



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

The Purga Project: Indigenous Knowledge Research

Norm Sheehan and Polly Walker
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit
The University of Queensland



confusing discourse and reality, your discourse is naïve, you misunderstand this or that science. (cited in Markus, 1999: 136-137).

We are Indigenous University lecturers involved in research with the Purga Elders and Descendants Aboriginal Corporation. Our research at Purga involves the instigation of Indigenous Knowledge as the basis of effective and valid research methodologies. This article will describe the work that the University of Queensland (UQ) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit is doing at Purga. It will then articulate the principles of Indigenous Knowledge Research that inform this work.

Our research aims to centre Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, to reclaim the right to use our realities and ways of knowing in the practice and articulation of Indigenous research. Indigenous Knowledge Research (IKR) aims to establish a philosophic equality as the only authentic basis for research in many Indigenous community contexts. Pathways to meaning are vital components of a people's way of being in the world. The imposition of methodologies that do not consider Indigenous ontologies represents a 'process racism'. This dominance has been well described by Wittig:

All of the oppressed know this power and have had to deal with it. It is the one which says: you do not have the right to speech because your discourse is not scientific and not theoretical, you are on the wrong level of analysis, you are

The Purga Project

The name Purga originates from *pur pur*, a Yuggera word meaning meeting place. As such, Purga is an inclusive place, open to all who enter in peace and with respect for Purga Elders, Aboriginal people, and the spiritual, cultural, historical and natural values of this land. As a meeting place, Purga is consecrated by the Purga Elders to be a sanctuary where all can come free from fear. It is a meeting place which prohibits violence, alcohol and drugs (Purga Elders, 2000).

The Purga Mission commenced in 1901 and was administered by the Salvation Army under the *Aboriginal Protection Act 1897*. The Mission was originally 1,500 acres and had a thriving rural industry until 1941 when Aboriginal people were removed to Cherbourg Mission 300 km further west. In 1988 the Aboriginal community purchased a 68 acre portion of the original mission which included the original Purga meeting place. The Purga Elder's centre has since become a meeting place for cultural, religious and community events (Haberman, 2001).

Many of the Aboriginal families living in Western Brisbane and South East Queensland have direct family ties to Purga. This creates the opportunity

for Purga to provide a base for educational programs that are authentic and relevant in addressing the cultural and social needs of the Aboriginal community. The Purga project also has a major focus on providing an authentic example of reconciliation through its inclusive educational focus. The Purga project grew out of a pressing and immediate need for the Indigenous community to have a place where Aboriginal culture and history are lived and passed on. This most basic of needs is not considered within any of the initiatives which attempt to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'problems' in the Ipswich/Inala area.

The Purga Elders have developed a long-term plan to re-institute natural vegetation on Purga land to enhance it as an Aboriginal cultural place. This will re-invigorate Purga as a meeting, healing and learning place where ceremonies can be held and Aboriginal people and others can learn about Aboriginal history, culture and spirituality. This work is being carried out by Aboriginal Commonwealth Development Employment Program (CDEP) work for the dole programs in conjunction with Aboriginal Programs at Kangaroo Point TAFE.

In June 2000, Purga Elders issued an invitation to the UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit staff to work with them on this community cultural development project. Since that time, University of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and many Indigenous and non-Indigenous students have volunteered their time and completed various projects at Purga. This work has ranged from professional organisational support to postgraduate theses and just helping out in the office.

The UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit has costed this contribution to the Purga Project to be in excess of \$100,000 over the last twenty months. This contribution has been wholly supported by the UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit and represents a major donation of time and expertise which has been achieved without the support of any funding agencies. We believe that this is the first time that a University has directly contributed to

grassroots Aboriginal community development in this way.

The benefit of this project to the UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit is that student researchers have the opportunity to experience the direct and practical outcomes of their work while they also learn to interact effectively and respectfully with the Aboriginal community and elders. As the Purga project proceeds, it will provide a valuable Indigenous experiential context for students working across a wide range of UQ programs.

