

Published *Magpies*, May 2005

## Remembering Mary Malbunka

I remember very clearly the time when Mary Malbunka began to tell me her story. We were in the kitchen at Papunya School, using the long tables for making 'circle stories' — a way we had of recording the story of our lives. I was sitting beside Mary as she began filling in the circle for her *ngurra* — her traditional country.

'I was born in the creek at Haasts Bluff,' she said to me, in a voice so quiet that I barely heard her.

At that time — my second visit to Papunya — I knew so little about the land that I did not understand how somebody could be born *in* a creek. I did not know that in that semi-arid zone, water rarely ran in *karru*, the sandy environment of a creek bed, which was the softest place for childbirth. Nor, at that time, did the name 'Haasts Bluff' hold any sense of history for me. I did not know that it had been founded as a mission station — first run by the Lutheran Church, and later by the government — where many Anangu (Western desert Aboriginal people) from various different *ngurra* lived, before being either enticed or forcibly removed to the government settlement at Papunya.

'I was born in the creek at Haasts Bluff in 1959,' Mary Malbunka whispered to me, and I remember that my mind gave a little jump at the mention of the date. I hadn't realised that Mary was ten years younger than me. Like most middle-aged adults in Papunya, she suffered from the poor health that was the legacy of the white-flour-and-sugar diet to which Aboriginal people were introduced at the missions and government settlements. When I met Mary Malbunka in 1998 she had already been diagnosed with kidney trouble, and she knew that there was a strong

chance that one day she would have to leave Papunya, her family and her job, and go to Alice Springs for dialysis. For the moment, however, she was working full-time at the school.

It's not 'right way' to ask questions, so I didn't ask Mary to tell me any more, but some of this story about food began to emerge as Mary illustrated her circle story. She drew a picture of herself as a child, together with some other children, riding a donkey and a camel, and she wrote a description of going out with family to get bush tucker. Anyone who has read Mary Malbunka's picture-book memoir of her childhood, *When I Was Little, Like You*, will know that this is one of its recurrent themes.

Whenever the opportunity arose, young Mary and her extended family left the settlement and went out bush to get honey ants, sugarbag, all sorts of fruits and berries, roots and seeds, witchetty grubs, lizards, goanna, echidna, kangaroo, emu, bush turkey... And this communal act of food-getting did not feed the body alone, for going bush gave the elders the chance to teach the young ones the lessons of their ancestry, the traditions of their country, and the wheels within wheels of the *Tjukurrpa yara*, the stories of religion and law.

To read Mary Malbunka's own story is to be reminded continually of a dichotomy between a world in which kindergarten children were handed white bread sandwiches and Vitamin C tablets by well-meaning but ignorant teachers, and a world in which the mothers and aunties would teach the children as they walked through their country gathering the grass-seed for nutritious bread, and picking the *akatjirri* (bush tomatoes) which scientists now declare to be one of the richest sources of Vitamin C available.

I remember how Mary brought a bag of dried *akatjirri* when she came to our house in Sydney to work on her book, in February 2002. She would often nibble the berries for energy, as she drew and painted. All the

working sessions were conducted in between the thrice-weekly trips to the dialysis centre.

If I keep coming back to Mary's book, it is simply because I hope to point readers to *When I Was Little, Like You* — a book which Dr Robin Morrow, picture book critic and commentator, recently described as being 'without doubt one of the most outstanding picture books ever produced in this country'. In the session on Reviewing Indigenous Books at the recent Re:Views Conference in Adelaide, Morrow declared that

*When I Was Little, Like You* transcends all barriers to take its place as a beautifully shaped autobiographical work, told with simplicity and skill. Mary Malbunka showed mastery of both Papunya style painting and western-style art, as well as generosity in telling her own life story, to produce a book which every child and family should meet and ponder.

Obviously, Mary Malbunka tells her own tale with an authenticity that I cannot presume to match. And yet I am aware that non-Indigenous people sometimes feel uncertain about the business of assessing a book by an Indigenous author, because they feel that they are ignorant of the context or tradition from which the book derives. For this reason, I am willing to do my best to provide some historical background to Mary Malbunka's autobiography.

Any Anangu life is lived within a context of family, community and country. A child born out of her traditional country (as Mary was at Haasts Bluff) still belongs to her *ngurra* through language and *Tjukurrpa* (Law). As Mary Malbunka explains, Warlpiri was 'the side for her mother's family', whereas her father's people were Pintupi/Luritja. Mention of this ancestry immediately takes us a couple of hundred kilometres north from Papunya, into the Warlpiri lands that stretch up past Yuendumu, and four

hundred kilometres west, to the Pintupi *ngurra* around Walungurru (Kintore).

