As researchers engaged with the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land, we were very conscious of being part of a work in progress—not only because the task at any one point in time is so enormous, but also since Yolngu society, like all societies, is in constant state of change. The primary ethnographic data for this chapter cover the thirty-five years of our own long-term fieldwork among the Gunmurri Miwatj (eastern) Yolngu, beginning in 1973. In addition we are fortunate to be able to build on an outstanding ethnographic heritage that dates from the first years of intensive European occupation of Yolngu country. The research of W. Lloyd Warner in the late 1920s, Donald Thompson between 1935 and 1944, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, and the work of our contemporaries and near
contemporaries Warren Shapiro, Nicolas Peterson, Nancy Williams, Ian Keen, and Janice Reid have created an exceptional record of the last eighty years of Yolngu society. There are now several younger scholars in the field, or just out of it, whose work promises to carry the record into the next century, and increasingly Yolngu scholars themselves are adding to the tradition.

Here we focus on changes in Yolngu mortuary ceremonies. In his fieldnotes of 29 July 1937 Donald Thomson wrote, "If a man could but follow all that takes place when a yakmurri [yakumirri, important; lit. name-having] man dies he would understand almost all of the culture of these people" (Peterson 1976, 97). Today Yolngu mortuary rituals are equally informative, both about the changes that have occurred in the interim and about the dominant values of contemporary Yolngu society. As representations of social structure and religious beliefs they show remarkable continuities over time, yet they also show many influences from the outside world—borrowings from Pacific Island cultures and from Christianity, the use of photographs and motor vehicles, and so on.

CHANGE, CONTINUITY, AND THE RELATIVE AUTONOMY OF SYSTEMS

Observed over a period of more than thirty years, Yolngu society has been in a state of almost constant change, affected by its encapsulation within the settler Australian state with its concomitant and perpetual changes in government policy settings (F. Morphy 2008), the introduction of new technologies, and economic transformation. A long-term historical perspective, encompassing both the observations of earlier ethnographers and our own over the span of our adult lives, allows us to see a society responding creatively and contingently to new circumstances and opportunities, but one in which life is often on the edge of being out of control, where the expression of values in new ways has had unintended consequences.

It is tempting to see contemporary mortuary rituals as a hybrid adjustment, with history sedimented productively in expressive cul-
in any performance tradition. However, when he came out of his tent and looked more closely at the context he might be surprised that the performance he had once seen enacted during the disinterment of bones from a grave now accompanies the transfer of a coffin from a funeral shade to the back of a Toyota Land Cruiser.

We have excellent data on Yolngu mortuary rituals at the time of European colonization (from Thomson; see Warner 1958, 412ff, and Peterson 1976). However, far from seeing this data as a means of establishing a baseline from which to measure subsequent changes, we see it as itself evidence of a continuing process of change. At the time of European colonization and of the first ethnographers, Yolngu mortuary rituals were best seen as the outcome of a diverse body of practice that varied across the region and according to individual circumstances, the place and context of death, and the social status, age, and gender of the deceased. Certainly European colonization has been the catalyst for significant change. But Yolngu mortuary rituals have probably always been in a state of change and have always responded to external factors. For some three hundred years before European colonization, trepang harvesters from Indonesia (mangathara, or the Macassans) visited the Yolngu coast annually. Evidence of Macassan influence can be seen in many aspects of Yolngu mortuary rituals.

While acknowledging that external influences have always been a factor in Yolngu mortuary practices (which are, if anything, characterized by their diversity), we nonetheless approach them as a body of practice with a trajectory that is relatively autonomous and that must be understood only partly in terms of adaptive responses to new circumstances. Yolngu mortuary rituals are not hybrid creations made up through combining elements that history has brought into contact. Rather they are the product of a regional ecumene, which has at its center distinctive value creation processes, beliefs about the nature of being, and ways of structuring action to express these beliefs and values. This is why, in hindsight, it is possible to see in Yolngu mortuary rituals many features that display continuity over time.

