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Ancestral, Corporeal, Corporate: Traditional Yolŋu Understandings of the Body Explored

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This article explores the various ways in which the Yolŋu of northeast Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory traditionally perceive of bodies, whether corporeal or corporate. It establishes how Yolŋu understand the human body, its environments and its behaviours as phenomena that are modeled on archetypal ancestral designs for life, and shows how Yolŋu nomenclature for human anatomy is used as a meta-language to describe the significances of features on country and in traditional modes of performance. It further explains how the Yolŋu concept of the body corporate is related to an ethos of recognition and sharing between different peoples under a common constitution and law, and demonstrates how the music of the Australian band, Yothu Yindi, uses this traditional symbolism to express ideals of sharing and common humanity among different peoples from around the world.

Introduction

In life, I am Neparrŋa Gumbula, but in death, I am already named by waŋarr ('ancestral progenitors'). My feet and legs are those of the wurrpan ('emu'). My knees are fruit from the n̄arraŋi ('native apple') tree. My front is that of the mokuy ('ghost') hunter, Muyarana. My back is the djalumbu ('hollow log coffin'). My heart beats as wurrpan's and my stomach, like his, is butulak ('yellow'). My spine is the waymamba ('pathway') worn in the scrub by the guwak ('koel cuckoo'). My mouth is the entrance to the beehive. My nose is beeswax. My eyes are nuts from the warraga ('cycad palm'). My hairs are the fine roots of the mayku ('paperbark tree') and the wulu ('white foam') that they produce in the swamp at Djiliwirri. My head and my knowledge are guku ('honey') from the waŋarr Birrkuda ('Short-Nosed Bee'). In death, my name is no longer Neparrŋa. It is Birrkuda. (Gumbula, 2001)

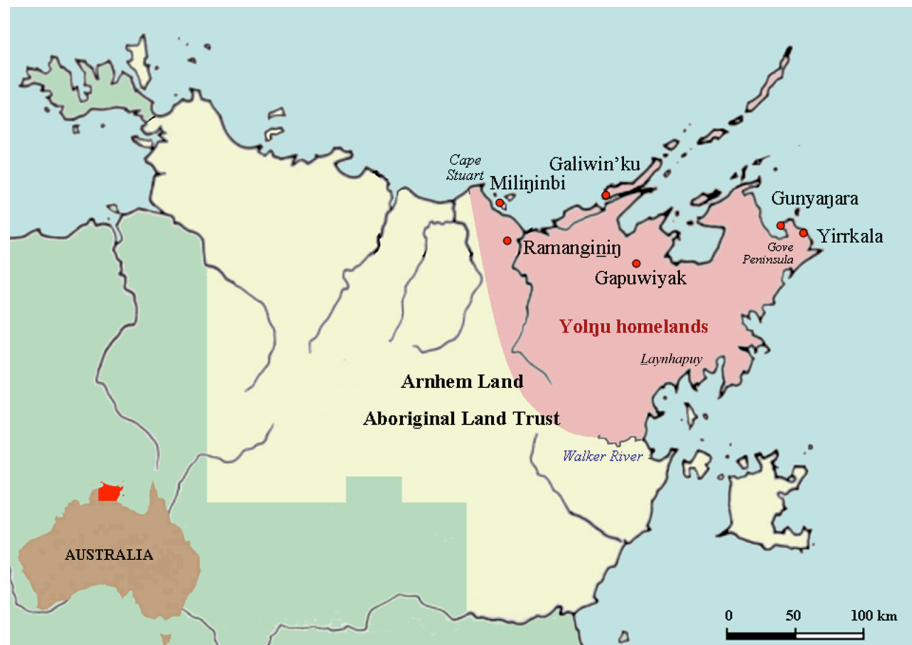
Such is the way that the Yolŋu ('People') of Australia's Northern Territory (NT) perceive human existence as part of a greater metaphysical design laid out by the *waŋarr* ('ancestral progenitors') who originally named, shaped and populated their homelands in northeast Arnhem Land. In Yolŋu epistemology, all that is found in the natural world – from the topography of country to the diversity of species found on them; from the living ecologies that sustain them to human life itself – are modeled on the metaphysical archetypal forms of *waŋarr* such as *Birrkuda* ('Short-Nosed Bee') and stand as *mali* ('shadows', 'reflections') of their progenitorial agency. All Yolŋu ultimately trace their patrilineal descent or *yarrata* (literally 'string') from such ancestral progenitors, and under Yolŋu law, this forms the foundation of Yolŋu ownership over their numerous homelands and all incumbent ancestral knowledge. However, Yolŋu are not only the direct descendants of their original *waŋarr*, but also exist in mirrored image as their living physical consubstantiations (Williams, 1986: 23-4).

