3 The Sociolinguistic and Historical Background

In Wadeye and surrounding communities, Murriny Patha has become a lingua franca that all Aboriginal people in the region speak. Although they can speak the language, many of these speakers may refer to themselves as belonging to a “mob” bearing the name of one of the other languages of the region. For most Aboriginal people under 50, Murriny Patha is their first language. The coastal region between the Moyle and Fitzmaurice Rivers, where Murriny Patha is the lingua franca, is known as the Thamarrurr region. Most of my research has been with people belonging to Murriny Patha clans, so any claims I make about “Murriny Patha” values or social practice will be based on fieldwork with the “owners” of this language. However as native speakers of Murriny Patha, these values and practices may well be equally attributable to members of any of the twenty clans groups in the Thamarrurr region, even if they do not claim the language as their own.

3.1 The Port Keats mission

The Moyle and Fitzmaurice region of the Northern Territory was one of the last corners of the continent to experience European incursion. Being a low-lying, swampy region that is prone to flooding, and one that contains no notable mineral deposits, the area was of little interest to either pastoralists or prospectors. For this reason, it was not a frontier region that experienced much of the violence that characterized the European expansion elsewhere on the continent. Between 1839 and 1931, there were a few isolated encounters between local Aborigines and Europeans and Japanese that resulted in fatalities (Pye 1972). The Murriny Patha and neighbouring groups gained a reputation as fearsome warriors – a reputation they still cultivate today (Ivory 2003).

In the 1870s Europeans and Chinese first settled on the Daly River and in 1886 a Jesuit mission was established. In the early 20th century the Daly River region was opened up to small farms. This period saw increasing movement of Murriny Patha people toward the Daly, attracted by commodities such as flour, sugar and tobacco; steel axes and cloth. There was likewise a southward movement towards cattle stations in the Victoria River basin, particular to Legune, Bradshaw and Auvergne.

37 Between 2003 and June of 2008, the region was a local government area presided over by the Thamarrurr Regional Council, which was comprised of members of the region’s 20 clans.
stations. Some Murriny Patha men used to travel regularly on boats between Darwin and Timber Creek.

In 1934, Father Richard Docherty MSC met with Murriny Patha Aborigines at Fannie Bay gaol in Darwin to discuss starting a Catholic mission in their area. In 1935, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) established the “old mission” at Werndek Nganayi, a beach on the estate of one of the Murriny Patha clans, Rak Kirnmu. In 1939 the mission was moved to Wadeye on Sandfly Creek, a site on the Yek Dimirnin clan’s estate, between the Fitzmaurice and Moyle Rivers. This mission became known as Port Keats until the 1970s, when the land was handed back to local people and Wadeye became the official name of the community. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart still remain at Wadeye although their political influence has waned considerably.

Murriny Patha people claim that they were already Christians before the arrival of the missionaries. Approximately three years prior to the start of the mission, a Murriny Patha man by the name of Mulindjin had a vision while he lay convalescing under a tree. In this dream, Mulindjin followed a brown hawk, ku kartjin, that subsequently turned into an angel. He then met a tall man with long hair and a woman who was standing on a snake. The long-haired man gave Mulindjin the series of songs that were later to be called malgarrin. When the missionaries arrived, the Aborigines told them that they already were familiar with Jesus and his mother Mary, because Mulindjin had already recounted the story of his dream in which he met people fitting their description. It was the images of the Virgin Mary, depicted standing on the belly of a snake, that the Aborigines recognized. Thus the Murriny Patha were able to incorporate aspects of Catholicism into their own autochthonous cosmology (Furlan 2005: 77-78).

