

*Kate Osborne*

## SEEDS, CORALS, SHELLS AND DRIFTWOOD

*Erykah Kyle, former Mayor of Palm Island remembers*

The sign announces: “Great Palm Island welcomes you” as the ferry nudges in alongside a jumble of pylons of various ages and styles.

Vehicles cluster around the end of the jetty and a crowd gathers to help offload the goods they have brought from the mainland. Tall citrus trees, pot plants in full flower, winter jumpers, DVD players, cartons of beer, and loaves of bread. Children on bikes and skateboards weave in and out of the crowd, while others throw a line, hoping for a fish to bite.

Last year, during the July NAIDOC Week celebrations to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Premier, Anna Bligh stood on this jetty, full of optimism for the future of the island, the rolling sandy flats and the dusky blue of the barrier reef water behind her. Bligh was opening the new government offices, built to replace those burnt down in the riots in 2004 after an indigenous man, Cameron Doomadgee died while in police custody. Speaking on the ABC 7.30 report, she was there to convince the wider world that Palm Island had turned the corner.

“We can be pulled down about all the problems but if you want to make something better you have got to be hopeful and optimistic and that’s what I am,” she said.

Erykah Kyle was the Mayor during this turbulent time of the island’s history when Doomadgee died. She does not share the optimistic view of the Queensland Premier. It was Erykae who delivered the news to her people of Doomadgee's death in police custody. Chris Hurley, the police constable involved in the incident, was acquitted of manslaughter in 2007. In 2008, the Queensland court ordered the inquest findings be set aside and a third inquest was held in March 2010 — another chapter in the island's violent past.

Erykah was born on Palm Island and has lived there most of her life.

Most days, she walks into town from her home around the headland to the south. She waits for the Post Office, a simple besser block building with a roller door to open so she can go through the mailbag to find her mail. There is no Post Office sign and no indication of when it might open or close.

“It’s all geared for the government no matter what you look at. You see people walking around their shoulders slumped. We will never see change. Ownership. I believe that. To see people inspired. Never.”

Palm Island is 65km SE of Townsville in North Queensland. Its peaks dominate the skyline of the group of around 10 islands, known locally as “The Palms” or Greater Palm Group. The main township is scattered between the jetty and the forested hills behind. In the gullies, vine forest gathers in deep green pockets. Eucalypts careen down the hillside to the wide sweeping bay. Towards the southern end of the bay, small green figs cauliflower from the trunk of a huge tree. Its luscious spreading canopy casts a deep shadow on the dusty ground around. Erykah says the old people, the Manburra people, used to see ‘spirit dogs’ appearing here. It is a special place.

The 3500 residents of Palm Island are collectively known as the Bwngcolman people. They claim ancestral links to at least forty tribes, having been forcibly brought to island from all over Queensland from 1918 until the 1960s. Erykah’s family grew up near the Cooktown people in Far North Queensland. Erykah’s mother was born Rose Lillian Hall. She was brought to Palm Island in 1911, when she was seven years old, because her father, Arthur Hall, was white.

“My father was fortunate. He came with the whole family. Big mob. He was a builder and he was a great fisherman in between. Our mother would cook it up, and that helped us. She baked bread and sold it. Our father’s job was minimal. At that time, they called it family allowance. It used to go into a pool regulated by the superintendent. He ruled with an iron fist. Very authoritarian. My mother was the one who went and said: ‘I’d like that money in my hand. I want to buy clothes, I want to buy flour.’ She was very brave.”

“In that time there were different areas tribally. My brother David, when we were growing up, he’d go over there with the old people, and he’d do corroborree too. The old people sang out to my mother, ‘Missus can we put some mud on him, he’s too white’. She just laughed.”

Walking from the jetty into town, there is a sharp delineation between the “loved” and the “unloved” parts of the landscape. Every concrete table along the foreshore is smashed. A row of empty street planter pots is testimony to the violence and vandalism that the island suffers.

Erykah says, “Our people destroy things because they don’t feel part of it. See all that there? There were plants in there. They pulled them up. They are thinking: ‘What about us?’”

Tucked in against the hillside is Erykah's island home, where she lives with her daughter and her family. The house is on the road that runs by the airstrip, a couple of bays to the south of the main township. Across the street, six or seven short legged, curly tail dogs battle to bark from the pinnacle of a large rock in the corner of the yard. Nearby, a street sign points vaguely toward the airstrip. It reads 'Jonny Jumbo road'.

"He was one of our hunters," Erykah says. "He struggled during his life. Why do they put up a street sign now that he is dead?"

A big mango tree cups the front of the house where a makeshift shelf is stacked with sprouting coconuts. Bird nest ferns and orchids thrive in the cool, shady yard. On Erykah's verandah, lattice splits and scatters the afternoon light.

