





# YOLNU LONGGRASSERS ON LARRAKIA LAND

August 2004

Acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Methodology	8
Research Findings	9
Discussion	15
Recommendations	17
Conclusion	19
Glossary	20
References	21

#### Note on Interviews, Translations and Quotes

All interviews with long-grassers were conducted in Yolŋu Matha (Yolŋu language). All the quotes in this report have been translated from Yolŋu Matha into English by the authors.



# Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* (Yolŋu Nurturing Centre) Management Committee and the Project Management Committee of Community Harmony Project of Darwin and Palmerston (formally known as the Itinerants Project) for supporting this project. Thanks also to the Northern Territory Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs (DCDSCA) and Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS) for their funding support and professional assistance.

We wish to thank Anne Lowell (CRCAH), Maria Scarlett (MSHR), Phillipa Webb (DCDSCA) for their assistance in developing the research methodology, and Dorothy Yungirriŋa and David Gelma for their contribution in carrying out the research. Thanks also go to Community Harmony Project Coordinator, Leon Morris, and Project Officer, Camille Damaso for their encouragement and support while facilitating and coordinating the project.

We are indebted to Joe Djindulu, Dhuwalatji, Genuluwun for their advice and assistance in carrying out interviews with people in the long-grass in Darwin.

We especially thank all those Yolŋu people living in the long-grass who participated in this research by agreeing to be interviewed. We dedicate this to them, and hope that the report will give others a better understanding of their situations and their needs.

## About the Authors

Maypilama (also known as Lawurrpa) and Garngulkpuy are researchers from the *Yalu Marngithathinyaraw*, Yolŋu Nurturing Centre, Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island.

Michael Christie and John Greatorex work at the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (SAIKS), Charles Darwin University.

Jocelyn Grace works for the Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin.



# Executive Summary

The *Yalu Marrgithinyaraw* centre runs programs to support families at Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island in Eastern Arnhem Land. *Yalu Marrgithinyaraw* is based on the traditional Yolŋu philosophy of nurturing through action. Yolŋu people have for a long time been concerned about their relatives living in the long-grass in Darwin. In 2002, there was considerable discussion in the media about 'itinerants', and some *Yalu Marrgithinyaraw* members became even more concerned, they began looking for ways of helping their people in Darwin. They heard about and made contact with the Itinerants Project, with a view to gaining support to carry on the work they had already begun, which they received. They were able to draw on the assistance of the CRC for Aboriginal Health, and later the Menzies School of Health Research and the Faculty of Indigenous Research and Education (now known as SAIKS) at Charles Darwin University, to design their research and to compile this report.

The *Yalu Marrgithinyaraw* researchers are not researchers in the Balandá sense, but concerned fellow Yolŋu who have the authority of senior men and women in the Yolŋu political world, and in some cases they are relatives of the long-grassers whom they interviewed in Darwin. The methodology was participatory and action-based; encouraging and assisting people is as important as gathering information. The researchers have implemented this methodology as a Yolŋu process. It is based on their experience and knowledge as Yolŋu people.

The people who were approached to be interviewed were informed about the purpose of the research, and those who agreed to participate gave their verbal consent. They were invited to tell their stories and were asked whom they wanted to tell those stories to. During the project the *Yalu Marrgithinyaraw* researchers assisted many people, providing referral to available services where appropriate, and/or facilitating repatriation to Elcho Island.

The main findings from this research were that for most people drinking alcohol was not their reason for living in the long-grass. Rather, it was the consequence of deeper problems, which had not been addressed or resolved. Most people said they wanted to go home and live on their country but there were many difficulties which prevented them doing so, and had usually triggered their leaving in the first place. The main reason for coming to Darwin was fear - fear of violence, including suicide, mental illness, aggressive behaviour and *galka'* (sorcery).

Some people who are living in the long-grass in Darwin have come to seek medical treatment, or to look after a relative receiving medical treatment, and have been unable to find acceptable, appropriate and/or affordable

accommodation. When these people want to return home, they sometimes find themselves stuck, unable to afford the cost of the airfare, and having to wait until their family can afford to buy them a ticket.

Other reasons why people chose to leave large settlements in East Arnhem Land to live in Darwin are grief at the loss of a relative, or seeing their elders being treated disrespectfully. They leave to escape disputes and conflict in the community. People also leave because they feel alienated by those in power, and cannot get jobs or access to other resources such as housing. Some leave because they do not want to live in large settlements, and some live on outstations in the dry, but return to Darwin for the wet season. Many people say they enjoy the freedom of living in the long-grass.

The key recommendations of this report are that more suitable accommodation in Darwin is required, and that there needs to be alternatives to existing alcohol misuse rehabilitation treatment programs, particularly involving elders (including women) from the beginning. An office in Darwin from which elders could work with long-grassers is needed, as it would enable them to facilitate their referral to appropriate services and/or their repatriation. For those who chose to stay in the long-grass, there needs to be more outreach programs to encourage healthy living and to reduce serious health risks. Appropriate medical and rehabilitation services are needed in the remote 'missions' and settlements to which people return to ensure their physical and psychological wellbeing. Without these changes, there will continue to be deaths from alcohol-related illnesses, and many of those who return are likely to leave again.

