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SCHOOL IS HOME, HOME AS SCHOOL: YOLNGU ‘ON COUNTRY’ AND ‘THROUGH COUNTRY’ PLACE-BASED EDUCATION FROM GäWA HOMELAND

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Abstract

In the review of rural, regional and remote education in Australia, Halsey briefly reflected on the old conundrum of how traditional Indigenous culture and ‘western’ knowledge (as represented in mainstream curriculum) might be integrated in remote schooling contexts. The recommendation supplied was for ‘*greater opportunity in the curriculum for learning about and valuing home and Homelands knowledge and life skills*’ (Halsey, 2018, p. 32). However, what appears a simple recommendation rests upon a complex definition of ‘homeland’ and a long history of Indigenous negotiation with *balanda* (white) educational policies and practices in north-east Arnhem Land. At the Warramiri Yolŋu homeland of Gäwa, a philosophy of education has developed to encompass a profound place-based prioritisation. Following a critical Indigenous methodological framework designed by Yolŋu Elders, community research from Gäwa will be outlined to elucidate this localised Indigenous ‘on country’ and ‘through country’ pedagogy, and a practical demonstration of the philosophy in terms of the incorporation of a Warramiri ‘turning’ seasonal-cycle curriculum will also be briefly discussed.

Keywords: Homeland education, Yolŋu Bothways, Gäwa, ‘on country’ and ‘through country’ pedagogy

Positionality and Methodology

In 2009-2010, Ben lived and worked at Gäwa, a Warramiri ancestral estate at the northern tip of Elcho Island, north-east Arnhem land. The Warramiri are a ‘clan’ of the *yirritja* moiety of the Yolŋu cosmos and are the people of the reef and the deep sea (Burrumarra, 1977). Warramiri have traditional estates on the mainland and at various sites throughout the string of islands stretching north-eastwards towards West Papua, known as the Wessel Islands. Over the centuries Gäwa has been a meeting place for Yolŋu clans to undertake important ceremonies, a site where whale-hunters interacted with Yolŋu, a sheltered bay where negotiations were entered into with ‘Macassans’ trading for trepang and other items, and remains a fertile hunting ground (Bruce & Huddleston, 2006, McIntosh, 1997). Through the initiative and perseverance of Warramiri and their inter-clan connections, by the early 1990s Gäwa had also been transformed into a ‘homeland’, where permanent housing, water supply, electricity and a homeland centre school had been established (Gäwa Christian School, 2013). Guthadjaka (Gotha) and her family networks were pivotal in the establishment of Gäwa as a settled community and Gotha was also

the first teacher, often teaching, feeding and caring for up to 45 students for the school week (Baker, Garŋgulkpuy & Guthadjaka, 2014; Nungalinya, 2017). In 2004, Gäwa community partnered with Northern Territory Christian Schools to ensure a permanently staffed and well-resourced school would develop and during 2009-2010, Gotha mentored Ben in application of the Yolŋu 'bothways' philosophy to education (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019).

Figure 1. Gäwa Homeland, 2013

In 2013, Ben returned to the community to undertake research with Gotha to analyse the 'bothways' philosophy in its local Warramiri manifestation. As a form of action research, the aim was also to assist in *applying* the educational philosophy to both the school curriculum and the development of the 'Warramiri website'. The website was to house and structure the many digital resources Gotha had collected and designed over the decades to assist in the intergenerational transmission of Warramiri language and culture (van Gelderen& Guthadjaka, 2017). Thus, in terms of explicating the research positionality, a multi-layered insider/outsider dynamic eventuated. Ben had been a teacher at the school, had lived in the small community a few years prior and had been adopted into the Yolŋu *gurruṯu* (kinship) system. In fact, he had been adopted as Djambarrpuyŋu 'child' for the Warramiri clan and was therefore in a 'caretaker' position to learn of and support the Warramiri vision for Gäwa. He had retained relationships with the governing Northern Territory Christian Schools organisation (who had encouraged the research to assist the formation of distinct policy documentation for the school), but he was no longer employed directly. Gotha is clearly acknowledged by both Warramiri and *balanda* as an expert in education and engagement with *balanda* systems of governance[1] and contributed directly to the research herself. However, she also directed Ben as to the who and when of interviews with other community members, choosing to be part of some of these interviews, but not others, depending on appropriate *gurruṯu* (kinship) avoidance categories and a general

[1] In 2018, Gotha was awarded an honorary doctorate for her service to education, an Order of Australia for her community development role at Galiwin'ku and Gäwa and was the Senior Australian of the Year for the Northern Territory.

desire to allow for divergent opinions. Overall, the methodological approach undertaken was a qualitative, semi-structured interview process. As of 2013, as just under a decade of formal partnership between Gäwa community and Northern Territory Christian Schools existed, it was also decided that an appropriate approach would be to frame open-ended discussion questions around the history and vision of the school, the curriculum and pedagogy patterns, as a form of informal review. Ethics clearance for the research was obtained through the Charles Darwin University Human Research Ethics Committee in 2012.

