

SCHWERPUNKT

"MOSAIK, *MELTING POT* UND SYNKRETISMUS: AUSTRALISCHER MULTIKULTURALISMUS *RECONSIDERED*"

SORRY OR REGRET - WHO CARES?

Towards a free and open debate. An interview with David Price and Bess Nungarrayi Price, Adelaide, March 2002

Lisa Wendlandt, Berlin



David Price and Bess Nungarrayi Price run the small family business Jajirdi Consultants. They offer cross cultural training, courses on cross cultural communication and the cultures and languages of Central Australia, as well as Warlpiri language services. Jajirdi is also involved in educational research and community liaison and advice on cross cultural communication and management. Bess Nungarrayi Price was born at Yuendumu. Her first language is Warlpiri. She also knows Luritja and Western Arrernte. Bess has a Bachelor of Applied Science in Aboriginal Community Management and Development from Curtin University and has worked in education and training, public administration, the media, community development, interpreting, translating and language teaching and has experience in small business management. She has represented Central Australia at conferences in Québec and Beijing. Dave Price has worked in Aboriginal education and training as a teacher and public administration in the NT, the Kimberley and South Australia for over twenty years. He has qualifications in secondary and special education and a Master of Letters in Linguistics from UNE. His teaching experience includes over seven years in remote Aboriginal communities. He also has substantial experience delivering training in the Public Service and has taught courses in Warlpiri language and culture and lectured to visitors to the Centre on Aboriginal issues for several years. Dave and Bess have been married for twenty years. They have a daughter and two grand sons.

The first time I met David and Bess was in Berlin - not in person, but on the small screen of my computer, at two o'clock in the morning. I was planning to visit the Australian outback around Alice Springs, and I was trying to find a place for practical experience where I could learn more about the current situation of Aboriginal people in Australia. When I came across the Jajirdi website of David and Bess Price, I was instantly grabbed by their work. I contacted them, told them about my plans and asked them for advice. The response I received could not have been any warmer and any more open hearted. We have since become good friends - or 'family', in Warlpiri terms -, and we have met a couple of times in Alice Springs and Adelaide. It is my absolute pleasure to present this interview, which I was able to conduct with them in Adelaide in March 2002. The starting point for the interview was David's article "The Remaking of our History - Or Why I didn't say 'Sorry' on 'Sorry Day'" (available under www.jajirdi.com.au). I was intrigued by his perspective on this delicate issue, and aware of the controversial debate his viewpoints could potentially provoke. Embracing the risk of provocation, this interview is meant as a contribution to a more free and open debate.

Lisa: I would like to know a bit more about what you mentioned in your article, Dave. Why exactly do you think the Prime Minister should not say sorry?

Dave: We just think it's not an important thing that's all. As an issue we think that it takes attention away from the profound crises that the Aboriginal communities are trying to cope with. Now the communities are in crisis and that's just not acknowledged. I think one of the reasons it's not acknowledged is because all the public attention and the media and politicians' attention is taken away from the real crisis and focused on issues like whether John Howard should say sorry or not. To us, if you've got a problem and you're not going to do anything about your problem while you sit around waiting for a Prime Minister to say sorry, then you have no power. You're not in control of your circumstances. So to us it's just one of those issues that is completely symbolic, and it doesn't have a lot of meaning. We'd be quite happy if he did say 'sorry' but it doesn't bother us too much if he doesn't either.

Lisa: So the symbolic meaning would not be important to you?

Bess: Well, it doesn't really affect us ... you know, we don't see it as an issue, or my people don't. The people out in the remote communities don't see it as an issue because a lot of this fuss is brought up by Aboriginal people who live in the cities, you know. They see it as an issue because of the effect that all of those issues have had on their people, because they are closer and have been in contact with white people earlier than us. And like I said, it's not really an issue for us.

Lisa: I find it so interesting how this issue gets so much public attention although it does not seem to be an important issue for many people in remote communities at all.

