

***Kura, yeye, boorda, Nyungar boodier nidja boodjar:*
community development and indigenous
communities**

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Noonookurt Nyungar Wankiny – Song/poem by Len Collard

Noonookurt noonookurt boorda gnulla koorliny
Noonookurt noonookurt boorda gnulla koorliny

Winja winja boorda katitjin ngulla koorliny
Winja winja boorda katitjin ngulla koorliny

Kia kia ngulla karla koorliny
Kia kia ngulla karla koorliny

Boorda boorda ngulla karla koorliny
Boorda boorda ngulla karla koorliny

Wankiny wankiny ngulla Nyungar darluniny
Wankiny wankiny ngulla Nyungar darluniny

Kia kia boorda barlung nitcha geenuniny
Kia kia boorda barlung nitcha geenuniny

Boola boola Nyungar nitcha wankiny
Boola boola Nyungar nitcha wankiny

Introductions and acknowledgement of country

Dave: I'd like to start by saying:

Kaya Nyungar, kaya Wedjela. Gnulla koort kwoppa noonook nidja koorliny yeye. Gnulla koort boola boominy geeniny noonookurt ni nyuny wankiny yeye.

Nidja Nyungar boodjar noonook nyinniny. Nyungar boordier nidja boodjar, koora yeye boorda.

Len: Both Dave and I start by saying hullo to our friends both indigenous and non-indigenous. We are pleased to come here and talk to you. As I'm sure people now realise, this is Nyungar country you are sitting in. We believe it is also worth remembering that Nyungar have contributed much to cultural and economic life in the south-west and that Nyungar knowledge

and systems have had and continue to have much influence in this part of the world.

Why we decided to participate today

Dave: It has been our experience that thinking about collaboration between indigenous communities and other Australians is a complex and difficult business.

Len: However, it is important for us to have a series of conversations around the following question:

What might help us move along the road towards positive collaborations between local government and indigenous communities?

What we will do

Dave: Although we believe that there are enormous difficulties associated with dialogues in indigenous domains, we want to demonstrate our commitment to the importance of conversational exchange by presenting in the form of a dialogue. Like any dialogue, it has a history. This is not a new conversation. There are long traditions in this country of indigenous and non-indigenous people having these kinds of discussions (see Nakata, 2000).

Our starting point will be discuss some of the questions that have confronted us in our attempts to get involved in community development initiatives.

Len: Our discussion will draw out a series of Nyungar conceptual ideas. These ideas have come to act as guiding principles or general themes that underpin how we think about community work with indigenous people.

At the end of our conversation we invite people to join us by asking questions or making a comment.

A conversation about community development and indigenous communities

Len: Dave some would question your right to be here and talk about things to do with indigenous communities. What would you say to those who might ask: what are you doing talking about the futures of indigenous communities?

Dave: Thanks for starting me off on the easy ones Len.

I find Professor Marcia Langton (1993), one of the country's most senior indigenous academics, very helpful here. She says that there are at least three broad domains or cultural spaces in which indigenous experience is negotiated. I think that Langton's ideas are relevant to community development with of indigenous communities.

She describes the first domain as those cultural spaces where indigenous people get to have social interactions, discussions, debates and cultural exchange sessions with other indigenous people in indigenous cultural settings. The second domain, according to Langton, is where non-indigenous people engage with popular myths about Aboriginality rather than actually with indigenous people. I suspect that this is the domain where most talking about community work goes on. The third domain is where indigenous and non-indigenous people actually engage in direct dialogue. I think this is also a space where good community work can get done too.

Len: Yes Dave, I find this helpful too. Langton reminds us indigenous people are not one single group and that work that influences how indigenous people are understood and how communities experience life goes on in a range of places. Some of this work goes on between indigenous people, some goes on between non-indigenous people and some involves both groups.

Langton seems to be saying the first domain is pretty well the place for indigenous people.

Dave: So are you saying that there is no place for non-indigenous people in this first domain?

Len: Pretty well. Non-indigenous people and organisations need to recognise that indigenous people need physical, intellectual and cultural spaces where they can feel safe to talk about community matters, without being steamrolled or bullied (see Oxenham et al 1999 and Arch et al 2000).

I think this idea is fairly well represented when Nyungar remind Wedjela that: *Nidja Nyungar boodjar noonook nyinniny*. This is Nyungar country you are sitting in, not only in terms of land and ownership but also in terms of cultural and community life. At the very least community development people ought to respect indigenous cultural and political space and be cautious about invading indigenous community governance.

Ngeern noonook, winja noonook koorliny: who are you and where are you going?

Dave: But Len would you agree that this is not the only place where policies are made and where action goes on that influences indigenous communities? As Langton reminds us, non-indigenous people, particularly many policy makers, often have little direct contact or relationships with indigenous communities.