This article explores traditional Yolŋu conceptualisations of the body in their various dimensions. It establishes how Yolŋu understand the physical human form, its natural environments and its traditional behaviours as phenomena that are given by ancestors and patterned on their grand archetypal designs for life. It demonstrates how the Yolŋu nomenclature for human anatomy is used as a meta-language to describe the significances of topographical features on country and the formal features of Yolŋu performance traditions. And finally, it explains how in Yolŋu epistemology, the concept of the body extends from the corporeal to the corporate; from a body of limbs and organs, to a body of different people and patrilineal groups.

The research presented in this article is grounded in more than a decade of my own collaborative work with Yolŋu elders from northeast Arnhem Land to explore the meanings and beauty of their sophisticated intellectual traditions (Corn, 2003, 2006, 2007; Corn & Gumbula, 2004, 2006, 2007; Corn with Gumbula, 2005; Yunupinju with Corn, 2005), and builds on the fine work of ethnographers and Yolŋu thinkers who have contributed significantly to shaping contemporary intercultural discourses on Yolŋu culture (Williams, 1986; Berndt & Berndt, 1988; Morphy, 1991; Rudder, 1993; Keen, 1994; Zorc, 1996; Yunupinju & Dhamarrandji 1997; Knopoff, 1997; Yunupinju, 1998; Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, 1999; Gondarra, 2001; Gumbula, 2001; ARDS, 2002; Magowan, 2007). The work of anthropologist Franca Tamisari has been particularly influential in its insightful focus on the body as a 'spatio-temporal "hinge" between people and place' (1998: 249), and its consideration of Yolŋu performance as a 'modality of co-presence and co-presencing, an encounter at a level of intensity which opens the way to an ever-deepening involvement with others' (2000: 274).

The Body Ancestral

The Yolŋu have inhabited northeast Arnhem Land for countless millennia, and maintain continuous knowledge of maritime sites on their remote homelands that, some 10,000 years ago, are known to have been above sea level (Yunupinju & Dhamarrandji, 1997; Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, 1999; Horton, ed., 1994: 201). Today, there are approximately 7000 Yolŋu. As shown below, their homelands extend from the Gove Peninsula in the northeast, west to Cape Stuart and south to Walker River. Of the six contemporary Yolŋu towns in this district, Milinjibi (Miningimbi), Yirrkala, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak (Lake Evella) and Ramanginj (Ramingining) were founded by the Methodist Overseas Mission between 1922 and 1973, while Gunyajarra (Ski Beach) was established by the Yirrkala community in the 1980s.



Yolŋu society is an expansive network of some sixty patri-groups or *mala* (literally 'groups'). Membership of a *mala* is agnatic, and passes through *yarrata* from father to child in perpetuity. This is also the hereditary conduit through which ownership of country and all incumbent ancestral knowledge passes from the original *waŋarr* to patri-groups of their descent. All *mala* own at least one *wāŋa* ('country', 'homeland') – comprising all lands, waters and natural resources therein – that the original *waŋarr* bestowed as a *wāŋa-ŋaraka* (literally 'bone country'). As explained by anthropologist Nancy Williams (1986: 232), 'so axiomatic' is the Yolŋu relationship with their homelands, 'that people without land are people without identity'.

All *mala* are organised under two discrete yet interdependent constitutions of law known as Dhuwa and Yirritja. In conventional anthropology, these constitutions are classified as patrilineal 'moieties'

from the Latin *medius* ('half'). The term thus describes them as halves of a greater social whole. The Yolŋu nonetheless perceive Dhuwa and Yirritja to be two distinct legal and religious charters which, in themselves, are whole and complete (Corn & Gumbula, 2006: 176-8). The renowned Yolŋu musician and educator Mandawuy Yunupinju instead uses the term 'constitution' to illustrate the agency of the *waŋarr* Baywara ('Olive Python') in founding the Dhuwa moiety. He describes her as 'maker of the land, maker of the song, maker of the constitution' (Yothu Yindi, 1993: track 4). While Yolŋu uses of terms such as 'constitution', and later 'nation' and 'sovereign', stem from twentieth century endeavours to demonstrate to external powers that their society does indeed possess a continuing system of law and politics, they nonetheless reveal critical insights into the functionality of Yolŋu social structures that are difficult to conceptualise and translate into English.

