



## *Yolkala Gumurrili?* with Whom Towards the Chest? A Relational Portrait of Yolŋu Social Organisation

Bree Blakeman & Dhambiŋ Burarrwaŋa

To cite this article: Bree Blakeman & Dhambiŋ Burarrwaŋa (2023) *Yolkala Gumurrili?* with Whom Towards the Chest? A Relational Portrait of Yolŋu Social Organisation, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 44:5, 678-696, DOI: [10.1080/07256868.2023.2198202](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2023.2198202)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2023.2198202>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 09 Apr 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 441



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

## Yolkala Gumurrili? with Whom Towards the Chest? A Relational Portrait of Yolŋu Social Organisation

Bree Blakeman<sup>a</sup> and Dhambiŋ Burarrwaŋa<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Centre for Digital Humanities Research, Australian National University, Acton, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Shepherdson College, Winnellie, Australia

### ABSTRACT

Much has been written about Yolŋu social organisation since Lloyd Warner's early ethnography (1937). Debates within this literature have predominantly focused on the relative independence of *bāpurru* groups, a significant social unit within Yolŋu society, and whether these can accurately be described as 'corporate descent groups'. To develop a fresh perspective on Yolŋu social organisation, this paper presents an exploration of five drawings by Dhambiŋ Burarrwaŋa and her *waku* (daughters, sister's daughters), a novel methodology which has allowed us to recast well-known anthropological tropes within a setting of relational growth and cross-cultural communication. Rather than outlining a structural model, themes of *raki* (strings), *luku* (foot, footprint, anchor, root of a tree), *gamunungu* (white clay), and *lirwi* (ashes, shade) are explored in detail, as they reveal multiple layers of complexity and connection within otherwise abstract notions like 'clan'. The drawings and accompanying exegesis situate Yolŋu identity within living social connections. What emerges is a relational portrait that embeds the 'clan debate' within those relationships that make understanding possible in the first place.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 August 2022  
Accepted 29 March 2023

### KEYWORDS

Aboriginal Australia; Yolŋu;  
social organisation; kinship;  
relational ontology;  
personhood

## Introduction

Much has been written about Yolŋu social organisation since W. Lloyd Warner's now classic structural-functional ethnography of 1937 (Warner 1937 (1964); Morphy 1991, 1997; Williams 1983, 1999; Keen 1995, 2000). Each approach has offered further insight into different aspects of the Yolŋu regional socio-political system; all attest to the integrity and continuity of definite sociomaterial<sup>1</sup> forms comprising this system. At its most basic, this comprises an underlying and universal system of *gurrutu* (kinship) relations across northeast Arnhem Land, within which the most prominent and important social groupings comprise approximately 60 *bāpurru* groups, generally defined as patrilineal clan groups.

One widespread approach describes *bāpurru* as corporate, exogamous clan groups, each of which is included in a number of cross-cutting sets or aggregates of different

**CONTACT** Bree Blakeman  [bree.blakeman@anu.edu.au](mailto:bree.blakeman@anu.edu.au)  Centre for Digital Humanities Research, Australian National University, Building 120, Sir Roland Wilson Building, 120 McCoy Circuit, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

kinds (see Warner 1937 (1964); Morphy 1991, 1997; Williams 1983, 1999). Keen challenged this conventional view of Yolŋu social organisation in his major ethnography (1994) and a number of subsequent papers (1995, 2000), arguing against the description of *bäpurru* as corporate decent groups. The concept of the corporate descent group, he argues, relies on images of ‘equivalent segments, external boundaries, and levels of taxonomic hierarchy’ which themselves depend on spatial metaphors of enclosure and boundaries. Seeking to foreground Yolŋu narrative metaphors, Keen argues that Yolŋu group identities instead extend outward from foci and consist of ‘strings of connectedness’ (1995: 502, 2000: 421). Yolŋu modes of group identity and relations, he argues, involve images drawn from the human body and plants, and beliefs about ancestral journeys and the traces these ancestors left in the landscape:

Far from being constituted by enclosure within boundaries or related in a taxonomic hierarchy of group and sub-group, Yolŋu identities, like their concepts of place, extend outward from foci. Connections among such identities are not those of enclosing sets but are those of open and extendable ‘strings’ of connectedness. (2000: 421)

Both Keen and Rudder employ the concept of ‘focus’ or ‘foci’ to express the anchored nature of *bäpurru* as well as ‘points where a set of relationships come together’ (see Rudder 1993: 23). Rudder suggests that a *bäpurru* identity can be considered as functioning as ‘one of the nodes or points to which a set of relationships is attached’ (1993: 23).

While such debate has been shaped by a desire to better understand and communicate integral dynamics within Yolŋu society – dynamics which extend to practices of ecological management, politics, and ceremonial performance – what is lacking is a consideration of structural forms outside the self–other binary of the Western individual, and of the undercurrent of movement and vitality that underlies the Yolŋu system.

Compared with these approaches, this article represents a slightly unconventional approach to the description of Yolŋu social organisation and a cross-cultural collaboration between Dhambiŋ and I, who have worked with one another since around 2007. Along with our late *yapa* (sister), Batumbil Burarrwaŋa, Dhambiŋ has been my closest sister, mentor, and teacher. Dhambiŋ and Batumbil adopted me into the Maŋamaŋa based Burarrwaŋa lineage of the Gumatj *bäpurru* as their *yapa* (sister). One’s *bäpurru*, and specifically one’s place within that *bäpurru*, situates a person structurally within the Yolŋu system of *gurrutu* (kin/ship) and *rom* (law) and, as we will see in this paper, in physical space as well. This is true for Yolŋu as well as Balanda (white people), like myself, who are adopted into the system. Your *bäpurru* gives you an anchored place in the world, a place from which you learn to orient yourself, a place from which to consider connections to other people and places. I use inclusive pronouns like ‘us’ and ‘our’ when talking about Dhambiŋ and ‘our’ *bäpurru* throughout this paper because this is the polite and proper manner of speaking, given my relationship to Dhambiŋ and our family – but, of course, I remain a Balanda (white person) and I am under no delusion that my connections and experiences are comparable to those of my adoptive Yolŋu kin.

This paper is structured around a series of drawings made by Dhambiŋ and our close *waku* (sister’s child)<sup>2</sup> to help me understand why my questions about social organisation were always met with further questions – rhetorical responses that spoke of *raki*’ (strings), *luku* (foot[-print], anchor, root of a tree) *gamanunŋu* (white clay) and *lirriwi*’ (ashes, shade). While this discussion is grounded in the well-known literature on

YolŃu social organisation relating to *bäpurru* or clans and their relation to land and associated, broader social groupings, less known are the local terms and concepts through which these sociomaterial forms and relations are articulated and how they express local understandings about personhood. This series of drawings illustrates the form of YolŃu social organisation. Together with the considered exegesis offered by DhambiŃ and *waku*, they introduce the regional system of social organisation in YolŃu terms and present a relational portrait of YolŃu social organisation.

