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ABORIGINAL GROUPS OF THE DARWIN AREA,
FOCUSING ON DARWIN TOWN

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If the question is only to which Aboriginal people the area of Darwin town belongs (and belonged), the answer is simple and undisputed - the Larrakia. This is so whether the source of information is Aboriginal (Brandl *et al.* 1979:3-4) or non-Aboriginal (Goyder 1869; Douglas 1870:3-4, Herbert 1873:23, Sturt 1879:92; Masson 1915:47-8 - among numerous early references).

However since 1869 Port Darwin/Palmerston/Darwin (as it has been variously known to Europeans) has been a focus of non-Aboriginal activities and has therefore been an assembly point for Aboriginal people of different linguistic groupings who have come there for a number of reasons. Such people have never disputed Larrakia ownership over the generations, but both they and the Larrakia would agree that their access to areas of Darwin is now based substantially on well-established rights.

Nowadays such groups include people from as far east as North-eastern Arnhem Land, as far south as Alice Springs, as far west as Western Australia and even from the north and north-east, since the Tiwi and the Torres Strait islanders are established in Darwin. The number and range of such groups could fairly easily be assessed by a survey of existing town camps, mission headquarters and Darwin suburbs.

However, it may be of interest to spell out here the more traditional associations of the Larrakia with neighbouring groups. The intricate interconnections have only recently begun to be understood.

Before doing this I will present a perusal of the historical and earlier ethnographic information on the location of the Larrakia people and others nearby.

PREHISTORY OF THE AREA

Although no archaeological work has been carried out around Darwin itself, excavations in the region show Aborigines have been in the area over 20,000 years.

At Namoyn and Malanganger in the Oenpelli region about 250 kilometres to the east of Darwin are sites dating back to and beyond 20,000 years before the present day (White 1967; Mulvaney 1975:287). At Ingaladdi to the south is a site dated to around 7,000 years before the present day (Mulvaney *ibid.*:289).

North of Ingaladdi on the coast at Yarar rock shelter near Port Keats, some 250 kilometres south of Darwin is a site dated to around 3,400 years before the present day (Flood 1970:50).

Of course such findings do not tell us whether or not a particular linguistic grouping occupied the sites. The findings do tell us, however, that the occupying groups were Aboriginal and, moreover, in a direct line of cultural continuity with present-day groups.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

First encounters

Explorers passed along the north coast as early as

1636 and 1644 when the Dutch explorers Pieter Pieterszoon

(Keen 1980:19) and Tasman (Sharp 1963:88-9; Bauer 1964:25)

mapped it. Later Baudin, too, in 1802-3 (see Peron and

Freychette 1807-16: Vol 2: 285-8) would have passed by Port

Darwin. These transient contacts, of which the historical

record is sketchy, must have referred to the Aborigines

a contrast to the many and sustained dealings they had with

the visiting trading companies of south-east Asia, who regularly

wanted the area around the Cobourg Peninsula, for instance, to

the east of Darwin for extended periods over an unknown length

of time (Peterson and Tonkinson 1979). Macknight states

(1976:1) that by the beginning of the nineteenth century several hundred traders spent four to five months of a year in Australia.

On the east coast of the Cox Peninsula opposite Darwin

are to be found tamariad trees, which may have sprung from the

diseased seed of the condiment carried by traders from the

account of encounters with Aborigines in the Darwin area, when he and his crew anchored in Port Patterson, some fifty kilometres east of Darwin in 1818. Philip Parker King (1827:270) gives the first detailed

The earliest recorded face to face contact in this area was made by Captain Wickham, one of Stokes' coastal exploration party in 1839 (Stokes 1846). The local people were terrified. By this time of course Aborigines of the area had already heard of, perhaps even encountered, the British who had settled at Fort Dundas on Melville Island and Fort Wellington on the Cobourg Peninsula at Raffles Bay. Both settlements were abandoned in 1829. Fear and caution had characterised approaches from both sides (Peterson and Tonkinson 1979). Some Aborigines were killed - up to thirty in the Raffles Bay area.

In 1838 the British established another settlement on the peninsula at Port Essington, called Victoria. By the time Leichhardt reached the East Alligator River in 1844-5 Aboriginal knowledge of the settlement was widespread (Leichhardt 1847:522). Victoria was abandoned in 1849.

