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“It is God who Speaks in the Thunder . . .”:
Mediating Ontologies of Faith and Fear
in Aboriginal Christianity*

The connection between Christianity and the ancestral law of Aboriginal culture has generated considerable debate within Australian Christianity. I explore the intersubjective flow between faith and fear emergent within these two systems and show how external influences have impacted ruptures of ontological thought and experience. These ruptures have both emerged from and shaped social and political change for Yolngu from Galiwin’ku in north-east Arnhem Land. I examine a range of discourses of religious rupture and argue that Christian influences have, at different times, variously competed with, moulded, and naturalized Yolngu ancestral understanding, leading to a surveillance of the social, spiritual, and political relationship between the Gospel and Culture by Yolngu Christians.

Introduction

“You were a forgotten people, a forgotten race, my lost tribe but now your name has been lifted up and people all across the land know about you. I want to bless you. You are my singing angels to sing my praises.”

This prophecy was given to a group of about 50 Yolngu from Galiwin’ku in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia who attended the Alice Springs Christian Convention in Central Australia in 1991. It came at a critical time

1. This prophecy was given by Dale Garrett at a convention to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of David and Dale Garrett’s music ministry, Scripture in Song. The prophecies of this convention were to spur Garratt on to host October 1, 1993, with the first international gathering of 4000 indigenous Christians.
2. Galiwin’ku was formerly known as Elcho Island. It lies 6 km off the northeast Arnhem Land coast, and is approximately 55 km × 35 km.

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* I am indebted to many Yolngu and balanda (non-Yolngu) who have shared their understandings so generously. In particular: Gudaltji Maratja and Gapany; Djinjijini and Gelung; Dangatanga and Bandi; Mawunydjil and Nyiminjda; Colin and Guthadjaka; the Gopuru miyalk; Yurranydjil and Djawut; Wanymuli; Ngandama; George (dec.) and Guymun and Mandjikay Praise; Muwarra; Manydjari; Johnny; Margaret Miller; and all the Datjwuy families. I am especially grateful to Peggy Brock for the opportunity to present this paper at the symposium, Religious Change and Indigenous People: Australia in an International Context, held at Edith Cowan University, February 2002. I thank the symposium participants, as well as Greg Anderson, John Rudder and two anonymous reviewers for their most helpful comments on this paper.
for Yolngu, who had been questioning the relationship between the foundations of the ancestral law and their Christian faith. This prophecy was frequently repeated in testimonies on Galiwin’ku following the convention and served to affirm confidence in their Christian music ministry.3

In the history of Australian missionization, Galiwin’ku Yolngu have been pivotal to internal and cross-cultural dialogues about “traditional” and Christian practices and missionaries in north-east Arnhem Land have played a critical role advocating land rights for Yolngu since the 1960s.4 Indigenous engagement with Christianity along the NT coast began with the arrival of the Methodist Church at Goulburn Island in 1916, followed by Milingimbi (1923), Yirrkala (1935), and Galiwin’ku (1942). World War II intervened in mission activities with the bombing of Milingimbi mission by the Japanese in 1942.5 When the Methodists amalgamated with the Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches in 1976, Galiwin’ku came under the auspices of the Uniting Church.6

Missionary approaches to religious doctrine have differed dramatically across Australia, resulting in varying degrees of acceptance, rejection, and adherence to localized expressions of Christianity.7 Arnhem Land was no exception. For example, in seeking to influence social change, the missionary Theodor Webb — the Methodist superintendent from 1926 to 1939 at Yirrkala — was the first to emphasize that if Yolngu chose to live in a European way, it must be by choice.8 This perspective differed markedly from Webb’s early views of Aboriginal life as particularly “primitive and crude.”9

The “choice” that Webb had spoken of would prove increasingly contentious as Yolngu encountered new legislation that allowed bauxite mining at Yirrkala and the influx of miners to dig in their ancestral earth, invading their spiritual presence in the land.10 Yolngu were concerned with communicating the ancestral essence of place as part of their spiritual ontology in response to the violation of their land through mining.11 Edgar Wells, an influential missionary at the height of the early 1960s land rights debate, understood

3. The prophecy was taken up by the women’s music ministry group on Galiwin’ku, Gopuru, who referred to themselves as “the singing angels” from then on.
5. During this period, “one missionary was taken prisoner and executed,” Harris, 803.
7. Although Max Hart and John Blackett have detailed testimonies from leaders and outlined particular characteristics of Aboriginal Christianity, neither has combined the two elements to explain the conditions for believing as a dialogue about faith and experience. See M. Hart, A Story of Fire: Aboriginal Christianity (Blackwood: New Creation Publication, 1988); J. Blacket, Fire in the Outback: The Untold Story of the Aboriginal Revival Movement that Began on Elcho Island in 1972 (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1997).
8. Harris, 803.
9. Harris, 802.
10. Land could legally be transferred for mining purposes as a result of an agreement between the Methodist Mission Board and the NT government administration in 1958. The Yolngu were not consulted, Harris, 804.
11. Although missionaries on Galiwin’ku had deplored the prospect of mining, the Naptha Petroleum Company had engaged in shale mining operations on the island much earlier in 1923, Harris, 802.
something of the spiritual connection between Yolngu and their land, “We came to believe that unless some Aboriginal leaders retained control of their traditional totemic land, not only would the accumulated wisdom of the people be threatened, but their very survival would be at risk.”12 Fears about the threat to human well-being from the effects of destroying land through mining around the town of Gove, located 12 km from Yirrkala mission, were to resonate across the continent. At Mount Brockman, Bill Neidjie commented on people’s strong reactions to the proposed Uranium mining around Oenpelli. He said, “No! We don’t want uranium. Gove e start . . . enough! We don’t want it here happen again . . . Killing his body where e digging . . . That spirit e do something. Might be im burn his house . . . easy! Or e might blow up car, e might puncture anykind. Because not you’n’me, you’n’me can’t because spirit.”13

