

8

‘We always look north’: Yanyuwa identity and the maritime environment

John J. Bradley

I look across the expanse
of the open sea:
The high waves in the north
are at last calm.

(Short Friday Babawurra)

The short piece of song-poetry given above was composed by a Yanyuwa ‘saltwater man’ while surveying the sea that he wished to travel upon. His descendants sang this and other song during the 1940s, 50s and 60s while working on cattle stations on the vast, wind-blown Barkly Tablelands and others, to remind them of the sea country which was there waiting for them. Today the Yanyuwa people live in and around the township of Borroloola some 1000 kilometres southeast of Darwin, and some 60 kilometres inland from the sea (Figure 8:1). Despite the effects of enforced relocation to provide a part of the labour force on the cattle stations and issues arising from various welfare policies, the sea has remained as an important point of identity for the Yanyuwa people.

It was Stanner (1965) who commented that within the anthropological literature there had been far too much emphasis on the inland Central Australian arid zone, primarily because it was perceived that the Aboriginal people of such areas had been isolated for the longest period of time from European influence, and therefore their social patterns and economies were felt to be still among the most traditional in Australia. There have been few major studies undertaken where the resources and environments of the coastal people of northern Australia

Customary marine tenure in Australia

have been explored. Chase and Sutton (1987) rightly argued, in relation to the coast, that this imbalance must be set right, as the coastal regions of northern Australia represent some of the most diverse in Australia, encompassing an area where the marine and the terrestrial environments come together. They (Chase and Sutton 1987:69) commented that:

The northern tropical coastline of Australia presents an area where Aboriginal hunter-gatherers operated within such habitats, and the complex patterns of plant communities, marine environments and animal life in these tropical areas provide opportunities for resource exploitation which can hardly be exceeded elsewhere on the Australian continent.

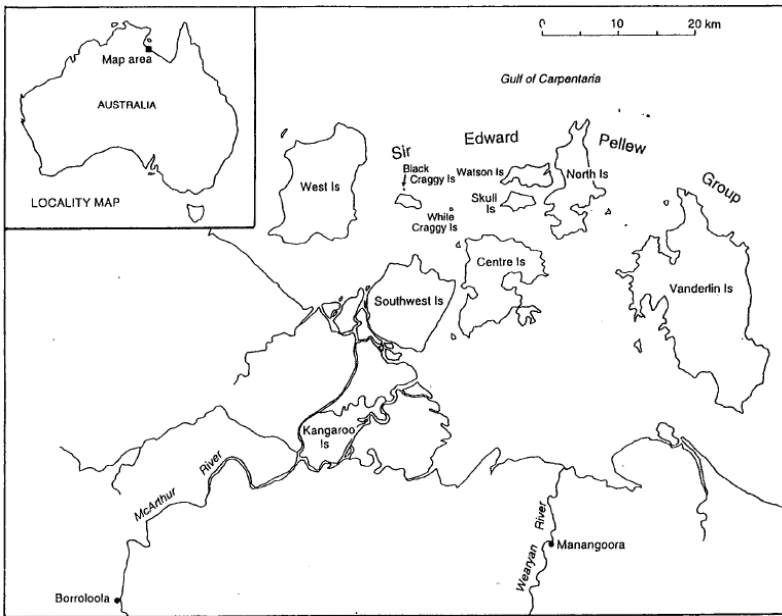


Figure 8:1 Southwest Gulf of Carpentaria, Borroloola and the Sir Edward Pellew Islands

The Sir Edward Pellew Islands and the immediate coastal areas provide a case where there is an interesting balance between mainland, sea and islands. Baker (1989) notes that the shallow nature of the sea in this area of the Gulf, the shape of the islands, and the complex maze of creeks and channels which make up the mouths of the rivers entering the Gulf, all produce a great length of coastline for quite a small amount of land. This large area of shallow water and long coastline has enabled the Yanyuwa to develop an economy and traditions which focus heavily on its marine and nearby terrestrial resources.

The island and coastal geography

The islands which comprise the archipelago of Sir Edward Pellew Group span out to the north and northeast across the mouths of the McArthur River, Wearyan River and Carrington Channel (Figure 8:1). These islands range in size from approximately 264 square kilometres (Vanderlin Island) down to isolated rocks of a few square metres. Arnol (1983:165–166) estimated that the group consists of eight large islands, more than fifty small sandy islets and approximately twenty reefs.

The dominant habitats on the islands are open eucalypt woodland, stunted monsoon forest, sandstone heath, salt marsh, dune communities, freshwater wetlands on Vanderlin Island, mangrove communities and, moving into the sea, sea grass beds. The sea grass beds surround the southerly coastal regions of the islands, and are therefore an important element of the total maritime ecology. This is especially the case in relation to a Yanyuwa perception of this environment (Arnol 1983; Ygoa-McKeown 1987; and Johnson and Kerle 1991).

Winds are an important factor in access to the sea and the sea grass beds and they decide whether or not people will be able to cross or hunt. During the mid to late dry season southeasterly winds blow at their most intense, the shallow waters of the Gulf become choppy and dirty as the water becomes clouded with sediment, thus reducing visibility through the water dramatically, and making it virtually impossible to

hunt for dugong and sea turtle. Such sediment-filled water is called *yurduwiji*, 'being with dust', and is differentiated from *manginy*, sediment disturbed by feeding dugong and turtle. The analogy between dust storms on land and the 'dusty sea' for the Yanyuwa is very close as the term *yurduwiji awara* or a 'country being with dust' is used for both land and sea.

