IN THE CORONERS' COURT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Rel No: A0045/2024

Police No: 24 92124

CORONERS FINDINGS

ROAD DEATH 43 OF 2024

Section 34 of the ***Coroners Act 1993***

I, Elisabeth Armitage, Coroner, having investigated the death of **a 56-YEAR-OLD ABORIGINAL MALE** and without holding an inquest, find that he was born on **1 January 1968** and that his **death occurred on 15 September 2024, at Telegraph Terrace, Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.**

Introduction:

60 people lost their lives on Northern Territory Roads in 2024. The highest road toll per capita in over a decade and by far the highest in the country. These findings concern road death 43.

Pedestrians are vulnerable road users and pedestrian fatalities represent around 19% of lives lost on Territory roads. Pedestrian fatalities are most prominent between 6 pm and 6 am. Pedestrians are hard to see at night. Since 2019, 97% of pedestrian fatalities were under the influence of alcohol. When under the influence of alcohol, pedestrians' movements are unpredictable.

This was the death of an intoxicated pedestrian (with a blood alcohol reading of 0.25%). It was night-time. CCTV shows that he stepped into the path of an approaching vehicle. The driver was not speeding, she was licenced and sober. Crash investigators concluded that the driver could not avoid the collision. She was not charged with any offences.

His death is a tragic loss for his family, his friends, and the greater community.

Cause of death:

1(a)	Disease or condition leading directly to death:	**Multiple blunt force injuries**
1(b)	Morbid conditions giving rise to the above cause:	**Reported motor vehicle crash (pedestrian)**
1(c)		**Acute alcohol intoxication**

Following an autopsy on 17 September 2024, Forensic Pathologist, Dr Salona Roopan commented:

- The opinion as to the cause of death is based on the available police and medical

information, and a post-mortem examination including ancillary investigations.

- Toxicological analysis of preserved femoral blood showed a blood alcohol level of 0.25% detected which generally correlates with a heavy degree of intoxication but this is also dependent on individual factors. The clinical effects at this level of intoxication may include confusion, disorientation, impaired balance and co-ordination.
- The cause of death is multiple blunt force injuries.
- I have no reason to believe with the information available and findings made during external examination of the body and a post mortem CCTV scan that the death was due to any other cause than the injuries sustained in the motor vehicle accident reportedly as a pedestrian.

Background:

Kumanjayi was born in the Gibson Desert, Western Australia. Kumanjayi was one of a family group which became known as the "Last Nomads" or the "Pintupi Nine". Three published media articles describing this family group are annexures A, B and C to these findings.

In 1987, he started painting and gained notoriety for his art as one of the Tjapaltjarri Brothers. His paintings are displayed in art galleries around the world including Switzerland, Germany, France and the United States.

At the time of his passing, he was not married and had no children but was a financial provider for his family and close friendship group.

Although he had fame in the art world and had previously lived in permanent housing, at the time of his death he was living rough in the saltbushes near a pedestrian crossing on Telegraph Terrace in Alice Springs.

He was not on the Banned Drinkers Register.

Circumstances:

In September 2024, Kumanjayi, together with family and friends, was camping rough in saltbushes next to Telegraph Terrace.

On the afternoon of Saturday 14 September 2024, he purchased alcohol on the black market. Living rough with no permanent housing meant that he was restricted from purchasing alcohol legitimately, and so relied on black market supply.

The alcohol was taken back to the salt bush camp site and consumed with friends and family. By midnight, intoxication had started to "fuel petty squabbles". Kumanjayi went to his tent in the salt bushes to sleep but was later woken over an argument about stolen blankets.

At 12:46.32 am, high quality CCTV obtained from a property next to the campsite, depicts two members of the drinking group pushing a shopping trolley containing blankets across Telegraph Terrace at the traffic lights. The couple continue walking west. They walk casually and appear oblivious to any trouble about the blankets.

One minute and sixteen seconds later at 12:47.48 am, Kumanjayi can be seen emerging from the salt bushes on the eastern side of Telegraph Terrace.

Seventeen seconds later, at 12.48.05 am, Kumanjayi can be seen stepping into the southern lane of Telegraph Terrace and yelling in the direction of the departing couple. He stays on the road, wandering between both south bound lanes. It is not known what he is yelling.

Nineteen seconds later at 12:48.24 am, a female member from the drinking group can be seen on the CCTV coming out from the saltbushes and standing on the footpath while Kumanjayi remains on the road.

Eleven seconds later at 12:48.35 am, the female can be seen running to the edge of the road and waving her arms. It seems she may have been trying to alert Kumanjayi to an approaching vehicle or vice versa (that is, she may have been attempting to alert the vehicle to Kumanjayi). Kumanjayi does not appear to respond to her and nor does he appear to recognise the approaching vehicle. He can be seen on the CCTV walking into the middle (island) lane, directly in front of the approaching vehicle.

Three seconds later at 12:48.38 am, he is struck and killed by a vehicle which did not stop.

The crash was reported to emergency services at 12:57 am by a passer-by who was driving south on Telegraph Terrace. He stopped to assist three females that he saw on the road. They alerted him to the Kumanjayi. He phoned 000 and waved down a passing St John Ambulance at 1:02 am. Kumanjayi was killed instantly and the paramedics declared him deceased at 1:07 am.

Police attended and a crime scene was established at 1:10 am. Major Crash Investigators arrived at 3:34 am.

The driver:

The female driver had just dropped off friends in Hong Street and was driving towards her house. From Hong Street, she drove to Larapinta Drive, and then turned right onto Telegraph Terrace. She was driving south when the crash occurred.

After the crash she did not stop. She drove a few blocks south on Telegraph Terrace and then did a U turn and drove north on Telegraph Terrace. At 12:54.52 am, she drove south, back past the body. At that time two people were walking north on the road to assist.

Again, she did not stop. She drove south to the Tom Brown roundabout and then north along Gap Road. She drove directly to the Police Station where she stopped and reported the crash to police at 12.59 am.

She told police that “he must have been walking across the road in the dark and all of a sudden he was right there”. She said that she drove past the scene to see what she had hit. When asked why she did not stop, she said "I thought I should come to you first". She later declined to participate in a formal interview.

She was tested for alcohol and drugs and returned negative readings. She produced a current driver’s licence and her car, a grey Mazda, was seized for examination.

The crash investigation:

The crash was on Telegraph Terrace, Alice Springs at GPS reading: S23.711904 E133.871875.

Drone image indicating location of the crash courtesy of Major Crime Investigators

At that location, Telegraph Terrace is a dual carriageway with two lanes north and two lanes south separated by an island. It runs approximately north south and is part of the Stuart Highway so provides carriage for all traffic heading from Adelaide to Darwin including road trains. Halfway along this section of road is a pedestrian crossing controlled by traffic lights. The speed limit along Telegraph Terrace is 80 km/h and flanked either side by 60 km/h speed zones.

At the time of impact, the traffic lights were green giving the driver right of way. At no time did any of the pedestrians press the pedestrian push button on the traffic lights to give them right of way.

The deceased was wearing predominantly darker clothing.

The speed of the vehicle at the time of the crash was calculated from the CCTV and scene examination and found to be between 72 and 83 km/h. Neither the CCTV nor the scene examination revealed any braking.

The weather was fine and dry and not considered a causal factor in the crash.

The 2019 grey Mazda with current NT registration was examined and no mechanical faults were identified that may have contributed to the crash. Notably, the headlights were in good order.

A Major Crash Detective Sergeant conducted light, distance, speed and response time calculations and concluded:

> Based on my analysis of the physical evidence, with the application of known scientific laws and principles, I make the following conclusions: The cause of the crash was the pedestrian walking into the path of the vehicle and the driver being unable to avoid [the collision].

