

PETER PURCELL

---

## The Ruse of Tradition

The societal conflict in Australia over Aboriginal rights is currently focused on a Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament, with its authority written indelibly into the Constitution. Beyond that are the demands for treaty and, in some form, the recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty over Australia or parts of it. These demands follow strategically from the successful land rights campaigns in the late twentieth century, which culminated in the “discovery” and implementation of native title rights. The current initiatives are led by the urban Aboriginal elite, but they are underpinned by a nationwide revival of Aboriginal culture, not only among Aborigines but also in the broader community. More precisely, they are underpinned by a re-imagining of Aboriginal culture, which now bears little resemblance to the reality of the past, having morphed in the popular imagination into a New Age idyll that is arguably as much Disney as Dreaming.

At the core of this revivalist movement is the dogma that Aboriginal tribes lived on precisely the same land for 50,000 years or so, with their sacred traditional knowledge unchanged across the millennia and faithfully passed down to each new generation. The ubiquitous claim of “oldest living culture” is its popular expression. This is not to deny the ancient presence across the Australian landscape of some of the ancestors of today’s Aborigines; only to disagree that they were forever bound to a fixed place and cultural belief.

The dogma of perpetual “sacred” homeland and tradition—what might be called a myth of origin—serves many purposes, a detailed discussion of which is not intended here. Suffice to say that, first and foremost, it accords a sense of “sacred” identity to the individual. This can be especially relevant for urban Aborigines who are partly or even predominantly of Anglo-Celtic ancestry. It can also be important in remote communities that have experienced major demographic and cultural changes. It is intrinsic to the native title concept.

At the same time, the claim of “traditional”

is a powerful shibboleth for many in the broader community, triggering substantial support for Aboriginal claims. This follows from the popular perception that the term identifies sacred cultural elements that are unchanged since their origins in the millennia long before colonisation. In a great many cases, perhaps a majority, the claim of unchanged ancient tradition is not true, though it may be believed by the claimant. The term is easily “weaponised” and it brings powerful forces into play in conflicts over Aboriginal claims. That, in turn, because the rights of other Australians are affected, should invite close scrutiny of all such claims, but this is rarely possible because there is usually very limited information available.

An exception to this was the confrontation that occurred over forty years ago on Noonkanbah Station, a pastoral lease in the Fitzroy River Valley in the southern Kimberley region of Western Australia. Widely acknowledged as pivotal in the campaign for Aboriginal land rights in Australia, the confrontation is unusual in the Australian context because it is so well documented: Aboriginal demographics and culture in the region had been studied for decades by Australian and international ethnographers and the confrontation itself was the subject of extensive media coverage.

Much is said these days about the need for truth-telling to cure the ills and hurts of the past. I would argue that truth-telling must do more than that; it must serve the future and to do so it must be bound by historical fact, not fancy and fabrication. Otherwise, it is unlikely to lead to well-founded and successful policies. Noonkanbah is a useful place to start, not only for the lessons inherent in the fabrication that occurred there but for the reminder that Aboriginal demographics and cultural beliefs are far more prone to change and evolution than Aboriginal dogma and popular romanticism allow.

The Noonkanbah pastoral leasehold was purchased in 1976 by the West Australian

government for the Aboriginal people who had lived on the station for generations and considered it their land. Earlier that same year, the West Australian government had granted an oil exploration permit to a small American oil company, Whitestone Petroleum, for whom I worked. When the company conducted a seismic reflection survey near P Hill in late 1976 to define a subsurface drilling target, no concerns were expressed by the local community about the work being near P Hill. In 1979, after several other companies joined the project and Amax Petroleum had become the operator, the group proposed to drill a deep exploration well about three kilometres from the hill on an otherwise featureless plain. The Noonkanbah community, who called themselves the Yungngora community, objected to the drilling plans and, after protracted negotiations with companies and government, refused access for the rig. The confrontation that followed, with the rig driven onto the station with a police escort, was an appalling development—but it was great publicity for the land rights movement.

What happened at Noonkanbah varies in the telling, of course, depending on one's side of the barricade. In my version of history, a group of land rights activists—some white, some black—exploited the very understandable xenophobia of the Noonkanbah community and orchestrated the confrontation to put “land rights” on the nation's front pages. The other side had its history written long ago by Steve Hawke (*Noonkanbah: Whose Land, Whose Law*, 1989), one of the principal organisers of the conflict.

My concern here is not with the events of the confrontation but with the fabrication of Aboriginal culture and history on which the opposition was mounted, and the consequences of it. Spokesmen and supporters claimed that the Noonkanbah community had unbroken ties across millennia to the land and its “law”, and were living in accordance with their timeless traditions. This protest, they said, had nothing to do with land rights but was solely to protect the “sacred site” of P Hill, because drilling there would damage the goanna spirits beneath it and bring great harm, even death, to the community.

Believing—naively, as it turned out—that a better understanding of the local Aboriginal culture might help find a compromise solution, I began

reading the extensive published anthropological literature. This told a sharply different story and was explicitly clear: major changes to the demographics, land affiliation and religious beliefs of Aboriginal people in the Fitzroy Valley had occurred in the twentieth century. There was no tribe living on their traditional land for millennia and practising an unaltered traditional law. Many of the people at Noonkanbah were not descendants of the river tribes but of desert clans who had migrated north into the river country, bringing their desert law with them and modifying it to better suit their new residence there. The main religious fervour among the valley communities in the 1970s was not an ancient code but several new cults with millenarian and cargoistic themes, preaching the end of white Australia. In short, Aboriginal society and culture in the valley in the 1970s bore scant similarity to

---

*The main religious fervour among the valley communities in the 1970s was not an ancient code but several new cults with millenarian and cargoistic themes, preaching the end of white Australia.*

---

the social structure and cultural beliefs that had existed before the arrival of “Europeans” at the end of the nineteenth century, and which constituted what the Australian public understood as “traditional”.

