

A Journey to Heaven: Burrumarra's Return to Gulirra

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ABSTRACT: David Burrumarra died at Elcho Island on October 21, 1994 at the age of 77. His extensive dialogue with the author has been covered in *Australian Folklore* and elsewhere. This article covers the events and discussions surrounding the elderly Burrumarra's return to what had been his childhood paradise in order to die there. It addresses the differences between the mythic power of the place and the reality of its present appearance. Burrumarra's reaction, and then his decision, opens the way for a reconfiguring and then reinforcement of the myths.

This is the story of a journey. A journey by an Aboriginal elder to a childhood paradise. An island storied in myth and legend though long abandoned as a consequence of the vicissitudes of time. But as one anthropologist once said, 'Aboriginal sacred sites don't get decommissioned.' Even if the people are gone and their language has been 'sent to the ground' the place still resonates with power and majesty.

No-one understood this better than Burrumarra, the great north-east Arnhem Land Yolngu (Aboriginal) leader. And for him, this sacred, deserted island was called Gulirra, an island in the English Company's group named by Mathew Flinders in 1802 during his circumnavigation of Australia. Flinders had it named Gulirra 'Truant Island' as it was separated from the rest of the 'Company's' island chain by a considerable gap of open water. It stood alone: proud, defiant, magical!

So cherished were Burrumarra's memories of his youth at Gulirra (well before the establishment of the Methodist mission on the mainland) that the place seemed to have no equal in his deliberations.

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The 'Whale Island'

For Burrumarra's Warramiri clan, Gulirra was a 'whale island' associated with the 'whale dreaming', 'dreaming' being the term that is often applied to describe the specificities of Aboriginal religion. In Warramiri belief, Gulirra is where the whale got its distinctive tail. The

dugong was also bequeathed such a tail at the ‘dawn of time’, but this ‘smaller cousin’ was sent to live in the mangrove-laden coastline belonging to the Mandjikay clans. The deep waters off Truant Island belonged only to the whale and to the whale people like the Warramiri.

Burrumarra was quite explicit to me then in defining the totemic whale’s significance in his life. At a personal level he would say: ‘There is something in the mind of the whale which is also in ours.’ And in an intercultural setting, he would add ‘What gold is to the land, the whale is to the sea’, giving dimension to the real wealth that his clan possessed. At the nearby city of Nhulunbuy (Gove), bauxite miners had desecrated sites of special significance to his clan, but Burrumarra, in philosophical mode, would claim that the spiritual wealth of his people was more than a match for all the material wealth that could be gleaned from the soil.

Gulirra was also linked to a group of mythical whale hunters, whose task it was to deliver the souls of the deceased of Burrumarra’s clan to the land of the dead somewhere to the north and east of that island.

Then and Now

And in this story it is 1992, and Burrumarra is dying. He was thinking of the world to come. The paradise.

Now in Yolngu mythology there is a curious complexity with regards to such beliefs. Does the soul go to reside in the sacred water hole of the clan, travelling there on the back of the whale, or in the tow of the fabled indigenous whale hunters who dwell somewhere in the remote islands to the north of Australia, as clan lore dictates? One of Burrumarra’s more famous maxims states that: ‘When a man lifts a spear to kill another, or an old person is about to die, a spirit will come from this place to a mother.’

This young child spirit will emerge from the sacred well and appear in the mind of the father in its totemic form in a dream. That baby might be a fish, a whale, or some other species affiliated with the clan. There is always this universal balance. People come from the land and return to it upon death. And for clan members, Truant Island was central to this vision of origins and destiny, and so of immortality. But also current in Yolngu society were stories of the paradise garden of Islam, a belief in heaven gleaned from those trepang (*bêche de mer*) fishermen from South Sulawesi (and known as the Macassans), who had frequented northern Australia’s Arafura coastline from 1700 to the early 1900s. (Macknight 1976)

When the Macassans came to Gulirra, Burrumarra’s father would greet them with the pearls and turtle shell that his family members had gathered over the previous year, and these would be traded for tobacco,

cloth, and iron tools. Sometimes a dugout canoe that the Macassans had used in procuring trepang would be gifted to the Yolngu at the end of the season. Gulirra was a place for such transactions as it was one of the last ports of call for the visitors prior to their long voyage back to Indonesia. (See McIntosh 1994)

