





ARTICLE

Keepers of the flame: songspirals are a university for us

Bawaka Country¹ including, Laklak Burarrwanga¹, Ritjilili Ganambarr¹, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs¹, Banbapuy Ganambarr¹, Djawundil Maymuru¹, Kate Lloyd² , Lara Daley³ , Sandie Suchet-Pearson²  and Sarah Wright³ 

¹Bawaka Cultural Experiences, Bawaka, NT, Australia, ²School of Social Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia and ³Discipline of Geography and Environmental Studies, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, Australia
Corresponding author: Sandie Suchet-Pearson; Email: sandie.suchet@mq.edu.au

(Received 23 February 2023; revised 13 August 2023; accepted 19 August 2023)

Abstract

“Songspirals are a university for us, they are a map of understandings” (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 33).

This paper is authored by Bawaka Country, acknowledging Country’s ability to teach and share. Country is homeland and place. Country is everything and the relationships that bring everything to life. Country is knowledge. This paper is shaped and enabled by songspirals. Songspirals are sung and cried by Yolŋu people in north east Arnhem Land, Australia, to awaken Country, to make and remake the life-giving connections between people and place.

The Goŋ-gurtha songspiral leads this paper, showing us how a Yolŋu Country-led pedagogy centres Country’s active agency by learning through, with, and as Country. This pedagogy shares with us the ongoing connections within and between generations to ensure that knowledge remains strong and that sharing is done the right way, according to Yolŋu Rom, Law/Lore. This learning is predicated on relationality and responsibility. It is a more-than-human learning in which human knowing is decentred and Country is knowledgeable. It is a learning which recognises and respects its limits and it is a learning in which the ongoing sovereignty of Yolŋu people is front and centre.

Keywords: Environmental philosophy; Geography; Epistemology; Ethics; Indigenous knowledge; Intergenerational; Ontology

Learning from Country through, with and as Songspirals

1. Gurtha nharana Goŋ-gurthawuŋu, Djambatjjuwuŋu, Wuymuwuŋuna. Gurtha nharana.

The fire is burning from Goŋ-gurtha, From the Djambatjjuwuŋu and the Wuymuwuŋuna, the expert hunter, the determined hunter we depend on. The fire burns.

The gurtha, the fire, is burning. The hunter we depend upon hunts because of the fire, their hunt is successful because they know and feel and are a part of Country. Country is homeland and

place, Country is spirit and song, Country is human and plant and wind and current, Country is knowledge. Country is everything and the relationships that bring everything to life.

The gurtha, the fire, burns, keeping Country alive. The fire is our knowledge and the knowledge of Country, as well as the relational materiality of burning flames. This paper and our learnings together are authored by Bawaka Country, recognising Country's authority and agency, acknowledging Country's ability to teach, share, shape and enable. Through the paper, we will spiral through learnings and examples of what it means when we say Country teaches, what it means to learn from and as a flame. This is a different structure to many academic papers. We structure our paper as guided by a songspiral and by Country and, in doing so, enact a Yolŋu pedagogy, do some of the very learning that we speak about.

Bawaka Country is a homeland in north east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory and we are the Bawaka Collective (also known as the Gay'wu Group of Women), an Indigenous-non-Indigenous, more-than-human research collective that has been working together for over 16 years. As part of Bawaka Country we are led by Dr Laklak Burarrwanga and her sisters Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs and Banbapuy Ganambarr, and their daughter Djawundil Maymuru. Four ŋäpaki, non-Indigenous human geographers, Sarah Wright, Lara Daley, Kate Lloyd and Sandie Suchet-Pearson, have been placed into the family to ensure they know and attend to their responsibilities as settler/migrants living on stolen lands. When we write as the Collective "we", we refer to the whole group; however, the ŋäpaki do not claim to be Yolŋu nor Indigenous. When appropriate, we use the third person to draw out our diverse positionalities. Playing a key role in this paper are also Mayutu and Maminydjama, the four sisters' children and grandchildren. They are the keepers of the flame, ensuring the fire burns on, and their generous sharing and wondrous minds bring this paper to life by showing how Country nourishes their learning as they are a foundational part of Country.

In particular, the paper draws on our collective learning with and as Bawaka Country through Songspirals (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019). Songspirals (also known as songlines or song cycles) are sung and cried by Yolŋu people in north east Arnhem Land to awaken Country, to make and remake the life-giving connections between people and place. Women cry songspirals through milkarri, ceremonial keening. Songspirals, and their expressions through milkarri, are always personal and always about Country, about places and our relationships with them. They are knowledge, and they are Law/Lore. Here, we share a little about a Yolŋu Country-led pedagogy and share some stories of how we teach and learn through songspirals with/as/from place.

That's why we have to learn. Songspirals are a university for us. They are a map of understandings. We have to learn how to walk on the land. Sometimes the songspirals tell us to avoid an area where we have no authority to walk on that land; this might be to protect us from danger or sickness. That's why Elders say to always be aware and learn the map through the songspirals before we journey through those woods, those rocks. We need to understand Country for our own safety (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 33).

