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## Waves of Knowing: Polymorphism and Co-Substantive Essences in Yolngu Sea Cosmology

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On a humid afternoon in 1990, we set off into the Arnhem Land interior from Rorruwuy homeland in search of honey, abundant during *dharratharra*, the early dry season. The rattles of the corrugated red earth, resonating through the Land Rover, all but drowned out the conversation when my sister, Lul'wariwuy, suddenly jumped up from the back seat, grabbing my shoulders exclaiming, 'Look, there *you* are. See those tall anthills, those Djakaḷuḷu over there?' As we approached the grey pyramid-like mounds wrapped around some spindly eucalyptus, the four children in the back began to sing out, 'Djakaḷuḷu Djakaḷuḷu, there's Djakaḷuḷu'.

Lul'wariwuy's brother, Manyjarri Ganambarr, was leader of the *Ḍaṭiwuy* group and traditional owner for Rorruwuy. He had invited me to spend some time with him at his homeland. One morning, he rose early and walked off into the privacy of the eucalyptus forest with a group of about six senior men. He returned after half an hour, his usually stern demeanour breaking into a joyous smile as he approached and announced to the now attentive and inquisitive groups of women and children sitting about me, '*Midiku*, (Sister), your name is Djakaḷuḷu'. I heard some children asking, '*Nha mayali* Djakaḷuḷu? What

does Djakaḷuḷu mean?' Mothers quickly silenced them, distracting their attention. (It was inappropriate to ask the meaning of new names publicly, their ritual meanings extending through the individual to ancestral experience). Partly addressing the women and children, Manyjarri commented, 'Most Yolngu' women are short, and so are the *balanda* non-Aboriginal women here. You are very tall, really tall – like those anthills not far from here on the mainland. You know, the ones that reach up to the sky and circle the eucalyptus trees. You have your head in the clouds and your roots in the ground.' At this explanation, the other men burst out laughing, aware of the sexual undertones of the connotations of the name.

The nature of the relationship between people, land and ancestors in Australian Aboriginal societies has generated ongoing anthropological debate. Since the inception of anthropological studies of Aboriginal religion, the idea of totemism has been used to elucidate the spiritual and physical relationship between these elements. The paper begins with a re-evaluation of the human-ancestor-land complex, focusing in particular on theorists of Australian totemism such as Stanner (1966), concerning Aboriginal religion, and Munn's (1973) seminal explanation of transformations of objects into subjects and subjects into objects in Walbiri ideology.<sup>2</sup> Both analyses offer critical insights into Aboriginal thought, as they depict a process of transformation in which spiritual potency is regenerated in the noumenal sphere through ritual naming. These

analyses do not explore the idea, however, that the landscape is in perpetual motion, as they focus more on topography than on oceanography, where landscape is a container of eternal and unchanging ancestral essence. Yet, ancestral power inheres in both topography and oceanography through its own natural movements and the actions of others upon it.

I will argue that the associations between people-as-ancestors and people-as-places in Yolngu thought are based on kinesis as a transformative agency where each transformation has its own dynamic and interactive agency arising from particular movement forms in the landscape and seascape. By examining the words of ritual songs in which such transformations occur, the connection between human and ancestral characteristics is shown to be kinesically determined. Various combinations of human-ancestral features emerge from the colours, shapes and sounds of place, which are co-substantive essences of the ancestral being. These further combine to facilitate the manifestation of ancestral power. Rhythmic patterning of song words aesthetically enhances the spiritual presence of the ancestor. In song, then, different configurations of co-substantive essences, allow apparently static topographical features to acquire human qualities because they image ancestral movement patterns, a process that I refer to as polymorphism. This process involves multiple morphologies of subjects as objects and vice versa, and is best illustrated through ancestral song images that stress the centrality of movement.

In this paper, I will focus specifically on ancestral song subjects contained in the seascape as kinesis is best illustrated in the perpetual ebb and flow of the sea, whereby subjects become subsumed inside objects and *vice versa*.<sup>3</sup> Ritual songs are the most efficacious mode of effecting polymorphism as the power of the ancestor is subsumed, embodied and reproduced in the ritual imagination and performative skill of the singer. The ways that songs are performed and the claims that singers make to ancestral subjects have political implications for the assertion of

group rights to land ownership and marine tenure across the whole north east Arnhem Land region. In the current Australian political climate, an understanding of the ritual connotations of Yolngu song has never been more timely, as Yolngu seek to defend territories for the Australian legal system. This paper finally addresses the cosmological principles of claiming rights to song and raises questions for the Australian legal system, as to how it might best accommodate this knowledge and practice in its judiciary findings.

### Simulation and simultaneity

In attempting to make sense of the complexity of Aboriginal totemic thought, W.E.H. Stanner (1966:260, 261) recorded the following conversation with an informant:

Informant: 'A man gets marks from *mir* (personal totem). That child there, his personal totem is buffalo. There are marks on that child where the spears hit. Every time that child cries it sounds just like a buffalo ... it wasn't really a true buffalo: it was that man's wife.'

Stanner: That was hard to understand: 'How the same?'

I: 'They were of one kind.'

S: 'Were they one clan totem?'

I: Laughter: 'Buffalo walks everywhere. He has no patrilineal clan totem.'

S: 'Were they one conception totem?'

I: Laughter: 'Woman is person, buffalo is animal flesh.'

