

# **Prelude 3. Deborah Bird Rose— Ahla Tyaemaen**

Linda Payi Ford

## **Introduction**

It is with honour that I have known the great works produced by Ahla Deborah Tyaemaen Rose. Ahla Deborah Tyaemaen Rose is always there for me, and she will always be with me in spirit. This is my story of how Ahla Deborah Tyaemaen Rose shared her sweat on my Country, *Kurrindju. Putj murikimiya woewoe, Ma!*

## **Historical background**

The reality of the history of my land rights and sovereignty is complicated and painful. For countless generations, Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu, DjataDjat, Rak Numala and Marrawulgat people, as described by my Kagal or Uncle Fred Waters while giving evidence in the Finnis River Land Claim (1980–81), belonged to our traditional lands, fresh and salt water, and the cosmos. Today I continue to acknowledge my ancestors accordingly and will refer to us or myself as Mak Mak in this paper.

The first permanent white settlement in our proximity was established by George Goyder and his surveying team at Port Darwin on 5 February 1869. In the early 1900s an Aboriginal Reserve was established on the Finnis River.

The Mak Mak—my old people—incurred many injustices. First, their land was stolen by the colonisers and some of our ancestors murdered. Later, some of their children were forcibly removed, along with some of the adults as well.

In more recent times my senior Elders—George Wigma, Fred Waters, Leo Djekaboi, Peter Melyen, Bilawuk Kirol, Pam or Pandela Clayton and Nancy Daiyi—had to stand up against coercive actions by the Department of Native Affairs, such as the removal of their children who are members of the Stolen Generations. From the late 1970s onwards, they also had to contend with the Northern Land Council. My senior Elders' understanding of the Westminster system and of both written and spoken English was extremely limited. Most of them could barely read or write their own names. *Keh!* This is why I share my story of our struggle for social justice.

It was not until the late twentieth century that a move to restore some of the Indigenous land rights was attempted. In 1973, in response to an inquiry by Justice Woodward, a statutory body known as the Northern Land Council was established in the Northern Territory. The Northern Land Council's role was to assist in claims to land by ascertaining the views of Aboriginal peoples and advocating for our interests. During the 1976–81 Finnis River Land Claim process, several groups had disputed ownership of the Delissaville, Wagait, Larrakia Aboriginal Trust, and nearby Crown land. The Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu people were recognised as the Traditional Aboriginal Owners under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* of Areas One in 1991 and Two in 1993 of the Finnis River Land Claim. These sections of the claim are now known as Gurrudju Aboriginal Land Trust.

At the time, my mother, Ahla Nancy Daiyi, contested the Northern Land Council's decision to recognise other clan groups as Traditional Aboriginal Owners. The Federal Court heard the case in 1991 with Justice Olney, the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, presiding. He overturned the Northern Land Council's 1981 decision. Justice Olney found that the Northern Land Council had not appropriately examined all the evidence provided to them by our old people, the senior Elders of the Mak Mak. He found that the Council had made the wrong decision in 1981 in the Finnis River Land Claim. Justice Olney ordered the Northern Land Council's decision to be set aside and directed the Northern Land Council to conduct new hearings in what became known as the Wagait Dispute Hearings 1993–94.

## Meeting Debbie Rose

Beginning with the Finnis River Land Claim in 1973, Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu worked with many anthropologists over the next four decades. In 1993 we invited an anthropologist and a lawyer to attend a meeting in Batchelor to discuss with them their interest in working with us on our land claim for the Delissaville, Wagait, Larrakia Aboriginal Land Trust, which the Mak Mak referred to as The Reserve or the Big Wagait and the Little Wagait. The Little Wagait is a section of Aboriginal Land Trust that does not join with the Big Wagait but is located east of the Big Wagait. Deborah Bird Rose came to Batchelor and announced at our initial meeting that she preferred to be called Debbie. She had come to meet with us and to see who we were. Later that year, Debbie notified the Northern Land Council that she would act as the Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu anthropologist in the forthcoming land claim hearing.

We were very excited to accept Debbie as our anthropologist and she was invited to meet with the Mak Mak family at our White Eagle office in Batchelor to plan our case to present at the hearing for the Wagait Dispute. Debbie spoke to all of us and wanted to assess what we thought the land claim meant to us and to prepare for site visits on Country and giving evidence at the Wagait Dispute Hearing. She cautioned it was going to be lengthy and intense—that, it certainly was!

## The Wagait Dispute Hearings

The hearings were to consider the arguments of five competing clans which were disputing ownership. They were chaired by a senior local anthropologist and overseen by a Queen's Counsel from the Justice Department, with a panel of members representing the Full Council of the Northern Land Council. The committee's determination was announced in 1995 when the Mak Mak people were declared Traditional Aboriginal Owners of the major part of the disputed lands—the E2 of the Delissaville, Wagait and Larrakia Aboriginal Land Trusts.

