Possum Skin Cloak Story Reconnecting Communities and Culture: Telling the Story of Possum Skin Cloaks

Kooramookyan-an Yakeeneeyt-an Kooweekowee-yan

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Kooramookyan-an Yakeeneeyt-an Koowekoowee-yan

Vicki Couzens December 2017
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Vicki Couzens
13 December 2017

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Cultural Sensitivity Warning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this dissertation contains images and references to deceased people.
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kata, finished!
Abstract

Please Note: This dissertation is accompanied by a 3D virtual gallery, which should be viewed alongside this work. The gallery is accessible here: https://publish.exhibbit.com/gallery/057344536/long-gallery-11002/

This PhD is a record of the Possum Cloak Story and takes the form of a dissertation, an online gallery with images, written works and audio and video works. It presents both my individual and collaborative work in cultural reclamation and revitalisation of Possum Skin Cloaks and language revival in Aboriginal communities across southeastern Australia. The study investigated the cultural revitalisation practice of possum cloaks and their re-emergence in more than 75 Aboriginal communities across south-eastern Australia. The research represents both a narrative and documentation of the journey of possum skin cloak-making over a 17-year history. Findings show that the sustainability of this traditional practice is dependent on the sharing of cultural knowledge, of cultural and spiritual health and wellbeing, community development, and ethical engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A model was developed to provide tools, teachings and resources to enable communities to practise their cultural traditions for future generations.

My project, Kooramookyan-an Yakeeneeyt-an Kooweekoo wee-yan (my Possum Cloak, my Dreaming, my Story), examines the questions: How have Possum Skin Cloaks re-emerged as significant cultural icons of cultural regeneration and revitalisation in contemporary times? And within this re-emergence: What impact can reviving age-old Aboriginal traditional practices have on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and their communities?

This project represents the first study to investigate the technical and creative processes, and health and wellbeing impact, of revitalising the cultural practice of Possum Skin Cloak making in Aboriginal communities since its revival more than 17 years ago. The research has three key aspects to it. Firstly, it provides an autobiographical record of the birth of Possum Cloak Story and a short historical reflection on Possum Cloaks. Secondly, the main body documents the reclamation and revitalisation journey and tells the stories of the creative cultural expression and impacts in community of this contemporary cultural reclamation phenomenon. Thirdly, the final component presents findings from a survey I conducted on the impact of Possum Cloaks in community and the analyses of evaluation data through a separate but related project. The survey and evaluation data from the related project were designed to garner information to provide understanding of the impact that reviving traditional practices has on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities, and the documentation and refined development of a model of practice. In this section, I discuss the potential for this model to be adapted and then adopted across a range of healthcare sector service facilities, such as crisis centres, Aboriginal women’s safe houses, shelters, hospitals, maternal, children’s and family health facilities, and health and mental wellbeing programs in community services.
Whilst colonising practices forcibly interrupted many cultural traditions and ways of Being and Doing, contemporary times have seen major cultural re-awakenings flourishing in Aboriginal communities across south-eastern Australia. Possum Cloak revitalisation and tradition is an historically significant cultural reclamation and revitalisation phenomenon of our times. In 1999 the Vision to return Possum Cloaks to community, to bring them back where they belong, was gifted to me from my Old People and the Grandfathers who made the Lake Condah Cloak. At this time, I shared this Vision with Lee Darroch, Treahna Hamm and Debra Couzens and over the ensuing years it became a shared, collaborative journey with them and many others. Through the sharing of the Vision and the establishment of collaborative working partnerships, funding and support from Elders and community, Possum Skin Cloak teachings have been shared with more than 75 communities over the past 17 years. Participants learn cloak-making skills and are guided in the use of cloaks in ceremonies for naming, funerals, marriages, graduations, baby naming, and connection to Country.

The Old People sent this story to us
We heard them speak through our hearts to our spirits
They told us what to do
They are still telling us what to do
Their message, our story, is to return the cloaks to our People
To reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember
To remember what those cloaks mean to us
And tell the stories of our People and Country

(V Couzens © 2009)

This is the Story of Possum Skin Cloaks.
Online Exhibition Guide

This dissertation should be read while viewing the accompanying 3D virtual gallery.

To access the online exhibition:
Using a computer with access to the internet and email facilities, please navigate to the address:

https://publish.exhibbit.com/gallery/05734536/long-gallery-11002/

- Information regarding movement within the exhibition is included in the site's navigation.
- Whilst not necessary, the use of a mouse is preferred to allow ease of visual navigation.
- Please note that this exhibition can be accessed with a Mac or PC and is best used with high-speed internet.

Instructions on how to navigate the gallery and titles of images are available in the online exhibition.
1. Introduction

Sing up the Country, talk up the Country, paint up the Country, dance up the Country, keep the Country strong – keep the people strong.
(Anonymous/unknown source)

I am Gunditjmara Keerraywoorroong from the Western Districts of Victoria. I have a life partner of 36 years, five daughters and fifteen grandchildren. My partner Rob Bundle is a musician, singer/songwriter and filmmaker. Our children have all participated in arts programs and festivals and are artists in their own right in varying capacities.

In my family we have a strong connection to the arts. My grandfather, Nicholas Couzens, was an exceptional artist, painting portraits and landscapes. I believe he worked primarily in oils in the early to mid-1900s, in and around the Port Campbell and Peterborough area. Uncle Stan Couzens became well known in his later years, taking up painting after his retirement. Aunty Zelda was a basket-weaver extraordinaire. Several of my cousins and their children are also practising artists. It is an affirmation of cultural pride and identity in having so many of the family in the arts and creative cultural expression.

So art and creative expression has been an integral part of our collective family story and my life, but up until the mid 1990s I was more of a spectator than a participant. Although during my teens and early twenties I made sporadic ventures into the arts, it wasn’t until my early 30s that I began seriously working in creative expression: exhibiting, writing and performing.

It was this transition from community cultural development to my emergence into the field of creative cultural expression and practice that led to my working in the field of Possum Skin Cloak-making for 18 years. My creative cultural expression is inspired by my culture. Land and language are the cornerstones of identity, of who we are. Through the use of language, stories and images our culture is made stronger, our connections are made stronger and we are made stronger. It is my passion for the reclamation, regeneration, revitalisation and remembering of our cultural heritage knowledge and practices that drives me and informs the work that I do.

My creative cultural expression and capacity building work is drawn from the learnings I have received through the teachings of our Ancestors, Old People and Elders, the custodians of the Law of the Land, who guide me through my life.

In my creative practice, I weave art-forms together with song, movement, dance, sound and imagery. These interwoven forms are tangible and real. They embody our spiritual connectedness and Belonging to Country. The process of making or the experience of a community workshop can bring a real and meaningful sense of connection and healing. The art-forms I create and the
community work I carry out is about sharing these understandings and creating opportunities for experiences which can evoke this ‘knowing’ in others.

The Possum Skin Cloak has re-emerged as a significant icon and collective symbol of our Aboriginal cultures across south eastern Australia. The creation of Possum Skin Cloaks is part of the ongoing cycle of singing up Country and keeping the Country strong. It generates a sense of recognition and acknowledgement of our place and leaves a lasting legacy with our communities and across mainstream Australia.

In revitalising culture, we gain a sense of peace and strength in knowing who we are and where we belong. Our cultural stories and identity can be firmly reclaimed and regenerated awaiting future generations.

As the Land is the Mother, we belong to Her. We are charged with the responsibility to care for our Country and all creatures. In accordance with our cultural beliefs through the continuation of our traditional practices, we maintain and strengthen the Spirit of the Land, our People and the creatures in a perpetual cycle of renewal and regeneration.

My philosophical approach to my life and my work is that life is a journey, with identity, connection, place and belonging our fundamental purpose. Language, culture and Land are central to our spiritual and emotional well-being, and the affirming of our individual and collective identities. These are the drivers that fuel my passion for the work I am guided to do by my Old People. It is for these reasons that I am undertaking this research. This is another way of keeping story and handing it on as a living legacy.
2. Overview of Research

Meerta peeneeyt, yana peeneeyt, tanam peeneeyt kooramook
Stand strong, walk strong, proud flesh strong, Possum Skin Cloak.

In this research project, I study the cultural role and significance of Possum Skin Cloaks for Aboriginal peoples of South Eastern Australia. I examine the re-emergence in contemporary times of the significance of possum cloaks and how this continues to contribute to cultural regeneration and revitalisation in south-eastern Australia. This exploration of Possum Skin Cloaks is the first study of its kind, bringing new knowledge and understanding to both the Aboriginal community and the wider community. For the research, I conducted anonymous online surveys with community and with those who had taken part in possum cloak workshops previously (Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey). I analysed the findings and gathered feedback data for guiding principles and indicators for the development of a cultural healing model using possum cloaks. Interviews were conducted and I facilitated a workshop to gather further information towards the understandings sought in this research. Survey respondents numbered up to 37, and 10 one-on-one interviews were conducted. I also used data gathered through the Banmirra Arts Cloak Workshop Program from 2009-2016 (14 community group data sets).

This research Project is about regenerating cultural heritage. Within the Project, I researched community responses to the meaning, knowledge and stories of Possum Skin Cloaks and explored cultural meanings in the visual language of designs and symbols. Through this exploration and inquiry, I examined how cloaks connect People, Language, Country and Place and how cultural revitalisation, strengthening and spiritual healing are affected. Towards the end of the dissertation, I explore possibilities for the learnings from this study to be extended to healthcare for Aboriginal people, in a new framework I call the Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing.

Possum Skin Cloaks tell our stories, representing the unique and distinct tribes and language groups of south-eastern Australia. They tell stories of belonging, stories of place and stories of the sacred and spiritual. Underpinning the research is the spiritual resonance of Belonging to place and Country and how this connects with song, dance, stories and language.


2.1 Research Questions

My research questions are:

- How have Possum Skin Cloaks re-emerged as significant cultural icons of cultural regeneration and revitalisation in contemporary times?

And within this re-emergence:

- What impact can reviving age-old Aboriginal traditional practices have on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and their communities?

2.2 Cultural Reclamation and Regeneration

From the beginning of Possum Story in 1999, and in particular, since 2006, the ensuing years have seen Possum Skin Cloaks become firmly re-established as a cultural practice across Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and parts of southern South Australia. In a cloak making workshop different generations interact. These community workshops facilitate interactions and trans-generational engagement creating opportunities for the transference of knowledge, for listening to stories, being given knowledge and responsibilities, and the strengthening of family and kinship networks.

Possum Skin Cloaks were an important part of our ritual and ceremonial life. Today, they continue that tradition and are used at Welcome To Country ceremonies, for everyday use such as warmth, bedding and baby carriers, various public events in both Aboriginal and mainstream communities, and other community ceremonies and milestone events such as naming ceremonies, births, marriages, deaths and burials.

Making Possum Skin Cloaks triggers a need to find out more about them: how were they made? where and how were materials sourced? what did we use them for? what is our language for possums, cloaks? what ceremonies did we use them for? who wore them? These questions, in turn, trigger the need to learn more about other related cultural knowledge and practice.

Cloaks need language and through this language the knowledge and stories needed for hunting, ceremony, dance and song are conveyed. Communities and individuals have sought and continue to seek this knowledge and begin to relearn their ‘mother tongue’, strengthening pride and identity in an affirming creative cultural way.

The impact of the revival of Possum Skin Cloaks as a community cultural practice has been significant and profound. The healing experience of a Possum Skin Cloak is immediate, powerful and
lasting. However the cloaks are encountered, their effect reaches to the person's spirit, giving strength and healing. In some communities cloaks are used directly for healing. Cloaks are taken and wrapped around a person who may be experiencing emotional issues. At other times, cloaks have been laid across hospital beds for those who are physically ill. Projects such as the 2006 Commonwealth Games Opening and other ensuing community workshops have engendered a sense of identity and pride in Aboriginal people across the south east of Australia. The most significant aspect of this cultural phenomenon has been the embedding of a southeastern collective cultural identity, represented in a Possum Skin Cloak and the spiritual healing that that gifts.

When a cloak is put around someone’s shoulders, when they are enfolded within, there is a visible and tangible sense of empowerment. Emotions are seen and expressed in smiles, words and actions. Some stand taller, beaming smiles and telling of what they feel. Some will stand quietly, reflecting on their feelings, and others will sit and go within to fully experience what they are feeling.

No-one is unaffected.
3. Research Methodology

In my research, I explore Australian Indigenous Research Methodologies and Frameworks. The first one I study is one that is already known to me, Dadirri or Deep Listening (Atkinson 2001; Ungunmerr-Baumann & Brennan 1989, Ungunmerr-Baumann 2015). Secondly, I research ‘Yarning’ as a methodology, as identified and described by Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng’andu (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010:40–1). And the third is a theoretical framework that privileges Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing as set out by Karen Martin – Booran Mirraboola (Martin 2003:205). What is salient to this Project and my learning is that I have applied them to reflect on, identify and develop my own Gunditjmara Cultural Ways of Knowing Being and Doing Methodological Framework, which incorporates and encapsulates both ‘deep listening’ and ‘yarning’.

The term ‘wangan ngootyoong’ from my language in literal translation means to hear/listen properly/to understand, and is glossed in our language resources as ‘respect’. I now use this term to describe and characterise my own personal, cultural ‘deep listening and yarning’ methodological Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing. Using a Deep Listening approach, I tell stories about my experiences in the cultural regeneration journey of Possum Skin Cloak making and my learnings and teachings with others. ‘Yarning’ methodology is applied in engagement and exploration with community in this Possum Cloak revival and regeneration journey.

Secondary historical sources contribute to my Possum Cloak Story and are incorporated in this work.

3.1 Privileging Indigenous Research Methodologies: Aboriginal ways of Learning, Knowing and Being

In this Project I privilege three key methodologies or frameworks or approaches. Dadirri – deep listening (Atkinson 2001; Ungunmerr-Baumann & Brennan 1989), Yarning (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010:40–1), and Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing (see Martin 2003:205)

Reflection and Elucidation of Indigenous Methodologies

Until recent times, available published information on Aboriginal epistemological pedagogies and methodologies, our ways of Knowing, Being and Doing (Martin 2003:205) has been predominantly discussion through the ‘inexpert’ cultural lens of the ‘outsider’: non-Indigenous ethnographers, linguists, anthropologists and the like. Today Indigenous peoples from Australia and
around the world lead the discourse on our ways of Knowing and Being. Australian Aboriginal/Indigenous educators, artists, political activists and academics are contributing to the rapidly growing body of published materials and publicly available knowledge. In this time now, we have ability, access and opportunity to share our insights from the learnings and wisdoms of our Ancestors and Elders.

Through these contributions and offerings First Nations Peoples are decolonising the histories of our Peoples and re-writing our history in our own words, stories, songs and dances (see Smith 1999). The availability of writings and publications that foreground and privilege First Nations Knowledges provides current and future Indigenous academic researchers with direction and support. We can draw on the teachings of celebrated Indigenous Academics such as Professor Lester Irabinna-Rigney, Miriam-Rose-Ungunmerr-Baumann, Professor Judy Atkinson and Karen Martin – Booran Mirrabooqa.

Professor Lester Irabinna-Rigney sets the scene with his leading inspirational thinking from the 1990s when he firstly positions Indigenous Knowledges as valid systems, as legitimate epistemological entities, then stresses the need to have these Knowledges at the core of research approaches, and as a final key element the Indigenous autonomy and ownership of the making of this Knowledge.

... my people's interests, experiences and knowledges must be at the centre of research methodologies and the construction of knowledge about us. Incorporating these aspects in research, we can shift the construction of knowledge to one which does not compromise Indigenous identity and Indigenous principles of freedom from racism, independence and unity... (Rigney 1997:637)

Rigney provides a powerful three pronged rationale of core interrelated principles for Indigenous research - ‘... resistance, political integrity and privileging Indigenous voices...’ (Rigney 1997:637). These principles underpin his summary of Indigenous research.

... research by Indigenous Australians whose primary informants are Indigenous Australians and whose goals are to serve and inform the Indigenous liberation struggle to be free of oppression and to gain power... (Rigney 1997:637)

In simple lay terms, this expresses the ‘for us, by us’ catch cry phrase of the re-emerging energy and political will of the Indigenous community in the continuing political pursuit for freedom and
justice. Rigney further explains that in more recent times there has been an expansion in the acceptance of the application of ‘a multiple methodologies’ approach in research (Rigney 2006:36–7). Through Rigney, Atkinson, Martin, Ungunmerr-Baumann and others, this forward thinking and championing of the legitimacy and efficacy of Indigenous Knowledges now enables Indigenous students to reference Indigenous methodological frameworks and a rationale that is relevant and meets the needs of and reflects the heritages of Indigenous scholars.

... Indigenous scholars can re-think research methodologies and use a variety of approaches that truly match people’s realities, interests and aspirations. (Rigney 2006:36–7)

This scene setting work of Rigney’s in foregrounding Indigenous methodologies has given context to and been foundational in the development and emergence of following theoretical frameworks and methodologies such as in the work of Karen Martin – Booran Mirraboopa, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann and Professor Judy Atkinson.

Dadirri - deep listening

Deep Listening – “Dadirri” – is an Aboriginal concept meaning deep and respectful listening, which builds community (Atkinson 2001, 2002; Ungunmerr-Baumann & Brennan 1989). This concept comes from the language of the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Daly River area of the Northern Territory. ‘Ngangi’ means word or sound. ‘Kuri’ means water and ‘kurr’ means deep. Deep water sound, or sounds of the deep, also explains the word “Dadirri” as inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness. In Professor Atkinson’s doctoral research she incorporated Aunty Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann’s description of Deep Listening and adopted it as a methodology in which research is undertaken and stories are listened to with a sense of responsibility and integrity.

We have spent many years learning about the white man’s ways; we have learnt to speak the white man’s language; we have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We would like people to take time and listen to us. If our culture is alive and strong and respected it will grow. It will not die and our spirit will not die. I believe the spirit of ‘Dadirri’ that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within ourselves but in all. (Ungunmerr-Baumann & Brennan 1989: 41)

This seemingly simple and moving insight into Aboriginal spirituality is an opportunity for others to move to a closer understanding and respect for Aboriginal people: our longevity in maintaining a deeply spiritual, living culture across millennia and through adversity (in a ‘Deep Listening’ way), listening with intent, heart and spirit.
Yarning

In much the same way as Dadirri, Yarning methodology describes a cultural Way of Knowing, Being and Doing (see Martin 2003:205). The key aspects of Yarning, as described in the Yarning Methodology, are inherently Aboriginal ways of Doing. This methodology articulates what is a recognisable, age old process, or Way of Doing in our communities.

... It came from doing research the Yolngu way – looking at ideas, people talking and working together, taking people out to explain things and then talking about what needs to be done. We sit down and talk about where to go, what to do, where we are up to. It takes three to four weeks to organise things before starting actions... (Yunggirringa & Garnggulkpuy, cited in Laycock et al 2011)

Bessarab, an Indigenous women of the Bardi and Indjabandi peoples of north western Australia, and her colleague Bridget Ng’andu, an Indigenous researcher from Botswana, both describe Yarning Methodology as having four different types or aspects of ‘yarning’, each of which has its own set of prescribed laws of behaviour and protocols (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010:40–1).

These four aspects are:

- Social yarning (before the topic yarn, when a connection is established and trust is usually developed).
- Research topic yarning (relaxed but purposeful, to gather information related to the research topic).
- Collaborative yarning (sharing information, exploring ideas in explaining new topics, leading to new understandings).
- Therapeutic yarning (when the participant discloses information that is traumatic, or intensely personal and emotional. The researcher leaves the research topic to become a listener). (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010:40–1)

An example is when you are visiting someone at their home or even if you meet them in the street, when you are seeking to engage with community, there is the initial greeting stage: ‘how’s the family, how’s the mob? where is Aunty ... how is your new granny? etc.: these interactions establish the trust and relationship. Perhaps you are then invited to come around for a cuppa to yarn further or invited in... the conversation then moves into the next stage or aspect of yarning, the relaxed but purposeful phase where you can begin to introduce the key subject matter... as long as these processes are observed the conversation and relationship will develop. If the matter is acceptable and everyone is comfortable then the topic can be discussed frankly and the last two aspects often flow from a sound foundation built in the first two aspects.
These practices reflect our deep understanding of the workings and needs of the human psyche and the dynamics of relationship building and patterns. Within this framework, relationship is negotiated and ‘conversations’ are carried out underpinned in the listeners position and Being of ‘deep listening’ and respect.

Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology. They are ‘factors’ to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood. (Smith 1999:116)

This Yarning Way, as my understanding and interpretation of the descriptions as set out by Bessarab and Ng’andu, describes integral Aboriginal Ways of Doing that I recognise as inherent in my practice: it is at the core of how I go about my work. I experienced a deep and immediate resonance with this Framework.

**Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing**

Deep Listening is an Aboriginal way of Knowing and Being as Yarning Methodology is also an Aboriginal way of Being and Doing. With this in mind, both of these methodologies I would consider to be incorporated and encapsulated within Noonunccal researcher Karen Martin – Booran Mirraboopa’s theoretical framework titled ‘Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing’ (Martin 2008). In this work Martin builds on the decolonising work of Smith (1999), Rigney (1997) and Atkinson (2002). Martin interrogates researchers and past and continuing research behaviour, and puts forward the challenge to use research approaches which build new relationships that create egalitarian spaces where the contributions of researcher and researched are equally valued. Martin offers seven ‘rules’ (Martin 2008:131), developed with key people in community she has done research with and based on their localised ‘expectations’. However these ‘expectations’, whilst localised, do articulate integral Aboriginal Protocols and Laws of Behaviour and as such are applicable broadly across research approaches. Martin proposes, like Rigney, that these principles must be integrated into research design from the outset propagating transformative decolonisation of western dominance in these spaces.

Martin’s rules align with the principles of best practice outlined by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Islander Studies (AIATSIS 2012), and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC 2003, NHMRC 2006).
• Respect Aboriginal land: also encompassing respect for Waterways, Climate, Animals, Plants and Skies;
• Respect Aboriginal Laws: to give honour to the Aboriginal Elders as keepers of their Ancestral laws;
• Respect Aboriginal Elders: as the ultimate authority;
• Respect Aboriginal culture: as Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of being and Ways of Doing;
• Respect Aboriginal Community: acknowledging this as a form of relatedness amongst Aboriginal people;
• Respect Aboriginal families: respecting the autonomy and authority of families;
• Respect Aboriginal futures: acknowledging relatedness of past and present for forming a future and thus accepting responsibility for this relatedness. (Martin 2008:131).

Martin positions herself as standing in her place of strength: that is, Being Aboriginal/Indigenous. From this position, Martin asserts she is therefore not actively resisting nor counteracting Western methodologies but that Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing in fact give her structure and guidance in her research, and that this sits, not outside of, but as part of the spectrum of worldviews and thinking. Martin elaborates and expands on Rigneys’ principles:

• Recognition of our worldviews, our knowledges and our realities as distinctive and vital to our existence and survival;
• Honouring our social mores as essential processes through which we live, learn and situate ourselves as Aboriginal people in our own lands and when in the lands of other Aboriginal people;
• Emphasis of social, historical and political contexts which shape our experiences, lives, positions and futures;
• Privileging the voices, experiences and lives of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal lands;
• Identifying and redressing issues of importance for us. (Martin 2003:205)

This ability to identify and describe or label what you do is a confidence boosting experience because as with many people, you are ‘doing it’, and in the ‘busyness’ of doing it, you are not thinking or reflecting on your ways of Doing nor seeking ways to articulate those Ways. Nevertheless, these descriptions not only describe our Ways of Knowing Being and Doing, but through this articulation, give legitimacy, validation and authenticity. This validation and authentication is con-
textual in relation to self perceptions as well as academic currency. Through the writings of these scholars we are shaping a definitive vehicle and voice for our Ways of Knowing Being and Doing (Martin 2003:205).

**Rover Thomas: An Example of Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing – Dreaming and Deep Listening**

Further enquiry into Aboriginal ways of learning and knowing led me to study Rover Thomas, an internationally celebrated artist from Warmun in Western Australia. His story is part of the ‘deep listening’ spectrum of learning that Ungunmerr-Baumann and Atkinson speak of. Rover Thomas’ experience was the acquisition of knowledge by way of ‘dreams’. This phenomenon is a well known cultural experience in Aboriginal cultures across Australia, and indeed around the world. Rover Thomas’ experience in ‘finding’ the kurrirr kurrirr ceremony story is an extant example of our Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning through dreams, our Dreamings.

The Kurrirr Kurrirr was ‘found’ by Rover Thomas in 1975. It came to him in his dreams over a period of time. As he shared his knowledge he had gained in this way, its significance was recognised. Out of his sharing emerged the community celebration the Kurrirr Kurrirr.

