Mildura Welcome Baby to Country: A strength based approach to Aboriginal community wellbeing
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Photographs courtesy the 2013 and 2015 Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony Project

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*Gukwonderuk (Wotjobaluk) is an important cure all medicine used by Aboriginal people in South East Australia; the word translates to Old Man Weed.
Welcome Baby to Country has been an important part of our society so that everyone in the Community knows this Child and knows where this Child comes from and belongs.

My role as an Elder is to pass on a part of our Culture and our heritage. Welcome Baby to Country is not welcoming the Babies into the Latje Latje Tribe, it’s welcoming the Babies into the Community. We are all part of one Mob and we are many Tribes.

Making the symbol on the Baby’s face is a traditional marking and it symbolises a part of traditional dress for a Ceremony. I use Ochre and it is a simple mark across the face, this is a part of our ancestry and our heritage.

Another significant part of Welcome Baby to Country is that it not only connects the Baby, it connects the Family and it connects the Community, even though we are many Tribes that have settled here on Latje Latje Country. It is just one of the ways of passing on our traditions, our Cultures, our practices to the Community and it is really great to connect the Babies when they come.

Walking around and having a look at all the faces at Welcome Baby to Country, to bring this sense of pride to a Community with a simple action, a sense of pride has just been reignited, a sense of Culture and heritage has just been embraced and it will just go on from this generation to many generations after.

Aunty Janine Wilson
ABC Open Sunraysia, 17th Aug 2015
## Contents

**Introduction and background**  
1. Local context for Welcome Baby to Country  
2. Local community strengths  
3. Aboriginal People know a lot about wellbeing  
4. Date of the Ceremony  

**The Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony**  
5. The venue  
6. Inviting Babies and Families  
7. Pre briefings  
8. The Great Cultural Safety Pram Incident  
9. Rehearsal  
10. Arrival and registration  
11. Staging of the Ceremony  
12. Mementos and Keepsakes  
13. Food and social connection  

**Conclusions**  

**References**
Introduction and background

Colonisation has caused extensive disruption to Aboriginal People’s lives and particularly in South Eastern Australia where a high level of cultural genocide has ensued\(^1\). Despite this, Aboriginal People have determinedly maintained and strengthened Cultural practices and knowledge. An important part of this has been the reinvigoration of Cultural practices. Every unique Aboriginal Person receives a diversity of benefit from Cultural practices with increased social and emotional wellbeing most often an outcome. Here we describe the process of reinvigoration of an ancient Aboriginal Ceremony of Welcoming Babies to Country. We also explore the wellbeing impacts for everyone involved in the event.

Local context for Welcome Baby to Country

Every Aboriginal Community is unique and the success of reinvigoration of Welcome Baby to Country was reliant on having complex understanding of the unique local context. The Mildura Aboriginal Community is located in a large rural township in Victoria, South East Australia. The estimated number of Aboriginal People in Mildura is 1,836 which makes up smaller group 3.8% of the broader Mildura Community\(^2\). The Community has many Little Ones with a large proportion of the Mildura Aboriginal population under four years of age, 14.6% or 268 Little Ones\(^3\). Many of these Little Ones live in one-Parent Families, with 62.6% of
Aboriginal Families with Kids under eight years of age one-Parent Families. This compares to 22.8% of all Mildura Families[4]. These Families are also likely to experience varying degrees of trauma and stress from exposure to racism; impacting on the Families’ social and emotional wellbeing[5]. While this data helps inform a picture about the Community other forms of data are also important to understand the local context.

Local people have a lot of knowledge about their community and this information is often crucial for planning purposes[6]. This type of knowledge, often tacit in nature, can inform realistic possibilities for local projects revealing relationships and priorities for different parties involved and providing information for appropriate pathways for communication[7]. In addition, Cultural knowledge is often held in this domain with Older People passing on information to Younger People in the Aboriginal Community[8]. This local knowledge was essential for informing development and implementation of the Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony.