Thus there was ample opportunity for extended discussion between Yolngu and the visitors on deeper issues, like the intricacies of Islam, for Yolngu were adept at language learning and had a great interest in the numinous and all matters connected with the afterworld. Indeed, many hundreds of Indonesian words are still in frequent use in Yolngu dialects, some of which indicate the many significant Islamic influences in Yolngu culture. (See McIntosh 2004)

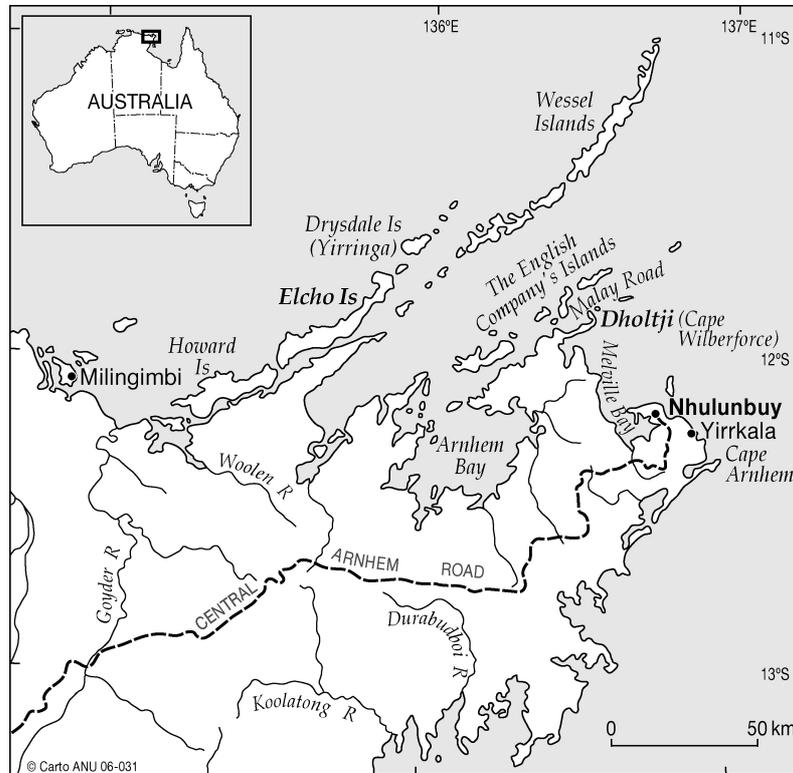
When thinking of the Macassan legacy, in a quiet voice Burrumarra would say: 'We have this idea of heaven...' And then he would speak of the people of old, both Aboriginal and Indonesian, the ones who were followers of Allah. 'In the teeming sea life they see a reflection of him. Allah is the giver of bread to the people. The seafood is their bread. They believe in him.' (McIntosh 1995)

Burrumarra was also a staunch Christian. As a young man in the 1930s, he had worked with missionaries in establishing the Methodist settlement of Yirrkala, directly to the south of Gulirra. For Burrumarra, the notion of heaven in both Islam and Christian faiths was similar. Before the coming of the Christians, his understanding was that 'When we die we go to a place 'on top,' to a world of beautiful things, an island, a garden ...where our life is bountiful. But there will be a time in the future when all the heavenly things will come to the earth and it will be one.'

For Burrumarra, heaven was the richest of all possible places. But where was this place? Was it the 'land of the dead' to the north of Australia, from where the mythical whale hunters originated? Or was it in the sky above Warramiri territory, in the high white clouds that gave their name to his clan? Or was it surrounding the sacred well on Gulirra?

Wherever this place was, in the land of the dead everyone was happy, good tempered and healthy. The weather was fine and there was always plenty of food. The people would sit in the sun, talk to old friends, and sing their favourite songs. There was no shortage of tobacco. The seas were still and perfect for hunting turtle and stingray.