S: 'Were they one image?'

I: Laughter: 'Buffalo has four legs, woman has two legs.'

S: 'So, well, what does a man get from the clan dreaming site?'

I: 'You look *like* your clan totem. You smell *like* it, the clan totem is *like* you, yourself, *like* your father, brother, friend. It is just *like* you being there, it is pushing you. You can't let that place go' (my emphasis).

Stanner, puzzled by his informant's analogy of the buffalo with the multiple identities of a child, wife and clan group, posited a symbolic relationship between totems, people and places where the subject was said to be *like* its object. He viewed the relationship between the buffalo, the conception totem, the clan totem and the person as a nexus of four symbolisms — essential, substantial, mystical and historical, all connected by symbolic operations (Stanner 1966:159). Thus, he went on to call the relationship between one flesh, one spirit, one country, and one dreaming, the symbolic complex. Yet, he also recognised that the totem is only one part of a potentially vast number of significations.

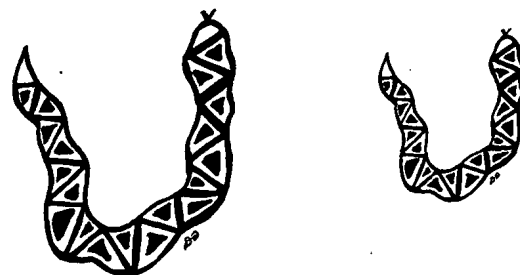
The problem of relationality has generally been a problem of the anthropological interpretation of simulation and simultaneity. For example, in Stanner's interpretation of the Murinbata, subjects and objects are constituted as *'like'* one another, a process of transformation that contrasts with the simultaneous rendering of subjects as objects in Yolngu discourse such as, 'I am the water', or 'I am the tree'. While the nature of the relationship posited by the Murinbata could be said to be one of *simulation*, Yolngu posit a closer ontological relationship between subjects and objects as one of *simultaneity*.<sup>4</sup> Embedded in these statements are ideas about how Yolngu view themselves as multiple, simultaneous entities encompassing and encompassed by the landscape and seascape.

Whilst Stanner dealt with the connections between subjects and objects as symbolic associations, other anthropologists (Keen 1995, Taylor 1996) have identified the relationship as one of sameness or equivalence, and, by implication, distinctiveness and difference. Anthropology's task has been to unravel a conundrum — that Keen (1995: 502), referring to Yolngu ties of kinship, has called 'the extendible strings' of relationality between subjects and objects, ancestors and humans, and concepts of being and belonging.

## The problem of temporality

An additional dimension to the nature of subjects and objects is the problem of time. In anthropological analyses, the ontological nature of the actual subject or object has often been obfuscated as a result of the ways in which temporality has been seen to underpin subjects and objects. In the history of anthropology, Aboriginal identities have been analysed in terms of a dual temporality in which past and present have referred to greater or lesser degrees of distance or congruence between ideas of transformation, change, sameness and difference. Munn (1984: 60), for example, has argued for a melding of past and present in Aboriginal thought that transcends specific historical location on the basis that ancestral transformations in the distant past remain visible in the topography, thereby condensing these two forms of temporality. However, I would contend that these temporalities are not 'condensed' into one, but are, instead, subsumed inside each other.<sup>5</sup> Implicit in this process of temporal subsumation of ancestral past and human present is the potential for spatial subsumation through performing the ancestral landscape in a ritual arena that is clan owned, demarcated and delineated by ancestral markers of the environment. Thus, the question is not so much what subsumations take place, but how do they operate and what ramifications are there for the way strategies are developed and employed by individuals and groups in claiming rights to the land and sea?

Building upon Munn, Morphy (1991: 80) circumvents the idea of subjects becoming static objects by arguing for a fluidity of temporality where the status of subjects and objects is interchangeable, depending on whether they are



seen to be either inside or outside: 'the ancestral world extends into the everyday world, the inside flows into the outside. Outside forms are in a sense generated by inside forms and are not separable from them'. This fluid merger of the two temporalities facilitates the ongoing presence of ancestors in the landscape — spoken of as if presently emergent — with the possibility of generating new ritual expressions of ancestral power in songs and dances. The visibility of ancestral forms does not render the landscape powerful *per se*; rather, it is the potential for these forms to be recreated through their patterning in performance that affords it potency through the fluid movements of the landscape and seascape which are imaged in song, animated by dance.

### The importance of movement

To understand the subsumation of people-as-ancestors and people-as-places, it is necessary to appreciate the importance of movement in Yolngu sea cosmology. However, to speak of Yolngu sea cosmology alone is a little misleading since in Yolngu society identity inheres in all land-based plants and animals as well as in all aspects of marine life and waters. In fact, one cannot be spoken of without inferring some connectivity to the other. Yolngu cosmology relates human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and atmospheric elements in a vast web of social interconnections as well as individual and group significations. Through exogamous patrilineal ties, all Yolngu society is divided into two moieties called Dhuwa and Yirritja. The relationship between these identities can only be known, as Djiniyini Gondarra told me, 'as you sing'.<sup>6</sup> Song words and song patterns are crucial in establishing differences between individuals and groups as well as their links. Performing identities from the sea and land, then, become a way of knowing the self and of invoking ancestral power through song patterns of movement.<sup>7</sup>

In Yolngu ideas of sea cosmology, humans, ancestors and waters are interlinked by a combination of the various shapes, forms, colours and sounds of water movements in, through and

upon the land. Movements of the ancestral past in the landscape and seascape can be evidenced when humans are perceived as ancestors with particular agencies in one or more of the following three processes.

