

Can my Country hear English?

Reflections on the relationship of language to country

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In July 2015 I sat with a senior Yanyuwa woman named Dinah Norman a-Marrngawi, who has been my teacher of Yanyuwa language and of Yanyuwa ways of knowing the land and sea she calls home, and of her family both human and non-human, for the last 35 years. On this particular day we were proofing a very long text for inclusion into the soon to be published encyclopedia of her language. We were resting, and in the silence she asked in Yanyuwa “Can my country hear English?” To which I responded, “What do you think?” Dinah sat for a while and then quietly said, “I do not think it does, it can only hear Yanyuwa”. She left the conversation there and yet it stayed with me, there was in this conversation a deeper understanding of an existential crisis for Dinah. At 85 she is the oldest speaker of her language; there are two other women speakers, who are 76 and 65.

I wish to return to Dinah’s comment and reflect on the question she asked. This paper is in part a reflection, in part research and critical engagement with issues surrounding the orality of a particular Indigenous Australian language, its translation and representation in print form. These thoughts of mine have been generated perhaps by the completion of a 35 year journey with this language which is now rendered into two tightly bound volumes of text behind which exist many hundreds of pages of field notes, photographs, sound tapes and maps. In this reflexive capacity I am inspired by scholars such as Rosaldo, Taussig and Behar. They ask important questions in regards to anthropology by asking that anthropologists not just give insight and information about a particular culture but to write as if they are reading or hearing a story and passing it on. Benjamin is also important because he asks us to question the gap between storytelling and information. For Benjamin information is analysis, it is a mode of communicating that is linked to development of the printing press and of capitalism, its speaks to information that presents itself as verifiable, to use his words, ‘it is shot through with explanation’ and in the end what is created is disposable because it is forgettable. Storytelling on the other hand, is ‘always the art of repeating stories’ without explanation, combining the ordinary with the extraordinary; most importantly it is grounded in a community of listeners on whom the story makes a claim to be remembered, which then inspires the listener to become the teller of the story. It worries me that one does violence to the life history of a story by turning it into a disposable commodity of information. There are questions surrounding such information, who is it for? And what purpose is it seeking to achieve? I take heed from Mignolo who speaks of an ongoing coloniality to describe the access to distribution, production and reproduction of knowledge as an often subtle process that ultimately excludes and occludes alternative epistemologies. Mignolo and others such as Quijano and Vazquez urge academic authors to step further into our own thinking to ‘decolonize’ our epistemic systems, our scientific methods and our understandings of our progression, which is after all, the making and generation of knowledge in academic institutions.

To engage with Dinah’s question there are a number of routes one may take, however for me personally at the heart of this journey is not just language learning, but also of trying to come to terms with the mechanics of orality, contemplating translation and the value of print tradition in all of this. In many conversations I have had with

Yanyuwa men and women I have certainly been made aware of the multidimensional dynamic of Yanyuwa knowledge that can be explored and understood in ever deeper layers. I still do wonder, however, how successful cross-cultural understanding can be when institutions such as the academy seek to examine and interrogate Yanyuwa, and by extension other Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, by the use of conventional western epistemological methods. Exploration of phenomena by western ways of knowing can see Yanyuwa knowledge reduced to a kind of raw data, which is then followed by narrow technical discussions of form, style and parts. Ultimately then this can only be a restrictive, abstracting process that leaves out the most essential dynamic, contextual, relational and affective aspects of the language and the culture it assists to support. Stories become information.

For me stories are at the heart of my journey of learning with the men and women who have taught and mentored me, and it has caused me to reflect on what it takes to understand- particularly a different kind of knowledge that has perhaps a different purpose than English and Western ways of knowing. I have watched many scientists, biologists, and at times even my own students become interested in this question; but the very institutions in which they are learning and researching tend to place a greater emphasis on the content of the knowledge rather than on knowing as a process. When people see Yanyuwa knowledge as a body of purely factual data, they miss the emphasis inherent in it on how to learn and why.

All Yanyuwa as it was once spoken and as it is spoken now by three elderly women, is oral, thus by definition then, it is something that printed books cannot contain, it is perhaps, to use an analogy, precisely the same sense that jazz, or the classical musical traditions of India, is music that a written score cannot contain.

