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**The dead as participants
challenged by the Yolngu Aboriginal child learner at Gangan**

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Special Edition: Ethnographic Stories of Disconcertment

Guest Editors: Michael Christie and Helen Verran



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The dead as participants: challenged by the *Yolŋu* Aboriginal child learner at Gāṅgaṅ

Helen Verran

Wurran, the black-legged crane, is painted on the outer east-facing wall of the school building at Gāṅgaṅ. Its wings are outspread; its head atop the long neck turned to one side. Many of the children who learn in this building are wurran; maybe this is their mother-place. South west from Nhulunbuy, it takes about half an hour in a light plane to get to Gāṅgaṅ. Gāṅgaṅ is in the homeland of my mothers' clan. Years ago I was adopted into the Marika clan, as part of being put on-notice that the work I was about to undertake as a teacher-educator and mathematics curriculum developer involved learning to be subject to, as much as teaching/learning/being what the subject is. On this visit I was to learn that in the past, my lot, Australians of Anglo descent, had taken a fatal interest in this new family of mine. I was to experience profound disconcertment over what is considered proper as the content of a junior primary school reading primer. This had me seriously reconsidering the role of the dead in curriculum and its development, and the agencies of objects in the *Yolŋu* world. The numbers of a new maths curriculum, the dead of Gāṅgaṅ, the problem-solving figure of the teacher educator/curriculum developer, the children who live happily in the present at Gāṅgaṅ... all suddenly seemed on a par, mixing up together in the same cultural space. I could no longer find a basis for discerning what entities I was supposed to know and how. I did not even know what to do with the befuddled wonderment that assailed, me sitting there, silent on the verandah.

I have arrived in Gāṅgaṅ along with *yapa* (sisters) who are teachers. We've come, together with other gurrutu, (kin folk from other clan groups), other teachers, both *balanda* and *Yolŋu*, for a workshop. We are involved in negotiating means for incorporating *Yolŋu* knowledge into the curriculum of *Yolŋu* schools. We see ourselves as working at a fundamental level thinking about how the logic of the *Yolŋu* world can be expressed in classroom lessons, connected to but also separated from the Western logic of the orthodox primary school curriculum. We are making what we call a *Garma* curriculum. From a *Yolŋu* point of view this involves negotiating in particular places at particular times with particular people present. We were told by elders to call such negotiations *Galtha Rom* workshops. We began with the maths curriculum. The new curriculum has at its core the insight that the property of recursivity is shared by the numbers of Western maths and the elements of gurrutu, the formalised *Yolŋu* kinship system. Although their lessons have been informed by this thinking for only a few months, already children in Yirrkala school

are scoring better in the Territory-wide tests that have recently been instituted in the Northern Territory school system.

Buildings of corrugated iron sheets held up with bush timber flank the airstrip. A teacher from the school meets the plane, and accompanying us on the walk to the school building he tells us that these buildings were retrieved from the first Gāngan settlement established in 1970, over there to the west, closer to the river. They were moved when the airstrip was built, east-west across a small rise. Houses with sand verandahs face outwards from the communal shower and telephone box. The Telecom logo seems oddly out of place—so orange. Set on a small hummock over to our right and behind us as we walk, screened by bushes, a steel tower with its dish and an array of solar panels. The light green colourbond school buildings face each other across a wide connecting verandah where we'll sleep. It funnels the breeze into the classrooms through open louvers. As we select our sleeping positions a young woman, mother for me, promises that tomorrow she will show me country.

At smoko the next day the plane brings more visitors. Aboriginal teacher education students in their final year of training have come to observe our workshop; Tiwi, Warlpiri, and Goulburn Island people. After lunch we visit the lagoon, seemingly the centre of life in Gāngan, a wide deep waterhole where the sweet fleshed baypinja (saratoga), lungfish and large barramundi live. We strangers all wade in along with the children. Our hosts don't, and we are teased. When our sweat, the sweat of strangers, is carried downstream, a tremendous storm will blow in—the place is cared for in that way. We impetuous visitors retreat back to the edge, and to no-one's surprise a storm does blow in later in the afternoon, whipping the sheets of butchers paper on and through which our negotiations are being conducted off the wall where they've been secured with masking tape.

Work is done for the day. I am trailing behind a mother of mine from another clan; I have learned to call her *Nāṅdi*. She's someone I know well since I've worked with her in the past. She's head teacher of the homelands schools collective. I hurry and stumble in an effort to catch-up without shouting for her to slow down. She has set out with the serrated bread knife, and I have little notion of what she is looking for. I'm curious. I want to call out, but I'm worried about the sounds that will emerge from my mouth. I so easily embarrass myself when I try to talk. I rehearse softly as I hurry along, and at last feel able to sing out. With some relief I hear approximately the right sounds emerge; she turns and slows her pace.

We are looking, I am told, for a particular sort of small tree whose inner bark is stripped off and used for making a particular sort of string. Near the bottom of the airstrip mother *Nāṅdi* dives into the bushes and the bread knife becomes an axe to cut down three sturdy sticks about a metre long. As thick as a child's wrist they are full of sap, and surprisingly heavy and pleasant to handle. Seated back amongst the others around the fire, the stick ends are bruised and the bark frayed and stripped. The perfectly white and naked sticks are discarded, flung aside. Later these become crutches in the hands of a young girl, causing laughter as she imitates one of the teachers who

years ago lost a leg to leukemia. They look a most satisfying toy and I feel an odd surge of envy for the child both for having such toys and for being so embedded, so respected it seems, in her family.

