UNDER a rock overhang on Aboriginal land adjoining Yengo National Park, near Wollongong, a crowded picture of charcoal hand motifs meets the eye.

According to the chairman of the Koompannoot Aboriginal Land Council, Mr Bill Smith, experts from the National Parks and Wildlife Service recently estimated the age of the artwork at about 800 years.

'Actually they're only 18 months old,' Mr Smith said, amused.

The hand stencils, made by a group of Aboriginal youngsters, were nevertheless regarded by Mr Smith as a site of significance.

They represent one facet of a movement that had modest beginnings in the Hunter several years ago and is now gathering momentum among Aboriginal people up and down the NSW coast.

This movement is a return to tribal and cultural roots.

Mr Smith said that over the past several years about 40 Aboriginal people ranging from their teens to middle-age have undergone traditional initiation.

The ceremonies, lost to generations of Aborigines, were recovered from their places of safekeeping in the memories of three old men, he said.

These three 'uncles', Mr Lennie De Silva, Mr Alf (Mandgi) Drew and Mr Leeton Smith, had long declined to share their knowledge, despairing that drink, hopelessness and the overwhelming impact of white culture had made most younger NSW blacks unworthy of their heritage.
As custodians, they had responsibility for keeping the sites clean, visible and in an appropriate condition to function as teaching resources.

One young initiate, Mr Smith’s 19-year-old son, Malcolm, said the process of initiation and continuing education in tribal ways had made him feel much stronger and more confident.

The young first grade footballer said his lifestyle had become cleaner and he felt he had something of great value to share with other youngsters, black and white.

By way of sharing, he demonstrated traditional dancing in Hunter schools.

Malcolm’s cousin, Wayne Moran-Williams, 26, was initiated last year after telling his elders he was interested in learning about tribal lore.

‘But they don’t do it just because you ask,’ Mr Moran-Williams said.

‘They have to believe that you’re ready. When they think the time is right, they’ll just grab you without warning.

‘I was watching TV when they came in and told me to get ready to go bush right away. I think it works best like that.’

Mr Moran-Williams said he had grown up in suburban Canberra and had long felt a kind of ‘missing feeling’ inside.

‘I feel as though initiation has taken me properly into manhood.’

Mr Moran-Williams wanted to share some of the lessons he had learned with black and white people alike.

‘I can see now that all people are the same,’ he said. ‘We have different cultures but we can all be just as good or bad as each other.’

Mr Smith said the process of rediscovering their heritage had demonstrated good effects on many black youngsters.

‘They learn respect for themselves and for other people and they have the opportunity to be involved in keeping our dream alive,’ he said.

In the case of the young artists whose charcoal handprints decorate the Wollombi overhang, Mr Smith said the stencils were created in the correct traditional way.

‘I didn’t plan to do that with those kids,’ he said. ‘It just came to me while we were sitting around the fire.

‘What it did was to make a bond between the kids and that piece of land. It’s their land and their painting makes them feel that inside.’
You see this fella? What do you notice about him?

Bill Smith is pointing to the outline on a flat rock of an unusual-looking duo. A small man is being clubbed over the head by a large figure. The large figure is holding a boomerang, has extraordinarily distended genitals and also appears to have a penis in the place of his head.

"You know what that means?" The two young initiates know very well what it means. They have passed through enough stages of their tribal education to be familiar with an essentially simple moral and social lesson.

"This fella has a penis for a head. That means his head is ruled by his penis. He's thinking too much about sex. It rules him and it makes him do bad things. That's why he's hitting this little bloke on the head."

"If you want to be a real man, if you want to progress to strength, you have to make sure your head rules your penis."

"You can't go sleeping around with anyone you like. You have to respect your woman and yourself," Mr Smith explains.

Bill Smith is chairman of the Koompahtoo Aboriginal Land Council. A veteran of decades of black and white politics and a founder of the successful Awabakal cooperative network, his current passion is the growing movement among NSW Aborigines to rediscover their cultural heritage.
IN TOUCH WITH HIS ANCESTORS: Bill Smith with his bare-foot entourage on an Aboriginal sacred site.

DREAMTIME AT HAND: Tyren Mundine, 5, seems awed by the hand paintings of his ancestors in a children's cave.

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