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TALKING FOR COUNTRY:
THE LAND AND ITS SONG
and
THE TIES THAT BIND
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AROUND
THE WORLD

by

Vai Stanton

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INTRODUCTION

These two talks were given by Vai Stanton in November 1991 and March 1993 at the State Library in Darwin as part of the Library's series of 'Under the Banyan Tree' lunchtime entertainments.

Vai is, as she tells us, a paperbark woman, from the Kungarrakunj tribe. What comes through clearly when she speaks of her "lok" or country is the deep emotion and the raw sincerity.

Those who had the privilege of attending her first talk realised, once and for all, what is really meant by the much spoken of, but little understood, Aboriginal ties with the land.

At times Vai draws attention to the pictures which she used to illustrate her talk. These have not been included here, as they were not suitable for reproduction in such a publication, but their absence in no way detracts from the strong impact of Vai's talk.

This was one of the best received 'Under the Banyan Tree' talks, and not only did Vai supply us with much food for thought, she even provided some genuine bush tucker, and fresh damper and treacle!

For her second address Vai chose to speak of the commonality between the various indigenous people of the world, a particularly appropriate subject for 1993 "The Year of the Indigenous People". Via spoke to us fresh from an international conference of indigenous people in Canada, and shared with us the insight she received at this powwow.

Vai has spent most of her adult life working to improve the lot of Territory Aborigines, and this is seen in her involvement with FORWAARD*. She has also worked tirelessly to improve relations between Aborigines and other sections of the Australian community. She is currently a Regional Councillor of ATSIC.

We present these two talks as part of our contribution to the Year of the Indigenous People.

*FORWAARD (Foundation of Rehabilitation with Aboriginal Alcohol Related Difficulties)
Talking for Country: The Land and its Song

by

Vai Stanton

There are times when the English language is not adequate. Obviously, I cannot speak my language to you, but I will write on the board something which talks about who I am and where I come from. Ngan Kungarrakunj is Kungarrakunj language. Ngan really means "the language". Lok Kurrindju: lok is home, country, hearth, home place; it does not mean house or dwelling, but rather "your place". Lok Kurrindju is Kungarrakunj homeland. Maplebak is the word for the Dreaming in Kungarrakunj. Our Dreaming for the tribe is Lundurru which is the Saltwater Crocodile. I have written, maplebak-lundurru Konotjorrba-gini Kungarakunj meaning "the Dreaming for Kungarrakunj people is the Saltwater Crocodile".

We all have our own personal dreamings. Myself, I belong to the Monsoon Dreaming - thunder and lightning, the works! I think I am one of those people who really feel their dreaming. The build-up to the monsoon is very important to me; I feel it, I live it, I know the really bad, hot days are going to end when the rains come. I am in tune with my dreaming.

I have brought some pictures of a lot of different places under lok. There are different parts of lok where we hunt, where we have ceremonies, where we sleep, where we go to collect materials that we need for making weapons or making things for the house. I have brought some food here to show you. The tree here produces one of the important fruits from our country.

This country had a very violent start. We suffered a lot of problems from colonisation. People were moved, dispersed, shot, poisoned. Some of these places are where we took the Land Commissioner to see where the big areas are where our bodies were just thrown into a pit. We have people who live in the area whose sole reason for staying there is that they mind the bones. It's called "minding the bones".

There has been a lot of decimation. Tribes were just slaughtered. In one area, mounted men would go out on raids shooting people. The people took cover in places that are places of prohibition under tribal law, but fear of their attackers was so great they forgot all fear and prohibition from tribal law, and that place actually gave them safety. One of the places we talk about in that situation is Pulandjaput, a place white people now call Sweet's Lookout on the Finniss River. You will know that they took a big lundurru from there. That lundurru is to us a great ancestor. He is now in the Museum. We don't like talking about museums; we call them "keeping places". We know that lundurru is there in a keeping place where people can see this magnificent creature.
There is a prohibition on calling that name after sundown, so I can only talk about *lundurru* in the daylight hours. It's very important for us not to breach that prohibition. It's one of the things we grow up with.

