

## Chapter 3

# Family matters: Yolŋu women and children and rural–urban mobility

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**Abstract:** *This chapter documents more than three decades of Yolŋu rural–urban mobility, focusing on women and children who move from remote communities in north-east Arnhem Land to live in urban hostels and suburban housing in Darwin. With diverse histories of education, employment and welfare entitlement, Yolŋu women’s lives illustrate social change in marriage, residential family, kinship affiliation and socio-linguistic etiquette. Life crises of birth, sickness and death — which invoke gurrutu (kinship) responsibilities in women and children, the sick and their support families — and ‘bringing the bāpurru’ (clan gathering and organisation) into action for funeral ceremonies, impact on suburban households and interrupt women’s urban careers. At such times, vulnerable women and children are targeted for care and control by both welfare government and Yolŋu family governance. While acknowledging Noel Pearson’s (2000:136–54, 2009a) call for reform of welfare government and Aboriginal governance, the authors argue that the movement of Yolŋu women and children from remote communities to the city is more complex, contentious and open-ended than Pearson’s (2009b:1) vision of Aboriginal people being enabled to ‘orbit between two worlds and have the best of both’.*

### Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the authors have been participant observers, although from different perspectives, of Yolŋu women and family groups moving from communities in Arnhem Land to live in Darwin and its satellite town of Palmerston. The data presented are based on earlier research (Coulehan 1995a, 1995b; Coulehan et al. 2005), current collaboration, and Gaykamaŋu’s lived experience of Yolŋu mobility and migration to the city.

This chapter documents more than three decades of Yolŋu rural–urban mobility and focuses on women, with children in their care, who follow the family and exercise personal choice when they move from their remote communities to the city. Living in urban hostels and suburban housing, the women’s lives illustrate different histories of education, employment and welfare entitlement, and changes in marriage, residential family, kinship affiliation and socio-linguistic etiquette. Life crises of birth, sickness and death — which invoke *gurrutu* (kinship) responsibilities in women and children, the sick and their support families — and ‘bringing the *bäpurru*’ into action for funeral ceremonies impact on suburban households and interrupt women’s urban careers. At such times, Yolŋu in Darwin experience an intensification of ‘control as care’ (Keen 1989:27), exercised by both welfare government and family governance.

From his perspective in Cape York Peninsula communities, Noel Pearson (2000, 2009a) argues for reform in government welfare and Aboriginal governance. Pearson (2009b:1) emphasises that young and able Aboriginal people need to be able to ‘orbit between two worlds and have the best of both’. Pearson does not address the out-migration of Aboriginal women and children, which is typically contentious in local communities and more open-ended than his proposed mobility for school terms, university semesters and work–vacation cycles. Our study of Yolŋu women and children, who live long term in Darwin, provides insights into individuals’ aspirations and strategies for more autonomy and opportunities in life within the benefits and constraints of two poorly understood and articulated systems of care and control.

In the 1970s self-determination policy and welfare entitlement began to enable Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to move from remote communities that were formerly mission and government settlements to places of residence on homelands or in urban centres (Taylor 2007). Government strategies of service delivery were, and continue to be, based on the concentration of comprehensive services in urban areas, which necessitates the sponsored rural–urban mobility of Aboriginal people. Despite the state’s structural involvement, Aboriginal peoples’ movement to urban centres continues to be described in media and policy discourse as ‘urban drift’ (Taylor 2007:174, 2009:6), thereby denying Aboriginal decision making and ‘mobility for survival’ (Young and Doohan 1989).

Aboriginal women and children continue to be sponsored by family and government to transit through and migrate to the city to access hospital and specialist health services, schools and tertiary education, court protection and public housing. Individual welfare entitlements and combinations of pensions, child endowments and student allowances have also made it possible for Aboriginal women with dependants to choose to settle in urban centres. By the late 1980s Collman (1988:105–25) noted that Aboriginal women with children moving into Alice Springs were ‘privileged’ compared to their menfolk in their access to welfare monies and housing in town camps, and that Aboriginal men were becoming ‘marginalised’ from women’s

matrifocal households. Similarly, Yolŋu women and family groups were moving to Darwin but living predominantly in Aboriginal hostels and public rental housing in the suburbs.

Access to hospital and specialist health services is a major driver of the rural–urban mobility of Aboriginal patients and supporting family members. In childbirth and as primary carers of ill and invalid kin, Aboriginal women are introduced to the nexus of urban hospitals, hostels and public housing. By the mid-1990s Northern Territory health research indicated that the rate of admission of Aboriginal people to hospitals would ‘continue to increase for as long as there is so much unmet need’ (Plant et al. 1995:x; see also Rubin and Walker 1995:402).

When Yolŋu patients are transferred to Darwin for hospital and other health services, family members ‘keeping company’ with them frequently stay at, and overcrowd, Yolŋu suburban households (Coulehan 1995a). Chronic and life-threatening diseases, which require ongoing specialist therapy, result in Yolŋu patients and support families living indefinitely in town, which in turn accentuates the need for Yolŋu interpreters in hospital, renal and other health services (Coulehan et al. 2005). The Aboriginal Interpreter Service and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education provide opportunities for Yolŋu interpreters and interpreters-in-training to live, train and work in Darwin.

