

## ***Yolngu program unique in the world***

Chance brought together three of the more remarkable intellects in northern Australia, writes **NICOLAS ROTHWELL**. Slowly, the word, the Yolngu word, unfurled its wings, and began circling over Darwin, over the settled peninsula and its red cliffs jutting into the Arafura Sea.

**TEXT**  
Nicolas Rothwell

It was just over a decade ago that the world's first Yolngu Studies program shimmered into being. Devoted to the bafflingly rich languages and cultures of north-east Arnhem Land, it took solid root at Darwin's university campus. During its short evolution from dreamy concept to well-subscribed study course, this venture still bears the uncompromising stamp of its original architect, Michael Christie.

But the key to the scope and depth of the project is the presence of Yolngu language queen, Waymamba Gaykamangu, who has been intimately involved in the development of the syllabus, the text books and the extensive audio-visual learning materials.

Waymamba spent many years teaching on Milingimbi Island, close to the western margins of Yolngu country, before she came to Darwin and worked in the Northern Territory's Education Department. Distinction and leadership sit as a kind of hereditary burden on her shoulders: she is the daughter of the distinguished Yolngu artist, songman and peacemaker, Djawa, and a full sister of the prominent musician and lecturer, Joe Gumbala.

Along with Christie and Waymamba, the third central figure in the Yolngu Studies course is the elusive John Greatorex, a man with an untarnished commitment to the cause of intercultural understanding.

Why, though, should anyone seek to learn Yolngu-matha — the generic term for the large set of interlinked dialects spoken by the 5000-odd people of north-east Arnhem Land? Most Indigenous languages are in steep decline, and are being replaced by English or local creoles. Hence the fledgling academic field of Yolngu studies, practised solely at Charles Darwin University, has the haunting quality of rescue linguistics about it.

But the discipline is firmly underpinned by practical motives. Many doctors, lawyers, local government and land council workers now realise that their ability to communicate with Yolngu people, and to comprehend the mental universe of north-east Arnhem Land, could be vastly enhanced by even a slight degree of language proficiency.

Waymamba reflects on the philosophical difference between the Yolngu cosmos and the western conceptual world. 'I find it always interesting, Yolngu studies, and the way that Balanda (the Yolngu term for Europeans) want to know our language and our culture.' She pauses beatifically, then adds, 'But it's a difficult language to speak — and to think. To think in the Yolngu way is hard. We are trying to make it easy for everyone to pick up and learn. We can't just tell a person to turn around their head and mind. My point of view can be very different from the person that I'm teaching.'

These difficulties are illustrated every day. Some 60 students, mostly mature-aged who need a degree of familiarity with Yolngu for professional tasks, attend the general Yolngu Studies classes at Charles Darwin University. Advanced technology, the Internet and a supple approach have made an international classroom possible: there are 15 students of the language who live overseas, in countries as far afield as Japan and the United States. They are able to pursue their studies by making use of the program's interactive CD.



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**1994** Renowned educator, Michael Christie, is appointed to develop CDU's expertise in Indigenous education. Negotiation followed with Larrakia and Yolngu elders to approve the teaching of Yolngu language and culture in Darwin on Larrakia land. Appointment of five Yolngu advisers to the program. Collection of 300 Yolngu-authored books supplement the University's library.

**1995** Appointment of Waymamba Gaykamangu as Yolngu lecturer delivering trial materials and developing course structure.

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**1997** Groundbreaking dictionary of Yolngu languages released — unique in its innovative and electronic search mechanisms.

**1998** Development of Yolngu Studies website and online classroom, globally unique for Aboriginal languages. <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies/>



**2005** Yolngu Language Team scoops Prime Minister's Award for University Teacher of the Year.

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**1999** External delivery of Yolngu Language and Culture Program trialled in Arnhem Land and North America.

**2001** Publication of Yolngu interactive CD of language and culture program, which allows students worldwide to access the Gupapuyngu language as spoken in Arnhem Land.

