

Why Warriors Lie Down and Die

Executive Summary

The book “Why Warriors” looks at why the Yolngu (Aboriginal) people of north-east Arnhem Land face the greatest crisis in health and education since European contact. Of course it is easy to point to problems but hard to find answers, as the following statements and quotes from the book reflect;

How have the Yolngu dreams of self-determination and self-management of the 1970s turned into a nightmare in the 1980s and 1990s? ‘I sometimes get headaches thinking about how the situation has turned around for me and for the community, and inevitably get bedridden for several days from the pain this causes.’ Why are many Yolngu professionals like teachers and health workers able to spell and use words such as ‘liability’, ‘bacteria’ and ‘virus’ but not know what they mean? ‘I’ve been a health worker for twenty-five years, but I still don’t know what bacteria are. I have all the names for them in my mind but I don’t know what they are.’ How is it that the grieving mother of a dead child knew the names of the medication (like Panadol and Amoxil) given to her for her sick child but did not give the medication to her child she knew was dying? I asked her if she knew what Amoxil was. She said, ‘Yes, it’s an antibiotic.’ I continued, ‘Do you know how antibiotics work or how they can make you better?’

‘No, it’s Balanda (European) medicine,’ she said. ‘I know its name and all that, but I don’t know how it works.’

‘Did you give him the Amoxil?’

‘No, because he was so sick. I didn’t know what it would do to him.’

Her child died in her arms as she carried her child to the health clinic. This mother spoke good English, so what went wrong?

How can another Yolngu patient who spoke, read and wrote English very well, spend 13 years trying to understand what the medical personnel were trying to tell him about his kidney and heart condition? Then a twenty-minute interview allows him to understand and comply with the doctor’s instructions and change his lifestyle - but too late to save his life. David had no more questions. We left the clinic and went back to his office. He was quiet and I asked him if there was anything wrong. ‘They’ve been telling me about my kidneys for thirteen years, and only today have I understood what they meant,’ he said.

Questions demand answers. Answers demand analysis. And analysis is difficult in a cross-cultural/cross-language situation. This book attempts to do that analysis.

“Why Warriors” uses history, narrative and case studies to give a glimpse of life from the other side of the cultural and language divide. Initially it speaks of some of the history of Arnhem Land. It tells of four wars spanning a period of about fifty years. Through these wars many Yolngu clans were decimated, with some wiped out or on the edge of extinction and their traditional economy in ruins. Then came a period of mixed blessings during the mission and welfare eras. The physical wars stopped, but this ‘peace’ was marred by a new, more subtle battle, a battle in which Yolngu fought against all odds to

remain independent. In this fight many tried to remain on their homeland estates while others turned to mission or settlement life and learnt new trades, hoping to be accepted in the white man's world. Yolngu thought they had finally made it in the 1970s when 'self-determination' and 'land rights' were talked about. These English words sounded like independence to them, but they meant something completely different to the Balanda (Europeans) who used them.

The past was hard on Yolngu but surely things have changed for the better in this 'enlightened age'? Yolngu know they have not. By 1991 Yolngu were suffering a death rate five times the national average. To find the reasons why, we need to look at life through Yolngu eyes and catch a glimpse of the daily reality that Yolngu face in this modern world. When we do so, it quickly becomes clear that Yolngu have lost control of their lives and their contemporary living environment.

Many factors contribute to this loss of control. They range from poor communication thorough to psychosocial phenomena such as 'culture shock', 'future shock' and the 'multigenerational legacy of trauma'. Others factors include:

- *the diminished authority of traditional leaders;
- *an almost total loss of employment during the 1980s and 1990s;
- *untrained resource staff;
- *welfare now being their central economic activity;
- *massive confusion among Yolngu about how the modern world around them operates;
- *the insecurity Yolngu have about the tenure of their estates;
- *the non-recognition of their ancient law, that once brought peace and prosperity, leaving Yolngu in an seemingly uncivilised, lawless crisis.

Information is power. Yolngu live in a community that is deprived of information from the modern outside world; a world that now shapes and controls theirs. The European Economic Community currently requires its doctors when moving from one country to another to learn the language of the host country, yet the same is not considered necessary for medical staff who work with Yolngu. Almost all doctors, sisters, teachers and community resource personnel come to Arnhem Land without any language training. Nor do they have any other special training as to how to communicate, without the people's language, across the cultural and language barrier.

