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# 19

## Language and land in the Northern Kimberley

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The coastal Northern Kimberley was home to several Aboriginal groups, as well as being the divide between two major culture areas: the (freshwater) Wanjin groups, and the salt water peoples particularly associated with the names Bardi and Jawi. In this paper I use evidence from place names, cultural ties, language names, mythology, and oral histories to discuss the locations and affiliations of several contested groups in the area. Of particular interest are the Mayala and Oowini groups. In doing this work I build on techniques exemplified and refined by Luise Hercus in her beautiful studies of Central Australian language, land, and culture.

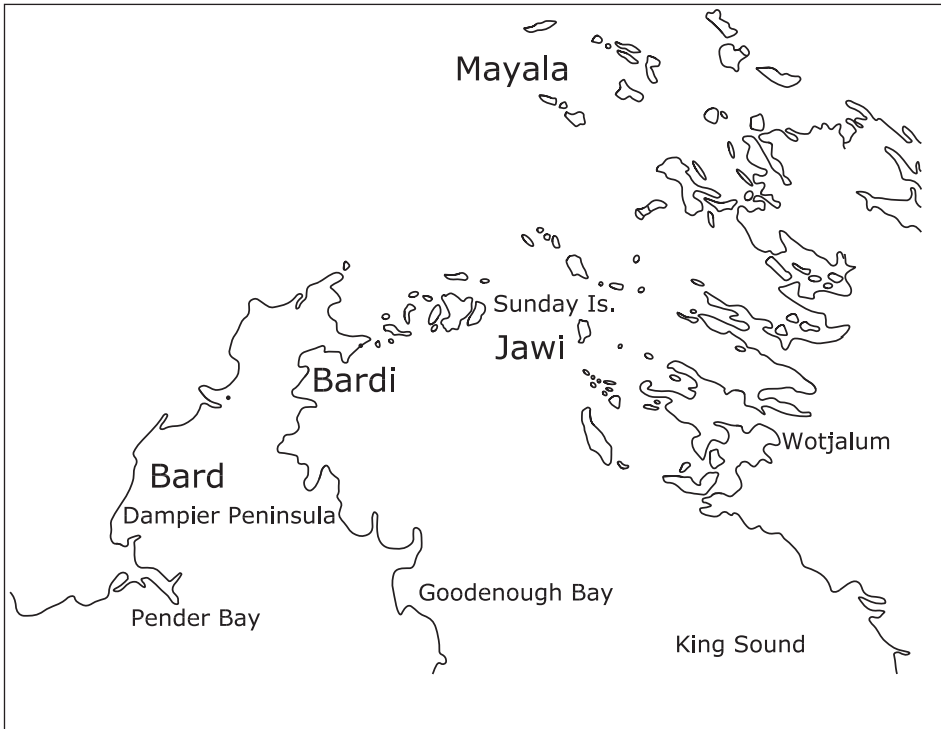
### 1. Introduction

When William Dampier careened his boat *Cygnets* and took on fresh water in the north of Western Australia in 1688, he recorded the inhabitants of the area as shouting ‘gurri’ at him. The place is now called Cygnet Bay and ‘gurri’ was probably the Bardi word *ngaarri* ‘ghost’. The Dampier Peninsula, Buccaneer Archipelago, and adjacent mainland areas are of great interest for linguists wishing to investigate the details of language contact, the marking of land ownership through language (for example, by naming places) and the discussion of land and language in song and story. Of particular interest here are the terms *Mayala* and *Oowini*, their designation and the relationships between these groups (if group terms they were) and the languages and peoples of the surrounding areas. In working on this topic I owe a profound debt to Luise Hercus, who introduced me to fieldwork with Aboriginal people and who has taught me a great deal about looking beyond language alone to study the past.

