

# Navigating the Western Academy: An Aboriginal Man's PhD Perspective

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This paper discusses the PhD research process from my perspective as an Aboriginal man. The paper illuminates how I navigated my way through a Western academic system using an Aboriginal framework. I give insights into the dynamics at play in both academic and traditional ways of knowing, being and doing. As an Aboriginal researcher, I was intent, as many Aboriginal scholars are, on doing research that was inclusive, respectful, culturally appropriate and satisfactory to both partners. The paper is not designed as a 'one size fits all', but may be used as a signpost for those who choose to do research with Aboriginal people or for insights into the experiences of an Aboriginal Higher Degree by Research student and researcher.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal/Western world views, Nanda, Indigenist methodology

## Positioning

I am a Nanda man from the Yamatji region and my mob come from the Murchison in the Mid West of Western Australia. The origins of this paper come from my PhD thesis, 'My mob, our Country: A qualitative study on how a Nanda family group connects to each other and Country'. I had been a PhD candidate at Curtin University in Perth for around four and a half years full time and recently submitted my thesis, so this is the perfect time to capture this extremely personal yarn. My rationale for the research was that, after 10 years living and studying away from home, I returned back to Perth with my young family, and our Native title claim was in its 16th year with still no outcome. My positioning as a researcher is not one of being an objective outsider. I am a Nanda man, but at the same time operating within a Western academic environment. I cannot completely set my identity aside from what I am doing, but at the same time I do have to negotiate practices and responsibilities to my people and the academy. I am married with two children and reside in the city of Perth, Western Australia. Nanda Country is located in the Murchison region in the state of Western Australia. My people have lived in and around this area for thousands of years. For as long as I can remember, the area where my fieldwork for this research project took place was known to my family and me as 'our Country'.

I was the researcher of the study and some of my family members were participants in the research project. I sourced all of the participants who are the members of

my family's native title corporation – Nhunadar Watchinar Parnba Community Aboriginal Corporation – and had full support from the Corporation in undertaking the PhD. As a member of the (NWPCAC), I participate in the Corporation's activities and will continue to do so long after this article is completed. Since completing my thesis I have disseminated a report of the findings to the Corporation directors and intend continuing with the struggle for Nanda sovereignty of our Country.

The Nanda people of the Murchison region have a rich and diverse culture. Nanda (other spellings are Nhanta, Nhunda and Nhanda – pronounced *Nun-Dah*) is the name of the language and people that lived, and today continue to live, along the coastal area north of Geraldton and south of Shark Bay, Western Australia. Nanda are considered to be the northernmost group of people in the area, with the Nanda language being spoken in an around the mouth of the Murchison River, which is near where the coastal town of Kalbarri (Wudumala) is currently situated, north to Gee Gie Out camp, and inland along the Murchison. Other groups of Aboriginal people in the area are the southern dialect Amungu, and the central group referred to as Watchandi, whose language was spoken in and around Northampton and Port Gregory (Blevins, 2001).

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## Background

### Historical Context

Nanda People, as with the other Aboriginal people throughout the Australian continent, shared a unique balance between men, women and landscape, which supplied their need of food and sustenance from within their respective territories. Europeans, on the other hand, relied heavily on introduced plants and animals to survive. The introduction of plants and animals proved to be at Aboriginal people's peril, our landscape was and continues to be changed by the introduction of such species. The landscape, that provided sustenance to Aboriginal people was being altered at devastating rates. As Stanbury (1977, pp. 46 & 47) explains

The greatest factor upsetting the balance of nature at this time was pastoral occupation. This was undertaken largely without an understanding or care of the Aboriginals rights, without a recognition of the delicate character of the landscape, and without an understanding of the problems which would be caused by the introduction of carnivores such as cats and dogs or herbivores such as goats and sheep . . . The native grasses, apparently were destroyed, or were fouled to the point of uselessness. The Aboriginals were thus driven away from their native lands into less congenial regions or, if they wished to stay, were placed in a debased situation on the outskirts of a civilisation they did not understand and within which they were not acceptable.

