

The Mowanjum Festival: A Pathway for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Mowanjum is an Aboriginal community some ten kilometres from Derby, comprising the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunumbal peoples of the Western Kimberley. The three groups are people of the Wandjina, the Spirit beings who, they believe, create and sustain the land and its people. The community has an Arts and Cultural Centre which has hosted a festival since 1998.

I briefly summarise my involvement in the Festival and with the community over nearly ten years. This involvement includes volunteer work with the Arts Centre and Festival as well as engagement with the people and their culture. Of recent years, I joined the Boab Network, a group of volunteers associated with the Floreat Uniting Church in Perth. The Boab Network has also assisted at the Festival and is undertaking a range of projects including youth work, the installation of computers, and enabling large groups to return to country.”

In this paper, I argue that the Festival is and has become a significant opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration, bringing together a wide range of people with diverse experience and talents to share. I posit a mode of action and being, based on the importance of developing and maintaining dynamic relationships with the people. Other key elements include listening to the needs and aspirations of the people, being prepared to take appropriate initiatives, and developing creative ways of reflection. In my case, I have used journal, various forms of visual and performance art, and conversation to explore the issues and tensions within such collaboration and engagement with an Indigenous community. However, being is as important as doing in this process. The need to be open to and aware of the land and the people is a necessary balance to the stresses of collaboration. Finally, it is necessary to develop a way of communicating the process and experience of this collaborative engagement with the wider Australian society. This has its own tensions and issues, which are yet to be resolved.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mowanjum is an Aboriginal community some ten kilometres from Derby, comprising the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunumbal peoples of the Western Kimberley. The three groups are people of the Wandjina, the Spirit beings who, they believe, create and sustain the land and its people. There are many Wandjinas in the Kimberley and of course many stories, as the Wandjinas journeyed through the lands. A notable example of a Wandjina was the large Wandjina, Namaraali, used in the 2000 Sydney Olympics opening ceremony (painted by Worrorra Elder Donny Woolagoodja)¹.

The community has an Arts and Culture Centre which has hosted a festival since 1998. The Mowanjum Festival takes place in July, a time when tourists flock to enjoy sun-filled days and mellow nights. It is also one of the key events of the Boab Festival when Derby becomes a centre for numerous

¹ Donny’s story of his role in the Sydney Olympics is described in V. Blundell and D. Woolagoodja, *Keeping the Wandjinas Fresh*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, WA, 2005, together with the story of his father and his journey as an Indigenous artist.

activities. In this paper I argue that the Festival is both an opportunity for, and expression of, Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration, bringing together a wide range of people with diverse experience and talents to share. I briefly describe my journey with the Mowanjum community over the past nine years. I also include key issues, which have emerged for me out of this long term collaboration involving both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizers and participants. Following a significant meeting with David Mowaljarli,² a remarkable Ngarinyin Elder, I sought out his people. This has been a journey of (re)conciliation³ with the Mowanjum people: the coming together of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with a common task. It takes shared activity to produce a festival; organization, making and repairing totems, preparing the stage and dance area and many other tasks. Admittedly this is not dealing with larger issues of (re)conciliation, such as health, housing, education and employment. But working together provides opportunity for creative dialogue, where new possibilities for collaboration emerge.

II. THE MOWANJUM FESTIVAL: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Peter Croll, the initiator and coordinator of the Festival has worked in cooperation with Mowanjum people, Leah Umbagai, Donny Woolagoodja and others to build this major Western Australian Indigenous event with over eighty Indigenous performers.

The Festival arose from a traditional dance workshop funded by the Australia Council, which led to the dance performance along with an arts exhibition at Mowanjum. In the past, the Mowanjum Festival included a variety of performances, from traditional to contemporary indigenous culture to cross cultural input. Mowanjum has had dancers from East Africa, Argentina and New Zealand to compliment the local performance. The Festival has also included interstate and local performers such as Mary G, the Indigenous comedian from Broome. For many years the Festival was held over two nights, with a varied intercultural program and an incongruous mixture of store holders and carnival rides. Children would run around with the latest in small tech gadgetry while painted up for their dance.