Undoubtedly Gregory in 1855-56 and McDouall Sturt in 1862 passed through the area near Darwin and their passage must have been known to Aborigines. These early explorers, however, were more interested in establishing the suitability of the country for agriculture or pastoral pursuits than recording ethnographic details of the local natives.

First settlement

In 1865 Colonel Finniss attempted to administer the first pastoral settlement in the Darwin area at Finniss Cliffs.

At this time J.W.O. Bennett recorded a vocabulary of the WuLna language (1869). This settlement also failed, not least because of the uneasy relationships with the local people on the Adelaidie River.

Mckinlay in 1866 investigated the country between the Adelaidie and East Alligator Rivers. It took him from 25 January to 7 June to make the journey. Quite understandably he subsequently recommended moving the settlement of Palmerston to Port Darwin (Keen 1980).

Mineral discoveries made by members of Evans, party, ensured the Long-term and continuing influx of settlers into the area and the gradual displacement of Aboriginal groups.

When Goyder surveyed four townships in 1869 - Palmerston, Southport, Virginia and Daly - he said they comprised portions of "four native districts: the Woollenr", Woollen-Larrakeyah", "Larrakeyah" and "Warrungger" (Goyder 1869; Keen 1971:173).

The only reference in the literature to "Warrungger" and so it is have a word meaning which means "people", specifically Aboriginal people, and even more specifically, themselves. It is possible Goyder was trying to render this word when he wrote "Warrungger".

In the early days of the survey he noted some 600 to 700 Aborigines on one occasion near the surveyor's camp.

In January 1870 J. Stokes Miller and his party arrived to establish Palmerston. He wrote from there that "the Larrakeyah tribe of Aborigines made their appearance here on the 6th February to establish Palmerston. In January 1870 J. Stokes Miller and his party arrived

and have been here nearly ever since".

They were at that time camped on "the tableland" *above the non-Aborigines and at "Gully well" (Millner 1870).

On Friday 11 March 1870 he reports that "several natives in their canoes crossed from Talc Head to Point Emery and joined the natives camp".

On 6 April a woman, presumably a Larrakia Aboriginal, informed him that the "Woolner natives intended to spear the shepherds".

By 8 April the Aborigines had left for "Shoal Bay or crossed to West Point", and this may or may not have been connected with the threatened "Woolner" attack.

On 23 April the "Larakeyah returned to their camp near the tableland fence".

On 9 June he reports that the "Larakeeyah" have been camped a quarter of a mile from the boundary fence and have varied in number from 30 to 150 men, women and children. On that day 100 to 120 Woolner arrived and camped outside the stockyard fence, "all well armed" and "many in their war paint".

* I suggest the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority confer with the Darwin Historical Society for the precise location of this and other localities named in early reports.

"Adelaiide River," (McLachlan 1870).
satisfied that the "Woolnerts" had gone on straigh to the
use to follow any further without provisions as they were
'Larakayahs', there informed us that they thought it was no
"We tracked the "Woolnerts" to Knuckey's Lagoon. The
party to hunt them back into their own territory. He said,
instance, after the attack by the Wuila on 9 June he led the
cooperators Miller's account and has additional details. For
Doughlas. However, it is useful for our purposes as it
reportedly by the Incomating Government Resident
diary for the same period as Miller - for which he was
one of his staff, a man called McLachlan also kept a

Elliot had been cut down suddenly by the Woolner blacks".
On 13 June he reports that "the big role on point

Woolnerts and send them back to their own district".
Later that morning he sent a party to "capture the

remained off the mouth.
continued to visit and treat the other two injured for the
woman was not named by Miller. Ounga died, but Miller
spared. "Ounga" and "Neurlunga" were the men's names. The
attacked the Larakayah camp, where two men and a woman were
"Donald's Well" in the evening. On 11 June the "Woolner"
and demanded white Lubras (sic.) and food. They moved to
On Friday 10 June the "Woolner" were very insolent

After Douglas' arrived he decided to keep the Aboriginal groups separate. "I shall take the necessary steps to prevent a too near approach of the Woolner blacks to the camp". Douglas had subsequent disagreements with the Larrakia, too, one of whom he had flogged for spearing a horse. It seemed the Aboriginal's dog had been shot by one of the settlers and he had exacted revenge. For this he was flogged, but only after several Aborigines had been seized and held as hostages while they gave up the horse-killer. Douglas then told the rest of the group "to retire beyond East Point for some four miles hence".

