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DHANGU DJORRA'WUY DHÄWU:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WRITING IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE

MARY-ANNE GALE

INTRODUCTION

Since leaving 'the bush' I have been continually surprised at the ignorance that still exists about Aboriginal people and their languages. When people chat to me, and it is revealed that I used to work in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory, they say things like "Do you speak Aboriginal then?... Maybe you could make a sign for us saying 'Welcome to our Kindergarten' in Aboriginal?" I then have to explain that there are many, many different Aboriginal languages, not just one, and to say or write such things in any one of these languages requires a lot more than a mere literal translation. When I began doing research on the topic of writing in Aboriginal languages, I was again surprised at the sorts of comments people made to me. Comments like "How can you do research on writing in Aboriginal languages; I thought the Aborigines didn't even have an alphabet!"

Hence, one of the purposes of this paper, and other recent works (see Gale, 1992), is to dispel the sorts of myths and misunderstandings that exist today amongst many white Australians about writing in Aboriginal languages. The fact is of the 250 distinct languages spoken in Australia at the time of white invasion, at least 90 of these are still spoken (Schmidt, 1990: 1). Most of these Aboriginal languages now have their own orthographies that utilise the symbols of the Roman alphabet, hence they can and are being written by Aboriginal people today. Even languages that are no longer spoken as an everyday language, such as Kaurna of the Adelaide Plains, are now being used and written for newly emerging functions in the community (see Amery, 1993). The purpose of the remainder of this paper is to provide a brief history of writing in Aboriginal languages, beginning with the arrival of the first missionaries to Australian Aborigines in the early nineteenth century.

THREE PHASES OF WRITING

As I see it, there are basically three developmental phases that have occurred for writing in Aboriginal languages since colonisation. These include a phase involving the production of bible translations and other Christianising material during the early mission days; a later phase of school-based productions for use in bilingual education programs; and a third phase that is only just emerging where Aboriginal people themselves are determining the direction, content, style and function of vernacular writing. The title of this paper ***DHANGUM DJORRA'WUY DHÄWU***, meaning *'These are the stories in books'*, is from the Rirratjengu language of the Yirrkala area in Northeast Arnhem Land. It was the exciting written texts now emanating from this community, which exemplify the third phase, that inspired me to research this topic. Below each of these phases are discussed.

CHRISTIANISING PHASE

The first phase, which I call the Christianising phase, began with the work of the missionary Lancelot Threlkeld, who arrived in 1824 to evangelise the Awabakal people in the Lake Macquarie district of New South Wales. Working with the Awabakal man Biriban, Threlkeld completed the Gospel of St Luke in Awabakal in 1830 (see Gunson, 1974 and Harris, 1990: 830). Linguistic work began in South Australia with the arrival in Adelaide of the first Lutheran missionaries Christian Teichelmann and Clamor Schiirmann in 1838, just two years after the colony was established. The industrious pair were soon conducting lessons in the Kaurna language in the Native Location school, as recorded by Schurmann in his diary on January 12th 1840:

> *...I have a lot of joy in seeing the more progressive ones learning their letters and enjoying the Gospel tales, but I sometimes fear that the wild life may make them forget.*
>
> (Quoted in E. Schurmann, 1987:84)

