1981

WORK PAPERS OF SIL-AAB

Series B Volume 6

LITERACY IN AN ABORIGINAL CONTEXT

Editor: Susanne Hargrave

SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES BRANCH
DARWIN
APRIL 1981

SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES BRANCH
BERRIMAH, DARWIN
N.T. 5788 AUSTRALIA

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ISBN 0 86892 225 0

PREFACE

These Work Papers are being produced in two series by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines Branch, Inc. in order to make results of SIL research in Australia more widely available. Series A includes technical papers on linguistic or anthropological analysis and description, or on literacy research. Series B contains material suitable for a broader audience, including the lay audience for which it is often designed, such as language learning lessons and dictionaries.

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The publication of this volume, and the research reported herein, were partially funded by grants from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Research Fund of the Australian Aborigines Branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

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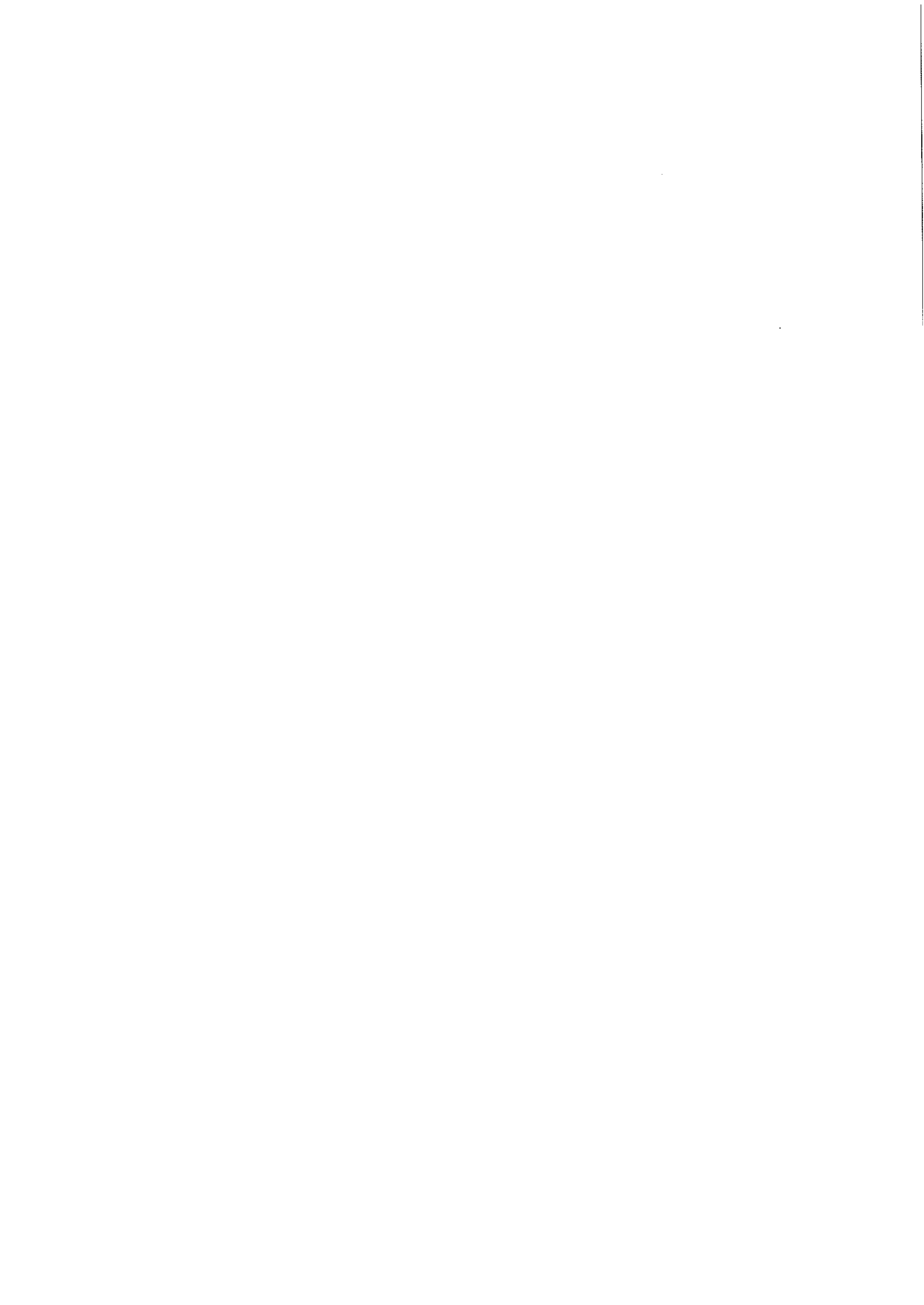

INTRODUCTION TO
SERIES B VOLUME 6

Literacy in an Aboriginal context is a complex concern. As the first four papers in this volume indicate, factors that need to be considered are psychological, sociolinguistic and anthropological as well as more directly educational.

The fifth paper is of a different mode but it too presents a factor for the literacy worker to consider — the growing importance of Kriol as an Aboriginal language. Whether one considers it a simplifying or complicating factor, it cannot be ignored.

All of the contributors are SIL field workers who themselves face the challenge of literacy in an Aboriginal context.

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CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN VERNACULAR LITERACY PROGRAMMES FOR TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED ADULT ABORIGINES

Joy L. Sandefur

0. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a new thing for the traditionally oriented Aboriginal. It involves concepts and skills that are different from anything that he has previously learned. Often the person who starts a vernacular literacy programme for adults is a European and his problem is how to adjust his teaching so that it is as culturally relevant to the traditionally oriented Aboriginal as possible. The method that he chooses to teach reading and writing should be adjustable to the situation and one which Aborigines can master and use to teach others.

The traditionally oriented Aboriginal who wishes to teach reading to his fellow tribesmen will not be able to draw on his Aboriginal background alone. Skills such as the association of sound and symbol and the deduction of meaning from abstract symbols representing sounds are foreign to him. For his understanding of the skills used in reading and writing he will have to draw on the methodology of the European. The Aboriginal teacher will be able to make a unique contribution in areas such as how letters, words and grammatical units can be described in his language. Aboriginal teachers who understand the skills involved in learning to read will be the most suitable persons to work out an Aboriginal way of teaching others. Yet the European can make his own teaching of Aborigines much more effective by taking cultural factors into account.

As the title indicates, this paper is concerned with vernacular literacy for traditionally oriented adult Aborigines, the area of literacy work in which I have had experience. I have assumed in the paper that the decision has already been made that a literacy programme (and the changes it could bring) is desirable, and also that a literacy method has been chosen.

My discussion of the topic is as follows. Firstly I discuss the traditional Aboriginal way of life as 'being' as opposed to 'doing'

and the implications of this view for literacy and education. The fact that some Aborigines are moving away from this towards acculturation of western values is also covered. Then facets and methods of traditional education are discussed.[1] This is followed by an endeavour to apply traditional Aboriginal teaching methods to the teaching of literacy skills. Finally I cover a number of other cultural factors that I see as being relevant to a successful literacy programme.[2]

1. TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL VALUES

Margaret Bain in 'Aboriginal Attitude: "Being" Rather Than "Doing"' suggests that the essential difference between Aboriginal and European ways of life is that the Aboriginal approach is based on 'being' rather than 'doing'. 'Before the coming of the whiteman, the major factors in the life of Aboriginals were the community, and the land, in which he dwelt. He existed in a state of being in relation to both, that is he was consciously and essentially "of" them and received from them. In corroboree this became reciprocal' (1969:1).

