11 The Language of 'Spiritual Power': From *Mana* to *Märr* on the Crocodile Islands

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A Brief History of Spiritual Power

When the earliest ethnographers and ethnographically minded missionaries arrived in the Crocodile Islands in northeast Arnhem Land in the 1920s, they brought with them an anthropological metalanguage that included the concept of *mana* as 'spiritual power' (Keesing 1984: 137). The nature of 'primitive religion' was still genuinely at issue among students of Oceania, and questions of religion, magic, and 'spiritual power' were matters of deep anthropological concern. W. Lloyd Warner, in his 1937 classic *A Black Civilization*, found 'spiritual power' to be a fundamental principle among the people of northeast Arnhem Land, and used the term *mana*, as developed by Bishop Codrington in Melanesia, to describe the concept known to the Yolngu[1] as *märr*.

Ethnographic research and writing in the Pacific since the early 1980s have demonstrated that earlier interpretations of *mana* have been problematic, and have overturned any simple translation of the concept. I have found the same holds true for the Yolngu concept of *märr* on the Crocodile Islands.

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1   'Yolngu' is a term used widely by Yolngu people and researchers since the 1970s to describe the Indigenous people of northeast Arnhem Land speaking languages collectively called Yolngu *matha* (lit. 'people's tongue'). Earlier anthropological literature has referred to these people as Murngin (Warner 1937), Wulamba (Berndt 1951, 1952, 1955) and Miwuyt (Shapiro 1981). According to Schebeck (1968), the term was introduced into the linguistics literature by O'Grady et al. (1966).

Recent scholarship, including that of Ian Keen (who himself conducted research there in the mid-1970s), provides a framework for undertaking this kind of re-analysis and reinterpretation. Warner's rendering of 'spiritual power' as *mana* on the Crocodile Islands highlights the potential conflict between an anthropological metalanguage and the ideational categories as conceived by members of the society itself.[2] Writing of *mana*, Keesing calls for 'a critical hermeneutics in which cultural translation is cast deeply in doubt' (Keesing 1984: 138). Closer to home, Ian Keen has argued that ethnographic description 'often involves the substitution in an anthropological metalanguage of expressions embedding one set of metaphors for indigenous expressions that incorporate quite different tropes' (Keen 1995: 502). Both call for greater attention to local tropes, idioms, and meanings. In light of this approach I reanalyse the language of *märr*, especially in everyday social life, as the key to unlocking this complex Yolngu concept.[3]

In this chapter, I argue that rendering *märr* as a generalised 'spiritual power' is misleading as it is a highly polysemous term. Within a Yolngu worldview *märr* as 'spiritual power' is best understood as a kind of ancestral essence. This distinctive view conceives of consubstantial connections linking kinds of ancestors, people, languages, and particular places as fundamental, and a key aspect of a Yolngu site-based ontology. This chapter begins with an examination of Codrington's interpretation of *mana* and Keesing's reinterpretation, so as to illustrate the utility of comparative geo-lexical data and attention to cultural context. I will then subject the concept of *märr* to a similar process, embracing Keen's call for greater attention to local tropes and idioms, first examining the early interpretations of Warner, Thomson and others, before providing my own ethnolinguistic reinterpretation.

Codrington's *Mana*

The concept of *mana* associated with maritime-agrarian cultures originated in southeast Asia and spread eastward throughout Pacific Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia over the last 10,000 years.[4] Bishop Codrington was the first to attempt an ethnographic description of *mana* in his studies of Melanesian society in the late 1800s. Codrington conceived of *mana* as a kind of magical power that existed in the world like an invisible substance or principle inhering

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2   See also Schneider (1965: 453).

3   This paper arises from conversations with Ian and colleague Ferg Ferguson working on the far eastern side of northeast Arnhem Land.

4   This maritime/farming culture travelled southeast from continental Asia and then sailed eastward to the islands of Melanesia and Micronesia between 1200 BC and AD 500, having settled most of the Pacific islands as far as Easter Island by AD 300 (see Capelli et al. 2001).

in nature, objects and the natural world, invoked by the 'natives' through ceremony. Codrington (1891: 191) says: 'By means of [*mana*] men are able to direct and control the forces of nature, to make rain or sunshine, wind or calm, to cause sickness or remove it, to know what is far off in time or space, or to blast and curse'. The bishop's powerful imagery invokes the forces of nature, and comprises a sermon on the dangers of the unrestrained spiritual power of the 'natives'. In hindsight, it is apparent that Codrington's impression of the concept of *mana* provided direction for later constructions by missionaries and ethnologists alike.

Following Codrington's lead, later ethnologists of Polynesia such as Hocart (1914), Speiser (1923), Fox (1924), Humphreys (1926) and Hogbin (1936), assumed that *mana* was a kind of invisible medium of spiritual power discernible in sacred objects, and manifest as some kind of potency radiated by humans. Anthropological understanding of this concept and its place in Polynesian society appeared to be following the predilections of Codrington. For example, C.E. Fox, an Anglican missionary working on San Cristobal in the southeast Solomons, some distance downwind of Codrington, wrote of the Arosi concept of *mena*:

> Mena … seems to be conceived of as an invisible spiritual substance in which objects may be immersed … A great warrior is seen to have mena and all his possessions are soaked in it, so his club is treasured and handed down … Certain places are impregnated with mena. (Fox 1924: 251–2).

The impression one gets of Arosi 'mena', as that of an invisible liquid in which objects are immersed, uses imagery that recalls the immersion of baptism or the impregnation of holy religious relics. The missionary Fox, writing at a period in which the European mind was captivated with Christian thematics, hydraulics and mechanical models, presents the kind of ethnocentric formulation common in the ethnological accounts of the day (see also Humphreys 1926: 70, 167; Speiser 1923/1990; cf. Oliver 1974: 55; Keesing 1984: 151; MacClancy 1986: 142). In the 1940s Raymond Firth responded to such formulations by replying that 'interpretation in terms of such abstraction can only be the work of the anthropologist' (Firth 1940: 498). Later, Jørgen Prytz-Johansen articulates the critical need for thorough and grounded linguistic examination in the case of *mana* in Maori religious practice:

> What seems to me to be missing is the simple recognition of the view that the core of the investigations must be philological, thus the use of the word mana by a definite people. Only in this way may we be sure of speaking about something real and not a compromise between a scientific technical term, mana, and more or less corresponding notions of mana in various peoples. (Prytz-Johansen 1954: 76)

Prytz-Johansen's call for a 'philological' approach here resonates with Keesing's proposition that cultural translation may 'more or less carefully, more or less faithfully' report the configuration of the conceptual schemes of native peoples through 'rigorous linguistic analysis' (Keesing 1987: 174). In this light Keesing (1984: 137) criticises the Codringtonian view of *mana*, saying it lacks solid understandings of the cultural context, and is based on insecure ethnographic evidence. He concludes:

> With few exceptions, Pacific Islanders have been unsuccessful in explaining that to theologically minded Europeans … We have not understood that mana-ness represented a common *quality* of efficacy or success, retrospectively interpreted, not a universal *medium* of it. (Keesing 1984: 149–50)

His idea of a 'critical hermeneutic', with a greater sensitivity to the rendering of local categories, lexicon and local context, adds a new dimension to his reinterpretation of *mana* as 'spiritual power'. *Mana*, Keesing declares, is more adequately expressed as an abstract verbal noun meaning 'efficacy', 'success' and 'potency' (Keesing 1984: 137). His method of comparative reinterpretation of lexical and geographical data and close attention to cultural context are key aspects of his 'critical hermeneutics'. By dint of these methods Keesing suggests that Proto-Oceanic *mana* is a stative verb meaning 'be efficacious, be successful, be realized, "work"' (ibid.). Further, he posits, where *mana* was used as a noun, it was an abstract verbal noun.[5] *Mana*, he says, has suffered a pervasive translation error in its description as a medium of power, where as it is most widely understood as a condition. In those specific geographical locations in parts of eastern Polynesia and Melanesia, where it was referred to as a medium of power, it accompanied very distinctive hierarchical political cultural contexts (ibid.: 137). Keesing's attempt to remain in rigorous ethnographic harmony with emic understandings provides new depth of insight about the meanings of *mana*.

Similarly but more recently, Blust (2007) and Blevins (2008) have paid profitable attention to the etymology of *mana* in comparing lexical and geographical data. Blevins' work supports the reconstruction of a Proto-Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian that casts *mana* as a 'supernatural power, associated with spirits of the ancestors and the forces of nature' (Blevins 2008: 253). Not too distantly Blust (2007) revisits cognates of Proto-Oceanic *mana* to find it a power possessed by 'forces of nature' like 'thunder' and 'wind'. Over time, he says, notions of its 'unseen supernatural agency' became detached from such forces as '*mana* assumed a life of its own' (Blust 2007: 404). As such, he concludes, the

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5   A verbal noun is a kind of noun derived from a verb (usually by adding the suffix '-ing' in English), and sharing noun-like properties, and also partly sharing verb-like constructions, for example, 'learning' in the expression 'a show of learning'.

meaning of *mana* can be seen as part of the wider processes of man's attempt to understand the forces of nature, and in so doing provides us with a deeper appreciation of *mana* and perhaps something about the precarious nature of the human condition.

Key among these ethnolinguistic pathways to greater insight are the comparative analysis of geo-lexical data and close attention to language and cultural context, to which I would add Keen's call for greater attention to local tropes, idioms, and meanings. If indeed the end of ethnography is to 'more or less carefully, more or less faithfully' report the 'configuration of the conceptual schemes of native peoples', then this approach affords some more fruitful ethnographic avenues of investigation (Keesing 1987: 174). Similarly I wish to begin by examining William Lloyd Warner's use of the term *mana* in the Crocodile Islands, as a prelude to a more nuanced examination of the Yolngu notion of *märr*.

Warner's *Mana* in the Crocodile Islands

W. Lloyd Warner made two trips to the Crocodile group, first in 1927 and again in 1928, including Milingimbi and Murrungga, largest of the outer Crocodile Islands. His landmark ethnography, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* (1937/1969), is an anthropological classic of remarkable scope and detail. For decades the centrepiece of Australian ethnography, it stimulated commentary across disciplines influencing scholars from Lévi-Strauss to Jung and Freud. The young Warner, student of R.H. Lowie and A.L. Kroeber, was himself influenced by Malinowski, Boas and Radcliffe-Brown.

On his arrival to the islands Warner found a ubiquitous notion of 'spiritual power' he called *mana*. One may speculate as to why he chose to use the term *mana* rather than the local term *märr* given the availability of the local concept.[6] Was the term *mana* so widespread in Warner's day that it was customary for anthropologists to use it generically, much like 'potlatch' or 'totem'? Could it have been his unfamiliarity with the local language? Despite Warner's meticulous ethnography it seems possible that the term *märr*, referring specifically to 'spiritual power', may simply have eluded him. Or perhaps, given its frequency in everyday discourse, and complex multiple layered usages, it may have appeared to be a term that was too imprecise, too hard to define simply. Nevertheless, naming the local concept *mana* seems to have created inappropriate comparison with the Oceanic notion and its ethnographic entailments, offering general correspondences that may well have obscured some distinctive local questions.

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6   On the Crocodile Islands speakers of the Yan-nhangu language use the word *mana* to mean 'is' or the progressive continuous 'still (is doing)'; for example, *nhani nhang'ku bayipi mana nyena* 'she is still living there'.

Regardless of these shortcomings, in other respects his analysis touches on some important issues for the anthropological understanding of Yolngu people. Warner explains that 'the mana of the Murngin well is due not to any mundane biological value its water may have for the group, but rather to the spiritual power of the water' (Warner 1969: 381). The sacred clan well is the origin from which each member has his or her beginning and end, the very centre of the 'spiritual life' of the clan, containing the 'souls of the dead and those who are to be born' (ibid.: 381). Warner portrays an essential ancestral nature in his picture of this *mana* and its bonds with people, place (well) and the group (clan), most particularly in his casting of the sacred totemic well as the site of the clan's *mana*. He continues:

> The clansmen are identified with the totemic well by the fact that they come from it and are allowed to be born by the action of the totem spirit that resides within the well; they are identified with the well because at death they will go back to it and because all of their kin who have died and those living, with whom they have had all of their social relations, are or will be either in this well into which their own soul returns or in other like clan wells; and finally, their wellbeing and that of their fellow clansmen and of other clans are dependent upon the proper enactment of the seasonal rituals which demonstrate the mana or power of the totem. (ibid.: 380)

In Warner's description, the linkages between *mana*, the well, ancestors, the living, the dead, religious icons (totems), and ritual life come into much clearer focus. He is describing the underpinnings of the fundamentals from which a Yolngu site-based ontology arises. The 'totemic well' is indeed a site from which members of the clan draw their spiritual identity, but some key connections are yet to be made.

With great ethnographic skill Warner develops a description of the invisible threads linking members of the clan, well, totems and ancestral powers and their shared *mana*. He then takes a Durkheimian turn, however, pronouncing that 'the mana of the ceremonial leader comes from his oral and ceremonial ritual, which in turn gains its power ultimately from a society or church, viz., the clan' (Warner 1969: 233). This Durkheimian direction sees *mana* as the 'totemic principle'; as Durkheim himself writes, 'The god of the clan, the totemic principle, must therefore be the clan itself, but transfigured and imagined … as totems' (Durkheim 1912: 154). Perhaps the questions that need to be asked here should be: How closely do these associated constructions reflect Yolngu ideas about *märr*? Or are they manifestations of a Durkheimian metalanguage and its notion of *mana*?[7] Warner astutely identifies key elements of the distinctive Yolngu concept *märr*, despite referring to them by the generic term *mana*, but

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7   Clifford Geertz observed wryly of Durkheim's ethnography of the Arunta that 'What one finds among the Arunta are the beliefs and practices of the Arunta' (Geertz 1973: 22).

then changes direction and opts for a generalising Durkheimian interpretation that owes more to the anthropological metalanguage than to specifically Yolngu ideas. It is not until the work of Donald Thomson, who was far more skilled in local languages, that an understanding of the Yolngu of concept of *märr* was developed more fully.