As the day fades, Erykah speaks of the violence and tragedy that has dogged her all of her life. Her distress is tangible, her hand on her heart as if she longed to wrench it out as she talks of the night Doomadgee died.

"People just ran, and to me, at that moment, it was like I was watching a movie. It's this rush. They headed up to the police station.

"It was terribly painful, as a mother, because I had lost my son in police custody."

Erykah's son, Brett, was found hanging in his cell at Lotus Glen, a correction center in the Atherton Tablelands near Cairns, in 2001.

"The message (of Brett's death) came to me before the messenger. My niece was the mayor here at that time. As soon as she arrived at the house, I said: 'You've got bad news for me'. I went to the inquest. Sitting there, going through the details. I still ask the question: 'Who was on duty? Where did he get what was used?' We never got any answers. I wanted to die. It is only natural to come to that point. If it wasn't for my family...they said: 'Don't leave Mum alone. Don't leave Mum, now.'"

Erykah is a survivor but she said things don't always turn out well for aboriginal people.

"My own cousin, she threw petrol all over herself. She had children, one after the other. Her husband was a top cultural man. They were forward thinkers. They were active in the community. But things went bad. She threw it over and lit herself up. We have had a lot taking their lives."

“It’s affected my whole life, the violence, the brutality. I have the two daughters. They saw the violence. They had one daughter each and never wanted anymore.”

Erykah was sixteen when she fell in love with a man who was sent to Palm Island for punishment from the south. He was charming and he had this particular whistle.

“In those days the men had different whistles. It was very romantic. It was the only way to communicate. When I went home, my uncles knew I wasn’t at church. They took me into a little back room. I was flogged. I ran away. I heard someone say. She’s gone to see him. They caught him and they flogged him. And then he was sent away.”

I should be dead now. My husband, he nearly broke my neck. I dropped the baby. The father and I, afterwards we became friends. You can’t hate forever. I made sure I went to his funeral to make sure he was gone.”

Erykah said that on Palm Island, people “go to funerals here regardless”.

“It’s a community thing. Our ceremony is very beautiful. At least we make sure we say goodbye. The men prepare the grave and afterwards, they shovel everything on. And then afterwards the women come and prepare it, they put the flowers on.”

Her position as Mayor from 2004 to 2006 was her last position in public office, but not the end of her lifetime of activism to improve the lives of Palm Islanders. She does not believe she will live to see change after what she describes as ‘the withdrawal of self-determination for aboriginal people’.

“We take 2 steps forwards and 10 back. The government controls our lives. They’ve got hold of us,” she said.

Anna Bligh’s visit to the island during NAIDOC week coincided with the first Palm Island death from swine flu last year and the pandemic spreading out of control on the island, which brought the living conditions on Palm Island again into the media spotlight. Mayor Alf Lacey said, at the time, that containing the virus will be impossible because of the mass overcrowding and shortage of housing. It is common for 15 people to share a three-bedroom house, a situation that would never occur on the mainland.

When she was mayor in 2005, Erykah put a case to the case government for 50 new houses on Palm Island.

“They came back. They said we could have three.”

She shakes her head sadly; her silver Indian earring dangles against the red, yellow and black beaded necklace.

“I said to the council, ‘Should I accept this?’ They were unanimous that we should not. It didn’t make any difference. We got three. We still get what they dictate.”

Black rubber matting, to keep the dust out of the house lines the front pathway, which in turn is flanked by hibiscus bushes, each with a different bloom. Some white, some yellow with a scarlet flush at the centre, and some a deep red, the same colour as Erykah’s dress. Their colours dissolve into the fading light.

Erykah said when she was younger she didn’t think of herself as an activist.

“I just saw things were needed. Like my mother. She had a soft heart. She made bread and pies. She’d say, ‘Here take over there to those people.’ I am fortunate to come from that, because that’s where I started.”

Tendrils of aroma from the evening meal sneak out of the house. Next door, the glow of a campfire flicks through the mango trees. Someone starts strumming a guitar.

Erykah continues, “Apartheid didn’t start in South Africa. It started here on Palm Island. This was a punishment place. They thought: ‘Put them on an island. They’ll probably kill themselves off.’ But it didn’t turn out that way. We are known as ‘historical’ people. I hate that. It’s like we are from some museum. Our mother’s afterbirth is here. It’s buried in this land. For me, I’ve got my grandparent, my parents, my son, my young sister. Down there in that cemetery.”

Inside, the house is like a shrine to her loved ones and to her island home. Photos jostle for space on every wall. Treasures abound. Seeds, corals, shells, and driftwood. Amidst the jumble of nature, piles of notebooks, newspaper cuttings, are small traces of the activists and spiritual leaders that have inspired Erykah’s life. An American Indian warrior has pride of place next to a small aboriginal flag. Among the photos is one of Erykah and Murandoo Yanner, an activist from the gulf country. They are speaking at the tent city in Canberra, which was established in 1972 on the lawn in front of old Parliament House. Erykah said, “Aboriginal right to self-determination was established by our activists, way back in Canberra. We were real activists, very brave. They brought the forces in. Phew, a lot of our people got knocked and gaoled.”