The decades from the 1970s to the present have seen rapid social change in marriage, residential family units and social order in Aboriginal communities in northern and Central Australia. In this period, new forms of violence have emerged in Aboriginal communities, including violence associated with substance abuse and ‘domestic violence’ (Bolger 1991; Burbank 1994). Aboriginal women and children have long been sponsored by health and welfare services, and under court protection orders, to move to urban centres for emergency and longer-term housing. Yolŋu women with children also independently move away from chronic housing shortage and family duress in remote communities to obtain housing in Darwin, and they hold on to hostel rooms and suburban housing for the longer term.

For the past 30 years the benefits and alternatives in life offered by welfare monies and comprehensive services have largely shaped the movement of Aboriginal women and families to urban centres, but more direct ‘policing of families’ (cf. Donzelot 1979) is emerging as a factor. Concerns about the safety of children in dysfunctional families and communities led to the ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report (Wild and Anderson 2007). The federal government’s response to the report was to initiate the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER, the Intervention) in 2007. Following the NTER, continuing interventions of health and police authorities in Aboriginal communities are likely to generate further sponsored and independent movement of Aboriginal people to Darwin and other Northern Territory urban centres (Taylor 2007:174).

The Intervention sparked heated debate among Aboriginal and non-Indigenous commentators about the levels of surveillance, coercive measures, problematising of culture and politicisation of Aboriginal distress (see Altman and Hinkson 2012; various authors in Altman and Hinkson 2007, 2010; Sutton 2009). The quarantining of a proportion of Aboriginal people's welfare incomes to meet 'basic needs', an intervention that required the suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) in the Northern Territory, was one of the more contentious measures.

In the main, welfare monies have provided Yolŋu women with the means to transit through or migrate to Darwin, and urban hostels and public housing have provided the keys to city living. The majority of Yolŋu women seek better life opportunities for themselves and their dependents and a relatively diminished kinship demand on their incomes. Some also take advantage of more personal autonomy in sexual-marital relations, including with *balanda* (Europeans, whites) and other Aboriginal men. A few drop out of Yolŋu family life and become 'lost to grog' in alcohol-drinking circles and 'long-grass camps' in and around the city. But the majority of Yolŋu women lead sober and productive lives in Aboriginal hostels and public housing in the suburbs of Darwin and Palmerston.

Whatever their urban circumstances, the authors argue that three factors shape Yolŋu women's rural-urban mobility and residence in the city: the agency of the welfare state, a Yolŋu system of family governance exercised in social organisation and ceremonial life, and individual Yolŋu making personal choices and setting out on their own life journeys.

## Aboriginal governance and welfare government

Keen (1989:27, 1994:298) notes that the term 'Aboriginal governance' has been employed in Australia to distinguish Indigenous mechanisms of care and control as distinct from institutions of 'government', including welfare measures. Keen (2004:243) identifies a number of features of governance including 'the framing' of norms and rules of behaviour, 'the socialization' of younger generations accordingly, more 'direct control' (including adjudication and sanction), and 'relations and structures involved in governance and the exercise of power'. In Aboriginal contexts, kinship, age and gender mark out relations of power, and 'individual autonomy and relatedness' are highly valued (Keen 2004:243).

Following the NTER, research has drawn attention to the 'contested governance' (Hunt et al. 2008) over Aboriginal populations, particularly over women, children and youth. Peterson (2010:249) argues that 'through the Intervention the government has tried to enter...ungovernable space' with policies that go 'beyond the normal role of the state in citizens' lives'. Diane Smith (2008:76) argues that 'the often unilateral imposition of the state's sovereign powers is deemed to be necessary to "protect" Indigenous people from the governance disabilities of their own culture.'

Smith (2008:80) further argues that policy makers and public servants have no concept of Aboriginal governance, other than the introduced, Western-derived apparatus of ‘incorporated community organizations’. In western Arnhem Land, Smith (2008:93) explains that:

Bininj governances lies in its institutions; that is, in its own ‘rules of the game’, the way things should be done. These give legitimacy to practice, and include laws, kinship and marriage systems, behavioural and gender norms, family values, religious beliefs and moral system, principles of land ownership, ceremony and ritual...

Such Indigenous systems of social organisation are ‘highly decentralised’ and function in ‘governance networks’ where individual leadership and agency exist together with group decision making and collective action (Smith 2008:95–6). Sullivan (2011) criticises the centralised policy making of successive governments for failing to recognise and support Indigenous authority and life ways, while pursuing political, bureaucratic and managerial priorities and agendas.

In north-east Arnhem Land, Keen (2004:262–6) identifies the authority of patrigroup elders in Yolŋu governance of life, according to *rom* (law, culture) derived from *wangaar* (ancestors, ancestral time). The Yolŋu have a continuing history of arguing for the recognition of ‘two laws’, Yolŋu *rom* and Australian law, in the context of land and resource rights, in family matters and dispute resolution (Williams 1986, 1987).

