

# The Tridual: The Totemic Philosophy of Aboriginal Elder David Burrumarra

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My dear friend and mentor, the late Aboriginal leader David Burrumarra from Northern Australia, was a complex man. For seven years, we were very close—meeting almost daily on a range of projects, including his biography. My ability to capture his complex nature in narrative form was a challenge from the outset. In his totemic vision of the world, he was a whale but also other sea creatures like the octopus. How do you write a biography of a whale or of a man that is a whale? Do you focus on the life cycle from birth to death and then rebirth in a new totemic form? The saltwater environs and the rich variety of life that constitutes the whale's (and the man's) world? The whale's (and his) physical attributes and intelligence? The endless struggle for survival of the fittest and the ever-present danger of predation? Burrumarra's world had been colonized and his people were displaced and marginalized; they struggled for survival, just as some natural species have been hunted to near extinction.

Claude Levi-Strauss, in his groundbreaking text *Totemism*, speaks at length about the special relationship that exists between people and their totems, especially in the Australian Aboriginal context but also in places like Southern Africa. The San people, for example, are recorded as saying: "The life of an elephant is the life of a man." It is such a simple statement, but one that has baffled even the most distinguished of social scientists. What do the followers of a totemic religion mean when they make such a statement? The idea of the "dividual," where two or more entities are understood to act as one, is well known in the anthropological literature. This theory allows us to reconsider the idea that the individual is the smallest unit to which a society can be reduced.

In a traditional totemic worldview, Aboriginal people are not wholly self-contained physical units, but rather a part of something much greater than themselves, as in any great religion. They are an integral part of the vast interrelated web of life. Within Burrumarra's immediate family group, for example, there were dolphin people, shark people, turtle people, and so on. This is the nature of the dividual. The Aboriginal man or woman cannot be separated from the spiritual forces that animate them and all the living entities that surround and support them.

In this paper, I will go beyond the concept of the dividual and introduce the controversial concept of the "tridual." A thought revolution emerged in Aboriginal circles following first contact with non-Aboriginal people. In a new and hotly debated philosophy, both black and white worlds were viewed as interdependent and inseparable—an extension of the foundational vision of the totemic world. Whale and human were one, but so were black and white, and grappling with the ramifications of this extraordinary vision became center stage in writing Burrumarra's biography.

In 1994, I published a series of biographical vignettes honoring Burrumarra's life in Australia's remote Northeast Arnhem Land. The book was called *The Whale and the Cross*, recognizing the two most significant influences in his life. It detailed his influence, Australia-wide, in the struggle for Aboriginal land and sea rights and reconciliation. While missionaries had led him to believe that he was created in God's image (naming him after King David), he told me that he was a product of the coral reef and salt water, and he was intimately linked to the natural world. Given the massive changes taking place in Aboriginal lives, Burrumarra and I decided to focus on the question of how his totemic outlook had served him and his people in their dealings with intrusive outsiders beginning hundreds of years ago, including Indonesian fishermen, Japanese pearlers, and also European colonizers.

But I struggled with the question of where to start the biography.

There were so few shared assumptions and so little common background when we began our extended conversation in the mid-1980s. From Burrumarra's side, as well as mine, there was only friendship, trust, and a willingness to share deep knowledge about ourselves and our worlds. But Burrumarra also had a message that he wanted to share with future generations, and he entrusted me, along with a few others, with that responsibility. I was the only non-Aboriginal. Other social scientists had worked closely with Burrumarra—he proudly viewed himself to be Australia's first Aboriginal anthropologist—but they either had their own agendas or were not able to invest the necessary time and energy on this task.

Today, the highest compliment or honor that an Aboriginal person can give to a non-Aboriginal person is that they tried with determination to live in two worlds, recognizing and respecting Aboriginal law and systems of authority. Burrumarra's message was encapsulated within this policy. He would call it "membership and remembrance," as I will describe later. Burrumarra promoted this policy with great passion and his influence was profound. His unwavering stance and unquestioned status would provide an entry point for Aboriginal people into the world of non-Aborigines, and vice versa, inspiring what is termed "two-way learning." For Burrumarra and others, this policy was a device for the survival of his people. Since the 1940s, they have been dealing with the harsh realities of the shock of the new, and many have been lost between traditional, missionary, and modern worlds. As people, they needed to find a path forward or simply disappear, as with so many before them.