For the past two years, it was decided to focus on traditional Kimberley culture and forgo the diverse program of the past. This was a risk, for it is difficult to be certain of the result. For example, dancers from one of the key communities were unable to perform because of Sorry Business. However, both the 2009 and 2010 Festivals were successful enabling the community to concentrate on presenting a distinctive Indigenous Festival that highlighted the cultures of the Kimberley people.

III. THE FESTIVAL: A MEETING OF MANY VOLUNTEERS WITH AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

I began my journey with Mowanjum in 2002, several years after the Festival began. My volunteer role began with helping to organize and sweep out the community hall, ready for the exhibition to take place along with the Festival. As a volunteer, I have undertaken many roles, from helping to make and repair the Totems, organization on the Festival night, helping with the Gallery, to compiling a procedure manual. I have also assisted with preparing the entry for the Derby Float parade. It was gratifying that Mowanjum entry won the best entry award in 2010 for the fourth year running. In recent years I received the support of the Indigenous Community Volunteers who have regarded this role as a continued exercise in community development.

One of the most satisfying aspects of volunteering at Mowanjum has been to join with the community as they journeyed to their traditional lands. For example, last year, I travelled to Freshwater Cove with

² Mowaljarli's story is recorded in D. Mowaljarlai and J. Malnic, *Yorro Yorro: Aboriginal Creation and the Renewal of Nature*, Vermont, USA: Inner Traditions, 1993, together with an account of his culture in relationship with the Kimberley landscape.

³ I have bracketed the (re) in reconciliation to express my uneasiness with the term reconciliation. As Raimond Gaita notes, "it was never a good name because it implies that non-Aboriginal Australians has a legitimate complaint against the Aborigines." See R. Gaita, 'The Moral Force of Reconciliation' in J. C. Altman and M. Hinkson, *Coersive Reconciliation: Stabilize, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, Arena Publications, North Carlton Vic, 2007, p. 301. But the intention of reconciliation was clearly to "reconcile Australia's festering historical wounds" and "ensure the recognition of Indigenous rights while overcoming chronic disadvantage." as Patrick Dodson argued in 'Whatever happened to Reconciliation?', see J. C. Altman et al, op. cit., p. 21.

senior Elder Donny Woolagoodja as he was filmed by Lonely Planet in conjunction with National Geographic. This trip enabled me to relate to the culture in a 'hands on' way. With Donny, I hunted and dived for turtle on the Montgomery Reef. I then travelled to the community's outstation at Cone Bay where the artists produced paintings for the festival. My task was to teach them how to stretch canvas and generally support them in this work.

The paintings are sold in the Arts and Culture Centre, which has been recently built at Mowanjum and managed by Jenny Wright who has brought new vision and enthusiasm. The Centre hosts the Festival and exhibits the extraordinary art of the people of Mowanjum as they paint their Wandjinas and other totemic figures. The Festival is not a staged performance, as in the Western sense, but has the authentic feel of singers and dancers allowing their culture to emerge on the night.

In the past two years, a group of volunteers from Perth, the Boab Network, assisted with the Festival. This group, initiated by the Floreat Uniting Church, was appalled by the high number of suicide attempts by Mowanjum youth. They decided to take action and have since introduced a number of projects aimed at creating a long term relationship with the Mowanjum people, primarily with the children and youth. The Festival provides a meeting point for ideas to be discussed and plans made. The Boab Network has run programs for children and youth during every school holiday including a bus trip to Perth. They are installing computers at Mowanjum for the benefit of the community and helping to organize trips back to traditional lands and outstations such as Cone Bay. The Boab Network is currently exploring a gardening program for the community, a maintenance trip to Cone Bay to develop a work ethic and trade skills for teenagers, and a visit to a remote area in Ngarinyin traditional lands.

IV. THE MOWANJUM FESTIVAL: AN ACTION/REFLECTION MODE OF WORKING AND BEING

The Mowanjum Festival continues to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people into relationship. As such it has become a long standing expression of (re)conciliation and collaboration. Indeed, it is important not only for the support and development of the culture, but for the many opportunities for creative dialogue that occur as people work together.

