

# BENDIGO POSSUM SKIN CLOAKS PROJECT



Project facilitators:  
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*February - March 2015*



*Funded by  
Indigenous Family Violence*



*We would like to acknowledge that we have developed and completed the Bendigo Possum Skin Cloaks Project on the land of the Jarra peoples.*

*We pay our respect to the elders of past and present and to the Dja Dja Wurrung Nation and their custodians.*



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# FOREWORD

Australia is one of endless plains, gum trees baking in the hard dusty sprawl, and rugged horizons stretching away for as far as the eye can strain. This vast ancient countryside carries generations of history, from the vein of ochre rock wall paintings found scattered in the mountains or the teeming waterholes where tribes gathered regularly to congregate. Australia has always been inspiration for storytelling and culture.

We wanted the three possum skin cloaks made here in this project to earmark our culture's passion for vivid storytelling and expression through the arts. With the theme of *Strong Family* in mind, the cloaks range from a large, medium and children sized cloak. It is our way of continuing this long tradition and where possible to establish the connection between community, country and culture.

This project was developed and run with the aim to cater for all Aboriginal people residing within the traditional boundaries of the Dja Dja Wurrung Nation, and to teach the process of making a possum skin cloak. It is the facilitators priority to give back to the Aboriginal community and to build positive relationships where healing may take place through cultural awareness. These cloaks are here for everyone to enjoy, to learn from, and to use in cultural activities where appropriate.





# HEALING THROUGH CULTURE

The aboriginal culture today is one of great divide. In many instances, it no longer resembles the complex and structured societies we are only just learning about. Anxiety through loss of identity has displaced unity, value and purpose in society.

We are a culture that has somehow become very good at telling ourselves *I can't* when presented with an opportunity in life. This shows through the struggle many of our community members face on a daily basis, through physical, spiritual and mental trials. The opportunity this project presents to the community is a rare chance to reconnect with all but forgotten cultural activities, i.e. through the creation of possum skin cloaks. We wanted to provide a positive force in life from which one can draw inspiration. This can come in the form of a mentor or in this case a chance for people to come together and be part of something significant.

You can see through people's eyes as they enter through the doors to the workshop a certain degree of uncertainty, even anxiety. Some of those who were unwilling to 'work' over the weekends left the workshops having enjoyed themselves and learning something new. It was particularly pleasing seeing kids coming along and participating, perhaps even learning something about themselves, but also having the chance to engage in culture they otherwise may have little to do with.

This here then has become our greatest success – that anyone willing to participate has gained from the workshop more than just a physical completion of the cloaks, but of a renewed heart and mind. Community members, who were naturally anxious upon entry, left smiling and laughing, and just a little bit brighter than before. Before they said *I can't*, or *I don't know how*. Now, they left saying *I can*.



# PROJECT FACILITATORS

**Simon Penrose** – *Lead Project Manager*

**Trina Dalton-Oogjes** – *Lead Project Artist*

**Matthew Penrose** – *Project Research and Report Officer*

Our primary role in the project was to ensure the workshops were as friendly and welcoming as possible but also to help record the progress made in the workshops through the use of notes and photos. We cannot express enough what an awesome opportunity this has been to partake in the Possum Skin Cloak Project. Our thanks goes out to the funding body *Indigenous Family Violence* for making this possible and of course to everyone who participated in the workshops to make the days so much more enjoyable.

It was certainly a learning curve for all of us; after practicing using the burning tools for the very first time, everything else seemed to take on a life of its own. It was important to simply enjoy the process and not stress too much about aesthetics. It was as much about coming together and giving back to the Aboriginal community than it was about how perfect the end result was.

That being said, we all surprised ourselves with the overall handy work of the cloaks, which included the patterns and designs burnt onto the pelts to form the theme of *Strong Family*. It was indeed incredibly rewarding and refreshing to come away from the workshops having done so much in relatively so short a time. We are all now able to take away a rare skill and experience, but also in having seen the joy the cloaks brought to others as they tried them on. That in itself is timeless.

# COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Once the facilitators had decided on the project, the timeframe and had suitable funding avenues, it was a necessity to have community consultation. Firstly to determine if this was the right project option for the community, and secondly if the community would support this project. Lastly to offer the community to have a say in how and why this project should be done.

The facilitators had three working days to apply for two lots of funding grants and had amazing support from the local Aboriginal community. This was done through luncheons and community emails, phone calls and other various means. The facilitators had received 17 community support letters within a three day time frame.





