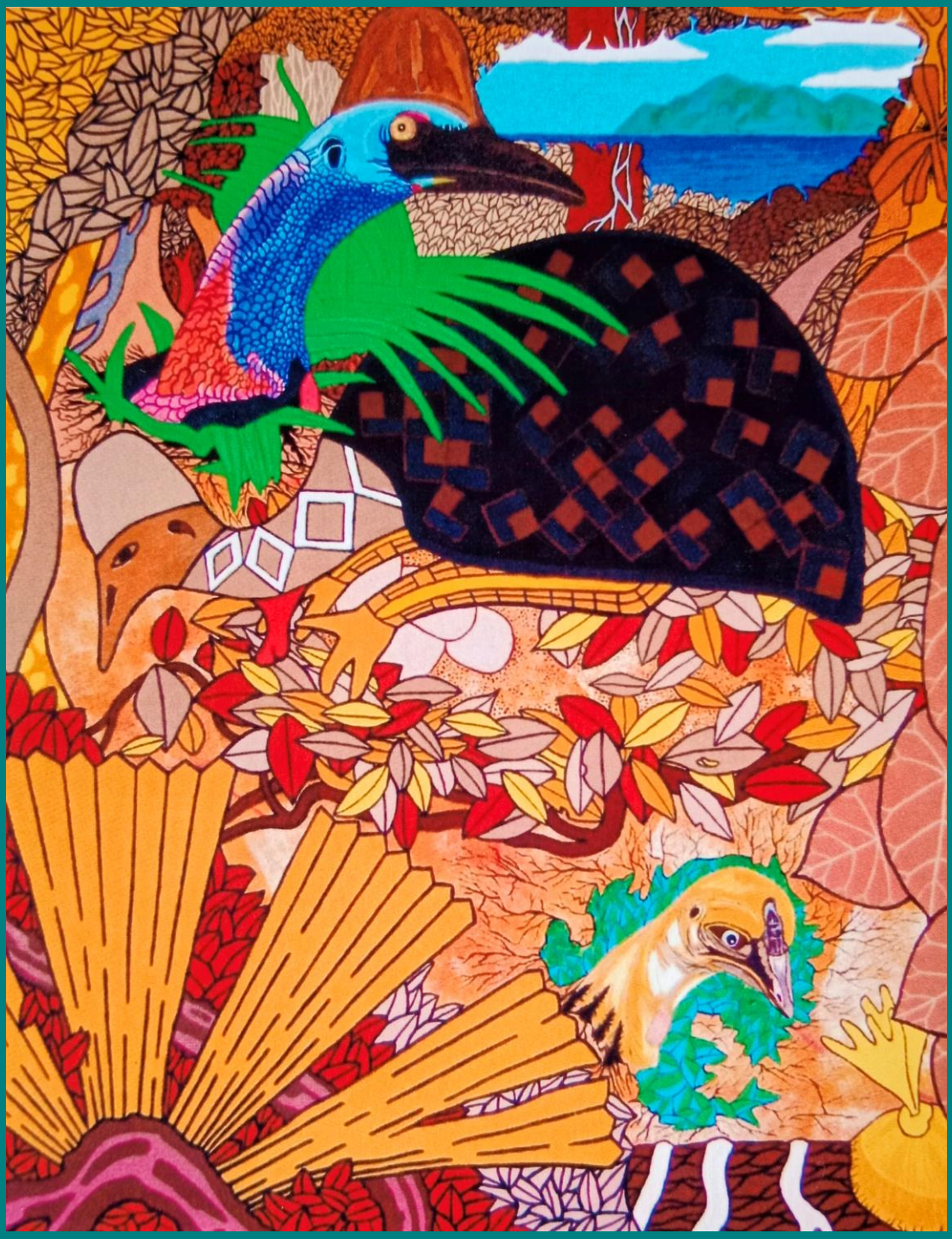
DJIRU PEOPLE:
ABORIGINAL LIFE BY THE SEA

EXCERPTS VOLUME 1: DJIRU COUNTRY



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The histories published by the Mission Beach Historical Society are as accurate as we can make them. Few accounts of history are 100% correct and there are going to be more errors when we recall events of many years ago. We always welcome suggested edits and additions or deletions and where possible we will edit where we find we are in error. However, the oral histories we record are the words of the people we interview, and we can only alter those with the authorisations of the people we interviewed.