The organisers of the Welcome Baby To Country Ceremony were long-term residents of Mildura and held considerable knowledge about the local Aboriginal Community. This included knowing that Aboriginal People in Mildura are very diverse, some are Traditional Owners and some People have moved to Mildura and are Traditional Owners to other areas. Some Aboriginal People in the Community due to colonisation, assimilation and consequent cultural genocide had little or no information about where their Family is originally from. The Community is recovering from the trauma and disruption from colonisation that can create disconnection between People in the Community, through psychological or physical violence that can be directed at the self or others. This was important information for the organisers to consider for the Ceremony.
Local community strengths

Despite the effects of disruption from colonisation the local Aboriginal Community has maintained many Cultural strengths. One of these strengths is a collective notion of ‘us’ rather than the singular person ‘I’ or the nuclear Family. This belief maintains that there exists a Community responsibility to raise a Family and a Little One. For example, if there were a Cultural program for Aboriginal Little Ones in Mildura, then the best possible outcome would be that every Aboriginal Little One would have potential access to this. This inclusiveness is about being a part of a Community, an authentic practice of being part of a group and belonging.

The organisers of Welcome Baby to Country recognised this Community strength and wanted to create a Ceremony that aimed to amplify and grow this sense of Connection. This was centered around a Traditional Owner wanting to find a process in which Aboriginal People living in Mildura could be Welcomed to Country. An important strength of the Ceremony comes from the commitment of the Traditional Owners to the local Community.

We wanted to say – you are welcome here and you are invited to flourish, live and participate as part of community.
Aboriginal People know a lot about wellbeing

Rituals and Ceremonies for Babies and Little Ones are practiced around the world[8] and provide People with connection to Community and enhance Community responsibility[9]. In First Nation Communities they are known to strengthen identity and affirm social relationships[10]. Indigenous Rituals and Ceremonies are diverse and often involve promotion of a sense of connection and belonging, acknowledge a life phase, assign a task or challenge and invoke the group with spirit[10]. These connections between People, Place and Country promote wellbeing for the individual and collective[11,12].

In Australia, Aboriginal Communities have been practicing Ceremonies and Rituals with Babies for millennia. These commonly relate to connections between Country and Family, and are voiced in oral histories, for instance, Joyce Williams (Wiradjuri) says, “The old saying, as my Grandmother said, ‘Wherever a Woman’s afterbirth is planted that’s their land’. See that tree down there that’s where I was born”[13]. Jipia Nappaljari Jones (Wlamadjari) says that her Mother told her, “You been born here in this Country and this land owns you and you come back anytime”[14]. Another example comes from Rita Watkins (Gunai Kurnai), “I believe the government policies that affected our Family’s lives did not deter us as Aboriginal people. My Mother went back to Lake Tyers so that I could be born with the help of Auntie Julia Thorpe”[15].

The organisers knew other Welcome Baby to Country Ceremonies and events were being held in Victoria and Queensland. The availability of a Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony in Mildura could provide a way to bring a diverse Aboriginal Community together to connect on a positive experience and memory. It could provide a Community connection through an ancient practice of acknowledgement and recognition of Traditional Owners of Country.

The fact that the Traditional Owners are saying to their ancestors that ‘hey this one’s here’, you know that’s pretty important it makes you feel good in yourself. There is something beautiful and raw about the Traditional Owners inviting you and heralding you in.

The re-invigorators also knew that Aboriginal Baby Ceremonies involved several elements, such as, respected Elders, celebration, formality, presence of Family and Community, the medium of smoke and that Babies were central to the Ceremony.

We wanted it be very ceremonial and pompous, we wanted people to feel special. We had no guidelines and didn’t know much about how other people did Welcome Baby To Country we just knew the concept which was welcoming new babies in a ritual ceremony.
The Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony

The organisers of Welcome Baby to Country identified several significant components of the ceremony and these were to:

- acknowledge importance of Traditional Owners
- connect People to Family, Community and Country
- create a happy lasting Cultural memory for People
- celebrate Elders, Families and Little Ones as special, important and worthwhile

When you walk down the street and you see someone else from Welcome Baby to Country you have something positive to talk about, a happy shared memory and a connection.

Important to the Ceremony is authenticity and meaning. Drawing on what is known about past practices and reclaiming this in the contemporary world. The Ceremony is not a direct replica of what happened in the past but is authentic to what is known and conveys the original Ceremony meaning. Several elements were considered in the creation of the Ceremony: the date of the Ceremony; the venue; pre-briefings; rehearsal; invitation to Babies and Families; the arrival and registration of Babies; Community sensitivities; the staging of the Ceremony; keepsakes and; provision of food.

There’s a lot of co-ordination and preparation. It’s really not that expensive to run given the enormous impact it has on Community. It creates a safe place, a connection and develops resilience. People know they are one of many and not standing in isolation, you are part of a group, you are part of a Family. It’s a Community owned asset. A Ceremonial passage.

