

# SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE CONTEXTS OF YOLNGU LIFE

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## Abstract

The notion of social capital has had wide currency in mainstream social policy debate in recent years, with commonly-used definitions emphasising three factors: norms, networks and trust. Yolngu Aboriginal people have their own perspectives on norms, networks and trust relationships. This paper uses concepts from Yolngu philosophy to explore these factors in three contexts: at the former mission settlements, at homeland centres (outstations) and among 'long-grassers' in Darwin. In Yolngu life, *mulkurr* (head) and *djalkiri* (foot) form behavioural norms; *gurrutu* (kinship) defines social networks; and *maar* (strength, power) is an indicator of trust. These components of Yolngu social capital have sometimes been strengthened and sometimes weakened by post-contact social development. At the major centralised settlements (former missions) they have been attacked and undermined; at homeland centres (outstations) they have been confirmed and remain strong; and among long-grassers in Darwin they are still held out as representing ethical behaviour. The persistence of these components of social capital at different levels in particular contexts should be seen by government policy-makers as an opportunity to engage in a social development dialogue with Yolngu, aimed at identifying the specific contexts in which Yolngu social capital can be maximised.

## Introduction

Politicians from Peter Costello to Mark Latham, as well as representatives of many non-government organisations, have bought into the notion of Social Capital. Falk (2002), following Putnam, defines social capital as "the social values (norms), networks and trust that resource a group's purposeful action". The World Bank refers to social capital as "the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's

social interactions”<sup>15</sup>. Now that the concept seems to be gaining some traction in policy debates, it is time to assess its application to a specific example of Indigenous affairs. Or vice versa.

In his recent Blue Book, Christopher Scanlon (2004) investigates ‘ the asocial life of social capital’, pointing to ways in which the concept is (mis)used to focus on relations of trust, reciprocity, tolerance and mutual obligation ‘without having to bother too much about the deeper cultural mooring points to which those relations are tied, and without which they would be impossible.’ (p. 3)

Its enthusiastic embrace by the conservative side of politics reflects the way social capital has in recent years become ‘a particular way of thinking about and constituting community, one that reconstitutes community in a form that is seamlessly compatible with the market.’ (p. 4) Yet another step in the ‘normalization of the market as the underlying model for social life.’ (p. 4)

This conceptualization represents a considerable decay from the original formulation of Pierre Bourdieu in whose hands, Scanlon notes, ‘it is inextricably tied to an analysis of social life as characterised by social and economic conflict and tension.’<sup>16</sup> (p. 5)

The Yolngu Aboriginal people of Northeast Arnhem Land have their own traditional perspectives on the norms, networks and trust relationships which preserve ethical relationships in the contexts in which they arise, and which resist abstraction from their ancestral roots.

The majority of Yolngu – whose numbers approximate 5000 - live in communities of between 500 and 2000 people which were originally established by Methodist missionaries between 1925 (Milingimbi) and 1975 (Ramingining). Today the missionaries have no formal role in governance of these settlements, with independent elected councils, set up under NT Government legislation, managing the communities on a day-to-day basis. Overlaying this local council process is the Commonwealth Government’s *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976*, or ALRA, which gives ownership and control of land to particular Yolngu groups determined under traditional law.<sup>17</sup>

Ever since the days of the establishment of the missions, small numbers of Yolngu have continued to remain living on their own, in family groups on their ‘homelands’, resisting the alleged attractions of living in the former mission settlements. Today, Homeland Centres continue to grow and are spread across Arnhem Land, their residents now

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/whatsc.htm>. Accessed 28/06/03

<sup>16</sup> He goes on: Bourdieu’s account of social capital is a rebuff to the belief that we now live in a post-ideological era, devoid of fundamental social cleavages or alternative ways of living. For the most concensually minded liberal-pluralist North American and Anglo advocates of social capital, the chief virtue of social capital is that it seems to be beyond ideology. Talk of alternatives or discussion of structural inequalities are portrayed as distractions to the task of developing practical solutions to pressing social problems.

