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Iris Stevens concluded in her 1995 Report of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission that the ‘whole’ of the Ngarrindjeri women’s business, identified in 1994 as part of the Federal Government’s reason for banning the proposed Hindmarsh Island bridge, was a fabrication. 3 Crucial to her categorical conclusion was a particular construction of Ngarrindjeri culture and history developed by a number of ‘expert’ witnesses to the Commission. Her findings rely heavily on the ‘expert’ conclusions of two of the museum-based ‘experts’ and their interpretation of the existing literature concerning Ngarrindjeri culture. Without the testimony of these witnesses, it would have been difficult for Stevens to have drawn her conclusion of complete fabrication. I argue in this paper that the misreading of one of the Commission’s central anthropological texts largely determined her final conclusion of ‘complete fabrication’.

The Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission used Ronald and Catherine Berndts’ book, A World that Was,3 as an authoritative text in its construction of Ngarrindjeri ethnography and history. 4 Key witnesses and museum ‘experts’, Philip Clarke and Philip Jones argued that it supported their assertion that secret Ngarrindjeri women’s business was a recent invention. They went further and argued that there was no gender-based exclusivity of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri society. 5 During the Commission I presented an alternative reading of A World That Was, that more closely resembled Deane Fergie’s. I concluded that it was entirely possible that restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island existed prior to the emergence of the bridge issue. I based my conclusion on several factors: my reading of the available ‘ethnographic’ material; my own research experience in the region; and my experience with several of the key proponent women, in particular, Doreen Kartinyeri. My views were dismissed by Commissioner Stevens and have largely been ignored by commentators such as Ron Brunton. 6

The following is predominantly an analysis of the ‘ethnographic’ evidence in A World That Was that supports the existence of restricted or ‘secret’ Ngarrindjeri women’s business and therefore the possibility of restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island. I have also included material from the Berndts’ book, other sources and my own research, that relates to the existence of gender-specific knowledge and separate men’s and women’s domains in Ngarrindjeri society.

A World That Was is the most detailed, published ‘ethnography’ of Ngarrindjeri culture available. 7 It is, however, a collection of oral histories and not an ethnography based on direct observation. It is a ‘reconstructive’ ethnography that attempts to provide an insight into the world of the Ngarrindjeri people, from the time of contact with Europeans through to the late nineteenth century; a period that the Berndts identify as the end of the ‘traditional’ Ngarrindjeri world. Importantly, Ngarrindjeri culture of the 1930s and 1940s is not examined. A detailed ethnography of this crucial period, when it appears that the last fully initiated Ngarrindjeri people were still living, would be an invaluable tool for understanding the changing status of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri society, providing essential insights from which to assess the existence of restricted women’s business.

Focusing on the realms of men’s and women’s initiatives, it appears from the Berndts’ book that there was separate Ngarrindjeri men’s and women’s business. A gender-based separation of other domains is also documented. Specialised, restricted knowledge associated with the putari tradition, involving male and female ‘doctors’, is a particularly significant example. 8 I would further argue that gender-based separation of knowledge and practice can be traced through the historic period to the present day. It appears, however, that Robert Tonkinson, who wrote the foreword for A World That Was, and even the Berndts themselves, failed to recognise the significant evidence of gender divisions of knowledge and practice contained in this work.

I have been working in the Lower Murray region since the early 1980s. My research has been both historical and anthropological. 9 I have worked with both men and women recording aspects of Ngarrindjeri culture and history. Much of my work has focused on the historical significance of particular places to Ngarrindjeri people such as fringe-camps, missions, Aboriginal-run farms and other cultural sites. Prior to the Royal Commission I had carried out only minor research into the Ngarrindjeri history of the Goolwa/Hindmarsh Island area. Most of this work dealt with general historical topics such as early Ngarrindjeri employment in the area. I had not recorded anything relating to women’s business in the region. This absence does not mean that such knowledge does not exist. It does, however, fit with the claim that certain aspects of Ngarrindjeri women’s business cannot be revealed to men.

II

Explorers such as Charles Sturt 10 made some of the earliest observations of the culture of the Aboriginal people of the Lower Murray region in South Australia. As with all early European observers his understanding of the cultures that he encountered was shaped by the intellectual traditions of his time. Attitudes towards gender relations and gender-based roles in society constrained European interpretations of Aboriginal culture. The bias of Museum collections towards male artefacts such as weapons clearly reflects this situation.

The explorer Edward John Eyre 11 wrote a comparatively detailed account of the culture of the Aboriginal people living just to the north of the Lower Murray. It was published in 1845. Fay Gale, a long-term researcher in the Lower
Murray region, has argued that Eyre provides evidence that Aboriginal women in the region had separate religious ceremonies. She writes:

It is evident that women in southern South Australia played a dominant role in the acquisition of daily food. It is also evident that this was not at the expense of involvement in ceremonial life, either in joint rituals with men, or in distinctly separate ‘women’s business’. An even cursory glance at the 19th century records questions virtually all our 20th century assumptions about the role of women in traditional Aboriginal society. 12

During the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission Philip Jones and Philip Clarke paid little attention to Fay Gale’s important article in Peggy Brock’s book Women, Rites and Sites. This collection of chapters, by leading female academics, specifically deals with the importance of re-considering women’s roles in Aboriginal religion and site-based heritage in South Australia in light of the what was then, the newly introduced Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988.

