



Reclaiming tradition and re-affirming cultural identity through creating Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Cloaks

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Figure 1 L. Riley. 'Lynette Riley & Diane Riley-McNaboe Modelling Kangaroo Skin Cloaks' (2012)

Abstract

Wiradjuri people traditionally made Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Cloaks to wear for warmth and protection. They were highly valued items used for trade as well as marriage gifts or peace offerings. The cloaks were also used for ceremonial purposes, where the underside of the pelt is incised with various designs to indicate the person's Moiety and Totemic connection as well as their journey through life and that person's status within Nations and across Clan groups. As Aboriginal people were colonised and cultural transmission was criminalised, government blankets replaced the Kangaroo and Possum Skin Cloaks and cloak making skills were not allowed.

In this paper I talk about the Kangaroo and Possum Skin Cloaks created. Through the process of creating the cloaks I utilise and share knowledge from my Elders and I am re-learning Wiradjuri symbols.

While my cloaks have been exhibited in museums and art galleries, they are also a personal gift for whom they are made and include: family histories, bloodlines telling their story using designs which are symbolic of that person. Traditionally the cloak would be worn

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by the person it was designed for in all ceremonies, initiations and be an extension of that person.

Keywords: Aboriginal, colonisation, cultural practice, healing, wellbeing, cultural identity.

Introduction

I am a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman from central and north-western New South Wales, Australia. I acknowledge my ancestors who in their fight for survival ensured our continuance; and I give thanks to my parents, grandparents and extended family for all they did for my personal development and cultural survival.

Primarily Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Blankets discussed in this paper are designed around Aboriginal people from New South Wales, using Wiradjuri symbols; and much of the work was done in association with my sister Diane Riley-McNaboe.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Map of Indigenous Australia (Figure 2) shows the diversity of Aboriginal Nations across Australia. The Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi Nations are two of the largest Nations in south-eastern Australia.



Figure 2: The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia, Horton (1996)²

² For enlarged and interactive map see: <http://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>

Significance of Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Cloaks

The following section on the significance of Kangaroo Skin Cloaks is taken from a short essay/pamphlet I prepared (Riley, 2012e) for a joint exhibition with my sister Diane Riley-McNaboe: ‘The Dhaga Ngiyanhi Ngan.Girra - Where We All Meet Exhibition’ held in at the Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, NSW in 2012.

Traditionally Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Cloaks were made and worn for two reasons. The first being an everyday purpose to provide warmth, as a shawl or blanket may be worn today; but also as protection from the rain as the water runs off the fur side as it does for the animals, thus providing protection from inclement weather. The cloaks could be made small enough to carry babies or small children; or a hood would be sewn into the cloak which would be slung down the back of the mother and the baby would be carried in this pouch; or large cloaks/blankets were made to provide warmth and shelter for several people. These cloaks could be used for trade, and were highly valued. Items that were traded for these cloaks would be significant and special: stones or crystals; stone axes; spears or *woomeras* (used to throw spears, a shield and to carry items); and even as marriage gifts or peace offerings in times of conflict.

An early documented reference, in the initial contact between Wiradjuri people and the colonists, in recognition of Possum Skin Cloaks is recorded in Governor Macquarie’s Journal (10th May 1815, Bathurst) where he talks of meeting three Wiradjuri “warriors” led by Windradyne. They exchanged gifts, Macquarie presenting Windradyne with a “tomahawk and piece of yellow cloth” and Windradyne presenting Macquarie with a “possum skin cloak” (Macquarie, 1809-1820).

In creating a Kangaroo Cloak, the pelt was usually taken from one kangaroo to create the cloak, but if wishing a larger cloak several Kangaroo pelts could be sewn together with kangaroo sinew, creating a larger cloak. Single

pelt cloaks for example would be made with large red kangaroos pelts used for adults and smaller kangaroo pelts would be used for smaller/younger people. No person would use the skins from a kangaroo that might be a Totemic connection, but could use pelts from other kangaroos. For instance, if your Totem was a Grey Kangaroo, you could not harm or use any part of that kangaroo as you would be in brother/sister relationship to this animal; but you may be able to use pelts, meat, sinew, and other material from Red, Brown, Black or Blue Kangaroos, depending on other Totemic connections.

The second use was for ceremonial purposes, where the underside of the pelt would be incised with various designs to indicate the person's Moiety and Totemic connection as well as their journey through life and as such would provide information on that person's status within Nations and across Clan groups. A Kangaroo Skin Cloak would be more specific in the purpose of the incisions.

A "Possum Skin Cloak" would be either created to commemorate a person's birth and would then be added to with each new piece recording a person's life journey. As such, no two cloaks would ever be similar, each was unique to represent that person and as such each person's cloak would be valued and recognised by all. The intricate design on these cloaks represented a person's Moiety; Nation and Clan affiliations; their Totems; and recorded specific ceremonial or other experiences in that person's life. Significantly the designs on the cloaks would be symbolic of and used in particular territories. This "cloak" would therefore be worn by the person it was designed for, in all ceremonies, initiations and be associated as an extension of that person. Ultimately and often the person would be buried with their cloak.

Additionally other Possum Skin shawls, cloaks or blankets, could be made by individuals or jointly by groups of people to record stories of significance or experiences – these could be traded. Kangaroo Skins and Possum Skins were also used to make: drums, arm and waist-bands, belts and headdresses. Current records exist of this practice mainly by Aboriginal Nations in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and

Queensland. The Nations in New South Wales which utilised this practice are: Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Dharug, Worimi, Wonnaruah, Awabakul and Narrinyeri (Fernando, 2010).

How are they worn? In two primary fashions, one is where the tail is used to wrap around a person's shoulder and neck and tied with sinew or with the skin being pierced by a bone (much like a button) to hold the cloak over a person's shoulders. The second is by the tail being wrapped across the shoulders and then under one arm, to allow for greater freedom of arm movement.