It is fairly clear from this and other incidents he reports (for example 50 coconut plants being destroyed at Fannie Bay) that the Larrakia were beginning to feel that the newcomers were outstaying their welcome. The damaged flour and biscuit handed out by Stokes Millner in payment for turtle and fish brought by the Aborigines to barter must never have seemed attractive nor a fair exchange.

Douglas was on his own admission fearful that the Queensland experience would be repeated in the Palmerston area. He speaks of how the "blacks" there were driven back by settlers with "loss of life on many occasions".

At Yam Creek in 1870 south of Darwin a rich deposit of gold initiated a gold rush to the territory and a rapid increase in the European, especially male, population. The first Chinese indentured labour arrived in 1874.

Wagādī Land when past Rum Jūnglē.

(1873:50) Journeying south from Palmersston speaks of being in
this brought reports of groups further inland. Thus Herkert
The Overland Telegraph Line had been commenced and

Location of neighbouring groups

and by 1876 140 "coolies" were in Palmersston too.
population was 302 male adults (which did not include Aborigines)
return for 14 July of that year states that Palmersston
that Aborigines outnumbered them had gone, for the population
were with Aborigines or their welfare. By 1872 even the fear
in the increasing number Indians and activists than they ever
government residents before and after him, were more interested
But for all this compliants price and the other

camp near the town" (price 1877).

it partly thefts, are committed the tribe will not be allowed to
kindly treated and well cared for in sickness or old age, but
let them understand that while they behave well, they will be
who work to leave the town at sunset each evening I have
to allow idle blacks to come into the town at all and those
both places. I have instructed the Inspector of Police not
in Palmersston and Southport and they have committed thefts in
that "the Aborigines have been more troublesome lately both

By 1877 the Government Resident Price was reporting

Wildey (1875:115) says the Larrakia numbered about 300 and were "located about Palmerston and Southport, as far as the Adelaide River and Escape Cliffs eastward The Woolnahs reside up and down the Adelaide River", and were more numerous than the Larrakia. The Wagaidj "are located to the westward about Anson's Bay".

During the 1880's tin mining became established at West Arm and in the Bynoe Harbour area, and by 1881 de Lissa had started a sugar plantation on the Douglas (now Cox) Peninsula, using Chinese and Aboriginal labour from Port Essington (Harry 1882:1310).

By 1882 pastoral leases had been taken up both to the east and west of Darwin.

Foelsche (1881:15) mentions a Southport branch of the Larrakia, and (in Curr 1886:251) gives the numbers of the tribe as approximately "100 men, 120 women, 150 youths of both sexes and 130 children, in all 500 persons". Further, he says "the Waggites live to the westward of Palmerston, across the harbour and extend to the Daly River, and perhaps beyond ". The Wulna live to the eastward, on the Adelaide River and the Cobourg Peninsula, the Larrakia midway between, and the Wulwongga to the south. The country of the Larrakia extends along the coast from the mouth of the Adelaide River, west to Port Patterson and stretched about 25 miles inland.

the way by bullets".

private opinion is that a good many have been put out of telegraph line between Calliet's Creek and Pine Creek. My away fastest is the "Woolwongas", inhabiting both sides of the In 1890 Parsons reports that "the tribe wither in

natives are "more tractable away from their own country".

mission authorities brought a "Daily River man" to Darwin as Mackillop in a later report (1889) says that the

Cherribies and Wagitties are friendly friends, [are] soon enemies of the white man race, and that they and the Agaduillas, their I fear, hopefully enlightened by the supervisor The Woolwongas on the right bank of the river are we have to go at present with the Mulluk-Mullucks.