<sup>17</sup> The ALRA, being Commonwealth legislation, can override any NT legislation, such as local government legislation, and so confers strong powers on traditional owners.

comprising a significant proportion of all Yolngu.<sup>18</sup> A third group can be found in Darwin, the state capital, several hundred miles away from Yolngu land and with difficult access. While some live in hostels and suburban housing, many of them are “long grassers”, living on the beaches, in the mangroves, parks and other public spaces.

In this paper we use key concepts from Northeast Arnhem Land Yolngu philosophy to contextualise and complexify the notion of social capital in its role in policy development for Yolngu in three contexts of Yolngu life.

## **Yolngu Perspectives on Norms, Networks and Trust**

Emboldened by the general fuzziness of the notion of social capital, we have identified a number of key concepts from Yolngu philosophy which might help to reground our policy decisions in the links of groups of people (and the complex relations among them) to their ‘deeper cultural mooring points’. How do Yolngu understand norms, networks and trust? The following notes arise from ongoing collaborative work among Yolngu and in our work at Charles Darwin University.<sup>19</sup>

### **Norms : mulkurr and djalkiri**

Yolngu philosophers often refer to mulkurr (literally head) and djalkiri (literally foot) in their elaborations of identity. The Yirralka (or home-identity-centre) referred to above, is also commonly known as ‘djalkiri wanga’, or foot (print) place. Djalkiri is also translated by Yolngu as foundation. Footprints are highly significant in Yolngu politics and religion and represented in song and art. Feet and heads are inalienable. Human feet have human heads. The norms of behaviour articulated through the mulkurr metaphor are not confined to the human species.

Djalkiri, the prints and paths across one’s ancestral country have been in place since the ancestors hunted, cooked, performed ceremonies, procreated, died (became sacred objects) and were buried as they travelled. The ‘scent’ of the ancestors remains in the land. Yolngu use the metaphor of the djalkiri of a tree (roots) that grasp and penetrate the soil, and thus become landscape.

Most significantly, different people, identified with different ancestral connections and associated estates, have quite different mulkurr. In her paper entitled ‘ Yolngu Balandi Watangumirri’, (Yolngu owners of connections) Garnggulkpuy, one of the Yalu<sup>20</sup>, researchers write about the normative function of mulkurr, the clan/land based identity.

Mulkurr is at work in everyday life when you are with people who are able to perceive and speak about (or sing or dance about) and produce a social/physical environment,

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<sup>18</sup> In reality, many Yolngu live part of the time in Homeland Centres and part of the time in the ex-mission settlements.

<sup>19</sup> Most recently: research into cross cultural communication in the context of clinical health service delivery, the perspectives of Yolngu ‘long grassers’ in Darwin and the role of digital technology in the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge.

<sup>20</sup> <http://yalu.ntu.edu.au>

using words and practices which are importantly identified with the creative words and practices of their own specific small estates and ancestral connections. Yolngu devote much energy to explicating the specific separateness of the *mulkurr* of their closer kin groups.

Garnggulkpuy notes that the *mulkurr* of those of her ancestral affiliations is known as *Gayilinydjil*. *Gayilinydjil* is both perceptive and productive – it gives you a particular way of seeing as well as a particular way of acting upon the world. Through the knowledge of their own *mulkurr*, other people know how to understand you, to act towards you, and to respect you.

The crucial difference between the values at work in the social capital of non-Indigenous Australians and Yolngu living on Yolngu land is that non-Indigenous groups' norms can be generalised from context to context. *Mulkurr* on the other hand, is celebrated for its specificity as it is found in place, and in people with historical connections with place. From the Yolngu point of view, the normativity of values is found through conformity to ecological norms, for example through water as it is found in springs which are particular to the ownership and identity of specific descent groups. The Yolngu verb *balyunmirri* describes this reflexive identity building through investment in country and totems, which works in concert with the environment and implies a certain sustainability (Christie 1990). By contrast, Balanda norms are derived from more generalisable understandings of human individuality, rights and responsibilities.

