

INTRODUCTION

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There is something very special about emu — the enormous, ever-curious bird who cannot fly. In the Aboriginal Australian world view, animals are other kinds of people and emu, perhaps more than most animals, is a special kind of person. She wanders the bush constantly in search of food, always returning to places in the right season to get what she wants. In the Bininj Kunwok languages of western Arnhem Land and Kakadu National Park, she is described as ‘ngal-rongmiken’, which means ‘always turning from place to place, a bush traveller’.

The Bininj people of western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia refer to emu as a woman; this can be explained in part by her history. Bininj say that in the period of creation when the world began, in what some English speakers call ‘the Dreaming’, the animals we see today were in human form. As is the case for all Bininj today, emu has a skin or ‘subsection’ name — one of the eight social categories into which a person is born. Emu was a woman in the Bulanjdjan or Ngal-kangila skin group in the yirridjdja moiety — one of the two halves into which everything in the world is classified (see Appendix 4). As a result of emu’s position in the world of kinship, people in western Arnhem Land can fix emu into their social networks. ‘Emu, she is my grandmother’ or ‘Emu, she is my auntie’ and so on. This stands in stark contrast to the way non-Aboriginal people think and talk about animals.

Like emu, this book too is somewhat unusual. A great deal of the text is bilingual, with the primary data consisting of transcripts and English translations of conversations in the Bininj Kunwok language which is spoken (along with other languages) from Kakadu National Park in the west through to Maningrida in the east (see the map in Figure 1). An entire book dedicated to the exploration of a single topic, and written in both English and an Australian Indigenous language, is a rare thing. There is an increasing awareness among speakers of endangered languages, such as Bininj Kunwok, that literacy and the development of a body of literature are among the many ways that a speech community can make a contribution to the maintenance of their threatened minority languages and the special world views that these languages afford their speakers.

Again like emu, the development of this book has involved a process of wandering, ‘turning from place to place’ over time, to arrive in this current bilingual and bicultural form. From 1988 to 1992 I worked as a visiting homeland centre teacher with the Northern Territory Department of Education. This involved living on remote outstations where Bininj had returned to their own country surrounding the settlement of Maningrida in the north of central Arnhem Land. I worked in small, family-based outstation schools in these remote communities with the Kuninjku and Kune peoples to the south and south-east of Maningrida in the Liverpool,

