

But, we are saying that this is not what knowledge is all about. It is not about knowing things, it is about being open to learning, being a custodian of that knowledge and passing it on and understanding that sometimes that knowledge changes or becomes redundant. I mean, how important is that fire story in those areas that are now off the coast under water! It's not important anymore, until that sea level drops away again. So, knowledge is about place and understanding the process about that place. It is important to understand that and that is one of the main things about the cultural learning pathways. When you are on those pathways, the country walks you, it pulls you through the land. It's kind of a spiritual belief but it's about being present with country. It's the understanding that when you tread on something, when you eat something, when you burn something, you are hurting mother, you

are hurting country, but if you understand and acknowledge what you are doing, you can acknowledge and undertake the obligation you have to do more good stuff than the damage that you are creating. All the country that you walk on is all the country that you have to protect and make sure that it is healthy. When you burn country, there are winners and losers. Some things don't do so well and other things do, so hopefully with the burning that you are doing, you end up giving back more. More life, more productivity, more plants and animals, more healthier systems, you know, these are important responsibilities.

Some people are starting to understand more, helping us to grow and build our capacity. That's about being part of country and sharing with our community. That's what we want, good relationships, good energy, healthy country and respect. Without that respect, people get sick and don't want to talk or share any more. That's what is happening in so many of our communities across Australia, people are getting sick and are losing those connections because those knowledge systems aren't being practiced and people are just coming in and taking and taking.

So that's what we are trying to change. How do we build those processes that are empowering and can be supported? It's really demanding and we really have to question ourselves sometimes because we sometimes feel that we might be putting too much out there in terms of time and energy, but we know how important it is in the long term and so keep on trying. We need more people to help us. We aren't doing anything special, we are just lucky enough to have had some experiences that we've learned from. Others have had the same experiences, but have not learned the lessons from them. So, what we are trying to understand is what gets people on that learning pathway. It's about people passing on knowledge and using it to empower themselves, their community, nurture country and looking after it for future generations. It's been this way since the beginning of time.

I suppose that traditionally those people that have that sensitive and fluid understanding of living with the natural environment have progressed to become the leaders. But we live now in a world where there are other agendas. These created systems of governance and value which don't make any sense in relation to the natural environment.

Yes, that's the problem, we are caught up in systems that don't make any sense and so become disengaged from the natural environment. We start to participate in these newer systems because we do what we need to survive. It's a real trap. It's an old problem. Old people have always struggled with young people who don't listen and then they have kids and the kids don't get it.

But sometimes they come back, later in life!

Sometimes they do. They reflect back to when they were kids and remember the stories and go “Wow”! that story really meant something. We have to create more of those opportunities, more of those pathways.

I think that fire was one of these pathways. To manage the land with fire, you had to understand all these protocols, understand the values, understand the cultural governance, whose country it was, who your neighbours were, then the kinship of the land, all the plants and animals. Stories have been told around campfires and meals have been cooked around fires for thousands of years. It has been key to a lot of these processes. Whenever you light a fire in the landscape, everyone pays attention. Fire makes you present.

All we are asking is for people to be present and pay attention to the landscapes. All too often we go into auto-pilot behaviour patterns, thinking ahead or caught up with our baggage from the past, and the present is where we need to be, listening and being present.



Figure 2: Oliver teaching the younger participants about fire, the cultural way, during the burning day at the Dorrobee Grass Reserve.

Tell me a bit about the projects you are doing in relation to fire?

Building on these relationships that developed, in 2010, I started to work with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and with some communities from the north to the south coast and inland to the Blue Mountains region. Several NPWS projects progressed in various ways. One of the key challenges that we have had is that to carry out any sort of fire management on NPWS lands in the past, you needed to be a fire fighter. That was a real barrier to these cultural learning pathways and community participation because the old people were not able to be directly involved in burning. It would be the rangers and the other fire agency officers directing a fire plan that elders and community didn't write. These plans might have had some cultural values and practices incorporated within them, but we started thinking about how we could shift that to a more cultural process and we can't do that without the right people. So, we started a few projects where we had people that were on parks but weren't fire fighters. One time, kids were given PPE and this raised some serious questions within the NPWS organisation regarding policies and procedures. This helped with

the development of the first NPWS Cultural Fire Management Policy and Guidelines, which was launched in March 2017 and helped to provide a framework to engage communities and support information for those that are interested in the firestick projects on NPWS lands.

What is happening on this patch at Dorrobbee grasslands today?

This Dorrobbee grassland is a natural cultural landscape feature. It is only here because it has been maintained as a grassland. It would have been a lot bigger and would have been used traditionally by Aboriginal people. It is a hill with 360 degree views and would probably have been managed for access and resources values. It would also have been a good place to hunt wallabies and other game in the interface between the grass and the forest.

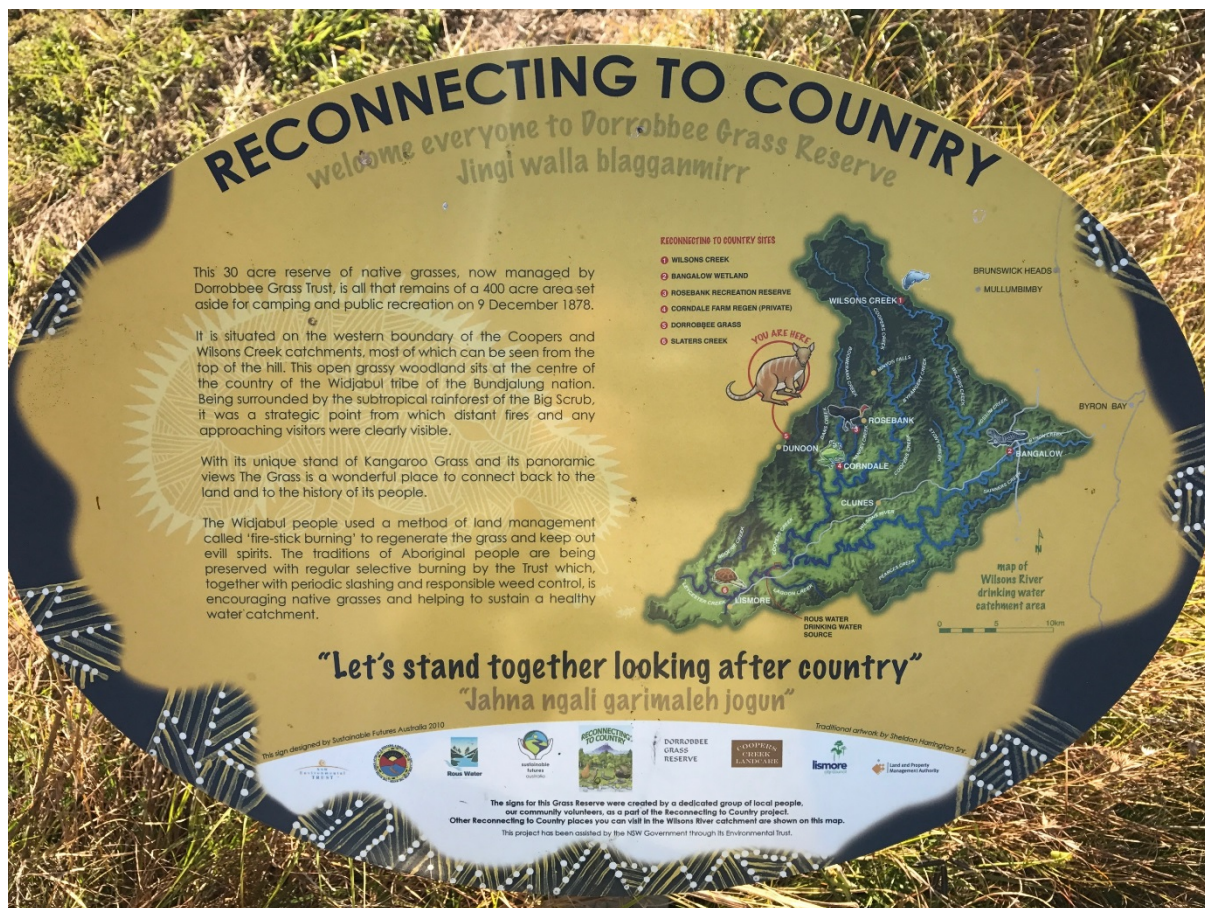


Figure 3: Sign by entrance to the Dorrobbee Grass Reserve.

Today, it is a remnant piece of cultural landscape, the dominate native grass here is Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*). It also has a whole bunch of other native and invasive species through it. Farming and gardening practices along with altered fire regimes has allowed invasive species to become problematic. The best way to manage it is to burn it. There has

been a bit of spraying, chipping and cutting done to invasive weeds like *Camphor laurel*, *Crofton*, *Setaria* and *Lantana*, but the main management process here is with fire and once we get most of the weeds out it will be easier to manage with fire in the future. I have been helping out the local Grassland Trust even since I met the late Ralph Woodford who founded the Dorrobee Grass Reserve Trust. Ralph was a bush regenerator and pioneered rainforest regeneration, but he also understood there was many other important ecosystems in need of restoration and protection. Ralph was an inspiring man, without his knowledge and commitment the grassland may have been forgotten and left to decline. The Dorrobee Grass Reserve Trust continues to manage the grassland through small grants and local community volunteers.

What other fire projects are you involved in?

I mainly work within NSW, however I do mentor and advise projects across the East Coast of Australia. In my NPWS role I helped to develop the NPWS cultural fire management policy and guidelines and lead the internal and external engagement to assist staff and communities to be able to participate on these projects on NPWS lands. We have run some projects on the coastal Themeda headlands around Coffs Harbour, up in the ranges around Dorrigo and Ebor, down on the south coast and in the Blue mountains.

Beyond NPWS lands I have been doing heaps of stuff through the 'Firesticks Initiative', in Northern NSW with Aboriginal land holders, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Working on Country rangers, bush regeneration teams and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs).

