

## **Revitalization of Indigenous Culture in Child Care Centre**

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*In this study, I address contemporary ways of looking after children and care giving roles women play in today's Aboriginal community in Brisbane, Australia. Data were collected through participant observation and interviews during field work in a family care centre managed by Indigenous women with the staff and their clients. My main contribution is in describing how various activities of the centre, such as parental programmes, women's gatherings, and rites of passage reflect the traditional models of child care and women's position in the family environment and how these models are perpetuated again in the modern urban environment. Furthermore, I present the implications for the contemporary Aboriginal community's understanding of their current culture as dynamic and open to change. Key Words: Cultural Revitalization, Indigenous, Family Care, Ritual, Tradition, Ethnographic Methods of Interview, and Participant Observation*

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Contemporary Australians are trying to redress the negative effects of the country's colonial past. The current effort for reconciliation is commonly understood as "creating a new relationship between settler Australia and its Indigenous people" (Merlan, 2005, p. 485), while decolonization is understood as "an attempt to reflect critically on the nature, scope, and process of colonialism, particularly its impact on colonized people and their environments" (Thaman, 2003, p. 1). Consequently, Aboriginal culture and ideas of Aboriginality are in a continuous process of adaptation and change. Various authors (Cowlshaw, 1993; Creamer, 1988; Kolig, 2005; Maddock, 2002; Merlan, 2005; Morton, 1998; Sutton, 1988) present different theories of cultural revitalization in rural and urban Australia today. Reay (1964), Maddock, and Morton reject the idea of creating the contemporary Aboriginal culture by transmission of cultural elements derived from the pre-contact period. However, authors such as Sutton, Cowlshaw, and Kolig (2002, 2005), argue for reflexivity, inventiveness, or adaptation of the emerging culture. This includes "revitalization," or a "voluntary act of adopting certain historical cultural practices and investing them with a new meaning by staging an event of certain elements of what is perceived to be traditional culture, as well as interaction with the contemporary western society" (Chevallier, 2005, p. 120).<sup>2</sup> Every revival of this kind, "represents the

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (1983) define the "invented tradition" as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (p. 2). Since the theory of invented traditions has political implications in the Pacific, the authors

creation of tradition . . . production of a new narrative, invoking the past and demonstrating its present” (Chevallier, p. 120). Besides defining this terminology, I also explain the usage of the word, *indigenous*, so crucial for the whole study. When talking about the natives of Australia, I refer to *Aboriginal people* or *Indigenous people*, but when talking about native people in general, I refer to *indigenous* people. This is a common practice for dealing with the indigenous category (e.g., Kolig, 2002 or Niezen, 2003).

The revitalization of indigenous cultures takes place in different areas and always reflects its actors—be they indigenous intellectuals, activists, men, or women. Most of the existing research is focused on the functioning of the remote communities in an effort to trace the remaining culture; however, there has not been much research within the urban context. At the same time, as Merlan (1988) depicts, there is a lack of knowledge on how men and women are positioned today within the Australian Aboriginal society. Gender separation in ceremonial and social life that used to be crucial for Aboriginal ways of living must be reflected even in today’s workings of their community. However, there are few studies on revitalization of indigenous culture in both male and female domains. Those available are Ralstone (1993) and Yamada (2001). It also needs to be mentioned that, globally, the existing gender discussion has arisen through research stimulated by European concerns about the nature of women’s involvement in society. Partly due to western orientation of these discussions, the specific problems of the modern Aboriginal communities have not been tackled. This led me to focus on the workings of an urban family care centre run by a community of Aboriginal women in Brisbane. The way this centre deals with child care, educational programmes for youth, and maternal issues carries many aspects of revitalizing the old culture. I will attempt to provide a thorough description of the functioning of the organization, its members, and its programmes and show how the particular activities of the centre are designed in order to uplift the contemporary Aboriginal family care by remodelling the old cultural patterns. The findings in the study may be a contribution to the current discourse on cultural revival and decolonization in the Pacific, but also another little step toward the gender issues within the contemporary indigenous communities.

