Arnhem Land, Kakadu, Indigenous history and knowledge, cross-cultural relations and translations

When travelling to the Cobourg peninsula from Darwin (capital of the Northern Territory), one passes through Kakadu National Park and Eastern **Arnhem Land**. This region is called "stone country" because it features a huge sandstone plateau rising 300 metres out of the adjoining plain. (Leichhardt approached this area from the south, crossing the Roper River, which lies on the southern border of Arnhem Land.) Arnhem Land has an estimated population of 16000, of whom 12000 are Indigenous Australians. Their first language is Bininj Kunwok, Iwaidja, Anindilyakwa, or one of the clan-based languages known collectively as Yolngu Matha. There are a few small towns or service hubs, often set up in the early 1970s as mining towns (uranium and bauxite). Most of the population lives on small outstations or homelands. The outstation movement started in the early 1980s, when Indigenous groups moved to usually very small settlements on their traditional lands. To access Arnhem Land a permit is required, issued through the Northern Land Council, which consults with traditional landowners on actions that affect their lands and seas. Historically, the people of Arnhem Land have a longstanding experience of cross-cultural exchange, with trepanging Makassans (*Marege,* "wild country", was the Makassan name for Arnhem Land), fishermen from Indonesia, Japanese pearlers, and European explorers, colonists and anthropologists.

Arnhem Land and the Kakadu region hold one of the world's most comprehensive body of **rock art**. The dating of rock art is in constant scientific evaluation subject to the latest research methods; carbon-dating methods verify that the images are at the very least 27000 years old. One of the most extensive studies on the history and the cultural significance of the art works was conducted by George Chaloupka (1932–2011), himself an artist. From the early 1970s onward he travelled through the region and documented rock art across Western Arnhem Land over two decades, amassing a remarkable collection of site recordings, ethnographic records and vast general knowledge in collaboration with Aboriginal Elders. "Many of the rock shelters are extensive galleries, the walls and ceilings covered with layer upon layer of brilliant paintings. They are not galleries representing collections of individual artworks, but rather a palimpsest of generations of work undertaken by successive artists" (Chaloupka). Chaloupka provided a chronological model based on artistic styles, on findings about superimpositions of art works, fauna representation in the images and environmental conditions allocated to a time period. The broad periods Chaloupka established were: Pre-Estuarine (from initial Aboriginal occupation some 50000 years ago to 8000 years ago); Estuarine (8000 to 1500 years ago); Freshwater (1500 to 300 years ago); and Contact (the last 300 years). The Pre-Estuarine period consists of seven styles, including the earliest technique of hand stencils, as well as dynamic figures, also called Mimi art. (Mimis are spirits in northern Australia, pictured with extremely thin and elongated bodies. They are said to have taught humans how to hunt, how to control fire and to cook. Before the coming of Aboriginal people, they had human forms. They live in rock crevices, where they executed the first rock paintings and taught Aboriginal people their painting skills.) Examples of the famous X-ray style, where animals are painted with anatomical features and in distinct cross-hatching style, can also already be found in early periods. Chaloupka's groupings have been accepted by many peers and researchers; although they are also seen as subjective and have been critiqued, his pioneering achievements are highly respected. Other important art practices in Arnhem Land include bark paintings and string figures.

When the movement for **Indigenous land rights** in Australia began to grow strong in the 1970s, many of the activities originated in the north and in Arnhem Land, where it was often connected with a struggle against big mining corporations. Since then, Leichhardt's journals have been used several times in land claim lawsuits as evidence that the land was not *terra nullius* – unclaimed, uninhabited land, land not owned by anyone – as it was regarded by colonial law, but had in fact been "in continuous use" since before the Europeans arrived. Reading through Leichhardt's expedition journal, one gets a vivid sense with every turn of the page of how densely populated the area was; the closer Leichhardt gets to "stone country", the more accounts of exchange show up. Local people supplied Leichhardt's group with water, food and information about the best track to follow, and closer to Port Essington some people even knew and spoke a few English words and phrases.