- By reflecting the shapes or forms of ancestral powers; for example, as a ritual performer dances shark, sings about floodwaters or painting ancestral designs.
- Where rocks or other inanimate natural features represent the ancestral past; for example, at Yirrkala a submerged rock in the sea commemorates a renowned community leader who died three years ago. When the waves wash up on the rock they leave different coloured marks which are considered to be his identity and other personalities of his deceased clan or related family members.
- In the 'epiphanic process', where spiritual activity is invoked through such events as singing into being a manifestation of light in the trees (Weiner 1995: 142).

These land and water movements, in turn, represent gendered entities. Thus, the land and sea are not disconnected but should rather be viewed as two entities with conjoining attributes. For example, where freshwater flows into saltwater, each body of water represents, at one and the same time, an androgynous body and a group of social bodies. However, the importance of bodies of water as independent entities has been overlooked until recently. Bagshaw (1998:154) notes that previous studies of coastal regions obscured the distinctive cultural status of saltwater in metaphysical terms and in terms of its traditional ownership through conflating site-specific ancestral activity with the seabed and saltwater. Instead, speaking of Burarra and Yan-Nhangu sea cosmology, he posits the notion of *con-substantiation* whereby groups are linked to waters, mediated by *patrification* (1998:162).<sup>8</sup> This connection recognises group identification, as 'begotten' through the male line *and* the body of water. Thus, he argues for two distinct bodies of ancestral saltwater, endowed with creative power and active agency that do not intermingle. These two bodies of water are separated

according to their patri-moiety affiliations, each with corresponding rights (1998:156). The focus on patrilineal identification renders the sea in terms of segregated and separable bodies of water belonging to either the Dhuwa or Yirritja moiety.

Ancestral entities of the land and sea are not asexual entities then, but embody human anatomical parts, some of which correspond to male and female sexual attributes. Bagshaw (1998:159) first recognised the anatomical referents for various saltwater features amongst Burarra and Yan-nhangu. The same referential process operates amongst Yolngu where ancestral water is lexically determined as anatomical parts. The source of freshwater is referred to as the eye (*mangutji*), while its stream is the neck (*mayang*). Adjoining tributaries are the arms (*wana*), and the points of confluence are known as the elbows (*likan*). The lower reaches of the river are called the tail or leg (*yangara*), and are referred to more generally as the bottom (*dhudi*). Where freshwater and saltwater mix at the mouth (*dhä*) of the river, the bubbling actions of the waves are performed in dance with the hands and fingers bouncing up and down indicating froth. Close to the shoreline, the coastal sea waters are known as chest waters, *gumurr gapu*.

While the lexical referents imply a direct correlation of land and sea to human body parts, these generic water terms do not specifically identify how particular currents reflect group identities. However, other ritual song names are used to identify specific group relations to water. These *bündurr*, or group surnames, Yolngu groups are associated with the upper or lower reaches of the river, and they classify groups as freshwater or saltwater people, respectively. For example, in the Yirritja moiety, *Gumatj-dhä lukulili* are known by their surname, *Munungguritj*, and come from Bawaka.<sup>9</sup> This subgroup of Gumatj represents the tail portion of their ancestral crocodile in the saltwater, while both the *Burrarrwangga* subgroup from Matamata and the *Yunupinggu* subgroup from Biranybirany represent headwater in the form of a spring which flows down to the sea, identified by their

*bündurr*, ritual song names, for the area. In the same way, the two Dhuwa groups, *Daṭiwuy* and *Ngaymil*, who have the same surname, *Ganambarr*, are related as *Gapiny dha-lukuwuy*, the bottom group, and *Gapiny dha-wupawuy*, the top group, respectively. *Daṭiwuy* are located in the mouth of the river beside *Rorruwuy* while *Ngaymil* come from *Yängunbuy* (Magowan 1997: 27,28). These two related areas also have their own separate ritual song names.

In practice, the managers of a particular homeland and its associated watercourses have primary responsibility for their area. However, as ancestral features of the landscape-seascape complex are shared with groups who relate as mothers to the managers of the opposite moiety, these groups also share rights in their waters. In song performance, it is possible to indicate which groups have these additional rights since the managing group will sing of the ancestral being or objects of the opposite moiety. The complexity of this inter-relationship was made explicit by a woman of the Djambarrpuyngu clan of the Dhuwa moiety who sang her mother's *Wangurri* sea song of the opposite Yirritja moiety, in this way:

### Wangurri Floodwater

*Djinaku ngunha ngarra muwatji gularri bulanydji*  
Inside there I tree water bulany  
I am inside the tree in the Gularri water (related to  
me as mother, bulany subsection)

*Wangarrwu marrawal mirriwu gandjikumawuy*  
Ancestral tree with mangrove worms (also called  
yumbuwar)

*Waku ngunha ngarra gulam dhanatjha*  
Child there I born tree  
I am the child being carried in the Yirritja tree

*Gadalpuma djanbilpilinha yiminda mindakanguny*  
*guymululu*  
Tree stringybark stringybark stringybark  
I am the Dhuwa stringybark tree with the sacred  
names *djanbilpilinha*, *yiminda*, *mindakanguny* and  
*guymululu*.