We were committed to applying a critical Indigenous methodology throughout the research, informed by international theorists (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai Smith, 2008), but insistent that localised Yolŋu priorities predominate. In this regard we relied on explicit community advice (such that the research should also involve the *balanda* school staff and community members), as well as reflections from significant multi-year research projects at Charles Darwin University which had directly involved Gotha and other Yolŋu co-researchers[2]. One of the methodological tensions was the interplay between research as an activity that involved *all* of the community; '*Yolŋu are experienced in building agreement while taking difference seriously… because agreeing over words is agreeing over worlds*' (Christie, 2009, p.31), and the Yolŋu *rejection* of 'epistemic equality': '*the idea that anyone can potentially know anything, and everyone knows in the same way…(and) the assumption that everyone does or can know the same things in the same way*' (Christie, 2013b, p. 49). The interaction of these principles produces the challenging methodological principle of good research as the '*right people talking to the right people in the right place at the right time in the right order*' (Christie, 2013b, p. 49). For *balanda* researcher Ben, this was clearly a closed loop- to find the right people, one must ask the right people! Therefore, reliance on Gotha and her discretionary timetabling of interviews was paramount. Furthermore, in presenting the data, an appropriate hierarchy is also maintained; Gäwa Elders' (W, G, C) statements are foregrounded, then other Elders from Warramiri and other closely connected clans (Gä, Gal, Bu, Ba, Wu) are highlighted. Lastly, *balanda* responses from Gäwa are presented (K, S, M, Ma).

A second challenge was to accomodate the Yolŋu insistence that research is a holistic, generative activity; it must function both to strengthen existing bonds of social harmony; '*Yolŋu often judge truthfulness in research through other criteria to do with… agreement in good faith*' (Christie, 2009, p. 32) and, refusing any notion of judging observer, produce outcomes consistent with the research data; '*the researcher is an engaged observer, and works to generate change practices through the research position*' (Christie, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, the website development was integral to the research as the on-going, generative aspect of the work. This was literal 'ground up' work, not only in terms of resources and suggested new content for the site, but what we learned in discussion with Elders about the primacy of *land* was built in to the design phase with significant changes made to the website to accommodate emerging priorities (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2017). In terms of negotiating to develop policy for the school, it was not always easy, finding the balance between helping retain and maintain community harmony and using connections and influence with other bodies (primarily Northern Territory Christian Schools) to advocate for generative changes based on the research. This is, undoubtedly, an aspect of the inherent complexity in honouring Yolŋu research methodologies; of Christie's 'double participation' (Christie, 2013b). It took several years to transcribe and translate the interviews and various other events slowed down the website development side of the research. Nevertheless, this was also a positive opportunity to re-visit the themes, outside of the 'formal' interviews; to '*work slowly and allow new ideas and practices to emerge here and how, and grow slowly through mutual respect and a history of shared experience*' (Christie, 2009, p. 32).

[2] See http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/ik/ikhome.html, http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/index.html and http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/inc/

Context: Yolŋu Homelands

What Are Homelands?

In the Northern Territory, 'homeland' is often conflated with 'outstation' and is sometimes utilized as a catch-all phrase for 'remote' land owned or cared for by Indigenous people. Indeed, Blanchard's (1987) significant report defined homelands and outstations *together*, as '*small decentralised communities of close kin established by the movement of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural and economic significance to them*' (Blanchard, 1987, p. xvi). This is certainly a useful starting point; however, it should be emphasised that for Yolŋu, 'homeland' has a quite specific meaning. That is, homeland centres are often established on existing sites of *yirralka;* '*the best translation of Yirralka may indeed be "home-land-centre" or maybe "land-identity-centre"*' (Christie & Greatorex, 2004, p. 44). Indeed:

> *The yirralka were set in place even as the creating ancestors, the original Yolngu, moved across the land, singing, dancing, crying and talking the forms of the knowable world into place, and leaving named groups of Yolngu and plants and animals behind on identified estates (Christie & Greatorex, 2004, p. 44).*

Thus, Yolŋu may 'return to country' to establish new homeland centres, but it is not a discretionary initiative. The 'return' is (almost) as important as the 'country' in that the specific portions of land (due to the creative activities of the ancestors) have already been situated in a complex network of clan relationships and responsibilities. In fact, the negotiated and re-definable nature of 'clan' and 'country' identity is a key characteristic of the Yolŋu cosmology; '*social and religious geography… was ambiguous and contested, clearly focussed (if disputed) here, fuzzy and undefined there*' (Keen, 1994, p. 105). Furthermore, the nature of the *gurruṯu* (kinship) system means that other clans (and particularly the 'child' clan in the *yothu-yindi* dynamic) will always have significant formal 'caretaker' roles over homelands that are not their own clan land; '*there is always a connection between a yolngu yothu and its yindi, there is always a connection between a yothu piece of land and its mother land*' (Marika, Ŋurruwutthun, & White, 1989, p. 19). However, none of these riders diminish the fundamental role homelands play in the complex of land and language that comprise the Yolŋu identity. The *reason* Yolŋu aspire to live on homelands, '*the foundational one, from which all else flows, is that they are living on their country, the source of their spiritual identity and strength… because of their profound attachment to the places that are the wellspring of their identity and creativity*' (Morphy & Morphy, 2008, p. 41, 43). Indeed, Christie and Greatorex (2004) convincingly argue that key Yolŋu cosmological and philosophical concepts such as *mulkurr* (head-right knowing), *djalkiri* (foot-foundation), *gurruṯu* (kinship-network) and *märr* (trust-strength) are significantly strengthened as categories of social capital in the homeland context. Thus, for Yolŋu, 'homeland' and 'on country' are virtual synonyms, implying a profound connection to clan land (or through the *gurruṯu* system, an appropriate inter-clan connection to land) and the identity complex of language, narrative and localised land knowledge that this entails. Homelands are not to be confused with community towns (usually founded on ex-mission sites), which are also Indigenous 'country', but almost always involve a mingling of many clans, languages and priorities (cf Shore et al. 2014, p. 5). As we now briefly summarize, the 'homeland movement' arose in many areas in contradistinction to life on the missions.

