

Kimberley Country Connections and Reflections

Erica Spry

Erica Spry is a Bardi Jawi Traditional Owner from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Her Aboriginal bush name is 'Roobinjin' (a name inherited from one of her old Aboriginal Grandmothers).

The Kimberley region of Western Australia is unique and a very special place to myself and other locals. There are many stories in the Kimberley, which tell how people over their years have connected to country, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The current proportion of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley is 47.7% as listed at 30 June 2006 in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Indigenous population census.¹ As a local Aboriginal lady who has grown up most of my life in the Kimberley region, I would like to share with you my brief personal perspective of Kimberley Country connections and reflections.

Smell of rain again. The heat has subsided. There is coolness in the air; powerful cloud in the distance. Crash, bang; the eerie sound of thunder echoes constantly, sending all the dogs (iila)² running for safety and shelter, especially with the force of the first gust of wind that sweeps the fallen leaves and loose sand off the ground.

The late evening heavenly skies now portray our Kimberley-inherited wonderful display of Mother Nature's fireworks. The rapid,

flashing web of lightning, the brilliant colours of pink, yellow, orange, green and silvery white, display awe, power and might. Some fear the power and might, but I embrace the whole event as it holds, to me, a certain pride to be a Kimberley local person. Some say us Kimberly Aboriginal people are a strong mob and if one is to compare Kimberley nature and natural events to the people, all would agree, there is a connection.

As a young Traditional Owner observing my senior Traditional Owners I remember many uplifting occasions that have healed and lifted my inner spirit. I can recall and reflect on some meetings that I have attended in my childhood and adulthood, experiences which one is able to feel; the passion, drive, determination and power of Elders voicing their concerns to care for their country, like thunder echoing, trying to light a path towards reconciliation.

My Kimberley Aboriginal mob are as diverse as the geographical country that we come from; saltwater, cattle/rangelands, river and desert people. If anyone had time with a Kimberley Aboriginal person on their particular country, they would experience the knowledge, connection and strength which that person has with their country. River people are fresh, healthy and cool easy-spirited people like the mighty Fitzroy River that they share and care for.

Born in Derby in Western Australia, I began my journey of learning about my identity as an Aboriginal person, starting with my family's trips on country. My childhood experiences on country consisted of saltwater and river culture and country. Weekends and the seasonal time displayed a different adventure each time.

In the few months after the wet season began, water holes and rivers would be full. Car packed, time to pick up the Mayala, Baarni hunting dogs; fuel up and head for the bush tracks near Bungarun, on the way to our fishing spot, near Point Torment, Blue Hole.

Spear grasses standing proud sharp and tall. We travel the twisting sandy track. Birds in flight provide entertainment and music to the ear. The driver and offsider watch the road in front, searching for tracks and any sign of movement near waters. Us on the back enjoy

the cool fresh breeze and tease each other with the seeds of the sharp spear grass, aiming for a t-shirt, it would stick. Car begins to slow, 'Get the dogs ready!' the voice from the front yells.

Action! The two dogs begin the chase, Mayala, Baarni running frantic from the waterhole heads for the safety of the nearest tree. Rifle in hand, God-Dad and us kids pursue the action. 'Good dogs, he's a fat one!' The dogs ensure the Mayala, Baarni stays up the tree till we arrive.

We don't need to use the rifle this time; the Mayala, Baarni is on a low tree. With the Mayala, Baarni tail in God-Dad's hand, round and round the Baarni is swung; with its head hitting the tree, our evening meal is now sorted for us.

We catch two more Mayala, Baarni; enough to bring some back home for my God-Mum and the rest of the family. The cooking hole in the sand is dug, fire blazing, coals display bright orange colour, finished listening to God-Dad's lesson on how to gut the Mayala, Baarni and prepare it to cook. Burn the Mayala, Baarni's outside skin then; leaves, Mayala, Baarni and now sand on top, it will bake well. We will be back in a few hours to collect the delicious cooked bush food on our return trip home. Off to blue hole fishing spot, before the tide comes in.

'Hurry up with the bucket you kids!' The throw net is full of live bait and the tide slowly begins to fill the creek, bringing in an abundance of fishes feeding on live bait. Our chances of catching fresh fish looked promising and we were all filled with enthusiasm.

Camp fire boiling billy tea, coals ready to cook freshly caught fish.

Enough time to make a cup of driftwood-flavoured tea and pick my fishing spot.

'Yippee, I got em God-Dad!' flip goes the mangrove jack (Maarrarn) on the bank of the creek, as I beamed with joy and confidence.

Splash bang, the famous show of the Barramundi as it is pulled into shore. 'You're the Barramundi King God Dad!' I would yell. 'Ask Aunty to cook that for you kids for lunch, I'll keep the next few for home!' replied God-Dad.