Burrumarra's message has been the subject of two books of mine as well as numerous articles. In this paper, I will focus on the theme of the survival and growth of his people. I will use the concept of the trividal to help explain Burrumarra's message. According to Burrumarra, following the arrival of missionaries, blacks and whites are now a part of each other's lives. He was a black man in a white world, just as I was a white man in a black world. The two of us, representing our places of origin, were bound by sacred laws. I will also detail the general outlines of these laws which had become the cornerstone of the "Dreaming"—or traditional Aboriginal religion—in the contact and post-contact periods. The specifics of these sacred laws were restricted to the ritual context of the ceremonial life. All that the general public needed to know was that blacks needed whites in this new cosmological formulation, but so did whites need blacks, as I will explain.

When Burrumarra and I first met, I was nearing 30 years old while Burrumarra was around 70. There were no birth records for children born in "the bush" in the days before the establishment of the Christian missions. I was a child of the British Empire, a product of the very best private school in Queensland, and a representative of that group who had stolen the land of the First Australians and devastated its people. Burrumarra was an elder statesman of Australia's indigenous people or, in particular, a group known as the Yolngu of Northeast Arnhem Land. As I have said, he was a staunch advocate for Aboriginal land and sea rights and reconciliation with the majority of non-Aboriginal society so long that reconciling was on fair and equitable terms.

We would sit under the vast spreading mango trees on the shores of the Arafura Sea discussing everything and anything, even King Arthur and unicorns, and Burrumarra would relate whatever I said back to his own clan's history and mythology. Indirectly, we were modeling the sort of relationship that should exist between white and black Australians, the newcomers and the original people. If white Australians could listen and learn from the first people and respect their cultures and rights, there could be a possibility of peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit. This vision of a united Australia was at the very heart of the idea of the trividal.

Early on in our conversation, I realized that there were some topics that were taboo, just as there were others that were cherished, and these latter topics became a gateway for deeper learning. Slowly but surely, Burrumarra's totemic worldview began to take shape in my mind. It was certainly clear, however, that my

privileged education had not adequately prepared me for what I was hearing. For example, one day, I asked Burrumarra to describe to me what his father saw when he looked into a mirror that had been gifted to him in the late 1800s by an Indonesian fisherman. I had a particular interest in this early trading relationship as it was the focus of my doctoral dissertation. Burrumarra's response to my question was immediate. His father saw an octopus in the mirror, just as he did. I protested saying that he looked nothing like an octopus, but he reprimanded me in a stern fashion and accused me of what anthropologists call ethnocentrism (i.e., judging another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own). I drew a picture of an octopus in the sand and asked him what it was. He said that it was a picture of himself. Pressed for more detail, he said that the octopus was that part of the man that swims around in the coral reef. Then I asked what a man is. He replied: "It is that part of the octopus that walks around on the land singing octopus songs." This is how one might define the *dividual* (i.e., the belief in a shared identity with the totem).

Burrumarra's life was indeed the life of an octopus, although the whale was his primary totem. The fact that these two entities were one in his mind's eye was astonishing to me, but there would be even more thought-provoking revelations. In the Yolngu languages, the terminology for various human body parts has its counterpart in the totemic landscape. For example, one of the words for hair also meant trees growing on the sacred lands; thus, the head is considered to be the sacred part of the body. The word for one's back is the open plains country, while the alimentary canal is a river, and the stomach is a fresh water swamp. The words for blood and fresh water are interchangeable, for blood is to the body and fresh water is to the land. In the anthropological literature, traditional people like the Aborigines are considered to be *autochthonous*—born of the land and integral to it.

So when and how did the concept of the *trividal*, as reflected in the policy of membership and remembrance emerge? How was the totemic mindset put to work in encompassing and incorporating powerful outside forces?

Academics have long struggled to characterize the totemic world view of Aborigines. The propensity of Aborigines for sharing has led some sociologists to describe them as the original communist society. Alternatively, totemism represents the very origins of the religious life. Emile Durkheim (1912) argued that the totem that each clan "worshipped" as a sacred power was in fact society itself. If God and society were one, then the people were actually worshipping themselves! But this was not how Burrumarra perceived the spiritual life. Burrumarra would sing about his "oneness" with the whale, the octopus, the pearl, the crayfish, and other totems of his Warramiri clan, including the long knives that the Indonesians had introduced to Northern Australia, the flags that they planted on Aboriginal soil, and the anchors that secured their boats. How was it possible that one shares a totemic essence with a sword, a flag, or an anchor? Did the totemic vision encompass everything animate and inanimate, ancient and modern, indigenous and introduced? What about the cultural values and religions of the newcomers? To what extent had these been absorbed into Yolngu perceptions of the natural order? Were they worshipping both themselves and the other? My questions were endless.