At Minyumai IPA and Ngunya Jargoona IPA on the coast from here, there are working on country teams like Ngulingah Aboriginal Land Council which owns some land around Dorrobee grass. They've been doing work out here at the site, but mainly looking after their Nimbin Rocks properties. There are also the Githabul Rangers out Muli Muli way tackling Lantana and Bell Miner Die back and Madhima Gulgan bush regeneration team at Mullumbimby restoring coastal habitats. We've been doing some fire work with the Casino Boolangle Land Council and my father's Land Council Gugin Gudduba at Kyogle, so there are many projects that we have been working on locally. We have project sites up in the Northern Tablelands with Glenn Innes Local Aboriginal Land Council and Boorabee Aboriginal Corporation at Willows-Boorabee IPA, and with Banbai Enterprises at Wattleridge IPA and Tarriwa Kurrukun IPA. Banbai Enterprises and Jagun alliance through funding from the

Northern Tablelands local land services have a project with the Jubullum Local Aboriginal Land Council which is to the west of here. We have been working with Banbai rangers for some time now. They have built up capacity and now they are going to share that knowledge and practice with the Jubullum community to help manage their lands. This is a key part of the Firesticks approach to support community capacity building for community led mentoring. It's good to see it in action.

I've also been working with Victor Steffensen on a whole heap of projects across NSW in the Blue Mountains, Hunter, west and south coast. Local Land Services have been supportive in these regions. The communities have really stepped up and have taken the approach on which is really encouraging. The challenge is getting the support to do the process instead of doing things the way that they are used to, you know, water trucks and drip torches and fire training instead of the cultural process which, with care and under the right conditions can be done in a safe way. The old people didn't have any of this equipment and PPE, they were just walking country bare foot and lighting up when the conditions were right. However, it is good to have those resources and equipment to get the country back to safe manageable levels, but good fire practices are really about timing and good preparation and getting the right people there.

I have had a bit of a connection in Victoria and Tasmania. Victor has certainly been working in those areas. We have been doing some great work in South East Queensland with the Bunya Mountains Murri Rangers and other ranger groups. Victor and I co-facilitated a Bunya Mountains workshop and burning for about 40-50 rangers and land managers in mid-2017. We have been trying to facilitate regional approaches in relation to the bio-cultural landscape rather than using state and government boundaries. Take for example the Bunya mountains. Any Aboriginal groups within say 1000kms from the Bunya mountains has some sort of cultural connection to there through cultural knowledge systems and pathways, so bringing people to gather there is a good thing culturally. These bio-cultural regions also take into account languages and kinship systems, so we are trying to build up that traditional governance again despite the fact that they are living in different states, there are similar language groups and cultural links, but the state lines creates different policies and regulations around land management.

Some projects that we have been involved in have had some bushfire fighter training provided by RFS which was fantastic, but this focus on firefighting development can be

distracting from cultural approaches. We don't want western training to be a barrier to the first step, it certainly should be part of the broader picture though. To be a cultural burner, you shouldn't need to be a fire fighter, although it certainly makes sense to have fire fighters around when cultural burns take place. The cultural burning pathway could be a different career path for many Aboriginal people and you would have thought that there may be sufficient opportunities for it to co-exist with more contemporary firefighting agendas that focus on fuel reduction targets or suppressing bushfires. This is important work, but it does not necessarily create healthy resilient landscapes. We may need to be fighting fires and carrying out hazard reduction burns, but we can also be investing more in community driven initiatives, but I believe it needs to be culturally led.

“Caring for dat land..., as mob bin teik keya of dat Kantri longtaim”

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Reflected in Kununurra Kriol

***Marie Carla D. Adone, Thomas Batchelor, Rozanne Bilminga, Melanie A. Brück, Bryan
Gallagher and Jimmy Paddy***

1. Introduction¹

‘Caring for *Country*’ is the expression used by Indigenous people of Australia for land and sea management. The title ‘caring for land’ is a quote by one Miriwoong speaker to refer to the responsibility she sees herself having towards Miriwoong land around Kununurra. Indigenous people see themselves as an inseparable part of the ecosystem and their wellbeing is very much dependent on its health, a view consistent with the Indigenous Australian’s concept of *Country*. The term *Country* in ‘Caring for *Country*’ refers to the land, but also includes other themes such as water and fire. In reference to *Country* Indigenous people see themselves as having responsibilities to sustain land, protect and preserve the ecosystem as well as to maintain law, culture and *Country*, just to name some of them. These are all essential parts of Indigenous ecological knowledge and are based on Indigenous cultural and social imperatives.

In this paper we discuss some aspects of Caring for *Country* as seen and practised by Miriwoong people in the Kimberley, Western Australia. Miriwoong is the traditional Indigenous language that belongs to the Miriwoong *Country* in the Kununurra area. Today most of the Miriwoong people are also speakers of Kununurra Kriol (KnK), which is a young contact language that emerged during colonisation in Western Australia. Miriwoong is without doubt the main substrate language involved in the formation of KnK. As a substrate language in the traditional sense, Miriwoong has exerted profound influence on this Kriol.

¹ We would like to thank the Mirriwoong language workers at the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre in Kununurra for sharing their knowledge, especially Julie Bilminga, David Newry, Diane Dingle, Glennis Galbat-Newry and Sylvia Simon. We also thank Dr. Knut Olawsky for his input and advice.

This influence may become apparent from time to time in the lexicon and grammar of KnK. However, the behaviour/attitude of Miriwoong people towards *Country* reflects strongly in-depth traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge which is expressed in KnK. Thus, KnK is used as a vehicle for the expression of traditional cultural values and aspirations.

In section two we refer briefly to work that has been previously done on Kununurra Kriol and the traditional language Miriwoong, taking into account the relationship between these two languages. We also describe the sociolinguistic profile of Kununurra Kriol. Section three analyses the themes of fire and water, which are parts of *Country*, as presented to us by Miriwoong people. Section four discusses that the in-depth traditional ecological knowledge is reflected through the Miriwoong cultural practices articulated in KnK. These practices include environmental conservation, focus on cultural governance, language revitalisation programmes, engagement with the education and academic sector, documentation of sacred sites and increase awareness.

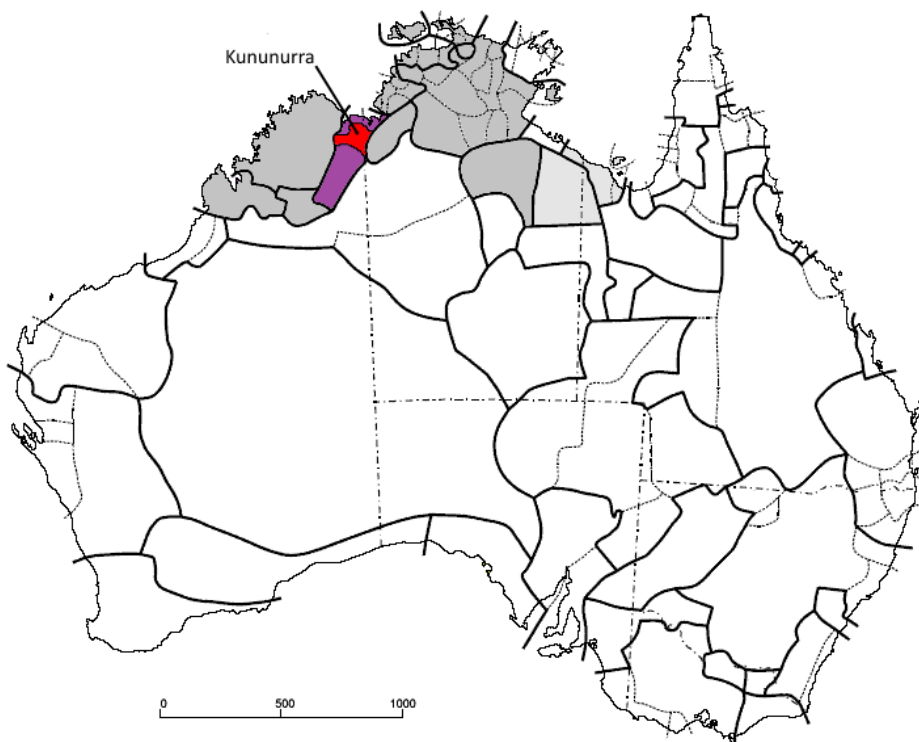
2. Kununurra Kriol

As seen in Map 1 below, Miriwoong *Country*, or *Miriwoong dawang*, is situated in the East Kimberley region, in the northern part of Western Australia, around the modern town of Kununurra, and extends partly across the state border into the Northern Territory. On this *Country* live the Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng people, who are its traditional owners. They are just one nation of the people who have inhabited the continent since time immemorial, with some recent estimates suggesting human settlement in northern Australia beginning some 65,000 years ago (Clarkson et al. 2017). Neighbouring Miriwoong *Country* is Ngarinyman *Country* to the east, Ngarinyin to the west, and Gija to the south.

From the late 19th century, European settlers began their encroachment on Miriwoong *Country*, establishing several pastoral stations that used local Indigenous people for much of their manual labour requirements, and, later on, Christian missions to convert and ‘civilise’ the locals (McGregor 2004: 10-11). In the 1960s, the town of Kununurra was established, the name of which derives from the local Miriwoong word, *goonoonoorrang* ‘river’, in reference to the important Ord River (MDWg 2017b). The town was established on Miriwoong *Country* as a means for the WA state government to attract development of agricultural lands surrounding the Ord River. To aid this and satisfy the irrigation needs of the agricultural

project, the Ord river dam was built, thereby creating Lake Argyle, some seventy kilometres south of the town itself.

Today, the majority of people – Miriwoong, Gajirrabeng, as well as neighbouring peoples and more recent, mostly European, settlers – are centred around Kununurra town, which also serves as the commercial and administrative hub for the Kimberley region, as well as a gateway for tourists in northern WA. The current permanent population of Kununurra sits at around 6,000 people, including well over a thousand identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the most recent census² (ABS 2016).



