2

COUNTRY, CULTURE AND KINSHIP

I'll tell you a story about Yingarna, a woman who came here from the west. She carried many children in a large number of (string) bags. She came here to the flood plain after crossing over (the East Alligator River) and to this place where we live.¹

Bininj (local Aboriginal people) have lived around the Oenpelli area forever. The first people were placed there by the ancestral woman, Yingarna (Figure 2.1). Yingarna emerged from the Arafura Sea before she journeyed inland, deep into the Northern Territory, forming landscapes, languages and their peoples as she went. Her story is long and complex and relates to many other ancestral stories. In the words of Thompson Yulidjirri:

Yingarna, carrying all that dilly bag that woman. She had the woman and all them boys inside the dilly bags, and she dropped a few here, she went east, and then around south, just around the Top End here. And then Alice Springs somewhere and then I don't know, that's where she disappeared somewhere. She taught them language and clan and every dilly bag she would leave places like here.²

1 Thompson Yulidjirri, 2002, Sally K. May field notes.

2 Thompson Yulidjirri, 2002, Sally K. May field notes.

Figure 2.1: Rock painting of Yingarna, Injalak Hill.

Source: Sally K. May.

Figure 2.2: Northern Running Figure rock art from Injalak Hill.

Source: Sally K. May.

Yingarna laid *bininj* in their respective countries, gave them the language of the land and taught them to survive in that place. And they did survive, and thrive. Archaeologists have shown that *bininj* faced all kinds of challenges as their environment and its ecosystem changed over the millennia.³ Recent archaeological research across the East Alligator River in Kakadu National Park confirmed the long antiquity of Aboriginal occupation of western Arnhem Land; *bininj* have been at the site of Madjedbebe in Mirarr country for over 65,000 years.⁴

More than mere survival in their country, *bininj* developed a beautiful artistic tradition. In fact, western Arnhem Land is also home to arguably the world's longest continuing artistic tradition.⁵ For thousands of years people painted on rock surfaces, illustrating complex cultural belief systems, ancestral stories, intricate detailed information about animal species and more (Figure 2.2).⁶ Art has always been an essential part of Aboriginal life in this region.

The entire western Arnhem Land landscape is imbued with cultural meaning. Every hill has a name and story, every river and waterhole is connected to the life cycle, and every animal and plant has a place within local beliefs. These stories often relate to the travels of the ancestral creatures, animals and people who formed (and often became) landforms such as hills or waterholes. The area surrounding Oenpelli is known for many *djang* (ancestral creation stories or 'Dreamings') sites, including places that relate to Adjumarllarl (an ancestral dog) and his sister Omwarl, Baladj (leech), Manimunak (magpie goose), Wurrkabal (freshwater longtom), and Namardaka (catfish).

If these places are neglected, disturbed or damaged, the spirits will punish those responsible with dire consequences. Newcomers to this area did not often understand these rules and moved around the landscape without thought to cultural protocols. As we shall see, the missionaries themselves experienced death and destruction that might be expected from angered spirit beings when they cut down sacred trees.

3 See Clarkson et al., 'Human Occupation'; Jones, 'Recommendations for Archaeological'; Jones and Negerivich, 'A Review'.

4 Clarkson et al., 'Human Occupation'.

5 Chaloupka, *Journey in Time*.

6 For example, David et al., *The Archaeology of Rock Art in Arnhem Land*.

Figure 2.3: Painting by Tony Bangalang (2003) that represents the key cultural sites around the Oenpelli township through their associated ancestral beings.

Source: Sally K. May.

Anthropologists have written many books on the complexity of *bininj* cultures.⁷ Local people take them for granted, but for outsiders *bininj* ceremonies, languages and social structures can be difficult to understand. The early missionaries could make little sense of them. Some of this knowledge is shared here to inform your interpretation of some of the events that are written about by the missionaries.

Bininj belong to various clans, with varying languages. You are born into your clan, inheriting your father's clan grouping. Yet your mother's and your grandparents' clans are also important throughout your life and give you rights and obligations to certain places and species of animal. Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul (skin name *Nawamud*) was a key player in the early history of Oenpelli, brokering the establishment of the cattle station under Paddy Cahill with local people. He was a Mengerdji-speaking Senior Traditional Owner for Oenpelli and a member of the Mandjurlngunj

⁷ For example, Altman, *Hunter-Gatherers Today*; Taylor, *Seeing the Inside*; Berndt and Berndt, *Man, Land & Myth*; Spencer, *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory*; Mountford, *Records of the American-Australian*, Vol. 1.

clan, an identity he inherited from his father. His mother, however, was Kunwinjku-speaking. This meant Marakarra was not only a senior man for the Oenpelli area but that he also had rights and responsibilities for his mother's country. His particular kinship connections may also be a reason why the Kunwinjku people were first welcomed to Oenpelli and why they continue to be so prominent in Oenpelli today.

Kunwinjku Subsection System
("skin names")
showing patri-moieties and matri-moieties

Figure 2.4: Kinship subsections of western Arnhem Land.

Source: Courtesy of Bininj Kunwok Language Project (bininj.kunwok.org.au/information/kinship/).