For Burrumarra and his clan, I played many roles, including secretary in his communications with governments, museums, land councils, or the institute for indigenous studies. In the eyes of the local Aboriginal community, our seven-year conversation was novel but not without controversy. Why was the old man sharing so much with this outsider? And what was being shared? Why was the elder not spending an equivalent period with younger members of his tribe or even his own sons and daughters? For a people who carefully guard their secret-sacred realm, there was always a question hanging over our relationship. I was an adopted member of the Wangurri clan, a closely related but distinct clan associated with the mangrove-fringed coastline, as opposed to Burrumarra's "open sea" Warramiri clan. With my emerging status in Yolngu society through my association with Burrumarra, elders from other groups would come to me to ask for advice or to gain access to Burrumarra's opinion on matters

of tribal etiquette or to help sway his views on specific community issues. I had not bargained for this and found such interactions to be awkward and inappropriate.

In Bruce Charwin's popular novel *Songlines*, which was based on his experiences in Central Australia, an anthropologist, whom I knew, had retreated to Europe because he had been exposed to too many sacred Aboriginal narratives. It was not possible for him to live a life in any normal fashion in the white majority cities superimposed over a landscape filled with tragic Aboriginal histories. That was not my story, but it still resonated deeply within me. I was told many things that my Aboriginal contemporaries could not know, not necessarily sacred stories but the fruits of Burrumarra's deep thinking over many years on particular aspects of Aboriginal law. In my case, however, I did not feel the need to run away as there was a task to be completed. The opportunity to write for *The Reflective Practitioner* provides an opportunity to speak to the essential message of Burrumarra—one that I am now also sharing with the younger generations of indigenous Australians, including Burrumarra's grandchildren. It is a message that often appears foreign to them just as it once did to me, yet it is vital to convey that message.

What was Burrumarra's message? Jeff Collmann (1988) has argued that if Aborigines are to control non-Aborigines at all, they have to try to bind them within the boundaries of Aboriginal society—meaning within the totemic framework of Aboriginal kinship and law. Burrumarra called this process of adopting whites into a black world membership and remembrance, and it was a policy linked to his people's very survival. By drawing upon their sacred traditions, Aboriginal leaders like Burrumarra formulated a prescription for what the people had to do in order to have a future in the new world that was thrust upon them. They had to be faithful to the laws of old but also alert to the contemporary needs of the indigenous population.

I once asked Burrumarra why he had made the choices that he did in his life like promoting this controversial idea of the trividal (the conjoining of black and white), and he would simply say, "So we could be here in the future!" In his mid-20<sup>th</sup> century reconfiguration of this policy, which had its roots centuries before contact with Indonesians, Yolngu would still see themselves as totemic people, as shark, whale, dolphin, and octopus "dreamers," but they were now also intricately linked to the world of the other. In the associated narratives, the foreigners were rich and powerful only because they drew their strength directly from Aboriginal land and waters. The indigenous people, the owners of the land, lacked the technological prowess and knowledge of the newcomers, but together there was the potential for a perfect union. If blacks denied whites access to the land, then both were diminished. If whites were permitted access on agreeable terms, all could flourish.

In the remainder of the paper, I will provide a number of case studies from the oral history and mythology of Burrumarra's Warramiri clan in order to highlight how the concept of the trividal or membership and remembrance emerged. In my understanding, the Yolngu response was not a unique strategy to the challenges of survival and revival in Australia. Such critical thinking would have occurred all over the continent, but unfortunately, we know very little about how the first people responded in places like Sydney or Hobart following British colonization. How did they rationalize what was unfolding all around them? In Northeast Arnhem Land in the 1940s, the policy advocated by Burrumarra enabled the Yolngu to embrace the Christian missionaries and their teachings and chart a future for the people as a pan-Yolngu collective living at peace with the world. This was an astonishing development and the product of great debates from one side of Arnhem Land to the other. Despite considerable acrimony from some traditional spheres, Burrumarra's vision, for the most part, held sway.

Now that I think back on it, all of my conversations with Burrumarra in the 1980s were future-focused. Even at my first meeting with him outside the Aboriginal council chambers in remote Elcho Island, his words reflected a focus on renewal. He asked me what I felt about the month of April. I really did not have any thoughts on it, though in the hot Northern Territory climate, April is usually the sweetest of months, the seas being calm, and the air clear. Later, in July, bush fires deliberately set by Yolngu to "soothe the land" and promote its fertility

fill the sky with towers of smoke. But back in 1986, I had nothing to say to Burrumarra, and he was disappointed. For him, April marks the rebirth of the world after the storms have passed and the “wet season” has ended. With the arrival of the “dry season,” all is made new again, for in his worldview, there is always the possibility of new beginnings and redemption in April. How wonderful it was to be alive—the crisp air, cool breezes, and a feeling that life as one knew it could continue forever.