Margaret Bain goes on to suggest that the Aborigines are perhaps unique in this way:

> I have come to the conclusion that rules which apply to other peoples do not necessarily apply to the Aboriginal. This has come about because the Aboriginal alone (and perhaps the Bushman of South Africa) through force of circumstances, is one who receives and not one who works and then receives in terms of that work. His contribution towards receiving from the land was through corroboree, by which he co-operated with the mystical forces associated therewith and so, for example, brought about increase in the various species of plants and animals. He received, therefore, not as a result of the manipulation of physical things, namely by works, but as a result of quite a different action, essentially in the realm of religion, or belief.

The skills and knowledge necessary to hunt and gather food successfully had to be learnt by each generation. But the food itself was not seen as a reward for the energy expended to acquire it.

Aborigines are community dwellers and they are also interdependent over large areas. Religious matters were one area of interdependence. Corroborees, particularly initiation corroborees, could call for participation by Aboriginal people over a wide area. This implies a common sharing of religious beliefs. Aborigines also share interdependence in land rights. 'His relationship to the land

is in the nature of being of it (intransitive) rather than owning it in the European sense' (Bain 1969:2). Many parts of the land have significance for him and his religious beliefs, e.g. a sacred site at Looma is significant for people as far apart as Christmas Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Derby and LaGrange.

The attitude of 'being' and an interdependence on each other has important implications for the traditional Aboriginal view of education.

> For a stable community interdependence requires conformity over that area too. This in turn precludes the possibility of individual advancement or change, without opting out of the community. Such interdependence and resistance to change implies a particular attitude to learning and also dictates a particular type of education, i.e. one aimed at maintaining the status quo geared to prevent individual thought and requiring acceptance of the content of the teaching in entirety. (Bain, p. 2)

This traditional attitude of resistance to change is given some support by John L. M. Dawson. Dawson (1970) undertook a study to analyse the origin and structure of Aboriginal attitudes towards education and integration and to see if particular variables were influencing the formation of these attitudes. He studied two groups in New South Wales: one was an urban group of Aborigines living at Green Valley and the second group was a more traditionally oriented group living at Wallaga Lake. He found that the Green Valley group had more favourable attitudes towards education than the Wallaga Lake people, but not such a marked difference of attitude to integration. 'Wallaga Lake subjects agree significantly more than Green Valley subjects that it is not a good thing for one Aboriginal to do better in the modern world than other Aborigines. This apparently culturally determined attitude relating to group cohesiveness is detrimental to integration as it limits movement of an individual away from the group in terms of educational and occupational achievements.' Dawson also says that it was not possible to determine whether this group cohesiveness was 'culturally derived, a function of minority groups reward-cost outcomes, or due (in the case of the Wallaga Lake sample) to a certain degree of isolation, or again an interacting process involving all three factors' (p. 112).

He concluded that the general trend of his findings 'indicate that certain aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture are adversely influencing the development of attitudes towards education. Where urbanisation processes are in evidence - mainly among the Green Valley subjects - these are nearly always associated with the

development of more favourable attitudes. It was not always possible to determine whether the origin of an attitude was due to cultural influences, minority group co-hesiveness, or economic factors' (pp. 114-15).

Dawson's work seems to support Bain's suggestion that if an Aboriginal who is a member of a traditionally oriented group wishes to accept a new way, he must go against the group and opt out of it. It is not culturally acceptable to be individualistic and succeed in a new and different sphere. The whole attitude of Aborigines to life and education is in contrast with the European view. To the Aboriginal the group is important and maintaining it is an important value. The European view focuses on the individual. Dawson's conclusion suggests that you cannot change an Aboriginal's approach to education unless you urbanise him, i.e. make his way of life the same as ours. The people living at Green Valley who had been exposed to and influenced by urbanisation were more inclined to see the education offered by the European schools as having value.

Bain says that given the Aboriginal understanding of education, 'the European type of teaching may not be understood at all. Education, training, with an objective, which is perhaps even out of sight, education for change, is not always apprehended' (1969:2). For the traditional Aboriginal, learning to read and write might well be seen as having no relevance. He may see it, rather, as a threat to the status quo, making those who learn to read different to others.

Group cohesiveness amongst minority Aboriginal groups is such that if the group as a whole can see no advantages in western education, group pressure will work against a child excelling at school. If a child chooses to excel at school and pursue western education, he is in effect saying that he prefers the new way to the old way that the tribal group regards as right and proper. Children who do so are the exception.

Tribal Aborigines are prepared to accept change to the status quo if it benefits the whole group, and will then press for schooling for their children. When this happens, reading and writing should be linked to short term benefits such as writing letters when absent and reading enjoyable material.

2. MOVES TOWARD EUROPEAN VALUES

Today not all Aborigines are traditionally oriented. Studies are showing that some Aborigines who have had long contact with white people are assimilating some of the European values. As mentioned above, Dawson found that the urbanised Aborigines had more favourable attitudes to education than non-urbanised Aborigines. This

would suggest that they have been influenced by European ideas and values. To them a European type of education would not be as irrelevant as to more traditionally oriented Aborigines.

Betty Watts has found evidence of some acculturation towards 'doing' by Aborigines, but the change is incomplete. She explored achievement motivation among Aboriginal girls through a comparison of achievement related values expressed by Aboriginal mothers and their teenage daughters, as well as white mothers and daughters. Interviews were from four areas in Queensland — a white urban area, white rural area, an isolated Aboriginal settlement and an Aboriginal settlement in communication with nearby white communities. She concluded that 'research data would suggest that there is evidence of acculturation of the Aborigines in regard to certain value orientations, but that they have not reached the stage yet where positions on these orientations are as strongly held as they are by the dominant white group. Perhaps the relatively less marked preference for achievement-related values helps to explain their lack of social mobility' (1970:110).

A. K. Ekermann (1973) has also done some research on value orientation. He tested an Aboriginal community (unnamed) where only 4% of those interviewed had had _no_ schooling. Based on the results of his research, Ekermann came up with some conclusions that are contrary to the usual descriptions of Aboriginal values, as given by Elkin and other anthropologists:

1. Aborigines have been described as strongly past and present oriented; the group studied by Ekermann showed a future over present over past orientation.
2. Ekermann's results showed a markedly individual orientation, not the collective orientation usually ascribed to Aborigines.
3. Aborigines are commonly described as a people who see themselves in harmony with nature. Ekermann found just as much indication that they see themselves in subjection to nature and also in mastery of nature. In short, there was no clear predominance of any of these three orientations toward nature over the other two.

All of this seems to suggest that in some places at least, if not in all Aboriginal communities, there is a shift from 'being' towards 'doing'. This could well mean that in many places in Australia literacy skills will be taught to Aboriginal communities that no longer are firmly rooted in traditional values. However, I would expect that very few Aborigines will have completely rejected 'being' for 'doing' in the near future. The value of

'being' is probably still very important. In fact, the only adjustment made by some Aborigines is recognising that the white man is now a dominant factor in his environment.