This is a short version of the full story with text from Djiru Country. Volume 2 of Djiru Excerpts contains abridged text from Contact History, while Volume 3 is about The Djiru Estate and Future with Forewords and Afterwords by Djiru Traditional Owner, Leonard Andy included. In these versions, the references and bibliography are not included and few images are inserted.

Cover Image
Art by Leonard Andy 'Djiru Gunday' copyright L. Andy, Parliament House Collection, Canberra.

LANGUAGE

The words *Aboriginal people* and *Aborigines* are used with no intended disrespect. These names are based on the Latin, *ab origine* "from the beginning". Similarly, "Old People" (past traditional owners, especially of pre-colonial times) is a term of respect which their descendants often use.

Occasionally derogatory terminology is to be found in this work, in quotations from writers of the past. The terminology of the nineteenth century writers is not appropriate today. It has only been retained in direct quotations where they are useful. The thinking of the times is recognised; terminology is a reminder of this.

DJIRU COUNTRY

'Where the rainforest meets the sea' is a description that justifiably entices visitors today to the stunning Wet Tropics World Heritage Area of Far North Queensland. It is here that tropical rainforests meet tropical inshore waters, which are complex, stable, and biologically productive ecosystems. The traditional home of the Djiru people includes both, and they have lived here for thousands and thousands of years. They are people of the rainforest and also custodians of the sea country adjacent, from the Hull River to Maria Creek on the coast, and inland to El Arish.

This beautiful part of what became "North Queensland" saw the Aboriginal inhabitants dispossessed of their land by colonial settlers within a few decades during the second half of the nineteenth century. As elsewhere on the continent, "there was almost total miscomprehension of each other's way of life". Recent granting of native title to tracts of crown land in the area has now done a little towards acknowledging their traditional ownership and spiritual links.

The way in which the colonisers took over ensured that little would be left of the lifestyle the Djiru enjoyed before the arrival of the intruders. The speed with which the Djiru population was decimated, as well as causing great human suffering, also resulted in tragic language loss and inhibited the passing on of cultural and spiritual knowledge. Yet the surviving families, with amazing resilience, continue today to adapt and maintain cultural integrity.

As well as the knowledge that Djiru people have of life before colonisation, there are historical documents extant in which Europeans recorded their observations of, and contact with, Djiru people. We also have the evidence of Djiru Country itself: the ecosystems that the people shared, were sustained by, and which they cared for through spiritual connections that went far beyond ecology.

Clump Point was a focus point in Djiru country and this became the English name by which people referred to Djiru people; it was used long before there was an aboriginal settlement on the mainland opposite Dunk Island and the beach there came to be called "Mission Beach". In the 1970s, the Girramay and other Elders I spoke with still referred to the "Clump Point mob".

The available ethno-histories are examined below for relevant information, while also considering their limitations due to the conditions of recording. The information from European observers must be understood to be limited by cultural and racial bias, as well as being based on transient contact, little or no understanding of the language and, usually, superficial knowledge. In some cases, the record was written down some time after just fleeting contact or passing events.

Location, Land and Language

Djiru Country comprises coastal land and the adjacent sea between Maria Creek to the north and Hull River to the south, while extending inland westwards to the cane fields of El Arish. This was the country of the Djiru nation, who spoke the language Djiru. Djiru was so closely related to neighbouring languages that linguists identify them all as dialects of a single language, which linguist, Bob Dixon, called "Dyirbal".

