



ABORIGINAL HEALING

We hear much about the healing systems of other nations, but the bush medicine practised by the original inhabitants of our own land is absolutely fascinating.

WORDS / CAROLINE ROBERTSON

For 60,000 years, Indigenous Australians learnt from their beloved land. Trials taught them tonics from toxins and ancestors shared sacred skills. Now, despite incredible hardships, Indigenous healers are helping us to understand and appreciate the healing heritage of this lucky land.

DAINTREE DREAMTIME

We're standing in the cradle of civilisation, absorbing the invigorating air and soothing sounds. As we step softly on the ancient rainforest soil beside a sparkling gorge, green-tinged sun rays stream through the canopy. "Careful, this is poison," warns Harold "Wawabuja" Tayley, or Mooks to his mates.

As Mooks tells it, the rainforest is rife with curses and cures. The heart-leaved stinging tree or gympie gympie has both: "Fine hairs can sting the skin for two months but the root juice relieves it." During the Ngadiku Dreamtime Walks organised by Mossman Gorge Centre (mossmangorge.com.au), this amiable Aboriginal man shares survival tips from his local Kuku Yalanji tribe. The 135-million-year-old World Heritage-listed Daintree rainforest has rich resources with up to 30,000 flora and fauna species per hectare. "The rainforest is like a pharmacy, supermarket and university," beams Mooks, proudly. His ancestral land gives him shelter, sustenance and spiritual strength.

The walkabout started around a sacred smoking fire to help us "go from here with good spirit", assured Mooks. He showed us the stone used to crack yellow walnut seeds for flour, the

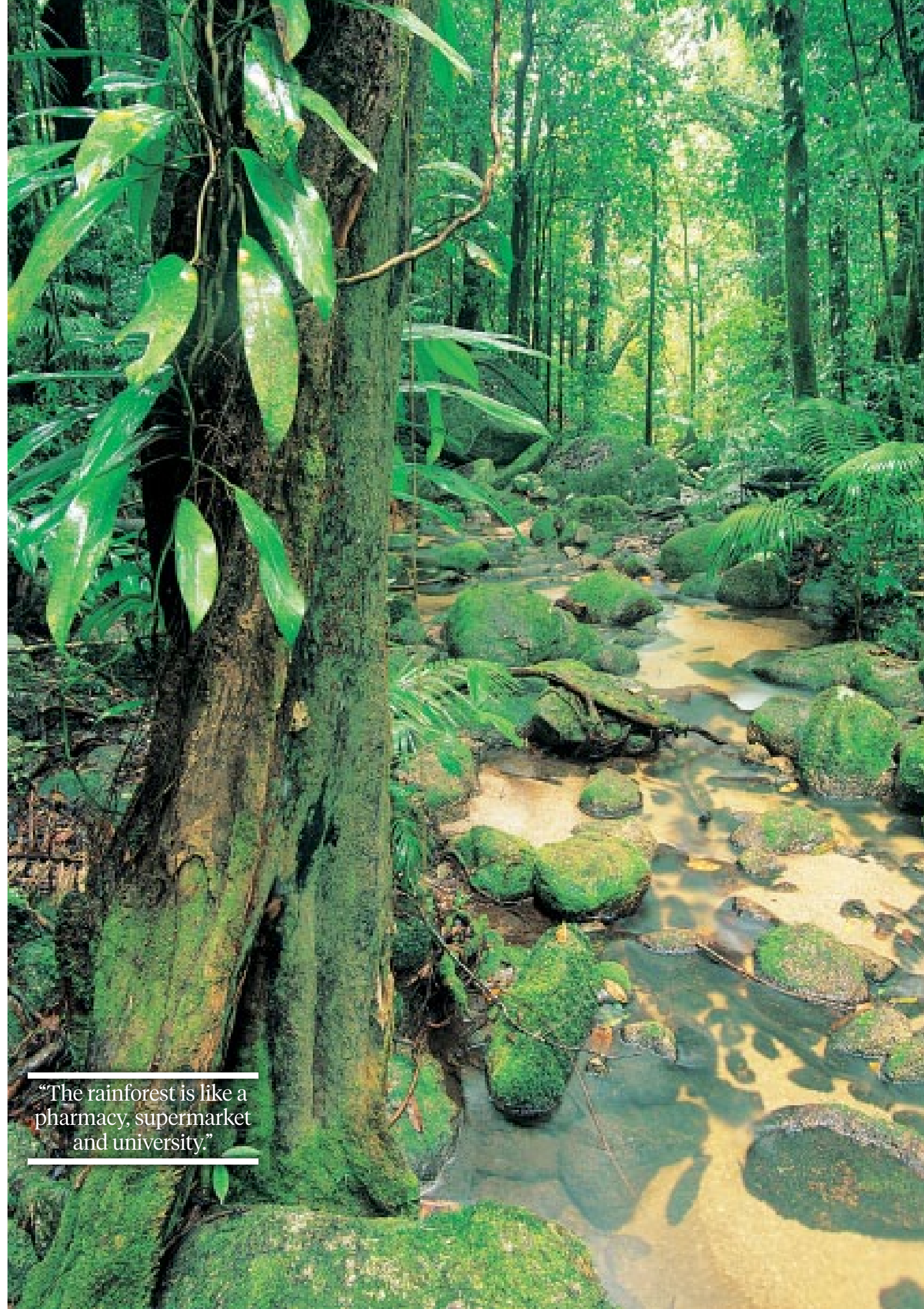
clam shell for cutting, the clay eaten to strengthen bones, the tasty pandanus fruit, sap used for cuts and green ants for box jellyfish stings, as well as how to hit the red cedar buttress to alert others when you're lost. You can survive in the rainforest with three essential items, Mooks says: a spear, firestick and water. He's grateful that his shaman grandfather selected him from 10 siblings to learn traditional healing.