The presence of (Nanda) communities was noted by Sir George Grey as early as 1839, with Nanda sites being located around the Murchison River area. Murchison House station was established in the 1860s, near the mouth of the Murchison River, and employed many Nanda people who had previously been living in the area. In 1965, with the introduction of the Pastoral Industries Award, which set minimum wage levels for all pastoralists, many Nanda people had to leave the station, as the station could not afford to pay them (Bottrill, 1991). The spread to the north of Perth by Europeans into areas, such as Northampton for cattle grazing was within Nanda territory, and evidence points to issues of concern between Nanda and Europeans over land and land ownership in the initial stages of European occupation.

Oldfield (1865) states that while Nanda people were acutely aware of their boundaries and that each tribe in the area was aware of these; they feared moving onto other Aboriginal territories even though they were being overrun by Europeans and their introduced species, such as cattle. An example of tensions around land and land ownership in the Murchison region between Nanda and Europeans arose from issues over who had rights to what. Moreover, European occupation of Nanda territory had retributory outcomes for Nanda who, after suffering from hunger, would kill and feast on the settlers' cattle. To avenge the act of their cattle being killed the settlers resorted to the indiscriminate slaughter of 'the guilty and

the innocent, of man, women and child as has too often been the policy of the Europeans' (Oldfield, 1865, p. 221).

Research on Nanda perspectives, connection to Country, and what it means to be a Nanda person in contemporary Australia, as well as continued documentation of Nanda culture, is long overdue. My PhD builds an account of traditional ties to Country and documents Indigenous perspectives that may assist in bridging the reconciliatory gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. I achieved this by answering the central question of my research: How do Nanda people connect to each other and Country? This central question was answered by describing what it means to be a Nanda person and how we connect to each other and Country through oral yarns of Elders, and by identifying the historical, ethnographical and anthropological records that connect Nanda to a particular area.

### Methodology and Method

This section explains the overall methodological framework that was used for the study and the specific methods adopted to collect participants' perceptions about Nanda connections to our land and to each other. The study's aim was to build a thick description of the everyday ways in which we maintain these links drawing on a range of sources and materials. Following this, a broad qualitative approach will be outlined. Next, the Indigenist research paradigm will be explained in the context of standpoint theory. The rationale for an autoethnographic dimension to this study will also be set out. My positioning as a Nanda man and member of the Kelly family will then be addressed. An account of the methods used will be provided, and finally the ethical implications and processes of this research will be discussed.

### Qualitative Research

This research is a blended qualitative approach and is best explained by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, p. 2) in this statement: 'In general, qualitative research draws on an interpretative orientation that focuses the complex and nuanced process of the creation and maintenance of meaning'. A qualitative researcher may be seen as a 'bricoleur', for the qualitative researcher adapts to and utilises many methodological practices to assemble a narrative that weaves together a range of diverse materials. Qualitative researchers, as explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 4), 'deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretative practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand'.

A qualitative research approach allowed me, as a Nanda researcher situated within the Western academy, the space to provide Nanda perspectives and accounts with critical judgments being made to ensure the knowledge is appropriate for the Western academy. Hence, there is frequently a commitment to using more than one

interpretative practice in any study” (Moore, 2008). There are several theoretical traditions, frameworks and approaches in qualitative research, such as Marxism, feminism, postmodernism and critical theory (O’Connell-Davidson & Layder, 1994). In this research, interpretivism supported an Indigenist methodological framework and standpoint. This methodology enabled me to present a Nanda epistemology, ontology and axiology as a framework to inform the research, including an analysis and discussion of what it means to be a Nanda person. This was achieved by examining how Nanda perceive ourselves, thus enabling members of my Nanda family group to freely and frankly share our perspectives of culture, identity and sense of belonging.

## Indigenist Methodology and Standpoint

The Indigenous research paradigm is founded on cultural respect and cultural safety embedded in Indigenous ontology (ways of being), axiology (ways of doing) and epistemology (ways of knowing) (Martin, 2008; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). This approach involves contesting a ‘Eurocentrism that supports the belief in the superiority of European people over non-European (Indigenous) peoples, and extends to the lack of recognition (or ignorance) of Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of knowing, ways of doing’ (Denzin, Lincoln, & Tuhinwai-Smith, 2008, p. 91).

As an alternative to the longstanding prevalence of Eurocentrism, Martin and Mirraboopa (2003, p. 9) explain

Ways of Knowing are specific to ontology and Entities of Land, Animals, Plants, Waterways, Skies, Climate and the Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups. Knowledge about ontology and Entities is learned and reproduced through processes of: listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging and applying.