The story of Mulindjin’s vision provided common ground between the indigenous cosmology and that of the missionaries. This point of convergence assisted in establishing a dialogue that developed in mutual collaboration. This

38 For published accounts of the Mulindjin’s vision see Molingin (1981) and Stockton (1985). See also Furlan (2005: 85-127) for analysis of these published versions as well as analysis of the malgarrin song series.
enabled the missionaries to secure a foothold in the world of the Murriny Patha and helped *kardu dimirnin* clansmen lure the missionaries, with all their associated economic resources, to Wadeye, in the estate of the *Yek Dimirnin* clan (Furlan, personal communication). Although little of the textual material in the song series relates to Christian themes, malgarrin has come to be associated with both the Catholic Church and the *Yek Dimirnin* clan of Murriny Patha people. (*Mulindjin* was a Kardu Dimirnin man.)

Father Docherty departed from Darwin in two boats with a number of Murriny Patha men and women. Also on board was the eminent anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, who remained at *Werndek Nganayi* for two months. Effectively, the ethnographic record begins at the same moment as the first permanent European presence in the region.

The missionaries quickly recruited the Aboriginal population and put them to work, building shelters and establishing a vegetable garden. When the mission was moved to Port Keats in 1939, tall trees were cut down and an airstrip was built, enabling faster provision of medicines and supplies from Darwin.

The Aboriginal population began to grow steadily. By 1941, there were 200-300 people congregating at the mission. The war years saw the arrival of larger numbers of Marri Ngarr, the traditional enemies of the Murriny Patha. It became necessary to implement drastic policies to reduce tensions and to feed the rapidly growing population. In this period, the entire adult population (with the exception of the local *Yek Dimirnin* clan) began to reside in a system of split shifts – two weeks at the mission, where people worked predominantly in the vegetable gardens, then two weeks back in their respective clan territories. These measures went a long way to reducing tensions at the mission (Furlan 2005: 80).

It was on patterns of marriage practice that the missionaries had considerable impact. The missionaries had the practice of polygyny in their sights and with it, the practice of bestowing young girls as wives on much older men. Infant girls used to be promised at birth to men who were then economically obligated to the promised girls’ father, mother, brother and mother’s brother (Falkenberg & Falkenberg 1981: 34-60).

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40 However Stanner (1936) notes that even before the mission, marriage practices were evolving due to the adoption of subsections from their Jaminjung neighbours (see §3.3.1).
By bestowing extra rations on the family of the bride, the missionaries took on the bride price\textsuperscript{41}, or *tharrtharr*, and the young girls then lived in a dormitory until the age of 18 (ibid: 65). After this, the girls were allowed to marry men closer to their own age. Missionaries also separated fighting co-wives from each other and arranged alternative husbands for them.\textsuperscript{42} In 1947, a dormitory system was also introduced for the boys.

Some of the priests made a point of learning the language, most notably Father William Flynn MSC, who incorporated Murriny Patha into his sermons. The positive attitude of these missionaries towards the Murriny Patha language may have gone some way towards fostering its dominance in the community. The Murriny Patha themselves also asserted their dominance. Ford & Klesch (2003) tell how a group of *Murriny Patha* people broke up a ceremony being performed by Magati Ke men and threatened them, saying that whilst on Murriny Patha country they should speak only Murriny Patha. Significantly, Magati Ke, which was only ever a small language group, is now the most endangered of the languages in the region (Abley 2005).

### 3.2 The languages of the region

All Aborigines in Wadeye speak the Murriny Patha language. It is the first language of all people under the age of 50. As a result of a community census conducted in 2003, Taylor reported that the total Aboriginal population of the Thamarrurr region as 2034 and projected a figure of 3833 for the year 2023 (Taylor 2004: 35). The number of speakers of Murriny Patha is thus increasing rapidly. Although there has been no specific study of either language acquisition or language change, my corpus shows remarkably little diffusion from English and little sign of the simplification and morphological reduction associated with weakening languages reported elsewhere in the country (e.g., Lee 1987; Schmidt 1985). Rather, the language appears to be gaining strength, at least for the time being. These gains would appear to be at the expense of the neighbouring languages, whose prospects are considerably less rosy.

\textsuperscript{41} Falkenberg & Falkenberg (1981: 34-60), Furlan (2005: 25). Intervention into wife bestowal was practiced extensively by Bishop Gsell in the Tiwi Islands (Gsell 1956).

