

# AKALTYE ANTHEME, A CONTINUING PARTNERSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

The Alice Springs Public Library's Akaltje Antheme Collection has two aims: to facilitate Indigenous people's use of the Library and all its collections; and to provide insight into local culture for non-Indigenous patrons and visitors. This Collection is a small but central part of the Library's profile and of its thinking about information provision for Indigenous people. Partnership was a key element in the establishment of the Collection in 2002 and still is in its continuing management and development. This partnership incorporates all the Library staff, particularly the Indigenous Services Officer and the Special Collections Librarian; the Council; local Indigenous organisations and the Library's membership. 'Partnership' is therefore the key focus of this paper. The meaning of the term will be examined, in the Alice Springs context.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is the joint effort of the Special Collections Librarian and the Indigenous Services Officer at Alice Springs Public Library. We have kept our voices distinct, because it is important that our different experience, cultures, aims and aspirations are clear. We use the first person – 'I', 'We' – and the third person – 'Fiona', 'Sylvia' – where appropriate. We tell you who's talking – '*Sylvia Perrurle Neale, Indigenous Services Officer*'; '*Fiona Blackburn, Special Collections Librarian*'; or use subheadings – '**Establishment**' – to indicate general discussion.

The story of how Sylvia found her way into Alice Springs Library begins the discussion of information services for indigenous people here in Alice Springs; and of partnership – what it means and how it works at Alice Springs Public Library. The Akaltje Antheme Collection, its establishment and development are described; as are new initiatives begun in the last twelve months. We highlight the key features of the partnership's success in our concluding remarks.

## Alice Springs

*Sylvia Perrurle Neale, Indigenous Services Officer*

Growing up in Alice Springs in the 50s meant attitudes towards Aboriginal people generally were less than perfect and in particular towards education where Aborigines were expected to go no further than to attain the basic of reading and writing. In many cases it meant just signing of their name.

I hated, yet loved school; for all sorts of reasons I did not attend that much. I still remember my first day at school, wild with excitement, I headed for the front desk, only to be told to take my slate and chalk and sit at the back and draw. Strange how some things never leave you and when reaching the age for leaving school it was suggested that I would make a really good housemaid because I was so clean. And so the

prediction and expectation came to be and my first job at the age of fifteen was a cleaner at a Hotel in Alice Springs.

I was a painfully shy kid so I reached out to that wondrous world of reading. Sitting in the creek bed on the soft warm sand sheltered by an old river gum, a clear blue sky, the sad cry of old man crow, the soft whistling of the wind through the trees, how could one not develop a positive view of reading? I use to sell bottles so I could buy comics, The Phantom, Superman etc; then came the romance books; the latter unfortunately gave me a rather distorted view of life love etc.

I have been working for the Alice Springs Public Library for 3 years but have a history with it since the age of 9.

The first Library in Alice Springs was in a tiny building in Hartley Street across from the Our Lady of The Sacred Heart Catholic School. Joy Brucek was the first Librarian in Alice Springs. There I was a skinny 9 year old aboriginal kid so shy that I would become frozen with terror in any new situation, sitting outside that little white man's building waiting and watching the white people coming and going carrying books. Three or four times a week I would sit there trying to get a peek inside.

Through her small window Joy would glance at me every now and then; I would run away but always came back the next day or the day after. Joy made several attempts to get me to go inside; eventually my need to go and look overtook my terror. I crept inside, was given a drink and a biscuit, I discovered Hitler and Shakespeare. I'd go home and tell my mother about this place, one year she bought me a children's book of Shakespeare's plays. I loved that book, it was in colour. I remember my mother saying, "I'm sorry you have to be brought up in a white world". I guessed she thought that I would not be able to get access into this world of books I so craved. My mother died when I was 10 years old.

I want my communities just to have the enjoyment of reading, to get lost in so many different worlds. Libraries need to be made a welcoming place with things around that are familiar, to have aboriginal people working, behind the desk, as Librarians or Cultural advisers.