When exploring the field, I drew on a vast literature base, concerning two larger bodies of work: cultural revitalization in the Pacific and the traditional women’s culture. For the former, I used Otto and Pedersen’s *Tradition and Agency: Tracing Cultural Continuity and Invention* (2005), which is a very useful collection of essays. The authors engaged in research of the contemporary phenomena of cultural revival in various areas, starting from studying rural symbols in France to material culture of carving in Papua, New Guinea. One of the main contributors is Erich Kolig, whose individual works from 2002 and 2005 I quote as well. Kolig specialises in current indigenous ideological upheavals, in various sources of inspiration, and religious leaders. His work has been crucial for all of my study, since he manages to evaluate in subtle ways the whole process of religious revitalization which also concerns Aboriginal culture, by presenting different viewpoints and perspectives – of the White scientists, church people, of the indigenous elite, as well as the common people on the street. He neatly explains how some of the

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writing about cultural revitalization in this area suggest using different terms, such as retraditionalisation, revival, or innovation.

cultural renovations can successfully correspond with the objectives of contemporary indigenous people, while, on the other hand, evoke suspicious feelings on the part of outsiders. Ronald Niezen (2003) in his book, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*, provides an overview of contemporary efforts to revitalize the traditional culture, and the acceptance by mainstream society, which can be a problem, such as the case of some traditions, such as ritual circumcision. When referring to women's role in the community, I use works of Merlan (1988), Goodall and Huggins (1992), while for family- and child-related issues I quote Myers (1993) and Graham (2006). Authors such as Cowlishaw (1993), Merlan (2005), Reay (1964) and Sutton (1988) provide a deeper understanding of the cultural movements and racial issues. To my knowledge, literature concerning particular case studies that describe the objectives and strategy of Aboriginal organisations aimed at reinitiating the old culture in any way is still lacking. For instance, Merlan (2005) calls for more specialised research on the current position of Aboriginal women within their family and community. Similarly, Kolig (2005) and Sutton describe the emergence of activist movements within Aboriginal communities however, they do not refer to any qualitative research dedicated to this subject. In this study, I present the everyday workings of an Aboriginal institution and its personnel, their agenda, and also their own perceptions of the contemporary Aboriginal culture. Thus, I try to describe and illustrate how the reinitiating of culture can be managed in practice.

### **Role of the Researcher**

It was mainly my long-term interest in the Australian Aboriginal culture and also my passion for travelling which led me to pursue my diploma research in Australia. I realised that there would be many local anthropologists with a better knowledge of Aboriginal culture than I; therefore, I decided to limit my research to the relatively accessible urban indigenous culture. Also, I saw my research as a chance to introduce the Indigenous culture to the Czech anthropological scene. Being a female researcher, I decided to focus on the activities of Aboriginal women, since traditionally knowledge, it is only appropriate for a female to access the female indigenous knowledge.

In order to have insight into the daily functioning of the organization and to maintain everyday contact with the personnel, I joined the centre as a volunteer. During my 6-month stay, I had a chance to see the running of the family centre on a daily basis, to conduct semi-structured interviews with the staff, to attend the meetings and staff discussions aimed at solving specific problems, and to take part in various community gatherings organised by the institution itself.

### **Ethical Considerations**

My entry to the institution was facilitated by the Aboriginal Unit at Queensland University in Brisbane. The leaders of the Aboriginal and Torres Star Islanders Unit introduced me to the CEO and asked for her to permission me to stay with the organization for several months. I also volunteered to help with the daily routines. The university officially oversaw my research. Moreover, every interviewee was asked to sign an informed consent form which also stated the possibility to withdraw. All

respondents allowed me to use the information for purposes of my study. Due to the small size of the organisation, staff names are likely to be identifiable; even though I intentionally did not refer to particular names. I provided them with a thorough description of the purpose of my research study, as well as of the future dissemination policy. I also asked for approval before taking photographs of the people. I was not allowed to take pictures of children who were in foster care.

### Research Methods

My area of qualitative research is classified as ethnographic, which can be described as “following people. . . watching what they do; making casual inquiries; recording their life stories, tales and legends, as well as genealogies. . . and conducting interviews with the key informants” (Spradley, 1980, p. 177 ). This kind of research is aimed at recording the actors in their daily activities and situations, in the most natural state possible. I have chosen this approach because of my anthropological background, and because it was the most relevant research approach in the circumstances. Thus, I used the qualitative research methods of participant observation and interview, as presented by Spradley. The theoretical paradigm which has formed the analytical part of my research included the theories of indigeneity (Kolig, 2002), cultural revitalization, and invention of tradition (Hosbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Since research on indigenous peoples always concerns sensitive cultural issues, I looked into related resources, such as an article by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and Indigenous Peoples*. She provides a critical approach toward this kind of research, raises the crucial issues regarding an outsider doing a study on an indigenous community, and the never-ending clash of western and indigenous ways of thinking. Since I spent one day a week for a period of 6 months working with the participants in my research, I had firsthand experience of their daily functioning. I was able to see the workings of the associated child-care centre by attending the women’s groups and gatherings, and listening to them while they were discussing cultural and community related topics. After learning generally about their work, I conducted interviews with every single member of the centre. The interviews were semi-structured, although some of the questions were designed to elicit specific life experiences. The questions mainly concerned the projects and the ideological background of a nongovernmental indigenous organisation called Kummara (meaning *walking together*). Because of a large organisational agenda, which consists of family counselling, parental and youth programmes, and various women’s gatherings, I had a chance to investigate the indigenous approaches to child care, women’s well-being and culture, as well as life stories of particular women.

