



# COMMUNITIES LIVING WITH HAZARDS

DAVID KING AND  
ALISON COTTRELL

## 8

# Lardil weather stories and experiences from Mornington Island

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Mornington Island is an isolated community, located in the Gulf of Carpentaria, off the south western coast of Cape York Peninsula, approximately 125km northwest of Burketown, 200km west of Karumba and 440km north of Mount Isa. It comprises an area of about 700 square kilometres, and is the largest of the twenty-two islands, which form the Wellesley Islands group in the Gulf.

After the end of the Ice Age, approximately 6,500 years ago, rising sea levels reached their current height. Before this change, the Wellesley Islands formed a peninsula that was part of the Carpentaria mainland. The Mornington Island landform comprises a prominent sloping plateau, and low, rounded and flat-topped ridges, separated by broad, shallow valleys. The highest parts, which feature the Mornington Plateau, are between twenty and forty metres above sea level.

Streams which often flood during the wet season, flow down to the coast forming wide inlets. In the dry season, the mouths of large streams and creeks of the island dry out to form clay-pans or salt-pans. Larger streams have permanent waterholes. The vegetation is mainly grassland, open medium to dense scrub, and low open forests and woodlands (Memmott & Horsman, 1991).

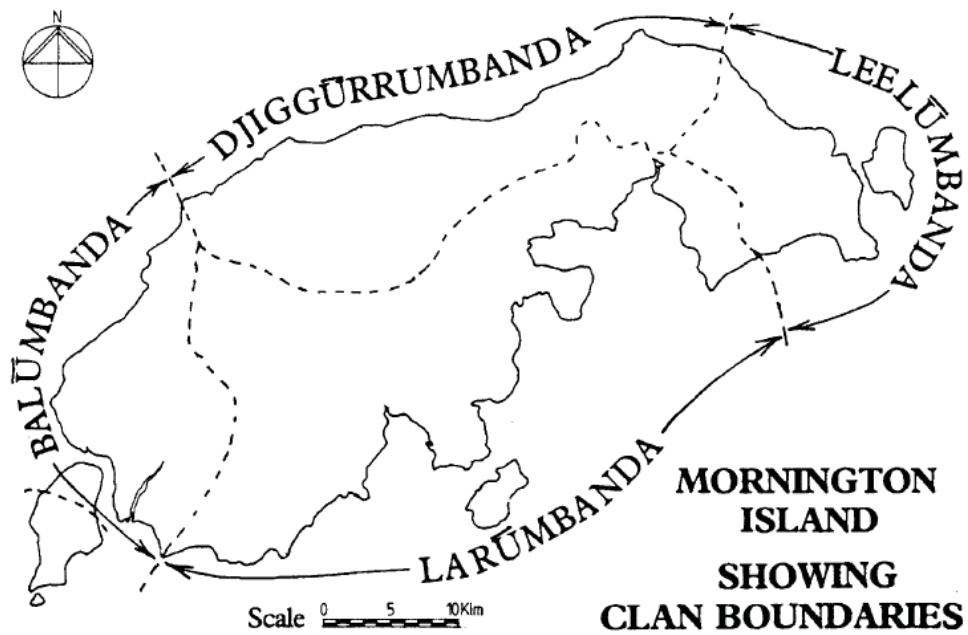
The original Indigenous inhabitants of Mornington were the Lardil Aboriginal people. They formed the largest tribal group that formerly occupied the North Wellesley Islands, which included Mornington, Sydney and Wallaby islands. The Lardil believed that long ago, in the Dreamtime, their ancestors came over from the Australian mainland. The link with the mainland constitutes an important legend for the people. It involved three characters, Maarnbil, his wife Jirnjirn, and Diwaliwal, who was Jirnjirn's mother's brother. It is believed the trio travelled across from the west when the Wellesley Island group was still part of a peninsula, which extended from the mainland. As they passed through the land, which is now the islands, the

three beings created rivers, hills, animals, trees, fresh water wells and stone fish traps. The legend tells that while Maarnbil was away, Diwaliwal and his niece, Jirnjirn had wrongful sexual relations, triggering catastrophic events, which would later have cultural significance for the Lardil people. The revelations of this particular section of the legend contains a range of connotations relating to the basic elements of traditional Lardil law, including incest taboos, moral obligations, and kinship relationships. Many of these concepts have since been ingrained into the Lardil world view, and traces can be seen in the society today. As an example, in the Gununa community, the uncles are responsible for teaching their nephews Lardil traditions essential to their developing into men. A very important aspect in this procedure is that from an early age the children are taught the importance, and meaning of their family totems (Ahern, 2002).

The association between the Lardil and their natural environment has always been a close one; the people-environment relationship is a cohesive one. Although the people have adopted most of the elements of western culture, they still maintain strong links with the bushland and surrounding seas of Mornington Island, and as part of their continuous relationship with nature, most have a strong understanding of the local weather system.

Before colonisation, each Lardil group was separated into four tribal areas (see Figure 8.1). These boundaries were set by the four winds in accordance with traditional Lardil beliefs. The Balūmbanda were the West people, Leelūmbanda were East people, Larūmbanda were South, and Djigūrrumbanda were people from the North. Natural features such as creeks, ridges, a line of trees, or a cluster of rocks, formed boundaries for each group. Clan groups were also generally known by reference to their location, associated with the influence of the island's primary winds, the east, and south-easterlies. The Leelūmbanda and Larūmbanda, who were directly exposed to the winds, were known as the Windward people, and on the sheltered side, the Djigūrrumbanda and Balūmbanda were named the Leeward people, (Binnion, 1987).

These days, residents from Gununa visit their homeland sites for short periods on weekend camping trips, and hunting and fishing expeditions. At some of those places where there are reliable sources of fresh water, outstations have been established, and are occupied by members of traditional owner's families. The island has a population of about 1,200, most of whom are Indigenous, and reside in the township of Gununa.



**Figure 8.1** Lardil clan boundaries  
 (Source: Binnion, 1987, p. 2)

Since the early part of this century, Mornington Island had been managed under the provisions of various Aborigines Acts, by the Uniting Church. Since 1978 the island has been managed by the Mornington Shire Council. A few of the original missionary buildings are still standing, a prominent one being the guesthouse (see Figure 8.2 below), which was in fact the old missionary's residence.



**Figure 8.2** The old mission house, now guest house, Mornington Island

The community library is housed in what was originally the old church building. The library contains many people-related tales about being part of the missionary system, or living on the island at the time of the mission, while other stories are of their parents who were 'mission children'. Many stories of Mornington Island relate to the weather.

### **Lardil people and cyclones: some personal stories**

*I grew up here...and I been through a lot of these things. I know how this cyclone season, this crisis of cyclone...if a severe one come, and if it isn't a severe one, you gotta be prepared-act ready and be prepared, at all times. It's life or death, you gotta be prepared (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2001).*

These words spoken by an elder member of the Lardil people of Mornington Island, signified the knowledge held by the Indigenous inhabitants, about natural hazards in the region. He indicated his experience of cyclones by stating people have to be prepared for the cyclone season, and they know nature is unpredictable, so they have to be ready regardless if it is a small storm or a severe tempest. An unprepared community risks leaving itself vulnerable to the fury of a cyclone. This essential survival knowledge for Lardil Aborigines has been accumulated from a long history of experiences, and related stories, passed on from generation to generation. It is an important part of the traditional knowledge that exists in Indigenous communities in remote Australian areas. Though now the Mornington Island township of Gununa, consists of infrastructure that boasts modern buildings and contemporary facilities, Lardil residents maintain their connection with, and hold intimate knowledge of, the surrounding land and sea. That knowledge is essential in keeping their identity, and maintaining their culture.