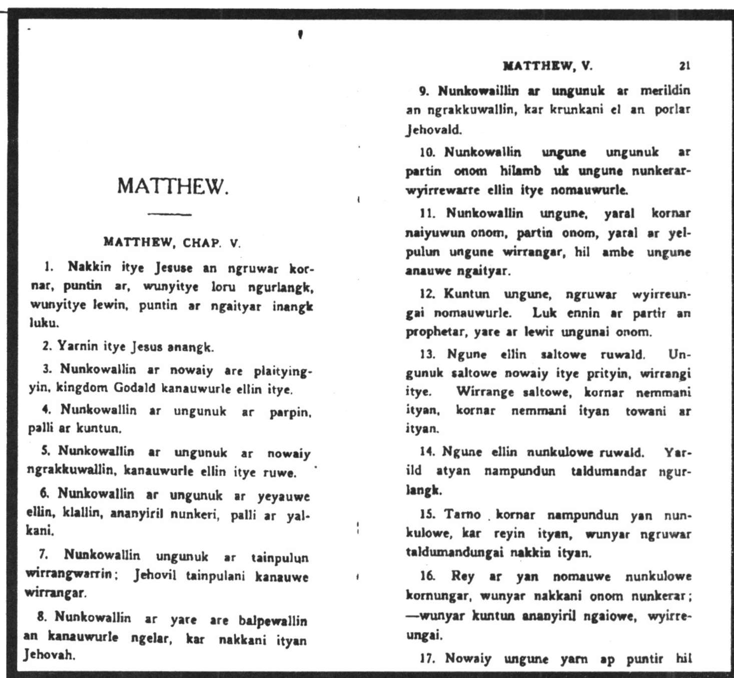
Subsequent missionary work soon commenced in other parts of S.A., also by linguistically trained Lutherans, at Port Linclon and Encounter Bay in 1840, and the Cooper Creek region in 1867.

Linguistic work was also to commence relatively early in the N.T. with the attempt of a Catholic priest, Fr. Confalonieri,in 1846 to establish a mission in the Port Essington area. Before his death two years later from malaria, Confalonieri compiled vocabularies of seven different languages in the area and translated some prayers and a catechism into a language closely related to Iwaidja. Later in 1882, twelve years after permanent European settlement in the Top End, a Jesuit mission was established at Rapid Creek near Palmerston (the original name of Darwin). Two years later a missionary arrived to work exclusively on the Larakia language, and by 1885 a school was operating with regular lessons and Bible stories in Larakia.

Later that year 'lessons books and songs' were printed in Larakia after the mission acquisition of a printing press (Harris, 1990:465). The Rapid Creek mission finally closed in 1891 as missionary efforts were slowly transferred to the Daly River district (see Gale,

1992:53-97 for further references and details on this phase of writing).

The vernacular products of this early Christianising phase were initiated by the missionaries themselves with the explicit aim of Christianising and 'civilising' Aboriginal people. They included translations of Scripture, catechisms, prayers, hymns and other Christian materials as well as student booklets for the classroom and published grammars and word-lists.



MATTHEW.

MATTHEW, CHAP. V.

1. Nakkin itye Jesuse an ngruwar kornar, puntin ar, wunyitye loru ngurlangk, wunyitye lewin, puntin ar ngaityar inangk luku.

2. Yarnin itye Jesus anangk.

3. Nunkowallin ar nowaiy are plaityingyin, kingdom Godald kanauwurle ellin itye.

4. Nunkowallin ar ungunuk ar parpin, palli ar kuntun.

5. Nunkowallin ar ungunuk ar nowaiy ngrakkuwallin, kanauwurle ellin itye ruwe.

6. Nunkowallin ar ungunuk ar yeyauwe ellin, klallin, ananyiril nunkeri, palli ar yalkani.

7. Nunkowallin ungunuk ar tainpulun wirrangwarrin; Jehovil tainpulani kanauwe wirrangar.

8. Nunkowallin ar yare are balpewallin an kanauwurle ngelar, kar nakkani ityan Jehovah.

MATTHEW, V. 21

9. Nunkowaillin ar ungunuk ar merildin an ngrakkuwallin, kar krunkani el an porlar Jehovald.

10. Nunkowallin ungune ungunuk ar partin onom hilamb uk ungune nunkerarwyirrewarre ellin itye nomauwurle.

11. Nunkowallin ungune, yaral kornar naiyuwun onom, partin onom, yaral ar yelpulun ungune wirrangar, hil ambe ungune anauwe ngaityar.

12. Kuntun ungune, ngruwar wyirreungai nomauwurle. Luk ennin ar partir an prophetar, yare ar lewir ungunai onom.

13. Ngune ellin saltowe ruwald. Ungunuk saltowe nowaiy itye prityin, wirrangi itye. Wirrange saltowe, kornar nemmani ityan, kornar nemmani ityan towani ar ityan.