Len: In my view non-indigenous community workers should certainly work within this domain so that we can move past the clichéd ideas and convince local governments to shift the way they deal with indigenous communities. Can I even suggest that it ought to be non-indigenous community workers who should take the lead in this domain?

Dave: Yes I agree with you. I think it is unfair on indigenous leaders to constantly ask them to take up leadership on things such as the reconciliation process, educating non-indigenous people.

Len: Dave I know you have a story about protocols you tell your four-year-old son Callum. It is one that I like because it expresses the importance of another principle that's worth considering - *Ngeern noonook, winja noonook koorliny?*: who you are and where you are going.

Dave: I think you are talking about a Nyungar story that you told me. This story is about a conflict between two creation beings down at Walyulup or Fremantle. I won't go into the details but it is a story about how an animal came down to the area so that it might feed upon the young of some locals. The principal custodian of the area warned the outsider a number of times to announce who it was, where it was from and what it was intending to do. The outsider of course refused to comply, a fight ensued and the foreigner was killed. When I ask my son what this story tells us he replies that when

he goes to someone else's house it is important that he follow a standard protocol. He first knocks on the door. If someone answers he must tell them who he is, where he is from and why he is there. When I ask him what he should do if he doesn't know the answer to one of these questions he responds by saying: "don't knock on the door in the first place."

Len: I like this and I know that many Nyungar would be pleased to hear and see kids learning these lessons about Nyungar *boodjar* and *karnya*. How might this apply to community development Dave?

Dave: I think Langton would probably say that those interested in community development work with indigenous people ought to begin by interrogating their own, and of course their organisation's, desire.

Some might suggest this sounds rather abstract and a bit like navel gazing. However, any decent planner knows the dangers of undertaking work without honestly tackling the why questions.

I understand that a few local governments have taken some steps towards critical self-examination. Some of my friends from Broome believe that the process of establishing a draft agreement between the local shire and native title interests helped non-indigenous stakeholders to examine why they should negotiate with indigenous people. I also think that the process of establishing a reconciliation policy has forced many in the City of Fremantle to re-evaluate their ideas and wishes.

Gnulla koorling: going along together

Len: Dave, Langton's third domain is possibly the most difficult one to work within.

Dave: Yes I agree.

Len: In this third place people with different histories, cultures and languages engage in dialogue, in negotiated exchange, in conversation with each other.

This is where we are confronted with the greatest challenge. Not only is it difficult because of language and cultural differences but because of the history of forced separation from each other, the mistrust that people hold,

and the social and political violence that people fear. However, it is important to work on *gnulla koorling*, or going along together.

Dave: How do we move on this challenge Len? How do we *gnulla koorling*?

Nyungar boodier: recognising the contributions of indigenous people

Len: There are no easy answers here. However, we have many examples in our history of indigenous and non-indigenous people working together, having useful conversations and sharing interests.

Dave: Yes, you are right. There are no shortage of stories that involved so called ‘settlers’ relying heavily on the leadership and direction of Nyungar who acted as guides, cultural attaches, workers, navigators, linguistic experts and political negotiators (see Palmer and Collard, 1998).

Len: Yes, we are badly mistaken if we think that it is something new to talk about non-indigenous people going along together with indigenous people. I know members of my Nyungar family have a long-standing history of working in the pastoral industry, as health care workers, in a range of community organisations and advising and assisting many government departments and programmes (also see Reynolds, 1990).

Dave, can we talk some more about this business of *gnulla koorliny*? I think the real challenge in the future is to figure out what might help us go along together.

Gnulluk dabakarn koorliny: us going along steadily

Dave: I recently read about the work of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council (Woods et al, 2000: 91-99) and how they use an approach they describe as the *malparara* way of working. I think this approach has some application in other communities around Australia.

In this context *malpa* means friend, and *malparara* means a person going along with a friend or companion. *Malparara* is used to describe the process of two community workers, one indigenous community worker and one non-indigenous community worker working together, directly along side of each other. Indigenous community workers are ‘chosen’ because of their expertise, seniority, knowledge of local language and skills in relation to the

local indigenous cultural domain. These are workers who know the country, know the families, understand local politics, and are very qualified in terms of indigenous law and culture. The non-indigenous partner is recruited because they have specific professional skills in at least one area such as nutrition, physiotherapy, anthropology, teaching, social work or policy. These people need to be competent at writing, dealing with funding, have knowledge of other “mainstream” services and the culture of public policy.

This style of community work is premised upon the idea that the skills, knowledge and community affiliations of one person or from one cultural domain are inadequate for doing community work and resolving community problems in an indigenous setting.