Map 1: Map of Australia with Miriwoong (red), other Jarrakan languages (purple), and languages of the non-Pama-Nyungan (grey) and Pama-Nyungan (white) groups. Map by Kwamikagami, via Wikimedia Commons, modified under CC BY-SA 3.0.

² The Australian Census does not distinguish between individual groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The traditional language spoken in the Kununurra is the Miriwoong language. Miriwoong is a non-Pama-Nyungan language of the Jarrakan family, closely related to the Gija language spoken just to the south. These languages are typologically described as prefixing and suffixing, like many non-Pama-Nyungan languages, and dual classifying; that is, marking only two genders, rather than a whole set of nominal classes (McGregor 2004: 38). It is currently estimated that the language is natively and fluently spoken today by less than a dozen elderly people, making the language critically endangered (Simons and Fennig 2017). Today, most Miriwoong people identify Kununurra Kriol as their primary language at home, which contains extensive local Miriwoong influences in the lexicon and grammar, setting it as a distinct variety of the larger Australian Kriol umbrella. Many Miriwoong people, whilst not fully fluent in the traditional language, profess a degree of knowledge transmitted through this unique variety of Kriol. In response to the threat of endangerment, the Mirima Dawang Wooralb-gerring Language and Culture Centre has been working to revitalise and reawaken the language. This has involved the documentation of knowledge passed from those elders who are still fluent, as well as from semi-fluent adult speakers, and passing this on to younger generations through the Language Nest programme. This programme, formally commencing in 2014, now reaches some 400 children in the Kununurra area every week (MDWg 2017a).

Australian Kriol is a relatively new language to northern Australia. In many European colonies, creole languages arose out of contact between the imposed colonial superstrate language and the native languages of locals, who were often forced to work under the new colonial rulers. Kriol in Australia traces its roots to the early NSW Pidgin spoken in the Sydney area from the arrival of European settlers in the late 18th century, as an English-based lingua franca between the settlers and local Indigenous communities (Troy 1994). From there, the Pidgin made its way across the continent as colonisation expanded, as a lingua franca between the settlers and local Indigenous peoples (Tryon and Charpentier 2011).

Eventually, around the turn of the 20th century, the pidgin creolised and started to gain young native speakers amongst Aboriginal communities on numerous pastoral stations and missions in the northern part of Australia. In these communities, Aboriginal people, coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds, had been forced together by European settlers for manual labour and missionary work and Kriol facilitated communication, acting as a common language (Meakins 2014: 376-379). Many accounts, both from multiple and single genesis approaches, place the most prominent location of genesis to be at the Roper River

(now Ngukurr) mission in the Northern Territory (Meakins 2014, Munro 2000, Sandefur 1986: 20-21). Kriol is spoken today by approximately 20,000 people across northern Australia (Ponsonnet 2010). However, this does not mean that there is just one single Kriol across the whole region. The diverse linguistic landscape of Australia, and the continent’s vast distances, has resulted in several major varieties of Kriol being spoken, recognisable through their grammar, lexicon and phonology (Schultze-Berndt et al. 2013).

Kununurra Kriol is the variety spoken around the Kununurra region. Although there are strong similarities with other Kriol varieties in Australia, all coming from an English superstrate, and sometimes labelled as a subset of Kimberley Kriol, its speakers nevertheless identify their variety as distinct. Furthermore, the Miriwoong substrate language of Kununurra Kriol has provided the Kriol in Kununurra with its own distinguishing features, especially salient in the distinctly Miriwoong influenced lexicon. The self-identification of its speakers and the Miriwoong substrate provide the impetus for Kununurra Kriol to be discussed here as its own Kriol variety.

3. Fire and water in Miriwoong Country

Caring for Country means engaging with the two most important parts of the Miriwoong environment: water and fire; bringers of both life and death on Country. In order to understand these elements and therefore care for Country effectively, the cycle of seasons should be understood. For the climate that is present on Miriwoong Country, the typical standard four-season calendar brought to Australia by Europeans does not work as it does in more temperate zones. Instead, Miriwoong people have retained the usage of their traditional seasonal calendar. As shown in Figure 1, the year is divided into three seasons, each with their own importance in understanding the management of land. The seasons all present different dynamics for engaging with both fire and water, with different animals, plants and environmental conditions present, as will be discussed further in this section.

The first season, *nyinggiyi-mageny*, or ‘wet season’, from roughly December to the end of March on the standard twelve-month calendar, is typified by heavy rains, high humidity and storms. This is then followed by *warnka-mageny* ‘cold season’, from April through to September, when temperatures and humidity drop; in almost sixty years of

available Bureau of Meteorology records³, Kununurra has never received more than 3mm of rain in August. Finally, from September to December is *barndenyirrin* ‘hot season’, also known as the ‘build up season’. This period is typically very hot and very humid, with temperatures soaring into the high 30s Celsius, and, as the name suggests, building up into the rainfall of the wet season.

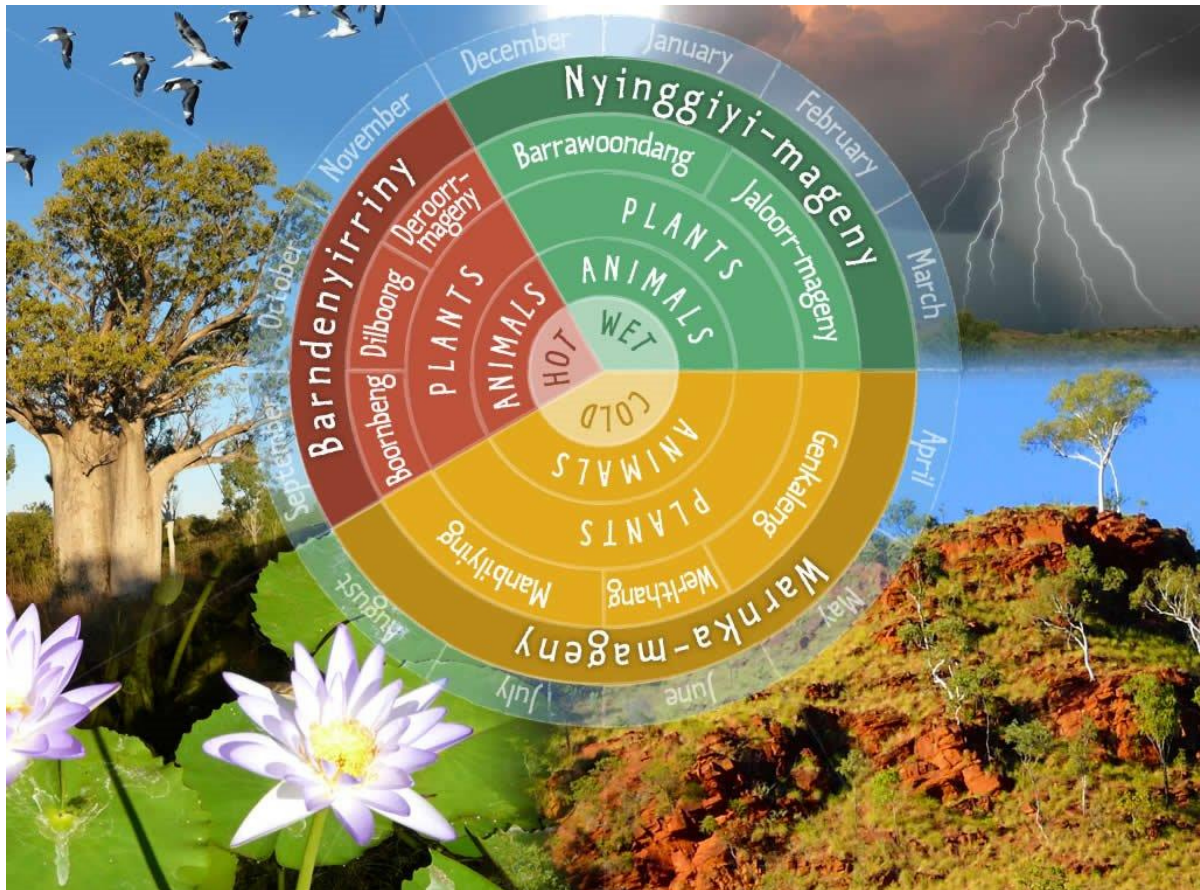


Figure 1: Miriwoong seasonal calendar. Permission granted from Mirima Dawang Wooralb-gerring Language and Culture Centre, Kununurra, WA.

³ Statistics available online: http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw_002038_All.shtml (accessed December 1, 2019).

3.1. Fire

In the Miriwoong community, fire has many functions, three of which we will highlight here: (i) the use of fire to prepare food, (ii) bushfires and land management, and (iii) the use of fire in ritual practices such as cleansing. Even though the use of fire to prepare food may be seen as its most general function from a cross-cultural point of view, a closer look reveals certain practices which embed this basic function in the culture-specific context of the Miriwoong community. The method of *warlayi*, i.e. underground cooking, includes specific burning materials and practices. The knowledge of this practice has been passed down over generations and is regarded as an explicit contrast to the *gardiya* ('white people') way of cooking:

(1) *Im digimbat hol goorrngong bla kukimbat mit. Demlat katim dat mit dat tribala lukinbat. Dei bin koverimap darran bif garra lif. Im bin liftimbat dat faya langa dat hol. Darran faya i burnin na. Im bin putimbat rok insaid langa dat hol bla kukimbat bif. Datlat rok langa dat hol im hotbala. Dei bin putimbat ol dat bif langa dat hol bla kukim. Im kuk mijelp. Dei koverimabat dat hol garra peiperbark. Dei koverimap dat saidpart garra sangran dat peiperbark. Dei bin koverimap dat bif la dat hol an dei weitimbat blanga dat bif get kuk. Dat tribala klinimbat dat sangraun burrum darran peiperbark. Dei dubala teikimabat darran kukwan bif. Im kukwan redibala.*

'He digs a hole, the *goorrngong*, 'ground oven', to cook the meat in. They cut the meat and three people watch. They cover the beef with a leaf. They lift the fire into the hole where it is now burning. They put rocks inside the hole where the beef will be cooked. Those rocks become hot. They put the meat into the hole where it cooks alone. The hole is covered with paperbark and sand, and they wait until the beef is fully cooked. Then the three people clean the sand from the paperbark and take out the beef, which is now ready to be eaten.'