Wexler et al. (2015) also draw attention to assumptions that maintain the epistemological divide, or different ways of knowing, that often separates Indigenous and scientific communities, suggesting that this ‘provide[s] important contrasting perspectives’, adding, ‘Addressing these divergent worldviews requires attention to alternate epistemologies and knowledge claims that may contribute to building more accurate scientific models’ (Wexler et al., 2015, p. 895).

Indigenist methodology permitted me, as a Nanda researcher, to explain how members of my family group connect to each other and our Country as part of a broader Nanda tradition. In this way, Nanda lived experiences were documented from an insider’s perspective, as opposed to the outsider perspectives of ethnographers, historians, and the like, whose knowledge has been privileged until relatively recently. By documenting thick and rich descriptions of everyday Nanda lived experiences,

I was able to enact the core principles of an Indigenist approach. This methodology is part of the struggle of self-determination. Informing this approach are three guiding interrelated principles: ‘Resistance as the emancipatory imperative research . . . Political integrity in Indigenous research . . . [and] Privileging Indigenous voices . . .’ (Rigney, 1999, p. 116). The aim is to decolonize Western research methods (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999) so that research is attentive to Indigenous people’s interests and needs, and not simply those of the Western academy.

In the introduction to my thesis the point made was that Australian Aboriginal people have been subjected to oppression beginning with the invasion of Australia in 1788. The ideological view from colonists was that the dispossession of Aboriginal land was their ‘right of occupancy’. The right of occupancy was utilised simply to justify a land grab that subsequently led to the oppression of Australian Aborigines through a variety of draconian measures utilised from the invading party. As Landor (in Reynolds (1989, p. 13) explains

A ‘right of occupancy’! Amiable sophistry! Why not say boldly at once, the right of power? We have seized upon their country, and shot down the inhabitants, until the survivors have found it expedient to submit to our rule. We have acted as Julius Caesar did when he took possession of Briton. But Caesar was not so hypocritical as to pretend any moral *right* to possession. On what grounds can we possibly claim a *right* to occupancy of the land? We are told, because civilised people are justified in extending themselves over uncivilised countries.

It is with this historical legacy in mind that I locate and centre myself with an Indigenist methodological framework. The research project provided examples of the struggle of this Nanda family group’s recognition of self-determination. Indigenous methodology allowed for us to set our own agenda, privileging our community Elders’ freedom to engage, or not, in my research project as participants, without fear of persecution (Rigney, 1999).

As an Indigenous scholar, I drew upon past and present Indigenous researchers. I recognised I am in a privileged position due to their struggles and I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to incorporate such a methodology into my study. I welcome the principles offered by Indigenist methodology in that it gifted me the space I required to do research in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner in order to draw on oral yarns from Nanda Elders. The platform afforded to me from Indigenous methodology led to a robust study of Nanda perspectives, with detailed examples of how members of this Nanda family group connect with each other and Country.

There is a clear link between Indigenist research and standpoint theory. With women’s, Indigenous peoples’, and other marginalised groups’ lived experiences and perspectives typically excluded or framed by European and patriarchal worldviews in the past, the voices of ‘others’ are crucial for more balanced and inclusive social and cultural

knowledge production. Standpoint theory was utilised as a 'method of enquiry' emerging in the 70s and 80s by Feminists. Feminist standpoint theory allowed women to emancipate themselves from a world where men have constructed the social organisation of their lives. Standpoint was then utilised by 'marginalised groups whose accounts of experience were excluded or subjugated within intellectual knowledge production' (Nakata, 2007b, p. 214).