14. Ngune ellin nunkulowe ruwald. Yarild atyan nampundun taldumandar ngurlangk.

15. Tarno kornar nampundun yan nunkulowe, kar reyin ityan, wunyar ngruwar taldumandungai nakkin ityan.

16. Rey ar yan nomauwe nunkulowe kornungar, wunyar nakkani onom nunkerar; —wunyar kuntun ananyiril ngaiowe, wyirreungai.

17. Nowaiy ungune yarn ap puntir hil

Bible translation work continues today throughout Australia under the auspices of Christian organisations such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who have conducted translation work into twenty six Aboriginal languages to date (Annual Report, 1991). However, Aboriginal people are now active members of such translation teams, and have far more say on the resultant style and forms of the written materials produced.

THE EDUCATING PHASE

The flourish in production of vernacular books during a second phase, which I call the Educating phase, is largely associated with the formal introduction of bilingual education into the N.T. in 1973. However, its impetus was the 1953 UNESCO axiom stating that 'the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil' (Bull, 1964). Prior to this, the assimilationist policies of the federal government had caused all government and many mission schools in Australia to adopt English as the medium of instruction. The Ernabella mission school, however, in the far northwest of S.A. had persisted with its vernacular program, and the UNESCO axiom gave its bilingual policy educational credence.

The first task undertaken in newly established bilingual programs in N.T. schools, was the production of a set of highly structured phonics-based Gudschinsky primers in the chosen local vernacular. However, this phase of writing really gained momentum when schools imbibed the 1974 recommendation made by the linguists Hale and O'Grady to 'Flood the Place with Literature'. Hence, fur-

ther primers, repetitive readers, transcribed oral histories and 'Dreamtime stories', community newspapers and translated English classics were soon locally produced in schools. This was all aimed at getting the children, and hopefully the adults, hooked on reading in order that they would ultimately succeed academically in the classroom. By 1981 twenty bilingual programs in seventeen different languages had been established in N.T. schools, and fifteen were still operating.

In the meantime, a couple of schools in Queensland, such as Aurukun, had also adopted bilingual education, as had some independent Aboriginal schools in the northwest of Western Australia (see Gale, 1990). Such schools drew from the initiatives first established in the N.T., with the production of vernacular materials being primarily aimed at promoting vernacular literacy attainment by children in their early years at school. When these same children later transferred to English literacy, they would supposedly be advantaged in their academic achievements in all subject areas.

Although Aboriginal people were employed as literacy workers to produce such materials, the direction of materials production was very much under the influence of non-Aboriginal teacher-linguists. Hence, they typically mirrored the types of reading materials to be found in mainstream all-English schools of that era, and vernacular materials were often slotted into a sequential reading scheme. However, some attempts were made to produce culturally relevant materials that appealed to the interests and humour of the children. Such attempts were the springboard from which more recent developments have occurred in Aboriginal controlled schools and Literature Production Centres (again see Gale, 1992 for more details on this phase of writing).

Aboriginalising Phase

The third phase, which I call the Aboriginalising phase, has only really begun in schools in the last five years or so, as Aboriginal communities have gained increasing control over the running of their own schools. As a result, the production of written materials emanating from the printing presses and photocopiers in Literature Production Centres and Literacy Centres, now reflect what Aboriginal people themselves see as worthy of reproduction (1). At the same time, a number of regional Aboriginal Language Centres have been established throughout Australia (at places including Aurukun, Kununurra and Tennant Creek) and at least one Aboriginal Publishing House in Broome in the Kimberlies. Like the Language Centres, Magabala Books has as its primary objective the 'restoring, preserving and maintaining of Aboriginal culture' (Newsletter, July, 1993), and an increasing number of books containing Aboriginal languages are now being published for the general public.

Even though contemporary developments in Aboriginal literature production are inevitably influenced by vernacular literature production experiences of the past, as well as by the norms of English literature, much of the literature now emerging from a number of Aboriginal schools and communities differ from the written products of earlier years. Contemporary productions display a wide range in form, content and style as they reflect a variety of reasons for different Aboriginal people choosing to write in their own languages.

