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## **'This Painting Becomes his Body for Life': Transforming Relations in Yolŋu Initiation and Funeral Rituals**

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**Abstract:** Among the most striking images produced in north-east Arnhem Land today, are the paintings given to young boys during their first initiation ceremony (dhapi). Skilfully applied on their chest over several hours, while singing and dancing proceeds on the ceremonial grounds nearby, these body paintings act as relational matrixes which locate the initiands within a socio-cosmic web of connections. At the other end of the male ritual life-cycle, the bodies of the deceased undergo a similar process of transfiguration, as they are made to resemble the groups' most sacred objects, seen to instantiate the powers of specific ancestral beings. In the context of these rituals, the links between clans, places and ancestral beings are expressed by being made visible on and around the body. Pragmatically composed and displayed for all to see, I suggest that Yolŋu ritual images appear as 'matter(s) of relations' par excellence, materialising various sets of social relationships. This paper examines the material logics behind this transfiguration process which, by turning people into ancestors, transform the relations between individuals and groups, between humans and non-human beings, and between the living and the spirits of the dead.

**Keywords:** body paintings, images, life-cycle rituals, Arnhem Land, ritual innovation

Late one night in September 2004, wailing broke the tranquility of bottom Gälpu road, in the Yolŋu township of Galiwin'ku. As my dog started howling uncontrollably, I turned on the outdoor lights and walked out on the back porch. A dozen people in a state of great agitation had assembled near the dark wooded area at the back of the yard. One of my female relatives, on her way to join the group, shouted for me to go back inside and to make sure I locked the doors. The next day, I was to learn from my adopted Dätiwuy sisters that a corpse had been found in the bush nearby, hanging from a tree. The deceased was a young man in his early twenties, the son of one of our elder brothers. The large Dätiwuy clan was in shock, overcome by grief and anger. This was the first time that the tight-knit extended family had to face a case of youth suicide.<sup>1</sup>

This local tragedy sadly reflects a broader trend in Australian indigenous mortality indicators. Almost non-existent 30 years ago, the rate of suicide and self-harm amongst indigenous Australians has reached crisis levels, particularly amongst the young living in remote communities (Dudgeon 2014, 6). In the Northern Territory, Indigenous youth suicide is 10 times higher than for non-Indigenous youth and suicide has become the second most frequent cause of death for Aboriginal men after cardiovascular disease (ABS 2012). In the East Arnhem Shire, home to the Dätiwuy and the other Yolŋu-matha speaking clans, there were 143 attempted, threatened or completed suicides reported among 9500 people between January 2007 and December 2008 alone (Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT 2011).

In the introduction of a recent volume on death in Indigenous Australia, Burbank et al. (2008, 1) observed that mourning and related mortuary practices have become especially germane in contemporary Aboriginal societies. Indigenous Australians' demographics are characterised by low life expectancies and high mortality rates, both increasingly due to death by suicide (Hunter & Harvey 2002). This bleak situation results from a combination of factors such as colonial disruption, economic marginalisation, social disadvantage, substance abuse and inadequate healthcare. The frequency of funerals and the expansion in space and time of what has become known in Aboriginal English as 'sorry business,' is a phenomenon that has been widely recorded by anthropologists working throughout the country. As Musharbash (2008, 22) points out in her chapter on the Warlpiri predicament, 'communities experience so many deaths that sorry business is now an elemental everyday experience.' Her observation is sadly relevant to many indigenous settlements in the Northern Territory (Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT 2012). Indeed, the time Aboriginal people devote to funerals has become a recurrent point of contention with the various government administrations that provide jobs and welfare services to remote communities: the demanding mortuary program is criticised for impacting on school attendance, employment, and economic development outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my families of the Dätiwuy clan for trusting me to recount this painful event a decade later. I thank Pascale Bonnemère and Sandra Revolon for challenging the participants to make use of this stimulating concept and the editors of this special issue for their useful comments. This paper has benefited greatly from the suggestions made by three anonymous reviewers.

Mortuary rituals have been well documented in the anthropological literature of North-east Arnhem Land, from the early missionary settlement in the 1920s (Warner 1937/69; Berndt 1974; Thomson in Peterson 1976), to the present times (Barber 2008; Keen 1994; Magowan, 2007, 70-102; Rudder, 1993, 105-126; Morphy 1984, Morphy & Morphy 2012; Reid 1979). Spanning close to a century, the ethnographic record on Yolŋu mortuary rituals provides evidence of a continuing process of change in the death-related arrangements in the region (Morphy & Morphy 2012, 53). Many pragmatic adjustments and ritual innovations have taken place in the organisation of funerals, in response to relations with various outsiders – such as Macassan trepangers, missionaries, government officials or health professionals –, the adoption of Christian beliefs and values, fast changing patterns of residence and mobility, new economic and political imperatives, and the availability of introduced materials, goods and technologies in the region. At the same time, many principles that guide people's actions have remained strikingly consistent throughout the oral and written records. Funeral events continue to provide a cathartic and privileged site for reordering the social cosmos after a death and restoring a state of peace (*mägaya*) among the participating groups.