Yolŋu are the best people to do work with other Yolŋu because of their understanding and empathy. At the same time, both Balandia and Yolŋu perspectives and expertise are needed to address the problems and needs of Yolŋu people living in the long-grass. Yolŋu ways of doing so already exist, and *Yalu Marŋithinyaraw* are already successfully encouraging people to return home, and helping them to settle in by offering counselling through hunting trips and other activities. They need more support and more resources to carry on and expand this work, both from the government and Yolŋu people in the communities.

This project is an example of how Balandia and Yolŋu can work cooperatively to achieve positive results. The Yolŋu research methodology has enabled the research team to achieve two important outcomes - the production of a report, which offers deeper understanding of the stories and needs of people living in the long-grass, and positive, concrete results in the referrals and repatriations that have taken place.

Twenty-five people have returned to Galiwin'ku as a result of this work, nine of whom are already employed, and a further fourteen receiving counselling. It is hoped that this model of research combined with action, employing the complementary skills of 'first language' and non-Indigenous researchers, can be replicated for other language groups in addressing the needs of people living in the long-grass throughout the Northern Territory<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>



# Introduction

The *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* group grew out of a collaborative research project involving residents of Galiwin'ku and the Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health (CRCATH) in Darwin. The *Indigenous Health and Education: Exploring the Connections* research project began in 1997 and was completed in 1999. In May 2000, the CRCATH funded a six-month pilot phase for the establishment of the *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* program. In 2001 the Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS) provided them with funding for a further two years (Lowell et al, 2003).

In July 2000 *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* staff started working informally with 'itinerants' from Galiwin'ku whenever they were in Darwin on other *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* business (while funded by CRCATH, then DFACS). In their own time Maypilama and Garngulkpuy began making contact with people from Galiwin'ku who were living in the long-grass. People in Galiwin'ku began asking them to make contact with their family members too, to see how they were and to ask them if they wanted to come home. They took tape recordings of them telling their stories to take back and play to their families, and they took recordings of their families in Galiwin'ku to play to people in the long-grass. They made contact not only with people from Galiwin'ku, but also those with family connections from Milngimbi, Gapuwiyak and Ramingining. That is, people of the wider Yolŋu language groupings. This work began because of Maypilama's personal experience and wish to make contact with her own family members, but they soon realised there was a great concern among others too, to keep in contact with, and help their people living in the long-grass in Darwin.

Eventually they made contact with Mission Australia, who operate the Night Patrol in Darwin, then went to the "spin-dry" (overnight detoxification centre), and arranged to go out with them on the Patrol. The name has been changed from Night Patrol to Community Patrol, and the hours have been extended so that it is now operating during the day as well as at night. The daytime Community Patrol was a new service aimed at early intervention, and one of the main initiatives of the Itinerant Project

They met with the Itinerants Project's Project Management Committee (PMC) to discuss carrying out research for the Project. Discussions about the research continued in more detail allowing them to design their Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach.<sup>2</sup>

In 2003 Maypilama, Garngulkpuy, Dorothy Yungirrija and David Gelma were asked by the Itinerants Project to begin work on the 'First Language Research Project'. Project staff and members of the Project Management

---

<sup>2</sup> See pages 2-3 in Lowell et al (2003) for a discussion of the PAR.

Committee (PMC) wanted this research to be undertaken so they would have a better understanding of the underlying issues, which resulted in, and affected people living in the long-grass in Darwin. They felt that the people's stories might only emerge through research conducted by senior people from their home communities, interviewing them in culturally appropriate ways using their own language.

The development of the 'First Language Research' model in association with *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* and selected non-Indigenous research professionals was considered an important initiative, which might achieve three potential objectives:

1. A deeper understanding of the stories of people living an 'itinerant' lifestyle.
2. Direct action outcomes such as referrals and 'return to home' for some clients.
3. An effective mechanism for communication and consultation between the project and the client group.

This report demonstrates the achievement of the first objective.

The second objective has resulted in approximately 16 people returning to Galiwin'ku and the development of a new health-based infrastructure initiative at Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Programs (CAAPS). Two duplex units with 6 beds for clients and 6 beds for support personnel are under construction, which had a completion target dated December 2003. This new facility is a direct response to the need identified by *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* to have a facility where they and other visiting elders could take people in need of assessment and withdrawal, prior to their returning to home, or referrals for appropriate treatment.

The research instigated a dialogue which must continue to enable 'itinerants' to participate meaningfully in the evaluation of existing initiatives and recommendations for future programs.

**Mainstream consultation mechanisms such as meetings and questionnaires have long proven inappropriate for this client group.**

The Yalu research model has been applied to a range of research and consultancy tasks.<sup>3</sup> This project offered an opportunity to implement a Yolŋu methodology conducted by those who are from the relevant cultural group, are of senior status and have a high level of integrity - a "strong heart".