Why aren't they made more often? One of the main reasons is government and missionary policies which made it a crime to transmit culture, as a way of forcing assimilation on Aboriginal people. The government would issue blankets as an incentive; of course this often resulted in ill-health for Aboriginal people as the government blankets were neither as warm or water-proof as the Kangaroo and Possum Skin Cloaks were. It was also evident that Aboriginal dress or lack of dress was directly linked with the postcolonial concepts of "civilising" Aboriginal people and as such an emphasis on clothing Aboriginal people was seen as crucial to the colonisation of Australia and the first decade of the colonial process, was devoted to dispersing clothing to Aboriginal people (Kleinert, 2010). Intrinsic in this was the lack of value towards Aboriginal cultural items and traditions and the further belief that traditional culture, particularly in the eastern and southern states, no longer survived, in any context of relevance, to the colonisers; regardless of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of Aboriginal people themselves. Unfortunately this was used to compound the image that the only real Aboriginal people – with any culture or traditions – lived in the western and northern states, that is: Northern Territory, Western Australia and upper Queensland.

Much of the research in the 1800s and 1900s, being undertaken and considered to be worthy was collected by a patriarchal society. What this meant for Aboriginal people is that much of what was recorded was done so by non-Aboriginal men, who failed to recognise and were not privy to the cultural traditions, skills,

experiences and eldership of women, within Aboriginal Nations, Clan groups and families. If you consider that Aboriginal history and culture as being hidden in Australia; then what this has meant for Aboriginal women's practices is a further veil to hide their practices and skills. It also resulted in a re-defining of what represented a "real" Aboriginal person; and those in the eastern and southern states, due to the greatest contact in the colonising process, were deemed to have lost their culture.

Of the traditionally produced Aboriginal Cloaks in museums today 15 were collected between the late 1800s to the early 1900s and placed in museums across Australia and overseas. Within Australia we have cloaks in - Western Australia Museum and Gloucester Lodge Museum in Western Australia; South Australia and Victoria Museums. Internationally we have cloaks in – The Smithsonian, Washington DC, The British Museum, London, Museum of Ethnology, Berlin and Pigorini Museum, Italy. More recently in 2010, a Possum Skin Cloak was created through the Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery as part of an Aboriginal Cultural revival project. This Cloak was displayed in the Sydney Art Gallery for several months (Blacklock, n.d.; see also Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, n.d.)

Case Study: How Has Making Kangaroo Skin Cloaks Affected Identity?

Background to Making Kangaroo Skin Cloaks

I commenced making Kangaroo Skin cloaks in December 2009. At the time I was going through a personal family crisis and as one does at those times you return home to your Country, that is, your Traditional Lands. As such I was staying with one of my sisters Diane Riley-McNaboe and she was making a cloak for a ceremony she was involved in. Being off Country often means you miss out on the ceremonies and new community ventures. Therefore I hadn't been involved in the making of cloaks. As such, I asked my sister what she was doing - she was burning designs onto a Kangaroo skin - and I asked if I could have a go.

As sometimes happens, in families, my sister said, "Oh no. You couldn't do this; you need a real steady hand". That comment added fuel to my request and I won't tell you what I actually said in response; but she gave me a Kangaroo Skin and showed me what was required to make the cloak. Observation and modelling is a traditional way of learning culturally.

Basically a traditional cloak is divided into sections; using a central point as the focus of the cloak, with each section covering a story or representing a person in a particular way, such as: their Totems, history or connections; and the cloak must be totally covered using symbols, which due to their context or combination will tell different stories. Hence people can use the same symbols but have a totally different story or representation to another person using the same symbols, based on the context within which those symbols are used.

Below in Figure 3 is the first cloak I made in 2009, *Goanna & Energy Trees*. The animal depicted here is a sand goanna. In creating this, I was thinking of the Totem for the Wiradjuri Nation, which is a *goanna*. I saw this sand goanna's skin patterns and wanted to try and replicate this. The goanna was a major source of food and health (goanna meat and fat) traditionally and when we were kids we ate these regularly. Goannas rely on trees for their energy and so do we. When you squint and look at a tree you can see the energy radiating from them. This piece of work represents the inter-connection between animals and the environment.



Figure 3: L. Riley, 'Goanna & Energy Trees' (2009)

For me the revitalisation and re-production of these cloaks is seen as an essential tool to re-claiming traditions thought lost and as a way to re-affirm cultural identity.

In the cloaks I produce I am looking at:

1. Re-learning symbols used in Wiradjuri (my father's Nation) art and cultural items; which have also been used as vital communication tools. Once I am familiar with these I will start learning Gamilaroi (my mother's Nation) symbols.
2. Re-establishing a cultural tradition.
3. Developing family histories and bloodlines on the cloaks, for family members and others.
4. To enjoy a form of artwork, which incorporates my own cultural revitalisation, which is both challenging and relaxing.

Moran, Newlin, Mason and Roberts (2011) emphasise that despite all the government policies imposed on Aboriginal people to prevent them from expressing and living their culture; many people have then been led to believe that the culture is lost, but what those people do not understand is that "Aboriginal culture is a living culture. Now we have to rebuild." (p. 24). The on-going test often for Aboriginal people is gaining recognition of how they present their cultural traditions; that they do this in the manner they see fit; and that this representation is accepted in the format that Aboriginal people chose to present. In the wider community there needs to be acceptance and acknowledgement that it is **not a right** for non-Indigenous people to take this knowledge and re-configure it to fit into their culture. In reality Aboriginal people are survivors of colonisation and are daily working to de-construct assimilation through creating their own ways of being, thinking and doing (Dudgeon & Felder, 2006). We are creating our own standpoint for how we wish to be viewed (Sherwood, Watson, & Lighton, 2013); and in doing so we provide added value towards improved inter-cultural understandings (Otten, 2003) by being active agents for change through Collaborative Community Participatory Action Research (CCPAR) (Sherwood, Watson, & Lighton, 2013). I, as such, use my cultural revitalisation to

transform myself and cultural understandings of my people.