Historically, disputes about sexual–marital relations were commonly described by Yolŋu as ‘little trouble’, as Yolŋu business rather than a matter for the police and the courts (Williams 1987:126–9). In Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land, social sanctions including ostracism, gossip, argument and ritualised violence that did not attract police intervention continued to be applied in disputes over sexual–marital relations (Williams 1987:147–8; Burbank 1994). Increasingly, the legitimacy of ‘traditional violence’ as a sanction of Aboriginal customary law has been challenged by white authorities and from within Aboriginal society, with differences of interests and opinions being evident between men and women and older and younger generations (Bolger 1991:49–53; Burbank 1994:146–51). In the Northern Territory ‘bullshit traditional violence’ is a phrase coined to describe how some Aboriginal men have attempted to justify violence against women as ‘traditional’, when violence is shaped by substance abuse rather than by cultural precedent (Bolger 1991:50). Since the 1990s the incidence of neglect and sexual abuse of children has emerged as a failure of both Aboriginal family governance and state and federal governments. The ‘Little Children are Sacred’ report purportedly triggered the Howard government’s NTER in 2007 (see, for example, Hinkson 2007; Merlan 2010).

Simultaneously, the evident deterioration in Aboriginal social order and living conditions in northern and Central Australia was being attributed, by neoliberal critics, to government policies and practices centred on Aboriginal 'rights', self-determination and welfare entitlement. Noel Pearson (2009a) identifies welfare monies as the root cause of widespread social dysfunction and violence in Aboriginal families and communities in Cape York Peninsula. Pearson argues that, by accepting their right to welfare support, Aboriginal people have lost sight of their social and cultural responsibilities and have become trapped in welfare dependency, potentially for generations to come. While acknowledging colonial histories and the continuing failures of governments in duty of care, Pearson (2009a:143) argues that for Aboriginal people the 'right to self-determination is ultimately the right to take responsibility' for their own present living conditions and future opportunities.

Pearson (2000:44) argues that the formal (state) system of government has undermined the informal (family, clan, cultural group) system of governance but has not fully replaced 'our traditional values and structures' and he calls for attitudinal and structural change on both sides. Pearson's reform agenda to overcome Aboriginal welfare dependency requires new local governance structures that sever individuals' direct relationship to the welfare state and reinstate moral authority and mutual obligation in Aboriginal families and communities. A limitation of Pearson's reform analysis is his failure to clarify what constitutes family and community in contemporary Aboriginal society (Martin 2001:13–16).

Martin (2001:15) notes that 'core constitutive elements' of Aboriginal societies are 'families' that 'may live across a number of households within a community or even dispersed across communities'. These are to be understood not simply as extended families but, as Sutton (1998:55ff.) points out, as 'families of polity' organised on lines of kinship and descent and operating in social, economic, political and ceremonial life. More recently, Sutton (2009:64) has argued that cultural traits are in part explanatory of dysfunction in Aboriginal families and communities today, but his analysis fails to adequately address the role of the state (Altman 2009).

Although Sutton (2009:85, 64) and Martin (2001:vii) deny a 'blame the victim' analysis, they argue that cultural traits in Aboriginal society may work against the changes that Pearson advocates for reform of Aboriginal governance at family and community levels. Martin (2001:15) further notes that:

Kinship may provide the idiom in which relations of amity and mutual support are expressed, but it also provides points of fracture and differentiation...

Within families and households, the autonomy of individuals is typically jealously preserved, and attempts by others to control behaviour strenuously resisted.

Debate about how the welfare state seeks to govern families and bring about social change by acting upon inherent differences within families is not new and not limited to Aboriginal Australia. Donzelot (1979:48–96) argued that state ‘government through the family’ sought to break up the ‘government of families’ in working-class society in France. He further argued that age and gender mark out relations of power and ‘differences of potential’ within the family. The state acts upon these differences by offering individuals welfare benefits and alternatives in life to bring about social change, including more individual autonomy, emancipation of women and youth from patriarchal authority, erosion of the ‘clannish’ family in favour of smaller family forms, and dependence on the state (Donzelot 1979:48–96).

In the West there has been a historical division of responsibilities between the church, the state and the family in the governance of ‘life’ and exercise of ‘pastoral power’ (Foucault 1986:208–26). Foucault (1986:213–15) describes the evolution of pastoral power into a power dichotomy in which spiritual functions were largely left to the church, while political–legal and socio-economic matters became increasingly the province of the state. The welfare state has historically taken responsibility for the more secular dimensions of governance.

This division of interests and of powers between the secular and the sacred, the material and the spiritual is not so readily separated in Yolŋu society, where responsibilities in social and in ceremonial life are more interdependent. Yolŋu *rom* is ‘nothing less than the Yolŋu way of being, conceived as having been set down in the time of *wangarr* (creation)’ (Morphy 2008:122). Yolŋu *rom* applies in the domain of *madayin* (the sacred, ceremonial) dimensions of life (Keen 1994:294), including in the ‘bringing the *bäpurru*’ together for funeral ceremonies and in the everyday arena of *gurrutu* practice.

Since the end of missionary and government supervision of Aboriginal people on reserves, Aboriginal ceremonial life has experienced comparative freedom from direct intervention from the secular state. This may be about to change as populist criticism is being made of Aboriginal ceremonial life, including ‘protracted funerals’, as hindering Aboriginal participation in ‘a real economy’ (Rothwell 2007:153). There continues to be little or no public and policy recognition of Aboriginal ceremonial practice as one manifestation of Aboriginal pastoral power or governance.

## **The *bäpurru* and the state — responding to a death**

Agents of the state are not interested in Yolŋu funeral rituals but are concerned with every detail of the management of sickness and death, and the altered circumstances which these entail for immediate kin. Yolŋu exercise relative autonomy over ‘funeral business’, which addresses the spiritual and social reintegration of the kin group after the death of kin, while the state is concerned with death certification, pensions, tenancies and other bureaucratic responses. ‘Bringing the *bäpurru*’ together for funeral

ceremonies is a public expression of how Yolŋu social organisation, religious law and ceremonial practice constitute a continuing system of Indigenous governance in awkward articulation with state mechanisms of government.

