‘The Spirit of Anchor’: Thinking History in the Yolngu System of Knowledge, North Australia

«Bayini was a great spiritual woman. The vision and the dream she was seeing are the Anchor» (Film by B. & W. Barker, 2002, CNRS Images/media)

Murrurrnga Burarrwanga, and his grandmother, Gaymala Yunupingu, tell a story relating to a long exchange between their people, the Yolngu from Arnhem Land, and fishermen from South East Asia who have been visiting their coast every year for centuries until the Australian government stopped this trade in 1907. An extract of the film will give a glimpse of the Yolngu system of knowledge based on a complex network of connections between places, clans, biodiversity and Ancestral beings. This ‘self’representation will be analysed in the light of 1930’s/40’s anthropological data collected in the region with a focus on the way Yolngu people (also known as ‘Murngin’) have developed since at least several centuries a very sophisticated symbolic treatment of their relation to foreigners and to imported objects.

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