The ‘finding’ of the Kurrirr Kurrirr is noteworthy in itself. In explaining to non-Indigenous people, Rover was always quick to convey that he hadn’t ‘made up’ or composed it, that he wasn’t a liar, and that the Kurrirr Kurrirr was ‘true’. Within the Indigenous world in which he lived, no such reassurance was necessary. His claims were accepted as self-evidently true. Two aspects of traditional epistemology - what [we] might characterise as the traditional philosophy of knowledge and knowledge acquisition - are especially significant in this respect. The first is belief that all that is really important, including knowledge itself, derives from the Dreaming. The second is that the Dreaming is a continuing process, not a process at an end but one linking past and present and involving living people in its continuance. (Christensen in Thomas 2003)

3.2 Wangan Ngoottyong: A description of a personalised cultural methodology founded in Gunditjmara learning and modelled on Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing

**Context**

It is from the context of growing up in the 1960s, in an Australia that hadn’t recognised us as citizens of our own Country, where our peoples were still struggling with basic human rights issues including our right to know and practise our languages, our ceremonies, dances and songs, that I
was moved to find the writings of Atkinson, Ungunmerr-Baumann, Bessarab (and Ng’andu), and Martin. At last, here were writings about our Ways, by our own People. Our Aboriginal ways of Knowing, of Being, being guided by our Elders, Old People and the ‘Dreaming’/Law of the Land.

Through childhood to adolescence and on during adulthood we undergo a journey towards self-awareness and maturation. Our Elders and family, personal experiences, observations and reflections teach us. It is through this fundamental, natural process of learning over a lifetime, you come to know yourself. Along the way we are guided by our Elders and Old People; we are schooled by our parents, peers, colleagues, friends, teachers and all those we encounter in our life’s journey.

During my life I would reflect on the ways I was thinking and acting or doing in my life and in my work. This reflection often led to insights and understandings of myself and my ways of Being and Doing. Although growing up no-one ever expressed directly or named this way of Knowing and Being, it was learned by example, by watching and seeing Elders and family. My father, Ivan Couzens, told me as a young woman in my twenties, ‘Sometimes you have to wait, to listen, to listen to others and let them feel that they are part of something, that they own it ... you sometimes have to wait...’ Gradually, over the years, this awareness grew. I learned to listen, to hear people’s stories, to learn from Country, and I learned to wait. ‘I will listen to you, share with you, as you listen to, share with me’ (Atkinson 2002:17).

When the concept of ‘Dadirri’ was explained, through discussion, I experienced an immediate resonance of recognition and connection to it. Dadirri felt like it was an actual description of how I perceive, relate to, understand, be in and make sense of this world. It was a moment of realisation that there is a name for this way of Learning, Being and Knowing. It brought a clarity to my awareness, which was empowering in an unexpected way. It gave a sense of validation of experience and knowing that until then I had not realised was lacking. It was a strengthening and illuminating experience.

Discovering the Yarning Methodology was, again, an experience of affirmation as with my initial encounter with ‘Dadirri’. Yarning, as my understanding and interpretation of the descriptions as set out by Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010), again, describes fundamental Aboriginal Ways of Doing that are inherent in my practice and now I am able to identify, describe and articulate them. It is only at such times as in this writing that you come to this articulation.
Throughout this Project in the practice of Deep Listening, I reflected on my own processes and ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: how I was going about my work, my research and how I was thinking. Previously, I had never adequately articulated or named my processes to myself or to others. I had spoken to others of being guided by the Old People, of listening to my Spirit and with my heart. However, I had never really taken the time to reflect, describe and name a clear notion of my Being and Doing to myself.

Dadirri as a methodology, as per Atkinson’s description, is fundamentally, in principle, a description of a collective Aboriginal cultural teaching and a learning methodology that has been used by First Nations Australians for millennia. This, along with Yarning, fits within Martin’s (2003) Ways of Knowing Being and Doing framework. This articulation of our cultural processes and Ways of Being excited me and inspired me to reflect on Gunditjmara Ways of Being and Knowing that I had learned growing up. Dadirri, Yarning and Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing inspire and support my newly articulated personal methodology, and help me consider the differences and distinctions within my own Keerray Woorrooong language group and Gunditjmara Nation Deep Listening.

**Wangan Ngootyoong - (lost in) translation**

As noted earlier, the literal translation of the term ‘wangan ngootyoong’ from my language, is to hear/listen good or proper/to understand. However, as with the term ‘dadirri’, this phrase has layers of deeper meaning and is used to describe a larger concept than literally ‘hearing good’. In translating ‘wangan ngootyoong’ from my language into English there is an integral central element of meaning that is lost in translation. ‘Wangan ngootyoong’ is listening good or properly; it is not asking questions but listening and looking to learn; it is respect.

Respect is not a singular word with a simple meaning, it is a semantic domain, “a specific area of cultural emphasis” (Ottenheimer 2005) that overarches and underpins; it permeates and surrounds; it is a core cultural value and principle that holds layer upon layer of meaning. Each and every aspect of Aboriginal culture has respect embedded in its meaning. I use the phrase ‘wangan ngootyoong’ as a term for this semantic domain of cultural respect. Respect for Elders, respect for our ways, stories, songs, dances and cultural expressions, respect for the animals, birds, creatures, water, skies, wind, sun, moon, rain, rivers, plants and trees, oceans and Country, respect and caring for self and others, respect for relationship, place and belonging. I have taken this term and use it in this potent manifestation of meaning. I use the ‘wangan ngootyoong’ phrase to take ownership of my personal deep listening approach in my Gunditjmara Ways of Knowing Be-
ing and Doing. And like Martin, I too stand in my strength as an Aboriginal woman, mother, grandmother, sister, aunt and daughter; a member of the matrilineal inheritance of our Gunditjmara Yakeeneeyt-ya (Dreaming) or Tyamateeyt-ya (Knowing).

My belief as an Aboriginal researcher is that I actively use the strength of my Aboriginal heritage… I research from the strength and position of being Aboriginal and viewing anything western as ‘other’… (Martin 2003:205)

Aspects of Wangan Ngootyoong

Being
Remembering, reclaiming, reviving and regenerating cultural knowledge and practice are the principle intentions and actions of my family’s shared belief systems and cultural philosophy. Reciprocity – mutual benefit sharing and contribution to the larger group, the value of giving back – is the backbone upon which these principles/values/actions rest. In our day to day living and through our contribution in community we engage in the actioning of these principles and beliefs through sharing our learnings and teachings of cultural knowledge and practices across contemporary and traditional mediums. These drivers augment the passion, commitment and actions myself and my partner, individually and collectively, undertake, in our family living and being, our contribution to Aboriginal community life and our intent in cultural maintenance responsibility and legacy.

Knowing
The process of Knowing is wholly internal and intensely personal. It is about learnings and knowledge acquired and how this is integrated into the body of knowledge carried within. There are many tangible and intangible aspects to my process of Knowing – Tyamateeyt-ya. In the intangible realms of Spirit and intuitiveness, I attribute my received learnings and subsequent integration into my Knowing to being spiritually aligned with, connected to, aided and guided by Country and the spirits of our Old People.

In this ‘Knowing’, I intuit an all pervading sense of ‘rightness’ or correctness: everything is proper. This sense of knowing you have got it ‘right’ or that something is ‘proper’ is reinforced through signs of synchronicity, dreams and omens from your totems: nature – seeing a particular bird or animal or a weather event, and/or physical sensations of being touched by spirits. This Creative Learning and Knowing process is an intuitive cultural space consciously entered into. When I am engaged in cultural reclamation or ‘deep translation’ (Stebbins, Eira & Couzens 2018, pp 210ff.) work in language or other cultural knowledges and practices, I enter this deeply spiritual space.
From this place, I contemplate and engage in a process I describe as ‘re-dreaming’. ‘Re-dreaming’ is to contemplate a notion or question, internally collate any known facts, hold those facts in a cultural mind set or lens (see also Stebbins, Eira & Couzens 2018: pp 207-8). In holding your cultural lens you allow your intuitiveness to surround the facts; as these ‘facts’ are contemplated, a distilling or filtering process of relativity and realisation occurs and the learning is taken, re-interpreted culturally, and integrated and contemporised into Being now. This process of Knowing, to summarise, is a coalescing of accumulated learnings and acquired knowledge across an expansive spectrum of knowledge bases including ancestral knowledge and memory, to current knowledges and experiences of this time, that forms into a tangible outcome, such as for example in language revival, a new word or phrase: through the intangible, the tangible is realised.

**Doing**

Important cultural protocols and practice require us to establish proper relationship as the starting point to any engagement, transaction, or interaction between individuals, families, clans or groups. It is a cultural imperative to approach and engage with respect. This process begins with making contact and yarning. Within this process there is the protocol of identifying who is the proper and correct person/s to be talking with; sensitivities must be taken into account in terms of relationship with the person/s you are wanting to be engaged with, appropriateness of collaborative models of working, proper ways and timing. Respect is paramount.

Built into this approach is the unspoken aspect of timing. Timing is paramount in Aboriginal community process across all levels from the physical, literal timing of everyday life activities to the deeper larger timings of Aboriginal cosmological concurrency of past, present and future continuum. This timing or what might be described as following the natural course or confluence of things, influences every aspect of community Being and Doing. It is at the same time a principle or Knowing and a way of Doing. It is simply Knowing when it is the right time to do or act or not. In my practice, I am immersed in this way of Being and Doing. It is within this integral and inherent state of Being that I Do.

**Ways of Knowing and Being – An Example**

Most of what we do on our Possum Journey is guided by the Old People and this project is an example of this guidance, in a very direct way. The following quote and song is part of a ‘paper’ I co-presented with Lee Darroch and Amanda Reynolds, at the Museums Australia Conference in Newcastle in 2009. This writing was done on the morning of the day the presentation was due to occur. I had not had time previously to prepare my part of the presentation. Lee, Amanda and
myself were not overly concerned that I had not written anything as we were speaking about Possum Skin Cloaks and this was something we can all do easily, from our hearts and our breadth of accumulated knowledge, with or without notes. However, Lee and Amanda, who had arrived a day ahead of me, had discussed an ‘idea’ that they had and that was to present our ‘paper’ in a different way. Their idea was to have a ceremonial aspect to our presentation, with permission of the local Traditional Custodians. This ceremony was to involve a song and the wearing of a possum cloak to the podium and stage where we would present. However, whilst they had this great idea it was me they ‘elected’ to write the song and perform the ceremonial wearing of the cloak, as at this time I was most experienced in Ceremony.

Previously in my reflections prior to this conference, I had also been ‘receiving’ ideas around the need to bring ceremony through into our teachings in Possum Skin Cloaks. It was not an idea that was fully developed nor had I articulated my evolving thoughts to Lee and Amanda. On the journey to Newcastle I had been feeling that something ‘new’ was coming through from the Old People by way of ‘deep listening’ but hadn’t had the space when travelling to ‘listen’ properly: to experience or enter my ‘Dadirri’. Now after talking with Lee and Amanda I retired outside to sit on the balcony of our accommodation. As I was contemplating their suggested ideas and integrated this with my previous reflections I became deeply absorbed in the transformative spiritual space within where I am able to receive learnings in a similar way as via dreams or connecting to higher vibrational frequencies to access the knowledge. From this place of deep translation I wrote the following, word for word, as it came to me. This became part of our written paper as presented later on that day at the conference, and has been used in many of our writings, publications and presentations since.

Our story began ten years ago. The Old People sent this story to us. We heard them speak through our hearts to our spirits. They told us what to do, they are still telling us what to do. Their message, our story, is to return the cloaks to our People, to reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember. To remember what those cloaks mean to us and tell the stories of our People and Country. (Couzens, Darroch & Reynolds 2009, Paper presented at Museums Australia Conference, Newcastle)

This writing was closely followed by a song (see below). The song was a ‘calling out’ song. This type of song is used to ‘call out’ to people to let them know you are approaching and wanting to sit down and talk business with them. I wrote this in my language and performed it at the conference. The most important teaching from this experience for all of us was that it was time for language, song and ceremony to be a greater part of the Possum Dreaming journey and this was
the next stage and level of learnings we had to incorporate into our work and share with community.

Ngaken ngaken
Ngaken ngaken deen
watangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
Ngaken ngaken
goopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
Ngaken ngaken
goopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
koopangalang-tja
Ngathoongan deen
Ngathoongan deen

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Wangan Ngootyoong - Depictions of Gunditjmara Ways of Knowing Being and Doing

When attempting to relate a visual interpretation to an audience and to express my perceptions of an idea, a concept or a story, I use an internal process I have described as ‘distilling’: distilling the story, idea or concept through layers or filters of knowledge. I allow the idea to ‘float’ in my mind's eye, passing through conscious and unconscious filters or lenses of my knowledges and knowings. Thoughts, feelings and images ‘float’ to the surface of my awareness, each acting as a lens or filter to shape, clarify and integrate the idea. As each lens or filter is applied the concept morphs, changes and grows until it crystallises. The idea or learning becomes clear, it becomes integrated through my internal knowledge and knowing systems and I have a 'completed' idea/learning. In this way much of my visual artwork is an abstracted essence representing and using symbols and motifs to tell the stories, to relate a message or idea.

The visual language of symbols is an ancient tradition used by cultures around the world as a means of interpreting and representing our understandings of the world in which we live. (www.jonathonart.com)

Many aspects of my works are inspired by nature – the patterns, the seeming randomness and the colours. For example, I have used the spiral symbol in the following works as a common feature in all of the designs to represent various ideas and thoughts from our personal sacred place, the deep inner spring that resides in us all (Ungunmerr-Baumann & Brennan 1989), for representations of community, culture and connection.
It is an alluringly simple symbol with many layers of meaning and representation. Depictions of the spiral in visual communication sees it representing concepts and objects ranging from the seemingly mundane through to the sacred - the natural cycle of all things in our known universe - star systems, orbits, vortex, weather and seasonal cycles, whirlwinds, water flows, spirit or life force, the seed, the unfurling new growth - the never ending birth, life, death, rebirth cycle... Carl Jung, the famous psychiatrist, said that the spiral is an archetypal symbol that represents cosmic force ... Some consider the spiral a symbol of the spiritual journey. It is also considered to represent the evolutionary process of learning and growing... (www.zenzibar.com/cosmicspiral)

The works in Figures 1-3 came about from my involvement in the Silcar Deep Listening Project with the Koori Cohort at RMIT University. I was commissioned to do three designs to represent ‘deep listening’. I did four designs and one was selected for use as the symbol for the project.

Figure 1: ‘wangan ngootyoong’ – Interconnectedness (V. Couzens 2008)  
Watercolour and marker on paper

Figure 1, ‘wangan ngootyoong - Interconnectedness’ references ‘deep listening’ through coming together in our hearts and spirits (spiral). Travelling that road together, linked through lines of communication, resonating frequencies from the human voice to vibrational energy senses. Linked, entwined in our interconnectedness.
Figure 2: ‘wangan ngootyoong’ – Community (V.Couzens 2008)
Watercolour and marker on paper

Figure 2, ‘wangan ngootyoong – Community’ is developed from a symbol on the Lake Condah Possum Skin Cloak. In this interpretation it is intended to represent the meaning and being of and in community. Community is family, kinship and working together, looking after, caring for Country and Community through ‘deep listening’.
Figure 3: ‘wangan ngoottyoomg’ – Culture (V. Couzens 2008)

Figure 3, ‘wangan ngoottyoomg – Culture’ references the possum skin cloak as the background shape with long white shapes that represent bones. The cloak is both a physical object and a symbol as a vessel for knowledge. Stories of clan, kinship and Country are etched into and carried throughout a person’s lifetime in their Possum Skin Cloak. The bones are about body and knowledge that is held in our DNA. They are about Belonging to Country and are used here to convey the message ‘...our blood, bones and stories... (O. Glennen pers. comm. 2004) are in this Country’.

The spiral, again the universal symbol for life-birth-death and the continuing cycles that turn from the life of a butterfly who lives two weeks to the neverending cycles of the cosmos. Culture is the framework through which we are connected to our world and the spiral is a representation of the elements of culture – language, song, story, dance, knowledge.

Figures 4 and 5 are inspired through research into DNA and cells. How our bodies are built and work in receiving information and messages. They are visual interpretations of ‘deep listening’, visual, aural, emotional (heart) and spirit levels. Elements of the works are derived from cellular structures such as receptors within the retina to neural synapses which relay information to the appropriate area of the brain. Some parts depict the cellular structure of the heart (muscle). The spiral references the cochlear which is part of the physiology of the ear, capturing aural messag-
The spiral is a universal symbol relating to the spirit world, and in these works it carries layers of meaning from the physical to the spiritual. Mitochondrial DNA, the bottom-line building blocks that define who we are, carry our individual codes which makes us unique individuals. They are the seeds of our ‘knowing’. These images evoke the sense of ‘deep listening’ – listening with your spirit, your heart, as interconnected beings in the cycle of life, part of nature, related to all, children of Mother Earth.

Figures 4 and 5: Embodiment - Spirit, Heart and Body (V. Couzens 2008)
Gouache and marker on paper
4. **Possum Dreaming Story:**

**kooramookyan-an yakeeneeyt-an kooweeikoooweeyan-an**

### 4.1 Background

My life’s work has been underpinned by principles of Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination. Working for almost 40 years in Aboriginal community affairs with a driving passion for the reclamation and regeneration of Aboriginal knowledges and practices has led me to this stage in my life. For the past eighteen years I have been working with Possum Skin Cloaks.

### 4.2 Encountering the Lake Condah Possum Skin Cloak: My Story

‘kooramookyan-an yakeeneeyt-an kooweeikoooweeyan-an’, my Possum Cloak Dreaming Story, began in 1999. I attended a printmaking workshop offered through the Melbourne Museum’s Roving Curator program facilitated by Lorraine Coutts, in partnership with Australian Print Workshop in Fitzroy. Aboriginal artists from across Victoria were invited to the workshop. I was part of a group of artists living and working in East Gippsland at the time, and a member of the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation. As part of the workshop we were taken to the Museum to view items from their collections. Our group was taken into a collections room that staff had set up for viewing an array of material cultural objects including baskets, spears, shields and the like. We were shown many beautiful and precious objects of our Peoples. We were encouraged to engage with and study these objects closely as inspiration for our printmaking. We were able to wander and look at what we felt inclined to, to ask questions and at times, with supervision, handle the objects. After a time we were called to gather around a large unopened box. As we gathered, the box was opened to reveal the Lake Condah Possum Skin Cloak (Lake Condah is in my Grandmother’s Country in the western districts of Victoria, near Heywood.)

The Lake Condah Cloak, collected in the 1870s, was laid bare, without the usual barriers of a glass case. Being in such close proximity I was overwhelmed with sensations. I stared at the details of the designs and stitching, smelling it and wondering, how was it made? Who were the makers? I was enthralled. Emotions welled and swirled inside of me - awe, respect, love, yearning. This yearning was a physical sensation, a tugging of heart strings, a reaching of spirit, to know my Ancestors, a sense of loss, of knowledge, of language, of wanting to fill empty spaces. I sensed the veils of time and space part; I felt the Old People surround our group, I could almost reach out and touch them. These emotions welling from deep within coalesced inside of me into an immediate connection with this Cloak from my Grandmother’s Country. It was a profound encounter, a powerful spiritual experience, between the Cloak, the Ancestors who made it and my-
self. The entire group felt the Old People’s presence and sensed the magic and power of this Cloak. (Note: The Melbourne Museum holds two 19th century possum skin cloaks, the Lake Condah Cloak (Gunditjmara) collected in the 1870s and the Maiden’s Punt Cloak (Yorta Yorta) collected in the 1850s. See Figures 6 and 7.)

![Figure 6: Lake Condah Possum Skin Cloak (1872). (Melbourne Museum line drawing)](image)

We left the museum affected and inspired by our experience of being with the objects and the presence of the Ancestors. During our return to the print workshop, the Old People ‘spoke’ to me. They conveyed, through my internal Knowing and Being process, like the conveyance by way of dreams or in a Deep Listening Way, that Possum Skin Cloaks ‘...belonged back in community...’ and ‘...I was to revive the knowledge about Possum Skin Cloaks, to bring it back to community...’ On our arrival back at the workshop I spoke to my colleague Lee Darroch of the vision that was
unfolding in my mind. I was trying to articulate the concept and vision of what was growing inside of me as this experience and vision began settling and integrating into my Knowing and Being.

In the receiving of knowledge from the Old People by way of a vision or dream, you can enter into a sensory mode of wholistic experiencing: that is, your mind, body and spirit are totally and wholly engaged, almost to the absolute exclusion of any other stimulation. Or sometimes it's a small quiet voice that is perceived as an intuitive thought. For myself at this time I experienced the sense of these ideas 'falling' into my mind (as if from outside of myself) and an accompanying intuitive sense of quiet voice 'speaking' to me. In these differing ways the information being conveyed can sometimes take time interpret and is by virtue of the medium, abstracted and not particularly direct or in a form that is readily interpreted. This simply means it can take a few moments to digest and understand what is happening and what is the message. Yet what I am describing is happening in micro time: that is, it seems like a longer time but when you check only seconds or minutes have passed. The words I spoke to my colleague Lee Darroch were in real time, as the vision was unfolding internally. My words were something like:

... I/we need to make copies of those old cloaks... yes...no...yes...uummmm make those cloaks but the cloaks... cloaks, cloak-making needs to go back to community...they, possum skin cloaks belong in community... (Couzens 1999 pers. comm. to Darroch)

Following my disclosure I began discussing with Lee what it all meant and began to talk about ways of realising the vision. Through these discussions I was expressing my imaginings to Lee about taking the Possum Cloaks back to belonging in community and was considering how this might happen. During this conversation with Lee, the renowned Yorta Yorta artist and printmaker Treahna Hamm arrived (Treahna is also Lee’s cousin). Lee and myself informed Treahna of our visit to the Museum and I excitedly told her about the Possum Cloak vision. As we were talking further, I suggested that with Treahna’s arrival it seemed to be serendipitous, ‘part of the Ancestors’ plan’, and as a starting point, we could create reproductions of the historical cloaks because we all had heritage connections to both historical cloaks in the Museum. Lee and Treahna could make a copy of the Yorta Yorta cloak and myself and my sister Debra could make a copy of the Lake Condah cloak and we could exhibit at the Museum (see Figure 8). It is important to emphasise that of the two Cloaks held at the Melbourne Museum, one is from my Grandmother’s Country, Gunditjmara, and the other is from Yorta Yorta Country, Lee’s and Treahna’s heritage. This is a central factor which underpins and makes ‘sense’ of the way in which the Possum Cloak Dreaming Story began, first through the Lake Condah cloak Ancestors’ vision and then came to
incorporate the Yorta Yorta cloak, through Lee and Treahna’s heritage connection. Taking these things into account it seemed destined to be, preordained, that we were all there at this time and the journey that unfolded consequently became a collective collaborative journey.

I still didn’t know how we would return Cloak-making and related cultural knowledges and practices to communities. There was just this vision, this calling from the Old People to **reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember**.

Those first words, once voiced, breathed life into and set in motion what has become a life-long journey of learning, teaching and healing, embracing many Aboriginal community groups and individuals; reaching out as well to groups and individuals from other cultures.

**Cloak projects**

‘tooloyn koorrtakay – squaring skins for rugs’

From the discussions at this time we agreed to recreate replicas or reproductions of the two historical cloaks. I was to apply for funding to enable us to recreate the copies of our two Ancestral cloaks, and to have an exhibition of our work. In the Project, titled ‘tooloyn koorrtakay – squaring skins for rugs’, Lee and Treahna were to work collaboratively on recreating the Yorta Yorta cloak and my sister Debra Couzens and I were to work as a team on the Lake Condah cloak. It was integral to our work to follow cultural protocol and seek support and permissions from Elders in our respective communities. Lee and Treahna approached the Yorta Yorta Council of Elders and Debra and myself spoke with our father, Senior Gunditjmara Elder Ivan Couzens and subsequent-
ly Gunditj Mirring Elders. We were supported throughout this project closely by our father Ivan, Gunditj Mirring Elders and Yorta Yorta Elders Uncle Henry Atkinson and Uncle Alf ‘Boydie’ Turner.

A successful grant from the City of Melbourne facilitated the opportunity to do this project. ‘tooloyn koorratakay – squaring skins for rugs’ was supported by the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum and the exhibition opened in 2002. The exhibition was a resounding success. The Cloaks were visually magnificent and awe-inspiring and, having been not known generally in community at this time, they evoked a deep emotional response.

At this point I would like to acknowledge Uncle Bill Onus (dec.), who in the 1950s and 60s was making and selling cloaks and other cultural objects through his entrepreneurial tourism retail business. Also other contemporary artists Gail Madigan and Kelly Koumalatsis and Elder Uncle Wally Cooper (dec.), who had made possum cloaks as part of their cultural journey.

Tooloyn Koorratakay exhibition was acquired by the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. (See also image in Figure 33, Chapter 6.)

