

Ganma: Indigenous Knowledge for Reconciliation and Community Action

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Contents

- ◆ [Summary](#)
- ◆ [Acknowledgements](#)
- ◆ [Two Cultures on One Land](#)
- ◆ [Community Action Research & Indigenous Community Action](#)
- ◆ [Ganma](#)
- ◆ [Ganma, Action Research & Reconciliation](#)
- ◆ [References](#)

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Summary

In this paper I reflect on a new model for doing action research in cross cultural situations, that can assist deep reconciliation as well as the growth of new forms of knowledge drawing on ancient and modern traditions. From 1993 to 1995, as a member of an Aboriginal Health Action Group, I worked on a successful community action research project to establish a new Aboriginal Health Service. A form of Indigenous knowledge called Ganma in Arnhem Land, and called Yerin in the Gurringgai language, informed the philosophy of the action group.

Models of community development and rational strategic planning did not meet the needs for community action in this context. An alternative to development theory was needed to explain and promote Indigenous community based action. We have heard calls for new paradigm research and practice in the health, but Australian Aboriginal people call for what may be called old paradigms, which have relationships with the Dreaming. An outcome of the community research project was a model for Indigenous community action (Hughes 1997).

This paper presents a reflection on the dialectical relationship between social science knowledge and Indigenous knowledge, using the Ganma metaphor.

Acknowledgements

I speak as a non-Aboriginal Australian who has accepted an invitation to learn from the oldest continuing intellectual tradition in the world. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which the congress is held. I acknowledge the elders who are custodians of Ganma knowledge, and my intellectual debt to Mandawuy Yunupingu (Yunupingu 1991; 1994). I acknowledge the contribution of Indigenous and non-indigenous members of the Aboriginal health action group whose work provides the basis for this paper.

I dedicate this paper to the memory of the Erina clan, who took their name from Yerin, the place where fresh water and salt water mix near the mouth of a creek. Their land was stolen and the clan was destroyed in the genocide following British invasion. The landscape has changed. The water now runs through gutters and drainpipes, but fresh water still flows downhill to meet the salt water. We can learn from this metaphor, which was of central importance to the Erina clan.

Last week, at The University of Sydney, Nelson Mandela said that: 'One of the most difficult things is not so much to change society, but to change ourselves' (Stephens 2000). This paper is the story of how my participation in a successful project to change society came to be a project in which I changed my way of understanding community action research, that is, I allowed myself to be changed.

Two Cultures on One Land

Australia is the home of the oldest continuing intellectual tradition in the world, and has the oldest rock art known in the world (Isaacs 1980). This may mean that people were inscribing meaningful symbols in Australia before any other place in the world. Australia is also a regional leader in science and education, and has made significant contributions in medicine, music, film, science and other aspects of Western culture.

Of these two great intellectual traditions, one comes from the land of Australia, where it is inscribed in the country Benterrak, Muecke et al. 1984. The other great tradition came over the sea from Europe, and is inscribed in books.

Community Action Research and Indigenous Community Action

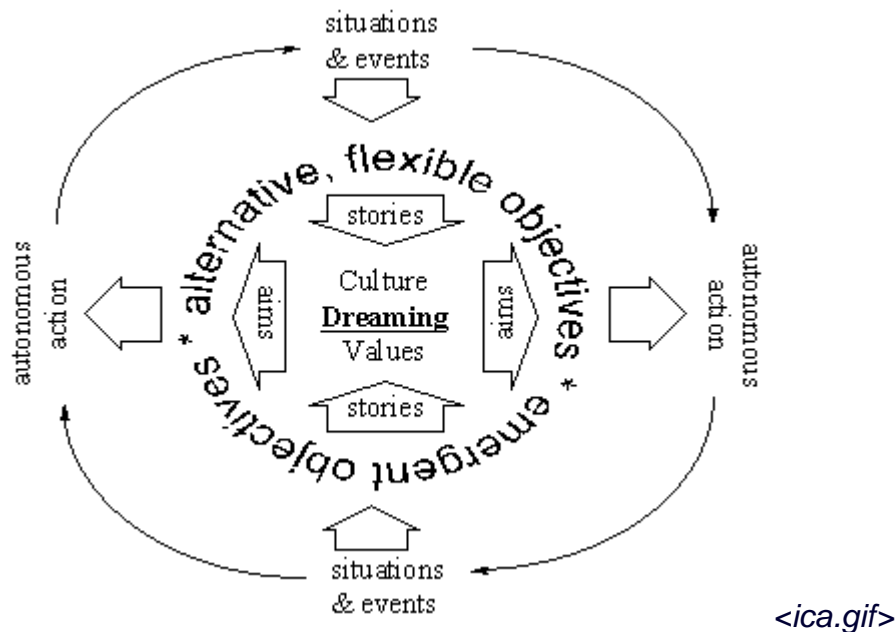
From 1993 to 1995, as a member of an Aboriginal Health Action Group, I worked on a community action research project to establish a new Aboriginal Health Service. Action research was chosen because Aboriginal researchers have recommended it as a culturally sensitive model for research (National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organization 1987; McTaggart 1991; Arbon 1992; Stewart and Williams 1992). The action research project followed the action research cycle that will be familiar to this audience (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). The project was successful. It was written up and reported as an example of successful action research in an Aboriginal community (Hughes, See et al. 1994; Hughes, Russell et al. 1995).