\textsuperscript{42} My consultants told me that one woman (now deceased), was taken from her first husband by a missionary, brought to Port Keats where she lived with her second husband who already had a younger wife. When these wives fought, she was then separated from that husband by another missionary and given to a third husband. Falkenberg & Falkenberg (1981: 65) state that the missionaries generally tried to arrange marriages that were acceptable under the Aborigines’ own marriage rules.
Murriny Patha is one of five traditional Aboriginal languages spoken at Wadeye. *Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, Marri Ngarr* and *Magati Ke* all belong to the Western Daly family (Green 2003: 128). The fifth language, *Jaminjung* (or *Murriny Nyuwan* as Murriny Patha speakers call it), is of the *Yirram* subgroup of the *Mirndi* family (Harvey 2008). The Daly languages are all nominal classifying. In their respective languages, *Murriny, Marri* and *Magati* are the nominal classifiers relating to the semantic domain *language*. Thus in the Murriny Patha language, Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, Marri Ngarr and Magati Ke are referred to as *Murriny Amu, Murriny Tjebin, Murriny Ngarr* and *Murriny Ke* respectively. None of these languages are spoken fluently by adults younger than 40. All children grow up speaking Murriny Patha as their first language, though perhaps with some lexicon hailing from these other languages. The other language spoken in the community is *Murriny Yinggalitj* (English). By and large, Kriol is notably absent from the range of languages spoken at
Wadeye. Murriny Patha and its north eastern neighbour, Ngan’gityemerri, comprise the Southern Daly family (Green 2003). Ngan’gityemerri is spoken at Peppimenarti, Daly River, Nganmarriyanga and Wudipuli. Peppimenarti and Daly River are not within the Thamarrurr region, but are both places that Murriny Patha speakers frequently visit. Kriol is spoken at Peppimenarti and Daly River.

Walsh (1976b) describes three Murriny Patha dialects: Murriny Patha, Murriny Dimirnin and Murriny Kura. Murriny Kura, “fresh water language”, is associated with the fresh water portion of the Fitzmaurice River. There are speakers of this variety living at Nganmarriyanga (Palumpa) and in Kununurra, Western Australia. People living in Wadeye use this term to refer to that dialect. The terms Murriny Patha and Murriny Dimirnin are more problematic. I have worked predominantly with speakers of the Yak Nangu, Yek Maniny and the Yek Dimirnin Murriny Patha speaking clans. These speakers acknowledge the existence of differences between their own varieties of Murriny Patha, yet do not particularly use labels to distinguish these varieties. When comparing speech varieties, they tend to contrast them in terms of whether they should be considered as murriny yittjit, “heavy speech”, or murriny parndurtparn, “light speech”. To date, I’ve found it difficult to determine what sort of linguistic features speakers consider when making these judgments. Murriny dimirnin is most definitely a label that speakers could use to describe speech as being characteristic of a kardu dimirnin person (that is, a person of the Yek Dimirnin clan); just as it would be possible to describe a yek nangu clansmen’s speech as murriny nangu. Although these are reasonable constructions, they fall short of being named varieties. That is not to say that Murriny Dimirnin may not have been a valid dialect name in the 1970s. However, given that over 1500 speakers have been born since that time and grown up in or near Wadeye, it seems likely that most of these may have learnt the local variety. Thus, the utility in distinguishing groups on the basis of speech varieties would have diminished considerably. These days dimirnin, “gravel”, is used with the nominal classifier kardu (relating to humans) to refer to people of the clan Yek Dimirnin.

