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TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL LEARNING

HOW I LEARNED AS A PITJANTJATJARA CHILD

*Nganyintja Ilyatjari

As a child I lived at a place called Angatja. My father, mother, grandmother, older brothers, aunts, and uncles taught me there and I learned from them. My mother taught me about her bush foods. She collected the plant foods and prepared them and I learned by watching her. I learned also from my father. He taught about meat foods, cooking the meat, making spears, joining parts of the spears tightly with sinew and going out hunting for meat. My mother would take me out with her. We two went out together to collect small animals and plant foods, hitting sand goannas, and sometimes collecting bush honey. I watched her and gathered some foods and when we all came together in camp we ate the meat and plant foods. My mother gathered various plant foods, native millet seeds, pigweed, roots which grew in the rocks and other seeds. These foods were available in autumn. Other foods were found on trees in spring. These fruits included mistletoe berries, mulga apples, native plums and quandongs. Also the native fig trees grew on small rocky hills.

They taught me many things and at night the men told stories. One man would tell one and when he finished another would relate one. They talked and we all just listened. We all listened together and nodded our agreement and learned, the children and women together. They talked in turn and when they finished we slept.

They taught me many things such as how to carry firewood on my head. My mother carried firewood on her head and I learned how to carry it and throw it down in the camp. Mother would give me a digging stick to dig, a small one, and I learned how to dig. I would dig a hole as mother dug for rabbits. As a child I learned by digging small holes. Mother would pull big witchetty grubs (from tree roots) and I learned to look for the right trees and dig for them.

* Tape transcribed and translated by Bill Edwards (1)

We would tell stories and then my father and mother would send us off. They gave us meat, damper and water to take to our older brothers. We took them to our brothers and having given them the food and water we sat with them for a while and watched them as they played. Those boys played with spears and we watched them. Our older brothers camped apart and the older ones taught the younger ones, and we girls would go over and watch and learn with them. They played with spears as if spearing kangaroos and learned. Having learned they went off the next day and their father gave them spears and they went out together to look for meat and learned to spear. All this work was truly good.

Again at night the men taught the children to dance the ceremonies, teaching night after night to sing and dance. Another evening they would imitate kangaroos and practise spearing. They practised with spears, missing the targets. Just as in the Army they learn to shoot with rifles, in the same way they learned to spear, to be fighting men. They learned to dodge the spear and to watch the prey carefully.

The women taught how to winnow the seeds, separating the seeds from the grass, and we learned by watching. We asked; "How do you winnow? Teach us." They taught us in this way; "Take the wooden dish." We took a dish and put seeds into it and shaking and shaking it we learned. We learned how to grind the seeds on grindstones and having ground them we ate. And we spun hairbelts. The women spun hair into belts and we learned all this.

The children played games. When we had done all the work and learned how to work, the children came together and we girls imitated the women. We made windbreaks and collected firewood as we had learned. We sat in the shelters and made fires and played at being women looking after babies. Having watched all this work we sat apart and made out we were women, making shelters, lighting fires and telling stories. We children did this together having listened to all these things.

We learned all of our ways correctly at Angatja, about the different plant foods, the various meat foods, the water holes and the camps. Father and Mother taught us the names of all the places as the whole family together looked after them, brothers, aunts and sisters. We who were

related to those places lived there together, grandfather, grandmother, my uncle, my aunt, my father and another of my fathers, and my elder sister. We travelled around close to our camps and as we moved around together we learned. As they taught and taught us we learned about all of the places and their stories. All the waterholes have names and as we moved around we camped at the named waterholes. We travelled around these places, going around from Piltati to Umpukula and from Umpukula to Angatja, and we would visit some of the smaller places. What were the names of some of them? Nyikina, Kurkaratjara, Araltji and Malukulu were some of these small camps. We would camp at them for a short while and they taught us their names and then take us to the large places and teach us. They would tell us; "These are small places that do not have water." They taught us about the camps, the creeks and the hills and we learned everything.