The Yanyuwa categorise their physical landscape in a manner which we would recognise, that is, divisions according to various land units, whereby the combination of vegetation, soils and topography provide distinct areas. The notion of distinctive land units recognised by Aboriginal people has also been explored by Jones (1980, 1985) in his research with the Gidjingali people of north coastal Arnhem Land, Williams (1982) with the Yolngu of North East Arnhem Land, and Chase (1980) and Chase and Sutton (1981) with Aboriginal people of Cape York Peninsula. Baker (1989) also discussed, in a general way, the notion of recognised land units amongst the Yanyuwa.

Such a sense of land units as discussed by the Gidjingali and the Yanyuwa people approximates a system developed by the CSIRO in 1953 (Christian *et al.* 1953, 1954; and Speck *et al.* 1960). Briefly, it may be said that western biogeographers classify the land into units so as to reflect what they regard as objective ecological realities.

While the system of land units as devised by the Yanyuwa and the CSIRO may be broadly comparable, their functions are somewhat different, deriving from the very different ways in which knowledge is embedded within cultural structures and processes. That the Yanyuwa and the biogeographers end up with similar schemes is not that surprising, because both schemes relate to a commonly perceived 'real' environment, but the Yanyuwa scheme is nonetheless richer and more animated in its conception.

The Yanyuwa consider the sea and sea grass beds to be part of these geographic land units. The sea and tidal mudflats and coastal salt pans are often described as being 'open country', where one can see a great distance, whilst the mainland and the islands are sometimes described as 'closed country' where one's view is hindered by trees, hills and other

geographical features. In the Yanyuwa language, the sea is often further divided into *antha*, which usually refers to that sea which is familiar and often travelled on during hunting and fishing, whilst the larger expanses of open sea and ocean are termed *warlamakamaka* or *mal-abubana*. These latter two terms connote a sense of caution necessary when travelling on them.

The term *kunjurrkunjurr* conveys the notion of sea that is so far away that people would be indeed rash to say they would travel there: it is unknown, dangerous and not within the realms of normal human activity.

The known sea is further divided into the sea grass beds and the sea above them and can be seen as a unit: this is the 'underwater country', named and known. The term *na-ngunantha* is used to describe the home or 'camp' of the dugong and sea turtle, and carries the same *na-* arboreal prefix which the Yanyuwa use for other types of 'homes', whether human or animal, such as *na-wungkala*, a flying fox 'camp', or *na-alanji*, a human camp.

The sea and underwater country of the Yanyuwa is, as with the mainland, often called by the term *awara*. It is a word which conveys a large number of meanings, such as earth, ground, place, country, camp, sea, reefs and sandbars. The term highlights the Yanyuwa concept that the sea and the underwater country are known places, that they are named. As such, it is perfectly reasonable to ask for the name of a stretch of sea, reef, sandbar or sea grass bed. Often the sea grass beds, for example, are seen to be an extension of the mainland and carry the same name as a section of the coast. In other cases the sea grass beds and the reefs have their own names by which they and the surrounding area of sea are known (Figure 8:2).

These sea grass beds are the 'home' or 'camp' of the dugongs and sea turtles. A more common term used for describing the sea grass beds is *ki-maramanda*, which means 'the place with the sea grass'. Because these sea grass beds and reefs are seen to be country which is identifiable by name and therefore known, they are owned. The underwater country has semi-moiety/patriclan association, and thus it too is intertwined

within the complex social workings of the *jungkayi* (guardian)—*ngimarringki* (owner) system, which in many respects is an expression of material, territorial and economic rights. Some of the sea grass beds and reefs are important sites due to the activities of the Spirit Ancestors, and many of them have song cycles travelling over them which are still sung during ceremonial performance. The Yanyuwa names given to the sea grass are also celebrated in these song cycles. Western scientific research has shown that the underwater country of the Yanyuwa is rich in sea grass species (Poiner *et al* 1987).

In Yanyuwa the term *maraman* is used to describe all sea grass species. A distinction is then made between those sea grasses that they perceive to belong to the major sea grass beds which follow the coastline and some of which are exposed at low tide. The sea grasses which are found there, which also represents the most favoured hunting areas, are called by the term *ma-Lhanngu*. The Yanyuwa then make a distinction between the sea grasses which are found on inshore and on offshore reefs. The sea grasses found on reefs are said to be the 'proper' food for sea turtles, though it is acknowledged that dugong will eat them also. The term *na-wirralbirral* is used for inshore sea grasses. The term *na-julangal* is used for those species of sea grass which are found on offshore reefs.

