



Scenes of Garma: every day ended with traditional dance and music.







# Sacred ground



**As the Federal Government rolled out its intervention in the NT, Indigenous leaders and health experts gathered at the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land. MELISSA SWEET was there, to witness their sorrow and to share the celebration of an ancient culture.**

PHOTOGRAPHY MITCHELL WARD

When we stagger off the bus into the red dirt, after a long day's journey, we find ourselves, quite literally, in the dark. We put up our tent by torchlight, uncertain of what the morning light will reveal.

We have come to an ancient ceremonial ground at Gulkula in north-east Arnhem Land, 600km east of Darwin, because we were invited and because we were curious.

Like many people schooled in the days when the only heroes in the history books were European settlers and explorers, we know so little about the first Australians.

I feel a particular shame that in 20-odd years of reporting on health and medical issues, I've failed to do more than portray Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health as a series of depressing statistical snapshots. When you don't know the people, their culture or history, how can you hope to understand their health?

So here we are at the ninth annual Garma Festival (my partner is here to work as a volunteer and to take photographs). It is the brainchild of the Yothu Yindi Foundation, which was established in 1990 by elders from five Yolngu clans, with a vision to support and promote the region's rich culture, as well as to enhance self-empowerment and self-governance.

Garma is billed as one of Australia's most significant Indigenous festivals but, to be honest, I hadn't heard of it before the organisers contacted me. You won't find an explanation for Garma in the *Macquarie Dictionary* and it's difficult to pin a narrow definition on such a broad concept. For the Yolngu people, Garma is the open space in the stringy bark bush which has been a ceremonial ground for tens of thousands of years. It is where their

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Members of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association at Garma (from left): Dr Marlene Kong, Dr Peter O'Mara, Professor Helen Milroy, Dr Mark Wenitong and Dr Ngiare Brown.



*Continued from previous page*

ancestor, Ganbulabula, brought the yidaki (or didgeridoo) into being.

But Garma is more than a place; it also refers to “two-way learning”, or what happens when people with different ideas and values come together, in mutual respect, to share knowledge, culture and understanding.

Garma is also, the organisers say, “about opening people’s hearts to the message of the land”.

The festival means different things to different people. For the Yothu Yindi Foundation, one aim is to develop economic spin-offs through education, training, employment and enterprise development.

Fresh ideas and opportunities arise when movers and shakers from government, business, academia and community rub shoulders in the open air, away from the barriers created by office walls and hierarchies.

Last year’s festival has germinated a training scheme for Yolngu people with the local arm of the international metals giant Alcan, say RMIT researchers studying the impact of Garma and other Indigenous festivals.

For cultural tourists, Garma provides a rare opportunity to learn about traditional healing, art and music direct from the source. But the drawcard for many festival goers is the key forum.

In an incredible stroke of timing, this year’s forum theme is Indigenous health. When this was decided months ago, no one in their wildest dreams could have guessed how timely this would prove, given the Federal Government’s intervention into Northern Territory communities in the name of tackling child abuse.

Mandawuy Yunupingu, one of the forces

**“If we talk about a mystery, it’s always going to be a mystery. People don’t learn that way.”**

**MANDAWUY YUNUPINGU**

behind Garma but better known as the lead singer of the internationally acclaimed band Yothu Yindi, gives us a warm welcome.

“We feel proud to have you here, to learn from us,” he says. He also urges us not to think of Aboriginal culture and knowledge as a mystery: “If we talk about mystery, it’s always going to be a mystery. People don’t learn that way.”

But one of the mysteries, for me anyway, is the genuine warmth of our welcome onto traditional land, especially after reading Richard Trudgen’s book, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*. It gives a powerful account of the traumas Yolngu have suffered since colonisation, from massacres to missions, welfare dependency and mining land grabs.

Trudgen also reveals how so many of the

Yolngu’s current problems result from profound misunderstandings between the two worlds, and their loss of control over their own lives. “All the people with whom Yolngu have battled since 1900 have had one thing in common: the desire to exercise control over Yolngu and their resources,” Trudgen writes. This is also a recurring theme in many discussions during the three-day forum.

**“Isn’t this just the most magical setting?”** Associate Professor Helen Milroy, a descendant of the Palyku people of the Pilbara region, and a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Perth, has taken to the podium under a rough bush shelter. It stands a stone’s throw from the edge of a steep escarpment and the views behind her stretch for kilometres across the tops of bush to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

It is indeed a perfect spot for enjoying Professor Milroy’s slides of vibrant Indigenous paintings, whose themes illustrate a holistic approach to health, incorporating the importance of culture, spirituality, land and community.

Professor Milroy speaks with power and passion as she argues that Western medicine could learn much from Indigenous perspectives – if only it would listen. Instead, it so often neglects the importance of culture and

*Continued page 10*



*Continued from page 8*

spirituality. “I have been educated to death, but I didn’t learn about healing until I went back to my grandmother,” she says. “We don’t just use knowledge to heal. We heal with our hearts and our spirits – and that is missing from mainstream medicine.”