All *bininj* relationships to others are determined not only by their clan but by their position within a comprehensive kinship system. For Bininj Kunwok speakers, this includes eight kinship subsections that help to classify and structure kin relations (Figure 2.4). This system determines your relationship to everyone else, including who you can marry. So, for example, if you are *Ngalkangila*, everybody with the skin name

Ngalbangardi is your mother (not just the woman who gave birth to you), your sons are all *Nakodjok*, your daughters are all *Ngalkodjok* and you must marry someone who is *Nabulanj* (or as a second choice – *Nangarridj*). This system is just as important as biological relationships and *bininj* must treat their kinship relations with appropriate respect.

The kinship system also determines your place within broader cultural systems. Everyone belongs to either the *Ngarradjku* or *Mardku* moieties, an identity inherited from their mothers. Likewise, everyone belongs to either the *Duwa* or *Yirridjdja* patrilineal moieties. You also inherit your ‘skin’ of either stone (*kunwardde*), sun (*kundung*), green ant (*kabo*) or fire (*kunak*) from your father.⁸ These categories are important for ceremony including burial rituals. Throughout life, both men and women pass through different stages of ceremony. The documents in this book reveal just how important ceremonies were when missionaries first arrived (Figure 2.5). When they wrote letters about *bininj* going ‘walkabout’, it is likely that Aboriginal people were visiting their country to partake in trade and ceremony. The missionaries also noted that ceremonies were taking place in and around the Oenpelli station itself.

Figure 2.5: Men gathered for ceremony following a burial, c. 1926. Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul is pictured centre.

Source: Northern Territory Record Series (NTRS 694 P1 Box 4 Item 90).

⁸ Elkin, Berndt and Berndt, ‘Social Organization’.

Since the first *balanda* arrived in western Arnhem Land, they affected and even interfered with this kinship system. As we shall see, Paddy Cahill tried to influence marriage arrangements, provoking retaliation from *bininj* elders. Later, the Dyers did not (or would not) understand this system and upset some *bininj*, especially when the missionaries encouraged ‘wrong’ marriages. Rites for deceased persons were also strongly contested, with missionaries insisting on burial, and *bininj* preferring, in some cases, for the body of the deceased to be placed in a tree or on a platform before their bones were removed to a cave.

Keep this cultural context in mind as you read the documents in this book. Local Aboriginal people were not ‘childlike’ or unsophisticated. They were, and still are, part of one of the most complex and dynamic cultural systems ever documented.⁹ Dyer himself observed the way that Aboriginal social structures and norms created, on the whole, a peaceful and equitable way of life:

The Aborigines have no police or prisons, no class/barriers, for all share their food (the old men keep the tasty bits for themselves). Their secret rites are to hold their power but their rulers receive no other compensation but the joy or worry of leadership. One king complained that he only had the worry of ruling and no wages or palace. They have no poor, no slums, no old age problem, no lunacy. They drink nothing but water, maybe the only race in the world. Their laws are kept. I never saw any wars for conquest, only over family vendettas or stolen wives and then they generally kill one on both sides and stop.¹⁰

Dyer’s assessment here was coloured by both romantic and racist assumptions of Aboriginal childlike innocence. Nonetheless, his comments reveal some admiration for the ways Aboriginal people had so successfully organised their society, ways that Christians like himself could only aspire to emulate.

Until relatively recently, many *balanda* believed that Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land were doomed to extinction.¹¹ As late as 1951, writer Colin Simpson described the ‘Australian Aboriginal’ as ‘a patient who years ago was marked down as “dying” and whose treatment since has consisted

9 See Berndt and Berndt, *Man, Land & Myth*; Taylor, *Seeing the Inside*.

10 Dyer Story, 22, NTRS 693, Item 8.

11 See Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 10.

mainly of pillow-smoothing and doses of pity'.¹² Dyer, too, doubted that Aboriginal people could survive contact, describing the Oenpelli mission as a 'real chance to make good'; that is, to provide some kind of compensation (albeit inadequate) for the evils of colonisation, 'even if it should be a failure to save a remnant of the race'.¹³

Despite such dire predictions, the Oenpelli community survives and continues to increase. Today in Oenpelli, the Mandjurlngunj clan continue their responsibility as Senior Traditional Owners. The descendants of many described in this book, such as Nipper Marakarra Gumurdul and his daughter Garabbunba ('Carabumba'), are esteemed community leaders. Dyer's strategy to entice Aboriginal people from across western Arnhem Land to the mission (and *bininjs*' calculated decisions to 'come in') has had lasting consequences. Today, people from over 40 different clan groups call Oenpelli home. It is a multicultural, multilingual community. While only a faithful few continue to engage with the Anglican Church there (now led by local Aboriginal woman and ordained minister Rev. Lois Nadjamerrek, and with the assistance of Church Missionary Society missionaries), nearly all uphold the kinship system. Ceremonial life is alive too, even as it has evolved to suit the needs of *bininj* today. The long *bininj* history of dynamic innovation and adaptation to new circumstances, even while upholding the fundamental changelessness of their traditions and identities, continues even now.

12 Simpson, *Adam in Ochre*, 186.

13 Dyer, 29 March, NTRS 1099/P1 vol. 1.

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