In the Aboriginal worldview, there is a oneness of all things, there is no separation between people and nature. Pascoe speaks of "a jig-saw mutualism" where the people had "rights and responsibilities

for particular pieces of the jigsaw, but they were constrained to operate that piece so that it added to rather than detracted from the pieces of their neighbours and the epic integrity of the land".

As Gulngay Elder, Joe Kinjun said, "Clump Point side, they're Djiru. They walkabout down here [Tully River mouth] for fish then go home. When asked about which people lived where, Ida Henry (of Jirrbal descent) said, "Yimunbarra at Lower Tully and Tully Heads, and Djiru down that way. Nobody down the Bluff [Murray River mouth] any more. Yimunbarra and Djiru talk different way".

Geography and Ecology

A narrow coastal plain is backed by a series of ridges forming the Walter Hill Range which, in the west, rises to some 1000 metres. High ground reaches the coast at Bingil Bay in the centre of the Djiru traditional area. Small streams drain the area, the largest watercourses being Maria Creek in the north and Hull River to the south, both of which enter the sea through widespread swamps, mangroves and wetlands. "The Clump Point shoreline is regionally very significant as it is the only area within the Wet Tropics Bioregion where basalt formations extend to the coast... Boulders extend into the sea on either side of Clump Point".

Offshore islands represent parts of the ranges which were partly drowned by a rise in sea-levels in post-glacial times, 8-10,000 years ago. Indigenous fish-traps are found on Hinchinbrook Island and Goold Island to the south. These were probably built when sea levels were lower but are still operational, catching fish, crabs, oysters and other shellfish. On Goold Island, they have been described as consisting of "a large funnel that is clearly visible together with some pools, loops and straight lines that can only be seen at extremely low tides".

The rainforest stories or "myths" are evidence that an unbroken oral tradition dates back thousands of years, if now only "remnant". There are "no other records in the world of a non-literate indigenous culture with such an accurate oral prehistory dating back 10,000 to 15,000 years". The latter dates refer to the sea level rise, not to overall length of occupation.

Natural Vegetation and Fauna

Widespread clearing for sugar cane, banana plantations and other grazing and agricultural endeavours has taken place in the hinterland, and settlement along the beaches has continued to grow. Yet there are residual areas where National Parks provide conservation zones.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Djiru traditional area was characterised by complex ecosystems; the plant communities and animal life of the rich marine environment, the shorelines and the coastal rainforest all contributed to a varied and intricate homeland that they knew intimately.

The rainforest between Cooktown and Ingham is floristically and structurally the most diverse in Australia, with some 1160 species of higher plants representing 516 genera and 119 families.

Clearing for agriculture has meant natural vegetation of much of the study area must be inferred from soil types and other physical features. Management of the Wet Tropics World Heritage area should now have halted further felling and clearing.

Like all rainforest people, the Djiru were aware of how the fauna occupied specific niches and conformed to seasonal rhythms. Seasonal fluctuations in fruit production by plants affected populations of animals as well as direct access to plant foods.

Clearly, a wide range of wild food plants was available for food and for technology to the Djiru. Similarly, a diversity of animal foods contributed to the traditional diet. Terrestrial animals in their country included wallabies, bandicoots, cassowaries, goannas, snakes and other reptiles and small marsupials. Fish, shellfish and waterfowl were obtained from the rivers, river mouths, swamps, mangroves and coastal shallows as well as the marine resources accessed by canoe. The latter included saltwater turtles and dugong.

Archaeological Record

The evidence from archaeological studies must always be qualified by a recognition that the environment here is not conducive to preserving cultural materials. The archaeological record and cultural significance of sites has been summarised and discussed by Pentecost. At Clump Point, fish traps, stone alignments, shell middens and artefact scatters have been recorded along the foreshore on both sides of the point and in Boat Bay, attesting to the former habitation and use of the place. It is a highly significant site to the Djiru people and provides material evidence of aspects of Djiru lifestyle.