Despite this publicly available information, the claims of traditional tribe and culture were repeatedly made by community spokesmen and supporters, endlessly restated by the media, Labor Party politicians, sundry clerics and others. Some of them knew the demographic and cultural reality on the Fitzroy River plain and chose not to reveal it. Others were blissfully unaware and spoke out of ignorance. Don Dunstan, for instance, the former Premier of South Australia, described Noonkanbah as “the only land where traditional tribal culture remained”, and suggested that any disruption would be cultural genocide. The National Aboriginal Conference protested to the United Nations that the drilling targeted one of the community's “utterly sacred areas representing the very essence of their law and culture [in] their ancestral home that has nurtured them for many centuries”. These were nonsense but excellent strategy—though I doubt either of these speakers was lying; just that they had no understanding of the untruths they spoke. Regardless, many in the public were misled by the constant claims of “traditional”, which they mistook to mean ancient unchanging Dreamtime ways. That was the ruse of tradition, as the famous Australian anthropologist Dr Kenneth Maddock would later call it.

This essay summarises the demographic and

cultural evolution of Aboriginal society in the Fitzroy Valley from pre-colonial time to the 1970s. Events so long ago now might seem irrelevant, but truth-telling is all the more important now when there is so little of it available. The essay is based on my writings then and since, all of which have drawn extensively from the many publications by Dr Erich Kolig, notably *Tradition and Emancipation* and his books *The Noonkanbah Story* and *The Silent Revolution*. Other key references are listed, but these books are referenced only where cited directly. (I should acknowledge that Dr Kolig has not been happy that I have used his work in drawing conclusions that are at odds with his perspective on the social and cultural developments among Fitzroy Valley Aboriginal communities.)

### Population changes in the Fitzroy Valley

The Fitzroy River rises in the rugged Kimberley ranges of northern Western Australia and flows south, carving Geikie Gorge as it sweeps into the vast hill-studded plains of the Fitzroy Valley and meanders westward to the sea at King Sound near Derby. The valley has been part of the landscape as river plain or ocean embayment for hundreds of millions of years. For 40,000 years or more, it was home to Palaeolithic people who came there from Asia by ways and paths unmapped. The river valley was often, as it is now, the last constant and reliable water source before the vast desert to the south. History tells us that such fertile river land would have been prized and fought over, and early twentieth-century records of conflict between Aboriginal clans along the river testify to this. Profound disruptions of land occupancy were forced by major climatic changes and rising seas, especially during early occupation, and by the arrival of new people with the dingo about 4000 years ago. The migration into the Fitzroy Valley in modern times of Aboriginal clans from the desert to the south, ultimately overwhelming the river people, has been the latest chapter in the parade of people across the region.

In the late nineteenth century, immediately before the arrival of the Europeans, the Aborigines who lived on the Fitzroy River plains north of the river at Noonkanbah were the Djaba tribe. They were, in the modern vernacular, the “traditional owners” of that land. To the west, mainly south of the river, were the Nygena people, with whom the Djaba had such friendly relations that they have been described as eastern Nygena clans—though the different languages suggest they were a distinct tribal group. To the north of the Djaba plains were the Bunaba, with whom relations were more

hostile. South of the river, among the rugged St George Ranges and beyond, were the desert clans of the Walmatjari.

In the mid-nineteenth century, before white settlement, the Djaba clans were slowly dying out, for reasons unknown, and the Nygena clans began to move across the river onto the Djaba land, including the Noonkanbah area. The Nygena “validated” their occupancy by learning the mythology and rituals (the law) of the Djaba clans, as evidenced by the many local myths that feature the Djaba language. By the time the last of the Djaba people died in the 1950s, the Nygena were the dominant tribe at Noonkanbah and firmly maintained as dogma that it had always been their country. Most published maps of the tribal areas show land occupancy patterns that post-date the Nygena migration and the Djaba are not mentioned. In essence, the “traditional owners” of the land at the time of European settlement have been forgotten and written out of history.

White pastoralists arrived in the valley in the early 1880s and slowly occupied the land along the river. Noonkanbah Station was established by the Emmanuel brothers in 1885, taking over land newly occupied by the Nygena clans and, later, when the station was expanded south of the river, the ranges and desert lands of the Walmatjari clans. Some Aborigines elected to “sit down” and work on the stations, while others remained relatively unaffected in the “bush”. Within a few years, frontier conflict ensued, with “bush blacks” waging a guerrilla campaign against the settlers, fighting with spears and rifles and by setting fires.

In the early twentieth century, people from deeper in the desert began drifting into the river country, leading to intermittent conflict with the pastoralists over several decades but also causing disquiet among the relatively settled Aboriginal communities, who feared the “bush men”, with their claims of powerful desert “magic” and their demands for women. These desert groups eventually settled on the stations—the super-waterholes, as the famous pioneering anthropologist A.P. Elkin called them. Proximity to “white” goods such as tea, sugar and tobacco was ultimately better than life in the desert, though the nostalgia for “home” would always remain. In the 1950s, a migration into the Fitzroy Valley of clans from deep in the desert, collectively called the Julbaridja, included a group of senior lawmen destined to play a leading role in the socio-cultural revolution that would sweep the valley in the decades ahead.

As this serial migration proceeded across the decades, the Nygena people and their descendants were progressively over-run by the desert people,

mainly Walmatjari. Inter-marriage and widespread adoption of the Walmatjari language and desert law blurred tribal lines: the Walmatjari language became the *lingua franca* in the valley and anyone who spoke it was accepted as part of the Walmatjari “tribe”. Identity became largely individual choice and did not always accord with an individual’s tribal ancestry. Like people everywhere, the community members knew their ancestry but chose their “tribal” identity to their advantage. On Noonkanbah, the descendants of Nygena and Walmatjari were relatively well integrated and referred to themselves as the Kadjina tribe. (The distinction between Nygena and Walmatjari people was revived during native title proceedings, and today is manifest in separate “camps” in the Noonkanbah township.)

