AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
HISTORY AND CULTURE OF MORNINGTON ISLAND
At the heart of everything is the land. It is the way we think and feel about the land that makes us Aboriginal. It is the only way to keep our culture. For many, many years our ancestors worked out how we should live in this country. How we should use everything around us and what to do to keep our relationship with it strong. These are the things the Europeans don’t understand about the way the bush can help us. These things can help Europeans too when their own way of living makes their lives sad. We can teach Europeans all about these things.

They are the things we have always known. Today my people can see more than one way of living. Now there are many things in our lives that were not there before. Our lives are changing but this does not mean we should forget the things that it took us thousands of years to work out. These things keep us clear and straight and make us strong inside. They show us the proper way for Aboriginal people to live.

Our bodies must keep doing the dances and living in the bush, and making the artifacts that keep our skills alive. These things are what we need to keep the head and the body together until we are given back our land and the land can make us whole again.

Jagarairee, the late Larry Lanley
former chairman of the Mornington Island Council
INTRODUCTION

This short document introduces you to the culture of the Lardil and Kaiadilt people and some of the basic history of Mornington Island.

If you are considering visiting or working in Mornington Island we encourage you to join one of our Cultural Awareness training workshops.

In this new initiative Mirndiyun Gununa Aboriginal Corporation are offering a two hour comprehensive training workshop for employees of community organizations who are new to the community.

Sarah Isaacs, a young Lardil woman, came up with the idea and over the last two years has put together the package which she delivers with passion and pride. It is packaged as a Power Point presentation and includes handouts of information about Community Protocols.

For more information contact brett@morningtonisland.com.au or visit the Programs page on our website www.morningtonisland.com.au
HISTORY

Mornington Island is the northernmost of 22 islands that form the Wellesley Islands.

The island is located in the Gulf of Carpentaria and is part of the Gulf Country region in the Australian state of Queensland. The Manowar and Rocky Islands Important Bird Area lies about 40 km to the north-west. Mornington is the largest of the islands.

Exploration of the Wellesley Islands began with the first recorded visit by Abel Tasman in 1644. The next recorded visit happened by Matthew Flinders in 1802 on board his ship the Investigator. Flinders respectively named the islands of Sweers Island, Bentinck Island, Allen Island and Mornington Isle which was named after Richard Colley Wellesley, the second earl of Mornington.

By 1841, Captain John Lort Stokes aboard the Beagle undertook a more detailed survey of the Gulf of Carpentaria. It wasn’t until the 1860’s when a settlement was developed on Sweers Island that the first of the interactions between the Indigenous people and Europeans began. But for the remaining years of the 19th century, there were minimal contact between Europeans and the Indigenous people of the Wellesley Islands.

The township is called Gununa which means ‘Enough’. Established as a Mission by the Presbyterian Church in 1914, it became a focal point for where ‘Wards for the State’ were placed for the Gulf region.

Children of Gangalida, Waanyi, and Yangkaal descent were taken and placed at this new Mission on Mornington Island. Later in 1948, due to a water contamination from a major cyclone, the neighbouring Island residents, the Kaiadilt people were forcibly removed to the Mission as well. Through this integration, Mornington Island’s population is now home to a rich and unique diverse group of people.

Our spiritual belief in our stories beginning from our creation beings Marnbil, Djual Djual and Djin Djin who named our sacred sites and sites of significance and who helped strengthen the ties to Law
and Ceremony that was passed on by our ancestral beings, Thuwathu and Nyaranbi, have become the backbone of our society and the songs and dances teaches and educates us on our history, our identity, our culture and our way of life.

If not for the formation and foresight of a group of Lardil Elders, who established Aborigines Woomera in 1973 we would not have managed to maintain this sense of cultural identity. Through Aborigines Woomera, our performances through dance and song gained national and international recognition and today, the Mornington Island Dancers are renowned.

With a new sense of direction and furthering this cultural strength hold, Woomera Aboriginal Corporation was incorporated in 1983 and continued to perform and share our dance and culture to both national and international audiences.

In 1978, Mornington Island became one of two communities who was give status as a Local Government and became a Shire Council. Free to elect an official body of Community Representatives, Mornington Island Shire Council was established and subsequently, the Mission era ended.

Today Mornington Island has many of the services common to most mainland communities. There is a health service, school, police and Council Office etc…A barge service runs from Karumba to the Island once a week and there are air flights on and off the island by Skytrans air services.

Mirndiyann Gununa Aboriginal Corporation is known as the ‘cultural hub’ for our community and will continue a great legacy of education, supporting and sharing our unique cultural heritage.
Mornington Island is located in the lower Gulf of Carpentaria, 125km north of Burketown and 44km north of Mount Isa. It is the largest Island within the Wellesley Island group. It is the traditional country of the Lardil people who have occupied the land for over 10,000 years.

Our unique environment allows for us to utilise both the land and the sea in all what encompasses as our ‘traditional culture’. Our land is the keystone to not only our physical wellbeing but our spiritual wellbeing and it strengthens the connections and beliefs we have to our sacred sites and story places. The land provides for us in every manner and it is why we protect and respect our county and our way of life.

Our physical environment consists mainly of gentle folding plateaus with both low round and flat ridges, often separated by wide shallow valleys. We have swampy inlets which often flood during the wet season but form into ‘clay pans’ or ‘salt pans’ during the dry season. We have a coastline that varies from location to location; from beautiful sandy beaches, to wave cut platforms that form rocky cliffs up to 10m high; to sandy dunes and mangrove rich inlets. All of which have provided habitats for many species of flora and fauna and have enabled the Mornington Island people to continue to live off the land as they have done so for thousands of years.
TRADITIONAL CULTURE

The Dreaming

Every society has a spiritual belief system. For most Australian Indigenous groups this belief system is what is called ‘The Dreamtime’.