## Autoethnography

As an Indigenous researcher working within my community, autoethnography enabled me to include myself, as a historical and cultural subject, in my study in a critically reflexive way. 'While Autoethnography is not a specific technique, method or theory, it colors all three as they are employed in fieldwork' (Hayano, 1979, p. 99). Autoethnography is culturally appropriate because it acknowledges equality as a significant component of Indigenous people's ways of knowing by asking 'us to consider epistemological perspectives equally and to draw together self (auto), ethno (nation) and graphy (writing) together' (Whitinui, 2014, p. 467). The writing process of autoethnography is believed to be a balancing act that is designed to 'hold self and culture together', allowing for the auto-ethnographer to transition between story and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Autoethnography recognises undergoing an 'analysis of self-other relations' and was vital in this research space. This is due to the fact that I am a family member and researcher of the Nanda family group that this study focusses on. My position therefore allows for autoethnography to differentiate itself from culturalism by executing an 'analysis of Self-Other relations, and what can be learned from this dichotomy as we feel, think and probe our way toward some kind of understanding' (Tomaselli, 2013, p. 171). As a method, autoethnography has been used to alleviate a host of issues that surfaced in the eighties within the social sciences and relates to their epistemological incubation. Ellis et al. (2011, p. 346) highlight this stance from the social sciences by saying: 'For the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper classed, Christian, able bodied perspective'. As mentioned earlier, my standpoint and chosen methodology opens up spaces for alternative accounts and counter narratives.

As a research tool, then, autoethnography is inclusive of differing epistemologies and aims to 'address social justice and to develop social change by engaging Indigenous researchers in rediscovering their own voices as "culturally liberating human beings"' (Whitinui, 2014, p. 456). At the same time, as pointed out by Hayano (1979), autoethnography, whose roots stem from ethnography, shares some identical methodological problems. In this sense, my own cultural and historical identity is entangled within the

family group participating in the research and I was attentive to these issues throughout the production of my thesis.

## Methods

The process I followed in order to garner the Elders' yarns was embedded in Nanda ways of knowing, being and doing and began several months prior to enrolling in the PhD program. My journey began with lengthy yarns with my mother, Gladys, who at the time was one of several directors of NWPCAC. These yarns were pivotal, as they gave me insights into the dynamics of my family and our corporation that would prove vital for the successful completion of my doctoral thesis in the ensuing years. These initial discussions began in early January, 2012, and it was through these discussions that it became evident that I would need to inform other NWPCAC directors and contact was made over the phone. Out of this initial phone conversation, I was invited to a general meeting in Geraldton, where I introduced myself and my anticipated research proposal to the members and directors. The setting was at a local BBQ area just north of Geraldton and the gathering included my wife and two young children, my Mother, several Aunty's, their children and their children. This process enabled members and directors the time digest my request and my proposal, and in the following weeks I received an email of support for my research proposal. I then moved to enrol in the PhD program and was accepted to begin my research in October, 2012.

## Ethics and Community Consultation

Participants were encouraged to proceed with an interview by word-of-mouth (snowballing) with other family members. After I had followed the above-mentioned protocol with family and our Corporation the Elders, who participated in my study presented themselves to me. I conducted interviews in a variety of ways due to the often busy schedules of all of the Elders. All interviews were conducted in a safe environment chosen by the Elders, and only after lengthy discussions and agreements were made. Sometimes, after initial discussion, information of the research project was left with Elders along with a consent form, allowing time for Elders to proceed at their own pace to consider if they were interested in participating in an interview. Follow-up was necessary, either by telephone or visits, and was instrumental in the interview process. Respecting Elders' time was crucial to establishing a sensitive process. There was never any pressure on the Elders to participate in any of the interviews conducted. All were fully informed of their rights as participants, of confidentiality issues, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time at their own discretion. In the event that a participant wished to withdraw, no pressure was applied for continuation. I made it clear that if Elders who participated in the research project wished to withdraw at a later stage, all previously collated data would be returned in



its entirety. As previously stated, the interviews were conducted in a safe environment, with Elders being informed of their rights.

I continued to have open dialogue and discussion with the Elders interviewed and delivered individual transcripts to the Elders either via post or personally. Yarning as a process came naturally to the Elders once barriers were down, and trust and rapport were gained. Some of the interviews were more structured than others, and the more unstructured interviews, questions and prompts followed, depending on a range of factors, such as age, Western education and time. Flexibility and respect for each specific participant was paramount and based on evaluating, observing and practicing cultural protocols. Great progress on Indigenist methodology and ethical frameworks has been made over the past three decades in Australia (Martin, 2008; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Nakata, 2007a, 2007b; Rigney, 1999).