For example, the majority of materials currently emanating from Yirrkala, such as the local newsletter and community workshop reports, tend to serve an ephemeral function and are predominantly reportage in style(2). This contrasts with the emphasis in the past on more permanent curriculum and reading materials that would ultimately serve as a permanent teaching resource for future use in the classroom. Furthermore, the languages that feature today in these newsletters and reports include a range of representative clan languages plus English, in addition to Dhuwaya, which has become the communilect of the younger generations at Yirrkala. School policy in the past advocated that the official language of printed vernacular books would be Gumatj, which is just one of the local clan languages spoken at Yirrkala, and generally English was reserved for the back page only of booklets (in the form of a translation for non-Aboriginal teachers).

The developments in literature production that have taken place at Yirrkala, particularly since the process of Aboriginalisation began officially in 1987, is best exemplified by three different types of diglot colour productions, which regularly emanate from the local school's off-set printing press. These include the regular community newsletters *Yutana Dhawu*, the less regular *Yan* newsletter, and Reports from the community run *Galtha Rom workshops* The two newsletters are predominantly reportage in style with lots of photos. They serve to celebrate, highlight and inform about events and occasions deemed significant in the community. They also contain articles that assert, reaffirm or explore individual and group identity, largely through reference to clan, land and language affiliations. The *Yan* newsletter is aimed specifically at an adult readership and contains, in addition to reportage articles, advocacy-style articles similar to those found in the Amata newsletter produced in S.A.

The *Galtha Rom workshops* have become an integral component of the accredited and Aboriginal controlled curriculum now taught at Yirrkala school, and are run with the assistance of community clan leaders on themes deemed to be important by the community. The resultant Workshop Reports reproduce much of the group written materials and diagrams produced by staff and students during the workshops, as well as numerous photos of various workshop activities and events that are held in significant places. Hence, for the participants, these reportsre-live valued community shared learning experiences that occurred throughout the workshop. Christie makes the following observations regarding the variety of purposes served by the resultant reports:

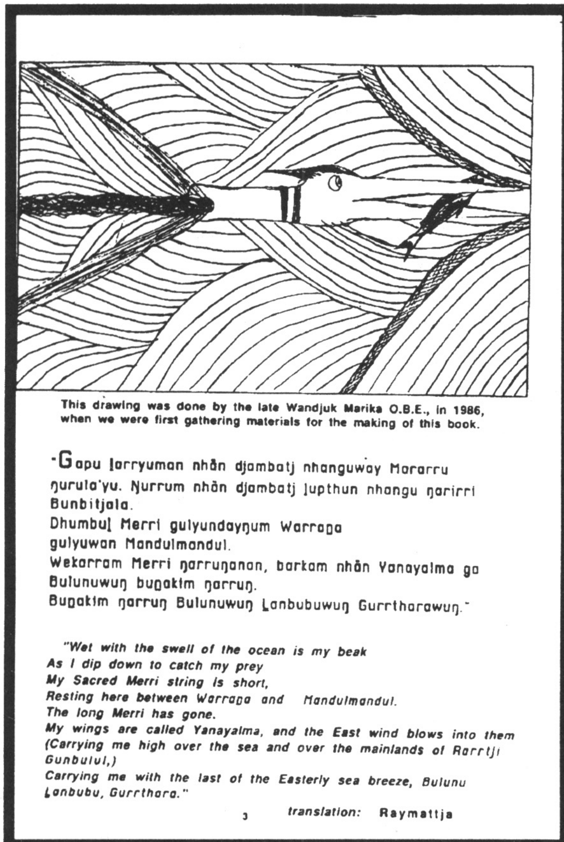
The school students mostly refer to them for the photos and drawings... teachers and students refer to them for their ongoing planning and classroom work. Old people keep them in their bags. Some teachers and community members read the books to their families. People stick pages and song texts, photos and diagrams on their walls at home

(Christie, forthcoming:9)

No two Galtha Rom workshops are alike, and each planned workshop is negotiated with community elders to determine where it is to be held, its content, format and pace, just as with any Yolngu ceremony (see Bilingual Evaluation Report, 1990). Hence, the resultant reports do not form the basis for further Galtha Rom workshops and are not seen as prescribed cur-

riculum material to be stored on shelves for later use.

