

**Where the Clouds Stand: Australian Aboriginal  
Relationships to Water, Place, and the Marine  
Environment in Blue Mud Bay, Northern  
Territory**

**Marcus Barber**

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I certify that this thesis is my own original work unless otherwise acknowledged.

Marcus Barber

Dedicated To:

Wakuthi Marawili, Mayawuluk Wirrpanda, Bakulangay Marawili

and

John Pryn

## Preface

It is a privilege to have the time to write human life, perhaps somewhat presumptuous to assume that it can be written, and yet more presumptuous to eschew writing one's own life and instead try to write about other people's lives with brevity, truth, and poetry. And every so often, when things somehow inexplicably fall into place, it is fun. An awareness of the complexity and changeability of our own lives necessarily provokes many doubts about the validity of trying to represent the lives of others in a single text. The truth claim that, at some level, we are all human has been for me both a reassurance and a caution. I feel there must be some basis for connection and commonality, indeed, to put it more strongly, to give up hope of this is simply to give up entirely. Yet the 'otherness' of others can be overwhelming at times, even when they are the people who are closest to us. When the complications of textual representation, cultural differences, a history of colonisation and racism, and the peculiar, idiosyncratic nature of anthropological fieldwork are thrown into the mix, the exercise becomes fraught to the point that for some it should be abandoned. For many reasons I did not make that decision. Perhaps the strongest was a simple, even naïve faith in the importance of shared humanity.

To seek the phenomenological, to emphasise the everyday sensations and activities of human life, is a dominant aspect of the contemporary academic zeitgeist. So much so that someone without undergraduate schooling as an anthropologist can find themselves instinctively wanting to adopt such a stance. My sense is that, amongst my own generation, the popularity of phenomenology may be partly due to eroded faith in either the search for and even the very existence of structures and truths at a higher level of abstraction. But, on a more pragmatic level, this popularity may also be due to the fact that anthropology now has an extended history, and in some important cross-cultural contexts, of which the Yolngu people are certainly one, the basic parameters of society have to a large degree been mapped out. The focus now is on critiquing the validity of those structures and representations, examining how they are changing, sometimes radically, and emphasising the moments of social life from which they were distilled. However to assume that previous generations of anthropologists somehow did not research the everyday seems to me implausible. Good anthropology must always have concerned itself with the experiences and anecdotes of everyday life. What has changed is the greater textual priority given to that level of specificity, rather than to the formal structures and holistic accounts of previous generations.

Yet what follows could be construed as an attempt to provide a structural and holistic account. I would perhaps plead more guilty to the latter than the former, but admit to neither in the strong sense of those terms. Rather than claiming holism, I have tried to trace a single strand through different areas of human life, or, to express a similar idea in language that perhaps has greater currency today, I have selected and illuminated particular fragments and positioned them in relation to each other. This had far more to do with what interested me personally than it did with any explicit theoretical commitments, but through the process of researching and writing, it somehow gained a more substantial theoretical cast. Perhaps that is the way that much theoretical positioning in anthropology ultimately emerges. I found Weiner's description of the rationale for his 1991 ethnography 'The Empty Place' particularly resonant:

“The Empty Place...is the attempt to see the whole of something in each of its parts, which is of course the only “place” we can find such a whole. If to be “structuralist” means that one cannot meaningfully appeal to fluidity, process, fragmentariness, or incompleteness without a tacit acceptance of the whole against which phenomena acquire such characteristics, then of course the analysis is structuralist, as are most of our anthropological analyses” (Weiner 1995).

Perhaps the most curious aspect of anthropology is the expectation that the foundations for such academic diversions are best created by spending 18 months in a tent in Arnhem Land. I am quite sure there are easier ways to answer such questions. But I know that my life is that much richer for having attempted the task.