If we look at the *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, we can see a photograph of Mary's paternal grandfather Kamuṭu, who in 1930 was living at the beautiful oasis at Ilypili when the Lutheran pastor from the Finke River Mission made the first white contact with this group of Pintupi. Pastor Albrecht recorded how healthy and contented these people were, and how well they lived in their demanding environment. Within a decade, however, the devastation wrought upon the land by the cattle stations would be so great that Kamuṭu would have no option but to bring his people to the ration depot established by Lutheran evangelists, far to the east, at the place that whitefellers called Haasts Bluff. Meanwhile, to the north, the Warlpiri were reeling from 'the killing times', which had begun with the Coniston Massacre of 1928. Many were forced to leave their *ngurra* and flee to the refuge provided under the umbrella of the Lutheran Mission. This tale of dispossession and exile is the background to how Mary Malbunka's parents came to 'sit down together' at Haasts Bluff.

'When I was about five,' Mary records, 'the mission boss said my family had to go to the government settlement at Papunya.' To the little girl, forced to move home in 'a government motor car', the new place seemed at first to be 'really big'. No doubt it was also really strange and scary.

Again from the *Papunya School Book* and from other secondary sources, we know that Papunya was founded in 1959 by the federal government. With the Assimilation Policy in full swing, this was part of the initiative to make Aboriginal people live and think like Europeans. By the time Mary and her family arrived, the settlement had about a thousand Anangu living there, from five different *ngurra*, five different languages. In order for different groups to live together in this way, people were forced

to break traditional law, and many Anangu saw Papunya as 'a mix-up place'. It was also a place of great sorrow. For example, of the seventy-four Pintupi brought in from the desert to live there over 1963-4, half of these newcomers died within the first couple of years. This, of course, was at exactly the time when Mary Malbunka was a little girl, building *ngurra ngurra* (cubby houses) with her girlfriends, nicking food from the settlement garden, and creeping under the barbed wire into the weekly picture show. If there were a background soundtrack to this story, it would be the keening that goes on in the weeks between a death and a funeral.

It was after one of these times of Sorry Business that Mary's parents shifted from north camp (where they had dwelled amongst other Warlpiri families) to west camp, where her father's people lived. It was around now that Mary decided to stop living with her parents and to live instead with her uncle Long Jack, and her auntie, and her cousins.

This uncle appears in Mary's book in the story about going for sugarbag, and we also meet him as the elder who used to teach the *pipirri* (children) about tracking, when the family went out to camp at Ikirriki. As well as being a Lutheran pastor, Long Jack Phillipus is one of the senior 'painting men' of Papunya. Indeed, he is acknowledged as being one of the men who painted the *tjupi* (honey ants) on the wall at Papunya School in the winter of 1971. This was the catalyst for the whole movement that we know as Western Desert Art.

This way of painting — which had been done on bodies, earth and rocks for countless millennia — is always a collaborative act. The Western Desert tradition of art is a whole mindshift away from our European notion of the individual artist expressing a unique personal vision. Even when it happens that only one person applies the paint, the artist is still telling (or rather, re-telling) a collective and communal part of the *Tjukurrpa* — the Law and the Lore. This is the context for the way in

which Mary learned to paint in the Phillipus family: with her uncle and aunt, with her cousins Charlotte and Patricia, with all the other *pipirri*.

Yet this wasn't all that Mary learned from her family. Anangu don't see learning as something that mysteriously happens to the child in the classroom, but rather as something that children know from birth, and bring from the community into the schoolground. However, when Mary went to Papunya School, in the 1960s and 1970s, Indigenous knowledge was not recognised by the authorities. Students had to have a shower on arrival and change from their camp clothes to uniform. This was a symbolic act: the Anangu way of life was to be washed off with the red desert dust. Mary records how she sometimes used to hide her camp clothes under her uniform T-shirt. Then she would put up her hand and ask to go to the toilet — where she would get changed before running off 'to play for the day'. She explains, 'School was hard to understand because we were talking Luritja outside, but in the classroom we were talking only English.' Despite the fact that most of the content of the curriculum was totally irrelevant to her life, Mary stayed at school until the age of seventeen.

In the mid 1970s, when Mary Malbunka joined the workforce, Papunya was still being run in the paternalistic colonial way, with a series of supervised areas of labour. Mary began at the sewing centre, where clothes were produced for community members. Over the next decade she did a number of jobs, including cooking morning tea for the school, serving petrol and groceries at Papunya store, and working as a cleaner at the clinic and the council office. In 1985, she began employment at the school. During all this time, Mary seized any chance to learn new ways of making art. As well as continuing to paint in the traditional way, she taught herself to paint in what is often called the 'Hermannsburg style': water colour landscapes in the style that Albert Namatjira had developed at the

Hermannsburg Mission. Mary also learned to do batik and screen-printing on fabric, and she made baskets.