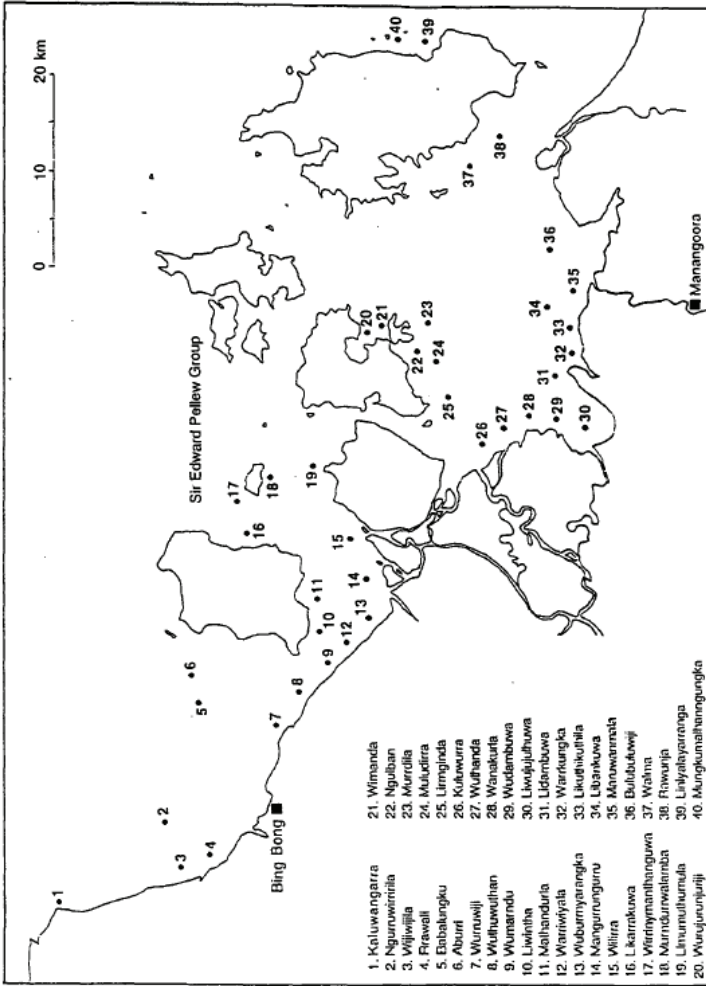


Figure 8:2 Sea grass beds and reefs known and named by Yanyuwa dugong and turtle hunters

The Yanyuwa perceive that there is a close relationship existing between the varying sea grasses and the dugong and sea turtle as, for example, in the expression *walya nyiki-nganji ki-maramanngku*, or 'the dugong and sea turtle are kin to the sea grass' (pers. comm. Charlie Miller 1980). A key word in Yanyuwa ethnoecology is the word *nganji* which, when accompanied with pronominal prefixes, conveys the meaning of kin, mate or established relationships. When unmarked by pronominal prefixes, the term means 'stranger' or 'enemy', in much the same way that host and hostile in English are related to each other. However, the word is multivocal and is dependent on context for full meaning. One of the implicit meanings of *nganji* when accompanied with pronominal prefixes is that of a perceived co-dependency of those entities to which the term is applied. The dependency is often associated with a hunter-prey relationship, where the hunter is always kin to the hunted. Many animals, plants and people are described using this term. For example, the Yanyuwa are kin to the sea, dugong hunters are kin to the dugong, while the dugong is kin to the sea grass beds. The term is used extensively in relation to the coastal seabirds; they are described by the Yanyuwa as being kin to the fish upon which they are said to feed. On a much more basic level, the term can be used to describe similarity, such as two yams which share the same soil type, two similar colours or a group of relatives (see also Chase and von Sturmer 1980 and Nash 1981). The term can also be used to make a detailed reference to someone's association with a particular place, or to a group of people who hold knowledge concerning a particular ceremony. The term *nganji* may be highlighting what the Yanyuwa perceive to be a mutual interest in each other's development.

Humans engage in a 'killing' dialogue with a number of animal populations which they pursue, kill and feed upon. Humans also have faculties which allow them to ponder the meanings of such bonds between themselves and the other species they observe. Such a view may provide one of the reasons why Yanyuwa hunters, both men and women, often express sorrow or pity when they are killing or butchering an animal. It is said by the Yanyuwa, obviously enough, that without

'We always look north'

the sea grass there would be no sea turtles, in particular, green turtles, or dugong: but likewise it is said that without the dugong and sea turtle, there would be no sea grass, as their feeding upon it keeps it healthy. In Yanyuwa ecological terms the death of dugong and sea turtles is seen to be important to the maintenance of the sea grass beds.

This belief echoes that of Heinsohn (1981:92) who suggested that 'the destructive feeding [of dugong] may help to maintain a diversity of species in sea grass communities by producing a large number of seral stages' and confirmed by Helene Marsh and Tony Preen (pers. comm. 1996).

The sea as country

There is a tendency amongst some Yanyuwa people, especially those of the older generation, to say that the mainland begins at the extreme inland limit of the coastal salt pans and mudflats. The reasoning for this is that these areas also contain small sandy 'islets', which are often covered in sparse vegetation. During the period of the king tides in the later half of the year and tidal surges caused by cyclones, these flats are inundated, leaving the small islets standing dry, quite isolated and surrounded by water. This landscape in Yanyuwa is classed as *narnu-ruluruluwanka*. Trigger (1987:72), in his work with the Ganggalida people to the east of Yanyuwa country, has also found a similar perception that the mainland begins on the inland limit of the coastal salt pans and mudflats.

The Yanyuwa are at home in these lower 'saltwater' coastal regions, and while they hunt in the inland 'freshwater' limits of their country, they describe it as *jibuburula* which is usually translated as 'dry country'. The word is based on the root *jiburu*, which means unpleasant, unpalatable or even worn-out or broken; it is the country of the Garrwa and Gudanji people. The irony of the term 'dry' in this context is that it begins where the McArthur and Wearyan River systems are permanently fresh and not under the influence of the tides.

Customary marine tenure in Australia

Such inland country is also called 'scrub country', and people describe it as country where it is not possible to get a breeze on one's face. This thought is highlighted in the following song composed by Elma Brown a-Bunubunu on her return to the coast from the Barkly Tablelands:

I stand and feel the sea wind,
it refreshes my face; for too long

I have been a woman of the inland 'scrub country'.

People such as the Garrwa and Gudanji see Yanyuwa country as being very distinct from the mainland. It is a country which fits the Yanyuwa people who are known as 'saltwater people', while the Garrwa and Gudanji are called the 'freshwater people'. Gudanji and Garrwa people travel into this country, usually in the company of Yanyuwa people. These trips by the 'mainlanders' usually only take place during the more pleasant times of the year such as the cool part of the dry season, and they do not bother with such country during the mosquito-ridden, intensely humid pre-wet season period.

