

Men's Business in Arnhem Land

Standing waist deep in the ocean, with only a hand-made fishing spear for protection against saltwater crocs, sting rays and marauding sharks, is probably not the best time to let the concentration waiver. Like most things up here in Arnhem Land however, spear fishing takes a



level of mental calm that my busy city life in Sydney has failed to prepare me for. Lulled into complacency by the tropical paradise surrounding me, with its beaches of pure white sand, expanses of crystal clear water and deep, almost tangible silence, my over-stimulated Balanda (white-person) mind soon begins to wander.

It seems impossible that it was only eight days ago that we arrived at Mapuru: a group of five men, here to learn indigenous hunting and survival skills

from the Yolngu men; and a larger group of women here to learn traditional basket weaving skills from the Yolngu women. The basket weaving courses have been running for eight years now, but we are the first group of men to come and initially neither us Balanda nor the Yolngu men are sure what each is expecting, or has to offer.

Luckily we have John, our Balanda contact and guide (though these days, he is more Yolngu than Balanda), who has spent over 30 years living and working in and with Yolngu communities. Through his patience and tireless efforts we engage in a process of negotiation with the Yolngu men to work out where we are all coming from and what we are hoping to get out of our time together.

The first few days are a little awkward as both us Balanda and the Yolngu men learn to understand each other. The distances between us in terms of language and culture seem gigantic at first. Our mental discomfort at the long, silent pauses in Yolngu conversation and the avoidance of eye-contact is matched equally by the Yolngu discomfort at us Balanda not having a place in their intricate kinship structure (around which the whole Yolngu world is based, including people, plants, animals, land, stars, colours, life, death...), and therefore no easy way to interact with us.

We learn that we are the first group of white men to come to Mapuru who are not Government officials (usually to assess their "progress") or contractors engaged to undertake some maintenance. We are definitely the first group of white men to come with the intent to learn from Yolngu men. A lifetime of pressure to give up Yolngu ways, of being told that the white-man's way is better, smarter, faster has left our Yolngu hosts with an understandable hesitancy when attempting to share their knowledge and skills with us.

Gradually, as we get to know the Yolngu men, and they us, these differences begin to dissolve. The early breakthroughs come about by the most basic and ancient of male bonding rituals. Jonathon, one of our Yolngu hosts shoots a buffalo on his mother-country and we all pitch in to butcher the animal and return laden with fresh meat to feed the community of over a hundred and fifty people. The tough, gritty, blood-soaked work and the sense of pride as we return to the community with our prize (and the cheers and whoops of the women) help to give our relationship a foundation to work from.



We soon find ourselves collecting the material to make spears, and the Yolngu men teach us how to straighten the long rods over a fire and how to set our spear points. We use a combination of traditional methods and western materials (such as reinforced steel for the spear points). Our total lack of knowledge in spear making techniques gives the Yolngu men an opportunity to take charge.



Lindsay, a grandfatherly figure with an unassuming smile and wise eyes, takes me under his charge and soon gains the confidence to start bossing me around as he realises just how little I know: "stand up", "push here", "hold", "enough" he says to me. I am glad of his transformation from passive bystander to commanding teacher, both for the learning I gain and for the glow of self-confidence that begins to show within him.

Before long, through our interactions with both the men and the hordes of happy, laughing, screaming children who clamour for attention and games, we find ourselves adopted into the various Yolngu families that make up the Mapuru community. Almost before we realise it we are assigned "mälk names" and suddenly find ourselves with an instant extended family of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. This is the last breakthrough needed. The Yolngu men now know how we fit into the kinship structure and can comfortably relate to us. The change in interaction on all levels is sudden and tangible.

After a couple of days in the community, the time comes for the men to head out into the wilderness on a survival trip. The plan is to take only our newly-made spears, mosquito nets and a blanket each, and live off the land for five days. Or so we thought. The Yolngu men, while

still holding true to many of their traditions, have over the last 100 years become dependent on western damper and sweet golden syrup. This is the white way that the early settlers, missionaries and now Government policies convinced them (either through coercion or force) to adopt. The idea of a group of white men wanting to go without, and to instead live off Yolngu bush tucker is such an unbelievable turn-around that they had not accepted it to be true.

