



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

ILING SIDAUN

Torres Strait Islands Healing Gathering



Introduction

The Healing Foundation's Torres Strait Healing Gathering, Iling Sidaun, was held on Thursday Island from 19 to 21 May 2014.

More than 60 community members from across the Torres Strait attended with over 600 people participating in community meetings in the lead up to the Gathering.

The Gathering was an opportunity for community members to share their stories, identify the causes of disharmony in the community, articulate healing needs and aspirations and suggest ways to achieve their healing objectives.

The Torres Strait Islands

The traditional people of the Torres Strait are of Melanesian and Aboriginal origin and speak distinct traditional languages. There are between 150 to 200 islands in the Torres Strait, with only 20 inhabited, and a population of approximately 10 - 12,000. Thursday Island is the largest populated island with approximately 3,600 people and the smallest populated is Stephen Island with approximately 40 people. The overall number of Torres Strait Islander people in Australia is approximately 90,000 with the majority living in Queensland and Western Australia.

The Torres Strait region is made up of five clusters: Eastern, Central, Far Western, Near Western and Kaurareg clusters. There is also the Northern Peninsula region where the majority of occupants are of Torres Strait background.





Engaging with the Torres Strait communities

The Torres Strait communities have their own experience of colonisation that differs from the Australian mainland. In the Torres Strait the impact of colonisation has manifested itself in the following ways:

- movement of Torres Strait people onto Aboriginal land and the displacement of Aboriginal people in their community
- the creation of apartheid and the segregation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people on Thursday Island
- breakdown of culture and cultural values through the impact of the missionaries and government regulations
- growth of pain-based behaviours in response to these issues such as substance abuse, domestic and family violence and child abuse

The Healing Foundation's engagement with the Torres Straits began with a healing gathering on Horn Island focusing on the relationship between the Kaurareg Nation and Torres Strait Islanders. This gathering was held in partnership with DATSIMAA and occurred in May 2012 with participants representing the Kaurareg Nation and the Torres Strait Islands defining healing, identifying their healing needs and beginning a healing journey for the Torres Strait community.

Forum participants recommended that the Healing Foundation commit to the development of a healing strategy for the Torres Strait.

As part of developing the Torres Strait healing strategy the Healing Foundation employed a project officer, based on Thursday Island, to engage with and discuss healing needs and aspirations with Torres Strait communities.

These consultations identified that similar issues were present across all islands. Key common themes emerged around community safety, children's safety, leadership and governance, self-determination and spiritual health. There was agreement that the Islands must work together to address these issues or they would not be resolved. Community members recommended that the next step was to hold a healing gathering.

Torres Strait Healing Gathering Iling Siduan

The Gathering was held on Thursday Island in May 2014. Participants and Thursday Island community members came together for the Welcome to Country including an enactment of the Sibwanan/Omar ceremony, a traditional ceremony of welcome and gift exchange.



The Gathering participants were supported to:

- understand their shared history and make sense of their experiences in the context of colonisation and past government policies
- take ownership of their story and develop a roadmap for healing in the Torres Strait that allows people to move towards a more positive future with confidence and purpose
- strengthen and build upon community networks, relationships and knowledge systems that can lead and support a healing movement in the Torres Strait now and in years to come
- revitalise and rejuvenate long held cultural traditions and practices that have supported Torres Strait Islander people to heal.

The following key themes, identified through the community consultation process and raised by Gathering participants, formed the basis of discussions.