My aim was to study how the women perpetuate the Indigenous culture on a practical level through the daily workings of the centre, and on a theoretical level through their ideological input. Also, I was interested in how they situate their daily working within the phenomenon of cultural revitalization; how they relate to it. Furthermore, I conducted several focus groups among the personnel of Kummara at various women’s meetings concerning contemporary women’s well-being and approaches to indigenous culture. In addition to keeping a field diary, I took audio records of the interviews and made visual documentation as well. Both my observations and questions to the

informants focused on the activities of the centre in relation to revitalization or reconstruction of the Aboriginal culture, and the understanding of these phenomena by its actors themselves. My second aim was to investigate the possible ideological influence from other cultures and movements. Thus, I attempted to look into the sources of influence of the contemporary Aboriginal culture.

### **Research Setting and Its Participants**

The primary participants in my research were members of the organisation. As explained above, I was in direct contact with them for several hours a week. In addition, I got in touch with the children and teachers in the child centre, and with parents and adults visiting the centre, but these were not my main target group. The respondents were five middle-aged, Aboriginal women, all working in or for Kummara (one of the women was employed as an external worker). There was the CEO of the organization, the cultural strengthening and community development worker, two consultants, and the family support and early intervention worker. The range of activities and programmes Kummara engages in could create a false impression of the organisation's size; however, the office was actually a very small and modest place situated in a quiet city area. There were only two large rooms and three individual offices. The women would gather mostly in the meeting room for occasions such as meals and discussions. There were also regular gatherings that women from the neighbourhood were invited to join. These were meant to be part of the community building and strengthening project. Kummara seemed to function as a supervisor or even a friendly listener to all visiting female community workers who had to face the reality of everyday work--domestic violence, neglected or lonely children, and homeless women. The centre personnel definitely gave an impression of a very friendly and pleasant place.

### **Data Collection**

Preliminary observations were made during the first visits to the centre in August 2006. I created a written record of the structure of activities including the times and settings, contexts, and participants, and description of the typical language interactions. The preliminary data included the following:

1. General description of physical characteristics of the setting, number of the staff and their ages, people usually present.
2. Description of the main daily activities, content of the discussions, service for clients.
3. Basic notions of Aboriginal cultural concepts and values reflected in the activities and interactions.

The first set of observations helped me to acquire general knowledge of the environment and a chronology of particular activities and events, and introduced me to the field. On the first day, I asked for permission to take photographs and voice recordings and received a positive response (with the exception of taking photographs of

the children in foster care). Thus, after the initial observations, I was able to engage fully in research planning.

I realized from my preliminary observations that I could extract the most interesting data from talking to the women in Kummara or from listening to their discussions and talks. The activities of the centre and their services for clients were a necessary support for forming my conclusions. I realized that it was very beneficial to be present at most Kummara meetings and community gatherings, since these provided space for a variety of opinions and cultural ideas.

Later on, the data collection consisted of participant observation – being present during both free discussions and work, and helping when needed. After having completed the preliminary research of the centre's functioning, I interviewed each of the five members of Kummara. They told me their life stories and the circumstances that brought them to the organization, as well as their perspectives on the contemporary issues of Aboriginal childcare and the role of women within a family and community. I asked about the specifics of their programmes and ideologies, and about their relationship to the traditional models. I also wanted to hear the women's opinions on the idea of reconstructing or revitalizing the old culture. I was particularly interested in what terms they used to talk about Aboriginal culture and how they defined it in the modern world. The interviews were conducted during work time, on an individual woman's breaks, or after work. Full written transcripts were made of all five interviews. In all cases, I sent the transcripts of the interviews to the interviewees for them to have a look and possibly amend. A written record was simultaneously made of the features of the setting, of activities and their participants including the language interactions as well as the nonverbal behaviour within the context of the situation. I was present in Kummara at least one day a week from 9 am to 3 pm for a period of six months. As I said above, I also attended additional activities such as the community gatherings.