### Series of Drawings and Associated Exegesis

DhambiŃ and *waku* produced the following drawings to help me understand the nature of *bäpurru* and relations between them. This was the only time during this period of fieldwork that DhambiŃ suggested using drawing as a methodology; it was solely for my understanding of the nature of *bäpurru* and the relationship between them, that these drawings were made. DhambiŃ could see that I was not understanding the verbal descriptions and explanations of *bäpurru* offered by her and others, especially the relevance of *raki*' (strings, ropes) to these groups, so suggested I bring the large roll of butcher's paper I'd previously used it to map out genealogies with DhambiŃ and others, and felt pens, and meet her down at bottom camp the following day. Bottom camp refers to the three dwellings located in the lower half of the community, closer to the water's edge. We sat under the shade of the mango tree near DhambiŃ' s house where *waku* was also staying.

The informal session began with DhambiŃ telling me to draw a *dharpa* (tree). 'Nili-murru *bäpurru*, Gumatj' (Our *bäpurru*, Gumatj), she began. The instruction and subsequent discussion followed from there. DhambiŃ and *waku* led the process and I interjected only when I needed clarification on what to draw or write. At times, DhambiŃ told me what to draw and I drew it; sometimes she took the pen and drew for herself. Audio of the conversation was also recorded.

### The First Drawing

The first drawing is of a tree, which DhambiŃ and *waku* described as *Ńilimurrungu bäpurru, Gumatj* (Our *bäpurru*, Gumatj) (Figure 1). The exegesis given below relates to the numbered parts in the drawing.

- (1) 'Dharpa, rumbal, body, *Ńilimurru wangany bäpurru*, where we come from'.  
Tree, torso, body: we are one *bäpurru*, where we originate, where we come from.
- (2) *Luku nherran gamunungunura, lirrwiŃura, wäŃaŃura*.  
The footprint/root of the tree is emplaced in the white clay, in the ashes/shade, in place on Country.
- (3) The various branches, from left to right are as follows:

*Wana*.  
Arm, branch.

*Yolkala gumurrlili?*  
With whom towards the chest?

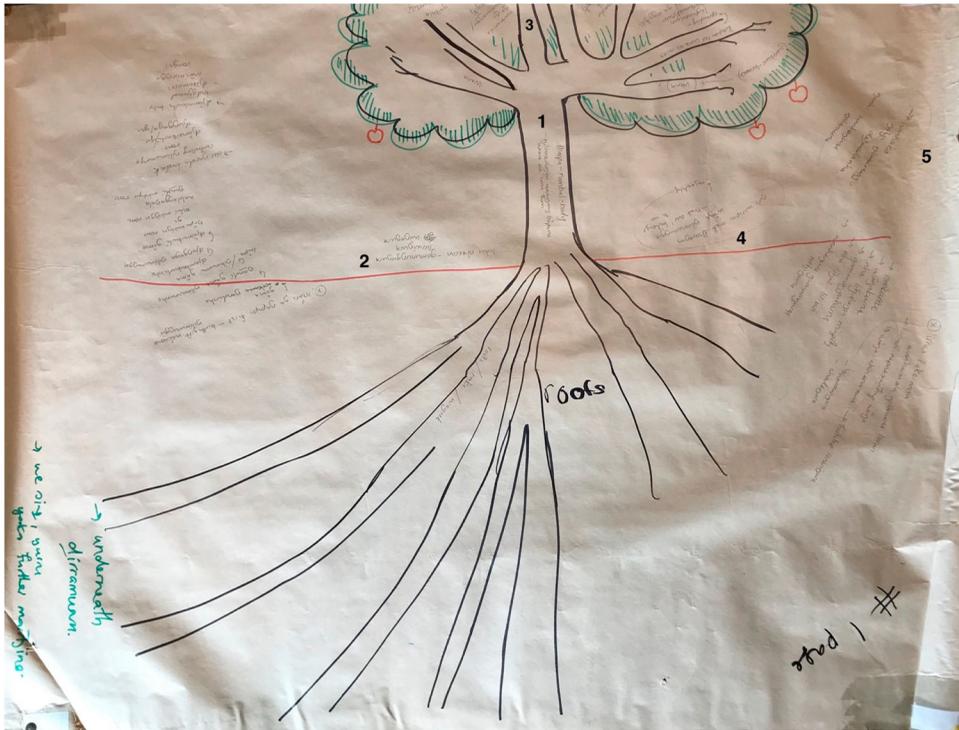


Figure 1. The first drawing.

*Wanhamala nayi gamunungu, nurrngitj?*

Towards where is that white clay, the design, the ashes/shade of the tree?

*Wanhamala nayi ringitj?*

Towards where is that joint ceremonial ground/group?

*Gurrkurr, branches, wana.*

Roots, branches, arms.

'Branches telling same as the roots'.

*Latjuwarr'yun, spreading out, barrkuwatjthirri, wanjilili ga ringitjlili.*

They are spreading out, spreading out, becoming separate/distinct, towards [certain places on] Country and towards the joint ceremonial ground/group.

(4) On top of the soil:

*Wanhaka nayi dolmalanha nunhi wanhanuru nilimurru.*

Where is that sacred place? That is where we are from.

(5) Slightly above the soil:

*Romkurru, wanjakurru.*

Through law, through Country.

*Nhä litjalangu lirrwi' wanhanuru gumurrjuru mittijjuru?*

What are our ashes? From where is the chest of the group?

The tree is ‘us’, the collective body of the *bäpurru*. All *bäpurru*, and indeed everything in the Yolŋu world, belong to one of two moieties<sup>3</sup> – Dhuwa and Yirritja. Gumatj belongs to the Yirritja moiety. The trunk of the tree represents that part of the *bäpurru* that is *gäna* (separate, alone) and *wiripu* (different, distinct). The trunk is where the *bäpurru* is ‘one’ and represents aspects of the *bäpurru* that are unique and not shared with others.

The root or base of the tree is the site at which the *bäpurru* is anchored in place on country. These are actual geographic locations on each *bäpurru*’s hereditary estate. These places are referred to as *dhuyu wäŋa* (sacred places) or *luku wäŋa* (footprint/anchor places). These *luku wäŋa* have existed in place in their present day locations since before Balanda (white people, European) records began. They are the most salient and significant form of social differentiation in the Yolŋu social world and the focal point of each estate – as per Keen’s *foci* (1995, 2000). White clay and ashes are essential elements of this sacred footprint, which we discuss further in relation to the second drawing.

The branches are ‘branching out, becoming separate’ from the anchored body. This branching occurs in geographic space relative to the body of the *bäpurru*, which is anchored in place at the *luku wäŋa* (footprint, anchor place). They are also branching out and becoming separate in terms of kinship relations, which are understood through a sense of relative distance to the unity of the anchored body of the *bäpurru*. The distance of kinship is measured from this site: *Yolkala gumurrilili* (with whom towards the chest), i.e. one’s closest kin are ‘towards the chest’ – the *rumbal* (trunk/torso) of the *bäpurru*.