The **relationship between the colonisers of Australia and the country's first inhabitants** can be regarded as particularly violent and difficult, even compared to other states with an indigenous population and a colonial past, notably New Zealand, which is "round the corner" and was also colonised by the British. Here, as early as 1840, colonial officials signed a treaty with the Maoris (Treaty of Waitangi). In Australia, consequences of colonisation are still marked today, for example, by appalling socio-economic and health conditions among high percentages of the Indigenous population. (One sign of a changing awareness towards the Indigenous past and present in Australia is the "acknowledgement of country", showing respect for the Traditional Custodians of the land, which is widespread today on buildings, publications, websites, before cultural events, etc.)

What follows are some important dates and milestones in the history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations: In 1788 the "first fleet" arrived at Port Jackson in Sydney, New South Wales. During the 1930s, the Aborigines Progressive Association petitioned for "the preservation of our race from extinction" and "representation to our race in the Federal Parliament". In 1948 the Commonwealth Nationality and Citizenship Act gave Australian citizenship to all Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but only in 1962, with the Commonwealth Electoral Act, were they able to vote in all federal elections. In 1963 Yolngu leaders presented the Yirrkala bark petitions to the Australian Parliament, protesting against the seizure of more than 300 km² of Aboriginal land in Arnhem Land for mining. In 1967, following decades of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activism, a landmark referendum (90% in favour) voted for the country's constitution to be changed to allow Aborigines to be counted among all Australians and to shift power to legislate on Indigenous affairs from the states to the federal government. In 1972 the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was pitched outside Parliament House in Canberra, campaigning for the recognition of Aboriginal land rights. In 1976 the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act was passed, leading to the establishment of Land Rights legislation in most Australian states in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985 Uluru was handed back to its Traditional Owners. In 1992 the High Court recognised the native title in the landmark Mabo v Queensland case, busting the myth of *terra nullius*. Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered the "Redfern Speech" recognising the history of dispossession, violence and forced removal of Aboriginal children. In 2008 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a formal apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian Parliament. In 2010 the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples was established as an independent body. The demand for the negotiation of a treaty, a formal agreement between the government and Indigenous people that would have legal outcomes, has sparked new activism. Many Indigenous leaders argue though that a more pressing need is the establishment of a national representative body allowing Aboriginal people to make their own decisions on matters affecting them, such as welfare, employment, education, health and land ownership.

Expedition collections and cross-cultural conversation. In 2011, a symposium was held to reflect on the American-Australian Scientific Expedition of 1948, which took place in Arnhem Land (with two camps in Eastern Arnhem Land and one at Oenpelli, today Gunbalanya, just behind Cahills Crossing, at the border of Kakadu and Arnhem Land). It was one of the last big expeditions, a "time capsule", a "historical re-enactment" of an expedition, as Martin Thomas called it. The symposium discussed its repercussions and the knowledge and intercultural exchange it produced, in the spirit of a true "cross-cultural conversation" between Indigenous and *Balanda* (non-Indigenous, white people), as is increasingly taking place today. Since the 1990s, historical source material stored in ethnographic archives has been taken back to the places of origin for interpretation. Film and photographs, as well as audio media, have also been repatriated as an effect of the digitisation of the archives, in turn "transforming them from institutions that serve researchers into ones that service the original knowledge holders or their descendants" (Thomas).

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We know the statistics so well they have become a mantra: the most disadvantaged; the worst health outcomes; the poorest housing; the least educated; the most incarcerated. Even on this sad balance sheet some numbers are startling: Indigenous people are fewer than 3 per cent of the Australian population, yet comprise more than a quarter of those in prison; black kids make up half the Australians in juvenile detention. Indigenous women are over thirty times more likely to suffer domestic violence, and far too often the law does nothing to protect them, and too many Aboriginal men are silent.

Stan Grant (Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi man, ABC Foreign Affairs editor) *The Australian Dream*, 2016

Appropriate Terminology, Indigenous Australian Peoples https://www.ipswich.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/10043/appropriate_indigenous_terminoloy.pdf

Interactive Map: Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia (Date Range: 1780 to 1930) https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php

Treaty is a song by Australian band Yothu Yindi, made up of Aboriginal and balanda (non-Aboriginal) members, 1991

https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia
AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) map of Indigenous Australia

Voice. Treaty. Truth.

