

7

‘Without culture, you’ve got nothing’: Taungurung cultural heritage

Uncle Roy’s knowledge of Taungurung bush tucker and bush medicine, shared in Chapter 6, makes tangible the legacy of generational connections to Country that his family have maintained despite dispossession. This knowledge speaks to deep family belonging in the Upper Goulburn and Upper Yarra River valleys. Uncle Roy’s understanding of the distinctive character of Taungurung culture was also informed by a personal history of wide travel and connection with diverse Aboriginal people and cultures. Uncle Roy recalls the understanding gained through comparison and contrast:

All my life I’ve lived in Healesville except for a couple of years when I worked with circuses on the circuit with Ashton’s Circus and Wirth’s Circus. I worked with the elephants and as an entertainer, being a clown, putting up the tents, pulling it down, getting it all ready for a show. It was a good life. I was workin’ hard, but I got to like it, even though it was very hard. We went right up into Queensland, Dubbo, Mudgee, all over the place. I met a lot of other Aboriginals and got talkin’ to them. I learnt a lot about Aboriginal cultures then.¹

1 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS3001141.

Uncle Roy placed lifelong importance on his reputation as a hard worker. This labouring identity meant a lot to him in his old age:

Here I am at 75 and I still cut me own wood. Even with this crook shoulder, I am still swinging a splitting axe. I can't just sit down and do nothing!²

The Patterson family established a generational niche in the timber industry after legislative changes allowed them to return to the Healesville district from Cummeragunja. Here they earned a family reputation as skilled and reliable timber getters. Uncle Roy's family and personal history demonstrates how Aboriginal people resisted assimilation, took pride in their Aboriginality, and passed on cultural knowledge to the next generation while negotiating legislative and cultural oppression. Previous chapters have shown how specific legislation introduced by the Victorian Government in the nineteenth century attempted to circumscribe and control most aspects of Aboriginal life, including employment, marriage and child rearing. The assimilationist agenda of this legislation, combined with the attitude and actions of the settler community, reinforced the assumption that Aboriginal people would only find acceptance in mainstream society if they relinquished their culture. Yet, the experience of the Patterson family shows that the need for labour in rural communities also provided niches where Aboriginal culture could quietly thrive, away from the conformist pressure of majority culture.³ Semi-autonomous work, such as that available in the timber industry, provided everyday spaces where Aboriginal people could pursue their cultural priorities. When he was a younger man, Uncle Roy found another niche that accepted Aboriginal labour and provided opportunities to learn more about Aboriginal cultures across Australia. As Uncle Roy's brother wryly noted at his wake: one day the circus was in Healesville, and so was Roy, and the next day the circus had packed up and gone, and so had Roy!

'I did what my ancestors did, we roamed'

Uncle Roy's circus adventure is part of a long history of Aboriginal engagement in rural recreation and entertainment industries, both within their home areas and as itinerant workers. When bush carnivals and

2 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS3001140.

3 Hunter, 'Rough Riding', 93.

agricultural shows brought boxing tents and rodeo fixtures to town, they soon attracted the attention of local Aboriginal communities. Trips to the annual agricultural show feature in Aboriginal autobiographies because they offered an exciting break from routine and, sometimes, rare public validation of Aboriginal identity.

Author Ruth Heggarty, for example, recalled the anticipation of being 'let loose' at the Murgon show in south-east Queensland. From the vantage point of the mission truck, she saw 'lots of camp people walking in, or riding bikes or horses, or in sulkies' making their way to the showground gates. Contextualised by her regulated life in the girls' dormitory at Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement, a new dress and pocket money to spend freely at the local show represented rare excitement.⁴ Bill Simon also recalled waiting impatiently for the annual Kendall show on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, when 'enough bottle collection money meant we could go on rides, eat hotdogs and go to sideshow alley'. Later, as an inmate at the notorious Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Home, Bill would scan the fighters lined up in the boxing tent at the Kempsey show, hoping to see his father, who supplemented the family income by competing in boxing fixtures around the district.⁵ Skilled local Aboriginal men like Bill Simon's father took the opportunity to exhibit their prowess in social contexts that otherwise diminished Aboriginal masculinity, while also competing for significant prize money. Bill recalled recognising his Uncle Jim Simon in the boxing tent line-up, and that seeing him 'standing there, looking proud and strong ... in his silk boxing robe filled me with pride'.⁶

The permanent workforce of travelling shows was supplemented by local Aboriginal talent and their displays of expertise in rough riding, animal handling and entertainment bolstered Aboriginal prestige in rural communities. Richard Broome's research into tent boxing troupes reveals that itinerant Aboriginal boxers were 'popular among the local Aboriginal community', many of whom 'turned out to see them on the line-up board or claimed a connection to them'.⁷ Wendy Holland and Mark Valentine St Leon suggested that travelling show communities employed Aboriginal people not only on the basis of talent, but also in solidarity, because show people were also marginalised by mainstream Australian society.⁸