Len: This sounds to me a lot like how indigenous cultural systems operate often. This happens partly because it is often seen as more efficient and this kind of work often needs people to negotiate at least two different cultural domains. It also happens because it is important that people keep an eye on each other.

Nyungar might say that it is important in community work that *gnulluk dabakarn koorliny*, two need to go along steadily together.

Dave: This reminds me a little of Warlpiri production of community television in Yuendumu a community in central Australia (Michaels, 1989).

Len: Yes. Yes, it also reminds me of the work of those involved in Aboriginal education in places like Yolngu country in northeast Arnhem Land.

Dave: You mean the work that has been described as two-way schooling (see Harris, 1990)?

Len: I think these approaches have a great deal of application to community development work. At the very least they emphasise the value of non-indigenous expertise and indigenous community needs for assistance in being able to move between two codes or cultural domains.

Kaitijin wangkiny: learning language

Dave: Not long after we had first met, when I worked in a youth centre, I asked what you considered to be the key to successful work with indigenous young people and their communities. What did you say?

Len: I believe I said something like:

*Noonook nyidiyang noonook yoowalkoorl yeye kidji nyin nicha
boodjar djinang kidji ni Nyungar wangkiny karnya ngalang
koorlangka.*

Dave: I didn't get it so I repeated my question. What did you do?

Len: I think I repeated myself and left it at that.

Dave: What were you telling me?

Len: Loosely translated I was saying:

*You non-indigenous person, go and sit down. Watch and listen to
Nyungar talk and speak in an informed way about working with our
young people.*

I guess I was saying how important is language in community work.

Dave: Yes, I probably did slip into the idea that Nyungar languages are either extinct or immaterial.

Len: Not only language in a literal or minimalist sense, but also as a set of interpretive tools, knowledges and conceptual theories.

It is not uncommon for people to fail to accept the old adage that “when in Rome ... do as the Romans do.”

Dave: Yes, in retrospect, I was so caught up in trying to create the definitive blueprint that it didn't occur to me that learning language is not something of a luxury.

Len: Of course some might say, “I don’t have time or the matter is too urgent to rely on my having language skills.” This may well be so. However, only when we start the process of learning language will we begin to engage in useful dialogue.

Dave: So are you saying that we should put on hold our ‘conversations’ until we have learnt the language of others?

Len: No I wouldn’t want to let people off the hook that easily. No one ever completely ‘knows’ the language of another. What I am talking about is the importance of starting the process. In my experience, show indigenous people some commitment to beginning the process of learning their language and they will likely give some respect for trying.

There is no longer an excuse for not learning language. For example, the Kulbardi Centre at Murdoch University now has a course on Nyungar language and culture specifically designed and made available for non-indigenous community members.

Dave: Might another way to recognise indigenous language be to focus on the local area nomenclature, indigenous place names, words for animals and words for plants? For example, I know here in the southwest over 60% of place names have their roots in Nyungar language.

Len: That’s right Dave. Think about many of the places close by, names such as *Wagin*, *Mandurah*, *Wanneroo*, *Pinjarra*, *Balga*, *Joondalup*, and so on.

Many of the names for trees, such as *Jarra*, *Karri*, *Marri*, *Tuart*, and *Wandoo*, are Nyungar. Likewise many of our words in Australian English come from Nyungar and other indigenous languages. When we say, “let’s go and have a cup of tea and a *wongee*”, “let’s use a *gidgee* to spear fish”, and address our friends as *cobbers*, we are using Nyungar.

Dave: Perhaps another community development initiative might be to make more explicit the fact that much of our everyday language already reflects the use of Nyungar language and knowledge.

Len: Indeed we have done some of this work in the southwest and with a number of local government groups whose borders run into the Swan River.

This has been one practical way of respecting the importance of this principle of *kaitijin Nyungar wangkiny*, learning to speak and understand indigenous language.

Karnya Wangkiny: respect, justice and speaking with sensitivity

Dave: Are there other principles that might help us think more clearly about community development with indigenous communities?

Len: I can think of a couple but what about you Dave? I don't want to be the one offering all the answers.

Dave: Hmm, I think you just were just implying something about a principle that has to do with non-indigenous people's obligations to come up with some answers.

This is very important in light of a couple of recent conversations I had with people who work within local government settings. According to these friends, some who work in their organisations cannot understand why local government should have to specifically deal with indigenous communities.

Thinking about this prompted me to re-read a report produced on indigenous people in the Kimberley economy. Crough and Christopherson's (1993) report produced in 1993 committed considerable time to discussing local government service delivery to indigenous communities.

The first thing the report does is show that the indigenous population in places like the Kimberley attracts substantial financial resources from other places. Significant numbers of non-indigenous people are heavily dependent for their livelihood and standard of living on indigenous spending and financial resources. Therefore, the ability of shires to raise revenue through rates is highly dependent on the economies of indigenous communities.