Here on Palm Island though, she said, everything they have tried has come to nothing.

“In the 1980s, a group of Island residents devised and promoted the concept of a place on Palm Island for young men who had been in prison. We talked with Paul Wilson, criminologist. We met with him, and he said: ‘You have to take them out of the community where there is so much alcohol abuse and violence.’”

Recidivism is the reoccurrence of criminal behaviour in prior offenders. The number of re-offenders on Palm Island is high. Add alcohol, unemployment and overcrowded housing to the mix, and day to day life becomes volatile. According to the March Quarterly report on key indicators in Queensland’s discrete Indigenous communities, rates of serious assault peaked in 2006/07 and in 2009 the rates were still three to four times higher than the average for Queensland.

“We were going to set up a place at Mundy Bay,” Erykah says, “A beautiful place. It was about getting back to our ways. Hunting, fishing, relaxing, sharing and being part of the land. It wasn’t a prison away from prison. It was quite dramatic and exciting. The community organisation incorporated in 1985 and forwarded its submission for funds to the Queensland Corrective Services. The project was not approved. When that situation happens, the people’s spirits go down. So we all went down. Lo and behold, corrective services came in and built an outstation. We call it the big house. Similar concept but different. A state run institution that just ticks off this and that, and our people are still incarcerated. It’s empty now.”

Erykah said this was typical of government responses to Indigenous community-based efforts to gain control over the services provided to its residents.

“We applied to set up a Murri school. Education Queensland did not support it. We set up our own health service. We called it Turtle dreaming because the turtle is a beautiful, gentle creature. Queensland Health did not support this locally run initiative.”

“Another time there was a proposal to run a retail store. I ran around. I talked to the women: ‘Do you think we can run that store?’ They said: ‘Yes’. We were forward thinkers, which was amazing at that time, considering the oppression we lived under. We wanted to set up a co-operative. We wanted the profits to go for housing for our young people. We engaged an accountant and a lawyer out of fundraising.”

The project never went ahead.

In the past, she says, she had enthusiasm.

“I travelled a lot, long, long way. I visited 14 countries as a delegate of the World Council of Churches. Mostly black countries. You see the despair but

you see the hope. One woman said to me: 'You can't do nothing.' She had given up. Back then, I believed that was too simplistic. I thought change comes slowly but what we do in this time will make a difference for the next time."

Once a Queensland government controlled and run reserve from 1918 until 1985, the land title for Palm island was then handed over to the local community Council. When the government pulled out, houses, shops, the timber mill and farming equipment were disassembled and shipped back to the mainland. Since then, Palm Island has been without an economic base. There is an ongoing struggle to meet basic infrastructure needs and most of the community is reliant on welfare.

Erykah said, "My daughter and I set up a bakery. We had a beautiful building built by our own men here. One of our people had learnt to be a baker while he was on one of the outstations. We had three and half thousand people. We could have had fresh bread every day but we couldn't get the funding for the equipment. We had to import everything. One day my daughter said, 'Mum, we can't go on like this.' I always say when the government was in charge, the key person here was known as the superintendent. The superintendent is still here. His spirit is here. We are still importing bread."

In 2004 there was massive media coverage following the riot. Feature stories, books and films. In 2009, the vital statistics on employment, health and violence are still shocking. Erykah says, "What do you do? We have had a strike. We have had a riot."

The PCYC is one of the newest buildings in the township. From inside didgeridoo and upbeat background music blares. Preparations for NAIDOC week are nearly complete. Painted boys are on the stage dancing with various degrees of enthusiasm and prowess. A crowd of school children and passers-by interject: ohh ahh, ayeee, carried away by the music. During the final song, a couple of the children's white teachers join the dancers in a parody of the children's spirit characters. The crowd is in uproar, their laughter so loud it overwhelms the ghetto blaster in the background. A speech of thanks winds up the rehearsal and the children wander back out towards the school.

Erykah sees tourism as a threat to the lifestyle of Palm Islanders, especially in the unspoiled bays that dot the coastline. "The bays have 'camps' in them where our people go, to relax, to get out of the suburbs," Erykah said.

The turn off to Pencil Bay is at the old mango tree at the end of the airstrip, just a short distance toward town from Erykah's house. Erykah likes to walk this way in the morning with her dogs. Her step is light and sure over the rough gravel surface. The road passes through small shrubby gum trees, which gives

way to swamp. Tea coloured water laps the road on either side, flanked by tall paperbarks. Their grey trunks criss-cross in the mirror like water. A single lily colours the reflections with its delicate mauve and yellow bloom.