We take some damper as a compromise but the bulk of our diet is still to come from the land. Two of us white guys (myself included) decide to avoid the damper anyway and for five days our entire diet comes solely from what the land can provide. We don't go hungry but the diet is a little meat-heavy. We spend intense hours collecting shellfish and crabs from the mangrove. We are engulfed in slimy mud up to our thighs and mosquitoes attack us mercilessly, but the mangrove rewards our efforts with succulent, salty mangrove-worms and an endless supply of long-bums that we crack open to get at the tangy, squishy flesh inside.

We eat some but most we use for bait. We cast lines into the murky, croc infested rivers and pull out a dozen or so fresh bream in the space of a few hours. At one point a fishing reel rolls down to the side of the bank and as I head down to recover it, one of the teenage boys (a small mob accompanies us everywhere) stops me, and with a meaningful glance at the murky water, says simply "be quick". Since Yolngu speak so sparingly, when they do talk, you know it's



important. In Yolngu terms that quick glance and two words amount to a lecture on the dangers of crocodiles. I snatch the reel from the water before racing back up the high, muddy bank, never once taking my eyes from the murky river.



That night we share not only food around the camp fire, but stories too. We are getting better at communicating, but John still translates some of the deeper comments and conversations. John translates as the Yolngu men speak: "We are happy you men have come. We have all this bush food here but we have begun to forget about it. We think we cannot go without damper, but our Ancestors never had damper. You have made us think about how we are living, how we are raising our children." It's a

touching moment, and it feels good that our visit is a two way exchange. As we gain knowledge and understanding, they regain self-confidence and pride in their heritage.

We change locations the next day. The men, now understanding why we are here and what we are about are keen to show us different parts of their country. We meet Jackie's (my now adopted Yolngu Uncle) mother-country, a beautiful waterhole where we drink sweet, cool water and wash the mangrove mud from us (and where we are made familiar to the land via a brief but very cool little ceremony that I won't share with you, as I don't know whether I'm allowed. It is best experienced personally anyway).

We learn an ancient story of a devil-beast that lived in a dark cave and would eat dead bodies, bones and all, but that (probably) no longer lives there. My white, analytical mind wonders if the story is about some long extinct carnivorous animal (a Thylacine maybe?) from the area. How old is this story, what knowledge does it contain about the behaviours of some animal we may never see? The Yolngu men let no such musings spoil such a good story. What difference is there between a Thylacine and a flesh eating devil-creature anyway? A mere happenstance of naming, at best.

Later, we collect sweet berries and seeds from the bush. We shoot two more young buffalo, butcher them and this time slow roast them in a kind of hangi (ground oven). We gorge ourselves before dropping off the bulk of the juicy meat for the women back at camp (again to the sound of cheers and hoots from the happy women).



And then, after a long drive down a rarely used and bumpy track we arrive at one of the most picturesque beaches I have ever seen. White sand, jutting rock shelves, a crystal clear expanse of ocean, and a cool fresh-water stream running meters from our camp site. All of this, and not



a single other person as far as the eye can see. I can't help comparing the peace and quiet to the crowded beaches of Bondi where I live with their domesticated, cement walkways and swarms of squawking seagulls and sun burnt backpackers.

We spend the remainder of our survival trip at this tropical paradise, spearing sting-rays, crabs, and fish, collecting oysters (though we find fewer than expected, leaving a mystery as

to why). We catch lake monitors in the nearby lagoons, we collect berries from the bushes, and we dig up a yam (the men are not so fond of these, so this is only at my insistence. I'm not eating damper and the meat heavy diet has me yearning something starchy). By day the ocean keeps us cool, at night we sleep by the fire for warmth and to keep away the crocs. Turtles bob past, feeding from the seaweed covered rocks, and schools of mullet chase bait fish in the waves as the tide comes in.