Yolngu mortuary rituals have always been an extended body of practice or performance, comprising the disposal of the body and
purificatory and commemorative rituals. In Warner's and Thomson's
time a person was in effect "buried" several times. Ceremony began
while the person was dying and when possible always involved them
as an actor (Warner 1938, 431). In certain (perhaps ideal)
circumstances, the dying persons initiated ceremonial activity themselves.
This initial stage has changed little and involves the performance of
songs and dances prefiguring those that will be performed after
death. In the past, the initial disposal of the body, after it had been
painted with clan designs, was through burial or by exposure on a
platform, and it was then left until only the bones and hair remained.
These were subsequently collected and re-"buried" in a bark con-
tainer that was carried about by close relatives for a number of years.
Parts of the skeleton were given to male relatives (Morphy 1977), the
hair was made into string, and the skull may have been painted and
on occasion worn suspended around the neck of a female relative
(Thomson 1939). In the final stage of the mortuary rituals, a hollow-
log coffin would be constructed and painted, and the bones placed in-
side. The main theme of the mortuary ritual, according to Thomson
and Warner, was to guide the person's kinship (soul) back to the
wanger (ancestral dimension), where it would be reincorporated in a
wangerji (spiritual reservoir; lit. eye, waterhole) in the person's own
clan country. Each stage of the process, each burial, was directed
toward the same objective. The spirit's journey was accompanied by
the performance of songs and dances and the production of paint-
ings celebrating wanger being connected the place of death
with the spirit's destination. A detailed analysis of Yolngu mortuary
ritual reveals many other themes (Morphy 1984, 2008), but we will
focus on this one.

Over time the events of Yolngu mortuary rituals have changed,
but they have always remained an extended performance. During
the period of missionization the main changes that occurred were
the gradual disappearance or removal of the actual body from the
commemorative process and its replacement by representations. Al-
though secondary and tertiary reburial was still being practiced on
the boundaries of Yolngu country at the time of our initial fieldwork
(Clunies Ross, and Hiatt 1977), they had long ceased to be practiced

in mission settlements such as Yirrkala. When we first arrived at
Yirrkala in the early 1970s, funerals comprised burial in a coffin in
a grave. The body of the deceased was no longer painted with clan
designs; instead the same designs were placed on the coffin lid. The
bones were no longer dug up to be eventually placed in a hollow-log
coffin. Instead, possessions of the dead person, in particular items of
clothing and objects of "contagion" such as mattresses, bedding, and
personal effects, were placed in a suitcase or an unused room and
kept for a subsequent occasion. That occasion might be a circumci-
sion ceremony or a special memorial event. The "remain(der)s" were
then treated as if they were the bones of the deceased and buried in
a special coffin or burned in a hollow inside a sand sculpture. The
ritual performance associated with these events drew from mira-
nyi ceremonial law exactly as if it were the bones that were being
placed in a hollow-log coffin. This appeared to us to be a relatively
simple process of substitution in which analogues for the body and
body parts were acted upon. The substitutions could be explained
in part as a response to missionary sensitivities and concepts of hy-
giene (though rules of hygiene were in fact always integral to Yolngu
ritual practice). The painting of the coffin lid as a replacement for the
painting of the body was a logical substitution; the coffin became an
outer skin for the body. Since it was no longer possible to disinter
the bones, objects closely associated with the dead person served as
substitutes.

Another change that had occurred was that ceremonial perfor-
manhad been organized to fit in with the timetable of the mission
work routine. While some ritual activity occurred in its own time—
all day and night beside the body of the dying person, with the nec-

essary rites performed at the moment of death—the main cerem-
onial events had to be coordinated with the mission's timetable. The
final days of the funeral, when ritual activity was at its height, usually
took place at weekends. Weekends were also the major days for other
ceremonial performances such as circumcisions and the major epi-
isodes of regional fertility ceremonies. The relationship with the mi-
nission and the missionaries was negotiated, and was viewed by Yolngu
in a largely positive way. Missionaries participated if they wished
in Yolngu performances; and the timetable of mission working life, while acting as a regulatory mechanism, did not intrude greatly on the structure of ceremonial performance. Yolngu elders carried on aspects of their law outside the mission timetable. The church had acquired a delimited role in funeral ceremonies; after the Yolngu performance ended with the body in the grave, the Methodist minister stepped up to perform the Christian burial rites. While the youthful Agnostics anthropologists found this somewhat intrusive, Yolngu did not.