Similarities are drawn between the *gurrkurr* (branches) and *wäŋa* (roots/veins, branches, arms). Here, it is important to note the overlapping and differentiated terminology. The branches and roots are the same in the sense that they are both *raki*’ (strings, ropes)<sup>4</sup>: branches and roots are ties of kinship that bind people together through mutual obligations and responsibilities and draw people together through mutual ties of affiliation and affection. While they are the same in this sense, that are also qualitatively different from one another: the branches, *wäŋa*, are above the soil and ‘outside’, whereas the roots, *gurrkurr*, are underground and ‘inside’ (Frances Morphy *pers. comm.* 2014). This distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is a key ordering principle in Yolŋu epistemologies and one that is crucial to understanding the Yolŋu system of knowledge (H. Morphy 1991: 78). While this contrast is a logical schema that can be applied to many situations, the opposition between inside and outside generally refers to a continuum of esoteric and exoteric meaning – to a continuum of more restricted to less restricted knowledge (Morphy 1991, Keen 1994). It also refers to an opposition between ‘inside’ things that are ancestrally powerful and sacred and are thus restricted, as opposed to ‘outside’ things which are neither (Morphy 1991). Things that are ‘inside’ are *maḍayin* (sacra) and *dhuyu* (sacred) whereas things that are ‘outside’ are *yaraŋu* (ordinary, profane) and *garma* (public, in the public domain).<sup>5</sup>

The roots might therefore be considered as established *a priori*, ‘underneath’ as a foundation of *rom* (law). The roots denote ‘inside’ ceremonial relations between *bäpurru* on the basis of shared *maḍayin* (sacra). They are *raki*’ established underneath, *romkurru*, *wäŋa-kurru* (through law, through country; Figure 1). These roots not only spread apart but come together, an important social form known as *ringitj*: ‘*Wanhamala ŋayi ringitj?*’ (Towards where is that joint ceremonial group/ground? Figure 1). *Ringitj* groups are made up of multiple *bäpurru* on the basis of shared *maḍayin* (sacra). *Ringitj* sites are actual places on country where *ringitj* groups come together for ceremony.

In contrast, the *wana* (branches, arms) are secondary in the sense that they grow and are given form through matrilineal affiliation and marriage. As the second drawing shows (Figure 2), the branches represent significant kinship relations between people in different *bäpurru* formed in this way.<sup>6</sup>

The tree, as we have explained, is a model of the *bäpurru* or collective self – it is the ‘we’ and ‘us’ of each *bäpurru*. Relatedness here is a measure of distance from the trunk/torso, anchored in place at the *luku wäna* (footprint, anchor place). This is the ‘sacred place, where we are from’ (Figure 1). This is also the proprietorial shade of kinship, further discussed below. The footprint/anchor of the tree-body, we suggest, is the anchor of identity or self-understanding. Dhambin’s comment, *Wanhamala njilimurru gorru[-ma] wärjalili* (We exist towards that place) speaks further to the *luku wäna* (footprint places) as the anchor of self-understanding. The term *gorru[-ma]*, in fact, literally means ‘well, soak, womb, vessel’ and refers to the paramount source of fresh water at the centre of each *luku wäna*. This is the place from which the *mali* (image, reflection, shadow) of children of each *bäpurru* are said to originate and to which the spirit of the deceased is returned after death.

### The Second Drawing

The second drawing was labelled ‘northeast Arnhem [Land]’ and shows the connections between different *bäpurru* in a regional setting.

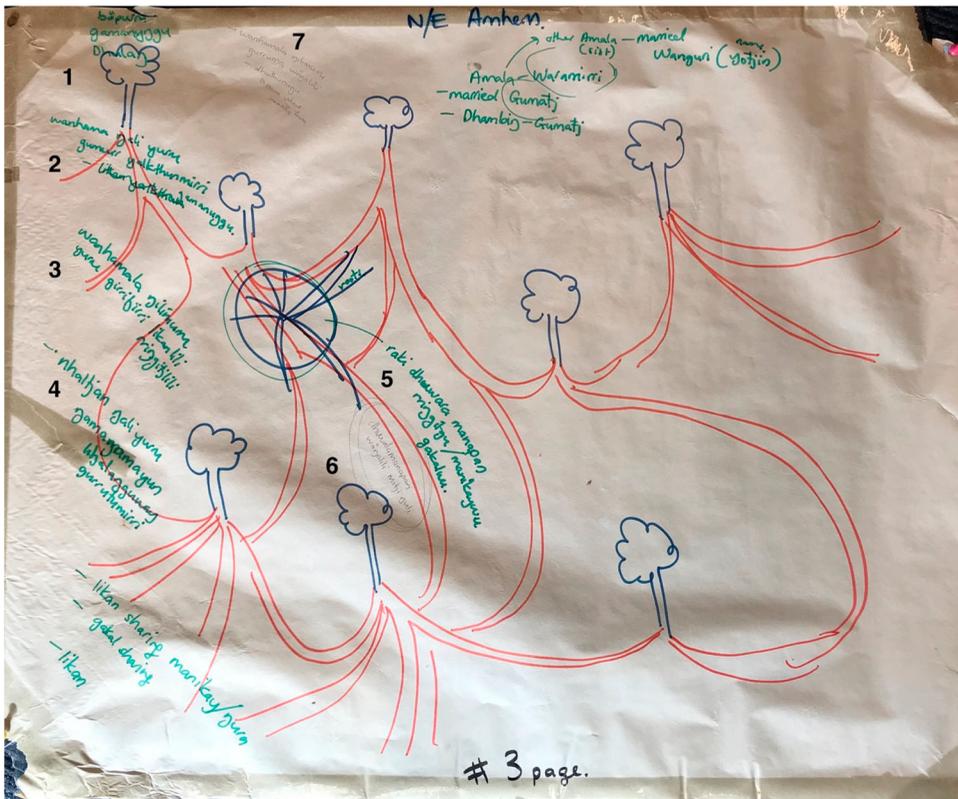


Figure 2. The second drawing.

The tree at the top-left of the page is labelled:

- (1) *Bäpurru, gamunungu, dhulaŃ.*  
*Bäpurru, white clay, (clan) design.*

At the base of the same tree (top, left) is written:

- (2) *Wanhamala Ńali yurru gumurr-yulkthunmirri gamunungu?*  
 Towards where is the place we always paint on our chests?

*Łikan ga gamunungu.*  
 Elbow (names) and white clay.

Written diagonally on the left side of the page reads:

- (3) *Wanhamala Ńali yurru giritjirri likanlili, riŃgitjlili?*  
 Towards where will we dance, towards the elbow (names), towards the joint ceremonial group/ground?
- (4) *Nhaltjan Ńali yurru Ńama'Ńama'yun litjalangu gurrutumirri?*  
 How will we create kinship for ourselves?

The circled cluster near the centre of the page was labelled in English as 'roots'. The writing on this part of the drawing, diagonally below the cluster reads:

- (5) *Raki' dhurrwara manapan riŃgitjgu, manikaywu, gakalwu.*  
 The ends of the roots join together for the *riŃgitj* group/site, for songs, for ceremony/dancing.

Just below this writing and written in pen is:

- (6) *Dhuwala manapan wäŃalili mittji Ńuli.*  
 The group is linked together forever to that place.

The writing in pen in the space in the upper left centre of the page is:

- (7) *Wanhamala Ńilimurru gorru[-ma] wäŃalili*  
 We exist towards that place.

Here we see the tree-body anchored in place in relation to others. We get a sense of the relationships between *bäpurru* from a regional perspective and a description of the attributes that make each *bäpurru* 'wiripu'wiripu' (distinct, different) as well as the shared attributes that they hold in common with significant others.