The Goŋ-gurtha songspiral leads and shapes this paper, as well as the learnings involved. Shared for our book on songspirals by one of our mothers at Bawaka, Marri'marri Burarrwanga, the words of Goŋ-gurtha lead each section of our paper. The verses of the songspiral are numbered and in bold. Following each verse, we discuss some insights that come from each verse and this forms the structure of the paper as well as the themes of the piece which we draw out as subheadings: from this introduction to Country and learning from Country; to the meaning of the Goŋ-gurtha songspiral as Keepers of the Flame; to the importance of keeping the fire alive through the spirals of intergenerational learning; to the active agency of Country as teacher; to the importance of emotion, heart and spirit; and, finally, to a discussion of authority, limits and responsibility. In this way, the songspiral, with and as part of Country, actively teaches and

suggests topics, provides the framing and flow of the discussion and is an enactment of the spirals of learning that make up a Yolŋu pedagogy.

In doing this, the Goŋ-gurtha songspiral shows us how Country shapes learning, how a Yolŋu pedagogy centres Country's active agency by learning through, with and as Country (Bawaka Country, Suchet-Pearson, Wright, Lloyd, & Burarrwanga, 2013; Bawaka Country et al., 2015). In this Country-based pedagogy (see also Arnold et al., 2021; Wilson & Spillman, 2021; Woollorton, Collard, Horwitz, Poelina, & Palmer, 2020; Woollorton, White, Palmer, & Collard, 2021), songspirals share with us the ongoing connections within and between generations to ensure that knowledge remains strong and that sharing is done in the right way according to Yolŋu Rom, Yolŋu Law/Lore. In centring the knowledge authorities of Country, and of working to follow, as far as possible, the teachings, obligations and relationships of Rom, Yolŋu Law/Lore, we follow and support the calls of many Indigenous scholars who have spoken about the importance of recognising and respecting Indigenous knowledge sovereignties and citational practices (see, e.g., Burgess et al., 2021; Somerville, n.d.; Liboiron, 2022; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This means foregrounding knowledges and sharing of the Goŋ-gurtha songspiral and the Yolŋu authors on our/their own terms.

As we follow Goŋ-gurtha through its spiral, it becomes clear that our learning through a Yolŋu Country-led pedagogy is predicated on relationality and responsibility and requires love and care. This is a more-than-human learning in which human knowing is decentred and Country is knowledgeable. It is a learning which recognises and respects its limits and it is a learning in which the ongoing sovereignty of Yolŋu people is front and centre.

Sitting on the sand, feeling the sand, the coolness, everything. It is the pedagogy of Yolŋu, of everything. It is a way of learning, another way of learning. It is a real-life learning, a learning journey of another sort (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 179).

As we sit on the sand and watch the fire on the horizon, we invite you on this learning journey with us.

Goŋ-gurtha: keepers of the flame

2. **Durryuna ŋunha marrtji Maywalkarra,
Goŋ-gurthawuŋu, Goŋ-yakaywuŋu.
Nyewunba, Gulthana, Rranyiranyi.**

*The fire rises on the horizon at that place Maywalkarra,
From Goŋ-gurtha, the person who starts the fire that burns the land,
From Goŋ-yakaywuŋu, the person who starts the fire with great
care and great awareness.*

The fire rises on the horizon in Yirritja Country, at Nyewunba, Gulthana, Rranyiranyi.

Goŋ-gurtha is a songspiral. Goŋ-gurtha, literally the hand of fire, is also the person who holds the fire, who is responsible for it. Goŋ-gurtha starts the fire, keeps the fire and the tools of fire-making and is the keeper of the flame in ways both literal and deeply symbolic.

Goŋ-gurtha starts the fire, with great care and awareness, so the fire can rise and send out messages to the hunters and to the birds, to the animals and to Country. Fire is not a wild or unruly agent, it has a place to cleanse Country and keep it strong. Keeping the flame alive keeps Country alive, keeping the songspirals alive brings life to Country.

The agency of the fire must be respected: it has its role in bringing fresh grass for animals in the right season, sending messages with its smoke to animals, helping certain plants germinate,

stimulating growth, announcing seasons and suggesting certain activities. These messages are heard by humans, if they listen, as well as non-human beings. The fresh grass will bring animals that can be hunted. The fire, with its sound and movement, heat, patterns and smoke shares song and knowledge; it brings people together, stimulating stories and song.

Without songspirals we couldn't know Country: the song of Goṅ-gurtha shares knowledge of fire and what it does, at the same time that it tells humans when, where and how to light fires. It sends a message of weather patterns, what to expect and what we may do; it heralds new seasons and makes them too. We breathe the smoke, we eat the kangaroo that has been hunted after eating the fresh grass; we remember the years we have done this before; the land changes as we change. And as we sing, we share this knowledge through generations. Other fires at our homes and on the beach bring people together to share stories and hold space, keeping people warm, cooking damper, connecting to the many fires of past, present, future.

Through songspirals we co-become with and as Country. Songspirals shape and enable our knowledges and responsibilities through intergenerational learning:

We don't have an identity without Country. We are all connected. Every contour on the land, every rock, every water, is connected to us. They are bigger than us, we are just a little thing. There is another big thing under us. We are small in ourselves but become who we are through milkarri. It is what we cry. We are connected through songspirals (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 149).

