


RESEARCH NOTE

Indigenous systems knowledge applied to protocols for governance and inquiry

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Abstract

This paper details the progress to date of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab (IKS Lab) at Deakin University in establishing organisational processes and methods of inquiry grounded in Indigenous protocols. Continuity of traditional knowledge and practice in the Lab requires a deep-time perspective of complex systems both local and nonlocal, ensuring that ancient psycho-technologies are retrieved forward for context-dependent, collectively responsive thought leadership and projects stewarding relational systems increase during phase shifts anticipated from future inflection points of wicked proportions. This work requires abductive reasoning, the eradication of discrete discipline boundaries, continuous adaptive responsiveness, distributed authority, agentic dyads of individual and group sovereignties, kinship protocols for solitary/pair/group/multigroup activity, traditional embassy protocols for dialogue between diverse systems and traditional Law-based principles translated into propositions that can inform innovative systems functions and theory.

KEYWORDS

complexity theory/science, fire values, indigenous systems knowledge, research translation, traditional governance

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab at Deakin University is establishing processes and methods of inquiry grounded in Indigenous protocols and custodial governance for organisational systems. The purpose of this work is to create nuanced tools and approaches for solving complex international problems and produce research (and accessible commentary) to inform better thinking around interventions in dynamic systems.

While the pools of complexity science and systems thinking have been muddled by grifters and a plethora of pseudo-scientific adventurers (Phelan, 2001), we are drawing from a pure well of intellectual tradition perfected over 60 000+ years, not invented in a castle 600 years ago or in a university 60 years ago. We are not creating a ‘third space’ dialectic between Indigenous Knowledge and complexity science (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2001) but rather seeking to adapt the language of systems disciplines as translation tools. These tools

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may provide access to some basic elements of Indigenous Systems Knowledge that may assist with the advancement of human and more-than-human inquiry, particularly in the design of human systems that do not trigger extinction-level events.

We respect the distinctions between complexity science, theory and philosophy and the lineage of its founders through systems theory to present-day incipient understandings of living systems (Dooley, 2004), but we draw upon language and metaphors from the whole of this emergent set of disciplines rather than settling upon any particular part. Our Indigenous (capitalised as respectful protocol) ontology and epistemology do not distinguish between separate disciplines and theories, but aggregate them together around a camp fire at the base of a Tree of Knowledge (Gilson, 2017).

2 | FIRE AS ORGANISING VALUE AND INTERCONNECTED SYSTEM

The metaphor of camp and fire becomes part of centralising shared values and metaphor-as-practice-in-becoming, informed of tree knowledges as they relate to fire. While each team member is connected to different sacred sites of increase in the land, we agree on common traditional Law of *Mimburi* which we refer to in English as flows, sites of increase (not growth, which is different) where energy, for want of a better English word, flows from a world of spirit into our physical reality. The collective sense making process, the *Wanjau*, is bound up ritually with that regenerative process. Our shorthand for how we work with this in our activity has become ‘the flows and the weaves’, and our research agenda and activities are formed from this process, nested within a field of sentient landscapes and more-than-human agents, with fire and sparks as a centralising core. We come to camp (virtually) with shared understandings of fire knowledge as part of a traditional system of Country management, well-being, healing and reciprocal relationships. We also acknowledge the colonial process of fire suppression and subjugation and the recasting of the agency of fire as an energy to be ‘fought’ (Eriksen & Hankins, 2014). Contemporaneously, this Eurocentric notion of defending *against* fire is both hierarchical and patriarchal and excludes women from fire knowledge (Suchet, 2002). The narrative of fire as an organising value is further restorative as it dismantles gendered regimes and enables human and more-than-human relations to be part of systems enactment. Building from a base of traditional knowledges and values, we draw from Western Knowledges (Steffensen, 2020) to transform and translate.