Human Population

It is thought that the first people entered Australia some 65,000 years ago, if not earlier. "The Aboriginal people of the Wet Tropics of Queensland have lived continuously in the rainforest environment for at least 5000 years". The earliest dated archaeological evidence is from 5100 years ago. However, there is no reason to think people were not here for some 40,000 or more years before this and lived through climatic variations and fluctuations in rainforests.

During the last glacial period, the lower sea level meant Djiru country included a more extensive coastal plain than the current one, probably with patches of rainforest vegetation as suggested.

It is estimated that in 1839 there was an Aboriginal population in what became Queensland of at least 300,000. Densities varied, but the northeast coast rainforests supported higher densities. There "must have been at least 5000 people speaking dialects of Dyirbal in the first part of the nineteenth century".

Harris used general estimates of post-European decline in Aboriginal populations to calculate that the pre-European population was not less than two and a half times the 1897 population. For the Djiru, their population in 1800 would have been 325.

However, as will be seen below, the Djiru people suffered a huge proportionate loss of population when the Native Police carried out reprisals following the deaths of eleven white men when they came ashore after the wreck of the brig *Maria* in 1872. The exact numbers are not known, but it is likely that at least 100 Aboriginal people were shot in retaliation. This is explored further below.

Rainforest People

"The Djiru consider themselves and their neighbours to be part of a wider group of coastal rainforest people who shared a common lifestyle… while ethnographic and ethno-historic information particular

to the Djiru people is limited, valid comment on their way of life can also be made from sources referring to the wider coastal rainforest region". The common rainforest lifestyle of the region between Cooktown and Cardwell is usually summarised as characterised by several features unique to this area, reflecting elements of the rainforest habitat.

There was a heavy dependence on plant foods including several species of toxic plants which the people detoxified by various methods. They had seasonally-based, semi-permanent camps; their huts being durable and thatched with bark, palm fronds or grass, which could be repaired when the people returned there at the start of the wet season. Their material culture included unique weapons for settling disputes by duelling: large wooden swords and shields. They also made use of various traps and nets in the hunting of game and fish. They made cane baskets used for the leaching of toxic plant parts in running water and made bark blankets and also bark bags for carrying water and honey. Some degree of food storage applied, as well as extended trading links and specialization in trade.

The annual round (or subsistence cycle) was based on the seasonal variations in the ecosystem. The fruiting of the main rainforest plants that provided food was a major consideration, with the availability of various animal and fish resources also changing with the seasons. During the wet season the groups returned to their wet weather semi-permanent camps away from the flood-prone creek and river banks. Fish, eels and crayfish were plentiful as floods receded. Wallabies trapped between floodwaters, and goannas hiding in trees were hunted. Some trees fruited at this time and other food such as palm tree hearts were available at all times.

As the year became drier people dispersed into smaller family groups. Wallabies were fattest at this time and were hunted, scrub turkeys were trapped. Fish were abundant, caught by stupefaction in small lagoons or by hook and line, spearing and with net traps. Family groups would forage within their own country but also come together for larger gatherings. The end of the dry season (October to December) was a time when plant foods were most abundant. This was the time when many groups came together for ceremonial gatherings (corroborees or *brun)* where disputes were settled, items were exchanged; dancing, singing and fighting characterised the social interaction. As Gulngay Elder, Joe Kinjun, said, "mob come up from Ingham, Clump Point, Tableland, Kirrama, Ravenshoe, all come down. Fight in day, then dance and make friends… Enough kai-kai [food] in one place – *mirrany, bara, banginyu* – take him – women carry it, men carry shields, boomerangs, all that, camp on the road along the way".

A track went from Girramay country to Clump Point and then into Mamu country. The "mailman" would take the message stick to the people along the track, then the people would go to the gathering. It took a week for Gulngay people to get to Innisfail according to Joe Kinjun.

Pentecost noted that such gatherings "are testament to the degree of inter-tribal interaction and communication that was practiced. They also required advance organisation and energy expense on the part of the host groups who had to provide food supplies".

