

**Different concepts and different perspectives across  
different cultures: Re-creating Indigenous Australians'  
storybooks in a Melanesian community**

**Yasuko Nagai**

*Summer Institute of Linguistics Australia*

In my previous paper (Nagai, 2008), I presented a process of incorporating local knowledge when introducing educational theories and practices of critical awareness in a Melanesian community of Maiwala. In the same community, local teachers and I continued to work together to create more storybooks for their elementary school children. While doing this Participatory Action Research process, we also re-created the storybooks of Indigenous Australians.

In this paper I will briefly explain elements of Indigenous Australians' culture and how children's storybooks can be created from within the world around them. Then, I will present how these storybooks may be re-created in a Melanesian community. This re-creation process helps the local teachers to develop not only wider perspectives concerning the natural world, but also to enhance awareness of the vital role of such perspectives in sustaining the ecosystem around them.

**Indigenous Australians Culture**

Indigenous Australians are intimately connected to the natural world, which they refer to 'Country' (or homeland) (Weir, 2012). 'Country' is not just physical, such as the lands, air, waters, trees, plants, rocks, skies, animals and weather. In their view these are all interconnected and essential to their well-being and sense of "self." This interrelation of all people and all things are expressed in the Indigenous Australians' knowledge called 'Dreaming.' "The Dreaming is a combination of meaning (about life and all reality), and an action guide for living" (Graham, 2008: 181). In Dreaming their beliefs and rules are connected to their ancestral beings from the time of creation (Glynn-McDonald,

2022). Based on this concept the following storybooks were created for their children.

### Storybooks created by Indigenous Australians

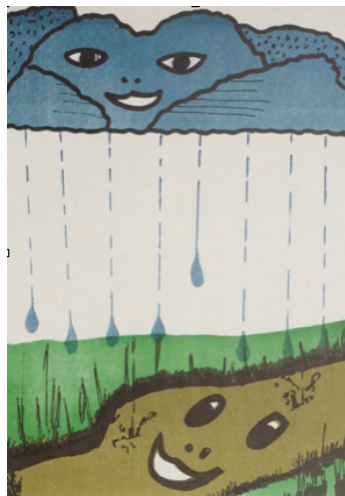
*Yorr Gu-rakaja* (It's raining) written and illustrated by Laurie Guraylayla and illustrated by Peter Danaja in their Burarra (Gu-jarlabiya/Gu-jingarliya) language of North Central Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of Australia. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

English translation of *Yorr Gu-rakaja*

Title: It's raining.

1. It's raining on the grass.
2. It's raining on the log.
3. It's raining on the road.
4. It's raining on the cycad.
5. It's raining...
6. but it isn't raining on me.

When the above text is accompanied by the illustrations, it becomes clearer that everything in the natural world is living and interconnected. On every page the rain cloud has a smiling face and rain drops are falling on the things that have human-like figures and faces. In particular on page 3, the picture of the road has a big smiling face. So in this storybook the accompanied pictures are closely representing the text and revealing the Indigenous Australians' connection to the natural world. As noted by Bergli (2023), accompanied pictures are an important essence of a children's storybook.



When Burarra children read this storybook, they are naturally reminded of their intimate connection to their Country. This background knowledge plays a major role in comprehension of the text (Gutt, 2006; Bergli: 2023).

*Ny-yinga ny-yelangga?* written and illustrated by the same author and the same illustrator in the Burarra (Gu-jarlabiya/Gu-jingarliya) language of North Central Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of Australia. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

English translation of *Ny-yinga ny-yelangga?*

Title: What's your name?

1. "What's your name?" "I am Frog."
1. "What's your name?" "I am Snake."
2. "What's your name?" "I am Spider."
3. "What's your name?" "I am Turtle."
4. "What's your name?" "I am Fish."
5. "What's your name?" "I'm Butterfly."
6. "What's your name?" "I am Ngularri. Do you want to play?"
7. "Yes!"

In this storybook the illustrations also have an important role to show the people's intimate connection to the living creatures in their Country. For example on page 2, a girl relates to a snake in a friendly manner without fear.



As part of Country and the complex natural world, Indigenous Australians respect and value animals. They have a unique and spiritual relationship with

animals on their Country, and value storylines that ensure they live sustainably with the environment (Glynn-McDonald, 2022).