The core of this article is what the terms *Mayala* and *Oowini* might denote. Are they language names, place names, culture groups, or something else? What language groups did they affiliate with? What types of evidence can be used

to answer these questions, and how have fieldwork practices made answering these questions difficult? In what follows, I sketch out a summary of the different strands of the argument about the meanings of the terms and the implications for language boundaries. The issues are as follows:

- relations between Bardi, Jawi, Mayala, and Unggarranggu, Umiida, Unggumi and Worrorra groups in terms of language, social relations, and intermarriage;
- language, culture and boundaries of the Mayala people;
- language, culture and boundaries of Oowini; and
- land rights, land tenure, and differential rights to country within the Mayala area.



*Map of Bardi dialects. Map: Claire Bowern.*

The area under consideration is shown in the map above. The area is at the intersection of the Nyulnyulan and Wororan language families. The Buccaneer Archipelago is where the northernmost members of the Nyulnyulan family meet the westernmost languages of the Wororan family: Bardi (Nyulnyulan) and Unggarranggu (Wororan) respectively. For further discussion of the Nyulnyulan family, see Bowern 2004, Stokes & McGregor 2003 and Nekes & Worms 2006. Unggarranggu is related to Umiida, Unggumi, Ungarinyin, and other languages of the Northern Kimberley. This is known as the Wororan or Northern Kimberley family (McGregor & Rumsey 2009; Capell 1984). These families are well-established in the literature on Australian languages and no one (to my knowledge) disagrees with this classification.

## 2. The Nyulnyulan – Wororan divide

The Nyulnyulan and Wororan language families are not closely related to each other; they are very different in both lexicon and grammar and there are no systematic similarities between them (cf. Bowern 2004). The language family boundary also coincides with a very sharp difference in cultural complexes. I mention four of the main ones here.

Wororan languages are associated with the Wanjina-Wunggurr culture complex. Wanjina are *Lalai* ('Dreamtime') creator beings who bring the wet season rains (Love 1936). Photos of Wanjina rock art appear in Blundell and Woolagoodja (2005) and on the front covers of Utemorrhah et al (2000) and Mowaljarli and Malnic (1993).<sup>1</sup> Wanjinās are both creators of and custodians for sites, and each Worrorra clan is associated with a Wanjina. They are 'fresh-water' beings; as a senior Bardi person explained, 'Wanjina don't like salt water'. Also prevalent in Wororan languages (and associated with the Northern Kimberley) are stories associated with *Wunggurr*, the rainbow serpent, hence the juxtaposition of terms in the name of one of the Wororan-based native title bodies, the Wanjina-Wunggurr (Native Title) Aboriginal Corporation.

*Wunggurr* are absent from the Bardi-Jawi region (and indeed, other Nyulnyulan areas further south), where instead *Milon*-time has a quite different set of properties. Rainbow serpent stories are largely absent from Bardi culture. Bardi creation stories involve the culture hero *Galaloong*, who travelled down the Dampier Peninsula, naming places, and giving law.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, Clendon (2009) describes a story shared by Western and Central Wororan groups involving dog ancestors *dila-ngarri* 'dog-ASSOC' (see also Utemorrhah et al 2000:21-30). Children are told not to make fun of the dogs that live with them, in case they laugh or answer back in their own language. If the dogs talk, that will cause the humans to be swallowed up by the ground. If the children do make a dog laugh, they are all swallowed up by the ground, but a Wanjina ancestor will ask two other people from elsewhere to take over the name *dilangarri*. There are no stories of this type in Bardi country.

Thirdly, Wororan groups such as Unggarranggu, Umiida and Yawijibaya have named patrilineal moieties associated with particular clan groups; Bardi-Jawi people instead use the egocentric generational moieties *jarndoo* and *inara*. That is, a person is *jarndoo*, as are their brothers, sisters, and all kin of that generation and their grandparents' and grandchildren's generations. People of their parents', children's, and great-grandparents' and great-grandchildren's generations are *inara*. Bardi-Jawi people must marry people who are *jarndoo* to them. This moiety system is likely to be old in Nyulnyulan, even though

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<sup>1</sup> Though Wanjinās have been widely photographed and published, including by Ngarinyin, Wunambal and Worrorra people, I have also heard concerns expressed about the dissemination of Wanjina photographs and so do not include any here.