In addition to the concrete steps of this cooking process, we also find knowledge of the type of wood to be used for *warlayi*, which rocks to put in the cooking hole and how to adapt the cooking method for fish:

(2) *Dat snappy gum i burn ol nait [...] gud wud for meikim kols, for kukim bif, fish, anything, yu kukim la kol, la warlayi.*

'Snappy gum will burn the whole night [...] it's good for making coals, creating beef, fish, or anything you want to cook in the coal, in the *warlayi*.'

(3) *Yu garra get dat rait rok dijan, dat river rok wen yu tjakim in deya, dei bast, dei jampat [...]*
Raitwan yu getim from hillside, i best.

'You have to get the right rocks. Those from the river burst and jump out when you throw them into the fire. The right rocks are those from the hillside, they are the best.'

(4) *If yu wanim brim nais yu garra lib dem gats in deya, daun gat them ap, dat gardiya wei. If yu libum ola gats in deya yu gotem rait wen yu kukim la kols.*

'If you want your bream nicely cooked, you need to leave the guts in there. Don't take them out like the White people do. If you leave them in you get them right when you cook them on the coals.'

Fire plays an important role in the hot season (see Figure 1 above), when bushfires occur frequently. Indigenous knowledge plays an important role here as controlled burning of dry grass has been a traditional practice of land management, especially as precaution towards the end of the cold season:

(5) *I gat a lot of resting area, piknik area deya. Dei know wijan area to burn. Dei know, dei sabi. Wen wi burn dat faya, burnim, wi go rait raun burnim [...]* *Mardi wandei luk bigmob draiwan gras. Mardi putdaun dat faya. Dei du training burnimbat grass.*

'There are many resting or picnic areas, but they [the rangers] know which area they can burn. When we set the fire, when we burn the land, we go right around burning [...] Maybe one day the rangers will see a lot of dry grass and then they might set it on fire. They train how to burn the grass.'

The effects of controlled burning, however, go beyond the mere avoidance of larger, uncontrollable bushfires. Burning country is also associated with clearing the land and enabling new life:

(6) *I drai deya dijan an windy, meikimbat drai. Bigwan draiwan gras. Wen dat faya, wen dei burnim dat faya, kuldaun olabat. Wen wi burnim dat faya nyuwan gras bin grow. Grinwan gras grow faindimbat animol kamaut. Langa grin gras yu gatim guana. Yu kan go hanting faindim goana, lizard, kengguru.*

'It's dry and windy, the wind drying the Country. There is a lot of dry grass. After burning the land, everything cools down and new grass can grow. When the green grass is growing you will find many animals coming out. There are goannas in the green grass. You can go hunting and you will find goannas, lizards and kangaroos.'

As such, burning Country is directly linked to the availability of food sources, highlighting the complex ecological networks and reciprocal dependencies between newly grown grass serving as welcome food for herbivore insects, which in turn are eaten by reptiles or birds. For example, the time of bushfires is overlapping with the time when to hunt for bush turkey, which, after having fed on the grasshoppers attracted by the new grass, are ready to be eaten.

Traditionally, controlled burning of Country relies heavily on the knowledge and authority of elders, as illustrated in example 7 below.

(7) Goonoonoorang Ranger im garra get permission from ol pipul for what boundary dei garra burnim na an how far they can go.

'The Kununurra Rangers have to get the permission of the elders concerning the area to be burned.'

Even though most of the rangers are considered 'family', i.e. they are part of the Miriwoong community, the administration of the ranger programme is in gardiya hands. As such, we witness a turnover of control, at least on a formal level: now the Rangers as an institution have to be asked for permission rather than the community elders. At the same time, the presence of Miriwoong people in the ranger programme makes it possible to integrate the traditional knowledge of when to burn which area in a gardiya-led institution. In principle this also holds the potential to avoid larger, uncontrollable bushfires by following the traditional practices of taking care of the Country from a Miriwoong perspective.

The third function of fire is to use smoke for cleansing. Cleansing people with smoke is part of traditional healing practices and is an important preparatory step before passing through or by dangerous places:

(8) Ai bin tumbun mijelp.

'I smoked myself.'

Smoke is also used to clean the houses of deceased people within a specific time period after their death in order to prevent their spirits from staying.

3.2. Water

Both fire and water may bring destruction to those who are not careful; however, there is no life without water. Water is required for all living things, plants, animals and people who live on the land. The management of water and what it can provide is important traditional knowledge that has been passed down through generations of Miriwoong people. Without this understanding, water resources can be lost or wasted through misuse, potentially leading to catastrophe. Even with Kriol as the main language instead of the traditional Miriwoong, the knowledge and concepts of water management are maintained.

The most important knowledge of water in the kind of climate Miriwoong Country experiences, is how to locate and utilise fresh water when out on Country. First and foremost, this knowledge is passed down from older generations; young people are shown how to find water as part of growing up. The most salient point here is learning the locations of rivers and waterholes. Where these open sources of water are not available, one of the main ways of locating water is through the local bird life. When inland, away from the sea, it is the presence of finches, or *nini* as they are known in Kununurra Kriol, from the Miriwoong word *niyini*, that indicates that there is water there. Then, one must dig at the spot until the water starts to *babulap from ground* 'bubble up from the ground', first dirty, and then eventually with clean water. The underground water is also indicated by the presence of green grass. When one is near the coast, different birds may indicate the presence of fresh water. In this case, it is said that *brolgas*, known in Kununurra Kriol as *goorrandal*, from Miriwoong *goorrandalng*, indicates fresh water. In addition to this, the birds may also indicate that rain is approaching through their singing and dancing, after which one may find plenty of fresh water pooled in the otherwise stagnant billabongs.

(9) *Wen dei dancing, singimbat rein.*

'When they're dancing, singing the rain.'

One major substrate influence on Kriol evident here is that the Miriwoong names for these birds are persistent in Kununurra Kriol. This shows the cultural importance and the lasting ties to Country that Miriwoong people retain. Despite most of the community having shifted to another language, the cultural substrate survives and is actively passed down to younger generations.

Another Indigenous method of extracting water when ground sources are less fruitful is to use the trees. As with many things, one cannot just use any tree for this; specific cultural knowledge of the local flora is passed down to identify the right kinds. For this, a plastic bag should be tied to green branches of the white gum tree. After waiting for some hours, an amount of fresh, drinkable water should then be available in the bag after condensing. As with many uses of flora, this must be done with the right kind of tree; pick the wrong kind and it could be potentially deadly.

Water is not just a resource to be consumed, it also has to be cared for, so that it may continue to flow. It is said often by Miriwoong people that if 'you respect Country, Country respects you'; and water is an integral part of Country. Water should undoubtedly be kept clean. Polluting the water with anything is strongly frowned upon, including throwing rocks at or into any bodies of water. The act of throwing rocks at the water is considered disrespectful to not only the Country, but the owners, both past and present, too. This act will anger the owners of the land, and the Country will no longer provide resources to you, as you have left your damaging scent there.

Not only a bringer of life, water can also be dangerous and destructive, especially when not handled properly. Traditional owners of the land in which a body of water is situated must be consulted for permission prior to activities such as swimming, or simply using the water for any purpose. This is so that you can be kept safe from injury or sickness, and the ownership of the water is respected. A strong connection to Country is also formed by using traditional language to talk to the water, offering respect that will be returned.

(10) Yu garra wotjat bo wodawan or he'll get you there, dem yelo sneik i stei deya.

'You have to watch out for the water one or he'll get you there, that yellow snake that stays there.'

As well as being an integral part of Country and life thereupon, water has its own spiritual value to Miriwoong people. The snake, an animal belonging to the Dreamtime, is believed to be the animal that keeps the water flowing all year round at rivers and important waterholes, and thus is part of the respect for water; angering the snake would imperil lives. This is in line with the common Australian belief in the Rainbow Serpent as the giver of life and creator of rivers in the Dreaming, often regarded as the most important part of the Australian pantheon (Mountford 1978: 23-24). Within this framework, every tribe also has its own specific totem to connect to the land. In conjunction with its spiritual value, water is also used by Miriwoong

people in Welcome to Country ceremonies, dabbed onto someone's head to welcome them on Miriwoong land.

(11) *Woda kant go daun bikos deya dreamings of sneik, darran woda hol. That's why water doesn't run dry. Dei ebriweya.*

'Water can't go down because there are Dreamings of snakes, in that water hole. That's why water doesn't run dry, they're everywhere.'

In addition to the necessity of water for survival, rivers and waterholes are also a source of food via the fish that inhabit them. There are no restrictions amongst Miriwoong people as to who is allowed to fish and where, however knowing what to catch, where and how is something that is passed down through generations of traditional owners, so that the fish can continue to provide nutrition, yet remain stable and sufficient for future generations. Whilst fishing can be done all year round, there are specific seasons where the catch is recognised to be best. In the cold season (see Figure 1 above) the fish are generally smaller and said to be 'sleeping', and therefore much harder to catch. The daily weather conditions should also be noted. If it is windy and cool, the fish hide away, and when one is fishing, they must be wary of the position of the sun, as a shadow on the surface can easily scare them away.