Indigenous Australians have deep knowledge of how to sustain and manage animals. This knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next. For example, those who culturally possess a goanna Dreaming wouldn't hunt it, but they would protect it. In the same way, those who have a Dreaming for a particular plant would ensure the survival of the plant (Glynn-McDonald, 2022).

### **Re-creating the storybooks in a Melanesian community of Maiwala**

The Maiwala Community is one of the small communities scattered along the coast of Milne Bay on the eastern tip of Papua New Guinea. According to legend (Nagai and Lister, 2003; Nagai, 1997), people from the island north-east of Papuan Peninsula first came to the mouth of the current Maiwala River. Later other people from another island and those from upstream also migrated to the regions around the river, and each group of people occupied their own area as their 'mother land' to collectively form a Maiwala community. Although it's a matrilineal society connecting with each mother land, they have no intimate relationship to the natural world around them like Indigenous Australians. However, over the years, they have learned to protect the land and river - because fish and shellfish live in the water and plants grow around the community. This is expressed in the Big Book stories, such as *Bada Galasi* (Old man Galasi) and *Duduna ma Datudatu* (Whelks and Snakes).

In the Maiwala community local elementary school teachers and I have created many children's storybooks (Nagai, 2008). During this creating process, I also introduced Indigenous Australians' storybooks to see if they could be re-created in the Maiwala language. As we were dealing with the stories that were already translated into English, it seemed to be a simple task of transferring the words and sentences from English to Maiwala. However, because the original Indigenous Australians' worldview was not conveyed in the English translation, the translated Maiwala story did not sound like natural Maiwala language.

Process of translation involves the interaction between two languages and communication between two cultures (Yu, 2013). So in order to connect Indigenous Australians' culture and Maiwala culture, I explained to the Maiwala teachers the Indigenous Australians' worldview. This helped the Maiwala teachers develop different perspectives concerning land, river, fish, weather, etc, around them. From then on, the process of re-creating Indigenous

Australians' stories in the Maiwala language became an element of everyday life for the Maiwala community.

### **Maiwala storybook *Gadiweve e atuatuna* (It's raining)**

One day I showed Ronah the English translation of the Burarra storybook: *Yorr Gu-rakaja* (It's raining) and waited for her reaction. She read it and said, "It's simple and good for the prep (i.e, kindergarten) level. But what is cycad?" "It's like pandanus here in PNG." "OK, we can change it to pandanus," said Ronah. So the above "It's raining" story was translated into Maiwala by replacing 'cycad' with 'pandanus'. But is it a normal everyday speech? Ronah said, "It's OK... but we don't usually say that..." She didn't say any more, but was thinking.

As we were standing at the edge of the oval near the Maiwala church, we could see the mountains covered by rainy cloud and thick mist. It was obviously raining up in the mountains and the mist was coming down very quickly towards the Maiwala community on the coast of Milne Bay. Ronah said, "Hurry, let's go under the house, as rain is coming down towards us!" While sheltering under the house<sup>1</sup>, the rain was pouring down on the oval and around the house, not just on the grass and rocks at the edge of the road along the oval. It was raining everywhere in the village!

When observing the heavy rain falling around us, Ronah said that they wouldn't normally say: "It's raining on the grass, rocks or road." Now it was appropriate for me to explain what Indigenous Australians believe. I said: "The land, air, water, trees, plants, rocks, animals and weather are all interconnected and essential to their well-being. That's why in this *It's raining* storybook, they are responding to the rain like they would to people."

Raining in and around Milne Bay was often local. When I walked along the beach with Ronah, we sometimes saw the rain falling on the small islands in the bay or in town across the bay. By observing how localised raining can be in various locations, Ronah rewrote a Maiwala version of 'It's raining' (*Gadiweve e atuatuna*). Its English translation is:

Title: It's raining.

1. It's raining up in the mountains.
2. It's raining in town across the bay.
3. It's raining on the islands.

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<sup>1</sup>Houses in this area are elevated except the kitchen.

4. It's raining on the beach.
5. It's raining everywhere!



Now the whole story was natural and meaningful to the Maiwala children. Especially the last page which connected to the frequent flooding of the Maiwala River. In order to deal with this environmental issue, we had already created a Big Book story *Maiwala Hoowana* (Maiwala River) (Nagai, 2008).