In the past, Aborigines met their needs through hunting and gathering what their environment offered. Now they tend to 'hunt and gather' from the white man. The position of the Aborigines who are still markedly traditionally oriented is well summed up by Margaret Bain when she quotes an older Aboriginal man at Finke: 'The white man has a secret and he won't tell the Aborigine what it is' (1969:5). She goes on to comment, 'In the conflict between two societies, one based on "being" and the other on "doing" it is not surprising that such a statement should be voiced, for "doing" is the secret'.

When thinking of how to start a literacy programme, it would be well to try and assess if the dominant value still is 'being' or if there is a shift toward European values. This will affect how one would introduce literacy and seek to motivate potential readers. If 'being' is still the dominant value, it could well be that little benefit will be seen in learning to read. By learning to read, a person will be moving away from the status quo for his group and showing individualism. However, in some situations individualism will be seen as totally acceptable if the person's skill benefits the whole group. At Ernabella the acceptance of literacy was facilitated because it could reinforce the 'groupness' and emphasise the value of their one language. As Ernabella people moved to Finke, Alice Springs, Amata, Indulkana and Fregon, written communication helped to maintain group unity (Hart, personal communication).

Exposure to schooling may help <u>or</u> hinder vernacular literacy programmes. It may provide opportunity to see how Europeans benefit from reading and writing and thus give incentive for gaining the same skills or the attempt to read and write English may be such a failure that the Aboriginal person has no heart for attempting vernacular literacy. Each situation must be assessed to find out what value is seen in reading and what is the best way to motivate people.

3. TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

3.1 APPROACHES

Gatjil Munyarryun from Yirrkala says (1975) that traditional education was based on the four senses: seeing or imitating, touching, smelling and taste. Munyarryun omits hearing from this list, but Max Hart comments that this was also a means by which Aboriginal children were taught. He observed that the word '*Kulila* was always used by the Pitjantjatjara people of Central Australia to indicate that people were to "listen" and take note of what was about to be said' (Hart 1974:1).

From other observers of Aboriginal culture, we learn that prior to puberty Aboriginal children were mainly taught skills for coping with their environment, such as tracking. This training responsibility was undertaken by parents or other adult relatives. After puberty, more serious or harsh training took place and the tribe or tribal elders assumed the role of teacher and authority (Montague 1937:124-5; Malinowski 1963:268). Young Aboriginal children were given a free hand and rarely if ever were they chastised for disobedience. This situation is very different from what the children usually encounter in a European school room, where they are enclosed by four walls, expected to be still for long periods, and must speak only in a foreign language.

In his book *Kulila*, Max Hart devotes a whole chapter to the subject of traditional education and the educational methods used by Aborigines. Hart refers to Dr Penny, who in writing about tribal education showed that

> Aborigines aimed to transmit their living culture to each succeeding generation, not indiscriminately, but to those young people willing and able to receive it. Their purpose was to maintain and to develop the whole community, not just to develop individuals within the group. The emphasis was much more on the welfare of the tribe than on the success of any particular person within it. Also it is evident that Aboriginal education was not so much a preparation for life as an experience of life itself. It was not concerned with piling up credits, certificates or degrees for a possible position in the future, but with experiencing and enjoying life at the present time, in childhood, in youth and in adulthood. (Quoted in Hart 1974:8)

This is in agreement with Margaret Bain's comments, referred to earlier, about the group being the important thing.

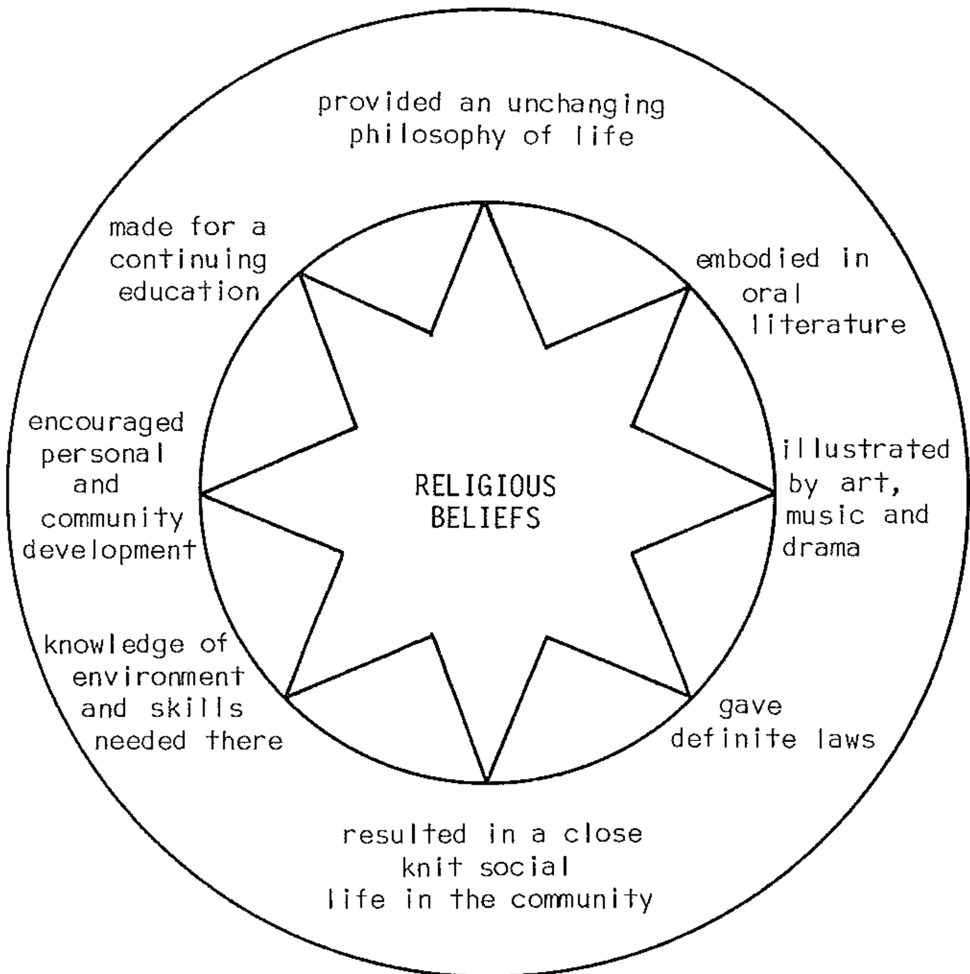
Hart sees many different facets of Aboriginal education with every facet centred around religious beliefs. There was no secular education as such. The permeating force of their life was religion. Food gathering, geography and social life are all connected with religious beliefs.

> From the belief in their spirit ancestors came their cosmic philosophy of how the earth they knew was formed. Their dreaming also gave purpose and relevance to their own life and that of their communities. This philosophy was not unfolded all at once through their education, but was gradually realised and understood from the time the child heard its first story, throughout the whole of initiation, and developed as the individual became more mature. (Hart, p. 9)

The following diagram, taken from Hart's book, shows Aboriginal education as a circle. 'It was life itself, a unity of experience', not a formal division into subjects as in our European schools.