# FUNDING & PARTNERSHIPS

The Bendigo Aboriginal Possum Skin Cloaks Project was funded by *the Regional Indigenous Family Violence committee*.

The Project was also grateful for the support from the organisations and committees listed below. Without their support this project would not have been successful:

- *The Bendigo NAIDOC Committee – providing and suppling the catering for all days of the workshops.*
- *The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation - for the use of their venue and some equipment for all days of the workshop.*
- *The Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-Operative - for the use of the equipment such as table, chairs and the use of transport.*

Lastly we would like to thank all community members for participating in the making of the three possum skin cloaks. The wealth of pride and knowledge within our community is amazing to see!



# PLANNING FOR THE WORKSHOPS

While it was important to have well planned workshop dates, venue and resource management, we also wanted to ensure that the project itself provided a relaxed environment and welcoming opportunity for all community members to learn culture and meet new people.





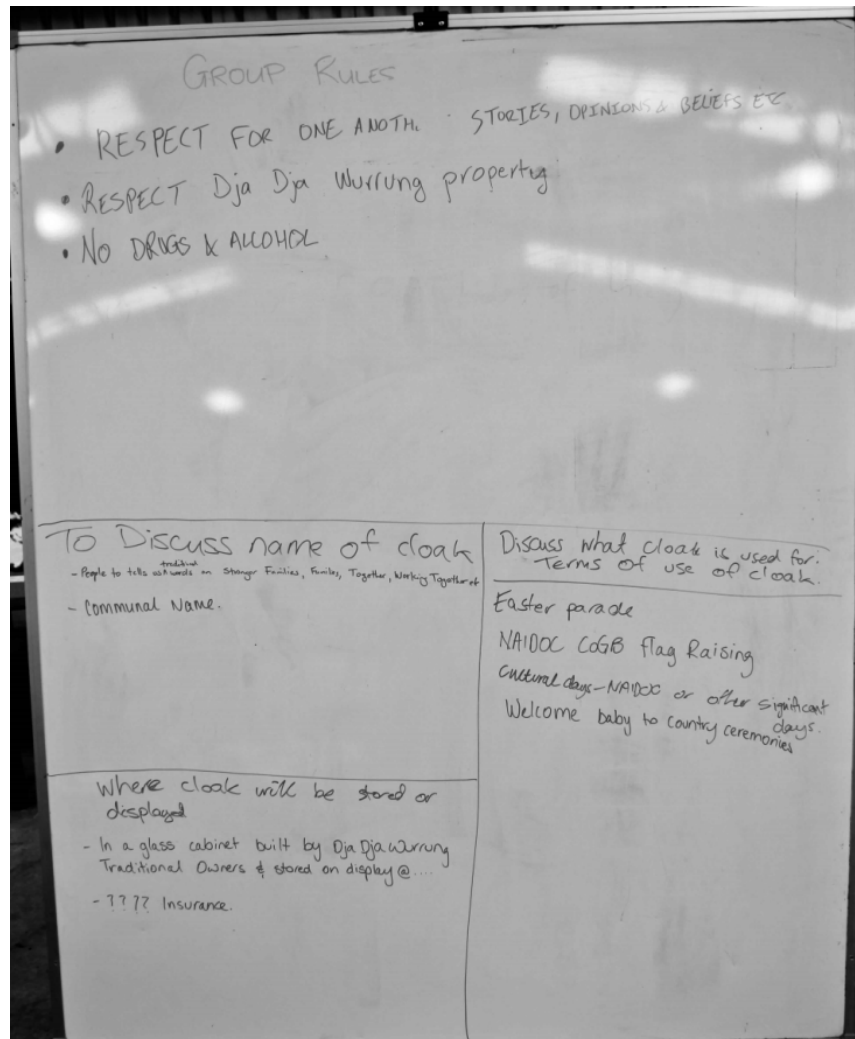
# STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOPS

We entered this workshop with the intention of bringing all community participants together in a friendly and welcoming environment, with a cause to understand, have fun and to listen and learn from one another.

The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation was very kind in providing the use of facilities and the service of staff members on the day of the workshops, while the Bendigo NAIDOC committee provided a number of barbecue lunches for which we are grateful.

The facilitators ensured community members were welcomed and introduced to the project upon their arrival, which included learning about blanket stitching, Aboriginal design work and using the burners when it came to applying the designs to the cloaks. It was also expressed that community members could come and go at any time during the duration of the workshops. The workshops were catered to assist with the informal nature of the day.