It is, however, in the writings of early missionaries such as George Taplin (e.g. 1873, 1879) that the most important non-anthropological observations of nineteenth century Ngarrindjeri culture can be found. I have recently argued that these records were uncritically applied during the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission by witnesses such as Philip Clarke. 13 The fact, for example, that Taplin did not record the existence of separate women’s initiations, provides important insights into his constructions of Ngarrindjeri culture, rather than providing empirical evidence for the absence of restricted Ngarrindjeri women’s business, as suggested by Clarke 14. Working with Ngarrindjeri people in the 1930s and 1940s, however, the Berndts recorded the existence of several stages of separate women’s initiation. 15 Ngarrindjeri women either kept these cultural practices secret from Taplin or he did not recognise their value because of the male-oriented, intellectual tradition from which he interpreted Aboriginal culture.

Norman Tindale and Ronald and Catherine Berndt were the principal anthropological researchers to work with the Ngarrindjeri people in the first half of this century, although Radcliffe Brown 16 did carry out some early work on the social organisation of the region. Tindale started his research in the 1920s and carried out significant work in the 1930s. The Berndts conducted several periods of fieldwork in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Most of this research was part of a wider study of ‘acculturation’ amongst Aboriginal people in South Australia. 17

The 1930s and 1940s was a period in Australian anthropology in which Aboriginal women were characterised as profane and their ceremonies were considered to lack ‘sacred’ status. 18 As pointed out by Rod Lucas, Catherine Berndt was ‘young childless and inexperienced during’ 19 fieldwork in the Lower Murray and she only developed a particular interest in women’s secret-sacred life after her fieldwork at Daly River later in the 1940s. It appears that during the majority of her time spent in the Lower Murray she worked with her husband and only developed her practice of working separately with Aboriginal women at a later date. 20 All these factors placed Catherine Berndt in a less than ideal position from which to document restricted women’s business amongst the Ngarrindjeri.

Alison Brookman (nee Harvey), a classics and history student in the late 1930s, gave evidence in the Royal Commission that she was instructed by Norman Tindale to question Margaret (pinkie) Mack, an initiated Ngarrindjeri woman and one of the Berndts’ informants, about the existence of secret women’s business in Lower Murray culture. 21 This struck me as a very significant point. I argued in the Commission that it was important to note that Tindale had been working in the Lower Murray for at least ten years when he still believed, according to Brookman, that it was possible that certain senior women possessed restricted women’s knowledge.

Coupled with the fact that the Berndts and Tindale carried out fieldwork in the Lower Murray prior to the significant impact of feminist critiques on the social sciences in Australia, they also viewed the Lower Murray societies that they studied in terms of cultural disintegration from what they perceived as a traditional past. They tended to see things through the eyes of their elderly informants, who believed that ‘true’ Ngarrindjeri culture was dying with them. Subsequently, the Berndts’ book is largely an account of what older Ngarrindjeri people living in the 1930s and early 1940s considered to be the Aboriginal domain of history and knowledge.

The Berndts placed too much emphasis on the gap between what they considered to be the ‘traditional’ culture of the Ngarrindjeri and the Ngarrindjeri culture of the 1930s and 1940s. They have also applied this interpretation to contemporary Ngarrindjeri culture, artificially separating Ngarrindjeri people from their past. They write:

Despite cultural and linguistic extinction, the descendants of the Kukabrak (or the Narrinyeri as they may prefer to call themselves today) continue to possess identity markers - not least in their personal names and patronyms. 22

It is unfortunate that this perspective may have had a major influence on the conclusions of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission.

Throughout their book the Berndts employ a comparatively static model of culture and this has restricted their ability to analyse adaptations, cultural change and continuity. Given the re-constructive nature of their work, there is no opportunity for an examination of the ways that the world-views of older Ngarrindjeri people such as Albert Karloan and Pinkie Mack shaped the beliefs and cultural practices of other Ngarrindjeri people. Although Karloan and Mack were certainly among the last initiated people, there were other Ngarrindjeri people who shared their values, experiences and knowledge. The old people of the 1930s and 1940s did have an impact on the ‘culture’ of the people around them and they certainly had a role in shaping the lives of their children and grandchildren.