Homeland Movement

My people are continuing to move out from missions to their own outstations of homeland centres. I believe that the reason for this movement is not only to divorce themselves from the pressures of laws governing them in local communities. It also enables them to make decisions that affect their lives on a day-to-day basis, on their own lands, without question by other clans and groups (Lanhupuy, 1982, p. 56).

Although ‘*it is clear that there were a considerable number of groups of Aboriginal people choosing to live or remain living in small groups well before the advent of the so-called outstation movement*’ (Myers & Peterson, 2016, p. 9), the 1970s are generally considered the beginning of the ‘movement’. For Yolŋu, the motivation to ‘return to country’ was multi-faceted, but, overall, involved both negative and positive concepts of liberty (Berlin, 1969), or *freedom from* and *freedom for* rationales. Freedom *from* the restrictions of government, the enforced jostling of competing clan rights created by the mission settlements and specific negative influences such as alcohol and violence, and freedom *for* the pursuit of autonomy and re-establishing traditional realms of authority. It was never a question of ‘turning back time’, (‘*even though we moved out to our own tribal land in our own Homelands, we didn't move back to a nomadic lifestyle but we took with us our new knowledge of settlement systems, needs for services and facilities*’, Marika-Munuŋgiritj, Maymuru, Munuŋgurr, Munyarryun, Ŋurruwutthun & Yunupiŋu, 1990, p. 38). However, it was an opportunity to reinvigorate traditional life-patterns and cosmology (‘*to rebuild social harmony through reference to these past structures*’, Livett, 1988, p. 15), for the homeland community ‘*in its composition, its structure of authority, its mechanisms of distribution of resources and in patterns of consumption… hints strongly at a past system of organization*’ (Morphy, 1991, p. 42). On Elcho Island, some Yolŋu linked the movement with the rise of land rights claims and the political good will of the federal government of the early 1970s; ‘*the main reason for the outstation movement was centred on land rights and the government's policy of self determination*’ (Biritjalawuy, 1993, p. 49). However, for others, self-determination was mere political rhetoric, highlighting instead the practical realities of homelands; ‘*a chance to develop the way we want… an education that will balance a community relating to its environment*’ (Munyarryun, 1976, p. 57).

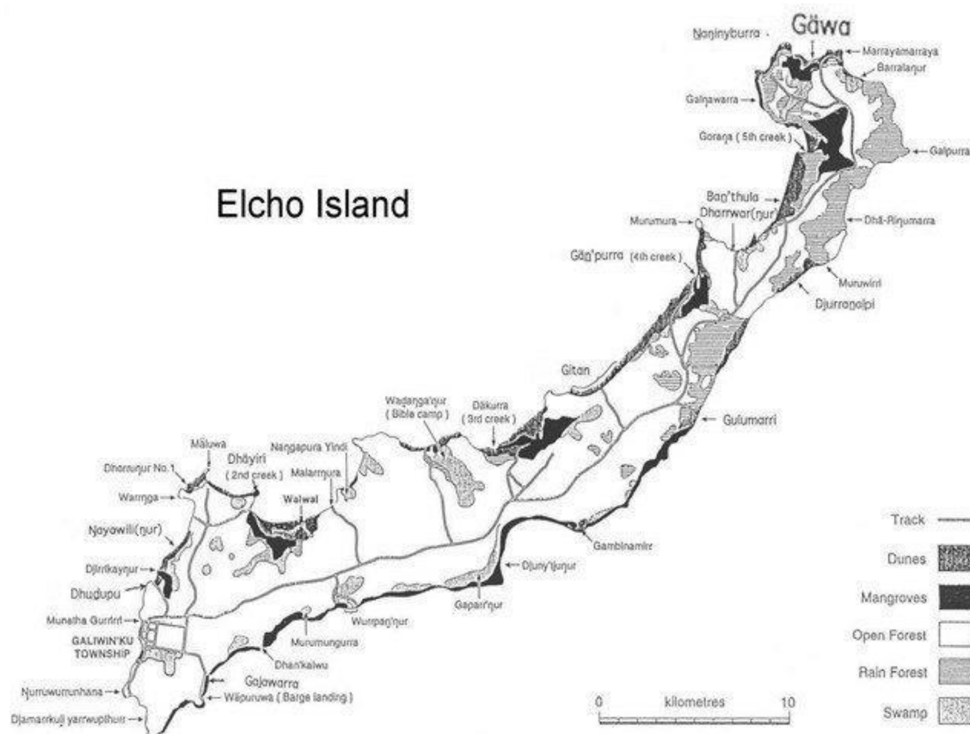

Figure 2. Elcho Island homelands and sites

Furthermore, in contrast to some of the *balanda* romantic/socialist imaginings of the movement (Hughes, 2007), homelands were never communes, they were neither isolated from each other nor other larger towns; the *regional* interactions between land and clan remained vital. In fact, such a dynamic continued the Yolŋu adjustment process, the new/ever-old interplay: ‘*the outstation movement provided a context and an opportunity for the reconstitution of local political*

relationships that were perceived to be in continuity with past trajectories' (Morphy & Morphy, 2016, p. 303). On Elcho Island in particular, the homeland movement was also fashioned by the particular missiology of the long-term missionaries, the Shepherdsons. 'Bäpa Sheppy' explicitly supported homeland living and facilitated trade through light-airplane from the very early 1950s. Anthropologists (Berndt & Berndt, 1988, p. 46; Bos, 1988, p. 160; Rudder, 1993, p. 4), historians (Baker, 2018; Edwards & Clarke, 1988, p. 196; Kadiba, 1998, p. 146; McKenzie, 1976, p. 175;) and Ella Shepherdson herself (1981, p. 35) have all acknowledged their pioneering role in establishing homelands.