<sup>2</sup> There are two other culture heroes which figure prominently in this story, but their names are restricted. One is particularly associated with the Oolooloong initiation ceremony.

most of the other languages of the family use section terms, related to the four-section systems of further east (McConvell 1997; see also Capell & Elkin 1937).

Finally, Wororan groups participate in a series of ritualised exchanges, named *wurnan* in Ungarinjin. This cultural complex is also absent from the Nyulnyulan region, though Nyulnyulan groups did of course trade with their neighbours, at least to some extent.

There is also evidence from stories for the distinctness between Ngarinyin (or inland Wororan-speaking peoples) on the one hand and islanders on the other. Oowini is included in the group of people who are hostile to islanders. An example comes from a narrative told by the Bardi man, Agoomoo (*nyami* or mother's father to the late Nancy Isaac). It was recorded by Gerhardt Laves in 1929 (it is story 142 in his collection). In this story, two men, Goolamana (Oowini) and Gaminijina are two ancestral figures who cannot understand each other's language. The relevant sentences are reproduced here in Bardi, with translations checked by Bessie Ejai and Nancy Isaac:

- (1) *Goolamananimi aranga ngaanka injayboona arra oolarlamankana Gaminjinanim rooban barna injoonina Gaminjinanimi aranga ngaanka Goolamananim arra nimoonggoonjini ngaanka.*  
Goolamana used a different language, Gaminjin didn't hear/  
understand him, and spoke back in a different language, which  
Goolamana didn't know.

*Ginyinggon ginyinggi Gaminjini goolboo injoonoo ginyinggi aamba arrangalba aamba.*

Then, this Gaminjin turned into a rock, he was a bush man.

*Goolamanajina ngaanka Oowini arra nimoonggoon ginyinggi Gaminjinanim.*

Goolamana's language is Oowini, and Gaminjin didn't know it.

Relations between Bardi-Jawi people and the mainland Wororan language speakers do not appear to have been very good. For example, Nancy Isaac remembered her family expressing worry when being taken to live on the mainland at Wotjolum and then Kunmunya in the late 1930s, since they were to be living amongst traditional enemies. She described to me the foreignness of a number of aspects of life at Kunmunya, including the horrible smell of *goonggooroom* 'cycad paste', which was not prepared in Bardi country.

Further animosity is documented in W. H. Bird's Short Vocabulary of the Chowie Language of the Buccaneer Islanders (Sunday Islanders), North Western Australia (Chowie=Jawi [CB]). Here he writes (Bird 1911:180):

The tribes to the eastward [of the Buccaneer archipelago], however, differ very much in type, customs and language; and until about four years ago there was no intercourse between the tribes on each side of King Sound. Previous to that time the Sunday Island natives lived in constant dread of an invasion by the tribes to the eastward and they would often imagine that the hostile native had really come down upon them, and have come to me for protection on several occasions.

This is consistent with discussion I had with Bardi elders. It is also consistent with reports from the Laves Bardi materials from the 1920s, where animosity is reported between Miidayoon people and Sunday Islanders against Yawijibaya. Laves' Text 103 provides an example, which recounts the time some Sunday Island men ran away from Port George IV mission. They travelled through the Yampi Sound and Dugong Bay areas, past Wilfred Pass and the 'Graveyard' (where many ships were wrecked) and were chased by local Aborigines. There are other stories which involve *daamanjoon* or 'night raiding parties', including one in Laves Text 102, told by Nancy Isaac's father.

There are, however, also a number of shared features between the areas. These include using double mangrove rafts (*gaalwa* in Bardi, *kalum* in Worrorra) and participation in the beliefs of *raya* (conception totems; known as *raya* in both language groups) (Coate 1966). There are also loan words between Wororan and Nyulnyulan languages, particularly into Bardi. Bardi *wangalang* 'young man', for example (cf. Worrorra *wangalanga*) can be identified as a loan into Bardi, because Bardi underwent a sound change where initial *w* is deleted. A loan in the other direction is Worrorra *warli* 'sea turtle', which is a loan from a Nyulnyulan language \**waarli* 'fish'. It is either from Bardi or Jawi, and the loan predates the loss of initial *w*, or the loan has come via Warrwa, where *w* is retained.

