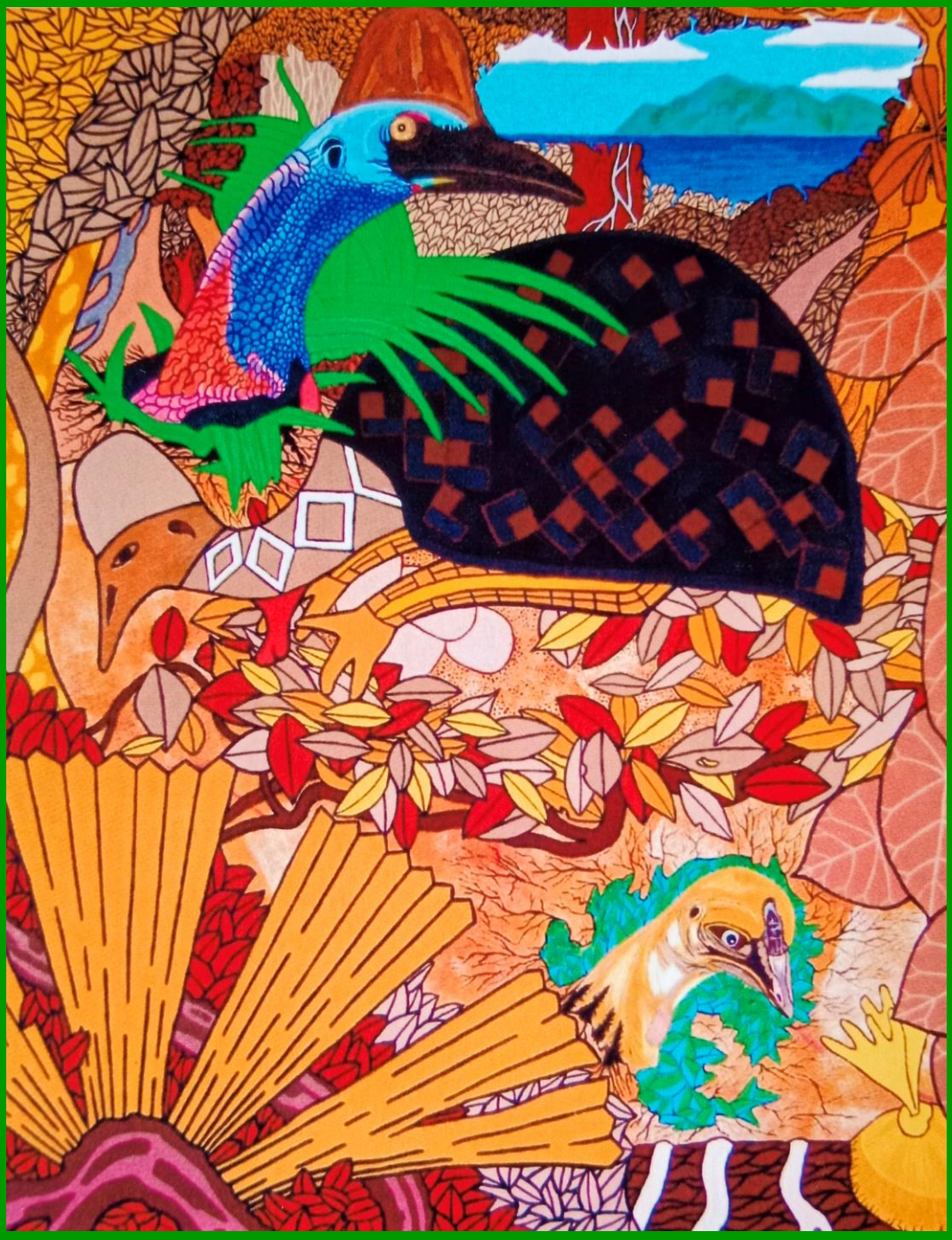
DJIRU PEOPLE:
ABORIGINAL LIFE BY THE SEA

EXCERPTS VOLUME 3: DJIRU ESTATE



By HELEN PEDLEY
With FOREWORD and AFTERWORD
by LEONARD ANDY, TRADITIONAL DJIRU OWNER.