Over the decades, Noonkanbah Station functioned in two worlds, being both a marginally successful pastoral station, running sheep and then cattle, and a respected centre for Aboriginal religious activity. Generations were born and worked on the station and regarded it as their homeland. For the majority, this was based on their being conceived and born there, rather than having ancestors who lived there before European contact. Having resettled in the river country, the desert people sought some religious authority there by acquiring knowledge of the river law from the local lawmen. Of particular importance for subsequent generations was a re-emphasising of the importance of their *djarin* (the “conception site” where their spirit child entered their mother, not necessarily where she physically conceived), and an insistence that being born of the spirits of the river country gave them substantial rights there.

In the late 1960s, a senior man, Friday Muller, emerged as the community spokesman and was, for all intents and purposes, their leader. Aboriginal living conditions on the station were appalling by contemporary standards and, in 1971, despairing of ever reaching agreement with the station management over improvements, Muller and the community “walked off” Noonkanbah and moved to the nearby town of Fitzroy Crossing.

By then, a major revival of Aboriginal culture had begun in the valley. It was not, however, a revival of the now-faded traditional river culture but based solely on desert law and driven by the Julbaridja desert lawmen who had arrived in the 1950s. These lawmen were appalled by the anti-social behaviour

they witnessed in the various communities, especially after moving into the frontier town of Fitzroy Crossing. Living conditions there were terrible because of the over-crowding with people forced off nearby stations after the introduction of the 1969 Pastoral Award. Drunkenness, fighting and domestic violence were endemic. The lawmen blamed this behaviour on the degrading influence of “whitefella law” and set about revitalising the communities’ religiosity.

Their solution was to re-establish desert law or, more precisely, their modified version of it, incorporating some traditional practices but also introducing new myths and rituals. In anthropological terms, these initiatives constituted a nativistic or revivalist movement. The lawmen’s prestige and authority among the communities dominated by desert people empowered them to totally reorganise the traditional desert-based totemic classification system, introduce new desert-based cults, institute punishment rituals (including “bush” jailing and fire-singeing) and reactivate initiation ceremonies (circumcision and sub-incision—slitting the underside of the penis) for young men.

The dream of the Noonkanbah community under Friday Muller’s leadership was the acquisition of their own land to start a cattle station. Initially they were not exclusively focused on Noonkanbah Station north of the river but wanted the Waratea pastoral lease area south of the river, within the traditional Walmatjari tribal land and purportedly the traditional country of Friday Muller’s father’s clan. To help them pursue this land claim, the group had adopted the name Kadjina several years previously and, while resident in Fitzroy Crossing, were legally incorporated with another group as the Kadjina Community.

Kadjina was a Dreamtime dwarf who had escaped from a giant mythic dog called Yungngora by climbing into the St George Ranges, where he became a dark-stained figure on a high cliff. From this high place, Kadjina was said to be not only overlooking Waratea land but also the distant homelands of other community members, thereby providing a mythological validation of the community’s land claim. (In reality, Kadjina’s position was not very high up the cliff and he could see little and not very far, but myth isn’t bound by physiography.)

For various reasons, the Noonkanbah group subsequently withdrew from the Kadjina commu-

---

*The Noonkanbah group subsequently withdrew from the Kadjina community and lost use of the name, but swiftly crafted a new identity by “redreaming” the mythology.*

---

nity and lost use of the name, but swiftly crafted a new identity by “redreaming” the mythology. In their new version, Kadjina didn’t outwit the dog Yungngora, but fled terrified up the hillside, all a-tremble at Yungngora’s superior physical and spiritual strength. With this myth-based equivalent of an “up yours” to their previous Kadjina partners, they renamed themselves the Yungngora Community.

In September 1976, the West Australian Aboriginal Lands Trust, using federal funds, purchased the Noonkanbah and Waratea pastoral leases from Dalgety Australia Limited, and assigned the title over Noonkanbah station (north of the river) to the Yungngora community. The Waratea leases south of the river, the original homeland sought by Muller’s Noonkanbah group, were given to the Kadjina community.

None of this is to say that many people on Noonkanbah in 1980 did not believe that they were living on their traditional land. They had been born there of conception spirits that many likely believed had been there since the Dreamtime waiting for them. That was the dogma: it was always their traditional land. Always was, always would be, in the modern vernacular. But, of course, it wasn’t. In rational terms, their claims might not have been fabrication, but they were an untruth or, as the anthropologists would prefer, a new exegetical interpretation. In this, we are no longer dealing with anything resembling rational objective truth but with what the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin called “perpetual self-creation”: the truth is what you choose it to be. The traditional tribal estate could be “reterritorialized as it [was] relocated within the living landscape”, as one anthropologist put it.

In the late 1970s, the Noonkanbah community subdivided the station into areas over which individual families were said to have “traditional” authority. In reality, most of the claimants were descendants of desert people, mainly Walmatjari, with no historical (that is, pre-contact) ties to those areas at all. None of the claimant families indicated at that time that they had significant Djaba or Nygena patriarchal ancestry and the claims were based on the family patriarch’s *djarin*, his conception site, on the station. Anthropologists would argue that this birthright was a traditional mechanism for acquiring religious authority over land and should be respected as validating “traditional ownership”. Conversely, the significance of such claims in contemporary Australia is, or ought to be, debatable, given that some claims have little or nothing to do with pre-contact clan territories—but the time for that debate has passed in Australia.