Police investigation:

Investigating police considered whether there was sufficient evidence to charge the driver with any offence.

Police considered there was insufficient evidence to charge the driver with dangerous driving cause death (section 174F *Criminal Code Act* 1983). Typically to make out such a charge there needs to be evidence of significant intoxication, dangerous speed or dangerous manner of driving, and these factors were not evident in this crash.

Police also considered a charge of hit and run cause death (section 174FA *Criminal Code Act* 1983). An opinion memo was submitted to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP), however, the DPP declined to pursue the charge. I note the circumstances here include that the driver did immediately attended the police station to report the crash, she submitted to drug and alcohol testing, and surrendered her car for inspection.

Police were further of the view that, as the driver was not breaching any road rules under the *Traffic Act* 1987 or Australian Road Rules, there was no evidence to support a charge of careless driving causing death (section 308 *Traffic Act* 1987).

Comments:

Investigating police asked the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure to review the 80 km/h speed limit and have been advised that this will be reviewed quarterly by the Fatal and Serious Crash Review Working Group**.**

Decision not to hold an inquest:

Under section 16(1) of the *Coroners Act* 1993 I decided not to hold an inquest because the investigations into the death disclosed the time, place and cause of death, and the relevant circumstances concerning the death, and I do not consider that the holding of an inquest would elicit any information additional to that disclosed in the investigation to date. The circumstances do not require a mandatory inquest because:

- The deceased was not, immediately before death, a person held in care or custody; and
- The death was not caused or contributed to by injuries sustained while the deceased was held in custody; and
- The identity of the deceased is known.

Annexure A

Pintupi Nine mark 30th anniversary of first contact with white Australia - ABC News
abc.net.au/news/pintupi-mark-anniversary-of-contact-with-white-australia/5840812

Pintupi Nine mark 30th anniversary of first contact with white Australia

By Alana Mahony

Fri 24 Oct 2014 Friday 24 October 2014

Pintupi people Warlimpirrnga, Takariya and Yalti have spoken of encountering white people for the first time 30 years ago. (Supplied: Safia Desai)

The last remaining group of Indigenous Australians to make contact with white Australia is marking the 30th anniversary of the event.

The so-called Pintupi Nine were discovered living a traditional hunter gatherer life almost 200 years after European settlers first landed in the country.

They spent their days walking enormous distances from rock-hole to water-soak searching for water, until the day in 1984 when they stumbled on the outside world and the media stumbled on them.

Three decades after they first laid eyes on white Australians, the Pintupi Nine have told their version of that day.

The family's leader, Warlimpirrnga, now in his early 50s, recalled his first contact with the outside world.

"We had just speared a kangaroo," he said through a translator.

"We could smell the shit of other humans in the air and we saw smoke, and we knew there must have been people camping close by."

He said he and his brother approached the campsite and spotted two men from the Kiwirrkurra community, which is located a couple of hundred kilometres away.
"The people heard me. They were scared. They became frantic running back and forth," he said.

The chance encounter sparked a dramatic chase over the next three days to track down the elusive Pintupi Nine.

'We had nowhere to go'

Yikultji was aged in her early teens at the time and remembered the moment the search party caught her.

"We started running towards our mothers, they saw us coming and asked, 'what's wrong? Why are you running?'," she said through a translator.

"We had nowhere to go. My mother hid in the Spinifex. The men grabbed us and put us in the car.

"Then the men took off their shirts and gave it to us to wear."

The fear and shock of the moment was eased once the older members of the family group recognized some of their own relatives, who had been re-settled in a community elsewhere 20 years earlier.

They eventually convinced the Pintupi Nine to go with them where the food and water was in more plentiful supply.

"I was listening and I thought about it for a while and then said, 'yes... take us, we've been sitting out here with no-one else around.'," Warlimpirrnga said.

A day later the family met Charlie McMahon, the only white fella living in Kiwirrkurra community at the time, and the first white man they had ever seen.

"I thought this bloke is white, this one. He is white this bloke," he said.
"We was sitting when I saw this whitefella, he was white!"

Group had become too small to survive in desert

Warlimpirrnga said it was his decision to go with the group into community life.

Pintupi man Warlimpirrnga took the decision to lead his family group tot he community of Kiwirrkurra. (Supplied: Safia Desai)

They knew their family group was too small for them to be able survive alone in the desert much longer.

"Driving in the car to Kiwirrkurra, the trees were going really really fast, so we ducked our heads," he said.

"It was scary. I don't know why these trees were moving so fast."

Since then the family had been exposed to a life that was, in some ways, easier than what they had previously known, with ready access to food and water, housing, education and medical treatment.

But it also exposed them to harsher elements of the modern world - "white-fella" diseases, alcohol, substance abuse.

All have had an impact on each of the family members in one way or another.

Their transition to community life marked the end of tens of thousands of years of continuous occupation of the Pintupi land, one of the harshest environments on the planet.

But as Yikultji explained, the land still holds as strong a bond for her today as it did 30 years ago.

"I'm Yikultji, Lake Mackay is my country, my home, my dreamtime stories, my birthplace," she said.

"This is my place, my country. I grew up around Lake Mackay. This is where I was born."

Annexure B
[The day the Pintupi Nine entered the modern world - BBC News]

The day the Pintupi Nine entered the modern world

Published 23 December 2014

IMAGE SOURCE,NEWS LTD/NEWSPIX/REX

By Alana Mahony

Kiwirrkurra

In 1984 a group of Australian Aboriginal people living a traditional nomadic life were encountered in the heart of the Gibson desert in Western Australia. They had been unaware of the arrival of Europeans on the continent, let alone cars - or even clothes.

If you want to know how Australian Aboriginal peoples lived for 40,000 years, just ask Yukultji. She stepped into the 20th Century just 30 years ago. She is the youngest member of the Pintupi Nine, the last family of nomads to roam the territory around Lake Mackay, a vast glistening salt lake spanning 3,500 sq km (1,350 sq miles) between the Gibson and Great Sandy deserts of Western Australia.

"When I was young I would play on the sand dune and when we saw the old people returning to camp we would go back and see what food they had brought with them. After we ate we'd go to sleep. No blanket, we would sleep on the ground," says Yukultji.
"Then we would go to another waterhole and make another camp."

Before 1984, the Pintupi Nine lived just as their ancestors had done. Waterholes in this area are often 40km (25 miles) apart or more, and every day was spent walking in the relentless heat from one to another. "Sometimes there was no water, so we would hunt for goanna," says Yukultji. The blood of these monitor lizards provided vital moisture when a water soak was dry.

IMAGE SOURCE,SAFIA DESAI

Image caption, The three sisters Yukultji, Takariya and Yalti

The discovery of the group caused a media sensation, but headlines referring to the "lost tribe" annoyed them - they weren't lost, they insist, just separated from their relatives, and other members of the Pintupi clan.

The Nine consisted of two sisters and their seven teenage children - four brothers and three sisters, who shared one father. So how had they become so isolated?

In the 1950s the British began conducting Blue Streak Missile tests over the Western Desert region, and the Australian government decided to "round up" the desert nomads and move them into settlements. All of the Pintupi were taken away apart from this one family, which was overlooked. From then on, suddenly alone in the desert, they saw very few signs of anyone else's existence.

Yukultji remembers seeing aircraft when she was very young. "The plane would fly over and we would hide in the tree. We would see the wings of the plane and we would get frightened. We thought it was the devil and so we kept hiding under the tree. When the plane had passed we would climb down from the tree."

