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978-0-521-47913-4 - A Death in the Tiwi Islands: Conflict, Ritual and Social Life in an
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**A DEATH IN THE
TIWI ISLANDS**
Conflict, Ritual and Social Life in an
Australian Aboriginal Community

ERIC VENBRUX

University of Nijmegen



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521479134

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First published 1995

Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data

Venbrux, Eric.

A death in the Tiwi islands: conflict, ritual and social life in an Australian Aboriginal community.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

1. Homicide – Northern Territory – Garden Point.
2. Funeral rites and ceremonies – Northern Territory – Garden Point.
3. Tiwi (Australian people) – Death.
4. Tiwi (Australian people) – Mortuary customs.
5. Tiwi (Australian people) – Social life and customs.
- I. Title.

364.152089915

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Venbrux, Eric.

A death in the Tiwi islands: conflict, ritual and social life in an Australian Aboriginal community/Eric Venbrux.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Tiwi (Australian people) – Funeral customs and rites.
2. Tiwi (Australian people) – Social conditions.
3. Homicide – Australia – Pularumpi (N.T.)
4. Death – Social aspects – Australia – Pularumpi (N.T.)
5. Rites and ceremonies – Australia – Pularumpi (N.T.)
6. Pularumpi (N.T.) – Social life and customs.

DU125.T5V45 1995

994.2'95–dc20

95–7772

ISBN 978-0-521-47351-4 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-47913-4 paperback

Cambridge University Press

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Preface and Acknowledgements

'We cannot live other people's lives,
and it is a piece of bad faith to try.
We can but listen to what, in words,
in images, in actions, they say about
their lives.'

Clifford Geertz (1986: 373)

Tobias Arapi made me his friend. His tragic death has changed my life.

Sometimes it is as if I hear his voice or feel a gentle breeze and I remember how we sat under the mango tree in front of his hut, where Tobias shared his memories with me. I was shocked when I learned he had been killed. Why did it happen? How could his violent death be understood? Did the homicide make sense from his people's point of view? It remained unclear who had killed Tobias. How would people evaluate the killing and how would they deal with the matter?

The homicide took place some two months after I had arrived on Melville Island to conduct anthropological fieldwork. The aim of my research was to study Tiwi mortuary practice and ritual. With at least a year's stay on the island I decided to document all events connected with the homicide case as meticulously as possible. The killing puzzled me but over time it became an avenue to gain insight into late twentieth-century Tiwi society and culture.

This book, based on fieldwork conducted on Melville and Bathurst Islands between September 1988 and November 1989, and in October and November 1991, provides a detailed description and analysis of a single complex of events related to a homicide in a Tiwi community (northern Australia). It includes an account of the victim's life, his disputes with other people shortly before he met his death, the response of Tiwi people to the killing, the mortuary ritual cycle, the seasonal rituals, the police investigation of the homicide and the case in the criminal courts as well as how the Tiwi people involved perceived the proceedings and handled the matter.

The choice of representing a special case is a strategic one: things are out of proportion, and thus what we see is a magnification of what remains hidden, common sociocultural processes that underlie

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behaviour in ordinary circumstances but that are difficult to detect in other ways (cf. Ginzburg 1982; Thompson 1979; Davis 1985; Darnton 1985). Shore states, 'An alien culture is inevitably a mystery and its comprehension can aptly be described as a piece of detective work' (1982: xiii). The case could help to illuminate something of contemporary Tiwi culture (although it is not my intention here to reify 'culture', of course; for a discussion of the concept of culture see, among others, Peacock 1989). I do not pretend to know who actually killed Tobias; the case is unsolved. What is more important is that it opens up a range of cultural possibilities (cf. Ginzburg 1984: 190, 210–13), represented by various Tiwi points of view.

To protect people's privacy I have substituted pseudonyms for real names. Tiwi people have 'a lot of names'; that is, they are important people, and hope I have not been impudent in adding these names.

'Under the mango tree' was used as a label for the homicide case (alluding to earlier events and violent occurrences) and as a post-humous name for the victim by his kin and friends.

The tragic event of a homicide was reworked in a celebration of Tiwi culture; above all, I hope readers will appreciate the creativity of Tiwi people, the dynamics of their society, and the strength and vitality of their culture amid change.

This book would never have been possible without the invaluable assistance of many people and institutions, in Australia as well as the Netherlands, and, of course, it builds on the work of anthropologists who previously conducted research in the Tiwi islands.