Yolngu were also concerned with educating the missionaries about their religious belief system.14 In 1957 Galiwin’ku leaders decided to show their sacred rranga to mission staff. These ancestral objects were foundational to the ancestral law and when they erected them in the mission they placed a Christian cross set in the middle. This “memorial”, which represented “a history of close cooperation with the missionaries,”15 formed the basis of the “adjustment movement” involving a revelation of ancestral objects formerly restricted for women and children.16 This act was an articulation of ancestral belief following Gospel teaching about not hiding things in secret. For Yolngu, the memorial gave respect to the ancestral law under the Christian Godhead. It signified their understanding of ancestral and Christian beliefs. For the missionaries and other balanda, the visual sculpture offered a means of learning about Yolngu religious belief.17

This significant religious event was followed by a charismatic “Revival” in 1979 of 200–300 people meeting nightly for fellowship, singing, praying, and speaking in tongues.18 The social emphasis of this movement was “love,”

15. Keen has argued that: the Memorial provided “unity” between men and women as well as between groups; it was “a gift to the superintendent Harold Shepherdson”; it sealed the authority of the Memorial leaders to preside over the running of the island; and it was “payment” in return for European knowledge. This so called “Adjustment Movement” was led by Wili Walalipa and Batanga. Wili’s son, Djinjinyi Gondarra, was ordained on 24 November 1976 and was to lead the next stage of religious discussion through an “Aboriginal theology” emerging from Galiwin’ku. See I. Keen, Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Religion (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1994), 276, 278.
16. Berndt, 68.
17. Whether referring to faith or church issues, educational contexts or local group management, Yolngu often speak of looking “two ways” to balanda culture and Yolngu culture. To affirm this way of thinking the following words were inscribed on the fence surrounding the memorial: “This is the law of peace, helpful to us all. Now we will worship to Heaven to God. Now we have changed our minds and worship God.” Berndt, 147. See also H. Morphy, “Now you understand”: An analysis of the way Yolngu have used sacred knowledge to retain their autonomy,” in Aboriginals, Land and Land Rights edited by N. Peterson and M. Langton (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983): 110–133, 112.
“friendship,” “brotherhood,” and “sisterhood.” Syncretic elements were also present, with parallels drawn between baptism and the traditional purification ceremony on the one hand, and the law of the sacred objects, *rranga*, and the ten commandments on the other. Debate about these elements paved the way for the rise of an “Aboriginal theology,” developed by a prominent clan leader and Christian minister instrumental at the time of the Christian Revival, Rev. Dr Terry Djiniyini Gondarra. But by the early 1990s, the Galiwin’ku church was seriously questioning the relationship between the ancestral law and Christianity leading to a week of discussions on the gospel and culture.

In this paper, I examine how Djiniyini and other Yolngu Christians understand the moral ties that bind ancestral law and Christianity together as faith and interpretation. I discuss the nature of contested rhetorics that have emerged at key points of ontological disruption in the history and practice of Yolngu Christianity on Galiwin’ku and further explore the complexity of changing social and political conditions that have shaped the experiential nature of Arnhem Land Christianity from the perspective of Yolngu Christians. Expressions of fear, anxiety, strength, power, and peace are shown to stem from the intersubjective flow between people and places mediating the embodiment of spiritual essence, where Yolngu speak of fear as dialectically situated in relation to other spiritual and emotional effects. This flow of spiritual essence regulates Yolngu experiences of harm, illness, and well-being in and through places. An analytic focus serves to draw out points of convergence and divergence with other denominational practices and understandings of ancestral and Christian belief in north-east Arnhem Land and elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia.

21. Rev. Dr Djiniyini Gondarra was trained by the founding Methodist missionary on Galiwin’ku, Rev. Harold Shepherdson and, following seminary in Papua New Guinea and ministry on Galiwin’ku, he was appointed to various positions as moderator of the NT Synod of the Uniting Church, Aboriginal representative to the Australian Church Congress and Aboriginal representative for the World Council of Churches.
22. The ancestral law is the blueprint for moral action and accountability in Yolngu daily life. It is based on the behavioural integrity and spiritual embodiment of the first ancestors, who left the imprints of human essence in the land and sea in the form of various ancestral beings.
24. See H. McDonald *Blood, Bones and Spirit: Aboriginal Christianity in an East Kimberley Town* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 8. In Arnhem Land, the majority of theological and anthropological writings have tended to detail the social parameters and contexts for the emergence or perpetuation of mission and church practices from events such as the Adjustment Movement (Berndt); to the Christian Revival (Bos, “Jesus and the Dreaming”; J. Rudder, “Yolngu Cosmology: An Unchanging cosmos incorporating a rapidly changing world?” (PhD. Thesis, Australian National University, 1993); I. Slotte, “‘We are family, we are one’: An Aboriginal Christian Movement in Arnhem Land, Australia” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1997) or they have focused on the analysis of missionary perspectives and intents (Harris; M. Dewar, *The “Black War” in Arnhem Land: Missionaries and the Yolngu, 1908–40* (Darwin: Australian National University North Australia Research Unit, 1992); Hart; Blackett 1997; T. Swain and D. Rose, eds. *Aboriginal Australia and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1988) as opposed to Yolngu expressions of Christianity.
Alternative rhetorics of belief have emerged as a result of significant events that have challenged the accepted norms and caused ruptures between religious thought and practice and social action. Ruptures have occurred when different domains of Yolngu and Euro-Australian meaning have come into competition with one another over symbolic capital, or when new economic or political structures have influenced local belief and sentiment. These rhetorics are generally constructed around communally recognized states of ancestral and Christian emotion and experience relating to fear and the release from fear, producing the internal state of märr (spiritual power or strength) and the structural conditions for mägaya (peace or the cessation of internal or external conflict materially, socially, spiritually, and physically). I examine various rhetorics of fear and faith in relation to the activities and expectations of the missionaries on Galiwin’ku and examine the ontological ruptures that ensued in the development of Yolngu Christianity. Thus, I move back and forth between the structural premises of ideology and doctrine, as well as prophesy and testimony and ancestral belief and feeling, to elicit moral responses about the relationship between fear and faith in Yolngu life.

