

Introduction:

The Storyteller

By the fires, the Old Men told the tales
which held their listeners spell-bound.

(Ingamells 1951: 175)

Kooris come back to this place all the time. The older people talk about it. Whenever someone returns to live at Erambie they typically explain it by the saying, 'once you drink from the Lachlan River, where the snakes grow bigger, you always come back to the Lachlan River'. But he was different from all the others who come home. He re-energised an ancient oral history tradition.

It was the mid 1980s when he packed up and came home to live at Erambie. I first noticed he was home when I found an impressive motorcar and caravan in the community park near the entrance to the mission. A closer look revealed a campsite where he moved about, stoked a fire, and prepared a cup of tea. He was a big white-haired man with enormous fists and forearms. He wore the white cowboy hat, a plain white western shirt, blue jeans with a belt buckle and riding boots familiar to him from his days as a drover. 'G'day mate,' he said, with a hold on the 'may' in 'mate' that lasted a while and showed that he meant it. I smiled without replying and hung around his camp and watched him go about his daily routine. He sang to himself, mostly in English, as he worked, but when he noticed I was watching he sang using Koori words. 'Uncle Geebung used to talk in the lingo,' he recalled, 'when the manager wasn't around.' 'Aw, g'day mate, how ya been?' he said, and I looked up to see a visitor had come over from the mission. He gave his mate's hand a shake and they sat down for a drink of tea and a yarn. That was the first day I remember watching the Storyteller.

As I listened to the two old mates tell tales of what they'd been up to, I went through what I knew about him in my head. I knew he had been a professional boxer who fought in boxing tents and that he had seen his name in lights at the famous Sydney Stadium. People on the mission said that he

was the first registered Koori boxing trainer and that he once owned a gym in Sydney. They reckoned he trained the champion Tony Mundine, and I had heard that his nephew and son were champion fighters. I knew that he worked for Koori organisations in Sydney because I heard Mum talking about it. Now I knew that he was retiring to Erambie because he told his mate, who replied, 'I heard you was coming home'.

It wasn't long before he moved into a tidy little house at the back of the mission. As he settled back into life there he encouraged people to share their stories. He was always saying that he grew up on Erambie when games, music and storytelling were 'the only entertainment on the mission'. His daily routine was scheduled around visits with other residents. They yarned for hours and drank tea. His company was anticipated and I often heard people say, 'he'll be along for a yarn in a minute'. Sometimes he rode his horse Champ but usually he marched, shadow boxing around the mission with a high step, whistling and singing a tune as he looked for a mate to have a yarn with. When he approached our house he would call out, 'ya there mate?' and he invited us to 'sit out here with me and have a yarn'. His yarns were more performance than conversation. Still, in me he always found a willing mate. He was a charismatic and skilful spinner of yarns who had a gift for storytelling.

He told a detailed and highly entertaining yarn about elders and life for Koori people on and off government reserves and missions. He usually started with an elongated, 'aww mate, I remember...'. He built anticipation in the story using his voice and body movements to the point where he would stand and mimic distinguishing vocal and physical features of the characters he brought to life before my eyes. Every so often he would ask, 'now you with me mate, you with me?' and when I acknowledged that I was he continued, 'aww mate, I remember...'. He sought a reaction and when he got one he became more animated and engaged in his performance.

When in the company of his peers he fed off their agreement with the truth of his account, repeatedly asking, 'now am I right sis? Am I right mate? You were there, ya with me?' He good-naturedly coaxed them to share their stories, 'come on now sis, come on brother, we gotta teach these young ones what we know'. He asked questions and directed the conversation to include discussion of the past. He delighted in their laughter when he mimicked a peculiar mannerism of a character in his story. His ability to imitate was

fundamental to his storytelling style and he used it to great effect. During his performance he often smiled, shut his eyes and sighed, and it was as if he had returned to the past. And I felt like I was there with him.

