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Seeing Yolngu, seeing mathematics.

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Forward

This paper is a study of mathematics and its meanings within the context of North East Arnhemland Aboriginal society. (They call themselves **Yolŋu***.) Much of the material presented here derives from my experiences (since 1982) within the Galiwin'ku community, and through my work with Yolŋu students at Batchelor College. During this period many Yolŋu have taken the time to teach me something of their languages, culture, and perspectives.

In this paper I look back at this Yolŋu world from my own perspectives as a scientist and educator, and distilling from it that which pertains to ideas of mathematics, make an effort to provide the non-Yolŋu reader with a broad picture of Yolŋu mathematics, and to offer the Yolŋu reader an insight into **Balanda** (European) mathematical thinking.

Thus the information presented here is based much more on personal knowledge derived from Yolŋu rather than a review of the literature of other researchers. This has the benefit of providing a primary source of information (valuable in checking the findings of others), but carries the risk of appearing to claim credit for work which may have been published elsewhere. Whilst I have indicated some of the important researchers in the various contexts which arise in this paper, I found too daunting the prospect of wading through a mountain of literature covering anthropology, history, linguistics and education, simply to ensure that all information is correctly accredited to those who first published it. Therefore I offer an apology for any inadvertent transgressions.

My principal sources are my Yolŋu teachers. They have included: Galpagalpa, Gandhuwuy, Djiŋiyiŋi (1), Lawurpa, Marrŋanyin (1 & 2), Njulpurray, Gurramu, Dhalmurrawuy, Liwukaŋ, Galitju, Gapany (1 & 2), Djulaymuŋ (1 & 2), Bätjaŋ, Dhaykamaŋu, Yalkarriwuy, Guywaŋa, Djalangi, Yaŋurr, Mänurr, Nyarrwa, Laklak, Wurrmitjin, Garŋgulkpuy, Rrany'tjiŋ, Birrkinbirrkin, Djalŋgirr, Wunyimarra, Gundjarranbuy, Rrurrambu (1).

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Michael Cooke
November, 1990.

*Standard Yolŋu-Matha orthography and spelling is used for Yolŋu words.

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