

The social organisation of Wadeye's heavy metal mobs

John Mansfield

Australian National University

The heavy metal mobs of Wadeye (notorious in the media as 'heavy metal gangs') are a new form of Aboriginal social organisation, almost entirely constituted by collateral kinship rather than descent relations. Dozens of overlapping mobs are each made up of sets of brothers and cousins, and are publicly symbolised by the name of a heavy metal band discovered via mass media. In contrast to recent Australianist anthropology that emphasises the fluidity of social structures and intercultural processes of identity formation, I argue that the metal mobs constitute a highly codified system of social organisation, and one in which non-Aboriginal cultural influences are quite peripheral.

Keywords: Aboriginal culture, social organisation, Wadeye, Murrinh Patha, intercultural theory

INTRODUCTION

The heavy metal mobs of Wadeye have received considerable coverage in the national press, especially with respect to violent conflict between the two biggest mobs, Evil Warriors and Judas Priest. In newspaper articles they are inevitably referred to as 'gangs', which suggests something akin to the criminal groups of big cities, something very un-Aboriginal, or perhaps even a corruption of Aboriginality (e.g. Murdoch 2006). Alternatively, where a little more social analysis is attempted, the mobs are presented as 'tribal' groups; proxies for the hereditary Aboriginal social groups of the area (e.g. Toohey 2004, 2006). But neither of these representations is correct: the metal mobs are indeed Aboriginal kinship groups, but the relations by which they are constituted are predominantly collateral, in contrast to the descent relations of traditional clan groups. In this essay I will show that they are neither gangs, nor clan proxies.

The approach taken in this essay is a fairly positivist one, describing patterns of social organisation I have observed while conducting primarily linguistic fieldwork in Wadeye, and treating these as distinctive features of an identifiable metal mob culture. This would appear to be more akin to early twentieth century social anthropology than to current Australianist anthropology, in which the idea of cohesive and consensual social norms is widely criticised and even the idea of distinct 'cultures' is viewed with suspicion. Contemporary research focuses instead on how individuals negotiate diverse cultural possibilities (especially at the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal interface),

and how supposed norms of social organisation are subverted. While I accept that earlier anthropologists were unrealistic in their portrayal of stable, cohesive and unitary cultural 'systems', I will argue that a focus on patterns and norms is appropriate to my subject matter, if tempered by balancing this view against one of individual flexibility and diachronic change. I am, to some extent, in disagreement with current trends in Australianist anthropology, concurring with Sutton (1999: 14) when he argues that 'the pendulum has swung too far' towards emphasising individuality and flexibility at the expense of social structures.

Wadeye is one of Australia's largest Aboriginal towns, in the sense of having a majority Aboriginal population and a distinctly Aboriginal foundation history. Its population is now about 2500, of whom about ninety-five per cent are Aboriginal (Taylor 2010: 8). The town lies on the edge of coastal mangroves between Darwin and the Kimberleys, and was originally founded as the Port Keats Mission in 1935. By the 1950s, some twenty Aboriginal clans who had populated the area between the coast and the Moyle River had moved in, voluntarily, to reside permanently at the Mission. But the period with which this essay is concerned began after the Mission was dissolved in 1975, and the secularised town was officially renamed as Wadeye. It was in the post-missionary period that the metal mobs emerged.

Although Wadeye has opened up somewhat to whitefella¹ influence in the post-missionary period, most visitors – even those familiar with other Aboriginal towns – remark upon its air of separateness (e.g. Hawley 1981; Toohey 2004; Shand 2006). Wadeye's distinctiveness is exemplified above all by its vast population of young people, who all speak Murrinh Patha but are often not comfortable communicating in English, or indeed, dealing with whitefellas at all. At least part of the explanation for these facts must lie in the geographic isolation of the town, with access roads that are very rough for half the year, and under water for the other half.

ABORIGINAL SOCIAL ORGANISATION – STRUCTURE AND FLEXIBILITY

The analysis of social organisation was central to Australianist anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the central concerns in the major works of Stanner, Elkin, Hiatt, the Berndts and, above all, Radcliffe-Brown, was the description of how Aborigines related to one another as social groups. And it is these core questions of social organisation that provide the framework for this essay: What social groups do people form, and how does one become a member of such a group, or cease to be a member? What are the relations between people in the same group, and between people in different groups, or between groups as wholes? How are groups constituted, in the day-to-day activities of domestic and public life, as well as in special events such as ritual and conflict?

The main principles of Aboriginal social categories were succinctly stated in Radcliffe-Brown's essay, 'The Social Organization of Australian Tribes' (1930), in which he described how clans, moieties, sections and subsections are constituted. Hiatt (1962) would later argue that Radcliffe-Brown had been a little *too* succinct in his eagerness

to propose universal patterns where, in fact, Aboriginal societies display far more variation (and, in particular, a more complicated range of relationships between patrilineal *clans* and residential *hordes*). Stanner (1965) responded in defense of the earlier work, arguing that Radcliffe-Brown's analysis had only been proposed as a set of generalisations rather than universal truths.

