

## RECONCILIATION IN THE LAND OF WARAJINDA (WOORABINDA) THE PREPARED ADULT!

**By Jennifer and Joel Rioux**

We cannot be in Woorabinda and not be touched by the students' will, by their happiness and sadness, by their desire to learn or by their tiredness, by their beautiful smiles or by their deep silent cries, by their love for nature even though home hardships simply take over sometimes involuntarily. However, we can be touched by this world of perfection of Mother Nature if we want to be. We can choose what we want to see and by learning more ourselves about a different culture.

Imagine... the dispirited vs the spirited!

The colours, the smells, the sounds of the crackling wood fires in the backyards during the cold winter evenings all combine to create an ever-changing environment. A car full of happy relatives' faces is driving up to a northern community called Yarrabah, near Cairns, to see the family and where sea turtles and dugongs will definitely be on the menu. The people of Woorabinda have been blessed by the touch of nature. For instance, they witness an agile goanna climbing up a tall gum tree behind the bush, and a pair of Crimson Rosellas flies at low altitude through the emerald branches of the Gumbi Gumbi (1). (medicinal local tree). Toddlers play and shout at the shop and a group of about 10 young children chase a pig to town, as they try to ride it. Some houses are in a decrepit state, too often the home of up to 15 people. Some students at smoko eat salty plums or pour quantities of salt on their half of freshly cut lemons, collected in the backyard, behind the school. We are told that this is a remnant of the ration period within all communities, a few decades ago (salty meat). A limping mangy dog roams the streets as it searches for scraps of food. A splendid, gigantic black-headed python slithers across the road towards the Post Office while sending everyone into a frenzy! In the backyard of the "women's shelter" (Gumbi Gunyah), one night, a giant kangaroo made a hole in the fence. Suddenly, this created discussions about definite spiritual signals sent by the marsupial. Along the road, in the village, there is a broken car windshield and there is garbage in some of the backyards. Peoples' confused eyes cut deep into your soul. About 200 metres further away from the township, a male emu guards a troop of at least eight babies in the scrub. The Wadja students are having the time of their life chasing the fleeing new born flightless birds. C.D.E.P. workers (Community Development Employment Program - a work for the dole program), are seen everywhere in town cleaning up the central avenue, but also working at the child care centre, hospital, Wadja Wadja, etc. One afternoon per week, some CDEP workers come to us to learn more about arithmetic and language using Montessori apparatus.

Domestic violence and social, financial, sexual, emotional, cultural problems slowly erode young, and not so young lives, a form of predictable suicide as we standby and watch. Unfortunately, reality also is that many young boys/girls slowly kill their organs through the abuse of petrol-sniffing and other substances. Finally the still fresh open wounds of the stolen generations, the decades of fear-inspiring government policies aimed at separating Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal families and assimilating them into the dominant white European culture pervades the community fabric. For any visitors like us, it is easy to see that the students' shrieks are like the silence of the green frogs in Woorabinda. You hear their needy calls when they rest beside you, when they place their young trusting hands on your shoulders. Even though you can hide and put their pain at the back of your mind momentarily, it acts like poison in your organs, weakening you. Curiously though, it can also strengthen you as it pushes you to "Champion the cause of all children" and fight harder for their rights. This is why working here in Woorabinda for us has been so rewarding and the best job in our careers!

At 3 o'clock, we go for a bike ride in the bush, just to recover our energy, and look for new bird species in the scrub, maybe "chirpings" we have never heard before in the area or simply just to meditate!

Fortunately at Wadja Wadja High School (W.W.H.S.) there has been a significant rise in attendance since Montessori was introduced. On the other hand, their commitment to education is not seen as a priority in our eyes. However, there is a warming brotherhood, a camaraderie rarely seen elsewhere; they look out for each other, a fiery companionship, no bullying, no jealousy or competition, a sharing of ideas, of knowledge, resources and guidance...