### **Data Analysis**

After having examined the data from the preliminary observations, I was able to specify better the research questions and the direction of the interviews but these were also altered throughout the research process. I proceeded to the final analysis after having transcribed and coded all my interviews and field notes in the final stage of my stay with Kummara. The data were analysed according to the standard processes of ethnographic research which includes qualitative coding and several types of analysis (Silverman, 1999; Spradley, 1980). For the analysis of the interviews I used the technique of qualitative coding. The codes are usually abbreviations that apply to larger thematic blocks within the text (Silverman). Using the codes made it easier to move within the text and search for a particular theme. For instance, any time the women referred to the gender roles and related issues, I made a specific reference "GENDER" on the left side. When I wanted to compare and analyse in what context the different women mentioned this classification, I simply looked for these references throughout the body of interviews. From the interviews, I moved onto the data from the participant observation. First, a preliminary overview of the cultural scene was made on the basis of the domains identified in the preliminary observations. The main domains covered: functioning of the family centre, children and families, centre-run programmes for parents, children, and

youth, and other cultural objectives of the members. After the preliminary observations, I specified the particular areas of research focus based on cultural revitalization as my area of interest. Therefore, I concentrated my attention on all the activities of the centre that could contribute to revitalize the Aboriginal culture. Through taxonomic and componential analysis as described by Spradley, I connected the domains from the observation with the appropriate themes in the interviews and examined their consistency. In this way, I tried to establish the connections between the domains and larger cultural themes. As an example, I provide the following group discussion from one of the women's meetings (25/08/06) that was related to the women's perspectives of cultural revitalization. Here, the topic concerns the contemporary definitions of and references to Aboriginal culture, which are discussed in a group of three women. Each of them contributes with her own statement on how Aboriginal culture can be reclaimed today. The women are trying to find a common ground on how to assert their cultural reconstruction in the present context, whether it is a reinvented action which has to be recalled from the past or rather an act of reclaiming something that has been denied to them but what they still possess. Here, I give a short display of the conversation which I categorised under the larger theme of women's notions of cultural revitalization:

Speaker One: We have to be aware of what we are trying to...not reinvent but...

Speaker Two: Reclaim.

Speaker One: Reclaim what Aboriginal terms of reference are.

Speaker Two: Because it can't be stuck in the past.

Speaker Three: So we have to keep the past in the mind but to move forward.

Speaker One: Because we never locate it in the history, we never locate it in individuals such as White people but we locate it in the land. Whenever we walk on land all our history is present. It is with us.

Speaker One: And it's still accessible.

Speaker Three: That's why we have to make people conscious of how it can be accessible for them. Bring it to their consciousness.

This group of women consisting not only of the members of the centre but from any interested women from the area would meet in Kummara fortnightly. They would discuss mainly issues of cultural preservation, women's role in the contemporary Aboriginal society, women's spirituality, and childcare.

## Results

### General Description of the Setting

Kummara (meaning “watching over the children”) is one of the Aboriginal self-governed community organisations that had been set up along with the changes in health and welfare services in the 1970s in Australia. The principal idea of that time was to switch from control over the Indigenous community to its self-determination and self-management. The Indigenous community-based organisations received funding from the State; they often linked western and indigenous health-care models, forming a productive mixture of both. Kummara was only established in the late 1990s, in response to a major need for a community-focused, professionally coordinated, integrated childcare family service. As such, the aim is to meet the needs of the family and community, as well as to fulfil the idea of communal decision-making (for more on organisations of this kind see Eckermann, 1992) within an indigenous community. In other words, to apply the indigenous methods and protocols for dealing with community things.

The mainstream has to deal with everybody so it is the *one size fits all* model, whereas Indigenous and all the other cultures have their own ways and protocols of working with the community. (Interview, 13/09/06)

Compared with the organizations established earlier on, Kummara was set up to be governed as exclusively women-led family care. Their motto was clear – “women are the ones responsible for their children.” The spirit of the motto sets a clear order of preferences for placing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with the child’s extended family, within the child’s Indigenous community, and with other Indigenous people.

The main objectives of Kummara are that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young adults (a) receive quality care in a safe and supportive environment in which their needs can be met; (b) are placed in a culturally-appropriate environment; (c) maintain and strengthen their relationship with their family, community, and significant others; (d) experience continuity of care in their placement, health, education, recreation, cultural and spiritual identity, family and community contact; (e) are supported to return home or to move to alternative placements; and (f) are assisted in their transition to independence, in accordance with the case plan. Kummara attempts to help their clients recover from the effects of the former governmental policy of hostile removal of children from their families, the experience of the stolen generation (Goodall & Huggins, 1992).

The period from 1910 to 1969 of Australian history strongly contributed to the deconstruction of family ties and functioning. The objective of Kummara’s founder, who had been a victim of the stolen generation herself, was to establish Kummara to help families to recover, as well as to protect them from another intervention by western social workers.