FIGURE 1

FACETS OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION (Hart 1974:9)



This education went on for the whole of life. It was not just a preparation for life, it was life itself: 'It prepared the child for the life he was to lead, trained him in economic pursuits, gave him the necessary social ability, and helped him to adequately enjoy his leisure' (Hart, p. 13).

3.2 METHODS

After dealing with the facets of Aboriginal education, Hart describes a number of successful teaching methods that were used by Aborigines. One method was the existence of a strong personal relationship between the teachers and pupils. A child knew every adult in the camp and identified with them. At the time of initiation the boy entered into a special relationship with older teachers. He called these teachers *tjamu* and they called him *pakali* (in the Western Desert group). Girls entered a similar relationship with an older woman who was held responsible by the community for her pupil. The girl called this woman *kuntili* and *kuntili* called her *ukari*.

Hart explains a little more of how the relationship between the boy and his teacher was carried out. Working from a close personal relationship, the *tjamu* would take his pupil away from the camp and instruct him in an outdoor setting. When Hart visited one of the 'schools' run by the *tjamu* he observed that 'It was very noticeable that the boys were most obedient to the teachers, a very different degree of interest and attention was manifest in the outdoor setting from their attitude inside the schoolroom' (p. 14). On another occasion when a young woman teacher took a group of girls outside to get photographs and a story for an English reader, she was surprised at how the girls lost their shyness and became far more communicative. Aborigines are more at home outside and often feel inhibited when inside buildings such as a schoolroom.

The *tjamu* was also responsible to teach his *pakali* about areas outside the local area which would be visited for the purpose of trade and special corroborees. Stories of the origins of sacred sites and waterholes would be told. Location of waterholes and where to find different foods would be taught. The *pakali* would also learn from meeting different people. Participation in corroborees at these different places would highlight the common area of their beliefs. Thus travel was an important method of education.

Educational activities were related to the environment. For this reason the education of coastal people would have differed from that of the desert people. On the coast, kangaroo skins were used for the making of rugs and cloaks, whereas in the centre of Australia no kangaroo skins were used for totemic reasons. Thus environment had a big effect on the practical education of tribal members.

Practical experience was another successful method of instruction. A child learnt by observation and imitation how to make spears, hunt, perform religious ceremonies, cook, etc. If he failed in his attempt at the skill, then he would observe even more carefully

the next time. Repetition was an important part of learning. A craftsman, when teaching someone how to carve, might have to repeat a demonstration several times, but each time the demonstration would be repeated in a slightly different form.

Repetition was important in other areas of learning, too. Meggit says of the Warlpiri, 'although a man has seen all the ceremonies and ritual objects by the age of about thirty, he does not as a rule understand the religious significance of all of them; and he continues to acquire this knowledge slowly from his seniors, until he is an old man and is competent to teach others' (1962:235). Hart maintains (pp. 17-18)

> the deeper meaning of these ceremonies involving their philosophy and religion would only be gradually understood by the repetition of them throughout life . . . In the ceremonies themselves the tunes and rhythm of the songs are repeated with slight variations and increments and lines or words are repeated and slightly varied. It is not a method of useless and boring repetition but a repetition of what is to be learnt combined with some interesting new feature; it is a repetitious and incremental method which prevents boredom and yet insures that the learning takes place.

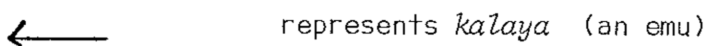
Another important means of helping Aboriginal children to learn was through challenge to their endurance. This meant that by the time boys were ready to be initiated, 'the challenge of their ordeal was met, as Strehlow noted, with keen expectancy and true fortitude. They were determined to meet the challenge of suffering with courage and prove themselves men. Provided this challenge was tempered to their capabilities, they were ready to endure pain and hardship to achieve the status of manhood' (Hart, p. 18).

To sum up, traditional Aboriginal teaching methods, as described by Hart, were the development of a strong pupil-teacher relationship, use of the outdoor environment, learning through practical experience, suiting the curriculum to the environment, using travel as a means to education, encouraging the development of powers of observation, repetition with careful variations and presenting a challenge to the learner. These methods were successful in the traditional environment. As very few Aborigines are now living in a totally traditional environment, we need to assess which of the above methods could be used in a literacy programme.

4. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION AND LITERACY PROGRAMMES

The skill of reading and writing is a foreign skill to Aborigines. There was little that was akin to it in their culture. Some tribes have a certain number of pictorial symbols which have meaning, and these symbols can make an excellent starting point for literacy. The following are two Warlpiri symbols (Hart, personal communication):

represents *maḻu* (a red kangaroo)


represents *kalaya* (an emu)

The Aboriginal skill of tracking might seem a starting point for learning to read. Both skills require careful observation of 'marks' to get correct information. An Aboriginal can tell from a kangaroo track how big the kangaroo was, whether it was wounded or had something unusual about it, how fast it was travelling, in what direction it was travelling and how old the track was. Yet this is rather different from learning the letter symbols of an alphabet, that the letters arranged in one sequence symbolise a certain word of speech while a different combination of the same letters symbolises something different, and that a word must always be read from a certain vantage point, i.e. left to right and right way up.

As reading and writing are foreign skills for the Aboriginal, the method used to teach literacy must be chosen with care. It could be an eclectic method as put forth by Gudschinsky (1972), a Breakthrough to Literacy approach (Mackay and Thompson 1970), a phonic method, or another. No matter which method one chooses, it will involve the teaching of concepts that are foreign to Aborigines. In this situation the question is how can the teaching of literacy skills be carried out in as culturally relevant a way as possible? As far as I know, no one has developed or discovered an 'Aboriginal method' for the teaching of reading and writing as opposed to western methods. Yet we can incorporate many aspects of traditional Aboriginal education.

4.1 TEACHER-PUPIL RELATIONSHIP

The traditional teacher-pupil relationship should probably be capitalised on, which will mean fairly small classes. Walmatjari adults have told me that their way of doing things is in small groups: 'It is not good to have large classes.' It has been my

experience that adults learning to read and write in their own language desire to develop a strong teacher-pupil relationship. If little individual attention is given, it is likely that the pupil will lose interest and stop attending the class. Aborigines should be trained to teach other Aborigines how to read and write in their own language, just as soon as it is possible, in an adult vernacular literacy programme. Aboriginal teachers will be able to make good use of the traditional teacher-pupil relationship in their teaching.

Because some relationships do not permit a teacher-pupil relationship, e.g. a son-in-law cannot teach a person in mother-in-law relationship to him, it is important that teachers are from more than one skin group, so that all may have the opportunity to learn. It would be more culturally acceptable if men were taught by men and women by women.

4.2 OUT-OF-DOORS ENVIRONMENT

With traditionally oriented adults, I have found the most suitable place for a class to be outside. The adults feel uncomfortable and ill at ease when surrounded by four walls. Outside, sitting on the ground in the shade of tree or bough shade, they are far more at ease and relaxed. When a literacy class was started at Fitzroy Crossing for Walmatjari women, the class was held inside a house for the first two weeks because of the wet weather. Then the class moved outside to a bough shade and the pupils were noticeably more comfortable. At Looma the breezeway of a house was regarded as an acceptable alternative to sitting in the shade of a tree. Working out-of-doors will limit the amount of blackboard space and the kinds of teaching aids you can use, but adaptations can be made. If the pupils feel more comfortable and secure, it is worth the effort involved. I certainly found it worth the effort. (You may find, however, that in some places a classroom has come to be regarded as the 'proper place' for literacy instruction, and you may need to at least start your sessions inside for community acceptance.)