Mackillop (in Parsons 1880) says that -

As far as the mission in the Daily River was concerned

189).

throughout the text of the same study (37; 42; 147-174; 187; these "Alligators" groups see the Appendix in Keen (1980) and for a detailed classification of the distribution of

are hanging about Palmerston" and afraid of the Alligators. mission population to decrease. He adds that "many Woolnas 1887 between "Alligator" tribes and the locals caused the of the Jesuit mission at Rapid Creek says that a fight in May government Resident in 1888 (Parsons 1888). Father Mackillop at Rapid Creek, now avoid it," says J. Langdon Parsons, to Palmerston, and who for some time made a camping ground The "Alligator" tribe, who make periodic visits

Parkhouse (1895a:1) says the Larrakia "inhabit a tract of land, embracing the seaboard from Shoal Bay to Southport, together with some portion of the country west of that port". Their southern border was at the 46 Mile on the railway and he names the Wulna as an allied tribe with whom intermarriages were frequent. He also remarks (1895b:638) that between the Larrakia and neighbouring tribes a neutral zone of some eight to ten miles is reserved, which is used by other tribes when travelling.

Brown (1906:20) says the Wagaidj extend from near Point Charles to the Daly River.

Basedow (1906:1) says that the Larrakia are the best-known of coastal tribes, on account of Port Darwin being within their "domain". Their country extended south between the Howard and Finniss Rivers, with a sub-division or clan, the Märri near the mouth of the Blackmore River. (This name was also given by a Limilngan man to M. Brandl in 1979). "The Larrakia further separate themselves into coastal and inland groups, Binnimiginda and Gunmajerrumba". The Wagaidj adjoin the Larrakia in the west, he says, and they have country across the Daly River to about Cape Ford. The Wulna were to the east. He mentions a tribe closely allied to the Larrakia, the "Sherait" or Paperbark natives, whose country lies between the Wagaidj and Larrakia. To the east of this was "Gunerakan" country. South of the Wagaidj lived the "Ponga Ponga". He also notes (ibid.:3) that while the languages of the Larrakia, Wagaidj and Djeraidj were distinct, the members of each tribe were familiar with the languages of the other two. The Wagaidj also knew Brinken, the language of the people south and east of Cape Ford.

Wulna to the east. Djeraidj and Kungarakany to the south and south-east and the Finnis River. The Wagaidj were to their west and south-west, to the west to the Adelaidé River in the east and south to the Darwin, extending from the chain of Islands in Port Patterson In brief, Larrikia territory was in a radius around

made above. maps of tribal areas which help illustrate many of the points knownledge". They also provide a selection of early and late Darwin-Palmerston area was Larrikia country was general Layton and Williams (1980:39) state "That the Port

the Adelaidé River. Larrikia as from the Finnis River north-east to the mouth of Osborne a Linyquist (1972) gives the location of the

Finnis and Daly Rivers. (1972) gives Wagaidj territory as the coastal region between the Biil Gasy, a Department of Aboriginal Affairs of the

established on it" (Elkin and Jones 1955:146 [1537]). "partly because of the Government Aboriginal Settlements Office opposite Darwin. This group has moved to the Cox Peninsula Larrikia at the Finnis River, and now inhabit the peninsula Elkin (1950b:67) says the Wagaidj formerly met the

of Anson Bay. Breinl (1915:7) met Wagaidj people in the neighbourhood

Note

The names given by early writers to "tribes" in the Darwin area are diverse (see Layton and Williams 1980:43, 46, 47). They were Aboriginal names denoting at times an ecological description of a group, for example, "beach" people as in Wagaidj. At other times a name will refer to a political alliance, as in "Wolwonga" (ibid.:46), of speakers of three dialects. At other times a label refers to a group speaking a distinct language, for example Larrakia and Wulna (see Parkhouse 1884-5:2).

The labels Larrakia and Wulna were both given to groups by outsiders (Brandl et al. 1979-5). Spencer (1913:9) says the term Wulna was inadvertently coined by English speakers, the people's term for themselves being Punuurlu.

Berndt (1947:50) gives Gunimilgin as the indigenous name for the Larrakia and Brandl et al. (1979:5) yet other indigenous names for the same group. Layton and Williams say (1980:46-7):

More importantly the definition of such a group in terms of language is a shorthand way of referring to a group which occupies a bounded territory, possesses a common culture and whose members are normally recruited by descent but see Sutton 1980-MB7 The degree of political unity within such a group varies widely between different parts of Australia. To be able to speak the language is not a sufficient basis for becoming a member of the group Conversely, not knowing the language does not exclude one from the group providing one belongs by descent, possesses other aspects of the culture and is accepted as a member of the rest of the group (Sutton 1978:1980) There may be sub-groups within the (linguistic) "tribe" defined in genealogical or local terms (cf. Mărri), ecology, or even dialect.