I see it from my story that even if you make that relationship with parents again, you don't form an attachment. And that impacts on your life and that's what we are trying to eliminate. I have been trying for years to get children to their families and form attachments. Because once they have been to a foster system they might go to six foster placements a year. Sometimes their parents just don't cope with their behaviour. And they are really traumatised kids. So we want children to go back to their families, and always to a safe environment. (Interview, 8/9/2006)

Most Kummara members have had the experience of this kind of hostile removal within their families which also leads to their emphasis on family and women's well-being. Nevertheless, the organisation's activities are not restricted to Indigenous people only, but provide help to any family in need. Kummara also operates as a mediator between the Indigenous and mainstream services. Thus, it attempts to find a link between the western agencies and the Aboriginal community in the inner-city area and to bridge the chasm between Aboriginal people and welfare services.

It is about making sure that we are included in decision-making process. There is a need in communities and not just in Aboriginal communities. (Interview, 8/9/2006)

For instance, Kummara organises family meetings to help in breaking down barriers through sharing information and knowledge between parents of different cultural backgrounds. Maintaining family connections in care and working towards family restoration are core components of Kummara's work.

Kummara focuses on providing prevention and early intervention programmes to strengthen families and build their resilience and support networks. The prime objective is to develop an approach to management of Aboriginal organisations and programmes which are tailored to the specific needs, aspirations, and circumstances of Aboriginal children, as well as of women and families who are served by Kummara and other organisations. In this way, Kummara endeavours to establish formal links within the community in order to integrate services. The services include essentially: (a) a cultural child centre where children are looked after during the day and where their cultural knowledge is being built; (b) parenting skills development programmes, practical assistance and advocacy to access specialist services (employment, drug and alcohol treatment, family violence); (c) building links to mainstream services (preschools, child and maternal health); (d) supporting education of children and young people, encouraging families to get their children to study, programme on traditional way of learning (rites of passage for youth). Besides all this, Kummara intervenes in family breakdown issues and safeguards the children before the state intervention which usually places them into western institutions. The staff deal with clients coming directly from the street, seek the best solution for their problems, and direct them to the relevant institutions of social care – mainstream or Indigenous. As the CEO of Kummara says, the actual service does not necessarily happen on an official level:

It might be sitting and talking and having a cup of tea, yarning (talking in a circle), or counselling but it is always about supporting the individual in finding his or her own way – referred to as ‘walking together’ in Kummara. (Interview, 12/10/06)

Kummara puts a strong emphasis on women as protectors of their children and families; therefore, on healthy women as healers of the community. Apart from helping children and families, Kummara organises regular women’s meetings and conferences in order to build a discourse on improvements in well-being of Aboriginal (or non-Aboriginal) women. The main objectives of these conferences are to identify cultural patterns of the contemporary Aboriginal society and the role of women in the community in particular.

It’s about women rebuilding and revisiting their strengths and recognising how strong they are. Because if you have been told enough that you are not capable, you start to believe that you are not capable. (Interview, 8/9/2006)

This again reflects the need of any minority/ethnic unit to establish a clear distinction from the major society in order to have its distinctive cultural rights acknowledged. The gatherings served as a forum to discuss various issues concerning not only the local community but also general topics and ways to define their cultural uniqueness. Thus, activities of Kummara also include intensive research on a common definition of contemporary Aboriginal cultural traits (Chapman & Munro, 2001). Additional aim of local communities is to examine women’s issues and to them in the face of growing male dominance (Goodall & Huggins, 1992), as well as cases of injustice and domestic violence experienced by Aboriginal women and children. Kummara and other associated organisations deal with cases of disrespect towards women and of interference in their sphere of business, such as in childcare. The past experience of Aboriginal children being taken away from their families perpetuates the persisting stereotypes of Aboriginal women as being neglectful of their children. That is why the women in Kummara emphasise their need to be culturally recognised within the welfare system as mothers and carers. They call for childcare and family well-being as women’s business, traditionally ascribed to women (Reid, 1982). How to redress and reform a woman’s role and authority, as well as her cultural and spiritual well-being were some of the topics of one of the women’s conferences which took place in Brisbane.

### **Programme of Rites of Passage**

One of the important programmes run by Kummara was that of rites of passage, traditional ways of bringing an individual from childhood to adulthood. The ritual of initiation of the young men into independent adults only takes place in the remote parts of Australia nowadays. It includes ceremonies, ritual circumcision, and a period of separation from their community. There is no analogous ritual for most of the young Aborigines living in the urban environment today, even though. The Aboriginal youth are the most rapidly growing sector of the society and their particular needs should be

addressed.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, there are growing numbers of youth suicide, substance abuse, and teenage violence.