Half a century later, it is perhaps Hiatt's approach that has become dominant. Since the 1990s, social organisation has been approached rather obliquely in Australianist anthropology – principles of group formation are discussed most often with respect to how such principles are undermined or subverted; indeed, the seeds of this approach were sown in the international sphere by a massive anthropological turn towards self-reflection and criticism of the positivist intellectual tools that had previously prevailed in the discipline (e.g. Keesing 1994; Vayda 1994). In Australianist anthropology the revolution was most completely embraced by two major journals dedicating special issues to 'intercultural theory' (Hinkson and Smith 2005; Sullivan 2006) – broadly, a critique of structuralist social anthropology, with its portrayal of separate cultures each distinguished by its own social system.

Traditional social organisation analysis always aimed, by formulating the principles of social groups, at laying foundations for what characterises 'a culture' (the Warlpiri, the Arrernte, the Murrinh Patha), and what makes each distinct from others. It is these aims that are rejected by intercultural theory, the main tenets of which are that (a) humans do not live within the space of a single, defined culture, but rather in an *intercultural* social field, in which every social interaction negotiates an unstable and relational position between diverse cultural resources (Hinkson and Smith 2005; Merlan 2005); (b) there is such a thing as 'culture', but there are not stable and distinct 'cultures' (Sullivan 2005, 2006). Accordingly, interculturalist work on social organisation focuses on the instability and negotiability of group identities, and how they emerge only through the relational play of cultural difference. In particular, for Aboriginal Australian society, it is shown that social life is constituted through the interplay of Aboriginal and whitefella cultural forms: Merlan (1998: 52, 86–94) describes how in the town milieu of Katherine, where much of the social space and infrastructure is controlled by whitefellas, traditional clan identities are replaced by broader language-group identities that show considerable flexibility and openness to contextual reinterpretation. Both Sullivan (2005) and Glaskin (2002) describe how group identities in the Kimberley region are constituted, and indeed reified, by engagement with whitefella law in the form of the Native Title Tribunal. Batty (2005) shows how Aboriginal corporate governance is produced through interaction with whitefella bureaucracy. Ottoson (2012) reflects on how the enjoyment of country music, and conceptions of geographic 'country', are influenced by a history of Aboriginal engagement with the cattle industry.

Given that the metal mobs of Wadeye name themselves after global heavy metal bands who are, without exception, whitefellas, it might seem natural to analyse this phenomenon as a product of intercultural identity. However, this will not be my approach. The emergence of the metal mobs clearly does involve some imaginative

identification with wild, rebellious whitefellas; indeed, a different essay might be written that would tease out the complicated conceptions of whitefella/blackfella among Wadeye youth. But the engagement with whitefellas, with non-Aboriginal culture, is very much on the imaginative level here, rather than through concrete social engagement. A common ingredient in all the intercultural studies mentioned above is a substantial history of direct engagement with whitefella social forms – and I note also that it is usually older, more socially mobile Aboriginal people who are the subject of these studies. Any such engagement is absent or at best marginal among Wadeye youth. Their school attendance level is extremely low, as is their participation in formal work or training (Taylor 2010: 19, 34); many young men have little confidence or indeed competence in communicating in English, which in itself testifies to their scant interaction with whitefellas – for many this is largely limited to transactions at the shop or takeaway (conducted in eerie silence), and occasional brushes with the police.

My contention is, then, that the metal mobs are a highly localised cultural form that is unambiguously Aboriginal, and which bears only an indirect relationship to whitefella culture, mostly on the level of the appropriation of mass-media images. Furthermore, while the current trend in the analysis of social organisation is to highlight its fluidity and instability, by contrast I will describe how the metal mobs show substantial stability and quite regular patterns in their codification of social interaction among Wadeye youth. I do not propose to reimpose structuralist distortions that portray social organisation as unrealistically rigid and deny any role for individual flexibility and choice. But neither do I accept that social interaction is pure indeterminacy and flux – I cannot, for example, concur with Sullivan when he characterises culture as ‘a series of sites of contested representation and resistance’ (2005: 184), nor Hinkson and Smith when they describe it as ‘the interplay of differing expectations, understandings and forms of practice’ (2005: 161). In such formulations there is little room left for social encounters in which participants have *basically the same* ‘expectations, understandings and forms of practice’ – i.e., all those interactions that are constitutive of relatively stable social patterns. In analysing the metal mobs as a form of social organisation, I aim to describe such patterns, while also acknowledging flexibility and ambiguity. When discussing well-established social forms like patrilineal clans, one has a better foundation for focusing on fluidity and social process; but since the metal mobs are a fairly new form of social organisation, neither well documented nor widely understood, it seems more important here to accurately identify their basic principles.

THE METAL MOBS OF WADEYE

Fieldwork and methodology

What brought me to Wadeye was not anthropology but sociolinguistic research – in particular, an interest in the youth or ‘slang’ variety of the Murrinh Patha language; however, I soon became drawn into ethnographic investigation as well. Sociolinguistics presumes a reasonable understanding of the society in which the language is

spoken, and in particular, one should be able to answer the question, 'What are the major social categories with which speakers identify?' Clan identity and hereditary language affiliation were possible candidates at Wadeye, but on closer observation these seemed unlikely to be linguistically meaningful categories, as I soon noticed that young men kept company primarily with reference to heavy metal band names, rather than hereditary clans or language groups. People who I encountered often as a group identified themselves with names such as 'Lica mob', 'Kreator mob' or 'Priest mob'.

