

## **Re-thinking Interactions between Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Modern Knowledge**

*Wade Mahoney*

My name is Wade Mahoney; I am a Barkindji man, born in Broken Hill, a western NSW mining town. Barkindji mob are of the Darling River country stretching from just north of Wilcannia through to Menindee and encompassing Broken Hill. In fact, Barka is the traditional name for the Darling River and the word Barkindji means people of the river. I spent a lot of time in the water and on the banks of the Darling River, fishing, swimming, shooting and trapping rabbits, wild pigs, goats and the odd kangaroo or emu. Remembering time spent near the river makes me think about how much we took it for granted and how much it changed in a very short period of time after remaining untouched for generations.

I left Broken Hill and moved to Mildura as a 17 year old who knew of his cultural heritage but was never able to discuss it, or own it due to the extreme racism from the narrow minded people of Broken Hill toward any person or people who were different to them. Mildura is situated beside the Murray River in North West Victoria

I met my wife and her family when I was 21 years old, the Clarke family were a well known, strong and proud Aboriginal family whom immediately welcomed me and made me a part of the family.

My wife and I lived with Aunty Maree Clarke and Uncle Len Treggonning for various periods of time in Melbourne. By around 1995 Aunty Maree, with Uncle Len by her side, was becoming busier and busier, taking on and completing several significant art projects in and around Melbourne. Aunty Maree's work was always about sharing her love of her own culture with as many people as possible, which allowed me to learn and develop a deep understanding of the impact that colonisation had upon cultural knowledge and practices of Aboriginal people right across Australia.

Very early in my learning I began to think about the effect that white man had had on the country surrounding my river, and compare it to the effect that loss of culture had on our people. To me it was always plainly obvious that the two were closely aligned and both had devastating consequences for land and people.

The natural floods, dry periods and regular flow of the river had nourished the country surrounding the river for as long as it had been there. The flood plains and river flats sustained many varieties of plants and animals, all of which contributed to, what we now refer to as cultural practices, but were just the activities of life and living. When white man dammed the river with weirs, he changed the flow and inhibited normal flooding so that water could be used for irrigation. Aboriginal people were subsequently moved off country that was used for

cropping, could not hunt or gather in or around the river and could not access the land that had always sustained them and created the cultural practices that were the activities of living with the river.

Over time, both people and country grew sick, people had lost the cultural knowledge of their ancestors and the country had lost the regular replenishments from the natural cycles of the river.

Through a growing art practice, Aunty Maree and Uncle Len were given many opportunities to share their cultural knowledge through installations and exhibitions that encompassed artefacts and other items of cultural significance to Aboriginal people from all over South Eastern Australia. As their own cultural knowledge and understanding grew, so did the size of their audience and their opportunities. Aunty Maree's work was now reaching not only South Eastern Australia but it was now being noticed in various parts of Europe, the United Kingdom and Asia.

Aunty Maree and Uncle Len were beginning to see the capacity for art to enable Aboriginal people to reconnect with their cultural heritage and assist in the recovery of generations of oppression. Which remains central to Aunty Maree's philosophy that the power of art can heal and inspire people to positively identify with their Aboriginality, a process that for some continues to be difficult given the ongoing negative effects of colonisation.

During the completion of her Masters at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Aunty Maree worked on a research project looking at the collections held at the Museum of Victoria. Particular interest in Possum Skin Cloaks and Kangaroo teeth necklaces, this early research lead Aunty Maree and Uncle Len, along with a number of other Victorian Aboriginal artists, to further research the last remaining 6 historical Possum Skin Cloaks held in collections around the world and revive the practice across South Eastern Australia.

## **Possum Skin Cloaks**

### *Historically*

Traditionally, an expectant mother or her new born baby would be presented with one or two possum pelts sewn together as a baby wrap, as the baby grew and either hunted for himself or had someone hunt for her, the pelts would be sewn to the cloak so that it grew as its owner did. New pelts were attached to the cloak using the sinew from the Kangaroo tail and hind leg, which was dried and then chewed to make it pliable but very strong. Sewed joints were rubbed with animal fat, making the cloak somewhat waterproof. During the life of the cloak, images depicting significant events, locations, animals and/or people would adorn the tanned side of the cloak, essentially forming the story of the cloaks owner. These images were scratched into the skin side with either a mussel shell, found along a riverbank or a possum jaw engraving tool and then Ochre mix with sap from black wattle tress would be rubbed into the engraved marks



Figure 1. Historical images of an Aboriginal man from South Eastern Australia in his hunting canoe and a portrait of a family wearing possum skin cloaks.

forming what is basically a tattoo on the cloak.

Cloaks were traditionally used for warmth in winter, shelter and/or shade in summer, a covering for a humpy or bow hut or to wrap and carry belongings, tools, shields or spears, they were a valued item in the life of an individual, family or community. Towards the end of a cloak owners' life, their cloak could be as large as 50 to 60 pelts, large enough for a number of people to shelter under it. Generally, the cloak owner was buried in their cloak once they passed away.