Thomson's *Märr* and *Mana*

The first recorded usage of *märr* in the literature was by the Rev. Theodore. T. Webb (Webb 1933: 36). Webb lived at Milingimbi from 1926 to 1939 and as a keen amateur ethnologist and linguist he hosted, at different times, both Warner and Thomson. Webb, theologically trained, used the term *märr* in much the same generic way as Warner had *mana*. Thomson, who arrived in 1935, trained as a structural functionalist under Radcliffe-Brown and travelled widely throughout northeast Arnhem Land with his friend Rraywala (Raiwala).[8] Thomson's paper on the concept of *märr* in Arnhem Land, compiled from his field notes by Nicolas Peterson, refers to and extends a critique of both Codrington's and Warner's *mana*. Thomson's use of local languages develops the subtlety of his definition of the term *märr*. In a letter to Thomson in June 1948, Radcliffe-Brown remarked that 'it is valuable from the point of view of scientific scholarship to have some of the more significant statements in the native language' (Thomson 1975: 1). Thomson translated and characterised *märr* in part thus:

> *Marr* as a spiritual force underlies all ritual ceremonial life in Arnhem Land, and finds expression most forcibly in the attitude toward totemic increase ceremonies which are carried out regularly at certain of the totem centres, notably at Mooroonga Island in the Crocodile Group. (Thomson 1975: 6)

Here Thomson explicitly links *märr* to sites he called 'totem centres'. He proclaims that 'in Arnhem Land the concept of a spiritual force very like *mana* is even more strongly developed … People … call it *marr*, a term known or used throughout eastern Arnhem Land' (Thomson 1975: 2). Thomson recognises the likeness of *märr* to *mana*, but distinguishes the distinctive site-based quality of *märr*. He echoes Yolngu understanding that *märr* exists not only in the clan waterhole, but in sites throughout the clan estate. Furthermore, he makes us aware that the clan's totems (ritual icons), ceremonies, and associated stories,

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8   I was told by old people that Thomson's Mildjingi informant, Raiwala (Mildjingi *bäpurru*; Djinang language) was one of four Djinang men alleged to have speared Laindjurra (Mälarra *bäpurru*; Yan-nhangu language), the lethal sorcerer of Mooroonga (Murrungga) made famous in Warner's ethnography (author's field notes, Murrungga Island, 1999).

songs, dances and paintings contain the clan's *märr*. These features of the clan's religious property are referred to by Howard Morphy as the clan's sacred *mardayin*.[9]

Thomson's work proved to be very influential on subsequent generations of Arnhem Land ethnographers. In his article 'From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu' (1989), Morphy credits Thomson for first noting the term *bir'yun* and its connection to *märr*. Morphy situates Yolngu paintings (*mardayin miny'tji*) within the Yolngu ritual framework and tells us that in *mardayin miny'tji* the aspect known as *bir'yun* (brilliance or shimmering) is a signifier of 'ancestral power' (ibid.: 24–5). Noting that the most important aspects of *miny'tji* refer to design and colour (ibid.: 25), he interprets *mardayin* or the clan's sacred property more fully, drawing important connections:

> The *mardayin* consists of sets of songs, dances, paintings, sacred objects and ritual incantations associated with Ancestral beings. The *mardayin* refers to the actions of Ancestral beings in creating the land and in instituting the practices of Yolngu life … To the Yolngu the *mardayin* are not only the means of expressing Ancestral events, but also part of the essence of the Ancestral beings themselves. (Morphy 1989: 25)

Morphy makes explicit the connections between ancestors, *mardayin*, and *bir'yun* as aspects of ancestral law (or property) connected to *märr* as a 'source of ancestral power for use in ritual' (ibid.: 25). He brings out the pervasiveness of ancestral essences in Yolngu life, linking ritual, *mardayin*, and the 'ownership of land conditional on maintaining the rituals associated with the land' (ibid.). He says '*Ma:rr* is a positive force associated with happiness, strength, health and fertility, but it is also associated with death and can always have a dangerous dimension' (ibid.: 30). Morphy's descriptions afford standpoints closely reflecting Yolngu perspectives on *märr* as an ancestral essence.

Thomson points to the negative dimension of *märr* in *miringu ma:rr,* (lit. 'enemy spiritual power'), 'the power of vengeance' in paintings of the 'shark ancestor' (Morphy 1989: 30).[10] Outside the ritual framework, Yolngu elder Joanne Garnggulkpuy reaffirms how positive Yolngu social behaviours are directed by collective knowledge linked to 'places, species and practices' using the expression *märryu-ḏapmaram* (Garnggulkpuy and Christie 2002: 6). Garnggulkpuy and Christie have re-interpreted *märr* as 'ancestral connections'. They translate *märryu-ḏapmaram* as 'faith/trust/confidence/good will-instrument-clench' (ibid.). The power of *märr* as 'ancestral connections' is said to control social situations by 'appealing to people's strength through identity

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9   *Maḏayin* (*madayin/mardayin/marrayin/mu-dayan*): sacred, secret, holy, taboo including objects or species containing consubstantial ancestor essence; synonym: *dhuyu* and *dharrpal* (see Zorc 1986: 204).

10   *Miringu*: enemy; soldier, warrior; battle, war, armed conflict (Zorc 1986: 235).

and kinship' (ibid.) This notion of *märr* articulating contemporary social identities and kinship relations points resoundingly to profound continuities in the foundational assumptions of spiritual power underlying the Yolngu cosmos.

So far the literature points towards a broad understanding of *märr* as a connection between ancestors and the living. 'Ancestral connections' are seen linking the living, dead and yet to be born, glimpsed in Warner's 'clan well', in Thomson's notion of 'spiritual force' and more recently in Morphy's ancestral essence of 'fertility', 'happiness' and 'death'. Garnggulkpuy provides a perspective on *märr* in *märryu-dapmaram* from her standpoint as a member of Yolngu society itself. Taken altogether these accounts describe a broad range of categories and metaphysical phenomena composed of *märr*. I want to turn now to ask, what kind of *märr*? Is it all the same everywhere, a generalised, universal *märr*, or are there different kinds of *märr*? To answer these questions it is necessary to examine briefly the cultural context that gives rise to this notion *märr*.

