

Bama Country - Aboriginal homelands

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Introduction

Like other Indigenous people around the world, Indigenous Australians have perceptions of their “country” that contrast with the materialistic value placed on their environment by invading Europeans. Throughout the continent, Indigenous Australians have used the environment peculiar to their area, being nourished by the spirituality that was imprinted on the land, and gaining physical sustenance. While the people of each locality may have been different, their religious view of their world was relatively similar. There is a commonality in beliefs across Australia. The Dreaming and the Dreaming Place beliefs of central Australia have their analogies here in Far North Queensland, in beliefs in Djudjaba or Bulurru or Ngajakurra translated as Religion/Law/Storytime (the time of the world’s making). These refer to the time of creation, and the events and beings of that time, which are ever present in the land, in its Storyplaces and Storywaters.

The rainforest of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area encompasses the traditional lands of the Bama - Rainforest Aboriginal people. From Ingham in the south to Cooktown in the north, four major language groups, each with many dialects, inhabited a relatively narrow coastal strip west to the coastal range, with swamplands, forests and many short, fast flowing rivers, creeks and waterfalls. From between 60 and 100 km inland, the wet sclerophyll woodlands take over. To the south between Cardwell and Ingham, Wargamay was spoken, and on the headwaters of the Herbert River lived the Warungu-speakers. The Dyrirbal-speakers occupied the area north to Innisfail. They comprised at least a dozen different nations/tribes and linguistically they are as different to their northern neighbours, the Yidinydji, as the French are to the Germans. Each (Dyrirbal-speaking) tribe is divided into four sections, each of which has its own distinctive totems and their Storytime characters came from the south.

The Yidiny/Djabaguy speakers living in what is now the Cairns rainforest region and who are linguistically related to one another, were divided into moieties, the wet season side (Gurrabana) and the dry season side (Gurraminya). Their main Bulurru Storytime characters - Damarri and Guyala - came from the north. The Djabugay, Yidinydji and Gungganydji (Cape Grafton) also shared a similar pattern of social organization. Each side was made up of clans and these had their own individual totems as well as sharing moiety totems. The marriage laws enforced marriage between the moieties, it being forbidden to have sexual relations with one’s own moiety. From Port Douglas to just before Cooktown are the many groups who are today glossed by the term Kuku Yalanji. They also has a two section arrangement and relatively friendly interaction with the northern Djabugay-speakers There appears to have been a major division between the Dyrirbal-speakers to the south, and their northern neighbours, the Yidinydji and Gungganydji. There are indications that, along with

the differences of direction in orientation of their storytime characters, the Bama who shared a common boundary in this area viewed one another as enemies.

At this point it is necessary to acknowledge that despite many similarities amongst the diverse Indigenous people of the rainforest, there were distinct differences in the way each clan viewed and used its own world. It is likely that the Wet Tropics area covers over 60 clan groups, and that any attempt to present an understanding of these people, will by necessity have to be in the form of a generalisation with its attendant exceptions and failings.

The Bama of this region have always been considered different from other Indigenous groups in Australia, partly because of their high population density but mainly because of their material culture, which early white explorers and settlers observed and plundered. Generally, these were the large wooden shields and swords, the cross boomerang, the giant stone axe, bicornual basket, bark blanket, and the single outrigger canoe. Again, the use of traps and nets for hunting larger animals, and fish traps and poisoning (or stupefying) methods when the water levels of streams were low, were noteworthy activities of the rainforest Indigenous.

The Bama themselves tended to be of shorter stature than other Aboriginal Australians although in other psychological respects they were no different. This may have been an advantage to gaining access to the rainforest canopy in order to hunt animals. The short statured Bama “with his trained eye... will immediately discover whether a tree kangaroo, a possum or a glider has been up or down the tree. Their sharp claws always leave a mark of some air gets caught in the crack of the bark.” The impressiveness of these feats can be gauged by Meston’s observation that “it would severely tax the readers’ credulity to describe how these natives take a vine and run up the tallest trees, walk onto others across the branches and descend sometimes a considerable distance from the starting point.”