Aboriginal Tent Embassy, Canberra 1972

One expedition scientist, Dave Johnson, mammologist, spent some time at Cape Don on the **Cobourg Peninsula**. The local Indigenous version of Johnson's time at Cape Don and his solo walk to Oenpelli includes many elements not recorded by Johnson himself, including an encounter with a yumbarrbarr 'giant' at Port Essington on Cobourg Peninsula and, more remarkably, an encounter with the spirit of the man Marrarna, whose remains lay in a cave at Dilkbany, a dangerous kuyak 'sickness' site north of Oenpelli. According to this story, Johnson places Marrarna's spirit in a bag when at Dilkbany and secretly takes him back to America where he is brought back to life in the form of a strong young man. Stories were recounted in two interviews by Croker Island people with a direct connection to the Johnson stories. **https://vimeo.com/21856606**

Bruce Birch

'The American Clever Man'

The relatives talked about how Marrarna came to life and started speaking:

He'd assumed the body of a living man. - He no longer resembled the bundle of human remains, the way we put them there. - He stood there as a living person. He spoke to [Johnson]. He spoke to all of them. 'Ngabi.' 'It's me.' 'Ngabi. Ngabi yarrumbilimany.' 'It's me. I'm the one you captured.' 'Ngabi yanbilimany.' 'You took me.' - He identified himself. 'Ngabi Marrarna.' 'I'm Marrarna.' 'Ngabi ngangurnaj barakbarda.' 'That's my name.' 'Ngabi ayunmardyarrwuny…' 'My sons' and daughters' names are…' 'Ilarri; Nawarlaj; Mayabany.'

The story of the American Clever Man allows us a rare insight into how the Indigenous people of North-West Arnhem Land tried to make sense of the activities of an **alien culture in their midst**, the fact that observation and analysis during the course of the Expedition were inevitably reciprocal in nature, the result of the interaction of **two distinct culturally reinforced world views**.

Acknowledgement of country (in Castlemaine)

Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, held yearly, is the most important Indigenous art event in Australia

A symposium revisiting a landmark international venture - the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land - and exploring the vast collections with an emphasis on Indigenous perspectives. … The people from Arnhem Land, many of whom were visiting Canberra for the first time, have as their first language Bininj Kunwok, Iwaidja, Anindilyakwa or one of the clan-based languages known collectively as Yolngu Matha. **Paper writing is not their cultural form.** Their participation took the form of community panels, where issues such as the theft of human remains were movingly addressed. Film and photography were interpreted, and magnificent performances were given.

Barks, Birds and Billabongs symposium (2011)

Book: Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition

The recognition that expeditions and other types of cross-cultural research can be of service to Indigenous communities is the most critical distinction between the approach taken in this book and much of the earlier literature on fieldwork and exploration (including **great swathes of post-colonial critique, where the views of colonised people are considered only from a theoretical point of view**).

Given that the traversing of 'unknown' territory nearly always involves contact with peoples of different cultures, there is a highly performative aspect to an expedition. … That is part of the reason why hierarchical display is pivotal to the expedition as an expression of power. At the peak is a leader whose name is often immortalised through attachment to the expedition. Below him (my gender specificity is intentional) is a deputy and then the middle ranks, and at the bottom the typically anonymous—and very often indigenous— guides and carriers, on whom it all depends. … An expedition is a type of activity, but it is also a *genre*; it is a distinctive and self-perpetuating mode of moving, acting, organising and writing. It is not surprising that the ethnographers in the 1948 team took with them copies of Warner's *A Black Civilization*—the most significant contribution to Arnhem Land anthropology then published— ... processing the current journey through the lenses of earlier travellers-cum-authors is crucial to the ongoing life of the genre.