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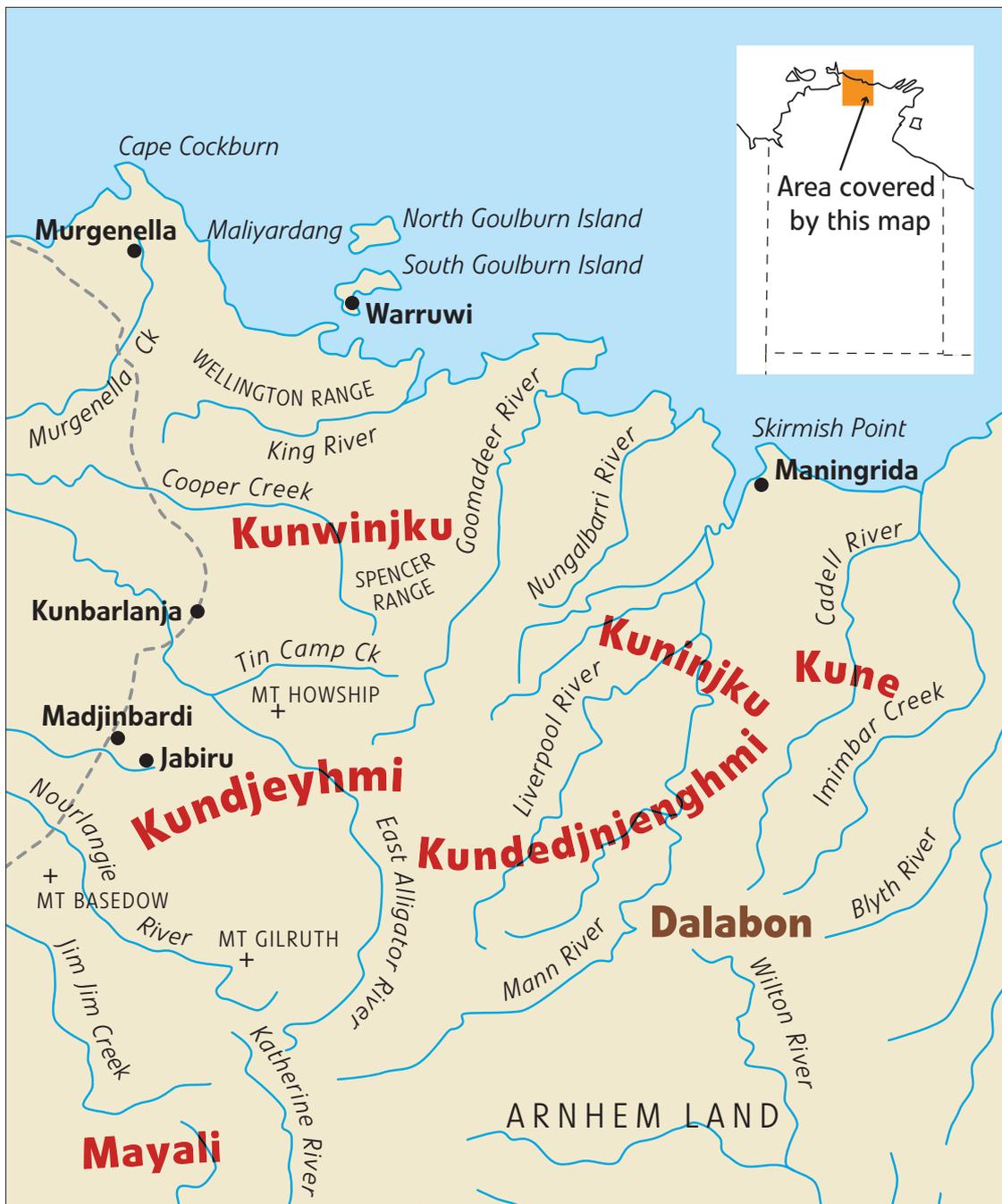


Figure 1: Map of Bininj Kunwok in western Arnhem Land and Kakadu National Park.

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Mann and Cadell Rivers districts. We held classes in the morning through to the middle of the day and would finish formal schooling when the community would disperse to go hunting, fishing and collecting food. Many of the experiences we had in the afternoon became the basis for lessons in the classroom the next morning. I would follow my Bininj friends each day on these excursions when it became their turn to play the role of teacher while I tried to learn how to speak Kuninjku and Kune. This opened up to me a whole new way of seeing their world, their families, and the plants, animals and landscapes that held so much significance to them. Through these experiences I had the good fortune of meeting and developing friendships with many knowledgeable Bininj elders and their families, many of whom have contributed to this book.

After five years as a visiting homeland centre teacher I then took up a position with the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation as Cultural Research Officer and Curator of the Djómi Museum in Maningrida. I continued, however, to spend much of my time out bush and at Yikarrakkal outstation in the beautiful Mann River valley. I built a cabin out of local sandstone and cypress pine which then became my base for almost a decade. I started working with a group of Aboriginal and Balanda (non-Aboriginal) colleagues at Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, and together we developed a variety of programs to support the cultural, artistic and linguistic heritage of the many language groups in the Maningrida region.

In the late 1990s there were new opportunities developing for Aboriginal people to work in land management and the burgeoning ranger programs that were being established across northern Australia. Part of this work included

the documentation of knowledge about the plants, animals and cultural landscapes of this region.