## The changing law

Major demographic and lifestyle changes, such as those which occurred over the past century in the Fitzroy Valley, with people from different “tribes”, some far removed from tribal homelands, all living together in station “camps” or towns, intermarrying and self-identifying as they choose, are inevitably reflected in dramatic changes in the belief systems of the people involved. The pattern of dynamic change in the religious and cult life in the Fitzroy Valley, as described by various anthropological observers since the mid-twentieth century, is consistent with this. Pre-contact traditional religious belief systems of the river people were eroded by acculturation with new and dominant groups, both black and white, while the migrant desert people had to adjust to life remote from their traditional land-linked mythology. Ultimately, exotic “travelling cults” emerged to fill the void, some singing of the apocalypse, some of salvation in a world without white people.

The link between traditional Aboriginal clans or tribes and their land is the subject of a rich and extensive literature which focuses, often quite romantically, on the interweaving of the Dreamtime itself with a timeless and unchanging man–land bond. In reality, Aboriginal mythology and occupancy patterns have never been as unchanging as Aboriginal dogma and European romanticism would have it. The twentieth-century migration of desert people into the Fitzroy River Valley and the supplanting there of traditional and contemporary desert myths and rituals is but one example of this dynamism.

The traditional (that is, pre-contact) mythology of the river clans of the Fitzroy Valley is known collectively as the Walungarri and describes the activities of various mythic beings as they wandered across the land during the Dreamtime. They did not make the world, which had always existed: they simply gave it shape and place. One of the principal characters on the Fitzroy River plains was the eagle-hawk man Wunyumbu: he had speared the two snakes called Yungurrugu and their writhing bodies carved the river and its tributaries. Wunyumbu spoke the lost Djaba language, unequivocally evidencing the origin of the myth with, and the earlier occupation by, the Djaba people. Another prominent being in the river mythology was Looma, a female blue-tongue lizard who fled down the Fitzroy Valley to escape a great flood, carrying her children on her back and resting at a hill the Djaba called Umbambur but known in modern times as P Hill: this would become the “sacred site” at the centre of the Noonkanbah confrontation.

The travels and adventures of the mythical

Walungarri beings were still well known to Fitzroy Valley Aboriginal communities in the 1970s, as evidenced by the plethora of sites documented by various anthropological surveys. However, while greatly respected, they were no longer the basis of “law” for the resident communities. This was especially true for the younger generation. The songs and ritual dances had not been entirely forgotten and might still feature in corroborees, but they were no longer the sustaining code they had been in pre-contact times. The mythic sites had become, as it were, places on the map of the Dreamtime wanderings, with the locations and stories openly revealed to any interested party.

For all intents and purpose, the traditional culture that had prevailed on the Fitzroy River plains in pre-colonial times was gone. (Some would argue an anthropological counterview that the sites will embody and contain the Dreamtime spirits forever, and the peoples’ traditional links to them will never weaken, even when the names and songs are largely forgotten. Even so, contemporary society might reasonably question whether such feelings were better seen as heartfelt nostalgia rather than sacred associations.)

The Walmatjari clans who lived south of the Fitzroy River in the St George Ranges and the surrounding region had a completely different mythology, reflective of their local landscape. A prominent being, dramatically expressed in this landscape, was the dangerous snake Djanggaladjara who came from the desert and whose body is seen today in the spectacular eroded dome of the St George Ranges. There are numerous myths that record different aspects of life and the landscape. One of the main mytho-ritual complexes was associated with Balyarra, a rainmaker who had come from the west carrying phallic-shaped stones which he used to create water sources. Balyarra was associated with the Rainbow Snake, and many waterholes were made by his water serpent Mangunambi. It is Balyarra’s giant dog Yungngora that gives the Noonkanbah community its name.

Major gatherings to sing and dance for Balyarra’s rains, once fundamental to the local “law”, were only vaguely remembered by the old Noonkanbah men in the 1970s and most details had faded from memory. The teaching of these half-remembered myths in community schools in the valley was admirable

for future-keeping but it confirmed that they were no longer the secret traditional law of the initiated men and could more accurately be described as lore. In like fashion, the traditional links to animals and nature in the tribal social classification system were largely abandoned, “remembered but smilingly shrugged off as the religious excesses of the ancients”.

In the vast desert to the south of the Fitzroy Valley, among the Walmadjari and Gugadja and other clans, the mythology tells of the travels in the desert of a diverse group of mythic beings and is known as the Dingari. Possibly a mythologised recalling of early migrations of ancestral Aboriginal groups, the Dingari “mob” had many characters, including Wadi Gadjara, the two-men; Malu, the kangaroo man; and Ganabuda, the mythical women. Traditionally, each of these beings was associated with its own myths and rituals and was the totem of a “lodge”, to which belonged all the initiated men conceived along its journey-line.

By the early 1970s, the elite desert lawmen who were resettled in Fitzroy Crossing and nearby communities had, as part of their revival of desert law, orchestrated the discarding—“desanctification”, if you prefer—of all the Dingari myths and lodges, except two. These two myths, known as Wandji and Djularga, spoke of the adventures of groups of initiated men and novices as they travelled into the desert from the western and northern coasts respectively. The other Dingari myths were all set aside to be viewed in future simply as legends from the “olden days”, in the same way that the river mythology was ubiquitously described. An analogy might be seen in the Greek memory of the mythology of earlier centuries.

This consolidation of the desert traditions was an adaptation to the realities of life for the desert Aborigines, whose residence in the valley meant that a man’s lodge could no longer be determined by his conception site in the far distant totemic landscape of the desert. A new criterion was needed and the reclassification of all the initiated men into these two totemic lodges “unified” the Fitzroy community and established a lodge affiliation system for the generations to come. Some “creative dreaming” was needed to validate these changes: initiated men from the discarded lodges now “dreamt” that their totemic ancestors had met the Wandji or Djularga

---

*The elite lawmen had been exposed to many new influences in the settlements and towns, and they syncretised all this with their ultra-conservative traditional thinking into an explanatory vision of white Australian society and its wealth.*

---

mobs at one place or another and by travelling with them a while had effectively become part of those mobs, thereby endorsing their new totemic identity. As it always has, the Dreaming changes when you need it to.