### 3. Mayala and Oowini: Languages, places, or peoples?

Given the evidence for a clear disjuncture between Nyulnyulan and Wororan culturally and linguistically, of particular interest to us is the term *Mayala*, an area of the Buccaneer Archipelago claimed currently by both Jawi (i.e. Nyulnyulan) and Wororan groups.<sup>3</sup>

Historical maps are rather vague about the ownership of the islands in this area. This is in part because of researchers' concentration on certain mainland areas (e.g. a concentration on Bardi and Sunday Island, to the exclusion of the more remote islands); likewise Ngarinyin and Worrorra are much better documented languages than Umiida, Yawijibaya and Unggarranggu. This is also in part because of speaker numbers. Bardi is better documented than Jawi because Bardi people substantially outnumbered Jawi throughout the documentation period (the 20<sup>th</sup> Century); there was more opportunity to work with Bardi people, and they were more central to the running of the structures that linguists worked through, such as the missions and school programs.

Secondly, there is evidence that clan estates in this area were merging and subsuming one another, even as early as the late 1800s. This is also documented by Clendon (2009, 2014:7). This area was subject to a devastating influenza epidemic in the period immediately preceding the founding of the first missions (Crawford 2001). It severely affected Jawi and Worrorra peoples, as well as other

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<sup>3</sup> Tindale (1974) lists *Maialnga* as an alternative name for Worrorra, but one that Lucich (1966 –*non visi*) could not confirm with Worrorra people.

groups. It is quite possible that the difficulty in finding clear descriptions of the owners of these islands was caused by the deaths of several clan groups. Clendon (2009:349ff) provides evidence for deceased Worrorra estates. Full mortality statistics from the Sunday Island Mission records have not been compiled but the influenza deaths in January 1919 are substantial.

Another problem has been that past researchers (including me, before I asked in more detail about this topic) have tended to treat all the islands in the same way. I also made the error in early research of asking only about the close-in islands and assuming that Norman Tindale's (1974) map was correct about the borders of Bardi and Jawi country. I subsequently discovered that Tindale's map in this area is clearly incorrect in a number of respects, including the southern border of Bardi country, the location of Jawi, and the assignment of boundaries within the Dampier Peninsula. It would not therefore be surprising if it were inaccurate in this area too.

I initially interpreted Bardi people's discussion of the extent of Mayala country to mean that the northernmost islands *Noomoonjoo* ('seaweed'), *Boordiji Ngaja* and *Moorooloo Ngaja* ('big' and 'small' *Ngaja* respectively), *Garranard* 'Bedford Island', *Bilanyoo* 'Cockatoo Island', and other islands in the area were in Yawijibaya country. Subsequent work showed that this was not correct, and that there were both Mayala and Yawijibaya patrilineal estates on these islands. In this respect, the situation is similar to the situation on Sunday Island, where there were both Jawi *booroo* (patrilineal estates; Bower 2012:56) and Bardi ones. This was subsequently complicated by an influx of Bardi people from the mainland with the pearling industry, and following the deaths of more than half the Jawi inhabitants of Sunday Island due to influenza.

### 3.1 The term 'Mayala'

The term *Mayala* was often used to refer to the geographical area under discussion, and the term *Jawi* to the language. However, both terms can also be used to refer to groups of people living in the territory, or speaking the language, and there, they seem to have slightly different ranges. For example, the Bardi people I worked with talked about Jawi *booroo* on Sunday Island as well as Bardi ones, but even though they talked about 'Mayala people' (i.e., people from Mayala), there were (to my knowledge) no *Mayala booroo* on Sunday Island.<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with the use of *Mayala* solely as a geographical term rather than a term which could also be used to refer to groups of people.

