

Chapter 4 Living with Lodi

Lodi entered my life in a most extraordinary way. The first time I ever saw Lodi he had a fish as long as his arm hanging off his hand. His hand was out of sight, down the cod's throat up to his wrist. I had been taking a midday kip by the banks of the rocky rivulet that supplied fresh water for the workers. They were cutting a new strand of cedar with extensive buttresses that would keep them occupied for some time. Even before they got to cutting through the trunk, it was no easy job setting up jiggerboards to lift them up to the desired smooth section of the bole. I reckoned it would be at least an hour before a tree would be felled, so instead of returning immediately with fresh water, I snoozed in a sunny clearing beside the stream just above its junction with the brackish water of the river. I awoke to the sight of a black boy about my size, flailing around with a huge river cod dangling from his wrist. Instinctively I rushed to his aid with a large stone that crushed the fish's head and nearly the bones of his hand. He saw my alarm but did not share my fright as he happily piled the fish with some others he had caught. No hook, no line, no sinker but still a stash of fine fish.



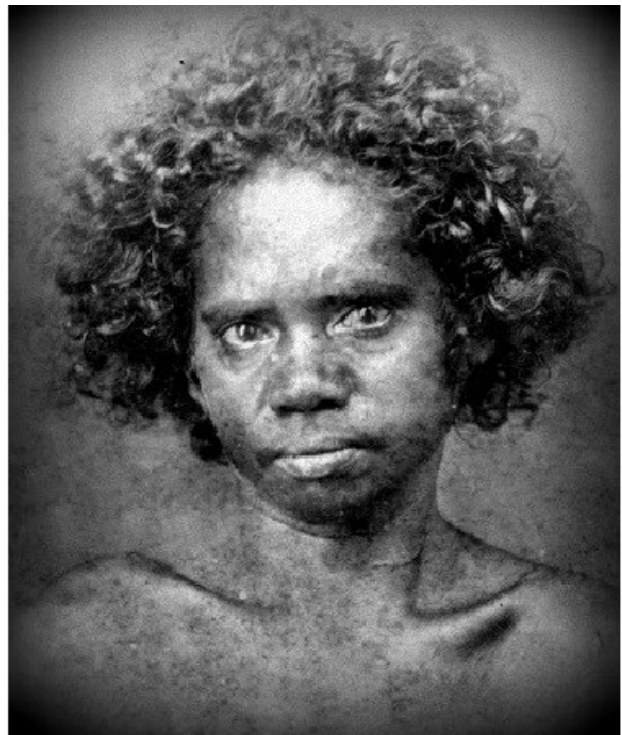
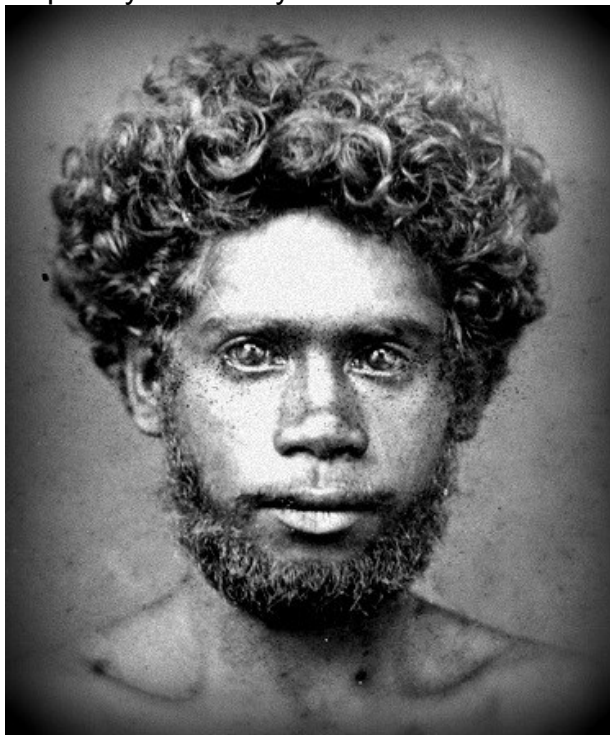
Natives Spearing Fish on the Bellingher River.¹

His luring secret I found in the palm of his hand, a yabbie he held firmly but gently to stop it squirming to freedom. I thought at first that he had saved it from the cod's maw as it was still wriggling and flipping between his fingers. We smiled and exchanged knowing glances before his eye caught the slight ripple of another fish scouring the surface for a meal. 'Choon-non'² he whispered as he pointed to a cod slurping the pond's surface. We lay quietly on the bank as he held the yabbie under water and let its tail flap vigorously at the surface. As the fish approached us, the sparkle in Lodi's eye and the gleaming smile he shared with me cemented our friendship. This choon-non, as long as his arm, sucked in the tail of the yabbie now aligned with Lodi's index finger. It continued sucking, and his whole hand vanished into the gob of the cod, clear up to his wrist. The next instant Lodi had opened his palm in the throat of the fish and swung it onto the bank. A firm clout on its head with a stick settled the fish's fate and freed his hand and the yabbie lure.