Having access to library services is a just a part of the bigger picture in the search for justice for Indigenous people of this Country. I feel that access to the Library experience at an early age as with pre school is a right of all children no matter what their background. I feel that it is also the first step to the making of Australia 'a knowledge country'.

Our children, that is, Indigenous children must be given the opportunities and the tools to be able to contribute and live in their changing community as well as in the wider community. Our future depends on them reaching their full potential.

## **Partnership**

*Sylvia Perrurle Neale, Indigenous Services Officer*

I realise that I will be taking a long road to stated goal of this paper that is Akaltye Antheme: A Continuing Partnership. You may wonder, "What is that woman going on and on about?" Please bear with me, I/we will get there. This paper has been for me a

very challenging exercise, but I am grateful for the opportunity. I have a working understanding of the meaning of the word partnership; my experience of it has taken many forms sometimes successful and sometimes not so successful. But one thing is always there: it must be worked on and worked on and worked on some more.

Partnership with us, the Indigenous people of this Country is a serious business. Contributing to this paper is a serious and important business. It has many layers and I need to peel off those layers if I am to do this thing properly. I feel that partnerships can work when all parties strive to understand each other, to walk in each others' shoes, to open their ears and listen truly, to try and understand each other. For communication to take place, each must have an honest heart, good intentions, and a generosity of spirit. Understand our shared history, understand our individual histories; we need this before we can move on as a nation. Let us concentrate on our similarities not just our differences.

As Indigenous Services Officer at the Alice Springs Public Library I like to think that I work with that thought in mind; I have not always felt like that, but I have come to the conclusion that partnerships, equal and honest partnership can work.

February 13, 2008 we had 'sorry', the big apology in Parliament on behalf of the Government of the day, a huge event in our history for the Indigenous people of this Country, a huge event in the History of Australia. Many of us thought we would live to see this day; it is too late for some including my father and my mother. Many of us were pleased to have received the apology; there were those who did not accept it. But, as positive as the apology was, but we all feel that sorry is not enough on its own it must be followed up with positive action, and one must be seen to be doing what is right. Saying sorry raises the question, can this event lead to be the beginning of a true partnership between Indigenous and non Indigenous peoples of this Country?

And so now Fiona and I will continue to work in partnership to present this paper.

*Fiona Blackburn, Special Collections Librarian*

I've been the Special Collections Librarian at Alice Springs Public Library since July 2007. It's my first position in a library and my first opportunity to professionally engage in one of the key issues for Australia. I've joined NAIDOC marches for roughly twenty years, Sorry Day commemorations for ten, visited the tent embassy in Canberra and the Sovereignty camp in Melbourne after the 2006 Commonwealth Games; and I've worked in a supported accommodation service for Koories. Those are significantly different activities to managing Akaltye Anthems. However these activities, and books like [Living Black; Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert](#) – read when I was twenty and one of two books which profoundly and permanently influenced my politics – meant I came to the job conscious of Indigenous people's everyday, continuing, continually changing, complex lived experience of injustice, disadvantage, survival and achievement.

Working in a cross cultural partnership is hard. It requires consciousness, a constant critical awareness of what you're doing; balance; and patience. Constant, revisited communication and clarification of meaning and understanding are essential. Where representatives of two cultures work together, this is inevitable. It is imperative in a working relationship like ours because I am part of the dominant culture that has treated Indigenous people with disrespect and destructiveness. Whether motives were well

meaning or vicious – and they have been both – an overwhelming result is damage. Acknowledging that, *and* the strengths, ideas and commitment that Indigenous people bring, is an everyday responsibility for anyone wanting to address justice for Indigenous people in twenty-first century Australia; or who wants more simply to provide equitable information services. A question that runs somewhat counter to the complex interplay of damage and achievement, but which is just as important and which requires just as much mindfulness so as to keep the balance, is: “At what point does consideration of culture and history obscure the other person as a person?” I’m not particularly motivated by guilt, although I do feel shame. I am motivated rather by a belief that we are just people and want the same things and have the same rights; and that when we stand on our similarities then we can understand appreciate and accommodate differences. Also, I think it’s self-evident that achieving equal outcomes can require special treatment.