Suddenly he would remember a detail, become excited. His eyes would open and he'd jump and laugh and congratulate himself for remembering, and his face would light up. The excitement would build in the story until he made his point and then he'd laugh and finish with, 'there you see mate, I remember, aww, do I what!' He'd barely finish his story as he'd march up the road, laughing and calling to see if his next mate was home.

There were other charismatic storytellers. Erambie was blessed with people who were gifted in the art. Two of my other favourites were a pair of beautiful sisters who came from a family of storytellers. They shared with their peers the ability to create vivid pictures with words. Beyond that, they were blessed with genius comedic timing that made them a joy to be around. They found humour in any event, no matter how serious. They giggled constantly as they took up endless invitations to share their stories. I found them very entertaining and enjoyed their company and the stories they told.

The warmth, caring nature and sense of humour of the senior men and women I grew up with at Erambie drew me in and I loved to sit all day with them and share their stories.

At the end of a typical day with them, my face would ache from smiling and my head would be filled with pictures of important people, places and events. Important enough to the people of Erambie that stories are told about them. Over time I learned the yarns well enough to be able to retell them. One day I told my mates about the place up the back of the mission — the railway gates — where I heard that fights used to be held. I mentioned names and certain fights I heard about as we walked the dirt track to the railway gates for a look.

I returned to a stable home with parents who live by and preach the virtues of the hard-working Koori men and women they know. My blessings include growing up in this nurturing, tight-knit community. Education was central to everyday life in my parents' home. However, neither of them demonstrated particular interest in, nor placed much value on, mainstream schooling. Some of the teachers I met in schools were excellent but I never felt comfortable in classrooms and I dropped out of high school at sixteen. My decision went unchallenged other than my mother asking, 'no more school?'

In place of school, I rose before dawn to join Erambie's seasonal workers. My days with them started with cups of tea; they lit and smoked cigarettes and prepared tools and lunches for the day ahead. They delighted in a patterned type of yarn where community gossip was reported before the previous day's conversations resumed. Once at work they yarned, joked and sang songs all day. A number of conversations took place at one time and all were required to keep up or be chastised. In the course of many conversations, I heard about their experiences of life. These were joyful and inspiring times.

Where these stories take me

My fascination with the social and cultural history of Erambie Mission is grounded in the community's oral history tradition. I watched the Storyteller and his peers bring to life the achievements of our community's storied athletes and leaders. My interest grew over time and as an adult I still gravitate toward the knowledgeable senior men and women from Erambie and I continue to seek their company. It is not uncommon that I sit with them all day.

An interest in sport and organising games for young people led to an offer of part-time employment as an education support worker. This work suited me and although I continued to do seasonal work, I enrolled at university thirteen years after dropping out of high school. During my first year at university, I sat with the Storyteller, the sisters and a group of their peers. He asked me to write down the stories they shared and they all agreed. It was during those university years that I began to develop my appreciation of the value of the teaching I received through Erambie's storytelling tradition. I also started to think about the ways other people view and talk about Indigenous people and culture, with a greater understanding of the importance of sharing positive stories. This book is a celebration of the continuity of Koori storytelling. It retells well-worn stories, many of them entrusted to me by gifted storytellers, and adds new ones I uncovered while walking another track outside of my community.

I came to academic studies with a personal interest and, as it turns out, a measure of knowledge on the subject. As I immersed myself in the ideas other people have about Aborigines in sport, I started making connections between

my background knowledge and the sports discourse. I began to question what the sports discourse says about Indigenous people. For years I tried to refine my thoughts well enough to be able to explain my unease with what I read about Indigenous communities beyond saying, ‘it just doesn’t fit with what I know’.

Overview

I did not set out to write a revisionist account of events that occurred at the elite level of sport. However, by comparing my own experiences with the equally legitimate — but more narrowly focused — stories about race and sport, inevitable differences emerged between knowledge created within my Koori community and knowledge created about us by outsiders. This book questions the foundation of knowledge about Aborigines in sport by offering cultural continuity as an additional framework through which to view the experiences of Aborigines. It tells the reader something more about who we are as a modern Koori community and the role storytelling plays in the continual formation of our identities.