### **Personal cyclone experiences**

The following are personal accounts of several Lardil residents of Gununa, detailing their experiences of encounters with cyclones, and also provides insights into the Indigenous perspective of related events, and personal views. The narratives are in their own words, because it is important that people's emotions and actions, are portrayed truthfully. Their stories contain Indigenous attitudes about cultural and environmental links, which symbolise the significance of local knowledge discourse in Australian remote communities (Sinatra & Murphy, 1999).

Like many Indigenous residents of Gununa, Melville Escott's parents were not from Mornington Island, but Melville, like others of his age group, was

born there. Melville is in his early sixties, and is a member of the Escott family, one of the oldest and well-known families on Mornington Island. He is an adept traditional and contemporary artist, and has spent time off the island when a young man, working as a stockman on various cattle stations in the Gulf of Carpentaria region.

*My parents originally come from the mainland, but I was born here. My father, he originally from Burketown, Gungullita tribe, and my grandfather been the king of that tribe.*

Melville said in his lifetime, he had experienced a few cyclones while on Mornington Island, but Ted is the cyclone that he remembers most clearly, chiefly because of the destruction it wreaked on the island and in the township, Gununa. His recollection of the event in December 1976, painted a picture of dramatic physical effects caused by the storm:

*I been here, yeah, I was here. I was young fulla, I was young man - Cyclone Ted - when we had Cyclone Ted.*

Like most Indigenous people of his age group, Melville recalled events that had a lasting effect on his life, and linked them to the stage of his life at the time. Hence he said he was, “a young fulla...a young man”, meaning he was probably more than twenty-one years old, because at the time, that was the legal age of consent, when young people were regarded as adults. So, although most of the Indigenous people interviewed, may not have known their exact age, or the year of their birth, if an event was dramatic enough, nearly all can remember some details. It is the event, and consequent effects, which are more important, not the age of the witness, or the exact point in time.

In December 1976, Cyclone Ted hovered for some time off the northern coast of Mornington Island, a short distance from the Birri Fishing Lodge, before it impacted upon the island.

*He came direct, straight in, he was stationary out there for a while. Yeah, come straight from out the open sea, from out of the Arafura Sea” (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

According to Melville, the damage in Gununa inflicted on buildings and possessions left out in the open, was quite spectacular:

*We had old houses, old timber houses, never had steel frame houses...Yeah, that Cyclone Ted, he came straight in, directly, yeah, he came straight in, it just flattened all them old houses. He flattened all*

*them top houses, that video there, them old photos showing how, what disaster it made. How it wrecked this place-luckily no one was killed! Lost dinghy, lost boats and things what, you know-never been brought up, or flung from the land, out in (the) sea - what was wrecked (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

The 'top houses' mentioned by Melville, were the twenty prefabricated houses erected in the early 1970s, on the town ridge. The 'old houses' were undoubtedly the residences situated down on the old village beachside area. Reports by newspapers confirmed the extent of the damage to the township buildings, an indication that they were not constructed to withstand a storm of Ted's ferocity. From accounts by those few who experienced Cyclone Ted, the consensus was that most Indigenous residents sheltered in the old mission house. They knew it would offer protection, because they either experienced occasions when they used it themselves, or they had been told by elders, of the building's reputation as a safe haven from severe weather. These actions are testament of local Indigenous knowledge that was utilised by residents, in a crisis situation, as a method of survival. This was a Lardil lifestyle strategy, which was acknowledged by Melville:

*No one was injured, but then, you know they had to manage, to protect their own life (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Alma Moon, an Aboriginal woman in her forties, has lived and worked on Mornington Island for most of her adult life. Alma recounted her experience of the cyclone, saying her family had to move from their house to safer buildings. The former mission house, now the island's guesthouse, was considered one of the sturdiest and safest structures, so it has been extensively utilised on occasions when shelter was needed in times of a natural hazard crisis. Alma remembered:

*We used to live down the old village, down near the waterside there. So we had to move up to my husband's mother's home. Then cyclone got really worse, they had cars moving people down to that old mission house, and the old canteen. And all under that old mission house, mission house was full of people, on top, underneath, we all stayed there (Alma Moon, personal communication, 2002).*

A couple of days later, after the danger had passed, those who had sought refuge in more secure buildings, moved back to their homes and proceeded to clean up their wrecked houses.

*We run away, but when that cyclone settled down, we go down, look for all our things now. I had a lot of things, photos...everything was taken out to sea, even our boat's motor was taken off. That's Cyclone Ted (Alma Moon, personal communication, 2002).*

Alma also had an exciting experience on Bentinck Island during a cyclone. From her recollections, and a study of relevant records indicated the storm was probably Jason, a cyclone which struck Bentinck in 1987.

*Alright that night now, we sleep-rain been pouring in, we sleep (in) wet blanket. I had my daughter with me, my eldest. Morning time now, I said to old Luke "You go make cup of tea for us." But when he went to make breakfast, he said "Oh the stove's wet, where power, gonna cook?" So we went round to the kitchen, we were sitting down-he said "What cyclone look like?" Soon as he said that, iron been rip past the side, and I just grabbed Beatrice, my daughter, (and said), "Come darling me-two go die together". And that house, been lift off-the whole frame-right up. We was just sitting there (in the house), and (then) we all ran behind the (water) tank. We had to lead each other, hold hands, so if one drift away, we all go. Some one said "Oh, let's stay in that freezer there, that big freezer," And I said, "No! We can't stay in that freezer, that wind go (will) come back, and that freezer go (will) fall down, and then we'll be dead!" So that freezer went, (did blow over) that big freezer, all our food, the gas stove, everything went (was lost) there la (on) Bentinck. So we had to start building again, build it up again (Alma Moon, personal communication, 2002).*

Alma's account contained details of an Indigenous person's personal view of a cyclone, and the actions taken to preserve their lives, in the face of a natural hazard. Strong family ties are extremely important to Indigenous culture, a fact stressed by Alma, as she expressed that at the height of the storm, she hugged her daughter and was content to perish, as long as she was with kin.

From the same incident, Alma described the Kiaidilt people's methods of survival on Bentinck Island in a cyclone situation. Similar to the Lardil, Kiaidilt Aborigines had their traditional strategy of constructing shelters, as protection against severe weather conditions.

*Old Bentinck Island people, they had this special grass, for little humpies. Luckily we had them old people that been grow up there. My cousin, and my brother-in-law now, we sitting down, watching now - soon as he been stop now, (cyclone passed), them boys had to*



*go and break them big grass, but we never hide, we been make, like, little breaks, like a wungura (Lardil small shelter). And we all sit down in that. All these boys, been go look for freezer (that had blown away), because we lost all our tucker. We had tinned stuff, but we needed flour, tea and sugar, and something fresh to eat (that was nutritious (Alma Moon, personal communication, 2002).*

This once more, emphasised their ingenuity in converting a natural asset into a cultural element, conducive to the group's survival. The scenario on Bentinck, also accentuated the fact that as a matter of survival, when modern building technology failed them, Aboriginal people had to employ a traditional survival strategy.