### Dreams of cargo

Interwoven with this revival of desert law was a rather fanciful commercial scheme to provide for the future. The elite lawmen had been exposed to many new influences during their early years in the settlements and towns—white people, government agencies, younger more acculturated Aborigines—and they syncretised all this with their ultra-conservative traditional thinking into an explanatory vision of white Australian society and its wealth. Inevitably, this vision was flawed, based as it was on such a limited and unrepresentative sample of white Australia, and it had at its core a cargoistic mentality that reflected those misunderstandings. Their traditional beliefs in the pre-existence of all things as spirits created in the Dreamtime and their lack of any understanding of industrial production led the lawmen to assume that “white goods” simply pre-existed in the “white country” as a sort of cultural manifestation, with the main repository in Canberra, from where they were distributed by various governments.

The secret to the white people’s wealth, the lawmen concluded, was their ownership of the land and the towns. If Aboriginal people were to share in that cargo, and enjoy the social equality it symbolised, they would have to acquire land or towns themselves, preferably both. Contemporaneously, as this all evolved, a sense of pan-Aboriginal identity progressively overstepped many clan and tribal differences and was expressed in the self-identifying Walmatjari term *bin*, and the contrasting, derisive *gadeja* (or *gudia*) for white Australians.

Government plans to construct housing in Fitzroy Crossing were seen by the religious leaders as a gesture of appreciation for their leading this revival of Aboriginal “law”, and they looked to the next step when the government would buy them cattle stations to live on. Initially, the aspiration for land had been relatively modest, but it developed over time into an expectation that the government would progressively buy all the pastoral stations in the Kimberley and give them to the Aborigines. In essence, the underpinning aspiration had become emancipation: ownership of the land, both local and regional, where “traditional” Aboriginal cultural and laws would be observed by all, under the leadership of the religious elite.

The world would then revert to the order of the

days before the great white cultural hero Gebnguk (Captain Cook) brought whitefella law to the land. Gebnguk’s law had prevailed for a long time but Aboriginal law, which was older and had been on the land first, was gaining strength anew and Aboriginal people would soon reclaim their stolen birthright. The new society would be free of white people. Cattle would be the principal primary industry, but the main business would be religion: the buying and selling of a new “traveling cult” called Woagaia, which the lawmen had introduced into the valley communities, as discussed below. Expanded and accelerated trading of this cult from community to community was the starry-eyed business plan, with the traders and “sacred” cult paraphernalia to be transported in helicopters and planes, as was the practice with important white people and goods. Taken in conjunction with the cattle industry, or even in its own right, this trade was seen as sufficient to provide financially for the new Aboriginal society—though there would, of course, always be substantial input from the government in all its forms, be it in Canberra or Perth, or separate gold or diamond mining establishments.

As the Woagaia traffic flowed and the society blossomed harmoniously, governments of all persuasions would be bountiful with their praise and products. The white men would be gone—apart from sympathetic anthropologists—and all would be well. This revolutionary notion started as a vague perception, but it became a key element of the nativist scheme and provided a powerful underpinning for the coming push for land rights by the younger, more acculturated generation of Aborigines and their white advisers.

### Travelling cults

This home-grown movement was not the only revolutionary dream of a new Aboriginal world that was widespread in the Fitzroy Valley and across the Kimberley in the Noonkanbah years. Several “travelling cults” were also in play, invariably preaching a message of freedom from whites and a reclaiming of the land and its wealth. The lawmen’s local scheme envisaged a lucrative business trading the Woagaia but the millenarian cults of Djuluru and Jinimin were promising far wider-ranging emancipation and wealth.

“Travelling cults” are so called because the songs and performances associated with the cults are sold from community to community, along with any associated “magical” powers, be they for good or evil. Known in Australia since the late nineteenth century, these cults commonly contain elements of both Aboriginal and Euro-Australian cultures and

are usually thought to be a response to the trauma of cultural contact: the associated mythology commonly has an apocalyptic or revolutionary thesis. The core beliefs and structure of the cults can vary considerably through time and place, as local beliefs and aspirations are syncretised, and the cults take on very different meanings, ideology and social purpose for different communities—as they do for the different anthropologists who describe them.

The best-known of the travelling cults and one which has, in various guises, been a component of several cults imported into the Fitzroy Valley is Kunapipi, a mytho-ritual complex about the travels and actions of the Kunapipi women, fertility figures connected with the Rainbow Snake. Commonly called Big Sunday in the presence of white people, Kunapipi might have originated as an All-Mother deity adopted by Aboriginal clans from Macassan visitors in the coastal Victoria River area of the Northern Territory. The cult spread slowly south in the late nineteenth century, with rituals that focused on “ritual copulation, female impregnation and fertility, and rebirth from the eternal mother”, as would be expected of a female fertility cult.

A derivative of the Kunapipi cult, focused initially on its sexual elements and known as Gurangara, was in the Kimberley by the late nineteenth century. In its early stages there, Gurangara had a despairing apocalyptic message that looked towards the end of the world or, at least, the world as it had been. The copulatory rituals were orgiastic, involving group intercourse and ceremonial use of the collected semen. Later, these rituals were modified and merged with a new myth about the Kangaroo-man Djanba, a very dangerous spirit of the dead who came from the desert and was greatly feared for his black magic and evil. Djanba lived in a tin shed like a white man and grew leprosy and syphilis plants, with the power of life and death vested in his ceremonial boards. One “branch” of the Gurangara cult came though the Pilbara region, where it acquired a strong anti-white revolutionary component under the influence of legendary white lawman Don McLeod.<sup>29</sup> In the 1950s, it swept up the west coast and into the Fitzroy Valley communities where claims of Gurangara’s black magic powers were still occasionally made in the 1970s.