IN RETROSPECT: A SYNCHRONIC AND PARTIAL VIEW

Yolngu mortuary practices in 1976, forty years after the establishment of Yirrkala mission station, appeared to us as a successful adaptation in response to the colonial context. The painting of the coffin lid seemed to be an established practice; it was a central component of every burial ceremony we attended over a two-year period across the Yolngu region between 1974 and 1976. The song series were the same as those that had been recorded and transcribed by earlier anthropologists, and the paintings produced in ceremonial contexts showed great continuity with the past. Yolngu participation in mortuary rituals seemed to be total and involving, with great energy directed toward the fate of the soul but equally toward the recovery and support of the living and bereaved. We had a sense of a new stability that depended on creative and productive processes.

Subsequent developments, which we would not have observed had we not returned intermittently to the field, revealed a more complex set of relationships between the relatively autonomous parts of the whole than were discernible to us in the mid-1970s. In that first period of fieldwork we were both focused on the art and material culture of the Yolngu. The painting of coffin lids and the substitution of material culture for bodies caught and held our attention.

Yet in retrospect it appears that the ancestral identity of the body could be designated without an accompanying painting, simply by dancing and singing it into existence. The act of painting in the end was not a necessary component of the event, for the painting of the coffin lid that seemed to be one of the defining elements of mortuary ritual in the mid-1970s was in fact a recent innovation going back a few years, and soon after our first period of fieldwork ended it was no longer routinely practiced. Since the 1980s it has not been practiced at all. Had we happened to undertake our first fieldwork ten years earlier or five years later, we would never have witnessed it as a component of funeral ceremonies.

There were things in our field notebooks that did not make it into our published analyses of the time (H. Morphy 1977:984). Our fieldwork coincided with the establishment of the local mining town and with the end of "mission time" and the transfer of local administration to the Yolngu-controlled Yirrkala Dhanbul Association. We witnessed at first hand, since we were living "in the camp," the ensuing disruption to everyday life and the violence fueled by the ready availability of alcohol. We wrote publicly of the beauty, complexity, resilience, and adaptability of Yolngu society and culture, while wondering privately whether, in fact, we were witnessing the beginning of the end of a coherently Yolngu sociality.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A MORE COMPLEX UNDERSTANDING

In the 1980s Yolngu women began to produce bark textiles at the local Women's Center. From that time, in funeral ceremonies, clan designs in the form of textiles were wrapped around the body; and later bark paintings would occasionally be hung on the interior or exterior walls of the sheds where the body lay. These innovations carried with them memories from the past just as the coffin-lid paintings had done—memories not only of the person who died and their relationships to others, but of past practices. The shrouds printed with the clan designs of the deceased could be connected to the cloths that were such an important part of exchanges with the Macassan visitors. But they also made new connections by reminding people of the shroud wrapped around the body of Christ (see Magowan 2007 for the articulation of Christianity with Yolngu religious practices). Thus in the 1980s we began to learn that the values and practices underlying the form of Yolngu mortuary rituals are fun-
damently both recursive and incorporative, and indeed these are precisely among the reasons why these systems of value and practice are able to adapt to new contexts and seize opportunities while appearing to carry the past with them.

