PLOS WATER

REVIEW

Gapu, water, creates knowledge and is a life force to be respected

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Abstract

In this piece, we share about gapu, water. Gapu gives life for a person and the land. Gapu nurtures and holds connection; it is knowledge and power, belonging and boundaries. We share as an Indigenous and non-Indigenous more-than-human collective, the Bawaka Collective, led by Bawaka Country and senior Yolu sisters Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs and Banbapuy Ganambarr, who speak from our place, our Country, our homeland, Rorruwuy, Dätiwuy land and Bawaka, Gumatj land, in Northeast Arnhem Land, Australia. Our piece follows the Songspiral Wukun, Gathering of the Clouds, and shares that water has many meanings, much knowledge and Law that must be respected. People and water co-become together. There is not one water but many, that hold balance. If we come together, waters, knowledges, peoples, acknowledging and respecting our differences, we can make rain.

We have a life force. . . inside. We are not asleep. We are here and have all this knowledge, this life force, collective thought, a soul that is created by water and soil from the backbone of the land [1]

Nhä? What is that rain we see? It is the power. Nhä means it is there for them, there, it belongs to them

Gapu, water, gives life, wala, for a person and for the land. Gapu nurtures the environment, it makes everything grow. It holds connection. Water is knowledge and power. It is belonging and it is boundaries. We will tell you something about gapu, about water. Please engage with this knowledge respectfully.

We are sitting together at Bawaka under the djomula, casuarina trees, looking at the gapu, the water, on Yolu Country, in North-East Arnhem Land, Australia. We are a collective, we are Yolu and äpaki, non-Yolu, and we speak with and as Bawaka [2–5]. We sisters, Laklak,

Ritjilili, Merrkiyawuy, Banbapuy, together with our daughter Djawundil, speak from our place, our Country, our homeland, Rorruwuy, Dätiwuy land and Bawaka, Gumatj land. When we talk about Country, we are using an Aboriginal English term that refers to specific places, specific Aboriginal peoples' homelands. There are many Countries in Australia, many peoples, languages, knowledges and many Aboriginal nations. To speak of Country is not just to speak of the land, but also the gapu, the waters, the people, the winds, animals, plants, stories, songs and feelings, everything that becomes together to make up a place. Country, for us, is alive. Country has power, has sovereignty, Country cares for us, Country has agency and communicates with humans and humans are part of its continual emergence [2].

We sisters and our daughter come together as a collective with Sarah, Kate, Sandie and Lara, four äpaki who have been placed in the family so that they can learn their responsibilities, be guided by the family and share with us. Known as the Bawaka Collective (https://bawakacollective.com) and the Gay'wu Group of Women, our collective is led-by Bawaka Country itself, its more-than-human agencies and co-becomings, and Country is lead author in our work together [3]. This is so that Country and its more-than-human sovereignties and knowledges are properly acknowledged and respected. We meet each other, our collective, like gapu, like the clouds, like the salt and freshwater from the land and the sea; we come together to share knowledges through yarning, hunting, weaving and writing, and we separate. We rain. New shoots grow. And, when the time is right, we come together again. There is a balance [6].

We use 'we' in many ways throughout this paper and care is needed when reading this 'we'. Sometimes it is the 'we' of the whole collective, that includes Bawaka Country as a more-than-human co-becoming, sometimes it includes the äpaki (non-Yolu) authors, Sarah, Kate, Sandie and Lara who live on unceded Gumbaynggirr, Dharug, Awabakal and Worimi Countries in NSW, Australia. Other times the 'we' is specifically the sisters, Laklak, Ritjilili, Merrkiyawuy and Banbapuy, or it includes the sisters and their broader family, the Yolu authors. When 'we' is sharing from the Yolu authors, this does not imply the äpaki authors are claiming any ownership or authority in that area. If you would like to know more about how the Collective works together see Bawaka et al [4, 5] or our other works. In doing this we take inspiration from, and work hard to align our work with, important discussions from many Indigenous scholars regarding ethical research including, but not limited to, Ambelin Kwaymullina [7], Linda Tuhiwai Smith [8] and the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* [9]. As you read this, please read each 'we' in context and, where appropriate, listen for the authority of the Yolu authors and of Country, of the lands, skies and waters.