4.3 PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

The traditional method of learning through practical experience is certainly applicable. It is only as the pupil tries to write that he will learn to write. The teacher explains the way a letter is formed by describing what he is doing as he writes the letter on the blackboard. He then has the pupil try to write it from memory. The pupil is actually mimicking the teacher in learning how to write. He is watching and then trying to do it, in just the way he has learnt to do so many other things. The process is repeated until the pupil can write the letter from memory.

Learning to read is more abstract and involves the ability to recognise graphic symbols, decode them and recode them as words and sentences with meaning. This is a foreign skill. In the past Aborigines have had spoken language and a complicated sign language. Written language has been described to me by Skipper Jangkan of Looma as a third method of communicating. Aborigines can interpret complicated designs engraved on shields, etc., but this is probably closer to pictorial representation than the kind of graphic representation we have for those sounds that make up an alphabet. The skill of reading can only be achieved through experience. For the Aboriginal it is a more abstract kind of experience than he is used to and foreign to his traditional way of life. It is a new kind of experience to sit in a class and learn to understand what letters and words are all about.

4.4 ADAPTING TO THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment will probably influence when classes are held, both as to time of day and which season. What we might think is a suitable time could well be regarded as unsuitable by the Aborigines. I used to think the wet was a good time for the Walmatjari but it turned out that the dry was better. During the wet season large numbers of Aborigines gather at Fitzroy Crossing for several months. Little work is available on cattle stations and the wet is regarded as holiday time. Corroborees are also held during this time and people tend to move from one centre to another for ceremonies and to visit relatives. The result is that people are too preoccupied with ceremonies and with visiting and entertaining relatives to include regular literacy classes in their activities. The dry season when there are not as many distractions was the better time.

Another way that we can adapt to the environment is in the teaching of writing. For some Aborigines, e.g. Western Desert groups, it will be most helpful if all the directions for writing a letter of the alphabet were given in terms of north, south, east and west, and up and down. This is the way they are used to giving directions and to orient to this in teaching writing is most helpful. In these ways the literacy programme can be adapted to the environment and the people.

4.5 TRAVEL

Traditionally Aborigines used travel as a means of education. These days Aborigines still travel, and visits are made to other places for weeks and months at a time. Perhaps the best use that could be made of this method would be to go somewhere with a group and then have them write a story about it. Also people could be encouraged

to write stories of places they have visited when they return home. It might be beneficial to occasionally camp out with people and have an intensive time of teaching literacy skills away from the demands of daily life.

4.6 OBSERVATION

Development of the powers of observation was a very important teaching method used by Aborigines. Learning to read and write fluently requires more than observation, but observational ability can be utilised in learning to recognise the graphic symbols that are needed for decoding skills in reading. Observational ability could be utilised if one was to teach reading solely by means of sight words. It seems to me that Aborigines have a strong urge to learn this way. This is how they learn tracking and nearly everything else that they do. The adult Aboriginal will tend to look at a word and then try to memorise it, but the memory load soon becomes too heavy. Furthermore, the sight word approach does not provide word attack skills for coping with unknown words.

Even though a student can use his skills of observation in learning new symbols, he still must learn the link between sound and symbols and the relationship between groups of symbols. This is the most difficult part of learning to read for adult Aborigines.

4.7 REPETITION

Often in the teaching of literacy it will be necessary to repeat something that was in the previous day's lesson. Here we need to follow what the Aborigines did and repeat the lesson but with variation. If it is still not fully grasped, it needs to be repeated again but in a different way until it is understood. This approach will avoid boring repetitions that soon dull any interest.

4.8 CHALLENGE

Learning to read is a big challenge for an adult and the primer material must be carefully graded in its progression to preserve this challenge, with some new words in each story and the stories gradually becoming longer. However, we do not want to make learning to read and write an endurance test. If we do, nothing will be gained and a lot of harm done as no pleasure will be gained from learning to read. It will take real skill to make sure that the lessons are stimulating and that progress is at just the right speed.

5. OTHER CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

So far I have restricted myself to dealing with Aboriginal teaching methods as described by Hart. However, there are a number of other factors that should be considered if we are to make literacy as relevant as possible. These include kinship, content of literature, illustrations, teacher's guides and teacher training.

5.1 KINSHIP

Kinship and social groupings are a very important part of Aboriginal life for they define how Aborigines relate to each other. The young child soon learns that with certain people he can have a joking relationship, others he must always be serious with and still others are to be avoided. For example, mother-in-law and son-in-law avoidance is commonly practised. The two avoid each other and never speak to one another. This kind of relationship can cause problems in a class if a boy and girl in this classificatory relationship are seated together or asked to work together.

R. M. Berndt (1965:8) has the following to say in reference to children at school:

> The section and subsection systems, along with the traditional kinship systems when they are operative, influence a child's response in a school situation: for instance, where he or she sits when allowed to choose, how he or she co-operates and participates with certain other children, and so on. Even in 'sophisticated' areas this still has a bearing on children's responses.

The same is true of adults. If a potential pupil is in an avoidance relationship with the teacher, that person cannot be a pupil in that class. Sometimes the relationship can be manipulated or changed to an alternative one so that the pupil can attend. On one occasion a Walmatjari young man who wanted to learn to read Walmatjari used an acceptable alternative kinship term to relate himself to the European teacher who had been given a skin grouping. This allowed him to talk with the instructor and be taught by her. I think it would be very unlikely that a relationship between Aborigines in the community would be readily changed in the same way. This highlights the need that any teachers that are trained should belong to different skin groups or social groupings. Otherwise there could be a whole section of the community unable to attend classes because of kinship pressures and restrictions.

A knowledge of the kinship terms and the kind of relationship you can have with each person in a certain kinship category can be very helpful. Among the Walmatjari it is customary to address a person by the kin term that describes his relationship to you. If he is a grandfather or a brother-in-law then you address him by the appropriate relationship term.

Proper names are rarely used, and if a teacher insists on using them it may be considered very disrespectful by adult Aborigines. If you know what kind of a relationship goes with each term, then you know whether a person should be addressed respectfully or not at all, or if a joking relationship is permitted. Also you will know whether your relationship permits you to correct a person when he makes a mistake.

Another important relationship that comes under kinship and social groupings is that of men and women. It could be very unwise to mix men and women in one class, as the two groups are never in competition with each other. Also it is very uncultural for a woman to do better than a man. On Croker Island, as a boy approaches puberty and manhood it is common for him to drop out of school, so that by the age of 12 most boys have left school. It is just not culturally acceptable for boys and girls to be in such close contact with one another at that age (personal communication, B. Larrimore). It is also wiser for adults to be taught before children. In Aboriginal culture it is unheard of for children to know more than their elders. If children are taught first it is likely that the adults will have little or no interest in acquiring literacy skills and could come to regard it as 'kids stuff'. The wishes of the community should be sought in regard to who is taught first to read and who is trained as teachers.