Just as the paper is led by Country so learning is more-than-human. Learning is not human centred or controlled by humans. Whistling kites, raptors with loud whistling calls, pick up burning sticks and drop them, moving fire onwards so they may hunt and eat well. They have learned to do this from each other and they teach their young. Humans can be part of this listening and learning too if they attend carefully to the messages of kite and fire. Humans can learn and teach as part of Country, part of a web of rationality and co-produced knowledges (Kimmerer, 2013; Poelina et al., 2022; RiverOfLife, Poelina, Bagnall, & Lim, 2020; Tynan, 2021; Watts, 2013). The fire cooks food and humans eat. This knowledge of cooking, the gift of food, shared by fire with humans (and birds of prey and others), and Country co-becomes in entangled, multiple ways. The fire makes charcoal, layers of which make up the land itself; digging layers of soil we find charcoal as Yolḷu presence through millennia. This also is the land teaching sovereignty, prior knowings, belongings, patterns, life.

And this learning must be done properly, the right way. For us that means following Rom, Yolḷu Law. It also means honouring the sovereignties of Yolḷu people and Country, and their concomitant knowledge protocols (for a broader discussion of Indigenous knowledge politics and protocols please see Kearney & Janke, 2018; Kwaymullina, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014). For example, Marri'marri could cry milkarri, keen for the gurtha, the fire, because she is wāṅa wataṅu, the custodian, for this songspiral. Marri'marri comes from the eldest grandfather in the family and one of her names is Goṅ-gurtha (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 204–205):

When we're painting the songspirals, on our bodies or on bark, canvas or screenprints, we have to make sure we put the animals in exactly the same area, the same way we sing it. If a place is in the north, we put it in the north; if an event happens in the east, we put it in the east. The art is a map that tells new generations where the sacred areas are, where the ringiti (sacred place or embassy) is that belongs to that area. Part of our learning is to paint the songspirals the right way. The paintings are a picture of the songspiral, a map of Country in a deep and spiritual way (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 33).

Spiralling the learning through Country and generations

3. **Gon-gurtha nharana, Djilayn̄anu, Batumbil, dhakalnydja ḍurryunara nh̄anala Maywalkarra.**

The Gon-gurtha lights the fire at Djilayn̄anu and Batumbil; the fire is burning along the coastline.

The smoke billows and the flames rise; it is burning along the coastline.

I can see it burning at Maywalkarra.

The keepers of the fire are the keepers of the knowledges; they light the fire in different parts of Country along the coast. As knowledge is nurtured in these places the flames rise and the smoke billows out, so that others can see those knowledges held in Country are continuing. The smoke and knowledges from different places send out their messages through sky Country—the knowledges move and transform.

To keep the fire burning the next generations need to learn to nurture the flame, to be the keepers of the fire and the knowledge. Elders and leaders, like Dr Laklak Burarrwanga who leads our collective, have thousands of generations of knowledge, thousands of generations of teachers, thousands of generations of the land (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 186). The songspirals hold this knowledge and are needed to teach and guide the next generation, but the next generation is also needed to keep the songspirals alive and Country strong. It is a cycle, one cannot continue without the other, and it is held in Country. It is a Yol̄nu spiralling pedagogy of Country, held in songspirals, cycling through the generations, learning through and as all time, past, present, and future.

And the children take this message to their hearts, they learn the songspirals, they learn gurruṯu, kinship, the stories and contours of the land. They each do this differently and in their own special way. Mayutu, Merrkiyawuy's youngest daughter, felt that she needed to honour what her mothers, grandmothers and her ancestors had done to maintain the knowledge of thousands of generations. She wanted to make sure the spiralling continued because she is young and proud. So, she helped create a cultural group at her high school to focus on Yol̄nu knowledge. Merrkiyawuy chose the name for the group: "Gon-gurtha. For they are keeping the fire alight. The flame is in their hands" (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 205–206). As Mayutu shares:

I just love my homeland Bawaka . . . I remember every weekend, going out, growing up in Bawaka. We are all here together, we are the young people, we need to pass on our message, we need to do it together as one. When my mum was young, older generations before mine, they learnt from Yol̄nu, they sat around, they lived Yol̄nu life and learnt the knowledge ever since they were young. It was just living and learning. And they learnt the songspirals. They learnt the meaning of it all. That's how you did it (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 246)

Going out every weekend, feeling Country, knowing Country, is learning and understanding Country (see also Poelina et al., 2020). As Mayutu shares, for Yol̄nu, the only way to know is to see everything through the homeland. That's the Yol̄nu way, to learn from Country by walking through, with and as Country.

Active agency of Country: Country as teacher

4. **Wuymuwuṅu nharana gurtha Rranyirran̄iyuwuṅu Gulthanawuyṅu.**

The Wuymu, the hunter, lit the fire. The fire is burning from Wuymuwuṅu, from Rranyirran̄iyuwuṅu, from Gulthanawuyṅu and from Nyewunbuwuyṅu.

In all these places that the fire burns, Country is there holding, supporting and leading the learning. Country is teacher, Country has agency, knowledge and Law. The temperature, the humidity, the wind, the moisture content of the grass instruct Goṅ-gurtha where and when to burn. The songspiral maps Country and its connections so we know where the smoke comes from, nourishing relationships.

