

Ecological Literacy and Local Wisdom of Australian Aboriginal People in *Welcome to My Country* Written by Laklak Burarrwanga and Family

Herawaty Abbas*

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

Burhanuddin Arafah

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

Fathu Rahman

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

M. Amir Pattu

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

Fierenziana Getruida Junus

French Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia,

Mardiana E. Fachry

Fisheries Agribusiness Department, Faculty of Marine Science and Fisheries, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

Waode Hanafiah

English Education Department, Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Bau-Bau, Indonesia

Rasynal Tenrisanna

English Language Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

Abdul Manaf

English Language Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

Abstract—The life of Aboriginal people in Australia has been depending on nature since thousands of years ago. The sources of their food are entirely of natural origin. Although they live in a nomadic way, they still maintain and protect the nature around them in order not to damage and become extinct. This research aims to explore ecological literacy (eco-literacy) and local wisdom of Aboriginal people to maintain a mutual symbiosis between man and nature, reflected in a non-fiction book entitled *Welcome to My Country* written by Laklak Burarrwanga and Family. This is descriptive qualitative research using the ecocriticism approach. The result shows that Australian Aboriginal people have much knowledge of eco-literacy that they apply in everyday life to maintain the sustainability of the ecosystem. Besides, they also have local wisdom they believe will bring good things in their life in terms of protecting their natural environment.

Index Terms—Aboriginal women, ecofeminist approach, environment-conscious culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Unfriendly human behavior has caused various adverse impacts on environmental sustainability, natural balance, and ecosystems in meeting the needs and welfare of mankind. Mambrol (2016) emphasizes that ecological disasters became a noteworthy matter faced by humankind in the late twentieth century. These disasters cannot be separated from the advancement of science and technology where humans tend to use natural resources excessively to meet their needs (Suhadi et al., 2022). Among these disasters are the decimation of natural resources, nuclear war, population explosion,

* Corresponding Author.

and species extinction. This disaster has become a concern for many people in the world including Indonesia. Every act of change as the effect of disaster in the environment can affect the system of society (Takwa et al., 2022). As a response to these issues, a strong need is urgently required to help people increase their awareness of the environment (Arafah et al., 2021). Due to this, various efforts have been made to maintain the balance of nature so that the sustainability of human life and other living things on earth can take place continuously. Furthermore, disturbed natural conditions can have a detrimental and hostile impact and even become dangerous if the natural resources around them become limited and insufficient. So that these natural conditions, especially in terms of damage and extinction do not occur, man must play an active role in protecting them. Some efforts have been made by man to maintain the balance of nature by managing it wisely and prudently, for example by not over-exploiting natural resources, caring for them, and adopting an environmentally friendly lifestyle. In this kind of situation, academic discourse is expected to take part in overcoming the problem through literary and cultural theory (Mambrol, 2016).

This research deals with learning the knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom of Australian Aboriginal people in treating their natural environment. In general, 'eco-literacy' which is a combination of the words 'ecology' and 'literacy' means the ability to understand and learn the relationship between man and nature. Capra and others in the broader humanities have advanced eco-literacy, with a focus on the creation of sustainable human communities and societies (McBride et al., 2013, p. 3). By applying the eco-literature approach, it is hoped that people's awareness of changing behavior, perspective, and mindset to overcome these environmental issues will arise (Manugeran et al., 2023). Meanwhile, local wisdom is generally understood as the way of life of a community in a certain region which consists of various activities and practices to overcome any problems that happen in the community. Sembiring et al. (2019) convey that what is the so-called local wisdom is the knowledge of a community which is in the form of values that the community follows as the guidelines of life. These values work as a standard norm and contain meanings depicted by cultural elements of society (Takwa et al., 2022). At this point, the local wisdom relates to a specific group identity in the art of behavioral patterns (Arifin et al., 2022). In other words, local wisdom is the guidelines that the community in a certain region follows wisely to make their life better.

Aboriginal people are the first inhabitants of the Australian continent. They had lived in Australia before the Macassar seafarers came to look for sea cucumber in the seventeenth century and before the Europeans came to settle in the land. According to Berndt and Tonkinson (2023), Aboriginal people came to Australia through Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries and they have lived in Australia for almost 50.000 years. To the above statements, Berndt and Tonkinson (2023) add that Aboriginal people have occupied all Australian continent since 35.000 years ago living in the southwest, southeast, and highlands of New Guinea. Some references note that the daily life of Aboriginal people depended upon their surrounding nature. Concerning this, Berndt and Tonkinson (2023) comment that when the Europeans settled in Australia in 1778, all areas in the continent were occupied by the Aboriginal people. They can adapt themselves well to various climate and temperature changes as well from tropical rainforests to deserts.

