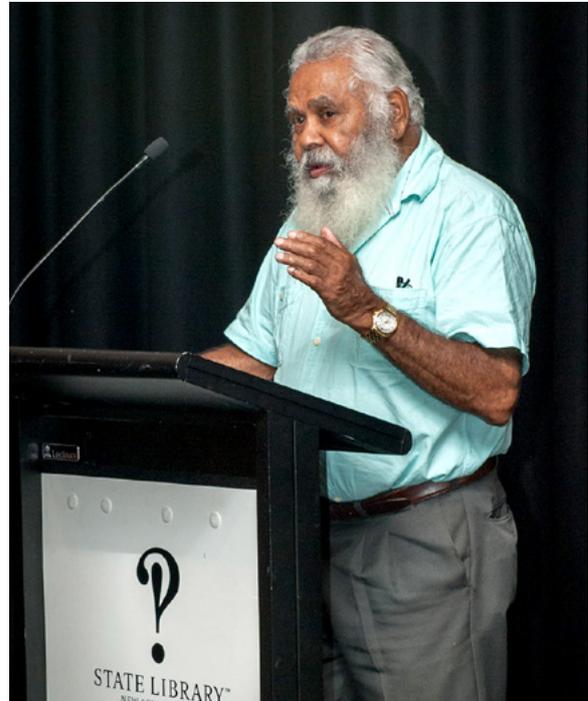


IN MEMORY OF UNCLE MAX DULUMUNMUN HARRISON¹

29 February 1936 – 11 December 2021

Over many years Yuin Elder and Loreman, Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison has taken a significant role at the Society and Culture Awards as well as being involved in Professional Learning for teachers of Society and Culture. Sadly late last year, Uncle passed and is now on his journey to the Dreaming. The Society and Culture Association offer our deep respect and gratitude for his sharing of culture through his many wonderful reflections, stories and teachings at our Awards ceremonies and other events.

Uncle Max at the 2017 Society and Culture Awards



Our Contemporary Context

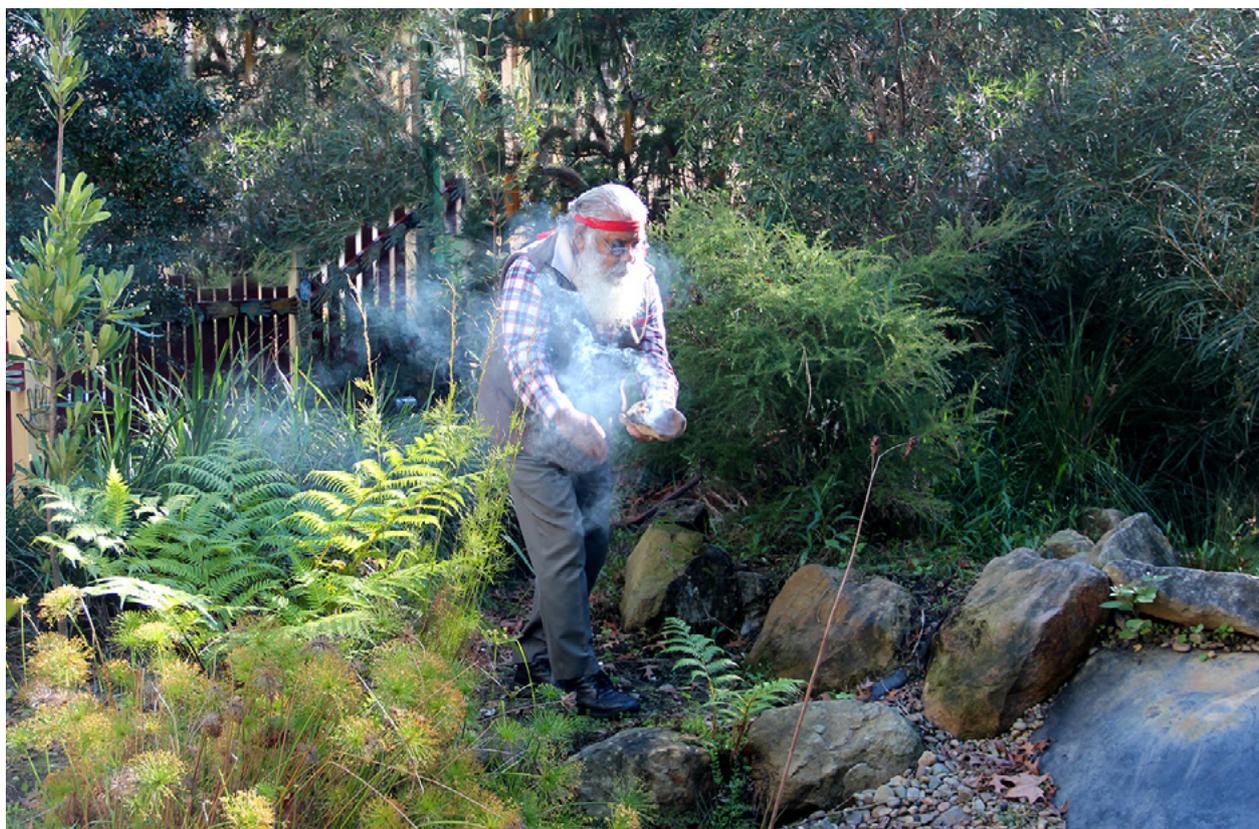
Turmoil and challenge seem to be the biproducts of our contemporary situation. People are encountering situations in ways they have not been experienced before, like the vast extent of environmental shock during the Australian summers of extreme fires and floods and the waves of change resulting from the corona virus pandemic. We have seen the cultural and political turmoil following the killing of George Floyd and the rise on a global scale of the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movements, just as the #MeToo movement in recent years has confronted so many previously unchallenged conventions on gender. The globalised world of recent decades is under challenge in so many ways, through impact of invasions, trade embargos and the rise of regional loyalties that has challenged what were contemporary shared values of cooperation. How do we make sense of a shape-shifting world?