Country shares knowledge when people feel and participate as part of Country. In this way we prefer to say that we are learning *as* Country rather than learning *on* Country (Bawaka Country et al., 2013). Country is more than background to our human learning, people are a part of Country's webs of existence: we co-become as Country (Bawaka Country et al., 2016). We, Yolṅu family, nurture our children so that they are learning as part of Country. We nurture them to experience, touch, smell and taste Country. We encourage them to be outside in the mud, to feel what it's like there, to go through the mangroves and walk barefoot on the coral beach so their feet can feel and learn what it's like to walk on this earth. Being with Country, the children are learning both ways, how to nurture Country and how to move through Western worlds.

Country also teaches in ways that may support ṅāpaki (non-Indigenous) curriculum, through two-ways learning. For example, Dr Laklak Burarrwanga started a school at Bawaka with her grandchildren. There were about ten of them. She wanted the kids to learn some ṅāpaki knowledge in ways supported by Country. A Yolṅu pedagogy works through relationship. Laklak started the kids writing in the sand with their fingers because they didn't have pencils or paper. Country supported ṅāpaki curriculum as the kids wrote in the sand, counted shells and sticks and learnt with the tides. Laklak and Country were able to teach the children the curriculum but in a different way. And, Country taught its own lessons in its own way too. So, mathematics is not only about division and counting in an abstract way, but Country teaches the importance of wetj (responsibilities of sharing and distribution), gurruṯu (more-than-human kinship) and patterns of existence and care. When Banbapuy digs for turtle eggs and teaches the children to count in the Yolṅu base five system, her teaching connects us to the turtle and its stories. She listens to the messages from Country, and shows children where and how the eggs may be found. Her counting and distribution of eggs to share fulfils and teaches the responsibilities so that everyone can be fed, and so that children can learn and practice wetj. This is Country teaching through co-becoming, preparing the children for two-ways life, for university, leadership in community and beyond, and business (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 224). It is the children learning from Country but also knowing that they are part of Country, they are Country.

And this learning is intercultural too. A Yolṅu pedagogy is underpinned by the importance of relationships and relationality, including with ṅāpaki. Our Intercultural Communication Handbook (Bawaka Country et al., 2018) shares some ways that Yolṅu Country-led learning has been experienced by teachers, students and visitors; elaborating the ways careful Country-led intercultural communication may be an entry into more profound and ongoing relationships, connections and transformations. Yolṅu learning is always ongoing, always in emergence, always in relationship with place.

As Mayutu reflects:

I think one of the things growing up as a young Yolṅu girl and growing up as a Yolṅu person, something about our culture, is that you learn through experiencing and it's not like going into a classroom and getting ready as in 'you're going to learn right now, and ok we are finished learning now'. Learning is happening all the time from when you are born and that is how Yolṅu kids grow up. So, growing up, it's been about going to my homeland, Bawaka, and going to all different places, but learning all the time. Sitting with my mothers and my grandmothers, and listening, and learning (2020, Northern Territory Writers Festival).

That's how the children learn—sitting down with their parents and grandparents, listening, talking about that Country, being a part of Country and experiencing it with all their senses. Everything that the animals, plants, tides and winds do has meaning and communicates knowledge. And if there's a story that is shared, there is meaning behind that story and purpose in

its sharing. If there's a song, there's also meaning being held and communicated in the song. We don't sing meaningless songs! As we say in our book: "All our children—they are our wonder. We nurture them to take their wondrous minds even further" (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 218). Our songspirals do this, they teach so much about life and being a part of Country, their knowledge is so deep. They are a university for us.

Where knowledge is held: in Country, heart, spirit, relationship

5. Nyewunbuwuyju yecee.

Wulpunduna nhāṅaya durryunara Goṅ-gurthawuṅu.

From these Yirritja people, the fire burns. We see the smoke clouds rising up high from Goṅ-gurtha.

From there, the smoke's mist rises up and becomes the cloud Wulpundu, a big cloud stretching forward into the sky.

As we watch the smoke's mist rise up and become a cloud, we feel it in our hearts. Marri'marri keens the flames on the horizon, with her beautiful crying song, her keening, her milkarri, full of grief and love with awareness and care of the Goṅ-gurtha who sets the fire and keeps the flame.

The songspiral Goṅ-gurtha teaches us through our emotions; it is personal, emotional and meaningful. We must learn through love, joy and happiness but also through heartache, loss and grief. We embrace these feelings as they are a fundamental part of connections and relationships with all of life. To learn from and understand Country you need to *feel* Country. Emotions connect us to Country; they are an important part of our co-becoming. This is central to a Yolṅu Country-led pedagogy.

Our knowledges, our memories are released through milkarri. Like the smoke rising, we don't keep our emotions bottled up in our bodies. Tears may roll down the faces of the women and the men. It is driven by our feelings. As we say:

With the milkarri, if you see the fire, you start straight away singing the fire. We cry tears of milkarri for the fire that's started from the Goṅ-gurtha. When we see it, we feel the one who has started the fire, the Goṅ-gurtha. The fire burns from Wuymuwuṅu (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 228).