In ethnographies of north-east Arnhem Land, *bäpurru* is variously translated as ‘clans’, ‘patrilineal descent groups’ and ‘patri-groups’ (Morphy 2008:113–51):

A person belongs to the *bäpurru* of their father. In one meaning of the term, *bäpurru* are the groups in which the ownership of land and sea estates is vested, and the meaning encompasses not just the living representatives of the group but also its spiritual essence located in the clan estate, the product of *wangarr* activity. (Morphy 2008:122; see also Keen 1994; Williams 1986)

Keen (1994:64) notes that ‘soul’ and ‘shared identity through father’ are also meanings attached to *bäpurru*. The death of kin necessitates ‘bringing the *bäpurru*’ to ritually announce the death (Williams 1986:65–70) and organise participation in the funeral ceremonies, which are held in Yolŋu remote communities. When Yolŋu die in Darwin, the *bäpurru* is also evident in rituals to announce the death in kinship circles, to ‘farewell the coffin plane’, to ‘smoke’ houses, offices and vehicles to release them from death taboo, and in the organisation for bereaved kin to return to the remote community for the funeral ceremonies (Coulehan 1995b). Close female kin of the deceased may be obliged to remain in the remote community after the funeral to observe customs of mourning.

The funeral ceremonies and mourning period consequent upon a recent death in the family is a time for individual kin to reassess their own lives, and for the family and wider social group to reassert responsibilities for and claims on individuals. The status and circumstances of Yolŋu women and children are especially liable to be readjusted after the death of spouses and parents, both in relation to family responsibilities and state welfare.

## ***Gurruṯu* and welfare interventions**

Births and serious illnesses are also times when family governance and welfare interventions are brought to bear on vulnerable individuals and families. Contemporary Yolŋu governance operates in everyday life in *gurruṯu* responsibilities in ‘looking after’ women and children and ‘keeping company’ with the sick and distressed. Morphy (2008:113–51) states that ‘the foundation of the Yolŋu social system and system of governance is *gurruṯu* — the complex networks of kinship that link individuals and groups to each other.’

Yolŋu kinship is complex and structured, and includes the moiety, subsection and classificatory kinship systems, as well as exogamous marriage. Features of



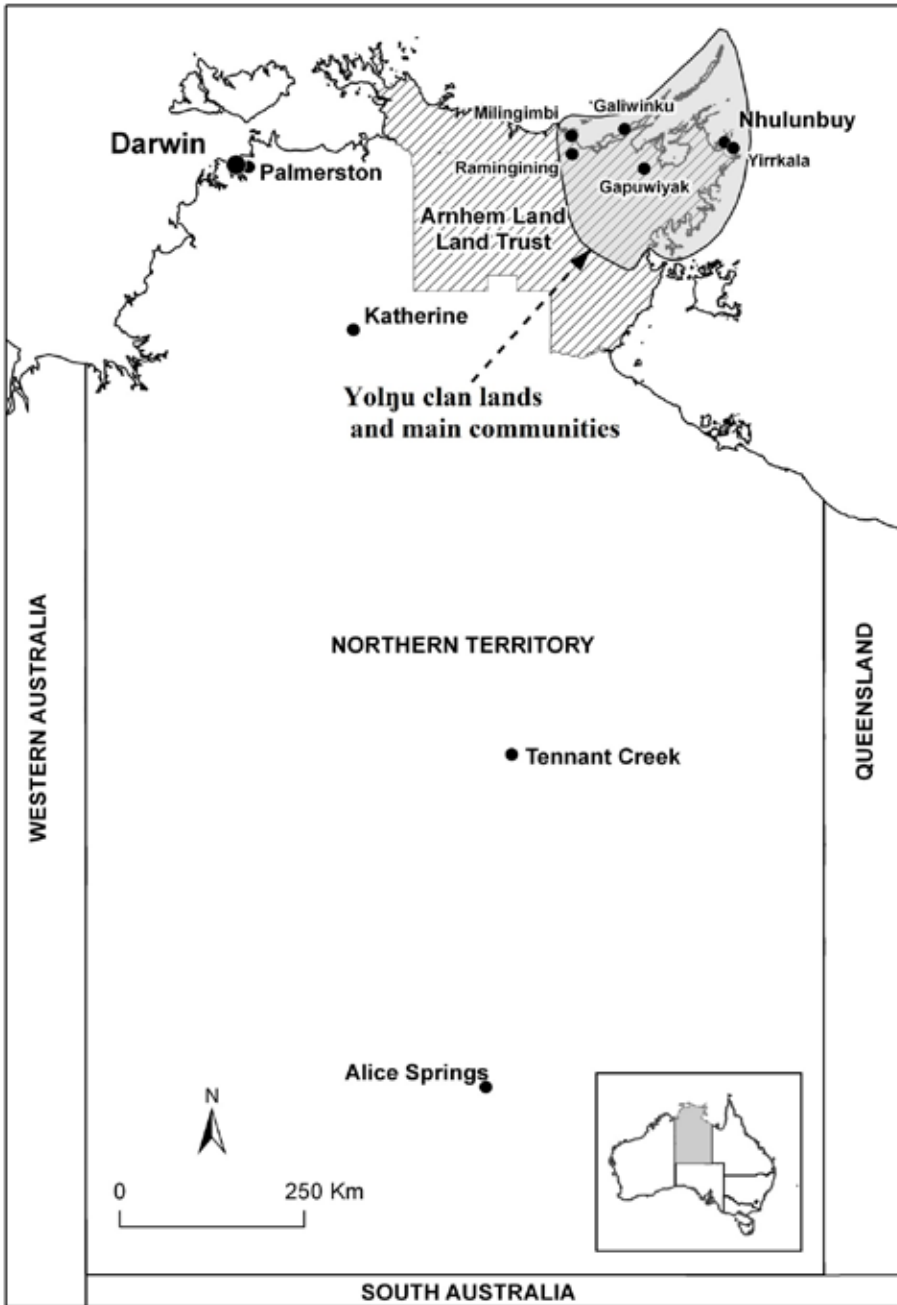
differentiation and integration, including by sex, birth order, generation, and close and wider kin, add complexity. We confine our focus here to the changing configuration of kinship relationships that have been shaping the Yolŋu residential family, as evident among Yolŋu families living in public housing and Aboriginal hostels in Darwin. First, we examine tradition and change in Yolŋu marriage and the *dhuway–galay* (husband–wife) relationship and potential for *mari*’ (trouble) in sexual–marital relations and between intermarrying groups. Second, we consider the *wäwa–yapa* (brother–sister) relationship, traditionally marked by avoidance behaviours, and the relevance of *mirriri* (ritualised violence) as a mechanism of family governance. Third, we note the declining influence of the *bäpa–gathu* (father–child) relationship, in contrast to the increasing predominance of the *ŋändi–waku* (mother–child) and the *märi–gutharra* (mother’s mother — daughter’s child; mother’s mother’s brother — sister’s daughter’s child) relationships in the lives of Yolŋu children living in matrifocal urban households.