Although many oral societies, have now developed orthographies and therefore the written word as a tool for documentation, it is rare in Australia at least, for these languages, once written to become mediums for self expression and deep written communication, many still depend on the way of orality and greatly value the oral transmission of knowledge as an intrinsic aspect of their cultures and societies. Nonetheless from the academic perspective, discussions of oral history have occasionally been framed in over simplistic oppositional binaries: oral/writing, uncivilized/civilized, subjective/objective. Critics wary of oral traditions tend to frame them as subjective and biased, in comparison to writings presumed rationality and objectivity. In Western contexts, writers who translate languages into written documents tend to be received automatically as authorities on their subjects and what is written down is taken as fact. Such assumptions ignore the fact that authors of written documents, even translated ones, bring their own experiences, agendas and biases to their work, that is, they are subjective. Ultimately, the divide between oral, and written, objectivity and subjectivity is a misconception. Writing and orality perhaps do not have to exclude each other; rather perhaps there are ways they might become complementary, but it should not be presumed it will be a straight line of knowledge transfer because there are still issues in regards to the effective translation of Indigenous languages, that are sometimes more complex than the English that is being used to translate them.

Translation of Indigenous Australian languages in the first instance was and sometimes still is a product of a Western epistemic tradition embedded within a colonial discourse that has sought to appropriate the Indigenous knowledges and narratives and recasting them with the objective of what a Western reader expects or would like to read. Walter Ong has written much on the nature of oral traditions and their culture and he reminds us that:

The purely oral tradition or primary orality is not easy to conceive of accurately and meaningfully. Writing makes 'words' appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: We can see and touch such inscribed 'words' in texts and books. Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit.²

Just as we do not meet any texts in the work of Ong still less do we meet an actual speaker. The result is that of the many ethnographic and literary texts that exist the real human beings who inhabited the oral cultures disappear and are silenced, or they are replaced far too often by stereotypes. Indigenous Australian oral story tellers, singers and poets have so often been mistreated in this way and their very namelessness has become so routine we barely stop to consider the silence.

There were few early immigrants arriving in Australia that really ever grasped the fact that they were coming to a country, to live, or to take refuge in a place already occupied by many Indigenous societies of great age and complexity. And for those that did take some trouble to find out, it was their very complexity that shocked them and their mentors and instructors back in Europe and Britain.

The academies and places of learning in the “old countries” were the controllers of knowledge, and they had the power and authority to allow certain aspects of Indigenous knowledge to exist and to have some meaning. However they also created a vision of their own human triumphalism in which to take the place vacated by what they could not allow to exist. And thus in a drive to claim some sense of cultural purity or power over the colonised subjects they failed to see, or perhaps did not want to see that every literature, every language, either written or oral is also a world, that is linked to other worlds, of which the speakers of a particular language are sometimes unaware. Every language and literature forms, if you like, an intellectual bioregion, an ecosystem of meanings, ideas and perceptions, a particular watershed of thought. The several hundred oral languages indigenous to Australia are all parts of the old and ancient growth forests of the human mind. There are questions here about the possibility of ever really to learn to hear these rich ecology of utterances, that from an Indigenous perspective are derived from the very earth itself.

If languages then are the old growth forest, we live in a time when we know that the rate of extinction has been great and it continues, there are questions about how to approach and understand what both remains alive and what is extinct or on the verge of extinction and whether these things can be reconstructed and given new life. Strict linguistic analysis can be wonderfully revealing, however it can give a false sense of security and of scientific precision. The forensics that such work entails can lead to a point where it is easy to presume that the language is now known and quantifiable, however there is a tendency for this kind of study to cast a light entirely on the language and its structures and genetics and leave the humanness of the language in the dark. Language such as Yanyuwa now exists under the white blanket of colonisation. Last month in a discussion with Mavis Timothy a-Muluwamara, a close relative of Dinah, she commented that “A whiteness has enveloped the country and the spiritual entities of the land have retreated to the caves because they are only hearing English and they are dreadfully afraid”.