4 Heggarty, *Is That You, Ruthie?*, 84.

5 Simon, Montgomerie and Tuscano, *Back on the Block*, 8, 48.

6 Simon, Montgomerie and Tuscano, *Back on the Block*, 48.

7 Broome, 'Theatres of Power', 12, 21.

8 St Leon, 'Celebrated at First', 64; Holland, 'Reimagining Aboriginality', 95.

According to Holland, 'the entertainment world was a fringe culture with its own rules and mores which were more liberal than those of the dominant settled society'.⁹ Circus life gave Uncle Roy an unexpected opening for hard work, wide travel and a break from restrictions that seemed to chaff back in Healesville. He recalls his early adventures:

I spent two years, 1961 and 1963, with Ashton's Circus as a tent hand, truck driver [and] as a clown. We went from Healesville right over to Norseman in Western Australia in 12 months, runnin' around to all different towns. Then I went back home and came back into the sawmill here at Healesville. They knew what I could do. There used to be 25 sawmills on Healesville; there was plenty of work in the timber game. I got sick of that again and went back to Wirth's Circus.¹⁰

One of the key benefits of the circus life, for Uncle Roy, was the opportunity it provided to connect with Aboriginal communities across Australia. In the circus, he learnt more about Aboriginal cultures:

As soon as Aboriginal people come in, I'd have a yarn with them, talk about their culture, talk about my culture; our laws and Dreamtime is very similar, but our totems are different. You can have kangaroos, wallabies, wombats, koalas, snakes, lizards, platypus, birds. I met a hell of a lot of people travelling round for those two years. Then I spent three years up in Darwin; I got out of the cold! Then came back and nearly bloody froze!¹¹

These periods away from Healesville, which lasted 15 years, reinforced Uncle Roy's appreciation of his distinctive Taungurung culture and history. He associated this time with the purposeful seasonal travel of his ancestors, which he described as 'roaming':

When I was workin' at Healesville, I was happy, but something made me go; I did what my ancestors did, we roamed. I roamed right around Australia three times and it took me 15 years. I worked as I went, but I always came back to Healesville. Then in

9 Holland, 'Reimagining Aboriginality', 95.

10 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

11 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

2002, I came up here to Taggerty, and I said, 'I am home'. I could feel the weight liftin' off me, 'I'm home'. Now I'm not moving off my ancestral Country, not to live anyway.¹²

Uncle Roy shares his generational knowledge of Taungurung culture below, revealing a way of life that responded to the distinct character of the central Victorian environment. Generational fidelity to Taungurung cultural laws ensured clan sustainability. This knowledge was of such importance to Uncle Roy that he reiterated key points two, three and four times in different discussions. In each re-telling, Uncle Roy offered more significant detail, a strategy that reflects an Aboriginal approach to education. Each of Uncle Roy's re-tellings drew attention to core Taungurung values, to the effects of dispossession, and to the opportunity now available for current and future generations to mitigate the impact of such disruptions.

Seasonal travel and dress

The movement of Aboriginal people across their lands was seasonal and predicated upon sustainable management of food sources, as well as meeting spiritual obligations and maintaining relationships with affiliated clans and bordering nations. Land management strategies that were 'unbroken for thousands of years before European settlement', resulted in the integration and interdependence of clan migrations and environmental cycles.¹³ These strategies included short periods of occupation in each place, firestick farming and other sustainable practices. Uncle Roy highlighted other practical motivations behind the seasonal movement of Taungurung people, including clan location in more temperate areas of their Country according to the season:

In the wintertime our mob used to move from the mountains closer to the Murray, but during the spring and summer they come back down here again to the mountain country. They used to dress in kangaroo hide and used the porcupine quill to stitch them together. The possum skin coat is better known, but it was ceremonial; they used kangaroo skin for everyday because kangaroo hide is bigger, and they are just as warm as the possum ones.¹⁴

12 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS3001141.

13 Kneebone, 'Interpreting Traditional Culture'.

14 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 12 July 2016, DS300154-56.

Some European settlers misunderstood Aboriginal movement, characterising purposeful travel as aimless nomadic wandering, giving the term ‘walkabout’ pejorative connotations. William Blandowski, a naturalist who collected specimens and described the physical geography and geology of Taungurung land during excursions to central Victoria in 1854, was arguably more sympathetic.¹⁵ When Blandowski observed clan movement patterns near Seymour and in the ‘Black Ranges, on the upper Goulburn River’, he described Taungurung people as ‘few in number, of a peaceable disposition, and distinguished by a local language and characteristic habits’.¹⁶ He also noted how:

In the commencement of October the Goulburn River falls to its proper level, the winter rains having then subsided; and the multitudes of fish which appear in its waters attract hither the tribes inhabiting the surrounding districts. At that season too, they subsist upon eggs, which may then be obtained in abundance; and upon turtle and river mollusca.¹⁷

