

Breaking of a People

Submission to Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory

I have called this submission "breaking of a people" because I want to talk about a number of destructive human processes that are in active play in Australia today. The factors that drive these processes are not very well understood in the mainstream community but it is these factors that continue to break Aboriginal communities and their families leading to many Aboriginal youths ending up in detention¹.

It's wise to remember that the Australian Aboriginal people participated in the 40,000 year real-world experiment of how to live effectively with each other and under extremely different living environments across the continent. The fact that they succeeded at this means they must have had some things right.

However something intervened in that well-tuned living model and I believe that the same something is still breaking them as a people today.

In this submission I hope to answer a number of questions;

1. Why so many Aboriginal Youths are ending up in detention?
2. What early intervention options and pathways can be put in place for children at risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour?
3. How can their time in detention be more positive?
4. International rights perspective.

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¹ Productivity Commission Report Nov 2016. Aboriginal youth incarceration rate 24 times higher than for non-Indigenous Australians.

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The writer's background

In 1975 I took up a position as a community development worker with Yolŋu people² at Ramingining in central Arnhem Land. Since then I've spent four decades working with them in a community development/education capacity.

During this time I have learnt their academic and intellectual language and worked alongside Yolŋu to help them run their local government councils, build local employment opportunities and organise their Homeland movement. I have also delivered thousands of hours of adult community education, built [Yolŋu Radio](#), and produced and delivered economic, legal and health literacy education programs. In the 1980's I helped the leaders of Ramingining community successfully deal with petrol sniffing, and it is the only major Yolŋu community still free of it today.

In 1994 the Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra asked me to deliver workshops to train Balanda³ staff in cross-cultural competency skills and understanding. Then in 1996 he asked me to write a book as to why so many problems existed in Arnhem Land communities. In 2000 the book *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* was published.

Today I still work alongside Yolŋu people of all ages as they try and understand the mainstream dominant Australian culture that impacts them at every point of their life. They seek explanation of difficult English medical, legal and other concept phrases and terms. They search like I do to find why they are a broken people.

Many will come to the commission pleading for things to change. Other will say things must change. But most offer few answers.

This long search has led us to discover many answers. Yet getting support for the solutions we know would make a big difference is difficult because the real issues are not even on most people's radar, and so real lasting solutions fall outside most funding guidelines.

Many say the responses to domestic violence, Aboriginal youth in custody is like ambulances waiting at the bottom of the cliff. Some are now suggesting that we need to go to the top of the cliff and see what is creating the victim's at the bottom.

I am aware that this submission is very lengthy. 40 years of working with communities, at the coalface, has taught me that a deeper understanding of these issues is necessary to move from the bottom of the cliff to the less travelled climb to the top. Once there we will need to see things through new eyes so that real answers and effective long-term solutions can be implemented.

Richard Trudgen 2016

² Yolŋu: Yolŋu means human or humans, person or people. It also now means an Aboriginal person or people from northeast Arnhem Land.

³ Balanda: Balanda comes from the word "Hollander", from the Yolŋu contacts with people from former Dutch colonies in Asia; and is used to refer to European or English-speaking "Western" person or people.

Note:

I will be using the term Yolŋu for Aboriginal people as it is the Yolŋu people of Arnhem Land who form the basis of the case study in this submission. These are the Aboriginal people that I have over 40 years close association with. However for extra clarity I will also use other terms like Aboriginal, Aboriginal people or Original Australians. However in all cases where the term Yolŋu or Yolŋu people is used it will generally refer to all the above mention groups. Exceptions to this are where I am specifically talking about Yolŋu culture or their communities.

I will also use the term Balanda. Balanda is a south-east Asian word that means European. Its roots come from the word "Hollander". It is used by Yolŋu people to refer to European or English-speaking "Western" people.

Yolŋu and Balanda both have a singular and plural meaning. However at times I will use 'Yolŋu people' instead of just 'Yolŋu' for ease of reading in English.

Lifting the lid

There is a real need to lift the lid to discover why so many Aboriginal youths end up in detention, so a real solution can be found.

A brief look back

To put this conversation in context we need to take a brief look back at the recent history of Yolŋu people.

If we look at the two very big volumes of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land we see none of the social demise that is now present in Yolŋu Arnhem Land Communities. In fact we see a very healthy, proud group of people.

Other recorded Balanda⁴ histories of the era tell the same story although when you looked behind the scenes you also see the beginnings of a broken people. There were many inter-clan disputes and people from all along the coast were moving towards the Mission Stations.

The Yolŋu account

The Yolŋu accounts of the same time tell us that their lives were in turmoil. Their traditional national and international economic trade had been decimated. The centuries old international [Macassan trade](#) had stopped. One trading season the Yolŋu and Macassans, operating as they had always done, brokered new buku djugu contract agreements for the Macassans to return for the next [trepanng](#) harvest season. But the Macassans never came.

No-one could work out why, as Yolŋu had no major avenue to access international economic and political happenings and only had regional information to draw on. Some clans were accused of falling out of relationship with the Macassans. It was thought maybe they had stopped the trade. Others wondered if it had something to do with the Balanda from Darwin. It wasn't until Yolŋu had their own Yolŋu Radio service around 2005 that they finally discovered the Macassan trade had been stopped by legislation of the South Australian government in 1906.

To make matters worse no more trade was coming from the south of Arnhem Land either. Yolŋu attributed this to the Balanda pastoral companies to the south and the Balanda police station at the [Roper Bar](#). Its infamous reputation for the killing of Aboriginal people moving backwards and forwards cross the Roper River that marked the boundary of southern Arnhem Land was already well known. The ancient trade from central Australia into Arnhem Land had stopped with products like central Australia boomerangs and red ochre now being unavailable.

⁴ Balanda: Balanda comes from the word "Hollander", from the Yolŋu contacts with people from former Dutch colonies in Asia; and is used to refer to European or English-speaking "Western" person or people.

This left inland southern Yolŋu clans who once had prized commodities to trade to the north coast for the incoming international trade with no products. And the northern clans also now had no international products to trade inland.

The Yolŋu regional economic structure was in total collapse. This came on the back of two decades of pastoral wars⁵ in central Arnhem Land. Many massacres had occurred and some clans were extinct. The Yolŋu clans who survived this tragic time fell into märrmiriw⁶ state of debt with other Yolŋu clans.

Then British-owned Malay-crewed boats turned up along the coast in place of the Macassan trade after 1906. Coastal clans found themselves in a 40 year war, spears against guns, as British boats stole pearls, pearl shell and turtle carapaces from Yolŋu estates⁷. These male only crews also captured many Yolŋu women and this long conflict left Yolŋu coastal clans greatly reduced in numbers or extinct.

Many Yolŋu elders told me in the early 1970s just how hard it was for them to survive on their own clan estates through this period of time, "We were starving and many of us moved to the Missions for supplies and protection. Others, because we could not live with the Yolŋu already on the missions, travelled west into Darwin".

The Missions along the coast and the Aboriginal Compounds in Darwin became refugee camps for many clans and tribes of Arnhem Land. Some Yolŋu stayed on their yirralka estates⁸ continuing to trade with the Missions to survive.

For the Yolŋu on the Missions and in the Government Compounds in Darwin they were now living on another landowning clan's estate. Living on someone else's land was extremely difficult as every time they went to take food or resources the Yolŋu felt as though they were stealing. They were soon suffering all the consequences of living in refugee camps. The wäŋa waŋaju⁹ landowners also suffered. There was extreme animosity between them and the other clans that were now living on their yirralka estates with the blessing and support of the Balanda Mission and Welfare authorities.

The Yolŋu wäŋa waŋaju land owners on these Missions became the first groups to show signs of clear social break down as they lost control of their estates. Many of these landowning groups became extinct. The children of those who survived became some of the first petrol sniffers after petrol sniffing was introduced to Arnhem Land by World War II RAF personnel based at [Milingimbi](#) (a Mission station in central Arnhem Land).

⁵ Pastoral Wars: "Why Warriors Lie Down and Die" Trudgen 2000, pp. 18-26

⁶ Märrmiriw (märr: spiritual power, strength 1.) (-miriw: indicates without) To be in a state of debt; being spiritually disempowered because you owe things to other people and their märr is building up in you suppressing your own spiritual power.

⁷ The Third War - Boat Wars: "Why Warriors Lie Down and Die" 2000, p. 28.

⁸ yirralka (estates). The Yolŋu Matha word for estates.

⁹ wäŋa waŋaju (land – owner/s). Many Australian actually argue that Aboriginal people never owned their land. So I have use their word wäŋa waŋaju, land owner, to show they have a word and therefore a concept for land ownership. Not everyone was free to come and go on someone else land. In fact other Yolŋu had to have permission to be on someone else's land.

Surviving refugee camps

Today many of these former Missions are now called Yolŋu communities. This gives us a very false picture of these communities. They should more appropriately be called surviving refugee camps.