My chief debt is to the Tiwi people from Melville and Bathurst Islands. I would like to express my gratitude to the delegates to the Tiwi Land Council for the trust they placed in my companion Jeanette Deenen and me, for the permission they granted me to attend land council meetings, and for the hospitality we received. Tiwi people – in Pularumpi, our host community, in particular – made us feel most welcome. My warmest thanks go to all those fine people who 'looked after' Jeanette and me, gave us their good company, took us out on hunting trips, provided us with accommodation and transport, shared food and sleeping places with us, took pains to answer our unremitting questions, and expressed their sympathy in Tiwi fashion. The superb collaboration throughout of my 'mother' has been invaluable; she not only took me under her wing but also translated and interpreted the Tiwi songs for me. Our stay in the Tiwi islands has enriched our lives enormously.

This work is based on my doctoral dissertation (1993c). I thank my supervisors, Professor Albert Trouwborst and Ad Borsboom, and the examiners of the dissertation, Professor Frans Hüsken, Lex van der

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Leeden and Ian Keen, for their constructive comments. For their encouragement, support and helpful comments on my writing I am also indebted to a great many colleagues and friends: although I am unable to mention them all by name, I would like to acknowledge their contribution here. Jon Altman, Henk Driessen and Léon Buskens have been of crucial importance in this respect and it is to them that I am most heavily indebted. I received invaluable comments, in addition, from the participants in the seminar for PhD students convened by Albert Trouwborst, from Vallaurie Crawford, Ton Otto and Anton Ploeg, and from two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. For the Press Jean Cooney, Robin Derricourt and Jane Farago managed the work through the phases of production and improved it with their editorial skills.

I am grateful to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) in The Hague and the Department of Anthropology of the University of Nijmegen for funding my research. I also would like to thank the following institutions for their invaluable assistance: the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology (the Faculties) and the North Australia Research Unit of the Australian National University, the Roman Catholic Church on Melville and Bathurst Islands, the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Northern Territory Police Force.

Thanks are due to Donna Burak for permission to reproduce her work of art on the cover and to Nicolas Peterson for allowing me to study the fieldnotes of C.W.M. Hart in his possession. To the Tiwi man charged with murder by the police and his counsel for defence I am indebted for permission to cite the court transcripts. An earlier version of chapter 7 (see Venbrux 1993a) was presented to the NICCOS Conference on the Politics of Ethnographic Reading and Writing in Plasmolen, The Netherlands (12–13 December, 1991).

For their material assistance and friendship in northern Australia I thank David and Elaine Benson, Annie Franklin, Susan Ostling, Celine Auton, Therese Fortier and Bob Dunbar. I am grateful for conversations with Gary Robinson, Jane Goodale, Maria Brandl, Andrée Grau and Arnold Pilling. Gary and I were able to compare observations of Tiwi society on several occasions.

From my parents, Jan and Toos Venbrux, I have received continual encouragement. Jeanette Deenen, my life companion and co-worker in the field, lent her generous personality to this work. Her love and faith in me, even when times were tough, kept me going. My deepest gratitude is to Jeanette.

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Genealogies

Selected genealogies of significant relationships referred to in the text. See also *Dramatis Personae*, following section.

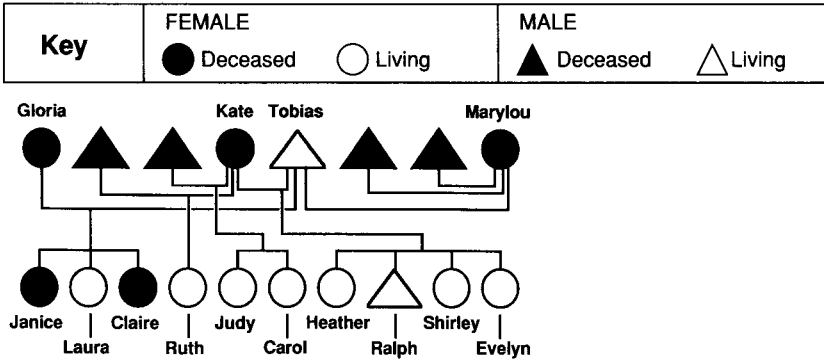


Figure 1 Tobias (Stone clan), his wives Gloria (Mosquito clan), Kate (Pandanus clan) and Marylou (Mosquito clan) and children.

