

6. Unbirri's pre-Macassan legacy, or how the Yolngu became black

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Introduction

From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, I was most fortunate to make the acquaintance of the Warramiri Aboriginal leader David Burrumarra MBE. A person of great consequence in northeast Arnhem Land, Burrumarra had been a leader in the establishment of Christian missions at Yirrkala and Galiwin'ku in the 1930s and 1940s and an advocate for self-determination in the post-mission period (McIntosh 1994). Burrumarra considered himself and was considered by others to be an intellectual and he was much sought after by politicians, religious leaders and social scientists, both for his astonishing general knowledge and for his influence within the Yolngu realm. His older relative Harry Makarrwola of the Wangurri clan had played a similar mediating role a generation earlier in his work with Methodist missionaries at Milingimbi and also with the pioneering anthropologist Lloyd Warner, author of the 1937 classic *A Black Civilization*.

My lengthy conversations with Burrumarra traversed all aspects of his illustrious career and the highlights were published in a biography in 1994 shortly after his death. Early on in our conversation I was interested in exploring his views on the possibility of pre-Macassan voyaging to Australia, and also the legacy of Macassan trepangers (McIntosh 2008). His homeland in the English Company's Islands included the fabled 'Malay Road' where Matthew Flinders encountered the Bugis Captain Pobassoo in 1803 (Macknight 1976; see also chapters by Thomas, this volume, and Blair and Hall, this volume).

It was evident that the memory of prolonged contact with visitors from Southeast Asia was influencing the ways that Yolngu (Aborigines in northeast Arnhem Land) were then fighting for sea rights, mineral rights and also a treaty with non-Aboriginal Australians, and I was keen to examine that connection. Burrumarra's priorities in those years were in bridging the gap between Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion and building strong, modern Indigenous communities that integrated the best from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. These two preoccupations, both mine and Burrumarra's, were intimately entwined.

Among Burrumarra's Warramiri clan there is a deeply held conviction that the relationships that were forged between Yolngu and the early seafaring pre-Macassans, also known as the 'Bayini', represented a 'high water mark' in terms of coexistence (McIntosh 2000, 2006a). The two intermarrying moieties (or halves) of Yolngu society, Dhuwa and Yirritja, find harmony in an intricate net of social relations, and such was the case also in the 'golden age' at the dawn of time when Yolngu and pre-Macassans danced together on the beaches of northeast Arnhem Land. Why was there not the same sense of connectedness between black and white Australians, Burrumarra would ask.

This connectedness of Yolngu and others was demonstrated most spectacularly in 1988 with the Northern Territory Museum's recreation of the voyage of Macassan trepangers from Sulawesi to Australia. The *Hati Marege*, a traditional Macassan prau crewed by a group from Makassar and under the direction of historian Peter Spillett, was met at Elcho Island by Yolngu men doing dances associated with the aforementioned pre-Macassans, those early non-trepanging voyagers so closely associated with the Yolngu Dreaming. I was there on the beach and I witnessed the Indonesians being welcomed to Arnhem Land as if they were coming home after a long absence (see Ganter, this volume; Ganter 2006, p. 33).

In this chapter I will share one pre-Macassan story told to me by David Burrumarra. First, I will give an indication of the manner in which the story was told, and second, through his analysis of the content and also mine, I will draw some conclusions on why the story was shared, shining light on what 'coming home' means in terms of contemporary relations between Yolngu and outsiders. The goal is to show how some Yolngu view the history and legacy of trepanging not just through the narrow lens of tamarind trees, pottery shards and the years 1780–1907, but, rather, through an entirely different and sacred lens.

The setting for this story is the period soon after the beginning of the world at a place called Unbirri or Stephen's Island, in northeast Arnhem Land.

The dawn of time

The news would have spread rapidly. Around campfires across Arnhem Land, Yolngu of all ages would have been speaking in hushed tones about developments at Unbirri, a small island north of Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island). A golden-skinned baby girl had made her appearance in the world. She was not an albino, an extreme rarity in Australia, but rather a light-brown colour that did not darken in the days immediately after her birth, as is the norm. Her name was Bayini.