### *Contemporary*

Aunty Maree's research enable her to understand the cultural significance of possum skin cloaks, how they were made, what some of the images meant that adorned the skin side and where they were mainly used. With that knowledge, Aunty Maree, Uncle Len and a number of other Victorian Aboriginal artists travelled around south east Australia working with a large number of communities in order to teach them about possum skin cloaks and then assist them to create their own cloak. Where they were historically hunted along the banks of rivers and in the bush, possum skins are now sourced from New Zealand, a waxed thread replaces the use of kangaroo sinew to sew the cloak together and the community making the cloak decides on the images that best represents those at the workshop which are then burnt onto the tanned skins with a hot iron and painted with the Ochre and black wattle sap mixture. Aboriginal people today generally have access to all that is required for comfort, warmth and shelter but contemporary cloaks are still being used by communities during modern ceremonies such as graduations, weddings, funerals, baby naming ceremonies, welcome to country and other important presentations.

So whilst the use of cloaks has changed, their significance hasn't. The ownership a cloak today represents the revival of a cultural practice virtually lost to Aboriginal people of south eastern Australia, and in creating a cloak, communities come together, elders, aunties, uncles, children and young people and tell their stories, passing on knowledge relevant to their region, people and their history. This practice will ensure the continuation of cultural knowledge is



Figure 2. Images of two contemporary cloaks produced by communities after participating in cloak making workshops with Aunty Maree

passed on verbally to all who attend these workshops and is also being captured in images on the cloaks that are being produced and cherished by the community.

#### *Possum Skin Cloaks on the world stage*

As well bringing possum skin cloaks back to communities throughout South East Australia, Aunty Maree and a few other Victorian Aboriginal artists worked with 35 of the 38 Aboriginal tribal groups of Victoria, creating a cloak with each community. These cloaks were then visible to the world during a ceremonial coming together of elders from each community wearing their cloaks for the closing of the 2006 Commonwealth Games. Allowing Aunty Maree and other artists to share their culture with an audience from around the world.



Figure 3. Image of the Victorian Aboriginal Elders wearing their Possum Skin Cloaks during a ceremony for the closing of the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

## Kangaroo Teeth Necklace

Body adornments, ritual and ceremony was another cultural practice and knowledge area that particularly interested Aunty Maree during her Masters with RMIT. In particular Kangaroo teeth necklaces appeared regularly in historical images of Aboriginal people from South Eastern Australia.

Whilst relatively unheard of, other than brass or tin breast plates imposed on so called “kings” or “queens” who were appointed by the colonists, Aboriginal regalia generally consisted of items worn around wrists, the waist, the neck or as a headband or a type of cap. Most items were made of materials available to people in the surrounding bush, on river banks or the edges of waterways or made from parts of the animals that were hunted and eaten. Materials such as river reeds would be dried and woven together, dried nuts or berries and sometimes echidna quills would also be incorporated into the item.

For significant people, both men and women within the tribe, Kangaroo teeth would be extracted from the skull of animals killed to feed the tribe. Each kangaroo had two very long front teeth that would be used by the animal to eat native grasses that were sometimes very close to the ground as they foraged. These teeth would be dried and then attached to a strip of kangaroo skin/leather with a gum type material obtained by grinding and burning the spinifex plant. Once the strip of leather obtained enough kangaroo teeth to stretch around a person’s neck it was worn with great reverence by its owner. Rarely traded or worn by anyone other than the owner of the item, there are only a few historical images of people wearing Kangaroo teeth necklaces (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Images of an Aboriginal man and woman both wearing historical kangaroo teeth necklaces. The Woman on the right can also be seen wearing her possum skin cloak

### *Re-creation of Kangaroo teeth necklace*

Aunty Maree's continuing desire to affirm and reconnect with her cultural heritage seen her and Uncle Len produce contemporary designs of kangaroo teeth necklaces, along with string headbands, adorned with kangaroo teeth. These items, based on 19th century kangaroo teeth necklaces and headbands held at the Museum of Victoria, were exhibited at Nga Woka, Woka Nganin, I am the land and the land is Me exhibition, at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria. This exhibition was the culmination of Aunty Maree and Uncle Len's intensive work collecting kangaroo teeth and sinew. Many trips back to her Country along the Murray River to collect teeth and hide from kangaroo carcasses enabled her to rekindle her continuing connection to river Country (Figure 5). Also providing the opportunity to reinforce her family and kinship connections, which included passing on knowledge of this practice to her sisters, nieces and nephews, all of whom were involved in the process of sourcing materials from for the project as they walked the land sharing cultural knowledge and stories.

Each Kangaroo tooth was individually cleaned and bound with Kangaroo sinew that had been dried and chewed. The teeth were then bound to a small strip of leather hanging 90 degrees from the main line that go's around the wearer's neck. The sinew dries, tightening around the tooth and the leather strip making it almost impossible to remove.