Seasonally motivated relocation made a rich diversity of food sources available to Taungurung clans. Traditional modes of dress also maximised the comfort of Aboriginal people in a land of climatic extremes. Yet, when early colonists recorded their observation of Taungurung adaptation to the central Victorian environment, the descriptions were sometimes disparaging in tone. John Cotton reflected upon Aboriginal dress in a letter to his brother in March 1844, expressing a derisive envy of Aboriginal freedoms. While deeming the Taungurung possum skin cloaks appropriate to the ‘primitive forest of Australia’, he also noted that his European garb was far less suited to the demands of the Victorian mountain environment:

Most of the men, although short in stature, are remarkably well formed and their appearance enveloped in their opossum skin rugs, which are light and handsome coverings, is very picturesque and appropriate in the primitive forest of Australia. Many of the heads remind me of those which are so worthily admired in Raphael’s pictures, although the features are certainly not so fine. The women, too, have generally fine moulded limbs, and with their opossum rugs, bags and buckets and long sticks are

15 Perhaps because his German nationality also positioned him as an outsider in colonial Australia.

16 Darragh identifies this journey as taking place in September 1854. Darragh, ‘William Blandowski’, 34; Blandowski, ‘Personal Observations’, 23.

17 Blandowski, ‘Personal Observations’, 23–24.

appropriate objects in the Australian landscape. I cannot think that the freedom which their limbs have in their loose robes and the facility with which they are cast off must be more congenial to human nature than the tailored cloth and vestments of Europeans. We can scarcely walk sometimes on the dry, slippery grass as the shoe can have no purchase, and when I go to bathe I often wish that I had merely a loose robe to cast off.¹⁸

Portrayals of Indigenous people written in the early colonial period reflect the cultural prejudices of the day and are often expressed in insensitive terms. Nevertheless, these observations provide valuable insight into Taungurung cultural heritage. Settler colonists justified their dispossession of Aboriginal people by characterising them as primitive people living in a primordial land. John Cotton held the (then common) view that he had 'reclaimed' his station in the Upper Goulburn 'from a wild, unprofitable state, and enabled it to yield fruit and grain for the general support of mankind'. He argued that, before he took possession:

It was a wilderness and useless to all the world. It is now brought into cultivation or covered with cattle and sheep, and hundreds of individuals are profitably employed in collecting or conveying away, preparing or manufacturing the produce.¹⁹

Judging Taungurung lifestyles as 'primitive' also asserted that a hierarchical distance existed between the cultures of European settlers and Traditional Owners. After more than 200 years of exploiting and ultimately degrading the land for profit, settler Australians are now beginning to understand that there is much to learn from sustainable Aboriginal ways of living. Thus, when Uncle Roy speaks of the clans enduring the cold and wet weather in caves near Yarck, the challenge is to abandon condescending images of 'cave dwellers' inherited from Western hierarchical thinking. Instead, try to imagine taking welcome respite from inclement weather in a significant cultural space. As Uncle Roy relates:

The clans used to keep out the cold and wind in caves up the back of Yaark. One cave looks right out over the valley; it's a beautiful view.²⁰

18 John Cotton to William Cotton, March 1844, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 45.

19 John Cotton to William Cotton, February 1847, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 54.

20 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 12 July 2016, DS300154–56.

Taungurung burial practices

Uncle Roy continues:

There was a young woman buried up in that cave and the university mob heard about her and came up and took the body away. They estimate the body to be about 2,000 years old. We are still trying to get that body back to put it back in the cave and close the cave up. If someone died there they would bury them there, right where they were camped. The Elders, they were wrapped in paperbark and put up a tree. If they went into the ground, they were put in the same position they were in their mother's womb before they were born.²¹

An early detailed account of this type of burial practice can be found in Dr William Henry Baylie's recollections of Taungurung people, titled 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', which was printed in the *Port Phillip Magazine* in 1843. Baylie described Taungurung preparation for burial as 'reducing the body to a small compass, making it outwardly appear like a large ball'.²² While Baylie's description assists in understanding the mechanics of the burial process, it does not clarify why it was important for Taungurung people to practise this distinct custom. Uncle Roy explained:

They were put in the same position they were in their mother's womb before they were born because we come from Mother Earth and go back to Mother Earth. This is the most powerful part of our Dreaming. The Dreaming comes into every part of our lives: our dancing and corroboree, when we go walkabout, our relationship with our totems.²³

Other Taungurung cultural practices associated with death and mourning were observed by early settlers, including Joseph Hawdon, who overlanded cattle from Port Phillip to Adelaide in 1838. Hawdon encountered a Taungurung man in mourning array, near the banks of the Goulburn River. He described the old man, who was occupied catching a possum in a hollow tree, as having 'his head plastered with a coat of white clay, which

21 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300141–42.

22 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 136.