One should not assume, however, that all literary productions at Yirrkala adopt such reportage styles, and serve relatively short-erm purposes. Raymattja Maika-Mununggiritj has compiled, with the assistance of other Yolngu people, some watershed literary products that record in a written and diagrammatic form, various significant songs and dreaming stories for future generations at Yirrkala. One in particular, that struck me as an outstanding example is the 28 page booklet *Ngayi Balngana Mawurrku: The song of Yirrkala*. It was produced in diglot form in 1989 and records the Rirratjingu clan salt water song, along with a Rirratjingu interpretation and an English translation. This song tells of the origins of the Yirrkala area and the sacred *Merri* string, and the booklet also contains various maps, diagrams and cultural notes.



This drawing was done by the late Wandjuk Marika O.B.E., in 1986, when we were first gathering materials for the making of this book.

"Gapu ḻarryuman nhän djambatj nhanguway Mararru
ŋurula'yu. Ŋurrum nhän djambatj ḻupthun nhangu ŋarirri
Bunbitjala.
Dhumbuḻ Merri gulyundayŋum Warraŋa
gulyuwan Mandulmandul.
Wekarram Merri ŋarruŋanan, barkam nhän Yanayalma ga
Bulunuwuŋ buŋakim ŋarruŋ.
Buŋakim ŋarruŋ Bulunuwuŋ Ḻanbubuwuŋ Gurrtharawuŋ."

"Wet with the swell of the ocean is my beak
As I dip down to catch my prey
My Sacred Merri string is short,
Resting here between Warraŋa and Mandulmandul.
The long Merri has gone.
My wings are called Yanayalma, and the East wind blows into them
(Carrying me high over the sea and over the mainlands of Rarrtji Gunbulul,)
Carrying me with the last of the Easterly sea breeze, Bulunu Ḻanbubu, Gurrthara."

3 *translation:* Raymattja

The direction of literature production has also swung at Nguiu, or Bathurst Island also in the N.T., where there is now more emphasis on the recording of cultural information (such as the making of cycad damper, the preparation of bark baskets in booklet form. Such booklets comprise Tiwi texts accompanied by large colour photographs and diagrams. Other communities such as Willowra in Central Australia, are showing an increased interest, particularly among the women, in the recording of the perceived superior quality of Warlpiri life prior to white contact (see Wafer, forthcoming).

Some quality productions are now also emerging from the presses of commercial publishers, with the co-operation of various Aboriginal groups. Two examples are Yuendumu Doors and Anangu Way, both coffee-table quality books containing glossy photographs of the now popularised dot paintings of Central Australia, along with diglot explanations (in English and an Aboriginal language) of the stories and ideas represented in each painting. Yuendumu Doors contains Warlpiri Dreamtime stories while Anangu Way contains Pitjantjantjara ideas on the concept of health.

Magabala Books, which only publishes books with a predominant Aboriginal involvement (as author or editor), has also published some very successful books. On e of their latest is Tjarany or Roughtail: The Dreaming of Roughtail Lizard and Other Stories Told by the Kukatja, which was short-listed for several literature awards, and won two state awards and the prestigious national Eve Pownall Award. This book includes a total of eight dreamtime stories from the Kimberlies, with the texts appearing in diglot form, with English on the left and Kukatja on the right hand side of each page. The realist illustrations are produced in a dot-painting style, along with graphic explanations of their contents.

Thus we see that a wide variety of literary products are now emerging from different Aboriginal communities in Aboriginal languages as well as English. Each community has its own set of reasons for wanting to write, and these reasons are reflected in the content and various forms and styles adopted by the writers and contributors. Hence, it is hard to generalise about the evolving forms and functions of these literary products, but I think it is possible to propose a set of reasons for why Aboriginal people themselves are now choosing to write in their own languages.

