

Gumbaynggirr Yuludarla Jandaygam: Gumbaynggirr Dreaming Story Collection

edited by Steve Morelli, Gary Williams, Dallas Walker

vii + 312pp., Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative,
Nambucca Heads, 2016,
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This is a remarkable book. It is clearly the result of many years of work by dedicated and knowledgeable people, both Gumbaynggirr and European. The stories are from three different dialect areas of Gumbaynggirr, in mid-north coastal New South Wales.

I must admit to being one of those who open a new book and cannot help looking at the illustrations first. The illustrations in this book are ideal. They are finely and delicately drawn by Shaa Smith. They provide an artistic framework for the stories and enhance them and do not obtrude. The landscapes that are celebrated in these stories are shown in quiet scenes: there are no glossy photographs. There is a muted distinction in the colour of the pages between the general introductory material, and different muted colours for each of the dialects represented. This makes it much easier to navigate one's way around, to look up material from the introductory section or to switch dialects. It is clear that everything imaginable has been done to make the book user-friendly.

It is current practice in editing language texts to have three lines: the text, below it the word for word translation and analysis, and in a third line the translation into English. This can look quite clumsy and the English translation does not necessarily stand out clearly. In the present work the English translation is in a separate vertical column. This means that the text and the gloss are clearly visible as a unit, and someone who just wants to know the story can follow it uninterrupted in the vertical column.

These wonders of layout and presentation are by no means the only reason why this is such a remarkable book. In sheer extent it is outstanding both in the number of stories and in their length and detail. In traditional days, Australia was covered by a network of myths and stories of Ancestors celebrated in songs and ceremonies. These were at the heart of social and religious life. With this work, Gumbaynggirr has become one of the very few languages of the wider south-eastern parts of Australia for which there is now more than a brief record of this great unwritten literature. In all the three dialectal traditions, the Ancestors are perceived as characters in a drama. There is little room for a narrator in the Nymboidan stories, and the earliest stories in the collection are entirely in dramatic form. The introduction discusses this and states (p. 21):

It is our belief that the stories would have been acted out by the storyteller. Tindale noted one long story about the Eaglehawk and Crow in Maraura, the Paakantyi language near the Murray-Darling junction, published in Tindale 1939. This is a dialogue between the two characters.

Tindale stated, ‘The principal Maraura text takes the form of a recital or monologue, in what may be regarded for convenience, as two acts. In this form it is told at evening gatherings of both sexes, around the campfire’.¹ He mentions the ‘dramatization introduced by change of voice and tone’. One can imagine exactly the same situation with the Gumbaynggirr stories. Contributors to the Gumbaynggirr book remember having heard such recitals as children (p. 21). Tindale obviously had real insight but sadly he did not even name his informant, Peter Bonney, in his published version of the story.

Such vivid storytelling must have happened around many, many campfires while the old men who knew the stories were still alive, and it is wonderful that this has been recorded so well for Gumbaynggirr, when it must have been lost in so many places.

The detailed study of the text contributes insights into social life, such as the use of respect plurals in pronouns, avoidance words and the use of the imperative to show excitement. There is some detailed site information and an impressive list of references.

This book is a powerful work that shows an ideal way of presenting stories. The Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative and the editors Steven Morelli, Peter Gary Williams and Dallas Fenton Walker, as well as the illustrator Shaa Elaine Smith, need to be congratulated, and we pay tribute to Gerhard Laves who wrote down Philip Shannon’s texts in 1929.

Reference

Tindale, Norman B. 1939, ‘Eagle and Crow myths of the Maraura tribe, lower Darling River, New South Wales’, *South Australian Museum Records* 6(3): 243–61.

¹ Tindale 1939: 243.

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