

13

Locating ‘mind’ (and ‘soul’) cross-culturally

Frances Morphy and Howard Morphy

1. Introduction

In 2016 Anna Wierzbicka extended her 1989 analysis of words akin to ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ in European languages to include discussion of Australian Aboriginal languages, and offered a critique of our treatment of Yolngu conceptualisations of mind and, particularly, soul.¹ She was responding to a seminar paper that we gave at The Australian National University (H. Morphy and F. Morphy 2013). That paper was never published, and this chapter presents us with a welcome opportunity to continue the conversation.

We are in agreement with Wierzbicka that mind is not a ‘thing’, but a culturally embedded, language-specific way of conceptualising mental states and processes. From our perspective—and this is where we begin to differ from her—the semantic overlap that she discerns between

1 The Yolngu, numbering between 6,000 and 7,000 and speaking closely related languages known collectively as Yolngu Matha (*matha* is ‘tongue, language’), are the people of north-east Arnhem Land in the Top End of Australia’s Northern Territory. They were colonised relatively late, with arrival of the first Methodist Overseas Mission at Milingimbi in the western part of the Yolngu region in the mid-1920s. They live at the hub settlements of Milingimbi, Galiwin’ku and Yirrkala, all former mission settlements; at Gapuwiyak, originally established as an outstation from Galiwin’ku; and at numerous small ‘homeland’ settlements on their clan estates established during a period of decentralisation in the early 1970s. The vast majority of Yolngu speak one or more varieties of Yolngu Matha as their first languages.

meanings of ‘mind-like’ words in different languages suggests a family resemblance; there are both similarities and differences between them, and it is productive to set up a potential cross-cultural metacategory—let us call it *MIND* to differentiate it from the English word—for use in cross-cultural analysis. Wierzbicka describes ‘words that are cognate and may share some semantic components but differ significantly in their over-all meaning and cultural significance’ as ‘false friends’ (2016: 451). Our approach is to consider them instead as particular instantiations of a polythetic metacategory that can fruitfully be compared with one another to reveal both similarity and difference. Wierzbicka herself comes close to taking such an approach in saying that, with reference to the articulation between mind-like and soul-like concepts, ‘one could even arrange European languages on a scale, with Russian and English at opposite ends and with French and German between’ (1989: 41).

In this chapter, our major focus is on what Wierzbicka refers to as the ‘modern Anglo concept of mind’ and our comparator is an analogous Yolngu concept which is not realised as a single lexeme.² But while Yolngu do not have a word that can be directly translated as ‘mind’, they do have words for ‘know’, ‘think’, and so on, and they locate those processes in the top and front parts of the head.³ Our analysis will reveal an overlap between Anglo and Yolngu conceptualisations that suggest they share much in common, as well as differing, and that they can be encompassed within a cross-cultural metacategory *MIND*.

2. Body, mind and soul

In post-Enlightenment Anglo (and arguably European) thought, mind is seen as part of a person. ‘I think therefore I am’ gives mind a central place in the existence of the individual. But can it be located in the body, and if so, where? In recent European theory of mind, and in everyday understanding, mind is associated with the brain and located in the head. It is possibly, then, also a part of the body.

2 And here we cannot resist pointing out that if semantic primes are not universally realised as lexemes (Wierzbicka 2016: 448), the same might be true for concepts.

3 The Yolngu Matha online dictionary does in fact give ‘mind’ as one of the meanings of *buku* (‘front of the head and upper face’). For reasons that will become clear, we think this is an oversimplification and does not represent its core meaning. Rather it is a locational referent for a lexically unmarked concept (Available at: yolngudictionary.cdu.edu.au) (*Yolngu Matha Dictionary* 2015).

The body can be viewed as an assemblage of anatomical parts and physiological processes. Parts can be seen, MRI-ed, revealed through dissection and felt. Processes can be observed or theorised—limbs move, breath is inhaled and exhaled from the lungs, the heart beats. Body parts are theorised in Western systems of knowledge on an underlying premise that they are connected to the functioning of the organism. Theory has made the function of the heart easy to understand; the heart pumps blood around the body. The heart stops beating, life ends. Of course, this is only part of the story but it is one most people understand—the heart is a pump. The relationship between mind, as our capacity to think and know, and the brain seems more complex—very much under exploration, poorly understood.

In this chapter, we look at the location of thought and knowledge in Yolngu conceptions of the body. We do so to see if the Yolngu can be said to have a concept of mind that links the process of thinking and the transmission of knowledge to the body in a way that has anything in common with the Anglo concept of mind or English-speakers' use of the word mind. Since Yolngu do not have a word that easily translates as mind,⁴ what we posit is, in analytical terms, a cross-cultural metacategory MIND, that is shared but differently elaborated in each case, and differently articulated with other metacategories. To signpost the direction of our thinking, two factors will prove salient. Yolngu associate mental processes and mental states with the front and top of the head; and in talking about their world to English-speakers, in English, they frequently use 'mind'.⁵

Wierzbicka's 1989 definition of 'modern English' mind (as cited in Wierzbicka 2016: 458) is as follows:

one of the two parts of a person
one cannot see it
because of this part, a person can think and know

4 Wierzbicka (1989) argues that that is the case with most languages, including other European languages.

5 Yolngu, like many other people who inhabit a contact zone, have an explicit theory of biculturalism—of different but coexisting systems of knowledge and ways of thinking about and acting in the world—that individuals can productively apply both when acting and communicating among themselves and in articulating their position to outsiders. We would argue that those systems of thought are only relatively autonomous because people are always in a context of cross-cultural communication. Analytically minded Yolngu are able to recognise the relative autonomy of their 'own' concepts and also think about areas of overlap just as the culturally Anglo person/anthropologist can.