On Miriwoong Country there are several different kinds of fish that can be caught. Black bream, catfish and barramundi are the common targets for fishing for food on Miriwoong Country. As well, prawns, known in Kununurra Kriol by their Miriwoong name *jilging*, may be caught, although these are better used as bait for larger catch. The best location to catch these is generally in saltwater, and it is taught to young Miriwoong people where the fresh and saltwater meets on the rivers through their Country.

(12) *'Gudenap' mean take what you need, not too much, don't be greedy.*

Regardless of the catch, it is very important to the Miriwoong people that the fishing is sustainable. For this, the Kriol word *gudenap* is used, the term explained to us by code switching into English in example (12). This means that you must take what you need only; to not be greedy and take more than you need yourself. Whilst the word is derived from the English term *good enough*, the Miriwoong traditional conceptualisation of sufficiency is transferred to it. As part of this, small fish must be thrown back into the water, as they are young and will grow up for another season, as well as still being able to breed more fish. In contrast, large fish are deemed acceptable to take. Further tying into the concept of only

taking what one needs is also the idea that the fish should be cooked and eaten at the fishing spot or close by, rather than being preserved and stored for future use. Through this tradition, fish stocks on Miriwoong Country can be kept stable for generations.

4. Discussion

In the previous sections of the paper we have analysed the role played by these two vital elements in Indigenous life. It becomes obvious that the cultural practices of the Miriwoong people are deeply rooted in traditional Indigenous ecological Knowledge systems. The Miriwoong people practise environmental conservation and treat their environment with respect following the ‘law’. The language revitalisation programmes as well as engagement with education through teaching Miriwoong on Country testify that the ecosystem and land is at the core of Indigenous thinking paradigms.

Since European invasion of Miriwoong Country, much has changed for Miriwoong people, who continue to live on and take care of their Country. Whilst the traditional Miriwoong language is threatened with endangerment today, the traditional knowledge used to take care of Country has nevertheless been passed down to the current generations. Cultural knowledge has transcended the shift in primary language from Miriwoong to Kununurra Kriol; from pre-colonial ways to the ‘modern’ colonial Australia. The survival of this important cultural knowledge and practices also give hope for the future preservation and revitalisation of traditional Miriwoong ways.

Alongside the survival of cultural practices in managing fire and water that have been discussed in the previous sections, the Miriwoong knowledge also appears in the language, Kununurra Kriol, itself. Most prominently this is through the use of Miriwoong words in reference to particular birds, plants and animals, for example *goorrandal* for broilga birds, *nini* for finches, and so on. Traditional methods have also retained their Miriwoong terminology in Kununurra Kriol, as with the *warlayi* pit oven, one of the traditional means of cooking meat and fish underground. Even where direct terminology has not survived into Kununurra Kriol, the cultural concepts are carried over using words introduced through the Kriol language. For instance, in example (12), when discussing the management of fish stocks in the rivers of Miriwoong Country, the Kununurra Kriol term *gudenap*, derived from the superstrate English ‘good enough’, is used. Rather than directly taking the same meaning as the English cognate,

Miriwoong people use this term in Kriol to explain the concept of only taking what is required, encapsulating the concept of sustainable self-sufficiency on the land.

The survival of traditional cultural practices in caring for Country is not only present in Miriwoong Country, but reflected elsewhere in Australia as well, by other communities who have been displaced by European settler society. For example, in Arnhem Land, the Kunwinjku custodians of the land continue to care for it and pass down knowledge in the traditional Bininj Gun-wok language, as documented by Garde (2009), in liaison with several elders. Although the traditional language there is in a stronger position than Miriwoong, Kunwinjku too has been threatened by the constant encroachment of 'modern' settler Australia, which has displaced them from their traditional ways of life.

Nevertheless, the important knowledge of fire management, as well as the traditional cycle of seasons, is passed down from generation to generation in order to do the best to live on the land and take care of Country. In some parts of the Country, the recognition of the value of traditional ecological management has led to the effective establishment of Indigenous rangers to help manage fires, which can be particularly devastating without the appropriate knowledge (cf. Khan 2019). Another example of this comes from the Roper River community of southern Arnhem Land, another area where Kriol has replaced traditional languages as the primary means of communication. Nevertheless, the traditional knowledge is also passed on there, as it has been in Miriwoong Country. The ranger programme in the Roper River community is another example of how Indigenous people keep looking after their land and transmit the traditional ecological knowledge to the next generation. These programmes and the transmission of ecological knowledge are becoming increasingly relevant in a world experiencing the often dramatic effects of climate change.

Miriwoong people repeatedly make it clear that these traditional ways can easily coexist with and complement western *gardiya* technologies and methods in managing fire and water, rather than being mutually exclusive. Government rangers are sometimes described as being an impediment to fire management, as instead of being able to burn when they see it is necessary, they must first go through government bureaucracies and gain permission. However, closer engagement with Miriwoong people, including the hiring of Miriwoong rangers on Miriwoong Country, can mitigate the bureaucratic delays and lack of governmental understanding, and produce a robust, modern system to engage with fires utilising traditional knowledge. First, however, this extensive cultural knowledge held by the

Miriwoong people and their connection to the land must be recognised. Aside from programmes such as the Indigenous ranger programmes, the system today remains largely limited to a one sided engagement.

The maintenance of traditional ecological management is also empowering for the revitalisation of other spheres of traditional life and culture, including the language. Recent programmes for the revitalisation of Miriwoong have heavily involved the traditional Miriwoong relationship with Country. For example, one part of the language revitalisation programme undertaken by the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre involves taking young children out onto Country so they can engage with the environment in their acquisition of the language, as such ecological terminology is a core part of Miriwoong tradition. Master-Apprentice programmes also regularly involve the undertaking of traditional activities, including land management, whilst using Miriwoong to the exclusion of English and Kriol. This highlights the importance of the environment as a core cultural element in Indigenous Australia.

5. Conclusion

Indigenous people see the preservation of the environment as an asset to economic and social development. Indigenous people see themselves as being part of the environment and thus they have a responsibility towards it. In order to sustain the human wellbeing there must be a balance of all our assets and the environment is one of these assets (Morrison et al. 2019). The survival of this traditional ecological knowledge to the present day is something that is often overlooked. Despite the upheaval produced by European invasion and settlement, where Aboriginal people across the continent were forced off their lands, and more often than not their connection to language severed, Miriwoong people continue to pass on traditional ways to the younger generations. With the shift in primary language in the past half century from Miriwoong to Kununurra Kriol, the knowledge is nevertheless persistent, as has been demonstrated in this chapter.

Recognition of the persistence of traditional Miriwoong ways of caring for Country extends into other spheres, not only through recognising Miriwoong elders as custodians of the land. Rather than imposing ‘modern’ western ways upon Miriwoong Country, traditional ecological knowledge represents a far deeper relationship with the land, and is something that can be learnt from, with Miriwoong people as custodians of their own land. This

fundamental connection to Country furthermore enables the revitalisation of other cultural domains, such as the traditional language. Abound to the core of Miriwoong culture, traditional knowledge and understanding of Country and how to take care of it has transcended the shift in language.

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River(s) of Resistance
Narratives of Water and struggles for “ex-colonialism”
in Tony Birch’s Ghost River

David Kern

“The whole world is creepy at times, boy”

(Ghost River: 119)

1. Introduction

There is a conundrum haunting the Anthropocene. In two related ways, the Anthropocene is all about the *anthropos*, the human, depending on the perspective one chooses to inhabit. It can be a story about human total control and all-encompassing anthropogenesis. It can be the story of the imprint of a petro-capitalist civilization in the geological strata of the planet accompanied by the erosion of the planet’s atmospheric roof, urgently re-called into attention by the declaration of a “climate emergency” in a short paper released on November 5 2019, supported and signed by 11.258 scientists in 153 countries (Ripple et al. 2019). Both go together, of course, and so the Anthropocene – at least in the more dominant versions of its narrative – seems to be about collective human self-reflection; ‘our’ way of being is shaping the planetary habitat. Powerfully, however, this idea alongside the ‘collective species’ narrative is more and more being called into question (Yousoff 2018, Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017, Malm 2015, Malm and Hornborg 2014). The Anthropocene is all about the human in that it is about coming to terms with impact and agency. But yet, in one important way which I would like to focus on in this paper, it is *not*.

Debates about the Anthropocene so far have not, it seems, fully acknowledged the important issue of inter-human relationships. Anthropocene thinking has with great detail and attention focused on our ‘collective’ human ways of relating to the other-than-human, to the animal realm, to the ocean, to deserts, to the planetary ecosystem and so forth. This is important. However, I would like to suggest that Anthropocene thinking in all its different shapes could benefit from expanding the focus towards critical explorations of how human

beings relate to each other, because how we choose to (not) relate to each other matters greatly. As Ambelin Kwaymullina writes in her introduction to *Heartsick for Country*: “The destruction of the environment, of our relationship with other life, is mirrored in the vast damage within us” (2010: 18-19). This paper is thus interested in the question of inter-human relationships in the Anthropocene, suggesting that relationships between human beings tell a story about ways of relating to the other-than-human, and are deeply connected, by extension, to states of a climate emergency.

2. A brief look (further) afield

I would like to speculate about this link between human care for each other and care for the environment, about a direct link between our choice about how to (not) relate to other humans, and our choices to respect or violate the environment. I do so using Tony Birch’s 2015 novel *Ghost River* and explore how a close-reading of selected aspects of this novel can make a case for this link. I openly privilege a perspective on inter-*human* relationships and thus employ an ‘anthropocentric’ angle, in one way or another. Not because I believe that we own this place, but because how we as humans choose to relate to each other on all scales might well determine the future of the planet. The moment of invasion in the context of (ongoing) settler colonialism is a good example to think about how the brutality of colonial regimes targeting human beings is concurrent with the destruction of place and country, leading to a catastrophic situation of climate emergency. Both tell a story about a shared trajectory of the negation and active denial of relationality; to people, to one another, and to place. Works like Kathryn Yousoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018) urge us to think about how stories of human geological imprints are political stories about petro-capitalism, something that is all about competition, trade wars, and deep-seated, strategically manufactured and maintained inequality between human beings. Examples for this are all around us:



The text reads: “This was a rocky coastline which once *looked* like the coast at Parkers Point, Rottnest. There was a strip of sand at the base of the cliffs. Above the cliffs *were* rock patches and sand ridges covered with bushes. The meandering path follows the original shoreline. The original vegetation has been *restored* and the area is being left in its natural state. This landscape of sea, sand, rock and scrub is a memorial to the land and its people in 1829. *The area was then called Manjaree*”, my italics.

