

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Murngin/Yolngu, northeastern part of Arnhem Land in Australian

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

N/A

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

Triangular area; between 11° and 15° S and 134° and 137° E [1]

1.4 Brief history:

“It is likely that the Yolngu have been in northeastern Arnhem Land for a comparable period of time (maybe 30,000 to 50,000 years ago). Yolngu had only sporadic contacts with non-Aboriginal people until European occupation of the Northern Territory was under way in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, except for regular visits by Macassans, traders from the Celebes, who gathered bêche-de-mer annually from the late seventeenth Century until 1907. Yolngu assisted the Macassans in gathering and processing the bêche-de-mer, and they obtained from them iron tools, cloth, tobacco, and the techniques of dugout-canoe construction.” [2] Yolngu and Macassans had good trading relationship for several hundreds of years. Macassans respected Yolngu people’s land and avoided contact with Yolngu women. Macassans visited Yolngu every year to harvest pearls and trepang, and paid Yolngu people with “knives, metal, canoes, tobacco, and pipes.” [16] The trade ended when South Australian Government did not renew the permit to allow Macassans to harvest trepang [16].

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Protestant missionaries influenced Murngin/Yolngu people.

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

northern and eastern sides are coastal while the ‘third’ line of the triangle runs inland southeast from Cape Stewart on north to south of Rose River on the east [1]. Monsoon during the period between December and April or May in the northeastern Arnhem Land.

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density:

Aboriginal population is thought to be approximately 3,500 people.

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Seeds, yams, root foods, plants, vegetables, fruits [16]

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Eggs, fish; shellfish; small animals such as goannas and snakes; The economy of Yolngu was based exclusively on hunting and gathering until missionaries arrived [4].

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Spears, fish-traps; spear, club, basket, or any other items belongs to an individual and not to a group [19 pg. 215]

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production:

Women mostly gathered and processed vegetable foods and some proteins such as shellfish. Men hunted for larger animals such as turtles, dugongs, fish at coastal sights, kangaroos, wallabies, emus and more. [4] Both men and women made baskets [10]

2.6 Land tenure:

Inherited ownership right of the land from father and responsibilities and use rights for mother’s estate; some could have subsidiary rights in the place where they were conceived (where their father found their spirit before it entered their mother) and also their birthplace [4].

2.7 Ceramics:

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

2.9 Food taboos:

There are food taboos for the childless, married man; they cannot eat these foods until there is an offspring or is an old age: porcupine, emu eggs, snake eggs, iguana eggs, turkey eggs, crayfish, crabs, and large barramundi [19 pg. 217]. A sister is not allowed to eat her brother’s kill of kangaroo, emu, etc. until the brother’s wife has a child. [19 g. 253]

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Bark canoes for swamps and dugouts in coastal areas

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

The study on 200 of mostly nomadic Aboriginal men of Australia showed that the mean adult height was 168.4 cm [14]

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

The same study showed that the average adult weight was 57.8 kg [14]

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

“Usually an older man with a wife or two acquires a young woman in her adolescent period. A young girl often starts living in her husband’s household before menstruation.” [19 pg. 225]

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

Divorce was not formerly institutionalized but permanent separation of spouses was common [6].

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Polygynous marriage was considered favorable before but it is now more rare. Men may have multiple wives but women can have a single husband at a time [19 pg. 224]

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

Young men perform the bride service [6]

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Patrilineal

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Moiety and clan exogamy are observed [5]. “...moieties of Murngin are exogamous...” [18 pg. 44]; “...Murdock states that... ‘a person is allowed to take a spouse from only one of the seven subsections other than his own.’ This statement is false. Everyone acquainted with the literature of Australian ethnography knows that a feature of the system of sub-sections is what are known as ‘alternative’ marriages” [18 pg. 40]; “In a man’s own generation division or moiety he finds all his relatives of his own generation, reckoning by genealogy, and all those of the generations of his grandparents and his grandchildren. The opposite, alternating, division includes all his relatives of the generation of his parents and of that of his children...Marriage systems are as a rule such as only to permit marriage between persons of the same generation division, which is the justification of calling them endogamous moieties.” [18 pg. 39]; Children belong to opposite moieties from their parents.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?:

In a ‘wrong’ marriage, ‘the father is thrown away’ or “...ignored for the purpose of designating the offspring of the marriage.” [17 pg. 323] “...the general rule in cases of wrong marriage is that members of the clan (patrilineage) of the husband reckon their kin-class relationship to the offspring of the marriage through the husband and disregard their relationship to the offspring through the wife—although they do not forget it, because it may be important for other purposes. However, for a person who does not belong to the clan of the husband, the general rule is to disregard one’s relationship to the husband and to designate the offspring of the marriage according to how one is related to them through their mother.” [17 pg. 322]