From ages seven to 17, Mooks studied tracking and healing. Now, he humbly imparts his encyclopaedic knowledge to the public while offering private healing sessions. As with many Aboriginal healers, his methods are secret and sacred to his specific lineage. He hopes, however, to pass on his invaluable inheritance to the next generation.

ORIGINAL PHYSICIANS

Aboriginal holistic healers balance the body, mind and spirit through traditional techniques. Relatives usually recognise their natural gifts from a tender age. Known as clever people, the healers are called *Ngangkari* in the Western Desert, *Marrnggitj* in northeast Arnhem Land, *Garraaji* around Sydney and *Yura urngi* in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia. These divine doctors diagnose and treat complaints and advise ways to wellness; they may be men, women or children. "Ngangkari were responsible for the spiritual wellbeing and health of the whole community — the whole family," says Ngangkari Toby Minyintiri Baker.

Coach and healer Sue Gregory (healthyoutlook.com.au) works closely with Indigenous healers and has observed them assist with abuse, mental illness, pain, post-traumatic stress



"The rainforest is like a pharmacy, supermarket and university."

disorder and broken bones. Gregory has also facilitated non-Indigenous Australians to connect with Indigenous healers to "make amends and address the psychic wounds from Australia's history of Aboriginal genocide".

This scar runs deeply through Tasmania. Sheldon Thomas, director of Trowunna Tours, is Tasmania's first Aboriginal healer in 228 years. Thomas uses visions to diagnose and then smoking ceremonies, counselling, healing songs and homemade *Rrala Rub* to heal. Drawing from a deep connection with Mother Earth, he encourages others to appreciate her: "We're all Earth's children, all part of her; we need to understand and respect her. Just say thank you to Mother Earth — she wants to feel that love." Thomas also shares Aboriginal practices through school programs (waytanga@gmail.com).

SUBTLE PERCEPTION

Indigenous doctors often obtain a diagnosis during Dreamtime trances. Their sensitivity to supernatural forces allows them to access deeper dimensions through spirits, animals and the elements. Aboriginal people believe there are natural and supernatural causes of disease. Serious illness or accidents may be attributed to sorcery or spirits.

