



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

According to the chairman of the Koompahtoo 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.

'But we showed them that we were serious about it,' Mr Smith said.

'We showed them that we were prepared to go back to our old teaching grounds and care for our sites.

'They wanted us to get the blackfellows' business back in our own hands.

'When we proved ourselves they were glad and they agreed to teach us what they knew.'

The Mount Yengo area was chosen because it had a large number of sites, about 200, within a relatively small radius.

'Everything was still intact,' Mr Smith said. 'It had been sleeping and now we've woken it up again.'

A successful land claim in the Mount Yengo area had made it possible for young Aboriginal people, once initiated in tribal lore, to be appointed custodians over the many sacred and significant sites there.

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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.'



Chairman of the Koopmahtoo Aboriginal Land Council, Bill Smith (background), with tribal initiates, Wayne Moran-Williams (left), 26, and Malcolm Smith, 19, with some of the rock art in the Mt Yengo area.

**‘Y**OU see this fellah? 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.

For the benefit of the visiting journalists, Mr Smith explains his view of the ancient carving’s meaning.

‘This fellah 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 Koopmahtoo 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.

‘Koopmahtoo means “fresh start”,’ says Mr Smith.

That’s what we’re doing. Making a fresh start. Our young fellahs, women too, are learning traditional tribal lore. They’re coming back in contact with the land and the sites that’ve been used for teaching for thousands of years.’

The reason for his passion is clear. He sees the initiation and tribal education of young black people (and old ones too) as a means of recovering pride in heritage.

‘So many of our young people are lost,’ he said.

‘They’re like roly-polies blowing in wind around the plain. They’re aimless. They’ve got no direction.’

‘But through our lore they can find themselves and find their direction. They can come back to their mother, the land. They can learn and gain from that and take things back into the world to use,’ he said.



**IN TOUCH WITH HIS ANCESTORS:** Bill Smith with his bare-foot entourage on an Aboriginal sacred site.



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

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