For Diane (Riley, 2015b), who also makes traditional feathered headdresses and belts, she feels that:

When I am making cultural items and artworks I feel that the Elders are a part of me and guide me in how I make headdresses and belts.

In making Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Cloaks it's a healing; as our mothers and grandmothers weren't allowed - through government policy and practices - to make these items. So in making these now for our aunts and uncles who weren't allowed, they get a chance to see how they were made and to hold these items.

I've had people come up to me and say, "wow you're making these in the old traditional ways, as our old fella's made them. How did you know how to do that?" For me it's the old fella's or spirit people working through me.

It's the same thing when I am making things with my sister. We talk and talk about what we are doing, but we just can't seem to do it on our own; but when we get together it happens straight away. It's like the old fella's are saying "no this isn't for you to do on your own you have to do it together.

Additionally for Diane (Riley, 2015b), what this cultural work means is that there is a benefit for the wider non-Aboriginal community including:

- education about Aboriginal culture
- creation of deeper understanding and deeper knowledge
- understand purpose and reason for what is done
- knowledge and skills get valued
- breaking down racism and builds bridges

And the benefits for our people are:

- knowledge and skills are valued
- revitalising traditional cultural practices
- empowers other Aboriginal people to make things
- therapeutic healing
- cultural practice spreading across Country

Since Diane and I started to work together we have held a major exhibition "Dhaga Ngiyanhi

Ngan.Girra -Where We All Meet” Exhibition, in Dubbo in 2012 which showcased my Kangaroo Skin Cloaks, Diane’s feather headdresses and belts and ochre balls and our combined Possum Skin Blanket. For this exhibition I created an education package to be used for school tours and others as required and a DVD containing interviews with people I had made Kangaroo Skin Cloaks for. Additionally ABC and Western Plains Cultural Centre made a DVD with Diane and I on the making of the Possum Skin Blanket – which was never released by ABC, but is used with our exhibition. The exhibition has also been shown in other communities around Dubbo, such as: Lithgow and Orange; and at the Macleay Museum, The University of Sydney. We are currently working on taking the exhibition on a travelling tour.

The Individuality of Kangaroo Skin Cloaks

Kangaroo Skin Cloaks have been made for individuals, within our main family members, as well as some commissioned cloaks. The cloaks are designed specifically for each person and require personal knowledge on each person: their family history, Nation, Clan and personal Totems, significant stories or history of each person, are all woven into the making of each cloak so that they become individualised histories and representations of each person.

Kangaroo Skin Cloaks - Examples

I ask in the making of the cloaks that I am able to take photos of people wearing the cloaks and to also have an interview with them, three questions are asked: first, where people introduce themselves; second, talk about what is on their cloak; and third, the significance of the cloak for each person. Five interviews have been made available and the comments from these people are used in this paper. The five people in order are set out in Table 1.

Following is an overview of what the design for each person’s cloak is; then a summary of responses by cloak owners on what their cloak means to them.

Table 1: Individual cloak examples

Person for whom cloak is made	Relationship to artist	Cloak details
Diane Riley-McNaboe	Sister	Wiradjuri - 2010
Graeme Mundine	Brother-In-Law	Bundjalung - 2010
Mindal Mundine Rolet	Daughter	Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi, Bundjalung - 2010
Julang Mundine	Son	Wiradjuri/Gamilaroi, Bundjalung - 2010
Larry Brandy	Wiradjuri storyteller	Wiradjuri - 2014

Diane Riley-McNaboe



Figure 4: L. Riley, ‘Diane’s Cloak – Tree of Knowledge & Magpie Totem’ (2010)

Diane’s Cloak (Figure 4) was designed specifically for my sister Diane Riley-McNaboe. The Cloak represents Diane as a *Tree of Knowledge*, both the external tree we all see and what is hidden beneath the surface. Diane is a complex and very talented person, so I wanted to make sure this was recognised. This depiction of the *tree* to me also represents the way in which we as Aboriginal people have had to hide our culture because the wider society refused to acknowledge the richness we have to offer and have tried to assimilate and carry out cultural genocide to make us fit into their society/social systems and conventions. Yet it is still there underneath, hidden and waiting to emerge.

The “Knowledge Tree” is Diane and all the people who have influenced and affected her life. Her children are represented as the “burls” on the tree. Each relying on and drawing strength from their mother, but creating their own identities – I was thinking of the beautiful bowls that are created from the burls taken off trees, each unique and astounding. I also think the “Tree of Knowledge” reflects Diane as the teacher she is; the knowledge she holds and gives to others.

The roots of the tree represent family and friends who have supported and held Diane up over the years, in effect helping to form the woman she has become and who will always be a part of her life. This indicates strong and on-going foundations.

The concentric circles on the cloak are a representation of Diane’s blood-line – grandparents (Moree and Dubbo), parents and then Diane’s own family – husband and children; and how they are all linked together.

Diane’s personal Totem, the magpie, figures largely on the Cloak and this represents Diane as the unique person she is, with all her strengths and her continuous learning and development.

Graeme Mundine



Figure 5: L. Riley, ‘Graeme’s Cloak – Baryulgil & Crucifix’ (2010)

Graeme in his career has been a Marist Brother; hence his cloak depicts the complexities in his life. The cloak (Figure 5) as such is based on two symbolic systems to deliver double and triple

cultural and religious messages. The key symbols are:

1. Three concentric circles inside each other which represent camps and Clan groups.
2. Double lines represent rivers.
3. Three wavy lines represent travelling tracks.