Cecelia Reid, an Aboriginal woman about fifty years old, whose family has a long association with Mornington Island. She acknowledged that the old mission house has been used on numerous occasions, as a refuge, for people who had to evacuate unsafe dwellings.

*We all had to move out of our homes. They had to put us all in safe homes. I went from my parent's place, to my aunty's place, and then ended up in the guesthouse. It was really bad (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

*Cyclone Ted? Struck in 1976, but there was many more in the 1960s. The worst one that struck here was when all these buildings were down, was 'round about '76, December '76. That's the worst one we had here (Edna Hills, personal communication, 2002).*

Edna Hills, a Lardil woman in her forties, has lived on Mornington Island most of her adult life. Like most residents her age, she had left the island to work on the mainland when she was younger. Her mother was Margaret Hills, an elder of Mornington, and was one of the few remaining people who, as a child, was a member of the earlier mission dormitory system. She talked about a cyclone that struck Mornington Island when she was a young girl during mission times.

*Two dormitories – senior and the junior dormitory. And during that time we were in the dormitory we couldn't get out, you know, playing in the rain because that was the law that we might get wet and we, you know, we was under the missionaries and then we was playing and playing, never think of anything you know, going to happen. And as we were playing there this big cyclone wind came up and he lifted the building off the, off the, what you call it, foundation boy – it was on a block, not on a bricks. And it lifted up and when we saw it, we*

*ran up – we ran out - and instead of we running under the house, where them big house is, the mission house, we ran down to the beach at the point boy, at the point. But a older woman said “let us go back around else you might, the wind might throw you into the deep – into the sea with the waves and ah, so we all came back boy, and we ran under that building there, up there – see that old mission house? Yeah. We went there – missionaries was there with us – Reverend Wilson and his family, and we stayed there, and then stayed there overnight, because our dormitory was lifted off the block, and I think we stayed there for the night, and might be a week, and that was all. I wasn’t like I am now – I had no breasts, I was a young girl. That was all, boy. But a very serious cyclone it was. Brought down lot of housing on this mission. And that’s all I can tell you what had happened while I was in the dormitory and of course I can’t remember, they must have replaced, made the young dormitory get back to normal again. Yeah, they built it – and that was all (Margaret Hills, personal communication, 2002).*

Literature indicates the event was probably a cyclone that occurred in February 1936 which was recorded by Reverend R.H. Wilson. Wilson reported, “Most of the buildings were demolished and there was a storm surge estimated at 5 foot or so” (Callaghan, 2003, p. 4). Other Aboriginal elders also referred to the dormitory buildings that stood beside the missionary house, which still exists and functions as the island guesthouse. As several dialogues have shown, it is a sturdy structure that has withstood numerous cyclones, so it is understandable that it was used for shelter as Margaret had indicated.

An interesting issue in Margaret’s interview, drew out the contrast in Lardil and western law, prevalent in the dormitory system of the era. Margaret remembered that as children, when the storm moved in on the mission, they were not allowed to venture out into the rain, as they would have done before colonisation. The cultural differences were further extended, as she related that when their dormitory succumbed to the cyclone’s destructive winds, the panicked children fled to the beach, instead of the missionary’s residence, which was still intact. However, after they realised the peril of their action, and at the insistence of an older girl, they did move back to the shelter of the standing mission building. Arguably, the children’s action indicated their natural Indigenous instinct, to get away from a dangerous situation to a context more familiar to them, namely the natural environment.

*Yeah. Tide came right in boy. People down there – all water came up into them little creeks, and up to this creek boy. And knocked down all of the vegetable trees, our garden, and made our well there – they*

*used to pump the water from the well there up to the tank and then – and we got salt water in it...* (Margaret Hills, personal communication, 2002).



**Figure 8.3**      **The wharf and channel at Gununa, Mornington Island**

The creek Margaret referred to was the narrow waterway which ran from the Appel Channel to the east of Gununa, and snaked along the bottom of the town ridge, to the west, where it flowed into a small swamp. The mission garden was situated in the small valley that was alongside the creek, which meant that when there was an unusually high tide, salt water from the channel was forced along the creek, up to the swamp. When this was combined with the heavy rains of a cyclone, the swamp would eventually fill and overflow, and consequently, the creek burst its banks, flooding the garden. The well that provided fresh water for the mission's use was also dug in the valley, so was subjected to inundation by the rain and sea water.

### **The effects of cyclones**

The devastation caused by Cyclone Ted triggered a number of major changes in the Gununa township. It resulted in the shifting of the old village from the vulnerable beach site on the Appel Channel, to the ridge, where one hundred and twenty new prefabricated homes were erected. The natural landscape was also drastically altered, the most talked about among those who were there, was the spectacular effect on the trees.

*... come direct, straight in, straight in the pocket, full blast! When it hit, he burnt all them trees! - top, with the wind pressure. I don't know what it was, but it just burnt, all that oak tree ay. Threw most of them seeds (oak tree) right up on dry land. Today, you go look there, you see oak trees growing up there right up the coast-inland, right up, up here, where this main highway going! (indicating the road to Birri Lodge, which is to the north of his house). Oak tree seed(s), trees growing, they were flung, taken by that wind (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

*...Cyclone Ted was the one that made everything baldy, it took all the leaves, stripped all the leaves off the trees, and you could see for miles, because of the damage (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

This appears to be a natural phenomenon remembered by all Lardil people who were there in 1976, when Ted tore across the island landscape. The force of the wind was so fierce, trees were stripped of leaves, and branches were snapped, and in the case of some trees, the bark was ripped completely off the trunks. Similar effects from cyclones have been observed in other parts of northern Australia, such as the Northern Territory (Skertchly & Skertchly, 2002). From all accounts, the effect was similar in appearance to that of a bushfire, as described by Ossie Escott, when he awoke the morning after the cyclone.

*I get up now, and look, next day, it looked like big bushfire been go through, the trees had been burned. Burnt. Had no leaves on them trees eh, you could see right through them (Ossie Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Ossie Escott is the younger brother of Melville, and a long-term resident of Mornington Island. He is in his late forties, and is partner to Alma Moon. Ossie has worked at various jobs, including time as a crewman on boats, and stock work on the island, and on the mainland. He also had an interesting cyclone experience which is related in detail in the following narrative.

#### **‘Good’ effects of cyclones**

On occasions after the storm had passed, the men would go down to the beach, and collect seafood that had been washed ashore by rough seas.

*They'll find fish, fish in millions! Up along the tide (mark on the beach), where he chuck 'em up...and where he sort of ease down, and*

*go back low (tide). And he look again, they might look-dugong! Still live one...kicking on the shore-side. Out here, you know, we used to do the same cycle how them old people used to do before – get up and go! After you feel that winds die down, no matter we got fresh beef in the fridge ay, people just want that fresh feed – that dugong or turtle, fish, crab, oyster, and them big prawn too. Big, ah, tiger prawn. They couldn't survive that underwater current. Must've got caught, got drowned and washed up on shore (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

This is one activity that is still carried out, after a cyclone passes, by Mornington Island Lardil people, in much the same manner as their ancestors in times past. They take advantage of a natural event, which on occasions, also creates disastrous consequences. As well as providing necessary rainfall, the rough conditions result in washing seafood up on the shores. It is a positive method integral to their survival, within the context of a potentially dangerous natural phenomenon.