Each *mala* is constituted as either Dhuwa or Yirritja, and this arrangement forms the primary balance of powers in Yolŋu political life (Gondarra, 2001: 19; Corn & Gumbula, 2006: 175-87). Alignment with a constitution, like membership of a *mala*, is patrilineal and Yolŋu are only permitted to marry someone born into a *mala* of the opposite constitution. Therefore, children inherit the constitutional alignment of their father, while their mother remains aligned with the opposite constitution. Similarly, a *mala* can only ever succeed ownership of another's hereditary property if it is of the same constitution. This renders the cross-constitutional relationship between *waku* ('woman's child') and *ŋāndi* ('mother') fundamental to maintaining balance and order within Yolŋu society. Because *waku* can never own their mother's hereditary property, it is their duty to support their *ŋāndipulu* ('mother's group') by scrutinising all of their ceremonies and political dealings to ensure their legality (Morphy, 1991: 66-7).

Knowledge of each homeland and how to live on it is codified by the original *waŋarr* in a hereditary canon of *yāku* ('names'), *manikay* ('songs'), *bungul* ('dances') and *miny'tji* ('designs', literally 'colour'). The most important traditional asset that a patri-group can own, other than country itself, is its distinct hereditary lexicon of sacred *yāku*. These names are said to have been called by the original ancestors as they shaped the Yolŋu homelands, and serve to differentiate the identity and property of one *mala* from another, even when both trace their descent from a common *waŋarr*. The speech of a *mala*, as defined by its distinct lexicon of sacred *yāku*, is called its *matha* ('tongue'). Some of these *yāku* are sung in *garma* ('public') contexts in the *manikay* of each *mala*, where they offer exquisitely qualitative and circuitous descriptions of country and ecology as observed by the original *waŋarr*. This is also the body of language from which Yolŋu traditionally draw all personal and family names (Williams, 1986: 42; Keen, 1994: 239; Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 120-2).

Under Yolŋu law, a patri-group's carefully-regulated ability to execute and interpret the canonical names, songs, dances and designs

associated with its homeland stands as evidence of its ownership by virtue of ancestral bestowal and descent. These canons of ancestral knowledge or *maḍayin* ('sacra') describe the natural beauty of all that *waṅarr* provide, and constitute an adaptive framework of materials and protocols for conducting ceremonies through which Yolṅu demonstrate their observance of *rom* ('law', 'culture', 'correct practice', 'the way') (Williams, 1986: 29; Keen, 1994: 137-40; Gondarra, 2001: 19).

Observing *rom* through a demonstrated knowledge of the *maḍayin* of one's *mala* is not only an esoteric pursuit. The practical skills that this pursuit teaches are vital to human life on the Yolṅu homelands and leadership in Yolṅu society. As the character of 'Lorrpu' states in the feature film, *Yolngu Boy* (Johnson dir., 2001), which presents a poignant coming-of-age story about the bonds among three teenaged Yolṅu men from Yirrkala (Corn, 2007: 91-3):

When the old people walked through the land, they made the rocks and trees. They made fire; everything we need. I had to walk like them. Be part of the land. This was my test. If I failed, we had nothing. (Johnson dir., 2001)

The canonical *bungul* choreography practised by men, women and children on the ceremony ground is seamlessly adaptable to the needs of the harvest, the hunt and the skirmish, while the *yāku* sung in *manikay* are deployed by Yolṅu leaders in sophisticated negotiations (Tamisari, 1998: 250-1; Corn & Gumbula, 2004: 106). In this sense, Yolṅu quite literally believe that to follow in the *luku* ('footprints', 'steps', 'foundation') of *waṅarr* is to reflect their metaphysical presence in each living human. As explained by Mandawuy Yunupinju:

If you've ever been exposed to those big ceremonies, you see people dancing whether they're Shark [*Māṅa*] people or Stingray [*Gapirri*] people, or whether they're *Bāru* [*Saltwater Crocodile*], the Maralitja man. Maralitja discovered fire in the beginning. So when you're dancing *Bāru*, you become transformed into Maralitja, and that's when you say, 'I'm the Maralitja. I own the land. I own that philosophy. I own that knowledge. I have a right to that land and you can't take that away from me.' Other groups are the same. When people dance Shark, they're transformed into the Shark ancestor or the Stingray, or whatever it may be. That's how one becomes transformed into something they want to show; they want to tell in that most classical way. The classical way of making their point known is by doing this in unity and strength with one's own *mala* and, of course, the *yothu-yindi* [*child-mother*] balance between *mala* [related through marriage] is always there in that strength and unity. (Yunupinju, with Corn, 2005).

Yolṅu believe that actively embodying *waṅarr*, through speaking, singing, dancing and appearing like them, enables the metaphysical ancestral entities who remain eternally present and sentient in country to recognise and protect their living *gurrutu* ('kin', 'family') (Williams,

1986: 43-4, 85; Tamisari, 1998: 256-67; Gondarra, 2001: 15-20; Corn & Gumbula, 2004: 101-16). Indeed, *waṅarr* are said to be able to smell and recognise the sweat generated by their living kin through performing this work (Williams 1986: 85; Tamisari 1998: 256, 267). Such observance of *rom* lies at the root of the long and arduous process of accruing *mārr* ('inner strength', 'ancestral power', 'spiritual health'), which is said to gather in one's *gumurr* ('chest'), and of preparing to become a *liya-ṅärra'mirri* ('learned', 'wise') leader with a comprehensive knowledge of Yolṅu ceremonial conduct (Keen, 1994: 94-5).