It is also worth noting that many local governments receive funding specifically because of the difficulties they face in providing services to indigenous people.

Even if one is only led by a classic market driven approach to local governance it would make good sense to offer support to indigenous communities.

Len: I remember hearing Dr Roberta Sykes, a black academic from Queensland, talking about how indigenous people are often expected to take leadership in reconciliation, Aboriginal Affairs and the education of non-indigenous people. She says that, given the population inequity in Australia, if indigenous people are expected to take on the responsibility of educating non-indigenous people then every indigenous person has to gather up over fifty non-indigenous people a piece. This is a hell of an unequal share of the workload.

Dave: Yes, when it is put this way then one can understand why indigenous people get tired of driving the reconciliation process.

Len: I also think it is important that we *karnya wangkiny*, we be sensitive to indigenous and legislative protocols and obligations. In other words, our work ought to be driven by a commitment to principles of social justice and statutory and moral obligations to deliver fairness across the community.

Dave: Yes I think there are basic moral issues here. Sometimes I think we make too much of the difference between indigenous and western values such as respect for elders, the importance of maintaining family connections, taking pride in community, regard for the views of others and most importantly offering care and support when in times of trouble.

I sometimes think we indulge those who say that as they were not directly involved in the dispossession of indigenous lands they should not be held accountable. We don't allow the logic of this kind of thinking in our children so I don't see why we should amongst our colleagues.

Len: Can you clarify this a little?

Dave: I for one grew up being taught not to squabble over whether something was my fault or not. I clearly remember the typical exchange in our house over the problem of a lounge or bedrooms littered with toys. Mum or Dad would of course tell my brothers and me that any mess had to be cleaned up. This would almost always be followed by a chorus from us kids of "It wasn't me", "I didn't do it", "they're not my toys," "it's not my fault." Of course my parents always responded immediately, "I don't care who made the mess, you will all clean it up."

Len: Dave, would the idea of celebrating *bullu warm Nyungar* also be relevant here? *Bulla warm Nyungar*, is the idea that there are many different sets of experiences and identities among indigenous people. Does this have some application in talking about the value local government groups involving local indigenous people in their processes?

Dave: One of the effects of this principle is that one develops a balance between an emphasis on how indigenous culture and community is distinct and how aspects of indigenous community life is shared with other Australians.

But then again Len, some might say that we are implying people should move on and forget the past.

Len: I don't think we are saying let's forget the past. On the contrary Nyungar and other indigenous ways of speaking and thinking would see no real distinction between *kura*, *yeye*, *boorda*, or yesterday, today and the future.

I know some think it is a cliché but I can't see how one can do any kind of future development of communities without giving legitimacy to the history of dispossession, the history of indigenous economic exploitation and the history of stolen generations.

Concluding remarks

Dave: Len, you began with a little song/poem. What were you saying?

Len: One year after finishing a semester of teaching (and having students constantly ask me about working with indigenous people) so I penned the song/poem.

Noonookurt noonookurt boorda gnulla koorliny
Noonookurt noonookurt boorda gnulla koorliny

Winja winja boorda katitjin ngulla koorliny
Winja winja boorda katitjin ngulla koorliny

Kia kia ngulla karla koorliny
Kia kia ngulla karla koorliny

Boorda boorda ngulla karla koorliny
Boorda boorda ngulla karla koorliny

Wankiny wankiny ngulla Nyungar darluniny
Wankiny wankiny ngulla Nyungar darluniny

Kia kia boorda barlung nitcha geenuniny
Kia kia boorda barlung nitcha geenuniny

Boola boola Nyungar nitcha wankiny
Boola boola Nyungar nitcha wankiny

Loosely translated it is about how important are indigenous people, knowledge, language and culture. The song/poem says the following.

In the future people will ask themselves, where are we going? This will prompt them to go to the home fires of Nyungar, talk with them and understand the wisdom of indigenous knowledge and practice. Yes, as a consequence we'll see lots of people speaking and thinking in a way that is consistent with indigenous ideas.

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Community development and indigenous communities

***Nidja Nyungar boodjar noonook nyinniny:* This is Nyungar country you are sitting in**

***Ngeern noonook, winja noonook koorliny?:* Who are you and where are you going?**

***Gnulla koorling:* Going along together**

***Gnulluk dabakarn koorliny:* Going along slowly in collaboration**

***Kaitijin Nyungar wangkiny:* Thinking and speaking Nyungar**

***Karnya wangkiny:* Cultural sensitivity**

***Bulla warm Nyungar:* Shared difference and diversity**

***Kura, yeye, boorda:* Continuity between past and future**