

Aunty Eileen's Story

"MY NAME IS EILEEN ALBERTS. I'M A GILGAR GUNDITJ WOMAN FROM THE GUNDITJMARA NATION. MY GRANDMOTHER WAS A WEAVER WHO WASN'T ALLOWED TO TEACH HER DAUGHTER HOW TO WEAVE.

BUT EVERY MAY MY GRANDFATHER, POP, WOULD GO DOWN INTO THE PADDOCK IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE AND BURN THE PUUNYGORT, THE CAREX TERETICAULIS GRASS, SO THAT MY GRANDMOTHER WOULD HAVE FRESH GROWTH THE FOLLOWING YEAR AND THE YEAR AFTER THAT TO WEAVE THE BASKETS THAT SHE SOLD.

NOW, BECAUSE OF GLOBAL WARMING, WE HAVE TO BURN IT IN EARLY MARCH IF WE'RE GOING TO HAVE ANY GOOD CROPS BY WEAVING SEASON. WEAVING SEASON STARTS AROUND MID-JANUARY AND GOES THROUGH UNTIL MARCH.

AS A CHILD, I WATCHED POP SUPERVISE HIS SONS AND BROTHERS AS THEY DID A VERY COOL CULTURAL BURN OF THE PUUNYGORT. BURNING WAS MEN'S WORK AND THEY WEREN'T ALLOWED TO TOUCH THE GRASS OTHERWISE, WHICH GREW IN A SPECIAL AREA. IT WAS LEFT THERE FOR THE WOMEN TO GO TO. THEY COULDN'T EVEN RUN THEIR HANDS OVER THE EEL BASKET AS IT WAS BEING MADE. MEN'S ONLY JOB WITH THE PUUNYGORT WAS TO BURN AND ONLY WHEN ASKED TO BY THE WOMEN. EVERYTHING ELSE CONNECTED WITH THE GRASS WAS WOMEN'S WORK.

WE NEVER STOPPED BURNING, AND KEEP IT GOING TODAY WITH THE BUDJ BIM RANGERS.

THEY DO THE BURNING AS DICTATED BY US WOMEN. I JUST TELL THEM WHEN IT NEEDS TO BE BURNT AND WHICH PATCHES TO BURN. THIS CULTURAL BURNING HAS BEEN HERE ALL THE TIME. IT KEEPS THE PUUNYGORT STRONG. FIRE IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE WIDER LANDSCAPE TOO. IT HAS TO BE PLANNED AND DONE RIGHT, NOT JUST TO CLEAR THE LAND BECAUSE THAT IS LIKE A WILDFIRE GOING THROUGH. IT HAS TO BE MOSAIC BURNING ALL THE WAY.

I WEAVE BECAUSE IT WAS A TRADITION THAT WE VERY NEARLY LOST, APART FROM AUNTY CONNIE HART.

IT TOOK US A LONG TIME TO CONVINCE HER TO TEACH US, BECAUSE IF YOU TAUGHT CULTURAL THINGS ON THE MISSION, YOU LOST YOUR CHILDREN.

NOW I HOLD WEAVING WORKSHOPS SO THAT THE CULTURAL TRADITION OF BASKET WEAVING WILL NEVER BE LOST. I TEND TO GRAB THE YOUNGER GIRLS THAT I'VE TAUGHT, OR MY DAUGHTER, AND SAY, 'COME DOWN I NEED ASSISTANCE TO DO THIS CLASS'...

...SO IT WILL CONTINUE ON GENERATIONS UPON GENERATIONS."

EILEEN ALBERTS
GILGAR GUNDITJ ELDER
GUNDITJMARA NATION