RESONS WHY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ARE WRITING IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES TODAY:

1. To assert, reaffirm or strengthen ones identity as a member of a particular Aboriginal group or clan.

2. To help reclaim or revitalise the use of Aboriginal languages that have undergone some loss.

3. To help maintain languages that are still viable as a means of communication, and to record them in their 'strong' form.

4. To 'maintain the Dreaming' and other culturally important information by recording stories and songs in some tangible form accessible to future generations.

5. To record and reveal to the younger generation the (often bloody) contact history and the early mission days, before the older people pass away.

6. For social action at a community level (through advocacy articles in the local community newsletters).

7. To protest and petition the government and other agencies (through diglot protest letters and petitions).

8. To celebrate the achievements and successes of local Aboriginal people.

9. To highlight activities, events and occasions involving local and other Aboriginal people.

10. To commemorate significant events involving Aboriginal people.

11. To reminisce about days gone by and memorable events of the past.

12. To inform local Aboriginal people about significant events, activities, issues, health hazards and imminent dangers etc.

13. To entertain through photos quizzes, puzzles, comics, poems, humorous 'true stóries 'etc.

The Roughtail Lizard Dreaming

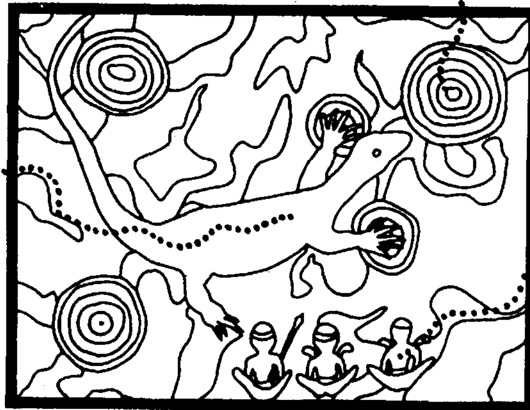
A long time ago in the Dreamtime,
there lived a Roughtail Lizard man
who had a lot of Dreaming
and songs he kept to himself.
One day he was sitting by a waterhole
called Ngamarlu, when some men,
who were staying by the water,
heard him singing.

Night after night those men got up to listen to that Roughtail man singing his songs as he sat by the fire. Every day when the men passed his camp they heard his singing. All the old people came together and they sat around, talking among themselves. They decided to send someone to meet him. "Go and ask that Roughtail man to sing us a song," they said. That person went over and asked him, "Show us how to sing one of your songs."

Tjaranykura Tjukurrpa

Kurralka Tjukurrtja Tjaranypa nyinama kutju kalyungka, Ngamarlungka. Puntuya tjiingka kalyungka nyinama, kulinuya turlku yinkarra nyinama tjiilu Tjaranytju. Mungakutjupa mungakutjupangka pakaraya kulinma. Tjarany tjiitja warungkama nyinama turlku yinkarraka.

Nyinanguya yungunkutjupangka, tjapirnungkuya, "Yarralalu tjapila tjiingka Tjaranytja turlkulampa yinkawa. Turlku palyaminyirri yinkalkuwa." Pakarnuya kutjungkarringu yirna-yirna. Yanuluya tjapirnu, "Tjaranytja turlkulanyatju kutju nintitjurra?"



14. To advertise items for sale or announce coming events (through local newsletters).

15. To inform and educate the wider non-Aboriginal community about the truths of Aboriginal colonisation, and about Aboriginal cultural beliefs and issues to ensure cooperation for their maintenance in the future (in the form of diglot books).

Conclusion

It is true that some Aboriginal people are choosing to write in Aboriginal languages today for the same reasons as the missionaries and the teachers in bilingual schools of yesterday; that is, to bring the Christian message to Aboriginal people and to teach the children to read and write. But, much of the emerging Australian 'Black literature' of today (including productions in Aboriginal languages or diglot vernacular-English productions, and bilingual or multilingual productions) are to a large extent politically motivated with the choice of an Aboriginal language medium being very much a part of that message. By choosing to write in an Aboriginal language, the Aboriginal writer is placed in a position of authority and power, especially when addressing an English only-speaking audience. At the same time, however, there is a *willingness* from Aboriginal writers to educate non-Aboriginal people and to share the rich cultural and linguistic heritage that they have to offer.