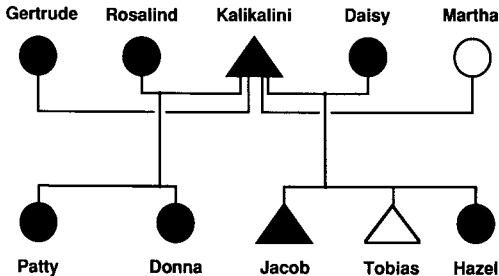


Figure 2 Kalikalini (Mosquito clan), his wives and children.

GENEALOGIES

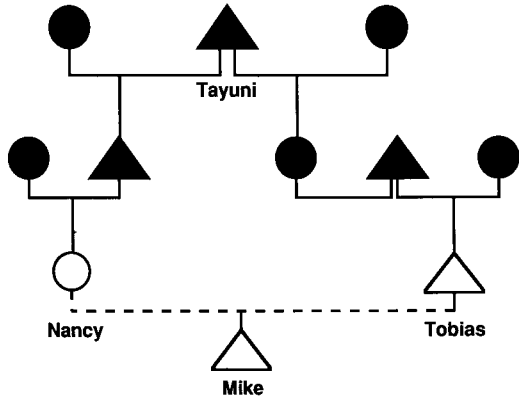


Figure 3 The relationship between Tobias (Stone clan) and Nancy (Mosquito clan).

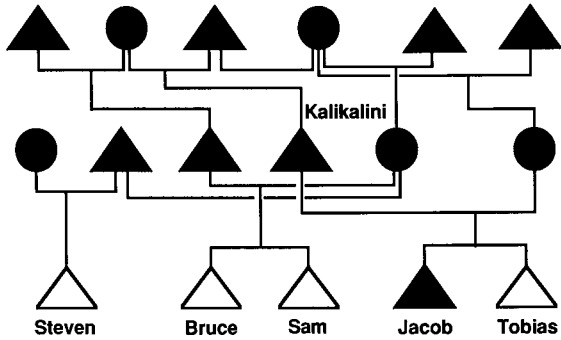


Figure 4 The genealogical relationship between the brothers Jacob and Tobias (Stone clan) and their classificatory brothers Bruce and Sam (Stone clan) and Steven (March Fly clan).

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GENEALOGIES

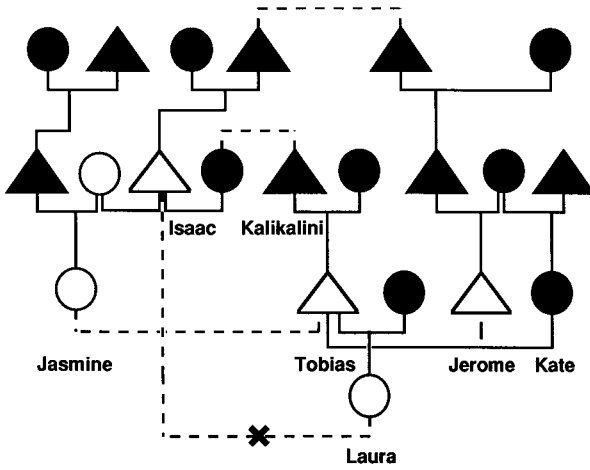


Figure 5 Tobias’ marriage to Kate (Pandanus clan), Jerome’s half-sister, his relationship with Jasmine (Pandanus clan), Isaac’s stepdaughter; and the relationship Isaac (Stone clan) wanted with Laura (Mosquito clan), Tobias’ daughter, which was refused by her.