I spent ten months at Wadeye in 2011 and 2012, recording the language spoken by young men and transcribing the recordings with their help. I also dedicated a lot of effort to learning Murrinh Patha, which I believe to be important to the credibility of my sociolinguistic research. I learnt most about the heavy metal mobs by making friends with various groups of young men and spending time with them unconstrained by any explicit research aim: playing football, going to the beach or other bush places outside Wadeye, just sitting around talking and smoking. But after having been at Wadeye for about six months, and developing some impressionistic hypotheses about the metal mobs, I systematically recorded a list of individuals with their mob affiliations, kin relationships and clan identities. My list comprises about eighty individuals affiliating to some fifteen different mobs, with three mobs (Kreator, Bullet and Machine Head) represented completely or almost-completely in my list. I estimate that in total there are between three hundred and five hundred young men who affiliate to about thirty different metal mobs.

No ethnographic analysis of the Wadeye metal mobs has previously been published, though they have been mentioned frequently in press reports, and have been the subject of a short video documentary. The most accurate and detailed description of the mobs is perhaps an article in the *Bulletin* (Toohey 2004), though this makes the common error of assuming that the mobs represent clan heritage. The documentary, *Heavy Metal Gangs of Wadeye* (Brooks and West 2009), takes a light-hearted approach that is not too much concerned with facts or analysis, but does contain some fascinating footage of the mobs dancing to their respective bands at a late-night party. Two unpublished academic theses include some material on the metal mobs, though neither is dedicated to an analysis of the phenomenon: Furlan (2005) provides useful background on the emergence of youth culture at Wadeye in the 1970s and 80s; Ivory (2009) describes conflict and violence among the mobs, and their (strained) relationship with town authorities. Neither attempts an analysis of how the metal mobs operate in day-to-day social interaction, social identity and social organisation.

Anecdotal reports suggest that something like youth 'gangs' are quite common in remote Aboriginal communities, but very little has been written about them. In Brady's (1992: 89–91) work on petrol sniffing she describes youth gangs of Arnhem Land in the 1980s, whose gang names and fashion sense are quite akin to the Wadeye metal mobs, though there is no detail on how these gangs are constituted or what 'membership' actually entails. Similarly, Martin's (1993: 19–20, 169–73) ethnography of Aurukun describes bands of subversive teenagers who vandalise the town, though they are not the subject of sustained analysis.

Metal mobs as collateral kin sets

The metal mobs are a system of social classification that applies to all young men in Wadeye from puberty to the age of about thirty, and in some cases to men in their thirties and forties. This age range corresponds very closely with an emic age grade, *kardu kigay*, so it is most accurate and convenient to use this term for those who make up the metal mobs. Almost all kigay I know declare an affiliation to one or more metal mobs – an affiliation that in Murrinh Patha may be described as one's *ku spidi* (from the sub-genre 'speed metal'). A very few kigay claim that they are not involved with any mob, but even in these cases, third parties readily identify their mob affiliation. Such kigay are presumably attempting to distance themselves from the violence with which the mobs are associated, perhaps assuming that this is the object of my interest, but they are nonetheless socially recognised as having certain mob affiliations. Beyond the age of about thirty it becomes more ambiguous whether a man is still a kigay, and more likely that he would be socially recognised as 'not in any mob', and perhaps even a *kardu ngalantharr* ('old man'). But there are also some men in their thirties and forties who have long-standing mob affiliations that are still referenced in social interaction, though they themselves might treat this form of social identity with wry humour. It is not clear whether a man can be both ngalantharr and have a mob affiliation – when I have raised this question it has been met with jokes and uncertainty.

Young women also have metal mobs, most of which are named as explicit female equivalents of mobs to which their classificatory brothers are affiliated – for example, the Maiden Girls are sisters of the Iron Maiden mob. Others have independent names such as the Kylie Girls (after chanteuse Kyle Minogue). However, the strong restrictions on socialising between males and females at Wadeye have prevented me from spending any significant time with young women, and without such first-hand experience no reliable account of the female mobs can be given. Therefore, this essay will be limited to a description of the kigay.

Shared mob affiliation is generally between kigay who are classificatory brothers or cousins. More rarely, descent relationships (uncle-nephew, father-son) may obtain between mob affiliates; but it is collateral relationships that dominate, and these may be on either the mother's or father's side, with no obvious restriction on degree of separation. In practice, though, co-affiliates seem to be immediate biological brothers, first degree parallel cousins (classificatory *ngathan*, 'brothers') or first degree cross-cousins (classificatory *pugarli*, 'cousins'). In the systematic mob data I collected, matrilineal links are somewhat more prevalent than patrilineal links. Though there is considerable flexibility in what kin relationship may obtain, it seems strictly necessary that some kin relationship must be recognised between co-affiliates – which is hardly surprising, since social interaction between Aboriginal people at Wadeye is still, in keeping with tradition, largely determined by kin relationships.