Indigenous people take risks in choosing to work with the dominant culture; and choose to trust when evidence suggests that great distrust is justifiable. Non-Indigenous people can reap significant professional reward for genuine commitment to working for justice; this can feel like a form of appropriation for Indigenous people.

The Akaltye Antheme Collection proves the necessity and the possibilities of partnership in the provision of information services for Indigenous people. The ATSLIRN Protocols and the National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections were important primarily because they enabled me to recognise the extent of the Alice Springs Public Library’s achievement. A philosophical and everyday commitment is as important as policy guidelines to building a partnership. Akaltye Antheme was developed primarily in relation to and gained strength from its community.

Working with all staff but principally with Sylvia is key to managing Akaltye Antheme. This is because of her role in the current shape of the Collection; her connection to her community; her perspective as an Indigenous person; and her experience as an Indigenous woman in a range of Western environments. And why would you reject her persistent good faith and commitment?

### **Akaltye Antheme**

*Sylvia Perrurle Neale*

Akaltye Antheme and the reasoning behind its development is a great beginning in achieving the Alice Springs Public Library’s goal for its commitments to its Indigenous patrons. I have witnessed this growth and development of the Collection, the new initiatives, the growth in the numbers of Indigenous people joining the Library, people using the internet and using the Library as a meeting place, a meeting place where they are welcomed and can access materials they can relate to.

*Fiona Blackburn*

Watching the way Indigenous people use Akaltye Antheme is an eye-opener. Many head straight for it every time they visit to the Library. It makes crystal clear a number of things: that people – indigenous or not – look primarily for material about themselves; how Western a structure a library is; and the work required to make it accessible for all.

### **Establishment**

The Akaltye Antheme Collection grew out of staff observing the way Indigenous people used the Library in the 1990's. In 2002 the Alice Springs Town Council funded a project proposal put by Glenys Aird, the then Library Manager, to "improve the outcomes for Indigenous users of the Library service". The project was to generate baseline data about Library use by Indigenous people; facilitate a better understanding of library services among Indigenous people; design and implement specific and appropriate programmes; make contact with other agencies; and develop access strategies.

Jude Pritchard was employed as the Project Officer. She conducted a survey conducted over three days which identified that 30% of visitors to the Library were Indigenous; and that 30% of that group were from outlying communities. These figures were and are remarkable. The survey design addressed the lack of written English skills and ignorance of Western information gathering methods among Indigenous people. This ensured robust data and consequently sound decisions.

Local Indigenous organisations were approached to provide resources. These resources would present Indigenous knowledge with respect, in a format accessible to the people they were about and for; and enable access for the wider community to resources produced by and for Aboriginal people. These resources are in English.

The Northern Territory Library and Information Service (NTLIS) provided twelve months' further development funding in 2002/03.

The Akaltye Antheme Collection was formally opened on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2002. Lhere Aretepe, the organisation for the Traditional Owners of the Alice Springs area, contributed the name, which is Arrernte for "Giving Knowledge". This initiative preceded the Northern Territory Library's (NTL) Library and Knowledge Centres in Central Australia.

This overview would not be complete or honest without mention of the difficulties and struggle that followed the Collection's establishment. Akaltye Antheme was welcomed. It also generated debate and resentment among some non-Indigenous people – in Council, in the community, among library staff. This took a toll on staff and management. It created the need to for cross-cultural awareness and training in how to manage difficult situations, and policy to, for example, ensure child and staff safety. These developments were perhaps unexpected but perhaps predictable.

The authors expect that a similar initiative elsewhere in Australia could elicit similar responses and reactions. Partnerships of the sort we are describing will help to mitigate these responses and help create success.