*I tell you, when we have real bad cyclones here, fish just get washed up and people go along the beach and they find fish kicking about on the beach. They just go and pick them all up and put them in buckets. They take buckets or they take bags and fill them up with fish (Clara Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

Clara Reid explained a food collection method using modern tools to continue a traditional gathering strategy, whereby they collect seafood washed ashore by rough seas, in plastic buckets and bags. Clara is in her late sixties and has a large family on Mornington Island, which includes sons, daughters, and numerous grandchildren. Some of her children work off the island but return for frequent visits. As an elder of the community, Clara had many experiences to relate regarding culture, community, and personal issues.

### **Laws: old and new**

One point discussed by Clara, and which was prominent in interviews with other elders, was the issue surrounding the many elements of traditional Lardil law, and the Western legal system. Melville also spoke about how strict punishment by traditional Lardil law was, compared to the view of some people of today's leniency of the Western judicial system, when people committed crime in the community.

*They knew laws, strict laws - they knew how to abide with it. You break the law, and that's it! You don't get punishment what white*

*men give you - punishment today, me and you - that punishment is (was) severe! You know what that severe is? – (long pause) - You get speared! Death penalty! Penalty is death! Me and you get jailed today for that, that penalty is twenty-five years imprisonment (Clara Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

The implication was that traditionally, punishment for breaking of laws was so severe, that people, especially the younger generation, were effectively deterred from any wrongdoing. The traditional laws as referred to by the people interviewed, included ordinary, every-day behaviour, as well as the more serious components. According to those who participated in the project, one prominent factor in the breakdown of present Lardil culture, appeared to be the attitude of the younger generation towards their elders.

Clara further reiterated this issue stating that:

*In the old days, no children ever over-ruled an old person. If a child was ever caught doing anything naughty, it could be spanked by the aunty, or uncle, or the grandfather. That was the law of the land, of our days. No children were naughty in those old days (Clara Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

Traditionally, Lardil Aborigines were taught from a young age, to listen and learn from their elders. As Clara asserted, youngsters who transgressed the law, were punished by their aunt, uncle or grandfather, who in accordance with Lardil tradition, were responsible for overseeing the behaviour of nieces, nephews and grandchildren.

Traditional law also encompassed the relationship between Lardil people and the Mornington Island natural environment (Binnion, 1987; McKnight, 1999). Limited references of traditional Lardil law, indicated that there were rules that involved an association between people and nature that were to be followed, as a matter of survival. According to Lardil legend, the Dreamtime creator responsible for the weather is Dewallewul, who can punish the people by sending a cyclone if laws are broken (Trezise, 1993). In that context, Melville suggested that in the past, because survival knowledge was passed on as Lardil traditional law, it would be accepted, and adhered to unquestioned, by the next generation:

*Might be soft, he act strong too, and he gotta be strong - he naked, and he gotta survive to look after his family. He gotta look after his line - family tree. He don't care about his own self, his life is nearly through. But them, them mob, their life is only starting. So he protect(s) them (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Melville's statement meant, that the will, and the instinct to survive, were put into practice by his ancestor, to ensure the survival of his younger family, with the premise that they in turn, would carry on the family bloodline. This is in fact, the Lardil practising, "traditional Aboriginal Law and culture, and associated appropriate behaviours for coping with severe weather in tropical monsoon environments" (Skertchly & Skertchly, 2000, p. 43).

Colonisation has meant that over time that traditional knowledge has been interfered with, resulting in changes, with which the Lardil had to cope. To outsiders, the knowledge and practice of adaptability and resilience, may not be visibly displayed by the Aboriginal residents of Gununa, but it is a key element of their survival.

### **The effects of Cyclone Tracy, and other cyclones in the region**

There were also tales of the effects of other cyclones felt in the community, especially Tracy, which destroyed much of Darwin in the Northern Territory, on Christmas Eve 1974.

*Had that cyclone in '74, we got half of that wind, and half of that tidal wave, sea. Imagine how far it is (from Darwin to Mornington Island)...it's over the west coast-north western coast. I nearly got killed. I nearly got drowned! Well I was working on a boat up at Gove (on the north east of the Northern Territory coast). We (were) supplying petrol to Taiwanese vessels. And when I wanted to come back, the skipper asked me then, he said, if I'd love to spend Christmas with him-in Darwin. I said "No, I'd rather go home to my family", you know? 'Cause something telling me, "Go home, go home and see your family." But I never really thought of dying, or getting sick, or them sort of things. He said, "Alright then, okay son". So he brought me home - brought me out here (pointing towards the western coast of Mornington Island) - low tide, he was gonna throw me up, leave me at that new cemetery - but then, I seen a boat coming out - he my brother-in-law. Yeah, anyway he brought me back here, dropped me...then, coupla weeks after, it was New Year's Eve - or Christmas Eve, it's going into, going into Darwin, they couldn't make it, they couldn't make it. He tried to shelter, he couldn't run, run to no shelter, because there's no shelter there! He was caught! He was caught out in the open, that boat couldn't go any (faster) - only ten knots. That's all he done. I suppose he can go faster that, but, it was only a wooden ship - three masts, sailing - engine and sail. That's fast enough though. Yeah, he got caught out - out in the open - and I been thinking about this a long time. You imagine how all his boat was*

*flung from the water - right up, on dry land! About twenty metres. Yeah, I lied down on the bed, and I turned the radio on...Yeah when that ah, I switched that radio on ay, right on time when that news came on, I heard, I heard that Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin. Right on the eve - Christmas eve of '74. And I thought about my mates, I thought of my mates, "I wonder how they got on?" But they rang up to me, they knew that I was on the ship, and they had to contact me. So ah, one of them Tiwi Islands, ay? Melville, I think it was...That ship broke up there, smashed like a match box-impact of that cyclone, it was so severe, that instantly, the skipper and his crew just died (makes a whistling noise), in the blink of an eye! No warning, no warning whatsoever (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Following Melville's description of the boat, and its duties, a search of literature indicated he was probably talking about the Booya. The Booya was a Dutch-built 35.8 metre, three-masted schooner, which was owned by the Denham Island Transport Company, and sailed frequently between Darwin, Asian ports and other remote Australian ports. The ship was built in 1917, and was probably one of the last of its type still sailing the seas at that time. Records say it had been sailing to Dili when it sank without a trace, during Cyclone Tracy, 24 December 1974, and four men and one woman perished. An article in the Herald Sun, dated November 1, 2003, stated that the wreck of the Booya had been discovered in shallow water in the Darwin Harbour, about five nautical miles off shore. It was believed that the vessel was due to sail from Darwin to Dili on Christmas day, and was carrying cargo, that included fuel and stores.

These facts seem to agree with Melville's description of the boat, "...*wooden ship - three masts, sailing - engine and sail*", except of course, the *Booya* had a steel hull. The boat was familiar to people in ports in the Gulf, and western coast of the Cape York Peninsula, up to Thursday Island, and many older residents of Gununa recall hearing about its presence. Melville's brother Ossie, related a story about when he was in Weipa at one time. He mentioned the boat by name, and also referred to its prominent feature, the three masts.

