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The Multiple Being: Multispecies Ethnographic Filmmaking in Arnhem Land, Australia

Natasha Fijn 

Ethnographic filmmaking can be an effective way of discovering layers of meaning, in this instance the concept of the “multiple animal,” where a significant animal’s multiplicity is revealed through ceremony and everyday encounters. Here we combine more-than-human sociality and multispecies ethnography with observational filmmaking, in relation to my own filmmaking and the earlier work of Ian Dunlop, and in collaboration with Yolngu communities in northeastern Arnhem Land. A re-examination of Dunlop’s visual ethnography, supplemented by my more recent film work, offers new insights into Yolngu perceptions about other beings, beyond symbolic metaphors and totems.

From 1970 until 1982 Ian Dunlop made eight filming trips to northeastern Arnhem Land during production of the Yirrkala Film Project series. I think of him as a mentor and, although modest about his achievements, he is recognized as one of Australia’s foremost ethnographic filmmakers. For five years I coordinated a course in Ethnographic Film, and every year Ian was generous with his knowledge.¹ On one occasion he had much of the class in tears as he spoke about the bond with his closest Yolngu collaborator, who had since passed away.

Having viewed the films of the Yirrkala Film Project allowed me to start on a different project from my previous multispecies-based research in Mongolia. This was also the case for Howard and Frances Morphy when they first came to Arnhem Land, as they happened to arrive while Dunlop was filming some of the key footage of the Yirrkala Film Project (Morphy 2012; Dunlop and Semler 1978). Dunlop and Morphy’s previous ritual and ceremonial accounts amongst the Yolngu prompted me to move into a new field area, in northeast Arnhem Land.

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After repeatedly watching the Yirrkala films it was as if I had personally come to know some of the people who had featured in them; and it was uncanny when later I met individual Yolngu who were only small children in the Yirrkala films but were now elders themselves. It helped my entry into the community when I explained how I had been inspired by Ian Dunlop's observational filmmaking approach. One young man told me proudly that his great-great grandfather collaborated with Ian in the films. He had incorporated some of the archival footage into one of his own films.² I could see that, like his ancestor, an exceptional leader within the community, he too had a similar quiet yet dignified disposition.³

My intention here is to outline how my observational filmmaking approach connects with multispecies ethnography in Arnhem Land. Through analysis of both Dunlop's archival film material and my own footage, the material led to insights into Yolngu perspectives towards other beings, particularly significant animals. But first I will give some background to visual anthropology in Aboriginal Australia, and then discuss the engagement of the more-than-human within anthropology and how this relates to the research itself.

Ethnographic Filmmaking in Australia

The Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) film unit, which operated from 1961 till 1991, was crucial for cultural production and funding for ethnographic filmmaking. The Institute often employed scholars and filmmakers who became well-recognized for their filmmaking and research. Classic ethnographic films in Australia have included Kim McKenzie's *Waiting for Harry* (McKenzie 1980); Sandall and Peterson's *Camels and the Pitjantjara* (Sandall 1969); and David and Judith MacDougall's large body of Aboriginal work. The AIAS also helped fund Dunlop's earlier filmmaking with some of the last independently nomadic peoples in Australia, including the beautiful black-and-white film of *People of the Australian Western Desert* (Dunlop 1967).

After the collapse of government funding for the film unit, the nearby Australian National University became a base for ethnographic filmmakers. My own approach has been influenced by the observational styles of David and Judith MacDougall, the late Kim MacKenzie, Pip Deveson and Ian Dunlop, all of whom were or still are based at the ANU.

Earlier film projects have drawn upon archival footage, including a documentary *Remembering Yayayi* (2014), filmed and edited by Pip Deveson in collaboration with Ian Dunlop and Fred Myers. Deveson edited together abandoned footage shot by Dunlop in the 1970s, and then Myers and Deveson returned the footage to the community. The internationally released feature film *Ten Canoes* (2006; reviewed in this journal, 21 (3):266–69) was inspired by archival stills taken by the anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s. Interestingly, *Ten Canoes* and Thomson's black-and-white photographs have become incorporated into the communities' own cultural narrative and oral history.

Visual anthropologists working in Australia have often focused on Indigenous media and the development of diverse forms of cultural production; from Eric Michaels' early work in the 1980s, through to Faye Ginsberg's ongoing work in collaboration with Aboriginal communities on multimedia projects.⁴ Jennifer Deger, for example, has worked with her adopted extended family in the Yolngu community of Gapuwiyak on several media projects since the 1990s. More recently this ongoing collaboration is in the form of Miyarrka Media, a community-based collective that produces films and installation projects for gallery and museum contexts (Deger and Gurrumuwuy 2016; Gurrumuwuy et al. 2014).

Individual Yolngu whom I came to know have a deep appreciation of the power of the moving image. Collectively they have been active in using visual media for communicating with the wider Australian public: from bark petitions against bauxite mining on their land, presented to parliament in 1963; to the Saltwater painting series, a means of communicating Yolngu connection to the coast (Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre 1999); or within mainstream documentaries such as *Dhakiyarr vs. The King* (Murray 2004).

Members of the public are able to go into the Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala to see films in their archives, including the Yirrkala Film Series. Yolngu actively view the ceremonies within these films, inevitably informing the form and structure of ceremonies today.⁵ At the local art center the Mulka Project facilitates the ongoing production and archiving of ceremonies, made by and for Yolngu.⁶ Filmmakers engaged with the project are producing their own audiovisual material, including for funerals and other important Yolngu ceremonies, as well as music videos.

