

# portrait of a people

The Tiwi of northern Australia

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# heide smith

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Readers should be aware that this book contains references to, and images of, deceased indigenous people

# Foreword

Heide Smith is a true artist. Her camera explores the inner nature of people, drawing the light from their expressions of joy, tragedy, love and wonder as they engage with their natural environment – the source of their culture and identity.

I first met Heide when she joined us in Cambodia in 1993 at a time when I was the Force Commander of the United Nations Transition Authority, restoring hope to that ancient people after nearly a quarter of a century of civil war of the most horrible kind. She had just published her successful first book on the people of Bathurst and Melville Islands, *Tiwi - The Life and Art of Australia's Tiwi People*, and was able to bring the same insights, creativity and compassion to capture the shared experience of the Cambodian people and those many Australians who were engaged in the resurrection of their nation. That photography is now a treasured part of Australia's military heritage in the Australian War Memorial.

Many things have happened since the optimism of those early post Cold War years. Globalisation and the accompanying economic rationale have distracted the Australian people from the fundamental importance of nurturing the ecology and the cultures of the truly wonderful landscape they share. The early warnings of climate change and large scale extinctions suggest the dawning possibility of reversing this neglect, but there will have to be many strategic conversations before there can be a proper sense of priorities attached to such a process.

Artists like Heide Smith play the vital role of showing us what is at stake in this conversation. In this book she and her husband Brian have taken their cameras and enquiries back to their subjects of nearly twenty years ago. The Tiwi are a distinctive and cultured people who are clearly under great stress. The shades of difference are captured here for the rest of us to see. The natural beauty of the Tiwi Islands endures, but the problem of offering a future to their young people while maintaining the culture that defines them becomes more complex as the world changes. It demands from the nation a more sympathetic and sensitive set of social policies than those practiced in recent times.

In many ways *Portrait of a People – The Tiwi of Northern Australia* encapsulates the historical experience and contemporary circumstances of all Australian Indigenous people. Those who read it and enjoy Heide's remarkable photography should recognize that we are at a critical moment in Australian history. Losing the cultures and the biodiversity on which they are founded would surely have an enduring impact on the vitality and creative potential of the nation for all time.

Lieutenant General John Sanderson  
Special Adviser on Indigenous Affairs  
Government of Western Australia

# Introduction

*Tiwi - Portrait of a People* is photographer Heide Smith's second book about the Tiwi Aboriginal people of north Australia, resulting from her many visits between 1987 and 2006. The first book, *Tiwi - The Life and Art of Australia's Tiwi People* was first published in 1990 and twice reprinted. An exhibition of photographs from those early visits was held at Australia's Parliament House, the first exhibition to be held in the new building. The photographs were later donated to the Northern Territory Museum and Art Galleries, which exhibited them in various cities around Australia.

On Heide's subsequent trips she was accompanied by husband Brian who researched and wrote the text for this book - and carried Heide's many camera bags. *Tiwi - Portrait of a People* is quite different from the first book, reflecting the numerous changes that have occurred in recent times, not all of them for the better.

The Tiwi Islands were once known as the Sentinel Islands, because of their strategic location 60 kilometres north of Darwin in the Timor Sea. The more easterly of the two, Melville Island, covers 5,788 square kilometres, and Bathurst Island 1693 square kilometres. They are the largest Australian islands after Tasmania, so large in fact, that they create their own weather pattern within the tropical monsoonal zone. Annual rainfall in the northwest of the islands approaches 2000mm, the highest in the Northern Territory (NT), whilst on the east coast of Melville Island it can be less than 1400mm. As a result there are abundant fresh water springs on both islands which, together with numerous bores in the townships, provide ample drinking water. The daily temperature range is from 19C to 36C depending on the season, although it can be colder inland. A feature of the north Australian coastline is the high tidal range; on the Tiwi Islands it can reach seven metres. There are two major seasons, the wet which is hot, humid and cyclonic, and the dry which is cool and yes, dry. The Tiwi describe the seasons according to the many natural events which occur during the year. Thus the wet season is called *Jamutakari* - the season of rains. As the grass dries, it is burnt off and fresh shoots appear, attracting the wallabies to the cleared areas, where they can be hunted more easily. This period is called *Kumurrupuni* - the season of smoke. At the hottest time of the year the cicadas appear, deafening everyone with their racket, an event the Tiwi aptly call *Tiyari* - the season when the cicadas are heard. Territorians call the period leading up to the wet season "the build-up", a particularly hot, humid, and unpleasant time, when tempers fray and much beer is consumed. The Tiwi call it *Pumwanyingari* - the season of thunder.

