



# 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*.

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## Research and Reconciliation

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*'Tis education forms the common mind: Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined (Alexander Pope)<sup>1</sup>.*

This paper is based on a workshop, which the authors co-presented on the politics and practice of research at *Trajectories: an International Colloquium on Intercultural Musics in the East Asia/Western Pacific Region*, held in the Department of Contemporary Music Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney on March 12, 2001

### Introduction

Drawing on musical research collaborations conducted between 1992-2001, this article upholds the *spirit* of Reconciliation to be an indispensable *modus operandi* for intercultural projects in Aboriginal Australia. The authors share insights into protocols, principles, problems and practices of research, with personal resolutions of issues such as authorisation, representation, respect/trust building (in the face of ingrained racism/paternalism), detachment/sociability, and conformity/compromise all demonstrating that the operating notion of Reconciliation provides a wholesome framework for research endeavour, and that, conversely, research conducted on the

basis of mutual goodwill contributes to symbolic and practical Reconciliation.

### Brief history of the reconciliation movement

The Federal Parliament set up the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation under the *Council for Reconciliation Act* in 1991. The Council envisaged 'a united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all'.<sup>2</sup> State and Territory government policies geared to eradicating Indigenous identity operated for 70 years and conditioned contemporary thinking so much that many citizens use the denigration of Indigenous people as a convenient way of making them appear less deserving.<sup>3</sup>

The decade-long efforts of the Council for Reconciliation provided a glimmer of hope in this wilderness, but for Indigenous people there can be no reconciliation without justice and the guarantee of a proud and healthy future on their own land. The movement gained momentum at Corroboree 2000, the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and the Melbourne Walk for Reconciliation on December 3, 2000 which was attended by an estimated 200-400,000 people. When the Council terminated on 31 December 2000, a 'people's foundation' called Reconciliation Australia was formed to take over the 'unfinished business' which the government had relegated to the 'too hard basket'.

The foundation facilitates debates, discussions and forums based on the 1997 Reconciliation Convention. Reconciliation Learning Circles provide opportunities for members of the public to participate in round table discussions based on eight modules containing topics, issues, discussion starters and activities. The 2,000 Reconciliation Kits currently circulating Australia do not supply the 'whole truth' about the process, but encourage a non-tokenistic method of learning. Circles typically meet in community halls or homes with Aboriginal personalities such as sporting stars contributing as guest speakers. Members tackle recommended books by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors.<sup>4</sup> The leader of a Learning Circle is just a facilitator: a different person may lead each meeting, and everyone is permitted to speak honestly without being cut off.

### Politics and public ignorance

Unfortunately the logic of Reconciliation is involved in a wider contestive field which stalls its spiritual progress. Whereas Aboriginal 'sorry business' actually involves mourning and grieving, non-Aboriginal politicians resort to kicking the word 'sorry' about like a political football. This is to be expected because politics survives and thrives on the creation of oppositional energy. Its very nature is adversarial and divisive, stereotyping the *white perpetrator* and the *black self-as-victim*. Politics is therefore impotent when faced with symbolic Reconciliation because its central aim of healing requires mutual respect and the honouring of differences.

Respect is absent because Australians lack collective knowledge and understanding of the nation's true history. Few know the Indigenous medicines and foods of their own region, let alone the creation stories of map names. This is a loss shared by all, but one which can be partly restored via research. Since research constitutes an objective search for the 'truth'<sup>5</sup>, non-Aboriginal researchers must begin by acknowledging Aboriginal absence and Aboriginal silence in their own stories. The extent of loss in Victoria, for example, is unspeakable, since within one

generation of contact, 85% of the Indigenous population were dead and all were dispossessed. Through informed discourse, researchers have privileged opportunities to expatiate the causes of such events to an ignorant population — a population amongst which most twentieth century school students could name several Native American tribes, but no Australian Aboriginal tribes.

### 'A season of listening'<sup>6</sup>

Solutions are always provisional, but given the academy's tendency to place higher value on cultural products than on cultural processes,<sup>7</sup> *listening* is a key tenet of Reconciliation consensus that merits deeper applicability to the philosophy and outworkings of research institutions. *Core listening* is a genuine value-adding process; it accelerates individual learning curves whilst providing personal enrichment. In fact some participants at Reconciliation Learning Circles listen so attentively that they need to take breathing space to sort through the reconciling of the two cultures and learning styles. Fortunately, most tend to return to their groups.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, the success of cross-cultural research depends heavily on *yarn-up* — a spontaneous sharing of cultural and social values that creates a common ground for dialogue and mutuality, for speaking as well as listening.<sup>9</sup> Dialogue inevitably challenges the paternalistic paradigm, redressing non-Aboriginal preconceptions and unexamined prejudice in ways ranging from the gentle and subtle to the raw and confronting. In the words of Marcia Langton: 'Reconciliation needs humanity and vulnerability'<sup>10</sup>.