Further it must be remembered that the Berndts were working in an era when anthropology and history were driven by an interest in what was seen as ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture and at that time they shared the view that the so-called ‘half-caste’ remnants of the Aboriginal cultures of the ‘settled’ parts of Australia would soon be assimilated into the general Australian population.
In a chapter of Peggy Brock’s 1989 book Women, Rites and Sites, Catherine Berndt argued that in Lower Murray society ‘gender-based differences in the sense of inclusion-exclusion, in religious and other affairs were minimal’ 23 I argued during the Royal Commission that this statement is not borne out by the ethnographic evidence contained in A World That Was. 24 I have also pointed out that Catherine Berndt’s generalisation does not take into account the cultural changes that have occurred in Ngarrindjeri society since contact. 25

In A World that Was the Berndts identify the existence of both Ngarrindjeri women’s and men’s initiation ceremonies at least as late as the 1880s. They highlight a specific, core aspect of the male initiation as being ‘secret-sacred’ and known only to the elders. 26 In this context the Berndts refer to ‘the elders’ as the old men associated with the novice’s initiation. The Berndts provide the following description:

After that the transformation to sacred status, the youth became narambi 27, sacred and taboo: he was no longer an ‘in-betweener’ but a novice. The red-ochring symbolised his ritual death. Moreover, he was said to resemble a corpse (Meraldi) which had been re-ochred in a similar way to await smoke-drying (see Chapter 19). Physically removed from the secular camp, the narambi was not only set apart but was temporarily lost as far as his relatives and friends were concerned. This interpretation of a novice’s ritual state at this time and of his red-ochring was a secret-sacred one, known, we were told, only to the elders (male elders). The general belief was that the red-ochring, which was really an anointing (since it was red ochre as a liquid that was emphasised), had the power to make the ritually anointed person strong, both physically and mentally. 28

This aspect of the men’s initiation is extremely important in relation to the categorical position held by Philip Clarke and Philip Jones that there was no gender-based exclusivity of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri culture. The Stevens Report effectively concurred with this conclusion. 29

The Berndts’ main Ngarrindjeri ‘informant’, Albert Karloan, described his initiation, lasting for five months, as a greatly shortened version of the usual Ngarrindjeri initiation. 30 Normally the novices remained in the narambi state for at least two years. During the initiation ceremony, where the young men were made narambi by the male elders, no women were present. 31 In Karloan’s case, one old woman was assigned to look after the initiate’s camp during the long period of segregation.

The Berndts argue that ‘clan songs were undoubtedly taught and sung’ 32 during the narambi phase and that these were related to ngartji or totems. Elsewhere they argue that ngartji songs were religious in nature. They also contrast this stage of the men’s initiation with the pre-initiation phase when only personal and nonreligious songs were sung. 33 Importantly, in their description of Ngarrindjeri initiation, the Berndts were unable to include any detail relating to the songs and ceremonies taught to the initiates during the narambi stage.

It is interesting to note that the Berndts did not record any songs and ceremonies associated with what they describe as the main ‘mythic instigators’, such as Ngurunderi. 34 The missionary George Taplin, however, records the existence of a song about Ngurunderi. He writes in his diary that:

Two of their songs in particular attracted my attention. One was called ‘The Ngurunderi’, and is about God, and the other is about ‘Shall I ever see my country again’. 35

It is possible that some of the detailed knowledge of the songs and ceremonies relating to the Dreamings of Ngurunderi and the other ‘mythic instigators’ were associated with restricted knowledge passed down during initiations. Norman Tindale did record songs associated with Ngurunderi and he also records the existence of secret and powerful songs known only to men. 36 Some of this knowledge relates to hunting practices, a domain in which he provides evidence of strict divisions between genders. For example only certain male hunters could approach important duck flyways along the Coorong – women were strictly forbidden in these areas. 37

According to the Berndts cicatrisation or body scarring concluded the male initiation sequence, although Albert Karloan did not undergo this rite. 38 He told the Berndts that this practice was seen as a comparatively recent introduction into Ngarrindjeri culture. It was, however, still being practiced as late as the 1870s, given the available photographic evidence of cicatrised Ngarrindjeri men. 39 One elderly Ngarrindjeri descendant living in Victoria told me that she remembered the body scarring on her grandfather’s chest. 40 The Berndts were unable to obtain any details of the Ngarrindjeri male cicatrisation ritual. This is a major omission in their attempt to document the male initiation cycle.

Albert Karloan (according to the Berndts one of the last initiated Ngarrindjeri people) argued that during the last male initiation ceremonies in the 1880s the old people only passed on a small percentage of the knowledge that they possessed - much of the detailed religious knowledge was withheld:

These older men were concerned that their traditional heritage should not entirely disappear - as evidence around them seemed to suggest it would. Of the three young men, only Karloan showed an aptitude for assimilating the information they wished to pass on. Yet, however receptive he was, he admitted to us that the greater part of the traditional heritage died with those older men. Moreover, he said, they deliberately withheld much of the religious knowledge because in their view it was of little use to members of the younger generation who were coming increasingly under the influence of the Mission and of Europeans generally. 51
From this passage it is clear that certain aspects of the detailed religious knowledge that the male elders held could only be passed on in the ‘restricted’ ceremonial context. It is also interesting to note the heightened ‘restrictions’ placed on religious knowledge by the elders during the contact period. This response by older people to European invasion was critical in shaping the process of knowledge transmission that has led to the divisions amongst Ngarrindjeri people, and particularly women, over the Hindmarsh Island affair.

