# Australian Indigenous Knowledge and the Globalising Social Sciences

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**Abstract**

The knowledge practices of Indigenous people may provide valuable insights and strategies in our struggle to understand the processes and effects of globalisation on the social sciences and humanities. This paper begins with a close look at two ceremonial concepts belonging to the Yolŋu Australian Aboriginal people which have been offered as conceptual devices for understanding a social knowledge practice which is pragmatic and local. Understanding these concepts as metaphysical underpinnings to a particular performative epistemology provides analytical framings whereby alternatives can be discerned to the globalising social sciences and humanities. Using a case study of work about human rights, the paper concludes with a renewed definition of social science in postcolonial knowledge work.

*Keywords:* Australian Indigenous, epistemology, postcolonial

## An Induction into an Aboriginal Social Science

Australia's Aboriginal people have distinctive epistemologies supporting what could be called their 'social sciences'. Here I begin with a definition of social science as 'knowledge production about the social'. My induction into the knowledge practices of the Yolŋu Aboriginal people in northeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory began as a teacher in remote Australian Aboriginal schools in the early 1970s, where I soon became a linguist, translator and interpreter of Yolŋu Aboriginal languages. Over the

following 40 years my academic life has increasingly involved working with Aboriginal knowledge authorities on collaborative transdisciplinary research which entails taking seriously both academic and Aboriginal epistemologies. I am interested in Aboriginal philosophy, particularly in epistemology, because it is in their epistemological practices that Aboriginal philosophers make a major contribution to alternatives to western modes of knowledge work, including the globalising social sciences and humanities.

These contributions could be understood, in terms of social sciences and their epistemologies more generally, as 'southern theories' in the sense provided by Raewyn Connell (2007); not as a 'sharply bounded category' of theory, but as theory that bears complex relations 'between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery' (p. vii‐ix). What interests me here is not the Aboriginal knowledge practices per se, but their contributions to the collaborations with academic knowledge practices over local issues.

## Garma and Galtha: Indigenous Metaphysical Commitments

In thinking of alternative social science and humanities practices, I focus on two particular concepts derived from a Yolŋu Australian Aboriginal philosophy. The Yolŋu people number about 5000, live on their ancestral lands in the remote east of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, and speak a large number of related languages belonging to the Pama‐Nyungan group. The fundamental notions of *garma* and *galtha* were originally provided to me and other educators and educational theorists working in collaboration with Aboriginal knowledge authorities in school curriculum development in the 1970s (discussed further below).

The *garma* which as we shall see can be understood as a powerful epistemological frame, is first of all a public ceremonial space. People come together at a *garma* site to celebrate and perform their very diverse ancestral histories, and to choreograph collectively a statement of who they are, here and now, in all their differences and samenesses, and thus to agree on an honourable and peaceable way of going on together. There are many *garma* sites all over the land. Sometimes the *garma* space is used for specialised conflict resolution, but more generally it is used for ceremonial cycles – exchange of morning star totemic objects, for example, and for funerals.

To explain the philosophical underpinnings of a *garma* practice, I need to digress slightly to an anthropological outline. The Yolŋu world is found divided in two mutually dependent halves, or moieties, and everyone and everything belongs to one or the other moiety. The world as we know it came into existence as the creating ancestors of each moiety, walked, flew, swam and danced their way across the country, singing and crying,

and leaving in place the land forms, the waters, the species, and the peoples and their languages, songs, sacred designs and ceremonies which we still celebrate today. Marriage is exogamous. One must always marry someone from a different clan group, and one of the opposite moiety. This has traditionally been organised through long standing alliances between particular groups, who call each other 'mother and child' and 'grandmother and grandchild'. One is always the opposite moiety from one's mother, and, of course, the same moiety (but generally a different clan group) as one's mother's mother. It is through one's mother's mother that one acquires much of one's totemic affiliation and with whom one unites in the *garma* for nuanced performances of sameness and difference. Enough of the anthropology. Suffice it to say that one is who one is by virtue of long chains and webs of connectedness between people, places and totems, and that all ceremonial and agreement making activity necessarily involves members of a range of different totemic groups in particular relation to each other. (For Yolŋu philosophical discussion on totems, the environment, identity and knowledge work, see for example Buthimang 2010, Garnggulkpuy 2002, 2010, Marika‑Mununggiritj et al 1990.)

Arriving at the *garma*, everyone is conscious of those complex webs of connections, and how they can be performed in subtle ways to draw out particular emphases, and background others, and to focus upon particular identities or on particular distinctions. The task is to work together, conscious of who and where we are, whose land we are on, whose ceremony we are revitalising (or whose life we are celebrating), to make a collective performance of who we are, while carefully preserving our differences, and making agreed ways forward together.