Late afternoon approaches, esky filled with fresh fish (Aarli) and mud crabs (Goorroorng, Ngarrangg), back to the baking Mayala, Baarni. Munching on my favourite part of the cooked Mayala, Baarni, the arm, I thought about how strong it looked running to the tree and hoped I would be able to run fast like that at our athletics carnival this week at school. Hunting for ducks was planned for next weekend, last year I had two ducklings for pets. I loved my hunting and fishing trips out bush with my God-Dad and the family. Country is healthy, bush food is healthy and it keeps me healthy too!

Being away from my family and country to gain a good education, was trying at times and each school holiday was gladly welcomed.

Mum's taking us to my Aboriginal Traditional homelands, Pender Bay, this school holiday break. I am reminded, that my clan group is Aarlaang baaniol; which means: my family live near the saltwater coast and my language group is Bard.

Turquoise-coloured ocean, white sandy beaches with purple flowers in full bloom on plentiful vines along the sand dunes, paper-bark trees in my favourite picnic spot, overlooking my favourite view, our famous legendary Pender Bay rocks. Bower birds (Goolyi) nests still on the large sand dunes for exploring; activities everywhere, swimming, fishing, reefing and all else that one can image at the beach sea side was on offer.

This place is extremely special to me and my family. My beloved maternal Grandmother was born here at Pender Bay and had her early childhood development days running along this beach. My Great Grandparents were born here also, in our Bardi Jawi native title lands. I am their descendant, the second generation born in a small township hospital, no wonder I feel for country more.

When I walk on my homelands I feel at peace, contented and connected to all; from the sea breeze, to the tall pandanus (Iidool) palms, the animals, the vegetation, all the land and the sea. I am a part of the great big circle of life, whereby nature is one with all that is living. This is healing in my Liyarn (inner spirit).

I have special spots everywhere, but truth is, I adore it all and I

am very grateful that I know my Aboriginal inheritance knowledge of culture and country and can enjoy it. From my childhood to adulthood, I grow with my country. It is time in my country as a child which underpins my foundation to be a stronger Adult, whereby I am able to face and contribute positive aspects to the many societies of the universal world.

As an Aboriginal child that is able to grow up with and on Country, I strongly believe that being out on country adventures and keeping your connection to country can shape one's personality and contribute to one's social and emotional well-being. Fishing teaches patience and allows time for one to reflect on pending issues on the mind and in life. Catching a fish builds confidence, accomplishment and contributes to a healthy lifestyle and eating habits.

Walking on coral reefs, searching for shell fish to eat, such as Lii, strengthens one's courage. For in order to locate Lii, you have to have the ability not to judge or fear the contents of the coral reef. Your natural instincts become alert such as a strategy (backup plan) on what you will do to safeguard yourself if a dangerous unforeseen incident did occur. While balancing these concerns, you continue your adventure to focus on your task at hand, which shall end in the reward of a delicious meal to share with your family and friends.

Another measure of one's connection to country is that if you look after your country then your Country will look after you. Being at Pender Bay on a school holiday became a tradition. When my Mother's eldest Brother was alive he was determined to build our Pender Gardens community. I was one of many teenagers returning home from boarding school and the thought of being out on country and swimming, bonding with nature, always lifted my spirit.

My God-Dad 'Fonzee' is a bushman legend to us, from adults to young children, but especially to me. I know in my heart and Liyarn (my inner spirit) that he is a good man and had earned the respect of country from all the adventures and connections that he had experienced with country over his years.

The legendary rocks of Pender Bay, the tide calm and full of



Drawing by Jannen Spry-Wiggan, 2009

abundant reef fish, set the scene one fine pleasant afternoon. Swimming, exploring and fishing filled the day. Fire boiling tea, with inviting coals to cook fish caught that day. There were over twenty children that afternoon, drawing in the beach sand, playing with soldier crabs (Ngorroongooroo) and making sand castles. Everyone from adults to children enjoying themselves by bonding with country and being able to lock in good positive memories of a lifestyle out bush, away from the township dramas influenced by the technical modern day structures and machineries.

The young ones seeking mud crabs (Goorroornng, Ngarrangg) came back with only a couple, not really enough to feed all the children. God-Dad sat on the bank of the Bay, humble and quiet, enjoying his

surrounding and waiting on the catch of the day. I knew he is blessed by country, for that afternoon, Mother's and children's prayers were answered. A giggle was heard. Then a figure stood up and with great might and skill, God-Dad began the tug of war, with the mystery on the end of his fishing line. Us kids gathered and watched with delight and surprise. Muscles flexing, tension on the line as it came from the sea to the beach. 'This is a big one! Go God- Dad!' I said excitedly.

'Stand back! You kids, so I can flip it up onto the bank!' God-Dad yelled.

Again I state God and Country must have heard our prayers, from Mothers to children, as it was nearly the evening meal time and we were all hungry.

We were provided with our evening meal; an extra large estuary rock cod (Biidib). How thankful we all were, to country, God and especially to our much loved and respected blessed hunter God-Dad. Sizzling on the coals of the fire place, leaves and plates were ready for our feast of fresh fish.