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The histories published by the Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we can make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits and additions or deletions and where possible we will edit where we find we are in error. However, the oral histories we record are the words of the people we interview, and we can only alter those with the authorisations of the people we interviewed.

This is a short version of the full story with text from Djiru Estate and Future as well as the Foreword and Afterword by Djiru Traditional Owner, Leonard Andy. Volume 1 of Djiru Excerpts contains abridged text from Djiru Country while Volume 2 is an abridgement of Contact History. In these versions, the references and bibliography are not included and few images are inserted.

Cover Image
Art by Leonard Andy 'Djiru Gunday' copyright L. Andy, Parliament House Collection, Canberra.

LANGUAGE

The words *Aboriginal people* and *Aborigines* are used with no intended disrespect. These names are based on the Latin, *ab origine* "from the beginning". Similarly, "Old People" (past traditional owners, especially of pre-colonial times) is a term of respect which their descendants often use.

Occasionally derogatory terminology is to be found in this work, in quotations from writers of the past. The terminology of the nineteenth century writers is not appropriate today. It has only been retained in direct quotations where they are useful. The thinking of the times is recognised; terminology is a reminder of this.

FOREWORD
By LEONARD ANDY
DJIRU TRADITIONAL OWNER

Djiru people are Aboriginal Rainforest people and wherever you have rainforest, you'll find Aboriginal people with a shared culture because their culture is shared amongst the other rainforest people - we all live in the same environment.

Since Europeans arrived in this area, they arrived with perceived views from other parts of the country where they had been longer and they stereotyped us with other Aboriginals in other geographical areas, locations around Australia.

It has always been a fight for your own identity, Aboriginal cultural identity, based on the geographical areas of your country where you live. A lot of people have decided what our culture is for us based on their knowledge, their history of Aboriginals in other geographical areas.

To make it seem easier would be to say we are wet country people, not dry country people. But that is why we get stereotyped because the majority of the landmass in Australia is not rainforest. I think we are about 3% of the landmass and for us it is constant, we have to deal with people that think they know everything about us already and tell us our culture. The academics have made a living of our culture and our people and continue to. A lot of times, what they are writing and what they are doing is to support their own livelihood and future. A lot of times, the stuff they are writing is not on a blank canvas, it has already been primed with an undercoat to receive stuff on top that will grip and stay on the canvas. When I say it has already been prepped and primed, they've all been to university. They all have a history and their history is not ours.

In this land today, they tell us we are 3.8% of the population, and this all happened in a couple of hundred years. They talk about a shared history, and we do have a shared history. Except there is a history … the people who tell you about shared history are usually those that didn't share. Because when it comes to the shared history, it is their version, their story about us and them and how we interact with them. In the past, we were the problem and we are still today. They don't want to share with us, they never shared in the past and they still don't want to share with us. And they talk about a shared history, it is a shared history of not sharing. Respect? There was none of that. They never asked us about what we thought, what we think. And those who did, we might have told them things but they were already in their mental makeup, already had pictures of Aboriginals – what they think, what Aboriginals need and should be done for them. There is no asking, it's telling: 'This is what you want, this is what you need'. Nobody asks, and why should they? They might be asked to do something their ancestors didn't do and the making of this country and what we have today, that is not made on sharing with the Indigenous people. That is why our identity has always been under threat and as a rainforest people, I'm not into multiculturalism. I can say that outright. We had our taste of multiculturalism; I'm a product of multiculturalism with European, and Chinese and South Sea Islander blood and Aboriginal. This wasn't an Aboriginal event. This isn't something we asked to be part of; this was forced on us. And it's a history that's shared.

There is no shared history: one is about discovery, conquest and nation building. The other is about invasion, occupation and loss of land and cultural resources and of self (identity and spirituality).