Last year, in class, the students went from walking around with an agitated mind, without projects, goals, without many habits of work and little concentration to a now sustained 45 minute to 1 hour interest in Zoology and Geometry. Last week we had distinguished visitors in town: the North American Montessori Teachers Association (NAMTA) video team (Tim-David Kahn's son and Joe as well as Pamela Nunn and Megan Tyne). They asked us "why has Montessori been successful here in Woorabinda?" To us, it is due to the Montessori vision of Education. One of the areas that we prioritised is the quintessential concept: the Prepared Adult. As the prepared adult dictates, we must remove our own defects and defences, barriers and past unresolved issues. We broke down our course notes about the prepared adult over a 100 times or more, we "decognitised" each word into syllables and bits of letters. Jenny and I discussed like overzealous neophytes, the three components of the Montessori system (materials, physical environment and the prepared adult) like we'd never heard about these vital Montessori concepts before, from 3:00 o'clock until the wee hours of the night ... many times. The core discussions always revolved around the physical preparation of the adult, the emotional and spiritual preparation. We have discussed, of course, the scientific preparation as well as observation.

**Reconciliation** means first taking a step back to look at what is happening in our community, what works and what needs to be addressed! After one and a half years spent in Woorabinda, we came to seven conclusions ...

1. We had to acknowledge first that Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged people in the country and the gap between Indigenous health outcomes and those of the rest of Australia are unacceptable and appalling. We agreed on the special status of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of our nation. The treatment of Indigenous Australians represents the most blemished and ongoing chapter in the history of Australia. We recognized that communal interest in (and spiritual attachment to) land is fundamental to Indigenous culture.
2. We need to adapt Material and Curriculum! We are discovering that within the Montessori materials and curriculum sits an untapped potential to support and reach the young Aboriginal student. Home-made adapted materials must be discussed/developed/adapted to support their learning!
3. We need to adapt language! We need to adapt our language, rephrase the wording contained in our lessons (e.g. in the study of lines (B series)) and our choice of words needs to cater for Indigenous students who come to us with a limited vocabulary and a limited knowledge of words and their meanings. In doing this, we can, definitely increase the success level of these students.
4. We need to focus on the universal Montessori principles of healthy living and realize that they are a gold mine in our community (concentration, choice making, independence, respect, development of the will, etc.). The students respond with a smile, with affection and with a gentle calmness and a peace of mind! The universal Montessori principles of healthy living are... talking to the students and they are reaching the unexpected ...
5. We had to acknowledge that the students deserve our deep reverence, profound respect for their inner strength. They are a model of tenacity to follow. Even through their torment, home afflictions and pain, they keep going. They have rarely shown impatience towards us and have

never screamed at us. All they scream for is for people to have a hearing ear! Also, the students respect the physical environment; we have never lost one single bead from our Montessori apparatus in 18 months. What is wonderful about human nature is that we all aim to be the best we can be, everyone. We all want to be kind to our fellow human companions. So do the students to themselves, their friends, their teachers and to their own peace of mind.

6. Jenny and I have prepared successful lessons “real life activities” that they will use when they leave us, hopefully equipped for supporting their community better. We need to design more of these home made lessons:

- Simple social skills when going on an outing to Rockhampton, to shop, to dine, to the post office, etc. (Grace and Courtesy lessons)
- Lessons like road signs bingo because of their interest in driving at a young age and preparing for their licenses.
- Health, hygiene and food habits lessons
- Reading Rockhampton/Yeppoon shop signs (bingo)
- Reading menus as if we were in Rockhampton (add costs)
- Goal setting-personal development/resumes
- Reading maps and adding kilometres between regional towns, near Woorabinda
- Reading movie/local train timetables
- Writing to the Woorabinda Council to offer ideas to improve the community
- Regional economies lessons/tourist spots: Great Keppel Island information, Coal in Blackwater, Sapphire mines at Rubyvale, orange, lemon, cotton and sunflower fields in Emerald, sugar factories up North, salt mines and mango farms (Bowen), sorghum and beef cattle at Folleyvale (Woorabinda Aboriginal Corporation/W.A.C.)
- Teaching about the Queensland cattle country. Droughts, floods, ticks, buffalo fly are all thrown up against farmers and that’s why “Brahman cattle” are nature’s best survivors in scorching Queensland sun. Brahman cattle is extremely tolerant to all of these harsh conditions.
- Activities related to peace and peace movements
- Domestic violence, petrol sniffing and diabetes lessons
- And many other ideas