Graeme’s cloak is divided into sections through the use of the various symbols: The tail – has in the foreground “Traditional Spirit” figures that protect us; line work in background – represents the “land”. At the base of the tail is the symbol, which represents the “sun”. The rays and dots indicate heat of the sun. This symbol also represents the head and the “Son of God”. The “rays” surrounding the head also indicate a “halo” around Jesus (the “Son of God”). The figures under the “sun” represent the “land”; with a river going through the land – “Clarence River”.

The symbols at each end of the river are “stars” – The Morning and The Evening stars. The two arching half circle symbols over the “land” represent “women”. The artwork within the inner circle represents Baryulgil – Graeme’s home community and Traditional Country. Under the symbol for “land” is a travelling track leading down to a campsite with “Clan” affiliations. The concentric circles on each side represent “Clan” groups with traditional affiliations with each other for: law, lore (traditional knowledge) and marriage.

The double/triple messages are important:

1. The keys to our survival in our environment are the sun, land and water. The land is paramount to Aboriginal identity; and on the New South Wales north coast (Graeme’s Traditional Country) is the importance of the Clarence River – and its water systems.
2. The combination of the sun, body of land (three large concentric circles also represents Jesus’ body), river, Morning & Evening stars, travelling track and Clan camp – form a representation of Jesus on the cross – the crucifix – the sun represents his head – Son of God.
3. The Clan groups “six” on each side – twelve – represents the twelve disciples and their work/discipline, each symbol inside each

Clan group, also represents the Totem of each Clan group – left side, top to bottom; right side, top to bottom:

- i. Peter: Rock, mountain
 - ii. Andrew: Water
 - iii. James ‘The Greater’: Fish
 - iv. James ‘The Lesser’: Morning star, justice
 - v. Phillip: Water
 - vi. Bartholomew: Bush food
 - vii. Matthew: Berries
 - viii. Thomas: Spear
 - ix. Thaddeus/Jude: Tree
 - x. Simon: Eel
 - xi. John: Fish
 - xii. Judas: Empty – also signifies need to be connected to one another and what happens when you get cut off, and that it effects everyone
4. In recognition of the work done by Graeme:
 - i. Footprints – individuals and people who are affected and supported by the work done with Graeme
 - ii. Small concentric circles – represents wider groups influenced by work done by Graeme, but not necessarily seen.
 5. Symbols of women over the main Camp – three large concentric circles – represent not only importance of women – mothers and wives - but each half circle also represents:
 - i. Jesus’ mother and Graeme’s mother (first influence)
 - ii. Mary Magdalene and Graeme’s wife Gabrielle (key supporter and influence)

Mindal Mundine Rolet



Figure 6: L. Riley, ‘Mindal’s Cloak – Frill Necked Lizard Totem’ (2010)

As Mindal’s mother, I designed Mindal’s Cloak to give to her in celebration of her gaining her personal Totem – “The Frill Necked Lizard”. This Totem recognised Mindal’s strength of character as being very loyal and family oriented. But watch out if she needs to defend her territory or family, she is not afraid to step forward in that defence. The cloak also explains Mindal’s family heritage and links to Dubbo (Wiradjuri), Moree (Gamilaroi), and Baryulgil (Bundjalung) through her grandparents and parents. It also shows the importance of the extended family through the small concentric circles, which represents her links across Country and how everyone looks after each other.

Julang Mundine



Figure 7: L. Riley, ‘Julang’s Cloak – Platypus Totem’ (2010)

As Julang’s mother I designed Julang’s Cloak (Figure 7) specifically to celebrate the gaining of his individual Totem, the “Platypus”. An individual Totem is about linking a person to the environment, but also an understanding of who that person is as represented by the universe. The platypus Totem recognises Julang as a unique person, with strong family values, with great tenacity and resilience. Despite the odds, he always has a go and more often than not achieves his goals. The cloak also indicates Julang’s bloodline and heritage of connections across Country – Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi and Bundjalung Nations, through his mother and father. In essence this provides Julang with his immediate family tree. He can read this and see the connections from his grandparents, his parents, then on through to himself.

Larry Brandy



Figure 8: L. Riley, 'Larry's Condobolin Cloak' (2014)

Larry's Condobolin Cloak (Figure 8) represents the Wiradjuri people around the Condobolin area, central New South Wales. The centre of the cloak has the Calare River – at Condobolin, New South Wales – running across the cloak. Beneath this are the two main areas of land on which the local Aboriginal people were forced to reside with encroaching colonialism – the Condobolin Aboriginal Reserve and Willow Bend Communities. The Reserve is represented by the large three concentric circles (inside one another) the pattern/symbols within these circles represents land, to remind us this was and will always be the land of the Wiradjuri. Further to the right are a collection of three smaller concentric circles, these represent the Aboriginal people of Willow Bend and the small footprints around these are the children who went between both settlements to spend time with their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins as they have done for millennia – spending time with these other parents, brothers and sisters was expected.

Spiralling out from these central symbols are representations of other family groups and to the left Elders gathering to discuss law and to hold important ceremonies together. Around the rest of the country is representation of various animals and plants. At the bottom of the cloak is the Condobolin Lake – this lake when seen from above looks like an emu. This would have been ideal country for the emu and for emu nests. It is the male emu, which sits on the

nests until the babies hatch and who then tends to these babies.

Above the river are tracks of different animals. The outer edge border markings lets people know this cloak was made by a Wiradjuri person; and the track marks represent the googar – a large black and gold speckled skin goanna, which is the Totem for the Wiradjuri people. The googar represents strength and resilience and the ability to stand up for others as well as ourselves.