Another ingenious ability that the Rainforest Bama possessed was that of detoxifying poisonous food resources like cycads (*Cycas media* and *Lepidozamia hopeii*) Black Bean (*Castanospermum australe*), Arrowroot (*Tacca leontopetaloides*), Yellow Walnut (*Beilschmiedia bancroftii*) Black Walnut (*Endiandra palmerstonii*), yams (*Dioscorea* sp.), taro (*Colocasia* spp), Cunjevoi (*Alocasia brisbanensis*) and other toxic plants. There are more than 14 different toxic plants that Bama used. Most of these are extremely dangerous if not treated properly. However, to the Bama during the wet season they were a staple component of their diet. Similarly, the Bama mortuary practice during the dry season, of mummifying some of their dead intrigued the newcomers. On many occasions Europeans took these bodies as trophies and did not consider the emotional import their acquisition would have on the relatives of the deceased. Associated with this aspect was the perception that cannibalism was rife, when it probably was not.

Archaeological evidence confirms a minimal Aboriginal occupation of the Cairns rainforest region for about 5100 years with carbon dating for Mt Mulligan (west of Mareeba) recorded an occupancy of 37,500 years. Pollen deposits found at Lynch’s Crater on the Atherton Tablelands suggests occupation there dates from 45,000 years. Drill core samples from the Great Barrier Reef suggest Australia may have been inhabited 140,000 years ago. Whatever

the scientists may conclude, one cannot doubt that Indigenous Australians have been here since time immemorial.

Like other Indigenous people throughout the world, the Bama perceived the landscape as embodying their spiritual heritage. The religious beliefs of the Bama pervaded every aspect of their life. The landscape itself is informed by the Storied Past. Features of the landscape have their place in the Creation Stories, and these stories link each Bama group to their homeland. It is this Storied Past which tells of the activities of their ancestors. Mirrored in these, the actions of the ancestors, the way of life is clearly outlined. Continuing in this “way” the Bama have walked in confidence, secure in the knowledge that others have so walked in safety before them.

Before European colonisation, the people were a series of cohesive communities bound together by strict Religious/Laws/Customs stemming from Djudjaba or Bulurru or Ngajakurra. Its potency was functional as it maintained Bama compliance with a series of living rules. These rules were “defined, interpreted, altered, waived (and broken) by humans and generally by a particular set of humans – older males”. So that while the impression was given that the laws were unalterable edicts from the past, they were really not quite so dogmatic. It was from that impression that the older men took their status as the ruling stratum. Women also had a role to play, although it tended to be subordinate to men, it was not necessarily always so; there are suggestions that some women did have “powerful respect”. In recent historical times women appear to have had more status, especially since men were away and women had to keep on going. Ceremonial rites confirmed Bama heritage and older men controlled the rites. A part of the rites involved initiating young men and women, and its purpose was that they should go through an ordeal that was mentally and physically taxing. However, it was the older males who controlled the resources of Religion/Law and hence regulation of initiation. In regard to ceremony, it would seem that rituals grew and altered in significance, albeit gradually.

The male elders controlled aspects of personal relations, property, aspects of diet, localities and names. However, it is necessary not to overstate this aspect, as an established belief structure and public opinion probably played as important a role as the elders in everyday life. The distribution of food resources was dictated by a variety of influences: kin relations, transitory states (such as pregnancy or widowhood) or totem affiliations, as well as age and sex. In particular, much of the food including the choicest items were reserved for the male elders. Roth observed that a husband lived on different food to his wife (or wives) and children. Like so many other Bama modes of life, there seemed to be good reason for this. Taboo foods tended to ensure continued supply. So that no one source approached depletion. Male novices in particular were prohibited certain foods. On the southern and northern extremities of the rainforest region of north Queensland, Flannery has observed the importance of some story places in helping to protect food resources, in this instance, the tree kangaroo. The Bama believed “that these places are inhabited by spirits and should on no account be entered.” It was believed that if any food taboos were broken, availability of that whole species would be threatened; not to mention the individuals responsible, who

would suffer some dire consequences (becoming diseased, treading on a poisonous fish or some other predetermined “accident”). The Law would always prevail!