By that time, the main travelling cult in the Fitzroy Valley was the Woagaia, which had been

introduced by the desert lawmen as part of their revivalist movement. Woagaia was a collective term for all the myths and rituals traded into the Fitzroy Valley by the Walbiri people of western central Northern Territory. These myths were a syncretisation in the early mid-twentieth century of the Walbiri’s desert-based myths about the Mamandabari men with moderated sexual rituals of the Kunapipi, which had become known in the desert as Gadjeri. Essentially, the Walbiri were trading the “ownership” rights to segments of their traditional mythology or to myths they had newly created about various mythic beings, with all the associated songs, rituals, objects and body paintings. These were traded westward through communities such as Balgo and Christmas Creek to Fitzroy Crossing and Noonkanbah, and thence to Looma and La Grange on the coast.

Arrangements for the sale and purchase of the Woagaia segments, including the teaching of the songs and rituals to the new “owners” or “bosses”, were complex and often lengthy. The ceremony presented the myth in song and dance, taking place over several days and nights under the control of the “bosses”, who instructed and directed the groups of singers and dancers from the local community. The songs and narrative of the Woagaia myths were in a language foreign to the Fitzroy Valley people and had to be translated for the audience by the “bosses”, who had memorised them during the sale negotiations. This obviously allowed for great variation in detail as memory struggled and imagination took over, and the storyline of a particular myth could vary greatly from group to group and even from one performance to the next. Regardless of these language issues, the Woagaia performances involved familiar desert characters and themes, and were very popular events. They might be seen as akin to a Christian audience watching a foreign-language play about the Apostles and their followers.

As the Woagaia cult was traded westward, it changed considerably. In communities such as Myroodah, west of Noonkanbah, the Woagaia myths were merged with Christian beliefs and took on chiliastic or millenarian overtones. Woagaia performances now spoke of a future golden age in which, in one version at least, the white people would all be gone, the law would be led by a “Jesus Christ” figure called Jinimin, and a future fortune

---

*As the Woagaia cult was traded westward, it changed considerably. In communities such as Myroodah, west of Noonkanbah, the Woagaia myths were merged with Christian beliefs and took on chiliastic or millenarian overtones.*

---

## THE RUSE OF TRADITION

would flow from Noah's Ark. A desert Walmatjari lawman in Fitzroy Crossing was believed to be the reincarnation of Noah; another, at Myroodah, looked after the "holy bible". The influence of Christian missionary teaching on the evolving Aboriginal myths and rituals is clear.

The Jinimin cult had emerged in the early twentieth century among the Murinbata people at the Port Keats Christian mission in the Northern Territory, reaching the Fitzroy Valley and coast by mid-century. The mythical Jinimin was the son of the ancestral All-Father Augamungi and, despite having committed the serious sins of fratricide and incest, was seen as analogous to Jesus Christ. Jinimin was both black and white in colour and, as the cult spread southward, it preached a message of revolution and salvation: the land had always belonged to the Aboriginal people, Jinimin said, and it would again, bringing equality of power and wealth, provided they practised traditional law—or, more precisely, what had come to be defined as traditional law.

Jinimin was said to have first revealed himself in 1963 during a Woagaia performance, thereby linking the two cults and elevating the Woagaia to "God's Law". Symbolically, Jinimin/Jesus Christ was re-establishing Aboriginal religious authority over the land. The special sites created by the mythic ancestors had lost their "sacredness" through Aboriginal neglect and exposure to whitefella "law". Now, the spirits were returning westward on Jinimin's orders, resanctifying the land as they went and making the sites sacred again.

A new order was promised. Aboriginal land had been forcibly taken by the whites who had exploited its pastoral and mining potential to live in luxury, while the "true" owners of the land lived in misery. Jinimin promised that would soon change. As such, the Woagaia cult observed on the Fitzroy Valley coastal plains in the 1960s was already spiced with the seeds of social revolution—seeds that would grow and blossom in the land rights campaign of the 1970s and 1980s.

The future riches promised by Jinimin had been placed in Noah's Ark, which was believed to be deep in the desert to the south, laden with gold and precious minerals. Its "existence" had been revealed in the late 1960s to Frank Baynes, a Native Affairs officer, by Friday Muller and other old men at Noonkanbah, who spoke of a long and silvery boat-shaped object in the Barbwire-Worrall ranges to the south. Said to have spades, shovels and axes lying around, it had been found by the leader of the Jinimin cult while travelling in the area years before. The "ark" or, more specifically, the feature from which it was imagined, has never been located

on the ground.

The ark myth was told in many versions, and descriptions of the ark varied considerably, from rusted metal boat to a glass-like object, but, since no one had seen it, most descriptions were really "extravagant fabrication". In the common version of this myth, the ark *gumana* had sailed into the Fitzroy Valley during the Dreamtime flood, circled St George Ranges and drifted south, coming to rest as the water subsided. Some people believed that only Noah, animals and good Aborigines were aboard the ark and that all the whites and bad black people had been drowned, leaving Australia exclusively and idyllically the land of good black people until Gebnguk arrived. In this millenarian dream, the white people would all be drowned in the near future by another Earth-cleansing deluge, while the Aborigines would be safe in the ark, and its riches would provide for their bountiful and blissful future in a land free of white people.

