

Reception for 40th Anniversary of Bima Wear
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory
Government House – 19 August 2009

Last year we held centenary celebrations here for the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. One of the OLSH Sisters, as they are affectionately known, was Sister Eucharía who worked at the Catholic Church Mission on Bathurst Island for many years. Amongst many other things, she is remembered for her light touch with sponge cakes - and for establishing the Bima Wear enterprise, originally to make clothing for the islanders.

Today is the very special celebration of the 40th Anniversary of Bima Wear, the producer, as we know it today, of unique fabric prints featuring traditional Tiwi cultural symbols. I would dearly love to think that there is “google” in heaven - or maybe a mundane search engine is not required – because it would be fabulous to think that Sister Eucharía could track the developments of her original idea.

One of the best introductions to Bima Wear, for the uninitiated, is the home page on their ecommerce website where three beautiful women model the new summer collection. A wonderful group photograph welcomes you to the on-line store featuring traditional hand printed fabrics including cottons and cheesecloth depicting *Kirimpika*, *Irimaru* and *Jurtaka* – crabs, sawfish and wedge tail eagles. The designs include ancient symbols, family and environmental representations, all central to the Tiwi culture.

Three of the original staff still work at Bima Wear - Ms Lucia Pilakui, Mrs Noreen Kerinaíua and Mrs Josepha Kantilla. They began by being taught to sew by Sister Eucharía and her sister Bertha McKenzie, working old treadle sewing machines in a makeshift workshop underneath the Nguiu church. They then moved to a room at the local primary school.

From small beginnings, Bima Wear went from strength to strength, enduring many setbacks along the way. A potted history records that by 1976, fourteen women were producing three hundred garments each week, including school uniforms.

Bima Wear was incorporated in 1978 and moved to its own building, made possible with a Federal Government grant and opened by The Honourable Fred Chaney, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. (Subsequently, this building was taken over by others, but Bima Wear managed to continue.) In 1982, screen-printing was introduced and garments were sold direct from the factory showroom. Over the years, many leading Tiwi artists designed for Bima Wear, including Bede Tungutalum one of the founders of Tiwi Design.

In 1987 Bima Wear designed and printed the vestments worn by Pope John Paul during his visit to the Northern Territory. In 1990, they exhibited hand-painted silks and prints on paper at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Their work also toured in the exhibition *Australian Fashion: The Contemporary Art of Dress*. Last year, eighteen Bima Wear ladies were guest artists at Womadelaide.

Throughout the years, the Bima Wear team has remained true to the belief that they themselves can independently own and operate their business and thereby generate significant income for the Tiwi community. Recently, the business won a grant under the Australian Government's Textile, Clothing and Footwear Small Business Program to be used to introduce a computer-based system to digitise print design.

Last weekend, the fourth Darwin Aboriginal Art fair was held at the Harry Chan Building. It attracted phenomenal interest and an opportunity to view a huge variety of work from thirty-two art centres across Australia, as well to meet some of the artists. There were barks and carvings, woven artworks and fabrics. I would certainly encourage Bima-Wear to also include this showcase in the future as hundreds of visitors were privileged to share the cultural experience and amazed by the variety of skills on view.

The heart of the Bima Wear enterprise remains the enduring workforce. Local Tiwis and Territorians can continue to buy clothing and fabrics through the shop. But it now goes much, much further. As Noreen notes:

Everything is so much bigger now - our premises, equipment and the number of staff. We thought we would only be supplying our local people with clothing.

We never thought that far ahead to where Bima Wear would be selling products all over the world.”

I will leave the last word to Lucia who has a simple answer for what inspires such a happy, stable and enduring workforce. *“We love working with our group of women and we love what we do. Our focus is to ensure Bima Wear has another forty years of life, bringing as much joy to as many people as the past forty years have done.*

To all of you who have shared this journey – well done and all the very best for the future.