I'm a woman of the paperbarks. We're called the Paperbark People. The name for the paperbark tree is *ponga tjuda*. A forest of paperbarks is *ponga ponga*. There are *ponga pongo tjudas* in my lok, Kungarrakunj lok. There are plains where you can drive for miles. You can go into one forest and come out the other end into another set of plains, then enter another one and come out into another one. You could go into two or three places or *loks* that are just *ponga tjuda*. Within *ponga tjuda* you will see tall palms. You are enveloped in this great cathedral. We call it *lok kimek*, a good place.

In the *lok* itself, not only forests, but you come out onto great areas where there are billabongs, lots of game, lots of fruits. There is a small shrub out on the plains from which one can gather fruits called *chorr*. In the seasons when *chorr* is plenty - they are quite large - you can gather skirts full of them. Another fruit is *wim*. They are just coming into fruit now. They are a beautiful fruit. In times of plenty, my people also dried them and crushed them and made cakes of *wim*. I have forgotten why they are called this name. I don't know the English words for a lot of these trees. My family are trying to learn these names, and we're working with the Conservation Commission who are helping us. We're very grateful, and they are also happy to take the information we have. I've been in the process now of naming tucker trees and tucker vines and just general trees that we use for whatever purpose. The Conservation Commission give us recognition for this, which I'm very pleased about.

My talk is 'Talking for Country: The Land and Its Song'. Our stories are that this land has a song. Some people fail to hear it, some people fail to recognise it, but it's there. The stories from my people are that this place we walk on, here, this *lok* that we all walk on, is inhabited by all sorts of people, all sorts of animals, birds, - different uses by different people on this *lok*. We're also told that there is a *lok* up here and that *lok* is very important. We're taught that there is a *lok* below us, and it's the domain of different "beings" - different "beings" use the *lok* above and different "beings" use the *lok* below. We have stories about the Creation and the Creation Song, and our word for song is *koowaruk*. When I talk about the land and its song, I know other people hear it, other people who are not Kungarrakunj people, other people who are not Aboriginal people. I do know people who are sensitive to the song.

The stories about the pioneering days of this country talk about the people who came here, and they fought the land, they battled it, they had tribulations every inch of the way. They fought the land. They fought the people who were on the land. They failed to hear the song. A lot of them made mistakes. A lot of people, they had a lot of havoc in their own lives. They got dispirited and left the land after they tried to do things with it and it didn't return them. It was left damaged and broken, and still they didn't hear the song.
I really should have brought a book where Ted Egan has written about a very old man who was not of this country, he was not Aboriginal, but he was to be my Godfather. He was a German man. A lot of people came to a place called Katherine many, many years ago. The Government's idea was to set them up on independent farming ventures. It was not properly thought out, and a lot of people went there, hoping to do things and live better. A lot of them became upset and depressed. In fact this old man who was to be my Godfather, committed suicide. It's a very sad story. The story is about August Paul. The interesting story about him being my almost-Godfather is the fact that my mother and father were living in the town, in Katherine, at the time. My father was a ganger on the railways and my father used to cut hair for the local people, and this was one of the people who became friends to my father, old August Paul. My mother was pregnant for me at the time, expecting me in August and if she had a boy, they would call it Paul. I ruined everything, coming in September and being a girl. But my mother and father called me August all my life; whenever they called me, they called me August. It was for the old man. So that story is talking about my almost-Godfather.

I feel that there were a lot of people like him who could have lived there and learned about how to live there with us. That did happen. We knew a lot of people who were so-called itinerants. I don't like that word. They were old people - not even old people - who were sort of down on their luck, and they camped on the river. They were bagmen, swagmen, if you like. We knew two of the men. One was a very quiet, very nice old man. He was a very polite Englishman. He was a remittance man. Now, two remittance men lived on the river. When the war came and we were bombed out of here, one of these old men elected to go with us as his only family, and we lost him down south in the first winter. But he was a remittance man. And there were also people the authorities called White Russians, who fled the Revolution, and there were Irish people all over the place. My grandfather was Irish, for goodness sake! I've had an Irish grandfather and I know a lot of people who can claim that, and an English grandfather. Irish on my father's side and English on my mother's side. And they both lived in the country and tried to understand the land and the people. And they were again discriminated against by their own tribe because they chose to fraternise with black people.