By the late 1970s, among many Fitzroy Valley communities, the pleasures and promises of the Woagaia cult had begun to pale against the revolutionary zeal of a new cult called Djuluru. The motifs of this myth were very different from those of Woagaia or Jinimin, but the message of liberation and future wealth was similar. Djuluru is thought to have been created in the Pilbara around 1950 by either Jack or Peter Coppin, Aboriginal brothers with strong Marxist, anti-white convictions and involved over many years with the self-declared Marxist revolutionary Don McLeod. Coppin reportedly dreamt of Malay ghosts from a sunken ship and reimagined his dream into a myth about the adventures of a powerful and dangerous spirit known variously as Wuirangu or Djuluru. The ship is identified by some as the MV *Koolama*, which was sunk by the Japanese in 1942.

Wuirangu travelled around the region as a spirit-child, usually on horseback, but also by transforming into a car or an aeroplane, or even a cow bell. He was considered capable of causing great harm, including serious illness and death, as well as less serious mishaps such as car breakdowns and accidents. In the myth, and re-enacted in the related ceremony, Wuirangu witnesses the bombing of Broome and the sinking of the *Koolama* and meets with Hitler and German and other characters.

The Djuluru cult had been traded from the Pilbara up the west coast in the 1950s and subsequently into the Fitzroy Valley. The stories of Wuirangu's travels were told in key words and phrases in a language unknown to the Fitzroy people, and even the local cult "experts" who were responsible for translation had vastly different opinions of the myths and their esoteric meaning, with

imagination and fantasy having relatively free rein. The cult rituals took place over several days and centred on “sacred” poles containing Wuirangu’s spirit, as well as canvas-covered enclosures which, in some versions, contained the spirits of the cargo which would soon arrive for the people. The dance performances depicted Second World War ground and air battles as well as the bombing of ships, and featured fire-singeing rituals between men and women, with attendant sexual privileges. The men marched back and forth with wooden rifles on their shoulders, but the metaphorical enemy soldiers were not Japanese invaders but white Australians.

In summary, by the end of the 1970s, as the Noonkanbah conflict erupted, the traditional and rigidly stern religious laws of the river and the desert people had lost their “cosmos-maintaining significance” and been replaced, on the one hand, by the holiday-like aspects of the Woagaia, with its “graceful playfulness and aesthetic enjoyment” and, on the other, by the millenarian and revolutionary promises of Jinimin and Djuluru. This is not to denigrate one or the other—there is no reason religion can’t be fun and the promise of a better life has been a universal attraction for the faithful of many creeds. Nor is this very simplified description of these various myths and cults meant to mock them in any way, neither the rich tapestry of mythic characters and events that gave purpose and guidance for so long nor the millennial dreams of cargo and equality that replaced them.

At the same time, those contemporary cults, as fascinating as they are, were precisely that: contemporary cults. They might contain traditional Aboriginal themes and rituals, but they are not traditional *sensu stricto*. People are entitled to incorporate Jesus Christ or Noah’s Ark into their belief systems, if they so choose, but those beliefs are traditional only within the Judeo-Christian context. In saying that, I am at odds with those who have abandoned the sense of continuity and long-standing the term “tradition” has long conveyed, and who now view as traditional any Aboriginal cultural belief or activity.

Those travelling cults were an adaptation to the new world order that came with colonisation, an evolutionary stage between the old world and the new and not without a longing for the best of both. Along with the modern motifs and millenarian dreaming, they retained a traditional flavour and they revealed on the Fitzroy River plains in the

1970s an older generation still profoundly tradition-oriented and still struggling through the rugged divide between the traditional Aboriginal landscape and the uneven terrain of contemporary white Australia.

### Concluding remarks

The Noonkanbah confrontation now looks long ago, given all that has happened since, and might easily be judged as without lessons for the present. In suggesting otherwise, I am reminded of Dicky Skinner, the “leader” of the Noonkanbah community during the confrontation, who became a devout Christian a few years later and apologised for it all. “Land rights gets you into a lot of trouble,” he said.

The Noonkanbah strategists always vehemently denied that the dispute had anything to do with land rights, but that was a lie: it was always about land rights, as they now acknowledge. It was, after all, a launching pad for the Kimberley Land Council. There is nothing inherently wrong with supporting land rights, of course, but neither is there anything wrong with opposing it, in principle or in practice. As the anthropologist Erich Kolig has noted, it is clumsy metaphysics to “hold that land title is bestowed on people by a supernatural or divine source, by destiny or blood or some such mystical inference”.

Yet it is that clumsy metaphysics that has underwritten the land rights agenda for decades: only by reuniting Aboriginal people with their traditional land, we are constantly told, can Aboriginality be preserved, and pride and dignity restored. But decades after Noonkanbah and *Mabo* and native title, it is hard to see that this policy has enjoyed widespread success in remote regions of Australia.

In the years after the Noonkanbah incident, dozens of pastoral stations were purchased in Western Australia to provide Aboriginal communities with their “traditional” land. Native Title was subsequently granted over some 90 per cent of the Kimberley region, including Noonkanbah in 2007. Yet, today, across the entire region, the blight of alcohol and drugs and the related domestic abuse among many of these communities is beyond crisis levels, from Broome to Fitzroy Crossing to Kalumburu. Noonkanbah itself was, until a few years ago, plagued by alcohol and drug addiction

---

*Those travelling cults  
were an adaptation  
to the new world  
order that came with  
colonisation, an  
evolutionary stage  
between the old world  
and the new and not  
without a longing  
for the best of both.*

---

and related violence. In many remote communities, high levels of unemployment and the seeming uselessness of future dreams lead inevitably to chronic drunkenness and drug addiction, juvenile crime and high suicide rates. It is sadly all too clear that many people—not all, but many—in those communities have not found the return to the land ennobling in any way, finding instead that they are without jobs, dependent on welfare, devoid of any sustaining sense of self-worth and without any hope of a better future.