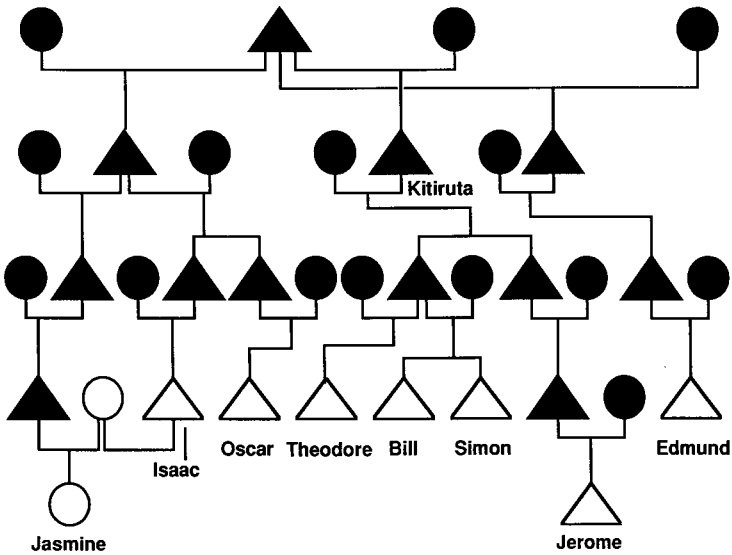


Figure 6 Some members of the Pamantari patrilineage: Jasmine (Pandanus clan), Isaac (Stone clan), Oscar, Theodore, Bill and Simon (Fire clan), Jerome (Pandanus clan) and Edmund (Honeyeater clan).

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Dramatis Personæ

See also Genealogies, preceding section. (All names are pseudonyms, except for those of Jeanette and Eric.)

AGATHA TAMPAJANI, wife of Steven; mother of Max and Harold; clan sister of Jerome and Jasmine.

ALAN PAMANTARI, a health worker; son of Bill.

ALEC ADLANANGO, half-brother of Nancy; senior clan brother of Jasmine.

ANNA WANGITI, a widow; sister of Melanie; Mike's lover.

ANDREW MUNULUKA, husband of Jasmine; clan brother of Sally.

ARAMUKUWANI (†), son of Tayuni.

ARTHUR WANGITI, elder classificatory brother of Kevin.

BARRY PAMANTARI, son of Edmund.

BASIL MUNULUKA, Miputingkimi's son's son; classificatory father of Tobias.

BETTY KERIMERINI, daughter of Bruce.

BILL PAMANTARI, brother of Simon, Mabel, Theodore and Mary; father of Alan; classificatory brother of Isaac; died in 1990.

BRENDA PAMANTARI, sister of Reuben; daughter of Jerome.

BRUCE KERIMERINI, elder brother of Sam; father of Jim and Betty; classificatory brother of Tobias; died in 1992.

CAROL ARAPI, daughter of Kate; stepdaughter of Tobias.

CECIL JATUKWANI, former husband of Tobias' half-sister Patty.

CHARLES FISHER, J., judge in the Northern Territory Supreme Court.

CHRISTEL PAMANTARI, daughter of Jerome.

CLAIRE ARAPI (†), youngest daughter of Gloria and Tobias; died in 1952.

CLAUDIA CALLEY, daughter of Maud and Lester; granddaughter of Nancy and Sam.

CURT JAMESON, Kevin's solicitor from the Aboriginal Legal Aid Service during the murder trial.

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DICK PAMANTARI, husband of Sally; elder brother of Jasmine and Rodney; stepson of Isaac; 'prisoner's friend' to Kevin.

DIMITRI PAPURULUWI, senior clan brother of Jasmine.

DON WANGITI, classificatory brother of Kevin.

DONNA ARAPI (†), sister of Tobias.

DOROTHY KILIMIRIKA, sister and former co-wife of Marylou.

EDGAR TAPALINGA, senior man from Nguuu.

EDMUND PAMANTARI, classificatory brother of Bill, Mary, Theodore, Mabel, Simon, Isaac and Oscar; died in 1991.

ELLA IMALU, wife of Simon; mother of Mildred and Rolf; half-sister of Roger; died in 1989.

EMMY JONES, Oscar's lover.

ERIC VENBRUX, the author, 'son' of Nancy.

EVELYN ARAPI, youngest daughter of Kate and Tobias.

FANNY GROVES (†), wife of Jacob.

FELICIA MUNULUKA, a widow who went to live with Kevin after he had been released on bail.

GEOFFREY ADRANANGO, classificatory brother of Nancy; friend and next door neighbour of Tobias.

GLADYS PAMANTARI, a health worker.

GLORIA PALURATI (†), first wife of Tobias; mother of Laura; died in 1959.

HAROLD TAMPAJANI, son of Agatha and Steven; classificatory son of Tobias.

HAZEL ARAPI (†), sister of Tobias.

HEATHER ARAPI, daughter of Kate and Tobias; sister of Ralph, Shirley and Evelyn; half-sister of Laura, Ruth, Judy, and Carol.

HELMUT BROWN, detective in charge of the homicide investigation.