Grammatical and lexical descriptions of the language began with the MSC missionaries, the most impressive of which was the work of Father William Flynn (Flynn nd-a, b). In the 1970s and 80s more professional linguistic descriptions were

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Walsh used subscripts to distinguish between Murriny Patha, the language, and Murriny Patha, the dialect.
provided by Michael Walsh (1976a, b, 1987, 1996a, b, 1997) and SIL linguists Chester and Lynette Street (Street 1980a, b, 1985, 1987, 1996; Street & Kulampurut 1978; Street & Mollingin 1981, 1983; Street & Street 1989). Following a hiatus in the 1990s, academic interest in the Murriny Patha language is currently undergoing somewhat of a resurgence. Rachel Nordlinger is conducting theoretical investigations into reciprocal constructions and verbal morphology (Nordlinger 2008, ms, to appear). Ford and McCormack (2005, 2007) have compiled a specialized lexicon for use in legal settings. I have been engaged in research on conversational interaction (Blythe accepted-a, b) and grammatical change (Blythe in press). The Murriny Patha song language team has been engaged in research on the language used in traditional music (Barwick 2006b, c, 2007a, b, 2008; Barwick, Marett & Blythe 2006; Barwick et al. 2007; Barwick et al. 2005; Walsh 2007, in press).

3.3 Social organization

3.3.1 The rise and fall of the subsections.
There have been enormous changes to the patterns of social organization in the seventy-three years since the founding of the mission. In fact, Stanner (1936) reported that the Murriny Patha were already in the process of adapting to external influences. Stanner wrote that within the twenty years prior to the start of the mission, the Murriny Patha had taken on the system of eight subsections from their Jaminjung neighbours. He wrote (1936: 186) that “[t]ribes peripheral to the subsection area seem to feel an inferiority by not possessing nor understanding subsections” and because of this, the Murriny Patha felt a compulsion to take them on. He noted however that the Murriny Patha were experiencing difficulty reconciling the patrilineal descent of the existing moiety system with the matrilineal descent of the introduced subsections (1936: 190). Equally, they had additional problems reconciling the original system with its preferred marriage of a man to his classificatory mother’s brother’s daughter or father’s sister’s daughter with the marriage partner preferred under the subsection system, namely of a man to his classificatory sister’s son’s daughter44 (Stanner 1936: 198-199). In overcoming these teething problems, the Murriny Patha borrowed certain kinterms from Jaminjung. Stanner noted that in

44 This is the same subsection as his matrilateral second cross-cousin – mo.mo.br.da.da.
adapting the Jaminjung subsections, “some of the subsections themselves remain virtually functionless” (1936: 200).

In 1950, fifteen years after Stanner’s initial fieldwork, the Norwegian ethnographers Johannes and Aslaug Falkenberg conducted six month’s fieldwork at Port Keats. Johannes Falkenberg (Falkenberg 1962: 225-232) described the subsection system as having successfully morphed into a system with only four functional categories, effectively a four “section” system (not his term) with variant names. Thus *Djimitj* and *Djanama* were equivalent names for what was functionally the same section. Women of that section (that is, sisters of *Djimitj/Djanama*) went by the names *Namitj* or *Nanagu*. These women would be expected to marry men of the *Djangala/Djulama* section, whereas their brothers (*Djimitj/Djanama* men) would be expected to marry *Nangala/Nawula* women. Falkenberg announced that the Murriny Patha seemed to have resolved many of the issues Stanner had reported in 1936. The four (sub)-sections were aligning themselves with the earlier moiety system, indirect patrilineal descent had been accepted and there was some consensus on the thorny question of *ngulu* totemism (matrilineally inherited totems). Generally people were pleased to be able to reckon relationships with strangers using the modified (sub)-section system. Unfortunately the Falkenbergs never returned to Port Keats to follow up on their 1950 fieldwork before publishing their second monograph (Falkenberg & Falkenberg 1981). If they had, it may have proven to be a very different volume because the social changes that have occurred since that period are profound.

Walsh (1976b), Street (1987) and Ward (1983) all reported the existence of subsections in the 1970s and 80s. However there is no sign of any functional section or subsection system in the 21st century. Nor do the two patrimoieties *tiwunggu*, “eaglehawk” and *karrtjin*, “brown falcon”, play any significant role in social organization (Furlan 2005: 24). Although the Falkenbergs dedicated two chapters of their monograph (1982: 23-105) to marriage practices and wife bestowal, by the time the book was published, *tharrtharr*, the “bride price” that underpinned the systems they described, was no longer being paid by would-be husbands (Furlan 2005: 25).

