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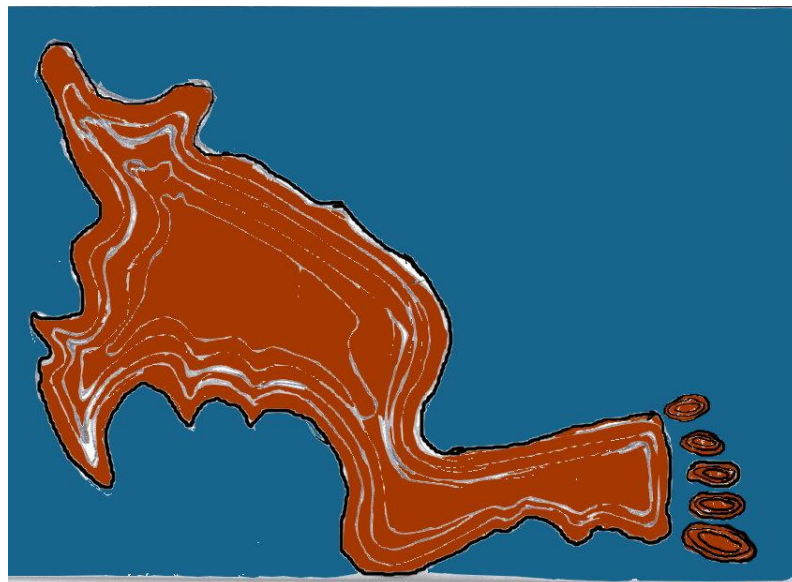
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**First Steps – Making Footprints: Intergenerational  
Palm Island families' Indigenous stories (narratives)  
of childrearing practice strengths**



**By  
Lynore Karen Geia**

**First Steps – Making Footprints: Intergenerational  
Palm Island families' Indigenous stories (narratives)  
of childrearing practice strengths**

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Father of my spirit, who has given me all good things, and to the father of my body Thomas Joseph Geia whose shoulders I still ride on; whose footprints I follow. To Betty Geia my gracious mother who with my father showed me the way to get wisdom and understanding and whose influence in my life continue to this day.

To the Bwgcolman people whom I am privileged to be amongst and to call myself a Bwgcolman, my hope and dream is to see your footprints going forward in freedom to the four corners of the earth creating new stories.

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3 September 2012

(Lynore K. Geia)

(Date)

# STATEMENT OF SOURCES

## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and had not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published, unpublished or oral work of others has acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

3 September 2012

(Lynore Karen Geia)

(Date)

Cover design: Creative representation of the map of Palm Island by Lynore K. Geia (author of the thesis). The design is simple yet complex as it conveys the Bwgcolman community in itself, a Bwgcolman family or a Bwgcolman person stepping forward into the future making new footprints.

## STATEMENT OF OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

I wish to acknowledge and thank the following scholarship providers whose generous contributions helped my young family and I during this PhD candidature, Carolyn Dixon and The Thelma Myers Aboriginal and Torres Island Memorial Nursing Research Scholarship; The Wood family and the Wood Scholarship; the Building Indigenous Research Capacity Grant; and finally the Australian Federation of Graduate Women-ACT for the summer accommodation bursary allowing me to conduct further research at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra.

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# PREFACE

## *How to Read this Thesis*

This study is written from an Australian Indigenous perspective by an Australian Indigenous Researcher. It is informed by the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island knowledge and practice construct and, specifically, from a Palm Island (Bwgcolman) perspective.

I know that it is difficult for anyone who is not a Bwgcolman person to understand the particular history of oppression that Palm Island has endured since 1918; however, under this layer of oppression the Bwgcolman people themselves remained strong and reared their families to be strong. This did not happen to all families therefore it is my conviction that someone like myself must articulate the strength of the people so that future policies will be liberating and not continue the oppression. Thus I have included my own memories of childhood and early adulthood to demonstrate how healthy cultural practices in childrearing can continue despite what may seem to be under overwhelming circumstances.

To unpack the many layers of oppression on Bwgcolman culture and practices, I use various forms of communication styles that are consistent both with the Indigenous understandings of knowledge and also western understandings of scholarship in privileging the voices of the Indigenous family storytellers. I understand that privileging the voices of participants is inherent in the ethics of research.

But I am arguing now that Bwgcolman people's voices have been silenced for so long and their efforts to speak out have been devalued or given tokenistic weight for so long that out of their own agency they choose now to speak to selected persons who not only share their life experiences but who will also privilege their voices with unfiltered integrity. At times the participants exerted their agency by reminding me of my responsibility to them and to the Bwgcolman people.

Therefore, I have constructed this thesis using various styles of communication that represent the personal, creative, and scholarly aspects of this study. I use a visual genre of Australian Indigenous art and art forms and also photographic images to explain concepts within the study. In addition, I use multiple representations of the personal and scholarly. I present these multiple representations by interweaving the study participants' voices (the family storyteller), my own researcher voice, and formal written documentation to underpin these voices.

To clarify the interweaving of these multiple strands, I have used italic font for poetry, visual explanations, and my personal voice. Then I have used text within a shaded box for explanations of and commentary on Murri words, terminology and context in the stories. Finally I have written the remaining text in Times New Roman 12 pt. normal font, and have used italics for emphasis where necessary. Thus the next part of the preface includes the memories of my childhood and early adulthood to lay the foundation for the authentic voicing of the participants' stories.

### *Memories of My Childhood*

#### **Situating Myself**

*When I close my eyes I recall my earliest memories of the dark green skin of the black mangoes, and my father's large capable hands pushing and jostling the mangos to remove the sap off the fruit so that we could feast. We would lean over the big wrought iron bathtub in the bathhouse out back of our family home. Each year my father would take us to the special places on Palm Island where the black mango trees grew. My siblings and I would walk four or five kilometres with my father at the head, sometimes tramping along in marching formation of 'steps and stairs' or sometimes grouping around him excitedly talking*

*amongst ourselves with enthusiasm. I remember carrying brown hessian bags with anticipation that they were going to be filled with the juicy sweet black mangoes.*

*One year in the 1960s my father bought a black and white Holden Special, quite a deadly car for Palm Island and, instead of walking we would all pile in the car and set off for the mango getting. Dad would climb the tree and climb out to where the fruit was thick and he would shake the branch with his powerful legs. We kids would be jumping around the bottom of the tree yelling out and squealing in sheer delight at the sight of our father in the tree shaking off the mangoes. We didn't care if the mangoes fell on our heads, sometimes they would and cause considerable pain but it was forgotten as quickly as it happened. We would then run around gathering the mangoes and putting them in the hessian bags. Sometimes dad would bring a big stick with a hooked wire on the end which he used to hook the fruit and pull them down. After the gathering, the mangoes would be brought home and the delicious fruit tipped out of the bags into the wrought iron claw footed bathtub that was half filled with water. The mangoes would then be moved around in the water to wash the skin of the mango sap; the sap would burn our skin and cause mango sores on the mouth if it wasn't washed off. Then came the ultimate moment of culinary delight; my father would choose a mango and begin to peel the skin with a sharp knife exposing the juicy yellow flesh and releasing the pungent aroma of the fruit. By this time my siblings and I were salivating like Pavlov's dogs at the sight and smell of the golden yellow flesh. My father would slice the peeled fruit on each side of the seed, juice dripping profusely he would pass it out to us to eat and experience what could only be described as heavenly delight. We would gorge ourselves silly until our belly was tight and we couldn't eat anymore, all the while talking and laughing, recalling the events of the gathering. The mango would be stripped of every bit of flesh on the seed, leaving the white of the seed showing through. We were satisfied, life was good and being a kid on Palm Island was the best thing ever.*

*This same food gathering expedition would happen every year with my siblings and me until my father's death in 1972. Now in my adulthood, my siblings and I still go out to the black mango trees to gather the fruit with our children and grandchildren; we still laugh as we recall the memories of our childhood mango expeditions knowing that the whole sensual experience of mango gathering can never be duplicated. Back then my world was different, I had a complete family, a mother who wholly adored and loved us; she would make our clothes, cook our favourite meals of the animals we seized on our hunts with the shanghai (homemade sling shot made of forked wood and rubber attached to a leather centre piece where the stone would be placed). She would rub our chest with Vicks vapour rub (a Eucalyptus balm) at night and bandage our puffy mumps infected parotid glands with a thick dressing made of a white cloth napkin infused with Vicks vapour rub which made us look like a black bunny with big white ears. Mother would even risk her life setting up and lighting the firecrackers for us on Guy Fawkes Night to our delight.*

*My father was an ever-present figure of authority, protection, provision, teacher, encouragement, fun and a source of love that propelled us along in our childhood. He was there alongside my mother, doing what fathers were supposed to do for their family. We were together, dad, mum and the wider family circle. My father was a man who people gravitated to like a magnet placed in the earth and all the metal particles in the earth would cluster around it forming a spectacular pattern of magnetic attraction. I remember my cousins arriving each year for school holidays, my uncles and aunts and nanas and granddads always frequenting our home. Some would live with us for a time and others would come and go on family visit. There was always a sense of cohesiveness and strength in having both parents within the wider family group in the home; each one having a significant role in the family.*

*My memory of the men in my family during my childhood is of their being protectors, hunters, storytellers, politicians, musical entertainers, builders, weapon makers, disciplinarians and the coconut oil makers. My father was an entrepreneur for his time on Palm Island; he would use the Holden Special car to taxi people to and fro from the store for a fee as a way of supplementing the household income. He would also go out trawling for mackerel fish that he would bring home and cook and then sell the fish around the neighbourhood. My mother recounts that “people used to love the fish and would sing out for more”. He raised us through role modelling in many ways and his entrepreneurial skills were passed on to his children.*

*Memories of the women in my family were of nurturers, the softness and warmth of arms, the smell of freshly washed sun dried linen, smells of cooking and baking, also of Vicks vapour rub and images of big white napkins tied around my face. The women were educators of puberty; and to my chagrin the enforcer of my separation from playing with the boys in my street when it all happened to me and put an end to my marble playing days. It was the women who encompassed us and held my family tight when my father died. My mother an amazing woman sacrificed what she wanted for her life to raise a family without a man; she became protector, provider, authority ... not quite everything a father would do but what she did do was the best of what could be done at that given time. She holds a place of honour today in our family and still has the last say on just about any subject that happens to be discussed in her earshot.*

### **A Common Stereotypical Event**

*I was born sixth of ten living children, the biggest baby and the blackest baby of us all. My birthplace is Palm Island, a Bwngcolman girl on Bwngcolman land. Absolutely welcomed and loved by my father, mothered and nurtured by my mother, aunts and older female siblings. A quiet baby, not one to attract attention, in fact most people didn't notice*

*my presence in the house, some visitors even going so far as to ask if I was my parent's child. That is a paraphrase of my mother's description of me as a child. She tells this funny story, although I imagine it was not so funny at the time. On the day of my birth there was another baby born in the hospital, a boy. When it was feeding time the midwife dutifully gave my mother her baby and the other woman in the ward her baby, my mother is a fair skinned woman and upon unravelling her baby for her feed, my mother was suddenly taken a back with dismay at the sight of a light skinned baby boy in her arms. Immediately my mother called to the other mother in the ward who was darker skinned who was also dismayed at the discovery of a big black baby girl in her arms ready to nuzzle in on her susu (breasts), "I think you have my baby and I have yours" the other mother yelled out to my mother.*

*Unknowingly this was my introduction to race relations; the midwife had given the fair skinned baby to the fair skinned mother and the black skinned baby to the black skinned mother. My fair skinned mother who is of mixed Aboriginal and Germanic heritage obviously (to the midwives) could not be the mother of a black skinned baby.*

### **The Balm of Bwgcorman Laughter**

*I am told that both women roared in laughter after they swapped back their biological prodigies with each other. The baby boy's name is Michael and these days we jokingly acknowledge each other in greeting, he says "hello my twin sister" and I laugh and greet him back as my twin brother. Additionally, when my sisters want to tease me they quizzically ask my mother "are you sure this is your baby" and the story is retold again and everyone has another laugh about it. But that was not all, the conundrum of my birthing continued.*

*My naming was the next problem, when it came time to register my birth with my given name, my parents had discovered that I had already been registered by the midwife and given the name of Gladys Roberta Jean. To this day my mother still cannot explain why*

*they did this. She can only surmise that the midwife was impatient and wanted to get the paper work done as my naming had taken some time because my aunt Mary was given that privilege. When my aunt had given me my name the birth register was amended to include Lenore Karon, still not quite the same as the name I was given but close enough I guess. Usually after telling this story my mother would shake her head in bewilderment and say sardonically “white people again”, meaning, what an affront, the arrogance of the nurses giving me a name without talking to her about it; for shame, Murris would never do that.*

### **Finding my Bwgcolman Self**

*My personal Aboriginal identity journey has seen times of tensions and transformations, more tensions than transformations in the earlier years. Nowadays, I sit and think about who I am, and where I am going, and I am truly astonished that I still know who I am, given that my Indigenous identity has been put through such rigorous examinations and definitions by others. However, it was in Central Australia, away from my Queensland home that the full significance of my physical, emotional and spiritual Aboriginal identity was finally clear to me. I had to go away from country to find myself. I came back to country where my lived experience is generally now more transformative I am relieved to say, even though the tensions still exist; but this belongs with another story.*

### **Authority to ‘Talk Up Loud’**

*Having disclosed some of my personal journey, it is important to note that despite a safe and secure childhood, finding my Bwgcolman self established a deep conviction ‘to talk up loud’ so that my lived experience and that of other Bwgcolman people could be heard. Riessman (1993) cautions us, as qualitative researchers, that we cannot give voice but we do hear voices that can be recorded and interpreted for a wider audience.*

*Therefore it is with great joy and deep sighs of relief to me that I am able to now bring the voices of the Bwgcolman storytellers to refute the ‘master narrative’ of hegemony.*



*All five Bwgcolman family participants' stories bear out clear-cut meanings of the importance of their Murri and Bwgcolman identity. Being Bwgcolman, and in particular a Bwgcolman born on Palm Island is especially significant. Furthermore, even the fourth generation storytellers' discourse on the importance of their Bwgcolman identity is meaningful. For them, identity is crucial to survival, resistance and resilience to past and present oppressive forces. I argue that the continuation of our cultural identity as Murri people and Bwgcolman people is an enduring strength that is passed on in Bwgcolman childrearing practices but does not surface in government policy. It is a strength that should be acknowledged more often by governments in their attempts to engage with the community, and in the development and delivery of their human services.*

The work in this thesis is grounded in the following highly political subject matters: the continuing practices of the State of Queensland over decades on Palm Island have been conceptualised as the 'Aboriginal problem'. Successive governments have conceptualised, in policy and practice Aboriginal people as a problem and they perceive their role as solving this problem.

In many ways such government policies have persuaded both Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples to believe both that there is an Aboriginal problem and that it is the government's role to address this problem. Aboriginal people until fairly recently have not been consulted and have not been in equal partnership with government about the present and future of Aboriginal Australia. Even now, on Palm Island equal partnerships with governments continue to be an elusive, edgy issue for the community.

# ABSTRACT

## *First Steps – Making Footprints: Intergenerational Palm Island families’ Indigenous stories (narratives) of childrearing practice strengths*

### **Introduction**

I am a Bwgcolman woman, and this thesis tells a story about the people and the country where I belong and this country is Palm Island, 65 kilometers north east of the Queensland city of Townsville. Palm Island was established by the Queensland Government close to 100 years ago as a Penal Reserve for ‘*problem*’ Australian Aboriginals; this history continues to challenge the orthodoxy of both Australian and Queensland governments’ policies and sectors of the wider Australian society. Six generations of Palm Island (Bwgcolman) families have survived, yet now the Bwgcolman people face new challenges; one, amongst others, is maintaining the integrity and strength of Bwgcolman childrearing practices as an essential pillar of survival and resilience for their families.

### **Background**

Families are at the core of Aboriginal society, and are challenged daily with complex and multifaceted problems. Australian Indigenous families are one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable family groups in Australia, facing an amalgam of issues resulting in family fragmentation. Palm Island families, along with other Australian Indigenous families, are still coming to grips with the legacy of colonial oppression in Australia, struggling to reconcile the transgenerational injury of the colonial past, and the cumulative layers of oppression. Long-term oppression from racism, poverty, addictions, family violence, abuse, and unemployment has resulted in individuals and families internalizing the effects of oppression. This internalization of oppression results in individuals and families’ significantly diminished their ability to cope and protect themselves against continuing

oppression. The daily struggle of coping with these internal oppressive forces effect individuals and families' self-image and self-worth.

Coping with such afflictions sometimes becomes an overwhelming burden. Assisting families to recover and reclaim their family strength and resilience requires more than political rhetoric and a matching budget. Addiction and violence emerge when families are unable to recover and reclaim their family strength and resilience. The current Australian Government intervention strategies to '*fix*' the '*Aboriginal problem*' are at best band-aid programs, which may provide short-term relief from current family hardships for some communities. Lasting and effective change can only come from intense work with families, long-term partnerships that go beyond child rescue. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families do not need more policy and practices done *upon them*, they need policy and practice done *with them*, valuing and empowering them as key components to their recovery. A strengths-based approach to parenting shifts the focus away from problems and focuses instead on building upon inherent family assets, thereby enabling the family to reclaim and develop their strength and resilience to successfully meet the challenges of today.

## **Study Purpose**

The aim of this study is to employ an Indigenous research framework to record the stories of three living generations of Bwgcolman (Palm Island) families in relation to childrearing. In particular, the aim is to reveal the intergenerational strengths of childrearing practices of the Bwgcolman people of Palm Island from a Bwgcolman perspective (Appendices A-H).

A paucity of literature on the *strengths* of Australian Indigenous parenting and childrearing exists side-by-side with a glut of literature on the *deficits* of Australian Indigenous parenting and childrearing. This situation makes it difficult, if not impossible, for non-Indigenous Australians to understand Aboriginal approaches to childrearing. Eurocentric

methods of research have been instrumental in shaping the history and service provision for the Palm Island community since 1918, resulting in child welfare policy development that continuously dismisses the integrity of Aboriginal childrearing practices.

### **Indigenous Epistemology and Ontology – Methods in our Madness**

I employed a bricolage of Indigenous research throughout the study processes. The novel approach of using Rigney's Indigenist Research Principles, Critical Murri Consciousness and Dadirri builds on liberation epistemologies to uncover deeper understandings of the effects of colonialism. These approaches depend on 'counter-story': counter-story counteracts western ways of understanding and allows for an Aboriginal reclamation of research processes and outcomes. Thus the counter-story reverses decades of enduring systematic "governmentality" (Kidd, 1997, p. xx) that problematised and pathologised Aboriginal people.

### **Study Originality**

This is a study for the Bwgcolman people of Palm Island undertaken for the first time by a Bwgcolman woman focusing on the intergenerational strengths and knowledge of the community. Five Bwgcolman families share their intergenerational stories of parenting and childrearing in this study which highlight the differences and strengths of Bwgcolman childrearing practices. The findings of the study acknowledge the continuing struggle of Bwgcolman families with the day-to-day issues of childrearing in contemporary society. However, the Bwgcolman storytellers demonstrate an inner strength of survival, resilience, and agency as they explore other paradigms of childrearing. This enables them to reconstruct their lives in new ways through dialogue among themselves as community, and with government officials as one people. It is a difficult quest, but a necessary one in these times of socio-political instability.

## **Findings**

Two major outcomes emerge from this research: (1) the study has the potential to be an agent of change to influence, guide and develop better government policies to deliver effective family services on Palm Island; (2) the study also makes space in western academia where the voices of Bwgcolman people, themselves, will be privileged. It is time for the voices of Bwgcolman families to be heard; to have the genuine engagement of government and non-government agencies, to build from Aboriginal strength toward significant Aboriginal child and family health.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **LIFTING THE BLANKET, FINDING THE VOICE**

### **Introduction**

Much of what is recorded in contemporary literature and media about Aboriginal childrearing practices is from a deficit perspective. Aboriginal childrearing worldviews have been infiltrated with words and systems from authorities in their attempts to fix their perceptions of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ in relation to practices of childrearing. These views have stemmed in the main from past government and church authorities which have contributed to shaping the child welfare system. We find ourselves in an uneasy truce. To break the power of this uneasy truce to which Bwngcolman people are now accustomed is the prime reason that led me to undertake this research.

It is my intention not to make this a political treatise. I strongly believe it is time for an epistemological turn where privileging the voices of Indigenous researchers on one front will not place us at risk of becoming elitist in our epistemology and marginalising ourselves within academia. On the other front, by not making this a political treatise, I believe I am creating footprints in previously unexplored territory toward mapping paths for other Indigenous and non-indigenous researchers to expand and to build on the developing field of storytelling research.

### **Study Aim and Approach**

The main aim of this thesis is to bring to the fore Bwngcolman childrearing strengths from an Aboriginal/Murri viewpoint; in particular I explore concepts of strength and the participants’ convictions of their strength in childrearing and parenting

practices. As referred to in the prologue I do this with the authority given to me by the Bwgcolman storytellers themselves. Therefore I intend to act with agency using counter-story in my approach to identify, document, and discuss Palm Island families (Bwgcolman) childrearing practice from a strengths based Bwgcolman family perspective. In taking this approach the Bwgcolman families are more than research participants, they have become my research partners in this study, their voices combined with mine make ‘our’ footprints specific to Palm Island. Counter-story is the contradictory texts and dialogue of the Bwgcolman people that have emerged out of their lived experience of the disruptive historical and contemporary socio-political events impacting upon their lives. Counter-story is used in everyday dialogue as a form of resistance and survival to hegemony.

The approach taken in this study is an interpretive yet critical qualitative design informed by an Indigenous research methodology. The Indigenous research methodology has two main components. The first is Critical Murri Consciousness which is a term generated by the researcher that describes a complex conceptual framework that is an intrinsic way of thinking, doing and living for the Bwgcolman people. The second is Dadirri which is a unique inclusive concept first expressed by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (2002) from the Daly River people of the Northern Territory of Australia; Dadirri is spiritual gift of “*inner deep listening and quiet still awareness*” (pp. 1-2). A *way of listening* that goes beyond the paradigm of the physical world, as we know it.

Palm Island childrearing perspectives will be revealed in the stories of five Bwgcolman families, including the individual stories of each generational family member of the three living generations in one family. Also included within the three generations story is the story of the deceased Elders of each family, representing the

first Bwgcolman generation. Hence one Bwgcolman family story embodies the story of four generations, thereby providing a four generational perspective of childrearing. In addition, I reveal Bwgcolman intergenerational family practices and perceptions of their childrearing strengths employing the following questions as a premise for storied data collection.

- What are the strengths in intergenerational childrearing practices of Palm Island families?
- How do Palm Island families pass childrearing practices down through the generations?
- How have past and present oppression influenced the childrearing practices of Palm Island families?

Before the reader continues, it is important to note here that taking a strength based stance in this study, (that is, looking at Bwgcolman from an individual and collective worth of the skills, knowledge and abilities as the focal perspective) is not a concept with which the Bwgcolman people are familiar. Although we (Bwgcolman) have our own community and family conversations embedded with our meanings of survival and resilience, it is only in recent times that Palm Island has been publically portrayed as a community in a positive light. These positive stories have been very welcomed and have had a tangible effect in elevating the discouraged hearts of the people. However, when it came to the participants articulating their personal and family strengths they were sometimes at a loss for words; some were hesitant to talk about the positives of their lives; some even commented that so much negativity had been written about the Palm Island community that they found it difficult to see the positives

through all the negatives. It seems as if the protracted days of deficit messages drowned out the inner Bwgcolman voice of strength.

*As a researcher I found this to be a challenge to uncover their strength perspectives, and personally I experienced a profound sadness for my people because of their difficulty and at times inability to identify their personal strengths, I wanted to shout out aloud the many positive and strong points I saw in their lives but I was very conscious that I could put words in their mouths. I wanted them to tell their story and through the process of storytelling discover and uncover their personal and family strengths.*

To bring the concept of strength into focus in the family storytelling sessions, I sometimes had to prompt conversations with questions, rephrase sentences, use Murri examples of strength, and be a storyteller myself where I would tell stories of my knowledge of Palm Island's prowess, in conjunction with other examples of the meaning of strength. Our Bwgcolman consciousness has been under siege and significantly socialised by destructive accounts recorded about Palm Island in government reports, newspapers, books, and documentaries. Affixing labels such as Palm Island is like 'Devil's Island', inferring its similarity to the notorious French Guiana penal colony, has reinforced these destructive accounts. Most notably, as an example of such destructive texts is the 1999 Guinness Book of Records (Young, 1999) notation describing Palm Island as the most dangerous place outside a war zone; a label then taken up by many other journalists and commentators in Australia and abroad.

The process of uncovering strengths required delving into the silence of trauma. I had to delve deeper with my promptings to open a way for the Bwgcolman storytellers' voices of strength, which had been locked up or put to sleep under heavy burdens of imposed views. Riessman (1993) reminds us that, "survivors of political

torture, war, and sexual crimes silence themselves and are silenced because it is too difficult to tell and to listen” (p.3). Further discussion on this topic is found in Chapter Nine in the research findings.

## **Outline of the thesis**

*In undertaking this study and writing this thesis I have walked an intense journey, one I probably would not have chosen willingly had I known about the academic, emotional and spiritual challenges that awaited me. Nevertheless, I am here and have made it through the tensions and welcome the transformations. Each chapter of this thesis was a personal journey within the larger academic journey, much of it written through times of mental, emotional and spiritual wrestling and times of liberated epiphany.*

*My wrestling occurred on two levels; the first was internal as I journeyed through the scrubby bush of negotiating the self as researcher and Bwngcolman woman. In listening to the stories of my Bwngcolman people I had to grapple with profound emotions of grief, loss, uncertainty and hope. The second level of my wrestling involved my coming to grips with my Indigenous research position and how this fitted in the ‘traditional’ system of academia. Many days and nights of tears, heartaches, family, children, personal health concerns and community issues brought seemingly untimely interruptions to this study, where I would come up against particular thick scrub and I would have to expend a considerable amount of energy fighting to get myself through to the clearing on the other side. However, in retrospect and reflection these interruptions were just as important as the uninterrupted times as they became a personal and academic refining process that made way for the epiphanies. Therefore, it is with a sense of celebration that I introduce the outline of this thesis comprised of the following ten chapters as summarised below.*

**Summary of Chapter One:** *Lifting the blanket, finding the voice.* This chapter details a profile of the Palm Island community, which includes details of geography, demographic data, and timeline of critical events that have shaped Palm Island's socio-political and economic environment. I also provide a brief discourse on situating myself as the Indigenous/Murri researcher and Bwgcolman woman within this study.

**Summary of Chapter Two:** *'Which Way', how they bin grow em up?* This chapter contains a literature review of Australian Aboriginal childrearing practices and Aboriginal parenting and legislative practices that are relevant to Aboriginal childrearing.

**Summary of Chapter Three:** *Can't we just yarn?* This chapter gives an exposition of the breadth and depth of the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of the study, which provide the rationale for the methodological decisions taken throughout the thesis (Polit & Beck, 2004). Chapter Three acts as a prologue to Chapter Four. In this chapter I discuss my Indigenist epistemological and ontological position, which I have engaged throughout this study.

Critical Murri Consciousness (L. Geia, 2010) and Dadirri (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002) are prominently positioned in the methodology. Contributing to this stance is the Indigenous research approaches used by Rigney – that is, resistance, political integrity and privileging voices (1999). The data collection and analysis are also informed by and utilise Clandinin and Connelly's metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (1990). In taking up this epistemological and ontological position this work departs from traditional practices of narrative inquiry and narrative analysis; however, this pioneering approach is based in an entirely different worldview to that of western narrative inquiry.



**Summary of Chapter Four:** *Doing it proper way?* This chapter describes the methods that I have employed throughout the study. These methods are the theoretical framework; process of analysis; positioning myself in the analytical process; analytical lens; validity and trustworthiness in storytelling; ethical considerations; participants and participant welfare; data retention and storage.

**Summary of Chapters Five to Nine:** *Bwgcolman Family Stories.* These chapters record the story data analyses, which are re-presented as the Bwgcolman family stories. The analyses were undertaken within the context of the following five analytical questions, which expanded the three research questions in Chapter One: (a) what meanings of survival and resistance to past and present oppression of families and community are contained in this story? (b) How is ongoing oppression revealed in the childrearing practices in this story? (c) What strengths of family and childrearing are contained in this story? (d) What influences of legislation and legislative practices on childrearing practice are revealed in this story? (e) How do families pass childrearing values and practices down through the generations?

**Summary of Chapter Ten:** *Who's Your Mob?* This chapter is an explanation of the Murri and Bwgcolman family structures. This explanation explodes the myth that is ubiquitous throughout Australia that Australia's First Nations are homogenous; whereas, in fact, Australia's First Nation peoples are distinctly heterogeneous. This pervasive myth leads to a wealth of misunderstanding at every level of social and political life in Australia.

**Summary of Chapter Eleven:** *Look what we got, look what we found!* This chapter contains the findings and discussion of the storied data analyses. I discuss not only the main story threads identified in each *generational* story but also I discuss the main story threads in each *family* story. This is demonstrated in a particular Bwgcolman

image included this chapter. I have used the analysis questions to interrogate the storied data; further, I have included in the discussion the signal importance of attending to the presence of silence in the stories and the meanings it brings to the stories by the researcher and the storytellers.

**Summary of Chapter Twelve:** *Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations.*

This chapter contains my conclusions, discussion on the limitations of the study, and I also include recommendations for future work that will build on strength-based approaches to develop a community knowledge base on Palm Island for better practice so that Bwgcolman families and children actively participate in constructing their own family support models. The outcome of this study needs to be foundational to any government and non-government policy relating family support and childrearing practices on Palm Island.

## **Profile and Demographics of Palm Island**

In order for the reader to have some understanding of Palm Island, I will provide a comprehensive contextual description of the past and present socio-political environment that this study is grounded in. In this section I also present to the reader a view of my home community from two perspectives, allowing the reader to see two sides of the story of Palm Island so to speak. The first one will be from a very demographic and outsider viewpoint including some statistical information and outside public opinion on the social fabric of the community; the second perspective will be through my eyes as a Bwgcolman woman and has been presented in the prologue.

### *A Brief History and Demography of Palm Island: an Outside View*

Palm Island was gazetted by the government for the land to be used as an Aboriginal Reserve in 1914. In 1918 the survivors of the cyclone at Hull River Mission were placed on the island. This first transportation was soon followed by Queensland State Government legislation sanctioning the forced removal of Aboriginal people of over 40 different Aboriginal language groups from their traditional country in parts of Queensland and other parts of Australia. During the years of forced removals of Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Island people were treated in like manner. The reasons cited by the government authorities for these removals were varied forms of Aboriginal or Native noncompliance and resistance to government colonial policies and practices of the time (Copland, 2005). The majority of the reasons recorded for the removals were value based judgements on the morality and integrity of the Aboriginal person, described by Watson (2010):

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Palm Island became the receiving centre for more than half the people removed to government reserves in Queensland, largely for trivial offences. Written records provide such scant explanations as: ‘causing trouble’, ‘for their own protection’, ‘for the good of other aborigines’, and ‘to give the Superintendent authority over him’. Others were simply labelled: ‘a troublesome character’, ‘incorrigible’, ‘very dangerous’, ‘destitute’, ‘a larrikin’, ‘a wanderer’ and ‘a communist’. Les Malezer has aptly described how the island became ‘for our people the “end of the road” ... the end point of our “trail of tears”’. (p.19)

Whatever the reasons given by government officials, Aboriginal people knew they were being removed because their land was valuable to the white establishment and their remaining on the land posed a barrier to the acquisition of the land and the state's industrial progress.

In addition, the eugenics policy of the Queensland Government aimed to “breed out” (Cavanagh, 1974, pp. 4-5) the Aboriginal or see them assimilated with white society where they would become productive citizens of Australian society and the Aboriginal race would fade into obscurity. The Palm Island Reserve was managed by state government employees who ruled with a hand of absolute authority dealing out punitive measures of punishment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island men, women and children. It was a place feared by many Aboriginal people, the very threat of being sent to Palm Island was enough to control the behaviour of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island person. Different tribes of people were forced to live together in a small land area of the reserve that would culminate in tribal factions. Fighting on a physical and spiritual level (Clever Men) was commonplace, as tensions would develop amongst the different tribal groups. However, over the years, Palm Islanders have become united as a people of one name and identity; that of the Bwgcolman people who persevere in their solidarity of protest against the actions of past and present governments (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** *This photograph taken in December 2011 is of a mural painted by local artists on the Joyce Palmer Health Service wall on Palm Island.*



Over the decades the community of Palm Island has seen great turmoil. Public scrutiny has exposed the tremendous social and political changes that has impacted and shaped family life of the Palm Island community. Overall these changes have brought about different challenges for families to contend with; some families have integrated the changes into their traditional parenting, but in other families traditional parenting has been eroded. Stress factors that impinge on the community have changed since the Old People have raised their families. Present day Palm Island individuals and families still face the stresses of historical colonial oppression. The pain of the unhealed wounds of past afflictions is amplified for families as they also contend with present day poor socio-economic status; high unemployment rate, alcohol and drug abuse; fractured cultural identity, loss of dignity, individual and family violence, and premature death of

family members. The mortality and morbidity rates are disproportionately high compared to the rest of Australia's peoples; death and illness through homicides, suicides, chronic disease, and mental illness are common occurrences. Men, and now more increasingly women are incarcerated in state correctional services; mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who are the crucial cornerstone of the family are now often seen as convicted perpetrators of physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual violence. Hence, as more and more family members are incarcerated, family life suffers enormously; and the fabric of the family deteriorates with ensuing wide spread effects to the community. Anecdotal community commentaries within our own Bwgcolman sphere attest to the considerable hardships of childrearing practices where male members are absent because of incarceration.

In spite of this bleak image, the intrinsic spirit of the value of family still resides deep within the psyche of Bwgcolman individuals and the community. The Bwgcolman concept of resilience survives despite the many hardships families endure. In an Australian Government discussion paper *The Impact on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children when their families are incarcerated* (2001) The Commission for Children and Young People and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board speak to the issues regarding children and families when a significant family member is incarcerated; the paper also reflects the underlying strength of families in the face of such hardship stating the following:

Many are still proud and dignified in the face of great adversity, but many are wounded, suffering poor health, affected by continuing discriminatory processes and haunted by a profound sense of loss. Alcoholism, violence, abuse and poverty are the legacies of the colonisation process. For many Indigenous people, the policies of

removal and subjugation have eroded the security the traditional family unit once provided. Yet some search to locate themselves in a familial and cultural environment, seeking to gain the security, assurance, nurturing and protection that a family and an extended family unit traditionally offered. (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian & The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, 2001, p. 7)

In the face of these cumulative stresses and losses, there is anecdotal evidence that families are reassessing and reconstructing themselves to regain what was lost, in particular young families are trying fit in with the current fast pace of social trends and at the same time wanting to hold on to cultural and traditional family practices.

## **Demographics of Palm Island**

During the years of the ‘Act’ Palm Island was one of the most tightly controlled Aboriginal communities in Queensland. Detailed data pertaining to the lives of the newly arrived people were unrelentingly collected and reported by the Office of the Chief Protector and its subsequent government officials such as community superintendents and managers to the overseeing government department.

After the ‘Act’ was rescinded in 1981, in a surprisingly selfish decision for a state government, public servants were directed to perpetrate a ‘Burnt Earth’ policy by removing the entire island infrastructure that had been built up over decades. Palm Island was left without its cattle and dairy industry, means for food production, the timber mill, and some heavy construction machinery. Thus, the first incoming Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council had to build from the ruins left behind. Some members

of this first council recall these first days of self-determination vividly and with a sense of pride.

Nowadays there seems to be a constant ambiguity in population data that finds various governments, non-government departments and the community sector at odds when it comes to accuracy and use of data for service development. For example the population of Palm Island was reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census in 2006, as  $n = 2165$ ; current health planning documents for the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council uses a Queensland Government 2008 ABS Estimated Synthetic Residential Population (ESRP)  $n = 2113$ ; and the local governing body the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council Population Survey undertaken in 2010 recorded a population of  $n = 3042$ . The census inconsistency provides a convenient point of argument for funding bodies, which results in poor planning and piecemeal financial investment. From that first Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council meeting, government control continues to be exerted behind different masks so that self-determination is minimum and there remains tokenistic consultation with the Palm Island community.

With this in mind, the following tables and explanations provide a summary of the main demographic markers that reflect the health and wellbeing of the Palm Island community. In addition, these data afford the opportunity to make general deductions or inferences for future service provision to support Bwgcolman parenting and childrearing practices.

The following tables are based on data in the recently released Palm Island Health Action Plan 2010 – 2015 (PIHAP), which includes data from the 2008 Australian Bureau of Statistics synthetic estimates; 2006 Census from the Australian Bureau of Statistics; the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council data holdings; and unpublished data from Queensland Health hospital records of 2006. The following



table represents the population and age profile based 2008 Australian Bureau of Statistics' synthetic population estimates.

**Table 1: Population and age profile of Palm Island based on Estimated Synthetic Residential Population (ESRP)**

<b>Palm Island Population Statistics</b>		
2008 ESRP, n = 2113 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people resident of Palm Island		
Age Profile	Number of Population (%)	Source
Less than 24 years of age	1120 (53.0%)	<i>PIHAP 2010 -2015</i>
Greater than 65 years of age	34 (1.6%)	<i>PIHAP 2010 -2015</i>
Age between 25 years and 64 years	959 (45.4)	<i>PIHAP 2010 -2015</i>
Median Age of 22 years old compared to 37 years for persons in Australia		<i>ABS Census 2006</i>

The above statistics reveal that Palm Island has a very young population with just over half the community population being less than 24 years of age, and a diminishing ageing population. The reason for the young population and declining aged population is cited as “higher fertility rates” and premature deaths of adults (Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council, 2011, p. 13).

The following table displays the types of families on Palm Island as recorded in the 2006 ABS Census and reveals a total of 396 families with 72% of those families caring for children or dependent students less than 15 years of age.

**Table 2: Palm Island families by type on Palm Island in 2006 – ABS Census 2006**

<b>Family Types</b>	<b>Number of families</b>	<b>% Of Families</b>
Couple families with children under 15 and /or dependent students	154	39
Couple families with non-dependent children only	17	4
Couple families without children	45	12
One parent families with children under 15 and/or dependent students	131	33
One parent families with non-dependent children only	29	7
Other families	20	5
<b>Total families</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006)

The information in Table 1 and Table 2 raise some serious questions about the future for families on Palm Island. A growing younger population, one parent families, and a declining Eldership, will add to the already burdened families further which will have repercussions for childrearing and family support services, particularly in the light of the current and future socio-political challenges that the Palm Island people are facing. In addition to the social aspects that affect families in the community, the following population health data gives a summary of the measure of disease burden in the community. The disease burden “is the total significance of disease for a population measured in years of life lost to ill health and disability” (Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council, 2011, p. 14).

**Table 3: Palm Island Population Health**

<b>Palm Island Population Health Statistics: Broad Causal Groups of Burden of Disease and Fatality of Disease 2006</b>		
<b>Disease</b>	<b>Disease Burden</b>	<b>Disease Fatality</b>
Cardiovascular	17%	79%
Mental Health & Substance Abuse	12%	28%
Accident & Injury	11%	85%
Type 2 Diabetes	9%	42%
Neoplasm (Cancer)	9%	95%
Chronic Respiratory Disease	8%	36%
Conditions originating in the Perinatal Period	4%	66%
Respiratory Tract Infection & Otitis Media	4%	38%
Infections & Parasitic Disease	4%	58%
Suicide & Assault	4%	76%
Nervous System Diseases	4%	48%

Table 3 shows some alarming statistics in regards to the fatality rates of particular diseases that more often than not are preventable. For example while the disease burden of the cardiovascular system is 17%, an incomprehensible 79% of the 17% die prematurely. Thus, in the case of Palm Island, these diseases place an enormous health burden on the families; in some cases this burden results in early death of grandparents, parents or siblings or significant family members who contribute to the childrearing in their families. This ought to be a critical issue to be considered in planning in the present for the future from all government and non-government sectors.

In this section I have provided a brief history and demographic view of Palm Island from the Bwngcolman lived experience of outsiders' commentaries and reports. The majority of outsiders' views on Palm Island and its peoples are heavily tainted with racism and what I describe as neo-colonial attitudes. However, what is most interesting is that more often than not those outsiders who brave the ocean to actually come to Palm Island to work and live amongst the people find their preconceptions challenged and transformed as they leave behind their world and enter into the relational world of Bwngcolman. In almost all cases a handful of the outsider becomes an adopted insider and they leave with their lives enriched from the experience and their prejudices altered to more congenial attitude about Palm Island. Such outsiders include grassroots service providers such as teachers, public servants, police and health professionals and church leaders who learn to listen to us but are unable to change the policy.

### **A Brief History and Demography of Palm Island an Inside View**

*This relatedness I speak of is the way that Bwngcolman people relate, communicate, share and live through relationships, with our history and stories, our relationship with the main island and the surrounding islands and seas, and the spirit world around us and in us. It is this relatedness that I will now briefly describe from my insider's view of growing up on Palm Island. It is important to note from the outset that many children grew up on Palm Island but some grew up in different circumstances to others. I grew up knowing and living the physical and spiritual world of Palm Island within the security and love of a family. In sharp contrast to this, there were other children who were my classmates who grew up in the dormitory system and experienced a different life altogether from mine.*

*I believe that it was the security and love of my parent's childrearing practices in the family home that made my childhood experiences happy and more bearable in the political environment that I grew up in. The adults were profoundly affected by the actions of governments but they protected their children as much as possible from the harsh repercussions of the 'Act', demonstrating their significant strengths as they kept close connections with other community and family members and practiced a shared unwritten policy of community child protection, children were cherished and education was highly desired in order that we would learn how to stand on equal footing with the outside world and become agents for change for the people of Palm Island. Some family members achieved what their parents desired for them and did become agents for change. Some are still on the journey and we need to hold them and bring them with us. There are still families on Palm Island today who seek the same ideals as I have just described, education is still highly thought of, child protection is still desired and the closeness and love of family still exists. Each Bwgcolman family strives to manage and live in the socio-political climate of today. Some are able to manage quite well and some need assistance in order for them to survive and build resilience to continue and function effectively as family.*

## **Governments, Legislative Practices, Missions**

I have previously referred to the legislative control of the Queensland Government that regulated the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in the State of Queensland. In this section of the thesis I will expand on the legislations and practices that governed the people on Palm Island. In doing so I will also use personal accounts of my family and many other Murri families over the years since Palm Island was established until the legislation was officially made redundant, though, the

redundancy of practice is still debatable amongst Palm Islanders. Although the legislations are now legally defunct, present day Bwgcolman discourses continues to make reference to their belief that the '*spirit on intent*' behind those legislative policies and practices still live on today, and exert their control in Bwgcolman lives in other ways, wearing another mask.

New ways of government '*doing consultation*' with Aboriginal communities still appear as interventions for purely political ends that are at most culturally inappropriate and inaccessible for Aboriginal families and bearing little sense of ownership by the Aboriginal people because their participation in policy development is at best given lip service. Again it is policy done *to* Aboriginal people and not genuine partnerships *with* Aboriginal people. The immutable practices of governments almost always result in little gain, and the prospect of moving forward and being effective in improving the lives of the Bwgcolman people and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples in communities remains at best a pipe dream. The policy makers continue to ignore Aboriginal community voices and continue to produce models devised in state government offices that are then with political ceremony placed on the people and the community.

### ***Under the 'Act'***

The title above belongs to what might appear as a small insignificant looking book to some, yet it is an important part of the history of Palm Island, written from a firsthand account by a very significant Torres Strait Island man named Willie Thaiday. I include his story to illustrate the lived experience of his generation under the 'Act'; my generation were in transition so never lived our whole lives under the 'Act'. Thaiday's account illustrates the resistance to oppression and its often repressive

outcomes but his story is celebrated annually as a shining light from the darkness of living under the 'Act'.

Thaiday, along with six other Palm Island men, was arrested at gunpoint on Palm Island at 4am on 13th of June 1957, placed in handcuffs in the presence of family and children, and marched to the beach. Under the watch of police armed with machineguns, Willie Thaiday, his wife and their eight children, along with the other men and some of their families were taken in a boat, on rough seas to the Australian mainland to face the punishment for their crime. Their crime was leading a community protest into a work strike, what is now well known in Queensland and Palm Island history books as the Strike of 1957. Thaiday, the other six men and nearly all the Bwgcolman people went on a strike from their government appointed workplace in protest against the unfair and severe treatment dealt out to Palm Island families by government authorities under the legislation known as the 'Act'. In his book Thaiday wrote that when they pulled out from the shore, the boat full of men and family, under the barrel of a machine gun, broke out in a "big song".

Soon as we pull out a bit I strike out a big song – island song about our home. The captain, fellow called Mr Whiting, hear us and say, "Who them boys? They can't be going to prison in handcuffs. They seem so happy." We sing like anything in the military patrol boat. It belong to air force in Townsville. The policemen are on top and machine gun is pointed down to us but while we are in front of machine gun we sing like anything. When we get on the boat it is nearly daylight. The walky talky is going all the time talking to people on shore, talking to people in Townsville. They ask him. "How them boys?" They say: "Nothing wrong. They singing like hell here" Mr Whiting can't get over it. They

wait to arrest us. They think we all wild fellows on boat but we happy fellows. (Thaiday, 1981, p. 36)

These men were Bwgcolman resistance fighters, they were under arrest but they were happy, facing an unknown future. One of the men is recorded as saying “I felt great ... at least someone was taking notice, no fear” (Watson, 1993, p. 114).

### *Categories and Identities*

The question of our Indigenous identity and our place in Australia has been played out in the public and political arena since Australia was colonised in 1788. Dodson (1994) states in his Wentworth Lecture:

Since first contact with the colonisers of this country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been the object of a continual flow of commentary and classification. Even a fragment of the representation of and theory about Aboriginality captures the tenor of the visions. (p.2)

Contemporary Australia has seen definitive turns in the politics of Australian Indigenous identity that appear to have some promise for both sides, yet at the same time the polemics for a national identity, amid contemporary political and social discourses such as ‘intervention’, ‘inclusion of’ and ‘mainstreaming’ Indigenous peoples only serves to alienate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people more as these new social discourses fundamentally deny and dismiss Indigenous identity once again. As Jull states: “Aborigines and Islanders have policy (or at least rhetoric) done to them, no longer with them” (2004, p. 22). Jull’s shrewd comment is a recurring testimonial of Aboriginal and non-aboriginal advocates of social justice since the early 1970s. Some



forty years later it still resonates today in our ears, like tinnitus, its wearisome rhetoric is the familiar drone slowly corroding the Bwgcolman soul and spirit.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHICH WAAYE ... HOW DEY BIN GROW EM UP?

*A review of the literature on Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island  
childrearing practices*

#### Introduction

I have titled this chapter with a question using Murri colloquial language, ‘*which waaye, how dey bin grow em up*’? These are words that I have heard spoken by my mother, the Elders and other community members as they observe aberrant children’s behaviour either in their family or in the community at large. Normally the question would be voiced in the presence of other Elders or family members to consciously prompt a dialogue that will bring the practice of parenting and childrearing to the attention of those that are deemed to be responsible for the care of children. This question is not solely asked of Aboriginal childrearing practices, but it is also used in criticism of aberrant child behaviour in the non-aboriginal population as well. Hence it is a general question that normally focuses on abnormal social behaviour in children.

In using this question as the chapter title I draw on the meaning of the question from its Murri context and deliberately use the words in the reverse context, and I ask this question of the existing literature’s ability to tell me how ‘*how we bin grow em up*’ within the construct of culture and society. Hence the main focus of this literature review is to appraise the available literature for descriptions and discussions of Aboriginal childrearing practices, concepts and meanings of Aboriginal childrearing strengths, the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island men in childrearing and the loss of their role in the family, and the intergenerational transfer of childrearing knowledge that are revealed within the contextual parameters of historical and

contemporary social viewpoints of Aboriginal family and community, I also include any legislative regulations that impacted on Aboriginal childrearing practices.

## **Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Childrearing Practices**

My initial search of Australian literature describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island childrearing practices in general revealed paucity in the existing knowledge base. Articles on the strength of Aboriginal childrearing were even scarcer, finding the few that revealed meanings of strength in the literature elicited a keen sense of excitement in me as if I had found buried treasure. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly the majority of my research hit upon an accumulation of reports and articles that discussed the problematic issues of Aboriginal childrearing, by and large written from a eurocentric perspective recommending eurocentric solutions to the seemingly Aboriginal ‘pathology’ (Cemlyn & Briskman, 2002; Hunter, 2008; Lewis, 2010; No Author, 1947; Ober, Peeters, Archer, & Kelly, 2000).

Nowadays many in the Aboriginal health sector would argue that pathologising Aboriginal childrearing practices has been the prominent point responsible for negatively influencing the wider Australian society’s perspective on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and their capacity to raise children. There is still widespread ignorance within the Australian non-indigenous community about the way Aboriginal families ‘grow up’ their children. *The Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) attest to the impact of this lack of knowledge stating:

At worst, cultural difference can be treated as a type of abnormality or pathology because it differs from the perceived dominant cultural norm.

In other words, if Indigenous childrearing is seen as pathological or

abnormal, Indigenous families will be more liable to intervention by social workers, police, and courts. (pp. 478-479)

Kearins (1984) points out the importance of recognising that different cultures bring up their children in different ways and that just because a person uses a different way to raise their children does not necessarily make it inferior. Shaw (2002) brings an important point to the fore based on Nancy Scheper-Hughes's 1993 work with poverty stricken Brazilian mothers and their childrearing, Shaw's sobering point is "the work of Scheper-Hughes sounds a warning bell to those who would embark on the study of childrearing methods of people from other cultures – put aside your expectations of what is "natural" or "right" – or for that matter, what is "wrong" (p.10).

There is a need to reverse the negative stereotyping of Aboriginal childrearing which can only be done through Indigenous cultural and academic knowledge generation thereby improving upon the existing poor knowledgebase and changing attitudes from deficit to understanding difference (Kruske, 2008; Kruske, Belton, Wardaguga, & Narjic, 2012; Long & Sephton, 2011). The current paucity of literature was recently confirmed in various presentations at a gathering of health and social welfare professionals at the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's health and wellbeing conference*, in May 2010, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. There was unanimous agreement that the lack of literature on Aboriginal childrearing practices is an impediment to the development and provision of effective and accessible family support services for Aboriginal families. Knowing the where, how and why of childrearing provides the crucial information that facilitates building a contemporary knowledge base which is foundational to developing service models,

service delivery and eventually influencing policy development for better services acceptable and accessible to the community.

My literature search led me to the library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies (AIATSIS) Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, I was excited, and at the same time felt the poignancy of coming across literature describing the where, how and why of traditional Aboriginal childrearing practices. The seminal ethnographic studies of several distinct Australian non-aboriginal scholars such as anthropologists Ursula McConnel (1933/34), Dianne von Sturmer (1980), Annette Hamilton (1981), and primary teacher Judith Kearins (1984) provide a rich documentation on the childrearing practices of various Aboriginal tribal groups in regions of Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Interestingly, and important to note, at the time that McConnel was undertaking her studies in the 1930s, the infamous Queensland Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (Queensland Government, 1897) was in full force. Under this legislation Aboriginal families were coming under the strict rule of the Queensland Government, whole families, and unaccompanied children were being separated from their tribe and families, and removed from their traditional Aboriginal land under legislative Aboriginal Removal Orders (Appendix I). They were transported and relocated to other places around Queensland, Palm Island being one destination. Some never returned to their country until decades later, like Betty whose story is included as an illustration of this tragedy in Appendix J.

At the time of von Sturmer's (1980) study, parts of the original 'Act' had been repealed approximately 10 years earlier. Presumably there were interruptions to the childrearing practices for those communities between these two time spans; however McConnel's and von Sturmer's study focused on documenting the childrearing practice

within the traditional practices of the Aboriginal people of the Wik-Munkan and Kugu-Nganychara tribe. In so doing both scholars left a rich repository of descriptions of childrearing within the family dynamics of an Aboriginal society, which no longer exists in its entirety today in Queensland.

I bring the reader's attention to this explanatory note; Aboriginal childrearing is not homogeneous, although there are similar ontological childrearing practices that are shared, Torres Strait Island culture is a distinct culture of its own belonging to the island peoples of the Torres Strait a body of water separating the tip of Australia and the nation of Papua New Guinea.

Although many Torres Strait Islanders have intermarried with Aboriginal people, their cultural practice including their parenting and childrearing remains very strong within the marriage and influences the wider family group. Kolar and Soriano's (1998) comparative study of parenting of Anglo, Torres Strait Islander, and Vietnamese communities provide important information on the views of Torres Strait Island families in regards to their parenting practice. Torres Strait Islander scholar Watkin's (2009), thesis *My island home: a study of identity across different generations of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait* introduces chapter one with a wonderful story of her family's Torres Strait Island culture revealing its strength within the changes through marriage and social reforms. My own wider family on Palm Island still identifies with and practice Torres Strait Island culture in their parenting and childrearing in a contemporary and complementary manner even though my family shares the heritage of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture.

The Aboriginal people in the eastern states of Australia such as New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, have had contact with white people since 1788. However the people of the Western Desert, in particular

the Martu have only had contact since the early 1960s when the last nomadic family was brought in by police to make way for the Australian Government Defence Department *Blue Streak Weapons Program* missile testing that was undertaken in Martu desert homeland (Jewell, 2008; Ngangganawili Health Service). The desert peoples' traditional lifestyle has changed dramatically since the last Aboriginal family was brought into contact with white society in the early 1960s; the resulting devastating effects on this family and their generations has been recorded by Jewell (2008) in his PhD thesis titled *Martu Tjitji Pakani: Martu Childrearing and its Implications for the Child Welfare System*.

## **McConnel**

Before I discuss the available contemporary literature I would like to take the reader back to the work of anthropologist McConnel and von Sturmer amongst the Queensland Aboriginal tribes. Ursula McConnel (1933/34) conducted her study amongst the Wik –Munkan tribe of Cape York, Queensland, Australia and titled her thesis *The Wik-Munkan and Allied Tribes of the Cape York Peninsula, N.Q. Kinship and Marriage*. Although McConnel's work was undertaken nearly 80 years ago her descriptions of family kinship life and some of the childrearing practices of the Wik-Munkan reveal a rich image that is congruent with the stories of some of the Bwgcolman Elders in this study who shared their memories of their childhood and family life before they were sent to Palm Island. These stories are still alive in the minds of the Elders and have been nurtured within their own immediate and extended family on Palm Island revealing intergenerational sharing of cultural knowledge.

An example of McConnel's descriptions of an early childrearing practice is the immediate postnatal period, which demonstrates the roles of the uncle and father in

caring for the spiritual welfare of a new born baby into a Wik-Munkan family, McConnel (1933/34) describes the following:

The methods and ritual of childbirth are in the hands of the women only, men being strictly tabooed from any participation in the actual birth. The expectant mother's mother will, however, be somewhere in the vicinity, walking about the bush, and the husband in communication. As the baby is being born, the mother's mother will call to her son, the baby's KALA, and informs him of the birth of his sister's child. Whereupon he will abstain from eating any fish or meat, lest the baby die. The father also, informed of the event, observes a similar food taboo. (p.317)

McConnel continues in her description of the immediate post natal care of the mother, where the afterbirth is disposed of in the correct cultural manner to protect the child from any harm or death. She describes another childrearing practice that signifies the father accepting his parental responsibility to care for the child; the mother lays the child in his arms approximately a week after birth when the umbilical cord has detached from the baby. McConnel describes the following:

Her husband sits waiting to receive her. She lays the child in his arms. The father rubs the sweat from his armpits on the child, a sign that he accepts parental responsibility for it as the child of the woman he has fed and cared for, and who has shared his campfire, during the growth of the babe in her womb. He will continue to support her as the child feeds at her breast. He feels that in so doing, before and after the birth of the child, he is contributing to the growth of the child, and that it is indeed his own. (p.318)



These two descriptions from McConnel clearly reveal the positive involvement of the father and other male family members in the very early stage of childrearing, which continues into the child's maturation to adulthood.

### **von Sturmer**

Similarly von Sturmer's (1980) Masters of Arts thesis titled *Rights in nurturing: the social relations of childbearing and rearing amongst the Kugu-Nganychara* was conducted in "response to the dearth of detailed ethnographic information on human reproduction amongst Australian Aborigines" (p. i). Using participant observation in an Aboriginal community in the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, von Sturmer produced significant in depth documentation of the Kugu-Nganychara birth and childrearing practices in the early years of a child's life, her main focus was to present a full account of the boundaries of "begetting, bearing, and rearing children" which she concluded as being embedded in the relational parameters of human reproduction and the wider family. She further stated that "contrary to western society where the responsibility for child-care and rearing usually falls on the mother and father alone, in Kugu-Nganychara society, participation in nurturing children is distributed among a much wider group of kinsmen" (1980, p. i).

In contrast to this previous description, von Sturmer describes a more prescribed model of childrearing in chapter six of her thesis where she discusses the parents as primary carers of children, however she qualifies her observations by commenting that parenting by mother and father is within a developmental process based on the relationships within the wider family. In Kugu-Nganychara families, the parents are key carers and hold responsible for the direct care of the child however, close family members may take on a temporary role of caring for the child when circumstances arise that a family member needs to step in as a temporary carer. This is not dissimilar to

what happens today on Palm Island and other Aboriginal communities in Queensland and other parts of Australia where, Aboriginal families still take on the care of children if the child's parents are not able to solely undertake the childrearing.

What so clearly stands out in the ethnographic works of McConnel and von Sturmer is the evidenced model of '*family-centred*' childrearing where childrearing takes place within a relational family and community environment in the context of the culture and society of the family they belong to. Such practices are shared by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families and communities where the family kinship system of care is paramount to their childrearing practices (Hamilton, 1981; Jewell, 2008; Kearins, 1984; Kruske et al., 2012; Long & Sephton, 2011; Penman, 2006; Shaw, 2002; Watkin, 2009).

Contrary to this family-centred model, present day eurocentric models of childrearing is '*child-centred*' mainly employed by the Queensland Government Department of Child Safety who are engaged in service delivery with Aboriginal communities such as Palm Island. Child centred models used by government services are based on the flawed assumption that an Aboriginal child taken out of family, divorced from the family social group is provided effective childrearing. It may provide a short-term solution to a child safety problem, however in the majority of cases it is an ineffective intervention. This type of service model continues to support the assumption that Aboriginal parents and their childrearing practices are inadequate.

There is disturbing anecdotal evidence today from mothers and family members, that babies are taken away from the labour room or postnatal ward straight after birth by child safety officers into the custody of child safety for protection. Removing babies from mothers and families in the perinatal period interrupts the establishment of the crucial bonding process between mother and child. Subsequently

when the reunification process of mother and child is not going well the blame is placed on the mother for not wanting to engage with the process. Government child centred models for the most part have little or no engagement with parents or are ignorant of the cultural norms of the community they work in, consequently the child's statutory out of home care becomes a protracted process of distress for child, family, community and for those child safety officers who genuinely care about the child and the family reunification process.

However, time and time again the statistics of government initiated Aboriginal child protection models disproves this flawed assumption. In the course of 2009-2010 the rate of substantiated child protection notifications for Indigenous children was close to eight times the rate for other children. Indigenous children were about nine times more likely to be on a child protection care or order, and almost ten times more likely to be living out of home (Kurtzer, 2003). At any point in the child protection process, departments may choose to divert children and their families into family support services that more often than not end up with the family disengaging from the service.

Family support services may be used instead of a statutory child protection response (that is, as a substitute service) or as a complementary service to a statutory response (Fredericks, 2008). Unfortunately, despite an increase in the introduction of programs to improve child health and parenting skills in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, child health outcomes have not improved (Guilfoyle, Coffin, & Maginn, 2008).

The general consensus in the health and welfare industry is that failure of these programs are most probably due to the fact that they have been based on western models of childrearing practices with little if any reference to or understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultural practices (Guilfoyle et al., 2008). Jewell's

(2008) doctoral study on Martu childrearing practices and their engagement with the child welfare system of Western Australia resonates with the same message, stemming from his belief that “one of the reasons for the continuing poor outcomes for Indigenous people was that the State-wide and national programs ignored unique local Indigenous culture and did not actively involve local Indigenous people in the development of programs for their area” (Jewell, 2008, p. i).

Hence the imperative for further and ongoing research in the area of Aboriginal childrearing practices involving collaborative research practice with Indigenous families and community members. Governments cannot continue to fund models of family support and child welfare that excludes Indigenous people in the developmental stage. More recent initiatives of the state and federal governments have seen a channelling of funding to organisations and Aboriginal communities in response this dearth of information, now fragments of information are beginning to come together (Penman, 2006; Priest, King, Nangala, Brown, & Nangala, 2008).

## **Hamilton**

The most eminent scholar cited in academic literature on Australian Aboriginal childrearing is anthropologist Annette Hamilton whose ethnographic study amongst the Anbarra people from the Aboriginal community of Maningrida in the Northern Territory region known as the Top End was published in 1981 in a book titled *Nature and nurture: Aboriginal childrearing in north central Arnhem Land* (Hamilton, 1981). Hamilton spent a significant amount of time sitting down with Anbarra women observing their parenting styles with their Anbarra children. As well as observing the Anbarra, Hamilton also had her own child accompanying her during her fieldwork and was simultaneously rearing him. At the time of Hamilton’s study Maningrida had undergone changes to their society and the influence of western paradigms and

legislative policy was in effect as Maningrida developed into a small town with access to various services such as western refined food and alcohol. Included in the town service provision was a government supplementary feeding program to infants and young children, initiated because the government believed the parents were not feeding children properly. The supplementary feeds were introduced to the baby by the white staff when the baby was three months of age. The Anbarra mothers did not look upon this practice favourably as they viewed supplementary feeds as interference by the staff undermining the exclusive right of the mother.