People come from far and wide, and sit in shelters around the edges of the *garma* space, and prepare themselves in extended family groups by singing their ancestral songs, and painting each other with detailed ancestral designs. All ceremonial activities, like paintings for example, entail owners (who 'own' or more correctly who 'are' the totem – the cheeky yam, the storm cloud, the spiders web…) as well as 'managers' (who call the totem and its human manifestations whether male or female, 'mother'). The old men are often in a sacred shelter, discussing links between the public *garma*, its paintings and performances and the secret‑sacred work to which it is connected, sharing and concealing stories and coming to agreement over truth claims.

The ceremony has a particular starting point. When the general form of the performance and the particular roles of senior people have been agreed upon, a senior custodian of the land and the ceremony 'throws the *galtha*'. Something, maybe a spear, or a just a foot stomping in the sand, comes from the air and pierces the land as a sign that agreement has been made, the talking will stop, and the performance will begin. This

gesture, instantiating and (re)mobilising an ancestral complexity in the here and now, is the '*galtha*' (Marika‑Mununggiritj and Christie, 1995).

Groups of people, young men dancing in front, women dancing behind, and old men and women standing at the side calling out directions, beating clap sticks, singing ancestral songs and incantations come into the *garma*, each group in turn, and work together to choreograph the performance. The *galtha* is a sign that ancestral reality is at work again in a special way, time bends back upon itself, history is folded back over the present, and we are taking on once again the creative work of the ancestors, redefining who and where we are in terms of our relation to each other and to the unfolding world.

## Garma-galtha as a Social Science

The ancient practice of the *garma* and its *galtha*, and the complex philosophies which emerge from it and which support it, first came to the attention of social scientists in the 1980s. The social scientists in question were curriculum theorists and developers (including myself) in a remote corner of Arnhem Land, and the concepts of *garma* and *galtha* were in fact pressed upon us by community elders and ceremonial leaders finally reacting against fifty years of colonial education. It being a particularly liberal period of Australia's political history, the policies of Aboriginal 'self‑determination' and 'reconciliation' were finding their way into schools (and other institutions), and Aboriginal governance practices and epistemologies were being taken seriously, at least by some.

Taking the *garma‑galtha* nexus seriously as a social science requires explicit attention to its underlying metaphysical commitments. In terms of the education of young people, it introduced a focus on embodiment in place as a reaction against the universalised and objectified knowledge and knowers of the colonial classroom. Quite opposed to the 'episitemic equality' of all creatures of the enlightenment (Addelson 1994), Yolŋu children (in fact *all* children according to Yolŋu philosophy), are individually unique and different, depending upon their ancestral connections to people, totems and place. In this knowledge practice, agreeing upon who we are, individually and collectively, and how we should live, given our agreements, our places and our identities, are all key features of any viable and just knowledge practice, whether it be in the classroom, the laboratory, or the ethnographic field. As Connell points out, this insistence upon land as 'capable of entering into organised social knowledge and playing a central role in representations of society' (2007, p200) is a particular feature of Australia's indigenous 'southern theory'. As Indigenous social science worked in collaboration with academic scientists interested in developing transdisciplinary alternatives to the

globalising knowledge practice under neoliberalism, Yolŋu knowledge practices have informed and enriched research into fields as diverse as health communication (Christie and Verran 2014) , environmental management (Christie 2007, 2008), resource allocation and planning (Christie 2014), homelessness (Maypilama et al 2004) and housing (Christie 2013), emerging uses of digital technologies in Aboriginal knowledge traditions (Christie & Verran 2013), mathematics education (Verran 2007), and problem gambling (Christie and Young 2011). The references above all provide details of the practice of our transdisciplinary research. (Transdisciplinary research in our definition, engages knowledge practices from *outside* the academy – as opposed to interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary which remain within the enlightenment tradition.) In the next section I explore some of the analytic framings which provide a contrast between the Indigenous knowledge practice and the increasingly globalising social sciences, not as they appear (as *galtha* and *garma*) in Aboriginal philosophical discourse, but in the categories of the western tradition.

## Some Analytic Framings of a Yolŋu Social Science
### Knowledge Traditions, and Knowledge Practices

My first move in framing this alternative social science is to step away from framing knowledge as *commodity*. Scientists working within the social scientific traditions derived from the European 'enlightenment', are prone to dismiss Aboriginal social science as folksy and unscientific because it eschews objective facts in favour of narratives and choreographed performances. So I use the term knowledge *traditions* deliberately and carefully, taking *both* the *garma* and the enlightenment as historically situated knowledge traditions. If we talk simply of knowledge, we may be tempted to think of knowledge as a *thing*, rather than as a *practice*. To take *knowledge* as an object of human endeavour, is already to slip into the enlightenment paradigm, where we find an *a priori* split between the knower and the known. I argue, at least within the Indigenous knowledge practices with which I am familiar, that the ontological divide between the knower and the known, between the subject and the object, is always provisional, always emergent, always negotiated and in fact always the effect of collective action, as in the *garma* process. We are constantly working together to create new possible worlds, including new selves and others, and ways of going forward together in good faith.