The Purga Project is a good working example of IKR because all the research conducted is directed by the aims and intentions of the Aboriginal community and elders. It emphasises the development of projects within the Aboriginal community which extends university research in a meaningful, practical and effective way.

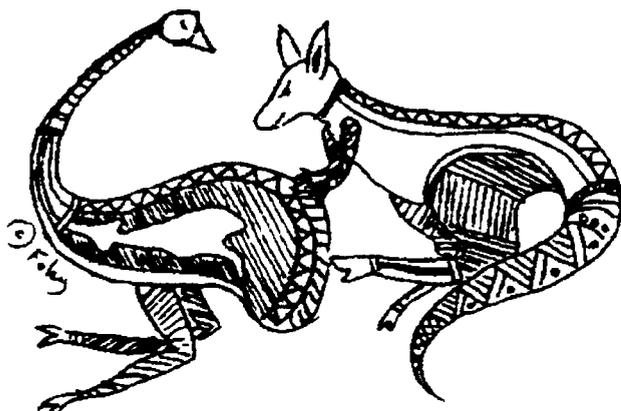
Principles of Indigenous Knowledge Research

The principles of IKR constitute the basis for all aspects of this research methodology. These principles inform the researcher concerning Indigenous research ethics and responsibilities, however, the actual formation of these principles is determined by the research context. Indigenous Knowledge Research principles that have emerged from engagement within the Purga project are:

- **Indigenous Knowledge is not open knowledge.** IKR recognises the importance of cultural mores placed on knowledge management within Indigenous groups. This recognition respects the role of senior people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Societies (Michael Williams, pers. comm., 2001). Often this ownership of knowledge is seen to be only the province of 'traditional' Aboriginal groups. IKR recognises that respect for senior community members and the knowledge that they hold is a basic tenet of Aboriginal cultures. IKR must therefore reinforce this respect to maintain its authenticity as an Indigenous methodology. Within IKR it is essential to understand that the ways that

knowledge informs actions are just as vital as the actions taken. In IKR a major methodological principle is that the researcher does not have a right to investigate or seek knowledge.

- **Knowledge is a living thing.** The focus of Indigenous Knowledge Research (IKR) is promoting and maintaining living knowledge, the knowledge that comes from people sharing their experiences, problems, hopes and dreams. This relationship must include the researcher and their institution. The living knowledge principle means that the relationship between the researcher and the



community is a living relationship with a life and lifecycle of its own. IKR is more than longitudinal research. Each project and every facet of each project will have a life cycle of its own depending on whatever agenda happens to emerge from the community context at the time. The researcher and their institution have an obligation to maintain this relationship on equal terms with the community for life, or for as long as they can bring life to the project.

- **Be present.** This principle involves showing up in person at community events, regardless of their import in the research process. Being present shows respect for the community because it places their living community events above the processes of research intent. If we are present, people will find out that researchers are just human and that maybe not all university research is a threat. Being present also means communicating to the Indigenous community the value of the

knowledge that they hold. Due to the legacy of colonisation, the ignorance of the general population, and, the romanticising of culturalism many Indigenous people have never had the experience of their knowledge being seen as practical, useful and valuable (Peat, 1995; Sheehan, 2001). The power of IKR is that it may prompt Indigenous people to believe that their knowledge has value too (Peat, 1995). This appreciation of IK can become the deep empowerment that IKR strives to instigate, as people come to believe in their knowledge of themselves and their world and its power to change their context in an authentic and healing way.