Such a comment by Mavis along with Dinah’s should shake us from accepting that somehow, the speaking of English, in Australia, is just an “ordinary day in the new world”, and that it does no harm. Mavis here speaks to an invasion, a colonial push, and it is not ordinary, the lifting of the white blanket somehow must be achieved to draw attention to what lies beneath, in the land and sea, rather than in the “scape”. I am reminded here of the wrapping of Little Bay in Sydney Harbour in 1968-69 by the conceptual artists Christo and Jean Claude, at the heart of this installation was the very question – “What lies beneath? What kind of story?”

In Yanyuwa there is only one word for story, *wuka*, it can also mean language anyone’s language, the word then, in and of itself, gives no overt clue to what this word can mean or the thoughts that can be associated with it, and yet to talk *wuka* in a Yanyuwa sense is a powerful claim to know something.

Yanyuwa poetry and narratives are all associated with place, with country and sea. Yanyuwa is a firmly emplaced language, works of oral traditions are rooted in time and place and in the person who was or is still speaking, thus it is then that we might want know about this language, but we may never hear it, and we perhaps must always be aware that what we are reading was ultimately shaped by a language other than the one I am now speaking, and informed by rules and ways of knowing that texts and books know nothing about. It accomplishes then very little to ask that these texts come to us, it we who must try to make a pilgrimage to the text, to see and perhaps hear the land, sea and people that have brought these works into being, and ultimately it is these tellers and singers who are always the recorder’s, the translator’s, the linguist’s second tongue and set of ears. All of the recorded stories and songs are addressed however to a group of human beings that had ears to hear without translation. They were spoken and sung in the knowledge that unseen kin, long or recently dead and non-human kin such, dugong, sea eagles and sharks were also listening, in fact the very land and sea itself is considered capable of hearing.

I was perhaps fortunate to see parts of Yanyuwa society as the old people wanted it to be, enjoyed it to be, and that is that the oral culture was still for a short while in the 1980s self-sustaining and thus the ontological, epistemological and

axiological premises of the some of the community at least still worked in very different ways than in cultures that have learned the use of writing. The shift from oral to a written culture affects the functioning of memory, perhaps even the understanding of what is truth and the place of voice and language in the working of the world. It affects the meanings that are given to the words, it affects the meaning of the language itself and calls into question debates of worth and value. It does in the end affect the meaning of meaning.

It is often stated, by people that have not worked within a place where oral traditions still hold sway, that the force of an oral tradition is learned and transmitted through memorization, it isn't. For people functioning within a tradition of orality, the various forms of orality such as song, poetry or oratory of speech, are seen as the highest form of the language. It is acquired over a lifetime in the way a language is acquired as an open ended gathering of vocabulary and knowledge along with a grammar and social rules that enable these elements to assemble themselves into ever more complex and self integrated ways. In something that is just purely memorized there is little to no life left, it is in some ways antithetical to what an oral tradition does, that is, with each new telling of a story for example, there is fresh life breathed into it, to retell an event based purely upon memory may preserve a particular form but its growth and development has been halted. The full functioning of an oral tradition is rather more like a journey, not just something to be repeated on demand. Of course memory is essential to the process, but it is not the essential means by which it works. When working with old men who could sing hundreds of verses of song lines that traversed many kilometres of mainland, islands and sea, creating a geography of sound, it was possible to hear and experience that an oral tradition is always more than just what is being heard, there is the journey of the self, of the people singing, of the intersubjective commentary with place and ancestry, thus by listening one enters a doorway, that leads into other worlds that live beside, and behind, or perhaps in front of our own. The learning of such songs and the worlds and words that surround them is not about rote acquisition but rather it is the experience that leads to the knowing. When the experience occurs then the knowledge is digested, and in order for the experience to occur then the story must unfold within the freedom of the tradition that holds it.

Within Australia the vast and nuanced ways of knowing this continent the languages that belong to this land are largely unknown, the value of these languages, their pertinence of what they might mean, to what it is to know Australia away from the default language that English has constructed, has generally been ignored, if not denied, and this had been a 227 year journey of purposeful forgetfulness and part of what W.E.H Stanner called the Great Australian Silence and a nation wide cult of forgetfulness. Indigenous languages such as Yanyuwa, are the sound of an authoritative link to the land, as the orality of the stories are lost their performative character is also forfeited, as well as their links to more than human earth; the country becomes stripped of the particularising stories that holds it. As continued loss occurs the felt primacy of places are forgotten and superseded by an abstraction called "space". In a Yanyuwa way of thinking this creates a dreadfully flat ontology, a homogenous and placeless void, which also leads to a new way of thinking about time. Thus it is, as the language of the country is no longer voiced, places become incidental, arbitrary backdrops for human events that could nearly have happened anywhere; it is the technology of writing too, as it spreads through an oral cultural that removes the felt power and "personality" of particular places and they begin to fade, the very act of writing down such a placed based "world" renders them separable from actual places- the stories are then independent of locale and thus the country then become remote, unfettered if not meaningless.