When the women cry milkarri we learn. We learn Country, how the women are describing the people and the area. We learn the feelings, the tears, and we feel connections with other people, other places. We learn life. So, we have tears and we have laughter; we have water and we have fire. We keen milkarri for that fire, we feel it in our heart. Western approaches to learning so often dismiss and deny emotions. But learning to express and honour emotions is integral to how we connect to each other and Country. Learning as Country comes from knowledge of the heart. These things have knowledge, are knowledge. And, in this, we help support our wondrous minds:

All of us are always learning, learning together. Every day, anything can let you down. We can feel pain being away from home, heartache grieving our mothers, our sisters; or bad things may happen, but if you have a mind that wants to learn, then you can overcome those obstacles. If you look after your mind, you can solve problems and work things out to make your life the way you want it to be. There are always people who don't look at things our way. There are people who need to understand more, to be educated, to have a broad mind, to accept things as they are and to work their way around if they don't like it. A healthy person has a mind full of wonder. A mind full of wonder is wondrous and a wondrous mind learns so much more than a mind that is sick (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 105).

Layers, protocols and authority; learning the right way

6. Yeeee, runurunu Djilayṇaṇu, Batumbil dhakalnydja ḍurryun ṇunha marrtji. Yeeee, Goṇ-gurthawuṇu.

Yes, those islands Djilayṇaṇu and Batumbil, I can see the jawline of the coastline through my crying. I can see those islands very clearly as the smoke rises up.

Yes, from Goṇ-gurtha.

Songspirals embody the importance of learning—but they also teach us how to learn in the correct way, from the correct peoples and places. Songspirals are fundamental to Rom, Yolṇu Law, and they have specific processes, which tell Yolṇu people what is the right way to do things, and what is the wrong way. “It’s already written through our blood. Ancestors recorded everything through our Songspirals” (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 33).

Part of learning is following the right structure, the right process. Without the right structure, we can go the wrong way. Our kids too, they might find themselves in trouble. Some of the bad things, the drugs and drinking, it can make you lose the djalkiri, the foundation. If you lose the foundation, you might float away, be lost. The land might be taken, the land and people ripped apart.

Learning the right way, means all is done in the right place. Songspirals tell us what should be done in a place. As we say:

The Law of that land says what belongs there. That is the power. What belongs in the land, stays in the land, you can’t take it out. You can’t change the Law (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 140).

As there is the right place, there is also the right people. There is a strict differentiation of roles within songspirals, and within Yolṇu knowledge. These roles are determined by kin relations. Some people may lead, some may initiate, some may listen and learn. The Dalkarra and Djirrikay, they “hold the power. They know the rules. They are like the top of the university, the leaders. The Dalkarra and Djirrikay are there as the professors, the doctors, to ensure that the power remains tights, that the songspirals is not loosened. They understand the spirit of the land, sea and river” (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 11).

Mayutu and Maminydjama, the Yolṇu sister’s daughter and granddaughter, are still learning but they also hold special roles, they are keepers of the flame. Songspirals give strength, they give structure and teach us how to be true and how to show the truth with power, with passion—and it can also be political. This is foundation for true learning and sharing. Maminydjama says,

I feel growing up both ways has given me a very good platform and understanding. It has given me, almost given me, enough power to speak out on behalf of my people and my community from the experience I have had. There is power in our names (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 134).

Understanding how songspirals are made and remade, taught, learned and corrected provides an insight to a Yolṇu Country-led pedagogy. Here, the Goṇ-gurtha songspiral points to some of the ways to express respect as part of learning—both what we learn and how we learn. It supports the importance of learning spiralling through the generations, encompassing respect for future generations as well of those of the past. Yolṇu learning is predicated on relationality and responsibility and requires love and care.

Learning limits

7. **Nunha Nyewunba, Rranyirranwuṅu, Gulthanawuyṅu, Goṅ-gurtha Mätjitji.**

There, that one now, the fire is from Nyewunba, Rranyirranwuṅu, Gulthana, from the people who hold that Country, keepers of the land.

From Goṅ-gurtha Mätjitji, the keeper of the fire, the one who starts the fire.

Through the songspiral, it is possible to see the fire, far on the horizon, the fire of those who hold that Country, the keepers of the land. The fire is knowledge shared; the smoke may be seen, smelt, sensed by many. In this way it connects. But it is always the fire of those who hold that Country. As it is for fire, so it is for knowledge. It is essential to respect that knowledge has a holder, a keeper. It is not for all, not to be grasped and owned by others.

As we say, it is important to treat knowledge with respect. This means “not writing about things that you don’t understand” (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. xxv). The sisters elaborate:

You can talk about it, but don’t think you can become the authority on it. You can use our words for reflection. You can talk about your own experiences and think about how to take lessons from our book into your life. You need to honour the context of our songspirals, acknowledge the layers of our knowledge. You can talk about the very top layer but you need to be respectful and aware of the limits of what we are sharing and what you in turn can share (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. xxv–xxvi).

Listening and learning from Country, connecting with Country through love and sorrow, teaches about limits. When Country is a part of you, it can help shift perspective so you are not blinded by your own desires. Nature and the land have much to say. It is important to stop and listen, to learn from and as Country.