This explication has an implied association with the discourse on mind–body dualism—the other part of the person, in this case, is the body.⁶ A later version of the explication (Wierzbicka 2016: 458) spells this out more explicitly, while simultaneously removing the (absolute) dualism:

someone's mind (2014)
 something
 this something is part of this someone
 people can't see this something
 this something is not part of this someone's body
 when this someone is thinking about something
 something happens in this part
 because this someone has this part, it is like this:
 this someone can think many things about many things
 this someone can know many things about many things

The Yolngu concepts that will emerge from our discussion differ in some ways from the one captured in these explications.⁷ But a family resemblance will remain. A full comparative analysis would involve an exploration of the history of the mind in English-language usage and conceptual thinking from prehistory to the present. That history would reveal many changes over time as both understanding of thinking and understanding of the brain have evolved. The history of Yolngu concepts is even harder to research, but there is no reason to think it has not also been a history of change.

Wierzbicka acknowledges that the sense of the English word *mind* has changed over time—and this change has crystallised in the post-Enlightenment era. An earlier concept of mind that was associated with the soul and goodness has become ‘morally neutral’.

The older mind had spiritual and psychological dimensions, but it did not have the predominantly intellectual orientation which it has now, with thinking and knowing dominating over any other nonbodily aspects of a person's inner life. (Wierzbicka 1989: 49)

6 Lillard's summary of research into Euro-American (EA) folk conceptions of mind is compatible with Wierzbicka's in that the 'major functions of the mind in the EA view ... are housing mental states and generating mental processes' (Lillard 1998:10).

7 A topic that we will not cover here for reasons of space is the problem of 'part' in Yolngu Matha and many other Australian languages (for a summary see Nash 2014: 84).

Lillard similarly concludes that 'the EA [Euro-American] mind has become a unitary concept, has lost much of its spiritual connotation, and has come to have an especially strong (although not exclusively) rational connotation' (1998: 13). We will argue, perhaps surprisingly, that Yolngu ideas about mind are similarly focused on thinking and knowing—but that they are also entangled with *birrimbirr* (the Yolngu Matha instantiation of SOUL) in the more general Yolngu theory of personhood, in ways that are very unlike the English mind's relationship to the English soul today. We suggest that cross-culturally and cross-temporally it may be meaningful to talk about a MIND–SOUL complex in which the two metacategories are deeply entangled—indeed, that much of Western theological discourse has concerned their entanglement or separation.

The emergence of the 'rationalist' concept of mind is clearly linked to the history of religion in Western Europe, including Britain. In the Yolngu case we will be investigating:

- whether we can identify Yolngu concepts that are analogous to Anglo 'mind' and 'soul' and whether they are entangled in similar or in different ways. We are not looking for precisely bounded equivalences and indeed will argue that the role given to 'goodness' in Wierzbicka's explication of soul does not have a central place in the Yolngu case. The absence of goodness in the Yolngu soul and the entanglement of soul in the Yolngu mind makes for an interesting contrast to both Wierzbicka's 'modern' Anglo mind and to its antecedents in Anglo thought.
- whether Yolngu conceptions of the corporeal location of thinking and knowing share a family resemblance with what Wierzbicka refers to as the 'modern' concept of mind. We will argue that, in the Yolngu case, the location of the capacity for thinking and knowing, as in the case with much Christian belief and theology (see Bieniak 2010), is seen as partly of the body and partly external to it.

3. Cross-cultural metacategories

The development of cross-cultural metacategories has explicitly or implicitly been integral to the history of anthropology. The challenge to evolutionary paradigms of progress—for example, from 'magic' though 'religion' to 'science'—has involved a continuing discourse over religion.⁸

8 For a relevant discussion with reference to the categories of art and aesthetics see H. Morphy (2007).

Anthropology has searched, through definitional discourse, for a cross-cultural definition of religion, which has, over time, encompassed greater diversity and, we might argue, framed a cross-cultural metacategory RELIGION. There have been similar discourses over art, the person, politics and so on. Such discourse has often involved shifting the meaning of English words away from a temporally based Anglo- or Euro-centric focus and working towards comparators from the vocabulary of other languages. Words such as *habitus* are redefined, and words such as *taboo* are appropriated to become part of the categorical vocabulary of anthropology. The vocabulary of anthropology may have an Anglo bias, but it is not the language of the everyday. While similar changes occur in the conceptual vocabularies of other disciplines, the creation of agreed epistemologies for communicating across languages and cultures, the openness to revision and to encompassing different ways of thinking, are integral to anthropology's methodology.