Disharmony and Imbalance

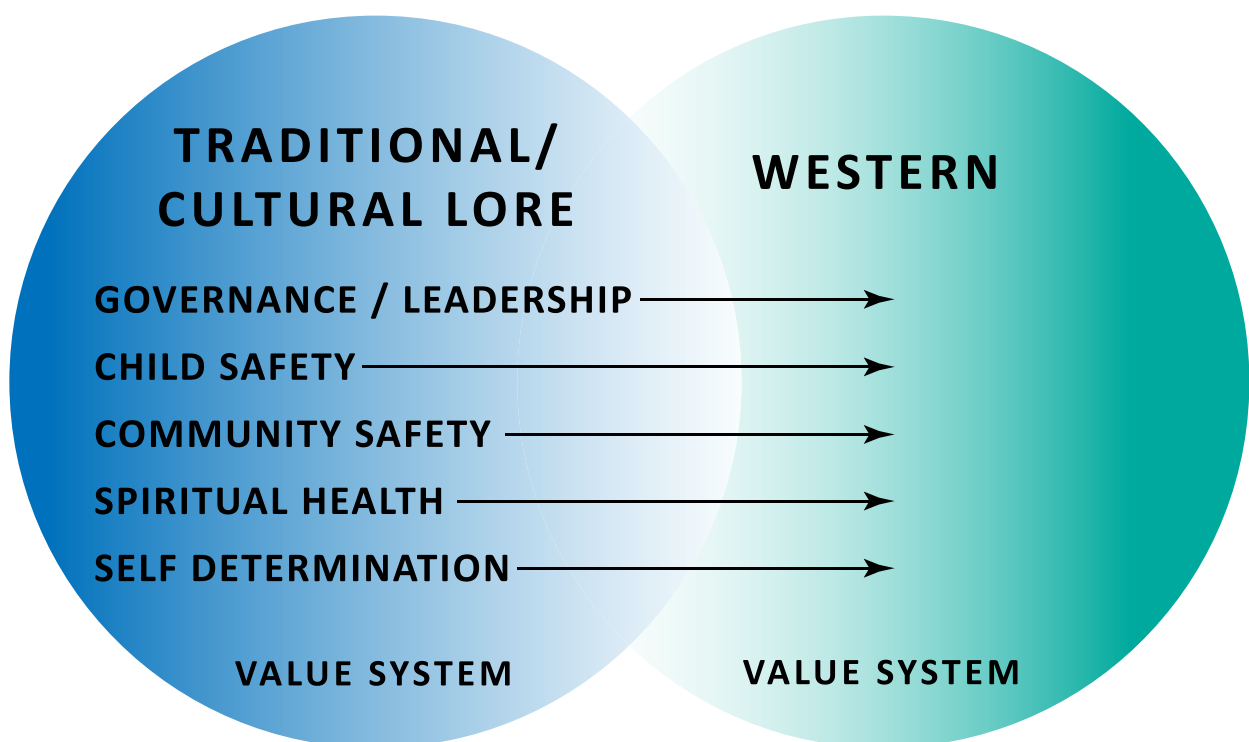
Community safety

The barriers to building safety in the community centre on lateral and domestic and family violence. Concerns were raised about the levels of domestic and family violence, the lack of community led responses and the isolation of women in dealing with these issues. The lack of family healing services and a failure to provide healing services for perpetrators of violence, with the focus only being on a justice response through police and the courts, was highlighted.

A tension between traditional and western traditions was creating imbalance in the community. Much discussion focused on lore versus law and the failure to implement any processes to discuss these issues leaving people frustrated, distressed and often in conflict. Participants noted a difference between government accountability and community accountability.

Gabriel Bani, community leader, presented a model for understanding these tensions and the complexity of bridging the gap between cultural value systems and the western value systems:

“Our traditional culture had strong values and our whole system was set about and around our children. How do we create the environment for our children? Identity is what makes me who I am. Culture will change, identity does not. We keep looking for answers in places we won’t find them, we will find it in our culture because we are all connected. We have a connection to the future”.



2 different worlds, different paradigms, practice, worldviews, pattern for connection. The imbalance and disharmony existing in our society is a result/symptom of the historical impact on our ancient value systems. Our cultural worldview on Governance/Leadership, Child Safety, Community Safety, Spiritual Health & Self Determination can only be brought back to balanced and sustained if we restore our cultural value systems.