This was not merely a reference to a desire for maintaining the status quo. The Yolngu had come far, but their continued progress was never assured. The impact of first contact had been devastating, and the aftershocks were still being felt. One can speak with any Australian Aboriginal people, and the sadness of the past is never far from the surface. The loss of land and languages and the destruction of culture through genocidal or assimilatory campaigns are fresh in people’s minds. Remote Northeast Arnhem Land is no different, even though its exposure to the uninvited forces of change came not with the European invasion in 1788 but with contact of a very different sort at even earlier time. Random Indonesian visits and settlements over an immensity of time, and then intensified contact from Islamic Sulawesi sultanates, Indonesian fishermen, brigands, and slavers in the 18th and 19th centuries, turned Northeast Arnhem Land upside down. By the early twentieth century, many clans had vanished—upwards of twenty by some counts—and there was an all-pervasive sense of despair and hurt.

Burrumarra’s own people faced extinction in the late 1600s or early 1700s in one of the most tragic episodes in Northeast Arnhem Land history. The concentrated presence of outsiders on Aboriginal land, the prostitution of Aboriginal women, and the impact of opium and alcohol took a heavy toll. Burrumarra’s homeland was the first major base of foreign settlement in Australia. The settlers were from Southern Sulawesi, from the sultanates of Gowa and Tallo, who had fled their homes in the mid-1600s after suffering defeat at the hands of the Dutch and Bugis. Anecdotal Indonesian records suggest a stay in Australia of more than 20 years. Yolngu accounts suggest a major settlement on Cape Wilberforce and smaller outposts at Port Bradshaw, Arnhem Bay, and the Wessel Islands. In this short period of contact, which Yolngu call as the “times of fire,” relations deteriorated from being amicable to the worst type of chaos, drunkenness, and murder. I have written in detail about this sad episode. In my best estimation, male members of Burrumarra’s Warramiri clan were being recruited and trained as military fighters for the South Sulawesi Sultanates. The plan of the outsiders was either to retake their homeland from the colonizing Dutch or at least be better prepared if there should be another attack. In the stories handed down to Burrumarra, this engagement was a source of intense pride for Yolngu.

Discipline, honor, and courage were the key characteristics inculcated in the troops, and these are referenced in Yolngu songs and stories drawn from the period. There are many words in the Yolngu languages to refer to this time, including the names of the land and sea commanders. The word “dhawiyuma,” for example, refers to men lined up on parade in military fashion. The Yolngu were black soldiers in an Asian army that encompassed many cultures and ethnicities, but they were all fighting for the one cause. This message of unity in diversity was not lost on Burrumarra. However, the rapid changes in Yolngu lives led steadily to societal collapse. Everything was out of control according to Burrumarra. Infighting and jealousy precipitated massacre, dispersal, and the eventual departure of the visitors.

During the times of fire, there was no longer any tribal unity or identity—just chaos, deception, and destruction. All that remains today in the deserted Warramiri homeland at Cape Wilberforce where that early settlement was located is a massive burial ground surrounded by flags and long knives. Few will speak of this time.

In the wake of these decisive events that occurred more than 300 years ago, Yolngu elders and thinkers “transported” the tragedy in their imaginations back to the beginning of time, so that a pathway out of the chaos could be formulated. The notion of changelessness in change would guide their thinking as new Dreaming laws

emerged to empower and guide the survivors. These laws, Burrumarra said, were centered on membership and remembrance.

Yolngu found a way forward out of the chaos by reenergizing the fundamental moiety divisions of Dhuwa and Yirritja, the yin and yang of the Yolngu kinship system. New Dreaming entities were added to the pantheon. One of these, Bayini, was a dreaming entity that was born out of the trauma that came in the wake of the number of children being born to the foreigners—children with light skin, who, as they grew up, owed no allegiance to Aboriginal traditions, only to the laws of the foreigner. This new Aboriginal law stressed how Bayini, a golden-skinned female deity, lived for the black-skinned Aboriginal people and reinforced their traditional ways. She may have been a foreigner herself, but she stood by the Aboriginal people in the event of a conflict with non-Aborigines.

