

The Place of Dogs in Traditional Culture

By Philip Donohoe, Yambapal Brando Garrawurri, Richard Trudgen

Phil Donohoe

Our speaker today, George Dayngumbu, is unfortunately in hospital. [*Since the time of this conference this man has passed away and as a mark of respect it is important not to say his name—Ed.*]. So I will begin with a bit of history about my involvement in dog health programs over the last few of years.

My introduction to the issue of dog health programs in Aboriginal communities was from a discussion with the late Dr Trevor Cutter, Stephen's father, who spent about ten years in Alice Springs working with the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in the 1970s and '80s. We were having coffee and I happened to mention the issue of poor dogs and how there could be a link with human health. He looked me in the eye (as only Trevor could do) and said, 'People have been going into these communities and they have been killing dogs because they believe these dogs are making people sick. But it's not the dogs making people sick; they are in fact keeping people alive in the winter because they use the dogs to keep them warm. They cherish these dogs. These dogs are of high value to them. Whitefellas have been going in and shooting dogs against the will of the people, and it causes amazing pain.'

Little did I know that three or four years later I would be up in the Northern Territory. I did understand there was some emphasis on dog health programs but I wasn't always convinced of their importance. In East Arnhem I had a particular program to carry on from the previous Environmental Health Officer, a dog program at Milingimbi. So there I was, faced with a situation where I had to support the wishes of a community to conduct a dog health program but a little bit uncertain of its value.

But Trevor's words stayed in my mind, and I continued to listen to the people's words and their wishes about how they would like that program to be conducted. Lapalung Dhamarrandji, who adopted me at Milingimbi, took quite some time to explain to me the tree of life or knowledge, showing me that how you see things and how you listen determines how much you will understand. While we can look at a tree outside, we know there are roots underneath and we cannot always see that. A person with deep knowledge knows everything about what is under the ground, and their understanding about that tree—or their understanding about that dog or crocodile or turtle or whatever—is very deep, way deeper than you and I could ever imagine. So how I could interact with that level of knowledge and sensitivity became an issue.

I was then talking with a Health Worker at Galiwin'ku who spoke about the issue of the 'bottom story'—the *dhudi dawu*. She said: 'See that tree over there? I know everything about that tree. I know its flower, when it flowers, when it's wilting, when it's sick, when it's healthy. I know what's under there, what food I can get from that tree. I know everything about it. But that other tree over there, I don't know about that. It is a missionary tree; they brought that tree here. It's got a pretty flower, it's got leaves, but I don't know the *dhudi dawu*, I don't have the bottom story, the deep story.'

Over a couple of years and several stories of that type, as I listened to people and showed them respect, I came to realise just how extremely important dogs are to people. It wasn't a matter of going in and doing cold science on the dogs, making them better and everybody being happy. It was something much wider and deeper that affected the whole community, the whole family and individuals quite profoundly.

So the method we used when we did start dog programs was to talk with elders in the community and people responsible for dogs. On one such day we spoke to George Dayngumbu, one of the elders of the Galiwin'ku community. After listening to us for a while George said, 'You've been telling us about your story; now I'll tell you about mine.'

He said that 30 years ago he was the town clerk working alongside the Balanda (white outsiders). One day one of the Balanda said, 'These mangy dogs are running around making all the community sick. You've got to exercise leadership and deal with those dogs so the community will be better. They're in a disgusting condition. We have to kill them.'

This put George in a very awkward position. He had to round up those dogs and take them from people. People were confused about what was happening and they weren't really happy for him to do it. He had the unfortunate job of taking the dogs to the tip and helping to shoot them. He had to try to explain to the people that the dogs had been making them sick, but the people didn't fully understand because they lived with the dogs and the dogs shared everything with them. The dogs were their friends—how could they make them sick?

After the shooting of the dogs, George returned to the community. Over time the dog numbers increased again and the sicknesses of the dogs returned. He said to me: 'I'd taken dogs that I shouldn't have taken. I didn't explain the sickness because I didn't understand the sickness that the people were supposed to have. I knowingly took ceremony and unceremony dogs away, and when I returned the people said, "You of all people. You are a dog dreaming person." Me of all people. I should know better than to be treating dogs this way.'

