Bringing narrative practices to work with Aṉangu people

by Tjunkaya Ken

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Abstract

This paper reflects on a conversation between narrative practice and Aṉangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people) culture, specifically with Aṉangu women from the Ernabella community. The focus is on amplifying the voices and perspectives of Aṉangu in relation to the effects of Western therapeutic practices, including narrative therapy. The Tree of Life metaphor was introduced to a group of Elders living on Country. These senior women provided insights into cultural resonances and adaptations that could be applied when working with Aṉangu to ensure the Tree of Life process aligns with Aṉangu cultural values and beliefs. To help piṟanpa (non-Aboriginal) practitioners better understand Aṉangu, the paper introduces the key cultural concepts of Tjukurpa and connection to Country, and outlines the effects of colonisation on Aṉangu. It also introduces the Aṉangu arts of kulini (listening, reflecting and sensing with the body) and milpatjunanyi (storytelling in the sand).

Key words: Aṉangu; Aboriginal; Tree of Life; kulini; narrative practice

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A central question has guided the work I describe in this paper: How might I bring narrative practices into my work with Anangu people? This has not been an easy question to answer! In considering the translation of narrative practices into Anangu contexts, I have been dedicated to amplifying the voices and perspectives of Anangu in relation to the effects of Western therapeutic practices. This has led me to focus on helping piranpa (non-Aboriginal) people and practitioners to better understand Anangu, and to recognise that therapeutic approaches need to align with Anangu cultural values and beliefs in order to be helpful.

This paper focuses on one example of bringing together a narrative practice – the Tree of Life metaphor and group process (Ncube, 2006) – and Anangu culture through consultation with Anangu Elders. As I described the Tree of Life to Anangu people, I found that they didn't at first understand *why* I would invite them to engage in such a practice. *Meaning* – understanding the 'why' – is very important to Anangu people. This interaction made me realise how taken for granted the concept of 'therapy' is in Western culture, and how the concept of doing something 'therapeutic' for its own sake is unfamiliar to Anangu. However, learning and care for children are central to Anangu values, and provided alternative entry points to discussion about how to adapt the Tree of Life metaphor to Anangu culture.

Before I describe the meeting between the Tree of Life and Anangu culture, I think it's important that I provide some information about the cultural context in which I live and work.

What it means to be Anangu

> Engaging with Anangu histories and their complex and diverse relationship with colonialism reveals a picture of ingenuity, independence and resistance as well as a strong and continuing commitment to cultural maintenance which includes a desire to remain connected to country, close to important ancestral sites in spite of the various policy priorities of the day.
> (Osborne, 2015, pp. 133–134)

I am an Anangu Pitjantjantjara woman culturally tied to the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands through my father, Kenneth Ngalatji Ken, who was a Pitjantjatjara Traditional Law man, born by a tree in the creek bed at Ernabella Mission in 1946. My mother Sandra is piranpa of English and Swiss-German descent and is a fluent Pitjantjatjara speaker and translator and has dedicated her life's work as a Teacher working alongside Anangu education workers producing a lot of resources, in particular in the area of well-being, she also helped me in facilitating my workshop.

Anangu culture is centred in the landscape and Tjukurpa. James (2015, p. 35) described landscape and Tjukurpa as 'central to Anangu ontology – as the first principle of things, which include concepts of being, knowing, substance, essence, cause, identity, time and space'. Tjukurpa defines who you are and where you come from. This is similar to how Western people carry their last names as signs of where they come from. For Anangu, last names were brought in through colonisation and they do not have the same importance. Our roots lie in our totemic creation beings, our nguraritja and tjukuritja, which means belonging to our ngura (home/Country) and our Tjukurpa. Unlike a name, this never changes and always remains the same.

> The *Tjukurpa* is inhabited by the first creative beings that were both animal and human, and who purposefully created landforms, trees, food plants, water sources and fire. These beings were *tjukuritja*, of the *Tjukurpa*, and are the direct ancestors of Anangu living today.
> (James, 2015, p. 39)

What is especially important to mention before I begin speaking about my work with Anangu people is that Anangu lands were colonised only recently compared to other parts of Australia. The APY Lands are considered 'very remote': they are five hours' drive away from the closest town, Alice Springs. Colonisation affected our people in many ways. Food rations during the missionary days made people like my grandparents move away from Country to be closer to the missions. Getting there would take a few days' walk, so they then would end up settling in those missions.