The Yanyuwa, however, see the coastal areas as being special in terms of their geography, the food sources that are available and as an environment that distinguishes them from the other Aboriginal groups in the area. The thought of their coastal country sometimes moves people to high levels of emotion. It is the sea more than any other geographical feature which the Yanyuwa use as a metaphor for their existence and their identity. The most common of these terms is *Ii-Anthawirriyarra*, which means 'those people whose spiritual and cultural heritage comes from the sea', but which in everyday English speech is rendered as 'the people of the sea'. Another term *li.Karinguthundangu*, means, 'those people who come from the coastal and sea country' and *ll-Kannuthundangu* means 'those people from the north', which is a shorthand reference to the sea and islands. Perhaps one of the most explicit references to this association with the sea is expressed in the saying *nganu Ii-Yanyuwa kaninyambu-ngka ki-anthaa*, meaning 'we Yanyuwa people have our origins, (or we originated), in the sea'. Young Yanyuwa people who do not speak Yanyuwa will describe themselves as 'saltwater people', or as

an 'island man or island woman', and then often derisively add that they are not freshwater mainland people. The strength of this attachment to the sea has meant that Yanyuwa descendants who may have had little or no association with the sea and islands will proudly proclaim themselves as 'belonging to the saltwater country of the Gulf'.

The sea, as with nearly all other geographical features and phenomena in the Yanyuwa environment is a Spirit Ancestor. The sea, which is masculine, belongs to the Rumburriya semi-moiety, while the waves are feminine and are also associated with the Rumburriya semi-moiety. Both the spiritual essences of the waves and the sea are said to be located on Cape Vanderlin or Muluwa. The tidal patterns of the sea are associated with an area of beach of the central east coast of Vanderlin Island called Wabuwa. This locality is associated with the activities of the Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors. The waves are associated with the activity of a seasnake called, in Yanyuwa, *a-wirninnybirniny* (*Lampemis hardwickii*). The waves, *a-rumu*, which the snake creates, are feminine, as are the crests of the waves, *nanda-wuku*, literally 'her back', or the sea spray *nanda-rayal*, 'her sputum', *nanda-minyimi*, 'her condensation from the mouth', which is the fine sea spray which results from waves pounding on the rocks. The sea snake is described as being *rrankun-ganji rru-rumungku*, or as 'one which is kin to the waves and sea'.

Similarly, many of the currents found around the islands are associated with the residual power of various Spirit Ancestors. These currents are generally called *wayikuku*, while the term *arrayalya* is applied to a point where two tidal streams come together, where Spirit Ancestor paths cross. The presence of two currents coming together is often evidenced by the existence of flows of tidal rubbish known in Yanyuwa as *janjirikirri*.

As with many other Spirit Ancestor entities, knowledgeable people can use the spiritual power associated with the sea and tides for either negative or positive purposes. People can 'sing' the sea snake and cause waves to form, or cause the sea to become calm. Likewise, knowledgeable people can sing the tide, as Jemima Miller Wuwarlu describes:

Customary marine tenure in Australia

The old men and women can sing people, they can sing them to the sea, as the tide goes out people become dry, they are tired, listless, not well, then later as the tide comes back up they are refreshed, they feel happy again. Such people have songs which make the sea theirs.

Such songs are sung by 'jealous' people who are envious of people getting dugong, sea turtle and other sea foods, or by angry relatives who have been left out of hunting trips or journeys to other places on the islands. In 1992 during the process of the land claim on the Pellew Islands, a number of people said they felt very tired and worn out. They did not put it down to the intensity of the land claim process in which they were involved, but rather, they said, someone had sung the tide and it had made them weak. When I inquired as to why someone would sing the tide on them, the reply was universally that other people on the mainland were jealous that they, the Yanyuwa sea people, still knew their country and were fighting to get it back.

The sea, as with the land, is not beyond influence, for there are those who know how it can be used to the detriment or betterment of others. The sea is still seen to be a mysterious place, but this is not to say it is feared. It is respected, and people will choose the right time to travel over the sea. It is common, when people are about to embark on a journey across a stretch of sea, or after having completed a journey, to recall previous journeys or speak of their ancestors who had completed the same journey in dugout and bark canoes.

The Yanyuwa are well aware that a life centred on the sea is far riskier than one based totally upon the mainland, and in the past there was a higher mortality rate associated with the sea. A number of stories are still told of drownings by overturned canoes, and of bark and dugout canoes that literally fell apart mid-journey (see Timothy (Jnr) in Bradley 1989:1 82; Timothy (Snr) in Bradley 1991:88). A number of log coffin and bone bundle burials on the islands contain the remains of people who died because of accidents at sea. In addition to this, a number of special memorial stones over the islands represent people whose bodies were never recovered. People were also born in canoes

and died in canoes. However, having said this, the Yanyuwa people's association with the sea has conferred on them certain unique benefits in terms of food sources, technology and ceremonies, and has given the Yanyuwa a very powerful status in relation to other language groups in the area of the Gulf. They are not, as they often put it, 'scrub dwellers of the mainland'.

The seas around the islands can become rough quite suddenly: squalls can hit without much warning. There are sharks, jellyfish, and stonefish as well as dugong, sea turtle and fish. Yanyuwa people respond to all this with great care, sometimes by the use of magic or 'power' and just as effectively, with great familiarity. For all the hardship that the sea can provide, it is still a familiar place. People accept the complex tides and currents and the, at times, unpredictable nature of the sea. Even when two people were involved in an incident where their dinghy capsized in rough weather when it hit a sand bar, the occupants were not overly concerned. It happened to the old people, and therefore it will happen to them, and as an added aside, maybe 'something' caused it to happen—an angry Spirit or human ancestor could just as well have done it. The dangers that the sea can provide for travellers are not spoken of as such. They are not even called risks: rather they are described simply as, 'that's just the kind of life we have on the sea' (pers. comm. Johnson Timothy 1982).

Such an acceptance of the dangers that the sea can provide is also expressed in the following song. It was composed after two women were caught in a westerly squall while paddling a dugout canoe and tells of how the two women felt during the experience:

We may yet be able, to cross westwards,
But we may be thrown eastwards, by these waves.

