
The Pintubi 9.

A First Contact Story

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October 1984



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40 years ago this headline was big news that made international headlines, breaking the story of the appearance of a family of nine Pintubi who had lived unknown to the modern world, a traditional existence as desert Aboriginal hunter gatherers. The Melbourne Herald did not get the story quite right. The 9 surely were not lost and a telling of what actually happened is timely.

2 *Front page of The Herald newspaper in Melbourne 1984*

Saturday October 13, Pinta Pinta and many others came to my camp late at night, very excited, and related the story of meeting two men, one middle aged and very tall, the other older, at Wimparrku. He (Pinta Pinta) said one of the men (the tall one) came toward him at the hand pump, laying his spears on the ground as he approached and asked Pinta Pinta for water. Pinta Pinta worked the cantilever hand pump on the bore to fill a billy can. Then his son Mathew Tjapangarti, alarmed when one of the men went to grab hold of his fathers arm, fired a shot gun blast into the air. Both men took off in fright, running. Pinta Pinta, his son, wife and Allen (son of Yala Yala) drove the 30 kilometers to Kiwirrkurra, some of it on a flat tyre. Everyone that evening was very excited and shocked, the community opinion is that the two men might be kadiatcha (spirit men on a vendetta).



Pinta Pinta



Unloading tank iron for shelters



Unloading fuel

3 The calendar that runs lives everywhere else made little difference to daily life at Kiwirrkurra but I didn't mind. The work was hard but progressed very well in a community of 45 souls happy to be back on their traditional country, the sorrow of grog fueled mayhem at settlements not remote enough behind them. So early Sunday two trailer loads of freight arrived. Everyone pitched in to help unload food, fuel and half round corrugated tank iron for temporary shelters. Bill Nolan Tjapangarti had turned up with a borrowed Central Land Council Toyota Land Cruiser trayback similar to mine and drove off with a group of men to Winparrku. Besides leaving me free to get on with things, I was not one to get involved in traditional business or local politics as it would interfere with my job, which was to develop the foundation services of water, communications and buildings. A funny thing it was how on Saturday Pinta Pinta had just turned up and asked, while we were working on the new Comet Windmill "how about a windmill for my place Winparrk" to which the men said to him (in Tjapanangka), "Go and live there and when Murra Hook (my nickname) finish he might fix him for you". So he drove off in a huff in his sedan with family to prove a point.

As Bill Nolan drove back Sunday afternoon the men on the back held spears aloft and declared "no devils, they were men" and there's speculation as to who they might be. Pinta Pinta now thinks they are relatives he thought were dead and George Tjapaltjarri who was called Doctor George for his nungkarri (medicine) skill, reckons they are men he knew as boys in yirriti (old) time. He would be later proved correct. A decision was made to go out to find them to "give them trousers" the next day, Monday. We fueled the Land Cruisers and prepped vehicles for off track by covering radiators with fly wire to keep grass seed from clogging them. This was a trip into the unknown and two vehicles were essential. Fortunately we both had Codan SSB transceivers with some shared frequencies. My call sign was a cracker, 8 Romeo Oscar Oscar. Our freight service bloke, the much revered Jim Dooley, an Alcoholics Anonymous activist, was given 8 Romeo Uniform Mike. Evidently call signs are issued randomly so any meaning is accidental.

After opening the store for a short trade I left the key and cash box with Madeline from Brandy Tjungarrayi's and drove East to Winparrku. Traveling with Bill Nolan was Freddy West Tjakamarra, Billy Ward, Joseph Jurra, Andrew Tjakamarra, Willy Bennet, Dr George Tjapaltjarri and Ray James while Charlie Tjakamarra from my work crew traveled with me. At Winparrku the tracks were easy to read and headed north. We had drilled the water bore there in October the previous year and I wondered if the two men had come across it before the Saturday night encounter. Oddly enough the bore was at the highest ground for as far as the eye can see in any direction but it tasted great with an output of 2 liters per second at a pump depth of 26 meters. So with no permanent water anywhere nearby we installed the sole hand pump I carried there and then.