Morphy (2008) describes *gurrutu* as the social environment in which Yolŋu governance operates. The welfare state directly challenges Yolŋu governance in the care and control over vulnerable individuals and families by providing a ‘safety net’ of welfare monies, coupled with access to services that are most comprehensively provided in urban locations. To understand the potential implications of the contested governance over Yolŋu women and children who move to Darwin and live long term in the city, it is necessary to examine tradition and change in Yolŋu marriage and family formation.

## ‘Going own way’: Yolŋu women, marital change and urban migration

The Yolŋu understand the universe as consisting of Dhuwa and Yiiritja moieties. For marriage to be ‘straight way’, both spouses must marry outside their own patrimoiety and patriclan. Cultural preference is for a man to marry one or more of his matrilateral cross-cousins, a female *galay* (wife), and for a woman to marry a male *dhuway* (husband), one of her patrilateral cross-cousins. Yolŋu marriage traditions include the complex ‘promise’ system of bestowal and arranged marriage between clans that ‘link groups of both moieties’ (Morphy 2008:118–23; see also Keen 1994:85–8, 2004:202–4; Shapiro 1981:47–56 ff.; Warner 1969:49–52, 63–85).

In the 1970s and 1980s Yolŋu marriage persisted, although widows’ pensions enabled women not to remarry and girls deferred marriage to their ‘promise’ husbands while they pursued opportunities in education, training and employment. Yolŋu women and girls were increasingly able to evade marriage as men’s willingness and ability to enforce marriage bestowals and widow remarriage declined. A decade later, polygyny in general was in decline and many men opted for monogamous marriage to fit their modern image and careers (Keen 1994:299).



**Figure 1:** Yolŋu clan lands and major towns in the Northern Territory (original map commissioned by K Coulehan, inspired by Map 2 in Keen (1994:77) and amended with advice from the Northern Land Council)

In the 1980s and 1990s Burbank (1989, 1994) found strong evidence of marital change and of single womanhood among Aboriginal women in south-east Arnhem Land. Cultural definitions of ‘correct’ marriage continued to be salient, but as the ideal was stronger than the practice, both customary sanctions and new forms of social conflict were common. Conflicts between men and women, women and women, the older and younger generations, and between close and wider kin were significantly traced to sexual–marital issues, with alcohol consumption frequently a contributing factor (Burbank 1994).

Among Yolŋu, conflict in the *dhuway–galay* (husband–wife) relationship has the potential to escalate into conflict between intermarrying groups. Yolŋu women remain affiliated with the group identity of their fathers and brothers (Warner 1969:99–100), while the children of the marriage are recruited into the patrimoiety and patriline of their socially recognised fathers. The group solidarity of men and women in the *wäwa–yapa* (brother–sister) relationship is in tension with the inter-clan relationships of *dhuway–galay* (husband–wife) and brothers-in-law, particularly if *mari*’ (trouble) within marriage spills over into trouble between brothers-in-law and intermarrying clans.

The *wäwa–yapa* (brother–sister) relationship entails behavioural rules of avoidance expressed ordinarily in socio-linguistic etiquette and extraordinarily in *mirriri* (ritualised violence) (Warner 1969:55, 98–102; see also Burbank 1985, 1994:151–5). Yolŋu brothers are obliged not to hear anything personal about their sisters, including their names from *ringitj* (sacred place on clan country). By custom, a Yolŋu woman is referred to and addressed as *wakinju* (without kin) and *bambay* (lit. invisible) by, and in the hearing of, her brothers. Alternatively, the name of the woman’s child plus the suffix *walaŋa* (belonging to) is used as a form of reference and address for a Yolŋu woman in the presence or hearing of her brothers.