23 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300141–42.

is the mode in which the tribes wear mourning for their dead'.²⁴ William Blandowski also commented on the material culture of Taungurung mourning during his excursion to Seymour in 1855. He noted that select trees associated with initiation ceremonies became memorials upon the death of the individual:

Each of the dead trees represent a member of the extinguished clan. [If] the person to whom the tree is thus dedicated dies, the foot of it is stripped of its bark, and it is killed by the application of fire; thus becoming a monument of the deceased. Hence, we need no longer be surprised at so frequently finding groups of dead trees in healthy and verdant forests, and surrounded by luxuriant vegetation.²⁵

Blandowski referred, in closing, to the population shocks experienced by Aboriginal clans following white settlement. Richard Broome has estimated that the pre-contact population of 10,000 Aboriginal people in Victoria was reduced by 80 per cent in just two decades due to disease and violence. Low birth rates 'caused by poor nutrition, venereal disease, loss of land, and loss of faith in the future' compounded this population disaster.²⁶

Clan leadership

In these circumstances, the wisdom of clan leaders and the strength of kinship ties became all the more significant. As Uncle Roy observes:

The Ngurungaeta was nominated by the tribe because of his knowledge, hunting skills and respect for the people and our law. You can become an Elder as you get older, with your knowledge of your bush tucker and bush medicine, your hunting skills, fighting skills and your treatment of your people. If you want to cause trouble, you've got no hope. If you insult a woman or girl children, you've got no hope; it's how you treat other people.²⁷

²⁴ Hawdon, *The Journal of a Journey*, 23 January 1838, 15.

²⁵ Blandowski, 'Personal Observations', 23.

²⁶ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 92.

²⁷ Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 12 July 2016, DS300154–56.

The influence and respect attributed to the Ngurungaeta (clan head), by Aboriginal people and settlers alike, can also be gauged in early colonial records. Dr William Baylie was appointed medical officer at the Goulburn River Aboriginal Protectorate in 1841 and his descriptions of Aboriginal cultural practices are based upon this experience. He generalised Aboriginal people as becoming 'wretched' and 'degraded' in the early post-contact period, but also acknowledged that they were 'men of like passions with myself' whose 'impressions of right and wrong [and] acuteness of memory afforded to my mind sufficient proofs that they were rational and social beings'.²⁸ Baylie's positive impressions of Aboriginal capacity were informed by the respectful and fond relationship he developed with the Ngurungaeta of the Taungurung Nira Balug clan, a man called Yabbee (also known Billy Hamilton).²⁹ Baylie observed in 1843 that clan movements were 'ordered by' the Ngurungaeta, including attending regular assemblies where clans and affiliated nations gathered for business and pleasure.³⁰ According to Robert Kenny, clan heads had authority over the management of land and resources in their clan's territory. They used the principle of reciprocity to negotiate safe access to the land and resources of their allies.³¹ William Baylie was impressed by Yabbee and the quality of leadership he exercised when he 'formed a council' to direct the Taungurung community. Yabbee's influence among the Taungurung clans and within the Kulin Nation was assessed by Baylie to be 'very great': 'he was always at the head of every debate, and no matter how trivial the circumstance he was always consulted and his advice generally taken'.³² Baylie continued:

Messengers are despatched to inform each other of the intended meeting, and when the grand division advances [and] assembles, the men in one band and the women and children in another; a consultation is now kept for some time; as to whether they shall receive the other tribes in a friendly or a hostile manner, and after this has been arranged the old men ... advance into conversation with the heads of the other tribes.³³

Matters negotiated between clans and nations included marriage arrangements, which ensured cultural continuity and genetic health within small populations.

28 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 86.

29 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 86.

30 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 90, 137.

31 Kenny, 'Tricks or Treats?', 38.4.

32 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 137.

33 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 137.

Marriage patterns and clan sustainability

Uncle Roy explained Taungurung marriage traditions with reference to the highly developed prescriptions on choice of partner and how these practices were maintained:

If a woman had a daughter, the girl could not marry into that clan or into a tribal clan. The boy, he can travel around and go and see a woman from another tribe and bring them in. The girl was taken to another tribe and offered to a male over there so that there wouldn't be any deformity in the children.³⁴

Blandowski had opportunity to observe and describe these Taungurung marriage practices during his 1854 travels to the Upper Goulburn:

The young man who wishes to marry, has first to look out for a wife amongst the girls or lubras of some neighbouring tribe, and having fixed his choice, his next care is to obtain her consent. This being managed the happy-couple straightway elope, and remain together in the bush for two nights and one day in order to elude the pretended search of the tribe to whom the female belonged. This concludes the ceremony, and the young man then returns with his wife to his own tribe. He is, however, laid under this peculiar injunction, that he must not see his mother-in-law any more.³⁵

Blandowski refers here to 'mother-in-law avoidance', a Taungurung cultural injunction associated with marriage that was little understood by Europeans. Deference and obligation informed this constrained mode of interaction, which was characterised by social distance.³⁶ While not an observer of this avoidance behaviour himself, Blandowski described the account of 'M. Grant, an eye-witness':

A mother-in-law having been descried approaching, a number of lubras formed a circle around the young man, and he himself covered his face with his hands;—this, while it screened the old lady from his sight, served as a warning to her not to approach, as she must never be informed by a third party of the presence of her son-in-law.³⁷

34 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS3001140.