'*Ngalapal mulkurr*' the 'minds of the elders' is necessary if for example a funeral or other ceremony is to be well organised. It represents the ability to plan and take into account all the various clan groups and their connections to the deceased. Even a child can be called '*ngalapal mulkurr*', if s/he is able to specify their kin, be they animal, plant, country, tribal groups or individual people. This kinship is the second foundation of Yolngu social capital.

### **Networks: *gurrutu***

Ever since the ancestors first moved over the land and sea, every Yolngu has been born into a vast network of kinship called *gurrutu*. While each figure of the tapestry has its own history and identity, the figures combine to produce a broader complex in which the group is always prior to the individual. Yolngu spend much time discussing and re-exploring kinship, and (re-)fitting newcomers and distant kin into the system. It is not unusual for an adult to detail hundreds of direct predecessors, detailing all their kinship connections.

The *gurrutu* paradigm (which has about 20 distinct terms) maps not only individuals into their extended families, but also whole groups of people into networks of clans, and corresponding totems, estates, languages, ancestral images etc. One may have as one's mother, for example, or one's daughter, a particular wind, star, rock, current, body of water, bird, cloud, or even ceremonial practice.

When people are living on country, secure in their rights to be where they are,<sup>21</sup> the networks of *gurrutu* work to enable the equitable distribution of resources, collaborative

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<sup>21</sup> The residents of Homeland Centres comprise not only landowners but also significant other people related in particular ways to the landowners and there by their agreement.

economic enterprises (eg. large scale food procurement such as fish traps and landscape burning), ancestral systems of conflict resolution and goal setting, implementation and review.

The networks of kin are still at work on the former mission settlements – all adults still know how they are related through gurrutu to all other adults, and clan groups are clear (although not always agree) about how they relate to the land they live on. The ascendant Gupapuyngu clan at Milingimbi for example often makes the point that they are living there on the beach at Rulku looking after the country of the Walamangu, their mother's mother's group. They make use of beautiful and esoteric idioms and the totems of tamarind and barramundi to link their blood to those of the ancestral landowners.

Thirty years ago, almost every young adult at Milingimbi could recognise the footprint of almost every other person in the community. Twenty years ago, every young adult could still name the kin link which related them to every other person in the community. Today at the major centres of Yolngu population, young people are growing up with a sense of other Yolngu as strangers, and the networks are retracting away from land and the wider Yolngu polity: the erosion of social capital.

### **Trust: maarr**

Maarr denotes the power which comes through the strength of identities and connectedness. The dictionary defines it as 'strength, spiritual power, faith, personality, nature, emotional state' (Zorc 1976). Many Yolngu verbs of emotion have maarr as their root – maarr-buma (hit) means to be concerned, maarr-garrpin (bind) means to worry, maarr-yuwalkthirri (become true) means to trust or believe, maarr-ngamathiri (act well) means to love, maarryu-dapmaram (to clench by means of maarr) means to treat someone properly through respect for traditional law. In the Gupapuyngu gospel, when Jesus asks his followers 'Where is your faith?', he demands 'Where is your maarr?' Donald Thompson, early friend and advocate of Yolngu, compared maarr to the Polynesian concept of mana (Thompson 1975).

In the 1940s the concept of maarr was understood to be transcendent of the psychological profile of an individual - something at work in the land, in art, music, ceremonial exchange and success at hunting. Yolngu today tend to see maarr more as residing in the individual: a sign of the strength governed from a well-realised mulkurr, properly located in land, and properly connected with gurrutu. So aspects of trust, as central to the theories of social capital, take on their meaning for Yolngu in the context of the wider quite strictly defined histories of rights and identity. When trust of this kind is at work, Yolngu make clear, the land recognises, respects and makes secure the people, just as much as the other way around.