Furthermore, Lehmann (2019) states that Aboriginal people in Australia are obvious evidence of how people can adapt themselves to nature. They represent the culture of people who have lived 50.000 years without being interrupted and applied living rules wisely by taking something from nature according to their needs (p. 3). In addition to this, Aboriginal people respect very much to their surrounding environment and do not take what they need from nature extravagantly. They take only what they need and do not let anything be wasted. Such a way they treat nature becomes an important way to be able to live sustainably for centuries (Asher, 2023). This point is very important to be the stepping stone to learning the knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom from Australian Aboriginal people since they can survive by applying such knowledge until the present. This paper presents a discussion on the way Australian Aboriginal people preserve their natural environment as reflected in *Welcome to My Country*. The book does not only tell their habitual life but also uncovers their knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom. This knowledge is a valuable lesson for other people in the world to be applied to keep a harmonious life between man and nature. This is in line with what Asher (2023) writes that Aboriginal people believe that everything they need is available in nature. But they also believe that if they take all from nature, all the resources will extinct. Therefore, nature should be preserved and maintained.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The approach used in this research is ecocriticism. In general, ecocriticism can be defined as an approach to studying the relationship between nature and literary work. The so-called 'ecocriticism' first came from Rueckett (Nahdiyah, 2023) through his book which writes that ecocriticism contains ecological ideas that are applied to literary study. It is because ecology has a tight relationship with the world's sustainability (Nahdiyah, 2023).

In addition to this, Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) define that the study of the physical environment and its relationship with literature is called ecocriticism. Meanwhile, Mambrol (2016) notes that ecocriticism examines the connection between man and nature which can be reflected in literary work. In other words, ecocriticism embodies how anything related to the environment and nature is criticized. Ecocriticism aims to explore the interconnectedness of human behavior toward nature which needs to live in harmony (Siwi et al., 2022). One of the important objectives of criticism is to examine how people treat nature and all its aspects.

III. METHOD

This is library research done by using a descriptive qualitative method. The data were taken from a non-fiction book entitled *Welcome to My Country* written by Laklak Burrarrwanga and Family. The book was published in 2013. The data all represent the knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom of Australian Aboriginal people through the expressions explained and uttered in the book. Some expressions and utterances are analyzed further in the findings and discussion.

IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this discussion, the knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom of Aboriginal people reflected in *Welcome to My Country* is divided into two parts preceded by a brief sketch of the book.

A. *Welcome to My Country*

Welcome to My Country is a non-fiction book written by Laklak Burrarrwanga and Family which tells the story of Aboriginal people living in the center of a beautiful beach in Arnhem Land, Australia. The book introduces readers to the native Aboriginal community of Bawaka in the northern part of Australia. *Welcome to My Country* portrays Yolngu stories and traditions with Burrarrwanga's personal history, which demonstrates how interwoven the life between the people and nature. The spirit of an entire people is on display here. The book is a celebration of all that makes the Yolngu unique and special, and by discussing the physical world of Bawaka, the authors discuss the source of their wisdom and their strength.

B. *Eco-Literacy of Aboriginal People*

The knowledge of eco-literacy plays a prominent role in preserving nature and the balance of the ecosystem. Australian Aboriginal people whose daily life is full of practicing this notion, can be valuable knowledge for other people in the world. After doing an in-depth reading on *Welcome to My Country*, there are many expressions from the book that represent the knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom of Aboriginal people that can be a valuable lesson for other people in the world to apply on the way treating the nature to balance the ecosystem.

The knowledge of eco-literacy can be seen vividly through the knowledge of seasons. When Aboriginal people especially the Yolngu, see the water calm, and its reflection can be felt inside the heart when the moon goes past, that is the season they call *Dharraddhrradya*. The beginning of this season comes with a wind or a flower or the appearance of an animal or a feeling. The weather is cold and there usually is not any rain or mosquitoes. To keep them warm they will make a fire or use some *ranan*, paperbark, for making a bed (Burrarrwanga et al., 2013, pp. 1-2). This knowledge of eco-literacy is used every year from time to time through generations to sign the coming of a new season which also means the right time to visit the land.