Following 'tooloyn koorratakay', we all returned to our home communities and continued our usual work. ‘tooloyn koorratakay – squaring skins for rugs’ was inspirational to community and ourselves alike. However, whilst it brought Possum Skin Cloaks to the attention of the community, it hadn’t instilled the practice of making back into community; cloaks were still not ‘living’ in community. This was the key, the heart and spirit of the vision from the Old People. So the real work was still to be done. It was time to enact the next part, to bring the skills and knowledge to communities. At the same time I wanted to explore Possum Skin Cloaks more and to search out the stories and knowledge in my own community.

I felt driven and compelled to make a start on bringing the cloaks back to community in ways that the Exhibition did not intend nor was able to deliver. In 2002-2004, I successfully gained funding support through Arts Victoria (now Creative Victoria) and Regional Arts Victoria, to begin two new projects: a regional community project making cloaks and a personal creative cultural exploration project to create a Possum Skin Cloak for each of the 21 clans of my language group, the Keerray Woorroong.
‘mayapa koorramookyan yakeeneeyt’ (make cloaks dreaming)

The regional community project, ‘mayapa koorramook yakeeneeyt’ (make cloaks dreaming), was in partnership with Brambuk Cultural Centre and involved working with Gunditjmara Portland and Warrnambool communities and the Djab Wurrung and Jarwadjali communities of the Gariwerd regions of south west Victoria. The community project was to bring cloak making home to community and so each community would come together to make a shared cloak that was to be kept and used by that community for events, ceremonies and other important gatherings. In Warrnambool community I worked with my cousin/brother Jamie Thomas. Jamie’s idea was to create a cloak for use at ceremonies for the stages/phases of life – birth/youth/adult – life/death. I mentored Jamie in the production process, guiding him in cutting, sewing and design development and application techniques. He created a cloak that continues to be used in ceremonies including naming days, marriages, dance and other community events.

At Gariwerd, I worked with Titta Secombe, a Senior Knowledge Holder and Elder of the Jarwadali and Wotjobaluk peoples, with Gunditjmara heritage connections. Titta and her family created two cloaks to represent their respective language groups. They continue to use these cloaks in ceremony and community life. In Portland community I worked with a local Gunditjmara woman whom I mentored in the production processes of creating a community possum skin cloak. This cloak remains with community.

This regional community project gave rise to the need to create a method for the delivery of the Project program of workshops. In my funding applications I had described a broad brushstrokes, flexible delivery community mentoring and participatory model that was founded in cultural structures and ways of doing. The actual delivery of the workshops aided the further development of this model and provided the groundwork for models of working in future, forthcoming projects.

The workshop model, being founded in Aboriginal cultural ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, was inherently flexible and responsive to different communities and their differing needs. The workshops were/are teaching and learning opportunities for revitalisation of cultural knowledge and practices and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, which were/are in turn underpinned by principles of cultural autonomy. Cultural autonomy and authority means, and in this context was intended, to convey to community participants the learnings of and sense of ‘belonging’ to this practice and knowledge. Participants are and become the authors and ‘custodians’ of their own cultural heritage. With knowledge comes responsibility, and the responsibility is to hold those learnings and to hand them on; to share and teach where appropriate to their
families and community. This model, founded in Aboriginal ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, is empowering for individuals and communities in re-invigorating or igniting individual and collective strengthening of identity and self worth. The experience of participating in a cloak making workshop can be the catalyst of a decolonising process for individual and collective thinking and actions.

In this Possum Cloak workshop model I was able to respond to community needs and deliver a Possum Cloak making workshop in a mode that changed to best suit the particular community. Workshops could be delivered in an intensive consecutive timeline model; or in a sessional structure over an extended period of time, depending on what suited that community at that time.

This regional Project and workshop program was the first in a line of actions that would be instrumental in realising the vision of returning cloak making to communities, the beginnings of the larger Possum Cloak Story yet to emerge.

‘meerta peeneeyt, yana peeneeyt, tanam peeneeyt’
(stand strong, walk strong, proud flesh strong)
Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games Possum Skin Cloak Project

Unbeknownst to myself or others, at that time, a major opportunity to bring the Possum Cloak Story to Aboriginal communities across the Victoria was being seeded. In 2005, I was attending a ‘think tank’ I had been invited to along with other Victorian Aboriginal artists, Elders and producers. The ‘think tank’ was to develop concepts for Aboriginal contribution to the Opening Ceremony of the forthcoming Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games. It was at this think tank that the idea for having cloaks as part of the Opening Ceremony was seeded. I had one of my possum cloaks returned to me at that meeting and so many people at that meeting were able to have a first time, up close and personal experience of a possum skin cloak. Many were overwhelmed, especially Wesley Enoch, the Artistic Director of the Opening Ceremony. Bambu, Joy Murphy-Wandin, Senior Wurundjeri Elder, was present and was inspired to say ‘...let's do Possum Cloaks in the Opening ceremony...’. And so the larger Possum Cloak Story began.

The idea was taken up by the group and presented to the Aboriginal Advisory Group to the Commonwealth Games, who endorsed the concept. This was the avenue through which we came to work with 35 language groups across Victoria to create a possum skin cloak for an Elder or nominated Community Representative to wear at the Opening Ceremony, to represent and present our culture to the world. Through this opportunity the responsibility to the vision of the Old People in returning cloaks to community was implemented across the state.
Regional Arts Victoria (RAV) were contracted to be the Project Managers and I was appointed as Artistic Director for the Project. On my commencement in this role I was assigned to work directly with Bin Dixon-Ward, the Senior Project Manager at RAV who usually oversaw all RAV Projects. For this Project Bin was working exclusively in the role of Project Manager, heading up the Project Team. We began with designing the Project: who are we working with? how would it work? What is the scope and capacity of what we are undertaking? Who do we need? Who do we have to ask? What resourcing do we need? And so on – a major planning and logistical production.

The Commonwealth Games Possum Cloak Project was the largest scale project that I had been involved in. The plan was to engage with 38 or more of over 40 language groups across Victoria to create a Possum Skin Cloak to be worn by an Elder or community representative at the Opening Ceremony of the Melbourne 2006 Games. To deliver this Project we developed a model for project implementation that had Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing embedded in it. In our planning, I was supported and guided by Bin and her expertise and experience in project management of large scale projects. She encouraged my intellectual cultural contributions in the project design through facilitating the expression of my ideas and concepts. Bin drew out my knowledge of Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing - of community engagement, protocols and appropriate project modelling structures – to support and apply to a respectful and responsible implementation of the Project. The model we developed was informed by the experiences of the ‘mayapa kooramook yakeen – make cloaks dreaming’ project and my accumulated life experience of living and working in Aboriginal community. It comprised a community cultural based structure that reflected our Ways of Doing and Being, with cultural protocols, Aboriginal empowerment and autonomy as guiding principles.

The Project Management Team comprised the Project Manager (Bin Dixon-Ward), the Project Administrator (Carolyn Sanders), the Artistic Director (myself) and behind the scenes support by RAV CEO and Administrative staff. The structure reflected Ways of Doing by employing a local artist who was selected through a community advertising process that included a requirement to be endorsed by the Elders of that language group. Through this process the final selection decision making rested with the Elders and Community. The Local Artist was employed to work with local Traditional Custodians, Elders and community to create a Possum Skin Cloak. The Local Artist was responsible for engaging with community, co-ordinating and facilitating workshops, ensuring Protocols were developed for the Cloak and producing the Possum Cloak. Local Artists
from 35 language groups were supported by Lead Artists: Lee Darroch and Trehna Hamm, joined by Maree Clarke. Each of these Lead Artists was chosen for their experience in the arts and community and for Lee and Trehna, their recent experience in Possum Cloaks. The Lead Artists were invited on board once the design of the Project structure and implementation strategy was complete. The Lead Artists worked across cultural affiliated regions supporting the Local Artists in the delivery of the workshops, providing hands on skills training, direction and cultural guidance. Lee lived and worked in East Gippsland and was therefore allocated Eastern Region. Trehna, living in Albury-Wodonga, took on the Northeast and Central Regions of the state respectively, and Maree, the northwest region of the state. I also had a dual role, as Lead Artist for the West, Southwest and Central Regions. In this way we covered the whole of Victoria. The Lead Artists with the Project Team provided overall support as well as practical direction and implementation.

The Games Cloak Project offered the opportunity for community cultural development on a large scale. Stories were told and shared with other community participants and groups; knowledge and skills passed on from Elders to the younger generations. This all involved the incorporation of different Aboriginal languages where people were stimulated to seek language for the names of possums and the making of the cloak, and language for the development of songs and ceremony relating to the cloaks. The Project was effective in the strengthening of cultural identity and pride, the healing of our spirit and the re-awakening of a continuing cultural practice that had been sleeping for a while. These cultural practices are just a shortlist of the ongoing benefits and cultural reclamation, regeneration and revitalisation occurring in Aboriginal communities across southeastern Australia.

As I reflect on this experience over the years, my understanding of the significance of this experience and our subsequent cultural and spiritual journey has flourished and deepened. From that first moment I had a sense of the enormity of the journey about to be undertaken, yet at the same time not realising just what this sense of responsibility would entail, and the social, cultural and spiritual impact this journey would make on ourselves and our communities. During our many and various projects which were the pathways to bringing the vision of the Old People to our communities, we would reflect and remember and be again inspired to continue with our responsibilities. We were given their guidance through dreams, messages, advice from Elders and community and through experiencing intuitive moments in our reflective discussions of ‘where to next’ in the Possum Dreaming journey. We continue to be guided by the Old People in these ways.
The vision also included researching other Possum Skin Cloaks held in other institutions around the world and reconnecting those Cloaks with their communities. Over time, my family, friends and colleagues, including Debra Couzens, Lee Darroch, Trehna Hamm, Maree Clarke, Amanda Reynolds and Esther Kirby, to name a few, have collaborated with over 75 Aboriginal communities across south eastern Australia. Together, we shaped an unique cultural revival and regeneration journey. We are the vessels. It is with deep knowing that if not for the Old People designing the destiny of the Cloak journey, it would not have happened. From my first encounter with the Lake Condah cloak in 1999 through to now, the vision of the Old People has been achieved. Cloaks are living back in community, their belonging is revitalised and they have become the proud iconic symbol of southeastern Australian Aboriginal cultural Ways of Knowing Being and Doing.

4.3 Cloaks and Healing

Healing in an Aboriginal context is wholistic, embracing physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation:

Healing is a sacred process that strengthens people, families, communities and whole of nations to be restored to wellbeing and wholeness. It is a personal journey that can involve recovery from trauma, addiction, and other types of adversity, and includes experiences such as cultural renewal, change, and reconnection to spirit.

(ATSIF Website [http://www.healingfoundation.org.au/])

Healing through cultural regeneration and reclaiming identity is a well-recognised phenomenon in Aboriginal communities. Healing is grounded in our deep spiritual beliefs as eloquently described by Aunty Lilla Watson:

Aboriginal people believe that the spirit child comes from the earth... I haven’t seen this belief about the spirit child in any other culture, even Indigenous ones. We come from this earth, we are born from the earth. We believe that the whole of life is a spiritual experience and that we as Aboriginal people are actually more spirit than matter... I really believe that emotions can create chemical reactions in the body. If we don’t face those emotions, it can create sicknesses... So for Aboriginal people, the whole of life is a spiritual experience, and so the whole of sickness is a spiritual process. The spirit cannot be in balance if it is out of balance with the body. If you’re spiritually unwell, you can’t help but affect the whole of your being... See, the impact of colonization has been huge... we Aboriginal people are spiritual people and we are still recovering because of colonization... There’s not a lot of understanding about the part of white Australia because they have this misguided belief that colonialism doesn’t affect them. Of course it does! It’s made them
into the people they are today, which means they cannot hear what Aborigi-
nal people are telling them... Many are trying to run away from their own
history... As they get older and more mature [chuckles], hopefully they’ll
have a better understanding... You see, that mouth of the snake... our people
have retreated into the belly of the snake. It's our consolidation of our Abo-
riginality, a renewing of our identity. Only recently have we begun emerging
from the mouth of the snake with renewal and consolidation of who we are...
You see, it's the white terms of reference, it's their misinterpretations that
have given definition to Aboriginal illnesses. (Watson, pers. comm., cited in
Phillips 2003, p. 25)

Some government departments have begun to recognise this approach to healing, assisted by
health research, and have implemented policies that translate into funding programs for com-
munities. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation (ATSIHF) is an organisa-
tion set up as a result of the 'Voices from the Campfires' Report (ATSIHF 2009) in response to the
National Apology delivered in 2008. ATSIHF’s mandate is to provide support and resourcing for
healing projects around the nation. The Foundation works to address the trauma associated with
past government policies such as the removal of children from their families (ATSIHF Website
http://www.healingfoundation.org.au/ ). In my experience over the past 17 years, spiritual heal-
ing has been at the centre of the work I have done with colleagues, friends and family. Whilst we
teach Cloak-making in the practical sense of cutting, sewing, incising, burning, it is the experience
of making, wearing, learning language, cultural stories and knowledge, of coming together in
community, of connecting to each other, to culture and to songlines that initiates a healing jour-
ney or brings about healing in all who join in.

When a person is enfolded in a cloak for the first time, a sense of empowerment is tangible to the
viewer. An array of emotions flit in rapid succession moving across the person’s face. There are
smiles, tears and laughter in between moments of reflection. You can see a quietness and still-
ness, a withdrawing inward, then more smiles and a standing tall. There is a pulling back of
shoulders with head held high and chests swell with pride. Men become ‘warriors’, women stand
regally. Mothers and grandmothers call their families to come and snuggle together in the Cloak
and to pose for family photos. All this speaks of a sense of strengthening and empowerment, of
homecoming in a physical and spiritual sense.

Here are some evaluation comments from people who have participated in the workshops,
demonstrating the experiences of healing:

This workshop made me remember. Made me think about the importance of
our mobs. All together. Put things aside to come together for cultural busi-
ness. One way, only way, right way – is together. We’ve got all different mobs together here – we’ve come to learn and share. We put up borders, we put up boundaries – but the songlines cross all of them. Where we are today and where we should be – is together with culture. Thank you. (Anonymous, Banmirra workshop 2011)

When I put the cloak on it sent shivers down my spine and made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It felt good to have it on ... (it) gives you a sense of country and culture and helps us reconnect to our ancestors. (Anonymous, Cloak workshop Part II, Hunter Valley 2011)

Aboriginal communities and our ways of Knowing, Being and Doing are strengthened through workshops bringing families and communities together.

The Cloak-making workshops bring healing in individuals, families and communities. Deeply felt realisations of empowerment for participants through their Cloak-making experiences strengthens their heart, mind, body and spirit.

I used to feel like you couldn’t do it – but now you know you can. It’s given us the skills to carry on. I’ve flagged with my family and we’re going to move forward and make a cloak for my Aunty, for my brother and for me. In that order – age order. (Anonymous, Banmirra workshop 2011)

The workshops, and the ongoing support and advice we provide, have given people the opportunity to learn, to reconnect to important cultural practices and knowledge, and through this reconnecting, to heal. From the feedback, we see that the Possum Skin Cloak making process has been a profound spiritual experience for many (see Chapter 7). In a Cloak making workshop different generations interact. Stories are told, family and kinship networks are strengthened and this supports the transference of knowledge and the responsibilities that come with being given and holding knowledge.

It is one thing to have a smile on your face but it is another to have happiness in your heart. This gave me happiness in my heart. (Anonymous, Banmirra workshop 2011)
4.4 Cloaks and Country – Possum Skin Cloaks: Designs and Landscape

The visual language of the markings on possum skin rugs directly connects us to Country: they depict who we are and where we come from. Figure 9 below shows a line drawing of the Lake Condah possum skin cloak held in the Melbourne Museum. The cloak in Figure 9 was the catalyst for our kooramook yakeeneeyt exhibition. Figure 10 shows the synergy of designs and landscape. The image shows the correlation between the symbols on the cloak and the camp ovens and sleeping pits observed in the 1840s by George Augustus Robinson. The meaning of these symbols and others from the original Lake Condah cloak became apparent during the making of a contemporary possum skin cloak for the National Museum of Australia (compare Figure 11). This process was very much a direct experience similar to the one described by Rover Thomas (see Section 3.1) in that cultural knowledge is acquired in our consciousness through osmosis or by way of a dream. The Dreaming of knowledge continued throughout our possum skin cloak-making journey and is still ongoing in the work we continue today. Figure 12 is a drawing of Lake Condah, and the photo background shows Lake Condah when it is full of water.

![Figure 9: Lake Condah Possum Cloak (1853)
Melbourne Museum line drawing](image)
Figure 10: Map of eel traps 1841 sketched by George Augustus Robinson 1872 reproduced in Clark (1998: 308)

Figure 11: Design detail from reproduction of Lake Condah possum skin cloak collected in 1872 V. Couzens and D. Couzens (2002) Photo by Dean McNicoll National Museum of Australia. (Reproduced from Reynolds 2005)

Figure 12: Aerial view of Lake Condah Photo by Robin Sharrock Australian Heritage Photo Library (Reproduced from Reynolds 2005)
4.5 Cloaks and Language

As the land and language are inextricably linked, possum skin cloaks are inherently connected to and intrinsically part of ceremony, songs, dance and story. Cloaks are used in many varied ways, from day-to-day uses in warmth and bedding to ceremonies including initiation, musical accompaniment as the women would drum on the stretched skins, and in healing practices. They are worn at gatherings and celebrations and the markings display your clan and Country. The markings and designs on cloaks hold the stories of clan, Country and place, making the cloaks repositories of knowledge. The visual and written works here are about representing that interconnectedness in contemporary cultural expression, thus linking language and cloaks.

Figure 13: ‘alam meeng ngaorteen weeng - ancestral memory’ (V. Couzens c. 2000)

Photo V. Couzens

Maree Stones, Weerreeyarr Woman Spirit, Leerpen Kanoo Meerreeng

Land and language are inextricably linked. Language is directly connected to place, through the mimicry of animals and nature in dance; the visual language in body art, motifs and symbols in stone etchings, sand paintings, and ceremonial ornaments, music, sound and vocalisation, and the naming and relationship of all things, embodying the interconnectedness of our existence. From the Creation times all things came into Being: the creatures, the people and our Mother Earth. As the Ancestral Beings lived, loved, fought and died, they created all the features of the natural world and the rules and laws for living. Their actions were transformed into landscape:
into the rivers, lakes and billabongs, the hills, mountain ridges and valleys, the sand-hills and plains, the caves and rock shelters. These places hold the stories of Ancestral Dreamings and are handed down through the generations in songs, stories, ceremony, ritual and dance. Language, story, song, and dance resonate with Country and place. Our language is the voice of the Land and this is heard in our songs. Our stories are the body of the Land and the rhythm and heartbeat of the Land is felt in the dance. In these ways our culture and language are embodied in Country.

**Woman Spirit – weerreeyaar**

Woman Spirit - weerreeyaar  

**ceremony, dance, song**  

**language, totem, dilly bag**  

**long time gone**  

to get them back  
i must find the key  
ancestral memory  
secret truth I must find again  
this is my journey  
creation magic of Woman Spirit  
this is my Law  

daughters hold to carry on  
seven generations..... and more  
keetoong......  
to keep the memory fire burning bright  

tidda, yorga, cudgeree  
ngaloyn, ngeerrang, thookay  
we belong to all same One  

woman Spirit – weerreeyaar  

Vicki Couzens © 1992
leerpeen kanoo meerreeeng – Sing up Country
pookkarr leerpeen (river song)

tangang puunhort  Hopkins Falls
murri-murkrii buurkrrakil shivering with cold, middle of winter - homestead of former
junction of Hopkins and Blacks rivers (Mt Emu Creek)
borroinyel-o night moon (source near Ararat)
bura kangaroo (western kulin near Ararat)
moyjil mouth of river nr pt Ritchie
pang no, refers to lower reaches of river
tonedidjerer waterhole near ‘Buruumbeep’ station
tuuram salmon/tidal estuary, where the salt water meets the fresh
water

winburren locality
alloburng locality
lappeet parreeyt salt water – locality on river (dharwurd)
lapeeyt salt
lappeeet salt – locality on river at ‘Gibbs’ – possibly Bolac plains
mopor locality – mopor gundidj clan
pannitarngite locality on river
perrenarrerwarre locality on river
porronedernite locality
porry locality
warerangjele locality at ‘Mt Fairies’ west of Rodger at ‘Kona Warren’ and
‘Merrang’ sth of Hexham

woerrer locality
wornghome locality
worrocubberrin locality (worro = 'wurru', 'lips')
yeddý yereim locality at or nr Websters, Mt Shadwell, Mortlake
pookarr lower reaches
wirpneung mouth of river
baller baller cort baler baler cote gundidj clan nr Hexham
poonoong poonoong waterhole nr Framlingham mission station

V Couzens © 2010

marree – stones

the stones are strength, stability and longevity
Stones hold our Earth together
Stones hold and support us
Stones keep our stories and
our Spirits safe
Stones speak to each other, passing on messages
Whispering secrets of the Ancient Ones
Stones are healing
Stones unseen.

marree peeneeyt peeneeyt maleeyeeto
marree mana ngeeye meerreeeng ngarrake-toong
marree mana ngathoongan
marree nganto pay ngeeye leerpeen ba
marree laka maar, wooka meetako yakeen
teerpta
leerpeen wanyoo alam meen

marree ngootyoong
marree yoolooween

VL Couzens © 2001, Translated into Keerray Woorroong 2007
Figure 14, Tooram Maree, is a depiction of a family story as told to me by our father, Ivan Couzens (dec.). It is an important place. The Old People had camps here and maintained fish and eel traps. It is the place where the salt water meets the fresh water in the Hopkins River near Allansford, near Warrnambool. It is a place his father had told him about and taken him there, and Dad used to take us there too.

4.6 Cloaks and Culture

Our culture is the longest surviving culture on planet Earth. Our Culture is unique. Aboriginal Culture is founded in a fundamental belief or knowing of place and belonging. This profound spirituality arises from an innate connectedness to Creation; the Dreaming, the beginning of all things, from the Earth, our Mother.

We are born of the spirit of our Country. It is where we are conceived from, it is our home, and it is where we belong. The responsibility and obligation to look after the homelands of our family clan group is a birthright handed down through bloodlines from generation to generation. Totemic relationships with birds and animals connect us to both the physical world and the spiritu-
al world and underpin a reciprocal obligation to care for each other and for the natural environment.

This is the framework through which we connect to our Country, our Belonging. It defines and makes us who we are. Our language, stories, songs, dance, artefacts, cultural knowledge and practices demonstrate our continuing connections. Land, language and identity are fundamental to our Being. To know who you are, and where you come from, is to know your Place.

Figure 15 (left): Jarrah Bundle

With the coming of the whiteman our way of Being was threatened. The systematic genocide of our people, forced from our homelands, our Country, lives lost in battles and massacres, forcibly moved onto mission stations enduring the restrictive practices imposed by the Government policies and administration: the missionaries' 'benevolence', removal of children, dividing of families, the scrutiny and control of our daily lives - all these have conspired to deny us our Identity. No more were we allowed to sing our songs, speak our languages and conduct our ceremonies. Ceremonies of honour and renewal, perfectly in tune with and resonating with Country, the natural environment and the People. These customs and knowledge have been denied to us through the inhumane, oppressive practices of the colonisers. Our identity has been fragmented - missing pieces, gaping wounds, in the body of our cultural knowledge, traditions and practices. Yet we have survived, each generation of families reclaiming, regenerating and remembering more of our sleeping knowledges. Some we have cherished and nurtured through the generations and others we are reawakening through the legacies of our Old People. In these times, through the work of those who have gone before us, we have regained the freedom, our birthright to reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember who we are and where we come from.
5. Pre-colonial Stories of Possum Skin Cloaks

5.1 Role and Significance of Possum Skin Cloaks

The information in this chapter has been synthesised predominantly from Cahir (2005) and historical records, republished as Smyth (1972), Howitt (1996), and Dawson (1981).

Possum Skin Cloaks were a vital part of Aboriginal people’s lives in pre-European times. Cloaks were used in daily activity, to keep warm, to sleep in and to carry our babies. To make a cloak was a very labour intensive and time consuming process. The skins were gathered, stretched and cured, incised with designs and sewn together with kangaroo sinew, some Cloaks comprising fifty or more skins. The skins were decorated to depict aspects of clan and Country affiliations.

Various species of possums supplied an extensive range of resources and tools for primary human needs of warmth, shelter and nourishment. These resources were procured from the skin, fur, bones and flesh of the possum.

The considerable range of ceremonial as well as purely utilitarian goods that were derived from possum skins demonstrates the importance of this commodity to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Indeed, its significance as a material cultural item may be gauged from the many diverse purposes it was used for, both before and after European contact. A list of uses would include sleeping rugs, cloaks, musical (percussion) instruments, spiritual amulets, ornamentation, handles for tools, footballs, medicines, pouches for tools, housing, water bags, baby carriers, yarn, initiation dress, and burial shrouds for deceased clans people. (Cahir 2005)

Possum flesh was eaten and roasted in fires. Whole skins were used as water-carriers and storage containers. Small bags were hung around the neck to carry pegs used for pegging out and preparing skins for use. Fur was rolled with hair to make string. String and skin pieces were used to create body adornment items such as necklaces, arm bands, head bands and dance belts. For sport, possum skins were sewn together to make a ball which was used in a game called ‘marngrook’, a game of keepings off between two teams, using the feet and hands, the progenitor of modern day Australian Rules football (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

Nothing was wasted.