This historical episode, now couched in myth, was described to me as occurring at the 'dawn of time'. It was the cause of much deliberation. The '*Momo*', the baby's paternal grandmother, rubbed the baby's skin with the bark of the gutu tree, which grew along the shoreline at Unbirri. It is black in colour like the people. After all, she believed that you need such a skin colour to be called a Yolngu (or human being). The application of the bark, along with the action of the sun, was understood to be sufficient to transform the baby into a person of appropriate skin colouring. But it wasn't.

Conception beliefs under scrutiny

The study of Yolngu conception beliefs throws some light on how this new arrival may have been perceived at Unbirri and, indeed, beyond. Anthropologists originally thought that Aboriginal people were ignorant of the role of sexual intercourse in reproduction but now we know this view was incorrect. For Yolngu, like most other Indigenous Australians, spiritual explanations of conception exist separately and override more mundane physiological explanations. Yolngu believe that spirit children exist independently in the environment, especially in sacred waterholes associated with a clan's totems. Spirit children go in search of mothers, and mothers in search of them. But according to Merlan (1986), marriage, Australia-wide, was an institution orchestrated and controlled by Aboriginal men, female sexual maturity being attributed to the actions of men and also ritual. When it comes to conception, the father may be visited in a dream by one of these child spirits, which he then directs to the mother, or there might be an unusual occurrence while hunting that he will link to 'finding a child'. The Yolngu word '*Gayi*', a personal name, sums up this male-centred belief. At one level it means 'in the image of the father', but it also represents the 'face of the land', that close bond that exists between people as a whole and totemic spirits.

With a cyclical understanding of the passing of time, Yolngu would envision a world in which there was an eternal balance between the temporal and the non-temporal, the physical and the spiritual, but now that timeless order was thrown into doubt. The arrival of the new child, who was not in the image of the Aboriginal father, signalled to the elders that there was a new order in the universe, a new law in the land, and a new principle guiding human interaction. And they seemed to have little or no control over it.

In search of meaning

Making sense of this occurrence obviously exercised the minds of Yolngu over many generations, long before Burrumarra and I shared our thoughts under the mango trees on the cliffs overlooking the vast Arafura Sea. In the past, Burrumarra said that Yolngu would ask, 'Was Bayini autochthonous, a product or outgrowth of the land? Or had a Dreaming entity deposited Bayini there?' If so, he said, what was its purpose? What was her message? There was much speculation; however, by the 1980s there was an emerging consensus. In conversation with me, Yolngu elders would discuss the significance of Unbirri in the context of the possibility of reconciliation in Australia, as I will explain.

There is no mention of Macassans in the Bayini narrative. No mention either of the trepang trade. Rather, the emphasis in the telling was on the evidence that it provided for the existence of a Dreaming entity, previously undetected, but now made visible in part by the emergence, and look, of this child. This Dreaming entity was understood to hold sway over peoples of all descriptions, black and white, living both in Arnhem Land and elsewhere, and it was the force behind all that was new and entering Yolngu lives (McIntosh 2011).

The place where the Bayini 'arose from the earth' is known as Gutungur, where a gutu tree once grew. In the 1980s a small outstation was built at Unbirri (Stephen's Island) by a Yolngu elder whose Christian name, by no coincidence, was Stephen. Yolngu would travel to Unbirri to consider the legacy of Bayini. People of many clans trace their origins to her, and all Yolngu, without exception, to the Dreaming entity that brought her forth into the world. Regina Ganter, in her book *Mixed Relations: Histories and stories of Asian–Aboriginal contact in north Australia*, quotes the Gumatj–Burarrwanga leader Charlie Mattjuwi, who says that all Yolngu are descended from Macassans (Ganter 2006). What he is actually referring to are not just his own personal connections to a Macassan lineage, but also to the Bayini legacy as a whole.

Bayini's law at Unbirri

Yolngu law at Unbirri was very strict. Bayini was a product of the new world entering Yolngu lives but 'she lived for the black people', Burrumarra said. In what appears to be a contradiction, Burrumarra would say, 'Yolngu for Yolngu and Macassar for Macassar. We do not mix. This Bayini's law.' And Bayini's Yolngu descendants at Unbirri and the neighbouring island of Yirringa (Drysdale Island) jealously guarded their homeland and inheritance.