One interesting thing in the life of Aboriginal people is that they believe *gapu*, water, around them, consists of two things similar to *yin* and *yang* in the Eastern way of thinking. They call them *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa*. It is the same with the land. They also divided the land into *Bawaka* and *Yalangbara*. This division is just like a mother and child relationship, or what they call *yothu-yindi*. This relationship may represent two people or two pieces of land which is a web that weaves and holds everyone and everything together as kin to animals and plants and to things that are not even considered living in other cultures (Burrarrwanga et al., 2013, pp. 2-3). This notion of relationship gives understanding that Aboriginal people respect and treat nature as very important to their lives.

There is a description in the book, where the authors talk about the knowledge of eco-literacy they get from their grandparents like walking in the land, telling stories, and singing songlines. The authors also show that the hill over there is Dhuwa country and they connect to the land. Because they regard the land as their family when they want to go hunting, they must get permission. This kind of rule they call the law (Burrarrwanga et al., 2013, pp. 5-6). From the above expression, Aboriginal people learned from their grandparents how important it is the nature to them. Nature is their family and they cannot be parted from it. Besides, they are also very respectful to the land especially when they hunt for food on it. They always ask permission to the land. From this, people can learn the knowledge of Aboriginal eco-literacy on how they treat the land. They do not just directly take what they need from the land but they ask permission.

Another Aboriginal people's knowledge of eco-literacy is expressed when the authors describe how they respect the animal, the turtles (*miyupuna*), and when the right time to hunt and collect their eggs. The authors also know that they learn from nature for example when *gaypal*, the flower is blossoming that means the right time to hunt *miyupuna* (Burrarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 26). Through this expression, Aboriginal people show their knowledge of hunting turtles wisely. It is not anytime they can hunt but it is only when the *gaypal* is flowering. In other words, they know the right time to hunt the turtle and to take the eggs from the signs nature gives. It is shown here that whatever Aboriginal people do it is always connected to the natural environment around them both with animals and plants.

Something is intriguing here because the consideration of the right time to hunt turtles is what Aboriginal people call "mathematics". It is so because deciding when the right time to hunt and the application of ethics of sharing according to them is all about patterns. This can be proved when the authors write in the book that what they count and talk about are the same as Western mathematics such as when to hunt, who will accompany during the hunting, and the rule of

sharing the hunting animal all constitute mathematics too. These are all they regard as patterns that just run naturally (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 37).

Other than the right time to hunt, Aboriginal people also have a rule on what to eat and what not to eat. For example, while the children are getting *gunga* (pandan leaves for weaving), the grandmother would hunt for other things. All the time she told stories about what to eat and what not to eat and she also showed how to find bush food, *natha*, as well as what things are wrong and what things are right (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 52). There is a law they have to obey about the natural resources they could get. The illustration of telling the story to the children is an example of how they teach their children the knowledge of eco-literacy from generation to generation.

The position of *Banumbirr*, the orbit of Venus, which refers to the morning star is the sign for Aboriginal people to have an important ceremonial time. The weather at this time is very hot. Everything is ripening and getting fat like *namura* (black-lipped oyster), *djinidjalma* (crab), *maranydjalk* (stingray), and different fruits. Furthermore, the *warrkarr*, a white lily, is out too at this time. One important thing behind the flowering of *warrkarr* is the time for stingray season (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 57). From this illustration, it can be seen that Aboriginal people have local wisdom through the sign of nature. This sign of nature gives them a clue to make a ceremony and to hunt for fauna and flora.

Another notion of *yothu-yindu* representing the land as the mother of a family can be seen when the government wants to take their land for the mining company. They tried to protect their land because they believed that every tree might be cut down, every lizard might be killed, and every rock might be ground up and taken away, which is the same as taking away their mothers and children (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, pp. 76-77). This proves that the land where everything they need to survive is there, and they need to protect them.

C. Local Wisdom of Aboriginal People

Other than the knowledge of eco-literacy, *Welcome to My Country* also contains knowledge of the local wisdom of Aboriginal people. In the expression when the authors write that they have a lot of food and one of the family members starts to set a fire, they ask everybody to join with *maypal* (shellfish). The authors also say that they can eat and drink tea. They let everybody look around, especially at the grass which is dry and is ready to be burnt to let the new grass grow for food supply (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 6). This expression explicitly explains that Aboriginal people always think about the sustainability of anything related to the nature around them. When the grass is dry, it is time to burn it. By doing this, they expect that the new grass will grow bringing fresh food. From this, it can be also vividly seen here that Aboriginal people consider the sustainability of the ecosystem. They believe that if one thing is gone another one will come.