*Yalu Marngithinyaraw* see this project as part of their work because it is aimed at keeping Yolŋu people strong in their traditional ways - physically and spiritually - wherever they are. It is important that Yolŋu language be used in doing this research. The wider community might think that Yolŋu are in the long-grass simply because they like to drink, but the truth is much more complicated and deeper than that.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Sharing the True Stories project; see [www.sharingtruestories.com](http://www.sharingtruestories.com).

It is also important to understand the Yolŋu long-grass presence within its historical context. Yolŋu people have a long history of partnerships with Larrakia and other Aboriginal people in the Darwin area. During the many years of the mission days, and earlier (since the 1930s), there were Aboriginal people in Darwin from many outlying areas, including Yolŋu speakers from East Arnhem Land. They worked hard and contributed their resources working cooperatively (*räl-manapanmirri*) with the Larrakia landowners and other Aboriginal people in the development of Darwin. They worked on the boats and in construction, and were often encouraged to do so by the missionaries in Milingimbi, and then Galiwin'ku. Yolŋu people assisted in the construction of the mission buildings in Mitchell Street in central Darwin, and participated in ceremonies with other Aboriginal groups at the Bagot town camp. It is partly because of this long association with the Aboriginal people of Darwin through their old people that *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* felt an obligation to respond when they heard about the negative aspects of the long-grasser lifestyle in the media.

Maypilama and Garŋulkpuy have given presentations on their work, and discussed the issues facing itinerant people in Darwin, in various places including:

- To the national Executive Officer and Board of Mission Australia,
- To a National Indigenous Homelessness Forum.
- In a teleconference convened at the NT Parliament, being part of a discussion among *Mala* leaders<sup>4</sup> from across the Top End about how to encourage the repatriation of people living in the long-grass around Darwin.
- To a Crime Prevention workshop on Indigenous Communities' role building a 'Safer NT' community.

---

<sup>4</sup> A *mala* is a clan group.



# Methodology

The *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* researchers are senior Yolŋu from Galiwin'ku, and in some case family members of the long-grassers interviewed in Darwin. The methodology was participatory, and action-based, encouragement and assistance for people were as important as gathering information from them. The researchers implemented their methodology in accordance with a Yolŋu philosophy and related practices, which create and reflect their experience and knowledge as Yolŋu people.

“We went to see people where they were. We only interviewed Yolŋu (not people from other places) and we interviewed them in Yolŋu *dhäruk* (language). We didn’t use many direct questions but approached relatives in a culturally appropriate way by discussing with people issues which they brought up.”

During a number of visits to Darwin during 2003, the *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* team conducted 43 interviews with people living in the long-grass at various camps and shopping centres around town.<sup>5</sup> These included Rapid Creek, Fannie Bay, Spot on Marine, Finnis Street, Mum and Dad's Camp, Galawu, Mindil Beach, Casuarina (BiLo), Old Waratah Oval, Hudson Fysh Flats.

*Yalu Marngithinyaraw* is based on the traditional Yolŋu philosophy of nurturing through action. Yalu in an everyday sense means nest, but it has many different meanings and some of them are ‘inside’ business - the totemic origins of groups of people are often referred to through the notion of Yalu. The yalu philosophy reveals to Yolŋu how they should live their lives, how they should approach people and work through people’s identities as connected to land, language and law. It has to do with caring for others, and offering themselves.

The people who were approached to be interviewed were informed about the purpose of this research, and those who agreed gave their verbal consent (on tape or video). They were asked to tell their story, and asked whom they would like to tell that story to. Sometimes it was too personal, or they were not able to put their reasons and feelings into words, either

---

<sup>5</sup> There were 24 men, and 19 women interviewed.

because they were difficult to articulate or because they were beyond verbal description.

The interviews were conducted in Yolŋu languages, then transcribed and translated into English with the assistance of non-Indigenous Yolŋu language-speakers. The writing of this report was a collaborative exercise between Maypilama and Garŋgulkupuy, an anthropologist Jocelyn Grace and Michael Christie and John Greatorex of Charles Darwin University.



# Research Findings

From the interviews, the reasons given by Yolŋu for living in the long-grass around Darwin can be summarised as follows.

**“We need to be in Darwin and we can’t find appropriate or affordable accommodation.”**

Some people come to Darwin and stay in the long-grass because they want to be with their relatives who are in hospital or on dialysis for kidney disease. They feel too lonely back at the “mission” without their relatives, so they accompany or follow them into Darwin<sup>6</sup>.

There are some well-known Yolŋu people who are living in Darwin because they want to be with their family members who are on dialysis (treatment for advanced kidney disease). Sometimes they have had houses to live in, or have been living in a hostel, but because of disturbances and disruption from other family members, they haven’t been able to stay. After such disruption, hostel and housing commission accommodation is no longer available to them.