Theocentric and Christocentric Approaches

Today, a number of Yolngu leaders negotiate their faith from a cultural basis, as they seek to serve their communities through Christian witness. However, Yolngu Christians hold a multiplicity of perspectives on their involvement in the tenets and requirements of the ancestral law. Some leaders profess a moral connectedness that is both heterogeneous and homogeneous; one that is theocentrically situated and rooted in the placedness of the ancestral law. Other leaders hold to a Christocentric profession of belief and experience, renouncing ancestral rootedness as unnecessary for living with appropriate moral accountability to God. The majority of Yolngu on Galiwin’ku acknowledge that belief in Christianity lies somewhere along a continuum within or between these poles. However, not all Yolngu on Galiwin’ku believe in the power of the Christian God over the spiritual efficacy of the ancestral beings and some reject Christianity as a way of life. As perspectives shift along the continuum, Yolngu contend with what constitutes acceptable thought and action in relation to social and material welfare and ancestral action and involvement.

As Yolngu Christians believe in the assurance that Jesus protects, they also hold a healthy regard for abstaining from things that could contaminate the spiritual self. Scripture provides moral codes for living, however there are contested views about the boundaries of Yolngu cultural practices. Indeed, individuals hold diverse opinions about what might be acceptable or unacceptable engagement with certain ancestral elements and ritual practices.

26. The state of being “inside” or “outside” with regard to knowledge of the ancestral law is relative to context and is derived from the continuum of restrictions pertaining to ritual knowledge and authority. See H. Morphy *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
such as singing and dancing. A few Yolngu consider their ancestral identity unnecessary for living, because they believe Jesus offers true life. They speak of walking in the *dhunupa dhukarr* (straight path) following the *yuwalk rom* (true law). A significant number of Yolngu struggle to relate their ancestral identity to Christianity. Others seek to bring insight to the idea that ancestral creation and identity reveal a divine relationship of God with His world. A few reject the teachings of Christ altogether. Religious services may have a more theocentric or Christocentric bent, depending on who is speaking and ministering, and whether they are at fellowships, rallies, or national and international conventions.

Social and Spiritual Surveillance

In addition to this spectrum of belief, Yolngu Christians also engage in a divinely orientated surveillance of their own bodies and their communal expressions of faith. The church elders often discuss external influences requiring social changes amongst themselves and in their homes. These surveillance practices are not new because a *mêlée* of alternative ways of knowing have permeated north-east Arnhem Land. The first visitors, fishermen from Macassar (Ujung Pandung) in Sulawesi, landed on the northernmost shores to collect trepang (also known as sea slug, *bêche-de-mer*, or sea cucumber) in exchange for metal axes, knives, fish hooks, wire prongs (for spears), pottery, glass, rice, tobacco, cloth, beads, arrack, and gin.27 They also exchanged their songs and some aspects of Islam.28 More recently, other belief systems such as atheism, Baha’i, humanism, materialism, and science have converged upon the area in rapid succession, some arriving and departing without significant impact upon daily practices, others requiring a continual evaluation of appropriate social responses. In this melting pot of contested ideologies, Yolngu Christianity has emerged as a powerful paradigm, gathering considerable momentum since early mission years.

From the perspective of many Yolngu and missionaries, the long-term missionaries on Galiwin’ku generally brought a sense of certainty, order, direction, clarity, security, and discipline, as well as the predictability of expectation and reward within Yolngu daily routine until their departure in 1977.29 They were fondly remembered and the events of mission days are still re-enacted on special occasions in the absence of the missionaries.30 When the Galiwin’ku mission was first established in 1942, it supported Rev. Harold Shepherdson (*Bäpa Sheppie*); his wife, Ella Shepherdson; one nurse; one

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29. One exception to this was James A. Robertson, the acting superintendent at Milingimbi, who tried to persuade Yolngu men to embrace monogamy and was wounded as a result (see McMillen, 91).
30. See McIntosh, “Anthropology.”
teacher; Clem and Joyce Gullick; and Harold and Heather Kraak. Approximately 700–800 Yolngu were resident in the town during this period. Morning prayer was held at 6.30 AM 5 days per week. At 8.00 AM the bell rang to call men and women to work and the children to school. Church services were held in English with Yolngu interpretations by leaders such as Batangga, Makarrwala, Burrumarra, Rurrumbu, and Bunbatju; and hymns were played on a pedal organ. The Galiwin’ku choir became renowned in NT for the quality of its singing. It won numerous awards over several years, beginning in 1969 at the Darwin Eisteddfod. The choir later toured to Brisbane and Central Australia.

This practical care opened up possibilities for dialogue and an exchange of reciprocal understanding. Some aspects of the missionaries’ “civilizing and Christianising” approach to Yolngu life spoke indirectly to a morally interconnective ancestral world. The missionaries’ moral engagement with Yolngu was based on a practical Christianity formulated as a Protestant work ethic and essentially motivated by mutual respect and love. In some ways, they were practising the very foundations of the ancestral law: the rule of djägamirr — caring for or looking after one another. This paradigm of care was manifested through development of gardens and a sawmill, teaching trade skills, and providing a general education that included learning to read and write in English.