Members of Reconciliation Circles and researchers alike will find that — exactly because 'stories' are personal — they are also intensely political in their expression of cultural values. Yet as their content is digested, the possibility for a listener to discover what really informs his or her *own* thinking and behaviour also increases. At a Reconciliation Workshop held at World Vision, Melbourne on October 17 2000, consultant Bev

Kennedy suggested that one's personal attitude should always be:

The more I learn, the more I realise how ignorant I really am.

To conduct research in the *spirit* of Reconciliation, one must attempt to listen *in the land* as well as *to the people*, valuing their culture and artistic traditions, and respecting the essential connection between the Indigenous arts, culture, heritage, land, sea and traditional law in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society. In this respect, non-Aboriginal researchers can be as well-educated as they like in these areas yet still fail to 'touch base', just as do-gooders who raise funds for Aboriginal causes can by-pass the listening and thinking process which critically questions society's relations of domination and subordination. Aboriginal people want non-Aboriginal Australians to listen to them with their hearts and their imaginations because art and spirituality matter to them. They are passionate about the land, about community, about love, loss and family. But as listeners, are non-Aboriginal Australians close enough to the earth, and do they have wide, open spaces in their minds? Anthropologist Jane Houston had this to say of the Westerner's interior complexity:

We have no resonance, no meditation, no communion. The Westerner tries to find his soul under a microscope — where is it? Our centre of presence is always outside of us ... We destroy the world. We carve it off and call it our project ... But in destroying the people who belong to the earth we have condemned ourselves to become alien to the earth.<sup>11</sup>

## Music and reconciliation

From the authors' disciplinary stance, the common factor linking research with Reconciliation has been music's inherent potential and demonstrated capacity for bridging cultural divides. Strictly speaking, music may not be a universal language, but it *is* a universal form of human expression. Music performance also facilitates narrative, ritual and symbolic transactions which inform and educate non-

Aboriginal Australia on historical and cultural matters. Music and sociability are common threads that unite people and build networks. At the Corroboree 2000 ceremony in Sydney, for example, people sang, clapped and swayed to repeated choruses of songs, and music sticks (*timpilypa*) were chosen as symbols of the Journey of Healing because they are used to call people together. 'Two are needed to make music', said Lowitja O'Donoghue, 'expressing the need for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work together'.<sup>12</sup> At the Melbourne Walk for Reconciliation on December 3 2000, Australia's first Aboriginal pop star, Jimmy Little, was there to 'add his energy' to what he called 'a moment of grace, fellowship and fun'<sup>13</sup>. Likewise, through his cultural work at schools, camps, museums, etc, Herb Patten has impacted the formal and informal educational sphere and experienced personal empowerment.

## A cross-cultural research account

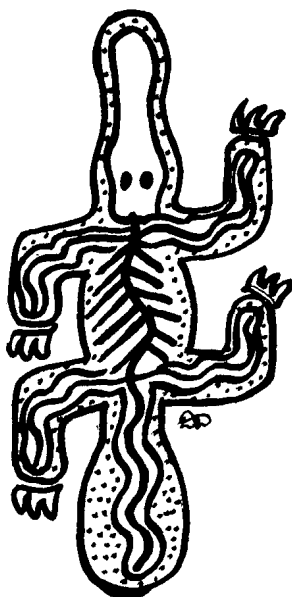
"Someone told me that my gumleaf was *"not really a musical instrument"*", commented Herb Patten at one of his performances in 1992. Robin Ryan felt stunned, and decided then and there that the history and significance of the gumleaf as a dynamic instrument in the service of those whose lives it reflected and whose dignity it celebrated needed urgent uncovering. Herb caught the vision, secured support from the Head of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, and played a central role in deciding what information should be gathered and what should be done with it. This discovery process was aided by the insights of several musicians and Elders, some of whom have since passed on.

In addition to 'history', the authors used 'historia' — a different yet valid kind of knowledge of the past based on appeal to ancient or modern authority and myth<sup>14</sup> — to document ways in which Indigenous people conceive of the gumleaf's origins and roots in the culture — real or imagined. Those who participated regarded the gumleaf as a 'traditional instrument'; besides which their performances of Western tunes on

gumleaves over at least six generations up until the present time have also come to be regarded as 'traditional' in their own right. Taken singly, the beliefs of research consultants did not *define* the origins of Indigenous leaf playing, but considered together with other sources, they furnished a set of cultural clues (see Ryan, 1999). Gumleaf playing can be read as a metaphor for a distinctive world of common meaning — namely a culture's own self-image. In this context, *authenticity* depends upon the arts still being rooted in, and enlivened by, the true spirit of the Aboriginal people rather than adherence to unchanging forms.