Comet windmill work the day before

After about 3 hours the tracks took us to Tarkuna, a fire dreaming place where amidst the sand hills a short dry creek forms between low lying sandstone cliffs. There we found a coolamon the tracked people had cut from the trunk of a smooth barked white gum and had used to scoop out the sand of the creek bed to find water but there was none. Here Freddy West talked of hunting Euros, a kind of large rock wallaby as a young man at a time I estimated to be around 20 years ago. He was thrilled to see them again but they bolted too fast to take a shot.



Winparku bore drilling October 1893



Charlie plucks a turkey

Leaving Tarkuna we came into sand hill country but they would be better described as long ridges the height of a house that flow with the prevailing desert wind and here that's roughly east to west with a southerly tilt. Too long to go around so crossing them entails driving at 90 degrees as fast as the lumpy terrain allows. The good rains of that year had the spinifex grass over a meter high so any severe lumps were hidden, but it also meant the sand was not so powder dry as to get bogged in. Were this to be a month or two hence there would have been no chance crossing them. There was not so much haste as to miss out on a rumia (sand goanna) and early in the season their burrows are not deep. Even better Charlie Tjakamarra shot a bush turkey (plains bustard) and as we made camp that night there was enough to go round.

The easy mood of the day gave way to some worry, or fear even, as to what the men being pursued might be up to. From the slim chance they were near, men yelled out to them to come and have water and meat with us. No one knew the personalities of the two men and wondered how fearful of us they might be. It was such bad luck they ran into Pinta Pinta mob and were scared off like they were. Pinta Pinta was a very imaginative person and at a ceremony I observed how he was the most animated and enthusiastic of all the men. His name meant Butter Fly and perhaps he got it for being a bit of an air head, but he was also nungkarri. That night we slept a lot closer together than we normally would.

Tuesday we were back on the tracks with no idea of how far we might end up traveling. I suggested getting help and stopped to make a radio telephone call via Royal Flying Doctor Service VJD Alice Springs. They had this great service of Radio Telephone Calls whereby they opened their base for anyone registered to be connected with a standard telephone during business hours, and while they were not doing medical stuff, which was most of the time. Connected to the Dept. of Aboriginal Affairs I said we were in the second day of a search for what appears to be a first contact group, and we might need logistical support. Gordon Williams said they were sending Speedy McGuinness out to assist. The DAA was our funding authority and had been most supportive of Pintubi clans in reoccupying their traditional lands. (1)

It was slow going, walking speed, as Freddy and the blokes had to follow tracks on foot, which the two men seemed to be trying to hide but it was no problem for Freddy and co to follow. The vehicles are being damaged from crashing over the sand ridges and if we went much further fuel would be insufficient for the return journey. Around noon we were skirting some clay pans and soon the going was made easier from the country being clearer. It was a sight to behold as we entered land that had been "fire stick farmed" as Peter Latz called it, a patch quilt of varying aged burns of a hectare and less. The men reckoned we were not far from the bush mob camp and that afternoon I realized I should leave the search. There was mail and fresh food for Kiwirrkurra to be picked up at Kintore on Thursday and I liked the idea of the first contact being an all Pintubi affair. Charlie Tjakemarra wasn't going to miss it and joined the others.

7 I drove up to a bare gravelly hill top at sunset and had a dinner of sardines and roasted Pangkuna beans. I took a bearing as to where Kiwirrkurra might be 60 km or so away, so as to take a direct route, since following the crooked inbound tracks would have been a few times longer. On the flat treeless country and cloudless sky I was able to navigate a constant course by aiming to the right of the Southern Cross in the windscreen. I had a lot to think about. My sweet heart Rosalie was due to deliver our first child in mid December and I was keen to go to Sydney for the birth. Also I had been in the Western Deserts doing the foundation services for home lands for most of the past six years and with the establishment of Kiwirrkurra it felt like a job had been done.

