

Reflections on the Bulwalwanga Ran Festival!

By Arjuna (7 –9- 2017)

Welcome to our inaugural Bulwalwanga Ran Festival! 'Bulwalwanga Ran' in Dhurga language of the Yuin Nation of the South Coast of NSW means 'we are strong you all.'

Our festival is about celebrating indigenous and other world wisdom traditions that honour Mother Earth. It is about learning from each other and finding the best ways to support personal as well as planetary wellbeing. It is also an attempt to redress some of the wrongs of the past when Europeans first encountered the First Nations of Australia.

(From <http://bulwalwangaran.com.au> accessed 7/9/2017)

This text is quoted from the festival program. I attended and presented at this 4-day festival in January 2017. We camped around the edges of the Milton Showground, and this added to the feeling of Connecting to Country, to use the term in the way Australian Aboriginal people do. It was an opportunity to listen to a wide range of speakers, as well as participate in workshops, meditations, kirtans, yoga classes and a bush tucker and medicine walk in the Meroo National Park just south of Milton.



A photo of the 3 keynote Aboriginal speakers in a panel, Uncle Max, Uncle Bruce, Uncle Noel and Nicola

The festival was very rich in cultural presentations, workshops and information sharing. The diverse ways of connecting to Earth included Ayurvedic medicine, yoga, biodynamic farming, herbalism, macrobiotics, Agni Hotra rituals, aroma therapy and many more. There was yummy vegetarian Indian food presented by the followers of Amma (see <http://www.ammaaustralia.org.au>), who also shared

several kirtan sessions, as well as a stall providing delicious Aboriginal food that included kangaroo steaks and emu burgers. Uncle Noel and others presented talks and information on Aboriginal bush food and traditional medicine.

One of the major themes of the festival was the extensive system of Aboriginal farming techniques as documented by early British explorers in their journals, information that never made it into the history books. Uncle Bruce Pascoe's presentation of this as documented in his book *Dark Emu*, was both revelatory and deeply disturbing to me. They grew yams, Kangaroo grass, wild millet and wild rice. Granaries were found in villages, which the explorers stole and burnt to the ground. Bill Gammage's presentation on his book *The Greatest Estate*, showed that Australia was a giant parkland not unlike the European aristocratic estates. Again this had been created by Aboriginal people over their 60,000 years plus living in this continent, which the Europeans called Terra Australis, the Great South Land. As well as the fire stick farming used to create these parklands, there were the earliest known human constructions of fish traps, weirs and water redirected to make it easier to catch fish, one of the major food sources for many tribal groups.

All the agricultural and food gathering practices were respectful of maintaining an ecological balance in harmony with nature. This delicate balance was devastated by the colonist's introduction of cloven hooved animals like sheep, cattle and horses. The sheep ate the yams, the cattle ate the grasses and their hooves compacted the delicate arid topsoil. The wide areas of open parklands allowed the colonists to travel quickly across the country with their stock, thus replacing the traditional food of kangaroo, wallaby, goanna, possum, emu etc.

The Aboriginal dance and smoking ceremony, as well as all the diverse musical performances and rituals like Agni Hotra added a rich cultural dimension to the festival/conference. It put into context for me the Aboriginal dance that Uncle Noel's nephew Philip has gifted to the Dances of Universal Peace community as part of what has become our annual Spring Renewal dance retreats over the last 3 years at Jamanee Gunya, which is Uncle Noel and Tricia's place near Ulladulla on the South Coast of NSW.

Through the talk that Nicola Lambert and I gave on the first day and the workshop we ran on the last afternoon, I felt a real deepening in the relationship between these Budawang and Yuin elders and the Dances of Universal Peace community. Overall the festival allowed me to deepen my understanding of the First Nations people of Australia, as part of a peace making process. As part of connecting to Country there is also a need to connect with the indigenous people of the Country, who tell the story of the Country through their dances and other ritual and cultural practices.

As humans we need to have both the experience of being in a place and understanding and knowing the story of the place. Just as we need to know our personal story to understand something of who we are. In Maori culture there is the ritual of the Mihi, where we introduce ourselves through our ancestors, our

mountain, our river, our totem as well as where we come from physically. In our workshop we encouraged people to introduce where their ancestors had been indigenous. We danced the Native American inspired dance with the words; "I walk a path of the beauty, a path my ancestors laid out before me." Then people were invited to introduce their ancestors' place of origin. Along with other processes of sharing we explored our cultural and indigenous wellbeing.



Here's a Kangaroo dance



Philip dancing with Uncle Max on the stage and Tricia singing

In a few weeks time we are going to revisit the NSW South Coast with our next Spring Renewal dance camp on the land of Uncle Noel Butler. This will be the 4th camp we've had there and has involved a deepening connection with the Aboriginal community of this region, the Budawang people, with the Australian dances network.