Led by Country and the Yolu authors, here we share some aspects of Yolu knowledge of gapu. The shape of this paper (as led by the subtitles) follows our songspiral of Wukun, Gathering of the Clouds, as written in our book *Songspirals* [1]. We share this knowledge as a yarn, a storytelling, which is an important form of Indigenous and Indigenous-led knowledge sharing [10, 11]. Sharing through stories requires non-Indigenous people (and Indigenous people too) to listen deeply, perhaps to put aside some expectations of how knowledge is transmitted and shared within an academic space, and to do some of the work of translation in an attitude of deep respect [12, 13]. Storytelling "is a process of reclaiming the story, to own the story, rather than be defined or storied by others" [14]. It is a chance to share research by and for Indigenous communities in a way that centres Indigenous worldviews [15, 16]. As we share some of our knowledge of gapu in this way, we join the powerful voices of many Indigenous people around the world calling for attention to not only Indigenous knowledges, but also Indigenous ways of knowing and being, of communicating and learning, including as it relates to water (see, for example, Redvers et al [17]; Yunkaporta [18]; Hau'Ofa [19]; Kimmerer [20]; Martuwarra River of Life [21]; Underhill-Sem [22]). In this article, then, we ask you to attend, deeply

and with patience, to our sharing and listen with an open heart (see Kennedy [23]; Nakata [24]; Bawaka Country [6]; [25]).

We cannot, however, and do not share everything. There are many layers of knowledge and it is only appropriate we share some of the top layer, some of the ways that water is richly known and agential, an essential part of Country. Yolu knowledge must always remain with Yolu people, it belongs with Country, and Country is the keeper of knowledge. This is some of what knowledge (and data) sovereignty means for us; it is important for researchers to learn that not all knowledge is for everyone [26–30].

Gapu is life and knowledge. There are different kinds of water, different sources, different journeys and places where waters meet. And with these many layers come different relationships and different responsibilities with and as Country.

Together we walk as caretakers of this land on that wet pathway because the pathway, the land itself, belongs to us and we belong to the land

In North-East Arnhem Land, every clan has their own land and every beach, every point, every part of that Country has a name. We sisters, as Yolu people, grow up knowing which place has what name, so that we the people and Country are one. We also have different names for the many kinds of gapu. Our knowledge comes from Country–from the land, from the water and from the old people, the ancestors. The old people know the mix of fresh water and salt water and today Yolu know what's dangerous, muddy, clean, calm; what's floating or not floating; where the gapu is salty, where it's fresh, where it comes from and where it is going.

Water is not separated from land. Neither is it separated from people. We are all part of Country. We all co-become, constantly emerge, together. As we walk on that wet pathway after the rain, we feel the knowledge of the land under our feet; we smell it, we feel it, we know it with our very being. As we walk, our footprints sing the land, sign the land.

Learning about water, being with/as water, from an Indigenous perspective means centring connection, centring co-becoming. This resonates with work from Indigenous people and Indigenous-led collectives which centre relationality so that water/s cannot and does not stand separate as something to be managed, but rather is kin; its very being emerges through relationships [2, 17, 31, 32]. As the Dhimurru IPA [Indigenous Protected Area] Sea Country Management Plan, which was created with Yolu Elders, explains [33]:

> We call up the names we have for important places in our sea country for different reasons and purposes–some are deep and secret. We celebrate and respect these creation journeys with their network of important sites in everyday life and in more serious ceremonial rituals. They link us to each other and to our world, they connect us to our sea country and everything within it. Our stories do not work alone; we are endowed with art, dance, song, and deep logics of kinship. We weave together the narratives of ancestral beings, important and sacred sites and creation activities across the lands of inter-related estate owning and language groups. All this gives us a tradition of politics, history, science, and guidance on how to live in harmony with our land and sea. . . we are committed to respecting, maintaining, and strengthening Yolngu Rom through all the work we do on country, through our research and management collaboration and through the involvement of our young people in the important work of caring for country–land and sea together.

In our co-becoming, there are always boundaries. All gapu is not the same, difference is always respected. There is Dhuwa gapu and Yirritja gapu. Everything in the Yolu world is

either Dhuwa or Yirritja, and Dhuwa and Yirritja are always related, related through the mother-child, yothu-yindi relationship. Dhuwa is the mother of Yirritja and Yirritja is the mother of Dhuwa. These mother-child relationships are a web holding everything together in balance so life continues to flow.

The waters flow together but they do not mix or muddle. There are different waters with different sources, different journeys and belongings. There are different places where waters meet. These waters and meeting places have knowledge, are knowledge. That knowledge has so many layers and there is authority in those layers. We know the names and the patterns, the relationships and the responsibilities. Yolu Law holds it together.

Yolu women have milkarri, our ceremonial crying, our keening songspirals, this is part of our Law. Historically in academia, more attention has been paid to Yolu men's knowledge, but both women's and men's knowledges are important. They balance each other, each complementing, connecting, nurturing and teaching the other [1]. Songspirals are the essence of people with land and water and sky. They hold us as water, as soil, as weather, as Country, and they bring Country alive. The spirals of our milkarri are a deep mapping and knowing of Country. This is why Yolu women's milkarri is so important. Milkarri, our tears, make the rain, the clouds, the land, the gapu. Our tears are gapu. As we milkarri, as we sing the clouds and the waters, we literally bring the world into existence. Women's milkarri is celebration. It is joy and grief. We cry milkarri for the rain, we make it rain.

