

Songs, stories, and 'rock art'

Re-thinking our approach to indigenous knowledge

Calls for academic decolonisation include recognition for indigenous knowledges. At Monash University, Associate Professor John Bradley is interested in how the West might come to understand and appreciate other ways of knowing, particularly with regard to the Yanyuwa people of Australia. Such an endeavour challenges western-centric approaches to logic, and to the concepts of time and place. Oral traditions and 'rock art' provide a window to Yanyuwa heritage, and to practical knowledge with very real implications for land and environmental management, but only if they can be faithfully translated and accepted.

The tumultuous events of 2020 are unlikely to be soon forgotten; not least, the meteoric rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which came to global prominence despite competing with a viral pandemic. The movement reflects a tsunami of calls for social change around issues of identity and racial justice. Among these calls have been those for academic de-colonisation; simply speaking, the reframing of academic discourse (including both teaching and research) to arrive at a less Euro/western/white-centric view of the world. One facet of academic decolonisation is addressing the lack of emphasis on, or even consideration of, indigenous knowledges within western academic institutions. However, while the concepts of indigenous knowledges and colonisation may only now be gaining widespread traction, there are a small number of researchers for whom it has been the building blocks of their scholarship for many years.

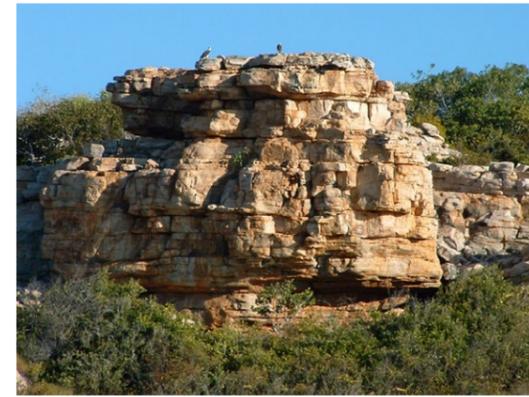
At Monash University, Associate Professor John Bradley has focused on Aboriginal cultures and indigenous knowledges since 1980, when he first arrived in the remote Northern Territory settlement of Borroloola. When viewed through a western-centric lens, Assoc Prof Bradley's work is firmly based in the humanities; however, when considered more holistically, he operates within a deeply multidisciplinary understanding of how research can inform other academic disciplines and communities that exist outside the university. With support from the Australian Research Council and Alan and Elizabeth Finkel Family Foundation, the work of Assoc Prof Bradley and his collaborators (including Professor Amanda Kearney

and Associate Professor Liam Brady of Flinders University) is about knowledge, and in particular how the West might come to understand and appreciate other ways of knowing particularly in regard to First Nations people.

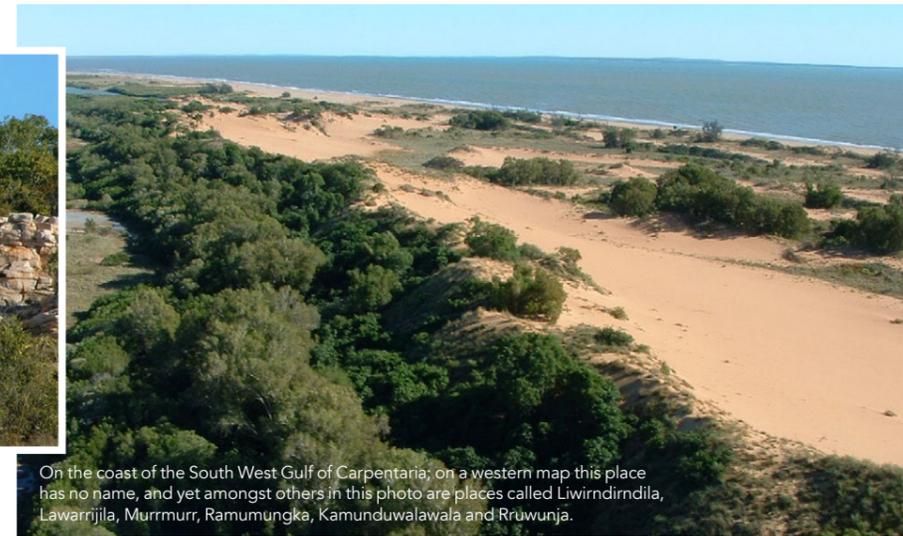
By forging lasting links with Aboriginal communities, Assoc Prof Bradley's understanding and curation of indigenous knowledges has resulted in a truly multi-disciplinary career. He has assisted indigenous peoples with land claims under the Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 and the Native Title Act 1992, through which Aboriginal communities can reclaim their traditional lands, but only by navigating a western-centric legal system. He has collaborated over the development of indigenous management plans for the Yanyuwa and Marra peoples of the southwestern Gulf of Carpentaria, and worked with marine biologists to understand the survival and extinction of dugong, marine turtles, and aquatic sea grasses in the Gulf of Carpentaria. He has worked with animation specialists to develop indigenous animations to help document and preserve various forms of Indigenous knowledges. The success of these ongoing relationships largely boils down to language; Assoc Prof Bradley has become fluent in Yanyuwa, an unusual indigenous language with distinct dialects for men and women.