The cross had turned on its side by the time I drove up to another sand ridge that had a dip at the top and the vehicle stalled as I hit the bottom of it and could not start up again. The battery was flat so I was stuck there. From the slow speed of the drive the engine revs had put less charge into the battery than the headlights took. Bloody disaster to be stuck but I was so tired the worry didnt keep me from sleep. In the morning after checking battery terminals I turned the ignition with trepidation and was ecstatic when the engine turned over after warming the glow plugs. Sometimes a lead acid battery will recharge after leaving it for a few hours. It turned out to be the last ridge before Kiwirrkurra and I was at the volcanic dykes a few km east of where I had aimed for.

When I arrived at my camp I was pleasantly surprised to see Geoff Toll there. Geoff did an upside down drummer and a Louie The Fly act in Circus Oz. The Tjilpi (old fellas) were always keen on trips to visit special places where they lived “before trouser time”. There was too much work on for me to do the trips and no locals had vehicles up to long off road treks so Geoff went out with them in his Landcruiser troopy. Anyway Geoff set off with one of the men and some supplies to meet up with the tracking party while I drove the 180km to Kintore where I met Speedy McGuinness from DAA at Steve and Kerry Pattmans camp. I drove back to Kiwirrkurra early Thursday and did the mail bag business which was mostly distributing Social Security cheques then cashing them when the store opened.

When I turned on the radio I was soon talking with Freddy and co who relayed the news that there were nine men women and children they had found living at a place called Marruwa on the south edge of Lake McKay. They asked for another vehicle to come out and to bring trousers and stuff. It was obvious that the Kiwirrkurra men were keen to bring them in, but I said to make it clear to the “bush mob”, as they were being called now, that they did not have to come in if they didn't want to. After a half hour the the call came that they were coming in once there was enough transport. We learned later that the encounter was a fraught event, some of the family running away in fright, spears thrown, but Freddy and co were empathetic, allaying the bush mobs fear by taking their clothes off. The smoke belching Toyota was scary no doubt, and they had stories of their own about how strangers on camels hunted people and ate them. Their suspicions were further fed by the horrific goings on in their tjukurrupa (dreaming) stories and questions as to what had become of members who had left the group and where had all the other people gone. In a Weekend Australian story by Richard Guilliat, one of the young women in the group, Yakulti, said she had been told by Warlimpirrnga of the fright at Winparrku and “there was a mamu (devil) coming to cook us”. (2) Freddy was convincing when he explained to Wallampiri how he knew his father when he was young.



First photo of the nine

On Friday Speedy McGuinness and I drove out in our vehicles about 70km and met them, Geoff and Bill Nolan with the others. The bush mob were nervous but not distressed, laughing occasionally. The two men who first met Pinta Pinta 6 days ago were younger than first thought, half brothers Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri and his half brother Piyiti the tall one. Warlimpirrnga's mother, Papalya Nangala, his sister Takariya Napaltjarri, his aunt Nanu and her three children, the girls Yalti and Yakulti, and boy Tamayinya. A boy Wallala of about 13 was also child of Papalya. Interestingly they had no dogs. At Kiwirrkurra they all stayed near the camp of Nangi Nungarrayi and her daughter Marrlene Nampitjinpa. Takariya, who was about 20, had instantly become the fourth wife of Freddy West who no one would argue with.

I had little to do with the bush mob as they settled in. From Kintore the Pintubi Homelands Health Service doctor, David Scrimgeour came out and remarked how "they were literally glowing with health, they were extremely fit" but there was deep concern for how they will cope with coming into contact with everyday pathogens they had been isolated from and which had been devastating for Indigenous peoples first encounters with colonizers here and the world over. While they were being overwhelmed by a plethora of the new but ordinary stuff of the modern world it was frustrating to me and a shame that they remained unaware of how extraordinary and admirable they were. The two mothers looked quite frail and were tiny relative to the other seven. They had the roughest looking short hair cuts done perhaps as part of sorry business for the recent death of Lanti the father of Piyirti who also had very short hair which was used for their hair string belts. Within a week all had respiratory infections but none became seriously ill. A later blood test revealed antibodies to Hep B, Yaws and Ross River Fever which had long been endemic.