THE DJIRU ESTATE

For a long time, the view prevailed among white people that Aboriginal people followed a lifestyle that was shaped by the environment in which they lived. They had close and intimate knowledge of their country but fitted into it rather than affecting it themselves. More recently, especially with Gammage's monumental work, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) and Pascoe's popular and occasionally controversial *Dark Emu* (2018), the fact of Aboriginal management of their estate throughout Australia prior to 1788 has been established. They were "not simply hunters and gatherers, as they have been portrayed in the past. They had a system of land and resource management that included firing the land to increase productivity, and erecting weirs or fish-traps for harvesting fish". Such management was informed by skill, inherited knowledge, spiritual links to Country and the Law which insured people took care of their country at the personal, family and national (previously known as "tribal") levels. Sophisticated and sustainable methods of hunting and fishing had been devised that worked with nature and its rhythms. Detailed local knowledge, including the creation stories that held and archived that knowledge, was crucial not only for spiritual wellbeing and for the gathering of food for sustenance, but also in the use of tools such as controlled fires to manage biodiversity and shape the country.

Existing archaeological, paleoenvironmental, and historical evidence demonstrates the diverse ways in which the rainforests of the Wet Tropics of Queensland "are globally significant, not only for their ecological heritage but also for their preservation of traces of millennia of anthropogenic activities, including active burning and food tree manipulation."

For Djiru and adjacent traditional areas, there is some evidence from European sources for resource management. When the first settlers arrived at Rockingham Bay in January 1864, Dalrymple reported they saw the imposing lofty mountains of the mainland "rising from level forest-clad low country… from which numerous smokes of bush fires of the natives curled upwards into the clear blue sky".

Early settlers in Girramay country at Murray Upper, the Butlers, noted how the local Aboriginal people would burn sections of the forest before the "fire season" (in the hot months fires could be very destructive). They "just singed the edges" in about September-October, to stop the build-up that led to bad fires later. The fire chased out the goannas and the subsequent new shoots brought out the wallabies.

Cycas media is a species of cycad found in the drier areas of open canopy woodlands. The seeds were collected and detoxified by many of the rainforest people whose country included such woodlands. It produces a large number of poisonous seeds, easily harvested. It is resistant to fire, and differentially favoured by burning, and also long-lived. It is not known how far the Aboriginal people of north-eastern Queensland went in managing cycads through burning to increase yields, but "both fieldwork observation and inference from the biology of the plants suggest that the large stands of cycads extant today may be, in large measure, the result of Aboriginal manipulation of the woodland ecosystem. Banfield records knowledge of this cycad by his Dunk Island and mainland Aboriginal colleagues, and they certainly were known and used by Girramay people. Johnstone mentions there were "many kinds of tree ferns, cycads and zamias" within the dense jungle of the small valleys running back from the coast into that of the Hull River.

Manipulation of the rainforest also took place. Research on the Atherton Tablelands and coastal lowlands demonstrated that the nut-bearing trees important to the traditional owners are "tightly clumped". This would mean a predictable pattern of resources would be available to them. Old campsites near the patches of trees would be re-used. According to Cosgrove, as the Aboriginal people exploited these nuts in large quantities, this encouraged germination of unused nuts. The clearing and maintenance of large open spaces for campsites and ceremonial grounds also favoured seedling growth. Horsfall speculated that, just as mango seedlings at camp sites have been observed to be watered and nurtured, so too in the past might seedlings of the desirable nut trees have been encouraged.

Girramay Elder Davey Lawrence, when recording sites of significance, frequently mentioned "pockets" (open areas in the scrub); usually these were also "early day" camping places, and for some of them he stated there was a mango tree there still.

Burning patches to encourage new shoots to attract the animals that prefer such feed was underpinned by knowledge of what to burn and when. At the coast they also factored in the land and sea breezes with their diurnal rhythms in order to burn a required swathe, after which the fire would extinguish itself before nightfall. Burning rainforest would only be possible where open areas such as *brun* grounds, burial sites, and camp sites at water holes already existed but would be deliberately maintained.