Yolngu mortuary practices have certainly been adaptive, and substitution has been part of how they are in continuity with the past. But in the 1980s we were now learning that an understanding of the trajectory of Yolngu mortuary rituals required a perspective that sees Yolngu agency behind a series of innovations that take the performances in new directions. The nature of these innovations can only be understood if they are seen as the outcome of continuing value creation processes that in turn influence the way in which radical social change has its impact on Yolngu society. We were fortunate to conduct our fieldwork at the beginning of some of the most significant changes and to subsequently see some further evidence of recursion. We will focus on two interrelated but relatively autonomous value trajectories: the politics of the body and the movement of the spirit of the deceased to its ancestral home.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In the mid-1970s newly available technology began to be exploited in significant ways. A body could now be preserved in the morgue of the local mining town's hospital and transported by plane to the clan homeland. Negotiations on a death could therefore be prolonged by extending the "life" of the body, and introduced transport could be used to move the body close to the spirit's final destination. These possibilities entered the Yolngu world at a time when, in reaction to the alcohol-fueled violence of settlement life at Yirrkala, the "homelands movement" began to gather strength, initially with the support of some of the local missionaries (see F. Morphy 2008). When the mission ceded control to the Dharawal Association, the mission work pattern no longer had to be followed so rigorously either at the homelands or at the main settlement. This set of factors moved the trajectory of Yolngu primary mortuary rituals toward larger events of longer duration held at one or another of the clan homelands.

"SOON WE WILL BE SPENDING ALL OUR TIME AT FUNERALS" | 59

We witnessed the very beginning of this change in trajectory. In 1970 a sixteen-year-old boy was killed in a car accident. He was one of the first to die as a result of the introduction of alcohol to the region. His body was placed in the newly opened Nhulunbuy hospital morgue while arrangements for his funeral were made. It was a tense period. His father lived at his clan homeland, and the family members were divided in their feelings as to whether or not to take the body to the homelands. The body remained in the morgue while negotiations took place, mediated by Narritjin Mayneri, the senior member of the Manggu clan, who was then living at Yirrkala. In the end it was decided to fly the body to the homelands and have the funeral there. It was the first occasion on which a body had been flown for burial, and the first time that the mortuary had held the body until funeral arrangements could be agreed. The funeral was a big occasion, and a cascade of vehicles transported over one hundred participants down the track to take part. Yolngu had no difficulty in adapting ritual performances to the new context—in dancing the body from the morgue, in escorting it into the plane, and devising ways of ensuring the plane could be "freed" to allow passengers to travel in it afterward. The event was successful and a successful mediation had taken place. But, perspicaciously, Narritjin said to us after the event that he was worried by the use of the mortuary. He said that knowing Yolngu, if they were not careful, they would find their whole lives taken up by funerals. He was more prescient than we were in predicting the direction of the trajectory; for the next two decades it did seem that funerals were gradually getting out of hand.

FUNERALS TAKE CENTER STAGE

There was a gap of nearly fifteen years in our fieldwork with Yolngu between 1982 and 1997, except for a short field trip in 1988. However, since 1997 we have been back each year. When we returned in 1997 we found that funerals had followed the trajectory that Narritjin had predicted. Bodies were held as a matter of course in the hospital morgue until people were ready to perform the burial.
Community resources had been increasing as the region became more integrated within the wider Australian economy and as mining royalties and welfare payments were introduced. And Yolngu invested much of those additional resources in increasingly expensive and prolonged funeral practices. Even once the body was collected time could be controlled, because Yolngu used their increasing resources initially to build their own mortuary in the mission settlement of Yirrkala and subsequently invested in transportable mortuaries—large purpose-built refrigeration units that could hold the body until the final day of the ceremony.

By the late 1990s one of the main sources of income was the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), inaugurated in 1977 and introduced into the area in the early 1980s. This scheme was designed to provide a subsidized wage to people working in remote areas with limited employment opportunities. It had a number of different aims, from job generation to income support for community workers. The scheme was initially implemented with a degree of flexibility, and it was applied in different ways in different parts of Australia (see Morphy and Sanders 2001). In the Gunwaa Miwatj region, people living at the Laynhapuy homelands could effectively take their CDEP with them when they moved temporarily to another community to take part in a ceremony or for some other legitimate "cultural" purpose. Given that the scheme was designed to support work programs that were otherwise unfunded, and given the importance of ceremonial performance in Yolngu life, such a use of resources was a perfectly reasonable interpretation of the scope of the scheme, as it was conceived of at that time.

In addition to the deployment of CDEP income, Yolngu had also gained some additional support from local organizations, government, and the local mining industry to add to the available resources, beginning in the late 1970s when the local mining company started to provide financial and logistic assistance for the funerals of significant local leaders.