Figure 1: Description board near Bathers Beach, Fremantle, WA.
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Figure 1 reads like an epitaph in its consistent employment of the past tense. An epitaph to an environment that was cared for and well looked after before *Manjaree* became ‘Bathers Beach’ near the old Fremantle Storehouse. It stands in viewing distance from Rottnest Island, a place of cultural significance to the local Noongar people, made into a prison camp for Aboriginal people in 1883, a sight of suffering that is now turned into a major tourist destination. The sign is – in this way and this particular place, in its eulogy of what once *was* and *has been* – a silent monument to the work of colonialism, in telling a story about how the destruction of people went hand in hand with the destruction of place: the “restored” bit of “original vegetation” now something ‘museumesque’ between coffee shops.

In what follows I explore the centrality of place in Tony Birch’s second novel *Ghost River* and I analyse how specifically water, in the form of the river, can be theorised as both a site as well as agent of resistance. I suggest that Tony Birch’s novel is an excellent case in point of narrative fiction as a means to foreground the importance of human interaction in times of climate change. In *Ghost River*, water, the river, is a gathering ground or meeting point of hopes, fears and aspirations, a point of convergence of different ways and walks of life, and of related narratives about place. As such the very Ghost River, as the central locus of the narrative, becomes a site of first encounter between people and their ways of relating to the world, which offers to become a space of creating alliances and discovering shared visions for the future. Arguing that water in *Ghost River* is literalised as a site of resistance means that it

is a site where ‘ex-colonialism’ *happens* over the establishment of equitable relationships based on mutual respect. And it is in this way of literalising water that climate and environmental change, sparking powerful moments of inter-human relationships, opens up new ways to think the Anthropocene as a time-space which calls for a renewed interest in ways of being with each other.

3. Decolonization as unpacking structures of denial

“On what terms can we speak?”, asks Cree Canadian scholar Dwayne Donald, making this a central concern in his analysis of contemporary Canadian Aboriginal-Settler relations. Donald’s work focuses on the Canadian context, but I would nonetheless like to use this approach as a conceptual foil here to think about an Australian piece of fiction, also showing how Donald’s argument echoes in recent Australian theorizations of decolonization.

Donald’s work in decolonizing methodologies crystallises around the attempt to unpack what he calls “colonial frontier logics” (2009: 4), which owe to “the fort as a mythic symbol deeply embedded within the Canadian national narrative that reinforces the troubling colonial divides that continue to characterise Aboriginal-Canadian relations” (Ibid.: 1). “Forts,” he continues, “as colonial artifacts” which represent “a particular four-cornered version of imperial geography” (Ibid.: 3) which “have taught, and continue to teach, that Aboriginal peoples and Canadians live in separate realities” (Ibid.: 1). Such a naturalisation of frontier logics, as he explains, and the continuation of “fort teachings” over time, effectively deny the “relationality and connectivity that comes from living together in a place for a long time”, arguing that the “implication here is that colonialism is a shared condition” (ibid.: 6) in contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships within the settler state. Donald concludes from this observation – a situation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people likewise caught in a crippling net of fort teachings – that:

If colonialism is indeed a shared condition, then decolonization needs to be a shared endeavour. I am convinced that decolonization in the Canadian context can only occur when Aboriginal peoples and Canadians face each other across historic divides, deconstruct their shared past, and engage critically with the realization that their present and future is similarly tied together.

(Donald 2009: 6)

What must be dismantled, Donald argues, is the fort logic’s assumption, a continued legacy of colonialism, that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people indeed inhabit or “live in separate realities” (ibid.: 1).

The above quoted question, “on what terms can we speak?” is the programmatic title of a lecture presented at the University of Lethbridge in 2010. Here, Donald returns to this issue and puts forward a very concise take on the effects and violence of frontier logics, which deserves quotation at length:

...in my experience, whenever Aboriginal people and Canadians sit across the table from each other, they're frequently missing each other. We've got one frame of reference over here and another frame of reference over here... there is, like, this disconnect. And of course that disconnect is a legacy of colonialism. Because I see *colonialism as an extended process of denying relationship*. Whether it be with places where we live, or our head and our heart, or people who look different from us, *and so everybody's been colonized, it doesn't matter what color your skin is or where you're from. So we need to sort of sit together and think about this.* And try to figure out a way where we can speak to each other on more ethical terms.

(Donald 2010, 12:40, my italics)

Donald's argument that colonialism is “an extended process of denying relationships” is a powerful one, for three interconnected reasons. First, because it makes the issue of decolonisation a deeply personal matter, and extends its scope beyond political ‘goodwill’ and performances of reconciliation to achieve much-needed, in the words of Tony Birch, “productive and equitable relationships” which “move beyond the symbolic gesture, beyond a form of *recognition* that does little more than maintain existing colonial relationships” (2018: 2, italics in original). Second, because it reads colonialism as a continued and *shared* condition that involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the context of the ‘post-’colonial settler state. He thus exposes yet another layer of prolonged and long-term colonial violence through directly linking a present state of disconnect back to the moment of invasion, however urging that “perceived civilizational frontiers are actually permeable and that perspectives on history, memory and experience are connected” (Donald 2009: 5). Third, because it suggests a way forward in that it makes the (settler) colonial framework subject to and a matter of self-reflection: If colonialism is a process of “denying relationships”, then the goal is “to figure out a way where we can speak to each other on more ethical terms”, which directly dethrones the settler government as the entity that is solely responsible for policies and “symbolic gestures” of recognition, reconciliation or decolonization, of which Tony Birch (see above) is sceptical, since they not only ‘absolve’ governments of sustainable action and effort to engage, but ultimately keep existing power structures intact and thus reaffirm the settler-state's legitimacy.

Decolonisation, in Donald's approach, becomes a deeply personal and private matter which challenges to reflect upon the ways oneself is being colonised by the legacy of fort teachings and the multiple disconnects that result from them. If colonialism is an "extended process of denying relationships", then decolonization as a "shared endeavour" must mean to re-build relationships, to reconnect collaboratively, which involves, as Ingrid Waldron put it, to acknowledge and think about "our failure to consider our own complicity in the subordination of others" (2018: 4). Ultimately, Donald's argument complexifies the task of decolonisation towards the rebuilding of genuine and sustainable relationships through dialogical engagement on equitable terms, to "foster the creation of an 'ethical space'... that would, in turn, enable a collective re-thinking of the ethical terms and conditions by which future interactions and engagements can and will be guided" (Donald 2009: 5). Beyond the context or framework of the "post-" colonial settler state, this way of thinking becomes a grass-roots invitation to re-think our relations and re-consider the terms on which we are relating to one another, quite generally. What is ultimately at stake in a deconstruction of the past, Donald argues, is the future:

I think, one of the big insights I've learned over the years is the importance of... amalgamating the past the present and the future, right? Because sometimes we separate those, *we think those are different eras but it is this idea that past occurs simultaneously in the present*, and has a distinctive bearing on how we think about the future.

(Donald 2010 15:18, my italics)

This describes a vicious feedback loop between past and present, warning of the ripple-effects for a potentially likewise colonial future state of disconnect. Donald's is a call to "foster attentiveness" to what he calls "an ethic of historical consciousness", which "requires that we see ourselves related to, and implicated in, the lives of those who have gone before us and those yet to come". An ethical imperative, as he goes on, "to recognize the significance of relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences are layered and position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people are similarly tied together" (Donald 2009: 7).

In a similar vein, Simone Bignall explores ways forward from colonial modes of being and relating, observing, problematizing how "[I]n modern and contemporary critical politics, social transformation is conceptualised primarily in terms of struggle and opposition, rather than collaboration" (2014: 340), couched in "the tendency to view conflict as an ontologically

given condition...dominant across diverse traditions of Western thought” (ibid.), reminiscent of Donald’s analysis of the ideological forms and functions of the fort in the settler Canadian context. Central to Bignall’s thinking about social transformation is what she introduces as the concept of “ex-colonialism”, which is to

designate an ideally decolonised form of future community that is (perpetually) ‘yet to come’. I use this prefix in the same sense I would use ‘ex’ to describe a former relationship, which remains an indelible and shaping part of my history but with which I am no longer entangled in a defining manner. This term ‘excolonial’ replaces the unhyphenated term ‘postcolonial’... ‘post-colonial’ Australia exists as a nation that has been colonised by settlers, which remains invested predominantly by settler interests and retains institutionalised characteristics of settler colonisation; by contrast, ‘excolonialism’ is mindful of the history associated with the event of settler colonisation and affirms the continuing coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples following this event, but is properly understood in terms of the future-anterior tense, as referring to a future form of decolonised sociability that has conscientiously ‘exited’ the settler-interested modes of social production.

(Bignall 2014: 341-342)

There is a distinct parallel between Donald’s and Bignall’s thinking, and a shared concern for the future. Donald argues that “curricular and pedagogical work dedicated to the goal of decolonization...must engage critically with the colonial nature of relationships” (2009: 6), towards an ‘ex-colonial’ mode of coexistence which, as Bignall asserts, however, is “(perpetually) yet to come”. The question is, then, how can we imagine ex-colonial ways of being? If the sign discussed above tells a story of the damage caused by the denial of relationships, what kind of stories do we need in order to envision for ourselves ways of relating to each other that can translate into modes of *being with* each other, that allow to exit from, to leave behind, colonial bias?