7. Finally, the prepared adult is the key to connect with the Indigenous students!

We discovered that we must First try to Reconcile with Ourselves and accept the unacceptable, accept that we have no control over certain situations before we can even think of reaching the students. This means if the students don’t feel like working, there is a reason why and we will try to find out why. Sometimes we need to go to others to find out the real reasons for non-involvement. We know as a certainty that they will do their work in the near future, if not today, perhaps tomorrow. We trust that they will try again and try to perfect themselves as much as us trying hard to meet them in the middle... This is our first commandment! The students must feel from us a free and open attitude, with definitely no subtle aggression from the adult; they must not feel attacked or threatened at all, all the time. We have to disarm ourselves and we have a desire to reach every single one of them, to be accepted as non-threatening and to gain their trust.

Reconciliation means to them...

Let’s abandon the status quo in Indigenous affairs. It failed us all for far too long! According to Cape York Partnerships leader Noel Pearson, what is required is giving Indigenous leaders the power to break the cycle of poverty from which the problems of rural and remote communities flow. For Mr. Pearson, reconciliation means empowering (2) the communities to ban alcohol and most important, it means finding ways to create sustainable economies in remote communities so work is an alternative to the dignity-sapping alcoholism-inducing passive welfare that Mr. Pearson rightly calls a poison.

“It is about all of us accepting responsibility to ensure that Indigenous babies are brought into the world healthy and loved with every opportunity to develop their talents”!

West Australian Governor John Sanderson

Lowitja O'Donoghue (Australia's most respected elder - inaugural chairwoman of the recently abolished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) developed an action plan about human rights. Some of her principles are:

- to accept personal responsibility for change, no matter how small. We don't assume that someone else will do it, we do it ourselves.
- to reflect on our own behaviour.
- to treat each other with respect as it is more important than compassion or sympathy.
- to be inclusive and celebrate successes.

Reconciliation means to us...

We can all make the changes needed to end the poverty cycle that consigns too many Indigenous Australians to life in the Fourth World conditions (3), which end in domestic violence or illness. We can't feel sorry all day long... We can shed tears over young students but if we are not going to take action to alleviate the suffering, nothing will change in our classrooms. We are usually strong on compassion but weak in action. Symbolic and official statements or articles like these ones are meaningless without practical action. Action is needed to address Aboriginal disadvantage. As a prepared adult, saying sorry to ourselves for our past mistakes and promising not to repeat them is where it all starts. Feeling sorry for them/us is not helping much! It is a less than useful gesture if it is not accompanied by a resolve to do better. In the classroom, all the apologies in the world will not end hearing problems, glaucoma, skin infections (scabies, boils), diabetes, the strongyloides infections and malnutrition among Indigenous students in rural/remote communities.

We can, as Montessori teachers, offer the students tools to improve these future Indigenous leaders' own circumstances. Reconciliation to us, in the classroom means enabling the students to be more independent, to develop self-esteem and to not be afraid of making mistakes... The Montessori setting excels in this domain, as we all know! To us, reconciliation is ensuring that the next generation of leaders, now our Wadja Wadja students, have a chance to make the most of their abilities.

Reconciliation is about rights and responsibilities in the classroom so we all know where we're going and what we're about! It is about the past, the present and keeping in mind the future. Reconciliation is to look to the future and engage the students with meaningful activities and for them to grab opportunities. The students' attendance and behaviour at W.W.H.S. show their level of interest and their responsibilities.

Reconciliation means providing the role models wanting the students to have pride in both their culture and in being Australian, “proud and deadly” (4), as we say here in the community. The essence of our concern is with the next generation, the young students and those not yet born. Reconciliation is improving our own views and being better at reflecting on the beautiful reality, and imagining a different future, rather than depicting the ugly one. We are hearing too often of painters depicting a depressingly familiar landscape of misunderstanding and hostility between teacher and students. However, reconciliation isn't only the responsibility of all teachers but of every one of us within the community who are storytellers in our own lives and who are agents for peace. It is an Indigenous challenge for all Australians. Reconciliation is a cultural, artistic process as well as being a political one.