5.2 CONTENT OF LITERATURE

A good literacy programme will have a number of books printed in the vernacular before a full-scale literacy programme is started. If this literature is going to stimulate interest in learning to read, then it must appeal to them and satisfy needs which they feel. For some of the Walmatjari, portions of scripture printed in their own language have been the great motivation for learning to read. Personal experience stories of life in the desert, on cattle stations, or adventures on hunting trips have also been popular. Until there is someone who can write such stories in their own language, it will be necessary to record and transcribe stories. But the question is, what kind of stories?

Ann Cates, from her experience in Papua New Guinea, has written up fourteen different ways to find out what people want to read (1973). Helen Marten gives a summary of these fourteen guidelines in her

article 'Keeping Literates Literate' (1974:112) and I quote this summary below:

1. Record historical events, listing facts, figures and names, and then see which things the people talk about most.
2. Record oral literature — stories, poems, chants, songs. Which do they like best? Note distinctive stylistic features.
3. Talk with village authorities on oral literature. Ask who tells the best stories, who knows the language best, who knows the tribal history best. Ask these authorities what the people like to hear the best. Even ask what to ask about — 'I want to know about *sing-sings*. What should I ask about?'
4. Note humour — the plight of others is a popular theme.
5. Note conversation. What do people talk about? In the Atzera language group, food, money, family and the past were the most popular topics.
6. Note questions people ask. What do younger people ask older people?
7. Ask people what they want to read. The first time people are asked what they want to read, they may not be able to answer because they may have nothing to base their judgments on.
8. Observe reactions to books shown.
9. Note what books people choose to read from libraries or buy in the markets. (The cover may have a strong influence on the casual reader.) What books do people buy in the trade language?
10. Observe reaction to pictures. Observe as they read magazines. Test interest by showing pictures. (In one SIL programme the men were more interested in things outside the culture than women.)
11. Observe the culture. What are some of the special skills? Do people want old stories and customs recorded?
12. Note tribal emphasis on needs (physical — food, recreation, sex; psychological — acceptance by the group). Provide literature that satisfies group consciousness.
13. Note the problems from their point of view. We may see problems that they don't see. Generally people will not accept literature on a topic until they see the need for it.

14. Note what the literates read about. The Atzera people wrote bird stories, football game reports, legends, humour stories, etc. They wrote both fact and fiction.

Helen Marten concludes her article by saying, 'One of the major goals of a literacy programme should be to develop tribal literature. Teaching reading is only part of this goal. The literature that is developed must contain that which satisfies the felt needs of the indigenous people themselves. It must have the flavour of the local culture and it should be authored by a member of the culture.' (See Kondo and Wendell 1970 for another useful article on the kind of reading material that will motivate people.) If we want Aborigines to be enthusiastic about reading, we must produce the kind of literature that they will want to read.

If the reading material is to be acceptable it must also be linguistically sound. The language must feel natural when read. This can be achieved through use of idioms, common vocabulary and natural-sounding sentences. The best way to achieve this is to have native-authored material.

5.3 ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustrations can add to the attractiveness of a book, help teach a keyword in a primer and be a useful teaching aid. However, pictures should be selected carefully, otherwise the picture might be conveying a message that is very different to that of the written message. Hall Duncan (1962:5) mentions a primer in a West African language where the text read 'falling on the ground' but the illustration showed 'falling from the roof'. The precise meaning of the verb used in the text was not made clear to the illustrator. This mistake was very confusing for the reader.

Duncan also points out the importance of knowing the reader. How will he react to the illustration? How much will he be influenced by the artistic conventions of his own people? What kind of attitudes and predispositions does he have that will influence his reactions to the illustration? Does he perceive depth when looking at a picture? How does he see fore-shortening?

> In a series of tests on how Africans see the human form in a drawing, we found that in such things as health posters that one would have to be careful in showing the limbs of the body with excessive fore-shortening. A good example of this is showing a picture of a healthy person in full front view. Fore-shortened feet appear as stubbs to some Africans. Think of the confusion confronting such a person as he reads the text about a healthy person. (Duncan 1962:21)

Duncan's book contains some good guidelines for choosing illustrations.

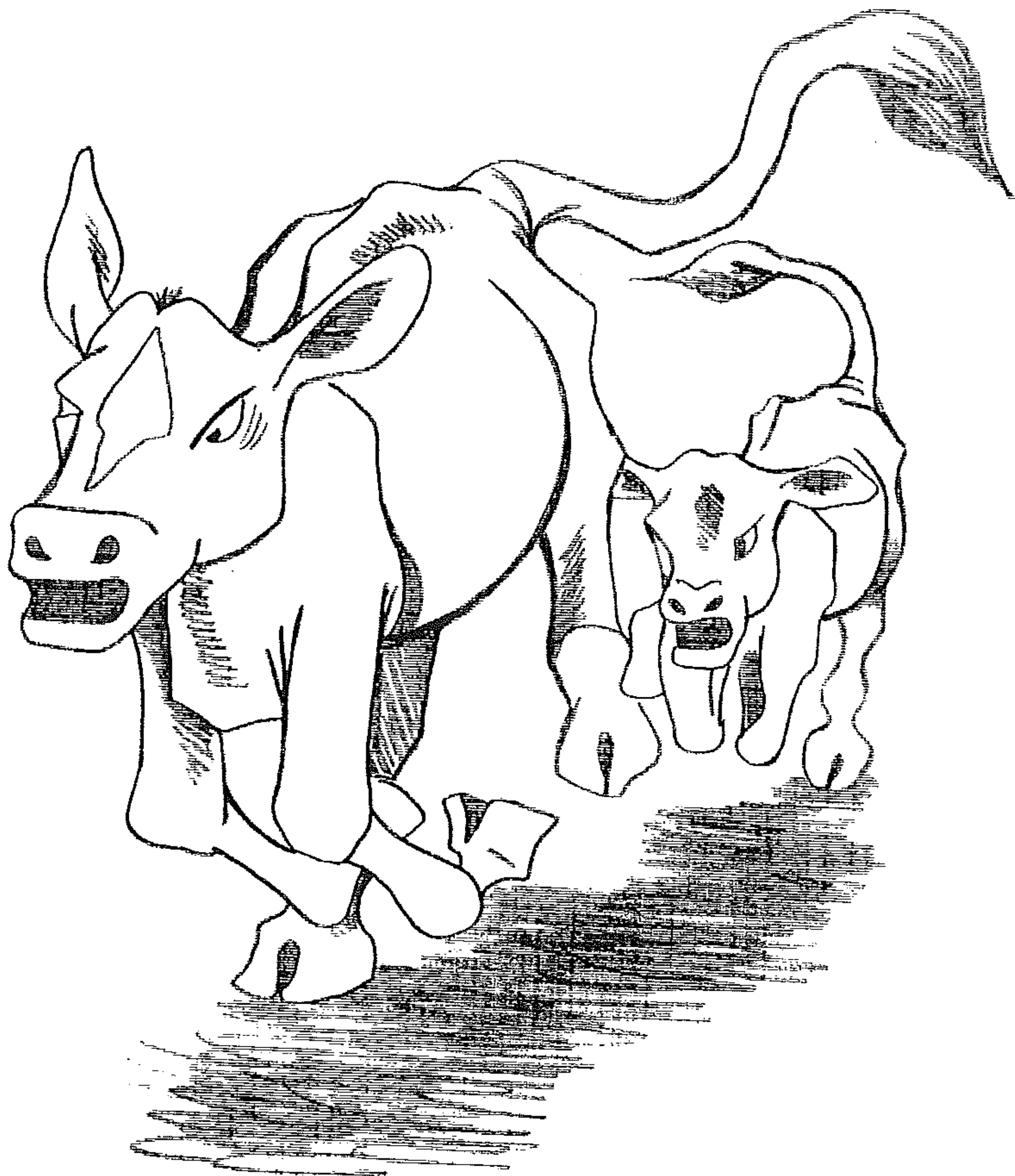
Alan Healey (1974) supports the views expressed by Duncan. Although Healey refers to one experiment in West Africa that indicated that improvement in depth perception is possible with three months training, he raises the point (pp. 142-43) that 'to train school children in the conventions of western pictorial representation is not the only approach that can be taken in developing nations . . . in fact why not encourage local artists to do the illustrating for posters, primers, readers, other primary school books, adult education booklets and Scripture translations?' It is my opinion that this is the way we must go if our literacy programme and materials are to be as culturally relevant as possible.