Instead of being one harmonious community they consist of as many as 13 different clan groups, all from different historical backgrounds and places and with different political alliances. Most Yolŋu who moved into these communities learnt the mainstream cultural ways and language (English) faster than the landowners. Some became brokers between the landowners and the new mission authority. So today these "out of country" Yolŋu wield extra power over the surviving traditional landowners in the same community. This sometime leads to all sorts of inter-clan jealousies and strife between their children, aggressively played out on football fields and also at times when different substances are abused.

This brief history gives us a picture of a broken people. It is through this window that we need to look if we are to get a clear understanding as to why so many Aboriginal Youths are ending up in detention.

If we look through this window we can start to see this issue in another way. To do this I want to tell a short community development story.

Going to the Source of the Problem

Babies on the River

As the story goes there was jungle village that started experiencing babies coming down the river in small watertight containers. The people had no idea where the babies came from or what was causing them to arrive. So they just started looking after them, making sure they were cared for and even bringing them up as their own.

It seems strange that no one ever thought about going up the river to finding out where the babies were coming from or why. They just kept dealing with the "problem" - lots of babies to care for.

Aboriginal youth in detention

This story is very similar to Aboriginal youth in detention. Much attention is applied to the crimes these young people commit and also how they are treated in detention. But I think the first question we need to ask is why are so many Aboriginal youth offending in the first place?

Going up the river to find and deal with the real source of the problem can stem the flow of Aboriginal youth into detention. It can also produce more effective outcomes for those who do unfortunately end up there.

If these same source problems are not dealt with then the cost in dollar, public disquiet and division and human misery will unfortunately continue to rise.

We need to understand why so many young Yolŋu people are involved in antisocial behaviour. The question is how to do this?

Social indicators

In looking at any problem it's good to have some clear indicators that can be measured. The health of any community can be measured by looking at social indicators emerging from that particular community.

Antisocial behaviour like substance abuse and acts of vandalism, inattentive and uncooperative students at school, youth involved in assaults on their own family, and self-harm are clear social indicators of a deeper human crisis within a particular family or community.

How we look at these "problems" determines how we try to solve them. Seeing these problems as social indicators is a much more helpful way of addressing them. It also helps us see past the particular antisocial end-stage behaviours/problems to what has/is producing them.

Just like babies abandoned on a river, these end-stage problems are not "normal" human behaviour. Our efforts will never genuinely help young offenders if we are not dealing with the real underlying conditions that produce their offending behaviour. Seeing these end-stage problems as social indicators also enables us to look more clearly at the social-economic-political interface of the community. Having a clear understanding of this interface helps all involved to change things and initiate programs that can produce a brighter future.

Abnormal becoming normal

Having lived with Yolŋu for over four decades I know what we are now seeing is not Aboriginal culture nor is it due to Aboriginal culture. It's helpful to remember that Aboriginal society is the oldest continuing human society on Earth. So it is very difficult for anybody to argue that the longest surviving culture on Earth did not have very highly refined social-economic-political structures that, when applied, can maintain well-functioning families and communities.

I also know from personal experience that when any of the above antisocial behaviours started to occur Yolŋu parents and leaders were extremely concerned, seeing them as abnormal. Sadly today the abnormal is now becoming normal in some communities.

For other Aboriginal people across the country who had to leave their traditional roots many decades ago this abnormal activity is now seen as normal and often considered by many as 'true' Aboriginal culture.

I know this is not Aboriginal culture but is due to the mismatch that occurs between two very different races of people now needing to coexist in the same environment.

Cultural refugees

From this small window into Yolŋu history we start to understand that Yolŋu today are what I call cultural refugees. This is despite the fact that many are still living on their heritage estates or somewhere close to them. Culturally they are refugees in the big ocean of mainstream Australian culture.

Other Aboriginal people across Australia due to varying degrees of their assimilation into mainstream Australian society are also cultural refugees.¹⁰ Looking at the “problem” in this way gives us a clearer picture of why Aboriginal people are suffering from all sorts of disproportional and abnormal consequences.

We should be one people

Many will insist that we should be one people; Australians. But most who say this come from the mainstream Australian dominant culture. A look at the statistics between the two different groups shows this isn't the case. Aboriginal people like the Yolŋu of Arnhem Land suffer high levels of unemployment, incarceration, chronic disease and early death compared to the mainstream. They also have extremely low levels of educational and training outcomes.

So what are the factors that have caused Aboriginal people to become cultural refugees and suffer this disproportionate level of crisis?

Comparatively easy for mainstream

Mainstream Australians find it comparatively easy to live in what is now the Australian dominant culture. However citizens like Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal people plus some migrant groups struggle in the same mainstream Australian culture environment and display many social indicators pointing to a breakdown in their separate communities.

As reported on ABC RN radio, there has been a 70% increase in Aboriginal children in Victoria taken into care by the state over the last few years. A few days later another report came out saying “*The number of Indigenous children removed from their families is set to triple in the next two decades on current trends*”¹¹. This is a

¹⁰ It is also recognised that there is an emerging Aboriginal middle-class living in urban centres around Australia. Many of these people speak mainstream English as a first language and have varying degrees of mainstream Western education. In most cases I'm not including these people as cultural refugees although some pockets even within their communities could be considered this way.

¹¹ ABC, The World Today program 9th Nov. 2016. Reporting on the “The Family Matters Report”: Measuring trends to turn the tide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child safety and removal. Eltham, Australia. University of Melbourne, the Centre for Evidence and Implementation, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and Save the Children Australia. (2016).

clear social indicator that something is wrong in this cultural group of people and they are not coping in the mainstream.

In the Northern Territory at the moment we are seeing a massive breakdown in the age-old social-economic, legal and political institutions of the Yolŋu people, and the results are clear. High levels of anti-social behaviour like petrol sniffing, substance abuse, vandalism, poor attendance rates and “uncooperative” activity at school. Domestic violence, self-harm and even suicide are on the rise. Incarceration rates are breaking all known records.

So the outcomes for the two different races of people coming together have severe ramifications for Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people. They continue to remain excluded without full access to the same information, rights and privileges that mainstream Australian citizens can access in a culturally safe and friendly way. They are cultural refugees encamped in the mainstream Australian society.

The mismatch

A quick look at the mismatch in outcomes reveals a very unlevel playing-field that exists between Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal people, and the mainstream Australia dominant culture.

When I make this statement I am not referring to the amount of money that government is/isn't applying to programs that are designed to level the playing field or Close the Gap. I believe a large proportion of these funds are presently directed at the wrong place, and in fact in many cases make the problems far worse. As in the story above they build orphanages and other services for the River Babies rather than dealing with the source problems.

The unlevel playing field I am referring to is that Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal people's socio-economic, legal and political systems and institutions are different to the mainstream Australian socio-economic, legal and political systems and institutions.

Let's look at some examples of this from a Yolŋu perspective.

The Yolŋu of Arnhem Land believe they have autonomy over their lands and resources. They are taught this from birth by their parents, cultural carers and teachers. However this autonomy is challenged and continuously diminished by the Australian mainstream dominant culture.

This occurred in a major way with the Commonwealth intervention in their communities in 2007. Their loss of control over their communities as government appointed autocratic business managers was horrific. In addition their private housing was taken from them by statute and gifted to NT Housing. For the intervention to occur sections of the Racial Discrimination Act were suspended. This

contravenes the UN Charter on the Rights of Indigenous People to which the Australian community is a signatory.¹² At the same time they also lost their local government councils, which were amalgamated into one regional Council against their will. Finally, bilingual education in Aboriginal schools was closed down.¹³

There was and is a clear unlevel playing field here. Yolŋu had very little understanding of the legal system and the contemporary Australian laws that were being used against them in full force during and since the intervention. They found it very difficult to tell their side of the story through the English language dominated media.

Nowhere else in Australia would the Commonwealth of Australia get away with legislating people's property rights away, but it was done across the Northern Territory in 2007. Not only were they now cultural refugees but also becoming political and economic refugees all over again in modern Australian times.

Legal political mismatch

There are clear legal and political mismatches. Yolŋu adults and youth ascent to their own Maḍayin law system through an institutionalised process called Waṇa Luṗthun. In this process they swear allegiance to their traditional Maḍayin law and not to the contemporary Australian law systems. This is a continuing practice of the original ancient Australia law, very much alive today in Arnhem Land.

Yolŋu people also have their own governance institutions and djungaya officers of the peace that have kept law and order and protected the rights of all its citizens for tens of thousands of years. This system of Maḍayin law is said by Yolŋu to create a state of māgaya, peace and tranquillity for all its citizens.

However despite this and the fact that the Maḍayin law is part of the Original Australian law and is protected under the UN Charter on the "Rights of Indigenous Peoples" Article 5 above and 4 below¹⁴ the mainstream dominant culture continues to deny its existence and acts in an excluding neo-colonial way, rather than an inclusive "Australian" way for all its citizens.

Currently Yolŋu have Commonwealth statutory authorities controlling their yirralka estate and Northern Territory police on all their communities. This contemporary legal mismatch creates a very uneven playing field leaving both cultural groups,

¹² Article 5. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.