Reconciliation means that we can offer a simple seed for their garden because reality is that Aboriginal students are the only ones really who can take charge of their own predicament. To us, the challenge of reconciliation is to admit that sometimes because of passivity, we must wait and not intervene in their classroom activity affairs. Think of the organic bulb graph designed by

Montessori just before her death. A gardener can only prepare the environment, by caring for the soil, by adding moisture, etc. There is everything within the bulb that is needed to grow. We are saying that if teachers in Indigenous communities are too worried about what other people think, worried about the curriculum or controlling the students through overt discipline, it just won't work! In other words, if the politics/government is setting up camp in their own kitchen, we feel we surrender the necessary building blocks of responsibility that are needed to underwrite a social recovery. Only the students can save themselves!

## The Montessori future here in Warajinda and Practical Reconciliation!

- Our work is more directed this year, more focused and, as always, supported by school level administration and the Board. All see for themselves the potential of the Montessori vision. More Nienhuis Montessori apparatus has been purchased this year and we scrounged around for a few more shelves. The physical environment has never looked better in our classrooms!
- Let's continue to engage the students in our microcosm (classroom). We create patterns of reconciliation and patterns of work to continue to develop the Montessori Universal Principles of Healthy Living!
- Reading and Linking! We will keep on reading our notes about the Montessori vision on a major front: the 3 components of the Montessori vision and especially the prepared adult. We are positive role models and we trust that change is happening under our noses! We will continue reading/discussing/searching more about the Montessori adolescent in Australia (through readings from AAAA Alcove newsletter), with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Education as well as articles contained in NAMTA journals and AMI Communications. Certainly, we need to investigate more of David Kahn's document "The Montessori Adolescent: Analysis in Retrospect" and look again at the universal characteristics and the needs of the Adolescent to really understand what the students are about and where they are heading!
- Our dream is to develop links with other Aboriginal communities from far north Queensland (FNQ) as well as other possible future Indigenous Montessori projects, perhaps soon in the Northern Territory, around Alice Springs, as we've heard. Our dream is also to start developing links with interested parties, donors, sponsors and friends of the newly founded Montessori Children's Foundation <http://montessorifoundation.org> What about putting together a bank of observations, strategies, articles, projects currently involving Montessori with Indigenous population in Australia and around the world to inspire each other: e.g. ASEEMA (India), as reported in AMI Communications 2003/4 and the project in Cambodia with Takako Fukatsu in South East Asia (refugee camp) , or the project in Thailand, Bhutan, Africa... (Alcove newsletter/January 2005).
- This year, John Smith (a horticulture trainer), offers at W.W.H.S. a course Certificate II in Agriculture (National code: RUA 20198). The older students at school (16-25y.o.) are modelling positively to the younger students into various areas such as spraying, cutting, drafting and branding cattle, looking after them, encouraging appropriate behaviour around cattle and in doing so raising the overall self esteem of the students. The youngest (our students) and oldest students teaching each other about what should happen. Also, other skills are indirectly involved where our young students are cooperatively working together with the oldest who teach them hunting echidna skills, making a fire at camp, using horse equipment (saddles, bridles, breaking equipment) and basic care for the animals. This program is based on the 2004 award winning "Yarraman Project" written by Mr. Roy Thompson. The program received National awards last year and Roy has kindly offered the program since January this year to W.W.H.S. The program is already lifting the profile of the students but also of the school and of the Woorabinda community. The older students seem to have regained a sense of purpose in their life. Instead of roaming the streets, at anytime during the day, they roam the cattle yard and learn the basics of being a stockman at school.



In the afternoon, Jenny and I teach them numeracy and literacy skills while our students learn woodwork and library skills. Eventually, with the support of John Smith, there will be local fresh farm products sold within the community so the younger students can support the older students to achieve economic independence as prescribed by the master David Kahn in his document "The Montessori Adolescent: Analysis in Retrospect".

- The future we believe is about delivering black curriculum and white curriculum. We can reconcile ourselves with the thought that we can offer a balanced program (white school and black school)! W.W.H.S. offers what we call the "Murri curriculum" (5) which includes: Indigenous cultural studies once a week with Elders and senior Indigenous teachers. We either stay in class learning about the basics of the Aboriginal culture, the history and stories or we go out bush for fishing, hunting, searching for yellow box trees (*E. melliodora*) for making didgeridoo or rosewood (*Dysoxylum fraserianum*) for making clap sticks. During these lessons, Jenny and I show a constant, genuine interest in their cultural activities, e.g. dancing.