Diagram by Gabriel Bani

Many parents and grandparents suggested that the level of access young people have to the internet and outside influences is perpetuating lateral violence.

Some community members felt that proper importance was not placed on cultural roles over western roles in terms of respect for positions within the community.

Children's safety

Community members outlined the significant distress they held about the levels of child abuse and neglect in their community including child sexual abuse. Gathering participants stated that it is often a sense of shame which inhibits people from reporting child sexual and physical abuse, for both victims and witnesses. Community members noted the levels of secrecy and hiding of abuse behind closed doors and these issues now being seen as individual family issues and no longer community issues.

In some instances a sense of cultural duty places a barrier to stopping child abuse. Often if the sexual abuse is perpetrated by a well-known or influential person in the community children are told to keep quiet for fear of creating friction in the community or family. People will wait for strength to be shown by other community members to speak out. Action will not be taken unless there is strength behind them. Being involved in driving solutions can be difficult due to the isolating nature of Island life.

A lack of parenting skills, changing family/community roles and children being sent away for school at a young age also contribute to current safety issues for children and young people. A breakdown in cultural values and the lack of support for strong parenting based in cultural knowledge were highlighted as a significant change in community life.

Spiritual health

The discussion around spiritual healing focussed on the proliferation of religious doctrines within the Islands, in particular, the multiplying and splitting of churches. This splitting of churches had divided the community and contributed to a lack of caring for each other and sharing in cultural way.

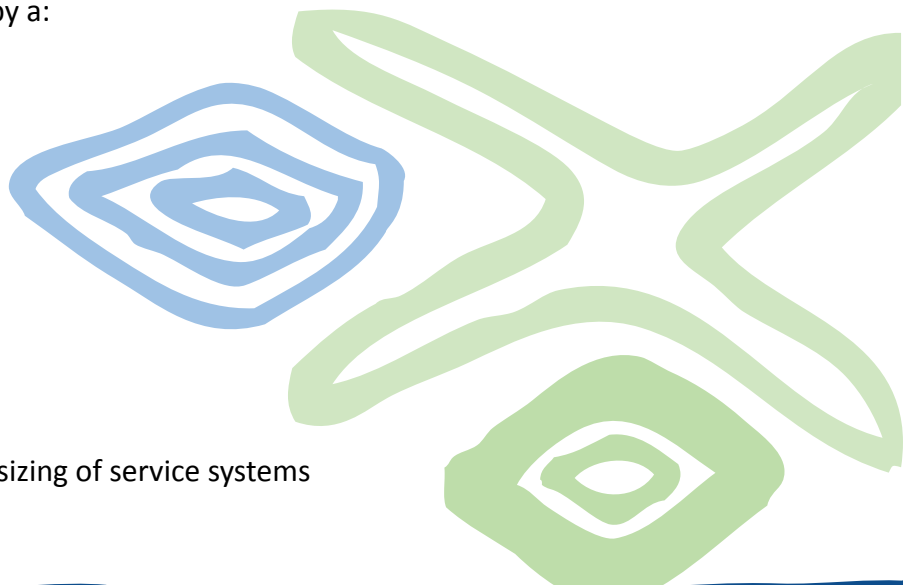
Community participants outlined the need for unity among the churches and a desire for the churches to conduct their religion in a method that does not stop cultural tradition from thriving.

Disconnection of spirituality, moving away from tradition and culture, and a western service system not operating in line with cultural beliefs were noted as creating tensions in this area. This was especially true in not having enough time to mourn and workplaces not supporting the traditional grieving ways, thus restricting the ability of community members to participate in their traditional spiritual and cultural practices.

Self-determination

Self-determination was seen to be hindered by a:

- lack of self-esteem
- poor motivation
- lack of family support
- poor parenting skills
- limited knowledge sharing
- lack of role models or mentors
- poor strategic planning
- lack of opportunity
- lack of jobs and nepotism
- changes in government policy and downsizing of service systems



It was noted that some Elders said they must be respected but perhaps are not fostering that same respect for younger members of the community through their actions and treatment of young people.