As in the first drawing, the *rumbal* (trunk/torso) and the *łuku* (root of the tree, footprint, anchor) are those parts of the *bäpurru* that are discrete and unique. But what of the

attributes of this part of the group? What do these members have or ‘hold’ together to the exclusion of others? Each *bäpurru* has a unique corpus of *madayin* that they alone hold. This is, in effect, their ‘title’ to country. These are aspects of the identity of the *bäpurru* that are unique – attributes that it does not share with any other *bäpurru*. Minimally, this includes a *likan* design (clan design) and a number of *likan* names pertaining to the *rapam* (big name Country) for which they are *wäña-watanu* (land-owners). Such designs are, in a very real sense, the imprint of the footprint or anchor of the *bäpurru*, impressed in place in the foundation of *rom* (law). The *likan* design is described as the ‘image’ of the *luku*, the footprint or anchor of the *bäpurru*, and the place where it is impressed is the *luku wäña* (footprint, anchor place) for that *bäpurru* and everyone in it. These are actual sites and the focus of life on Country in the sense that each homeland community – the houses, airstrip and other infrastructure – is typically located near this site on each estate.

The *luku* (footprint, anchor) is described as being impressed in the foundation of *rom* (law), *gamanungunura* (in the white clay) and *lirrwijura* (in the ashes). The mention of *gamanungu* (white clay), specifically white clay on the chest, is a reference to the painting of the *likan* design on the chest of initiands and on the chest of the deceased in preparation for burial. The *luku* impressed in the ashes refers simultaneously to three things: the hearth of one’s homeland or *yirralka* (sometimes used as a synonym for *luku wäña*) around which generations of kin sit, live, share food and grow; the shade of the tree as the proprietorial shade of kinship, relative to the trunk of the tree,<sup>7</sup> and; the shade of the mortuary shelter under which the body of the deceased is kept prior to mortuary rituals. These are all considered as part of the ‘footprint’ of the *bäpurru* anchored in place at the *luku wäña* (footprint, anchor place). As our late *yapa* (sister) once explained: ‘*Lirrwij lakarama wanhamala nilimurru lirrwij. Lirrwij representing wäña, wäña nhinanarawu. Footstep lirrwijura, warrawijura, shadenjura*’. (The ashes/shade tells us where our shade/ashes are. The ashes/shade represent our place, our place for stopping/living. Our footstep is in the ashes, in the shelter, in the shade.)

For Yolŋu, the hearth of one’s *luku wäña* (footprint, anchor place) is the centre of life for generations of Yolŋu of the same *bäpurru* and residential group (see Tamisari 1998). The footprint in the ashes speaks of residential rights but it is far more than that too – it is the focal point of life and death for generations of kin living together and belonging on the same homeland or *yirralka* (sometimes used as a synonym for *luku wäña*).

The roots, *manapan ringitjgu*, *manikaywu*, *gakalwu* (join together for the *ringitj* group/site, for songs, for ceremony/dancing; Figure 2). These are the ‘underneath’ strings of relatedness from Figure 1 that join people, groups and places together through *madayin* (sacra).<sup>8</sup> These are the ceremonial *raki*’ (strings, roots) that cross-cut the region. Where they come together in a dense cluster, as in Figure 2, this represents both a *ringitj* group and a *ringitj* site where the different *bäpurru* comprising the *ringitj* group literally gather for ceremony. Recall Dhambinj’s explanation in Figure 2, *Dhuwala manapan wänalili mittji nuli* (The group is linked together forever to that place): this is about *ringitj* as a group and *ringitj* as an actual geographic site on Country.

### The Third Drawing

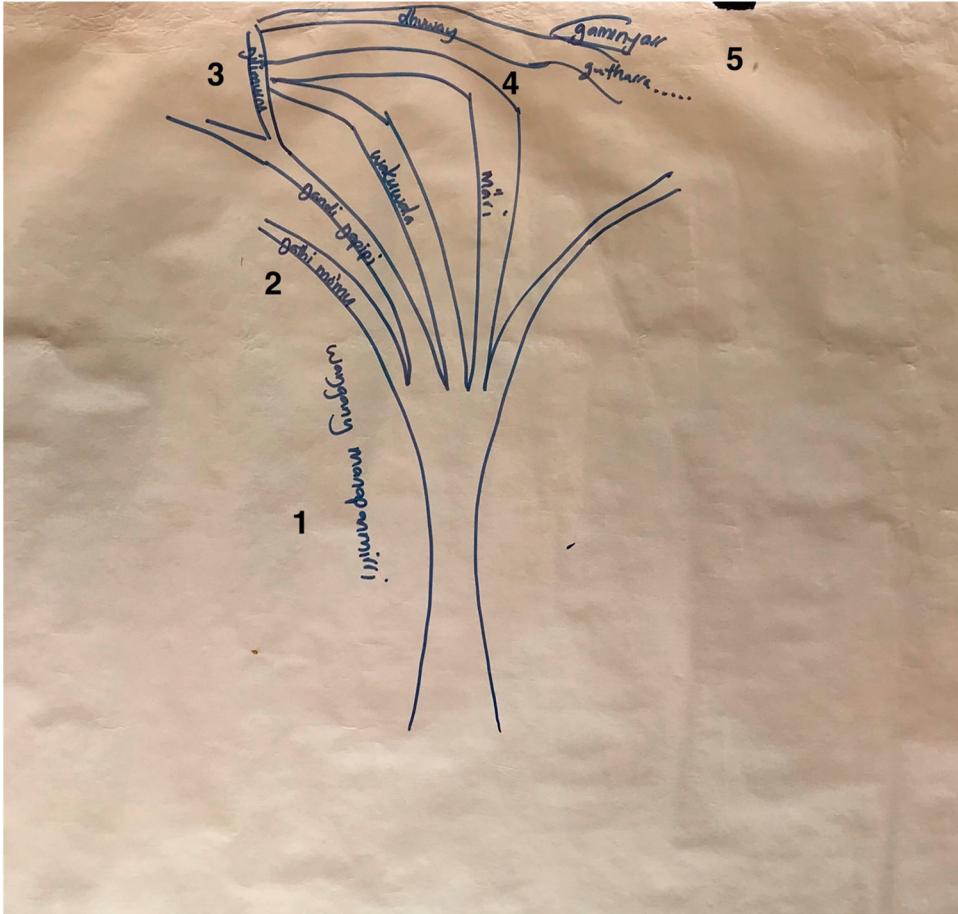


Figure 3. The third drawing.

- (1) *Wangany manapanmirri.*  
Joined together as one.

The writing in the branches (from left to right) reads:

- (2) *Nathi, momu.*  
Mother’s father (MF), father’s mother (FM).

*Nandi, napipi.*  
Mother (M), mother’s brother (MB).

*Waku-walala*  
Woman’s children (wC)/sister’s children (ZC).

*Märi.*

Mother's mother (MM), mother's mother's brother (MMB).

The top branch, 'branching off' the *ñändi*, *ñapipi* branch is labelled:

(3) *Ñilimurru.*

Us.

