

LISTENING TO COUNTRY

A journey to the heart of what it
means to belong

Ros Moriarty


ALLEN & UNWIN

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*To the memory of four strong Australian women: my mother,
Nancy Ridley Langham, and my Borroloola mothers-in-law
Kathleen O'Keefe Murrmayibinya and Annie Isaac Karrakayn
and sister Thelma Douglas Walwalmara*

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Prologue

THE IMAGE IS VIVID in my mind. The night I am thinking about is a clear and recurring memory. Five or six of us are seated on the ground around a smouldering campfire under a star-filled black sky by the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria in Australia's remote north. It is 1982—twenty-seven years ago. Our baby is sleeping in a cot nearby. There is no wind, no temperature to notice, no sounds. The darkness begins immediately behind us. My husband's uncle, Musso, the ceremonial leader of the Yanyuwa people, is telling stories about spirit ancestors in the bush around us, about people leaving their bodies to travel vast distances, about messages birds and animals bring to people in danger. Afterwards we drift off to sleep in the total silence.

This same man hauls an enormous sack of writhing crabs across the mudflats the next day to throw on the coals of the fire. We share the sweet white flesh with his family. Laughing, talking, enjoying each other's company. And this same man commands the hunting boat for dugong, singing the song of the animal's spirit when it is speared, cutting its portions for distribution according to ritual and protocol. I pick up just a crude inkling of the interconnection between his powerful culture and the everyday

balance of a satisfying life lived in harmony with the elements. In his words and when he is quiet, I sense the sharp wisdom and deep humanity that lies beneath his humility.

We were visiting my husband John's Aboriginal community at Borroloola, in Australia's Northern Territory. It was the start of an extraordinary journey. Not so much because of the terrain or the vistas—as spectacularly different as they were—but because the cultural landscape of family and humanity radiated a warmth that seemed to rise from the baked land itself. In my early twenties, with a baby in tow, the impressions seared into the heart and mind of a white girl from down south were indelible. They were then etched deeper with every trip back over the years, as my own life story became entwined with theirs.

Culture separated the sexes much of the time, and it was the women who showed me a view of the world fundamentally different from any other I knew. Despite their abject material poverty, illness, and the increasing violence in their community, happiness and optimism permeated their lives. The spirit of their men shone too, but I knew custom would dictate that if I could tell anyone's story, it would be mostly that of the women. I knew it wasn't a story I could hurry in the telling. In fact, a quarter of a century of pilgrimages north would go by before I would begin to think seriously about what to tell. And why to tell it.

What to tell would be something of the spiritual wealth that wraps these women tightly together, and which has taught them the rules for happy lives. It would be a story, too, of Australia's identity and its future in the face of the catastrophic legacy colonial collision continues to inflict on Aboriginal people. Why to tell it would be to open a window to the times of Yanyuwa Law women. To reveal a glimpse of the philosophy they have gleaned along humanity's pathway of more than forty thousand years, set

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down by the oldest living culture on Earth. I felt that in this story others would find moments of inspiration and revelation along their own life journeys, as I had.

We took our children back as babies to the nurturing of the tribe. Old Tim Rakuwurlma, after whom we named our first baby, and who remembered life in the bush well before white men came, announced our little boy's name would be 'Baniyan, cheeky brown snake'. He sang the Baniyan songs which our baby would belong to, and the women cuddled and carried Tim from place to place. Our baby's grandmother, blind from glaucoma, pointed out the night sky constellations that lived in her memory, and sang songs of her Dreamings from those stars. We slept soundly on the ground with the clan group by the campfire, and feasted on fish grilled in the ashes.

Our second son, James, was given the name dugong—Jawarrawarral. Just as Tim would show himself to have a darting imaginative mind as he grew, like a brown snake striking, James would have the deep stillness of his gentle ocean namesake. They were just babies when the old people held them close and named them, giving them their birthright.

When they were a little older, the boys clambered noisily over stones and logs, shinnying up trees, leaping into cascading river pools with local kids. They poked at the eyes of bush turkeys their father shot for dinner, heroes in their school classes for the letters sent home. They urged their uncle Samuel to drive the tin dinghy ever closer to killer crocs sunning themselves on the river's edge, squealing when he turned suddenly, laughing, sending a spray of wake from the boat across the massive scaly animal as it slid into the water under the boat.

Our daughter Julia, born five years after James, was named Marayalu, the mermaid. Her songs begin near Alice Springs,

a thousand kilometres down through the centre of Australia. A rocky outcrop by Wigleys Waterhole spills a seam of glassy quartz down its rounded form. It is the breast milk of the mermaid. The story of mermaid spirits who left the sea to dwell in fresh waterholes starts at this landform, in the middle of Australia's red desert. Julia basked in the stories and in the love of her aunties and grandmothers. She would tag along behind the line of women collecting sugarbag (bush honey) from craggy tree trunks, sucking at the gluey sweetness of the chunks they gave her.

The children's Borroloola world was a universe away from our usual life in the city. Spotting the eyes of crocs at night along the riverbank, eating dugong meat boiled up on the fire, tearing around the Gulf in a boat hunting turtle. They would float on their backs in wonder on a steaming thermal lake under soaring red cliffs, and paddle a boat through canopies of foliage draped with tree snakes.

