

# The Possum Skin Cloak – Being Warmed by Culture

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For me, wearing a possum skin cloak is as foreign an idea as it is to non-indigenous Australians. But I know, from stories told by Elders and old photos, that possum skin cloaks are part of my heritage as a Koorie person. We wore them inside-out – with the warm fur on our skin during the cold winter days and nights. And that was how we kept warm for over 40,000 years.

Today we don't hunt the possums ourselves; in fact we have to buy them from New Zealand as possums are a protected species in Australia. Of course, despite our 40 millennia of hunting them for clothing and food, we never had the problem of running out of possums.

Culture is our possum skin cloak. It keeps us warm. It binds us to our ancestors and creator spirits and the land. It even keeps us warm us during cold snaps and storms. It has warmed us against the vagaries and iniquities of over 200 years of colonisation and trauma. The traditions of making possum-skin cloaks involve skills and story-telling given to us from the Creator Spirits through our Elders.

Our *Possum Skin Cloak* project at the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is very much “healing in action”. The project team involves community Elders who teach the traditional skill of making a possum skin cloak to some of our young people in out-of-home care. It is not simply the action of making the traditional cloaks but it is relational, a journey of people coming together, sharing knowledge, healing and growing in pride of their identity and culture. As well as teaching a skill, traditional stories are told and connection to community made.

The young people have the opportunity to listen to the Elders speak about how the cloaks represent a connection to country, language and clans, all of which is culturally strengthening. Parents, carers and guardians attend the workshops as well; a collective healing and culturally strengthening practice that impact beyond the workshop itself and into the family home.

There have been significant transformations; our young people have developed stronger relationships with each other and with the Elders. They are using Koorie English and are showing greater pride and confidence in themselves

and their identity: who they are, where they come from and a shared appreciation of how all is connected. The older youths also appreciate that they too will pass on these stories, so they sense their role is passing on this knowledge and take pride from this. Like all our cultural programmes at VACCA, the *Possum Skin Cloak Project* was developed and implemented with community involvement, led by the Elders and guided by principles of empowerment and self-determination.

Spending time with Elders, artists and community members helps young people understand who they are, and helps their cultural connections develop. So our cultural programmes seek to strengthen the safety, wellbeing and cultural connectedness of Aboriginal children, individuals and families in their community. We are committed to protecting, promoting, reviving and celebrating Aboriginal culture, knowing that this is integral to the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of our people.

VACCA's vision is for a community that is strong in culture, values their children and young people, and recognises the importance of the whole community in raising children and keeping families together. We advocate strongly for the right of Aboriginal children to be raised in their own culture, and the importance and value of family, extended family, kinship networks, culture and community in raising or “growing up” Aboriginal children. We seek to grow a range of culturally relevant services that are responsive to the diverse needs of our community and based upon holistic, strengths-based and trauma-informed models of practice and care.

Our communities are made up of complex family and kinship networks. In all Aboriginal communities, nurture and care is the responsibility not just of parents but of the extended family. Raising children is shared by the extended

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family and guided by the wisdom and experience of Elders. Elders play a critical role in education and the maintenance of culture.

With close to 40 years' experience, VACCA has a comprehensive understanding of what it means for Aboriginal children and young people to feel safe, to realise their cultural identity and what strong family connections mean for the wellbeing of the Aboriginal community in Victoria. While VACCA acknowledges the challenges faced by the Aboriginal community, we also acknowledge their strengths. We draw on these strengths and importance of culture to protect and empower our children and families.