### **Partnerships - with staff**

As Project Officers from 2002 – 2004, Jude Pritchard and Paul Quinliven strongly influenced the shape of the Collection. Jude's creative thinking underpinned the Collection's initial direction and the links built with local organisations; Paul's commitment to acknowledging culture, resulted in outreach activities not conventionally 'library'.

Library management were instrumental in its establishment. They have continued supportive of the Collection and the staff responsible for it.

Other staff, current and past, all contribute to its success through their professional commitment and willingness to engage with Indigenous patrons. This engagement by all staff is important: provision relying on Indigenous staff is token provision; and if Indigenous staff carry this aspect of provision alone, the pressure on them is unsustainable.

#### **Partnerships - with Council**

Alice Springs Town Council's support for the establishment of the Akaltje Antheme Collection has already been described. Council has continued committed to the provision of Library services for Indigenous people: it funds the Akaltje Antheme Collection's budgets, and the Indigenous Services Officer and the Indigenous Trainee positions. It has also funded the new initiatives described later in the paper.

#### **Partnerships - with donor organisations**

Donation of resources by local Indigenous organisations has been and continues to be the central strategy in acquisition for this Collection. These resources keep the Collection grounded in its community, ensuring that it contains material Indigenous people want, and showcases local Indigenous life and culture to the community more broadly.

Tangentyere Council; Central Land Council; Pitjantjatjara Council; Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi; Ngannnyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunyatjara Women's Council; Yipirinya school and Yirara Christian College all donate their publications to Akaltje Antheme. With the exception of Yirara Christian College, these are local Aboriginal controlled corporations providing health, education, enterprise development and advocacy services for indigenous people and communities in Central Australia.

Donations are generally in hard copy, which means processing to stand heavy use. Increasingly, organisations are also giving the Library pdf versions of their resources, to be added to the Akaltje Antheme intranet and as a master for replacing hard copies when they can no longer be used. Organisations are also building databases about their communities. The Library already hosts two of these – Ara Winki, a derivation of the Pitjantjatjara Council's Ara Iritija database; and the Central Land Council database – and may host others currently under construction.

#### **New Initiatives**

*Sylvia Perrurle Neale*

Many of my people are illiterate in English and more importantly illiterate in their own language. This situation has been a source of pain and unhappiness for me for many years. I yearn to see my people have the opportunity and choice to read and write their stories, contemporary as well as traditional. Language is the gel that joins one to one's Culture; that gel that holds it all together without it one can have a sense of being apart from culture.

We are and will always be an oral culture and our stories will still be passed down in that way. But, this is a new world a new world in which we must live but not only live but survive and prosper. Having the Language written is one way of passing it on to future generations. Many Aboriginal people are taking this on board.

Libraries can act as a keeping place. We always see a LOTE Collection in every Australian Library and now we will see the Local Indigenous Languages Collection in the Alice Springs Public Library. As the saying goes, one small step.

**A new collection – ‘Local Languages’; or is that ‘Local Indigenous Languages’?**

Sylvia instigated the establishment of this Collection, an extension of Akaltje Antheme. Senior staff have discussed its shape and initial acquisitions; and Council’s financial support continues.

There is debate about the name of this Collection – should it be Local Languages or Local Indigenous Languages? Sylvia prefers ‘Local Indigenous Languages’, to emphasise their living existence. Fiona prefers ‘Local Languages’, arguing that Arrernte, Warlpiri, Luritja, Anmatjere, Pitjatjantjara, Alyawarra etc are the local languages of Central Australia as French is the local language of France – you wouldn’t suggest that German is a local language of France although it may be spoken there, so why make an indirect reference to the polyglot – English, Tagalog, Hindi, German, etc – brought by non-indigenous people to Central Australia?

The aims of this Collection are: to strengthen Indigenous people’s literacy in their own languages; and to make available local language resources for all patrons.

The acquisition strategy for this new Collection is best described as “emergent”, ie responding to circumstances and opportunities as they arise, rather than primarily by referral to an already formulated structure and strategy. Initially we anticipated a small budget for acquisition. We expected that acquisition in all the target languages would take many years; and decided that the first language to be collected would be Arrernte, the language of Alice Springs Traditional Owners. What languages would be collected thereafter would, in best emergent fashion, depend on what was produced and the budget available.