Figure 1 shows an example of a fairly small metal mob, Kreator, which is named after a German thrash metal band that found international success in the late 1980s. I believe this is a complete or almost-complete representation of current Kreator

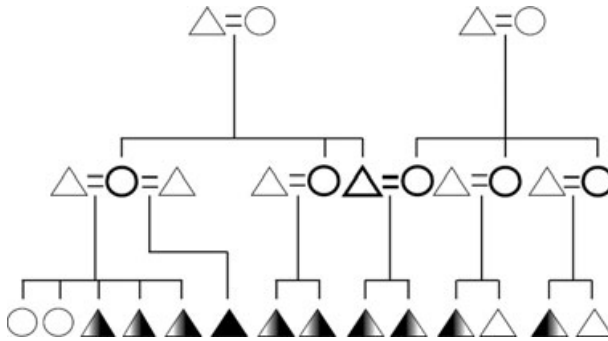


Figure 1 Kreater mob kinship.

affiliates, with the mob essentially made up of two sets of classificatory brothers (in both cases classified as such because their mothers are sisters), with the two sets of brothers related as cross-cousins. Their clan membership is diverse, embracing Nganthawudi (Marri Mentherr language), Kirnmu (Murrinh Patha), Nadirri (Marri Tjevin) and Yederr (Magati Ke) clans.

The metal mobs are essentially kin sets which take up a name and an external symbol as a way of expressing their relatedness. In this they show strong continuity with traditional Aboriginal social organisation, which at Wadeye is most manifest in clan groups that are formed by patrilineal descent, and symbolised by totemic species of flora and fauna, or other natural phenomena (Stanner 1936; Falkenberg 1962). Also important at Wadeye are the ceremony groups Djanba, Wangga and Lirrga, which are effectively super-sets of clans, activated for ceremonial purposes (Marrett 2005; Barwick 2006, 2011). But there are also fundamental differences between the metal mobs and traditional groupings, not least of which is the formation by collateral rather than lineal relations. Other differences might be considered to follow from this essential fact: mob affiliation is non-exclusive; there is a substantial element of individual choice or discretion in affiliation; the mobs do not own land, and do not hold sacred/secret knowledge; but they do have symbols, stories, and shared beliefs. All of these differences will be discussed in the sections that follow.

There was already an emergent urban youth culture at Wadeye before the metal mobs came into being (Furlan 2005: 221), but after ABC's music video program *Rage* started broadcasting in 1987 (the same year that television first arrived in Wadeye), named youth mobs proliferated, and began to name themselves fairly consistently after heavy metal bands. When I have asked both older and younger men about how they first discovered their *ku spidi*, *Rage* is almost always mentioned as an originating source. A coherent history of the mobs would need to explain how the earlier mobs emerged after the end of Mission governance in 1975, and how the mobs expanded and came to include two very large groupings, the Evil Warriors and Judas Priest, that in the years after 2000 caused major disruptions in Wadeye by their chronically violent conflict (Toohey 2008; Ivory

2009). I hope that such a history may be written, but to do it justice would be beyond the scope of this essay.

For the purposes of this essay it should suffice to observe: the Wadeye metal mobs have been in existence for at least twenty years, and there are now about thirty named mobs active in the town. Most are named directly after a heavy metal band (Judas Priest, Fear Factory, Megadeth), though some are usually known by an abbreviated or modified name (Lica from Metallica, Tera from Pantera, Big-T from Testament), and there are also a few mobs that take their names from other sources. For example, the German mob – perhaps the oldest in continuous existence – is named after the Nazi villains who appeared in war films shown at Wadeye film nights in the 1960s and 70s; Bad Boys are named after a 1995 film starring Will Smith; the Evil Warriors name has a more complex and ambivalent history, but I believe that *ku karratj* ('the devil') being a clan totem of some founding members was important, and that the latter part of the name was influenced by *The Warriors* (1979), a dystopian film about urban gangs in New York City.

Mobs or gangs?

The Wadeye metal mobs are elsewhere referred to as 'gangs', but I prefer to avoid this term since I find it misleading. Both terms are used by the kigay themselves when speaking English, and both are borrowed into Murrinh Patha, though in the latter context 'mob' is the more common term. The image of a gang connotes systematic criminality, and is furthermore often associated with ethnic minorities in large cities. Neither of these applies to the Wadeye metal mobs. In press reports they have always been associated with violence and vandalism, but this is a bias created by the fact that metal mobs only come to the media's attention when involved in these activities. Individual metal mob affiliates, and indeed entire mobs, can exist without having any substantial involvement in the violent conflicts for which Wadeye has been notorious. On the other hand, because the mobs value solidarity above all else (as discussed below), they are usually drawn into conflicts as a group, so that a conflict which originates as a dispute between individuals comes to be seen as a conflict between mobs.

Flexibility in a non-deterministic system

As described above, mob affiliation has very strong patterns of kin relatedness, especially between brothers, but it should also be stressed that affiliation is not deterministic. Brothers usually share a mob affiliation, but there are also cases where even direct biological brothers do not share the same affiliation. Ultimately, it seems that shared mob affiliation is a product of 'close' relationships in the sense of shared experiences, residency, and time spent together – though I would still defend my statement that the metal mobs are kin sets, because it is in practice impossible in Wadeye to separate close relationships from kinship.