Her older sister, Takariya, remembers coming across a plane that had crashed. "We found some rope in it and we tied it around our waist. We didn't know it was rope. We would tie it around our waist so that we could hang our goannas from it," she says.
Their father may have been aware of the settlements - the children remember him describing what must have been a sheep, but when they asked to be taken to see such a strange thing, he refused.

In the 60s and 70s Aboriginal people were allowed to move back to their land, but Kiwirrkurra community, where the Pintupi live, was only built in 1984, when a borehole was sunk there for the first time. It is the most remote community in Australia - a two-day, 700km (440-

mile) drive from Alice Springs along a bright red sand track lined by Spinifex grasses, with an occasional cluster of Mulga trees.

IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

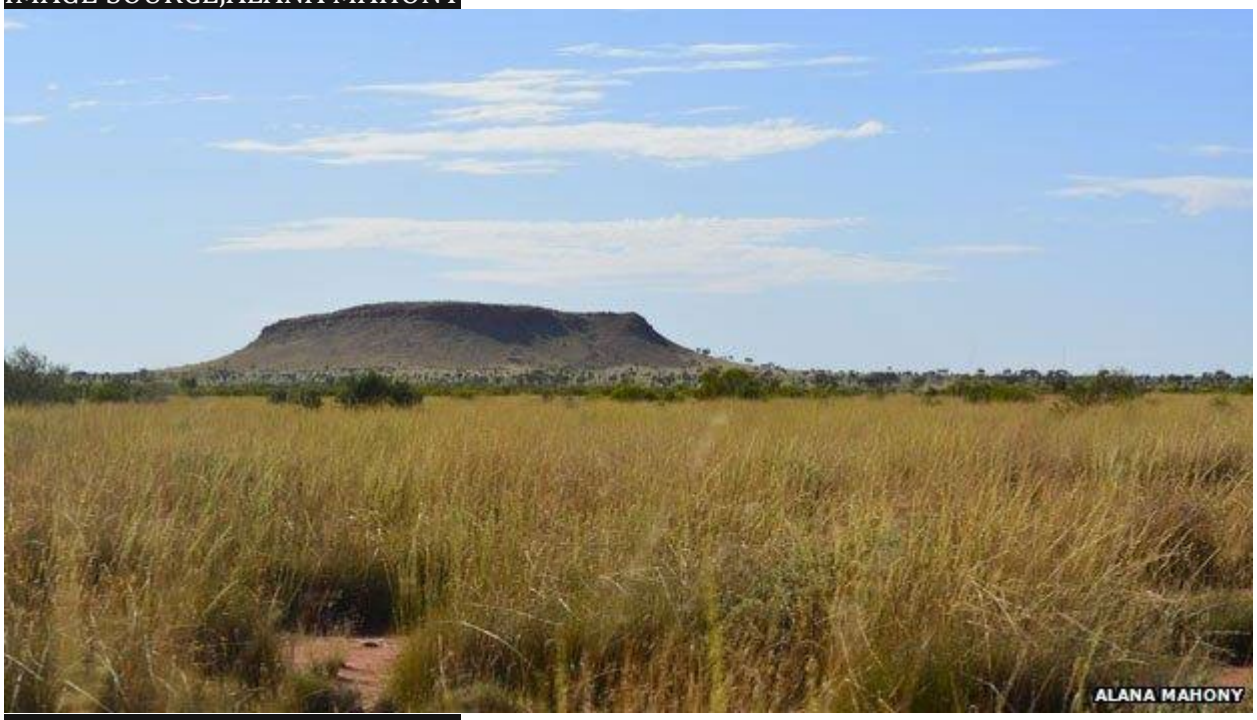


IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

Image caption, Kiwirrkurra country

The creation of the settlement brought the Pintupi closer again to the family that had remained alone for up to 20 years. Those most closely related to the Pintupi Nine had often spoken about family members who were still "in the bush" and had not been accounted for - they had always wondered what had happened to them.

Warlimpirrnga, the eldest brother, and the head of the family after his father's death, remembers the day that the family stumbled across other members of the clan.
"We had just speared a kangaroo. We could smell the faeces of other humans in the air" - they were probably a couple of kilometres away - "and we saw smoke in the distance.

"We moved closer and stood on a rock and could see people camping down below. So I began to move closer to their camp. I ran towards where they were standing. Then I snuck over closer. I coughed. The people heard me. It looked like they were scared. They became frantic, running back and forth," he says.

"This is my grandfather's land," Warlimpirrnga said. One of the men started filling a billycan with water for them. "When he did, we thought, we won't spear him," says Warlimpirrnga. "They were so scared. They were really scared of us, scared out of their wits."

The campers were a Pintupi man, Pinta Pinta, and his son, Matthew, who had decided to set up an outstation at a place named Winbargo, 45km from Kiwirrkurra. The young man panicked and fired a shotgun in the air - all parties scattered, and the two men drove off at speed, despite a flat tyre.

"We heard the sound of that car long into the distance," says Warlimpirrnga.

This was the first time he and his brother Thomas had experienced running water, clothed people or a motor car.

Pinta Pinta and Matthew raced back to to tell the others what they had seen. We know their side of the story from the diaries of Charlie McMahon, now a well-known musician but back then the only "whitefella" helping 60 to 80 Pintupi to establish the community at Kiwirrkurra. They called him Murrahook, because he had a hook for an arm.

00:53

Media caption, Charlie McMahon’s 8mm film shows daily life in Kiwirrkurra in 1984

"Saturday, 13 October: Pinta Pinta and many others come to my camp late at night very excited; they relay the story of meeting two naked men," McMahon wrote. "They said one of the men, the tall one, came towards him at the hand pump, laying his spears on the ground as he approached and asked Pinta Pinta for water. Pinta Pinta worked the hand lever pump to fill up a billycan. Then his son Matthew fired a shotgun, blasted into the air. Pinta Pinta and his son were startled by the two naked, wild-men with spears... they thought they were kaditcha or evil spirits."

By the following day, the community had calmed down sufficiently to realise the men were probably long-lost relatives. McMahon records the moment they decide to track them down. "A decision to go out on Monday to find them and 'give them trousers' is made."

A three-day chase through the bush followed. One of the members of the search party, Joseph Tjapaltjarri, was sure he recognised the footprints they were tracking - he remembered the shape of the foot from his childhood and knew it belonged to his "skin-brother", Warlimpirrnga.

IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

Image caption, Warlimpirrnga (left) with Joseph, who recognised his footsteps

McMahon was back at base camp, waiting for news. "Tomorrow we will find the two men's tracks and maybe, tonight, the last of the ancient people will spend their last night free of the modern world. However, I'm quite prepared to turn back and won't feel in any way daunted, if they stay out here as they are," he wrote in his diary.

Yukultji, a young teenager at the time, was the first to be found, together with her sister Yalti - she says it was a frightening and bewildering experience. "We had nowhere to go. My mother hid in the Spinifex. The men grab us and put us in the car, leaving Takariya's mother behind, they didn't see her in the bushes. The men took off their shirts and gave it to us."

Yalti says her senses where overwhelmed by the experience of travelling in a car for the first time. "We were frightened and we covered our faces. As the car kept moving, we looked up and the trees and Spinifex were moving around us and we kept hiding. When the car stopped I jumped off all frightened and dizzy, my head moving. It was the first time I had been in a car. I didn't know what was happening."

Warlimpirrnga tracked the car and there was a confrontation - he was the leader of the Pintupi Nine and a man of strength and determination. Armed with a spear, he was preparing to defend his family, but as he took aim his mother yelled out: "Stop that, that's your brother, your mate, leave him, that's your brother."