Participants identified the increased reliance on the dole as a means of living and the lack of purpose this related to. Many individuals and families were experiencing financial hardship and had poor access to economic opportunities. Participants also noted that although a lot of training was offered in the community there was little focus on real qualifications, which led to people feeling disheartened.

A breakdown in community life and the lack of a focus on community roles and responsibility was seen to be creating isolation and a lack of participation by community members in issues that affect them.

Leadership and governance

Participants emphasised the lack of Torres Strait representation on peak bodies and advisory committees, at both state and federal levels, resulting in the community having little input into decision making processes. This hampers the accountability and responsibility they could have for their own future. Issues were raised about the amount of bureaucracy in the lives of the community that undermined their capacity to take control of their lives and lead their own solutions.

Participants saw this as creating community disempowerment leading to community members believing that they could not affect change in their community.

Concerns were also raised about the lack of women in leadership roles and the imbalance this was creating within the community



Creating harmony and balance – moving forward

“Strong spirit, strong culture, strong people must be in our minds everyday”

“We must reinstall our cultural values and teach these to our children”

“Healing has to happen within ourselves - we can't have outside people come and heal us – we have to take responsibility”

“We must start building from the ground up for ourselves. There will be gaps but we must just build one brick at a time – owning the good foundation and the gaps”



Child safety

Creating safe spaces for our children

There is a need for spaces where children can talk about their issues and be safe to seek support. Children who were abused needed to be supported and encouraged to tell their stories and seek help.

Mentoring and development for our young people

There are current mentoring programs, for example on Yam Island, which have created positive change focusing on culture. These should continue and grow. Community expressed a need for this to be maintained and expanded where possible.

Building community capacity to respond to crisis

There is a need for crisis responses, when issues arise, particularly on the outer islands. The inner islands were noted as having closer links/connections to mainland services and some of the outer islands were left on their own. The islands need counsellors and support groups with cultural/community knowledge on the ground.





Supporting culturally strong parenting

There is a gap in the provision of parenting programs with a focus on culture. Community education around child protection processes, obligations and rights, was seen as a way to strengthen community capacity for both self-determination and the ability to support better response.

All foster families must have comprehensive and specific training around Torres Strait culture. Children need a good cultural care plan that is Island specific. If children are taken away from community a culturally safe environment needs to be established to ensure children's safety and to maintain connection with culture and community.

Strengthening our responses

Concern was expressed about how families were covering up abuse and not taking action to create change. Participants wanted to see increased action in this area and were keen to look at community means to achieve this.

Community safety

Creating Safe spaces to talk

Encourage community to talk about what they need for healing and to share their stories. Create the opportunity for supported meetings with Elders, councillors, church leaders, law enforcement agents and the general community promoting open talking of community issues.

Community led responses

Community safety plans need to be developed on each island and led by community participants. This could be done in partnership with police and other government and non-government services to assist in developing localised solutions.

Integration of our cultural knowledge systems

Establish processes to enable people to explore the integration between lore and law as this was seen to be contributing to community conflict, misunderstanding and a lack of coordinated and effective responses.

Spiritual healing

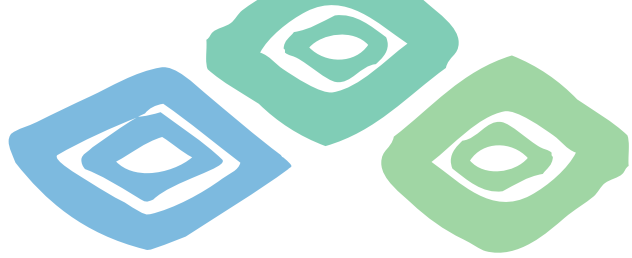
Reinstalling our cultural values

Renew the balance between Christianity and cultural values. Much emphasis was placed on reinstating cultural values and creating systems to enable this.