The latter option appears to predominate in contemporary circumstances where Yolŋu households contain young adult and adolescent siblings of both sexes and one or more of the sisters are single mothers. There are other indications of change in the socio-linguistic etiquette of brother–sister avoidance. Households containing young adult and adolescent siblings of both sexes are now commonplace in remote communities, owing to chronic housing shortage and increased options for individuals to remain single. In Darwin during a crisis in health and in housing, adolescent brothers were observed to call their young adult sisters by their personal names. Yolŋu explained that the sisters, who were single mothers with pension incomes, had long been caring for their *yukuyuku* (younger siblings) since their mother was ‘lost to grog’ in the ‘long-grass camps’ of Darwin. They were more like ‘little mothers’ than sisters to their brothers so avoidance etiquette was not observed in the siblings’ household. Another Yolŋu woman continues to be called *bambay* in kinship circles, even though no brothers are present. More than a decade ago she lived as a single girl in her older, married brother’s suburban household, where resident and visiting kin were obliged

to avoid her personal name and *bambay* became an enduring substitute, perhaps a nickname.

As late as the mid-1990s, the threat of *mirriri* was sufficient to suppress gossip in kinship circles about Yolŋu women's sexual-marital affairs in Darwin (Coulehan 1995b). In Arnhem Land *mirriri* customs evidently constrained expressions of male anger and aggression in a ritualised way, served to prevent an escalation of violence, especially between intermarrying groups, and rarely caused actual bodily harm (Burbank 1985, 1994). Brothers 'colluded to protect' women by ignoring what was going on in their sisters' lives and by reacting in ritualised violence when circumstances could not be ignored (Burbank 1994:154). In consideration of these features and effects, it would appear that *mirriri* acted among Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land as a mechanism of Aboriginal family law to prevent or limit *mari*' (trouble, fighting).

It has been argued that Aboriginal girls in Arnhem Land are socialised into subordination to males (Cowlshaw 1982; Hamilton 1981), and women are 'very careful of brothers', suggesting that brother-sister avoidance behaviour is an example of sexual asymmetry (Burbank 1994:152). Social change, including decline in Yolŋu marriage alliances between clans, the incidence of adult siblings sharing housing and the rise of substance abuse in kinship circles, has led to a decline in the use and efficacy of *mirriri* as a mechanism of customary law and family governance.

Sutton (2009:110) argues that Aboriginal women in northern and Central Australia have no reason to 'have a nostalgia for the old patriarchy' and, while 'violent aspects of this apparatus have become illegal', the traditional social order has always relied significantly on 'dispersal as a means of keeping levels of conflict at manageable levels'. Keen (1994:299) writes that Yolŋu women take advantage of 'alternatives' in life offered in education, employment and marital choice, and that some choose to avoid local 'power structures' in remote communities by moving to urban centres.

Today, whether they live in remote communities or in urban centres, many women and girls live outside Yolŋu marriage as widows, estranged wives, unmarried mothers, single girls and career women. While some women migrate with their husbands from remote communities to Darwin, and a few exceptional women enter urban employment, in the main it is Yolŋu women's pension incomes, together with child benefits and youth study allowances, that have provided the means for Yolŋu women and children to live in the city. Yolŋu women find that access to urban hostels and housing in their own right affords them more personal autonomy and the opportunity to live longer term in Darwin.

We argue that while Yolŋu women take up their options in 'going own way' outside of Yolŋu marriage and by migration to Darwin, they have not placed themselves and their children outside of a Yolŋu system of governance, as the relations, norms and mechanisms of family governance are changing to fit new circumstances. Even when they live long term in the city, Yolŋu women and their children are following 'both

ways’ — that is, Yolŋu and *balanda* ways of living — and they are subject to family care and welfare conditions.

### **‘Both ways’ and ‘best of both worlds’?**

In Aboriginal society authority and respect, and socialisation and knowledge transmission, are shaped in long-term, intergenerational relationships. Keen (1989: 34–8, 2004: 243–5, 262–4) identifies processes of socialisation as indirect and long-term mechanisms of Aboriginal governance. In the sense of Habermas (1987:299), for the Yolŋu to be empowered, to be self-determining as a socially and culturally distinct Aboriginal people, the Yolŋu ‘life-world’ must reproduce itself by means of ‘the propagation of cultural traditions, the integration of groups by norms and values, and the socialisation of succeeding generations’.