Mandawuy himself demonstrates this kind of ancestral embodiment in the music-video for Yothu Yindi's original song, 'Tribal Voice' (1992: clip 6), which incorporates footage of a genuine Yolṅu male initiation ceremony. Here, he dances *Gapirri* ('Stingray') over three boys as their reclined bodies are painted with elaborate sacred *miny'tji* in preparation for their initiation into manhood. As he dances, his fixed forward gaze is piercing, and between his teeth, he clutches a sacred *bathi* ('basket') to reflect the fierce ancestral power of *Gapirri* and the gravity of the ceremonial act to be undertaken (Morphy, 1991: 263). The *miny'tji* painted on the boys' torsos and *bathi* held in Mandawuy's mouth are among the most sacred emblems of *waṅarr* authority that can be displayed in any public context.

In such ceremonies, the metaphysical nature of physical being for Yolṅu is realised. In their classical understanding of the world, all that Yolṅu are, know and have is the stuff of *waṅarr*. In death, their *birrimbirr* ('souls') are believed to become indivisible with the eternal *waṅarr*, and from birth through death to rebirth, migrate between the physical and metaphysical planes of reality in an endless loop. As people age, the innate *waṅarr* attributes of their *birrimbirr* are said to become visibly manifest. The *birrimbirr* is homologous to purified bone, and through the process of final burial into a hollow log coffin, is released to return to its metaphysical ancestral home. All flesh and blood that remains to decompose in the physical world simultaneously manifests as the deceased's *mokuy* ('ghost') (Berndt & Berndt, 1988: 213).

The Body Corporeal

Among the seven Yolṅu languages or Yolṅu-Matha (literally 'People's Tongues'), there is no direct word for the corporeal body of an organism as a whole. Yolṅu instead use *galṅa* or *monydjulṅu* (literally, 'skin') in its place, or *rumbal* or *yuwalk* (literally 'true') for 'trunk' or 'torso'. They nonetheless make extensive use of anatomical nomenclature as a meta-language to describe the component features of other things including plants, other animals, and sacred artifacts. A tree's root, for instance, is its *luku* ('foot'); its trunk, its *bundhurr* ('knee'); and its branch, its *likan* ('elbow') (Rudder, 1993: 29). The propulsive tailfin of a fish is also its *luku*, while the penetrating stinger of a bee is its *ṅurru* ('nose'). The tip of a flagpole is

its *nirru* ('head'), and the bright feathered cords that adorn a sacred *bathi* ('basket') are its *wana* ('arms').

Such terminology is also applied to topographical features on country that remain as *mali'* ('shadows', 'reflections') of the original ancestors who shaped it (Keen, 1994: 103; Magowan, 2007: 131-2). As the *wanjarr* imprinted their metaphysical archetypal forms into the Yolŋu homelands, they inscribed *mali'* in the topography and ecology that would hold meaning for their human inheritors. At the epicentre of each homeland is a *luku* ('footprint', 'foundation') site, where a specific *wanjarr*, *Māna* ('Shark') for example, will have embedded itself deep into the bedrock. A hill at such a *luku* site would be his *buku* ('head') and all his knowledge; the scrub behind it, his *diltji* ('back'); a rocky outcrop there, his *djukurr* ('liver'); and the lagoon below it, his *gulun* ('belly'). A bend in the stream flowing from this lagoon would be the Shark's *likan* ('elbow'); the stream's estuary, his *mayan* ('neck'); its stream's mouth, his *dhā* ('mouth'); a rock pool off to the side, his *manutji* ('eye'); and a solitary rock beside this, his *nurrku* ('brain'). A point some distance along the shoreline from the stream would be his *ŋurru* ('nose'); an islet off the coast, his *dhakal* ('cheek'); and an adjacent landmass across a strait, his *makarr* ('thigh') (Rudder, 1993: 48-50).

It is by such signs of progenitorial *wanjarr* activity on country that Yolŋu 'orient themselves now and believe to have always oriented themselves' (Williams, 1986: 28), and it is in this way that the body spatio-temporally hinges people with place (Tamisari, 1998: 249). Just as the *wanjarr* originally shaped the environment by 'externalising and imprinting parts of their bodies' into country, Yolŋu come to experience, know and be part of the ancestral within country by moving through it and leaving remnants of their own presences there, such as the *ganu'* ('ashes') left at a well-established campsite that has been used by a family over countless generations (Tamisari, 1998: 250-8).