(Suzanne Jujana and Darby Muluwamara)

The sea has represented for generations of Yanyuwa people a point of unity with the natural environment. It embodies for these people a place of origin. It provides metaphors by which they describe themselves. It is important to note that they do not often call themselves island people, they are 'sea people or saltwater people'. The reason for such

self-description becomes obvious when one travels with the Yanyuwa people to the relatively shallow areas of sea, under which grows the sea-grass that the dugong and sea turtle feed on.

Dugong and sea turtle

The dugong and sea turtle they are sea creatures of authority, they belonged to our ancestors and they belong to us ... they are like the fruit of the cycad food as it too is a food of authority. (Nora Jalirduma 1988)

Within the Yanyuwa classification of the environment, the dugong, the green sea turtle and the fruit of the cycad palm (*Cycas angulata*) are all classed as being food sources of *wurrama* or 'authority'. They were in past times considered to be those food sources which were essential for the physical as well as the spiritual survival of the Yanyuwa people. At the present time, the cycad palm fruit is rarely gathered and processed, although when people speak of it, their voices still resonate with a degree of emotion, highlighting the importance that this food source has in the historical view of the Yanyuwa environment and their place in it (see Bradley 1988: 1–29; McDinny in Bradley 1989: 215–235).

The dugong and sea turtle are still important. They represent for the Yanyuwa an important focus which demonstrates a continuity with the past, and in times which are rapidly changing, an affirmation of the ability to maintain the links with the past. This is demonstrated not only by the hunting of these creatures but also in other knowledge associated with them, which seeks to explain their behaviour and their place within the marine environment (see Bradley 1991: 91–110). Yanyuwa men and women say that such creatures as the dugong and sea turtle have their own Law, their own culture, their own way of being. The view that the various species have their own culture is also evidenced in that they have their own favoured food sources and localities and that they behave in certain ways. Because of the strong links between people, living things and sites on the landscape, it is also felt that all life

forms such as animals, plants, insects, fish and birds have the ability to make perceptions about the environment they live in. They can evaluate a given situation within themselves, and ultimately, they are seen to be totally conscious and responsible beings. Furthermore, just as human beings observe and interpret the actions of other living things, it is also felt that living things observe and interpret the actions of human beings. As such, they too are part of the established Law which began when their own Spirit Ancestors first moved on the landscape. Thus, the Dugong Spirit Ancestor not only provides the basis by which human beings can try to understand dugong, but the original Dugong Ancestor is also seen to provide the reasons why dugong behave like dugong. In this instance, the term Law is being used to describe the various habits of other species, and the word Law is being used as a paradigm for the biological traits which each species possesses.

Thus, the understanding of animals and other species having Law means that actions such as mating, giving birth to young, the laying and hatching of eggs, feeding habits, growth and eventual death are seen to be elements which express the eternity of the order which is simply called the Law. Such processes as alluded to above are a continual restatement about how things were in the very beginning, and how it is hoped they always will be. However, the contemporary world shows that outside influences can dramatically change the perceptions of this Law. For example, professional fishermen set nets which run over the sea grass beds, dugong get caught in them and drown. The question, 'Why don't the dugong learn about nets?' could be posed. The knowledge of nets, however, is not a part of dugong Law: it is a part of human Law. Humans, therefore, have to act on behalf of the dugong to try and preserve them. This should not be seen as just good environmental or ecological sense: rather, it is the way that kin should treat each other because of a shared genesis, dugong and Yanyuwa people are relatives.

Likewise, the activities of tourists, miners and other unknowledgeable people over the sea and coast all worry the Yanyuwa in regard to their relationship with the other species which inhabit the environment. The death of large numbers of dugong in gill nets set by professional

fishermen over the sea grass beds causes immense grief and anger amongst the Yanyuwa.

A general principle of Yanyuwa ethno-classification is a division between what are considered coastal-marine and island species as opposed to inland-mainland species. This categorisation is not rigid, and depending on circumstances, some creatures and plant species will move between the maritime environment and the mainland. Usually such examples have more to do with individual perception of the species involved, and in group discussion such differences in opinion can be the source of lively debate. Thus, any species seen to be associated with the sea, islands and coast are called *wurralngu*, a term meaning literally 'being for depths of the sea'; by extension, however, the term is also used to describe any creature which is perceived to belong to the marine and island environment. Yanyuwa people, too, are included in this category.

Dugong and sea turtle are of course labelled as *wurralngu*, but are more commonly referred to as *walya*. This term *walya* has no direct English translation, but it is generally translated as 'dugong and sea turtle'. The basis for such a category is probably twofold: firstly they are the only creatures in the sea which feed extensively on sea grass; secondly, they are the largest marine animals hunted and are culturally significant.

Hunters in the marine environment

Our hair is strong, tightly coiled and heavily oiled;
For we are inhabitants of the sea country
We are dugong and sea turtle hunters of excellence
(Jack Baju 'Akarrunda')

The above song is still sung by older Yanyuwa men and women. It was composed in the mid 1920s when a visitor from one of the linguistic groups neighbouring the Yanyuwa suggested that the closest relative of the Yanyuwa people was the black saline mud of the sea country, and

that this mud could always be seen clinging to the bodies of Yanyuwa people. In response Jack Baju composed this song; it is bold and boastful and it speaks of meanings and understandings for the Yanyuwa people that words alone cannot convey.

The song is important for both Yanyuwa men and women. The key words in the Yanyuwa original are *li-wurralngu* which literally means 'the people, all people, who are inhabitants of the sea' and *li-maramaranja*, which is best translated as meaning 'those people who are dugong and sea turtle hunters of excellence.' In the song Jack Baju has is stressing the importance and centrality of this activity to the Yanyuwa people, expressing it as a means by which they truly demonstrate their self-perceived uniqueness.