When Ian Dunlop was in Arnhem Land during the 1970s, Yolngu (like most people across Australia) had no access to the expensive cine cameras and film stock that he managed to obtain through government support. At the time, Yolngu elders were eager to record ceremonies as an important source for future generations. Nowadays good-quality recording devices are readily available. As ceremony is well represented and covered in the archives and through ongoing recordings as part of the Mulka Project, my own focus was to capture everyday life, as part of my multispecies approach to filmmaking in the field.

To this end I collaborated with individual Yolngu who were regularly out on the land and acted as cultural custodians within their communities. My approach has been to research, film and edit the footage myself, an admittedly subjective cross-cultural perspective, but doing so in collaboration with Yolngu so as to pass on knowledge through both recorded words and actions. This meant interviewing and discussing people's connections with other beings, recording while the community fished, hunted and gathered, then further developing this understanding through reviewing and translating the footage with individual elders.

Anthropology beyond the Human

Within the past decade or so there has been an academic turn towards the animal. As a mode of interdisciplinary research it has been categorized as part of

human–animal studies, sometimes now referred to as animal studies (humans inherently being animals), a move to bring animals into academic discussion as active agents. Post-humanist theory, an extension of post-structuralist and post-colonial scholarship, also tries to engage with the social beyond the human. Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing and others from the University of California at Santa Cruz have been particularly influential in this post-humanist movement surrounding the “animal turn” and were the initial proponents of terms such as multispecies ethnography, or multispecies storytelling (Haraway 2007; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Tsing 2010). This connects with an “ontological turn” within anthropology, stemming from the work of Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Phillipe Descola (2013), in analyzing different ways of knowing other beings and breaking down dichotomous barriers between nature and culture.

Earlier Tim Ingold (2000) focused on human–animal relations too, opening the door to anthropologists examining more-than-human worlds. Ingold aligns himself with the work of the philosopher Dominique Lestel and colleagues who emphasize hybrid communities, with a sharing of interests and meaning between species (Lestel, Brunois, and Gaunet 2006). Ingold points out that in their ethno-ethology and etho-ethnology, Lestel and his colleagues' fundamentally relational perspectives are not far off from Eduardo Kohn's (2013) “Anthropology of Life,” which includes entanglements with other kinds of living selves. Ingold refers to such research as an “anthropology beyond the human” (Ingold 2013).

In Anna Tsing's book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing 2015) humans, pines and fungi are community assemblages, multispecies worlds. She emphasizes the entangled relations with significant others as “more-than-human sociality” (Tsing 2013), and brings together different disciplinary elements in her work on mushroom hybrid communities, including cultural and natural history. In order to study sociality we engage in participant observation and what Tsing refers to as “critical description” (*ibid.*, 28), a development from Geertz's use of “thick description.” A nice aspect about observational filmmaking is that a non-didactic approach encourages the viewer to observe and to take notice too, as a critical viewer. Filmmaking can encompass both participation (reflexively from behind the camera) and observation (through the lens).

The idea in this article is to explore multispecies landscapes, or social ecologies, so as to describe different kinds of interspecies sociality. Filmmaking lends itself well to this kind of more-than-human sociality. Elsewhere I wrote about the potential for combining natural history and ethnography within filmmaking (2007). Other anthropologists well before me have combined cultural with natural history in Australia, but they were unusual for their time. Of note are the large bodies of work of Baldwin Spencer and Donald Thomson, both of whom used film and photography to convey their ethnographic and natural history material (Thomson and Peterson 2013).⁷

Australian colleagues doing ecological and environmental studies have been influential in engaging beyond the human (e.g. van Dooran and Rose 2016;

Rose 2011; Plumwood 2012). Yet, apart from the work of Deborah Rose, anthropology beyond the human has been under-examined in relation to Aboriginal Australian ontologies. My focus is on Yolngu connections with significant animals as beings-in-the-world:⁸ how Yolngu encounter other beings, from an ontological perspective, but also as physical beings whom Yolngu live amongst. Using the Yirrkala film archives, my focus was on the cosmology of Yolngu ritual connections with significant totemic beings.

THE YOLNGU CONNECTION WITH SIGNIFICANT ANIMALS

I produced an observational film, *Yolngu Homeland* (2015) about Garrthalala as a place and how the community who live there are connected with other beings, including ancestors, animals and plants. Aboriginal people have lived in Arnhem Land for over 55,000 years, and have developed a deep, spiritual connection with the land. Totemic beings of significance seen in the film include the saltwater crocodile, crows, dogs, crabs, sea eagles, turtles, and even yams.