One recent way of integrating core cultural ways of knowing, being and doing has been the establishment of an eight-way framework that is ‘the narrative based’ story telling by (Yunkuporta, 2009). Narrative-based story telling or yarning as a method is a prominent process of transferring knowledge in families within my community organisation. NWPCAC is a not-for-profit community organisation based in Geraldton and Kalbarri, and has extensive membership throughout Western Australia. Our corporation vision statement sets out: ‘To respect and promote our Nanda Cultural Heritage with a sense of belonging; to generate a strong sustainable vibrant and healthy community for future generations; while caring for Country and walking in partnership with the wider community’ Nhunadar Watchina Parnba Community Aboriginal Corporation (NWPCAC): Organisational Information-Including Five Year Strategic Plan 2010–2015, 2010’.

As an Indigenous researcher within a Western institution, I often dealt with complex political interactions between Nanda and non-Nanda, and within my own family group. I was required to mediate and operate at the interface of these two ‘worlds’. I was always aware of the sensitive issues around my research and that issues with family members can and, over the course of the project, did flare up. As such, I relied heavily on Elders from within the Corporation to guide and direct me when any issues occurred. As a member of the NWPCAC, I attended quarterly meetings and gave updates to the directors and other members of the Corporation. For example, I provided opportunities for open dialogue with family members at all times via telephone, gatherings and meetings, and held open forums where I presented my findings to members of the family group. In doing so, I allowed for input and advice from members of my family throughout the life of my research project. I retained my independence as a researcher by living in Perth and doing my field work in the Murchison region. I committed, over the course of this

project, to family obligations that needed to be addressed as they presented themselves as I understand that obligation and reciprocity are vital to any research with a group or groups of people. In order to receive support from my family in my attempt at such a personal, political and often difficult project, I sought and was provided with a letter of support from the NWPCAC that I attached to my ethics application.

## Yarning

I conducted semistructured Interviews (yarns/yarning) with Elders, allowing for these Elders to speak on their own terms without time limits or constraints. Yarning is explained by Besserab and Ng’anda (2010, p. 38) in this way

... a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research.

As a method, yarning is empowering, both for me as Nanda person and the Elders who participated in the research process, as they were given free range to speak as they would in a natural setting free from Western constructs. The setting was on Elders’ terms in accordance with Nanda ontology and axiology. These practices provided a conduit that afforded this research the platform to encourage Nanda epistemology. In permitting these frameworks, answers to the questions being asked, such as how we Nanda connect to each other and Country, were able to flow freely. Yarning incorporates storytelling, and the Elders interviewed provided rich oral accounts of day-to-day events by recollecting shared lived experiences and the mundane details of everyday life that illuminate and give meaning to how we, as Nanda, connect to each other and Country. The significance of storytelling is conveyed succinctly by David Graeber’s claim (in Jackson 2013, p. 29):

If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life, we must start not with cosmologies and worldviews but with “the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat each of our friends, enemies, and children – often with gestures so tiny (passing salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all.

To this list of everyday details, we might add storytelling. In essence, my thesis is a collection of stories (yarns) as told by Elders and myself. The yarns gleaned from interviews cover a range of traditional concepts and practices from Nanda Elders that include social organisation and an oral history that pre-dates colonial Australia. The yarns are written in detail, free from academic jargon. This shift of position allows for Nanda Elders to be seen as active, authentic, intelligent participants whose

shared lived experiences collectively provide evidence to what ‘William James called the “plenum of existence” – the full range of human experience, intransitive and transitive, fixed and fluid, rational and emotional, coherent and wild, real and symbolic’ (Jackson & Piette, 2015, p. 7). Finally, the chosen methodology, standpoint and methods used in this research seek to achieve what Mattijs van de Port advocates: ‘risking oneself of the kinds of openness to others and to otherness that will engage our emotions, senses, and bodies, and not simply our intellects’ (Jackson & Piette, 2015, p. 7).

Drawing on Elders’ knowledge through yarning and storytelling, and utilising thick description, has enabled very small, and often neglected details, to be examined and incorporated into the larger story presented in my PhD thesis. In order to achieve this, it was imperative that I reconnect with family members. Connecting and reconnecting with family members was carried out throughout the period of the research project, and has continued long after completion of the study. Davis (2018), used yarning circles followed by one-on-one yarning as a method in his PhD, and is explicit on how yarning as a method, is built on strong reciprocal relationships prior to the research being conducted.