It would be a mistake to propose this as a complete rupture from traditional forms of social organisation, as there is evidence elsewhere for flexibility in how kin relations

are determined, with social and geographical closeness taken into account along with genealogy (Dousset 2002). Membership of country-owning groups has also been flexible, at least in some cases (Myers 1986). But even though flexibility is not a new phenomenon, the degree of individual choice manifest in Wadeye metal mobs seems greater than that of the traditional social categories. Certainly the contrast in Wadeye is quite clear: when it comes to clan identity, I have not encountered any kigay who does not identify his country as being the same as his father's country, but it is not difficult to find instances of brothers who do not share the same mob affiliation, or who share only one part of their respective compound affiliations (see below).

The non-deterministic nature of metal mob membership is a feature shared with another new form of Aboriginal social organisation: the cognatic descent groups that have been documented in various urban and rural settings. These are groups to which one can belong either by patrilineal or matrilineal descent – in short, by identifying any ancestor who is a member of the group (Sutton 1998: 64). These cognatic kinship structures and households tend to be matrifocal, with the authoritative role of senior males much diminished, and they variously refer to themselves 'clans', 'mobs' or 'families' (Eckermann 1977; Koepping 1977; Birdsall 1988). But the metal mobs are also very different to cognatic descent groups, firstly because they are not constituted by descent but by collateral association (a point that will be expanded below). Furthermore, while cognatic descent groups have emerged in place of patrilineal clans in 'settled' areas where these older structures were radically disrupted by whitefella incursions, the metal mobs have emerged in a situation of less drastic whitefella incursion, and where patrilineal clans remain active alongside the metal mobs.

The use of collateral links in constituting mobs, and the non-deterministic nature of affiliation, together make it almost inevitable that mob affiliation is non-exclusive. Every kigay has many classificatory brothers and cousins, and there is nothing to prevent him being socially close to, say, one group on his mother's side, and another on his father's side. In fact, most kigay are affiliated to more than one mob in this way, and it is especially common for a kigay to affiliate primarily with some quite small mob that is constituted by close brothers or cousins, and secondarily with either Evil or Priest, both of which are very large mobs and quite loosely connected. There is nothing contradictory about such multiple mob affiliations, and kigay will readily identify themselves using compound identifiers such as Evil-Kreator, Lica-Priest or White Lion-Bullet, though the history of conflict between Evil and Priest seems to weigh so heavily that no-one identifies as both Evil and Priest. Figure 2 represents an attempt to map associations or alliances between mobs, as defined by any one or more kigay declaring a joint affiliation to those mobs. This information was gathered either from compound mob affiliations recorded in my mob membership list, or the compound mob affiliations that often appear in Wadeye graffiti.

One point on which no firm statement can (yet) be made is the permanency of mob affiliation. As mentioned above, there are some men well into middle-age who still declare affiliations that they formed back in the 1980s or early 90s; but there may be others who participated in the early mobs who are now truly dissociated from mob

identity. It will take some years more to get a clearer picture of whether mob affiliation really is '4 life' (as much Wadeye graffiti would have it), or whether it will be abandoned by most as they move beyond their kigay years. As for the longevity of mobs themselves, this seems to be variable. There are some mobs that once existed but no longer seem to have any declared affiliates (Mad Wolves, Red Devils), while other mobs have existed for twenty years or more (German, White Lion, Iron Maiden), and have new, younger affiliates, conjoined by occasional father-son or uncle-nephew links.

The possibilities and limitations of mutability in mob affiliation can be seen in an episode that occurred with a certain kigay of my acquaintance. When I first got to know James,² aged twenty-one, he was living in an area of town known as Pepenyi, and was affiliated with Evil-Bad Boys. At Pepenyi James lived in a house with his mother and various relatives on his mother's side, with affiliations including Evil, Bad Boys and Megadeth. Some tension arose between James and other people in the house, as well as with other kigay in Pepenyi, and James started living with different relations on the other side of town, in a new suburb named Nilinh. Other kigay from Pepenyi told me at this point, with some malice, that James had changed allegiances and become Lica-Priest. When I asked James himself about his mob affiliation, he ignored the question (a common response to unwelcome questions). The kigay living in the house that James moved into at Nilinh were Lica-Priest, and since the Lica mob have been at odds with various Evil mobs in recent times, perhaps it was not possible for James to make the move without a change of affiliation. However, after a short time living at Nilinh, James fought with some kigay living there, and moved back to Pepenyi. At this point I noticed that he had painted a new graffito on a wall of the Recreation Hall, giving his full initials (representing both European and Aboriginal names, as well as clan and country names) along with 'Evil Dave', the latter being a reference to Dave Mustaine, the lead singer of heavy metal band Megadeth, an affiliation that overlaps almost completely with Bad Boys.