All this happened over 30 years ago, but the man was crying as he was telling me the story, hoping I would understand.

I think I have understood something of the importance of dogs and their health and their place in Aboriginal communities. It saddens me that there are a whole lot of assumptions made about both dog health or human health where the depth of the people's knowledge is not necessarily respected, where we don't even bother to find out.

Yambapal

My name is Yambapal Brando, from Galiwin'ku—Elcho Island.

I have worked in environmental health for many years. First time Stephen [Cutter] came to Elcho Island, I explained everything to him, about how to respect people so people don't get into trouble. We used to go and talk to people, finding dogs to operate on or to give Covinan or Ivomec—and if people say yes, that's okay. Sometimes they say 'leave it alone' and we say okay. And sometimes the owners come and talk to us if they need a dog taken away to the tip, then we do so. We make it pass away there. I'm based in the housing office in Galiwin'ku. I usually work in the community with environmental health issues.

Richard Trudgen

I came to this area in 1972 and lived at Ramingining. There were about three houses there, and I was there for a period of 11 years as the town was being built.

The whole issue of dogs became fairly real about two years after I arrived. Around 1974 I experienced my first dog program when I was working in a workshop as a fitter and turner, a mechanic. One morning the police drove in and we heard high-powered rifle shots. Dogs came running up past the workshop, howling and screaming because they were wounded. The superintendent had said to the police, 'Can you get rid of some of the dogs around here?' and they

had said, 'No worries, boss'. They went down to the middle of the village, pulled out their rifles and started shooting.

I have since seen many dog programs throughout Arnhem Land and the experience is often the same or close to what I experienced that day.

I've just finished writing about the wars of the area that the people fought against the Balanda, the 'outsiders'. ('Balanda' is a word that comes from Asia. It means 'Hollander' from when the Dutch were there. Many people in Asia, including Arnhem Land, use the word 'balanda'.) When I came, the people of Arnhem Land had already experienced about 50 years of war, over 20 years with the pastoralists and 10 to 20 years with British and Japanese boat owners. When the people saw dog programs where rifles were used, it was like the war was continuing. That is, their beloved dogs were being treated as if they were just rubbish by other Australians.

So when I became a community worker, the first program I attempted to do was a dog program. I sat down with people and asked, 'What's your biggest problem?' They said they were itchy, from fleas coming off their dogs. Whether or not we are looking at parasites coming from dogs to humans, the fact is that if dogs have lots of parasites, the chances are the people do too. What we need to be doing is dealing with the human element of it. The deep concern the people have is for the well-being of their dogs.

It's interesting that wherever we go, from health or education to economics or law, Yolŋu use one particular story a lot. (*Yolŋu* is their term for people.) I'll tell you that story.

[Overheads were used to demonstrate the following story.]

When the Balanda came to our community we showed them everything. It's like we showed them the whole tree, leaves, roots and all. We showed them everything. If they are men we take them to the ceremonies. We took anthropologists into our deepest ceremonies—we've shown them things we never should have showed them. We trusted them with our lives at times, and some of our people actually got killed because those people betrayed that trust. We showed them everything.

The trouble is, it seems as though it is not the same when it comes to information relating to Balanda knowledge. When we go over to the Balanda world, it's like Balanda only ever teach us the surface story. We only hear the top story about the trunk, branches and leaves on the tree. They never show us the roots that support the tree. They keep that foundational knowledge from us—that is, the knowledge that supports the tree and gives it life. This knowledge we are looking for is all the foundational information about their society they never teach us.

Let me give you an example. Terms like 'bacteria' and 'virus' have been taught to most Aboriginal Environmental Health Workers, environmental educators, even health workers. I'm speaking about Aboriginal people who use English as a second language, not Aboriginal people with English as a first language. Where English is a second language, you would be surprised how many Environmental Health Workers and others are totally confused about what those words mean. They don't know whether they signify a spirit or an object. They definitely don't think they mean a living organism, especially an organism you can't see (without the aid of a microscope of course), an organism that's actually reproducing at a fast rate. And it's the same when it comes to knowledge about dogs. The people don't really know what makes their dogs sick.