Walking paths crisscrossed the region from the coast to the inland, connecting people in the north, west and the south. They crossed the ranges throughout the Wet Tropics Bama lands. Well established and maintained walking tracks were important for travel to access seasonal food/resources, places – including Storywaters, and other Bama.

Coastal Bama resource use

Each Bama group tended to specialise on whatever species were prevalent in its own territory besides any other factors that may have determined preference. During the period of thunderstorms, flying foxes returned to roost in great numbers, usually in the mangroves, and fed on nectar trees and fig species. These creatures were considered a delicacy and tended to be available from December through to April/June.

Fishing was a year-round pursuit, and for the coastal Bama marine creatures were a very important component of their diet, particularly as the quantity and quality of a catch enhanced the general prestige of a family and their group. Shellfish were also a year-round resource which were harvested in large quantities mainly by women from the beachfronts.

Meehan has noted “as good gatherers in hunting societies women were more important than men in the tropical areas where foods occur in abundance.” She has also deduced that 70% of gathering is done by women, 98% of hunting is done by men, including 60% of the fishing. However, the breakdown of who provided the greater amount of food towards Bama diet must lie with the females at 52%, in comparison with the males at 48%. The major factor in this is that the woman’s contribution is more reliable.

Vegetable foods, particularly toxic plants, were readily available. Before the onset of the wet, when the coastal flats were hot, humid and infested with insects, some of the coastal Bama would be likely to ascend to the Tablelands to eat yellow walnut (*Beilschmiedia bancroftii*) and lawyer cane. Similarly, “when the black scrub locust first cries out around Christmas time, it is time to ascend to the Tablelands to gather black pine.”

The close of the wet season and the beginning of the dry saw a profusion of food resources. The eggs of geese, scrub hens (megapods), waterfowl, turtles and crocodiles became important. Goose eggs could be obtained from approximately February onwards as the birds gathered in the flooded lagoons behind the beachfronts.

The camps of the wet season were larger and more concentrated than at other times and were usually sited “near a sandy beach... where they ... build fairly substantial gunyas on the sand ridges that are well sheltered from the seashore”. It was with the end of the rainy season and the abundance of vegetable foods that major gatherings for ceremonies and duelling contests became possible. Camps tended to be relocated on raised beaches and sandpits on the coast and sandbanks on river courses, generally on open ground exposed to south-easterly winds, in order to discourage mosquitoes. Sharp observed “during the dry season of the south-east trade winds... there is an expansion of activity and this period

becomes the sacred season in which Aboriginal totemic life receives its most complete and intense expression." Major gatherings of neighbouring tribal groups occurred along the coast and inland.

Mjoburg noted that "if a tribe has surplus of vegetables or game in its area, the neighbouring tribes are often invited in to harvest and hunt the surplus". Some Gungganydji of King Beach (Cape Grafton) claim that smoke signals were sent from prominent points to inform Tableland Yidinydji that shell seafoods were fat. It was at these major gatherings that the Bama implemented the ritual ceremonies of the many facets of Religion/Law. Quarrels amongst individuals could be settled and items of trade could be bartered. Roth observed that in relation to trade, that it was an individual effort, "each one doing business on its own account." For the coastal Bama the windy period of the dry season was climatically a very pleasant time. So good, in fact, that many of the Tablelands Bama "would come down to the coast to avoid the worst frosts and mists to eat Mulgrave walnut (*Endiandra palmerstonii*).

The coastal Bama hunted macropods, small mammals and reptiles, particularly as the latter were sluggish in the winter and easier to catch. Wallabies, native cats, goannas and cassowaries were also obtained through hunting in the lowland rainforests and open woodland forest. "Sugarbag" or wild honey, which was considered a delicacy, was also readily available during this period. Yams, tubers and bulbs, especially "cheeky yam" (*Dioscorea bulbifera* var. *bulbifera*) a toxic plant, was a mainstay for up to five months. Many fruits and berries ripened in the dry season, such as Burdekin Plum (*Pleiogynium timorense*, April to October) and the Blue Quandong (*Elaeocarpus angustifolius*, June-February). Another coastal meat resource which was popular during this period was mudcrabs. When golden wattles (*Acacia crassicarpa* and *A. flavescens*) bloom, the crabs are full or fat, and better to eat although they are harder to get than at the time of the high tides before the wet.