From at least the late nineteenth century, the gumleaf's status as a signifier of Indigenous cultures became infused with the strains of hymnody and popular music from Australia and abroad. From 1900 the Wallaga Lake Gumleaf Band and its splinter groups integrated a localised form of traditional Aboriginal musical practice with Western repertoire over a period of nine decades, an inheritance upon which Herb leans heavily (see Patten and Ryan, 1998).

In the popular imagination the gumleaf is an icon, a site for upholding nationalistic agendas, but Herb takes on a traditional musician's role to reclaim Indigenous space. The Australian Indigenous cultural revival typifies other movements across the globe which conjure up links with extant cultures and bolster political



agendas to forge new artistic paradigms. We therefore adopted another approach to this topic — that of conceptualising the habitat as the 'raw material' of cultural elaboration. Drawing on the Aboriginal peoples' multi-layered levels of understanding about habitat, wildlife and totemism, we identified some predominant native plants and recorded various leaf birdcalls. Herb's leaf performances provide him with a site for creative cultural response to contemporary racial tensions and the push for Reconciliation.

### Cross-cultural research problems

This intercultural research foray was constrained by several inherent factors. Revisionist attitudes towards research uphold that the interests of Indigenous research associates must always be protected. *Observation from the outside* and *representation from the inside* is a safe law of thumb, although Said (1988: viii) points out that the claim that *Aborigines are the only ones who can speak by virtue of their Aboriginality* can be 'as exclusivist, limited, provincial and discriminatory in its suppressions and repressions as the master discourses of colonialism and elitism'. His argument is based on the principle that insiders don't necessarily provide 'better' accounts of themselves; that people can be known by others in different ways, and that this can help them to gain valuable insights about themselves. Attwood (1992: xiii) stresses that the problematic of non-Aboriginal representations lies not in the fact that one speaks, but in the particular *nature* of *how* one speaks, arguing that the degree to which one dilutes and distorts the lived experience and worldview of the *other* determines whether representations are reprehensible or not.

Reconciliation is a two-way process. As non-Aboriginal members of the public recognise the steps that Aboriginal people themselves have taken towards Reconciliation, they are motivated to make their own contribution, but this may mean *waiting*, since Aboriginal peoples are not bound to jump to the tune of the Western clock! They will naturally want to ask: Who is going to

reproduce this knowledge, and for whom? For what purpose is it being documented, and what will its benefits be? How do we know who to trust?

Respect has to be earned and this works both ways. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Policy Principles and Priorities of the Australia Council include cultural diversity and pluralism, the right to receive respect, and the right to fully express Indigenous spirituality, integrity and authority through the arts. Picking up on one of these tenets, it was necessary for us to recognise and respect differences in our spiritual heritage. Workshops in this area would particularly enhance researchers' sensitivities towards the belief systems of individual Indigenous people who have grown up with mixed Aboriginal cosmological and Christian inheritance.

Paternalism is still embedded — even in the thinking of some Aboriginal people — and until governments deal with the underlying issues, archotyping and stereotyping will persist. In the midst of this *us mob/you mob* dichotomy, humour and wit often prevail, forcefully demonstrated by Melbourne activist Gary Foley's quip that 'white women who enter Aboriginal Affairs are either mercenaries, misfits, missionaries or morons!'<sup>15</sup> Robin Ryan once interviewed an Elder whose reply cleverly interrogated her whiteness: 'What's your talent? What's your belief system? And what's the most important thing in life to you?' Having gained the upper hand, the Elder generously shared with Robin some of the knowledge he had acquired as a 'professor' by the standards of his own culture.

Effective communication skills may come naturally, but they may also have to be learnt. Once having established a rapport with Indigenous representatives, a non-Aboriginal researcher needs to reflect upon his/her topic from a liminal position, i.e. without taking on problems that aren't really his or her 'pigeon'. This involves common sense, detachment, and respect for social and cultural boundaries. At the same time, neither research nor Reconciliation exist in a

social or ethical vacuum: both are negotiated through the demonstrative expressions of the parties involved. Indigenous Australians will be quick to express whether so-called 'informed' discussions about their history and culture approximate the truth.

With deference to Attwood's maxim that all knowledge is *interpretive* and that academic disciplines are just *discourses* which construct or produce knowledge (1992: xiii-xiv), non-Aboriginal researchers can't claim to be personally reforming their research attitudes. New canons emerging as a basis for Indigenous studies are being developed through engagement with Aboriginal critics, with Aboriginal voices increasingly providing the framework in which non-Aboriginal researchers work, and increasingly 'possessing their possession' by doing the research themselves.<sup>16</sup> Indigenous researchers are the custodians of valuable cultural knowledge that is being reproduced for the benefit of their communities, whilst their activist representations are effectively challenging non-Aboriginal canons.