- **Let the environment of IKR 'speak' and listen deeply to all the voices that emerge.** This can be achieved through co-designing projects within community that respect the Indigenous Knowledge (IK) context and recognise that local intent, processes, agendas and solutions are the best informed. Within IKR it is crucial to realise that we cannot 'have' another's life experiences. Therefore in deep listening we seek the solutions that emerge from the whole environment. Deep listening by all participants also means that voices from the land, the spirit and the people can be heard. These voices are not acknowledged within the traditional Western research paradigm. As a consequence it is all the more crucial that they are listened to with respect and inform the IKR process.
- **Be a learner and foster learning.** When a researcher enters an Indigenous community they must be willing to learn how to be practically useful to that community. An IK researcher's aim is not to collect knowledge that benefits the research community even if there is a belief that this new knowledge will flow down into programs that address community 'needs'. The aim is to seek methodologies that instigate, support and enrich IKR co-learning activities that directly benefit the Indigenous community from within.
- **Be real.** The researcher must engage authentically and appropriately with the community. Professionalism in the Western

sense has no place in IKR. The notion of an ethical distance from the subjects of research just does not fit with IKR projects. To instigate Indigenous Knowledge you must be accepted in the community context. Engagement in an Indigenous community context may take lots of time. If a researcher is accepted into an Indigenous community, however, this acceptance can often be the basis of a life-long relationship.

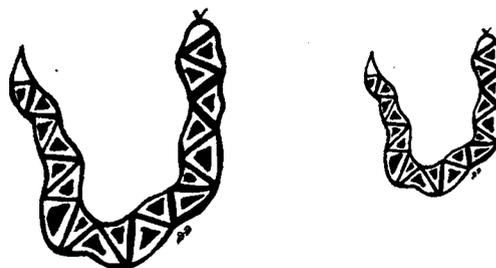
- **Respect all things.** The researcher must be prepared to be there at the level and in the role that the community decides is appropriate. She/he might be ignored, asked to do the financial records, represent the group at some important meetings or sweep the floor. Whatever the task, the researchers must be themselves and bring themselves authentically to the job. Respect is built only on truth and being true to oneself. The ultimate demonstration of IKR respect is 'not knowing'. This IKR conception of respect is a trust that each community environment holds and innately seeks the particular knowledge/growth that has the potential to be self-healing.
- **Engagement in IKR is engagement within a field of powerful and often hidden cultural, environmental, historic and social relations.** The principles of IKR are essential tools to establish a place for research within these essential relations of community life. IKR relationships propose that universities become perpetual living participants in Indigenous community development. IKR recognises that the generations of marginalisation in Aboriginal communities requires generations of healing.
- **As a broad set of principles IKR is transportable to a wide range of eventualities and contexts.** However, methodologies are not transportable. IKR means the process starts again from the beginning in each new context as directed and informed by the knowledge in that context.

Indigenous Knowledge Research/ Indigenous Science

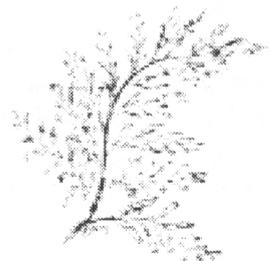
The Purga Project is an exemplary Indigenous Knowledge Research project, supporting the principles of Indigenous science. Indigenous science is grounded in Indigenous realities and methodologies (Churchill, 1996: 278-286; Smith, 1999: 146). The following principles of Indigenous science are clearly evident in the Purga Project:

- Elders are utilised as the primary teachers, facilitators and guides (Cajete, 2000:71,84-85; Suzuki and Knudson, 1992:18). The Purga Elders initiate all IKR programs and projects that are carried out on the Purga Site.
- Indigenous science projects emphasise participation with the natural world (Cajete 2000:1). In all aspects, the Purga project emphasizes relationship with land. This relationship includes listening to the land, as well as engaging in relations of care and custodianship. Authentic Indigenous science is characterized by such relationship with place (Begay & Maryboy 1998; Cajete 2000: 4). *'As Aboriginal people we know that the land is the spiritual center and source for all our lives, from it all life and knowledge arises, we in turn have a duty to protect and care for the land'* (Purga Working Group 2000). Indigenous research involves respectful relationship with land. Respectful relationships are evident in the responses of the CDEP workers, TAFE staff and students who are working on the restoration of Purga lands. In the following response, the coordinator of this project describes these relationships:

We had planned to start the replanting and the cultural trail at the top of the hill and methodically work our way down in a well planned way so that people could see that something was



going on that was serious and well thought out. And we sat down at the creek talking about it and for some reason the track just seemed to grow out of the ground down there. And the Aboriginal students or workers just seemed to keep discovering where the paths should go along the sides of the creek and around special places (TAFE teacher, pers. comm., 2001).