Across northeast Arnhem Land there are many myths of first encounter in which the question of how Yolngu might react to the presence of the other is discussed. In a majority of narratives, as I detail later, the bricoleur or mythmaker uses the dingo or wild dog as the central character (McIntosh 2006b). In dog myths from Yirringa, for example, the mythical actors use only traditional technology—bark canoes and stone axes—and nothing from the visitors. The message seemed to be that the Yolngu would not be overrun by the new, losing control of their lands and bodies as the influence of newcomers steadily grew. And yet even with this self-imposed regimen of seclusion, the Yolngu landowners of Unbirri and Yirringa, relatives of today's Warramiri clan traditional owners, became extinct in the 1800s in part as a consequence of diseases introduced by Macassans (Burrumarra, Pers. comm., 1988). A 'scratching sickness', most probably smallpox, was experienced along the entire Wessel Island chain and elsewhere in Arnhem Land, leading to the demise of many clans (see Campbell 2002).

In the 1980s, visitors to the region would often avoid the use of non-traditional material culture. Even though Bayini herself represented all things new, her law in this instance meant no metal cooking pots, no axes, knives or any other such items. Baler shells were preferred for carrying water for this was the law of Bayini at Yirringa.

On a hunting trip with Yolngu friends and family to Yirringa in the late 1980s, I witnessed this practice first hand. Our five boats were anchored offshore in a wide semicircle. Some members of the party waded ashore to make fires while others ventured into the swampy hinterland where their hunting dogs were let loose to chase out goanna. It was an extraordinary scene as the dogs, the men and the women, working together, herded dozens of the scurrying lizards onto the beach and into the water, where Yolngu were waiting knee deep in the water with wooden clubs to kill them. After a memorable feast, we left the island, never once using modern technology. I remember how the elders joked as they made fire without matches, to the delight of the children.

Bukulatjpi and cognitive dissonance

What can we deduce from the contradiction at the heart of the Bayini narrative? In Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, drawn from his book *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger et al. 1958), the conflict or tension between established beliefs and new information leads to a disequilibrium, which motivates people to reduce or eliminate the contradictions and justify a new stance through what is called 'adaptive preference formation'. Burrumarra was aware of this term, 'cognitive dissonance'. He had spent many days with world-renowned clinical

psychologists and psychiatrists, including Dr John Money, most famous for his work on infant sex assignment in cases where the sexual identity of newborns was not apparent. In relation to the uncertainties and dissonance of those early days of contact, Burrumarra simply said that his ancestor, a Warramiri leader from the early 1800s named Bukulatjpi, dealt with the disequilibrium by ‘picking up the swords and doing the dance’.

Burrumarra was referring here to the many ceremonies, some integrating flags and swords, that were understood to be held in common by Yolngu, pre-Macassans and Macassans. ‘There were no doubts’, Burrumarra said. Bukulatjpi’s actions and the thinking behind them, variously interpreted, became the basis of an enduring Yolngu law that emphasised pride in one’s Yolngu heritage, and also a pan-Yolngu sense of resistance to unwelcome outside intrusion.

Bukulatjpi’s significance to the Yolngu as a whole became evident when, in the 1960s, the lives of Arnhem Landers were becoming increasingly bound by the administrative procedures of the Commonwealth Government of Australia. Yolngu were required to have a surname and the labels Burarrwanga, Yunupingu, Dhamarrandji, Dhurrkay, Marika and so on were adopted by young clan leaders (McIntosh 1994). Each of the aforementioned names has a profound meaning. The Warramiri clan chose the surname of their ancestor, Bukulatjpi, a man who was credited by Burrumarra and others with ‘doing the thinking’ with regards to the pre-Macassan Bayini.

Bayini narratives drawn from sacred sites across northeast Arnhem Land are centre stage for at least five Yirritja clans—the Warramiri, Wangurri, Birrkili, Dhalwangu and Gumatj—and a number of now extinct groups, such as the Lamamirri and Yalukal (McIntosh 2000). While there is considerable variation in the Bayini narratives, the essential elements are the same and they all derive for the most part from Bukulatjpi, and then through multiple hands and interpretative processes down to the present. Bukulatjpi died at Melville Bay near Nhulunbuy at a sacred place now occupied by the Nabalco aluminium plant (Burrumarra, Pers. comm, 1988). The irony was not lost on Yolngu who look to the Bayini narratives for inspiration in their fight for the recognition of their individual and collective rights in a world in which they had become increasingly marginalised.