## Conclusion

At the national level, Reconciliation is not easy to do. The 'turn around in thinking' required by members of the public involves acceptance, forgiveness, respect for differences, and — ultimately — healing through restitution. Meantime, far better to make clumsy attempts at communication than to remain indifferent, because there is still a huge gap between the rhetoric and practice of Reconciliation. The spirit of the *yarn-up* facilitates the beginnings of grass-roots Reconciliation: it projects an Indigenous view of our shared history and present experience which defies the '-ologies' and '-isms' of Western research jargon.

No intercultural project is too insignificant to furnish creative support for the push towards a reconciled Australia. The authors' gumleaf music study, for example, pro-actively affirmed the instrument's Indigenous cultural status, with Herb

and others reshaping a unique fringe musical practice — a window of opportunity for elements far larger than musical repertoire to be shared.

The crucial point for researchers is that cultural outpourings merit more radical reconstructions than print publication. We can take time out to reflect on what we're doing, and search for new ways of doing research that are creative, questioning, open and co-operative. But the bottom line is that we need to move on from debating the problems to implementing Indigenous rights and knowledge. Reconciliation Circles involve input from those Reconciliation effects the most — the Indigenous people. It is only natural that more and more non-Aboriginal Australians will want to draw on these lives so steeped in collective Indigenous history and experience, for the motivating force behind research and Reconciliation is a desire to journey into a better place:

In this realm, there is a new kind of freedom, where it is more rewarding to explore than to reach conclusions, more satisfying to wonder than to know, and more exciting to search than to stay put (Wheatley 1997: 1).<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The maxim which inspired journalist Terry Lane to write *As the Twig is Bent* (Collins Dove, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous peoples were formally excluded from the constitutional landscape of Australia when the Federation of states occurred in 1901.

<sup>3</sup> In Victoria, for example, Northland Secondary College in Preston refused the Kennett government decision that it should close at the end of 1992. The government consequently starved it of funds, changed the locks and brought in guard dogs. With community support, this resilient intercultural school weathered a protracted legal battle, re-emerged vindicated, and in 1996 introduced a pilot course to prepare students for the music industry (based on Guy, 1998: 16).

<sup>4</sup> The works of Henry Reynolds, for instance, pile up evidence of the 'hidden' history of contact encounters from letters, journals, editorials, and official reports — and let it speak for itself. By providing the unspoken wider context in which the personal life stories 'heard' elsewhere were lived, Reynolds corroborates their

'truth'.

<sup>5</sup> The Macquarie Dictionary (1985: 1446) defines "research" as diligent and systematic enquiry or investigation into a subject in order to establish facts and principles.

<sup>6</sup> Expression derived from *Guide to a Season of Listening*, an undated booklet published by the Melbourne Diocesan Working Group on Aboriginal Matters, Anglican Church of Australia.

<sup>7</sup> Based on a comment about the ethnomusicological academy by Turner (1999: 144).

<sup>8</sup> Comment made by Reconciliation consultant Bev Kennedy on 17 October 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Based on Attwood (1992: xiv).

<sup>10</sup> *Awaye*, 8 December 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from ABC *Encounter* series, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> *Walking Together* 29, August 2000: 17.

<sup>13</sup> Introductory comment to Little's performance.

<sup>14</sup> Based on Kartomi (1997: 224).

<sup>15</sup> *Awaye*, 3 November 2000.

<sup>16</sup> At the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) at the University of Adelaide, for example, Indigenous students are now assigned research projects from the outset (Turner, 1999: 144).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted at the Reconciliation Workshop, World Vision, Melbourne on 17 October 2000. □

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Herb is a renowned performer and teacher of Koori cultural traditions, author of the first CD/booklet on gumleaf playing. He is the proud nephew of activist Jack Patten, and has tribal affiliations to the Ulupna, Wiradjurie and Kurnai. Herb's enthusiastic public relations skills have enhanced the process of Reconciliation through his work as Aboriginal Cultural Officer for the Cities of Dandenong (1993) and Melbourne (1996), his performances at Sorry Day celebrations, the Melbourne Museum, and countless mainstream events. In 1996 the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Incorporated honoured Herb for his valued services to the Koori community.
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Robin wrote the first Master's thesis on urban Aboriginal music through Monash University, Victoria in 1992, and her PhD (*A Spiritual Sound, A Lonely Sound*, 1999) documents the Aboriginal gumleaf music tradition in Australia. Robin is a teacher, music critic, published songwriter and musician who pro-actively supports the use of Indigenous performers and educators in the secondary and tertiary sphere. She has published joint-authored articles with Herb Patten and avidly supports Reconciliation Learning Circles in local community contexts.