In time, Lodi taught me to spear n'gulli, rays, and hunt kirrahbam, paddymelon in his garden of Eden along the Clarence and its tributaries. To any with educated eyes, and Lodi

made sure that I was well informed in the ways of his people, trails were to be found crisscrossing through the bush. Important dreaming trails were blazed by intricately and anciently carved cedars. They marked out routes followed by creator-beings who gouged out gorges and river valleys during the Dreaming. I even learnt the song that those on walkabout used to guide them from coast to tableland. Such Dreamtime song lines traced the footprints of creator beings in ancient ages.³ His stories resonated with Irish tales Mum told of a supernatural ancient race, the Aes Sidhe.⁴ As deified ancestors they lived below ground in mounds that formed the 'palaces, courts, halls or residence' of those ghostly beings that, according to Goidelic mythology, inhabit them.⁵ It was easy to understand that Lodi's Dreaming bestowed reality on the created abundance in which we lived. For him, Dreamtime creators were still providing profusely for their people in this land of plenty.

I marvelled at the way the locals could find space to slip through the mangle and tangle of the undergrowth as though it was not even there. I learned so much from them about being at home in this wilderness. My friend, Lodi, could appear from out the seemingly impenetrable undergrowth as if by magic, and just as quickly disappear. Mum had told us stories of the old country where the forest was the abode of 'little people' who could lead us to a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Lodi taught me to find my way through bush so thick no rainbow ever shone. His pot of gold held treasure beyond measure as what I learned completely turned my life around.



Clarence River Aboriginals of the time, (Mitchell Library, NSW)

Black as the darkest night, with beautiful curly locks, Lodi brightened up my days and led me to a whole new love of life in tune with mother nature. Close to my own age and from the Munduu clan of the Gumbaynggirr people, he showed me how to make the forest my home. His mob was 'renowned as the sharing people'. Their land was so rich that food and other resources were commonly shared with other nations'⁶. Lodi reminded me of the magical little people in Mum's stories except that he was as youthful as me. Just when I would be getting used to him watching us and wondering what the cutters were up to, he would vanish into the shadowy foliage. Maybe, just for an instant, I'd look away, and he'd be gone.

Gratitude from the clan for nature's abundance was essential to sustain their idyllic lifestyle. Each group valued a different totem and held it sacred as it symbolised their clan.⁷ Their grateful reverence for of each group for its emblem, be it possum, parrot, pademelon, whatever, ensured its continued abundance in nature. Some things were forbidden, and Lodi

did not clearly know why. He accepted that his elders in their wisdom knew better. When we first met, he was looking forward to an upcoming ceremony that would introduce him more fully to the privileges of manhood. Women would die if they happened onto that corroboree. His mum, his aunties, his sisters, all women who had been central to his young life were to be excluded from aspects of his adulthood. His life so far had been led, under the watchful eye of women but they would be put to death if they dared to share in the upcoming men's business.

In soft and gentle tones; with eyes even more expressive than the gestures of his hands, I grew to understand so much. Lodi led me to grasp where he was coming from. Spirit was his origin; his dreaming, a spiritual connection with his land, with all surrounding nature. Abundance is provided from the Dreamtime when creation spirits formed this land. And we both were 'of the land' by being born in it.

When teaching me to spear and fish, he hardly needed words to share his ways. Still he let me know that knowing how was not enough. Unless combined with spiritual understanding our choices can steer us to make mistakes that lead to destruction.⁸ For Lodi, there was always a spiritual aspect to material things. I came to comprehend that every moment of his day was essentially an act of reverent veneration. His way was one of worship. The upcoming corroboree when he would move to manhood was eagerly anticipated. It was a ceremony to unite the clans in song and dance, to honour the ancestral spirits of the Dreaming.



Flushing out a Roo.⁹

Fishing provided much of the local diet and rivers were bursting with abundant fresh food. What a relief it was from the salted pork provided by the logging ships. Sometimes aboriginals were used to flush out kangaroo from the forest to make them easy picking for local landowners. My reward for good hunting was freedom from watering the cutters. I loved to learn from Lodi to sight and spear a meal even when standing balanced in a bark canoe. Boulders on the river bank provided rock on which to draw, a favoured pastime of Lodi. With a piece of clayey stone for chalk, he drew 'human heads and figures, kangaroos, etc. with a firm and defined outline 'that few my age could emulate'.

