



# 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.

# Aboriginal Knowledge Narratives and Country: Marri Kunkimba Putj Putj Marrideyan

Payi Linda Ford

Post Pressed, Mount Gravatt, 2010, i+196pp., ISBN 978 1 921214 71 4

Reviewed by Michael Christie, Professor of Education, Faculty of Law, Education, Business and Arts, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory, 0909, Australia

Payi Linda Ford takes us on a journey from the mangrove swamps and grasslands of her Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu people south west of Darwin, Northern Territory, to the concrete jungle of a small regional Australian university. Her quest is to find ways to institutionalise her traditional Indigenous — or in her language *Tyikim* — knowledge practices in a teacher education course. She is not searching for a general theory of Australian postcolonial work, but looking closely as a *Tyikim* knowledge authority at a particular problem in a particular context. Her focus is discerning authentic *Tyikim* education for *Tyikim* students under the guidance of *Tyikim* knowledge authorities. The question of *Padakoot* (non-Indigenous) students' access to *Tyikim* knowledge, while a significant one, is not at all the focus of this book.

Like exploring the grasslands and swamps of other people's country, the book's beginning is rather tough going, full of strange objects, words and ideas, of memories and expressions that locate us in a place which is very unfamiliar, but we have a good, caring and meticulous guide. The author takes great care from the outset to define precisely what she is talking about ('the expansion of the *Tyikim* community domain of knowing, being and doing into a previously alien landscape'), and what she is *not* talking about ('cross-cultural education and its many derivate forms').

By chapter 2, we know what we are looking for as we are taken on a journey through the landscapes of Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu and Marrithiel knowledge. While most of us have never been to Payi's country — many of us will find quite familiar the sense of place and relatedness, and to some extent even the characteristic epistemology, metaphysics and ontology, the evidential practices, the histories, the local systems of authority and accountability, intellectual property and ethics that *Tyikim* bring with them from home to a university, and which are routinely misrecognised, colonised, devalued, patronised, and exploited.

We emerge from *Tyikim* country to the university world in chapter 3, positioning the study in academic theory. Much of the literature reviewed and critiqued here we have read elsewhere, but Payi's account poignantly

reminds us of the extreme difficulty some *Padakoot* academics experience accepting even the possibility of authentic, viable, robust knowledge practices on country in Aboriginal Australia, often daunting those *Tyikim* students who were never completely sure they wanted to be at university in the first place. The author here opens the question of the history of *Tyikim* access to higher education, leading to a discussion on place and space which become relevant to the notion of landscape and the critique of 'enclaves' developed later in the book. What Payi and her *Tyikim* knowledge community were working to achieve in the research reported here is utterly different, and in fact in some way divergent from the goals and practices of conventional entities 'established for the encouragement and enhancement of *Tyikim* student participation in university-based studies'.

The methodology chapter takes us back to country, where traditional knowledge authorities mobilise metaphors associated with the routine practices of everyday and ceremonial life to elaborate an embodied and performative epistemology that, as we soon see, presents a profound challenge to knowledge work of universities. Payi has chosen — or been given — the metaphor of *Mirrwana*: the tough and poisonous cycad nut, which, through careful and precise ceremonial processes, is converted into a sustaining sacred bread, particularly in the late dry season, where people gather together for ceremonies and some other sources of food are scarce. Again we hear voices in this description that we will not fully understand, but here in her writing the author is again *performing* the partial (in both senses of the word) knowledge practices. No one knows everything. Everyone brings something of their own. There is no single ontology. We are introduced to participatory action research — which is not conflated with *Tyikim* knowledge work. There are significant differences, for example, to do with the special status of narrative in a *Tyikim* epistemology, with the way in which new materialities are 'unfolded' through careful, collaborative knowledge work, the way in which 'rightness' as a truth criterion is negotiated, and as we come to see, the particular authority of community elders in a *Tyikim* knowledge practice. It is by no means a simple business, and to keep us on track, Payi has produced a painting,

*Mirrwana and Wurrkama Model for Accessing Tyikim Knowledge systems on the Landscapes of Universities*, under the authority of her 'mentor, supervisor and boss', Koonie Koonie Ngulilkang Nancy Daiyi, and given us a finely detailed explanation of all that is symbolised — or at least all she is willing or allowed to tell us.