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45 I am only aware of subsection terms being regularly used to refer to three people: one Aboriginal person, myself and Michael Walsh (both “whitefellas”). See also Furlan (2005: 24).
3.3.2 The Murriny Patha kinship system
As is typical of all traditionally oriented Aboriginal groups, the Murriny Patha have an all-encompassing classificatory kinship system that allows every individual to relate to every other using a kinterm. Because the subsection system is no longer operational, the integration of outsiders into the kinship system is not as easily achieved as it is in places where functioning section/subsection systems exist. Having said that, by applying the three principles that Radcliffe-Brown (1977 [1931]: 141-142) identified as underpinning all Australian kinship systems, working out what to call unknown persons is relatively straightforward. The first of these principles, “same-sex sibling merger” (Scheffler 1978: 115), treats pairs of brothers and pairs of sisters as categorially equivalent. Thus if you call a particular person yile, “father”, and that person has a brother, then you should also call the brother yile. The second principle brings relatives by marriage (affinals) into the same class of kin as consanguineal (blood) relatives. Thus, if your father takes a new wife, you should call her kale, which is the same term that you use for your own biological mother. The third principle is that of the “non-limitation of range” – namely, that the equivalence of same-sex siblings can be extended indefinitely to encompass the whole of society. Thus any “newcomer” can be allocated a kinterm by finding a linking relative. For example, if you and I have never met before but we manage to establish that you call person X kawu, “mother’s mother” (mo.mo), and that I call person X mangga, “father’s mother” (fa.mo); then I should address you with the same kinterm that I use to address X’s daughter’s children – pugarli, “cousin”.

Both Stanner (1936: 197) and the Falkenbergs (Falkenberg & Falkenberg 1981: 142) reported that the Murriny Patha kinship system was in the process of evolving from a Kariyarra (Kariera) type system (with two grandparent terms) to a system somewhat closer to the Arrernte (Aranda) systems (with four grandparent terms). This evolution was seen as a consequence of the adoption of the subsection system from the Jaminjung. The changes in the kinship system could be seen in the collapsing of certain kinship categories and the adoption of new kin terms.
Figure 3.2 Murriny Patha kin charts.

Male ego

Female ego
The Falkenbergs’ treatment of the Murriny Patha kinship system is very thorough; far more thorough than my own investigations to date. However, a notable absence of several important kinterms that the Falkenbergs recorded in the 1950s prompted me to revisit the kinship system in 2007. This work is ongoing. Figure 3.2 presents the Murriny Patha kinship system from the perspective of male and female egos. The charts represent my current understanding of the system and should be considered a work in progress. The differences between Falkenbergs’ data and these presented here are likely to be due to the less than adequate understanding of the Murriny Patha language on both the Falkenbergs’ and my behalf, as well as to likely diachronic changes in the kinship system itself.

Where the above system differs from those given by the Falkenbergs (Falkenberg & Falkenberg 1981: 139, 141; Falkenberg 1962: 216-217) is in the generations immediately above and below ego. In the generation above ego, the Falkenbergs reported that a range of compound kinterms were used to distinguish consanguineal kin from affinal kin. For example, they provided the contrasting terms pipi ngutjnan for father’s sister (fa.zi) and pipi nginarr for wife’s mother (wi.mo).46 In 2007, my consultants (all in their 70s) did not recognize the term pipi ngutjnan and merely used pipi to refer to both fa.zi and wi.mo. They did accept pipi nginarr for wi.mo, as well as nginarr pipi (along with nginarr by itself) but neither of these compounds were ever produced spontaneously. Similarly, the Falkenbergs provided contrasting terms yile, “father” and yile nginarr for wi.mo.br. I find that both of these categories are normally referred to simply as yile. Wife’s mother’s brother may also be referred to as yile nginarr, nginarr yile or just nginarr. Murriny Patha people certainly recognize these consanguineal and affinal kin as being categorically distinct, though how they designate specifically to which category a kinsman belongs is not well understood. Significantly, all of the affines that may be referred to with the term nginarr, are to be avoided (to some degree). I conclude that nginarr is probably not a genuine kinterm, per se, but rather a descriptor that can be applied to any potentially avoidable affine in a disharmonic relation to ego – in other words, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law, fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law (see Figure 3.3). It can be used to specify a