Western medicine too often focuses on the individual rather than the broader environment, Professor Milroy says. “Unless we understand how important family is, they are often left out of treatment and the healing process.”

In the audience are two traditional healers from the Pitjantjatjara area of Central Australia, who will later speak through an interpreter of their work with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Professor Milroy wants the health system to make greater use of traditional healers. “Health is not so much about restoring structure and function but about restoring balance and harmony,” she says.

“We were healthier than most Europeans at the time of colonisation. We have a lot of knowledge. To restore that balance back, we have to use some of our own ways of knowledge and knowing.”



Pat Anderson: “When we turned on the TV and saw the troops rolling into the NT, we were just devastated that that could happen.”

Professor Milroy paints a damning picture of the Australian health system, where it is difficult for Indigenous people to receive appropriate and effective care.

“My experience in a mainstream service is that our health systems have a lot to answer for,” she says.

“They are steeped with racism and discrimination. We see people being mislabelled in hospitals as aggressive or ‘non compliant’ when maybe it’s because no one has taken the time to understand their point of view.

“We also see a level of incompetence that wouldn’t be acceptable for any other group except for us. We see systems of care that could be much more welcoming for those who need the most care.”

Over the next few days it becomes clear

that the health system is not only unsympathetic to Indigenous patients, many Indigenous doctors also have a hard time. Indeed, one describes how she left Australia to work and study overseas, in order to escape the “pervasive” racism here.

One afternoon, I find Pat Anderson, co-author of the *Little Children are Sacred* report on child sexual abuse. Ms Anderson, who has spent many years leading Aboriginal health organisations, looks exhausted.

A friend is giving her a deep, intense foot massage, and it looks as though she is trying to relieve more than Ms Anderson’s feet.

Ms Anderson is not only carrying the burden of what she and Rex Wild, QC, were told when they visited communities throughout the NT, asking about child sexual abuse. She is also carrying the burden of having been entrusted with people’s most intimate stories.

Now she feels that trust has been breached by the Federal Government’s response which, as she and Wild stress, bears no relationship to their report’s carefully considered 97 recommendations, the first of which stresses the importance of consulting with Aboriginal people.

“When we turned the TV on and saw the





troops rolling into the NT, we were just devastated that that could happen,” Ms Anderson tells the forum. In her typically forthright manner, she mentions feeling “pretty pissed off” as well.

By coming forward to speak about an issue that every society has difficulty acknowledging, Ms Anderson says Aboriginal people showed their willingness to own the problem of child sexual abuse. Now, they have to own the solutions, for them to be effective and lasting. “Those days of us being passive recipients are over, absolutely over,” she says.

Judging from the audience’s response, it doesn’t seem as if anyone at the Forum – a veritable who’s who of Indigenous health experts – thinks the Federal intervention will be effective.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough had been scheduled to speak but pulled out at the last moment, and there seems to be no one here prepared to defend his government’s plans, which as well as child health checks, include removing communities’ control over their land, quarantining welfare payments and banning alcohol.

Dr Ngaire Brown, a prominent Indigenous doctor at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, says the intervention has been developed “in a complete policy and strategic vacuum”, and violates the principle of “first do no harm”.

She says the “punitive” intervention has left many families and communities frightened, especially as it is leading to an influx of “culturally incompetent” people.

Dr Brown says the government should instead be supporting families, and providing funding and long-term commitment for effective interventions such as home visit programs, including nurse home visits during pregnancy

and early childhood. Such programs have been shown to reduce abuse, behaviour problems, drug use and other problems associated with disadvantage and poverty, she adds.

Fran Baum, professor of public health at Flinders University, is so worried that the intervention will be detrimental that she gets up in the middle of the night during the festival to write an opinion piece, subsequently published in *The Age*.

She describes how the Garma forum was initially intended to celebrate some of the achievements in Indigenous health – such as the success of Aboriginal community controlled services in Central Australia at increasing the birth weight of Aboriginal babies to the national average, or the health services in Katherine that are “as well thought out as any mainstream services”.

Instead, writes Professor Baum, the overwhelming mood at Garma is “despair that the government is using a report that bravely named and respectfully described the problem of child sexual abuse to launch what is seen as an offensive, an attack, an assault on fragile Aboriginal communities”.

As a commissioner on the WHO’s Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, Professor Baum is familiar with the research showing the health benefits of having a sense of control over your life.

“*The Little Children are Sacred* report called not for the declaration of war, with its echoes of domination and crisis, but for a thoughtful consultative process that stands some chance of meaningful change,” she writes. “The report recognised that there has to be change but that this was only likely if Aboriginal people are listened to and respected – the basis of any functional relationship. Instead the government is

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## What they said at Garma..

“Spending 1% less on non-Aboriginal health would mean 50% more for Aboriginal health. It is so very little to give up that the only explanation for not doing it must be lack of concern, lack of caring, lack of compassion. Aboriginal health and wellbeing are as bad as they are because no one in power gives a shit. No one in power is prepared to give enough money or enough power to Aboriginal people to improve things.”

*Professor Gavin Mooney, professor of health economics, Curtin University*

“No one should ever suggest that those who question aspects of the government’s plan do not want an end to child abuse.”