John Sievert (1970:20) refers to a test that was carried out in Papua New Guinea to discover which of the following was preferred:

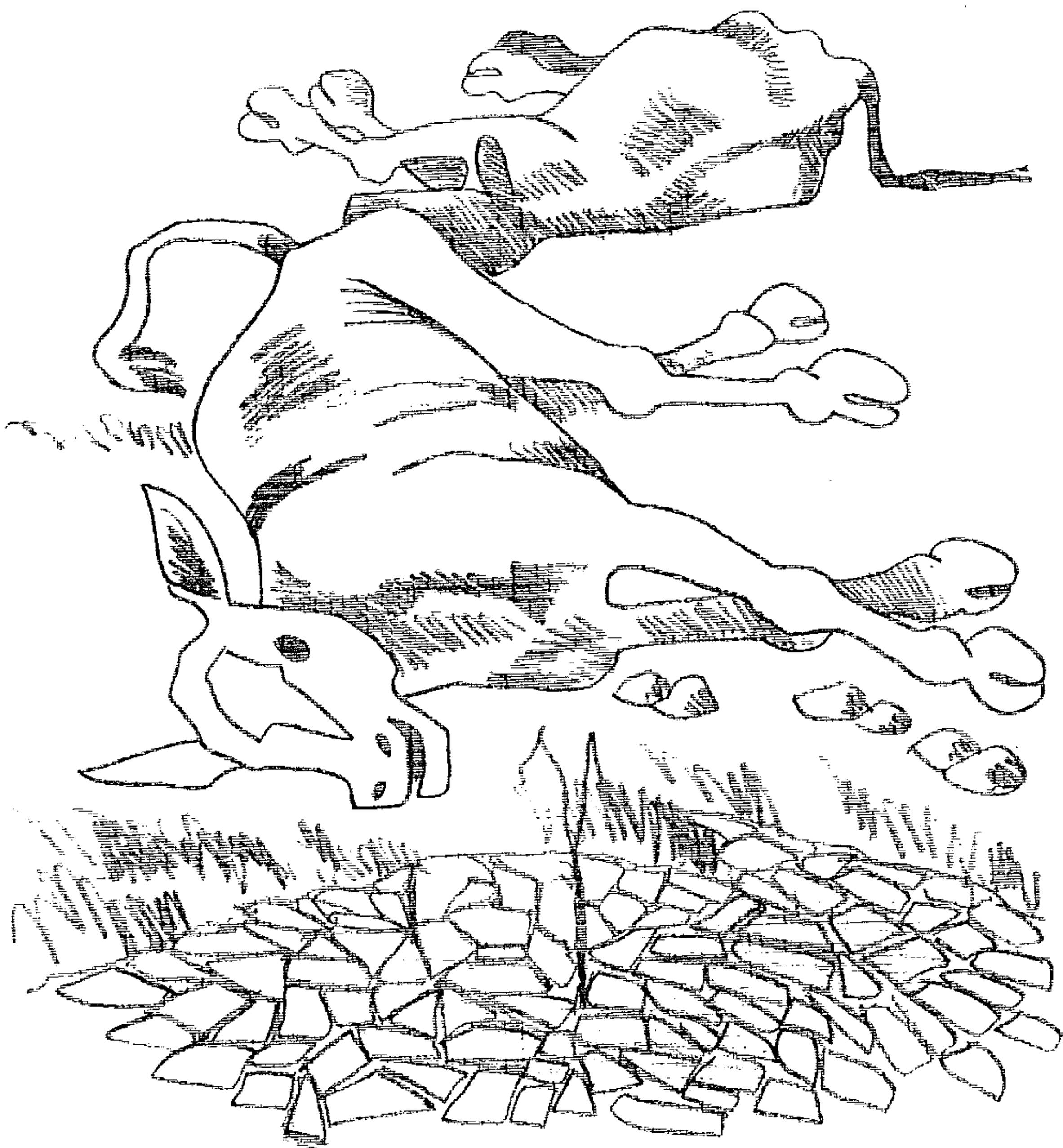
a) photographs,
b) three dimensional drawing,
c) a predominantly black reverse or scratchboard,
d) a two dimensional outline drawing with an additional colour added,
e) a single colour two dimensional outline drawing or
f) a stick figure.

Among other things, photographs were shown to have a high prestige value in Papua New Guinea. Roy Gwyther-Jones (1971) has written on the results of another test that was conducted in Papua New Guinea in 1970. In both these tests, the results are applicable only to Papua New Guinea but the tests could probably be adapted to determine the preference of Australian Aborigines.

It is wise to always test your illustrations before they are printed, and this is especially so if they are drawn by a European. Some illustrations that had been drawn by a European artist were tested out before being printed. A copy of some of the pictures, what each represented and how each was perceived by the Walmatjari is set out on the following pages. (This information was provided by Eirlys Richards, an SIL fieldworker with the Walmatjari.)

