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Ayeye Ntyarlke-kerte
The story of the Ntyarlke Caterpillar
The making of a ground Mosaic

*Mike Bowden **

A RECORD OF A COMMUNITY ART PROJECT IN AN ABORIGINAL UNIT PROGRAM

The Ntyarlke Unit is a special program unit of the Catholic High School (CHS) offering education to Aboriginal youth from the town camps of Mparntwe (Alice Springs). These students are mostly Arrernte speakers and descendants of the traditional owners of the McDonnell Range country of Central Australia.

During July 1993 the parental community of the Ntyarlke Unit met at Ti Tree to discuss the future educational needs of their children. The meeting, which also included parents from *Ltyentye Apurte* (Santa Teresa), was successful because it provided an opportunity, within a culturally sensitive environment, for Arrernte parents to reflect upon and make known their feelings about education .

The *Arrernte* people have come into Alice Springs from *Ltyentye Apurte* since the 1970's. They have made their homes in the town camps of Alice Springs. Some of these camps are located on sites traditionally occupied by families long before the white invasion of Central Australia. Charles Creek camp while one of these is also on the site of Little Flower Mission, the first Catholic mission in the area. Mt. Nancy, Hidden Valley, Larapinta Valley, Ilypeye Ilypeye, and White Gate are the places most commonly associated with these *Arrernte* Catholic people. Some also live at the Amoonguna Community a settlement about 17 kilometres South East of town. Agnes Palmer says that *Ngkarte Mikwekenhe* is an Eastern *Arrernte* organisation representing these *Arrernte* families "coming together as

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one community." She designed a symbol made of a cross and surrounding circles which she says represents the town camps and the outstations further away from Alice Springs, such as Harry Creek and Sandy Bore. It is these families who send their children to Ntyarlke Unit and who gathered at Ti Tree to discuss the education of these children.

Here are some of the things they said at Ti Tree:

" Education is Life - life and survival. It's about Aboriginal cultural and spiritual beliefs and values."

"...give that child the best kind of education that can help that child stand up strong and say; "I'm proud to be an Aboriginal person".

" For an Aboriginal child if only one set of tracks is presented the child loses out and I'm sure as I am today the Aboriginality of the child can very easily be wiped out..."

"Our children are the future forerunners of what rightfully belongs to them in the first place. Let's not deprive them of that privilege."

"Survival means making our children stand up and to be proud of who they are. Survival means successfully intertwining and reactivating hidden talents and gifts within the child so that the children can then interact in the wider community with a sense of achievement and pride... Most of the teachers do not see what's inside the children."

"But our children and our people will always belong to this country. So give them the time and space to share their knowledge from the beauty of our creation. Ngkarte gave us the Dreaming ..."

" Our Arrernte language and culture in the school should be involved with some of our old people coming into school and teaching them more and more, so that our language and culture can be held onto to our future."

"Bring an elder who can teach the children the strong way of our culture and language."

"The culture and Arrernte language should be strong in our schools. We should have more people and elders involved with the teaching of Arrernte culture and language."

"Arrernte language should be taught first. The first word learnt at home is Arrernte and then brought to school. Students should get strong in Arrernte first, then learn English later. Arrernte materials could be used at school then taken home and talked about at home.."

(Quotes taken from the transcript of proceedings of the Ti Tree meeting)

As a result of listening to these presentations the teachers of the Ntyarlke Unit were even more convinced (if that were possible) to include in their curriculum learning experiences designed to fulfil the aspirations of the parents. Demonstrating that they recognise the latent abilities of the students, even despite the assertion that "Most of the teachers do not see what's inside the children" they decided to take on a project "successfully intertwining and reactivating hidden talents and gifts within the child". It was decided to employ a pair of visiting community artists, Christine Skoryk and Shirley Carter, to direct the technical aspects of a project designed to record and retell in visual artistic form an aspect of *Arrernte* culture.

