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RVIVAL STUDIES IN ETHNICITY AND CHANGE

Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming

Warramiri Yolngu and the Quest for Equality

Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming:

Warramiri Yolngu and the Quest for Equality

Ian S. McIntosh
Cultural Survival, Inc.

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'Father you gave us the Dreaming'

Rev. Dr. Djiniyini Gondarra 1988

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Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Dreaming

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Foreword to the Series

Cultural Survival is an organization founded in 1972 to defend human rights of indigenous peoples, who, like the Indians of the Americas, have been dominated and marginalized by peoples different from themselves. Since the states that claim jurisdiction over indigenous peoples consider them aliens and inferiors, they are among the world's most underprivileged minorities, facing a constant threat of physical extermination and cultural annihilation. This is no small matter, for indigenous peoples make up approximately five percent of the world's population. Most of them wish to become successful ethnic minorities, meaning that they be permitted to maintain their own traditions even though they are out of the mainstream in the countries where they live. Indigenous peoples hope, therefore, for multiethnic states that will tolerate diversity in their midst. In this their cause is the cause of ethnic minorities worldwide and is one of the major issues of our times, for the vast majority of states in the world are multiethnic. The question is whether states are able to recognize and live peaceably with ethnic differences, or whether they will treat them as an endless source of conflict.

Cultural Survival works to promote multiethnic solutions to otherwise conflictive situations. It sponsors research, advocacy, and publications that examine situations of ethnic conflict, especially (but not exclusively) as they affect indigenous peoples, and suggests solutions for them. It also provides technical and legal assistance to indigenous peoples and organizations.

This series of monographs entitled "The Cultural Survival Studies in Ethnicity and Change" is published in collaboration with Allyn & Bacon, a division of Pearson Education. It will focus on problems of ethnicity in the modern world and how they affect the interrelations among indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and the state.

The studies will focus on the situations of ethnic minorities and of the indigenous peoples, who are a special kind of ethnic minority, as they try to defend their rights, their resources, and their ways of life within modern states. Some of the volumes in the series will deal with general themes, such as ethnic conflict, indigenous rights, socioeconomic development, or multiculturalism. These volumes will contain brief case studies to illustrate their general arguments. Meanwhile, the series as a whole plans to publish a larger number of books that deal in depth with specific cases. It is our conviction that good case studies are essential for a better understanding of issues that arouse such passion in the world today, and this series will provide them. Its emphasis nevertheless will be on relating the particular to the general in the comparative contexts of national or international affairs.

The books in the series will be short, averaging approximately 160 pages in length, and written in a clear and accessible style aimed at students and the general reader. They are intended to clarify issues that are often obscure or misunderstood and that are not treated succinctly elsewhere. It is our hope, therefore, that they will also prove useful as reference works for scholars and policy makers.

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Preface

This book represents the outcome of my studies with Australian Aborigines from the remote Northern Territory settlement of Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, in northeast Arnhem Land. Material for this book was gathered between 1992 and 1994, while I was working towards a PhD in anthropology at the Northern Territory University. My topic was Aboriginal reconciliation. The possibility of a treaty being signed by indigenous and nonindigenous peoples by the end of the millenium was a much debated topic in Australia in the late 1990s. Yet in 1788 when the British founded the penal settlement of New South Wales there was scant official recognition of the presence or rights of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Is it too late to contemplate a pact with Australia's indigenous peoples? What form would such a treaty take and who would benefit?

In my thesis I was interested in how Elcho Islanders approached the subject of treaty negotiations, given that for perhaps 200 years prior to European occupation of Australia, these Arnhem Landers had traded with and worked for visiting Macassan fishermen from Sulawesi in Indonesia. It has been speculated, for instance, that Arnhem Landers were better able to withstand the coming of Europeans, given their prior exposure to outside ideas and influences. I began my inquiries by asking what was the relevance of the memory of these contacts for contemporary Aboriginal land and sea rights struggles. This evolved into a review of Aboriginal treaty proposals. Detailed discussions between myself and Aboriginal leaders took place both in their homes and mine, and on a number of homelands or outstations which surround the main community living area. In particular I worked with members of the Warramiri clan, one of twelve clan groups resident on Elcho Island. The Warramiri had the most detailed narratives concerning contact with Macassans and other non-Aborigines and were willing to discuss their sacred stories (traditional Aboriginal religion is referred to as the Dreaming).