46 These terms have been adjusted to the present orthography.
particular *pipi* or *yile* as affinal, though I suspect that if the compound terms occur at all, then they are not used very frequently in natural conversation.\(^{47}\)

![Diagram](image_url)

Figure 3.3 Functionally different kinship categories that lack unique identifiers. The *nginarr* categories require avoidance.

The Falkenbergs’ terms also differ in the immediately descending generation. What the Falkenbergs failed to grasp is that the primary sense of *wakal* is “small”. *Wakal* is not a genuine kinterm per se, though it is frequently used as a kinterm in much the same way that *child* and *kid* are frequently used as kinterms in English. The Falkenbergs provide contrasts between *wakal*, “son” and *muluk* *wakal*, *da.hu*, *zi.so*; and between *wakal*, “daughter” and *newuy* *wakal*, *so.wi*, *zi.da*. The terms *muluk* and *newuy* mean “son” and “daughter” respectively, though these terms are used far less frequently than the gender-unmarked *wakal*, “child/progeny”. Son’s wife and daughter’s husband are both treated terminologically as “daughters” and “sons”, respectively (as would be predicted by Radcliffe-Brown’s second principle – that relatives by marriage are brought into the same categories as consanguineal kin). However, these kin are veritable affinals, and in the case of a woman’s daughter’s husband, ones requiring extreme avoidance. Because of this, they may also be referred to as *nginarr*.

Whilst *nginarr* can specify a *muluk* or a *newuy* as affinal, I believe that the way Murriny Patha people normally distinguish between these functionally different

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\(^{47}\) Similar contrasts provided by the Falkenbergs are *kaka ngutjnan*, “man’s mother’s brother” and *kaka kapi*, “wife’s father”. Today these functionally different categories are both referred to simply as *kaka*. Whilst I do not doubt that there have been diachronic changes to the kinship system since 1950, the notable absence of almost all the compound kinterms raises the question to what degree the Falkenbergs unwittingly imposed a terminology on the system they sought to describe. If this is what they did, then I do sympathise. Whilst attempting to elicit the kinterms provided in Figure 3.2, I too found it nearly impossible to establish which class of kinsman consultants were referring to without also resorting to some sort of circumlocution or compound term. This question remains to be resolved.
categories is by comparing the terms that the individuals in question use to refer to ego. So an affinal *muluk* (that is, a *nginarr* type – *da.hu*, *zi.da.hu*) calls a male ego *kaka*, “uncle”, whereas a consanguineal *muluk* (so, *zi.so*) calls a male ego *yile*, “father”. An affinal *newuy* (*so.wi*, br.*so.wi*) calls a female ego *pipi*, “aunt”, whereas a consanguineal *newuy* (*da*, br.*da*) calls a female ego *kale*, “mother”.

In the grandparents’ generation the kinship system is asymmetrical (see Figure 3.2). The grandparent terms show sibling merger, though not absolutely across the board. The term *kanggurl* designates both fa.fa and fa.fa.zi and the term *kawu* designates both mo.mo and mo.mo.br. However the term *mangga* designates fa.mo but not fa.mo.br, which is *thamuny*. *Thamuny* additionally designates mo.fa and mo.fa.zi.