**“I came here to take care of my uncle. This is the only story I have. I came up here to Darwin to help my uncle because he’s very sick man. I’m waiting for a ticket, I’ve been ringing up my family at Elcho.”**

The accommodation available in Darwin for these people is not considered by them to be good - it costs a substantial amount of money, often

---

<sup>6</sup> Galiwin'ku and Milingimbi were mission stations until the 1970s, and so these communities are still commonly referred to as ‘mission’.

involves having to comply with strict rules, and in some cases the physical (hygiene) conditions are unacceptable. About one facility, people said:

“Ok, when we are (staying there) everything is expected to be spotless. And the food, we are given the same food over and over again. And if a child does something wrong they will (kick) us all out. Outside there (in the yard) children are not allowed to run about. And tobacco - no smoking inside the buildings. The guards will lock (the gates) and we'll be prisoners (inside)<sup>7</sup>.”

With respect to another, some people said that they went to a hostel with the intention of staying there, but found it so dirty they decided they were better off camping down at the beach.

Many of the people interviewed said that the new Itinerants Centre, adjacent to the Christian Outreach Centre in Berrimah, is too far away. They also said it was not a pleasant environment, and that facilities like that need to have the support of Elders who are prepared to take the time and work gently on problem solving and *raypirri*<sup>8</sup> with the long-grassers who go there.

There is insufficient hostel accommodation available to meet the needs of those living in the long-grass in Darwin.

**“We are stuck in Darwin and can't find a way to get back to the ‘mission’.”**

Some people who want to return to East Arnhem Land are getting stuck in Darwin because they don't have the money to pay for a ticket to fly back. A fortnightly Unemployment Benefits payment is around \$360<sup>9</sup>, while a one-way ticket to Galiwin'ku costs \$312 for an adult, and \$163 for a child.

Some people ring their family on Elcho Island and ask for a ticket to fly home, but while families are always willing, they are often unable to afford to buy them one.

B: This place is not good. I need to go back, because I have a lot of daughters and grandchildren there.

L: Is there any money in your account?

B: No, there's nothing. I did get paid last week, but I played poker machines, and he took out the rest (referring to her husband, M). I'd go to Centrelink for help, but this one isn't very well, but soon as he's better, I'll go home. That's why I'm stuck. My plan is that I need to go back.

L: Are you ill?

M: I'll go back to the hospital and they'll operate on my leg.

L: Will you go back to Elcho when it's better?

M: Yes.

<sup>7</sup> Being locked up at night can be seen as an unjustifiable punishment.

<sup>8</sup> Means straightening people out by talking with them. Only people who have a right to do this with a particular person will be able to help them. They won't listen to someone who does not have that right. (See glossary for more detail.)

<sup>9</sup> It varies according to how many children a person has.

When someone dies and there is a funeral being held in East Arnhem Land, all his or her relatives will want to fly back to attend. The expense of paying for a number of family members to return from Darwin is often much more than the family can afford.

E: I'm thinking of instead of going to Elcho, going to Milingimbi. I'll go whenever my family book a seat for me (on the plane).

L: What are you thinking about S?

S: I'm thinking about going back. I'm just going to talk about myself. I'm not earning any money at the moment. I did before, but not now. Then I broke my leg and ended up at the hospital. We heard a story about Larrakia booking our seats. If they book a seat for us, will they be deducting the money from UB (Unemployment Benefits)?

L: I'll try and see if there's a way.

S: That's OK, because now we're drinking too much alcohol and it's hurting our bodies. His (referring to her husband E's) two brothers stopped E from going back to Elcho for the funeral of his previous wife, because they didn't book a seat for him.

L: There was no money at Elcho to pay for everyone to come back.

E: From here I'll go and get all my children back from Elcho and take them to Milingimbi. (E is angry about not getting a ticket back to Elcho for the funeral) Can you give us money?

Air North has a policy of not taking a booking or issuing someone with a ticket after a "no-show" (i.e. when a seat has been booked but the passenger doesn't turn up). They will only allow that person to use the ticket by being on standby for flights. A person might have to go to the airport several days in a row and wait all day to find out whether or not they can get on the plane.

**"We are in the long-grass because we feel grief."**

Some people want to move away from Galiwin'ku and other settlements to escape the memory of a deceased relative. It is a traditional practice to avoid the place where a relative has died out of respect for that person.

Some people have left East Arnhem Land because their Elders or other family members were not being properly respected at the 'mission'. They leave to save themselves from the grief and sorrow of having to observe this happening to them.

**Fear is probably the most common reason given by people for why they have left East Arnhem Land to live in the long-grass in Darwin.**

There is almost universal fear of *galka'* - sorcerers/assassins - among the Yolŋu, and is particularly the case at Galiwin'ku.<sup>10</sup> Some people may have been accused of sorcery, while others fear being accused. Some people are frightened of being contracted by sorcerers to perform assassinations and

---

<sup>10</sup> See glossary on page 28 for a more detailed explanation.

are threatened with violence if they refuse to perform sorcery. People who are accused of being a *galka'* will run away in fear of their lives.