Article 9. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an indigenous community or nation, in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned. No discrimination of any kind may arise from the exercise of such a right.

61/295. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

¹³ <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/stories/s2450065.htm>

¹⁴ Article 4

Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

61/295. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

particularly Yolŋu citizens, law officers and governance institutions, in continual conflict. Peace and tranquillity is not evident anymore in 2016 across their lands.

Economic mismatch

The economic mismatch is also very evident to Yolŋu people. As stated above in 1906 the South Australian government stopped the centuries old international Macassan trade into North Australia. This decimated their traditional economic system. Yolŋu once produced [natural pearls](#) and sold them into Asia through the Macassan traders. They had annual contracts with the Macassan people to trade with them for their trepang, timber, turtle carapaces along with many other things.

Today the natural pearling and the trepang industry is worth hundreds of millions of dollars across the world, yet was destroyed by the South Australia government act.

In 1972 the free range [crocodile skin industry](#) was closed down by the Commonwealth government. This was mainly due to overshooting crocodiles by Balanda¹⁵ crocodile hunter's from Darwin. This was one of the last remaining industries that allowed many Yolŋu families and clans to be economically independent on their own homeland yirralka estates.

If these industries remained today they would be a powerful economic backbone that would be stepping stones for other growth. They would have provided Yolŋu society with the finance for self-governing autonomous functioning. Sadly today almost all these industries are in the hands of Balanda in Darwin.

When Yolŋu parents relate these stories and their own confusion about the contemporary economic system to their children it creates a very unhealthy "them and us" relationship as clear injustices are understood by all groups of people.

Today the whole Yolŋu region is now very heavily reliant on government funding. Yolŋu are almost wholly dependent on welfare and in fact many are now convinced that welfare is the new economic way of the world.

Again this mismatch reveals a very unfair, unlevel playing-field that also contravenes the UN Charter on the Rights of Indigenous People, Article 20.¹⁶

Language mismatch

It is said that, "Information is power". So the lack of information should equal powerlessness. For Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal people this is so.

¹⁵ Balanda: Balanda comes from the word "Hollander", from the Yolŋu contacts with people from former Dutch colonies in Asia; and is used to refer to European or English-speaking "Western" person or people.

¹⁶ Article 20:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems or institutions, to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development, and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities.
2. Indigenous peoples deprived of their means of subsistence and development are entitled to just and fair redress. 61/295. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Nowhere else can the cultural refugee status be more clearly seen than when it comes to Yolŋu remaining on an island in a sea of English information, education and training. Government spends many hundreds of millions of dollars on these functions and because they do not recognise the difficulty of a group of people moving from one language to another these programs become torturous, defeating and destructive. Good public money is spent but makes the problem far worse.

Many Aboriginal people living in mainstream Australian society experience absolute powerlessness, as they are locked out of mainstream information news and current affairs with no access to information in a language they can understand. In fact many young Yolŋu are incarcerated for breaking Balanda laws that in most cases they didn't even know existed.¹⁷

This is due mainly to 2 factors.

1. Yolŋu still speak their original language, Yolŋu Matha. They think and construct knowledge in Yolŋu Matha which is extremely different to English. Other Aboriginal people speak their own language or an Aboriginal English. Most forms of Aboriginal English have a grammar structure very similar to their original Aboriginal language making the Aboriginal English they speak different from mainstream English.
2. Over the last 200 years no Australia government has ever provided a "constructed English learning program" for any of the Aboriginal (Original Australian) language groups so they can learn English in a relatively fast, cost-effective and efficient way. This basic essential resource for Yolŋu continues to be unfunded.¹⁸

Yolŋu Matha

Yolŋu Matha (the language of Yolŋu people) is one of the many Original Australian languages and has its roots in Sanskrit in India. Therefore it has Asian syllabic phonics and grammatical makeup. Many of the economic and legal concept words within Yolŋu Matha are also spoken and understood in other Asian languages.

This makes Yolŋu Matha an extremely efficient and effective communication and teaching language with their concept language equal to that of Asian languages including in economic, medical, legal and political subject areas. There are economic and legal concepts in Yolŋu Matha that do not exist in English.

¹⁷ Most Yolŋu people learn about new NT and Commonwealth laws passed Darwin and Canberra when they are arrested by the police for breaking these laws. No one has ever sought to tell them about these new laws in a language they can understand.

¹⁸ There are a number of funded learning to read and write English programs employed for Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people. However you can learn to read and write a language but you still may not understand it. I can learn to read and write Japanese but does that mean I can understand it? These ill-conceived, 'cart before the horse' programs, leave many Aboriginal people totally confused, frustrated and therefore further disempowered and defeated. Some can read and write, even spell correctly, but have little or no understanding of what the sentences mean. The normal way to learn a language is to learn the language first. You can then also learn to read and write it at the same time. Aboriginal people need access to constructed English learning programs that work from their own language across to English so they can have equal access to English information.

On the other hand English is a completely foreign language to Yolŋu people. This is especially so in its grammar construction. Some Yolŋu people have little trouble dealing with English tangible terms. It is the concept level academic English language that creates massive problems. Some can even read, write and spell medical, legal and economic concept words and phrases, but have no idea of their meaning. This leaves these people extremely confused about the Australian dominant culture English speaking world.

Less than a 70 year history

To make this more difficult for Yolŋu people the academic interaction between English and Yolŋu Matha has less than 70 years of history. Pacific Island nations have at least 180 years interaction and English and Chinese and Japanese have 400 years of academic interaction. Therefore many resources exist for Chinese, Japanese and Pacific Island nation people for them to understand English, especially at the academic concept level. However these same resources do not exist for any of the Original Australians, including for Yolŋu youth, their parents, or other Aboriginal people.

This leaves Yolŋu youth and their parents severely disadvantaged as most speak English as a fifth or sixth language and have few "self-learning tools" like dictionaries so that they can get quick access to the meaning of academic English terms and concepts in their own (thinking) language, Yolŋu Matha. To make it more difficult English concept roots go back to Europe, which has no connection with their language Asian roots. So the whole semantic construction of English concept terms is very foreign to them.

Lack of understanding of English economic, medical, legal and political terms leaves Yolŋu people out of the mainstream conversation and ability to learn at almost every level of the schooling and tertiary system. Whereas people who come from European countries and even most African countries can learn effectively through Australian tertiary institutions because those people have good dictionaries from English to their "thinking" language specially at the academic intangible concept level of language.¹⁹

It is a common occurrence for Yolŋu teenage men to be sent from classrooms for being obstructive and uncooperative. Many dropout of the schooling system as soon as they possibly can. Most times the reason for this behaviour is due to the intellectual torture they experience with incomprehensible English concept words being used over and over throughout the day.²⁰

¹⁹ Many Aboriginal people, who today speak English or Aboriginal English as a first language, attempting legal studies struggle and drop out because of this factor. Yolŋu drop out in droves at the High School level returning home broken people.

²⁰ Speaking with a Spanish student attending the local high school, last week, who had only been in Australia for a number of months and her English was pretty good but her first language is Spanish. I asked her how she coped with the concept, academic English terms in high school. She said she referred to her English to Spanish dictionary (a number of times each week) which covered all these academic English words. I pointed out to her

Concept English terms, that they have absolutely no understanding of and no way/s of accessing that understanding, become like weapons deployed against them. When they are pushed and tested on these unknown words and concepts the experience becomes intolerable and they lash out and rebel. Many start to believe that they are dumb and stupid because they are black, "We're not smart like white kids/people".

Almost all teachers who come to Yolŋu schools learn no local language or good cultural competency and cross-cultural communication skills. So the burden of the mismatch is placed fully on the shoulders of vulnerable young Yolŋu students. This creates a very unfair, unlevel playing-field. As one young Yolŋu student said, "I learnt nothing at school today. Just like every day. All I wanted to do is find some marijuana and smoke it".

Again this language mismatch contravenes UN Charter Rights of the Indigenous People Article 14²¹

Why does this mismatch exist?

In 1998 Marie-Anik Gagne stated in her paper on the James Bay Cree Indians: ...colonialism is the seed of trauma because it leads to dependency, then to cultural genocide, racism, and alcoholism. These in turn lead to sexual abuse, family violence, child abuse, and accidental death/suicides. . . .²²

Marie-Anik Gagne clearly sees the same end-stage problems being caused by underlying conditions and processes amongst James Bay Cree. She named the seed of the trauma as being colonialism.

Here in Australia we also see the same end-stage antisocial behaviours. I am also absolutely convinced that these antisocial behaviours are the fruits of a deeper more destructive force or trauma. However I want to look at it in a slightly different way as many have heard the colonial argument before and just dismiss it.

Worldwide Indigenous problem

All over the world Indigenous people who have been colonised face many the same predicament that Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people now face. A clear cultural mismatch occurs and the Indigenous people suffer and become cultural refugees.

that the Yolŋu students who also attend the same school did not have an English to Yolŋu Matha dictionary that covered the same academic concept words. She was shocked and said, "How do they cope"?