At this point Joseph Tjapaltjarri and Freddy West explained who they were, and the fear and tension evaporated. Warlimpirrnga could see that the men were not hurting the women and he slowly began to identify the relatives standing in front of him.

The Pintupi Nine's experience of first contact was less traumatic than it could have been. Unlike the Pintupi who had been rounded up 30 years earlier, they were met by relatives who spoke the same language, and it was a whole day before they met a white man.

IMAGE SOURCE,NEWS LTD/NEWSPIX/REX

Image caption, The Pintupi Nine in 1984

With a hearty laugh and wide smile, Warlimpirrnga reveals what he thought when he first saw McMahon. "We were sitting down, I saw a whitefella, he was so white," he says. "'This bloke is white, this one,' I thought. 'He is white, this bloke.'"

McMahon did not want to put the group under any pressure to join the community, but he witnessed the moment they were persuaded. "It was unthinkable that they would stay out there because the modern world was so seductive. One of the fellows suggested, 'Give them a taste of the sugar and they'll be in for sure.'"

Indeed, the taste of sugar had a big impact on the Pintupi Nine and it is this aspect of their story which now animates them most. "I tasted the sugar, we didn't know what it was, but it was so sweet. I tasted the sugar and it tasted so sweet - like the Kulun Kulun flower. My mother tasted it and it was so sweet. It was good," says Warlimpirrnga.

IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

Image caption, Yukultji making moigeba - a "damper" (a kind of bread) made with black and brown seeds

IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

Image caption, The family ground seed on ancient grinding stones

Warlimpirrnga had a choice to make. If he decided to take his family into Kiwirrkurra Community, life as they had always known it would change forever. They would no longer walk from sunrise to sunset looking for water and food. "My brother Joseph, Freddy West and I were talking. 'We're taking you with us,' they said. 'We're going to take you home where there is more food and water.' I was listening," says Warlimpirrnga. "I thought about it for a while and I said, 'Yes, take us, we've been sitting out a long time with no-one else around.'"

By the time the Nine reached Kiwirrkurra, new bonds had been formed. One of the search party, Freddy West, an elder of high status, had married Takariya before they even arrived - she was only a teenager at the time. "Freddy has taken one of the women as his fourth wife and everyone is amazed by how quick he was," McMahon wrote in his diary.

Aboriginal tradition has strict rules surrounding marriage. At birth you are given a skin group, which is determined by the skin groups of your parents. This determines who you are allowed to marry and is used to prevent incestuous relationships.

Warlimpirrnga does not regret deciding to leave the bush for community life. "As we came into Kiwirrkurra, I saw my nephew and niece and all the people in the community started crying when they saw us, because they knew we were family. They looked after us, they kept us, and they taught us. I got used to them. Over time I felt that I was with family together in Kiwirrkurra community and we were the same. I was happy to be with them now."

Yalti says it took a while to adjust to her new life. "We would go to the store and take flour, tin-meat and sugar. We walked out and didn't pay. We didn't know - we were bush-people. Our families would give us money and we would dig a hole and bury it. We didn't know what to do with it," she says.

The new food was also bewildering. "I cooked a potato on the campfire and it tasted good. I put an orange on the fire and it got burnt, burnt, burnt! I thought I had to move it around in the ashes, but instead the orange got really black," says Yalti.

Despite the challenges, McMahon remembers they had a terrific sense of humour. "One funny thing that happened. To do the water pipe I had to cut into the main - this was a fair amount of pressure, water spurted, everyone laughed together."

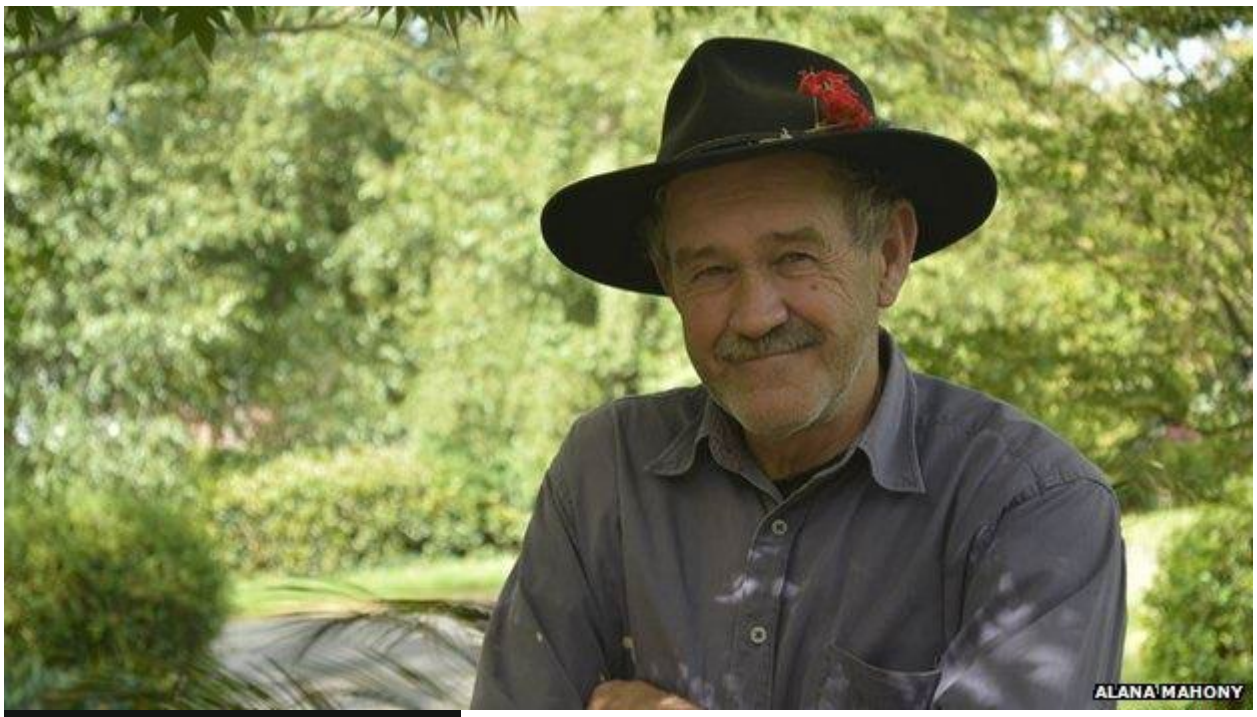


IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

Image caption, Charlie McMahon - today the didgeridoo player lives in the Blue Mountains

Adjusting to community life was not easy for all members of the family. One brother, Payirti, returned to the bush soon after arriving at Kiwirrkurra. The family does not talk about him, but other people say different things - that he is living in a different community, or that he visits Alice Springs under a different name.

McMahon has his own thoughts on why Payirti turned back. "He was in there for about two months but even when he was there he was going off on his own. He was getting away from the place... I think he couldn't handle human conflict. The strife that was happening between families and individuals that was commonplace in Kiwirrkurra - that's why he went. He just couldn't handle the stress of it and went back. I heard stories that he had gone in to the sky... mythological kind of thing," he says.

The Pintupi Nine's story underlines how young modern-day Australia is and its vastness.

The Pintupi were some of the toughest and most skilled survivors on the planet, and by passing down their survival skills from one generation to the next, they managed to occupy this part of the world, uninterrupted, for tens of thousands of years.

IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY

Image caption, Takariya and a blue-tongued lizard catch

Community life is, in some ways, easier than their previous nomadic existence, but it also exposed them to nastier aspects of the modern world. When they came out of the desert they were examined by a doctor and found to be incredibly fit and healthy, without an "ounce of fat", but in the Aboriginal communities of Western Australia diabetes and obesity are rife. McMahon remembers how quickly they succumbed to "whitefella" diseases like the common cold. Alcoholism is a problem in the Western Desert and paint- and petrol-sniffing were too, for a number of years. All have touched the Pintupi Nine siblings in one way or another.

The last nomads?

The Pintupi Nine may not have been the very last to give up a traditional life in the outback - in October 1986 a nomadic group of seven reportedly walked out of the Great Victoria Desert - it is unclear how aware they were of modern society. A **government report, external** praises them for surviving in "one of the most harsh and remote places in the world".

Warlimpirrnga, Takariya, Yalti and Yukultji still live between Kiwirrkurra and Kintore communities. Two brothers, Walala and Thomas, are both living in Alice Springs. The old ladies have passed away. All the siblings apart from Payirti are artists - Warlimpirrnga, Walala, and Thomas have gained international recognition as the Tjapaltjarri Brothers, and in 2007 Warlimpirrnga was described as "one of the greatest painters of the desert". Yukultji too has had exhibitions in Sydney and New York.

The land still holds as strong a bond for Yukultji today as it did 30 years ago, and during a trip to Lake Mackay she is delighted to come across a Minkelbar plant - a popular bush plant which acts as a mild sedative. "Lake Mackay is my country, my home, my dreamtime stories, my birthplace," she says. "This is my place, my country. I grew up around Lake Mackay. This is where I was born."

Earlier in the year, the Pintupi community signed an agreement, external that turned 4.2 million hectares (16,200 sq miles) of their traditional land into an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). The Kiwirrkurra IPA is now part of the largest protected zone of arid land on Earth. "We have been looking after country for thousands of years, and we still do so today," the traditional owners declare, external. "We came back here because country is not healthy without us. We make it palya (good)."

IMAGE SOURCE,ALANA MAHONY
Image caption,
Kiwirrkurra Community
Additional reporting by Safia Desai.

Annexure C

The Pintupi Nine - One of Twelve

'The Last Nomads'

An article by Paul Toohey, first published in the Bulletin (2004).

The Pintupi Nine became an international sensation when they walked in from the desert in 1984. Now, the survivors are finally willing to tell their astonishing story of life before – and after – the white man invaded their lands.

The Pintupi Nine at the time of their first contact with settler Australians in 1984.

For years he has buried his story deep within and sealed it there with pride and a strange and needless sense of shame. But sitting back by a rock hole in his homelands far to the west of Alice Springs, Pintupi man Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, aged about 45, is finally opening up. It is 20 years since he literally laid down his spears and, with eight family members, emerged from the forbidding Great Sandy Desert to a bewildering modern age. In doing so, the group created an international news sensation. But their relatives were determined they would not become a tragic spectacle, as they themselves had once been, and the world was kept away. They have never before told their story.

For Warlimpirrnga (pronounced “Wallimpirri“), who has never learnt to read or write but who has become one of central Australia’s most sought-after artists, the 20-year anniversary is absolutely meaningless. Same for Tamayinya, or Thomas, who is now about 35. He is Warlimpirrnga’s silent shadow, a warm but impenetrable man who appears either afflicted or blessed by a state of childlikeness. These men, most likely the last true subsistence hunters this country will ever know, reluctantly accept they have a place in history. And Warlimpirrnga

and the others are prepared at last to talk about the long pre-contact wilderness years – and of what has since become of the group that became known to the world as “the Last Nomads”.

On October 24, 1984, Melbourne’s The Herald – as it was then known – announced the discovery of the Pintupi nine with an understandably hysterical front-page screamer: “We find the lost tribe.” The newspaper had a journalist who happened to be in central Australia and was handed the scoop. But The Herald did not find the tribe and, more particularly, they were anything but lost. Lost people do not survive in a desert, successfully raising children to adulthood, initiating their boys, wandering among claypans and soaks, and literally, in the words of Warlimpirrnga, “chasing the clouds” to stay beneath the precious rain.

Two weeks before the news broke, Warlimpirrnga and his older brother, Piyiti, found themselves staring down from a red sand dune at a family of Pintupi Aborigines camped by a vehicle. The place was Winparrku, or Mt Webb, on the road between Kintore and Kiwirrkurra, where a hand-pump bore had recently been sunk. Warlimpirrnga watched in fascination as an older man drew water from the bore.

On a previous occasion, Warlimpirrnga had lain hidden as two four-wheel-drive vehicles churned through his roadless red-dust world. But he had never been as close to a car as he was now. He was deeply suspicious of the contraption. He wanted water but also fancied running a spear through these strangers, blithely sitting there on his grandfather’s land. To understand how this encounter came about – which ultimately led to Warlimpirrnga’s group leaving their bush life behind – something of the history of the Pintupi (also Pintubi) people must be known.

In the 1950s, the British were testing their Blue Streak and Black Knight rockets, firing them from Woomera, South Australia, to the seas off north-western Australia. The Pintupi, who lived under the flight path, were being cleared out. Some went to Balgo, in north-western Western Australia, but most were taken hundreds of kilometres to the east, out of their homelands, to Papunya, Northern Territory. Here, other desert tribespeople were gathering to live on government-supplied rations.

As the last of the Aboriginal people to come in from the bush, the Pintupi were derided even among other Aborigines as unsophisticated myalls and were forced to the fringes of Papunya. By the mid-1970s, they were in deep trouble, dying fast from alcohol, sugar and chronic lung problems. In the words of Pintupi elder Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, culled from an old film: “From that first taste of grog we began killing each other.” With the advent of land rights in the Northern Territory in 1976, Aborigines started thinking about returning to their land – and none was more desperate to do so than the Pintupi.

Kintore in June 1986, five years after its establishment (Photo courtesy of The Australian Museum).

In 1981, the Pintupi went back west to establish the community of Kintore, close to the WA border. But their real heartlands were even further west, across the state line where there were no land rights. Wrongly relying on a federal government promise that national land rights legislation was coming, Freddy West Tjakamarra and others crossed over into WA in 1983 to nominally reclaim their land and to create Kiwirrkurra. Now, at least, the Pintupi had good access to Lake Mackay, a giant salt plain where a multitude of critical Dreaming tracks converge.

More and more Pintupi people began moving back. By October 13, 1984, a man named Pinta Pinta was, with his family, in the process of trying to set up a tiny outstation at Winparrku. As the sun went down, Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti – venturing at least two days' walk from their family group – crept close to see who had lit the fire.

"I saw the fire," says Warlimpirrnga through a translator, Pintupi man Bobby West, son of Freddy. "They were burning spinifex because they had a flat tyre. They were calling out for help. I waited till the sun went down. I wanted to spear them. I didn't know Pinta Pinta or [his son] Matthew. Pinta Pinta didn't take notice of what I was saying. I said, 'My grandfather died here. This is my country.' Pinta Pinta said, 'This is my father's country.' We didn't believe one and other. They thought I was a featherfoot [kadaicha man, also called a "spear man", or witchdoctor]. I thought they were featherfoot men."

Piyiti, less feisty than his younger brother, stood back. "I got my spear ready," says Warlimpirrnga. "I was angry – they were angry, too. They had a shotgun ready, but Pinta Pinta was shaking, frightened." Warlimpirrnga called for water, so Pinta Pinta pumped some from the bore into a billy can. "He said to me, 'This is water'." The naked Warlimpirrnga tugged on Pinta Pinta's shirt out of curiosity, at which point Pinta Pinta was terrified to notice both men had sacred objects in their headdresses. He was convinced they were some sort of secret-society "revenge killers".