Despite the intrusions of the *balanda* and the interventions of mission, and then government, in family and community life, the Yolŋu continue to reproduce and modify a Yolŋu way or life-world in their own communities in north-east Arnhem Land. Under the former policy of self-determination, Yolŋu social and ceremonial life and introduced contexts of local self-government and community services, and in particular schooling, were significantly conducted in Yolŋu languages and by Yolŋu kin. Yolŋu espouse ‘two-ways, both-ways’ as a philosophy of engagement with wider Australian society and as a model for the education of their children in bilingual, bicultural programs in Yolŋu community schools.<sup>1</sup>

In the mission era a select few Yolŋu were sponsored to travel to southern cities for Bible studies and community leadership courses. Following the transition from mission to government, and then to nominally self-governing communities, a number of Yolŋu travelled to Deakin University in Victoria and Batchelor College near Darwin. They studied for qualifications in teacher education, which in turn led to their employment as Aboriginal school principals, teachers and teachers-in-training in their remote communities. This cohort of Yolŋu principals and teachers worked with *balanda* educators to develop, implement and evaluate bilingual, bicultural programs in remote community schools.<sup>2</sup>

A number of bilingually educated Yolŋu went on to other careers in and beyond their remote communities, including in Darwin at the Aboriginal curriculum development unit of the Northern Territory Education Department, at the headquarters of Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation and Traditional Credit Union, and within the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Northern Regional Council Congress of the Uniting Church. Yolŋu have been regularly employed as interpreters in urban and remote contexts of courts, hospitals, police and Centrelink services since the introduction in 2000 of the Aboriginal Interpreter Service in the Northern Territory. One author of this chapter, Gaykamaŋu, provides an example of

the success of bilingual education, training and employment in her personal history, including remote schooling, teacher training at Batchelor College, teaching experience in a remote community, and moving to Darwin to work in the Northern Territory Education Department on curriculum development for remote Indigenous schools, then as a lecturer in Yolŋu language and culture at Charles Darwin University, a position she held with distinction from 1994 until she retired in 2008. Since then Gaykamaŋu has continued her bilingual consultancy work with Charles Darwin University and with Aboriginal Resource and Development Services for Yolŋu radio.

Education for and employment in the remote bilingual teaching context evidently provided a number of Yolŋu with the foundations for long, distinguished and diverse careers in remote communities, in Darwin and in the wider world, where their bilingual, bicultural knowledge and skills were valued.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, Yolŋu with Aboriginal teaching qualifications have no career path into schools in Darwin, even though Yolŋu children are increasingly enrolling as boarders in private schools and as day students in state schools.

In their analysis of the history and future of schooling in one Yolŋu remote community, Tamisari and Milmilany (2003:2) state that a Yolŋu ‘vision of education’ has always been ‘developed within the broader political struggle for the maintenance of local authority structures and the assertion of control and decision-making in the school’. With a background of research in south-east Arnhem Land, Burbank (2006) notes a contemporary Aboriginal resistance to the hegemony of institutions of Western government, including schools. The causes of truancy and poor educational outcomes among Yolŋu children are complex and arguably include a failure of family governance, and a failure of state and federal governments to nourish the early promise of bilingual, bicultural education in remote community schools.

Sutton (2009:66) argues that ‘getting rid of profound disadvantage’ in Aboriginal communities requires taking into account ‘the critical and central role of the socialization of children’. The question is whether it is socialisation or education that outsiders can ethically seek to influence. The policy of assimilation included the radical sundering of child–parent–family bonds for the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children. Perhaps anticipating such criticism, Sutton (2009:67) counter argues that ‘lost generations’ are not just those damaged by malnutrition, substance abuse, domestic violence and sexual abuse but potentially all the young people who are ‘functionally illiterate and unemployable in real jobs, but who have also received only a diminished education in their elders’ cultural traditions’.

In his reform agenda for Aboriginal communities in Cape York Peninsula, Pearson (2009a:292–300) argues that the ‘young and able’ need the capacity to ‘orbit’ between their remote communities and centres of education and employment, whether rural towns or cities. He acknowledges that family and community elders may be opposed, fearing that mobility may be a ‘one-way ticket’ taking the young away from their cultural and social origins. Pearson emphasises that social order must be restored and

employment capacity developed in Aboriginal communities if the young and able are to return.

Pearson (2009a:298–300) is critical of the state secondary school system and advocates boarding schools and proficiency in English as keys to social, economic and geographic mobility for Aboriginal children and youth. He further argues that Aboriginal people need to dichotomise their lives, with time and place to pursue socio-economic advancement of self and immediate family, and alternative time and place for cultural recharge via re-emersion in their Aboriginal heritage based in land, language, kinship and ceremony (Pearson 2009c).

Aboriginal people routinely use ‘cognitive compartmentalization’ (Smith 2008:103; cf. McConvell 1991) in day to day interaction with white people and their agendas when they are obliged to speak in English and modify their socio-linguistic etiquette to fit in with the speech conventions of the dominant culture. When Yolŋu come to Darwin to seek the life chances offered by more comprehensive services in the city, especially those of health, housing and education, they must communicate their needs in English and to strangers. They must also compartmentalise their responsibilities in *gurrutu* (kinship) and to the *bäpurru* (clan organisation for funeral ceremonies) to fit in with their responsibilities as tenants of suburban housing, parents of children enrolled in school terms, as employees with limited compassionate leave, and as welfare recipients geared to Centrelink pay cycles and conditions.

When Yolŋu move to Darwin, they may choose to leave their children behind in the care of close family or take children with them. If their purposes and stay are long term, Yolŋu parents or guardians will enrol children in suburban primary and secondary schools as day students. In order to fulfil their kinship obligations to attend funeral ceremonies in remote communities, Yolŋu typically have to interrupt children’s schooling, as well as incur the additional expense of taking children with them. Return airfares from Darwin to remote communities are expensive and require kin to pool monies over a number of Centrelink pay cycles, so visits to remote communities tend to be prolonged, which further impacts on children’s schooling.