For the secret-sacred culture of the Yolngu, the 'adjustment movement' signalled a revolutionary transformation by which formerly esoteric ceremonial objects, known exclusively to male initiates, were made public as an offering to non-Aboriginal Australia in the expectation that the nation would reciprocate by sharing money, educational resources and material goods. Ronald Berndt, in his classic monograph *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1951) claimed that it was a screening of an Arnhem Land Expedition film production showing secret ceremony - and thus indicating to Yolngu that their most cherished secrets had already been disclosed - that was the impetus for this development.

9.8.2019, attended the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Awards - Opening Night and Awards Ceremony

We observed the structures of the **white ant (termites)** in every form, from the narrow cone of three feet high, to colossal piles fifteen feet high, and more than eight feet in diameter, with various buttresses and turrets. The latter were particularly large near the sea coast. (**Dr Leichhardt's lectures. 1846**)

termite mound

on the road from Kakadu to Cobourg through Arnhem Land

"brumbies" - wild horses, maybe descendants of Leichhardt's horses

"border" to Arnhem land at Cahills Crossing

Leichhardt was the first European to comment on some of the paintings he saw while travelling over the Arnhem Land plateau: "A turtle was depicted very accurately on a rock with red ochre, and a fish in caves, in which the natives were accustomed to paint themselves for corrobories." **(Dr Leichhardt's lectures. *Sydney Morning Herald*,1846)**

Cinema-photographer Peter Bassett-Smith demonstrating the Expedition radio to an unidentified boy, 1948, by Howell Walker.

http://www.manikay.com/albums/american-australian_expedition.shtml

Bird life on a swamp on Arnhem Land 1948 - archival wire recording for radio

human-made (regular) sounds versus nature (regular-irregular) recordings: Mary River Resort sprinklers with cicadas - Uranium Geiger-counter with manufactured bird sounds looped at Bowali Center at Kakadu

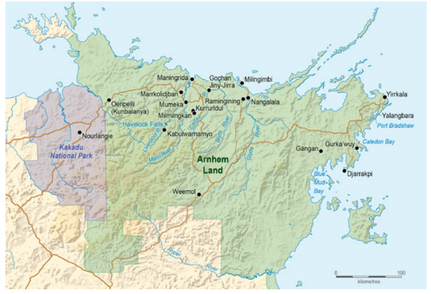
George Chaloupka, Journey in Time

rock art documents every stage of the region's contact history: Makassan prau, European ships, decorations from gloves, horse-drawn buggies, English letters and numbers, pipes, coffee mugs, LL armour-plated horse, Chinese gold seekers, bicycles, Qantas planes (McKenna)

I am fascinated by photographs of people ***listening*** *- especially listening to media - concentration is mirrored in the faces, the open mouths … there is also a sense of non-hierarchical-ness, of individuality and yet sharing …*

media as mirror and source of reflection and insight - playing recordings back to people, in context

The principal ancestor for most of the Aboriginal groups living in this region was the female **Warramurrunggundji**, who is attributed with the creation of *bininj*, the people, in the land which she had prepared for their reception. The main incidents of her creative acts are well known. She emerged from the Arafura Sea at **Cobourg Peninsula** and moved inland. During her journey she met a man called Wurrag, sent out spirit children to various localities, and planted vegetable foods. Most people also know the general location of her last camp, her Dreaming, where she remains in spirit to this day. The articulated detail of sections of this myth remains with particular local groups. For example, the Margu people of Croker Island retrace Warramurrunggundji's steps through their land until she reaches the mainland. From there they say 'it is another man's story'. (Chaloupka)



Yolngu are always negotiating among themselves the boundaries between the art and artefacts for public exposure, and those to be kept for private negotiation, production and display.
For example, the archetypal Yolngu painting has fine cross-hatching fleshing out the totemic designs. This crosshatching produces the effects of ancestral power.
The signified here, is a long way away from its contextualisation in community history and place, so it becomes framed by a fantasy of some exoticised other.
So when there is no real access to the connectednesses of Yolngu performance, there is a fantasy at work, which involves a sort of aestheticising of Aboriginal culture, and a stripping away of aspects of Aboriginal history and culture which are much more complex and more interesting and confronting – the very things which the artists see as central.