... if a man leave two barramundi behind, he go bad....he can't waste anything. My cultures hard but got to keep him. If you waste him anything now, next year you can't get as much because you already waste. (Neidjie 2007, p. 27)
The jaw bone of the possum was hafted to a wooden handle to produce an engraver which was used to carve designs into wooden implements.

The tool with which the natives use to ornament their wooden shields and other weapons is called Leange-walert. The lower jaw of the opossum is firmly attached to a piece of wood (which serves as a handle) by twine made of the fibre of the bark of a Eucalyptus obliqua and gum. This tool, simple as it is, enables the black to carve patterns in the hard, tough woods of which his weapons are made with ease and rapidity. The front tooth is like a gouge or chisel, and with it he scoops or cuts out the wood with great facility. The old weapons are easily known by the marks made by the tooth. (Smyth 1972, p. 349)

Last but not least, the most substantial and significant item was the Possum Skin Cloak, being used for shelter, warmth, ceremony and trade.

5.2 Making a Possum Skin Cloak

Collecting skins and producing a cloak or sleeping rug was very labour intensive and time consuming with both men and women contributing to this process. Brush tail possums, most commonly used for cloaks, were hunted by men.

the Aboriginal men went hunting possums, and returned with between 40-50, one man had caught ten. (Cahir 2005)

To capture the possums, the men would seek them out in trees with hollows, where possums nest. Once ascertaining there was a possum or two in residence, the men would make notches, with a stone axe, into the lower part of the tree’s trunk. The hunter would place a rope around his waist and the tree trunk and lean back into the rope to create tension and act as a kind of sling, he would then ascend the tree using the notches he had already cut as foot and hand holds and making more as he climbed. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981)

Once the hunter was near the hollow he would beat a club on the trunk or branch where the hollow was, scaring the possum out. He would club and grab it or cause the possum to fall to the ground below, where the rest of the hunters were waiting to capture and finish the possum off. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981)
Sometimes smoke was used to ‘smoke’ the possum out of the tree where the hunter would club it and it would be caught or fall to the ground to the other hunters (Figures 16 & 17).

As the skins were gathered they were stretched and cured by both men and women. The women carried, in a small possum bag, up to 300 handmade wooden pegs which were used to stretch and peg the skin on a piece of flattened bark. Once stretched, the skins were scraped with a sharpened shell or stone implement and cured with smoke, ash and fat, made ready for use. The skins, once prepared, were sewn together by the women with kangaroo sinew. The sinew was obtained by the men, being extracted from the tail or hind leg of the kangaroo. The sinew had to be chewed to break it down into thin threads for use in the sewing of the skins.

During the process of sewing the skins together and after the cloak was completed, the designs depicting clan and Country were incised into each skin. A sharpened mussel shell implement was generally used or sometimes a stone blade or knife. The incising process aided in making the skins more flexible for wearing as well as the practice of rubbing animal fat into human skin along with natural body oils helped, through wear and daily use, to make the skins more supple. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

Ochres were used to colour the skins and/or selected designs. Ochre was used to decorate the cloaks. Each individual had a Possum Skin Cloak. As a child outgrew being carried by his mother,
a cloak was made for them which was theirs from birth to death. The cloak, growing as the child grew, became their life story, a living visual biography. Skins were added and scored with markings that depicted clan and Country; symbols were added as their life unfolded, marking pivotal events: milestones such as initiatory rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, from girl-child to woman or boy to man; marriage, the birth of children and so on. In this way the cloak became powerfully connected to an individual. ‘...each man's rug is particularly marked to signify its particular ownership...’ (Howitt 1996 in Blacklock http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/nqr/fabri.php). The time spent in the gathering of resources, in production and the ceremonial and spiritual significance contributed to the high esteem and economic value of Possum Skin Cloaks.

5.3 Spirituality, Ceremony and Ritual

Aboriginal everyday living through to the most secret and sacred is governed by a wholistic spiritual belief system founded in the Dreaming which I characterise and distill into two quintessential principles of ‘respect and relationship’. These principles underpin the Law of the Land – that is, Laws for living; how each person is connected into the ‘great web of life’ through skin, kin, totems and Country. The Law determines your place, who you are, your belonging and how you live within Country.

... I feel it with my body, with my blood. Feeling all these trees, all this Country ... Earth. Like your father or brother or mother, because you born from earth. (Neidjie 2007, p. 39)

This system, or cultural framework, is one of respect for all things with a mandate to leave things as you find them. It involves caring for creatures and Country through sustainable, conservation practices and ceremonial rituals that maintain Ancestral stories and songlines. Bill Gammage (2011) in his recent publication ‘How Aborigines Made Australia – the Biggest Estate on Earth’ relays a quote from Strehlow revealing:

the overwhelming affection felt by a [native] for his ancestral territory. The mountains and creeks and springs and waterholes are, to him, not merely interesting or beautiful...[but] the handiwork of ancestors from whom he himself has descended. He sees recorded in the surrounding landscape the ancient story of the lives and the deeds of the immortal beings whom he reveres... the whole countryside is his living, age-old family tree. The story of his own totemic ancestor is to the [native] the account of his own doings at the beginning of time, at the dim dawn of life, when the world as he knows it now was being shaped and moulded by all-powerful hands. He himself has played a part in that first glorious adventure, a part smaller or greater according to the original rank of the ancestor of whom he is the present rein-
carnated form... Gurra said to me: “the Ilbalintja soak has been defiled by the hands of the white men...No longer do men pluck up the grass and the weeds and sweep the ground clean around it; no longer do they care for the resting place of Karora...[but] it still holds me fast; and I shall tend it while I can; while I live, I shall love to gaze on this ancient soil. (Strehlow in Gammage 2011, p.131)

This is the cultural lens that frames the importance of possum skins and Possum Skin Cloaks in spiritual beliefs, practices and ceremonial ritual. In everyday life people wore a small amulet or charm bag strung around the neck, produced from skins. (Cahir 2005)

Possum skin ‘charm bags’ held individual items of importance such as a stone or feather or the like. These items might represent an individual's totem, song or dreaming story, similar to a cross on a chain or other religious or sacred symbols. These ‘charm bags’ were a continual, intimate reminder of place, connection and belonging, within a spiritual belief system encompassing the whole of Creation.

5.4 Grief, Loss, Mourning and Burial

In this section I provide, in brief, overviews of some of the many and various practices that are part of a complex system of Aboriginal mourning and funerary practices, and in these descriptions discuss the centrality of possum cloaks.

Aboriginal mourning and funerary practices varied across Australia. Ceremony and ritual were complex and ‘sorry business’ could take several weeks or a couple of months to complete its first stages. In many Aboriginal groups mourning rituals are carried out around one year after the deceased has passed with some rituals being observed for a number of years. For example, in my own cultural group's practice, when a person loses a spouse, the widow or widower would wrap an arm and/or leg bone, which had been extracted from the deceased person prior to burial, in a possum skin, which was placed into a basket and carried for up to two years by the widow (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

...The widow of the deceased chief, by first marriage, wears the bag of calcined bones suspended from her neck. She also gets the lower bones from the right arm, which she cleans and wraps in an opossum skin. This she puts in a long basket made of rushes and ornamented with kangaroo teeth, emu feathers, cockatoo crest feathers, red paint and a lock of hair of the deceased. These relics she carries for two years and keeps them under cover with great care...the body of a chiefess is treated like that of a chief and the bones are carried about in a basket in the same way. (Dawson 1981, p.65)
Burials could take different forms across different cultural groups. Some groups used cremation; others wrapped bodies in bark bundles and placed them in trees to be interred at a later date; others used mounds for interment. Different burial methods occurred across different cultural groups. In south east Australia deceased persons were commonly wrapped in their Possum Skin Cloak and interred or cremated, along with their personal items like shields, spears, baskets, sticks etc. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

...when a person died all their belongings were disposed of, also some people were wrapped in their skin cloaks after their death. (Cahir 2005)

In some groups, if the deceased was cremated, small bags made from possum skin were strung around the neck containing the ashes of the deceased loved one. These were carried for a significant period of time as part of mourning rituals. Some other common practices included the shaving off of hair and the wearing of objects for mourning. In the Mutti Mutti and other related tribes, the women would cut off their hair and cover their heads with caps made from gypsum. These would be worn for up to six months before being placed on the burial mound of the deceased person. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981)

The use of white pipe clay was common, in painting mourners’ faces and sometimes other parts of the body to display mourning. Women would wail and express the characteristics and qualities of the deceased. Women also cut their foreheads, waiting for the blood to stream down their faces and covering their heads and faces with clay. This bloodletting in various forms was common as grief induced self-cutting, hitting the head with stones causing bleeding, ritual scarring, and burning to the torso, arms and legs with hot ashes and coals. Men and women both undertook one or more of these bloodletting processes as part of individual and collective mourning rituals.

a widow mourns for her husband for twelve moons. She cuts her hair quite close, and burns her thighs with hot ashes... (Dawson 1981, p. 66)

The passing of a community member affected the whole community at differing social and spiritual levels depending on the relationship of the person to the deceased and, of course, the role and status of the deceased person to the community. When a person became deceased many adjustments had to be made by the community. Some tribes relinquished names. Any living relatives with the same name had to give up that name and either use another name they already had, inherit another name, or be given a new one. Many tribes used avoidance language when referring to a deceased person. Their name was not spoken again. If that person was a keeper of
a story or song the next story-holder or song-person had to step into that senior role. In some tribes, if the deceased person was a man and left behind a wife or several wives and children they would be given or married to the eldest brother or brothers to be cared for. This allowed for skin and totem groupings to remain intact, maintaining social equilibrium (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

I have briefly described here a few of the various and complex mourning rituals and spiritual practices that were carried out by different tribes, all aimed at keeping balance and harmony for the group socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually.
5.5 Initiation Practices

Initiation and rites of passage practices are common in cultures all around the world. Significant times of transition are common milestones marked by ceremonies and rituals, such as the 'coming of age' when a girl becomes a woman or a boy becomes a man. The rituals acknowledge and celebrate attaining adulthood, taking on the roles and responsibilities of men and women, marriage, births as well as scholarly, athletic, social or community achievements. These ceremonies
and rituals take a multitude of forms from male circumcision, ritual knocking out of teeth or tattooing, to contemporary debutante balls.

The intent and purpose of these rituals is to acknowledge and honour pivotal points in a person’s life. Through a process of learning, ‘the getting of wisdom’, each individual is acknowledged and valued through these rites. Their growing and changing roles, responsibilities and obligations are recognised by their families and communities and the initiate is empowered through this process to take on their new role. In Aboriginal culture initiatory practices are carried out with the same intent and purpose. Prior to becoming an initiate you undertake learning from an early age. ‘Look, listen and learn’ is the way Aboriginal children are encouraged to learn. Mimicry is encouraged by adults with babies and small children to learn how to speak, forage for food, track and other daily activities. The parents and Elders watch the children as they grow, grooming and training individuals who are chosen for particular roles as adults. When that child has been deemed fit, learned and ready and has achieved approval of the Elders, they are then ‘put through the Law’ and initiated.

Family and community have various responsibilities and roles to play in the initiation process and the subsequent ceremonies. In many of the tribes women had active roles in boys’ initiation ceremonies. Mothers or a senior female relative of the initiate would shroud the boy with his Possum Skin Cloak and lead him to one of the ceremonial grounds where he remained covered until the time for the cloak to be removed for the next stage of the ritual to continue (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

Through the contemporary revitalisation of Cloaks we see them used in many ceremonies including newly regenerated initiatory practices. Cloaks and culture continue.

5.6 Corroboree, Exchange, Trade and Economics

Cloaks were present at ceremonies, with their role and uses ranging from shrouds to percussion instruments. The women bundled their cloaks over their knees and used them for percussion, drumming and singing. At inter-tribal gatherings the markings on the skins displaying who you were and where you came from were especially relevant. In these ceremonies and uses we see the importance and centrality of Possum Skin Cloaks in the celebration of the esoteric. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).
In terms of trade and economics, cloaks were valuable items. Whilst the cloak you wore was a personal item, cloaks were also specifically made for trade. At inter-nation gatherings they were prized trade items. Not only were these items valuable for trade and sale but were important in exchange and reciprocal obligation responsibilities.

Possum skins and their various uses are referred to extensively in the ethno-historical records, but there has been little discussion of their considerable economic importance to the Aboriginal people of Victoria... (Cahir 2005)

(Note that cloaks are sometimes referred to as rugs in historical records.)

That night there was another great Corroboree, with shakes of the hand, and congratulations at my return. When these ceremonies were over, I went with my new relations to their hut, where they regaled me with roots, and gum, and with opossum roasted after their fashion... They presented me also with an opossum-skin rug, for which I gave my new sister-in-law my old jacket in exchange... (Cahir 2005)

Cloaks were also valuable gifts in the establishing of relationships, maintaining of diplomatic relations and dispute resolution with neighbouring tribes.

The women also engaged in this trade, exchanging opossum rugs, baskets, bags, digging sticks. Not only were these things bartered but presents were made to friends and the Headman by the other men. The women also gave things to the wives of the Headman... (Howitt 1996, p.719)

Whilst the impact of European colonisation was devastating to our People, we are a very clever and adaptable people and sought ways and took opportunities to fit dealing with the Europeans into our established systems.

The diverse and complex patterns of Indigenous production and exchange served both symbolic and concrete functions, and this was also observed in the ways in which Aboriginal people approached inter-cultural trade. Indeed, at times the economic aspects of the exchange seem to have been secondary to the social function of establishing a relationship with the Europeans, in both the pre-pastoral and pastoral periods. (Cahir 2005)

Establishing a relationship with visitors is a fundamental Aboriginal protocol. The exchange of greetings, information about the visitors, informing visitors of their rights and responsibilities and the giving of gifts was a common practice. Many Europeans received gifts of value such as weapons, cloaks, baskets etc.
...the chiefs, to manifest their friendly feeling towards me, insisted upon my receiving from them two native cloaks and several baskets made by the women, and also some of the implements of defence. (Batman’s journal, cited in Cahir 2005)

The widespread trade routes across the country and regular gatherings were the basis for a thriving economy at the time Europeans arrived. With the coming of these strangers, new economic opportunities arose for Aboriginal people. Many took up the challenge of working for station owners; others bartered, traded and sold skills and knowledge of tracking, sourcing food and water supplies; cultural material items were sold as souvenirs as well for their practical uses. Possum Skin Cloaks and baskets particularly were prized for their usefulness to the Europeans who were spreading rapidly across the country (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

...the possum skin cloaks come into high demand. Baskets too were sought after commodities because of their fine craftsmanship and sturdiness. (Cahir 2005)

Adaptability and resilience are two qualities that have sustained our peoples survival over millenia, and Aboriginal people today continue to participate in economic exchange across the spectrum of economics and business in contemporary times.

5.7 Historical Cloaks and their Stories

Possum Skin Cloaks, many other material cultural objects and human remains were ‘collected’ by diverse kinds of people – ethnographers, botanists, linguists, artists, squatters and the like – in the 18th and 19th centuries. I use the term ‘collected and ‘collectors’ here, loosely as most items held in institutional collections here in Australia and overseas, especially human remains, have been acquired without consent. In some instances during the very early first contact period, human remains and other items like spears and shields were taken from battlefields as spoils of war or trophies of victory, when settlers and Aboriginal people fought battles over Country (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981). Often ‘collectors’ justified their acquisitions by claiming the importance of their study for science. Some settler families have Aboriginal artefacts in their family collections, sometimes as commissioned objects or gifts from local Aboriginal people who might have worked on or been sheltered on their station during our homeland wars and settler frontier days. As more land was appropriated, towns were established and the population of Europeans and other migrants grew, Aboriginal people engaged in trade and selling cultural items as the market demanded.
Collectors, both amateur and professional, acquired a wide range of objects, many of which were sent 'home' to England or gifted to institutions in Europe. Some of the overseas collections hold types of objects which haven't survived into collections here in Australia. The British Museum has a set of bark etchings from Victoria in its collections. No examples of these kinds of objects are in collections in Australia. In an attempt to understand the new southern land, explorers, scholars, artists and scientists including botanists, ethnographers, anthropologists, linguists, surveyors and the like traversed the Country recording flora, fauna, customs and languages. They sought information on tracks, food and water sources from the local tribes. In their travels many acquired and collected objects from local Aboriginal people, and as was the norm, took them back to England and Europe. Many objects, ther identification known and unknown, have been acquired into collections, both public and private, in these ways. (Smyth 1972, Cahir 2005, Howitt 1996, Dawson 1981).

![Figure 19: Yaruun Parpur Tarneen](image1)  
*(Victorious): Chiefess of the Morporr Tribe, c. 1881*  
*Photo: Museum Victoria*

![Figure 20: Kaawin Kuunawarn (Hissing Swan)](image2)  
*Chief of the Kirrae Wurrong tribe, also known as King David, 1820-1889.*  
*Photo: La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria*

### 5.8 Historical Cloaks Held in Institutions

The historical cloaks in overseas collections continue as an important storyline in my inquiry into Possum Skin Cloaks; in fact it is part of the original shared vision to find out as much as possible about these cloaks and reconnect them with their communities. Few of the cloaks mentioned in the records have survived, and to date there are only fifteen known skin cloaks, six or seven of which are possum skin, in collections at two Australian and several overseas institutions.

There are only fifteen skin cloaks located in Museums within Australia and overseas. In Australia there are skin cloaks held in the Western Australian Museum, Gloucester Lodge Museum, Western Australia, the South Australian Museum and the Museum of Victoria. Overseas there are cloaks in the Smithsonian Institution - Washington DC, The British Museum – London,
Museum of Ethnology – Berlin, Germany and the Pigorini Museum in Italy. European anthropologists collected most of the cloaks found in museums overseas during field trips to Australia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. (Blacklock 2017)

There are historical records that show that cloaks were made for, traded or gifted to European settlers. Some of the early European settler families have made personal communications with myself that some families did have cloaks. There is one Aboriginal family that I know of, who has an ‘old’ cloak that belonged to their grandmother (Troy. J pers. comm. 2011).

How many cloaks may have survived in private and family collections is a ‘mystery’ yet to be investigated. More thorough and directed research into this aspect of cloaks needs to be undertaken but it is outside the scope of my investigation.

As part of the Possum Cloak Story vision of returning cloaks to community, there was a mandate to reconnect communities who have connection to cloaks held in collecting institutions in Australia and overseas. To address this mandate, Banmirra Arts received funding to directly target and deliver Possum Cloak workshops to communities who have those cultural heritage connections with the possum skin cloaks, or remnants of cloaks, held in the British, Berlin, Lieden and Pigorini museums in Europe and the Smithsonian Museum in the US. Banmirra has shared the Possum Cloak Story with the communities that belong to these cloaks, reconnecting them to their historical cloaks and their birthright of belonging in contemporary cloak practices and knowledges (see Section 6.2, Banmirra Possum Cloak Workshop Program Model and Resources).

**Skin Cloaks held in overseas museums**

The following descriptions are sourced from *Aboriginal skin cloaks* by Fabri Blacklock (Assistant Curator, Koori History and Culture, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney), published on the National Quilt Register [https://www.nationalquiltregister.org.au/aboriginal-skin-cloaks/](https://www.nationalquiltregister.org.au/aboriginal-skin-cloaks/)

**British Museum, London:**

Registration No: 4571 Animal: Strip of opossum skin decorated / Collector: Received by William Blackmore Esq 1st February 1868 One possum and one kangaroo skin cloak (Kangaroo skin missing) / Place: The possum skin cloak appears to be from NSW and the kangaroo skin cloak appears to be from WA possibly Swan River settlement / Description: A small strip from a cloak the design forms a spectacular pattern of diamond lozenges.

**Pigorini Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography, Italy**

Registration No: 5803 Animal: Possum / Place: Australia near Sydney (Probably from the Hunter River area) / Collector: Wilkes exploring expedition / Date: 1838-42 / Size: L – 58
½” W – 57” / Description: Features rectangular pelts the skins are laid in 4 rows of six skins each, and sewn on the back, edge to edge with very fine overhand stitch of cotton cord sinew. Fur has been left on and the backside of the skins are completely covered with large diamond shaped designs made by scrapping up a thin layer of the skin so that it stands up in a little curl.

Pigorini Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography Italy:
Two possum skin cloaks one decorated and one undecorated, acquired from the Australian Museum (AW Franks (collector), EH Giglioli Collection, 1913.)

Museum of Ethnology Berlin, Germany:
Animal: Possum / Date Made: Collected in 1879 most probably by E. von Guerard / One possum skin cloak / Collection area: Probably South Australia. (E von Guerard was one of the collectors)

Leiden Museum, Netherlands:
Comes from the Richmond River district in the states north east / Registration No: 885/11 (this cloak has since disintegrated).
6. Contemporary Stories of Possum Skin Cloaks

In this chapter, I tell stories linked to my research question about the re-emergence of Possum Skin Cloaks in contemporary times and the significance of this creative cultural expression movement. It is a common occurrence now to see individuals or groups wearing Possum Skin Cloaks at various ceremonies like the Welcome to Country, at both mainstream and Aboriginal community events. The Welcome to Country ceremony is in itself, like Possum Skin Cloaks, a re-generated customary practice, having re-emerged over the past couple of decades. It has become re-established as due practice and occurs regularly in Aboriginal community events and cultural ceremonies. Importantly, it has been embraced broadly across mainstream and Welcome To Country or Acknowledgement of Country is now observed through local, state and federal government and non-government agencies, some private sector organisations and community events. A local Aboriginal community representative will, more often than not, be wearing a Possum Skin Cloak or collar at these events.

Some of the events and ceremonies that cloaks are being used in again as a vital part of continuing tradition, story and song are:

- Ceremony - cultural ceremonies in communities and families; corroboree, dance, musical accompaniment - possum cloaks used for drumming
- Welcome To Country
- Community events such as during NAIDOC week (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) or other culturally significant times in both Aboriginal and mainstream communities
- Festivals
- Everyday use such as for warmth/bedding, baby carriers
- Naming ceremonies
- Births
- Mourning rituals and burials
- Healing programs and ceremonies
- Graduations
- Marriages
- Healing.
The making of Possum Skin Cloaks has a seeding or rekindling effect on other cultural practices like ceremony, language and song. Gathering in a workshop setting allows for questions to be asked and knowledge reclamation and remembering is effected.

The process of making a Cloak evokes many questions in participants:

- How were possums hunted?
- How were the skins sewn together and with what?
- What tools were used?
- What else are Possum Cloaks used for? Who can wear one?
- What are our language words for possum? for cloaks? how can i find out?
- Where do we gather our ochre for painting? who is allowed to gather ochre?
- What designs do we put on the cloak? what stories?
- What are our designs?

Many of the answers to these questions are learned and shared through interactions with the Elders and Knowledge Holders at the workshops that my colleagues and I share in communities. Some information is documented and shared with people to take away with them and to follow up if they want to know more.

This Chapter is one of the shared collective and personal stories I tell in which possum cloaks and related cultural practices are featured. Some stories, like the young women's ceremony, may not, to the reader, be obviously connected to or part of possum cloak practices and knowledges but do in fact have possum cloaks as central to the ceremony. I would ask the reader to keep this in mind when reading the following stories and to understand the relevance of each of these stories as part of an integrated and interconnected Story or Songline that has been re-awakened and continues across the south east of Australia.

6.1 Opening of Commonwealth Games

I begin my ‘contemporary possum cloak storytelling’ with the story of the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games as discussed in Chapter 4 (‘meerta peeneeyt, yana peeneeyt, tanam peeneeyt kooramook – stand strong, walk strong, proud flesh strong, Possum Skin Cloak), and how this was the major opportunity to realise the Possum Cloak story vision of the Ancestors in the interconnected narrative that is the ‘contemporary possum cloak story songline’. To provide
greater context to the emergence of Possum Cloaks, I want to now reinforce the significance of reviving this traditional cultural practice in contemporary times.

It was the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games that provided the opportunity for us to attain the vision of bringing the skills and knowledge of Possum Skin Cloak making to the communities (Figure 21). The project was about regenerating cultural heritage. It provided representation of the language groups of Victoria in a culturally significant manner. The creation of Possum Skin Cloaks for each of the language groups and the wearing of them at the Commonwealth Games gave rightful recognition and acknowledgement to the tribes, the traditional custodians within the state of Victoria. It told the story of each group and displayed the breadth and depth of our place and belonging in this Country.

Once the Local Artist was appointed, the communities had responsibility to contribute knowledge and skills and to decide who was to be nominated to wear the cloak in the Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Games. It ensured all cultural protocols were respected and that communities were responsible for the content of stories to be recorded on the cloaks and permissions to use the stories was obtained. This model of working was inclusive and fitted within our community cultural frameworks.