At the other end of the Yolŋu ritual spectrum, the first male initiation ceremony, called *dhapi*, is organised for all of the young boys aged between eight and ten. Focused on a circumcision ritual, this ceremony marks the boys' passage from the status of children to that of young men. It opens up aspects of their clan's sacred law to the initiates by acting upon their relations with certain classes of kin and ancestors. With a third of the East Arnhem Land population under 14 years of age (ABS 2015), *dhapi* ceremonies are also frequent and regular events in the region's ceremonial calendar, offering a much needed relief counterpart to the funerals. Preferably organised in the dry season, or during school holidays to accommodate the educational obligations of the children, circumcision ceremonies can also, in some instances – such as the violent death described above – be held in conjunction with funerals.

The pairing in a single ceremonial event of these rites that mark the opposite ends of the Yolŋu male life-cycle invites us to think of *dhapi* initiations and funerals as part of a ritual continuum, an integrative set. These ceremonies effectively provide privileged moments to act upon and transform the relations between individuals and kin-related groups, human and non-human entities, and between the living and the spirits of the dead. These transformations are in part made visible through specific material actions on the body. In the Yolŋu context, ritual images can be usefully conceived of as 'matters of relations', as special kinds of relational artefacts that reflect and create new social connections between different classes of beings. Building on a pragmatic and relational perspective on these rituals (Houseman & Severi, 1998), I focus on the series of actions that are undertaken, by specific groups of relatives, on and around the initiates and the dead. Drawing on the extensive ethnography on Yolŋu ritual practice and innovation on the one hand, and on my own observations in Galiwin'ku and its region on the other, I will examine the changing uses and value of the sacred imagery that is produced, in a variety of material forms, in the course of these two life-cycle rituals.

### The ‘Matter’ of Relations in Yolŋu Initiation and Mortuary Rituals

In her study of Ankave theories of personhood in Papua New Guinea, Bonnemère (2014) proposes to consider male initiations as ‘moments when the community carries out the transformation of relational states’ (2014, 738). To become full men, the Ankave must undergo a series of rituals whose success partly relies on the participation of their mothers and sisters who engage in complementary material actions. In North-East Arnhem Land likewise, the unfolding of life can be usefully apprehended as a series of relational transformations. During circumcision and burial rituals, two ceremonies in which women are active participants, former relational states between individuals and certain classes of kin, of non-human beings, and of spirits, are acted upon and reconfigured through specific material actions on the body. In the context of these events, ceremonial image-making can be seen to signify the terms of the relations that will be acted upon in the ritual process. These relational terms are expressed through reference to *gurrutu*, the all-encompassing network of kinship that links individuals and groups, but also people and non-human beings such as animals, plants, certain types of natural phenomena and ancestral spirits.

In his seminal study of ‘Murngin’ age grading and mortuary rituals in north-east Arnhem Land, Warner observes that in some cases a circumcision ceremony could immediately follow a secondary burial in a hollow log coffin (1969, 408). Noting the use of the songs and dances associated to Nierk [*ŋerrk*] (white cockatoo) in both events, he points to the ‘rather important interpretative significance’ of the ‘sequent association’ of mourning and circumcision rites. When examining these two life-cycle rituals in a relational perspective, a number of related themes emerge. *Dhapi* and funerals are important rites of passage that mark significant changes in a person’s social and spiritual existence. These rituals belong to a public genre of ceremonies called *garma* (public, open) that are held in the midst of residential areas, accessible to women, children and outsiders. Both rituals provide a regulated setting for the collective expression of emotions, such as in the women’s wailing songs (*milkarri*). They involve, for the members of an extended Yolŋu family, the same set of clans and strings of relatives, a region-wide network of kin bound by sentiment and ritual obligation. Through paintings and other expressive forms, these ceremonies act upon interpersonal relations with ancestral beings and lands that are the foundation of individual and group formations.

In the course of *dhapi* and *bäpurru* ceremonies, the bodies of the boys and of the deceased undergo a similar process of transfiguration. While these actions remain remarkably alike in the context of contemporary *dhapi* ceremonies, they have shifted in focus, in burials, from the body of the deceased to the new surfaces that have come to encapsulate it. Prior to the missionization of the region, initiates and corpses were progressively made to resemble their clan’s most valued possessions called *mädayin*, sacred forms and expressions that are seen to instantiate the powers of specific ancestral beings at the core of the various groups’ spiritual identity. These sacred artefacts, including the series of songs and dances of each clan’s ancestral repertoire, lie at the heart of the transformation processes that characterises Yolŋu life-cycle rituals.