In the subsequent period the resources available for funerals became institutionalized. Community organizations quite appropriately acknowledged that people should be allowed time off for cultural practices, of which participation in mortuary rituals was a major component, and they too began to subsidize funeral expenses. The local community-owned art center set up a fund to be used to help cover funeral costs, and people supported by welfare payments or community wages were free to spend the time participating in funerals. The availability of vehicles increased, and a successful local airline developed to provide transport to homeland centers. All these factors worked together to create the possibility for extending the duration of funerals. And the use of the hospital mortuary and the availability of transportable mortuaries meant that the funerals could be scheduled to maximize participation.

Scheduling became increasingly necessary. One consequence of the advent of the mine has been to greatly increase the Yolngu death rate as a result of injury, accident, suicide, and illness associated with alcohol and substance abuse. The nature of many of the deaths increased the tensions associated with funeral arrangements and prolonged them, but at the same time made a display of unity associated with a grand funeral all the more necessary. By taking advantage of the potential of new technology, Yolngu were able to manage the politics and trauma of death and burial, and to schedule the events to achieve maximum participation.

By the late 1990s a regional economy of consumption and redistribution had developed that was centered in large part on Yolngu mortuary practices. This development was perfectly logical, in harmony with Yolngu values, sustained by moral imperatives and obligations to others, and directed in part toward mitigating the trauma felt by the community as a consequence of the increasing death rate among younger people that had followed the development of the mining town. And indeed, as Donald Thomson had intuited, mortuary rituals are the context in which the politics of Yolngu society are played out and during which core values and attachments associated with kinship are reinforced.

Whereas in the past Yolngu ritual had moved in synchrony with the seasonal cycle of a hunter-gatherer economy, by the 1980s and
1990s it had become increasingly disconnected from any such constraining economic cycle. The costs became benefits for the local businesses in the mining town, whose stocks reflected the greatly increased demand for rolls of cloth, artificial flowers, tents, blankets, and other essential items for Yolngu funeral encampments.

By early 2000, Narritjin’s prediction had come to fruition. Many Yolngu spent much of their lives participating in funerals. Not only was this traumatic for individuals, placing a huge responsibility on the shoulders of ritual experts, but it disrupted normal life to the extent that it had become normal life. And this was recognized by some Yolngu perhaps earlier than it was by outsiders. It was the elders and in some cases the dying themselves who took the initiative to change the trajectory once again.

HINTS OF RECURRENCE

Between 2000 and 2005 we spent several weeks or months each year based at Yilpara, a Yolngu community of about 100 people on the north of Blue Mud Bay. We were working as consultants to the Northern Land Council, assisting the Blue Mud Bay Yolngu to prepare a native title claim to the waters of the bay. During that time the community leader Djambawa Marawili and others expressed to us on many occasions their thoughts that funerals went on far too long and that they had never lasted so long in the past. People would refer both to pre-European times and to mission times and would seek confirmation from us that this indeed had been the case. In such discussions the boundaries between us as observers and Yolngu as observed became increasingly blurred. After all, we and our interlocutors had known each other all our adult lives, and we were drawn into their discourse on the basis of our shared history and our shared understandings of that history.

One reason for concern was the interruption of work schedules; another was the expense occasioned by funerals. However, people also recognized that outstations such as Yilpara bore a disproportionate responsibility for the organization of funerals. One of the reasons for holding funerals away from the main settlement was so that people could be buried close to their clan homelands. Moreover, homeland settlements were largely free of the alcohol and substance abuse that sometimes disrupted funerals at the settlements near the mining town, and homelands people had strongly maintained their ritual law. While there was a degree of prestige associated with these factors, they also imposed a considerable burden.

We ourselves felt that burden. In contrast to our extended fieldwork in the 1970s when, in typical “participant observation” mode, our lives flowed with the pace and rhythm of the Yolngu lives around us, this time we were undertaking fieldwork in what might be called “native title” mode. This meant short concentrated periods of fieldwork with particular, narrowly defined objectives. Funerals kept getting in the way, competing for the attention of the people who were the most knowledgeable native title “applicants.” It proved almost impossible, for example, to arrange general meetings of the applicants at which all the relevant people could be present.