Sea Country People

Just as we can learn from the rainforest what resources would have been available to Aboriginal people and when, inferences can be made from the resources of the coastal fringe, beaches and mangroves. Seasonal variations in availability of marine resources would have been important. During the wet season, rough seas and heavy discharge of waters in the estuaries and creek-mouths from flooding inland would have meant only spearing fish because fishing with hook and line were more difficult. It

is likely shellfish from sheltered inshore beds, and molluscs from mangrove communities would have been favoured. Cyclones and storms at this time could also damage shellfish and mollusc habitats. As the dry season ensued, fishing would have become easier, as also would turtle and dugong hunting. Turtle eggs are laid in hot sand, where they require six weeks of incubation. The Djiru would have known which beaches (including offshore island beaches) were favoured and when to seek the eggs.

Historical observations of Djiru lifestyle

To this broad context of Djiru life can be added some specific information from white men who recorded aspects of Aboriginal life as they observed it in the area. Djiru people had an oral tradition and passed down their histories and knowledge by non-written means. Edmund Banfield and Walter Roth, in particular, provide some records of aspects of Aboriginal life at the turn of the nineteenth century. Their information is, of course, limited by their opportunities as well as their attitudes, while some forty years of colonial oppression had greatly affected the traditional owners of the area.

At the same time as Banfield was writing, Dr Walter Edmund Roth was collecting ethnographic information from Aboriginal people in many parts of north-eastern Queensland. Roth was a doctor and an ethnographer, as well as a Government Protector of Aboriginals for some years. He provided scientific reports to the Home Secretary that contained meticulously collected data. His "evident humanitarian concerns conflicted with a harsh administration… [he was] exceptional for his sympathies during an era of social ignorance and racist dogma".

Roth and Banfield were writing at a time when the Djiru and Malanbarra people had suffered half a century of colonial depredation and "dispersal", dispossession and loss of culture. Their observations only point to glimpses of pre-colonisation lifestyle seen through a lens of assumed racial superiority.

Banfield says Tom was "one of the few survivors of the native population of the island," while his wife, Nellie, was from the mainland. He had lived on the mainland for some years before the Banfields arrived, but he returned to Dunk to work for them. He had a great knowledge of the coast as well as of the islands. However, Tom was a Warrgamay rather than a Djiru man (L. Andy).

Fishing

Banfield presented an article, "Blacks as Fishermen" to the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia which was published in the Queensland Geographical Journal in 1909. He lamented the loss of knowledge exemplified when he asked if they used pearl or tortoiseshell fish hooks and was told they prefer "i-een" (iron) bought from the store. Yet they knew well the habits of fish and had varied and unconventional methods of fishing, which was a serious occupation.

The mouths of the smaller creeks were "sometimes dammed, save for certain sluices and by-washes… Weirs formed by stakes driven into the sand and interwoven with twigs guide incoming fish into ingenious traps, whence they are scooped up in dillybags." Men, women and children all took part. The spearing of fish in shoals detected in shallow water did not involve use of the woomera here, although it did in other localities. Fishing at night also took place: torches of paperbark provided illumination as the group of people rushed in to spear the panicking fish.

From November to December myriads of sardine-sized fish (sprat) appeared in shoals and encircled the islands. Other fish and birds fed on these small fry, while the Aboriginals used a seine net made

from trailing vines and grass growing on the beach, rolled up and twisted into a huge loose cable. This was run out at right angles to the beach by the men, curving it back towards the beach, while the women and children waded out in a line and as the net caught the fish they threw them into dilly bags. "The haul often amounts to a surfeit for the whole camp".

Larger fish were harpooned, a long line being used. These included groper, the giant perch, king, bonito, rhoombah, sweet-lips, parrot-fish, sea-mullet, and the sting-rays. The people also had a "decided partiality" for eels, according to Banfield, and would wade in the shallow mangrove-bordered creeks probing the bottom with a spear.

