Phyllis B Burarrwanga's Dry Leaves Story

Richard Trudgen in conversation with Phyllis B Burarrwanga

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Gaypalalini and Matamata Gurruwiwi have given permission for release of this story and video.

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Marr dhumbalyuna [Mystified and confused]

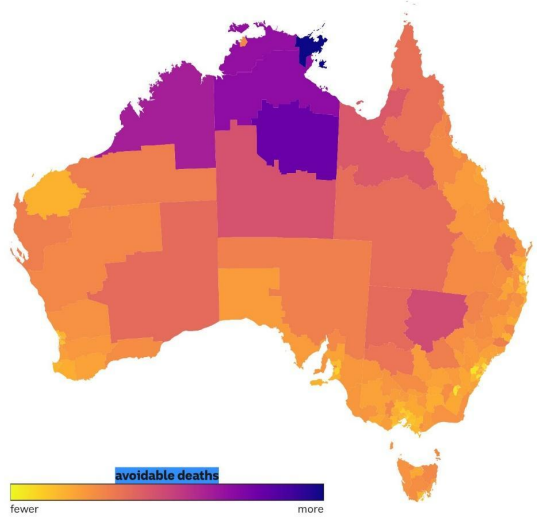
Yolŋu people of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, are severely mystified and confused (*marr dhumbalyuna)* about the contemporary mainstream Western (Balanda) world that now controls their lives.

The Balanda world's control over their lives was not their choice, nor part of their birthright as First Nations People. An English-speaking, European-based culture and language has displaced their original Australian 'Aboriginal' culture and languages. Yolŋu people's original legal, economic, language and cultural systems have been denied and forced aside, leaving them in the hopeless situation where they now have to understand and work with a very strange foreign system.

Yolŋu people need access to this strange new Balanda world's information and knowledge to be able to function as equal citizens. As a result of colonisation, many First Nations people in other states in Australia now speak English as a first language and have acquired large amounts of the mainstream culture's worldview, information and knowledge. Some, though, still have massive gaps in their cultural knowledge base within their group about how the mainstream Australian culture operates.

Yolŋu, and many Australian First Nations groups, have had less than 100 years contact with mainstream Australian society, and are now in another devastating phase of the colonisation cycle. In the current phase, it is failed communication and inappropriate contact practices that are having the destructive effect on them.

This can be seen in north-east Arnhem Land, which had the highest avoidable death rate in Australia in data obtained between 2015 to 2017.



https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-20/other-everyday-pandemics-we-could-be-trying-to-stop/12368354

This death rate reflects the many ways that cultural liaisons are failing between mainstream Australia and Yolŋu. These failed cultural liaisons breed systemic problems such as ill-health, low rates of education and employment, and high death and incarceration rates. All of this arises from the confusion and disempowerment that Yolŋu live with, every day of their lives.

Yolŋu need to understand the new legal, economic and governance systems and processes otherwise they will be 'kept in the dark'; unable to find a way forward. However, Yolŋu need to receive this information it in a way that makes sense to them, in their language, and through a process that builds on the knowledge that is so familiar to them—their traditional cultural knowledge base.

In July 2016 I had the opportunity to sit down with Phyllis B Burarrwanga at her home in Galiwin'ku. I was in the community explaining a new economic service to people. After an invitation from Phyllis, I sat down and explained the information I had. The conversation included deep economic and governance information in Yolŋu Matha, Phyllis's first language (English being her fifth or sixth language), so she readily understood what I told her and asked a few clarifying questions.

Then Phyllis started telling me a story, what Yolŋu call a *mayali'mirri dhäwu*.

Mayali'mirri dhäwu [Story full of meaning]

To understand what a *mayali'mirri dhäwu* is, we need to break the word up into different parts. *Mayali'* signifies 'meaning'; *dhäwu* means 'story'; and *mirri* indicates 'full of, possessing, with, or having'.

Mayali'mirri dhäwu is a story full of meaning. The use of *mayali'mirri dhäwu* is very common in Yolŋu society. There are important reasons for *mayali'mirri dhäwu*.