Killing them Softly
When the mission staff left Galiwin’ku, responsibility for Yolngu welfare was transferred to the Galiwin’ku Community Council, which issued fortnightly benefit cheques. A former council chairman lamented the passing of the mission and the changes taking place in Yolngu culture when he remarked:

Look at Galiwin’ku. There are problems with litter, children sniffing petrol, dogs with diseases, pregnant underage girls. Why? Because everyone is sitting around doing nothing. Not like the old mission days. Then we had work to do all day and it was strict. Bâpa Sheppie would come out and say, “Nhä (What) you playing yidaki (didjeridu)? Nhä (What) at 10 o’clock at night? You have work in the morning.

Today, the bell announces the two services that are held on the island at 10.00 AM and 7.30 PM on Sundays. Morning prayer takes place at 6.00 AM most weekdays and members of the bible translation team lead lunchtime prayer meetings. There are 1200–1300 people resident on the island (800 in the town and 400–500 living at homelands along the coast), of which 60–130 attend church services in the morning, and 20–200 or more attend at night.

32. Hymns had previously been taught in English at Yirrkala, having been translated into Gupapuyngu by Beulah Lowe in 1955.
33. Successive school choirs have continued to perform competitively in Darwin since their first musical awards including the category of sacred song in 1969. In 1991, I accompanied children of the Gopuru women’s ministry group who first competed in Darwin for the Eisteddfod and they, in turn, won both categories of sacred song. It could be argued that the early inculturation of these children to sacred song partially accounts for the strength of musical leadership in contemporary Galiwin’ku Christian worship.
depending on the event and its location. Church services may be held in church on Sunday morning, outside the church at night, at a funeral area, on a homeland, or at someone’s house. People may congregate for fellowship during a funeral; for other community rallies; or celebrations such as Easter or Christmas. The Galiwin’ku congregation is continually involved in taking their music ministry to outstations for Christian rallies, both on the island and on the mainland. At these rallies, a wooden stage is generally constructed in a shady clearing encircled by lights and situated a short distance from the camp. Shelters are built from stringybark trunks with leafy branches or tarpaulins stretched across the top to provide shade in the heat of the day. By dusk, a few Yolngu start to drift across the area for worship and spread sheets out on the sand for themselves and their families as they sing, pray, and listen to readings, testimonies, and sermon.

Although the principle of *djägamirr* has remained of paramount importance, people have continued to struggle to ensure their children are woven into the ancestral law of accountability. Parents are confronted with their children sniffing petrol, and they must deal with absenteeism from school, despondency amongst youth, conflicts over the nature of education and ritual responsibilities, and a general loss of control over their own lives.

Although Galiwin’ku can police alcohol infiltration to some extent because it is a “dry” island, it is not free from the new youth trend of fermenting cordial with yeast; nor the sporadic influx of kava from Yirrkala; nor, at times, the availability of marijuana from passing contractors working on the island. These drug-related activities impact on the mental and physical health of youths. They separate them from their families and their responsibilities, leading to social alienation and an eventual lack of moral accountability to and by their peers who view them as irresponsible and unworthy of being entrusted with the ancestral law.

The slide down the slippery slope of mistrust and disrespect has been a common route since government intervention. Too often youth have ended up in a spiral of despair and prison sentences. In continually changing social circumstances, leaders speak of mission days as ones of reformation with education, care, and development leading the way. When the transmission of ancestral knowledge has been threatened by social problems — or other destabilizing factors, such as the welfare system that establishes differentials of access to money in the community — rhetorics of fear have been played out in a complex series of irruptions and engagements over conflicting values and priorities, such as time-consciousness, monetary concerns, and work-orientated living in relation to ritual obligations and ancestral principles.35

Although Bos has argued that this situation was easing by 1976 because of self-determination policies,36 it is clear that these social pressures did not die

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out, nor were communities able to completely control the problems they were encountering as a result of outside influences. At that time, people also began to speak against church ideals and practice. In this increasing spirit of social and spiritual unrest, the then Minister of Galiwin’ku, Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra, recalls how he began a morning service in 1979:

I began to pray for the people and the Church that God would pour out His Holy Spirit to bring healing and renewal to the hearts of men, women and the children . . . suddenly the whole form of prayer changed and everybody began to pray and there was a great noise in the room. After this people began to meet every evening in family groups and . . . people were singing choruses and hymns where before there had been violent fighting.

The effects of the Revival were critical to ameliorating social discontent. Singing was a traditional and transformative catalyst for emotional release as one of the major obligations of Yolngu ritual is to respect and honour one another through song and dance. This principle has been “naturalised” as part of the Christian obligation to witness as Yolngu have developed indigenous expressions of Christian worship. By the time of the Revival, guitars and keyboards had been introduced to worship and Soft Sands (a Gospel music group) had been playing Christian songs in a Country and Western style. The music of the Revival also involved the formation of family singing groups, such as Dhurrkay Praise (who composed their own choruses in Yolngu style and language but with guitars and keyboards), at evening fellowships and as “items” for Sunday morning services. By 1990 media technologies and new instruments such as elaborate keyboards with a range of rhythms and sounds were radically altering Yolngu understandings of Christian expressions of worship.

Yolngu Christian groups had also taken their songs and dances across the nation and the world to Darwin, Katherine, Sydney, Germany, and Israel among other places.

In the past decade, Christian Yolngu on Galiwin’ku have developed a wide range of music through which they dance out their faith to counter feelings of doubt or fear. Youth groups from various homelands practise dance actions to American Gospel choruses on cassette, Sydney’s Hillsong ministries, music

37. Today, council leaders still exhort parents over the public announcement system to go and look for their children, while calling community meetings to establish rehabilitation programs for youth, engaging them in community projects.