There are many complex issues and questions that might usefully have flowed from the Noonkanbah confrontation, had the truth been told at the time. What is the meaning of “traditional culture”, for example, as understood by the layman versus the anthropological fraternity? What is the validity of “traditional ownership” and “traditional rights” in areas subject to serial migration since European settlement? Can “traditional ownership” of land be acquired in modern Australian times by being conceived there? Do relatively assimilated mixed-race people in urban centres have the same “traditional rights” as tradition-oriented people in remote settlements?

These discussions would have been useful in recent decades in the public and legal debates about *Mabo* and *Wik* and native title. Indeed, more informed discussion of these issues would have been useful during the Noonkanbah dispute itself. Instead, we had fabricated claims about traditional tribes and ancient laws and the sacredness of featureless plains. As noted earlier, the late eminent anthropologist Dr Kenneth Maddock described the claims about traditional culture at Noonkanbah as a “ruse” which might easily have backfired on the strategists, had the truth become known.

The fabrication of Aboriginal culture did not begin at Noonkanbah, of course, but it was encouraged by what happened there. I think Noonkanbah’s revolutionary moment came at a pivotal time in the evolution of Australian attitudes towards the Aboriginal people. What had been largely passive feelings towards Aborigines by many Australians, notably those living in the major urban centres, had “given way to tumultuous feelings of guilt, responsibility, admiration and even yearning for the indigenous culture”, to borrow Jonathan Lamb’s trans-Tasman observations. Those feelings have deepened and spread during

the decades since, and interacted symbiotically with the emergence of an increasingly vocal urban Aboriginal community.

Highly romanticised and poorly informed views about traditional Aboriginal culture now prevail among the general public, including many Aboriginal Australians of mixed heritage. In most descriptions, Aboriginal culture is barely recognisable as anything resembling its traditional pre-contact forms, even allowing for normal cultural evolution. The realities of the pre-colonial Aboriginal past, with all its hardship and violence, the revenge killings and infanticide, the sexual abuse and sorcery, have been replaced with visions of a noble and idyllic society, free of the avarice and inequality deemed characteristic of contemporary capitalist Australian society. All ills are said to have been learned from the “invaders”, without whom Eden would not have been lost. These views have become the popular wisdom, are ubiquitous in the media, and are now taught as fact in schools.

This pessimistic view of Australia’s founding Anglo-Celtic cultural heritage has been developing and deepening since the 1960s. Suffice to say here that this intellectual drift—*demise* might be a better term—involves a loss of faith in Western culture, religion and technology, and a turning back to nature, even a worshipping of it:

---

*It is the Aboriginal adaptivity to these awful demands of history that might more usefully be emphasised, not some imagined cultural fragility that better charms the urban romantic imagination.*

---

what historian Geoffrey Blainey called the Great Seesaw. The idolising of nature and “native” cultures has deep roots in the Western psyche: unhappy urban intellectuals hate the “city” and bemoan the ruination of man’s inherent nobility by Western civilisation. Aboriginal people, especially those in more remote settlements, are seen to be closer to nature, with a culture that is socialistic in its sharing and caring. In this paradisaical perspective, it is only a return to country and the reclaiming of culture, in the imagination if not in reality, that will restore a natural nobility to urban Aborigines and ensure a life free of burden or want. This, of course, is the age-old urban intellectual fantasy—flight from the despoiling city to the forests of his origins will restore man’s soul—but the fantasy is now pervasively spread through the broader community. Nowadays, of course, the flight is metaphorical, seeking lift from a constitutionally enshrined Voice, but with Treaty, Reconciliation and Reparation in the wings.

That might be a lesson then, that Noonkanbah

## THE RUSE OF TRADITION

offers the twenty-first century. Supporters regularly warned that the cultural and physical well-being of the Noonkanbah people were so fragile and finely balanced that the slightest disruption to the goanna site at P Hill would shatter them forever. This was a lie: what was being claimed to be timeless Aboriginal tradition at Noonkanbah was actually “a relatively recent and curious mix of post-contact and imported beliefs and practices”. The community’s religiosity not only survived the decline of their traditional beliefs but adapted to, and seemingly thrived on, the many changes that came their way in the twentieth century.

This experience was not unique to Noonkanbah or even the Fitzroy Valley. Similar patterns of serial migration and cultural adaptation have challenged most Aboriginal communities across Australia. It is, of course, a universal experience, so often bred of warfare and colonising migrations, perforce of population or climatic pressures, and is invariably burdened with great suffering. But it is the Aboriginal adaptivity to these awful demands of history that might more usefully be emphasised, not some imagined cultural fragility that better charms the urban romantic imagination.

The truth about the demographic and cultural evolution at Noonkanbah tells us clearly that

neither the tradition-oriented person in remote Australia nor the younger part-Aboriginal person in the city need see themselves, or be seen by other Australians, as existentially bound to a fixed landscape or a constant mythology, and incapable of participating successfully along with their fellow Australians, as so many Aborigines already do, in our multicultural landscape.

In his 1989 essay “Creating the Past”, the late Roger Keesing described falsehoods about Aboriginality and the Aboriginal attachment to land as valid weapons in political and environmental campaigns. As long as the lie is being used for resistance against “the oppressor society”, Keesing said—in this case, the Australian public—the lie doesn’t matter. The prevailing dishonesty about Aboriginal history and culture is not a concern to those who agree with him. But Keesing was wrong: the lie does matter. Because, if truth is lost, we cannot realistically expect future planning and policy to be well founded and likely to succeed.

John Greenway’s counsel fifty years ago in *The Last Frontier* is a valuable caution in that regard: “humanitarianism is commendable enough, but it gets in the way of historical fact, and with facts gone or distorted, understanding and the whole purpose of scholarship vanish”.