![Figure 21: Community Workshop at Koorie Heritage Trust.](commonwealth-games-project-2006.jpg)

This Project sparked a major cultural revitalisation phenomenon. It brought together the largest gathering of Aboriginal people in cloaks in over 150 years; to represent their People, clans and communities, all there in unity, One Heart, One Spirit (Figure 22). It was a healing journey for all bringing an all- encompassing sense of belonging, togetherness, pride and strengthening of identity 'mpyptpk' enabled us to realise the core intent of the Old People through 'kooramook yakeen -possum cloak dreaming' and that was to bring the knowledge, skills and cultural revitalisation of possum cloaks back to Aboriginal people in communities across Victoria and south eastern Australia. This final culmination of the Project, the M2006 Opening Ceremony, brought together the
largest gathering of Aboriginal people in cloaks – all were there in unity and One Spirit, an all-encompassing sense of belonging and togetherness was shared by all.

Figure 22: 2006 Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Games
Elders and community representatives of 35 language groups at rehearsals.
Photograph: Mick Harding

The Commonwealth Games Project was the forerunner to and impetus in the establishment of Banmirra Arts.

6.2 Banmirra

Following the Commonwealth Games 2006 Possum Cloak Project, Banmirra Arts was established. It was the key vehicle for the structured delivery of possum cloak workshops seeding the Possum Cloak Story out of Victoria and across southeastern Australia, over a period of 9 years. This is a summary description of its role and operations, and the projects it delivered.

Establishment of Banmirra

As discussed in Chapter 4, with increasing requests to offer Possum Cloak making workshops to communities from across the east coast of Australia, my colleagues Lee Darroch, Treanha Hamm, Maree Clarke and and I discussed how we might collectively and collaboratively move forward to continue the Possum Cloak cultural and spiritual healing journey we had embarked on.

Through our discussions and forthcoming funding opportunities it was agreed to set up an arts and cultural organisation, Banmirra Arts (since disbanded). Colleagues and friends who were keen to support our work agreed to become members of the Board and Banmirra became registered in 2008. Many thanks to Frances Bond (dec.), Larry Walsh, Brian Stevens, Jason Eades, Gen
Grieves, Dr. Shannon Faulkhead, Kimberley Moulton and Myles Russell-Cook. This organisation became the vehicle for the continuing of the Old People's vision in bringing cloak making back to community.

**Funding support**

At this same time, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation (ATSIHF) had been established and was offering funding to support the kind of cultural reclamation and healing work we were doing through the Possum Cloak workshops. We successfully applied for and received a triennial grant to deliver Possum Cloak Cultural Healing Workshops. This initial ATSIHF funding included resourcing to establish our infrastructure for the organisation to facilitate the operational aspects of Program delivery including the set up of an office space, administrative processes and policies, financial requirements such as bank accounts and bookkeeping, and appointment of a part time Program Manager, Lee Darroch.

The Program Manager's role was to manage the day-to-day operations of the organisation in collaboration with the Board, and administration and co-ordination of the Workshop Program.

It was during Banmirra's establishment phase that we signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work in partnership with Stella Stories, a storytelling and curatorial business run by Amanda Reynolds. Amanda had been associated with Vicki and Lee since her previous work with the National Museum of Australia (NMA) where she was the Senior Curator, and had acquired the 'toolyn koorrtakay – squaring skins for rugs' exhibition for NMA in 2004 (see Section 4.2, Cloak Projects). Through this relationship Amanda became an integral collaborator in our Possum Cloak Story journey.

**Banmirra Possum Cloak Workshop Program Model and Resources**

The funding grant from ATSIHF gave Banmirra a stable basis, with resourcing to develop workshop resources and a workshop program. While for this initial Possum Cloak Workshop Program we had identified the need to work with those communities connected to cloaks held in Australian and overseas institutions (Sections 5.7 and 5.8), over the three years of the ATSIHF Program we also included additional communities who had requested a workshop.

At that time we had an ever growing list of requests for workshops. These requests formed the basis for funding submissions building on the original ATSIHF grant. Over the nine years of Banmirra's operations we received triennial and/or yearly funding support from other Commonwealth funding grants such as the Indigenous Language and Arts program and Australia Council for the Arts, and project funding support from Creative Victoria.
During the early establishment phase Banmirra, with our new partner and collaborator Stella Stories, worked on developing Workshop Booklets (Appendix 8) and a Workshop model in preparation for the delivery of the Possum Cloak Workshop Healing Program. Stella Stories was contracted to develop the resources for the Workshop Program. As part of the development of this, each of the Cloakmakers, Lee Darroch, Maree Clarke and myself, in collaboration with Amanda, contributed our individual and collective community arts and creative industry knowledges and intellectual cultural property. For myself this was based on my previous experience including the ‘toojoy koorrtakay’ project 2002, ‘mayapa koorramookyan yakeeneeyt’ project 2004, and ‘meerta peeneeyt, yana peeneeyt, tanam peeneeyt’ (Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games Project). All of these projects, as the seeds of my Cloak vision of ‘returning cloaks to community’ development process, provided a core basis for informing my contributions to the development of the content of the workshop resources and the structure of the workshop delivery. The Workshop Booklets and other written materials were authored by Amanda Reynolds as our Contracted Writer.

**Workshop Model**

The Banmirra Cloak Workshop model was a work in progress over the years. However, our initial ideas were developed through reflecting on our previous experiences in ‘toojoy koorrtakay’ and the Commonwealth Games project. The Commonwealth Games project was more relevant in looking at the design of the workshops and the practicalities of implementation on the ground because in this Project we had worked with Traditional Custodians and communities, whereas ‘toojoy koorrtakay’ was a more intimate, personal project. Nonetheless, both projects reinforced my personal practice and the group’s collective principles of practice in the positioning of cultural protocols as an encompassing basis – the front and centre approach in our design considerations.

The Games model and format, where we had local artists working with their community, wasn’t necessarily something we could simply translate as an established model of practice for Banmirra. However, the things we had learned from this Project were used to intimately inform the Banmirra model. First and foremost, the ‘new’ model had to be embedded in cultural ways of Knowing Being and Doing, in a format that worked well in being fluid and responsive or adapting to suit the new circumstances: delivered in a much shorter timeframe than the Comm. Games project while still allowing for an impactful community participation and experience.
Banmirra’s workshop was designed to be delivered in an intensive three day experience, at a local venue, at the invitation of the Traditional Custodians and community of the place. Inclusiveness was an important principle of practice which allowed for people in communities who were not Traditional Custodians of that Country, but were by birthright belonging to Possum Cloak Story, to have access to and be part of the Workshops. We endeavoured to work in a model of partnership with communities and community organisations. The funding we received allowed for most of the workshop activities and expenses to be covered. The activities, staff, equipment and materials Banmirra provided included: two or three Senior Cloakmakers and a Documentation and Feedback Facilitator (Stella Stories was contracted to undertake this role), materials and equipment including possum skins, and workshop resources, i.e. the workshop booklets. Banmirra also covered travel and accommodation expenses for the duration of the workshop.

In the partnership with the community, the community contribution we sought included the facilitation of a Welcome to Country by Traditional Custodians, provision of a venue, information dissemination and communication, community access, support and catering. These workshop arrangements were negotiated with each community individually to suit the needs of that community.

The Banmirra model is further discussed under 7.1.

Through these Workshops, over nine years, we worked with the Aboriginal communities and cultural groups listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Communities and cultural groups involved in the Banmirra Possum Cloak Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural groups/Communities</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gumeroi/Kamilaroi</td>
<td>Gunnedah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boandik</td>
<td>Mt Gambier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunnawal</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngambri</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngarrandjeri</td>
<td>Raukkan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuin</td>
<td>Gerringong, Ulladulla, Batemans Bay, Eden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiradjuri</td>
<td>Dubbo, Katoomba, Bathurst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngaiampa</td>
<td>Menindie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awabakal</td>
<td>Newcastle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonnerua</td>
<td>Newcastle and Singleton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural groups/Communities</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worimi</td>
<td>Newcastle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gunditjmara</td>
<td>Warrnambool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latji Latji/Barkindji</td>
<td>Mildura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake MacQuarie Community</td>
<td>Lake MacQuarie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 6.3 Repatriation of Ancestral Remains to Framlingham (former mission settlement).

The artwork in Figure 23 honours our Ancestors and is a depiction of the return of Ancestral Remains which were interred in the Framlingham Mission Cemetery in late 2003. A ceremony was held for the interment and the whole community was involved. The day was very special, a sacred act as we reverently placed our Old People in Country, back where they belong. Ceremony, the use of fire, smoke, song and language was a reclaiming of our heritage and identity – a connecting with our Ancestors, our sense of place and who we are.

nggeeye ngalam meen watanoo gadubanud, gulidjan, djargurd wurrung, kirrae wurrong, dharwurd wurrung ba djab wurrung ngarraketoong, yoowatay-tootangan ngathoongan.

ngatanwarr warrn meerreeng teenay ngathoong-ngan.

mayapa-nawarr ngootyoong thoowoong karrweeyn, teen meerreng moorraka-n nggeeye alam meen. Friday 7th November 2003

Yakeen ngaken ngootoowan.

We lay to rest our ancestors of the gadubanud, gulidjan, djargurd wurrung, kirrae wurrung, dharwurd wurrung and djab wurrung clans. We welcome them home to Country.

This land has been cleansed and prepared through ceremony for the reburial of our ancestors Friday 7th November 2003

see you in the Dreaming.

(Written, translated and spoken by Vicki Couzens at the Reburial Ceremony 2003.)
Figure 23: Our Ancestors, Ngalam Meen.
This is who we are and where we come from, so we honour and remember them.
V. Couzens, 2005 (Photo V. Couzens)
Acrylic, pencil and handmade paper on canvas

6.4 The Walk
This body of work was created from participating in a project titled ‘Walk’ in 2007. This Project was developed by Carmel Wallace and Ilka White and was toured by NETS Victoria (National Ex-
hibition Touring Support) in 11 galleries across Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia.

‘Walk’ artists were Peter Corbett, Nicky Hepburn, Brian Lawrence, Jan Learmonth, Carmel Wallace, Ilka White, John Wolseley and myself. All artists had some connection to the south west districts of Victoria and worked in different media: from drawing, jewellery, sound and film, sculpture, painting, printmaking and textiles. The concept of ‘Walk’ developed from conversations between Carmel and Ilka as they were walking one day along a section of the Great South West Walk, a community-developed walking track traversing the country from Portland through the Glenelg National Park into South Australia and along the coast returning to Portland. Carmel and Ilka, in their own practices, gather inspiration from spending time in the natural environment, and conceived of developing this project as an opportunity for other artists to do the same. Along with this was the intent to raise awareness and bring a message to the wider community through the works produced by the artists, of ‘caring for country’, of being aware and developing a sense of belonging. It could be said that Australians are essentially a displaced people and as such often feel a lack of personal integration into the landscape they occupy. Such alienation makes destructive processes more likely. (Stony Rises Project, http://netsvictoria.org.au/exhibition/the-stony-rises-project/).

‘unseen’

I was inspired to express my experience of the ‘Walk’ Project through a theme I titled ‘unseen’. This theme was in response to my closely experiencing my Grandmother’s Country for the first time and feeling strongly connected. As I walked, I was reflecting on my Grandmothers’ and Ancestors’ experience of our Country and reflecting on what they might feel and think about it now. As I was reflecting on this it led to me thinking about non-Gunditjmara people’s experience of this particular place and the way in which western culture has and continues to abuse and mis-treat Country. I was thinking of how many people love to experience the bush, walking or camping, yet remain unaware of our Gunditjmara presence and belonging in Country: the ‘ngamateeyt’ (white person) ignorance and ‘unseeing’ of the story of place, the creatures, our bush medicines and so on.

From these ponderings, I decided to create a body of work that would foreground the ‘unseen’ - the tangible and intangible manifested in visual imagery and objects. I thought about what is tangible and intangible in the ‘unseen’. The body of work I produced comprised a possum skin cloak, a series of six copperplate etchings and the painting below in Figure 25.

The possum skin cloak was a representation of the experience of and a repository for the stories I learned of my Grandmother’s Country. The markings and designs on this cloak (Figure 24) are
the depictions of these stories and places. It is a legacy object that contributes to the maintenance of our family history.

The etchings depicted a visual representation of a cry of the sulphur crested cockatoo - ‘ngayook leerpeen – song of the white cockatoo’. The sulphur crested cockatoo is an important moiety in Gunditjmara culture.
This was a tangible thing but still ‘unseen’ because of the invisibility of Gunditjmara culture in mainstream awareness.

So the ‘unseen’ is about bringing that awareness to the fore.

‘meerta peeneeyt, yana peeneeyt, tanam peeneeyt’. (stand strong, walk strong, proud flesh strong) (Couzens, 2009). This work is about the landscape and the changes in it as you traverse the Country. It is also about the ‘unseen’, what is above and below the surface, in a literal and metaphorical way, relating the ‘unseen’ to the spiritual. It is coloured with hues from the land and waters. Text is hidden in the layers looking like markings of ancient tribal symbols but in fact are the names of the 54 clans of the Gunditjmara Dharwurd Wurrong language group.

Figure 25: ‘worn meerreeng’ – home country V. Couzens 2007.
Acrylic and marker on canvas (Photo V. Couzens)

Land, language and identity are a central focus of this painting. In the nexus between land and language, past and present are linked. Rhythmic sequences made of colours and markings anchored in the specifics of place, convey a sense of land as ancestral body. Traversing the land, in the songlines and dreamings... Singing the land... each in a different language... and painting the land, with its invisible stories and histories, pervasive through the now. (Copley 2007)

6.5 Biganga – Keeping Tradition

This section shows works from ‘Biganga - keeping tradition’, an exhibition that creates connection between traditional historical possum cloak making and contemporary possum cloak mak-
ing practice through the presentation of both historical and contemporary works. Biganga ‘keeping tradition’ was another step in realising our possum dreaming vision. It ran for 12 months at Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum during 2006-07, and involved the showing of the Yorta Yorta cloak held by the museum, some old artefacts like possum jaw scrapers and awls, as well as new works by Lee Darroch, Treahna Hamm, myself, my daughters and my cousin.

**Figure 26: Biganga - ‘keeping tradition’. Left: Mothers' Cloak (2006), Right: Grandmothers' Cloak (2006). Possum skin and pokerwork, waxed linen thread.**


Lee and Treahna created three cloaks about Yorta Yorta Country. With their permission I invited my 5 daughters to work with me and we created three cloaks on women’s business – koorrookee kooramook (grandmothers’ cloak), ngeerrang kooramook (mothers’ cloak) (see Figure 26), ngart kooramook (daughters’ cloak) – all six of us worked on the daughters’ cloak. Along with my daughters I also invited my wartee (cousin/brother) Jamie Thomas to make a men’s dance set – headdress, belt arm bands from possum and swan feathers. The girls made a women’s dance set and these were all exhibited together with other contemporary prints, paintings and Treahna’s woven spirit figures ‘Mulan 1’ and ‘Mulan 2’.

These contemporary objects together with the historical artefacts demonstrated the diverse uses of possum cloaks and related materials such as the possum skin jaw etching tool and the headbands and dance belts used for ceremony. It is learning about the diversity of uses that is im-
portant for community reclamation practices, especially for the development of possum cloaks in contemporary health and wellbeing settings.

6.6 Birrarung Wilam (camp by the river of mists)

During the years of 2005-2007, I worked with Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm concurrently on the Commonwealth Games Possum Cloak Project and another major project – the Birrarung Wilam Public Art Project. It was this concurrency that gave rise to the opportunity to have both Projects inform and dovetail across each other. Through this crossover we were able to bring Possum Cloaks into the Birrarung project not only in sculptural form, but as a major component to the ceremonial element of the work, ceremony being a primary use of cloaks. In the Birrarung Wilam Project we again worked with the same communities across the State.

Birrarung Wilam is a major public art installation along the banks of the Yarra river behind Federation Square. It also became a major ceremonial celebration and an historical event in the Aboriginal history of this State, but particularly in the Possum Cloak Story. Cloaks featured in this project in two ways. Firstly, as part of this project a cultural ceremony was held involving 35 language group representatives wearing possum skin cloaks. Secondly, three stainless steel etched possum skin cloaks were installed as part of the whole artwork. These aspects of the project are discussed further below.

The Birrarung Wilam commission came about from a recommendation in the 2002 Reconciliation Report that a ‘common ground commemorative place’ be established to commemorate and celebrate all of Aboriginal Victoria. The cultural and artistic concept included nine elements around the central idea of camp and family. The campsite, with bronze cast water containers, is representative of home, hearth, family and the women - keepers of the kinship laws. Spears and shields represent the men, who are the hunters and protectors of family. Message sticks invite and welcome visitors to the site, as per our cultural protocols.

Ancestor Stones surround a corroboree/ceremony area, standing as sentinels in watchful guardianship, engraved with depictions of the Ancestor creator beings. Stainless steel possum skin cloaks hang on the wall of the ArtPlay building with designs etched into each panel - touch the panels and you hear stories and songs as told by Aboriginal individuals and communities from all 38 language groups of Victoria. A one hundred metre long cast iron eel path – a male and female eel entwined – sinuously winds its way through the site. Eel, kuuyang, swim from their home waters, the rivers and lakes of coastal Victoria, to spawn in the Coral Sea, and then return
to live and grow in the homewaters of their ancestors. As with Aboriginal people, they are innately connected to their Country, their place of belonging.

The final element of Birrarung Wilam was the ‘calling up ceremony’. This was held with 35 Victorian language groups, represented by Elders and community representatives who gathered to inter objects into the campsite mound and perform a ceremony which activated the site, creating a new and special ceremonial site which indeed represents and celebrates all of Aboriginal Victoria. There is no signage to inform the visitor. We chose to use our way of knowing and being as the way for those who enter the space to experience birrarung wilam, to listen with their spirit and to see, with their hearts, our stories.

6.7 Community Rituals and Ceremonies

Introduction

The following stories are part of my personal story in the reclamation, revitalisation, regeneration and remembering of Possum Cloak Story knowledge and practices. Many of the stories described are regenerated cultural practices in their own right and have been seeded by the Possum Cloak Story or have become part of the ceremony.

In particular I have included ceremonies and projects – primarily Women’s Business and Women’s Law – which are strong areas of my practice and knowledge reclamation.

Naming Ceremony

On 26 January 2012, at ‘thangang puunoort’ (eels bite the stones) alongside the Hopkins River east of Warrnambool (Figure 27), along with other community members, I was involved in a ceremony for the Naming of Children. This event involved families who wanted their children to be acknowledged as part of this community, recognised by their families, community, Elders and Ancestors as belonging to this Country. It was inspired by a similar event several years earlier.

In our community we hold ‘Birthing Tree’ ceremonies for families whereby the afterbirth of a baby is buried under a tree during a ceremony attended by the family and Senior people of the community. The Naming Ceremonies are a further development of ceremonial tradition. For the Naming Ceremony this particular year it was decided that a cloak for this specific event should be created. The concept came about from a discussion between Yaraan Bundle (my second-eldest daughter), the Gunditjmara Aboriginal Health Service’s Aboriginal Health Worker Leann Bain and the Maternal and Child Health Nurse, Kay Netherway. Following discussions about a ceremony for Naming and Birthing Trees, funding was sought by Gunditjmara Health Service and was
successful. The Project was implemented through Gunditjmara Health Service Warrnambool. Yaraan, as the initiator of the concept, was nominated to be the facilitator and teacher for this project. Yaraan has experience working with Possum Skin Cloaks through our mentoring relationship and was deemed to be the most appropriate person to undertake the role.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 27: Thanang poon’oort - eels bite the stones
Hopkins Falls, Warrnambool. (Reproduced from Krishna-Pillay, 1996.)

For the Project, Yaraan had an advisory, guiding group made up of her Grandfather Ivan Couzens and Rob and Daphne Lowe (Senior Peek Wurrong Elders), Leann Bain (Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health Worker), Jamie Thomas (Senior Peek Wurrong Man) and myself. My initial involvement in this project was to support and guide Yaraan both in practical terms with the making of the cloak, and with cultural, spiritual advice in the development and implementation of the ceremony. Yaraan led a group of families with young children on a shared journey to make a Possum Skin Cloak for this ceremony. She facilitated workshops over a period of six months, guiding the families through a design and story-telling process, discussing and understanding how the designs and stories needed to relate to each other and the Country, the purpose and significance of the cloak and the ceremony, and the practicalities of how to make a Possum Skin Cloak.

This cloak now belongs to the community and will be used annually, if not more often, to welcome new babies and families with children to our community.
**Women’s Business**

thanampool kooramook, gunya-winyar (women’s possum cloak)

Women are the keepers of women’s business, repositories of vast knowledge and learning. It is our life’s work to care for our families, to contribute to our communities and keep our culture strong for the generations to come. In this work, the markings and symbols have layers of meaning and degrees of knowledge as does the journey of a woman’s life; we move from daughter/young woman, to mother and grandmother – wise woman. We learn as we grow and our knowledge and wisdom deepens with time and experience. This cloak is about all of that – ‘women’s business’. The Spiral is the universal symbol of birth, life, death and rebirth. It is who we are and where we come from – our Mother, the earth, our Country. Women keep the power of creation and so, the spiral in this work. The arms or tendrils that come from the spiral represent our bloodlines. Women are the keepers of kinship and family knowledge and stories. The tendrils are also representative of our life’s journey. On another level the tendrils emulate the veins in our bodies that carry our blood as the rivers carry water, the lifeblood of the land. The other markings are about all parts of our lives, the daily gathering of food to feed our families; our stories and our ceremonies. (Interpretative text of Cloak by Lee Darroch and Vicki Couzens, 2008)

**Women’s work**
we keep the home and hearth
we gather the food
we grow the young children
we grow the young women
we are the keepers of the kinship law
we dance and sing our stories
so the next generations know
who they are and where they come from

Vicki Couzens, © 2008
Figure 28: Women's Business Cloak, made by V. Couzens, L. Darroch 2008 for exhibition at the National Museum of Australia. Possum skin, ochre, wattle gum, pokerwork, waxed linen thread (Photo L. Darroch)

yoonggama-teeyt kooramook baparra-bannarrak nanyuk biganga
Gift cloak long ago Dreaming cloak (Figure 30) was presented to Te Papa Museum in 2011 during a cultural exchange ceremony honouring the renewal of ancient wisdoms, Laws and songs that hold the world together (Figure 29). The cloak is a gift honouring Maori people as the traditional custodians of Aotearoa – the homelands where we now harvest our possum skins. This project was carried out with the support and guidance of the Banmirra Arts Board: Aunty Frances Bond, Vicki Couzens, Jason Eades, Brian Stevens, Lee Darroch, Maree Clarke and Niyoka Bundle; and the assistance of Stella Stories.
Figure 29: Smoking the cloak as part of a gifting ceremony. Photo courtesy Te Papa Museum, Wellington, Aotearoa, 2011.

Long ago, our possum was introduced to your country and has since been declared vermin in New Zealand and listed as a protected species in Australia. The recent cultural revival of possum skin cloaks – one of our most sacred south-eastern traditions – might not have happened if we weren’t able to import the large number of skins that we do. We acknowledge our relationships with Maori peoples and the inspiration we’ve gained from your cloak traditions, the strength of your cultures and your wonderful weavers. (Lee Darroch, 2011, Smoking ceremony for Gifting cloak)
Figure 30: yoonggama-teeyt kooramook baparra-bannarrak nanyuk biganga
(V. Couzens 2011)
Possum skin, ochre, wattle gum, waxed linen thread (Photo V. Couzens)

Figure 31: Gifted from Senior Cloak Makers.
Left to right: Lee Darroch, Maree Clarke, Vicki Couzens and curator Amanda Reynolds. (Photo courtesy Te Papa Museum, Wellington, Aotearoa, 2011.)
**Lullaby Birth, Life and Death**

ngowata ngowata koornong poopoop  
come, come little baby  
ngowata ngowata  
come come to us  
ngathoongan ngarrakeetong  
we are your family  
wayapawan ngeerrang-an  
wayapawan koorrookee-an  
meet your mothers  
meet your grandmothers  
koornong poopoop,  
ngyoorn ngyoorn  
do not cry, we keep you safe  
ngowata ngowata koornong poopoop  
come, come little baby  
(V. L. Couzens © 2009)

A song I wrote in my imaginings of when a baby is born, in pre-European times when our Women’s Law was intact and we knew the midwifery practices, the birthing rituals and songs. Babies were and are wrapped in possum skin cloaks.

This is a song for my great great grandmother, who was born on the banks of the now named Moyne River near Port Fairy, Peek Woorroong Country.

*Figure 32: Granddaughter sleeping.*  
Photo V Couzens
Women’s Dance Group
peeneeyt thanambool - women’s and girls’ dance and cultural group
Established in 2000 by Vicki Couzens, Jarrah Bundle, Yaraan Bundle, Marlee Bundle and Kirrae Bundle.

