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978-0-521-47913-4 - A Death in the Tiwi Islands: Conflict, Ritual and Social Life in an Australian Aboriginal Community

Eric Venbrux

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

Under the Mango Tree

In the year Australia was celebrating its bicentennial of European invasion, the Tiwi Land Council, representing the Aboriginal people from Melville and Bathurst islands, gave me permission to conduct anthropological research in the islands. The research proposal focused on a study of Tiwi mortuary ritual and mortuary practices. The delegates to the land council who lived in Pularumpi on Melville Island had decided they wanted me and my wife, Jeanette Deenen, to stay in their community.

At the end of the 1980s, three predominantly Aboriginal townships, which had developed out of previous mission and government settlements, existed on the islands: Nguuu, with a population of over 1200, on Bathurst Island, and Milikapiti and Pularumpi on Melville Island (see map 1). In September 1988, about 300 people lived in Pularumpi, whereas Milikapiti had a somewhat larger population of about 400.¹ Near Pularumpi were the remains of Fort Dundas, the first British colonial settlement in northern Australia (1824–29), abandoned within five years (see Campbell 1834). It was not until 1937 that the Australian government founded a rations depot at the site of the present township, to be taken over by the Roman Catholic Mission of Bathurst Island (founded in 1911) three years later as a place where they would raise children of mixed descent. In 1968, the mission sold out to the government: Pularumpi, known as Garden Point at that time, became a predominantly Tiwi community (Pye 1985). Two decades passed before Jeanette and I would become acquainted with Tobias, the later homicide victim, who had spent most of his time during these years in Pularumpi.

The light aircraft that came in twice a day circled above Fort Dundas and then descended over huge mango and cashew trees, planted by the mission nearly fifty years earlier, before it landed on Pularumpi's unsealed airstrip. In the pre-wet, that is before the rains, the atmosphere

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was hot and humid. Three tourists, bathed in sweat, left the cramped plane. They were taken to Putjamirra Safari Camp, about 20 km north of Pularumpi, in a Landrover. The African-style tourist resort was in its second year of operation. A Tiwi woman was greeted by her relatives who had come to the airstrip. Jeanette and I were expected too. For the first few days we stayed in the vacant presbytery, then we moved to a dilapidated little house in the heart of the community. Tiwi people helped us to fix up our Pularumpi home.

On the day of our arrival there was a dancing ceremony under the mango trees in an area locally known as the Old Camp (see map 3). Here I met two delegates to the Tiwi Land Council, Roger Imalu and Jerome Pamantari, and a senior woman called Nancy Kerimerini. These people told me I had come to study their 'culture'. The senior people in Pularumpi (who perceived their community as a stronghold of Tiwi culture) had decided, so I was told, to teach me. In the Social Club, a beer canteen, Jerome announced that my wife Jeanette was from then on his 'daughter', whereupon, following a discussion with Roger, Nancy made it known I would be her 'son'. She embraced us and kissed us. White people who were expected to stay in the community for a longish period were soon given a position in the kinship system, whether they knew it or not. Jerome told me the next day I had to 'support' him because he was my 'father-in-law'.

The initial days of fieldwork were overwhelming, I must admit. The morning after our arrival, Nancy took Jeanette and me with her into the mangrove swamps and wanted us to share in a feast of delicious mud crabs, mussels and whelks. In the afternoon, Jerome demonstrated his spear-making skills. He gave us a number of artifacts he had made, such as throwing sticks, a barbed spear, and miniature mortuary poles, while he said he would produce some better poles because these were only for 'bloody tourists'. Jerome presented himself to me as a knowledgeable person and almost immediately started to teach me words in the Tiwi language.²