*Djinaku ngaya ngarra dhalirr djinakungu*  
Inside I come water from inside

My water inside is the tree is the Dhuwa water,  
called dhalirr

*Birrkarrwirrkarryun ngakalarrnha*

A rhythmic pattern and movement motif indicating  
the bouncing of the tree on waves represented by  
moving a clenched fist holding a stick backwards  
and forwards past the right ear  
The Yirritja water bubbles up

*Gularrinyga wanggalawu ngunhuku*

Water for camp, place for that person  
The Gularrri water (my classificatory mother's  
water) is my nest

The inclusion of Dhuwa water references to the stringybark tree with the sacred names *djanbilpilnha*, *yiminda*, *mindakanguny* and *guymululu* in the Yirritja freshwater song, brings into focus her own patrilineal identity. However, her father's saltwater name, *dhalirr*, follows the Yirritja freshwater name, *gularrri*, indicating his conjugal union with the freshwater of her classificatory Wangurri mother. Here, there is a comingling not only of identities but of actual water sources in the seascape from each of the moieties. Thus, one water is held metaphorically, ancestrally and physically inside the other: the song tells of the Yirritja moiety water as simultaneously the container, nest and womb for the singer's imminent birth, as well as constituting female waters of coitus. The reference to Dhuwa saltwater provides an image of male waters covering the female freshwater as it runs into the sea, inseminating the singer's mother. In contrast to the Yan Nhangu/Burrarra case outlined by Bagshaw, a Dhuwa man commented: 'There are still Yirritja names in Dhuwa water and *vice versa*, it's not all neatly cut up into boundaries'. In the Yolngu case then, con-substantiation should not be viewed as only patrilineal and applicable to segregated bodies of water, instead, Yolngu hold matrilineal waters inside patrilineal ones, and *vice versa*.

### Polymorphism and the subsumation of subjects and objects

Polymorphism relates people to the landscape and seascape by the recognition of their particular

features as co-interdependent. Thus, polymorphism is the process whereby an ancestor, human or part of the landscape or seascape is seen as being simultaneously held inside the other. In both moieties, water songs can be seen as both object and subject simultaneously — the object of human song and the human-ancestral subject — kinesic agency realised through the rhythmic motifs of the singer. Water songs also embody human agency in movements that express the consummation of marriage between people through the mingling and swirling of waves, depicting the conjoining of two individuals. A senior Wangurri man commented:

There's a good relationship there — for marriage. It shows how we are related to other people because the water forms that relationship for us. The freshwater and the land have overlapping stories with the sea as they form the basis of close relationships.

Waters, then, are ancestral subjects with their own recognised active agency and kinesis in wave motion. When Yolngu speak of two rivers coming together they call it *ganma* and say the water tastes brackish (*dhākay-murrkthuna*), a term that provokes much amusement from those singing or talking about it, as it implies the mixing of bodily fluids in sexual intercourse. Sea currents are always viewed in relation to river sources, where freshwater and saltwater mix in swirling streams at particular points, generally at the mouth of a river. Froth can be seen where Yirritja and Dhuwa waters mix. This bubbling is known as *gapu-djulk* that is also the term for the breaking of waters at birth and the placenta. These confluences occur most commonly between mother (*ngāndi*) and child (*waku*), currents or between grandmother (*māri*) and grand daughter (*gutharra*), water courses. Keen (1977:1098) has noted, 'where tidal waters meet between Howard and Elcho Islands for example, Yirritja and Dhuwa, 'mother' and 'child' waters meet and mix together.' These two waters are connected through a polymorphic relationship in that they share the same co-substantive essences of froth, allowing them to be viewed simultaneously as ancestral entities and as particular kinds of

human relations, each being subsumed inside the other.

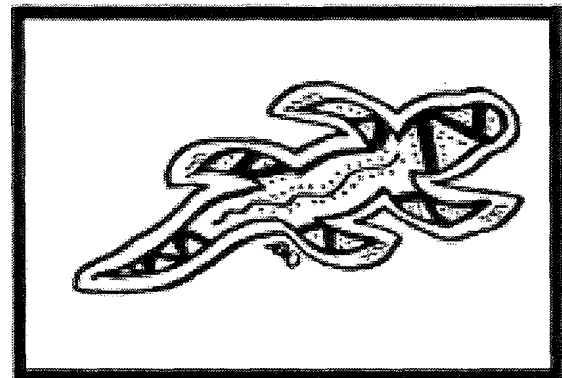
### Kinesis and sea currents

Kinesis is a constant factor in Yolngu ideas of the ocean. The sea is never still. Its tidal motions are set in action by the waxing and waning trajectory of the moon. This tidal flow creates a series of waves within waves, each formation closely related to the one before. Waves constantly change as time passes, the strength of the ebb and flow dictating the height, length and fullness of the crest of each wave. In this respect, time mediates the wave patterns in the past and the present, their identities determined by gravitational forces. The agency of the land in the sea and the sea in the land is evidenced when a stone is cast into the sea creating a series of ripples. When each ripple follows the same track as the previous one, its motion can be traced back to the first splash of the stone. In the same way, patterns of movement connecting humans, ancestors and the sea, enable body parts and ancestors to be viewed as co-terminous with one another, although the relationship between their parts is multivalent and multifarious; and just as single ripples are not the same as the original splash, yet they combine to form part of the same wave.