## Acknowledgements

Judging the order in which to thank people seems in some ways the most fraught aspect of this whole exercise. Like many before me, I will start with those with whom I spent the most intense 18 months of my life, and who are both the subjects of and the inspiration for the work that follows. A greater sense of who some of these people are will emerge in the pages that follow, so I will limit myself here to naming those who contributed most to my knowledge and my enjoyment of life in Blue Mud Bay. My thanks go to Djambawa Marawili, Nuwandjali Marawili, Mayawuluk Wirrpanda, Julia Wirrpanda, Waka Mununggurr, Bakulangay Marawili, Gumbaniya Marawili, Ngulpurr Marawili, Gawirrin Gumana, Dhukal and Wuyal Wirrpanda, Bangawuy and Boliny Wanambi, Malumin, Batja, Amos, Mulawalnga, Wurrandan, and Muypirri Marawili, Cathy Wirrpanda, Dhupilawuy, Wanyipi, and Waninya Marika, and Bandipandi and Binninydjirri Wunungmurra. Last, but by no means least, my thanks to the old, invalid, blind man of whom I saw very little but whose vision and wisdom helped create and then sustain the community of Yilpara for so many years. My thanks to Wakuthi Marawili.

Turning my attention to the non-indigenous people who were integral to the production of this work, my heartfelt gratitude goes to my two supervisors, Professor Nicolas Peterson and Professor Howard Morphy. They were brave enough to take on a marine biologist with a rather disparate, Honours-less Arts degree containing no anthropology or indigenous studies subjects, and then trust that he could make the switch from a minor thesis about fish otoliths to a PhD about coastal Aboriginal people. Whether that judgement was successful entirely depends on the attitude the reader has to this text, but there is no doubt that I owe them both a great debt for their trust, knowledge, enthusiasm, and support over the course of my studies. From my first day at ANU, Nic has been extraordinarily generous with his time, comments, and encouragement, and has gracefully accepted my need for narrative flights of fancy amongst the empirical work he values so much. Howard's comments were always very perceptive and he was unfailingly generous with his extensive existing Yolngu material, his financial resources, and with his time in a very busy schedule when I needed it. I should also acknowledge the substantial personal risk that he and Frances Morphy took in endorsing the presence of an untried student in a community of people with whom they have deep relationships going back more than thirty years. I am most grateful for the trust that they showed in me. Although not part of my supervisory panel, Frances certainly could have been recognised as such, for her intellectual and personal contribution to the work presented here is considerable. I am grateful for her support, ideas, criticisms, and insights. She and Howard are an incredibly daunting act to follow, and in a number of important respects, I have not presumed to try.

This PhD was unusual for anthropology in that it was part of wider project containing a number of researchers. I am grateful for the quiet community and PhD student solidarity provided by Patrick Faulkner over the years. Remote fieldwork in demanding conditions tests many things, and he passed them carrying burdens that would have brought down strong people living in the most comfortable of conditions. For that he will always have my greatest respect. Together with Dr Anne Clarke he provided me not only with the comforts of a communal camp in the dry seasons, but with a better understanding of the challenges and rewards of archaeology. I am grateful to them both

for their generosity with the resources that they purchased for their work and allowed me to use, not least the laptop on which the bulk of my fieldnotes were written.

The second aspect of the wider project was the involvement of the Northern Land Council and its staff. I would particularly like to thank Mick Reynolds and his wife Tania for their friendship, support, and hospitality, and also Philip and the staff at the NLC offices in Nhulunbuy. Thanks to Jeff Stead and Ben Scambray, who were very supportive of the project in the early years, and to Penny Creswell, Phillipa Hetherington, Ron Levy, and Belinda Oliver.

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Of the ANU students I was fortunate enough to get to know, Yasmine Musharbash’s contribution to this work could not be understated. Now long graduated, she has been a source of friendship, support, advice, gossip and wise criticism over more than five years. Her deep anthropological training provided me with the perspective of a young, female, well read, and experienced desert anthropologist, and for someone trying to come to grips with the discipline for the first time, this was a valuable gift. I only wish I could have reciprocated to an equivalent degree!