Walter Hill, Queensland Government Botanist, accompanying Dalrymple's expedition in 1873, examined the Maria Inlet, where he found trees such as *Calophyllum inophyllum* and *Eugenia grandis*. They grew so regularly that they had the appearance of being planted and gave the place the aspect of a well-laid out park. The natural groves of Maria Inlet, to Hill's taste, produced a far more pleasing effect than the work of the landscape gardener's art which he had seen in royal parks in the "mother country" [England]. It is not known if this was a result of thousands of years of nurturing by Aboriginal people, but the possibility is there.

In sea country, knowledge of saltwater animals, fish, shellfish, tides, winds and seasons was similarly drawn on. Fish-traps were built in suitable places, some of which, like that at Scraggy Point on Hinchinbrook Island, still operate today. Clump Point fish-traps are archaeological evidence of long-term manipulation of marine resources by the Djiru. The early European observers remarked on the diversity and number of items of fishing equipment the people made and used as occasion required, from spears to nets, to hooks and lines, harpoons and canoes, in both riverine and coastal settings. Traditional artefacts were highly efficient for specific functions, but if not available, usually an *ad hoc* substitute could be found. They were made from materials found locally by well-known techniques, but individuals could be particularly skilled at specific technologies.

TO THE FUTURE

The Djiru people have experienced a dark and sad history since the arrival of the colonists. They were subject to alien diseases, kidnappings, mass shootings and deprivation of land and liberty. As numbers declined, language was spoken by fewer and fewer. When the Europeans took over the land, not only did the Djiru lose access to hunting, fishing and gathering territory, they also experienced spiritual loss when they could no longer visit the places their ancestors had bequeathed to their care. Their rich and complicated spiritual heritage and knowledge that underpinned life, archived in the memories of the Elders through the land itself, struggled to survive.

The present study has not looked at their history since the destruction of the Hull River Settlement in 1918, where most of the remaining Djiru people had been incarcerated since its inception in 1914. After 1918 the survivors were taken to Palm Island, another government place of effective imprisonment, where they had to adjust further and make a home. Today only a few Djiru people have chosen to live in the Mission Beach area; some live in Innisfail and others remain on Palm Island. They bear a precious heritage of stories and memories and a special understanding of their Country.

The application for Native Title rights by the Djiru was commenced in 2003. In 2011, over an area of 94 square kilometres of land including the Hull River and Clump Mountain National Parks and the Walter Hill Range Conservation Park, Djiru rights were acknowledged officially following a Federal Court decision. The title deeds to 89 hectares of land at Mission Beach were also handed over to Djiru Traditional Owners in 2012.

Native title has thus been granted for certain parts of Djiru country, and the Traditional Owners are encouraged to share knowledge in caring for land and sea country. As part of the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, Djiru people seek more meaningful management involvement in policymaking, planning and on-ground action affecting the rainforests and adjacent coasts and waters of this unique region. Girringun's corporate vision is "Strong Aboriginal people, strong culture, strong Country".

The "holistic, adaptable, sustainably focused perspectives held by Indigenous people offer a way forward through the chaotic times of climate and environmental change that we find ourselves in". On the journey to understand the long human history of this place from the fragments that have survived the vicissitudes of time, we also are led to respect the "deep past" as a living heritage that generates responsibilities.

