

Weaving in Arnhem Land June 2007: A personal account.

Not all indigenous communities have need of the Commonwealth government's intervention to deal with problems of abuse and alcoholism. Recently I had the opportunity, (with my eldest daughter, my best friend and five other women), to spend some time in a remote Aboriginal community in north east Arnhem Land. This community is happy and successful mainly thanks to the strong women elders who are intent on passing on their weaving skills to the younger generation. They have been assisted to run a weaving workshop to interested 'outsiders' because, if the project is a success, it will bring meaningful employment to the community as well as financial independence for themselves and their families who are striving to create a welfare-free future without having to leave their traditional lands.

It took us 15 hours to drive to Mapuru from Darwin. The first 4 hours we drove on sealed roads then almost 600 km on the unsealed Central Arnhem Highway and the final 2 hours, (in the dark), on a rough track for 70 km or so into the community.

On our arrival we were greeted by Roslyn with the 'news' that the water pump was broken so there could be no showers or water available, other than from the creek, until someone was flown in from Elcho Island to fix the problem! We were so tired that this did not worry us...all we wanted to do was to pitch our tents and go to sleep!

The next day we were keen to wash off the dust from our journey and headed off to the creek accompanied by several inquisitive children who took great delight in watching us swim and, once their shyness had worn off, were keen to jump in with us and play all sorts of games including 'crocodile'! In this particular game they would hide under the water and then surface right next to you...just when you least expected it! They thought it was great fun to surprise us in this way!

After breakfast it was time to work!

Mats were spread out under the bark shelter where we were to weave each day. Linda and Margaret, the two most senior women of the group introduced themselves and then the younger women came too, so that each participant had their own 'tutor'. The women also brought with them examples of their baskets which we all admired. How could we possibly compete!

Effortlessly, our teachers sat cross-legged on the ground for several hours. We all valiantly attempted to do the same but it wasn't long before our chairs had to be employed (even by the younger members of our group!).

Once we had settled in Roslyn, gave us a talk and explained the weaving process from start to finish.

Step 1: Collect the pandanus. This is easier said than done when it usually involves a 4 km walk there, plus the return journey with all the leaves. The selection of the pandanus leaves is important, and removal from the trees is not easy, since, before they are

stripped, the leaves are covered with sharp spines. (We had been warned about this and came equipped with our gardening gloves...the women did laugh at us!)



Collecting Pandanus leaves

Step 2: 'Strip' the pandanus to remove the tough outer epidermis being careful to avoid the spines. The women's deft fingers did this very easily. Even the very young girls (5, 6 and 7 year olds), were better at this than we were! In order to ease the burden, the women usually spent the day in the bush 'stripping' the pandanus in order to make it less heavy to carry home.

Step 3: Dig up roots or search for 'special' leaves and fruits which can be used to make the dyes to colour the pandanus leaves. If roots are used then these have to be cleaned, peeled, chopped and ground up to a fine powder. The leaves usually have to be boiled in water in order to produce the dye. Different colours are also achieved by adding various other components such as ash from fires, or charred embers.

Step 4: Soak the pandanus in the hot dye solution and hang to dry. Pandanus which is left in its natural state is just soaked and then dried and some is left to bleach in the sun too.



Preparing a dye

Step 5: Once it is coloured and dried, the pandanus is ready to use.

Dyed Pandanus, drying

We were able to participate in all of these processes during our workshop. Since we had a drive the women to the area pandanus was collected. We "Pandanus World"! We had pandanus trees in one spot!



patient with us and, after our we were able to produce a small newly-found confidence we all

vehicle we were able to from which the called this spot never seen so many

The women were very first hesitant attempts; basket each. With our went on to produce bigger and better (?) baskets!

Our interaction with the women and the children was very special. I had taken along some little gifts from the Questacon shop and I also showed the children some basic science experiments which had them enthralled.

Apart from the weaving, one highlight of our time there was being taken to the mangrove swamp to look for mangrove worms. These 'grubs', which are found in the rotting bark of fallen trees, are prized delicacies, (much as we might savour oysters), and eagerly collected and then eaten by the women and children. Some of us, (myself included), were even tempted to try one!

Mangrove worms!



All too soon it was time to leave. We chose and purchased baskets made by the women (oh how ours paled in comparison to these!) and then said our teary farewells.



A weaving lesson

This was a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience, which I would recommend to anyone interested in learning about this remarkable Yolgnu community.

Estelle Roberts

For more information go to www.arnhemweavers.com.au