When we come from our cultural knowledge base to talk to a group of people who have a different

cultural knowledge base, our communication doesn't work. The people end up only getting the top, surface story because what we say to them in English doesn't make any sense. They just don't get it because they don't have the supportive cultural information to make sense out of what is being talked about. It took Westerners some 400 years to assimilate the knowledge about what these little things that cause disease and sickness are. Nobody has run any extensive programs to get the knowledge of bacteria into Aboriginal society. Nobody has done it.

A lot of Aboriginal people say, 'We get so tired of hearing this top story'. It's not a top story because we intend it to be. It's a top story because when we, as people from one cultural group, talk to people in another cultural group, we shortcut our communication, assuming the other people have the same "cultural knowledge" as we have.

It's when language and culture collide that the problem occurs. Most people don't have the training in how to get the two messages to meet so we end up missing each other all the time. Sometimes Yolgnu people get so frustrated asking what something is about that in the end they grab the tree by the trunk and rip it out of the ground to see what's down there to support the information they are being given. And what happens then? The roots break off and they still don't get the information they are after, the supportive foundational information. That's what happens with contact between white and Aboriginal cultures—it usually ends in conflict over communication, missing each other, not understanding. It leaves people totally frustrated because they've only got the surface story and the roots have broken off in the ground. So we have to be careful in our communication all the time.

With that in mind, we'll move on to the cultural significance of dogs in Aboriginal society.

In Arnhem Land there are up to 60 different clan groups. They have different clan estates, and each of those clans relates to a particular estate. At the dawn of creation, the Creator, who was on an island to the east of Arnhem Land where the morning star rises, sent people like angels to create things. They were female and they walked through Arnhem Land and created everything there.

There were other types of angels also, *malagatj*, who were sent as representatives of the Creator. The *malagatj* can come in the form of an animal. (My particular clan comes in the form of the shark and taipan snake; others may have the magpie geese as their 'angels'.) Through these *malagatj* the Creator spoke to the people and taught them about the nature of the creation.

Throughout Arnhem Land, you'll find clans identifying with particular animals. They will say 'we are the honey bee people' or 'we are the magpie geese people'. Different groups who identify with a particular animal will join together and they play a primary role in its conservation, its protection. For example, Magpie Geese people, at the beginning of the season, get together for the first hunt and ceremonially teach the people how to use magpie geese: how to dress them properly, how to respect the animal, how to cook it, how to eat it. They instruct and teach. They are the ones who have the prime concern for the conservation of that animal, the prime concern that it be eaten in the right way. They have a primary respect and protective role for the animal.

Now throughout Arnhem Land you will find clans related to dog dreaming, who say 'we are the dog people'. This is very important to understand.

It was this knowledge that was the main factor behind the virtual disappearance of transmissible venereal granuloma in some of the Arnhem Land communities. It was the fact that Stephen Cutter talked to the right people, the people who saw themselves as the dog people. Once he had talked to them, he showed them what the disease was and also talked about the consequence of the disease getting into the dingo population. Then the dog people took control, and he was almost knocked over when they said, 'All right, let's take this disease right out. Let's try and keep it out of the dingo population.'

There is one factor that is forgotten in every education package that exists in Australia when it comes to Aboriginal people. We forget the power of the people. Teach them first, in terms they can understand; show them bacteria—real stuff, don't talk Japanese or some other foreign language like English—and we will find that the people will come on side and the problems we are worried about will disappear.

For some people in Arnhem Land, the dog is a representation of the actual Creator himself—not the Creator, but representing the Creator. However, for most people the dog is just a bloody good friend. If you do live in a world where you believe in sorcery (which traditionally is illegal in Arnhem Land), then dogs are great protectors: they wake you up and let you know that somebody is around trying to kill your people, or trying to do sorcery. Dogs are protectors. For old people especially it is also a friend thing. There are many different levels of affection that people have for dogs.

Part of the problem with dogs is that we have no rule of law. There is no recognition of the traditional law and that impacts on many of the things that we look at.