## **Contexts of Yolngu Life**

### **Homelands**

Although 'homelands' existed from the early mission days, the incentives of homeland living have become more apparent since the 1970s, with the loss of the Gove Land Rights

case<sup>22</sup>, and the enactment of the ALRA during that decade. This was an era of direct action by Aboriginal people all over the Northern Territory: many workers on pastoral stations agitated, with only limited success, for Aboriginal living areas to be ‘excised’ from the cattle properties; land claims were made under the ALRA by the newly-formed Northern Territory Land Councils; and some cattle stations were purchased, to become Aboriginal land. In those years and since, Yolngu have voted with their feet in significant numbers, walking out of the centralised former mission settlements to set up small homeland settlements back on their traditional country.

When first established, Homeland Centres received almost no government services, and the provision of physical infrastructure was left to Aboriginal communities themselves. The movement was widespread, reflecting a range of goals, expectations and results (see Gerritson, 1982). Water was carried in buckets, airstrips and roads were cleared by hand, toilets were dug and solar power was gradually introduced. Homeland Centre residents today talk proudly of how they overcame these barriers through combined hard work, and built their own communities.

In 2004, many Homeland Centres are equipped with well-built houses, piped water, mains power and telephones. Government-sourced funding to Homeland Centres is now available for various infrastructure purposes but is much less than that available for the former mission settlements. For example, current policy guidelines of ATSIC and such Northern Territory Government agencies as the Power Water Corporation and the Northern Territory Department of Health are notable for the restrictions they place on providing services/funding to new Homeland Centres and to Homeland Centres which have less than a certain number of permanent residents.<sup>23</sup> Instead, the main policy focus of these agencies is on the centralised former missions and the larger, better-established homeland centres. To its credit, the Commonwealth Government does now provide some assistance, for example by funding some primary health care services to a number of Homeland Centres.

There is no doubt that providing services and infrastructure to Homeland Centres, particularly the smaller ones, is an expensive business on a per capita basis and so some policy restrictions must be put in place; however, the economic cost/benefit equation should also include the benefits derived from Homeland Centre living, such as improved health, environmental sustainability and so on. If this were done, and the results compared to the lesser social benefits derived from spending government money in the

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<sup>22</sup> *Milirrpum vs Nabalco Pty Ltd* (1971) 17FLR 141

<sup>23</sup> ATSIC asserts that it supports the development of Homeland Centres as a matter of principle, but that it should not be expected to provide funding/services to organisations such as Homelands Resource Centres which should properly be the responsibility of governments (ATSIC NT, *Submission to the Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration Inquiry Into Local Government and Cost Shifting*, July 2002). National ATSIC policy is that Regional Councils cannot consider funding homelands unless they are sure there is security of land tenure, it will be the principle place of residence, potable water is available and ongoing support will be provided by resource centres/agencies (ATSIC, *Community Housing and Infrastructure Program Policy for 2002-2005*, Canberra). Regional Councils also have policies which add to these restrictions. It is notable that if the homelands movement had had to satisfy such conditions when it got going in the 1970s, it would never have happened.

former missions, it may well be that the opportunity costs of funding Homeland Centres are not as high as some claim.

The persistence of Homeland Centres in remote places with significantly poorer infrastructure and service delivery than is the case in the centralised settlements is a sign of the strong resolve and dedication of the Yolngu who live there. The populations live on through the drive to care for their ancestral domains; the desire of people not to be caught up in the troubling politics and social dysfunctions of life in the major Yolngu centres; the responsibility to ensure a safe environment for children and grandchildren; and the need to follow in the steps, and actively pursue the instructions of, the ancestors.