²¹ Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

61/295. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

²² Gagne, 1998. P. 358.

For Australia the mismatch is quite simple in that the mainstream Australian dominant culture has its roots in British culture. It is a British history, language, legal and political system, with social and economic systems that now form the foundation for the dominant Australian mainstream culture.

However if this was the only problem then the results would not be as permanent or destructive as it continues to be. Over time there would be an equalisation of citizen rights and access to information between the two groups and a clear acceptance of each other's differences. Both groups would be able to compete on a level playing field in a more harmonised inclusive way. Different but still the same.

However something stops this happening and it is this factor that keeps Aboriginal people as culture refugees excluded from the Australian mainstream cultural make up. I will submit that it is also this factor that leads to the trauma experienced by the people and the end-stage "problems" occurring.

Construction of two-way cultural naming "boxes"

The major underlining factor is that both cultural groups have constructed cultural naming "boxes" for each other. The parameters of these prescriptive cultural naming "boxes" are then used to create programs and services in response to the end stage problems rather than the real situation that exists on the ground for these affected communities. Therefore it is these cultural naming "boxes" that leads to many youth ending up in detention, and contribute to why they suffer different forms of violence against them when in State care.

Two way naming

Mainstream Australia has created a cultural naming "box" for Yolngu and other Aboriginal people. And Yolngu and other Aboriginal groups have also created cultural naming "box" for Balanda.

In fact any human group that comes into close contact with other different human groups fall into the same practice of naming the other group in their own language to define their understanding of the other group. The detrimental effects of this leads to many of the dysfunctional "problems" we are concerned with. Plus, the more competitive the different groups are for the same resources the stronger the naming activity becomes. So in Australia the naming between the dominant Australian community and the Aboriginal people competing over the same nation and resources has become very intense and has created the current mismatched, unfair and unlevel playing-field.

Let's have closer look at this.

British naming of Aboriginal people

It was early British settlers who started to name Aboriginal people and their culture. The contemporary stereotyped naming of Aboriginal people and their culture today is in English and has existed since the beginning of colonisation, recorded in the English historical records and also in contemporary writings and education.

As the British settlers observed Aboriginal people and their culture they constructed a cultural naming "box" of their making. This was a normal thing to do as they met together and discussed, in English, what they saw as a very different cultural group of people. Virtually everything Aboriginal people did they found strange and objectionable, including their language, dress and customs. Their fire stick control of the land and other natural farming techniques were confusing and contrary to anything Europeans recognise as farming even though highly productive open grasslands were evident all across the country.²³

As the competition over resources, Aboriginal women and land occurred many physical brutal battles occurred between them, so the naming became more intense and derogatory.

Setting the parameters of the other group

This one-sided subjective cultural naming was to become the "box" that set the parameters for the Original Australians and their socio-economic, legal and political systems, in fact for their whole way of life, even defining their identity.

Part of the cultural naming also evolved to justify the many massacres, rapes and disregard for Aboriginal people as human beings at the hands of some early Europeans.

Today if almost any mainstream dominant culture person was to sit down and write a list of what they considered to be the traditional cultural of Aboriginal people and/or the quality of Aboriginal people's character most would come up with a list like savage, native, simple, primitive, hunter gatherer, lore and many more. Some might even have on their list lazy, amoral and dirty. There would be few positive names in this list such as spiritual, musical or artistic.

Subconscious stereotype naming

In short no matter how Aboriginal people and culture are described it is the colonial British settler's construct that has now become the subconscious stereotyped naming that defines the relationship rules between the Original Australians and mainstream Australian culture. To make it more difficult the naming is now so hardwired into the community subconscious that it is hard for many people to truly appreciate this argument in an objective way.

²³ The Biggest Estate on Earth, Bill Gammage, 2011.

It is this naming that paints Yolŋu as amoral people²⁴, having no economic²⁵, legal or political systems. The constructed cultural naming "box" tells us they had (and have) no real educational systems or governance institutions. No real systems of organised farming, that they never produced products or actively participated in regional, national or international trade. This is despite all the evidence against it.²⁶

This subconscious stereotyped derogatory naming has been so effective at indoctrinating the mainstream that even many Aboriginal people themselves, who now speak English as a first language, believe this British cultural naming "box" construction and many have appropriated it, or believe it is their real original culture.²⁷

As Yolŋu now interface with mainstream culture through contacts with service agencies, government programming or when large numbers of Balanda access their communities this subconscious stereotyped naming becomes the defining prism through which they are seen, continuing to break them as a people and creating the disastrous consequences discussed here.

The Yolŋu naming of Balanda

Yolŋu as well as many other Aboriginal people have also constructed the same derogatory naming for Balanda. The naming is not well known in mainstream Australia and consists of terms like;

Maŋ'tjarr - leaf litter. Balanda are like the leaf litter that is blown in by the wind. Leaf litter has no concern for whose country it settles on and stays there until another big wind comes and blows it somewhere else.

Rommirru - Lawless. Balanda people have no system of law. This implies that mainstream Australia's legal systems are based on a rule of man rather than a real system of law.

Raypirrimirru - no discipline of mind body and soul. Balanda are completely undisciplined people who just following their feelings and desires at all times. They are perceived as rude and arrogant.

²⁴ One of my early surprises in learning about Yolŋu society was to discover that they were such a highly moral community, against everything I was ever taught about Aboriginal society from my dominant culture upbringing.

²⁵ One day I was translating for a Yolŋu board of directors in one of their meetings. CEO of the local mining operation made a statement saying, "I know that work and business is not part of your culture but I think your culture has to change". As soon as I translated the statement in Yolŋu Matha an elderly Yolŋu director jumped to his feet and said very abruptly, in their own language, "Don't tell us that work and business is not part of our culture, you Balanda have stolen all our work and our businesses".

²⁶ Bruce Pascoe Dark Emu, 2014

²⁷ One of the many visitors I have had, on this subject, was an Aboriginal man from Sydney who had been paid to travel to remote Aboriginal communities to convince them that they needed to accept the fact that business was the way of the modern world and they needed to "change their culture" and accept business as part of their culture. I showed him the wealth of documented evidence to the contrary. I also took him through the Yolŋu people's economic language concepts showing they have had business forever. He was shocked. He had grown up with the accepted British cultural naming box of Aboriginal people and their culture and accepted it as his own.

Mokuy mala; Mokuy corpse - dead person or evil spirit. Balanda are evil cheeky spirits.

Watu - dogs. This name refers to the sexual activities of Balanda being morally corrupt and doglike. It particularly refers to the public sexual activities of Balanda or when they greet each other in public by hugging/kissing.

The cultural naming "boxes" are a set of derogatory names and terms, in their own respective languages, used to keep the other group "in check", disempowered and even defeated. It is the interplay of this subconscious stereotyped naming that becomes the "them and us" weaponry, used from within each ethnocentric base towards the other competing cultural group of people.

It is this two way naming process that creates and reinforces the mismatch between the two groups creating the disastrous cultural refugees status for the First Australians.

The interplay of the cultural naming

The interplay of the cultural naming manifests itself in different ways for both Balanda and Yolŋu.

The effects on Balanda

Balanda have little or no knowledge of the Yolŋu cultural naming applied against them. Yolŋu people are not the dominant culture in Australia today and so the naming has very little influence or control over the mainstream dominant culture economic, legal or political systems. So it doesn't matter what sort of cultural naming box Yolŋu construct for Balanda it will have little to no effect on them, except dent their pride a little bit when they first hear it.

However the Balanda cultural naming of Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people is now so cemented into mainstream dominant culture psyche and structure to the point that it has become the "official" understanding and naming for Aboriginal culture and their activities. It is seldom questioned and many cases it is accepted as absolute fact.

Balanda naming can get Balanda in trouble

The way the mainstream uses cultural naming of Aboriginal people seemingly has no real direct negative effects on the Balanda community. However there are many. Some Australian communities are divided and struggling with all the end-stage problems occurring in their neighbourhoods and in Indigenous communities. It damages Australia's international reputation, breaks international charters agreements, and costs the government a fortune with no real positive returns for money spent.

It also creates a very direct and dangerous psychological interplay that causes bad relationships and conflict in the workplace, in the service industries and at other times gets some Balanda into trouble with their own moral or legal standards.

Most of the time though the cultural naming of Aboriginal people allows the dominant culture to maintain a position of power and superiority over Aboriginal people as it has for over 200 years.

This culture's interplay gives permission to members of the dominant culture to act out in different ways, in accordance with the cultural naming, when they relate to Aboriginal people or are involved in discussions and decision-making about them.

Because much of the stereotyped naming is also now appropriated by many English first language Aboriginal people it creates real problems when the same colonial mindset is used to create programs for their own communities or for more traditional Aboriginal people. These programs can also become part of the problem rather than a real part of the answer.