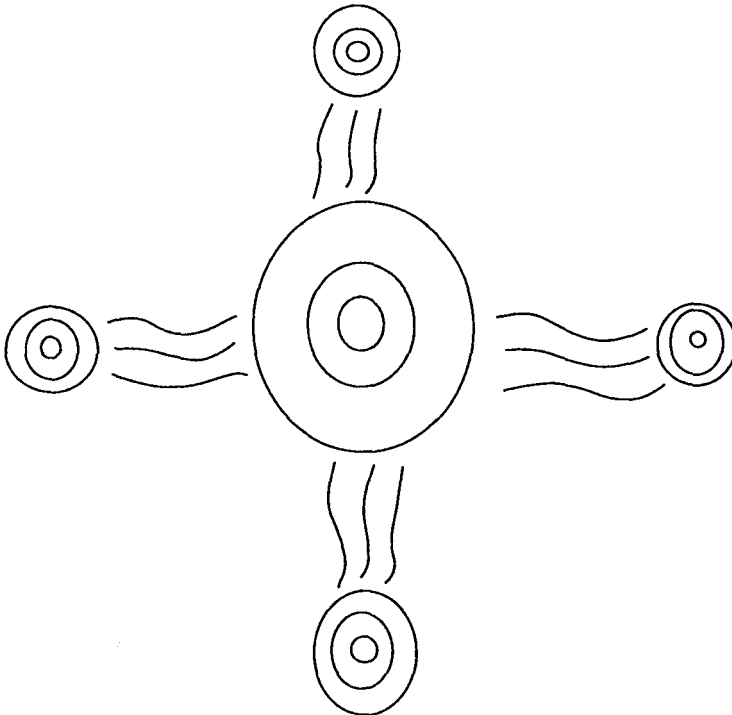
The process: Stage one

The first stage involved Mike Bowden, coordinator of Ntyarlke Unit, visiting 'Wheelchair' Ross at his camp at 'White Gate', just out of Alice Springs, to ask him if he would tell the students an important story that they could use as the basis of a permanent art project designed to preserve the story for future generations. 'Wheelchair' was keen to be involved. Myra Hayes, also of 'White Gate', was also approached. She too was enthusiastic about the project.

'Wheelchair' as his name indicates is crippled and unable to move from his camp easily and so it was agreed that the students would come to visit him at his place rather than he having to come into school to tell his story. It was also thought that this was an appropriate way to collect the story.



Armed with a video camera and tape recorder the students, along with the community artists and teachers visited the camp one sunny afternoon. 'Wheelchair' agreed to tell the *Ntyarlke* story, one of the most powerful of the *Arrernte* stories of Alice Springs. *Ntyarlke* is the name of the Aboriginal Unit at the Catholic High School.



The Ground design as drawn by Myra at 'White Gate'

The students gathered around the bed of the old man as two young blokes held microphones to record the story. As 'Wheelchair' told his story Myra sketched it with a stick in the dirt, in traditional form. The story she "told" was "written" in circles.

The circle is a common feature in Central Australian Aboriginal art. It means such things as place, waterhole or home. Agnes Palmer spoke about the importance of circles at Ti Tree:

The circle is a symbol. It has a lot of meaning for me. A circle is a symbol that signifies a lot of things. Our old people sat around in circles, sharing things, talking, telling stories. We sit in a circle. And in a circle ... every member of a circle is a special person. This represents a sense of serenity, security, safety, peace calmness. I don't feel alone in a circle. God is like a circle. The circle has no beginning and no end and whom God loves he loves to the very end, and there is no end cos the circle continues - the circle of life continues. In our life - anwerne ampe akweke apetyeme ... middle age irreme, ampwe irreme our life ends our physical life ends, our spiritual life continues - never ends.

Now we had the story recorded and strong memories of the story telling. We returned to school and began the next phase.

Stage two

In the classroom we replayed the videotape of the story telling. At this point we asked *Kwementyaye* Cleary - another man from 'White Gate', to assist us in interpreting the story as we found 'Wheelchair's' talk hard to 'hear'. *Kwementyaye* helped a great deal and together we retold the story so that everybody could understand it.