Thanks to the members of staff at the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at ANU, who made the place such a pleasure to work in, particularly Sue Fraser, David McGregor, and Marian Robson. Dr Melinda Hinkson and Dr Margot Lyon provided valuable criticisms and insights, and Dr Jon Altman and Dr Deborah Bird Rose gave me important early encouragement. Thanks also to Pip Deveson and Katie Hayne at the Centre for Cross-Cultural research for their time and support.

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to Keren's family, for Jerry, Suzanne, and Karly supported Keren and I in so many material and non-material ways. Their welcome and generosity made the distances our career choices created much more bearable, and I very much appreciated their real enthusiasm for the research that I was doing.

Lastly, I wish to thank my own family in Melbourne. I know that it feels to all of us that I have been away for a long, long time. Thanks to my grandmother, Marjorie, and to my grandfather John, one of the people to whom this work is dedicated. Thanks to Elspeth, who spoke so often of how much she missed me, and to Fran and Dave, who were there offering support when it counted most. Dave and now little Samuel have joined our family since I left, but it is now very hard to imagine it without them. Most of all I thank my parents Leonie and Bruce. Their patience, encouragement, wisdom, and guidance throughout my life have enabled me to do something that is hard to do, and yet because of this, they have had cause to worry. I know that this marks a return to calmer waters for all of us.

## **Explanatory Note: The Blue Mud Bay Project**

The PhD research outlined in what follows was part of a larger project involving five other academic researchers and the Northern Land Council as an industry partner. When it began, such a sizeable project containing formal involvement by non-academic parties was unusual in the humanities, indeed it was the first of its kind in the Anthropology program at the Australian National University. Now, more than five years on, such projects are far more common, and seem likely to become even more prevalent in the years to come. Two concerns are sometimes raised about such projects. One is whether the graduate student is operating sufficiently independently from the other researchers on the project to the extent that their work is worthy of a postgraduate qualification. The second is the degree to which involvement by non-academic parties has affected the nature and outcomes of the research. The first of these concerns I would address by stating that where elements of this text rely on the work of others, in particular Howard and Frances Morphy, then it is acknowledged accordingly. Material that is not so acknowledged is based upon my own independent research.

Addressing the second concern about industry partner involvement requires a little more time and space, for it touches on some potentially complex issues. My first response is, perhaps unexpectedly, to relate an anecdote. In September 1999, before I had heard of Blue Mud Bay or considered working in Aboriginal Australia, I contacted the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at ANU about their Masters program, thinking that the discipline of anthropology might be a good way of shifting my research focus from biological science to an interdisciplinary context. A brief explanation of the research I had in mind resulted in a recommendation to email Dr Nicolas Peterson, whom they believed would be interested. Without any real knowledge of why he would be, I sent an email to Nic in which I explained my strong desire to undertake interdisciplinary research about the way that human beings relate to the marine environment across a number of areas of life. I envisaged that such research would use my skills and knowledge as a quantitative marine scientist, but also my background in the humanities, which had not been required to any significant degree in my Honours research. Not long before my email arrived, Nic and Howard had been awarded 3 years funding from the Australia Research Council to investigate precisely this question in Blue Mud Bay. In other words, taking on the scholarship that was part of the Project determined the location and focus of a research topic I had already decided upon. It is often assumed that a student working on an industry partnership project has not had complete freedom to choose their topic, but instead has accepted one that has already been constructed for them in some way. In my case the opposite was largely true; I chose my own topic, the Blue Mud Bay Project just happened to fit it.