As we learned the stories of the country. They kept telling them again, again and again. Father told me many stories and I learned. He would say to me: "You are hearing stories all the time. You keep asking for another one." I would say: "You know all the stories." My elder brothers also told stories and as they told story after story I listened and listened and learned. I think about these old times and I wish we could live like these old times again. We should always live as we did in those old times when all our work was beautiful and straight.

Yes, we listened then to the story from the land, from the places to which we are related, from our very own camps. The knowledgeable men danced invisibly. We heard about these knowledgeable men of the spirit, from the ancient spirits. The spirits lived in their own places where it is said they performed the beautiful ceremonies. And a man would say, "I have received this beautiful ceremony," and they would perform the ceremony of that place. For example, there is the story of a bird related to the camp named Miniri. Only the boys danced then, not the girls. The boys only danced, not us. It is only now that women dance for money but in the past the girls did not dance. They did not dance the Seven Sisters ceremony then, only now. They started to do it, not when we were at Ernabella, but at Amata. Some of the women received ceremonies from the North. But only the men danced then.

Sometimes during the day or in the evening, as we sat in the bush shelters our older sisters told us stories, (2) placing leaves on the ground to represent men, women, children and the youths who camped apart from the others. They placed leaves representing old men and old woman and told the stories, relating the womens' stories. They would tell a story about an old woman and her husband who was blind. The woman called out; "Bring some firewood. It's freezing." And a daughter got up and brought some firewood. She lit a fire, got some wood and threw it down. And a son put wood there and they made a windbreak and left them.

Someone else would tell a story about a man who wanted a young woman. They told these kind of stories, about a man, or a good child, or a bad child who was hit. A child who was bad was punished. Another story was about a man who wanted two wives. His first wife hit him and abused him. These are the things they taught us using the leaves; living good lives, about a man getting plenty of meat and about sharing everything. They placed leaves also to represent our relationships and moieties. "These are people of our moiety, and those are from the other moiety. This is a daughter and this is an uncle." Mother would teach us and we watched.

They taught us to avoid snakes and to be afraid of them and about ants that bite and to fear them and watch out for them. "This one bites. It is bad. Keep away from them." They pointed out the green ants and the meat ants that bite. "Watch out for these, watch carefully in case they bite you. Be careful, watch out and hit them. Beware of poisonous snakes."

They told us; "Don't talk about some things or you will be hit immediately. Avoid all those things. Don't go near the mens' places. Don't look at them. Turn around and go straight in the other direction, or you will be killed. Don't go back. Go straight ahead and don't be disobedient."

And they taught us about the plants and to choose the edible ones only, the desert raisins, bush tomatoes, native gooseberries and mistletoe berries. These ones we learned to eat, but not some others such as the emu bush and poisonous vines and herbs. These are bad. They taught

us how to make shelters with spinifex grass, branches and posts and how to light fires. The men showed how to light fire by rubbing sticks together. They taught us to go carefully across the land, to look for good campsites and to look for the direction of the wind when making a camp. "If the wind is blowing this way, build the windbreak that way, and if it changes to another direction watch and if it is blowing that way build it this way, to the east." And when lighting fires we saw which way the wind was blowing and made the windbreaks accordingly. They taught us these things.

They taught us to read the tracks on the ground. Mother, grandmother, older sister, aunts, uncles and grandfather drew prints in the ground and taught us to read the prints of men, women, children, dogs, monsters and evil spirits. At night we children were afraid to go far away in case the wind took us away. We were safe in the camp. "All the children stay with your mothers, fathers, older brothers and other relatives all the time. Don't go out on your own. Don't stay on your own but together with father, mother, brothers and other relatives. Everyone looked after a child. As we grew older we looked after the younger ones. Everyone looked after the youths and the boys. All were happy and the whole family looked after everyone and cared for them, sisters, uncles, aunts, all together.