LEARNING THE LINGO: YANYUWA

Yanyuwa Country is in the southwestern Gulf of Carpentaria region of Northern Territory, Australia. For Assoc Prof Bradley, much of his work over the last 40 years has involved documenting the traditional knowledge of the Yanyuwa community, with the aim of preserving this resource for the next generation.



Yanyuwa country, North Island, a place called Wulibirra, the rock monolith is the ancestral body of the White-Bellied Sea Eagle.



On the coast of the South West Gulf of Carpentaria; on a western map this place has no name, and yet amongst others in this photo are places called Lwirndirndila, Lawarrjilla, Murrmurr, Ramumungka, Kamunduwawala and Rruwunja.

This process is fraught with difficulty; while the simple act of recording and translating Yanyuwa stories to the written page is simple within the accepted anthropological and sociological methods of western academia, the transcribing of oral traditions, however carefully done, reduces the knowledge embedded within.

For example, 'logic' from a western perspective differs greatly from a Yanyuwa perspective, and so by imposing a 'logical structure', as defined by western academia, on Yanyuwa stories and songs changes their very meaning.

The oral traditions of the Yanyuwa people encompass complex and important information, including land-ownership, kinship, and the rules of their complex social system. A point that is often lost in translation is that these stories and songs are a living document, not simply a narrative of past times. Bradley highlights this point using the words of a Yanyuwa elder following a meeting to discuss land management: "Where do whitefellas learn this stuff they talk, is that what you do inside that university, when will whitefellas grow ears and learn to listen to us, to help us tell our real story?" In short, for the Yanyuwa people, their form of logic and rational thinking are steamrollered in a world of western-centric academics, lawyers, and politicians.

One such 'logic' of a western-centric perspective is the classification of knowledge into groups such 'literature', 'history', 'science', and even sub-groups

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(e.g., 'biology', 'physics', etc.). Within Yanyuwa traditions, these distinctions are artificial, as espoused by the sentiment "We don't talk like that, we don't think like that", as told to Assoc Prof Bradley in 2016. This speaks to the very real issues of translation that arise when two sets of knowledge traverse not just a different

language, but totally different cultural and linguistic structures. Even with recognition of this, Assoc Prof Bradley has struggled with the 'flattening' of indigenous

knowledges, as he attempts to translate them to articles and books. Lost is the complexity and nuance stored within oral traditions, much of it of very much practical importance; for example, a deep understanding of the

hydrological and ecosystem services of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

DOCUMENTING 'ROCK ART' IN YANYUWA COUNTRY

Along with oral traditions, Yanyuwa heritage is also rich in what a western-centric view would call 'rock art'. Over



John Bradley working with Dinah Norman a-Marrngawi, the oldest speaker, and only one of three fluent Yanyuwa speakers left.



Traditional owner of Vanderlin Island, Steve Johnston, dissecting a dugong for research scientists in regards to a spate of starvation due to over-silting of sea grass beds due to large floods.



Traditional owner Steve Johnson with marine turtle research scientist, Dr Scott Whiting discussing sea turtle starvation due to over-silting of the sea grass beds due to large floods.

the last 10 years, Assoc Prof Bradley has worked with a team of anthropologists and archaeologists to survey and document rock art sites throughout the southwestern Gulf of Carpentaria. This region is truly remote, being visited only on occasion even by its Yanyuwa owners. However, the great distances and logistical challenges (both financial and practical) are only part of the story; the region around Walala and Liwingkinya on the largest island in the Sir Edward Pellew Group of islands is collectively known as *ngabaya awara* — a place where spiritual entities are powerful and care is needed.

The western-centric approach to rock art (or to any art) centres around interpreting the historical meaning/significance and assigning human authorship. However, such an approach risks obscuring indigenous narratives. For example, on encountering deep red hand stencils in Liwingkinya, it was made clear to Assoc Prof Bradley that these markings were fresh, made in the proceedings hours or days by *Namurlanjanyngku* (or spirits), when they had heard the voices of Bradley and a group of Yanyuwa women singing *kujika*. *Kujika* are a special form of oral knowledge; songs that provide a complex map of the physical landscape and the actions of the spirits that live within it. Critically, *kujika* are not simply a retelling of the past, they are always present within the landscape, with humans simply a means to give them a voice.