The subconscious interplay

Balanda cultural naming of Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people allows the mainstream to see and name all the activity in Yolŋu society as just "culture", rather than recognising different aspects of Yolŋu activity as environmental, economic, legal, educational and so on. Their institutional processes of governance are just seen as dance, song, or 'cultural ceremonies'. Traditional educational processes, including important ones for younger members of the society to transition effectively from children to adulthood, are also destined to become just "ceremonies" with no real intrinsic social or education value.

Arts and craft store managers see more aspects of the Aboriginal legal system and its instruments and articles of Law than the contemporary Australian legal system does. However it often doesn't realise it as these items are usually categorised as "cultural artefacts" rather than understood as the legal items they are.

Whereas when the dominant culture talks about their own human activity they differentiate them appropriately into various areas; economic, legal, medical and so on. Because of this difference in naming many Yolŋu people have asked me, "Do Balanda have culture? They never seemed to talk about it like they always talk about our culture"?

Misunderstanding Yolŋu language

Strangely even academics like linguists call the Yolŋu gurraŋay matha (academic cognitive effective language) "ceremonial language". This continues to deny the true academic significance of the Yolŋu Matha academic language. Therefore it is hardly studied, recorded or used in academic endeavours, further cementing the divide and the culturally constructed naming of Aboriginal people.

It is also seen when education and training is created for Yolŋu or other Aboriginal people. Most education campaigns whether they cover primary health, legal or

commercial topics are couched in their simplest form for supposedly “simple people”. As an example, cartoons characters are the flavour of the day for a lot of Aboriginal education.

Yet on the other hand mainstream national accreditation guidelines are strictly followed, whether they are relevant or not, instead of delivering the semantic and constructional knowledge that Yolŋu people need to actually understand the subject. Then it is delivered and tested in English. Many defend the position by saying, “Aboriginal people should be forced to learn English”. Part of the reasoning that supports this argument is that Aboriginal languages like Yolŋu Matha are seen as primitive and simple; an idea taken straight from the Balanda stereotyped cultural naming box for Aboriginal people. So we should force these “simple” people to learn English so they can have better capacity to think and communicate.

Less than 50 years ago Yolŋu people were whipped for speaking their own language in classrooms. Today the educational methodologies are aimed at forcing them to learn English. Yet constructed English learning programs are not delivered; ones that work from their very effective Original Australian first language across to English, which is what happens when other cross-language constructed language learning programs are created.

Having spent thousands of hours teaching Yolŋu people different academic English words and concepts I know Yolŋu are desperate to learn this information and to properly understand the Balanda world. But the cultural naming stops this ever happening.

This cultural naming also psychologically affects teachers that come to Yolŋu communities. Many teachers make no attempt to learn the language of the local people, as it is seen as “primitive”. A few who desperately do want to learn are told by their employer or those in authority, “What a stupid idea. What educational outcomes would ever possibly come from you learning an Aboriginal language”? I have had many Balanda teachers in tears on the phone after being discouraged in such ways. They had come to the NT wanting to learn an Aboriginal language and the people’s culture but get blocked by the tired old dominant culture naming of Aboriginal people.

Some teachers even drop their learning standards as the dominant culture naming tells them that they are working with “a primitive, backward group of people who have little desire to learn”. Note Dr Chris Sarra of the Stronger Smarter Institutes dedication to push back against this derogatory naming and the poor standards it sets in Aboriginal education, [Changing the tide of low expectations in Indigenous Education](#).

Some Balanda victims

Despite that let’s look at how some Balanda also become victims of this cultural naming. We need to remember that the cultural naming box was constructed at the interface of colonial settlement of this country. And that was a time when many of

the European settlers were feeling very vulnerable from attacks by the “natives” on their settlements and communities. A few Balanda and a lot of Aboriginal people died brutally throughout this period of time.

Some Balanda still carry deep fear and guilt stemming from this colonial interface²⁸. Most will not be conscious of it but may react in different ways as though they are still defending their loved ones and society against “the Aboriginal threat”. At different times, and often unexpectedly, they revert to “them and us” subconscious colonial reactions.

Bully in the playground response

It is at these times the dangerous subconscious “bully in the playground” or the “colonist at the barricades” response occurs. When it happens all contemporary moral or legal standards take second stage. In fact conscious thinking gets overridden by the parameters of the cultural naming box and a subconscious response, “It is them or us” fight for survival impulse emerges and defence actions or outright aggressive attacks occur.²⁹

This subconscious response occurs more readily when the particular dominant culture group is in the majority, responding to the minority of Aboriginal people. This can be seen in the evidence before the Royal commission at the moment into the abuse of Aboriginal juveniles in State’s care. The correctional services staff clearly had the upper hand. From this power position some Balanda will act out, “against the Blacks/natives” in a defensive or aggressive manner. It also occurs when police officers are caught on video violently attacking Aboriginal prisoners being held in “protective custody”.

If those offending correctional service offices or police were asked why they did what they did, many will say, “I don’t know”. Others would say, “It’s not part of my character so I don’t understand why I did it or why I joined in”. In these situations staff find themselves breaking their own moral and legal statutory requirements.

It is the British constructed cultural naming box that subconsciously validates and even promotes their actions. This is where the cultural naming starts to play a dangerous subconscious role in the relationships between Balanda and Yolŋu affecting many in the service industry, including policing, correctional services, health and child support services for Aboriginal citizens.³⁰

²⁸ In the early 1990’s I worked with groups of prominent community leaders who wanted to be involved in reconciliation programs in their own communities with local Aboriginal people in New South Wales. Many of these Balanda were farmers from the local area others were involved in the local municipal councils at high-levels. I couldn’t believe how much coaching it took for them to overcome the fear of meeting the Aboriginal people in their own community for the first time. Who they had lived with all their lives. To get them to the first meeting where we had tea and scones took a process of almost 12 months. Many of them physically shook in the stomach at the first meeting with the local Aboriginal people. Once over the first meeting things went great.

²⁹ Shankar Vedantam; *The Hidden Brain* 2010

³⁰ On a constant basis I receive phone calls from Yolŋu in hospitals in other service areas where they continue come up against being treated as primitive, backward people no matter what their level of Western education is. Many also experience continuous aggression from dominant culture mainstream service staff.

Two important phenomena

To help expose the human element of this tragedy experienced on a daily basis by Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people I want to talk about two phenomena. One is the culture of silence and the second is the intergenerational transfer of trauma.

Culture of silence

Some mainstream, dominant culture people may still find it hard to understand why so many things seem to be out of control in Aboriginal families' right across the nation. Many Aboriginal people including Yolŋu also ask the same question.

I have heard much criticism of some Yolŋu adult's playing cards while the children are sniffing petrol or involved in some other antisocial behaviour. Many will see it as abnormal and totally irresponsible behaviour. And in a "normal" culturally empowered functioning community it is. But by now we know that we are not dealing with "normal" communities here anymore.

I want to repeat again. Where these things do occur this is not normal Yolŋu behaviour nor is it part of Aboriginal culture but it is a result of the effect of the mismatch that has occurred between them and the mainstream dominant Australian culture turning them into cultural refugees in Australia in 2016. The experience of being a fourth or fifteenth generation cultural refugees produces a new culture, called a culture of silence³¹.

What is a culture of silence

Culture of silence is where the people's once strong traditional (Original Australian) socio-economic, legal and political institutions and processes lose their function due to disruption and misunderstanding from the dominant Australian community. This dominant cultural action destroys the very 40,000 years plus of societal mechanisms that maintained normal functioning families and clans, as well as regional and national communities.

Aboriginal people lose their ability to be self-governed and self-directed and become confused as to how the contemporary world around them operates. They experience life as refugees within the mainstream culture. Even their interaction with Aboriginal organisations from the mainstream end in confusion and many times conflict, as English and the foreign mainstream processes become the conduit that the people are **forced** to operate in and through.

What does it look like?

Culture of silence is where a whole community or groups within that community experience communal depression. As with all forms of depression people within the group will experience various levels of depression at different times. As it happens it

³¹ Cultural Action for Freedom, Paulo Freire 1972 p 57-.

changes the people's original culture. Their makeup changes from a happy, outgoing, assertive, confident people to an inward looking culture displaying a sad, quiet, timid, morbid demeanour. If the cultural of silence persists this new way of living is transmitted to the next generation.

In its extreme forms a culture of silence stops people participating in life at all and whole groups of people will "sit down and die". Of course during the dying process they will experience many forms of addiction and social destruction. Across the nation different Aboriginal groups of people have done just this. I first saw these elements in Arnhem Land in the 1970s and this was with some of the most remote and untouched Aboriginal people in Australia. Over the four decades I have been in the area I have seen Yolŋu change from assertive and outgoing people to a community consisting of many depressed people showing little interest in life other than just playing the next set of cards.

Today in pockets all over Australia there are groups of Aboriginal people who display severe cases of a culture of silence. I have visited Aboriginal communities outside of Arnhem Land where all the men stare at their feet and do not participate in any way in the running of their communities.