## **Bestowing a Mak Mak name**

In the course of preparing for and engaging in the Wagait Dispute Hearings, we all developed a good relationship and connection with Debbie. My Ahla (mother) Nancy Daiyi, a senior Elder of Mak Mak, bestowed Debbie with her deceased sister's name, Tyaemaen. This meant that Nancy had accepted Debbie as her classificatory sister. Therefore, I was now to refer to Debbie as Ahla Tyaemaen and my Mak Mak kinship roles and responsibilities with Ahla Tyaemaen meant an extension to our relationality.

As time went by, my relationship with Debbie grew and formed a solid bond between us. This was an essential quality embedded in our 'daughter-mother' relationship. It was special as it was authorised by my Ahla Daiyi through a cultural iterative process of drawing interconnections between discrete categories of knowledge, knowing, being and doing. It allowed my relationship with Ahla Debbie Tyaemaen Rose to grow respectfully, professionally and personally. I viewed Ahla Tyaemaen through a Mak Mak lens as the first anthropologist who addressed our social justice issues using the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights legislation.

## **Full circle**

In 1991 my husband Mark and I returned to my hometown and birthplace at Batchelor in the Northern Territory. I commenced my professional tertiary teaching at Batchelor College as an academic lecturer. In 1993, I completed my Graduate Diploma in Special Education, awarded by the Warrnambool College of Advanced Education (later amalgamated with Deakin University). Professor Pat Varley travelled to Batchelor to deliver my Warrnambool College of Education testamur at the Batchelor College's graduation ceremony. My Wangga and Wali ceremony family from Wagait and Daly River danced me up to receive my degree.

Prior to my graduation ceremony I had never imagined my life as an Aboriginal scholar. At the time, I was teaching in the tertiary education programs at Batchelor College (now called the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education), applying the 'Both Ways Philosophy' developed by Yolngu from East Arnhem Land, which was being appropriately advocated by colleagues at this time. It was an exciting time and place to be working in tertiary education.

I recall having numerous discussions with Debbie about discourse and pedagogy, about Aboriginal knowledge, languages and cultural practices, and what this meant for Aboriginal people. This was especially informative since I was then working as an academic at Batchelor College and past practices were being challenged. Those discussions opened my mind's eye to endless possibilities for Aboriginal people and for myself. In 1995 my father Maurice (aka 'Max' Sargent) and I were having a yarn about Debbie, and he mentioned how Debbie had taken an interest in my career and had taken me under her wing. I agreed and confirmed that I would be respectful of our relationship and that I would approach Debbie to discuss career options with her. At the time Dad was very unwell and he passed on 24 June 1995, alas, just before the Wagait Dispute Hearing Committee handed down its decision.

I was keen to enrol in my Master of Education in 1995 at Deakin University. Ahla Tyaemaen encouraged me to apply for the inaugural Stanner Scholarship at The Australian National University. My application was successful, but I ceased the scholarship in early 1996 because I had become pregnant with Chloe Ngelebe Ford. Three years later, I graduated with my Master of Education from Deakin University. This was the year Emily Tyaemaen Ford, my second daughter, was born. My husband, Mark, and I believed we were truly blessed. We had our own family and two beautiful daughters.

In 1998, I enrolled in a doctoral degree part-time at Northern Territory University but, in 2001, I transferred my doctoral studies to Deakin University. I had resigned from Batchelor and accepted an academic lecturing position at the Northern Territory University in the Faculty of Science, Information Technology and Education. Northern Territory University became Charles Darwin University in 2003.

Ahla Tyaemaen continued to stay in close contact with Ahla Daiyi after the Wagait Dispute Hearing. Throughout this period Ahla Tyaemaen had been drafting the book *Country of the Heart* with us and an American photographer. She organised slide nights for editing purposes for the book at our place in Batchelor or at her place in Tiwi in Darwin's northern suburbs. The first edition of *Country of the Heart—An Indigenous Australian Homeland* was published in 2002 by the Aboriginal Studies Press at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. All the co-authors celebrated the amazing event with the first-named author, Deborah Bird Rose.

## The power of publishing

In the late 1990s, Ahla Tyamaen relocated to Canberra, so we didn't see each other as often as we would have liked. Still, she invited me and family members to do guest lectures on a regular basis at The Australian National University. She also organised an installation of the Mak Mak Marranunggu in the *Tangled Destinies* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia in 2002. This had a huge impact on my views on what museums and archives were and how they housed historical records and influenced Australian and overseas visitors who would check out their collections.

