



Major 'Moogi' Sumner: *One River* Symposium Address

This is the text of an address given by *One River* Reference Group member, Major 'Moogi' Sumner, at the final of three *One River* Symposia, presented under the banner of *Critical Undercurrents*. This session was held in the Visions Theatre at the National Museum of Australia on Sunday 25 August, 2013, in partnerships with the People and Environment Program of the NMA.

25 August 2013, National Museum of Australia.

Before I start my talk, I would like to invite our ancestors but also honor the ancestors and the traditional owners of this land that we stand on here today.

[Sings and speaks in Ngarrindjeri language]

In my language, I've invited the ancestors to come here from four directions. When I talk about our ancestors, I don't just talk about mine, I also talk about all of your ancestors, wherever you come from in the world, whatever brought you here to our country. I invite them here too, to be with you and to help us understand each other, to help us understand this country and what we are here talking about today. To help us think and to help us to speak about all the right things. I've invited the spirits of our ancestors to be here with us - the ones that looked after this land before us and the ones that will be there after we go, when we join them. We'll be there looking after this land.

I'd like to thank the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and a man who has become a friend. Over the last four years he's been travelling - not all the time, but he's been making it possible for us to travel right up into Queensland to dance, in all the different communities, to tell their story, their creation of their part of the river - that is Roger Davies from the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. He has travelled with us a couple of times. He knows about the river; he knows the stories; he's been there; he's camped alongside us.

The cultural side of the river, the cultural side of this land: as Aboriginal people and particularly as Ngarrindjeri, we put that first. We put our mother the earth first, because we all come from the earth. It doesn't matter where we come from, we all come from there and then, ultimately, we go back to there.

Our journey through life sometimes can be a very rough one, sometimes smooth, the rivers that we travel. I was born down on Lake Alexandrina on Raukkin Mission. I lived there and I went to school there. I grew up to be nearly a teenager, and then we had to move to another community. But I remember the river, the lakes, the fishing and the stories that my grandmother told me. We would go fishing and she said: 'If you go to that part of it, there is this type of fish that lives there. You go around here and there is this type of yabby there. Then you go over here in this area here and this is where they live in the holes, the yabbies live in the holes and there are all different types of fish.' It's like a multicultural community down in the water. Certain types of fish live here

because the yellow belly don't like living with this mob so they all live together and they feed there because that's where their food is. Over the last couple of hundred years it's all been mixed up. You look at how Auntie Beryl says, 'Come Michael, see how the water was'. I remember the Coorong when we went fishing and you could see the fish swimming into the nets. You can't do that now. It's all a funny colour, right through.

In our Ringbalin ceremonies we've been dancing the spirit back into the land, dancing the spirit back into ourselves, and then inviting other nations to come with us to learn about the country they live in, to learn about who they live next to. I always think, well, you live in this part of country, how many people here speak Ngunnawal language? How many people speak a language that is local to where you live? How many people speak another language where your home, closest friend or town is of that group - learn about the stories, learn about the language, sing the songs, be involved?

I know that people need that river, need that water for survival, for their economic base. I know they need it for their crops; I know they need it for their farms. But if we have no water to drink to keep us alive, those farms and crops are not worth nothing because we won't be here. If we have got no water to drink and we have got no fresh, healthy water to keep your body going, then we die. The Ngarrindjeri have that spirit inside, and we've all got that spirit inside of us, but in Ngarrindjeri we call that the *Me we*. That tells us if we're doing something wrong to ourselves or to another community. If you're doing something wrong to the land, your spirit tells you. But I think some people built a little thing inside of them that overrides that spirit - 'Nah, that'll be all right.'

But as Aboriginal people of this land we know it's not going to be all right. We know of the stories that have been handed down to us for thousands of years. That's why when we've done the Ringbalin ceremony. We've been doing that for thousands of years, connecting up, because as river people we come under one law, our law of that land and our law of that river. We're under that one law and we have practiced that. Not many people that are non-Aboriginal recognise or honour our law, but we still do.

As Aboriginal people we have to live in two worlds: we live in our Aboriginal world and we live in the western world, because we're all involved in that nine-to-five work, we're all involved in different meetings and we're all involved in trying to convince people that this is the way to go.

How many people live along the river? Thousands, millions of people live along the rivers right through the country, but how many of them know the creation stories? How many of them know the songs that are sung at certain places? The song we sing is not just a song you pull out of the air and say: 'We'll sing it here. Next year we'll sing it over there.' No, those songs are about the land. They're about our connection to the stars, our connection to the wind, the trees, the sand and the animals. Ngarrindjeri have a word, we say *Natchey*, which means your closest friend. And to us the plants, the animals, they're like a totem, or at least they're similar to a totem. That's our closest friend, that river. Some of us have got that river as our closest friend - the water, little creeks and the fish that live in those little creeks and in the swamps, the breeding places.

There's a man in our community who says the swamps are the nurseries for all the little fish that come back into the water. They're all waiting there. In some places there are mangrove swamps near the oceans - a lot of the life for the ocean starts there in those mangroves, and yet people want to knock them down, fill them in and build buildings

on top of them.