"Connecting to spirit has to do a lot with deep listening," Aboriginal medicine woman Anne Warren explains. "Spirit comes in through dreams, visions, signs and symbols in our daily lives. It's about listening to everything, acknowledging the interconnectedness between yourself and every living thing." Aligned with higher forces, the healer becomes a conduit for healing. Irrespective of the illness, the treatment is tailored to the individual — there isn't a "one cure for all" approach. Modalities may employ art, counselling, charms, chants, stories, dance, herbs, massage, music, meditation, rituals, sucking, psychic surgery and energy healing.

Health is fostered by the philosophy of being in harmony with oneself, others and nature. The Ya-idt' midtung people of northeastern Victoria and Kosciusko encapsulate Aboriginal beliefs beautifully through their following four tenets for enlightened living:



1. **Aildt.** One spirit connects all.
2. **Adtomon.** Be true to oneself and to nature.
3. **Dtwongdtyen.** Seek and see the truth through varied perception and perspectives.
4. **Linj'dta.** Live in the moment to be blissful.

TRADITIONS TODAY

Aboriginal healing is an aural tradition of songlines with sparse written records. Though much Indigenous information was erased during the assimilation assassinations, there are moves to preserve healing practices before they're lost. "Australians tend to revere Native American or Mayan healing, forgetting that the oldest living culture is on their doorstep," says Sue Gregory.

Indigenous Australians have an impressive pharmacopoeia of plants and their applications, which we're only

"Spirit comes in through dreams, visions, signs and symbols in our daily lives. It's about listening to everything, acknowledging the interconnectedness between yourself and every living thing."

beginning to explore. At the forefront is Indigenous ethnobotanist Gerry Turpin of James Cook University's Australian Tropical Herbarium in Cairns. Turpin is researching and recording herbal wisdom for future use. He's validating traditional plants' therapeutic properties through scientific testing in a team effort between healers from the Mbarrum people and the University of Western Sydney's National Institute of Complementary Medicine.

Someone who shares Turpin's passion for restoring traditional knowledge is Indigenous microbiologist Dr Shane Ingrey. In liaison with Aboriginal elders, Ingrey has isolated five natural antibiotics from traditional plants and hopes to discover more antiviral and antibacterial agents to overcome ailments.

Another organisation keeping Aboriginal traditions alive is Adelaide's

ANTAC, the Anangu Ngangkari Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation (antac.org.au). Formed in 2013, ANTAC is the first organisation of Aboriginal traditional healers to work alongside conventional healthcare, offering traditional treatments and rituals for mental and physical diseases. They also provide training and educational workshops about Aboriginal medicine.

Yet another beacon of Aboriginal culture is central Australia's Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation (npwyc.org.au), an advocacy group and provider of human services including Ngangkari healing. They actively produce and promote bush medicines, focusing on women and childcare.