**Table 4: A summary of Hamilton's observation of Anbarra childrearing practice as documented in her book 'Nature and nurture: Aboriginal childrearing in north central Arnhem Land'**

Childrearing Practices	Reasons for the Practice
<p>Infants up to 6 months of age - <i>'fat and happy'</i></p> <p>There is a careless acceptance of a child's presence, a ready indulgence of their demands, the child is given a measure of non supportive behaviour which could be termed as hostile or aggressive;</p> <p>There are no routines and babies exist as appendages to their caretakers activities;</p> <p>They are also recipients of high stimulation from other people, and very little from the non-human environment.</p> <p>Babies are carried in upright positions to foster rapid physical development, and are encouraged to perform activities beyond their physical capabilities;</p> <p>Babies are repeatedly handled by other people, usually other women;</p> <p>Men have little to do with daily care of infants but do play with them (Hamilton, pp. 29-46).</p>	<p>Infants up to 6 months</p> <p>Child is autonomous This is a period of rigorous selection imposed unconsciously for maximizing of survival of the infant. The infant either survives and adapt or dies</p>
<p>The group may rock, talk, make sounds, hold their faces close to the baby, and</p>	<p>Socialisation of the baby into the family and kinship group it will grow to be part</p>

<p>identify their kinship relationship. If the baby cries it is handed back to the mother who would normally put baby to the breast for comfort (Hamilton, pp. 26-31).</p>	<p>of. Babies are always in physical contact with others. They fall asleep in the mother's arms, are carried around.</p> <p>European babies spend much of their time in cots and cribs and even alone in a room with the door closed. Anbarra children are constantly exposed to all the sights and sounds of the camp. Receiving more sensory stimulus from the environment and more physical stimulus from people.</p>
<p>Fathers might hold the baby for a time but they play a small role in looking after the baby (Hamilton, p. 29).</p>	<p>Fathers had different roles to the mothers/women. Fathers' role took on more significance when the male child left the mothers care in the process of getting ready to be a man.</p>
<p>Hamilton comments on views of other societies that the infant mother bond is weakened when there are several women involved in the care of the infant.</p> <p>As Hamilton points out this could be misconstrued as parents not undertaking their parental responsibility properly and the child gets passed around from one to the other (Hamilton, p. 31).</p>	<p>From about 6 weeks babies are cared for by several women 'mothers' although there might be a number of 'mothers' the birth mother is the main one whom the baby bonds with, carrying, sleeping with and breast feeding the baby at all times.</p>
<p><i>'Sitting on the shoulder clinging'</i></p> <p>The child continues to be exposed to camp life, pass through normal stages of development; learn to fear strangers and cling to mothers, mothers accept child dependence without question, and no rigid demands are placed on child's behaviour.</p> <p>Babies still breast feed but now initiating the feeding themselves they learn to get food for themselves;</p> <p>Illnesses are given no cultural significance;</p> <p>Falls and accidents are not given</p>	<p>Children 6 to 18 months</p> <p>From a eurocentric view the child is deprived without routine, toys and playthings. However the child learns other skills on how to integrate with and in their world on both the benign and unpleasant levels. Child learns to cope, survive and adapt with the adult world</p>

<p>attention but child is picked up and placed near the mother and fed to comfort.</p> <p>Child learns they are only safe near their mothers.</p> <p>Mothers use the fear of evil spirits to keep the child near her</p> <p>Receive significant non verbal communication from the mother;</p> <p>Child receives emotional and physical stimulus from mother and mental stimulus from others (Hamilton, pp. 47-67).</p>	
<p><i>'The Fearful One'</i></p> <p>Mobility is established and child separates from the mother physically and emotionally and moves into a group of other peers. New siblings may appear, and breast feeding is stopped in order to feed the new baby, the weaning period;</p> <p>Older children are allowed free access to the younger child and usually teases the younger;</p> <p>Child is able to elicit food for itself from adults;</p> <p>Child has free run of the camp within the boundaries of the 'devil devil'</p> <p>Toilet training is learnt from peer group role modelling.</p> <p>Child sleeps when tired at the camp or where the adults are at that time</p> <p>Adults and child have midday sleep of up to 3 hours.</p> <p>Peer group companionship is the most important for the child (Hamilton, pp. 67-79)</p>	<p>18 months to 3 years</p> <p>Gradual weaning period – stressful time</p> <p>No demands is made on the older child to allow the child to come to terms with being weaned,</p> <p>Child becomes independent of the mother nearing 3 years old.</p>
<p>Still can choose to obey or ignore a command from the parents without punishment.</p> <p>Main source of learning is emulation of parents and peers and other adults, no special training is given.</p> <p>Boys and girls start to accompany their fathers and mothers to adult activities</p>	<p>3- 5 years</p> <p>By 5 years Child is ranging farther afield from the mother with its own peer group or older children and separate in same sex groups, By 5 children are independent, self possessed and fully capable of asserting their will power of adults in tantrums, and they become closely involved in adult affairs.</p>

<p>such dance and singing where they observe the activities and sometimes join in until they are bored and then look to other activities.</p> <p>Girls remain close to their mothers and emulates women's activities, such as cooking, looking after babies, helping around the camp, washing clothes (Hamilton, p. 80)</p>	<p>No formal training is received from parents in skills, beliefs, moral values and their days are occupied with little supervision. Spend considerable amount of time with other children.</p> <p>Masters of their own social world tolerated and indulged in their demands, with an assured place beside a number of different adults and children to whom they are tied by bonds of kinship, aid and daily interaction.</p>
<p>Second phase the child is expected to adapt to new circumstances, accept the peer group dynamics, look to other children rather than mother or father to support and learning experience. Parents' still indulges the child especially for food, make no effort to anticipate child's need or structure the child's day. Children learn to assert themselves ( sometimes with aggression against their mothers) Adults rarely punish children physically but use stereotype threat gestures which has less and less effect on the child as they grow older. There is no systematic training of children, rather children are expected to learn what they can through observation, children are expected to be cooperative and friendly and reasonable, not naughty and self willed and anti social (Hamilton).</p>	<p>Anbarra infancy and early childhood can be seen to divide itself into fairly clear segments. There are long periods of great indulgement, dependency on mother to 2 years, weaning period when sibling comes along, the child separates from mother and joins his or her peer group. The common theme is the child's agency and indulgement by parents and others.</p>
<p>Both girls and boys are no longer indulged as under 5 year olds are, they are seen as entering adulthood and an intensive learning period under the supervision of the adults.</p> <p>Gender activities are much more pronounced.</p> <p>Peer group is main focus of the boys from 9 onwards, there is very little teasing or aggression towards each other. Boys usually act as sponsors in supporting the younger ones in the</p>	<p>5-9 years is the final phase of childhood in Anbarra terms; Waiting period in the process of acceptance as adults.</p> <p>By 9 years old</p> <p>Boys enter into manhood training when they become <i>wana</i> (big), they are usually circumcised;</p> <p>Girl becomes <i>ngamanguma</i> (with breasts), the girl maybe claimed by her promised husband at this time.</p>



<p>group to grow; activity is mainly physical exercise perfection of skills. Tracking is a special skill learnt to identify others in the camp</p> <p>Girls are expected to learn and perform the main duties of the women in the camp and go out hunting and gathering with the women, they separate from the boy play mates of their childhood and stay close to girls' friends and family. Girls are more available to the beck and call of parents and other relatives in the camp to assist them (Hamilton)</p>	
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Although Hamilton's book is criticised as "not always bringing theory, methods, data, and ethnography together" (Chisholm, 1982, p. 252), its existence provides a wealth of foundational information, to add to the works of McConnel and von Sturmer in Queensland Aboriginal communities.

## **Kearins**

The insights of Judith Kearins (1984) begins her 31 pages of distilled wisdom with this statement:

Different human groups bring up their children in different ways, and although most people are not aware of this, there are thus many 'correct' ways of rearing children. But every group probably considers its own method of childrearing the only good one and is therefore prepared to disapprove strongly of methods, which are different. And since other people's methods or practices can sometime be seen, but not the attitudes and assumptions underlying them, most people probably never realize that differences in the treatment of children arise from differences in

attitudes and assumptions about the nature of children, and not from carelessness, neglect or wrong-headedness. (p. 7)

Kearins also advocates the need to look at the adults in the context of their cultural heritage and environment stating:

One of the best ways to understand why differences might exist between groups, and roughly what sorts of differences these might be, is to look at what people need to do as adults in any one culture. Ways of bringing up children seem to be closely related to adult work, to interactions with others and to special skills needed in a particular life-style. If two cultures expect quite different things of their adults, the ways in which they rear children can also be expected to differ a lot. (p. 7)

Kearins' wisdom is still relevant for all cultures today, and for this study it relates to Australian Indigenous and non-indigenous ways of childrearing practice. Thus, even when sudden change happens within a society, the childrearing practices do not follow suit at the same pace. Kearins brought her descriptive Aboriginal childrearing knowledge to the fore, in a small informative book on Western Australian Aboriginal childrearing practices giving the wider Australian institutions and society at large a better understanding of Aboriginal culture and society of their time. Kearins' work informed the development of better understanding and service provision to the Aboriginal children in the Western Australian education system; I discuss Kearins' work further in this chapter.

Kearins uses two examples of the sudden economic changes that took place when settlement happened between the Australian Aboriginal society and the British

colonials; and the change brought about by the European Industrial revolution. Although the assumption can be made that childrearing practices changed with the trends in society on a gradual basis to fit the new economy. Changes to childrearing practices involves attitudinal changes of the adults within the family cultural environment and changes to practices rarely happen on an instantaneous basis as practices are usually established over a lengthy period of time at the outset.

I note here that von Sturmer's work was undertaken over forty-five years after that of McConnel within the same Aboriginal tribal region albeit not with the same tribe. Interestingly, there was very little change to the Aboriginal childrearing practices in that region as documented by von Sturmer to those documented by McConnel. Hence one could assert that childrearing practices within the Cape York Peninsula region of Queensland continued as it was in earlier times and did not undergo dramatic change as one may expect over forty five years when presumably changes did take place in the socioeconomic environment that the Kugu-Nganychara lived in. Therefore this continuity of childrearing practices reveals critical meanings of intergenerational strength within the Aboriginal families, culture and society of the Cape York Peninsula.

Kearins uses as an example the similarities of childrearing between hunter gather people groups like the Australian Aboriginal and the Kalahari Desert people of Botswana because of the specific lifestyles of both groups. On the other hand, Kearins points out the difference between the expected child practices of obedience of the children to the adults in a farming community where team work and assigned tasks is essential to get the job done. In contrast, the childrearing practices of individualism and independence of actions are useful to the hunter gather life style where individuals and small groups work individually and not as a collective team. Hence, each childrearing practice is 'correct' for that particular lifestyle. Kearins emphasizes the continuing wide

difference between white Australia whose origins presumably stemmed from European agricultural culture with its corresponding childrearing practice and that of Aboriginal Australia who belongs to the hunter-gatherer culture. The following table is a condensed outline of much of what Kearins (1984) described in her book in regards to the differing childrearing practice between white Australian culture and Australian Aboriginal culture.

**Table 5: Kearins' descriptive comparison of childrearing practices of white Australian culture and Aboriginal culture.**

<b>White Australian Culture</b>	<b>Australian Aboriginal Culture</b>
Tend to treat babies as helpless creatures who need all decisions made for them, need to be fed at regular intervals,	Adults seem to see babies as autonomous individuals...the baby knows whether he/she is hungry, not the adult. The adult must attend carefully to the baby's signals to feed on demand.
Children are placed to sleep in quietness and alone sheltered from noise and roughness of life.	Babies are not put alone in a quiet place to sleep; babies are kept with the group, either being held in the arms of an adult or older child or sleeping on lounge or armchair in urban areas.
Babies are not to be overindulged and not to be spoilt.	Babies are treated with extreme indulgence by everyone... and are able to demand whatever they need to help themselves as they are physically able to. They are not considered a nuisance; adults have no notion of babies being spoilt.
As children grow the main task is to train them ...toilet training, obedience training begins early, child first learns to understand the word 'no'. child is shaped by prohibition commands such as 'stop', 'don't touch' and 'naughty' as well as approval words such 'good boy', 'isn't he clever'	Mothers stand back and watch quietly until it is deemed that activities and dangers are in the child's hand to decide. If the child is very young the mother may use distraction rather than prohibitive commands to guide the child from danger.
Progressive verbal instructions to teach simple instructions and perform tasks. Carrying messages by the age of three or four years between adults and follow reasonably complex instructions.	Parents are willing providers of whatever is necessary to the child...their job seems to be that of helping the young one to help himself to grow up successfully. Children learn by observing others and mimicking

	the behaviour usually without verbal training from an adult.
Not expected to be independent in eating, dressing, washing until at least four years of age.	Children become good judges of their own ability to perform physical tasks and become adept at risk assessments to themselves. Children are allowed to light fires and cook food in it at a very early age.
Children are expected to stay in the vicinity of their mother or caretaker, they are not expected to know their way about in any but small and familiar areas.	Children mix with all age groups and may move out of the sight of the mother by eighteen months or two years gradually extending their range under the private monitoring of the mother. By three or four years of age children can move to half a kilometre from their home and go exploring with other children in their areas. Their assessment of direction is accurate and they move by direct routes when young.
Physical skills allowed to develop slowly, parents prevent children from attempting activities they consider too dangerous.	Babies are held in an upright manner the arms of an adult from the age of one month allowing them to observe and interact more easily with others than if they were lying flat. Children have freedom to experiment with developing skills without obvious verbal or physical restraint by adults; this includes the freedom to hurt themselves in the learning process.
Children are expected not to cope with or ignore damage to their bodies...to seek help from an adult. Parents hurry to pick up fallen babies, 'kiss it better'	Children in semi urban and remote settings take very little notice of damage to their bodies such as cuts, bruises, burns etc. They normally don't go to adults for help and carry on in what they were doing when the pain has subsided or they change their activity if they judge the previous activity is dangerous to them.
Learning styles rest on the expectation that adults require the child to learn obedience to adults. Children are not expected to ignore adults when they are speaking to them.	Children grow up respecting those they admire and like and will listen to them. Children have no obligation to listen and obey. They choose to meet another's request or not. There is no punishment if they do not obey a request.

Shortly after Kearins' work was published another formative study on Aboriginal childrearing practices came to be the forerunner for contemporary knowledge in the existing Aboriginal childrearing knowledge base. Malin, Campbell and Agius' (1996) publication *Raising Children in the Nunga Aboriginal Way*, came out of a larger comparative ethnographic study undertaken by Malin in 1989 which explored the implications of different ways of Aboriginal and white Australian childrearing in relation to children's adaption to the classroom environment.

### **Malin, Campbell and Agius**

Contemporary studies are now emerging from the 1990s, Malin, Campbell and Agius (1996, pp. 43-47) work provides an unambiguous and succinct snapshot of raising Aboriginal Nunga (colloquial terminology for Aboriginal people from South Australia) children in South Australia. This innovative study has emerged out of what previously seemed a dry well of information; the authors provide a comparative snapshot of Nunga childrearing practice and white Australian childrearing practice. Malin, et al. (1996) document the dialogue and perceptions of two women with the pseudonyms of Dorothy, who represents two Nunga families, and Anne who represents two white or Anglo Saxon families that were participants in Malin's 1989 PhD study.

At the time of this publication Malin lectured in the Faculty of Education at Northern Territory University, Darwin, while, Katho Campbell and Laura Agius are Aboriginal women from South Australia. Their astute descriptive article published fifteen years ago is still important for today; it allows the reader some insight into significant aspects of contemporary Aboriginal childrearing for Nunga families in urban South Australia. The authors clearly point out that the article provides a significant bird's eye view of a much larger comparative, ethnographic study undertaken by Malin for her PhD studies in 1989 which explored the implications of

different ways of childrearing in relation to children's adaption to the classroom environment. Malin et al. (1996) describes the difference in the childrearing practices of Nunga families compared to the childrearing practices of non-indigenous families through the observations and perceptions of Dorothy and Ann. Of great interest to the reader are the insertions of short story scenarios and explanations of parenting styles from each cultural perspective of parenting and childrearing. It clearly describes the differences in the childrearing practices and parental values surrounding those practices. The other interesting note that Malin makes is the similarity to what was observed in this study to what Hamilton (1981) documented in her observations of the Anbarra people's childrearing practices in Maningrida, Arnhem Land in the 1960's. *Raising Children in the Nunga Aboriginal Way* reveals strong inferences to the strength of childrearing from the Nunga family perspective Malin et al. (1996) affirmed that:

Aboriginal childrearing practices that may be seen in a negative light by non-aboriginal people are, in fact, effective means for preparing Aboriginal children to deal with the conditions they will encounter as adults. These findings have important implications for the decisions made by non-aboriginal service professionals who work with Aboriginal families in urban environments. (p. 43)

The authors stress that their publication is not a recipe for childrearing but rather an illustration of the ease that some people from other cultures make value judgements about Aboriginal childrearing despite its effectiveness in preparing Aboriginal children for life experiences in adulthood. The article makes reference to significant family events that are commonly experienced by Nunga families and Aboriginal families in general. For example the authors make reference to the absence of a father through

death at an early age; the incarceration of young male family members; the fear of suicide of children; the importance of learning to be independent and resilient in an urban society as a family caring for each other the Nunga way; and children learning to be competent in looking after their younger siblings from an early age. In short the Nunga Aboriginal way of childrearing is making sure their children will survive in adulthood in contemporary urban Australian society amid all the challenges and hardships that Nunga people so often experience (Malin, 1990).

Positive inroads into studies in Aboriginal family parenting and childrearing are now emerging. Shaw (2002) and Jewell (2008) both document and discuss childrearing practices in the Aboriginal communities of the Western Desert of Western Australia amongst the Ngaanyatjarra and Martu people. These scholarly works have brought new insights of understanding the childrearing practices of Aboriginal people of the Western Desert who until the early 1960s have been living a traditional nomadic desert lifestyle away from the contact of western influence and in the case of the Ngaanyatjarra (Shaw, 2002) have been relatively free from being the subjects of research.

## **Shaw and Jewell**

Gillian Shaw's (2002) study with the Ngaanyatjarra people of the Western Desert attests to the new inroads of government 'sitting up and taking notice'. Shaw's qualitative research was collaboration between the Ngaanyatjarra women and the Ngaanyatjarra Health Service on the Federally funded *Strengthening Families* project. Shaw's role was to consult with Ngaanyatjarra communities to develop fresh approaches to strengthen family function, focusing in particular on early childhood and parenting (Shaw, 2002). She interviewed female participants representing two different generational perspectives, the first involved women who were childrearing in the pre-contact with white man era who have raised at least one child to adolescence and the



second was the post contact group with women in their early twenties to mid- thirties who were childrearing at the time of interview. In her treatise Shaw gives significant credence to the ethnographic study of Annette Hamilton amongst the Anbarra people of Maningrida in the tropics of the Northern Territory as the foremost expert documenting Aboriginal childrearing practice in Australia. In contrast to this work, Shaw's study is based on childrearing in communities in the dry desert country amongst a fairly semi-nomadic group of people. She documents the childrearing practice and cultural beliefs and attitudes of the Ngaanyatjarra with great insight. Most of Shaw's descriptions of Ngaanyatjarra childrearing indicate that parenting practices affirm that the child has centre of attention in the family and allow the child to act with agency in regards to its wants and needs within the boundaries of safety prescribed by cultural and social norms. Shaw gives a humorous account of her own experience with the notion of 'autonomy' in the following short story:

To give an example, my three-year-old son was playing in the sun without a hat while I interviewed a young woman. I told him to put a hat on and he ignored me and continued to play. I told him again, reminding him that he'd sunburnt. He ignored me. I told him once more and was about to take action and put the hat on his head whether he liked it or not, when the young woman commented 'He not listening to you-oh well, that's his business'. There before my eyes, was the principle of autonomy granted to children from the time they are born. In these circumstances the degree of freedom for children to make their own decisions stuck me quite forcibly because I was concerned about my son getting sunburnt, and found it very difficult to continue sitting and

interviewing, while watching him out of the corner of my eye. (2002, pp. 47 - 48)

Shaw (2002) also included another study undertaken by a non-government agency in Central Australia under the *Aboriginal Childrearing Strategy* in response to the need for a more appropriate early childhood program suitable for people with semi traditional lifestyle. Study outcomes were documented in the report *Pipirri Kanyilpayi Caring for Children Childrearing Practices Report 2000 – 2001* which confirmed that “it draws a picture of Aboriginal practices as based on seeing babies and small children as little adults who have a set place with the kinship structure of the community” (p.26), and how children are raised within the four parameters similar to the Ngaanyatjarra practices of Waltja: Family and extended family, all family; Ngurra – The home, the land, this place, the country; Tjukurrpa – The dreaming, the culture, spirit, the lore; Kanyini – The connection, the holding together, relationships. The aforementioned childrearing parameters are shared unanimously albeit under different names by Aboriginal people in general across Australia, and is most commonly understood as body, land and spirit. Shaw’s research is a significant contribution to the body of knowledge of Aboriginal childrearing practices, and her clear descriptions and discussion provides foundational documentation.

The concept of ‘agency’, ‘autonomy’, ‘permissive childrearing’ or ‘spoiling’ as other scholars and observers have described it is noteworthy, as it is a contentious issue that is not fully grasped by the non-indigenous child care/welfare industry yet so easily accepted by Indigenous people. The notion is incongruent to the eurocentric practice of childrearing where the child is fully dependent on care of the adults in the family. However, non-indigenous observers fail to grasp that the child’s behaviour is still

subject to unspoken safety boundaries of the parents or other adults. Ernest Gribble, (1932) well-known Anglican missionary to the Aborigines of Northern Queensland pens his observations of ‘spoiling’ children. In his written observations of Queensland Aboriginal people on marriage, birth and infanticide, he wrote “Yet the natives are very fond of their children; in fact the children are utterly spoiled” (p. 41).

## **Penman**

The recent study of Robyn Penman (2006) *The growing up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: a literature review* is a welcomed contribution to bolstering the need to increase the existing knowledge base on Australian Aboriginal childrearing practices. Penman is author of a selective literature review commissioned by the Australian Government to investigate particular documentation over a decade from the early 1990’s to 2003 that referred to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children and families from childhood to 18 years old. The review formed a component of *The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children*, an initiative of the Australian Government to find better outcomes for the lives of Indigenous children. Penman (2006) notes her earnestness in reviewing the literature for strengths based stories but coming up with insufficient information and makes the following remark:

I kept on searching for positive stories that inspired hope: stories that showed where the strengths lie, where the sources of resilience are, and what good options there may be. These are the stories that show how it can be better. While I did find some, and where I could have used them to construct more positive stories, there are not enough. It would be good to know more. (p. 4)

This review was published six years ago, and although Penman did not find adequate descriptions of Aboriginal childrearing practices to build a strength-based collection of data, she has considerably contributed to the dialogue of socio-political factors that influence Aboriginal childrearing. It is particularly refreshing to see the practical approach in the study being given as much credence as the scientific approach. Penman (2006) concludes that:

We know far less from a practical point of view that allows insight into the experiences of the different Indigenous communities in Australia and into what may be practical possible for further, and better action. . . . What we need is an understanding and learning from without – the mainstream paradigm – and from within – the Indigenous culture. (p. 18)

## **Long and Sephton 2011**

Long and Sephton (2011) conducted a qualitative research study that aimed to identify Aboriginal perspectives as it applies to childrearing of Victorian Aboriginal children. These authors take a particular stand of what is best from the child's point of view. These authors contribute to the growing body of knowledge that there is a distinct Aboriginal understanding of what constitutes a best interest framework for childrearing. They raise the point that the ongoing western ethnocentric application of child welfare policy and practice by mainstream service providers is not in the long-term best interest of the child. However the author of this study believes that a family-centred approach will be in the long-term best interest of the child.

## **Kruske 2012**

Kruske, Belton, Wardaguga, and Narjic (2012) in a timely study, explored the experiences and beliefs of 15 Aboriginal family groups in relation to their childrearing practice in the first year of life. This study was conducted in the Northern Territory of Australia, and included two Aboriginal researchers. Both Kruske et al. and Long and Sephton are clearly articulating pioneering work in their own areas, but the participants in both these studies are quite different to the Bwgcolman people from the perspectives of history, geography, cultural practices, and in many other areas. In particular Kruske et al. say that despite a significant increase in the introduction of health and education programs targeting remote Aboriginal communities in recent years, their overall lack of impact could be attributed to the fact that they are based on western conceptual models (Kruske et al., 2012). The aim of this current study was to privilege the voices of the Aboriginal participants so that government would hear the crucial tenets of the Aboriginal perspective that must be the basis for any future policies.

## **Role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Men**

Penman (2006) also makes comment on the absence of fathers as role models in the family home and the resulting poor outcomes, especially in the lives of boys and young Aboriginal adults. It is only in recent times that the focus of attention has turned to Indigenous men and their role in the community. The previous decades has arguably seen the government and non-government sectors primarily supporting Indigenous women in their roles as carers in the family and the community. Various collections of data have raised the awareness that women are taking on the roles of the men in their absence. Programs that have had the best of intentions to support women of the community have inadvertently emasculated Indigenous men even more. Such is the strength of the garrison of programs and services for Indigenous women it has left men

devoid of a role identity in their community. This deficit of role identity has possibly led to criticisms from men that Indigenous women have taken on the characteristics of the western constructs of feminism. Acbar and Richards (2006) are two Aboriginal men from South Australia who work with traditional and urban Aboriginal families in Adelaide and share in their personal communication with me on the changing roles of Aboriginal men in the family:

One of the major contemporary changes that impacted on the role of Aboriginal men in the 'modern-world' was the introduction of monetary payments to 'single-mothers' and the adaptation of feminism amongst Aboriginal women, that shifted the need to maintain cooperative parenting and shared responsibility for childrearing, and provision of food and material needs to the family... women no longer had the need to be reliant on the 'hunter' and more traditional roles that Aboriginal men had as a birth-right and communal responsibility has accordingly eroded and/or disappeared.

However, the earlier pioneering study of Indigenous medical doctor Mark Wenitong (2002) brings a clear message that Indigenous males do not necessarily want a complete isolationist approach, and regard Indigenous women and family as a significant support and integral part of their health. Since the late 1960s, and more so into the 1970s and 1980s, a 'meaningful-role' and status for Aboriginal men has rapidly declined, oft-times opening pathways of behaviours that are counterproductive to family wellbeing. Such pathways would not have become endemic, as they are now throughout the Aboriginal communities in Australia, had Aboriginal men's roles been maintained. With the obvious interruption to and the consequent erosion of Aboriginal

culture and the adoption of western lifestyle changes Aboriginal men experiencing this 'cultural-transition', find themselves at 'a loss' and existing in a 'state of confusion' within themselves and their daily lives (Wenitong, 2002). Hammond, Fletcher, Lester and Pascoe (2004) in their article *Young Aboriginal Fathers: The Findings and Impact of a Research Project Undertaken in the Hunter Valley NSW*, briefly speak about the undermining and devaluing effect on Indigenous men as fathers from the process of colonisation. The authors further stated that "Indigenous fathers are deserving of specific support in reconstructing a culturally appropriate contemporary fatherhood" (Hammond et al., 2004, p. 5). The outcome of the research project reported the responses of ten young volunteer Indigenous fathers to questions on their perceptions of their needs and access to existing services. The responses of the men in the project clearly reflect the experiences of young Indigenous fathers who live in the Hunter Valley. However, the sample size of the research project is small and does limit taking a broader view of the findings to reflect the general experience of Indigenous fathers. It is only now, in recent years, that this situation is being recognised and named, and more people throughout are attempting to finally identify and resource appropriate strategies, programs, and services that will be able to assist with the re-generating of Aboriginal men's purpose and role into a more healthier and positive context.

The latest works on Indigenous men's issues by McCoy (2004; 2007, 2008), and Tsey, Patterson, Whiteside, Baird and Baird (2002), supports the current sentiments on raising the importance of Indigenous men's role in the community. These researchers go further to developing solutions with Indigenous community men to reconstruct their place in family and community. In order for men's voices to be heard innovative sensitive and different approaches to research need to be applied. Central to McCoy's work is the Aboriginal central desert cultural concept of 'kanyirninpa' in the

Kukatja language, which similarly means ‘holding’ in the English language. Briefly described, this concept involves a rich and complex paradigm where Elders and men play a pivotal role in authoritative nurturing of individual, and family from a cosmic generational perspective. The concept of holding changes over time from birth where it is particularly the woman that provides ‘kanyirninpa’ to boys, until the time of traditional men ceremonies where the transference of authority for nurturing and providing ‘kanyirninpa’ of boys who now become known as young men resides in the domain of older men who instruct the young men into the social mores and values of central desert adulthood. McCoy’s research explored how central desert Aborigines concept of ‘kanyirninpa’ survived the process of colonisation and how it is now practiced in contemporary Aboriginal life in the central desert of the Kimberly Region.

Tsey et al. (2002), offer a rich description in a preliminary analysis of their ground-breaking participatory action research study, *The Family Wellbeing Project*, in Indigenous men’s health in Yarrabah, a north Queensland Aboriginal community not dissimilar to Palm Island. Yarrabah and Palm Island share a common history of being communities affected by the past government assimilationist policies, and, through the networks of Aboriginal kinship systems which includes intermarriages of families between the two communities, Yarrabah and Palm Island remain closely connected for community individuals and family business. According to Tsey et al., the implementation of participatory action research facilitated the men through a process of reassessing, and reconstructing their concepts as men taking their rightful role in society. The project was not an academic investigator driven research but formed a part of a whole community approach. Thus, according to the writers, this represents a very good example of academic researchers “responding directly to identified Indigenous community research needs and priorities” (Tsey et al., 2002, p. 279). Although the



study outcomes are derived at a different way to traditional western research, their results are rigorously supported by the Aboriginal community and academia.

One final noteworthy new program meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island men in Queensland and other States and Territories in Australian is *Red Dust Healing*, an emerging dynamic Indigenous developed pathway to addressing the contemporary issues and life experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island men who seek to break free from the legacy of their experiences of “oppression colonialism, drug and alcohol issues, family violence, grievance and loss, stress and mental health issues”. Developed by Indigenous men Tom Powel and Randal Ross, the *Red Dust Healing* program is also delivered to women and seeks to address key areas such as: identity, relationships, family roles and structure (Ross, Nicks, & Drysdale, 2008). This innovative program is still developing and publications are beginning to emerge. Whilst it does not provide a description of Aboriginal childrearing practices for the purpose of this literature review it does however, centre on the roles of men in families. Programs such as *Red Dust Healing* have the potential to be appropriate sites for research on Indigenous men’s issues conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island men. These cutting edge ventures for Indigenous men sets a strong precedent for research on men’s issues for Palm Island and indeed for other Indigenous communities as these processes are responding directly to community identified needs. Similar voices of men’s concern are being raised in the Palm Island community; the recent renewal of the Indigenous Men’s Group has begun a new journey to addressing the obvious shortfalls for men on Palm Island. Government focus has shifted to a more holistic and inclusive approach to family support in the community, however the men are still excluded in what is commonly viewed as the women’s domain. The roles of men on Palm Island as fathers have become a focal point for the Men’s Group to work

as more and more men are revealing their concerns regarding their roles as men and fathers in the community, there is an encouraging move to engage with existing initiative of the *Family Wellbeing Project* and the *Red Dust Healing* project that can only add to the existing strengths waiting to be uncovered from its long place of hiding.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the available literature on Aboriginal childrearing practices is mainly within the discipline of anthropology. These have given us rich repositories of knowledge of traditional and semi traditional practices, but our focus need to turn now to the issues of our families today as we take what we can from the past to build our future. There is no significant literature that can tell me *'how we bin grow up our children'*. Most of the available literature is from qualitative studies of particular groups or communities with sample sizes that would not normally be generalisable to the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island society. If it were acceptable to do so, where qualitative research is being undertaken within Indigenous communities with Indigenous people, the findings are usually only generalizable to that community. Of the existing literature knowledge base there are nominal points of strengths, and meanings of resilience related to intergenerational childrearing; but as Penman (2006) comments, there is still not enough documented evidence to develop a strong stance to make inroads or even win the argument that Aboriginal childrearing practices are strengths based. Literature on Indigenous fathers and fathering is inadequate and more work needs to be done to build upon the seminal works of Wenitong, McCoy and Powel and Ross and other Indigenous scholars who have a passion for this area.

There is still so much to do and at times it feels like there is so little time to do it in as we continue to stem the tide of neo colonialism that laps at our community shores. *Nevertheless we Murris know how we bin grow our children up, we been here a long*

*time, longer than the white man. How have we survived to present day? Because we are strong and our strengths are just under the sand there, we only need to dig em up, polish em up, put em to use and show it to the wider world – Murri way, Bwgcolman way - this how we bin grow our children up, real good, prapa deadly!*

# CHAPTER 3

## PHILOSOPHICAL AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

### OF THE STUDY: CAN'T WE JUST YARN?

#### Introduction and Cultural Shaping of Methodology and Methods

##### *Murri Perspective – Murri Way*

“*Can’t we just yarn?*” he said, rolling up his eyes as he quizzically surveyed the scene before him, as the others in the group surreptitiously smiled. Here was I, the ‘Murri’ researcher that he knew from childhood, setting up the tape recorder and arranging pen and paper in preparation for the interview. Semi-structured questions were firmly imprinted on my mind ready to be unleashed. Suddenly my whole train of thought and preparation seemed like it was out the door before it got a chance to come in.

Murri is the colloquial term used for Aboriginal people born and/or living in the State of Queensland, Australia. The name Bwgcolman is recorded as being given by Aboriginal Elders who were initially relocated to the island from the cyclone damaged Hull River mission. Bwgcolman generally means people of many tribes or by some account newcomers. The Bwgcolman people consist of the descendants of the Manbarra tribe, and the descendants of other Aboriginal tribes historically transported to Palm Island during its inception as a government reserve and penal settlement in the early 1900s.

This was my first encounter with the dual struggle of undertaking academic research and ‘*being*’ a Murri.

I italicised the word ‘*being*’ because it is more than just the physical state of being I am referring to. My ‘*being*’ denotes my relatedness to this study in the context of my

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island world view of being a member of this group and this community and the knowledge of my culture and academia and how I interrelate these world views as an Indigenous researcher.

My first observation and reaction was to the instant change in the dynamics of the planned interview strategy. I had to quickly get my head around being the researcher and sticking to the initial plan in contrast to my own *place*, as a Murri woman within the context of this small group of Murris yarning about their life experiences, I knew each person and they knew me.

In some ways I felt exposed that my actions were being scrutinised by my peers. There was this sense of tentativeness in the air as I saw the unseen statement in their eyes, *'you are one of us (a Murri) but you are acting like one of them (academic researchers)'*. That nonverbal message catalysed an internal wrestling within me that has continued to provoke constant self-examination and internal questioning "Who am I in this study and where do I fit in community and academia"?

Therefore, this chapter I will explain the framework that I have chosen to use to situate both the study and the self through the methodological process. I will explain the method/s and methodology of pre-study preparation, data collection, and data interpretation within the context of my role as researcher, and, being a Murri woman conducting research on my own land; and amongst the people of my island home community of Palm Island.

## **The Purpose of the Study**

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to record the stories of three living generations of Bwgcolman (Palm Island) families in relation to their childrearing practices, and the childrearing practices of the Bwgcolman people in general. In particular the aim is to reveal the intergenerational strengths of childrearing practices of

the Bwgcolman people of Palm Island from a Murri perspective by answering the following questions.

- What are the strengths in intergenerational childrearing practices of Palm Island families?
- How do Palm Island families pass childrearing practices down through the generations?
- How has past and present oppression influenced the childrearing practices of Palm Island families?

Initially this study emerged from my personal and professional perspective; primarily from my own observations and experience when I was working within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island family relationships programs through Relationships Australia Queensland, engaging with the state delivered child protection and child welfare industry. These observations and experience were at the most extremely distressing for me as a worker and for the parents and families I worked with. Furthermore, I was astounded at the plethora of literature that focused on the deficits of Aboriginal childrearing practices compared to the paucity of literature that documented Aboriginal families' strengths and childrearing practices in general; and, in particular, the lack of documentation on the strengths of the families and community of Palm Island. Having come face to face with a deficit focused system I had a strong conviction to bring to the fore the stories of families and their strengths through the hardships they currently endure and have endured in the past. I also wanted to see these stories preserved for future generations of Bwgcolman families; this would be a heritage for future parents to hold on to and to appropriate in their parenting practices.

Furthermore, I also wanted a means through which the wider Australian community could be informed of the positive aspects of Palm Island people.

Too often, the community of Palm Island has been portrayed, and continues to be so, as dysfunctional and deficit ridden, an aberration in today's Australian society both to the wider society in Australia and internationally (Davidoff & Duhs, 2008; No Author, 1947; Selby, 1999). Consequently, the following questions born out of these experiences began to arise in my mind:

- Why, after generations of engagement with Aboriginal people, do governments still continue to attempt to impose their expectation of the eurocentric model of childrearing upon Aboriginal families?
- After all these years, why do Aboriginal families still struggle to have their voices heard?
- Why do senior government child welfare officials purport to have good relationships and good communication with the Aboriginal community, when, in truth, relationships are fractured and effective communication is a rare occurrence between government departments and Palm Island?
- Why, then, do Aboriginal families, more specifically Palm Island families feel like they are expected to raise their children in the 'right white way' as the appropriate parenting model by the '*system*' and not the Murri way?
- Is there scope to explore, develop and implement a Murri model of childrearing and family support that is just as valid and acceptable in the child welfare arena as the current eurocentric model?

These are questions that many Palm Islanders, and indeed other Aboriginal people, ask and discuss in community circles. In most cases asking these questions

creates a level of despondency eventually resulting in bemoaning acts of submission to the imposition of government eurocentric models because of the lack of genuine engagement by government and community.

One could argue that what is being seen and implemented on Palm Island is the perpetuation of Foucault's concept of the "*eternal optimism*" of government as acknowledged in Kidd (1997, p. xx). In the introduction to her book *The Way We Civilise*, Kidd's use of Foucault's concept of governmentality succinctly 'hits the nail on the head' in relation to past and present government interventions on Palm Island.

[Governmentality denotes] the field of reformatory intentions and bungled operations of governments. The constant devising and implementing of supposedly more effective strategies exemplified what he dubbed the "eternal optimism" of governments. But at the same time, Foucault argued, such optimism is constantly sabotaged by the conflicts and complexities arising from the sheer quantity and extent of official interventions. Governmentality therefore, he said, is also inherently blighted by "congenital failure" (p. xx).

Over the years, Palm Island has been the recipient of numerous government programs with the aim of providing human services for the Bwgcolman people that endeavour to lift us out of the cycle of welfare dependency and social deprivation. However, nothing seems to significantly change, even though the times just keep changing and the programs come in another guise, and under another name. But, we Murris know that it is the same face of yesteryear that lies behind the mask of today, hence our sighs of despondency to the 'eternal optimism' of governments. In a recent television story Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television reporter Michael



Brissenden recently quotes Wall Street historian Steve Fraser as saying, “times have changed, but the parallels remain valid ” (Brissenden, 2011). Indeed, how those words ‘ring true’ in my ear to the ever-stagnant parallels that seem to blanket the community of Palm Island. This is why I have chosen to undertake this study, so that the stories of the experiences of Bwgcolman families’ parenting and childrearing practices brings in a fresh stream of air to lift the blankets of stagnation, and move the debate in a different direction, one that challenges current dialogue about Bwgcolman childrearing.

The practices of the legislative child welfare sector have been a long standing contentious issue between governments and the Bwgcolman people. The major concerns from government perspective lie with the ‘deficit’ Bwgcolman practice of parenting and childrearing on Palm Island and the disengagement of parents and families from their programs. Whereas, on the other hand the major concern for Bwgcolman is that their childrearing practices are ignored, misunderstood and for the most part rejected by government. Past and present Bwgcolman perceptions are that the intense scrutiny applied to the community is under the judgmental eye of government child welfare services. It would be fair to express that both parties aspire for a similar outcome whereby Palm Island children are raised by their families in a secure home environment, and are living a positive, productive life in the community. However, a persistent gap of confutation persists between parties about childrearing and parenting the Murri way compared to childrearing and parenting the eurocentric way, which keeps the issue inert. The current debate around the issues is like the government pushing a coconut (Bwgcolman ways) under the water with the aim of permanently keeping it immersed, but as soon as the coconut is released it immediately springs back to the surface again and the dialogue continues down the same old track.

The coconut is remarkably buoyant and cannot sink even with the heaviest of pressure, unless its husk (the outer protection of the shell) is removed. When the outer protection is stripped away the inner nut then sinks to the bottom and no longer surfaces.

Therefore one of my aims as a Murri researcher in this study is to be a catalyst for change by bringing in the voice of Bwgcolman families from the academic stance affecting the present momentum of the Palm Island child welfare debate, and shifting it to a more active, engaging, inclusive process with a resulting paradigm change in government and Bwgcolman community human service development.

### **Situating Myself as the Researcher in the Study**

*I am a Bwgcolman woman born and raised on Palm Island into my early adult years when I left my island home to pursue my nursing career in 1977. I was raised by my parents, the sixth child of ten children. My heritage is mixed in that my mother is an Aboriginal woman of the Kalkadoon people of Western Queensland, whose biological father, we are led to believe, was a German man whom she never met. My mother was sent to Palm Island as a child with her mother under the government Aboriginal Removal Orders. My mother was adopted by a traditional Aboriginal man from the Clumpoint area of the north Queensland coast when he married her mother, my grandmother. Thereafter my mother's identity was established as a woman from the Clumpoint people as well as the Kalkadoon. My father was born on Palm Island a Bwgcolman man; his paternal heritage is from the Torres Strait people of the Kaurereg nation of the Western Islands in the Torres Strait, the body of ocean between Australia and Papua New Guinea, and his mother was an Aboriginal woman from the Birrigubba people of Queensland whose family tree also has European ancestry. So you see we have a diverse family heritage; however, we were raised in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture and identity.*

*My childhood on Palm Island was during the years of the punitive policies of the Queensland Government towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. My formative years were growing up under the 'Act' (Queensland Government, 1897) observing and experiencing its effects in my home and community life. My parents provided a secure loving Murri home environment to raise a family; this included knowledge and respect for the physical world and the spirit world in which we lived. Within this sphere my parents placed an emphasis on gaining an education, they believed its emancipatory nature would lift the individual and, in the right time, would assist the Palm Island community to walk out of the oppressive conditions that had become such a familiar way of life.*

*My earliest memories of education are of my father attentively reading my own school reports as well as those of my siblings making comment and taking disciplinary action where it was necessary to fine tune our progress in the education system. Hence, I grew up with a firm conviction that to succeed in my life I needed to succeed in being educated. As a parent now raising my three boys I find myself continually impressing on them the importance of gaining a good western education and holding the western paradigm of education within the foundation of their Aboriginality.*

*The combination of a strong Aboriginal identity and strong foundations in western education I believe will give my children a pathway of success for their lives. In retrospect, my embarking on and completing this PhD degree is a culmination of one of the strengths of my parents' childrearing practices, which I am now appropriating in raising my children. Hence the desire for change for the better was embedded in my consciousness as a child growing up on Palm Island, and it has now become a driving force in my conviction as a Murri woman to continue to gain knowledge and use the knowledge to build my individual intellect but also and, more importantly, to use the*

*knowledge to influence and guide emancipatory change on a practical and spiritual level in my community.*

*My conviction to gain and use knowledge led me to search out an appropriate methodology for my study, one in which I could feel unrestricted by its canon, that affirmed my personal and academic ontology. In the course of my search I was guided to the Dadirri methodology which I was excited about because of the consistency that Dadirri held with my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island heritage and my Christian faith (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002).*

*My journey of employment, academia and self growth has brought me to what I believe is a timely place where my awareness and understanding as a Murri woman, who is also an academic researcher, is now able to engage from a place of strength with western systems of academia. I also believe that I am able to 'see' (Du Bois, 1897; Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002), and contribute to the tensions and transformations within traditional western research paradigms and my Murri paradigms.*

Therefore, I believe that the advent of welfare reforms imposed on Indigenous communities and the recent changes in family law and family relationship support services in Australia have ushered in a timely doorway for this study which reveals its originality and significance through the following points:

- To begin, the study is timely in that families are now ready, for a variety of reasons, to reassess and reconstruct family and childrearing practices within their immediate families and the wider kinship groups;
- Next the researcher employs the innovative Indigenous research methodology Dadirri developed by Australian Aboriginal woman and scholar Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann of the Daly River people in the Northern Territory of Australia (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002);

- In addition to the Dadirri methodology I combine my own critical Murri standpoint, which I have named Critical Murri Consciousness (CMC). The use of Dadirri builds on previous scholarly works of other Indigenous and non-indigenous researchers in Australia; however, the combination of Dadirri and CMC gives this methodology a distinctive Palm Island world view approach which has not been applied before on Palm Island;
- Finally, the study firmly challenges the eurocentric child welfare models of policies and practice of the Queensland Government and the Australian Government and is intended to educate so that one of the main hoped for outcomes is to effect government policy development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island family support services.

Thus, as a Murri woman, a Bwgcolman woman, becoming an Indigenous academic researcher is a way of giving back to my community in the hope that we can make and leave our footprints on the sand for ‘our mob’ to follow and make their own.

## **Dadirri Indigenous Research Method**

Dadirri was introduced to contemporary Australia by Aboriginal woman and distinguished scholar Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann from the Daly River people of the Northern Territory of Australia. Dadirri can be described as *a way of listening* that goes beyond the paradigm of the physical world as we know it, it is a living way that brings with it a sense of the present from the past and shapes the future of the individual on a spiritual and physical level that Aboriginal people understand. Dadirri is described by Ungunmerr-Baumann as a spiritual gift of “*inner deep listening and quiet still awareness*” (pp.1-2). Ungunmerr-Baumann (1988) reflects on the way her people live Dadirri and explains Dadirri *Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness* in an

article which reflects her life in the context of her Christian spirituality and faith and her Aboriginal spirituality.

NGANGIKURUNGKURR means 'Deep Water Sounds'.

Ngangikurungkurr is the name of my tribe. The word can be broken up into three parts: Ngangi means word or sound, Kuri means water, and kurr means deep. So the name of my people means 'the Deep Water Sounds' or 'Sounds of the Deep' (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002, p. 1).

She speaks of the special quality of her people...a unique gift called Dadirri in her language.

It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. When I experience Dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of Dadirri is listening. Through the years, we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by. As we grow older, we ourselves become the storytellers. We pass on to the young ones all they must know. The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside. In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn - not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting...there is no need to reflect too much and to do a lot of thinking. It is just being aware (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002, pp. 1-2).

Dadirri is distinctly an Indigenous Australian paradigm; yet its essence of knowing, being, or spirituality is consistent with other Indigenous peoples of the world. The notion of listening in still awareness involves a holistic way of living. African American scholar Du Bois' notion of 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 1897, 1903; Ladson-Billings, 2000) was lauded as revolutionary for its time in American scholarly circles; what Du Bois was describing was the uncomplicated reality for 'black folk', their ability to see beyond the physical realm, "to see incomparably farther and deeper...the gift of second sight in an American world", an intuitive faculty enabling him/her to see and say things about American society that possessed "heightened moral validity" (p.9). Just so, it is with Murriss, and our ability to see through a double lens beyond what is in front of us.

Dadirri became a component of scholarly discourse through the work of Stockton (1995) and Atkinson (2001; 2002) who described a process of deep contemplative listening to another within a reciprocal relationship as central to Dadirri research. Dadirri was then employed by Atkinson (2002), Professor of Indigenous Australian Studies Southern Cross University in her PhD research *Trauma Trails Recreating Song Lines; The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia Methodology*. Following on from Atkinson's work, the use of Dadirri gained more acceptance in Australia as a scholarly method of research.

Dadirri is employed in this study because of its epistemological and ontological characteristics of listening and hearing with more than the ears; it is discerning with the spirit that which is in the spirit of the story and the storyteller. It involves a process of reflective non-judgmental consideration of what is being seen and to have the responsibility to act with fidelity in relationship to what has been heard, observed, and

learnt. Dadirri provides a *space* for awareness, connection, balance between logic of mind and feelings of the heart which incorporates listening and observing the self and acknowledging that the researcher brings to the research his or her subjective story as well as their relationship to others. It offers the researcher the opportunity to work with Indigenous people in a way that is informed by its approach within the theoretical framework. Dadirri has become this methodological medium that moves me through different times and space in my life, the life of the storyteller and the life of the Palm Island community.

Now both Indigenous and non-indigenous researchers have begun to use methods of research including the Dadirri Indigenous research approach when working with Indigenous Australians (Clarke, Hamett, Atkinson, & Shochet, 1999; de Souza & Rymarz, 2007; Ferguson-Hill, 2009; Miller, Spring, Goold, Turale, & Usher, 2005; Tanner, Agius, & Darbyshire, 2005). Dadirri has become an integral process that offers the researcher the opportunity to work with Indigenous people in a way that is acceptable to their experiences, meanings and interpretations within principles of reciprocity and responsibility. Indeed the principles of Dadirri can now be found incorporated in other areas of industry that involve relational practices in human services, environmental, commerce and also other numinous related industry.

## **Reflections and Decisions**

*Throughout the journey of this study, especially in the writing up of the thesis, I experienced times of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual challenges that brought me to the point of exhaustion. I was carrying and still carry an enormous burden and responsibility to represent the Bwngcolman people with integrity, and balancing this in this foremost piece of academic work. As an Indigenist researcher it was difficult at*



*times to keep the boundaries of the researcher and the participant totally separate. A self-imposed caveat led me to constantly question and appraise my relatedness with the story before me. During each session of data collection I asked myself the questions “Am I too close to this story?”, “Should I pull back and change my approach of engagement?” With every yarn/story there was a collision of past and present emotions; there were stories that I heard that took me back to my childhood and I felt that I was at risk of steering the storyteller in a direction that fed my desire to hear more of that time where my story was entwined with theirs.*

## **Reflexivity**

Taylor (2000) drew together the many strands of reflexivity that have grown steadily through nursing curricula and nursing research since the 1980s in Australia. Taylor argues that unless events in time are analysed nothing can be learned from these events. Further she continues to argue that if people do not consider the events of their past, they are powerless to shape their future (Taylor, 2000). Tomaselli, Dyll, and Francis (2008) explore the ‘self’ and ‘other’ in Indigenous ethnography, cautioning the reader that; “We should not be embarrassed, ashamed, or tentative about what we are doing (in being auto-reflexive in conducting research)” (p.137). Reflexivity is a central part of the Dadirri method, as ‘deep listening’ implies frank appraisal of group and individual experiences, thus the silences that occur frequently in Dadirri are a crucial element of this research approach. Attention to the silences validates Murri discourse among Murris and in the wider Indigenous worldview.

*For example, there were many times where I just wanted to weep and most of the time I did. Sometimes I felt like I was doing this all the wrong way because I was caught up in a self-dialogue, questioning whether I was doing ‘real’ research, was I supposed to be subjective or objective? I had to admit to myself that I was wrestling*

*within my mind; the product of my western education seemed to be drowning out my Indigenality. I feared I was drowning in academia at times and I was afraid my Murri voice would be immersed under all the western research constructs. I recognised that I had to self decolonize my mind in order for me to stay true to my Murri heritage and to that of the Palm Island people, it was and still is an ongoing tortuous process of finding the right balance to walk in both camps with integrity. Even though self-appraisal as the Indigenist researcher was constant in this study I arrived at a new level of understanding and clarity about my research stance and the effectiveness of research in my own community. My epiphany arrived after reading the three principles of Irabinna-Rigney Indigenist research; that of resistance, political integrity and privileging Indigenous voices. The window in my mind was opened and a fresh wind came in and cleared the maze. This initial level of clarity has incrementally moved over the period of this study to a point whereby I have made the decision that the presence of Dadirri along with my critical Murri consciousness is my central epistemological and ontological standpoint in this study.*

### **Standpoint: Critical Murri Consciousness**

*Critical Murri Consciousness or CMC was conceived from my Bwgcolman Murri perspective during one of the times of intense internal grappling with, and deliberation on, the theoretical conceptual framework for the data analysis. As so often is the way, these times of epiphany seem to happen in the predawn hours of the morning for me, after a night of fitful sleep. I recall bolting upright in my bed, grabbing notebook and pen and I began to conceptualize what I was seeing in my head during the night. CMC leapt out on the page, but as I began to realise what I was naming this concept, and what CMC meant to Bwgcolman, I began to laugh out loud at the paradoxical twist of this concept for the Bwgcolman people 'CMC' has always been a*

*reference to the State of Queensland's Crime and Misconduct Commission whose motto is 'Fighting crime and promoting integrity in Queensland'. But now 'CMC' as Critical Murri Consciousness now has a deep and positive meaning as it provides a paradigm for Murri reflection that takes in all aspects of our lived experience.*

*The genesis of this satirical political pun lay in the fact that during the time of this study the Crime and Misconduct Commission of Queensland were involved in the ongoing investigation of a widely publicised death in custody of a Bwgcolman man who was found dead in the Palm Island police watch house in 2004. After the death in custody of Mr Doomadgee (Mulrunji) in November 2004, Palm Island spiralled into a depth of despair and desperation that I have not seen before in my lifetime. The people of Palm Island were looking for answers from the Crime and Misconduct Commission, which is designed to work independently of government.*

*However, despite the involvement of the Crime and Misconduct Commission the level of distrust between the Bwgcolman people and the Queensland Police Service (QPS) surpassed even the actions of community and police in the 1957 strike on Palm Island where similar tactics of control were used by the State to quell the strike and punish the strikers. The parallel between the Bwgcolman people and the QPS were sinister and frightening (Smallwood, 2011).*

*The death of Mr Doomadgee saw a profound community outpouring of grief of the Bwgcolman people that sent shock waves throughout Australia and into the international community. The events following on from the death of Mr Doomadgee in custody, that is the public reading of the Coroner's report on the cause of death; the ensuing community uprising/ 'riot'; the burning down of police and magistrates court buildings; the declaration of the State of Emergency by the then Premier Beattie of Queensland; and the use of the Tactical Response Force (in full military style riot gear)*

*to quell the uprising; and the arrest of the alleged 'ringleaders' only reinforced past governments' policies and practices on Palm Island. When I heard of the death in custody and watched the televised coverage of the community's response to the Coroner's report I was not surprised; my heart was crying out in pain; but I was not surprised.*

*There has been an underlying deep 'festering' wound in the consciousness of the Bwgcolman people since 1918, one which has never been healed and this was opened up again in 2004 by the events of the death in custody. The open wound spilled out the 'pus' filled emotions of hurt, anger, frustration, desperation, disempowerment and hopelessness felt by the community, who, unwearyingly endured the ensuing protracted court case involving the prosecution of the arrested Bwgcolman 'ringleaders' and the defence and acquittal of the police officer (Hurley) in relation to Mr Doomadgee's death.*

*The Crime and Misconduct Commission's whose motto is 'fighting crime and promoting integrity in Queensland'; was engaged as it normally is when there are circumstances involving alleged corruption in the public service. They led an investigation into the death and circumstances surrounding the death of Mr Doomadgee. This investigation resulted in a prolific emergence of critical debates, analysis and critical texts about Palm Island and the justice system, but on the grass roots level no real outcomes of justice were perceived. These critical dialogues and texts were heard and read in the national and international media arena, some sincere and constructive and others damning and reprehensive towards Indigenous Australians. The event of November 2004 was likened to Palm Island being dragged back into the times of State control; however, this time the Bwgcolman people raised their voices and took action to such an extent that it galvanized the attention of the*

*nation and beyond. Even today, as back then in 2004, despite the Doomadgee family being offered and accepting an out of court settlement on the matter, it would be accurate to postulate that many Bwgcolman believe that justice was not given either to the family or the Bwgcolman people. Almost all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other non Aboriginal people believed there was a police cover up and saw the police as protecting their own man (Brennan, 2011) for being charged and convicted of murder and manslaughter.*

*Because of this background the Bwgcolman people would understand intuitively Critical Murri Consciousness even though they would not name it as such. Hence I have chosen to position Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness as the central standpoint of this study. This standpoint, and its constructs, embraces social justice, emancipation and critical thinking. It's about telling our stories and our way of interpretation from our lived experience, 'Murri way'. Therefore, in the following section I give a description of my meaning of Critical Murri Consciousness.*

## **Meanings of Critical Murri Consciousness**

Critical Murri Consciousness is complex, yet uncomplicated; the complexities arise when attempting to describe it in a western conceptual framework beyond what I have just mentioned as a combination of critical theory, critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology embedded in Dadirri. It is uncomplicated because it is an intrinsic way of Murri knowing and living and needs no explanation or description to validate it within the Murri community. It has a perspicacity that enables Murri people to walk cross culturally between the dominant culture of Australia and the Murri culture 'seeing' within the natural and the spiritual world. It requires the non-Murri reader to reach beyond their own conscious way of thinking to gain an insight of the way Murri people 'are'. Critical Murri Consciousness is not a matter of the mind; rather, it is a

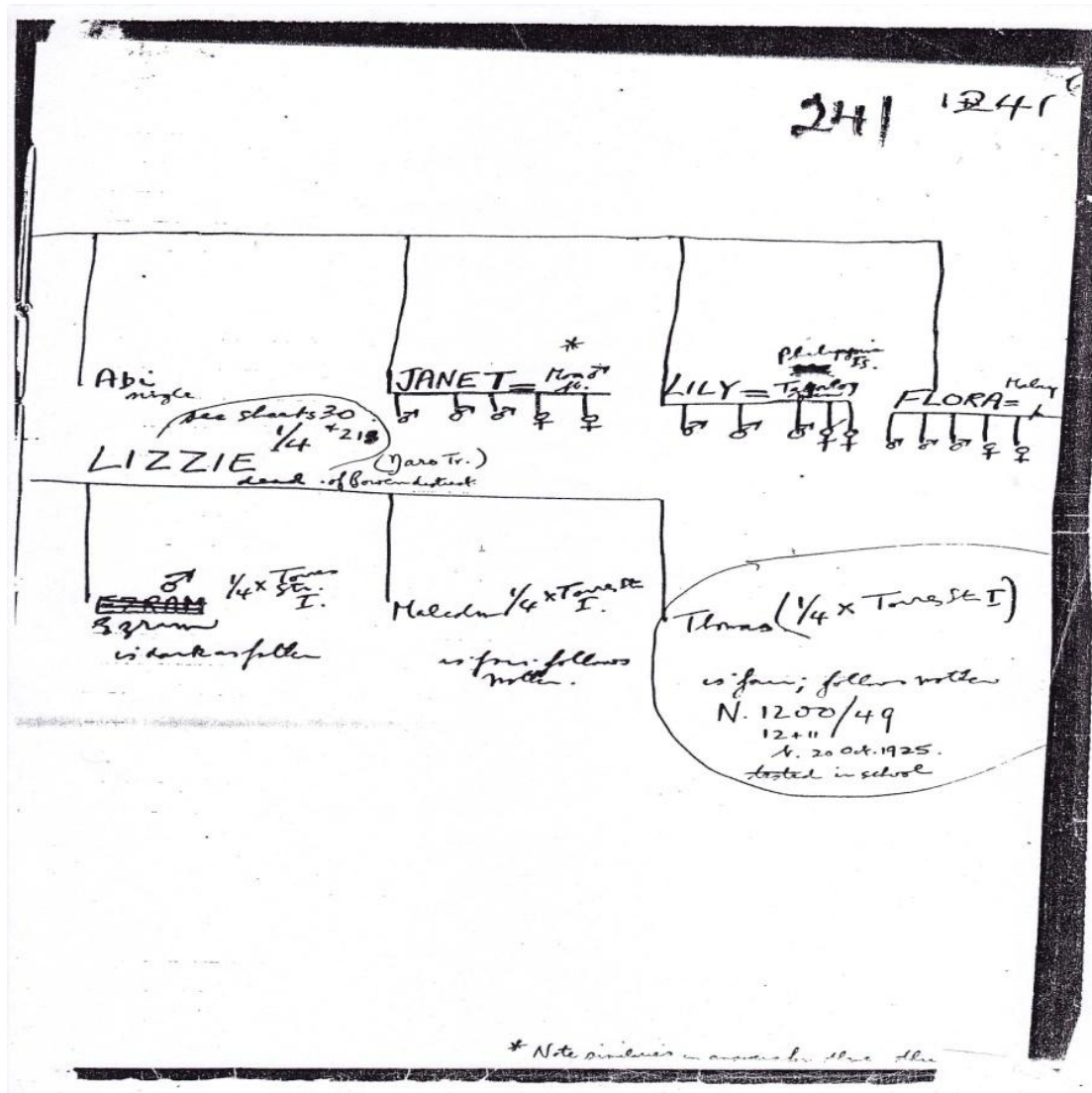
matter of the '*heart*'. The use of the word '*heart*' describes the symbiosis between the mind, emotions, senses, will and spirit, which moves through temporality, place, and space. Critical Murri Consciousness is resilient within the '*heart*' of a Murri and supersedes any attempts of hegemonic categories of defining Aboriginal identity.

For example, my great grandparents and my parents' generation were examined by anthropologist Norman Tindale who conducted extensive genealogy studies in Queensland Aboriginal communities in the 1930s. Tindale documented Palm Island family genealogy and also conducted some physical and developmental examinations on children. The following Figure 2 is an extract of Tindale's (1938) field notes on his examination of my father (Thomas) who was a thirteen-year schoolboy at the time. Tindale noted my father's skin colouring as fair, following after his mother, and recorded his degree of racial mixture as quarter caste Aboriginal, with Torres Strait Island racial mix. Furthermore, in a personal communication with Bwgcwoman Rachel Cummins (May 2012), Cummins discloses that in 1976 she was working in the office of the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs (DAIA) on Palm Island. Cummins sighted Stock Breeding books kept under the front counter of the office, she says, as people were sent to Palm Island these books were filled out by the department official with the person's name and their racial breed amongst other personal information. Cummins revealed that people received certain government privileges according to their racial breed as documented by the DAIA.

These examples highlight the attempts of governments and scientists to categorise, and provide a pseudo identity to Aboriginal people such as, half castes, quarter castes, one eighth castes and so on. These were highly pejorative, biased pseudo-intellectual studies on Palm Island people. My father never identified himself as a quarter-caste Aboriginal; on the contrary, he rejected any attempts of imposed pseudo-

identity and remained resolute in his Murri identity. These government practices were not confined to Palm Island, but were the general practice across all Aboriginal Reserves. For the purposes of government policy and practice, racial mixture defined how Aboriginal people would live and work on and off Aboriginal Reserves. In the estimation of the 'sovereign state of Queensland' the lighter the skin colour the more hope for assimilation and civilization for that Murri.

**Figure 2: Extract of Tindale's genealogy field notes on Geia family; Tindale notes Thomas Geia (author's father) as  $\frac{1}{4}$  caste and Torres Strait Island (circa 1938)**



## Tenets of Critical Murri Consciousness

The tenets of Critical Murri Consciousness are colonisation, race, dispossession and emancipation (L. Geia, 2010). The first three tenets are based on normative social principles embedded in the worldview of antipodean colonialism and manifested as normative white Australian behaviour from a Murri perspective. The last tenet of emancipation is a critical principle embedded in the Bwgcolman struggle for social justice and freedom from oppression.

Additionally, I wish to convey to the non-Murri reader now that Critical Murri Consciousness (CMC) is innate. CMC is our spiritual and physical footprint in and on this nation; it encompasses body, land and spirit and carries the memories of ‘knowing’ from past, through to future. CMC includes memories of our lived experiences, which can never be erased through any form of colonialism, neo-colonialism, dispossession and assimilation processes. The following points are a brief description of the *modus operandi* of the abovementioned tenets.

Arguably, colonisation and dispossession took place pre settlement in 1788 through the decisions of the parliament of the British Empire. Although colonisation and dispossession commenced well over two hundred years ago its fatal impact on the first nations people well established on the land continues to be experienced in the following ways upon Aboriginal people;

- Dispossession of Aboriginal (Murri) sovereignty, which was never ceded by Aboriginal people through the notion and legislation of *terra nullius* (Biedermann, Hayes, Usher, & Williams, 2000);
- Colonialism and dispossession embedded in the law of the land through legislation to support the colonial worldview;



- The loss of dignity through the policies and practices of racism, dispossession of identity and culture through segregation and assimilation;
- Dispossession of parents and family heritage in the name of civilisation by removing children of lighter skin (half-castes) from families through the stolen generation;
- Transportation to Palm Island in the name of progress for state economics; *'protection and punishment'* for being a Murri;
- Dispossession of knowledge and ways of knowing through the imposed practices of eurocentrism without genuine engagement or consultation;
- Dispossession and denial of the future development as Murris through current government policies and imposed practices that dismiss Murri identity, knowledge, intellect, and community;
- Bwgcolman resilience and continuing struggle for freedom from those oppressive policies and practices of colonialism and neo-colonialism in our walk towards emancipation for our families and community.

This is just a small list of a long line fraught with the emotions of the wounded *'heart'* of the Aboriginal people; racialised, colonised and dispossessed to the present day by an unseen pervasive force still existing throughout all systems of society and implemented through 'Australian sovereignty'. Our Murri cries for deliverance appears to fall on the deaf ears of hegemony. The following is a poem I wrote which describes our voices falling on deaf (Binnagurri) ears, written 7.30am Sunday morning 6th July 2008 whilst I was lying in my bed, listening in Dadirri:

### ***Listen – Do You Hear Me, Can you hear me?***

*Can you hear me?  
I; we call to you from the depth  
In me; in us  
To the depth in you  
Respect, Listen deep  
Hear what I say, hear what we say  
We are heart sore  
We mourn, we grieve, we groan  
I, we, cry within  
Soul and spirit  
My; our, hopes.  
My; our, dreams  
It is the voice from within  
My past, my present, my future  
Echoes of time collide with the present  
Voices of my ancestors' soul and spirit  
Waves of eternity falling on deaf ears  
Binnagurri, when will you listen, when will you hear?*

Our memories cannot be erased, however I do believe our pain can be healed, our dignity as a people can be restored and stories of our lived experience can be told with hope and optimism by future Bwgcolman generations.