Of course, there is a sense in which most Yolngu Homeland Centres were never 'established' in the European sense. The sites were always there in what Yolngu call Yirralka. The best translation of Yirralka may indeed be 'home-land-centre' or maybe 'land-identity-centre'. The Yirralka were set in place even as the creating ancestors, the original Yolngu, moved across the land, singing, dancing, crying and talking the forms of the knowable world into place, and leaving named groups of Yolngu and plants and animals behind on identified estates.

However, the creation of stable homeland communities - in a fixed location and supplied with houses, water bores and other infrastructure - is relatively new and, particularly when viewed in the context of the ex-mission settlements, throws up important issues to do with the proper relationship between governments and Indigenous people. Life at Homeland Centres is difficult, and some are significantly more successful than others.<sup>24</sup> But where a minimum level of infrastructure is provided, and where the residents are determined to succeed, the social outcomes at Homeland Centres represent a huge improvement over those of the centralised former mission communities.

Clues to the connection between these good outcomes and the land-based knowledge inherent in life at Homeland Centres can be found in research pointing to the presence of strong traditional authority over land and law (e.g. Altman 1987) and the good availability of traditional foods (e.g. Altman and Taylor 1989) as being key factors in the viability of homeland centres.

The point of this is that the existing web of kinship and relationship obligations, which is itself based on obligations to land, and which forms the basis of Homeland Centre life (but which in the former mission settlements is often debased and distorted), has the potential to act as a mechanism by which governments can lever genuine community development.

### **'Missions'**

While it is commonly thought by non-Indigenous people that life in the centralised former mission settlements and life in Homeland Centres, are similar, this is in fact far from the case. It is problematic to describe today's former mission settlements like Galiwin'ku as 'Aboriginal communities'. Rather, today they are simply western

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<sup>24</sup> It is commonly observed that Homeland Centres have been more successful in the Top End of the Northern Territory, where food and other resources are relatively plentiful, than in Central Australia, where the desert landscape means day-to-day life is harder. A number of Homeland Centres in Central Australia have been abandoned, probably for this reason.

settlements with majority Indigenous populations, often living in a very unhappy interworld. Yolngu continue to routinely refer to them as ‘mitjin’ (mission).

There is a sense in which the land on which the former missions stand is not communal or public land and never can be: particular individuals (the ‘landowners’) have ancestral connections to this land and these are usually respected by the other residents whose ancestral lands are remote from the settlement. Under the ALRA, the rights of traditional landowners to have a major say in landuse activity even within the former mission settlements are protected, at least in theory. However, in practice their interests may not be particularly privileged by community politics in general or by decisions of the elected local council in particular.

Indeed, under the criteria of both ‘efficiency’ and ‘democracy’, it is feasible to assert that traditional landowners should not necessarily have the major say in running all the town’s affairs.<sup>25</sup> For example, those who prioritise administrative efficiency would query the need for senior Yolngu to be involved in decisions relating to mundane governance matters (such as garbage collection or house maintenance). And those who prioritise democracy would point out that *all* the residents – including those not from the land-owning group - should have a say in the settlement’s governance.

The ‘other’ Yolngu – those not from the land-owning group - may choose to become involved in local politics at some level or, more likely, may show their respect for the traditional land owners by an unwillingness to become involved in the settlement politics or issues relating to ‘mission’ land. In the former case, traditional authority is weakened, and in the latter case democracy becomes a less relevant concept.

The co-location of a spectrum of clan groups, each with its own language and estates, did not present an unmanageable situation in the mission days, but with the demise of the missions and the rise of government and council bureaucracies, the powerful authority of collaborating Yolngu elders has been eroded. The number of Yolngu estranged from their ancestral land is accelerating. Increasing numbers of young people are looking westward, as the grasp of community life weakens. Today, as is frequently reported, ‘the youth control the elders’. These tensions have led to great distress, concentrated in the former mission settlements. Incidences of suicide, substance abuse, and widespread fear of sorcery have been documented for the former mission settlements (Maypilama et al., Reid 1982) whose major demographic feature is the proportion of people from various faraway estates, often traditionally without a lot of common trust, living in close proximity, and unhappily.