During the Royal Commission Jones and Clarke argued that there is no evidence of restricted Ngarrindjeri knowledge according to gender and no secret-sacred elements of Ngarrindjeri society. 42 Robert Tonkinson in his foreword to A World That Was writes, ‘Yaraldi ceremonial life was public, and there was apparently no secret-sacred men’s religious domain, which is rare in Aboriginal societies’. 43 This statement is contradicted by the Berndts’ assertion that the core interpretation of men’s initiation is secret-sacred. The actual initiation ceremony for the men can certainly not be described as public - only certain senior men could be present. As I will argue later in the paper, the women’s initiation ceremonies, as documented by the Berndts, were restricted to women.

IV

Through an examination of the available information recorded by the Berndts concerning male initiation, a possible connection between fresh water and femininity can be detected in the relationship between the male novices and fresh water. The strongest threat to the narambi state of male initiates was various types of contact with females. 44 The Berndts write:

Upon completion of the initiation, the narambi taboo was lifted by washing in River water not only the young men themselves but all their possessions. Water was regarded as a neutralising factor. 45

The ‘secret-sacred’ interpretation of the novice as being ritually dead is interesting given that the ritual restoration of life appears to be activated by the fresh water of the River or Lake.

During the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission, Veronica Brodie, the sole senior proponent woman to give evidence, identified a link between the Seven Sisters Dreaming and the waters of Lake Alexandrina. 46 In particular, she made a connection between the restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island and the Seven Sisters Dreaming. The final report of the Royal Commission, the Stevens Report, however, argues that:

The Seven Sisters’ Dreaming story was, however, never part of the Dreaming of the Ngarrindjeri people. It was part of Western Desert mythology and is likely to have been introduced by Doreen Kartinyeri. 47

Philip Clarke arrived at this conclusion in his evidence to the Commission, although his Ph.D. thesis contains several references to Ngarrindjeri people holding beliefs associated with the Seven Sisters that have no connection with Doreen Kartinyeri and pre-date the 1990s. The more recently completed Commonwealth Hindmarsh Island Report prepared by Justice Jane Mathews, comes to some very significant conclusions regarding the Ngarrindjeri version of the Seven Sisters. Justice Mathews specifically contradicts the findings of the Royal Commission and writes:

There is considerable material, much of it unearthed for the purpose of this Report, which directly refutes the Royal Commissioner’s findings on this matter. References to the Seven Sisters Dreaming Story in Ngarrindjeri culture can be found in several sources, some of which go back a long time. Philip Clarke’s Ph.D. thesis quoted a 1960s account of the Seven Sisters Dreaming Story as recorded by Annie Rankine, a Ngarrindjeri woman whose father Milerum (Clarence Long) was Norman Tindale’s principal informant. 48

Annie Rankine’s account links the Seven Sisters with the belief (still held today by Ngarrindjeri people) that it is dangerous for children to swim in the Lake water at certain times of the year.

During the Royal Commission the so-called amateur historian Betty Fisher referred to some notes of a 1960s conversation that she had with Rebecca Wilson, Veronica Brodie’s mother. The Commonwealth Hindmarsh Island Report includes what is apparently an excerpt from these which indicates that the mother of the Seven Sisters wept for her daughters and that her tears became the waters. According to Justice Mathews the proponent women argued that these waters included the Gooolwa channel. 49

A further significance assigned to water and in particular the waters surrounding Hindmarsh Island was made during the Royal Commission, by George Trevorrow, a senior Ngarrindjeri man. He gave evidence about the connection between the creation of Ngarrindjeri ngartji (totems) and the area referred to as the ‘meeting of the waters’. 50 In 1986 he told South Australian Museum staff, on tape, a version of the important Ngunderi Dreaming that identified the area where the salt and fresh waters met as the place where Ngunderi cut up the giant cod and created the fish species. George Trevorrow’s version of the Ngunderi Dreaming was different from the primary account published by Ronald Berndt 51 and the version included in A World That Was. 52 This information was incorporated into the Museum’s Ngunderi film which was used as an introduction to a major exhibition dealing with Ngunderi culture. 53 The finished Ngunderi film identified the location where Ngunderi created the new fish species as the place where the salt and fresh water met.