My experience of the Festival, together with many opportunities for engagement with the people and their culture, leads me to offer a suggested mode of creative collaboration with an Indigenous community.

I am conscious that I am only presenting my side of the story. Would the people also affirm this mutual collaboration and agree that they have benefitted from it too? I will certainly ensure that their voices are heard as I frame proposals for future research and communicate the findings to the wider community.⁴

V. COLLABORATION BEGINS AND ENDS WITH RELATIONSHIP.

Volunteering at the Mowanjum Festival has led to a significant long-term relationship with the people. I have worked as a volunteer each year since 2002. The Boab Network is also developing a long-term relationship with the people. This is a reciprocal relationship in which we experience Indigenous culture and community as we share our own skills and contribute to the practical organization of the Festival. The Festival is thus a way of bringing people with diverse backgrounds together to work side by side on a common project. The continuity of relationship has enabled the wider learning to take place. The people have invited volunteers such as I to experience their traditional lands, giving us a unique opportunity to engage their culture and relationship with their land. This could not have occurred unless there was a trusting relationship. Mowanjum people on the other hand have travelled to Melbourne or Perth and engaged our worlds. Again, trust was required for this to occur.

⁴ Collaboration with Indigenous Communities involves particular care as outlined in the set of research ethics offered by Marie Battiste in Denzin N.K. et al (Eds), *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, Sage, London, 2008, p. 433.

VI. LISTENING IS A VITAL INGREDIENT TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION.

The Festival has changed over time. The Mowanjum people have been concerned that the Festival had a mixed program, which diluted their traditional cultural presentations. This has now changed. Those responsible for organizing the festival have listened to the voice of the Mowanjum people. The Festival is now truly an Indigenous festival.

The Boab Network has developed its wider program through keenly listening to the needs of the people. This often happened during the festival and in those creative moments when people were working side by side. For example, the Boab Network heard the need for children and youth to be given an opportunity to travel with their families to traditional lands. Last year, in response to the request of the people, they organized a large-scale journey to Worrora lands on a remote coastal outstation at Cone Bay. This year, they are arranging an excursion to Ngarinyin lands. The Festival provided the natural time for essential communication and planning.

VII. COLLABORATION, IF EFFECTIVE, MUST HAVE VALUE TO ALL PARTIES.

The Festival is of great value to the Mowanjum community because it provides a unique focus for teaching and including children and youth in cultural activities. It has been satisfying to see that the culture is alive and well. Performances include a dance especially for children in the presence of adults. This is the encouragement dance where children get a feel for what it means to take part in the Corroboree or Jundba. They are painted up in the traditional colours of red and white ochre and dressed in red or yellow. Tribal markings are painted on their bodies including their faces. The Jundbas follow with storyboards, which illustrate the traditional stories. As the Festival is based on Black/white collaboration, this gives Indigenous people an opportunity to experience new and creative ways of relating to those from a dominant and often destructive white culture. Organizers such as Peter Croll and the volunteers who come to Mowanjum do not come to take control or manipulate, but work in integral relationship with the people.

Many others and I have been radically affected by our relationship with the Mowanjum people and the Festival. It has given us a unique opportunity to relate to Aboriginal people in a creative way where we work side by side in an equal relationship. The people of Mowanjum cease to be strangers and become our friends. It has been a reciprocal friendship in which we have received as much or more than we have shared. People are not jealously protective of their culture. On the contrary, they welcome others to join with them, by helping in preparations and learning about their culture.

VIII. TAKING INITIATIVE IS PART OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP.

The journey of planning and developing the Festival is like a dance involving two partners in reciprocal relationship. At times one partner will take initiative; at other times the other partner will take the lead. It has been satisfying to be part of this ongoing dance. At times I have waited to be asked to take part in helping with cultural matters such as the repair of totems, the organization around the dances themselves and the preparation of the children for their part in the dance. I have also been encouraged to take the initiative at critical times when the dance presentations seemed to stall or need extra support. It is a delicate balance, for it is important that Indigenous people take the ultimate responsibility and control of the Festival. Such action is also the product of a healthy relationship.