While conducting a Participatory Action Research (Nagai, 2008) in the Maiwala community, I stayed with different families. I noticed that Maiwala people were sun-drying various items. When the rain was coming down from the mountains, they shouted to each other, “Gadiwewe e atuatuna! (It’s raining!)” Whoever was nearby quickly put them away on the verandah or under the house. While Aiva and I were talking about it, it began to rain! So Aiva quickly went down to take the clothes off the line. After hanging them on the verandah, she wrote another story: *Gadiwewe e atuatuna*. Its English translation is:

Title: It’s raining.

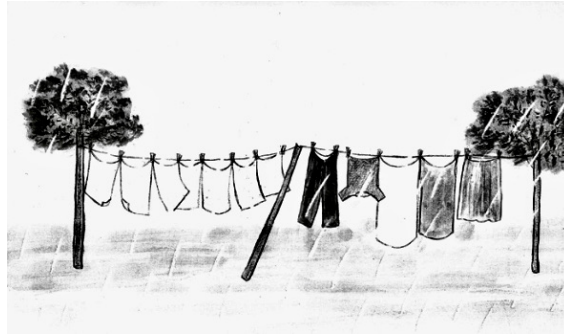
1. It’s raining on the pandanus strips<sup>2</sup>!
2. It’s raining on the clothes on the line!
3. It’s raining on the firewood!
4. It’s raining on the watermelon seeds!
5. It’s raining!
6. It’s OK now, as they are all in/under the house.

In this recreated Maiwala story, a sudden rain is not welcomed, while the steady rain in the Burarra story is welcomed by the people and everything in their ‘Country.’ In the original Burarra story, the author and the illustrator

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<sup>2</sup>Dried pandanus strips are used for weaving mats and baskets.

expressed their intimate feelings towards rain from their cultural perspective. By contrast, Maiwala authors and illustrators viewed weather patterns as a separate entity that affected their lives.



At the Maiwala Elementary School, children not only learned to read the story *Gadiwewe e atuatuna*, but also enjoyed playing a drama of this story. As a result, they became helpful members of the community.

### **Maiwala storybook *Wavam aiwai?* (What's your name?)**

As Maiwala people teach children in the actual context (Nagai, 2008, 2001, 1997), I waited for an opportunity to introduce another storybook: "*Ny-yinga ny-yelangga?* (What's your name?). As there are many legends in which various animals and humans are talking and interacting, it's not a problem to create a story between humans and animals. However, in order to re-create the Indigenous Australians' storybook "*Ny-yinga ny-yelangga?* (What's your name?), I waited for a perfect opportunity to make the story more appropriate and enjoyable for the Maiwala children.

While staying with Nuku and her family, I often spent my time with their 4-year old daughter, Bonu. One day after her parents had gone to their garden, Bonu and I walked to the beach, where we could see the wharf of the Alotau Harbour across the bay. When we sat down on a log, Bonu told me about her exciting experience of seeing a 'wam ghaeghaena' (big boat), when she went to town with her parents recently. She proudly said, "Wavana ba-ji (Its name was barge)." So I asked her, "Ma, wavam aiwai?<sup>3</sup> (And, what's your name?)" She looked at me with a smile and said: "Tau Bonu (I am Bonu)."

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<sup>3</sup> "*Ma, wavam aiwai?*" literally means: "And, name-your what?"

When we returned home, I quickly drew a picture of a little girl and a dog, and wrote: “Wavam aiwai?” above the girl and wrote: “Tau Kedewa (I am Dog)” above the dog. As I pointed to the text above the picture of a girl and read: “Wavam aiwai?” and pointed to the text above the picture of a dog. Bunu immediately said, “Tau Kedewa!” “Oh, you can already read it!” Bonu was very pleased and excited. In this familiar context the picture certainly spoke more directly to the viewer than the text (Gilbert, 2022).



Next day I told Ronah and Aiva about the re-creation of “*Ny-yinga ny-yelangga?* (What’s your name?) in Maiwala. They were also very pleased and chose a selection of familiar animals in the community to re-create the storybook: “*Wavam Aiwai?*” in Maiwala. Its English translation is:

Title: What’s your name?

