

The Guardian



Welcoming babies to country: the Indigenous ceremony revived after 80 years

North of Brisbane, traditional owners conduct a ceremony to give their children a sense of identity denied to generations

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Donaro Duart McLean is barely awake when his face is smeared with ochre. He is given a headband made by aunties and the gift of an animal skin, the same sort that generations ago would have been used to wrap newborns in Gubbi Gubbi country.

Traditional owners last held this sort of ceremony, welcoming new babies to country, more than 80 years ago. Today more than 20 newborns from the Moreton Bay region, north of Brisbane, are being embraced by the local Indigenous community.

Baby Donaro's parents, Dion and Jessica McLean, want their children to grow with a cultural understanding, and a sense of identity, that was denied to generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Dion has recently connected with his background and has put in countless hours tracing his ancestry to the Gumbaynggirr people of the New South Wales mid-north coast.

"I've known since I was a young kid of our Indigenous background but unfortunately due to life circumstances ... there was not a lot mentioned of it - you weren't encouraged to pursue it,"

he says. “It always intrigued me as a young child to find out everything I can.”

Jessica McLean says the couple became involved with the First 1,000 Days Australia program, which organised the “welcome baby to country” ceremony, to help pass down that Indigenous culture to Donaro.

“My husband has missed out on connecting with culture and family,” she says. “He’s got a hunger to find out who he is and where he comes from.

“Culture should be handed down and that has been kind of been stolen from a lot of generations who haven’t had that opportunity to pass down their culture. A lot of young guys are missing that. Having a son now, we want to pass that on to him, and to our girls. We want them to know who they are and to open the door to that.

“It’s about taking back what was taken.”

Generations robbed of culture

Most of the children who were welcomed to Gubbi Gubbi country on Saturday are generations removed from their ancestral lands. The practice of taking children from their families fragmented Australia’s Indigenous populations, to the extent that many people know they have Indigenous heritage but not where they belong.



‘These kids’ll be here long after those signs are gone.’ Photograph: Katie Bennett/Embellysh Photography

In Queensland, children from the stolen generations were routinely sent to missions on opposite ends of the state. They were robbed of their families but also of communities and culture: the opportunity to learn oral histories and cultural practices, and in turn pass them to future generations.

When Moreton Bay families attended a workshop earlier this year, Jackie Bennett, the regional implementation officer for First 1,000 Days Australia, asked them to name their child's traditional owner group. Only about half were certain enough to write it down.

"Some had only recently found out they were Aboriginal because of their grandparents or ancestors being part of the stolen generation," Bennett says.

Kerry Arabena, the chair of Indigenous health and the University of Melbourne, and who is leading the First 1,000 Days initiative, says culture protects families.

"We have seen people dispossessed of this kind of knowledge by not being able to practise culture, it has been denied," she says. "The stolen generations had a way of removing that deep connection that people have to country.

"Lots of people come from different places and, even though they may not know their cultural stories, they know birth is a really important time to embed that knowledge and those totemic responsibilities.

"When they understand that culture is the protective factor for our families, then perhaps we can see more children stay with their families rather than being removed from it."

These ideas underpin the First 1,000 Days Australia initiative, a "culturally informed intervention" to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The initiative started welcome baby to country ceremonies in Mildura in Victoria two years ago.

"It is about helping our children know who they are - even if they don't know where they come from, they belong somewhere," Arabena says. "It's resetting our cultural ways of living and being together in a community of people.

"It's very, very simple. Every single one of our children has a right to be cared for through culture, connection and love. It's cultural practice that connects people. Parents can be celebrated for bringing this beautiful little gift into the world."

'They want to keep that connection to one another'

Deb Cleary, the service manager of the local Aboriginal development organisation, Mindle Bygul, says Gubbi Gubbi traditional owners were excited by the notion their local Indigenous community could embrace people from other traditional owner groups who live in Moreton Bay.

"It really brings back pride in culture and ownership and identity," she says.



'The families that came together have that connection to each other, they want to have more workshops and little gatherings.'

Photograph: Katie Bennett/Embellysh Photography

Bennett says many of the families involved in the ceremony had grown close as they shared cultural and other experiences.

"There's families who haven't been connected to their home country but who have been born into the Moreton Bay region, so it's a chance to welcome them to Gubbi Gubbi country, welcome them to the Moreton Bay community, and it will form a connection to the community that they're welcomed to," she says.

"It was beautiful to be part of because all of the families that came together have that connection to each other, they want to have more workshops and little gatherings.

"That connection to the group has been useful to them but it also presents the opportunity for them to learn something about culture. They want to keep that connection to one another.

"I think that all comes back to their identity. It's part of their identity, knowing where they come from."

McLean says she and her husband "don't have a lot of family around" and that the support network has been wonderful.

"It has helped us connect, to create a little community and bring our kids in to the community, letting them know who they are and getting the support they need as kids," she says. "Because it just hasn't been there for us as a young couple.

"It's really good that the doors are open and we can bring our kids in and connect with a family, in the sense of community."

Welcome to the mob

Conrad Carter is from Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia but has called Moreton Bay home for most of his life. He and his partner, Jaymie Loy, have six children and attend Naidoc Week celebrations every year.

"We've always been involved in the community," Carter says. "All our kids, we love them to learn about their culture and to be proud of it."

Today their son Levi is being welcomed to country at a beachside park where his siblings spend hours fishing.

Generations ago, Gubbi Gubbi women would have given birth by the beach. After cutting the umbilical cord with a shell, the women wrapped the newborns in animal skins then later presented them to the community.

One by one, the Indigenous babies of Moreton Bay are named and presented, to the applause of a small crowd at a Naidoc Week gathering in Barujugan Park.

The location of the event, as one wag deep in the crowd points out, is the corner of Endeavour Street and Captain Cook Parade.

“That’s poetic justice, eh,” he says. “These kids’ll be here long after those signs are gone.”

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