

From Past to Future: Lessons Learned from Walking in Two Worlds - Opening Address at the Launch of the International Journal of Indigenous Business at The University of Queensland

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Abstract: This speech was delivered by Baringa Barambah at the launch of the International Journal of Indigenous Business at The University of Queensland. It explores how First Nations business leaders navigate the intersection of culture, community, Country, and contemporary business demands. Drawing on her own journey growing up immersed in Turrbal culture and later navigating corporate environments, Baringa highlights lessons from “walking in two worlds”. The speech examines three key challenges faced by Indigenous leaders: balancing cultural protocols with external expectations, shifting mainstream mindsets to value Indigenous knowledges, and carrying the weight of the collective. Each challenge is paired with practical responses, demonstrating how First Nations organisations provide a model for holistic, sustainable, and purpose-driven approaches to business.

Introduction

How do we walk in two worlds at once: the world of culture, community, and Country, and the world of business, growth, and efficiency? These worlds don’t always move in the same direction—cultural obligation and community responsibility can sit in tension with commercial timelines, efficiency, and growth targets.

This question has been shaped by my own journey: growing up immersed in my Turrbal culture, guided by Elders, and later navigating the corporate world where success was often defined only by profit, growth, and efficiency. Yet what I have witnessed is that many First Nations businesses weave together economic strength and cultural responsibility—measuring success not just in dollars, but in people, culture, and Country.

By navigating these tensions daily, we develop approaches, frameworks, and values that offer lessons for anyone seeking a more holistic, sustainable, and purpose-driven way to do business. These lessons emerge from what we call “walking in two worlds”, where an identity grounded in over 65,000 years of culture, law, and knowledge with a deep connection to Country, community, and ancestral wisdom must be balanced with modern business demands.

Walking in Two Worlds

I’ve seen the tensions of walking in two worlds appear in multiple, interconnected ways. While not exhaustive, the following three highlight common areas where many Indigenous business leaders continually adapt and innovate.

1. Balancing Cultural Protocols with External Expectations

In my experience, balancing cultural protocols with external expectations is a constant challenge. Cultural protocols are grounded in values, relationships, and responsibility. They guide how we engage, make decisions, and honour our communities. External expectations, on the other hand, often focus on timelines, budgets, and deliverables. Bridging these two ways of working requires patience, skill, and intentional communication. What is considered urgent or essential in one world may be secondary, or even irrelevant, in the other.

For example, a corporation once approached my community about commissioning artwork. In the first meeting, their focus was entirely on approvals, deadlines, and ticking the project off their to-do list to meet a key performance indicator (KPI). Not once did they ask about values, community, or story. Where they saw a project, we saw a

relationship (or a lack thereof, in this instance). That moment highlighted the ongoing balancing act required to bridge these worlds to ensure our culture is honoured while working within commercial systems.

Response: Leading with Cultural Protocols

Across my work, I've seen various First Nations businesses respond to the challenge of balancing cultural protocols with external expectations by leading with culture from the outset. This often involves approaches like opening conversations with values rather than KPIs, holding meetings on Country rather than in boardrooms, or sharing stories of place before discussing deliverables. It also includes having the courage to decline projects that do not align with cultural protocols.

The impact of this approach is tangible. Partner organisations willing to engage in this way often experience a shift in perspective; instead of asking "How can we tick this off?", they start asking "How can we honour this land and its people in the right way?". Over time, this shift in language reflects a deeper transformation in how projects are conceived, partnerships are built, and responsibilities to Country and community are understood. What begins as cultural leadership from First Nations businesses can ripple outward, creating lasting cultural change in the partner organisations.

2. Shifting Mainstream Mindsets to Value Indigenous Knowledges

In my experience, creating space for Indigenous knowledges to be recognised and valued alongside other forms of expertise is another challenge. I've seen western systems privilege technical expertise, data, and efficiency, while overlooking the cultural wisdom that grounds decisions in values, relationships, and long-term sustainability. Sidelining this wisdom can lead organisations to prioritise short-term outputs, potentially at the expense of deeper, longer-lasting outcomes.