Mayali'mirri dhäwu is the good etiquette way for Yolŋu to check if it is okay to ask a particular question, or move the conversation into a particular subject area, without infringing on the other person's personal information and or any 'corporate knowledge'. The person hearing the story can decide to continue with the story or opt out of the conversation without embarrassment if they want to.

In Yolŋu society, many levels of information are classed as 'holy' and or 'corporate in

confidence', and only available to those who are invited into that particular knowledge area. This is much like 'corporate in confidence' information in Western society.

The problem for Yolŋu though, in many cases, is they have still not worked out the demarcation parameters when it comes to the Balanda culture. So, they are not sure what is allowed and what is not allowed when speaking to Balanda. This is especially so when it comes to intangible subjects like economics, law, and governance, as they are difficult subjects for persons who have no experience with European-based cultures.

To make it more confusing, often when Yolngu do ask questions of Balanda in these areas, they get vague answers that suggest to them that the Balanda are using *mayali'mirri dhäwu* in their answers. Yolŋu think this must be because they are Yolŋu—or for some other unknown reason—and they are not allowed access to that knowledge. In Yolŋu culture, someone using *mayali'mirri dhäwu* when answering a question, suggests to them they shouldn't be asking such questions. Yolŋu are still not sure if they can ask these sorts of questions of Balanda. This is just one of the cross-cultural nightmares for Yolŋu to work out: what information is public and what information is not, what is proper etiquette and what is not.

Even if Yolŋu wanted to, they could not escape what is now the mainstream Australian culture and language; it infringes on every part of their life. So, they need access to mainstream knowledge and information in a way they can understand it. This is the only way to create a fairer, level playing field so Yolŋu can participate as equals.

Access to this Balanda knowledge is a hard reality that many Yolŋu, like Phyllis, want to understand rather than flee from. This is even shown by the fact that Phyllis adopted the English name of 'Phyllis' as one of her coping mechanisms in the mainstream Balanda world, instead of the original Australian name gifted by her parents or grandparents.

When Phyllis started to tell her story, I got the drift of where she was going. It was a story I had first heard at least three decades ago at Ramingining, and a subject Yolŋu had raised with me many times. I had used a similar story in cultural awareness seminars around the country and had heard several other versions of it from different Yolŋu people. However, this time, Phyllis's story had new depth and insight to it that I had not previously heard.

Phyllis was well into the story before I remembered I had my camera with me and so I asked her if I could record the story. She was very happy with this, as she wanted her story shared as 'widely as possible'. Ŋulwudit was the only other person there. So, I asked him if he would attempt to film our conversation. After a very quick camera lesson, we picked up on Phyllis's story again. To my great surprise, Ŋulwudit turned out to be a very good cameraman.

It was many months later, when I had started working in earnest on this story, I was shocked to hear that Phyllis passed away. Unfortunately for Phyllis, her early death was likely avoidable. It is a sad example of what she meant by Dry Leaves—her *mayali'mirri dhäwu* here—how good people are being lost before their time. Phyllis was a mover and shaker in her homeland of Mata Mata; a great leader who will be truly missed.

At first, I wasn't sure what to do, but then after listening to the whole video I knew that Phyllis wanted me to get the story out as widely as possible. So, I continued to work on it.

It is my hope that in some way the *Mayali'mirri dhäwu* you're about to hear will broaden the debate on how to help and empower Yolŋu people. I encourage the reader to first watch the video, and then read this story the whole way through. This story can help ensure Phyllis's Yolngu colleagues, and the younger generations, do not have to live through the same crisis of communication with the affluent, dominant Australian culture that she struggled with all her life. It's the right thing to do to give her an opportunity to make a statement about one thing that stopped her living her life to its full potential.

As with most *mayali'mirri dhäwu* stories, there can be several levels of meaning within the one story. Phyllis started by talking about the living system of a tree. For any tree to survive and grow it needs to be a complete system. The tree itself, its leaves and branches, the trunk and the leaves cannot grow unless nourishment comes from the roots deep down in the ground.