### 3.3.3 Contemporary social groupings

There are twenty one patrilineal clans in the Thamarrurr region, seven of which – Rak Kirmmu, Yak Nangu, Yek Dimirmin, Yek Maniny, Rak Wakal Tjinang, Yek Kultjil, Yek Wuny – are associated with the Murriny Patha language. Eight clans (Rak Wakal Bengguny, Rak Wurdipuli, Rak Kulinmurr, Rak Kungarlarl, Rak Pulampa, Rak Kura Ngaliwe, Rak Ngan, and Rak Mardinga) are associated with the Marri Ngarr language. Rak Nadirri and Rak Perrederr are associated with the Marri Tjevin language. Rak Anggileni and Rak Tjindi are associated with Marri Amu, whereas Rak Kuy and Rak Yederr are associated with Magati Ke (Barwick et al. 2009).

The local clans are best thought of as groups of people who share a specific set of patrilineally inherited totems, *ngakumarl*, that are embodied in totemic sites, *nguguminggi*, scattered throughout a clan’s estate. It is the patrilineally determined conjoint responsibility for the *nguguminggi* that gives individuals the right to claim the *ngakumarl* as their own, the estate as their own, clan membership and with it the right to both own and speak for the languages that are associated with the *nguguminggi* on their clan’s estate. Falkenberg’s (1962: 21-123) treatment of the clans is very thorough. The work includes a complete survey all of the people affiliated to each of the clan estates. He lists many of the various *ngakumarl* associated with each clan and many of the important *nguguminggi* associated with...

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48 The terminology in Figure 3.2 for both the grandparents’ and grandchildrens’ generations is entirely consistent with that provided by the Falkenbergs.
their respective estates. An individual regards his various ngakumarl totems as ngathan, “brother” or munak, “sister”. Some of the ngakumarl are shared with other clan groups. Individuals who share the same totems may also refer to each other as ngathan or munak.

The clans are comprised of a number of large patronymic families. Some of the smaller clans consist of a single family whereas the Yek Dimirnin clan has nine families (Ward 1983: 5). Many of the patrilineally inherited surnames in Wadeye were once the Aboriginal names of powerful men living in the area when the mission started. The patriclans are exogamous. In the days before the mission, a married woman would generally reside with her husband on his estate, along with his co-wives, his fellow clansmen and their wives. These days, some families (or part thereof) live in small communities or outstations on their clan’s estate. Other families mainly reside in Wadeye, often traveling to their patriclan’s country to hunt or to camp out, particularly on the weekends and during the “bush holidays” in June/July. Individuals tend not to visit country for which they have no legitimate claim, unless invited by an “owner”. However they do have rights to visit their kangatji, “mother’s country”.

Furlan (2005: 147-159) describes a larger social grouping, the “mob”, or “macro-language group”. The three mobs are the djanba mob, the lirrga mob and the wangga mob, so named after the three ceremonial performance repertories that emerged at Port Keats in the 1960s. The djanba mob is comprised of the seven Murriny Patha clans. This mob is associated with the repertory of djanba songs. Djanba is the most recent of three public performance genres associated with Murriny Patha people. The other two, wurltjirri and malgarrin, are not currently being performed. Djanba was mainly composed by Yek Dimirnin men and is performed by Murriny Patha men and women. It has totemic associations with Murriny Patha country, particularly with sites in the Yek Dimirnin estate (Barwick et al. 2007). The djanba songs are predominantly in the Murriny Patha language. The lirrga mob is comprised of the eight Marri Ngarr clans and is associated with the lirrga repertory. Lirrga was composed and performed by speakers of the Marri Ngarr language. The repertory has numerous totemic associations with the Wudipuli region of the Moyle river floodplain (Barwick 2006a; Ford 2006). The wangga mob is comprised of the Marri Tjevin, Marri Amu and

See also Ward (1983).
Magati Ke clans. The wangga mob is associated with the *walakandha wangga* performance genre. The repertory of walakandha wangga songs are associated with the Rak Nadirri clan (Marri Tjevin). The songs are predominantly in the Marri Tjevin language. The songs are sung by Marri Tjevin and Marri Amu men and are performed by people from each of the Marri Tjevin, Marri Amu and Magati Ke language groups (Marett 2005).