When the Presbyterian mission was first established in 1937 by Dr Duguid in Ernabella, he recognised the importance of missionaries and teachers learning the Pitjantjatjara language. This was the beginning of bilingual education, which was a very positive step and helped build closer relationships between the missionaries and the Anangu people. My father went through that educational system and became very knowledgeable and literate in both English and Pitjantjatjara. He was thus able to challenge the government in relation to the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981*. In the late 1980s, bilingual education was taken away by the government. Children are now forced to learn in a foreign language in a Westernised educational system, and this has affected An̲angu ways of learning.

Osborne (2015, p. 9) described communities in the area as having 'a general store, a local school and medical clinic, but hospitals, banks, shops, specialist health and large-scale employment and economic opportunities are located many hundreds of kilometres away'. As a result, many An̲angu have been forced to move away from their Country to get access to medical treatments and employment opportunities.

My work context

I am currently a director of Iwir̲i Aboriginal Corporation for An̲angu in Adelaide. We support An̲angu who are living away from the APY Lands, including people living in Adelaide to access health care. Iwir̲i meets with local councils and state government agencies to address issues that may arise relating to An̲angu. Government services consult us about how to address these issues in a more culturally appropriate way. My co-directors and I are constantly seeking ways of responding that are sensitive to An̲angu culture and its language and kinship systems, and that the An̲angu voice is heard. My deep understanding of An̲angu culture is significant to my role at Iwir̲i. In addition to this role, I also engage with An̲angu communities in more informal ways, which are tied to my dedication to supporting An̲angu people to remain connected to their language and culture.

Punu Wankanya: Tree of Life

As part of this dedication to finding new ways to respond to issues, I travelled to the APY Lands to meet with a group of An̲angu Elders to talk about narrative practices including the Tree of Life metaphor. It was difficult to find a time to meet as all the women were busy with work, but we managed to find a time when four senior women could meet with me. We were able to use the Aboriginal Bible translating office, which luckily had a big whiteboard that I could use.

Two of the ladies, Katrina Tjitayi and Makinti Minutjukur, were part of the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Education Committee and had worked a lot with researchers such as Samuel Osborne (2015), who is also my marutju (brother-in-law). The other ladies were Maringka Burton and my old schoolteacher when I was a little girl in Amata An̲angu School. Her name is Anne Jack, and she was really delighted to be a part of my project. All of these ladies and many others had also worked on Bible translation and were highly skilled in English and Pitjantjatjara translation, both linguistic and cultural.

In this significant meeting, I sought to consult with the Elders about how I might use the Tree of Life with other An̲angu. I decided to focus on describing the Tree of Life methodology and its history, rather than taking the senior women through the practice, as I knew this was a unique opportunity to learn from a group of An̲angu Elders who had worked in education their whole lives and who were rich in lived experience and cultural knowledge.

I found that I need to explain the Tree of Life in a visual way, as many of the words did not seem to translate well. I took my time explaining all that I knew about Punu Wankanya, the Tree of Life. As I spoke, I used the whiteboard to draw the different parts of the tree and what they represent. I included the following categories:

- iwir̲i (roots): heritage
- manta (ground): the present
- punu (trunk): values and skills
- punu mina (branches): horizons
- nyalpi (leaves): special people in our lives
- mai (fruits): legacies bequeathed to us/ character strengths
- inuntji (flowers) and kalka (seeds): legacies we wish to leave.

With their backgrounds working in An̲angu education, and a strong sense of how troubled some young An̲angu people are, all the women immediately and collectively focused their responses on children and what might be most helpful to them. This reflected the very important part that grandparents play as Elders in An̲angu communities.

I asked the women what they would describe as their heritage – their roots. They collectively named their family and Tjukurpa. Katrina Tjitayi expanded the idea of roots: 'inside iwir̲i [roots] is the kapi [water]. We have to drink the water'.

For Aṉangu, living in the desert, water has always been an important life source. Some people would have to walk for hours or all day to get to a rockhole to drink. Many Aṉangu, especially the older generation, combine their grounding in their Tjukurpa and spirituality with Christian beliefs. This brings additional resonances to the significance of water. Katrina and the other ladies referenced a description of the Tree of Life in the Bible:

> Kaṉi angeltu piṟuku ngayunya ninti kapi wala wankaṟunkupainya ukalingkunyangka. Ka kapi paluṟu pirpi-pirpiṟa ukalingangi Godaku pulampa Lamalamaku tjiyanguṟu. Munu kapi paluṟu tawunungka nguṟurpa karuringkula iwarangka ukalingangi. Ka karu kantilypa kutjarangka ngaṟangi puṉu wankanya. Ka puṉu pala palula mai ilaṯu-ilatu pakaningi kinaṟa kutjupa kinaṟa kutjupa titutjarangku ngalkuntjaku, kaya ngura winkitjangku puṉu pala palulanguṟu nyalpi mantjiṟa nyiṯilpai pika wiyaringkunytjikitjangku (Bible Society, 2002, pp. 916–917)
>
> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life – water as clear as crystal – pouring out from the throne of God and of the Lamb, flowing down the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life producing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month of the year. Its leaves are for the healing of nations. (Revelation 22:1–2, NET Bible)

Here too, the Tree of Life is associated with water.