> Phyllis said to me *(02:04)*: "So, this is for you. Something you'll keep… You'll keep this metaphor. To talk to the Government people about how we feel, us Yolŋu. And how we see, Yolŋu, the world [how Yolŋu see the world]. It's complicated to us… What they don't know. *Yaka walala marŋgi*, they don't know [the] Indigenous world, they don't know how we feel. And how we see it. Our world. And then like transferring to the white society, and they still clashing."
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> I agreed. "That's what I'm trying to get the government to see, Unless they teach, what I call, the *dhuḏi rom* [foundation of law way]. The foundational law about money… about government, about everything—health."
>
> Phyllis: "Yeah! When will I know about government *rom* [law and ways]? A person like you, they have to accept [acceptance] with your story. Because you sitting beside with us Yolŋu. You're drinking and eating *ŋatha* [food] with us. So you're sitting on the ashes of the Yolŋu people [at the fireplace hearth with Yolŋu]. You're getting the truth. Yaka not from the leaves. You're getting it from the roots."
>
> Phyllis *(00:22)*: "[When Yolŋu get a job] there is no real information. *Bäyŋu* [nothing], there is no *dhuḏi-dhäwu* bottom story, foundational information. So that's where we Yolŋu are not, are not acceptable, because we don't have the… full, full information."
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> Richard: "Like you're thinking: *Nhaku Balanda* why are Balanda [doing this so that]? Why are Balanda doing this to Yolŋu? Why are they keeping them, what we call, 'in the dark'?"
>
> Phyllis: "In the dark side….But not in the light side. So, one example I'm talking about, the leave [leaves of the tree]. The green leaves [*nhakuna*]. And when the green leaves turn into the yellowish colour, and then it turned into the brownish, then it's [they] drop-down. That's not the full information. That's telling us that we just... just there for nothing."
> Richard: "That's what Yolŋu feel like. they feel like they're green leaves... turn into dry leaves, just drop down."
>
> Phyllis: "Yes, because we don't have that bottom line *dhäwu* [the underlying foundational information]. Not, we not getting the roots *dhäwu*, [the information from the roots]."

Phyllis's Dry Leaves story can be interpreted many different ways, yet with complementary meanings. This is the whole point of *mayali'mirri dhäwu*: deep meanings with stories inside a cover story.

Dhuḏi-dhäwu [Foundational information]

For the first level of meaning in this story, Phyllis wasn't just talking about the tree growing, she was talking about the tree being like the relationship between Yolŋu people and Balanda. The leaves on the tree signify the 'surface knowledge' of the Balanda world, but Yolŋu don't seem to get access to the knowledge that comes from the roots, the *dhuḏi-dhäwu* (bottom story) that many Yolŋu believe is being hidden from them. Yolŋu believe they are only getting the top-level knowledge 'not the full knowledge from the roots of the tree'.

English is still very foreign for most Yolŋu. Yolŋu think and construct knowledge in their

original Australian thinking language Yolŋu Matha, not in English. Within one's first language and native cultural mores a lot of concept-knowledge is informally passed on, usually from our parents or peer group, about how different things in the world work. This is the important 'how and the why' information. Some of this 'how and why' concept-knowledge is also taught to us in school, and through different learning channels within our first language domain.

When Yolŋu look around at their own world they see the massive amount of information and knowledge that has been passed down over thousands of years. All the knowledge is there, how to live and survive in their culture as they know it; they understand their own economic, legal, governance and social systems. Yolŋu have been successfully conducting their Madayin law—to which they have assented to in ceremony, becoming Yolngu citizens—for thousands of years.

Many Yolŋu believe that mainstream Balanda, intentionally, do not want to share this deep knowledge about how to live and survive in Balanda culture with Yolŋu. To Yolŋu, there seems to be a whole level of knowledge that the Balanda education system has not given them access to or has locked away from them. Phyllis sees this knowledge as the roots of the tree because that is where she believes the dominant Balanda culture is hiding this knowledge; it is hidden in some place unknown to her. Every time I have heard this story it has the same underlying understanding that Balanda are hiding key principle knowledge from Yolŋu.