39. Items are special compositions sung or danced by family groups for the congregation.

40. The music of Galiwin’ku has spread across Australia and has been translated into Warlpiri, Pitjantjatjara, and other indigenous Australian languages. The influences of audio materials have been immense and the Bible translation “Scripture-In-Use Team” produces song cassettes, recordings of services, posters, and bookmarks for local distribution. In addition, Yolngu can now see depictions of the Gospel in their own language because two videos have been produced in Djambarrpuyngu illustrating the Crucifixion from John’s Gospel and the Christmas Story. By August 1992, a mini version of the Djambarrpuyngu Bible had been published during the 50th anniversary mission celebrations, and a full version of the New Testament was completed in September 2002 for the 60th mission celebrations.
from Israel, or music from Ireland such as Revival in Belfast. A number of families have visited the Mary Sisters in Sydney and Germany and some have spent several Easters in Israel. Yet others have attended workshops in Brisbane to learn Christian dance with tambourines and streamers. The flow of these dances is seen to reveal the relationship between the Holy Spirit, the individual, and their moral accountability to God and one another. Speaking of his children’s involvement in this ministry, Colin commented on how they have been used to bring prophetic messages to the congregation in Christian dances set to contemporary music using tambourines and streamers:

Many times the Lord has used them to bring a message to the church. One of the messages that was brought to the church was through this song Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus. It came at a time when a lot of people were very frightened and there were payback killings going on and rumours about that sort of thing and a lot of trouble in the community, and the message of Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus was something that was given by God at the time and it strengthened the faith of a lot of people. It changed the focus from what the Devil was doing to what God was doing and it really made a difference in the community.41

Dancing prophecies are spoken of as clear, sweet sounds in the heart. Some say they are “felt” as frequencies where the foundation of Yolngu being is as a musical note; a vibration of life, matter with frequency emplaced in and arising from the ground on which one stands. Consequently, the dialogue between Christianity and the ancestral law has been played out either in Christian songs that emphasize the centrality of Jesus or in musical items that draw upon traditional song and dance using clapsticks and didjeridu. Some songs have incorporated women’s ritual melodies and some groups sing and dance their own compositions wearing traditional body painting. These local expressions of Christian creativity contrast with other denominational practices across Australia, such as the United Aborigines Mission in Halls Creek where:

Present day missionaries wish there could be more Aboriginal cultural content in their church services, that didgeridoos and boomerang clapsticks could be introduced along with Aboriginal languages in singing, and that more of the Dreamtime stories were known.42

One explanation for the lack of cultural content comes from the United Aborigines Missionaries’ concern that Aboriginal religion is based on fear resulting in a reserved approach to cultural elements.43

**Overcoming Captivity**

In Arnhem Land, the relationship between fear of the Devil through sorcery and the power of Jesus is at the heart of Yolngu issues between culture and the

41. The words of the song *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* speak of reassurance from fear:
   
   I was hopeless ‘till He touched me
   I was scared until He heard
   I was senseless ‘till I placed my wonder
   In His hands.

42. McDonald, 61.

43. McDonald, 62.
Gospel. In Yolngu thought, spiritual attack is the possibility of being led to fear and be afraid. It is perceived as a potentially ever-present danger that needs to be addressed by the Church. The “call” to Christian evangelism, then, creates a paradox between local expressions of faith; engagement with Christian and non-Christian relatives; ancestral obligations; problems of sorcery; and social and material living. In this call, there is a tension between the once-and-for-all personal sanctification of baptism and the ongoing resanctification of daily moral outworking through the continual submission and humbling of the self to God’s purposes and cultural obligations. In 1991, assistant minister of Galiwin’ku, Dangatanga, said, “I’m a blood-washed, life-changed Christian. How can we, the Church, grow and nurture our Aboriginal people?” Where and how obligations to the ancestral law fit into the call to witness is perceived as a challenge for the church.

Yolngu Christian leaders often reflect on the nature of their moral selves in relation to their ancestral identities as they pertain to the foundational principles of ancestral cosmology. Despite disparate views about the synchronicity between Christian and ancestral belief on Galiwin’ku, all Yolngu share a common concern of moral accountability to one another in the ancestral law. Accountability is represented in ritual feather strings that are fashioned for each clan and worn when dancing the journeys of the first ancestral creators.44 These journeys are realized through word, vision, and action manifested in story, song, and dance. They twist and turn like the ritual feather strings used in armbands,45 headresses, and dillybags that metaphorically tie people and homelands together by their designs and spiritually constitute the moral fibre of Yolngu being.46

Each person possesses their own ritual string given in recognition of their development of ritual knowledge signifying the relationship that each individual has towards his or her homeland(s) and reflecting their rights and obligations. Composed of bark fibres, the string is interspersed with feathers that carry moral, social, spiritual, and political meaning. Women roll two strands of the crushed and softened bark of red kurrajong fibres on their thighs, meshing them together. A third element of perhaps orange lorrakeet feathers, white cockatoo feathers, or grey possum fur is incorporated and the substance of string comes to life; women weaving the blood and essence of the feathers and fur into the “marrow” of the string as flesh and sinew into the person on

44. These journeys have not been without their contentions and some individuals have chosen to step aside from certain levels of involvement with their ancestral roots owing to apprehensions about the sorts of spiritual activity they are engaging in. Elsewhere, I have discussed the debates that have taken place on Galiwin’ku over whether ancestral words can be used for worship and the politics of ancestral belief in Christian contexts. See F. Magowan, “The Joy of Mourning: Resacralizing ‘the Sacred’ Music of Yolngu Christianity and Aboriginal Theology,” *Anthropological Forum* 9, (1999): 11–36; F. Magowan, “Songs of the Spirit or Spirit Songs?: Tension and confluence in Yolngu music syncretism,” *Manchester Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 5* (Manchester: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, 1996), 1–22.