35 Blandowski, 'Personal Observations', 24–25.

36 Merlan, 'The Mother-in-Law Taboo', 106.

37 Blandowski, 'Personal Observations', 24–25.

Part of the conventions of respectful behaviour practised by Taungurung people, mother-in-law avoidance required a man to refrain from going near, looking at, speaking to or even mentioning his mother-in-law's name. All relationships between clan members were constrained by protocols of proper demeanour that fostered good relations. Boys were therefore taught to exercise 'reserve and circumspection towards all females from whom, in accordance with marriage rules, they could expect to receive a wife'.³⁸ Francesca Merlan suggested that specific cultural principles undergirded these formalised interactions between in-laws. Behaviours that were in daily use around an Aboriginal hearth also underpinned more infrequent encounters, such as trade between geographically distant communities. Both types of interaction were mutually understood, formalised social linkages based on obligation and reciprocity.

Another means of obtaining a wife and ensuring genetic diversity in the clan was 'bride capture', a practice that targeted women from non-allied nations or outside groups. This practice was also little understood in settler colonial society. Bride capture gained the salacious attention of Europeans as a form of 'courtship with a club', becoming an exemplar of the exotic sexual practices of 'primitive people' that entrenched racialised thinking and assumed the cultural subjugation of women.³⁹ Colonists frequently characterised Aboriginal wives as holding slave status, based upon their misunderstanding of Aboriginal attitudes to sexuality and the gendered division of knowledge and work within a clan.⁴⁰ Aboriginal women had significant autonomy and authority in the management of gendered economic and ritual activities, and these roles provided important freedoms and status.⁴¹ Thus, when Uncle Roy describes bride capture, he does so in very pragmatic terms and links the practice to clan sustainability, not to gender inequality:

You get raided by another tribe because the men from another tribe want fresh women in the tribe or they start to interbreed, and you can't interbreed in Aboriginal law because all your children must be born in good condition ... The men, when they go out after women, they go out without the women and children and the Elders; a few of the older warriors stay back, and the others go out.

38 Hiatt, *Arguments about Aborigines*, 151.

39 Konishi, *The Aboriginal Male*, 7; Connor, "A Species of Rough Gallantry".

40 Watson, 'Aboriginal Women's Laws', 19.

41 Russell, 'Dirty Domestics', 21.

If they get women from another tribe, they bring them all back; all the girls and boys and the boys grow up to help defend the clan. That way there is fresh blood coming into the clan with the girls, the boys and the women. That is how you make your clan and tribe bigger.⁴²

The viability of infant life is also framed in pragmatic rather than emotive terms:

If there was a deformity, the mother would get up and the child would stay where it was born; if you were not healthy you were not meant to be in the clan or the tribe. The child born deformed wouldn't have a chance of life and that was our law. All your children must be born in good condition. They can't be born deformed because you've got to be healthy to go out digging or hunting. It was pretty hard for the women. There was no option on it.⁴³

W. H. Baylie observed these birth control practices in 1843, noting that:

Women destroy many of their children at birth, and cause preternatural confinements ... the difficulty of rearing their offspring may be the cause of this melancholy practice, but it is generally adopted.⁴⁴

European reports on the frequency and rationale of Aboriginal infanticide, like Bailey's above, were not necessarily based upon trustworthy information and did not refer to Aboriginal perspectives on the practice. Infanticide, which was a form of birth control also practised by poor European women, caused a moral panic among the upper and middle classes in nineteenth-century Australia. This resulted in social condemnation of poor white women who practised infanticide and an increasing number of legal convictions. Yet, these individual cases were not, as Liz Conor has argued, generalised as reflecting a barbaric 'white custom', which is how infanticide was framed in Aboriginal communities.⁴⁵ Reports of Aboriginal infanticide and other tropes of deficient 'primitive maternity', although perhaps based upon rumour and exaggeration as Conor suggested, were nevertheless used to explain Aboriginal population decline in preference to acknowledging the effects of colonisation and dispossession. William Baylie concluded his note on Taungurung birth

42 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300144.

43 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300144.

44 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 135.

45 Conor, *Skin Deep*, 81.

control and parenting with a positive observation: ‘to the children whom they rear they become greatly attached’.⁴⁶ This attachment, as Uncle Roy explains below, reflects group-oriented cultural values that contrast with the individualistic values of European settlers. Decisions regarding child rearing therefore reflect the paramount needs of the collective.