The falling rain is also the tears: Our tears and the tears of the spirits of the land

As Yolu mothers and daughters, we milkarri the rain and our songs spiral on; the gapu spirals through cycles of evaporation and falling rain on the land that hold us all. It holds mala, the nation of people, and the joy of the land. We are the gapu as it spirals out. We are the gapu as the tides come fast after the rain.

We milkarri the muddy Dhuwa gapu flooding in through the paperbark trees, through the mangroves and out to the sea. As the power and anger of that muddy Dhuwa gapu comes into the mangroves on the big rushing tide, the ancestral shark is nearby, proclaiming that the boundary is occupied by the mother shark and calming the gapu, peaceful again. It is here in its territory.

As we sing the land and waters, we are singing sovereignties, both human and more-than-human, the shark, the paperbark, the tide itself. The many waters are richly felt and known, both by humans and more-than-humans and of course, they are known to each other. Knowing in this way is a challenge to many Western frameworks, challenging even the idea of management. For we are not looking after something separate from us, not managing it, not responsible for a passive thing. Rather we are part of it, we care as part of Country, it is part of our responsibilities-as-Country [2, 4].

Centring relationships to, with and as water challenges settler-colonial forms of management and of natural resource extraction [34]. And there are very real repercussions of centring the challenges and teachings that have been offered by many Indigenous people in different contexts; this is not an abstract thought-experiment but the basis of Indigenous being and knowing [32, 35, 36]. There have long been tangible, violent impacts on Indigenous peoples and Country from mainstream settler-colonial forms of governance starting from the inability of colonial governments to even see Indigenous peoples, their connections and belongs with/as Country [37]. Indeed, ongoing injustices around water provisioning, and the 'development' of water resources, marginalise Aboriginal people in Australia and other Indigenous people the world over [38–40]. Hartwig et al [38] call this water colonialism. And, it is not just

Aboriginal people but also water itself, the beings that know and live water, the relationships of all people with land and sea Country that suffer [41].

Centring relationality means starting from a different point, taking connection as our galtha dupthun, the point that creates the energy from which things flow, like the pebble thrown into the pond from which ripples spread, the rippling out of the water creating change [42]. As Leanne Betasamosake beautifully states: "the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment*. Indigenous bodies don't relate to the land by possessing or owning it, or having control over it. We relate to land through connection–generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping and nonlinear *relationship*." (cited in George and Wiebe [34], p 46).

For Yolu, our attachments and relationships are at the centre of all; multi-layered, spiralling every onwards, more-than-human. Dhuwa gapu coming from Dhuwa Country is the bottom water, the yothu (child) clan, and the song names the different waters, following them as they flow out to the bay where the yothu gapu joins together with the yindi (mother) gapu, the Yirritja water–the salt and fresh water meeting. There the song sings the driftwood that has been dislodged by the rain and the fierce tide. The gapu opens the pathway for the baru, crocodile, to go to its nest. The baru uses these mangrove sticks and leaves floating and bobbing on the water to build its nest. This is yothu-yindi, the mother–child relationship. The child is helping the mother and the mother helps the child. One cannot do this without the other.

This happens at Rulyapa, the rough saltwater country between Gutjanan and the large island of Dhambaliya as shown in the artwork by Manala Marika Gulurua, our brother's daughter, who is child and mother for Bawaka (see Fig 1). In the work, you can see the overlapping of waters from the mother and child clan–yothu-yindi.

And the song spirals on, because they always do

Onwards it spirals, the water, the song and our connections. And the sooty oystercatcher rests on the stick, calling out to the clouds, naming, then taking flight, dipping its wings in the water, riding the winds. The songs always and forever spiral on, creating Country, creating gapu, creating life. They sing about what we do, who we are, what exists. It has already been signed. Spiralling out across Arnhem Land and across Australia as they connect to other clans and are passed from one clan to the next. Telling journeys of Law, of relationships, of boundaries, of authority and of responsibility. And this includes the responsibilities of you the reader: responsibilities to learn from the sharing here, but not to steal, not to extract or appropriate what is not yours [4], to think carefully about your own authority and your own place. We are telling you some of the layers, telling you what we want you to know.

We invite you to bring this learning to your own work and reflect upon what it might mean. There are many people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, working with water who know it intimately and express their care in many ways, including through trying to advance different ways of thinking in science; such as through thinking about socio-ecological systems and through integrated water management [43, 44]. Our aim is not to make these connections for you, as we stay firm within our own knowledge. Rather, it is to offer some of our knowings and beings with gapu here in the hope they may connect with you. Our waters and currents may speak to each other, not for one to overtake the other, or to mix together without pattern, but to move out to the sea and back to the land, giving and taking [42, 45].