### Framings and Theories

To resist the enlightenment figure of the knowable world 'out there' (see for example Law 2007), and to embrace knowledge work as a collaborative, productive,

world-making process, we reinterpret the traditional intellectual practice of theorising as *analytic framing*. We are not taking a step backwards to judge an otherly world by formulating a theory to map over and explain that external reality, but we bring an analytic framing as a tool for use in the here and now, in the hope that our academic work might intervene in the contestations around the problems of the moment (including globalisation and its alternatives). Analytic framings, like the ancestral stories in the *garma*, participate in knowledge production as players. They do not explain the world. The *galtha* refuses the role of the judging observer. Knowledge makers are always active participants in collective action, even if they feel and say they have a privileged perspective through which they can see what others cannot. We must do theory and practice together.

## Political Ontology

Doing theory and practice together is significantly an ontological issue rather than an epistemological one. And it is not merely that academic social sciences and Australian Aboriginal knowers engage the world 'out there' using different ontological commitments. (That would be mere relativism, see further below). What we learn from Yolŋu philosophers is akin to what Blaser (2013) terms 'political ontology' which implies not only a certain political sensibility to the 'pluriverse', but also a 'problems space' where different ways of 'worlding' interact productively (or not), and a modality of analysis concerned with reality making and its own role in reality making' (p552).

## Performances and Representations

We do not reject or repudiate the knowledge practices of the enlightenment. They are valid, significant and useful. (As the Yolŋu elders reassured the white Australian school teachers in our discussion over curriculum many years ago, Western knowledge practices are useful for Aboriginal people too, in appropriate framing). What distinguishes the knowledge work of the enlightenment from that of the Yolŋu, is the focus on *representation:* i.e. a subject perceiving and specifying an object. The metaphor of a light shining to reveal a previously unseen but ready-made world 'out there' is of course the fundamental metaphor of enlightenment epistemology. When following the Yolŋu, we talk about knowledge as a practice, rather than an object, we can include both the *representational* knowledge practices of the enlightenment *and* the *performative* practices of those who resist representationalism, including Indigenous peoples. Representations of 'truth' are performances too. The notion of *knowledge practices*, provides us a frame through which we can compare and contrast the globalising social sciences of the

enlightenment, and the localised knowledge work of other knowledge traditions. It also allows us to see the knowledge practices of the enlightenment and of Aboriginal Australia both in their cultural and historical contexts.

## Relativism and the Local

So in any context of knowledge work, enlightenment practices (demography, sociology, anthropology, history, etc.) may find their place in our agreement making. But they may not. The Yolŋu knowledge tradition is strongly anti-relativist. Not all contributions are equally useful, honourable or relevant. The different performances are all enacted and interwoven as truth claims, upon which follow the difficult complex, sometimes tense, located, embodied epistemic practices, where truth claims are assessed by the community under the authority of the elders, making clear agreement about the here-and-now-for-us truth of how we should go on together. This does imply a different notion of truth from that found in representationalism.

## Narratives and Facts

The truth claim of a Yolŋu is always a story. If you ask a Yolŋu a question, you will get a story in reply. In my efforts to find a common ground from which to celebrate the contributions of Aboriginal social science, I would argue that the (European enlightenment) fact is actually a narrative with its cultural, historical and political clothing removed. Facts are historically and politically contingent, and often depend upon a hidden grand narrative' of, for example, 'progress' or 'cause and effect'. *Theory* is a narrative of *then and there*. *Practice* is narrative of the *here and now*.

## Progress and Colonisation

Aboriginal knowledge authorities are very conscious of the ways in which the colonising social sciences refuse to engage face to face in collective action around the problems of the moment, a refusal which is tied to the colonial project of *progress*. The *garma* (with its insistence on the face-to-face here-and-now in truth and agreement-making) and the *galtha* (with its insistence that all honourable futures must involve a careful 'remembering of the future'), keep the progressivism of colonization (and of globalisation) at bay. There is a close connection between the monologic of western social science, and the notion of the colonised people being invited to move from a past of darkness through a difficult present towards a glorious future of salvation, enlightenment and progress (Fabian 2002, Rose 2004). Echoing as it does the monotheistic religions from which it derives, this progressivism denies the viability and plurality of ancient and

local life ways and obscures the alternatives to globalising knowledge priorities.