By chapter 5 we are ready for the rollercoaster ride of negotiating and implementing the research — within both her own Marranunggu knowledge traditions, and the fraught university community. I know both the author and the university, but any reader who does not will still be unable to miss the hard work, integrity, collegiality and good humour that brought her through this long and difficult journey. From the original refusal and then, after a longish proving period, the final, sudden granting of permission by her elders to use her ancestral knowledge in university research ('You could have knocked me down with a feather'), through the toxic cloak-and-dagger politics of the university, the complex process of finding good supervisory teams (both *Tyikim* and academic), the horrors of ethics approval, and the building of teams of support and advice to help 'fire up' the landscape to make it productive, we finally make it to the classroom. All that has gone before can now be seen as constitutive of this particular space and practice, for these particular *Tyikim* students (self-selecting for the research from a larger group of students) studying 'ETU323 Language and Culture in Educational Settings'. It is a fascinating story of how a particular *Tyikim* teaching–research practice mobilised, implemented and renewed ancestral knowledge practices in this foreign and dangerous setting. We are given some hints and analysis (I wanted more) of the peculiar and unique sociotechnical practices that emerged when the students, the staff and the community members, the bicycles, pushchairs, barbecued sausages, the family members and laughter all came together. While we read very little of what the *Tyikim* students brought from their own *Tyikim* knowledge traditions to contribute to the unit (I wanted more), it is made clear how what is achieved through the Mirrwana/Wurrkama model is quite different from what the traditional Indigenous enclave system within Australian universities are interested in or capable of delivering. That is the work of chapter 6.

The program lasted for one semester, but was never developed into the sustained, generative practice within the university, or within the faculty, that it should have. Why? Many reasons are offered, including the mind boggling number of changes within the university's Indigenous policies, structures and practices. There is also the question of the support given from Payi's extended family for her research work that contributed to the

success of the teaching program. For people like these to remain involved they need not only a welcoming and safe space and practice, but they also need to be paid properly for their contribution. *Tyikim* knowledge is owned and has value. On the other side of the coin, and in complete contrast, developed further in chapter 7, are the ongoing attempts by particular university staff to appropriate *Tyikim* knowledge to be included as content in the university curriculum, or attempts to appropriate Payi as a token authentic Indigenous researcher in projects into which she had had no conceptual input whatsoever. But she does not dwell on these offences. Rather she goes on in the final pages to draw some striking conclusions: She points out the critical role of *Tyikim* knowledge authorities who are not part of the academic scene to be carefully and respectfully involved as supervisors of knowledge work within the university setting, and the need for *Tyikim* knowledge to be developed with *Tyikim* only cohorts of students, in *Tyikim* only spaces (physical spaces as well as curricular places). Then she reflects upon the pedagogical principles which have emerged from her reflection upon the work she and her colleagues, family and students did together (and here I cannot help but add my own reflections that emerged as I read the book as both a narrative and a performance of a life-research experience).

*Narrative as pedagogy*: The *Tyikim* world is made out of narrative. Facts are made out of stories, not the other way around. Memory is not history. Narratives bring out the joy and grief of a place and its people alongside their knowledge. *Relationality as pedagogy*: Create an intellectual and physical space where there are no a priori distinctions between the natural and cultural, between research and teaching, between language and reality. *Discursiveness as pedagogy*: As we work together building performances of who we are and how we can go on together making futures different from pasts, it is the laughter, the good faith, the aesthetics, and the 'rightness' or 'fittingness', of what we produce which evidence the truth of our work. *Political integrity as pedagogy*: I think of the authority of the elders to make the final verifications. Knowledge work is not a democratic process. Some people have more authority than others. And finally, *Indigenist research as pedagogy*: in a *Tyikim* epistemology knowledge production is a collaborative, performative practice. Everyone contributes, but differently. Everyone learns, and differently. And this again is the achievement of this remarkable book. It not only *describes* a unique and honourable Indigenous knowledge practice, it *performs* it.