Acquisition has actually been more rapid than that. Council made a very generous, one-off establishment allocation which enabled us to acquire all the resources in the market that we could find.

**New and unusual resources**

The 2002 funding application to NTLIS stated among other things that “Aboriginal people with limited literacy who use our Library are predominantly looking for imagery that reflects their world.” This visual orientation is central to acquisition decisions today for both Collections. The next two sections describe new and unusual resources, chosen for their potential to draw people into the Collection through a visual format. The collaboration fundamental to this partnership is also illustrated.

*A Language Map*

Deciding to commission this is an example of a pragmatic idea transmogrifying into something far more ambitious through staff discussion – an “emergent” strategy and a partnership in action. Discussion between Fiona and Sylvia and then at a senior team meeting followed these lines: the possibility of local kids painting an unattractive set of display shelves, to hide their ugliness and to freshen the Akaltje Antheme area; the employment of a local Indigenous artist to work with the children to paint the shelves;

the employment of a local Indigenous artist to paint the bookshelf, without the children - and then the employment of an Arrernte artist to paint a map depicting the languages in the region, using Arrernte to do so, to be prominently displayed over the new Collection.

*Putye-werne Alheme: Going Bush*

Putye-werne Alheme: Going Bush is a painting made by Veronica Turner Kngwarraye. It depicts collecting bushfoods by describing the activity in Arrernte, the artist's language, and is the first resource purchased for the Local Indigenous Languages Collection.

As an artwork, it couldn't be purchased out of our budget so Council had to be persuaded. First our Library Manager went in to bat for the Collection and the purchase, speaking to the Corporate and Community Service Director from a list of arguments put together by the senior team and refined a little by Sylvia and Fiona. The response was sceptical.

The next step took some days. We borrowed the work on purchase or return basis from Irrekerlantye Arts and wrote a two-part paper putting our case.

Sylvia wrote Part One, beginning with a poem she wrote about Putye-Werne Alheme:

Tears come to my eyes a smile to my face  
I gaze upon this work  
I feel the artist's love and peace  
Her strength  
I close my eyes sound and visions of country  
A celebration of language  
Tastes bitter sweet  
Hope  
Hope  
My people  
Hope  
A more positive future

She then noted the importance of artistic forms in Indigenous cultural expression and survival; the low rates of literacy among her community; the vital importance of literacy to cultural continuation and agency in a Western world; and how the confluence of literacy and art in Putye-Werne Alheme would encourage Indigenous patrons to see their language as written as well as oral and to use other, text-based, resources. She wrote as an Eastern Arrernte woman.

Fiona wrote Part Two, attempting to assume the perspective of a Director with a marketing background; and the attitudes and interests of a business-minded Council. Part Two referred to Council's demonstrated commitment to services for Indigenous people; the innovation in Akaltye Antheme's establishment and to the need for continuing innovation in any refreshment or extension of the enterprise. Words like 'innovation' and 'enterprise' were deliberately chosen. Part Two also asserted the importance of libraries in improving cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect.

We presented the paper and the artwork to the Director; and asked strategic questions to identify Council's concerns. Fiona then wrote a second paper, Parts Three and Four,

describing strategies for promoting the new Collection; the impact of the purchase on the acquisition strategy; the opportunity cost of not purchasing; the market value of the work; and alternative means of purchase. After another presentation, to the Director and Council's Chief Executive Officer, the purchase was approved.

The exercise demonstrated the importance of accurately gauging decision-makers' concerns; the most persuasive arguments were not the first ones to occur to us. We made our first case as library service providers; from our belief that the work would function effectively to meet our new Collection's aims; and from our presumption of Council's concerns. However those concerns weren't accurately identified for the first paper so weren't adequately addressed.