Djambawa’s father was still alive. He was in his mid-eighties and had been raised to young adulthood in the precolonial period. He strongly supported the son’s view. He spoke to the community about the need to return to short funerals and insisted that when he and his wife passed away they should be buried quickly. And indeed, when they died their funerals were relatively short—though nonetheless spectacular. Many reasons contributed to the fact that he was granted his wish. One was his own authority and that of his son. Another was that his death was anticipated; it fit the Yolngu conception of a normal or “good” death (Barber 2008). Another was that he died in his own country. Finally, his distinction meant that a huge attendance could be guaranteed, irrespective of competing events. All such factors are likely to reduce the tensions and the politics surrounding a funeral and enable it to start soon after the death. However, Djambawa was able to point to it as a precedent in his conversations with others, and his views began to prevail in the organization of subsequent funerals where he was a major actor.

Between 2006 and 2008 we were back in the area again for several short field trips. Frances was undertaking research as part of a comparative project on the governance of indigenous community
organizations. Her case study was of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association, the resource agency and CDEP organization for Yilpara and the other Laynhapuy homelands (Morphy 2008). On one occasion when she was at Yilpara, the community got news of a death at Yirrkla. It was one of several deaths that had occurred in the region in quick succession. Before it was formally announced to the women by the men so that they could mourn, Djambawa addressed the assembled community. He asked the women to mourn briefly, as was appropriate, but then to go back about their daily activities. He said that Yolngu life had become just one long funeral, and that his father, before he died, had been worried about this. His father had told him, and he remembered himself, that when somebody died in the past the primary disposal was a quick affair, maybe one or two days, “because in those days we had to move around and hunt to eat, we would have starved if we had sat all day at funerals the whole time.” He drew an explicit analogy between work and hunting. Working for the community, to keep it in order and to develop new enterprises and jobs, was hunting in a new form, and just as vital as the old kind of work. His father had had a short funeral, according to his wishes, and it had been a good funeral, with no arguments. He expressed the wish that people pay attention to the wise words of the old man.

However, it is hard for an individual or a small number of like-minded people, no matter how locally influential, to effect more widespread changes in a major social institution simply through force of argument. Many funerals in the region continued to be both prolonged and contentious affairs. The imperative for more widespread change came from a different quarter. In 2003 the Commonwealth government initiated a radical reform of the CDEP program on which so many depended for their income. The “old” CDEP was deemed to have led to an undesirable form of welfare dependency, and the objectives of the scheme were recalibrated away from “community development” toward a focus on the individual, and on moving people off CDEP into so-called “real” work. As part of the process of making people “work ready,” the conditions under which people received their CDEP wages were tightened. CDEP participants were now to have a written description of their duties, and they were obliged to fill out time sheets at the community where they were deemed to be resident. Unexplained and undocumented absences would result in the docking of people’s wages, and ultimately, for persistent offenders, to expulsion from the scheme. The organizations that administered the CDEP program, such as the Laynhapuy Homelands Association, came under more rigorous scrutiny. Failure to deliver CDEP in the manner prescribed by the government would lead to loss of the CDEP contract, which was one of the organization’s major sources of funding. Quite clearly, these new restrictions would place limits on people’s mobility, and therefore on their ability to attend prolonged funerals in communities other than those in which they were deemed to be resident.

As part of her research during this period, Frances attended several Laynhapuy Board meetings at which the Yolngu Board members and the staff of their organization grappled with the implications of these changes. The ideologies of the government and local indigenous organizations such as Laynhapuy differed widely (F. Morphy 2008), but they coincided in the aim of developing a more self-sustaining regional economy, which generated employment for Yolngu. The local organization with its Yolngu Board was more sensitive to the complexities of the local situation and the need to take account of cultural and economic realities in planning regional development. However, the new constraints on movement provided a context in which those who favored shorter funerals could advance their case. As board members of the organization charged with implementing the changes to CDEP, they could advocate measures that would both shorten funerals and help the organization to fulfill the terms of its CDEP contract.