The community were encouraged to voice their thoughts and opinions on what the design of each cloak would be, where the cloaks would be used and what they would ultimately be used for once completed. We also covered which organisation the community recommended to maintain and store the cloaks in the foreseeable future. This information was added to a large whiteboard situated at the front of the discussion table for the community to view, but also as a record to carry throughout the workshops.



(The whiteboard and comments made by community)

# OVERVIEW OF CLOAKS

Without knowing how many community members would participate, it had been decided that the workshops would initially aim to complete the larger adult sized cloak within the course of the workshops.

However, due to the successful involvement of well over 50 community members attending over the course of the project, we were able to complete the stitching of the entire larger adult cloak within the first day and had nearly completed stitching together the second medium sized adult cloak. The facilitators then decided to go ahead and complete all three cloaks.



*(Matthew working on the Children's Cloak and Design)*



# WORKSHOPS DIARY

The workshops started between 10am and 4pm each day, and were initially planned to carry out over two weekends. However due to the amount of work involved we decided to come together for a third weekend to finalise work on the cloaks. Dja Dja Wurrung provided venue use with excellent facilities for the project, as they were not only ideal to allow for a large amount of people but well-insulated for use of the burning tools later on.

## FIRST WEEKEND

*28 February - 1 March*

1. We began the session by laying the pelts out according to the individual sizes we wanted for each of the three cloaks. We decided on two adult (one large and one medium) and one children-sized cloak, each progressively smaller than the last. The first cloak, being the largest of the three, contained the most pelts. It was laid out 4 across by 8 down in a rectangular shape. We tested it against male participants to ensure the size of the cloak was suitable. The medium-sized adult cloak in turn was laid out 4 by 6, while the children's cloak was only 4 by 4. It was important to get this process right first to avoid future mishaps, and so the cloaks would comfortably fit anyone wearing them.

2. The pelts were trimmed to size with careful precision, each in accordance with the other so that they interlocked nicely in the overall layout of the cloak. We were very mindful of keeping the possum tails on the top 4 and bottom 4 pelts of the cloaks for aesthetic purposes, while the rest were simply cut off and used for wrist and ankle bands. Nothing ever went to waste.

As a side note, we discovered it was important to regularly wipe the cloaks down during the trimming process in order to catch the loose fur that would gather onto everything, and



dispose of into a plastic bag. Larger trimmings went into another bag, which we used to test the burners on and try out patterns and designs.

3. We labelled each pelt according to their place in the cloaks so that the layout organised earlier would not be lost during the stitching process. As the pelts were laid out 4 across and 8 down for the large cloak, the first 8 pelts were labelled R1 (row 1) with the last row labelled as R4 (row 4), while each pelt from top to bottom was labelled N1 to N8 (N1 = number 1). In other words, the first pelt in row 1 would have R1 N1, while the adjacent pelt on the second row had R2 N1.

4. We decided on blanket stitch to put the pelts together, and the group spent the majority of the weekend going about this. Over this time we shared stories, laughed, and generally had the chance to get to know one another.

5. As people began to arrive at the workshop during the day we used a white board to note project rules and potential uses for the cloaks, such as ceremonies, naming days and cultural events. We also discussed the theme of 'Strong Family' and what that meant to everyone, while listing on the white board any ideas we had, including names of the cloaks and general designs. We gave particular attention to children attending the day in order to make them feel welcomed and introduce them to this forgotten part of our culture.

## SECOND WEEKEND

*14 - 15 March*

1. We began the weekend with discussions of the design and burning process of the cloaks, and what 'Strong Family' meant to everyone. Pictures and articles were supplied containing Aboriginal symbols and expressions for potential designs on the cloaks. Participants were given A3 pieces of paper and were set the task of drawing their own designs to be burnt onto the cloaks.



By doodling designs for the cloaks and discussing what each of three cloaks would embody.

It was decided the male or larger adult cloak would feature a centring image of 'Bunjil', depicted as an eagle. A kaleidoscope of images and patterns were arranged around it.

For the children's cloak we ultimately decided on a central theme of the sun shining over the Australian countryside, but surrounded by the hand prints of all the children who participated in the workshops, with their initials labelled beside them. Because the design was so complex fine lines were traced out around the cloak using a charcoal pen and burnt over afterwards.