It appears from George Trevorrow’s evidence to the Royal Commission, and his 1986 account of the Ngunderi Dreaming, that the meeting of the salt and fresh waters in the Lake was a significant creative location associated with Ngunderi’s creation of a range of fish and their associated ngartji. The 1986 record provides support for George Trevorrow’s prior knowledge of the creative significance of the ‘meeting of the waters’, a site recorded by the Station
archaeologist Neale Draper during his 1994 Hindmarsh Island site survey, required under the South Australian Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988. The Stevens Report attributes no significance to the evidence provided concerning creative significance of the ‘meeting of the waters’. The Mathews Report makes the following point:

This matter was ventilated during the Royal Commission. It was suggested there that the concept of the Meeting of the Waters as a Ngarrindjeri tradition emerged only in 1994. However, Stephen Hemming’s record of a conversation with George Trevorrow in 1986 suggests this to be wrong. 56

V

Returning to the topic of initiation the Berndts record a series of stages in the initiation of women. 57 They make it clear that men were specifically excluded from these ceremonies. Importantly, when considering claims that there is no evidence of restricted women’s business in Ngarrindjeri culture, it is useful to consider Tonkinson’s following observation from his foreword to A World That Was:

Although some kind of puberty ritual for girls was part of the traditional culture in most parts of Australia, formal initiatory rituals like the Yaraldi (Ngarrindjeri) manggi (a stage in women’s initiation) were uncommon. 58

As mentioned previously, Faye Gale has identified what she believes is evidence of women’s initiations amongst the Aboriginal people immediately to the north of the Ngarrindjeri. 59 She argues that Eyre recorded the existence of separate women’s ceremonies associated with initiation. 60 According to the Berndts the last male initiations, or at least as I have already argued, the last pre-initiation ceremonies, were staged in the area that Eyre was describing. Members of the groups from South Australia’s Mid-Murray took part in these ceremonies. It is certainly possible that women’s initiations amongst the Lower Murray shared common elements with the Mid-Murray area and that Mid-Murray women took part in joint ceremonies with women from related areas such as the Mid-Murray.

It is to be expected that the women’s ‘religious’ knowledge imparted during initiation, would have been restricted to the ceremonial context and to other initiated women. For example, when the Berndts asked Pinkie Mack, an initiated woman, about the songs that accompanied the various stages of women’s initiation she claimed that she did not remember them. 61 The following excerpts from A World That Was illustrate the context of her consistent denials and provide basic details of the stages of women’s initiation:

A day or so after the beginning of a girl’s first menstruation......An older woman (probably the putari), using a ngalaii (grasstree) stem dipped in the girl’s blood, would tap the muscles below her shoulder blades and then her chest to make her healthy and strong. Songs accompanied this rite which Pinkie Mack had undergone, but unfortunately she could not remember them. This (next stage) took place some short time after a girl’s first menstruation and the focal point was the manggi, meaning ‘marking’ rite. A large group of women would accompany the girl into the scrub, where they prepared a cleared space and built fires. (Pinkie Mack added that all women of the local camps would go out to make fun at this time). Men and boys were strictly forbidden to come near where the women were camped. The women would sit in a large circle with the novice in the middle and chant special songs referring to the girl’s puberty. (Again, these songs were not remembered). 62 Some time after the manggi rituals and after her hymen had been pierced (see below) .....she would go out into the bush with some of her female peers and close relatives where they would clear a place and make a fire. Sitting around it. they would sing her breasts to grow large, rounded and heavy, with nipples protruding. 63

Pinkie Mack’s consistent denial of knowledge of songs associated with women’s initiation cannot be explained by a simple memory-loss. She was a recognised song-woman who would have remembered songs that were central to her own initiation. Catherine Berndt writes:

Pinkie was a notable singer, or song-woman: not that she usually composed songs herself, but she remembered a great many (Among the few she could not recall were some of the girl’s initiation songs. 64

This should have read ‘all of the girl’s initiation songs’ rather than ‘some’. It is more likely that Pinkie Mack decided not to reveal to the Berndts the restricted meanings of women’s initiation which would have been contained in the songs.

As mentioned previously Tonkinson argued in his foreword to A World That Was that, ‘Yaraldi ceremonial life was public........ 65 It is important to point out, in relation to this generalisation, that the women’s rites described by the Berndts were certainly not public affairs.

A song known to some contemporary Ngarrindjeri people and according to the Berndts associated with initiation or more specifically pre-initiation, of which both Pinkie Mack and Albert Karloan claim they did not know the meaning, is a song that! also recorded in 1983. 66 Two elderly Ngarrindjeri women - Annie Koolmatrie and Flora Kropinyeri - knew the song and its basic meaning. 67 They described it as a song about the white people coming and taking away the lands of the Ngarrindjeri. 68 This is the same song that the Berndts record as being sung at the ceremony at which Karloan was seized in preparation for his initiation. They provide a Ngarrindjeri text with no translation. Given Pinkie Mack’s skill as a song-woman and the fact that she was well-known for singing this song later in life, it is difficult to
believe that neither pinkie Mack or Albert Karloan knew its meaning. I would argue that this is further evidence that on occasion they withheld information from the Berndts - an evidence of absence rather than an absence of evidence.

The Berndts further record that specialist knowledge was passed on to men and women after initiation. It related to their training as ‘doctors’ or putari. 69 This knowledge was kept secret by the trainees and male and female putari had separate knowledge. Female putari for example specialised in childbirth and other forms of women’s ‘business’. The putari training of the of the initiated males was the responsibility of the men who looked after them during their initiation. This training involved strengthening his miwi, a central part of the individual’s spirit, which was said by Albert Karloan to be ‘the crux of religious belief. 70 Deane Fergie argued during the Royal Commission that the restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island was connected with the putari tradition. 71

The Berndts also record the separation of Ngarrindjeri lives on the basis of gender starting from approximately age five. 72 They point out that ‘boys were replicating the activities of the men; girls, those of the women’. Ngarrindjeri boys and girls even held separate ceremonies with separate songs and dances. It seems likely from ceremonies associated with ‘women’s and men’s initiation that these separate songs and dances continued throughout the lives of Ngarrindjeri people.