This can be partly explained by the absence of role models traditionally provided by elderly people. Another possible cause is the decreasing authority of parents, and an undesirable example that they pass onto their children in terms of lifestyle or level of education. The centre has addressed this by forming an educational programme for Aboriginal youth (both boys and girls) from various backgrounds. The Rites of Passage programme aims to support a holistic development of individuals on all levels: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. The envisioned plan by one of Kummara's staff (Graham, 2006) addresses different domains from cultural foundations and spiritual teachings of elders to community-based initiatives, and direct experience of caring for sacred natural sites and ecosystems. Suggested courses and activities consist of:

1. Learning about protection of the land and its sacred sites, environmental studies, land rights, native titles, and ecological sustainability.
2. Learning the Aboriginal worldview through understanding Aboriginal logic and the Aboriginal sense of time through storytelling, writing stories and poetry, painting and drawing, dance, drama, and music.
3. Learning physical skills, self-respect, respect for others, sport, bush-craft and wilderness skills, food preparation and nutrition, and games.
4. Learning good manners, self-regard, self-respect, positive relationships and appropriate and positive social interaction.

Last but not least, there are also formal education courses such as English, Mathematics, History, Aboriginal Language, Politics, and International Affairs, and possibly evening discussions and workshops that encourage participation of the families that can contribute with a valuable feedback (Graham, 2006). The programme is framed for a period of 12 months - two or three months to prepare, six or seven months to carry out the modules and the remaining two months to debrief with the participants and their families with a final report on the outcomes for the funding bodies also provided at the end. The completion of the programme is marked with a ceremonial entry into adulthood and assistance with finding a job or further education. There is also a follow-up visit to participants and their families to record their impressions and the impact of the programme on their development six months to a year later (Graham).

The rites of passage project, along with parental focus groups, form the educational part of Kummara's activities. In the study I show that they both contain references to the traditional model of the process of readying children for adulthood. In today's world, indigenous people tend to reconnect to their past and recreate themselves by using their ancient values and traditions. In the contemporary world, only a clear distinction from the mainstream society can justify their claims for civil and land rights, and for their intellectual heritage (e.g., Kolig, 2002). "Indigenous people the world over are busily constructing a cultural being in which they can set themselves apart from others. This is a culturally based indigeneity – as opposed to a physically or genetically based

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<sup>3</sup> Half of the population is under 25 years of age (<http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/>).

indigeneity – in which issues of culture are pivotal, rather than issues of race and genes” (Kolig, 2002, p. 9).

### **Cultural Revitalization**

I find Kummara’s work very ideological since it involves a continuous process of distinguishing the specifics of Indigenous and western world views and operating with both intellectual systems. As I mentioned, the women are involved in regular conferences in which cultural issues of the contemporary Indigenous community are discussed. The women are trying to find a common ground on many cultural aspects, including their position of Aboriginal women. My recordings have shown that the expressions commonly used by them in relation to cultural topics would be: “reconstructing,” “rediscovering,” “reclaiming,” “rebuilding,” “reinforcing,” “rejuvenating,” “regenerating” or “revisiting” and “taking back control” – which reminds us of the semiotics of revitalization. At one of the women’s conferences organised by Kummara (personal communication, 18/10/06), women were encouraged to list the important aspects they would attribute to their cultural well-being. The most common results were: maintaining creativity, strength, and resilience; respecting elders’ knowledge; living in harmony with nature; environmental and family nurturing; cultural healing and reconnecting; leadership in the family and in the community; living in the present but reflecting on and healing from the past; sharing with everybody; honour; belief in a better future; having a healthy life style; and respecting themselves.

There were many outstanding examples of attributing cultural meanings arising at the conference, such as a celebration of Mother Earth’s day as a form of a contemporary Aboriginal tradition. The speakers paid special attention to notions of traditional healing and well-being. In Aboriginal holistic understanding, healing covers spiritual, emotional and psychological well-being, and relations with the land as well. In that way, even community meetings, yarning (talking) circles, art making, singing or spending time in nature can have a healing effect. It is also necessary to keep nature healthy. “If the land is unwell, then we will be unwell. And that affects our emotional, our spiritual, and psychological well-being” (personal communication, 31/10/06). Although women in Kummara do not practise any traditional cures in terms of physical healing, they practice women’s spiritual well-being, reconnecting to women’s roles, women’s values and traditions, all of which relate to the definitions of their culture. Women also identified several emotional and spiritual strengths of their lives: self-understanding and wisdom, finding roots and family connections, spending time with family, connecting with the land, connecting with the ancestors spiritually, contact with nature, going to sacred places, self-valuing, the true women’s role, releasing pain from the past experiences, and finding harmony and balance.