The bureaucracies which dominate Aboriginal affairs today – the Northern Territory Government, ATSIC, local councils and so on – have an inexorable tendency towards centralisation – whether it has been the amalgamation of ATSIC zones, or the attempted amalgamation of local councils into regional councils, the underlying tendency is always in the same direction: more centralisation. More and more funding is concentrated in the

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<sup>25</sup> This view is reflected in current policies of the Northern Land Council (the body set up under the ALRA to represent traditional landowners’ interests) which is exploring ways in which traditional owners can cede some powers to local councils, to give local councils genuine authority to act on municipal issues within town boundaries, and to avoid the need to consult traditional owners on relatively mundane matters.

centralised former mission settlements, in the mistaken belief that more funds will make these happier places to live.

The key policy point is that this centralisation, this attempt to build Aboriginal towns on a European model, where 'community development' is equated with mere service delivery and where knowledge is taken out of its land-based context to become a tradable commodity like any other good in the marketplace, flies directly in the face of the Yolngu experience of what makes a happy and functional settlement.

Social capitalists may tend to rest easy with this centralization wherein as Scanlon notes, 'ethical relations are made over into a form that is radically continuous with the exchange relations of the market, insofar as both are detached from broader frameworks of social and cultural meaning grounded and bounded by the face-to-face relations which to some extent limit and constrain such relations.' (p.6)

Consider, for example, employment and health in this context. These days on the ex-mission settlements, almost all paid work is done by 'Europeans' and by Aboriginal people who are not local. This is in marked contrast to twenty or thirty years ago where plumbing, building, electrical, gardening, fishing, sewing, baking and other 'teams' of local Yolngu carried out most of the community development and maintenance. Decades ago, Yolngu men and woman from quite different and disparate clan groups and Yirralka were working together on shared projects. In the former mission settlements today, the loss of employment to contractors (many on a fly-in basis) has resulted in widespread disaffection among young adults - notably males - including feelings of inadequacy, depletion of the skill base of the community and attitudes of 'what's the point' amongst non-Aboriginal staff.

This is in contrast to the Homeland Centres, where a much lesser proportion of the work is done by Europeans, as the community together maintains a greater degree of responsibility for the infrastructure and overall community development. The rich network of communication and collaboration in Homeland Centres, where the sharing of resources continues, is the basis of this.

There are high levels of ill health in the centralised settlements, and good evidence exists for the health benefits of living on country. Living at Homeland Centres has been shown to dramatically improve morbidity and mortality among Aboriginal people, to a greater extent than clinical interventions could bring about and in contrast to the dire health situation in the centralised settlements (McDermott et al). The homelands movement has already shown itself to be a genuine public health movement, yet it remains largely unrecognised as a health strategy by policy-makers.

### **Long Grassers**

Yolngu have enjoyed an association with Darwin for many years - probably since soon after its establishment. Up till recently old people referred to Darwin (and other centres of European population) as Yumaynga - a Macassan name. Yolngu used to travel to Darwin in the old days, a few by boat, and others walking along the coast. There were many wide river crossings, and interactions with other non-Yolngu Aboriginal groups. Yolngu acknowledged and built economic, marriage and totemic connections with the local

Larrakia landowners, and others in surrounding areas. Larrakia place names, like Mindil Beach (Mindilbitj) have been taken into Yolngu naming systems.

Yolngu live in Darwin in a variety of contexts. Some Yolngu have lived in Darwin in public and private housing for many years. Six Aboriginal hostels accommodate about a hundred Yolngu every night - mostly people in town for a short while. There are similar numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from other areas also staying in Aboriginal hostels, but Yolngu probably represent the largest cultural group. At any one time there are probably about 50 Yolngu in-patients at the Royal Darwin Hospital, and almost every one of them will have at least one relative in town looking after them.