The episode with James suggests that mob affiliation is changeable, but not without a good deal of social friction. It also demonstrates that while certain compound affiliations are possible (e.g. any combination of Evil, Bad Boys and Megadeth), others are not (e.g. Lica cannot be combined with any of the aforementioned). James has a certain degree of choice in how he places himself in the mob system, but the choice is between a limited set of options and unfortunately, in this case, all options seem to be accompanied by social tensions.

Profane knowledge and urban spaces

Traditional clans and other totemic groups are characterised by their association with places in the landscape and with carefully guarded forms of knowledge that are often associated with those places. For males at least, membership of such a group entails access to an oral canon of names, stories and ceremonies that are powerful because their knowability is earned and exclusive. I do not believe that the metal mobs have any such relation to land or to secret knowledge.³

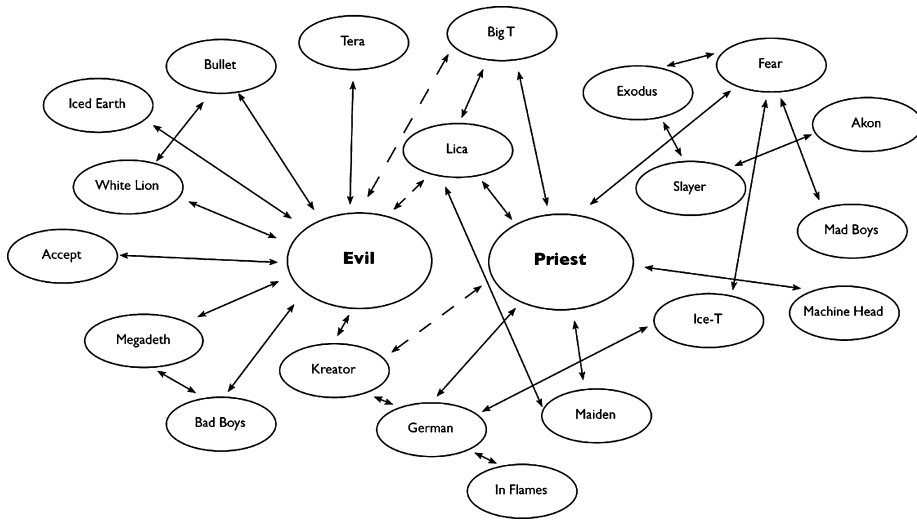


Figure 2 Mob alliances. The discontinuous lines indicate connections that existed in the past, but have since been annulled.

The mobs are associated with loosely defined sections of town that are called ‘areas’. I have drawn up schematic maps of the town with various kigay and found some general agreement between them in where the areas of various mobs lie, though much discrepancy in the details. The area of some mobs is indicated as a circle around one or two houses; for other mobs the area amounts to a sizeable portion of town space. The area of some mobs sits within, or overlaps with, the area of others – and there is a partial correlation between such geographic overlaps and the overlapping affiliations that were described above. Graffiti also gives some idea of mob areas around the town – a mob identifier such as FF (Fear Factory) generally appears at a higher concentration in the mob’s area, though it may also appear anywhere else around town. Graffiti may appear outside a mob’s area as a form of challenge: in early 2012 there was a substantial fight between Slayer and Evil mobs, fought within the Evil area. A few days after the fight, a new ‘Slayer’ graffiti had been painted on the road at the place where the fight happened.

But these mob areas have little in common with clan estates. They do not encompass sacred sites, and there are no serious restrictions on who can go where in mob areas – though there can be practical danger for a kigay venturing into the mob area of those with whom he is in conflict. Mob areas do not have an economic role in providing subsistence, though they do clearly relate to *residence* – the mob area is based on the concentrated residence of affiliates – but this residence is now detached from economic subsistence as a basic function of the switch to urban living, where as a rule place of residence no longer follows from food sources. As units of urban space, the mob areas are fundamentally different from landscape places, the latter being more powerful both in economic and in spiritual terms.

As for secret knowledge, the kigay have a very vibrant story-telling culture, and some stories are certainly less public than others, but mobs do not seem to ‘own’ stories. There are stories *about* certain mobs – in particular, fight stories that relate the course of a street fight, with great detail about who did what and to whom. And although it took a little while before I was ever told such stories, any secrecy here is because the stories are criminal, rather than because they hold spiritual power. Kigay do also tell stories that involve Dreaming figures, and include strange or miraculous events, which are normally marked in the story-telling by a lowering of the voice, or some demonstration of reluctance to name the figure involved. But such stories reference clan identities, places and totems, not mob identities. In general, more supernatural stories reference clan and land, while more profane stories reference mobs, but I have noted a couple of exceptions that are worth mentioning.

I have recorded two stories about the origins of the Evil Warriors mob that describe founding members transacting certain powers with *ku karratj* (‘the devil’). Another story relates both Evil and Priest to a supernatural augury. The story gives details of a well-known fight that occurred in 2002, and resulted in the death of a Priest kigay (for outsiders’ accounts see (Toohey 2008; Ivory 2009)). As both mobs gathered in vast numbers for an arranged fight on Wadeye’s main oval, two symbols representing Evil and Priest appeared in the sky and, according to the storyteller, ‘everyone witnessed this’. He drew the symbols in the sand (Fig. 3).