Several of my mothers separate the inner and outer barks, then using the back of an axe head—awkwardly for she is sitting and the axe is heavy—one of them crushes the inner bark against a flat stone, cring.... cring.... cring.... Later my brother uses the same axe head to straighten the bread knife, re-flattening the serrations. Among the group of women, mothers and sisters I sit and separate out the flattened bark into strips—so satisfying to sit with bundles of fibres growing in one's lap. But of course not all bundles are equal. Some are regular in width and length, in other bundles, like the one in my lap, the fibres are ragged and lumpy. Accreting the bundles is enough for most of us, satisfying our enthusiasm for handcraft. I watch as the more determined and the more skilled produce fine string by rubbing two fibres on their thighs. I don't try. I know from experience that I'll get a chaffed and sticky thigh and lumpy useless string.

Young men walk by in single file calling out and being called to. They carry coloured creels of fishing line on their heads, baypinṅa swinging from their hands. Later two girls hand over plump parcels of thick moist paper-bark tied neatly with strips of banana leaf. Baypinṅa steamed over a slow fire. The parcels are still warm, the flesh is firm, white, and sweet. We all end up with sticky fingers.

As promised, my young plump mother shows me country. The *yati* (ceremony ground) with its huge tree, the river. About halfway along the lagoon we visited at lunchtime we stop at a sandy spot, naturally clear of bush, dominated by a large, shady fruiting tree. 'It was through there', my mother indicates, 'Along that rise you see there across on the other side of the lagoon, that Bilarni (Bill Harney) and his men rode'. She points back towards the *yati*, 'All the men were doing men's business, way back there...' This is the story of a 1920s massacre in which the Dhalwaṅu clan was very nearly wiped out; from which today it still struggles to recover. As she goes on, tears begin to stream down my cheeks, quite unbidden. The place becomes its history. My young mother gestures, making a map of the horror, pointing out the landscape features that had their place in the killing, the dying, the surviving. The hollow water lily stems through which some of those who take to the water breathe; the huge rotting log behind which the rifle shooters kneel; the trees behind which the Dhalwaṅu men stood as they prepared to throw their spears. The shots crack noiselessly around me. Invisible children fling themselves into the water as it remains undisturbed. The young woman, member of my adoptive mother clan, becomes a distressed crane, dragging her broken legs, furrowing the sand we stood on.

Later back at the schoolrooms, my guide goes into the teachers' store room and brings me a small green covered booklet. The story she has told me has been written down in both Gumatj and English. It has gruesome amateurish line drawings illustrating it.

All the men were at a private ceremony site in the bush nearby. The children and women were at the camp. The other women and children had gone gathering yams, berries, goannas, and freshwater turtles.

None of them knew that a party of men with guns were riding towards the camp on horses. They were led by Bill Harney, a yellafella from the Roper River area. The armed band of men rode into the camp and shot the older women. The men heard the shot[s] from their gathering spot and ran to see what was happening at the camp. There they saw their wives being shot dead so they attacked the killers with their spears. The rifles were too much for the spears and they were driven back to a large lagoon nearby. Some of the men who went in the water were shot and killed.

Meanwhile other women were shot and killed at the camp. Some escaped with their children, where they were joined by the men who escaped. The other young women, children and men were captured by [the] men. Bodies were lying everywhere. Those in the bushes watched as Bill Harney and his men started their journey back, taking with them the captives, back the way they had come from.

That was not the end of the story though, Bill Harney returned the next year and collected the skulls of the people he had murdered. He later sold them to a museum in southern cities and made a lot of money (Yunupingu, 1981).

When I'd finished reading this small book, my young guide, a teacher at Gāṅgaṅ school, mentioned that among the children it was one of the most popular reading primers, even though they, as a homelands school, did not have a bilingual program. 'It's taught so many children to read English!' she enthused.

The odd bodily feeling of profound wrongness which that remark evoked in me is certainly the most vivid memory I retain of that maths curriculum workshop. Many years later I still puzzle over that bodily felt disconcertment on being told that the story of a massacre is enthusiastically used as a text in a primary school reading programme.

Predictably, I had cried when faced with the place of a massacre, I was strongly affected by words uttered and gestures enacted in a place where years ago entire families had been slain. It was around the time my mother was born as the very first Australian in my family, setting her apart from her Scottish brother. It is not unexpected that on experiencing something of the rich family life within which children grow up in *Yolŋu* homelands I feel delight, and even an odd sense of envy, remembering my own lonely growing up in a family almost destroyed by the experience of emigration. Perhaps I should be sceptical about the veracity of reports of skulls being sold to museums after a massacre in the twentieth century, although it had certainly occurred often in earlier times. These are emotional responses expected of anybody. So too perhaps is the upset over hearing that a reading primer which matter-of-factly relates a massacre that occurred at a place almost within sight of the school, is a favourite of children, highly instrumental in their learning to read.

But there seems at first to be a difference in this latter episode of upset. This disconcertment concerns the professional educator. It arises from within the circuit of the professional work I was in Gāṅgaṅ to do, whereas the other emotional responses do not concern the professional. But

is that a valid separation? Surely the point of my being taken to meet the dead of Gāṅgaṅ means that they too must find a place inside the new maths curriculum alongside the numbers that have already been unsettled by being rendered just another instantiation of recursion, and now must be further disturbed by those dead at the hands of men, who no doubt had numbers as their familiars.

Reference

Yunupingu, W. (1981). *A true bad story*. Yirrkala, NT: Literature Production Centre.