The potency of these designs derives from the ‘material relations’ they have with a source of power located in a distant past – a dimension now commonly referred to in Aboriginal English as the *Dreaming*. Indeed, as suggested by Morphy, the Yolŋu ceremonial system can be regarded as ‘the integration of individual life-cycles within an all-encompassing cosmic scheme in which the present is continually being recreated through the Ancestral past’ (1984, 33). Materialising the relations that connect specific groups of people and places, these artefacts are conceived of as the transformation of the ancestral beings (*wajarr*) whose presence will be sought during the different stages of the ceremonies. Following certain ritual sequences when these objects are revealed, the dust arising from the dance ground is imbued with spiritual power (*märr*) and participants may be seen rubbing their skin with the sand. Through participation in ritual events and repeated contact with these sacred forms, *märr* drawn from the ancestral beings can be harnessed, affecting the inner being of the participants who will individually and collectively feel their presence.<sup>2</sup>

Considering *dhapi* and *bäpurru* ceremonies as part of a ritual continuum makes it possible to assess the cumulative effects of sacred images throughout a Yolŋu person’s life. Starting at first initiation and continuing throughout their adulthood, the accumulation of spiritual force brings individuals closer to the ancestral beings of their group, so much as to eventually, at the end of the mortuary rites, transform them back into *wajarr* ancestors. Ultimately, as suggested by Rudder, these rites ‘can be considered as marking in both a physical and a ritual sense the successive steps or transformations towards the fullest expression of the individual’s unchanging identity, rather than being thought of as marking changes.’ (1993, 125-126). As with Ankave rituals described by Lemonnier (2012, 82), this incorporation of ancestral power is reached in initiation and at death through various modalities of contact with the group’s sacred objects or with one of their alternative sensible forms. In Arnhem Land today, these forms can be materialised as paintings and designs on various media, or as dead people’s photographic representations (Deger, 2008).

The paintings produced on the body of the initiates and, in the past, on the body of the dead, transform existing relations in both the human and ancestral realms. The enduring effect of body paintings on the life of a person is summarised in the statement that provided the title of this paper. ‘This painting becomes his body for life’ was one of the explanations given to me in August 2004 by a ceremonial leader of the Liyagawumirr clan. Richard Gandhuwuy Garrawurra had driven me to a place called Dhambala where the circumcision ritual now performed by his group had been instituted in the ancestral past to talk about young boys’ initiation. It was at that rock formation nearby, on a site called *dhapi-dhapmaram*, glossed as ‘old man holding the initiate’, that a couple of ancestral Sisters named Djaŋ’kawu had instituted the first initiation ceremony which, with a set of associated songs, ritual objects and paintings, was inherited by his forebears. As he was recounting the foundation of the *dhapi* law (*rom*), Gandhuwuy alternatively pointed to the different sections of a large ochre painting unrolled at our feet and towards certain features of the landscape around us. Like some of the earlier Yolŋu barks produced for the art market, this painting took the shape of a *dhapi* chest

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<sup>2</sup> While *märr* can be a source of strength, of striving and propitiating, it can also present a danger if perceived by the wrong people and bring sickness and death (Thomson 1975, 3, 7-8).

painting. His finger moved from the stylised representation of one of the two Sisters' sacred basket on the canvas, to the dead tree erected on the sandy area near us from which the same baskets are hung during ceremonies – the dead tree itself being the representation of the tree in the myth. In the same way that the Dhambala estate was fashioned by the actions of the two Sisters in the ancestral past, the painting is considered as a 'trace' (*luku*) of their creative deeds on this site.

Generically speaking, the paintings produced on the chest of initiates and during mortuary ceremonies are called *luku* or *mādayin minyt'ji*. The term *minyt'ji* pertains to designs, patterns, both man-made and found in the environment. The painted motifs are the 'shade' (*mali*) of the patterns, burn marks, trails of froth or reflections of sunrays, appearing on the ancestral beings in specific places of their journey (Thomson 1975, 8). These clan-owned designs are an integral part of the ancestral beings themselves and are believed to contain their power (Morphy 1991, 102). Like the elbow on an arm or the branch of a tree (*likan*), these paintings have connecting properties (*likanbuy*), they articulate human groups to ancestral beings and strings of connected estates in a landscape saturated with meaning. The word *mādayin* refers to highly valued clan-owned sets of ritual forms which derive from ancestral actions in specific places. When used to refer to a person, it denotes great affection, especially towards old people (Williams 1986, 29), whose accumulated ceremonial experience progressively assimilates them to their clan's *mādayin*. When nearing death, an old person is often seen performing movements relating to an ancestral being: Yolŋu may explain this occurrence by saying 'He is becoming like his totem' (Warner 1969, 404).

The material aspect of colours used in painting (pigment, texture, source) has often been downplayed in art anthropological scholarship in favour of semantic or symbolic approaches (Young 2006). Yet, part of Yolŋu sacred images' ritual efficacy stems from their very materiality. Blocks of the hematite pigment (*ratjpa*) from Elcho Island were exchanged within an economic and ceremonial circuit well beyond the Yolŋu region (Thomson 1949). The ochres and clays used in painting come from specific deposits in the landscape that have their own mythical origin: the red blood of the wounded kangaroo ancestor, the yellow fat of the ancestral emu, the white faeces of the great python. These ancestral organic substances transformed in mineral and chromatic matter provide the ceremonial painters with their basic palette. The use of these colours in ceremony points to specific mythical associations between ancestral beings, the places they journeyed through, and the land-owning groups or clans that are said to share 'the same song' relating to these journeys. As corpses are prepared for disposal and the bodies of the *dhapi* covered with the first layer of paint, songs pertaining to the clan-owned sites where the matter is found are interpreted. Each land-owning group possesses stories that explain the presence of colouring matter on their territory.