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**THIS PAGE LEFT**  
Michael Christie  
PHOTOGRAPH  
John Greatorex

**THIS PAGE RIGHT**  
Waymamba Gaykamangu  
PHOTOGRAPH  
John Greatorex

**OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT**  
Betty Marmganyin  
PHOTOGRAPH  
Barry Ledwidge

**OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT**  
John Greatorex  
PHOTOGRAPH  
Barry Ledwidge

But it's not just the language that requires translation — it's the conceptual scheme. A smaller, more intensive conversation class is constructed around 'cultural situations' requiring artful decoding. Students are plunged almost immediately into an unfamiliar world, where questions and responses are phrased in Yolngu languages.

How different can a linguistic world be? It would be fair to say that the elaborately binary realm of the Yolngu baffles most who encounter it. Absolutely everything is divided into two categories: Yirritja and Dhuwa. Everyone is further classified into a complex kinship system. Indeed the first thing that happens to a Yolngu Studies aspirant at CDU is their own classification into the kinship network.

'One of the main ideas we teach is about kinship,' says Waymamba. 'Kinship and how it operates. We try to make our students see exactly how it all works in Yolngu society, because it's a part of the Yolngu system.'

Learning Yolngu-matha may not be for the faint-hearted, but the actual

mechanics of the language are far from challenging, especially if one is guided through their complexities by the course CD and the pellucid grammar: six vowels, 25 consonants, and only a few of those tricky retroflexed.

As Michael Christie puts it, 'To have an ordinary conversation in Yolngu-matha is not that difficult. The pronunciation is simply not so hard to master; you can do very nicely very quickly. But to understand, to really understand what the Yolngu are saying is very hard, even after 30 years of study. This is because of the richly metaphorical nature of the language, and its tendency to take off abruptly into flights of high abstraction and conceptual analogy, family-related explorations and context-specific areas of communication.'

Another layer of difficulty is the centrality of Manikay, or ancestral song, to Yolngu. As Waymamba explains: 'If you don't understand the Manikay, you will not get anywhere: the Manikay acts as an ancestral language.'

In fact, Christie believes the dawning of serious Yolngu-matha comprehension only begins with a large-scale shift in the outside speaker's capacity to grasp the language's intellectual scheme. 'After a while you have to start using verb forms and tenses that simply make the world different — and so you have to start acting in a different way.'

This doesn't come about as a matter of course. Waymamba estimates the number of westerners who have learned to effectively speak Yolngu-matha in her lifetime as less than a handful. It is a detail that makes CDU's Yolngu Studies program unique in the world: for it is the sole significant

repository of external knowledge of a major language group. Consequently, anyone with a keen interest in the endlessly seductive realm of the Yolngu must come to CDU to further their knowledge.

The evolution of Yolngu language and culture studies has taken a serpentine route from its origins in mission times to its present, more sophisticated incarnation. Inevitably, anthropologists have a keen interest in the Yolngu. Philologists are fascinated by their complex, interleaved dialects; musicologists by their dances and song. But the atmosphere of the Yolngu Studies program, and the austere reserve of its three guiding instructors, suggests another key aspect of the engagement between north-east Arnhem Land and the wider world.

Waymamba ponders the problematics of translation, and the elusive goal of clear communication. 'You see,' she says, 'I don't think Europeans will ever actually be like Yolngu — but they can gain some understanding of Yolngu thinking, which is so very different from their own thinking.'

It is, then, a philosophical quest that the Yolngu Studies program has in view — a quest that may be impossible to fulfil, but that stretches constantly, invitingly ahead. 'If the language is learned,' says Waymamba, 'then you can start to understand. The language itself, in fact, is just a tool for understanding. It is the beginning, not the end.'



**ANTENNAE**

In November 2005 the Yolngu Studies team was awarded the prestigious Prime Minister's Award for University Teacher of the Year, the premier university teaching award. The award is presented to an academic or team with an exceptional record of advancing student learning, educational leadership and scholarly contribution to teaching and learning.

Each year the winner of the Prime Minister's Award for the Australian University Teacher of the Year is chosen from the winners of the Teaching Excellence Awards.

The Yolngu Studies team comprises a group of senior Yolngu advisers from five major communities who guide the program, which has been developed over the past twelve years. The team is led by four Charles Darwin University lecturers — Waymamba Gaykamangu, Michael Christie, John Greatorex and Betty Marmganyin.

**WEB BYTE**

Visit the Yolngu Studies website <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies/> for information on the academic program, current research, Yolngu stories and images, resources for sale and the Yolngu font. The website provides instantaneous translations between Yolngu and English.