Mums the word

Frontline workers in Aboriginal communities across the nation experience "mums the word" interactions with some Aboriginal people. Even where internal family violence has occurred, even to children, the group will not talk to anybody from the dominant Australian culture, especially those in authority. They know from continued experience that if they speak up the resulting violence, shame and oppression perpetrated against them, as a group of people, will far outweigh any of the internal violence that has occurred within their own group.

A few stoic Yolŋu characters will stand out of the crowd, trying to keep family and community together. However a number will just want to deny the social chaos happening around them, to their people or their families. Like depression a culture of silence is a condition that the people themselves cannot just switch off. It needs the outside oppressive influences which are creating the psychological damage to be modified or removed.

It is the culture of silence that breeds the antisocial behaviour that leads to the end-stage problems where many Yolŋu juveniles are now ending up in detention. We need to recognise the broken condition that many Aboriginal communities are now in and move to empower them.

Intergenerational transfer of trauma

The second phenomenon I want to discuss is the intergenerational transfer of trauma.

Aboriginal youth who display all sorts of antisocial end-stage behaviour problems do not sniff petrol, self-harm, commit acts of vandalism, or behave violently toward

their own family just because they are bad or bored. In many cases they are traumatised young people living in families and communities that are also experiencing high levels of trauma and dysfunction.

Aboriginal youth suffer enough direct crises in their lives just being born on the wrong side of the dominate Australian culture. Some also suffer directly if their parents are no longer coping. Others see their parents no longer smiling and hear of intercultural conflict and accounts of injustice. However they also suffer from the multilayered crisis effect called the intergenerational transfer of trauma. This is where the trauma that their grandparents and parents have experienced in their lifetimes is transmitted to them on top of everything else that is going on in their lives.

The ramifications of intergenerational transfer of trauma have been clearly defined as in the Vietnam Soldiers Return Study.³²

As this study showed there are clear ramifications for the third-generation of the children of war veterans. For example, Vietnam veterans whose fathers also served in combat displayed higher levels of PTSD symptoms. The suicide rates among the children of Australian veterans are three times the expected rate and death by accident is twice the expected rate.

It is the same for Yolŋu children in the present time. They suffer intergenerational transfer of trauma passed down from their parents and grandparents, as well as being retraumatized by their own contemporary experiences.

³² Rosenheck, R. & Fontana, A. "Warrior Fathers and Warrior Sons: Intergenerational Aspects of Trauma", in Daneli, 1998. And the; Daneli, Yael (ed.) International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma, Plenum Press, New York, 1998

Lifting the lid, finding answers

From my own personal experience working with Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people I know when programs are designed to empower people they can grow in confidence and experience control over their lives. This applies to early intervention options and pathways that can be put in place for children at risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour by empowering them as individuals' or their whole families and communities to decrease or stop the behaviour in the first place.

When this happens, individuals, families and whole communities, create their own interventions; ones necessary to stop the decay in their own lives and communities and return to more "normal" healthy and responsive behaviour.

To do this we need to lift the lid and find out what works.

The alternative; community capacity building

A far more effective educational model is the community capacity building model. One of our present programs called '[Hope for Health](#)'³³ is turning back chronic disease amongst Yolŋu people, including diabetes, heart disease and renal failure. The central core of the program is Yolŋu people understanding the whole issue of chronic disease and its relationship to diet and exercise, down to a deep biomedical level. The program is delivered in their own language.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s working with Yolŋu in Ramingining and using their own language and cultural constructs the people were able to manage their whole community. This included all the administration, house construction and winning government contracts. They also successfully defeated petrol sniffing by re-establishing an age-old teaching ceremony to successfully transition young men and women to adulthood. This teaching ceremony still happens annually today, with no government funding, and no petrol sniffing exists within their community although it occurs in all the communities around them.

At the time I was the dominant culture community worker working with a team four other Yolŋu in the community development office. We developed a program called Discovery Education. That meant that any question any member of the community had in relation to how the dominant Australian culture worked could be answered by us. We become like the people's Google search program – a bridge into the mainstream Balanda world - except it was in Yolŋu Matha.

We found that we were doing, medical, economic and legal literacy education where the curriculum was determined by the people through their own questions and through the analysis that I did around the subject areas they raised. I would map the contradictions I discovered between the people's world view and understanding of the particular subject and the actual situation and by doing so developed a whole

³³ Robert S Tate's video of Hope for Health Retreat, Sep 2016. <https://vimeo.com/182625748>

list of cultural knowledge gaps. It is this information that people need to learn to truly understand the subject they showed interest in.

All this educational material was delivered in their own language so they could fully participate in the discussions and receive real understanding. At the same time many of the people also learnt a lot of the academic English terms and concepts related to that topic. Using this method any medical, legal or economic subject can be taught effectively and efficiently to the oldest or youngest people in Arnhem Land, using their own language. Once taught to one adult generational level it will be taught internally to successive generations by the people themselves.³⁴ For example; when all the parents and elders have a clear understanding of mainstream Australian laws and rights they can then apply them to protect vulnerable people from within their families and community groups.

Again I applied this same education method through Yolŋu Radio for about 8 years while some funding was available. And again it work over a broad range of issues covering 8,000 plus Yolŋu people. Antisocial behaviour decreased and things like petrol sniffing stopped across the region. The 2007 intervention into the NT stopped all that by closing down the funding for program development.

Community education not elitist education

The educational method we deploy is aimed at educating the whole community not just a few individuals with it. It is the whole Yolŋu society as a socio-economic-political unit that needs to be empowered not just a few of their young people.

Most mainstream programs are actually elitist education, targeting specific Aboriginal students and often taking them out of their community in order to receive training.

When only a few younger individuals from within the community are empowered with dominant culture information and knowledge it sets up another unlevel playing field, only now it is within the Yolŋu families and communities themselves.

The young Western-educated Yolŋu return home and challenge the authority of the community's selected traditional leaders. Creating many disputes. When these students lose this contest many spend the rest of their lives on the road living on the fringes of many dominant culture communities as itinerants.

Those who win these battles, usually suppress the community's selected leadership and end up keeping most of the dominant culture resources and information to themselves. This is because the community does not know where their power and authority come from so they cannot control self-selected "leaders". Their immediate family becomes wealthy while the wider community suffers.

This model creates a very undemocratic governance structure within communities and contributes too many end-stage antisocial problems.

³⁴ The parenting factor in education <https://austparents.edu.au/apcarticles>

A failed colonial method

In 1789 Captain Arthur Philip captured Bennelong and Colby³⁵, pioneering this method of Aboriginal "advancement". It did not work then and does not work today.

This old colonial method leads to many of these young people becoming lost between two worlds, super confused and rejected by both Balanda and Yolŋu communities. Destined to a life of drug abuse and crime in Balanda communities. Most itinerant Aboriginal people in Darwin, and other capital cities across Australia have also walked in these same tragic shoes of Bennelong and Colby adding greatly to the incarceration rates of Aboriginal people.

Captain Phillip's two students were the first victims of this destructive educational methodology. Colby died in England from pneumonia and Bennelong died back in Sydney of alcoholism at the age of 42 rejected and despised by both the British settlers and his own people. His only son, reared by a Methodist minister, died at the young age of 24.

Instead of using Philips model of taking people from their community trying to change them and then using them to bring about change in their community, we need to look at the discussion above and find a new way. We need to find a way where we can help many different Aboriginal communities, working from where they are at, to get access to the information and resources they need for them to be in an empowered position to respond to the many living issues they face every day.