The term *Mayala* appears in the Bardi dictionary compiled by Gedda Aklif based on field work with senior Bardi men and women (many now passed away) from 1990-1993 (Aklif 1999). In this work, the definition is given as 'Islands off

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<sup>4</sup> With respect to *Mayala* people within the Bardi-Jawi context (such as knowledge of *Mayala* place names), people at One Arm Point recommended that I should talk to Charlie Coomerang, and that Alec Isaac (late husband of Nancy Isaac) was from that group and his family had that knowledge; his traditional country was *Gararr* 'Mermaid Island'. The observations in this section, however, come from mainland Bardi people as well as the Isaac family.

the coast of the mainland. All islands east of Iwany [Sunday Island]'. That is, the work by Aklif (1999) would also indicate that the term Mayala is primarily a term referring to place, rather than to a language. This is in contrast to the terms Jawi and Bardi, which are both names for languages. They are also used as social group terms. Thus the most likely explanation for the apparently conflicting uses of these terms is that while Jawi and Bardi are language names, and Mayala is a geographical area term, all three terms can be used as terms of social identification for groups of people under certain circumstances.

### 3.2 Oowini

In earlier work I initially thought that the term Oowini designated a Wororan language (specifically, a variety of Yawijibaya or Unggarrangi), but that assumption was on the basis of it not appearing in other sources for Nyulnyulan languages. However, the name does not appear in sources for Wororan languages either (e.g. in Capell 1984 who lists Yawijibaya, Winyjarrumi, Worrorra, Unggumi, Unggarrangi and Umiida as Western Wororan languages, nor in McGregor & Rumsey 2009). Subsequent discussion with senior Bardi-Jawi people, including Jimmy Ejai, led to a definition of the name Oowini as being the name of the people who live in the Miidayoon area, that is, the islands closest to Wotjalum. That is, Oowini and Mayala are not synonyms; Mayala refers to all the islands, Miidayoon to the islands close to Watjolum, and Oowini to the people who live there. There is, however, no information about whether Oowini is a term particularly associated with a language.

A referee suggests a linguistic relationship between the terms *Miidayoon*, *Umiida* and *Oowini*, with the first being the territory, the second the name of the language spoken in that territory, and the third the patriclan name. This is plausible historically, but as far as can be determined, the Umiida language was not associated with the Miidayoon area by the time I did fieldwork. Umiida was described as a mainland language, from the Oobagooma area.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Nyulnyulan language naming does not have the type of naming system in evidence here, and all three words would have to be loans from Wororan. This would be in contrast to other Wororan language name borrowings into Bardi, where only one term (usually the language name or patriclan name) is borrowed. Perhaps more likely is that Miidayoon is in origin a Bardi social group name. For the use of the *-yoon* 'source' case suffix in this context, compare *Iwany-oon* 'Sunday Islanders' and see Bower (2012:248-49).

We thus have evidence from the Nyulnyulan/Wororan border area of several different types of terms that can refer to social organization. From elsewhere on the Dampier Peninsula, we are accustomed to thinking of language names as terms which also by default refer to social groups; but Mayala and Oowini are different in being geographic names.

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<sup>5</sup> Note that this is in contrast to the descriptions given in Tindale (1974), which place Umiida on the islands in Strickland Bay (as well as on the mainland), and Unggarrangu both on the mainland and outer islands northeast of King Sound.



## 4. Further discussion: Implications for land tenure

If the Mayala area is primarily Jawi-speaking, and there is a deep division between Nyulnyulan and Wororan languages in that area, but there were nonetheless Yawijibaya patrilineal estates in the region, what was the land tenure system of the area? That is, what does it mean to say that Mayala *is* Jawi, or that Mayala country is associated with the Jawi language?

Bardi-Jawi people recognise four types of ‘right’ to country, as I understand it through discussions with senior Bardi-Jawi people. First is ownership of a *booroo* (patrilineal estate) through a patrilineal descent group. This is the strongest right, and Bardi-Jawi people identify with a particular *booroo*. In the texts recorded by Gerhardt Laves in the late 1920s, participants are frequently referred to by their *booroo* name alone (e.g. *Gooloorroonbooroo* would be a member of the Gooloorroon estate). Secondly, a subsidiary right called *ningalmoo* is recognised; this accords right of access to one’s mother’s patrilineal estate. Third, there are some rights through the place of one’s *raya* ‘conception totem’ (shared by both Nyulnyulan and Wororan groups), and fourth, there are some rights through customary use and marriage.