Date of the Ceremony

The Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony significantly falls in NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Observance Committee) week in July. This week is a celebration of Aboriginal history, Culture and achievement and was considered a good fit for a Ceremony celebrating Little Ones through a Welcome to Country. There are many events occurring during NAIDOC week so to assist Community planning during this week it was decided that the Ceremony would have a consistent day and time from year to year.

Consideration and sensitivity was also given to broader Community happenings at the time of the Ceremony. For example, the first year of the Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony, the event was to occur at a time of Sorry Business in relation to the passing of a young Community member. The organisers consulted the Family concerned and feedback from the Family was that the Ceremony should go ahead and was needed more than ever to assist promote wellbeing and prevent other Community Sorry Business happening.
INVITATION

In 2015 we will celebrate NAIDOC with the annual “Welcome Baby to Country” ceremony. The event recognises traditional owners of the region, ensuring all new Koorie babies are traditionally ‘welcomed’ to this country and this community.

The ceremony will take place in the Mildura Arts Centre Theatre and each baby ‘Welcome to Country’ will receive a certificate and gift to commemorate the event. The event will include traditional story telling, music, and the welcoming ceremony conducted by local elders.

After the ceremony you are invited to join us for lunch at the Mildura Arts Centre.

To register your baby or to book a seat at the event please contact the organisers, RSVP by Tuesday July 7th.

This is a free community event

Welcome Baby to Country
Thursday July 9, 2015
12.00pm

Contact
Rose Gilby: T. 5022 5513  E. rose.gilby@monash.edu
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The venue
The Mildura Arts Centre Theatre was identified as a suitable Welcome Baby to Country venue for a number of reasons:

- it could accommodate a large number of People
- it provided a feeling and experience of formality
- it offered comfortable seating
- it had access to toilets
- it provided weather protection

In addition the venue was considered a reasonably neutral social space. This was an important consideration as some Families attending the Ceremony were clients with various service providers in Mildura and the Families’ relationship to these services could be complex. As the venue was not a service provider, but rather a venue specializing in events it was considered a better social fit for a Ceremony.

Many of the Families that came along to the Ceremony had never been to the Arts Centre. The Arts Centre is historically connected to colonisation in Mildura with a prominent colonial home located on the property. The Ceremony has to some extent reclaimed the space for local Aboriginal people and some of these People are only a few weeks old.

Inviting Babies and Families
In the lead up to the event widespread invitation is distributed for the Ceremony. A flyer is sent to various local agencies, Community contacts and early childhood places to be disseminated further. A registration form is available for Families to fill in and register their Baby and Little One for the Ceremony. The registration form allows the organisers to plan for each Baby and Little One on the day of the Ceremony. Flexibility is also provided for registration to be made up on the day of the Ceremony as well. The aim is to be as inclusive as possible. A media release is distributed on the day of the Ceremony to raise awareness about the event, which also assists the Community to get to know about the Ceremony and think about participating in the next year’s event.

We need to reclaim this for our Kids. They need it. We need it. We need it to instill that thing of who we are and that we’re not so far removed from culture as what people say we are, you know our Culture is still alive.

Given Victoria has a high number of Aboriginal Babies and Little Ones in care[16] the organisers appreciated that it was likely that a number of participants could be in care. The organisers worked with child protection workers and early childhood workers to ensure that these Little Ones could also participate in the Ceremony. Some of these Little Ones were living with non-Aboriginal families and so the Ceremony was additionally important for these Little Ones as a way of providing a lifelong connection to the Aboriginal Community. Ensuring that consent was provided for these Little Ones to be photographed was considered especially crucial so that these important Community People have a lasting memento of the Ceremony.
Pre briefings
Pre-briefings have been an essential component of the Welcome Baby to Country. The organisers knew that the chosen venue had previously not held events that primarily focused on the local Aboriginal Community and involved large numbers of Babies and Little Ones. This meant that venue staff were not used to how the local Aboriginal Community functioned and the local Aboriginal Community were not used to how the Arts Centre functioned. For instance, the venue employees were accustomed to people arriving at certain times, having bells to enter the theatre and the Aboriginal community were used to more flexibility around attending events.

There was learning for everyone.