The categorising exercise is very different from the process of word for word translation. There are differences and similarities that cannot be grasped at the level of the word. The absence of a word that can be easily translated into a direct equivalent in another language, in particular English, is not evidence that the culture's conceptual and cognitive systems do not overlap with those of English-speakers in a particular domain—that there is not a family resemblance that can be grasped through categorical analysis. Anthropology does not reduce one ontological system or world view to another. Rather, it sets them in conversation, just as communication and contact across borders and boundaries has done throughout human history more generally. Indeed, many of the shifts in meaning of English words have been in response to a widening of understanding of difference in the world.

Those changes are also reflected relatively independently in the ways in which people in postcolonial contexts map their own concepts onto English vocabulary and use English terms in explaining the particularities of their own society. Yolngu, for example, use words such as 'law', 'parliament', 'embassy', to indicate to outsiders the family resemblance between their own political and religious institutions and those of their colonisers—in effect, they create analogies based on their intuitions about overlapping categories, as a means of cultural translation (see F. Morphy 2009).

Such processes are not neutral—in Australia, neither the Yolngu world nor the Anglo world remains the same. However, we would argue that their deployment allows the relative autonomy of cultural systems to be maintained, while changing (see F. Morphy and H. Morphy 2013, 2017). By explaining aspects of their own way of life to non-Yolngu through creating a shared vocabulary, Yolngu hope to facilitate understanding and mutual adjustment. Yolngu can explain aspects of their own sociocultural world to non-Yolngu by using emergent categories that they sense are helpful in conveying aspects of their world to non-Yolngu speakers: 'We have our own laws just as you do, let us work them together.' We use the word emergent deliberately, in that the adoption of English words in their particular Yolngu sense is a process that takes place over time according to the relevance of the concept and the development of cross-cultural ('two-way' in Yolngu parlance) learning. Yolngu use of the word 'mind' is indeed more recent than their incorporation of the word 'law'. It overlaps with but is not subsumed by the contemporary Anglo use of the term. And, interestingly, their sense of 'mind' points towards earlier senses that the word had in English usage.

By arguing for a cross-cultural metacategory of MIND OR ART OR RELIGION, we are not arguing that people across cultures or times share the same concept as is conveyed by the English words; rather, we are enabling a discourse over difference in an area of family resemblance. We make explicit that the comparative analytic statement of the kind 'Yolngu locate mind in the head whereas Illongot locate mind in the heart' makes sense, while requiring deep explication.⁹

People who take on board Wierzbicka's explication of the modern Anglo mind respond by using terms such as 'counterparts' and 'approximations', in effect creating an implicit cross-cultural metacategory. Toril Swan, for example, writes that 'English uses the term mind very differently than its *seeming counterparts* are used in the other Germanic languages (as well as in French, Polish, etc.)' (2009: 462, emphasis added; see also Low 2001: 11).

9 The sentence references Rosaldo's rich ethnography of the Illongot (1980, 1984) and Lillard's (1998: 12ff) discussion.

4. On the Yolngu head be it

Yolngu Matha (Yolngu language) has a rich vocabulary of verbs for things that we, as English-speakers, think of as things the mind does (*marrngi* ‘know’, *guyangirri* ‘think’, *guyanga* ‘think of/about, remember’, *moma* ‘forget’, *dharangan* ‘understand’, and so on), and a rich vocabulary of metaphorical forms (both verbal and nominal) for what we, as English-speakers, might describe as ‘states of mind’, ‘characteristics of mind’ and ‘processes of mind’. These take the form of compounds in which the first word is *buku* or one of its near-synonyms *dämbu*, *mulkurr* and *liya*. All refer to the top and front parts of the head: *mulkurr* is the top part of the head in a general sense, including the temples, *liya* is more precisely the crown, and the close synonyms *buku* and *dämbu* refer to the forehead, and to the upper part of the face more generally. A final term, *wanda*, which does not participate in these kinds of compounds, references the skull. But, as we shall see, it has a role to play as a container.

A word that does not figure at all in such compounds is *mamburungburung* ‘brain’, or any of its synonyms. Thus Yolngu do not suffer from ‘brain fade’, and there are no ‘brainy’ or ‘brainless’ Yolngu. Mental operations and states are located, it seems at first sight, rather precisely on the top and frontal regions of the head rather than inside it.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of Yolngu Matha semantics; rather, our aim is to give a flavour of how the vocabulary of mental states and processes works, with a few examples.¹⁰

4.1. ‘Minimal pairs’

The addition of the privative suffix (‘lacking/without’) to the words for parts of the head yields the following idioms that might be seen as analogous to the minimal pairs of phonology:

<i>mulkurr-miriw</i>	‘muddleheaded’
<i>liya-miriw</i>	‘stupid’
<i>dämbu-miriw</i>	‘senseless, idiotic’ (<i>buku-miriw</i> is not attested)

There seems to be a cline of severity here that we will return to below.

¹⁰ For a general grammar of a Yolngu Matha language, see F. Morphy (1983).