Dreams and waking revelations are media through which *wanjarr* are said to communicate with their living kin when visiting their homelands (Corn, 2003: 122-4; Corn with Gumbula, 2005: 55-62), and when Yolŋu musicians perform on the sacred sites that their *manikay* name, they commonly describe how they can feel their napes tingle as they are observed by *wanjarr* from waters nearby (Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 117). Yolŋu musicians also describe how they can know their homelands through *manikay*, even when they have never physically been there. The sensations of recreating and moving through country that *manikay* and *bunġul* evoke in performers are explained in detail by anthropologist Fiona Magowan:

While the seeing, singing body does not necessarily move from place, it moves in the mind through different landscapes, touching them in various ways as it goes. ... Yolŋu [singers] move through the landscape at different rhythms, hunting and gathering, resting and sensing the feel of place through sight, sound, touch, taste and

smell. ... [They] turn the rhythms and movements of the environment into active images that they feel and touch through the mind's eye in song and the body in dance. Yolŋu have a sensorial mastery of the environment through which they interpret changing colours, sounds, feel, tastes and smells of seasons that are marked by the prevalence of particular fruits, animals, birds and other species. The environment shapes the performers' reflections of sensory awareness as much as performers recreate its sounds and movements ... Singers must learn to 'feel' the environment as sensory experience within the body ... Aural, visual and kinaesthetic fields are completely intertwined. Yolŋu singers and dancers allude to their bodies as 'feelingful extensions' ... of the ancestral seascape and landscapes as the ritual context invites men to dance as *the ancestors* with vigour, dynamism and sometimes anger in revenge for the deceased. Learning to dance is an integral and primary mode of learning to sing and directly involves the externalization of musical form as bodily action with a corresponding internalisation in bodily memories ... (Magowan, 2007: 14-15)

Corporeal nomenclature is further found among terms that are used to describe the formal parameters of a *mala's* integrated *manikay* and *bunġul* repertoire (Tamisari, 1998: 253, 2000: 278). Though the specific synonyms used can differ from *mala* to *mala*, all *manikay* repertoires have a *dāmbu* or *liya* ('head'), *makarr* or *yutunġurr* ('thighs'), and *gumurr* ('chest'). The 'head' of a *manikay* repertoire is its vocal melody, or to be more precise, is a fairly static intervallic structure that is sung repeatedly, with only subtle variation, in each vocal phrase of each discrete song item throughout a *manikay* series (Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 120-2). It is the 'head' of any given *manikay* series that most plainly identifies it as the property of the *mala* who owns it (Knopoff, 1997: 128).

Consisting largely of the sacred *yāku* ('names') inherited from the *waŋarr*, the lyrics of a *manikay* series are also intimately linked to the ancestral identity of the *mala* who owns it (Keen, 1994: 239). The 'thigh' of a *manikay* item is the lyrics of each discrete song item, or again to be specific, it is the fully-accompanied core of each song item. Usually only around a minute in duration, the structure of each *manikay* item is tripartite. It consists of (i) a brief unaccompanied introduction called the *ŋurru-waŋa* (literally 'nose-speech') in which the 'head' is softly hummed, (ii) the greater 'thigh' in which the lyrics are sung with full *bilma* ('paired sticks') and *yidaki* ('didjeridu') accompaniment, and (iii) a brief unaccompanied coda in which a small sample of key lyrics are softly recapitulated. The accompanied 'thigh' of a *manikay* item will also include at least one 'chest', which is a stanza of repeated vocal phrases that terminates in a distinctive *yidaki* cadence.

Manikay repertoires are highly adaptable and can generally be performed in two basic formats: (i) without *bunġul* and (ii) with *bunġul*. *Luku manikay* refers to the 'step-by-step' performance of each successive subject in a *manikay* series without *bunġul*

accompaniment. By contrast, *bungul'mirri manikay* ('songs with dance') refers to the deployment of songs and their corresponding dances in fully-realised ceremonial contexts. As ceremonies are structured to deliver predetermined outcomes such as the initiation of boy into manhood or a funeral for the deceased, less pertinent subjects within a *manikay* series will usually be omitted from a *bungul'mirri* performance (Keen, 1994: 138-41; Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 120-3).

The term *bungul* itself comes from the root word *bon* ('kneecap'), which alludes to the way that dancers repeatedly touch their knees to the ground. Similarly, the virtuosic leaders of a dance chorus in ceremony are said to be *gakal* ('calves'), which alludes to the deft precision of their every dance step (Tamisari, 2000: 278). Tight ensemble in a *bungul'mirri manikay* performance is achieved through clear aural and visual cues between musicians and *gakal*. Such communication between participants in ceremonies is a vital mechanism through which Yolŋu performance functions as a 'modality of co-presence and co-presencing', and generates sufficient intensity between individuals that deepens their rapport with each successive performance together throughout their lives (Tamisari, 2000: 274).