Dave: Well, the reason for that is really simple. The way the media and politicians operate in a democracy like ours, they want everything to be simplified, oversimplified usually. The popular media can't handle complex issues. They want to see things 'good guys, bad guys', 'black and white' and it's got to be reduced to a 30 second grab on the television. The issues that Bess' people face are profoundly complex and really difficult, so the media would much rather fasten on something like making the Prime Minister look like a twit because he won't say sorry because it sells, I suppose. But the other thing is that political power in Australia is

based in the cities, most particularly in the southeast. That's where most of the people live and that's where the economic power is. And therefore the Aboriginal people in those areas are the ones listened to, because they are at the center, they're physically in the center of power and they also speak English. This can make us very very unpopular to say such a thing, but they also run political campaigns like whitefellas do. Now Bess' people, and the people in the bush, their culture is about as different as you can get from whitefella culture, so the two sides find it really hard to communicate. Now, we're not saying that the Aboriginal people in the cities in the south are wrong to be doing what they're doing. What we're saying is it's an issue [that the Prime Minister says sorry, LW] for them but it's not for us, that's all. So we don't work against them, and in their country we'd support them. One thing is that Bess' people have suffered massacre, the violence at the frontier, but much less than the people down south, and we recognize that. People down south have been through a much harder time, that's one reason why they think differently. The other thing is that Bess' people, bush just don't think racially so they don't see it as a black against white thing at all. They just have a very different way of looking at it all probably. So, for them what Johnny Howard does in Canberra doesn't matter, who cares?

Lisa: But maybe it's not about taking the blame for something other people have done. Maybe it's rather about a public acknowledgement of the past. The question is would it change anything if that sorry was said, would that change anything in the attitude of white people. Maybe it's not important for Aboriginal people, maybe it is an important thing for whitefellas to get to that stage where a public sorry is actually said and maybe that changes attitudes, I don't know.

Dave: In our work we don't see white attitudes as the main, major problem. The idea of being able to say 'well the problem is racism and these whitefellas are doing the wrong thing and if we stop that everything would be alright' is nonsense, it's just not true. Now, racism is a problem but it's not the main problem. When we look at the problems occurring now in communities that we are associated with, these problems are caused by Aboriginal people, not by whitefellas. They're in those situations because of colonialism, because of the invasion, yes, yes, all that we take for granted, but the main problems are problems that Aboriginal people can now take responsibility for. But nobody is saying to them 'you are responsible'. Everybody's saying 'we whitefellas are responsible, we're the problem, racism is the problem, the Prime Minister should say sorry and everything will be alright'. That's what worries us about taking that tack. Now, what you said about acknowledgement of the past I agree with totally, and white Australia definitely should acknowledge the violence of the past on the frontier and that's a painful and difficult thing to do. It is happening, gradually in our experience and certainly we do that in our work. We teach people about the violence and the great majority of whitefellas we work with are quite happy to acknowledge it. They actually walk out feeling pretty bad often. But we're saying to them you're not to blame but the Australian nation was built on racism, and it was. As all colonial societies are based on racism, by definition they have to be, and you have to acknowledge that. And look, I wouldn't say it's not an issue for Aboriginal people in general. It's not an issue for the Aboriginal people who are closest to us, but there are a lot of others for whom it is an issue, and we acknowledge that. But we want to see the focus shifted to communities, to what Aboriginal people can do now about their own problems, rather than waiting for politicians to apologize. I mean John Howard did express 'profound regret'. I don't see what's wrong

with that. Why argue over the semantics of sorry and regret. Who cares? To me that's an acknowledgement. He has acknowledged it, in a weak sort of way...

Lisa: So when you say the main problem is not necessarily whitefella racism, what would you say are some of the main problems in Aboriginal communities these days?

Dave: Without a doubt the core of the problem is loss of control over life circumstances. Aboriginal people feel completely out of control, and that loss of control is at the heart of the whole thing. They see things going really bad all around them and they see terrible things happening to their children but they don't feel able to do anything about it.

Lisa: A lot of people are now saying that this has to do with the self-determination policies of the 1960s and 1970s. Do you agree with that?

Bess: Before that came into place, people were a proud 'race' or whatever you want to call them. They knew where they stood within their communities; they had jobs, a proud people... But as soon as self-determination came in the seventies - that just wiped the responsibilities away from my people, I guess. They were just lost as soon as white people left communities, or handed communities over to the Aboriginal people. They were just dumbfounded, they just didn't know how to handle it. And in fact when self-determination came, to drink yourself to death came to them as well, so people have been dying ever since they were allowed to drink.

Lisa: They were not allowed to drink before?

Bess: They weren't. They weren't.

Dave: See, up until 1968 they were wards of the State and didn't have the legal right to buy and consume alcohol. When they became citizens they got the right to drink themselves to death.

Lisa: It is tragic that some policies like the self-determination policies were made originally with good intentions...

Bess/Dave: Definitely with good intentions, definitely.

Lisa: But they have achieved the opposite of what they were trying to achieve. That is tragic. Do you think it is generally accepted knowledge that these self-determination policies actually failed?