Bayini’s people

From my discussions with Burrumarra, I gathered that Bukulatjpi had lived at the very end of the heyday of the pre-Macassans in what we might now construe as the first stage of Macassan visitation. Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1954) wrote about distinct periods of foreign contact in northeast Arnhem

Land. In Warramiri oral history, there is a long gap of many generations before the second wave of visitors to his homeland. The Macassan fishermen had avoided the Yolngu, venturing into the Gulf of Carpentaria as far south and east as Mornington Island in Queensland. Burrumarra said that when they returned, they were of a different mind-set. They were now trepangers. Thus we see the differentiation between the two categories of outsiders in the Yolngu world view: 'Bayini' and 'Macassan'. One was considered to be on sacred business and the other profane.

Bayini narratives from other parts of northeast Arnhem Land identify key pre-Macassan leaders, like Luki, Lela and Leku. We know something of their religion, personalities and leadership qualities and also the hierarchical structure of their society (McIntosh 1996, 2004a, 2004b, 2008). Luki, for example, was described to me as a saintly figure who 'lived for the Yolngu'. Members of the Yirritja moiety today are named after these Bayini *bunggawa* (leaders) but they also have personal names drawn from the professions practised by the Bayini on Arnhem Land shores, like boatbuilder, iron-maker, rice-grower and cloth weaver. We also know the names of the Bayini boats, like the *Matjala* with its tripod mast, which was one of the very first, according to Burrumarra. In Yolngu languages, *matjala* means the most precious of things, a great treasure. But it was also the name of this Indonesian sea craft, giving some idea of how these first visitors were viewed by Yolngu. These leaders and their professions, like the memory of the baby at Unbirri, are cherished. As Burrumarra said, 'They are my backbone'.

In that period of hiatus between the departure of the Bayini and the arrival of trepangers, Bukulatjpi—who knew the songs and ceremonies of the early visitors—began to dance for the creational entity that had inspired the partnership of pre-Macassans and Yolngu. He danced with long knives, symbols of that deity, moving his arms and legs in the fashion of these early *bunggawa*, bringing into alignment the world views of both peoples. You will see those same ceremonies performed today, especially at the funerals of Yirritja moiety Yolngu, with all their dazzling references to other worlds: samurai swords, dances with flags and long-barrelled smoking pipes, prayer calls to Allah, and references to Southeast Asian ports like Djakapura (Singapore), Djumaynga (Makassar) and Banda. These songs evoke the rich and diverse world of which Yolngu were now a part (see Berndt and Berndt 1954). Burrumarra stressed that these dances, now performed in public non-ceremonial settings, are not in celebration of Macassans. Rather, they are celebrating the Dreaming entity believed to be shared by pre-Macassans, Macassans and Yolngu.

The colour of affluence and poverty

Cognitive dissonance must have reached profound levels with the arrival of the Bayini child at Unbirri. Before the coming of pre-Macassans and Macassans there was probably no differentiation between people on the basis of skin colour. Black was the colour of humanity. But according to Burrumarra, with the arrival of the Bayini child, colour came to take on a new meaning for Yolngu. They began to think that perhaps in the distant past all people had been the colour of this baby, and that some cataclysm had brought about the change. In the 1980s, this was a foundational belief of all Bayini-inspired clans (see McIntosh 2000). This colour consciousness came hand-in-hand with an awareness that white was the colour of affluence and influence and black was the colour poverty and subservience. As in Stanner's (1966) depiction of the Dreaming and Aboriginal life-worlds as being 'a joyous thing with maggots at the centre', the Yolngu mythmaker Bukulatjpi, his peers and descendants understood that something had gone wrong at the beginning of time, the departure of the Bayini being equated with the withdrawal of this new deity from Yolngu land and lives and the impoverishment of Yolngu. So they would dance for this departed deity. As it was a Yolngu Dreaming, they exercised ritual authority over it, but only in tandem with the other believers could they restore harmony to the universe (McIntosh 2011).