The majority of Yolngu Laynhapuy Board members began to support policy changes that would encourage shorter funerals. In 2005 we were present at a meeting called to discuss future policy and directions for Laynhapuy. There was a general consensus that funerals needed to be managed better to enable other people to perform other duties. Over the next months the board began to put in place measures to achieve this, not all of which were mandated by government regulation. They endorsed the new time-sheets regime and the abolition of special cultural leave, so that people had to use their
normal vacation time to participate in funerals. They reduced (and later abolished) subsidies for funerals, and in 2007 stopped subsidizing the use of portable mortuaries. In effect, there was a transfer of expenses from the state-subsidized community chest to the funeral participants as a means of encouraging funeral practice to integrate with the evolving contemporary economy.

"TRADITION" AND "CHANGE"

It would not be correct to suggest that funerals are returning to some original, earlier form, although this is sometimes advanced as a proposition by Yolngu who favor shorter funerals. Yolngu funeral practices have to be seen as part of a complex body of practice that is connected to mortuary rituals as a whole and to all other aspects of the society. All this, not just funeral practice itself, is continually changing, always responding to contingent circumstances. Indeed, the changes we have documented are testimony to the complex nature of the interrelationships and the multiple factors determining the form of each event.

Yet at the same time each Yolngu funeral appears, at the time of its occurrence, as a set of recognizable and ordered events in which people know their roles (although these may be the subject of discussion and negotiation—that is part of normal process). Yolngu funerals are the product of a cultural trajectory that at any point in time has a known history and a set of structural properties that Yolngu utilize in the organization of particular instances of ceremony.

Narritjin Maymuru did predict that the use of the morgue would prolong funerals, and Djambawa Marawili and his father certainly did refer to the precedent of tradition in justifying a return to shorter funerals. It would be neat to see them as providing solutions to problems predicted by Narritjin in his perceptive analysis of social processes.

If only anthropology (and anthropologists) could be so predictive. Narritjin, and Djambawa and his father, were speaking from knowledge accrued through their role as agents in social processes.

Narritjin sensed the importance that funeral rituals had in Yolngu life; he was aware that mortuary rituals as a whole were a vehicle for resolving conflict and ameliorating the pain and the sense of loss felt on death. His prediction also showed an awareness of the transforming nature of Yolngu mortuary rituals as directed by a trajectory of value and a history of practice that responded to new situations and accommodated to change. It was because he recognized the important role that mortuary rituals had in value creation and in social relationships that he saw what the consequences might be of opportunities to extend the duration of funerals. His analysis acknowledged that Yolngu were agents of change, but also that they might not be able to control the consequences of change.

Djambawa and his father were equally aware that although rituals for the primary disposal of the dead had been shorter in the past, mortuary rituals as a whole had been, if anything, more extended. They were positioned as agents aware of the consequences of the changes in their own society—changes that may have been predictable because they were in accordance with Yolngu values, but which nonetheless were imposing an increasing burden. Known history—known in part through their awareness of the anthropological record to which we provided access—contained the possibility of other trajectories and alternative ways of acting on death. Interestingly, Djambawa and his father were arguing from "tradition" to pull back from a recent development that had in turn been motivated by "traditional" Yolngu values. Thus a precedent from the past is not to be seen simply as a return to the "authentic" way of doing things but as adding recursively to the ongoing trajectory. It is only through understanding the complexity of social processes and the multilayered nature of determinacy that one can escape from the simple dualism of "tradition" versus "change" (H. Morphy 2007).

AND WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

It could be argued that in "Thomson time" ceremony was one of the productive engines of the hunter-gatherer economic cycle. It is pos-
sible that the emphasis on primary burial that evolved during the mission period and intensified during the last quarter of the twentieth century will be replaced in the future by a reworking of extended mortuary processes that will fit with the new economic regime that is emerging. Yolngu have many rituals of commemoration, and there is some evidence that such changes are already taking place. There are signs of an increase in larger and more encompassing regional ceremonies in which the commemoration of the recently dead is a component. These regional ceremonies are not dependent on the contingency of death. They can be pre-planned and integrated within the developing contemporary economy with its time-management requirements. And Yolngu have recently embraced the memorial service as a cultural form, particularly for senior and prominent people. Interestingly, this is the forum for invited non-Yolngu to memorialize the deceased—non-Yolngu are often among the invited speakers at such events. Such memorial services are consciously constructed as intercultural or "hybrid" moments.