On Monday a light plane buzzed us and landed at the incomplete air strip half a kilometer away. Speedy drove to see who it was and returned with a media pair. We had commenced trenching for a water pipe line extension so the bush mob could have their own camp area with a tap while Speedy looked after the pair who I had been led to believe were DAA staff sent to document the occasion.



Bush mobs installing water main extension work

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They camped the night at the air strip with Speedy and left on Monday. A most memorable time with the new arrivals was when their tap was being fitted. In the trench as I cut into the 50 mm water main, water under pressure burst out meters into the air and they all laughed so much while I yelled out for someone to run back and close the bloody gate valve.

It seemed Kiwirrkurra was the least difficult setting for the nine to come into the modern world. The locals were largely sensitive to their needs having gone through first contact only 20 years and less before. It was the memory of feeling awkward in their nakedness at meeting clothed people that made them so insistent on the nine getting clothed straight away. The place was free from alcohol mayhem as had Kintore in my two years there before Kiwirrkurra. So the only strife was home made, enabling us to get so much done in under a year. There was an 8 x 10 meter store, a secure fuel yard, radio antenna tower, my workshop, and the recently erected Comet windmill with a 35,000 liter tank.

We didn't need the disruption that came when The Melbourne Herald broke the story with that ridiculous 'We Find Lost Tribe' headline front page story on 24 October. It was apparent that Clyde Holding the Aboriginal Affairs minister had authorized the Herald to come out with no thought other than to use the event as an opportunity to curry favor with a media mate. That folly led to DAA falling out of favor and Central Land Council being deemed a better outfit to manage affairs. The two bodies had been at loggerheads anyway and the extent of distrust was evident from how they both engaged different linguists. For the big meeting on Thursday DAA came with Ken Hansen who had compiled useful Pintubi Loritja dictionary and grammar books while CLC had Fred Myers, author of the insightful book 'Pintubi Country Pintubi Self', to come all the way from New York.

The decisions of the meeting were to close the airstrip for all but emergency landings, refer all media enquiries to the CLC and for Pintubi Health Service to have sole responsibility for the nines health care. The NT government Health department had wanted to come and do medical checks and were told they were not needed. The locals were most adamant that they should be paid for photos taken and on-sold by the Herald. It was a busy day at the store and fuel yard with about a hundred people at Kiwirrkurra, more than double the norm. There was a near catastrophe the following day when a plane buzzed us low and it was action stations as Geoff drove off to occupy the strip to thwart it landing. The Cessna dodged the Toyota and the bush pilot managed to land safely. It turned out to be Freddys eldest son Bobby Tjupurrula who had come from Balgo and was unaware of the big news.

Things settled down and a story emerged in some media out of suspicions of the news black out that the Pintubi 9 were a hoax story drummed up to support land rights, which didn't worry us a bit. Geoff left and stone mason Berndt Kaiser returned from Alice Springs to continue work on building the Kiwirrkurra Road House. (3)



Roadhouse crew.

Berndt was a backpacker I found when I returned to Sydney after a break playing with Midnight Oil on their first tour of America. It was late February, I had to get back real soon so I asked Triple J radio to announce I needed a co-driver to Alice Springs. There was already a plan to build in stone suitable for the desert and labor intensive to make work for the idle young men so it was fortuitous on the drive when he said he was a stone mason from Essen Germany.