46. Ritual objects such as the Morning Star have feather strings attached along their length “representing the journey of the Morning Star to each clan’s territory and the feathered tassel at the end stands for each Morning Star place in turn” Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*: 230; Rudder (1993).
their points of being and journeys of personal growth. Each feathery marking is a sign of place, a focus of becoming, an ancestral event of the emergence of life where the ground and identity of the string maker is also inscribed in the action of rolling in the nostalgia of her own ancestral belonging.47

Just as a woman rolls fibres of moral and emotional obligations into her relational journey with others as she makes the string, so a man can break his moral duty to a woman by cutting his ritual string if he chooses. On one occasion, Wadaymu tied his ancestral honey string between two eucalyptus trees and sat down at the back of his house underneath it. He spent 2 days in contemplation. On the third day he rose and, taking a knife, cut the cord in an act of severing his heart and soul from a lifelong commitment and obligation to his next potential spouse. As a Christian man, Wadaymu understood the significance of the third day of Christ’s resurrection. In the process of severance, he enacted the antithesis of Christ’s reconciliatory grace bestowed upon humanity when he rose again from death on the cross, by “hanging” his potential spouse between two trees and severing the string of moral obligation and emotional denial as he cut his ancestral substance from hers.

Thus, knowing oneself as ancestrally bound to other people and places by spiritual string begins with the knowledge that the fibre of the ancestral self is dreamt from the land, painted into the ritual body as streaks of lifeblood, ochres of the earth, and sunset-red clouds. These colour-pulses of moral fibre are the life force of river veins and sound over the landscape in the ritual echoes of song, meshing the string of one ancestral journey with another, at the same time that the beat of dancers’ feet on the earth pound out the heartbeats of ancestral obligation from compassion to love and from fear to faith. This “flow of ancestral life-forces between the living and the dead”48 is remarked upon in a story that Djanggirrawuy told to John Rudder (my emphasis in bold):

If he loses [a man dies] and passes away and lies back on his elbow likan ngayili djipthun . . . like [a] broken branch, sing mayku (barrukala dharpa [paperbark tree]). Instead of saying, “He’s gone”, I sing the song that says, “He’s resting in peace”, and in that song mention the places and announce with my spirit where his spirit has gone [my emphasis] . . . Next I sing guku (my spirit turning into guku (honeybee) and flying). The song tells where he’s started and then his journey as guku. Then sing mokuy ([spirit being named] Murayana.). Same thing . . . After mokuy, singing about “märr” (a man’s deepest desires and feelings, likened to string) but singing about the string called Yaliyali and Rätja . . . By singing the song, it’s like praying how much we love that mokuy (dead person). Our love is long like the long string. It doesn’t help the mokuy (dead person), it helps our beliefs. We perform in a special way making ceremony (bunggul) and song (manikay) so we feel comfort instead of hard feelings or jealousy.49

48. McDonald, 22.
49. Rudder, 60. Morphy also comments on the movement of spirit to the homeland through funeral rituals and the return of spiritual power through the Djungguwan ceremony. Morphy, Ancestral Connections, 132.
The final song of the string is a journey of deep emotional connection between the living and the deceased, mirrored in the earlier song of the honeybee flying, where the honey is the water and clean flowing lifeblood of the person that has just oozed back into the spiritual vein of the earth to be taken home to the pool of spirits to be reborn.

Just as a man can choose to cut off his moral ties to a potential spouse, so a person can forfeit their right to be protected by the ancestral law by breaking it. The fear of breaking an ancestral cord of accountability provokes moral and spiritual retribution as violations of personhood and unresolved relational tensions allow toxins to leach into the person’s lifestring and destroy the moral fibre of reciprocity between relatives. The assistant minister of Galiwin’ku remarked:

You don’t need to fear unless you do something like walk into a men’s business, a Ngärra or something like that and then after a few months you know you’d die. But you broke the Law. Yes, I know what fear is. Sometimes when I’m out hunting I can feel galka, a harmful spirit, watching me. If someone tells a woman or young person about some Gunapipi thing then they know that they will maybe get very sick or die too: that’s evil and there’s fear there.50

Rhetorics of fear take several forms. Most prominent among these are rhetorics of social deprivation and dislocation, bodily malaise, and spiritual illness resulting from involvement in inappropriate ancestral activity or intrusion to ancestral places that hold people accountable for their actions. They contain deep, “inside” law that cannot be broken and that is restricted for senior male leaders only. This ontological relationship is not unique to Yolngu. Speaking of ancestral sites in Western Arnhem Land, Bill Neidjie, explains:

That secret place . . . dreaming there.
We fright. Might be something there.
You might get hurt or you might spoil something there.
You might spoil anybody, no-matter where.
Same as cyclone if you spoil it. First one might be east,
No-matter Croker, Elcho or Brisbane . . . same.52

For Yolngu Christians the fear of spiritually dangerous places may be covered by the blood of salvation that is to be found by believing in Jesus.53 Whereas Yolngu understand the ancestral environment as embodying trickster spirits, Yolngu Christians now perceive nature as mediated by good and

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50. This situation is similar to that cited by McDonald, 44, with regard to Halls Creek. There the mamu/juwarri (spirits of the dead) were once used to give people special powers to see inside the Law. In Arnhem Land, galka spirits were called upon for sorcery. However, since missionary times, these spirits are seen as bad influences that should not be “touched” in any way.
51. Sansom discusses the concepts of “risk” and “danger” in relation to the threat of being evicted from camp dwelling around the fringes of Darwin. B. Sansom, The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers in Darwin (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980), 178.
52. Neidjie, 80–81.
53. In ritual, Yolngu paint their bodies for dancing as spiritual protection against potentially harmful spiritual influences. The metaphysical covering of the “blood” of the lamb is also spoken of as spiritual protection. The assistant minister on Galiwin’ku told me that he would greet “poison” relations in the name of the Lord because he was covered by the blood of Jesus.
healing forces, combatting fear in the assurance and peace of God.\textsuperscript{54} Dangatanga noted:

The trees talk to me, the waves are speaking to me, everywhere I am talking to God and He is speaking to me. You know about those curses when the *galka*, harmful spirit comes? One man said he was frightened because of a curse from the lightning. A *galka* had cursed him through the lightning. I told him the lightning can’t curse him because it is God who speaks in the thunder and the lightning. The voice of God is what we hear and a curse cannot stand against the power of the voice of God.