### **Couldn't you go back to Galiwin'ku?**

- G: Maybe, lots of *galka'*.  
X: Lots of mosquitos (describing young people doing the work of *galka'* as mosquitos - blood suckers, draining - blood and life).  
G: Mmm, we are watching them from a distance.  
M: Those Yolŋu (*galka'*). Who are the *galka'*s?  
X: The young people.. all of them are too clever, all the kids. The young people have taken over *galka'* business.  
G: The old people are sending the young ones (to do *galka'* business). Yes, that's true (now there are) too many *galka'*.  
.. .. . . .

It is important to understand that when a person dies, someone will almost always be accused of having caused that person's death. As long as there remain questions about how someone has died<sup>11</sup>, then others will live in fear of being accused, and of being the victim of *bayarra'*.<sup>12</sup>

Some people living in Galiwin'ku are so afraid of *galka'*, and so tired of arguments and violence, that they stay inside their houses all the time, and won't go out. Many people are frightened of the suicide, violence, mental illness and uncontrolled anger back at the "mission". These people said they feel much safer in Darwin.

**"We have been rejected by our Yolŋu family. We have rejected our own family."**

Some people are in the long-grass because they do not feel represented, but rejected and alienated by the people in power in their settlement. "Mission" politics, and the way councils make decisions - including the favouritism that occurs with the allocation of jobs and housing - has driven people to leave and live in Darwin.

There are people living in the long-grass because they feel comfortable living with Larrakia people on Larrakia land.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is regardless of forensic evidence, which only explains the *physical* reason for death, not the *social and spiritual* reason.

<sup>12</sup> See glossary on page 28 for a more detailed explanation.

“I’m staying back in Darwin because my relatives are not generous, they don’t help me, but the Malakmalak, Larrakia and Brinkin people help me. I’m not Yolŋu any more, I’m Larrakia now.”

Some people feel that they have been cut off from their families. They are still proud of their Yolŋu identity and they are living a Yolŋu lifestyle.

**“We are in the long-grass because Yolŋu culture is being abused at the ‘mission’.**

Many long-grassers see themselves as practising a stronger Yolŋu ethic and identity than those ‘socks-up’ Yolŋu on high salaries sitting in offices at the ‘mission’. They say these bureaucrats are always compromising their Yolŋu responsibilities.

Long-grassers pointed out that when there is a funeral they show respect though *manikay* (ancestral songs) and *rom* (law), and observe these more diligently than some of the “important” Yolŋu people back home.

Young people “at the mission”, according to some long-grassers, are not respecting older people, and no longer looking after them.

“Young ones are *märrmiriw*, old people *märrmirr* - the young people controlling the old people.”<sup>13</sup>

“Young people see themselves as someone else, not Yolŋu. Yolŋu people have made their own culture, into an individual way.”

**“We don’t see a good life for ourselves back at the ‘mission’.”**

In Galiwin’ku, there are many disputes over land, ceremonies and marriages, and when agreement about such issues can’t be reached, some people decide to come to Darwin to get away from the conflict and tensions.

“Ok, here we are talking in the bush at Mum and Dad camp. We are Djambarrpuynu Yothu-Yindi staying (here). We have lots of children here, we will continue camping here and we always pick up rubbish here.”

The group at Mum and Dad Camp (in Darwin) are all relatives connected with the Djambarrpuynu clan, the Djambarrpuynu being one of the twenty or so clan groups forced together at Galiwin’ku, Elcho Island. The groupings, which form in the various locations around Darwin, better reflect traditional patterns of Yolŋu relatedness than do the ‘missions’. See the note on Yothu Yindi in the glossary.

---

<sup>13</sup> See translation of terms in the glossary.

Some people are tired of “being a witness” to violent events at Galiwin’ku, and having to tell the story of what they saw to the police and others, so they leave and go to Darwin. They don’t want to be implicated in the accusations.

Some people say that there is no work for them at the ‘mission’, even though they see themselves as having useful skills. They are *djämamiriw* (without work) because only “top level people” (i.e. those in power) and their relatives get the jobs which are available on Elcho Island.<sup>14</sup> Non-Yolŋu people now do most of the work, which was once done by Yolŋu.

Some people have been drinking heavily while living in the long-grass. If they return to their settlement they will not have access to professional services (including medical) to assist them in dealing with the effects of alcohol withdrawal (“grog shakes”) and/or other alcohol-related illnesses.

There are people who don’t want to live in large settlements like Galiwin’ku, and want to live at an outstation on their own country, but there are no jobs and no CDEP for them there. Some of these people become long-grassers in Darwin, rather than live in a crowded and conflicted settlement.

Some people think that both living in the bush and in Darwin are better than living in Galiwin’ku, and so they live in their homelands (i.e. outside the settlement but on their country) during the dry season, and then go back to Darwin for the wet season.

### **“We are in the long-grass because we enjoy the freedom.”**

Some people living in the long-grass say that they enjoy the freedom and peacefulness of camping on the beach in Darwin.

“I’d rather be a bush boy living in the open air, watching the stars, listening to the sea, smelling the smoke.”