Most Australians do not even understand that this communication crisis exists. In fact, many times it is dismissed as 'humbug' with statements like 'The people should just learn English' or 'I can make them understand using English'. Unfortunately Yolngu do not think in English so they have difficulty communicating and constructing knowledge in English. In reality it is yet another war that Yolngu are being forced to fight— a war of words and misunderstandings.

Poor communication leads to dangerous, life-threatening misunderstandings between medical professionals and the people. It turns education into a farce and makes economic development almost impossible.

Everyday diseases and sickness are not understood by the Yolngu patients and sometimes even Yolngu health workers. This results in the Yolngu communities become more and more dependent on outside medical services as the confusion about new diseases and medical condition increase. Yolngu also find it impossible to comply with instructions that make little or almost no sense to them. This war of words leaves Yolngu casualties suffering from poor health and premature deaths.

Teachers and trainers arrive in Yolngu communities unable to communicate effectively with the people they have come to teach and empower with knowledge. Their teaching or training experience soon turns into a nightmare and they are not sure why, with many blaming themselves for being ineffective. Yolngu on the other hand, become tired of schooling and training where they learn almost nothing. Comprehensive English to Yolngu Matha (the people's language) dictionaries do not exist. Therefore Yolngu can not self-learn or understand what the hard or "secret" English terms mean. Nor do Yolngu professionals and adults have a dictionary to assist them to understand the technical terms in the many letters and communiqués they receive. This war of words cuts them adrift in a sea of uncharted language without a paddle or a map to guide.

Economic development also becomes virtually impossible as Yolngu committees and boards flee meetings before decisions are made because communication has become "like a bomb thrown in front of them". At other times they just say "yes" to almost anything that is put to them, having committed themselves to a conversation in English that they find they can not understand. Embarrassment sets in and the people just want to flee, hoping nothing important is being said to them. The war of words leaves them economically, intellectually and emotionally shattered.

What is education? For any group of people to understand or learn they must have access to information which makes good sense to them. The information needs to be communicated in a language in which the people think and construct knowledge. It must be built on their "cultural knowledge base" and explained through their world-view. Otherwise it will make no more sense than a Japanese classroom would make to an English speaking Australian born and bred child. Yet the Yolngu are blamed for not learning and understanding in an Australian classroom where English is the language spoken and the "cultural knowledge base" and world-view being used is from an almost totally foreign mainstream Australian culture.

The cost of being different! Yolngu also suffer because they come from a different cultural group. That is, within their own culture they had their own doctors, midwives, teachers and professors, but they were seen by others Australians as primitive or even evil. Yolngu economic, legal and education systems were also not recognised by those who arrived on their lands because it was thought that they were primitive and simple people without these developed systems. The cost of being different has destroyed or damaged the very systems and social fabric that Yolngu need, to function as a cohesive and progressive group of people.

Addressing the causes or the symptoms? "Why Warriors" goes on to analyse the primary causes of "this crisis" and the symptoms that stem from them. Through this analysis it seems that most of the present programs are designed to deal with the symptoms not the underlying causes. No matter how good the intentions of the program developers and their implementers are, treating the symptoms and not the primary causes leads to a compounding of the problems and a waste of government money. Maybe we are spending good money to make the problem worse!

The way forward. When the primary causes are identified programs can be developed that will return real control into the hands of the people. When Yolngu receive real knowledge and information that they understand, they will create their own intervention strategies to deal with particular problems. These interventions will:

*suit their cultural way of life and their particular environmental conditions; *work because the people design and therefore 'own' them; *be cost negative, in many cases, to government because the most valuable resource of all, the Yolngu citizens, will have been released to initiate, innovate and construct their own future.

From the outside the problem will just seem to disappear, as the people will be in control of their own lives and living environment once again.

If the approaches that "Why Warriors" suggests are implemented we can avert an even greater crisis than the one that is occurring right now. With new-world knowledge the Yolngu of Arnhem Land can stand shoulder to shoulder with other Australians, proud of their history and traditions and be djambatj mala (great warriors) once again.

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