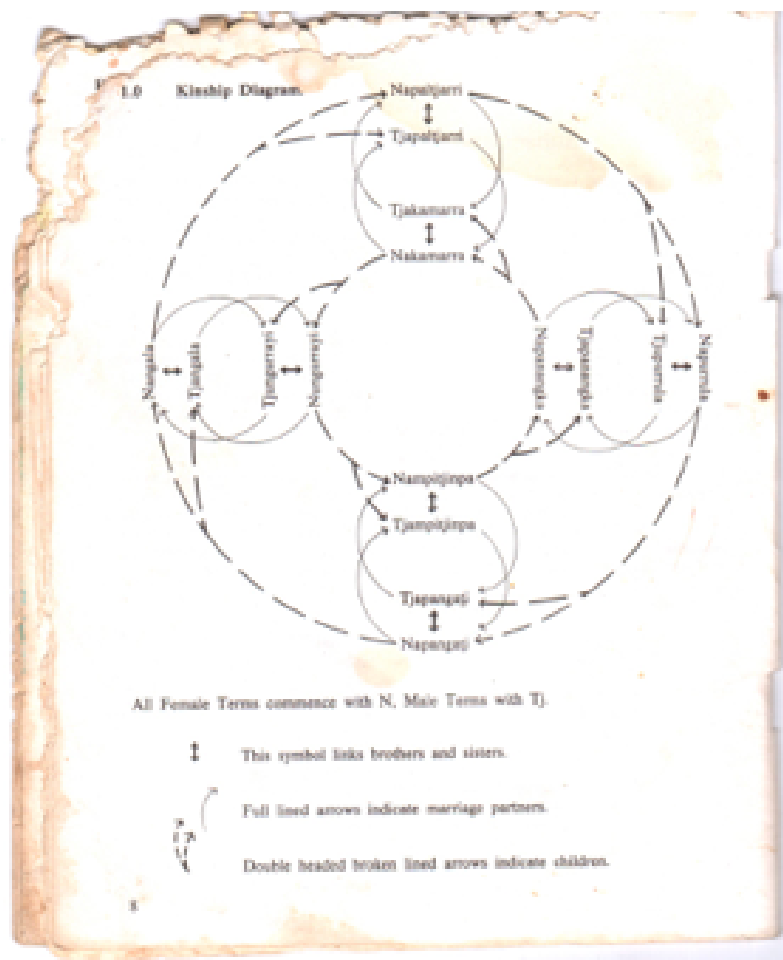
Berndt's crew included Richard Tjakamarra, Kenny Williams Tjampitjinpa, Kanya Tjapangarti and Jimmy Brown while Charlie Tjakamarra and Henry Tjapaltjarri worked with me. There was no media and we mostly camped together around the workshop with the sole comforts of a shower and ventilated pit dunny. We had no refrigeration but in this fresh country bush tucker was plentiful and sometimes the community seemed deserted with so many out foraging. My dog Danger, a Lab Dobe cross, was good company and they would often take him on their hunts.

I was soon to leave and with the upheaval had not had time to find a replacement. While picking up fresh stores at Kintore I ran into John Mecharo who had experience as a Community Advisor as remote area live-in administrators were called then, and he was up to coming to see the place and meet the locals. Some knew him already from Pitjantjara lands and he would come as temporary when I left in late November.

12 Things were running smoothly until Freddy West appeared mid morning in battle dress; red head band, shorts and shirtless with 3 meter spears and woomera. He said he had come to fight Richard Tjakamarra who he said was trying to steal his new wife Takariya. It now dawned on me what the feeble looking freshly made spears I saw Richard with the day before were about. Poor bugger I thought, he didn't stand a chance against fierce Freddy who had grown up fighting and hunting with spears. (4) I looked down at Freddy's thighs, scarred from paybacks, and said to him calmly "wanu kuwarripa' (wait a bit) so I can talk with flying doctor to come and pick up young fella after 'pika' (fight), you don't want to kill him do you" to which Freddy nodded. I pulled the radio out, lifted the Toyota bonnet to connect to the battery terminals and Freddy assisted rolling out the aerial wire. I switched to the frequency VJY, Flying Doctor Base Port Hedland. As expected with the day already hot the static was loud and impenetrable so they were unable to receive me after a few attempts. "Radio no good" I said "so how about come back for pika arle tjingurru (tomorrow maybe)" and Freddy was ok with that and left. (4)

The whole drama played out for all to see and that night there was much camp to camp chatter about it. Freddy did not return to confront Richard but some compo came by Richard paying off Freddy's debt at the store. Takariya copped a severe beating from Freddy a while after I had left and her arm was in a sling when I saw her on my return in February. She was with Richard till dying from cancer in 2015.