One of the most distinctive features of Yolngu communities across north-east Arnhem Land is the sight of so many colourful flags. Set upon large bamboo poles, these pieces of cloth commemorate the dead and make reference to the heavenly place where the soul of the deceased resides. (McIntosh 2008)



Map of north-east Arnhem Land

When pondering the fate of the soul, Burrumarra admitted that the Yolngu really did not know what happened after death or where this paradise was located. ‘All we know is the bunggul [ceremony]’, he said. There were whale dances, whale hunter rituals, Islamic ceremonies, and Christian hymns and blessings. Of all of these, the whale hunter stories were most precious to him. The fabled hunters named Papayli, Wuramala, Turijene, Gelurru, and others make their voyage from the land of the dead in their long canoes to collect the Warramiri souls. They are black like the Yolngu and they share a common belief system with Yolngu clans like the Warramiri and Gumatj. Their relationship is one of reciprocity. Yolngu send their souls to the north and, in return, the whale hunters send south various items of flotsam and jetsam, like coconuts, and also cooling breezes. (McIntosh 1995) In contemporary renditions of these whale hunter narratives, larger ships—even imaginary battleships—are the mode of transportation for the Aboriginal spirits of the dead in their journey to the heavenly paradise. One of Burrumarra’s more notable idiosyncrasies was his great fondness for the Australian

Navy, and especially for the large aircraft carriers that he imagined (and prayed) would take his soul to the world that is to come.

But Burrumarra was keeping his options open on all possible eventualities. He had a year at most to live. Not longer. And at his home community at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, plans were already been made for his funeral. In one memorable encounter, members of the Wangurri clan had offered to paint the totemic designs of Burrumarra's clan on his chest in preparation for the voyage of his soul, but Burrumarra was not yet ready for that journey. In a fashion all of his own, he told the men to 'Go paint it on yourselves!'

The Last Wish

There was one thing Burrumarra still wanted to do before he died. One last wish. He wanted to visit his homeland at Gulirra one more time. The waters of Truant Island are teeming with seafood, and he wanted to eat again the turtle eggs, the black-lipped oysters, and rock lobster. For many years Burrumarra had been a staunch advocate for the full recognition by government authorities of Aboriginal rights to their lands and waters. And if you don't exercise your rights to visit and enjoy, to hunt and gather, and otherwise exploit the riches of your homeland, can you really call yourself a land owner?

Gulirra was Burrumarra's island and he wanted to be there again, to breathe in its air, sit on its mighty sand hills, and stare out, dream-like to the northern horizon. But those weren't the only reasons, or even the main ones.

For Burrumarra, Gulirra was not just sacred for the whale. It was sacred also to other Dreaming entities and spirits whose imprint lies at the very heart of the Warramiri clan, giving them a distinctive identity, focus, and passion. And there was one spirit, in particular, above all others, that defined Burrumarra's life. To this spirit he owed more than he could express. It was a mermaid spirit. When called upon, this special spiritual entity had come from the island and protected Burrumarra throughout his life, even when he admitted to misconduct, like breaching tribal etiquette, which he said he did on a number of occasions as a young adult, and also during the infamous 'adjustment movement' in Arnhem Land, when he facilitated the public revealing of sacred paraphernalia as a means of building bridges between black and white communities. (McIntosh 2003) When the most deadly of sorcerers were out for Burrumarra's blood, the mermaid formed a shield around him that no magic 'sting-ray barb of death' could penetrate.

Burrumarra wanted to visit Truant Island one last time before he died to say goodbye to her.

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This is a story about visiting paradise.

But the wish of the old man was causing a hullabaloo. Yolngu were not prepared to take the risk of transporting him such a long way from his home base at Elcho Island, about 100 kilometres to the south-west. There were no facilities at all on this remote Warramiri outpost. No-one had lived there on any permanent basis for over a hundred years.

What if he got sick? Who would look after him? As there was no airstrip at Gulirra, a longish sea voyage would be necessary, and there might be storms and rough seas; anything could happen. The journey alone could kill him. There was also the fear that, if Burrumarra was to go to Gulirra, he might not want to come back. He could be very stubborn. But Burrumarra had his heart set on this trip and he would not let up about it.

In this story of the eternal present, I agree to take him.

And so to Gulirra

I wanted to see Gulirra for myself. We didn't sneak out, but we didn't tell too many people either. His extended family might try and dissuade or physically restrain us. Burrumarra was my friend and mentor and over the years he and I had enjoyed the liveliest of conversations. Two books, including a biography and eighteen articles [Several of these, from *A.F.*, are listed at the end of this article. Editor] are based on our lengthy discussions. And the subject of Truant Island was often raised. He had not been there for fifty years, but if he closed his eyes he could see every headland and beach. So I had developed a very detailed picture of Gulirra's clear water bays and coral reefs. And I knew about the mermaid!