Currently, although the population is clearly mobile between homelands and community towns, it is estimated that between 25-35% of the Northern Territory Indigenous population reside on homelands through the year (CreativeSpirits, 2017; Kerins, 2009). Significant research has focussed on benefits for natural resource management (Douglas, 2011), health outcomes (Andreasyan & Hoy, 2009), cost-benefit analysis (Mooney, 2009), and social capital (Christie & Greatorex, 2004) in homeland contexts. However, it was not until 2009 that the Northern Territory released its first, official policy for homelands/outstations, and despite the rise of 'caring for country' and 'working on country' regimes (Altman & Kerins, 2012), the direct implications of the policy included '*that no new outstations will be financially supported, and service delivery will be negotiated via individual service agreements. Education will be provided (via)… existing bush schools, distance learning, boarding in TGTs (Territory Growth Towns) and transport to TGTs*' (Kerins, 2009, p. 5). The most recent government release, *Homelands Policy: a shared responsibility* (2015) contains significant rhetoric around enabling residents to live on and maintain connections with ancestral lands but offers minimal support for repairs and a moratorium on new homelands. The policy makes no reference to homeland education.

Homeland Education

In contrast, the homeland movement historically was intrinsically connected to education, undoubtedly encouraged by early missionary prioritisation of '*self-sufficiency in food and housing (and) schooling for the children*' (Morphy & Morphy, 2016, p. 308). For Yolŋu, homelands offered the potential to reinvigorate an intercultural philosophy of education to also include *balanda* curriculum, for '*in Yolŋu society there is negotiation of meanings between the two moieties, dhuwa and yirritja, which can be applied to negotiation between Yolŋu and balanda cultures to find the common ground that makes up the two way curriculum*' (Wunuŋmurra, 1989, p. 13). This was the first iteration of 'bothways' education and '*the flow of these ideas guided the development of all the Homeland schools*' (Marika-Munuŋgiritj, et al., 1990, p. 40). In particular, homeland education countered the disruption to the intergenerational transmission of language and cultural knowledge apparent in the large community schools and the disconnection with clan-based country. As Christie summarizes, homelands were:

> *Always as much an educational imperative as an economic or religious one. From the Yolngu perspective, one could participate properly in the growing up of young children, only if they were in the right place, with the right people, and away from some of the bad influences of settlement life* (Christie, 2006, p. 28).

On Elcho Island, by 1984 there were nine homeland school centres. They were only rudimentarily resourced, but in accord with the political good will of the time, there was a clear emphasis on 'Aboriginalisation' of these Department of Education schools (Marika, 1999): '*the school is structured so that the people are running their own school. The main ways in which they influence the school is through their selection of teachers and what is to be taught*' (Biritjalawuy, 1993, p. 49). In the Laynha region surrounding Yirrkala, there was a similar evolution as homelands and schools progressed together. It was an organic and generative process; '*they all started at different dates as their communities were ready, but in the same way – under a bark hut or shed, under a paperback shade or under a shady tree, - real open air teaching*' (Marika-Munuŋgiritj, et al., 1990, p. 40). In many school-centres there was a clear expectation for reciprocal, 'two-way'

teaching and learning between the *balanda* teacher and the community, including a bilingual medium of instruction, adult education initiatives and a marked emphasis on 'teacher-training' for the local Yolŋu school staff.

Despite Blanchard (1987) comprehensively outlining the diversity of homeland communities whilst also noting that '*in all cases homeland communities want an education service that is very much a part of the community in a way that has often not occurred in the major communities*' (Blanchard, 1987, p. 213), support at both theoretical and financial levels has declined in recent decades. In conjunction with the winding back of bilingual education; '*in those relatively few places where traditional knowledge practices are alive in Aboriginal schools, and where Aboriginal homeland centres thrive, this is the case in spite of radical disinvestment on the part of governments*' (Christie, 2006, p. 28). Indeed, the most recent large-scale report into Indigenous education in the Northern Territory noted that '*there is no longer a specific system-wide Homelands bureaucratic structure… (no) common application of the policy position for the provision of education… (and) no common programs used across all Homelands education facilities*' (Wilson, 2014, p. 73). Surprisingly, whilst acknowledging that the differences in infrastructure and resources between homelands and similarly sized non-Indigenous remote schools were a significant racial-equality issue, Wilson nevertheless concluded that '*urban boarding arrangements will be recognized as the only viable way to provide for the education of students living in small, remote Homelands*' (Wilson, 2014, p. 75). Such a sweeping generalisation seriously undermines the profound connection to country that underpins the Yolŋu philosophy of education (as outlined below) and is also based on questionable assumption as to whether boarding students do actually show an improvement in the area of English literacy (as assessed through NAPLAN results). More fundamentally, the issue is consistently raised as to whether such a narrow focus should actually remain at the core of an analysis of quality education in remote Indigenous contexts (Guenther & Bat, 2013; Spillman, 2017). Considering the interconnected nexus between health, social capital, overall well-being, maintenance of traditional language and culture and education in the homeland context, it is very questionable whether these assumptions are justified. At the very least, genuine research with homeland schools should be prioritised, as there exists '*little longitudinal research to guide the development of evidence-based policy for homeland/outstation education*' (Kerins, 2010, p. 6). Despite the inadequate empirical data, there are some excellent, recent case studies. Morphy & Morphy (2016) provide a detailed overview of the development of Yilpara, the complex interplay between infrastructure implementations and micro-economies, bilingual policies, teacher-training initiatives and new 'independent' school alternatives, and White's (2016) history of Donydji also features the development of the local school. Likewise, Greatorex (2016) reflects on almost 40 years of involvement with Yolŋu at Galiwin'ku and the Mäpuru homeland, highlighting the struggle to ensure a permanently staffed and resourced school and an intercultural curriculum whereby '*Yolŋu values have prominence in the school, alongside Yolŋu ways of seeing the world so that students' Yolŋu identity is not challenged, but deeply enhanced*' (Greatorex, 2016, p. 341). We certainly believe the research with the Gäwa community will enhance this burgeoning interest in homeland education and could potentially act as a stimulus for the kind of first-language, case-study, action-based research so desperately needed.[3]