I established this group with my daughters to bring women’s and girls’ dance, song and story home to Gunditjmara Country. The Peeneeyt Thanambool group grew to include five or more adult women who performed various roles including dance and/or song, and over twenty girls and young women.


Figure 34: Gunditjmara dancers – men, women, boys and girls 2004, Moyjil beach, mouth of the Hopkins Photo Jill Orr

Young Women's Ceremony
Continuing with the theme of strengthening our young people's culture as they approach adulthood, this section re-visions rites of passage ceremonies.
I created this rite of passage ceremony for young girls who are moving from girls to young women. This ceremony is a teaching ceremony in learning the responsibilities of their new role; it is also an acknowledgement and celebration of the transition from girl to woman.

My cousin/brother asked for this ceremony for his daughter. I created the structure and the songs and teachings for the ceremony. Two Senior women accompanied me and carried out the ceremony for two young girls. It was the first ceremony of this kind that had been conducted in contemporary times. It was an honour to do this for my young cousins.

The songs in this section are not fully translated for reasons of cultural appropriacy protocols.

**Ancestor Calling Song**

Pernmeeyal, ngalam meen, koorrookee, ngapoon
Wanga-ke-an, Ngaka –ke-an Koopa–ke-an deen
wanga-ke-an Ngaka –ke-an Koopa–ke-an deen
wanga-ke-an ngaka-ke--an Koopa–ke-an deen
Koopa-ke-an deen, koopa-ke-an deen koopa-ke-an deen

Kiyan Kiyan - Kooka koopa-ke deen ba
Young women, young women, Come sit down in this place.

**Notes for Senior Women to talk to girls about:**

— Women talk to girls, talk of life cycles
— Birth life death rebirth – baby, young girl, young woman, woman, mother, grandmother
— We change, we grow in wisdom, learn things – learn basket weaving this might seem like simple thing but it is an important skill for survival, for understanding how the strands of your life are connected and how as young women you will grow and new strands creating yourself as you go, with the guidance of the old people, family, and experiences.
— Our bodies change and you have experienced the beginning of a new stage phase in your life the cycle of woman, the releasing of eggs, the womb preparing for life; the shedding of blood each month is the powerful reminder of this gift. Women have the gift of creation.
— Safety and responsibility
— As you grow and your body changes and you mature, your roles and responsibilities in family and community grow and change too. It is a turbulent time, changes in your body, your feelings, how you think and how you act. It is important to remember what your family and parents have taught you in making decisions, choices: these can affect how you be and how you live your life.
— Self respect /self esteem is important and respecting others. Disease, pregnancy,
A question to pose to the girls:
What do girls think we are doing here? How do they think this will help them? What are their understandings? Do they have any questions?

These discussions are followed by the following song. We take the girls back to the fire, where we smoke them, and the men welcome them back and acknowledge their new status.
The girls speak to the Men/community.

**Song**

Koorrookee Wanga-ke-an
Leenyarr Wanga-ke-an
Weerreeyaar Wanga-ke-an
Weerreeyaar Wanga-ke-an
Meerreeng-geeye Wanga-ke-an
Meerreeng-geeye Wanga-ke-an

pooleeyta tarayl parayt Deenani
these ones two young women
Koopa-war martka-ngu koopa-war martka-ngu
Sitting here before you
Ngakake deen ngakake deen
See them here see them here
Thanambool-wata nhungalanaba
They will be women soon
Mana-war keerreek meerreeng-ayi
Take their blood into the earth
They will be women soon
Thanambool-wata nhungalanaba

Weerreeyaar weerreeyaar weerreeyaar weerreeyaar x2

Girls’ response at fire with men and families:
Tarayl parayt tarayl parayt
Mayapa wangan ngootyoong wanyoo
Koorrookee, leenyarr, ngeerrang, wanung ngeerrang
Mayapa wangan ngootyoong wanyoo
Peepay, wanung peepay, ngapoon kookoon ba
Ngarrakeetoong
Mayapa wangan ngootyoong wanyoo
Ngeerrang meerreeng-nggeeye

**Fresh n Salty**

This sculptural installation work is not obviously connected to possum cloaks except, again, that cloaks, ceremony and dance were part of the celebration of this work. However, it is especially relevant to the concept of cultural reclamation and revitalisation practices in our local drystone walling techniques used for the construction of our stone houses and the aquaculture systems and eel harvests. The regeneration of these knowledges and practices contributes to improvements in Aboriginal health, healing and wellbeing.

Fresh n Salty was a collaborative work with Portland environmental artist, Carmel Wallace. It was a statewide project initiated and managed by Regional Arts Victoria. Jo Grant was the Regional Arts Development Officer for the South West who managed and co-ordinated the Project in our region. The project was partnered by Windamara Aboriginal Corporation in Heywood and the regional Catchment Management Authority. The site, at Kurtonitj, outside Heywood, was an old farm, partially cleared. The local Traditional Owner group has acquired the property and agreed for us to do the project there.

The Project was about interpreting water use and issues in our region. As the artists, we had to develop a concept and design taking into account community views and concerns. This occurred by way of consultation with the local Traditional Owner group, an open day and presentation to the wider community. To undertake the work, we engaged local drystone stonewall expert Alistair Tune. As part of the Project we employed three young Aboriginal people to work on the construction of the artwork. It was constructed over 5 weeks with our team working 3-4 days a week. During construction a workshop was offered to interested people in the region. Six participants were selected and attended for one day, working with Alistair to construct a section of the work.

The Gunditjmara people, my grandmother’s People, used drystone techniques to construct stone hut villages, and sophisticated drystone aquaculture systems in the creeks, rivers and lakes of
our Country. These architectural and engineering structures were developed over thousands of years. There was a great ritual time when the clans would gather to harvest the eels. With European invasion the settlers brought their skills in drystone walling and much of the countryside is laced with drystone wall fences and other structures such as sheep dips. The project thereby draws on the skills and knowledge of both cultures. The Country around this area, near Heywood in the Western Districts, is stony rises country, seasonal swamps and marshes within the lava flows across the region.

This work evolved from the landscape and environment we lived in and knew. It draws on both ancient Gunditjmara cultural knowledge and practices and recent European history and heritage. The shape of the work, from an aerial view, is based on the shape of traditional eel baskets that were placed in weirs in creeks to catch eels. It is a large spiral shape winding down around a large mound of stones that was already present from clearing for the farm. There are then two short stone walls and a triangular piece on the ground. Offset to the side is another short wall and a large round circular piece, again on the ground. The circular piece serves as a fireplace for events and ceremonies. The young people working with us gained new skills, the opportunity to learn more about their own culture and connect with the Country at the site we were working on. The community were engaged and a vital part of the project. Place and our Old People were honoured through ceremony.

Figures 26 & 27: Fresh n Salty project by V. Couzens & C. Wallace 2007
Photos by Bindi Cole for Regional Arts Victoria
7. Possum Cloaks and Health and Wellbeing

This final concluding chapter of my dissertation is designed to provide an analysis of the impact of reviving possum cloak making practices in a contemporary context. This is important for the ongoing form of the practice into the future as more and more communities and the younger generations participate and contribute to making their own skins as part of their life journeys. I have alluded to the potential for this Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing to be adapted for application across a range of healthcare sector service facilities, such as crisis centres, Aboriginal women’s safe houses, shelters, hospitals, maternal, children’s and family health facilities, and health and mental wellbeing services. This is only the beginning of the journey for the next phase of the Possum Cloak Story. This chapter also situates my learnings and teachings as a form of communal engagement and cultural practice in its own right. Additional supporting material to contextualise this engagement and cultural practice can be found in Appendices 5-10. This includes some of the cultural material and workshop kits developed through Banmirra Cloak Workshop program and courtesy of Banmirra, presented to participants during Possum Cloak Making workshops.

My findings suggest that the sustainability of this traditional practice is dependent on an understanding of health and wellbeing, community development and ongoing ethical engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To contextualise this next phase of the Possum Skin movement, I believe it is appropriate for me to talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing as a starting point. There are several elements that define the difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non Indigenous approaches to health. Aboriginal health means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life, death, rebirth. (See National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, 1989.)

... I was at one point in my life a victim of family violence and those teachings helped us to understand where we needed to stand up and change the statistics of our people and seeing how others whom were mentally ill, had come to workshops and became involved and it changed their outlook on life. Where they had bad substance and alcohol abuse, they actually told me they felt lighter, more easier to make decisions around their families and peers because of coming into contact with the cloaks. Some young ones had no idea about proper respect for family culture, but by participating in the cloak workshops, learnt that respect was paramount to our way of living.
learning, teaching..... because we were able to teach in our ways, and honouring those kinships, so no-one was left behind... (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

In Section 4.3 I discussed how the Aboriginal concept of health is holistic, encompassing mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health, with Land being central to wellbeing. This holistic concept does not merely refer to the ‘whole body’ but in fact is steeped in the harmonised inter-relations which culturally constitute wellbeing. These interrelating factors can be categorised largely as spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental and physical.

For me healing and wellbeing in an Aboriginal context envelops connection to traditions, connection to Country and connection to community. A place to feel that you belong, and are nurtured with positive people/Elders around. It is the learning of traditional practices that have been buried, giving them new life to learn and to pass down to the next generation...I have learnt a lot about healing, as I’ve recognised so many of our mob need healing in many different ways but it comes back to our connection to our sacred land. Aboriginal well-being, one element is healthy body, healthy mind, running blood, when your blood is running no disease can stick to it, we are also less susceptible to modern disease n mental illness, f we keep this learning inside us and live by it. To get running blood you must be true to yourself and Country, eat as much natural foods from the bush as we can, reactivating our Country and ourselves thru kanang wanga, in my lingo means deep listening. When we are in tune with our Country we are in tune with ourselves.... essentially we take a holistic approach and cultural practice is a vital element in that. When we participate in the making of objects or practice culture in any material way I believe we trigger positive things within our minds, body and soul. This contributes to well being... (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these interrelations, as eloquently described in the previous quote, is disrupted, Aboriginal ill-health will persist. (See Swan & Raphael 1995.)

Health and community development with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are intrinsically linked. Community development is defined in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian context as a process of working with communities, in an environment that advocates the full and active participation of all community members, to assist their members to find plausible solutions to the problems they have identified, so that Indigenous people understand and acquire skills to develop culturally appropriate programs and services for their communities. Two types of outcomes can be fostered by a ‘community development’ approach:

(1) improvement in health outcomes by effectively addressing a health issue, and
(2) increased individual and community empowerment, which leads to healthier and more equitable power relations. (See Campbell et al. 2007.)

There are art/culture/knowledge protocols that need to be reinforced more and the way to do that is to have these workshops and acknowledge our mobs that pass on skills to reinforce identity and wellbeing. (Anonymous, Possum Cloak Survey 2017)

Community development cannot take place without deep engagement with the Values and Ethics of community. ‘Value and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research’ was developed in 2003 by the Australian Government department, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), as a replacement for the ‘Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research’, which was issued in 1991. ‘Values and Ethics’ covers ethics in health research conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and has been written for researchers, communities, human research ethics committees and other stakeholders in the research.

These guidelines are linked to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC 2007), with references to the relevant sections within the document. ‘Values and Ethics’ is not meant to be a compliance checklist, but to offer a framework of important cultural values common to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for researchers to address throughout the design and implementation of their research work. The concepts of ‘Values’ and ‘Ethics’ here are based on the importance of trust, recognition and values. The guidelines describe six principles important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which were identified through a national consultation process including workshops with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The six principles are: Spirit and Integrity, Reciprocity, Respect, Equality, Survival and Protection, and Responsibility. While I have used these guidelines to inform my own research, I am also conscious of how these very concepts of values and ethics are context dependent. Furthermore, I recognise the ways in which universal guidelines such as these can de-personalise one’s communal and ethical engagements with community. I hope the narrative I have presented of my research to date in the preceding chapters acts as a representation of that complexity.

**Knowledge Translation in Research**

The Lowitja Institute, a key agency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health research, believes it is vitally important that our investment in research findings results in lasting, positive impact on the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (https://www.lowitja.org.au/).
Therefore, integral to our research effort is the identification of policy and/or practice outcomes based on evidence. According to the Institute, the organisation is responsible for supporting research projects in meeting its knowledge translation requirements. This requires that a knowledge translation schedule is attached to the project contract, a proportion of each research project is identified for knowledge translation activities, and there are a number of frameworks or models available to guide thinking around potential knowledge translation, and knowledge exchange activities for projects. These models can include what the Lowitja Institute calls a Facilitated Development Approach where the research places a high value on knowledge exchange and stakeholder involvement at every stage of the research, including priority setting, conducting research and implementing the findings.

...We have to make sure that culture is not something that is only for a few but open to all and keeping the values of our culture in how we work with each other... (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

The Lowitja Institute also looked at the Dynamic Knowledge Transfer Capacity model (Parent, Roy & St-Jacques 2007). This model highlights the crucial need to engage after the research has been produced and disseminated. The importance of post-research follow up and continued engagement is vital to the continuing healing trajectory of individuals, families and communities. It is also crucial to sustainability of community access to and participation in forthcoming opportunities. Both my individual and collaborative practice and research experience has been frustrated with the lack of capacity through the constraints of funding requirements that do not support or enable after-research engagement and follow up.

However, the following set of questions developed by the Lowitja Institute from (Masching, Allard & Prentice 2006) did assist in guiding these knowledge exchange activities with community:

- How will the project contribute to better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- How does this project relate to other relevant research work or trends in policy and practice?
- Who are the potential users of the evidence?
- How will the project achieve impact?
- What are the knowledge exchange opportunities for this project?
- What are the risks to successful knowledge exchange for this project?
- What are the publication (and other dissemination) requirements for this project?
Further, what is the potential ‘absorptive’ capacity for this work; i.e. how can we take published findings further to make impact on the ground? If applicable, how will feedback be provided to community participants? (https://www.lowitja.org.au/)

I adopted these questions and adapted them to suit the context of my work with communities as I progressed. Not all the questions were relevant at any one time, which is why it was important to consider the specific situation I was working with as my research progressed. The possum-skin cloak-making workshops offered a unique, context specific framework of knowledge exchange that is the basis for the development of my emerging Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing. It is this Framework that will potentially be replicated for wider application across the health and wellbeing sector and potentially across cultural organisations that have an interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues (e.g. museums, galleries, local community support groups).

Cloak making is a partnership of knowledge and identity that embeds traditional and bolsters cultural strengthening. The methods and community way of working together helps with learning about oneself and find that connection that works to create harmony in spirit. Wellbeing is a crucial component of cultural strengthening and is bandied about by govt especially in new directions in policy but it is the grass roots community projects that really have meaning and develop networks to learn and stay strong. (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

7.1 Banmirra Possum Cloak Workshops and the emerging Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing

In this section I discuss the model that is the Banmirra Possum Cloak workshops, and a summary analysis of selected Banmirra data sets, leading into a discussion and description of the emerging Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing I am developing. This emerging ‘in process’ Framework has its roots in the earlier framework models and delivery methods already discussed, which in turn are founded in Aboriginal Ways of Knowing Being and Doing (see Martin 2003:205).

Banmirra Workshop Program Model

The development of the Banmirra Possum Cloak Workshop model was discussed in Section 6.2. The nine years of its implementation allowed for workshops in 30+ communities across south
eastern Australia (see Table 1, Section 6.2, for the language groups covered). They facilitated the reconnection to and reclamation of the cultural practice of making Possum Cloaks and in the doing, supported the cultural and spiritual health and wellbeing of Aboriginal individuals, families and communities.

During the three days of the workshop, tools, teachings and resources were offered to capacitate communities to practise their culture. In the workshops communities reconnect with the traditional practice of cloak-making and this in turn seeds growth of other related cultural practices. The workshops also provide participants with resources and support for the transmission of cultural knowledge between people and communities (individuals to individuals, individuals to families and families to families, as well as between Indigenous communities and the wider non-Indigenous community). Workshop participants can learn from the skills of cloak custodians in how to develop designs and stories, and to cut into, burn and/or sew onto the possum skins. Participants are also provided with opportunities to discuss the cultural protocols involved in using the cloaks for ceremony, healing, education and exhibitions. The workshops encourage individuals and communities to explore how cloaks contribute to health and wellbeing. This Model of introducing cultural practices and traditions in communities supports Indigenous engagement and participation.

The Banmirra Model’s principles of practice, cultural protocols and key aims and tasks/activities.

Principles of Practice and Cultural Protocols:

- Cultural protocols – Workshops are delivered at the invitation of Elders and/or Traditional Custodians of the community; Welcome to Country Ceremony is the first shared experience; reciprocal response requirements - Acknowledgement of Country; other cultural protocols as negotiated in each specific setting or context – for example, a sharing exchange of a dance and song.

- Empowerment and experience of collaborators – Community participants are considered to be and treated as partners and collaborators; they have sovereign responsibility for the holding and keeping of knowledge and autonomous self-determining decision making rights which are overtly discussed, practised and reinforced during the workshop. In this the communities/families/individuals are positioned as the decision makers throughout the Workshop, based on the premise that practice and knowledge of Possum Skin Cloaks is a birthright cultural practice. They are therefore belonging to the tradition, and consequently hold responsibility for their story and practice and are the decision makers.
• Cultural knowledge – Workshops are led by Aboriginal facilitators with established knowledge and experience of the practice.
• Flexibility and adaptability – The workshop is fluid and responds to context and circumstance.
• Seeding of other cultural practices.

Aims, Tasks and Activities
Key milestone activities to be achieved across the Workshop timeframe:
• the sharing of the history and the birth of the contemporary Possum Cloaks Story;
• historical and traditional practices
• contemporary methods for making - each step of preparation, cutting, stitching, etc;
• discussions facilitated about the protocols of Cloaks;
• story, design and design application;
• practice of, care and uses of cloaks;
• ceremony, song, dance or sharing experience.

My research into the other models (Banmirra: this chapter, Section 6.2 Appendix 8; Coymmonwealth Games: Section 6.1) has led to the emergence of the developing Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing. This culturally-appropriate, context specific framework could potentially, as already stated, have wider application across the health service sector. This project thus offers an alternative, complementary healing framework for individuals, families and communities. Developing a Framework of this kind can extend the impacts of strengthening hope and resilience that have already been effected in communities that have participated in workshops to date.

‘… It enables us to learn from past practice, engage with it in the present which strengthens the future. I think drawing from the cloaks that bring stories and narratives across multiple generations helps us to have hope, aspiration and vision for our descendants…’ Anonymous 2017. (Possum Cloak Survey)

Banmirra Model and Preliminary Research Findings Analysis
Before I describe the findings and analysis of my PhD Project study and the development of the emerging Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing, I will describe and present some of the findings from my collaborative work as a Senior Cloak maker with Banmirra Arts.
It is important to note that my analysis of findings combined the Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities PhD Survey 2017 with an earlier evaluation process that was conducted by Banmirra. Banmirra had been collecting feedback and evaluation data for the nine years of its operation, with a total of around 1,000 respondents from this early evaluation. Banmirra allowed me to use 14 data sets to contribute to this study (Table 2). The feedback data gathered by Banmirra covered questions about the workshop process, the facilitators’ delivery and, most importantly for the present purpose, questions about the participants’ wellbeing and experiences during the workshop, and cultural knowledge or experience of possum cloaks specifically.

In the Banmirra method of feedback and evaluation gathering, space is allowed for verbal feedback, and when permitted this is used in reports and other such documentation. The questions used in this process are given below.

**Banmirra Feedback and Evaluation Questions** (permission of ICIP Co-authors, A. Reynolds, L. Darroch, V. Couzens)

1. Have you experienced a possum skin cloak in person before?
2. Has the workshop helped you feel reconnected to cloak making and cultural practices of cloak making?
3. Has this workshop encouraged you to discuss cloaks and cultural protocols with Elders and your community?
4. Do you believe cloaks are an important legacy for the future?
5. How would you rate this workshop?
6. How would you rate the workshop presenters?
7. How did working with possum skin cloaks make you feel?
8. Do you have any recommendations how we can improve the workshop?
9. What does social, spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing look/feel like?
10. Did you experience positive changes in your wellbeing after participating?
11. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

Preliminary anecdotal data analysis from participants who have taken part in the Banmirra workshops identified an ongoing need and interest in workshops of this kind. Following is a sample of quotes from this data. The samples are from five different community groups during 2012-2016 and are representative of responses that highlighted the need for more of this type of workshop. The words and sentiments expressed by participants clearly articulate a keen interest and desire to participate in further workshops.
Table 2: Banmirra Feedback form from 14 datasets: Number and Types of Participants, Feedback Sheets completed, Verbal Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Participants/Casual Visitors</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Forms completed/Verbal feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25/45</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40/10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44/8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42/150</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>10/8</td>
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<td>47/12</td>
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<td>15/13</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>34/9</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>14/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Participants/Casual Visitors</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>Grand Total Forms completed/Verbal Feedback 149/101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>475/279</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grand Total Feedback 350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Should be funding for more workshops. There are a lot of groups who want workshops.’
‘More cloaks in communities – it’s a very important cultural practice. Children need to be involved with making cloak. Need lots more targeted funding.’
‘...Please come again – more cultural workshops’
‘...do more workshops, more frequently, more people.’
(Anonymous, Banmirra Workshop Feedback Data 2012-2016)
The most significant finding from the available data was that more than 85% of workshop participants expressed a deep emotional and spiritual impact from encountering a possum skin cloak and, ergo, participating in a cultural practice. This very high percentage is in itself strong evidence of the importance, significance and centrality of cultural connection and the impact of cultural and spiritual healing on individuals, families and communities (see Tables 3 and 4). It is the sentiments expressed through the participants' words that support this quantitative figure, giving authentic and salient insight.

'It made me think about my Old People. Talking to me grandkids. Need to talk more to kids about Nan. Will install in family, in my boys, how important women are...’
'Made me feel good about myself and my culture I was learning more about my culture'
'When I worked with the possum skin cloaks I felt a strong connection to my Ancestors. I also felt it was a privilege and honour to be working with something so old and sacred and further strengthens our identity.’

Feedback statements also comment on the way in which the workshop is delivered and experienced. In this it is expressed that the practice of culture brings individuals, families and communities together working together for a common shared goal without the stresses that can come from other types of participation and involvement in Aboriginal community life.

I think it is wonderful how the community came together to participate in the workshop. How everyone was respectful to each other's suggestions. It's the first workshop I've been to that hasn't had a lot of the negativity. (Anonymous, Banmirra Workshop Feedback Data 2009-2016)

It is the safety and comfortableness of being in an environment in which respect for learning and sharing of cultural knowledge and practice is upheld and paramount to the experience. Responsibility and decision making are also integral to the practising of respect and this too is articulated by participants:

'It makes me feel humble and safe. Connected to the past and the future. ‘It's one of the best workshops I've ever been to – put all decisions back on us.’
'This was an extra excellent workshop because of communication skills, inclusiveness, [saying to us] “its what you want”, and decisions left up to us.’
(Anonymous, Banmirra Workshop Feedback Data 2009-2016)

The activities offered, the methods of delivery, and the innate observation of cultural protocols that are built into the workshop structure are vital elements in this model for practising culture, learning, sharing, cultural remembering and healing.
Revisiting the cultural protocols is so important. This workshop made me remember. Made me think about the importance of our mobs. All together. Put things aside to come together for cultural business. One way, only way, right way – is together. We’ve got all different mobs together here – we’ve come to learn and share. We put up borders, we put up boundaries – but the songlines cross all of them. Where we are today and where we should be – is together with culture... (Anonymous, Banmirra Workshop Feedback Data 2009-2016)

7.2 An emerging Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing: research background and description

The design of the Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey (see Table 3) drew on methodological and theoretical approaches applied to the analysis of social and emotional well-being (SEWB) issues (Garvey 2008; Grieves 2009; Tsey et al 2007). These studies equate social and emotional wellbeing with a strong culture, which in an Aboriginal context can in turn relate directly to people’s identity, connection to place and sense of belonging. These themes are generally difficult to define and considerably harder to quantify, as Aboriginal scholars and others have often noted, therefore making studies of this kind necessary and pertinent to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s wellbeing (Moreton-Robinson 2003; Read 2000; Rose 2000). While studies on social and emotional wellbeing have gained traction in the field of Aboriginal health, they tend to be overshadowed by a focus on improving Aboriginal health service delivery standards (Raphael 2000), reducing Aboriginal youth problems (Dudgeon et al 2010), and closing the gap on statistical inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations (Black & Richards 2009).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the latter approaches. My research, however, provided a way to understand the significance of culture to Indigenous people’s social and emotional well-being and everyday lives, and exposes and expresses the need for further programs of cultural reconnection.

Healing means freedom to practice cultural on ones own terms as an Indigenous person as opposed to governmental terms which have dictated to Indigenous peoples day to day activities since colonisation begun (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

The surveys played an important role in providing a richer and more nuanced view of this issue. Therefore, the survey design was an attempt to capture the range of experiences participants had of culture through their cultural practices, highlighting the importance of culture and social con-
nection to Aboriginal people’s health and wellbeing. Adopting a holistic approach, my research specifically examined how breaks in Aboriginal people’s connection to culture impacted on their life experiences. It sought to highlight the importance of reconnection to culture through cultural revitalisation processes. It did so by posing questions about how participants responded to the workshop learnings and how these learnings have influenced their ongoing cultural connection.