## Contributions of Aboriginal Epistemology to Decolonising the Social Sciences: The Example of Human Rights.

Aboriginal philosophers understand the world itself, including time and space, and all social and political categories, as coming to be in collective action. Since the originary actions of the ancestors who made our time and place, right up to now in the ongoing *garma- galtha* practices of agreement making, including knowledge production, in this metaphysics, the categories and boundaries are provisional and subtly negotiated in place[1].

So to use the example of human rights, an understanding and practice of rights must be seen to emerge in collective action. Rights are not ontologically given. They are constructed. But of course different groups (lawyers, activists, policy makers, academics, Aboriginal participants) construct issues of rights quite differently. That is why in doing careful postcolonial practices together, we search for a *galtha* – a new way of *doing* rights as well as of *understanding* them. (We could have used any other example apart from rights – it could be any social, psychological or political problem in context.)

In working in complex contested political situations, analytical framing work needs to be directed towards 'success in winning' particular struggles over particular rights, and not to a more general theory. Joining the battle over human rights requires using the language and tools available for winning in the here- and- now of collective action. In research work on Indigenous rights, we should assume that Aboriginal people and governments should/ could both be winners, both 'end users' of research. They should all be involved in the *garma* of social science. And as we work around concrete issues of rights, we see how some particular discourses and practices actually constitute the nation state, while others may unsettle it.

As we look at the way issues around human rights and responsibilities of individuals and groups are defined as a public problem by various participants, we start to see the range of solutions that are appropriate for human rights. Seeing all materialities as somehow emergent in collective action allows us to be respectful of both government and Aboriginal community members and the participants in their worlds – even though they can be quite different. It allows us to avoid the metaphysics of western science, and the individualism of western ethics and political philosophy.

While collaborations with Australian institutions over issues involving rights (human, land, language etc.) seem straightforward in this analysis, they belie a quite fundamental difference between Aboriginal and globalizing concepts of human rights, the

nation state and rationality. In an Aboriginal ontology, as noted above, all individuals are unique and of a piece with their ancestral land (the natural and the cultural being undifferentiated). So human integrity, like the integrity of all nature-culture is intrinsic. But rights are political and constantly (re)negotiated. The nation-state in this analysis is not an *a priori* category. It is emergent and constituted in the everyday here-and-now life in Aboriginal Australia. This of course implies a quite different rationality in which things and the relations between them are provisional and contingent, and (re)constituted through complex performances by cultural authorities in an open (*garma*) forum, in good faith.

How do these rationalities and understandings of law, statehood and rights find their place in our collaborative social science? Methodologically we could for example look together at the changing rhetoric and practices of governments concerned with individual and collective rights, and compare them with the history of Aboriginal thinking and practices of rights, responsibilities, care and concern (with respect to various issues or projects of current concern– eg housing, land tenure, research, education, tourism, arts, health). As pragmatists, we need to do this in the piecemeal tactics that work in producing knowledge and policy and changed practice at the same time.

Yolŋu knowledge authorities, whose pragmatist philosophy see them engaged quite directly in public problems, contribute to social movements in different ways from general theorists. They are not looking for rational consistency across various understandings and practices of human rights and responsibilities. It is from the tensions between the different rationalities that we may be able to devise a more generative approach to Human Rights policy, advocacy and practice.

So the contributions of Yolŋu social science to globalizing discourse of human rights entails framing and enacting what is happening *in the public problem of the moment*, producing provisional theories and practices that we should not expect to easily or automatically extend to cover other situations, but through which we devise, celebrate and perform just ways of going on together. We point to this located, momentary practice of knowledge and agreement making as informing discussions around alternatives to the globalizing social sciences and humanities.

**Notes**

1.   The exception to this is the ontological split between the two moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja, which seem to both precede and enable this metaphysics of emergence.

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# オーストラリア先住民族の知識とグローバル化社会科学

**Michael Christie**

　先住民たちの知識実践は、グローバル化の過程と、それが社会科学、人文科学に与える影響とを理解しようとするわれわれの営為に、価値ある洞察と戦略を与えてくれる。本論文は、はじめに、Yolŋu オーストラリア先住民の二つの儀式概念に注目する。その分析は、彼らのプラグマティックでローカルな社会的知識実践を理解する概念的手がかりを与えてくれる。こうした概念を文脈依存的な行為遂行的認識論にとっての形而上学的な基盤と理解することは、現状のグローバル社会科学、人文科学とは別様の分析枠組みを提供してくれる。本論文は最後に、人権研究を一つの事例研究として検討し、ポストコロニアルな知識研究における新しい社会科学の規定を提示する。