ISAAC PAMANTARI, stepfather of Dick, Jasmine and Rodney; classificatory mother's brother of Tobias; died in 1992.

JACOB ARAPI (†), son of Kalikalini; brother of Tobias; speared by Tobias; died in 1976.

JACK MUNULUKA, brother of Mavis; classificatory father of Tobias.

JANICE ARAPI (†), first-born daughter of Gloria and Tobias, found dead in the Apsley Strait in 1952.

JASMINE MUNULUKA, wife of Andrew; sister of Dick and Rodney; clan sister of Jerome; stepdaughter of Isaac; Tobias's lover.

JEANETTE DEENEN, wife of Eric, 'daughter' of Jerome.

JEROME PAMANTARI, half-brother of Kate, classificatory brother of Jasmine and Nancy; father of Reuben; 'father' of Jeanette; classificatory son of Simon and Isaac; brother-in-law of Tobias.

JESSICA NEMANGERAU, a widow; sister of Nancy; former lover of Tobias.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

JIM KERIMERINI, son of Bruce; brother of Betty; classificatory son of Tobias.

JUDY ARAPI, daughter of Kate; sister of Carol; stepdaughter of Tobias.

KALIKALINI (†), father of Jacob and Tobias; former husband of Martha.

KATE MARUWAKA (†), half-sister of Jerome; mother of Ruth, Judy, Carol, Heather, Ralph, Shirley and Evelyn; second wife of Tobias; died of a snake bite in 1976.

KAREN ADRANANGO, interpreter, daughter of Mary.

KARL HANSEN, a Norwegian sailor; living with Laura in 1988.

KEVIN WANGITI, the accused; clan brother of Mavis; classificatory father of Sally.

KITIRUTA (†), a 'magic man'; father's father of Bill, Theodore, Mary, Simon and Mabel; father's father's father of Jerome.

LAURA ARAPI, daughter of Gloria and Tobias.

LESTER CALLEY, husband of Maud.

LIONEL JATUKWANI, a ritual worker from Nguuu.

MABEL PAMANTARI, sister of Mary, Bill, Theodore, and Simon.

MARTHA ARAPI, only surviving wife of Kalikalini; died in 1989.

MARY ADRANANGO, sister of Bill, Theodore, Simon and Mabel; mother of Paul and Karen; and clan sister of Oscar; died in 1989.

MARYLOU KILIMIRIKA (†), third wife of Tobias; sister of Dorothy; died in a car accident in 1988.

MAUD CALLEY, a health worker; daughter of Nancy and Sam.

MAVIS PAMANTARI, sister of Jack; clan sister of Kevin; classificatory mother of Tobias.

MAX TAMPAJANI, son of Agatha and Steven; brother of Harold.

MELANIE WANGITI, a widow, sister of Anna; mother of Phillip; Roger's lover.

MIKE KERIMERINI, son of Sam and Nancy.

MILDRED PAMANTARI, daughter of Ella and Simon.

MIPUTINGKIMI (†), classificatory brother of Kalikalini; father's father of Jack, Mavis, Basil and Ryan.

NANCY KERIMERINI, wife of Sam; mother of Maud, Walter and Mike; 'mother' of Eric; sister of Jessica; half-sister of Alec; former lover of Tobias.

OSCAR PAMANTARI, classificatory brother of Isaac; classificatory father of Jasmine; clan brother of Mary; former lover of Ruth.

OWEN BERMAN, detective investigating the homicide.

PAMELA WURUKWATI, classificatory mother of Kevin; clan sister of Nancy and Marylou.

PAUL ADRANANGO, son's son of Miputingkimi; son of Mary.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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PATRICK NORMAN, QC, barrister who undertook Kevin's defence during the murder trial.

PATTY JATUKWANI (†), half-sister of Tobias.

PETER SMITH, Crown prosecutor in the Northern Territory Supreme Court.

PHILLIP WANGITI, an interpreter; son of Melanie; died in 1989.

RALPH ARAPI, son of Kate and Tobias.

REUBEN PAMANTARI, son of Jerome; living with Laura from 1991 onwards.

RICHARD SIMPSON, prosecutor in the Court of Summary Jurisdiction.

RODNEY PAMANTARI, younger brother of Dick and Jasmine.

ROGER IMALU, husband of Vanessa; lover of Melanie; classificatory father of Tobias.