## **Indigenous Epistemology, Indigenist Research and Research**

### **Methods**

My personal critical perspective of situating this study within academia in 2006 was validated when I was introduced to the work of Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous People* which was receiving wide acclamation in Indigenous research circles in the university. As is common in intellectual insights these rarely occur alone. Other Australian Indigenous scholars and writers were journeying this same path of privileging Indigenous voices. Prior to Tuhiwai Smith's published book in 2005, Australian Indigenous researchers were creating space for Indigenous research by extending the boundaries in academia. Notable researchers parallel to Tuhiwai Smith's

work are Martin Nakata, thought to be the first Torres Strait Islander to receive a Doctor of Philosophy in 1998, for his research in exploring the cultural interface of western knowledge systems and Torres Strait Islander experiences (Nakata, 1997). Aboriginal academic and researcher Lester Irabinna Rigney published his essay *Internationalisation of an Indigenous Anti-Colonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and its principles*, initially in 1997 as an oral presentation in the conference proceedings of the prestigious HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia) and then, in 1999, in *Wicazo Sa Review: Journal of Native American Studies* (Rigney, 1999). Both these Australian Indigenous researchers producing seminal writing, works for a timely recognition of this emerging research approach by other Indigenous peoples.

Recent additions to Indigenous research are the works undertaken by Australian Indigenous researchers Karen Martin (2006), Felicia Watkin Lui (2009), Roxanne Bainbridge (2009), and Tyson Yunkaporta (2009). Importantly two of these Indigenous researchers were awarded their PhD Degree *Cum Laude*.

Each of these Indigenous researchers challenge structures that informed the western knowledge base of research. Tuhiwai Smith (2005) broke new ground by introducing the concept of removing the coloniser from Indigenous research and endowing authority on the Indigenous perspective of world view as a source of knowledge and ways of knowing as a valid framework for research with Indigenous communities. Martin (2003) speaks of the “ongoing quest to re-search and re-present our world view as the basis from which we live, learn and survive ... the experiences, beliefs, tensions, celebrations and exchanges that have occurred over time...” (p.4). A few years later Martin (2006) further penned her specific context in her PhD study with

the Kuku-Yalanji people of Northern Queensland which frames her work within the Australian Aboriginal perspective in the following way:

Recognition of our world views, our knowledge 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 land and when in the land 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 (p. 5).

The development of Australian Indigenous epistemology is not dissimilar to other global racialised discourses and ethnic epistemologies. African American scholar Ladson-Billings (2000), cites Shujaa linking her African American epistemology intimately to world view; “worldviews and systems of knowledge are symbiotic that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by one’s worldview...”(p. 258).

Ethnic epistemologies differ from the dominant worldview in that it requires “active intelligent work on the part of the knower” a deliberate turning away from the internalised knowledge of the dominant worldview and an emergence of an Indigenous/ethnic worldview through Indigenous/ethnic voices (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 258).

Kovach (2009) enriches the emerging discourse:

In line with Ladson-Billings, I have come to believe that a significant site of struggle for Indigenous researchers will be at the level of epistemology because Indigenous epistemologies challenge the very core of knowledge production and purpose. While this is not a matter of one world view over another, how we make room to privilege both while also bridging the epistemic differences, is not going to be easy (Kovach, 2009, p. 29).

Well known Australian Indigenous leading health expert and foundation Chair in Indigenous Health at the University of Melbourne Professor Ian Anderson strongly advocates the privileging of Indigenous voices in all academic disciplines ... “It is important for Aboriginal people to have a voice in the debate on Indigenous health and to contribute to the outcomes of that debate...” (Richiardi, 2006). Indigenous research in Australia is emerging as a powerful tool to redress the power imbalance that exists in our society whereby the research process and its outcomes have historically been contested possession between western paradigms and Indigenous paradigms, the “tensions between Indigenous peoples and the broader research community” being played out (Henry et al., 2011, p. 3).

All of these above mentioned scholars have been instrumental in bringing Indigenous epistemologies to the academic table. Although CMC connects and builds on the work of these scholars by sharing common ground with Indigenous ontology, which supersedes the attempts of hegemonic anthropological categories of identity, the Dadirri approach that I have used breaks new ground. Dadirri was articulated first by an Aboriginal Elder and scholar from the Daly River in the Northern Territory of

Australia. Dadirri embraces both Aboriginal and Christian spirituality; the ancient spirituality of the Aboriginal peoples recognises the spiritual essence of Christianity and realises that they have the same universal source. Dadirri is built on ancient and strong foundations that are not limited by academia but Dadirri both embraces and enriches academia.

### **‘Talkin Up Loud’ – Our Voice in Indigenous Research**

Privileging our Murri voices has seen many past and present Murris stand up and speak out (or talk up loud as Murris would describe it) from a ground roots level, which has required great courage to confront and contest Australian cultural hegemony. Much of what our voices carry is our wrestling with the social and political issues affecting our lives and communities, not knowing whether our voices would fall on sympathetic ears or closed (Binnagurri) ears.

Nowadays, ground-roots Murri voices are emerging, organising and theorising within and supported by academia. At the same time we are confronting and contesting academic faculties and traditional knowledge systems, which also takes great courage for those Murris who ‘step up big’ into a system that has been a foreign paradigm to us. Now we have arrived in this place and are making a space where our Murri voices are becoming Murri texts, such leaps of Murri courage are exciting and liberating which is felt not only by the scholar but also felt and celebrated by the community as well. I can remember attending academic and government forums 25 years ago with my Aboriginal colleagues where our voices would put forward the premise that Aboriginal people know the issues and Aboriginal people have the solutions. For this reason I believe being an Indigenous researcher undertaking Indigenist research (Rigney, 1999) is a vital catalyst, not only for the empowerment of our people but also for progressing emancipatory change that is owned by the community of the people it serves. Hence,

this research perspective is uniformly related to the emancipatory goals of this study. It was widely accepted in academia that research into peoples and culture was undertaken in most cases by non-Indigenous researchers on Indigenous peoples and their culture. This traditional research intelligence once recognised and accepted as being in the disciplines of anthropology, history and the social sciences has now taken a dramatic and strategic direction.

This new direction in Indigenous research epistemology challenges traditional and contemporary eurocentric scientific research paradigms and is seeing the emergence of a specific Indigenist research undertaken by Indigenous researchers. The emerging contextual frameworks of Indigenist research serve Indigenous communities in recognising, acknowledging and documenting the richness of knowledge and understanding that would normally be passed on through the oral traditions of the Old People. Indigenous research is able to gather and hold our individual and collective stories so that they can be accessed and understood by future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples after the original story tellers have passed on into the next world

Because of high levels of morbidity and mortality, and the continual struggles in Indigenous communities, our children do not have the opportunity to hear the stories of the Old People as we used to. However, what was once disqualified and devalued by eurocentric research paradigms has now become an essential standard for gathering and holding the stories of our people through research that only can be done through the unique depth of understanding inherent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island researchers. Nakata (1997), Rigney (1999), Martin (2006), Fredricks (2007) and other Australian Indigenous researchers bring relief and provide a space in academia for the long awaited breath of expiration; affirming the desire for recognition and validating

the journey taken by Indigenous researchers to be a distinct part of a system whereby our voices can be heard with credibility beyond our communities and within and beyond the walls of universities.

## **Indigenist Research**

Rigney (1999, p. 109) clearly gives substance to Indigenist research through three principles and rationales which have assisted me to refine my research standpoint. Rigney describes his principles and rationale as resistance, political integrity, and privileging Indigenous voices;

1. Resistance is the emancipatory imperative in Indigenous research whereby stories of survival, resilience and resistance to past and continuing oppression gives support to the personal, community, cultural and political struggles experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people;
2. Political integrity in Indigenist research meaning that, in this time, Indigenist research should be undertaken only by Indigenous Australians who live in community and their research is done with community. Thereby, setting the opportunity for the political and social agenda towards the liberation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. Indigenous researchers can only meaningfully connect the research with political and social pathways to change within the community;
3. Privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenist research is giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people a credible voice in national and international arenas. Indigenous researchers are able to represent the unique and distinct community voice and be accountable to their community for what they are relaying to others. Indigenous researchers are able to speak on a political level with awareness and authority about Indigenous issues.



Rigney and other Indigenous researchers (Bainbridge, 2009; Watkin, 2009) make use of the tenets of critical theory thereby counteracting eurocentric Australian hegemony and shedding light on the underlying power struggles within Indigenous research and indeed in Indigenous communities.

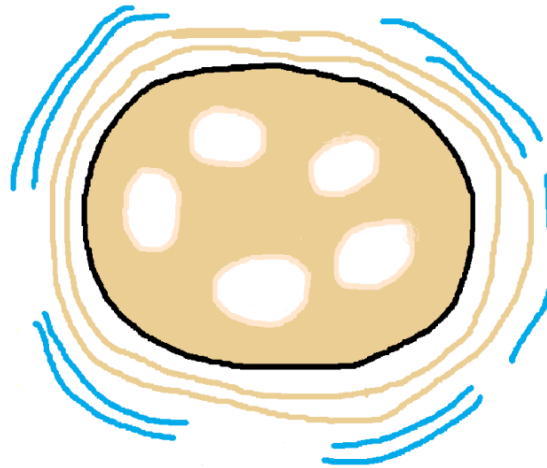
### **A Murri telling a story**

*I too have developed an epistemological and ontological stance for this study from a Bwngcolman perspective; I describe my stance by using the example of a story of the female turtle and her egg laying and hatching process that my father used to tell us about and show us as children on our sea hunts on Palm Island. Before I tell the turtle story I have to say something about my father's storytelling. When I think about those times, my father would have our undivided attention to tell us stories on many topics relating to our world and the white man's (Migloo) world. A great, animated critical storyteller, my father would tell stories and bring their meaning to meet our needs and understanding in the context of our culture. Now I am able I see the parallels of his storytelling and the storytelling I bring to this study. When my father told stories he would be simultaneously listening to what was around him, in him, and conscious of what was around us, his children. In other words my father was ever conscious of the spirit realm. He would speak watchfully and respectfully as words held responsibility and weight in the seen and unseen world. Furthermore he would show a story through his actions and interpretations, at the same time teaching us the story. In almost all of my father's storytelling there was a lesson to be taught and learnt. In retrospect, my father was using all the components of Ungunmerr's Dadirri, and his own inherent critical Murri consciousness, which he so deftly wove together in telling and interpreting. For this reason the following turtle nest story and interpretation*

*represents the centrality of Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness that I employ as the Indigenous storytelling methodology in this study.*

### **Figure 3: ‘The Turtle Nest’**

*The Nesting of Turtle Eggs*



The drawing above (Figure 3) represents a turtle's nest on the beach surrounded by water. The black circle represents Dadirri, and each white egg represents a theory or stance. In this nest is Critical Murri Consciousness, Indigenist research, narrative inquiry and other elements relevant to undertaking Indigenous research.

### **The Story**

*The female turtle finally arrives on the shores of the beach after a long journey navigating the oceans, taking on food, escaping predators, compelled to move forward all the while holding on to the precious cargo of eggs that she carries within her being. At her final destination she pulls herself up onto the beach, selects a place in the sand and begins to dig a big sandy nest. It's hard work, but she persists under compulsion for survival. When her nest is ready, she begins to fill it with her precious cargo, her eggs. These little white spheres with a gelatinous core carry her genetic history and*

*that of her species; she is compelled to keep laying her eggs until all have been released. When she is finished laying her eggs she covers the nest with the warm sand for incubation, the turtle then turns back towards the sea and makes her way back to the ocean. After a time many of her eggs will reach maturity, hatch and emerge from the sand as new life and the baby turtles scramble down the very same beach that she dragged her-self upon. They race to the water line where, (if they survive, and few do, the distance between leaving the nest and reaching the water) they enter the ocean and begin their navigation of life in the vastness of the seas. Eventually, if the female hatchlings reach adulthood, they will return to the same beach of their hatching and then repeat what their female parent did on the same shoreline ...*

### **The Interpretation:**

The turtle story's meaning and representation of the digging and making the nest is representative of my making a space in western knowledge systems of academia for a Murri way of doing, storytelling and meaningful interpretations. The nest is a carefully chosen construct, which represents the centrality of Dadirri in this study. It is large enough to include the eggs, which represent my Critical Murri Consciousness construct and the components of other research theories and methodologies such as critical theory, critical race theory, Indigenist research, narrative inquiry and narrative analysis. These all sit within the nesting of Dadirri, and with time other Indigenous or critical viewpoints, stances and theories may be added to the nest and then arise out of the nest, much like the turtle hatchlings emerging from the sand and making their way into the vastness of the sea. Akin to the analogy of the turtle hatchlings, other Indigenous epistemological and ontological hatchlings emerge and enter the vastness of the sea of academia where they navigate, negotiate and avoid academic predators, and, if or when these hatchling knowledge matures they make their marks in the sand and in

turn make their own nests of knowledge and theories, and the cycle continues building upon what was laid down before.

A note for the reader; now having told the above story I know that I run the risk of some of my Murri colleagues, peers and family having a good laugh at my turtle analogy. They may even throw in a few humorous adjectives that liken me to the female turtle and I will inevitably return the pun with the same sense of humour. I am prepared for this because this is Murri humour, we can normally find something to laugh at in our life experiences, even in serious academia. Murri humour as with other forms of humour is a highly intellectual activity – ‘the mind at play’. However, humour and witticisms aside, I also know they will understand what I am talking about because the story is intimately linked to their Murri knowledge and understandings as well. The above turtle story may seem like a roundabout way of coming to my epistemological and ontological stance, nevertheless Foster (personal communication, 2012) adds the following reflection:

it seems to me that it is this ‘non-directness’ which is also a key part of Murri consciousness – it is a key part of the storytelling which starts, moves through, and ends at one particular, non-final, point, through which the key points or ‘morals’ of the theoretical story are being told.

I can see it, and explain it more clearly using the above story because it is intimately related to my Murri knowledge system of making meaning of the world around us. So too, Cree researcher Margaret Kovach (2009) discusses the use of her tribal knowledge and its relatedness to her research processes being nested in her Cree Nêhiyaw methodology. Kovach, (2009) places emphasis on the “centrality of tribal epistemologies to Indigenous research frameworks.” Stating “[i]t is this epistemological

foundation that differentiates Indigenous research from western methodologies” (p. 56)..

Whilst Dadirri did not originate out of my Bwgcolman tribal knowledge, it does however carry the ‘*heart*’ of Indigenous epistemological and ontological relatedness to who we are as first nations people of Australia and the way we live and understand our life in family and community. This is something that is universally understood by all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in this country, hence my decision to nest my methodology and methods in the centrality of Ungunmerr-Bauman’s Dadirri (2002) in this study.

### **Narrative, Stories or Yarning: Which way, Which one?**

Stories, yarns and narratives have been an integral practice of people over the ages of humanity. Clandinin (2006) asserts that “narrative inquiry is an old practice that may feel new for a variety of reasons” (p.44). So too, Indigenous storytelling is an old practice; and the following is an exposition of the unique and ancient place of Indigenous storytelling as distinct from the relatively recent emergence of western narrative inquiry.

Although, Clandinin makes clear that people have always engaged in telling and living their stories and this is a way that people create meaning in their life and the life of their community. She suggests that the new feeling about narrative inquiry is its progressive emergence as a methodology in the social sciences research field. So, too, Riessman (2008) describes the migration of narrative inquiry from the archives of old literature into the discipline of human sciences. This progression of the narrative movement has led to an intensified interest and dialogue about the use of stories and

their role in building personal and collective life in communities. Riessman (2008) asserts that;

... the field of narrative studies is cross-disciplinary, a many layered expression of human thought and imagination. Narrative inquiry in the human sciences is a twentieth century development; the field has realist, postmodern, and constructionist strands, and scholars and practitioners disagree on origins and ways to conduct analysis (p.14).

Riessman also discusses the varying histories and the ‘narrative turn’, time, places, theoretical shifts and political movements that shaped the development of narrative inquiry and its sequential differing definitions and contrasting interpretation approaches to narrative. Consequently the rise of interest in narrative inquiry as a methodology has raised a particularly difficult issue with varying opinions and definitions, somewhat confusing as to what really constitutes a narrative. The following examples portray this very point: “narrative remains an elusive, contested and indeterminate concept” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 122); “accounts of experiences with a beginning, middle and end not always in sequential format” (Holloway & Freshwater D, 2007, p. vii); “oral versions of personal experience” (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 12); “the making of meaning through personal experience by way of a process of reflection in which storytelling is a key element and in which metaphors and folk knowledge take their place” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 245) “the word narrative calls to mind a particular genre with formal characteristics. A story is an example of a narrative—a kind of narrative. A story is always a narrative, but narrative structure is not limited to story” (Kramp, 2004, p. 106); Clandinin emphasizes the “use of careful attention and discussion if the field of narrative inquiry is to realize its potential for

making a contribution to the study of human life” (p.2). The above variety of definitions illustrates the perplexity of blurred lines between stories and narratives. Riessman (2001) gives a simplified definition “storytelling ... is what we do with research and clinical materials, and what informants do with us. The approach does not assume objectivity but, instead, privileges position and subjectivity” (p.696). Much of the current literature on narrative inquiry has common themes of the narrative as studied phenomena and the researcher’s role of writing up the narratives of the storyteller’s experience. This portrays an image of the researcher being outside of the story in most cases studying the experience, *whereas in clear contrast within Indigenous research the researcher is actively involved in the story both personally and collectively*. Most Indigenous researchers experience the same life experiences as their research participants and are integrally connected to the stories being told.

The term narrative, or tales, has little meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and are not used in everyday dialogue or understanding; however, the terms ‘yarn’ and ‘story’ are common terminology and common communication practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. Yarning is now an accepted research method for data collection (Begley & Harald, 2005; Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Fletcher et al., 2011; Toombs, 2011; Yunkaporta, 2010).

## **A Bwgcolman Murri Perspective**

The chapter title *Narrative, Stories or Yarning: Which way, Which one* describes my personal internal wrestling as researcher during this thesis journey. The juxtaposition of academia and Indigenist research has been a difficult process of convergence, one which has led me to lengthy deliberations on the validity of my work compared to the conventionally established scholarly methods that are well known and

well employed by many qualitative researchers in their respective fields. The constructs of 'classic' narrative and narrative analysis processes do not sit easily in my '*Murri thinking*' as narrative is a word that is unfamiliar in our *Murri* discourse. The narrative analytical processes during the course of writing this methodology chapter and doing the data analysis became an unsettling process as I discerned within me that I was at risk of becoming part of the colonising force upon my own *Murri* people's languages and '*Murri thinking*' by trying to fit their voices into a model that I was wrestling with. Lekoko (2007) succinctly summed up my sensitivity on the issue, as she writes on the tensions of Indigenous storytelling methods fitting with classical research paradigms:

... the growth of knowledge generated through the extensively used classical research inquiries has actually created a kind of mandarin and sheltered culture where anything that does not fall within these inquiries is received with scepticism. This sheltered culture has made it possible that indigenous ways of knowing, such as storytelling, be accepted feebly by the scientific community as an authentic research tool. However, storytelling is a potent research tool even if it does not complement but stand alone from classical inquiries. Its strengths lean more on its nature as an integral element of day-to-day communication on-indigenous communities (p.83).

*By continuing on with the process I felt I would further negate my/our Bwngcolman Murri identity even more and add to the already deficit paradigm existing about us in mainstream Australia. The unsettled discernment became a strong conviction and internal wrestle, so much so that it stopped me in the midst of data analysis and I was paralysed from going any further for some weeks.*



*As a Murri researcher, I had to stop and listen to what I was hearing. The voice within me was speaking, my own Dadirri (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002), this was something in academia that I had never encountered with such strength of conviction before. I kept hearing the voices of Bwgcolman that shared their stories with me to “make sure you write it our way, not university way, make sure we are heard, they been telling us for long time our way is wrong”. It was these comments that kept ringing in my ears each time I went home to Palm Island, and when I left the island their voices followed me into academia. I knew that I needed to write in a way that would bring validity and integrity to the way Bwgcolman people lived and understood their world view and their ‘Murri thinking’; this was their life and their stories that I was given the privilege to ‘hold’ for a time and bring their voices into an arena that was foreign and at times opposed to their voices.*

The responsibility of walking this road of academia and making tracks alongside it, sometimes cutting across it with intersections of our Bwgcolman/Murri footprints is a heavy one to carry at times. However, along this track connections were and are revealed with *like-minded and like spirit*, academic peers and colleagues in concurrence with the works of other Indigenous peoples in other nations who are walking a similar journey to privilege their people’s voice.

Most notably, scholar Margaret Kovach’s voice in her book, *Indigenous Methodologies, Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (2009) resonated within me. As I read the book, I could feel Kovach talking directly to me. I caught my breath many times and celebrated and applauded this Indigenous sister for her words that have been an imperative to me to press on. Consequently after much deliberation out of my experience of *Dadirri* with community, family, and mentors and my academic peers and supervisors I was finally led to another standpoint in this study. The well-

substantiated interview method whether structured, semi-structured or unstructured, no longer served the purpose for data gathering for this study. The participants themselves through their yarns/stories offered a solution. Hence the use of the term narrative will be exchanged with the use of the term yarn/story, yarns/stories and yarning/storytelling to bring contextual Murri perspective to the methodology and method.

## **Interpretive Framework of Murri Storytelling**

The construct of the story or storytelling in Murri way weaves together the notions of time and temporality from an Indigenous perspective. When a yarn/story is told, there is a point of beginning; however this is where yarns/stories diverge from an accepted linear narrative construct. In Murri storytelling, the story is shared and the persons involved in the yarn/story may take the story to a deeper level of meaning by adding their memories and insights, which almost always includes the moral undertones and reasoning of the storyteller. This fluidity and textual ‘messiness’ is consistent with our way of storytelling which maintains the integrity of the story and at the same time allows the story to progress through levels of interpretation, then it turns back again to the main storyline contextually dramatic and richer.

Hence, Murri yarning/storytelling moves backwards and forwards between past, present and future and also involves what I call ‘*Murri interpretive turns*’; this differs from the classical meanings of interpretation or explanations in narratives. In this study I use ‘*Murri interpretive turns*’ whereby I also add my voice to the story and bring my insights and interpretation to the story as my Murri researcher’s voice is shared with the Murri storyteller’s voice and builds on the meaning of the story.

Thus, there may be several Murri interpretive turns in one of these small yarns/stories to progress the overall story. There is no linear construction of beginning, plot and end; the notion of moving backward and forward between past, present and

future involves all parties in the yarn/story. In this case the researcher is also an active voice in the yarn/story. This above description is at the core of the Dadirri research method and is employed in this study whereby my storytelling through the reconstructed stories of the Bwgcolman families is one of telling and interpreting or telling and showing which is consistent with Murri storytelling.

To that end, the methodological framework for my study employs emerging Indigenist research methods and Murri/Indigenous methods positioned within the constructs of qualitative research methodology.

## CHAPTER 4

### DOING IT PROPER WAY

#### **Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Method**

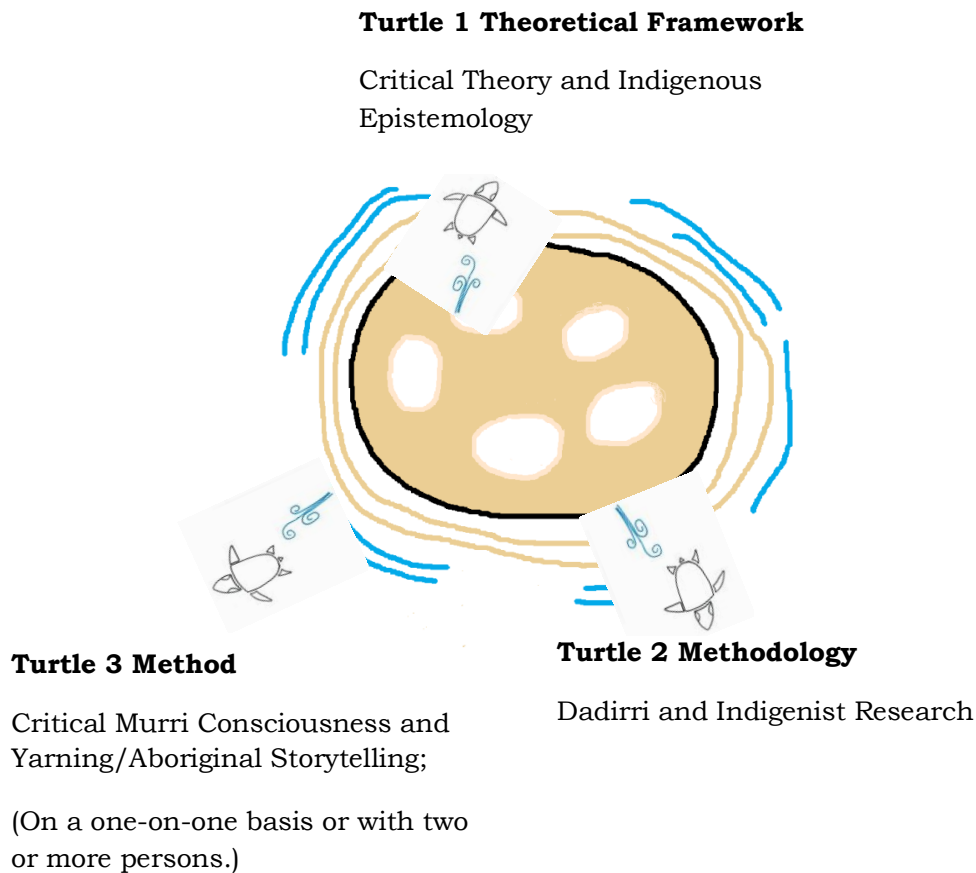
The words ‘proper way’ or ‘*prapa way*’ are Creole language words commonly spoken by Murris and Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland. Their English synonym is ‘doing things the right way’. I’ve deliberately used Creole language for the title of this methodology chapter as these words carry a deeper meaning than just the standard English verb of ‘doing things right’. In the case of this study doing things the proper or ‘prapa’ way means using all my faculties of intellect and cultural knowledge to ensure that I am employing my skills and knowledge as an Indigenous researcher that is commensurate to undertaking research within the community of Palm Island. Doing it ‘proper or prapa way’ is the expected cultural process that I undertake in this study from a Palm Island community perspective as well an academic perspective. This is reflected in my chosen method of data collection and data analysis, which ensures the integrity of the processes of engaging with the storytellers in their *yarning*/storytelling. This process also includes ‘correctly’ attending to the academic requirements of a methodology chapter within a doctoral thesis.

Therefore, this is a qualitative research study, which is principally positioned within a ‘*decolonizing lens*’ comprised of the primary lens of Dadirri (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002) and Critical Murri Consciousness (L. Geia, 2010), combined with Indigenist Research (Rigney, 1999). However, the link between Clandinin and Connelly’s (2006) three dimensional inquiry space - interaction, continuity and situation is serendipitous and, also, is a useful analytical aid to the more primary Indigenous approach in this study.

For example, Clandinin (2006) described how Clandinin and Connelly built their three dimensional construct on the Deweyan theory of pragmatism using the notion of ‘experience’ in relation to studies on human life. The author distinguishes the study of ‘experience’ as a point of constancy in observing the way humans “individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 46). Thus, ‘human storied lives’ is a particular phenomenon requiring a specific way of thinking on the part of the researcher. The meanings of interaction, continuity and situation are congruent to Indigenous worldview, and fit together with this study’s theoretical framework.

Therefore, the theoretical framework for the study is developed from the tenets of critical theory and Indigenous epistemology as I have described in the previous chapter. The methodology of this study employs the tenets of Dadirri, and Indigenist research, together with the method of this study Critical Murri Consciousness and Yarning/Aboriginal Storytelling. The following picture (Figure 4) represents my epistemological perspective of the methodological constructs I employ in this study. The turtles are the new hatchlings from the nest representing new Indigenous knowledge generation entering western academia.

**Figure 4: Theoretical Framework, Methodology and Method**



The methodological constructs above inform the recording of the Bwgcolman stories. The storied data in this study are a unique collection of ‘counter stories’ (Barney & Mackinlay, 2011; Burke, 2012; Gilmore & Smith, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005) of three living generations of Bwgcolman families lived experience. Their stories or “counter narratives” are opportune instruments to articulate their resistance to what Nelson describes as the “master narrative” (Nelson, 2001, p. 155). In reference to this study the master narrative is Australia’s historical account of its systematic imposition of hegemonic identity of Aboriginal people. The Bwgcolman stories also bear meanings of survival and resistance as the storytellers assert their “moral agency to set out to repair the damage that has been inflicted on identity (Bwgcolman identity) by an oppressive master narrative. Through their function of repair, counter stories aim at

freedom of moral agency... are acts of purposive moral self-definition...” (Nelson, p. 157).

Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith (2008) describe the function of counter narratives is to disrupt and disturb hegemony:

Critical personal narratives are counter narratives, testimonies, auto ethnographies, performance, texts, stories, and accounts that disrupt and disturb discourse by exposing the complexities and contradictions that exist under official history (pp. 12-13).

Hence the collection of valuable Bwgcolman intergenerational stories in this study is foundational in this study’s approach to exploring the history of Bwgcolman childrearing practices of the first generation of Elders of Palm Island. This then establishes a platform that brings recognition to the lived experiences of their descendants in the context of their culture, land, spirituality, family and community. These dimensions, implicitly and explicitly, shape not only Palm Islanders’ parenting of children but also the way they articulate their parenting (Barton, 2004). Included in the Bwgcolman family stories are also meanings of the toxic influences in the lives of the storytellers. Goodall (2005) discusses the construct of narrative inheritance with the explanation that “what we inherit from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs”, and helps us to see how “we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it means” (p. 494). Goodall further describes what he calls ‘toxic’ inheritances where issues such as abuse are passed down through families and result in substantial impact on inter-generational legacies of shame, guilt, feelings of inferiority, and loss. Goodall’s meanings of toxic

inheritances are also relevant to this study as the Bwgcolman storytellers also talk about their experiences of shame, loss and grief in their family.

## **Process of Analysis: Making New Spaces**

It is clear from the literature that global Indigenous researchers (Kovach, 2009; Martin, 2006; Rigney, 1999; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005; Watkin, 2009; Yunkaporta, 2009) have eloquently positioned themselves and have dived into the waters of Indigenous inquiry making new spaces by pushing boundaries, causing ripples and dare I say tidal waves in the existing systems of western academia. Indigenous ways of inquiry are ‘making new space’ in western academia. The making of new spaces allows for Indigenous researchers to bring into western academia the individual and collective voices of our community. In particular, challenging the ‘traditions’ of western academia as an Australian Indigenous researcher is exciting and at the same time daunting; nevertheless, it is timely and necessary as we make the way standing poised on the opportune springboard ready to launch off showing others how to follow suit.

One of the major challenges is confronting the language of research and engaging in the praxis of decolonising research language which I believe is a necessary prerequisite to make space for Indigenous inquiries. During the process of data analysis I was personally challenged by the meanings of the research language and battled with an internal paradox about the use of words and the way the analysis should be done as documented earlier. Readings on western narrative analysis constructs revealed in most cases a prescriptive analytical design (Kelly & Howie, 2007); however, my internal conviction led me to believe that a prescriptive design would compromise the Indigenous tenets of the study. Therefore, I was drawn more to an interactional process of analysis (Riessman, 2005) but within an Indigenous construct. Riessman’s



interactional analysis involves processes where “storyteller and questioner jointly participate in conversation. Attention to thematic content and narrative structure is not abandoned in the interactional approach, but interests shifts to storytelling as a process of co-construction, where teller and listener create meaning collaboratively” (p. 4). I see the use of interactional analysis within an Indigenous construct as a progression on the works of eminent researchers in narrative inquiry and building a vital new space for Indigenist inquiries (Rigney, 1999) within narrative design.

### **Positioning Myself in the Analysis Process**

In moving beyond the use of prescriptive structures for data analysis, I have privileged in particular the voices of Indigenous peoples by stepping out of the process of story preparation and story creation. I did this because I was grappling with an internal conflict of using a prescriptive preparation of data analysis; I felt that I would compromise fidelity to the stories and the people that allowed me to enter their space. My conviction was so strong that I had to speak with a respected community member and mentor on the issue, after our discussion Cummins told me that “I would be taking away the voice of the people” if I prepared the stories for analysis using a western construct (Cummins, 2010). Cummins was reiterating the principle of ‘privileging voices’ of Indigenist research and confirmed my internal conviction. For that reason I clarify my position in the use of language for this analysis by choosing to use the term ‘story data’ to describe the transcript data. I accept that the word data is standard research language. However, as an Indigenous researcher and an active community member I had difficulty using just the word ‘data’ to describe the stories of my people. Data is synonymous with statistics and statistics in most cases is synonymous with the perceived ‘deficient’ state of Indigenous people’s lives. Indigenous people’s historical and contemporary experiences have been saturated with deficit statistics, highly

political our statistical profiles challenge Australia, spring boarding such political catch phrases as ‘Closing the Gap’.

Instead, in front of my own eyes, was something more precious than what the word ‘data’ conjured up for me; it is a recorded collection of life in all its beauty and ugliness. It is their Bwgcolman story, an autobiographical window involving the people that I belong to and who belong to me. It is a plaited story, a double helix that refers back to the collective, which gives me an autobiographical window. In describing her Quampie methodology Martin (2006) stated:

Quampie methodology as Indigenist research methodology requires culturally rigorous choices to be made for methods for the design and conduct of data collection. One difference is in defining and using Storywork (Archibald, 2001) as a culturally safe, culturally respectful, culturally relevant research method based on Aboriginal epistemology and axiology and communication protocols. Storywork is not just a method to collect data, but is a discourse where relatedness is engaged and maintained...Storywork is not interviewing or narrative inquiry (p. 4).

Much like Riessman’s interactional style of creating meaning in stories of lived experience between storyteller and listener, Quampie methodology voices the Indigenous relational process between storyteller and listener. It relates to the analytical approach I have chosen in this study because Martin is pragmatic in emphasising the maintenance of relatedness that is inherent in Indigenous research approaches. The analysis of the stories was also informed by Silverman’s (2000) five questions, which

he suggested interview researchers may want to ask themselves, and to which I have added my response:

- (1) What status do you attach to your data? – Is it treating the interview responses as giving direct access to “experience” or as actively constructed “stories” involving activities that themselves demand analysis? I needed to justify and explain the position I take;
- (2) Is your analytic position appropriate to your practical concerns? – What am I responding to; my practical issue is identifying the strengths in the practice of raising children on an Aboriginal community by Aboriginal people. It embraces critical theory, story work based on Critical Murri Consciousness and Dadirri;
- (3) Do interview data really help in addressing your research topic? Was I going to find the answers to the research questions through interviewing or listening to stories?
- (4) Are you making too-large claims about your research? Am I making too-large claims about my research? Be careful about originality, scope, or applicability to social problems are all hostages to fortune. Be careful in how I specify the claims of my approach. Show that I understand that this constitutes one way of ‘slicing the cake’ and that other approaches, using other forms of data, may not be directly competitive;
- (5) Does your analysis go beyond a mere list? Link together elements of analysis to bring out the active work of both interviewer and interviewee, and say something lively and original.

Having considered the various traditional academic ways I may approach this analysis I decided on the using a storytelling process, because of its natural affinity to how Murris would give and gain information in the community setting.

## **Analytical Lens**

The analytical lens that is applied to the storied data is composed of three distinct and interrelated theories and methodologies. Figure 4 illustrates the relationships between the three components of the analytical framework.

- The first component is Rigney's principles of Indigenist Research approach – that is, resistance, political integrity and privileging voices (1999).
- The second component is Critical Murri Consciousness which relates to the power and justice issues that affects the individual and collective society of the Bwgcolman people. This has been explained in the previous paragraph of why I chose the theoretical framework for this data analysis.
- The third component of this trifocal lens is Dadirri Indigenous research which constructs a dimension of the spirit world that is in and around the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. The spiritual is integral with the experiences of temporality, and this comes from the springs of spirituality within; a spirituality which is informed by the spirit world *without*. Dadirri brings a holistic aspect to the analysis as it is intrinsically related to how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people live their life. Therefore, the use of *yarning* in the process of data collection and analysis creates a timeless perspective in that I am aware of a rippling effect through a triune relational dynamic of researcher, participant and the yarn (story); where all three aspects are entwined.

In this study the process of analysis of the storied data began when I was listening to the personal story of the Bwgcolman person sitting with me, the process then continued on a more formal level when I read the transcripts of the stories in my room at the university. As I listen to and read the transcript of the stories I am drawn into a space where their story and my story collide bringing with it the emotions of both past and present and a consciousness of the future. History is always present within the parameters of the story in the majority of cases of yarning between Murris, this is where the Indigenous research methodology of Dadirri then creates a rippling effect. This effect is much like a stone when it is dropped into a body of water and the ripples of water move out of the central point of impact into wider circles. Present time is filtered through the memories of the past as the two collide and reveals fragments of the future.

### **Analysis/Story work process**

The Bwgcolman family stories were audio taped at locations chosen by the family member, some were in their homes whilst others chose outdoor environments to share their story. The stories were transcribed verbatim into written transcripts, which I will refer to as ‘story data’. The transcript was de-identified to protect the privacy of the storyteller and a coded identifier was assigned to each transcript (this was one of the ethical principles that were particularly important to the storyteller). An example of one family’s story data is de-identified as follows:

- ≈ Gen 1A represented the deceased elder and parent who handed down the oral knowledge and traditions to the storyteller;
- ≈ Gen 2A represents the living Elder storyteller;
- ≈ Gen 3A represents the child of the living Elder storyteller;
- ≈ Gen 4A represents the grandchild of the living Elder storyteller.

Subsequent families were de-identified as Family B, C, D, and E with its corresponding generation identifier and Gen 1,2,3,4 until all participating families' story data were de-identified. These story data were then formatted into numbered lines; and the analysis page was formatted into three columns. The first column contained the story data, the second column was used to write my initial impressions when reading the story, and the third column was used for more in-depth analysis of the story data. Each storied data was analysed using the following a dual approach, the first approach involved the following process;

1. Each story was constructed into family stories and read through to simultaneously re-familiarise myself with that particular story and the story teller both in the text and in my recollections of person, place, time and space;
2. Each story was then analysed as a whole story with the researcher's voice included along with the narrative commentary in the story in shaded boxes;
3. The story was then submitted to intense line by line analysis using different highlighter colors to identify those parts of the story that contained meanings asked by the analysis questions as outlined in Table 1 which are inclusive of meanings, strengths, and oppressions across the generations with the narrative commentary of the researcher's and storyteller's voice.

**Table 6: Questions for Analytical Framework**

<b>The Study: First Steps – Making Footprints: Intergenerational Palm Island families' stories of childrearing practice strengths</b>	
<b>Framework which the questions are drawn from</b>	<b>Question</b>
Rigney – principles of Indigenist research and Dadirri	1a) What meanings of survival and resistance to past and present oppression of families and community are contained in this story?
	1b) How is ongoing oppression revealed in the childrearing practices in this story?
Critical Murri Consciousness and Dadirri	2a) What strengths of family and childrearing are contained in this story?
	2b) What influences of legislation and legislative practices on childrearing practice are revealed in this story?

	2c) How do families pass childrearing values and practices down through the generations?
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The second approach of the analysis entailed identifying the main story threads (findings) in each generational story within each family. The threads were then brought together into a table representing each family intergenerational story threads, which has informed the discussion on the findings. The outcome of the analysis are the revealed meanings in answer to the questions in Table 6 which provided insight into the social architecture of the strengths of childrearing on Palm Island under the overlay of socio-political structures placed on the people.

With the use of the analytical lens of Rigney's principles of Indigenist Research, Critical Murri Consciousness, and Dadirri I examined the macro and micro level in the participants' life history and current life experience of how life is lived on Palm Island; passing on of knowledge and skills over the generations and whether those skills and knowledge are incorporated in contemporary parenting practice; and the evidence of practice for the development of a framework for a specific Murri model focused on childrearing and parenting for Palm Island.

## **Validity and Truth in Storytelling**

Arguably, knowledge can be suppressed for various reasons, in the majority of cases the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples were denied the right to speak their traditional language or practice their ceremonies because of the coercive practices of colonisation and assimilation. Consequently stories and practices are, for the most part, lost and only fragments of memories remain in the minds of the Old People and of those that have been given the knowledge to hold. Therefore in using what I call '*reciprocative cultural archaeology*' I am engaged in a process whereby the heart of an

individual or the collective can be heard through listening to the past, the present and the future, simultaneously as the Indigenous researcher is I am also listening to my own past, present and (in some sense my future) in uncovering or discovering their cultural truth. Bishop (2008) has a similar Maori term “*Ako*” meaning reciprocal learning through teaching and learning in the context of teacher and student “storying and restorying their realities, either as individual learners or within a group context” (p.443). Similarly, Applebee (1996) refers to ‘knowledge in action’ a relational construct of temporality linking present with past.

Knowledge in action is positioned in an interesting way with respect to both the past and the present. A tradition (of ritual, of art, or inquiry, of behaviour) as it exists at any point in time is orientated toward present activity: it is also an interpretation of the past. It represents a synthesis of what we choose to remember and how we choose to remember it. As our present concerns change and develop, history is reconstructed to reflect our current understanding. Thus the past is always a living part of the present, and in a very real sense dependent on it (p.16).

Murri storytelling of life experiences entails ‘*heart*’ listening to the continual process of storytelling that is an integral part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders oral traditions. It is important to note that storytelling as a research tool is a collection of each storyteller’s truth; each individual sees the facts of their story through their own lens of experience within their family and community. Bishop (1996, cited in Tuhiwai Smith, 2005) brings confirmation as he explains;

Intrinsic in story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as Indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves.



Such approaches fit well with the oral traditions which are still a reality in day-to-day Indigenous lives...their themes tell us about our cultures. Stories employ familiar characters and motifs which can reassure as well as challenge. Familiar characters can be invested with the qualities on an individual....story telling is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the 'diversities' of truth within which the story teller rather than the researcher retains control...the Indigenous community becomes a story that is a collection of individual stories, ever unfolding through the lives of the people; who share the life of that community (p.145).

Therefore, as the Indigenous researcher, I am conscious that the family stories that I am listening to is the storyteller's aspect of their lived experience within their family as an integral part of a whole family story, the family story is also a significant part of a whole community story. Within the Bwgcolman family stories there are slight variations of the present life experience of the storyteller, however viewed through a family lens of life experience a collective story of community emerges that brings validity to their truth of past and present.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The research guidelines for this study were informed by the James Cook University and *National Health & Medical Research Council Research Guidelines for Indigenous Research*. Ethics approval H2650 for this study was gained through the Human Ethics Research Committee, James Cook University and through the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council. A face to face presentation of the study was presented to the Palm Island Aboriginal Council by my academic supervisor who visited Palm Island to meet respectfully with the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council for the

following: (a) to consult regarding differentiating the role of the researcher from other roles/positions on Palm Island; and (b) to clarify ownership of the data. The council requested that each family receive a copy of their recorded story and that a copy be preserved in the recently established Bwgcolman Indigenous Knowledge Centre for future generations.

Participants were invited by the researcher from the first-generation Palm Island Elders, their children and grandchildren to take part in the study. A culturally clear and sensitive information sheet and consent form (Appendices K&L) that outlines the study aims and the role of participants was provided to each participant. These were presented and explained to each participant then signed by the participant and witnessed by the researcher thus informed consent was obtained from all participants who agreed to participate in the study. The ‘interview/yarning’ was audio taped and took approximately one to one and a half hours.

### **Participants and Participant Welfare:**

This study was undertaken in accordance with the *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* (National Health & Medical Research Council, 2003). The study involved recording the stories of five Bwgcolman (Palm Island) families from the living Elder and the subsequent representatives of each family generation drawing on the familiar principles of a Murri yarn /story telling. At the time of this study a small number of Elders continue to live on Palm Island, these Elders were part of the first generation of Aboriginal people relocated to Palm Island under the *Order for Removal of Aboriginals* policy of the Queensland Government, an example of a removal order is attached in Appendices (Appendix I). Some of the Elders were children who were transported with their parents to Palm Island in the early 1920s and some were born on Palm Island,

these are now the living community Elders who have been privy to the changes in the function of the family unit over a period of five to six generations. The Bwgcolman Elders hold individual and collective community information that is important in the story of family and community survival and resilience. Therefore recording the story of the Bwgcolman Elders was a crucial part of this study to capture the Elder generation of parents' practices and passed on what was laid down as the foundations for parenting on Palm Island. Knowing their stories will bring clarity of family life in the genesis period of the Palm Island community and its ensuing changes over time.

I approached the Elders and their families in the community and talked with them about the purpose of this study prior to the actual data collection phase because I wanted to sow the seed that I was undertaking this study in the community, which would involve talking to them about their life story. Talking about the study prior to data collection allowed the participants to have discourse on the topic within their own family and community circles. It was essential that they did not feel coerced into participating in at any time of the study. I then approached them again at the time of commencement of data collection and we talked again about their feelings on participating in the study. Those that chose to engage with the study received the Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent form. Time was given to the participants to read both forms with opportunity for questions to be asked and answered. It was important to ensure that the participants were informed and understood that their involvement was on a voluntary basis and they were able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty imposed on them. They were also informed that recording their story would be stopped at any time during the data collection session if they felt uncomfortable. Each participant joined the research study when all parties were assured that consent was understood and given by the participant.

A Community Agreement outlining the roles and responsibility of the researcher, research institution and participants between the Palm Island Council and James Cook University was negotiated as explained earlier in Ethical Considerations. This was a critical component of this study and indeed of any research with Indigenous people. In the particular context of this study I as the researcher already fulfilled several family and community roles on Palm Island as a Palm Island woman. I wanted to proceed with the full support of the community elected leadership in my new role of an Indigenous researcher doing research within a western university system. Included in the Community Agreement was the provision to refer study participants to pathways of support of their choosing should the participants become distressed during the study in accordance with ethics committee guidelines.

## **Data Retention and Storage**

As was earlier explained all story data were de-identified, the story data stored securely during the conduct of the study, data collected in the field was stored securely whilst in transit and then locked in a filing cabinet in the office of the researcher. After completion of the study the data will be kept in storage for a minimum period of five years. In obtaining participant consent it was determined that the privacy of participants will be protected wherever possible. However, in a surprising turn on validation of the story data the participants rejected the de-identification of the data. After reading their story they said “this is my story, so my name should be used with it”. The researcher contacted the Human Subject Sub Committee of the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Committee who assured me that alteration to the consent form was all that required (Appendix M).

The next chapter will pick up this surprising finding and the stories will be presented in the first person but also with the participants own name on each story. This

departure from the usual qualitative analysis approach of de-identification has emerged as part of the Indigenous research methodology and thus is the embodied validity, which has credibility for the participants.

*This painting titled 'Identity' by artist Daniel Geia (author's nephew) is a story about finding your place in family, ancestry, culture, environment, community and life. With no knowledge of this you feel lost, alone, ignored, and misplaced. Once you have found what is lost you can grow strong and feel unstoppable, then be able to pass on knowledge and strength to generations to come. The painting is based on the stories of Bwgcolman Elder Bill Congoo (now deceased). This painting was included with written consent from the artist Daniel Geia, Cairns, Queensland, Australia (circa 2003).*



## CHAPTER 5

### FAMILY STORY 1: STRENGTH THROUGH STRUGGLE

#### Background

*This is a family story of three living generations of Aboriginal women, descendants of the Birri Gubba people of Queensland, Australia.*

*This family story begins with Erykah who is a 73 year old well respected retired Elder of the Palm Island community. Erykah is the eldest daughter of twelve children, and grew up on Palm Island until her adult years when she left to seek employment. As a mother of seven children; a grandmother of thirteen; and great-grandmother of ten, Erykah wanted to share her story so it could be preserved for her family and the younger generation of Bwgcolman people of Palm Island.*

*Andrea is 40 years old and Erykah's eldest daughter. Andrea is a working wife, mother of two children, one, her own child and the other her brother's child and she is also grandmother of her daughter Erica's two children. In addition Andrea is also mother in Murri way to the children of her siblings. At the time of this story Andrea was working on Palm Island and simultaneously completing an external law degree at university. Andrea's story particularly focuses on her childhood and her observations of her mother Erykah childrearing practices. She agreed to tell her story because of the many changes she has seen in the community and the way these changes have affected Bwgcolman families and children.*

*Erica is 25 years old and Andrea's eldest daughter who was raised on Palm Island in her early childhood and now lives off the island. She is a single mother of two boys. Erica was initially a little shy about sharing her story, but became more relaxed after she overcame her initial apprehension of the voice recorder and openly shared*

*about her life. Erica's story tells us about what it means for her to be a single parent and the important role family and male role models play in her parenting.*

*This family story also captures a brief recount of Erykah's parents and their childrearing practices providing the reader with a four generational perspective of this family's story that begins with Erykah's Journey.*

## **Erykah's Journey**



**Figure 5: Photograph of Erykah and her grandson Jharquin**

*(Photograph included with written consent from Andrea, Erykah's daughter)*

## **Family and Childhood**

It is a warm weekend day and we are sitting in Erykah's home which is tucked away behind the covering of fruit trees. Inside the home is cool and as I look around the room I can see a collection of family photographs displayed in various arrangements. Photographs with images of family past and present give me a sense of the depth of connection between us and the images of family faces that look out at us as we sit together to hear *our* story. To clarify for the reader, this is Erykah's story, but it is also my story because Erykah and I have a common heritage and family connection.



Erykah's grandmother is my great grandmother, therefore within Erykah's story of her family is the story of my family as well. Our relationship brings with it certain protocols that I am aware of during the time that we sit together for the recording of her story. I call Erykah Aunty during the taping of her story because in Murri way she is my father's cousin sister and therefore my Aunty.

Erykah sits quietly, as if meditating, and then she begins her story with her birth and her place in the family:

*Mmm - my name is Erykah Kyle, I presently live at Butler Bay outside of the main community of Palm Island community and I was born here in 1937. That followed the removal orders of our people from their tribal lands my mother (Rosie) was 7 years of age and put in the Dormitory, my father (Andrew) was somewhat fortunate; he came here with mother and father.*

Under the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts, 1987 to 1901 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people were forcibly removed from their country under the Queensland State Government legislation *Order for Removal of Aboriginal People*. Family and countrymen were relocated to another place under the direct control of the Queensland Government.

Erykah reveals that her mother Rosie was placed in the girls' dormitory and grew up as a ward of the State; her father Andrew being "somewhat fortunate" was raised by his parents in the camp. Eventually Andrew and Rosie married and lived in the camp area on Palm Island known as Cooktown Camp where they raised their own family. Unlike most children, Erykah also lived in the camp with her parents in the stability and security of family unity amongst a community of people she knew and felt a belonging to in comparison to life in the State Institution.

The camp was one of many areas on Palm Island where families lived amongst their own language and neighbouring tribal group. Camps were chosen by the Old People as a place of residence but remained under tight control of the superintendant and his

designated armed staff who regularly patrolled these residential areas (Watson, 2010, pp. 40-41). Separate camps were a functional necessity for tribal solidarity and safety as the community on Palm Island consisted of over 40 different tribes and language groups each of whom were removed from their traditional country and placed together on one large bay of the Island.

Erykah recollects that during her childhood times were hard; she talks about the forced removal of Aboriginal people from their lands to be sent to Palm Island, which she names as “that terrible history”:

*And, of course, that terrible history comes out of the government at that time, two things, there was the grab for our lands throughout Australia, particularly Queensland but also too it was titled the ‘out of sight, out of mind policy’ by those people looking to such a terrible way of taking our lands. Oh I feel a pain when I think about it because while our parents, old people were all forcibly removed, we became one tribe and therefore, from that, the name Bwgcolman that means people of Palm Island. We Bwgcolman people, we were proud you know all together as just one tribe. So it was that we found our way through it all but it was very strict. I’d say in my thinking a hard time developed on Palm Island because, growing up we weren’t allowed to walk down Mango Avenue, that was the White Area, we had to go around the traps and I can still see those traps there. And, of course, it was the time of caning you know, for anything*

I ask Erykah whether her mother ever told stories about her removal, she replied “she would only tell aspects of it which was very brief and because it was very painful and in talking to you now, I can feel a pain, a bit of her pain”. In an instant Erykah’s whole countenance changed, she held her hand to her chest as if holding the pain, closed her eyes, and gently rocked back and forth to comfort herself. We sat in silence; until she recovered and reassured me she was able to continue with her story:

*Yes, thank you. However, now let me jump ahead a little, when I was growing up I never could forget those institutions. We were fortunate to be out in the camps however they were behind what we called American Wire because there was an American base here and the small girls’ dormitory was on one side, the older ones had the other side so we’d walk in between and they would sing out ‘tell so and so, so and so’ it’s*

*something that they wanted. However there was a boys' home too up a little bit further.*

The Palm Island Dormitory (circa 1928 – 1975) was the state government operated women and children institution enclosed by high diamond wire mesh fencing. This was commonly referred to as American wire by Bwgcolman because it was associated with the WWII American Naval Air Station located at Wallaby Point on Palm Island in 1943 who used diamond mesh wire for their security fencing.

Erykah's stories of the dormitory seemed to have left an indelible mark on her mind because she recalls them repeatedly throughout our yarning. As she speaks her sense of time, place and events move effortlessly back and forth throughout her story as if she was weaving her story with a long thread bringing a sense of continuity.

### *Grandparents and Parents*

Passionately recalling the way her parents and grandparents lived as one family in community on Palm Island Eryka's story reveals a childhood shaped by a "strong" mother and a "quiet" and "smart thinking" father whose knowledge and intelligence remains an important memory for her:

*My father, he was one of those smart thinkers too who built our own boat and the fact is you know it was built there in the back yard, it didn't have one nail and – smart brained people hey? – And there were others in the community too who built boats, not one nail but I don't know how to explain that. But we'd cruise around like rich people and we'd go over there (Erykah points in the direction of one of the smaller islands) because there were goats there and father would get the goat or something. But, yes, yes, yes but like you know our father 'quiet!' very quiet but up here, (Erykah points to her head) he had it up there to be that builder before TAFE and everything.*

Known for their responsible living in the community Erykah's parents were appointed by the Superintendent to a position of authority in the Boys Home, the male equivalent to the girls' dormitory. Erykah relates that her mother did not agree with the punitive practices enforced on the boys in the Boys Home under the sanctioning of the

Superintendent. Eventually she challenged the superintendant in regards to the governance of the Boys Home. With her challenge unheeded her mother eventually resigned from the position:

*The Superintendent saw my parents as reliable or whatever the term might be so therefore, they were in charge of the Boys Home until my Mother came to a point where she didn't want to, she had to, she was strong. When I say 'strong' she would start questioning and, she was the one who challenged the Superintendent; as the women had moved forward when the men were crushed by oppression.*

Throughout her storytelling Erykah's facial expressions change as she recalls memories of her childhood. The stories of the Superintendent revealing momentary expressions of pain in her voice and body language which were quickly replaced with expressions of joy as she remembers her family connections. Erykah's face lights up with pleasure as she recalls growing up with her family in Cooktown Camp where communal life was a place of culture, laughter and acceptance by all. She amusingly recounts a corroboree scene when her brothers were allowed to be part of the dances and singing:

*...we were given a place where we were living with only one house on the other side of the road, but opposite that was what was called 'Cooktown Camp' because with the Removal Orders, they'd go in there, they had this other group there and so on. And there're some aspects of it I've been thinking about it as well in terms of their dances, their corroborees, their ceremonies and so on. But our lot, the younger ones, would go over there, the sons because they were allowed that freedom. They were allowed to go but we were quite restricted; me, older sister, the others younger and I remember that when they have their corroboree one of the old women sang out to our Mother, she made them sign there 'this boy he like corroboree but he too white, better put some mud on him', my Mother just laughed. So it was that kind of acceptance, it's beautiful, no one knew the word 'racism' and so on ...*

A corroboree is an Aboriginal traditional cultural song and dance story ceremony steeped in deep Aboriginal spirituality. The corroboree is a form of dynamic storytelling as Aboriginal people build historical and contemporary stories in song and dance.

Erykah's description of the beautiful kind of acceptance by the people in the camp and the use of humour is a shared value of Bwgcolman. Humour was and still is a way of coping with the past and present oppression that family live under. This small yarn also had a profound meaning for Erykah's family and other families in similar situations. Erykah's brothers had white skin but this did not disqualify them as being accepted as Murri children. More often than not children of light skin colour were equally accepted and treated the same as children with dark/black skin. There was no place for 'being flash' (a colloquial terminology used by Bwgcolman to denote a person's prejudicial attitude or action towards another Aboriginal person or circumstance resulting in a sense of separation) The fact that her mother could laugh at the comments of the old women about her children's skin colour reinforces that beautiful kind of acceptance that Erykah speaks about.

Throughout Erykah's yarn her mother emerges as an important female role model in her life and she shares some insights into her mother's character:

*... A very strong woman, very strong woman and she did an amazing job in rearing us up, taught us strong values and so on, disciplined us, worked very, very hard under that regime at that time. She was a hard worker, very, very hard and, of course, your mother as well, the days where there were no washing machines, the old boiler and so on. So where we lived down Cooktown Camp, I remember my mother would look over and see smoke ... he (a young man from the community) was sent here on punishment – oooh, she had a very soft heart, I wonder what V would like? Because she would cook you know bread and pies like the other women and so she'd sneak word over with the men who took the rations and ask him what he wanted.*

The smoke that Erykah refers to is camp fire smoke from a small neighbouring island called Eclipse Island or better known as Punishment Island. Men and women were placed on Eclipse Island as retribution for any actions that were deemed as insubordination by the Superintendent and his administration. Usually those sent for punishment were given minimal supplies, their survival depended on relatives and friends sending food by boat to them, the alternative was days or weeks of food deprivation.

### *Bringing in the Uncles*

Erykah's childhood memories of Cooktown Camp now take a different direction. Her story reveals the death of her father when she was still a teenager and she describes aspects of her adolescent years without him. With her father gone her mother brought in her uncles to help, consequently the uncles in the family took on a significant childrearing role in her teenage years. Erykah reveals that they were tough too; at times handing out physical discipline that sometimes made Erykah run for cover. On one occasion she recalled her uncles finding out that she was seeing a young man she fell in love when at the time she was supposed to be in church:

*He was quite a charismatic man and I even remember what I was wearing. It was a Spring Fair, it was beautiful, beautiful. Because of our grandparents, I always went to church, it was the AIM Church, all did; I always carried my bible and he indicated where he was, and I went into church and I made the mistake and left my bible behind, everybody knew something was wrong. So we met, we went down to the beach. What happened in those days where your father had died, your mother brings in the uncles and they were there. But you know us women we're smart thinkers, I saw the opening, I made it to the door, the back door and I heard someone sing out 'she's gone to meet him', I was running for my life really and I went. Yes, I went, I hid down at the beach there like where there was salt bush and I stayed there, I just sat there crying, bewildered and then finally, finally I had to go back home and that's the way it was because it was strict then, very strict.*

Erykah knew that she had to go back home and that even though her uncles were very strict this strict upbringing was part of family and community life. However, this event in her life led to a critical experience with the Superintendent, Erykah continues her story from when she went back home:

*Then the next day I was escorted by the Police, the Aboriginal Police and yeah, it was ....- preparing my thoughts, I came to that point of that examination, the Superintendent just wrote down something and then I was escorted by the Police... oh yeah, I had to go there. He (the young man) was put in jail, he was flogged, I know that – I never ever saw him again – terrible. Anyway yeah I'll never ever forget that examination – I don't know, you understand, but it clearly showed I was still a virgin and, naturally, they told my mother, the superintendent just read it - that*

*was it. On the way home, my mother didn't know what to say and all she said to me was 'you don't have to go to school if you don't want to' – I couldn't answer...*

The superintendent dealt with every aspect of people's lives in the community, matters of adolescent sexuality or sexuality in general was given undue, almost fanatical attention by the white authorities. There was an expectation that the Bwgcolman people would comply with enforced practices laid down by the government authorities on pain of retribution. Invasive gynaecological examinations to ensure moral purity of the female were common practice when young female adults returned to the island after visits to mainland of Australia.

For Erykah this was a pivotal life event that filled her with shame after having to submit to a gynaecological examination to prove her virginity as a teenager. Her account of this poignant event of her teenage years abruptly ends here and almost in the next breath she expresses a joy and thanksgiving for her life and her survival of the events of her life:

*However, jumping ahead, I lived in a lot of places, yeah a lot of places and it's a miracle I'm alive and I thank God every day, I thank the Lord for this beautiful day, Thank you for my life. Because I have lived longer than seven brothers and sisters and, of course, mother and father so I say Thank you for this beautiful day.*

As she brushes back her unruly curly white hair laughingly Erykah recalls of how as an adult she left Palm Island to study theology on the mainland, a result of her love for learning as a child:

*I was also a good student, I loved to learn however I was sent out ... and we laugh about this – sent out most of the time to tidy myself up, I had untidy hair. Here I am today and my hair is still untidy so what kind of rebellion is that.*

### ***Motherhood and Parenting- a Woman's Journey***

As we join together in laughter at her description of herself, we also sit together in quietness and in a little while Erykah continues her story – recalling her working

years on the mainland, and the beginning of her own journey of relationships and motherhood. Again her face reveals painful emotions as she shares her mixed experiences as a parent in her relationships, the pleasure of having her children and also the pain of broken and violent relationships with the children's' fathers:

*Struggled – struggled...umm and, of course, there was Andrea and there was Brett and David then and, in those days, there wasn't that support and it was very, very difficult ... I just wanted babies, that's all, in all of that violence, I found I was pregnant with Shannon but I wouldn't go back so Shannon grew up not knowing any of that. I thank God I'm still alive.*

Erykah reveals that although she was away from the community she still kept in contact with her mother who was her emotional support and that throughout her parenting journey she received help from her extended family members. In particular she recounts an episode where my own father was involved in helping her, which resulted in my parents adopting one of her children:

*Your father, your father he had this special relationship for me and so one day he saw my mother in town and he was asking about Erykah and that ....' there wasn't the money at that time and they were one, two, three you see ... "we'll look after Erykah" so – yeah.*

This is an example of kinship adoption in Palm Island families. It is an accepted practice, when families needed help other family members would take on the responsibility of childrearing on an informal or formal basis as the family agreed. These circumstances in family reveal meanings of strength rather than weakness, looking after their children meant giving them to other family members to grow up. This meant the family could still have contact with their child knowing they were being looked after.

Although Erykah could only articulate her childrearing as a struggle, she successfully raised seven children as a single parent with the assistance of her extended family and while surviving years of domestic violence with several of her partners.