Extending from the branch labelled *ñilimurru* (not visible) is:

(4) *Dhuway.*

Father's sister's child (FZC)/husband.

Extending from the branch labelled *dhuway* is:

(5) *Gaminyarr, gutharra.*

Woman's son's child (wSC/ZSC), woman's daughter's child (wDC)/ sister's daughter's child (ZDC).

Here we see the self and its relationship with significant others in more detail. Once again, the trunk/body represents the minimal unity of the *bäpurru* as a discrete or autonomous entity: this is where the *bäpurru* is *wangany manapanmirri* (joined together as one).

The branches here are kin from different *bäpurru* who are nonetheless joined to the *rumbal* (trunk/torso) of the *bäpurru* through the matriline and by marriage. These are particularly significant *galki* (close), *yindi* (big) or *dhañañ*' (full) kin from different *bäpurru* (and thus different tree/bodies according to this model) but who are nonetheless joined together via the branches to the collective self. At this level, the tree can represent an individual or a *bäpurru*.

From a socio-centric point of view and looking at the system in the abstract from an outsiders perspective, the kin *waku* and Dhambiñ identified as branches of the *bäpurru* are all from one of four *bäpurru* involved in the marriage bestowal cycle.<sup>9</sup> Figure 4 (below) provides a diagrammatic representation of Dhambiñ and *waku*'s diagram. This is a genealogical diagram illustrating bestowal relations and a genealogical bases for socio-centric clan relations (adapted from Morphy 1991: 55). Each 'tree' is a *bäpurru* joined together with significant others. It is therefore important to point out that the 'tree' does not actually constitute a singular *bäpurru*. The various kin relations denoted by these branches belong to from different *bäpurru* and thus different collective bodies, as per Dhambiñ and *waku*'s drawings (Figures 1–3). There is great stability in this system *and* the branches of each *bäpurru* grow, fall away, and regrow as interdependent forms.

Centred on a male ego, the marriage bestowal cycle involves interrelations between five *bäpurru*. Excluding one's own (and thus one's father's) *bäpurru* these include two of each moiety: *märi-pulu* (MM *bäpurru*) and *ñändi-pulu* (M *bäpurru*) to the right of 'us' in the diagram, and *waku-pulu* (wC/ZC *bäpurru*) and *gutharra-pulu* (wDC/ZDC *bäpurru*) to the left. Men look to their male *märi* (MMB) to bestow his own daughter (*gäthu*) as their mother-in-law (*mukul rumaru*), and to their *ñapipi* (MB) to bestow

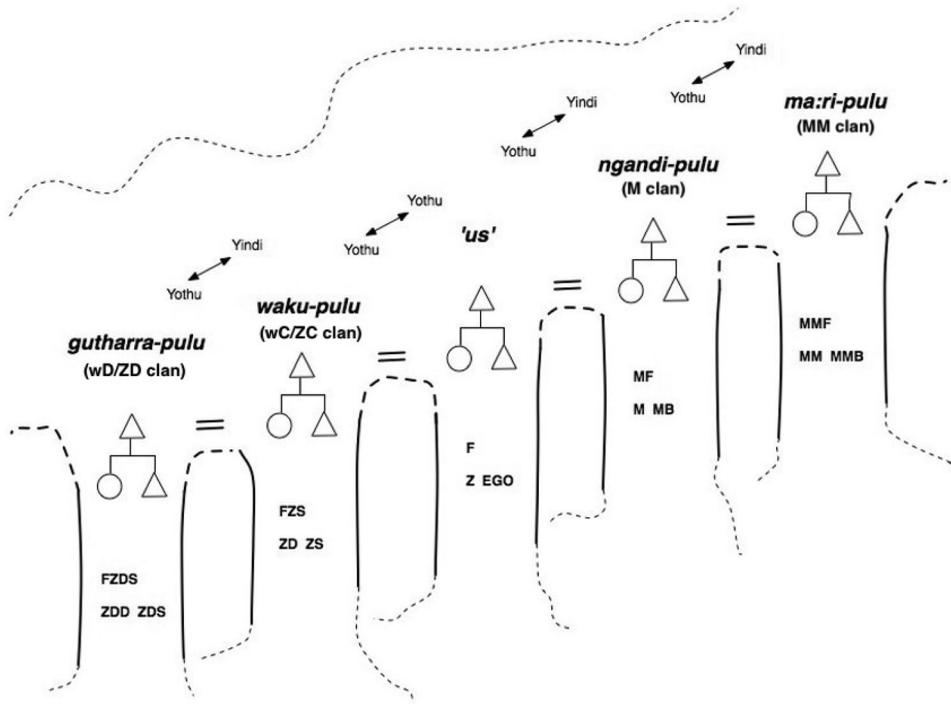


Figure 4. Bestowal relations (adapted from Morphy 1991).

one of his own daughters to them as a wife (*galay* MBD). This is possible because *ŋapipi* marries *mukul rumaru* (Frances Morphy *pers. comm.* 2012).

With some exceptions, F. Morphy observes, ‘People in the past tended to intermarry with *bäpurru* whose countries were close to their own’ (2008). Intermarrying *bäpurru* from close or contiguous countries, linked through recurring ties of kinship, form what F. Morphy has termed ‘connubia’ (2008): ‘Dense connubial networks are recognised by Yolŋu as a social fact and are often associated with regional names’ (F. Morphy 2008: 7). The networks were effective at a regional level, at which patterns of seasonal mobility and residence were organised (F. Morphy 2008: 7). This is still very much the case in the network of homeland communities around Maṭamaṭa near Arnhem Bay. This will be discussed further in the next section which illustrates our final point, namely that this model has motivational force. That is, this model implicates people’s sense of identity, affect and movement and the understandings that underlie it motivate people to action.

**The Affective, Moral and Directive Force of rom (law)**

We would like to draw your attention to the way Yolŋu talk about this model of trunks, branches, and roots, using rhetorical questions that concern orientation, direction, and movement. This is partly a reflection of the way Yolŋu think about relationships as ‘strings’ that *manapanmirri* (connect, join link) people and places together. *Raki*’ (stings, ropes), as previously suggested, are ties of kinship that bind people together through mutual obligations and responsibilities, and also draw people together

through mutual ties of affiliation and affection.<sup>10</sup> They are not static but implicate feelings about oneself in relation to others (people, places, *bäpurru*) and, importantly, they instigate action (*gakal*) through affective ties, responsibilities and obligations. This echoes the way Daniel Wilfred speaks about the affective ‘pull’ of *raki* in his experience of *manikay* (ceremonial songs): ‘I can feel it on my mind, I can feel the old people. The *raki*’ is still there, pulling me’ (quoted in Curkpatrick 2020: 78).

However, it is not just *raki*’ connections that implicate strong feelings and instigate action. This can be said of the tree-body model as a whole which seeks to articulate the affective, moral, and directive force of *rom* (law). Further examples of this way of talking about this model can be given. For example, on one occasion, in talking with Dhambin̄ about relations between ‘our’ *bäpurru* and how it relates to certain estates owned by other closely related *bäpurru* (a distinction which relates to what might be described as primary versus secondary rights to Country). Dhambin̄ explained as follows:

*Dhuwala nhe gulun’ wāṅa.*

This here is your stomach place.