This history is relevant when considering the role in the research process of the Northern Land Council and of the Native Title sea claim that the Council was overseeing on behalf of the Blue Mud Bay people. Native Title refers to the rights in land, and to a far lesser degree in the sea, which indigenous Australians can claim by following certain legislative and legal processes. It has been and remains a dynamic and highly controversial area of Australian law and public policy. Under the Blue Mud Bay contract, the Northern Land Council supplied a 4WD vehicle and some research funds

to assist in my research, and their expectation was that my component of the wider project would produce information about resource use and ecological knowledge amongst the Yolngu living in the area. I did obtain such information, and it was documented in a report to the Federal Court of Australia, in order to assist in the Court's deliberations regarding Native Title in Blue Mud Bay. Appendix 1 contains information from that report relevant to this thesis.

The fact that Blue Mud Bay people had decided to undertake a Native Title claim certainly encouraged them to talk to me about the places that mattered to them, to take me to visit such places, and to reflect on how they could best articulate the importance of them to outsiders. They wanted to talk about their 'Sea Rights'. Yet the timeframe on which anthropological fieldwork is conducted made maintaining any kind of pretence or façade in their articulations very difficult, for 18 months is far too long for any overstated claims about the role of the sea in people's lives to survive without being exposed. There are simply too many other things to attend to in life in a poor and remote Aboriginal community to spend every minute worrying about how things might appear to the resident anthropologist. The claim was a factor in my time in Blue Mud Bay, and in my interactions with its residents, but it did not always, or even often, loom large. A thesis about coastal life at Yilpara was the preeminent objective of my research, and it was the major outcome. Yet it is also true that this course was taken in the knowledge that a work which successfully examined Yolngu relationships to the coastal environment would facilitate the conduct of any Native Title proceedings. Achieving such complementary aims seems to me to be the intention of such collaborative research projects.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationships between people, water, and places in the everyday life of the Yolngu people of Yilpara in northeast Arnhem Land. In the Yolngu world, a sophisticated understanding of the fluid and dynamic relationships between fresh and saltwater is given a greater priority than the division of the coast into land and sea. These waters are continually moving and mixing, both underground and on the surface, across an area that stretches from several kilometres inland to the deep sea, and they combine with clouds, rain, tides, and seasonal patterns in a coastal water cycle. Yolngu people use their understanding of water flows as one basis for generating systems of coastal ownership, whilst water also provides a source of rich and complex metaphors in wider social life.

Describing this coastal water cycle provides the basis for a critique of the way European topographic maps represent coastal space, and also for a critique of common formulations of customary marine tenure (CMT). However as a methodological tool, I use maps to provide a detailed analysis of people's connections to place and as part of a wider examination of how places are generated and sustained. In this way the thesis contributes to anthropology, marine studies, and indigenous studies as well as touching on some issues of coastal geography. The approach I adopt has a phenomenological emphasis, since it enables me to show how Yolngu concepts arise out of and articulate with their experience of living in their environment and of using knowledge in context. This perspective contributes fresh ethnographic insights to some ongoing contemporary debates about people and place.

The paired tropes of flow and movement are used as a gloss throughout the work, as each chapter takes a different domain of human life at Yilpara and explores how water, place, and human movement are manifested in it. Such domains include subsistence hunting and fishing, group and gender distinctions in presence on the country, food sharing, memories of residence and travel, personal names, spirits and Dreaming figures, patterns of coastal ownership, and interactions with professional fishermen. Together, they provide an account of the different ways that people relate to water, place and country in contemporary everyday life. 'Where the Clouds Stand' is predominantly an ethnographically driven work from one locality, but within that approach, it also explores broader considerations of phenomenology, anthropological inquiry, and human life more generally.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>EXPLANATORY NOTE: THE BLUE MUD BAY PROJECT</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>XI</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>XII</b>
LIST OF MAPS	xv
LIST OF FIGURES	xv
LIST OF TABLES	xvi
ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION	xvii
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Coastal Flows: Water and Movement, Place and Country</b>	<b>1</b>
Aqueography: Mapping water	7
Flows and Countries	11
Landscapes and Places	12
Hunting and Phenomenology	14
Water and People, Movement and Flow	16
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Flows from the West: Sea Spaces, Customary Marine Tenure, and Aboriginalist Anthropology</b>	<b>19</b>
The Sea Spaces of the West	19
Customary Marine Tenure	23
Aboriginal Sea Tenure	24
Water, Sea, and the Ethnography of the Yolngu	28
Fieldsite: Yilpara Homeland and Dholupuyngu Country	36
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>People Flows I: On a Hunt</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Resource Flows: Sharing, Mobility, and the Taste of the Sea</b>	<b>63</b>
Sharing Miyapunu	66
Wakuthi Marawili	66
	xii