1. “What’s your name?” “I am Dog.”
8. “What’s your name?” “I am Bird.”
9. “What’s your name?” “I am Pig.”
10. “What’s your name?” “I am Cat.”
11. “What’s your name?” “I am Frog.”
12. “What’s your name?” “I am Fish.”
13. “What’s your name?” “I am Bonu. Do you want to play?”
14. “Yes, let’s play!”

In this re-created Maiwala storybook animals and humans interact each other in a friendly manner, although they are not interconnected to each other as would be the case within the ‘Country’ of the Indigenous Australians.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I presented a process for re-creating Indigenous Australians' storybooks in a Melanesian community through Participatory Action Research. It was not a process of re-writing and re-shaping of the original work, but a process of re-contextualising in another culture in another language. It involved a process of developing an understanding of different concepts in both the original and the target cultures. As a result, the original Indigenous Australians' storybooks were re-presented from within a Melanesian community in a culturally meaningful way. Furthermore, the re-creating process helped the Maiwala teachers gain wider perspectives towards the natural world around them and heightened sensitivity towards sustaining its ecosystem, with both the children and other members of the community.

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## **Author Information**

Dr Yasuko Nagai is a retired member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics Australia. She has worked as an educational consultant among Indigenous Australians in Northern Australia and then among Melanesians in Papua New Guinea. Any correspondence should be directed to Yasuko Nagai at [yasukonagai3@gmail.com](mailto:yasukonagai3@gmail.com); Phone: 61435930609; Address: PO Box 7087 West Lakes, SA 5021 Australia.

## **A Data Availability Statement**

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its endnotes.

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**Different concepts and different perspectives across different cultures:  
Re-creating Indigenous Australians' storybooks in a Melanesian community**

Yasuko Nagai

**Abstract**

In this paper culture is not static like a museum artefact, but a total way of life of people, including the patterns of people's beliefs, knowledge, practices, values, worldview and image schema (Yu, 2013; Matthews et al, 2011). In order to understand each others' cultures, it is necessary to become aware about how each others' cultures can connect or differ. When introducing children's storybooks across different cultures, concepts derived from both the original author's culture and the target culture need to be understood clearly because of their implicit differing perspectives. This paper presents a process for discovering different concepts behind these stories and development of different perspectives in order to re-create Indigenous Australians' storybooks which are more meaningful to a Melanesian community.

**Keywords**

traditional culture, traditional concepts, re-creating stories, differing perspectives, translation

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**Résumé**

Dans cet article, la culture n'est pas appréhendée comme une pièce de musée, mais comme un mode de vie global, englobant les croyances, les connaissances, les pratiques, les valeurs, la vision du monde et les schémas d'image d'un peuple (Yu, 2013 ; Matthews et al., 2011). Pour comprendre les cultures d'autrui, il est essentiel de prendre conscience de leurs points communs et de leurs différences. Lors de la diffusion de contes pour enfants dans différentes cultures, il est crucial de bien saisir les concepts issus à la fois de la culture de l'auteur original et de la culture cible, en raison des perspectives implicitement différentes qui les sous-tendent. Cet article présente une démarche permettant de découvrir les différents concepts présents dans ces récits et de développer des perspectives variées afin de réinterpréter les contes des Aborigènes d'Australie et de les rendre plus pertinents pour une communauté mélanésienne.

**Mots clés**

culture traditionnelle, concepts traditionnels, réinterprétation des récits, perspectives différentes, traduction

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**Resumen**

En este artículo, la cultura no se entiende como algo estático, como un objeto de museo, sino como un modo de vida integral de las personas, que incluye sus creencias, conocimientos, prácticas, valores, cosmovisión y esquema mental (Yu, 2013; Matthews et al., 2011). Para comprender las culturas de los demás, es necesario tomar conciencia de cómo estas pueden conectarse o diferir entre sí. Al presentar cuentos infantiles de diferentes culturas, es necesario comprender claramente los conceptos derivados tanto de la cultura del autor original como de la cultura de destino, debido a sus perspectivas implícitas diferentes. Este artículo presenta un proceso para descubrir los diferentes conceptos que hay detrás de estas historias y el desarrollo de diferentes perspectivas con el fin de recrear los cuentos infantiles de los indígenas australianos que son más significativos para una comunidad melanesia.

**Palabras Clave**

cultura tradicional, conceptos tradicionales, recreación de historias, perspectivas diferentes, traducción