Learning our limits, of what we can share, of what we can know, and how we can know it, is important for everyone but it is a lesson that ṅäpaki and those living a mainstream Western life, in particular, desperately need. Rather than a mindset of entitlement as if all knowledge, all life, is there for the taking, as if it is there for human enjoyment, Country needs a mindset of respect. Respect for the worlds, lives and Laws/Lores of other beings, other beings that co-become with Country, are part of Country, part of us, is central (see also Watts, 2013). This is how we can act together as family, how knowledge may be shared through good relationship. As we share:

We try to break racism by adopting ṅäpaki as family. This way we teach ṅäpaki and show them what to do. ṅäpaki kids don’t just go anywhere—there are rules, quite strict rules about what to do, what not to do, what to touch, what not to touch. There are rules and regulations for the dangerous things, like for bäru (crocodile), and for the ways that learning means sharing, sharing our families and bringing them into the learning too. We see the kids all playing together, we know they are listening and taking it all in. The kids are building their own bridge. They have their own ideas. We are a big family (Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 103).

Our learning from/as Country, our learning from/as Goṅ-gurtha, is a learning which recognises and respects limits; it is a learning which is predicated upon the ongoing sovereignties of Yolṅu people and Country.

Responsibility

8. **Djambatjnuwuyṅu gurtha nharana Bolumi, Djilayṅaṅu, Batumbil.**

From Djambatj, the hunter, the fire burns. From the place Bolumi, a distant place where the bamboo, bolu, grows. From the islands of Yolṅu Country, Djilayṅaṅu and Batumbil.

Learning from/as Country connects onwards. The spirals continue through relationships from one Country to the next, from one people to the next. The fire burns onwards to Bolumi, a distant place of bamboo. From Yolṅu Country, relationships and knowledge-through-relationships extend both through time and space.

Generously sharing insights into their learning journeys, Maminydjama and Mayutu highlight the importance of Yolṅu learning in, through and as time, and how what has always been will always be. Mayutu says:

I need to start learning it so it can't be lost. I'm going to be the one who has to tell my daughter or son. I don't want to say, "Don't ask me, because I don't know." I'm meant to know that because that's my culture (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 246).

Mayutu is acutely aware of her responsibility to learn so that she too can share, with her children, with future generations. In this way, knowledges and learnings may spiral onwards: the fire will be kept alive. It will be kept safe in the hearts of Mayutu and the younger generation as they look after the Law and the knowledge of the land, leading dances of their mother clan. Mayutu and other members of the younger generation learn from the songspirals and, at the same time, they *are* the songspirals. They learn from Country as part of Country. They are keepers of tomorrow's knowledge. This is part of their responsibilities.

We all have responsibilities to respect knowledge, to listen, to learn, to act as part of Country, and from our own place (see also Bishop & Tynan, 2022). As we say:

We were taught the rules by our grandmothers and grandfathers, our aunties and uncles. It is about learning the language, the culture, the dances, the Law, the discipline, the different ceremonies. It is about learning how to read Country, to listen to what it tells you. We listen to the water when it is muddy, the clouds when they reach across the sky like octopus tentacles to announce a message from home, and the birds when they send messages of welcome or warning. This is the spark of our mother clan, Gumatj. We see the spark of Gumatj when we look at the fire (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 109).

The spirals of knowledge and responsibility spiral through generations, through time, and also through space, to incorporate other Countries, other Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This means that, for ṅāpaki, there are responsibilities too. This includes respecting limits and also bringing the learning into our/their bodies and lives; stopping and respectfully listening, with all our/their senses. It means acting through kinship, through gurrutu, in connection with Country and not with a sense of entitlement and greed. The responsibilities of gurrutu mean, "sharing and learning. Giving and taking, not just take, take, take. Bala ga' lili—we must have a balance" (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 104–105; see also Bawaka Country et al., 2022). Then our knowledge may flow both ways, in balance and with respect.

Conclusion

9. **Durrunara nhānala Maywalkarra.**
Nunha Djilayna Batumbil Goṅ-gurhawuyṅu,
Durrunara nhānala Nyewunba, Rranyiranyi, Goṅ-gurtha.

The smoke rises high from far away, from islands a long way away. See the smoke rising high at Maywalkarra.

There at Djilayna and Batumbil from Goṅ-gurtha, the flames are rising up high. See the hunters Nyewunba, Rranyiranyi, Goṅ-gurtha.

The gurtha, the fire, continues to burn keeping Country alive. As the flames and smoke rise high into the clouds, we reflect on the learnings we have shared through this paper:

There are many of us breathing the same air. The clouds are above us all, with their messages and their Rom. You don't need to look somewhere else for answers, to go away and explore or build a new house or make a fortune. Life itself is important. We need to tell those who are blinded by their own desires. It's something we don't want to hide. We want to tell the truth to the greedy people about climate change, building, building, never replanting, digging, killing. If it's something we don't want to tell the nāpaki, then who are we going to tell, the spirits? Many don't want to listen to us. But perhaps you can listen. Remember the limits. (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. 111).

The paper has spiralled with the Goṅ-gurtha songspiral; it has guided us through some layers of a Yolṅu Country-led pedagogy. Through our learning from/as songspirals, Country holds and teaches important knowledges. It is an active guide. It nourishes the learning spiralling through the thousands of human and more-than-human generations. This learning needs to happen not just on Country, but as part of Country, so that people can hear, see, smell and feel Country's messages about the right time, right place and right way to do things, maintaining balance and nourishing life. A Yolṅu Country-led pedagogy means learning from the heart, listening and learning from emotions that are an expression of connection with Country, and it means learning limits. For learning is not about grasping and acquiring all we can, but understanding that there are things that should not be done, there are the right ways of doing things, there are correct people to do them. Learning this as part of Country helps us to know who we are and where our responsibilities lie as Country.