Yolŋu women’s pension incomes and child subsidies have enabled their rural–urban mobility, but following the NTER and linking of parents’ welfare money to their children’s school attendance, there is more constraint on mobility for cultural purposes. Behrendt (2009:5–8) argues that the new welfare measures are ‘punitive rather than constructive’ and perpetuate ‘negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people as irresponsible parents’ (see also Sarra 2009).

Some Yolŋu women and adolescents in Darwin contemplate the advantages of private boarding schools, including the ability for children to have uninterrupted schooling while their parents and guardians have the flexibility to attend funeral ceremonies in remote communities. To date, Yolŋu women who are resident in Darwin have found it ‘too hard’ for their children to access urban boarding schools, which are geared to enrolment of Aboriginal students who are resident in remote communities.

Most Yolŋu parents and guardians in Darwin are therefore obliged to reverse ‘orbit’ children between the city and home communities, not just during school vacation but when important ceremonies are taking place in home communities. In this way, Yolŋu attempt an informal ‘both ways’ education for their children, but this strategy is unlikely to deliver ‘the best of both worlds’ (Pearson 2009b:1) as their children’s formal education is typically compromised.

Yolŋu women who have benefited from school, further education and employment are keen for the children in their care to regularly attend suburban schools. They participate in homework sessions and parent–teacher interviews, and express pride in their children’s progress, especially in English language and literacy skills. On the other hand, Yolŋu women who are ‘shy’, lacking in confidence in urban contexts or transient in town, have been noticeably more reluctant to engage with urban schools. As Gaykamanju has shown, Yolŋu parents and guardians who have secure and functional housing and urban employment are well placed to use their housing as a staging post for children and youth in their care to access suburban high schools and post-school programs for employment readiness. Post-school qualifications improve Indigenous Australians’ access to public service and non-government employment where ‘cultural obligations are recognized in workplace agreements’ (Taylor et al. 2012:25).

## Conclusions

The aspects of social change we have examined in this chapter include the increasing incidence of unmarried status among Yolŋu women and relative socio-economic independence of women as widows, single mothers, unwed child-carers and career women. Marital change has been accompanied by change in residential family units, particularly from male-headed, marriage-based, patrifocal households to female-headed, matrifocal households and sibling-based households.

Some preliminary observations have been made about changing socio-linguistic etiquette between, and in respect of, Yolŋu brothers and sisters who, in contemporary housing circumstances, find themselves living into adulthood under the one roof in parental homes and increasingly in female-headed, sibling households. It would also appear that social change in marriage and residential family may be leading to the declining relevance of relations of avoidance and *mirriri* (ritualised violence) as mechanisms of family governance, at least as observed among Yolŋu living in Darwin.

Far from being confined to remote communities by welfare monies, Yolŋu women with a mind to be independent, including as widows, single mothers, students and would-be career women, have been aided by welfare monies and centralised services to seek more personal autonomy and better life chances for themselves and their children by migrating to Darwin. The problem is that the welfare trap may be set for them in the city if they and their children do not access long-term secure housing,



a necessary platform to make the health, education and employment transition. A personal background in mission and bilingual schooling in remote communities, and in further education and training in bilingual teaching, has evidently provided a solid foundation for some Yolŋu women, and men, to find urban employment where language and culture are valued.

As women, children and youth embody the future of social reproduction and cultural transmission, as well as the potential for social change, they are targeted for attention both by mechanisms of family governance and state interventions. In the foreseeable future, Aboriginal remote communities are not going to be able to provide sufficient education and employment opportunities to match population growth. Aboriginal peoples' rural–urban mobility already has a long history, and 'orbiting' will continue to be necessary for future generations.

Among Yolŋu, obligations in *gurrutu* at times of life crises, especially birth, sickness and death, will continue to impact on urban lives, prompting individuals and families to reassess their priorities and trajectories in life. In particular, funerals will continue to shape the periodic return of urban-dwelling Yolŋu to remote communities. It remains to be determined if the *bāpurru* will continue to shape the organisation and gathering for funeral ceremonies in remote communities for Yolŋu who grow up in matrifocal families and households in the city.

When at least three generations of Yolŋu women have been living long term in Darwin, and adolescent girls in the fourth generation are living with them in urban housing while going to high school, it may be time to say that Darwin is a home base and Yolŋu are reverse 'orbiting' to remote communities for cultural purposes.

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## Notes

1. For discussion of 'two-ways, both-ways' as a philosophy of cross-cultural interaction and a methodology of bilingual schooling in north-east Arnhem Land, see Christie et al. 1987:148–53; Harris 1990; McConvell 1991. See Mandawuy Yunupingu's (1994:1–11) article in *Voices from the Land: The 1993 Boyer Lectures*.
2. See contributions by Yolŋu educators in *Aboriginal Pedagogy: Aboriginal teachers speak out* (Deakin University 1991). See also 'Yolngu metaphors for learning' (Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie 1995).
3. The federal government introduced support for Indigenous bilingual education in the Northern Territory in the 1970s. In 1998 the Northern Territory Government prioritised the teaching of English as a second language, then revitalised its commitment to bilingual education in 2005. In 2008 the Northern Territory Government again prioritised the teaching of English in the first four hours of class time in Aboriginal community schools (Harris 1990; Devlin 2009). Following the National Indigenous Languages Survey report in 2005, Ministers Macklin and Garret introduced the National Indigenous Languages Policy in March 2013 (Office for the Arts 2013).