4.2. *Djabatj* idioms

The adjective *djabatj* on its own summarises the distributed qualities of a good hunter: alertness, quick reactions, sharp eyesight, skill with weapons. When this occurs as the second part of a compound we get:

mulkurr-djabatj or *liya-djabatj* 'intelligent, clever, able'

focusing thus on the mental aspects of being *djabatj* (cf. *mel-djabatj* 'keen of eye, marksman', which focuses on aspects related to vision).

Idioms that predominantly involve one part of the head help us to refine the aspects of mental states or attributes that each seems to reference.

4.3. *Mulkurr* idioms

Mulkurr-gulku, literally 'top of head-many', translates as 'indecisive' (a property of a group or individual) as opposed to *mulkurr-wanggany* 'top-of-head-one', 'of one mind' (property of a group). Compounds with *mulkurr* seem to reference general states of mind that in their negative versions are related to lack of clear purpose (recall *mulkurr-miriw*). *Mulkurr-wanggany* contrasts with *wanda-wanggany* (skull-one), which refers to people who are spiritually linked to the same ancestral being—a point we will return to later.

4.4. *Liya* idioms

Recall that *liya-miriw* 'lacking the crown of the head' was glossed roughly as 'stupid'. There are two further *liya* compounds that allow us to refine the import of *liya* constructions further: *liya-yalnggi*, literally 'crown-weak': 'impressionable, lacking in understanding, intellectually challenged'; and *liya-gulinybuma*, literally 'crown-criticise': 'reject (someone else's) ideas, disagree'. It would seem that *liya* is associated with the notion of 'idea' in a rather intellectual, perhaps almost context-free sense. To be without *liya* is to be lacking in ideas and therefore 'stupid', to be weak in the *liya* is to be too susceptible to the ideas of others.

4.5. *Buku* idioms

Buku metaphors are all about mind in its social context. We will leave aside the many compounds that reference particular kinds of speech acts and mental operations, and focus on those that seem to reveal aspects of the Yolngu conceptualisation of the nature of mind in context.

First, *buku* can be used as an alternative to *dämbu* or *liya* in combination with the adjective *dhumuk*, which means ‘closed, blocked, impenetrable or blunt’, in the expression *buku-dhumuk* ‘forgetful, stupid’. And it contrasts with *liya* in one telling ‘minimal pair’: whereas *liya-marrtji*, ‘*liya-go*’, means (roughly) ‘feel homesick’ (or more precisely ‘go to the idea (of home)’), *buku-marrtji* means ‘to go with one thing or purpose in mind’.¹¹ Purpose or intent is the metaphorical core of *buku* compounds, so we will start there, with the following examples (all of which are *buku*-specific):

- buku-däl* (+ strong, hard, steady, firm, difficult) ‘persistent, hard-headed, can’t be deflected’
buku-duwat (+ upwards) ‘persistent, insistent’
buku-duwatthun (+ go up) ‘persist, keep trying’
buku-dhuwalyun (+ say ‘this’) ‘nag, keep asking for something’

As in all but the last of these examples it can be an admirable (or perhaps neutral) quality. But this quality can veer into obsession, for example:

- buku-dhayka* (+ woman) ‘woman-crazy’
buku-guya (+ fish) ‘always thinking about fish’ (to hunt and eat)
buku-dharpa (+ tree) ‘always climbing trees’ (e.g. of a child)
buku-mari (+ trouble) ‘troublemaker who wants to keep feuds alive’
buku-dhirr’yun (+ disturb) ‘incite by reminding of past injury’
buku-man.guma (+ collect) ‘accumulate possessions, hoard’

And so on. This is a very productive construction.

¹¹ We will see later in the analysis why the idea ‘of home’ in particular is invoked by *liya*.

A second theme might be characterised as 'thinking together', for example:

buku-mala (+ set, group) 'crowd, flock, school of fish' (i.e. a group that acts as if it has one mind/purpose)

buku-lukthun/luj'ihun (+ come together, collect) 'come together, gather together for one purpose' (used e.g. for a memorial ceremony)

also:

buku-lupthun(marama) (+ wash, bathe) 'perform cleansing ceremony following an illness or death and burial (also baptise)'

and:

buku-manapan (+ join, link, mix, combine) 'gather together'

as opposed to:

buku-gänang'-thirri (+ alone, separate, distinct + become) 'wander off alone'

and:

buku-lalawukthun (+ peel off, shed (snakeskin)) 'refuse to become involved in quarrels between one's kin'

Whereas the first of these suggests 'group mind' in some instinctive sense, and the last two suggest the rejection of group mind, the three metaphors in the middle are the core of this theme. And they link to the first theme through the idea of purpose. This leads us to a third metaphorical theme concerning what happens to the mind at death. For example:

buku-mulka (+ hold, touch, reach, feel, arrive at) 'end of a person's life'

buku-y-moma (+ INSTR case-forget) 'leave others behind at death' (as opposed to *buku-moma* (+ forget) which means to 'forget, lose or misunderstand')

and lastly:

buku-but(marama) (+ fly away (cause))

which is the descriptive name for a ceremony in which a person's bones are brought back to their own country, to their final resting place.