In *bungul'mirri manikay*, male dancers embody the observations of the original *wanjarr* not only through the performance of choreography, but also with their voices. Male *gakal* lead the male dance chorus in antiphonal call-and-response vocal parts that interlock formally with each specific song item. Usually consisting of relevant place names and onomatopoeic vocables, the call-and-response vocal parts of male dancers offer an additional layer of musical and lyrical meaning to each specific *manikay* subject that is sung. The various painted designs worn by dancers over the days of a ceremony will also be drawn from the subjects of the specific *manikay* series being performed, and contribute an even further layer of meaning to the overall performance (Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 123).

To return to 'head' and 'thigh', the temporal and textural interrelationship between melody and lyrics in *manikay* offers a compelling window onto Yolŋu understanding of a (super)natural order, modelled on archetypal ancestral forms, in which the individuals of a species or a *mala* are each the same but different. *Manikay* are most often sung by several parallel singers in heterophony, but although each singer ostensibly sings the same melody with the same lyrics, their individual performances will almost never be exactly the same. Movement from one note to the next, and the ordering and repetition of each word sung is entirely individuated. Together, the singers' voices delicately intertwine and gracefully permute around the ideal of a unified melody over the more rigid *bilma* and *yidaki* patterns that anchors them rhythmically. They give the illusion of hearing a single voice comprised of many: one that is loosely unified, yet full of ever-shifting ever-resolving dissonances (Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 116-20).

This aesthetic of difference within similitude lies at the core of the *manikay* tradition, and captures the diversity that can be observed in all natural forms. Just as each species in nature carries its own genetic blueprint yet seldom produces two individuals that are exactly the same, so too are the parallel voices heard in a *manikay* performance. Each singer follows the same melodic and lyrical templates for a performance, yet is free to realise these in a multitude of individuated ways. Each voice can be likened to an individual thread that is woven together with others to create a more substantial whole, and just like each new generation of a species or a *mala*, each new *manikay* performance will yield new, yet familiar, realisations (Corn & Gumbula, 2007: 120-2).

The Body Corporate

Manikay repertoires also incorporate different *bilma* modes, different combinations of rhythm and tempo in the *bilma* part, that serve to reveal in turn the different features and behaviours of each subject performed. The specific rhythms, tempi and nomenclature for the suite of *bilma* modes that can be performed in a given *manikay* series will differ from *mala* to *mala*. However, a typical *manikay* series will nonetheless include both a *wana* ('arm') *bilma* mode and a *rengitj* ('body') *bilma* mode, which can alternatively be called *yothu* ('small') and *yindi* ('large') (Tamisari, 1998: 253; Corn & Gumbula 2007: 120).

Rengitj, also spelt *ringitj*, is a fascinating concept. Though 'body' is one of its possible meanings, like so many other Yolŋu terms, it defies direct translation. In the *Yolŋu-Matha Dictionary* (Zorc, 1996), it is defined rather vaguely as a 'place which is sacred to special people' and a 'ceremonial group'. Anthropological accounts offer considerably more detail. Ian Keen (1994: 312) states that a *rengitj* site is a 'place at the confluence of several groups' countries, associated with ceremonies'. Nancy Williams (1986: 79, 88-9) specifies further that a discrete *rengitj* site will commonly be owned by one *mala*, yet lie encapsulated like an 'embassy' within the larger homeland of another *mala* as a symbol of those parts of their respective ancestry and law that is shared. Franca Tamisari (1998: 260-1) again links this concept to the 'embassy' metaphor, yet instead describes a *rengitj* site as a place on a *mala*'s larger homeland that symbolises its unity with other patri-groups who trace descent from the same *wanjarr*.

Rengitj primarily refers to a place on a group's country where ancestral beings emerged to commence or gathered to continue their journey across the land. These places are often characterised by particular geographical features or botanical images which iconically convey ideas of connection between groups. For instance, the creeks or tributaries formed by the water flowing into a river, the rays radiating out from the sun, parallel paths cut through the shrubbery along a beach, or the branches of a tree departing from its trunk are examples of *rengitj* places ... The creeks, paths or branches are said to represent the different groups which are distributed along the same ancestral trajectory.

Reṅgitj places, I was told, are like embassies which represent and stand for different groups on another group's country. It is at these *reṅgitj* places that the ancestors 'picked up all the names' which were to be distributed along their journey. Thus the *reṅgitj*, as a visible mark or imprint on the land, is characterised as a place of origin, the repository of all the names, as well as a kind of mapped visual expression of the connection between people and places which is to be carried out in the temporal sequence of the journey. In fact, it is through the movement of the ancestral body over the land that the connections embodied in the *reṅgitj* place are realised and the names distributed. (Tamisari, 1998: 260-1).