One day in the early 1980s I was telling the 'Knowledge Tree' story to a group of Balanda and Aboriginal leaders from across the Territory, at a government workshop in Darwin, when one of the Aboriginal leaders from Katherine, a long way from Arnhem Land, said, "Yes that's a story like we have but we have another part to it. Sometimes we get so frustrated and angry with the Balanda for not telling us this important hidden information. So, we grab the bush/small tree by the stem and try to put it out of the ground. But the roots break off and we don't get the information we need."

It is a common story and belief amongst Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people. They believe they have shared all their knowledge about their culture and way of life with Balanda. They tell how they brought all their knowledge out and shared it, exposed it, like the leaves in the top of the tree. They even invited Balanda into their deepest most sacred ceremonies where they allowed Balanda to write up and record some of the deepest knowledge they had. But to them it seems that the Balanda don't share their knowledge in the same way. Yolŋu believe that Balanda have kept their knowledge hidden somewhere underground like in the roots of the tree so Yolŋu can't access it.

Of course, the reverse is true for Balanda. From their point of view most Balanda will believe that Yolngu have not shared their deepest knowledge with them. This is again the consequence of ineffective cross-cultural, cross-language communication where each culture sees the other culture in a confused and mystified way. The clash of different worldviews, and miscommunications in language, lock up the concept-knowledge within each particular cultural/language group.

For any tree to survive and grow it needs to be a complete system. The tree itself—its leaves and branches, the trunk—cannot grow unless nourishment comes from the roots deep down in the ground. Knowledge is the same; you can't just have the green leaves, like leaves at the top of the tree, without having all the connecting information back to the foundational knowledge (the *dhuḏi-dhäwu,* or the concept-knowledge*)* in the roots of the tree.

In fact, in many cases, it is the concept-knowledge that needs to be obtained *first*. When this happens the 'nutrition' of this knowledge is reinforced later through skill level training and education. When the whole semantic concept relationship—between language and knowing, living and being—is taught well, thriving and surviving within that foreign cultural environment becomes possible. Without it, all the skill level education in the world will not keep the leaves green and growing.

Concept-knowledge needs a first-hand cultural understanding to teach and comprehend it. This depth of knowledge requires a level of English language that Yolŋu people are having great difficulty understanding. As of writing, there is no competent English–Yolŋu Matha dictionary. It is clear this presents many cross-cultural hurdles that cannot be surmounted until a comprehensive dictionary exists, or special capacity building education programs are instigated.

As their relationship with the English language is very short, and the cross-cultural semantics understanding work that is needed has not been done, Yolŋu find this level of communication in English almost impossible.

Balanya Nhakuna [like Green Leaves]

In another level of meaning, the leaves on the tree represent the Yolŋu people themselves. When they are young, they are encouraged to attend college, or participate in training; they are just like young green leaves on a tree.

In her *Mayali'mirri dhäwu,* Phyllis tells of her experience of a better-than-usual mainstream education, and how spending many years in an Aboriginal training Institute left her with certificates and dead promises. She was qualified, but found it difficult to find acceptance in the workplace. It took awhile for her to realise this was because she still did not have a good understanding of the concept-knowledge of the Western Balanda society. She had studied business and administration, yet she had little understanding of the western governance, economic, and legal systems. Apparently, she had only learnt the 'skills' of business and administration, not the underlying information that she really needed.

> Phyllis *(06:05)*: "We need to, closing the gap. There's a lot of people that have been missing out [on their] education. And... the reason why I'm saying this because of the... a lot of Yolŋu, have been gone through the study, and come out the other end. No one is recognised. There is no recognition. Like, I've gone through the education. I went right through. And I finished it up. To do my graduate diploma, post graduate diploma in Business and in Administration… through Darwin, Bachelor. So… I'm sitting back at Mata Mata (Homeland) and I'm seeing what's going on. Because from me, from my experience, I'm standing in both worlds. *Märrma'* worlds, two worlds. I can on the side, and I can handle it on the side. But it still confuse [confusing]."