Once the desired number of teeth had been cleaned, bound with softened kangaroo sinew, the leather and sinew ties were rubbed with red Ochre and the teeth were again cleaned, resulting in the completed object as seen in the images below (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Nephew's out collecting Kangaroo teeth on the left while Aunty Maree pulls the teeth from the jaw bone of a kangaroo carcass.



Figure 6. Images of re-created Kangaroo teeth necklaces created by Aunty Maree and Uncle Len, thought to be the first of their kind made in almost 200 years.



Figure 7. Historical images of a woman and man wearing their Kopi mourning caps. As can be seen in the 2nd image, some Kopi's were worn until they crumbled off naturally

### **Kopi Mourning Caps**

Another area of interest to Aunty Maree was the mourning rituals of southeastern Aboriginal people. Research identified river clay mourning caps known as a “Kopi” These KOPI mourning caps were worn by Aboriginal women and men after the death of a family member or senior person in the tribe. Women wore these caps for periods of anywhere from for 2 weeks to 6 months depending on their relationship to the deceased. Males also wore the KOPI on the death of a family member or senior female in the tribe (Figure 7).

The Kopi was generally made of river clay or gypsum which was also readily available in and around river flat country. Huts made of sticks were built where the deceased person was laid whilst the tribe mourned. Once mourning was completed, mourners would remove their Kopi's and place them over the deceased person forming what becomes the grave.

### **Contemporary Kopi Mourning Caps**

Aunty Maree's reinterpretations of the caps and ceremony have seen her create 38 skull-cap plaster castes of contemporary Aboriginal women's skulls. These represent the 38 Aboriginal language groups throughout Victoria. The caps were exhibited in front of eerie white tree

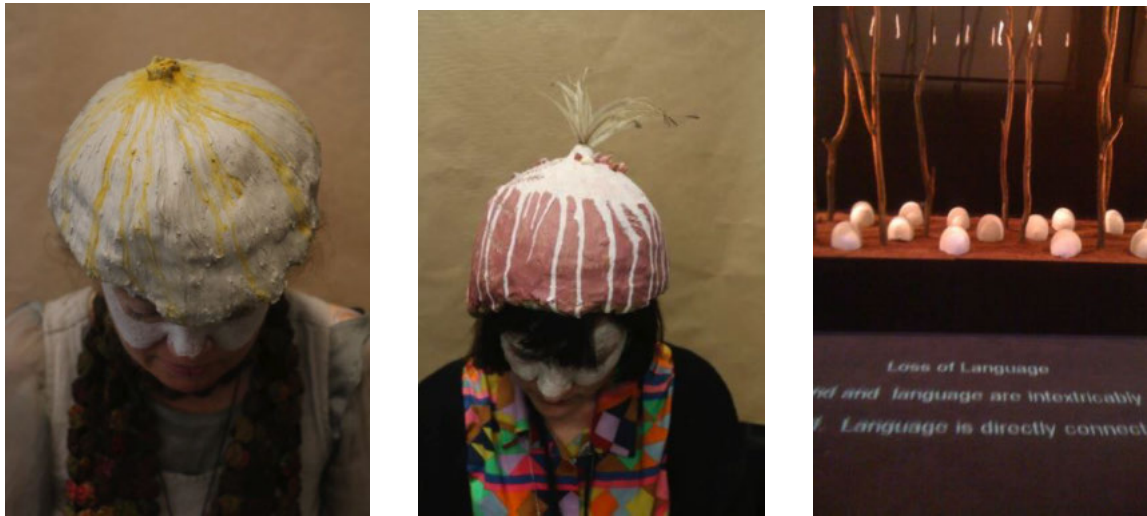


Figure 8. Images above depict two examples of contemporary Kopi mourning caps made by participants of mourning workshops held by Aunty Maree. The 3rd image is of the exhibition “Ritual and Ceremony” held at Melbourne Museum

boughs, with full scale black and white photographs of the women beyond. All women were dressed in black with painted white eye masks, reminiscent of traditional ceremonial mourning paint.

The white ochre represents traditional mourning practice and the black dress represents our mourning practices today. The sticks represent the huts that were built to place the deceased person in during the mourning period.

### **Re-thinking interactions between indigenous traditional knowledge and modern knowledge**

The work presented during the workshop in Kyoto in October 2017 are by no means an exhaustive account of all the work Aunty Maree has been involved as an artist and exhibition curator over the years. It more represents a slice of her endeavours to establish a broader recognition of southeast Australian Aboriginal culture and to reinforce the continuation of art practices from colonisation until today.

Just as white Australia has recognised the damage caused to the land by controlling the flow of the river, the damage caused to Aboriginal people due to the controlled flow of cultural knowledge and cultural practices has also been well acknowledged. Aunty Maree Clarke and the late Uncle Len Treggonning have been instrumental in healing the past by reviving it in a modern context.