The next expression is when the authors of the book say that *miyapunu* (turtles) are special animals. The authors add that Aboriginal people collected *miyapuna's* eggs a long time ago since they existed in the world considering that they do not take all the eggs but just some of them (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 26). In this case, Aboriginal people realize that it is very important to balance the ecosystem by not taking all that they want but just taking according to their needs. This is to keep the harmonious life between man and their surrounding environment.

Although there are many *mapu* they can take, they just take as many as they need. They left some to let the *mapu* hatch and grow. Aboriginal people are sure that although nature has provided a lot of food for them, they must take the food wisely in order not to diminish. The authors believe that the ancestors of Aboriginal people have taught them to respect their environment including not wasting food or over-harvested. This is what makes Aboriginal people can survive for centuries.

Sharing, *wetj*, is the local wisdom the Aboriginal people always do since thousands of years ago especially sharing food that they have hunted and cooked to friends and loved ones. That is the way they respect the *miyapunu*, turtles, which also represents respect for the land. According to them, sharing was taught by their parents in order not to be greedy. Furthermore, the knowledge of sharing is really strong for them and it has a cycle they believe that if you share with some, others share with you (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 37).

In addition to this, Aboriginal people believe that every time they go hunting, if they get *garrtjambal*, a fish, red kangaroo, or *guyu*, they will give it to their mother, father, or family. This is also *wetj* which means a gift that becomes their responsibility to give to other people. They believe the cycle of *wetj* means if you give you also will receive (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 42). From this, the local wisdom of Aboriginal people can be seen where sharing contains an implicit message asking all people not to be greedy. If this kind of behavior is followed by people in the world, it can create a harmonious life.

Dealing with chopping the trees, Aboriginal people have local wisdom on the way to take care of them. "The men won't chop all the trees; they only take one or two because they care for the land. Yolngu have always cared for the land and Nature with their knowledge" (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 89). It can be seen from this expression that taking care of the trees is very important. For Aboriginal people, trees represent the land and nature. In other words, they view nature as an extension of them.

Burning is an activity that Aboriginal people always do for specific reasons. It is categorized as local wisdom because they remove something but with the expectation to have more things later. Sometimes they burn grass, leaves, and trees to clear up or to encourage fresh grass to grow for animals, especially for *dhum'thum* (wallabies). For this particular activity, fire for them is useful for sending messages for example when they are lost in the bush (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 107).

Taking care of each other between the people and the country is another local wisdom that Aboriginal people apply in their daily lives. It is expressed in the book when the authors write that the country cares for Aboriginal people. Therefore, Aboriginal people must care for the country too. Everything should mutually respect and care for one another including water, wind, sky, and land (Burrarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 129). This expression presents local wisdom on the way Aboriginal people care for the country. What is involved in this expression includes men and all creatures in the world.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, the conclusion is that Aboriginal people have much knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom that can be valuable lessons for other people in the world. There is no doubt that all the knowledge of eco-literacy and local wisdom they apply in their everyday lives has been proven by their persistence in living interdependent with nature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Institute for Research and Community Services (LP2M) Hasanuddin University Indonesia for financially supporting this research (contract number: 00323/UN4.22/PT.01.03/2003).