Yolngu think of themselves and other beings as part of what I refer to as a “social ecology,” in which everything and everyone is interlinked through an extension of kinship and grounded by the land, or place (Fijn 2014). Many of the beings one encounters, such as the morning star, a particular shape of cloud, a kind of yam, a species of mud-crab, the saltwater crocodile, or Yolngu from elsewhere can be placed within a kinship structure relating to the land. When encountering something new, their relationship is categorized within this framework by working out whether the being in question is of the Dhuwa or Yirritja moiety, whether they feature in ceremony and are part of the Ancestral Dreaming of a known clan. This extended kinship is essentially the way that Yolngu structure and organize their place in the world.⁹

The Yolngu way of life is based on a long history of connections with local animals through hunting, gathering and fishing them for food. Fishing, crabbing and searching for yams are not just a pleasant weekend activity, or something done for the benefit of an interested researcher. Garrthalala is a strong community, bonded by kinship, where all able-bodied community members go out to hunt and gather food whenever they can, and seafood particularly still forms a large part of their diet. While filming I did not want to dwell on the times when the community are required to be part of the broader Australian society, where they are expected to fill out government benefit forms, or need to leave the homeland to get groceries from the central mining town, or go as far afield as Darwin to visit relatives in hospital.¹⁰ Such elements have been documented extensively in the main Australian media. Instead I recorded when everyone was occupied with the sustenance of life, while out on Country (Figure 1).¹¹

Multispecies Ethnographic Filmmaking

The documentary *Yolngu Homeland* shows activities at Garrthalala during my three filming trips (during the dry season between June and July of 2012, 2013



Figure 1 A Yolngu Homeland, Garrthalala. (Video still from opening titles; photo © the author)

and 2014). I recorded how Yolngu engage in an everyday sense, as their activities naturally unfolded, rather than recreating significant events for presentation. While filming and editing the material I was intentionally reflexive, revealing my questions and comments from behind the camera. The main participants in the project were quite aware of being able to use video as a tool for passing on knowledge, particularly for the benefit of future generations of Yolngu. It was evident that elders were not only showing and teaching me the Yolngu way but that they had future generations in mind too.

I see the observational filmmaking style as part of a research process, both analytical and interpretive in approach. This observational style involves relatively long takes, a wide-angled lens and use of hand-held camera techniques (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; MacDougall 2006). Although referred to as observational film it is essentially both participatory and observational in the field, following anthropology's core method of participant observation.

David MacDougall emphasizes the importance of setting the pace of a film within the first five minutes, particularly acknowledging for the audience the slower pace and specific style of an observational film from the beginning (MacDougall, pers. comm.). The initial sequence within *Yolngu Homeland* is edited with the overall pace in mind: the film follows "Yolngu time" where the pace is measured, not in accordance with the time-frames of wider Australia. In the first light of morning it is not humans that dominate the homeland (*wänga*), it is foraging dogs and calling crows.¹² People wake up slowly, tell stories at a leisurely pace, and spend "quality time" gathering food from the surroundings.

While filming there my initial focus was on the relationship between individual Yolngu and connections with significant animal species, but I soon realised that it was the links *between* beings and their mutual connections to the land, one's homeland, that are important. It was imperative for the custodian of

Garrthalala, the late M. Mununggur, to introduce me to the land.¹³ She tells the story of the land, mentioning key landmarks, while indicating two significant totemic species connected with her custodial rights to remain on her land: the fight between the ancestral being Bāru, the crocodile, and Maranydjalk, the stingray. Later, on the beach, she points out the islands that featured in this part of the songline. Knowledge is not revealed as one linear, chronological narrative but is passed on in the right context, particularly when referring to surrounding country.

Three members of the community had differing roles in the film. Although I filmed the activities of Yirralka rangers in other homeland communities, my base was at Garrthalala, and it soon became clear in the editing that I needed to focus on one place, so as to make sense of the Yolngu world as being connected to clan land. Above all M. was an educator, teaching children in Yolngu both maths and English. She had spent decades as a primary school-teacher promoting two-way learning,¹⁴ then successfully set up a remote secondary school for children from across the communities of northeastern Arnhem Land. Djurumbil Mununggiritj, a sister of M, looks similar but her character is quite different. Her role is also different, as a *miyalk* (woman) ranger her job is to look after the country. She is more inclined to teach her children and grandchildren in a subtly different Yolngu way, through doing rather than storytelling: by actively fishing, hunting and gathering along with her extended family. Shawn Burarrwanga is also family, as his mother is a sister of the two older women. He is part of the next generation living on the country at Garrthalala, looking after his children and a grandchild there while actively caring for the homeland.

While making the film my intention was to convey a Yolngu perspective that was not a linear, hierarchical view with humans at the pinnacle of the food chain, but instead to involve multiple species interconnected through kinship ties, the land and water. Below I provide examples of two significant animals, which resonate on multiple levels within the film: the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodilus porosus*, *bāru*) and the white-bellied sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*, *djet*).

The Absent Crocodile

An animal that features in Yolngu everyday lives is the crocodile, a powerful apex predator within its own ecosystem. To the Gumatj and Madarrpa clans, however, who have the saltwater crocodile as a totem, *bāru* is kin and is sacred. Crocodiles are important symbolically but are also a very real presence at Garrthalala (Fijn 2013). I anticipated recording Yolngu engaging with crocodiles either out on the water or on the beach, but soon realised that, although relatively common in waters across Arnhem Land, saltwater crocodiles tend to keep a low profile and so Yolngu rarely hunt them nowadays.

Yolngu would point out individual crocodiles swimming past that probably would have gone unnoticed to my untrained eye. They seemed distant dark objects, looking like large floating logs. There was a large resident crocodile

that patrolled up and down the beach near the Garrthalala houses, but whenever I was doing fieldwork during the dry season he had moved elsewhere. M. told me that he would go off to where it was warmer, along a river system rather than on the more exposed coast. We would note the smaller tracks of other crocodiles on the beach as they moved from the coastal water into the mangroves. The actual crocodiles were well hidden amongst the thick tangle of mangroves. Unlike filming domestic animals, a feature of my previous fieldwork in Mongolia, the filming of free-roaming animals that are hunted means that it is the tracks (or what Yolngu refer to as footprints, *luku*) left by the animals that become significant, rather than one-to-one social engagement with an individual animal.