Ahla Tyamaen had indeed opened my eyes to scholarly work. I felt there was honour and respect in her approach to working with Australia's First Peoples. This is evident in this book, *Dreaming Ecology*, in how she celebrates the knowledge of her Indigenous teachers and sees her words as a bridge for them. This was also illuminated when she shared in the co-authorship for the publication of *Country of the Heart* in 2002 (and its republication in 2011). The unprecedented reciprocation of western 'treasures' in this way with us was nothing short of brilliant. It was from that moment that my view as a higher education scholar about authorising the application of my Aboriginal knowledge in my own research projects shifted. This was mainly in how research and publishing Indigenous knowledge could be achieved. I was no longer the subject but the owner of my published work.

Ahla Tyamaen had ignited the metaphorical fire within me to address Indigenous knowledge, intellectual property and shared ownership through my teaching and research in higher education, as well as in community development projects. Publishing research changed the way I thought about publishing our stories—as it did for Ahla Daiyi. She would often say, 'If only I could read and write I would write my own book!' She said this often when outsiders visited our Mak Mak Country, and our communities couldn't understand what she was expressing. Later Ahla Daiyi, in collaboration with Ahla Tyamaen, did publish that book, *Country of the Heart—An Indigenous Australian Homeland*. She was on the front cover, proudly walking on her Country to her favourite fishing spot at Ditjini.

## Standpoint in womanhood

The cultural and language barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were and still are present. This would frustrate Ahla Daiyi and me no end. The relationship that Ahla Tyaemaen had with her sister, Ahla Daiyi, was unique. They could understand each other's standpoint and womanhood in iterative ways. Both women were able to analyse their intersubjective discourses where their standpoint positioning was in their own authoritative domains and rooted in their own individual personal knowledges and perspectives, as well as the power that such authority exerts. Thus, the shared space of understanding their subjectivities and epistemologies, based on their lived realities, generated a nuanced theoretical approach. This was clear in how they navigated the difficulties of their female experiences within spaces which challenged their epistemologies and their feminine discourses over their lifetimes.

They built on their positionalities in the land claim process, a form of knowing through a method of inquiry, described by Martin Nakata as making more intelligible the corpus of objectified knowledge about us as it emerges and organises understanding of our lived realities (2007, 213–16). This was a unique experience for me to observe as it unfolded. I now reflect upon those histories, applying a new lens from my own feminine discourse and genre.

Standpoint theory has allowed me, based on my own lived experiences, to place important values on those experiences where two senior women dialogue as a source of knowledge. Moreover, Brenda Allen (1996) describes how women of marginalised and/or oppressed individuals can support each other. For me, the Wagait land claim was organised as a quest to create more objective accounts of the world.

In this social and political context, both my Ahlas gave voice. Patrice Buzzanell (2003) describes how standpoint theory gives voice to marginalised groups, allowing them to challenge the status quo as outsiders within the status quo, which represents the dominant position of privilege. In the case of the land claim, the dominant position of privilege was held by the Northern Land Council.

As described by Victoria DeFrancisco (2007), the predominant culture in which all groups exist is not experienced in the same way by all persons or groups. The views of those who belong to groups with more social power are

validated more than those in marginalised groups. Those in marginalised groups must learn to be bicultural, or to 'pass', in the dominant culture to survive, even though that perspective is not their own.

In 1991, I realised how much Ahla Daiyi really wanted to know more about writing, reading and multiple literacies. She was hungry for more knowledge and to share her knowledge. Ahla Daiyi enrolled in a vocational training literacy course in 1992–93. Ahla Daiyi, Mark and I, and later Chloe and Emily, travelled as a family unit across the world to places where Ahla Debbie Tyamaen Rose had organised book launches. We went to the Sydney Writers' Festival, the University of Melbourne, Scotland, America and The Australian National University. Then, for the second edition of *Country of the Heart* in 2011, we went to the Brisbane Writers' Festival. Ahla Tyamaen certainly looked after us in this regard.

## Outcomes of high knowledge

In October 2006, I graduated with my doctorate 'Narratives and landscapes: Their capacity to serve Indigenous knowledge interests'. My Ahla Daiyi and Ahla Debbie were very proud. In turn, I was proud of both my Ahlas for their contribution to my rites of passage in both cultures. At the time Ahla Daiyi was unwell. She passed on 4 April 2007. I, as well as loved ones and others, were dealt such a huge blow. Ahla Tyamaen attended the Ceremonies on Country on the Wagait after Ahla Daiyi's passing. Ahla Debbie continued to work on projects that she was passionate about. She loved the environment, plants and animals. Her words describing Country were profound. Our book, *Country of the Heart*, captured the moods of my Country's spirit.