The questions raised by #BLM has seen diverse responses – I've heard people offer '*but all lives matter*' and '*I'm so glad I am white at this time*'. However, there have been so many powerful stories shared of black, brown and coloured peoples experiences of prejudice, discrimination and racism at the personal, societal and the institutional levels. We live in a time when these histories, stories and lived experiences are being openly shared and there is a call for truth telling. If we truly hold to the principles of:

- Empathy with and appreciation of the diverse beliefs and values of different societies and cultures
- Applying skills to achieve social inclusion and awareness of the issues of discrimination and prejudice
- Having a sense of social responsibility and displaying active citizenship by engaging critically with social issues, and takes considered action for the welfare, dignity, social justice and human rights of others at the local, national and global levels.²

then we genuinely and respectfully need to open our ears, open our minds and open our hearts. Listen and learn from the voices of those who have lived with oppression as we all need to be informed to consider the best options for a positive future.

IN MEMORY OF UNCLE MAX DULUMUNMUN HARRISON



Uncle conducting Smoking Ceremony

Generous Sharing of Aboriginal Story and Culture

Uncle Max lived his life in this contemporary context. He knew from lived experience about the denial of social justice and human rights. As a young boy he knew to run and hide when one of his totems, the willy wagtail did a dance which warned of danger – the welfare coming to take children like him away from his family. He was never stolen but he knew where many Yuin children were taken and the impact it had on their lives. Uncle solemnly showed me the big house in North Nowra where stolen children had to live. His anguish at that loss of family, of culture, of language and connection to the land was palpable but expressed with very few words. Uncle only went to school for a few years. He recounted the experience of being taught in class that “Captain Cook discovered Australia” and when he challenged his teacher on this by saying his people were here before *Jimmy Cook* arrived he was sent out of class and did not return. Uncle taught himself to read and write and went on to be offered an honorary university degree, however, he did not take up this offer saying he did not need a piece of paper to validate his knowledge. For many years he has taught and advised architects in Australia and in France how to build in harmony with the land and the waters.

Uncle also revealed a place by the beach at Bawley Point where the ground was scattered with rock flint from making tools with which to harvest shellfish. This place was also the site of a massacre – an act of absolute prejudice and racism. Again Uncle solemnly shared that story.