Kinesis underlies the connection between subjects and objects in polymorphism because it is not only a means of singing the merger between song subjects with similar co-substantive essences, but kinesis facilitates the linear construction of a ritual song series in the connection of seemingly unrelated song subjects.<sup>10</sup> These subjects can be juxtaposed because they have semantic properties that logically relate them to the previous and following subjects. However, their juxtaposition must contribute to the overall path of the ancestor travelling through the land or sea. They will have been pre-empted by the kinetic actions of the ancestor, bird or animal in the previous song, comprising a polymorphic 'string of connectedness' (Keen 1995: 502), that allows

one or more of the preceding images to come into view simultaneously as the song series proceeds.

For example, in the following excerpt from the Djambarrpuyngu song series, the song of the ancestral thunderman and the East wind are related over seven verses. The thunderman is a giant figure whose head is in the clouds that he holds up as a spear above his head. He brings these clouds together from across the sea causing rain to fall. Included in these verses are other ancestral subjects of the rain — the thunderman's spear and yams. A senior man of the Djambarrpuyngu clan began the song with the East Wind (*bulwunu*), depicting it blowing over the ocean, bringing clouds from different clan lands, and whipping up the sea.<sup>11</sup> The wind blows the leaves of the arrowroot, *rowu*, on the beach. The third verse tells how the wind brings darkening skies and the rain begins to fall at Runu on the main Arnhem Land coast. The rain comes closer, in verse 4, falling at Dadal and Banba. In the fifth verse, the clouds become the thunderman's spears, pelting rain into the water and onto the land. Verse 6 develops the idea of the spears raining from the sky as, *djambuwal*, carries a spear aloft. In the final verse, the spears of rain begin to dance out of the clouds, landing at four different places related to the Djambarrpuyngu clan, and into the sea.





## Djambuwal the thunderman and the East Wind by Bāni (Gundangur Djambarrpuyngu)

### Verse 1

*Namaṇda Rowumirr Dhalwirtjamirr*  
Names of the beach creeper, rowu and Polynesian arrowroot, Dhalwirtjamirr  
*Garrwarthinan bulpuḷwu Dhalwirrmara*  
The east wind ruffles the leaves of the purple beach creeper, rowu and the polynesian arrowroot

### Verse 2

Yā - - -  
*Bulwunu ngilimurru*  
Our East wind  
*Juthurru Dhalurrutjingu*  
and our root food  
*Garrwarthinan bulpuḷ Murunkungu*  
The purple flowers of rowu called Murukun are blowing in the approaching storm

### Verse 3

*Durryunna bulwunu*  
The wind is coming up  
*Durryunna munakuy*  
It is bringing darkening skies  
*gongarri waltjan*  
The rain called gongarri  
*Dharryun Runuwuy Runuwuy*  
Pours down at Runu  
*Junhukuy yarrayarkthun*  
Where the dark clouds and thunder roll around

### Verse 4

*Bulwunu ngilimurru yātjun*  
Our East wind and rain thunders and pours down  
*Junha dharryun Daḍalwurri*  
Over there at Daḍal  
*Junha dharryun Baṇbawurri*  
And also at Baṇba  
*Gongarri gong-waltjan*  
The rain of the thunderman  
*Dharryun yalalpum*  
His rain pelts down

### Verse 5

*Dharryunna bulwunu*  
The rain of the east wind  
*Lungarri Munakuymirri*  
(Pours) like spears out of the dark sky  
*Junha dharryun Gaṇambaywurru*  
(Hitting the ground) at Gaṇamba  
*Bawaypaway yarrkyarrkmirri*  
The thunder rolling around the island of Bawaypaway

### Verse 6

*Dharryunna yalalpum*  
The rain falls  
*meimel dharryun*  
On the rock and sandbank at Garraṭa  
*Joyngumha bulwunu*  
From the storm clouds of the east wind  
*Lungarri yokungul*  
Come spears of rain

### Verse 7

*Dharryunna bunggulnydja*  
Dancing as they fall  
*Bulwunu nhāngal Golngarri*  
See the storm at Golngarri  
*Yalalpum Dhudupu*  
Raining at Dhudupu  
*Warrwarrtjngawuḍal*  
and Warrwarrtjnga  
*Ngoy dharryun Gunuwangal*  
It is raining on the water and the rock, Gunuwangal  
*Gongarri yokungu Dhāpurrungal*  
Raining on the seawater called Dhāpurrungal.

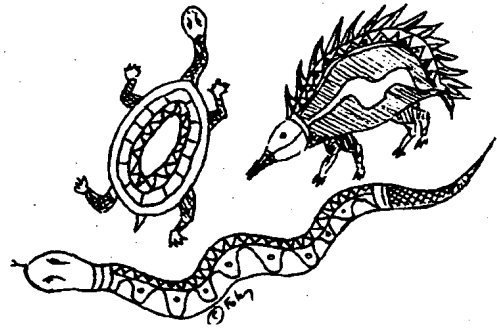
These song subjects represent a polymorphic string of entities connected by certain aspects of their shape and form, allowing one to be imaged as simultaneously subsumed inside the other as the series progresses. Where it might normally be considered that cloud images followed by rain implies a rupture between two separate song subjects because of their distinct meteorological features, this disjuncture is erased in the ancestral polymorphism of the correspondence between the thunderman as cloud and as the carrier of water — and also as emptying his contents of rain as he hunts with his spear. The rain inside the cloud, like the two waters, freshwater and saltwater, erase any disjuncture as one polymorphically carries the essence of the other on the inside.