But the spiritual difference went deeper than the physical, and it began to emerge in layers, a little more every time we went back. During the quiet times of sitting down by the riverbank with family in the morning, cooking by the fire at night, in the boat drifting around at the creek mouth in search of fish. It was of course natural to John, in his pores and under his skin, but to me it was a gradual revelation. The intellectual complexity of it, disguised by understatement, offered veiled viewing. Travelling with small children in the oppressive climate, and my impatience with a slower, foreign world, restricted my senses in the beginning. While freely given, it would take time for me to feel the arms of inclusion.

John continued the children's teaching back home. Even in the city he pointed out the cleverest of camouflaged insects, identified birdcalls in the street, and drew animal tracks on the

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sand at the beach. He taught them the silence of listening out of doors, and shared the taste of bush berries and fruits on walks into the scrub. The stories he told them were bedtime favourites, and kept them connected to their Yanyuwa family.

Borrooloola family visited us in Adelaide, often travelling by air for the first time. John's stepfather, Willie, had never seen a washing machine before, describing to Kathleen, John's mother, the vortex of water that rushed all by itself, in and out of the clothes. Kathleen ended up in John's arms when a lion roared at Adelaide Zoo. Uncles and cousins came with us to France and Japan, touching the stone of Notre Dame—'proper old, this place, eh'—and asking John if there were crocodiles in the Seine. They smiled shyly at the attention from leggy French girls when they jammed on didgeridoo in Parisian bars. They declared sushi in Tokyo to be just like the bait they ate when the fish weren't biting. The constellations of the Northern Hemisphere night sky were baffling, and the mystery of the time difference was the focus of most phone calls home.

We visited Borrooloola as often as we could put jobs on hold, jump in the car and head three thousand kilometres north. With each visit, John's mother's generation grew older and physically weaker as the community structures disintegrated around them. Bush food was being hunted out by tourists, dugong and turtle were drowning in the nets of commercial fishermen. Shops stocked the salt- and sugar-laden tinned precursors to heart disease and diabetes. The joy of seeing family was all too often tinged with the sadness of funerals.

When John's mother passed away, we drove back to the Gulf from Tathra on the New South Wales coast where we'd been camping. The children sat cramped and quiet in the car on the road in from Mount Isa, a simple sheaf of long-stemmed white

carnations balanced on ice between their seats in the hot, steamy weather. They sweltered in the sticky Wet season heat at the bush cemetery, joining the grieving line to scatter red sand gently onto their Abuji's tiny coffin. John's mother took with her fluency in eight Aboriginal languages, and the complete and sophisticated knowledge of a senior Law woman. She took with her secrets that the sacred Law forbade her to pass on to those who had not been ceremonially prepared to receive them. I sensed both her frustration and acquiescence in the silence the Law demanded of her to erase the irreplaceable.

Yet despite the loss and the deprivations, the same as Indigenous communities the world over, a deep sense of the spirit has not deserted the older women of my husband's family. The rich warmth of their human connection has endured. It seems to be a connection that goes further than most of us experience in our developed-world relationships, where we hurry through the competitive ambitions that drive us. Over the years of visits back to Borroloola, I've seen how these women are able to give and receive happiness in the face of chronic disadvantage. I have wondered if it springs from the nourishing spirituality that envelops them, if it is embedded in the continuation of culture, in the retention of language that interprets their world. In the comfort of the rules and traditions that family has carefully set down for them. I wonder if we have traded enduring happiness in the first world by our increasing rejection of things spiritual, esoteric and ancestral.

It seems there is a pathway gouged by a metaphorical river of intricate knowledge and wisdom deep inside my husband's community, which feeds a positive outlook in the face of dire hardship. It is clear that people's lives are not without sadness, but they find a way to nurture the spirit. The Yanyuwa call it

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anyngkarrinjarra ki-awarawu, 'listening to country'. It is a time and place to sit down, absorb, reflect, see how things really are in the place you come from. A place in the mind, a place with family, or a physical place where the mind is freed.

In May 2006, I had an unexpected chance to 'listen to country' with the women of my Borroloola family. It is ultimately not just a women's thing, because the culture that demands 'listening to country' weaves its structure around all. But men's business is not for women to describe, and it was the powerful matriarchs of John's tribe who generously took me on an inspiring and humbling journey into their spiritual world. It was an ordinary journey of everyday intimacy with the natural order of life. A simple chance to be still. To 'listen in order to see'. It was a time to begin to tell the story I had wanted to share for so long. A story of a disappearing world hidden behind stigma and prejudice, where family is paramount, nature sustains the spirit, and relationships are enshrined in clear-cut rules. Of contemporary women with old spirits, who have survived a turbulent and violent history of European contact. Who live their difficult lives in a way that brings the happiness of heartfelt human connection.

In opening a tiny window to their story of 'listening to country', my intent is to honour their wisdom and hear their voices. It is not to use their resilience to excuse the deplorable physical conditions they live in, the result of colonial dispossession and confused, 'out of sight, out of mind' government policies since. Neither is it to pass judgement on the social dysfunction which has decimated their children's generation, forcing these ageing women to bring up their grandchildren. Most of all, it is not to tell their secret, sacred stories. It is to hear their songs, to celebrate their heart and generosity, and to share a glimpse of the philosophical insights which allow them to live their lives with

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power and meaning. It is to ponder, too, the quiet passing of this last line of full Aboriginal Law women. When our fragile and beautiful land, Australia, will no longer be sung by its first people, and will no longer remember their nurturing, resilient hands.

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