I see the Boab Network also struggling with this issue, particularly when they have taken the initiative to provide computers for the children and youth of Mowanjum. The Boab Network has the necessary skills to gain Government Funding and is in a position to take initiative in a complex field. Yet, members of the Boab Network are also mindful that the ultimate responsibility for projects rests with the community.

IX. REFLECTION IS A VITAL PART OF THE COLLABORATION PROCESS

The journey with the Festival and with the people of Mowanjum has been long and often stressful. I have encountered many challenges: issues of grief and loss, difficult cultural concerns, engagement with a

community under strain, helping to organize a Festival which brings a traditional Indigenous culture into a Western framework, not to forget the Kimberley climate. It has been essential to link action to reflection. Initially I did this through a journal, collating the various episodes of my involvement into the framework of journey and discovery.

I cannot present my journal in detail. However, I will include a poem that reflects my awareness of a conflict that began to take place within me. I became aware of the grief and sadness of the people who had experienced great losses in the face of the white invasion. The Mowanjum people like many indigenous peoples live in exile from their traditional lands. It is too costly, or difficult for many to make.

“The wind blows cold over Kimberley rock.
Silent tears cry out to be heard,
They hang as clouds in a cloudless sky.
The Wandjina waits, entombed in the cave
The people have gone; their songs not sung.
The land pleads for its renewal.
The old sun, set in blood, waits the coming of a new day.
The white men sent them away.
They sent them to Derby, Fremantle,
And mainly the grave,
The old spirits languish in hidden exile.
They cry for their land,
they long for return.
How long will it be?
How long will it last,
Before new dreams and unborn dreaming
Call the old one’s home, the long and arduous trip to this red dust
land.”

My journal has been my constant companion. However, in recent years and in response to a Visual Arts and Design degree at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), I have explored visual imagery, through painting, sculpture and video. I found it helpful to present a performance art piece placing small images on a tent with appropriate words. This arose from work with a practitioner from The Melbourne Institute for Experiential & Creative Arts Therapy (MIECAT) who also worked at ACU.

X. BEING IS AS IMPORTANT AS DOING

The Festival is a time of high stress and activity. It is important that this be balanced by the art of being rather than doing. The stresses of meeting Festival deadlines and dealing with the complexities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration often mean that I lose my own self in a flurry of action. This is counter to the culture and spirituality of the Mowanjum people and can be injurious. Fortunately, I have usually been able to balance this activity by journeying with the people to their traditional country. I am able to find a different rhythm and relationship with the people as they relate to their land.

XI. I HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH A WIDER AND NON-INDIGENOUS WORLD.

My work with the Festival and journey with the people of Mowanjum involves both a privilege and a responsibility. I have been privileged to share in an Indigenous community and their culture. I now have the responsibility to share this journey in a wider sense. I am preparing to research modes of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This research will raise many issues. Would this new role threaten my long-standing relationship with the people? How can I ensure that their input and voice is heard at every part of the research? What can be communicated about the Festival and other collaborative projects? Who will be my audience in this process? How do I ensure that communication does not infringe the rights or needs of the Mowanjum community? Furthermore, how can I faithfully express the depth of what I have encountered in these extraordinary people of Mowanjum? I am also very aware that Indigenous communities such as Mowanjum are over-researched,⁵ often with little benefit for the community.

Finally, what has this journey to do with reconciliation? My volunteer work with the Mowanjum community was my personal response to the decade of (re)conciliation that was initiated in the 1991 by the Federal Government. The people of Mowanjum offered me a practical way to meet and work alongside them over the past ten years, sharing their culture and concerns. I intend to continue this journey and explore their perspectives on (re)conciliation as we discover new ways of collaborative and mutual involvement.

⁵ As Tuhiwai Smith argues, “The word... ‘research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary,” in Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies : research and indigenous people*, Zed Books, Dunedin , 1999, p. 1.