The natives have for many years past, been divided into various camps located in and about the towns. These camps are occupied by natives of different tribes, the larger number belonging to the "Larrikia" tribes, which is the local tribe, others to the Alligatot River, Dally River, Botroloola tribes, Worgait, etc.

but it appears that people usually lived much closer to town: congregated at the short-lived Jesusit Mission at Rapid Creek, during the 1880's some Larrikia (and others) were

world wars, to name some factors. (particular in the case of women), disease, violence and life was disrupted by their employment and exploitation around Darwin as isolated Aboriginal people and how traditional purists out how pastoral, agricultural, mining and recreational pursuits lived post-contact. Brandt et al. (1979:79-100) have pointed to profound effects upon where Aborigines lived and gained a undoubtedly white activists had considerable and

"MIXING" OR RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURS

Aborigines call it "mixing". Particular for observers expecting or looking for "tribes". For the outsider this multiracial labeling can be confusing

groups. Number of so-called linguistic groups, descent and ecological for example Darida, a ceremonial status includes men of a ceremonies were also an important reason for labeling groups, In the Larrikia and Wagait cases links formed by

The largest Larakia camp is located, half on the cliff forming part of the Esplanade bordering the Harbour and half on the beach at its base (Spencer 1912).

Spencer recommended the removal of these camps to "Cullin's Beach" (i.e. Kahlin) near Myilly Point, where they remained until the late 1930's when most were moved to Bagot Compound. The Larakia, however, preferred to live unsupervised at Kalalak, and One Mile Dam in particular. Other areas - for example Rapid Creek, One Tree Point - have become associated with the Tiwi and other groups again with other areas.

The non-Aboriginal presence has, it seems, brought local Aboriginal groups in the Darwin area into close contact with one another.

This fact obscures another, equally important fact only recently established and that is that these groups have many ties and interconnections which the non-Aboriginal presence has only intensified. No doubt (as we saw in the settlements of 1864 and 1869) the non-Aborigines have also disrupted some links between Aboriginal groups. But what Aborigines in the area call "mixing" needs to be explored here.

"MIXING"

This term does not mean "mixed-up" or confused. It was not the case that specific Aboriginal groups, here or anywhere else in Australia, lived in isolated socio-cultural capsules with

Braudal et al. (*ibid.*:61-67) list numerous sites in the Darwin area, and give an outline of the sacred significance of the area surrounding Darwin. Within Darwin town both Gundal-Madlamarding (Emery Point) and Kalilak are of major significance (see Walsh 1981). Nearby the rock Dariba Nunggaliinya is also crucial in ceremonial cycles and dreaming tracks (and not only to the Laritakia - as is the case with the other sites too).

NAMED SITES IN THE DARWIN AREA

As I have said "mixing" has not been an abrupt process nor a new phenomenon. For a discussion of how it operated in the past see Brasil et al. (ibid.:113-119) and Keen (1980:75-77; 79).

In brief, many Aborigines in and near Darwin have close family and other ties with the Larrañaga. Many of them have been vested with responsibilities for the Darwin area and are intricably linked with the traditional owners.

The concept of "mixing" in the matter of identity is discussed in Brandl et al. (1979:33-38); in name exchange (ibid.:187-88); and in genealogies today (ibid.:228-230). See also Appendix I (excepts from the *Kenobi Claim Book*). See

- shared experiences such as re-settlement, world wars, cyclones, building a settlement, drinking (see Sansom 1977:1980, and Land rights movements) multilingualism
- life crises situations, birth and death of kin socialisation.

language or other cultural items that were peculiarly or pristinely their own. No Aboriginal group, even an island community like the Tiwi or the Groote Eylandt peoples can be considered a "unified whole" (Stanner 1966:36). "Tribe" however, is a concept implying this.

No one principle, even language (Sutton 1978:28), orders the totality of interaction between Aboriginal groups around Darwin. Stanner (1966:37) tells us how the Murinbata use sticks and stones to describe the articulation of groups. Their constructions emerge looking a little like a branching tree or a flung fishing net.