One of the interesting forms of healing presented at the conference was an American education forum advertising new methods of learning with the motto: “Our educational methods enhance what you know and explore what you don’t know” (personal communication, 18/10/06). This consisted of workshops on self-empowerment and self-esteem. By undergoing this process, one can slowly heal his or her mind and avoid all preconceived ideas about his or her future. The work of another female healer was based on classical Eastern knowledge of body chakras and meditation techniques.

She opened her speech with a welcoming spirits ceremony using a smouldering incense stick, continued with meditation, and then presented the chakra theory. Occasionally, she related particular chakras to Aboriginal subjects such as land or contact with spirits. Both of these healing concepts included Aboriginal cultural patterns and formulations in a way, but because of their background, they were mostly borrowed from the New Age ideologies and concepts of understanding the world.

Also, the concept of Mother Earth's Day is a very new ascription of gender to ground as the source of all existence which would not necessarily fit the traditionally androcentric character of Australian Aboriginal society. This was also claimed by Kolig (2005) who refers to the same phenomenon occurring in a different Aboriginal community. He asserts that this particular case could also be an example of a cultural adaptation – of appropriation of the dominant society's taste for celebrating Mother's and Father's Days and environmentalism

However, the women in Kummara were not sceptical at all about these programmes as long as they led to an improvement in family and women's well-being. Furthermore, some identified with them as with traits of the traditional culture. This means that the common understanding of tradition is dynamic, not denying an appropriation of other cultural forms. This corresponds with the modern indigenous societies' search for cultural determination and self-identification. Coming from the fact that so much has been lost from the old tradition, it is difficult to agree on one definition of the Aboriginal women's culture. It seems that the action of redressing the old traditions can happen in a modern way, not as a rigid reconstruction of the past. On this note, one of the members of Kummara says:

Most of the people would say that we want to go back to the past, to bring some old traditions. But it cannot be completely like that. If we could identify with the old tradition and fully western culture, neither of them would be true today. But what is this authenticity everyone talks about? Is it living in the bush, throwing a boomerang? (Interview, 12/10/06)

This quote can serve as an example of awareness of the necessary modification of Aboriginal women's culture for contemporary use.

The example of Kummara shows that today's indigenous people are aware of social problems within their community and aim to address them. Further in my research, I established several relationships between women's actions and the theory of cultural revitalization. I am going to introduce examples of practical actions taking place on the edge of the traditional and contemporary practices.

Although the women in Kummara talked about "necessary changes" in their culture, their activities could be also seen as a reconstruction of their indigeneity. However, while implementing these changes, they were very much sourcing from western and eastern ideologies at the same time. Maybe that is also why some women questioned the word *traditional*, which implies the former anthropological concepts of the authentic and *real* Aborigines in the *Golden Age* before colonization, and of their current counterparts as being "unreal" and culturally "lost" (Cowlshaw, 1993; Keefe, 1988; Maddock, 2002). They also avoided using the word "invention" since they were only calling for the things they have already had. Therefore, they communicated this

change as “rejuvenation,” “revisiting,” or “reclaiming.” I understand, and this is a key theme of this study, that they perceived this as a process of re-establishing their current authenticity as Aboriginal women, by not only acknowledging and drawing from the past, but also by accepting cultural modernisation in the present. Today’s Aboriginal community is certainly more of a new form of sociality than a continuation of its old form. With the breakdown of their social organisation, such as family and community, Aboriginal people have lost a significant cultural pattern. Coming from Myers’s (1993) concept of holding cultural values within the kin through nurturing, caring for, and teaching of children and young people, their social construction of *shared identity* has been disrupted. Thus, the new communities attempted to protect themselves. According to Bell (1965), the new communities were characterised by “extensive kinship ties. . . a strong sense of belonging to a group and this ethnocentrism has done much to preserve the homogeneity of their birthplace” (p. 402). Belonging to a particular place is, among other things, stressed in Kummara’s framework.

It turned up in the interviews that another important factor in managing cultural changes within an ethnic group seems to be the level of education people generally achieve. Most of Kummara’s personnel graduated from Australian universities with degrees in social work, social politics, or psychology. Kummara’s conceptual framework has been designed to see indigenous research methods combined with western research methods. The Kummara staff members have been trained in a community-based approach drawn from western social work conceptual models. In this way, Kummara is using both western and indigenous ways of offering services effectively. The staff members were all well-educated women, with solid personal backgrounds in the position of *culture-makers*. They are the modern leaders who determine contemporary cultural patterns and actively introduce them to the public as stated by Kolig (1981).