## *Courageous Living*

Erykah reveals that she had the courage to leave her last relationship so that her youngest child was protected from the violence. At this time, returning to Palm Island and raising her children on the land as a sole parent with help from her extended family was a safe choice. She shares that her experience as a parent seems to have influenced the way her daughters planned the number of children in their family, *“well my two daughters, they were very careful, one each, they didn’t want two – they know what their Mother has experienced, and that’s about it”*. During her years of childrearing on Palm Island Erykah became very active in community development work especially working with other women who were victims of domestic violence. She became a strong advocate for the Palm Island community and now in her elder years her thoughts focus on the future of her grandchildren:

*And I think about the grandchildren and so on but that’s another life they’re coming into aren’t they? What’s going to be their future? How can I articulate that? It’s going to be very, very difficult. Maybe education wise yes; we’re getting them through now aren’t we? We’ve got one of our own doctors, there’s you and so on – wow.*

She solemnly ponders on what life holds for this generation and envisions education as a possible vehicle to take them forward. In her solemnity there is also a sense of hope as Erykah shares small yarns of other Palm Islanders who have graduated as professionals in the medical and nursing field. She ends her story by speaking of her strong sense of self as an Aboriginal woman and her achievements in spite of the uncertainties of the future:

*I am an Aboriginal woman with strong cultural and spiritual beliefs. Because of my beliefs, I’ve been an integral part of the continuing struggle towards the empowerment of Bwgcolman people such as Kootana Women’s Centre where women have suffered.*

## Andrea - a Daughter's Voice

### *The Burden of the Eldest*

Andrea is Erykah's eldest child; we are sitting together on the beachfront of Palm Island under the cover of a large leafy Sea Almond tree (*Terminalia Catappa*). A hot wind is blowing in from the sea; Andrea positions herself so that she has her back to the sea and looks towards the business centre of the community where she can observe the flow of people and traffic. She holds a pivotal working position in the community and her time is in demand by other community members. Looking past me to a point beyond as if watching for the next demands upon her, she breathes deeply and begins her story;

*Um, I'm the eldest child of the family; with this is a burden of heavy responsibility for the rest of the family. I grew up in Brisbane, went to boarding school when my mum returned to Palm Island; my brothers and sisters were raised on Palm Island. I've been back and forwards to Palm Island over the years, I've got two children, one twenty five and one nine. Each of those I believe has been disciplined in the same way.*

Andrea shares that family discipline and boundary setting for children has been an important component of her childhood, which has remained constant for her as a parent; and now to a greater extent as a senior member of the community coexisting with the working position she holds. Sharing her observations and experiences of her mother's childrearing, and the discipline she has learnt from the stories of her grandparents she explains:

*Our upbringing was with physical discipline. All of us, there was no difference between girls and boys although there's only two girls. I'd never raise my children with any physical violence or physical discipline I should say, although I'm very tempted at times I must say. My mother was from a very large family as well and they only needed to hear the whistle of their father and they knew that it was time to come home, time to do their chores, time to get out of the water so there was no physical discipline as well but rather the strong respect and, I guess, fear of what could happen if they didn't listen. So when the whistle blew it was for all*

*of them not just one in particular. Or they knew by the walk that they were in trouble, the stance of their father or their grandfather, they knew if he was marching down fairly quickly, they were in trouble.*

Physical discipline of children and young adults was not an uncommon practice within families on Palm Island. Most of the time the family units were close and just the sound of a father's whistle or body stance would send a disciplinary message to children and they accordingly altered their behaviour to bring it into line with the expectation of the parent or grandparent or other significant adults.

Andrea reflects upon Erykah's childrearing practices and reveals strong similarities between Erykah's ways and the ways of other families on Palm Island at that time each of which had similar styles of discipline. Her story reveals the respectful relationship that she and her siblings developed with their mother and for each other:

*When my mum returned to Palm Island, she was a single mother so she raised us all on her own, so she had to take the responsibility of mother and father and she had to take the responsibility for the discipline. We'd always – to ensure that she held onto that respect, and that respect didn't fall outside of the family, we'd always have family camping holidays – six weeks at Mundy Bay, every school holidays so we were gone the whole six weeks. We enjoyed the company of each other, all the children, we didn't have friends there; it was just purely the family. There were other people camping there as well so we'd sort of camp with them, but that sort of strengthened us for the year ahead.*

Andrea believes that building their relationship with each other as a family unit was critical to their mother's parenting and for their function as a family. The planned camping trips would provide family opportunities for building skills and knowledge with fun and play.

### ***Brothers and Fathers***

Andrea particularly shares about the special relationship she and her siblings had with her brother Brett who was the eldest male of her family. Brett assumed the

principal male/father role model for her and her siblings before his untimely death as a young father himself:

*That put in place our respect for one another as brothers and sisters, we became close, very, very close and I think that's probably why we had such a really big impact when we lost our brother because we've really lost one of the family unit.*

Brett died in custody of the Queensland Department of Correctional Services. His death caused an overwhelming deep bereavement for the whole family, and to this day Erykah and his siblings still grieve the loss of his life openly and indeed this event still affects my own family. At the time of his death, Brett was survived by his two children a young daughter who is now a mother of five children and a young son who is now a young man.

*We'd play games, he'd play games against us and like he was the stronger male against all of us weaklings, the rest of the family so we'd build up that bond between us and that would carry us through the whole year and we knew where to turn when we needed help. We grew to know – with his voice as well, that we'd be in trouble with him. Yeah and me being the eldest, I didn't really have any authority, the authority came more from him I suppose... Yeah, the male and there was no father so therefore he sort of did that but then, as we grew, they all tended to lean on me as the oldest.*

Andrea talks about this same pattern of fathering by the eldest male child in other families where fathers have died at an early age or have been incarcerated for long periods and are separated from their families – older siblings parenting younger siblings in the Palm Island Community:

*Yeah, particularly where that father figure has gone, the eldest male, he may not necessarily be the eldest child but the eldest male sort of takes that responsibility and role as the head of the family. Even though mum is still alive but they sort of still took that sort of role. I think it happens a lot because there's a lot of families on Palm with no father – where fathers have gone young. And the other thing that I was going to say is with the majority of the families here too, they're big families and all steps and stairs and so the eldest would always help with the younger children. Yeah. I've even noticed that today, that children, young children of the families are still expected to look after the younger ones,*

*even I was, growing up I had to look after my younger siblings and I think that's because there's so many. But it's a big burden for the children to carry that because they're only young but we've become accustomed to it I think.*

## **Changing times, changing parenting**

Andrea's story turns here and she speaks about significant changes to parenting she has observed in the community as a result of the socioeconomic climate on Palm Island. She reveals life is very different because people have to work and home life has had to accommodate childrearing practices; in most cases this seems to have resulted in parents spending less time with their children. She continues and describes her own home routine:

*Yeah the present routine of home life at the moment is I go straight home, cook tea for myself, oh and the family and cook tea for Mum ... the TV's on, the daughter is watching TV, father's watching TV, I'm cooking, bath, bed. So there's no interaction, there's no bonding, no nothing.*

Andrea laments the loss of interaction time with her daughter, as her husband and daughter become engaged with television during all of this meal preparation time. A strategy to resolve the issue of missed family interaction is what she describes as essential regular family fishing and camping trips. These times of family togetherness allow for sharing stories and teaching the meaning of family strength:

*We regularly go fishing and we try to camp at least the night and that way there's no TV, the routines' broken, and there can be that form of bonding so you're sitting constantly in the company of each other... today our kids, there is no such thing as any time, it's just work, work, work, work. Um and that's why I think it's essential that – but I don't know how you can do it but for each of the families to have that time with each of their children to build that strength back up within the family unit, that respect for their parents...*

Andrea describes the 'good' activities that parents are doing with their children such as playing on the beaches and going camping to get away from the community

because of the parties and the noise. She reflects that just the simple fact of getting away from the everyday life to clear the noise and the traffic is good to see because the community does not have a lot of organised leisure activities. At the same time, she observes that while people are making the most of their leisure time by spending more time with little children they are not spending a lot of time with their teenage children.

## **Strength in Discipline**

Throughout her yarn Andrea reaffirms her perspective that discipline in childrearing is a significant factor to building strength in families, and children learn respect through discipline. She describes her own style of parental discipline as an ongoing adaptation to the times:

*I tried the whistle thing but it didn't work for me. I tried the stern talking but that didn't help so now I've just resorted to denying privileges um particularly with Christmas coming...swimming, which is part of the children's lifestyle and that's a hurtful thing.*

Andrea reflects on the difference of strengths in her own family, mainly between her mother and her grandparents, but how the two *strive* for the same purpose of family function in unity where discipline and boundary setting is an important aspect of family life:

*The two generations are completely different in their discipline practices. As I said, my grandfather would only need to make a sign or a sound and the family would know what that was for, that was a large family of 13. Of course my grandfather was the discipliner in the family, it wasn't left to my grandmother and when he passed away it was then passed down to the older brothers to carry out that discipline and take care of the younger siblings and ensure that they were all in line because he had instilled in the older ones, those disciplines, well respect practices and their methods to ensure that the family unit stayed together and did the right thing. Whilst we were brought here as criminals, all of the children I believe that grew up in that period weren't naughty, weren't bad, they know love and caring and I would love to see that in our community.*

Andrea explains that her mother Erykah did not regularly use physical discipline but she did have a voice that would put fear in the children if they kept pushing the boundaries:

*My mother couldn't afford to use those discipline practices because she was trying to grow the family unit up, look after the family unit, keep us all in line, she did have a manner about her that her voice would put the fear in us but I think we just kept pushing it - pushing, pushing, pushing until we got a physical whack and I don't think that did us any harm today in fact it probably did us more good than not because it's made us stronger people.*

Andrea continues and describes her one attempt of physical discipline as hurting her more than her daughter. This part of her story reveals that an important aspect of discipline is respect in relationship; she laughs as she tells a small yarn of teaching her younger daughter to be respectful to older people:

*I think I did a fairly good job in raising them as good children, they weren't naughty, they were both girls so they've got a pleasant mannerism about them and try to ensure that they're respectful. I tried teaching the younger one to respect older people so she ended up calling everybody from the Woolworths Check Out lady 'aunty' to the man down the butcher shop, called him 'uncle' and I said no, no that's not your uncle - trying to learn and understand (her daughter) said "well you said anybody older that's my uncle or aunty"- but she's now since learnt because she's got such a large family on Palm Island and just about everybody is her uncle and aunty or her popeye or nana.*

In her story, Andrea shares with me that her extended family is also permitted to discipline her children, not in a physical sense but they are able to verbally chastise them if they are seen as doing anything wrong. Disciplining in this way is an aspect of her childrearing practice she views as not solely her job to do, but rather one which is shared by others in the community:

*I think it is extensive within the community, I've noticed because it sort of takes me a little while to realise the connection between certain people. If I see somebody growling someone and I think 'how come they're growling her?' because it's not their child but then I realise there's a family connection there. So each and every person in the*

*community with most of the people, either their parents didn't bring them up or they're brought up by their grandparents and their grandparents aren't capable of carrying out the discipline or the positive childrearing, other members of the family do take on that responsibility. When they see them in the community, they take on that responsibility of disciplining them, growling them, warning them so there is still that fear within the community with some of the children but in some of the family units there's just no respect whatsoever left, it's just gone which is really sad.*

'Growling someone' means that a person, (normally an adult) is verbally disciplining another (usually a child) with an angry tone in their voice. It may be through the use of angry tonal noises or actual words used to stop the other from carrying on with the unacceptable behaviour and usually to move the other on from the current place of misdemeanour to appropriate behaviour. People looked after each other's children and there was a certain element of community child protection where everybody looked after each other's children and growled at them when they were down the street not doing the right thing. If as a kid you got into trouble with someone they would always growl at you and you would go back and tell your father when you got home and get another growling. So there were people looking after you everywhere in the community, it was an accepted part of community practice, of community discipline, an informal agreement between parents that you were able to discipline other children at a certain level.

*But the children do know right from wrong because when you see other people growling those particular kids, they don't back chat, they don't say nothing, they don't swear, so they know right from wrong so somewhere they were instilled with that respect and right and wrong but it just got lost throughout the family unit because it was just that culture of just allowing it to happen, be lost. But, yeah, like I said there's not a large group of disrespectful children, it's only a small group but, unfortunately, they do have an influence.*

## **What Children Want**

Andrea's story is nearing the end as she reveals her observations of the role of the wider family group in parenting, in particular the young grandparents in the community. She speaks of families planning weekends away from the community and



how they end up with ten or twenty children wanting to go with them. The children invite other children or some invite themselves because they don't want to stay home with their families. Andrea sees these times as opportunities to help families by giving them a break from childrearing for the week end and also giving the children freedom to play without the constraints of home duties because there is no work to camping. She relates that children want the freedom of childhood within a family unit and with the attention of family adults. It is these family times that build a place for positive family interaction and strengthening family bonds:

*You know there's not great chores to do unlike in the household there's continual cleaning up and cleaning of the yard so yeah I think – and because a lot of us are young grandparents we can take the entire family unit as well, our children and the grandchildren because there are a few of us that are young grandparents. So, at Christmas time we took my daughter and the grandchildren and my sister and her daughter and so it was a big you know group and the kids just swam and we just enjoyed each other's company and because if you knew you've got to watch the children with the water, you're constantly with your children. So, it's spending a lot of time together*

## **Mother – Daughter, Grandchildren**

Here Andrea's story turns again and she gives attention to how her daughter Erica is parenting her two sons. Her facial expression reveals she is deep in thought as if formulating her next words, she shares her thoughts:

*I sort of think that I did the wrong thing with her (Erica) because she doesn't have parenting discipline practices. Her children are a little bit out of control - but she's taken on the practices of the Day Care - 'okay, over in the corner' so she's still doing that non-physical, at least that's what I'm aware of.*

Andrea notes that Erica practices *Murri ways* in the non-indigenous mainland community where she lives way from Palm Island. It gives Andrea a sense of comfort that her daughter Erica is able to seek out family on this level:

*She has relied on her cousins a lot because they've all got children and she probably observed the practices that they have and they sort of set a guide for her and that extended family has been good support in need ... So they all depend on each other and they sort of look to each other.*

She views this caring for each other as a family strength particularly in this family peer group, and a reflection of intergenerational transfer of values and practices from the stable supporting relationships of her parent and grandparents time:

*It makes me feel comfortable knowing she's got them around in the event that anything might – like she needs that support of young girls. I think too with our grandparents, or the generation before us, their relationships were solid and stable and were – what do you call it? – For life, those relationship. Whereas today, we can have a number of different relationships and children from those relationships and so some of the children's fathers have taken a part in their life so some are disciplined, others aren't so.*

Andrea ends her story with sharing her thoughts on the importance of fathers in childrearing, and the lack of commitment in relationships today resulting in family breakdown. She makes special note that nowadays women are taking on more, being both provider and homemaker, “*it's difficult because the women are the men of the family really, the strength*”. This statement of Andrea is bears a fundamental truth for Erica who is now a single parent carrying the burdens of provider, homemaker and disciplinarian for her two boys.

## **Erica - Big Yarn and Small Yarns**

### *Murri Identity*

Erica begins her yarn as we sit on the lounge in her housing commission house, and her son lies dozing in her lap, fighting the heaviness of sleep. He wants to be part of what is going on but Erica growls him and begins to tell her story. She starts her story by stating her name and her genealogy, validating her Murri identity:

*My name is Erica, I'm 25, single Mum of two, I was born in Canberra ACT, umm how I'm connected to the Palm Island Bwgcolman mob is um my great grandfather Andrew and my great grandparent Rosie, she was a (identifies great grandmother's maiden name) before, and they the Birrigubba people, um Nana was born on Palm, Mum was born in Ayr I think., knowing who you are, um who your people is, where you come from, how you connected to your own mob you know (umm) it does play a big role you know for a Murri person.*

Erica is aware of the responsibility of her role as parent, especially as she is solo parenting and lives away from her mother and grandmother and the geographical distance between them means their practical support is not always on hand when it is needed. Yet she is philosophical about this reduced support, because she has chosen to live on the mainland for her own personal reasons.

### *Single Parenting and Fatherless Children*

Within her story are many small yarns of different aspects of her life as a mother. Erica speaks about the difficulty of raising two boys on her own and the pain she feels from her boys not having regular contact with their father:

*Um, it's a big responsibility, really big um, boys, um I got support from all the family, my Mum, Nana. Nana is on the island, um other family members especially my mother's brothers; they help me a lot because you know I've got two boys.*

In the absence of her children's father Erica also receives support from her uncles - her mother's brothers who are important male role models for her two sons. Erica finds it hard being a single mum, especially providing financially for her young family and having to parent alone. She speaks in hushed tones and gives a clear impression that her sole parenting is unfair to the children because their father isn't with them, her facial expressions reveals the hurt and sadness she feels about her current situation. However, she quickly produces a positive side to her present circumstances and shares that her current hardship makes her a stronger woman in her

dual role of mother and father to her boys. Although she wants the children's father in their life she explains her understanding of his absence as a probable result of alcohol misuse and addiction; and the possible fact that he did not have his father around as a role model for him. Even though this obviously pains her she recognises the reality of this choice and its consequences:

*Yeah um it's hard cause the alcohol has just got the best of him as well and it's sad cause his family I know like alcohol is a thing but um does it come to a point in your life you know you, wake up, you know, can't you just get a job to occupy your mind or but yeah, but it is yeah, haven't got that role model there.*

She is relieved that her uncles are around to be male role models for her sons; a situation similar to that of her grandmother Erykah who was raised by her uncles when Erykah's father died. The support of her uncles brings happiness to Erica and this is evident in her description of her uncle's interaction with her boys:

*um it's like, you know it's like they do boys stuff like which I wouldn't do, like and other stuff, well like J will do little weights when uncle O doing his session and stuff like that...they get involved yeah, yeah like fellas do, even though I'll play and that but not do weights and stuff like that (giggle). Especially like uncle S, got all his boys, and they'll show J. J has a problem with his speech and the big boys will help him or the nephews, J's cousins will help him pronounce a word so which is really good like that, um even Jo um it's good um yeah...*

Erica also receives assistance from the local school where one of her boys is enrolled; here she learns strategies to parent her son at home with his speech impediment. Erica's grandmother, mother, uncles, cousins and nephews use these same strategies as they help out with her boys:

*J's school even help me, a non-indigenous lady and with a Murri lady too, probably cause J has problem with his speech. How am I supposed to get his attention...some strategies yeah um like strategies that are like make him hold up, make him move his muscles in his hand how to hold on to a pencil properly, I didn't know about that I thought you can have one of those grip on things on the pencil but yeah you use play doe massaging the hand. With his talking have more exercise with his mouth,*

*I thought he might need more um talking you know saying no repeating and stuff but it's also mouth exercise.*

### **Cousin Sisters**

As well as receiving help from her uncles and the boys school Erica seeks advice and assistance from other family members who live close by to her on the mainland:

*Yeah, yeah oh there's aunties, uncles, big cousin sisters help me, like J's toe nail nearly got pulled off by the scooter and I went to T and said "T what do I do, do I pull it off or do I leave it", she goes "no leave it, put him in the hot bath, when he's in the bath tell him to pull it off" like that; I get nervous, yeah so yeah stuff like that with family.*

Cousin sisters are just as close as siblings of the same parent, in some cases cousin sisters' bonds are stronger than normal siblings.

In Erica's case her cousin sisters have been her stable companions since childhood, they are a little older than Erica and they too are single parents. These women's parental wisdom appears to be a reassuring source of assistance and family support for her as she parents her boys.

### **Present to Past – Erica to Erykah**

The story takes a turn here as Erica reflects on her childhood with her family on Palm Island and remembers the enjoyable aspects of growing up under the care of her mother Andrea and grandmother Erykah:

*We go camping, reefing, fishing um what else um, I used to be with nana all the time cause she was into lot of Boards like at the Women's Centre and she would see other Elders in the community. Yeah I liked that... cause they would be under the fig tree or having their cup of tea and I'll probably be playing with the animals like the dogs and that, but it was always nana saying hello to em. It was small but it was lovely, like our Elders it means a lot to us cause they got our stories they got a lot more background of the community than the young generation.*

As a child Erica spent a significant amount of time with her grandmother Erykah and learnt to value and esteem community Elders who did not object to allowing Erica play in close proximity to their conversations. Erica also recounts snippets of information about her grandmother Erykah and the activities they undertook together as family where Erykah informally educated Erica in her Murri ways:

*... it was just go to Mundy Bay and like nana will tell us about how she used to live at Kyle rock and that's near Cooktown and when we was growing up how we could um leave things, it doesn't get stolen, whatever and that. Everyone knew all the family and would just get along and stuff, we still do like today but it's different ....the generation gap... she use to tell us that you have to be home before dark. Her dad used to growl her if she wasn't home before dark and she made sure, and it still is this today you have to be home before dark. Yeah like if you're playing you have to home before dark, um I went.*

#### *Learning ... Carn Hunt!*

Some of the activities that Erykah and Erica undertook at the bay were looking for Julgai and other bush foods. Erica's voice changes from seriousness to cheerful childlike glee as she remembers trying to teach her son the same foraging and survival skills as Erykah taught her. She recounts one event where her Nana taught her to collect shellfish and live off the land:

*Julgai is Pipi shells, Nana showed us how to do that, I was only small then um, yeah (laughter) I showed J but he was a bit too young, he was there trying to look, but he was getting different kind of shells too. Yeah um oysters was cracking oysters, my Mum showed me that, Nana showed Mum. But we all go together me, Nana and Mum. Um look for Giro, I forget these other little fruit, they like little berries they have over Palm ... Blue, blue,... cherries (voice raised in confirmation) wild cherries (laughter) I was walking with Nana cause she likes going for walks and I was wondering how come she like walking off the road, she was there picking little cherries and she explained it and yeah um... she was giving them to me and I liked it, we was there getting lot to munch out on (giggle) Yeah, cherries; she was telling us how many lemon trees she got in her yard, mango trees. She reckons she is a fruit bat (laughter) cause she likes fruit. Yeah um*

### *Remembering Erykah and Andrea*

Erica's cheerful laughter gives way to a more contemplative mood as she speaks about her grandmother Erykah's life. She bears out the fact that Erykah was a single mother too, but of seven children with her own mother Andrea the eldest of the seven who was sent to boarding school. By Erica's reckoning Andrea would have found this hard:

*She (Andrea) went to boarding school, I reckon she found it hard but she was there for her Mum and for her brothers and sisters. She played a big part not like a mum, but being there, being the eldest, especially to brothers, I only got sister but yeah she did really good.*

Erica's description of the role her mother Andrea undertook within the rest of her family gives meaning to the common practice in big families of the older or eldest child helping to raise the other children in the family.

### *Getting Greedy for Bubba*

Remembering Erykah and Andrea brings Erica's focus to other young Murri parents that she encounters in her daily parenting. In particular she describes display of love and attachment physically demonstrated by mothers towards their babies in the community on Palm Island, and how others in the community would follow suit:

*Over Palm I see a lot of young mums. How they grab their babies and kiss their babies showing their Mum's love to their babies, see em walking home um. (Laugh) they're so cute, they just make you want to pinch them too, they showing their affection their love and you know, especially when they get greedy. We all baby mad, gruelling babies, yeah and when you see em walking along or like for instance when I had my babies when they were small, you know some people that I don't really talk to sings out and they want to look at your baby and they get greedy for them. (Laughing) oh you feel shame but you just, it's nice you know. Because I wouldn't expect some people I don't really talk to, I don't know if they are being a busy body or what but it was a good feeling. Yeah I feel very proud and happy yeah, you know they're not cheeky about the baby or anything, they just looking at your baby, getting greedy, hugging and kissing em yeah it's really cute.*

“We all baby mad gruelling babies”, the term gruelling babies and getting greedy refers to the actions of squeezing, holding tightly, kissing, stroking whilst speaking words of affirmations to a baby. These actions manifest from strong feelings of enjoyment, caring, ‘holding’ and welcoming and acceptance of the baby in the family and the community. Most babies are greeted in such a way by family and community members which give rise to the well known assumption for Bwgcolman that babies are wanted and cherished in Murri society.

### *Observations of Fathering Today*

Getting greedy for babies is not the sole province of women, Erica speaks about her observations of young fathers on Palm Island and how they are engaging in parenting their children. She notes that a lot more fathers are taking an active caring role for their babies. This surprises her to some extent, and she questions how they are able to engage with parenting at the level she describes when they don’t have role models of fathers in their own lives:

*You see a lot of young fathers walking with their children, pushing pram and you know hugging em and kissing their baby and buying stuff for them as well, yeah I see a lot of young fellas they got it’s really good cause you wonder how they, how they, not their upbringing but you know for instance who their role model, who was there? Is it they woke up to themselves? I wonder about that you know; you have to think about who? Unless they just being good father making a decision to yeah making their own decision to say oh I’m a Dad now.*

Erica postulates that perhaps the young men woke up to themselves and their situation and just made the decision to be a good father in spite of having no father role models in their life to learn from. She believes it is the proper way that young fathers are involved in childrearing on Palm Island and she notes there seems to be commitment in the relationships of young parents as well:

*Yeah it’s a good thing for them, especially for Aboriginal community like our home Palm. The fathers are doing...especially I see them working and then they go home and get their babies. Like I’ll go home for holidays I’ll look, see em walking with their babies, it’s good yeah. And*



*good for the kids as well to have two, yeah, two of them young Mum and Dad, yeah it is good.*

### ***Mum Nana and Dad Bulloo***

Erica shifts her story to the practice of grandparents raising their grandchildren and the number of children calling their grandparents parents Mum and Dad. She explains that parents are not fully involved in the childrearing because they are young and believe they are missing out on the young person's lifestyle, hence they go out partying and the grandparents take on the responsibility. Erica speaks of her sadness about this situation, because she believes that grandparents have been through the tough times of raising their children and they should not have to do it again with their grandchildren. However, she also acknowledges the positive side to grandparents parenting, because this means that the children are kept together with family and can avoid the possibility of being removed from their family environment by Child Safety. Erica is quick to point out that she would only accept her Mother's and Grandmother's help if the circumstances were serious enough to warrant their long term assistance:

*It's a bit sad but it's good, it's just like what if it is a serious thing I would let my Mum raise, be there for or help me or some kind of thing to be there for the boys, but not like Nana raising my kids, they can't cause you know they did their time. Like I see that they (the young parents) do, yeah probably pressure maybe their lifestyle is just partying or thinking they still young, I don't know. Um but I only if there was serious thing, like if I really ... if Mum was alright with, but she's there for Nana and I don't want to come between that ... it is my responsibility an Mum's got her role helping her Mum.*

### ***Making Strong Legs – Bury 'em Legs in Sand***

Erica recalls stories of a particular practice of babies and toddlers been taken to the beach by family members and having their legs buried in the sand to make their legs strong. She laughs as she remembers trying to bury her eldest child's legs when he was

a baby because Erykah told her it would help the baby with walking. Except when Erica attempted to bury his legs he did not want to put his foot in the sand which brought on a comical exclamation of “*hey look this baby he don’t even want to put his foot in there*”. Erica explains that when the baby is in the sand other members of the family surround the baby and speak encouraging words and play with the baby:

*They um dig their little legs in the sand and it’s cute and hold them and ahh... oh they just sing out, cause they just standing up there and smiling and getting all the attention. Oh just looking and smiling and oh that little brightness in the face, the face is just so bright like, so happy and you look at everyone that when they all happy and that.*

What Erica describes here is a family orientated event of burying baby’s legs in the sand to make their legs strong, almost similar to a rite of passage for babies and toddlers. This event brings family members together to focus on the baby and interact with each other with the baby as the central point of discussion and play.

She expresses her desire to see this happening more often in the community because of the positive effect it has on the families.

### *History and Strength*

Erica turns her yarn around and contemplates her grandmother Erykah and the people of Palm Island and how the Old People lived under a different time and laws compared to current laws. She acknowledges their struggle and admires the strength of individuals and families as they found ways to cope with their life on Palm Island. Erica speaks of the power of unity in families and commitment to pass this on to the next generation – her generation:

*Like I just think they (Old People) didn’t want to accept what happened what was going on, why they were under this, why they getting treated like this, but just had to, I don’t know how to explain but it would be mentally, physically, but spiritually they were really strong people, they knew how to cope, deal with what was going on - there was going to be a*

*good outcome in the future, yeah hold on. You know teach their children what was going on and how to cope with it ...*

Erica maintains that her ability to parent her children is directly linked to knowing and learning from the fact that her Grandmother survived through her hardships. She pays tribute to her mother Andrea and the way she overcame her hard times; and now Erica sees herself as coming through. She concludes her story by affirming that her strength and the strength of other Murri parents are reliant on the support of family, holistic education and knowing her Murri identity of family and country.



**Figure 6: Four living generations of Erykah's family**

*Erykah is seated in the red dress, on her left is Andrea, standing behind Erykah and Andrea is Erica and the baby is the eldest of Erica's two sons. This photograph was included with written consent from Andrea, Erykah's daughter*

## CHAPTER 6

### FAMILY STORY 2: HOYA

#### Background

*This is a family story of the descendants of Hoya, a Gudjal Aboriginal woman from the Charters Towers region of Queensland, Australia. This story was given the title Hoya by her great granddaughter Pam who now lives on Palm Island. In calling this family story 'Hoya' Pam wanted to honor her matriarchal ancestor Hoya and acknowledge her place and influence in this family story, which begins with Dawn.*



**Figure 7: Photograph of Hoya with daughters Cora and Alice**

*The above photograph is of Hoya (centre), with her daughters Cora and Alice, in Charters Towers. This photograph was included with the written consent of Dawn James granddaughter of Hoya and daughter of Cora.*

*Dawn is a 70 year old widow, who has raised many children in her capacity as a mother of eight children, grandmother, great grandmother, and foster mother of*

*many. Dawn was sent to Palm Island as a child with her mother Cora in the early 1940s and spent a significant amount of time growing up as a child in the dormitory institution on Palm Island until her adulthood when she went nursing, got married and then finally left the institution. Dawn later left the island with her family, raising her children on the mainland as well as raising other children as a foster mother. Dawn is now retired from childrearing and lives in Townsville.*

*Pam is fifty-one years old and Dawn's eldest daughter. Pam was born on Palm Island whilst Dawn was still living in the dormitory consequently Pam was raised in the dormitory in her early childhood years. Pam currently lives on Palm Island and is a working mother, grandmother and foster mother. Pam wanted to share her story because of her concerns for the plight of the Bwgcolman families in the community both in the present and the future.*

*Nikki is Pam's 26 years old daughter, who also lives on Palm Island with her partner and is a full time mother, Nikki shares her story of parenting and childrearing in today's society, and her shared concerns about the plight of the Bwgcolman families of Palm Island in the future.*

## **Dawn**

It's a Sunday afternoon, the neighbourhood streets are quiet, the sun is shining and I am sitting with Dawn and her daughter Pam in the shade of her front veranda. The sounds of Dawn's grandchildren and great grandchildren at play float out from the front room behind us; they interrupt their play and poke their faces out the door to ask us what we are doing. Dawn, Pam and I turn around and give them a mixed reception of smiles, growls and frowns which send them back inside giggling as they begin their game again, and Dawn begins her story.

### *Born in Hoya's Country*

*I was born in Charters Towers, or out in the bush, Corinda, I was there in Charters Towers until I was about four and they sent us away to Palm with our mother because she had TB – or so they say, you know – I hear two different stories there.*

Dawn's story begins with her birthplace of Corinda out bush from Charters Towers where she lived with her mother until the age of four when she was sent to Palm Island with her family; the year was around 1944. Dawn's recollection of the reason for her transportation to Palm Island is uncertain as she has heard conflicting accounts of this critical point her life.

Dawn reveals that for the next eight years of life on Palm Island she lived with her sister and mother Cora in various camp areas on the island. She remembers going to school with her sister and playing with other children, in particular the outings or the "tramping down to Long Beach" with other family members as she shares:

*Yeah. Yeah Mum used to go with us, or down the big reef there near the Cemetery there, we'd go tramping there. We used to go out and spend like say almost all our school holidays out there, you know go reefing, fishing and that – it was good from what I can remember.*

### *Dormitory Life for Mother and Child*

Dawn shares that it was during these childhood years that her mother Cora became increasingly ill which resulted in Cora being admitted to hospital with tuberculosis. At the age of twelve Dawn and her sister were placed in the dormitory for care, with Dawn recalling life at this time as a series of domestic chores beginning early in the morning and continuing after school hours:

*Um I was twelve at the time, my sister was – I think she would have been about ten. But anyway, we'd get up in the morning at 6 o'clock, scrub floors, then have breakfast, go to school, come home – I don't know, we'd still do some work there – we did this right up until we left school. I was working in the dormitory there, in the sewing room where we had to*

*mend sheets and all that sort of thing and, around about September, I went nursing and did a couple of years there.*

Dawn reveals that she was seventeen when she left school and the dormitory, to go nursing at the general hospital with another woman named Pam. Dawn worked in nursing for a few years and during this time she became pregnant with her daughter whom she named Pam. Because of her pregnancy Dawn was unable to continue with nursing so she returned to the dormitory and remained there until she married at the age of twenty one:

*I was seventeen I think, then I went back to school until grade seven you know and then I went to nursing then ... Pam and I at the general hospital. I was there until I got pregnant – went back to Palm, back to the dormitory again, then I got married – that was in 1960.*

Dawn raised her daughter Pam in the dormitory in the early postnatal period of Pam's childhood. During the time in the dormitory Dawn learnt how to care for her daughter's physical needs along with the other single mothers. Dawn attributes this time of self-learning about child care in the dormitory as foundational to her ability to physically care for her other children during and after her marriage years. *"I just had to learn by myself you know, that's probably you know when I had Pam I learnt how to cope when I had the other children you know."*

Dawn's story takes a poignant turn here; her voice changes when she speaks about those times of parenting in the dormitory. Her story reveals painful memories that still remain today for her and other mothers who share the same experiences of being a parent in the dormitory:

*When we were there, they used to put the babies and the little people there in the nursery. And after tea you used to have to go and put them on the potty, clean it, give them a bath, get them all ready for bed and you had to leave them there overnight you know. Only one person stayed there to look after the children overnight. The very young ones*

*like the newborns they stayed with their mother upstairs but, as they grew older, they went down into the nursery.*

Dawn explains that the dormitory had separate areas for single women without children and for single women with children. The dormitory also had separate areas for the different age groups of children so that the mothers did not live with the children and could easily be sent to work:

*No, they worked. Oh they had about twenty to thirty children there and cots there I think, yeah. You know from babies, oh they might be about six months to three years – because once they turned five they go to school and they put them in the other dormitory, school girls or school boys dormitory.*

Dawn explained that mothers had very little contact time with their child once the child was moved into the school girls or boys dormitory. In those separate areas the child would be mostly cared for by somebody else appointed for the task. Dawn plainly states that the mother's feelings about being separated from their children did not matter:

*“It didn't matter what we felt because that's how we had to live our life. That was the rule yeah. Sometimes they took children away from their mothers and adopted them out, outside of Palm Island”*

Dawn recalls the dormitory requirements that mothers were expected to look after the physical needs of their children in the evening: feeding, toilet training and bed time. It was during these times of contact that mothers would sometimes snatch the opportunity to tell stories to their children. There was a strict emphasis on child cleanliness, if a child was found to have made a mess the mother would be punished, for a prolonged period of time in some cases:

*Once they take them over to the other side, they don't have to look after them because they'd be looked after over there by somebody over there and once they take your child off you, you probably go from this side to that side you know. That's what happened to me. When I had Pam,*



*when she went to the nursery they shifted me from the women's side to the single side but I still had to go down there and get her ready for bed at night. Most – well all of us did that, if you didn't look after your child, sometimes if your child made a mess there and continued to do it, they'd punish you for it.*

Mothers were separated from their children in the dormitory and were not allowed to care for them even though they still lived in the dormitory. The children, once they were older, were moved to the nursery because the mothers were required to work outside the dormitory. Sometimes mothers were sent off the island as required government labour force to work for pastoralists and other industries.

### *Marriage and Family Life*

Dawn finally left the dormitory when she got married in 1961; she and her husband lived in the camp, sharing a house with another family until they moved into their own home on Gribble Street. Dawn speaks candidly about her marriage years and refers to her husband as 'old Grumpy'. Her story of her married life continues to affect her today as she shares her emotions of still feeling angry about events and circumstances relating to her marriage. Dawn reveals feelings of hardship in relation to raising her eight children, expressing that she felt like a single parent, even though her husband was present. She did receive some help from her mother Cora and other women close to her but she felt alone in the task of raising her family both on the Island and when she moved away.

Dawn reflects on her experience of living on Palm Island under the 'Act' where she received rations from the store and the baby clinic. In addition to the rations Dawn took on work in the store and the hospital to supplement the family income:

*Yeah and we used to get rations from the store and then we used to get a rations from the clinic, the baby clinic ...Um, the ration is sugar, tea, flour, salt, syrup whatever and we'd get that from them, they had these little tins or cups or whatever you know and they would give you one of each for each one in the family. But, if you had children under five, you'd get that ration from the clinic. We got that every week- sometimes*

*the ration lasted and sometimes it didn't. You know you had to make your own damper, scones whatever – there was no baker shop that – and then you had to go and get meat from the butcher shop which wasn't very nice either, sometimes if you missed out, you'd get corned meat – how are you going to cook corned meat? You might get a bit of fresh meat on the bone or just fresh meat.*

Dawn then moved to Bowen with her husband and children and lived in the Delta area for 10 years visiting Palm Island on occasions. She shares the highs and lows of her childrearing experiences during this time. One of these highs was that all her children went to school in Bowen emphasising her daughter Gina completing her high school education to grade twelve. One of the low experiences of her childrearing was when Dawn saw disappointment in her children as a result of their father's actions. Throughout all these experiences in Bowen, Dawn focused her attention on raising and providing for her children. Dawn's daughter Pam affirms her mother's parenting, describing her as *"a rock and foundation"* who created stability in the family home. Pam left Dawn's home in Bowen at the age of seventeen returning to Palm Island to work and begin her own family. Following Pam's departure for Palm Island the two older boys followed suit and returned to the Island as well. After living in Bowen for 10 years and following the death of her husband two years earlier, Dawn moved her household including five younger children to Townsville. Throughout her time in Bowen and Townsville Dawn still sought employment to supplement the family income.

### *Fostering and Education*

Dawn describes her life in Townsville as still including caring for children. At this point, Dawn's story focuses on her role as a grandmother and foster mother. Dawn's childrearing practice in Townsville was an extension of her parenting as a mother. Some of the children that Dawn raised were her grandchildren along with many

other children who came to live with her over another ten-year period. Dawn became a foster carer to boys and girls and placed an emphasis on supporting them to go to school. Dawn tells some humorous short stories of the children who lived with her, clearly recounting the various schools they attended and what she had to do to ensure they received an education. In her eyes the boys were better at getting off to school than the girls.

Pam reflects on Dawn's influence on one particular young male family member who was troubled in an unstable family life. This young man sought Dawn out and came to live with her in Townsville where she supported him to return to school. Both women speak proudly of his accomplishment of completing high school and attribute his educational success to the security he experienced in Dawn's home. Dawn's story reveals that she cared for family and foster children until she was in her late sixties. A few years later Dawn experienced a sudden onset of deteriorating health and was diagnosed with kidney failure in 2007, which now requires regular treatment on a kidney dialysis machine. She says that after she was diagnosed with this illness she stopped raising children and focused on her own health.

### *A Grandmothers Reflection*

Although Dawn doesn't live close to most of her children and grandchildren at this current time in her life, she reveals a keen insight into their lives. Her grandchildren and great grandchildren visit her at home now although none are permanent stayers. Dawn speaks about the stresses she sees her children and grandchildren experience as parents. She gives several examples of the parenting styles of her grandchildren, which describe the role of the extended family in helping each other with childrearing. Dawn acknowledges the hardships that come from her grandchildren parenting at a young age,

and the social and economic pressures in their environment that affect the way they raise their children. From this point of family reference, Dawn makes an observation about young parents in general whom she sees as struggling on their own and not receiving enough support from their partners. Pam suggests that society has changed from her mother's time with many young parents nowadays being required to work and raise children simultaneously to move with the times. Dawn ends her story by inviting her daughter Pam to have the last say. Pam ends with an affirmation *"well, she's a strength, a pillar of the family. Like I always say men might have the muscles but women are the stronger sex – we've come through a lot. I see it in my daughters"*.

## **Pam**

Pam's storytelling is on Palm Island. We are sitting in the cool of her backyard with her grandchildren and foster children playing around us. Her daughter joins us and we move into the house, where many handcrafted objects adorn the home all of which are made from natural material found on the island. Pam tells her story in the presence of her grandchildren playing around us and her daughter whose story becomes knitted with hers.

Pam was born on Palm Island in 1959 *"the most beautiful island in the world and I would never live anywhere else"*. The first two years of her life were spent as a dormitory baby before her mother Dawn married. Pam is fifty-one years old married and the mother of five children, (four girls and one boy), the grandmother of twelve grandchildren, and foster mother to many who have become part of her family over the years.

## *History and Identity*

Pam begins her story with talking about her family's Aboriginal identity, in particular the identity of women in her family. Identity and strong women is a major theme that runs throughout this story, one that gives meaning to her and her family's survival and resilience. She also speaks with particular pride in the Bwgcolman identity of her only son *"the son was born here so he's a Bwgcolman, he's a true Bwgcolman and he makes up for all the sons I'll never have"*. Even her description of Palm Island being the most beautiful island in the world reveals her deep attachment to the land her family has now come to know as home. Pam recalls her mother's identity as a *"Gudjal woman"* who was sent to Palm Island with her grandmother Cora from the Charters Towers region. Cora was sent to Palm Island because she was sick with tuberculosis. Initially her grandmother was medically interned on Fantome Island for quarantine and treatment before being allowed to live on Great Palm Island.

Many Aboriginal people were transferred to Fantome Island for the treatment of non-sexual and sexually communicable diseases under Queensland Government legislation. The island is well known for its reputation as a leprosarium for the treatment of Queensland Aboriginal people with leprosy. Many Aboriginal people lived and died on the island. Those who had children were separated from their children because of quarantine laws, some never having the opportunity to raise their children.

Pam's memories of her grandmother are of a strong determined woman who never spoke of her past family life but rather focused on the present circumstances of raising her own children. Pam speaks with some sadness about the loss of family connections because of her grandmother's inability to speak of the past:

*Things I remember about my grandmother, she was a strong woman but never, ever spoke about her life, so I think she had a very hard life, never even really spoke to my Mum, my Aunt Ellen, and still today we're still trying to find the family connections and that's hard because today, I*

*don't even know my family connection because we're still talking about it and who's related to who and how and it's very hard.*

The inability to speak about the past is a common situation amongst the Elders on Palm Island because of the painful memories that are uncovered in family history. Hence the loss of family history and connections become a painful legacy for present day families.

Pam's feelings of loss are apparent in her voice and her face when she speaks about her grandmother and mother:

*I suppose I'm past that stage now because I'm fifty-years old and I've come to learn to accept that my life is now and just being with the kids, my children and now the grandchildren and learning to live and looking forward and just teaching them about life, about everyday living.*

Pam's sadness about her mother gives way to the reality of living and parenting her own children on Palm Island. Entwined in Pam's childrearing practices is the constant memory of what her mother endured in raising her and her siblings. Her story turns to describing memories of her mother's struggle as a parent in the times of living under the 'Act'. This reveals strong intergenerational connections through the retelling of stories of her grandmother and mother. As a mother, Pam's own story contains intergenerational connections with those of her grandmother and mother, and she speaks of these stories in the presence of her children and grandchildren who come and listen at intervals to what she is saying. Pam joyously expresses that she is a 'fortunate mother' raising her children on Palm Island and resolves to recognise her strength and the responsibility of her parenting:

*I think, also, living here and because of living – well we're living under the Act – and seeing what our parents went through, I mean they had to line up for rations and they still talk about the pre-issue days. I remember my Mum, one day, actually going off because one loaf of bread wasn't enough to feed eight kids or seven kids at that time and your know really and every other time you really didn't have food in the house, we'd be having rice and milk for three days you know and for breakfast, dinner and supper and toast, whatever, you know there wasn't*

*that much food around but I think we learnt to survive which made us strong and, being a mother and looking at that today and being responsible, you know, for myself I said well I had my children and, for me, they were my responsibility and it was making sure that I cared for them because I gave birth to them and I think I'm one of the luckiest mothers on Palm Island the way my children grew up because I was there for them. I didn't want to live anywhere else.*

Much of Pam's childhood was spent at home with her immediate family with the occasional family outing to the pictures where her stepfather worked. Pam describes her mother as a strong honest woman who worked to supplement the family income and to keep them together. Dawn was skilled in practical and intellectual pursuits that have created positive family memories:

*Oh she was quite talented and she knew how to sew, knew how to read patterns and how to crochet..., I never learnt how to pick it up but sewing, she cooked, she knew how to cook and she taught me how to sew and use a machine and just do basic that's it, I never went any further than that but, yeah she knew how to make dresses and shorts and you know anything really. But very knowledgeable, still today, she reads a lot ... she's marvellous how she talks about everything you know, sporting people, you know this person or that person but I don't have time to sit down and watch TV and sports or anything like that but yeah, it's marvellous what she knows even about medical things. I'm just amazed sometimes.*

### *A Singular Woman*

Pam learnt many things from her grandmother and her mother; in particular she identifies her individualism as a strength that she gained from them. Even within her marriage it was important to keep her individual identity to achieve what needed to be done. Pam describes herself as a woman who is not a party person, who doesn't drink alcohol or gamble because her place was in the home raising her children. Pam has passed these principles on to her children for their future parenting:

*Well I always say being an individual is – even though if you're married or you're living with a partner, you're still an individual and you still have rights to do what you need to do... I think well, that everyone's an individual and it's about choices that you make and you stick to them.*

*Just be yourself and be honest and do what you think is right and don't go out and if somebody tells you something, don't carry yarns, don't go – we keep it to ourselves, we talk about it in our house and it stays here.*

Pam sees that her individual strength has been her source of resilience and has helped her to cope with the social and family conflicts in her neighbourhood. When there were fights in the streets Pam was able to stand as protector and teacher for her children on the appropriate way to respond to conflict situations. She would say “*don't go out there and look, there's no need ...do you want to grow up and be like that?*”. In these situations Pam would keep her children indoors and away from the violence in her street. As they grew older into young adults Pam learnt when to let go and let the children make their own decisions. She explains how difficult it was to hold back advice, “*it's hard to hold back I guess but there's a point in your life where you say well ... I can't say anymore, it stops there and they have to learn the hard way themselves*”. However she concludes that as her mother was always there for her, she will be there for her children when they need to talk.

Pam's story turns to focus on what she observes in the community around her; in particular she speaks about the current social situation of children growing up too fast. Her childhood was a fun time, playing games such as hopscotch and marbles with the boys; in her estimation their play was natural and innocent. In contrast to this she expresses grief about some children in the community today losing their innocence and becoming parents at a very young age:

*Well you know, children having children, there's not enough time for these children to grow, to be – they need to be children before they can be responsible and have their own children because there's too many children without parents, it's been taken away from them because they're not allowing their children to grow.*

Pam continues to talk about the addictions of drug and alcohol and gambling and how this has drawn parents away from their central role of childrearing. She speaks



about the flow on effects where children roam the streets and are vulnerable to pressures from peer groups and other groups within the community. Her observations reveal the ongoing oppression from the socio-political issues affecting Palm Island, and family pressures within the community that parents experience and as a result the children experience it as well. As Pam tells her story her voice is strong and clear as she maintains her belief that children need to be children until they reach adulthood and are ready to have a family:

*Yes, until the time when they say well I'm ready and if they are ready then, and they want children, then they have children. Because I say to my girls, if you want to be sexually active, you protect yourself because you don't need children now, not in this day and age because people need to grow and just be children and be happy.*

### *Fostering Murri Way*

Pam's story of parenting turns to her role as a foster mother to children of extended family members in the community. She speaks with passion on the Murri way of looking after other children when they are not being cared for properly by their parents. She explains that fostering Murri way has been a common occurrence in the community since the early days of settlement that should be continued outside of the formal system of the Department of Child Safety "*...we need to step in and say you know well you don't want – can't handle or you've got a problem and you need a break, give it to someone that will help you out and look after them – it's not easy*".

Fostering Murri way has been an accepted form of childrearing in the Palm Island community since the early establishment of the community in the 1920s. Fostering is a contemporary terminology that is more commonly used in present day. In the early years it was known as 'growing kids up', where families would look after/grow up, children of other families for short and long term periods.

Pam's role as foster mother has seen her raise several children into adulthood. Some of the children were given to her by other family members. On one occasion Pam and her husband rescued a child from an at risk situation, she goes on to tell the circumstances of how this foster child came into her care:

*She's 11; she'll be 12 next year. We actually went to the house, never ever baby-sat this child, but we've heard that she's been around in the community. Different people used to baby sit her and one day one of the girls went up to the house and found her in the house all by herself with the grandmother, the great grandmother actually – brought her home... I said to them then 'what are we going to do?' I said 'if we're going to keep her, you will all have to help me look after her' and she just thrived, she just fitted in. And now I've given her so she can have a better education and do something better with her life – her mother was only 14 when she had her.*

Pam maintains that bringing up other people's children is part of Murri way, she recognises the difficulty with this at times but she firmly believes this is better than the child going through the government child safety system:

*... the way that child safety get hold of the children and they're sort of lost forever... because they want to come in and they want to know everything about your lifestyle and who lives in your house and if they've got a criminal record and I won't touch any children that are under Child Safety. I prefer just to say you know 'give me the child and I'll give you a break and help look after them and when you're ready, you can take them back'*

It has been common practice on Palm Island where families would help each other by looking after other people's children to give those parents who needed it some assistance. The care arrangements were between families, which happened on a short-term basis to a long term basis. Parents were always able to see the child/children whilst another was caring for them. When parents were able to resume the parenting they were able to have their children back in their home. This arrangement could be repeated many times during a child's life within the community.

Another issue that Pam mentions is that some individuals will contact the Department of Child Safety in anger and report other parents whom they are in conflict

with. Pam sees this as a knee jerk reaction of retaliation because of a conflict situation between individuals or families. She clarifies that usually when the conflict is resolving there is remorse on the part of the person reporting to child safety. She continues to explain that there are many people wanting to be involved in building the community and helping families but at the same time the community experiences frustration and anger that has probably been underlying since the time of living under ‘the Act’.

These frustrations sometimes manifest in community or family conflict situations. This causes community disunity and becomes a barrier to the community goal of *“fighting for a better life on Palm Island and a better future for the children”*. Pam paints a likeness of these conflict events to an octopus with arms flaying where the head represents the common goal of a better life but the flaying arms represent the disunities of attempting to get to that one goal. Pam’s insight reveals the meanings of a community’s challenge to overcome past and present oppression and how this has influenced childrearing practices of families within the community environment. She emphasizes it is a problem that needs to be recognised by the community, and which needs solutions to be found by the community.

When asked about her observations of childrearing in the wider community of Palm Island Pam brings immediate attention on the domestic situation of parents in the community. Pam pointedly states that *“first of all, parents need to have their own space with their own children”*. She shares the difficult experiences of trying to discipline her children when she was sharing her home with other couples and their children in the early years of her relationship with her husband. She discusses the situation of overcrowding in homes on Palm Island which makes parenting and childrearing

difficult for couples. This gives rise to domestic conflicts in the home and this in turn influences the parents' childrearing practices.

### *Her Own Style*

Pam's story turns here to reflect on her children's parenting styles. She reiterates the individuality of her children's lives and the different ways they teach their children. Pam describes her children as "*strong and knowing what they are doing*", and maintains that her own childrearing practices have taught her children to learn and continue to learn how to live a balanced life as individuals and parents. Pam speaks on the importance of discipline in children's lives and bringing correction in the right way. This discipline style mostly included reverse psychology, teaching by demonstration and on rare occasions a smack. At this point Pam is clear the intention of physical chastisement is not to hurt or injure, but '*a sting*' to bring the child's attention to adjusting their behaviour to the more accepted one. She tells a small yarn about a disciplinary teaching event involving her grandson which gives a bird's eye view of her family life:

*Oh well, at the moment we've got this little grandson, he's 4 years old, and for some reason he doesn't like this other child. He just lashes out at them and I'm just saying that we'll have to reverse it and get the other child to say to the smaller child, you know, share things with him and tell him that you care about him and maybe love him up and see how that goes. They just have to reverse it and see how it goes.*

Pam continues her yarn and makes the point that reverse psychology doesn't always work when you want it to which brings a little chuckle from both of us. As Pam's story is ending, we are joined by Nikki who is Pam's daughter. Nikki is heavily pregnant with her fifth child; she emits an air of confidence as she smiles and sits down

beside us and begins to tell her story. *“My name is Nikki, I was born in Townsville, have lived on Palm most of my life, I’ve got four sons and I’m having another baby”.*

### **Nikki’s Voice**

Nikki is 26 years old and lives in her own home with her partner and their children. She has regular contact with her mother Pam as they live near each other. Nikki talks about how her mum has taught her how to be a good mum, to stay at home to look after her children, and how to discipline them and teach her children to respect other people in the community. In her words Nikki describes her mother as *“gold and she’s just taught us that life is not boring and not to go out and drink all the time and stuff. She’s always there for us”.*

Nikki acknowledges that being a young mother is not easy at times, with this comes the realisation that she is not able to enjoy life as she knew it before having her children. In conjunction with her personal experience Nikki also relates how she observes other young mothers in the community who have similar feelings about how life changes with being a parent. However she observes that some of these young mothers do go out and resume an active social life at the expense of caring for their children:

*I see a lot of young mothers around you know like you see them drunk all the time or they go out and smoke and they don’t really look after their kids, ... it’s hard for them some of the parents don’t do the right things. They don’t really have food for their kids or they’re dependant on another person to buy food.*

Nikki shares that there is not enough support for children and parents in the community. She continues to share that if she was starting out as a parent she would

want to access services such as afternoon care, and other activities for the children to engage with. She talks about her peer group of friends who work as well as raise children, some of whom are managing on their own while some depend on their parents to help with childrearing. Nikki shares that she would like to see her children teaching their children what she has learnt from Pam and as a mother she would be available to support them as she is supported.

It is evident from Nikki's comments that women provide crucial support for families on Palm Island. Here the story turns to gain some insight on the role of men in families. Nikki muses over the question of why the voices of men are quiet in families when it comes to raising children. Her response to the question reveals that some men may not feel able to take on parenting roles because of the complexity of their relationships. Nikki clarifies that some mothers may have different partners and have children to different partners. She comments that some men want to do the right thing of engaging with the children but feel some reticence to engage fully because they are not the biological father of the child or children. At this point Pam voices her opinion that it must be hard for some men to relate to another man's child, that is why it's important that a mother settles down with the right man and raise a family with him. Whilst Pam is sharing her opinion Nikki is nodding in agreement. This topic generates an engaging dialogue between Pam, Nikki and I on the complexities of mixed family parenting.

Pam continues, and suggests that the ages of children are significant when their parent enters into a relationship with another who is not their biological parent. She believes the child integrates better in a mixed family at a younger age as opposed to the child being older. Her suggestion is picked up by Nikki who adds that the older the child the greater risk of conflict between child and the new male partner of the mother.

At times the older child will not take direction from the 'new man' because the child will dismiss any authority the man may try to bring into the relationship because he is not the child's biological father:

*(Pam) Yes. I think it all depends on the age too as they come into a relationship. If they're only small, you know it might be easier for them but if a child is a lot older and knows that that person isn't their father*  
*(Nikki) Well then they're like yeah, you can't tell me what to do, you're not my father*

Pam recollects that one of the reasons men are not overtly seen in childrearing is because this has traditionally been the role of women or women's business in the community. *"It's not a man's thing, they think it's for women you know and mainly because of the ancestral thing that the women look after the children – yeah, women's business, you know what I mean"*.

When asked about her brothers and the role of their father in childrearing Pam replies that she believes her brothers have learnt a lot from their father who was the wage earner, with the exception of the young two boys who were young when their father died. Her mother ran the home and disciplined the children whilst her father earned the household income. Nikki interjects here and adds that that the discipline of children in her home is undertaken by her partner and herself. There is a learning process of discussion and agreeing on how to discipline. Nikki continues on the subject of child discipline and expresses that she would like to see parenting programs available to couples that teach child discipline, which is currently acceptable under the law. She believes a family approach would be of benefit because it teaches both parents and children about appropriate disciplinary practices. Nikki's voice is strong that this kind of family support program should be available to women, men and children in an informal environment. She suggests play groups or the notion of play is a good approach as men need to learn to play with their children whilst learning other

parenting skills. *“Yeah. That’s what I’d like, a centre like where fathers and their kids can go and other fathers and their kids and teach them how to play together or you know do stuff together, yeah.”*

Both Nikki and Pam speak strongly about parents being supported and taught how to grow up their children on the island. They both propose the development of a specific centre for family support, as they talk their voices become animated and their excitement of the possibility of such a service is contagious. All three of us talk and wonder about the likelihood of its existence. Pam excitedly launches into sharing her long held desire to see a program and a building dedicated to encourage and teach children on Palm Island:

*I’ve always, for years I’ve thought of this dream, having this Drop in Centre. All this talk about this Drop in Centre, well I’ve been involved with the Women’s Centre and all this but we should have a Drop in Centre. All these children wandering around and don’t go to school you know, have this Drop in Centre where teachers, counsellors are there every day so they get all these children, take them and teach them everyday living skills and, at that same time, counselling them, giving them, you know getting them ready to go back into the class, you know those children don’t know how to sit in the class, they’re so hyped up, so*

It is clear from the way Pam and Nikki speak that these two women have held these dreams close to their hearts for a long time and just speaking aloud about the dream sends the three of us women in a heady dialogue of optimism. However we are brought back to the reality of Palm Island when Pam speaks of the opportunities available to the young parents and children today, which they are not accessing because they are caught up in the ‘system’ and become stuck. Nikki is nodding in agreement and comments on the high welfare dependency that she observes in the community amongst young parents. She notes that working with mothers and children in the play environment is one way of helping them break the cycle of dependency. Both Nikki and



Pam acknowledge the changes in parenting and childrearing over the generations, and the effect of the 'new system' of education and child behaviour management.

Nikki shares her observation and frustration of the current broader system's inability to help families. She feels that parents receive a lot of blame for their children in the education system but Nikki also feels that the school system is not delivering what is needed on Palm Island. Her comments raises what seems to be a persistent contentious issue between the education system and parents in the community. Pam interjects here and again reiterates the importance of a place where families and children can be supported so that children on Palm Island can receive the benefit of education for the future development of the children's lives and for the longevity of the Palm Island community.

### *Bwgcolman Hope*

Pam and Nikki's story equally speak strongly about the need for present day building up of children and families to ensure that a permanent Bwgcolman community is secured for Palm Island in the future. Pam asserts that together Bwgcolman people are strong and can achieve good outcomes for the future of Palm Island although the process of getting things done needs refining. Here she alludes to the way government programs as not always being the way to address the problems. As she speaks there is a sense of urgency in her voice that now is the time to harness Bwgcolman strength for Bwgcolman future by Bwgcolman people:

*I think that together we're a strong – we're strong and we've made headlines. But how they're doing it, yeah it's about how are they doing it – just coming in and saying yes, we're going to do this... Well it should come from us really but to me it seems like it's coming from way down south, the capital of Australia. To me, personally, I think that's where it's coming from and there's nobody there to represent us.*

Here Nikki adds her voice to reiterate what Pam has just said about Bwgcolman strength, *“It’s just we’ve always stood up, the people always stood up for this place and just trying to keep Palm Island for our people, for the later generation and stuff”*. Both Nikki and Pam believe that a strong Bwgcolman voice is needed in the present day to respond to the social issues on Palm Island as well as challenging the intent of governments towards Palm Island. Their concern for the future of Palm Island and its people is apparent in the following discourse:

*(Pam) I think the strength is now, I personally think the strength is now and I fear for the future. When you look around and see the children, they are the ones that are going to lose out if nothing happens now; they are the ones that are going to lose their home. Because there’s strength in us, we’re here now but in the next maybe two generations I can’t see it there – it’s going to fall apart if nothing happens now. And I think personally that Palm Island will not be Palm Island, it is going to be a multi-cultural island.*

*(LG. Researcher) So there’s the fear that we lose our home*

*(Pam) Yeah and it’s going in a different direction by then, we can see it. I mean I don’t know if it’s going to be a good thing or if it’s going to be a bad thing and we’re not going to know, our age group anyway, we’re not going to know.*

*(LG. Researcher) Mm ... so the collective strength of the now?*

*(Pam) Yes. Because the future doesn’t look very pretty, it doesn’t look very good from my point of view anyway.*

*(Nikki) Yeah I reckon the same thing; I don’t think Bwgcolman won’t even be here if you know with all these people here and they want to see the land off and stuff like that or whatever.*

*(Pam) Yeah with the kids, we need to build their future now because I can’t see a future for them because they, right now, are the ones that don’t care and they are the ones that should be caring and going to school, getting that education...*

Pam and Nikki’s voices of concern for Bwgcolman land and people are echoes of the voices of our Elders and ‘freedom fighters’ now passed on who spoke the same with the same aspirations for Bwgcolman. This is a ‘Dadirri moment’ in this time for the three of us; because we know what has been spoken is in reality the stories of our past families, their voices merged with ours cutting through the present. It’s a cry from the heart and spirit reaching out from the time our Elders were taken from their land and sent to Palm

Island. It is our merged voices that speak about, and into the future carrying Bwgcolman dreams of our future.

Their story continues on with a sense of reminiscence, they speak of Palm Island being a place where government people came to work. Some wanting to be there to help Bwgcolman and others being on Palm Island for their own gain or under duress of work contracts. Their story reveals the constant contradictions of what the media projects about Palm Island, (most of it negative) to the responses of the lived experience amongst Bwgcolman by government workers. Nikki says it succinctly:

*“Like yeah, when some people do come here and they’re oh Palm Island is nothing like what I read or seen you know, or hear on the news, they don’t actually know until they come to Palm and see that the people are actually civilized and live you know normal lives.”*

On this note Pam affirms and proceeds to tell me about the normal and good things that people do and see on Palm Island. She begins to set the scene as if to an invisible visitor urging the visitor to look around and see the natural beauty of the island. Pam’s spiritual belief is brought to the fore when she declares that *“the natural beauty didn’t come from the man made things, it came from God and it’s the man made things that make the place look ugly”*. Pam continues and lauds the strength of the Palm Island people, *“the unity, one mob, the Bwgcolman mob which came from about 40 different tribes”*. Her description of one mob reveals the importance of a Palm Island identity even when the future is not so clear.

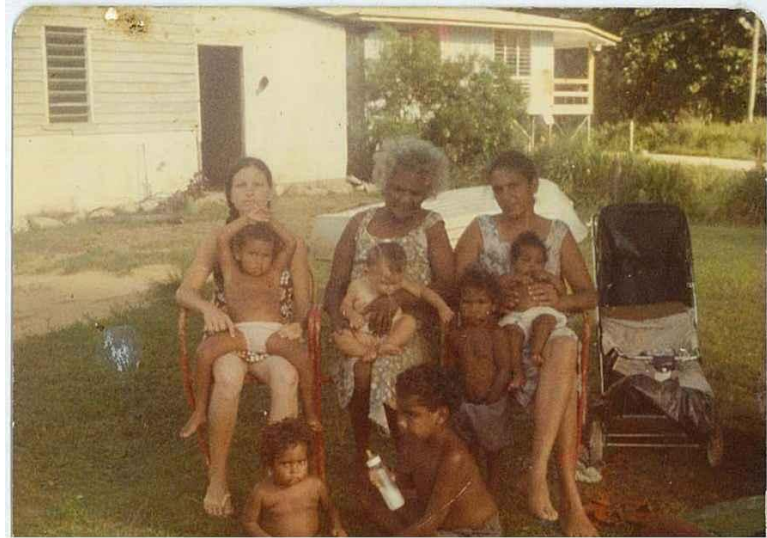
Nikki speaks of the family activities that she and her siblings experienced as children such as learning how to survive on the land, going out fishing and camping and teaching other family members how to forage and hunt from the natural resources that Palm Island provides. Pam excitedly adds *“And we love our bush food – yeah even our grandkids go and get cockles and Julgai and teach them how to look for all those*

*sort of things and they love it, they fight over Julgai to eat". Nikki explains that her brother takes her two big boys hunting with the boy's father. Her brother teaches the boys how to fish and hunt so that the boys are able to teach their children when they become fathers. She sees this as an important part of Murri way that needs to continue. She comments that other children marvel at her children's opportunity to learn from their uncle, because they rarely get the opportunity to go out with their family because of the absence of men or family to take them out, "I know a lot of older kids don't have that opportunity with their parents, with their father or their uncle. And they can't really or their uncle's always somewhere or they just don't have time for that stuff".*

Nikki and Pam firmly believe that children and their family need to go out more than what is happening today. They turn their focus to describe a familiar event that was seen as regular family activity at the beach. Pam talks about the practice of taking babies down the beach to bury their legs in the sand to make them strong for walking:

*Yeah well I believe it's still strong, it's still getting handed down – take the kids down to the beach, especially when they're about 9 months, 10 months old, ready to walk, they bury them in the sand and just go from there and let them crawl around and get into the sand and get it all over them. Yeah, it's still strong in the community.*

Nikki explains that she didn't do that with her children because they walked "before their time". However, she goes on to explain she takes the children down to the beach frequently to play. Pam nods in agreement, she believes taking children to the beach is good for the family and builds family relationships. Here this story ends with Nikki, Pam and I sitting at Pam's home dinner table surrounded by children darting in and out looking at the tape recorder, asking questions and generally being inquisitive. As we sit together we all know there is so much more to be said, but for now Pam and Nikki are satisfied that they have shared what is needed at this time in their story.