Some people who have houses in Darwin prefer to sleep on the beach during the dry season as it is cooler, and so they can keep an eye on, and help their relatives and friends living in the long-grass.

Some long-grassers have run away from their marriage partners back at the “mission” and are now living with a new partner in Darwin. They don’t want to return to the “mission” because they will be in an uncomfortable situation, and it will be more difficult to get on with their lives there than in Darwin. This is often the case when women leave their husbands for younger men.

There were only a couple of people who gave drinking as their reason for living in the long-grass in Darwin. Many people living in the long-grass don’t drink.

---

<sup>14</sup> There is a handful of families who wield power and so control access to employment, housing and other resources in Galiwin’ku.



# Discussion

The public visibility of those long-grassers who do drink has led to a perception, expressed regularly in the Darwin media, that this is overwhelmingly the most important reason why Yolŋu stay in Darwin. In setting out a more complex series of reasons, the research has added depth to the analysis of social policy, which should in turn bring about a more thoughtful response from governments than has been the case historically in the NT.

In particular, the responses indicating concern about the lack of services in communities to help those who wish to withdraw from alcohol are significant in view of current consultations regarding an Alcohol Framework for the NT.

The project also made it clear that non-drinkers work extremely hard to look after their relatives, partners and children. The families of long-grassers back in the settlements know where they are and keep in contact with them, through those who live in Darwin and those who travel back and forth. These connections - constituting Yolŋu social capital - remain a very important factor in the lives of Darwin long-grassers, and have potential to be utilised by government and other agencies dealing with this issue.

The project concluded that people who say that they stay in the long-grass because they like to drink are people with deeper problems, which they don't want to talk about, or can't talk about. They need help in understanding and addressing those problems - help that at present appears unavailable.

Also contrary to the public perception is the fact that most people would dearly love to go back to their country and live on their homeland (or outstation), but there are logistic and bureaucratic difficulties in achieving this goal. Becoming 'stuck' in Darwin because of a lack of ready cash with which to purchase an air ticket has been identified as a major issue. The project has found that this problem - which has apparently been too difficult to solve for the past several decades - can be effectively addressed through simple co-operation between Centrelink and local community bodies. This is an example of the benefits achieved by the 'system' changing to meet the needs of clients, rather than the other way around.

The research has highlighted the continuing importance of sorcery in contemporary Yolŋu thought. There are *galka'* reasons preventing many long-grassers from going back to live at the "mission". In this sense, there are

more long-grassers in Darwin than would be the case if *galka'* activity at 'the mission' was not so bad. Many of those who return to Galiwin'ku don't stay long, and either return to Darwin or go bush to their homeland because of *galka'* and other reasons. Sorcery by *galka'* is complex and reflects more than simple revenge or unexplained evil doing. When *galka'* have a dominant role, it reflects deep structural problems in the way the community operates - it reflects community maldevelopment. *Galka'* are a sign of social disharmony, that the Yolŋu world has been turned upside down (Reid 1982). This research identified that the crucial issues involved in this maldevelopment are (1) governance (2) employment, and (3) education, in that order. If governance and employment issues were addressed, then we would have better attendance and success rates at school - school attendance levels are generally higher, and governance issues simpler and less problematic at outstations than they are in large settlements. Welfare dependency is less of an issue than governance structures: they need to be reformed so that everyone feels their interests are being represented. Then *galka'* will not dominate community life.

Yolŋu governance depends to a large extent in the right people, through kinship, being called in to each new context of concern. People from one land and language base share an identity, which produces in them, *märr*, or spiritual power, when people work together remembering their history and their responsibilities. People who share this spiritual strength - *märrmirri* people, or who access it through their totemic connections *riŋgitj* are crucial to a true Yolŋu healing and problem solving process.

There was a range of responses to the issue of accommodation in Darwin. For some, accommodation was unsuitable due to the range of 'rules' about such things as smoking, visitors etc. Others spoke of how they enjoyed sleeping in the fresh air, under the stars, as being part of a truly Yolŋu way of life. Public policy can respond to both of these types of responses, by creating another accommodation option for Yolŋu visiting Darwin: open air shelters/camping spaces which are clean and healthy but allow for a Yolŋu lifestyle by including open areas to sit around and talk, fireplaces for cooking, access to counselling, substance abuse and medical services, and so on.

Since *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* members began their work with the Itinerants Project, twenty-five people have gone back to Galiwin'ku and most are doing well, but they need more support. Without it those people are very likely to leave again. A number of those who returned already have employment, and a few are heading out to live on homelands away from the main settlement on Elcho Island.

The research has shown that the problems raised by the long-grassers are not insoluble. They are potentially amenable to solutions which utilise the information uncovered in the research, although this may often involve new ways of operating - for example, by using gurrutu (kinship) networks to encourage community action rather than just exhorting 'service delivery' agencies to act.

Discriminating between those factors which can reasonably be seen as the responsibility of the NT Governments and those which are better seen as the responsibility of local councils, individuals or other groups is not easy.