Warlimpirrnga then grabbed Pinta Pinta by the arm in a traditional Pintupi greeting. Matthew, standing by with his shotgun, panicked. "He fired a shot in the sky," says Warlimpirrnga. "I threw the water away and ran."

To this day, sorcery informs decisions in the desert. Spirits are most active at night, so humans keep their evening movements to a minimum. But having looked into the eyes of a devil, Pinta Pinta and his family were not about to sit still: they bolted, driving 60km or so west to Kiwirrkurra on a flat tyre. Bobby West, then a young man, remembers hearing the car limp into town late at night. Pinta Pinta and his family caused a commotion. “They said, ‘Ah! We saw featherfoot man in Winparrku!'”

Freddy West questioned the logic of Pinta Pinta’s account. He knew of a family who had never come in. People would at times see footprints and distant campfires. From Pinta Pinta’s description, Freddy knew this was no featherfoot. Freddy had known Warlimpirrnga and his parents well, in pre-contact times. And now Warlimpirrnga was making an appearance, after all these years.

Kiwirrkurra’s leaders decided to find Warlimpirrnga’s group and bring them in. Their main motivation was a sense of pity for what the elders called “the naked ones”. It was a prescient move. By then, the group was in real danger – not from the desert, which they had mastered, but from themselves. The gene pool was running dangerously low and inbreeding – which Aborigines avoid with their complex skin classification system – was imminent. In 1962, these nomads were sometimes part of a larger Pintupi group, which included Freddy West Tjakamarra and his family. West and his family had decided to go in to Papunya and, on the way, met NT welfare officer Jeremy Long, who was on an expedition to check on remaining Pintupi nomads. West told Long of the family who had chosen to remain in the Lake Mackay region.

This group was, at this point, led by a man named Waku Tjungurrayi. Waku and Papalya had an older daughter called Topsy and a young son, Warlimpirrnga. Papalya had three sisters known as the “Nangalas” and Waku had already fathered Piyiti to one of these women.

A year or two after the West group went their own way, Waku’s group met a small hunting party that included Purungu George Tjapanparti and Tommy Gibson, who had previously encountered whites at Mt Doreen station, near Yuendumu. They were intent on heading back to Mt Doreen – which, like Papunya, had become a ration centre. Waku fiercely opposed “going in” to live with whites but his daughter, Topsy, was then a young woman with no one to marry in her own group. It was agreed she would marry Tommy. They walked back to Mt Doreen for their “honeymoon” – and this would be the last time Topsy would see her family for 22 years.

Waku and Papalya then had another child, Takaria. Then Waku died, probably about 1964. “Someone sing him,” Warlimpirrnga says, explaining that his father fell to sorcery. “My cousin came out, a featherfoot, and sing him ‘from the side’ [meaning in a sneaky way]. It was a jealousy thing, something to do with all his women.”

After that, a man known as Lanti, or Old Joshua, came south from Balgo to marry the widows. “Joshua,” says Warlimpirrnga, “was a featherfoot man himself, very clever. He could fly.” He delivers such statements matter-of-factly. Joshua had lived at the Catholic mission in Old Balgo and had first-hand experience of whites. “Joshua had got into too much trouble in Balgo,” says Bobby West. “He used to kill the sheep and nanny-goat [for food]. He got too much problem, so decided to leave Old Balgo.”

Warlimpirrnga says Joshua was “just sort of travelling by himself” when he ran into the family. His luck was in. Joshua’s skin grouping was the right match to Nanu’s, so she became his primary wife and they began a family. They had Thomas, Yalti and Yulkulti. Walala, the youngest in the group, was Joshua’s son to another woman, Watjunka, who also passed away in the desert.

Kadaitcha, also known as ‘featherfoots’ were powerful sorcerers who could inflict harmful magic. They were referred to as featherfoots because of the special shoes they wore made from human hair and emu feathers, allowing them to sneak up on their victims without leaving tracks.

By 1967, Jeremy Long heard that Waku’s widows had been joined by a new husband, Joshua. Although Long had never met the group, he investigated Joshua’s background and found he had been burned in a fire at Balgo and ended up in Derby hospital. Long suspects it was this experience that persuaded Joshua to leave Balgo – and leave behind a wife and children. Knowing Joshua knew the way to Balgo, Long never tried to find the group. He took the view they would come in if and when they wanted. It was probably the death of Joshua, three of four years before first contact, that focused the group’s thoughts towards coming in. They believed whites were out to kill them. “He [Joshua] got poisoned by a tin of meat,” says Warlimpirrnga.

“He was poisoned by mining people,” explains Bobby West. “Because he was sneaking into their camp every night, pinching that tin of meat, food, mining group. Somebody always drive around [working], come back home and say, ‘All that tin of meat gone, tucker’s gone, everything’s gone.’ So they say, ‘We’ll get ’em next time.’ They [the whites] get a couple of tin of meat, and put some sort of poison. One morning, he [Joshua] eat this tin. He stomach was like this. [Indicates a hugely distended belly.] He went back with his family. He was suffering. They stay with him till he die.”

Warlimpirrnga now seems happy with this version of Joshua's death, but when the group came in they gave Lutheran linguist Ken Hansen a slightly different version. Government documents reveal they complained Joshua had been shot by whites. Approaching two four-wheel-drives, Joshua had picked up a tin can and tapped it with his spear – possibly asking for meat. There was the sound of a shot and Joshua was found dead on the ground, with blood on his chest. The group placed his body in the traditional manner, in a tree, away from the dingoes.

By 1984, this wandering band numbered nine. Papalya and Nanu, as the group's widow-matriarchs, were both aged in their mid 50s. There was Takariya, then 24, nowadays sometimes known as Doris, and the girls Yalti, 14, and Yukultji, 12. Of men and boys there was Piyiti, then about 26, Warlimpirrnga, about 25, Tamayinya, 15, and Walala, 12. The group's only modern tool was an axe-head that Joshua had brought from Balgo. It was said to be so handled and valued that it was polished to a mirror-finish. Warlimpirrnga had grown into the role of big-game provider. "I would spear mala [kangaroos], emus, pussycat, rabbits, snake," says Warlimpirrnga. "It was easy to catch them. I made my spear sharp with a limestone rock."

Warlimpirrnga tells how he and Yalti were once hunting when they saw vehicles. "I saw a white motor car and another one with a canopy. It was the first time I saw a car. I was a big boy by then, a young man. I was with Yalti and we were married [she must have been a very young bride]. We had just caught a kangaroo. We were frightened and we went away. Old Joshua had told us about white men and motor cars. We knew there were non-Aboriginal people closing around us. We didn't know what was happening."

Warlimpirrnga and Yalti were terrified when encountering a motorcar like this one for the first time (Photo by Fred Myers).

It is believed Papalya and Nanu, fearing being killed by the whites who had killed Joshua, or others, decided to send Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti to find their relatives. Having missed the boat when the others went in more than two decades earlier, they were simply too fearful to turn up unannounced in a community. They had heard Joshua's stories, once widely shared among Pintupi, of how white people ate human flesh.

They also lived in fear of a man, Yawa Tjapaltjarri, who lived alone in their area. This man, like Joshua, had experienced white society, but was on the run from Aboriginal men who had killed his older brother.

The eminent anthropologist Fred Myers, who wrote a report on the Pintupi nine shortly after their first contact, noted: "Probably because [Yawa] lives alone, they regard him as having become a mamu [demon] and were frightened of him 'lest he bite us'. He is regarded as a 'clever man', with special powers including the ability to fly."