Today, these colours are occasionally transported on planes to be given to grieving kin in distant townships, ground in ceremonial paint for the funeral or displayed on the tombstones. The act of 'showing respect to the body' through a gift of colour to one's living relatives, illustrates well the idea of 'matters of relations' at stake in Yolŋu rituals. By conceptually dissociating colours from matter, one overlooks one of the most signifying relations made

visible in ritual painting: the continuity of matter between ancestral beings, the land and human skin (De Laryg Healy 2010, and see Whiteley, this issue, on the importance of materials produced from lineage land in the transformation between vital but temporary relations with the living and enduring ancestral matrilineal relations).

### **Making ‘Real Humans’: Materialising Relations in Dhapi Initiation Ceremonies**

The term *dhapi* refers simultaneously to the rite of circumcision, to the foreskin and to the initiate. A boy’s circumcision is a major ritual that marks his passage from the status of uninitiated child (*yothu*) to that of a bachelor (*yawirriny*). Unlike female puberty rites, which persist only within the domestic sphere, *dhapi* ceremonies are popular public (*garma*) events, attended by dozens of participants including women and children.<sup>3</sup> They are still organised today for all the young boys aged between 8 and 12 in order to make them in to ‘real humans’.<sup>4</sup>

When a boy comes of age, his parents start to negotiate the terms of the *dhapi* ceremony with a set of related clans from both Yolŋu moieties (Dhuwa and Yirritja). Members of the boy’s own patrilineal clan and of his mother’s mother’s clan [MM(B)] (*māripulu*), both of the same moiety, usually lead the ceremonial action. Also involved, are members of the boy’s sister’s child [Zc] clan (*wakupulu*), of the opposite moiety who, in the position of workers or managers (*djunḡayi*), will be in charge of making the sacred objects and dancing. The ceremonial leaders of these groups agree in advance on a series of songs from their sacred repertoires that will provide both the content and the framework of the ritual sequences of the *dhapi* ceremony. Performed over several days, the songs and their accompanying dances instantiate the actions of particular ancestral beings across the lands of the participating clans.

During a Gumatj Burrarrwaṅa *dhapi* observed in Elcho Island in August 2004, a large sandy area was cleared behind the boy’s parents’ house. During much of the ceremony, the boy was sitting or lying on a mat under a shady tree, surrounded by a party of men, which included several singers from his own and his mother’s clans equipped with ironwood clapsticks (*bilma*) and a didgeridoo (*yidaki*) player. The women and small children sat huddled together on the other side of the ground. Dancers from both groups got up regularly to perform at the centre of the consecrated stage, interpreting ‘funny dances’ to everyone’s delight. On the final day, the ‘place of blood’, where the actual circumcision takes place, was built at short distance. This place, conceived of as a ‘nest’, represented a site of ancestral import on the boy’s clan’s lands, a group closely associated with Bāru the ancestral crocodile.<sup>5</sup> Two large stringy bark panels were joined at the edges to form a triangular secluded space symbolising

<sup>3</sup> The public settings of contemporary *dhapi* ceremonies are shown in two recent films *Yirritja Dhapi* (2009) and *Dhuwa Dhapi* (2009) produced and distributed on DVD by the Yirrkala-based Mulka Project <https://yirrkala.com/the-mulka-project>.

<sup>4</sup> The only exceptions to my knowledge concern children who suffer from disability.

<sup>5</sup> This symbolic set up has its counterpart in funeral ceremonies, where the burial site of clan members of the Yirritja moiety can also be conceived of as a crocodile nest (see Dunlop 1979; Morphy 1984).

the reptile's nest. A sacred pole painted with the diamond pattern specific to this ancestral being, and matching the design covering the boy's chest, was erected to mark its entrance. Prior to the circumcision by a specialised 'doctor', a male dancer enacted the mother crocodile laying its eggs, consecrated the space inside the nest, while the sacred names associated with this mythical place were chanted by the ceremonial leaders. As the circumcision took place, men surrounded the 'nest', hiding it from view with their bodies, while women danced in circle around them. After the *dhapi* was complete, classificatory mothers and maternal grandmothers' crying-songs were heard, expressing their sentiment of grief at the boy's pain and at the remembrance of deceased relatives associated with the same *mādayin* artefacts.

For boys to become young men, their bodies must undergo a process of transformation through the apposition of an ancestral clan painting on their body. On the last day of the ceremony, a ceremonial painter, who nowadays can be a female relative, applies the combination of *mādayin miny'tji* that was agreed upon on the child's chest: these can be his own clan's designs, those of his *māripulu* (mother's mother group) and sometimes those of his *yapapulu* (sister group). This painting, and the songs and dances that accompany its production, connect the *dhapi* to specific totemic beings, of their or other closely related kin-groups, bringing them closer to the corporate identity of that group. The decision to paint clan designs other than one's own actualises ritual alliances between closely related groups by making them visible: it is said to make the gifting group 'happy'. By materially connecting the *dhapi* to another clan's *sacra*, the ceremonial leaders may reinforce the spiritual and political bonds of cooperation between the concerned groups. Tamisari further suggests that 'The act of making visible social and emotional relationships and political links is central to the fashioning and negotiation of group and individual identities' (1998, 251).