Invisible Links of People, Places and Language

Yolngu cosmology posits the existence of ancestral *wangarr* (creator/spirits). These moiety-specific *wangarr* created the known universe in two halves, either Dhuwa or Yirritja.[11] This is the origin or genesis of the law (*rom*), the instantiation of the laws of cosmic order. These laws are contained in myths recounting the distinctive cosmogonic acts of the *wangarr*. Forming the world they left traces, imprints and procreative powers in the land, seas, phenomena, and names imbued with their essence. Each distinctive group, or *bäpurru*, inherit their sites, laws and myths from a particular ensemble of *wangarr*.[12] The laws, myths and acts of this ensemble of site-specific connections constitute the distinctive consubstantial ancestral inheritance of each discrete and named *bäpurru*.[13] These locality-based and site-specific myths, powers and laws comprise a worldview that provides the blueprint for the reproduction of the precepts and practices of the respective *bäpurru* and society as a whole. The *bäpurru*, their sites, *maḏayin*, iconic species, dances, paintings and ritual icons (*rangga*) share

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11   Dhuwa and Yirritja are two halves, or moieties, of the Yolngu 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.

12   The term clan is now usually replaced by the term *bäpurru* as it denotes a more complex meaning closer to Yolngu 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).

13   To be consubstantial with something is to be identified with it at the elemental level, to be of identical substance. Consubstantial identification constitutes the principal ontological basis of ownership of the elements of the *bäpurru*, sites, *maḏayin* and the ancestral essences of their living descendants (see also Bagshaw 1998: 162).

the inalienable consubstantial links of ancestral essence that distinguish their identity. These ancestral essences are the *märr* of the *bäpurru* and a key element in the overarching architecture of a Yolngu site-based ontology.

According to the laws of this site-based ontology people believe that the languages of their respective *bäpurru, maḏayin* and countries were simultaneously endowed to them by the *wangarr* (creator/ ancestor spirits). The mechanism of this linguistic endowment is important and described here by Nancy Williams (1999):

> The spirit beings/ancestral beings/creator beings vested land in particular groups of people in a time long past. Both the beings and the time are locally distinctive, as are the acts of vesting. They all, however, include descriptions of flora and fauna as well as topographical features of the particular land and sea, and most importantly they gave names to them. Usually the language in which these acts are done is also distinctive and pertains to the specific locality. (Williams 1999: 57)

What are of conspicuous significance are the links between the creation of, and endowment of, specific locality, sites, language, and *bäpurru*. Each *bäpurru* has its own distinctive language, as endowed by the ancestors, and conceived of as a signifier of their unique ancestral inheritance.[14] This language of the *bäpurru* is imbued with the same consubstantial ancestral essences as the land, sites, and all other aspects of the *bäpurru*. This characteristically Yolngu scheme of ancestral endowment of language is not just associative, but a fundamental ontological truth. As a consequence, the words of each *bäpurru* language are understood to be imbued with the same, particular ancestral essences or *märr* as all the other elements of the *bäpurru*. Put another way, the words of the language of the *bäpurru* contain the *märr* of the *bäpurru*. This is a feature that will re-emerge in geo-lexical analysis.[15]

This emblematic relationship of the *bäpurru*, country, and language has an enormous significance for the Yan-nhangu people and their sites in the Crocodile Islands. People share their names with sites, ancestors and their cosmogonic acts, in the language, rituals and everyday practices. People often spoke of the signs of *märr*, the signifiers of 'spiritual powers' present in the country, in the movement of the seas, in the changing seasons, everywhere manifest in

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14 Some researchers have played down this Yolngu perspective on the distinctiveness of *bäpurru* languages citing statistical evidence of mutual intelligibility; however, in this examination, attention to emic categories of cultural context aims to render the ideational categories as conceived by members of the society itself and not the technical orthodoxy.

15 Outside the ritual sphere, decline in the significance of linguistic identification impacts more directly a younger generation unfamiliar with their *bäpurru* lands. Homeland life provides strong links of language to country, although now most homelands have been dismantled by concerted settler state policies to undermine them.

the living world. Today this sense is less apparent in the modern community setting. Also, today this idea of language ownership has a far greater significance for an older generation, those having grown up in close connection with their *bäpurru* country, or living on the homelands. Nevertheless, the idea of language connections to ancestral power persists strongly in the ritual sphere.[16]

The Yan-nhangu People of the Crocodile Islands

My interest in Yan-nhangu began at Murrungga, largest of the outer islands, where I first began working with speakers of the Yan-nhangu language. At that time (1993), fewer than 300 words of the Yan-nhangu language had been recorded and almost nothing of their maritime way of life was known. Over the last two decades we have documented some 4,000 words from this language, giving new insights into life on the islands. While documenting patterns of everyday discourse, the profound significance of the notion of consubstantial ancestral essences linking language, sites, people and names began to emerge, a pattern that underlies the poetry, music, songs, ritual and incantations of the islands. It is here in the language of the Crocodile Islands that I first came across the term *märr*.

The Yan-nhangu people are the traditional owners of the Crocodile Islands. They are known as (and refer to themselves as) the Yan-nhangu because they own, and notionally speak, the Yan-nhangu language. Yan-nhangu is the western-most of nine distinct sociolinguistic varieties of the Yolngu language family (Schebeck 1968: 10–11; Waters 1989; Zorc 1986; cf. Christie 1994). Made up of six *bäpurru*-centric dialects or *bäpurru* languages, it is a distinct language but related to the northern Nhangu-mi language variety of the Wessel Islands (for more complete explanation see James 2009: 170–9; James and Baymarrwanga 2014: 532–8; cf. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nhangu_language).

The Yan-nhangu are an exclusively island-dwelling people with no mainland estates. It is the ancestral endowment of marine and island sites, together with their language, that is a fundamental dimension of their identity. This endowment at once distinguishes them from and simultaneously incorporates them into the body of their Yolngu kin, from surrounding *bäpurru* with mainland estates and languages. Yan-nhangu people are made up of six *bäpurru*, three of the Dhuwa moiety (Gamalangga, Malarra, and Gurryindi) and three Yirritja (Walamangu, Bindarra, and Ngurruwula) (James 2009; James forthcoming). Numbering about

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16   Notably, Yan-nhangu rituals, initiations and funerals rites on the Crocodile Islands are still carried out in the Yan-nhangu language.

200 people, they live on their islands and the nearby mainland. Today most Yan-nhangu speak a variety of ex-mission Yolngu language called Yolngu *matha* (lit. 'people's tongue'). The sociolinguistic roots of this Yolngu *matha* variety arise out of conditions brought on by colonial missionisation.

The establishment of the mission at Milingimbi in 1921 brought conflict between Yan-nhangu and Yolngu groups who had migrated west from their *bäpurru* estates on the mainland to live permanently at the mission and access its resources. This influx created the need for a commonly understood code of communications between members of *bäpurru* speaking some nine different languages. These circumstances saw the creation of a new amalgamated linguistic style, Yolngu *matha*, based largely on two closely related *bäpurru* languages, Djambarrpuyngu (Dhuwa moiety) and Gupapuyngu (Yirrijta moiety). Comprising a large portion of the new community polity, kin from these *bäpurru,* speaking mainland languages, came to dominate affairs on the Yan-nhangu Island of Milingimbi. Mission routines, away from the father's *bäpurru* estates, began to undermine the significance of the father's *bäpurru* language inheritances (Devlin 1986).[17] But for the Yan-nhangu, this meant the everyday use of their language declined to the point of near extinction. Today there are only 10 full speakers of Yan-nhangu left, living with their kin in ex-mission communities and homelands, largely speaking Yolngu *matha*.