Ngarrindjeri children were also assigned secret names. The Berndts document the following:

A third name, a secret one, was given to children around the age of five years, and would be known only to themselves, their father and male members of their family. On no account could it be mentioned in front of strangers or women. 73

It is unclear if women assigned girls with secret names associated with their mother’s country. However, it is clear that the ‘secret’ names assigned to males were not to be mentioned to women and these names were critical for identifying primary connections with country and the Dreaming. 74 The ‘secret’ names were based on the ‘mythological’ names of key sites in a person’s clan country and not the ‘ordinary’ names. Apparently, the secrecy surrounding naming was falling into disuse by the twentieth century. This is a good example of the changing status of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri culture and seems linked to the end of formal initiations.

VI

I would argue that a key factor pointing to the possibility of the ‘survival’ of restricted women’s knowledge has been the continuing importance of the Ngarrindjeri midwife until the recent past. 75 Given this fact, I argued in the Royal Commission that there is a strong possibility that some of the ‘women’s knowledge’ associated with this practice could have been handed down to certain younger Ngarrindjeri women, well after equivalent ‘men’s knowledge’ associated with initiation may have ceased to be transmitted. Women such as Pinkie Mack’s daughter would have been likely sources of women’s business. Interested younger women such as Doreen Kartinyeri would have been obvious choices for the handing-down of knowledge. On numerous occasions Doreen Kartinyeri has identified her mother’s eldest sister as one of the sources of the restricted women’s knowledge. 76 She was a young woman with children, living at Point Pearce Aboriginal settlement, when she was told important information by her Auntie Rose Kropinyeri. The fact that only a few contemporary women appear to possess restricted knowledge is wholly consistent with the severe impact that European invasion has had on Ngarrindjeri society, the nature of cultural change and the patterns of knowledge transmission that have developed.

Albert Karloan provided the Berndts with most of their information on Ngarrindjeri childbirth. This account ‘was supplemented by details given by Pinkie Mack. 78 Pinkie Mack was a leading Ngarrindjeri midwife and initiated woman - she would have been regarded as a putari. It is surprising that she did not provide the main information on childbirth. Again she may have been withholding information and perhaps the female interpretation of childbirth. The 1939 field notebook of the researcher Alison Brookman appears to shed some light on this issue. 79 She identifies childbirth as ‘secret’ in her notebook. During the Royal Commission she gave evidence about this issue and argued that what she really meant by the use of the word secret was separate. 80 She was working as a lone, female researcher and this may have resulted in Pinkie Mack providing her with a glimpse of the women’s perspective of childbirth. Although Brookman’s notes are brief they do contain details not recorded in the Berndt’s account.

As I have pointed out in a previous paper 81 and during my evidence to the Royal Commission, Doreen Kartinyeri has on a number of occasions in the last seventeen years indicated to me that she possesses knowledge that she cannot reveal to me because of my gender. When I was researching the Ngarunderi exhibition for the South Australian Museum she was concerned about the ‘Shelter and Clothing’ diorama and in particular, a model of a seated woman. She was worried about the seated position of the model. On one occasion, I taped a discussion about the Ngarunderi gallery, and during comments on the ‘Shelter and Clothing’ diorama, she told me, the Exhibition Officer and Philip Clarke that there were women’s ‘stories’ that she could not reveal. 82 Dr. Kartinyeri asked me to switch off the tape so that she could point out the problem with the sitting position of the woman - she indicated that the position suggested menstruation and men knew to keep away from women in this condition. This information was submitted to the Royal Commission.

During my fieldwork older women with whom I have worked have shown obvious unwillingness to discuss issues relating to childbirth with a man. Most have just ‘skirted’ the topic with brief discussions about the women who acted as midwives. The separation between men and women in the domain of childbirth has been very clear. A few years ago I conducted an interview with one of the proponent women, Margaret Jacobs, and the daughter of Pinkie Mack, focusing on the history of the Wellington/Tailem Bend area. 83 We discussed some beliefs about pregnancy such as, ‘never listen
to mother’s stomach, never feel for baby, don’t make a fuss over pregnant women’. This discussion was very brief and the conversation was quickly moved to other topics by the women.