ROLF PAMANTARI, eldest son of Ella and Simon.

ROY MORNINGTON, adoptive brother of Dick, Jasmine and Rodney.

RYAN MUNULUKA, classificatory father of Tobias.

RUTH WAKITAPA, daughter of Kate; stepdaughter of Tobias; wife of Theodore.

SALLY PAMANTARI, wife of Dick; clan sister of Andrew; classificatory daughter of Kevin.

SAM KERIMERINI, younger brother of Bruce; husband of Nancy; father of Maud and Walter; elder classificatory brother of Tobias.

SHIRLEY ARAPI, daughter of Kate and Tobias.

SIMON PAMANTARI, husband of Ella; brother of Bill, Theodore, Mary and Mabel; father of Rolf and Mildred; lover of Ruth.

STANLEY FORD, the local senior police constable.

STEVEN TAMPAJANI, husband of Agatha; father of Max and Harold; and classificatory brother of Bruce, Sam and Tobias; died in 1989.

TAJAMINI (†), father of Bruce and Sam.

TAKAMPUNGA (†), father's father of Paul; father's brother of Alec, Jessica and Nancy.

TAMPAJANI (†), father of Steven.

TAYUNI (†), father's father of Nancy, Jessica and Alec.

THEODORE PAMANTARI, Simon's elder brother; and Ruth's husband.

TOBIAS ARAPI, the homicide victim, 'Under the Mango Tree'.

TREVOR KIRINGARRA, most senior man of Tobias' country.

VANESSA IMALU, wife of Roger.

WALTER KERIMERINI, son of Nancy and Sam; classificatory son of Tobias.

YINGKERLATI (†), victim of Tayuni's sons.

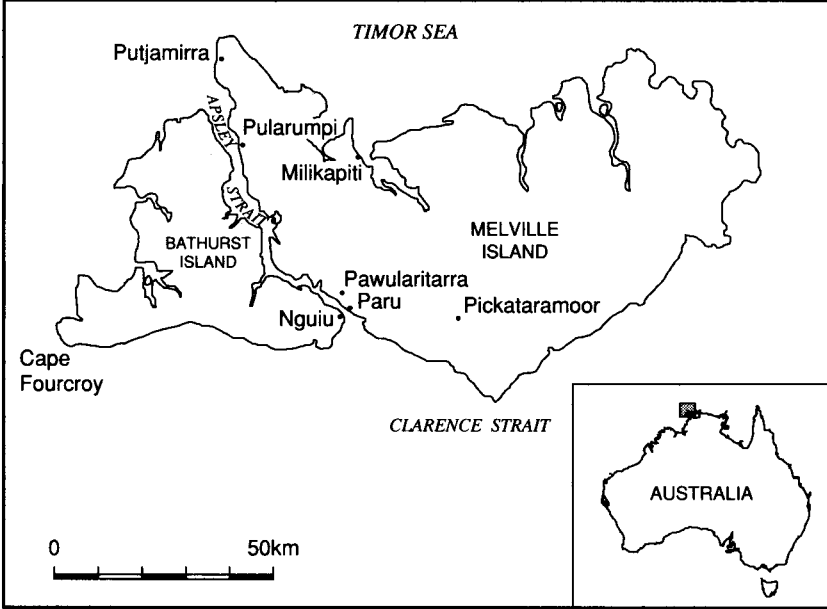
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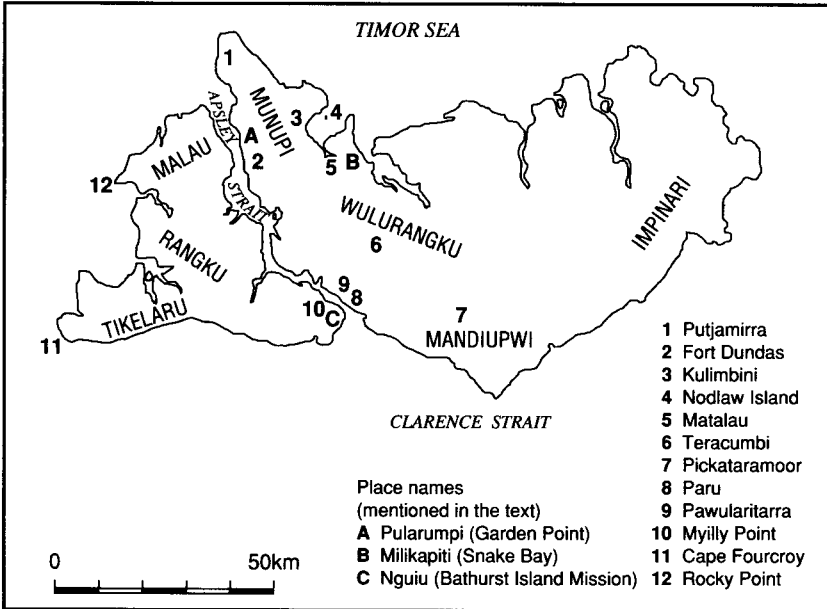
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Map 1 Melville and Bathurst Islands



