



**Significance of Kangaroo Skin Cloaks
and Possum Skin Cloaks
By Lynette Riley (2012)**

Significance of Kangaroo Skin Cloaks and Possum Skin Cloaks

Traditionally Kangaroo Skin Cloaks - and Possum Skin Cloaks were made and worn for two reasons. The first being an everyday purpose to provide warmth, as a shawl or blanket may be worn today; but also as protection from the rain as the water runs off the fur side as it does for the animals, thus providing protection from inclement weather. The Cloaks could be made small enough to carry babies or small children or a hood would be sewn into the cloak which would be slung down the back of the mother and the baby would be carried in this pouch; or large cloaks/blankets were made to provide warmth and shelter for several people. These cloaks could be used for trade, and were highly valued. Items that were traded for these cloaks would be significant and special stones or crystals; stone axes; spears or woomearas; and even as marriage gifts or peace offerings in times of conflict.

An early documented reference, in the initial contact between Wiradjuri people and the colonists, in recognition of Possum Skin Cloaks is recorded in Governor Macquarie's Journal (10th May 1815, Bathurst) where he talks of meeting three Wiradjuri 'warriors' led by Windradyne. They exchanged gifts, Macquarie presenting Windradyne with a 'tomahawk and piece of yellow cloth' and Windradyne presenting Macquarie with a 'possum skin cloak'.¹

In creating a Kangaroo Cloak, the pelt was usually taken from one kangaroo to create the cloak, but if wishing a larger cloak several Kangaroo pelts could be sewn together with kangaroo sinew, creating a larger cloak. Single pelt cloaks for example would be made with large red kangaroo pelts used for adults and smaller kangaroo pelts would be used for smaller/younger people. No person would use the skins from a Kangaroo that might be a Totemic connection, but could use pelts from other Kangaroos. For instance, if your Totem was a Grey Kangaroo, you could not harm or use any part of that kangaroo as you would be in brother/sister relationship to this animal; but you may be able to use pelts, meat, sinew, etc from Red, Brown, Black or Blue Kangaroos, depending on other Totemic connections.

The second use was for ceremonial purposes, where the underside of the pelt would be incised with various designs to indicate the person's Moiety and Totemic connection as well as their journey through life and as such would provide information on that person's status within Nations and across Clan Groups. A Kangaroo Skin Cloak would be more specific in the purpose of the incisions.

A 'Possum Skin Cloak' would be either created to commemorate a person's birth and would then be added to with each new piece recording a person's life journey. As such, no two cloaks would ever be similar, each was unique to represent that person and as such each person's cloak would be valued and recognised by all. The intricate design on these cloaks represented a person's Moiety; Nation and Clan affiliations; their Totems; and recorded specific ceremonial or other experiences in that person's life. Significantly the designs on the Cloaks would be symbolic of and used in particular territories. This 'Cloak' would therefore be worn by the person it was designed for, in all ceremonies, initiations and be associated as an extension of that person. Ultimately and often the person would be buried with their cloak.

Additionally other Possum Skin shawls, cloaks or blankets, could be made by individuals or jointly by groups of people to record stories of significance or experiences – these could be traded.

Kangaroo Skins and Possum Skins were also used to make: drums, arm and waist bands, belts and headdresses. Current records exist of this practice mainly by Aboriginal Nations in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The nations in NSW are: Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Dharug, Worimi, Wonnaruah, Awabakul and Narrinyeri.²

How are they worn? In two primary fashions, one is where the tail is used to wrap around a person's shoulder and neck and tied with sinew or with the skin being pierced by a bone (much like a button) to hold the cloak over a person's shoulders. The second is by the tail being wrapped across the shoulders and then under one arm, to allow for greater freedom of arm movement.

Why aren't they made more often? One of the main reasons is Government and Missionary Policies which made it a crime to transmit culture, as a way of forcing assimilation on Aboriginal people. The government would issue blankets as an incentive; of course this often resulted in ill-health for Aboriginal people as the government blankets were neither as warm or water-proof as the Kangaroo and Possum Skin Cloaks were. It was also evident that Aboriginal dress or lack

¹ Journeys in Time 1809-1820 (Governor Macquarie's Journal), 1998-2009, Macquarie University Library and the State Library of New South Wales, www.lib.mq.edu.au/all/journeys/people/peoplea_f.html

² Fernando, D. The History of Cloak-Making in Eastern Australia, pp7-9 in 'Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak by the Lake', 2010, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery.

of dress was directly linked with the postcolonial concepts of civilising Aboriginal people and as such an emphasis on clothing Aboriginal people was seen as crucial to the colonisation of Australia and the first decade of the colonial process, was devoted to dispersing clothing to Aboriginal people.³ Intrinsic in this was the lack of value towards Aboriginal cultural items and traditions and the further belief that traditional culture, particularly in the eastern and southern states, no longer survived, in any context of relevance, to the colonisers; regardless of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of Aboriginal people themselves. Unfortunately this was used to compound the image that the only real Aboriginal people – with any culture or traditions – lived in the western and northern states, ie: NT, WA and upper Queensland.

Additionally, much of the research in the 1800s and 1900s, being undertaken and considered to be worthy was collected by a patriarchal society. What this meant for Aboriginal people is that much of what was recorded was done so by men, who failed to recognise and were not privy to the cultural traditions, skills, experiences and Eldership of women, within Aboriginal Nations, Clan Groups and Families. If you consider that Aboriginal history and culture as being hidden in Australia; then what this has meant for Aboriginal women's practices is a further veil to hide their practices and skills. It also resulted in a re-defining of what represented a 'real' Aboriginal person; and those in the eastern and southern states, due to the greatest contact in the colonising process, were deemed to have lost their culture.

Of the traditionally produced Aboriginal Cloaks in museums today 15 were collected between the late 1800s to the early 1900s and placed in Museums across Australia and overseas. Within Australia we have Cloaks in - Western Australia Museum and Gloucester Lodge Museum in WA; South Australia and Victoria Museums, SA. Internationally we have Cloaks in – Smithsonian, Washington DC, The British Museum, London, Museum of Ethnology, Berlin and Pigorini Museum, Italy. More recently in 2010, a Possum Skin Cloak was created through the Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery as part of an Aboriginal Cultural revival project. This Cloak was displayed in the Sydney Art Gallery for several months. ⁴ The revitalisation and re-production of these Cloaks is seen as an essential tool to re-claiming traditions thought lost and as a way to re-affirm cultural identity.

In the Cloaks I produce I am looking at:

1. Re-learning symbols used in Wiradjuri art and cultural items; which have also been used as vital communication tools. Once I am familiar with these I will start learning Gamilaroi symbols.
2. Re-establishing a cultural tradition.
3. Developing family histories and bloodlines on the Cloaks, for family members and others.
4. To enjoy a form of artwork which incorporates my own cultural revitalisation, which is both challenging and relaxing.

The on-going test for Aboriginal people is the recognition of how they present their cultural traditions and that they do this in the manner they see fit. Not that it is a right for non-Indigenous people to take this knowledge and that this representation is accepted in the format that Aboriginal people chose to present.

Lynette Riley 2012

³ Kleinert, S. 2010. Clothing the postcolonial body: art, artifacts and action in south eastern Australia. . Craft+Design Enquiry, Vol 2, p4. Found at www.craftaustralia.org.au/cde on 23 February 2012.

⁴ Blacklock, F. Aboriginal Skin Cloaks, National Quilt Register.