REFERENCES

- [1] Arafah, B., Abbas, H., & Hikmah, N. (2021). Saving the Environmental Lessons in Colin Thiele's *February Dragon*. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 12(6), 935-941.
- [2] Arifin, M. B., Arafah, B., & Kuncara, S.D. (2022). Dayak's Sociocultural Situation through Locality in Lumholtz's Through Central Borneo Travel Writing. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(12), 2695-2703.
- [3] Asher, Hugh. (2023). What We Can Learn About Nature Connection From Indigenous Australian Cultures? *An Darach*. <https://silvotherapy.co.uk/articles/nature-connection-aboriginals#:~:text=From%20an%20early%20age%2C%20Indigenous,cultures%20to%20last%20for%20centuries>. Retrieval time: 24 July, 2023.
- [4] Berndt, RM and R. Tonkinson. (2023). *Australian Aboriginal Peoples*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal>. Retrieval time: 01 October, 2023.
- [5] Burrarrwanga, L. et al. (2013). *Welcome to My Country*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- [6] Glotfelty, C. and Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- [7] Lehmann, Steffen. (2019). Reconnecting with Nature: Developing Urban Spaces in the Age of Climate Change. *Emerald Open Research*, 1(2), p. 3.
- [8] Mambrol, Nasrullah. (2016). Ecocriticism: An Essay. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. <https://literariness.org/2016/11/27/ecocriticism/>. Retrieval time: 28 September, 2023.
- [9] Manugeren, M., Arafah, B., Purwarno, P., Siwi, P., Ekalestari, S., & Wulan, S. (2023). An Ecoliterature Approach to Environmental Conservation: Take Four Selected Literary Works as Examples. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 13(5), 1318-1327.
- [10] McBride, B.B., Brewer, C.A., Berkowitz, A.R., Borrie, W.T. (2013). Environmental literacy, ecological literacy, ecoliteracy: What do we mean and how did we get here? *Ecosphere*, 4(5), 1-20.
- [11] Nahdiyah. (2023). *Ecological Relationship Between Human, Nature, and God in Paolo Coelho's Selected Novels*. Makassar: Hasanuddin University.
- [12] Sembiring, A.S., et al. (2019). Character Formation Based on North Sumatra Local Wisdom through Orchestral Learning in Music Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Medan. *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute Journal*, 2(4), 315-325.
- [13] Siwi, P., Arafah, B., Wulan, S., Purwarno, P., Ekalestari, S., & Arafah, A.N.B. (2022). Treatment of Nature: An Ecocriticism Approach in 'Komat Kamit' of Tejo and Kamba's Tuhan Maha Asik. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(7), 1278-1285.
- [14] Suhadi, J., Arafah, B., Makatita, F.P., Abbas, H., & Arafah, A.N.B. (2022). Science and Society: The Impact of Science Abuse on Social Life in Well's *The Invisible Man*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(6), 1214-1219.
- [15] Takwa, Arafah, B., Sopiandy, D., Taqfiah, S. J., & Arafah, A.N.B. (2022). Humanistic Values in Metaphoric Expressions of Traditional Marriage in Tolaki Mekongga Kolaka. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(8), 1602-1608.
- [16] Takwa, Arafah, B., Kaharuddin, Putra, E., Masrur, & Arafah, A.N.B. (2022). The Shift of Lexicon in Traditional Technology System in Tolaki Community at Konawe District of Southeast Sulawesi. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(5), 980-989.
- [17] Wright, Sarah et al. (2015). Co-Becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(4), 455-475.

Herawaty Abbas is a senior lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University. She graduated with her Master's Degree from Gadjah Mada University Indonesia and Saint Mary's University Canada and her Doctoral Degree from The University of Newcastle Australia. Her research interests are Australian literature, gender in literature, and translation.

Burhanuddin Arafah is a senior lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University Indonesia. He graduated with his Master's Degree from Gadjah Mada University Indonesia and his Doctoral Degree from the University of Newcastle Australia. His research interests are English literature, Australian literature, American literature, literature in language teaching, and the language of social media.

Fathu Rahman is a senior lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University Indonesia. He graduated with his Master's Degree and Doctoral Degree from Hasanuddin University Indonesia. His research interests are English literature, language in social media, and local culture.

M. Amir Pattu is a senior lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University Indonesia. He graduated with his Master's Degree from Gadjah Mada University Indonesia and his Doctoral Degree from Hasanuddin University. His research interests are English Literature, American literature, and sociology of literature.

Fierenziana Getruida Junus is a lecturer in French Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University Indonesia. She graduated with her Master's and Doctoral Degrees from Indonesian University. Her research interests are French literature, gender in literature, and language in social media.

Mardiana E. Fachry is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Marine Sciences and Fisheries, Hasanuddin University Indonesia. She graduated with her Master's and Doctoral Degrees from Hasanuddin University. Her research interests are women and empowerment, women in coastal areas, and waste management.

Waode Hanafiah is a senior lecturer in the English Department, Faculty of Education, Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University Bau-Bau. She graduated with her Master's and Doctoral Degrees from Hasanuddin University Indonesia. Her research interests are linguistics, teaching methodology, and English academic writing.

Rasynal Tenrisanna is a student in the Doctoral Program at Hasanuddin University Indonesia.

Abdul Manaf is a student in the Master's Program at Hasanuddin University Indonesia.