Thomas Allen Young was Police Magistrate at Cardwell from 1885 to 1886. In this position, he travelled throughout the region and had a cutter and four men at his command. He wrote some of his memories of those days in the *Cairns Morning Post* in 1908 under the pen-name "Ishmael". He describes the people at Clump Point as "wonderfully clever at making twine and fishing nets.

Pearl shell hooks were used "principally for smaller fish - whiting, perch, bream, flathead, etc. - the occurrence of large hooks being exceedingly rare. Mullet (if tradition is to be credited) were seldom caught by hook and line but were speared among the mangroves at high tide - a practice which prevails to this day". With barbless hooks the bait was not impaled but strapped on with shreds of bark.

Canoes and Hunting at Sea

Banfield described the skill of catching a turtle. The men would "voyage out each in a bark canoe, which weighs about 40 lbs., is 8 feet long, 2 feet beam and 1 foot deep midships, … leaving little more than an inch of freeboard. … occasionally, two men fit themselves into a canoe".

"The canoe is constructed of a single sheet of bark, preferably of "Gulgong" or "Carr-lee" or "Wee-ree" brought neatly together at the ends, which are sewn with strips of lawyer cane. Pieces of lawyer cane are sometimes also stitched in to represent stem and stern posts, and the chaffing pieces also are of cane, though occasionally thin pliant saplings are strapped and sewn on. Across the bow and the stern are stays of cane, with generally a stronger thwart midships. When new, and the stitches of yellow cane regular and bright, the canoe represents about the neatest and nattiest of the few constructive efforts of the blacks and is as buoyant as a duck. The seams are caulked with a resinous gum, "Tambarang," of the jungle tree known as "Arral"".

In the canoe, three or four harpoons were carried. Three species of turtle are found in these waters: the loggerhead, the hawksbill and the green, which is plentiful. Both of the latter are herbivorous and edible and are preferred as food to the fish- and mollusc-eating loggerhead, which has stronger flesh but is not shunned. Dugong were also harpooned. The people were familiar with their life-history, the strength and trend of currents and the locality of their favoured feeding grounds and approached the shy creatures with stealth and struck when they surfaced to breath.

Crocodiles

The people were very cautious of crocodiles and knew where individual crocodiles lived and were very careful crossing creeks; Maria Creek was well-known for crocodiles. Djiru constructed rafts of logs strapped together with lawyer vine to cross creeks. In tidal waters crocodiles were caught by means of a temporary blocking of the creek with stakes and lawyer cane. When a crocodile is found to have gone

up the creek through a space left in the blocking stakes, they close it with a lawyer cane screen. On the falling of the tide the animal is speared".

Torres Strait (Imperial, Nutmeg) Pigeons

The Torres Strait or nutmeg pigeons arrived from the north in their thousands during the first week of September and departed in March. They found food during the day on the mainland but flew back to the islands in the evening to nest and roost there. They mainly kept to particular routes, flying in flocks. "Early in the season, they pass Dunk Island at the rate of about 300 per minute, during the hour and a half preceding sunset." Yet the numbers were greater prior to Europeans arriving. "Pioneers tell of the days when blacks were wont to make regular expeditions, returning to the mainland with canoes laden with fledglings and eggs, which in accordance with tradition were devoured by the older men and women."

Signs

The people watched the flowering of trees that signal the first appearance or disappearance of birds. "When the leaves fell and the red flowers began to decorate the leafless branches of the coral tree, the blacks knew of the coming of the [Torres Strait] pigeons". The calls of the little white tern mean the coming of vast shoals of sprats that attract bonito and other large fish. Leonard Andy, Djiru Traditional Owner, says that when the Cottonwood tree is flowering, it signals the arrival of grunter and bream.