Another major Dreaming entity that emerged was Birrinydji, a black/white figure in the image of the boat captain and blacksmith. He was the husband of Bayini. Yolngu, in the face of the shock of the new, realized just how poor and subservient they were in relation to the people of South Sulawesi. This new law promised the Aboriginal people a level of prosperity comparable to that of the foreigners. Birrinydji's message was that while the visitors had a wealth of technology (boats, canoes, axes, knives, and tobacco, among others), this wealth came from Aboriginal land; therefore, it belonged to the Aborigines. If Birrinydji was the animating force of the outsiders, as the Yolngu believed, then they each needed the other. Black and white had to work together, each contributing what they had to the partnership if they were both to flourish.

Burrumarra would draw inspiration from these inherited laws. He would refer to them as he preached in the church at Elcho Island in the 1940s, 1970s, and 1980s in his dealings with government officials about land rights and sea rights for Australia's indigenous people.

Warramiri survivors of the tragedy had removed themselves from the scene of their former demise and rebuilt their lives in the lands of related but now extinct Yolngu clans. It was the Wangurri clan, my adopted group, who helped guide the Warramiri through this transition period. This history was on display as Burrumarra and I talked under the mango trees—the old Warramiri man explaining the truth of the past to the young Wangurri adoptee. When the Warramiri were strong again and their clan numbers had increased, the plan was to return to their homeland at Cape Wilberforce. But the times were changing, and Christian missionaries intervened in the early twentieth century, setting up bases across Northeast Arnhem Land. A new chapter of the Dreaming was being written, and a new avenue for Aboriginal survival and growth was discovered, and Burrumarra was at the helm.

## Conclusion

In the 1980s, Burrumarra was recognized by the Australian Government with the Member of the British Empire (MBE) Award for his work in community development in Northeast Arnhem Land. He was deeply honored by this accolade, which came from the Queen of England. For some of his peers, however, this recognition was duplicitous. Being recognized by the colonizer was tantamount to submission or admitting defeat. The fight to seek remedy for the injustices of the past had to continue. Burrumarra had spent a lifetime fighting for Yolngu rights, but he acknowledged that the concept of the trivudal or a tripartite identity was easily misunderstood. Burrumarra was not a proponent of either assimilation or integration, neither was he an advocate of separate development. He was not trying to be a white man, even though he was living in an increasingly white world. He envisioned a future where Aboriginal people held down all the vital jobs currently occupied by non-Aborigines, like doctors and nurses, teachers, engineers, and so on, without losing their cultural or totemic bearings as traditional owners of land and sea.

As I mentioned, in Western perceptions, the individual is the smallest unit into which a society can be reduced, while in traditional Aboriginal society, it was the dividual—the human being in association with his or her totems. In a post-contact rendition, the tridual became the smallest unit. This theology of membership and remembrance, which has its origins in totemism, was Burrumarra's constant guide. In a traditional sense, Yolngu are members of totemically defined lineages that define and empower them. But simultaneously, they also remember that all totems, all living things under the sun, are in a special relationship with one another. They do not stand alone as they are united for a greater cause which is "holding up the universe." Burrumarra often said that one must learn to listen to the birds, trees, fish, and animals and know what they are saying, for each needed the other. The whale and octopus have no meaning or significance outside of their connection with whale and octopus people in the dividual mindset, and octopus people cannot endure without their special relationship with the dugong and shark people of the coast or the duck or goose people of the interior, etc. This is where they find wives and husbands, where they travel for sacred ceremonies, and where they obtain sustenance in collaboration and consultation with their relatives.

Bringing non-Aborigines into this Aboriginal cosmos in the 1700s was an enormous philosophical achievement by Burrumarra's ancestors, and my mentor carried on this thought-tradition well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the standpoint of the newly reconceived tridual, it is not possible for Yolngu to be subservient to non-Aborigines or for the newcomers to control the first people or dictate anything. If they both reached out their hands in friendship, then they could enjoy the riches of Aboriginal land and seas together and grow strong and healthy as one.

In Burrumarra's vision of membership and remembrance, the Yolngu could be functioning members of the modern world without losing contact with who they were as totemic sea and land people. Concomitantly, non-Aborigines could find a place in the Aboriginal world, just as I had been adopted into the Wangurri clan. The perceived ideal was about peaceful coexistence. If black and white Australians were to have a new birth in this land as one people, they had to understand each other's cultures and know about each other's sacred beliefs and practices. The Yolngu theology centered on the tridual was undoubtedly instrumental in helping Yolngu negotiate dramatic changes over the centuries. It was my assigned task in the 1980s, one which I accepted with great enthusiasm, to keep the thought-fires of the Yolngu elders burning for a new generation of both white and black Australians.

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