*Jackie Huggins, co-chair, Reconciliation Australia*

“The last 40 years or so have given us a bloody good idea of what doesn’t work. And it’s pretty well the opposite of what does work. Centralised, top-down, imposed, one-size-fits-all programs; programs devised and run from Canberra or the state capitals – these are the ingredients for failure.”

*Jackie Huggins, co-chair, Reconciliation Australia*

“We don’t empower people by removing their control. We don’t overcome poverty by stripping them of their land and assets. It’s patent fiction to link land rights to child protection.”

*Dr Ngaire Brown, Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin*

“The NT initiative is an example of how not to do it.”

*Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner*

“The road to outcome failures is paved by good intentions of white fellas who think they know best ... What shocks me the most is that Australians are prepared to live with these outcomes.”

*Tim Marney, WA Treasury*

“I suspect the NT intervention has nothing to do, or very little to do, with child abuse.”

*Broadcaster George Negus*

“The title of the report reflects that everywhere we went, Aboriginal people made it clear that Aboriginal children are sacred.”

*Rex Wild, QC, co-author of Little Children are Sacred*

“Nobody cares more about Aboriginal children than Aboriginal people. There is no evidence that I can find that taking over control of land will reduce child abuse.”

*Professor Helen Milroy, psychiatrist*



Continued from previous page

sending in the army, boots and all.”

Professor Baum describes writing the piece while “in the heart of one of the oldest living cultures on earth”.

“It feels such a privilege for me as a non-Indigenous Australian to experience this palpable richness of spirit and timelessness evident in the landscape and people,” she adds.

**F**estival numbers are down slightly this year because many Yolngu people are away at funerals, but still it is impressive to see the logistics cope so smoothly with 2000 people camping in the bush.

One of the many wonderful things about Garma is the queuing, and some of my most treasured moments occur while standing my turn in the open-air showers or the meal line.

Waiting for dinner one evening I strike up a conversation with a friendly woman. Our talk turns to a well-known actor, who has been a high-profile presence at the festival, and is a long-time supporter of Garma. But I have a mental blank, unable to remember his name. “You mean Jack Whatsie?” I say, before adding, in reference to the actor’s impressive girth, “Big Jack?”

A few minutes later I ask my companion, who turns out to be a filmmaker, what sort of films she makes. Actually, she is married to “Jack Whatsie”, also known as Jack Thompson, and is in stitches at my embarrassment over the faux pas.

You just never know who you will bump into at Garma. It might be a retired German teacher who has travelled halfway around the world for the didgeridoo workshop. Or it might be one of the Aboriginal actors from *Ten Canoes*.

On that first night, as we stumbled into the darkness, we chatted with an older man with the conservative look of a grazier.

## “The way the Federal Government has gone down this route appals me, because it makes all the mistakes of the past.”

**MURRAY WILCOX**

(retired Federal Court judge)

Over the next few days, the recently retired Federal Court judge Murray Wilcox shares with the forum some of the moving stories he encountered while hearing the Noongar peoples’ native title claim in WA.

He describes meeting a man who was taken from his family at age seven, but then escaped and travelled 200km to be reunited with his parents. They hid him for four years until he was picked up again and sent away.

Another story, which struck a deep chord with the judge, involved an Aboriginal woman who spent the years while her husband was away fighting for Australia in WWII moving from place to place so her children wouldn’t be taken away. “While her husband was away fighting for freedom, she was terrified of losing her children,” Mr Wilcox said.

After the judge found in favour of the Noongar claim last year (now under appeal by the WA and Federal governments), his associate was contacted by a psychologist, saying the decision had done more for the Noongar’s mental health than anything else in the past 20 years.

Mr Wilcox speaks with the temperance you might expect of a judge but makes clear his con-

cern that a terrible injustice has been done, through both the removal of children and then the country’s failure to respond to the recommendations of the Stolen Generations report.

He describes the disparaging of that report as “one of the most shameful episodes in Australian history” and the Federal Parliament’s refusal to apologise to Aboriginal people as a “running sore”.

Mr Wilcox says the Federal Government’s intervention in the NT continues an approach of dominating people in a way that must further damage self-esteem: “The way the Federal Government has gone down this route appals me, because it just makes all the mistakes of the past.”

Listening to the judge are people whose lives have been shaped and twisted by the impact of policies contemptuous of Aboriginal culture and traditions.

One speaker tells how his grandparents were put in chains and taken to jail for speaking their language. Another collapses in sobs as she describes how her mother, grandmother and uncle were ripped from their families.

But every day, after the sorrow and anger, there is the dance and the music. We gather around the ceremonial ground to watch and listen to the mesmerising stories that have endured in this place for tens of thousands of years.

Small children echo their elders’ moves in the soft light of the late afternoon. The sand sprays as they jump lightly and heavily.

Watching the grace of the dancers, their gleaming skin and strong, lean limbs, you are left with another perspective of Aboriginal health that contrasts so strongly with the picture presented by researchers’ grim statistics.

And you wonder how different things might be if more Australians had the opportunity to share in the Garma learning. ●