Counter to dramatic and close physical encounters featured in wildlife documentaries, I realised that it was more important to convey a multi-layered presence of the crocodile in people's lives, even in its absence. I edited the footage so that the crocodile emerged through storytelling in separate references during the film: initially M. relates how she and her kin are connected with Bāru, the ancestral crocodile, through the land; M. encourages her grandson to practice the movements of the crocodile dance, while jumping over a fire (fire is intrinsically linked to the ancestral *bāru* in ceremony); Charlie throws sticks into the billabong to try to get a large crocodile to emerge; M. mentions how Shawn was too fast for a crocodile; then Shawn tells of how he had a close encounter with a crocodile underwater and shook with fear afterwards. The crocodile thus is present in the minds of the people even when the animal is not immediately visible. It is symbolically a significant totemic being, but there exists also the very real threat of possibly encountering a hidden crocodile and the potential risk this poses.

Yolngu understand the character, habits and behavior of crocodiles well and learn to watch for signs in the landscape that a crocodile may be present. The main crocodile sequence within *Yolngu Homeland* comes when the extended family are beside a waterhole, near the sea, and have come to gather plants and yams near the water's edge. If I had been alone with the possibility of encountering a crocodile at the waterhole my tendency would have been to try to sneak around quietly, unnoticed. A crocodile would have detected my presence, of course. In contrast, when Yolngu are aware that a crocodile regularly frequents a particular place, they announce their presence directly through clapping, yelling loudly, calling out to that individual crocodile directly, and throwing logs in the water. These actions makes the crocodile come to the surface to survey the disturbance. If the crocodile remained resting on the murky bottom, then that sit-and-wait predator might attempt a surprise attack. Acknowledgement of the crocodile's presence is also an indication of respect, particularly if the individual crocodile is considered to be an ancestral being, acknowledging that the family are there and that they intend to share the same space.

The crocodile sequence in the film also reveals how younger generations are taught, through observing an elder's methods of engaging with other potentially dangerous beings (they yell loudly at the big-horned buffalo too). Charlie



Figure 2 Scanning for crocodiles in northeastern Arnhem Land. Charlie comments that the ground has been disturbed by a crocodile lying at the water's edge and that it is a big one. (Video still from Yolngu Homeland; photo © the author)

Munungurritj notes where the crocodile has been lying, its tracks, and the size of the individual. Within the sequence, he indicates to his grand-nephew that he should be wary, noting the crocodile's large size (Figure 2).¹⁵

A Sea Eagle Called Scott

In the past Aboriginal stories were popularly portrayed as fanciful mythology, just simple stories; but even stories for children are layered with different levels of meaning (Berndt and Berndt 1988). M. told me the story of *djet* on the spur of the moment. As we sat resting near a family of sea eagles living in a prominent tree nearby, M. indicated that the eagle family had lived in that same tree for generations—at least nine years. This shows the benefit of knowing the country intimately. Yolngu living on their homeland have time to observe other beings and to note changes over time.

The knowledge of the story of *djet* belongs to the community residing at Yilpara Homeland, in Blue Mud Bay, northeastern Arnhem Land, because there are marks left upon the land there. The emphasis within the story tends to change depending upon who is telling it. M. particularly emphasized the perspectives of female relatives. She later said that she could readily tell this story to me on camera, as she had previously written it down for a school publication. While she was a young teacher, the late Dr Yunipingu, the principal of the Yirrkala Homeland School at the time, had asked M. to translate the story into English so that students could read and learn from the story in both languages. Laklak Burarrwanga et al. (2013, 41) have written down their own account, with slightly different emphases, but the moral is the same: "That is

why the eagle eats only raw fish now. He does not eat cooked ones anymore. He eats raw fish. And still today, if you go to Yilpara you will see the anthills there on the coast looking out to sea [the features of Djet's ancestors upon the land]. The moral of the story is that we must share. Whatever we catch, we share with people. Don't be like Djet."

The story of *djet* probably sprang to M's mind because the real sea eagle family were calling nearby while being bombarded by crows. During the telling of the story, these eagles occasionally call in the background. That same day, just as occurs in the story of *djet*, Yolngu men and children waded out from the beach to spear fish. In the editing I intercut a boy catching a fish, tossed by an older man after he had speared it, then I follow with the camera as the boy carries the fish back for one of the women to cook for the family to eat.¹⁶

Later in the day I recorded M.'s account of how a sea eagle from that same family had been found and brought to her with a broken wing. She subsequently gave him the English name of Scott. I was interested in this story, as M. had clearly nurtured the bird, yet she did not attempt to contain, tether or keep him in any way. As her daughter states in the background at one point in the footage, "we preferred for him to be free." When Scott had recovered, he followed M. as she flew to another homeland in a small plane. She recounted how Scott became lost along the way. Her nephew told her he had seen Scott sitting on the clothes-line at his homeland quite some distance away. She says Scott "went his own way in the end."

In a separate scene, M.'s husband tells of how this tame sea eagle would sit on his spear as he was fishing and M. was foraging for shellfish out on the water. The sea eagle would wait for him to share some of his catch and in return the eagle would warn him of impending danger, such as sharks swimming nearby. This scene nicely links back to M's narrative, whereby in this instance the man readily shares his catch with the sea eagle, while reciprocally the sea eagle protects him from predators.

