



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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TRADITIONAL -

THE HEROIC FISHERMAN: THE MUNJURR MYTH*

The Aborigines faced hardship and danger daily, so it is no wonder that courage was instilled in the youths by example and precept. The myth of the brave fisherman is typical of those told around the camp fires to show the young the kind of behaviour they should try to emulate (L.A.A.)

In the Dreamtime, in the country of the *Manggalilji* people of northeast Arnhem Land, lived a great fisherman called Munjurr. In his bark canoe he ventured far out to sea, spearing kingfish and dugong for the people of his camp. Wise in the ways of wind and tide was Munjurr. When the waves rolled high, of all the men, he alone skillfully steered his canoe between the combers. When the others feared to fish even in the surf, Munjurr calmly paddled through the white-capped breakers to the fishing grounds beyond.

One morning, Munjurr strode to the camp fire of his friend, Nurru, the best drone piper in the camp. Nurru was practising power notes on his *didjeridu* in preparation for a ceremony to be held before the moon died.

"Come fish with me," invited Munjurr.

Nurru objected. "The waves are high today. Surely the canoe will be overturned."

"This is a fine time to catch the big fish, for when the surf runs high they come close to shore," Munjurr pointed out.

"Today let us stalk the wallaby," said Nurru, trying to divert him. "Tomorrow, when the wind dies, we can fish."

But Munjurr would not be put off, and now he tried a new approach. "You are known as a brave man, Nurru. You and I will

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bring back a great catch today, and our friends will be proud that only we dared brave such rough waters. If we meet difficulty, you can sound a power song on your *didjeridu* to help us."

Nurru was still reluctant, but his pride was touched. He followed Munjurr to the beach and helped pull the canoe from the bushes. Carefully, the two friends checked the strands of woven fiber that bound the bark sheets to the frame and to each other. Satisfied the canoe was watertight, they stowed the fishing gear and the drone pipe aboard, splashed into the surf, and quickly began to paddle.

Almost at once a great wave caught them. It took all Munjurr's skill to regain control and steer a course through the mountainous surf. But slowly he drew away from the treacherous shore to the relative calm that lay beyond the reef. There the two men navigated easily and turned their attention to the fish.

Walu, the Sun Woman, had barely moved across the sky when Nurru suddenly grasped Munjurr's arm, leaned close, and pointed past the stern of the canoe. "A whale!" he hissed. "It comes this way."

Munjurr looked. Some distance away, a large humpbacked whale had surfaced and was moving toward them. Water ran in rivulets from its sides and flowed in curves from its snout as it cut through the sea. The story of *deimiri*, the whale spirit, was often repeated around the camp fires of the *Manggalilji* people. Remembering the vivid descriptions of *deimiri*'s three mouths - two of which were in its tail - and how the whale seized and capsized the canoes of fishermen, Munjurr turned and gave the command.

"Paddle hard!" he shouted to Nurru.

Desperately they paddled as the great whale plowed toward them, bearing down faster than they could pull away. When the small eyes and blowhole were clearly visible, Nurru picked up his drone pipe and began a power song that he blew with all his might. Almost upon them, the whale unexpectedly raised its snout and plunged beneath the surface of the sea. In its place, the water heaved with tremendous force, seizing the canoe and sucking it

towards the vortex in a dizzying spin. The two fishermen fought for balance, but the canoe capsized and hurled them into the sea. Dazed and confused, they struggled in the swirling water.

Munjurr recovered first. Seeing his spears pop to the surface, he swam toward them. Quick as he was, they floated beyond his reach. Now Nurru revived and snatched futilely at his drone pipe as it bobbed off. Meanwhile, Munjurr had laid hold of a paddle. "This way," he shouted at Nurru, gesturing toward the distant shore. He began to swim, pushing the paddle before him so he could rest when he grew tired.

Nurru swam also, but with less strength and speed. As they approached the shore, the surf grew rough, the currents unpredictable. Munjurr was a strong swimmer and had drawn well ahead of his companion. But now even he had to stop occasionally to rest on his paddle. Nurru, the weaker of the two, could not rest. As he struggled through the waves, his arms grew heavy and slow, his legs barely moved. He began to sink.

Munjurr turned, saw his friend's difficulty, and swam toward him. "Take hold of the paddle!" he cried, thrusting one end at Nurru while he held fast to the other. Nurru caught hold, but the paddle proved too light to buoy them both, and again Nurru sank. Munjurr released his end and the paddle rose to the surface, pulling Nurru up with it.

"Hold onto it!" called Munjurr again, and then he swam off.

The last rays of Walu were streaming along the horizon when the incoming tide cast Nurru onto the beach. As he lay there, barely breathing and limp from exhaustion, he still clutched the paddle in his hands.

But Munjurr did not return. Not that day, or the next, or even the day after than, though his people combed the beaches for him. The waves had claimed his body, carrying it far out to sea. And his spirit had gone to the Sky World, where Barama, the powerful creator ancestor, waited to greet him.

"You saved your friend," said Barma, "but you lost your family,

your friends, and the land of your birth. So that you need not grieve, I make you my messenger. You are to carry my words to the people on earth and bring back their messages to me. In this way you will be content."

Munjurr made his camp beside the Milky Way, the great river that flows across the Sky World. He fashioned a canoe like the one he had used on earth, launched it in the river, and continued to fish happily as before. From time to time, Barama sent him to earth with messages, as he had promised, and from these journeys Munjurr always returned refreshed.

Below, in the land of the *Manggalilji*, wet season followed dry and was succeeded by wet, until Nurru's eyes grew dim, his shoulders stooped, and his feet no longer shuffled far from the camp fire. One morning, when the surf ran high and the winds blew strong, his spirit joined the spirit of Munjurr beside the Milky Way to fish forever in the great river and sometimes stalk the turtle and water birds that make their homes along its banks.

In his foreword to *Time Before Morning*, Louis Allen, says:

This book is an attempt to describe how the Aborigines lived and to explain their beliefs through the medium of their art and mythology. There is much we can learn from the old men of this vanishing culture. As they chant their stories of the Dreamtime - the time before people, when spirits lived on earth - the strange yet familiar themes trace the beginnings of good and evil, the rebellion of youth, the dramas of forbidden love, of adultery and incest, of compassion and sharing. If we will but listen, they can speak to us with power and wisdom...I have tried to convey a fuller idea of what the myths and art express by integrating in my retelling something of the landscape, the birds and animals, and the customs and habits of the people. This social and cultural material, of course, does not appear in the Aborigines' narrations...The myths and text are illustrated by photos of the bark paintings and carved figures I have collected...

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