Late at night, someone rattled at our door. A lean Aboriginal man with grey hair introduced himself as Tobias Arapi. He said he had heard about us, this was the reason that he had come to see us. Tobias said that he was concerned about the younger people losing their culture. According to him, even adult men did not know their language properly; they mixed things up. Tobias stressed that it was important that we 'get it straight' and what we would write down had to be correct, because after we left we would pass it on to other people. In this context he asked about the words we had already learned (from Jerome). He used these as a case in point: some of these words were wrong! 'This is what I mean', said Tobias, 'it is all mixed up in their heads.' He gave us the 'right'

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words and left no doubt that *he* was a better teacher. 'In my opinion', he phrased his proposal, we would have to start together with the smaller words and after much repetition proceed to the more difficult and larger ones. Tobias emphasised that he was a knowledgeable man. He had been to Canberra twice to record his comments which were a major part of the commentary in an ethnographic film about a Tiwi mortuary ritual. 'I explained the concepts and ideas', Tobias said. These were the first signs of rivalry between Tobias and his brother-in-law Jerome. At our first meeting, Tobias revealed much about himself and his life, speaking about his children and his deceased wives. His third and last wife, Marylou Kilimirika, had been killed in a car accident a few months earlier. Tears came to his eyes. 'The memories of a black man are different', said Tobias, 'I see her before my eyes all the time.' Tobias told us that he would leave Pularumpi that week to stay with his daughter, Heather, in the other township on Melville Island. Perhaps, he continued, he would return at the end of the wet season for the annual yam ritual.

Despite Tobias' intention to leave Pularumpi, we were to see each other often from then on until his death. We had long talks at our place and on the verandah of his hut or under the mango tree in front of it. Sometimes Tobias cried. Several times he showed us photographs of Marylou, saying that he did not need these to picture her. Tobias was the first to give me a sense of what death meant for a Tiwi person.

Tobias lived in the Old Camp, which was the focus of ceremonial activities (see map 3). The huge mango trees provided shade for the people beneath them. During the hottest times of the year it was considered one of the most pleasant places to be in the township, as there was always a gentle breeze. Lorikeets gathered in the trees, eating the ripening mangoes. By moonlight, Tiwi boys sometimes tried to shoot flying foxes in the mango and cashew trees with their catapults. Visitors to the Old Camp had to chase away the many camp dogs that roamed about there.

Tobias occupied one of the little houses or huts in the Old Camp. In the 1960s, these huts were built for the people of mixed descent who had been raised at the local mission. Tobias' fibro hut consisted of a single square room (approximately 2 by 2 metres) with a verandah in front, on a concrete slab; the hut had a tin roof, a door, and three small windows with glass louvres. Like his neighbours, Tobias did his cooking on a campfire outside. Water could be obtained from one of the few taps in the area. The Tiwi people in the Old Camp shared one toilet building.

In the hut opposite Tobias' lived his 'mother's brother' Isaac Pamantari.³ Isaac was widely regarded as the most knowledgeable person in the township in matters of traditional lore. Next to Tobias, on the verandah of a somewhat larger house Geoffrey Adranango, a frail old man who had been a petty officer in the Australian navy in his youth, was

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staying. Geoffrey first camped under a tree, but he had moved to the verandah because of the rains. Tobias regarded this man as his friend. Geoffrey was very ill and Tobias often brought him bush food. Kevin Wangiti, a forty-year-old bachelor, lived in the hut next to Geoffrey. Behind these huts and passing behind the health clinic, a footpath led to the Social Club. People could drink beer here from 4 till 7 pm, except on Sundays. At the edge of the Old Camp, opposite the club, stood Simon Pamantari's hut.

The footpath went in the other direction to the camp of Tobias' classificatory brother, Sam Kerimerini, back in the Old Camp, which consisted of a semicircular grouping of five huts. The membership of this camp fluctuated, as visiting relatives from the other townships often stayed here. The more-or-less-steady occupants of the huts were Sam and his wife Nancy, their two adult sons Walter and Mike, and Tobias' daughter, Laura, and her white friend Karl Hansen. The white man, a Norwegian sailor, did not talk much. He cared for his pet lorikeets and experimented with tropical gardening, and in order to protect his plants from children and dogs he had put wire netting around them.