Debbie's anthropological studies were amazing. In this book, *Dreaming Ecology*, you can feel the heart, intellect and deep respect she brought to her studies of the First Nations Peoples of the Victoria River District. In her later years in academia, her focus was on the anthropology of the environment and the changing climate's impact on the land, fresh and salt water, plants, animals and cosmos. Ahla Tyamaen supported my Australian Research Council grants and other research projects. I felt blessed to have someone of her standing in academia to be working alongside me, providing a collegial way of thinking, doing and being, while collaborating and advising me on sensitive issues as they arose.



When Ahla Tyaemaen informed me that she was unwell, my family and I were devastated. We often visited her when we were travelling to Sydney University where I was working as an Adjunct Research Fellow at The Sydney Music Conservatorium. My research had taken me, my family, other Mak Mak and colleagues to museums, archives, and private and public institutions across the nation and globally. There are amazing amounts of information stored in archival collections waiting to be read and critically interpreted.

Ahla Tyaemaen passed away in December 2018. What a great loss to the Australian academy and to me. Both my Ahlas' spirits continue to influence my research and are powerful drivers in what I do today. These two giant mothers whose shoulders I stood on were my key family members. They supported me and gave me the strength and confidence to move forward with my research and celebrate in our successes altogether.

Both Ahlas, Daiyi and Tyaemaen, always gave me 100 per cent support and encouraged me to continue to further my education, extend my understanding and to share my knowledge. Ahla Daiyi would always remind me by saying, *'If you don't do it, no one else will!'* The lessons learned from these wise women have nourished my research spiritually and their presence continues to grow through my research projects. Both Ahlas have taught me about the benefits of life on Country, lived realities and connections. This has also taught me that my oral histories, along with historically documented files in museums and archive collections, are there to access as tools to integrate traditional knowledge systems with other knowledge systems. I have developed my own repository with the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC). This was a collaborative effort with my colleagues, and my Mak Mak family members.

This story is deep. The knowledge from my Ahlas will continue to be transferred by me, to you. Honouring my Ahlas' knowledge about history provides an account of the past to right the wrongs and to include an Aboriginal perspective. This practice is formalising an alternative lived historical narrative to forge a better future for the next generations of Australians.

## The future

The history of our engagement with the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act created a milestone, a lived moment in my family's shared histories. Those days will always remain etched in my memory and will always be a memorable period of my then young life. My story potentially offers a pathway to understand the struggle of Aboriginal people of Australia and those of us under the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights legislation.

It is up to individuals to come to terms with their identity and what they wish to do and how they determine their own pathways to aspire to their full potential. The destiny and life of an Aboriginal person is influenced by colonising history, by pain and by grief at the loss we have endured. It is up to us to have a voice and decide how this may or may not contribute to a future with justice to honour the First Nations Peoples' ancestors and Country.

Ahla Tyamaen's professionalism on behalf of the Mak Mak people enabled us to stand up and have our voices heard. Today we are recognised as Traditional Aboriginal Owners of the lands covered by the Delissaville, Wagait and Larrakia Aboriginal Land Trusts and the Little Wagait Aboriginal Land Trust. This is a small portion of our traditional lands and sea in the Finnis River and Reynolds River region that we fought so hard to claim. It was a significant hurdle to pass over and a milestone never achieved before. It allowed the Mak Mak to be proud of our First Nations' identity.

Sadly, there are many, many First Nations Peoples that continue to struggle with their identity and Country. This is through no fault of their own, but because of colonial practices and legislation of the past that led to the taking of so much that belonged to us on our own lands, sea and cosmos. It cut off and deprived us all of rich connections and histories. The depth and breadth of these rich connections and the losses wrought by colonialism are beautifully described for the First Nations Peoples of Yarralin and Lingara by Debbie in *Dreaming Ecology*.

Linda Payi Ford  
Associate Professor  
Charles Darwin University  
Darwin  
May 2023

## References

- Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. Online: [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2016C00111](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2016C00111), accessed 5 May 2023.
- Allen, Brenda J. 1996. 'Feminist Standpoint Theory: A Black Woman's (Re)view of Organizational Socialization'. *Communication Studies* 47 (4): 257–71. doi.org/10.1080/10510979609368482.
- Buzzanell, Patrice M. 2003. 'A Feminist Standpoint Analysis of Maternity and Maternity Leave for Women with Disabilities'. *Women and Language* 26 (2): 53–65.
- DeFrancisco, Victoria P. 2007. *Communicating Gender Diversity: A Critical Approach*. Thousand Oaks, Indiana: Sage Publications. doi.org/10.4135/9781483329284.
- Nakata, Martin. 2007. *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

This text is taken from *Dreaming Ecology: Nomadics and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Victoria River, Northern Australia*, by Deborah Bird Rose, edited by Darrell Lewis and Margaret Jolly, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.