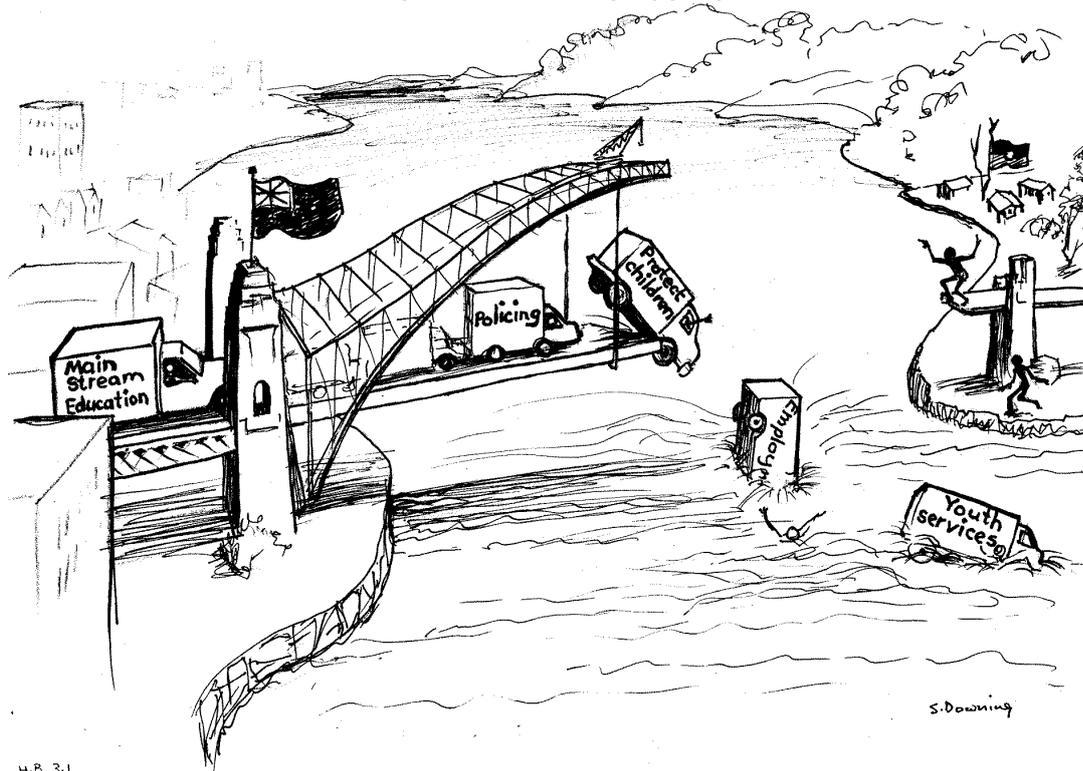
In the diagram below we have a situation where there are two communities. One developing fast within their own social-economic-political (British culture) structure on the south/left bank of the harbour the other (Aboriginal people/s), on the north/right side of the harbour, lock-out of this same social-economic-political structure.

Real solutions require that real capacity is built within the Aboriginal community/s as whole living units.

Just rolling out more dominant culture services, to fix the "problem", will not work. No matter how much money is direct at it. Leaving the people on both sides criticising Government. Many mainstream Australians will say, "Look at all the resource going nowhere" while Aboriginal people will feel more deprived. Without the capacity being built on the right side of the harbour the Aboriginal Communities

³⁵ Two Aboriginal men from Manly Cove.

will not be able to effectively and efficiently appropriate the services and resources.



Imagine being born on the north side of the harbour and wondering all your life how the people, just over there, on the south side become so successful, do not die young like your people do, seem to have so much money and so many assets, have thriving businesses and good employment, do well at school and university and the list goes on. Imagine how that feels. This is the mental torment that is carried by Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people across the country.

The 'just over there' experiences are now very real for Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal people in Australia today. The people have access to TV, videos and many also find themselves on school excursions to capital cities and places of interest across the country. But these conversations are all in English and when they ask their parent question about mainstream Australian people their parent have the same question so they cannot help them in their home language. For them it's as though they lived just across the Harbour, seeing the lifestyle and wealth of people on the south side. Most conclude that all Balanda people get all their assets, homes and jobs through some form of government grant. Their big WHY question is, why do we miss out?

Trying to work out how the mainstream dominant Australian community works, without any formal community capacity building program to do so, leads to high levels of depression and creates the paralysing culture of silence. The latest 2016 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report spells out that there are three main areas that show a clear regression in Aboriginal communities. They are mental

health, suicide and self-harm, drugs another substance abuse. All clear social indicators of disempowered communities now living in a culture of silence.³⁶

Capacity building for Australian citizens

What are the capacity needs of these Aboriginal Australians citizens?

Today Aboriginal people live in many different communities all over Australia. Some still have a lot of traditional knowledge while others have lost almost all of it. So the capacity needs will be different within each of these communities.

However there is some essential principle information and knowledge that is needed in all communities, with some variation, to build capacity so the people can take control over their family and communities and become effective citizens.

Regardless of where Aboriginal people are at they need to be able to understand how the mainstream community operates. All Aboriginal people across Australia need to know how the world around them works in 2016. In short they need to become economically, medically and legally literate.

We need to dispense with the neo-colonial idea that only Aboriginal People educated through dominant culture schools and universities can understand these things. Having worked with Aboriginal people in many different situations across the country as well as with Yolngu I know that the capacity building/community education, proposed here is possible in all groups of people. We need not be limited by the Balanda understanding of education or the cultural naming that suggests that adult Aboriginal people will not be able to understand this information. In fact people with the most traditional knowledge will be able to understand very quickly, due to the highly developed concept knowledge construction in their own Australian Language/s.

Without this concept form of community education, cause and effect around medical, economical or legal issues make no sense. Past experience also shows that once people have a clear conceptual understanding of how the world works they will then demand skill education.

Five capacity building programs

I find over and over again that when the people get the answers to the big WHY questions in their own language they find solutions within their own great resources to remedy their situation. Many of these solutions are cost-negative to government, due to the people being equally empowered like other Australian citizens.

Listed below are five capacity building programs that I believe will provide the building blocks to close the gap. These building blocks will allow the people to build

³⁶ <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016#factsheets>

their half of the bridge, bring the people back from the cultural refugee status, break the cycle of trauma, change the culture of silence and lessen the end-stage anti-social “problems” seen across many Aboriginal communities today. These same programs would also make time in detention much more positive where young people have a chance to receive good communication, real support and answers to many of the big question they carry about the world around them.

1. Community education

The first of these building blocks is a community education program aimed at the adult population within a particular language group. Good community education programs that cover the major questions and themes that are necessary to understand how the world around them works.

This would cover different themes including economic, medical, legal and political/governance processes and structures. People also need access to good current affairs in their own language to keep them up-to-date with the conversations that are happening across Australia and the world. These programs would also help develop the people’s everyday use of English and encourage their participation in formal education and training already available.

Although people are suffering from high levels of disease and sickness I would actually place basic economic literacy as one of the most essential educational needs. It is the confusion around economics that is leading to a strong “them and us” negative response we are now seeing in juveniles across Arnhem Land. And I would suggest it will be the same in other places across the country.³⁷

Basic economic literacy

For over 30 years now I have campaigned for an economic literacy program for Yolŋu people in their own language. The need now is greater than ever.

Some financial literacy programs were delivered, however understanding budgets and the like were not what Yolŋu needed. In these programs financial literacy starts at the skill level, like most mainstream education programs. However Yolŋu need the conceptual understanding of economics first.

They need constant conversations in their own economic language that deals with their specific confusion around contemporary economics. Some Yolŋu now believe that the government can “just print money and hand it out”, while others might say to them, “If you have a budget you always have money”. So some will think, “How can I get two or three budgets”? While this type of thinking might sound absurd to many people in the mainstream, having spent 30 years investigating and mapping the contradictions that Yolŋu have around contemporary economics I know this level

³⁷ <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/townsville-cleveland-detention-centre-youths-in-rooftop-incident/news-story/d09a3f0824cc2a6b9e0e0dcb83b07161>
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-02/perth-banksia-hill-detention-centre-probe-launched-after-riot/7807124>
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-14/melbourne-youth-justice-centre-riot-police-called-second-time/8022206>

of confusion is real. I have a very clear understanding of the subject needs for this education. Unless there is a program that deals with these specific contradictions their confusion will not disappear.

I question how any group of people can get excited about education or training, or develop businesses if the core basic understanding of how contemporary economics across the world operates is non-existent or very confusing for them.

If Yolŋu parents are confused about economics and tell their children that it is Balanda who are stopping them getting access to money and goods then this sets up a no-win situation for all.

This call for good economic literacy continues to fall on deaf ears. If Yolŋu people believe that Balanda get all their housing, goods and jobs given to them by a “grant” of some form from the government then they will continue to believe that until they have other evidence that convinces them of the real situation.

Good economic literacy programs can also help Yolŋu people to transition from traumatised people on welfare to functioning citizens that can seize the opportunities that exist on their resource rich estates. There are millions of dollars of unrealised business opportunities that currently exist across Arnhem Land.³⁸

Economic literacy could be delivered through radio and Internet.

Health literacy

Similar arguments can be made about health literacy. When many Aboriginal people across the nation have no real understanding of germ theory and other health issues then the cause and effect in relation to disease and sickness is non-existent.

Although Europeans suffered from the black plague in Europe many years ago Aboriginal people in Australia had no similar experience until European diseases were introduced only 200 years ago. So there is a big gap in health knowledge and a lot of catching up for Yolŋu to do. Unfortunately no Australian government has helped to make sure that the whole Aboriginal population is health literate.

Again the mainstream idea is to take a few Yolŋu or Aboriginal people and turn them into doctors and health workers. This method of cultural empowerment will take many centuries. For the same money it takes to train a few people whole language population groups could learn health literacy.

I have mapped the contradictions in the knowledge gaps that exist for the Yolŋu people of Arnhem Land around the whole subject of health and disease. And we have applied lot of this information to small programs we run today. We have proven it is possible to turn back chronic disease; now the programs need to reach a wider audience.

³⁸ Please see “Getting Yolŋu Back into Business” which includes an extensive economic word list in Yolŋu Matha. <http://www.whywarriors.com.au/2014/07/getting-yolnu-into-business/>

Legal literacy

Legal literacy and political/governance training is also absolutely essential for Aboriginal communities to understand that there is a real system of law operating in Australia today. A system that can protect their rights and resources as well as those of the mainstream. For them to know this though they need good capacity building/community education to teach this subject.