Family and clan

The family and the clan are important, so if any strangers come around the animals give warning. The dingo or a pet goanna, or a bird gets disturbed and they wake the man up and he knows that trouble is comin’. He will defend the clan with all his might and the whole clan will join in; 70 or 80 people in the clan, half of those will be women and children, and the rest will be men. When you got 30 or 40 blokes there, you got a big mob all with spears, boomerangs and nulla nullas. The man is the last in line as far as bein’ important. It’s not because he is useless (although most are!) but because if any strangers are comin’ in they have to get past him to get to the family.⁴⁷

According to Uncle Roy, the kinship ties within the clan undergird Taungurung collective belonging:

We live for each other, we protect each other; when you make a humpy in a camp; the children are up against the back of the wall, then the women, then the animals, then the man outside. He’s got fires around him and a dog and he is up and ready to fight at any warning. It is a good way of life. There was no animosity in our law and our culture: very simple. The first and fundamental thing is respect. We haven’t got it today because of the alcohol and drugs.⁴⁸

The harmony of this social organisation, as Uncle Roy explains, has been undermined by the legacies of colonialism now manifest in Aboriginal lives. According to Indigenous scholar Irene Watson, Aboriginal people continue to struggle ‘against the oppression of colonialism and for the sustainability of the collective’.⁴⁹ She has argued that policy that addresses

46 Baylie, ‘On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District’, 135.

47 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300144.

48 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 12 July 2016, DS300154–56.

49 Watson, ‘Aboriginal Women’s Laws’, 26.

Indigenous experience, including the experience of violence, must acknowledge this prioritisation of collective belonging. Working for community benefit and prioritising respect for Elders ensures community cohesion. Uncle Roy continues:

When they bring the food out, the best of the meat goes to the Elders who can't go hunting, both men and women; then the children; then the men and women get their food and that way everybody gets a feed. No one is left out. The ones that [hunt and gather] make sure that the best goes to the Elders who can't go out [anymore], which is a great thing.⁵⁰

Aboriginal lifeways promote the sustainability of both the clan and their environment by prioritising harmonious relationships among individuals and community members. Irene Watson has argued that the Australian public still knows very little about Aboriginal law, which is 'a balance of women's, country and men's law'.⁵¹ These three realms of law relate to 'the obligation to care for country and family, ecological sustainability, and the ethics of sharing and caring and their deeper philosophy'.⁵²

Gendered knowledge and learning

Aboriginal cultural knowledge is managed and taught in complex gradations, ranging from open knowledge that is available to everyone, through to secret knowledge that is restricted according to gender and authority.⁵³ When Uncle Roy describes Taungurung knowledge systems, he connects it explicitly to gendered instruction:

There are two lores: men's lore and women's lore. When a woman has a boy child, she has him until he is about three years old and then she hands him over to the Elder so that the Elder can train him in tracking, hunting, weapon making and all men's business. The woman keeps the girls and teaches them. Men aren't allowed to go anywhere near women's business like the birth of a child and all that.⁵⁴

50 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001138.

51 Watson, 'Aboriginal Women's Laws', 21.

52 Watson, 'Aboriginal Women's Laws', 20.

53 Rose, 'Women and Land Claims', 92.

54 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001138.

Gender and place-based learning are central to Aboriginal pedagogies, as teachers draw upon profound ancestral and personal connections to Country to contextualise learning objectives. Other key characteristics of Aboriginal pedagogy, according to Tyson Yunkaporta, include group-oriented storytelling and modelling. This experiential approach to learning engages the student in repeated observation, listening and practice to gradually attain mastery.⁵⁵ William Baylie described this competency-based approach when he watched Aboriginal mothers teach their babies to swim in 1843:

The children soon acquire the art of swimming; in the warm weather the mother takes her baby on her back and plunges into the water, the little thing soon gets accustomed to it, and at the age of five or six becomes a very good swimmer.⁵⁶

Uncle Roy explains that the relationship between Elders and children is especially important. This is because the independent competence and mastery of the student is dependent upon the prowess of the Elder:

The only time the mother has got anything to do with the boy is of an evening time and dinner. The rest of the time the Elders who are too old to go out and hunt have got him; they teach him weapons, artefacts, how to hunt and how to track, how to do anything a man does. Men also know the bush tucker and bush medicine; when he goes out he has to be able to gather all that food for himself because he doesn't take a woman with him. When they go out for the hunt, they remember what their Elders taught them.⁵⁷

Recalling and enacting the knowledge handed down by the Elders and returning the benefit of this action to the community is central to Aboriginal pedagogy.⁵⁸ Another important characteristic of an Aboriginal approach to learning is the use of all the senses to engage students and to foster comprehension of deeper symbolic meanings. Performance, such as in a 'corroboree' or ritual practice, is therefore a significant strategy in Aboriginal education. As Maryrose Casey has explained: "The layers of meaning within the performances were learned progressively through

55 Yunkaporta, 'Aboriginal Pedagogies', 45.

56 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 135.

57 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300142.