Map 2 The 'countries', Melville Island (1988)

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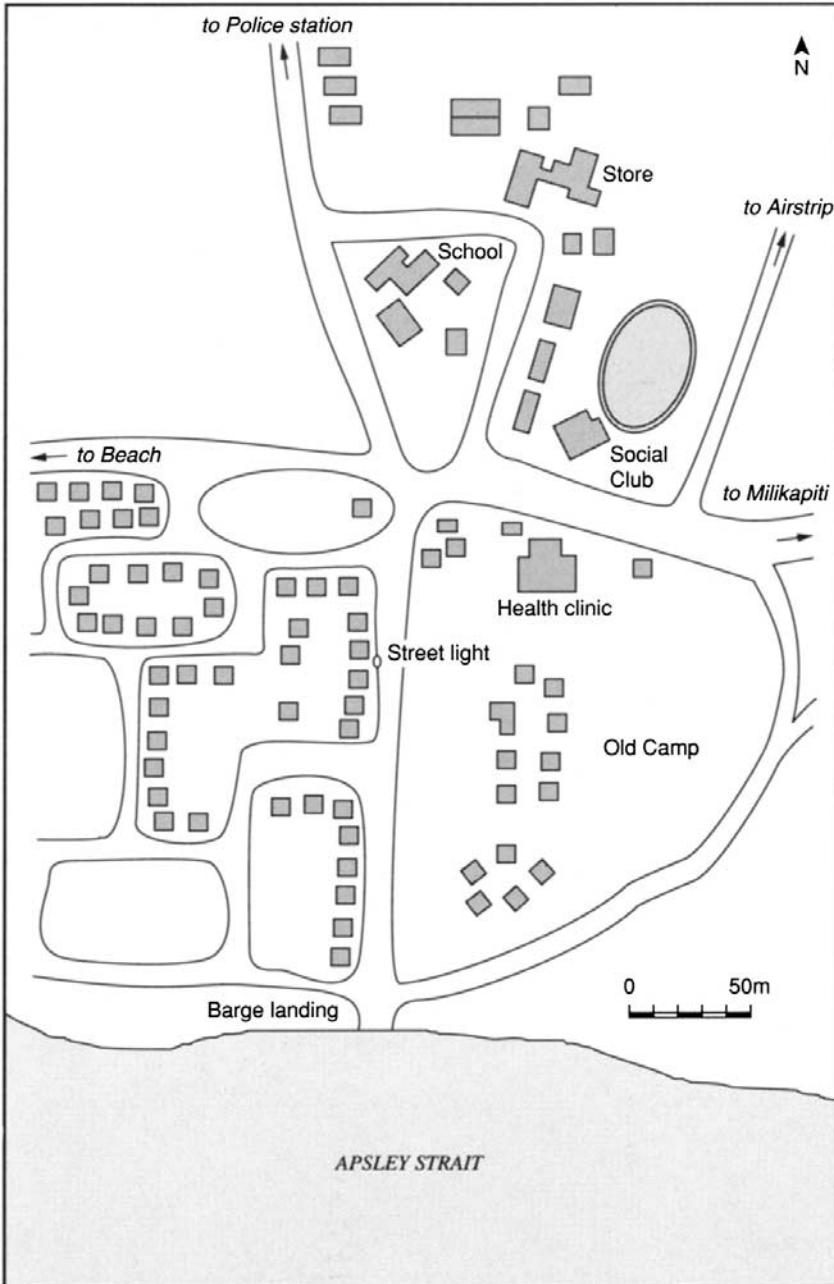
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**Map 3** Pularumpi, Melville Island

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To the memory of
ngia ringani