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”):

Flesh of the fetus comes from mother’s blood [9 pg. 830]

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?:

Bones of the fetus comes from father’s semen [9 pg. 830] Creation of fetus is made complete with the “good” soul which is also known as *warro* (small fish-like-spirit-child) created by Dreamtime Powers [9 pg. 830] Father, almost always, dreams of the child’s spirit’s arrival [19 pg. 218]

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape:

At Gunabibi ceremony, a woman may express dislike for the ceremonial partner, but her husband would force her by telling her that she would become ill if she does not obey. If a young man tries to refuse his ceremonial partner, the woman would occasionally tell him that Mui, the great subterranean snake, will make him and her ill. [19 pg. 216]

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin):

Karadjeri type of marriage is observed among Murngin. A man can marry a woman from his own mother’s patrilineal clan but cannot marry a daughter of a woman of his own clan; asymmetrical cross cousin marriage is seen [18 pg. 42] A man usually tries to marry a daughter of his mother’s brother [19 pg. 224]

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

It is not uncommon for the wives of *wawa* (older brother) of the tribe to have outside affair with *yukiyuko* (younger brother) due to *wawa*’s senility [19 pg. 213]

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring:

“Presents are always being exchanged between kutara and mari.” [19 pg. 248]

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?:

Two main kin avoidance that exist among Yolngu people are sister and brother relationship and son-in-law and mother-in-law relationships [16]. In avoidance, people do not speak directly to each other or look at each other. They avoid being close to one another but still maintain respect [16]. “A custom referred to as *mirri* relates to special kinds of avoidance behavior expected between brothers and sisters regarding a reference to a woman’s sexuality—a reference which, if made in the hearing of her brother, causes him to attack that sister or any other woman he calls sister.” [7]

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations:

Patrilineal; “The main corporate kin groups are patrilineal clans that own land and the ritual objects and ceremonies that validate their title. In the case of large clans, this function may be assumed by subclan or lineage groups. Kinship provides the primary

medium of social identity in the Yolngu social domain; each person is reckoned as kin to every other person, and kin links may thus be traced through Several different relatives. Matrilineally defined relationships establish rights and duties complementary to those of patrilineal descent but not corporate landowning groups" [5].

4.26 Incest avoidance rules:

"...there is frequently the fear that *yukiyuko* will fornicate with *wawa*'s wives...An old man usually suffers this indignity from a younger brother in silence since he knows that his senility forces his wives to go to other men for sexual satisfaction and that his younger brothers who will inherit them are the proper ones for them to go to...an older brother always helps a younger brother to acquire a wife because it settles the younger man and tends to prevent his getting into trouble with more remote *wawas*, *yukiyukos*, and other kin, by copulating with their wives, thereby forcing the *wawa* to defend his brother from their vengeance." [19 pg. 213] "...there is a strong tribal rule that no *yukiyuko* can talk to or be near *wawa*'s wives, but *wawa* can talk to and be near *yukiyuko*'s. This would not be true of a woman beyond the age when she would be sexually interested in *yukiyuko*; nor of boys below the age of puberty. This rule holds against all *yukiyuko* no matter of what category (actual or tribal) except for blood brothers who had a tremendous love and trust in each other. There are cases of this kind among blood brothers, but none were observed of tribal brothers breaking this rule." [19 pg. 213-214]

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

"A brother and father always know and keep the tabooed names of a girl. No woman knows her ceremonial name." [19 pg. 253] "Personal names are greatly treasured by the Murngin, and both men and women receive them from their mari, such names being more important in daily life than those obtained from a marikmo. Besides the ordinary personal names given by a mari, one also obtains any nickname that might have been given to mari through some peculiar circumstance in the latter's life. The boy's father decides what names shall be given, which means that the father chooses the names from his marelker." [19 pg. 248]

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?):

Marriage formed alliance between lineages. Two men can be married to one another's sisters [17 pg. 317]

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

Warner says that when families arrange marriage; "ideally a young man is assigned a mother-in-law who is his mother's mother's brother's daughter" [6] However, Lawrence and Murdock states that the "...real' arrangement is one by a system which is equivalent to one of thirty-two marriage classes, based on 'patri-moieties,' 'matri-moieties,' 'semi-moieties,' and 'semi-semi-moieties' and eight 'patri-lines.'" [18 pg. 37]

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Husband and the wife must be from opposite moiety; if the wife is Yirrijta, the husband is Dhuwa and vice versa [15]

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

Approximately 33% [12]

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

there are six distinct types of warfare among Murngin people—1) *nirimaoi yolno* which is a fight within a camp; 2) *narrup* or *djawardlt* which is a secret method of killing; 3) *maringo* which is a night attack in which entire camp is surrounded; 4) *milwerangel* which is a general open fight between at least two groups; 5) *ganger* which means a pitched battle; 6) *makarata* which means a ceremonial peace-making fight [11].