With the first male initiation comes a range of new social obligations and ritual responsibilities. By making the initiate more connected to the ancestral workings of the cosmos, the knowledge transmitted during *dhapi* increases the anxiety about dangerous things and places (Biernoff 1978). Becoming more knowledgeable also means holding more responsibility for maintaining and transmitting the sacred Law (*rom*). During the seclusion following the ceremony, the initiate is taught the values of respect and discipline (*raypirri*) and is instructed into the code of conduct that will govern his behaviour towards certain places and categories of kin (*rum'rumdhun*). The corporal induction into social etiquette *raypirri*, necessary to become a 'real man', is one of the main effects of the body painting, as Gandhuwuy explained:

The reason we put the painting [is] the delegation of the *raypirri*, respect, discipline behaviour, self-respect and other things. We give a painting to the boy, that's what it means, so he can live and grow and be a man, a real man. That body will be attached by this symbolising of giving the delegation of authority to you, so when the boy becomes a man, he can become a man. And you got the symbol of that picture with you.

Chief among the new set of social rules is the opposite sex sibling avoidance relationship called *mirriri*. The *mirriri* or ‘ear-thing’ (Warner 1969, 55) is also defined as ‘the feelings of a man where his sister, or unclean things are concerned’ (Lowe 2004), an emotion associated with shame. The brother–sister etiquette involves the avoidance of physical proximity, direct interaction and eye contact. When a man hears obscene talk about his sister, he will be overcome by a wild rage and be expected to assault her (Warner 1969, 98-102; Burbank 1994, 151). After their initiation, brothers will cease to use their sisters’ names, referring to them instead by a series of standard surnames meaning rubbish (*midiku*, *wakinju*), ghost or evil spirit (*mokuy*, *bambay*), or sick person (*rrikminy*). Because of the polysemy of the word *dhapi*, sisters do not use that term to designate their brother’s circumcision ceremony: instead, they will refer to this event as ‘*darrtjalkkum*’, to make clean, from ‘*darrtjalk*’, clean, a word also used, for instance, for dish washing. Like other kin relations, siblings are mapped on the human body, being symbolised by the lower part of the leg (see also Venbrux this issue). When boys underwent *dhapi* initiation, their sisters were expected to cut the skin of their calf, a practice that has now largely been disregarded. This body marking still has its counterpart during mortuary ceremonies however, when sisters are required to paint their lower legs with ochre in order to be protected from the pollution of the corpse. The development of a boy into a full man is made possible by the transformation of his relations to sisters (see also Bonnemère, 2014) and matrilineal kin, including his mothers-in-law (*rumaru*) with whom the avoidance is extreme. This transformation is visible as physical separation, through no reference to the other’s bodily functions, and in specific ways of addressing each other.

As the ritual performance recreates the mythical itineraries at the foundation of the *dhapi*’s spiritual identity, the body of the boy transforms under the ceremonial leaders’ expert hands. His skin is first coated with red ochre or white clay, his arms and forehead adorned with sacred strings and feather ornaments of which each clan own particular varieties. These twined artefacts called arms (*wana*), ornament the clans’ secret ritual objects (*ranga*), also referred to as the ‘bones’ of the ancestors. The painting of a *mādayin* design on the *dhapi*’s body appears as a means of directly associating him with the ancestral realm, ‘he becomes attached by this painting’ Gandhuwuy explained. He becomes positioned in the cosmos through his inscription in interspecific kinship networks that relate him to sets of people and of totems. The *dhapi* painting becomes a sign for part of the spiritual dimension of the person. In some cases, when people grow old, this painting can become identified with them (Morphy 1990, 130). It is the visible manifestation of an ancestral presence that is acting on him through the alteration of his being, and on others who will collectively feel its effects, as the *dhapi* is made to resemble the clan’s most sacred objects. The formal analogy between the painted human body and the *ranga* sacred objects is also made during funeral ceremonies when the corpse undergoes a similar process of transfiguration (Keen 1994, 178).

### **Making Ancestors: Transforming Relations in Yolŋu Funeral ceremonies**

The same act called *gupa-ŋamathama* forms the core of circumcision and mortuary ceremonies. The expression that has been translated as ‘making good’ (Thomson 1975) or ‘doing up’ (Keen 1994) ‘the back of the neck’, the anatomical part signifying the Father [F] and Father’s Sister [FZ], refers to the action of adorning the body of the initiate or the body of the deceased.

Like the word *dhapi*, *bäpurru* is polysemous. It can designate funeral ceremonies, refer to one of the named patrilineal groups or clans of the Yolŋu-speaking block, and also pertain to the body of the deceased. Keen notes that the senses of the word *bäpurru* centre ‘on the relationship between *wangarr* ancestors, their traces, and people – living, dead, and yet-to-be-born’ (1995, 512, my emphasis). This semantic relationship between ancestral beings, the dead and the living clan members is also expressed in the clan-specific terms used to refer to individual corpses in substitution for the personal names of the deceased during the mourning period. These clan-owned terms, like the *raŋga* sacred objects, identify the deceased with the body or a body part of a major ancestral being of his or her group.