Dave: No. That acknowledgement is only beginning to happen now, because Aboriginal leaders are saying it. Prior to this stage - before Aboriginal leaders started saying it - if you were white and said it you were branded as a racist. And I certainly would have been branded as a racist if I didn't have my Aboriginal wife standing behind me backing me up, no doubt at all. But when people looked at me and I could see it in their eyes they also looked at Bess and backed off. Because I was repeating what Aboriginal people were saying to me. That's a pretty, awful, difficult situation for a whitefella to be in. When you talk about the policies in the past... I personally believed in them passionately. I was involved professionally in the whole project, so I've seen it go wrong. An awful lot of people who were involved now look back and say 'well it just didn't work'. Hearts were bleeding all over the place, we gave our life's blood, we worked like hell but it didn't work.

Lisa: Is that because control hasn't really been shifted, hasn't really been handed over?

Bess: Yes, because most of the jobs were held in communities with white people in control,

and when they left there wasn't a handover period, I guess, so that people could actually take control. There wasn't enough time for that.

Dave: And the other thing is we really seriously have to look critically at what's happening on the Aboriginal side, and I don't think we've ever done that. We went through a period where we stereotyped Aboriginal people as savages, as childish, who had to be led to civilization. Then we came up with a stereotype that says we're the ones at fault, we've done everything wrong, we've been imperialist and colonialist and racist and sexist and every other '-ist' you can think about and we feel really bad about that and Aboriginal people are victims and they can't do anything wrong and everything that goes wrong is our fault. Now, that to me is more damaging than the old stereotype, because it places a stereotype of victimhood on people, and their behaviour confirms that and they sink deeper into the morass. Treating somebody as equal is not looking them in their eyes and saying you've got a whole lot of problems poor thing and I caused them and gee I'm really sorry. That's not treating somebody as equal, it's treating them as a beggar. Aboriginal leaders are now saying these things. Noel Pearson from North Queensland talks about 'negative welfare'... From post war up till say the mid 70s we were one of the richest countries on earth and we went through an unimaginably affluent period. The politics that came out of that were the politics of welfare state - we're rich enough to look after everybody. Aboriginal people like Bess' mum and dad owned nothing. They didn't wear clothes, they didn't wear shoes, they didn't wear hats, they didn't have buildings to live in, they didn't have any vehicle. In our terms they lived in extreme material poverty. Now we take them from that situation and put them in a situation where we give them money that in our terms is at the poverty level but in world terms puts them in a wealthy bracket. I mean compared to what's happening in India and Africa they're wealthy, in terms of the disposable income, and compared to what they had before. And we wonder why they don't have any initiative. We see poverty but they're richer than they've ever been before. We are so different from each other that we just see everything differently. And to me, whitefellas of my generation are the last ones on earth to know about poverty. We don't know about poverty... well, actually my family lived on the poverty line but I didn't know about it until I went to University and read these books that told me I was living in poverty. I didn't know before that. That shows how rich our country was then, you know, people who didn't realise they were in poverty... Now Noel Pearson says that negative welfare, just giving people money for nothing, has been far more destructive of traditional culture than the old fashioned racism, and I think he's absolutely right. Things have gone downhill a lot quicker.

Lisa: I always found it startling to look at the history of Christian missions in Australia and compare it to the situation that Aboriginal people are in today. I feel very restrained to say that a lot of Aboriginal people seem to have lived better lives back then than what they do today... They were in jobs. They had respectful things to do...

Dave: They were healthy...

Bess: Yeah, I agree with that.

Lisa: But it almost feels as if you cannot say such a thing today.

Dave: But we do, we do. We need a free and open debate. That's the first thing we need to do. We need to get rid of this idiocy we call 'political correctness'. It has to be based on mutual respect, of course. There has to be an ethic involved, but it needs to be frank and

open and people need to be able to say in public what they really think. Because the silly thing is that a group of whitefellas will be called 'racist' if they get up in public and say certain things. They may be saying exactly what Aboriginal people are saying in private. It's exactly the way Aboriginal people speak, but they don't do it in public. So very often they're saying the same things. I mentioned Noel Pearson, and other Aboriginal leaders are now doing the same. There was a program on the absolutely outrageous levels of child sex abuse in Aboriginal communities, like in some communities it's 400% higher. Rates of venereal infections of children is 400 times the rate that it is in the wider community. Figures like that are suppressed in order not to encourage racism. What is happening as a result to me is the children and the young women are being sacrificed on the altar of political correctness. They're the ones suffering, nobody's acting on their behalf because we don't want to encourage racism. So you've got this notion that if a white man rapes you or murders you somehow that's worse than if one of your own kind does it. I simply do not understand that thinking.

