

Yan-nhangu: People of the Crocodile Islands & the Endangered Language of Spiritual Attachment.

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The Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia are renowned for their vibrant dance, didgeridoo (yidaki) music and the depth of their spiritual attachment to their land. Yan-nhangu is the western most Yolngu language of the people of the Crocodile Islands. In 1993 only two hundred words of Yan-nhangu had been recorded. For twenty years I lived with the Yan-nhangu and recorded their language, changing patterns of life and intimate spiritual connection to the Crocodile Islands. The result is an Atlas.

This paper is structured in three parts. Firstly I introduce the significance of Yan-nhangu language and metaphysical connections to sea country. I discuss collaboration with the Yan-nhangu and the Atlas, and lastly outline challenges faced by a new generation. This paper provides insight into the round of seasonal inter-island travel and resource use in the period before the colonist mission. A detailed and sophisticated mental and cultural map of places, tides and times filled with spiritual significance was held by each person. Governed by notions of kinship with the environment and of the spiritual entities dwelling there, local systems interwoven with songs, rituals and knowledge arise from countless generations of intimate co-existence with the environment and shape the patterns of island life. The significance of these metaphysical, economic and historical attachments to place are still prominent in the lives of Yan-nhangu people under colonial settler state assimilation policy.

Bio

Dr Bentley James has lived and worked in North-east Arnhem Land for over twenty years. His long term engagements have borne a family of interrelated projects. In collaboration with locals he has founded language nests, junior ranger, ranger and heritage programs, bilingual resources and livelihoods activities on country in support of linguistic, cultural and biological diversity. He has published in anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and education. He continues to promote the intergenerational transmission of local languages, bilingual education, continuities in the management and conservation of natural resources, and local knowledge for meaningful livelihoods on country.