In Lardil peoples’ belief there are Marnbil, Dhual-dhual and Ghingin who are the Lardil people’s creation ancestors – they along with Thuwathu (the Rainbow Serpent) and Nyaranbi (Dingo) are responsible for making our customary laws, ceremonies and laws that govern how we behave and treat our land and sea country.

They gave us our totems, kinship system and land and sea story places.
Marnbil, Dhual-dhual and Ghingin and Thuwathu are very important ancestral beings and they created important story places whose moral implication tells us how we should behave to members of our family, how we collect and prepare our bush food, create and sing our corroboree.

Many of the dances performed by the Mornington Island Dancers are based on creation stories and stories of significance. Many were ‘dreamed’ for ceremony and it is to their credit that the Lardil Dancers are still able to perform these dances in much the same manner as their forefathers and mothers did.

**The importance of land and country**

The land is very important to Aboriginal people.

Consequently, each family country is protected and looked after by the eldest man in each clan.

Each person or family group are either from the Leeward side, which is the sheltered north-side of the island or the Windward side of the island.

It is from either of these two sides of the island that clan skin names and totems are represented.

With the Lardil people there are eight skin names and each has associated totems to that skin name. This is what further identifies what family group you belong to and what part of the land you have claim to.

A man’s land is called his ‘ngarrawa’ and is inherited from his father and grandfather. The caretaker of this land is referred to as the ‘dulma-da’. It is the duty of the ‘dulma-da’ to guard, protect and maintain the land and more importantly ensure that the laws of the land are adhered to.
As a consequence of European contact and the subsequent integration of other Indigenous groups, Lardil language was affected immensely. However, it was through practicing traditional dance and ceremony that people managed to retain their hold on the Lardil language.

Today revitalising our traditional language had become a major priority for our community and we are now teaching our language in our school, and reading it through information booklets and posters etc… we are hearing it and learning to speak it through the help and support of our Elders and Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation.

The Kaiadilt language has been even more challenging but through Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation we are also trying to rebuild a platform to which both Lardil and Kaiadilt languages are spoken by future generations.

Through our Elders dictionaries in both Lardil and Kaiadilt have been published by Mirndiyan Gununa, and used as resources to further the education of our younger generations.

**KAYARDILD LANGUAGE**
- Kayardild Language
- Dr Nicholas Evans

**LARDIL LANGUAGE**
- Lardil language

**OF INTEREST**
- Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre
TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

Dancing

What makes the Mornington Island dancers so distinctive is their woven hats. Made of woven human hair and reinforced with tea tree bark and sporting a feather, hats are only worn by fully initiated men.

The distinctive conical hat (*kajawur*) is worn by men from the leeward side of the island, while dancers who come from the windward side have a cylindrical shaped hat (*wadaburr*).

Other items worn by the dancers include arm bands and dancing skirts while the women have a dancing string.
Ceremonial Spears

This spear is one of the oldest forms and is made and decorated only by men. Made from Kurrburu - wood of the Gidgea tree.

Carving

The art of wooden carving is sadly dying out. There are very few people in the community who now make these wooden items.
The dancers use clapsticks (either plain or decorated) and are accompanied by a songman with his singing boomerangs. Occasionally a didgeridoo will be used.

**Hunting**

Hunting implements include boomerangs (different kinds), digging sticks, fighting sticks, shields and spears.

 Returning boomerang - NGEERNENKUR WANGAL

 Large COOLAMON
Kinship systems

Lardil and Kaiadilt kinship and social organisations is complex but to simplify a comparison could be made with the immediate European family structure.

The Island is divided into two areas; Windward side and Leeward Side. This is further subdivided into four clan groups two to each side; Windward side: Larumbanda and Djigurrumbanda clan groups. Leeward side: Balumbanda and Leelumbanda clan groups.

Each family group comes from one of these clan groups and each is further divided into specific ‘country’ or ‘nyerrwi’. Because there is no ‘ownership’ of country a special ‘custodianship’ will fall onto the responsibility of a chosen person from the clan group. This person is called the ‘Dulmada’.

In Lardil kinship system there are 8 skin-groups which are assigned ‘skin-names’ and their associated totems. They are:

1. Ngari-Boolungi  Rainbird, shooting star, egret
2. Nungaringi  Brown hawk, turtle
3. Bulunyi  Crane, salt water, sleeping turtle
4. Bulyarini  Black tiger shark, sea turtle
5. Burulungi  Lightning, rough sea, black dingo
6. Gumerungi  Rock, pelican, brolga, red dingo
7. Gungulla  Barramundi, grey shark
8. Yugumari  Seagull, barramundi, grey shark

It is important to know about kinship at it determines many society rules and responsibilities not only to your fellow clan members but to the wider community. They tell aspects such as; which people can marry, which people share the same totems, which people they have to help and which people have to help them, which people they have to avoid, which skin groups children are born into.

We display totems through our dance and paint up process; it is a symbol not only of community pride but personal pride as well.
Gurrbudjee - The Land (or Brown) Hawk Paint-Up

The Lightning Paint-Up

Balibal - The Stingray Paint-Up
Ngarembee - The Dingo Paint-Up

Gidegal bana thuwathu - The Moon and Rainbow Serpent Paint-Up

Thuwatu - The Rainbow Serpent Paint-Up
The Skin-Groups Matrix

**PAINT-UPS**
Source: The Lardil People of Mornington Island Student Handbook by Joan Binnion (1987)

**SKIN-GROUPS MATRIX**