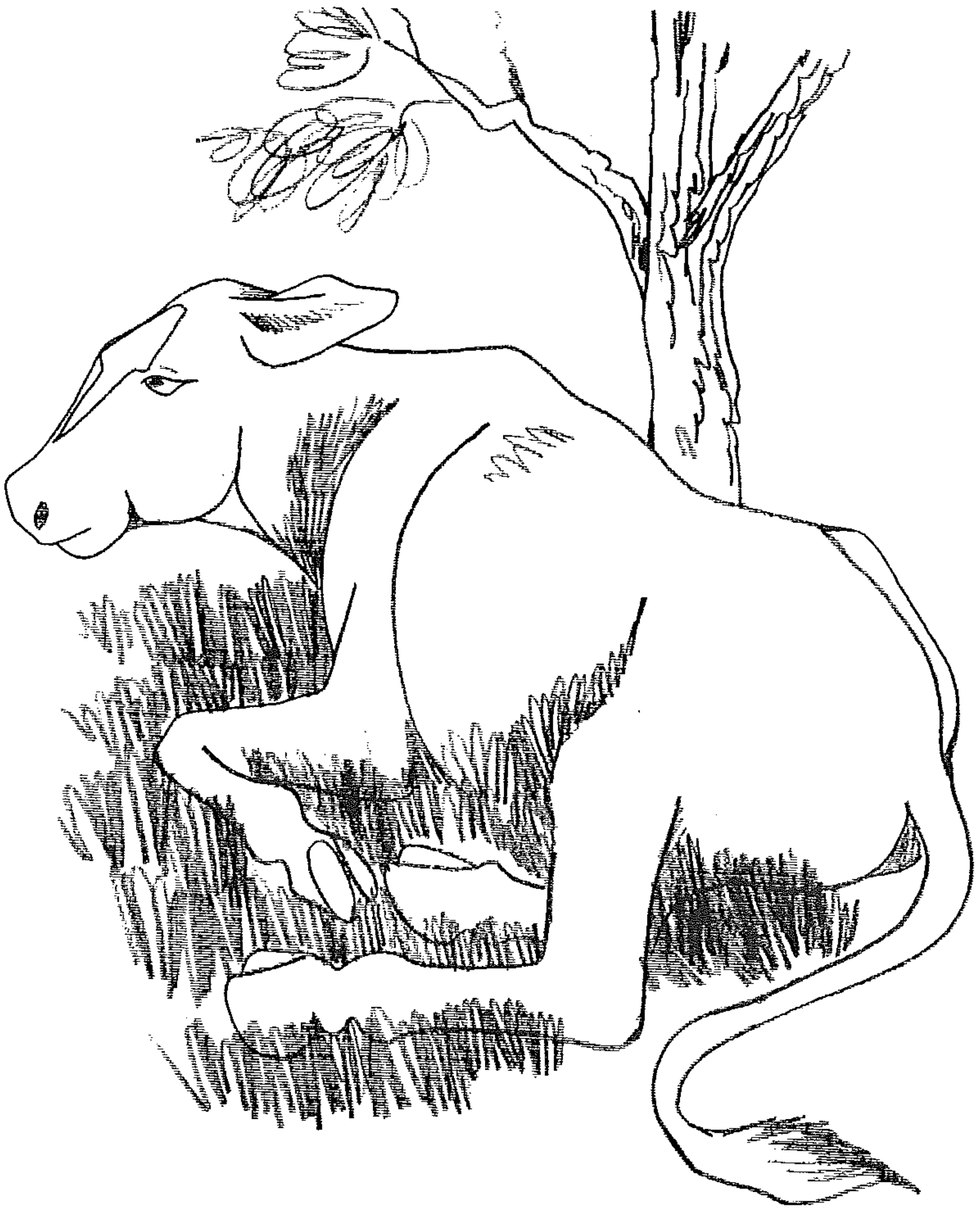


This illustration represents a mother and calf running. The Walmatjari thought the cows were lying down chewing their cuds. The position of the front legs indicated this.



In this picture the cows are lying dead beside a dried up waterhole. The Walmatjari thought that the one behind was drinking milk from the front cow. There seemed to be nothing to indicate that they were lying down. It was also thought that the one behind had just been born.

The man on the horse was chasing the two cows and using a rifle to shoot at them. The rifle was not obvious to the Walmatjari.



In this picture the cow is lying down in the shade. It was thought to be a mule because of the ears lying back, the shape of the ears, and because of the beard (dark line under the chin mistaken for a beard). Also the Walmatjari thought it was in running motion.

Once these pictures were adjusted they were happily accepted. As the perspective of traditionally oriented Aborigines is very different from that of Europeans, it was just as well the above pictures were checked. However, it is so much better if an indigenous artist can draw the illustrations.

5.4 ABORIGINAL TEACHERS

If a literacy programme is to be culturally relevant and not just another white man's 'thing' it will be important to have Aborigines doing the teaching just as soon as possible. This means having a teacher's guide available for them to use. Anne Cate's article (1973b) would serve as a good starting point for anyone planning a teacher's guide.

Teachers will need to be chosen with care. They must be acceptable to the community. As mentioned earlier, it is desirable that they should be from different skin groups or social groupings. You might need to train women to teach the women, depending on what the community feeling is about women teachers. If you train women as teachers, it may be necessary to have a separate training session for them. The trainee teachers should be able to read and write fluently in the language they are to teach in. If they are going to be successful, the training programme needs to be long enough to give a thorough training in the teaching techniques they are to use. This kind of teaching will be foreign to the traditionally oriented Aboriginal, and he needs careful training if he is going to be able to carry it out with confidence. Then there should be adequate supervision and encouragement to assist the new teachers where needed so they are not left to flounder and become discouraged. The supervisor needs to be always on the lookout to see in what ways the teachers are adapting their teaching to meet Aboriginal needs. Many improvements in teaching patterns can come from this. The supervisor should always be alert to see if any of the teachers are evolving a truly cultural way for teaching reading that produces results. Such a discovery would be extremely valuable. The sooner the teaching of literacy skills is done enthusiastically by Aborigines, the more likely it will be seen as relevant by potential readers.

For group-oriented traditional Aborigines, we should not try to get pupils to compete with one another, nor should we focus attention on any one person who is doing well. These students will want to do things as a group. So if one person is having trouble, the pupil next to him will tell him an answer. Then all can go on to the next lesson or book at the same time. One way this can be coped with is to have plenty of supplementary reading for the brighter pupils. This idea of doing things as a group is somewhat foreign to our individualistic European way, but if we realise the pressure of the group in Aboriginal culture, we can find ways to use it to our

advantage in teaching literacy.

No matter how excellent the reading materials, or how well trained the teachers, a literacy programme will fail if the people are not motivated. The motivation could come from a number of sources: community appreciation for the skills of vernacular reading and writing, desire for knowledge, a need to write letters or a desire to read Scripture. If motivation is missing, there is little point in starting a literacy programme. Time would be better spent in stirring up motivation and showing how literacy would be a benefit to the community.

6. CONCLUSION

A study of Aboriginal culture, teaching methods and ways of doing things can give us many clues for making the literacy programme as relevant and acceptable to the people as possible. It can also give clues as to what to avoid, such as ignoring kinship terms and relationships, holding classes at unsuitable times and having too many pupils in a class. But in making use of such information, we must not think that Europeans are teaching literacy in an Aboriginal way. It will be Aborigines who understand the foreign concepts and skills involved in learning to read who will be able to teach reading to traditionally oriented Aborigines in a cultural way.

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper was originally written in 1976. Since then Stephen Harris, in particular, has published some excellent material on Aboriginal approaches to learning. Harris's material is worthwhile reading for anyone involved in teaching Aboriginal adults or children. Bibliographic information is given in 'Suggested Readings' at the end of this paper.

2. I would like to express my appreciation to Susanne Hargrave for editing the manuscript and to John Sandefur, Eirlys Richards, Max Hart and Pam Harris for reading the manuscript and giving me helpful comments.

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N.B. *Read* is a publication of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Papua New Guinea Branch (Box 233 via Lae, Ukarumpa, PNG). *Notes on Literacy* is an in-house publication of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Copies of articles from either *Read* or *Notes on Literacy* can be requested from the Librarian, Summer Institute of Linguistics, PO Berrimah, Darwin, NT 5788.

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