The various symbols as represented on the cloak are as follow:

- i. The stars and the Milky Way.
- ii. The sun.
- iii. Family groups – mother, father, daughters and sons.
- iv. The Calare River – the symbols between the banks represents water in the river
- v. Symbols for Possum, this would be a possum colony; on the other side of the river are tracks to represent ants and snakes.
- vi. The Condobolin Reserve – note the three wavy parallel lines with dots in between represents connections between the different groups of people: at the Reserve, Willow Bend, family groups and the Elders – these are Kinship connections which exist across our country.
- vii. Elders sitting together to discuss law and ceremonies
- viii. Condobolin Lake – note the lake is shaped like an emu running and at the head and neck section are sandpiper tracks. Sandpiper tracks are also at swap areas along the river.
- ix. Emu's nesting and emu tracks.
- x. Symbols represent "bush food" and the Cockatoo, which are always found around this lake. The cockatoo is seen as a major messenger bird, which I see as appropriate as this cloak will be used as a teaching tool.
- xi. Elders sitting around and talking (concentric circles) with children playing around them (footprints).

- xii. Emu, Kangaroo and Possum tracks – main sources of food and clothing.
- xiii. Kangaroos feeding – note these are living in a section surrounded by the river. This would have been a natural reserve for breeding and hunting.
- xiv. Trees represent forested areas and between are Kangaroo tracks. This shows the set patterns of movement for these animals around their territory; but also notes the kangaroos feeding within these tracks – this represents the men looking after/protecting the women and children.

Owner’s Responses to Having a Cloak and What the Cloaks Represent to Them

Cloak owners have their own views as to the value of their cloaks. Following are comments taken from personal interviews held with cloak owners:

- family relationships and personal connections– across generations and for self; a family tree; bloodline and heritage
- helps to heal from historical repression of our culture
- another form of language to tell our histories and stories
- shows our traditional symbols and artwork
- represents who I am as a person, my Traditional Country and my life; demonstrates struggles in life and strengths of me as a person; tells my story
- symbols on the cloak have multiple meanings, the context is very important
- pride and honour to own a cloak; never thought I’d have something like this in my lifetime
- personal learning’s and teaching’s – knowledge and growth as a person
- a family heirloom to be handed down to next generation
- Nation, Clan and individual Totems - demonstrates me as a person
- amazing gift which is hard to put into words – makes me emotional every time I hold it
- shows Country where I live
(Riley, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, & 2014)

And finally from Diane (Riley, 2015b) it is about:

- Community responses
- Our culture is being observed
- It’s the feelings
- It’s the feelings
- It’s the feelings

Possum Skin Blanket

Both Diane and I were extremely excited by the prospect of creating the Possum Skin Blanket as it is the first time in living memory that a possum skin blanket or cloak had been made in our region. After the making of the blanket and during the “Dhaga Ngiiyanhi Ngan.Girra -Where We All Meet” Exhibition, at Dubbo, which was on display for three months, open to school groups and all community members; an opening was held for the local Aboriginal community and Elders who were brought in to view the exhibition. Diane was able to speak with the Elders groups and she commented on the number of Elders who had quite emotional responses in seeing the cloaks and headdresses and they openly cried in viewing the exhibition, particularly the Possum Skin Blanket and they gave instructions, such as: “you aren’t to keep this exhibition to yourself; you have to go out and show this to everyone. So they can see what we do and what we have nearly lost” (Riley, 2015b).

The Dubbo-ga Possum Skin Blanket (as shown in Figure 9 and Figure 10) is made up of 54 possum skins, it was designed by Lynette Riley and Diane Riley-McNaboe (© 2012). The possum skins were bought from New Zealand as possums are a protected animal in Australia. The possums were originally transported to New Zealand by colonists and are now considered a pest and hence possum skins can be used if brought from New Zealand. The Possum Skin Blanket was designed row by row and also to ensure that the fur side – with tails hanging – had skins with similar colour tones in alignment, for example, rows of red and rows of grey tones.



Figure 9: Dhaga Nginyanbi Ngan.Girra.

Exhibition; Diane, Lynette, and Curators --Caroline and Kent -- with design-side of Dubbo-ga Possum Skin Blanket (2012)

Possum Skin Panels

Each of the possum skins used in the blanket were numbered from 1-50 with four skins used to create a pocket at the top of the blanket in which a pole is placed to hang the blanket. The blanket consists of five rows of 10 possum skins. Each row and each possum skin panel has a specific purpose. The specific representation is as follow:

- 1. Four Rivers** - flow through the skin panels: Macquarie, Talbragar, Bogan, and Castlereagh – as major rivers across our Traditional Country:
Macquarie River - Panels: 3, 4, 12, 13, 21; Totem represented is the “sandpiper”
Talbragar River - Panels: 7, 8, 18, 19, 30; Totem represented is the “possum”
Bogan River -- Panels: 21, 32, 33, 43, 44; Totem represented is the “mudlark”
Castlereagh River -- Panels: 30, 39, 38, 48, 47; Totem represented is “sacred water holes”



Figure 10: Dhaga Nginyanbi Ngan.Girra.

Fur-side of Dubbo-ga Possum Skin Blanket (2012)

This representation of the four rivers also forms a diamond pattern, which is a significant pattern in our sacred and religious practices.

- 2. Animal Rows** – Each of the five rows within the cloak represent different types of animals:
Row 1 – birds
Row 2 – animals in trees
Row 3 – animals that walk on the ground
Row 4 – water animals
Row 5 – animals that live near, on or under the ground
- 3. Tree of Knowledge** – Panels 15, 16, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 35, 36:

These panels form the foundations for the cloak – they represent the major Totems in our Country for our Nation (23, 24, 27, & 28) and Clan groups (15, 16, 25, 26, 35, 36); these Panels also form the pattern of a tree trunk (15, 16, 25, 26, 35, 36) with the

branches spreading on either side (23, 24, 27, 28).