So strong is this bond between sea, dugong, sea turtle and being Yanyuwa that one elderly man once commented to me and a gathering of Yanyuwa men and women that:

The old people spoke Yanyuwa, they were always talking
Yanyuwa,
we are here speaking Yanyuwa because we are dugong and
sea turtle
hunters of excellence, we are those people who desire to har-
poon them

(Tim Rakawurlma, field diary 1984).

For this old man and the assembled men and women, who added their own self-affirming comments, the fact that they speak Yanyuwa is also intimately associated with the activity of hunting sea turtle and dugong. The term *maranja* and the group term *li-maramanja* for skilled hunters are terms not used just for someone who is able to kill a dugong and sea turtle, although in the contemporary sense, it is more often becoming so. Rather, it is and was reserved for those people who also knew the Law associated with the sea, the sea grass, dugong and turtles, as well as knew the spiritual significance of the activity.

To become a *maranja* involves training, an apprenticeship, and finally, after some time, the term is awarded to an individual who has showed that he had absorbed all of the teachings associated with

the activity and can demonstrate the knowledge in all its areas, from hunting, butchering, and distribution of meat to also knowing the more esoteric spiritual matters associated with the way of dugong and sea turtle hunting. In the past and, to some extent today, the training of young men to become hunters, and of young men and women to understand the Law associated with hunting, butchering, cooking and distribution involves quite strict procedural steps. There are certain rituals which are designed not just to increase the efficiency and discipline of the hunt but also to create respect for the roles played by the individuals involved in the actual hunt and by members in the community waiting for the return of the hunters.

Over the last hundred years, or perhaps more, the activity of hunting dugong and sea turtle has changed dramatically. New technology such as aluminium dinghies have replaced bark and dugout canoes, steel harpoon points, nylon and hemp ropes, and polystyrene floats have all changed the visible aspects of hunting. But other things have changed too. The time spent hunting, the necessity to hunt and who is available to hunt have all had an impact upon Yanyuwa dugong and sea turtle hunting.

Some factors associated with the activity of hunting have been relatively stable. They are the more esoteric things, and they continue to have importance for the Yanyuwa. They are part of the means by which the continuity from past hunters to contemporary hunters is preserved. One of the important ways this continuity is achieved is by the Spirit Ancestor narrative of the the *li-Maramaranja*, which the Yanyuwa simply call the Dugong Hunters, but which, as mentioned above, could be translated as the 'Dugong and Sea Turtle Hunters of Excellence'.

The narrative and song of the Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors are associated with the island Rrumburriya semi-moiety, and the path of these Spirit Ancestors crosses the breadth of the Pellew Islands from Vanderlin Island in the east to West Island in the west. All of the other semi-moieties have groups of spirit beings on their own country which are sung in their song cycles and which are also designated as dugong and sea turtle hunters. They are not creative beings in the sense that the

Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors are; rather, they are spirit beings who were sighted by other Spirit Ancestors as they journeyed.

For example, in the Wuyaliya song cycle associated with the Groper Spirit Ancestor, groups of spirit being dugong hunters are encountered on the northwest tip of South West Island at a locality known as Mawarndarlbarndarl. In the Wuyaliya song cycle associated with the Dingo Spirit Ancestor, spirit being dugong hunters are found at the mouth of the Crooked River. The Sea Turtle Spirit Ancestor of the Wurdaliya semi-moiety sings of spirit being dugong hunters at Mamadthamburru, or Crocodile Point, on the southwestern tip of West Island; and the Rock Cod Spirit Ancestor of the Mambaliya-Wawukarriya semi-moiety sings of dugong hunting spirit beings on Sharkers Point or Jarrka. It can be seen from Figure 8:3 that while there is a major Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestor which crosses the islands, each semi-moiety has associated with it various tracts of their country where spirit beings engage in dugong and sea turtle hunting. Thus in a sense, these spirit beings and the Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors infuse the entire geography of the islands and the sea with that activity which the Yanyuwa see as of prime importance. Many of these locations, mentioned in the song cycles as having dugong and sea turtle hunting spirit beings, are now favoured as overnight or base camps from which contemporary hunters depart to hunt dugong or sea turtle.

The narrative of the Spirit Ancestor Dugong Hunters may be viewed, like many similar narratives, as just a list of named places through which they passed, or it may be interpreted as an act of creation, the effects of which are still resonating within the Yanyuwa environment, still capable of having a profound impact on the Yanyuwa community in contemporary times. One of the most important factors about the narrative is that the Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors, in many respects, represent the immediate and material reality of the present-day Yanyuwa dugong and sea turtle hunters. They travel in boats, they carry harpoons and ropes, they pursue dugong and turtle and it is at this level that the narrative provides very common ground with a contemporary reality. The boundary between Spirit Ancestor times to the everyday contemporary situation is not great.

The appeal of this Spirit Ancestor narrative to contemporary Yanyuwa people is that it does not deal with fish, birds, wind or insects being Spirit Ancestors; instead, the Dugong Hunters are seen as a group of men hunting, and although they perform some rather amazing feats on this journey, they are at all times primarily human. As some Yanyuwa people have commented, this narrative, more than any of the other Spirit Ancestor narratives, is 'like real history' (Don Miller with Johnson Timothy 1985).

The journey of the Spirit Ancestor Dugong Hunters, their 'mythic' journey, is the true reality; and the present and historical moments of hunting dugong and sea turtle achieve their full meaning and reality because of the repetition, recitation and reenactment of what occurred in the time of these Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors. It does not take set ritual performance and song to re-create the actions of these Spirit Ancestors: the mere fact of being in a boat, standing with a harpoon, turning the dugong to face the sea before butchering and cooking dugong flesh are all re-creations of the Dugong Hunters' reality. It should be added that there are actual religious ritual actions also associated with the Dugong Hunters, but on a day-to-day secular level, historical and present Yanyuwa hunters and cooks of dugong and sea turtle have experienced and are experiencing the 'true time' (Yerushalmi 1954; Eliade 1965) of the original activities and archetypes associated with the Spirit Ancestor Dugong Hunters.