It was at the end of the windy period (August-September) and the beginning of heat haze (October) that food resources were truly plentiful. At this time, the coastal Bama hunted Torres Strait pigeons on the offshore islands.

No animals were allowed to be taken if the Bama knew they were pregnant or lactating. In the period of calm whether before the cessation of the south-easterly winds and the beginning of the north-easterlies/north-westerlies (around September to November) it was easier to hunt the large marine animals with harpoon from a single outrigger in the calm of shallow waters on the reefs just off the coast. Marine turtle and dugong hunting was an extremely high prestige activity which was surrounded with specialised ritual. It was a way men could achieve very high status. The success of these hunting trips, providing large quantities of food, would also enable the Bama to hold large gatherings.

By the time of the heat haze period of the dry season, water courses were drying up and water cherry (*Syzygium tierneyanum*) began fruiting; the Bama know that freshwater fish were fat, and that stone fishtraps should be built to catch them. Similarly, as the watercourses were reduced to a fraction of their wet season volume, the use of fish poisons became prevalent. From about November/December high spring tides would begin, and with

them after the spawning season, fish and eels would then move up the rivers. Mudcrabs and mussels were then easier to get around the mangroves as the creatures moved to higher ground in response to the high tides. The eggs of scrub fowl in large mound incubator nests on the lowland rainforest adjacent to the coast were also collected during a period termed "scrubhen time". The flowering of *Faradaya splendida* with its massed white blooms was a convenient calendar plant indicating the eggs would be available. Controlled grass burning was also carried out systematically in conjunction with hunting drives for wallabies, sometimes grey kangaroos, and other mammals and reptiles (this tended to occur just before the arrival of the wet). If it was a typical year, when scaly ash (*Ganaphyllum falcatum*) began flowering, it was known the wet season was about to begin. However, this was usually preceded by thunderstorms which heralded the cyclical return of the wet season. The hunting of animals would decrease at this time, although major vegetable foods were readily available in the early part of the wet.

Inland Bama resource use

The onset of the wet season saw the inland Bama obtain large quantities of fish when the first flush of the flood waters came down the creeks and rivers. Plant and animal foods were still sufficient in the late dry and early wet, although the diversity of choice in food resources became restricted during the rainy period and was the leanest time of the annual cycle. Edible roots and fruits were available, and with regard to toxic food plants, "this is a harvest time for the Aborigines who eagerly search out walnut-like fruit" of *Beilschmiedia bancroftii*. The availability of toxic Yellow Walnut was also an attraction for some of the coastal Bama to visit the Tablelands roughly during the months of January/February as well as to gain relief from the heat, humidity and insects. Similarly, from February to about June, another nut, Black Bean, was used extensively for food after the bean had been detoxified. The processing of otherwise toxic plants tended to enable larger Bama gatherings.

The Bama knew when and where particular species were ripe and ready to use. Bama informants have stressed that resources were managed (or "farmed" in the unconventional sense ie. domiculture) with species being encouraged to regenerate after the food source has been harvested. It definitely was not the haphazard affair which some Europeans came to believe.

Inland Bama generally built their wet weather camps "on some dry situation, beside or very near a running stream" (Meston, 1889) but above potential flood levels usually on the ridges between gullies. The cleared areas in the Tableland rainforest which later became known as "pockets" were campsites which were relatively permanent and linked by well beaten tracks to a seasonal cycle of migration. Lumholtz stressed that the Tableland Bama preferred the grassy plains to the rainforest during the wet season. It was also around this time that "inland tribes uniformly recognize that if they encounter seagulls too far from the sea then a cyclone is approaching".