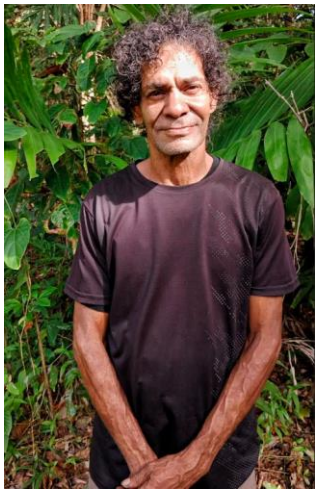
AFTERWORD

By LEONARD ANDY
DJIRU TRADITIONAL OWNER

Our knowledge needs to be protected because we are being taken over - like the knowledge. They want us to believe that Australia, we are all Australians – that's what they tell us. History tells us that it is not true, especially around here where we are. And for knowledge, we have two different types of knowledge systems. Our knowledge is based on the land. It's not a knowledge based on what the land can do for me or how many dollars the land can create – economic potential in that. With the forest, you take away the forest then we start to see the economic potential of that land. That doesn't come from our culture or our history. That comes from Europe and it has been relocated here, another geographical area and today we can see it is not a benefit to the land here because these practices brought from the past from somewhere else don't fit on this land. They come from another land. They should be able to see that today when they use language like minimise, mitigate not stop. They don't mean stop those words. It will continue to go on. What they are doing to the land affects the reef, straight out here from us, because we are rainforest and saltwater people. How our Old people tell us stories about things that we never see that we will never see, I guess - when they talk about herds of dugongs and large herds. Where are they gone?

Everyone today wants to protect things and they want to ask us about our intellectual property and our knowledge, like we have little secrets … secrets that have been there for thousands of years but no one wants to listen to them. And today, they want to listen, but why? They got their own motives and they can be around the one bracket and that bracket is Australia. It's for Australia's benefit. I don't

know if that's a benefit for us, the Aboriginals. So far, Australia has benefited us to 3.8% of the population. I don't know if we need more of that benefit.



Leonard Andy, Djiru Traditional Owner, 2024.

Because with knowledge comes respect, also you don't get anything for nothing. And not everything has a value on it you called money. Some of our knowledge comes with obligations and responsibilities. A lot of our people don't know about that today in some areas because their ideas of responsibilities have all been changed because of a different cultural base. They don't know any different because this started before our grandparents were born. They were all the same, they all came under the same system. If you are talking about knowledge, when I was younger I was told 'You don't need to know that's only blackfella stuff. It's not important.' It's not as important as learning how to plant cane and drive a harvester or a tractor. That was more important.

But I don't always listen. And everything I know now is because I didn't listen. I got told who the Elders are and what knowledge they had. They were not my Elders. They were family to me, but I didn't consider them as Elders. Grey hair doesn't make you an Elder and doesn't make you a knowledge holder either. When I was younger, some of the knowledge holders I know, people rubbish them, put them down. They are not Christians, so you had religious segregation and religion has played a part in sanitising our stories and our knowledge because you can't say this and you can't say that. Me, I just didn't listen. I didn't learn my culture from these people that want to change our culture to make it more friendly and adaptable and more acceptable to the wider Australia so we can fit in. But we never have fitted in and I don't think we ever will. That may be down the track. You have to remember that we think in different timelines. Australia, some people think Australia is important but it has only been here for how long? When we look at things around the world, cultures come and go, countries stop and change. People who make these countries usually make them with power and guns; they draw up boundaries. Groups of people that are enemies in one area, in one land, and say they are all the same now. And they rule over them with their cultural authority, which is the Commonwealth, the Queen, now the King. I don't think everybody tells me the thing I don't like to hear is 'it's everywhere, it happens all over the world'. I don't like to hear that because I'd like to go all over the world and talk to all the people it happened to. I think they'll tell you the same story I'm telling you.

I look at other places around the world. I don't want to become like Africa: wildlife parks, protect the lions, the zebras, the elephants. Look who is protecting it and you'll find out who created the situation why these animals need protection. In our area with the rainforest, don't trust World Heritage. They are the ones that are telling us how they are going to protect the rainforest. They tell us they are the

ones who are going to protect the reef. That's where our cultural knowledge comes from, those places. And they are going to protect it? It won't be for us. They are going to protect it, they might tell people 'It'll be for Australia'. My fear is when they say they are protecting it for everybody in the world. We are not everybody in the world. Rainforest people, we are not everybody in the world. Our identity doesn't come from the world.

I've never liked that saying, 'We are protecting it for everybody', 'Oh, it happens everywhere in the world'. There's another kind, there's a name for them. Clarence [Kinjun] told me a long time ago. I've heard it, but I keep forgetting it. It has a funny name. The pronunciation of that name and it's a name for people of colour, that don't come from here. Not Migalloo, white man, there's another name for people of colour, and other cultures that came here. It's a made up name. It didn't exist before. Like 'Gullidgi', it comes from somewhere else – further north – it means 'pig'. After a while, it meant 'policeman'.