[3] The extensively researched Menzies School of Health Research Report into 'early years' acquisition of English for Indigenous students recommends 'the commissioning of formative research and *in-depth case studies* [emphasis added] to inform specific policy and practice' (Silburn et al., 2011, p. xi) and the AMA note that a 'greater emphasis should be given to *action-based research* [emphasis added] in the form of projects developed for, and located within, local communities' (Australian Medical Association, 2013, p. 12).

GÄWA HOMELAND: 'RETURN TO COUNTRY'

The Gäwa homeland narrative reflects some of this background, but it is the localised '*factors that are commonly ignored, or that are, indeed, unknown at the non-local level, yet which need to be taken into account when planning for the future*' (Morphy & Morphy, 2016, p. 302). It was for this very reason that the opening research question was focussed specifically on why Gäwa existed as a homeland; what was the original vision? Gäwa Elders responded:

> W: *The reason people go back to home is that they feel in their heart they want to go back to their homeland. Other people stay here (Galiwin'ku) far too long. It's on the inside, in their heart, they want to go and stay. There is a great yearning, telling them to go back. It doesn't just happen in a rush… until that person is ready... then that person can go back. 'Come on, let's go and see that place so we can stay there'.*
>
> G: *Well, the 'old man' asked us to go to Gäwa. He could see what would happen in the future. He asked us. At that time Galiwin'ku was a good place to live.... (but) we went, no road, no plane… we went by boat. And his thinking, the old man, was that it was for all his (Warramiri) family.*
>
> C: *I use the word 'clean'... there are a lot of problems in towns which don't exist here. So, you get a clean start, so it's what you make of it really. Not what other people have messed up... (also) the old man of the family asked us to establish the place, so that family would have a place to go to, rather than being stuck. And it also means, you know, that the family doesn't lose their inheritance, it's safe... And the other part of the reason was and really for me the main thing was similar to that word 'clean'; a fresh start with the church to have total freedom, rather than be bound by other peoples' concepts of what it should be.*

There are some clear parallels between the Gäwa Elders' responses to the question of community vision with the overall 'return to country' homeland movement. Most importantly, the land itself is an active participant '*telling them to go back*' and it is connected to a fundamental identity process; *'they feel in their heart… there is a great yearning'.* There is also the notion of escaping some of the negative influences of Galiwin'ku township, that the 'old man' (Warramiri Elder Ŋulpurray) could see would worsen in the future, and so he directed his daughter (Gotha) and families to boat out to Gäwa to survey the Warramiri clan land; *it was for all his family*. There are also allusions to the positive freedom, in this instance linked to a physical and symbolic 'clean'; the capacity to not be stuck in town, to decide one's own fate. And the mention of the inheritance being *safe* is a reference to land right claims and encroaching *balanda* interests such as mining and fishing industries in the Wessel islands. In particular, there was also the opportunity to live and express a holistic and integrated 'faith' as the community truly desired it; of Christian and traditional Yolŋu ontologies together, *a fresh start with the church to have total freedom.* This last aspect was certainly supported by other Yolŋu in terms of the vision for education as a Christian school. Yolŋu responses included:

> *G: So, I told the Government and they discussed it and gave me three options to pick from: One teacher school, Independent Government School, Shepherdson College… but none of those, I wanted the Christian school. That one was left out. So, we kept working and that's how the Christian Gäwa School started. We had a trial, no more arguing, and left it with the Lord.*
>
> *Gä: It's up to you to make that change to a Christian school. Gäwa and Mäpuru were leading the way…. Your (Gotha's) idea was very good and we support you in that.*
>
> *Gal: I would want a Christian school, so they could know Jesus' name. Yes, son.*

Bu: It's good to have a Christian school so they can learn 'Bothways', but most important is to learn about Christ. Through that the kids can see what's good and what's bad and they can choose.

Balanda were very cognizant of this community priority:

K: We're a Christian school- first and fore mostly we've got a deep interest in making sure that this student knows and loves the Lord. And that everything else in life is built upon that; so that's the first layer.

S: There's that element from a Christian perspective too I think; there's a sense of not in wanting to escape but creating a unique Christian community here that's different to the Christian community that's in Galiwin'ku.

Ma: I understand, especially from a Christian perspective, there are parents who want their kids to have a Christian education and not to be influenced by the negative things that were obviously in town. And certainly, to be on their own home land. Educated here, and hopefully to learn and be strong in their own culture and strong in the stewardship of the land that God's given them.

Ta: We've often had that 'balanda culture', 'Yolŋu culture'… but we want Christ culture… That's the beautiful thing of this place, that's what, hopefully, the community want and that's what they wanted initially… working together towards that is a wonderful thing to be part of.

S: For me, from what I understand and from what I see here and from talking to C and G, it wasn't just education, it was a whole way of living and being together in community. And then being a Christian school as well.