Piyirti visited our camp a few times for no apparent reason other than to check us out. He was most curious about my prosthetic hook right arm and the locals called me murra (arm) hook. Beside their excellent physique I was struck by how he and all the bush mob were unblemished by scars in contrast to the locals who had lots from fights and 'accidents'. It occurred to me that they must have been a genial close family out there in the Gt Sandy. They had not had to endure the inter tribal disputes and grog violence the others had, but moreover there could be no sexual conflict among them since, according to the strict Western Desert kinship code, none were possible marriage partners.



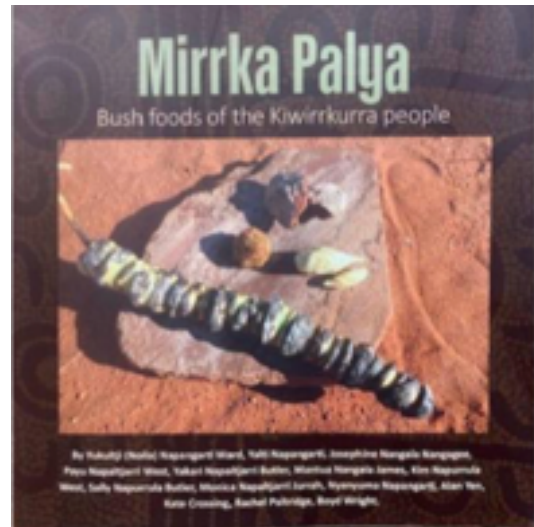
Pintupi kinship diagram by Ken Hansen

The most oft said comment about Piyirti was that had a gentle nature and his departure back to the desert might have had a lot to do with that. He discarded his clothes and with out a word left Kiwirrkurra for good. t People went out searching on foot and from the air in Nurse pilot Helen Reid's plane, but he was not seen again. Maybe he just could not adjust to conflict among kin.

The two mothers who were estimated to have been born around mid 1930's most likely lived easier and longer lives by coming in to Kiwirrkurra. Papalya died in 1998 and Nanu in 2002. Tragically Tamayinya Tjapaltjarri was killed recently when run over on a main road in Alice Springs late on a Sunday night. He had been living off his paintings there. Initial reporting suggests it was misadventure. The bush mob certainly are not as fit as they were choosing the easy life as people almost always do. That the artists among them can earn enough from a few works to buy a four wheel drive would have been unimaginable for their kin when they moved to settlements in the 1960's. Recently they signed agreements with mining companies for Potassium and Rare Earth minerals. Some of their children now work as Rangers in their vast IPA. The Gt. Sandy Desert which had severe droughts from the 1930's to the 1960's is now lush from climate change, making the summer monsoons pour further south. Yalti and Yakulti co-athored the book 'Mirrka Palya; Bush foods of the Kiwirrkurra people', the most thorough work on bush tucker yet.



Pintubi country



Book by Kiwirrkurra women

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The fate of the Pintubi 9 tells us much about Australia and our understanding of each other. That they lived a traditional life alone for so long and true to their law attests to the strength and genius of their kinship system and land management. There has been a trend to play up Indigenous material culture recently. The Brewarina Fish Traps are praised for being millenia before the Pyramids. Bruce Pascoe argues were more than 'mere hunter-gatherers' as if that way of living is less worthy. Well, the Pharaohs for all their monuments still didn't appreciate human genetics and Aborigines had a humane spiritual ethos that abstained from sacrifice.

