

"Family, weaving and the Chicken" by Bianca.

When the chance arose to visit Mapuru in east Arnhem Land for a ten day women's basket weaving/cultural experience, I booked in immediately, with little hesitation and even less consideration for the practicality of taking off for almost three weeks at very short notice, abandoning family and work commitments! With no particular interest in basket weaving, but with fond memories of Yolngu family friends in my teen years, I was excited to reconnect with Yolngu culture, meet new people and learn new skills. The trip was my first experience visiting an Indigenous community and in many ways a life-changing experience. Aside from discovering the joy of basket weaving, the ten days sitting, weaving and talking left me with a great respect for Yolngu culture and wisdom, a sense of connection with the women in Mapuru, and a much bigger family!

The two day drive from Darwin was filled with stimulating conversation, as the nine women on the trip discussed our views, understanding, experiences and ignorance of Indigenous Australia, as well as our expectations for what lay ahead. I recall thinking, as we came closer to Mapuru, that all of what we were discussing would be completely irrelevant once we arrived, when abstract reflections would be replaced by real immersion in Yolngu culture, which of course was exactly what happened!

We arrived in Mapuru at dusk and were greeted by a mob of excited, smiling children and women, whose friendliness contrasted sharply with the restraint and good manners we were familiar with. Roslyn Malngumba, who heads the Arnhem Weavers program, welcomed us warmly, making us feel comfortable straight away. Questions around our adoption into the Yolngu kinship system began immediately, with kids grabbing our hands, wanting to adopt us - it was a bit hard to know what we should do or say so we just smiled and nodded a lot! The adoption process ended up taking many days to get sorted out (and no doubt will take years for us to fully understand). I had a very basic understanding of this kinship system, but I was surprised by how integral it is to the Yolngu daily life. I expected this system of relatedness to be somehow additional to general life, and the inclusion of non-Yolngu people in it a sort of token gesture. How wrong I was! It quickly became apparent that these family relationships were the core foundation of not just the local community happenings, but extended out and out to eventually encompass *all* of life. We were adopted into this out of necessity really, not just to make us feel warm and fuzzy. This web of inter-relatedness and how we as new-comers fitted into it became the focus of our conversations over the ten days, as we tried to get an understanding of the amazingly intricate system in which everyone and everything has a place.

Sometime into the trip, I realised that in Yolngu culture no-one is truly alone or isolated. There is such an abundance of family, everyone has multiple mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, and beyond that everyone is related to the animals and plants, the land and the environment, etc, that the Balanda (European Australian) experience of

feeling alone, and our endless insecurities and questions around belonging, are perhaps non-existent within this reality. It was one of many such moments where I glimpsed the inner workings of a culture that has what it takes to survive and prosper for thousands of years. These moments brought up a lot for me... deep respect and awe, sadness, grief - for what has happened post European arrival, and for what our own culture fails to offer us. But mostly I just felt a very strong sense that we have so much to learn from the Yolngu worldview, which was somehow humbling and reassuring all at once.

The weaving itself took place daily from morning til sundown, interrupted only by eating and journeys out into the bush to collect pandanus leaves (the main fibre for weaving); roots used for dyeing the pandanus, reeds for thatching, and bush foods such as mangrove worms, mud crabs, yams and berries and swimming with the kids, trusting they were joking about the crocodiles.... We sat on the ground under a beautiful shelter decorated with baskets and our new sisters, mothers and grandmothers shared their weaving skills with patience and encouragement. I spent most of my time sitting with my nandis (mothers) Caroline and Roslyn and my mari (grandmother) Margaret, who all became my teachers.

The teaching style itself was intriguing...mainly non verbal given the language barrier, but regardless of that it was clearly a “learn through observation” approach. Rather than having us start from the beginning of any activity, the women would get the process started for us, and only introduce a new skill once we were comfortable with what we were doing. Whenever we reached something tricky or made a mistake, our teacher would simply take the basket, fix the problem, and weave for a while (sometimes quite a while...) then return the basket. If you paid close enough attention you would learn what you were doing wrong... Dramatic verbal praise was given when emerging baskets were shown, as well as occasional jokes about our amateur attempts!

An interesting process was the choosing of the colours and patterns of each basket, which in most cases was done for us by our teacher. Although we didn't understand the full significance of their choices, it became clear that the colours at least related to an individual family. For those who were expecting the weaving to be more of an individual creative pursuit this was quite uncomfortable at first. Ownership of the individual baskets was slightly different too - although each project belonged to one person, the work itself could be shared and the Yolngu women often picked up another woman's basket and spent some time weaving it, without any need to ask permission. It was a little window into the huge difference between our western focus on personal individuality and the communally based Yolngu one. It was a peaceful experience, sitting and weaving, listening to the women talk and laugh together and yell at the kids and dogs (who mostly ignored them it seemed, as kids and dogs do everywhere...)

While we were weaving, the children too young for school played, easily moving between the weaving space and the surrounding area, and were

joined by the rest of the children after school. As a mother of three, watching the parenting take place in Mapuru was fascinating as it is completely different from our way, even though the children's behaviour was much the same. The difference was in the response from the women, who for the most part did not interfere with the children's games or arguments, other than offering occasional verbal advice or admonishment. The kids constant, often loud presence did not in any way disturb the women's work - the women neither sought to send the kids away or to intervene in their squabbles or accidents, unless something serious happened, which rarely did. It appeared that parenting was seamlessly blended into daily living and children a totally accepted part of everyone's life and therefore always welcome. I didn't see any signs of the stress mothers often carry in our society; feeling overwhelmed by their parenting responsibilities or the children's needs, nor the strain of feeling that a child's behaviour was a reflection of personal success or failure as a parent. The kids were more than happy to help us try and learn some Yolngu words, and we had some beautiful spontaneous language lessons which always included loud laughter as we tried to get our tongues around the unfamiliar sounds of Djambarrpuyngu, the language spoken at Mapuru. And I found that basket weaving was actually really enjoyable and quite addictive - I often kept weaving late into the night under the light of my head torch!