This is the story as 'Wheelchair' told it:

Ntyarlke Utnerrengatye eh, been here all the time, apmere yanhe-le Todd river-le. That the main place for Ntyarlke, Utnerrengatye and Yeperenye. They've all got tail akweke nhenge. They been stop there a long long time. All over the place travel- irreke from miles away from East, West, South-enge arle alakenhe and nhakwe side too - Athanthekele side, yanhe arle. Yeperenye live-irretyerte yanhe-le somewhere around, iwenhekeye nhenhe Dalgetty Barracks long time

aneke. That's Ilpeletyarte. They been through yanhe-le petyeme, yanhe Heavitree ap-werne. Heavitree Gap itne aneke. They been alakenhe travel-irreke, then East, travel East to Emily Gap side settle down there then, whole lot from all over the place. All the Yeperenye had good ceremony there all the time and all the urrweketye and all used to dance, women and men dance together there....

Below is a rewrite of this story in English only:

The *Ntyarlke* and *Utnerrengaty*e have lived for all the time on the Todd river. That's *Yeperenye*, *Ntyarlke* and *Utnerrengaty*e caterpillars. All those caterpillars have small tails.

A long time ago they came from all over the place and stopped there. They travelled in from miles away - from East, West and South - and from the other side too, from a place called *Athanthekele*. All those *Yeperenye* lived over on that side - somewhere around that old place, what's its name - Dalgetty Barracks - yes, they lived there. The name in *Arrernte* is *Ilpeletyarte*.

As they travelled they came through from *Ilpeletyarte* to Heavitree Gap and stayed there and then went on to the East, to Emily Gap. A whole lot of *Yeperenye* people settled down at Emily Gap.

They had good ceremonies at that place. The women used to dance there - the man and women used to dance together...

Now we had the story and the interpretation we proceeded to the next stage.

Stage three

We had decided to work the project over nine afternoon school sessions. The first was on Tuesday when we recorded the story at 'White Gate'. So we had eight more sessions and a deadline for completion.

Chris and Shirley provided expert artist advice on the medium and process of transforming the traditional story into a permanent piece. They suggested a sand relief plaster casting on a larger scale.

Before attempting this large work we decided to practise the procedure by making small pieces of the students' own designs. Using a sand pile in the school grounds, students and teachers began experimenting with the technique. The process is a simple one. After the design is pressed into moist sand the area is confined by a cardboard 'wall'. Into this space a sloppy mixture of casting plaster and water is poured. After one session of casting we had about six pieces representing the students creative designs based on some traditional motifs. Over the next two days, as more students came into the process, more of these pieces were made. Eventually by the end of week one we had about 20 of these small works.



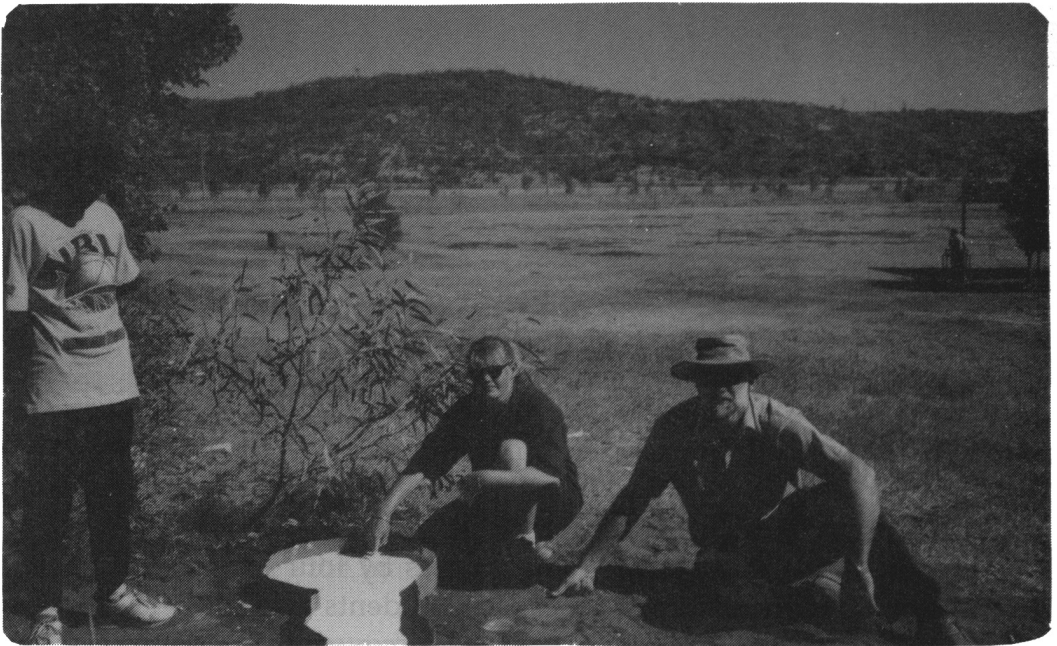
Some early students casts

In week two we began to prepare the main site for the large cast. We smoothed out an area about four metres by four metres and began the large circle in the centre of this space. Students and teachers worked collaboratively at this point. The artists had discovered that 'damp course' made a suitable material for enclosing the space for the cast.