Aboriginal people working together in their community, learning about their culture which in turn helps people with their social, and emotional wellbeing and their physical wellbeing’ (Anonymous, Banmirra Feedback Data 2012)

Importantly, SEWB research demonstrates how such a focus can provide the basis for future health and life opportunities. Understanding the foundations four establishing and maintaining a person’s health and wellbeing throughout their lives continues to be a major challenge for those studying Aboriginal health and wellbeing.

Research suggests there are many factors tied to Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing. For instance, studies by Gorman (2010) and Kingsley et al (2013) demonstrate the centrality of cultural connection in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. Similarly, Tsey and Every’s research (Tsey & Every 2000) highlights the important role of family and community, which is part of cultural connection, in addressing social and emotional wellbeing issues. More recent studies have examined the emergence of cultural revitalisation as a critical aspect of strengthening social and emotional wellbeing among Indigenous communities (Thorpe & Galassi 2014). In comparison, one of the strongest findings from my collected Survey data and the Banmirra data sets is that the intrinsic interdependence of cultural connectedness and wellbeing and family and culture is a well known and established knowledge in Aboriginal communities, and that Aboriginal people understand the need for health and healing programs to be founded in cultural practices and frameworks.

Cloak making is a partnership of knowledge and identity that embeds traditional and bolsters cultural strengthening. The methods and community way of working together helps with learning about oneself and find that connection that works to create harmony in spirit. Wellbeing is a crucial component of cultural strengthening and is banded about by govt especially in new directions in policy but it is the grass roots community projects that really have meaning and develop networks to learn and stay strong. (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

My study on possum-skin cloak-making, as a revitalised cultural tradition, aimed to shed new light on existing social and emotional wellbeing studies. It examined a range of interrelated determinants of health issues across the themes of social, family, health service, cultural and community experiences. This kind of data is currently missing from studies on cultural revitalisation
practices, most of which tend to focus on language revival (see below). While my PhD research also emphasised the importance of cultural connection, family and community experiences, and the health benefits of reviving traditional Aboriginal practices in contemporary life, my focus was to build on existing studies by tying all these different elements together through a study of practices, events and responses over a long period of time. Specifically, this meant that my approach to gathering data through the surveys provided a way to bring a large volume of qualitative, and some quantitative, findings together at the stage of analysis. Following the work of Halcomb & Hickman (2015) in mixed methods approaches, and guided by existing reviews of the field (Brown et al 2015; Östlund et al 2011), this approach enabled me to examine complex phenomena in detail. Hence, the study generated new understandings about how Aboriginal people’s health and wellbeing impacts have extended over time.

Theoretically, I am also drawing on the work of Nagata (2004) and adopting a critical lens from postcolonial theory and dadirri (deep listening) or wangan ngootyoong (in my language, meaning to hear/listen good) to understand the lives of my participants (see Atkinson 2001; Ungunmerr-Baumann & Brennan 1989). This theoretical focus also helped me to build self-reflexivity into the cultural material with which I am always working. This affords me a culturally specific way to engage with the rich and diverse findings I expected to generate from the survey data. Furthermore, the health framework and model I built as part of this research offers a sustainable model of Indigenous healthcare in forms that aim to develop Indigenous leadership capabilities. The model is designed to be viable and relevant across the generations, which is why it was important to be able to use the surveys, combined with the valuable qualitative data I generated (findings represented through multiple forms throughout this dissertation, in paintings and poems, and the online virtual gallery) and from the interviews, to identify future cloak custodians to inspire, teach and mentor the next generation of Indigenous leaders.

Since our cloak workshop my daughter has made a cloak and my mum has started one. This has helped facilitate conversations about the family violence in our family which has been a healing experience. It has also fostered a keen interest in my daughters about the women in our family… our matriarchs and we’ve recently travelled together to Country to learn more … (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

Fantastic and overwhelmed. Used to feel like you couldn’t do it – but now you know you can. Its given us the skills to carry on. I’ve flagged with my family and we’re going to move forward and make a cloak for my Aunty, for my brother and for me. In that order – age order... (Anonymous, Banmirra Feedback Data 2011)
Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing

It is the expression of the need for more workshops, the identification of a gap in, or absence of a sense of wholeness or completeness, the disconnect and then the re-connectedness to culture and a feeling of wellbeing that has been evidenced in experiences and data feedback. This information, together with the long-term perspective of my individual and collaborative experiences of practice and research, was the genesis and inspiration for me to explore the possibilities of extrapolating experiences of participants into other contexts. My research and practice over the past 17 years has led to the translation of this accumulated knowledge into the articulation of my emerging Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing. In this section I will attempt to describe the Framework and contextualise it within my research findings, looking at both data sets and drawing on my personal experience.

It was recognised very early on in the Possum Cloak Story that the reconnecting of people with their birthright knowledges and practices had a powerful resonant impact. As evidenced from the Banmirra data sets and the PhD Possum Cloak Survey data, this impact is intuitive, deeply spiritual and gives an improved sense of wellbeing and contributes to healing.

Many examples of survey and feedback responses have been used to demonstrate and exemplify the healing and wellbeing effects this research Project is attempting to articulate. However these statements also infer that people come with, often an unspoken and sometimes unacknowledged, feeling or a deep sense of the absence of connection to culture, knowledge and practice. Others refer to, sometimes overtly, sometimes implied, the presence of some kind of emotional wound or life trauma that individuals carry, and that the participation and experience in Possum Cloak making provides a degree of healing and improvement in wellbeing.

I feel I have a much more complete understanding of who I am. The process of engaging with an ancient cultural practice is visceral and stirs a deep longing for cultural completeness. It starts a journey which is satisfying and grounded in resilience of generations. (Anonymous, Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017)

Building on conversations held with colleagues from the Banmirra Workshop Program, participant feedback and community anecdotal responses, I asked questions like, how can this healing and wellbeing be translated into other settings/environments? and how would that be applied? what shape would that take? what health care settings would it suit? how would it work in different health care settings? The process of questioning and reflection has led to the concept of all of these accrued learnings, into what I am calling a Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing, that facilitates introducing cultural practices that effect changes in wellbeing and activate healing in participants.
This dynamic and responsive Framework has a central foundational practice principle of observing cultural protocols, which frames the design and delivery of an experience.

**Summary of key qualities and attributes of the Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing**

- Fluidity and shapeshifting capability – This means the Framework moves and changes with the context and circumstance. This fluidity and shapeshifting capability offers a tailored response to an identified need that is shaped in Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Being, and the implementation is founded in Aboriginal ways of Doing. This allows for negotiation in the design and shape of an experience: it can be shaped to suit specific circumstances and environments. For example: an intensive immersive experience in a finite time frame or an experience that unfolds over a timeline that suits the individual, family or community;

- Responsive – The Framework has an inherent response capability - the participant group leads the identification of the workshop or experience need; content is not prescribed and set, rather the Framework allows for change and adaptations throughout the process; the experience can have a staged process – for example, a possum armband workshop as an introductory experience which can be built on;

- Experienced facilitators who are knowledgeable and have appropriate expertise in a specific cultural activity, and who are versed in cultural protocols;

- Sustainability – Legacy is facilitated in the sharing of knowledge and practice and training, and mentoring opportunities are offered for participant group individuals.

This list of attributes and qualities is preliminary and further research and trials planned in the post doctoral phase of research will no doubt contribute to the emergence of a newer and more closely relevant iteration.

**Improving Indigenous Health Outcomes**

There is a large body of literature on cultural revitalisation practices which, as previously mentioned, tends to be dominated by the theme of language revival (Hornberger & King 1996, Hinton & Hale 2001, Stebbins, Eira & Couzens 2018, Warschauer 1998, amongst others). Considerable research has also been undertaken in the area of eco-tourism, environmentalism and land resource management as forms of cultural revitalisation or maintenance (Pilgrim et al 2010). Other studies have focused on the revival of traditional healing practices and belief systems (Baird-
Olson & Ward 2000), midwifery (Carroll & Benoit 2004), cultural dances (Brown et al 2012), and the arts and heritage sector (Simpson 2009).

In all of these studies, there is a direct correlation drawn between social and emotional health and wellbeing and people’s participation in traditional cultural activities.

The work of language revitalisation has social and political foundations that emerge from the needs of individuals and families to find healthier and safer ways of living by restoring culture to the community. (Stebbins, Eira & Couzens 2018: p43)

The benefits of participants’ involvement in these activities include reducing isolation, promoting social networks, and improving self-esteem and communication skills (Anwar McHenry 2009). Some of the literature also discusses benefits such as therapeutic and cathartic effects, developing skills in self-expression and strengthening social skills and communal ties (Johnson 1998, Starks et al 2010). Other studies have also found that people who participate in cultural revitalisation practices have greater life satisfaction and enhance their quality of life because they tend to live a healthier and longer life (Perkins et al 2002). Research also suggests that these types of social and cultural activities can sometimes offer a temporary distraction from drugs, alcohol and substance abuse (Brady 1995, Gone 2013, Walters et al 2002).

My PhD research offers an important contribution to cultural revitalisation scholarship through its focus on cloak-making practices in an Aboriginal Australian context. As the first study of this subject matter to take place in Australia, my aim was to offer a point of difference to previous studies. This Australian study is unique because it highlights how possum-cloak making has impacted on more than 75 different language groups (Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games Project and Bannirra Workshop Program combined) in southeastern Australia since the workshops were introduced to communities. It is a reflexive study of my personal Possum Cloak Story and the southeastern Australian Possum Cloak cultural revitalisation story. As a study extending over more than 17 years, it also offers a long-term context to examining the health benefits of cultural revitalisation practices.

Most definitely. It enables us to learn from past practice, engage with it in the present which strengthens the future. I think drawing from the the cloaks that bring stories and narratives across multiple generations helps us to have hope, aspiration and vision for our descendants. (Anonymous, PhD Possum Cloak Survey 2017)
Development and Trialling of a Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing in Healthcare Facilities

This research generated new findings on the immediate and longer-term health and wellbeing impact of participating in the cloak-making workshops. Based on these findings, I was able to approach a range of healthcare facilities to discuss future possibilities to trial the Framework. What was unexpected in this process was the interest that would be generated. This interest came from a range of sectors beyond the health sector. The practice of incorporating possum skin cloaks in healing contexts was implemented in a hospital context with women cancer patients, a prison context with female offenders, an education context with young Indigenous students, in an Aboriginal healing centre for victims of family violence context, and as a healing program with children in out of home care. As previously mentioned, everyone who engages with the process of possum cloaks is transformed through the experience and no-one is left unaffected. I described explicit moments of this kind of transformation taking place in people in the research for this dissertation: how people felt overwhelmed by the experience, its spiritual nature, the sense of belonging the experience induces. The implications from these research findings provide a way to promote the benefits of the Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing to other healthcare facilities, such as a hospital, women’s shelter, safe house or mental health service provider. The next phase will be to prepare a fully developed report that describes both the immediate and longer-term health and wellbeing benefits evidenced by past participants of possum workshops. This will enable healthcare facilities to assess the value of the Practice Framework for Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Healing in greater detail for the people who might potentially benefit from participating in the workshops or similar experiences in through the emerging Framework, such as at risk or vulnerable communities.

My postdoctoral work will build on this PhD research in vital and necessary ways. Moving forward and presenting the key findings to a suitable healthcare facility will be a crucial aspect of the next phase of the study. However, this will require careful planning and extensive consultations with relevant individuals, families, communities, community health care organisations, healthcare representatives and organisations, such as the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO). VACCHO’s support will be critical to aspects of my postdoctoral work in terms of negotiation and establishment of trials in health facilities and possible replication of the Model across the State.
Other key stakeholders and potential partners will be identified and included in a comprehensive post doctoral research plan.

This PhD has generated new data on how participants’ health and wellbeing has changed, developed and/or improved since participating in the cloak-making workshops. I posed questions about how the workshop learnings have shaped participants’ everyday lives in terms of their social networks, connection to Country and cultural tradition. The survey asked participants to respond to their current healthcare service experiences and expectations. Posing these types of questions allowed me to understand what might be currently missing in our existing healthcare service provision and what Aboriginal people’s expectations and experiences are in terms of their existing and ongoing healthcare needs. These findings helped to contextualise my assessment of existing facilities that provide healthcare services to Indigenous community members. This allowed me to gain a better understanding of how healthcare facilities can contribute to responding directly or in more effective ways to Indigenous people’s diverse healthcare needs.

Table 3 provides the questions used in the Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey and a range of sample responses.

**Table 3: Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017: Questions, response rates and sample text responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Number of Completed Surveys/Incomplete</th>
<th>Percentage responses to questions</th>
<th>Qualitative text samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Have you ever participated in a possum cloak making workshop?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. When did you participate in a possum cloak making workshop?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. Was it a community possum cloak workshop? Yes/No</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. If not a community workshop, was it a family workshop, organization program workshop, individual workshop, specialized one off workshop ie for family violence? in a few words, please describe</td>
<td>25/1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. Did you participate with any other members of your family or community?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, we participated in a group of at least 10 other community members and carers, as well as others whom came at different session. I also shared the experience with my young daughter whom we have created her own cloak for since and has become strong and wise at a young age of the importance of her cloak and the strength and energy it fills her with.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. What does healing and wellbeing mean in an Aboriginal context?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our souls are hurting because of the effects of colonisations and disconnection that has happened within our communities to our culture, language, songlines and purpose. We are hurting in many ways and when we find ourselves enriched by the strength of our ancestors and connecting with our people, earth and purpose we become strong. Eating well and self destructive habits change when you are in line with yourself, confident and strong. Healing is necessary and found in things like this. You just need to participate to feel it!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.7 Does cloak making support cultural and spiritual healing? How? Which ways?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>By connecting us with old ways and our ancestors. You feel surrounded by spirits and safe when creating a cloak or wrapping yourself when it is done. The stories it tells can take you to a place of dreaming and happiness. Knowing you are doing something that your elders and ancestors did is an amazing strength builder. Especially when so many practices were forbidden and could have stayed dormant for even longer. To be part of something so important and significant is incredible, empowering and grounding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. Is your spirit and identity strengthened by encountering possum skin cloaks?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Spirit and identity is greatly strengthened by the encountering of possum skin cloaks. It embodies the knowledge and strength by so many that have created it, their touch with in the creation is felt with in this cloak.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Can you say more about any specific cultural spiritual health and wellbeing benefits the workshop offered you or affected in you?</td>
<td>24/2</td>
<td></td>
<td>It has had a profound effect on me. It is like a new door has been opened and let my creative being out. I have taken up my art and performance art like never before. And found great success. I am astounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. How would you describe your cultural and spiritual health and wellbeing prior to the workshop?</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>I am up against the wall for a long time now but in spite of sad losses i continue to go on.I would say such support has been life saving for me - I’m sure I would have left the building long ago without my cultural exposure - of which your women’s teaching has been a most important and central example. As an academic my identity often gets caught up in the day to day workings of my job which can be a good thing but is often tiring as its often about explaining and fighting for the Aboriginal perspective. My cultural health can take a battering in this process. So I felt depleted and was questioning my role and job. Being part of the cloak workshop and actually doing my PhD has renewed my cultural health. Listening to others and how they have engaged with their cloaks is also helpful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q.11 How would you describe your cultural and spiritual health and wellbeing since the workshop?

25/1

I feel I have a much more complete understanding of who I am. The process of engaging with an ancient cultural practice is visceral and stirs a deep longing for cultural completeness. It starts a journey which is satisfying and grounded in resilience of generations.

...being a part of this process, is so enriching for my spirit, it's taken me to another part of my potential, my higher self. I am very proudly continuing telling the possum dreaming story, even when I'm not being a part of a cloak making workshop, we now have an important job, once we've learned to pass that knowledge on...

Cloak making as well as other cultural creations and connection has lifted me personally and given me a lot of strength and purpose. My healing journey is still continuing and may never fully reach an end but each moment of cultural, spiritual and earth connection is empowering and strengthening and brings me back on track in a world where the tracks are really bumpy.

Q.12 What particular aspects of the workshop stood out for you and why?

26 100%

Q13. Optional: What (Aboriginal) community do you belong/identify?

24/2

Q14. Optional: What role does your community play in your life?

23/3

Q15 Optional: In which ways do you participate in community?

21/5

Table 4 gives a Word Cloud analysis of the responses from Questions 6 through Question 9. I have highlighted these questions as they are most pertinent to my second Research Question re-
lating to the impact of Possum Cloaks on cultural and spiritual healing, health and wellbeing in individuals and families. In all four questions, culture, connection, cloaks, health/healing, community/family and Country are strongly represented, with culture, connection and healing encompassing almost 75% of the responses. These responses identify clear and direct symbiotic correlations between sharing and participating in and learning cultural knowledges and practices, healing and social and emotional wellbeing.

Table 4: Text Analysis identifying themes for Questions 6-9 (inclusive) - Possum Skin Cloak and Healing in Communities Survey 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Word cloud - most used words</th>
<th>Word usage percentages</th>
<th>Sample Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. What does healing and wellbeing mean in an Aboriginal context?</td>
<td>Spiritual Values, Country, Sharing, Culture, Knowledge, Connection, Survival, Healing, Mob, Soul, Holistic Approach</td>
<td>Connection 29.73% 11</td>
<td>It means connection to self, to country, to culture. Knowing who you are and where you come from and being proud in that knowledge. Culture is essential to wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Culture 29.73% 11</td>
<td>A deep spiritual connection that requires you to listen deeply, be guided by the old people who left us stories in the landscape and to the stories that elders pass down when they feel culturally safe and respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Healing 24.32% 9</td>
<td>Connecting to my culture and country, being with family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Country 24.32% 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spiritual 13.51% 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Holistic Approach 8.11% 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Survival 5.41% 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge 5.41% 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yes Cloak making supports cultural and spiritual healing as it gives great connection to a life force. It brings understanding for practises that have been lost, it gives connection to community and a great sense of belonging. It is healing!!!

By connecting us with old ways and our ancestors. You feel surrounded by spirits and safe when creating a cloak or wrapping yourself when it is done. the stories it tells can take you to a place of dreaming and happiness. Knowing you are doing something that your elders and ancestors did is an amazing strength builder. Especially when so many practises were forbidden and could have stayed dormant for even longer. To be part of something so important and significant is incredible, empowering and grounding.

Because mob are doing cultural practice the act itself creates spiritual connection and therefore healing. The act of being in a space as a collective and making a cloak is spiritual in itself and of course cultural because of the work being done.
8. Is your spirit and identity strengthened by encountering possum skin cloaks?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestors, safe, strong, practice, cloak, culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancestors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definitely! The cloak my daughter and I created has become a necessary tool of our daily lives. When sick, sad, in doubt or nervous the cloak is the first thing we grab. We take it with us when we feel a need for protection and strength. It is hard to explain the invisible powers that it has but they are real. My 5 year old described to me how she was so sad and I put the cloak on her and her body felt different and she felt so calm, when I had training for a week and was unable to do any kinder drop offs all week she turned to me and said "mum i need to to take batjar (possum) with me, i knew that she would feel safe, confident and strong all day regardless of me being close or far.

totally 100% my identity is enriched with the strength of the magik of the cloaks, my spirit and teaching has grown and travelled many places because of what healing the cloaks have taught me. My sons are also stronger because of theirs kooramooks.
9. Can you say more about any specific cultural and spiritual health and wellbeing benefits the workshop offered you or affected in you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloak</td>
<td>20.59%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It taught me if I thought enough about country I could produce art to celebrate it.

Yes the process encouraged me to physically represent story lines that have not been well documented previously and this continues to sit with me spiritually and in memory

I think it is within our DNA. It reconnects with our traditions and ancestors.

I work in a very what can be termed a very stressful environment and being able to wrap myself in a cloak from time allows me to feel grounded and able to cleanse and reconnect with my mob and country which allows me to focus and gain strength to keep working for the community.

### Conclusion

A key existing and ongoing aspect of the study will be to identify community leaders who can be supported to continue this kind of cultural revitalisation practice in their own communities. The focus here will be to evaluate the Practice Framework for Cultural and Spiritual Healing and to test if it is sustainable, culturally-appropriate and responsive to the needs of Indigenous communities. While trialling the Framework in a healthcare facility may be a suitable approach, it will be important to note that this process is still a test and the test is to find out if such a Framework can be culturally-appropriate, relevant and sustainable. This is why it would be important to gain the support of community leaders who may potentially be interested in working with me to sup-
port this Framework, and mentor, teach and inspire the next generation of Indigenous leaders in this cultural revitalisation process. In future, the aim will be to explore how other Cloak Custodians can mentor our future Aboriginal leaders through this process. A crucial aspect of trialling the Practice Framework in a healthcare facility is to understand how a Framework of this kind can be sustainable, practical and complementary to the existing healthcare infrastructure. This is where I believe future research may be undertaken.

Research demonstrates that cultural initiatives that promote self-determination and community governance, reconnection, community life, and restoration and resilience have positive outcomes for Aboriginal health and wellbeing. Most of this research centres on interventions that support families to prevent child abuse and neglect, alcohol and substance misuse, and suicide (see for example Campbell et al 2007, Swan and Raphael 1995, Atkinson 2002, Garvey 2008, Dudgeon et al 2010). Assessments of interventions may include evaluating a range of outreach, healthcare and welfare delivery services. Yet my research has illustrated that knowledge gaps remain concerning interventions that support local communities to participate in cultural activities to account for Indigenous values, lifestyles, aspirations, family and differing needs and capacities. Very little research knowledge has been generated on interventions related specifically to the cultural regeneration, reclamation and renewal of cultural traditions. To my knowledge, no studies have been conducted on how the revival of cultural traditions addresses the priorities of Indigenous people in diverse, complex economic and social circumstances. This project is innovative because it offers a culturally-specific Framework that enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to practise their own culture in a safe, supportive and empowering environment, and on their terms.

These final words in my dissertation are my hopes for the future that I might effect through my work. Since colonisation, our cultural identity has been forcibly stripped away through government policies and practices of the past 200 years. Our cultural identity has been dissolved and dissipated in many ways. Modern life is accelerating that process. The time has come now to take stock of where we are as Aboriginal people and our place and belonging in the 21st century. Those who have gone before us have paved the way for us now to search for and strengthen the cultural knowledge and histories which have been hidden, sleeping or seemingly lost. My intent has been that the documentation of these stories will ensure the strengthening of our Aboriginal community identity. My hope is that this repository of stories will contribute to realigning the imbalance of the oppressive impact of the past two hundred years of colonisation.
My work has been and continues to be about the empowerment of our Peoples as individuals and collectively. I have also undertaken the responsibility to educate mainstream through the sharing of our stories. However, into the future, I will continue my work with a shift in focus towards embedding my learnings and teachings firmly in those who are our living repositories: our communities, our families, our children.

Whilst this PhD document provides a record and reference for those yet to come, it is vital to the continuance of our cultural Law of the Land that it be upheld through living legacy. Living legacy is the handing on and carrying forward of our stories, knowledges and practices in our families and our children.

Possum dreaming, kooramookyan-an tyamateeyt-an, is a journey of healing – a pathway to connection and restoration of cultural pride and dignity. Our Peoples experience a sense of fulfilment and completeness through the strengthening of our personal knowing of who we are and where we belong. Our cultural stories and identity are firmly and tangibly reclaimed, regenerated, revitalised, and remembered, awaiting future generations.

As the Old People have told us what to do, and as our journey has unfolded over almost two decades across the south-east of Australia, the work is done, their Vision realised. Cloaks are living and Being in communities, in families.

This is my privilege and honour to do this work and I am humbly grateful for the experience.

Dedicated to our late father, Ivan Couzens, our Mum, Joy Couzens (deceased) and, always, our Old People.