In this series of metaphors the aspect of mind that is the socialised (sometimes group), purposeful mind is conceptualised as being realised to its full potential in an individual as they near death, and then it leaves the living behind on death. Freed from the weight of embodiment, it returns with the *birrimbirr* (soul) to the ancestral realm.

5. The Yolngu mind as process

In surveying the sets of metaphors associated with regions of the head our focus has been on the individual, human mind. But understanding of the semantics requires us to step outside the head and place knowledge and understanding in a wider cultural context. The Yolngu mind is both inside and outside the body. In talking about knowledge Yolngu give priority to the Wangarr—the ancestral determinants of the present (H. Morphy 1991).¹² Narratives of the journeys of Wangarr beings centre on them as a source both of knowledge and of human existence. Wangarr beings think their way through the world and externalise their thoughts and actions in the form of objects and features of the landscape. These objects are referred to as *madayin rom* which can be translated into English as ancestral/sacred law/knowledge.

Yolngu society is based on a division into two moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja, and Wangarr beings belong to one or other moiety. Wangarr beings travelled cross-country transforming features of the landscape and creating sacred objects, songs and dances that commemorate their actions. Certain places in each clan's estate are centres of their spirituality. These are referred to as *djalkiri* (footprints or foundations) of the clans that succeeded the Wangarr in place. They are locations of spiritual power, restricted of access and adjacent to sites of major ceremonial performance.

12 Wangarr is very similar to concepts such as Tjukurrpa and Altyerre (in desert languages) that are translated into English as Dreamtime or Dreaming. However, the Yolngu point out that Wangarr is not related either etymologically or semantically to the notion of 'dream' in Yolngu Matha, and do not like the connotation of 'unreality' that dream conveys. Both they and we avoid using the term.

Each place is associated with a *mangutji*—a sacred well (literally ‘eye’) that is the source of and emanates Wangarr power (*märr*).¹³ The songs, paintings, dances, objects and sacred names that provide the substance of ceremonies re-enacting the founding ancestral events are manifestations of the Wangarr and are centred on the *mangutji*.

There are many different narratives centred on this knowledge. For example, the Dhuwa moiety ancestors known as the Djan’kawu sisters carried their knowledge with them in their sacred dilly bags and also gave birth to the ancestors of clan members beside the *mangutji*.¹⁴

Clan members are deeply connected to their Wangarr; in Munn’s phrase they are consubstantial with the Wangarr domain (1970: 141). Life is initiated by a conception spirit emanating from one of the clan’s Wangarr entering the mother’s womb. The person’s relationship with the Wangarr dimension is cumulative. Experience of the Wangarr dimension through participating in ceremonies and living in the ancestrally created landscape adds to a person’s spiritual identity—knowledge and spirituality are intertwined. On a person’s death both *buku* and *birrimbirr* leave the body and become reincorporated within the ancestral domain. The return takes place over a number of years and is associated with a ritual process that transforms the individual’s identity into an ancestral one. There is a process of remembering and forgetting that moves the focus of ritual from the sense of loss that follows death to the positive presence of the Wangarr domain and the strength of the foundation (*djalkiri*) that continues across the generations.

We can see now how this complex process of the entanglement of knowledge with the spiritual dimension of Wangarr is reflected in the ways in which the metaphors associated with different parts of the head are structured. *Liya* is the locus of the initial connection between Wangarr mind and knowledge and the individual mind. When an infant’s fontanelle is still open and pulsating, they may be described as *liya gapu-mirr* or *liya mänha-mirri* ‘*liya*-water-having’. This water, occurring in a depression in the skull (*wanda*), is thought to be water from the place where the baby’s conception spirit originated, that is the *mayutji* where the Wangarr knowledge that flows in the waters beneath the land wells to the surface through the *wanda* of the Wangarr ancestor (see also Blake

13 For a general discussion of Yolngu religion see H. Morphy (1991).

14 For more on the Djan’kawu sisters see Berndt (1952) and West (2008).

2012: 54 and Stubbs 2012: 39). The human *wanda* is consubstantial with the ancestral *wanda*. Head wounds sustained as a result of conflict are considered much more serious than other wounds, because, as someone explained to us, ‘you are also hitting the *wanda* of the Wangarr when you hit that person’s head’.

Yolngu metaphors and their referents are framed by Yolngu ontology and enacted through ritual processes. It is significant that following a person’s death, in the past, the *liya* (of the skull) was painted with *likan’puy minytji*—the painting that represents the *mangutji* associated with the person’s clan, the *wanda* from which the conception spirit came.¹⁵

Liya, then, is the locus of the connection between the Wangarr and human mind. In the infant’s fontanelle it is just a potential, as yet not fully realised. *Buku*, on the other hand, is the locus of the socialised, individuated, often purposefully developed mind. It is telling that a number of the *buku* metaphors centre on the process of the mind leaving the body and with the process of forgetting the identity of the individual person. Consciousness goes, and so too, gradually, does the memory of the individual person among those who remain behind.