Furthermore, clouds and rain, like freshwater and saltwater, embody both human and ancestral forms. The clouds tell of different clan groups coming together from various homelands to mourn for the deceased. As the rain begins to fall, it pours onto the sacred areas belonging to the deceased. The clouds gather just as Yolngu gather to hear of a death, telling of the tragedy in dance, by pointing their spears to different places related to the deceased. When the clouds/people

have gathered in the same way that the ancestral thunderman (*djambuwal*) gathers the storm clouds together, the rain, (his urine) soaks the land and the sea. The rain on the sea is a cue for women to cry for the deceased, their tears falling like the rain on the ocean. Thus, by viewing the two subjects, clouds and rain, polymorphically, they can refer to elements of human agency. In this way, the water of human tears and the voices of song echo the sentiments of sorrow evoked in Djambuwal's thunder and rain-making at another level of subsumation — that of people-as-ancestors.

### Co-substantive essences

Keen (1995: 518) has considered the problem of understanding these sorts of similarities between disparate human-ancestral entities, asserting that connections are made through 'the equivalence of elements', and, furthermore, that these elements may be 'aggregated'. Basing his notion of aggregation on spatial connectedness outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 26), Keen has argued that aggregation is perceived as the spatial proximity of a plurality of elements partially separated from others. His definition of aggregation has some parallels with polymorphism although, I would want to emphasise that while these elements do not have to be viewed as partially separated from others — as they can also be seen to be the same object/subject with multiple facets — it is possible to perceive both processes simultaneously where the shape, form and ideology of the two elements are subsumed into the same entity with multiple *simultaneous* identities which are derived from their *co-substantive essences*. Thus, I would argue that the polymorphic relationship between subjects and objects operates in a different framework from that of transformation. By simultaneously subsuming subjects inside objects, and *vice versa*, the distance between them is erased. Polymorphism further empowers objects with their own agency whereby they, too, may become subjects — an agency that is imparted by kinesis



embodied in the ontological properties of colour, speed, rhythm and design. As landscapes and seascapes move, so do their shapes and colours, thus creating new patterns. Therefore, in order to establish the simultaneity of clouds with rain in terms of people-as-ancestors, Yolngu isolate patterns of similarity rather than difference in ontological essences and disparate objects. These essences are co-substantive in that they are multi-faceted and simultaneous with places, people and ancestral forms. Thus, by imparting an agency to objects to become active subjects, polymorphism is affected through particular colours, shapes and patterns employed on each occasion — their co-substantive essences. For example, co-substantive essences, such as the colour and speed of water currents, distinguish groups from one another as well as subgroups of the same group from another. The speed of the current, the motion of the waves or ripples and the sound of the water swirling, bubbling up or slapping against rocks, characterises and differentiates groups and subgroups at their homelands. To illustrate this, Murukun sang another version of her mother's freshwater songs.

### Wangurri Water

*Lalalalalala gularri ngarra ngunhi dhuniya  
ngarkalama Gurrinyinywuy*  
Rippling and gurgling I there go down water  
water

I am travelling down the rippling, gurgling water  
called ngarkalama, Gurrinyiny

*Dhurrawalapamurru dhurrawalapamurru*  
Water water  
Through the freshwater at Dhälinybuy to the sea

*Gurunyinyi Djambalmurrunguru ngarkalama*  
Water water water  
I am the water, my foundation

*Djinaku ngunha ngarra muwatji bandjurrwa*  
Inside there I water tree/ Wangurri water  
I am inside the tree in the Wangurri and Warramiri  
clan waters

*nuku mirrarwirrarwi djalathun*  
Foot djalkirri anchor  
These waters are the foundation of my Ancestral  
Law

*Djinaku ngayam ngarru nakarman*  
Inside come I  
I come from the backbone which is my identity

*Mirrarwirrarwi bandjurrwu djalathun*  
The anchor black mangrove tree anchor  
The anchor is the black mangrove tree and an  
anchor in the ground.

The song tells of the Wangurri mythology of the two ancestral sisters, Yalmarrinda and Bayunun, who see the mangrove tree, *yumbulwarr*, in the mangrove swamps. As they go into the swamps to get mangrove worms (*latjin*) from the tree, sandflies start to bite them. They chop down the dead mangrove trunk and it floats downstream to the swirling rapids with *latjin* inside. As they continue chopping, more dead trees fall into the river which gets broader, carrying the logs and other natural debris on the surface, rushing headlong, towards the sea. This current flows from the bush area at the Wangurri homeland, Dhälinybuy, to Datuiwuy land at Rorruwuy and past Mindharr, a Wangurri homeland, up to Golumala land and finally to Dholtji, Warramiri land whose ancestral foundation takes the form of an anchor. Currents of belonging, or streams of identity, do not simply carry essences of another entity; they mingle and merge those essences through rhythm and motion. The closure of this ontological gap is essential, as it explains how links are established between groups that share the same surname but have different subgroup names and are located at different places. To explain the link between different groups related to the python snake (*Wititj*), Djalal Gurruwiwi (1997: 128) noted:

All these clans tell 'a different story' and [still the] connection is one — different background, one connection. For this [story], because the language is always changing, [when] *Wititj* is painted by this area it is a different language, a different background, but covering one story.