I had been closely associated with this Aboriginal (Yolngu) community of Galiwin'ku for some years before undertaking these studies. As an adopted member of the Wangurri clan, and in my capacity as Homelands education supervisor, I had for many years been viewed as a mediator between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. For instance, in 1987 I was asked by Warramiri leaders to assist in the production of a prototype for a new Australian flag and to organize for the dissemination of information pertaining to it. As part of this work, I was told sacred or "inside" narratives from the Dreaming. This was not, Warramiri clan elder David Burrumarra said, so that I could parade these stories in front of a non-Aboriginal audience for my own self-interest. Rather it was so I could work for Yolngu for the furtherance of their ambitions, which in this case was the achievement of a composition or treaty between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Australia.

All discussions referred to in this book were held in public and there was symbolic value in the way interviews were conducted. (A glossary is provided at the end to assist readers.) Burrumarra and his brothers Liwukang and Wulanybuma were already aged when I first met them, and I was considerably younger. They played up this point, that is, the elder Aborigines and the younger non-Aboriginal, the "old hands" teaching the newcomer. For them it was symbolic of Warramiri mediating traditions and, more generally, of the way relationships between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Australia should be viewed. Aborigines are the first Australians, and while this fact is openly acknowledged by Australian government authorities, that is where recognition ends. This has to change, they said.

I wish to thank all the people of Galiwin'ku, especially the late David Burrumarra, as well as Timothy Buthimang, Joanne Garngulkpuym, George Dayngumbu, and Tracy Djoymi. Thanks also to David Mearns, my PhD supervisor, and to my dissertation examiners Howard Morphy, Ian Keen, and Robert Tonkinson, and to David and Pia Maybury-Lewis of Cultural Survival, for providing the opportunity to spread the message of Aboriginal reconciliation to an international audience. My gratitude is also extended to Ken Lum, Jeremy Beckett, Jitendra Kumarage, Paul Hayes, and Jeff Stead, who each provided criticism for particular chapters. Most especially, I wish to acknowledge the encouragement and editorial assistance of my father Stuart McIntosh, my mother Jean McIntosh, and my wife Karen...Bravo.

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The Warramiri, 1920 Onwards

Stingray and catfish from the sheltered blue waters of the Arafura Sea roast on the coals. Baking in another fire are two goanna and the golden bandicoot from the rainforests behind the seashore, snared with the help of semi-tame dingoes. In baler shells are handfuls of crunchy water chestnuts, fresh black-lipped oysters, and dozens of turtle and seagull eggs. It had been a good day of hunting, thought the Warramiri clan patriarch, Ganimbirrngu. The men, mostly his sons, had gone out early in their dug-out sailing canoes, traveling up through the reef-lined channels to sites off the islands of Wirrku and Unbirri, where only male clan members can visit. Although they harpooned no turtle, with fishing lines and spears they caught plenty of fish and collected other tasty morsels, and were greeted with cheers of delight by the children as they helped pull the canoes onto the beach. The women, six of whom were the wives of Ganimbirrngu, along with their mothers, and Ganimbirrngu's female children, after collecting firewood and clearing out the waterholes of accumulating debris, had successfully scoured the wetlands for native foods.

Now as the sun set on Nangingburra, on the far northern tip of Elcho Island, the Yolngu sat around the fire and reaped the rewards of their toil. With stomachs full, they sang songs for enjoyment, and also discussed the days ahead. From this headland, Ganimbirrngu could clearly make out a collection of small fires perhaps twenty kilometers to the south. Wadangayu was the camping place of the Gupapuyngu leader Batju and his family. Both the country and the people there were called "grandparent" by the Warramiri and, through kinship, the Gupapuyngu called the Warramiri "grandchild." A sacred ceremony was soon to begin in Gupapuyngu territory and the Warramiri would all go there to stay for a month or more, joining clans from throughout the region. The Gupapuyngu liked to have lots of visitors, for their land is even more bountiful than that of the Warramiri, especially at this time of the year.

Ganimbirrngu's son Burrumarra loved to visit Wadangayu in the dry season, that half of the year when the skies were clear and the water sparkling. There was much happiness and freedom. The fish were jumping, making everyone laugh with excitement thinking about the richness of their country and time. Burrumarra believed that there was a special rock at Wadangayu that made people's lives joyous. The country and everything in it is divided into halves or moieties. This was Yirritja land belonging to Yirritja peoples like him.