Response: Bridging Knowledge Systems

There are First Nations leaders actively bridging Indigenous wisdom with modern knowledge in mainstream settings, creating spaces where both knowledge systems operate as equals. One powerful example is WV Technologies, founded by Kurt Grueber. Kurt's words reflect the very essence of WV Technologies: "Aboriginal people have long understood that we are one with Country and must care for it. In a modern world, this can take many forms." The company bridges traditional knowledges with modern practice, tackling environmental challenges while creating meaningful employment pathways for First Nations youth. By re-using and recycling the vast majority of the e-waste it processes, WV Technologies delivers measurable environmental benefits, such as reducing emissions, conserving resources, and recovering valuable materials.

From this example, several key lessons emerge that illustrate how bridging knowledge systems can deliver impact.

- Indigenous knowledges as the foundation: Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing shape purpose and decision-making.
- Modern tools as enablers: Digital skills, technology, and systems allow scaling and impact.
- Youth engagement: Young people learn, lead, and translate knowledge into action.
- Outcomes that matter: Social, economic, and environmental impact is achieved.

This approach shows that, when Indigenous wisdom and modern knowledge are treated as complementary, the results can be far-reaching for communities, for business, and for the wider world.

3. Carrying the Weight of the Collective

For many First Nations business leaders, stepping into business spaces is never just about ourselves. We carry our Elders' stories, our community's hopes, and the dreams of those who never had the same chances. Every decision, every partnership, every workshop or speech carries the questions: *Will this uplift our people? Will this open doors for others?* For many of us, individual success holds little meaning if it does not contribute to the wellbeing of our community, strengthen cultural connection, or create opportunities for the next generation.

From the outside, I can understand how this weight may be perceived as a burden, but it is actually a strength. It makes every decision matter and reminds leaders that success is collective. This perspective sheds light on why many Indigenous businesses operate differently.

Response: Redefining Success Metrics

In my work, I've come across First Nations organisations that respond to this collective responsibility by defining their own measures of success. Financial returns are just one part of the picture; equally important are community wellbeing, cultural strengthening, and intergenerational impact.

Some leaders have their standard business KPIs sit alongside cultural outcomes, ensuring that work honours both community and Country. Others focus on employment opportunities, accepting lower margins because the social and cultural impact is valued more than commercial outcomes alone. These approaches show that purpose and profit are not mutually exclusive, but rather that they can coexist to drive sustainable, community-centred growth.

Why This Journal Matters

These approaches exemplify the values this journal seeks to capture, making today's launch especially significant. This is why the work we're launching today—this journal—is so important.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge and congratulate everyone who made it possible: the researchers, editors, community partners and Elders. Your dedication, deep listening, and courage have brought this vision to life. This launch is the result of years of work, and it deserves to be celebrated. In my view, the value of this journal is as follows: it preserves our knowledge, provides evidence to influence systems, and connects us across generations and countries. And, as we reflect on that, it naturally leads us to the question of how we carry these lessons forward.

Conclusion: From Past to Future

Past to Future reminds us that business can be about more than financial returns, that social impact and commercial success can go hand in hand, and that responsibility to community, Country, and future generations can shape how we measure success.

If this way of doing business is possible, what role will each of us play?

- For First Nations entrepreneurs and leaders: How might you continue to define success on your own terms—grounded in culture, community, and Country—even when pressures to conform are strong?
- For mainstream business leaders: What lessons from Indigenous ways of doing business could help your organisation thrive in the decades ahead?
- For policymakers: How can your decisions help expand the impact of business models that deliver not just economic benefits, but social and cultural benefits as well?
- For researchers and academics: How will your work go beyond papers and reports to create real pathways that document, validate, and amplify First Nations business models?

By thinking about how we can support businesses that balance purpose, people, and profit, we open the door to a stronger, more connected, and more sustainable future.

About the author

Baringa Barambah is a Songwoman of the Turrbal People. Raised in Meeanjin, she grew up learning traditional laws from her Elders. Following the Voice referendum, Baringa founded Yadeni Consulting to foster cultural understanding. Prior to this, she worked in finance, strategy, and operations roles in corporate, government, and not-for-profit sectors to deliver projects across Australia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Baringa holds commerce and economics degrees from The University of Queensland, is a Chartered Accountant, and earned a Master Business Administration from the University of Cambridge as a Chevening and a Roberta Sykes Scholar.

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