Makinti explained the importance of the tree having a strong trunk: 'when the punu [wood] is strong and wiru [good/healthy], it is like good knowledge and wisdom'. She repeated this in Pitjantjatjara: 'kulinytja palya ka kulinytja ninti'.

Katrina added, 'but it [the trunk] needs water. That is the families' support'.

Makinti stated, 'when we help the tree to be strong, we likewise help our families to be strong' (translated from Pitjantjatjara to English). The ladies agreed that their role is to help children on their way, and that 'children are growing like the tree'.

Although the Tree of Life metaphor resonated with the Aṉangu Elders, when I introduced the 'storms of life' as representing the hardships people may face, this was not a good cultural fit. The ladies explained that because they live in the desert, they look forward to storms, and that rain brings life and joy in the communities. For them, storms and rain were times to celebrate, not a reflection of hardship. A different metaphor was needed. The women suggested bushfire because it destroys the landscape. This was a very helpful adaptation from the Elders, and in my subsequent work with Aṉangu I have used bushfire to represent hardships.

Mental health prior to colonisation

In my conversation with the senior women, the concept of 'mental health' came up. When it did, I asked the ladies if there was a term for 'mental health' in Pitjantjatjara. They all said 'wiya [no]'. I then asked what terms had been used for people with mental health issues before colonisation. Maringka Burton said, 'we were ipilpa [healthy] and nyantulpa [refreshed] because we did exercise and walked everywhere ... our roots were strong'.

Makinti jumped in and said, 'we didn't have mental health problems. That all came after they [colonisers] came'. After hearing this significant statement from Makinti about the effects of colonisation, we had the following conversation.

Tjunkaya: When people were upset or there were problems, what did people do back then?

Makinti: We had safety ... kukaputju [skilled hunter] and traditional law ... We used to get water and cool someone down [demonstrates by touching her head] ... There was always a peacemaker in the community who would come to help.

Tjunkaya: Oh, so there were peacemakers?

Makinti: Yes, there is always someone in each community who everyone goes to as a peacemaker.

Tjunkaya: What other things would you do in the community with your families?

Makinti and Katrina: We would tell bedtime stories to the children as they would go to sleep, and also warning stories every evening and in the morning – alpiri wangkanyi [morning news/evening news]. This would be where someone just comes out and talks out loudly into the air for everyone to hear.

I really enjoyed this conversation with the senior women, and I learnt a lot. It demonstrated the effects of colonisation while also highlighting the women's strong cultural knowledge that helped them (and others) get through hardships.

As part of introducing the Tree of Life process, I invited the women to remember significant people in their lives (past and present). One of the women, Sandra Ken, my mother, told the following story to me:

> Your father once said to me, at night my kami [grandmother] would sit around the campsite and would tell stories while us children were laying down for bed. Throughout the storytelling the children (if awake) would reply 'uwa' [yes] to let her know that they were still awake. Once there were no more responses from the children the story would end.

The importance of context and finding connections between Anangu and narrative therapy

As I reflected on my meeting with the senior Anangu women, I started to make further connections between Anangu culture and narrative practices. I also realised how important it was to include in this paper some further information about the history of the community in which these women lived (the Ernabella mission) as the effects of colonisation had a significant impact on their lives and the lives of the younger people in their community.

Only in the last 100 years have Anangu been exposed to European contact, and some are still able to recount life before colonisation: 'European contact, colonisation and the provision of schooling … is relatively recent' (Osborne, 2015, p. 126). I mention this to demonstrate how colonised or Westernised perspectives are still relatively new for Anangu. This helped me to understand why it was so difficult at first to explain my work to Anangu. For example, as I tried to introduce the Tree of Life metaphor to the senior ladies, it just didn't seem to make sense to them at first. The only thing that seemed to work was when I said it was for my university studies. When they heard this, the ladies seemed to then understand the 'why' and were more than happy to be a part of the project. After this 'why' was understood, I could then explain a bit more about the Tree of Life practice.

Reflecting on their stories also made me want to stress the importance of language and of listening within Anangu culture. These aspects stood out to me as significant because without this context, my reflections on my time with the Anangu senior women may be misunderstood. Therefore, in the following sections, I provide some information about the importance of language and listening and the Anangu concept of milpatjunanyi.