6. Yolngu mind and the use of English ‘mind’

In May 2017 we attended an event at the Australian Consulate in Los Angeles. Yinimala Gumana, a young Yolngu ceremonial leader and artist raised and educated at his clan’s homeland settlement of Gängän, had just concluded the event with a powerful rendition of a sacred song (*manikay*). The audience was moved, and so clearly was he. He said to us: ‘The *rirrakay* (‘sound, voice’) was here in Los Angeles but my mind was in Gängän.’

Gängän is not just a homeland. It is a *djalkiri* place associated with Barama, a major Yirritja moiety Wangarr. Yinimala sees his *rirrakay* as an aspect of the emplaced Wangarr knowledge. The *rirrakay* carries *manikay*, an expression of that emplaced knowledge. When Yolngu use the English word ‘mind’ they ‘have in mind’ the Wangarr body of knowledge and

15 In the past Yolngu performed several ceremonies to effect the transfer of the dead person’s *birrimbirr* back to the Wangarr realm. The body was first buried or exposed on a raised platform. When the flesh was gone the bones were retrieved and cleaned, then carried by relatives for several years before final disposal. It was at this point that the skull was painted with *likan’puy minytji*.

sources of power invoked in songs, performances and the sacra—the dilly bags and sacred objects. Yinimala's mind is, in a profound sense, always in Gängän, wherever he happens to be himself. Like all clan members he is *rirrakay dhawalwu* 'the voice of the land'—this is the duty of Yolngu towards the Wangarr.

Song equally connects the singer emotionally to other people associated with the place in a way readily accessible to European audiences. Referring to a performance of the Yolngu *manikay*-jazz improvisation 'Crossing Roper Bar' Daniel Wilfred explained:

In my mind when I sing I cry. You listen to me when I changed my voice, I am crying ... Always singing this song, always thinking about my brothers, sisters, all my nieces, nephews. When I sing this song, it's always in my mind, making me cry. Maybe you listen and hear my voice changing: that's me crying. (cited in Curkpatrick 2019: 90)

In our experience the association between thought and painting is routine in Yolngu accounts of the production of paintings. In the 1970s, Narritjin Maymuru stressed to Howard Morphy the connection of the *marwat* (brush made from human hair) with the head and the connection of hair to the fontanelle as a source of knowledge. He 'thought with' or 'through' his *marwat* (*marwat-thu*). Narritjin's daughter Galuma, 20 years after his death, sat before a plain sheet of bark and said that she had to 'think hard' before she began a painting.

About 15 years on, in April 2011, the late Joe Gumbula, speaking to an audience in Geneva in the lecture theatre where Ferdinand de Saussure taught, stated unequivocally, 'we paint in our mind'. And, more recently, Gunybi Ganambarr is quoted in a catalogue essay for the Annandale Gallery in Sydney in 2012: 'I try and bring the Yolngu law into reality. That is what is in my mind. To show what is already there.' His use of the word 'law' translates Yolngu Matha *madayin rom*, which refers to the body of knowledge that people inherit from the Wangarr who pre-exist them in their country, and pass to one another in life.

It is interesting that in these statements in English, Narritjin and Galuma speak in terms of thinking, whereas both Joe and Gunybi, speaking more recently, use the word 'mind', as did Yinimala in 2017. We did not hear Yolngu routinely use the word 'mind' until about 15 years ago. This suggests a process. In earlier Yolngu English, people used English words

that map more closely onto Yolngu translation equivalents when they spoke in the ‘art frame’. They spoke in terms of ‘thinking’ (*guyanginyara*) and ‘meaning’ (*mayali*). But more recently they have adopted ‘mind’, and their use of it makes perfect sense to their English-speaking audiences.

It is important to note at this stage in our argument that Yolngu would not substitute the English word ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ in any of these uses of the word ‘mind’. Yolngu do also use ‘spirit’ when speaking in English. For example, we were once sitting in clearing in the bush working on the Blue Mud Bay native title claim, drinking tea. A hint of breeze touched our skin. Ralwurranydji said: ‘That was the spirit of X’, referring to a woman who had died at Yirrkala the previous week. We must have looked sceptical, though we did not say anything. Ralwurranydji elaborated: ‘Couldn’t you smell it? She was a drinker, you could smell the alcohol in the air.’ We postulate that when using English, Yolngu are likely to choose ‘spirit’ when they are referring to external manifestations or expressions of the ineffable part of a person (the ‘soul’ *birrimbirr*, or in this case the ‘ghost’ *mokuy*), and ‘mind’ when they are referencing the Wangarr generator of knowledge located in a *mangutji*.

Since Wangarr are also the source of animating conception spirits, there is no absolute boundary division in the Yolngu conceptual universe between mind and spirit. But when speaking in English, Yolngu distinguish the two—they do not conflate them.

7. Yolngu mind and English mind as instances of MIND

Our analysis so far suggests that Yolngu have a complex set of concepts about the location, nature and processes of thinking and knowledge that can be placed in the same cross-cultural metacategory MIND as the set of lexemes from different European languages that Wierzbicka places in her comparative frame. We will now suggest areas in which the Yolngu mind differs from and overlaps with the Anglo concept. While we cannot complete a full comparison of all of the languages encompassed in Wierzbicka’s argument, it will be apparent that in some cases the Yolngu concept shows more in common with non-Anglo concepts and in other cases less. We will

centre on the dialogue that Wierzbicka sets up between spirit and mind in European ontology and theory and suggest ways in which, as cross-cultural metacategories, MIND and SOUL relate to Yolngu concepts.