Phyllis was even instrumental in setting up new health services for her homeland at Mata Mata and others in the region, even though she was in many ways 'health illiterate' in the context of modern diseases—something that probably shortened her life.

Phyllis knew the health service was important but had many deep questions again, at the concept level of knowledge around health issues. Many of her conversations with English first language speakers became confusing and she felt left out of the picture, the 'Western Balanda picture'.

The promises she received from Western educational and training institutions, contemporary commentators, and politicians about the rosy future that education and training could deliver, turned into deep disappointment—like leaves on a tree turning from green to yellow, through a lack of real access to nutrient needs, the concept-knowledge.

This state of affairs leaves Yolŋu, and other people like them, mystified and confused about mainstream Balanda society and culture, how it operates, and what are its main driving forces and parameters. Due to this mystification and confusion, Yolŋu are unable to operate at a functional level, experiencing non-acceptance and rejection from Balanda. This leads to missed employment opportunities, despite how many certificates they have. Course after course, and certificate after certificate is offered. Yolŋu afford a lot of concentration and attention on the

certificate giving ceremony: these ceremonies are supposed to change their lives.

Politicians and community leaders come together in big displays at the certificate giving ceremonies, but the hype of the night becomes a dark cloud in the morning, like a terrible hangover. Many Yolŋu say: “We get these certificates, but they don’t mean much, because something is missing from what we were taught.”

Yolŋu students and adults are bombarded with a massive array of strange English terms and phrases which at times they learn to spell and pronounce clearly, though these words deliver no real intellectual meaning to them. They are just symbols on a page. Sometimes they even learn the perfect syntax structure of the sentence, so it is thought that they understand the meaning of the word. But they have just learnt the symbols, syllables, context and syntax structure of the sentence by rote, without knowing its meaning. This non-educational process is as good as intellectual torture. As one young 13-year-old once said to me: “I learnt nothing from school today except I am stupid, I just want to go home and smoke marijuana and forget it.”

Educational institutions mostly concentrate on students’ abilities to read and write English script and manipulate mathematical numbers. This is quite normal in many ways, because understanding intangible language and knowledge is usually gained through informal learning and interaction, with senior peers such as parents, guardians or teachers from one’s own culture and language group.

After a while, and usually not long after people get their certificates, life seems to unthread for many of these Yolŋu students. They were promised so much but they now realise they have not received the full story. The joy of getting this ‘special piece of paper’ that the Balanda promised would deliver so much, is gone. So much was promised—a job, money, success, acceptance—and all have evaporated. Even those over-enthusiastic, encouraging Balanda colleagues and politicians are nowhere to be found anymore. Yolŋu all tell the same story: “Just the piece of paper is all we end up with.”

It seems the Balanda who encouraged and trained them lived in an unreal world that disappears along with their certificate giving ceremony. Yolŋu see Balanda go on to be doctors, lawyers, mechanics and pilots and have little or no issues. Balanda get on in their jobs, staying in their profession most of their lives. It seems the Balanda are not struggling like Yolngu are.

For Yolŋu, the educational experience is very different. They received their qualifications, but things just don’t add up. Most are only in their job for a few months or years before they are moved aside and Balanda take over their job. So, it seems that Yolŋu people can go to training institutions and receive skill training certificates but they came away with no real understanding of how the Balanda world works. They are not ‘world literate’.

Other Yolŋu go on believing that they have made it; they go on believing in the absurd mixed-up version they have of the Balanda world. Sometimes many years later, they suffer from the effects of this, usually through some form of mental breakdown.

The lack of the necessary concept-knowledge education, as well as a competent English Yolŋu Matha dictionary, is literally killing any attempts at advanced education for Yolŋu people. I would even go as far as to say it is killing the people themselves, as the second, deeper metaphor in Phyllis’s story explains.