4. Calendar, Seasons and Stars – these are grouped in seasonal panels at each corner of the cloak:

- Season 1 - Panels 1, 2, & 11
- Season 2 - Panels 9, 10, & 20
- Season 3 - Panels 31, 41, & 42
- Season 4 - Panels 40, 49, & 50

Each panel represents a month and each group of three corner panels represents the seasons as per the European calendar, as:

Top left corner triplet is – December (11) January (1) and February (2)

Top right corner triplet is – March (9), April (10) and May (20)

Bottom right corner triplet is – June (40), July (50) and August (49)

Bottom left corner triplet is – September (42), October (41) and November (31)

Each of the above panels are divided into five sections – left to right – larger diamond panel is the 1st section and smaller corner sections are parts 2, 3, 4, 5. For each of the five panels the different components represent:

Section 1 – large diamond panel: A site or a star

Section 2, 3, 4, & 5 represent: bush foods, bush medicine and one part of a traditional story. Three panels in each corner have one part of the same story in each panel.

5. People – represented in following:

- Women - Panel 13
- Children - Panel 17
- Men - Panel 34
- All People Together - Panel 37

6. Carved Trees – Panels 13, 18, 33, 38:

These panels represent the carved trees of the western plains; across western New South Wales, and is the only recorded evidence of the creation of these carved trees. These were not simply an art form, but contained in essence the presence of a person of significance. In many ways it

could be equated with a grave stone marker – but would contain greater spiritual significance. It is not appropriate to reproduce any one carved tree and it's marking – this would be sacrilegious, but rather these panels pay homage to our unique form of remembering an individual's contribution to others' lives. It's also important to acknowledge that these trees were alive and not destroyed through this creation.

Possum Skin Template

The design for the Dubbo-ga Possum Skin Blanket (Figure 11) was done as a joint venture between Lynette Riley and Diane Riley-McNaboe in 2012. This was done to create not only cohesion and flow around the cloak but also to ensure the whole design reflected our Traditional Country appropriately.

1 C	2 C	3 P	4 P	5 *	6 *	7 P	8 P	9 C	10 C
11 C	12 P	13 *	14 P	15 T	16 T	17 P	18 *	19 P	20 C
21 P	22 P	23 N	24 N	25 T	26 T	27 N	28 N	29 P	30 P
31 C	32 P	33 *	34 P	35 T	36 T	37 P	38 *	39 P	40 C
41 C	42 C	43 P	44 P	45 *	46 *	47 P	48 P	49 C	50 C

Figure 11: Possum Skin Blanket design

Panels in blue – designed and created by Diane Riley-McNaboe

Panels in orange – designed and created by Lynette Riley

Response to Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Dubbo-ga Possum Skin Blanket

The Senior Curator, Western Plains Cultural Centre, Kent Buchanan (Riley, 2015c) had the following to say in regard to the Dubbo, New South Wales 2012 exhibition “Dhaga Ngiyanhi Ngan.Girra - Where We All Meet”:

At a personal level I can't measure what I have learnt from the interactions with the Riley sisters on a daily basis, in putting the exhibition together. It has added layers of knowledge I couldn't have done in any other way. I learnt about the inter-connected nature of Aboriginal culture; the importance of reviving traditional skills; and the need to ensure local Aboriginal voices are loud. This awareness now informs everything I do.

The impact of the exhibition has been phenomenal on a number of levels. For me meeting with Aboriginal Elders allowed me to hear their stories and learn which was wonderful. I gained a greater understanding of the complexities of how traditions were lost. For the Elders it was seeing their traditions being presented with new eyes – very moving and important for them.

For young Aboriginal people seeing their symbols and stories like this has been the beginning of putting the pieces of the puzzles together, to understand:

- why and how traditional practices were lost
- importance of bringing traditional practices back
- effects of colonisation; loss of culture and destruction to tenants of Aboriginal life
- importance of family stories as skills to keep families going; anger at loss and shared concern at loss
- renew and revive culture with elements displayed – humbling and crucial
- exploring Aboriginal culture celebrates Aboriginal culture
- resilience of Aboriginal culture
- Aboriginal culture is living and breathing now.
- The lessons learnt by non-Aboriginal people:
 - to listen, observe and learn
 - what we have learnt through media – in Australia – has been problematic
 - little first-hand experiences
 - assisted to humanise Aboriginal experiences, as it's become abstract as

- something which happened two hundred years in the past and something to get over
- the complexity of problems and how complicated it is.

I think exhibitions and sharing of culture like this exhibition are essential in slowly chipping away at the lack of knowledge in the wider community and to ensure cultural knowledge. This show provided a huge leap as it demonstrated strong, knowledgeable culture; and in watching non-Aboriginal people engage in and learn from the exhibition it was clear that Wiradjuri culture is not dead. (Riley, 2015c)

A further “The Dhaga Ngiyanhi Ngan.Girra - Where We All Meet” Exhibition was held, at Lithgow (New South Wales, Australia) through the Eskbank House and Museum, 2 April–4 May 2014. The aim of the exhibition was to:

1. provide an opportunity for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community to learn about Wiradjuri culture;
2. encourage visitors from outside the Lithgow area to visit the museum to see a nationally significant exhibition; and
3. encourage schools to visit the exhibition to learn knowledge and respect for Wiradjuri culture.