Phil Donohoe

People from Aboriginal communities want to know a lot more about parasites and bacteria than people from white communities. In white communities, once you reach the surface story they don't want to know anything else; as long as they have the word and a bit of a concept, that's the finish of it. But in traditional communities they want to get right down to the bottom and find out how things work. At Ramingining community Rick Speare was involved in a dog health education program and was teaching local people postgraduate concepts that they could understand quite easily.

The other thing that we wanted to do was conduct some post mortems on dogs. But in one community there was a lady who brought along a boy who had a congenital malformation of a patch of hair on his back, and she said, 'This boy is a dog dreaming boy, and when dogs are killed in this community, he gets sick. So I'd ask you not to kill any dogs.' Since I was a visitor, it was not my decision. So we said, 'I will respect that and people here can work it out with you. If they decide dogs need to be put down, we will put them down. However, if they don't want any put down, we won't.'

In the end we went ahead just with the education and had a very productive time, even though we appeared to achieve very little in physical outcomes (dog operations).

Richard Trudgen

One of the main reasons people ask more questions is the same reason you guys are going to ask questions now. When it's new knowledge coming into a cultural knowledge base—say, the idea of dog parasites moving to humans—it's got to be critiqued, it's got to be argued, to make sure it's right.

That's why national accreditation, national programs do not work; they are based on the knowledge that is already accepted by the dominant culture rather than on the information that is needed by the culture that is assimilating the new knowledge. And the information that is needed for the assimilating culture to argue and critique the subject is much deeper information than the information required by the culture that has already accepted this information as real knowledge. Like all people, Aboriginal people want to be sure they're not being had, that somebody's not pulling their leg with some stupid story. They want to know the information that will make it all fit together intellectually for them.

Discussion from presentation

Gill Little (*Palmerston Town Council*) A couple of people have mentioned a ceremony dog. What's the significance of a ceremony dog?

Richard Trudgen People sometimes will give a dog a special name that belongs to the angel from the Creator. So if a dog is seen as a special dog and has been given a special name, that dog is almost seen like one of the angels revisiting, a reminder of the angel itself. And if that dog is killed, it has the same repercussions traditionally as killing a person.

It's all a matter of control. When people are in control and they make decisions about something, then the consequences are far less than if somebody from the outside, seen as a powerful agent, makes the decision over, say, euthanasing a dog. If people have all the information, then they have control to make the decision, and they see that it's for the best that this happens. Then the consequences are far less, even with a ceremonial dog.

We need to understand that community violence is one of the worst forms of violence psychologically, even worse than natural catastrophic violence like cyclones, earthquakes, whatever. When violence is committed by one cultural group against another cultural group, it creates repercussions that are far more severe. So when people say 'this is a ceremony dog', we should back off and say, 'Okay, this is one dog in particular that we must absolutely make sure the owner has control over and that they deal with it.' In my view, we should treat all animals, especially pets, with respect.

If you euthanase a dog and you don't know whether it's a ceremony dog or not, and it is, the owner gets into deep trouble because he hasn't protected that dog.

Jackson Sailor (*senior quarantine inspector, Torres Strait*) Getting back to the discussion about dogs being warm in winter: they are also our friends. Security is secondary to the dog being a friend and a blanket.

The other thing was about the type of dogs. The Balanda are having dogs more as security than pets. Some urban dogs are the size of an APC or whatever. People keep them in their backyard to keep intruders out.

It would be good to discuss the effect of surgery and medication on the dogs' aggressiveness.

Alison Hunt (*ATSIC, Alice Springs*) I'd like to address the question about the ceremony dog. The ceremony dog is very important in our culture; it is a totem to our clan groups and our ceremonies.

When I would travel south with my family and we would go through the dog dreaming country, every time we go past that country there is a rock there which is a totem that belongs to an old fella who lived in Pupunya. We had to stop and say hello to that dog; we were going through his country. There are a lot of totems—snake dreaming, bird dreaming, wind, the sea for the people at the Top End. So it's our totem, our belief, what God has put under our land for our people.