Important Indigenous History lessons we've had so far:

- A) The tent Embassy in 1972 with famous black activists (Gary Foley and Bobbi Sykes, among many others). Protesting for recognition of land ownership and funding for medical, housing and Education.
- B) National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration/Commemoration (N.A.I.D.O.C.). Celebrating the history of the people, the culture and traditions, the unification of the extended families...
- C) The famous Mabo case, the decision that overturned the myth of terra nullius, that the continent was empty, an unowned land before 1788 and recognized the native title rights of Australia's Indigenous people.
- D) The 1967 Referendum in which 90% of Australians supported the removal of clauses from the Constitution which discriminated against Aboriginal people. This was the turning point in the relationship between the wider Australian community and Indigenous Australians.

The white school: Adapt some of Montessori blueprint to Indigenous classrooms!

Jenny and I deliver the white or also known as Migalu Curriculum (6) (e.g. Geometry B series for the study of lines called "The love story" and the relationship between 2 straight lines; convergent, parallel and divergent lines). The challenge for us in the future is to find clever ways to adapt the genius of the Montessori home made-materials and Nienhuis apparatus to the students' knowledge, to their vocabulary level and students' needs plus awareness of their immediate surroundings. For instance, in the topic of zoology, imagine the miniature scientific library also called classified nomenclature - internal parts of the vertebrates. What if we could make it more relevant for the students? For the class Aves - instead of the British sparrow, let's offer the flightless bird, emu, so close to the students. For the external parts of the mammal we have the horse (great). But for the internal parts, instead of a European goat, the unique monotreme echidna Murris cook on the fire in their backyard during winter. Then, in the making of the pictures for the nomenclature, let's imagine we could have the students designing the internal parts using what they learned during "Murri cultural sessions" (x-ray painting-drawing), line drawing or dot painting. There is so much potential to redesign some of the Montessori key pieces of equipment. Think of animals close to Central Queensland for the material called "first classification of the animal kingdom" chart and animal cards! I hope that my future research on the topic of Montessori Zoology and Indigenous Education, through the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), can enhance the positives of using Montessori in Indigenous communities, both rural and remote. What about Botany "first classification of the plant kingdom" chart and the plant cards! Or again for the study of roots (classified nomenclature), we could draw the plants they know; Gumbi Gumbi (1) used as medicine for stomach ache/or simply to consume for its lemon flavour) to distinguish between fasciculated and tap roots...

How can we incorporate from the Murri Curriculum, a plant like Bindoomas with its little berries found around here, within the Montessori curriculum? How can we integrate their knowledge of the land and their wonder for nature and use it to spark interest for learning using the Montessori vision? How can the two curricula meet? Why have two discrete curricula anyway? Perceiving the curriculum as divided into two seems too much like the divisions in Australian society, dominant and non-dominant, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Traditional Aboriginal society has two moieties. Our goal should be one curriculum with two parts, blended, interacting in support of each other and drawing on each other, i.e. Reconciliation with Two-way Learning or Two-way Learning to Reconciliation.

Currently, the two curricula barely touch as they are like the lines in the 'love story'. Our goal is to get the two curricula now running parallel, then convergent and finally as one (as nearly as possible).