The upland Bama burnt the grass in early February in order to hunt wallabies. It was a controlled affair which was attempted on a relatively small scale and only with the likelihood of rain, heavy dew or terrain (eg. fire stops at creeks or on tops of ridges or at rainforest

edges) in order to prevent the fire from getting out of hand. Burning off more regularly occurred toward the end of the heat haze period of the dry season. The beginning of the windy period of the dry season with the ensuing abundance of vegetable and fruit resources enabled major gatherings to occur. The most sought after fruits tended to ripen between approximately July and October and at least 240 edible plant species were available in north Queensland.

Non-seasonal opportunistic food sources such as eels, tortoises, wallabies and goannas were utilised when obtainable. Some Bama were guided by the flowering of a small bean tree (*Pongamia pinnata*) as to the correct time to build stone fish traps. It was then that they erected traps in the shallow water sections of creeks or rivers, so that they could catch fish when they were at their fattest.

The peak of the dry season's leaf and flower production (August/September) corresponded with increased insect populations, which in turn influenced the insectivorous bird population and consequently provided other Bama food resources. During this period, fish are ... more likely to respond to bait used in fishing. However by November, when figs begin dropping into rivers, the fish are more discerning and consequently more difficult to catch. The period of adjournment to the coastal country in order to avoid the worst of the frost and mists, was indicated "when the tail feathers of the willy wagtail turn white". Sugar bag or native honey was also more easily obtained during the Dry season. At the beginning of the Dry it is cool to cold, but grows hotter around October. Towards the end of the windy period, meat foods like native cats, goannas, wallabies and other animals are more easily obtained, but fruits are not so abundant.

From approximately July/August *Cycas media* which requires detoxifying has importance, as do wild yam, bulbs and tubers up to November/December. Depending on the availability of food resources, each season dictates when it is possible for gatherings of groups to occur in order to perform ceremonies and have dueling contests.

The main period for controlled burning of the undergrowth was in August/September, well before the start of the heat haze period. There seems to have been at least three logical reasons for this activity. First it made it easier to travel; secondly, wallabies and other animals were attracted to the new plant growth; and thirdly it rid the area of leeches. There were other food sources such as insects. Lumholtz refers to the roasted larvae of the Coleoptera as having "the flavour of nuts and tasting even better than a European omelette". Another was a large, fat larvae of the long-horned beetle. Similarly, the larvae of ants, butterflies and the nests of green ants were used for food. Frogs were also considered a delicacy and after collecting them in large numbers they "did them up neatly in some green leaves and roasted them". (Roth, 1901)

Seasonal climatic forces greatly affected the mobility and residence of the Bama. Not only were the food resources influenced by seasonal forces, but also the obtaining of the materials required for the manufacture of tools and availability of the pharmacopeia of rainforest plants.

The clan was generally comprised of up to eight families which although it exercised customary rights over resources in its own country or territory, it did not always act as a single unit for the purpose of food procurement. Generally gatherings of inter-tribal and intra-tribal groupings would depend on a variety of factors, from seasonal to social. Not all the people necessarily attended them, some preferred to maintain the land and possibly to look after any infirm older members not capable of travel. During the heat haze period of the dry, there were many fruiting plants, both on the coast and inland. With the advent of the wet, some coastal people adjourned to the Tablelands to gather edible toxic nuts and from approximately December onwards, flying foxes, geese and ducks were additional resources. In turn, during the cold period, some Tablelanders adjourned to the coastal area to utilise edible toxic plants. These occurrences offered opportunities for gatherings to take place on either a neighbourly clan level, or an intertribal level. However, this fluidity of movement could not be taken as an indication of nomadism, with all its associated connotation; for the Bama's "rich diverse base and permanent water did facilitate large, semi-permanent ... camps for much of the year". The family grouping was a prime concern to the Bama individual, intertwined with clan affiliations and responsibilities, and lastly tribal associations. It was into this closely knit grouping of people with their inextricably linked fellowship between the physical and spiritual world, Religion/Law, and their habitable place of the land, sea and sky – Homeland, that a new phenomenon began to make its presence felt. The strangers had no understanding of these pivotal aspects of Bama life and arrogantly transgressed basic laws regarding trespass and proprietorship. As occasional visitors they did not appear to pose much of a problem to Bama life. However, the future did not look bright with the increasing frequency of visits by the "spirits of the dead" – white men.