Napurru's sand draft for a painting is a wonderful demo of Desert Art roots. The appeal of the art movement has much to do with how it can express culture and country in one vision. The tjukurrupa stories and the country they happen in. A vast natural land uncluttered by the material doings of people and instead speaking its eternal.



Sand draft for Brush Medicine Painting Napurru



Yakulti Napaltjarri and Ben McMahon

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There were tough time in the 4 decades since the surprise of 84. Unprecedented rain submerged most of Kiwirrkurra and everyone was evacuated for a year and a bit in 2000. The stone road house had a fire and was deemed too damaged for reconstruction. Kiwirrkurra is most often described as the most remote community in the country and it has benefited from it. Blow ins from towns usually run out of steam and 'supplies' by the time they've got that far out and its a long and bare trail to the nearest bolt hole. The attention the Pintubi 9 drew to it elevated Kiwirrkurra in the minds of authorities with civil responsibility. The road in both east and west directions is all wheel drive two lane job with hard gravel base that the West Australian Government has spent seven figure sums on. Likewise the water, communications, electricity and buildings are all of a high standard. With relative harmony staff stay longer. Little things can make a difference and what stood out was the sand pit in the shade of the school.

Kiwirrkurra is special. It has a fan club of sorts and the Tjamu Tjamu Aboriginal Corporation face book page shows lots of whats going on Thanks to Julian Santamaria, Rod Menere, Dr Scrim, Berndt Kaiser, Deb Nesbitt, Fred Myers for infos to help write this.

Footnotes:

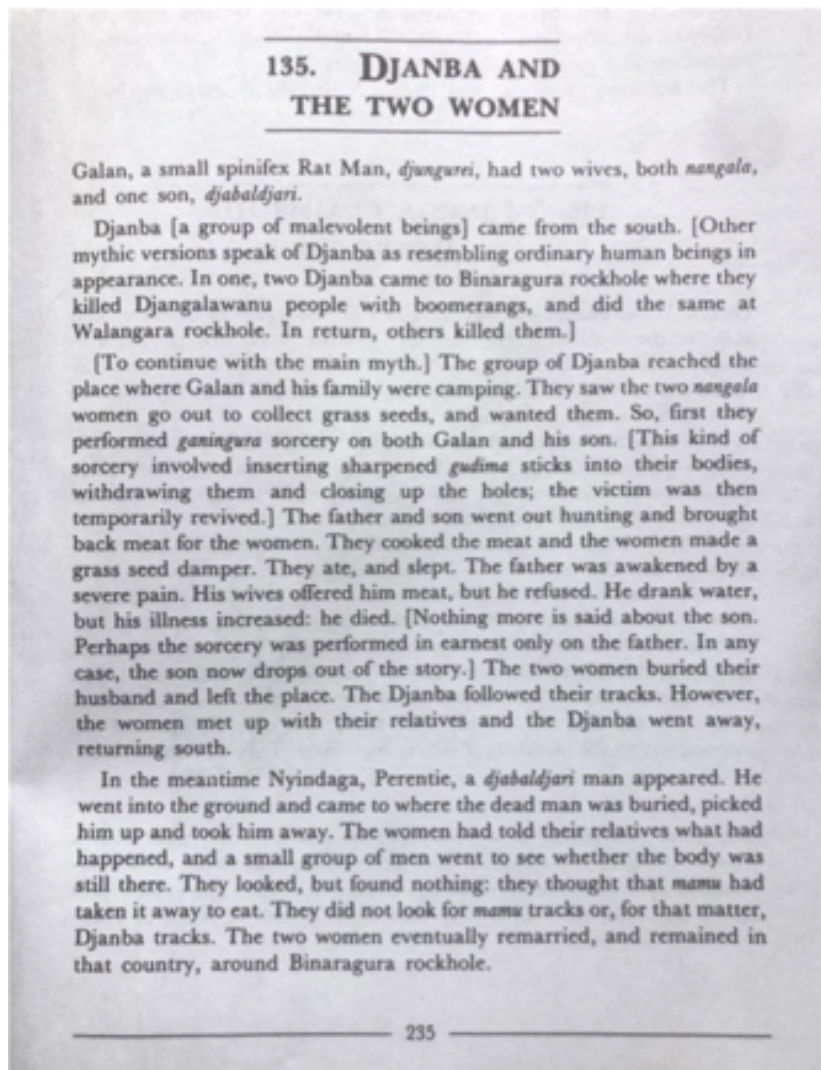
1. The move from assimilation settlements and missions had been supported by both Coalition and Labour Federal governments since the mid 1970's. The first Pintubi community at Kintore Range, 600 km west of Alice Springs, came about after a recommendation to DAA to drill a bore there in 1978 following a field trip from Papunya westwards to Umari with Tjapaltjarris Mick and Benny and families. Mick gave me this water dreaming painting as encouragement.