Perhaps in regards to the academy one of the critical questions in relation to the knowledge of Yanyuwa people and others like them, that existed within the complex world of orality is how that knowledge might now be represented once it is reduced to print and translation? Much of my own research has involved working with, or observing relationships that have been generated by scientists and Western legal experts working with Indigenous people, this has over the last 20 years lead to debates about the value of indigenous knowledge. In the 1990s both in scholarly scientific debates, and as a part of everyday conversations surrounding Indigenous governance of their traditional land and seas the term "traditional ecological knowledge" and its acronym TEK are ubiquitous in Australia, in diverse topics such as feral animal management, fisheries, wildlife management, climate change, health and education. So much of what is now called "indigenous knowledge", still occurs within the context of encounters;

encounters that occur for very specific, sometimes very functionalist purposes, yet what happens is the very “locality” of such knowledge increasingly disappears as very prescriptive methodologies are developed to gather it proliferate. In the most extreme examples, is TEKs potential for being “discovered”, as if the knowledge had not existed before. It has become its defining characteristic, it is unfortunately a very old story.

What interests me in this discussion is that in as much as the resource management literature has allowed a space for Indigenous knowledge to exist, is that it can only exist as some kind of distinct epistemology that is systematized and incorporated into western intellectual thought and management systems. As soon as what is really everyday knowledge, held by other languages and ways of knowing becomes defined and bounded as a “system of knowledge” it sets in motion processes that further fracture and fragment already fragile human experiences. There are recurring questions here about how knowledge gets identified and authorized, and who gets to control it. One of the larger questions that is ongoing is how do different knowledge concepts, not really at home in translation, connect with academic and bureaucratic practices in which much resource management research, for example is now centred?

The issues that are associated with what I have said above are as follows. There, is the underlying premise that different cultural perspectives are bridgeable by concepts in English language, with words like sustainable development or co-management, that have their origins within a scientific discourse. It is believed too that “truthful knowledge” can be “captured”, filtered and then recorded on a database. These are damaging ideas because it often leads to translated statements by knowledgeable people being stripped from evocative and complex contexts, having been recorded, transcribed, codified and labelled within a “system” developed by western categories. Then there is the use of the word “tradition” itself, a concept that is seen to be compatible with western institutions rather than those understood by Indigenous people. Scientists have not been shy about naturalizing culture and tradition as an endangered object, then selecting data that effectively conflates their own environmental and social agendas. Indigenous knowledge has repeatedly been framed as a foil for concepts of Western rationality that inevitably reflect more about Western ideology than about ways of apprehending the world. Thus it is that peoples own languages, the translation of these languages and the knowledge derived from these translations is then represented as an object for science rather than an intelligence that with much work might inform science or other canons of western thought. There is another question here about whether English, one of the primary weapons of settlement and of an ongoing coloniality, that was and continues to be used against Indigenous people can ever be turned into a language that can express Indigenous knowledges and ways of being, I am constantly reminded of Stanner who in the 1960s said that there is stuff in Aboriginal life, culture and society that will stretch the sinews of any mind which tries to understand it.

All of these discussions go to the core of recording and translating, and the reasons why we might wish to do this. Ultimately in the context that I work within it is also about great loss. This loss is also in deeply private moments hard for the last speakers. It is why in July 2015 the most senior Yanyuwa speaker leant over to me and asked in a near whisper, “Can my country hear English?” Such a comment goes to core issues of how does one translate and if, as this old woman believes, her land is animate enough to hear, what then is the value of translation into a very foreign language, if the end result creates an ontological flatness and ecological deafness?

Notes

1. John Bradley is an Associate Professor in the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre, Monash University.
2. Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*. Routledge, London 1982, p 11.