



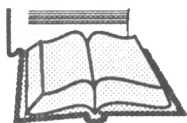
# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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**Warlpiri Women's Voices: Our Lives Our History**

Stories collected by Georgina Napangardi and Janet Nakamarra Long, and edited by Petronella Vaarzon-Morel

IAD Press, Alice Springs, 1995, 118 pp.

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*Warlpiri Women's Voices* emerged from a project initiated by Vaarzon-Morel in 1985, to study the impact of social and economic changes on Aboriginal women from Wirliyajarrayi (Willowra) in the Northern Territory. Engaged at the time in anthropological research, she proposed to record some senior women's stories, prepare translations from Warlpiri into Standard English, and provide commentaries. After stories were recorded, they were taken back to the community for approval and revision. This was a participatory research venture, with the entire community having input into the accurate transcribing of the text, and into publication decisions.

When that initial research was published, it became clear that there was sufficient interest to develop the project further. This was done with the financial assistance of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD). The final product is the result of a collaboration with the women over ten years.

The book is a collection of narratives concerning the lives of women from Willowra on the Lander River. As they tell us repeatedly, they are from families 'who stayed here and did not go to other places'. These are women who have a traditional relationship with the land, and can speak of what life was like when they were children, as well as commenting on the changes they have observed. This is significant because now 'people from other places are living on [their] fathers' sacred land'. The information the

women share reflects their unique ownership and long personal history of the land. Not intended as an ethnographic study, this book presents us with the women's own voices and lets local history emerge from the women's own stories. The story tellers participated with the two-fold goal of recording history for the children of their community, and of educating non-Indigenous readers about history from an Aboriginal perspective.

Most of the stories were told in Warlpiri, with the exception of one woman who spoke in Aboriginal English. Many pages are divided into columns, with the story in its original form and in Standard English. The editor regrets that they could not represent the women's body language in the text, and tries to remedy this with the use of clear photographs of the women telling stories, performing dances or engaging in daily life. The fact that the stories are recorded in Warlpiri is useful in providing a written record of a language. Although it is hard to know whether things may be lost in the translations into Standard English, it is significant that the women themselves, and not the linguists, were the primary translators. Even in Standard English, the stories the individual women tell sound lively and passionate.

The book is divided into three parts: 'Following the tracks of our ancestors: living from country', 'Olden time: the first white men', and 'Changes'. Each individual story is given a title and short biographies of the story tellers are included. Often cultural or historical detail is given before each narrative. The division of the book is quite remarkable, illustrating

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how much life has changed for women over their lifetimes. When they remember their childhoods, it is often with the memory of collecting bush foods, hunting and performing traditional dances and ceremonies. Later childhood, for many of them, meant hiding from the first white men. Recounts of life in the 1940s document what life was like for them as young women beginning their own families, working on cattle stations and then living in 'army time' (a period that some of them remember fondly as 'free time', when people were free to live how they wished in their own country). Reading first-hand about the conditions people were forced to live in reminds the reader of Australia's shocking track record. The women remember being fed only on 'meat water' (bones boiled up as soup). It was not until 1968 that equal wages were awarded to Aboriginal employees, and 1973-74 when they began receiving the same entitlements as other Australians. There is a striking contrast between the abundance of food, freedom and care they remember as children, and the welfare and handouts they survived on after their land had been taken over. As adults, they discuss recent history, and their recent involvement in Lands Rights issues.

An interesting historical and cultural view of education is presented. Molly Nungarrayi speaks of having become well educated at her grandfather's knee, and it is not until much later that formal schools came into existence. Eventually, teachers were not only brought in to instruct the children, but to distribute food and provide a public health care role within the community. There is some implication in the stories that children used to be better behaved, and better informed about traditional ways. This also appears to be true regarding health issues. The women remember that 'in the olden days' people looked after each other's health. For instance, women did not have the problems giving birth that they do now. Yet these things are told without bitterness. Change seems inevitable, and what the women want for their children is to be able to adjust to change and to succeed without losing touch with their own culture. A book of stories such as this one makes the point without preaching. It is impossible to ignore the comparison between the lives of the women sixty years ago, and their grandchildren's lives now without worrying about what has been lost.

The stories are informative in presenting what might be the last recollections of certain customs and ceremonies. The women remember having been told about the ways marriages were arranged, and although some of these ways remain true today, they lament that the young people have stopped taking them very seriously.

Footnotes at the end of the stories are useful and instructive as well. For example, the editor allows herself to comment on features of language being used (e.g. that 'sideways' language is sometimes used to refer to people without mentioning their names), to give other references that corroborate a story, or to give historical background. This enriches the text, and confirms the accuracy of the women's recounts. For instance, the poignant recollections of the 'Coniston massacre', when white men killed over 100 Aboriginal men is told by the women, who were children at the time. They recall hiding in caves. Several women remember the story of an old man who 'sang' a white man's rifle so that it jammed. These stories are documented in other sources, and the references are given, both in footnotes and a list of references at the back of the book.

Milly Nangala says, 'We always spoke out hard and well', when she speaks of their fight for land ownership. These are women who speak up hard and well in telling all their stories. The value in hearing people speak in the first person about their own lives cannot be denied, and books like this provide a much needed Indigenous Australian perspective. It is a clearly produced book, well laid out and with good photographs. It would be of value to all readers, including educators who would find it a useful way to present an alternative angle on history. □