- Indigenous ways of knowing are moved from the margins to the centre. IKR research draws on the traditions of bodies of IK and values which have evolved for thousands of years in native cultures (Churchill, 1993:405-451). Such epistemologies have been systematically implemented and developed into scientific approaches (Peat, 1995; Suzuki and Knudson, 1982). The Purga Project arises out of IK negotiations which incorporate some aspects of Western approaches that support Indigenous ways of knowing.
- Incorporates story as epistemology (Begay and Maryboy, 1998; Cajete, 2000: 27). Indigenous Science could be described as '*a story of the world and a practiced way of living in it*' (Cajete, 2000: 14). The Purga Project involves collecting the stories of people associated with Purga during the Mission years. In Indigenist research, oral histories create a place of belonging, a larger story in which individual stories are connected. In Indigenous use of story, '*the story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story*' (Smith, 1999:145). The history of the Deebing Creek and Purga Missions being recorded by Dan Haberman (2001) include oral stories of Aboriginal community members. These stories have the power to establish connections through stressing the importance of reconnecting with families, community and place. The story that emerges from working in the IKR community development process also brings life to the community and is passed on:

I was thinking that we will be planting trees here and one day my son's kids will come and say nanna planted these trees (CDEP worker, pers. comm., 2001)
- Reading country – Indigenous science views humans as being in co-creative relationship to country. '*As we experience the world, so we are also experienced by the world. Maintaining relationships through continual participation with the natural creative processes of nature is the hallmark of Native science*' (Cajete, 2000: 20). The design of the Purga Heritage Trail emerged from the discussions and actions of the CDEP group. Workers planned and designed this trail by reading the land. The trail design emerged from the process without distancing workers' knowledge from the final result. In contrast, most Western landscape design solutions do not capture this living knowledge. The unity and interconnectedness of IK in process eliminates the consultative and interpretative necessities imposed through the Western concept of planning. At Purga, the tree replanting technological skills also emerge from 'reading the land' aspects of IK. The participants come to understand the ecology of these plants primarily in terms of their IK. They are involved with all stages and elements of their learning, therefore this learning re-connects them to their country as they regenerate it. Western knowledge alone cannot facilitate this process. IKR is a mutual and corresponding regeneration and healing of a people and their land.
- Incorporates spiritual aspects of experience (Suzuki and Knudson, 1992:16). Indigenous science integrates a spiritual orientation in which everything is animate and has spirit (Cajete, 2000:63). IKR celebrates the ways in which Indigenous peoples and communities retain '*cultural and spiritual values and authenticity*' (Smith, 1999:145). The Purga Project celebrates Indigenous cultural and

spiritual values. In particular, the Heritage Trail and the annual Dawn Ceremony are examples of celebrating life, diversity and connectedness. Celebrating survival *'is an individual and communal process that celebrates the mystery of life and the journey that each of us takes'* (Cajete, 1994:73).

- Authority resides in individuals and their direct experience rather than a social establishment (Peat, 1994: 265). IKR involves proactive processes of change that seek to reshape institutions that deal with Indigenous peoples, rather than seeking to change Indigenous people to fit the structures of Western institutions (Smith, 1999). Through their experience in planting native vegetation, CDEP workers involved in the Purga Project are learning skills and employing technologies that are the means of their own cultural regeneration.
- Incorporates an ethical, moral framework (Cajete, 2000:76). In the Purga Project, the use of Indigenous Knowledge has an ethical dimension, encouraging transparency and accountability of ways of knowing.
- Emphasises interconnectedness. Other Indigenous researchers have noted the importance of making connections and affirming connectedness. *'Connectedness positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment ... To be connected is to be whole.'* (Smith, 1999:148). Instigation of cultural infrastructure through Purga development connects Aboriginal youth with their culture. Participants in the Ipswich research project commented:

What is the point of just getting Aboriginal kids into university if there is no cultural infrastructure anywhere in the community and no visible cultural presence except as an identity as in need of the dominant culture? (Pat King, pers. comm., 2000)

- The principle of Reconnection is vital in Aboriginal higher education. This can be demonstrated on the ground at Purga because Purga provides opportunities to share culture in ways that assist students in developing

connections between Indigenous knowledge and university studies. Interconnectedness also involves relationships of respect between the non-Indigenous researchers and policy makers who work with Indigenous communities. *'Connecting is about establishing good relations'* (Smith, 1999:149). Purga Elders have established guidelines and protocols to ensure that researchers, students and visitors respect Aboriginal people, land and culture and the knowledge that emerges from this world view.

- Sharing IKR demystifies university research and education, sharing in ways that communicate clearly, openly and culturally appropriately with community members (Smith, 1999:161). Purga Elders have commented on the ways in which academic research and language exclude elders and other members of the community from sharing in the design, implementation and benefits of higher education and research. Researchers at Purga develop ways of communicating within the academic community while including and communicating clearly with a range of Aboriginal community members.

The Purga Elders Working Group envisions Purga as a cultural place that also provides employment and real wages. Such a vision asks that Indigenous people imagine a future that rises above present day situations in which unemployment, racism and violence often present depressing statistics (Lucey, 1998; Smith, 1999:152-153). In dreaming new dreams and setting new visions for moving forward in a sustainable manner, the Purga Elders and Descendants envision new futures for their children and grandchildren.



Conclusion

IKR methodologies are meta-research methodologies. Their aim is to instigate environments that facilitate Indigenous people defining their own pathways into the future. Colonial societies have a tendency to imagine that their own solutions are the only ones that can assist the Indigenous communities they have displaced. IKR is based in Indigenous ways of knowing and approaches knowledge only through respect for Indigenous epistemologies. The product of Indigenous Knowledge Research is actual community growth through mutually productive relationships between these ways of knowing.

References

- Begay, D.H and Maryboy, N.C. (1998). *Naniit'a Sa'ah Naaghai Naniit'a Bik'eh Hozhoon*, Living the Order: Dynamic Cosmic Process of Dine Cosmology, PhD thesis, California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Cajete, G. (2000). *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers.
- Churchill, W. (1996) *From a Native Son: Selected Essays in Indigenism, 1985-1995*, Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Haberman, D. *The History of Purga Mission*, Ipswich City Council, in press.
- Lucey, J. (1998). *Report on an Inquiry into the Needs of the Urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Their Parents in the Inala Area of Brisbane*. Brisbane: The Christian Brothers of St. Francis Xavier Province.
- Markus, J. (1999). *A Dark Smudge Upon the Sand: Essays on Race, Guilt, and the National Consciousness*. NSW, Australia: LhR Press.
- Peat, F. D. (1994). *Blackfoot Physics: A Journey into the Native American Universe*. London: Fourth Estate Ltd.
- Purga Elders (2001). *Minutes of the Purga Working Group*, unpublished document.
- Sheehan, N. and Budby, J. (2001). *The Ipswich Project, Identifying the Higher Education Needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People living in the Ipswich/Inala area*. Brisbane: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit, University of Queensland.
- Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Suzuki, D. and Knudson, P. (1992). *Wisdom of the Elders: Honoring Sacred Native Visions of Nature*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Norm Sheehan** is an Aboriginal person born in Mudgee, NSW. He has worked for over twenty years in Aboriginal education in NSW and Tasmania. Norm is currently a Lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland, St. Lucia. Norm is currently completing his PhD in Education and his main research interests are Indigenous Knowledge and Aboriginal community development.
- Polly Walker** (Cherokee) has a PhD on Conflict Transformation from the University of Queensland. She has published in a wide range of journals and presented at conferences around the world. Polly is a lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland.