A church congress could be held to discuss the tension between traditional ways and Christianity and a healing process undertaken to enable better understanding and respect for the impact of the missionaries on cultural knowledge.

Education

Government departments and non-government service providers need to be better informed about the spiritual and healing practices of the Torres Strait.



Self Determination

Developing our own solutions

The development of our own solutions underpinned much of how to recreate harmony and balance. Community led and developed solutions were seen as critical to creating strong spirit, strong culture and strong people. Our people, our choice, and our future was a common theme expressed.

Funding should be made available to create, develop and support leadership so that community members have the skills to create and drive their own solutions.

Accountability

Government must be accountable to the Torres Strait community and the community must ensure that community consultation and participation is at the heart of the responses from all tiers of government. It is important to renew ways of achieving government accountability including the development of community led strategic plans that are enacted by governments and non-government agencies working together.

Leadership and Governance

Leadership our way

The Gathering outlined an emphasis on leadership that comes from the cultural values of reciprocity, humility and respect - reclaiming cultural ways. It is important to focus on creating more equity in leadership and representation and to develop knowledge circles that inform and support our representatives and leaders.

Better accountability for community representatives would increase harmony in communities and a mechanism for representatives to report back to community easily and quickly should be developed. We must recognise the importance of empowering ourselves as individuals to know that we all have a place to lead in our family and community and the contribution this makes to the way forward.

Growing the strength and voice of our women

Many women expressed a desire for increased participation in the leadership and governance of the community and the opportunity to create this.

Coordination and Integration

Services need to be better coordinated to limit duplication and to grow better and more robust responses for community members across the Islands.



Where to from here: developing a community healing strategy

The Gathering engaged communities across the Torres Strait in a process that enabled them to have a comprehensive view of the difficulties they face and build a holistic, integrated response that can support constructive change.

The Healing Foundation has committed to working with the Torres Strait community to develop a community healing strategy. The Healing Foundation in reviewing the outcomes of the Gathering, believes that to restore harmony and balance this strategy needs to address three key areas.

Women's leadership healing strategy

The Gathering identified key issues of domestic and family violence and child abuse. The lack of women in positions of authority in the Torres Strait at times results in an absence of the development of local level solutions to these issues.

Women spoke of not being able to effectively navigate the issues that are impacting on them and the impact of this on their spirit.

A concentrated effort to develop better leadership and healing opportunities for women is essential.

Children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing strategy

Many issues about children's wellbeing were raised at the forum including significant struggles with interpersonal relationships and a lack of focus on healing and wellbeing for children and young people. This included a lack of consultation with young people about their healing needs. Culturally driven and

developed solutions were lacking, with a need for focus on building the strength of our children's cultural identity. The need for safe and supportive spaces for our children was also raised which would require training, education and support for adults in how to respond safely for our children.



Men's healing strategy

The Gathering identified that men were struggling with their changing role and were experiencing cultural dislocation.

The process of enabling men to relocate their cultural authority and reclaim this in the changing constructs of men's work will be explored. A number of agencies are beginning work in this area but it is not currently integrated or well developed.

The Gathering set a mandate in relation to some critical areas for development. This included

- using the strengths of cultural knowledge systems to guide the development of the healing strategy
- ensuring that the strategy is community led, developed and designed
- building the healing responses in an integrated and collaborative way

To enable this, the Healing Foundation will work in partnership with all tiers of government in our efforts to create change. A healing strategy development team will be created with representatives from government, non-government and community to guide the development processes and to ensure a strong partnership is established.

The community showed great courage and generosity in creating a blue print for change. Healing is enabled where we are able to create a new ending to an old story. Thoughtful and creative responses were developed at the Gathering that have begun to address some significantly painful issues and create renewed opportunities for a hopeful and strong future.