There are about eight different languages spoken in the Maningrida area¹ and these language groups typically have very small speech communities compared to the large world languages of nation states. Today, there are about 2000 speakers of Bininj Kunwok and although this might seem to be a small number for a language group, it is actually one of the larger Indigenous language groups in northern Australia today. For Bininj people, knowledge about the natural world and the way they interact with it is of course best expressed in the Bininj Kunwok language. It might seem obvious, but it is still necessary to remind ourselves that the English language comes from England in Europe and languages such as Bininj Kunwok are the real Australian languages, and as Australians we have much to learn about our country and history by learning an Australian language. But, like emu herself, I'm now wandering off into another direction, so let's return to the story of how this book came to be.

Around 2001–2, the Bininj ecologist Dean Yibarbuk commenced work on recording information and stories about emus with the assistance of a research grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Having a multitude of commitments at the time, Dean invited some colleagues, of which I was one, at the Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management at Charles Darwin University in Darwin to continue with the project. I then commenced a collaboration with senior Bininj across Kakadu and western

¹ These languages are Ndjébbana, Na-kara, Gurr-goni, Burarra, Kuninjku, Rembarnga, Kunbarlang and Djinang.

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Arnhem Land, and after 2004 combined this expertise with that of Wendy Telfer, a zoologist with whom I had collaborated previously on a project focused on rock kangaroos of the Arnhem Land plateau (Telfer & Garde 2006). As part of our quest to learn more about emus, Wendy and I travelled across Kakadu and western Arnhem Land seeking out knowledgeable people who had stories to tell about ngaleh ngurrurdu, ‘that woman, the emu’. We camped at the many outstations and homes of these knowledgeable people where we made audio and video recordings of their stories about emus. In the appendices to this book you can find Wendy Telfer’s invaluable summary of this knowledge about emus, based on the conversations presented in this book.

In July 2004 I was involved in a cultural site survey of land in the upper Goomadeer River region in western Arnhem Land. The senior cultural advisor during that work was the celebrated Kundedjnjenghmi artist and traditionalist Jimmy Kalarriya. We criss-crossed the region in a 4WD vehicle and by helicopter in order to document traditional walking routes, much loved camping places, rock art galleries and sacred sites of great importance to the Bininj people of western Arnhem Land.

One site that Kalarriya was keen to relocate, and which he had not seen for some decades, was a stone arrangement in the form of an emu at a site called Kurdukadji Dedjbarlkarrhmeng, ‘Emu slipped on her arse (dodging a spear)’. It was a djang — a sacred totemic increase site that was located on an important Bininj manbolh or ‘Aboriginal walking route’. In order to ensure the abundance of emus in the region, visitors passing through would stop at the site and strike the stones of the emu-shaped arrangement with branches while calling

out to the spirits of their deceased ancestors, requesting that they increase the numbers of emus for the benefit of the living.

After searching for the stone arrangement for a couple of days, we finally located it. The senior men present that day — Jimmy Kalarriya, Djawirdda Nadjangorle and Isaiah Burrunali — promptly conducted the increase ritual by whipping the stones with branches and calling out to their deceased relatives. After witnessing my first religious ritual relating to emus, we all talked about emus for the rest of the day and I learned a great deal more about their importance to Bininj. I felt that the knowledge that these and other senior men and women had about this very special Australian bird was worth recording and sharing. And so our emu odyssey began — kulurik kulurik!

In 2005, Wendy Telfer and I set out to record knowledge about emus from senior Bininj across Kakadu National Park and western Arnhem Land. This work was supported by an AIATSIS grant and support from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management at Charles Darwin University. We camped at a number of outstations in the region between Gunbalanya and Maningrida, and encountered the generosity and hospitality of many Bininj who enthusiastically shared their emu knowledge and experiences with us.

Quite a few years later, in late 2013, our friends at Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation in Kakadu National Park suggested we publish the results of our collaborative work with the many esteemed Aboriginal elders who had generously shared their knowledge about emus. With the assistance of the Australia Council’s Languages Other Than English Program and the Australian government’s