But even very difficult problems (for example, governance issues) can be solved by active partnerships between community groups, governments, local councils, land councils and others.

The *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* Centre is already working with long-grassers, and planning more programs and activities for those people who return from Darwin. This is part of the Strong Families Program, and includes taking them out hunting, giving them good bush food and medicine, and engaging in spiritual healing. Spiritual healing can take place using the support system, which already exists - through *manikay* (ancestral songs) and the transmission of *rom* (traditional law). *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* is facilitating this process, however they need wider support from the relatives of long-grassers, and from the government.

An important difference defining this research is that it was carried out by Yolŋu, that is by members of the same (minority) group as those being interviewed. In some ways, this has definite advantages - it facilitates access, understanding and trust.



# Recommendations

- (1) That the NT and Commonwealth Governments develop a clear policy of support for homeland centres/outstations. For people who want to get out of Darwin and return to their country, but not live at the "mission", their needs to be government support. They need funding so they can have their own places, where they can be free, live in traditional groupings of their own selection, have their own identity and care for their lands. Funding of homeland centres, or outstations, is now under a cloud with the abolition of ATSIC, and so this is a timely opportunity for governments to revisit their commitment to the inappropriate policy of building up the centralised communities rather than supporting the decentralisation inherent in the homelands movement.
- (2) That NT Dept of Community Development work towards the establishment of a counselling and advising program, utilising a combination of western professional expertise (psychologists) and Yolŋu expertise (mala leaders). The goal is to heal the inner being, and this requires working with individuals. *Mala* leaders need to be involved in this work, and it is especially important that senior women are involved. The spiritual aspect of the problems discussed in this report must be addressed in a Yolŋu way, in the way this research was done: using significant family members to be involved with people who need help, using traditional kin protocols, traditional ways of meeting, talking, listening, reaching agreement, and working on activating the solutions while doing the research. A combination of Balandia and Yolŋu

perspectives can work together to create solutions for the problems of long-grassers. This project is an example of this.

- (3) That the NT Dept of Health and Community Services reassess the adequacy of substance abuse rehabilitation programs back at the 'mission' and at the homelands - detoxification facilities, referral to the appropriate Elders and other relatives for support, training and employment opportunities, and the ability to live on homelands. For example, *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* has the experience working with petrol sniffers at a camp on Maya-Wun'pirri, a small island off Elcho near Galiwin'ku.
- (4) That the NT Department of Health and Community Services assess the adequacy of substance abuse rehabilitation programs in Darwin. The Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Programs (CAAPS) is too directive for some people. Their work is good but, in order to address the spiritual aspects of healing, respected and empathetic elders need to be involved in the treatment programs from the beginning.
- (5) That the NT Dept of Housing increase its support for people who have housing commission houses in Darwin, by informing prospective tenants of Balanda *rom* (law, culture, way of life) and how to deal with neighbour complaints, paying rent, and calling Night Patrol when they need to.
- (6) That a more acceptable form of temporary accommodation be available for Yolŋu in Darwin. There is an urgent need for more acceptable forms of accommodation in Darwin, apart from hostels and houses, particularly a sheltered camping situation, which is clean and has rules but allows for a relaxed style of open air Yolŋu living.
- (7) That the NT Government in consultation with *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* consider establishing a place in Darwin where long-grassers can sit and talk with committed *ŋayaŋumirr* (empathetic) Elders. This could also serve as an office for *Yalu Marngithinyaraw*.
- (8) That the organisations, which comprise the Harmony project, collaborate to offer programs that support a Darwin based healthy life-style for long-grassers, including exercise, bush tucker and access to mobile clinics.
- (9) That the Harmony project ensure that Air North undertake an information campaign for its Yolŋu customers, explaining verbally and in writing that if they don't arrive in time for an Air North flight, or fail to cancel their booking, the policy is that they will only be able to use that ticket by being on standby. This applies to everyone, including patients leaving Royal Darwin Hospital and returning to East Arnhem Land.



# Conclusion

The *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* researchers are part of a network of Yolŋu people - they don't stand outside or apart from Yolŋu people as a non-Yolŋu researcher does. Yolŋu people are all connected through *ringitj*, which are the links they have with each other through ancestral and/or totemic connections. These links obligate and enable Yolŋu people to help other Yolŋu people. This has been the driving force behind initiating this project, and an important factor in the degree to which it has been successful in achieving its objectives. A combination of Balandia and Yolŋu perspectives and approaches are needed to bring about lasting solutions to the problems that people living in the long-grass experience. This project is an example of how Balandia and Yolŋu can work cooperatively to achieve positive results.

The development of the *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* Centre, and the involvement of its members in the original action research through the 'Health and Education Project'<sup>15</sup>, were crucial in the development of this project. It meant that there were Yolŋu people with the skills to carry out research, and programs in place to assist people returning to Galiwin'ku from Darwin. The "First Language Research Project" created an opportunity for more experienced and senior *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* researchers to teach younger member some of their skills, and have them take part.