At a two-day walk south of Gupapuyngu land, at the southern tip of Elcho Island, Ganimbirrngu noticed towering clouds of smoke. This was Galiwin'ku, in Dhuwa moiety country belonging to the Liyagawumirr and Gunbirrtji clans and the patriarch Banburruwuy. The Warramiri often trade with, and procure wives from, these Dhuwa moiety clans, but they know not to visit now. There has been warfare between the Dhuwa clans over suspected misuse of sacred paraphernalia, and jealousy and competition over who had rights to marry women from the mainland tribes. The strife was not yet over.

Banburruwuy was setting fire to the country, an annual occurrence, as a sign of his care and interest in its well-being. It is also an aid in hunting. Land to the Aborigines is treated as an entity with feelings. Its happiness is reliant upon the attention it gets. It needs to be worried about for it gets lonely. It longs to feel the pounding of feet when a ceremony is performed and delights in the sound of children playing, although this must be in "safe" areas, far from the sacred places. In July or August of each year, the men set the long grass ablaze and the land emits an audible "aaaahh" sound, for it recognizes the presence of law keepers.

Ceremonies are also held at this time, and because the Liyagawumirr are Dhuwa and the Warramiri Yirritja, Ganimbirrngu has no business going to Galiwin'ku. But he would encourage his sister's resident Dhuwa husbands to join in this "business," as it is called. Aboriginal society prides itself on the level of personal freedom. The only restriction is that the sacred laws of the Dreaming, the body of myths and legends which guide and animate the generation, are not breached.

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Ganimbirrngu's children were now mostly all adults with families of their own. By the age of thirteen, his daughters, of whom there were many, had gone to live in the land of their Dhuwa moiety husbands-to-be. Only his sons remained with him. At Nangingburra, the oldest and most responsible was Djarrambi, who often made clan decisions in league with his father. Then there was Nyambi, who resented and sometimes attacked with spears the occasional Japanese fishermen because they tried to steal his wives. Mattjuwi excelled in

canoe-making and had a sprinkling of pidgin English which he had picked up on the two or three trips he had made to Darwin, the only city on the coast, 500 kilometers to the west. Gawirrin was a master hunter and could easily pluck fish from the ocean's depths with his beautifully crafted three-pronged spears. Wathi, on the other hand, was sickly and suffered from leprosy, possibly introduced by the Indonesian traders who had long fished for *trepang*, or sea cucumber, on the coast in the wet season. Another son, Balwutjmi, was somewhat of a loner, and he refused to hunt, preferring to sit with the women. His existence was ignored by the male members of the clan. Then there was Liwukang, who stayed very close to the clan elders Ganimbirrngu and his "second father" Bambung and followed their every command. Burrumarra, one of the youngest, was different from the others. From the earliest age, he understood the laws of the Dreaming and had mastered a repertoire of more than one hundred Dreaming-related song cycles. He also knew love magic and sorcery, and even the sacred stories from other clans.

Ganimbirrngu believed that Burrumarra had a special gift. This young student of Aboriginal law knew that the Dhuwa moiety ancestor Djang'kawu had created the world Yirritja people lived in, but that it had been shaped by the actions of totemic beings such as the duck, octopus and whale, his clan's emblems. He was aware, also, that the social laws which govern interaction between Aborigines had been established by the Yirritja moiety founder, Lany'tjun. Though Burrumarra was still young, Ganimbirrngu decided he would break with custom and tell his child about the deeper aspects of the Warramiri Dreaming. In particular, there was the complex and often contradictory legacy of a Dreaming entity called Birrinydji. At one point in the far distant past, Warramiri Aborigines were white and enjoyed the wealth of non-Aborigines, but now they were black and poor. Knowledge is passed on just a little at a time, lest the hearer become confused and, well before his contemporaries, Burrumarra wondered to himself what must have gone wrong at the "beginning of time" for this transition to have occurred. What must happen in the future to put race relations on an equitable footing?