My paternal grandfather was a ganger on the railway and he was sacked because one of his settlers fell onto the line and was hit by the cow catcher of the train and he was held responsible. He was sacked, and so my grandmother said, "All right, we go. I'll take you back to my lok, lots of tucker there, we can live easily, no problems". So grandfather went out to my grandmother's country. He tried to learn the language. A very hard language to some people, Kungarrakunj. I don't think it's hard. But can you imagine my poor grandfather with such an Irish accent trying to cope with Kungarrakunj language?

There is a story in my family, whereby my grandmother is admonishing the children for laughing at him, rolling around the floor, laughing at his attempts to string some sentences together in Kungarrakunj, and grandmother ticking them off and saying,
"You are naughty children, you are really very naughty. You should feel sorry for your poor old dad. He can't really speak English!" But at least, my grandfather tried. My maternal grandfather tried as well. People have tried to do that, people have tried to live with us in our country.

I'm sadly remembering Alec Fong Lim here because we went to school together. I remember coming in because he was talking and I came in to 'Under the Banyan Tree' and he was in full flight. He was talking and I walked in and he stopped and just stared at me and said, "You're late!" And I was all sorry and everybody turned around to see who it was. He said, "This is my countryman". He said, "Look at her, she couldn't even come here in time for me". Alec always called me "Country". If ever he met me, he'd say "G'day Country!" and I'd say "G'day Country!" So there you are, even the Chinese people tried to talk our language. We learnt also to talk and understand Chinese.

What happened here in Darwin when I was growing up, it was very, very much a lot of Asian people, because you had all the indentured labourers that came in to work in the pearling industry. So we grew up with talking Malay, Chinese, different people's language. I talk Tiwi language. I don't dare do it when my people are around because it's considered to be very discourteous that you don't talk in your own language. Some of these languages are beautiful and we've got to learn to talk to each other, anyway! We're all using this common language, aren't we? I mean, I've had to learn it as well. To go to school and get belted for talking language or pidgin English, they called it in those days, which is now a little bit more accepted because it's called Creole, but if you talked Creole in the school grounds, you got belted over that, too. I remember putting my hand out and getting five or ten of the best, and they always got you on that thumb knuckle!

Where the language was reinforced was at home. My parents actually made sure that we kept language at home and I have no problem, that I know now. They turn around in the schools and they're now trying to teach kids languages. Probably other languages from other places. It's important, I think, that we understand that language is important. It's not going to cause the Government any problems at all, so really what I wanted to say was that a lot of people - I've had people come to me and talk about trying to understand and wanting to come out and look at "country" and talk about "country", and I'm happy about that.

I once had a, what I like to call, "cross cultural" camp, and I thought if I got more sense and I learnt a bit more out of that, I wouldn't do it at those numbers again, because it just about drove us silly. Different people who didn't want to do particular things or only wanted to do particular things when we had a whole range of stuff. But I've learnt from that experience.

I'd say that one of the other things that I'd like to bring up is when you look at these pictures, and I'm talking about the song here, the song of the land is there for everybody. But it's being replaced all the time with things. We hear motor cars, we
hear machinery, we hear grindings, we hear jack hammers, we hear all sorts of other things that drown out the song. And with that I'd like to just turn this picture around and show you another part of *lok*. That " is on my *lok* as well. If you can just get an idea - they say, "it's all right - when it's rehabilitated it'll fill up with water and it'll be a lake". That's also *lok*. It's *lok* Kungarrakunj. We have been talking with these people. In fact, I went and asked the manager if I could have a copy of that and I think he was so intrigued with my story or with my argument, that he took it off the wall and bought it for me which I'm very grateful about. We don't say that it's no longer useful or that we don't like it any more. It's still Kungarrakunj *lok*.