*Well, bulla, I was in Weipa - coast in Weipa, me and 'nother island bloke, and this old sailing boat - he had three masts, we call it Booya. Big prawn factory used to be over here (pointing to Denham Island, that was visible across the Appel Channel) used to be doing the prawn season, and things...I was working in Weipa, that time - the three of us there, and the skipper said, "You boys ready to sail back, but - we have to sail up to Groote Island (sic)", somewhere, you know, before*



*we came back to Mornington Island. And that time, the weather wasn't too good, you know? That's when Cyclone Tracy started, you know? Oh, that place been dark (because of cloud cover), three of us, we said, "Oh we'll just go up the pub first, have a few beers". And we thought that you know, it might calm down a bit - but, we didn't really wanna go, you know? But we had something in us, you know? Like something wrong - something telling us. He went (the skipper) - So off that old boat went. Skipper said "Oh well, you boys can stay, next time we can pick you up again". (He) went to Groote Island, then he went up to Darwin. That the time Cyclone Tracy...and all them mates mine, that's on the boat, everything was...all gone! Skipper, and the boat...And we said to ourself, "We could'a been with that other mob!" You know...We felt Cyclone Tracy, you know? Yeah, it was inside...That's my story now - Ossie, Escott. (Ossie Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

The premise of Ossie's narrative was that he, and his two crew mates, could have been aboard the *Booya* on its fateful journey to Darwin. Luck or fate played a major role in why they did not take that voyage. In all likelihood though, it was probably their acquired abilities to read weather conditions, which caused them to forgo the trip. As Ossie expressed, at the time, they knew Cyclone Tracy had formed near Darwin, and the weather conditions over Weipa were unsettled, with heavy cloud cover producing a dark atmosphere. These facts, plus the knowledge that the skipper wanted to travel across the rough, open Gulf waters to Groote Island, was a deciding factor in their staying in port.

It appeared that Ossie and his crew mates adjourned to the local hotel, where they discussed the weather conditions, after which a decision was reached to not board the *Booya*. According to Ossie's narration, it was their experiences and knowledge of weather conditions with which they were familiar, that ultimately influenced their final decision. On reflection, years later, he surmised it was their weather knowledge, plus a certain spiritual feeling.

Melville also went on to speculate about the effects of Cyclone Tracy. Whether this was based on his personal experience, or information he had picked up from media outlets - television and radio, or perhaps a combination of all three - it is an interesting narrative, nonetheless.

*It was about five category - five category cyclone, and I think he wiped, he even wiped aeroplane off the main runway! Even at the hangar, big jets, tip 'em over! Well that five category, ay, it be around about six or seven - about five - five hundred miles an hour! That's fast! Two hundred is fast enough - two to three and a half - would*

*have been three - would have been three hundred and fifty kilometres an hour. How that cyclone lifted everything! Smashed poles - right on the old station, out there 'bout ten, twenty miles away, iron flew from that main capital of Darwin. Yeah, right out in that ah, mustering camp and all that stations where they used to muster, ten twenty miles away - and that cyclone was severe (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Melville's estimation of the wind gusts was overstated, but from his perspective, it would have taken winds with that velocity, to cause the type of damage he described. The account of smashed telephone and light poles, and sheets of corrugated iron being found twenty miles away from Darwin, could well have been based on events he witnessed during Cyclone Ted, mentioned earlier. The effects of the winds on Mornington were similar, as he stated that high winds were responsible for seeds from trees on the island coast, being found some distance inland.

### **Lardil weather signs**

Long before the technology available today, Lardil people relied on nature to tell them about weather patterns. The natural cycles were vital to their existence, because the availability of natural food coincided with the seasons. For the Lardil, the wet season was divided into two periods. Firstly, Mulung was for the period December, January, February (i.e. summer), and secondly, Lee-a-lin for the period March, April, May (i.e. autumn). This period traditionally, due to the rains, meant hard times for people, because food was hard to obtain, and living conditions were uncomfortable. Constant heavy and windy downpours confined families to shelters on the coast, and the inland areas were too wet to hunt for food. The Lardil diet through Mulung, was restricted to parrot-fish and mullet, captured from the reefs and creeks, and wallabies. Lee-a-lin was better, as salmon were in abundance, and other bush foods were in ample supply. Fresh water supplies were plentiful due to storms and the occasional cyclone (Binnion, 1987).

*My grandmother used to talk about cyclones. Always talk about big tides associated with cyclones. Big tide, strong winds – how they destroy, bring destruction with them. My mum always seems to know when there's going to be a cyclone. I think it's because of her experience in cyclones and from what she heard from my grandparents. My grandparents said if a cyclone was coming you couldn't run – if you were to run, you would have to run in a zigzag line. She reckon because the winds were so strong, you would get blown away. But I couldn't understand. Maybe she was in that situation where she had to do that. But the tide was always unusually*

*high just before a cyclone. No matter how many miles away from Mornington – kilometres away – it could be way up in Nhulunbuy. It could be over in Weipa – we always experience very high tides. We call them king tides. And they more or less – we get the idea there's a low somewhere, you know (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

The intimate details of the Mornington Island landscape and the sea, as indicated in Cecelia's statement, were derived from centuries of knowledge about the natural environment, accumulated by the Lardil, which is traditionally passed on to the next generation. The local Indigenous knowledge is learned from individual observations and interpretations, plus the incorporation of traditional beliefs. Thus, Cecelia remembered the advice her grandparents imparted, about how to run if caught in a cyclone, but the observation regarding high tides, and the implications, were derived from her own experiences.

*And we noticed too with the weather going hot and cold – going to have a cyclone. And the formations of the clouds. But it's when the clouds start moving and they pretty low and we get the real big king tides and it just gets so unbearably hot. But even before cyclone too, I think – fish – well, sea life – they sensitive to cyclones. Because before Justin (1997), a day before Justin, we went fishing in the channel and we just caught salmon, salmon, salmon. They were all hiding out in a jew hole. And we didn't know. But after the cyclone we knew why they were there. Well, another thing too that tells us we may have a cyclone – the sea, the temperature of the sea. It's very hot, really hot. You're pulling fish in and you feel them warm – even bait. And you can tell when a cyclone is approaching too – when going to have a cyclone – the sea turns green (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

The natural indicators mentioned by Cecelia were obtained by a process of observing changes in patterns of natural weather cycles. Cecelia knew from experience that when unusually high tides were seen on beaches at Gununa, there was probably a low system somewhere, in the Gulf of Carpentaria region. This is a reliable indicator, because the waters of the Gulf are shallow, and confined between the landmasses of the Cape York Peninsula, and the Northern Territory. When there are major disturbances in the height of tide phases, it is transferred through the sea, to other areas in a rippling effect. Therefore, as Cecelia explained, if a low developed in the waters even at great distances from Mornington Island, it affected the tidal levels at Gununa.

However, knowing if a cyclone was imminent entailed correlating a number of other natural weather indicators as well as tide levels. This is evident as Cecelia and others pointed out, that it was a combination of elements that forecast the presence of a cyclone. The common factors observed, were uncommon high tides, extremely hot weather, and low heavy clouds. To ascertain when the cyclone approached Mornington Island, Lardil people looked for further natural signs, namely frigate and booby birds flying over Gununa from Rocky and Manowar Islands to the north, and also seagulls from the other coasts, seeking shelter on the town airstrip.

Local elder, Howard 'Bluey', Wilson, said he knew that a:

*...cyclone was getting closer when I saw the seagulls all flying in and landing on the airstrip (Howard Wilson, personal communication, 2001).*

Howard explained it meant that conditions at sea, and along the coast of the island, were so rough due to the approaching storm, the birds sought shelter inland. From experience, he knew the storm was about one, to two hours away before it reached the Gununa township. Also, when birds referred to locally by the Lardil as manowar, or manohawk, are observed flying over Mornington Island, people know there is either a severe storm or a cyclone approaching. The birds nest on the small, outlying Manowar and Rocky Islands, which are located a short distance to the north of the Mornington Island coast line.