This story of *djet* really gains significance when sitting and listening while out in the country. Without sitting near the eagles as they wheel around above, while hearing their shrill cries, the story would not have the same depth of meaning. When it is told with reference to place it holds much greater significance for the listener. The sea eagles become kin, such that they could have been a human family in the ancestral past. For Yolngu, *djet* has layers of meaning: it is not just a squawking bird sitting in a tree nearby but a *multiple* animal. Both Yolngu and significant totemic animals, such as *djet*, have the ability to metamorphose into different forms, yet both human and eagle retain the same essential characteristics from their mutual ancestor (Figure 3).

THE MULTIPLE BEING

Animal species are often referred to metaphorically or metonymically in anthropological literature when connections with Yolngu are described, particularly with reference to underlying kinship relations such as past conflicts or



Figure 3 Sea eagle (djet) family, Garrthalala Homeland, northeastern Arnhem Land. (Video still from Yolngu Homeland; photo © the author)

allegiances between clans. This is partly due to the earlier anthropological focus on the complexities of Aboriginal social structure, but it is also due to the way Yolngu relate to animals themselves, through multiple names and references to other beings in connection with the ancestors, the land and within a broader ecological matrix. Stingless honeybees are a good example, as these bees are not generally referred to on their own but as part of a whole sugarbag complex—an interconnected ecological entity, where Yolngu also implicitly refer to place, the stringybark tree where the bees reside, the flowers, the bees' nest within the tree, the wax and the larvae too (Fijn 2014).

As does Franca Tamisari, I have reservations about the use of metaphor as a term in relation to Yolngu meaning: "If the term metaphor is to be maintained it needs to be redefined as revealing the experiential fusion of domains of language, knowledge and bodily praxis" (Tamisari 1998, 253). Yolngu use both metaphor and metonym differently and in different ways: there is not just a one-to-one correspondence between names, objects and things; instead there are webs of interconnected meaning. As a means of describing this layered approach to thinking about animals, beyond the individual animal, and even beyond the individual species, it helps to think in terms of Marilyn Strathern's use of the term "multiple" when she writes of the "multiple, partible nature of persons" (Strathern 1988, 321).¹⁷ In the case of Yolngu ontology all *beings* have the ability to be multiple, and not just people.¹⁸

As with Strathern's conceptualization of the multiple dividual (*ibid.*), in an ontological sense Yolngu tend not to apply a particular bounded sex in relation to ancestral beings with an ability to morph into animal form. At first I was confused that the ancestral crocodile, Barü, was being referred to as male when the ceremony was clearly enacting a female crocodile nurturing young at

her nest. When I asked Yolngu about this they indicated that the sex of the crocodile was not important. Luke Taylor (1990) found that bark painting depictions of the ancestral rainbow serpent, Ngalyod, in western Arnhem Land are a conglomeration of features from multiple species, including the python, crocodile, buffalo and water lilies, while having inherently androgynous qualities. Instead of the singular individual, sex, or even species, Yolngu do not bound significant animals in this way.

Although one totemic animal may feature within a song cycle with men or women performing crocodile, shark or python in a dance, the ceremony is not just about that species of animal itself. There are always multiple layers to be drawn out of any performance. An overarching premise is that all ceremony is in relation to kinship (*gurrutu*), and all moving beings (including fire, tidal currents, the stars and the moon) are interconnected. It should be noted however that not *all* animals are viewed by Yolngu as multiple, only those that are significant within a ceremony and feature within the story of a person's homeland. In other words, not all fish are multiple beings though stingray, sharks and barramundi are, not all birds are multiple beings but sulphur-crested cockatoos, emus and sea eagles are, within Yolngu clan land.

Many song cycles, and the corresponding dances, indicate Yolngu perceptions of a shared personality, shown through the behavioral characteristics exhibited by particular species: the shark is represented as dangerous and aggressive, thrashing to and fro; the crocodile exhibits both strength and nurturing characteristics; the crow is portrayed as lazy (a scavenger that does not hunt for itself); while the sulphur-crested white cockatoo is represented as a reflective, mournful bird, presiding over burials.

Earlier in this article I described how significant totemic animals, such as the crocodile or sea eagle, were featured in *Yolngu Homeland*. I now turn to the Yirrkala Film Series as a comparative source to examine how Yolngu are connected with animals, particularly with reference to ritual and ceremony for the saltwater crocodile and the python.

THE YIRRKALA FILM SERIES: ON CONNECTIONS WITH TOTEMIC ANIMALS AND ANCESTRAL BEINGS

Ian Dunlop produced 22 films recording the Yolngu way of life, including their ritual and ceremonies. His work today has great significance and meaning for Yolngu. It has been recognized in an anthropological context for its importance in relation to kinship structures, performance, ritual and cosmology, yet the relevance of the footage and the detailed knowledge that might be obtained about Yolngu connections with animals have not been previously noted. The archival ritual film material of the Yirrkala Film Project is important as a record of connections with animals seen in ceremony, in song, dance and painting on the body and on bark.