I went into that tunnel, and I tell you I was really scared. We had to talk to the spirits. We had to plead with the spirits to understand that we had no part in this. We had to seek some assurance that we make them understand that we had no control over it. We couldn't help this when it happened. Other members of my tribe who did go into this also felt very fearful, but they felt they had to make apologies to the spirits. That's what I'm talking about - the other domain that's below.

The very important creation figure for us is the rainbow and this is its domain. We have said to the miners, "we're very, very afraid that you disturb this great ancestor, that we have to make the apologies for that". People have to. Because we didn't seek to have that happen.

If you just look at the depth they go down, you wonder. They say they've ten years mining left here. They're not going to dig any more; they just want to use some parts of the land to put up the overburden, the infrastructure and things like that. I tell you, we've had to talk, we've had to get different resource people in to help us to talk about that, because they're things we've never had to deal with in our lives before. I showed you the previous pictures about the *lok*. They also wanted to have E.L.A.s out there and we said "no", because at this point in time we have the right to say no. Once we allow exploration then it's almost a "yes" to mine. So we've kept those other places fairly safe, as safe as we can. The other parts that are being kept safe are the ones they've put into a park which is in my country, Litchfield Park.

Portions of the *lok* can be so different. You can be talking about escarpments, you can be talking about flats and plains and water. I'm a paperbark woman. I'm a swamp rat. I come from the wetlands and the river systems. Our *lok* also extends right up to the coast and we have places where we traded with coastal people. That *lok* is just as important for the coastal people to come into our *lok* to fish and to hunt. Things that they couldn't get in their *lok* they got out of ours and we got stuff from their *lok*, and we traded with them.

My tribe the Kungarrakunj people, are bordered by the Wadadjing people to the west and the Larrakeyah people to the north, to the east, from Warai, you go to Wulna mimitja to Limulingun up to Kakadu, Wagaman and Malak Malak people to the south. We have kinship or ceremonial links with all those people immediately

*Woodcutters open cut mine
†Exploration Licence Applications
outside. When I am talking about the Limuengun people, they're the people who come from the Alligator River. They're between our country and Wulna minitja and the Gagadju people.

That's where I am at the moment, talking about this, but it was really about the song and this land and the love of land. I can't express it to people any more. These sorts of things, people can tell me all the time how important it is, how it's good for the economy, how it's good for progress, that we'll all have jobs. I don't know where you start weighing up. OK, what happens here? When all that's gone, say about ten years from now, and there's nothing more there, you still got jobs for those people that you had there? I don't know. Do you make another big hole in the lok again somewhere else, or is there some other way? Eventually, you are going to have just a big quarry. We're all going to live in a quarry. That's where I want to end.

Answers to questions from the floor

The mine in question is Woodcutters which mines silver, lead and zinc. They said they want to continue, that it still has a life for them. They've to compete on the open market. They are not assured even of selling it and of getting a great profit. They've no money. They say that they need the money to pay their workers. They've no money, not a great deal of money, for anything else. We have said "you have to find the money to rehabilitate". The place is to be revegetated, and it has to be, trees put back. What do you do with that great hole when you "can't pull up the hole", like Ted Egan says, and "slice it up for fence posts"? It's there, but they say there will be a beautiful lake and that they will plant nice trees around the lake and put a beach there, some sand.

Rum Jungle was another in our lok. We couldn't do anything about that. They are trying to rehabilitate the thing. We're happy that they are rehabilitating or trying to. How can you change the damage? You see the dead trees, the polluted streams. You go there and see just these dead trees standing up and to us the trees are crying out, but they are dead, they are just dead arms into the sky. They are finished. They've gone.