Clara Reid confirmed this with further information regarding Rocky Island:

*...you can see it (Rocky Island) sometimes from Birri (Lodge) then, but you go further on, you see straight across. It got no trees – it's just a big, high sand bank It got rocks there, and a big, high sand beach. Very rich country, oysters all around it, and turtle. But seagulls and pelicans and manowar and boobies live on that island. When we have cyclone, those birds come across to Mornington Island side, they stay along our side of the country (Clara Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

Every respondent emphatically asserted ocean tides are strong indicators of imminent severe weather conditions. However, it was not any single natural indicator from which they drew conclusions of impending weather.

*When this high tide – I know about this high tide – when it's high tide, then you know the cyclone's coming. And we see the booby and manahawk birds flying high. Them birds with bony wings, bent*

*wings, they start to come around, and the water get higher (Digger Adams, personal communication, 2002).*

Digger Adams, a resident of the Aged Persons Home in Gununa, at the time of interview was very old, stating he was born in 1936, and he provided the information with a degree of pride at being able to remember such things.

Several people told of how past and present Indigenous Mornington Islanders read warnings from nature of impending 'bad weather', a local term applied to severe storms as well as cyclone conditions. According to locals, another reliable natural indicator of impending rain is the flying ant, which is attracted to light sources at night, and comes out in swarms a few days before the event.

### **Traditional shelters**

Melville Escott described how his Lardil ancestors built shelters for protection from cyclones:

*They get that cane grass and they make a big, humpy too - shelter, like a, just like a anthill. But they, yeah create it, and make a big one - well, four or five family(ies) each, they help to create that thing. Might be a big one, you know, a large one to - (accommodate) like four families where it's close to (their) relatives. They get together, they help one another - it's just like them ants you know, how they get prepared waiting for rain? They gotta help one another, yeah, well like that. They get prepared! Preparation ready! Same like that. But them old people used to keep well away from - keep out in the open, or down where - where there's wind-break. Not big tall trees, little scrub - they build that - it on a slantish area, on a hill. So that water don't rise - it runs. Very clever ay?*

*Smart. How they used to manage, you know? They used to get dry wood, get prepared - break 'em up, stack 'em up inside, and it was a big enough shelter. They have a stack load of wood there - lot of fish, meat, raw food waiting to be cooked, and they cook 'em in there too. They take that stick by that water, where that water not far, so they can keep that clear distance between that rising tide-how far that tide comes, well they know how far the tide come in, they know where to build that thing. They just keep watching that rising tide-current. Yeah, we still do it today, we still, you know...*

*Another way again how they used to survive, they used to get up on the top of the hill, where there's no trees. If that cyclone coming on the*

*north side, they got to go on the south side - where they dig that - make a hole. They make a hole and put - make a little frame - and they make a little breathing hole too - to breathe air. But they wait for the right time - like you know? So, he just wait and watch, if it's coming, he know that thing's coming closer he (says) "Alright, time now, get in there", and he put that bark over that hole. They lie down, belly-up, and he cover them with sand. Behind the hill, behind the wind break, that's how they survived. The little air-hole too - but they used to put a rock, put a rock on that air-hole, (they'd sit up?) but they'd breath about that far off that hole (indicating with his hands about thirty centimetres), they can't breathe that far (indicating closer to hole) because they might be breathing grit and stuff, you know, coming in - they keep it about that far away - big enough hole. They get that bark, paper-bark, sticks too, just put the sticks up there on top, put the paper-bark on top, put the hole on that side - they lie down this side they just cover it then, with heavy sand. The weight, feel that sand heavy, on that bark there. When that cyclone, he over, they come out dry one (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

The Kaiadilt people from Bentinck Island also had unique traditional shelters. Bentinck Island is south of Mornington Island, and is the second largest island in the Wellesley Island group. In missionary times, the small population of Kaiadilt was encouraged to move to Mornington Island, where they tried to keep their separate identity, as well as inter-marrying with the Lardil. In recent years, Kaiadilt descendents have moved back to Bentinck Island and established a small modern village.

*Old Bentinck Island people, they had this special grass, for little humpies. Luckily we had them old people that been grow up there. My cousin, and my brother-in-law now, we sitting down, watching now - soon as he been stop now (cyclone passed). Them boys had to go and break them big grass, but we never hide, we been make, like, little breaks. And we all sit down in that (Alma Moon, personal communication, 2002)*

*Like a wungura (small shelter). Little grass-little thing! Cyclone lifted the whole building! And that grass (shelter), it hold all them... (Ossie Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Melville Escott described the construction of the Kaiadilt shelters in more detail.

*In them days they had no houses then...no houses. Well, I was told by an old person, old Indigenous person from Bentinck (Island) - well I'm married to a Bentinck girl - she come from here, she born here, but her mother from Bentinck. And ah, I was told by these old Indigenous people, how they survived, and I, you know, I think... I used to think - how they used to survive? You know? No cave there! Well they got here and there a bit of cave, you know, but - you gotta go down (to) the water. The, ah, tidal area - where there's that, where (there is) rock. Where that wave he create the cave, to make a bit of a shelter...wave created that shelter. And every time it's cyclone season, that tide he come up very high - and he cover that shelter."*

*But how, one old fella told me, how they used to survive too, they used to get this ah, cane grass - they used to get this cane grass, before, when, this sort of time now - they feel it, they feel it in them that there (is) gonna be a cyclone somewhere or (a) low. They get prepared, they get that, they get a double - they double that cane grass, and over Bentinck Island, that cane grass over there, (it's) ohh, thick, thick, thick! especially along the creek. Yeah they got this grass, now, this cane grass, they get it woven - I don't know how they do it - but they get it and double it, they double that grass. When they finish that, they make a sort of little window, to cover that too. They make it a double, so when that wind blow, they put that paperbark in between - like that, you know, that have it very closed - like two inches apart, or three - three inches apart. So that thin piece of bark just fit - thick piece of bark just fit in the middle, so when that wind blow, straight through that point, it won't move, it'll just lock on. Yeah with the pressure of the inside of the...yeah, you know how an aeroplane fly ay? You'll be blown out if that ...if there's an opening on the side - suction, yeah. Well they make a little fire, to cook, and to keep warm too. And inside of that shelter, there they just sleep...sleep in peace, good, dry. But mainly old people you know, who really want to get out there and hunt, 'specially after that cyclone (is) finished-when he passed through (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).*

Melville Escott expressed his thoughts regarding different survival methods of Aboriginal groups of the region, and elsewhere in Australia.

*Yeah, you go to another place, he the same, but he different again too. All tribes, they got different way of surviving cyclones. Alright the desert people, I don't know how they... oh there...they already got - it's created...caves and that. Not like we mob, we gotta build to survive, stay alive, build stronger things to stay alive. And then they*

*get that grass, that cane - grass, good thing that was - very handy one ay? Yeah...* (Melville Escott, personal communication, 2002).

These thoughts were given as a result of Melville having long, and numerous connections with Aboriginal groups from the Northern Territory, and the Queensland coast. Dance groups from Aboriginal communities from these areas frequently gather on Mornington Island for traditional dance festivals. During these events people renew acquaintances with relatives, as well as learn different dance methods, and participate in a general exchange of knowledge.