In summary, then, for the Yan-nhangu people, just as for their Yolngu kin from mainland estates, their site-based, *bäpurru*-centric views hold that their language establishes an ontological link between their identity, ancestors and the sites of their estates. A corollary of this is that the words of their language contain the *märr* of their *bäpurru*. I want to examine the effect of this belief in some of the linguistic and geo-lexical peculiarities of Yolngu languages more broadly, firstly with reference to *märr* in everyday discourse and then with reference to body-part initial verbal idioms, returning later to the Crocodile Islands and the Yan-nhangu language.

Märr in Language and the Language of *Märr*

The term *märr* is unusual for many reasons. Among these is the fact that it is shared across the entire Yolngu language family. Of the nine distinct varieties of the Yolngu languages, and the 60 *bäpurru* patrilectal varieties (depending

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17   The earlier norm of transmission of the father's *bäpurru* patrilect after learning the mother's tongue declined because the majority of people at Milingimbi mission were women speaking closely related Dhuwal languages, so most children grew up speaking these Dhuwal languages without learning father's language.

on who is counting), each uses the word *märr*.[18] In all these languages *märr* has a number of meanings, making it a kind of homonym.[19] In one sense *märr* functions as an adverb. In this sense it is used to mean 'moderately', 'a bit', 'somewhat' (like), 'relatively' or 'quite'. In this very common usage *märr* is the opposite of 'very', 'intensely' or 'extremely'—*mirithirr(i)*, *wirrka*, *wirrki gurrku* (Zorc 1986: 226; James and Baymarrwanga 2014: 361–2). For example, *märr* the adverb can be used to modify an adjective, as in *märr-gorrmur* (a bit hot) or another adverb, as in *märr-gangga* (relatively slowly).

A second common usage of *märr* is as a conjunction. *Märr* is often used to introduce an independent clause. In this usage *märr* can be translated as 'because', 'so that' or 'that'. For example, as a conjunction *märr* is found in the following Gupapuyngu expression:

> *Gunggayurru ngapurrrunha märr (ga) nganapurr dhu ngayathama nhunngu romnha.*
> Help us so that we will/keep your law. (Lowe 1957: 155)

Another example is the Gupapuyngu phrase:

> *Dhiyala limurru yurru nhina märr (ga) mulk'ngura.*
> We'll sit here because it is dry. (Lowe 1957: 155)[20]

These two very common usages of *märr*, as an adverb and as a conjunction, give it a high frequency in everyday discourse. Other meanings of *märr* are recorded as dispositional nouns including strength, faith, personality, nature, emotional state, and other nouns including 'spiritual power'. David Zorc (1986: 226) mentions the Burarra, a nearby mainland indigenous language group with whom the Yan-nhangu intermarry, who translate *märr* as 'inner being' or 'essence' and at times also synonymously with *ganydjarr* 'strength' (Zorc 1986: 219). As a noun, then, *märr* is extremely variable. As a verb, Zorc (1986) records other forms of *märr,* such as *märrthirri* [verb group 3a, intransitive], as to 'want' and or to 'love'.

Many Yolngu expressions and everyday words incorporate or are derivative of *märr* and are worthy of careful semantic examination. As noted above, Thomson recorded *ma:rr miringu,* 'the power of vengeance', and the commonly heard *märr miriw* (lit. 'power-without') might well be understood to mean exhausted, but has an idiomatic meaning of 'indebted'.

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18   In the eastern Yolngu languages, Dhangu and Djangu, '*mä*' without the '*rr*' is a potential alternate pronunciation for *märr* as spiritual power (see also Zorc 1986: 219).

19   *Märr* the homonym has identical spelling (homograph) and pronunciation (homophone) and a number of different meanings.

20   The bracketed (*ga*) may be omitted and is not used at Yirrkala (Lowe 1957: 155).

Märr in Idioms: Idioms of *Märr*

The idioms of a language are a recognisable trove of culturally specific notions that in some interesting ways point to or reflect the unexamined assumptions and underlying ideas of a society. Keen reminds us of the Yolngu predisposition for drawing metaphors from natural forms (Keen 1995). And idioms, as we know, are those elements of speech in which the literal meaning may not always reflect the commonly understood meaning; for example, 'kick the bucket' has little to do with buckets. A predilection for idioms using body part names and the contours of landscape are characteristic of Yolngu languages.[21]

Another distinctive Yolngu style idiom is the body part initial verbal compound drawing its metaphorical power from the category of body parts. The kinds of idioms that *märr* appears in most commonly are these verbal compounds or body part initial verbal idioms.[22] These idioms deploying *märr* focus on human dispositional, emotional and psychological states. It may at first appear odd to use *märr* as a body part and so some further explanation is in order.

As in many societies, and depending on kin relations, among Yolngu, humorous, and otherwise intentioned verbal sledging using body parts, including genitals, is common practice and often a source of delight and sometimes conflict. Body part initial metaphors like *dhumi lalkal* (lit. 'posterior greedy', meaning 'always hungry'), *moku wanga* (lit. 'anus speak', meaning 'speaking nonsense'), and *gurrka djulngi* (lit. 'penis good', meaning 'darling' or 'adorable'), are amusing and commonly used for humorous effect. Some body part initial compounds may be very tricky to translate outside of their cultural framework. This case may be accentuated given the pervasiveness of a significant body of secret knowledge. Local styles of communication err on the side of vagueness and less direct verbal interaction. The patent opacity of some metaphors helps to sustain the local conventions of ambiguity demonstrated to be a characteristic feature of Yolngu communication styles (Keen 1995). As Wilkinson explains:

> As the body part term is associated with both literal and non-literal meanings there is much scope for ambiguity. In many contexts it seems that only knowledge of the specialised meaning of the particular collocation permits the construction to be disambiguated. (Wilkinson 1991: 533)

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21   Body parts are regularly used to denote a wide range of phenomena, such as kin categories (*yangarra* [calf] = 'sister') and time of day (*riya* [head] *walirr* [sun] = 'noon'), etc. (see also Galpagalpa et al. 1984).

22   Wilkinson indicates a likely 'cline between true compounds and common collocations or idioms' in Djambarrpuyngu, a related Yolngu language (Wilkinson 1991: 539).

The meanings of body part initial verbal idioms can be hard to fathom given their often tenuous relationships between body part, literal and idiomatic meanings. It is nevertheless intriguing to attempt to work out the possible layers of meaning locked within their structures. It is in these deeply convoluted twists of meaning that some of the most extraordinary insights appear.