Vicki Couzens 2017
Bibliography


Appendices
A1: General Glossary

B
ba And
bareedy Water
boorraknawa Unseen, no
bullen-merri Lake in crater at Mt Leura

D
deen Here, this
Djargurd Wurrong Language group

G
Gunditjmara Name of tribal group

K
kaawirn kuunawarn Hissing Swan, head man of Guunaward Gunditj clan
kaltyarr ngart Eldest daughter
kanoo Up
kapang Spotted quoll
karman Paint, to
karweeyn Ceremony
keeleengk Lake
keerray Blood
Keerray Woorroong Language group
keerreek Blood, red
keilambete keeleengk Lake Keilambete
kookoon Paternal grandfather
koong Body
kooparr Paternal uncle
koornong Little
kooramook Possum, possum skin cloak
koorookee Maternal grandmother
kuulorr-kuulorr Volcano, two volcanoes
kuuyang Eel

L
laka Speak
lakan To tell, story
leehura-leehura kang Mt Leura, Camperdown
leembeen Paternal aunty/other mother
leempeeyt Camp place
leenyarr Paternal grandmother
leerpeen To sing, song

M
maar People
makatepa Today
maleeyeeto Long time ago
mana Hold, or keep to
mangnooroo watanoo Come from, belong to
marree Stone (basalt), stone lava
mayapa Make, do
mayapa-nawarr Make, pay, give (inclusive plural)
meereng Country
meetako On, passing on
meerta Stand, stand up
moorraka (-n) Grave, burial place
moornong Yam
moorroop Spirit/good/bad
mootpa Cook, to
maarngat tyamanyoongako ba yakeenako Aboriginal (Gunditjmara) Knowing and learning/dreaming
N
nanoong Day
ngaken To see
ngalameen Ancestors
ngalookngart Third born daughter
ngantopay Keep, to
ngapang Breast
ngarra Who
ngarakeetoong Family, large group of people
ngatanwarr Greeting of welcome, to all
ngathook I, first person
ngathoongan We (inclusive)
ngarringnguyun Childers Cove
ngayoook Sulphur crested white cockatoo
ngeelam Infant
ngeerrang Mother
ngeeye Our
nguongala They
ngootoowan You (all)
ngootyoong Good, healthy, (him or her)
ngootyoonooyt Safe
ngowata Come, to come to
nguurnduuc Air, wind, breath
ngyoorn Cry, sorrow
O
oorate therrang Place of many stones/kangaroos - locality named the Sisters in the Country of the Nguurad Gundit clan of the Keerray Woorroong
dergonnernut
P
pakarr yawayan Early spring... the time between
pakarrngart Second born daughter
pakan Bone
pawan Burn, cook, heat
peepay Father
peeneeyt Strong
Pernmeeyal Great Spirit
ponponpoorramook Red tailed black cockatoo
pookar  River
poonart  Bite
poopoop  Baby
pooleytparrngart  Fourth born daughter
pooyeet pooyeet tyeepet  Ancestor Spirits
poorrpa  Go, travel across
T
tanam  Proud flesh
tarn weerreeng  Sacred cave site in Gunditjmara Country
tarree nung  Waterhole covered in leaves
teeboom  Freshwater mussel
teenay  In, into
teen  Here, this
teenyeen ngapang  Youngest daughter
teertpa  Whisper
thanampool  Woman
thanampolleear  Belonging to the woman
thangang  Tooth, teeth
thowoong  To smoke, smoke
tooloy koortakay  Squaring skins for rugs
tootangan  To rest,
tuuram maree  Fresh water stones
W
wangan ngootooyong  Respect, deep listening
wanyoo  For, of
wearerungwongwong  Moonlight head, the three spirit women who guard this place
watanoo  Coming
wayapawan  To meet
weeyn  Fire
weeweeyt weeweeyt ngothuk  Name of place at Mt Leura, translation unknown
wombeetch puyuut  Name of man from Djargurd Wurrong
wooka  Give
woontha  Where
worn  House, hut
woorn  Variant of worn
woorrn  Variant of worn
woorrkngan  Birthplace
woorroong  Tongue/language
Y
yakeen  Dream, dreaming
yana  Go, to go away
yaruun tanneen parpuur  Victorious, senior woman of the keerray wurrong
yaweejt  Cooking basket
yoolooween  Lie concealed
yoowata  To sleep
A2: Glossary ~ Names of Places
along the Hopkins River at Warrnambool (in geographical order along river)

tangang puungoort
murri-murrkrii buurkrrakil
booroinyel-o
bura
moyjil
pang
tonedidjerer
tuuram
winburren
alloburng
lapeeyt parreeyt
lapeeyt
lapeet
mopor
pannitarnigte
perrennarrerwarrer
porronedernite
porry
warerangjele
woerrer
worjghome
worrocubberrin
yeddy yerrin
pookarr
wirpneung
baller baller cort
poonoong poonoong
taree nung (a waterhole just north of Rosebrook (near Port Fairy) on the banks of the Moyne River - part of the pyupgkil gundidj clan territory)
## A3: Glossary ~ Family/Relationship Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kakay</td>
<td>Elder sister or cousin, mother's sister’s daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karreen</td>
<td>Daughter in law, son's wife (female speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kookoonyarr</td>
<td>Granddaughter, son’s daughter (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kooparr</td>
<td>Paternal uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koopang</td>
<td>Son or nephew, brother's son (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koorookee</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koorrook</td>
<td>Grandson, daughter's sons (female speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koorroyarr</td>
<td>Granddaughter, daughter's daughter (female speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leempeen</td>
<td>Paternal aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leenyarr</td>
<td>Granddaughter, son's daughter (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngeerrang</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>malang</td>
<td>Wife, general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>malat</td>
<td>Sister in law, brother's wife (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>napyarr</td>
<td>Granddaughter, daughter's daughter (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngalooyarr</td>
<td>Mother in law, wife's mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngaloonyarr</td>
<td>Daughter in law, son's wife (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngameen</td>
<td>Maternal uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nganap</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngapoon</td>
<td>Grandfather, maternal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngapoon</td>
<td>Grandson, daughter's son (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngart</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peeneengyarr</td>
<td>Sister in law, youngest brother's wife (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peepay</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teerrayarr</td>
<td>Sister in law (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wanoong ngeerrang</td>
<td>Other mother/aunty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warringyarr</td>
<td>Niece, sister's daughters (male speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warrangngat</td>
<td>Nephew, sister's sons (female speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wartee</td>
<td>Brother, elder cousin, father's brother's sons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## A4: Glossary ~ Aboriginal Language Words
from other Language Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dadirri</td>
<td>hear/listen good/quiet contemplation (Ngangikurungkurr)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gunya winyarr</td>
<td>womens possum skin cloaks (Yorta Yorta)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>birrarung wilam</td>
<td>camp by the river of mists (Wurundjeri/Woi Wurrung)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A5: Contract of Respect

Contract of Respect (Template)

Name of Cloak: ..........................................................................................................................

Community: ..............................................................................................................................

Background Description:
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................

Purpose of Contract of Respect:
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................

Conditions/events/occasions and person/s for use of Cloak:
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................

Care of the Cloak
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................

Storage of Cloak:
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................
Physical care of cloak:

Cultural care of cloak:

Access Process:

Permission authority/s:
A6: Training Cloak Care Guidelines (Courtesy of Banmirra Arts and Stella Stories)
Guidelines - caring for your community possum skin cloak

Caring for a cloak involves physical, cultural and spiritual elements and we recommend each community develop their own plan for managing their cloak. (Courtesy of Banmirra Arts and Stella Stories)

¥ What is the vision and purpose of the cloak?
  o Can it be worn?
    • By whom?
    • For what occasions?
    • What are the responsibilities of the wearer?
  o Can it be displayed in exhibitions?
  o Can it be used in educational activities?
  o How else can it be used?
  o How will you keep a record of its use?

¥ Where will the cloak be housed/stored?
  o Who will be the caretaker of the cloak?
  o What are the caretaker’s responsibilities?
  o How will it be stored?
  o Will the cloak be insured?

¥ Can the cloak be loaned and taken offsite?
  o Who can loan the cloak?
  o For what purposes can the cloak be loaned?
  o Who can approve the loan application?
  o What are the responsibilities of the lender?
  o How will the loan be recorded?
  o How will the condition be checked before and after each use?
How will you review and/or update your cloak management plan?

Recommendations for cultural and spiritual care include:

¥ develop a ceremonial cleansing routine to prepare your cloak for each new use or for its return to store; eg.
  o you might have a spoken blessing or a song;
  o or a traditional smoking ceremony;

¥ ask the Elders to appoint a cloak-keeper or create a journal of people’s experiences with the cloak to share with each other;

¥ seek the guidance of Elders if anything seems unusual or the cloak is involved in any stressful situations.

Recommendations for a cloak that is out and about:

¥ keep away from food and drink;

¥ try to avoid temperature and humidity fluctuations;

¥ get a cloth bag or wheelie bag or a large sheet to carry the cloak around;

¥ shake the cloak out and lay the cloak in the sun to get sun cleaned;

¥ brush the fur occasionally and rub your fingers through the fur to check for moths, insects or give the fur a light vacuum with clean vacuum head;

¥ repair any damages quickly (a stitch in time saves nine);

¥ **don't** keep in plastic as the cloak will sweat and grow mould (especially in the boot of the car).
Recommendations for physical storage and care include:

¥ store in a dry place with good air ventilation;

¥ try to avoid temperature and humidity fluctuations;

¥ keep insects (moths and silverfish) away from storage;

¥ keep the cloak flat or with the smallest number of folds;

¥ if possible store in a large archival box with tissue paper or calico laid across the skin side of the cloak prior to folding or rolling;

¥ or store on a loose large roll (like carpet is stored) and cover with a piece of calico or cotton sheet;

¥ seek the advice of a conservator for long term museum storage or care.
A7: Use of Cloak Request Form (Courtesy of Banmirra Arts and Stella Stories)
Use of Cloak Request Form

Name
Address
Phone
Email

Request for use: please describe what you want to use the cloak for

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Date/s
From: To:

Return Date:

Cost: (if applicable)

Pick up and drop off information:

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Name of person lending(pls print): Name of Authorised Lender:

Signature: Signature:

Date: Date:
A8: Cloak Workshop Training Material
This booklet is titled Cloak Workshop and accompanies the dissertation. (Courtesy of Banmirra Arts and Stella Stories)
Cloak Workshop

(insert name of community) 2015

Figures in possum skin cloaks
by William Barak c.1898
Photo courtesy National Gallery of Victoria

Possum skin cloak workshop
delivered by
Contents

Hissing swan arts
Vicki Couzens

in partnership with

(insert partner organisation logo here)
Acknowledgement of Country

We pay our respects to the Ancestors, Elders and community of the (blank, insert name here) where we are gathering for this workshop.

Thank you to the (blank, insert name here) for co-hosting the event and your venue and funding support.
The Vision


Our story began many years ago. The Old People sent this story to us. We heard them speak through our hearts to our spirits. They told us what to do, they are still telling us what to do. Their message, our story, is to return the cloaks to our People, to reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember. To remember what those cloaks mean to us and tell the stories of our People and Country.

Vicki Couzens, 2009
We aim to work together to:

• Reconnect communities to cloak making and cultural practices of cloak making;

• Support transmission of cultural knowledge between people and community;

• Strengthen individual and community identity;

• Encourage individuals and communities to explore how cloaks contribute to wellbeing;

*Uncle Ivan Couzens wearing djargurd wurrong, 2006. Photo courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust.*
During this workshop, we will share:

- Our knowledge about the history of cloaks and the cultural reclamation of recent times;

- Our skills in creating cloaks: from developing designs and stories to cutting and sewing skins;

- Our cultural protocols when using cloaks for ceremony, healing, education and exhibitions;

- Our respect for Ancestors and Elders who guide us on our journey.
During this workshop you can:

- Make a possum skin armband;
- Learn how to make a possum skin cloak;
- Gain knowledge about sourcing research materials;
- Learn cultural protocols for possum skin cloaks;
- Contribute to creating a possum skin cloak for your community;
- Continue a cultural tradition of your Ancestors.

The culture has never ever been lost and what you four girls have done is – you’re preserving something.
Uncle Henry Atkinson, 2004
Roles and responsibilities – Facilitators

**Senior Cloak Makers**
Our role and responsibility is to share the knowledge and skills we have learned over the past fifteen years and to teach: making possum cloaks and associated materials; respecting cloak protocols; and wearing and sharing cloaks. We are also responsible for ensuring the health and safety of participants during the workshop.

**Resource Coordinator**
My role and responsibility is to share skills in locating resources about cloaks; prepare your workshop kit and a post-workshop report for your community and support the teachers. With permission, I will take photos and assist with evaluation forms.

We are all responsible for respecting the guidance of your Elders and the copyright of your community’s knowledge and stories as we share our possum skin cloak story and journey with others. Vicki
Roles and responsibilities – Participants

We ask participants to:

- Seek guidance from your Ancestors and Elders about your community’s stories, designs and traditions;
- Be mindful of your health & safety and that of others;
- Contribute to making a cloak for your community and caring for the cloak into the future;
- Respect our cultural protocols and copyright in relation to cloaks and the information we share.

You may also wish to note your own goals, roles and responsibilities in relation to cloaks here:

My aims  My roles & responsibilities
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________
Cloak-making is both great fun and hard work. Cloaks are important vessels for re-connecting with past cultural practices and keeping our people healthy and strong. A few words of advice:

- Be mindful of the equipment we are using and try to focus on one thing at a time when burning designs or cutting and sewing skins;

- Some people experience allergic reactions and/or breathing difficulties when we are cutting the skins due to the loose fur – please take care;

- If feelings and emotions become intense, we recommend sitting quietly and breathing deeply for a few moments and sharing your experience with your Elders, family or one of us;

Please ask for help or advice - we are happy to help.

Poker burners are HOT, needles and scissors are SHARP! Please take care and supervise your children.

James teaches his daughter to use a poker burner, 2011. Photo by Amanda Reynolds.

Deanna shows care with needle and scissors, 2010. Photo by Amanda Reynolds.
Armbands

Armbands can be plain strips of possum fur or decorated with ochre, shell and emu feather. You can also burn or paint your clan designs or contemporary story/identity onto armbands. If you want to know more:

- Ask Vicki about wearing armbands in dance;
- Ask Lee about armbands as traditional trade items;
- Ask Maree about work-shopping design ideas;


*Workbench with a variety of armbands made during cloak workshop, 2010.* Photo by Amanda Reynolds.

*Ruben making armbands, 2010.* Photo by Amanda Reynolds.
You may like to practice your designs here before making your armband:
Waistbands and dance-belts

Waistbands and dance-belts come in all shapes and designs and are great for showing identity and personality of maker and/or wearer. They can be plain with strips of possum fur or tails attached. They can be decorated with ochre, shell, emu feather and other materials. Like armbands, you can burn or paint your clan designs or contemporary story/identity onto a waistband.

Please ask for more information.
You may like to practice designs or jot down ideas for dance-belts here:
Elders and community representatives come together for the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games, 2006. Photo by Mick Harding.

Our journey with possum skin cloaks has been a journey of healing, of reclamation, of ceremony, of celebration.

Vicki, Lee and Maree
Where to start?

Possum skin cloaks are one of the most sacred expressions of traditional south-eastern Aboriginal peoples. Cloaks are vessels for the body and spirit, they connect people with Country and community, they offer pride, dignity and respect. At the same time, cloaks can be one of our most intimate belongings used in a variety of everyday activities – sleeping, wrapping babies, teaching Country and sharing stories.

Making a cloak is a physical, spiritual and emotional journey that requires patience, dedication and the support of your Ancestors, Elders and family. Every person’s journey and relationship with cloaks will be ‘same, same but different’.

My guidance and support will come from:

_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________

Kaawirn Kuunawarn (Hissing Swan), Chief of the Kirrae Wurrung Tribe (1820-1889). Photo courtesy Warrnambool Historical Society.

Kaawirn Kuunawarn is an important Ancestor for my family. Vicki Couzens
Designs and Stories

Cloaks embody and strengthen identity. The designs can represent clan, Country, Dreaming, personal and contemporary identities and stories.

‘they made what are now called “opossum rugs”. These were made of the dried pelts of the opossum sewed together with sinew. They did not dress the skins but merely dried them, and to make them more pliable cut markings on the skin side by means of mussel shells (nanduwung). These markings are called waribruk, and each man had his own.’

Alfred Howitt, 1904 re Gunai/Kurnai of East Gippsland

We have found inspiration from a range of sources:

• Ancestors and Elders
• Old Cloaks and photos of cloaks (from our Country)
• Designs on artefacts in museums (from our Country)
• Reading anthropologists and historians
• Being in Country
• Listening to our Ancestral Memories
• Practicing, experimenting,
Our first cloaks were reproductions of fragile historic cloaks. The story of how we made reproductions of the historic Lake Condah and Maiden’s Punt cloaks, is told in the book ‘Wrapped in a possum skin cloak’ (AJ Reynolds, D Couzens, V Couzens, L Darroch and T Hamm, 2005), and the exhibition and film ‘Tooloyn Koortakay’ at the National Museum of Australia.

By renewing the Old Cloaks we learned:

- To be respectful;
- To seek guidance from our Elders and Old People;
- To awaken Ancestral Memories;
- To embrace cloak-making as a form of cultural remembering and healing for our people.

The feeling was really strong and spiritual as we were putting the designs on and sewing it together … We never actually put it on ourselves or let anyone do that because it didn’t belong to us. These are someone else’s designs. It was just a real privilege to be able to recreate these designs.

Debra Couzens, 2004
The Djargurd Wurrong cloak was made by community and worn by Uncle Ivan Couzens during the Comm Games opening ceremony. The cloak is now held in trust and borrowed by community for special events - graduations, family occasions, exhibitions and ceremonies.

There are several ways to design a community cloak and you could discuss:

- Is there one central story or individual story panels?
- Are the designs appropriate for a cloak?
- Will we depict Country and Dreamings? If so, how?

We encourage people to make their own decisions about community cloaks. Work together when making decisions about designs, who can wear, when and how.

Vicki, and Lee.

The mob at possum skin cloak workshop, Koorie Heritage Trust 2005. Photo by Vicki Couzens.
You may like to practice designs or jot down ideas for cloaks or panels here:
Cloaks are powerful companions during ceremonies. Like our Ancestors before us, we roll them in our laps and use as drums.

Wearing a cloak during a ceremony signals the person is special – they might be the Elder, the Singer, the Healer, the Speaker or a young person reaching a goal (marriage, University graduation or 21st birthday).

Cloaks are transformational. If you want to know more about using cloaks in ceremonies, please ask.

The cloaks that the two headmen are wearing here were made of possum skins. I don’t believe that Barak had just painted that with a picture in his mind – I believe that he painted the living things. He wanted people to remember those ceremonies.

Aunty Joy Wandin Murphy, Wurundjeri 2006
Healing

Living in southeast Australia, we all know the destructive impact colonization has had on our Peoples and culture. Just as loss, dislocation and disruption is evident, so too is the resilience, creativity, determination and vision of our Elders and Ancestors whose paths we seek to follow. Their guidance exists in their art and material culture, their words and stories as passed down through our communities or recorded by researchers, in our hearts and in our Country.

Cultural practice, tradition and innovation are ways of communicating with past, present and future generations and of sustaining our culture and Peoples. Cultural practice heals people and heals Country, and provides a way of sharing culture with the broader community.

Cloaks are powerful vehicles for healing the mind, body and spirit. Whether designing, making or wearing a cloak, you will probably undergo a range of emotions, feelings and experiences. We encourage you to share those with your family, loved ones and guides.

Its only when you can share your grief and pain with others that you can start the healing process and find peace within yourself. Uncle Jim Berg, 2009
The safety and the warmth of the cloaks is a real thing in practical terms, you wrap it around you and carry your children, its used in everyday life. In most instances its used in death as well. You’re wrapped in your cloak and buried. I read a quote once about a blanket of love. For me the possum skin cloak is symbolic of wrapping that love and that culture around you and that’s also symbolic in the warmth and the safety of belonging and of knowing who you are.

Vicki Couzens, 2004

My reflections:

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‘Cloak Workshop’ © Banmirra Arts Inc
Cloak protocols

Old People and Elders have guided our understanding of cloaks. While reclaiming and regenerating cloaks through our practice and teaching, we developed the following protocols:

• **Acknowledging and respecting** Ancestors, Elders, Country and community is at the core of cloak-making;

• People from cloak-making tradition *belong* to cloaks in the same way people belong to their Country;

• Each individual is responsible for **honoring** Law, Ancestors, Elders and Country – particularly when working with traditional symbols and designs and/or in public;

• Cloaks are sacred and require respect – when treated with respect, cloaks can also be **uplifting and fun** and bring people together;

• Communities who **make a cloak together** also need to develop a way of managing the cloak together;

• Cloaks can be a way for **trading knowledge** and experience with other mobs if our rights and responsibilities are properly respected;

• Cloaks can be a way of **embracing others** through exhibitions and education if our cultural property is protected; and

• We encourage you to **seek guidance** from your Elders and Ancestors as you begin your own cloak journey.

‘Cloak Workshop’ © Banmirra Arts Inc
The workshop is a place for sharing and exchanging knowledge and skills, but also a place of respecting cultural rights and intellectual property.

We recognize that you may bring knowledge about Country, Creation, family and identity to the workshop. The cultural rights and intellectual property of your knowledge and stories remain with you.

We ask you to recognize that our cloak-making is based on twelve years knowledge and experience. We retain our cultural rights and intellectual property over the skills and knowledge to teach our method of cloak-making.

This workshop is based on the cultural revival of cloak-making in south-eastern communities and we want you to make cloaks, wear cloaks, celebrate cloaks and share your stories and cloak traditions with others.

We ask you to do this by respecting traditional cultural rights to knowledge as well as copyright law.

And as we continue to share our cloak stories and journey with others, we are committed to respecting the traditional cultural rights and copyright of those who share knowledge with us.

Yarruun Parpur Tarneen (Victorious), Chiefess of the Morporr Tribe, c. 1881. Photo courtesy State Library Victoria.
Resources

F Blacklock, Aboriginal skin cloaks, National Quilt Register
http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/nqr/fabri.php

C Cooper 1989, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas
Museums, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

V Couzens, L Darroch and A J Reynolds, 2009 Possum skin cloaks: 
strengthening communities, strengthening collections, paper presented to the
Museums Australian National Conference: Work in Progress.

R Frankland (dir) and J Foss (pdr), 2004 Possum skin cloaks (DVD 10:28 mins) a
Golden Seahorse and National Museum of Australia Production.

C Keeler and V Couzens (eds), 2010 Meerreeng-an: The story of Aboriginal
Victoria told through art, Koorie Heritage Trust Inc, Melbourne.

National Gallery of Victoria, 2003 Remembering Barak, NGV Melbourne.

A J Reynolds, D Couzens, V Couzens, L Darroch and T Hamm, 2005 Wrapped
in a possum skin cloak: the Tooloyn Koortakay Collection, NMA Press.


Photographs courtesy: National Gallery of Victoria, Koorie Heritage Trust,
National Museum of Australia, State Library of Victoria, Warnambool District
 Historical Society, Mick Harding, Vicki Couzens and Amanda Reynolds.

Thank you to the Elders and community members who shared their quotes
and gave permission for their photographs to be taken.
(name of) ‘Cloak Workshop: (insert name of org) with funding from the (insert sponsors names here)

‘Cloak workshop’ was produced by Stella Stories for use by Senior Cloak Makers
A9: Possum Cloak Workshop Presentation Example
This document is attached separately. This Powerpoint presentation is titled Possum Skin Cloak Healing Workshop in Wiradyuri Country and accompanies the dissertation. (Courtesy of Banmirra Arts and Stella Stories)
Possum skin cloak healing workshop

in Wiradyuri Country

delivered by Banmirra Arts

hosted by Bathurst Wiradyuri and Community Elders & Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

With funding support from Bathurst Regional Council B200
The Elders welcomed everyone to Country and we offered respect to the Wiradyuri Ancestors, Elders and communities.
We introduced ourselves and our work

Our story began long ago. The Old People sent this story to us. We heard them speak through our hearts to our spirits. They told us what to do, they are still telling us what to do. Their message, our story, is to return the cloaks to our People, to reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember. To remember what those cloaks mean to us and tell the stories of our People and Country.

Vicki Couzens
Over the next few days we sat down together, yarnd together, and worked together to make a possum skin cloak.
and created a beautiful space for yindyamarra
sorting and laying out skins
by alternating top and tail
cutting the skins to size
stitching, stitching, stitching
under and over

row by row
having lots of fun and sharing with others
making armbands and dance belts from the off-cuts
talking tools and suppliers
brainstorming design ideas
The young people shared songs and dances and wrote a tribute to thank the wilay possums.
the Mayor dropped in to show his support and Sarah and the BRAG crew were lovely hosts
Jade did a wonderful job taking photos
and we were all excited as 36 individual pelts came together as one cloak
When asked for feedback, you said …

Proud. Deadly.

Had a stressful 2 years and last night was the 1st time I slept in 2 years.

Working with the cloaks goes deep inside you – to the core inside. It’s a spiritual experience, it’s a healing experience.

This whole weekend – this weekend has done everything for us. We’re strengthening each other and connecting on a different level. We’re experiencing healing and spiritual connection.

Can’t be better – lit fire in the belly. We shared with each other and learned from each other.

Energised. At peace. Positive energy everywhere. Working together on one thing is fantastic.

Really like the sewing – it’s therapeutic. Feel like I’ve done it before – connected to past lives. Just doing it is really good.
A warm thank you to all who guided, supported and participated

The workshop kits and community report were prepared by Stella Stories for

Banmirra Arts
and the

Bathurst Wiradyuri and Community Elders

Photos by Jade Flynn are © Charles Sturt University and Bathurst Wiradyuri and Community Elders

The workshop was co-hosted by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery with funding support from Bathurst Regional Council B200

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