The importance of language

My interaction with the senior Anangu women reminded me of the importance of language, and the question of what to do when a culture does not have words to describe something. For example, taken-for-granted words and concepts from the Western 'therapy world' just didn't seem to translate into Anangu language and culture. However, I remained hopeful that language could be found to make connections. Although I am still finding it hard to bring narrative therapy into my work with Anangu, I have found some relief in the following quote about the importance of language:

> We have to be very sensitive to the issues of language. Words are so important. In so many ways, words are the world. So, I hope that a sensitivity to language shows up in my work with persons and, as well, in my writing. (White, 1995, p. 30)

Despite the difficulties around language, I have continued to try to incorporate Anangu elements within a narrative approach. For example, the Anangu art of kulini.

The art of kulini

One of the most important aspects of communication for Anangu people across the Western Desert is the art of kulini. The Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara dictionary (Goddard, 1996, p. 44) describes nine meanings for the term kulini:

1. Listen, to heed
2. Hear
3. Think about, consider
4. Decide
5. Know about
6. Understand
7. Remember
8. Feel
9. Have a premonition from a sensation in the body.

This is really important for anyone working with Anangu communities to understand, because kulini involves more than 'deep listening skills' (as it might be described from a Western perspective). It's also about listening with your senses and your body. Anangu read body language more than speech, and can tell if someone is genuine or not, so it is really important to have a lot of self-awareness, to feel comfortable in silence and to listen more than speak when working with these communities. After reflecting on my time with the senior ladies, I thought that it was important to share a bit about the art of kulini as I realised that it might help other people and practitioners who work with Anangu.

I found some resonances between descriptions of narrative practice and this concept of the art of kulini. In narrative practice, '"Speaking" and "voice" are used as metaphors for the agency of the client' (Besley, 2002, p. 128).

> Narrative therapists adopt an optimistic, respectful but a 'not-knowing', tentative or curious stance using listening, language and therapeutic skills to assist people to find inconsistencies, hidden assumptions and contradictions in stories. (Besley, 2002, p. 129)

While not necessarily listening for inconsistences, this optimistic and respectful approach to listening with a curious stance is how Anangu listen to others. For Anangu, how we speak to each other is very important, including the tone we use and, most importantly, our body language.

Milpatjunanyi: An Anangu therapeutic practice

The Anangu concept of milpatjunanyi also connects to narrative practices. Milpatjunanyi is the practice of storytelling in the sand (Eickelkamp, 2008). This storytelling is done using a stick and leaves, hence the word, from milpa (stick) and tjunanyi (to put). Since colonisation, the sticks that were traditionally used have been replaced with wire that is bent into a curve. Fortunately, this new stick/wire is still used in the same way. People use sand to tell stories, drawing with the stick/wire in one hand, and sweeping the sand blank with the other hand as scenes change. I remember learning this practice of storytelling as a child with other girls, usually family members. I remember creating scenes representing the interior of a house. I also remember learning how to create animal tracks in the sand so I could recognise them when we went hunting, which we often did with my father or uncles.

My Aunty Nganinytja once described milpatjunanyi:

> Sometimes during the day or in the evening, as we sat in the bush shelters our older sisters told us stories, placing leaves on the ground to represent men, women, children and the youths who camped apart from the others. They placed leaves representing old men and old women and told the stories, relating the women's stories. (Ilyatjari, 1991, p. 9)

Milpatjunanyi teaches Pitjantjatjara children how to express themselves, but also trains them in the art forms of oral tradition and storytelling, which are a very strong part of Anangu culture. My mother explained to me that milpatjunanyi was a form of therapy because you can also sit and tell a story to yourself. As a teacher who had been working on the APY Lands since 1968, she observed that this art of expression was particularly important for mental health: 'it was a way of letting things out on their own and with no one disturbing them ... Kids in particular, they sit on their own and tell stories to themselves by themselves and sometimes with another person, and often it's things that might have happened or whatever is on their minds'.

This statement from my mother about how milpatjunanyi is used in her context reminded me of this description of narrative therapy:

> A person's story is a first person narrative in which the person defines himself or herself based on memories of his or her past life, present life, roles in social and personal settings, and relationships with important others. (Ricks et al., 2014, p. 100)

I learnt a lot during my time with the senior Anangu women up north and have brought these learnings into my life and work. I continue to seek practices that are meaningful to Anangu people and culture, rather than trying to fit them into Western notions of what is 'therapeutic' or 'helpful'.

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