**Figure 8: Cora, daughter Dawn, granddaughter Pam and great grandchildren**

*(The photograph above is taken on Palm Island, Cora is centre with her daughter Dawn on her left and her granddaughter Pam on her right surrounded by her great grandchildren. Written consent to include this photograph was granted by Pam)*

## CHAPTER 7

### FAMILY STORY 3: MAVIS THE GREATEST

#### Background

*This is the family story of Aunty Mavis also known as Aunty May, her daughter Dianne and granddaughter Larissa.*

*Aunty May is 84 years old; she was born at Lawn Hills, Western Queensland, a Waanyi woman, Aunty was sent to Palm Island with her parents 74 years ago. She is currently one of the few Elders of the Palm Island community. She is a widow, mother, grandmother, and great grandmother and respectfully and affectionately acknowledged as Aunty by the rest of the community. Aunty May agreed to tell her story because her memories as well as her health is not as it used to be, she wanted to be part of leaving a family story for her grandchildren and other children of Palm Island.*

*Dianne is Aunty May's 50 year old daughter; born on Palm Island; she is the mother of ten children, six living children and four deceased children. Dianne is grandmother to twelve grandchildren from her biological children, and is aunty and nana to extended family members and countrymen on Palm Island. Dianne has recently completed her studies in Social Work and holds a Bachelor Degree in Social Work. Dianne agreed to tell her story because she wanted to be part of building positive stories to help the younger generation and young parents of Palm Island.*

*Larissa is 29 years old and Dianne's eldest daughter. Born on Palm Island Larissa lives with her fiancé in Townsville and is growing up five children; four of her own and the other her niece. Larissa agreed to tell her story because she wanted to part of the family story and also believes that positive family stories of Palm Island will help break the negative stereotype that is so frequently in the public media.*

## Aunty May



**Figure 9: Aunty May and Dianne**

*(The photograph above of Aunty May and Dianne was taken at Christmas church service on Palm Island, circa 2011. This photograph is included with written consent from Dianne and Aunty May.)*

### *Memories of Country*

It's an April afternoon on Palm Island and I am sitting with Aunty May on her home veranda where we both have a good view of the constant traffic of cars and people in street below. Aunty's house is well known where a huge Sea Almond Tree (*Terminalia Catappa*) shades her veranda, adults and children call out their greeting to her as they pass by. She shares that there are a lot of things that she would like to tell about herself but she is not able to remember a lot. Aunty May begins her story of how she came to Palm Island, a place she now calls home, and shares some of her memories of her birth, her parents and countrymen:

*I came with my parents here, I was probably around about 10 or 11, I might have been a little bit older ... I come from a place called Lawn Hill, I was born there. I can remember a bit you know, I was with my Mum and Dad and they were both a wonderful old couple, his name, my father's name was Willie Jackson and my mother was named Dianne. To tell you the truth I can't remember her maiden name but yes we had a wonderful time and she taught us a lot. She'd teach us about different things that we want to do, like we love cutting trees and you know cutting trees just for the fun of it. You know I remember my mother saying 'don't do that, somebody greater put that there', they never ever mentioned God's name but they knew there was somebody greater somewhere. I always remember that you know. Yeah. And we did a lot of fishing, we never starved.*

Aunty May's description of her childhood memories portrays a very strong image of a unified family life with both parents whom she describes as “a wonderful old couple”. Aunty talks about how her knowledge and respect for the land was taught to her by her parents, which reveals a connection between spirit and land and her duty to that connection. Her father's position in the family was that of provider to feed the family and the tribe. In hushed tones Aunty May shares a sensitive piece of information that her father was a cattle duffer, and that he would steal the cattle to feed the tribe:

*Yeah, I don't know whether I should mention it but he was a cattle duffer. He was a cattle duffer to feed the tribe, the whole tribe...to feed other people there by putting marrow bones on the coals and he fed them and he finally got caught and we were sent to Mornington Island.*

Aunty's story reveals that the consequence of this was her father being convicted for cattle duffing and her family's relocation from their birthplace to the Aboriginal community of Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was on Mornington Island that Aunty had the opportunity to go to school and inspiring a love for learning in her. She remembers Mornington as a beautiful place where she was surrounded by her mother's people and she was able to play amongst her people for a short period of time. Aunty continues and talks about a pivotal point in her life on Mornington Island, of which the circumstances are unclear to her now but it resulted in



her father being sent to Palm Island. One of the strongest memories that Aunty talks about is her father refusing to comply with the removal orders to leave for Palm Island unless his family was allowed to accompany him. This aspect of Aunty's story reveals the importance of family and keeping the family together even under circumstances in which her father was being sent to Palm Island:

*Well we played on Mornington Island and all my mum's people were there and I think maybe a bit of trouble started there and they had to send my father away. He was getting sent to Palm Island and he said 'I won't go without my family' so that's how I came to be on Palm Island.*

I like Palm Island, I don't think I want to go anywhere else, I grew up here, this is my home now. The family were settled at Butler Bay on their arrival from Mornington, at this point Aunty gives a humorous account of the white authorities recognising her father's skills with and knowledge of cattle. Her father was employed as bullock team driver, to work the bullock team transporting timber from Mundy Bay to the community timber mill for processing into building supplies.

Aunty May relates the importance of family life, in particular she shares about the strength of family unity and how her parents were her source of security in her childhood. She speaks fondly of her father as the disciplinarian in the family, his way of discipline was to give her and her siblings a "good talking to". Her story reveals her parents acceptance of living on Palm Island and came to love Palm Island as their home even though they were sent away from Lawn Hill and Mornington Island. She shares that both her parents lived and died on Palm Island and are now buried in the old cemetery. Aunty recalls how both her parents believed in gaining an education to learn about the white man's world. She recalls her parents talking to her and her siblings about learning to cope with the white man's world:

*I remember my mother saying "you won't have us around too long. You've got to face the world on your own" but sometimes I don't*

*understand her because she's a tribal woman, ... We had to go to school, we didn't miss out, we didn't learn much, I didn't have the opportunity like you had but I wish I did, but we went to school, learnt to read and write a bit, they always said that to us – education is a wonderful thing. We've got to learn the white man way sometimes they say...*

Throughout her story Aunty May makes reference to her education and how she wished for the opportunity to continue to go to school:

*I didn't have much schooling but I wish I did, I could have done a lot of things you know with young people and gone to college and all that you know, I wish I'd had that chance. To read a bit more, write, and be able to speak nicely to other people especially to white people but I didn't have all that, I've never been to college, you don't know how lucky you are, you've been to college.*

Aunty May talks about her mother and describes her as a tribal woman who was always quiet a woman and kept her children close to her. She shares how her mother used to talk language to her and payed special attention to teaching Aunty May about the ways of men, relationships and the challenges of raising children.

### *Dormitory*

Aunty's story now turns to her adolescence when she was placed in the dormitory on Palm Island and lived separately to her parents:

In 1922 Palm Island became the first Aboriginal reserve to accept children under the 1911 State Children's Act, which endorsed the committal of Aboriginal children (even when they were living with their parents on Palm Island, the state removed them) as wards of the state in dormitories ('industrial schools') for the purpose of free labour for the state (Watson, 2010, pp. 79-79).

Aunty remembers dormitory life as a good life because there were other girls of her age group who became her support group. She recalls the enjoyment of walking together to St Michaels School and many other times spent in mutual enjoyment of

each other's company. She also recalls the hard times in the dormitory, when they were physically punished because of some misdemeanour such as being late to start their appointed chores or doing the chores too slow. Aunty's voice goes quiet and her facial expression changes to one of deep thought:

*We were flogged many a time, I hardly talk about that, oh I don't know, sometimes we'd be a bit late for scrubbing and we'd scrub every morning and every afternoon, scrub the dormitory and some of the girls were a bit slow...*

Aunty May shares how she was sent out to work on Hamilton Downs property for a white family. Parts of her duties were to look after the children in the family. She recalls how the family included her as part of the family:

Many young Aboriginal children were sent out to the mainland on cattle properties in late 19th and early 20th century. Girls were especially favoured as domestic workers to fulfil the labour demand by pastoralists. Under the State's Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897, domestic service was seen as the only appropriate employment for young Aboriginal females (Kidd, 2000; Robinson, 2003).

Aunty returned to Palm Island after 12 months of working on Hamilton Downs to the dormitory, it was at this time that she found out that she was going to have a baby. Aunty May shares about becoming a mother at a young age and living with her baby with her in the dormitory. She recalls how there were other young mothers in the dormitory at the same time as she was, and how they all were taught to care for their babies by the older women who also lived in the dormitory. Aunty believes that life in the dormitory was made easier because of the solidarity of the group of mothers and older women:

*But sometimes it was a bit hard when you got put in the dormitory and lived without a mum and dad you know but the dormitory was full of girls like me, no mum and dad but we used to make ourselves happy...*

*we didn't have you know the best of things but we were happy with whatever we had.*

### ***Marriage and Motherhood***

Aunty May left the dormitory when she married, her husband Les who worked in the local hospital and dental service and Aunty May stayed home as the homemaker, *“well I used to be the cook, see that they have their meal as usual and do the washing, kept the place nice for them, see that they go to school clean and all this stuff”*. Both Aunty and Les disciplined the children mostly with a firm word, on occasions the discipline involved a smack. Aunty raised her children for the most part with her husband's help. At times she would ask for help from other friends when she wanted to have time to go fishing or dancing.

Aunty shares how she would tell her children about her parents and her birthplace and tribe and many other things relevant to their family and upbringing. She particularly focused on her teenage girls and talked to them about boys, relationships and waiting for the right one:

*Well I told them a lot of things you know, a lot of things about what you should do with your child, and growing them up especially when they're a teenager, you've got to keep them away from a lot of things. I get frightened and I used to tell them that when they are teenager, you'll get a lot of boys who want to have something to do with them you know and I say you've got to watch those, you don't just have anybody.*

As Aunty May's story comes to a close she points out that her main focus was instilling her love of education into her children. Aunty believes that a gaining a good education is important in life. She shares her observations about the education of children on Palm Island and her voice reveals her pleasure as she talk about children going to secondary schools off the island and beyond to further their education. Aunty

ends her story with reminiscing about her desires to further her own education in comparison to the opportunities for the young people of Palm Island today:

*The main thing I believe in was my family, sending them to school you know, education, that's the most important thing you know. I think there's a lot of difference you know, like kids go out to college now and learn things out there – I wish I had that, I really do, to be sent to college. Yeah they've got more things than what we had growing up on the Island today, the young people.*

## **Dianne**

Dianne begins her story of her birth on Palm Island and her memory of going away from the island with her parents and siblings when she was about three years old. Although her parents did not say why they took their family away from the island she believes that her parents did not want them growing up on Palm Island under the strict laws of the 'Act'. Dianne's father found work in the sugar cane, railway and mining industry and local town councils, in and around Townsville, Charters Towers and Hughenden. Dianne relates going to school in all three towns and finally doing most of her primary education in Hughenden where her family settled for a time.

### *Memoirs of Mum*

Before Dianne continues and shares the history of her parent's story as she believes it is important to tell of their birthplaces and how they came to Palm Island. Dianne particularly talks about her mother Aunty May, and recounts some of Aunty May's story, which provides additional details about her mother's childhood experience on Palm Island. Dianne recalls what her mother had told her about coming to Palm Island with her grandparents and believes it is important to begin her story with her mother's story because of what she has taught her. In this recount, Dianne speaks of her mother's separation from her grandmother and grandfather shortly after arriving on the

island. Her mother Aunty May was placed in the dormitory, and to this day Dianne says Aunty May is unable to give a reason for the separation.

### *Loss of Language*

Dianne recalls one specific part of Aunty May's story with sadness. She relays that her mother spoke her tribal language fluently, when she was placed in the dormitory. Her grandmother was allowed to visit but only on supervised visits with the dormitory fence between them, her mother on the dormitory side and her grandmother on the camp side of the fence. Dianne narrates that her grandmother's visits were regular events where she and Dianne's mother were able to speak in their own tribal tongue in the early years of her mother's dormitory life. She relates that within a short time of her mother's dormitory life the government authorities on the island enacted a policy prohibiting the Aboriginal people on Palm Island from speaking their tribal language. The result of this was that Dianne's mother had to learn to speak English whilst her grandmother was not able to speak English; over a period of time Dianne's mother was not able to communicate effectively with her grandmother anymore:

*She said that when she came here also she only spoke her language because where she's from she's a Limey woman and she spoke that Limey language fluently as a child and her parents did as well. I think her father, he spoke some English but her mother was a very private woman, she just spoke her language and she said every time her mother visited her she was on the other side of the fence and there was always somebody there telling them they weren't allowed to speak language so mum had to quickly learn to speak English because she reckoned that often she got flogged and punished mm, for speaking her language so they said 'no, only English allowed' 'you're only allowed to speak English'... and her mother could still speak language but then when she'd go and visit her, of course by that time mum was a bit older and just about six or seven and she could speak English better than she could speak her own language then and so she couldn't communicate with her mother any more.*

The grief is evident in Dianne's voice as she relays that the separation and loss of communication between her mother and grandmother left a profound effect, which she says is noticeable today in Aunt May's speech and behaviour when she talks about her childhood in the dormitory. Dianne notes that she has observed the outward display of happiness, sadness and shame in her mother during these times of remembrance. She observes that nowadays her mother doesn't speak about her childhood that often, she believes the memories are burdensome and her mother's silence on the subject is her way of coping over the years.

### ***A Daughter's Gratitude***

At this point Dianne begins to share her story, she commences by stating "*One of those things was I'm glad mum and dad left when I was a baby because you know I wouldn't like to grow up in a dormitory under those rules*". Dianne is happy that she wasn't separated from her parents; her early memories of her family life are full of happiness living in a close knit family unit. Dianne's shares how her parents taught them how to be independent and to seek after self improvement through education, and to build their self esteem. She says her parents wanted them to get an education and get ahead in life, do better:

*Mum and dad they taught us to be independent and always to do something better with our lives and don't let people dictate us and – yeah, so I suppose Mum and dad knew what was happening back then although they didn't really talk about that but it showed in their actions because they took us away, wanted us to do things and wanted us to get an education, get somewhere in life and don't just settle for some community job and things like that. Do something better with your life.*

Dianne describes the strong demonstration of love in her family, her parents towards each other and to the children and the extended family. Dianne speaks of her feeling proud when she saw her parents out in public. She tells of how they would

always keep the family together and close to them. When her father got a job, her mother would find some work that was close to his work and the children moved with the parents to each place of her father's employment. Dianne speaks of these as happy times with her parents and siblings moving around together. She shares how her father always told them stories about his life and how he was raised by his parents. Her father talked about a family tradition of baking bread for others in the community, Dianne says her father continued the tradition and taught his children how to hunt and cook. In particular her father was strict in teaching the children how to look after themselves and know how to work:

*Well dad always talked about like his parents were strict with him and how after school they had to bake bread for people in the community and he kept that tradition going. He taught us that um he taught us how to cook and clean you know whereas mum – mum did that too but dad was sort of more strict whereas mum you know, she said to us oh you've got to do those things you know as part of life and keep the house clean, do the cooking and all these things.*

### ***Catching Goanna & Collecting Shells - A Small Yarn***

Dianne's story reveals how she and her and her siblings learnt gender specific tasks when they were out bush. The boys would be taught by their father how to hunt, prepare and cook small to medium game and Dianne was taught by her mother how to collect water, collect wood chips for the fire, gather bush honey and dig for mussels. Dianne recalls two particular events, the first when the boys went hunting and caught goanna; they came back to camp so full of pride of their hunting success and how they contributed to the family meal:

*I remember when we used to go camping out at Hughenden, the boys were in charge of getting like the firewood and, I had to do that too but I had to get what they call the little chips. I had to get the little chips and collect the water. Mum would make me collect the water in a billy-can and the boys would do the hunting. I remember them catching goanna, yeah. I was really excited, oh – and they said "we can eat it" and I said "hey eat it?" Oh!, they were just so like full of pride and they just loved*



*it, looking after the family and they felt good about themselves bringing something home and dad would teach them about it and what part to eat and that was good. Mum and dad reckon I used to eat carpet snake too and I said “no” but they said “no you used to eat that” (laugh).*

The second event that Dianne recalls is going to Palm Island on holidays and spending time with her extended family, playing with her cousins on the beach, making sandcastles, going reefing and swimming. She shares her love of shell collecting as a child continued into her adulthood, *“I remember collecting shells and I still love that today, I love collecting shells, collecting shells all the time. Mum and dad just loved ornaments and decorating the house with shells and pretty thing”*.

### *My Children and Their Children*

Dianne’s story now focuses on her life experiences of parenting her children and grandchildren. Dianne reiterates that her family is central in her life and family togetherness is something that is always important to pursue. She shares how her parents taught her how to have fun and relax in family life with siblings and others, this is something that Dianne has endeavoured to pass on to her children and grandchildren. Dianne had her first child at the age of twenty-one years; her years of parenting has experienced the grief of losing four children and the joys of raising six children and being a significant part of raising twelve grandchildren. Dianne says that she has a good relationship with her children and grandchildren as they are very close-knit family. Dianne talks about how her children look out for each other and strive to meet each other’s needs when they can. At times this means taking care of a sibling’s child/children to lessen the burden on that particular sibling.

Dianne reflects on her role as a mother and grandmother, and comments on the similarity of many aspects of her life with the stories she has told about her parents. She describes how she does her teaching in the environment of family outings:

*But I think I have a good relationship with my children because I listen to them and we do things together, the same way like mum and dad, you know we were always close, we do things together, good times and bad times we share everything with each other. When we're feeling down or sad, we can talk to each other about things and happy times we share with each other, we go out a lot and the same thing, I take my grand kids to the beach too and I take my children there too and I teach them things you know, tell them what to eat, what not to eat, teach them oh when they growl their kids you know – don't growl them, don't smack them you know all these kinds of things.*

Dianne speaks about her views of child discipline, she shares that her childhood discipline experience was inclusive of the practice of communal discipline from extended families and others in the community. Dianne shares that her discipline style with her children was mostly withholding privileges as this appears to be more effective on the children, while shouting at or smacking the children was avoided. Dianne speaks of her appreciation of the discipline she received from her parents and the boundaries placed on her, while noting that her disciplined childhood and her parent's teachings gave her the confidence and desire to explore and to educate herself in life:

*Oh the good things now that I look at my life now and I think I'm glad you know that they were strict with me and told me to do things for myself because now I see it as I didn't turn out lazy or anything, you know I always want to do things, I want to try something new and family is central and keeping the family together, working together – time is important, always doing something.*

### **What I See Today**

Dianne's story comes to a close, and she makes a general note of the social changes that she has seen on Palm Island that has impacted on the family and the community:

*It could be how Palm Island is progressing now, the way things are changing and I don't know, that link between mum and dad and kids, it's sort of fading somehow and I see some of the children just think that their parents are there just to do things for them and I feel like some of the parents aren't valued anymore. I worry about that because it wasn't like that before, you know mum and dad were the head of the house and we all respected them and loved them and they could say things to their children that were respected, but now, it's different. Some of the*

*families are still together you know, still have that unity but a lot don't have that anymore and that's what I've noticed too and, as well, they don't go out much, although this beautiful Island is here.*

She reveals one of the main factors in this social change is unemployment, in her opinion this diverts parents attention from engaging in more family orientated activities as much of the parents time is focused on alleviating the constant financial burdens they experience. She explains that this constant pressure places further social and emotional burdens on the families, which is disruptive to family life. Dianne also acknowledges that the community family structure has changed to having more single parent families and grandparent carers. She believes families with two parents, and those who experience active involvement from extended family members have an easier time of childrearing in the community. At the same time Dianne acknowledges that single parents can parent successfully as she and others have succeeded with the help of family. Dianne ends her story on a positive note and asserts that in the face of the changes that has taken place over the decades since her childhood she still sees and believes that people care for each other and desire to be a whole family unit together again.

## **Larissa**

Laughter and the thud of children tumbling in play become louder with each ascending step I take to Larissa's front door. Standing in the doorway waiting for the OK to enter, my senses take in the scene before my eyes which makes me smile. Baby, toddler and older children are playing hard with their father, grabbing him and rolling on the floor, distracting him from his television. He looks up and acknowledges my presence with a nod and a call to Larissa. She walks out of the kitchen, a big smile on her face greeting me as well as smiling at the scene around her. She shakes her head

laughing, sweeps her thick black hair into a pony tail and invites me to follow her, all the while giving instructions to the children and their father that she was about to do business with me, meaning keep the noise down and watch the little ones. Cups of teas are made and we settle down at the kitchen table for her story session. Before too long, children poke their heads around the corner of the door to see what their mother is doing. The youngest comes right in and demands his place at the table with us, Larissa scoops him up in her arms, with a kiss sits him on the table where he takes a liking to the tape recorder. His effort to grab a hold of the machine is gently but firmly met with a 'don't touch' growl from his mother.

Watching Larissa interact with her child is delightful as I see her Murri ways and western ways of parenting coming into play. Larissa is Dianne's first born child and she begins her story by identifying herself:

*My name is Larissa, I'm twenty-nine years old, I have five kids, four of my own and I look after my niece as well, I'm from Palm Island, currently living in Townsville, all my kids grew up in Townsville here. I had my first on Palm, then moved away so I could, I suppose, just get them into better schooling and get into a new place, not only for them but for myself as well.*

Larissa's life off the island enables her to take advantage of better education services than are currently available on Palm Island for her children:

*The boys wanted to go back to school. I think I'll be here now and just wait until my kids are grown up by the looks of things. It's very important to me because a lot of kids these days are dropping out of school and you know, missing out, so yeah it's really important to me.*

"You know, where's their future", she continues as her eyes reveal both sadness and frustration. We both know this a loaded question, but we don't speak about the answer lest we get caught up in a whirlwind of emotion, the rhetorical query is left hanging as plenty food for thought. Murri children dropping out of school are missing

out on a future of opportunities that could be theirs if they continued with school. She shares that her nana Mavis was always talking about education and white people; to be smart you had to get educated just like a white man. Larissa reflects on this and explains that her nana was probably conditioned by white rules of the dormitory, which has stayed with her throughout her life.

Leaving Palm Island in the pursuit of education is not an uncommon practice for families, as the education system on Palm Island does not meet every families need, parents like Larissa make the sacrifice to leave their home community and live off the island in order for their children to gain an education that will enable them to engage with both the mainstream system and the Murri way of living. Once the children complete their education, most parents move back to the island on a permanent basis.

The baby wriggles making moves of wanting to get down from the table, the sudden distraction is welcomed, taking the edge of the solemnity of the question, Larissa puts the baby on the floor, he happily crawls away and plays around our feet as the story continues.

### ***Nana and Granddad's Place***

A smile begins to form on Larissa's face again and her story turns to her childhood, she recalls the many enjoyable days spent playing at her grandparent's house on Palm Island. Her nana Mavis, allowed her and her siblings to play freely, antennae up, nanna Mavis was ever watchful and ready to discipline when it was needed, her eyes and ears not missing a thing. Chuckling now, Larissa talks about her memories of the first time her nana taught her how to cook her first meal:

*Nana used to let us do all the things, let us play, just show us how to cook – the first thing I learned how to cook for a meal was custard, when I was a little girl, she taught us how to cook. That custard and bread and butter pudding, (arrgh at the delicious memory)!*

The thought of homemade bread and butter pudding and custard makes us spit for it, wishing we could taste it right now; we laugh our heads off at our behaviour.

Larissa turn her story to the “*real good*” times with her family living outdoors; “*I remember swimming every morning, every day swimming – eating bush food, mangoes, going for walks on the reef and we’d take off on our bikes every day, we were always outdoors those days*”. Annual family events of Christmas and camping were particularly enjoyed Larissa describes them as the best family time between grandparents, parent, aunties and uncles and extended family members where fun was tied with teaching and learning. “*Mum and grandad took us out, we used to have Raymond, mum’s big brother, used to take us out in the boat, just all the kids and he would let us all wait in the boat while he would dive in and give us each one fish*”. Talk of her grandparents brings up thoughts of her grandfather John. “*Yeah, grandad was there, grandad was really a lovely old man*”. Time seems to stand still as Larissa pauses and listens to the silence of remembrance, her grandad John now passed on, “*Grandad used to drink a lot, he used to drink but he was really lovely, he died when he was too young I think*”. The close relationship she had with her grandparents Mavis and John is significant now as in her childhood; the reach of their influence is evident in her life as she talks about teaching her children what her grandparents taught her. Yarning about her Grandad John, Larissa remembers him telling her stories of his mother and how she was a strict old woman with the children compared to his father who was a gentle old man:

*She used to flog them and be real cruel or so he’d say, - yeah and he showed us a picture of her one day and she was really pretty, old Nana Jessie, a beautiful old woman ... he used to say that’s my mother there and I wouldn’t believe him because he looked more like Grandad see? But he said she was the strict one, not Grandad.*

In her eyes, her Grandad John inherited his softness from her great grandfather, no matter how much she and her siblings provoked her grandad to anger he would never raise a hand to them. *“Grandad was always sticking up for us. Even when we were small, we used to swear at him but he’d just growl – Nana always wanted to hit us but he stuck up for us”.*

### ***A Mother’s Protection***

Larissa turns her attention to her mother now describing her gentle manner and how she went to great lengths to protect her and her siblings in the home and community. She shares that her mother and grandparents taught her the importance of providing a disciplined environment for her children. Now as a parent she explains to her children that she had to accept discipline from her grandparents when she was a child just like they have to expect to be disciplined at home:

*I want my kids to know who their grandparents are and where they came from and what they’ve been through and you know if I’m correcting them I’ll say ‘well when I was your age, you know, I’d be getting a hiding if I was talking back to my Mum or my Nana or anything like that’...*

Larissa recollects how her mother and grandparents allowed others in the community to verbally discipline her which she accepted as a standard of practice, with never a thought of rebelling *“I wouldn’t back answer no-one at all, no other parent or anything like that, I would just take it. I wouldn’t even tell Mum”*. Larissa knew her mother would be informed about her behaviour and knew there were consequences to face when she got home.

We sit for a while in silence, thinking about what’s been said, I notice Larissa’s facial expression change, sadness appears, her eyes averting mine she shares about her father whom she hardly saw when she was growing up *“he was there, but difficult,*

*Mum was the main carer”, memories of father daughter activities are scant “I can’t really remember him doing stuff with us, like going fishing or anything, it was always Mum taking us with Nana, always us, we were never around Dad’s family for the important things”. Essentially reared by her mother Dianne and the help of her Nana Mavis, Larissa learnt the importance of making sure the children were kept safe in and out of the home:*

*I learnt a lot from Mum. I think I’m just a bit more careful about – sometimes I get a bit um – ah what can I say? – I think protective over the kids. Like, because Mum was protective of us you know, she was the only one looking after us and Dad used to bash her up... she protected us...*

Larissa reveals how her mother Dianne would always put the children first and would not let them see any of the “*bad stuff*” even though they could hear the fights her mother would still be reassuring them that they would be alright. The next day Dianne would go out to work and Larissa would be left in the care of her aunt or nana. “*No matter what was going on with her life, she always put us first, she always made sure we got to school, had feed in our belly and clean clothes and stuff like that, she just always looked after us. Her strength was her love. She loved all her kids, - protected us*”. Larissa believes in the importance of the extended family helping parents to care for their children when the father is absent, and gives thanks that her children have their father in their home always available to them.

### *Parenting in partnership*

The mood in the room changes and is brighter now, Larissa’s story turns to the way she and her fiancé are growing up their children, tongue in cheek she compares their parenting “*I think I’m soft but I’m the one who can say ‘no’ really whereas, my partner, he’s more stricter than I am but he always gives in to the kids*”. She laughs at



the difference in their style, at that moment two of the younger ones come running into the kitchen giggling as they escape from their father's care in the next room. Larissa takes all this in her stride, and with an obligatory growl of discipline sends them back to their father. *"I hardly hit the kids I'm always just growling and growling"*, her approach to discipline is verbal growling and withholding privileges when she needs to with the children, which, most of the time is successful in her estimation. She makes special mention that as a direct result of her childhood experience of domestic violence she pays particular attention to protecting her children, at the same time she takes care to make it clear to me that there is no violence in her current relationship with her children's father.

### *Marriage Plans*

The mention of her partner lightens Larissa's mood; now bubbly with excitement she tells me *"well yeah, we're going to get married when we save enough money"*. Ahh, our excited tones of expectancy and laughter can be heard in the kitchen at this new revelation, it's exciting business, and her mother thinks so too:

*I mean Mum, she's really excited about it, I think she's happy you know that we're going in that direction, that we want to get married I think because it was important for her to see her daughters have found love, someone to love them back, yeah and a father you know that's going to be there for all their kids – just all the things she didn't have really, so I think it's important to her.*

Larissa views marriage as an important step in providing stability and security in the home in a committed relationship. She believes in having two parents in a family, and speaks well of her fiancé, praising his fatherhood paying tribute to what he brings into their relationship in his role of father and husband.

Her view of motherhood is very hands on; she tries to make sure that the children have what they need on a daily basis. *“For me – I want to be the one to send them to school and be here when they get home and cook their dinner, care for them every day”*. Mothering includes being a storyteller as well, she reveals telling stories to her children brings joy, small fun yarns about family members and her childhood are much loved favourites with the children, they love it and have a good laugh. Larissa also uses her storytelling as a way of looking back and teaching her children about the past and family and how they looked after each other. One of her memories is going to the Catholic Church on Palm Island as a child with her nana learning about her faith, seeing it outlived in her nana’s life, and now she wants to raise her children with the knowledge of God and to teach them about the importance of faith:

*I’m not going to church as much as I did but I still have my faith and I believe in God – I think that’s important too. I think if I throw that away, I have nothing really. You know like you’ve got to believe in something, and that’s where Nana came in mainly, like she took us to church and was that strength on the spiritual side. Like things that happened in her past, she was able to move on, through her faith, by going to church.*

Larissa’s spirituality is deeply connected with her relationships with family, she shares that she spends a lot of time with her sisters and their children, in Townsville and on Palm Island. Much of their time is spent on the beach with their nana. She makes the observation that families need to:

*get their kids out more, teach young men to fish, you know go fishing and go swimming down the beach as a family, all together. You know, when you’re out together with your kids down the beach or something there’s always something to laugh at, you’re always laughing, you know you’re happy, you talk about it for a long time.*

Larissa remembers her nana telling stories about putting the babies’ legs in the sand to make them strong for walking. She tells a funny yarn about her own baby

Shauna who was over twelve months old before she walked, and her nana Mavis told her *“take her down there now and bury her legs in the sand, she’s lazy you know”*, Larissa said her daughter spent more time eating the sand than anything else, but being together with the family romping around Shauna, legs buried in the sand was the best part. Times with her family brings a lot of enjoyment

### *Child Welfare*

Not all families and family members share the same joyful experiences as Larissa; she talks with sadness about families being torn apart under stressful circumstances. One particular incident has left an imprint in her memory that distresses her when she relates the circumstances. It’s the story of her cousin who had her children removed from her care by the Department of Child Safety and the devastating effects it left. Larissa saw the children being driven away by child safety workers as her cousin was left standing to look on:

*they dropped her off here and her kids were in the car and they were driving away, the kids were going mad, - crying - that’s too sad,- she had a look on her face like she was upset but she didn’t cry, she just walked away with her head down you know and didn’t want to look at them.*

Larissa relates that her cousin has not been reunited with her children since they were removed those four years ago, she believes the system gave up on her cousin and stigmatised her. This story makes her angry at the child welfare system and its failure to help the parents in the process for reunification *“they’re being judged all the time, yeah, you know, being questioned”*. The story doesn’t end here, Larissa shares that her cousin turned to alcohol to dull the pain, got pregnant and *“you know Child Welfare know her too well, they know the bad side of her and they’ll just probably take that one too”*. Larissa reasons that Murri parents are easily judged by professionals and society,

and this is one of the reasons why parents don't want to have anything to do with the system. She puts across her concern about the system fostering Murri children out to white families and believes this can have a negative effect on the child's self-esteem and identity as a Murri. She reveals a situation of having a family member living in her neighbourhood in foster care. Larissa has never spoken more than a few words to her because the child is prevented from having any meaningful contact with the family by her non Aboriginal carer. Nevertheless Larissa acknowledges her family member by waving to her as she walks to school. Larissa finds the whole child welfare business very distressing:

*I think they give up on the parents too easy you know they just take them or leave them you know, they're not going to change. I reckon if they're going to take the child away, I reckon they should help that mother, or father, help them more like get them back on their feet and then they can get their kids back.*

### *Looking to the Future*

Larissa is coming to the end of her story; she emphasises the importance of family and knowing family history. She talks about the negative light that Palm Island is portrayed in and disregards what is being said in the media and by society at large. She believes that there is still strength in families on Palm Island and people are not looking close enough to see it:

*Everybody looks at Palm like it's a bad place but I grew up there and I loved growing up on Palm, it was the best years of my life, as a kid on Palm Island – everybody's just looking at the negative stuff, reckon all the kids are going to grow up and do the same thing but I think they're looking at the people who are drinking and walking the streets but there's still a lot of people over there who go camping and fishing and stuff like that, there is still a lot of strength there – family is the most important thing on Palm.*



**Figure 10: Larissa and her two sons, Colin and Thomas**

*(This photograph is included with written consent from Larissa.)*

## CHAPTER 8

### FAMILY STORY 4: “WE’VE MADE IT THROUGH”

#### Background

*This family story is about Aunty Beryl and her family, Aunty Beryl was sent to Palm Island as child with her parents under the Aboriginal Removal Orders. She was raised by two parents in the camp with her siblings and the wider family group. She grew up on Palm Island, and later attended college to study theology. As a young woman, she was employed as a nanny to a white family with whom she continued a long friendship with in her later years. She is a widow; a mother of three, two sons and a daughter, a grandmother and great grandmother.*

*Boleen is Aunty Beryl’s 41 year old daughter who lives on Palm Island with her only son Christopher and granddaughter Lauren. Boleen is employed in early childhood education and has given many years to teaching and raising children in the community. Boleen also cares for others in the Murri way and also cares for her brother’s children when the need arises.*

*Sondra is Aunty Beryl’s 20 year old granddaughter; although Sondra is not a biological mother, she cares for many of the young family members and is known as ‘mum Sondra’ in the Murri way. Sondra has recently completed her secondary schooling and entered into the workforce on Palm Island hoping to obtain further education.*

## Aunty Beryl



**Figure 11: Aunty Beryl**

*(The photograph above of Aunty Beryl is included with written consent from her daughter Boleen.)*

Aunty Beryl and I are sitting in her Mango Avenue unit on Palm Island. Aunty Beryl is a mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, and Aunty to many (not necessarily blood relations) in the community. She holds a place of matriarchal respect within her extended family as she is now the last of her siblings in her immediate family.

Mango Avenue is significant in that it was the main point reference of apartheid on the island, it is an avenue of mango trees that was planted in the early 1920's; it separated the living areas of the Aboriginal community from the living area of the white government staff. During the time of apartheid Aboriginals were prohibited from walking down Mango Avenue, they were only allowed on the avenue for work purposes with a police escort, the practice of apartheid ceased in 1971.

## *Rainforest People*

Aunty Beryl begins her story by recounting memories of her family connections with Palm Island. She recalls that her father was born in the rainforest town of

Herberton, and her mother was raised on a cattle station in Minbooka. Aunty was told by others that her parents and siblings were sent to Palm Island in 1938 because her father had asthma, at the time of her family's relocation to Palm Island she was a three month old baby, accompanied by her brothers Neville and John, and sister Lena. Aunty describes her parents as quiet people, *"knowing my mum and dad they were so quiet, very quiet people, not troublesome so it was either people who got in trouble or people who had some sort of sickness that they sent here"*. Aunty's voice reveals her uncertainty of why her parents were sent to Palm Island, one story she has heard was that her father was ill, another story, which she is more inclined to believe was because Palm Island was a penal settlement at the time. She speaks of the loss of knowledge of her birthplace of Herberton and the loss of her language as a result of being sent to Palm Island. Aunty explains that she was just a baby when she came to Palm Island and her parents did not speak to her about the loss of their language. Her sadness is evident in her voice and facial expressions as she shares her experience:

*When we came here, as I was growing up I remember my mum and dad used to talk language, we lived around the Cooktown area there and they used to talk language. We caught on a few things but they were told not to speak it publicly so they lost all that, all the language, all the cultures, we weren't allowed to practice our culture here, the only thing that we had was our corroboree. Apparently it happened to everybody. Everybody that came here like I don't know if it was a government thing, they were trying to make us into white citizens and they didn't want us speaking language in the schools or even when you went into town. But our people still kept it quiet, you know they used to still talk their language and they knew where they came from, they knew their tribe and our tribe was Jirrabal and that includes Herberton, Ravenshoe, Mt. Garnet area and both mum and dad they lived in that same area so we sort of had that one tribe, Jirrabal. They never told me anything. I was the last child see, and by that time, by the time I was grown up, they'd actually forgot, you know they were speaking perfect English. So like by the time I grew up, there was nothing, there was no language being spoken any of the time. But, when the old people used to get together they'd greet one another in their language but most of it was they had to speak English.*



Aunty talks about growing up living in a one bedroom coconut house with a dirt floor, the walls and roof were made of coconut leaves and corrugated iron, much the same as other homes on the island at the time. She speaks with pride about how these homes remained standing during a cyclone. Other memories of her childhood filter through in her story such as adding green pawpaw to stews because they were poor and could not afford potatoes. Aunty shares her feeling that these were hard but happy times as a child, full of fun times with the family as they went out on family camping and hunting trips.

Aunty shares that her childhood memories of family togetherness has taught her the importance of family. She relates how she learnt from her parents' generation, everyone used to go to church when she was a child and how the people had values. She speaks of how her parents and others genuinely carried out their parenting and childrearing responsibilities in their own homes and also in the community. Even though her parents could not read or write Aunty says that her parents had an instinct of how to look after the family, *"they knew there was an instinct in them and they knew what to do"*. She consistently speaks about how she and her siblings were raised in a strict and respectful manner by her parents which is much the same as the old people grew up their children on Palm Island in a close knit community:

*They brought us up strict, we had rules in our house. They were clean people, they kept us fed and happy and it was with most of the families on the island at that time. You know there was a real family connection, really happy times and I had a lovely, happy childhood growing up on Palm and I've never come across any bad thing happen in my life because I suppose we were always with our families, we've never wandered away that anything could have happened. In those days, every family, every parent was responsible for their own family.*

When she was about ten-years old Aunty Beryl's father died at the age of forty-six years and her mother remarried Jim Julian whom she remembers as a lovely Christian man who was able to guide her like her father did:

*So he was able to guide me too like my dad did and just by having parents there with you all the time, that made us strong – that's how I brought my children up you know, tried to keep them together and we had a strong family bond.*

She shares that she felt strong and secure when there were two parents in her family. Aunty tells a small yarn of how in her adult years she and her brothers and sister and their spouses would gather at her mother's house almost every evening to sit with each other and have family contact time.

### *Learning and Teaching*

Aunty Beryl talks about her childhood again and how she learnt to do things through watching her mother work in the house. When she was growing up Aunty was required to do jobs, such as sweeping, making beds and other house duties. She shares she learnt domestic skills but she also had to do the cleaning because the house was regularly inspected by a government health inspector. *"They used to come around and inspect the houses, the outside as well as the inside to make sure that people kept their homes clean"*. She also learnt other skills from her mother as a seamstress and cook which gained her employment in later years in the Palm Island Hospital. There is one particular work experience that Aunty speaks of with warm smile on her face. Aunty was employed as a nanny to a white family off the island; she shares about a long friendship that she had developed with the family, one that she continues to cherish today. Aunty believes that the teachings of her own parents helped her forge lasting friendships:

*And I lived in the home as one of those people, I was a nanny and yet I was like a member of that family and even today I keep in touch with one family in Sydney. The lady's 80 now, two years ago I had the chance of going back to see her and it was just the same like I'd never left so that, I believe was from how my mum and dad brought me up way back then.*

Aunty's story reveals what she has learnt from her parents she has put into effect in the way she has raised her children. She asserts that she has tried to raise her children by leading them like her parents reared her, keeping her family together, praying for her children and creating a strong family bond. She speaks with pride as she names her children and the way they are living their lives now:

*Albert always says "yes, mum, I know, I remember what you taught me" and I see a lot of good things in Albert, Dennis was on the right track, he was doing a good job there, I brought him up and he was doing a good job, Boleen, I'm happy for her because she listened, she's got a good job, she's got her life sorted out...And, like I said, I look at my nieces and nephew, I can see some of the good things that came out from their mother and father too.*

Aunty Beryl also speaks of her brothers' and sisters' children as if they were her own children; Aunty shares that she is the sole surviving member of her parent's family and now "*stands in the gap*" for all of her sibling's children. She holds a position of respect among her extended family with the authority to speak in to their lives from the oldest to the youngest. Aunty asserts that respect is an important component of a strong family. She shares about teaching and passing on respect by ensuring each family member knows the 'proper' relationship to each other. As soon as a family member is born, the older members teach the younger ones how the newborn is related to them. Aunty explains that even when a younger child of four years old is aunt to an older child of ten-years old, the four year old is given the respect of their status by the ten-year old and other family members:

*I know my family as soon as they're born, we tell them that's you're little niece and that's your little nephew and when they go to school, in the*

*school ground, they respect them. And Tooya tells everyone 'they've got to call me 'Aunty''. You know because she took on that role as an Aunty because we keep telling her respect, we tell them to respect – even the big ones – you've got to respect Aunty Tooya.*

Aunty and her family members strive to keep the family connections strong and believe that they are successful as they carry on today. She believes that family members have to 'have a say' about rearing children because family need to be strong and lean on each other, they need to know their roots and connections. Aunty comments that not all families are as strong today as they were in the years of her parents' generation. In her view this is a result of interruptions of society and technology that is taking people's attention away from their families. She comments with a mixture of sadness and hope that families only seem to really connect now at Christmas time, however she still sees this as positive event because families are still coming together each year.

### ***'Lookin' Out for Each Other - Camp and Dormitory***

Aunty explains that the concept of family was not limited to blood ties but it extended into the wider community and included her childhood friends and their parents. She relates how her childhood friends were like sisters to her and how she learnt to respect their parents and called them aunty and uncle. She talks of the agreement between her parents and other parents to look after each other's children and to chastise and discipline them when it was needed:

*But they say, if they saw any other children doing something wrong, they had the right to correct them and all the parents agreed that you look after one another and check the kids so, to us, everybody was aunty and uncle and that became a real family tie with everybody, even today. Even today we still have that connection with the families from back then; you know it comes right up until today.*

She tells small yarns about children who ‘wagged’ school to go to the beach or other places during school hours. Because they were a close community there was always an adult around who would correct the truant children and send them off to school. Adults other than parents were also around to supervise children’s leisure time, Aunty Beryl talks about how the adults supervised lots of children who would swim at the beach front and how she and other children felt safe everywhere they went on the island:

*We felt safe because we knew we had an adult there but most of all too I suppose, it was growing up – there was no alcohol or drugs in our days and it was beautiful here in those days, you felt safe. You felt safe everywhere you went.*

Aunty Beryl’s story relates the closeness of her childhood relationships with her friends and how this has continued to the present day. She believes this is because of the shared experiences of being sent to Palm Island, growing up in the camps and building a community together. She speaks of the enduring bond with others who have left the island for many years whom she has met again:

*Because, when you leave this place, you meet people out on the mainland that have gone away from here for years, you’re still a sister or brother or Aunty to those people and that’s come because we lived so closely together. It was really a closely knit family.*

### ***Dormitory Friends***

Aunty’s story now turns to her memories of girls growing up in the dormitory and how they looked after each other. She tells of the friendships that she forged at school with girls from the dormitory and how they told her stories of their childhood of being taken from their family and placed in the dormitory on Palm Island. Aunty now tells their story as it was told to her of how the girls would cry in the night and the older girls would comfort them, through these circumstances the girls built their relationships of support in the dormitory:

*I never ever knew what they were really doing in the dormitory; I never knew that they were stolen from their parents. They used to get up and cry for the mum or dad at night and the bigger girls used to comfort them and that's how they formed a relationship, the dormitory – all the people that were in the dormitory, they formed a strong relationship by supporting one another because they all grew up without parents. And then they were about 16, that's when they left and then they had to fend for themselves. But, yeah, they really had a hard time you know.*

Aunty's sadness is evident in her voice as she recalls going away for a few years to college and on her return to the island she found out that her some of her friends were sent back to where they were taken from. Conversely, some of her friends stayed on Palm Island and built a life for themselves when they left the dormitory. Aunty talks of the difficulty that she observed in the lives of the dormitory girls in the community:

*They weren't as close as we were you know like ... some of them were in the dormitory and never had that – yeah, never had that close relationship with their mothers and fathers, that's where it comes down to. And when they came out, they had to fend for themselves, they had to build their lives up and when they got married, well they had to try and plan their life. But, without having that first contact from their parents, that's where a lot of the breakdown is. I grew up with my family and, when I went to school, I had lots of friends in the dormitories. I had lots of friends in the dormitory and we were very close and, anyhow, I went away at the age of 15 to that church college and I was away for a few years and, when I came back, I asked for so and so and they said oh she went back to where she came from and I said 'what?' I said 'I thought she was a Palm Islander' and they reckon no, she came from Coen or she came from Weipa or some other, you know those other communities up there.*

Aunty shares it was a difficult time but she notes that it was compulsory practice in the dormitory era for the girls to go to church which she believes gave them a sense of hope and kept them alive during their times in the dormitory.

### **Spirit**

Here Aunty's story focuses on her own spiritual life experiences, she speaks of the time she went away to the church college at fifteen years of age. Aunty talks of the things she learnt to appreciate and of the things others taught her during her stay in the

college. Aunty Beryl believes that these college experiences strengthened the foundations of her parents' teachings and added to the development of her personal character:

*You see when I went to this college; I was that grateful to see the food, I knew that we didn't have those things back home. I appreciate everything, any advice people give me, I'd listen to it because I wanted to learn more and more and more. And, in doing so, you build your character up and you know people used to say to me, white people used to say to me, 'where did you go to school?' because I spoke so good. I stood on my own but it's because of the teaching that I had back here, and Mr Krause was part of that too, in teaching you know. So, a lot of us are like that, all stood up for what was right and that's because of how we were brought up. Strong, we've got strong characters today. We had to learn, we had to fend for ourselves and that's where we are today. Because of that, because of what happened back then, the strict discipline we had made us men and women today, I believe that.*

Aunty's story reveals that her spiritual experiences did not start in her church college years, nor were they limited to the practices of a Christian church. Aunty shares some of her observations and experience of the spirit world from a Murri perspective. She tells a story of a childhood experience of hearing the music and singing of the corroboree of the old people, the Sundowners who lived near the big mangroves between the current state school and Catholic school.

Sundowners or Sundown people are the Aboriginal people from the Western Queensland region, mainly comprised of the Kalkadoon people. They lived in one camp area on Palm Island known as the Sundown camp.

The Sundowners used to gather in a central area near the mangroves on a big sandbar where as Aunty relates:

*They used to do all their corroborees, that was their sacred ground and no women were allowed to go in there. I remember walking along the beach and we'd hear the didgeridoo and the clap stick and it would send shivers down your spine. You know so we grew up in that era and they used to – like what they say – if they had an enemy, they had to be*

*careful you know because they were catching one another, taking clothes and things like that – the singing, they used to sing people.*

Aunty recalls the many tribes of the old people that lived together on the island and the tribal wars that occurred during those times. She remembers the children were told to be home in their houses before the sun set because the men would be walking around all painted up according to their tribe:

*All the children had to be home in their house because any men that were out there, they'd walk around painted up. I remember seeing one person come to our house all painted up with a bundle of spears and it was frightening but he moved on you know.*

Aunty describes the tribal fighting which would end in fatalities in some instances and also the practice of the 'Clever Men' who possessed certain knowledge of the Aboriginal spirit world and how they utilised their knowledge. She speaks of stories of supernatural events that have taken place on the island, which are still talked about today. In her eyes these wars and spiritual events were a direct result of the tribes forced living conditions by the government. Aunty recounts the tribal tensions of early days living as strangers to each other but she now sees that over time of living together tribal strangers have become one people on the island. *"We were all sisters and brothers and cousins and it's marvellous you know I think about the Lord, the Lord placed us all strangers on this Island, 40 tribes and we became one and now that bond is so tight."*

### **God Comes In**

Aunty Beryl speaks of her love of going to church as she was growing up on the island. Her story reveals her strong belief that she has a vocation in the Christian church even in her current age and shares yarns of how God has met her daily needs. She talks about living a good life on Palm Island with no regrets and believes that God has placed



his hand upon Palm Island and brought the people through the difficult times.

*“Sometimes you think you’re in a situation where there’s no end to that situation but it does end and I believe God comes in and helps people”.* Aunty speaks of living and doing good things for others and good things are returned. *“Yeah. The good things you know, you’ve got to do something good to get a good thing back, yeah you reap what you sow and that’s been my motto you know. If you want to be treated good, you’ve got to treat somebody else the same and that’s how I look at my life”.* Aunty also shares her belief that families are in a bad way on the island because of becoming so involved in the material things in their lives at the expense of their spiritual life. Aunty finishes her story by making known her thoughts about Palm Island:

*God’s got a plan for Palm Island, He keeps saying it all the time. And I can see us, nobody wanted us back in those days, it was just out of sight, out of mind but now this place is such a beautiful paradise, everybody wants it now...The first nation people of this land,...God will do something her but, until that time, see we’re still waiting for that time to come. But yeah, God planted us here in this place and I said all these outsiders coming in, they’re not going to take this place, they’re not because I believe deeply in my heart God’s got a purpose for Palm Island. And anybody coming in and trying to do something, God won’t let that happen until His plan has been fulfilled first.*



## **Figure 12: Aunty Beryl at celebration of her tribal Jirrabal heritage**

*(Post Script: Aunty Beryl lost her battle with a chronic medical condition and entered into Eternity on Wednesday 27th July 2011 on Palm Island two weeks after validating her story. The photograph above was taken as a celebration of her tribal Jirrabal heritage shortly before her death and included at the express request of Aunty Beryl)*

## **Boleen and Sondra**

Boleen is Aunty Beryl's daughter, and youngest of her three children. Boleen is 41 years old, she is mother to Chris, her only child and grandmother to Lauren. In addition to her biological family Boleen is caring for other children and young adults who share her home. Sondra is part of the next generation and is Aunty Beryl's 20 year old granddaughter who boasts of sharing her birthday with her grandmother and expresses the joy she feels when they get to spend their birthdays together. Sondra is not a parent as yet but she shares that she has had a lot of experience caring for her extended family's young children.

Boleen was born in Quilpie, Qld and came to Palm Island with her parents as a five year old child. Boleen's education was shared between Palm Island and the mainland from primary to secondary school. Her father was a community orientated man who was an active community worker involved in the various community organisations in the Palm Island community. Boleen and her siblings were raised by her mother and father until her father died when she was a young adult.

## ***Long Beach Days***

Boleen begins her story with sharing memories of her parents taking them out on camping and fishing weekends where they would meet up with her cousins and spend the days together in family fun. In particular Boleen talks about her mother's story and how her grandparents instilled in her mother the importance of family. She

recalls how her mother; a keen gardener and would take her and her cousins up the hills and wade through swamp looking for water lilies and other plants to add to her home garden. She speaks of these activities as family bonding times where teaching and learning were mixed in with the fun they experienced. Boleen reminisces that the main aspect of her childhood was family togetherness. Her story conveys a childhood where play times with her cousins would last all day, interrupted by eating bush food to sustain them throughout the day until they went home before sunset. Boleen's describes her childhood growing up on Palm Island as good times full of fun. She shares that the absence of mobile phones and television afforded her and her cousins a freedom in their childhood which she observes as lacking in the present day for children in the community.

### *The Way Mum Grew Me Up*

Boleen's story turns to her recollections of her mother's childrearing practices. She shares that her mother imparted to her and her brothers the importance of living right, she remembers her mother taking her and her siblings to church and teaching them about the moral and spiritual principals of living. Boleen's story reveals how her mother was also protective of her and would always endeavour to keep her away from bad influences in her teenage years. This meant many nights of staying home whilst her cousins were allowed by their parents to go out to the disco. Boleen explains that at the time she didn't understand why she had to stay at home but as she looks back on her teenage years she now understands her mother's decisions were to keep her safe from negative influences. Boleen's story also reveals how her parents instilled a strong sense of work ethic as she and her brothers were taught to work from an early age as entrepreneurs, to make their own pocket money. She believes that her parents gave her a foundation to pursue employment and to continue to improve her knowledge; which

is something that she continues to practice today in her work as a Teacher's Aide at the community school.

### *We Are One Big Family*

Boleen continues her story and it is at this point where her story becomes intertwined with her mothers. She reveals how her mother took on the responsibility of raising her first grandchild and other children who are not blood relatives who were given to her family in the Murri way because their mothers were not able to care for them. Boleen explains that it was common practice in her mother's time for children to be given to other families on the island to grow up, this practice is still happens today in the community. Boleen tells of how as a child she would help care for the children in her mother's care after school whilst her mother worked.

This practice continued as Boleen grew up and other children came into their family for care. Boleen shares how she is now carrying on this practice and has become the primary carer for the last 20 years for other children and young adults who currently live with her in the community. Boleen reflects and speaks about taking on her mother's role of caring for the family *"Like now I feel like I took on her role of looking after everyone, sort of like how mum grew her grandchildren up and kept them together"*. Boleen becomes teary eyed when she talks about taking on the role that her mother did in the family, she speaks about being the storyteller now and fulfilling her role of teaching the younger family members about their family heritage. She shares that she sees herself as holding the family, now that her mother's health is deteriorating by passing on what her mother taught as her.

### *Men and Fathers*

Caring for children from other families has brought its challenges; Boleen speaks about the complexities of caring for those who live with her. One of the main

issues that she reveals in her story is the loss of identity that the children/young adult are experiencing. She shares candidly of the pain she sees and the cries that she hears in particular in the young male adults who are grieving for an unknown father. As Boleen speaks about this her eyes are glassy with tears and her facial expression shows her sadness. However she explains that although there is pain, her family is constantly present to provide love and security and she continually reassures the young men of their place of belonging in her family. Boleen shares about her parenting experience of raising her only son as a single mother from the age of seventeen-years old with the help of her mother and extended family. Boleen believes that fathers have an important role in a family. She reveals that when her son was a teenager she took him to his father's country to reconnect with his father and his father's family. Boleen believes that this was an important step to undertake for her son's identity and emotional and mental health.

Both Boleen and Sondra agree that the role of a father is important, in particular as role models for boys in the family. However, they go on to clarify that not all families have their father living with them and women have taken on the role of childrearing by default. Boleen speculates that a lot of men are away from the community because they are in prison and this is why women have had to take over and fulfil the role of men. Sondra speaks of her father and describes him as being a good support person for her, whose presence in the home provides security for her and her family. She speaks with happiness in her voice of the things her father has taught her and her siblings as they went out on the boat doing family activities together around the island. Boleen then continues the conversation and adds a general comment of her observations of the current involvement of young fathers in the community. She notes that father's who are in the community are getting involved in child care; taking their

children out fishing and camping and directly with admiration in her voice she directly knows a father who is undertaking baby care for several days while a mother is sick.

### *Insights of Aunty and Niece*

Boleen's story reveals a noticeable change in her twenty-year experience of caring for children and young adults and working in the area of early childhood education on Palm Island. She speaks of challenges in the school system to retain the students' attention in the classroom; and notes that students' literacy skills have deteriorated over the decades. Coupled with her teaching challenges, Boleen also notes that there is less respect shown by the younger generation for the older one. She asserts that children need positive parental role models in their lives as families are breaking up due to alcohol and drug addiction, consequently the children miss out on being taught the right way at home and do not have a clear footprint to follow from their parents. Boleen also talks about the rising number of young people becoming parents without having the foundations of life experience and the personal resources to cope with the difficult task of childrearing in a relationship.

Both Sondra and Boleen identify a need for relationship education for the younger generation on Palm Island who they believe are not adequately knowledgeable or skilled on healthy relationship building. Boleen asserts it's important for both parties to treat each other with respect in a relationship and learn about each other's expectation for the relationship before going any further and having children. She concludes that parenting is an experience which is full of the enjoyment of children and grandchildren, and having her extended family around. This is important for Murri families, *"it's about looking after each other and teaching the younger parents to "step up to the plate" to take on the responsibility of caring for their children"*. Sondra is still living with her parents and affirms that family is important, having them around

and supporting each other, doing 'life' together is special to her and her siblings. Sondra describes her grandmother as her idol whom she looks up to; she shares how she lived with her grandmother when she went to school off Palm Island for five years and how her grandmother taught her about family life along with teaching her other skills as gardening, and cooking. She speaks of her desire to learn and do well in life; she shares of her mother's and father's commitment to ensuring she went to school. Gaining an education and a good job are important aspirations that her parents have taught her. Sondra started working at the age of sixteen-years old and has remained employed over the last four years. She believes that working is important to her as it allows her to be financially independent of the social welfare system and her parents. Boleen and Sondra shares how they have learnt the value of employment from their parents. Both agree that having a job gives a sense of self worth as they reflect on the effects of unemployment they see in the community.

Sondra's story reveals insights about life as a young person and her peer groups. She is of the same mind as her aunt Boleen; that remembering the past is a way to foster a stronger youth in the present. She notes from her experience that the youth on Palm Island express their boredom mostly in destructive ways and need more support and encouragement from the community in order for them to go forward. She speaks about community events such as NAIDOC week celebrations and how she would like to see this happening all the time and not once a year. Sondra believes that community events such as these is encouraging to the young people as it showcases the strength of Palm Island culture and instils a sense of pride in the community. Sondra and Boleen converse on the positive emotions that cultural events evoke in the community.

NAIDOC - National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee originating from 1920s Aboriginal social justice movements. NAIDOC celebrations are now a national annual event that is celebrated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. NAIDOC also seeks to educate and raise awareness in the wider Australian community about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and their historical and contemporary culture

They speak in excited tones about tribal marches in NAIDOC week and the empowerment that adults and children feel when they walk behind their tribal flags as their sense of identity is affirmed in a public procession. *“Those who did not know their tribal names walked behind the Bwgcolman banner. It was really heart warming to see and people felt proud”*. Boleen and Sondra expresses the affirmation of Bwgcolman strength within individual people and the community that is still present today in the face of the negative attention from the media and politicians. Both believe that there is future for the youth on Palm Island and families will still live and support each other and teach each other about their heritage to build Bwgcolman strength.







**Figure 13: Aunty Beryl, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren**

*(The photographs above were included with the written consent of Boleen and Sondra. The top photograph is of Aunty Beryl and her grandchildren and great grandchildren; Sondra is in the striped shirt on the right. The bottom photograph is of Aunty Beryl and her daughter Boleen, grandson Christopher and great granddaughter Lauren (circa 2010))*

## CHAPTER 9

### FAMILY STORY 5:WHITE DOVE

#### Background

*Betty is an Elder on Palm Island; she is approximately 84 years old and has lived on Palm Island since early childhood. Educated to primary school level of year three, Betty worked as a teacher's aide in her early adulthood. Betty is a widow who had been married for 25 years to Thomas a Palm Island born man (now deceased) a mother of 10 children, grandmother of 36 grandchildren and great grandmother of 51 great grandchildren. White Dove is an affectionate name originating from the white Torres Strait Island Pigeon which is highly revered bird in the Torres Strait, the island men that travelled to Palm Island called Betty's mother-in-law a white pigeon when they first saw her because she was the fair skinned and beautiful wife of Thomas's father a respected Torres Strait Island man.*

*Magdalena is 58 years old, daughter to Betty and Thomas and is the next generation to step into Eldership. She was born and raised on Palm Island, and obtained a secondary school education at boarding school in Charters Towers. Magdalena is married to a European Australian man of Scottish ancestry whom she met on Palm Island in the early 1970s. She is mother to 6 children, and grandmother to 10 children.*

*Keira is Magdalena's 23 year old daughter who was born in Townsville and raised on Palm Island. Keira is the mother of Ari her only child at present. She has completed her secondary school education to the level of Year 12 and currently works full time in the Palm Island community.*

## Betty – White Dove



**Figure 14: Family Five Storytellers – Betty, Magdalena and Keira**

*(Photograph included with written consent from Betty, Magdalena and Keira)*

### *Sundown Woman*

Betty begins her story with identifying her name and the country she was taken from with her mother. She explains that they did not know why they were sent to Palm Island, but over time the reason became clear to her and others in the community:

*My name is Betty I came to Palm Island as a small girl, three years old – me and my sister; we came with my mother from Cloncurry, out West Queensland. We came with a lot of people who were sent here to Palm Island and those days they didn't understand what people were sent for but now they know.*

Betty believes she is one of the Stolen Generation because her mother was sent away from home and she and her sister Mary, who was a one year old at the time, were sent with her mother to Palm Island.

The Stolen Generation refers to young Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed under state government policy for the purpose of raising them separately from their Aboriginal culture and people under a planned government process of extinguishing Aborigines as a distinct nation of people. It is estimated that 50,000 children, most under five years old were forcibly removed from their family and country from 1910 – 1970.

### *Fantome Island & Dormitory*

Betty continues and explains the process of being confined to Fantome Island with her mother and others for quarantine purposes before arriving on Great Palm Island. She reveals that her mother Jessie obtained work on the island in the leprosarium and gave her and her sister into the care of another Aboriginal woman whom she calls Aunty Ethel for an interim period. Betty shares her experience of Aunty Ethel's care as one of a mother for a daughter who took Betty and her sister off Fantome Island to live in the dormitory on Palm Island for approximately four years. Betty describes Aunty Ethel as a kind and gentlewoman who taught her and Mary their early learning in moral and social values on Palm Island. She recalls an event that is imprinted on her mind where Aunty Ethel's teaching first came into effect. Betty tells a small yarn about arriving on Palm Island for the first time and being surprised at seeing a number of children who were darker in skin colour than those kids who were swimming at the jetty:

*When we first came over for the first time we saw a lot of children swimming at the jetty, the old jetty, they were all in a heap there swimming around and of course my sister Mary said "hey look, there's a lot of black kids there swimming" and I got a surprise too to see them all like that. But we saw so many black children and Aunty Ethel she corrected my sister and said to her "look you must not say that because you'll be going to school with them all". "Oh" she said – so that's the first sight we saw when we first came to Palm Island, all the children swimming.*

Betty's short years in the dormitory saw her forging strong and lasting friendships with other families in the same circumstances. She relays that she became known to the children in the other families as their sister a relationship that extends to the present day. Betty explains that it is Murri way to extend the family to others through friendships and marriages:

*"Yeah part of Murri yeah, to take one another in you know and treat them as family. And you get treated as family through marriages and that – if you marry into a family well that becomes your family. That's the Aboriginal way of life."*

Betty's stay in the dormitory came to a close around the age of 10 years as her mother met and married a man called Major on Fantome Island and they moved to Palm Island to start married life.