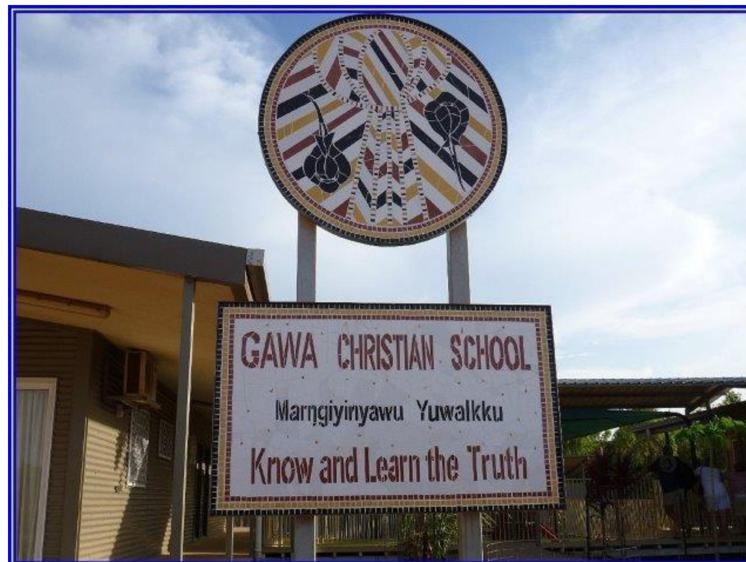

Figure 3. Gäwa Christian School logo and motto

The whole topic of Yolŋu adoption of Christianity and the interplay with traditional beliefs and schooling is a complex and fascinating one, involving questions of mission history, syncretism and/or contextualisation and a burgeoning Yolŋu theology. *Father, you gave us the Dreaming* (1988) is a clear starting point, as well as Gondarra's other works; 1986, 1987, 1992, 1996. Also, see Magowan 1999, 2001, 2003, cf Kelly, 2014. Suffice it to say, the Gäwa return to country certainly involves this as a vital element, alongside the shared issues of (negative and positive) freedom, holistic land-language identity formation and land rights.

School is home: 'on country' education

From his years living at Gäwa, Ben certainly knew of the community aspiration to live on country and sustain a holistic and integrated 'bothways' education (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019b). He was also very aware of the fundamental role Warramiri language and literacy played (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019), through team-teaching with Gotha and having read her reflections on the key nexus between land, language and identity in child development (Guthadjaka, 2010). Indeed, he knew (from lived experience) that Yolŋu '*most often start by reorienting white Australian researchers into the theories of place, language and identity which lie at the heart of their research and education practice… (linking) a good quality education to place and to place consciousness*' (Christie, 2006, p. 29). However, as of 2013, there was broader conjecture across the Northern Territory around bilingual education, its on-going sustainability and appropriate models of implementation. Specific research questions therefore focussed on whether (and how) Yolŋu language(s) and culture should be taught at school and/or in the community at large. As above, W had already outlined how the homeland calls for people to return, and the spirit of individuals respond, each in their own time. But in response to the initial 'languges and culture' question, he supplied a genuinely profound statement that cut across half of the further questions, making them somewhat redundant:

> *W: Yes, in the school and when they finish (the school day) then they learn the Yolŋu way. It must be there, on their own land. Yes, there, on their own land (Gäwa), not on somebody else's land. The school is at home, it's all home. They learn Yolŋu way, the culture at 'home'. It is all the same, it is home. Home, home, home...*

The clear truth is, once the Warramiri children are at Gäwa, they are home. Thus, whatever they are doing, be it at 'school' with *balanda*, or at school with Yolŋu, or at a 'house' with *balanda* or at a house with Yolŋu, or at the beach, or on the reef, or in the bush or the creek... they are *home* and they are learning where they should be. School is home. Logically then, the actual formal *school time* must include Warramiri language and culture because the school is at Gäwa, it is already part of home. Such a place-based educational positioning stems from a deep philosophy, an ontological truth about the real nature of Gäwa as *yirralka,* as 'home-land-centre'.

Although expressed profoundly by W, such a notion was supported by other respondents, both Yolŋu and *balanda*:

> *G: School has always been here. The 'ceremony' is like a school-they were being schooled there. Not a balanda school, a Yolŋu school; ceremony. And they were learning the law and the male elders were handing out teaching and handing out land. School was already happening there, so we made a balanda school too.*

> *C: When we moved out we brought kids with us... a lot of kids, 46 to be exact, and set up school straight away. Of course, we weren't allowed to call it school, it was called a 'homeland learning centre'.... from the start the thought was that education was important. And our focus has been more on the kids than anything.*

> *C: I don't think there should be a terribly big, ugly division between life at school and life at home. I think there should be a blending of things, and we've always seen that here and been glad of that. That the lines blur a little between things and I think it's healthy that they should.*

> *Gä: Yes, that's the place, you are living there, at home. Yes, they can learn, they have the old man (W) there.*

> *S: In my 'ideal' Gäwa world, there would be a lot more overlapping of adults, kids, creating spaces to do that. Just slowing things down maybe, slowing things down so people feel like they've got something to contribute.*

Overall, 'education' has always been the top priority for Gäwa. There had been a sacred ceremonial (*ŋärra*) ground functioning there, a key formal part of traditional Yolŋu education. And when G and C first came out to Gäwa, they came with kids and had school throughout the day (regardless of what the department called it), sleeping on the beach at nights before there was a single building, electricity or water supply. To desire a permanent *balanda* school was not to desire a change in the localised, educational philosophy, it was simply an extension of physical resources. There never was and so there should not now be any '*terribly, big, ugly division*' between 'school' and 'home', there should be '*a lot more overlapping of adults, kids, creating spaces*' around learning and various people functioning as 'teacher'. For it is all home for the children, Gäwa is truly, where '*they can learn*'.