'It is certainly not from want of intelligence that Australian Aborigines are loath to leave

their life for the monotonous and toilsome existence of the labouring classes in our so-called civilized communities. Exciting living filled their days with carefree hunting, fishing, fighting, and dancing.¹⁰ Sadly colonists generally had but little understanding of the Aboriginal love of country and the pride they took in their way of life. We came as strangers and tried to teach them our ways; we scorned them just for being what they are. It seemed to me a local version was being played out of tales Mum had shared with us when we were children at her knee. Stories about the way the strangers from across the Irish sea tried to teach us their ways. Scorn of the 'black heathen' so easily turned to abuse most terrible behind a screen of silence. Years later I heard whispers of how members of his tribe were massacred down on the coast. So called civilised Europeans, bent on exterminating what they considered vermin, massacred Gumbaynggir people near the sea at Red Rock. Paradise was passing even as we played in this garden of God's bounty.



Red Rock Headland

Lodi's mob lived along the Clarence where it tumbled out of the tablelands onto the coastal plain. His country was the land along Big River around Jaganyji, called Jackadgery by the straight hairs as the locals called the convicts. In the coastal rain forests as the moderate warmth of winter gave way to spring, thunderstorms began building in the western mountains. On most afternoons their distant thunder signalled the return of summer heat, reminding me of family and the approaching journey home. For Lodi, the distant rumbles were the sounds of warrior spirits in battle¹¹. Runners had already been sent to invite the surrounding clans to the ceremony and he was eagerly looking forward to his initiation into manhood. We left for home before his big event, but I here present a description of one such corroboree gathering of the .clans a few rivers south of The Clarence.

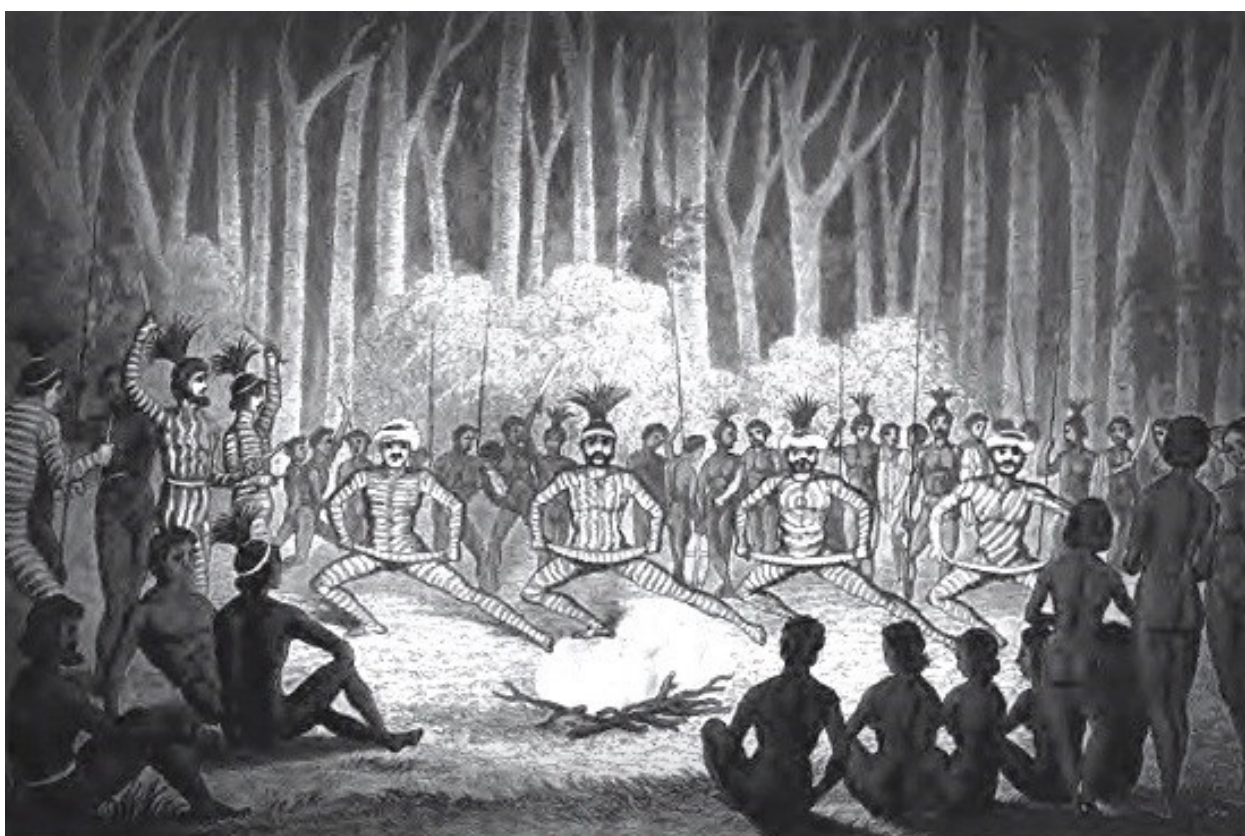
'As the boys of a tribe approach the age of puberty, a grand ceremony, to inaugurate them into the privileges of manhood, takes place...When a tribe has determined on initiating their youths into these rites, they send messengers to the surrounding tribes of blacks, to invite them to be present on the occasion. These messengers or ambassadors appear to be distinguished by having their head-bands coloured with very pale yellow ochre, instead of the usual deep red, whilst their hair is drawn up and crowned by the high top-knots of grass, resembling nodding plumes.