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

"The makarrata, which has been described as a "peace-making" ceremony, or as a "trial by ordeal," is ritualized revenge. A successful outcome is signaled by blood flowing from a wound inflicted in the thigh of a principal offender and is accepted as balancing accounts, at least during the time required for the performance of the Ceremony." [7]

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): There are five types of fathers and sons—1)

blood father, 2) his brothers, 3) fathers more remote than the first two, but in the same clan, 4) fathers from nearby clans, 5) fathers from remote clans [19 pg. 217]; "...frequently, because of the opportunities of competition for women between these groups, there is actual animosity and warfare." [19 pg. 217]

4.18 Cannibalism?

Yes, it is observed in intertribal warfare [13]

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

Four major towns existed in Yolngu population and each 'town' ranged between 1000 to 2000 people [3]

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

Leadership roles are defined by seniority, which is determined by the birth order [7] "The oldest man in a sibling set exercises (or should exercise) primary authority over his brothers and sisters and their Families. The oldest man in a clan should be its head, with his next-younger brother "second" to him. The expectation that the oldest man in a clan will be its head mitigates the strict ranking of lineages, and in practice if the first son of the first son is still regarded as too young to assume the headship, a younger brother of a deceased head will usually assume the headship. Here exist the grounds of competition for the headship. The rule of seniority operates with respect to both men and women; except that in public men usually exercise authority, birth order is more salient than gender in Yolngu Political process." [7]

5.4 Post marital residence:

A man and his wife (s) sleep and eat together; brothers of the wives frequently live in their proximity [6]

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

Yolngu people say that the land is one of the sources of the conflict [7]; approximately 300 people live in each territory [9 pg. 830]

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

Yolngu's social relationships can be categorized in three different views: normative, existential, and suppositional. Normative view refers to the norms in the society and accepted way of interacting with each other is shaped by the majority of the adults. The relationships included ranges of rightness. Existential view is how the people actually interacted, verified by the observers. Finally, suppositional view is the beliefs/myths held by people about the interaction among other people. [9 pg. 827]

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

Since 'towns' originated as mission areas, they included administrative buildings such as churches. Away from the center were the houses (traditional shelter design) of Yolngu people which were often made from bush timber and corrugated iron [3].

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

Universe is divided into two complementary moieties: Dhuwa and Yirritja [7]

5.12 Trade:

Bark paintings and carvings mainly done by men; woven net bags and baskets made mainly by women comprised significant source of income [4]. Traded "...highly prized stones, ochres, and other objects of ritual value..." with their trading partners [4].

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?:

Kinship, factors of age, gender, birth order influence the organization of groups [7]

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

"Yolngu may now avail themselves of Western medicine and also call on the services of a marrnggitj for diagnosis and/or treatment, especially if the cause of illness is suspected to be sorcery or inadvertent entry into a spiritually dangerous place. Yolngu have in addition a large pharmacopoeia based mainly on indigenous plants, the knowledge and use of which most people have some familiarity with." [8] If a child becomes ill, especially a son, father treats him magically or use native remedies. Father would become very angry and will beat his wife, or even try to kill her, if she neglects her child [19 pg. 220]

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

"The initial phases of induction into ritual adult manhood were often conducted at this time too, when ritual paraphernalia had been renewed and all the appropriate relatives were gathered. Marriage arrangements, trade, and other negotiations were also conducted during the time of ceremonies, which tended to be at the end of the dry season. Rituals at which the clans' most sacred ritual objects are freshly decorated, displayed, and their meanings explained are the most restricted of all: these ceremonies are directed by the oldest men; only mature men who have demonstrated their worthiness are admitted; and the meanings are imparted incrementally." [8] The boy is circumcised between the age of six and nine. His father decides the type of initiation of the ceremony. The child's body is painted in the preparation of initiation. Father teaches his son how to hunt and fight, the dances, songs, words for the great ceremonies [19 pg. 220].

6.4 Other rituals:

In the past, the properties of deceased person were destroyed but now, if they are valuable, they are purified and distributed to their relatives of the deceased [6]

6.5 Myths (Creation):

"Religious beliefs center on the myths that tell the travels and activities of spirit beings "in the Beginning." The earth was much as it is now, but the acts of the spirit beings at that distant time in the past set the patterns of proper behavior for the Yolngu who would follow, and left signs of their presence in the land. "Wangarr" refers both to spirit being and distant time past; it is comparable to what has been called "the Dreaming" or "the Dreamtime" in other accounts of Aboriginal religion. The spirit beings named plants and animals in the language of the people on whom they bestowed the land and performed ceremonies that Present-day owners of the land should perform. They transformed parts of the landscape during their journey." [8] Two mythic cycles about the human origin in Yolngu are Wawilak and Djungkao [9]. Wawilak describes the adventure of two sisters toward the sea while Djungkao describes how another pair of sisters landed on the eastern coast of Arnhem Land and traveled to the west and north. [9 pg. 829]

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

Bangarra Dance Theater is a contemporary performance troupes of Yolngu people [16]. As for the music, Yothu Yindi is a contemporary indigenous music band that is very successful and widely recognized throughout the world today [16].