When he spoke about Gulirra, Burrumarra would drift back in time to the days when he and his brothers were visiting. He would circumnavigate the island in his memory and at each totemic site he would wait until he could hear the name of the place come from the mouth of one of his relatives. 'Lukimi' he would say in an excited tone, 'That's where we camped. The long white sandy beach.' In this manner, we mapped the entire island in absentia. Very rarely did he need to consult with someone else about place names.

The Return

This is a true story.

I arranged a flight to Gove for Burrumarra, and from there we would immediately board a yacht that a dentist friend of mine owned. A nurse from Elcho Island would accompany us for the entire journey, which would take the good part of a day depending on the winds.

I remember it all so clearly. There was no wind on the journey out of Melville Bay (Nhulunbuy) and we had to motor most of the way north and the fumes from the engine were making us feel quite ill. One by one we took turns at being seasick, while Burrumarra sat alone at the rear of the boat in deep contemplation. Then he too succumbed and we all had the horrors when we saw him lean over the side of the boat and empty the contents of his stomach with one giant heave.

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I had always been so deeply impressed by the way in which Burrumarra was able to convey a depth of meaning about the sacred realm without direct reference to the sacred. He was always very careful in the wording of his pronouncements. And he would rather ask a question than give an answer. He was also most concerned that the thinking be done by the listener. He wasn't going to give away any secrets. He was a lifelong learner and the door was always open to new knowledge, and for new interpretations of old knowledge. (McIntosh 2005, 2006) At any given moment, he would be posing questions to us all, impossible questions about the meaning of life, but now he was completely silent.

Then everything changed as we lost sight of Cape Wilberforce, the north-eastern-most point on the Australian mainland, and Gulirra became visible on the distant horizon. There was such a feeling on anticipation, and the excitement grew even more as we rounded the eastern tip of the island. Burrumarra was beginning to open up.

What were we seeing in those complex rock formations along the headland? What was their totemic significance? Was that an eagle rock? Was that a beached whale or a partially submerged stony platform?

We would have to wait to learn about this paradise from the comfort of our anchorage, Burrumarra told us. We would have to be patient. He would only give us snippets at this stage.

But as we approached our destination point at Lukimi, we were struck dumb. What we saw was unbelievable. Unpredictable. Unacceptable.

Lukimi was packed with non-Aboriginal picnickers from Nhulunbuy who were lazing on the beach, swimming in the cool clear waters, drinking from their yellow, blue, white and green beer cans, as if this were a public resort. But what was even more astonishing was that the crew of a sizeable navy vessel, anchored well off the beach, were there as well, playing volleyball in the midst of the noisy partying masses.

Withdrawal?

This was Aboriginal land and Burrumarra was the land owner under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1976. (McIntosh 2000) None of these people had permits from the land owner. They were all trespassing! What was meant to be a quiet retreat for deep contemplation was not off to a good start. These people knew nothing about this place or its historic or sacred significance, and their presence was an affront to Burrumarra.

Once we had landed, Burrumarra promptly sent me over to tell them all to leave. Their loud beer party antics on the beach of his ancestors was repugnant to Burrumarra and, indeed, to us all. They paid no attention to me. I had a few words to the leading officer of the naval shore party and I asked that they come and give greetings and pay respect to the Warramiri leader, which they did. When the sun went down and all the interlopers had departed to their vessels, we made our camp. Burrumarra slept a long way from the rest of us, for we, too, were something of a disturbance to him. We talked too much he said. Silence was what was called for now.

Apart from the obvious surprise, the presence of the Navy vessel off the sacred beach was of striking significance to Burrumarra. In his belief system, as I mentioned, upon death, the soul of the Warramiri is transported to the land of the dead on a canoe paddled by a mythical whale hunters. But in modern times, it was not uncommon for the Warramiri to speak about how the soul would travel aboard a great ship—an invisible battleship—that is always at anchor just off the coast, but over the horizon. And we all knew this story. We could not help but wonder if Burrumarra was thinking that this was the boat of his destiny. It was such an ominous sight seeing this huge battle craft stationed just off the tiny island. Had it had come to Truant Island for Burrumarra's soul? The timing seemed extraordinary. At first light when we noticed that the ship had departed we were exuberant to find that Burrumarra still alive and kicking!