Water dreaming by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri

In a similar but far quicker way Kiwirrkurra was initiated at a meeting in Kintore in April 1983 which proposed to DAA a bore drilling program across the border into Western Australia. From unspent funds \$50,000 was found, resulting in seven cased bores and an air strip at the furthest west bores at Kiwirrkurra by October of that year. Interestingly the only involvement of the WA state government was the provision of a hydro geological report. From the NT / WA border 129' South to a bit east of Winparrku at 128' it was classified as Aboriginal Reserve while Kiwirrkurra would be on Vacant Crown Land. The Native Title Decision in 2001 declared the Kiwirrkurra Indigenous Protected Area of 43,000 sq km.

2.



Story by Sandfly Yalpayu from "The Speaking Land"

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3. Kiwirrkurra got the Roadhouse name from an early meeting with locals. Kiwirrkurra is the traditional name and is water dreaming. When I was filling in forms for registering the air strips, trade accounts and what not, I asked them what they wanted to call it. It definitely was not a settlement as government run Indigenous places were in assimilation times and they were not keen on the community tag, and when someone suggested road house there was unanimous 'yuwa palya' (yes good). The sense of it was, they wanted a normal place like white fellas have, for their experience of government turn outs had been bewildering. Inevitable equal pay decisions and the end of a system of virtual tutelage meant a move from government and cattle station rations or low wages, to welfare entitlements. Naming the new way 'sit down money' sums their attitude to it. As iniquitous as it was they were still proud of the useful work and status they had in the rural economy. They had little to no part in the polict change and the high turnover of officials made them seem flakey compared to mission and station people, who endured. Tellingly the ex Balgo Mission arrivals at Kiwirrkurra were better educated than their kin who had lived at Government settlements for the past 20 years, excepting some with a Lutheran connection via Hermansburg. The missions were orders, their fantastic tales had a familiar touch: ceremony, singing, garb the lot, not much dancing but they taught kids and adults.

4. Freddy had unintentionally killed his first wife during an argument at Yaiyai in 1976 and the scars in his thighs were from the ensuing paybacks. I was told he was a sorry sight for years afterwards. When the move to Kiwirrkurra was imminent he moved his family from Kintore to Moying bore on the NT / WA border. He would cheer us on as we drove out with loads to do the first jobs at Kiwirrkurra and sent his sons Nicholas and Tony to work with us. I wondered if his name West came from his enthusiasm for his country. One day he took me to an old water hole south and went behind a boulder where he picked up a rusted billy which he had left, he said, when he ran away from Papunya settlement. Pointing northwards he said he killed a man in a fight there when he was young fella yirriti time (long ago). In 1994 on a visit to Alice Springs I noticed his wife Parrara on the hospital lawn. She was there faithfully as Freddy was a patient and had not long to live. He slept or was unconscious when I saw him, lying in bed on his back, still an impressive looking man with a long perfectly tapered white beard. His eldest son Bobby has the most authority at Kiwirrkurra.



Water dreaming by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri



Kiwirrkurra turn off



Kivirrkurra today