With this sharing comes the importance of responsibility (Bawaka Country et al., 2019). There are layers and layers to our knowledges. As Banbapuy says, "they are like the ranan, the paperbark tree, there are layers and layers of it". These knowledges must be cared for and protected, so they can be shared in the right way by the right people. This is how we keep our knowledge sovereignty:

You need to honour the context of our songspirals, acknowledge the layers of our knowledge. You can talk about the very top layer but you need to be respectful and aware of the limits of what we are sharing and what you in turn can share (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, p. xxvi).

Merrkiyawuy and Mayutu, mother and daughter, are keepers of the flame, keepers of the knowledges. They keep the fire burning and nurture the next generations as they learn. They live a Yolṅu Country-led pedagogy through the songspirals in their relationships with each other, their people and their Country. We end by listening to their learning and discussion about the layers of knowledge shared:

Mayutu: What's your message for people who have listened to this? What do you think people should take away from this book?

Merrkiyawuy: To realise that we don't sing about nothing, we sing about Earth, life on Earth about life and that we are all part of it that we should look after our world, our Earth and our animals and our lands but also respect the people who sing this songs, respect the people which is us, respect us for who we are. We are here, still, and we will be singing the same songs for the next thousands of years.

Mayutu: And that's what Yolŋu are singing about. Its not just blah blah blah, you see what is happening.

Merrkiyawuy: Yes, its not just blah blah blah we are actually singing life on Earth and it's the same words that somebody had sung thousands and thousands of years ago.

Mayutu: That's why it's so powerful. When you're talking about gathering, it includes the gathering of new things, which means we've brought in so many new things for thousands of years. They've come into this.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to acknowledge that this essay was written on the unceded lands and Country of Yolŋu, Gumbaynggirr, Awabakal, Worimi, and Dharug peoples, and pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. We'd also like to thank Mayutu and Maminydjama for their inspiring contributions and the amazing editors of the special edition for their fabulous support.

Competing interests. The author(s) declared no potential competing interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Financial support. This research is covered by University of Newcastle ethics protocol number H-161-1205 and is partially supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP190102202), and Professor Sarah Wright and Professor Sandie Suchet-Pearson's of Australian Research Council Future Fellowships (FT160100353; FT210100320).

Ethical standard. Nothing to note.

References

- Arnold, C., Atchison, J., & McKnight, A. (2021). Reciprocal relationships with trees: Rekindling Indigenous wellbeing and identity through the Yuin ontology of oneness. *Australian Geographer*, 52(2), 131–147.
- Bawaka Country including Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D., ... Daley, L. (2018). *Intercultural communication handbook*. <http://bawakacollective.com/handbook/>
- Bawaka Country including Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D., ... Hammersley, L. (2022). Bala ga'lili: Communicating, relating and co-creating balance through relationships of reciprocity. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 24(7), 1203–1223. DOI: [10.1080/14649365.2022.2052166](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2052166).
- Bawaka Country including Suchet-Pearson, S., Wright, S., Lloyd, K., & Burarrwanga, L. (2013). Caring as Country: Towards an ontology of co-becoming in natural resource management. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 54(2), 185–197.
- Bawaka Country, Suchet-Pearson, S., Wright, S., Lloyd, K., Tofa, M., Sweeney, J., ... Maymuru, D. (2019). Goŋ Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities as situated co-becoming. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37(4), 682–702.
- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., Lloyd, K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., ... Maymuru, D. (2015). Working with and learning from Country: Decentering human authority. *Cultural Geographies*, 22(2), 269–283.
- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., Lloyd, K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., ... Sweeney, J. (2016). Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(4), 455–475.
- Bishop, M., & Tynan, L. (2022). Finding perspective through our more-than-human kin. In *The Routledge handbook of global development* (pp. 593–604). London: Routledge.
- Burgess, H., Cormack, D., & Reid, P. (2021). Calling forth our pasts, citing our futures: An envisioning of a Kaupapa Māori citational practice. *MAI Journal. A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship*, 10(1), 57–67.
- Gay'wu Group of Women (Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D., Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., & Lloyd, K.) (2019). *Songspirals: Sharing women's wisdom of Country through songlines*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