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

"Since all Yolngu are expected to participate in religious ritual—and most do—all are practitioners. All men sing the ritual songs and at some time do the appropriate dances; all women perform the women's dances that are required for the enactment of some phases of Ceremony. Traditional ritual specialists are men who commit to memory a large corpus of sacred names (sometimes called "power names")—names of clan lands, sites, spirit beings, and their appurtenances—and who intone them in the manner of invocations at certain junctures in ritual performance." [8]

6.8 Missionary effect:

Since the arrival of missionaries, most of the Yolngu people have some knowledge regarding Christianity and some attend churches. [8] “Some Yolngu men have been ordained as ministers in the Uniting Church (the successor of the original mission Methodist church)” [8]

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

“The major ceremonies of the Yolngu focus on death; their mortuary rituals are an elaborate and important part of their culture, although they have undergone certain changes since the advent of the missions.” [8] “At the time of death, the soul, or its malign aspect, remains about the place of death and is a threat to close family members. One objective of the purificatory rites performed to “free” both survivors and material objects associated with the deceased, including houses, is protection from the malignity of the soul. During the extended course of the mortuary ritual, the soul is guided to some particular area or site on its own clan land, usually a place where, along with other souls of its clan, it awaits reincarnation.” [8]

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?:

“After a Yolngu man named Bitjingu died, the word *bithiwul* “no; nothing” was avoided.[4] In its place, a synonym or a loanword from another language would be used for a certain period, after which the original word could be used again; but in some cases the replacement word would continue to be used.” [16]

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

N/A

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

Men learn how to paint the figures and symbols of their clans or their mother’s clan’s heritage

7.2 Piercings:

N/A

7.3 Haircut:

N/A

7.4 Scarification:

N/A

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

The houses are decorated with bark paintings (most prominent) and carvings; necklaces are also made from seeds, shell, and fish vertebrae [16].

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

At large funeral ceremonies, adult men’s bodies are painted in moiety designs of either dhuwa or yirritja; the colors of the paintings are earth-based pigments; they can range from white to beige, brown to yellow, red rust and black [15]

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

7.8 Missionary effect:

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

24 kin terms are used [5]

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

Yolngu people are divided into two moieties: Dhuwa and Yirritja. Dhuwa consists of ten clan groups which are Gumatj, Gupapuyŋu, Wangurri, Ritharrngu, Mangalili, Munyuku, Maḏ arpa, Warramiri, Dhalwaŋu, Liyalanmirri. Yirritja consists of thirteen clan groups which are Rirratjŋu, Gälpu, Djambarrpuyŋu, Golumala, Marrakulu, Marraŋu, Djapu, Ḑatiwuy, Daymil, Djarrwark, Mäl arra, Gamalaŋga, Gorryindi. A person must marry a person of another moiety. Each of these 23 clan groups have their own totems, languages, lands, and philosophies differing from each other. Almost everything is categorized in either Dhuwa or Yirritja such as fish, stone, river and many more. Few items do not have moiety and are categorized as *wakinŋu* [16].

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Yolngu people use hollow logs for burial rituals, and they are also important canvases for Yolngu art [16].

There are dozen dialects of a language group called Yolngu Matha. English can be ranked anywhere from third to tenth language for the Yolngu people [16].

“Yolŋu identify six distinct seasons: *Mirdawarr*, *Dhaarratharramirri*, *Rarranhdharr*, *Worlmamirri*, *Baarra'mirri* and *Gurnmul* or *Waltjarnmirri*.” [16]

Murngin do not practice sister’s daughter exchange [17 pg. 317]

A dog is known to belong to a single man though others may share a feeling of secondary ownership [19 pg. 215]

Father never corrects his children, and this task is left up to other kin. Mother seldom corrects her child, too. [19 pg. 220]

A death of a son is a great loss to his father since there will be nobody to take his place in the future. Father will beat his own head and tries to hurt himself to show his sorrow [19 pg. 220]

Abortion is not infrequent among Yolngu/Murngin people. Pregnant women's sisters exert pressure with knees and hands on the abdomen. If twins are born, girl is usually put to death. One is always killed because it makes the mother feel like a dog who gave a litter. [19 pg. 245]

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