As a culturally appropriate method, yarning is accepted and utilised by Aboriginal researchers throughout Australia (Besserab & Ng’anda, 2010; Davis, 2018; Fredericks et al., 2011; Walker, Fredericks, Mills, & Anderson, 2014; Yunkuporta, 2009). As my chosen method, I spent long periods of time establishing myself by, first, reconnecting with Elders before enrolling in the PhD program. Within this space, I also committed to strong relationship building and reciprocity. This process was to me as a Nanda man a cultural imperative, and as a researcher integral to gaining the trust required in order to deliver the richness of data I compiled to successfully complete my PhD. Utilising yarning as a method, I followed the basic principles of this method and the thesis explains in detail precisely how these yarning relationships are established to gain trust. Establishing researcher and participant relationships and supports was essential to hearing family members’ stories. As such, ‘clear lines of reciprocity were established as part of the sharing protocol/principle in research’ (Davis, 2018, p. 112).

## Nanda Definitions of Eldership and Knowledge

Community credibility is based on being connected according to Nanda ways, and recognition of leadership and recognised Elders within the community is crucial to this process. Nanda definitions of Eldership and knowledge as a specific response to land and living are similar to that of other Aboriginal groups throughout Australia. There are many similarities that we Nanda share on a myriad of social aspects in relation to land and living that are

apparent in the format of Eldership and what constitutes being an Elder and Eldership. For example, Eldership is not defined by age: becoming an Elder is developed over time through processes that derive from within my family group’s ways of knowing, being and doing. Nanda Elders and knowledge holders must engage with young people. Aboriginal groups such as Queensland *Murri*’s harmonize similarities, explaining

*It is critical that our young people are engaged in caring for country business, with Elders and knowledge holders and with each other. Elders and knowledge holders are only as effective as the young people supporting them and vice versa. Together they form a critical relationship that supports the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and culture.* (Bonye Buru Booburgan Ngmmunge: Bunya Mountains Aboriginal Aspirations and Caring for Country Plan, 2010, p. 20–21).

The same process depends on relationships in order to enact the cycle of knowledge transmission from within my family group. Thus, Eldership knowledge and knowledge transfer as a process is ‘delivered through a multifaceted platform by Elders, and then passed back and forward from family member to family member’ (Kelly, 2017, p. 67). Story telling or yarning as a means of knowledge-transfer is our way of teaching and learning as a process and is how ‘elders teach using stories, drawing lessons from narratives to actively involve learners in introspection and analysis’ (Wheaton in Yunkuporta, 2009, p. 49).

An example of Nanda pedagogy is highlighted below in an interview I completed with my Aunty. When asked about the significance of being an Elder on Country and what this means my Aunty, in her assertion of her role as a Nanda Elder, as a teacher, and upholder of our family cultural ways, explains:

*I can teach my children, so I can teach my grandkids (deep breath). I mean, my kids . . . My oldest boy might, he knows a lot too cos he had a good teacher in Uncle Oldie and Victor, Victor and Oldie, my first brothers, my first cousins. And just to be here, back here on Country, I think I, well, I’m here. I want to revive the culture, and teach our grandkids, my kids. It’s gonna die out, slowly and surely, it’s gonna die. We’re gonna lose it all, and if we don’t make a stand now, we, we will never have that, knowledge* (Kelly, 2017, p. 66).

It is clear then that Elders play a vital role in yarning, and that ‘Yarning is a conduit for Aboriginal people used to teach, learn and transfer knowledge to and from generation-to-generation, and yarning is a traditional practice engaged in since time immemorial’. It is a conversational process that is culturally acceptable and ‘involves the telling and sharing of stories and information’ (Walker et al., 2014, p. 1217). Today, yarning is still being utilised by Elders to pass on knowledge, by sharing stories and information of their time and place as children growing up and experiencing life as they knew it back then, as my Aunty explains:

*Well isn't that, isn't that Aboriginal culture? That's Aboriginal culture, that's our way of preserving our history, and our culture, is word of mouth. Pass it down the line, so that, why are we the survivors? You know, because that knowledge will never die out. It'll never die out because, through our yarns and our stories, will always be passed down from generation to generation (Kelly, 2017, p. 69).*

## Participant Observation

I chose participant observation as a method to incorporate set periods of quality time doing fieldwork with the research participants. This data collection method complements my research project and, along with other data collection methods mentioned above and those mentioned below, allowed me to delve into the complex nature of my Nanda family. The process of collating data was achieved through the non-obtrusive method of participant observation, which was necessary at times in order to interpret and explicate details of Nanda experiences in ways not impossible with other techniques, such as structured observations and surveys. Participant observation has been used in ethnographic studies for over 100 years as a means for researchers to observe the practices and behaviors of people and groups of people 'within cultures they studied' (Dahlke, Hall, & Phinney, 2015; Kawulich, 2005; Timseena, 2009).