Dunlop had long-term projects for many years in Central Australia, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and in Arnhem Land. He consistently worked in cross-cultural film, often collaborating with anthropologists, including

Maurice Godelier with the Baruya in Papua New Guinea. While in Arnhem Land he worked with the anthropological collaborators Nancy Williams, and also Howard and Frances Morphy. His ethnographic filmmaking in northeastern Arnhem Land lasted from 1970 until his eighth trip in 1982. By the time he was making films in Arnhem Land he had been influenced by the work of Jean Rouch about the need for the filmmaking to be in collaboration with Yolngu, incorporating their filmic ideas and direction into the project.¹⁹

Howard Morphy (1994) writes how films in the Yirrkala Series can be described as both ethnography and text. Some of them were remarkably long and minimally edited. *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy: A Film Monograph* (1989), for example, consists of five films divided into five parts that document a single mortuary ceremony, with a total running time of 235 minutes. In this film monograph Dunlop's intention was to have the films viewed chapter by chapter. There is another archival version of the Djungguwan ceremony that is a lot longer still but, as this version contains sacred, restricted material shot within a men's camp, the footage was edited with only initiated Yolngu male elders as the intended audience, and is not available to outside viewers. Dunlop's filming technique involved working with individual Yolngu, particularly his friend Dundiwuy Wanambi. Using exceptionally long takes Dunlop recorded ritual and ceremony faithfully. He was loath to cut a song mid-way and would record song cycles in their entirety wherever possible.

The focus of the Yirrkala Film Project was initially on how Yolngu perceived the development of a mine in their midst, but later it became more focused on ritual and ceremony, as this was what Yolngu themselves wanted recorded for future generations. What is important, in relation to observing and analyzing Yolngu connections with animals in the ritual-oriented Yirrkala films, is that Dunlop recorded ceremonial events as they unfolded. This has meant that, forty years later, I have been able to return to this film record with a very different focus in mind from Dunlop's intentions. Two examples are discussed below, in order to illustrate how the olive python (*Liasis olivaceus*, rainbow serpent, or *wititj*) and the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodilis porosus*, *bäru*) can be viewed as significant totemic beings through the interpretation of ceremony.²⁰ I will not go into too much detail concerning the cosmological significance of the rituals, as this has already been analyzed extensively (Magowan 2005; Morphy 1977, 1994, 2005).

Dundiwuy's House-Opening

In Ian Dunlop's opening narration to this early Yirrkala film, shot in 1971, he explains the purpose of the ceremony. Dundiwuy Wanambi asked the film crew to record his house opening for future generations. His family had been living temporarily in a bark shelter, as Dundiwuy's wife's father was living with them when the old man died. They wanted a ritual opening before the rainy season set in, so that they could move back into their house to sleep. The house-opening ceremony conveys one part of the journey of the Wawilak Sisters, who gave birth to the first children of the Dhuwa moiety and who feature prominently in

Dhuwa rituals across Arnhem Land. This part of the story is where the sisters rest inside a bark hut, near the enormous ancestral python's well. Dunlop has referred to the ancestral python in his narration as "Thunder Snake."

Through opening intertitles Dunlop broadly outlines the narrative that will be re-enacted as part of the house-opening: "Dundiwuy told me the Wawilak Sisters camped near the well of the great Thunder Snake. The well became polluted ... The Thunder Snake rose up in fury and swallowed the Sisters. Its thrashing body smashed down their stringy bark shelter" (Dunlop and Deveson 1996). The American anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner (1958) was the first to describe the Sisters' journey in ethnographic detail, but the narrative has since been recorded repeatedly. Part of it is that the python rises up out of a waterhole in anger, detecting menstrual blood in the water. The Ancestral Snake swallows the two sisters and a baby whole.

The anthropologist Nicholas Peterson also took part in an earlier filming of the Djungguwan Ceremony. In his notes he describes the actions of three snakes in relation to the Wawilak (or Waggilak) Sisters:

There were three snakes in the area: one from the Wessel Islands at Marlpanidi, the one that swallowed the sisters at Mirrarmina and a third in Madalpui country at Muduwurr. They were all standing high in the sky and they started talking to each other asking what they had eaten. Each snake was making rain and lightning. When the Wessel Island snake had spoken he fell down and coiled off through his country. The snake that had swallowed the sisters never moved. The Mandalpui snake was taller than the others for he was the most important snake and he asked the Mirrarmina snake what he had in his belly. I have swallowed those sisters and their baby but I am going to vomit them. (Interview with Peterson, in Graham et al. 2006, 5)

During the house-opening ceremony three men are dancing before the house: they become agitated, in a trance-like state, as they embody the characteristics of the ancestral python (see footage in Dunlop and Deveson 1996). With ceremonial sticks they search from one side to another, rise up periodically then, whirling sticks above their heads, they slash young palm stalks with the sticks. This destruction of the surrounding vegetation represents the ensuing storm flattening trees in its wake.

It is clear that there are multiple layers of meaning in this ceremony. The men are mimicking the behavior and movement of a python: how it detects its prey through water, how it moves about, rises up, strikes, how it has the ability to swallow its prey whole, then regurgitate a meal. One aspect of the python is that the shape of the erect head is representative of the anvil-shaped cumulo-nimbus clouds that build and form menacingly on the horizon prior to the first big rainfall of the monsoon season. There is a build-up of storms before the rainy season hits, engulfing the dry land. This is represented in the narrative by the Thunder Snake regurgitating the women but later swallowing them again whole.

Howard Morphy states that the Ancestral Snakes "spit water from their mouths into the sky causing rain clouds to form, and the flickering of their tongues produces thunder and lightning. When the snakes of different clans talk to one another lightning flickers in distant places, thunder rolls over the

countryside and rain clouds move across the sky" (1984, 92). The symbolism of these Ancestral Snakes clearly conjures up powerful imagery and is featured repeatedly in ceremony across Arnhem Land through song, dance or the painting of sacred images.

Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka'wuy: The Final Crocodile Scene

In 1976 Ian Dunlop and film crew, including the anthropologists Howard and Frances Morphy, were invited by Dundiway Wanambi to the newly established homeland of Gurka'wuy to record a Djungguwan ceremony on film. Wanambi wanted the film to educate people with regard to his custodianship of the land. Before the ceremony had begun a baby boy had died in a shelter during the night. This meant that it was necessary to perform a funeral ceremony for the baby, which resulted in the film crew capturing the events of the funeral as it unfolded, ultimately forming the separate film described here.

In foregrounding the film Ian Dunlop (1978) uses an intertitle to state "At one level of meaning they tell stories about everyday things in nature [for example, a crocodile]. At deeper, more sacred and more secret levels they express man's relationship with his creator ancestors and with his land." These secret and sacred layers of meaning are only taught to men within a ceremony when elders decide that individuals are experienced and wise enough to receive the sacred meanings. My focus is not on the underlying sacred layers of meaning but on the portrayal of the significant animal as a being-in-the-world.

The final sequence of *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka'wuy* is the burial of the baby's coffin, featuring the ritual singing and dancing of Bärü, the ancestral crocodile. Three men perform the saltwater crocodile dance: one assuming the role of mother crocodile, searching for a place to lay her eggs, while two other dancers are her sons. Dunlop's narration describes the kin relationships of the dancers: "Daymbalipu, Bakulangay and Minyapa dance Bärü: Bakulangay is the mother crocodile, Daymbalipu and Minyapa her sons, dancing for their mother's country. Wanygawuy in the striped jersey breaks her stick, ready to mourn in ritual song for her grandchild."

In a monograph written to supplement the film, Morphy (1984) describes how the mother-son relationship in the crocodile dance is representative of the Madarrpa clan's kinship ties with the neighboring Djapu clan, who are also important participants within the mortuary ritual. Dilly-bags held in the dancers' mouths help to contain the aggression and danger of the crocodile and at the same time the emotions of the mourning dancers. The stance of their arms and hands indicates the physical positioning of the limbs of the saltwater crocodile, as opposed to a different posture adopted when dancing the freshwater crocodile (Fijn 2013).

The lead dancer imitates a female crocodile tirelessly nurturing her eggs.²¹ The mother crocodile looks around, as if searching for her nest (the grave) and by pawing with hands and feet flicks handfuls of earth, covering up the eggs (the body of the child). As Morphy explains, the lead dancer portrays the crocodile as being "sick and exhausted from laying the eggs," as she and her

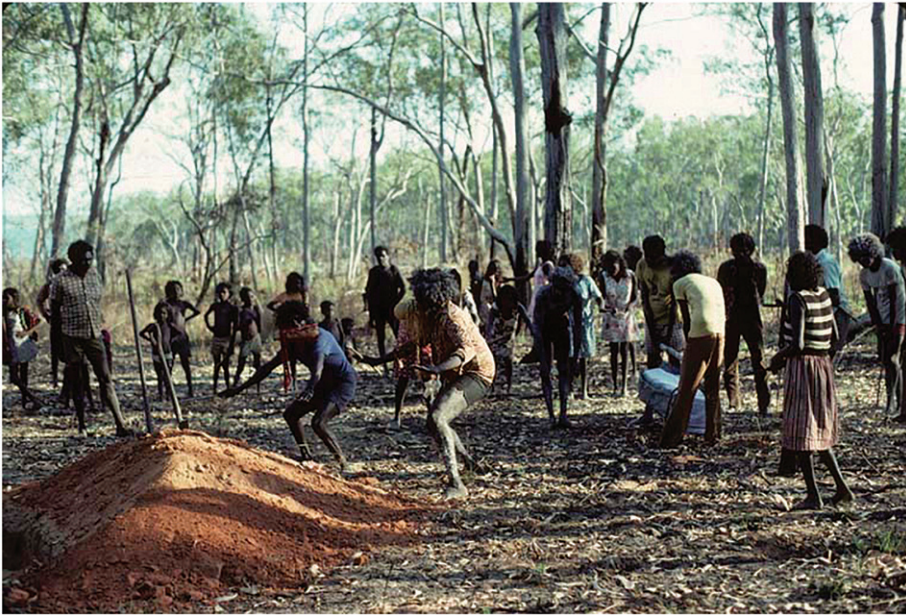


Figure 4 The crocodile dancers lead the crocodile to the grave, the crocodile's nest. (Photo © Ian Dunlop, 1976)

sons cover the nest (1984, 101). This mimicry of the behavior of the crocodile is also a means of expressing grief during the burial. The significance of the salt-water crocodile in Yolngu lives is evident. It is associated with key moments in a person's life as they age: that is, during initiation, purification and funeral ceremonies (Figure 4).²²

Looking back at these films closely, they reveal how Yolngu have special connections with significant animals and how the creativity in ceremony is imbued with multiple layers of meaning with reference to these animals.

