

THE STORY COMES ALONG, AND THE CHILDREN ARE TAUGHT

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from an edited interview in English with John Greatorex

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Yolŋu education on land has never always been where people can actually choose what they want to learn about. (Neither do) we the teachers of the land, want to tell children about what they want to be and what they want to know. We always wait for seasons to come. When the time is right for young children to be told about certain stories, to be taught about how to learn about the land, learn about the history, the time comes when the elder of a clan of the land decides and says it is right for me to go and tell these certain stories about this land to these people.

And they start teaching when they feel it's right to start teaching. It is not done by force of time when it must be done. It is done when the time is right, the Yolŋu teaching on country. The resources that are on the land are the seasons of the time when the children are right to be taught about the culture, the land.

It is not like when the children are four, they start to learn about what they need to learn, like it is in the classrooms of Balanda (European) schools. It is never like that on the land. It is when children are right to start learning, the resources are the land, the trees, the wind, the actual seasons that change, (and) tell that it is right to tell a story to some children.

The children don't really choose what they want to be when they grow up, or what they want to learn as in Balanda education (where) there is a range of subjects, a range of positions for when they grow up, and they want to be a certain person...in the 'task force' of police force or in the army or as a teacher or as just a local to run a business or that sort of thing.

(Yolŋu) children just grow up, because of the land, and the old people...they are born gifted,

with a talent which only the wise people, and which only the land can provide. And when they are born on the land they are chosen to be certain leaders in the tribes.

So the education on the land is the behaviour of children when they grow up and want to be as the signs tell us; we tell the story to our children when certain seasons come up. Straight after the Wet Season when we sit down by the beach and look at the sea around the small islands of the hunting grounds of the reefs where we hunt turtles and the certain signs in the skies tell the stories, of clouds sitting in the air after people have eaten; tells a metaphor of the shapes of clouds just sitting around the horizon which tells who we are, the Dhuwa people. Actually, it tells the story that we are the right people of that country.

And then comes a story, where our young people can be taught by the old ones as they are cutting up the turtle meat or fishing, and the story comes along, and the children are taught.

We have never learned in classrooms, we have never asked questions about what we want to learn. Our children have just participated in normal lifestyles for how to survive in hunting and living in the bush, to be able to grow up and get the knowledge, and then as they grow up, they are ready for another level of education in the bush, according to the old men, the wise men, and the land and the trees, and the birds that talk with the land. It's all connected with the learning, association with the land. The trees are all related, the trees all tell a story. Certain bark, certain plants can be used for certain things, medicine, food, ceremonial rituals, ceremonies and so on.

So it is different to the education you get in the classrooms because the classrooms don't talk to you. We're learning out there under a tree. We're learning out there in the bush walking around. The trees are always communicating with you. The hills, the land, the air are always communicating, teaching you, and understand every need that Yolŋu children have to go through.

When I'm teaching in classrooms and when I'm studying in classrooms reading books, it's just not in the part of my culture, it just wasn't the way that my ancestors, the ancestral predecessors, when they created the land. They never wrote on the land, they never wrote on books. They told stories through the landscapes, sculptures. They told stories through paintings. They told stories through looking at the first thunderstorm of the year, standing tall and straight when it calls out, and I feel strong, stand up strong and the tears run out from my eyes remembering the land, where I am, and it gives me a new knowledge.

Teaching Balanda students in the classrooms is not the same as teaching the children out there in the bush. Because in the classrooms it is not the same and we're teaching on someone else's land. The resources, the connection with land, you don't feel the rich stories that actually

come from the land of your fathers. It really is never the same as teaching out there through ceremonies, through the landscapes, the hunting, and survival of learning the strict discipline on the grounds of the old wise men.

The Yolŋu people have always discipline through ceremonies, through paintings. When I'm teaching Balanda students in a classroom it is not the same as teaching the Yolŋu students at home because the classroom's in another man's land, the classrooms don't have spirits, they are not alive. When I'm actually teaching on the ceremonial grounds, when I'm actually teaching in the bush, it is not only I that are teaching or talking, but the land is actually talking with me. I can turn around, the bulunu¹ wind blows gently and gives me the feeling of what the stories are and the stories are automatically being told by the land itself, through me.

When I am standing on my own land I feel confident that the stories I'm telling are right. If I'm telling stories that are not right, I feel the land, the atmosphere, the spirits of my people, the spirits of the land where I come from are correcting me, (if) I'm not doing the right thing, I'm not going the right way.

But when I'm teaching in a classroom or teaching in another man's land, I feel that unwanted feeling that I'm talking in the land of another man's spirit, I'm talking in a land, for instance, in the classroom, that is not a living thing, there is no breath in it and the classrooms doesn't really help me, it is just there to maybe to form a block, form a wall around me, surrounding me.