Cooking

Turtles were cooked by a "kummaorie". A big fire was made, and large smooth stones placed in the embers to heat up; meanwhile the turtle was killed and head, neck and sometimes front flippers were removed. The entrails and stomach were also removed, cleansed and put back into the cavity. The turtle was stuck upright in the sand, tail-first, banked by sand, then the red-hot stones were lifted with sticks and dropped into it. Another hole in the sand was lined with stones and a fire lit on them. When the stones were hot, the fire was raked away and the turtle was eased onto them, retaining all the gravy, carapace down. The whole was then covered with leaves (native banana, native ginger or palms), a mound of sand was raised over this and left overnight. In the morning the flesh was thoroughly cooked. The shell was lifted off revealing a rich soup. Balls of grass were used as sops. The people, "loudly smacking and sucking their lips to emphasise appreciation" ate "to repletion for a couple of days".

"One of the chief vegetable foods of the blacks is the fruit of "tinda-burra" (Moreton Bay chestnut or black bean. "Blacks regard this tree with special favour and consideration." The raw seeds taken from the bean pods are poisonous as they contain saponin. Leonard Andy confirmed its Djiru name is *mirryn*.

"It is women's work to collect the beans, make the shell-planes, and do the shredding. In the first place the beans are cooked, the oven consisting of hot stones covered with leaves. In three or four hours they are taken out and planed, a dillybag full of the shavings is immersed in running water for two or three days, the food being then ready for consumption without further preparation."

Another plant food requiring careful preparation was the cycad. Banfield describes the process. Leonard Andy confirmed the zamiad *banginyu* was harvested and processed in Djiru country.

"Ishmael" also wrote of Clump Point: "It was here for the first time that I saw the match box bean, a large vine bearing pods from six inches to two feet long made into flour. They steep the nuts in water. A dillybag is filled with the beans and placed in a stream of running water, until the shell bursts, which takes about three days. The nuts are then cleaned of the outer shell and the bean is then pounded into a beautiful white flour and baked in cakes.

Large Gatherings ("Corroborees")

Banfield wrote in 1908, corroborees "took place every week or so... residents from various localities met, disputed and parted… they served to display skill in use of weapons".

Banfield devotes a chapter in his book, "Tropic Days", to a corroboree that he and Bertha attended on the mainland across from Dunk. Message-sticks had been carried into unfamiliar country by "nervous boys" and the men, women and children all assembled. The beach Aborigines carried oysters and scraps of half-baked fish in well-worn dilly bags. They trudged along the margin of the sea where the receding tide left a firm, level, springy track. They were familiar with all the moods of the sea, and "took little heed of any". The natives of the mountains hastened to the coast, some of whom had not seen the sea before ("big fella salt water").

The corroboree began late in the afternoon, "many of the participators having spent hours in the assumption of the festive costume of the down of sulphur-crested cockatoos plastered to the skin with grease and blood… The down was arranged in tufts following the perpendiculars of the body from shoulder to shin, or in a series of circles accurately spaced, or in intersecting spirals, while the heads of all performers and combatants were converted into white mops."

The clapping of hands and clicking of boomerangs accompanied dancing and singing. The airing of private grievances and individual challenges resulted in spears and boomerangs being thrown in aggression, usually over women. "With feasting and fighting, with dancing and storytelling, quarrelling and reconciliations, the assemblage spent a happy week. Then the jungle reabsorbed the nervous hillmen, and beachcombers straggled along the yellow sands".

Stories

The Aboriginal people knew many stories about their country and the spirit beings that created features long ago. Banfield recorded some of these. One story relates to Bedarra Island and it's "rocky satellite", "Peerahmah". Banfield was told the story belonging to this place was that of two women who were left on Coonanglebah (Dunk) while the other Aboriginal people all went to Hinchinbrook Island. The women decided to swim there. After swimming to Bedarra they were exhausted and were changed into the stone island "Peerahmah".

The story of the restless stone is told in "Tropic Days". A particular large tree "stands at the spot where generation after generation of the original owners of the soil has crossed the creek, wearing a waving path upon which ferns ever encroach and which every flood amends. In a recess in its massive roots reposes "Kidjo-bang," the restless stone - a boulder, man's-head size, stained with a rim of sober brown. This is its accustomed scat. It roves the locality, returning, swallow-like, to the close-fitting hollow of the root.