They were always teaching us about the plant foods, the honey foods, the edible scale on the gum leaves, the stories, the meat foods, making string from sinews, threshing spinifex grass to make gum and all these kinds of work, mens' work and womens' work. We learned the womens' work and watched the men work, such as making spears.

Our mothers gave generously to the child and taught them to share quickly. And if a child kept something selfishly or stole, thinking: "This is mine," the mother would hit and say, "No! Give it! It's hers. You give it to her." And we gave it immediately. If a child went too close to a woman and her baby the mother rebuked her, "No! Go this way." Mothers taught us to go straight. "Don't play around close to the men but go off a little way," they would say. "Go around, not straight through here, not this way, but around the old men, the men, the young men and the old women. Everything was good and we learned not to go around without thinking. If we did that we were hit. They would say, "No!

Go this way." If the children played near the camp, our mothers sent us off and we would go immediately. One would get up and wave a stick and send us off, "Run off, all of you!" And we would listen obediently and go. The children did not play near the camp. They were sent off to play at a distance. The old men and old women lay sleeping in camp and we played away from them and when we had played we would come back. The older brothers and sisters looked after the little children.

The women and older girls would go out together in case there was a man around. If one went alone a man might spear her so they went with friends for fear of men and they would come back together with lots of meat. We were learning and we were happy, eating plenty of meat and playing as children, making out we were women and learning to do the work of our mothers and fathers, cooking meat, grinding seeds, winnowing seeds, gathering foods, telling and listening to stories. We were learning about the stories, the plant foods, the meat foods, the land, and choosing good sites for camps near firewood and shelter. We learned to build camps according to the wind. We learned to observe the wind and then build shelters and windbreaks and light fires. We learned to eat the honey foods and the plant foods from the trees and we learned about the waters and the hills. We sheltered inside caves when it rained and we had no shelters. We learned to eat bush onions and to swim in the waterholes. Our mothers, fathers and older brothers taught us how to swim in the waterholes, and we learned how to dig for water and to place some spinifex grass on the water to stop it splashing. We learned everything from our fathers, just like school. We became very knowledgeable and we did our own work well.

FOOTNOTES.

(1) The above recollections of childhood learning were related by Mrs Nganyintja Ilyatjari and recorded by Bill Edwards on the 27th September, 1982 at Angatja. The tape has been transcribed and translated by Bill Edwards. An earlier draft of the translation made in 1986 was published in Learning and Other Things: Sources for a Social History of Education in South Australia, Edited by Bernard Hyams, Lynne Trethewey, Brian Condon, Malcolm Vick and Denis Grundy, South Australian Government Printer, 1988. This revised

translation was completed in August, 1990. Nganyintja was born in the late 1920s in her father's country near the eastern end of the Mann Ranges in the Far North-West of South Australia. After the establishment of Ernabella Mission in the Musgrave Ranges in 1937 her family moved there and she was one of the first children to attend the Ernabella School when it opened in 1940. She later became an assistant teacher at the school. She married Charlie Ilyatjara in 1950 and they had seven children. When Amata government station was established in 1961 near the western end of the Musgrave Ranges they moved there to be nearer her country. Since the late 1970s they have spent much of their time establishing a small homeland community at Angatja, in the area where she lived as a small child. There she seeks to teach young people some of the skills and stories she learned as a child and welcomes small groups of tourists who are invited to share in this learning experience.

(2) Nfanyintja is referring here to the story telling method used by Pitjantjatjara women and girls and called by them *milpatjunanyi*. A woman or older girl cleared an area of sand or soil in front of her and as she told a story to younger women or girls sitting around her she held a stick in one hand and beat the ground with a rhythmical action while drawing symbols in the sand with the other hand to represent the people and places of the story. Sometimes leaves were placed on the ground to represent the characters of the story. Through these stories children learned about relationships and behaviours.