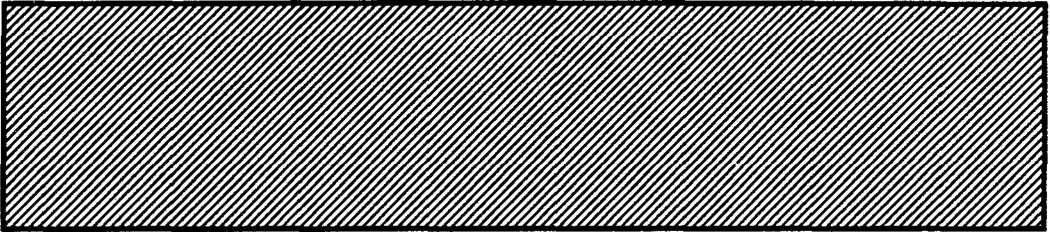
Other more locally oriented vernacular productions, such as community newsletter, magazines and workshop reports, commonly adopt a reportage-style, but go well beyond merely reporting about an event, workshop activity or incident. They also serve to celebrate, consolidate, highlight, assert, reminisce, commemorate, reclaim or maintain some issue or aspect of Aboriginal identity and cultural life. At an academic level, such productions challenge the western notion of what constitutes real literature, by demonstrating that a print media dominated by ephemeral productions is still a valid and meaningful realisation of literature.

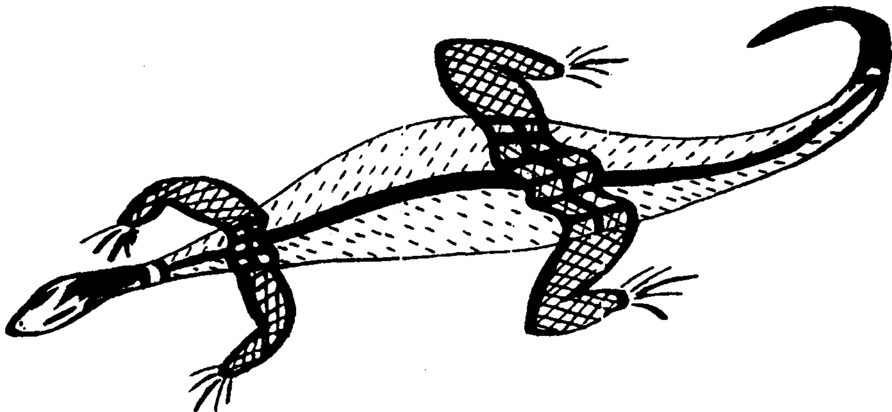
Let me conclude by expressing the hope that Aboriginal individuals, schools, communities and publishing houses will continue to explore, challenge and freely develop a print media that meets their own aspirations, through writing in their own languages. Let me also caution against any unnecessary influence that the genres of English, or current mainstream pedagogical theory, may have on contemporary writing in Aboriginal languages. Because slowly but surely an important vehicle of communication and expression is emerging in Aboriginal Australia that is developing a range of meaningful Aboriginal forms and functions that are worthy of serious academic consideration and celebration.

Notes

1. In schools in the N.T. a distinction is made between Literature Production Centres and Literacy Centres. The former is a larger complex and is staffed and funded by the Education Department to operate an off-set printer while the latter, at most, has a photocopier. Both Centres have at least one Aboriginal Literacy Worker and a TeacherLinguist.

2. Goddard (1990) was the first to write on the emergence of an 'ephemeral' function for literature in Aboriginal communities when he examined the Reportage and Advocacy style of texts that appeared for a period in the late 1980's in the local newspaper Amata Tjukurpa. produced in the Amata community in the Northwest of S .A .





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