An entry in Heide's diary in 1988 describes an early morning trip on Goose Creek during the wet season:

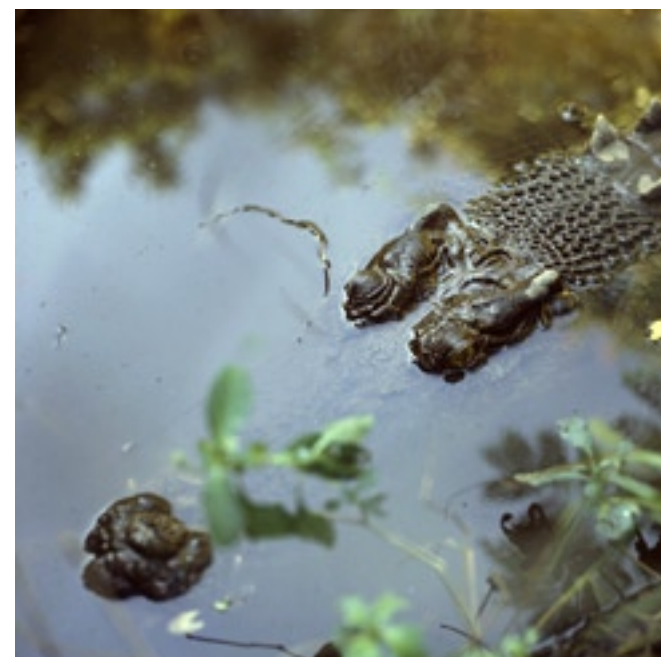
"Our headlights panic a buffalo, which crashes off through the bush. Scared wallabies cross our track ahead. The trees fly past and the tall spear grass flicks against the sides of

the truck. I am with foresters from Pickertaramoor and we are off to Goose Creek on Melville Island. We arrive before dawn at the dingy waiting to take us along the creek, which now in the wet, is a swirling river. The creek is named after the magpie geese which live in their thousands along the banks. When the four of us plus my camera gear are aboard, the boat lies very low in the water, but no one but me seems to notice.

The rising sun brings the creek to life; the water is a perfect mirror reflecting the paperbark trees, the pandanus and the mangroves. We glide through a sea of delicately coloured pink and white water-lilies - no motor, the tide carries us along. We bump into something. 'Don't move' I am warned, 'We have just hit a crocodile, there she goes.' A dark shadow disappears among the lilies. 'This is a nursery for baby crocs - fish galore. Mostly barra and salmon, and of course we're not short on water snakes. Melville is the home of snakes!'

The sky is still pink, the clouds are forming into towers. A sea eagle perched in a tree follows our progress. The creek widens, the banks are lower, and the trees fade away as we approach the sea. The geese honk noisily overhead. We watch a lone jabiru, a giant black and white bird with bright red legs, standing motionless in shallow water waiting for breakfast. Eventually we have to turn around to return to base, and now we need the motor. The noise shatters the spell of paradise."

Clear warm seas rich in fish and other marine creatures are flanked by large stands of mangroves, rocky headlands and beautiful clean white sandy beaches. Some of those "creatures" include crocodiles (salties), box jellyfish and sharks,



## Apsley Strait - separating Bathurst and Melville Islands

so swimming in the sea can be deadly. Fortunately, there are a number of fresh water swimming-holes on both islands, which are very popular with young Tiwi. The northern coastlines of both islands are home to dugongs and marine turtles, both of which are currently protected as part of a conservation program involving Tiwi marine rangers.

The islands are generally low-lying with numerous shallow lakes, swamps, and mangrove-lined tidal inlets. However, on Melville Island, there is a timbered sandstone range 160 metres high, running for a hundred kilometres west to east, which drains predominantly to the north. Vegetation cover varies from shrubby timber to areas of dry and wet rain-forest, rich stands of eucalyptus, and commercial plantations of cypress and caibbean pine, and acacia on Melville Island. Wild pigs, dingoes, snakes and wallaby are plentiful on both islands, with water buffalo and geese completing the menu on Melville, which is also home to mobs of fine looking wild-horses. They are reported to be descendents of the whalers; specially bred horses which carried the Australian Light Horse in the desert campaigns of the First World War, and were quarantined on the island on their return to Australia.

Less than one hundred years ago, the Tiwi were hunter gatherers living in small family groups (bands); there were no villages, in fact there were no permanent settlements of any sort. Today the Tiwi are firmly ensconced village-dwellers. There are now almost 2,700 Tiwi, largely congregated in three communities. Nguuu on Bathurst Island is the largest with a population of 1600: on Melville Island 450 Tiwi live at Pirlangimpi, formerly known as Pularumpi or Garden Point, while another 600 live at Milikapiti (Snake Bay). Other small communities have settled at Wurankuwu on Bathurst Island, and at Paru and Pickertaramoor on Melville Island.

The Tiwi Islands Local Government (TILG) in partnership with the NT Government, govern the Tiwi. Each of the major communities is represented on the TILG, together with members appointed by the Tiwi Land Council (TLC), which has paramount powers relating to land use, culture, and economic development. The TLC itself was formed in 1978, following formal recognition of Tiwi ownership in 1977 after the passing of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976.

Education on Melville Island is the responsibility of the NT Government, as is the child-care centre on Bathurst Island.



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Peter Alimankinni dressed for the beach in 1988 and then again



IX - Heide Smith - Portrait of a People

Everybody called the sturdy toddler 'Lija-Lija' in 1988. I photographed





Sunset is the time for stories of long ago - and the children cannot get enough of them! This image was used for the cover of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Bringing Them Home Report*. Pirlangimpi (1988)