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This is a Story of Farewell.

At the end of the second day, Burrumarra alerted us to what we all feared the most. He had no wish to return to Elcho Island and wanted to

be left at Gulirra to die. If you knew that heaven existed and you had the chance to go there, wouldn't you want to stay forever? How could you go back? Why would you want to? In Burrumarra's mind, Truant Island was heaven and he didn't want to go home. He said to me: 'If heaven has this wish for us, if it wants it this way, then we must follow it.'

And so began a long conversation that began with me stressing that at this time of his life he needed to be around his family, and not just around those of us who were indulging him in this last wish. But he was not interested in our pleas. He was preparing himself for the end. Nothing I could say would change his mind on that second day. Even the prospect of the arrival, next weekend, of another marauding band of party-goers from the mining town and the outrageous piles of beer cans that they left littering the beach, would dissuade him.

The third day passed without any change. I brought him fish that I had caught, but few words were exchanged. But then that night, when the sun had set and a sudden darkness descended upon us, he began to speak in a different way to previously. It had been an exceedingly hot October day, but now there was a welcome cool sea breeze. Burrumarra was in no hurry to sleep, nor was I. He was smoking, or so I thought. Only the glowing ember of his cigarette was visible. Occasionally I would make idle conversation but there was no response. At one point I noticed that the cigarette was not in his mouth. Rather, he was staring at the burning tobacco leaves, considering how his desire for a smoke was controlling him. He was not in charge of his life—this cigarette was—and it was mocking him. He would tolerate it no longer. That night, under a starry sky on Truant Island, Burrumarra quit smoking. 'Enough,' was his final word on the subject.

The connection between his decision on smoking and staying on the island to die or departing for home is anyone's guess, but on that third night, Burrumarra's mind had changed. 'It is over,' he said. We left Gulirra the next morning for the return trip to Nhulunbuy. And at Burrumarra's request, the dentist (our captain) carried him to the dinghy for the row out to the yacht's anchorage. He was too weak to walk.

Not much was said on the homeward journey. As Truant Island disappeared under the horizon, Burrumarra said in a soft voice. 'Goodbye old friend.' And with that, we sailed on, a hearty breeze this time ensuring our trip was swift and eventless.

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Burrumarra lived for another two years after this journey. And at his funeral, as expected, a great sadness descended upon the entire community. Hundreds of people from all the Yolngu clans were in

attendance, coming from far and wide to pay their respects to the old man. Government, public service and military personnel were also in attendance, for he was a person of great stature.

As anticipated, the ceremonial component of the proceedings included all manner of references to the afterlife. There were whale songs and rituals for the whale hunters, ceremonies associated with Allah and the paradise garden of the hereafter, and also many Christian hymns and blessings.

But amidst all the sorrow, word started to spread first from among the traditional singers and musicians—and then to all the gathered mourners—that a large Navy aircraft carrier was stationed off Elcho Island, just over the horizon ready to take the old man's spirit to the land of the dead, to the sacred well on Truant Island.

This thought alone, so mysterious and impossible, created a spark of exhilaration that filled everyone's hearts with a sense of wonder. It was only right that the aircraft carrier be out there, and that it take him to his spiritual home. The sacred waterhole at Gulirra was where his spirit had come from, and to there it would return. And a new life would emerge from that same source, in due course, and the eternal balance of all things would be restored. Happiness would return to the community.

And so the funereal songs continued. Not dirges by any means. Rather, these were mighty stirring songs of old about the collaborative effort of both Macassan and Yolngu, white and black, needed to raise the ship's mast and set the sails. The singers might have been thinking of Burrumarra's aircraft carrier, but they were singing about a Macassan prau; the wind filling the expansive cloth, and the flags atop the mast, yellow, blue and red, dancing themselves in the steady breeze, as the spirit sea craft headed outwards on its journey to the land of the dead.

But in this complex vision inspired by the singers, Truant Island is a mythical place. It exists only in our dreams. It floats timelessly in a clear blue sea to the north-east in a place that cannot be accessed by ordinary mortals. It remains unsullied by the drunken antics of the more ignorant among us.

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We look forward to working with you in forging an online community of scholarly discussion! If you have any questions, please contact:

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