These stories do appear to show some form of ‘powerful’ or at least supernatural knowledge relating to mob identities; but they are unusual, and not so secret that they could not be told to a whitefella in his first year at Wadeye. Also, they relate only to the Evil and Priest ‘super-mobs’, not to the more closely-bonded immediate mobs of the story tellers. These stories perhaps show the beginnings of a mythology growing out of mob culture, but not the complex and multi-layered forms of knowledge owned by traditional totemic groups.

My focus on metal mobs should not be misunderstood as an implication that the clan/totem system has been deprecated as a form of social organisation. But its social

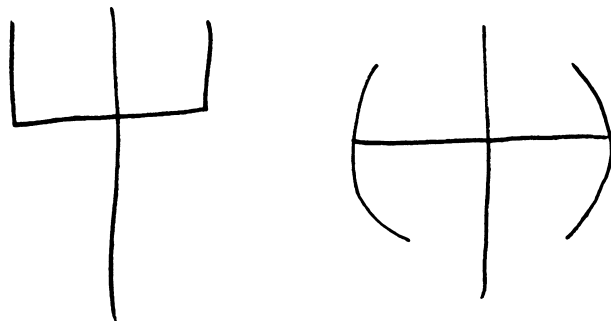


Figure 3 Evil and Priest symbols (left and right respectively). The Evil symbol is drawn from European devil imagery; the Priest symbol is a graphic device used on Judas Priest album covers.

role is quite distinct from that of the metal mobs, and rather more peripheral than it might have been in the past. While metal mobs are constantly referenced and activated in everyday life (more on this below), clan identity is only activated on special occasions. For some kigay this would include trips to the clan estate, though there are many kigay who rarely or never make such trips. School events designed to celebrate and maintain 'Culture' (in the most reified sense) inevitably focus on clan identity, as do the more serious initiation ceremonies that occur only every few years. Perhaps the most regular context for clan identification is the funeral, for which clan members dress in totemic t-shirts and together make a procession to the burial.

In brief, the contexts in which kigay identify with clan categories are contexts in which a concept of Culture is active, and this Culture is something that should be revered, but is not often deployed by kigay in their day-to-day interactions. As mentioned above, kigay have grown up in urban space, which is not a space in which residence is intimately connected with sources of subsistence and spiritual power. Without such a connection at work in the everyday, residential world, it is difficult to see how clan identity could be maintained in any way other than as a thing for 'special occasions'; rather, it is mob identity that is most active in urban space.

Notably, most of the Cultural events that activate clan identity are events in which whitefellas play a major supporting or managerial role (cf. Reynolds 1999; McKnight 2005: 16). It is this sort of Culture at Wadeye to which an intercultural analysis would be more appropriate.

Solidarity and the collateral group

Instead of a hierarchy of knowledge, rights and access, metal mobs are formed by a 'flat' set of relations between affiliates of equal status. Perhaps the greatest moral value of the mobs is solidarity: unconditional mutual support between affiliates that is owed equally by each to all. As mentioned above, a fight with one mob affiliate generally means a fight with the whole mob – and this is perhaps the only thing the metal mobs really have in common with 'gangs', and which causes them to be labelled as such. The sharing of material goods – which is a widely reported feature of both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture (Peterson 1977, 1993; Sansom 1988) – is very thoroughly observed. The goods most often shared are money, tobacco and marijuana, though almost all goods seem to circulate within mobs, and I have often noticed non-consumables such as clothes and mobile phones shifting possession from one mob affiliate to another. Marijuana, in particular, is shared not just as a consumable, but as an experience: most kigay smoke every day, but at \$50 for a very small packet it is quite expensive, so they collaborate in groups of two, three or four to gather enough money for a deal, which can require a considerable amount of trailing around town making demands from various relatives. When the deal is finally achieved in this way, the kigay will then smoke the marijuana together. The groups who enact these marijuana quests together are almost always mob co-affiliates, and this in itself appears to be one of the most important practices in producing mob relatedness. This is

evident in a narrative fragment where a kigay describes how he came to be associated with the Lica mob on his father's side:

Ngarra Ng___ kanyi matha ngay-yu stak ngardidha kardu wakal-gathu, thama. Kigay purrkpurrk nganki-yu thama, i ngay-ka manangka feel-like-it-wa ngarra mama ngay-yu wurda warda. Kardu ngay-ka memperrabirl pigunu nginipunh maniperr kanyi-warda nganinthariwak ngardi-yu, 'Aa,' ngay ngamam 'Kardu kigay kanamkawuk kanyi matha.' Metritj, mi ne, mi ... le ngardingkawukdha mi kantje, thama, yuwu mi yiningu. Ngurdiniwi ngardidha, pule riliwan matha.

I was always stuck with Ng___ when I was little, you know. We were all little youth, you know, and I didn't feel like staying at my mum's house any more. I turned myself to the boys here, I was following them, I said 'Ah, this is my real group right here'. There were mattresses, and smoke ... I was happy, there was ganja and all that. I was smoking, that's true brother. (Conversation recorded 17 September 2011)

Certain elder brothers who have had a role in initiating a metal mob may be recognised as 'starting it', or bringing in younger kin, but kigay do not usually speak of mobs having leaders, bosses or any other form of hierarchy. The exceptions to this are the Evil and Priest mobs, each of which has a well-known 'boss', though one has been in prison for some time, and the other was recently killed in a fight. But this is something particular to Evil and Priest and is perhaps related to their protracted conflict, again indicating that these two mobs should be treated as special cases.