Comments from the art gallery were:

- Highest visitation to the museum and art gallery during this exhibition in Eskbank's records.
- 327 visitors with 138 to visit the exhibition; the museum recorded that the largest proportion of visitors came for this particular exhibition rather than to visit the museum.
- School visit of 100 students (as the school holidays fell during the middle of the exhibition there was not as many schools visiting as might otherwise have attended).
- Visitors from Blue Mountains, Sydney, Bathurst, Oberon and Kandos came specifically to see the exhibition.
- Visitors spent a longer than average time in the exhibition than most other exhibitions due to:
 - DVD being interesting, informative and relevant to an object in the exhibition (Possum Cloak).
 - Interpretive material being easily accessible, informative and interesting.
 - Information and art included within the objects themselves being of high interest and artistic merit.

- The ability to touch some of the exhibits and trace the stories with their own hands and try on Kangaroo cloaks.

A selection of comments on the exhibition from visitors were:

"It is fantastic to see such fantastic traditional art work displayed by such talented Wiradjuri women." Garigarra

"Fantastic Work! So Exquisite! Keep Sharing." Lyn

"Such a beautiful show - The cloaks are so elegant and dignifying to the rich and diverse Aboriginal culture. The detail is superb." Maryanne

"Beautiful work. Thanks." Kerri and Milli

"A beautiful exhibition, full of information presented in a wonderful way. We are so very fortunate that Diane and Lynette are not only reviving and carrying on these traditions and skills, but they are also generous enough to share their works with us all." Pauline

"Beautiful works - amazing lessons – and so much to learn." Fiona

"Wonderful artworks. Very educational. Learnt more appreciation for Aboriginal people." Sue

"Wonderful Exhibition, really helped by DVD, excellent production-keeping culture alive." Brian

"A beautiful experience to hear the stories and see the art and creativity that has come from connection with family and spirit." Diane

"The students of Lithgow Public School have had a wonderful day and are buzzing with excitement about all they have seen. Thank you so much." Greer

In summary the Lithgow art gallery manager and curator, Wendy Hawkes (2014) thought:

The exhibition fulfilled all of the aims beyond expectations with many more visitors than anticipated based on previous exhibitions and visitors spending longer than average viewing the exhibition. Comments (written and verbal) indicate that a greater understanding of, appreciation of and respect for Wiradjuri culture was gained by those viewing the exhibition. The staff at Eskbank House and Museum were exceedingly pleased with the exhibition. Not only did it increase numbers to the exhibition, but broadened the depth of experiences for visitors through the introduction of another culture and style of art work not previously exhibited at Eskbank. It also deepened the knowledge, understanding and respect of the staff for Wiradjuri culture. Hosting the

exhibition also created a relationship with the Western Plains Cultural Centre/Dubbo City Council and developed more connections with the local Aboriginal community through the Mingaan Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation.

The exhibition was also held at the Macleay Museum, The University of Sydney for Reconciliation Week, 2015. Jude Philp, Senior Curator (Riley, 2015a) commented that:

from my experience talking with the visitors to the exhibition some found it revolutionary, others inspiring. Those that found it revolutionary had not realised or ever been taught the depths of deprivation that Aboriginal people faced in New South Wales recent history, like language-bans.

They found it moving and uplifting to see how you and Diane were willing to tell your stories, experiences and share your family with others - and truly welcomed the experience to learn. Inspiration came from seeing the creativeness of your works, the incredible detail in depictions as well as the detail of information. I don't think I need to say that everyone seemed to feel compelled to throw themselves into the embrace of the cloak (although resisted thanks to the museum environment!) - its warmth and love shone.

Most people who stayed a long time, looking and reading the stories you both gave also sat and watched the video - in other words they wanted to hear and see more.

There were some who at first thought the use of animal skins distasteful but then said once they understood what it meant to use them, and how this history had unfolded they found them beautiful.

Chinese visitors especially were drawn to the beauty of the materials and thrilled to see something that was made by the people from the First Nations of New South Wales.

Over the course of the exhibition (which didn't have paid publicity) we had 3,481 visitors to see the exhibition - including of course the special Indigenous envoy to the United Nations, who also found your works inspiring.

An interview by Lynette Riley and Diane Riley-McNaboe of their exhibition was held with NITV, which is an Indigenous channel in Australia, the interview can be seen on Youtube on:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5mP95HgUek>.

What is clear and evident is that the value of showing cultural knowledge in the form of an exhibition is that it provides pride for Aboriginal people and improved knowledge to non-Aboriginal people of what can be gained through Aboriginal culture.

Indigenous Cultural Identity Factors

As an Indigenous person where do you start with discussing cultural identity when there are so many complex and intertwining issues, that revolve around cultural background, our government influences, international support and us as individual people. For an Aboriginal person in Australia all these factors need to be drawn into conscious awareness to understand ourselves and where we fit in the wider context, as a person living in the current fabric of Australia both culturally and socially. I also think we need to understand this to help educate the wider society, who in the majority still remains ignorant of these factors.

In Figure 12, in both diagrammatical form and expanded, are some issues to be explored and discussed with other Indigenous people in reflection of the many issues which have impact on us as Indigenous peoples and our cultures. This requires further discussion and exploration as they are only initial thoughts of the presenter.

These initial issues are listed as below, without as yet complete discussion and completion of factors within these issues:

- 1. Individual**
 - 1.1 Wellbeing
 - 1.2 Social and Economic Status
 - 1.3 Family Structure and Support
- 2. Cultural Background**
 - 2.1 Connection to Country, Clan and Kinship
 - 2.2 Active Personal Cultural Interaction
 - 2.3 Indigenous Community Cultural Interaction
- 3. Government and Community Influences and Recognition**
 - 3.1 Historical Policies and Practices

- 3.2 Current Political Influences
- 3.3 Wider Community Recognition and Respect

4. International Support

- 4.1 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- 4.2 International Recognition of Indigenous Arts and Culture

In discussing the above issues in future forums it is hoped that we can arrive at some consensus about the issues which drive us as Indigenous people and which contribute to our on-going cultural identity. I would welcome input or discussion from any of my fellow Indigenous peoples on these.