My friend Stef, who is my next door neighbour and came to Mapuru with me, had the idea to host a basket weaving workshop in the Yarra Valley where we live, so we asked Roslyn if she would be interested in travelling down with a few women to facilitate this. Roslyn was enthusiastic and tentative plans for early 2010 were made. Stef and I saw this as a way to give our community a chance to experience something like we had in visiting Mapuru, and also a way to continue the relationships we had formed. But aside from that, it was also a way to support the Arnhem Weavers business in its aim to create a welfare-free future for Mapuru. Home-land communities such as Mapuru (where families are living on land they have owned since the beginning of time) continue to face pressure from the Government to move into bigger towns, which is the opposite of what Roslyn and her family want, as it's in the bigger towns where European influences and the resulting social and health problems are more likely to be found. They see their future in Mapuru, living where they belong, fulfilling obligations to care for the land and keeping their cultural traditions strong. The Arnhem Weavers business is a way to create financial independence despite changes in Government policy, and the women are working hard towards this end. We felt that organising a weaving workshop in Victoria would support this aim and bring many other benefits as well. This tentative plan helped to ease some of the sadness that emerged as the time came to leave Mapuru. However, the final goodbye was very emotional and lots of tears were shed!

When I got home I had a feeling of culture shock - it seemed like I'd been away for years not weeks and I found my perspective on life somewhat altered. I knew that this wasn't just an isolated experience to be added to others, but the beginning of a significant relationship with the beautiful

people I'd met, which came with a responsibility to maintain contact personally and to explore Yolngu culture further. I enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Yolngu Studies through Charles Darwin Uni and started planning for the weaving trip in March. By chance (?) we discovered a couple living ten minutes down the road who had lived in Gapawiyak, a community close to Mapuru, who had studied the course I was enrolled in, and who had much greater understanding of Yolngu culture and language than Stef or I. So our team became Stef, Lara, Christian and myself and we launched into organising the workshop, which was to coincide with the Harmony Festival in the Yarra Valley during March 2010.

We set up a basket weaving exhibition at the local Arts Centre and held an information night/fundraiser to let people know about the workshop as well as some of the issues Yolngu communities are facing, and to raise money to help cover costs. Suzie, who went to Mapuru with Stef and I, also held a fundraiser in Melbourne which helped enormously, and some people made independent donations. This, along with the workshop fees, covered the travel costs and payment for the women. The workshop places filled extremely quickly so advertising was almost unnecessary. Leading up to the workshop we talked with Roslyn regularly on the phone, sorting out all the logistics and making sure she felt comfortable and supported in making such a big journey.

Roslyn, Margaret and Rebecca travelled from Mapuru to the Yarra Valley via three plane flights and an overnight stay in Darwin. It was so exciting to greet them as they came off the plane and we went straight to collect their luggage, which included dyed and un-dyed pandanus, roots for dyeing, currajong for string making and finished baskets for selling at the festival. During the week, the women facilitated a three day basket weaving workshop with 15 participants per day and visited two local schools - one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous. At every level the trip was successful - the participants loved the workshop, the kids at the schools were really moved by their experience and the women had a great time, mostly.... At the opening of the Harmony Festival there was a Tibetan throat singer, whose very, very long monotone chants were a bit much for Margaret, who was holding her breath in sympathy with him and become increasingly short of breath until we had to make a very quick exit to get some air. The Tibetan singer then became known as "The Chicken" in reference to his deep throated chanting and his headdress which looked like a rooster's crest.

However, during all of this something else entirely was taking place. Somehow the Yolngu way of relating came down with the women and we welcomed them into our lives as family - as they had when we were in Mapuru. We spent many hours together as an extended family - Roslyn, Margaret, Rebecca, Lara, Christian, Stef's family and my family, sharing meals, cups of tea, shopping, working, talking. The women trusted us to take care of them because, as Roslyn kept saying - we were family. They related to my and Stef's children as family and we worked together as a family to make the week a success. When one of Stef's children was having

a sleep over at a friend's house, Roslyn was deeply concerned about her safety, because she wasn't with family. When asked if it would be o.k for her to stay at our house, Roslyn said of course, as we were family! Explanations of good friends being 'like family' were rejected as irrelevant. Given that in Balanda terms Stef and I are good friends, not family, and none of us are Yolngu, our family relationship exists only through our adoption into Yolngu kinship. Yet, although it raises some interesting questions, it somehow made sense. It also made clear just how real the adoption process is for Roslyn and her family. Both my husband and I have adopted brothers and our relationship with the women began to feel more like that, rather than just a nice way to be included in Yolngu life whilst in their communities. It became serious - we became real family, which perhaps was how the women saw us soon after we were adopted, I don't know.

By the time the women left, I felt a closeness and sense of receiving and responsibility that I have only felt with family. It was very hard to say goodbye. As a non-Indigenous Australian I've always felt that I have a responsibility to be part of the reconciliation process and have sought ways to engage with this. Now I feel that this responsibility has moved from a general or political context to the personal, and the process of reconciliation is taking place within my family - both my adopted and blood family. Although we come from two very different cultures, our lives are enriched greatly by getting to know and understand each other better as people, as family and as Australians- as Roslyn would say; "Yolngu and Balanda, working together, manymak (good)".

I look forward to returning to Mapuru later this year with my husband and children - and another Yarra Valley weaving workshop in 2011 is a definite possibility.