Again I have mapped the contradictions that Yolŋu people have around legal literacy and have applied it in many hundreds of education sessions. However many more are needed.

Understanding economic, medical, legal and political/governance processes and structures is essential for all Aboriginal people.

2. Cultural Competency Staff Training.

Good quality, in-depth cultural competency training (CCT) should be mandatory for all mainstream dominant Australian culture people working with Aboriginal people. This should include the learning of language and cross-cultural communication skills for all frontline staff.

Good CCT will also help people recognise the danger that lurks within and that could present itself when least expected bringing an end to a person's career. CCT can expose the cross cultural naming scenario and work through issues of trauma and the culture of silence that is now prominent in many Aboriginal communities. CCT can also teach good communication skills and how to keep staff safe and working effectively in the cross-cultural cross-language environment.

Cross-cultural and basic cultural awareness courses are separate to CCT. They are very useful to teach good local information and customs to staff. However they should not be seen in the same category as CCT.

The cost of government staff recruitment is phenomenal and the cost to Aboriginal communities because of culturally incompetent mainstream personnel is unmeasurable in human suffering terms.

Having delivered CCT training now for over 35 years I know from many hundreds of personal stories how good CCT training can make a difference to massively reduce recruitment cost and the trauma being experienced by children and adults in Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal communities across Australia.

Good cultural competency training must become mandatory as a basic human right to culturally safe service access for Aboriginal people.

3. Culturally appropriate schooling

The third extremely important building block is culturally appropriate schooling that works. The Education system needs teachers who learn the language of the local people so they can work more readily with traumatised young people, create safe

and effective learning environments, control classrooms, answer the conceptual questions the students have, and do genuinely effective education.

All the latest schemes that have been tried in Aboriginal education have come to nothing. How about trying education using an Australian language, Yolŋu Matha, as the main conduit for learning? I'm not even talking about full bilingual education here. Let's just get some good basic communication happening first to create a safe and more effective learning environment.

Many will say that this would cost too much. However with the cost of recruiting one teacher being anything between \$60 and \$160,000 or more and the cost of the massive social problems now occurring plus the policing and incarceration costs I think this argument is truly dead in the water. That's not to mention the massive cost to Yolŋu people themselves, where Yolŋu receive very little from the present "education process".

The coming and going of teachers at the moment is like backpacker tourism. While backpackers may be great at picking fruit for short periods of time the same model is not good for building relationships with Yolŋu children and teens in a classroom over a number of years and being able to communicate with the students at an intellectual level. Yolŋu students are being traumatised and left out in the social wilderness by this failed education process.

The Education Department's continual denial to equip teachers with language and cultural competency skills must change. Some ask, "Will all teachers learn language if they were given the resources and time to learn"? The short answer is no - but some will. The teachers who do will stay and develop long-term relationships with the community. Then as each new group of recruits join the same process another few will learn, then after a number of years we will have many long-term teachers on community that can communicate sensitively and intellectually without further traumatising Yolŋu students. The saving to government and positive outcomes for Yolŋu students will be massive.

Culturally safe, linguistically constructive and intellectual learning environments will only exist when teachers come halfway and do their share of learning in a very complex cross-cultural cross-language learning environment.

Why Warriors Pty Ltd can provide this training to teachers through mentoring packages, workshops and seminars or in self-learning modules. We have over 35 years' experience in teaching, language learning, cultural competency, community development/education and cross-cultural communication skilling.

Culturally appropriate schooling that can teach in a cross-cultural environment is a must.

4. Constructed English lessons

Dealing with frontline crisis issues every day I know the provision of constructed English learning lessons would be much more than just a building block. Daily I

receive questions from Yolŋu as to what different English words mean. In medical situations misunderstandings around English terms are quite literally killing Yolŋu. In legal situations they are getting into conflict situations with police. Lack of understanding around economic language makes most conversations about employment and business development incomprehensible.

Week after week people travel to Yolŋu communities to talk to them about all the different things that government want to share but much of it just ends up a confusing mess, with more angry people on both sides blaming each other. Just a big waste of money.

Constructed English lessons can be delivered to the whole Yolŋu community through their own Yolŋu Radio service and could also be made available on the Internet where everyone in the language group can learn together. It is a well-established practice across the world. Most adult Fijian people coming to Australia learnt English on Fiji radio.

Migrants coming to Australia are taught English through constructed English learning programs but Yolŋu and other Aboriginal Australians have been left out in the cold.

As mentioned above no government since colonisation has provided a formal English language learning course that starts with working from the people's language as the instruction language across to English. This should be seen as a national shame as it has locked Yolŋu and many other Aboriginal people out of the mainstream conversation, education, training and access to mainstream services for too long.

I am advocating starting this with Yolŋu people in Arnhem Land. The instruction language (Yolŋu Matha) can then be changed to other original Australian Aboriginal languages across Australia one at a time. This would include constructed English language courses for Aboriginal people who speak an Aboriginal form of English or Kriol. Lessons could go on to a very high level of English where medical, legal, economic and other concept terms could also be covered. Construction of online audio dictionaries dealing with the academic terms is also possible.

Constructed English learning lessons are the primary building block to bridge the gap.

5. Community workers

The final construction block I am advocating here is to do what Captain Philip didn't do. That is to train and send dominant culture community workers/educators to work alongside Yolŋu and other Aboriginal communities. This will give community members more access to the dominant culture information and knowledge. These people will need language, cultural competency, community development/education and communication training.

Good community workers can dig down to find out why young people are behaving the way they are and why they act as disenfranchised people within their own communities. If trauma and social-economic dysfunction and confusion are the

reasons then the only way to solve the problem is to have trained community workers working alongside Yolju people, including working with whole family units around these issues.

Part of their role would also be to identify the people's questions and contradictions around medical, economic, legal and general current affairs information. This information can be networked across a computer program. This could feed into the production of good community/adult education radio and Internet programs, in their own language, eliminating the confusion/powerlessness that Yolju people are currently experiencing.

Community workers can help Yolju find ways of being including in the development and maintenance of their own communities rather than just things being done for them. Why Warriors Pty Ltd would be willing to employ and train these workers across the region.

Conclusion

This document has ended up being much larger than I ever wanted it to be. I hope it has given some clarity around the human issues that so urgently need to be understood and addressed. At times I found this submission very difficult to write. How to show the human element is always a big question in my mind? At one stage I stopped and wrote the laments of many of the young people I have spoken to over these issues.

Now a Broken People

From the laments of Yolju youth....

"How do you explain the pain of growing up black in a white man's world? Where everything around you is so foreign, strange and unattainable?"

"They tell me we were once self-sufficient, great hunters and warriors. In fact I have been told my people walked our country for 40,000 or more years and we were masters of our environment. What has happened to us in such a short time? And why do I feel so lifeless and broken?"

"We left our yirralka estates and came and lived with Balanda (the white people). They told us; "Forget your culture", because their culture "was better", "Eat our food", because their foods were better than our "rubbish bush foods", "Live in our housing" because your housing is "disgusting and unsophisticated". Now we live in their housing and eat their food, but we are sicker and poorer than we have ever been."

"It's the white man's language that messes with my mind. The white kids seem to get it real quick! Maybe it is my black brain that's just too thick?"

"Why do I feel I've been born on the wrong side of humanity?"

"It seems the white man has everything; knowledge, power, wealth and will not share it. What's left for me to do but hate myself, hate him and kick back?"

"Our culture teaches me to respect and be proud of my elders, but I look on them with detest and shame. Why have they let this happen to us?"

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Glossary:

Balanda: Balanda comes from the word "Hollander", from the Yolŋu contacts with people from former Dutch colonies in Asia; and is used to refer to European or English-speaking "Western" person or people.

Gurraŋay matha: academic cognitive effective language

Märr: (spiritual power, strength 1.) The spiritual power or force of strength that is imparted to an article of primary production or a manufactured product, or a service provided. In all cases märr is produced where ever sweat is produced. It is a person's 'sweat' that transmits the worker's spiritual power märr, or force of strength märr into the article or service.

Märrmiriw: (märr: spiritual power, strength 1.) (-miriw: indicates without) To be in a state of debt; being spiritually disempowered because you owe things to other people and their märr is building up in you suppressing your own spiritual power.

Wäŋa waŋaŋu: (land – owner/s). Many Australian actually argue that Aboriginal people never owned their land. Their word wäŋa waŋaŋu, land owner, shows they have a word and a concept for land ownership. Not everyone was free to come and go on someone else land.

Yolŋu: Yolŋu means human or humans, person or people. It also now means an Aboriginal person or people from northeast Arnhem Land.

Yolŋu Matha: The language of Yolŋu people of north-east Arnhem Land.

Yirralka: Clans estate of land and water. There are many different clan estates independently owned by different Yolŋu Clans across Arnhem Land.

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