The only metalled road, which led from the barge landing to the community buildings (school, store, and council office), separated the Old Camp from the rest of the township. Late at night, people used to play cards under the street light on the other side of the road. Pre- and post-funeral rituals and the seasonal yam ritual were held at ceremonial grounds in the Old Camp. Local community meetings and outdoor Catholic masses took place in this location as well. The people in the Old Camp had many visitors during the day who preferred their company under the trees, chatting and playing cards. The elderly people in the Old Camp – Isaac, Simon, Nancy, Sam, and Geoffrey – received pensioner cheques every fortnight (A\$219). Karl had a relatively well-paid job as a carpenter with the local housing association. Kevin also was paid by the local community council; he helped maintain the public gardens. The local Aboriginal police tracker had learned his tracking skills from Tobias, who had been in this job previously. Tobias and his daughter Laura participated in the Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP, cf. Morony 1991) which had replaced government unemployment benefits in the townships on Melville Island. They did various cleaning jobs and, in accordance with CDEP regulations, worked a maximum of four hours a day for five days a week (earning A\$5 per hour). Tobias obtained some additional income demonstrating his hunting skills as a tourist guide for Putjamirra Safari Camp. The Safari Camp would be temporarily closed during the wet season. When this was about to happen, Tobias was found dead under the mango tree in front of his hut in the Old Camp.

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Early on the morning of 29 October 1988, Kevin, following his daily routine, left his hut to get a cup of tea and breakfast at Sam's camp from his 'mother' Nancy. Then, so he told me, his attention was caught by barking dogs which were around the body of one of his neighbours lying under the mango tree. Kevin signalled to another neighbour who was having tea at his campfire, which had been shifted and newly made. The man, Isaac Pamantari, indicated he did not know what Kevin was making a fuss about: 'What for? I don't know', he said to Kevin, and proceeded to ignore him. Kevin went nearer. He made signs to another man who was approaching, driving a loader behind Tobias' hut, indicating that there was something wrong. The man on the loader, Lester Calley, then drove to his house to tell his wife Maud about it, because Tobias was her 'father'. Kevin saw that Tobias' body was covered with blood. He decided to warn the health worker, Alan Pamantari, who was on call at that time. Kevin told Alan that there was something wrong with Tobias. Together they came back with the ambulance to have a look.

Alan, according to the account he gave me, soon found out that Tobias must have been dead for some time. He had bled from the mouth and there were flies crawling out of his mouth to which his body had not reacted. The time was about 6 am. Alan made a telephone call to the local police constable, as health workers had to report unnatural or sudden deaths.

In the meantime, Maud Calley, who had been informed by her husband and by Alan as well, had set out to enlighten Tobias' close relatives. She had sent her daughter Claudia to her parents, Sam and Nancy Kerimerini, in the Old Camp with the message. The girl caught her grandfather, Tobias' elder 'brother', asleep. She woke him up and told him, according to Nancy, that his 'brother' was dead. 'You stupid', she would have said to Sam, for he was considered 'deaf', that is, he could not understand in both senses of the word, and he was supposed to protect his 'brother'. Nancy informed Tobias' daughter, Laura Arapi, who lived with Karl in the hut next to her. Maud herself made her rounds through the township to tell the people concerned about Tobias' death. She also came to our house early that morning.

About 6.40 Maud knocked on the wall. She told us she had bad news. 'The old man is finished', she said. 'He died last night . . .' In response to our reaction of disbelief and grief she added that he had had a stroke. Jeanette and I hurried to the Old Camp.

Tobias' body was lying under the mango tree in front of his hut. More precisely, the corpse, facing Sam's camp, was located beside a tap about three steps from the verandah of Isaac's hut, from where it was around twelve steps to Tobias' verandah.⁴ He lay naked except for a pair of shorts. Some fifteen Tiwi people stood at a little distance. The police

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constable had come to the scene and decided to cordon off the area surrounding the body with a white and red tape.