In this sense, the different *mala* who trace descent from a common *waṅarr* are quite literally like the branches or *likan* (literally 'elbows') of a tree or a river system. Indeed, they will be said to hold their own discrete *likan* of a shared ancestral law with sacred names and subjects that are specific to each. The ways that a *mala* typically expresses its *likan* are among the most sacred that can be presented in any public context. They include (i) invocations of *likan yäku* (literally 'elbow names') that echo the ancestral *gunbur* or *birkarr* ('power') vested in each *mala*; (ii) the distinctive angle in the repeating geometric patterns painted by each *mala* on torsos and its sacred *bathi* ('baskets'); and (iii) the way that dancers bend their arms to recreate this angle when dancing to a *likan yäku* invocation of that *mala*.

To describe more of their ceremonial importance, Williams (1986: 89) explains that *reṅgitj* sites are places where the initiated men from related *mala* gather to perform and share knowledge in deeply-sacred *ṅärra* ('restricted') ceremonies. Howard Morphy (1991: 59) adds that the knowledge obtained in such *reṅgitj* contexts is considered the most definitive, as it is generated through accord among the members of each *mala*. Men will accordingly authenticate the credentials of their knowledge by referring to the various *reṅgitj* contexts through which they acquired it. The *reṅgitj* context is also one in which disagreements and divisions must be resolved or put aside before such knowledge can be shared or joint ceremonies can be undertaken in common purpose (Yunupinju, 1998; ARDS, 2002; Corn, 2003: 96-103).

Chaired by the retired Yolṅu reverend Djiniyini Gondarra, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services (ARDS) presents a somewhat different view of *reṅgitj* that links it to the concepts of 'nation' and 'alliance' (ARDS, 2002). In this model, a cluster of individual *mala* will be joined together under a common constitution, whether Dhuwa or Yirritja, in a 'sovereign' *reṅgitj* or national alliance. Because of the recursive logic of the nomenclature used in the Yolṅu *gurrutu* ('kinship') system, each *mala* will relate to others in its *reṅgitj* as either *wayirrilili* ('women's daughter group') *yapapulu* ('sister's group') or *märipulu* ('mother's mother's group'). As one's own *mala* is a *ṅapawanditj* (literally 'spine group'), *wayirrilili* literally means 'towards the spine', as it is a 'women's daughter group' who is most likely to inherit its *märipulu*'s

property should the 'mother's mother's group' possess no viable male heirs of its own (Corn & Gumbula, 2006: 175-87).

The constituent *mala* of each *rengitj* nation commonly possess broadly distributed homelands that rarely possess common boundaries. However, each *mala*'s ownership rights over its own homelands stop at the *yirralka* ('bedrock'). The subsurface of each constituent homeland within a *rengitj* nation is instead owned collectively by the alliance. All decisions relating to the subsurface, mining negotiations for example, must be made by the *rengitj* nation as a whole, and if an individual *mala* becomes alienated from its homelands, through an absence of viable male heirs, its property can only be ceded to another *mala* within the same *rengitj* nation. This kind of traditional alliance once prompted Yolŋu *mala* of the Laynhapuy region to controversially push for the creation of their own Northeast Arnhem Land Rengitj Land Council (Martin, 1995; Reeves, 1998; Levitus, Martin & Pollack, 1999; Australia, 1999).

Echoing Williams' (1986: 79, 88-9) explanation of *rengitj* as 'embassy', ARDS (2002) also refers to small *rengitj* or 'alliance' sites that are encapsulated within the larger homelands of other *mala*. It is protocol for visitors of one patri-group onto the country of another to stop first at the *rengitj* site that, due to its shared ancestral significance for both, is designated for their *mala*. There, the visitors will light a signalling fire before either seeking out the homeland's owners, or if matters are tense, awaiting their arrival.

Although these explanations of *rengitj* are somewhat varied, they each touch on common themes of confluence, shared ancestry, accord, cooperation and political alliance between different *mala*, and it is in this sense that *rengitj*, as originally translated, can mean 'body'. This, however, is not a corporeal body, but instead a corporate one: a body of people across a body of *mala* who come together as *rengitj* through their shared heritage under a common *waŋarr*. Generally, a patri-group will identify the various other *mala* to whom its *manikay* repertoire refers as its *rengitj* allies, yet this does not preclude the formation of new alliances between *mala*, based on other evidence of their shared ancestry, through ceremonial exchange (Keen, 1994: 140; ARDS, 2002). However, the broader definition of *rengitj* as a body of people across a body of *mala* coming together in unity is also evident in the structural significance of the *rengitj bilma* mode in *manikay* repertoires, and *bungul'mirri manikay* in particular (Corn & Gumbula 2007: 123).