*Wanhaṅuru ṅayi dhurrwara-manapan.*

From where the ends of the string join [together]

*Wanhamala ṅayi raki’ dhuwala?*

Towards where is the string?

*Ga nhepi nhe yurru miny’ tji dharrpum wanhaṅura nhe Yolṅu.*

You yourself will paint the designs to show the place you are [truly] from.

*Wanhaṅura ṅayi ṅunhi raki’ nhuna dhunupa-yirra ga wanhaṅuru nhe yuwalk.*

From the place that makes your string straight, that is where is you/your body is truly from.

Strings that are *dhunupa* (straight, proper, correct) describe relationships that are proper and correct relative to the anchored body of the *bäpurru*. This contrasts with strings (i.e. relationships) that are *djarrpi* (crooked, improper, incorrect), which threaten to upset or cause conflict between people and *bäpurru*. Put another way: straight relationships are those that ‘follow up’ the *raki*’ (string, rope) and make people *dhunupa* (straight) in relation to each other. In times of unrest or conflict, when elders seek resolution or restoration, they appeal to the strings between people and *bäpurru* involved – the need to follow up the strings (between people) and make them straight. Strings can only be straight in relation to one another when people stand with their feet in place in the proper foundation of *rom*: strings are straight in relation to the anchored body of the *bäpurru*, emplaced in the foundation of *rom* (law).

For Dhambin̄, *raki*’ ultimately provide orientation, clarifying the relationships between different *bäpurru* and their associated country, ceremony, and kin. Seeking to clarify my understanding of the relationship between our *bäpurru* and significant others, she put her hand on my chest and said,

‘From every *ringitj*, *gamunungu*, *gapan*, it’s becoming separate, do you see? But that is our front.’

From every *ringitj* group/site, white clay/clan design, it’s becoming separate, do you see? But that is our front.

Dhambin's words above conveyed the importance of recognising differences between *bäpurru* to gaining a sense of orientation that is at once social, geographic, political, and moral. From an anthropological point of view, the force of this model derives in large part from the 'naturalness' and 'rightness' of the *a priori* commitments and understandings that underlie it. From a Yolŋu point of view, these drawings tell a story about what is normal, proper and right for Yolŋu people. This model has strong feelings behind it because it tells a story about 'who we are, what we are like, and how we relate through *gurrutu* to each other and to Country. These relationships all entail responsibilities and obligations that Yolŋu strive to fulfil, not because of any 'rules' but because that is what it means to be Yolŋu and to have *gurrutu* (kin/ship). To dismiss such commitments would be to act as if we were *gurrutumiriw* (without kin/ship), one of the worst insults in the Yolŋu world.

### *Topography of the Anchored Body and Strings of Relatedness*

What does it mean in topographic terms to suggest that the shared understandings underlying this model are imbued with affective, motivational, and directive force? In the broadest sense it means that the *luku* and *raki*' closely reflect patterns of residence and mobility. The tree-body model of the collective self in relation to significant others can literally be mapped onto place in terms of geography and even mobility data, as illustrated in [Figure 5](#).

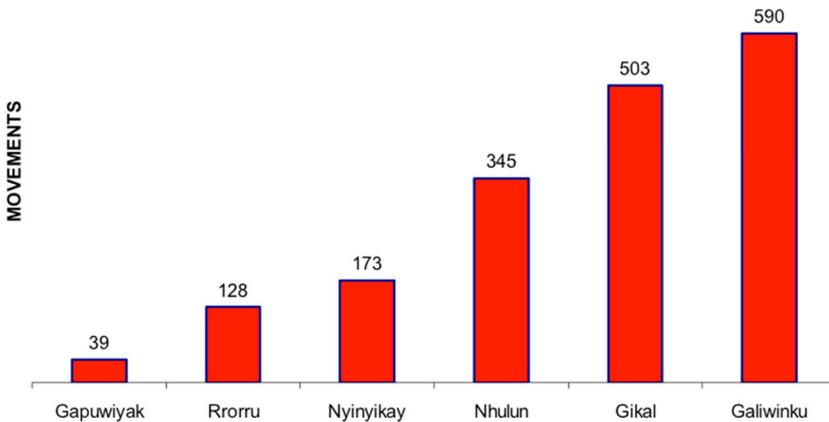
In [Figure 5](#), we can see the most salient relationships between *bäpurru* in the immediate area surrounding Maŋamaŋa, which is the focal site of the estate held by Burarrwaŋa Gumatj (identified as 'ego').<sup>11</sup> The *bäpurru* pictured are the significant *bäpurru* that together comprise a bestowal cycle, as per [Figures 3](#) and [4](#), in relation to the Burarrwaŋa Gumatj. The position of the tree in the Figure shows the *luku-wäŋa* (footprint place) of this *bäpurru*'s estate. On neighbouring estates can be seen our *waku-pulu* (WC, ZC *bäpurru*), our *ŋändi-pulu* (M *bäpurru*) and our *märi-pulu* (MM, MMB *bäpurru*). While these are each anchored in place on their respective countries, they are also joined or linked together through *raki*' – both *gurrkurr* (roots, veins) and *wäŋa* (branches, arms) – which connect 'inside' ceremonial relations of shared *maŋayin* (sacra) and 'outside' relations through maternal relationships and marriage.

By looking at mobility data ([Figure 6](#)) we can see movements between the homelands of *bäpurru* and gauge the significance of connections that link people, *bäpurru* and place. The mobility data that I collected over a twelve-month period illustrates the motivational force of these significant, close *raki*' (strings). While based at Maŋamaŋa in 2007–2008, I recorded daily movements of people in and around the community over a twelve-month period. I noted how many people came in and out of the community each day for twelve months. Each person leaving or arriving was counted as 'one unit' of movement for the day. I also noted where they had come from and where they were going. Collated, the data shows the pull of the *raki*' joining people to this place as a close and important connection. Movement was predominantly between countries of one's closest kin and their *bäpurru*. It is interesting to note, however, that the data is skewed by the larger townships of Galiwin'ku Island and Nhulunbuy, where many close kin now reside and where particular resources and services are readily available (such as grocery stores, government services, banks, etc.).



**Figure 5.** Topographically locating kin and bestowal relations. The trees drawn over the satellite image show the location of the *luku-wāna* (footprint place) of different *bāpuru* estates around Matamata.

**PLACE AND MOVEMENT**



**Figure 6.** Movements of people between Matamata and other locations, over a 12-month period.

The homeland community of Rrorruwuy belongs to our *waku-pulu*, Dātiwuy. The Homeland community of Nyinyikay is part of the larger Warramiri estate held by Burarrwāna Gumatj. Gikal is our *nāndi-pulu*, belonging to Gālpu. The area surrounding the

township of Nhulunbuy includes Gumatj county, and thus visitations to the township are also visitations to kin, although family often stop with our *nāndi-pulu* (mother's *bāpurru*), Gälpu. Galiwin'ku Island belongs predominantly to our *nāndi-pulu* (mother's *bāpurru*) and *waku-pulu* (WC/ZC *bāpurru*). When family stop at Galiwin'ku they typically stay with close kin from the same *bāpurru* or one of the *bāpurru* in the local connubia. In this way, we see that the mobility patterns reflect what it means to be anchored residentially, at or near one's footprint place as the primary place of residence, and also the pattern and frequency of movement between places. This illustrates the weight of the *luku* (footprint, anchor) and the 'pull' or 'draw' of strings of relatedness.<sup>12</sup>

In death as in life, this model motivates action. After a person's death senior ceremonial men gather to make important decisions about what songs to perform as part of the mortuary ceremony to guide the spirit of that person back home to their *luku wāna* (footprint, anchor place). As our late *yapa* (sister) said when explaining about song choices for funeral ceremonies:

We have to go back wanhaŋuru ŋayi yuwalkndja, to sing from that place, from the root of the tree, māri-pulu, yapa-pulu, ŋandi-pulu, momu, dhuwayku manikay, Datiwuy, Gälpu, Djapu, Djambarrpuŋu, Ńaymil. We can't cut off any of the tree!