Nancy walked over to us to tell what was going on: 'That old man died yesterday night! Too much beer. He drunk too much, too much sugar in his tea', she said, maintaining an explanation suggested by the Aboriginal health workers. 'Doctor told him not to use sugar, his blood pressure was too high.' A few days earlier Tobias and a number of other Tiwi people had given blood to a medical team investigating diabetes. Tobias, however, had neither diabetes nor high blood pressure. But at this point a medical explanation of the cause of his death could not be excluded as a possibility.

We went nearer and joined the close relatives of the deceased. When the policeman covered the corpse with a sheet, the people present started wailing loudly. They cried, bent over, and wiped their eyes with their fingers. At this stage, many people from the township came to the Old Camp. Some came to have a closer look, others remained at a distance.

Jerome Pamantari, facing the body of his brother-in-law, said to us, 'Maybe someone killed him or he killed himself'. He made a sign with his thumb on his side.⁵ 'They had a fight last night', he told us. Although Jerome's words were rather indecisive, I felt it inappropriate to elicit further comment.

Several men walked up to Tobias' hut. They looked around his verandah and turned round. There were large patches of blood on the concrete floor of the verandah. The dead man's pipe lay carelessly to one side. Obviously his shirt had been dropped at the entrance to the verandah. The recently re-elected community president was looking in the grass around Tobias' hut. He later told me he had been trying to find a knife. The town clerk also came to have a look. 'This is suspicious; there is something wrong here', he remarked. Both men of mixed descent, raised at the mission, represented the community government council. The local Tiwi assigned some responsibility for maintaining law and order in the township to the council. As the matter was already in the hands of the police, they could contribute little here. Jasmine Munuluka, who had been Tobias' lover, visited the Old Camp too. She showed little emotion and remained at a distance. We left the Old Camp accompanied by Jasmine's cousin, Ireen Pamantari, and her infant daughter. 'Some people hated him', Ireen said.

About 7.45 am we had breakfast with Jerome at our place. Afterwards, Jerome explained, he had to perform certain tasks as a ritual worker (*ambaru*). He belonged to this category of people because his half-sister Kate had been married to Tobias. Among other things he would have to collect the dead man's clothes and personal belongings. These had

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become taboo (*pukamani*) after Tobias' death and therefore had to be destroyed, buried, or thrown into the sea. The tasks of the ritual workers could not be carried out by the dead man's relatives in other categories of bereaved kin, who were restricted by mourning taboos.

Back in the Old Camp we passed Kevin's hut. He sat on his verandah reading a newspaper, the *Northern Territory News*. Roy Mornington, his friend, was leaning against the verandah. Kevin would assist Roy in skinning and roasting buffalo meat for the white headmaster's wedding that was to take place in the afternoon. When asked, they said that Kevin had found the dead man early in the morning. In front of the next house, the one next to Tobias' place (empty because its occupant was in Darwin Hospital), the police constable and the Aboriginal police tracker discussed the situation. The constable said that a post-mortem had to be done when a body was found under suspicious circumstances. He preferred a forensic pathologist to do it on the spot in order to minimise intrusion in Tiwi affairs and mourning. If this could not be done in this case, the corpse would have to be sent to Darwin. First the policeman wanted to talk with the close relatives of the deceased and have them to agree to a post-mortem.

Near the corpse, a senior man named Bill Pamantari approached us. 'He killed his elder brother with a spear', Bill said, pointing at the middle of his chest. 'Someone killed him', he said, 'He killed his brother, he killed his big brother with a spear . . . over there [Sam's camp].' Bill's gesture of pointing to his chest indicated in terms of Tiwi body symbolism his relationship to the deceased's late brother, his 'mother's brother'.

In the meantime Nancy performed a mourning song. She walked back and forth along the footpath between Tobias' and Sam's place making strokes, as if beating, with raising one arm in the air. Her conventional body posture and movements denoted a feature of her role, characterised by aggressiveness and sexual jealousy, as a ritual worker. Jerome instantly translated Nancy's mourning song: 'His father was a killer, now he is killed himself!'