Yolngu who come to Darwin have a variety of choices of accommodation. One of the choices made with increasing frequency is the 'long grass'. One any one night there is claimed to be up to 1,000 people sleeping under the stars in the Darwin area.<sup>26</sup> This number fluctuates with the wet and dry seasons. The number of Yolngu in this group would fluctuate between 50 and 300. Some Yolngu long grassers stay for many months, some become part of the culture of heavy drinking which pervades the long grassers' lifestyle. There is considerable community concern about long grassers, and the NT Government has recently developed a project aimed at meeting their needs while ensuring they do not become a 'nuisance' to other Darwin residents. Originally known as the Itinerants project, now called the Harmony project, this combined the expertise of a number of government departments, non-government organisations such as the Larrakia Association, Yolngu leaders (the mala elders) and organisations such as Yalu Marnngithinyaraw (a family support centre at Galiwin'ku).

As part of the Harmony project, Yolngu researchers from the Yalu Marnngithinyaraw interviewed Yolngu long grassers in their own languages and found that the majority: acknowledge and respect Larrakia ownership of the land they occupy. Some go so far as to claim, albeit rhetorically, that they have become Larrakia ('Larrkiya') themselves, because the local people trust and help them more than their kin back in the former mission settlements of Arnhem Land.

Further, they claim a strong and continuing link to their Yolngu identity and culture, and claim a more authentic Yolngu way of life than the bureaucratic "socks-up" Yolngu (and other non- Yolngu bureaucrats), whose involvement hampers the proper processes of Yolngu governance at the larger communities. The long grassers make clear their response to the complicity of some Yolngu in bureaucratic reconstructions of Yolngu social capital. Often the kin to which they refer are those privileged through Indigenous government agencies. 'The mechanisms of delegation and representation (in both the theatrical and legal senses) which fall into place ... as one of the conditions for the concentration of social capital ... also contain the seeds of an embezzlement or misappropriation' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 251). While they presented a very wide range of perspectives on life in the long grass, they were remarkably unanimous in their assertions that, despite their 'exile', they retain and reclaim the specifically Yolngu norms, networks and trust which constitute their Yolngu identity.

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<sup>26</sup> *Longgrass* Newsletter, Issue 3, October 2003, p. 1

## CONCLUSION

The vagueness of social capital terminology in western debate has allowed different people to use it to bolster their own ideological perspective. The fact that the Treasurer in the current Australian Government has drawn a link between participation in voluntary (unpaid) work and social capital suggests a conservative ideological role for the concept (Costello 2003). And it is probably no coincidence that the terminology of social capital has grown remarkably over the last decade or two, a time in Australia of greatly increased privatisation of services previously provided by public enterprises and institutions. There is a neat ideological connection between the Treasurer's lament for the decline of voluntary work, the emphasis on the obligation (allegedly as part of 'mutual obligation') on the unemployed to 'participate' in society by working for the dole, increased emphasis on privatisation in such areas as health, education and telecommunications, and increased use of the terminology of social capital.

We have argued that Yolngu concepts of social capital also have a political aspect. We find common ground with Bourdieu's view that social capital can be best understood in the context of struggle, of various interests asserting themselves in the complex negotiations over power and influence: a clearly political process. In the history of Yolngu since European contact, and particularly in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is apparent that the clash has been between Yolngu and Balanda notions of what makes a 'good' society - of what processes represent 'good' community development. The creation of social capital takes on an ethical dimension – the assertion by proponents of different development processes that their process is the best. In this debate, who are we to listen to? We can listen to funding bodies as they privilege formal institutions such as local councils and support, through funding programs, the further growth of the already-dysfunctional centralised former mission settlements. We can listen to governments and bureaucracies such as ATSIC as they privilege accountability on paper rather than in everyday life, and turn community development from a grass roots discourse to air-conditioned meetings dominated by the 'socks-up' people. Or alternatively we can look at the successes achieved by Yolngu themselves – marginalised people acting in struggle.