A form of Indigenous knowledge called Ganma in Arnhem Land, and called Yerin in the Gurringgai language, informed the philosophy of the action group, and provided the name for the new organisation that has run the new health service since 1996. After Yerin Aboriginal Health Services was established, I analysed tape recordings of all the action group meetings that had organised this new service. I was surprised when discourse analysis showed that while I was working on a community development project, using participatory action research, the Aboriginal members of the same action group were not using discourses of research or development. Together we were successful in getting a health service set up, and undertaking research. But, although it was not apparent to me during the project, I later discovered that the Aboriginal members of the action group were not doing the same thing as the non-Aboriginal members of the same action group. This intrigued me. How could we work in quite different ways to achieve the same outcome together? How had we done this?

I went back to the research data, including tape recordings of action group meetings, to find out what it was the Aboriginal members of the group had been doing, that was different to what I had done.

Critical reflection on a successful action research project led to further reflection and generation of new knowledge. In 1997 I produced this representation of a new model for indigenous community action.

Figure 1: Indigenous Community Action



Source: (Hughes 1997).

This diagram was first presented as part of a Doctor of Philosophy thesis in 1997 (Hughes 1997). At this point the relationship between the model of Indigenous Community Action and the Ganma theory it grew out of remained unclear to me. The diagram (Figure 1) represents my interpretation of what I observed working with Indigenous people in a community action project. It is not a prescription for what they, or anyone else, should do.

At the centre of the model is the Dreaming. The Dreaming shapes the Aboriginal worldview. To understand the Dreaming you must live it. It is not possible to describe the Dreaming in a conference paper. But Indigenous people insist that The Dreaming is the centre and wellspring of their culture and social organisation.

From the Dreaming come the shared culture, shared values and shared broad goals of Aboriginal people.

In the Yerin project Indigenous people shared broad aims or goals in common. These originated from their culture and shared values, from their common history and shared experience. The aims did not lead to a strategic plan with agreed objectives, but the aims were expressed in flexible and emergent objectives, leading to autonomous individual actions. Aims and objectives were discussed in groups and meetings, but this did not lead to the formulation of binding corporate plans.

Indigenous community action was much more flexible and autonomous than corporate strategic planning.

Individual objectives, and plans of individuals were formulated in the context of shared aims in a specific social, historical, economic and political situation. There were no specific corporate plans.

Actions were decided on and implemented by autonomous individuals. There was a high degree of personal autonomy, resting on a base of shared values and broad goals held in common.

Similarly, observation was autonomous. Individuals observed independently. There were no agreed observation forms or standardised questions. No one person was delegated the tasks of observing on behalf of the group. Each member looked and listened independently, as they had opportunity.

People reported back to the action group by telling stories. As observations were shared these stories became part of the history and culture of the action group. They informed the value system.

There was a repeated cycle of shared goal setting, autonomous actions, individual observation and shared story telling. The cycle was repeated with each meeting of the action group. At each meeting participants shared stories, and related these to their shared goals. Goals were modified on the basis of information contained in the stories. Between meetings individuals pursued their own actions and made individual observations. There are obvious similarities with the action research cycle, and important differences.

The indigenous community action cycle of aims, actions, observations and stories corresponds to the action research cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect. But when I looked at these dynamic systems in operation I noticed a difference.

Western culture is individualistic. Individuals come to participate in action research for different reasons and motives. Rather than shared aims, they tend to have individual objectives. The underlying goals and motivations are individual. Although project planning or strategic planning is typically corporate, this tends to be corporate planning to control the action phase. That is, action is corporate rather than individual.

Observers are trained, and use standardised methods and instruments for data collection. So observers are part of a shared team effort. Reflection, however, is often individual, through reflective diaries and the like. Research reports are typically written by researchers working at solitary workstations, coming together to tell stories to each other only occasionally at conferences like this. So the process of action research is a mirror image of Indigenous Community Action.

This could be represented as an opposite dynamic, representing movement in the opposite direction. A diagram would contain two intertwining spirals, like a double helix.

Note that when I was working in community action research cycles, and my Aboriginal colleagues were working in Indigenous community action cycles, I was able to observe their Indigenous community action (which is what led to this presentation) and they were able to watch my action research. In other words, Europeans can watch Aboriginal people without leaving the European domain, and without changing their Western point of view. And Aboriginal people watch and learn about Europeans from within the Aboriginal domain. We can observe both inside and outside our own system, without leaving our own system. We can see what the other does – if we look.