Home as school: 'through country' education

Although not often expressed as an ontological foundation as above, various iterations of 'community-based' education, often relying on the seminal work of Freire (1970) link notions of place with revolutionising education systems through Indigenous methodologies and authority systems. In fact, there are distinct links between Freirean pedagogies and the evolution of Batchelor College, significantly influencing the development of the Yolŋu 'bothways' philosophy of education in the 1980s (White, 1998). More recently, Arenas (1999) coined the phrase '*pedagogy of place*' to realign the globalisation movement; that '*children cannot comprehend, much less feel a commitment toward, issues and problems in distant places until they have a well-grounded knowledge of their own place*' (Areanas, 1999, p. 2). And Grunewald (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) has championed a 'place-conscious' education, explicitly engaging with the tide of standardised curriculum and assessment regimes across western education systems over the last decade. He argues strongly for a socio-ecological place-based paradigm whereby '*the character and quality of places, and our relationship to them, figure significantly in the purpose, process, and assessment of education*' (2003, p. 645). In the remote Northern Territory context, Fogarty (2010) has relied on this theoretical background and his experiences of teaching and research around Maningrida to argue for a 'learning through country' schema in remote, Indigenous contexts. He also outlines specific 'country as classroom' (2012), experiential learning activities, including elements of 'on country' education ('*in this way Indigenous knowledge is transferred intergenerationally and in an appropriate way-on country*', p. 89) as well as providing connection to mainstream curriculum ('*catching a long-necked turtle can be the spring-board for a host of learning opportunities in a more traditional western schooling sense*' p. 89) of science, maths, literacy etc. He further argues that the strength of the approach lies in its localised, 'bottom up' approach where each program is different, but often leads to involvement with ranger groups and Indigenous Land and Sea Management (ILSM) programs and training/employment opportunities (Fogarty & Schwab, 2012).

The 'learning through country' emphasis certainly resonates with presentations made by Gotha on homeland education at Gäwa, vis-à-vis community life at Galiwin'ku; that there is a serious issue of *loss* occuring in the towns whereby young Yolŋu no longer recognize the signs and signals for hunting:

> *Another thing they have to learn, if they are in the creek, they have to listen to the sound of the bird that the tide is coming in. And go through the season. If you don't know the season, you might fish on the west side. You can't fish there if the season is wrong. If you don't know your season, you might catch crab that is light, yaka (not) heavy. That is why they need to know, when to get right things, food, what season… (knowledge being lost) Yes, in Galiwin'ku, it's like a theory they hear, but not practical* (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019).

Instead, Gotha advocates using the Warramiri language and seasonal knowledge as foundational to 'two way' education at Gäwa:

> *The list of words that our children understand is getting smaller, word by word. Our words are being replaced with English words; colour by colour... At Gäwa, we found... a better way: in-season, local background for good communication. The new teaching can often be communicated better with a familiar local illustration. This engages the students who take the position of being the 'experts' on the subject… the students will often teach the teacher as the teacher is teaching them* (Guthadjaka, 2013).

There was unanimous support at Gäwa to embrace this pedagogy of 'learning through country' from all other Yolŋu Elders:

> *Wu: Gäwa, Ṉaŋinyburra, Maṯa-maṯa are related, like the language they sing. They don't have one, they have their own register...(sings)...the children should be taught whatever belongs to there...(W and 'brothers') should be giving information to the Gäwa/Maṯa-maṯa people, the proper names and the information from the land. These things (Warramiri) should be taught at the school.*
>
> *W: For me, the important thing is to learn. We have to go back (to Gäwa homeland) and do the work, for their future, for later on. So, for that reason we have the school...and when they finish the school day, they should continue to learn Yolŋu law and connections. Like they learn in school, it should be like that.*
>
> *G: They should learn the Yolŋu way, about caring for the land, looking after people, respecting the teachers and the other children and whatever other little law there is that they need to know.*
>
> *Gä: We need to teach our culture, boys hunting with spears, girls going for shellfish first and then into the bush for yams and other food there. The Elders out there (at Gäwa) they have the knowledge.*
>
> *Ga: When they're little and when they grow big still....Yes, all (aspects of) 'culture', everything in the school!*
>
> *Bu: Yes, cultural aspects; dancing and painting and totems… where they come from. Learn all that in school. Later, when they grow up, the children know, and they have to teach their own children the same way. And be taught at school as well…*

It is clear that Gäwa Elders expect the school to embrace the teaching of Warramiri 'language and culture', and in fact, cover the full spectrum of an appropriate Yolŋu education. Thus, there is talk of '*boys hunting with spears, girls going for shellfish*' but it moves beyond these practical skills; '*the proper names and the information from the land*' is vital, as is learning the '*dancing and painting and totems*'; the ceremonial manifestations of identity of '*Yolŋu law and connections*'. Likewise the attitudinal emphases of '*caring for the land, looking after people, respecting the teachers and the other children*' should also be included. All of these concepts suffer in the translation process, as in the original Warramiri and Djambarrpuyŋu, interviewees explictly raised categories of Yolŋu cosmology which, translated into everyday English, do not always carry the appropriate gravitas. Nevertheless, even with such a constraint, it is most apparent that there is unanimous support for a holistic, 'learning through country' regime to be integrated into school life.

Figure 4. Guthadjaka and Dhalutj; 'learning through country', 2010

Learning 'from country'?