In the physical and social environments which provide the opportunity, the mesh becomes tighter. What we are looking at, then, is better described as a "social field". Sutton (1978: 116) uses this term for coastal groups on Cape York Peninsula.

The range of activities in which are demonstrated the complex socio-cultural links between people in the Darwin area includes the following:

- marriage and kinship, including descent
- attendance at and participation in ceremonies - death and initiations for example
- access to religious knowledge and inheritance of this
- territorial affiliations, including residence
- hunting and gathering
- name exchange

See Stanner 1966:37

Note also that Aboriginal names on maps of the Darwin area are Larraakia, according to Local Aboriginals. These names appeared on maps during World War II when Aboriginal names were employed as guides and pilots on coastal patrols (see Brandt et al. 1979:58).

As far as I am aware these names are from the Larraakia language which, incidentally, has been described as one of the two member Larraakian family of Australian Aboriginal languages (Wurm the other being the Wulna, their easternly neighbours (Wurm 1972:126).

Rapid Creek is Gurinaby, Nightcliff is Madjamaraballi, Parap is Bilawara (see Bunji, May 1973). Meryrang is the name for East Point (Norman Harris, Kituk Aboriginal).

Munggalu, an Aboriginal most knowledgeable about the area. Penitusula (Lockwood 1968:102 and, independently, George is scarcer to find. We do know that Garramalai is the Darwin Information on sites of non-ceremonial significance.

RITUAL LINKS OF GROUPS FROM BELYUEN TO OENPELLI

The Aboriginal population decreased rapidly in the first decades of settlement around Darwin, particularly among groups to the east, where Keen (1980:37-8) estimates that their numbers today are less than four per cent of that at the time of contact. Keen makes out a well-argued case for an originally dense population on this well-watered and resourced area between Darwin and the East Alligator River.

Information about rituals in these groups is sparse not only because of the descriptions, dislocations and de-populations they suffered, but also because of the secrecy surrounding many of their rites (MacKillop 1893:261). This is still the case today.

In matters of social organisation it is clear by now that in broad terms the people between Duyinmirrie Island in the west and central Arnhem Land in the east belong to the same cultural grouping. Important differences exist between groups in this area and should not be overlooked, but the similarities are crucial in differentiating them from groups to the east in north-eastern Arnhem Land and to the south. Some similarities which have been noted are:-

- non-circumcising or subincising rites
(see Berndt and Berndt 1964-68:139, map)
- matrilineal emphases (see ibid.: 56, map)
- semi-moiety organisation of totems (Keen 1980:92).

Waagai'dj and Larrikia, especially Elklin (1950b).
Brandl et al. ibid.), and a number of other writers for the
Warai around Humpty Doo and by Herkert (1873:27) and later by
area; in the South and East Alligator rivers area and for the
to the Daly River; by Williams and Layton in the Finnis River
and was first reported by Tanner from Port Keats (1936:303-8)
ngirrawad (see Brandl et al. 1979:39). This is a name exchange
people in the region and to shared aspects of culture, is the
Another custom which bears upon both the "mixing" of

sites recorded by Keen (1980).
work on this could possibly be done, especially by visiting
myths of the other groups in the area has been recorded. Some
To the best of our knowledge no information on the

21 and Brandl et al. 1979:69-75).
is often linked, too, to an Orpian (see Berndt and Berndt 1970;
Gummingu cases it is often accompanied by a whale. The Rainbow
from the west to the east. In the Waagai'dj, Larrikia, Tiwi and
Mauing and Gummingu have a myth concerning the Rainbow moving
among groups in the region. Thus the Tiwi, Waagai'dj, Larrikia
It is not surprising to find other broad similarities

the region.
valuable for what they may suggest regarding other groups in
outer limits. Nonetheless, ethnographers of these groups are
are the Tiwi and the Gummingu, both of whom are groups on the
from as early as 1844-5. The best documented groups in the area
similarities, as does Brandl (1971:77-8), who presents evidence
Spencer (reported in Keen ibid.:91) notes these

Initiation for girls

It is likely that institutionalised girls' puberty rites were also common in the region. Certainly the Tiwi, Wagaidj and Larrakia still practise them and Berndt and Berndt (1970:202) speak of them as indigenous in the East Alligator region. A number of women's sites extend across the region, too. More information, especially on sites, would certainly be available in this region from fieldwork, were it to be carried out soon.