The general purpose of mortuary rites is to turn the deceased into ancestors, by accompanying their soul (*birrimbirr*) to one of their clan’s sacred water source. It is from this aquatic plane, in a sort of recycling of souls, that the spirits of the group’s newborn, who are often conceived as small fish, also originate. The journey of the soul is performed through a series of dance and song sequences that re-enact the itineraries of a specific set of ancestral beings, from the place of death to the final destination of the spirit on his or her clan’s land. Another objective of the funerals is to remove all contact of the dead from the living (Warner 1969, 435), notably by chasing the ghost or evil spirit of the deceased (*mokuy*) that lingers around his corpse and possessions. Purification rituals involving fire, smoke and water, are performed on the close relatives of the deceased, those in most danger of pollution, especially the mothers and sisters, as well as in the house, vehicle and other belongings of the deceased. Called ‘*goŋ wukundi*’ (hands taboo), the people handling the coffin, often members of the deceased’s child clan (*wakupulu* [Z]c), have their hands and lower arms painted with red ochre for the same reasons.

Historically, Yolŋu funerals have been the site of significant ritual innovations and introduced technologies have been used. Following the prolonged contact with the Macassan trading crews who visited the Arnhem Land coasts since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, flags and masts from the visitors’ ships – as well as many other elements of language, religion and material culture – were incorporated into the different sequences of funeral ceremonies. With the missionary settlement of the region throughout the 1920s and 1930s, funeral arrangements were supplemented by a Christian service and the burials transferred into designated cemeteries. While three phases were recognised in mortuary rituals – the primary disposal of the corpse, the exhumation of the bones ceremony, and a secondary burial in a hollow log coffin – the emphasis has shifted nowadays towards the primary burial (*bäpurru*) (Morphy 1984, 43). The *bäpurru* ceremony, which has become by far the most frequent religious practice in Arnhem Land, second only to Sunday Church service, has extended both in time

and scope to accommodate and condense significant aspects of the second and third mortuary phases. From a mortuary process that was orchestrated over a period of several years, contemporary *bäpurru* ceremonies are completed within a few days for infants and several weeks for important ceremonial leaders, victims of violent death or people who have reached a national level of notoriety. With many deaths occurring outside of the region, ritual arrangements have had to be adapted for multi-site ceremonies. Bodies can be kept for long periods of time in morgues and it can be months before an agreement is reached or appropriate people available for the ceremony. The repatriation of a corpse from the Darwin hospital, some 500 km away, is usually overseen by a mother's mother's brother [MM(B)] (*märi*) who will sing this additional part of the journey home.

In the three mortuary phases mentioned above, the ritual process focused on the material actions required for the treatment of the deceased's remains. The body painting produced during the first phase was said to act as a 'message' to the spirits of previously deceased relatives to collect the dead person's spirit and guide it back to the clan well (Warner 1969). In the course of the mortuary cycle, the corpse became assimilated to the clan's *wañarr* ancestors in the form of prey. After being symbolically hunted and speared, the body was enclosed in a mortuary receptacle, itself painted like the *wañarr* and like the clan's sacred well (Warner 1969, 427). As one of Thomson's informants described this transformation 'his skin has *miny'tji* (designs) and therefore his ghost will have *miny'tji* too' (Thomson 1975, 3).

The marking of the mortuary container still remains a central feature of funerals, calling for much care, planning and resources. Bark receptacles and hollow logs have been replaced over time by other ornate body-wrapping devices such as painted coffin lids, custom printed shrouds, gravesite installations and finely engraved tombstones (De Largy Healy 2014).

Following the violent death of a young man of the Gumatj Burrarrwaṅa clan mentioned earlier, associated with the ancestral Crocodile, an elaborate grave was built at the front of two Elcho Island houses in August 2003. The decision to locate the grave in a residential area rather than in a town cemetery appears to be a recent way of expressing deep feelings of grief by keeping the dead in proximity to the living (Barber 2008, 163). On the concrete surface of the grave, shaped as an elongated diamond, a stylised crocodile was painted amidst the clan's sacred red and black diamond pattern. The painted tombstone formed the apex of a three-dimensional installation comprising half a dozen yellow and red flagpoles, his own and his mother's clan colours. Rope and tinsel connecting the poles were arranged to form the outline of a Macassan prau anchor. This material association of elements relating to Bāru the ancestral crocodile and to the Macassan ceremonial cycle instantiated a special site in Arnhem Bay, a place at the core of the spiritual identity of the deceased's clan.

Another recent innovation in the use of sacred imagery in mortuary contexts concerns the decoration of the bough shelters and funeral chambers where the coffin is displayed prior to burial. Installed in or near relatives' homes, these secluded places have become increasingly saturated with *mādayin*-like images. To 'welcome the body' of the young Dätiwuy man who had died by suicide, his mother group (*ṅandipulu*) painted a corner of the mortuary room with a giant octopus, a *wañarr* ancestor of their group, its tentacles spreading on each side of the

wall as if enveloping the coffin. The classificatory mothers of the deceased also painted on their stomach, the body part pertaining to a woman's child, a yellow u-shape representing their son's Shark's liver. A dozen photographs of various living and dead relatives, including the deceased's framed portrait, were arranged on the walls surrounding the coffin. Two A4 laminated portraits of his two old paternal grandfathers (*māri'mu*), photographed by the anthropologist Donald Thomson in 1942, dominated the display. A sacred white and orange feather basket, one of the Dätiwuy most sacred objects, was placed above the head of the coffin covered in bright plastic flowers. The combined images, like the paintings that used to be produced on the skin of the dead and on the bark receptacles that contained their bones, effectively acted to materialise a range of human and non-human relations. By both 'presencing' the dead ancestors (Deger 2006) and wrapping the body in *mādayin* designs, these images mediatise the relations between the living, the dead and the ancestral spirits. They complete the life-long process of transfiguration of men into ancestors of their groups.