We believe, even so, that you must demonstrate your commitment, expertise *and* different perspectives. Sylvia's willingness to include her poem and the depth of her response to the painting; and making insistent 'librarian-ly' arguments did sway the decision in our favour. We hope we expanded Council's understanding of library services and the requirements of Indigenous people.

That hard work, coinciding with the mid-year budget review and with further support from the Library Manager, brought results beyond the immediate aim. As already mentioned, Council made a generous establishment allocation that has enabled purchase of all the available resources we could find.

#### **A new partnership – Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE)**

Following a tip from Sylvia, Fiona met with the Librarian at BIITE to discuss obtaining copies of readers produced by linguists working at the Centre for Aboriginal Languages and Linguistics years previously. The Batchelor Librarian instead referred Fiona to a lecturer working with women from Utopia, who are studying their own languages. BIITE, its students at Utopia and the Alice Springs Public Library are now collaborating on the Bush Medicine project. The project, based on a request from the students to record the bush medicine knowledge the old ladies at Utopia hold, combines traditional knowledge, art, language and literacy.

Specifically, we are working with the BIITE Library to support the development of information literacy among students and to promote the Public Library as a place of recreation, information, cultural strengthening and greater cross cultural understanding. We are hoping to build relationships with the students so they will donate their work to the Local Languages Collection. These resources, potentially in a range of formats, will be available for individual use and for use in programs such as bi-lingual story-telling.

We are delighted by this opportunity and feel that it justifies emergence as a legitimate strategy. It is also an example of a flexible partnership between many entities.

#### **Further analysis**

We plan to replicate the 2002 survey in the next year, to test whether Indigenous patrons constitute the same proportion of library users. The Indigenous Access project was not intended to increase numbers of indigenous users – the numbers were already remarkable – but by replicating the survey we will see the patterns that survey revealed, have changed.

A Research Fellow from Australian National University is interested in including Alice Springs Public Library Indigenous users in her investigation of the information literacies and resources used by Indigenous youth in the region. We are keen to participate in this as the potential insight into users' resource preferences will be invaluable in planning.

## **Conclusion**

The Akaltye Antheme Collection is the result of a partnership that began in 2002. It can be seen as the culmination and the beginning of a commitment to provision of services for Indigenous people.

The organic collaborative nature of the Collection, and its grounding in community, are its hallmark. Its development included encountering and responding to difficulty. The difficulty couldn't be avoided and anybody implementing similar initiatives could expect the same.

The Library and its community are very proud of this Collection. Glenys Aird, Library Manager from 2002 – 2004, considers it both the hardest and most important work of her career. For many Indigenous patrons, Akaltye Antheme is the beginning point for all their visits to the Library; for some it is the only area they use. Non-Indigenous people who have helped produce the resources get a boost to see their contribution on display.

The commitment of management has been and is essential; as is Council's support. Individual workers' perspectives and approaches have shaped it distinctively. The Collection would languish in its small area without the support of all staff.

Akaltye Antheme has been and is a rich source of innovation and partnership. It offers challenge, opportunity and deep satisfaction in the provision of responsive, locally designed and driven services for Indigenous people.

## **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTERS**

### **Fiona Blackburn**

Fiona's work experience ranges across the public private and community sectors. Roles have included administration, nursing, community development, publishing and fundraising; in health, housing, advocacy, education, and overseas aid. Her community engagements and paid employment in community development and overseas aid are the basis for her commitment to access and equity, old fashioned terms that fortunately still have currency in libraries. As Special Collections Librarian, Fiona thinks she has the most interesting job in the Library – or the one that suits her best.

### **Sylvia Perrurle Neale**

Sylvia is the Indigenous Services Officer at the Alice Springs Public Library. She was born in Alice Springs; an Eastern Arrernte woman. Sylvia has travelled and worked in many other States in a variety of jobs. All of her positions have had an education slant in its various forms from cross cultural to adult Literacy. As Indigenous Services Officer Sylvia sees her main job is to establish an environment within the Library that is welcoming to Indigenous people, and to encourage involvement and participation of Indigenous people in activities within the Library.