This afternoon's evening meal is real proof to me that we are connected to country and that if you look after your county then your country will look after you and provide for you, one and all. Aboriginal connection to Country is alive and grows with each generation; it contributes to one's identity as a person and to our identity as an Australian nation in our universal world.

As a Kimberley Aboriginal lady, in order to understand my position in Australia's identity as a Traditional Owner, I often wonder and reflect on my past experiences to look at where I am and where my possible future could lead me. What does my Aboriginal identity and connection to my inherited country mean to me and how does this contribute to our Australian identity as a whole universal country?

I am a grandmother's daughter and through my mother's teachings I have inherited the calling to care for my traditional homelands to the best that I am able. But my homelands are connected to others and so my concern to care for country has extended to the universal connection that encompasses us all. From a Kimberley person's perspective, a

person is shaped by their nuclear and extended family, the spirit and surroundings of their township, and the remote community lifestyle of bush life.

From an Aboriginal perspective, you begin with the love of your family and friends and then your connection to country ignites you spiritually and culturally. As a person shaped by religion, one is also taught that we are God's greatest creation; we are gifted with our connection to country and all that a country has to offer. Country can heal, nourish, strengthen, shape and give you peace and serenity, but it can also teach you unpleasant lessons, especially if one does not uphold the laws of the land that is taught to one by their senior Traditional Owners.

My childhood days were blessings to my Australian Aboriginal identity and early childhood developments; my love, passion and appreciation for country began to ignite. Then in my adulthood I began to find my life being shaped by the growing calling to care for country, within my own family and through my time with senior Traditional Owners.

These are some findings I would like to share:

Connection of people to country is symbolised in many forms. From a one on one, person to country and a people, to the many diverse geographical country forms. Reflecting on my past experiences this is what I find:

Each country has stories, a local Aboriginal language, ancient lore (Law) and culture and customs. What a gift and honour to inherit such knowledge that is described and known in the wider universal world as the oldest culture on Mother Earth.

If one was able to understand and feel the true meaning of our human connection to country as do my Aboriginal Elders, then they would have healing as we do, for when our country is healthy so are we as a people/person.

Exercising, exploring, bonding with nature/country, conducting oneself with safety, being successful at reaching a goal and enjoying

the benefits of one's positive actions contributes to the overall health of your country, yourself and all else. Reflecting on one's learnings of life, especially to do with country connections and adventures is important for a balanced full life. What works for you, maybe worthwhile sharing with others, especially children.

I cherish the memories of life's adventures on country. As an adult and a parent, my future outlook and challenge is to pass on my knowledge of my Aboriginal connection and obligations to country to my children. These reflections are only a glimpse into the many times on my homelands country and other Traditional Owners' country, which is also known as our national country Australia. My reflections that I have shared, depict a modern-time scenario of a childhood connection to country, set in the 1900s and an attempt to try and allow all to understand and have an insight into the many ways that my people, Aboriginal people are connected to country and promote all to care for country, to keep it healthy.

I have been blessed with dreamtime stories of creation, traditional customs and learnings which defined meanings still relevant today; but as a cultural Aboriginal person, some of these stories are only for my children and family who have had to earn the right to hold them, like I had too.

There are many other stories that my fellow Kimberley Aboriginal mob share each day, older generations to younger generations and to others that seek to understand and learn.

Aboriginal connection to country is real, important, continues to grow and is supported.

My Aboriginal identity and connection to Country is important to me and my fellow peoples. There are many unknown Aboriginal connection to country attributes that are waiting to be discovered, recognised rightfully and shared, that could strengthen our national Australian identity.

Saltwater Country people are strong like the rising of daily tides, which expose beauty and growth on coral reefs;

River Country people are strong like their Rivers which flow to maintain health for all;

Rangelands Country people are wise as their Rangelands heights gives them sight into the distance; displaying a wholesome view of the diversity of hidden valleys and water ways; and

Desert Country people have hidden healing gifts just like the Desert Country Deserts which can be conceived as dry, but has various times when there are carpets of colourful wild flowers in full bloom, depicting serenity and healing to ones soul/spirit.

All that Country encompasses, contributes to shaping people's lifestyle and personalities. Country is a gift to us human beings and with the most common concerns of events such as climate change now threatening our Country's seasons, it is important to come back to 'Caring for Country' and I hope that this is the message that I am sending to the reader.

Caring for Country is everyone's duty, let it be that; this is done and that rewards come to those that understand and do!

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Regional Profile: Kimberley (Statistical Division): <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/545Population/People12002-2006?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=545&issue=2002-2006>.
2. Words in brackets are from the Bardi Aboriginal language dictionary, G. Aklif, *One Arm Point Bardi Dictionary—Ardiyooloon Bardi Ngaanka*, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Halls Creek, WA 6770, 1999. Mayala, Baarni is the goanna, and the Aboriginal term is used as the goanna is a central focus of the story.