For hundreds of years, Macassans from Indonesia had visited these shores, but now, in the 1920s, they no longer came. Ganimbirrngu, like his father and his father's father, had grown used to having access to trade goods like tobacco, cloth, and metals. But the Macassan leader Daeng Rangka had told Ganimbirrngu that the white man no longer wanted them coming to Arnhem Land. They were being driven off at gunpoint. Yes, they had introduced diseases like small pox, and yes, there had been bloodshed at many sites over breaches of etiquette, but for many clans this trade had become a fixed and essential part of their yearly schedule. The 1920s were times of hardship, for there

was no other source of the prized trade items, save by traveling to Darwin. Well to the east and west, church missions were being established, and Aborigines were leaving their country in droves to join them. The land was starting to become depopulated and that vital exchange that used to take place with mainland Aboriginal clans for stone tools and bamboo spear shafts was no more. Whites were encroaching on all sides, and while clan groups on Elcho Island still maintained their traditional ways, they were beginning to feel both isolated and besieged.

By the late 1920s Ganimbirrngu was worried. His health was in decline. Of all his family, he chose the young Burrumarra to be the one to find out about the whites, to learn from them, and to ensure that the good life he had known as a child could be available to future generations. It was right for a person of the Warramiri clan to take on such a role, Ganimbirrngu advised Burrumarra, because they were the custodians of the laws of Birrinydji—the whiteman Dreaming—white being the color associated with the wealth that rightly belonged to the Aborigines.

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Not long after this decision was made Ganimbirrngu died—well before his time, other patriarchs declared at his funeral. Out of respect for the leader, members of the neighboring Gupapuyngu and Wangurri clans came to collect Burrumarra and delivered him by canoe to the newly established mission at Milingimbi about 80 kilometers to the southwest. But he didn't stay long. In the 1930s a new mission was being established at Yirrkala, closer to the major and largely deserted Warramiri homelands of Dholtji, MataMata, and Nyikala. Burrumarra was selected by missionaries as the person to make contact with these distant "warlike" clans.

Without knowing it, Burrumarra was embarking on a journey that would lead him away from his homeland forever. Never again would he awake on the sandy beach, with the dew in his face, to the sound of his kin preparing for the day's outing, and reach for whatever turtle meat was left from the night before, to heat up on the still-smouldering fire. Within a year of Burrumarra's departure, his brother Wathi died from complications linked to leprosy, and Balwutjmi was stung by a box jelly fish on the chest and drowned. A similar fate awaited Gawirrin a few years later when on a canoe trip to the sacred islands just to the north of Nangingburra. His flimsy dug-out craft was overturned in a storm and he was eaten alive by sharks. But Burrumarra would always be reminded of the fire that symbolizes the communal and energetic life of the group when at night he looked to the Southern Cross. In Aboriginal mythology, it is the fire that burns brightly in wait of the hunters who strayed too far

from their land and were whisked away into the unknown by a waterspout. Soon they would be united.

When the mission came to Galiwin'ku in 1942, there was no one living at Nangingburra or at Wadangayu. They had all died or moved on to other communities. Burrumarra was a mission leader in his own right now. By the 1960s, like other Arnhem Land Aboriginal leaders, he was calling for land rights and autonomy for Aborigines nationwide. Cherished were his memories of the bush life, and the words of his mother Wanambiwuy and Ganimbirrngu's sister, Bamatja, who told him, "Don't run away from the land or hide yourself. Stand up." His younger brothers Liwukang and Wulanybuma, and his now widowed sister Rruwayi stayed close by him and his wife Lawuk, and together they held on tightly to the beliefs they had acquired as youths and applied these rigorously in all their various interactions with non-Aborigines.

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Burrumarra had a vision of a united Australia that was drawn from long years of contemplating the Dreaming. His philosophy was as follows: Yolngu clans are affiliated with each other and with the moiety in ways which promote both a sense of unity and of diversity. Burrumarra would use the English expression *membership-and-remembership* when discussing the significance of Aboriginal law to his generation, or when promoting the building of partnerships between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples. He said that Aborigines remember or honor their specific family lineages and personal totems when Elcho Islanders unite and celebrate their membership in a clan. Similarly, Aborigines remember or uphold the laws of their clans when circumstances require that moiety issues be discussed or the journeys of Dreaming beings are ceremonially reenacted. As members of a community which includes whites, Aborigines also acknowledge that non-Aborigines occupy a significant place in the worldly scheme of things. The Birrinydji narratives, for instance, imply that whites should recognize and respect the rights of the Aborigines as keepers of the law. For Burrumarra membership-and-remembership was a policy of crucial importance in the promotion of what has become known nationally as the quest for Aboriginal reconciliation. As the first step, Burrumarra believed, whites and blacks Australia-wide must not only grasp the momentousness of the Dreaming, but respect the various levels of membership it entails and bring honor to these relationships.