At risk of becoming "hillbillies", as Bobby West puts it, and fearing dark human forces, it was time to think about bringing this way of life to a close. Two weeks after Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti's encounter with Pinta Pinta and his family, the group would see two cars – loaded with Aborigines – approach. Even though they were desperate to meet their relatives, they did not know what to do except to run for their lives. Warlimpirrnga, however, wasn't having any of that. He launched a spear.

Yalti and Yukultji, now about 35 and 34 respectively, are seated on a mattress in Kiwirrkurra, 700km west of Alice Springs. They rarely give their story an airing and, as such, attract a small crowd. As with Warlimpirrnga, the women worry that their story will show them up as ignorant or primitive. Bobby West works hard on them to not be ashamed. Theirs is a story of pride and survival, not disgrace: they can rightly be called the last of the First People.

The sisters tell how they lived mostly at a claypan-soak called Marua. "We knew about Balgo and Papunya and Yuendumu," says Yalti, but they never went near these places. "We wanted to go to Balgo to visit our family, but the old man [Joshua] always say no." She and Yalti would stoke the morning embers and prepare the camp. After that, "we played around the sandhills, looking for witchetty grubs and lizards". It was, she says, a "most happy" life.

At night, the nine slept by four separate campfires, divided along gender and age lines. Helping keep them warm at night, says Yukultji, was a "big mob of dingoes, full dingoes, might be 12 of them or something". They used their own hair or cat fur to make nimpala, short skirts that served as belts in which to keep lizards – the group's staple – rather than offering concealment.

Yukultji remembers seeing an aeroplane and a helicopter cross the sky. "We were too frightened," she says. "We hid under a tree." Such visions were not associated with any recognised Dreaming story and impossible to explain. Joshua, who must have seen a plane when he was at Balgo, apparently did not try to set them straight. He told Yukultji that "kartiya [whites] got no god".

Sisters and renowned artists Yukultji (left) and Yalti (right) today (Photo courtesy of Papunya Tula Artists).

Now, they laugh about how confused they were when they first came in. The diary of Charlie McMahon – later to become known as the didgeridoo player with the group Gondwanaland, and at the time Kiwirrkurra's community development officer – reveals much about events leading up to that moment.

It was a Saturday night when Pinta Pinta and his wife and sons raced to Kiwirrkurra to breathlessly report seeing "two naked men". McMahon notes that on the night of Sunday, October 14, Kiwirrkurra people were scared and "sleeping close", discharging shotguns randomly into the air to ward off Warlimpirrnga, who they feared would seek revenge on Pinta Pinta and Matthew. That afternoon, McMahon writes, a decision "to go out to find them and give 'em trousers is made!"

The seven Aboriginal men who led the search party on Monday morning had lost any fear of featherfeet men but were worried – rightly – that Pinta Pinta and Matthew may have roused Warlimpirrnga's ire by discharging the shotgun. McMahon was in one of the vehicles that set out to search for Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti's tracks. "Tomorrow, we will find the two men's tracks and maybe they will spend their last night free of the modern world," he wrote. "Tuesday morning: Freddy finds tracks going north … Willy finds discarded boomerang. By midday after crossing about 10 dunes skirting the edge of Angas Hills, the two men's tracks are headed north … they are trying to obscure their tracks …" That night the search party camped close enough to see Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti's fire.

McMahon had work to do and turned back to Kiwirrkurra. The seven Aboriginal searchers were joined in another vehicle by an Aboriginal Affairs field officer, Speedy McGuinness, sent from Alice Springs, and Geoff Toll, a friend of McMahon's.

Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti had headed north from Winparrku, the shot of the gun still ringing in their ears. For a while they attempted to lose any potential pursuers by jumping on spinifex clumps to avoid leaving prints. After a while they gave this up and the trackers had no difficulty picking up the trail. At Mamurltjunkunya, the searchers found the two men's tracks and a campsite. They counted seven other pairs of feet.

Reasoning the group might be afraid of seeing clothed Aborigines, the men stripped naked. Footprints led the searchers deep into the mulga scrub. They first found one of the older women – probably Papalya – panting and exhausted, trying to hide in the spinifex. She swore at them when they offered water. Thomas stood to throw a spear. They let him go. "We were running around – we were so scared," Yukultji says. "They came and grabbed us." It sounds like a mass kidnapping but it wasn't really that way at all. The men wanted to calm them and offer them the choice. Warlimpirrnga was not so easily appeased. "I was angry because they were following us," he says. "I ran straight to my humpy and grabbed a couple of spears and nulla nullas. They kept coming at me."

Bobby West says his father spoke to Warlimpirrnga, who was by then in full warrior stance, his spear loaded in his woomera: "You mob been living in bush too long. You've got your family here – we are your family. You know my father's name? I will tell you my father's name."

"And I knew," says Warlimpirrnga. "I threw the spear anyway, because they'd been chasing me." But he says he deliberately misdirected it to fly past Freddy West's thigh. It is also suggested there was anger at West – who left the group all those years before in 1962 – for not coming back to find them. "After that, I left my spear and woomera by a tree," Warlimpirrnga says. "That was all."

Warlimpirrgna with his spear at Lake Mckay (Photo courtesy of Curated Adventures).

McMahon diary note, Thursday October 18: “Radio message this arvo says they’ve found the two men with seven other women & children – they require more fuel and vehicles to bring ’em in. Over radio-telephone I asked that they tell the ‘bush people’ that they can stay out if they want and after 20 mins discussion they decided they want to come in. Anyway, Freddy and the Kiwirrkurra mob seem very keen to bring them in.” On Friday, McMahon met the returning vehicles at the south-east edge of Lake Mackay. “They seem very nervous but in very good health …”

Most got in the vehicles, reluctantly, although Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti jogged behind as they ploughed across the hard-going sand hills towards Kiwirrkurra. Looking back over the tray of the vehicle, Yukultji saw smoke coming from the exhaust and leapt out. “I thought the car was on fire,” she says, laughing.

Even though Kiwirrkurra is about as remote a community as can be found in Australia, there was still a full sense of culture shock awaiting the Pintupi nine. But before discovering modern amenities, one of the first things to get out of the way was a weeping and wailing session with the relatives – and a reunion with Topsy, who had in the 22 years since she had left the group married and married again. Topsy had promised she would one day come back and find her family, but never did. Myers writes that upon seeing her “their faces turned dark with rage”. Her brothers and sister attacked, striking her “for having left them behind and not having come to search for them”.

When they were calm, Topsy introduced her daughters to Warlimpirrnga. Myers writes: “As [Topsy’s] brother hugged his niece to his chest, the wrenching sorrow of his crying was added to Topsy’s.” For the anthropologist this was proof that the group, while never lost, had always wanted to be found. They were immediately clad in ill-fitting rags. The Kiwirrkurra people, having known ridicule for their own nakedness, wanted to be sure this group did not suffer similarly. Boxes of matches were struck and burned in awe. But adapting wasn’t easy. “This one [Yukultji] was trying to put sugar in her tea, but she put Rinso,” says Yalti.

“I was digging a hole, putting money in it,” says Yukultji, explaining that she just didn’t like the stuff. She was laughed at for trying to roast an orange and an apple in the fire. Yalti had never had a blanket before and quickly took to it. Yukultji refused, insisting on sleeping naked by the fire. Yalti remembers grabbing handfuls of sugar and stuffing it into her mouth. In a matter of days, they had left their pristine health behind. They were snotted up and had hacking coughs.

Kiwirrkura community, 1988 (Photo by Fred Myers, 1988).

In Canberra, two days before The Herald broke its story, then Aboriginal affairs minister Clyde Holding was itching to make an announcement. With debate raging about land rights, the discovery of this group seemed to provide proof to doubters of Aboriginal connection to land. But Kiwirrkurra’s Aborigines were not about to be used as political pawns. Especially not with a government backing down on its promise of national land rights.

