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Magazine

The Dreaming

■ **Sharing Indigenous culture in a spirit of peace and unity.**
Feature story and photo by Kia Mistilis.

SEVERAL thousand people attended Australia's largest international Indigenous festival, The Dreaming, a four day cultural event held at the Woodford festival site over the June long weekend.

From dance to song, theatre to film, comedy to ritual, art to the arts, and storytelling to ceremony, The Dreaming brings together and celebrates a diverse range of Aboriginal cultures, from Australia and the South Pacific, to North America and Canada.

The strong feeling connecting the culturally diverse experience of this festival is one of unity - a coming together of many peoples on common ground, a place where shared stories and new connections between indigenous and non-indigenous people build bridges of understanding and strengthen the knowledge that we are one human family.

In the opening ceremony and 'welcome to country' on Friday night, Jinibara Elder and spokesperson for the Traditional Custodians, Uncle Noel Blair, acknowledged the recent 40-year anniversary of the 1967 referendum, when an overwhelming majority of Australians voted 'yes' to granting Aboriginal people citizenship in their own country. "We have come a long way since then, but we still have a long way to go," he said. "We accept the changes that development brings, but we as Aboriginal people still have our own cultural responsibility to uphold."

Uncle Noel announced that a new memorandum of understanding was signed last week between the Queensland Folk Federation and the Jinibara Traditional Custodians and shared their vision that The Dreaming Festival, growing strongly and now in its third year, will soon take its place amongst the great Indigenous gatherings of the world.

This year a new link in the Indigenous cultures of our region was made with the first appearance by a Timorese artist at The Dreaming Festival. Singer songwriter and permaculture trainer Ego Lemos was warmly welcomed to country by Jinibara Aunty Edna on behalf of the Jinibara people, making a new connection between the Indigenous peoples of Australia and East Timor, Australia's close neighbour and the world's youngest democracy.

"Coming to the Dreaming and representing East Timorese artists and the East Timorese people is a great honour," Ego said. "This is the first time I have seen an Indigenous Festival which is recognised by the Government and the Australian community. It makes me feel very happy, deep in my heart, and it will be good if we can have some cultural exchange between East Timorese culture and Aboriginal culture to share and learn from each other. I'm looking to meet with Aboriginal communities to see if we can connect and collaborate in strengthening our respective cultures."

While Australians may be aware of the political unrest and difficulties facing East Timor since the 1999 referendum when 78% of Timorese people voted for Independence from Indonesia, much less is known of traditional Timorese culture, which has survived 450 years of Portuguese colonization and 24 years of Indonesian occupation from 1975-1999.

The positive initiatives undertaken by Timorese people committed to peace and sustainability who work at the grass roots level to rebuild their country are virtually unheard of in the international media, yet they are the ones who are instrumental in East Timor's current journey from social and political trauma which faces all post conflict societies, into a better future.

Representing East Timor at The Dreaming, Ego Lemos played traditional songs and original compositions on guitar, harmonica, bass drum and percussion, singing in his native language, tetun. Ego's vibrant performances were a warm and inclusive invitation to the audience to sing, dance, listen, and share the stories and songs of his homeland.

Ego's music emphasises the importance of traditional cultural roots in the revitalisation of East Timorese society. As well as being an accom-

plished musician, Ego is closely involved in the sustainability movement with farmers in East Timor, as a leading permaculture advocate and trainer. Coming from a farming family, and seeing first hand the devastating effect of the occupation on the rural population, Ego started an organic farmers' movement at university in 1995.



Ego Lemos, the first East Timorese artist to perform at The Dreaming festival, in concert on Monday night.

to bring together students from different districts and dialects to promote sustainable agriculture, primarily through a demonstration farm in Dili. They had

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Permaculture's cultural connections

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tremendous difficulty operating under the Indonesian military occupation and were eventually forced to stop.

In November 1999, in the wake of widespread militia violence following the independence ballot, Ego met Maleny based permaculture trainer Steve Cran, who had just arrived in Dili. After initially training and working with Steve, Ego soon began to lead his own projects with farmers in the districts of East Timor, and trained other Timorese people to work with him.

In 2002, with a Diploma in permaculture and considerable field experience, Ego founded East Timor's first permaculture NGO, Permatil. (Permaculture Timor Lorosac)

Ego sees permaculture as having close connections to Timorese culture. "I try to encourage

East Timorese people to stay strong and revitalise the traditional knowledge which already exists in our culture," he said. "80% of Timorese people are farmers and during the Indonesian occupation, much of the traditional knowledge and sustainable farming practices were suppressed or lost. Chemical fertilizers, hybrid seeds and other unsustainable land practices were introduced, which destroyed soil fertility and aqua systems and also led to Timorese farmers becoming dependant on external agricultural inputs. Permaculture is a means of reclaiming traditional culture and knowledge to reduce poverty and promote economic independence," he said.

Permatil are based in the mountainous region of Same. They work with farmers in villages across East Timor, and also provide permaculture training for local and international NGO staff. Permatil are currently translating East Timor's

first permaculture manual from English into Tetun, a substantial book written by Australian permaculture educator, Lachlan McKenzie, compiled from field project experience since 1999 and featuring diagrams and illustrations by Timorese students of Arte Moris (Free Arts School) in Dili.

Whether in his homeland of East Timor, or travelling around the world, Ego is inspired to play his music to "encourage and unify Indigenous peoples." His message to both Indigenous and non-indigenous audiences at The Dreaming was "Keep going, keep strengthening the voice of peace and unity in the world."

Journalist Kia Mistillis first met Ego Lemos whilst working in East Timor during 2003 as a Project Officer for AUSTCARE's sustainable livelihoods program.



Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter performing 'Ruby's Story' with the Australian Art Orchestra.



Cocoum Wharton.



Ego Lemos and son Marcello.



Comedian Mary-G.



Mornington Island Dancers.

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