Ministers such as Mawunydjil further stress that Christian worship should be discerned from the Holy Spirit through communion with Jesus in prayer. He is concerned about the nature of spiritual forces that may come into play during ancestral events. He said:

We know in our sacred sites there are good and bad things. Maybe we have to open the Bible and see what it says about bad things. When our forefathers had visions who was the spirit who gave it? Good or bad spirits can talk to us. Now we all claim when we have a vision it’s God. When people sit and sing at sacred sites who are they singing to? We tell people, “Be quiet this is a sacred place, you have to be careful”. I ask, who are we respecting or afraid to offend?

Release from fear is a central concern of the Yolngu Church and a continuous discourse within the community that is often addressed in sermons and local stories about the effects of fear from unexplained deaths. For example, Mawunydjil explained how he overcame fear by trusting in Jesus when he had contravened ancestral law by not observing the proper ritual treatment of cycad nut. He said:

One day I was eating *warraga*, cycad nut and I didn’t put a piece into the sacred ground but I didn’t get any boils or sores on my body. I should have been very sick. I broke the Law. So I will build my church on Jesus’ foundation and not on my *luku*, sacred ancestral foundation.

As Mawunydjil reveals, the articulation of fear is a controlling aspect of social behaviour through ancestral rituals but it may be overcome by the reconciling power of Christ. In another context, regarding the now obsolete practices surrounding the treatment of female menstruation, Yälurr commented:

In the past, people had to go out and get *miyalk* [women] to teach the special law. [They would say], “You’re not allowed to eat *munydjutj*, [green plum] or *ngarrirri mama* [fish eggs] or anything on the sea. You eat tinned food – meat – not fresh. It’s forbidden when you have a period until it’s over.” But when the Revival happened here, *bala ngayi ngunhi*, [then their] spiritual minds opened. Most time Yolngu *nhama* [see] they have period but [they say] “*Baydhin limurr dhu lukan dhiyaku Djesuwal limurr dhu lukan*.” [“Never mind, we will eat because Jesus ate.”] Many times, I’ve heard that. Because, before, if you eat *guya* [fish] or *miyapunu* [turtle] while you’re still having a period, the person who spears that turtle wouldn’t get any the next time. Same way, if you go to get *marinydjalk* [stingray] it will turn around

and sting you because someone ate marinydjalk with a period. Many times it’s happened. Yo.

Yälurr relates how, in ancestral practice, the natural environment responds to the respect afforded it by the correct management of potentially polluting substances, just as its mismanagement results in reprimand or fear of attack from evil spirits. The reconciling element is seen as Jesus’ unconditional love that can overcome the fear of spiritual attack that otherwise would cause illness and possible death.

In another ritual context, speaking of the law of circumcision and the Ngārra fertility ritual, Yälurr continued:

Ngārramirri [At the time of the Ngārra fertility ritual] a new person through the Ngārra gets a painting and pay people to do it. Before, we used to use warraga cycad nut (bread) to pay or ngula nhā walal dhu gurrupan gara [or whatever we could give them like spears]. They wear a T-shirt over it all the time. When they paint the chest you can look. Nowadays people take photos of it everywhere. Before it was forbidden in circumcision to see the painting, now you can see it. They must not wash the painting off until it has worn off naturally, otherwise he’ll lose his life. Today that law still applies.

Cycad nut bread is ambiguous food because the nuts are poisonous before leaching, but peace can be restored between people by eating it. Offering food in compensation that is potentially lethal, but has been thoroughly leached of toxins before being pulped and made into a dough, is a sign of trust and friendship and good food permeates the body of feeling with “sensational properties”. By contrast, ill-will can be transferred through the wrong actions carried out on poisonous food resulting in social or physical violations of personhood. The ingestion of “bad food” can take the form of any sense-related poison from seeing, smelling, tasting, or touching a restricted sacred object.

On another occasion, Gelung recounted how Djiniyini had a dream about bad feeling between groups that required restorative moral action mediated by cycad nut bread:

He told the women in a dream to go out and collect warraga [cycad nut] and balkpalk [red-fruited kurrajong] and prepare them because the enemy was coming from Dholti. The enemy came in the form of warruyu, [bats]. Lots and lots of bats representing all Yirritja people and they sat on a tree at Dhalinybuy. The one on the top, however, was madakarritj [angry]. This represented Dholti. The bat then flew to Galiwin’ku and sat outside Wanymuli’s house on the telephone box. It took the form of Jezebel with bracelets and long hair, like a loose woman.

Gelung interpreted Djiniyini’s dream as God asking whether they were all prepared to meet Him, given that there had been arguing between different Yirritja and Dhuwa groups. The groups in conflict were the two Yirritja cycad groups (Warramirri and Wangurri) and the Dhuwa balkpalk red-fruited

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56. Dholti is Warramiri country in the Wessel Islands.
57. Dhalinybuy is Wangurri country in Arnhem Bay.
kurrajong, or peanut-tree group (Djambarrpuyngu). The image of conflict between the cycad-nut and peanut-tree groups symbolized the preparation it would take for them to be “made ready” — leached of their bad feeling towards one another before they would be like Jesus. The bats flying from one group’s homeland to another represented the strings of bad feeling, poor relations, and lack of unity that characterized them at the time, because bats and owls are messengers of bad tidings.