58 Yunkaporta, 'Aboriginal Pedagogies', 48.

exposure to the words and movements and when the right questions were asked and answered'.⁵⁹ Performances are offered without explanation, requiring students to actively engage with what they have seen and heard. When they are ready to deepen their learning, the student is provided with appropriate information, therefore increasing their understanding. Ritual performances were a feature of daily life prior to European settlement. They fulfilled ceremonial obligations, enabled teaching and learning exchanges and provided entertainment. Such performances 'combined dance, song, mime, dialogue, musical accompaniment, body decorations and costume, set and props as well as the use of lighting from fire and moonlight'.⁶⁰ Uncle Roy explains:

Women and men dance together after a hunt. The men bring the kangaroo or the wallabies or the emus home. The women—I've got respect for all of them, they work just as hard as a man, gathering bulbs and roots, goanna, porcupine, small wombats. The women do the dance of the gathering while the meat is cooking. Then the men do the dance of the hunt. The children are sittin' there watchin' and this is how they learn. Then, you've got the girls over there on one side, the boys over there on the other side. They never sit together.⁶¹

Based on his experience with Taungurung people on the Goulburn River Aboriginal Protectorate in the early 1840s, Dr William Baylie recalled how Aboriginal infants participated in cultural events. He noted:

At an early age they are taught their principal amusement, the corrobbery [sic], and it is amusing to see the pleasure the mother evinces at the sight of her infant with its little legs in motion, attempting to dance, when scarcely able to crawl about.⁶²

Audience restrictions were enforced for Aboriginal performances that had ritual or teaching intentions. As Maryrose Casey has observed, intra- and inter-community gatherings included choreographed performances of ritual that fulfilled judicial and diplomatic functions, including the arrangement of marriage alliances.⁶³

59 Casey, 'Colonists, Settlers', 63.

60 Casey, 'Colonists, Settlers', 56.

61 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001138.

62 Baylie, 'On the Aborigines of the Goulburn District', 135.

63 Casey, 'Performances of Belonging', 189.

Aboriginal people also initiated ritual performances as part of cross-cultural exchanges. These events provided opportunity to assert Aboriginal sovereignty and to educate settler audiences about Aboriginal culture. Even when the audience was wholly composed of Europeans, however, ceremonies were never translated or explained. This choice reflects the offer of Aboriginal knowledge to the settler on Aboriginal terms. The settler was required to engage with Aboriginal language and cultural values if they wanted to develop their understanding.⁶⁴ The Upper Goulburn squatter John Cotton noted such a performance during the gathering of two Taungurung clans near his station, Doogallook, on the Goulburn River near Yea in March 1844. It could be argued that Cotton's cultural competency was not significantly improved by his experience, as he remained unaware of the reason for the co-location of the clans and the performance of the ritual. He and his family took the opportunity to trade food (including cabbages, carrots and melons) and tobacco in exchange for possum skins and spears. In a letter to his brother, Cotton then described being admitted to a Taungurung ritual that was 'performed in the rudest manner imaginable':⁶⁵

The lubras or women and children are seated in a dense circle and beat second time with their right hands on their folded opossum skins, which sounds something like a muffled drum, for they all strike together with great precision. A singer, one of the men stands by the musicians beating time with two sticks, which if well selected give out a sound something approaching that of a triangle. A large fire is lighted before the performers, who presently issue from behind a tree or other shelter, one or two at a time, assume a position like a spread eagle, and shake their knees with rapid motion, beating time with two sticks. Their bodies are painted with pipe clay, and their ankles and feet enveloped in bands of leafy twigs; a girdle is around the waist. They shuffle about from place to place, exhibit their spread eagle performance, and after a time all collect together behind the singer, increasing the time of the beat until they finish with one loud, simultaneous beat and retire precipitately. Their movements are varied occasionally; sometimes they finish their act ... with a loud scream and retire with quick motion; at others the beats are varied and they retire with slow movement. I was amused with this exhibition for two hours one night. It is not commenced until sometime after sunset.

64 Casey, 'Performances of Belonging', 193.

65 John Cotton to William Cotton, March 1844, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 44.

At the conclusion of the performance some of them came up to me and asked me for tobacco, which I promised to give them the next morning.⁶⁶

Taungurung requests for tobacco after the performance indicate that the clan considered John Cotton's participation as an extension of a mutual relationship of exchange and obligation. Bartering cabbages for artefacts may have been of little consequence to Cotton, but from a Taungurung perspective, the exchange established or extended a relationship between the settler and the clan that was bound by protocols of 'right behaviour' (i.e. their expectations of proper conduct). Richard Broome has argued that Aboriginal people 'tried to impose their ideas of right behaviour on strangers in colonial times', even after they had been forced into unequal patron–client relationships.⁶⁷ Taungurung leaders believed that usurpation of their lands required recompense, and that John Cotton was therefore obliged to ensure access to their lands and to provide tobacco when they requested it. Taungurung expectation of right behaviour, expressed in the form of maintenance payments, persisted regardless of settler recalcitrance. Indeed, Taungurung insistence that settlers respect their culture and practise right behaviour was maintained despite evidence of systematic non-compliance.