Conclusion

In conclusion the work being undertaken by Lynette Riley and Diane Riley-McNaboe in the making of Kangaroo Skin Cloaks, Feather Headdresses and Belts, and Possum Skin Blankets is seen to be vital at a personal level for cultural revitalisation and strength; for the Aboriginal community as proof of their living culture despite attempts by many government policies and practices to destroy and assimilate Aboriginal people; and to create improved bridges of cultural understanding for non-Indigenous Australians. The wider Aboriginal community sees the dispersal of cultural knowledge through exhibitions, such as developed by Lynette Riley and Diane Riley-McNaboe, as a key instrument in ongoing cultural building and knowledge sharing. This cultural information sharing is supported by international Indigenous groups as a part of cultural identity; re-building traditional knowledge and heritage; and healing traumatised Indigenous Nations.

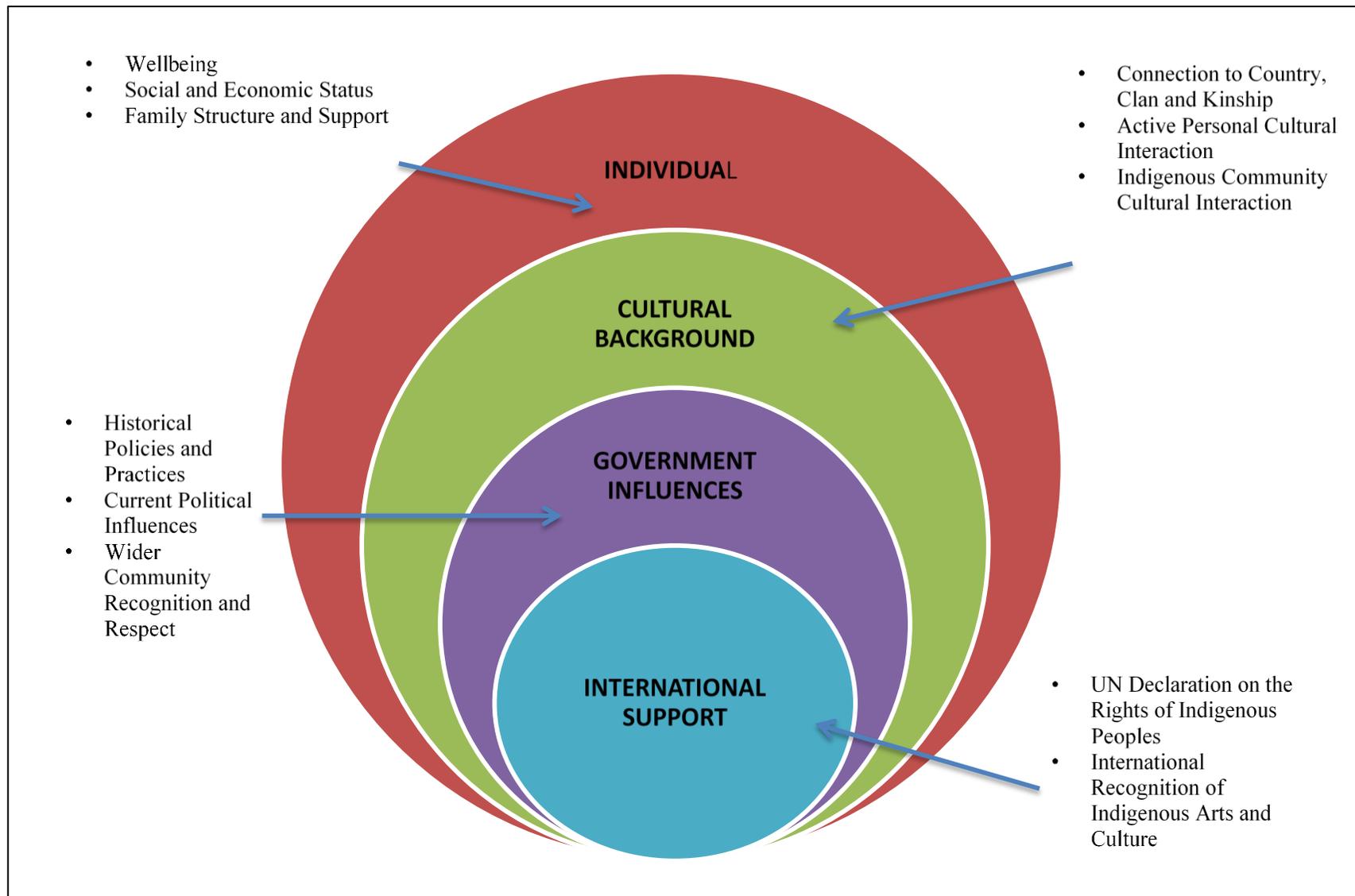


Figure 12: Indigenous Cultural Identity Factors

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- Lynette Riley** a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman from Dubbo and Moree; is a Senior Lecturer, Academic Leader (Curriculum) in the National Centre for Cultural Competence, The University of Sydney. Lynette has submitted her PhD thesis and hopes to graduate with her doctorate in 2016.

Lynette trained as an infant/primary teacher through Armidale College of Advanced Education 1975-1977, after completing her HSC at Dubbo High School. Lynette has almost 40 years' educational experience, working to improve Aboriginal education and administration within: primary schools; high schools; vocational education and training; state office and universities.

Lynette is also an artist having presented her Kangaroo Skin Cloaks – a traditional Aboriginal art form - at several exhibitions since 2012 with her sister Diane Riley-McNaboe. A request from her community Elders is to educate others about this cultural art practice.

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