And at times, the stories I'm telling, are not really alive and it doesn't really touch the hearts, touch the feelings, touch the ears of the students. When I actually show photos, the images, the videos of the lands people can understand what we're talking about. But when we're actually on the land, everything speaks, the wind, the rain, and it sings, and it sings a song and it sings a story. Every song talks about the land. Every bird singing away, every wind blowing tells a story of the creation, and of the future leader who is about to take their place and tell the story when old people are passed away.

When I'm actually standing on the ground and teaching, using the later technology through videos, and the technology the world can offer today. When I'm actually walking around, standing beside a tree, standing beside a rock, I can actually feel that it is part of me; and feel very, very much different.

I can remember once when I was standing at Bamuniya talking about, telling a story about when the rain comes, my fathers, Dhuwa bulunu rain, and it rains on the land, and it shoots out the

1 East wind

new suckers of the Dhuwa trees associated with my tribe, the paperbark², the pandanus³. And the river running down from the rain, starting off as little brooks, little streams, and then all of a sudden it flows right down to the sea and meets the Dhuwa ceremony which is the ‘rulyapa⁴’ waters of my clan.

And in that you can feel a lot different. If I was actually sitting out there on the land there would be more powerful strong stories coming out. It would be a lot different because this is not my land, I am not teaching in the grounds.

If I had to be teaching here then somebody who belongs to this land would have to be sitting right here next to me and to be talking to his ancestors around the ground here, that I’m only a friendly person, I don’t mean to harm anything around here. And that’s the spirits that we always come across in different lands, that you’re unwanted on certain areas, certain lands.

And I don’t have any stories to tell about this land. So when I’m talking about the land of my fathers, my tribe, my clan, here in another man’s land, it just doesn’t make any sense; as if I was actually standing on the ground walking and touching and holding onto the images of my predecessors, on the land.

I would like to be standing there actually singing songs, telling stories through songs, ceremonies and the images.

People always say: How do you find a spirit? or How do you see a spirit in a goanna? or How do you see a spirit in that rock? It’s just a rock. That is the gap that we want to close up, that we’re Yolŋu people sitting on the land, saying that that rock is actually alive. As Christian believers find a spirit in the cross, and it can actually heal, can touch the feelings of the people, the changes in the bondage. That is the feeling that we are talking about when we talk about the image, the image of a rock, the image of trees. There is power, there is healing, there is a strength and there is history and there is story on rocks. Yeah, the spirit’s the land out there. It’s just never the same as it is here. It is full of stories, it is full of history. Turn around and just naturally there’s just the right story for the right person, for the right student to learn.

If there is a technology out there that we can use to be able to actually, I stand on the ground on my land out there, on Badaypaday or Mirrŋatja or Wulkundiya, or Gupawupa, and have the cameras looking at me. At the same time I’m looking at the students, looking at the people, sitting back here in classrooms whether that be here in Darwin or whether that be down south, and we are both seeing each other as we teach and you’re asking questions, and I’m actually

2 nāmbarra

3 gunga

4 Dhuwa ocean water

standing on the ground at Badaypaday telling you this is the image of the canoe that was used for hunting here by my Mukarr ancestors.

So I am hoping that in the near future, that we can be able to use this sort of technology where we can actually see each other and talking, standing on the ground and you watching live coverage of the stories that I'm telling. And at the same time I'm looking at the faces of the students that are actually learning.

Growing up we have never asked questions to our teachers, to our elders. We have never asked them about what the images are, what the stories of this land are. And in fact it is bad manners when I stop an older person, an elder, a senior elder in the clan, and start asking them questions about what the story of this land is and what does he think of my leadership when I grow up.

We have always learned (from the elders) through participating in ceremonies, we always listen when their time is right, when they want to tell the story, because the land is talking to them, because their feelings and their knowledge is ready to be told to the younger generation. And when I actually talk in the interview, the stories are just not there. I'm not ready to tell that story and the land is not ready to talk to me about certain stories, about certain lands, and then the story might not be fully told what we want to be able to tell. (When) we've always asked questions to older people- what's that in the ceremonies? how are we going to do? what song is this? or how can I lead these people? – the answer we get back from the elders are 'I've shown you this so many times, haven't you yet picked it up? Haven't you yet learnt?' And I walk away and say to myself, 'But I can't remember him stopping and telling me, and showing me what steps are to be done in certain songs and words'. They never tell you. It's just a matter of participating and concentrating. When they are doing their song, when they are participating in ceremonies, that's when they are telling you and there's no second chances; you just learn it.

But if you're actually born gifted, and you already start to pick up automatically that you are the right person for that song, and if you still don't know what you're doing then you're not the right person; and the right person just triggers up and picks up everything first go. Then the elders in the clan say that is the right person to be the next leader in the clan. Yes. It is like a djakululu⁵ being grown up and starting to form by the ants, and it comes out of the soil and starts to grow up, until it reaches the height, the size, and then it starts to speak and it starts to tell the story of who he is. The right stories for the right people on the land of my father's, I call myself djakululu, the giant, the termite mound, the real huge tall one which is the djakululu.

5 Termite mound