While it is unlikely that Yolngu will ever revive exhumation and rebural as part of mortuary practice, it is interesting that one of the main advocates of shorter funerals, Djambawa Marawili, has also at times advocated reintroducing rebural in hollow-log coffins. Again this illustrates the extent to which Yolngu mortuary practices are, and continue to be conceived of, a complex, interconnected whole. Our prediction rests on the difficulties of persuading Euro-Australian society of its desirability, and on the fact that several Yolngu generations have grown up to experience bodies being buried only once. But we certainly predict that Yolngu mortuary rituals will remain

PHOTOGRAPH BY HOWARD MORPHY.

Facing bottom, Howard Morphy with Marnuyula Murunggurr at Yilpara, Blue Mud Bay, 2009.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JUDY WATSON.
extended affairs, and that they will remain a focal point of value creation and a generator of social and economic activity.

REFLECTIONS ON MULTITEMPORAL FIELDCWORK—
AND ON RESILIENCE

Paraphrasing Bruce Knauf (2002, 23) we can safely say that we could not have “extrapolated the extent and character of change” in Yolngu mortuary rituals based on the understandings we arrived at in the 1970s. Indeed, as we have shown, it was Narritjin Maymuru, a perspicacious and wise local actor, who largely succeeded in this enterprise. He could not have predicted the external factors that would interact with the Yolngu trajectory, but he had a profound understanding of the internal dynamics of the Yolngu system. Over the years we have learned that certain Yolngu intellectuals have acute insights, and these have immeasurably enriched our own.

Multitemporal fieldwork confers two unique benefits for the anthropological enterprise. First, it allows the anthropologist to be present, fortuitously, at certain moments when changes in a trajectory occur. The more times one returns to the field, the more chances there are to observe such moments directly. Second, it confers the benefits of hindsight, allowing recursive interpretation of earlier events and observations, which in turn feeds into an ever richer analysis. Theorizing relative autonomy would be difficult if not impossible without such a base of accumulated knowledge and experience of one society.

As anthropologists, we have come to both temporal and intellectual maturity with and within our experiences of Yolngu society. Our contact with it has enriched our own existence, even as we have learned to value and understand (to some degree) its complexity and its resilience in the face of its encasualisation by the Australian settler state. Aboriginal Australia is currently experiencing a second wave of assimilationist pressure, and we occasionally wonder, as we did back in the 1970s, whether Yolngu will, inexcusably, be leveled to a condition of undifferentiated “Aboriginality,” where all that remains of their distinctiveness is their genetic inheritance. But with the benefit of hindsight we think we know better.


3

Returns to the Maasai

Maltemporal Fieldwork and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge

AUD TALLE

Anthropologists have many reasons or motives for returning to the field, and returns can, for practical or professional reasons, take many temporal shapes: they can be for proper revisits after a long absence, regular follow-up visits of samples over several consecutive years, or a mixture of planned and more haphazard returns, as opportunities are made available. My pattern of returns to the pastoral Maasai of Kenya over more than three decades belongs to the last category; whenever the chance to return arose, I took it. This means that my returns have varied in duration as well as in intention. At times I have returned in order to pursue specific research questions, follow certain lines of inquiry, or fill gaps in my understanding of Maasai ways to accumulate knowledge, as it were. Other times I have gone back with no other apparent motive than to greet friends, see how they are faring, and in general keep in contact. In other words, returns have also been a constitutive part of forging a relationship.

Irrespective of motives for returning, “returns” in anthropological practice can never be a purely descriptive term. They are not just a matter of going and coming; returns have implications for the interpretations that we make. We go back to look or “something,” and this something is not always clear to us beforehand. It is rather after