

## ANCESTRAL FIGURE

### Will Stubbs

In the distant past there was an ancestral figure with mythic powers and wisdom, who moved through the landscape connecting different estates through his extensive travels and bestowing names and dispensing Law that the people still abide by today. The kinship system which asserts that Yolŋu are all one family stems from his actions.

It was his revelation of the Law which outlined the foundational links between the people and the land and between people and all living things. His Law continues to manifest in the people he left behind. And its expression remains etched on the landscape itself.

Although the track of this ancestor does not enter northeast Arnhem Land, the Law he brought is widely honoured, to the extent that the capital of the Northern Territory is named after him.

In this region there are always other laws and songlines that web together over the landscape autonomously. Usually inert to the other, but sometimes intersecting, sometimes even conflicting. It is familiar to pass from one mental landscape to another. Like people crossing from Tweed Heads to Coolangatta strain to feel the difference. In the air, or the vegetation, or in some other invisible dimension. "It's so much more Queenslandy now".

Another exotic songline which has zones of power within our district is the Jesus ceremony. This hops along the coast landing in small consecrated sites at Yirrkala, Galiwinku and Milingimbi to name a few.

These two songlines contradict each other and tangle and intertwine and push each other back and forth like the tides and entities in Yolŋu law. They are each oblivious to other laws that they cover or are submerged by. Being autonomous they act as if there is no other source of power or wisdom on the landscape.

This is not uncommon with such elemental forces. Barama who dispatched his disciples from Gängan to elucidate the Law did so by right, without reference to Darwin or Christ. Neither did he depend on the Djan'kawu who were themselves on a distinct voyage as they progressed from their paradise at Buralku Island to their landfall at Yalangbara. Their journey across Arnhem Land giving birth to each separate Dhuwa clan is a law which holds strong amongst Yolŋu, whereas Darwin is unknown.

But it is common to find the shape of a law replicated in more than one place. In several places an ancestor chops a tree, which is full of honey, in an escarpment place, where the crashing tree forms a watercourse, which is filled with the honey, and carries that tree to the sea. In each place the ancestor can have a different name, so can the tree, the river and the sea. The language spoken or bequeathed and the clan identity of the places created can all be different, but the shape of this story is the same. It happens this way at Trial Bay, Melville Bay and Arnhem Bay.

And so it is with *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin says that we are all related. We are, in literal fact, one family. Not just with all other humans but with all life forms.

Yolŋu law is identical. This is the same shape that the law of Barama, Djan'kawu and Wuyal has. Gurrutu (or kinship) is the root law which governs all Yolŋu life. Yolŋu action and thought is guided by the principle of this family relationship with the entire world.

As a result of this Project, the sacred songline of Darwin that stretches from Shropshire to the Galapagos and Darwin has come ashore at Yilpara and kissed the ground only lightly, as other older tracks course by powerfully.

Autonomous and powerful it does not displace the forces already at work.

Will Stubbs