Throughout these years, Mary brought up a number of children. She was also a strong member of the church. For Anangu this does not mean abandoning the *Tjukurrpa*, but rather accreting it with another system of religion and law, which also comes out of a desert tradition. In Mary's painting on the window of Papunya church, she depicted the Cross as a series of linked white *maku* (witchetty grubs), explaining that '*Maku* is sweet and good food for us, and Jesus is sweet and good food for us.' If here again we are reminded of food in its traditional role as something to be communally got and shared, we also see a theologically brilliant synthesis of sacrament and resurrection.

By the early 1990s, Anangu at Papunya were demanding more control over the way their children were taught. After a widespread boycott of the school, the community drew up a document outlining the 'minimum requirements' for a partnership between the community and the Education Department. After this, the school got a new principal, Diane de Vere, who encouraged the team of Anangu teachers to develop their own curriculum of local knowledge, which could be used in conjunction with the Northern Territory syllabus. Under what became known as the Papunya Model of Education, Mary Malbunka was given the opportunity to use her talents for art and language, and to pass on some of her great wealth of knowledge to the next generation of *pipirri*. Working in the Literacy Production Centre with teacher-linguist Jenny Wilson, Mary wrote stories in Luritja, and illustrated them in coloured pencil and paint. These little books were then photocopied in tiny print-runs for use in the school's bilingual program.

It was in this period that Ken Searle and I first met Mary, when we made a series of visits to Papunya School to assist the Anangu staff and

students produce the resources for their own curriculum. From the moment we saw the books that Mary Malbunka was making, we were aware she had a rare gift for the kind of illustration that is needed for a children's picture book. This is something different from just being able to draw well. As Ken often described it, Mary had developed a *narrative* way of drawing: a form of story-telling in itself, rather than just making images that depict the words of a written story.

Sadly, through the few years in which we worked at the school, it was evident that Mary's health was becoming worse. She was very much part of the team of forty staff and students who worked during the year 2000 on the *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, but it was not long after this that she was told that she would have to move to Alice Springs, to attend the dialysis clinic three times a week. For a woman such as Mary Malbunka, who still went out bush at any opportunity to get *mangarri* (food), this move to town represented a terrible loss. Fortunately, her partner, Peter Ward, lives in Alice, and Mary was able to make her home with him and his family. She was supported, too, by Joy Wurst, from the Finke River Mission, and many other friends.

Going on dialysis also meant that Mary Malbunka went from being an employed person to being someone on a sickness pension, with the combined loss of income and status that this entails. It was at this time that Ken and Jenny and I talked to Mary about whether she might like to work on making a book that could be sold in the shops like the *Papunya School Book*, and read by *pipirri* throughout Australia.

'*Uwa*,' she said without hesitation. Yes. And so it was that Mary came down to Sydney with Emma Nungarrayi, and Jenny Wilson joined us, and we set up a production centre in our dining room.

Naturally, Mary's story of her childhood began with what she had told me so long before, when she had been illustrating the circle of her history: 'I was born at Haasts Bluff, in the *karru*. That was in 1959.'

And her book ended with the words that are used to end a telephone call, or a discussion, or a story, or a life: '*Kala. Palya.*' Which means something like: 'It is finished. It is good.'

'You have to hurry,' Ken and I used to say sometimes to the publishers, when we were designing and editing Mary's book. If you are working with Indigenous authors, you cannot take time for granted.

Fortunately, Mary was able to see her book, and to come to Sydney for the dinner at Government House, when she was shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier's History Award in October 2003. Charlotte Phillipus came with her, and four of the *pipirri*, to be part of the celebrations and the holiday that we went on with Mary's good friend, Jenny.

In April 2004, Mary Malbunka had a kidney transplant. For a while, everything seemed *palya*, good. But after a dose of chicken pox, Mary's immune system was weakened, and she spent more and more time in hospital. She passed away in October.

Although she was ten years younger than me, Mary had lived a life that traversed the whole of Australian history, from the traditional way of life, through the colonial era, to the post-colonial period.

Mary Malbunka was the first Pintupi/Luritja speaker to have a book commercially published. She was someone who would always make you laugh, and she would encourage you to learn her language, teasing gently and with a smile. Most importantly, she was a woman who lived 'right way', for her family and community, making the world a better place through her presence in it.

Everyone who worked with Mary remembers her singing as she painted. She was a beautiful singer and often sang as she worked — singing strongly and proudly in her own language. We also remember Mary's knowledge and wisdom, her understanding of humanity, and her generosity of spirit.

Mary leaves us with the beautiful gift of her own story of childhood, which all *pipirri* can share.

*Kala. Palya!*