4. On equal terms – making friends in *Ghost River*

Ghost River is a celebration of relationship and a sense of care for each other across cultural and class backgrounds, irrespective of social stigma, established and lived over a shared love of place. It literalises the potential of relationship-building, the power and centrality of ethical and equitable relations, and is thus in many ways a deeply anti-colonial narrative which probes and explores avenues towards a de- or “ex-” colonial way of being couched in a celebration of place. In other words, it is a narrative thought experiment asking what kind of world we would be living in, if people cared for each other enough to appreciate each other across individual and collective ways of life, and sought shared common grounds instead of

continuing the “temporal and spatial extensions of settler colonialism” (Waldron 2018: 7) on an inter-personal level.

Set in the late 1960s, this “love letter to... childhood” in suburban Melbourne, “viewed through the lens of teenage friendship” (Jaffe 2015), problematises the issue of retained coloniality, and explores some of the dimensions in which this rings true in a suburban and late capitalist ‘post-’colonial context. Crafting a story that seems to owe a great deal to the coming-of-age genre in its frame narrative – the friendship between the two young adult protagonists Ren (Renwick) and Sonny – *Ghost River* subverts the coming-of-age framework in its relentless depiction of how young adults are cast into a world marked by utter adult dysfunctionality, which is a recurrent feature of much of Birch’s literary work.

Sonny is introduced as the first character right at the beginning of chapter one, when he moves into the house next to Ren’s together with his father. Presented through the perspective of Archie, Ren’s stepfather, who watches them settle in, Sonny “[W]hile he couldn’t have been more than thirteen years old at the time, ...wore a *fuck you* attitude and liked to show it off”, “*trouble’s moving in next to us*” (*Ghost River*: 1 original italics). The initial perception of Sonny as a troublemaker, of someone when given “the choice of the right or the wrong way to do something, ... mostly steered the wrong way” (5), is quickly challenged by the narrator who turns, without much warning, to a depiction of domestic violence Sonny has to endure on a regular basis: “And when his drunken father bowled into his room of a night, drunk and swinging his trouser belt, Sonny wouldn’t bother asking what it was he’d done wrong. He’d simply drop his pants, eager to get the whipping over and done with. He never felt sorry for himself, and took every knock like he deserved nothing better” (5). A boy whose looks “particularly the demented eye, didn’t invite friendship” and “a loner at school” who could “never focus on study and spent most of his time fashioning darts out of matchsticks...” who, however, “if the work had been graded...would have picked up an A-plus” (7). Sonny is a teenage character who is colonised by regular domestic violence perpetrated by his father, criminalization by the local and corrupted police for his lower working-class background and poverty, and a public middle class narrative which construes his street smart skills of survival as human trash.

The friendship between Ren and Sonny, which the narrator’s voice marks as “unlikely” (7), “began when the younger boy [Ren] was taking in the schoolyard one lunchtime from a mound of a kid, *Milton the Monster*” (7, original italics). Sonny’s intervention safes Ren from

the beating, “bulldogging through the crowd,” Sonny “tore Milton off Ren. Although Sonny stood no taller than Milton and was at best half his fighting weight, he gave Milton a brutal lesson that day” (8). And the subsequent conversation shared by the two boys sets the tone for a vision of friendship based on mutual respect and equity which runs through the whole of *Ghost River*. Asked why he had saved Ren, Sonny says: “You’re smaller than him. He should have gone after someone closer to his own size. There was enough of them standing there. He picked you out because you’re the smallest. What time you leave for school in the morning?” (9).

Sonny is motivated, in this scene, by a distinct common sense for justice which allows him to relate to Ren without any noticeable self-interest. “That’s what it would be between the friends”, the narrator comments. “Whenever Ren needed him Sonny would be there, standing by the front gate, looking like the loneliest kid in the world without realising it. Except for Ren, other kids steered clear of Sonny” (9). Mutual trust quickly develops within the boys over sharing personal stories of loss – Sonny lost his mother who ran away with his baby brother, “leaving him behind with this father”; Ren is without a “real dad” except for his stepfather Archie, who is just “okay most of the time” (10). Neither of the boys are judgemental, and while dialogue here lacks any markers of ‘pity’, it is marked by understanding and interest, and genuine empathy in the projection of feeling: “Your mum and dad split?” Sonny asks, “I bet you miss him” (10). What the boys are not expressing directly, what lies in but also between their words, is taken up by the narrator who comments on the nature of their relationship: “Differences between the boys could have set them apart, but their shared loss drew them together. Ren and Sonny were also the only kids around in the neighbourhood without brothers or sisters living under the same roof, which was unusual” in the (lower) working class Fitzroy environment they both inhabit (10). “...from the day he’d been rescued in the schoolyard it became the two of them, for better *and* worse” (10, original italics). Shared circumstances power this relationship, and *Ghost River* traces, as the narrative unfolds, the various lines of shared love, struggle, hardship and joy between them. However, it is important to note that their friendship, as the narratorial comment suggests, is a matter of conscious decision to celebrate common grounds and to accept (and by the same token to *ignore*) the differences that are between them – e.g. while both share a working class background, Ren enjoys, considering the circumstances, a stable home, unlike Sonny, above the poverty line.

5. Meeting the River Men

Ren, “was a dreamer”, the narrator explains through his mother Loretta, she knew it “from the day she spotted him looking up at the sky...sitting on a rug in the public gardens, watching the flight of a bird above his head” and he had soon begun “drawing them with crayons, on the rough concrete ground in the backyard, or on the footpath in the street” (11). Ren is characterised as acutely and minutely aware of and in love with place, enchanted by what remains of the local natural environment, most significantly with a local stretch of the Yarra (Ghost-) River, in danger of destruction in ongoing urbanization and gentrification. Ren’s relation to the river runs deep:

Ren knew *his* river as good as anyone and better than most. As well as drawing birds and other animals, his exercise books were increasingly filled with maps of the river, including sketches of the swimming holes, the hollows where rabbits burrowed into the ground, the fox holes hidden beneath the barbs of blackberry, and the drainways spewing out rubbish from the streets above. Ren’s thoughts of the river were so constant he sometimes woke in the night, recalled an image of his most recent visit, opened one of his books and began drawing.

(Birch 2015: 12, original italics)

Early in the narrative and likewise early into their friendship, Ren shares his knowledge of the river with Sonny and brings him to that place he cherishes and loves – Ren engages in an act of sharing a place and ‘inviting someone in’, reversing the logic of the fort which operates to keep others out. On one of their trips down, near a spot where “[I]n one direction lay an iron bridge, which carried traffic to and from the high side of the river where the moneyed people lived”, Ren and Sonny encounter, for the first time, the “river men” (12-13). If, as Meredith Jaffe suggests, Tony Birch is a “chronicler of life on the margins” (2015), it is probably this depiction of a group of ultimately not so ‘homeless’ men, “outcasts”, who live by the banks of the river, and the evolving alliance between them and the two boys, which provides *Ghost River’s* frame narrative that marks *Ghost River* as a celebration of place and (urban) country as a site which forms inter-human relationships based on trust, respect, and a protocol of common sense and shared humanity.

In a scene which is reminiscent of a moment of first contact, importantly, without invasion, Ren and Sonny “saw a group of men underneath the bridge stomping around a campfire. They looked like a long-lost tribe. The men passed a flagon of wine between them while they sang and kicked up dust” (14).

“Don’t be shooting at me, youngster”, calls one of them to the boys, “Are ya from the authorities?’ he asked Sonny, humouring the boy. ‘We’re outlaws,’ Sonny answered. ‘Thank Jesus Christ for that one...so are we. How about you be polite and come over here and introduce yourselves?’” (14). There is no sense of danger in this scene, no room to read into the river men a source of threat, into their leader Tex, who is “boss down here” (15) who invites the boy into their camp. What the reader is then offered is another powerful scene of meeting on equal terms in which, Tex makes sure of that, respect is being established in a round of introduction in which names and stories about how they were acquired are shared and honoured. The casual and at the same time highly formal, almost ceremonial moment of first contact between the two boys and a group of outcasts disarms notions of social stigma – ‘homeless’, ‘unemployed’, ‘alcoholism’, ‘drug abuse’ are categories persistently disallowed by the narrative frame, which juxtaposes these categories with Tex’s “rule number one... that any man in need of a warm fire and a meal could not be turned away”. “While sharing the fire and the food, Tex would observe a newcomer until he came to what he described as an *understanding of character*” (18, original italics).

Character and protocol are sacred to Tex as “camp boss” and the only condition in the camp, which is built around mutual respect and acceptance for each other and their needs, is enshrined in Tex’s “three commandments: *Never call a man a dog unless he is one. Never take another man’s food or bed unless he offers to share. And never touch another man’s fire*” (18-19, original italics). As the narrative unfolds, what develops between the boys and the river men is a kind of decolonial relationship in that it is based around acceptance without critique and respect for ways of life and life choices. The boys supply the men with food when they can, clean up their shelter when they are passed out or when they are too drunk keep it in repair – and while they don’t support their consumption of narcotics, they don’t openly challenge their addiction to “metho” or “the white lady”, and the narrative rejects condescension in depicting addiction or the inability to fight it.

6. Celebrating the Ghost River

Decolonial relationships between people in *Ghost River* are based on a shared decolonial love for the River which is the centre of the narrative. As the narrator comments: “The river took such good care of the men that Tex called it their *mother*. She kept them safe from those who would do them harm, be it young bucks from the streets above, out for a night of menace, or the local police steaming with grog themselves” (21, original italics). Likewise, the river becomes a shelter for Ren and Sonny, a place to be at ease and out of trouble, a shelter from violence. Yet beyond the emotional significance of place, the narrative crafts an almost physical entanglement with the river and its waters:

Ren sniffed his arm. The water smelled like nothing he’d expected. It was a rich scent... As the skin dried he noticed specks of dirt, fine as baby powder, covering his body. From that day on, the boys carried the river home with them. They went to bed of a night with the scent of the river on their bodies and through their hair, no matter how hard they tried to wash it out. And it was with them the next morning when they woke.