#### *Clumpoint Mob Now!*

Betty was returned into the care of her mother and stepfather and Aunty Ethel returned to her own community of Yarrabah. Betty's story reveals that her stepfather Major was a traditional Aboriginal man from Clumpoint who took Betty and Mary as his own daughters and officially changed their surname to his surname; and that they came to know and love him as their father. Betty relates that four other children were subsequently born into their family and they lived as one in the community. Betty's story tells not only of being adopted by a man from Clumpoint, but being adopted and recognised as belonging to the Clumpoint people. Even though Major was not her biological father the significance of his adoption of Betty and Mary has echoed down the generations of their children today in regards to land custodianship.

Betty speaks of her father as a gentle man who obtained employment as a baker and used his knowledge and skills to teach his family how to bake bread, which they freely gave to other families in the community. This was a practice that became a

lifelong tradition for one of Major's sons who passed it on to his children. According to Betty's sister Mary, Major's bread making skills were sort after by the white government staff as well. They regularly sent a note with money to Betty's parents to reserve a loaf of bread and the homemade butter Betty's mother would make.

### *Visiting the Old People*

Betty diverts her story and talks about the 'Old People' and how they lived their lives as quiet well mannered family orientated people. She identifies her people as the Sundowners, Kalkadoon people who came from Western Queensland and the Clumpoint people of North Queensland. She relates how her mother taught her and her siblings not to be 'flash' with the Old People. Betty recounts the times when her parents would take her on Saturdays to visit the Clumpoint people around Dee Street area, and to the Lime Shed every Sunday to visit the Kalkadoon people to learn of her cultural heritage. She yarns about her mother saying to her and her sister Mary *"look, don't you be flash from other people, I don't want you to grow up that way, flash from Old People"*. Her mother would take them to corroborees each week and Betty asserts that her mother was resolute in teaching her and her siblings the meaning of respect for Elders and culture. Sometimes her grandfather Joe would take her to Townsville where Betty would meet the Old People camped at Pallarenda Point. Betty further comments pensively that this kind of respect has gone astray on the island and reaffirms *"it was important for us to learn, to know the Old Peoples' way and that's how we all grew up you know. To understand the other people's ways"*.

### *Innocence*

Betty speaks of a childhood full of innocence where children would simply swim naked and play in the sea up until they were early adolescents without feelings tainted by guilt. Family outings which also included her grandfather Joe were a regular

occurrence. Betty voice becomes excited as she talks about school as an enjoyable venture where she learnt all sorts of things from fancy work to building a school garden near the big fig tree that stands in the centre of the community. She makes special note that her childhood was family and community orientated where the majority of family units had a mother and father present. In her eyes marriage was celebrated as a sacred vow made before God which is important when raising a family as couples did in her time; committed to caring for their families and other children in the community:

*They were married people, most of them, they had a mother and a father, they were married people in those days but it's different today, people are living together but in those days, people were married and brought their children up the right way, they way they see fit. See all the people in the old days were well mannered people, never gave any problems and trouble – they used to take care of one another's children. Yeah. And we used to tell one another if we saw any children doing wrong, we'd correct them, tell them to come home, like that and they would do it ... but today you can't do that because they'll pull you up in Court quick for interfering with their children whereas in the old days it was okay, we could chastise one another's children and nobody would say anything. That's how my children grew up you know, they grew up different.*

Betty believes that children of parents who are not married and live together feel less secure in their family. She clarifies her conviction by describing the inconsistency in relationships that she frequently observes in the younger generation and forms the conclusion that children do not benefit from the insecurity of an uncertain family life and outwardly show this in their aberrant behaviour in the community.

### *The Cornet Player and Making Music*

Betty's story turns here and she talks about meeting her husband Thomas, she begins by setting a scene and tells the story of the American soldiers who were encamped on the island coming into the community to meet and barter with people, American cigarettes for boomerangs, shields and spears and the odd silk stockings for

the women. Betty recalls she was 18 or 19 at the time and living with her mother, she would attend dances where she made friends with some of the band members who would go back to Betty's home after the dance to socialise. She remembers one boy in particular that stood out and describes him as well mannered, friendly, handsome and well built who played the cornet in the band, his name was Thomas. She relates how she and Thomas became close friends and eventually married after a two year engagement during which time Betty had to convince her mother that Thomas was a good man. Three years after their marriage the first of ten children was born, nine others came between the years of 1950 to 1965, Betty recalls with happiness living with her husband in her mother's house with her children and extended family. *"We all enjoyed ourselves there doing things together, going out to picnics, camping, fishing and going to church every Sunday"*.

Betty describes her husband as a hard working man who took on work where he could and sometimes it meant that he had to leave the island for a length of time to work on the cane fields and the railway to provide financially for the family. She shares he also would trawl the ocean in the early hours of the morning to catch mackerel to cook and sell to community members. She proudly adds that Thomas was the first man to buy a car and television and brought them to the island in the early 1960s. She tells how he would set up the television on the lawn in front of the house and the neighbourhood would be invited to watch the programs. *"We would share the TV with other people, by taking it out on the lawn and children would come to look at cartoons and big people would come to watch boxing. A few years later people started to buy their own TV and cars"*.

Betty describes a family life of going out on family walks in the evening and going down to the beach where Thomas would bury the youngest child's legs in the



sand to make the legs strong. *“Yes, everybody – when their children were small, they used to take them to the beach together and doing things together it would make them walk quicker than usual you know because we believed the sand would help them”.* Betty recalls that Thomas would play the piano accordion to make the children sleep after the family returned home from their evening walk and then he would sit and watch television when all the children were in bed asleep.

### ***Eating Carpet Snake – A Small Yarn***

Betty shares a yarn about her reaction to Thomas giving the children carpet snake to eat. She recalls how Thomas would call his children around him to taste a snake that he cooked, and Betty would question his actions, and Thomas whom she would call Dad on occasions would reply that he was teaching his children how to survive:

*Yes Dad would call all together and say come and have a taste and I would say ‘what are you feeding them with now – rubbish?’ And he would say ‘I’m teaching my children how to survive’ I don’t know about you, he’d say you can starve if you don’t want to eat. The same with the turtle – I didn’t like turtle very much, not the meat as such but the smell of it which I couldn’t stand and he used to say ‘stop screwing your nose, I’m cooking it’ and he would feed all with it. And his answer was ‘I’ll teach my children to eat bush food so they know how to take care of themselves’.*

### ***A Husband’s Legacy***

Here Betty’s story turns again, and she speaks of the sudden ending of her 25 years of marriage with the death of her husband Thomas. She describes his passing as a great loss to all, almost in the same breath she also affirms that God had blessed her and she continues to be blessed through the legacy of love given by her husband through the grace of God for their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Betty's story describes a close family life where she and Thomas ensured their children were taught to work and value the meaning a good education. She explains that Thomas was a strict and loving father who ensured that their children were prepared for the experiences of life outside the family when it was time for them leave home:

*Education was most important to him; he made sure all children were sent out to college on the mainland to get a better education so that they can get a better job. He also taught all to do other work too such as cleaning and washing up in the house, cooking, washing clothes and other little jobs around the house also to take care of one another, he also taught to respect people. When it was time for those to leave us to go out on the mainland, he would sit and explain to them about life on the mainland because he'd say from that day, they will be on their own and how to take care of themselves.*

Betty speaks with pride in her voice of her and Thomas's children and how they have succeeded in gaining a secondary education, and some a tertiary education. She affirms that all their children did well because of Thomas's belief in education and his ability to be a good provider for his family.

### *Reflections*

Betty is now the matriarch in the family and notes her age of 83, she has remained a widow for the last 38 years, she shares some of her reflections on the people of her generation who lived "through the strict laws" of the government describing them as hard days but happy ones. Betty reveals that people didn't agree with the rules they lived under but they made the choice to make build happiness in their lives.

Betty considers the lives of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and believes that they and other people of Palm Island are free to make a life of their choosing compared to her generation. She looks back on Palm Island history and speaks of those men and families that have fought for the freedom of Palm Island. She acknowledges the significant socioeconomic changes that have happened on Palm

Island which brings a distraction to family relationship building, in particular Betty sees the destructive elements of drugs and alcohol addiction in the community as harmful and “*changing everything*” in families:

*Well things have changed today because there's a lot of other things going on, the TV it draws the attention of children and videos and all that, games – we didn't have them in those days. Younger people you know get drawn into the smoking and drinking, all that is going on today which changes everything. It must be hard today with children because some of them haven't got a father figure to lead them, I guess they're just doing their own thing, the mother and father so the children just go off and do their own thing. It's a wrong that they'd doing and it's a sad thing.*

She believes that strong leadership is needed in the family and community for the young people in families and in general for the future of the Bwgcorman people. Betty reflects on the importance of giving the youth of Palm Island a voice and believes more resources should be made available to attain this:

*Young people always look for a leader in this community and they would sit and talk if there was someone interested in them because I used to talk to a lot of young people and they would come out and speak about things which they think should be done here on this Island. That's why it's important that somebody speaks to them all, I believe that – I'm always putting that across to people when I talk to them – do something for our young people*

Betty ends her reflection with voicing her desire to see the spiritual life of the people renewed and believes this will help them build their families again:

*I'd like to see people getting back to church like it was in the old days – we haven't given up on Palm Island – they will all one day get up and come to church, I pray all the time for them and I believe Palm Island is blessed, I believe we claim this Island for Jesus and one day, everybody will be going to church. I say that to the grandchildren, I might not be here, but they will see it.*

## Magdalena

Magdalena begins her story by situating herself as a married woman of 35 years to a non-indigenous Australian man of Scottish ancestry, a mother of six children and grandmother to nine children. She relates that she was born on Palm Island; she is the daughter of Betty and Tom Geia and is the child of a very large family of 10 children. Magdalena describes herself as having gained a lot of experience in childrearing as a result of her being the third child of a family of ten children. She explains that this gave her a position in the family whereby she would help in the house and look after her younger siblings.

### *Perceptions of a Mother*

Magdalena shares that her mother Betty always seemed to be busy and happy doing the housework and taking care of the children. She recalls how her mother would ask the children to do the jobs rostered to them but otherwise her mother allowed the children to enjoy their playtime as children:

*My mother was not always asking us to do too much, just if we can help and also if we can deal with rostered jobs because in a big family we need to have rostered jobs I think and I followed my Mum's example with my own children in that regard. Mum seemed to always be busy and happy to be doing her housework and taking care of all her children and I believe I've followed her in that way. She showed me that childrearing is not a hard job, it can be a happy job and I always try to be happy.*

Before Magdalena continues to tell her story she relates some points of her parent's story, firstly her mother's story of being brought to Palm Island as a child on government removal orders. Her account of her mother's story sheds a little more light on the reasoning behind her mother's removal:

*Mum said she was brought here to Palm Island through the removal orders, her mother was sent to Palm Island because she had two half caste children ... those children were taken over to Fantome Island, they had a home on Fantome Island for half caste kids and she was grown up by a lady called Mrs. Singleton and Mum would call her Aunty Ethel.*

### *Perceptions of a Father*

Secondly Magdalena recounts some of her father's childhood story that he had shared with her. Her father told her that he spent his childhood living in and out of the boys home (the dormitory) because his mother had died when he was a very young child and his father was away regularly with work:

*Dad told me that when he was a little boy, he was always in and out of the boys' home because his mother passed away when he was two years old and his father was from the Torres Straits had a lugger, a pearling boat used to go diving a lot for the crocus shells so dad was always left either with a grandmother, but mostly he was put in the dormitory, him and his brothers, a boys' home.*

Magdalena tells a small yarn she describes as "one good story" as told to her by her father. She recalls how her father shared that in the boys home they didn't have a lot of clothes and when their clothes got too dirty he and his best mates would wash them and dry them on the rocks. Whilst they were waiting for the clothes to dry her father and his mates would scramble about and play naked around the rocks. If the clothes took too long to dry her father and his mates would grab someone else's clothes off a line and run away into the bush to where the old traditional people lived at Luma Luma Camp. Her father said he and his mates would sit and listen to the old people speaking their language; he and his mates would learn to speak some of the words and make up their own language to communicate with each other:

*If their clothes didn't dry fast enough, they used to grab somebody else's clothes off the line and run away out to the bush, up to the Luma Luma Camp where the strong, traditional people were still at Luma Luma Camp and they used to sit in there and learn the language and because they weren't growing up with the language, they used to pick out some of*

*the language words and him and the others used to make up their own language between them for communication.*

Magdalena remembers her father telling her that he had a rough time in childhood because he didn't have a mother to raise him. She recalls that her father described his father as a tough man who taught him and his brothers' skills that required them to develop a considerable amount of physical and mental stamina as they grew into manhood. Magdalena shares that her father contemplated that his father was probably making them tough for the future:

*And I remember dad saying that – he had a pretty tough time growing up without his mother – he remembered some good times and when he got into teenage years, his father was a pretty tough man, he used to take them rowing and they used to row around the island, him and his brothers used to just row in a dinghy all over the place looking for turtles or other types of things to hunt, he said it might be old grandad was making us tough for the future.*

Here Magdalena shares her perception that her father wasn't too tough on his children, she relates that her father was a strong man whose word was taken seriously in the home, and on occasions he would hand out physical discipline. As Magdalena continues to speak about her father her story reveals a man who played with his children and invented games, who would take his children swimming, teaching them to dive as a deep sea diver. At other times her father would take the children possum hunting at night and this entailed Magdalena and her siblings walking in single file behind their father holding onto each other's clothing to avoid being lost, as they only carried one light, a spear and at times a rifle, on the hunt. *"That's the kind of dad he was, he was always sharing sort of hunting as a fun thing as well as getting food... it was fun to learn for children"*. Magdalena affirms that her father taught his children Murri ways and made their learning fun and enjoyable.

## *Perceptions of Parenting*

Magdalena now focuses on what she observed in the way her parents raised her and her siblings. She shares that her parents were very consistent with dealing with their safety. Magdalena relates how her parents were always mindful of the whereabouts of the children and enforced household rules such as asking permission to go out into the community and arriving home on the allotted time. *“I thought dad excelled himself as an individual to deal with the security of his family”*. Another observation that Magdalena reveals about her father’s parenting skills is his ability to provide for the family. She recalls her father growing vegetables and keeping a poultry run of chickens and ducks, as well as taking to the sea to fish for mackerel:

*As I got older, I used to help him in that vegetable garden. He had a chook run, we kept chooks and ducks and we got eggs from them and we were allowed to eat them but mostly it was used for bread and cakes and things like that which we used to sell. And he also fished, he was a fisherman, and he was always providing in every way he could because, having so many children, he was mindful and he was always reminding us that we have to be strong individuals.*

Magdalena remembers her father telling them *“if you want to be working in a white man’s world and succeed, you have to be strong people, individuals and go to school and get everything right at school”*. Her story reveals that education was an important aspect of their household as they were growing up. She talks about her father’s continuous encouragement to the family to strive to do well and get a good job to succeed. She shares that her father told her that he only gained an education level of grade two and that he made every effort to educate himself to read and write. *“He said I taught myself how to do most of the reading and writing that I do so you kids should find it a bit easier because you’re in a classroom”*. Magdalena muses that her father may have felt sad that he was not able to finish school but in her observations he was an extremely intelligent man with beautiful hand writing who kept a suitcase full of books

that he cherished, and he used to say to the family that *'in the middle room is my port full of books and nobody go and take the books out without talking to me first'*.

Magdalena ends her story with her evaluation of her parents, she affirms her belief that her parents worked well together in partnership providing a balanced family life of discipline and love.

*I think dad and mum combined, they worked very well together. And dad being that strong voice, making us listen and behave ourselves and mum always ready to grab us and give us a hug and making sure we were comfortable and cared for.*

## **Keira**

Keira is Magdalena's youngest daughter and mother to a four year old son whom she is raising on Palm Island with the help of his father and her family. Keira begins her story by identifying her parent's birthplaces and the circumstances of their meeting on Palm Island.

### ***Mum is Liker Her Mum and Dad Too!***

Keira shares how her mother would tell her stories of how her grandparents Thomas and Betty taught Magdalena the skills and knowledge to enable her to live her life as an independent adult. She also talks about her grandfather's ability to provide for his family and how this characteristic is evident in her mother's parenting style:

*Yeah well mum told me a bit about how she grew up, a hard working family you know, do what you've got to do to survive and that. About how her father would hunt and get out there to support the family and he moved off Palm Island to go and work on the mainland because there was no jobs here and well mum's always pushed that onto us ... I was working ever since I was younger because mum and dad had their own businesses and we were always in there helping them. And they've just pushed that onto us and probably that's what made us what we are today because all my brothers and sisters, the six of us, we all have jobs and have never been unemployed since we left school. I think that's good what they did with us, you know, they taught us to be independent, strong and we're good workers.*



Keira recalls her mother's endeavours to give her and her siblings as much freedom as possible to enjoy their childhood. She tells of her mother teaching them certain knowledge on bush foods, gathering and cooking it Murri way. She ponders and shares with a hushed voice her mother talking to her about 'coming of age' when it was expected that a young girl's childhood changed, and she was required to learn and behave more like a woman as best as she could.

### *From Childhood to Parenthood*

Keira's story now focuses on her parenting, she describes her parenting aim as striving to be caring and understanding, without placing too much pressure on her son. Keira is employed on the island and she shares her desire to be a positive role model in her son's life through her ability to work and live as independently as she is able to. She explains that her decision to live this way is her means of teaching her son the knowledge and skills she believes he will need to survive in the world as she makes note that *"parents aren't always going to be there for you, because one day they're going to leave and you have to teach your children to be strong and independent."*

Keira is currently teaching her son about fishing and bush foods that are safe to eat, she acknowledges that she will have to get her brothers involved in teaching her son about this as well as is the role of uncles in the family:

*I know in our family if you have a child, everybody's there like your mum and your dad and the aunties and uncles and everybody helps you then. But the boys in our families, like my brothers, take them out bush and you know tell them stuff, especially my older brother, Robert.*

### *The Importance of Culture*

Keira's story reveals her appreciation on and her stance of continuing cultural practices for the community. She particularly believes that the continuation of culture

is important for affirming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island identity in the younger generation:

*It's very important, that's where we come from, that's our being you know and we should always have it with us and I'm certainly going to teach my son the Aboriginal ways and Islander ways because that's part of the strength and it's where we come from.*

Keira continues and describes some of what she perceives as strong practices in the community in regards to childrearing, she particularly makes mention of seeing parents taking their children out camping, fishing and reefing. Keira also speaks with delight about parents taking the opportunity to encourage their children to participate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island dancing in the community. She shares that in her school years cultural dancing was a regular activity amongst her peers; and now laments the irregularity of dance opportunities. Keira comments that nowadays cultural dancing is seemingly relegated to NAIDOC week celebrations and only performed by certain groups:

*At the times when we have the dance group there were heaps of parents encouraging their children to go and learn how to do the dancing. When we were at school, we were always doing our dancing and stuff but you don't see that very much. It's not in the schools now and it's just a certain group of families that do it on NAIDOC Week and it's sad...*

### **Peer Parenting**

Keira's story shifts and she gives attention to her observations of her peer group who are also parenting, and she acknowledges the challenges they are experiences as parents, in most cases as single parents in the community. She talks about some of the current challenges of unemployment, and welfare dependency and how this can become a cycle of behaviour for some parents. Keira speaks of the perceived changes in the different generations; she comments on how new technology is now firmly established

in the community, this in turn affects the youth and young adult culture on the island. In her opinion this leads to searching for more varied forms of entertainment out of the home environment that is not always beneficial for the individual. Keira voices her concern about seeing children on the streets late at night; she associates this behaviour to the limited or lack of resources and facilities on the island to provide diversionary activities for young people. Keira believes that being employed gives her a sense of personal achievement and an appreciation of how her job assists others in the community:

*Well employment to me is very important. I know I wouldn't like to be unemployed and having to raise children. You know it's hard enough having a full time job and raising a child but it just makes you feel more confident, it gives you something to do, it completes you in a way that you feel that you're needed in the community, especially in my job.*

She strongly voices her assertions that young parents need more support from the community and professional sector, in the area of literacy and numeracy training and skills training to enable other young parents to be more confident in being a role model for their children:

*Because I've seen lots of them haven't finished school, only went up to a certain level and they don't have that literacy and numeracy that they need, and they need more training, more centres here for young mothers to go and learn, educate themselves so they can be that role model, that person for the next generation to come.*

She also believes that support from families need to include grandparents and extended family members investing time to pass down family history knowledge to their children. Keira gives credit to her mother and father for being available to help her when she needed help and raising her and her siblings to be confident adults who are successfully “walking between Aboriginal and white culture”. She acknowledges that her parents are always there for her in the Aboriginal way, on hand to help just like her

grandparents was there for her mother. Keira brings her story to completion by sharing a message to her peer group of Bwgcolman parents; she conveys the following message to them:

*We just need to be strong, be confident and know what we want in life and try to achieve it to the best of our ability. Don't be afraid to show your weaknesses because doing that only makes you a better person. Learn about your culture and teach your children the same way that your grandmothers and grandfathers taught you and don't let things just slip away. We need to embrace our culture, embrace the modern way of life and just be strong for our next generation.*



**Figure 15: Keira and her son Ari**

*(Photograph is included with written consent from Keira, circa 2011)*

## CHAPTER 10

### WHO'S YOUR MOB? - PRELUDE TO THE DISCUSSION

#### History, Society, Politics and Family

Childrearing practices in every society occur in accordance with the cultural norms of the society. In most societies, however, childrearing practices share a common value: the preservation of life and maintenance of the health and wellbeing of a newborn infant (Liamputtong, 2007, p. xxvii)

Pranee Liamputtong (2007) begins the preface of her book *Childrearing and Infant Care Issues: A Cross Cultural Perspective* with the above quote. I chose to begin this preface to the discussion chapter with this statement by Liamputtong because it compelled me to critically reflect on the childrearing practices in the so called '*cultural norms*' of the society that the Bwgcolman Elders were thrust into when they were forcibly removed from their traditional country and relocated to Palm Island under the 'Act' (Queensland Government, 1897). From 1918 onwards Aboriginal traditional childrearing knowledge and practice according to Aboriginal '*cultural norms*' was set on a collision path with the eurocentric '*cultural norms*' under the control of the Queensland Government administrators on Palm Island. It is important for the reader to grasp the critical historical and contemporary socio-political environment of Palm Island and the subsequent life changing effects on family and childrearing practices of the Bwgcolman family. Likewise, many other Aboriginal communities in Queensland experienced these same changes that impacted on their family and child rearing which continues today (D'Antoine & Bessarab, 2011; L. K. Geia, Hayes, & Usher, 2011;

Shields, 1994). As discussed earlier in this thesis, the beginnings of Bwgcolman life was through incarceration on Palm Island under government 'protection' in 1918 and continued until the early 1970s. The 'protection' years provided approximately eighty-four years of dominance in Queensland of white Australians over black Australians, some Murriss call it '*dreamtime turned into a nightmare*'. Following the rescinding of the 'Act' the Palm Island community was thrust into four decades of turbulent social, economic and political change, which had a significant impact on Bwgcolman childrearing and parenting practices.

In stark contrast to Australia's two hundred years of settlement and economic growth, these turbulent forty years jettisoned the Bwgcolman people on a rollercoaster course of exploration, adjustment and in some parts catch up, with late twentieth century Australia. Prior to the early 1970s, the superintendent and his designated staff had total paternal responsibility for Bwgcolman parents and the children (Kidd, 1997; Watson, 2010). In a sudden turn of events Bwgcolman parents had a new-found authority for their children. In late 1975 the institutions of the dormitory on Palm Island officially closed its doors. Experiencing the sudden responsibility of childrearing on their own, Bwgcolman people had to learn and act fast to maintain and improve their family situation equal to mainland Australian standards.

Furthermore, these salient forty years saw the removal of legislative barriers that opened pathways for social inclusion; it allowed Aboriginals for the first time to have the freedom of dreams. They dreamed of a return to country to reconnect with family; education of their children; the accumulation of material possessions; the freedom of movement; and a healthy lifestyle. Some of these dreams were never realised, others are still being played out around the tables of governments and at the grass roots of the community today.

Following on from this other changes brought the production of a cash economy and introduction of the basic wage which was a significant turnaround from payment in rations. More importantly this new-found freedom of early 1970 made way for one significant event that changed the course and dynamics of Aboriginal family life. Government initiated Wet Canteens were established in Aboriginal communities, with Palm Island being one of those communities. For the first time alcohol was freely accessible to Aboriginal people, initially it became the domain of men; instead of outings with families, men would frequent the Wet Canteen preferring not to miss out on the few hours designated drinking time. More often than not men 'sculled' their pre-opened beer cans before it went hot and flat within the allotted drinking time designated by the white administration. They learnt to binge drink in order to consume their alcohol within the allotted time period (R. Cummins, personal communication, May 1, 2012). However, the alcohol consumption escalated resulting in men and women ingesting dangerously high levels of alcohol. The devastating fallout of heavy alcohol consumption was domestic violence, homicide, chronic illness and the need for a new service, a rehabilitation program for alcohol addiction by the end of the 1970s (Watson, 2010, pp. 131-133).

Child rearing norms underwent a radical shift from the years of the Old People; families were unable to cope with the deleterious behavioural changes in their men and women as they became physically and emotionally separated from the family as a direct effect of the alcohol binges (Hudson, 2011). A conversation with Rachel Cummins, community leader, revealed:

*Men and women's lives were affected by the change of new responsibilities, the end of food rations meant that their weekly allowance of cheese, eggs, and milk was no longer available. As these items weren't always available for sale in the community store women had to supplement their diet elsewhere. Fortunately, the removal of the permit system and the freedom of movement meant that families and*

*women were able to gather bush food and hunt on the seas at leisure to supplement the loss of rations. This had a positive effect of re-engaging families and children on their food gathering expeditions where teaching and learning as a family was recovered. Women had free and easy access to their own children whereas the previous dormitory regime segregated mothers and children. Conversely, the new freedom saw pregnant women 'bail up' or resist visits to the hospital for antenatal care, whereas, under the control of superintendent women were mandatorily required to attend antenatal care, more often than not without being taught or explained the importance of pregnancy care (R. Cummins, personal communication, May 1, 2012)*

Apartheid had ended on Palm Island, and Mango Avenue was open for Aboriginals to walk down, the unseen gargoyle guardians of racism were torn down, people felt the oppression of apartheid lift as they stepped out in places where only whites were allowed. *On a personal note, in a decolonising step of victory my father moved our family into a new home built on the street once designated for whites only. I believe it was his personal victory of seeing the regime collapse, during that same year of moving my father collapsed and died in the garden of our new home, this was a major turning point for us a family and for my mother's childrearing practice.*

From the 1980s to this present day government policy has been to mainstream services to Aboriginal people and include them wholly in the Australian society. However, government programs such as the *Northern Territory Intervention*, *Closing the Gap*, and *Aboriginal Income Management*, speaks volumes about how far behind the Aboriginal people still are and how allocated funding is not filtering through bureaucracy and into where it is needed at service delivery level. After forty years of catch up time Aboriginal Australia still haven't caught up, the dream continues to be elusive as Aboriginal people continue to grasp at straws held in tight fists of governments.



## One Mob – Family

This study is about family, a distinct and fundamental human institution in society across all cultures. Seemingly fragile, yet more often than not the family is remarkably resilient in its ability to endure countless internal and external changes over time. Current social trends have seen a reformation of the family in response to the rapid social, political, technological and economical revolution. This has resulted in an increasing trend in western families to veer more toward the nuclear family model as a protective response to the rising socioeconomic pressures of our times. Hence families across cultures are undergoing their own macro and micro modernisation in order to fit with their changing socioeconomic needs (Baxter & Alexander, 2008; Kolar & Soriano, 1998).

Equally significant, young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families are journeying the same path of modernisation but not to the same extent seen in western families (Soriano, Weston, & Kolar, 2001). One might anticipate that these young Indigenous families would shift away from their Aboriginal family constructs; however this new technological and economical revolution is seeing a reconstructing of the young Aboriginal family, the underlying values not diminishing, but adapting and emergent.

The '*Murri family*' structure is home to many people, comprising of biological (blood) relatives, marriage/in-law relatives, tribal and country connections ('countrymen'), and people who have maintained significant close relationships through life. These can be people from other cultures as well who are adopted into the 'Murri family'. There are many anecdotes of non-indigenous women, men and children being taken into an Aboriginal family where they are given an Aboriginal position in the family. In most instances those who are adopted in an Aboriginal family remain

closely connected to their Aboriginal family throughout their life. By now it will be clear to the reader however, that the western and Aboriginal concepts of family are not the same.

## **Bwgcolman Family Structure**

Bwgcolman families are a living composition of rough and smooth characters where their lived experiences in the most part are very public affairs within and without the Palm Island community. Even so, under this atypical family construct, runs a deep river of sophistication and solidarity, passion and will to survive and live Bwgcolman way. The Bwgcolman people have a complex relationship to their country, countrymen and family. They have endured punitive government interventions since 1918, Bwgcolman families are able to bend where bending is needed, holding the capacity to reach out and bring others in – they tolerate injury and hold many memories. Moreover, the Bwgcolman family is the foundation of the Palm Island community; necessary for our wholeness and survival as people; and yet there is vulnerability in families that can so easily succumb to internal and external pressures.

Each Storyteller spoke of their childhood within the context of the ‘Murri family’ and family activities; these were not mere descriptions of family life but descriptions of an integral structure in which the Storytellers drew their strength from; it affirmed their identity; it was their place of refuge but also a place of their contentions; a place where family members in all their fallibility would come together and create new ways of engaging western culture while maintain Bwgcolman culture.

The Bwgcolman family is the holding circle in which child rearing happens, where children and childrearing cannot be separate or divorced from the family, the two are indivisible. The separation of children and childrearing from their natural family has been, and still is an extremely contested issue between Indigenous people and the non-

indigenous child welfare system. The practice of child separation has inflicted intergenerational deep wounding and bereavement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples that continues to be felt today (Atkinson, 2002; Dodson & Wilson, 1997; Hunter, 1999).

### *Relationships within a Murri Family*

When a child is born within a Murri family he or she is born into a specific identified genealogical place within the family matrix. The child becomes socialised into his or her place by family members and other Murri families through formal and informal interactions with the child and family members. The complexity of relationships in the family is commonly taught to family members from the birth of the child and remains with the child and family for the life span of the family life. For example, Aunty Beryl of Family Story Four spoke of her granddaughter Tooya and the position that Tooya held in the family because of her genealogical relationship with other family members. When Tooya was born, her title and position in the family was immediately affirmed by her parents and grandparent in relation to the other children in the family. Baby Tooya was as an aunt to children who were much older than her, and yet in this seemingly disparate arrangement Tooya's status of Aunty is upheld by the other children and adults with the family. Aunty Beryl names this as respect in the family, which in our Murri world view means more than a western dictionary definition of respect.

There is a deeper meaning of the respect that Aunty Beryl was naming; this is the acknowledgement and maintenance of the Murri tradition of holding the family in its proper social order within the system of family kinship in our Murri culture. Well known anthropologist Dousset (2002) recognises "social organisation and relationships based on kinship were and still are one of the most important organising institutions in

Australian Aboriginal culture; but are also important in processes of Indigenous cultural recognition”.

When a child is introduced to other children in the family, the child and the other children are taught about their relationship to each other and the rest of the family members. As they are raised, the child will come to know that they have more than one mother, a child will call the sisters of their mother and father ‘mother’ or ‘mum’; and the brothers of the father and mother ‘father’ or ‘dad’; they will grow up knowing many grandmothers and grandfathers (Nana and Bulloo) who are the sisters and brothers of the child’s grandparents; there are many uncles and aunts, some who will be junior in years to the child; and, lastly, the child’s siblings called brother and sister will be inclusive of their biological siblings, their cousins known as cousin brother and cousin sisters; and when their cousin brother or sister have children the children will call the child aunt or uncle. It is in this way that the Murri family kinship system is maintained.

Added to this, is the claiming of a brother or sister from others who have no blood ties to the family but have intimate social and relational ties from shared life experiences as evidenced in some of the Bwgcolman family stories. Dousset (2002) also engages with the notion of consubstantiality developed by Julian Pitt-Rivers who asserts that “relatedness or kinship, it is now argued, can be established through other means than simply being born into a specific family or marrying into another family”. Dousset gives the following example of consubstantiality; the particular reference to the Noongar people of Western Australia is closely aligned with Bwgcolman family relatedness. Even the concept of the extended family has little or no meaning in Murri family thinking, we simply refer to ourselves as a family. Dousset points out as well that this is not unique to Murri culture but is shared by other cultures:

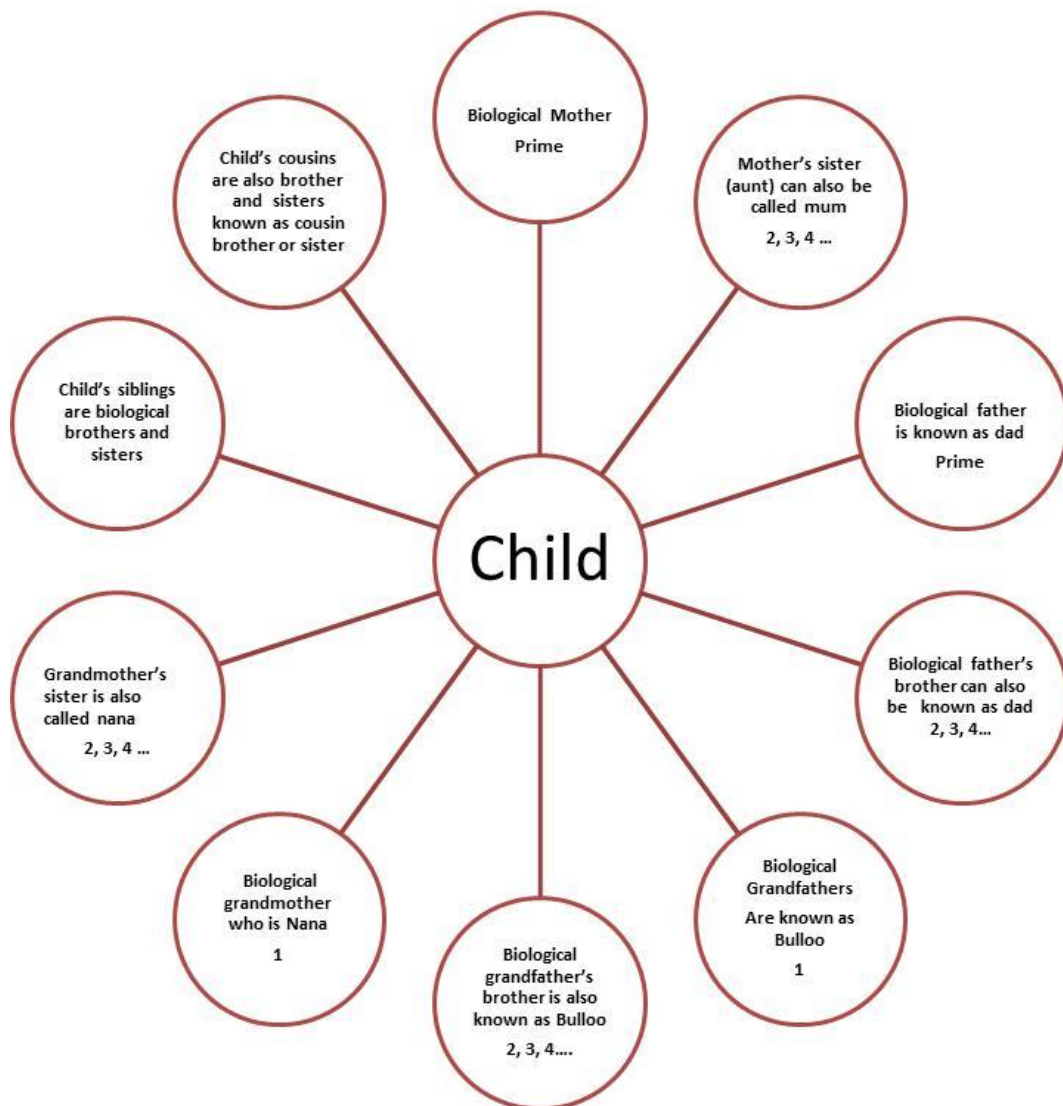
*Indeed, in New Guinea, two persons that regularly drink from the same cup and eat the same food become brothers. They share substance, they establish kinship through consubstantiality. Among the Inuit or Eskimos, you do not always have to hunt with or fish with your kin, but an unrelated hunting partner may end up as your kin, nonetheless. In Aboriginal Australia, in many groups, people that live together for prolonged periods in the same community may well become close relatives, as if they were born by the same mother. Among Noongars, as Chris Birdsall shows, rearing up is an important mechanism in the establishment of kin ties. Of course, those who are reared up together do not have to be what Euro-American culture calls blood relatives.*

Returning to the Murri family, the following is a diagram of a child in the Murri family (Figure 16), which will give the reader some understanding of the complexity of Murri family relationships:

- Mother – is the biological mother and or sister to mother (aunt), or cousin to mother (aunt) or significant other female family member;
- Father – is the biological father and or brother to father (uncle), cousin to father (uncle) or significant other male family member;
- Grandmother – maternal and paternal grandmother, plus grandmother's sisters who is also child's grandmother;
- Grandfather or Bulloo – maternal and paternal grandfather, plus grandfathers brothers who is also child's Bulloos;
- Childs sibling – biological sister or brother, child's first cousins who are cousin sister or cousin brother.

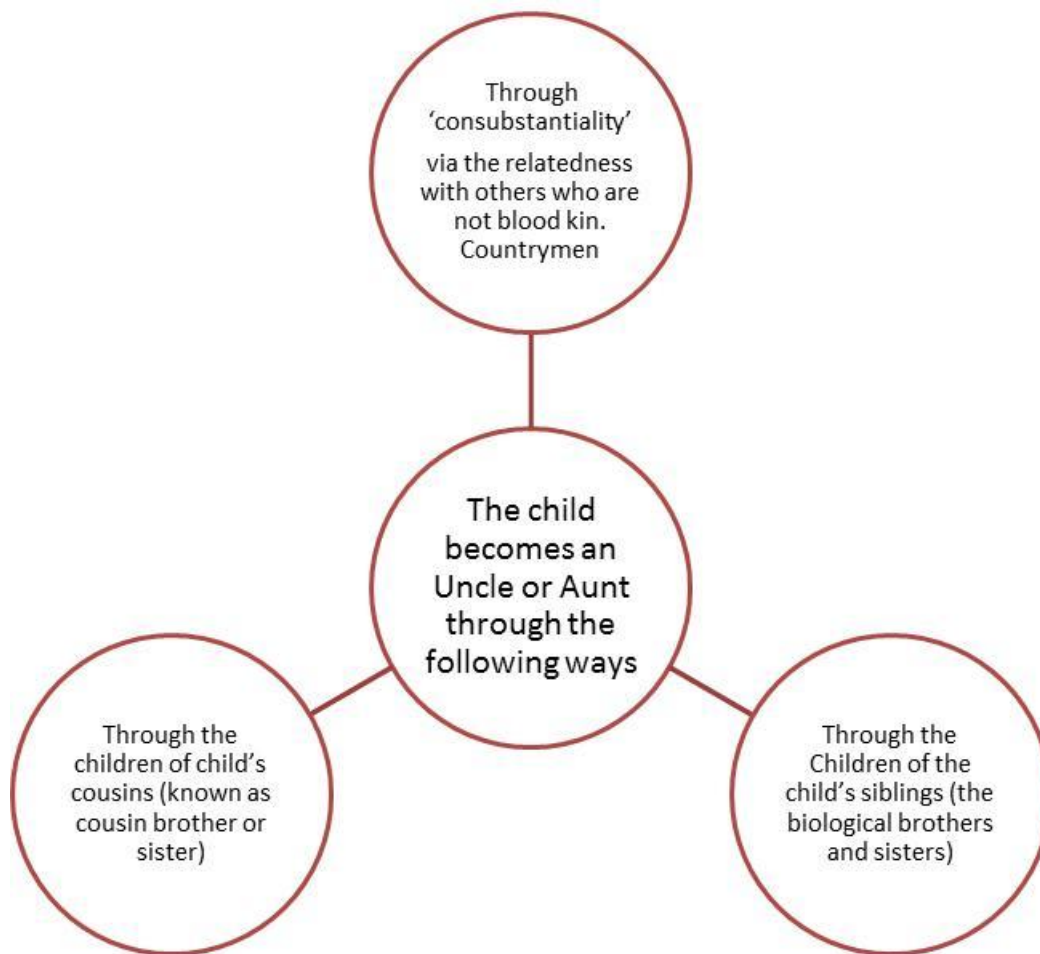
With the changing dynamics of the family and the adaptation to society grandparents are now parenting grandchildren. These grandparents then become known as 'mum nana' and 'dad bulloo'; this will be discussed in more detail further in the chapter.

**Figure 16: Murri Family Relationships**



While Figure 16 is a simplistic depiction of a family social order; Figure 17 depicts a secondary relatedness to the child through the biological siblings, the cousin brothers and sisters and significant others who have an intimate relatedness to the family.

**Figure 17: Murri Family Secondary Relatedness**



Usually a child is accountable to all tiers of the family structure; although some family members have greater influence and responsibility towards the child beyond the biological parents, this is normally understood by all within the boundaries of culture. The family matrix is not complicated for Murri people as we have been socialised within the relationship structure since birth over generations. It does however become complicated with in a eurocentric perspective, especially when a eurocentric model of child welfare is imposed on the family structure without understanding the relationships within a child's family. Each family story gives the reader a prescribed view within the limitations of this study of childrearing and parenting within Bwgcolman family life. In as much as the storytellers share aspects of their family life there is overwhelming

evidence that Bwgcolman childrearing and parenting takes place within the context of the family.



# CHAPTER 11

## INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION FROM THE FINDINGS: LOOK WHAT WE GOT, LOOK WHAT WE FOUND!

*Make sure you tell them our story;  
the Murri way not the white man way;  
they need to hear our voices out there ...*

*(Personal conversation with a Bwgcolman Storyteller, August, 2011)*

### Introduction

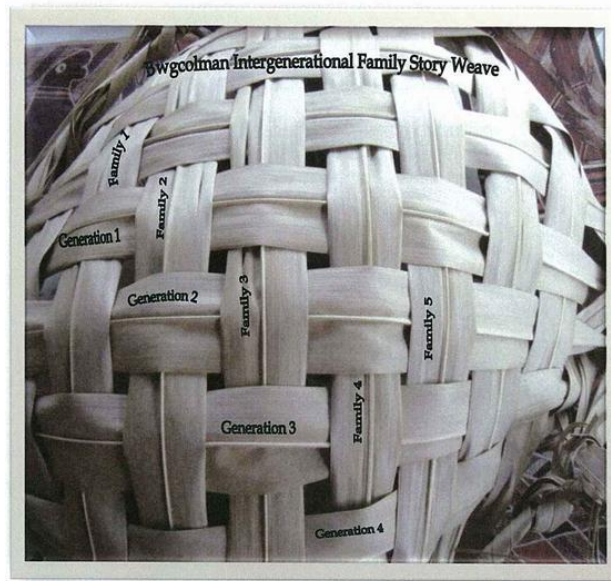
In this chapter and the next, I present a synthesis, interpretation and discussion of the key findings from the analysis of the five Bwgcolman family stories from an Indigenous epistemological approach. Because one of the major findings of this study is the development of a novel Indigenous research approach which bridges Dadirri and western narrative inquiry through Critical Murri Consciousness the findings need to be teased out not only with care but with a finely tuned fidelity to the Storytellers' stories. This care and fidelity to the Storytellers' stories required the space of two chapters. Recommendations, based on the interpretation and discussion of the key story threads in Chapters 11 and 12, are presented in Chapter 13.

The story analysis was conducted in relation to the study aims and questions. The aims of this thesis were to record the stories of three living generations of Bwgcolman (Palm Island) families, including the stories of their previous deceased generation in relation to their perceptions of their strengths in childrearing from a Murri perspective by answering the following questions:

- What are the strengths in intergenerational childrearing practices of Palm Island families?
- How do Palm Island families pass childrearing practices down through the generations?
- How has past and present oppression influenced the childrearing practices of Palm Island families?

Guided by my theoretical stance, responses to the study questions emerged through a twofold process of analysis of the family stories. The first stage was interrogating the raw data of the family stories by the use of the questions above. The second stage was weaving the story threads horizontally across the five families and then weaving the threads vertically down each family, thus providing a family generational analysis. The process is illustrated by the Bwgcolman Intergenerational Family Story Weave represented below (Figure 18). The four generations of storytellers comprised of (1) Generation One – Deceased Elder, (2) Generation Two – Living Elder, (3) Generation Three – Child of Living Elder and (4) Generation Four – Grandchild of Living Elder.

**Figure 18: Bwgcolman Intergenerational Family Story Weave**



After iterative analysis of the story data, key story findings separated out into horizontal threads and vertical strands of storied data. The horizontal threads were those shared across the generations in each family group, and the vertical strands of storied data were those intergenerational strands distinctive to each family story. Therefore, I have clustered the following six key threads (underlined), and under each of these six key threads I expose the finer story strands (italics) that are often unappreciated or overlooked but which support the key threads.

In this thesis, the key thread findings and their storied strands were (1) Murri Way: Centrality of Dadirri, Critical Murri Consciousness and Tending to the Silence in Storytelling (2) Walking Two Cultures: Family, Survival, Education and Identity; (3) Childrearing is Relational: Women as Primary Carers, Fathers and Male Role Models, Grand-parenting-Shared Parenting, Fostering Murri Way: Growing up our Kids, Protection and Discipline in Childrearing, and Childrearing – In the Home and on the Land; (4) Resisting Oppression and Being Resilient: External Oppression, Internal or Internalised Oppression, Spiritual Oppression, Institutional Childrearing and

*Pathways to Recovery*; (5) Hope in Oppression: Renegotiating Family and Childrearing, *Fresh Footprints Stepping Out, When the Wish Comes True* (6) Storytellers Possible Solutions: Stepping Forward: Fracturing Current, Social, and Political Climate, *The Socio-Political Dance of Bwgcolman Childrearing; Healing Past and Present for an Effectual Future, More of the Same Policy and Practice, Navigating Contemporary Childrearing and Potential Solutions*. As signalled at the beginning of this chapter, thread findings and story strands one to three are discussed in this chapter, while thread findings and story strands four to six are presented in the following chapter.

The analysis of the story data clearly demonstrates that key story threads are not confined to discrete linear storylines in the Bwgcolman family stories; rather, they run parallel, merge, and overlap at points in the stories. In the same way, Riessman (1993) describes the context of narrative structure as, "...multilayered, involving the historical moment of the telling, the race, class, and gender systems that narrators manipulate to survive and within which their talk has to be interpreted" (p. 21). Moreover, Kovach (2009) establishes the employment of Indigenous story constructs as "tribal stories are not meant to be orientated with the linearity of time, but rather they transcend time and fasten themselves to places" (p. 96).

Like the continuous over and under layering of the coconut basket weave, so too the key story threads and the story strands form a weave of decolonising family concepts and constructs of survival that make up the whole family story and are an integral component of the community's story. Thus, this thesis expands on the broader body of existing Indigenous research knowledge. Its distinctiveness in Australia rests within its research context in the discrete community of Palm Island, Queensland. This study also complements and builds upon the previous study and literary work of Joanne

Watson (1993, 2010) in her scholarly accounts of the socio-political history, and contemporary society of Palm Island, the published personal narratives of Bwgcolman Elders, and other authors of the Palm Island story (Gibson & Bell, 2010; Isaro, 2011; Prior, 1993; Rosser, 1978; Thaiday, 1981).

Each of these scholars have been sensitive to the complexity of the Bwgcolman story and have opened and explored initial pathways; however, this study has widened and lengthened the initial pathways to provide opportunity for intergenerational family voices to be heard for the first time in their own words, and out of their own experiences in order to provide possible solutions based on mutual justice and contemporary feasibility.

## **Discussion of the Horizontal Threads and Vertical Strands**

### **1. Murri Way**

The first horizontal thread Murri Way refers to an accepted and frequently used term for Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people of Queensland's 'way of being and doing' (Jones, Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Martin, 2006; Mead, 1928). Included under the horizontal thread are the additional vertical strands of the *Centrality of Dadirri, Critical Murri Consciousness, and Tending to the Silence in Storytelling*. Thus, in this case it refers not only to collecting the stories of Bwgcolman people in their own voices, but also collecting these stories using an Indigenous methodology. Employing Murri Way is a crucial, delicate and somewhat elusive approach even for Murris who have been constrained by western research paradigms. Penman (2006) signalled that using only the western paradigm that generated data in a western approach is valuable because it is the dominant paradigm. However, Penman also made the pertinent point that to only use the western scientific approach would be

disrespectful to the cultures concerned. This current study draws on Penman's major Australian Government Review entitled *The 'growing up' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: a literature review*. Thus Murri Way is building on previous academic study including this longitudinal study of Indigenous children.

Therefore, an outcome of matching an Indigenous methodology with stories of Bwgcolman childrearing is that valid voices are now heard. These voices reveal the strengths of intergenerational childrearing practices of Palm Island families and that Palm Island families pass childrearing practices down the generations through story and family orientated practice. Further, the story threads reveal how past and present oppression influence their childrearing practices. Additionally, the Storytellers in each family bring a fresh perspective to the issue of family childrearing through offering potential solutions to problems that impact upon childrearing on Palm Island. These add a problem-solving outcome to their collective stories. The outcomes of the stories bring new light to bear upon culturally sensitive and potentially highly effective interventions for families on Palm Island.

#### *Centrality of Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness;*

Murri Way also refers to a Bwgcolman's innate employment of Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness within their Bwgcolman lived experience as discussed in Chapter Three. To date there are no published studies that employ both Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness by an Indigenous researcher with Indigenous storytellers. Within this methodological approach, developed for this thesis; the gathering, analysing and interpreting of the family stories brings to the surface conversations which were previously unspoken outside of the family. The Storytellers have brought out in the open accounts of their lives that have long been hidden from mainstream research discourse. Biedermann (2001) reminds us that "it is imperative that oral historians

concede that oral narratives are an unfinished history rather than a total story” (p. 212). So too, ‘unfinished history’ in regards to the stories of Bwgcolman and Palm Island is implicit in this discussion chapter within the storied data analysis and interpretation. Within their stories the Bwgcolman Storytellers make references to their future, thus indicating new and unspoken conversations and texts (Kovach 2009) silently waiting to be uncovered.

### *Tending to the Silence in Storytelling;*

Both Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness have been addressed in detail in this thesis, but ‘tending to the silence’ in Murri storytelling is pivotal to both, and to unpacking the story data. Often literal conversational silences, especially long silences, are deleted or not attended to in traditional transcription and analysis of narratives (Charmaz, 2002). However, with respect to Indigenous research, silences of unspoken thoughts, unexpressed emotions and spiritual contemplation are shared Dadirri silences between Indigenous researcher and Indigenous storyteller. As Miriam Rose Ungunmerr (1988) states, “My people are not threatened by silence. They are completely at home with it. They have lived for thousands of years with Nature’s quietness” (p.10). Thus, the use of Dadirri in the interviews with the Storytellers is inclusive of, and acknowledges, the ‘presence of silence’ that dwells behind the words and actions of the five family stories. As we, Geia (the researcher) and the family members (the Storytellers) sat together as Bwgcolman we were conscious of our shared experiences and the silences spoke more than words in some respects. There would often be tears in our eyes, or subtle avoidance behaviours such as averting eye contact, and a slight bodily turning away, or looking out past the physical presence of another to objects around us into an unseen place.

These silences and silent behaviours were non-verbal expressions of the pain we felt through our shared life experiences. For us the silences in storytelling are not aberrant. On the contrary their presence is an important component that validates the understanding of who we are to each other at that particular time in relation to the unfolding story and in relation to the broader unspoken and unseen of Palm Island (Gardner, Mushin, & Mey, 2009). Kovach (2009) cautions us that “a researcher assumes a responsibility that the story shared will be treated with the respect it deserves in acknowledgement of the relationship from which it emerges” (p. 97). Similarly, Yunkaporta (2009) describes the silence in the Aboriginal worldview as “the deepest knowledge is not in words. It is the meaning behind the words, in the spaces between them, in gestures or looks, in meaningful silences, in the work of hands, in learning from journeys, in quiet reflection...” (p. 2). In addition to the silence of pain in grief and loss, there is also a silence in the pain of hope, where we would dare to think about a brighter future but find ourselves reticent to articulate our hopes in the face of ongoing external and internal oppression.

Thus, the development and refinement of Murri Way, that is, the Indigenist epistemology based on the centrality of Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness developed and refined in this study is one of the major findings. First, Dadirri, as discussed, is a deep part of the spiritual consciousness of Australian Indigenous Peoples articulated by Ungunmerr-Baumann (1988) as an expression of her spiritual connection with her country of Daly River in the Northern Territory of Australia. Next, Atkinson (2001), a Koori woman from northern New South Wales as a researcher brought Ungunmerr-Baumann’s insights into academic research in her doctoral study *Lifting the blankets: the transgenerational effects of trauma in indigenous Australia*. Further, the appeal of Dadirri to the intellectual imagination of Indigenous academics is



demonstrated by West (In press 2012) who employed Dadirri to inform her research approach in investigating the factors that impact on successful Indigenous nursing completions in Australia.

However, in this study, Critical Murri Consciousness is explicated for the first time as a bridge to the deep spiritual space of Dadirri. This bridge validates the voices of the Bwgcolman People and also connects Murri Way with western narrative inquiry; thus Murri Way provides a robust intellectual pathway for this particular Indigenist epistemology in research and academia. Dadirri comes to its full expression when both the researcher and the participant can attend to the ‘silence in storytelling’. Silence in storytelling is difficult for western intellectuals to grasp; as narrative, by its very name and through the history of western thought from Chaucer on, is meant to be linear with a beginning, middle and an end. But, Dadirri progresses in spatial silences and loose but logically connected words; therefore, in this study, Dadirri finds its full expression when connected with Critical Murri Consciousness.

## **2. Walking Two Cultures**

The second horizontal thread Walking Two Cultures refer to the process of Bwgcolman survival in the present and in the future. Bwgcolman Storytellers express that the future survival of their children is closely linked to the child or children’s ability to successfully negotiate two cultures; their Aboriginal culture and the dominant ‘white’ culture. The ability to walk the two cultures with relevant ease for Bwgcolman includes a sense of security and confidence within the following social life spheres presented in the following vertical story strands of *Family, Identity, Survival and Education*.

### *Family:*

Consistent with literature on Aboriginal childrearing, Family is the primary functional unit for growing up children; in this study the Bwgcolman family is the prime structure for Bwgcolman childrearing. From the 19th, 20th and the 21st century, in many western and industrialised cultures the nuclear family (Mai, Owl, & Kersting, 2005) became the most common family structure in contemporary society; however, this has never been the case for Murri families. In this thesis, each of the five families, which emerged in both the horizontal and vertical story analysis, reiterated how maintaining extended and interlinked family structures were central to their *Survival* and retention of personal and cultural *Identity*, as reflected in the following excerpt from the storied data:

*... all the parents agreed that you look after one another and check the kids so, to us, everybody was Aunty and Uncle and that became a real family tie with everybody, even today. Even today we still have that connection with the families from back then; you know it comes right up until today. (Generation Two Storyteller, Aunty Beryl, Story Four)*

Within this complex family structure, the family stories in this study reveal enduring meanings of *Survival and Identity*. In the wider context of Aboriginal history this story strand of Family, *Survival* and *Identity* are intimately interrelated (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997); in the Bwgcolman family context they are indivisible, as stated by one of the fourth-generation Storytellers Keira who believes in teaching her son to be proud of his personal and cultural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island heritage :

*It's very important (Bwgcolman family and identity), that's where we come from, that's our being you know and we should always have it with us and I'm certainly going to teach my son the Aboriginal ways and Islander ways because that's part of the strength and it's where we come from. (Generation Four Storyteller, Keira, Story Five)*

So too, third-generation Storyteller, Boleen celebrates the continuity of culture and *Identity*. She spoke with excitement of her observations of the obvious pride displayed by the community participation in the tribal marches celebrating the National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee week on Palm Island: *“Those who did not know their tribal names walked behind the Bwgcolman banner. It was really heart warming to see and people felt proud”* (Generation Three Storyteller, Boleen, Story Four). The importance of families and their survival in contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island society is paramount and is supported by government and non-government research and literature (Australian Family Law Council, 2004; Turner & Sanders, 2007; Watts & Carlson, 2002). The findings in this study agrees with other leading research findings that the fragmentation of families is a significant contributor to social and emotional illnesses in Indigenous communities (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Gordon, 2002; E. Hunter, 1999; Johnson, 1991; Wild & Anderson, 2007). Therefore, the implication of this study finding is for the development of robust professional family support practice to strengthen Indigenous families Murri way. This is vital for the health and improvement of families and its consequent positive flow on into their childrearing practices.

#### *Survival:*

Survival is defined as, “endurance under adverse conditions or remaining alive longer than expected” (Mai et al., 2005). Despite overwhelming odds the Storytellers in this study recounted numerous occasions where they carved out strategies for *Survival* as typified by the necessity to hunt for meat to supplement the meagre, mainly carbohydrate ration diet that was supplied by the State:

*Yes Dad would call all together and say come and have a taste and I would say ‘what are you feeding them with now – rubbish?’ And he would say ‘I’m teaching my children how to survive’ I don’t know about*

*you, he'd say you can starve if you don't want to eat. The same with the turtle – I didn't like turtle very much, not the meat as such but the smell of it which I couldn't stand and he used to say 'stop screwing up your nose, I'm cooking it' and he would feed all with it. And his answer was 'I'll teach my children to eat bush food so they know how to take care of themselves' (Generation Two Storyteller, Betty, Story Five)*

For these Storytellers, *Survival* also meant developing and extending their coping strategies to the ongoing oppressive experiences including dealing with the ongoing legacy of intergenerational trauma, coping with financial hardships, drug and alcohol addiction, and family violence that the Elders endured from the 1970s, and which the younger fourth-generation parents are now experiencing. The Bwgcolman family stories contain strong undergirding weaves of *Survival* that are articulated in family discourses of overcoming and looking toward a future.

#### *Education:*

This future forward outlook is not a new stance for Bwgcolman, accordingly the Elders saw through their own Dadirri that learning the 'white man's' way was necessary for their *Survival*, hence they became strong advocates for *Education* to enable Bwgcolman to walk the two cultures. This is related by the generational Storytellers in *Story Three: Mavis the Greatest*.

*I remember my mother saying "you won't have us around too long. You've got to face the world on your own" but sometimes I don't understand her because she's a tribal woman ... "We've got to learn the white man way sometimes they say". (Mavis, Generation Two Storyteller, Story Three)*

*Mum and Dad knew what was happening back then although they didn't really talk about that but it showed in their actions because they took us away, wanted us to do things and wanted us to get an education, get somewhere in life and don't just settle for some community job and things like that. Do something better with your life (Dianne, Generation Three Storyteller, Story Three)*

*It's [education] very important to me because a lot of kids these days are dropping out of school and you know, missing out, you know, where's their future? So yeah it's really important to me. (Larissa, Generation Four Storyteller, Story Three)*

The intergenerational story strands above are not discrete to this family rather they are shared by the other four family Storytellers; further, in Murri way, few voices can also speak for the collective on some issues. Hence, these story strands also reflect the anecdotes of the wider Bwgcolman community in relation to their view of the importance of *Education* in their childrearing practices. With such strong family advocacy for a good education for their children, why then is the education statistics on Palm Island in such an inexcusable poor state? Councillor Geia (2003) of the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council makes a succinct statement to the House of Representatives on the matter:

The education system in this community is failing us. It is not 100 per cent the way that we, as a community, want it to be delivered—culturally appropriately. That is why we have a lot of high school dropouts and kids that do not go to school at all. We as parents, caregivers, guardians, grandmothers and grandfathers can voice our concerns with the school and with the department of education. It seems to be going nowhere. We have struggled with the education system here for a long time. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, pp. 815-816)

Further, the plight of Palm Island childrens' education has been a protracted topic of discourse between the community and governments (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003; Elston, Stirling, & Geia, 2010; McDougall, 2006; Palm Island Aboriginal Council, 1999; Queensland Government Legislative Assembly, 2005

August). Likewise, Palm Island community parents have made repeated representations to Education Queensland for collaborative approaches to develop a *Two Way Strong* (Queensland Government Legislative Assembly, 2005 November, pp. 18-19) Palm Island education curriculum for the local school. However, despite recent Australian research into Aboriginal/western two-ways learning in schools, the pleas from Palm Island parents continue to fall on deaf ears in the state education system. Consequently, the number of children leaving school with a minimum standard of education continually frustrates parents, widens the education gap between Indigenous and non-indigenous children, frays what little trust that exists between the Palm Island community and Education Queensland, and finally, more importantly, fails the children it is meant to serve and potentially robs them of future success.

#### *Identity:*

At this point I argue, *a priori*, that before their forced removal to Palm Island the first-generation Elders were living a greater part of their lives in a traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle with their family and countrymen on their own country. *Identity* and survival for the Aboriginal hunter gather required an Aboriginal person to possess intergenerational knowledge and skills. That is, the necessity to move with the seasons, to gain food and shelter, to overcome tribal rivalries, and to practice their spirituality, ensured their tribe was resilient and strong. Hence, the hunter-gatherer lifestyle provided a range of skills which the first-generation of Elders imported to Palm Island, and which they adapted in forging a personal and cultural Bwgcolman identity in the face of considerable adversity. Therefore, to maintain a sense of personal and cultural *Identity*, it is important that future generations are educated with these skills and knowledge of their Elders. Aunty May, a second-generation Storyteller provides an insight into her parental education on her traditional country:

*I come from a place called Lawn Hill, I was born there. I can remember a bit you know, I was with my Mum and Dad and they were both a wonderful old couple, my father's name was Willie Jackson and my mother was named Dianne. She'd teach us about different things that we want to do, like we love cutting trees and you know cutting trees just for the fun of it. You know I remember my mother saying 'don't do that, somebody greater put that there', they never ever mentioned God's name but they knew there was somebody greater somewhere. I always remember that you know. Yeah. And we did a lot of fishing; we never starved. (Generation Two Storyteller Aunty May, Story Three)*

Aunty May's small yarn, is an example of her parents' childrearing practices of passing on their knowledge on survival and spirituality. The ability to live on country was vital to their lives. First-generation Elders brought their sense of personal and cultural *Identity* with them when they were sent to Palm Island. Although these Elders found themselves in alien surroundings and harsh living conditions they did adapt to their new life. They raised their children in this new place and reconstructed a new corporate cultural *Identity*; which they gave to their second generation children; who kept fidelity with this traditional tribal identity; and were visionaries;

*Everybody that came here like I don't know if it was a government thing, they were trying to make us into white citizens and they didn't want us speaking language in the schools or even when you went into town. But our people still kept it quiet, you know they used to still talk their language and they knew where they came from, they knew their tribe and our tribe was Jirrbal. (Beryl, Generation Two Elder, Story Four)*

Analysis revealed each Bwgcolman Storyteller paid particular attention in their individual story in identifying their traditional people and their country as well as their Bwgcolman identity. In identifying their Elders the Storytellers honour their Old People the first-generation of Elders and the people and country they belonged to before they were sent to Palm Island. Fourth-generation Storyteller Erica embeds her identity as Murri and Bwgcolman through her great grandparents:

*My name is Erica, I'm 25, single mum of two, I was born in Canberra ACT, umm how I'm connected to the Palm Island Bwgcolman mob is um*

*my great grandfather Andrew Kyle and my great grandparent Rosie Kyle, she was a Hall before, and they the Birrigubba people, um Nana was born on Palm, mum was born in Ayr I think., knowing who you are, um who your people is, where you come from, how you connected to your own mob you know (umm) it does play a big role you know for a Murri person. (Erica, Generation Four Storyteller, Story One)*

Listening to, and recording the fourth-generation stories of Erica, Nikki, Larissa, Sondra and Keira's recount of their family history, what they have learnt from their families and its importance in their childrearing practices reveals an active oral history practice of passing on knowledge. The importance of the link between their personal and cultural Aboriginal *Identity* to their *Survival* and resistance from external oppressive forces is an integral component for the continuation of their individual and collective lives. Fourth-generation storyteller Keira affirms the practice of passing on cultural knowledge in her parenting, and encourages those of her generation to do the same:

*Learn about your culture ... teach your children the same way that your grandmothers and grandfathers taught you ... don't let things just slip away. We need to embrace our culture, embrace the modern way of life and just be strong for our next generation. (Generation Four Storyteller, Keira, Story Five)*

Unlike the European system of written family heritage and diagrams of family genealogies, Bwgcolman people have maintained an oral history practice for generations; it is only in recent years that Bwgcolman oral history is now being transposed into written form. Thus, by handing down their stories the Bwgcolman people have kept their family and tribal *Identity* foremost in their lives as a reminder of their *Survival* and connection to country (Watson, 1993, 2010). The significance of Bwgcolman *Identity* and *Survival* is a complex matrix of 'knowing' the natural and spiritual self in relation to others. Where I come from, who my people are and where I



fit in the world and the responsibility I have towards others in my world is essential to living, and to childrearing practices.