In Sam's camp Tobias' 'daughter' Betty Kerimerini wanted to play cards. She was told off because she was restricted by mourning taboos and not allowed to play cards until a special cleansing rite with water had been performed. Some people were crying. Laura appeared to be in a state of shock. She sat silently and glared. Nancy continued her singing. According to her daughter Maud she sang about what had happened: 'Yesterday they had heard something and now they had found him.' Nancy's sister Jessica, who used to live in Milikapiti, happened to be staying in the Old Camp too. Tobias and Jessica had had an affair when both were young. When they were both widowed, Tobias composed a song

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saying he wanted her as his wife but she had refused. Like her sister, Jessica walked back and forth performing a song: 'You are singing long way now. You cannot come to sing with me.' Jessica stressed the physical distance Tobias' death had created between them. The singing (of love songs) in her text is an allusion to sexuality.

Nancy said that she herself sang about Tobias' father. 'He was a bad man. He killed a lot of people', she said. 'Someone killed him [Tobias].' She explained to other people that she and her husband were listening to their new music cassettes the previous night. Because the music was so loud they had heard nothing else. She said she would bring the two tapes (with Christian songs in Tiwi) back, one from her and one from Sam. Then to us: 'They had a fight over there, maybe they know. Someone must have walked around with a big crowbar, maybe Isaac, that he has done it, I don't know.' Moving with her head towards Isaac at a distance, 'Look that policeman is talking with him.' We saw the constable approaching Isaac and having some very brief communication with him. Isaac signalled with his head that he could not understand what the man was saying.

We all walked back from Sam's camp to Tobias' hut. At the back we sat down on a tarpaulin, waiting for the dead man's other children to come. The women were wailing. Betty dropped down and beat the ground with her fists. Her brother Jim wailed extremely loudly. Simon Pamantari arrived at the scene. He sat down, together with two grandchildren, on a bed beside the hut. In the corner of the verandah at the other side of the house lay a long iron bar. Nancy pointed out this piece of metal to me as the weapon with which Tobias would have been killed.

Just after nine o'clock a truck drove very fast up the main road towards the village. The small truck, laden with people, turned off in the direction of the Old Camp. About 150 metres from Tobias' hut, a girl dropped off the rear of the truck, landing on her front, wailing loudly. Another woman, Tobias' stepdaughter Ruth Wakitapa, threw herself from the fast-moving truck. She remained lying on her back, crying with loud screams. Heather, another daughter, jumped out of the cabin. She landed on a piece of corrugated iron. Her white husband brought the truck to a standstill. Trembling, he took hold of her wrists to stop her from doing herself harm. Another young girl was wildly flailing around, hitting herself mainly. Nancy told her husband to hold on to her as one of his 'children bereaved of a parent'. Sam did not react. Nancy went to the girl and took her by the wrists. The wailing of Tobias' children continued for a while and the other women who were in the truck started wailing loudly as well when they saw the huddled body covered with a sheet.

Jerome walked backward and forward along the inside of the cordon. He held one hand in the air and performed another song. It was a

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mourning song that he would repeat several times. The constable wrote a short note. The police tracker went away with a blank piece of paper. He wore only track suit pants, a pair of plastic gloves in his belt.

Jerome entered Tobias' hut, the door of which had been closed until now. He came out with a Polaroid photo of Tobias which he showed to the dead man's daughters. They became upset immediately and started wailing and hitting themselves again. Heather's husband took the photo and put it away. Jerome and Nancy's half-brother Alec Adranango, another ritual worker, re-entered the hut to collect Tobias' personal belongings. Under the bed cowered the dead man's dog. A month before, Tobias had told me that he had raised this dog to protect him. Its long teeth would easily bite out part of a man's leg, he said. The dog, however, now seemed to be shivering in fear. On a little table near the bed was some paper and small coins which Tobias used to give to people who came to borrow money. Jerome found the photographs of Tobias' last wedding and his marriage certificate under the mattress. He dropped the certificate and went outside to give the photographs to Tobias' children. This time they did not look at the photographs but put them away immediately.

