

CrossArt Future Feminist Archive Project
Pearl Gibbs 'Gambanyi' Kangaroo Cloak
By © Lynette Riley 2016

It is with a great deal of enthusiasm, excitement and privilege that I was approached to create a Kangaroo Skin Cloak in the memory of Pearl 'Gambanyi' Gibbs (1901-1983). At first I was daunted by the prospect and whether I could do sufficient honour for Aunty Pearl who is a Kins-woman from my home town of Dubbo. When discussing the project with my family, my sister, Christine Riley commented that it was only right I be the person approached to make the Cloak. When I asked why, she said, "Well she was your godmother". This is probably why I recollect visiting her all the time as a child, but had forgotten in the passage of time of that relationship. Hence an even stronger reason to properly represent Aunty Pearl.

One of the first conditions required when working with someone in an Aboriginal community is the engagement, involvement and approval of family. My first task was therefore to approach Aunty Pearl's family and ask permission to create the Cloak for her. I met with Anny Druett, one of Aunty Pearl's grand-daughters. I took examples of other Cloaks to show what I do in creating the artwork on the Cloaks. Next thing I need a good understanding of the person I am creating for: their history; Nation, Clan and traditional affiliations; and Totems of significance. I spent a wonderful morning with Anny, getting a better image of the woman Aunty Pearl was; all her personal hardships and despite this (or maybe because of this), her triumphs for Aboriginal people. I must admit to being distraught at her hardships and trying to reconcile the woman I had known as a little girl, to the personal tragedies Aunty Pearl had had and then understanding what was behind her resolve to gain civil and human rights for Aboriginal people, right across Australia.

I gained the personal insights about Aunty Pearl from Anny, but also from my sister Diane Riley-McNaboe who spoke to other people in Dubbo for me and tracked down a lot of information. Diane even – following guidance from Anny - searched the cemeteries with me to find Aunty Pearl's resting place in Dubbo. From Anny, Diane and Charlie (Marbuk) Wilson, I got the information on Aunty Pearl's Totems – Nation: Eagle Hawke; Clan: Crow; and Personal: Rock Wallaby. I was also sent a lot of material from Jo Holder (CrossArts) and the Librarian at Dubbo Macquarie Regional Library, Simone Taylor. I am also indebted to work produced by Heather Goodall, Rachel Standfield, Ray Peckham and John Nolan – who wrote with great clarity and insight about the complexities of Aunty Pearl, her life and fights for Aboriginal rights.

Pearl Gibbs had an amazing resilience, intelligence and networking ability. I spoke with Uncle Ray Peckham in Dubbo who talked of being almost interned by Aunty Pearl as her personal researcher. She would send Uncle Ray out across NSW to gather information from a wide range of Aboriginal communities regarding their needs. Uncle Ray travelled across northern NSW from Tamworth and Armidale across to Coffs Harbour and further up the coast. He collected first-hand information from Aboriginal people living on Reserves and Missions what they needed someone to fight for them; and bringing this back to Aunty Pearl to use in her range of networks as evidence of Aboriginal peoples' plights.

The Cloak for Aunty Pearl therefore had to represent all the intricacies in her life; and in many ways her life she was under-represented as a woman; but she was also under-valued as an Aboriginal woman. It is clear in all I have read and heard from people about Aunty Pearl, that she was the foundation for many Aboriginal rights organisations and battles. She was the person behind the scenes who did the research,

found out what was required and how to make it happen. She spoke with a young Charles Perkins about the need for and replication of the Freedom Rides in Australia. Aunty Pearl was the instigator – not always the up-front spokesperson for change, challenges and movement for Aboriginal rights – though she could do that as well when required; but she always had a hand in pushing the agendas and directions to be undertaken. People such as Uncle Ray Peckham commented that, “without Aunty Pearl, many of the rights agenda’s wouldn’t have happened”. At the same time Aunty Pearl was the ultimate networker, finding and bringing together people and organisations that could make real changes. She threw these people and groups together, demanding that they work with each other to make the changes she wanted for Aboriginal people and communities. The more I learn of Aunty Pearl the more I admire her intelligence, tenacity and resilience.

The Cloak designed for Aunty Pearl Gibbs ‘Gambanyi’ depicts her: traditional affiliations, family connections, life journey, and networking for Aboriginal Civil and Human Rights.

PEARL GIBBS 'GAMBANYI' KANGAROO CLOAK – INFORMATION

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The following provides information on the symbols and placement of symbols used on the Cloak to tell Pearl Gibbs' 'Gambanyi' life story. These are the many influences and drivers in Pearl's life; her connections across a multitude of organisations; with her always fighting for Aboriginal people, women and children's rights.

1. CLOAK BORDER

The Cloak is bordered by a single thick line which outlines the Cloak. On the outer edge are a series of little lines – in traditional art done by Wiradjuri people from our region - this is called "Little Trees" and serves the purpose of letting other people know that this artwork was completed by a Wiradjuri person.

2. TOTEMS REPRESENTED

Nation – Eagle Hawke (Ngemba)

Clan – Crow (Ngemba)

Personal – Rock Wallaby

Note:

- i. Pearl lived a large part of her life in Wiradjuri Nation's Country; on the right hand side of the 'Tree of Knowledge' is the tracks for the 'Guuga' / Goanna, the Wiradjuri Nation Totem.
- ii. We weren't able to identify Pearl's family Totem – due to colonisation practices of dispersing Aboriginal families. Therefore the Cloak used is a grey kangaroo which is the family Totem for the Riley's of the Dubbo-ga region. Due to Pearl's close association with the family it felt appropriate to wrap Pearl's story in the Riley family Totem.
- iii. Underneath the Rock wallaby is represented the granite of the Terramungamine Reserve at Dubbo. This is a significant site for Aboriginal people in this region. Contained within the site are area which have '3' grooves ground into the rocks – these act as directions to the next site which people travel to. I feel that Pearl was directed in her life's work by her Elders.

3. TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The large tree on the right of the Cloak is a 'Tree of Knowledge' to represent Pearl's knowledges and wisdom. It's important to note that Pearl's traditional name is embedded within the tree, as the foundation for her identity.

4. SPIDER'S WEB - on the 'Tree of Knowledge'

Pearl was the ultimate networker and the spider's web with organisations and issues Pearl fought for entwined within the web.

Network of Organisations and Issues fought for:

5. ORGANISATIONS

AAF	Australian Aboriginal Fellowship
AAL	Australian Aborigines' League
APA	Aborigines Progressive Association
APB	Aborigines Protection Board
AWB	Aborigines Welfare Board
CACR	Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship Rights
CAR	Council for Aboriginal Rights
FCAATSI	Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
SFC	Sydney Feminist Club
UWA	Union of Australian Women Hostels Waterside Workers Federation of Australia

ISSUES

Activist and Advocate
Racism
Equality
Living Conditions
Feminism
Reserves and Missions
Social Reform
Human Rights, Civil Rights,
Social Reform
Unions
Women and Children
Communism
Day of Mourning
Referendum 1967

6. FAMILY TREE / CONNECTIONS

On the far left are large concentric circles - '3' within each other – with symbols around them which indicate parents – mother & father; and siblings – sons & daughters, in Pearl's immediate family. These relate bottom up, to:

- i. Pearl's grandmother & mother;
- ii. Pearl's mother & father with two girls – Pearl and her sister Olga, the darker thicker
- iii. Pearl's marriage and three children – daughter (Marie) and two sons (Charles & Jack);
- iv. Pearl's daughter Marie – six children – 3 daughters & 3 sons
- v. Pearls' son Charles – 3 daughters
- vi. Pearl's son Jack – not known

After Pearl's marriage broke up, she was left with the children as a sole parent. When the children were, 7 (Marie), 5 (Charles) & 3 (Jack), Robert (Pearl's estranged sailor husband) came for a visit and disappeared with the children. He told the children that their mother didn't want them anymore and put them into an orphanage in Sydney, and then he sailed away. Despite Pearl's constantly trying to find her children throughout her life, they did not make contact again in her lifetime. Whilst the older two siblings were able to maintain contact, it is not known within the family what happened to Jack. It is my feeling that Pearl used this personal trauma as her driver to fight for Aboriginal, women and children's rights.

As such the travelling tracks – wavy lines – between the circles indicate family lines of connection; the dots within the lines indicate continuous relational contact. Where there are no dots between the lines indicates a non-continuing relationship.

7. '8' SMALLER CONCENTRIC CIRCLES ACROSS THE CLOAK

There are '8' small concentric circles across the Cloak – these represent the townships/geographical locations in which Pearl resided. They are placed in a fashion to represent their location on the map of NSW. They are, left side (down), across the bottom, and up right side: Brewarrina, Bourke, Byrock, Dubbo, Cowra, Yass, Nowra, and Sydney.

There is dispute as to where Pearl was born, according to Jack Horner and re-stated by Heather Goodall Pearl was born at La Perouse in Sydney. But family comments are that the La Perouse Aboriginal community denies this and state she was born in Brewarrina her mother's birth place as do other Aboriginal people in Dubbo. As there is no birth certificate for Pearl, and the birth, death and marriage certificate were destroyed by a clergy man at La Perouse, it is open to dispute. Apparently the only proof Pearl had of her existence – to gain the Old Age Pension – was her Baptism Certificate, gained when she was a child in Yass. As such, I have indicated – with a dark half circle shape - where Pearl was born by indicating both Brewarrina and Sydney; and her final resting place in Dubbo.

8. FOOTPRINTS

There are footprints across the Cloak – the darkened ones represent Aboriginal people; and the outlined footprints indicate non-Aboriginal people. The footprints around the townships indicate where Pearl interacted predominately with Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people or both.

The other grouping of footprints – have one darkened set which represents Pearl herself and then Pearl's working with other people. Pearl worked with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; either one-on-one or in groups. The tracks indicate where she was clearly the leader or speaker at different gatherings. This is to demonstrate the wide range of people Pearl interacted with and influenced throughout her life.

9. SUN & STARS ON CLOAK TAIL

At the top of the tail is the symbol for the sun – our life giver.

The stars down the length of the tail (top to the tip of the tail) are to recognise people who had personal contact and influence in Pearl's life and formed the issues she fought for, such as: Pearl's three children – Marie, Charles, & Jack – and their children (Pearl's grandchildren); Faith Bandler; Jessie Street; Bill Ferguson; Jack Patten; William Cooper; Michael Sawtell; Bert Groves; Charles Perkins; Kevin Gilbert; Ray Peckham.

The list of people who worked with Pearl is long, this small recognised group is to symbolise Pearl's personal drivers in gaining Rights for Aboriginal people; being her family, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and men. I think that Pearl realised we achieve nothing on our own and need to work with a multitude of people to create improved circumstances for all people.

Pearl Gibbs 'Gambanyi' Kangaroo Cloak Details (2016).