We have to go back to where they are truly from, to the trunk/torso, to sing from that place, from the root of the tree, mother's mother *bāpurru*, sister *bāpurru*, father *bāpurru*, father's mother *bāpurru*, husband-country songs, Datiwuy, Gälpu, Djapu, Djambarrpuŋu, Ńaymil. We can't cut off any of the tree!

## Conclusion

In the three drawings by Dhambiŋ presented above (Figures 1–3), *bāpurru* have been represented as collective social bodies, drawn as trees 'rooted' in place and known as *luku wāna* (footprint, anchor place). While the collective social body of any one *bāpurru* is discreetly identified in important ways, every *bāpurru* is *manapanmirri* (linked or joined together) to a number of significant others, through ceremonial relations and marriage, here represented as *raki*' (strings, ropes). The *rumbal* (body or trunk) can be seen as the minimal unity of the group or 'least inclusive *bāpurru*' (Keen 2000: 421). These are aspects of the identity of the *bāpurru* that are unique, attributes that it does not share with any other *bāpurru*. These unique attributes minimally include a *likan* design and a number of *likan* names associated with the big-name country that they own or 'hold'. The most unique and important design of the *bāpurru* – their *likan* design or *dhulaŋ* – is described as the 'image' of the *luku* of the *bāpurru* – as it is impressed in place, in their 'footprint, anchor place'. These are actual sites and the focus of life on Country. The *dhulaŋ* designs that pertain to the *luku wāna* of each *bāpurru* are effectively their 'title' to Country. These are considered identifiable attributes of the *bāpurru* and they are also properties of the people of that *bāpurru*, a part of their identity as a person.

On this point, our late *yapa* (sister) Batumbil Burarrwaŋa described the intimate, co-substantial identities of people, place, and *maḍayin* (sacra) of one *bāpurru*. *Maḍayin* are in fact considered the manifestation or product of the *wāŋarr* who created them as are Yolŋu people themselves.

'Narra nhānharamirri?  
What, who am I? What am I [like]?

Yolḥu ḥarra, ḥarra Yirritja, ḥarra Gumatj.  
I am Yolḥu, I am Yirritja, I am Gumatj.

'Narra nhā? Gurtha ḥarra, ḥarra bāru, ḥarra maranydjalk.  
I am what? I am fire, I am crocodile, I am stingray.

'Gumatj ḥilimurru, ḥilimurru Djutarra – Bayini ḥilimurru [. . . ]  
We are Gumatj, we are Djutarra, we are Bayini [. . . ]

Ḥuli ḥilimurru yaka ḥunhi waḥarr ḥilimurru manapanmirrinha, we would be jus' nothing.  
If we didn't have waḥarr joining us together we would just be nothing.

Emptyha, sitting here jus' emptyha, ḥuli ḥilimurru yaka manapanmirrinha waḥarryu ḥuli  
wāḥa dhuwala yaka maḍayinmirri.

Empty, just sitting here empty, if we weren't joined together by those waḥarr, if this country  
was without maḍayin (sacra).

### Revisiting the Literature

Rather than supporting any one side of the debate about whether Yolḥu clans should be considered corporate entities or not, Dhambiḥ's drawings introduced a new position in agreement with aspects of both sides. We would affirm that Keen is partly correct in his critique of the clan model, in which he argues that *bāpurru* are not discrete, bounded, corporate entities, nested in a number of cross-cutting aggregates of various kinds. This can be seen in our drawings. No one *bāpurru* stands alone as an independent, discrete, social entity; *bāpurru* are anchored social forms that are 'linked' or 'joined together' to a number of significant others through ceremonial relations and marriage. Further, the *luku* (footprint, anchor, root of a tree) closely reflect Keen's description of focused group identities, and the *raki'* (strings, ropes) his description of group identities extending outward from this point. However, the *raki'* (strings, ropes) in our model indicate specific *gurrutu* and inter-*bāpurru* relations, which suggests a more distinct or definite form than Keen's description of connections among such identities as open and extendable 'strings of connectedness' (2000: 421). Perhaps another minor difference relates to Keen's argument against the description of *bāpurru* as 'corporate' – here our model supports aspects of Morphy and Williams' position. This material suggests that *bāpurru* are indeed corporate, as Morphy (1991) and Williams (1999) argue, but only in the sense and to the degree that each *bāpurru* 'holds' a distinct corpus of *maḍayin*, here represented as the *luku* (foot, footprint, anchor) and the *rumbal* (body, trunk or torso), anchored in place on Country.

What was an impromptu methodology – drawing on some butcher's paper – within an ongoing cross-cultural conversation between the authors, has proved to be a useful pedagogical tool with which Dhambiḥ was able to help me understand the nature of *bāpurru* forms and interrelations. It also proved to be a useful heuristic tool that enabled us to reinterpret or recast well-known anthropological tropes as a living portrait of Yolḥu social organisation. Our method captures a living portrait of *bāpurru* as *relational* structural forms – structural forms that are both discrete and anchored in place,

and inextricably linked to significant other kin, *bäpurru*, and places.<sup>13</sup> The drawings also introduced the dimension of affect and motivation which allowed the focus to shift toward the movement of relations, rather than a static model. We were able to show that there are strong feelings underlying this model because, for YolŃu, it tells a story about what is normal, proper, and right for YolŃu people – how YolŃu relate to each other and to country through *gurrutu* (kinship) and *rom* (law). These relationships implicate strong feelings of connectedness and belonging and entail responsibilities and obligations that people strive to fulfil because this is what it ‘is’ and means to be *gurrutumirri* (kin, to have the quality of kinship), to people and to country. *Yolkala gumurrilili?* Towards whose chest? This is an anchored orientation and movement: it is about knowing where you are from, where you belong, and it is about *gakal* (action) through one’s connections – our responsibilities and obligations – to others.