Beginning with the writings of anthropologist Lloyd Warner in the 1930s, we see references to this struggle with myths focusing on the rejection of Macassans and of a concomitant sense of loss right across northeast Arnhem Land. The antisocial and dangerous qualities of the dingo singled it out for use by the bricoleur in many of these myths of encounter, but it is not the only totem that rejects the visitors. Totems of all coastal Yirritja clans reject the Macassans. The honeybee rejects the Macassans in Buckingham Bay on Gupapuyngu land. The scrub fowl rejects them on the Wessel Islands in Golpa territory. Even the trepang itself rejects the visitors at Cape Arnhem in Lamamirri waters. It sends up a torrent of seawater and its own intestines to capsize Macassan fishing canoes. The entire Aboriginal totemic world opposes the presence of Macassans, except at those locations infused with the spirit of the Bayini.

Burrumarra would speak at great length about myths of opposition to the Macassan presence; the dingo's rejection of Macassans at Howard Island was the most famous and the subject of much scholarly reflection (see Berndt and Berndt 1989; McIntosh 2006b; Warner 1937–58). Lloyd Warner, speaking with Harry Makarrwola in the 1920s, for example, wrote of how the dingo was fearful of losing his identity if he accepted the gifts of the Macassans. If the dingo was

to take possession of the matches, the rice, the necklace or fishing line on offer, he would become a Macassan, and the Macassan, by this logic, would have to become a Yolngu (Warner 1937–58).

Most notable in these dingo myth variations is the classic tale from the Gupapuyngu and Warramiri territories in which Yolngu, at the beginning of time, are white (just like that Bayini child), but become black as a result of their non-acceptance or violent rejection of Macassans. The Macassan offers everything in the way of material wealth to the dingo but it refuses, believing in the inherent value of Yolngu technology and ways of life (McIntosh 2006b). You will hear similar stories from all the Bayini peoples—the Warramiri, Dhalwangu, Birrkili, Wangurri and Gumatj. They share a common understanding that non-compliance led irreversibly to a new and lesser status for them that was characterised not just by skin colour but also by poverty, powerlessness and immobility in relation to the Macassans and subsequently Japanese and Europeans.

The paradise to come

Now this belief did not mean that the Yolngu wanted to become white once again. Rather, the story of skin colour and identity emerging from Unbirri became the foundation for a struggle to regain what was believed to have been lost at the 'beginning of time', taking back control in a world which was becoming increasingly dominated by others. The Bayini, according to Burrumarra, had a wish for Yolngu.

The continuing sacredness of Unbirri is a reminder to Yolngu of the proper order of the universe—now in disorder, but one day to be remedied. As Bakhtin (1981) reminds us, narratives about a lost paradise are really about a future that is yet to be realised. In the mind of Warramiri leaders like Bukulatjpi and Burrumarra, Bayini speaks to Yolngu about this paradise to come.

So the 'inside' message of the Bayini heritage, then, is one of defiance in the face of outside intrusion by Macassans, Japanese and Europeans. As Yothu Yindi member (and former student of David Burrumarra) Mandawuy Yunupingu sings in his popular 1988 album *Homeland Movement*, the Yolngu might be living in the mainstream, but they should not be fooled by the Balanda (non-Aboriginal) ways. And in classic video clips like 'Djapana' (Sunset Dreaming) and 'Treaty', he dances the traditional movements of the Bayini rituals and calls for justice and reconciliation between Yolngu and Balanda in Australia.

The real legacy of the extended Macassan encounter, which endures today, is embodied not just in tamarind trees and lines of stone that once supported

cooking pots, or even in the fascinating rock art associated with visitation. It lies also in the stories of the Bayini at places like Unbirri and elsewhere in northeast Arnhem Land. Many of these are restricted places of contemplation where the identity of Yolngu is affirmed and their authority as landowners is recharged. I believe that this is why Burrumarra shared his story with me. The Bayini narratives are what he described in his Warramiri language as a '*yindi dhawu*' and '*yindi rom*'. Big stories and a big law.

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