In 1988 Doreen Kartinyeri and I interviewed Marjory Koolmatrie and Jean Gollan at Raukkan. In my notebook I recorded the following details:

Talked about delivery of babies and who helped on Raukkan - Doreen said people always said ‘find a baby’ you go and ‘find a baby’ not deliver. Never talk about pregnancy etc. on street - it not done. 84

In a 1991 conversation with Doreen Kartinyeri in the Museum tea-room I recorded the following points:

I asked Doreen about childbirth and mentioned (the daughter of Pinkie Mack). She said Pinkie Mack also used to deliver babies. She heard her (the daughter of Pinkie Mack) telling people ‘I found you’ which means she delivered that person. It used today by older people. Then Doreen ‘who said she shouldn’t tell me (a man) about such things but that she and plenty of others know the Ngarrindjeri way of childbirth. 85

In another conversation with Doreen Kartinyeri and Jean Gollan at Raukkan in 1988, I recorded the following notes indicating Doreen’s interest in what she calls her ‘grandmother’s religion’:

Doreen did lot of talking about the Salvation Army and how she was only girl that didn’t convert.

She was too used to her grandmother’s etc. religion. 86

During the Royal Commission the opponent Ngarrindjeri women gave evidence about childbirth and knowledge of reproduction. They consistently highlighted the point that it was their experience that older Ngarrindjeri women did not prepare them for childbirth and motherhood. This was an area of life where it appears that the older people withheld or restricted information.

VII

Knowledge about Ngarrindjeri culture and history is varied throughout Ngarrindjeri communities. Knowledge varies according to factors such as age, gender, life-history, general interests and family background. The severe impact that European invasion has had on Ngarrindjeri society has meant that knowledge is fragmented and Ngarrindjeri culture has changed as people have adapted. The experiences of individual Ngarrindjeri people and families have often been very different. Some have lived on missions, others in fringe-camps and others in country towns or suburban Adelaide. The putari tradition, involving specialised knowledge, also underpinned a differentiation and restriction of knowledge in Ngarrindjeri society. 87 All of these factors make it entirely possible that knowledge of women’s business may be restricted to only certain people in the Ngarrindjeri community. Other women of similar ages may have absolutely no knowledge of the women’s business.

Through an alternative reading of the Berndts’ book A World That Was, I have argued, as I did in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission, that it is entirely possible that some Ngarrindjeri women know restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island. My conclusions are not only based on my reading of the ethnography, but they incorporate my research experience and in particular, statements made tome by Doreen Kartinyeri (prior to the Hindmarsh Island issue) about the existence of separate Ngarrindjeri women’s knowledge.

The Berndts’ ethnography should have provided the Royal Commission with ample evidence that restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island could exist. This book, however, has been misread and an argument that Ngarrindjeri culture was distinctive in Aboriginal Australia for a lack of gender divisions in knowledge, religious beliefs and practice was developed by ‘expert’ witnesses such as Philip Jones and Philip Clarke. These witnesses and the Royal Commissioner herself have failed to recognise the significance of evidence recorded by the Berndts.

The Berndts, for example, identify what they describe as a secret-sacred core meaning in the men’s initiation ceremony. They document this ceremony as being held separately from women. They also, perhaps more importantly for the Hindmarsh Island debate, document the existence of several stages of separate women’s initiation - a feature of Ngarrindjeri culture which Tonkinson argued is unusual in Aboriginal Australia. The Ngarrindjeri putari tradition with its emphasis on gender-based, specialist knowledge is also an important aspect of the Berndts’ ethnography that supports the possibility of restricted women’s business associated with Hindmarsh Island.

Not only has there been a misreading of key sources such as the A World That Was, but there has also been what I would describe as poor scholarship by some academics and lawyers involved in the issue. The fact, for example, that the Royal Commissioner argued that the Seven Sisters Dreaming was not a Ngarrindjeri tradition and was most likely recently introduced into Ngarrindjeri tradition by Doreen Kartinyeri has been discounted by the Mathews Report.

Although the Federal inquiry into Hindmarsh Island has been deemed invalid on the basis of a technical legal point, it has been crucial for anthropology in Australia that several senior anthropologists with extensive field experience in central and northern Australia have been exposed to the ethnographic detail of this issue. It is also important that the results of the Federal Enquiry be carefully examined by the anthropological community. The Ngarrindjeri women and men who have attempted to protect what they argue is an extremely important area have unfortunately endured the many shortcomings in both State and Federal heritage legislation and its implementation by governments. Along with other groups in the community, anthropologists need to examine these shortcomings and lobby for changes that provide real protection for sites of significance and better mechanisms for understanding the complex cultural factors involved in heritage protection.
ENDNOTES