- Kearney, J., & Janke, T.** (2018). *Rights to culture: Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP), copyright and protocols*. Terri Janke and Company Pty Ltd. Retrieved August 22, 2023, from <http://www.terrijanke.com.au/single-post/2018/01/29/Rights-to-Culture-Indigenous-Cultural-and-Intellectual-Property-ICIP-Copyright-and-Protocols>.
- Kimmerer, R.** (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Minneapolis, MA: Milkweed Editions.
- Kwaymullina, A.** (2016). Research, ethics and Indigenous peoples: An Australian Indigenous perspective on three threshold considerations for respectful engagement. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 12(4), 437–449.
- Liboiron, M.** (2022, March 2). *Citational politics in tight places*. CLEAR. <https://civillaboratory.nl/2022/03/02/citational-politics-in-tight-places/>
- Moreton-Robinson, A.** (2015). *The white possessive: Property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Poelina, A., Wooltorton, S., Blaise, M., Aniere, C., Horwitz, P., White, P., & Muecke, S.** (2022). Regeneration time - ancient wisdom for planetary wellbeing. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 38(3-4), 397–414. First View (Special Issue: Post-Qualitative Inquiry, Theory and Practice in Environmental Education).
- Poelina, A., Wooltorton, S., Harben, S., Collard, L., Horwitz, P., & Palmer, D.** (2020). Feeling and hearing Country. *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, 15, 6–15. <http://panjournal.net/issues/15>
- RiverOfLife, M., Poelina, A., Bagnall, D., & Lim, M.** (2020). Recognizing the Martuwarra's First Law right to life as a living Ancestral Being. *Transnational Environmental*, 9(3), 541–568.
- Somerville, A.T.P.** (n.d.). *An Indigenous scholar's request to other scholars*. Facebook. https://m.facebook.com/nt/screen/?params={%22note_id%22:370458960817776}&path=/notes/note/&rdr
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K.W.** (2014). Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 811–818. DOI: [10.1177/1077800414530265](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530265).
- Tynan, L.** (2021). What is relationality? Indigenous knowledges, practices and responsibilities with kin. *Cultural Geographies*, 28(4), 597–610.
- Watts, V.** (2013). Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 20–34.
- Wilson, B., & Spillman, D.** (2021). Country as teacher: Using stories from and for Country in Australian education for social and ecological renewal. In *New perspectives on education for democracy* (pp. 52–63). London: Routledge.
- Wooltorton, S., Collard, L., Horwitz, P., Poelina, A., & Palmer, D.** (2020). Sharing a placebased Indigenous methodology and learnings. *Environmental Education Research*, 26(7), 917–934. DOI: [10.1080/13504622.2020.1773407](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2020.1773407).
- Wooltorton, S., White, P., Palmer, M., & Collard, L.** (2021). Learning cycles: Enriching ways of knowing place. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 37(1), 1–18. DOI: [10.1017/aee.2020.15](https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2020.15).

Author Biographies

The Bawaka Collective (also known as the Gay'wu Group of Women) is an Indigenous and non-Indigenous, more-than-human research collective. The collective is led by Bawaka Country and includes human authors Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru, Kate Lloyd, Sarah Wright, Lara Daley and Sandie Suchet-Pearson.

Bawaka Country is the diverse land, water, human and non-human animals (including b̄aru and the human authors of this chapter), plants, rocks, thoughts, and songs that make up the Yolŋu homeland of Bawaka in North East Arnhem Land, Australia.

Laklak Burarrwanga is a Datiwuy Elder, Caretaker for Gumatj, and eldest sister. As such she has both the right and the cultural obligation to share certain aspects of her knowledge and experiences with others. She has many decades experience at sharing this knowledge with children and adults through teaching, art and tourism. She is a senior member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Ritjilili Ganambarr is the second eldest daughter, a Datiwuy elder and caretaker for Gumatj. She works hard on health issues in the community and is passionate about working with mothers and children – teaching and educating them that strong mothers create strong children. She is a weaver and writer/illustrator. She is a senior member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs is a proud Yolŋu woman and leader from North East Arnhem Land. She has written 6 books. Her children's books are written in Yolŋu Matha for use in primary schools as Walking Talking texts. She plays an

important role in the bilingual education movement in Arnhem Land working with Yolŋu Elders to develop both-ways learning. She is a senior member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Banbapuy Ganambarr grew up at Gularuŋa. She is a bilingual student who completed her degree at Bachelor College through the Northern Territory University. Banbapuy is now a senior Indigenous teacher at Yirrkala School. She is an influential author, artist, weaver, and teacher. She is a senior member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Djawundil Maymuru is a Maŋgalili women, raised by a Gumatj elder. She is a Yolŋu mother and grandmother from the beautiful homeland of Bawaka in North East Arnhem Land. She is a co-author of three books works with Bawaka Cultural Experiences, a highly successful Yolŋu owned and run Indigenous tourism business. She is a member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Kate Lloyd is a Associate Professor in Human Geography at Macquarie University. Kate's work focuses on several projects which take an applied, action-oriented and collaborative approach to research characterised by community partnerships, co-creation of knowledge and an ethics of reciprocity. She is a member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Lara Daley is a research fellow in Human Geography at the University of Newcastle. Her research engages Indigenous-led geographies and ongoing colonisation in urban and semi-urban Indigenous/settler colonial contexts. She is a member of Yandaarra and the Bawaka Collective, two Indigenous-led collaborations with a focus on Indigenous sovereignties and Indigenous-led ways of caring for Country and addressing socio-environmental change.

Sandie Suchet-Pearson is an Associate Professor in Human Geography at Macquarie University in Sydney. Her research and teaching experiences over the last 20 years have been in the area of Indigenous rights and environmental management. She is a member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women.

Sarah Wright is a professor of human geographer at the University of Newcastle. She is a member of the Bawaka Collective and the Gay'wu Group of Women. She also works in the Philippines with a network of subsistence organic farmers and is part of Yandaarra, a Gumbaynggirr-non-Gumbaynggirr collective seeking to shift camp together to care for and as Country where she lives on Gumbaynggirr Country on the mid-north coast of NSW.

Cite this article: Bawaka Country including, Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D., Lloyd, K., Daley, L., Suchet-Pearson, S., & Wright, S. (2023). Keepers of the flame: songspirals are a university for us. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 39, 279–292. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ae.2023.27>