Ranhdhak-com ga Dhingama [Dry Dead Leaves]

Now, the green leaves on the tree in Phyllis's *Mayali'mirri dhäwu* start to change. The young Yolŋu start to suffer because they cannot get the nourishment from the roots of the tree, which

seems to be hidden from them. They attempt to find employment and soon start to wonder why all the barriers are going up. After a while, despite all the education and training, or the number of certificates they have and their futile attempts to apply what they learn from the Balanda, nothing seems to come together. Their life of misery begins.

> Phyllis said *(01:17)*: "And when the green leaves turn into the yellowish colour, and then it turned into the brownish, then its [they] drop-down. That's not the full information. That's telling us that we just.... Just there for nothing."

Many Yolŋu turned to alcohol and drug abuse; the green leaves start to turn yellow. Family violence is a natural outcome of this failed education: as they act out the internal conflict now experienced within, Yolŋu lash out at those who are closest to them. Once they turn yellow (like under-nourished leaves) the Balanda show little or no more interest in them.

These Yolŋu struggle over many years, slowly becoming dry and brown (*Ranhdhak-com ga Dhingama*), and finally drop from the tree dead. Yolŋu people haven't received the full information about how to survive in the Balanda world, so despite all their efforts, they cannot understand how to succeed.

This cross-cultural cross-language dilemma, where many Aboriginal people believe that information and knowledge is being kept back from them, is leading to a lot of anger and strife in Aboriginal communities right across Australia. This anger is seen in the kickback of younger people, but is usually suppressed in adults, until things like alcohol release the pressure valve. Most adults just walk away, sit down, and play cards to forget about that strange world they find impossible to understand.

Their confusion also leads groups of people like Yolŋu to see themselves as a lesser species of human beings without the supposed supernatural ability that the mainstream Balanda seem to have, to survive and to thrive. Some Yolŋu are convinced that they, as Aboriginal people, do not have the intellectual ability to understand such things. Many Balanda will be quick to tell them that as well. Still, other Yolŋu conclude that it is all just part of the crazy mixed-up world that they now live in, that the Balanda world cannot be understood as it is so irrational and incomprehensible.

> Phyllis wanted to know: "Always government people are saying there is not enough *rrupiya* (money). When will I know about government *rom* (law and ways)? When will I know? About the real political situation. When will I know? When will I learn? How will I get there?"

It's not what Yolŋu know about Western mainstream Balanda society that's the problem, it has more to do with what they don't know that leads to many wrong assumptions and massive confusion.

As Phyllis said *(01:44)*, "Not, we not getting the roots *dhäwu*, [the information from the roots]... *Balanya nhakuna*, like when we turn into green leaves… green them [then] become a yellow...then brownish and dark brown ya… falling off on the ground."

Bright, capable Yolŋu give up on life, dying much earlier than they should.

Man'tjarr Larryun [Falling Leaves]

Sadly, the lack of proper, concept-knowledge education leads to high levels of social dysfunction across Yolŋu communities. Now there are law and order problems; high levels of unemployment, incarceration, and disease; low levels of school attendance; and a much shorter than normal life

expectancy. In fact, the issues are worsening as we speak.

Unfortunately, in many cases, these negative social indicators have now become the norm and are seen by many in mainstream Australia as being the result of people's original Yolŋu culture and language, rather than seeing it as the result of a clash between two language and knowledge systems: the implanted colonial system and the original Australian systems.

These adults, now yellow on the tree, are seen as failures by the mainstream Balanda community. The dominant culture starts to name them as lazy and irresponsible.

> Phyllis remarks *(17:27)*: "And they're talking about all those lying stories about Yolŋu.... That Yolŋu is not doing good things."
> Richard: "[They're saying] Yolŋu are not interested, not involved…"
> Phyllis: "Yeah. Yeah. But…we are not getting those information. Information *bäyŋu* [nothing is] on the table."