A lot of the towns that were built in this country are the towns that get flooded every year. You see it on the TV with people crying, ripping their carpets up, pushing all the mud and dirt out of their front lounge room, pushing it down the passage. Their windows have broken and the cupboards are floating around in the house. Every year that happens. That tells you one thing: you have built your house on a flood plain. I thought you people were supposed to be smart! The smartest thing you could have done or can do in the future is talk to us - talk to the Aboriginal people of that country around where you live. You'll notice some of the old people lived up on high rises. People would say: 'That's all right. We'll build down here.' But those old people lived up there for a reason. Every now and again that water will flood through. How many times has water been cruising through Brisbane, or Nyngan? Have you heard of a town called Nyngan? You could fish in your lounge room there at certain times of the year. You'll catch a lot of fish there too!

We know the stories of this country. We've been here for thousands and thousands of years. I go on ceremonies every year - not just the river ceremony - I go on other ceremonies with different groups. We start from the Coorong and we finish up right up in the desert, about 500 miles away I think, at the other side of Uluru. The songs are sung and the water is shown in different places where if you're thirsty you go here, you dig a little hole and you sing and you hit the ground and in a few minutes the water will start coming up. This is in dry river-beds.

When we talk about culture, we talk about an ancient culture, ancient stories, stories of a long time ago that are still current today and that are still very powerful today. That's what I'm involved in along with other groups, as well as with my own family, my own grandchildren. I have 24 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. I've got nine children, and they're all involved in culture.

We'll be dancing and doing that ceremony here on 30 September. We're coming up and we're dancing up at the Snowy Mountains. We're dancing right at the headwaters of the river. (I don't want to get too cold. I know this is cold country but we still want to dance up there.) We want to get involved with the group from here, the Ngunnawal people, so they can be involved in our ceremonies about the river, dancing, being a part. And it's open for everyone to come - everyone. Dancing will start just on sunset. That's how we do our ceremonies. We invite everyone and their ancestors to be there on the 30th September. We start on the Murrumbidgee and then come back here into Canberra.

My reason for wanting to see the rivers healthy is a different reason from what we've heard so far today. My reason is a cultural reason. First and foremost, is if we look after ourselves then we look after other things because if we don't look after ourselves in the physical, spiritual and mental sense, then there's no way we can look after anything else.

Rather than put the farms up here as the top priority, put them a bit lower down the list and, instead, you put yourself up there because if we can't keep healthy ourselves there's no way we can help anyone else in a physical and mental sense or in a spiritual sense. That's where culture comes into it. Because despite all the farms, if you're not healthy - if you're down here waiting for the water and all the farms are up there - we'll all be dead. The animals will take over the farms, if they're around, but they need water too. And we need fresh water to live.

If that spirit leaves us, we're nothing. We're dead inside. We need to keep that spirit going. We need to keep the spirit inside of us that tells us that we're doing the right thing or that we're doing the wrong thing. We all have to be responsible, not just us as Aboriginal people - everyone have to be responsible for that river, for that land that they live on.

Some people say to me sometimes: 'But what about the white people? What are they going to do?' I say, 'Well, you can rest assured. Write this down. They're not going home, they're staying here, they have to be involved too. They have to come and dance with us.' I've been doing this ceremony for four years now.

About three weeks ago I was in France. I got invited to a boomerang throwing competition. They've got their own boomerang throwing club in France, so I got invited there, me and the dancers and we danced at a few ceremonies. One of the men from France comes over here every year to be involved in that ceremony for *Mura Mura*, all the way down to the Murray mouth, he travels with us. This year he brought his girlfriend and they both danced with us. We painted them up and they danced with us. We taught them the dance on the way down. They're not the only non-Aboriginal people who have done that. There was a woman from America a couple of years ago who came across as an onlooker. I said: 'If you're going to travel with us, you might as well learn some of the dances. I'll get my wife and my daughters to teach you.' Then she danced all the way down. She lives in Denver in America. The other week I got an email from her - she wanted to know what date we're doing the ceremonies next year because she's going to bring some of her friends.

There are people that have been travelling with us. A couple got married and used it as their honeymoon to travel down the river with us. So it's open there for everyone to come, everyone to be a part of. Even if you don't want to dance, just come down and look and listen to the stories - but learn about this country that you live in. Learn the true stories about this land, the creation stories. I think you people would be very surprised of how some of our land was created, of how the rivers were created and the mountains - about why that little bush is there.

I've done a few cultural things. I cut a bark canoe out of the red gum and I floated it in different places down around in South Australia. I brought it up to Sydney and I floated it in Darling Harbour. I'm doing a bit of work on it now but I'd love to bring it up here when we come up and float it in one of the little rivers or lakes here. It'd be good to bring it up and get other people back into doing cultural stuff - shields and all the other things. These little clap sticks are from the mallee right on the Coorong. My reason for being here, my reason for talking is entirely different but, at the end of it, it's for the same thing - it's to keep the water in this country, whether it be the Murray, the Darling, the Lachlan, the Murrumbidgee, and all the little rivers and creeks that come in, to keep them healthy. When we keep them rivers healthy, we keep ourselves and people around us as well as the animals and plants, we keep them all healthy too.

I'd like to thank you all for listening to me and I'd like to thank Lindy, Malcolm and *One River* for inviting me up and making it possible for me to be here. But also last of all I'd like to thank the people here, Adrian Brown and his family, for taking me up and showing me the mountains, showing me the rock paintings yesterday. I had a really good day looking at their cultural stuff.

There's a lot of rock art around the mountains. How many people in Canberra have been there to see them or to honour the people that painted them? Maybe learn the song and sing that song as you walk through, letting them know that you're coming. When we sing a song and dance we sing in Ngarrindjeri. We do that ceremony. We're coming to dance, we're coming to talk.

Thank you very much.