If we accept Lillard's conclusion that the EA (Euro-American) concept of mind can be summarised as the 'housing [of] mental states and generating mental processes' (1998: 10), it provides evidence for an overlap between EA and Yolngu conceptual schema. Although Yolngu do not have a word for mind, we have seen that they do have an elaborate vocabulary associated with the head that makes it the locus for knowledge and processes of thought. When Yolngu use the word mind in English, they are referencing cognitive capacities that enable them to act in the world, as it is construed by them. It is significant that Yolngu do not associate mind with a specific organ such as the brain, but with (external) parts of the head. There is also an association between the water pulsing under the newborn's fontanelle and the waters of the clan *mangutji*, the source of Wangarr knowledge, with the entire skull (*wanda*) of the infant conceptualised as consubstantial with the skull of the Wangarr being.

The metaphors associated with parts of the head and the Yolngu use of mind when speaking English suggest areas of overlap with the Anglo concept of mind. However, Yolngu have a theory of the origin and acquisition of knowledge that posits Wangarr origin and an initial entry point into the human body through the fontanelle. The Wangarr source of *madayin rom* and also of *birrimbirr* means that mind and soul are more closely linked than in modern Anglo usage. However, the fact that Yolngu, when speaking in English, distinguish between mind and spirit, and do not conflate them, suggests that Yolngu knowledge-in-mind is substantively different from the individual's *birrimbirr*. There are no compounds or phrases that link *birrimbirr* to knowledge, in marked contrast to *buku* and *liya*. The distinction captures different processual aspects of Yolngu ontology, which involve the separation and reintegration of the sentient human body and the sentient ancestral body.

A person's accumulation of knowledge is conceived of as a transferral—a passage of knowledge from the Wangarr domain into the human domain where it is for a while manifest in the actions of human beings in the world. Yolngu praxis centres on processes that ensure that the knowledge that pre-exists the individual is acquired incrementally through their lifespan. And it grows through exposure to Wangarr knowledge in the form of sacred objects, paintings and songs. These

externalised manifestations of the Wangarr beings are the substance of ceremonies—the major context in which people develop the expertise to live under *madayin rom*.

The person who becomes knowledgeable also becomes closer to the Wangarr. Yolngu mortuary rituals can be seen as a process for returning both the mind and the *birrimbirr* to the Wangarr dimension—a process through which they ultimately forget or leave behind the person of which they were for a time a part. The *birrimbirr* does not carry with it the characteristics of the living person beyond the Wangarr essence itself. The *birrimbirr* does not come back to haunt the living or express anger towards relatives left behind. That role is left to the *mokuy* (ghost). The *buku* metaphors discussed above suggest that the accumulated mind—knowledge purposefully acquired during life—also becomes disembodied and returns to the Wangarr domain at death (H. Morphy 1997).

8. *Birrimbirr*, soul and soul

In Yolngu Matha, as we have seen, something very similar to Anglo ‘soul’ is lexicalised as *birrimbirr*; in our terms both belong to the cross-cultural metacategory SOUL. But *birrimbirr* seems not to share certain essential characteristics with the ‘European’ concept of soul. Wierzbicka writes of the soul that:

We can begin with what seems reasonably clear: the word soul can only refer to persons, not to things; it doesn’t normally refer to a person as a whole, but only to one part of person; the part to which it refers is not a part of the body; and it cannot be seen. (1989: 43)

Wierzbicka writes further of the soul’s ‘moral character, that is, to its links with the idea of “good.”’ (ibid: 43) and ‘to a person’s capacity to be good’ (ibid: 44).

In 2016, Wierzbicka sets out her explication of *birrimbirr* (2016: 472). Here we want to respond briefly to some details of that explication in the light of the discussion in this chapter.

Our first and perhaps most substantive comment is that *birrimbirr* does not carry the connotation of ‘goodness’ that Wierzbicka’s detailed explication of both soul and *birrimbirr* entails. Whereas Wierzbicka notes

people can be referred to as 'good souls' in English, in Yolngu we have never heard an equivalent reference to *birrimbirr*. In the Yolngu case people have a responsibility to follow the ancestral law (*madayin rom*), and to do so is to be *dhunupa* 'straight'. But morality is not involved; *madayin rom* is not inherently good or bad, it just *is*. If anything it is inherently dangerous, and transgression potentially invites catastrophic consequences.