I don't know how long it stays in the ground. We don't know that. You can't use the land any more. There are big warning signs there to say you must not use the water, it's contaminated. How long does contamination last? People worry me. They find it OK to go and swim in, what they call, "Rum Jungle Lake". I didn't. That was a beautiful spring. It was called Kanwuduk. They call the hill there Meneling, and Kanwuduk was the spring coming out of it. There were two places, Meneling and Yitpiling, that were very important in our stories. Kanwuduk has been ruined. Kanwuduk is the son of Meneling, and all we can do is cry for the land. I don't know what rehabilitation means. I don't believe I understand now what they talk about rehabilitation. It's only getting it back to look nice again. It's still poisonous. It's dangerous. The "beings" who live in that domain there have suffered. We have strong stories of punishment if you do it knowingly and willingly, if you damage and
pollute and destroy and hurt places, that the tribe is responsible for not exercising proper care and looking after country.

Where we go in country, we always call out to the spirits that we're approaching, that we're coming. "May we come? We want to get a fish, we're hungry". We say this in language. That's very important and the children do this. They actually argue and fight with each other about who is the one to do the calling out when we're going out. It's important that you pay proper respect for the *lok*. There are spirits who live in the trees, in the grasses, in the water, in the air, under the ground, so proper respect is paid by the people.

People might say, "Look, you've grown up, you've gone to white man's school, you've learnt all that business. How come you still believe that?" Of course I believe it. It's my belief. I have just been taught a whole lot of other things that might be useful to me, that I can make use of, but I don't discard the others. I don't just discard my beliefs. This is very important to me. I write poetry and I have talked to the people and I think sometimes I get very frustrated with myself. I want to say things and I want to do it in such a way that it's important for me to say it. I find sometimes that I can use English very well, but sometimes when words are not adequate I have to use language to fill it in. My writings are a hotch potch of language and other person's language (English).
Good afternoon people. If you look up on the board, I've written my language there. The top one is the customary greeting, Kimek ngee yengah! (How are you?), and the other is just saying who I am, Kingi ngirrga-Mimbinggal (My name is Mimbinggal). This is my Kungarrakunj name but it is not just a name, it is also a traditional place name, it fixes me to a particular place in this land. I have a responsibility and, as a Paperbark woman, (that means we're water people, we're swamp and river systems people), it is important for us to look after the place, to care for it. If streams are blocked with debris or damaged, it is our responsibility to clear it, to look after it. The rest of the statement I put up was Kingi ngirrga Mimbinggal lukrikkan ponga tjuda Kurrindju lok Kungarrakunj konotjorrba gini that actually means, "My name is Mimbinggal, I am a Paperbark woman" (lukrikkan ponga tjuda is our name for paperbark). Kurrindju is the spiritual place for the Kungarrakunj people, Kungarankunj konotjorrba gini is belonging to the tribe. I've given you my language from my father's language, mainly because I'm in father's country. If I was in mother's country I would put mother's language up there, since it would be very discourteous for me to use another language, you know.

I decided on this topic, because this is the year identified as the 'Year for the Indigenous People', and there are a whole lot of things which I can identify with other indigenous people. This identifying with other people ranges across land, beliefs, customs, seasons, food and dreamings. I can't say I've met all the indigenous people, but I have met quite a number of them and we've always found similarities between us.

I recently had the privilege of going to Canada for the "Healing the Spirit Worldwide", the first international conference on alcohol and substance abuse, so I would like to start with this most recent contact with these people. The things that they used, the food, the preparation of food, some of it was different but basically I could go up and say, "What do you call this?" because I knew it from home. And they would give me their name for it. An example is what people here, stockmen and people in the bush here, would call "Johnny Cakes" or "Buggers on the Coals". Those people do that too, with just little differences - they use more sugar, whereas with us we make it with salt. I found theirs a little bit sweet for my taste, but it was the same thing.

I think the major similarities I found with the people were the absolute love and respect for Mother Earth; the love of forests, of animals and birds. In this recent contact I stayed at a place with a group of Indian people. They lived on the shores of a lake near Chase in British Colombia, and they had carvings depicting two particular dreamings. I can only call them dreamings because that's how I know them. One was a bear dreaming and the other was porcupine. They use the designs or carvings
outside their place in exactly the same way we would use them, and also in writings
and in speech, and they show the proper reverence for those dreamings.