The book is not a detailed history of a particular period of time. The tightest focus is on the period from 1900 to 1960, but there are places where I pick up stories from before and after this period. Non-Indigenous people’s descriptions of Koori people consistently emphasised difference and inferiority on the part of Aborigines. I examine the ways that Kooris are described over the entire period of contact from 1815 through to the present day. If I only wanted to record the community’s sporting achievements, one clearly defined, historical period would make sense. However, this book is more about how history is constructed so it makes more sense not to restrict myself to a particularly narrow historical period.

This book examines physical activities and sports that are important to Erambie Kooris, including the animated form of storytelling that has a significant physical performance component, games such as rounders and skipping, as well as bare-knuckle fighting. It also examines the connections between physical activities and sports as cultural practices. In doing this, the book gives a picture of daily life, albeit through the lens of sport and physical

activity. The reader should get an understanding, not just of the types of racism Aborigines face, but also of our lives independent of mainstream society and the extent to which this life revolves around a distinctively Koori culture. This is important to understand in relation to the concept of authenticity and modern Koori culture. It is also important to consider this alternative reading of a Koori community's experience in sport in relation to the origins of knowledge about our community. The reader should consider not only what is known about Indigenous communities but also where that knowledge comes from.

Some of the chapters include previously published material. Parts of the story were previously melded into a review of literature and published in *Australian Aboriginal Studies*. These previously published parts are put back into place for this book. Chapter One explores the ways that a certain type of discourse developed about Aborigines in sport. These 'straight-line' stories contribute to a broader discourse of deficit where Indigenous communities are represented as inferior. Rather than being a denial of racism, this chapter makes the case that such a discourse runs the risk of creating another, inferior, stereotype of Aborigines. In summarising this discourse, I also consider the importance of theoretical and methodological approaches that are used in creating knowledge in this area. Chapter Two introduces the Koori people who live at Erambie. It gives the reader an idea about who we are and briefly outlines how the Erambie community came to be. This chapter also explains the significance of the Erambie community within Wiradjuri country and gives an account of the rich community life on Erambie, while telling the reader something more than our experiences with racism. I also describe how an extensive repertoire of stories from Erambie's oral history tradition was worked into a manageable and focused set of stories about life on the reserve. In Chapter Three, the floating nature of representation of Aborigines is uncovered through an account of the popular Erambie Allblacks football team that barnstormed the Western District for two decades beginning in 1922. Here, the way non-Indigenous people represented Aborigines during a time of high visibility for these Koori athletes is examined. Although the main focus is on representation, this chapter also considers the significance of a football team to the Erambie community as a further example of cultural continuity.

Chapter Four also deals with contrasting representations in the ways that Indigenous cultural practices can become known. This chapter includes description and an examination of the practice of fighting to settle disputes. The fights at the railway gates are described by those who took part in them, and comparisons are made between their accounts and those of the people who witnessed them as outsiders. Continuing a dual focus on representation and continuity, Chapter Five gives an example of how variations from the common theme of representation can be accommodated. The significance of sport in maintaining community organisation is illustrated in this case study of one 'clever' Wiradjuri family. This chapter also establishes a link between the physically and intellectually outstanding men of pre-contact Wiradjuri culture and those of the Erambie community. Chapter Six draws on my more recent work to build on my own developing understanding of the importance of adding to the predominant ways that Indigenous people are represented in the sports discourse. This chapter offers continuity as an alternative theoretical framework to telling stories about Aborigines. Continuity of culture is one way to understand the many social and cultural differences between mainstream society and the Erambie Wiradjuri community. Chapter Seven highlights the fundamental contrasts in the ways differences are explained. It also makes clear the implications of having an imbalance in the way knowledge in this area is constructed.