In recent times, however, the method of participant observation has widened its scope, so it is increasingly being accepted as a superior, non-obtrusive data collection method by other disciplines, including psychology, health and education (Aagaard & Methieson, 2016; Watts, 2011; Woods, 1986). The method of participant observation as undertaken in my research includes spending time in the field with family members in their natural surrounds and yarning. Within this space, participant observation enabled family members to articulate what DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) describe as *explicit* culture; that is, what we know and how we can communicate our knowledge with ease. As such, the practice of participant observation has worked in unison with yarning in order to provide a robust account of this Nanda family group's links to land.

## Archival Documentation

A significant source of information about my family and Nanda people more generally was drawn from a variety of grey material; and literature from books, journal articles, and archival records, state welfare reports, and police reports and ethnographic and historical reports. Lived experiences, perceptions and stories were gathered from recorded narratives of Elders and photographs. The rights and welfare of participants was respected at all times. Critical engagement with the literature is a vital part of corroborating and contesting existing narratives with what we draw from our peoples' lived experiences.

## Ethics and Community Consultation

During and before my research follow-up was necessary, either by telephone or visits, and was instrumental in the interview process. Respecting Elders time was crucial to establishing a sensitive process. There was never any pressure on the Elders to participate in any of the interviews conducted. All were fully informed of their rights as participants, of confidentiality issues, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time at their own discretion. In the event, a participant wished to withdraw, no pressure was applied for continuation. I made it clear that if Elders who participated in the research project wished to withdraw at a later stage, all previously collated data would be returned in its entirety. As previously stated, the interviews were conducted in a safe environment, with Elders being informed of their rights. I continued to have open dialogue and discussion with the Elders interviewed and delivered individual transcripts to the Elders either via post or personally. Trust cannot be assumed: it must be won and sustained.

Yarning as a process came naturally to the Elders once barriers were down and trust and rapport were gained. Some of the interviews were more structured than others, and the more unstructured interviews, questions and prompts followed, depending on a range of factors, such as age, western education and time. Flexibility and respect for each specific participant was paramount and based on evaluating, observing and practicing cultural protocols.

## Conclusion

The methodological framework used for this research has drawn on an Indigenous research paradigm embedded in Indigenous epistemology, ontology and axiology. The framework was designed to employ a culturally appropriate and community collaborative study founded on cultural respect and cultural safety. Moreover, this paradigm was adopted in recognition of the struggle of this Nanda group's self-determination and to support Nanda representation at all levels of the research. The aim of using thick description of the everyday ways we maintain these links was to draw from a range of sources and materials. This enabled me to incorporate very small, and often neglected, details into the larger story presented in the thesis (Jackson, 2013; Jackson & Piette, 2015).

The methods used in the research – participant observation and the traditional concept of yarning, or storytelling – were integrated to assist in giving clear insights into how members of this family group are connected to each other and to our Country. The blended qualitative approach that incorporated autoethnography allowed me, as a Nanda researcher, to provide Nanda perspectives and accounts of everyday shared lived experiences and perspectives. At the same time, critical reflexivity was applied to ensure the knowledge is appropriate for the Western academy. Very clearly, there are tensions that exist

when operating at the interface between two broad ways of knowing, being and doing, especially when the researcher is trying to clearly articulate ways that have been ignored or devalued by the dominant culture. Maintaining one's cultural integrity while complying to some degree with Western methodological standards is a struggle, but one that cannot be avoided if the aim is to gain a better understanding of a marginalised knowledge system based on interconnectedness. This paper has outlined my struggle to adopt an Indigenist approach to more effectively capture Nanda people's lived experience in a rich and nuanced way.

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