Culture and voice – those are the two key principles of our work at VACCA and our advocacy to the sector and governments. For Aboriginal people, our culture not only warms us; it provides us with resilience. It also enables us to make our voices heard. Aboriginal people have a long history of resistance; one that is seldom taught in schools. And I don't just mean the battles fought all over Australia during invasion, there have always been Aboriginal leaders speaking up for the "mob". In fact, in the late 1930s, it was Aboriginal people who organised and led the protest against the treatment of the Jews in Germany, taking their concerns to the German consulate in Melbourne. Aboriginal people have always recognised the importance of voice. That is why we hold dear our Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

Many years ago, Aboriginal academic and trauma expert Judy Atkinson said the following:

Although some Indigenous children grow up in safe environments, others experience trauma. . . . The trauma of historical events associated with colonisation of Indigenous land can pass to children (inter-generational trauma). Even if protected from the traumatic life experiences of family, some Indigenous children, like non-indigenous children, directly experience trauma through exposure to an accident, family violence and abuse. Although the effects of childhood trauma can be severe and long lasting, recovery can be mediated by appropriate interventions. (Atkinson, 2013, p. 1)

Culture for us is that intervention. Fortunately, in Victoria not only VACCA is saying that now. Addressing the needs of the child for cultural identity is part of our legal and policy framework. The Children, Youth and Families Act and the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (2005) have set the broad framework for reforms in the child and family services sector. A foundational component of the Children, Youth and Families Act (2005) is the Best Interests of the Child principles, which promote:

. . . the need, in relation to an Aboriginal child, to protect and promote his or her Aboriginal cultural and spiritual identity and development by, wherever possible, maintaining and building their connections to their Aboriginal family and community. (Section 10)

However, the government and the sector still struggle to implement what we call the lens of culture when seeking

to analyse and address the cultural needs of the child. All our cultural programmes are funded either through philanthropic grants or our own reserves. Government does not provide specific funds for our cultural treatments. We have good intentions but, as T.S. Eliot once said, 'Between the idea and the reality . . . falls the shadow.'

So, even today, for Victorian Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, their basic human right of developing a strong Aboriginal identity, of having a right to learn and practise their culture remains compromised. We know culture to be a protective factor. VACCA is directly and contractually responsible for fewer than 200 out of approximately 1030 Aboriginal children in care across Victoria. The majority of Aboriginal children in care are the responsibility of mainstream community service agencies, not Aboriginal agencies. Most of those children are living with non-Aboriginal families.

During the possum skin project one of the young girls asked if she could take a possum skin cloak to her school as they were studying ancient civilisations and she felt the teachings she had learnt were a good fit for the unit of work. We arranged it so that each student had an information pack and we offered support to the teacher. Imagine how we felt when the next day our worker received a call from the carer saying the school had rung her and was appalled by the cloak and they couldn't possibly show it to the children as this would upset them too much as it was made from possum skins. They asked me to pick up the cloak and the information packs as soon as possible. Imagine the damaging impact of this staggering insensitivity on the child, the carer and the worker.

Even when the possum skin cloak warms us with culture, we still have to contend – as we did in the 18th century – with those shallow glances of pity and scorn. The problem is not only the past; it is also the present as our children have to contend each day with either hurtful, cultural misunderstanding or overt racism.

So we still have a long way to go, but at least some benchmarking has occurred. I am pleased and privileged to say that I was in parliament on that fateful day 6 years ago for the National Apology. After the speeches were made in parliament, Prime Minister Rudd was presented with a glass coolamon by Stolen Generations member Lorraine Peeters – within it was a message that not only thanked the Prime Minister for saying sorry but also said:

We have a new covenant between our peoples – that we can do all we can to make sure our children are carried forward, loved and nurtured and able to live a full life.

The use of coolamon as the carrier of this message is significant as coolamons were often used to carry newborn children in Aboriginal communities. On National Apology Day it also became the carrier of the future for both Indigenous and non-indigenous children alike, in response to the nation saying sorry for the carrying away of

indigenous children from their families, communities and country.

So to that metaphor of the coolamon I want to add another; the possum skin cloak. Not only does the Aboriginal community need the continual warmth of millennia-old traditions and cultures, the whole nation does. The one thing that makes Australia unique in the world is that it is the place where the oldest living continuing cultures reside. Perhaps next year that will be recognised if we have a referendum that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples as the First Peoples, removes the racist elements of our current constitution and establishes a protection against racial discrimination. On that day – if it is as successful as the 1967 referendum – we may all feel the warmth of the possum skin cloak.

Atkinson, J. (2013) *Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children. Resource Sheet No. 21*. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

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