Strangely this name-calling of Yolŋu leaders, as 'lazy and irresponsible' by the Balanda society has happened for every generation of Yolŋu people I have known over the last 45 years. The young people, who were once paraded around as the system's great successes on graduation night (*nhakuna,* the green leaves), are later seen as the problem for their people (*ranhdhak-com ga dhingama,* the dry dead leaves). So, the destructive neo-colonial cycle just goes on.

Before the Intervention in 2007, petrol sniffing had stopped in north-east Arnhem Land. Since the Intervention, petrol sniffing has become a major problem again along with glue, paint sniffing and drug abuse; break and enters; and other acts of vandalism against Balanda institutions. The intervention has left Yolŋu in Arnhem Land in a far worse state, with a massive amount of money spent, but none of it spent to remedy the issues raised here.

Working with some of these young petrol sniffers, it becomes clear that three main driving forces exist for wanting to experience this 'cheap drunk state'. Firstly, it is driven by the confusion they experience from mainstream educational institutions. Secondly, this craving for dissociation is compounded by the fact that their parents are also confused about mainstream Balanda society, and the young people see this confusion as weakness in their people. Thirdly, it is the hopelessness, and lack of joy they see in their parents' faces.

The young people in general are losing all respect for their elders because their elders do not understand the mainstream world, so they see their language and cultural ways as unsophisticated and primitive, just as the mainstream has named them. Many believe that they are born on the wrong side of history, which can lead to deep psychological trauma, drug abuse, radicalisation against the mainstream order, and suicidal attempts.

Yolŋu see their ancient legal systems as valid. The confusing Balanda law system is seen as absolute lawlessness and demands no respect. Their language they see as beautiful and poetic where English is meaningless and clumsy, yet Yolŋu languages are denied in educational and training institutions. Their economic ventures are denied and blocked at every turn. Where Yolŋu once produced, harvested and traded trepang, crocodile skins and pearls, these industries are now owned and control by Balanda. Hopes of full-time employment in a contemporary Australian world is replaced by feelings of injustice as more and more Balanda, English speaking Aboriginal people, and even immigrants take up the jobs in their home communities and on their traditional estate lands.

The result for Yolngu is increased unemployment and higher rates of imprisonment. Death is everywhere: more and more of their people die of unknown conditions, explained by doctors using foreign English words. Anger is evident in many Aboriginal communities where they believe they are being excluded rather than included in the knowledge that they need to prosper and survive. It is this 'covered-up nourishment knowledge' that is the cause of their ills.

Yolŋu need to see how the mainstream culture operates, clearly, in their own language and worldview. When they do, they will find it easier to understand it in English and communicate more effectively with people who speak English as a first language. Plus, they will be able to predict, with a degree of accuracy, particular outcomes in economic, legal and health areas. On top of that, their Balanda mainstream certificates might even find acceptance with more real employment opportunities.

There will be less dispute and conflict, positive initiatives and growth coming from within communities themselves. The overflowing jails will empty, and the schoolyards will fill up.

A Healthy Tree

Paulo Freire, in South America in the 1960s, spoke about the need for Indigenous people to learn to 'read the world' before they need to learn how to read and write. He also said, "If we teach the people the concept-knowledge that they need to understand the contemporary world around them, then they will demand skill education".

We will not need to have millions of dollars spent on truancy officers and other paternalistic programs, as we will not be able to keep First Nation children and adults away from educational and training opportunities. Once Yolŋu can 'read' and understand the world around them (achieving world literacy), they will demand the skill education necessary to be able to take advantage of the concept-knowledge that they can now understand.

To overcome the problems that Phyllis speaks of, Yolŋu and other Aboriginal groups need well-implemented community education programs, aimed at delivering the fundamental information that is key to their empowerment and freedom. This needs to be run from a community development perspective aimed towards the whole cultural language group, along with other special empowerment programs. This approach will ensure unity is maintained within the whole social and economic group who have equal access to influential, advantageous mainstream knowledge, so no-one feels like they are missing out.