There were also times of celebration of culture when Uncle showed our group a large circle of ground, a Bora ring that had been a place of ceremony for generations, where so many dancing feet compacted the ground to make it look quite different from the surrounding countryside. However, access to that Bora ring was limited as it was on private property. How can Australians better show a meaningful appreciation for the beliefs and values of Aboriginal peoples?

IN MEMORY OF UNCLE MAX DULUMUNMUN HARRISON

The Land

Inland from the coastal town of Narooma are two sacred mountains: Gulaga and Biamunga. The learning journey of walking this country with Uncle Max has been a truly profound experience. However, in the 1960s the massive granite tors at the summit of Biamunga were dynamited to make way for a television tower. My question to Uncle was why did people not protest this desecration of a sacred site? 'Because we had no rights back then. We were counted with the animals prior to the referendum – actually, I like animals and don't mind be counted with them but we had no way we felt we could object.' Uncle has conducted ceremony to bring the energy up from deep in the ground to restore that site. However, the sacred site on Gulaga has not been desecrated in this way. To experience the teachings in this place is deeply moving and profound and the experience serves to redefine what it means to be a person living on this land, to connect with land and spirit and to respect lore and custom.



Uncle Max teaching on the Whale Dreaming during 2007 SCA Professional Learning at Kuring-gai.

The Waters

Uncle Max held the knowledge of how the fish traps at Mystery Bay worked and it was his dream, as the only person to hold that knowledge, to rebuild them. As a boy, Uncle was told by his Elders to sit and watch the waters swirling around the rocks which he did for days to learn by observation and without words. Sadly, this work remains to be done. Another legacy of Uncle's knowledge and teaching is the story of Gurruwul – the whale. His book is due for publication in 2022 and brings together stories from all corners of this land and its waters. It is so significant to share that the songlines that the whale travels which were once on dry land.

Of many lasting legacies, is Uncle Max's working establishing Back to Country, a charitable organisation that works to 'create a greater connection to Country and promoting respect for culture, with programs to empower strong Aboriginal role models to achieve positive change in their communities.' See <https://www.backtocountry.org.au/> A recent Men's Camp had 75 participants and is a testament to the strength of culture on Yuin country. These Gurandgi are tasked to maintain culture, maintain strong connection to the land and to continue to share Yuin lore and Uncle's teachings.

BackToCountry

Creating strong Aboriginal role models and positive change in communities



IN MEMORY OF UNCLE MAX DULUMUNMUN HARRISON

In Australia, how can we listen and learn from Aboriginal people to respectfully reach out to their lives and ways of knowing the world? I have had the experience of working with Yuin Elder and Loreman, Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison for many years and through his generous sharing of culture and ceremony so many people have been able to experience and learn of Yuin beliefs and wisdom. Uncle gave permission for me to share story which I trust will offer the chance to learn from the wisdom of the oldest living culture on this earth. For further readings see Uncle's book *My People's Dreaming*. I acknowledge and pay my respect to Uncle Max, *Through the Mother* – the earth.

Reference

Harrison, Max Dulumunmun, *My People's Dreaming*, 2013, Harper Collins.

Endnotes

- 1 Uncle's name, images and story used with permission.
- 2 from Social and Cultural Literacy, Society and Culture Syllabus, NESAs, 2013, p25.

About the author

Marshall Leaver's career as a secondary school teacher focussed on cultural studies, in particular, Aboriginal cultures, Indonesia, Timor Leste and Japan. Marshall worked with the guidance of Uncle Max, the late Aunty Elaine Walker, Aunty Julie Smith and Aunty Janette Blainey to establish the Biamunga program at Monte Sant Angelo Mercy College, North Sydney which for over 25 years operated to provide deep and genuine understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and establish community connections with Aboriginal communities in the Central Desert (NT) and South Coast NSW.

On behalf of Marshall Leaver and the Society and Culture Association of NSW all payments for this article were kindly donated to the charitable organisation Back to Country (<https://www.backtocountry.org.au/>) It is hoped that this small contribution can continue on the work of Uncle Max into the future.