Ultimately, through the website development, we attempted to progress this 'through country' philosophy to a further level, perhaps best expressed as a 'from country' dynamic. 'From country' teaching and learning highlights the agency of the land itself, although the phrase has been utilised in a different context to indicate distance learning from Yolŋu Elders based on their homelands (see http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/inc/tfc/). But at Gäwa, the intention is for Warramiri country to not only connect with mainstream curriculum, but to *structure and guide* the curriculum itself in a fashion reminiscent of the classic 'bothways' iterations at Yirrkala and surrounding homelands of the 1980s (Christie, 2007). For Yolŋu, land is not only alive, it is both sentient and individualised: *'it is in this sense that the ontological dimension of place is deeper than subjectivity. Place is not simply constructed as a centre of agency and will but has its own individuality'* (Tamisari, 1998, p. 220). Thus, country plays a specific, direct role in education and many famous Yolŋu, when reflecting on their childhood, share of an epistemology of land *as* their teacher; '*my father told me the historical genesis of the Warramirri clan. I am as grateful to him as I am to the Warramirri country of Dhuldji*' (Burrumarra, 1977, p. 52), '*the land contains our information about our traditional way of life. It's written there. It's like a library for our people and children*' (Rrurrambu, 1980, p. 33), '*we went from place to place, and every place had its stories. Some of these were sacred stories that we heard sung in ceremonies… each move was a change in context as far as my education was concerned*' (Yunupiŋu, 1994, p. 2-3), '*my first real learning that I received was about the wäŋa, the environment, and my relationship to my community*' (Marika, 1999, p. 108). Indeed, there is a movement to include specific Yolŋu land as 'author' in recent historical and geographical research (Bilous, 2015), acknowledging the agency involved: '*this is knowledge generated with humans and nonhumans at, through and with Bawaka. Bawaka is in our stories, and our stories are in Bawaka*' (Wright et al. 2012, p. 53). Gäwa, therefore, needs to be considered an active participant in the education process; Gäwa *as* teacher: learning '*from* country'. Thus, we canvassed the potential for a *gurruwilyun* (turning), seasonal-cycle resource, which could be developed (in conjunction with the website) to function *as* the curriculum. Gotha herself had reflected of the students at Gäwa:

> *They know the land, they know the land and the breezes, and the water, what time the tide will be in, when it will be out, because they are learning on country, and he grows with them, by means of that learning* (Guthadjaka, 2010, p. 27).

Furthermore, such education 'from country' is only the first layer in the Yolŋu epistemology, the land continues to reveal the 'inside' secret/sacred truth in conjunction with the Elders guidance:

> *You see there are two layers, one inside, and one outside. They will learn the outside story, and they will learn the inside one too, through the metaphor, its kinship and stories. Not just for the head, but for the inner being, the spirit and for good faith, if he gets it, the inside and outside will truly come together and help each other through the perspective of kinship* (Guthadjaka, 2010, p. 27).

Of course, there is a clear connection between the 'on country' and 'from country' concepts; as

Figure 5. Gäwa seasonal-cycle chart, 2013

children live on the appropriate ancestral estates, they are in the right place, with the right people (*perspective of kinship*) to continue through the layers of traditional knowledge. Vitally, it is more than an expanding of practical knowledge of hunting, traditional bush foods, seasonal markers etc. (important as they are), but living on Gäwa homeland facilitates the traditional Yolŋu maturation process whereby '*the ancestral world extends into the everyday world, the inside flows into the outside. Outside forms are in a sense generated by inside forms and are not separate from them*' (Morphy 1991:80). To capture something of this dynamic, the seasonal-cycle website and curriculum was propounded to ensure that the land at Gäwa retained its active role. Just as the homeland had called Yolŋu to return to country, it now could have a distinct voice in the on-

going education at Gäwa. Home as school. It was in its early design phase as of 2013, went through some major alterations in 2015-2016 (Guthadjaka & van Gelderen, 2019), and is not entirely realised even now (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2017). However, we briefly raise it here as there was clear support for the website as the proposed pedagogical foundation from the Gäwa community in the research interviews. As the content of the site is almost exclusively due to the foresight and persistence of Gotha, in researching and collecting digital resources for many decades, we conclude with her thoughts:

> *G: My thinking about this website is that it will come to be something very useful in the future. Those people who are working to help us will be able to see what it is we want for this place here at Gäwa... Everything is there in the seasons, the songs are there, the women's crying, the sacred art, the clan groups, they are all there in the seasons.*

Figure 6. Gäwa, 2018

Conclusion

The Gäwa homeland is an inspiring narrative, a genuine story of self-determination; of a visionary and resilient network of families intent on providing the best holistic, Warramiri education for their younger generation. In pursuing an 'on country' and 'through country' place-based pedagogy, Elders at Gäwa have interacted with the priorities of the broader homeland movement and expanded them to include a local, contextualised Christian perspective and a seasonal-cycle digital curriculum. Indeed, in returning to Halsey's report, it would appear that in significant ways Gäwa has now forged ahead of many homelands established in earlier times. Government policy no longer supports homeland education in any meaningful way, such that it is only appropriate to conclude with the sombre rebuke from Mr Mark Yiŋiya Guyula's (MP) maiden speech to the Northern Territory parliament in 2016. He clearly reiterates the vitality and need for the renewal of 'on' and 'through' country, place-based education:

> *Yolŋu children on homelands do not have equal access to education, qualified teachers attending every day and working with Yolŋu teachers and community to develop bilingual, bicultural curriculum, and for the children that is created on country and taught through Yolŋu language and culture, discipline, rehabilitation; educating young men and women towards being responsible, respectful parents and future leaders* (Guyula, October 18, 2016).

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