1. This paper is based on a presentation given at the Australian Anthropology Association’s Annual Conference in Albury, 2-4 October 1996.
4. See Hemming, S.I., ‘The invention of ethnography’, Journal of Australian Studies, 48 (1996), pp. 25-39; Fergie, D., ‘Secret envelopes, inferential tautology’, Journal of Australian Studies, 48(1996), pp. 13-24; and Lucas, R., ‘The failure of anthropology’, Journal of Australian Studies, 48 (1996), pp. 40-51 for further discussions of the use of A World That Was by the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission. The book was the Commission’s exhibit Number 4 and with Philip Clarke’s Ph.D. thesis and his report to the Commission, was the principal source used in the ethnographic background chapter in the Report of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission 1995 (hereafter the Stevens Report). Commissioner Iris Stevens argues that, ‘the groups of indigenous people who occupied the Lower Murray region prior to colonisation and whose descendants are today called the Ngarrindjeri’. This is a very restricted and one-dimensional definition of Ngarrindjeri. Some Ngarrindjeri people, for example, argue that their territory stretches from the New South Wales border on the Murray to the Victorian border in South Australia’s southeast. In this paper I will, however, use the term Ngarrindjeri to refer to the indigenous people of the Lower Murray and Coorong region in South Australia. Ronald and Catherine Berndt employ a number of group terms in their book A World That Was. The term ‘Yaraldi’, appearing in the subtitle of the book, is for example, the language name of one of the units that constituted what the Berndts refer to as the ‘Narrinyeri constellation’. The Berndts’ principal Aboriginal sources identified mainly with this group, producing a bias towards Yaraldi culture in the Berndts’ work.
7. See Lucas op. cit. for a discussion of how anthropology defines ethnography.
8. Deane Fergie and I raised the example of the putari tradition during the Commission. See Fergie op.cit. for a discussion of the significance of this tradition to the debate about women’s business.
24. Hemming, T47164717.
27. My preferred spelling is narumbi, due to its acceptability to the Ngarrindjeri community.
28. ibid, pp. 175-176.
33. ibid.
36. An example of a song about Ngurunderi recorded by Tindale is a ‘Tanganekald song about Ngurunderi’ in Tindale, N.B., ‘Native Songs of the South-East of South Australia, Part II’, Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia, 65(2) (1941), p.235. Tindale records the existence of a secret and powerful song associated with a place in Lewurindjeri clan country in Tindale, N.B., ‘Tanganekald Data’, The World of Milerum. N.B. Tindale Collection, Anthropology Archives, South Australian Museum. Tindale also refers to a Mudawuli song which is very secret and sacred and used by doctor men in healing - Tindale, N.B., ‘Native songs of the south-East of South Australia’, Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia, 67 (1937), pp. 107-120.
39. Many examples exist in the south Australian Museum’s anthropology archives. See for example the Taplin family, Marj Angas and Norman Tindale collections.
40. The late Connie Hart from Portland told me that she remembered seeing her grandfather William Carter’s body scarring.
42. Jones T4470; Clarke T191.
44. ibid., p.179.
45. ibid., p.182.
46. Brodie T6475.
47. Stevens, op.cit., p.278.
49. ibid., p.180.
50. ibid., p.182.
51. Trevorrow, G., T6423-6425. I have discussed George Trevorrow’s Royal Commission evidence concerning ngartjis in some detail in Hemming 1996, op.cit. The following provides a brief explanation of the cultural meaning of ngartjis. For Ngarrindjeri people, ngartjis are inherited from their parents, usually with the principal ngartji traced through the male line. Originally ngartjis were associated with particular pieces of country connected with local descent groups or ‘clans’. This specific connection between ngartji, family and land is still known by some Ngarrindjeri people. Many Ngarrindjeri people also still know their ngartjis and these ‘protectors’ add a further dimension to other connections with ‘country’, developed through life-experience and historical association.
52. George Trevorrow talking to Winston Head and Vince Buckskin (South Australian Museum Exhibition Officer) about the Dreaming of Ngurunderi, 17/06/86. The quote provided in this paper is a partial transcription of the tape made by S. Hemming 27/02/96. It is also important to note that I included reference to this tape in my representation to the Commonwealth Inquiry (Representation 244:10).
56. Mathews, op.cit., p.162.
58. ibid., p.xxix.
60. Eyre, op.cit., pp. 34.0, 342.
63. ibid., p.156.
66. ibid., p.172.
68. See Ely, Bonita, Murray/Murrunde (Adelaide 1979), for Annie Koolmatrie’s stated knowledge of Ngarrindjeri songs and corroborees.
70. ibid., p.287.
71. Fergie, op.cit., p.23.
73. ibid.
74. ibid.
75. Ngarrindjeri women such as the daughter of Pinkie Mack acted as midwives. People living in fringe-camps often relied on these women for childbirth.
76. One of these being the letter that I typed for her that was sent to Robert Tickner in May 1994.
77. In A World That Was the Berndts document the existence of specialist knowledge in ‘traditional’ Ngarrindjeri society and the associated restricted channels of transmission - see references to putari.
79. Harvey, A, Field notebook, Fry Collection, South Australian Museum Archives, Adelaide, 1939.
80. Brookman, T 4570-4571.
82. This incident is recorded on a tape of a discussion relating to the Ngurunderi Exhibition - Doreen Kartinyeri talking to S. Hemming, W. Head and P. Clarke, 22/08/88. I attempted to submit this tape, along with a basic transcription of the relevant section, to the Commission during my evidence. I also referred to it in my statement.
83. Interview conducted by S. Hemming with M. Jacobs and the daughter of Pinkie Mack at Murray Bridge, 17/10/93.