### **Combining Funeral and Circumcision Events: Ritual Efficacy in Changing Times**

Underlain by a system of values and practices that are both 'recursive and incorporative', responding to new circumstances through innovations while 'appearing to carry the past with them' (Morphy 2011, 57-58), Yolŋu funerals have developed historically as dynamic ceremonial forms. The ways in which ritual images have been adapted to various introduced media, to fit new and changing circumstances, illustrate this adaptive process well. In the main Yolŋu townships such as Galiwin'ku, however, where the mortality rate has risen steadily over the past three decades (Rudder 1993, 118), mourning has become part of everyday life. In the East Arnhem Region, deaths have increased from 43 to 76 per year between 2004 and 2014 (ABS 2010, 2015), putting an immense stress on families and on the ceremonial leaders of the Yolŋu clan groups bound by ritual obligations to one another. Beyond the grief induced by repeated losses and the stress placed on relatives holding the burial arrangements, the mere economic weight of funerals has become overwhelming. Much of people's resources are poured into funerary logistics: from high transport costs to stocks of food and camping equipment, ceremonial paraphernalia such as metal daggers or themed patterned skirts ordered from Darwin, and coffin and grave customisation with printed fabrics, plastic flowers, photographic reproductions and elaborated tombstones. Indeed, the concern over the impact of the mortuary economy on people's livelihoods has recently led some clan leaders to advocate for the organization of shorter burial ceremonies (Morphy 2012, 63-67).

At the same time, the general feeling of concern for the young 'stuck in between two worlds' and prone to self-harm behaviours has resulted in *dhapi* ceremonies becoming a privileged locus for imparting respect and self-discipline (*raypirri*) to the boys. In addition to the *rum'rumdhum*, which focuses on social rules of conduct towards sisters and mothers-in-law, *dhapi* ceremonies also provide a framework for warning the young boys against the dangers of alcohol and drug consumption, and anti-social behaviours. Emphasising the role of *dhapi* in making boys into 'real humans', Gandhuwuy urged to consider this ritual reference frame

as a key to many of the social problems faced by the youth at present. In this social climate ridden with tension and uncertainty, *dhapi* ceremonies also appear as a welcome solace. They play out as a celebration of life, a time when a certain licence is encouraged through a combination of ‘funny dancing’ and burlesque behaviour that is said to make people ‘happy’ (*märr-ŋamathirr*). As some men dress up with skirts and mimic female dance steps and women steal their hats and spears and take over the ceremonial ground, people burst into laughter and cheer loudly.

This feeling of happiness, associated with an inner spiritual power, can be gained in ceremony through contact with sacred artefacts and expressions. A *dhapi* can sometimes be organised to make a dying ceremonial leader ‘happy’, usually for one of his grandchildren (*marratja*, male’s Son’s Child [mSC] / Brother’s Son’s child [BSC]). In addition to lifting the dying man’s spirit, such events are said to create a special bond between the old man and the young boy, the living and the soon to be dead. Whereas some specific Yolŋu ceremonies, such as the *djuŋguwan*, both an initiation ritual and a memorial for the recently dead, directly associate new clan members to the spirits of their ancestors (Morphy 1991, Dunlop 1989), *dhapi* and *bäpurru* ceremonies are usually organised at separate times. In some situations however, such as a violent death or the passing of a very old and knowledgeable person, *dhapi* ceremonies can also be held to coincide with the funerals. This was the case in September 2004, as the Dätiwuy clan faced its first death by suicide.

In the midst of the high-strung funeral performance that brought together some one hundred participants from the neighbouring communities, a *dhapi* was organised for the dead man’s young classificatory father (his actual father’s father’s brother’s son [FFBS]).<sup>6</sup> The deceased and the young boy belonged to the same patriline (*yarrata*), both descending from the two paramount leaders of the clan, the two old and highly respected brothers proudly referred to by their many descendants as the ‘fathers of the Dätiwuy nation’. Fierce warriors in their youth, with a deep knowledge of the Ancestral Law (*rom*) and extended networks of alliance gained through the ten marriages they had contracted, between the two of them, with women from five different clans, these two men were already regarded as ancestors while they were still alive. It was said that ‘they were Mäna [the ancestral shark] in a human form’. The two old men had travelled to Elcho Island from the homeland on the mainland where they usually resided to oversee the mortuary ritual organised for their grandchild [SS]. It was under their authority that the decision was made to hold at the same time a circumcision ceremony for their youngest child (*gathu*), the son of the first brother’s seventh wife.