Characterised by fast and even *bilma* beats, it is *manikay* items in the *rengitj* mode that lead into the focal outcomes of ceremonies, such as the exact moment when a boy is circumcised or when a corpse is buried into the ground. They articulate seamlessly into *likan yäku* invocations which are sung over the very same *rengitj bilma* pattern, and function as an executive seal of approval over the correctness of the ritual deed being undertaken in the name of *waŋarr*. The *rengitj bilma* mode quite literally brings together all who are present at a

ceremony, irrespective of *mala* alignment, to gather around, participate in and witness firsthand the veracity of its ritual outcome(s). Indeed, the *garma* ('public') ceremony that brings a community together for the announcement of a death can be called a *rengitjithirri* (literally 'to be as a corporate body') (Keen, 1994: 139). In this sense, the overall quality of a ceremony is indexical to the number of people and *mala* who gather to participate in it, just as esoteric knowledge that is generated in multi-*mala rengitj* contexts is considered to be the most definitive.

In its broadest sense, *rengitj* is the expression and realisation of all that people of different *mala* under a common constitution share, by virtue of common ancestry, within a common system of law. It is as much about the act of sharing as what is shared. This ideal is expressed by Yothu Yindi in the original song 'Timeless Land' (1993, track 1), which incorporates a traditional Gumatj *manikay* item on the subject of *mambulmambul* ('rare kangaroo flesh') as an extended coda. Its lyrics describe how the Gumatj *mala* will share the spoils of the hunt, the rare meat of the red kangaroo, with all of their extended family: whether they be Yirritja like the Gumatj or Dhuwa like their mothers; whether like the Gumatj, they trace descent from Saltwater Crocodile or a different *wanjarr*.

In a later original song, 'One Blood' (Yothu Yindi, 1999: track 2), the blood of the red kangaroo is transformed into an even more inclusive metaphor. This song was composed in anticipation of people from all over the world gathering in Sydney for the 2000 Olympic Games. So here, the blood of the red kangaroo's rare flesh is used to symbolise the 'one blood', the shared humanity, of all in the context of sharing and cooperation between peoples of all nations in common purpose. Its chorus includes the lyrics, '*Mittji mäypa* [Different peoples], *miny'tji gulku* [many colours], *bata'yunmirri* [racing each other], *ganydjarr-nupan*' [racing]. Ah, one blood' (Yothu Yindi, 1999: track 2).

Conclusion

This article has explored the various ways in which Yolŋu traditionally perceive of bodies, whether corporeal or corporate. It has established how Yolŋu understand the human body, its environments and its behaviours as phenomena that are modeled on archetypal ancestral designs for life. It has demonstrated how Yolŋu nomenclature for human anatomy is used as a meta-language to describe the significances of features on country and in traditional modes of performance. And it has explained how the Yolŋu concept of the body corporate is related to an ideal of recognition and sharing between different peoples under a common constitution and law.

At a more fundamental level, this article has shown how traditional Yolŋu understandings of the body reflect innate truths about life on Earth in two key ways. Firstly, with their emphasis on the continual (re)birth of the *birrimbirr* ('soul') and decomposition of the *mokuy*

(‘ghost’), they demonstrate how life is cyclical, and how all matter is recycled and reused by living environments. Secondly, with their emphasis on the faithful passage of ancestral knowledge from generation to generation, they remind us that we humans are all the stuff of our ancestors; from those forebears we have known in life, to the countless unknown individuals over 40,000 generations of our species’ existence whose genetic legacy lives within us.

There is much beauty in the Yolŋu ideal of *rengitj*, as both the act of sharing and that which is shared, among groups and individuals in common cause. Humanity inflicts its most terrible injuries on itself when we forget, or willfully deny, that all humans are of the same species; that ultimately, we are all of the same ‘one blood’ (Yothu Yindi, 1999: track 2). While no human society is entirely conflict-free, the notion of *rengitj* as multi-party relationships through which disputes must be addressed and consensus reached before new knowledge and plans can be generated, seems an effect and reasonably-equitable mechanism that has long served the Yolŋu well in maintaining order among individual bodies corporeal within a functional society of prosperous bodies corporate.

However, it is important to remember that, in Yolŋu tradition, the body corporeal and the body corporate are not mutually exclusive domains. Both are seen as physical manifestations of ancestral agency and experience. Whether encoded in the genetic makeup of an individual person or in protocols for how different individuals should treat each other, Yolŋu perceive both to be consubstantiations of eternal blueprints for existence that can be observed in the patterns imprinted by *wanjarr* on the natural environment, and in the metaphysical bodies ancestral that reside dormant and unseen within each living being.

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