CONCLUSION

From everyday encounters with animals, even through encounters with their traces (footprints) and other signs of animals, Yolngu are constantly acting in a multispecies world. For them these encounters with other beings while out in their country are not separate from ceremony: nature and culture are intrinsically inter-linked through multiple layers of significance, as integrated and structured nature-cultures. It is often the traces or footprints of the animals upon the landscape that bring to mind the animal as a powerful being, such as the ancestral sea eagle's family represented by anthills at Yilpara, or islands off the coast as places where the fight between the crocodile and stingray had occurred. The crocodile and the sea eagle are part of a deep connection with the land that flows from these ancestral beings. This is regularly reiterated through the performance of ceremony. The multiple nature of significant

beings cannot be conveyed through a single filmic sequence or event. I could only draw the conclusion that totemic beings are conceptualized as multiple beings from editing separate narratives within my footage together, accompanied by revisiting the layering of totemic symbolism within ceremonies that was evident in the archival footage.

The Yirrkala film material has been integral in terms of understanding my own experiences in the field and as a means of ethnographic analysis. Within the ceremonial films, through their observational style, I was able to glean meanings in relation to connections with animals. When Yolngu sing, dance or paint the form of an animal, they are not only referencing the form or behavior of the animal itself but also the ancestral being from which both individual Yolngu and different classes of animal are derived. It is left up to the observers to deduce their own meaning from a ceremonial song or dance: there is no one individual bodily form, nor one specific meaning, as the interpretations are layered and multiple. It is only once an individual attends the same ceremony repeatedly (or through watching film footage repeatedly), accompanied by an explanation of the different layers of meaning by knowledgeable elders, that a person will become proficient enough to unpack all the meanings behind an animal featured in a song-cycle, dance or painting. A significant animal drawn out within ceremony then becomes a *multiple* being.

NOTES

1. For an article that summarizes Dunlop's approach in the Yirrkala Film Project, see Deveson and Dunlop (2012).
2. For an example of how the Yirrkala Film Project has influenced the younger generation of Yolngu today, see "Wanga Watangumirri Dharuk (Land Owners Speak)," <https://vimeo.com/38957867>, incorporating some of the archival footage from the Yirrkala Film Series.
3. In the foreword to a book *Yalangbara—Art of the Djan'kawu* (2008) on her clan's paintings, Banduk Marika (2008) writes, "In a way, *Yalangbara* is like the film about my father *In Memory of Mawalan* [1983], in showing people that this is our land, these are our ancestors and they are important for Aboriginal people, not just our family."
4. See, for example, the earlier work of Michaels (1986) and Ginsberg (2002).
5. For an interesting comparison of the changing structure and emphases of the Djungguwan ceremony over time, Film Australia released three separate Djungguwan films based in northeast Arnhem Land; see Graham et al. (2006).
6. See <http://yirrkala.com/about-the-mulka-project/>.
7. To view the Spencer collection including images, see: <http://spencerandgillien.net/>.
8. For the importance of animals as beings-in-the world, rather than only as symbols and metaphors, see Ingold (2000).
9. It is interesting to note that all European settlers (*balanda*), as were the Macassans before them, are considered part of the Yirritja moiety.
10. Homeland communities are increasingly under threat from lack of financial support and investment into infrastructure by the State, with a push for Yolngu to move into town centers, despite the fact that the quality of life on outstations is significantly better. The surrounding ecosystem also remains more intact in comparison to many parts of Australia (Altman 2012).

11. See Fijn and Baynes-Rock (2018, 209) for an explanation of the term “Country” with reference to Aboriginal Australia.
12. See the *Yolngu Homeland* trailer, which is also the opening sequence to the documentary: <https://vimeo.com/139168511>.
13. M. Mununggur has sadly since passed away. I have therefore refrained from using her first name, for Yolngu do not mention people’s names after they have died. Henceforth within the article she is referred to simply as M.
14. To link to the segment from *Yolngu Homeland* see <https://vimeo.com/273845962>.
15. To link to the segment from *Yolngu Homeland* see <https://vimeo.com/287549284>.
16. The “two-way learning” approach is where knowledge is gained from both Yolngu and wider Australian educational frameworks; it is a favored teaching approach among Yolngu educators (e.g. Verran 2002).
17. This differs from Mol’s ontological theory in *The Body Multiple* (Mol 2002), as the multiple layers of meaning here are part of the *same* ontology (and the same all-encompassing philosophical ecology).
18. Ian Keen also writes of the notion of the dividual in relation to Yolngu, but in a different sense, extending the boundaries of the person in space and time beyond a person’s life-span: “beyond the boundaries of sensations and everyday perception and beyond the temporal zone between conception and death” (Keen 2006, 516).
19. For background to Jean Rouch’s collaborative approach to observational filmmaking, see Rouch (2003).
20. As these ceremonies are sacred to Yolngu, shortened segments integrated with this article would be out of context in relation to the ceremony as a whole. The reader should watch each film in its entirety: *Dundiwuy’s House Opening* (1996) in relation to the olive python and *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’wuy* (1978) in relation to the saltwater crocodile.
21. Donald Thomson writes, concerning the female saltwater crocodile, that she “constructs a great incubator nest of vegetable matter which she scratches into a mound, the heat of decomposition supplying the warmth needed to incubate the eggs. Meanwhile she remains on guard in the vicinity of the nest, and at this time is dangerous and aggressive” (Thomson 1949, 65).
22. Dunlop described the final scene of *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’wuy* (1989) as one of the most moving and beautiful scenes but that it was nearly ruined by technical failure when the film was being processed. The film is bleached of color during the climactic burial scene. Dunlop chose to retain the damaged film material because it was just too important in an ethnographic sense.

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