The Yilpara Families	67
Shaping the Flows: Factors in Sharing	68
Labour	68
Kinship and Country, Proximity and Practicality	70
Seniority and Gender	71
Sharing from other Hunts	74
Resource Flows, Regional Mobility and the Taste of the Sea	76
The Taste of the Sea	77
Flows between the Homelands	78
Flows from Groote and Bickerton Islands	79
Flows to Yirrkala	80
Conclusion	81
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>People Flows II: Patterns in the Maps</b>	<b>82</b>
What to Hunt- Food from the Country	84
How to Get There- Roads, Cars and Boats	84
Mapping Hunting: 2000-2001	89
Seasonality	89
Hunting in 2002	94
Hunting and Lineage	98
Child Hunters: Agency and Personality	103
Hunting Routes	104
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Time Flows: Memories and Journeys, Water and Places</b>	<b>109</b>
“Sometimes by Canoe”: Journeys on Land and Sea	113
‘I Know to Paddle’: Women in Boats	116
“Big Water There”: Knowing Island Country	117
“A Big Wind Came”: Travel and Weather	118
“We Can Always Cry For Something”: Journeys with Kids	119
“In the Wet Season, We went to the Beach”: Seasonal Movements	122
“More Water There”: Locating the Homelands	123
“I’m Alive from Gapu”: Water, Life, and Death	125
Conclusion	127
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Sound Flows: Yolngu Names</b>	<b>129</b>
Names and Naming	130
Naming processes	131
Märi-gutharra	132
Women’s Knowledge	133
Knowledge Flows	133
Naming and Everyday Events	134
Multiple Names: The Madarrpa	138
Naming and Place	140
Naming and Water	146
Conclusion	149
	xiii

<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>Ancestral Flows I: Spirits, Safety, and Seeing the Snake</b>	<b>150</b>
“The Country Does Not Know You”	151
“You Talk to the Country”	153
Death and Country	155
Closing the Country	157
Wangarr: Seeing the Snake	158
Hunting with Madayin	161
“We Live in a Different World Now”: Rirruwalwuy 1970, Yilpara 2005	164
Conclusion	164
<b>CHAPTER 9</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Ancestral Flows II: Coastal Ownership</b>	<b>166</b>
Coastal Ownership 1: The Journeys of the Wangarr	169
Coastal Ownership II: Estates and Named Places	174
Coastal Ownership III: Coastal Flows	177
Water and Kinship	178
Marriage and Fertility	179
Language	181
We Share the Sea: Saltwater Ownership	182
Whose Country?: Changing Owners and Moiety Confusion	183
Conclusion	187
<b>CHAPTER 10</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>Contested Flows: Crabbers, Colonialism, and Cross-Cultural Encounters</b>	<b>189</b>
Fishermen Past and Present	191
The Crabbers	192
Ownership: Controlling Access to Country	194
Ownership: Responsibility for People	195
Ownership: Responsibility for Country	196
Ownership: Receiving a Share	197
Ownership: Reciprocal Relations	197
Ownership: Yolngu Mediators	198
Recognition?	199
Brother Bun?	200
Ownership: Control of Information	200
Ownership: Contracts	201
Crabbers and Police	202
Money Talks: Royalty Distributions	202
Barramundi Fishermen	204
Fishing Politics	206
Owning a Future	207
<b>CHAPTER 11</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>Scanning the Clouds: Coastal life, Coastal Futures</b>	<b>208</b>