A large sandy area was cleared at the back of the deceased’s father’s sister’s house, where the coffin would be kept, to delineate a common *garma* (public) ground for the double ceremony. During the overlapping days of the rituals, two clusters of ceremonial singers in a *märi-gutharra* relation to each other (mother’s mother [MM(B)] / daughter’s child [(Z)Dc]) set themselves up a short distance apart, facing in different directions. Parties of male and female

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<sup>6</sup> From the moment the young man was found dead in the bush to the actual burial of the body in one of the town’s consecrated cemeteries, about three weeks elapsed. Preparations for the funeral started when the corpse was sent to Darwin for a post-mortem and the *bäpurru* ceremony itself lasted for eight days, from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2004. The *dhapi* was held on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of September.

dancers performed in front of each group, with an alternation of ritual sequences from both ceremonies. A string of related agents – people, ancestral beings, and artefacts – were mobilised in turns in the performances. While the Dätiwuy claimed the body of the deceased, with a vivid display of ritual images associated to their ancestral shark in the *bäpurru* side, the Gälpu clan, their *märipulu* (MM), took over the *dhäpi*, by gifting the boy a chest painting of their own sacred corpus. ‘Every funeral’, wrote Rudder about the situation in Galiwin’ku in the early 1990s, ‘is, among other things, a statement of relationships, a levering for advantage and an occasion for imposing obligations on others’ (1993: 234). The combined Dätiwuy ceremony indeed provided the scene for a public demonstration of authority, social sway and power. Another boy, of the Liyagawumirr clan, one of township’s most influential land-owning groups and secondary *märipulu* to the Dätiwuy, was circumcised at the same time. This public display of cooperation and commonality alleviated some of the social tension resulting from the death by consolidating the position of the grieving clan within the local political sphere.

While the organisers of another circumcision ceremony in the region have been criticised for holding it too soon after a burial,<sup>7</sup> it would appear that for the Dätiwuy clan, the collapsing of a *dhäpi* and a funeral ceremony was not a recent ritual innovation (see also Venbrux this issue). The doubling-up of these two life-cycle rituals was presented to me as a part of Dätiwuy *rom* (Law), something that had been done ‘for a long time’.<sup>8</sup> ‘Two *bunguls* [ceremonies] together is power [*märr*]. You show your spiritual aspect, your respect. When *dhäpi* goes into the *mokuy* [spirit of the dead] area, they will be happy [*märr-ngamathirr*] too’. As suggested by this quote, this pragmatic mutualisation of resources further points to something else, especially in the case of violent and unexpected deaths. By making the *märr* good and restoring a sense of comfort among the participants, ‘big ceremonies’ seem efficacious in bringing about the resolution of grief, through achieving a ‘compensation of relationships with those still living’ (Reid 1979, 339). In the Dätiwuy situation, the *dhäpi* was thus said to have been ‘promised’ to the deceased, the same word that is used in English to refer to the bestowal system. Through the combined rituals, a special relationship between the boy and the spirit of the deceased was established, so that the *dhäpi*, when growing up, would ‘keep thinking about his *gathu* (son)’ and thereby maintain his memory alive. In the future, the boy will continue to remind people of the deceased, making him present through a living member of his clan.

### **Conclusion: Life-cycle rituals and social reproduction**

Bringing into co-presence bodies, artefacts and spirits, the rituals that punctuate human existence in north-east Arnhem Land are part of a ceremonial continuum that ultimately enables the reproduction of life, society and the cosmos as a whole. In both *dhäpi* and funeral

<sup>7</sup> I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this local criticism to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> To my knowledge, there has been at least three other occasions in the past decade. A comparative analysis of these events would exceed the space allocated here, but would be of great worth to better understand the works of ritual dynamics in context.

ceremonies, the body is progressively made to resemble the group's most powerful secret ritual objects that are themselves conceived to result from the localised transformation of ancestral beings' bodies. The transfer of spiritual power from the ancestors to living members of their own and related clans is mediated through the use of ritual images, materialised in ceremony as body paintings and other *mādayin*-like sacred forms. The chest painting received during *dhapi* has a lasting influence on the boy's existence and development into manhood. 'He carries the picture in his life' explained Gandhuwuy, and 'when the boy is finished [dead], he is carried by his body'. It is as if the painting received at *dhapi* impressed itself, through the skin, into the body and, in turn, at death, enabled the passage of the spirit to the ancestral realm. In this sense, the 'matters of relations' analytical perspective is productive in accounting for the transformations at stake in Yolŋu initiation and funeral ceremonies.

In the context of angst and social tension that dominates contemporary life in Yolŋu communities, with a tendency for interclan conflict and intraclan fission, *dhapi* and funeral rituals have come to play an important role for the production of social cohesiveness. Because of their frequency, they have become privileged spaces for broader relational states to be renegotiated in the region. They provide the locus for the transformation of individual relations to various classes of kin and ancestral beings, but also for the reconfiguration of sociocentric relations between the groups involved. Ritual images drawn from the sacred corpus of the various participating clans are carefully chosen to achieve these relational transformations. The enduring value of these processes, and the creativity to articulate them to changing circumstances, seems to point to the effectiveness of rituals in engaging with the contemporary threats on Yolŋu livelihoods.

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