While clans can share the same ancestral beings, the names they use to identify themselves will differ from one another, although they refer to the same entity. Ultimately, each ancestral body of knowledge comprises its own ontological singularity within which fragmentation is recognised.

The sacred mangrove trees cut down by Yalmarrinda and Bayunun are located at four places — Dhälinybuy, Dhirrupuy, Milingimbi and Maningrida — which belong to Yirritja groups of the same *rringitji* i.e., groups who have rights in speaking for the same sacred objects and polymorphic complexes of the Ancestral Law.<sup>12</sup> These places represent the homelands of grandparents of the clans, who contain the identity of their grandchildren inside and are the ancestral containers of the grandchildren of the groups belonging to each of these regions. The future is secured through the kinetic agency embodied in the speed of the current and the waters of ancestral-human procreation which carry the spirit children to their ancestral place of rest/ birth.

As an unborn child, *Murukun* is inside the womb of the mangrove tree. She is not just 'like' the mangrove worm; she *is* the mangrove worm being taken down the river to the mouth of the sea. At one moment she is also her mother's water which is part of her matrilineal essence and, at another, she is the child travelling down the birth canal to be born. The mangrove worm provides this imagery as it wriggles through the muddy interior of the tree trunk. Thus, *Murukun* can see herself, at one and the same time, as the water, the tree and the *latjin*. When *Murukun* sings of Wangurri water, the image is a powerful current flowing rapidly as the tide comes in. Male and female identities are alternated in the song.

The rushing current from Dhälinybuy, with its white foam is a co-substantive marker of her mother's Wangurri clan. Then, the focus turns to her own patrilineal Dhuwa identity travelling through the Yirritja waters. Finally, she refers to herself inside the Warramiri Yirritja water of her matrilineal identity. Her second mother, Warramiri, emerges as she sings of her presence in the tree in these waters. This reference does not subordinate Wangurri rights in the water to Warramiri ones, but, rather, explores how the differences between groups are temporarily rendered invisible through the ability for one group such as the Wangurri grandmother (MMB) clan, to subsume the presence of their Warramiri grandchildren (ZDC), at different times in the same song, and vice versa. The same process occurs between mother (M) and child (ZS) clan references within songs.

### Ephiphanic manifestations

In this song, the water is co-substantive with the encasement of her inside knowledge that has created her own children and will enable them to continue the sacred essence of her group in the future. Thus, through a polymorphic process, Murukun encapsulates the sacred entities of the mangrove worm, the tree and the current, and, by implication, human aspects of the unborn child — the womb and the birth canal. The power of this song resides in the fact that the tree moves down the river and the motion of the waves bounce the tree up and down, the *latjin* wriggling inside it — a complex imagery of rhythm and motion in sexual intercourse and birth.

The water names she refers to indicate the speed of tidal or freshwater movements which are conveyed by specific rhythms that indicate group-locality affiliations. In songs, the proper water names become part of rhythmic structuring and comprise *movement motifs* that are onomatopoeically sung and danced. The motifs can refer to a wide range of other Dhuwa and Yirritja co-substantive essences. For example, the sound of the Wangurri tree travelling down

the river is animated by the motif *galalalalala* indicating the speed and movement of the tree relative to the rhythmic song motifs of other groups who share the same mangrove tree song. At another level, the motif, *galalalalalala*, indicates the tree's journey through the waters, the waves slapping up against its sides and the wake it leaves behind.<sup>13</sup>

The movement motif symbolises both the motion of the tree drifting down the river and the worm wriggling through the tree, the water sounds providing a metaphor for the child emerging from the womb. Thus, kinesis allows the ancestral past to be made present by the manifestation of ancestral power, a process that Weiner (1995: 142) has called 'the phenomenon of epiphany'. Murukun's songs are themselves epiphanic conduits because the ancestral past is animated by the power of sonic frequencies. By singing these entities into being, the object is construed, both in terms of its movement and by vocal animation. Furthermore, in calling out different names of the tree and the waters, multiple identities make distinct groups visible. However, similarities between patterns of colour, sound and movement can override these differences, creating links between distinct groups who share the same song. In this case, the four groups who share the song of the mangrove log, called Mandjikay, are thought of as a single unit.<sup>14</sup> In this way, co-substantive essences allow groups and individuals to identify themselves as distinct yet united.

### Conclusion

Just as Stanner questioned why the Murinbata saw a wife as a buffalo, I have posed the problem of what it means for Yolngu to say, 'I am the water', or 'I am the tree'. Previous frames of anthropological analysis have referred to the connection between subjects and objects as symbolic transformation, condensation, equivalences and aggregation. Instead, I have sought to reconsider these terminologies and their nuances by referring to this process as one

of a simultaneity of the subsumation of subjects inside objects and objects inside subjects, a process, in which conceptual distance between human subjects and ancestral objects is minimised. Of course, difference operates in establishing distinctiveness between groups and, in this case, this has been shown in the identification of distinctive bodies of fresh and salt water affiliations. However, what I have been at pains to re-evaluate is the way in which sameness can override difference as individuals claim rights to more than their own water. I have argued that polymorphism enables this closure through the identification of simultaneous relatedness. Polymorphic processing conjoins strings of related subjects by equating similar patterns of movement derived from the colours, shapes and sounds — the co-substantive essences that depict human qualities of the landscape and seascape.