Without an exhaustive search I have found some 300 or more such body part initial verbal compounds in Yan-nhangu, a number consistent with other Yolngu languages, including Djambarrpuyngu (Wilkinson 1991: 539). There is no systematic or formal model into which such body part idioms may be categorised, but there is a large subgroup that describe what in English we might call human dispositional, emotional and psychological characteristics. Common within this group of body part initial verbal compounds are idioms of the head, nose, mouth, eyes, skin, stomach and chest, as well as *märr*. Idioms beginning with *märr* are numerically in the top six body part initial verbal compounds, with more than two dozen instances, making them very common.

In some cases *märr* and a named body part can be substituted with no change to the meaning of the idiom. This is a limited group so I will list them all. For example, *galnga* (skin) and *ngoy* (seat of the emotions, or lower stomach) can be substituted in the expression *galnga/ngoy/märr-ngamathirri,* all having the meaning 'to be happy'. So too, *dhä* (mouth) and *märr* in *dhä/märr-bandany* (honestly), *liya* (head) in *liya/märr-garrpin* (to worry) and *buku* (forehead) in *buku/märr-ngal'yun* (worship). Although these are the only cases that will allow such substitution, it does appear to lend some weight to the argument for *märr* initial verbal idioms to be categorised among body part initial idioms.

These body part initial idioms have a conventional structure. The first part is necessarily a body part, like 'head', 'nose' or 'foot'. The second part, or lexeme, is usually a verb like 'put', 'see', or 'poke'. In Table 11.1 the literal meaning of the second lexeme is given in English, and in the last column the idiomatic meaning is translated. I have chosen to demonstrate these body part initial verbal idioms in the Gupapuyngu language as it is one of the common Dhuwala Yolngu *matha* varieties now spoken in communities on and around the Crocodile Islands. The examples in Table 11.1 of body part initial verbal idioms are broadly representative of the sorts of things to which such idioms refer.

Table 11.1 Body part initial verbal idioms in Gupapuyngu.

Body Part	Second Lexeme	Literal Meaning	Idiomatic Meaning
forehead			
buku	*ngal'yun*	raise	respect
buku	*moma*	forget	misunderstand
buku	*nhäma*	see	dislike
skin			
galnga	*däl*	hard	obdurate
galnga	*marimirri*	trouble (possessing)	angry
galnga	*ngonungdhirri*	heavy (becoming)	sorrowful
eyes			
mel	*de'yun*	poke	jealous
mel	*dharangan*	recognise	covetousness
mel	*däl*	hard	unsympathetic
stomach			
ngoy	*badarratjun*	twinge of pain	guilty
ngoy	*badupadumirr*	erase	anxious
ngoy	*nhärra*	burn	angry
chest			
gumurr	*maram*	obtain	adopt
gumurr	*gumurryun*	chest (verbaliser)	meet
gumurr	*däl*	hard	unsympathetic

As an element in body part initial expressions *märr* has a general focus on human emotional and psychological states. As previously mentioned, these body part initial constructions are a very distinctive kind of idiom that make up a large part of the corpus of conventional Yolngu metaphor. Among the 300 or so most common body part initial idioms, *märr* is the only member of the class that has no physical site in the body. Table 11.2 shows a brief selection of *märr* idioms in Gupapuyngu constructed in the same manner and similarly focusing on human dispositional characteristics, emotional and psychological states.

Märr in these idioms is deployed to express the qualities of emotions, demeanour and dispositions that are a part of the whole person. The sense that *märr* pervades the whole body lends it a seemingly general quality. This general quality is further augmented by the fact that *märr* is the only body part in all the body part initial idioms that is present in every language, giving it a very widespread geographical distribution.

Table 11.2 *Märr* initial verbal idioms.

Body Part	Second Lexeme	Literal Meaning	Idiomatic Meaning
märr	*dälthirri*	become hard	trusting
märr	*dhumbal'yun*	confused	ignorant
märr	*djulkthun*	pass	disbelieve
märr	*ganggathirri*	reduce	prepare
märr	*garrpin*	tie up	worry
märr	*ngal'yun*	raise up	praise
märr	*ngamathanmirr*	good	love
märr	*wanangguma*	imitate	antagonise
märr	*yal'yun*	becoming cool	calm
märr	*bandany*	drying	honest

From a comparative lexical and geographical perspective *märr is* distinctive in these body part initial verbal compounds in that it appears in all Yolngu languages. These mutually unintelligible languages, although with many cognate or shared terms, possess their own distinctive words for body parts, and each also has a distinctive verb for the second lexeme. It is interesting that *märr* is shared by all. Further, these body part initial idioms retain their idiomatic meanings across languages (Waters 1989: 126; Wilkinson 1991). This shared meaning is hardly surprising given the very high levels of multilingualism and shared *habitus* of community life.[23] What is more interesting is the paradox that lies in the widespread and apparently general usage of the term *märr*, juxtaposed with a very *bäpurru*-specific ownership of the 'ancestral essences' of *märr,* implied in the *bäpurru* language used. Table 11.3 shows how *märr* initial idioms in Yan-nhangu and in Gupapuyngu keep their semantic meaning across the two languages.

Märr in these idioms is representative of its widely shared meaning, broad geographical distribution, but also another feature. Because of the language type used, it refers to its membership of a *bäpurru*-specific language. It is not a general *märr* in this sense, but a specific *märr*. As previously mentioned, it is axiomatic that the words of the language of the *bäpurru* are imbued with the *märr* of the *bäpurru*. From the perspective of the *bäpurru* language *märr* is spoken in, it always refers to the inalienable relationships of the *bäpurru,* to its

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23   Keen (1995) and Toner (2001) have discussed shared meaning in songs sung in different languages. In ritual, as in discourse, the idea of *dhakay nhama* (tasting a piece) is a convention of performing/singing/ speaking in another *bäpurru's* music/song/language to show respect/relatedness/closeness (Toner 2001).

sites, language and ancestral essences. Today, this *bäpurru*-centric interpretation is more properly present on the homelands and in religious life and the ritual context.

Table 11.3 *Märr* initial verbal idioms in two different Yolngu languages.

Yan-nhangu Compound	Gupapuyngu Compound	Literal Meaning Second Lexeme	Idiomatic Meaning
märr-barrathalanguyirri	*märr-dälthirri*	become hard	trusting
märr-bambuma	*märr-dhumbal'yun*	confused	ignorant
märr-duwalkthun	*märr-djulkthun*	pass	disbelieve
märr-ganggayirri	*märr-ganggathirri*	reduce	prepare
märr-dät'thun	*märr-garrpin*	tie up	worry
märr-ngal'thun	*märr-ngal'yun*	raise up	praise
märr-mitthu	*märr-ngamathanmirr*	good	love
märr-wanangugumarabu	*märr-wanangguma*	imitate	antagonise
märr-dalkalyirri	*märr-yal'yun*	becoming cool	calm
märr-wirripalyirri	*märr-bandany*	drying	honest

Life on the homelands is focused around people's links to country, ritual, ancestors, names and languages. This stands in contrast to the missions, founded on the colonial project to settle people, to discipline nomadism and so distance them from their land and dislocate the yearly rounds of ceremonial activity. The significance of *märr*, as links to the *bäpurru*, as ancestral essences inhering in the words themselves, is much less obvious in everyday community discourse nowadays. The routines and dialogue of contemporary ex-mission communities are no longer focused on links to country. Today, for the most part, more uniform linguistic styles result from the constant pressures of the settler state, enforced English monolingualism in schools, and the workaday clock, resulting in fewer opportunities for invoking *märr* in reference to the inalienable relationships of the *bäpurru*, ancestral essences, sites and language.

