



Tiwi Story: Turning History Downside Up,
Mavis Kerinauia and Laura Rademaker

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Tiwi Story: Turning History Downside Up is an exciting and accessible history, presenting a simple but innovative approach to using oral history to read the colonial archive. In 2015, Dr Laura Rademaker went to the Tiwi Islands, 80km north of Darwin, to ask members of the Tiwi peoples whether they wanted to share their stories. They told her it was not enough to interview them: rather, she would need to work with them on the project. Tiwi historian Mavis Kerinauia joined Rademaker as a co-author along with seven Tiwi as contributors. The result of this co-creation is that the Tiwi people are active participants in a process where their intellectual

property is valued and sovereignty is recognised. Consequently, chapters on academic research are each introduced by an oral history testimony from a Tiwi leader. At times this juxtaposition is discordant, yet it propels us forward in our understanding.

The book begins with the authors situating themselves, their backgrounds, and their approaches. Kerinaiaua is a Tiwi woman, cultural broker, and historian who comes in from the ‘ground up’. She explains:

(W)estern research principles just don’t quite understand how important relationships are. That’s the beautiful thing about Tiwi, and other Indigenous people. That’s where we’re different. For us, research goes much, much deeper because of the connections, the relationships.¹

Kerinaiaua is an expert in culturally responsive research and has been developing the Turtuni Framework – effectively cultural protocols for researching in the Tiwi Islands, which brings Tiwi knowledge to the forefront.² She outlines the project’s goals, which include healing, truth-telling, and documentation for future generations. Rademaker acknowledges her positionality as a settler, feminist historian, author and academic. Her self-introduction includes the naming of an ancestor’s role in the colonial occupation in Darwin.

Many of the Tiwi historians interviewed in the project were Kerinaiaua’s relatives who, in an act of co-creation, adopted Rademaker. She explains the relationship:

White authors can fall into the habit of suggesting that being adopted by Indigenous people gives a unique insight into First Nations culture. It does not. My adoption is not even really about me. It is for Tiwi. It means that Tiwi people know where I fit: they know who I need to respect and who is responsible for keeping an eye on me. It also meant that my Tiwi kin took

1 Mavis Kerinaiaua and Laura Rademaker, *Tiwi Story: Turning History Downside Up* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2023), 4.

2 Tiwi Resources, The Turtuni Framework (2024). Available at <https://www.tiwiresources.com.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=295&l=1&id=80>. Accessed 24 April 2024; Terri Janke, *True Tracks: Respecting Indigenous Knowledge and Culture* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2021), 253.

me under their wings, and their voices will be represented more loudly in this book.³

The authors are explicit in their intention to prioritise oral testimonies and current lived realities over the colonial archive. This is achieved through oral history testimonies, each from a different Tiwi historian, two to four pages long, foregrounding the Tiwi concerns and reading their priorities into the subsequent chapters of academic research on the same topic. This parallel presentation is in effect, a meta ‘Right of Reply’ to the archives.⁴ The testimonies amplify traditional owner context and meanings including the ongoing impact of colonisation. They are powerful stories of Tiwi determination, joy and tactical brilliance. Ancestors such as Ungaraminingamo (Martina) are celebrated as charismatic heroes who embraced the new and played active roles in determining social outcomes for their people.

Martina’s story exemplifies a striking divergence between the Tiwi canon and the roles of locals that are stripped of agency and imagination as ascribed in official documents. Martina escaped an arranged marriage to live on the Catholic mission. She was the first of what priest Francis Gsell called his ‘150 wives’.⁵ Martina leveraged access to materials, food and schooling by nuns and ushered in marriage reform that allowed young women to delay motherhood. Tiwi families would receive gifts from the mission, future husbands had (supervised) visits from their betrothed in the dormitory, and on weekends, the girls went back to their families in the bush. ‘She had the courage to do that, run away and change everything’, says Martina’s granddaughter Dulcie Kelantumama in her oral testimony preceding Chapter 8 ‘The Girl Who Turned the World Around’.

The book’s subtitle, ‘Downside Up’, has multiple meanings. Through learning about Martina, the Catholic priest’s ‘150 Wives’ story is turned upside down. It also

3 Mavis Kerinaia and Laura Rademaker, *Tiwi Story*, 18.

4 Indigenous Archive Collective, ‘The Indigenous Archives Collective position statement on the right of reply to Indigenous knowledges and information held in archives’, *Archives & Manuscripts* 49, no 3 (November 2021): 244–252.

5 Francis Xavier Gsell, *The Bishop with 150 Wives: Fifty Years as a Missionary* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955).

refers to the way Tiwi people boldly experimented and negotiated change for their communities, as well as the challenge that the oral testimonies in the book present to theories of unilineal evolution embedded in colonial narratives.

Within the book, chapters are organised chronologically from 1911 to the 1970s. The use of oral histories in the exploration of Tiwi experiences of mission life allow for multiple contradictory truths to be held simultaneously. This dialectic, as historian Alessandro Portelli puts it, allows the oral history practice to 'lead up through and beyond facts to their meanings'.⁶ For example, the chapters 'Mission Days' and 'Creating a Sanctuary' explore the vastly different experiences during this period:

There is no one story of the mission times. Some families experienced a time of stability and learning. Others endured humiliation and violence. Some went through a confusing combination of both.⁷

The simple and empathetic technique of prefacing academic research with oral testimony offers an emotionally resonant approach in this book that disrupts the colonial lens. It underscores the conceptual shift truth-telling as counter-memory requires and encourages researchers to further consider the use of oral testimony more broadly in historical research.

6 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991), 2.

7 Mavis Kerinaia and Laura Rademaker, *Tiwi Story*, 128.