During the research period *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* were able to assist twenty-five people living in the long-grass in Darwin to return to Elcho Island. Unfortunately one person died while planning to leave Darwin, and two others died after they had returned to Galiwin'ku. All three were in their 30s or 40s, and died from alcohol-related illnesses. This is evidence of the need for appropriate medical and rehabilitation facilities, both in Darwin and in the communities to which people are returning.

While this is the first "First Language Research Project" to be conducted as part of the Community Harmony Project, it is hoped that this model can be replicated with other language groups. The *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* researchers are in a position to pass on to others some of their knowledge and experience of conducting research among the members of their immediate community and their wider language groups who are living in the long-grass in Darwin and Palmerston, and in other regional centres throughout the Territory.

---

<sup>15</sup> See Lowell *et al* 2003.



# Glossary

**Bayarra'** is commonly translated as 'ipayback' but can also refer to atonement, propitiation, or compensation. Innocent people can become caught up in the economies of *bayarra'* where there are accusations of *galka'* business circulating. They may be wrongfully accused and punished (*bayarra'*), or be a risk of being sent (*gorrwuma*) to achieve *bayarra'*.

**Galka'** is sometimes translated as 'witchdoctor', sorcerer or assassin. It is common for people to be held responsible for deaths, which Balandi would attribute to natural causes. In places where there is considerable social dislocation, and large numbers of untimely deaths (like Galiwin'ku), people have become deeply concerned about *galka'* and there are high rates of suspicion and accusations among individuals and family groups. Even suicides and fatal accidents are attributed to *galka'* business. Many people believe those in powerful positions abuse their authority through using threats and accusations of sorcery, and failure to thoroughly investigate and disclose the reasons for deaths. Innocent people can be afraid of being given 'contracts' (*gorrwuma*) for the death of others with the threat of their own ensorcellment if they fail to comply with orders. This fear of being contracted to kill is given as a reason for people choosing to live in Darwin. This works in two ways: Some are threatened with sorcery if they do not use violence against others. Others are threatened with violence if they don't use sorcery against others. The fear of sorcery also impacts on innocent people who are called to account for their behaviour in contexts surrounding untimely deaths. To be a witness to any accompanying behaviours always brings a threat of implication in the murder. People are not as afraid of *galka'* when living outside the main settlement, because people can hear a vehicle coming before it arrives, and so know who is around and what they are doing. Much of the *galka'* business in large settlements is about the politics of control.

**Märr** can be translated as 'properly generated and directed spiritual power'. It is achieved through proper contact with land, history and spirituality.

**Märrmirr** means possessing *märr*, **märrmiriw** means lacking *märr*. The concept has a wide range of applications, but in the context of what the *Yalu Marngithinyaraw* researchers have to say, the solution to a great deal of psychological and personal distress of long-grassers lies in the involvement of senior people who have the *märr* to deal sensitively and productively with people in their care.

**Nayanu** refers to the seat of the emotions, the part of the individual which feels and which links to Yolŋu identity. **Nayanumirr** refers to people who are sympathetic and concerned to help and comfort those in distress.

*Raypirri!*, sometimes translated ‘discipline’, refers to a particular hortative practice in which responsible usually senior people admonish, advise and encourage others, usually younger people. It is important to note that it is not simply a form of rebuke - as it is often misrepresented. It is a honourable and honouring practice. It is done in the spirit of mutual obligation and of support and in reference to the subject’s marr and ringitj. Only the right people can successfully deliver *raypirri!* - people who are respected and trusted and in an appropriate relation to those who are being advised. It could be contrasted with the verb *ŋarrtjun* which means to speak overbearingly, roughly, to reprove, and implies anger, and acting outside acceptable protocols of authority and encouragement. It could also be contrasted with *djabarrkthun*, which implies haranguing without active participation of the hearer.

*Ringitj* are the links between clan groups through ancestral and totemic connections. For example, people who dance the same totem have inner feelings of recognition amongst themselves, and this signals to them their responsibility toward each other.

*Yothu-Yindi* *Yothu* refers to child, *Yindi* refers to the big or great (mother). *Yothu-Yindi* denotes the bond between two different entities, the bond characterised as a mother-child relationship may be between two lands, people, songs, or ceremonies. For example a Djambarrpuynu woman's children will refer to not only her brothers and sisters as 'mother!', but also to the Djambarrpuynu clan as 'mother!'. The members of the Djambarrpuynu clan will refer to these children as '*yothu!*'. Hence the term *Yothu-Yindi*. The '*Yothul*' is the caretaker or '*djungaya!*' of the mothers' land, ceremonies, and so on. This relationship is an important political reality and the basis for social organisation in Yolŋu life.

## References

Lowell, A., Maypilama, E. and Biritjalawuy, D. (2003) *Indigenous Health and education: Exploring the Connections*, CRCATH Project Report.

Reid, Janice (1982), *Sorcerers and Healing Spirits: Continuity and Change in an Aboriginal Medical System*, ANU, Canberra.