Kinesis thus creates patterns of sound and design that are associated with particular groups. These essences, which are conveyed in ritual names, are most frequently heard in songs. In all songs, groups may be distinguished by the names of saltwater or freshwater songs. Some of these names are onomatopoeically performed as movement motifs which distinguish different clan groups who share the same song subject because of the differing tempos and rhythms of the movement motif. These motifs link humans to ancestors as the speed, movement and colour of currents are associated with human fluids as well as with ancestral beings that travel through their water courses.<sup>15</sup> The human-ancestor-seascape is thus united by complexes of co-substantive essences whose movements animate ancestral subjects.

The polymorphic conceptualisation of landscape and seascape reflects the movements of waves themselves. For example, I have argued that the human-ancestor-seascape relationship is based on movement arising from patterns through colour, sounds or design and, likewise, ripples are recognised by the relationship between their movements, each affecting the next. Temporally speaking, one ripple is more recent than the

other, the movements of the current wave altering the form of the previous ripple and eventually subsuming it. While that ripple may have disappeared from sight, its essence is still present in the wave. Thus, the rhythm of the wave, and the speed with which the ripples form, have separate identities that are multivalent, their connections being indissolubly linked to each other; and, despite physical temporal distance between them, they are eventually fused into the same undifferentiated body of water. In effect, they become like Yolngu individual and group identities past and present, part of a wave of knowing that they belong to the same sea in which the differences between them may be momentarily transcended in song.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yolngu is the name which the people of northeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia use to refer to themselves. In the past, they have been variously referred to as Murngin and Wulamba in the Arnhem Land literature.

<sup>2</sup> Ritual analyses such as those by Berndt (1952) and Morphy (1984) have largely focused on land-based plants, animals and topographical formations.

<sup>3</sup> Yolngu sea cosmology refers to both freshwater and saltwater courses as one flows into the other.

<sup>4</sup> This article has been developed following a sea consultancy conducted around Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory of Australia in April 1997. Yolngu gave cryptic statements of being both an ancestor and a human as ways of claiming their rights to the land and the sea. In reviewing the literature on human-ancestral complexes, I found that anthropological analyses had not adequately addressed statements about the direct equivalence of human-ancestral identity such as that expressed by Yolngu. Yolngu come to know their world quite differently from Western frames of thought, the latter positing greater conceptual distance between subjects and objects through processes of representation, simulacrum and

mimesis. For a detailed discussion of these issues see Morphy (1991), Baudrillard (1983) and Taussig (1993).

<sup>5</sup> Subsumation is adopted here to refer to the process by which each temporality enfolds inside the other to constitute a new category. Nothing is lost in this process, nor reduced, as Munn's (1984: 67) notion of 'condensation' implies.

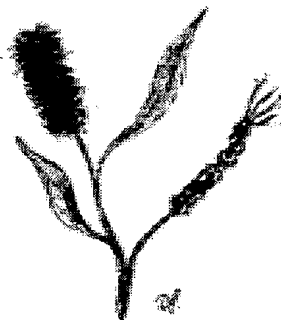
<sup>6</sup> Rev. Dr. Djiniyini Gondarra is the leader of the Golumala clan and the Aboriginal representative for the Australian Church Congress.

<sup>7</sup> All Yolngu performances comprise a rendition of landways and seaways song series.

<sup>8</sup> Analyses of Yolngu sea cosmology is a relatively recent endeavour arising out of Native Title claims around the north-east Arnhem Land coast.

<sup>9</sup> In the recent publication, *The Painters of the Wawilak Story 1937-1997*, it is noticeable that artists of Central Arnhem Land are listed by freshwater and saltwater location while the artists of Eastern Arnhem Land are listed by clan only. The omission on the part of the Eastern Arnhem Land artists may be partly due to the influence of Yolngu-*balanda* relations where identification by clan names only have become standard terms of reference for groups. (*Balanda* is a term used to mean non-Aboriginal people.)

<sup>10</sup> During rituals, each clan will sing a series of subjects relating to the sea and the land from their own Ancestral Law and from related clans' Ancestral Law. In a funeral ritual, the songs follow a particular sequence relating to the deceased. Each song subject, such as cloud, rain, seawater, etc. has a number of verses which are repeated before the next subject begins. A sequence of song subjects within a particular ancestral journey comprises a song series.



<sup>11</sup> The singer, Bāni Dhamarrandji, passed away in 1992.

<sup>12</sup> They share these water and mangrove worm songs because the tree is a container for future Yirritja generations.

<sup>13</sup> Men only perform these movement motifs in ritual.

<sup>14</sup> Mandjikay is the surname for Guyamirrilil, Wangurri, Golpa, Gamal, Walamangu and Wolkarra, indicating that they all share part of the same track of the Ancestral Law.

<sup>15</sup> Amongst the Luritja, Bagshaw (1983:32) talks of polymorphic consubstantiality as a means of explaining human physiological connections and characteristics with similar features of animals and the animating spirit. □

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