On the beach we discover several forms of traditional Yolngu "social security". The first comes about when I spear my first fish: a well sized shovel-nosed shark darting along the sand. No one is more surprised than me when the spear hits home and I raise my catch above me whooping in an un-Yolngu like display of pride.

I heave my catch back to the waiting men only to be told: "No good. This one's for that other mob. Down south. We don't eat him." In typical Yolngu fashion that's the only explanation I get and I'm left to work out that the shovel-nose is a shark that travels further up river (i.e. south) than most fish. These men, who live where the river meets the sea, and who can hunt everything the ocean has to offer, avoid the shark so those further in have a steady supply of meat too.

Later Bobby, one of the older men, whose favourite catch phrases are "make it easy" and "have a rest" (both of which I agree with readily whenever he says them) shows us a traditional "fish-trap". This is a horseshoe-shaped, loose rock wall built at the half tide mark, near the mangroves. When the tide rises the fish swim into the mangroves to hunt for crabs and worms. As the tide drops back out again they become trapped in the man-made rock pool. The fish are then easily speared in this small pool, and these easy catches are left for the children and older folk who cannot hunt in the deeper waters on their own. It's a kind of traditional, community-run welfare scheme.

The ancient stories and traditions of the place all highlight the connection the Yolngu have to their homeland. It's not "ownership" in the western sense. The land isn't their property, it's their family. Just like with a family member, the Yolngu can take what the land offers and has to share, but they have to respect it and care for it. These men know this land (and only this land) and it's moods, like a child knows it's mother.

One night, I find myself sitting alone with the Yolngu men, the other Balanda having run-off eagerly into the dark with the young Yolngu boys who have found fresh crocodile tracks. As we sit watching a full moon rise



over the waves, we talk of my home in Sydney, and of my travels around the globe. They ask me if I will spear fish when I return to Sydney. They are shocked when I tell them I am not allowed, that I need a permit even to fish with a hand-reel. They listen thoughtfully when I explain that there are just too many people down there now for this to be possible.

There's a pause. I realise I am used to these now, it's no longer an awkward gap but a comfortable silence. I wait for the Yolngu men to work through their thoughts before speaking, knowing that when they do speak, every word will have value.

Eventually Jackie starts in quiet tones. "There was a man", he says and then pauses. "An Englishman. Cook. Captain Cook. I think his name was. Maybe you have heard of him." I tilt my head slightly in acknowledgement. "He came here, to Australia, on a big ship a while back", says Jackie. "He looked and said 'there's no people here'. Then he put up a big flag and said 'this is our land now'".

There's a long, silent moment as his story finishes. I wonder if I am being reprimanded; being tried for this act of stupid ignorance, or blatant theft. Then, to my amazement, Jackie begins to laugh. It's a slow, infectious Yolngu laugh that builds in momentum, as if this story of the crazy Englishman named Cook and his odd little flag ceremony was the funniest joke he had ever heard.

Sitting there on that beach, with these men whose ancestors probably sat in the same spot, gazing patiently, peacefully out to sea, watching the moon rise, and the fish jump for thousands of generations, I can see the humorous side of it. It is after all a ridiculous story from the Yolngu point of view. It's a little too tragic a tale however, with a little too much cultural guilt, for me to join in the laughter.

I leave Arnhem Land several days later, but I am touched by the exchange and I intend to return in the future. Although I've learnt a lot about outdoor survival and hunting, it is the cultural learning that I feel most privileged to have experienced. My eyes have been opened to a side of Australia, the country I call home, that I had no real appreciation of until now. A place the rest of Australia has a lot to learn about, and even more to learn from.

It's a part of Australia I feel almost cheated for not having known sooner. An Australia rich in history, culture and, most of all, family. A place where Australians, the first Australians, are battered but still standing against all odds, and are still trying to stand proud while they work out how to fit into this new big Balanda family with all its noise, and its people and strange laws and funny customs.

In a way it's the same thing we are all trying to work out, the only difference being that the Yolngu have something (everything) to lose if they don't work it out soon. I'd like to think that

we Balanda are up to the challenge of meeting them halfway, and are able to give them the space, the patience and, most of all, the respect they deserve. We are, after all, family.



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