We also think that Yolngu would find the absence of any reference to the Wangarr very strange, and unsatisfactory. Wierzbicka's explication attempts to capture the, perhaps unique, emplaced nature of Yolngu (and by extension other Indigenous Australian) belief systems in the following way in part [D] of her explication (2016: 44):

[D] [WHAT PEOPLE CAN KNOW ABOUT THIS PART OF SOMEONE]

people can know that it is like this:

some time before this someone was born/this part of someone
was part of a place

where some people lived before

after this someone dies, this part of this someone can be part
of the same place

The Yolngu *birrimbirr* is the ancestral identity of the person, something that is consubstantial with and a manifestation of the Wangarr. *Djalkiri* places, and the *mangutji* from whence the *birrimbirr* comes, is not just *any* place where 'people have lived before'—that would be true of many places in Yolngu country. It is a special kind of place imbued with Wangarr *märr*, and any explication would have to account for that in some way if it were to ring true to a Yolngu person. *Birrimbirr* is an expression of an ancestral (Wangarr) process that connects a spiritual domain with the lived and living world through a transformational process that includes spirit conception, the growth of the *birrimbirr* in the living person and the return of the spiritual dimension on death. The human cycle is one manifestation of the Wangarr that can also appear in material form and in the forces of nature—winds, tides, lightning, trees. But certain places are focal points of the spiritual essence (*märr*) of particular Wangarr. The body (perhaps particularly the skull) is the container of both the MIND and SOUL, which are arguably different aspects of the same *märr*, but conceptually distinct. The *birrimbirr* is the SOUL of the individual, consubstantial with the Wangarr, and *madayin rom* is the socially shared and transmitted product of the associated Wangarr MIND.

Both *birrimbirr* and *madayin rom* differ in another significant way from the Anglo concepts as analysed by Wierzbicka, in that arguably both are intimately associated with material objects. In Wierzbicka's (1989) explication of both mind and soul 'one cannot see it'. In the Yolngu case, paintings, sacred objects, elements of the environment, properties of the ecosystem are all in different ways externalised manifestations of the Wangarr. The connection with the person is emphasised in metaphor and ritual. On a person's death in the past the skull—the *wanda*—was painted with a design that comes from the *mangutji*—the source of Wangarr knowledge. A sand sculpture in a mortuary ritual originates from the same place, and the grave has the name of the *mangutji* sung into it. In each of these cases, from a Yolngu perspective, the material objects and the images and sounds they convey carry the agency of the Wangarr. As Daniel Wilfred puts it when referring to sound and rhythm of the clap sticks in song: 'The clapping sticks, they lead everything. You think they are just sticks but they have a song. Everything comes out of the clapping sticks' (Curkpatrick 2019: 24–25).

In our terms, and as Wierzbicka's detailed (2016) analysis of soul-like concepts including *birrimbirr* shows very clearly, the cross-cultural metacategory SOUL needs to encompass the diversity of *birrimbirr* and other soul-like concepts. If it is to encompass the English soul and *birrimbirr* it needs to encompass a polythetic set of attributes, and 'goodness' is not a necessary attribute of every instantiation of the category.

9. Conclusion: The nature of cross-cultural metacategories

In her comparative analyses of soul and mind across a wide set of languages, Wierzbicka uses the difficulty of translation of key terms from one language to another as part of the evidence for cultural difference. Yet at the same time what she chooses to translate is evidence of an intuition that the concepts compared have something in common. Translation from one language to another involves a double articulation, which is why it can seldom be 'literal'. On either side of the divide is an enculturated language, such that the categorisations salient to each culture are encoded in its language in complex ways. The task of anthropology is in part to focus on the commonalities that exist within trajectories and discourses of difference that intuitively make comparison possible. A long view of contact between human societies suggests a history of interaction across

boundaries, histories of translation and comparison, in which categories are continually emerging and boundaries shifting. Methodologically, we believe it is important to make explicit the categories of comparison and frame them in such a way that they encompass difference and change while reflecting intuitions of similitude. Often communication reveals difference at moments of profound misunderstanding, when people find themselves using apparently the same word with very different senses (see e.g. F. Morphy 2007). A cross-cultural metacategory should facilitate discourse by holding certain things in common while anticipating difference. Not all concepts are going to be amenable to a cross-cultural analysis; the widening of a metacategory may result in a change to its definition, but too much widening may make it meaningless.

Implicit in our cross-cultural metacategory MIND is that the family resemblance which defines the polythetic set of culturally embedded concepts centres on the cognitive capacities of thinking and knowing. The boundaries around a concept may be fuzzy and may change through time; the modern Anglo mind is continuous with early and more morally or spiritually entangled variants, but all are instances of MIND. Discourses that occur across boundaries of language, culture, religion and discipline may also cause boundary shifts. The category MIND can thus be compared across cultures and/or time on the basis of factors such as its location, or its relationship to SOUL, or the degree to which it can be distributed among persons, supernatural forces and things. Our comparison of Wierzbicka's 'modern Anglo' mind with 'our' Yolngu concept is highly productive in that it sets both within their own local cultural trajectories. The Yolngu mind complex, though historically distant from the concepts belonging to the set of European languages and cultures that Wierzbicka compares, is not categorically discontinuous. Which is to say, the concepts are not incommensurable, but may be meaningfully compared because they are members of the polythetic MIND.

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This text is taken from *Meaning, Life and Culture: In conversation with Anna Wierzbicka*, edited by Helen Bromhead and Zhengdao Ye, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MLC.2020.13