In 1999 I participated in a series of workshops trying to bring together Indigenous and Western knowledge of housing and community infrastructure into a common framework (Callaghan 1999). In preparing for these workshops Colin James and I were able to make explicit connections between the Ganma metaphor and pattern languages (Alexander 1977) used in architecture and community planning (James and Hughes 1999). This provided me

with the tools to describe connections between the model of Indigenous Community Action and Ganma theory explicitly. I reflected on the Ganma metaphor to deepen my understanding of the relationship between Indigenous and Western knowledge in community action research.

Ganma

Aboriginal traditions see a powerful metaphor in the meeting and mixing of two streams, a stream of salt water from the sea and a stream of fresh water from the land.

The metaphor has meanings at surface and deep levels, and inside and outside meanings. Ganma is at once a metaphor, a theory and a kind of indigenous social science (Watson, Chambers et al. 1989; Yunupingu 1991; 1994).

It is an ancient metaphor that has served Indigenous people well, and from which we can all learn. Aboriginal elders have made this knowledge accessible, and given the name 'ganma' into the English language. We may use the word 'ganma' in English to refer to the situation where a river of water from the sea (western knowledge) and a river of water from the land (indigenous knowledge) engulf each other, flowing together and becoming one (Watson & chambers 1989:5). The theory holds (in part) that the forces of the streams combine and lead to deeper understanding and truth.

The first two centuries of cultural interchange in New South Wales have been a tragic story of violence, injustice and suffering. This is represented by the turbulence that produces foam where the salt water and fresh water collide in the creek bed. We are now learning to use the energy generated at the meeting of the two great streams in more constructive ways.

Ganma theory can provide us with ways to think about how to work in ways that promote reconciliation, not further turmoil and destruction.

To put it very briefly, Ganma is an Indigenous form of dialectical praxis for working both-ways, with Indigenous and Western cultures. Ganma does two things. It takes elements of Western culture and makes the Aboriginal, and it provides a pattern for interaction and dialogue that respects the integrity of both cultures.

Figure 2: Ganma, by Yalmay Yunupingu



Source: Watson, Chambers et al. 1989.

The bark painting by Yalmay Yunupingu represents the concept of Ganma. There are many levels of meaning in the painting. The pattern is made up of a grid, a network that extends in all directions. The lines that make up the pattern cross and intertwine with each other. The red and black diamonds represent land and sea, fresh water and salt water, Aboriginal knowledge and European knowledge, Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge. Between red and black are the white cross hatching of turbulent foam, and the multicoloured diamonds representing the interchange of ideas. These diamonds, which are the result of fresh water and saltwater coming together, are made up of grids of smaller diamonds. They are networks within networks. The underlying pattern is mutual interdependence and balance between complementary opposites. This is a pattern for reconciliation. It calls for respect and understanding of each other's ways of knowing and doing.

Ganma, Action Research and Reconciliation

Ganma shows us a way action researchers can think about two ways of working, and put them into a single frame of reference.

We have the knowledge from the land and the knowledge from the sea both operating according to their own dynamic, in opposing directions, and we can put this into a single frame.

The first two hundred years of interaction between two Australian cultures has been a tragic story of violence and suffering.

The white cross-hatching in Figure 2 represents the foam that is whipped up when fresh water and salt water collide. This is a metaphor for the disturbance and chaos of the violent clash of cultures. But the ganma metaphor points to complementarity and collaboration that can transcend the domination of one culture by another.

One task of the action researcher at the point where foam is generated is to help construct ways of knowing and ways of constructing knowledge at the meeting of two streams of knowledge.

This is represented by the brown cross hatching, where knowledge and understanding can grow through watching each other's cultures and engaging in dialogue.

Now, near the end of this paper, I come a new paradigm, or rather, is an ancient paradigm grounded in the Dreaming.

What I have explained above is ganma research from a non-Indigenous perspective, using the language, culture and symbols of Anglo Australian academic culture. An Aboriginal expert would give a different description and explanation. He or she would speak, from an Indigenous frame of reference and point of view. In Figure 2 this is represented by two squares, each containing a pattern of diamonds. On one side is the Anglo Australian description. On the other side is the Indigenous Australian explanation. Between them is a gap.

If the two ways of understanding come together in dialogue we may be able to develop a deep understanding. The brown bar in the middle of Figure 2 represents this.

In the bark picture we see Indigenous and Western knowledge as Aboriginal people understand them, and we see Indigenous and Western knowledge as Europeans understand them, and in the middle, the narrow bar of deep mutual understanding. This does not seek to dominate one side or the other, but to understand and appreciate both.

For deep reconciliation we can go further than using European models that are sensitive to cultural difference (such as participatory action research). Ganma is a model that builds on the idea of mutual interdependency of different and interacting categories of people and systems of thought.

The moral of the story is that we should not expect people of other cultures to do things in the way our culture does them, even when we believe our way is good (even when our way is action research).

Ganma is a model that does not say: 'do it my way', but says: 'we can each do it our own ways, and speak to each other, and listen'.

Thank you, Ganapiya.

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