These programs need to give Yolŋu access to general knowledge, as well as news and current affairs. Most of all they must address the cross-cultural semantic confusion by answering people's questions. The programs must be driven by a curriculum developed by Yolŋu's own queries about how the mainstream world around them operates. Programs will need to cover subjects from the seemingly mundane, to highly complex economic legal and governance questions—all the questions that Phyllis wanted to know in our conversation. This will help eliminate the confusion that Yolŋu people have about the mainstream language and culture, which now controls almost every aspect of their lives. There is nothing more disempowering than being controlled by a system that one finds totally confusing.

Yolŋu also need special language self-learning tools to close the gap, and competent two-way dictionaries and complete English learning programs. In effect, they will need to become bilingual and bicultural world-literate citizens, which includes being literate in health, economic and legal systems.

While working with the Yolŋu people in Ramingining for 11 years, I saw they were able to manage the whole community when they had access to an educator that was able to help them understand the concept-knowledge of the modern Western world. Since then I have been trying to make this education available to all Yolŋu people across north-east Arnhem Land. However, attempts to get support for this form of community education continue to fall on deaf ears. Yet, tens of millions of dollars have poured into failed mainstream education and training programs that produce 'dry dead leaves, which fall from the tree well before their time'.

Some will say, "Just employ Yolŋu people themselves to teach their own people." However, they

miss the point. If Yolŋu people, like Phyllis, can do all the training she has done, and still don't have access to the concept-knowledge, then how could she or others like her teach their own people about the mainstream concepts and knowledge?

Yes, Phyllis could teach the skills that she learnt, but her call is for real education, including education on how the economic and legal system works, education on how the government works, education about the cause and effects of different diseases and sicknesses work. Phyllis wanted that deep intellectual 'concept nourishment' that comes in all its complexity from the roots of the tree. Phyllis's *mayali'mirri dhäwu* has shown us that if this nourishment 'knowledge' does not come through the trunk of the tree to the leaves, then the leaves will turn yellow and die.

Phyllis placed the job of getting this education in my hands, as many other elders have done over a number of decades now, believing somehow, I could get her 'Dry Leaves' story out. Despite having known about it for so long, I have not been able to tell the story in a clear enough way to convince governments and other people in mainstream Australia to help to resource and create the education that Phyllis and many other Yolŋu leaders so desperately want and need.

If Yolŋu people like Phyllis were teamed together with trained mainstream cross-cultural bilingual community educators then, as a team, they could do a lot of education with Yolŋu people. These programs, well implemented, will allow fairer and more equal access opportunities to mainstream services like health, employment services, legal, education and training and allow them to create their own business and employment opportunities—something that should be standard for all First Nations people.

These programs cannot be delivered by mainstream education and training institutions that operate from a mainstream educational perspective. These institutions do not have the cross-culture, cross-language and interpersonal skills necessary to fill the linguistic and concept gaps between the two worlds of Yolŋu and mainstream Australian citizens.

Aboriginal groups across Australia need broad-based community education programs that work on a curriculum developed from people's questions and knowledge gaps. This program should be delivered to the whole community, with media platforms in their language and worldview. This will allow the whole cultural group together to be empowered around uncovering the underlying linguistic and cultural workings of the dominant culture world.

The program needs to continue until the people have no more questions in regard to the 'how and why' of the dominant culture world. It needs to be driven by the people's questions for their empowerment. Therefore, it needs to be community developed, rather than an education program.

> Phyllis said, "They won't reach down and give us the *dhuḏi-dhäwu* (foundational information)... Is there any chance that we can be... walking hand-in-hand?"

Well Phyllis, I hope your wish will come true. I hope I have not let you down, along with many other Yolŋu people and the Yolŋu generations yet unborn.

> After the camera was switched off, we kept on talking. During this conversation, Phyllis said something else that struck me. "The Balanda are not interested in us older Yolŋu anymore. Now they come to get the young green leaves from the tree to take to college."
>
> She looked at me and gave me another belly laugh, as if to say, "How silly is that?"

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