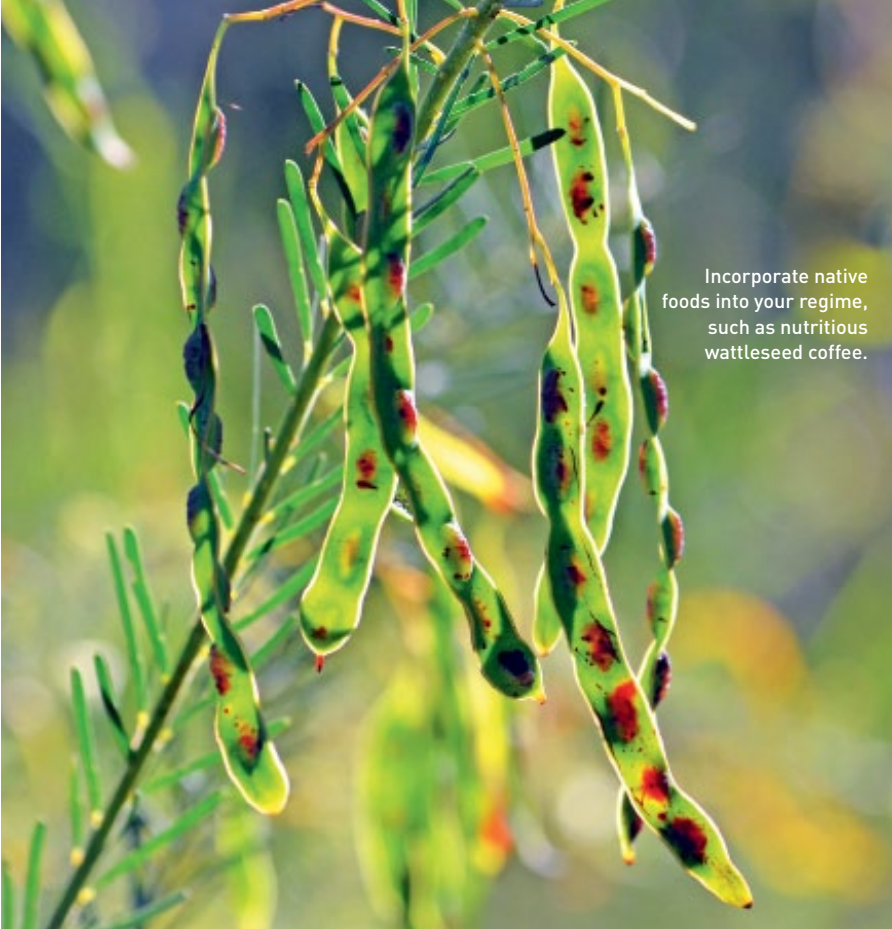
Cultural camps conducted by Aboriginal horticulturist Noel Butler and his wife Trish Roberts (nuragunya@gmail.com) at Burrill Lake, NSW, are increasing awareness of authentic Aboriginal healing and traditions. Their belief is that medicine can only gain from embracing Aboriginal healing. As Hippocrates said, "Foolish the doctor who despises the knowledge acquired by the ancients." The couple host guests including Youth Off the Streets kids and Sydney University medical students to impart Aboriginal health and heritage.

Butler's passionate about reinforcing cultural pride and purpose in Indigenous people and raising recognition of the Aboriginal plight.

He despairs at the dismal state of Indigenous health: "Aboriginals' life expectancy is still 17 years less than [other] Australians and they have a three times higher rate of diabetes." He attributes the situation to lack of acceptance. "Many Australian Aboriginals suffer health issues because they're denied the basic right to live where they want, with whom they want and how they want."

It's understood that mental conditions only arose after the influence of colonisation and intoxicants. According to healers featured in the book *Traditional Healers of Central Australia: Ngangkari*, the resulting substance abuse is very difficult to deal with. Indigenous Ngangkari healers say they lose their powers if they, too, suffer substance abuse. Addicts are encouraged to follow the traditional ways, associate with elders and seek assistance through supportive healthcare.

Indigenous healers, unlike their Western counterparts, generally don't request payment for their services but live off donations. "Indigenous healers are often poor materially and we're poor spiritually," says Sue Gregory. "We can interact to enrich each other." According to Ngangkari healer Arnie Frank, "Ngangkari work is mostly a labour of love because everyone is our kin. But we've got to live on something." With more collaboration, recognition, funding and facilities, Indigenous healers could be serving more people while



Incorporate native foods into your regime, such as nutritious wattleseed coffee.



supporting their families through their valuable work.

GOOD VIBRATIONS

"I have never felt something vibrate inside my body like that; truly amazing," author Louise Hay remarked after experiencing Jeremy "Yongurra" Donovan's didgeridoo (info@jeremydonovan.com.au). This primordial pipe echoes the album of our mothers' wombs. Studies show the didgeridoo induces relaxing brainwaves, relieves pain, releases emotions and increases circulation.