Importantly, these rights are not weighted equally (cf. documentation of this type in Sutton 2003). Patrilineal descent is a primary indication of who can speak for a country. I came across this frequently when asking for information about places and people. For example, Jessie Sampi gave me information about places on the Western side of the Dampier Peninsula, but she always prefaced it with whose country it was, and how she was able to provide that information (such as through it being her husband’s country, or through general knowledge about Bardi country). She, and all the elders I have worked with, both men and women, Bardi and Jawi, were very clear that possessing information about a country and practices were not sufficient to allow someone to speak for a country or to make decisions about it; nor were rights other than those inherited through the *booroo* or the *ningalmoo* relationship, which extends to one’s mother’s estate, but not to one’s father’s mother’s estate.

Second is the question of how these estate rights translate into rights for Mayala country more generally. Older Bardi-Jawi-Mayala people distinguished very clearly between primary and subsidiary rights. Bessie Ejai, for example, explained on more than one occasion that she felt funny being one of the main contributors to the Bardi dictionary and the Bardi language program, because she was born in Derby and came to Sunday Island as a baby; her rights to country derive in part from her husband, and by virtue of her being one of the most fluent speakers of the language and therefore in a position of knowledge and responsibility to record that knowledge for Bardi-Jawi people. However, she still treats them as secondary rights.

The Isaac family have told me many stories about connections to Mayala country. Nancy Isaac told me how she and her husband and family would go camping in that area for a ‘holiday’ away from the mission. They have identified many places in that area, from Oolala, Diiji, Oolagija and Oonggaliyan in the south to Bilanyoo and Goolan in the north. These place names were permitted to go in the Bardi dictionary. In contrast, although older Bardi people know the names of places in Nyulnyul country, and in Nimanburru country south of *Garramal* (Cunningham Point), they would not permit them to be printed in the

dictionary, in case it was seen as an assertion of links to country to which they claimed no primary rights.

Place names for some of the places in the Mayala area clearly reflect speakers of Bardi-Jawi (or a very closely related language). The Bardi name Oolagija is not just a spelling variant of Woolagooja, for example, but it shows a characteristic Bardi-Jawi sound change of the loss of initial *w* (compare the Bardi word *aamba* ‘man’ with the Nyulnyul word *wamb* and the Nyikina word *wamba*, both of which also mean ‘man’; this change is regular).

Because Bardi people practised clan exogamy, a family group would contain members of several patrilineal estates, and these ties are built into loose confederations of speakers of the same language. Thus a group of Bardi people might travel across several patrilineal estates in order to camp at different times, with different members of the group being primary according to where they were. I do not know of any cases where someone whose tie to a place was through a father’s mother would have rights over that of people whose ties were directly through a father. Moreover, claims to a particular estate in an area do not, as I understand it from Bardi elders, translate to claims within the larger language group. For example, a Bardi person who has secondary or tertiary rights to a single estate in Nyulnyul country would not have rights of determination to Nyulnyul country in general, although it is true that they have ties to a particular Nyulnyul estate. If such rights are not clearly distinguished, due to the complex marriage patterns and exchange networks throughout the Kimberley, most people would have a ‘right’ of some sort on most land claims; that would appear to severely problematise the concept of a traditional owner.

## 5. Conclusions

Luise Hercus has long recognised the importance of looking beyond language forms to other aspects of culture, and in working with speakers to listen to their testimonies, beyond elicitation of grammatical terms. As seen in this paper, multiple lines of evidence allow us to draw some conclusions about the meanings of group terms such as *Mayala* and *Oowini*, and how they relate to other terms that can refer to social organization, such as language naming. We see that the Northwest Kimberley coast, like many other areas of Australia, has complex ways of referring to country, complex ways of establishing rights to country, and complex interactions between groups. The area gives evidence for sharp boundaries as well as contact, and provides an illustration of the ways in which language can reconstruct the history of peoples no longer with us.

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