Lisa: Maybe we can only explain that by saying this is the past influencing the present.

Bess/Dave: It is.

Lisa: Because of the past we feel so restrained to actually do something now... We have been so involved, so far too much involved in Aboriginal people's lives and in dominating them and in controlling them without asking them, and now we feel that we cannot do anything any more whatsoever.

Dave: That's right. So you don't do anything....

Lisa: Yeah...

Dave: The 'stolen generation issue' is one of the campaigns that we're really worried about, the way it was run. Not because the campaign isn't truthful but it's not the whole truth. It's true, there was a lot of incredible injustice and broken hearts and spoiled lives, yeah all of that. But there were other things going on as well. There were kids taken away from intolerable situations, there were kids saved, lives saved, girls saved from sexual exploitation. So it was a complicated story. Now we've had Aboriginal people working in the welfare industry say 'we can't act to help Aboriginal kids because we're government and because the stolen generation campaign has so restricted us'. Governments just will not take Aboriginal kids away from Aboriginal families even when they're under age and suffer venereal infections and even when it's obvious that they're being really badly abused. People feel constrained to actually do something about it because they're in an Aboriginal family... We call them the 'lost generation'. They're the ones that nobody did anything about and it's getting worse, it's not getting better. But the good news is that on that television program on the issue of sexual abuse and violence in communities (Four Corners on ABC) several prominent Aboriginal male leaders stood in front of the camera, admitted to the problem and said something must be done about it and we have to do it. We've never heard that before in public, so that's a change. And just recently I was emailed a copy of the speech to Parliament by John Ah Kit who is the only Aboriginal minister of State in Australia. He's a minister in the Territory government – he said in Parliament that the Aboriginal communities are all dysfunctional in the Territory, all of them - they're all in a state of crisis. He was talking about the huge social cost that's going to confront society, it's going to be so big if it continues the way it is that the Territory government will be bankrupted trying to

control it. In Aboriginal health renal disease now accounts for 56% of the budget and the problem is quadrupling every ten years or so. It's just growing out of all proportion, you know, it's becoming a very significant fiscal problem for the government. This is an Aboriginal minister saying it, and what he's saying is Aboriginal people generally know that the rot is in their own communities. So Aboriginal leaders are now saying that at last.

Lisa: So it's not another whitefella's idea to shift the responsibility more to Aboriginal people, but that's actually something that comes from within the communities?

Dave: It's coming from the communities, absolutely.

Bess: It does have to happen. Aboriginal people have to say to themselves - acknowledge that there are serious problems within our society and Aboriginal people are the only ones who are going to have to fix those problems. They can't be left to anybody else.

Dave: White men won't do it.

Lisa: And there is a willingness?

Bess. There is. There are some people out there who are able to help themselves, some groups in communities, yeah. That's happening slowly, slowly, but hopefully there'll be more people who'll be able to stand up and say lets all get together and see what we can do. Let's help each other.

Lisa: What possibilities do they have to organize themselves?

Bess: Well, they've got national health groups or education groups that get together and talk about problems within Aboriginal communities, I guess, and that's how people bring up the problems and see if they can support each other. But they're organizing these things out there. Like the CLC (Central Land Council, LW), groups like that, that help tackle some of those problems. It'll take a long time. But it won't happen overnight, it'll be ages. It'll be like Leiland and Leiland's children [Leiland is Bess and Dave's 3 year old grand son, LW], they'll be the ones who'll be able to get it better.

Lisa: Can I ask you what your biggest wish would be, Bess?

Bess: I just wish I had enough money to set up the outstation out there and that's where I know I could help improve my people's lives.

Lisa: Which station is that?

Bess: Oh, just our block of land just outside of Yuendumu. If I had a lot of money then I'd set it up as something like a pilot program, teaching people how to grow, or live a healthier life. That would be great. That's one of my wishes.

Lisa: And yours, Dave, what would be your wish?

Dave: I'd like to set up an institute of - call it something like 'cross-cultural understanding' or something - where we actually look at cultures respectfully but critically. I'd like to set up a situation where we could run courses, so if you want to learn about Aboriginal culture you can come here and we'll teach you about Aboriginal culture, but only if you teach us about yours, so it's a two-way thing. We're all students, we're also teachers. That's one of my fantasies. We're now so respectful of Aboriginal culture and the word 'indigenous', you know, it's like angelic or saintly or ... I just don't like the way people use the language. We're talking about human beings and I've always believed that the line between good and evil

runs down the middle of everybody's soul and the same goes for Aboriginal people. They are human beings. Now there's a lot of really serious problems on the Aboriginal side when their culture comes up against ours. For thousands of years it worked really well in the desert, it worked brilliantly, but when you bring it together with our culture you've got really serious problems. So we can't be saying to Aboriginal people 'look, you keep your culture, it's absolutely wonderful, we don't want you to change, but we can also bring you into the cash economy and make brain surgeons out of your kids'. You can't have both, so what we should be saying to people is 'look, if you want to learn these things from us you're going to have to change certain things on your side and there's no way out of that. Do you want to do that?' And if people say 'no we don't', then we can only say 'well keep your bleeding culture', say 'good on you, okay, see you later, but don't blame us if you haven't got what we have to offer.'