Enough evidence now exists to state that at least two more general initiation ceremonies were shared throughout the region. In particular one which had as its focus the poisonous yam and initiation of the young, usually boys, and involving depilation and the ritual use of fire.

The yam ceremony

Brandl et al. (1979:194-5) report these two ceremonies formerly held in Larrakia territory - including Darwin. One involved the poisonous yam. As with the Tiwi kulama ceremony, it combined initiation and increase-type rituals (Brandl 1971: 247-338; 1970).

Larrakia and Wagaidj people can still point out sites on the Cox Peninsula and east of Darwin as gulida or yam ceremony sites (Brandl et al. 1979:184-5). A still living Wadjiginy man and another, a Limilngan, both senior ceremonial men are said to know songs from it, and Keen records some of these (Keen 1980:179). A resident of Darwin of Larrakia descent knows details of the ceremony from his mother.

The marerlma or Mordag ceremony mentioned by Bunji in September 1973, the "Makulorite". Certainly a Kiuk man named a ceremony as manguurit (Brandt et al.: 1979: 184-5) and implied its separateness from gullida and other menitioned by Keen (1980: 178) relates details of the ceremony given to him by the Lämängan ceremonial leader mentioned earlier. It is not clear from this description in what ways for the Larraakia by Basedow (1906) and Elkkin (1955) among others. In fact, they may well be one and the same, although at times I have gathered from informant that the gullida was older and contained fewer elements from southern ceremonial contexts. Distinct ceremonial grounds are involved, for instance.

The Guwünggu, too, formally performed an initiation and Berndt (1970: 37) is undoubtedly the same as the kulama of the Tiwi, the gullida of the Larraakia, and the wilae of the Wagadji. The Yam concerned, manginadjeg, as described by Berndt and Berndt (1970: 125, 132-3). The Guwünggu, too, formally performed an initiation ceremony for the Ka:kudju.

Spencer reports (1914: 146-9) a Yam and initiation ceremony for the marerlma (or Mordag) ceremonies (Keen 1980: 202). Guwünggu creator with the institution of the gullida and the Larrakia/marerlma (or Mordag) ceremony may well be the Wagadji ceremony mentioned by Bunji in September 1973, the "Makulorite". Certainly a Kiuk man named a ceremony as manguurit (Brandt et al.: 1979: 184-5) and implied its separateness from gullida and other menitioned by Keen (1980: 178) relates details of the ceremony given to him by the Lämängan ceremonial leader mentioned earlier. It is not clear from this description in what ways for the Larraakia by Basedow (1906) and Elkkin (1955) among others. In fact, they may well be one and the same, although at times I have gathered from informant that the gullida was older and contained fewer elements from southern ceremonial contexts. Distinct ceremonial grounds are involved, for instance.

ceremonies. Keen (1980:89) reports that marerlma is equivalent to the murak, murdag, morag of other groups, and that marerlma ceremonies are shared by the Limilngan with the Wulna and Larrakia. Keen (ibid.:89) says that other groups in the area have the morak ceremony - the Mbukarla, Bukurni:dja, Ka:kudju and Kundjey'mi, but gives no further details. However he obtained an account of the "secret Marerrlma ceremony" from his Limilngan informant (ibid.:179) and recorded its songs.

CONCLUSIONS

Of course no sharp line separates off the region from its neighbours - not even the practice of circumcision. For Basedow (1906:10-17), when describing Larrakia initiation ceremonies for girls and boys, gives not only Larrakia terms but Wagaidj, Djeraidj and Brinken, too. Similarly, the Gunwinggu in the east share many elements with people further east again. The Tiwi certainly represent the northern limit of the region but this is due to a physical boundary, the sea, and not a cultural one.

When all the evidence is weighed, however, it is possible to speak of a cultural wedge between the two great ritual cults to the east and west of Darwin - Karwadi in the west and Kunapipi in the east (as Xavier Herbert pointed out in Brandl et al. 1979:183).

Between are the three cults we have dealt with here, the gulida and mordag, probably both concerned with male initiation and increase of yams, in particular, and girls' puberty rites.

It should certainly be possible to gather together more information than is presently known on any of these. One quite urgent task would be the mapping of Moradag and gulida grounds.

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