

KYLE, Erykah

Palm Island Aboriginal Council

Queensland

Australia

The Aboriginal Way: Self-Determination, Human Rights and Education on Palm Island

In November 2004, Aboriginal residents of Palm Island (65 kilometres off Townsville in Queensland) stormed the island's police station, barracks and courthouse after the death in police custody of a local man, Cameron Doomadgee, who was found dead in his police cells just hours after he had been locked up for the minor offence of "causing a public nuisance" - he had been singing in the street! The rebellion (some call it a "riot") was triggered by the Queensland State Coroner's partial release of an autopsy report which indicated that Doomadgee may have been beaten by police. He was only one of nearly 300 Indigenous people who have died in police custody since 1980. The police reacted to the "riot" by invoking far-reaching emergency powers, including flying in riot police who took control of the airport, school and hospital, closed roads, and raided homes. In the wake of these events, Queensland's government and corporate media attempted to blame the Aboriginal residents themselves.

By any measure, Palm Island is a social and economic catastrophe. It's population of approximately 2,500 people is crowded into 200 homes. Their average life expectancy is 50 years - 30 years less than Australia's average. Unemployment levels are between 80 and 90 percent. These conditions are the result of Palm Island's oppressive past. Established as a penal colony in the mid 1900s, Palm was a brutal prison for Queensland Aboriginals and its purpose was to enforce the "good behaviour" of Aboriginals confined to the state's reserves.

Erykah Kyle, the Mayor of Palm Island, will talk about her peoples' strategies for cultural survival. It is her belief that only through self-determination in all fields of life - including education and health - will her people be able to heal their lives. Insisting that her people have the ability to solve their own problems, she is demanding that they be given the resources that they need, and the respect which is rightfully theirs according to their inalienable human rights. Only then will the government's stronghold on Aboriginal people be broken.