Nevertheless, *märr* retains its distinctive ancestral connotations in the ritual context. Here, in the words of the incantations, of ritual, sung in the language of the *bäpurru*, the implications of ancestral essence inhering in language are re-ignited. In light of this more metaphysical quality of *märr*, I want now to turn to a re-examination of *märr* as 'spiritual power', but first it will be necessary to distinguish it from another Yolngu word for power, *ganydjarr*.

'Spiritual Power' on the Crocodile Islands

There is another word, *ganydjarr*, that also translates as 'power'. Simply put, the feature that sets *ganydjarr* apart from *märr* is that *ganydjarr* power has no supernatural or spiritual associations.[24] *Ganydjarr* is a noun meaning 'power', 'strength', 'energy' and 'speed' (Zorc 1986: 148). It is the kind of power used to describe power in mobile phones, batteries or the force of an engine. As an adjective *ganydjarr* means 'hard', 'powerful' or 'with force'. Commonly, one will be entreated to 'hurry up' with the expression *ganydjarriyu!* (lit. 'power-emphasis'), and to be exhausted is to be *ganydjarr-miriw* (lit. 'power-without'), a condition endemic to mobile phones. Substitution with *märr* is very case-specific. It will not do, for example, to substitute *ganydjarr* with *märr* in most *märr* constructions; for example, *ganydjarr-mirriw* ('without power') with *märr-miriw*; this construction would be like a second-language gaffe. There are times in which the two are transferrable: for example, the constructions *märr dhumurr* (lit. '*märr*-large') and *ganydjarr dhumurr* (lit. 'power-large') can be used to mean the same thing, but the kind of power that is *ganydjarr* is understood to have no sacred connotation. It is, of course, possible to use *ganydjarr* to describe ancestral power if *ganydjarr* is linked with the ancestors, as in *wangarryu ganydjarr* ('ancestral power'), but the ancestral aspect of the power is not inherent in the word *ganydjarr*, as it is in the word *märr*.

Ethnographic anecdotes drawn from everyday practices of island life ranging from the mundane to the ritual will further explain *märr* as 'spiritual power'. The following anecdotes describe a number of aspects of *märr* as an ever-present spiritual power that resides in the bones of the land (*bäpurru*-based), a personal spiritual essence passed on after death and linked to the *bäpurru*, and passed on by spirit familiars to spirit healers and sorcerers (*marrnggit*), again indelibly joined to the *bäpurru*.

Märr has an everyday influence on social behaviour in part because of the widespread recognition of powerful ancestral essences known to dwell in the sites, in the rocks and stones, and in the waters of the estate. The potential of these powers to bestow benefit or impart sickness is well recorded in the literature (Biernoff 1978; Keen 1978, 1991; Reid 1983; Morphy 1991; Bagshaw 1998; Magowan 2001). There are many kinds of ancestral entities understood to be watching and listening: the *wangarr* creator ancestors; the *malagatj* or dangerous spirits; the *mokuy* ghosts of the dead. None but the very young

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24   Warner also used the term *däl* in a way synonymous with power; *däl* is, however, more correctly translated as 'strong, hard, steady, firm' (Zorc 1986: 61).

or foolhardy would set out alone or contemplate any action on country or sea without first considering the implications of ancestral powers known to be present.

For example, I learned about a certain kind of ancestor or forerunner (*ngurunganggabu*) from a Yan-nhangu person (and Yan-nhangu-language speaker) of the Gamalangga *bäpurru* on their estate on Murrungga Island. While walking around checking the fish traps we passed a number of sites. As we walked my companion related the names and stories and sang snatches of song related to the ancestral journeys that linked these sites with others further afield. Such narrated walks produce a kaleidoscopic mental map of signification in the landscape linking every conceivable aspect of the environment. Upon rounding the point at Garlayamirringuli my guide held me by the arm and told me that I must not look landward, but to the seaward side for the next part of our journey. She then rubbed sweat over my eyes and made an incantation in old Yan-nhangu, that I could not follow. She then told me only that she had introduced me to the ancestor (*ngurunganggabu*) Gurrmirringu so that I would be safe from harm, and that I should refrain from asking any questions.[25] The Gurrmirringu, she explained later, is known to dwell at this site, telling how the spirits of place are always present and listening, but the Gurrmirringu is particularly dangerous:[26]

> *Gurrmirringu nhani nininyngu märr barrngarrannhanin nhan'ku mananha mungubnuma wangalanganga.*

> The Gurrmirringu 'spirit man's' power is in the ground and is listening forever.

In this example we get a glimpse of site-based ancestral power—the power of the Gurrmirringu is recognised as present, and dangerous to the uninitiated. The Gurrmirringu is understood to have both agency and power. His ability to act on the world comes from his *märr*; it is the power through which he may protect or destroy and by means of which he continues to shape the behaviours of the living.

People's social worlds are shaped by the recognition of essential links understood to exist between people, places and ancestors infused with *märr*. On the islands it is a common experience to 'hear' a bird call 'announcing' a death. For example, one day after a funeral I was talking to someone who had just got a fright. This person (Gupapuyngu Birrkili *bäpurru*, speaking the Gupapuyngu language)

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25   Ian Keen has examined Yolngu doctrines and related practices to do with totemic ancestors and their traces, magic and sorcery, drawing on beliefs about intrinsic relations between part and whole, image and object, and the powers of bodily substance and spirits of the dead (Keen 2006).

26   An image of the Gurrmirringu painted by David Malangi Daymirringu appeared on the Australian $1 note in 1966.

explained how they had just seen the dead person's spirit, or essence, described as *märr*, inside a bird recognisable as one of the iconic species identified with the deceased's *bäpurru*:

> *Dharra ngarranha malng'thunminy, ngunhapuy märrpuy, nhakun ngayi dinggam, märrndja nhanngu ngunhidiyi birrkbirrkanga warrakanngur, djinagangur, nkakun, ga ngarranha dhakay nhakul marrararyun, marnggi ga wandinanhan.*

> I was standing and it appeared to me, that *märr*, when he/she died her (*märr*) entered a bird and I felt it [like the shiver you get when you feel somebody behind you], and you know it, and you take fright and run away.