The tracker returned with the police car and gave the piece of paper, some kind of form, to the constable. Having formally identified the deceased and carried out his duties, the police tracker did not participate in the mourning sessions. Jeremy, the constable, had told him that he did not have to work if he did not want to. A lot of people from the township were seated at some distance from the dead man's hut; Roger Imalu and Edmund Pamantari sat under a cashew tree. The previous night the bar had been closed at eight o'clock, according to Roger. It had been quiet in the Social Club, Tobias must have been one of the last to leave, said Edmund. Jeanette, my wife, talked with Jasmine. She said that someone killed him, and went on to play cards with some other women.

From here we went to Sam's place. A special police plane flew over the Old Camp. The tracker put on a shirt to go to the airstrip to fetch the pathologist and the coroner from the plane.

The people at Sam's camp moved back to Tobias' hut, where a new episode was about to be added to the happenings. About 10.15 am the police car arrived at the scene. The tracker, wearing his police hat, got out of the car. The other passengers were two men in shorts, the coroner and the pathologist, accompanied by a police sergeant in uniform. Their luggage consisted of three suitcases carrying a number of instruments. They were briefed by the local constable, while the tracker remained at a distance, just outside the ribboned demarcation area and close to the large group of mourners. The coroner took a few pictures of the place

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where the body was; he also took a shot of Tobias' hut. The men took a large plastic body bag out of one of the suitcases and unfolded it. They had to put the corpse in it, and went towards the body. One of them pulled the sheet away.

Immediately loud wailing started. Heather screamed and hit herself. Judy, another of Tobias' daughters, threw herself with some force against the metal wall of the house next door. She tried to beat herself unconscious, slamming her head against the wall. Nancy grabbed the youngest daughter, Evelyn, and prevented her from doing herself more harm. Sam, her 'father', stood close by. Karl, on the scene for the first time, picked his girlfriend Laura up from the ground. He had taken a shower and combed his hair.

The coroner took a few additional photographs of the position of the body, and the forensic pathologist examined the body more closely. Then the people from Milikapiti were allowed to view the corpse. The women fell to the ground, prostrate next to their father's body. Wailing loudly, they hit themselves and the earth with their fists. Simon made a sign to me, placing his hand on the back of his head. 'He has a big cut there', he said. Simon, like Nancy, was of opinion that Tobias had been hit with the metal bar.

The policemen turned the body around so that Tobias was lying on his back now; his hands were tensed, his fingers outstretched. His arms lay stiff on his breast. While the policemen were handling the body, the onlookers wailed. The men put the body in the plastic bag and closed it with a zip. Then they left for the police station. They were waiting for Tobias' son Ralph and stepdaughter Carol, who had to come from Nguuu on Bathurst Island. The police wanted to give them the opportunity to view the corpse.

The demarcation ribbon had been taken away. Jerome walked back and forth near the body, first his left hand up in the air, then his right. He performed his song again: (Dead man saying to him) 'My brother-in-law, you did not sing properly for me./I am the one who married your sister!/And I made a big family with your sister.' Nancy took her turn and repeated her song too. She walked backward and forward, also with one hand lifted up. Then Jerome took the long iron bar (thought by Nancy and Simon to be the weapon) and stuck it in the earth in front of the body.

Heather yelled at the people from Pularumpi: 'You fucking coward, come out, you fucking . . . Who killed my father?'⁶ Her half-sister Judy called out, 'If I was a man I would come by day, not at night!' While she was yelling she looked at Isaac, who sat motionless on his verandah opposite Tobias' hut.

When they quietened down, Simon told the people from Milikapiti about killings in an ambush carried out by Tobias' father. (This is dis-