**LIST OF MAPS**

Map 1A: Map of Blue Mud Bay  
Map 2A: Regional Map of Northeast Arnhem Land  
Map 2B: Local Map of Blue Mud Bay  
Map 5A: General Locations of Resources Obtained  
Map 5B: Yilpara Roads marked on Commercial Maps  
Map 5C: Yilpara Hunting Tracks  
Map 5D: Total GPS Points  
Map 5E: Wet season GPS Points  
Map 5F: Dry season GPS Points  
Map 5G: GPS Points from Men's Hunting  
Map 5H: GPS Points from Women's Hunting  
Map 5I: GPS Points from Mixed Gender Hunting  
Map 5J: GPS Points for Djambawa Marawili  
Map 5K: GPS Points for Julia Wirrpanda  
Map 5L: 2002 Mixed Gender Group GPS Points  
Map 5M: Mixed Lineage GPS Points  
Map 5N: Wakuthi's Lineage GPS Points  
Map 5O: Mundukul's Lineage GPS Points  
Map 5P: GPS Points for Ningiyama Marawili  
Map 5Q: GPS Points for Guypungura Marawili  
Map 5R: Hunting Routes 2000-2002  
Map 6A: Locations in Chapter 6  
Map 7A: Dholupuyngu Person/Place Names  
Map 7B: Madarrpa Person/Place Names on the Yilpara Peninsula  
Map 7C: Madarrpa Names coding for Place on the Yilpara Peninsula  
Map 9A: Ancestral Paths  
Map 9B: Regional Ancestral Journeys  
Map 9C: Estates and Places  
Map 9D: Water Flows at Milngiyawuy/Mayawundji

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Fig. 1A: Coastal Flows I  
Fig. 1B Coastal Flows II  
Fig. 1C Coastal Flows II  
Fig. 1D: Coastal Flows IV  
Fig. 1E: Satellite Image of Northern Blue Mud Bay  
Fig. 3A: Turtle Hunting  
Fig. 3B: Back on Shore  
Fig. 4A: Miyapunu Butchery  
Fig. 5A: Yolngu Seasons  
Fig. 5B: Djambawa Marawili  
Fig. 5C: Julia Marawili

Fig. 5D: Cathy Wirrpanda on the Boat  
Fig. 5E: On the Boat  
Fig. 5F: Wakuthi's Lineage  
Fig. 5G: Mundukul's Lineage  
Fig. 5H: Ningiyama Marawili  
Fig. 5I: Guypungura Marawili  
Fig. 6A: Mayawuluk Wirrpanda  
Fig. 6B: Gawirrin Gumana  
Fig. 6C: Gumbaniya Marawili  
Fig. 8A: Waka Mununggurr waiting for the Boat  
Fig. 9A: Painting of Lulumu by Bakulangay Marawili  
Fig. 9B: Detail from Painting of Baraltja by Djambawa Marawili  
Fig. 10A: Crocodile Head  
Fig. 11A: Fishing at Ngärri

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 7A: Yolngu Water Names  
Table 7B: Yolngu Cloud Names  
Table 10A: Crabbing Royalty Payments

## ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION

The orthography used in this dissertation is based on that used by Keen (1994:xiv-xv) and following him, Toner (2001:viii). The short vowels are *i*, *u*, and *a*, while long vowels are *e*, *o*, and *ä*. A single *r* is pronounced as in rung, and *rr* is rolled. The consonant combinations *dh*, *th*, and *nh* are pronounced with the tongue between the front teeth, and the retroflex letters *d*, *t*, and *n* are pronounced as if with the letter ‘r’ in front of them. The combination *ng* is pronounced as in ‘rung’, whilst *n.g* indicates that the letters should be pronounced separately. The combination *ny* is the same as the ‘ni’ in the English word ‘companion’.