## Notes

1. Sociomateriality is a concept used to describe the entanglement of social and material elements in the production of human action and meaning-making.
2. I use a kinship term to refer to *waku* throughout because, while she was happy for this article to be written, has asked not to be named.
3. A moiety system is a structural system which divides the social world into two divisions.
4. On *raki*, see also Curkpatrick and Wilfred (2023), who explore the ways different voices entwine in song as akin to *rärk* (crosshatching) in painting and the texture of *raki* (many fibres intertwining). Corn and Gumbula (2006:178–179) write about *yarrata* (string lines of descent) which ‘represent within each moiety and, more specifically, within each *mala* the direct patrilineage or *yarrata* (literally ‘string’ ‘line’) of contemporary YolŃu from their *wajarr* and the authority that YolŃu have always possessed over their *wäŃa* and *maḁayin* [sacred law] by virtue of those lineages.
5. Joseph Gumbula (in Corn and Gumbula 2006) has drawn an insightful diagram of the different ‘domains’ of YolŃu knowledge and associated polities, entitled ‘the YolŃu knowledge Constitution.’ See also De Lary Healy (2022).
6. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out a missing annotation for the red fruit in this drawing. DhambiŃ and *waku* reported that the fruit represents the children of the *bäpurru*.
7. Kinship is considered as a measure of distance, from *galki* ‘close’ to *barrku* (distant, far away). That is, spatially, the place kinship is measured from is the *luku* and that the *luku* impressed in the *lirriwi* (ashes/shade) is the possessive and protective shade of kinship.
8. Ian Keen notes that people who share a particular set of *maḁayin* will contextually say they are ‘one *bäpurru*’ for that *maḁayin* complex (1994, 2000). This is consistent with the terms explored here. With reference to DhambiŃ and *waku*’s drawing, we can see this potential relation between two *bäpurru* who share the same inside string, root or set thereof. People certainly say that *bäpurru* are ‘one’ where they come together as *ringitj* groups, for example, on the basis of shared *maḁayin* and connections to place. Keen describes these as ‘extendable’ strings of relatedness – new connections that may be discovered. However, I have not come across the notion of ‘extension’ used by YolŃu in this way.
9. The YolŃu marriage system is actually defined by the mother-in-law bestowal rather than the bestowal of women as future wives (Morphy 1991).
10. A number of anthropologists have also noted that socio-political, ceremonial relationships are frequently represented in ceremonial performances by handmade strings (e.g. Williams 1999, Rudder 1993: 20).
11. *Maḁamaḁa* is the father’s country for Warramiri but has been ‘looked after’ by the BurarrwaŃa Gumaḁj as their *märi* (MM) country in line with principles of succession since a

time before European arrival in the area. This does not affect the relations between people and country depicted in these drawings because the foundation of *rom* does not change: language and *maḍayin* exist *a priori* in the form and identity of country. When a *bäpurrū* succeeds to a particular country they become the people who stand with their feet in the foundation of *rom* in that place and they ‘look after’ the country and associated *maḍayin* as it existed before and always. It simply becomes part of their ‘body’, as it were. There is a clear line and process of succession in Yolŋu *rom* between particular clans of the same moiety. Howard and Frances Morphy (2023: 10–11) have recently written on this topic: ‘The Ancestral footprint of the land cannot be changed. Land has belonged from the beginning of time to a clan of the same moiety. Hence a group cannot succeed to its mother’s country – a clan of the opposite moiety. The primary claim to succession is for *gutharra* to take over their *māri*’s country. The group taking over will sing the songs that were already there, will take on the ritual responsibilities associated with place and will speak the dialect associated with that estate.’

12. Frances Morphy has written about this patterning in terms of Yolŋu cultural topography exploring the way it manifests in contemporary Homeland life, in the location of the settlements themselves and also in the ‘mobilities and immobilities’ among and between settlements throughout the region (2010).
13. This echoes the concept of ‘relative autonomy’ that Frances and Howard Morphy have written about regarding Yolŋu orientations and political desires in a cross-cultural context (2013).

## Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude to *gurrutūmirri walala* for your generosity and kinship. Without your generosity and patience my research, and collaborations like, this would not be possible. Fieldwork for this paper was originally undertaken on an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) scholarship. Many thanks to Samuel Curkpatrick, Howard Morphy, and Frances Morphy for your helpful feedback on the draft.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Australian Research Council: [grant number DP200102773].

## References

- Corn, A., and Gumbula, N., 2006. *Rom* and the Academy Repositioned: Binary Models in Yolŋu Intellectual Traditions and Their Application to Wider Intercultural Dialogues. In: L. Russell, ed. *Boundary Writing: An Exploration of Race, Culture, and Gender Binaries in Contemporary Australia*. Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press, 170–198.
- Curkpatrick, S., 2020. *Singing Bones: Ancestral Creativity and Collaboration*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
- Curkpatrick, S., and Wilfred, D., 2023. Shimmering Brilliance: A Yolŋu Aesthetic of Creativity and Collaboration. In: S. Kirby, and J. Gabriel, eds. *Australasian Music at Home and Abroad*. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, in press.
- De Lary Healy, J., 2022. Yolŋu Pathways to Value Creation in Museum and Archival Collections: The Work and Journey of Joseph Gumbula’. In: H. Morphy, and R. McKenzie, eds. *Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value*. London: Routledge, 240–259.
- Keen, I., 1994. *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Keen, I., 1995. Metaphor and Metalanguage: Groups in Northeast Arnhem Land. *American Ethnologist*, 22 (3), 502–527.
- Keen, I., 2000. A Bundle of Sticks: The Debate Over the Yolŋu Clans. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6 (3), 419–436.
- Morphy, H., 1991. *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morphy, H., 1997. Death, Exchange and the Reproduction of Yolngu Society. In: F. Merlan, J. Morton, and A. Rumsey, eds. *Scholar and Sceptic: Essays to Honour of Les Hiatt*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 123–150.
- Morphy, F., 2008. Whose Governance for Whose Good? The Laynhapuy Homelands Association and the Neo-Assimilationist Turn in Indigenous Policy. In: J. Hunt, D. Smith, S. Garling, and W. Sanders, eds. *Contested Governance: Culture, Power and Institutions in Indigenous Australia*. Canberra: ANU ePress, 113–151.
- Morphy, F., 2010. (Im)Mobility: Regional Population Structures in Aboriginal Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 45 (3), 3630–3382.
- Morphy, H., and Morphy, F., 2013. Anthropological Theory and Government Policy in Australia's Northern Territory: The Hegemony of the 'Mainstream.'. *American Anthropologist*, 115 (2), 174–187.
- Morphy, H., and Morphy, F. 2023. 'We Follow The Names': 3000 Years of Yolŋu History in Northeast Arnhem Land. Unpublished paper presented at the Royal Anthropological Institute Research Seminar Series, February 27, London.
- Rudder, J. 1993. Yolŋu Cosmology: An Unchanging Cosmos Incorporating a Rapidly Changing World? PhD Thesis. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Tamisari, F., 1998. Body, Vision and Movement: In the Footprints of the Ancestors. *Oceania*, 68 (4), 249–270.
- Warner, L., 1937 (1964). *A Black Civilisation: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe*. Revised ed. New York: Harper and Row.
- Williams, N. M., 1983. Yolngu concepts of land ownership. In: N. Peterson and M. Langton, eds. *Aborigines, land and land rights*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 94–109.
- Williams, N., 1999. The Relationship of Genealogical Reckoning and Group Formation: Yolngu Examples. In: J. Finlay, B. Rigsby, and H. Bek, eds. *Connections in Native Title: Genealogies, Kinship and Groups*. CAEPR Research Monograph 13. Canberra: Australian National University, 125–139.