The work was composed in five sections. Firstly the central major circle, representing Emily Gap, and surrounding it, the four feeder circles depicting the places of the origin of the *Yeperenye*, *Ntyarlke*, *Utnerrengatye* and *Alkngiltye* men. Each was cast separately. The first circle was cast on Tuesday and the other four on Wednesday. On Thursday we unearthed the casts. To our delight they were great - better than we had even dared hope.

Our final task was to colour the designs using as many natural materials as we could. We used copper oxide for the yellow - a colour that 'Wheelchair' had told us was the traditional one for the shields. We had to use a synthetic paint for the white - the other required colour. Finally we sealed the colours with a commercial sealing agent.

Having 'unearthed' the piece we now sought to bury it again in an appropriate site in the school grounds. We chose a site on a grassy area which we covered with weed mat onto which we then spread the sand, to create a home for the piece. We then reassembled the work and surrounded it with the smaller pieces created by the students earlier. The photographs indicate the placing process and finished work.



Pouring the cast

It was a delight to see the effect the work had on the creators. For the students this was truly a memorable experience. One of the teachers videotaped the final placement. In reviewing the tape what stands out is the impact of the work on the students. As they participated in the placement they were constantly standing back and looking at the piece. Quietly they would resume work and then stand back and oversight it again. From the looks on their faces and their body language, an interpretation of their responses could be that the work seemed to emanate a sense of power and serenity at the same time.

A group of non-Aboriginal students visited the site and observed the work as it was placed and another group visited subsequently. The piece seemed to have the same effect on them. In this way it also seemed to promote that sense of reconciliation that is so much sought in Australia today.



The final piece

Stage four

The work is to be moved once more to be presented as part of "Proud to be" an exhibition of the art of Aboriginal students from the North West of South Australia, Yirara College and Ntyarlke Unit, CHS at the Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs in late August. We plan to place a sheet of plastic on the floor of the gallery and cover it with sand and then place our piece once more.

Finally we will return the piece to the school grounds and permanently place it where all visitors and student may be reminded of the *Ntyarlke story of Mparntwe* (Alice Springs). We believe that the final piece is an authentic representation of the design and story given to the students by the elders at 'White Gate'.

Final Comments

What lessons can be drawn from this activity?

In this process we endeavoured to marry the aspirations of the parents of the strictures of a school program, by identifying a theme and employing a process that could be the vehicle for a jointly negotiated, working project, using the resources and skills of both traditional *Arrernte* elders, and non-Aboriginal artisans within the framework of school facilities.

The teaching/learning in all elements was of old learning from young and Aboriginal learning from non-Aboriginal, and at all times this learning being reciprocated. Our photos and videotape demonstrate a process that was less threatening for Aboriginal students. It was based on a known context, mediated from relatives and kinsmen, moving from the known to the unknown or as yet unexperienced. The emphasis was not on the 'right' way but on 'making it work'. The work was shared, collaborative, involving. It was not stressful, the pace was gentle although time constrained - the work had to be finished - could not be left half completed, as is so much work in an Aboriginal classroom.



Students and teachers working together

For the two young community artists who had never worked with Aborigines before the project required patience and creativity to establish a working relationship with the students and members of the adult *Arrernte* community. They were sensitive to the learning styles of the *Arrernte* students. Their sensitivity enabled some very high quality work to be achieved by some students who could be described as reluctant learners and underachievers.

We believe and hope that this ground mosaic and the process that produced it will become a lasting legacy for future generations of *Arrernte* students in the unit and for the *Arrernte* community in relation with the school.

Here is a model of learning that we have used before and will continue to use in future in our efforts to discover an appropriate pedagogy for *Arrernte* education.