In summary, identity based on family, survival and education are concepts which have emerged in the study of Indigenous peoples by western anthropologists for many decades – notably with the studies of the Samoan People of the South Pacific by Margaret Mead in the 1920s (1928). However, what is singularly distinctive about the sense of *Identity* for the Bwgcolman peoples is that in a relatively short time, the Elders of over forty-three language groups brought together by forced settlement on Palm Island, since 1918, have been able to forge a corporate *Identity* as Bwgcolman people. This study, in a piece of ‘social archaeology’ unearthed the layers of this Identity as maintaining discrete, but extended, family groups in the face of wave after wave of threats to *Survival of Identity* and suppression of self determination.

### **3. Childrearing is Relational**

The third horizontal thread Childrearing is Relational refers to the complex relationships (Penman, 2006) within the Bwgcolman family structure in their childrearing practices. This key story thread also revealed strands of family members roles in their childrearing practices such as, *Women as Primary Carers, Fathers and Male Role Models, Grand-Parenting and Shared Parenting, Fostering Murri Way: Growing up Our Kids*, in addition to a reoccurring horizontal thread and vertical story strand of *Protection and Discipline in Childrearing and Childrearing – In the Home and on the Land*.

The family stories in this study reveal that Bwgcolman parenting and childrearing is a highly relational process between child, primary parent, the immediate family group and the wider family group (the extended family) within their community. This study agrees with the findings of Penman (2006) who describes “the most

important care giving role is normally spread over more family members than in non-Indigenous ones, making any non-Indigenous notion of a single primary caregiver meaningless” (p. 9). However, Penman also comments that more information on why other family members such as grandmothers and aunties are taking on more childrearing responsibility today would be useful. The Storytellers within each family and generational story clearly maintain that their childrearing practices are not divorced from the family, but are embedded in their family function and family relationships as demonstrated over the following four generational perspective of one family story.

The Storytellers of *Story One: Strength Through Struggle*, Erykah, Andrea and Erica reveal an intergenerational practice of family focused childrearing. Firstly, second-generation storyteller Erykah describes her first-generation mother’s childrearing practice with the involvement of her uncles in childrearing when Erykah’s father died:

*A very strong woman, very strong woman and she did an amazing job in rearing us up, taught us strong values and so on, disciplined us, worked very, very hard under that regime at that time... what happened in those days where your father had died and your mother brings in the uncles and they were there. (Generation One as recounted by Generation Two Storyteller Erykah, Story One)*

Next Erykah describes how her cousin brother (my own father) supported her as a single parent in difficult circumstances:

*... in those days, there wasn’t that support and it was very, very difficult. Your father, your father he had this special relationship for me and so one day he saw our mother in town and he was asking about Erykah and that ....’ there wasn’t the money at that time and they were one, two, three you see ... “we’ll look after Erykah” so – yeah. (Generation Two Storyteller Erykah, Story One)*

Following on, third-generation Storyteller Andrea describes another aspect of childrearing in their Bwgcolman family structure:

*So, at Christmas time we took my daughter and the grandchildren and my sister and her daughter and so it was a big you know group and the kids just swam and we just enjoyed each other’s company and because if you knew you’ve got to watch the children with the water, you’re*

*constantly with your children. So, it's spending a lot of time together.*  
(Generation Three Storyteller Andrea, Story One)

Finally, fourth-generation Storyteller Erica reveals the family relationships involved in her childrearing practices:

*I got support from all the family, my mum, nana. Nana is on the island, um other family members especially my mother's brothers; they help me a lot because you know I've got two boys. Yeah, yeah oh there's aunties, uncles, big cousin sisters help me.* (Generation Four Storyteller Erica, Story One)

The above story extracts not only reveal childrearing in a descending generational family relationship in this one family, but the story extracts also show that this family's childrearing practice extends outside their own family into Story Five family's account – still within their wider Bwgcolman family structure. Hence, there is a downward flow of childrearing practice accessing social practical family support that is understood by all concerned that this is congruent with Bwgcolman values. As these 'downwards' and 'across' childrearing practices occur, the Bwgcolman family structure naturally generates its own sophisticated support network of interdependency.

### *Women as Primary Carers*

All of the Bwgcolman Storytellers in this study are women; of the second-generation Storytellers four are widows, and one is a single parent; of the third-generation.

Storytellers three are married and two are single parents; finally, of the fourth-generation Storytellers two are in a defacto relationships, two are single parenting and one is a mother in the Murri way to her nieces and nephews. All provide primary care in their in their family childrearing; yet, all of the women in this study maintain the importance of having fathers and male role models in the family for the emotional

health of children and the overall health of the family. In particular, the women lay emphasis on the importance of men for the rearing of boys in the family unit.

The Storytellers reveal several contributing factors that have influenced the roles and position of women as primary carers in the family. Firstly, the role of women as primary carers is defined by cultural mores, (Carter et al., 1987; Hamilton, 1981; McCoy 2004; Shaw, 2002). Third-generation Storyteller Pam explains; *“It’s not a man’s thing, they think it’s for women you know and mainly because of the ancestral thing that the women look after the children – yeah, women’s business, you know what I mean”*. For women in Pam’s generation, and in earlier generations, childrearing was culturally viewed as the role of women or women’s business in the community until children reached an age where gender specific education came into effect. Although, childrearing was deemed a woman’s role, the men did engage at various levels to alleviate some of the burdens off their women.

Secondly, second-generation Storyteller Erykah refers to historical factors on Palm Island that had detrimental effects on the men in the family. She recalls the decades of government control under the ‘Act’ where the role of women was paramount as the men were subjugated to the authority of the superintendent as Erykah reveals in her mother’s story, *“When I say ‘strong’ she would start questioning and, she was the one who challenged the Superintendent; as the women had moved forward when the men were crushed by oppression”* (Story One). According to Watson (2010), superintendents “operated from assumptions of almost absolute power, ... over decades, in a context of extreme government neglect of even bare essentials on reserves” (p. 20). Therefore, in this socio-political environment men were seemingly prohibited from completely fulfilling their role as husbands, fathers and cultural leaders. Consequently, women were compelled to take on more of the responsibility as

primary care givers and role model in the family because their men were being emasculated by the authoritarian system that governed them.

Thirdly, following the rescinding of the 'Act', men and women were suddenly faced with a totally new social, political and economic environment to rear their children. However, within this new-found freedom families began to experience change once again. The introduction of alcohol in the community through Wet Canteens not only became a place for men to gather in camaraderie; it also was a place for men seeking release from their pain. This is consistent with Davui (1991) who observed the effect of alcohol on Aboriginal parenting on Mornington Island, "Some chose to drink to escape from day to day problems and the lack of strength to control the changes happening around them ... some...because of the loss, fear, sorrow, loneliness and brokenness in their lives" (p. 5). So too, Wenitong (2002), recorded an Indigenous man at a national men's conference stating; "In my community when an Aboriginal woman is in distress she goes to the women's refuge or women's shelter, when an Aboriginal man is in distress he goes to jail, or the wet canteen" (p. 19). Accordingly, families experienced catastrophic consequences because of the high levels of alcohol consumption rendering men ineffective in their roles as fathers in their homes. An inquiry into Aboriginal men and incarceration found that:

... many are wounded, suffering poor health, affected by continuing discriminatory processes and haunted by a profound sense of loss. Alcoholism, violence, abuse and poverty are the legacies of the colonisation process. For many Indigenous people, the policies of removal and subjugation have eroded the security the traditional family unit once provided. (Commission for Children and Young People and

Child Guardian & The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, 2001, p. 7)

Consequently, as a way of coping with the situation women were duty-bound to take on the responsibility as primary carers for the children and hold the family together. However, the pattern of deterioration in men's social and emotional wellbeing has continued down the generations; now into the fourth-generation; and most likely will flow into the following generations if it is not halted. More importantly, fourth-generation Storytellers discuss their experiences and observations of their peers; moreover, they reveal strong aspirations to rear their children within a relationship. In spite of this, many find themselves as primary carers in single parent families because of relationship breakdowns with the child's father as Erica explains:

*Yeah um it's hard cause the alcohol has just got the best of him as well and it's sad cause his family I know like alcohol is a thing but um does it come to a point in your life you know you, wake up, you know, can't you just get a job to occupy your mind or but yeah, but it is yeah, haven't got that role model there. (Generation Four Storyteller, Erica, Story One)*

The particular finding in fourth-generation stories has implications for developing strategic processes to build resilience in assisting young parents in relationships, and providing support mechanisms when relationships breakdown. This study finding supports the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council Report (2010), addressing the issue of single parent families stated, "Functional and resilient families and communities are generally seen as being fundamental to the physical and mental health of adults and children" (p. 98). In attending to the voices of fourth-generation younger parents appropriately will lead to a greater chance of breaking the cycles of toxic relationships and enabling them to rear their children with better outcomes.

### *Fathers and Male Role Models:*

Following on from the previous section, it is important to reiterate that the role of men and fathers were defended by the Storytellers in spite of the issues they raised in relation to alcohol and absence. In this section the discussion moves from women as primary carers to emphasise the importance of fathers and male role models in childrearing in the family. Accordingly, this study reveals that fathers and male role models are vital to the family; particularly important in a boy's life; to guide and direct a boy through the journey of childhood, adolescence and to be there in adulthood. This finding strongly agrees with McCoy (2004) who describes the importance of men in "kanyirninpa or holding" in his study of Western Desert Aboriginal men:

When boys (marnti) become men (wati) the manner of kanyirninpa changes. No longer do young men seek to be held by their mothers and female relations. Instead, they seek to be held by older men: brother, uncles, and other males. By holding them, older men induct younger men into the social meanings and behaviours of desert male adulthood. A generative and generational male praxis is disclosed. (p. 4)

McCoy's study of *Kanyirninpa: Health, Masculinity and Wellbeing of Desert Aboriginal Men* is specific to Western Desert Aboriginal men, yet its tenets are complementary to this study and for Aboriginal men generally. Similarly, the stories in this study contain common threads consistent with *kanyirninpa*, which are revealed in the Storytellers recounts of their fathers. Furthermore, the Storytellers identified the tasks that a father or in his absence a male relative would undertake in the family in their child rearing practices. The following examples from the Storytellers highlight the practices of grandfathers, fathers, and uncles. Furthermore these men undertook their

childrearing roles in a family structure consisting of two parents in a marriage relationship sharing the childrearing with the wider family group members. The following points describe and discuss the Storytellers perceptions of their fathers and family men as: teacher; discipliner; entertainer; protector; provider; cultural mentor; storyteller and nurturer.

**Teacher;** Second-generation Storyteller Beryl, shares that her father died when she was a child and her mother remarried. In the same way that her father was her teacher, so too her stepfather undertook the responsibility of teacher and guide, Beryl recalls:

*So he was able to guide me too like my Dad did and just by having parents there with you all the time, that made us strong – that's how I brought my children up you know, tried to keep them together and we had a strong family bond. (Generation Two Storyteller, Beryl, Story Four)*

**Discipliner;** In Story One third-generation Storyteller Andrea's reflects on her grandfathers' style of discipline. His was a gentler style of discipline where a body stance or a whistle would bring correction where needed. Conversely, some men would employ physical discipline and assign work tasks as other forms of discipline. Andrea's recount of her grandfather demonstrates his role in their family;

*My mother was from a very large family as well and they only needed to hear the whistle of their father and they knew that it was time to come home, time to do their chores, time to get out of the water so there was no physical discipline as well but rather the strong respect and, I guess, fear of what could happen if they didn't listen. So when the whistle blew it was for all of them not just one in particular. Or they knew by the walk that they were in trouble, the stance of their father or their grandfather, they knew if he was marching down fairly quickly, they were in trouble. (Generation Three Storyteller, Andrea, Story One)*



**Entertainer;** In Story Five third-generation Storyteller Magdalena shares that her father taught the children Murri ways but his teaching methods always included fun, play and entertainment which made it all the more enjoyable for them to learn.

*“That’s the kind of Dad he was, he was always sharing sort of hunting as a fun thing as well as getting food... it was fun to learn for children”.*  
(Generation Three Storyteller, Magdalena, Story Five)

**Protector;** In Story Three, third-generation Storyteller Dianne relates how her mother and father made the decision to take their children away from Palm Island for a time to protect them from the harsh socio-political environment shortly after the ‘Act’ was rescinded. Moreover, Dianne’s mother and father wanted the children to learn independence and have a better life than they had on the Island, she recounts:

*Mum and Dad they taught us to be independent and always to do something better with our lives and don’t let people dictate us and – yeah, so I suppose Mum and Dad knew what was happening back then although they didn’t really talk about that but it showed in their actions because they took us away, wanted us to do things and wanted us to get an education, get somewhere in life.* (Generation Three Storyteller, Dianne, Story Three)

**Provider;** Again Magdalena recalls how she would help her father in the family garden where vegetables were grown to supplement the meagre government rations of carbohydrates. In addition, fishing supplemented the poor protein rations, and poultry was kept for the entrepreneurial activities for selling baked goods to supplement the family income. Magdalena shares:

*As I got older, I used to help him in that vegetable garden. He had a chook run, we kept chooks and ducks and we got eggs from them and we were allowed to eat them but mostly it was used for bread and cakes and things like that which we used to sell. And he also fished, he was a fisherman, and he was always providing in every way he could because, having so many children, he was mindful and he was always reminding us that we have to be strong individuals.* (Generation Four Storyteller, Magdalena, Story Five)

**Cultural Teacher;** Additionally fourth-generation Storyteller Larissa describes an annual family Christmas event when grandparents, parent, aunts and uncles and extended family members went out on the land and sea to observe and learn hunting and gathering as well as fun in their teaching and learning. Larissa particularly remembers her mother's older brother taking an active role in the cultural aspect of their childrearing as she recalls:

*Mum and Grandad took us out, we used to have Raymond, Mum's big brother, used to take us out in the boat, just all the kids and he would let us all wait in the boat while he would dive in and give us each one fish.*  
(Generation Four Storyteller, Larissa , Story Three)

In addition Keira confirms the role of uncles in teaching as she looks to her brothers to teach her son gender specific knowledge and skills:

*I know in our family if you have a child, everybody's there like your Mum and your Dad and the aunts and uncles and everybody helps you then. But the boys in our families, like my brothers, take them out bush and you know tell them stuff, especially my older brother, Robert.*  
(Generation Four Storyteller, Keira, Story Five)

**Storyteller;** Fathers and men traditionally told the stories in families, almost all of the Storytellers reveal a strong practice of oral history in their families where stories of family members and events were passed down through the generation. For example Magdalena describes her father telling "one good story" to her of his childhood. So fourth-generation Storytellers too emphasise storytelling as the means of their family history lessons.

**Nurturer;** Finally, second-generation Storyteller Betty tells of the nurturing role of her husband in the family. Betty pays particular attention to the time of preparation for the children to leave home and go out from the island to the mainland to make their own way. She describes her husband in his role of father and nurturer:

*When it was time for those to leave us to go out on the mainland, he would sit and explain to them about life on the mainland because he'd say from that day, they will be on their own and how to take care of themselves. (Generation Two Storyteller, Betty, Story Five)*

The findings in this study illustrate the continuing rich involvement of Bwgcolman men in family life. However these, accounts of the strength of men are almost obscured by the deficit narratives about Palm Island, which are constantly present in this contemporary time. Indeed, even our own eyes can deceive us; as Bwgcolman we too are at risk of making value judgements about our men by what we see on the external as they struggle with alcohol, drugs, violence, incarceration and family fracturing.

The findings in this study also reveal an emerging trend of young fathers reconnecting in childrearing and are consistent with the growing body of knowledge on Indigenous men's issues. More importantly, men are articulating their desire to be active, positive role models in their family, and acknowledge the healing that needs to happen in their lives to achieve their goal (McCoy 2004; Ross et al., 2008; Wenitong, 2002).

In summary, the story data clearly demonstrates the continuing existence of family inclusive practices from first-generation Elders to today's fourth-generation parents; in addition, the findings also emphasise the importance of two parent families and shared childrearing with other family members and significant others. However, the previous discussion on women as primary carers has shed light on the underlying issues that men are struggling to engage and *re-fine-d* their place in family. This has particular implications for the health and wellbeing of boys and young male role modelling in families, therefore it is crucial that community and governments explore and implement support strategies to help young fathers and men in general to fulfil their

role in the family to the best of their ability. Such strategies may include men's outreach programs, mentoring; educating fathers about play interaction with their children, and men's healing programs.

### *Grand-Parenting - Shared Parenting;*

All of the Storytellers make reference to the shared parenting knowledge and practice they received from their grandparents as one of many primary carers Murri way in the wider family group. However, more recent observations and anecdotes from Bwgcolman grandparents themselves relate an emerging concern that grandparents are taking on more of the childrearing responsibility for their grandchildren. This increasing trend is not distinct to Aboriginal people; it is also a growing trend in the non-indigenous Australian population as revealed in the 2003 report commissioned by The Honourable Larry Anthony, the Australian Government, Minister of Children and Youth Affairs:

Many grandparents take on the role of raising their grandchildren, as they have throughout the ages. The difference now is the effect of parental drug abuse, which has resulted in a recent and rapid increase in the numbers of children being raised by their grandparents (COTA National Seniors, 2003, p. 7)

Fourth generation Storyteller Erica briefly talks about her observations of grandparents raising their grandchildren and the number of grandchildren calling their grandparents parents mum Nana and dad Bulloo. Whilst grandparents had an accepted family role of caring for grandchildren Murri way, Erica's story reveals a deeper concern that young parents are relinquishing their roles as prime care giver, therefore,

the grandparents are compelled to on the childrearing role. Erica sees this as an added burden to grandparents who should be enjoying life and not raising children:

*It's a bit sad but it's good, it's just like what if it is a serious thing I would let my mum raise, be there for or help me or some kind of thing to be there for the boys, but not like nana raising my kids, they can't cause you know they did their time. Like I see that they (the young parents) do, yeah probably pressure maybe their lifestyle is just partying or thinking they still young, I don't know. Um but I only if there was serious thing, like if I really ... if mum was alright with, but she's there for nana and I don't want to come between that ... it is my responsibility and mum's got her role helping her mum. (Generation Four Storyteller, Erica, Story One)*

Coupled with her concern, Erica also observes a positive side to grandparents parenting, albeit burdensome, as preventing children being removed from their family environment by the Department of Child Safety. This finding exposes a potentially serious contemporary issue for Bwgcolman, and other Aboriginal communities. Most of the current evidence of this practice on Palm Island is anecdotal and prolific with minimal empirical evidence on Bwgcolman grandparents parenting grandchildren to date. Therefore, this emerging childrearing practice needs further research to understand its effects on current family and community life and what structures of support are necessary for the grandparents and their grandchildren.

#### *Fostering Murri Way: Growing up Our Kids;*

*... one day one of the girls went up to the house and found her in the house all by herself with the grandmother, the great grandmother actually – Brought her home... I said to them then 'what are we going to do?' I said 'if we're going to keep her, you will all have to help me look after her' and she just thrived, she just fitted in. (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)*

In addition to *Grand-Parenting* and *Shared Care* childrearing, *Fostering Murri way* is a recurring story thread in this study. Similarly, as in the previous section,

*Fostering Murri way* is an informal, family-orientated practice; moreover, children can be fostered from the biological family or from a non-biological family. The findings in this study reveal that the families in Stories Two, Three and Five maintain strong intergenerational family practices of fostering children Murri way. Third generation Storyteller Boleen relates how she now continues to ‘grow up’ and look after others as her mother taught her, *“Like now I feel like I took on her role of looking after everyone, sort of like how mum grew her grandchildren up and kept them together”*. (Generation Three Storyteller, Boleen, Story Four) Likewise, according to third-generation Storyteller Pam, the important aspect in Murri fostering is the community’s readiness to help other families in trouble to rear their children in the community:

*...we need to step in and say you know well you don’t want – can’t handle or you’ve got a problem and you need a break, give it to someone that will help you out and look after them – it’s not easy.* (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)

Fostering Murri way or ‘informal fostering’ as it is defined by the state child protection system has been a way of family life on Palm Island since first-generation Elders came to Palm Island. The practice is accepted, the rules are understood by family parties ‘you look after them for a time and they go back to the family’. Furthermore, fostering Murri way is based on the integrity of family knowledge and the family agreement. Additionally, it ensures the child/children continue to have contact with their biological family and cultural connections. Third-generation Storyteller Magdalena shares the story of her mother Betty who was fostered by a woman for seven years when she first arrived on Palm Island. This arrangement was agreed to by Betty’s mother who had to work, however she resumed parenting Betty after the seven years were up:

*Mum said she was brought here to Palm Island through the Removal Orders, her mother was sent to Palm Island because she had two half*

*caste children ... those children were taken over to Fantome Island they had a home on Fantome Island for half caste kids and she was grown up by a lady called Mrs. Singleton and Mum would call her Auntie Ethel.*  
(Generation Three Storyteller, Magdalena, Story Five)

Yet, fostering has become a highly contentious issue today on Palm Island and in other Aboriginal communities; the government is more involved today and is having minimal success in officially recruiting foster parents in Aboriginal communities. Hence children are being removed to out of home care (McMahon, Reck, & Walker, 2007; Valentine & Gray, 2006). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Queensland Government child welfare department commenced removing children off Palm Island approximately twenty to thirty years ago. In successive years, the number of child removal has increased; currently the disproportionately high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children in the child protection system is a source of profound distress for families and community members.

This is unacceptable; I argue here that the continual removal of children from their families and the community is not ‘in the best interest of the child’ (Long & Sephton, 2011). Despite many submissions to government ministers and senior public servants to develop a collaborative community and government approach to child protection issues on Palm Island little has changed in the way the department of child safety engages with the community. On the one hand, the government continually espouses their ‘Closing the Gap’ message through the production of glossy reports to Indigenous families and the wider Australian families. It is rhetoric at its best, and Aboriginal people have had their ears filled with it over the last four decades. Yet ‘with the other hand’, governments withhold the necessary social, political and economic resources from communities. Furthermore, the lack of genuine engagement in real partnerships between the department of child safety and the Palm Island community in

a critical impediment to effective child protection on Palm Island. Therefore, nothing changes and the status quo is maintained, Long and Sephton (2011) advocates “legislative reform, which promotes Aboriginal self-determination, and argues that more work is needed to ensure Aboriginal perspectives are incorporated into service provision to Aboriginal children and families if we are truly to meet the best interests of Aboriginal children” (p. 96).

Conversely, many Murri families prefer fostering Murri way because it avoids the formal scrutiny of the child protection system; third-generation Storyteller Pam maintains that bringing up other people’s children is part of Murri way. She acknowledges the challenges involved however she firmly believes this is better than the child going through the government child protection system:

*... Child Safety get hold of the children and they’re sort of lost forever... because they want to come in and they want to know everything about your lifestyle and who lives in your house and if they’ve got a criminal record and I won’t touch any children that are under Child Safety. I prefer just to say you know ‘give me the child and I’ll give you a break and help look after them and when you’re ready, you can take them back. (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)*

Moreover, fourth-generation storyteller Larissa recounts a distressing scene that she recently witnessed of her friend’s children being taken away by child safety officers:

*... they dropped her off here and her kids were in the car and they were driving away; the kids were going mad, - crying --- that’s too sad,--- she had a look on her face like she was upset but she didn’t cry, she just walked away with her head down you know and didn’t want to look at them. (Generation Four Storyteller, Larissa, Story Three)*

The scenario recounted by Storyteller Larissa is not an uncommon one. Furthermore, family negotiation processes with the department of child safety to keep children in the community is fraught with ambiguous and unclear administrative processes.



It is important to note, here, that I support protection measures for the safety of children and do not dispute this objective, rather they are very necessary. However, an Aboriginal person who may have a criminal history in the past and is now a reformed and respected member in the community is prevented from formally fostering by ambiguous and unclear administrative processes, which excludes them from this role in the community.

This is a wide spread issue for other Aboriginal communities in Queensland and indeed Australia. Yet in order to have the positive impact of keeping Aboriginal children in their community avoiding out of home care off the community, requires serious and confronting dialogue between community and government for the successful recruitment of foster parents in the community. This level of government and community engagement requires integrity from both sides and if successful can only benefit the child, community and government processes. Conversely, in lifetimes of first and second-generation Bwgcolman people, family fostering was a normal practice undergirded by the intimate community knowledge of who was capable and not capable of caring for a child. Surprisingly, according to Elders these decisions were in the most part not questioned by the superintendent.

Therefore, a strong argument exists for improving the current unfavourable child placement situation. The solution lies in the department of child safety building better relationships with Bwgcolman, together based on integrity. In addition the opportunity and challenge for government officials is to gain a better understanding of Bwgcolman childrearing practices. Furthermore, the recent Queensland Government announcement (2012) to review the effectiveness of the Queensland Child Protection System provides an opportune time for the Department of Child Safety and Bwgcolman to contribute together for the wellbeing of Bwgcolman children and family. The

question left hanging is the Department of Child Safety willing to engage at levels they have not entered into before with Bwgcolman? Hopefully future child protection practices will not be a repeat of Larissa's summation of the Department of Child Safety:

*I think they give up on the parents too easy you know they just take them or leave them you know, they're not going to change. I reckon if they're going to take the child away, I reckon they should help that mother, or father, help them more like get them back on their feet and then they can get their kids back. (Generation Four Storyteller, Larissa, Story Three)*

### *Protection and Discipline in Childrearing;*

Interwoven in the Bwgcolman family stores are familial and generational story threads and strands of discipline, protection and respect in Bwgcolman childrearing practices. All of the Storytellers relate their strong belief that the discipline of children and teaching respect is a very important component in Bwgcolman childrearing. Interestingly their stories reveal a two-tier level of child discipline; the first tier reflects discipline in the family home undertaken by parents and others who share the family home environment. The Storytellers reveal their childhood disciplinary practices, which varied between the physical, verbal to denying privileges. Third-generation storyteller Andrea recounts the changing disciplinary methods in her family:

*Of course my grandfather was the discipliner in the family, it wasn't left to my grandmother and when he passed away it was then passed down to the older brothers to carry out that discipline and take care of the younger siblings and ensure that they were all in line because he had instilled in the older ones, those disciplines, well respect practices and their methods to ensure that the family unit stayed together and did the right thing. I tried the whistle thing but it didn't work for me. I tried the stern talking but that didn't help so now I've just resorted to denying privileges um particularly with Christmas coming...swimming, which is part of the children's lifestyle and that's a hurtful thing. (Generation Three Storyteller Andrea, Story One)*

The second-tier of discipline is revealed as a combination of community child protection and social behaviour management at a community level. This level reflects a strong social cohesion and is particularly spoken of in almost all the stories. A striking feature revealed by the Storytellers is the uniformity in their stories relating to the practice of home and community discipline. All three generations and each family story reveal a strong interconnectedness between home discipline, community child protection and teaching the younger generation respect. Fourth-generation Storyteller Larissa shares that even she respected others in the community disciplining her without questioning it, *“I wouldn’t back answer no-one at all, no other parent or anything like that, I would just take it. I wouldn’t even tell Mum”*.

The relationship of the family extended beyond blood-lines into relationships with others of the same tribe and language group. These relationships were important for ‘looking out’ for the children; in effect it was a community driven child protection system. Although this system is not as common today, some community members still engage in the practice and others continue to value it.

Second-generation Storyteller Betty explains the intergenerational changes she observes in the community:

*See all the people in the old days were well mannered people, never gave any problems and trouble – they used to take care of one another’s children. Yeah. And we used to tell one another if we saw any children doing wrong, we’d correct them, tell them to come home, like that and they would do it ... but today you can’t do that because they’ll pull you up in Court quick for interfering with their children whereas in the old days it was okay, we could chastise one another’s children and nobody would say anything. That’s how my children grew up you know, they grew up different.* (Generation Two Storyteller Betty, Story Five)

It was an accepted custom for families to give permission to others to discipline and watch over their children. For this reason the practice of community discipline has significant implications for the state child protection policy development. However, it is

clear from the stories that successful community based child protection is dependent on a high level of community cohesion to implement, as illustrated by second-generation Storyteller Beryl:

*...if they saw any other children doing something wrong, they had the right to correct them and all the parents agreed that you look after one another and check the kids so, to us, everybody was aunty and uncle and that became a real family tie with everybody, even today. (Generation Two Storyteller Beryl, Story Four)*

One of the major threats to family and childrearing on Palm Island has been the western notion of the nuclear family with its limited extension of first and second-degree relatives. Childrearing in the relational family structure on Palm Island has provided a range of parenting options, which have been adopted for the survival of children when biological parenting was fragile. In the comparatively recent shift from the ‘hunter-gatherer culture’ to that of the late 20th and early 21st centuries women have remained the primary carers but fathers and male role models have always been within the perimeters of parenting, now, in the fourth-generation, fathers are engaging in direct childrearing. Above all, regaining community based child protection practices to the same level described by Storytellers may not be achievable. Nevertheless, this should not prevent the Palm Island community and governments from collaborating to the degree required towards developing better community service provision for families and children and better child protection strategies.

#### *Childrearing – In the Home and on the Land;*

A consistent story strand in the stories reveal all five Bwgcolman family childrearing practices are not confined to the physical home environment but are undertaken in much broader cultural contexts. For example, the storytellers made continual reference to family outings and the activities they undertook together. The

reader must understand that it is only in the last 40 years since the repeal of the ‘Act’ in 1981 that Palm Island families have had the *‘freedom’* to extend their childrearing practices in and out of the home environment. Significantly, the Storytellers yarns of going out to the beach, boating, fishing or hunting and gathering on the reef is more meaningful than ‘just a day out’; it is a process of family reconnection and strengthening of relationships. Third-generation Storyteller Andrea confirms the importance of family cohesion with her husband and children through regular times away from the home environment:

*We regularly go fishing and we try to camp at least the night and that way there’s no TV, the routine is broken, and there can be that form of bonding so you’re sitting constantly in the company of each other... Um and that’s why I think it’s essential that – but I don’t know how you can do it but for each of the families to have that time with each of their children to build that strength back up within the family unit, that respect for their parents...(Andrea Generation Three, Story One)*

So too, Larissa a fourth-generation Storyteller recounts her childhood outings with her siblings, and mother, grandfather and uncle:

*Mum and Grandad took us out, we used to have Raymond, Mum’s big brother, used to take us out in the boat, just all the kids and he would let us all wait in the boat while he would dive in and give us each one fish. (Generation Four Storyteller Larissa, Story Three)*

To outsiders, such close family activity can be superficially dismissed as unimportant, but by Bwgcolman standards these family gatherings in and outside of the physical home environment create a vast classroom for the teaching of children, and for the exchange of help and advice for the adults in the family. This is the way Murris help support each other in family; it is informal, family orientated, holistic and meaningful where issues can be addressed pointedly by family, promoting family cohesion without fraying the fabric of family. Again, Andrea, shares her childhood

experiences of regular family outings with her mother, as a means to preparing them for the year ahead:

*When my Mum returned to Palm Island, she was a single mother so she raised us all on her own, so she had to take the responsibility of mother and father and she had to take the responsibility for the discipline. We'd always – to ensure that she held onto that respect, and that respect didn't fall outside of the family, we'd always have family camping holidays – 6 weeks at Mundy Bay, every school holidays so we were gone the whole 6 weeks. We enjoyed the company of each other, all the children, we didn't have friends there; it was just purely the family. There were other people camping there as well so we'd sort of camp with them but that sort of strengthened us for the year ahead (Generation Three Storyteller Andrea, Story One)*

Out of home childrearing also continues the family's important connection with the land, thus reinforcing their identity and the essence of their survival from the oppressions of the past. In this natural classroom the children learn about the seasons for hunting and gathering including the weather and tides along with other environmental markers to the food supply cycles and land care. Fourth-generation Storyteller Nikki, for example, tells of taking the children to gather shellfish:

*And we love our bush food – yeah even our grandkids go and get cockles and Julgai and teach them how to look for all those sort of things and they love it, they fight over Julgai to eat. (Generation Four Storyteller Nikki, Story Two)*

Being out on the water also included lessons of discipline in strength, agility and resilience as Bwgcolman hunters. Magdalena recalls the stories her father told her:

*And I remember Dad saying that – he had a pretty tough time growing up without his mother – he remembered some good times and when he got into teenage years, his father was a pretty tough man, he used to take them rowing and they used to row around the island, him and his brothers used to just row in a dinghy all over the place looking for turtles or other types of things to hunt, he said 'it might be old Grandad was making us tough for the future'. (Generation Three Storyteller Magdalena, Story Five)*

The family based practices of childrearing outdoors demonstrate the continued existence and employment of traditional cultural knowledge and skills, revealing Bwgcolman survival, resistance, and strength. Conversely, the family stories also reveal a deep concern about the changes in generational attitudes of children towards adults in the family, and the decline of families going out with their children as expressed by third generation Storyteller Dianne:

*It could be how Palm Island is progressing now, the way things are changing and I don't know, that link between Mum and Dad and kids, it's sort of fading somehow and I see some of the children just think that their parents are there just to do things for them and I feel like some of the parents aren't valued anymore. I worry about that because it wasn't like that before, you know Mum and Dad were the head of the house and we all respected them and loved them and they could say things to their children that were respected, but now, it's different. Some of the families are still together you know, still have that unity but a lot don't have that anymore and that's what I've noticed too and, as well, they don't go out much, although this beautiful Island is here. (Generation Three Storyteller, Dianne, Story Three)*

In summary, throughout their stories the storytellers themselves validate the continuing distinctive relationship between Indigenous people and their land and the significant role it plays in their childrearing. Further, this is consistent with the literature describing childrearing on country in the past and present day (Hamilton, 1981; Jewell, 2008; Kearins, 1984; Kruske et al., 2012; McConnel, 1933/34; Shaw, 2002).

Although current models of family support such as those developed and implemented by the Queensland Government on Palm Island profess to employ culturally appropriate practices; these practices are in most cases limited to four walls in a building. This is not culturally appropriate care; it is narrow in its objectives and limits access to the most vulnerable families in the community. For the most part these families end up engaging with these services out of an emergency response to their

need, usually for food vouchers. Beyond that, they mostly reject the current models of family support because there are no real strategies to work with families on the coalface of their lives. For example the current mainstream programs expect the people to come to them at a central shopfront, whereas better service provision can be achieved by taking the program to the people in a way that meets their need. For this reason, it is essential that the development and delivery of family support services at government and community level are broadened to include in and out of home family support practice. This is achievable by including resources to assist families to engage in out of the home family orientated activities on Palm Island and the surrounding island environment; thereby utilising the physical and cultural resources, which are readily available and consistent with Bwgcolman ontology.

In summary, I have presented in this chapter three key horizontal story threads emerging from this study significant to Bwgcolman childrearing practices: Murri Way, Walking Two Cultures and Childrearing is Relational. These story threads and its vertical strands reveal a fabric of resilience, which not even the Storytellers were fully aware of before this study. Thus, this shaping of Bwgcolman heritage lays the foundation for the description and interpretation of the next three story threads and the accompanying vertical strands: (4) Resisting Oppression and Being Resilient: *External Oppression, Internal or Internalised Oppression, Spiritual Oppression, Institutional Childrearing and Pathways to Recovery*; (5) Hope in Oppression: *Renegotiating Family and Childrearing, Fresh Footprints Stepping Out, When the Wish Comes True* (6) Storytellers Possible Solutions: *Stepping Forward: Fracturing Current, Social, and Political Climate, Healing Past and Present for an Effectual Future, More of the Same Policy and Practice, Navigating the Social Situation of Childrearing and Potential Solutions*. The six threads and their accompanying strands demonstrate both to the



Storytellers and non-indigenous peoples the breadth and depth of the strengths of  
childrearing practices on Palm Island.

## CHAPTER 12

### MAKING NEW FOOTPRINTS

#### Resisting Oppression and Being Resilient

This story thread Resisting Oppression and Being Resilient refers to the Bwgcolman agency of intellectually and practically opposing the effects of oppressive forces beyond their control. Woven throughout the five Bwgcolman family stories are images of past and present oppression within each intergenerational story. In telling their story the Storytellers employ what Nelson (2001) describes as a function of repair, that is, they tell their story of oppression to validate their present freedom of “moral agency and moral self-definition” (p.157). In many ways their story of oppression is a springboard for resilience, the more they speak of it, the more they are awakened to the journey they have travelled to reach the present. During the story times, I observed that each Storyteller’s narrative of oppression was their way of resistance to the “master narrative” (Nelson, 2001, p. 155). All of the Bwgcolman family Storytellers share images of their own and their family’s experience with forces of oppression that were beyond their control. Interpreting these conversational images revealed several sources of oppressive forces which are described in the vertical story strands: *External Oppression, Internal or Internalised Oppression, Spiritual Oppression and Institutional Childrearing* each of which impact upon the lives of the Bwgcolman people.

#### *External Oppression*

The first of these oppressive forces *External Oppression*, is revealed in the stories that originate from the long-standing practices of the ‘Act’ (1897). For the Bwgcolman people living under the ‘Act’ meant over seven decades of control, stigmatised as a problem by the legislative powers of the state. McDonald and Coleman

(1999) discuss stigmatising ideologies and quote Richie who said “oppression results from domination and marginalisation, and is both a process and an outcome” (p.20). In addition to this, McDonald and Coleman assign their meanings of oppression to Richie’s saying “oppression is also discrimination systematically enforced through use of social/economic/political power, in such a way that the status quo is maintained and inequality is legitimised” (p. 20). Similarly, the Bwgcolman Storytellers reveal discourses of trauma consistent with meanings of their “domination and marginalisation” as illustrated in the following story extracts from each generation:

Generation Two:

*“That terrible history comes out of the government”; “it didn’t matter what we felt because that’s how we had to live our life”; “he was getting sent to Palm Island and he said ‘I won’t go without my family; “but they were told not to speak it publicly so they lost all that, all the language, all the cultures, we weren’t allowed to practice our culture here” (Generation Two Storytellers, Erykah, Dawn, Mavis, Beryl, Stories One, Two, Three and Four)*

Generation Three:

*There’s a lot of families on Palm with no father – fathers have gone young”; “the future doesn’t look very pretty, it doesn’t look very good”; “that link between Mum and Dad and kids, it’s sort of fading somehow”; “Some of the families are still together you know, but a lot don’t have that anymore”; Mum said she was brought here to Palm Island through the Removal Orders, her mother was sent because she had two half caste children”. (Generation Three Storytellers, Andrea, Pam Dianne, Magdalena, Story Four)*

Generation Four:

*“It’s hard cause the alcohol has just got the best of him”; “a lot of kids these days are dropping out of school and you know, missing out, you know where’s their future”. (Generation Four Storytellers, Erica, and Larissa, Stories One and Three)*

These discourses are not just specific to Palm Island, although their content maybe different, the life experiences of oppression are shared by other Indigenous peoples who have been colonised and by other peoples who are marginalised (Bricher, 2000; Gerlach, 2008; Poupart, 2003; Wheeler, 2006).

### *Internal or Internalised Oppression*

The second oppressive force revealed in the stories is somewhat veiled, and more complex, it is an internal personal oppressive force. These forces are experienced from within the psyche of the individual as described by Generation-two Storyteller Erykah. During the course of her description she placed her hand on her head and pushed in a downward motion and whispered *“it pushes you down and people walk around with round shoulders, that’s true, – terrible, terrible”*. Poupart (2003) describes this kind of oppression as the “learned and internalized discursive practice of the West – internalizing Western meanings of difference and abject” (p.88).

Holding or keeping the ‘abject’ discourses of the west within the heart and mind, can manifest in various ways of emotional and mental ill health for some. When this occurs over generations, as it has done for the Australian Indigenous people, their own sense of personal and cultural identity diminishes and they see themselves through western meanings of ‘difference and abject’. This results in deep internal dissonance.

During the storytelling the Storytellers referred to the experience of struggling with a conflicting self-identity – a pseudo identity. That is, the constant internal conflict of the Bwgcolman personal and cultural identity competing with the perception and self worth becomes defined by the western perspective; they begin to appropriate and believe the fruitless discourse of hegemony. This pseudo self-perception disrupts the social and emotional equilibrium and their ability to function effectively within the community unless they acquire the coping skills necessary to deal with the pressures.

More often than not when individual coping skills are absent, *Internal Oppression* can result in the individual making decisions that brings further injury to themselves or their family through actions of violence and abuse upon themselves or upon others. Aboriginal child psychiatrist Milroy in Hunter and Milroy (2006), describe the effects of trauma and oppression, likening it to being trapped with no way forward:

Looking through trauma is like being trapped in the back of a mirror, there is no reflection of self. It is like being trapped in darkness, unable to see where to go or what is there, surrounded by 'not knowing', paralyzed by fear. When we are wounded, our story is disrupted and life becomes fragmented. We may not be able to find our way forward and may start to see life through warped mirrors (p.151).

Poupart (2003) provides a clear explanation of what Goodall (2005) refers to as 'toxic' inheritances where issues such as abuse are passed down through families and result in substantial impact on intergenerational legacies of shame, guilt, feelings of inferiority, and loss. Poupart explains that:

Outwardly expressed internal oppression and the subsequent harm of family or community is also an assault upon the self, as one destroys their own social network of support, connectedness, and love. Likewise, the inward expression of internalized oppression upon the self also harms the community to the extent that one is unable to provide support, connection, and love to family and tribal members (p.90).

Such self-harming behaviours have been known to last many years for individuals, family and community, some never being addressed, and some resulting in

death, either by suicide, homicide, or medical illness. These external and internal oppressive forces are intimately related constructs in iterative communion disrupting the social and emotional wellbeing of an individual, the family and the community of Palm Island. Hunter, Reser, Baird and Reser (1999) give a poignant example of the devastating effects of external and internal oppressive forces culminating in the death of two Palm Island women in the 1960s and early 1970s:

It is important at the outset to emphasise that suicide and attempted suicide are powerfully symbolic acts which are intended, in part, to make particular statements and express one's pain. Those who 'witness' such an act or outcome are visibly affected, shaken and impacted by the act. This symbolic statement can be very political as well as poignant. It is noteworthy that a number of the early recorded suicides on Palm Island in the 1960s and early 1970s were younger women who immolated themselves when their children were taken away, acts which clearly communicated their acute sense of injustice as well as pain (p.22).

*I am compelled to pause at this point in my academic writing as it is difficult to follow on from the above text. In my lived experience the community of Palm Island have witnessed numerous deaths from suicides. I cannot state the exact reasons why our young men and women take their own lives; however I know deep in my heart that many, if not all, have battled with a profound internal oppressive and depressive force, which they could not overcome on their own and make it through.*

For this reason, the existing and newly developed programs targeting social and emotional wellbeing within Bwgcolman family structures *must* include a *holistic skilled* pathway of care, Murri Way, to ensure such programs are truly acceptable and accessible to Murri people. Indeed, the days should be numbered for programs with

minimal or no successful outcomes that continue to be propped up with government funding. The collateral damage of Bwgcolman lives because of politics is no longer acceptable. Family support to strengthen Bwgcolman childrearing practices is imperative to prevent the next generation from experiencing the same negative outcomes as their forebears.

### *Spiritual Oppression*

I now follow on from internalised oppression and cautiously lead into a discussion on a force of oppression that is perceived as unconventional in western paradigms, yet it is deeply embedded in Aboriginal ontology. I refer here to the paranormal or spiritual forces; from a Murri perspective such forces are an equally powerful causal factor of internal oppression as are external forces. Current literature of psychology and psychiatry is replete with causal medical paradigms of mental illness, which, based on empirics is widely accepted in the dominant worldview. The notion of *Spiritual Oppression* is held with scepticism in traditional medical models. Conversely, and more importantly; from an Indigenous perspective this is not a notion, the spiritual or the spirit world is very real; just as real to Murris as the natural world. Within the Bwgcolman family stories the Storytellers make reference to their Aboriginal and Christian spirituality. Second-generation Storyteller Beryl shares a childhood experience:

*I remember walking along the beach and we'd hear the didgeridoo and the clap stick and it would send shivers down your spine. You know so we grew up in that era and they used to – like what they say – if they had an enemy, they had to be careful you know because they were catching one another, taking clothes and things like that – the singing, they used to sing people. All the children had to be home in their house because any men that were out there, they'd walk around painted up. I remember seeing one person come to our house all painted up with a bundle of spears and it was frightening but he moved on you know.*

Implicit in this is an unspoken understanding of *power* of the spirit world. These are Aboriginal ontological constructs that are embedded in everyday living and are commonly referenced by Aboriginal people, for example, in times of undiagnosed medical illness or an unaccounted for and out of the ordinary event. It is not uncommon to hear conversations that '*someone was caught*' meaning the illness has a malevolent spiritual source. However difficulty arises when explaining this to mental health professionals who view mental ill health from a pragmatic rational medical model.

Australian psychiatrist Ernest Hunter has worked professionally for the last two decades in remote Australian Aboriginal communities. His experience in Aboriginal communities has led him to acknowledge the systems of conflict and two world views of the Indigenous sacred sphere and the European positivist paradigms of disease (1999). Hunter demonstrates the perceived incompatibility of the two systems from a European medical perspective. In this light the Aboriginal worldview of disease and illness was undermined and dismissed. Nonetheless, Hunter a western trained psychiatrist acknowledges the influence of the spirit world or the sacred upon Aboriginal men and women's social and emotional wellbeing (E. Hunter, 1993). In their groundbreaking study *An Analysis of Suicide in Indigenous Communities of North Queensland, The Historical, Cultural and Symbolic Landscape* (1999), Hunter et al., refer to the experiences of Aboriginal men's anxiety and "fear from malevolent spirits, 'travelling men' (sorcerers), or spirits of the deceased...the phenomenon of a 'sensed presence'... is often very strong in Aboriginal community circumstances" (pp. 54-55). The authors also make mention of young men in the Queensland Aboriginal community of Yarrabah who made "repeated reference to these 'spirits, and the ghosts of non-custody suicides, 'calling out' to young men to take their lives in this way (by hanging) and join them" (p.28). The authors go on to note that young people in remote



Aboriginal communities are influenced by traditional beliefs that can be the cause of contemporary anxieties. These research findings are still relevant today, as spirituality is a core element of Murri Way. Likewise, for Bwgcolman family health and childrearing, this cultural more indicates a necessity to legitimately incorporate spiritual beliefs and sources of spiritual assistance and support within government and non-government service delivery models to families and individuals. Finally, the words of Hunter and Milroy (2006) “To live without spirit is to sleep without dreams and wake to oblivion” (p.29), demonstrate that attending to Aboriginal spiritual resilience is equally important as attending to their physical and emotional resilience so that families are functioning effectively in their childrearing practices. The following story strand is a stark reminder of the legacies of external and internal oppression from a pervasive institution that the Storytellers in this study still carry and pass on to their children.

### *Institutional Childrearing*

One of the most harmful child welfare interventions to come out of the ‘Act’ was the institutionalisation of children and adults in State and Church residential homes known as dormitories in Aboriginal communities. The forced separation of children from their family, kin and country and the consequent ‘incarceration’ in the dormitories has left many Aboriginal men and women still seeking their pathways to recovery from the oppression of the ‘system’ in this present day. Kidd (1997) recorded a 1950 medical review of the dormitory system in Queensland by a Dr Macken, who described the dormitory as:

“Pernicious”, offensive and counter-productive ... Girls were locked up at night and confined to a compound for daytime labour at domestic chores ... “If these coloured women are to become properly adjusted to

normal life” the dormitory system “must be broken down”. “It is completely futile and artificial and unnatural to enclose, or rather encage, women, and to expect any sort of normal psychological balance on their release”.

Kumm cited in Watson (1993) revealed that many children were removed from their parents and sent to Palm Island, because Bleakley, the chief protector at the time, believed that; “ the rising generation’ should be removed from ‘the retarding influence of the old myalls’ – their parents, grandparents and kin – so that ‘their education to better things can be successfully carried out”. Kumm further stated that “Bleakley promoted the confinement of children in reserve dormitories, and during his reign parents were sometimes illegally threatened by police that they had either to let go of their children or be sent to Palm Island” (pp. 173-174).

Within the second-generation stories the Bwgcolman Storytellers particularly make mention of the dormitory system and its effect on the girls and boys that lived in the institutions. One Storyteller gives a firsthand account of her childhood as a dormitory inmate and her experience and as a single mother in the dormitory:

*Um I was twelve at the time, my sister was – I think she would have been about 10. ... we’d get up in the morning at 6 o’clock, scrub floors, then have breakfast, go to school, come home ... we’d still do some work there – we did this right up until we left school. I was working in the dormitory there, in the sewing room where we had to mend sheets and all that sort of thing and, around about September, I went nursing and did a couple of years there... until I got pregnant – went back to Palm, back to the dormitory again. (Generation Two Storyteller, Dawn, Story Two)*

Dawn describes her time in the dormitory as a single parent where she learnt to care for her daughter’s physical needs along with the other single mothers. However one striking feature of Dawn’s story was the separation of young children and babies

from their mothers within the dormitory; hence the women and children lived within a twofold level of separation from the outside world and inside the institution:

*When we were there, they used to put the babies and the little people there in the nursery. And after tea you used to have to go and put them on the potty, clean it, give them a bath, get them all ready for bed and you had to leave them there overnight you know. Only one person stayed there to look after the children overnight. The very young ones like the newborns they stayed with their mother upstairs but, as they grew older, they went down into the Nursery. (Generation Two Storyteller, Dawn, Story Two)*

Some children were even adopted out at the superintendent's discretion without the mother's knowledge as usually the mothers were sent out to work on the mainland, forced to leave their children in the dormitory to be cared for by other women appointed to do the job. *"It didn't matter what we felt because that's how we had to live our life. That was the rule yeah. Sometimes they took children away from their mothers and adopted them out, outside of Palm Island"* Dawn's story is supported by other contemporary studies which verify her testimony (Watson, 1993). Very little opportunity was given to mothers to develop strong parent – child attachments in the dormitory. Hence, the women and men who came out of the dormitory system experienced difficulties, or in some cases the inability to maintain marriage relationships and *grow up* their own children. Second-generation Storyteller Beryl explains:

*They weren't as close as we were you know like ... some of them were in the dormitory and never had that – yeah, never had that close relationship with their mothers and fathers, that's where it comes down to. And when they came out, they had to fend for themselves, they had to build their lives up and when they got married, well they had to try and plan their life. But, without having that first contact from their parents, that's where a lot of the breakdown is. (Generation Two Storyteller, Beryl, Story Two)*

The negative experiences described by the Storytellers are supported by existing literature demonstrating the significant implications for childrearing where institutionalised children become parents themselves (Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Kidd; McCallum, 2006). Ring and Elston (1999) concur, stating that:

People brought up in dormitories/institutions or passed around foster families didn't learn about good parenting and, as parents, many such individuals had 'problem children' of their own. Many forcibly removed children and their subsequent children and grand-children have lost their cultures, languages, heritage and lands, as well as their families and communities. (p.229)

However, and more importantly, recovery is possible; through understanding these difficult issues, a family may discover opportune turning points for recovering their strength and resilience, similar to that of their parents and grandparents who survived the bleak living environment of dormitory. Further, I argue that resilience was present then although not recognised as such; as many of the dormitory children forged enduring relationships under extreme duress in the institution. Luthar (2005) asserts his notion of resilience in that:

Resilience is a process or phenomenon reflecting relatively positive adaptation despite experiences of significant risk or trauma. Resilience involves judgments about people's lives. It is never directly measured, but rather is inferred, based on knowledge of two conditions: (a) that a person is doing reasonably well; and (b) that this has happened in spite of significant adversity. (p. 1)

In spite of their separation from family and country, the dormitory children, reconstructed their sense of family with the system and extended their kinship family structure through these enduring relationships as second-generation Storyteller Beryl shares:

*I never ever knew what they were really doing in the dormitory; I never knew that they were stolen from their parents. They used to get up and cry for the mum or dad at night and the bigger girls used to comfort them and that's how they formed a relationship, the Dormitory – all the people that were in the Dormitory, they formed a strong relationship by supporting one another because they all grew up without parents.*  
(Generation Two Storyteller, Beryl, Story Two)

Moreover, it is important to note that the dormitory years on Palm Island were a travesty of appalling child protection and welfare services for Aboriginal families and children. Yet, in the face of such misery Bwgcolman strength and resilience emerged and is celebrated thorough the re-telling of their stories that provides a pathway of healing and remembering. Haskell and Randall (2009) support this pathway and assert that "Healing from trauma takes place through connection, through developing and experiencing healthy attachments. These attachments can be individual but must also be fostered at the level of the community" (Luthar, 2005, p. 1). This process of healing was realised for those women who, as young people, were separated from their families and incarcerated in the dormitories when these same people were able to have a 'dormitory reunion' described by Watson (2010) as "a healing and a sad occasion" (pp. 89-90) on Palm Island in 2007. These people were now in their 50s, 60s, 70s and some in their 80s; this demonstrates how long it takes for healing and recovery. Figure 19, is a photograph of a commemorative monument erected on the historical site of the women's dormitory, which now is the sight for the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) on Palm Island. The words on the monument read:

*This monument is in remembrance of all of the Sisters and Brothers who were displaced and endured the dormitory era. And in honour of their pain and courage through these years. We would like to acknowledge those who have passed on. We would like to thank the Elders who recommended the dormitory reunion as a part of healing their spirits 1918-1975.*

**Figure 19: Commemorative Memorial Palm Island: Photograph from the author's private collection (circa 2007)**



### *Pathways to Recovery*

Recovery from trauma is vital for the ongoing health and wellbeing of individuals and families and their childrearing practices. Within the Bwgcolman stories are finer story strands illustrating what I identify as discourses of recovery; words and phrases revealing markers of resilience and survival which are rarely heard in the wider public domain because they are usually blanketed under covers of deficit discourses (Watson, 2010). Moreover, I argue that these words and phrases are discourses of strength. Furthermore, they are key recovery conversations that necessitate further study with an objective to developing Bwgcolman specific pathways of recovery. For

example, third-generation Storyteller Pam affirms “*we’ve come through a lot. I see it in my daughters*”. Similarly, second-generation Storyteller Beryl provides words of resilience from a spiritual perspective; “*Sometimes you think you’re in a situation where there’s no end to that situation but it does end and I believe God comes in and helps people*”. Likewise second-generation Storyteller Betty focuses on engaging the youth of Palm Island:

*Young people always look for a leader in this community and they would sit and talk if there was someone interested in them because I used to talk to a lot of young people and they would come out and speak about things which they think should be done here on this Island. That’s why it’s important that somebody speaks to them all, I believe that – I’m always putting that across to people when I talk to them – do something for our young people.* (Generation Two Storyteller Betty, Story Five)

Finally fourth-generation Storyteller Keira demonstrates foresight in summary of the intergenerational teachings of her forebears, reversing deficit dialogues to a dialogue of positive action, “*parents aren’t always going to be there for you, because one day they’re going to leave and you have to teach your children to be strong and independent*”. (Generation Four Storyteller Keira, Story Five)

Although, on the surface, it seems that Palm Island People are now ‘consulted’ about any changes in government policy regarding families and childrearing, there continues to remain a significant lack of understanding of Bwgcolman’s insights into what promotes their own social, emotional and spiritual well-being. The creation and implementation of innovative models of partnerships between the Bwgcolman People and government and non-government agencies is crucial for closing this gap of misunderstanding. Collaboration in real partnership where Bwgcolman and governments have equal authority can build enduring pathways and programs of recovery for individuals and families that will have direct influence on their childrearing practices for the better.

## *Hope in Oppression*

*When hope is crushed, the heart is crushed,*

*but a wish come true fills you with joy*

(Proverbs 13:12 Good News Translation)

The second horizontal thread in this Chapter, Hope in Oppression and its story strands *Renegotiating Family and Childrearing* and *Fresh Footprints Stepping Out* refers to a future outlook for Bwgcolman that includes prosperity of the body, soul, spirit and country for their children and the Bwgcolman generations who will follow with a legacy of hope. Integrating the previous sections of Chapter 11 with this chapter, I now turn to the notion of hope; Freire and Freire (2004) describe hope as an ontological need. These authors maintain that the human condition in social political struggle is symbiotical with hope, which has to be “anchored in practice ... hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness” (p. 2). Freire and Freire go on to explain that “without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness” (p. 3). Similarly, the intergenerational stories of the five Bwgcolman families contain clear interweaving conversations of Bwgcolman hope.

Generally, the notion of hope evokes images of elation and striding forth in great expectations, conversely, hope can also bring to mind images of desperation and brokenness. Significantly, both these images of hope have emerged throughout this study at various points in the telling of the Bwgcolman family stories. Equally important is the enduring image of Bwgcolman resilience that is revealed in the stories. Given the growing anxieties of the Bwgcolman families in this uncertain social, political and economic environment one might anticipate a shift away from hopeful



future outlooks; furthermore, one might well understand if this was so. However as I sat with the second-generation Storytellers who are now our Bwgcolman Elders and listened to their stories full of pain and struggle, I was struck with profound admiration and love for these women whose ability to look beyond themselves and their circumstances strengthened their resolve to keep going. Moreover, I was also comforted to hear and see their weaves of hope through their own sense of *Dadirri*.

Hence, threaded throughout these family stories are very clear meanings of the Storyteller's sense of hope for a future from their perspective of the present. In particular the fluidity of movement of the conversations from the starkness of oppression to an elation of survival is a point of meaning in the stories. For example in Story One, second-generation Storyteller Erykah has just finished disclosing a pivotal traumatic event in her life of being escorted by police to the hospital for an invasive examination to prove her virginity, and yet in almost the next breath she exclaims with joy and gives thanks for her life:

*Anyway yeah I'll never ever forget that examination – I don't know, you understand, but it clearly showed I was still a virgin ... On the way home, my mother didn't know what to say and all she said to me was 'you don't have to go to school if you don't want to' – I couldn't answer... However, jumping ahead, I lived in a lot of places, yeah a lot of places and it's a miracle I'm alive and I thank God every day, I thank the Lord for this beautiful day, Thank you for my life. Because I have lived longer than seven brothers and sisters and, of course, mother and father so I say Thank you for this beautiful day. (Generation Two Storyteller, Erykah, Story One)*

Alexander (2008) describes a process of the narrative therapist finding the alternate story in a story of pain, an “often unnoticed story” that reveals the person’s “survival, strength and practices which have enabled them to fight back and then overcome” (p. 115). So too the Bwgcolman Storytellers reveal practices of personal strength as their story demonstrates an intentional and volitional move forward to

persevere; and in the preserving, building resilience through the struggle, to continue the struggle – thereby making footprints for other Bwgcolman to follow. This underlying value of Bwgcolman hope is to be celebrated. In sharing their stories the Storytellers reveal the pain of their hope; their meanings of hope in their identity as a community of people, and in the survival of their families from the past practices of governments and current oppressions they experience. Their practices of fighting back are evident in their dialogue as demonstrated in the following discourses of survival and hope from the third, fourth and fifth-generation Storytellers.

*we've made it through; it's about looking after each other and teaching the younger parents to "step up to the plate"; we're getting them through now aren't we?; We just need to be strong, be confident and know what we want in life; I don't know how to explain but it... but spiritually they were really strong people, they knew how to cope, deal with what was going on, there was going to be a good outcome in the future, yeah hold on*

Equally significant in Bwgcolman hope is the acknowledgement of deep emotional and spiritual pain that is not fully grasped nor understood by outsiders. Even though the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised nationally to the Indigenous Stolen Generation in February 2008, very little has changed at the community level. During the storytelling the attempts at verbalising our hopes would at times elicit strong emotions, and more often than not we found ourselves catching our breath and shedding silent tears.

*In these times I could not allow myself to focus on these emotions during the storytelling process for fear it would overcome me and I would end up crying whilst the storyteller was speaking. This pain of loss and hope was left for me to explore its meanings in the privacy of my home and university room where I employed Dadirri and Critical Murri Consciousness to the discourses of pain in the stories.*

Likewise, this is a delicate and adventurous step to take by a researcher to try and bring forth the depth of pain and hope which, when undermined or disregarded, can lock Bwgcolman to the past, and can limit their present and future. This delicate step also includes sharing this knowledge with Bwgcolman and others in academia and governments. Conversely, I argue that the commonly held notion that Aboriginals are chained to the past is a neo-colonial justification and one of the major reasons why non-indigenous people keep saying 'why are they (Aborigines) like this'. This study clearly demonstrates that Bwgcolman are not locked in the past, that they are moving forwards exploring, and appropriating new ways of doing in their childrearing practices without compromising the integrity of their personal and cultural Bwgcolman identity. The central position of my argument is that governments and non-government service provision sectors must move beyond these entrenched attitudes and perspectives about Indigenous peoples and create a new paradigm of understanding and collaboration with Indigenous peoples and particularly with the Bwgcolman people.

### *Renegotiating Family and Childrearing;*

In marked contrast to earlier first, second and third-generation the current fourth-generation Storytellers and their peers now find themselves in a modern social, political and economic environment. Furthermore, with the new environment there is a freedom of choice of parenting and childrearing practices compared to their grandparents who did not have a choice under the control of the 'Act'. Hence the stories of fourth-generation Storytellers Erica, Nikki, Larissa, Sondra and Keira reveals a significant shift in their Bwgcolman family structure and their hope filled aspirations for their childrearing practice. All of the fourth-generation Storytellers concur that adapting their parenting and childrearing to the current changing society poses great

challenges for them, for their parents, family and their community. A major challenge within this generation is the increasing numbers of single parent Bwgcolman families.

In 2006 the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that thirty three % of the total number of families on Palm Island were single parent families with children under 15 and/or dependent students (Cook & Alexander, p. 115). Similarly, the anecdotes of second and third-generation Storytellers provide community confirmation of these statistics; third-generation Storyteller Pam articulates her concern about the growing numbers of young parents on the island:

*Well you know, children having children, there's not enough time for these children to grow, to be – they need to be children before they can be responsible and have their own children because there's too many children without parents, it's been taken away from them because they're not allowing their children to grow. (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)*

So too, the Elder generation have articulated their observations of the changing face of the family. In contrast to fourth-generation family structure and childrearing, the Elders reared their children within a marriage, usually a Christian marriage where both parents were committed to the relationship and the subsequent childrearing of the children in their family. Second-generation Storyteller Betty reflects on the change in families and provides possible causative factors for these alterations:

*Well things have changed today because there's a lot of other things going on, the TV it draws the attention of children and videos and all that, games – we didn't have them in those days. Younger people you know get drawn into the smoking and drinking, all that is going on today which changes everything. It must be hard today with children because some of them haven't got a father figure to lead them, I guess they're just doing their own thing, the mother and father so the children just go off and do their own thing. It's a wrong that they'd doing and it's a sad thing. (Generation Two Storyteller, Betty, Story Five)*

However, in spite of the high percentage of single parenting, second and third-generation Storytellers reveal that a significant level of family support is being

provided by their Elder peer group. These supports include the provision of housing, albeit in an overcrowded situation at times, financial support and assisting with the daily childrearing of their grandchildren or great grandchildren. Whilst this is the current practice it does place disproportionate burdens upon the Elder generation that is not always resourced to parent young children and adolescents. This concurs with Kilcullen, Swinbourne and Cadet-James (2009) in their conference presentation *Factors affecting resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Grandmothers Raising their Grandchildren*, when the authors reported that:

Carers felt the burden of responsibility of caring for those children in need when others were not able. Carers described the need for culturally appropriate support from both departmental workers and specialist services for themselves and the children. Frustration caused by the lack of material disadvantage such as low income, inadequate funding from government agencies was also apparent. They described difficulties in being able to provide the necessities for children due to financial stress.