Within that virtual garma we must work to produce what Barthes called ‚healthy' signs – representations which bear within them the signs of their own partiality, constructedness, and historical location. And these signs would best be performed as narratives – stories of how we ourselves fit into the larger story we work to articulate together.

situatedness of knowledge - contextualised language - ***einfache Sprache/plain language,*** *translation processes*

Yirrkala bark petition, 1963

4 → 1 → 2 → 3 **excerpts from: Michael Christie: Aboriginal Knowledge on the Internet**

Aboriginal people have traditional ways of understanding knowledge: what it is like, where it comes from, how people make it, how it is remembered, celebrated, and made new, how knowledge belongs to people, and how secret and sacred knowledges relate to public knowledge.

Our knowledge, whoever we are, can only ever be a function of both the totality of language which we have received, and the full history of our embodied experience somewhere on the planet.

We all learn our identity as we learn to know our own territory and to speak our own language with confidence.

The work that the community does in bringing up young children is to teach them their territory and the language together. It could be understood as a form of mapping. This link between language (as narrative) and material reality (our bodies in land) constitutes our identity.

This is just as true for nonAboriginal people as it is for Aborigines. Every human being who has language receives a fundamental framework for their identity from the languages of their community.

Of course many new words and ideas are added into languages all the time, but in Aboriginal society, new knowledge is not valued above old knowledge. New knowledge only has meaning and value through its ability to be tied to received knowledge and identity.

There is no progressive enlightenment. There is just working together in and with the world as we find it.

People can tell you about their ancestors and their creation stories, songs, ceremonies and dances, but they are always careful not to tell you about those of other people. You need to go and ask them. Even if someone really knows another person's stories, when someone asks them, they would be bound to say 'I don't know' and refer you to the people to whom the stories belong. When people tell you what they know, it will be in the context of a story which is shared with others. This is very different from then western notion of knowledge, which is represented as abstract, universal, value-free, not belonging to anyone in particular.

Knowledge seen as performative implies knowing 'how' rather than knowing 'that'. A common Yolngu word for 'know' is marnggi. This word doesn't so much mean to know *about* something, as to have embraced the experience of something. If someone says they are marnggi for 'horse', they are not merely stating that they know what a horse is, but rather that they know how to ride one. This position can be seen to step around the difficult problem which is nearly always lurking behind European philosophy, of the split between mind and body (theory and practice). Knowledge cannot be seen as a function of the intellect as divorced from the body.

From this perspective, we understand knowledge to be a function of the performance and embodiment of history.

Truth emerges like a tangent to a narrative - momentary and structured like a fiction. The poststructuralists insist that, all truth claims are embedded in a metanarrative. Dependence on metanarrative in Western science is hidden, in Yolngu science it is foregrounded and celebrated, leading to particular knowledge practices which are both socially and ecologically sustainable.

"sitting under a tree" - embodied learning practise

view from the escarpment into the plains (at Ubirr) …

In this theory, there is a difference between identity, and knowledge. Identity can be learnt within the context of your own family, your kin, your traditions, your language and your land. Knowledge production takes place as a result of negotiation between people of different backgrounds.

When indigenous and nonindigenous people sit down and talk to each other in an agreed place, and with a spirit of mutual respect and negotiation, the knowledge they produce is new, and fresh, and true. This knowledge is different from what either of the two (or more) contributing parties began with.

This deep knowledge can never be commodified. It is intersubjective – it can't be the function of one single person, it has to be shared before it can exist. It is distributed – it lives in objects and practices and structures as much as inside peoples heads. It is extralinguistic – some of it can never be told because it is unable to be expressed in language – so it is sung or danced or painted.

There is another way of understanding knowledge: as somehow stored or contained inside a book or a painting or video or sound recording.
This metaphor is typical of the Balanda approach to knowledge and education where teachers hand out text books and students copy the knowledge from the books into their heads.
This is quite different from community negotiation. In the ceremonial context, when it is all over, the Yolngu leaders usually bury the artefacts which they have produced, or wrap them up so they can only be seen by the right people. Truth must be produced and presented in its narrative context.