We want you to know that water is always full of knowledge and Law, that water has many meanings and must be respected. We want you to know that gapu, all over the world, has people that belong to it, that it belongs with and as First Nations people. We want you to know that water and land and people and songs and story and all the beings that make up our worlds

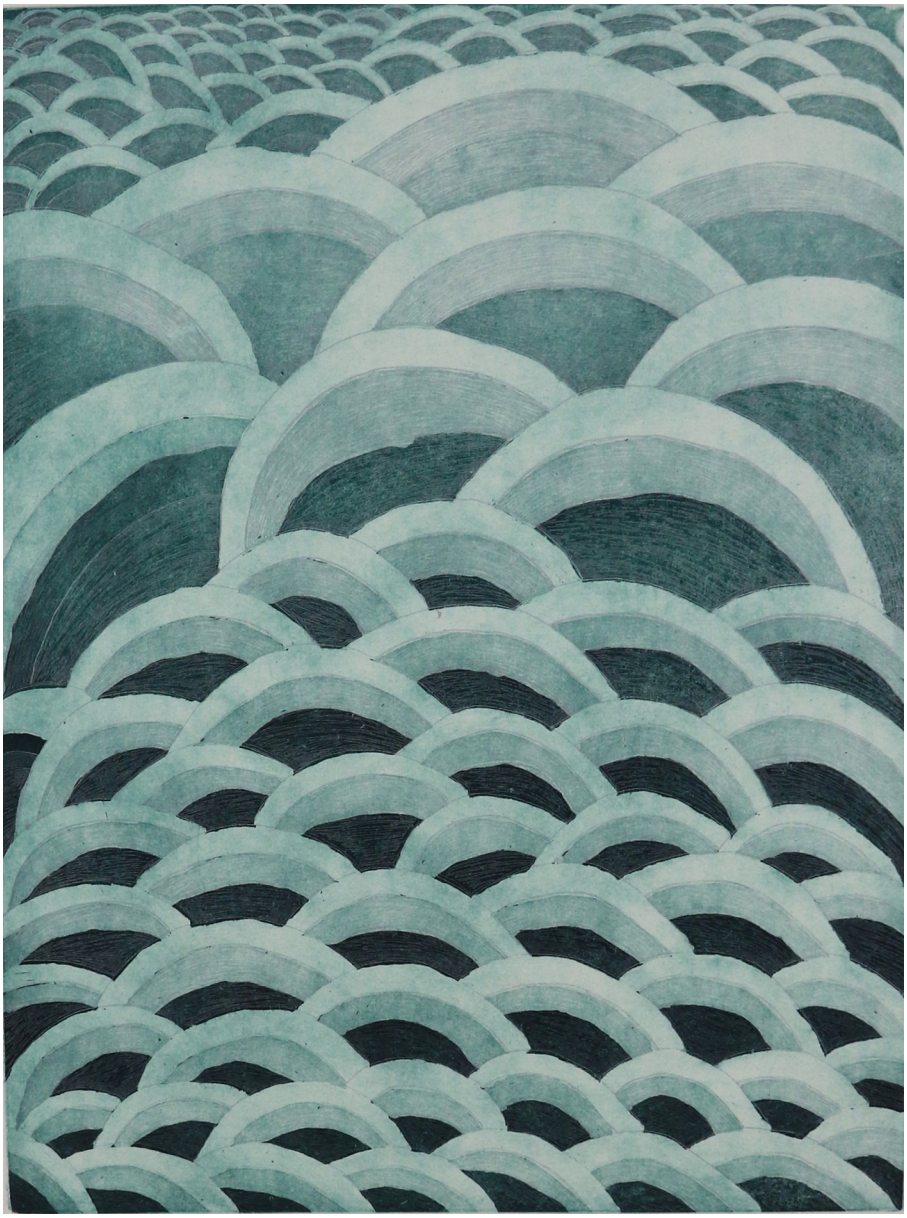

Fig 1. Rulyapa, by Manala Marika Gulurua. Image from The Buku-Larrgay Mulka Art Centre archives (shared with permission of the artist).

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are connected; they co-become together. Violence against one is violence against all. We can and must come together in balance. In our coming together, respecting our differences, we can make rain (this is something that Jampijinpa Patrick [46] also points out). Clouds gather to make rain, to make gapu. When Yolu people sing, Yirritja and Dhuwa people call the clouds to come together. This is the balance, the two complementary aspects of life coming together in their difference. Meeting but not merging, mixing but not hurting. Coming together, they make it rain.

Yolu people are Country. Coming from that land we must talk for that land; as people who have the language to speak and protect it, we are guardians of the land, sea and space; we must protect and fight what is right and good to look after the mother earth. This is who we are.

We are the rain falling, the waters meeting, mixing, clashing, the gathering of the clouds. We milkarri and sing to make the gapu. Each song must sing of the other, we must always acknowledge each other. That is the respect.

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