And other things brought in by other Indigenous people, not just language. These other people are indigenous to where they come from, but they didn't come here on their free will. They were brought here for greed - some of their own greed and the Europeans' greed. The gold, when that run out they started to go into areas like agriculture and they were allowed to do things because they are from somewhere else. They are not Aboriginal. Multiculturalism – in the past Aboriginal women had the chance to be raped and have children to every culture that was brought here – and they were brought here. Today we are all part of it, whether it is Chinese, Japanese, and Timorese. The name they use, we didn't hear too much about Sri Lankans but some Old people call them Singhalese. They were the overseers in the cane paddocks, follow with the stick and the leather belt and a whip and made our people work. When they are intermarried now, their children grow up different too than us. Things change over time, but people don't forget. That's why the other people that were brought here, they were not brought here for the benefit of the Aboriginals. They were brought here for the benefit of the people that brought them here. They were already slaves over where that British culture already hit – the other Commonwealth countries – before they came here. The people who were brought in were already assimilated; they've assimilated. When they came here, they are boss.

There was no law and order. When the Europeans came, they were the boss. You don't have to listen to other Aboriginals. Because they judged us as all the same, any Aboriginal could turn up and say, 'Hey boss, I'm from here.' How are you going to question it if you are white man? You don't question it. They just assumed that what that Aboriginal told them was, you know. It goes in the ear, but when it goes in the ear, it touches the brain. Their brain is already brought up and fed by knowledge, cultural knowledge, lifestyles … nothing to do with Aboriginals. They'll make those decisions based on their history and their background about us – yet they never met us and they have talked to us, seen us, took photos of us, shot and killed us and stole all our artefacts, our 'treasures'. And they took it all, but they never really met us. They never met us as equals or met us … when I say 'equals' I mean on equal footing and open heart. They came here with an ulterior motive, set agenda – something that came from Europe, and they relocate to this land. 'Aboriginals don't do anything with the land, look they are just wasting the land. They are not using it'. That doesn't come from here. That's a new concept brought in. That's a bit of multiculturalism. Yeah, you can go and cut all these trees, because them black fellows not using them. Look they are just wasting the land'. We are not making money from it; we are not doing as our forefathers and our history tells us that we should be doing work on the land. It worked in Europe, I guess it worked anywhere. Today we can see that on a global scale with the Commonwealth, what they've done – geographically and environmentally – on other people's country

around the world. These ideas and concepts, they come from their part of the world. They try to transfer them geographically, and it doesn't work. The Aussie battler, ask him what he's battling. What is he battling … the land! They don't live with the land; they live on the land. They make the land change for them.

When you say credibility of information sources, credible to whom? Like-minded people with a shared education and cultural background and geographical connections to wherever. Credible to whom? As long as it sounds good to them, they'll write it up and make it sound good to make them look good. You know, you don't write anything … you don't hear anything in history about people praising each other up about you had the best massacre, who is using the best poison on their cattle property around here for the Aboriginals. You don't hear such stories. My Snider rifle is better than a Martini-Henry when you are having a massacre. We have cultural connections with those things. Easy one is 'bambu' that's language name for 'egg'. After the white man came 'bambu' became bullet and the medical procedure to fix that wound is the same as a spear being put through you. Same material, same methodology. All your stuff comes from the forest. The injury was nearly the same just the instrument used, but the medicine and the practice of healing were the same. Everything used in that procedure comes out of the forest. That didn't change, it's just … you were not getting hit with a spear you were getting shot with a bullet. That's that cultural connection, 'bambu' is still 'egg' but back then became bullet. They had no medicine for strychnine; people tried to eat mud and grass because they see animals doing it too. This was before cat came to this country and dog, white man dog. People were trying to do that but it didn't work because in the past we don't have a shared history of – I don't believe we do – of extermination, of killing people for their land. You can kill people, but the idea of stealing land from someone else is mad. It's a foreign concept for us. You never steal someone's land. You can kill them all, bury them in the ground and make them disappear like they were not here and tell whatever stories you want about them and you can call it yours.