On this particular evening they had invited another group to come in and entertain us
- dancers, men and women, and drummers - and I actually was so amazed to find that
some of the things they used in their dancing were things we use. One in particular
was a fan, but they made it from eagle feathers and ours is from the goose-wing.
Otherwise it was the same fan, made in exactly the same way. I actually asked one of
the dancers if I could have a look at it, and the binding, the way the feathers spread,
was exactly the same method we use. (We call that fan kibiepie). They were not
surprised at this similarity and I found it easy to talk about these things because we
could relate to different uses of that fan, and to so many other things. There were just
so many things that were similar; the food they put on, the speech, how the elders
were presented to the people and the proper, customary way of speaking to the elders.
It was just like at home so I didn't feel out of place.

When we talk about land we talk about the people, the ancestors, the wise people, the
elders. In my tribe we call the old, wise people the numundurrks and ulmandurrks.
I'm talking father's language here. If you go out into my country you will see
evidence of these wise people who have remained on the land giving us the security,
the feeling with the land, and you would no doubt see them, but here they are
magnetic ant-hills. To us they symbolise the guardians, the sentinels of this land, and
I found the same thing in talking with other people. I found this over in north
Queensland, I found numundurrh and ulmandurrh there. I was surprised, I didn't
know; I thought they were only in my country. So that's one of the things that we
found incredible, that people have the same respect and reverence for ancestors - they
are not just anthills.

I was at a barbecue at this place up near Laura with some Aboriginal people and I
heard these two men ahead of me talking in language which I understood. They were
talking my language and when I spoke to the man I said, "Did I hear you say 'do you
want the meat on the bread or the plate'?". He said, "Yes, I did." "What language
were you speaking?" He said, "My language". The language was from that area, and
it was similar to mine except for small differences (we call meat minyuk and they call
it minyuk, and bread is mai for us and they say maiee). I was really quite amazed -
how come they're speaking my language over here? Then I realised that a long time
ago, the borders, the so called parikoot borders (that's white man's borders), didn't
mean anything - language transcended such artificial borders. It was absolutely
fascinating to me to find these similarities with other people that I really have had no
real contact with.

I have lived in the Pacific for a year and I found similarities there too with our
customs - similarities in the way we address people, in the proper social kinship
terms of who you could or could not speak to or be comfortable with because they
stood in a correct or in a wrong relationship to you. Because the incest laws in
Aboriginal society are very, very strong the kinship structure is very important and it
is essential that people understand this and where they fit in. I found this in other places too. For example, in Fiji, a woman who calls me rivanis, means I can be on a marriage system with her family. There are so many things that are the same, so many things about which we feel the same - the processes of colonisation, the removal of people from land, the children that were taken away and put into mission schools.

One of the things that came out very strongly when I was in Canada was the reinforcement of language and customs, teaching the children. In the old days there were laws against the Canadian and American Indian people teaching their children language, teaching the dances, teaching the songs. I went to this incredible big powwow where the children were dressed in all the different costumes from the different tribes, which previously had been illegal. There is now this great surge towards the rescuing of language among all indigenous people. The only way my language was maintained and reinforced was at home, because when we went to school we were flogged for talking language - it really is one of those things that you can't imagine now; you can't imagine people doing that. Today there are only a very few language speakers, entirely through the foresight of our old people, who said they must be taught at home. Even if you get belted at school, you come back and learn language. This in spite of the penalties. If it got out that you were going against authority there was a danger of being removed to a place like Haasts Bluff or somewhere away from your country, which would kill people, you know.

At the conference there were two groups of Samis, one from the Norway side and the other from Finland - these blond, blue-eyed "natives" sitting with us and talking about indigenous rights! They said they were belted at school, taught not to speak language too. I don't know what they call Mission Schools over there, but the same thing, the same divisive, colonial sort of thing happened to them, to these white skinned people. They identify themselves strongly as Sami, they don't like to be called Laplanders. I found that there were no differences really in what happened to people when their country was overrun.

But I didn't realise the extent to which this very thing happened to all indigenous people. Today, among indigenous people throughout the world there has been a resurgence in the teaching of language and customs, which previously were condemned and criticised and prohibited.