It is not uncommon for people to interpret the appearance of a bird, bird song or apparition, as the incarnation of the spirit of the dead, the *mokuy* (ghost), however in this case it was not a ghost. In this example *märr* is used to denote the spirit of the deceased called *birrimbirr* (the *bäpurru* [totem] soul that returns to the sacred well), quite distinct from the *mokuy*.[27] This *märr* is distinctly that of the deceased, *märr-ndja nhanngu* (*ndja* = focus/emphasis, *nhanngu* = his or hers [the deceased's]), and as such this *märr* refers to the *birrimbirr* which returns to the *bäpurru*. That is, the *birrimbirr* (*bäpurru*-ancestral essence) as *märr* (*bäpurru*-ancestral essence), returns to the focal sites of the *bäpurru* in a way that reflects the return of the spirit to the 'totemic well' as described by Warner (1969: 380). This example provides an indication of the bond between the spiritual essence of the deceased person, bird ancestor (iconic species) and *bäpurru*—a relationship comprised of and expressed in terms of *märr*.

After a funeral the clothes of the departed are burned as they are thought to contain the *märr* of the deceased.[28] This is why images and speaking the name of the deceased are also proscribed. Ian Keen has discussed Yolngu notions of intrinsic connection between persons, parts of persons, hair, bone and sweat, spirits' ancestral icons, and sites (1978: 337; 2006: 522). It is recognised that such intrinsic connections can be harnessed for special purposes through ritual, such as those rituals performed by the *marrnggit*. The *marrnggit*, or healer, is said to be able to harness these intrinsic connections. The *marrnggit* harnesses the *märr* of spirit familiars in the form of birds, animals and 'spirit children' (*djamarrkuli*) (Webb 1938; Thomson 1961). For example, the following story was told to me in Djambarrpuyngu by a Djambarrpuyngu man (Wanybarrnga *bäpurru*, Dhuwal language) at Murrungga Island. This story tells how *märr* is given to healer witch doctors by familiars known as spirit children (*djamarrkuli*):

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27   Nor is it *bamay* (distinct from *mokuy* and *birrimbirr*), which is now described as more like the soul Christians believe goes up to heaven. I was unable to discover a pre-mission translation for *bamay* from people of the oldest generation who remembered the coming of the mission.

28   People will often say *djikay bäpurru bulthana* (lit. 'bird-death-tell'). The *bäpurru* (group) and the *bäpurru* (death and funerary rite) are thus denoted by the same term.

> *Marrnggit ngayi dhu nhäma ngunhi baman bili djamarrkuli walal nguli djama märr gurrupan marrnggitjkurr ganaman nhanukal.*

> The witch doctor can see right through you because the (children) spirit familiars give him (insight/power/understanding-*märr*).

The *märr* of the spirit familiars is not a kind of generalised spiritual power. The *marrnggit* knows *exactly* which kind of *djamarrkuli* (*bäpurru*-specific iconic spirits), or what kind of named bird (*bäpurru*-specific iconic species), in such situations. Each kind of spirit familiar *djamarrkuli* is linked to a *bäpurru* and each kind of bird belongs to a specific *bäpurru*. The *märr* of each is a very particular kind of *märr*, each linked to a specific *wangarr* consubstantially identified with particular *bäpurru*.

The following is an excerpt of a story about how people lived together on the island of Murrungga in the old days, ending with a clear warning:

> *Djini dawal ngali gurrku nyena walipma ga bulthun mägaya, rulka ngali mana gurrku nhama bayngul djiningul mari mägaya yolngu rulka nyena mana gurrku. Rulka wanggalanga märr ngaraka ranu, bilamunu.*

> In the past we lived together, and met and told stories in peace, we never caused any trouble. Do not offend the bones of the land, so be it (amen).

The sentiment expressed in *rulka wanggalanga märr ngaraka ranu*, 'do not offend the bones (spirit) of the land, so be it (amen)', is customary. Always used by an older generation, it reveals the open recognition that the listening spirits of the land have the potential to wreak havoc if offended. What is tacit here, and thus well understood, is that the agent of retribution is the *wangarr* of the site; and the bones of the land upon which we stand, and their *märr*, are that of the *bäpurru*. These ancestral actors, the *ngurunganggabu*, *malagatj* or *wangarr*, possess the *märr* or power to destroy, as agents of the originating myths; they are part of the *bäpurru*. In the final analysis, the *märr* of the *bäpurru* is the 'spiritual power' that provides the social force behind the injunction. This *märr*, the *märr* that identifies the distinctive site-based laws of each *bäpurru*, which discerns each powerful spiritual entity, obligates its members to protect and care for kin and country—an inviolable moral duty to protect and to care, through ritual and practice, the re-invigoration of *märr*.

The familiarity of *märr* as a term in the everyday contrasts with its specificity as 'spiritual power', as the named ancestral essences of the *bäpurru*. This *märr* as the 'ancestral essence' is fundamental to the constitution of the *bäpurru*, and so a central focus of Yolngu society. It is this notion of *märr* as the inalienable ancestral links between ancestors, their descendants, their country, language

and the law, that comprises a Yolngu site-based ontology. The esoteric knowledge of these connections and how to deploy them within and without the ritual context is the very coin of an economy of sacred knowledge.

Conclusion

When W. Lloyd Warner came to the Crocodile Islands, he found the notion of 'spiritual power' to be a fundamental principle and used the Melanesian term *mana* to describe the concept known to the Yolngu as *märr*. I have sought to render a more nuanced reading of the Yolngu concept *märr* in a way that reveals a more complete meaning than that captured in the term *mana*.

In this chapter, I have argued that rendering *märr* simply as a generalised 'spiritual power' is misleading, not only because of its polysemy, but because of its complex nature. What at first appears to be a generality in the use of the term *märr*, on closer examination reveals very distinctive and highly distinguishable kinds of named inherited ancestral essence. These kinds of named ancestral essence constitute and identify the distinctive, multivalent, dynamic entities known as *bäpurru*, focused around common connections of shared ancestral essence. *Märr* comprises the inalienable connection between kinds of ancestors, people, stories, language, and place that make up the Yolngu site-based ontology. Ancestral essences, comprised of *märr*, are key distinguishing forms at the centre of the Yolngu world. This, in part, gives a clearer understanding of the meaning of *märr* in the language of 'spiritual power' on the Crocodile Islands.

Perhaps in the long run the fate of *märr* will resemble that described for *mana* by Blust. He described how, over time, notions of 'unseen supernatural agency' from such forces as thunder and lightning had detached from the meaning of *mana*, and so '*mana* assumed a life of its own' (Blust 2007: 404). But we know that *mana* is an even more important and potent concept in the lives of Melanesian people today. Perhaps the policies of 'normalisation' on the Crocodile Islands will diminish the role of site-based ontologies and blanch the meaning of *märr*. Or, what if these forces drive an increasing need for the revivification of this very special kind of site-based 'spiritual power', this *märr*?

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