So dogs are friends, ceremonies, totems. They're keeping people warm and acting as security to wake people up, old people sleeping, drunks. It's a friend and a sacred animal.

So when you hear people talking about dog sickness . . .

I grew up with dogs and without blankets. We had to be warm. One time we travelled to Yuendumu and I didn't take my swag and blanket. When I got there I said, 'Nanna, where am I going to

camp?' She said, 'You got to camp in that humpy. The dogs will keep you warm.' So I had ten dogs over me to keep me warm.

Geoff Shaw I have a cousin named Renee that lived down in the creek bed of the Todd River, just north of Alice Springs. She had about four dogs, and bear in mind that English was her second language. With the officer from the town council they went up there to talk to my cousin about her dogs harassing people. They told her, 'You're going to have to get rid of them.' She said, 'Look, the only way we're going to rid of them is to take them back to my community which is Santa Teresa.' So they had to be transported 70 km away. When the white fellas from the town council came to do that, my cousin spoke to the dogs in Arrente, saying, 'Go up on the top of the hill.' So all these dogs went up on the top of the hill and the council couldn't catch them. English wasn't their first language either. So there you go, they understand the language.

Richard Trudgen It's very clear that people want to have control. Research out of America is showing that 60% of the health factor in our communities is due to loss of control. That research was done over a period of 20 years in America.³

We've got to move past being technocrats and just hitting parasites like neo-colonialists who are out here to control people's lives. We've got to move over and meet the people where they want knowledge and information about these dog diseases.

It's great if people can then start participating in operations and so forth. Traditionally people never used open-cut operations, but now they can participate in open-cut operations with the dogs. The potential knowledge flow-on for human health is incredible.

We do a lot of microscopy now and showing bacteria, and if you are going to get in to that, know that you need to teach people microscope literacy first. Let me give you a quick example of that. When I first went into this as a community educator, just showing old people a black and white flat photograph, their minds were not trained to read a flat black and white image.

Let me explain this. Has anybody seen the Magic Pictures? You know, when you go to the flea market and try to see the images in the three dimensional pictures. You might come back a number of times before you can train your mind to decode the three dimensional picture. You've got to teach yourself to read them. It's exactly the same if you've never in your cultural knowledge base experienced the fact that there is life smaller than what you can see. You actually have to teach your mind to think that.

So we use a dissection microscope first. We pull the microscope apart and show them it's really only a magnifying glass. We get the people to get an ant, put it under the microscope and play with it on the dissection microscope. Then we move to a compound microscope and blow up a hair in front of them.

Don't use stained slides or set slides. People have said they've tried to teach this to people before and it doesn't work. I ask them, 'What did you use?' 'Oh, we used stained slides.' Well, that's where it's gone wrong because you've just cut people out of the picture—they don't know where the slides came from or how they came about. They need to make the 200-year jump in understanding the whole story about bacteria; and it can happen in about 30 minutes when it is done correctly.

Let me give you another example of this. Some doctors showed a group of Yolŋu people bacteria from spinal fluid that was causing meningitis in a relative of theirs. When the doctors looked at the images they said, 'Isn't this great? Look at it, you can actually see them.' But the people said, 'Gee, they're pretty pictures', and the doctors couldn't work out why the people responded so

³ Syme, Leonard S., 'Individual Versus Community—Interventions in Public Health Practice: Some Thoughts About a New Approach', in *Health Promotion Matters*, Vic Health, Issue 2, July 1997, pp. 2–9.

indifferently. The reason was this. From their cultural knowledge base, the doctors could see that the images they were looking at were really very small living creatures that were breeding in the spinal fluid and making the patient very sick. But the Yolŋu people could only see the colour images in front of them. They saw those images at the size they were on the television monitor, not knowing that the microscope was making them bigger. Plus the people did not see them as tiny living, breeding creatures. The two groups saw two different pictures from the one image.

Do it properly, work through the steps that people need to know to see things. I know Steve has done quite a bit of good work around parasites and Rick has done quite a bit with the people. It works and it's powerful when done correctly.

All the other issues—education versus enforcement—won't be an issue if we move over and give real, appropriate knowledge to the people in a way they understand it.