To improve understanding about the Aboriginal Community pre-briefings about conduct were provided for venue staff. Including, how to communicate, such as, being mindful of voice volume and tone to prevent sharp or loud tones assisting to maintain respectful communication. It was highlighted to staff that the event aimed to create positive lasting memories. Explanations of the protocols of Aboriginal People and Country were given so employees would understand the importance and significance of the event. In response the employees often voiced privilege at being allowed to attend the event and were appreciative of recognition from organisers that they had contributed positively to the event.

The benefits for workers and clients are that by sharing the Ceremony experience rapport and relationship can be strengthened.

The Great Cultural Safety Pram Incident
You might not consider that a Cultural Safety incident could be related to prams. Despite careful planning at the first reinvigorated Welcome Baby to Country in Mildura; a Cultural Safety pram incident did happen. Families arrived with their prams loaded up with loved Little Ones, precious possessions and the usual baby paraphernalia prams do hold. An announcement was made to let Families know they could enter the theatre and Families wheeled their prams to the door.

The Families were very surprised to be told by the Mildura Arts Centre employees that prams were not allowed into the theatre and they would need to leave prams outside. Families did not know where in the Arts Centre they could leave their prams leading to some chaos and frustration.

Arts Centre staff had never had to deal with so many prams and Families had never had to deal with a pram free zone. Needless to say the following year a special pram depot area was organised and Families arriving were welcomed and told where they could leave their pram.
Another important group requiring pre-briefings were any social services case-workers attending the Ceremony with Family members. These workers were provided an explanation of the ceremony and aim to provide a positive memory for families. Workers were asked to be mindful of this, such as, the expectation of phones being silent during the Ceremony. Workers were informed that their presence at the Ceremony made them a part of the Ceremony and that memories were being created for them too.

Rehearsal
The Ceremony is highly organized with a running sheet for the day. The day before there is a rehearsal with everybody. This is to make sure that the sound, music, timing and lights all run to plan. This also allows the People involved in providing the Ceremony opportunity to understand the running of the day and feel confident with knowing their roles. Contingency plans are also in place in case there are any incidents or happenings that might require one on one attention from the organising team. Clear responsibilities are given to the team, especially so venue employees know which person to contact if they need support. The rehearsal allows organisers to be calm and organised on the day assisting to create an environment that Families can feel safe and confident in.

Arrival and registration
Families are welcomed at the venue front door and a registration table is provided at the front doors of the venue. Flexibility in registration is provided with some Families filling in a registration form prior to the day and others registering on the day. The registration form allows recording the Baby and Little One’s name and also includes consent to be photographed.
Staging of the Ceremony

The staging of the Ceremony is highly formalised with the aim to provide a lasting memory for People. Important to this has been that People with theatre experience have been involved. This expertise strengthens the impact of the Ceremony on People taking part hopefully creating such an impression that the event stays in People's memories for a lifetime. This has included theatre elements, such as, stage set up, transitions between components of the Ceremony, sound, dance, performance, music, special effects, lighting and multi-media.

It’s a full stage production with lights, curtains and special effects, we stay true to what we know of the Ceremony and put it in a theatre context. We want People to remember Welcome Baby to Country as a special and important day.

Families arriving for Welcome Baby to Country are asked to wait in the foyer area. Just before the Ceremony starts an announcement comes over the loud-speakers formally welcoming everyone to Welcome Baby to Country and informing everyone that the Ceremony is about to start and to enter the theatre.

At the first reinvigorated Ceremony the Dads and Men were unsure about whether they should enter the theatre, wondering whether men were allowed at the Ceremony or whether it was Women’s Business. The Men involved in development of the Ceremony were sent to clarify the situation and reassure that the Men could come into the theatre and were an important part of the Ceremony. In response to this at following Welcome Baby to Country Ceremonies the organisers made sure that Male Elders were present on stage as part of the Ceremony. It has now become commonplace that Dads, Uncles, Brothers and Granddads come along to the Ceremony.

Mr Harradine and his partner took their eight month old son, Oliver, along for the Ceremony. Mr Harradine is of Latji Latji heritage, and says he wants his son to know about his Ancestors’ history and traditions. ‘We want him to be proud of being Aboriginal,’ he says. ‘The younger generation is missing out on the older stuff. My Grandfather had a real Cultural side, my dad was too, and when they passed away I pushed away from it, so now I’m trying to get back into it.’