I conclude that Aboriginal people engage in a process of necessary self-identification within the world they live. However, in their claims for culture and specific cultural rights, they need to re-establish the link with their past. This includes significant moments of “retraditionalisation” as opposed to the process of “detraditionalisation” so typical for modernity, where ingrained traditions are commonly reduced (Kolig, 2002, p. 7). In this way, Aboriginal people engage in recreation and revitalization of their culture, and in reaching cultural autonomy on a political level (Kolig, 2002, p. 7). As implemented by the women in Kummara, this undoubtedly represents an opposition to the Australian mainstream society’s assimilative push towards the Aboriginal population. This corresponds to the theory of contemporary indigenous cultures as constantly being “formed and reformed by individual creativity, inventiveness, and self-interested enterprise” (Kolig, 2002, p. 13). However, it is questionable whether the cultural influence always follows the interests of a wide society given the variability of interests and needs of Aboriginal communities and social classes. We have to remember that while some are educated and well-situated members of the society, some are still on its bottom and care about things other than the ideological components of their culture. Another point is Aboriginal traditions have been suspended with their forced assimilation, Christianisation, and collective re-education. The small vestiges of traditional knowledge have been kept by Aboriginal elders or clandestinely handed down within the families. It is questionable if the bearers of one culture can be fully aware of all the changes that have occurred to their culture and to what extent they

have altered the essence of their tradition. These questions would certainly deserve further research.

### **Limitations**

There have certainly been limitations to my research such as the restricted length of stay, limited number of respondents, and limited amount of time spent in the actual field work. However, I think that I have grasped the basic functioning of the institution and its agenda; I have documented women's personal histories, recorded their contact with clients and time spent in discussions ... It would be interesting to spend more time in the field, and to see some of the plans developed - such as the programme of rites of passage and parental programmes regarding the focus of the research, I realized with time that the range of Kummara's work was very wide which made it very challenging to get a good understanding of the whole. This is partly caused by the fact that the organization worked on both practical and theoretical levels. While there were many specific programmes and activities run by the centre, there was also a growing intellectual support for potential changes in the system of child rearing and social care. For future research in a similar kind of institution, it would be easier to select one particular area of interest, such as the programmes for the youth.

### **Conclusions**

It is a worldwide phenomenon that, in reaction to modern society in which women in general (and indigenous women especially) are still disadvantaged, indigenous women have taken affairs into their own hands.<sup>4</sup> There are social and cultural organisations founded and led by indigenous women and according to their beliefs (Goodall & Huggins, 1992). They often draw on rituals and other social activities which would be practised in the traditional past but reshape them to suit the modern context. At the same time, there is certainly an influence from their western counterparts. Culture, which is a problematic term itself, can hardly be identified with one specific society and vice versa. Thus, people who might call themselves indigenous can refer to parts of their traditional customs but, at the same time, share the mainstream ways of living and thinking. Indeed, we have to distinguish the interpretation of the contemporary Aboriginal culture by Kummara as only one of the existing interpretations. Kummara's clients and members are immersed in Kummara's notion of Indigenous culture which raises another question: Will Aboriginal people continue in their cultural recovering and create various communities with differing versions of Aboriginal culture? It would not be uncommon, were this occur as Aboriginal people used to live in separate clan groups, sharing different cultural patterns, and speaking different languages. Therefore, different concepts of culture would be a natural consequence.

Apart from the focus on childcare which primarily addresses the consequences of the stolen generations and the disruption of Aboriginal families, Kummara's interest is in

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of women's culture-revitalising activities in the Pacific area have been recorded among Indigenous peoples of Canada, Australia (Goodall & Huggins, 1992), Asia (i.e., Ainu women in Japan, see Yamada, 2001), and New Zealand (Ralstone, 1993).

women's spirituality and well-being. This also seems to reflect the targets of other Indigenous women's communities within the Brisbane area. The female Aboriginal clients are apparently helped by Kummara's women and their ways—be it their way of communication, emphasising the land connections and authorities, rites of passage and parenting programmes, childcare, women's gatherings, or well-being. They are included in a network of Aboriginal but also non-Aboriginal families. They are in daily contact with indigenous ways of thinking and acting, and always made aware of their own Indigenous descent. Therefore, Kummara's work and objectives can be understood as a form of cultural manifestation of free will and of the right for self-determinacy. Thus, the process of an emerging indigenous culture, as represented by Kummara, is also a contribution to the rising cultural awareness among Indigenous people of Australia. It would be very interesting to continue to document the functioning of Kummara, the practical implementation of its programmes, and eventually its contribution to contemporary Aboriginal society.

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