After all the preliminaries are settled, and the surrounding tribes arrived, the blacks repair to the Cawarra ground. This is a circular plot about thirty feet in diameter, carefully levelled, weeded, and smoothed down. It is, in general, situated on the summit of some round-topped hill, and the surrounding trees are minutely tattooed and carved to such a considerable altitude, that one cannot help feeling astonished at the labour bestowed

upon this work. The women are now dismissed to the distance of two miles from the Cawarra ground; for if one of them should happen to witness, or hear any portion of the ceremony, they would be immediately put to death.

The first evening is passed in dancing the ordinary corroberree; during which, the invited blacks sit round their respective fires as spectators, whilst the boys, who are to undergo the ceremony, squat down in a body by themselves, and keep up a bright fire for the dancers. From the repugnance which the blacks at the MacLeay displayed on my looking at their performance, and their angry refusal to allow me to see the main part of the ceremony, I am unable to give a regular account of it, having only been able to obtain occasional glimpses.

After many preliminary grotesque mummeries have been performed, the doctors or priests of the tribe take each a boy, and hold him for some time with his head downwards near the fire. Afterwards, with great solemnity, they are invested with the opossum belt; and at considerable intervals between each presentation, they are given the nulla-nulla, the boomerang, the spear, &c. Whilst these arms are being conferred upon them, the other natives perform a sham fight, and pretend to hunt the pademella, spear fish, and imitate various other occupations, in which the weapons, now presented to the youth, will be of service.



Dance at the conclusion of a Cawarra Ceremony¹²

Each man was also provided with a singular instrument, formed of a piece of hollowed wood fastened to a long piece of flax string; by whirling this rapidly round their heads, a loud shrill noise was produced, and the blacks seemed to attach a great degree of mystic importance to the sound of this instrument, for they told me, that if a woman heard it, she would die. The conclusion of this ceremony was a grand dance of a peculiar character, in which the boys join, and which the women are allowed to see'.¹³

For well over a fortnight the ceremony itself went on with dance and song late into the night. That did not include the prior despatch of runners and the preparation of the Cawarra ground itself. Cedars around the dance mound were intricately carved and refreshed over generations of initiation while the mound itself was cleared and weeded.

I was witness to such preparations by Lodi's clan near their Buccarumbi camp where the Boyd River joined the Nymboida. Our logging camp had been set up in the same area that the locals had used since time began. Much white orche was gathered from the headlands as well as the white feathers of many kayeer, cockatoos, that flocked in their hundreds as the weather warmed They were greatly valued for their fine feathers. However, I did not see the actual initiation ceremony. Lodi even indicated he was relieved when he heard we were leaving beforehand. Tribal elders were not very happy at the prospect of a stranger in their midst at such an important time for the tribe.

Authors Note: There is no evidence that facts recorded in this chapter were part of the life of Hugh Quinn.

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- ²Hewitt, Thomas George Aboriginal words etc, U Clarence R dialect,
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- ⁵Wikip: Sidhe. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aos_S%C3%AD#The_s.C3.ADdhe:_abodes_of_the_aes_s.C3.ADdhe2
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- ¹¹Wikipedia: Thunder battles http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bundjalung_people#Religious_beliefs
- ¹²Hodgkinson, Clement. (1843). Dance at conclusion of the Cawarra ceremonies. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135586982>
- ¹³Ibid Hodgkinson, Clement. (1845). Op. cit. p 230-235 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn740742>
- ¹⁴Story Copyright © T Quinn. All rights reserved.