Lisa: But do you really think they still have the choice to live either according to the old way or according to a western style life? Do you think that choice is still there?

Bess: Oh, each group is different. I think most of the young ones these days just want to live like everybody else I guess, or the western way. Times have changed and most of the old ways have fallen away. That's what's happening. See, in a place like Yuendumu you're exposed to everything... to videos, to TV ...and TV's all about movies with black people like Wesley Snipes, and all these young ones are aware of all the clothes that they wear, and hats 'back to front' and they talk like them...

Dave: See, if they really wanted to learn, what we should be saying to them is that there are things they've got to change. Now for example, we're talking about acknowledging customary law – customary law from our point of view is pretty brutal business, like for example if a woman or a child accidentally sees certain objects that belong to men that are secret-sacred or a ceremony that men are performing that's secret-sacred then the law says they should be killed and in some cases gang raped and then killed. Do you reckon that's fair? No, you don't. Fair enough. Now, that becomes an issue for me because my wife and daughter are female and Aboriginal. Now it doesn't really become an issue in fact because my wife and daughter know how all that works and it's not about to happen to them, but it is part of the law. However Aboriginal people do resort to physical violence much more readily than whitefellas do. In our case it is the State that exercises violence, in their case everybody has the right to in certain circumstances. So an awful lot of the interpersonal violence we see going on is actually culturally appropriate. But it horrifies us.

Lisa: But their ancient law system has never been acknowledged either. I mean, it's not as if we have two legal systems that respect each other and work it out in the middle, but we have imposed our legal system.

Dave: But there are attempts now to acknowledge customary law. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But what we're doing, I think, is only looking at those elements of customary law that suit us to acknowledge. Nobody mentions the business about women and I'm one of those rare souls that mentions it in public. You just don't talk about it but it's there and fear and terror is very much part of their culture. It's deliberately cultivated. It is in ours, too, but in different ways. As an example of cultural clash if you like, the biggest reason education is not working now is because kids don't go to school. Now, the whitefella liberal explanation of that is that it's not culturally appropriate. It teaches them alien values and

blah blah blah blah blah. But the schools that have bicultural programs and bilingual programs and have Aboriginal staff still have huge problems with attendance. To me the reason is that the Aboriginal style of child raising is immensely free, they let the kids do anything. If the kid says 'I don't want to go to school', granny says 'that's alright, you don't have to, so don't'. I think what we should be saying to people is 'look, don't complain to us if your kids can't read and write if you don't send them to school. You must send them to school'. We're not doing that. Just small things like that. We have to begin right at the ground level and negotiate our way into something that works.

A month after this interview was conducted, I received an email from Dave telling me that the dreams they had talked about in the interview were suddenly starting to become possible. They are working with a friend who has agreed to help them draw up a business plan and work towards attracting funds for a project based at the outstation that could lead to achieving Bess' dream. They are hoping to set up programs that could be used to increase Warlpiri people's self confidence and esteem and to encourage school attendance and combat boredom and therefore substance abuse, especially petrol sniffing amongst the young. Dave and Bess are hoping to set up a 'bush' training centre to be used to offer courses in culture and language and contact with Warlpiri people, in an environment that is non-threatening to the Warlpiri, for visitors who are genuinely interested in learning and teaching. So the deal would be – we teach you about the Warlpiri and you teach the Warlpiri about yourselves – everybody is a student and a teacher that way. Dave and Bess are doing this already with a group of students from a small private university in Pennsylvania. Visiting students would be both fee paying and volunteers.

Dave and Bess are also thinking about coming to Europe in 2004 with some Warlpiri artists for a lecture and performance tour in collaboration with two Danish post graduate students who have become close friends. If you would like to get in contact with them, you can email them under pjiiji@ozemail.com.au or visit their website under www.jajirdi.com.au. My own contact is: LisaWendlandt@gmx.de. Finally, my greatest thanks go to Felicity Curtis for helping me with the transcription of the interview.