Dreams such as these are central to the mediation of Christian action and experience. For example, a senior woman, Gudaltji, related a prophetic vision she had prior to the death of her close friend and member of the women’s Gopuru singing group, Tracey. She related how Tracey had been out hunting with some relatives but she had suddenly fainted, and, after being taken to hospital, died on a Sunday night. The news of the death did not reach the community until Tuesday but Gudaltji had a vision before the community announcement. She said:

On Monday night I was at Dhambala sleeping and I had a dream that I was walking by a gulun (freshwater lake) that God had created, with lots of wakwak (waterlillies) that God had made and beautiful clear water. There were lots of animals there too, just like a Garden of Eden. As I walked to the other side of the lake there was a tree and underneath there were the Gopuru girls, “the singing angels”: Yikaniwuy, Wuthangi, Tracey, Djakalulu, and Margaret. They were singing all the new songs that God had given them. Then they got up and came back around the lake and sat with all the Yolngu women and taught them the new songs. The women started to sing in tongues. They were all dressed in different colours reflecting their different groups and praising in their own tongues. Then, in the dream, I woke up and I was back in my room at Dhambala but there was a light on the door, like a candle and I saw Tracey there. At the same time, a cool wind, a really beautiful wind blew through the room and I knew [that Tracey had died]. The next morning, I got up to make Dhalnganda his tea at 6 AM and was driving back into town when Wuthangi said to me, “Look at all those people sitting at Gundjirrirr’s house, there’s a hearing going on.” I started to cry because of my dream the night before. I already “marni” [knew that she had died].

In this vision, the natural environment is the Edenic antithesis of worldly pain and therefore a cathartic conduit for ordering a sense of loss, grieving and detachment from a loved one. Gudaltji’s vision is centred around the encouragement of singing, praising, and praying — just as funeral rituals are centred around singing and dancing — when she senses Tracey’s presence as a cool wind blowing through the room. The light on the door was a visible appearance of Tracey “born” as spirit like the light of a candle. Zorc notes that the term malng’tun means “to be born” and (more commonly) “to appear,” “come out,” “come to light,” “happen,” and “turn up.” D. Zorc, Yolngu-Matha Dictionary (Darwin: School of Australian Linguistics, 1986), 169.
sounding, moving corporeality of the self as centred in Christ and as spiritually interacting with a feelingful understanding of the ancestral landscape.\textsuperscript{61}

The varieties of Yolngu religious interpretations suggest a spectrum of approaches to faith, raising questions about the extent to which Yolngu Christianity might be considered theocentric and Christocentric. As MacDonald notes, “The liberal churches in Arnhem Land make a stronger case for continuity between Aboriginal traditions and Christianity,”\textsuperscript{62} a continuity that has been more concertedly worked through Djiniyini’s Aboriginal theology:

If I am to have my true identity before God, you cannot lock me into your ways. You must give me freedom to be me . . . He has given us the vision for the Aboriginal Church to think and theologise the Gospel in the language and the culture of the people.

The Reformation gave Western culture the freedom to explore the dialogue between Gospel and culture in many directions. The Western Church has not, in turn, given that same freedom to Aboriginal people to explore that dialogue through their own culture. We now want to, and must explore that dialogue.\textsuperscript{63}

The effects of this merger have tended either towards theocentric analogies between Old Testament practices and the ancestral law; or towards a more Christocentric faith, often centred on overcoming the fear of spiritual power in ancestral places. However, these positions are ontologically joined by a continuity of “potent substances and energies of the body.”\textsuperscript{64} Consequently, the dilemma perceived by Christian leaders (who are also senior elders) is the need to discern how to live for Christ whilst still negotiating cultural issues. Some tend more to a Christocentric perspective that holds to the omnipotent power of Jesus in overcoming fear. However, as has been shown, certain places are known to be dangerous and the “inside” law of the land is still restricted for senior male elders. For Christian leaders, their engagement with ancestral duties are brought to the fore as they have obligations to particular clans to handle *rrangga* (sacred objects) and make decisions about engagements with place based upon the law.

**Conclusion**

By unravelling these entwined strings of social, political, and religious knowing, it has been argued that Yolngu practise a lived faith that is historically and politically situated and experientially dynamic due to the convergence of separate spheres of meaning peculiar to Galiwin’ku. In these contentious and shifting spaces of negotiated belief, some Yolngu are recreating their own faith-centred emplacement in landscape; one that transcends the original context of fear through the presence of divine goodness in the power of Jesus.

61. Another kind of naturalization has been identified at Roper River where local concepts such as “*gud binji*,” (a full stomach or a sense of self worth), speak to the divine characteristics of God, who is also said to have *gud binji* in the Kriol Bible. B. Sansom, “A Frightened Hunting Ground: Epic Emotions and Landholding in the Western Reaches of Australia’s Top End,” *Oceania* 72 (2002): 156–194.
62. McDonald, 186.
63. See Gondarri, 6, 7.
64. McDonald, 16.
Alongside belief in Jesus’ love and protection is a concern for ensuring moral accountability between relatives by fulfilling ritual obligations of the ancestral law. These two strands of ontological being have resulted in the Galiwin’ku Church working to shed light through Scripture on what they see as an increasing world of fear and doubt as they deal with ever faster rates of technological, political, and social change.

Within this arena of uncertainty, Christian doctrine remoulds the ontological ground of ancestral being and, for Christian Yolngu, it is faith in Jesus’ love that binds kin together in cords of continuous ancestral becoming.