As Families enter the theater ushers guide and seat Families in rows and assist Families with any required needs. Once seated a second formal message is provided over the loud speaker welcoming People to the Mildura Arts Centre. The announcement also states that the Arts Centre is proud to host the Ceremony and asks for mobile phones to be silenced. The lights lower, the curtains raise and the stage lights up with the first part of the ceremony. This involves some introductory entertainment with short performances from Aboriginal community, such as, singing, dance or performance. The intent of this is to allow Families to relax and settle into the theatre space with some familiar entertainment that celebrates Aboriginal culture.
The next phase of the Ceremony focuses on the Babies and the Elders. A Welcome to Country is provided for everyone and a Traditional Owner provides an introduction to the Ceremony. The Babies and Little Ones are then invited to come on stage with their Families. This is done in an organized fashion, row by row, so that Families are not left standing for too long waiting for their turn to come up on stage.

The Babies and Little Ones come onto the left of the stage and hand a piece of paper with the Little Ones’ name on it to the announcer. There are often Brothers and Sisters or Cousins together. The announcer reads out the Little Ones’ name and the Family move to center stage to the Traditional Owners for the Little One to be officially Welcomed to Country, shaking hands, receiving mementos and having their little face painted with ochre. What is happening on stage is projected on a big screen at the back of the stage so everyone can see what’s happening. In the audience there is a designated Elders area and Local Elders are sent an individual invitation to attend the Ceremony.

Little Ones and Elders are the main important focus, although dignitaries are invited to the Ceremony their role is not to be onstage, their role is to witness the Ceremony.

Mementos and Keepsakes

Mementos and keepsakes are important as they assist retain memory of the Ceremony through remembrances that connect Families to the experience. The provision of these also symbolizes to Families that the Babies and Little Ones are valued and important to Community. Local artists make and decorate Kangaroo Skin Headbands for each Little One taking part in the Ceremony and a Possum Skin Cloak made for a Baby or Young Child is available for Little Ones to try on and have their photo taken in. The Headbands and Possum Skin are an ancient Cultural tradition and provide Little Ones a tangible connection to their continuing Cultural heritage from a young age. In addition a memento sash and certificate are given to each Little One. Families taking part in the Ceremony are invited to take part in media interviews to ensure this voice is present in media also reinforcing memories of the event.

We wanted to create a happy and lasting memory, a connection to culture and community.
Food and social connection

A buffet style meal is provided for people at the end of the Ceremony and is important for a number of reasons. The provision of healthy, good quality food conveys a message to Families and Communities involved that they are valued, important and cared for. This is a very old tradition for Aboriginal People as sharing food at Ceremonies, gatherings and events of importance has occurred for millennia [1]. Having food after the Ceremony provides an opportunity for Families and Community to mingle and socialize after the event, strengthening and deepening connection. It allows People to find new connections, renew old connections, the space to reflect on the event and further celebrate Little Ones in the Community.
Conclusions

Everyone who has been involved in Welcome Baby to Country has benefited in some way, such as:

• Traditional Owners being recognized and appreciated
• Increased local understanding about importance of Welcome to Country
• Families and Little Ones experiencing a positive connection to place and Community
• Local artist skills being valued and recognised
• Aboriginal Community connection and access to the Mildura Arts Centre
• Mildura Arts Centre employees strengthening Cultural intelligence
• Social service providers having opportunity to connect with clients around a positive experience
• Non-Aboriginal Family members increasing their understanding of Little Ones Cultural heritage and birth rites
• Enhanced understanding about wellbeing, connection and culture for all

Organisers have received various kinds of feedback about the Ceremony. Families have said how impressed they were with the organization and expressed pleased surprise at the formality of the event. For non-Aboriginal Parents and Family there have been expressions of gratitude for assistance to understand the importance of their Little One’s Aboriginal identity and culture.

Very sadly, one Family had a Little One go through the ceremony who later passed away. The Family expressed appreciation that their loved Little One had the chance to go through the Ceremony prior to the Sorry Business. One Dad who came to a Ceremony was in the Defence Force and saw their Little One through the ceremony before being posted overseas to a high-risk zone. Other Little Ones have been separated from their Family for complex reasons; yet remain connected to community by having been through the Ceremony.

Families have also got to know each other through the Ceremony, with a shared memory and experience to talk about when they run into each other at the school or around town. The benefits of a thoughtfully organized Welcome Baby to Country Ceremony are many for everyone involved and the Ceremony provides an important example of a strength based approach to Aboriginal wellbeing.
References