To truly appreciate Yanyuwa heritage and culture is to realise that western-centric concepts of time and place do not directly translate. To the Yanyuwa people, time and place are interwoven; moreover, they are not discrete fixtures, but part of an ongoing process. Physical locations may be spatially distant, but they do not exist in isolation; from an academic perspective, this means that the 'rock art' of one location cannot be isolated from that at other locations. Complex directional markers describe the movements of the spirits and of physical processes (such as wind and

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water). Such movements are mapped in great detail within *Kujika*, and are recorded within 'rock art', the markings of which are more accurately described as "the embodiment and essence of the actual spirit being entities". Similarly, oral traditions are not simply linear. Stories of the past can also be stories of the present; as such, western views of 'time' provide an unreliable structure for recording Yanyuwa knowledge.

For the Yanyuwa, *Kujika* and 'rock art' represent truth (or what we might call

'common sense'). Given their link with Yanyuwa spirits, such 'rock art' cannot be understood simply through scientific methods (e.g., taking measurements and photographs, dating and sourcing of pigments, etc.). The landscape in which these markings occur is crucial to their significance.

TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The lands, cultures, and voices of indigenous populations have been drowned by hundreds of years of colonial dominance. While the importance of

indigenous communities and their knowledge is increasingly acknowledged, without suspending our western-centric views of 'knowledge' we will fail to harness this power. For instance, for Yanyuwa men and women, 'rock art' is an expression of time and of place, of both human and non-human worlds; insisting that it be considered 'art', even when the Yanyuwa have no such concept, is to impose colonial views. The ultimate result is to obstruct the agency of indigenous people and minimise their contribution to a more sustainable global community.



Behind the Research

John Bradley

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Research Objectives

John Bradley's research centres on Aboriginal cultures and indigenous knowledges.

Detail

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Bio

John Bradley has worked for 41 years in the south west Gulf of Carpentaria. He is deeply interested in matters to do with knowledge production and

understanding in cross cultural spaces. His work crosses disciplinary boundaries exploring knowledges and areas of incommensurability. There are important decolonising principles behind his research.

Funding

• The Australian Research Council

• Alan and Elizabeth Finkel Family Foundation

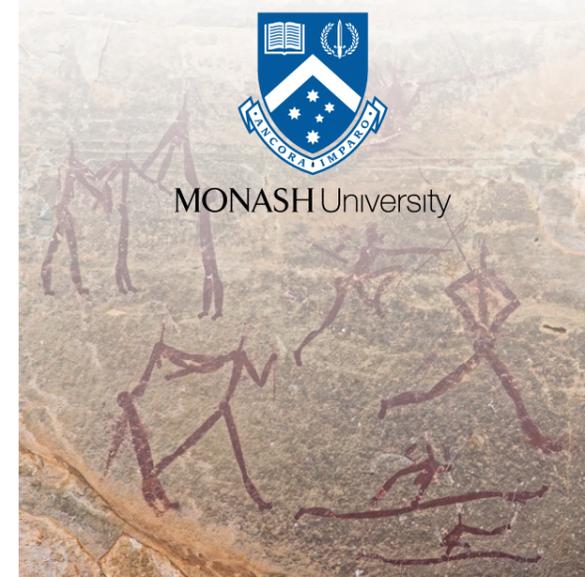
Collaborators

• Professor Amanda Kearney, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia
• Associate Professor Liam Brady, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia

References

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Personal Response

Do you see parallels between forms of indigenous knowledge in Australia and other colonial regions (e.g., North America)?

|| The parallels are present in all colonised cultures. Indigenous knowledges are intimately tied to lands and sea of the First Nations people. If one looks at the historical experience of First Nations people since colonisation we see policies created by ruling authorities to dispossess people from their lands, stop languages being spoken, children taken from their parents. These issues in some ways still exist, in perhaps what might be best called 'deep colonisation' whereby Indigenous people are constantly having to enter into what are quite unfair and problematic power differentials to find a voice. ||

Are there many individuals from indigenous communities working within western-centric academia? If not, is there an interest in encouraging the younger generation to pursue such a path?

|| This of course is a question bigger than one hundred words. Increasingly Indigenous people are coming into the academy, as students, and there is a growing body of Indigenous academics and academic leaders. In some respects though even the academy as it now stands can be a bastion of both hidden and overt colonisation that Indigenous people have to work against constantly, this should not surprise anyone if the history of such institutions is tracked through time. Universities in Australia now have Indigenous pro-vice chancellors whose task is to work within the system to create more equitable environments for Indigenous knowledges and the place of Indigenous students and staff within the academy. ||