### **Houses in Gununa today**

Lance Gavenor had a different experience of cyclones, saying he had not been in Gununa when severe Cyclone Ted had struck the township, in 1976:

*Cyclones? Oh, only two cyclones I been hit, in this (place) or three... about three I think, three cyclones. There's one cyclone I wasn't here, ah, 1976, I was in Sydney then. Cyclone Ted, yeah, I wasn't here. About three, I was here. Ah, no nothing, nothing, no one lost their lives, but ah, few buildings got a bit bumped around, shaken up, (laughs softly) ... yeah."*

During those storms, Lance sheltered in relative's homes, which were modern cement block dwellings:

*Oh, one of them, old type...them brick house, now. Yeah pretty safe, in a brick house, oh yeah, gotta be safe in a brick house. Corrugated roof-fly everywhere.*

Like most present Gununa residents, Lance intimated the 'safe' feeling that a solid building constructed of brick walls, provided to the people. When he was younger, there were different types of buildings in which he could remember Aboriginal families residing.

*Yeah, yeah, they used to have them old corrugated iron diners, water front, there, they had a big village there, they used to have ground huts, you know, to live in, sleep, houses with corrugated iron around them, that's all they had.*

These homes were constructed down in the old village area along the Appel Channel shore. According to Lance, they were similar to the type of buildings they had when Cyclone Ted impacted in 1976.



*Yeah, that's when Ted knocked the whole village down, took 'em all (the houses). Some of these new homes, they still stood up there, some of them fell down,... like old Clara Reid's, them type of buildings... See, like what Anthony Jingles got, old mum and dad had one like that, but this only the front iron part went, and the two bedrooms left and the shower. That's all lost - that's when I came back from Sydney, then, that was 1976 (Lance Gavenor, personal communication, 2003).*

The new homes he referred to were the pre-fabricated houses built in early 1970. They were the first residences that were erected on stilts, and contained several rooms. Electricity was also connected, and the new houses also featured kitchens and electric stoves (Binnion, 1987).

Lance described where he lived now, and commented it was not a safe place to be in if a cyclone struck the island:

*Well I live in a house, yeah, in a house, family, relative's home. It's a little, low, upstairs one, it's on the ridge up there...Yeah, one behind the power station there, fibro, fibro house.*

The house Lance indicated was one of the many that were probably built in the late 1970s, after Cyclone Ted, and were constructed of fibro walls and sat on metre-high stumps. Most of these dwellings were showing wear from years of exposure to general weather conditions, with the outside walls, roofs and wooden materials, in an advanced stage of dilapidation.

*I think he bit too old, now, I don't think it'd be safe enough. Yeah, I think it might...see most the time, most people move out of there, some go to neighbours, or police station. I don't think that house that I'm staying with a relative, I don't think it'd be safe, not now. (It was) ...built some time ago, now. Yeah, I'd rather go to a brick home. Another family's home-relatives (Lance Gavenor, personal communication, 2003).*

## **Communications**

While the communications system for the island is sufficient, when there are severe storms in the area, television and radio signals are blacked out, as observed by Cecelia Reid:

*Yeah – go off, yeah...the antenna. We just get cut off. So we just cut it off, turn the TV off. The TV breaks up – picture breaks up. I don't know why, but that happens to every TV on the island when there's a cyclone. Yeah, it would be nice to know where the cyclone is. But you*

*can virtually watch it for the first – but once it's almost here on us you can't watch it. On TV they just show you a map of the Gulf, that's all. But you can't see the cyclone. I suppose you could watch it from elsewhere you know, outside of Mornington Island. It was – we were getting it from the satellite, our reports, because we weren't getting much from the TV channels. We were trying and trying. Only ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) was pretty good – the next day we heard about Mornington being hit by a cyclone (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

This flaw in the communication system of Mornington Island has the potential for serious consequences. While early television and radio reception indicates to residents where a cyclone is located, and when it will probably impact, as it nears Gununa, these communication lifelines are severed. During this blackout, the cyclone can change course, or more seriously, intensify.

The Lardil people possess knowledge about their natural environment, and the weather of their region, which is a result of thousands of years, residing in their particular surroundings. The stories recited by the people, indicate that knowledge of survival has been maintained, though both traditional strategies, and Lardil lifestyle which have been adjusted in relation to time, and Western colonisation. That is, the residents have had to adapt to an alien social culture imposed on their society, as well as keeping traditional methods of survival relevant, within the structure of their ever-changing culture. The information from the story-tellers, regarding these subjects, demonstrated that this knowledge was still passed on through generations.

Clearly, Gununa long-term residents like Cecelia, have had many experiences with cyclones, and the associated effects. From their accumulated experience, these residents know that every wet season, there is a high probability of at least one cyclone hitting the island, or forming in the Gulf of Carpentaria region. Cecelia pointed out, that it is seldom the island that comes under siege from more than one cyclone in a year, although, that can also happen. She also stated that Gununa residents do not sit around during the monsoon period, worrying if a cyclone is going to come; it is simply not a priority. However, when there was a low system, or cyclone detected in the Gulf region, home-owners began pre-cyclone preparations. The cyclones that have passed over Mornington Island, in the last few years, have not posed any major problems for island residents, which prompted Cecelia's vow that she would remain on the island, no matter how strong a cyclone may be. Because of its natural land barriers, any major disturbances to the seawaters in the Gulf region, brought about by a cyclone, affects areas within it, including Mornington Island. To most of the Lardil inhabitants on

Mornington Island, the place is their home in every sense of the word. Nearly all of the Aboriginal people over forty, who have been born and raised on the island, as they matured, have been taught essential traditional Lardil knowledge. Weather knowledge is a vital factor in their lifestyle, so elders tutored youngsters in reading various natural signs, which indicated changes in the weather pattern.

*Yeah, he got TV there at the house...used to have radio, but they bust that radio up, yeah, young children, teenagers. Yeah, still got the TV. That's a good thing, that, look the news, and what's happening round the world. Yeah, watch the weather, or you can do that too when there's cyclone around, you know? (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

When conducting interviews and talking with Indigenous town residents in general conversation, there was a consensus that the weather maps shown on television weather broadcasts, were hard to understand, particularly synoptic charts. Although, like most of the Australian population, Gununa residents find stylised pictures of clouds, rain and cyclones depicted on television reports easy to grasp, they do not have a functional understanding of the lines, arrows and other characters featured in synoptic charts.

*Oh, yeah, they hard (to understand)...see most people don't know about that... (Lance Gavenor, personal communication, 2002).*

Cecelia Reid spoke about cyclone preparations:

*Yeah. The CDEP boys go around or men in the Air Sea Rescue, they get around and they pick up all the things that are possible missiles and put them away and people batten down their boats. Everything sort of gets looked into just prior to the cyclone. So everyone's rather busy and people – the shop is – the shop caters too because it stays open and it even allows the people to get credit. Some people may not have food so they allow for them to get food and things like torches and candles. Get them because most of the time cyclones usually hit at night and everything else necessary, you know – like water. I always put a lot of water aside – 2 or 3 buckets of water. Ready for the cyclone because we know when the power goes off you have to – the water goes off. But this time, this last cyclone just this year, we didn't need to because it was only a small cyclone – Category 1. I think it was a Category 1 – it could have been a Category 2, but it wasn't that extensive. Yeah it just went past – and we still had the lights. We still had power on.*

Cecelia stated some people would stay on the island, even if asked to evacuate in times of crisis, preferring to remain and look after their homes, and possessions:

*No. They won't. You won't move them. They'd stay. They wanted to send people off the island after Cyclone Ted because there was no water. Something like that. Or the damage that was done to the homes – homes were flattened – but they would not move. No, they love Mornington too much.”*

On refuge places in times of cyclones:

*Yeah there's safe places. People go to the hospital, it's good to go to the hospital because, well they're prepared too, you've got doctors and nurses on hand. You got – even if there was a blackout they have their own generator to keep the hospital going, you know. So that's one good place to go. Police station – you can go and wait in the cells. But I don't think I'd want to do that. And they build houses today too, to, for cyclones. Yeah, ever since Ted, they've been building homes that suit cyclonic weather.”*

Referring to the guesthouse, Cecelia said:

*Even this one (the mission house) was built stronger. She had a really – you go underneath this place and you look at how they've screwed on things underneath and the timbers are hard – you know, very thick timbers. Yeah. And the roof. Cyclone Ted took a bit of roof off, but they put that back on and it hasn't been moved since. Since Cyclone Ted. So the sheets are stable. I'd rather be here than anywhere else. I think this is the strongest building on the island, this house. I think this is the place I'd want to be. Guest house. Yeah, we get frightened. Mainly because of the wind that comes with it. The gale force winds – and you don't want to be caught in a house where suddenly the roof goes off – iron lifts off – and you're standing there, or sitting there, and you don't know what to do next. Because if that's happening you couldn't possibly go out in the cyclone then. Be far too dangerous for flying objects, you know. Because that's what happened I think in Darwin when Tracey hit. People weren't prepared for it and that's what – that's our greatest fear because we learnt from what happened to Tracey – so we learnt to go out and find a safe place before it happened. And everything was in order for Cyclone Ted. People moved around, like, really helping everybody to get out of their hands if they didn't feel their homes were safe enough and they were taken to safe places. All prepared and bedded down*

*before the cyclone hit. We were all ready for it – because we knew if we weren't ready, we might get caught up like those ones did in Darwin. Yeah all this area down here was flooded – salt and fresh water mixed. Well, as soon as the cyclone is over everything's sweet. The water just drops. The water inside just goes straight out into the ocean. But we've had weather in the past – growing up as a child, I've seen weather where we've had king tides and no cyclones, but we used to live down in the old area, the old village. And we used to come across, and just – see the ridge running along that way, high ride, and this flat area – that used to be full of water. Yeah. And we used to cross knee deep, as adults, knee deep. And us kids, it used to be up to our waist. Just to get across to this side. Not so much for schooling, but to do shopping. Yeah there were bad tides in those days. I don't see that tide anymore, only when there's a cyclone looming (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

Cecelia talked about the general attitude of the Indigenous people on Mornington, regarding cyclones:

*Yeah, I stay for cyclone any day. Once a year, yeah. You're lucky to get a second cyclone. It may just come by, or you hear reports of a cyclone approach. But we rarely get two in one year. A couple of years – I think a couple of times we come close to having two in a year. People sort of just go about their own business until it happens and then they get ready, you know, but they don't look in anticipation – “I wonder if we're going to get a cyclone?” you know. They don't look forward to it, they just accept it when it comes. And it always starts with a low pressure.*

*This last Cyclone Bernie – Wednesday night, we were getting horrific winds coming from that direction and it was supposed to be up this way. We couldn't understand. That's why I moved from the back rooms to this side where Rachel is because the wind was just coming through to the toilet and bathroom and we were in and out and everything was just wet in my room, so we moved around here. And it was Thursday night when it was supposed to have hit and we didn't get much out of it. You could hear the wind shaking the trees behind us here. Horrific. We didn't have to move out of my back room. We went back into it and it was quite comfortable. And the wind was coming from this direction then, the actual direction that the cyclone was supposed to be in. Yeah, it was strange you know. Mum said “Well the cyclone's on us now”, because the wind was very strong. Very gusty winds. Made those poor old trees – gave them something to shake for. But the next night when we were expecting the cyclone –*

*I think we may have gotten a bit during the day, but that night it settled down – was good. Cyclone was over – the next stage. The water still hasn't quite cleared up... (Cecelia Reid, personal communication, 2002).*

The cyclone Cecelia referred to, Bernie, was a category 2 cyclone, which passed to the north of Mornington Island. Consequently, the island was battered with strong winds and heavy rainfall from the storm, for several days. The unpredictability of nature was emphasised, even to experienced individuals such as Cecelia and her family. During the event, in relation to the position of the storm, they were expecting strong wind gusts from one direction, but were surprised when the building was pummelled from the other side. At the time of the interview, Cecelia noted that water in the Appel Channel was still murky, as a result of the rough sea currents churning up the sand of the waterway.

### **Lardil resilience**

The Lardil of Mornington Island have not only survived the invasion of their land and world by Western culture, they have managed to maintain and rebuild elements of traditional culture, which was destroyed during the upheaval of change. Although the Lardil culture now present in the Gununa township on Mornington Island is not the same as their forefathers knew, it is nonetheless distinctly Lardil. Many traces of the traditional features can be observed in the dances, craft making, and the Lardil language that has been preserved by elders, teaching the young and others who want to learn. Resilience has been a major factor in the evolution of Lardil culture, and linked to that is their environmental and weather knowledge.

The Lardil's traditional ability to adjust to changes was developed as a survival strategy, which they implemented to cope with seasonal environmental and weather conditions. Over generations, they learned and modified methods on how to live with normal weather seasons as well as the extremes, which on occasions affected the island with sweltering summers and bitterly cold winters. Particularly strong cyclones wreaked devastation on the Mornington Island natural landscape, and put the lives of the Lardil inhabitants at high risk to injury and death.

When the missionaries arrived, the Lardil utilised their traditionally acquired skills of adjusting to different situations, to understand and devise a method to cope with the alien Western culture imposed upon them. This was an important phase in Lardil history, because it was at this point that development of a new form of Lardil resilience emerged. They constructed a system to contend with changes to their lifestyle. The prime instigation of major change to their way of life was the forced placing of their children into

dormitories, and the consequent moving of Lardil families to the mission area, to be near them. Ultimately, this action brought together four separate groups that usually did not associate with each other, unless it was necessary. Prior to the mission period, encounters between clans were brief, and were for trading resources, marriages, or seeking permission to enter another's homeland. The act of having their young taken away had dramatic ramifications on a personal level for families, and for the clans, because it took away the next generation, which was the essential resource for their continual existence. Elements of resilience and adaptability were forged as parents dealt with their personal losses. The imposed situation made the Lardil face problems they had not experienced before, so they had to develop ways to manage. It was a unique strategy constructed by the Mornington Island Aboriginal inhabitants, as they received no guidance or assistance from elsewhere about how to cope with the foreign changes. Settling in a cluster of camps near the mission ground forced the groups to soon learn how to associate and cooperate with people from other groups outside their own. This process entailed adjustments to individual and group behavioural patterns, which the makeshift settlement needed to operate efficiently as a community.

The Lardil developed their form of resilience by drawing upon internal resources and competencies, from within family and tribal groups to manage the demands, challenges, and changes, which they encountered. This highlighted the capacity of the traditional Lardil system to maintain its integrity, and the relationships and balance between elements in the presence of significant disturbances.

In communities like those on Mornington Island, that are vulnerable to disruptive and destructive natural hazard activity, which temporarily incapacitate institutional resources, a focus on individual resilience and adjustment, is important. When such a disruption occurs, primarily it is individuals and families who will be responsible for their own safety and well-being until institutional resources recover.