Conclusion: Seeing Taungurung people on their own terms

Recalling his first sighting of Europeans as they crossed the Goulburn River at Mitchellstown in 1836, Yabbee, the Ngurungaeta of the Nira Balug clan, told Assistant Protector James Dredge of 'the dismay he and other blacks experienced when they first saw [the] white men [in] Major Mitchell's party' on their return journey north-east.⁶⁸ Fox and Phipps noted that Yabbee, who was apparently swimming in the Goulburn River at the time of Mitchell's crossing, was not observed by the Europeans. They argued, further, that Yabbee and his Taungurung clan members were philosophically unobservable because, 'in a European schema it [was] not necessary to know anything of Yabbee's existence before the arrival of Europeans with guns,

66 John Cotton to William Cotton, March 1844, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 44–45.

67 Broome, 'There Were Vegetables', 43.3.

68 James Dredge, journal entry, 30 January 1840, quoted in Clark, *Goulburn River Aboriginal Protectorate*, 19.

boat and sextant'.⁶⁹ As this book has shown, European settlers would take more than 150 years to begin to comprehend their need to 'see' Aboriginal people on Aboriginal terms. Yabbee and his compatriots, by contrast, likely understood what the arrival of Europeans represented for Taungurung people long before any direct or personal encounters.

When Hume and Hovell's party of explorers paused on Taungurung land at the Broken River near Mansfield in 1824 (12 years prior to Mitchell's journey), they observed that the bark of a tree had been recently removed using a steel tomahawk.⁷⁰ Possession and use of such technology indicates that Taungurung people had been exposed to European goods, and to stories about the society that introduced such implements, in the years prior to the arrival of explorers and settlers.⁷¹ Aboriginal trade routes facilitated the movement of goods between distant Aboriginal clans, and they also enabled the exchange of news and ideas. Aboriginal message systems were highly effective means of communicating across language barriers, to the extent that the 'first contact' between Europeans and Aboriginal people south of the Murray River, in 1824, probably eventuated years after these nations had first heard about the expanding European settlements to the north and south. Even with no direct experience of European settlers themselves, according to Robert Kenny, 'the Kulin people of Port Phillip would have known something of this expansion and its dire consequences'.⁷² Thus, when Taungurung leaders established relationships with pastoralists, they did so strategically, to extract gains and to assert their sovereignty. Yabbee, for example, visited John Cotton at Doogallook Station whenever he 'was in the neighbourhood'.⁷³ Yabbee continued to visit despite being assessed and described patronisingly by Cotton as a 'half civilised black'. He was unsettling Cotton and maintaining relationship to traditional lands.⁷⁴

Nearly 40 years later, Ngurungaeta of the Yeeun-illam-balluk clan, Thomas Bamfield, still expected Europeans to modify their behaviour to accommodate Aboriginal sovereignty, despite the closure of Acheron

69 Fox and Phipps, *Sweet Damper*, 15.

70 Parris, 'Early Mitchellstown', 128.

71 Kenny, 'Tricks or Treats?', 38.6.

72 Kenny, 'Tricks or Treats?', 38.7.

73 John Cotton to Marian Cotton, December 1846, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 48.

74 John Cotton to Marian Cotton, December 1846, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 48.

and Mohican stations and his experience of conflict with authorities over the management of Coranderrk Station. In his 1881 letter to the board appointed to enquire into the management of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, Bamfield testified: 'I think they [settlers] have done enough to this country to ruin the natives without taking it from us any more'.⁷⁵ As Richard Broome observed, Bamfield submitted his testimony because he saw a political opportunity to draw attention to 'the failure to extend right behaviour to "a poor black"'.⁷⁶ Taungurung objectives to educate and alter non-Aboriginal behaviour have remained constant since Yabbee and Thomas Bamfield led the clans. Uncle Roy wanted to see non-Aboriginal people modify their beliefs and lifestyles to show greater consideration and respect for Country. Caring for Country, as Sean Kerins has explained, 'encompasses being spiritually bound to Country through intimate connections with ancestral beings still present in the land and waters'.⁷⁷ Uncle Roy believed that the social fabric of the Taungurung community would be strengthened by revitalising connections to Country and by sharing cultural, spiritual and ecological knowledge. Feelings for ancestral Country prompted Uncle Roy to undertake a return migration up the Black Spur to his traditional lands. His mission in the final years of his life was to re-establish connections to Country through the preservation of place-dependent knowledge of bush tucker and bush medicine that, in his view, was endangered by forestry practices and lack of respect for Taungurung culture:

Our Dreaming is our law, which includes respect for our culture, our bush tucker, our bush medicine and the spirit world. The Dreaming starts at birth and when you start to walk around and start to learn. It goes through your whole life. There has got to be more of it in the community so we can all get together and really do it.⁷⁸

Uncle Roy also envisaged a wider movement of cultural revival based on Taungurung educational practices. He believed that Taungurung cultural ways could be recovered and strengthened. He wanted this book to instil wider respect for Taungurung clan values—a measure of the 'little bit' that he could do.

75 Thomas Bamfield [alias Tommy Michie, alias 'Punch'], letter tabled 30 September 1881, in Victoria, Parliament, *Report of the Board*, 8.

76 Broome, 'There Were Vegetables', 43.11.

77 Kerins, 'Caring for Country', 29.

78 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300141–42.

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