In such a 'mythic' conception of time, everything continually recurs in the lifetime of those Yanyuwa people who pursue the hunting of dugong and sea turtle. The narrative and the song of the Dugong Hunters can be seen as a metahistorical story that can happen over and over again. A Yanyuwa person who hunts dugong or visits the sites scattered over the Pellew Islands associated with these Spirit Ancestors thus encounters the 'myth' directly and human history, which cannot be repeated, is replaced with the primary reality of dugong and sea turtle hunting and of being a Yanyuwa 'saltwater person'. Finally, the humanity of the Dugong Hunter Spirit Ancestors means that there are no real surprises, no actions that cannot be repeated. What has been, is now, and

'We always look north'

will hopefully be the future. The people who undertake the actual activities of hunting will change, but the essentials of the drama recounted in the narrative will always remain the same. Thus, things will end in the way they began, with people travelling in boats, being aware of the tide, carrying their harpoons and ropes in the hope they will achieve the aim of all such hunters, a dugong or sea turtle.

The account of the Dugong Hunters' journey appears to follow a linear path across the islands from east to west (Figure 8:3). The Yanyuwa tellers of this story speak of a group of people travelling in bark canoes over a much wider path and area. At its most basic, the narrative, which describes the journey of the Dugong Hunters, emphasises why Yanyuwa people are different from mainlanders. Yanyuwa people are not hunters of kangaroo and emu, although they sometimes do that, but their own self-perception and other people's perception of them is as hunters of dugong and sea turtle and as a people who are ecologically, economically and technologically distinct. There are still great contrasts between the life and economics of the Yanyuwa people who inhabit the coastal mangrove country, the saline flats, islands and sea, as opposed to those, who Tindale (1974:121–122) calls 'the scrub covered upland dwellers,' a sentiment with which the Yanyuwa would no doubt agree.

Conclusion

People from mainland language groups such as the Garrwa, Gudanji and Wambaya show a degree of amazement that the Yanyuwa actually do travel to the sea and capture dugong and sea turtle and that the sea and the marine environment in general, is capable of sustaining human life.

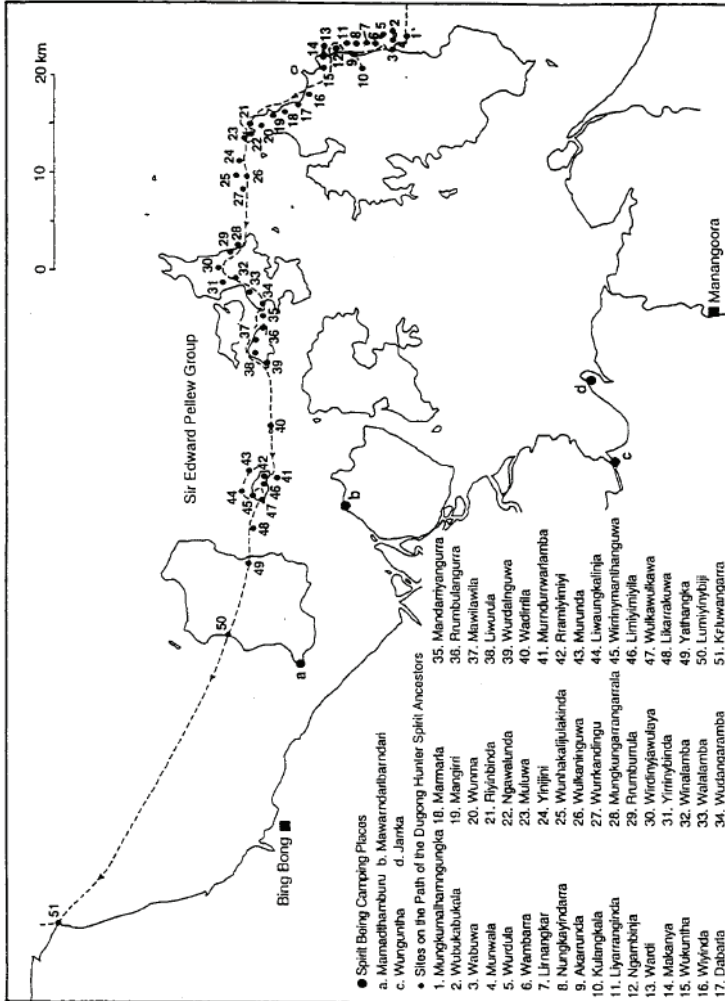


Figure 8.3: Paths and camps of the Dugong Hunter spirit ancestors over the Pellew Islands

The Yanyuwa term *nganji* ('kin') provides a key to explore one of the ways by which the relationship with the sea is sustained. The term connotes the enduring relationships that exist within the maritime environment that the Yanyuwa share with many species of plants and animals. In an environment where people describe animals as being kin to each other, such as sea birds being kin to the fish, or hunters to dugong, dugong to sea grass, there is also a belief that such relationships are beneficial to each other. If a hunter does not hunt a dugong, then the dugong numbers will decrease, which will be bad for the Yanyuwa. If seabirds do not hunt fish, then both the fish and bird will suffer. This aspect of Yanyuwa classification is also an implicit directive for action (putting classification into practice) that is, preying upon the creatures so linked as kin.