## THIRD WEEKEND

*21 - 22 March*

This weekend consisted of finalising the burning and design process of two of the cloaks, while we decided the third cloak (the medium-sized adult cloak) would be left plain for now due to time constraints. In any case, having two cloaks completed was a phenomenal task and one which everyone who participated enjoyed immensely. We also took photos of the finished products and allowed community members to try them on. The looks of joy on children and adults alike was priceless.





## THEME & DESIGN OF CLOAKS

This project was funded to address family violence within the Bendigo Aboriginal Community. The Facilitators sought to address community violence through this project by bringing the community together in a safe environment.

Over the past few years the community has become disconnected from within, which has helped to fuel violence. This needed to be addressed in a positive and cultural manner. Family Violence definition – is the physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economical abuse that occurs within families, intimate relationships, kinship networks and communities.

It was decided that the theme *Strong Families* should be incorporated into the designs on the cloaks. Each community member had their input in this and how the cloaks would look. Traditionally, Aboriginal customs and beliefs ensured men and women's business were done separately. However it was decided by the facilitators that all community members would work on the same cloaks together through the entire process to ensure there was no friction or further divide. That said, our community still hold and respect traditional beliefs and customs.



## LARGER ADULT SIZE CLOAK

Made from 38 possum skin pelts, the larger adult size cloak was developed to cater for taller people to wear during cultural events and activities. The design was decided by participants together as a collective, that the design shows, represents and respects the local Aboriginal Nation- The Dja Dja Wurrung, the creator spirit of the land being the Wedge Tail Eagle - *Bunjil*.

Bunjil was to be located at the top of the cloak, as if it was looking over all individuals and families to protect them and keep them safe. The connected circles and lines that travel around the outside of all designs represents the journey, the journey of the community as a whole, being connected or interconnected with one another, being united.

All families and individuals designed their own stories and symbols to show what makes a strong family to them. In the cloak you can see people and campsites. This could mean families or gatherings, and more importantly connection. You can see lots of different animals, bird and fish, this could represent each families or individual totem. This is the story of the local Aboriginal community, showing its diverse wealth of culture, all coming with different views and stories in life and their journey but as a community connected and united together, with the support of Bunjil and paying respect to Dja Dja Wurrung Nation. This is what *Strong Family* looks like and means to our community.



*(View of the completed larger sized adult possum skin cloak)*



(Sections of the larger sized adult cloak)





(Sections of the larger sized adult cloak)





(Sections of the larger sized adult cloak)



## MEDIUM ADULT SIZE CLOAK

Made from 24 Possum skin pelts, The Medium sized adult cloak had been developed to cater for Community members to use but may benefit from the smaller of the two adult sized cloaks. This cloak has no designs painted or burnt onto the cloak as of the 14/05/2015. This could be something for future community events to focus on.



(full view of the Medium sized adult cloak)



# CHILDREN'S CLOAK

The children's cloak was made from 15 possum pelts arranged 3 across and 5 down. The featuring design was traced over the cloak lightly from a picture drawn on a piece of paper, and added to over the process. It is as much an image of the spiritual and physical coming together in a heightened state, and where an Adam and Eve-like couple are standing together and raising their hands. Before them the light of the Great Spirit streams through the sky like the sun, a river of life, and connecting the countryside with the people. Surrounding the couple are the hands of all the children who participated in the workshops. This was done by getting the children to sketch the outlines of their hands on a piece of paper which was then cut out and traced lightly onto the cloak.



*(view of the completed children's cloak)*



*(Sections of the Children's Cloak)*



*(Sections of the Children's Cloak)*





*(Sections of the Children's Cloak)*



*(Sections of the Children's Cloak)*





## RESOURCES

The Possum skin pelts were purchased from *Basically Bush Limited*, which is located in New Zealand:

<http://www.basicallybush.co.nz/>

The possum skin pelts were purchased from New Zealand as we found Australia does not have a fur industry due to native animal protection laws. The possum was introduced to New Zealand in the 1800's from Australia to start a fur industry. Without any natural predators the possums thrived within New Zealand, continuing a long lasting fur industry.

The burners and tips were purchased from *IronCore Transformers*. The burners are more specifically called Pyrographs or poker work units:

<http://www.ironcore.com.au/>

The thread and needles were purchased from *Gascoignes of Gippsland*. The website does not promote the sale of the thread and needles. The thread has been found to be very reliable and durable through the development of several possum skin cloaks, as opposed to using sinew from native animals which was traditionally used in the past.

<http://gascoignesofgippsland.blogspot.com.au/>