3 | TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE

Our governance is based on protocols from the huge multitribal gatherings that occur in the Bunya Mountains on *Wakka Wakka* and *Barrungam* Country every 3 years (Bunya Mountains Elders Council, 2010), as they have done forever. These are embassy protocols that allow Lab members (‘*labbers*’) with diverse tribal or clan affiliations to self-regulate within a framework of Aboriginal Law, enabling individual self-determination while also binding us in networks of relational obligation that extend throughout a ‘deep-time’ ontology encompassing both ancestors and descendants as stakeholders. Non-Indigenous affiliates (‘*kolabbers*’) are also inducted and regulated through these protocols. We are responsible for their behaviour in the Lab and resolve any transgressions by ‘calling in’ rather than ‘calling out’. This involves including more ritual, song and story that highlight the protocol in question, for the benefit of all, and to stimulate closer bonds and higher-order thinking through ‘yarns’ (an Aboriginal form of discourse).

We spell ‘*kollaboration*’ with a ‘k’ to distinguish between our relational embassy with outsider specialists and the usual ‘co-management’ and ‘co-authoring’ activities of dominant culture scholars in our communities and lands. We have observed many attempts by researchers to introduce systems thinking to Indigenous communities, for example, through Group Model Building (Browne et al., 2021) and Participatory Systems Dynamics (Kiraly & Miskolczi, 2019) to facilitate culturally appropriate research interventions highlighting the common ground between Indigenous Knowledge and systems theory (Heke et al., 2019). Our own *ko-design* activities diverge from these approaches through our embeddedness in sacred Law and regulation of outsiders who we have invited around our fire to *kollaborate* with our relational sensemaking and inquiry. This is a continuous process collectively updated as contexts and relationships expand and shift, ensuring that our priorities remain grounded in our Law, rather than being driven by the elements of settler theories that appear to correlate with aspects of our traditional knowledge processes.

We are committed to community transparency, so our research translation/science communication interface with the public through accessible media is continuous, from project ideation to postpublication. This ensures that we have continuous flows of increase to and from land and community in all Lab activity, which constitutes noncoercive, multipolar thought leadership. We currently have a podcast, ‘The Other Others’ (<https://anchor.fm/tyson-yunkaporta/episodes/IK-Systems-and-Climate-e15hib2>), featuring unlikely connections, thought experiments and global First Nations Peoples

applying Indigenous complexity thinking lenses to international problems. As a nascent project, we are currently developing a dedicated Lab website that will provide an accessible platform to share and grow our work and radiate energies. We are interested in, and more significantly, obligated by, *Mimburi*—our ‘flows’ and *Wanjau*—regeneration and our ‘weaves’ to home our inquiry in real-time research translations as a motile state of shared focal ever-becomings.

Continuity of traditional knowledge and practice in the Lab requires a deep-time perspective of complex systems both local and nonlocal, ensuring that ancient psychotechnologies are retrieved forward for context-dependent, collectively responsive thought leadership and projects stewarding relational systems increase, during phase shifts anticipated at future inflection points. This work requires abductive reasoning, the eradication of discrete discipline boundaries, adaptive responsiveness, distributed authority, agentic dyads of individual and group sovereignties, kinship protocols for solitary/pair/group/multigroup activity and traditional processes translated into propositions that can inform innovative systems functions and theory.

Cursory examination of these features might suggest an alignment with Complexity Theory notions of mutually interdependent, agentic nodes interacting in autopoietic ways (Waldrop, 1993), like a collectively intelligent ‘invisible hand’ emerging from a ‘free market’ system, but Indigenous Knowledge protocols are more rigorously (and ethically) structured than this, existing within a dyad of individual accumulation and progressively collective aggregation. This results in distributed, living knowledge systems that are not random but highly structured and therefore with design capabilities far beyond ‘the wisdom of crowds’ (Kameda et al., 2022).

4 | RELATIONAL FIELD OF INQUIRY

We have deployed our Indigenous languages to make explicit the traditional structure of this organising principle, which forms the basis for both our method of inquiry and our governance in the Lab. Specifically, we deploy the pronouns that delineate our various social roles and relations to inform systems knowledge production and management.