In the 1960s, a tripartite system of ceremonial exchange emerged at Port Keats. These three song series are performed at circumcisions, funerals and mortuary ceremonies. If someone from the *djanba* group passed away, one of the other ceremonial groups, *lirrga* or *wangga*, would perform their own songs on behalf of the *djanba* group. On other occasions, *djanba* will be performed on behalf of persons from either of the *lirrga* or *wangga* mobs. This system of ceremonial reciprocity had the effect of reducing tensions in an overcrowded community where traditional enemies lived side by side.

Furlan (2005: 178-180) notes that the *djanba*, *lirrga* and *wangga* mobs tend to reside in distinct named areas (camps) within the community of Wadeye. The spatial orientation of these areas reflect the orientation of the various mobs’ estates towards each other. The *djanba* mob tends to reside in the camps toward the south (*Kempinyangganal*) and southwest (*Yelmugam* and *Wadeye*) of the township, reflecting the general orientation of Murriny Patha country vis-à-vis the other mobs’ countries. The *wangga* mob tend to reside in a camp at the north of the community (*Nguminyik*), reflecting the general orientation of the Marri Tjevin, Marri Amu and Magati Ke estates to the north of Wadeye. The *lirrga* mob tend to reside in camps in the middle of the community (*Yidiyi and Nilit*), reflecting the more central orientation of Marri Ngarr country vis-à-vis the *djanba* and *wangga* mobs’ countries.

In recent years, gangs of youths that are (in the main) named after heavy metal bands, regularly engage in battles for dominance of the community (Ivory 2003). There are about a dozen gangs, each associated with a family or collective of families.\(^{50}\) The gangs are in turn associated with one of the town camps. On occasions when violence erupts, aggression is predominantly targeted towards the vehicles and

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50 Furlan (2005) states that some of the current gangs grew out of the (comparatively peaceful) bands/gangs that used to play rock and roll and country music. The members of these bands/gangs were also from the same clan. Falkenberg & Falkenberg (1981: 71-91) reported “gangs” in the 1950s. These gangs consisted of sets of clan brothers and their associated wives. Whether or not these residential and economic units have any relation to the modern gangs has not been determined.
houses associated with an enemy gang or enemy gang member’s family. This violence is unlike that of other Aboriginal communities and towns in that it is generally not fueled by alcohol. Rather, these sporadic (albeit regular) outbursts are the result of simmering tensions within the community that are exacerbated by, and are largely the direct result of, high population density and massive overcrowding.

3.4 Conclusion
Wadeye is more isolated than the 240 km direct flight from Darwin would suggest. It has until now escaped many of the dominant influences of the outside world. The road from Daly River to Wadeye is impassable for 5 months of the year due to flooding. Because Wadeye is the end of the road, and because non-Aboriginal people require a permit to enter the region, Wadeye is not a place that outsiders happen to visit in passing on their way through to somewhere else. The Thamarrurr region is however changing more rapidly than ever before, and in ways that are hard to predict. The recent development of a gas pipeline running within a few kilometres of Wadeye signals the arrival of industrialization.

Wadeye has many of the typical problems that have beset other Aboriginal communities. Decades of governmental under-resourcing and neglect have resulted in poor service delivery, chronic overcrowding, endemic health problems, few employment prospects, poverty, poor educational outcomes and as a result of these, generations of under-skilled, welfare-dependent adults that have seldom been employed. The region is also experiencing a population explosion. Recently, overcrowding is being addressed (somewhat) with the construction of a numerous of houses, largely by visiting tradesmen. Each year increasing numbers of professionals and bureaucrats visit the community, mostly for short periods of time. Although there are many more non-Aboriginal people in the community than there have ever been before, they still remain a low percentage of the population and a largely transient one. It remains to be seen what effects the larger white population and the associated greater contact with English will have on the community and on the persistence of the Murriny Patha language (Barwick et al. 2009).

51 Priority for housing has largely been given to schoolteachers and other non-indigenous service providers, rather than the indigenous population. Both long and short-term accommodation in Wadeye remains in critically short supply, for both the indigenous and non-indigenous populations alike.