(Birch 2015: 34-35)

The spiritual significance of the river is made explicit in an episode that depicts the river men’s burial of one of their own, releasing his body into the river to be carried away (106-107), and Tex shares a story of importance with Ren and Sonny:

This is a story from the other time when this river she did not end where she is today. There weren’t no boats for travel back then. And there weren’t no bay at the end of the river. The land was full and the river was a giant. Then one time more water come and stayed. Years and years of rain. The land filled up and there was the bay that come, drowning the old river... But she’s still there, under this one. The old ghost river... This is her. And when a body dies on the river, it goes on down, down, to the ghost river. If the spirit of the dead one is true, the ghost river, she holds the body to her heart. If the spirit is no good, or weak, she spews it back. Body come up. Simple as that.

(Birch 2015: 108-109)

This story is reminiscent, in a way, of the sign at Bathers Beach discussed above. Yet against the grain of the former’s reliance on the past tense, Tex’s narrative insists on the presence of the ghost river’s ancient power and strength, its sovereignty that was never yielded or ceded to environmental change or technological advance, making this an affirmation of the sovereignty of country. It is impressions like this one which awakens especially in Sonny a spirit of resistance to fight to the best of his abilities an assault on the river.

7. Conclusion: transformation through sabotage, sabotage as transformation

The narrative gains dramatic momentum when the boys learn that ‘their’ particular stretch of river country is being surveyed for the construction of a bridge and a five-lane highway. An assault on country becomes a deeply personal matter for Sonny and Ren, who increasingly spends his time “drawing colourful maps of the river and writing more stories” about it (138). Machines arrive, “pile-driving deep holes into the ground. Each time the hammer stabbed the earth it shook the ground. Workmen were following behind the machine, laying down metal poles, and tolls of wire” (148). Concern for the stretch of river country is equalled immediately to concern for the safety of Tex and the other river men: “I dunno how Tex and the others will get up to the street with that fence in the way. It’s hard enough for them now” (150). And the wire fence, in this scene, powerfully explores how the act of fencing in country tells a story about the neglect for those whose identities are marginalised and considered ‘abject’ by narratives of economic growth and urban development. “Then we have to work quick”, Sonny says, “Stopping them” – “We have to make a plan”, he urges, “What do they call it? Sabotage” (150-151).

Sonny’s determination to end the violence to country and those who hold it dear, experiencing, together with Ren, “another day of destruction” day after day (164), finds expression in rising anger: “Fuck off and leave our river alone!” (169), is what he calls out to the construction workers. In what follows later, Sonny steals into the construction site, manages to get hold of a measure of explosives used by the workers to blow up parts of the river site to clear the land for construction, and blows up some of the heavy machinery. As Sonny later explains, somewhat surprisingly, however: “I was lying on my bed thinking about how easy it had been for them workers to blow the steps above the falls... These pricks can do whatever they like to us and we can’t stop them. Breaking into the compound was nothing to do with saving the river”. Challenged for an explanation by Ren, Sonny asserts that he did it to “make them pay. Nothing more than that” (190-191).

Sonny’s argument suggests that he does not act out of environmentalist sentiment which, at this stage, seems highly curious and is questionable to some extent seeing how he tried to deceive Ren about his intentions when saving him in the schoolyard, suggesting that he was just after a fight before acknowledging that he could not stand unfairness. Whether or not Sonny acts on behalf of an environmentalist vision is, however, not the decisive issue

in this episode. What matters is the fact that Sonny acts out of anger over a massively unequal distribution of power and perceived powerlessness in the face of continued assault on something he holds dear. What matters is a transformation he experiences, according to which the very river is in danger of becoming yet another moment of loss – the river has become a relation that Sonny means to protect, to hinder from being taken away from him – like his mother, his baby brother, and finally his father who takes off to leave Sonny with his uncle in the belief that Sonny would be better off without him. Sonny's act of sabotage, in this way, becomes an act of retaliation as self-defence. It may be true that he does not act on behalf of the river itself. But he certainly seems to act on behalf of himself, as one who has developed a deep appreciation of the river, of place, and love for those who inhabit this space as something he is irreversibly related *to* and implicated *in*. Sonny's 'environmentalism', in this way, is an affective environmentalism of a person who has experienced a triangulation of place, self, and relations to others based on or rather vested in the river as a site who nourishes it.

Water, the river, for Sonny, may not be of value in and of itself, as he holds, but I suggest that Sonny's position of deep-seated and personal anger enables him to undergo a powerful transformation: Sonny loves a place, he loves the river, because he experiences love in and around it, through positive and equitable relationships with people who respect and honour the river. Looking out for each other, in this scenario, directly translates into looking out or 'care' for country – and it is in this way that, as I suggested at the beginning, the river is both an agent and a site of resistance in that it becomes a site of relationality, of alliance, of care for each other. It is a place in, with, and through which ex-colonialism *happens*, and which creates the meeting space on equal terms which Donald understands as vital to decolonization. Sonny's grass-roots act, however radical, I suggest, articulates a personal take on decolonization as a personal matter in the double sense: resistance against another assault of power against place, and resistance against being colonised together with that place – raging and lashing out in the only way Sonny thinks he can, against the trauma of being subjected to forces that have so far been beyond his control: loss, poverty, violence, lack of any stability and until that moment, having no place to belong.

I argued above that *Ghost River* develops a what-if scenario, a decolonial thought experiment in inter-human relationships which extend into a love of place. What could happen, the narrative seems to challenge us to ask, if people cared enough for each other,

and deeply cared for a place? What *could* be, if we understood that place and country, such as rivers, have the power to make people relate to each other across divisions of race or class, and across the violence of social dividing lines enshrined in categories such as ‘mentally healthy’, ‘able bodied’, ‘addicted’, ‘civilised’, ‘urban’, ‘progressive’ etc.? These are but some of the products of the “frontier logics” and “fort teachings” attacked by Dwayne Donald, and aspects of how, as he argues, we are all colonised by a massive disconnect from each other, which further entails a likewise massive disconnect from place and its importance for us as human beings. The world is indeed “creepy at times, boy” – to take up the initial quote. What would happen if we cared enough for each other? What would happen to how we think of and relate to each other, if we cared to care about place?

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Bryan Gallagher has been working at Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre, Kununurra, since 2017. He is proud of his language and is happy to be working here with the team and the elders. He likes preparing materials and presenting classes, radio recordings, and assisting with his technology skills. He is a confident teacher, and enjoys learning new skills, working in a team, and sharing knowledge.

Bentley James is a linguistic anthropologist living in remote Indigenous Australia. Beginning learning in the late 1980s with his brother and Warlpiri people at Yuendumu, he later moved to the Crocodile Islands in 1993, to collaborate with Yan-nhaṅu elder Laurie Baymarrwaṅa. Together they created a family of interrelated projects re-appropriating settler state technologies, categories and power in support of local linguistic, cultural and biological diversity. Securing state recognition of Baymarrwaṅa's traditional ownership of sea and island country they produced heritage, ranger and language programs, resources for bilingual bimodal education, saving her language with the first dictionary, ethnography and atlas and more recent works on Yan-nhaṅu sign language. Bentley continues to promote intergenerational transmission of local languages, conservation, and local knowledge for meaningful livelihoods on the homelands.

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David Kern is a lecturer at the English Department of the University of Cologne, where he teaches courses on Indigenous Australian writing and post-colonial theory. Since 2017 he serves as eLearning coordinator at the Centre for Australian Studies (CAS) in Cologne. He is currently working on a project on Climate Justice in Indigenous Australian and Indigenous Canadian novels. His publications cover ecocritical readings of Indigenous Australian fiction, war and remembrance in Indigenous Australian theatre and performance, and *Migrant Australia: From Botany Bay to Manus Island* (with Beate Neumeier and Katrin Althans, wvt Trier 2019).

Anthony Kerr, MA BSc, works as a Regional Program Coordinator for Northern Land Council's Caring for Country Branch. This work involves supporting Indigenous ranger groups in the Darwin/Daly region to develop the capacity to undertake land and sea management as well as cultural protection activities on Aboriginal Land Trusts. Anthony is a passionate advocate of regional collaborative land and sea management initiatives. Anthony and his family live happily in the northern suburbs of Darwin, Northern Territory. In 2019, Anthony published a book entitled *To Burn or Not to Burn – Perceptions of Fire Management Around Australia*, as he sought to understand the various regional drives to proactive and reactive fire management on mainland Australia.

Jimmy Paddy is a Miriwoong/Gajirrabeng man from Kununurra (Western Australia). He has been a Language Worker with Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring for more than seven years. Jimmy specialises in the preparation of language teaching materials as well as teaching language classes for Indigenous boys. He has a strong interest in using technology for language revitalisation. Jimmy has been working in video and audio editing, slideshows and database software to create language resources.

Katrina Karlapina Power is a proud Kurna woman, mother and grandmother who has long walked extra miles to ensure the voices and stories of Kurna people are heard. In her own camp and in mainstream circles she cited Kurna language and the reclamation of traditional funerary practices as a key to lessening the continuing impact of Aboriginal intergenerational grief and trauma. As a journalist (*The Advertiser*) and as a Narrative Therapist working with Aboriginal parents, children and babies (*Relationships Australia*) she sat on land and/or near water to share Kurna stories and spark curiosity. From 1994-2002 she was Chairperson of Tandanya (National Aboriginal Cultural Institute) and then became co-chair of Museum Australia's Indigenous Advisory Committee which launched "Previous Possessions. New Obligations", its inaugural policy on the return and repatriation of skeletal remains and secret sacred objects being held in international museums. In August 2018 a repatriation ceremony saw two Kurna men (skulls etched 1864) returned to Kurna country.