In our Indigenous languages, there are more first-person pronouns than ‘I’ and ‘We’. There is ‘*I-as-self-in-relation-to*’, ‘*us-two*’, ‘*us-only*’ and ‘*us-all*’. These represent a highly structured sequence of processes for data aggregation, similar to the developmental stages of an infant coming into an awareness of the world. The individual comes to know themselves as only existing in relation—initially in kinship pairs (beginning with *mother-child*); then in exclusive clan, gender and age groups; and then in inclusive groups

including outsider communities and more-than-humans (through totemic classification systems ritually mapped within one’s own kinship structures).

This relational field of inquiry extends fractally through the expansive *us-all* towards a *Sunrise and Sunset Dreaming* understanding of governance as communities of communities and networks of networks embedded in land and continuing throughout all of creation (Yunkaporta, 2019). Within this Law, the *self-in-relation-to-all-things* is part of a nested system of knowledge and relatedness and therefore is bound by ontological rules preventing any action or speech without alignment with the whole. Individuals with high levels of knowledge in specific contexts carry authority within those contexts but not power. Power is distributed throughout the group, and all are respected.

Each *labber* pursues individual research agendas as *self-in-relation* while being accountable to their own communities and networks of relationships. They also belong to several *us-two* pairings for various projects and investigations. Those pairs connect with other pairs and individuals for *us-only* small group research activities and then extend outwards to *us-all* projects. The application of Indigenous Knowledge accumulation at the individual level thus scales to the aggregation of general knowledge and collective insights at increasingly interdependent levels, eventually expanding to external embassy and lateral diplomacy with partner organisations.

Restricted knowledge is not secured by a central authority but held in *us-two* and *us-only* configurations throughout the group. These configurations may be determined by totemic affiliation, cultural status in specific contexts, gender, age, group roles (e.g. Fire Keeper, Song Man, Translator, Ambassador and Custodian) and discipline specialisation. This structure forms multiple membranes of data protection that might be visualised as concentric circles in which every member is responsible for defending the sovereignty and integrity of all. No single member has access to all restricted knowledge.

5 | CHALLENGES

This creates a problem we have not entirely resolved yet regarding the itinerant nature of university employment, although we have noted that when staff members leave, the relationships remain as permanent connections that may be accessed at any time. *Us-two* and *us-only* projects usually continue when a team member becomes affiliated with another organisation, as we remain embedded in Indigenous Law and community relation regardless of which institution is providing our salaries.

Health and safety issues are held and resolved within the group, which can include and exclude members in

response to shifting relational dynamics. Members breaking protocol do not require disciplinary action, as transgressions result in self-exclusion through abandonment of relational protocols. The group is then responsible for ‘calling in’ that individual and bringing them back into proper relation. There is no requirement for the installation of permanent leaders or managers in this system, although we have identified the need for a co-ordinator/ambassador to focus on administrative tasks within the university, as our heterarchical structure proves to be inefficient in managing bureaucratic tasks within appropriate timeframes.

Therefore, we must also acknowledge that the Labs sit within a system of nested hierarchies belonging to the economy and culture of occupying powers on our lands. As such, we must navigate the prevailing administrative structures of the academic institution that is hosting our activities within a broader system of imperial relations and extractive economies. We frame our interactions with this system as a process of cultural and intellectual embassy. Our work goes far beyond postcolonial critique and praxis, as we strive to identify structural leverage points for the strategic embedding of our Indigenous governance and inquiry models in parasitic relation with the host institution. This is intended as a process of co-evolving towards more symbiotic relations internally and externally, with the deep-time goal of a systems-wide phase transition resulting in the re-embedding of humans within healthy landscapes as custodians of creation.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our hypothetical framing for this larger project is that impending extinction events may only be avoided if First Peoples can find innovative ways to bring industrial cultures into proper relation with land, more-than-humans and each other. This forms the organising principle of all our Lab activity and research design, binding *labbers* and *kolabbers* in common purpose.

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