Furthermore, grandparents as parents should not be seen as the only primary carers, resources are necessary to assist the parents as the primary carers and strengthening the family structure so that childrearing is shared across the family effectively.

However, not all single parents rely heavily on their parents help, for instance Erica, and Keira live independently of their parents and demonstrate a high level of competency in their parenting. Similarly, Larissa and Nikki are single women sharing their childrearing with their partners, yet all fourth-generation stories reveal that their mothers are still very important support for the wellbeing of their young family. In

addition, third-generation Storyteller Dianne also articulates her belief that single parents can be successful in their childrearing as long as strong family supports are in place.

A growing trend in establishing strong family supports finds young parents now using other mediums such as social networking on *Facebook* with their peer groups as a way of information sharing, and also to bridge the physical and emotional isolation of single parenting. This clearly is a new way of peer support in childrearing.

*In my own personal observations as a Facebook user, I witness numerous posts between young Indigenous parents, many Bwlgcolman parents who are constantly encouraging each other, offering taxiing and babysitting services, as well as emotional empathy in their care for each other.*

As well as using social networking sites, fourth-generation parents demonstrate their ability to engage with formal supports networks in their childrearing practices. Erica shares that she accesses the formal support offered at her son's school and implements the strategies they teach her:

*J's school even help me, a non-indigenous lady and with a Murri lady too, probably cause J has problem with his speech. How am I supposed to get his attention...some strategies yeah um like strategies that are like make him hold up, make him move his muscles in his hand how to hold on to a pencil properly, I didn't know about that I thought you can have one of those grip on things on the pencil but yeah you use play doe massaging the hand. With his talking have more exercise with his mouth, I thought he might need more um talking you know saying no repeating and stuff but it's also mouth exercise. (Generation Four Storyteller, Erica, Story One)*

Second-generation Storyteller, Andrea speaks about the significant changes to parenting that have come as a result of the socioeconomic changes on Palm Island where life is much different now because people have to work and home life has had to accommodate childrearing practices within the changed socioeconomic environment.

Andrea concedes that this seems to have resulted in less time that parents spend with their children. However she is pleased that her daughter Erica is able to access family support from her family peer group of cousins and states: *“It makes me feel comfortable knowing she’s got them around in the event that anything might – like she needs that support of young girl”*. (Generation Three Storyteller, Andrea, Story One)

### *Fresh Footprints Stepping Out*

In an interesting turn, the story threads reveal an almost new-awakening of young fathers becoming involved in their child’s childrearing. I have described this as an interesting turn or a new-awakening because anecdotal community evidence indicated that when relationships ended, fathers did not always stay involved in childrearing. Usually the mothers would turn to their families for most of the support and many times the father would enter another relationship and have irregular contact with his child/children as Andrea shares:

*I think too with our grandparents, or the generation before us, their relationships were solid and stable and were – what do you call it? – For life. Those relationship, whereas today, we can have a number of different relationships and children from those relationships and so some of the children’s fathers have taken a part in their life so some are disciplined, others aren’t so.* (Generation Three Storyteller, Andrea, Story One)

Conversely, young fathers are making choices to remain engaged with their child and participate in childrearing practices. Erica makes some in-depth comments on her observations of this encouraging and interesting ‘turning point’:

*You see a lot of young fathers walking with their children, pushing pram and you know hugging em and kissing their baby and buying stuff for them as well, yeah ... it’s really good cause you wonder how they, how they, not their upbringing but you know for instance who their role model, who was there? Is it they woke up to themselves? I wonder about that you know...Unless they just being good father making a decision to yeah making their own decision to say oh I’m a dad now. Yeah it’s a good thing for them, especially for Aboriginal community like our home*

*Palm. The fathers are doing...especially I see them working and then they go home and get their babies. Like I'll go home for holidays I'll look, see em walking with their babies, it's good yeah. And good for the kids as well to have two, yeah, two of them young mum and dad, yeah it is good.* (Generation Four Storyteller, Erica, Story One)

Whilst Erica does not give any particular reasons why young fathers are seemingly more engaged, she is nevertheless declaring that this is a good thing. Furthermore, there appears to be an increase in blended families where children from previous relationships are being accepted in current relationships, albeit contentious at times, the separate couples are sharing the childrearing. This is also a new practice; Elders too have commented on the practice of young fathers taking on childrearing responsibilities in blended families; perhaps Palm Island is on the cusp of a new age of parenting, perhaps the young fathers are discovering their roles in a new light of social changes.

Although these new moves may be tentative footprints towards a future, we do well to remember that there is still an unacceptable lack of formal support for families and children on Palm Island. The time is now; Palm Island cannot continue on this same path, the future of Bwgcolman children is at stake. If governments are serious about 'Closing the Gap', then they need to provide space and give opportunity to the community to develop a Bwgcolman model in genuine partnerships with them in a new paradigm. How long must Bwgcolman keep relaying this same message to government bodies?

Nevertheless, in all the difficulties of past and contemporary parenting and childrearing, the Bwgcolman people have always welcomed and celebrated babies and children. The following story extract of one of the young parents of today demonstrate the communal joy in babies. Above all, this generation of young families are endeavouring to make new pathways for parenting and childrearing, and engaging in



available supports that meet their need as young parents. Therefore, community and government cannot fail to support them; Palm Island cannot have another generation of Bwgcolman growing up with toxic issues. In conclusion, I end this section on a positive note, with fourth-generation Storyteller Erica's description of Murri celebration of babies and their belonging in families:

*Over Palm I see a lot of young mums. How they grab their babies and kiss their babies showing their mum's love to their babies, see em walking home um. (Laugh) they're so cute, they just make you want to pinch them too, they showing their affection their love and you know, especially when they get greedy. We all baby mad gruelling babies, yeah ... for instance when I had my babies when they were small, you know some people that I don't really talk to sings out and they want to look at your baby and they get greedy for them. (Laughing) oh you feel shame but you just, it's nice you know... Yeah I feel very proud and happy yeah, you know they're not cheeky about the baby or anything, they just looking at your baby, getting greedy, hugging and kissing em yeah it's really cute. (Generation Four Storyteller, Erica, Story One)*

All of the participants in the study attested to the flame of hope kept being kept alight and handed on from generation to generation. Individual family participants have described how re-negotiating the sense of family while surviving under oppression has given them strength of the present and the vision to forge a better future. All believe that there can be a better future for their children and all believe their united voices can prevail against the oppressions of the past and present. Nevertheless, in the light of their own experience, and the experience of their forebears, all understand that making *Fresh Footprints* will take time with personal and corporate patience, energy and resilience.

### *When the Wish Comes True*

I describe Bwgcolman hope as a progressive internal vision, a symbiosis of the 'heart' and an attitude of the mind, it is looking beyond the trauma of both the natural and spiritual situation, it is not a notion of wishful thinking, it is a deep heartfelt longing for a profound change for the better from adversity. Throughout the

intergenerational family stories the Storytellers made reference to the biblical aspect of hope, revealing meanings of strength gained from their religious conviction in Christian hope. All five of the second-generation Storytellers spoke about the importance of their Christian spirituality and how this has helped them cope with life. Furthermore, and going beyond; the hope that the first-generation Elders carried enabled them to see beyond the natural circumstances and to pass this on to their children and grandchildren. Their stories reveal that their hopes was not without pain; on the contrary; their Christian hope in the midst of their pain served as a practical anchor for them and became a deep foundation for their strength and resilience which was tangible to their families as fourth-generation Storyteller Larissa shares about the influence of her grandmother:

*I'm not going to church as much as I did but I still have my faith and I believe in God – I think that's important too. I think if I throw that away, I have nothing really. You know like you've got to believe in something, and that's where Nana came in mainly, like she took us to church and was that strength on the spiritual side. Like things that happened in her past, she was able to move on, through her faith, by going to church. (Story Three)*

Moreover, this depth of spirituality did not exclude their identity as Aboriginal people; the Elders embraced their Aboriginality in their belief of an already divinely ordained future for their lives. In conclusion, second-generation Storyteller Betty reveals her deep Christian belief in the salvation work of God for Palm Island through a resolute embracing, a sacred holding of the land of Palm Island and the Bwgcolman people in the 'spirit realm' in the belief that God will redeem Palm Island and bring about a change for the better for the Bwgcolman people:

*I'd like to see people getting back to church like it was in the old days – we haven't given up on Palm Island – they will all one day get up and come to church, I pray all the time for them and I believe Palm Island is blessed, I believe we claim this Island for Jesus and one day, everybody*

*will be going to church. I say that to the grandchildren, I might not be here, but they will see it.* (Generation Two Storyteller, Betty, Story Five)

Betty's story of her faith coupled with the other Elders brings meaning to Cook and Alexander's work (2008) on finding the alternative story in narratives of suffering. Furthermore Cook and Alexander explore the juxtaposition of Christian spirituality and psychological change through narratives of struggles that has the potential to be transformative processes towards positive growth. She writes about her observations that painful life events give rise to decision making in pursuit of change and growth, in the book *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian faith*.

I have pondered on the reality of suffering and its redemptive value – not that suffering in itself brings redemption but that it is frequently the site of transformation when it is brought into the presence of the God who knows the suffering. (p. 114)

Holding on to hope and putting it into practice enables an individual, a family and a community to keep moving forward seeking new ways and solutions in hard times.

All of the participants in the study attested to the fact that the existence and flourishing of Bwngcolman people on Palm Island, a century after the first forced settlement are, in and of themselves, a witness to the flame of hope being fuelled and handed on from generation-to-generation. Individual family participants have described how re-negotiating the sense of family while surviving under oppression has given them strength of the present and the vision to forge a better future. All believe that there can be a better future for their children and all believe their united voices can prevail against the internalised oppression of the past and the tokenism of consultation by

government with Bwgcolman people of the present. But, in the light of their own experience, and the experience of their forebears, all understand that *Making New Footprints* will take time, patience and resilience. The following story strand discusses possible ways forward for parenting and childrearing.

### **Storytellers' Possible Solutions.**

Finally the sixth horizontal thread, Storytellers' Possible Solutions refers to the glimpses of ideas and dreams of the Bwgcolman Storytellers themselves as they seek solutions to the adverse experiences and issues that surround them in the community of Palm Island. In talking about solutions the Storytellers include the past, giving weight to the temporal and spatial connections of past, present and future in stories of lived experiences. Making new footprints towards the future requires healing the pain of the past in order to function effectively in the present, so that Bwgcolman people are able to prevail over personal, collective, and socio-political impediments Murri Way with authority of voice. These findings are revealed in the vertical story strands: *Stepping Forward: Fracturing Current, Social and Political Climate, The Socio-Political Dance of Bwgcolman Childrearing, Healing Past and Present for an Effectual Future, More of the Same Policy and Practice, Navigating the Social Situation for Childrearing and Potential Solutions.*

#### ***Stepping Forward: Fracturing Current, Social and Political Climate;***

In the process of holding and looking to the future the Storytellers in this study make references to possible solutions to long standing issues of concerns that have plagued the community of Palm Island. It is important to note here that the negotiation process to solutions has been iteratively presented to governments and local authorities, yet the community's voice continues to be devalued or dismissed. Undergirding the

negotiation processes is the long held tenet of collective identity, embracing the cultural, social and political dimensions of the Bwgcolman people's inherent link to Palm Island. Since the early 1990s, being born on and living on country has cultural, social and political implications for an authority of Indigenous voice, as evidenced in the Mabo High Court decision (Bartlett, 1993). Regardless of the political gains in Parliament that purport to support Indigenous self determination and equal engagement at government negotiation tables the Bwgcolman peoples' authority of voice is continually undermined or dismissed by government. This consistent rebuff of government is framed by the question 'why does the government continue to ignore the Palm Island voices?' Third-generation Storyteller Pam sheds some light on this question:

*I think that together we're strong – we're strong and we've made headlines. But how they're (governments) doing it, yeah it's about how are they doing it – just coming in and saying yes, we're going to do this...Well it should come from us really but to me it seems like it's coming from way down south, the capital of Australia. To me, personally, I think that's where it's coming from and there's nobody there to represent us. (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)*

Consequently, Bwgcolman authority of voice has minimal impact on government policy and practice that affect Palm Island. A prime example of this is the recently developed Queensland Government initiative on Palm Island called the *Palm Island Community Company (PICC)*, a misnomer, and, once again a misrepresentation of government development on Palm Island. In the case of PICC, 'consultations' were conducted by government officials with the community on the issue of supporting and building capacity of an existing community model of human services delivery. However, Palm Island's voice was yet again dismissed, the response of the Queensland Government was dismantling and dissolving the existing community services and replacing it with their own model conceived and developed outside of Palm Island by

‘senior and experienced’ policy makers in Brisbane and then transposed onto the Bwgcolman people. Protests have been made to government (Appendix O), which resulted in Phase 1 of an independent external review of PICC by means of the gracious engagement of the Bwgcolman people with the reviewer. In spite of this, the results of the review once again misrepresented and devalued Bwgcolman voices. Hence the model of PICC and its functions are still an extremely contentious issue between the Palm Island community and government five years after its inception in 2007, moreover, the Bwgcolman people await the outcome of Phase 2 – An assessment of the Palm Island Community Company.

One of the causes of the current sense of *Internal Oppression* that the Bwgcolman participants describe in this study is the lack of a ‘corporate memory’ within government and non-government agencies. This absence of corporate memory stands in stark contrast to the detailed tribal memory of the Bwgcolman People and is a further cause for the gulf of misunderstanding between Bwgcolman People and government and non-government agencies. This lack of continuity leads to repetition of abortive policies of the past, despite the clarity of Bwgcolman voices advocating against reinstating mistakes of the past and adds to the sense of Bwgcolman internal oppression. A radical new paradigm of forging partnerships between Bwgcolman People and government and non-government agencies would be the long-term appointment of the office of an Ombudsman with dual input from the Bwgcolman People and government and non-government agencies.

### *The Socio-Political Dance of Bwgcolman Childrearing*

The current attempts of gaining community perspectives and involvement in developing family support and welfare services on Palm Island is still met with a significant level of distrust towards government from the Bwgcolman people

(Limerick, 2010). Millions of dollars have been expended by governments over the decades on Aboriginal communities in Queensland alone in providing family and child welfare services. Yet these government funded policies and practices still fall short of achieving their aims and objectives. Why is this so? This seems to be the perennial question asked by the community and governments over the last four decades. This study reveals some of the Bwgcolman Storytellers perspectives in answer to this question.

### *Healing Past and Present for an Effectual Future:*

Firstly, the Storytellers retell the memories of the cumulative losses from oppression; the memory of the past is still foremost in the minds of the people; second and third-generation storytellers recount the effects of past oppression in their family:

Things I remember about my grandmother, she was a strong woman but never, ever spoke about her life, so I think she had a very hard life, never even really spoke to my Mum, my Aunt Ellen, and still today we're still trying to find the family connections and that's hard because today, I don't even know my family connection because we're still talking about it and who's related to who and how and it's very hard. (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)

These living memories intensify the spiritual and emotional pain of cumulative grief and loss experienced on almost a daily basis by individuals:

*She would only tell aspects of it which was very brief and because it was very painful and in talking to you now, I can feel a pain, a bit of her pain".* (Generation Two Storyteller, Erykah, Story One)

This profound pain cannot be healed by the liberal application of money into physical programs alone. This is where eurocentric government programs also fail; they dismiss or undervalue the power of spiritual healing as a necessary parallel process for supporting families, along with attending to the social processes of release from social hardships. The intention of the author is that the present study will provide a platform

for the development of effective strategies to achieve healing of past and present trauma. One practical pathway is directing, financial and human resources towards service delivery that are inclusive of healing of the spirit as well as the emotions, in conjunction with attending to the physical issues.

*More of the Same Policy and Practice:*

Secondly, the storytellers bring to bear the consistent actions of governmentality, where current government policies and practices are still being done on Aboriginal people and not with Aboriginal people. Third-generation Storyteller Pam clearly expresses this notion:

*I think that together we're strong – we're strong and we've made headlines. But how they're (Governments) doing it, yeah it's about how are they doing it – just coming in and saying yes, we're going to do this... Well it should come from us really... (Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)*

Pam's comments reinforce the continuing practice of excluding Bwgcolman voice by governments in regards to program and service development for Palm Island. Constant exclusion of genuine community input results in more of the same policy and practice; and to a large extent becomes an oppressive practice; consequently such programs are met with community indifference. For this reason, it is imperative that governments begin to act outside their rigid frameworks of policy and practice, and engage with community using a holistic, flexible Palm Island inclusive construct with integrity. Underlying these stories is a clear message to governments that cannot be ignored any longer; the message is; talk to the people, listen to their voice, don't talk over or down to them in a gamin way. The time is now to do things the proper way in real partnerships. To prevent the same policies and practices being re-iterated by turn-over of government employees, a 'level playing field' needs to be instituted where the



voices of the Bwngcolman people bear the same moral and economic authority as that of the government employees and that, via the office of an Ombudsman, continuity of effective policies can be instituted. The current power differential between the Bwngcolman people and government agencies needs to be recognized and renegotiated. Continuity of employees of government and non-government agencies is a major difficulty in real terms but, at least, continuity of effective policies can demonstrate that small changes can add value to investment of long-term funds.

### *Navigating Contemporary Childrearing*

Finally, the stories of fourth generation Storytellers reveal a clear shift in childrearing attitudes and practices. In contrast to first, second and third-generation Storytellers, the stories of these young parents reveal their difficult experiences of childrearing in the current social and economic circumstances of high unemployment, alcohol and drug addiction, child protection interventions, violence and mental illness. Fourth-generation Storyteller Erica shares her experience of parenting on her own without the children's father:

*Yeah um it's hard cause the alcohol has just got the best of him as well and it's sad cause his family I know like alcohol is a thing but um does it come to a point in your life you know you, wake up, you know, can't you just get a job to occupy your mind or but yeah, but it is yeah, haven't got that role model there. (Story One)*

Furthermore, the stories also reveal the harsh reality for some young parents in the community who are seemingly unprepared for the magnitude of change to their lives when they become parents. Fourth-generation Storytellers Nikki and Keira describe their observations of a number of their peers in their parenting roles:

*I see a lot of young mothers around you know like you see them drunk all the time or they go out and smoke and they don't really look after their kids, ... it's hard for them, some of the parents don't do the right things. They don't really have food for their kids or they're dependant on*

*another person to buy food.* (Generation Four Storyteller Nikki, Story Two)

*Because I've seen lots of them haven't finished school, only went up to a certain level and they don't have that literacy and numeracy that they need, and they need more training, more centres here for young mothers to go and learn, educate themselves so they can be that role model, that person for the next generation to come. Well I think we just need to be strong, be confident and know what we want in life and try to achieve it to the best of our ability".* (Generation Four Storyteller Keira, Story Two)

The young parents in this study were clearly mindful of their peers and the future of the next generation of Bwgcolman children. Moreover, their observations are cause for alarm; necessitating a strategic family support policy and service development focussing on assisting young parents to effectively raise their children in the present social climate. Nevertheless, the young fourth-generation parents demonstrated a remarkable level of resilience; and revealed tenacity in their aspirations to parent well in spite of their social circumstances. Fourth-generation Storyteller, Sondra makes plain, *"it's about looking after each other and teaching the younger parents to "step up to the plate" to take on the responsibility of caring for their children"* (Generation Four Storyteller Sondra, Story Four). Additionally, Erica expresses her view of her parenting and childrearing as her responsibility:

*Like I see what they (the young parents) do, yeah probably pressure, maybe their lifestyle is just partying or thinking they still young, I don't know. Um ... it is my responsibility and mum's got her role helping her mum.*

In summary, the Bwgcolman Storytellers, in particular the fourth-generation Storytellers reveal a continuing resilience and a determined attitude to be successful in their childrearing practices within the current socio-political climate. It is also important to note that the confidence of the fourth-generation in this study reveal a

quality of their inner strength. I argue that these five young mothers were able to be assertive in this study because of their close and deep relationship with their parents and grandparents. Accordingly, the aspiration for a robust Bwgcolman childrearing practice model must be founded on the basis of relationships in family and community.

### *Potential Solutions*

Throughout their storytelling, the Storytellers shared glimpses of their vision for change in the community. I have included these storied glimpses as an example that the Storytellers were not just talking about the hardships of life on Palm Island; they were also sharing possible solutions that for some of the Storytellers were their own valued dreams they kept in silence until they had the opportunity to share in this study.

Throughout the horizontal story threads and vertical strands in the study are references to the Storytellers placing importance on the role of *Education* for their children. In particular an education curriculum that accommodates the learning processes of Murri children, incorporating Murri Way. However, the Storytellers also reveal that for a positive education experience and outcome for Bwgcolman children there needs to be a corresponding constructive home situation.

One major issue on Palm Island that prevents a productive home environment is the overcrowded living situation that directly impacts on family functions and their childrearing practices. Third-generation Storyteller Pam asserts that *“first of all, parents need to have their own space with their own children”* (Story Two). Pam’s assessment of overcrowding reveals a difficult environment for fostering parenting and childrearing, the overcrowding giving rise to domestic conflicts in the home contributing to non-attendance and poor engagement for children in school. Whilst the government has provided funding and manpower for increasing the housing stock on Palm Island the situation of overcrowding is still unacceptable. Given that the majority

of the population are young parents it is crucial that basic human rights of providing adequate shelter for families are prioritised by governments and local community legislative structures.

Together with developing a childrearing positive home environment, the Storytellers revealed their desire to include community support programs aimed at strengthening bonding and attachment between fathers and children. In particular the fourth-generation parents in this study welcomed any process that would support father and child engagement. fourth-generation Storyteller, Nikki shares *“I’d like, a Centre like where fathers and their kids can go and other fathers and their kids and teach them how to play together or you know do stuff together, yeah”* (Story 2) Again, these aspirations are supported by government reports and studies and yet there is still an existing shortfall between policy and practice.

Likewise, there is unanimous consensus in the stories for models of support and care for families and children. In particular to assist getting children off the streets and into a structured program that provides youth counselling and support with life skills education. One model suggested in this study is for a discrete program centre as a possible pathway of support:

*I’ve always, for years I’ve thought of this dream, having this Drop in Centre. All this talk about this Drop in Centre, well I’ve been involved with the Women’s Centre and all this but we should have a Drop in Centre. All these children wandering around and don’t go to school you know, have this Drop in Centre where teachers, counsellors are there every day so they get all these children, take them and teach them everyday living skills and, at that same time, counselling them, giving them, you know getting them ready to go back into the class, you know those children don’t know how to sit in the class, they’re so hyped up, so...(Generation Three Storyteller, Pam, Story Two)*

Furthermore, the stories revealed concerns regarding adolescent parenting, which was seen as unfavorable and provided limited future opportunities in particular

for the young mother or father. Similarly, with the suggestions of counselling, there was also a strong inference towards relationship and self-awareness education for young people in school to strengthen the individuals' personal decision-making processes.

In summary, the Bwgcolman family stories affirm the existing intergenerational models of family care that passed on valuable social and cultural childrearing practices in families. Moreover, the stories also reveal a level of sophistication in Bwgcolman agency in identifying and confronting social and family issues, discussing them openly in this study. Furthermore, Bwgcolman history attests to the use of problem solving in situations of adversity; likewise, this current presentation of possible solutions clearly demonstrates that the current Bwgcolman people are consistently engaged in seeking solutions to problems in the community. The overwhelming barrier to bringing these solutions to a government negotiation table or possibly into practice is convincing governments to provide Palm Island the opportunity to develop Bwgcolman programs and models of care Murri Way. For this to happen it requires working together in genuine partnership collaboration and some risk taking by both parties. Once again a level playing field and a different government negotiating paradigm is critical to seeking solutions for Palm Island.

## CHAPTER 13

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The central aim of this study was to examine and make known the intergenerational Palm Island family (Bwgcolman) childrearing practices. In particular, I explore the relatively unacknowledged hypothesis of strength in Bwgcolman childrearing practices through the Storytellers (participants') perceptions of strength in their childrearing and parenting practices over four generations. Furthermore, I envision that this study would provide new information relevant to government and non-government bodies as an instrument to assist with the development of effective Indigenous family support policies and practices for Palm Island. Past and current policies are not only minimally effective but also are fragmented, confusing and incongruent with Palm Islanders' complex culture. The time has come for a radical change.

The following recommendations arise from the detailed integrity of stories of the Bwgcolman Storytellers. Not only have the Storytellers revealed the many layers of resilience of intergenerational childrearing practices, but also have disclosed profound meanings of the cultural practices which they have maintained under external and internal oppression. Each of the families have storied these practices in an individual way so that following generations recognise their family practices and can integrate these practices in their own childrearing.

Recommendation 1: Development of a radical new paradigm between the Bwgcolman people and government and non government agencies that must include a *holistic skilled* pathway of care, Murri Way, for families on Palm Island.

The development of a radical new paradigm will be very difficult for government agencies as they do not see the necessity for change. However, the Bwgcolman people are at the point that unless a 'level playing field' is agreed to the present high levels of ambivalence to any government intervention will be passed onto the next generation and widen the 'gap' even further rather than 'Close the Gap' which is the current catch phrase of governments.

Decades of spurious consultation has only resulted in frustration for the people of Palm Island. Nothing less than a paradigm which includes legitimate authority for the Bwgcolman people equal to that of government will genuinely give power to Bwgcolman people to create and implement their own strategies for change. This paradigm must be protected against the inevitable short-term cycles of political party politics. Ironically, this is similar to the recommendation of the Palm Island Select Committee of 2005 and the government's rapid response (Queensland Government Legislative Assembly, 2005); seven years later nothing has moved.

Recommendation 2: Expansion of formal academic research methodology to include the novel development of Critical Murri Consciousness and Dadirri as evidence of an Indigenous methodological approach emerging alongside the awareness of a need for western theoretical tools that can assist with analysing power relations.

At various times in the continual dynamic shift of worldviews in research a discernible turn occurs which expands a particular worldview and challenges the dominant discourse. This is one such turn in qualitative research methodology, which will influence emancipatory research discourse.

Recommendation 4: Establishment of a designated space in research centres for this Indigenous epistemology and formal representation to major funding bodies that this is

a legitimate, significant and essential approach to answer long standing and traditionally ignored Indigenous research questions.

The absence of a discrete Indigenous research space within universities and other research centres has only recently been recognised as a direct result of the emerging decolonisation research paradigm within Australia, New Zealand, Canada and other nations with a history of colonisation. The sometimes painful realisation that emancipatory research depends on the development and establishment of Indigenous epistemologies is one that cannot be ignored.

**Recommendation 5: Change in policy and practice immediately to develop a holistic support service Murri Way, based on strengths based parenting and childrearing, centered within family story on Palm Island.**

Often a recommendation from research for a ‘change in policy and practice’ is too open ended to implement. However the above recommendation to ‘develop a holistic support service Murri Way’ immediately is reality based as existing poorly directed funds could be channelled into such a service by the end of the 2012/2013 financial year. The generational stories from this study will be returned to the Storytellers families. Using this study as empirical evidence, family work on Palm Island would centre on the recording of each family story as the core component for their own family support framework on all levels.

**Recommendation 6: Inclusion of the principles of the proposed radical new paradigm in both the theory and practice education curriculum for all professionals involved in service delivery to Australian Indigenous people.**



Both Recommendations 5 and 6 are grounded in the immediate future as professionals involved in service delivery need to attend to the voices of the younger parents in the fourth-generation appropriately. Thus, there is a greater chance of breaking the cycles of toxic relationships and enabling fourth-generation parents to rear their children with the hope of better outcomes than those they anticipated in their stories.

These six recommendations are precursors to addressing disadvantage and to validate the strength and resilience of Palm Island people and other Australian Indigenous people in forging pathways initially for local reconciliation and, hopefully, for national reconciliation.

## CHAPTER 14

### CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

#### Introduction

This study grew out of the questions evoked by my lived experience of being born and growing up on Palm Island. Further, as a health professional I realised that rigorous research would provide both a platform for healthy families and also to challenge the stalemate between the authentic Bwgcolman voices and entrenched hegemonic patterns.

Fortunately, this research does demonstrate how the Bwgcolman people of Palm Island employ their own ontological childrearing practices and engage in social agency to reconstruct their childrearing over four generations despite the history of punitive policies under the ‘Act’ (Queensland Government, 1897). The study Elders, along with generations two and three, lived under the restrictions of the ‘Act’ while generation four currently lives under the ambiguity of the ‘shifting goal posts’ of government policy and practices in relation to Palm Island.

Moreover, this study breaks significant new ground in the disciplines of nursing and midwifery. That is, both the articulated family childrearing strengths by the Storytellers and the expansion of formal academic research methodology signal a clear turn in the road. This turn in the road adds a new stream of knowledge to existing nursing and midwifery knowledge. Contemporary and future practitioners will glean the fruits that this knowledge brings to the discipline and profession of nursing and midwifery sciences by liberating nursing practitioners from self-imposed prisons of their four walls of the hospital or clinics to allow them to go out and expand their practice.

This enriched and expanded practice offers practitioners two sequential steps in the care and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families. First, it challenges the continuing western medical paradigm that contributes to the reinforced historical deficit models of care employed in Aboriginal communities. Second, it advocates a strength based approach to Aboriginal family care models shifting the focus away from problems to focusing on supporting the inherent strength of families and their communities. However little empirical data are available on contemporary Indigenous family structures and further research is essential, preferably conducted by Indigenous researchers. Further, most of the current evidence, to date, of Indigenous family support on Palm Island is anecdotal and prolific with minimal empirical evidence on Bwgcolman parents and grandparents parenting children and grandchildren. Therefore, this emerging family support practice demands further research to understand its effects on current family and community life and what structures of support are necessary for the parents, grandparents and the children.

In addition, the use of Murri storytelling is a creative and emerging methodological approach within nursing and midwifery research. Murri storytelling is able to contribute to, and present a fresh perspective to nursing knowledge and understanding of the historical and contemporary events that impact and shape the lives of Aboriginal families on Palm Island and in the wider North Queensland area. Consequently, in gaining a better understanding of Aboriginal family childrearing practices – nurses, midwives and other clinicians will be better equipped to tailor their family care practice specifically to the needs of Aboriginal families and children.

## Limitations of the Research

While the main findings of this study are highly significant in making footprints to enhance the contemporary care of Palm Island families the following limitations still leave several directions for other studies. First the recruitment and retention of the five families was to a certain extent self selected; that is, there were only a minimal number of families with three generations who, by their very willingness to tell their stories, indicates their cohesive strength. Thus, other families who were approached declined the invitation because, for example, they felt ‘shame’ about some of their family situations of which they had no control. I am very aware that this is a ‘biased’ sample. Another bias is that no fathers accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Finally, hovering over the study was the shadow of the possible death of an Elder as some of them were very frail in health. This indeed occurred to Aunty Beryl but I was able to show her the family story before she died and she happily validated the story in the presence of her daughter.

In summary, this study has confronted and fractured the boundaries of imposed silence on Bwgcolman people by generations of external and internal oppression. Thus the Storytellers could for the first time tell of their strengths and survival through those decades of oppressing. Further, a distinctive dimension of Indigenous research, which differs from several western research methods is that the Storytellers (study participants) remained connected with the study from the very first phase. The study is not yet completed because a required component was that each family would receive their family story in written, oral, diagrammatic and photographic form. Also a copy of their story along with this thesis will be deposited in the *Bwgcolman Indigenous Knowledge Centre* on Palm Island. Thus the continuity of these courageous participants will stand as witness to the dignity and survival of a proud people.

In conclusion, I leave the reader with the following poem of the story of Bwgcolman, *Captivity & Life*, which I penned at the beginning of this study:

*Captivity & Life*

*We see the dust from afar; we hear the sound of horse and car  
Men on horseback, men in cars  
Mother's heart beats like the pounding of those horses' feet  
Screaming for their children, come quick, come here my darling  
Hide! Hide! For the white man comes  
Let me rub your honey skin with the black of charcoal  
Let them see that you are mine  
Come little one hide in the bushes for they come to steal from my  
embrace  
Shhhush my darling do not cry, Let silence be our shield*

*Men, fathers, grandfathers stand to fight  
Hearts pounding, warrior blood surging  
Arms flung wide to protect,  
Arms flung wide to protest.  
Children taken, women wailing, men stand helpless, crying  
Families shackled, chains dragging, Cooktown bound, then Palm Island  
Backward glances, heart is beating, my land, and my mother  
disappearing  
Deep within spirit cry, heartbroken, hope is dying*

*Boat is loaded, on sea set forth, waves of change are calling.  
New land, new life,  
Palm Island in sight  
White sands, blue sky, palms swaying.  
Paradise is a lie,  
White protector, eyes of ice, men are boys, women girls, children: wards  
of state.  
Hearts beating, women wailing, families shackled, people degraded.*

*Time heals surface wounds, deep within hurt festers on.  
Yet life still moves in earth and heart,  
Marriage, birth and death, generations born  
Bwgcolman now, people stand,  
Dignity in this our land,  
Arms flung wide to protect,  
Arms flung wide to protest.  
Deep within spirit cry, hearts broken, but hope did not die  
Embers of hope still survive, waiting for the Breath of Life...*

*(Lynore K. Geia, unpublished poem, 2006)*

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*practice in the revitalisation of Australia's indigenous languages* (pp. 37).  
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## GLOSSARY

Aboriginal Reserve	Land legislated and designated by the Queensland Government as a compulsory residential community or reservation where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people were forced to live on, under law.
American Wire	The high wire fence that was place around buildings and compounds that separated the Aboriginal from the non Aboriginal community.
‘Act’	Queensland Government legislation - <i>Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act</i> of 1897, later amended in 1939. The Act was not rescinded until the early 1970s.
Being flash	This is the colloquial term used on Palm Island to describe the action of one that is prejudicial to another
Binnagurri	Palm Island (Bwgcolman) colloquial terminology for poor hearing, deafness; or it can be used to describe a person who is deliberately not listening to what is being said.
Boys’ Home	The Boys’ Home is the name applied to the Queensland Government residential children’s home for male children on Palm Island.
Bwgcolman	The name Bwgcolman is recorded as being given by Aboriginal Elders who were initially relocated to the island from the cyclone damaged Hull River mission approximately 50 kilometers north of the Queensland mainland town of Ingham. Bwgcolman generally means people of many tribes or by some account newcomers. The Bwgcolman people consist of the descendants of the Manbarra tribe, and the descendants of other Aboriginal tribes historically transported to Palm Island during its inception as a government reserve and penal settlement in the early 1900s.
Clever Men	Clever Men are men who have knowledge of and practice the skills of supernatural traditional Aboriginal practices, also referred to as magic, or witchcraft.
Camp	Camp is the designated area of residence on Palm Island for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people who were not living in the male or female residential institutions. Camps were normally comprised of people who were of the same language and tribal group.



Counter story Counternarratives	Counter story or counternarratives are contradictory texts and dialogue of the Bwgcolman people that have emerged out of their lived experience of the disruptive historical and contemporary sociopolitical events impacting upon their lives. Counter-story is used in everyday dialogue as a form of resistance and survival to hegemony.
Consciousness	Is a term generated by the researcher that describes a complex yet uncomplicated conceptual framework that is an intrinsic way of thinking, doing and living for the Bwgcolman people.
Dadirri	An inclusive concept first expressed by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (2002) from the Daly River people of the Northern Territory of Australia; Dadirri is spiritual gift of <i>“inner deep listening and quiet still awareness”</i> . A way of <i>listening</i> that goes beyond the paradigm of the physical world as we know it.
Dawn’t	Dawn’t is a verbal Murri creole sentiment usually spoken when someone is empathizing or sympathizing with or about another person or persons. It is a sentiment of feeling sorry for another who is experiencing difficult circumstance or appears to be needing assistance.
Dormitory/Girls Home	The Girls Home of the Dormitory is the name applied to the Queensland Government residential children’s home for female children on Palm Island. It was also single women’s residential institution and nursery for children separated by the authorities from their families.
Dormitory Child	A child born and raised in the Dormitory on Palm Island.
Exegetical Texts	Exegetical texts is used in this thesis as a reference to Indigenous Researchers challenging dominant discourses in academia by writing and voicing their perceptions and standpoints through their critical explanations, analysis, and commentary.
Fantome Island	Fantome Island is one of the islands of the Great Palm Island group that was designated as a disease screening station for Aboriginal people transported to Palm Island. It was also designated as a leprosarium hospital and permanent residence for Aboriginal people diagnosed with leprosy.

Gambling School	The gambling school is an informal gambling house or gathering of people practicing illegal gambling and betting.
Gammon	Aboriginal colloquial term for telling lies, deliberately and falsely misleading people in action or word.
Getting Greedy	Getting greedy is a Murri colloquial terminology that describes the overwhelming feelings of emotional attachment that one feels or observes in others. It is usually used in the context of excitement and attachment to babies. It can be manifested verbally, and physically as making baby noises, pinching, squeezing, hugging, kissing and holding a baby, sometimes to the point of making a baby cry.
Indigenist research	A term generated by Indigenous researcher Irabinna Rigney (1999) which describes Rigney's principles and rationale of resistance, political integrity, and privileging Indigenous voices;
Indigenous	Umbrella term for peoples who first known human occupants of tracts of land. In this thesis it is used interchangeably to refer to the two distinct cultural groups that make up Australia's Indigenous peoples, the Australian Aborigine and the Torres Strait Island people.
Indigenous research	Research conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island scholars from their unique perspective.
Julgai	Scientific Name: <i>Plebidonax deltoides</i> , ( <i>Donax deltoids</i> ), small edible white or creamy coloured clam like shell fish found in the sand close to the beach waterline.
Migaloo	This is the colloquial Queensland Aboriginal terminology to identify a white person.
Murri	This is the colloquial terminology used to identify Aboriginal people who are born in the State of Queensland, Australia.
Old People	The Old People are the first generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people that were transported to Palm Island from 1918 to the early 1920s.
Our mob	A common terminology used by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in the context of identifying the people of their clan, tribe, language or family group.
Prapa way	Creole terminology which mean doing something in the right and proper way.

Rations	Rations is a collective term used to describe the government food subsidy of meat, milk, tea, sugar, flour, blankets, tobacco, baby food and miscellaneous supplies.
Removal Orders	Legislated policy and practice of forced relocation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people under the Act.
Scrubby bush	Describes a clump of salt bush that grew along the beach front of the island community or thick vegetation in the hillside surrounding the community.
Stories	Story, stories, yarns are substitute words used in this study because the word narrative is not used in Murri colloquial language.
Sundown Camp	Sundown Camp is the designated living area on Palm Island for the Aboriginal people relocated from Western Queensland region mainly from the Kalkadoon tribal region.
Sundown People	Sundown People are the Aboriginal people from Western Queensland, mainly comprised of the Kalkadoon people.
Superintendent	The Queensland State Government official appointed with wide ranging powers over the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people on Palm Island.
TAFE	The Technical and Further Education System for vocational training across Australia.
Ward of the State	An adult or child whose guardianship is determined by a judge who appoints a government agency to oversee the ward of the state's affairs.
Wet Canteens	Wet Canteens were alcohol outlets also known as Beer Canteens initiated and established by the government in the community of Palm Island in the early 1970s.

## APPENDICES

Appendix A:	Rite of Passage
Appendix B:	Gathering Julgai
Appendix C:	Childrearing Out of the Home Environment.
Appendix D:	Getting Greedy for Bubba
Appendix E:	Bury their Legs in the Sand
Appendix F:	Continuing Culture
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Appendix N:	Ethics Approval
Appendix O:	Issues of Concern for Palm Island Community

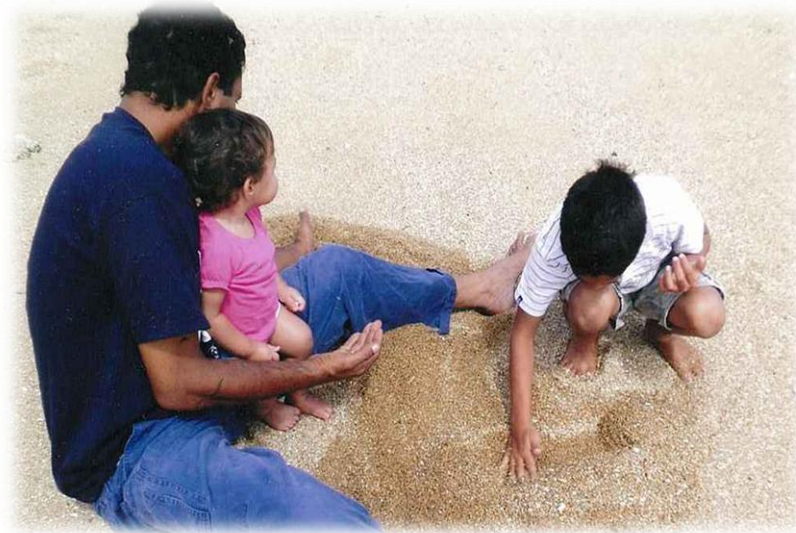
## Appendix A: Rite of Passage

*Author's children, Raymond and Daniel engaging in 'rite of passage' jumping into the depths of the shipping channel off the jetty on Palm Island. Parents and adults would be present whilst children swam under and around the edge of the jetty (Photograph from author's private collection, Palm Island Jetty, circa 2005)*



## Appendix B: Gathering Julgai

*Children learn by observation and practice. William and his daughter Niley and son Ronald are looking for Julgai in the beach sand at the water edge. (Photograph included with consent from children's parents, William Obah and Marcia Ketchell at the Palm Island beach front, circa. 2011)*



*Julgai is Pipi shells, nana showed us how to do that, I was only small then um, yeah (laughter) I showed J but he was a bit too young, he was there trying to look, but he was getting different kind of shells too. Yeah um oysters was cracking oysters, my mum showed me that, nana showed mum. But we all go together me, nana and mum. (Generation 4, Storyteller Erica, Story 1)*

*And we love our bush food – yeah even our grand kids go and get cockles and Julgai and teach them how to look for all those sort of things and they love it, they fight over Julgai to eat. (Generation 4 Storyteller Nikki, Story 2)*



## Appendix C: Childrearing out of the home environment.

*Children are taught and learn survival skills and knowledge on the land. Here, boys Khalu, Ali, Ronald and adult family member Julia are reefing for shellfish. Below Ali and Khalu are given the task of wood gathering for the camp fire. Photograph included with the consent of parents and family members Marcia Ketchell, William Obah and Julia Tomachy, (Fantome Island, Palm Island circa, 2012).*



*We regularly go fishing and we try to camp at least the night and that way there's no TV, the routines' broken, and there can be that form of bonding so you're sitting constantly in the company of each other....Um and that's why I think it's essential that – but I don't know how you can do it but for each of the families to have that time with each of their children to build that strength back up within the family unit, that respect for their parents (Generation 3 Storyteller Andrea, Story 1)*

## Appendix D: Getting Greedy for Bubba

*Childrearing is also fun and imaginative. The photograph below is of the author's son Daniel with a Torres Strait Island Elder Kasabad Alfred holding him seated in her lap over a bowl of flour. The Elder was making damper at the time of our arrival at her camp, when she saw Daniel she 'got greedy' for him and displayed her great affection for him by hugging, kissing, squeezing and telling him he was beautiful. In this instance she put flour over his chubby feet pretending to make him part of her damper making. (Circa. 1995, Butler Bay, Palm Island. Included with consent from the Kaddy Family)*

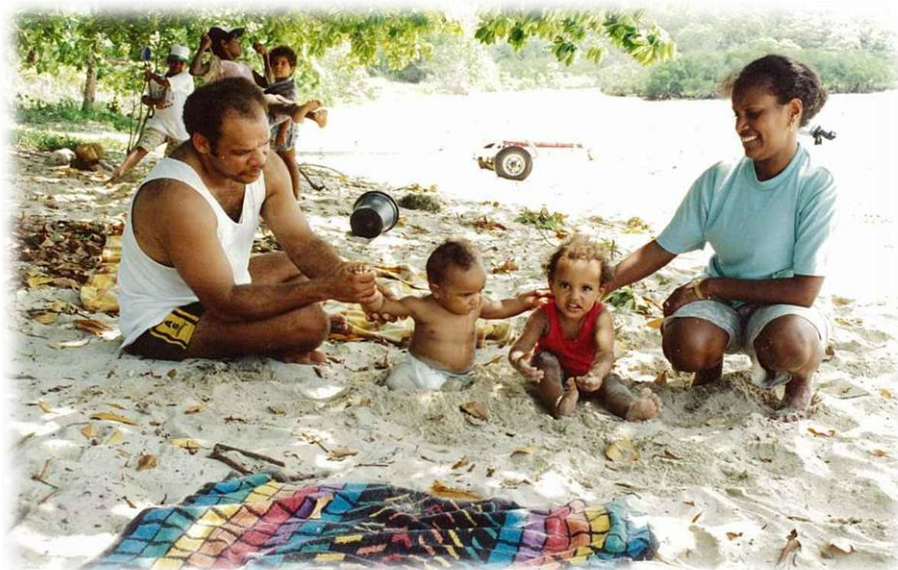
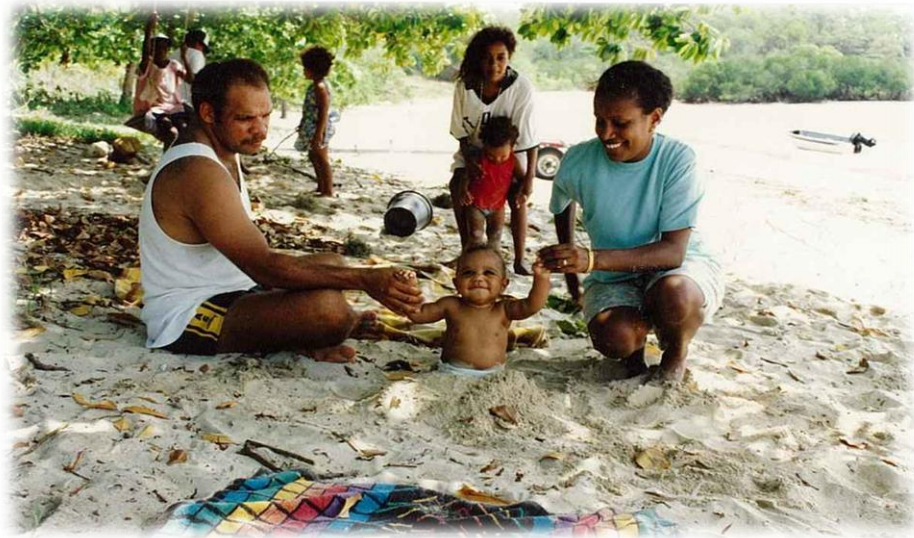


*Over Palm I see a lot of young mums. How they grab their babies and kiss their babies showing their mum's love to their babies, see em walking home um. (Laugh) they're so cute, they just make you want to pinch them too, they showing their affection their love and you know, especially when they get greedy. We all baby mad gruelling babies, yeah and when you see em walking along or like for instance when I had my babies when they were small, you know some people that I don't really talk to sings out and they want to look at your baby and they get greedy for them. (Laughing) oh you feel shame but you just, it's nice you know. Because I wouldn't expect some people I don't really talk to, I don't know if they are being a busy body or what but it was a good feeling. Yeah I feel very proud and happy yeah, you know they're not cheeky about the baby or anything, they just looking at your baby, getting greedy, hugging and kissing em yeah it's really cute. (Generation 4 Storyteller, Erica, Story One)*



## Appendix E: Bury their Legs in the Sand

*The following two photographs demonstrate the practice of burying a baby's legs in the sand to make his legs strong for walking and other physical activities requiring the use of legs. Young boy Josiah, (now a proficient football player) is surrounded by his parents Ron and Deniece and older brother Ron with other family members in the background. (Circa. 1995, photograph included with consent from Deniece)*



*Yes, everybody – when their children were small, they used to take them to the beach together and doing things together it would make them walk quicker than usual you know because we believed the sand would help them. (Generation 2 Storyteller Betty, Story 5)*

*Yeah well I believe it's still strong, it's still getting handed down – take the kids down to the beach, especially when they're ready to walk, they bury them in the sand .... Yeah, it's still strong in the community. (Generation 4 Storyteller Nikki, Story 2)*

## Appendix F: Continuing Culture

*The following two photographs demonstrate two contemporary cultural childrearing practices; (1) solemn remembrance ceremony and (2) public display of dance at a community celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture. (Photographs from author's private collection, of Fantome Island and children dancing in the Mall, Palm Island, circa 2011)*





## Appendix G: Celebrating Identity and Culture

*Each year the Palm Island people celebrate the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) with other cities, towns and communities in Australia. This is a day of particular observance of the survival and continuing identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. The photograph below is of the local St Michaels School's NAIDOC float. Children engage in all activities in the community which reinforces their tribal and Bwgcolman identity. (Photograph from author's private collection, Beach Road, Palm Island, circa 1986)*



*Sondra and Boleen converse on the positive emotions that cultural events evoke in the community. They speak in excited tones about tribal marches in NAIDOC week and the empowerment that adults and children feel when they walk behind their tribal flags as their sense of identity is affirmed in a public procession. “Those who did not know their tribal names walked behind the Bwgcolman banner. It was really heart warming to see and people felt proud” (Generation 3 Storyteller Boleen and Generation 4 Storyteller Sondra, Story 4)*

## Appendix H: Childrearing Relating to Burial Ceremony

*Family relationships and responsibilities extend from birth to death. Bwgcorman children are taught to engage in funeral and burial ceremonies of family members. The burial process of loved ones is completed by attending to closing the grave by family members and others who have significant relationships with the family or the deceased person. Adolescent males and men each take turns in closing the gravesite in the presence of other family and community members who witness and validate the relationship. (Babidge, 2004, pp. 259-261)*



*For example, the photograph above is of my nephew Raymond attending to closing the grave ceremony of his great grandmother watched on by family and community members who silently acknowledge and validate his relationship to his great grandmother and his family group. (Photograph is from author's private collection, Palm Island, circa 2010)*



Copy provided with consent from Kathleen Denigan researcher and author of Yarrabah Project.

E. M. Hauler  
Home Secretary.  
b. 1114

## Appendix J: Going Back Re-connecting Generations to Country and Countrymen



*My name is Betty I came to Palm Island as a small girl, 3 years old – me and my sister; we came with my mother from Cloncurry, out West Queensland. We came with a lot of people who were sent here to Palm Island and those days they didn't understand what people were sent for but now they know (Generation 4, Storyteller Betty, Story Five)*

*In December 2011, the author's mother (pictured above) made a pilgrimage back to her country in Central Queensland accompanied by her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. This was the first journey back to her country since she was removed to Palm Island as a child of 3 years of age, eighty one years ago.*

*This journey was the author's personal family intergenerational practice of passing on tribal knowledge to the grandchildren and great grandchildren; to meet unknown family, and to reconnect with the spirit of the Kalkadoon people and the land of my mother's birth.*



*The photograph above is from the author's private collection of three of ten of Betty's children, David, Lynore (author in white shirt) and Jennifer; three of thirty six grandchildren Daniel, Raymond and Daniel and two of fifty great-grandchildren Nathaniel and Khalu in Mount Isa, Central Queensland. (Circa, December, 2011)*

## Appendix K: Participant Information Form

Administrative documentation  
has been removed





## Appendix L: Participant Consent Form

Administrative documentation  
has been removed



**Appendix M: Participant Consent Form for Use of Name and  
Photograph**

Administrative documentation  
has been removed

## Appendix N: Ethics Approval

Administrative documentation  
has been removed

## Appendix O: Issues of Concern for Palm Island Community

### ISSUES OF CONCERN FOR PALM ISLAND COMMUNITY

#### Subject

Palm Island Community Company (PICC) - Non Compliance with delivering a service that meets the needs of the Palm Island community.

#### Purpose

To raise awareness of the Palm Island community concerns regarding PICC functions, its non compliance with its original intentions, PICC ineffective service delivery and the inefficient use of public finances.

#### Recommendation

The Palm Island community respectfully;

- Reaffirms its right to develop as an autonomous self determining community through the development of its own community model of service provision by Palm Island people;
- Rejects the current model and intentions of the PICC believing it to be a flawed model originating from a process that has misled the Palm Island people, built on pretense and continues to be non transparent and unaccountable to the community;
- Requests the PICC disbanded and removed from the Palm Island community forever and;
- The PICC model not to be imposed on any other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island community in Australia;
- Requests the current funding of PICC including additional funds for training and professional support to be transferred to the Palm Island community to assist the community development of its own service delivery model by the Palm Island community for the Palm Island community.

#### Background

*According to the Palm Island Community Company Annual Report of June 2009, PICC is established under the Corporations Act 2001, (Commonwealth).*

- *It is a public company...not for profit organisation... limited by shares and guided by a Shareholders' Agreement and Constitution. Ordinary shares are held by the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council and State of Qld through the Minister for Communities and there is provision for the Commonwealth Government to become an Ordinary Shareholder.*
- *The directors on the board represent the three **partners** in the company – the Palm Island Community, the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council and the Queensland Government.*
- *The Company acts as a **bridge** between the government and non-government sectors, through **supporting existing non government organisations** on the island, **attracting** funding and **expanding services** where there is a need.*

- PICC focus is **identifying community priorities** and **developing an appropriate response** that leads to better outcomes for all individuals, families and organisation.
- PICC has **established a benchmark** over the last 12 months through which continual improvement and **review of all activities** is effectively maintained;
- PICC is a pioneering initiative to provide service delivery, capacity building and economic development to Palm Island having been **established as a Government structure** that incorporates commercial expertise, together with Palm Island representation;
- PICC was registered in 2007 and established **to link** a wide range of services on Palm Island to assist across the three areas of service delivery of **service provision, capacity building** and business entrepreneurial skills;
- PICC is **supporting** governance, management, leadership and service delivery mechanisms through **capacity building**;
- PICC **ensuring services have the resources and capacity** required in order to deliver targeted programs that **meet the diverse needs** of community members through **capacity building**;
- PICC can **successfully** develop the **level of accountability and transparency** required in order **to build trust with the community**;
- The future steps for PICC is to continue to have an **ongoing engagement** in the community, whereby PICC can work in **partnership in a collaborative** approach towards achieving outcomes and **improving** lifestyle, options and opportunities for individuals, families and organisations on Palm Island.

## Issues

The PICC model is not a community proper model; it is not a negotiated model with the Palm Island community. The model was already developed in the office of the Director General (Linda Apelt) and brought in to the community by staff of the office of the Director General who promoted the PICC to Palm Island as an interim service that would assist with expertise advice and practical support with capacity building to sustain existing Palm Island community service delivery thorough providing governance support and training.

The (PICC) model is

- Understood to be conceived and developed by the Director General Dept and;
- Imposed on the Palm Island people and community;
- It was and still is a model that is not community developed by the people, nor supported nor owned by the Palm Island people and community.

*The issue of PICC being in partnership with the Palm Island community is farcical. There is no real effective and committed partnership between PICC and the Palm Island community.*

- From the very outset the PICC model was introduced to Palm Island as a compulsory intractable model that was being implemented by the Qld Government Dept of Communities;
- From the initial days when the staff of the office of the Director General and their lawyer came into Palm Island with this model the Palm Island service providers strongly voiced their concern and disparagement that PICC was imposing yet another bureaucratic tier of government on Palm Island;
- Our cry of protest against the PICC model fell on deaf ears and was overlooked by the staff of the Director General;
- To date there is no evidence of a PICC Exit Strategy of how PICC is going to transfer control back to the Palm Island community services and leave Palm Island.

*The Company does not act as a bridge between the government and non-government sectors on Palm Island.*

- PICC has changed their initial mandate from supporting existing non government organisations on the island to taking over the funding from the majority of non – government human and social service providers in the community;
- PICC does not attract funding; it is funded by the Qld Government Dept of Communities to the estimated amount of \$ 3 million plus dollars. Approximately \$1.5 million dollars was the initial expense provided by the Qld Government to provide a foundation for the PICC with the vision that it would begin to generate its own income. Since the inception of the PICC finance of up to \$3 million and more is being poured into the PICC to date with not visible effective service delivery to the community.

*PICC ensuring the Palm Island community services have the resources and capacity required in order to deliver targeted programs that meet the diverse needs of community members through capacity building; and that PICC can successfully develop the level of accountability and transparency required in order to build trust with the community;*

- To date there is no effective and functional service delivery happening and no mechanism that the community can access information on how and what the finances are used for.
- There appears to be no transparency and accountability mechanisms to the Palm Island community, consumers are not able to access information of service availability or service effectiveness hence Palm Islanders are not able to make informed decisions to service access. There doesn't appear to be an accessible service evaluation documenting outputs;
- Palm Island people do not know how the millions of dollars plus is being spent nor do they see it at a service delivery level.

*There is no service expansion on the service delivery level, what has taken place is the mere transfer of funding from one community program there by making that program defunct and transferring that money into the coffers of the one entity of PICC.*

- Prior to PICC overtaking the services, the exiting non government organisations were delivering a functional service to the community and forming a purposeful service discussion group to provide a more coordinated approach of service delivery across the human and social services spectrum of which the Dept of Communities were a significant part.
- PICC in now attempting to deliver what the existing community services used to do in the community and doing it badly. To date PICC has been unsuccessful at service delivery to the Palm Island community because their structure and processes do not support the unique service provision that was provided.
- The PICC focus of identifying community priorities and developing an appropriate response that leads to better outcomes for all individuals, families and organisation is failing Palm Island.

*There is no bridge between the government and the non-government sectors on Palm Island, there is only the Government assuming control of the non-government services and imposing the Government agenda on Palm Island under the guise of being a community NGO.*

From the outset the true developmental process was hidden from the Palm Island people, we were led to believe a ruse. PICC did not support existing non government organisations on the island; it took over those organisations and now controls the funding with no input from the community.

There has not been any support given to the existing community services to build capacity in their governance skills according to their original intention that the staff of the Director General came into the community with. If the Palm Island NGO services were funded to the level as PICC is they too would have the capacity to buy in expertise, training and programs.

- This same PICC smacks of the days when the Dept of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Affairs (DAIA) and its predecessors wielded their control over the Palm Island community and its people, stripping the Palm Island community of the opportunity to develop, making its decisions and its own mistakes and allowing the Palm Island community to rise up and learn from those mistakes.
- Where is the government's commitment to building community independence?
- Where is the empowering of community's integrity and its self belief in self management and self determination?
- The community is now witnessing over the last 12 months PICC has not built capacity; rather it has incapacitated the community in their vision and progress towards autonomy, self worth, and community pride in self determination.



Twenty five years ago the then Dept of Aboriginal and Island Affairs removed their staff and all infrastructures leaving Palm Island. The Palm Island Council had to rebuild from nothing. However despite the actions of D.A.I.A the Palm Island community under local community government by local people has progressed at a steady pace towards self governance and self determination. Yet we are continually obstructed by government at every attempt of moving forward.

PICC has become a millstone around the neck of the Palm Island community, weighing Palm Island down and undermining the integrity of the community development process of self determination that Palm Island has been progressing towards over the last 25 years

The existing community services that were funded by the Dept of Communities have in effect been made defunct by the Dept of Communities and the funding for those services has been transferred to the PICC. These services are Services

- Men's group night patrol program
- Relationships Australia – Healthy Families Program
- PCYC - Universal Families Program
- Kootana Womens Centre
- Diversionary service
- Disability services
- Youth Patrol

The PICC has been active for 2 years from ASIC registration; its initial intentions have now changed dramatically. PICC is now the central point of receiving funding from the Dept of Communities to be the service deliverer of family support and other human and social services. This means that the various existing human and social service provider programs has been undermined, bypassed and incapacitated of funding to build the PICC in the community.

*PICC endorses that it has established a benchmark over the last 12 months through which continual improvement and review of all activities is effectively maintained. **Their bench mark misses the mark!***

- The current staff of PICC has raised their concerns that during their short time of employment over the last 3 months they have received no professional support and work direction from the Service Management level. Staff are working with out real direction and feeling like they are being set up to fail;
- There is little to no confidence in Management. After the initial 3 month probation period some staff members were demoted and some of the positions were changed with out prior knowledge of the staff. They now have new job descriptions but still with no real support and direction;
- Staff employed in new positions need support and training; 3 months is an inadequate period of time to assess work performance; demoting staff and changing job positions in an organisation that is just beginning to provide services;

- The internal function of PICC is unstable with growing staffing problems of disgruntled employees who are expressing their concern that they do not have clear direction from Service Management as to what their jobs entail;
- They do not have a clear directive on the outcomes or outputs of their service delivery;
- Consequently some staff has resigned and others are examining their employment and that of the commitment to them by PICC Senior Management. Current anecdotes reveal the lack of staff development and training of current human and social service staff employed by the PICC in the community, once again setting up Indigenous people to fail in their jobs and consequently attracting the comments from Governments that Palm Island is not able to manage its own affairs;
- PICC has now employed a non Indigenous supervisor to make sure the employees turn up for work and do the job on Palm Island. The new employee is now the Services Manager for Palm Island site and will be flown over 2-3 days a week to make sure staff goes to work. The staff alleges that this new onsite Services Manager does not engage with them about their work performance or give them direction;
- As of the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009 two significant Aboriginal PICC employees have resigned their positions from middle management and practice level because of no confidence in the management ability of PICC General Manager & Services Managers.

It is now general knowledge that the PICC model be developed by the Government in order that it can be transferred or transported to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities in Queensland, placing on those communities what has been imposed on Palm Island.

The name Palm Island Community Company although owned by the entity is a misnomer.

- Calling PICC a community company when it is not is misleading to the public and to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities;
- Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will be misled by its implication that the PICC is a Palm Island *community proper* owned and driven entity.
- In reality; Palm Island people strongly believe that PICC is a government intervention developed and implemented by government for government's agenda.
- The presence of a Traditional Owner on the board or the community nominated directors does not represent *community proper* support and engagement.
- Despite the rhetoric and propaganda that the Qld Government espouses; there is currently no support for the PICC to remain in the community.

In effect PICC is creating community dependency whereby the community development is contingent on this Government entity to provide the majority of human and social services to the community; it has become a monopoly model by taking the funding of local community organisations and making them obsolete.

The majority of Palm Islanders are uninformed of the workings of the PICC, its structure and function in the community; PICC is viewed by the community as another layer of government bureaucracy that has taken away the opportunity for community autonomy and capacity building of community services by Palm Island community service providers

*PICC has Ordinary shares which are held by the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council and State of Qld through the Minister for Communities and there is provision for the Commonwealth Government to become an Ordinary Shareholder.*

- To date the Commonwealth Government have not taken up the two places reserved for them on the PICC Board of Directors. **Why has the Commonwealth Government distanced it self from PICC, why have they not taken up the provision to be an Ordinary Shareholder?**

*The annual report says future steps for PICC is to continue to have an ongoing engagement in the community, whereby PICC can work in partnership in a collaborative approach towards achieving outcomes and improving lifestyle, options and opportunities for individuals, families and organisations on Palm Island.*

**The consistent storyboarding of PICC processes ensures that there is an up front face that service provision is happening which deflects any opportunities for criticisms to be laid at their door on their performance.**

**How can the government justify continued support for PICC when millions of dollars have been poured into the PICC with only 4 Palm Island community shareholders?**

#### **Contact Details**

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