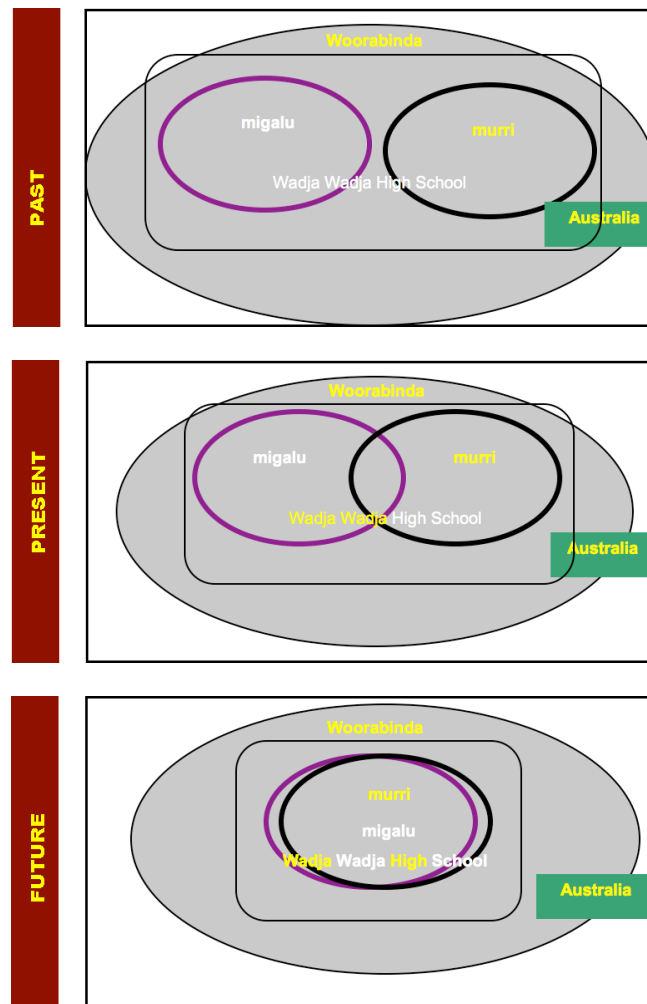


Figure 1: Converging Murri & Migalu curricula at Wadja Wadja High School

Still on the topic of the white curriculum, let's admit it, we feel a geometry lesson, e.g., the relationship between 2 straight lines: convergent, divergent and parallel, is irrelevant when we feel the deep pain of the students in front of us. We feel so disconnected from reality at times, but we have to reel it in and keep going hoping we'll make a tiny difference in their lives.

The future for us in Woorabinda, is looking at eminent challenges we see such as accepting the ways of living that differ from ours; diet habits, sleep patterns, understanding of time, family patterns, health promotion and illness prevention and teaching the students to avoid future issues like kidney failure, dialysis, and diabetes - to try and provide more awareness in these areas... The future is also to get the students involved into "The UNESCO Associated Schools Project (ASP), as mentioned in a recent AMI Communication (Victoria Barres). The project is a network of schools throughout the world integrating international elements into the curriculum. The themes of study include environmental issues, world concerns and United Nations system in dealing with them, and many more.

To end, we would like to thank Jean Miller (International AMI trainer based in Texas) for freely offering us Geography and Botany charts. Thanks to AAAA for the \$500 donation to purchase Nienhuis materials and for 2 free admissions to the International Montessori Congress (July 14-17th in Sydney). Thanks for the \$50 donation from a friend to buy Nienhuis materials.

There is so much work to do in order to accomplish two true Montessori classes within an Independent Indigenous High School completely adapted to the needs of the students! We'll need support to make this happen! How can we all serve better?

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#### NOTES:

1. A rare plant called gumbi gumbi or 'cattlebush' (*Pittosporum pehylliraeoides*). It is sometimes described as the most multi-purpose bush medicine in the central Queensland region. It is rare because it is eaten avidly by cattle. Gumbi Gumbi/cumbi cumbi AKA Berrigan, bitter bush, butter bush, cattle bush, cheesewood, locketbush, meemei, native apricot, native willow, poison berry tree, snotty gobblers, western pittosporum. [Wild Food Plants of Australia by Tim Lowe].
2. As words used in a cross-cultural context, empower, empowered, empowering, empowerment ... can be interpreted by some as racist. Members of the dominant, non-Indigenous society are seen as the power holders. Condescendingly and patronisingly, they are perceived as granting some of that power to the non-dominant Indigenous society. Here, we have used the word to demonstrate our philosophical, Montessorian stance from which we endeavour to help learners develop skills, knowledge and understanding of the present and future benefits to individuals and communities of the learning we facilitate.
3. The term, Fourth World, refers to the condition of a dominated group of people who live in an industrialised First World country. The condition of the Fourth Worlders is akin to that of Third World peoples.
4. The Aboriginal English/Kriol word, deadly/deadli/dedli, has almost the opposite meaning to that used in Standard Australian English. 'E deadli one' usually means that something is very, very good – Propa dedli, eh!
5. A Murri is an Aboriginal person from Queensland. Kooris come from Victoria and New South Wales.
6. Migalu/mighalu/mighaloo is one of the many terms used by Indigenous Australians when referring to non-Indigenous Australians, eg, markai, gadiya, balanda.