“Brett, the son I lost, used to get in there and pick the flowers. I don’t know why the flowers have gone now. Our family are possum eaters too. I miss that now. The hunters in my family have gone.”

Pencil Bay is named after the sharp clam-like shell that is collected and eaten along with small clams, spider shells and oysters. At the beach, the road turns into a sandy track and winds through the scrub past a series of camps. A concrete slab with a couple of steps. Nothing else is left. Another one with sheets of tin, slowly lifting and coming back down to rest in the breeze. Another shelter, this one with the roof intact. A shovel rests against the lean-to and nearby, a hole in the ground and charcoal, the remains of a kup murri, the traditional way of cooking food by burying it in the ground with hot coals.

When she was a child, Erykah used to come past Pencil Bay in the family boat that her father built, called Caroline. They would wave to the people with leprosy, who at that time, lived in the huts down one end of the bay.

“I grew up at a time when Fantome Island was a leprosarium. They always had a boat on standby. If there were births, it went straight over and brought the babies back. The mother was never able to caress that child. It’s very painful for me as a mother. I want my son-in-law to take me there. This community should acknowledge that burial ground.”

From the end of the beach someone yells out: “Erykah.” An old man and his son are at the last camp. Their shed close to the beach has a tarp slung over a timber frame. Under the tarp, a pair of old shorts is hanging out to dry. Sheets of tin enclose another shelter. Erykah and JB pull up some chairs in the sand. Mud covers reef rocks close to the beach give way to the mounded shapes of corals exposed in the low tide. They sit and talk, while JB’s son wanders around picking up the red and yellow leaves from the beach almond trees that carpet the sand around the camp. He spears each leaf with a stick until he has a stack and then piles them up around the fireplace.

Erykah laughs and her green eyes twinkle, happy now, to be on the beach, having a chat.

“Once I had my own children we drove down here in my Subaru. The old people, they used to say: ‘That Erykah, she got a selfish car.’ Because, you know, I could only fit two people in it.”

The conversation turns to Mundy Bay, south of the airstrip, which is Erykah's family's camp place. She says, "We used to go to Mundy Bay during the school holidays. We'd stay there the whole time, just come back if we needed something, you know. We swam and fished. There were waterfalls. It was beautiful."

JB wants to bring his children and his grandchildren to this bay. He says he comes here now and then, but he is worried the beach is being washed away. They talk about who comes to the other camps on the beach and how an influential local resident is pegging out land up on the ridge.

Erykah admits: "Dirty politics are strong here. It's cut throat. I fear for our future. I want to ask the CEO, is there going to be a community meeting to talk about change? They have not had meetings with us. I would like to invite the traditional owners over here to talk with us, maybe under the big fig tree. We, the Bwgcorman people, need to make that move. My mind has been whirling. Where do we go from here? I can see them coming on the jetty with their cameras. Our people dancing. To me, it is like an invasion."

Erykah resigned from her position as mayor in November, 2006. The enormous strain of the ongoing investigations into Doomdagee's death had taken their toll. Criticism and political pressure came from within the council and from the Queensland Government.

In 2007, the current mayor Alf Lacey was elected. At that time the structure of government on Palm Island was also revised, as the island became an Aboriginal Shire Council. Mayor Lacey said that Palm Island Council is now the same as all other Local Government Authorities in Queensland and therefore governance of the community will be transparent and just.

Lacey, Erykah says, is experienced and is politically minded. While there is widespread disagreement about land ownership and tourism amongst Palm Islanders, one thing everyone seems to agree on is the need for employment.

Money flows into Palm Island and it flows right out again. Erykah says:

"Our councillors are young people. We have lawyers now, and doctors. Our young people will take things forward from another angle."

Back at the house, Erykah leafs through a folder where she keeps press clippings and letters she has written. She picks one and reads the final paragraph.

"The regional report by Lewis Wywill QC, covering aboriginal deaths in custody has long been forgotten. Yet I still marvel at his insight concerning our plight.

One of the statements I keep close to my heart: "The effective re-empowerment of aborigines in communities requires no less than the granting of power over law, land and people."



*Nathanael O'Reilly*

## SUBURBAN FANTASY

As pre-pubescent boys roaming  
The suburbs on our BMXs, searching  
For excitement on long, hot Sundays,  
We were simultaneously disgusted  
And thrilled to discover used condoms  
(Which we called Frenchies, rubbers  
And dingers) on the dirt slope beneath  
The squash courts behind the Underwood  
Road shopping centre. The discarded  
Rubbers hinted at a sordid world of furtive  
Teenage sex going on all around us, yet  
Out of sight and out of our childish reach.  
We perved on horny teens French-kissing  
And groping underwater in public pools,  
Took mental notes and foolishly imagined  
We had a chance with bikini-clad classmates.