Mob affiliation is socially codified in a range of modalities, one of which we have already encountered. Graffiti is used extensively as a written public record that specifies mob affiliations both simple and compound, with either individuals, or pairs or groups together declaring their joint affiliations. Heavy metal band t-shirts play a similar role, except that they are physically attached to the person to which they apply. Mobile phones are particularly rich in mob semiotics: the image used as 'wallpaper' on the main screen can be customised, and this is usually occupied by a photograph of either kigay, a heavy metal band, or a favourite football player, with mob identity labels superimposed over the top using image editing software that is on the phone itself (see Fig. 4). As for the digital image and music libraries saved on the phone, both are replete with media from the kigay's *ku spidi*, and this totemic music may be played aloud from the phone's tinny speakers as the kigay walk around town. As mentioned above, mobile phones are not treated as strictly private property in the whitefella way, but instead circulate among kigay – usually among kigay with shared mob affiliations which, together with Bluetooth file transfer, creates a mob-based network of digital media distribution. Somewhat fewer kigay have access to a stereo system, but those who do use it to broadcast the music of their *ku spidi* at a much higher volume.

Finally, mob affiliation is constantly expressed in conversation, where the name of a kigay's *ku spidi* is often used as a way of referring to that kigay. This is an extension of a traditional practice of name avoidance among Aboriginal people in the area,



Figure 4 Mobile phone screen background image. Image used with permission of creator.

which in its older form involves addressing and referring to people by their kin relationship, totem or other nickname (Stanner 1937; Blythe 2009, in press).

On a more abstract level, many of the features of the mob social organisation described above can be seen as aspects of a lateral, rather than lineal formation. Metal mobs organise kin relationships, knowledge and symbols in a series of roughly equal relationships – symmetrical dyads of brother-brother, cousin-cousin. This might be contrasted with more hierarchical forms of social organisation in which symmetrical dyads are combined with asymmetrical relationships of seniority and knowledge. Intuitively one might expect the loss of hierarchy to be associated with fluidity and the undermining of social ‘systems’. However, although we have seen that the lateral nature of the metal mobs does enable multiplicity of affiliation, and a certain degree of individual choice, the degree of codification in how mobs constantly reaffirm their identity and their bondedness results in something quite stable and even systematic. Norms and boundaries may be transgressed, but at the cost of conflict and tension – and it is generally much easier for kigay to stick with their established mob.

In this essay I have eschewed questions of historical causality and cultural adaptation, preferring to focus on features of social organisation observed through first-hand experience. But it is worth noting, briefly, that the emergence of lateral social organisation at Wadeye seems to have coincided with a period in which authority was at its weakest. Numerous newspaper reports describe ‘riots’ in post-missionary Wadeye, and the older people in town prefer not to say much more than that the decades after the Mission were *da wiye* (‘a bad time/situation’). Whether Wadeye is still *da wiye* or has now been renewed is a controversial point, but these glimpses into the post-missionary past attest to an extended crisis in authority, social cohesion and public order. When Mission governance ended, neither mainstream Australian governance nor experiments in local Aboriginal leadership were successful in establishing a new order (Ivory 2009); this is combined with a demographic boom resulting in a town population where kigay outnumber ngalantharr by a ratio of ten to one (Taylor 2010: 12). The metal mobs seem to have arisen because other forms of social organisation had fallen away or, in a more dramatic view, because individual kigay needed to bolster their own physical safety in an environment of frequent violence. With clans now intermingled by marriage and residence (and detached from their traditional estates), it must have been very difficult to establish any form of hierarchical authority, and much more practical to codify an overlapping network of lateral kin sets.

CONCLUSION

The Wadeye metal mobs are a new form of social organisation that have emerged in a large and somewhat isolated Aboriginal town. They have some features in common with cognatic descent groups that have been documented among urban and rural Aborigines, though their use of external entities as symbols for the kin sets has more in common with traditional Aboriginal clans. The dominance of collateral kin relationships, however, makes the metal mobs quite different to any of these forms.

Perhaps the most intriguing question about the metal mobs is: have similar types of social organisation emerged in other Aboriginal towns? The existing ethnographic literature contains only occasional and brief references to such phenomena, though this absence of research may be attributed at least partly to anthropologists’ focus on the instability of older forms of social organisation, at the expense of identifying new ones.

Please send correspondence to John Mansfield: jbmansfield@gmail.com

NOTES

- 1 I use the term *whitefella* in the sense it is used by Aboriginal people at Wadeye – not so much a reference to race as a cover term for all things considered to be non-Aboriginal.
- 2 A pseudonym.

- 3 I cannot state categorically that such secret knowledge does not exist, because the possibility always remains that it exists but has not been revealed to me. However, I have not had any hint of secret knowledge among the metal mobs, and my intuition is that there is no such thing.

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