Donovan, of the Far North's Kuku Yalanji people, learnt to heal with the *yigi* (didgeridoo) from his grandfather. He explains, "The didgeridoo's vibration enters the body and shakes our cells. This allows us to access cellular memory and break down blocked energy. Then, using medicinal traditional chants, these energies are moved from our bodies into the Spirit World where they can be released."

During a 90-minute session Donovan transports you to a deep dreamtime using didgeridoo, bodywork and chants. "There's a language you're taught that resonates with the three major brains or energy centres within the body; these are *Gumbalanya* (stomach), *Gupaanyung* (heart) and *Duulpurruu* (mind)," he shares.

Didgeridoo healing can be practised by personally playing it, feeling it played over your body or holding the end in your hands as someone else plays it. Be aware that in some tribes it's taboo for women to play the didgeridoo. "I make it my job to educate people from all corners of the world about the beauty that exists within our sacred and traditional culture," says Donovan, who has worked with the Dalai Lama, Dr Wayne Dwyer and Eckhart Tolle. He's also a world-renowned artist, motivational speaker and retreat leader for team building using traditional skills.

You can experience Donovan's healing on his *Two Worlds*, a healing meditative journey through the sacred heart of Australia, available on iTunes.

PSYCHIC SURGERY

"We are able to use our hands to get out those things that are causing the harm, and help people be well again," shares Ngangkari, Rupert Langkatjukur Peter in *Traditional Healers of Central Australia: Ngangkari*. Compiled by



Studies show the didgeridoo induces relaxing brainwaves, relieves pain, releases emotions and increases circulation.

the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation (npywc.org.au), which has over 6000 members, this enlightening tome profiles Indigenous healers from central Australia.

The contributing Ngangkari talk about seeing the spirit, putting it in the right place, strengthening the spirit, bringing spirit back to the body and exorcising bad spirits. They also help departed spirits move on or place them in loved ones, for nurturing and to comfort the grieving.

Another Ngangkari ability is to astral travel. Writes Ngangkari Marinka Burton, "We perform a beautiful service to people while on our journeys because

"Touch therapy aims to bring back into balance all the elements of that person."

we find people who are unwell. We come back to our bodies in the morning and then we go around to see them and give the help that they require."

Touching the spirit with open hands, heart and mind is imperative. Massage is integral to Indigenous healing methods, with each tribe having its own techniques. Aboriginal medicine woman Anne Warren elaborates: "According to Ta-Idt' midtung medicine, massage is not a separate modality but is integrated and connected to the 'touch', combining understandings from the person's physical, emotional, social, environmental and spiritual life. Touch therapy aims to bring back into balance all the elements of that person."

Bodywork may include the use of smoke, balms, crystals, inhalation and oils. Various coloured clays are also used to soothe skin, ease aches, strengthen tissues and purify. 🍷

HOW TO APPLY ABORIGINAL WAYS

Incorporate Indigenous wisdom into your life through the following three channels:

1. Connect to yourself. Regularly go within and attune to yourself. This deep listening is called *Dadirri* in Bunjuling language. In still silence, simply observe your mind, body and surroundings. Peace and harmony hail from this clear consciousness. Return to your birthplace and contemplate your past, present and life purpose.

2. Connect to family. Aboriginal people draw power, protection and guidance from their ancestors. Connect with your ancestors and care for your family to nurture the root of your health and happiness.

3. Connect to nature. Incorporate native foods into your regime, such as citrusy lemon myrtle seasoning, spicy bush tomatoes, nutritious wattleseed coffee and vitamin C-rich Kakadu plum. Find your peaceful place and deeply absorb the environment. "Walk barefoot on the ground and sit in the bush," advises Noel Butler. Nature will nurture you. Patiently wait for your totem animal to appear and communicate with them. Pay respect to sacred sites and understand Indigenous land rights while offering acceptance, appreciation and support to Indigenous people.

To connect more with Australian Aboriginal wisdom consider visiting the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park in Cairns, Queensland, and similar centres around Australia.

Caroline Robertson practises and teaches natural therapies and First Aid in Sydney. To learn more about her consults, classes, treatments and retreats, visit carolinerobertson.com.au.