In the almost-empty landscape of social achievement in Northeast Arnhem Land, one phenomenon stands out: the success of the Homeland Centre movement. This success, achieved through struggle, and measurable in health or other indicators, highlights the myopia of policy development in Northern Territory Indigenous affairs. It draws attention, for example, to the need for governments to *really* question the criteria by which they hand out money – more than just looking at financial acquittals, there is an overwhelming need to look at outcomes on the criteria of their ability to strengthen or weaken the key indicators of Yolngu social capital: of mulkurr, of djalkiri, of gurrutu, and of maarr.

Certainly Yolngu have shown, by their own action in creating and maintaining Homeland Centres with a minimum of government support, and even in asserting the importance of the proper connection to land and landowners when they camp in Darwin, that they value mulkurr, djalkiri, gurrutu and maar as key outcomes. For Yolngu, they are by far the most important criteria in identifying proper social development. Yet policy development by government and semi-government bureaucracies goes on ignoring the impact which government schemes have on these aspects of Yolngu social capital. If policy-makers

developed an economic opportunity cost equation which tallied *all* the benefits of Homeland Centre living (including, for example, long term health and environmental benefits) against the costs, it may well be that the conclusions reached by Indigenous people and those reached by mainstream economists would not be too different.

Further, if policy researchers examined Yolngu views regarding current policy, they would find parallels between what Yolngu are thinking and what is being said in mainstream debate. One particular example of this is a concern among Yolngu that by creating dependence on welfare we are weakening the 'social capital' of the group. In the early mission days when elders had authority, and were respected, this respect was self-perpetuating and reinforcing, there was positive feedback and encouragement to continue believing and trusting in one's relatives and one's place in the world. Yolngu observers of life in the former mission settlements, where almost everyone's main income is welfare payments, and where scrutiny of the uses to which welfare payments are put is non-existent, are very aware of the damage being caused to Yolngu society – to its social capital – in this process. They contrast this with the ability of community development projects in Homeland Centres to both utilise existing social capital and increase its stock in the process.

Scanlon (2004) has noted social capital's acceptance of the individual as a rational self-interested agent, and its generalisability based on 'universal' notions of individual rights and human needs. Rather, this paper suggests the assumption that social capital can be transferred from one context to another with no loss of validity is at the heart of bureaucratic notions of community development, and underlies much misguided policy. A key point is that it is precisely the grounding of Yolngu concepts of social capital – *mulkurr*, *djalkiri*, *gurrutu* and *maarr* – in particular locations and in specific contexts that gives them their strength. The reason for this is obvious when one takes a land-based perspective – relationships, people, everything has its source in, and gains integrity from, the land. The land, and its provenance, is different in different places.

Therefore, social development programs must be based on strengthening connections with the normative value of particular pieces of land, and it is those social development programs based in Homeland Centres which are most likely to achieve this. Even social development programs based among the long grassers in Darwin have a chance of achieving this, if worked through the concepts of *djalkiri*, *mulkurr*, *gurrutu* and *maarr*. But social development programs based in the centralised ex-mission settlements have little chance, instead being likely to merely cement the decay in Yolngu social capital which is increasingly apparent to both black and white.

Experience from Northeast Arnhem Land clearly demonstrates the 'ethics of co-operation' is the community development strategy most likely to hold out hope of a better future for Yolngu. The problem from a policy-maker's perspective is that this ethic is grounded in deep culture – the meanings contained in specific pieces of land – and as such cannot be adequately translated into program guidelines and outcome indicators without a fundamental shift in approach. The shift can be achieved through decentralised place-specific negotiations in which the goal of supporting the deep cultural mooring points of Yolngu social capital can be provided not on the basis of transferable individual 'rights' but on the basis of local connectedness.

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