Amidst such discussions, people reflect also on a less intimate but no less important relationship between creatures and environment. As Annie Karrakayn has commented concerning the sea birds, 'they make me think about my country, my island, the sea, my mother, poor thing'. What is being demonstrated in such a statement are the deep and enduring emotional links between people, sea-country and many of the creatures which inhabit the area. This in itself is not unusual. It is spoken of continually in the media and in books and popular writings about indigenous peoples' relationships to their country, but when people make statements such as the one above, they are highlighting an evocative and emotional attachment of 'things' to people. This provides reference points which allow a phenomenological rendering of the Yanyuwa environment and it moves away from a presentation of dry empiricism to one which expresses the true consciousness of the people, including their belief in the consciousness of their environment.

Such an exploration does give rise to the idea of indigenous people being 'at one with the environment', rather than being separate, and in this there is nothing new. It gives a richer substance to the notion of 'being at one'. The Yanyuwa people stand within an ecological system, dominated by thoughts of the sea, which has as a part of its integral components human agents and spiritual beings one of which is the sea and special knowledge and power.

Note

I acknowledge with gratitude the large number of Yanyuwa men and women who have, over the years, been responsible for sharing the deep knowledge about the sea country. Many are now dead but amongst those who are still alive and should be thanked are Dinah Norman, Annie Karrakayn, Jemima Miller, Roddy Harvey, Mussolini Harvey, Tom Friday, Eillen McDinny, Steve Johnson and Mavis Timothy.

References

- Arnol, J 1983. *McArthur River catchment management (NT)*. Melbourne: Monash University, Graduate School of Environmental Science.
- Baker, R. 1989. *Land is life: continuity through change for the Yanyuwa from the Northern Territory of Australia*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Adelaide: Department of Geography, University of Adelaide.
- Bradley, J. 1988. *Yanyuwa country: The Yanyuwa people of Borroloola tell the history of their land*. Richmond, Melbourne: Greenhouse Publications.
1989. Keeping up our language: a collection of Yanyuwa texts and articles dealing with Yanyuwa language and society. Unpublished manuscript. Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
- 1991a. 'Li-Maramaranja', the Yanyuwa hunters of marine animals in the Sir Edward Pellew Group, NT. *Records of the South Australian Museum* 25(2):91-110.
1994. Some Yanyuwa songs. In *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and other Aboriginal song poems* (eds) Martin Duwell and R.M.W. Dixon. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press. Pp. 3-67.
- Bradley, J. and J. Kirton 1992. *Yanyuwa Wuka*, language from Yanyuwa country: a Yanyuwa dictionary and cultural resource. Unpublished

manuscript. Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Chase, A. and J. von Sturmer 1980. Anthropology and botany: turning over a new leaf. In *Papers in Australian linguistics No.13; contributions to Australian linguistics* (eds) B. Rigsby and P. Sutton. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics. Pp. 289–299.

Chase, A. and P. Sutton 1981. Hunter-gatherers in a rich environment: Aboriginal coastal exploitation in Cape York Peninsula. In *Ecological biogeography of Australia* (ed.) A. Keast. The Hague: W. Junk and Co. Pp. 1817–1852.

1987. Australian Aborigines in a rich environment. In *Traditional Aboriginal society, a reader* (ed.) W.H. Edwards. Melbourne: MacMillan. Pp. 68–95.

Christian, C. 1952. Regional land surveys. *The Journal of Australian Institute of Agricultural Science* 140–146.

Christian, C. and G. Stewart 1953. *General report on survey of Katherine-Darwin region 1946*. Land Research Series No.1. Melbourne: CSIRO.

Christian, C. and L. Noakes 1954. *Survey of the Barkly region, Northern Territory and Queensland, 1947–48*. Land Research Series No.3. Melbourne: CSIRO.

Eliade, M. 1965. *Cosmos and history*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Heinsohn, G. 1981. The Dugong in the seagrass system. In *The Dugong* (ed.) H. Marsh. Proceedings of a seminar/workshop held at James Cook University, 8–13 May 1979, pp.125–129.

Johnson, K. and J. Kerle (eds) 1991. *Flora and vertebrate fauna of the Sir Edward Pellew group of islands, Northern Territory*. A report to the Australian Heritage Commission and Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory. Wildlife Division. Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory. Alice Springs. 22.

Customary marine tenure in Australia

Jones, R. 1980. Hunters in the Australian coastal savanna. In *Human ecology in savanna environments* (ed.) D. Harris. London: Academic Press. Pp. 107–146

1985. Ordering the landscape. In *Seeing the first Australians* (eds) L Donaldson and T. Donaldson. George Allen and Unwin. Pp. 181–209.

Nash, D. 1991. Comparative flora terminology of the central Northern Territory. In *Archaeology and linguistics: Aboriginal Australia in global perspective*. (eds) P. McConvell and N. Evans. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press Pp. 187–206.

Poiner, I., D. Staples and R. Kenyo 1987. Seagrass communities of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Australia. *Australian Journal of Marine and Freshwater Research* 38:121–31.

Speck, N. 1960. *The land and pastoral resources of the north Kimberley area*, WA Land Research Series No. 4. Melbourne: CSIRO.

Stanner, W. 1965. Aboriginal territorial organisation: estate, range, domain and regime. *Oceania* 36:1–26.

Tindale, N. 1974. *Aboriginal tribes of Australia, their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits and proper names*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

Trigger, D. 1987. Inland, coast and islands: traditional Aboriginal society and material culture in a region of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. *Records of the South Australian Museum* 21(2):69–84.

Williams, N. 1982. A boundary is to cross: observations on Yolngu boundaries and permission. In *Resource managers: North American and Australian hunter-gatherers* (eds) N. Williams and E. Hunn. Colorado: Westview Press. Pp. 131–154.

Ygoa-McKeown, R. 1987. *An assessment of the conservation significance of the Sir Edward Pellew group of islands*. Darwin: Environment Centre, NT.

Yerushalmi, Y. 1982. *Zahkor: Jewish history and Jewish memory*. Seattle: University of Washington.