Holding’s information was so restricted that he had little to tell the press, apart from a vague concern the group lacked immunity from disease and that a common cold might prove fatal. The Herald had already been given brief exclusive access to the group, Holding claiming

this would “keep the dingoes [media] at bay”. Herald journalist Robyn Dixon – who had to promise to keep the group’s location secret – wrote of Warlimpirrnga’s “numb, expressionless face”.

The DAA’s deputy secretary, Aboriginal man Eric Willmot, advised his own boss, the well-known Aboriginal leader Charlie Perkins, against allowing any anthropological access to the Pintupi nine: “The anthropological community seem somewhat put out by us not seeking their eminent advice,” he wrote in a departmental note. “Personally, I think they have done well enough out of Aborigines. With the exception of a few very practical people like [linguist] Mr Ken Hansen, we don’t need them.”

This was a time when anthropologists were often seen as skull-measurers who gnawed the bones of Aboriginal people. But the Central Land Council, by then in full land-rights mode and claiming vast tracts of central Australia, knew the value of anthropologists. They could provide detailed genealogies which could, in turn, prove legal connection to land. The CLC insisted, against advice from Holding and Willmot, that Fred Myers – who had studied Pintupi people and was fluent in their language – be flown in from New York to write a report.

Holding’s department was further frustrated when it tried to send a medical envoy, the NT’s chief doctor, John Hargrave, to examine the group. Hargrave, who arrived in Kiwirrkurra unannounced and began examining the newcomers, was promptly stopped in his tracks by Aborigines who ordered him back on his plane.

Myers said in his report that Pintupi “memories are still strong about the number of people they lost when they went to Papunya in the 1960s” and doctors were still hated for their poking and prodding – and their failure to resurrect failing lives. A Kintore doctor, David Scrimgeour, part of an independent health service, who had a long history with Pintupi people, was initially the only practitioner allowed in. George Tjapaltjarri, a respected ngangkari, or traditional doctor, assisted.

Hargrave complained of “political manipulation” and wrote a panicked telex to Canberra. “Why are the nomads mixing in the extremely unhealthy environment of other ‘infected’ Pintupi at Kiwirrkurra?” he asked. “All nine first-contact Pintupi are sick – lying down, fever, not eating, nasal discharge, loose cough … new Pintupi may be exposing others at Kiwirrkurra to leprosy or vice versa.” It raised real alarm.

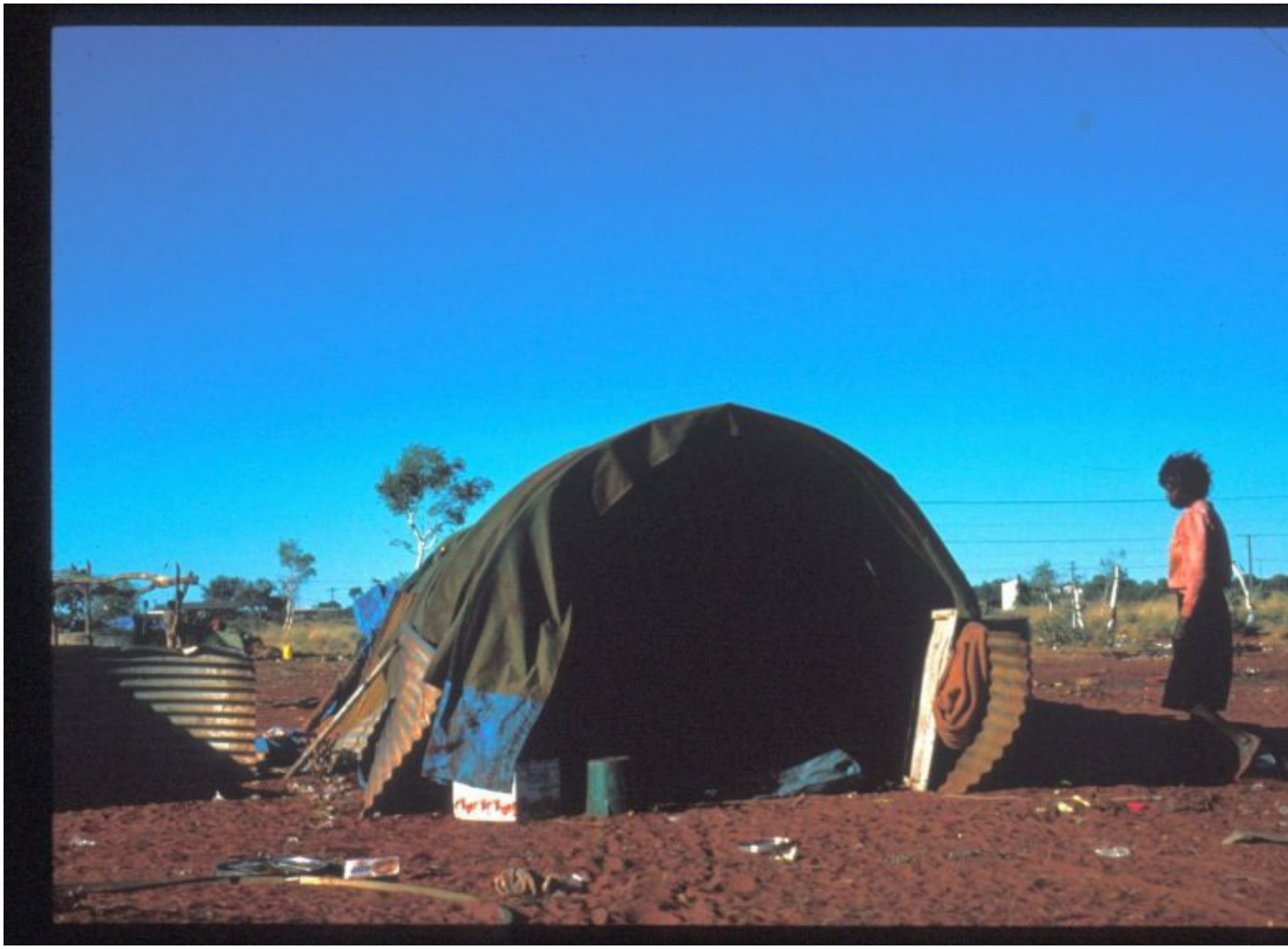
Notes from a teleconference in early November, between Perkins, Holding and others, reveal their anger at being kept in the dark. “Nine people could die within the next two months,” Perkins said. “So the blood of these people is going to be on the hands of who? It’s going to be on the hands of the minister for health, and the minister for Aboriginal affairs and the Central Land Council … and the so-called independent Kintore health service.”

Perkins demanded that a full medical team be allowed to inspect the people. “They’ve got to be protected from their own kinfolks who are giving them disease and deciding what sort of health they should have. It’s an infringement of civil liberties. How dare they decide that you can’t have a [government] doctor because we don’t like government doctors so they just die. They die. That’s literally what’s going to happen.”

Letters to Holding from children at Bunyip Primary, in Victoria, reflected the widespread but mistaken view that the federal government had forcibly dragged the Pintupi in. “You should be ashamed of yourself,” Shannon, aged 10, told Holding. “Even if you don’t care about Aborigines, I do.” “The least you could have done was stop those ignorant so-called kidnappers from taking those poor Aborigines from the Great Sandy Desert,” wrote Lynda, also 10. “Just send them back!”

By mid-November, the group had been given penicillin and a range of immunisations. Blood tests showed they were all positive for the treponema organism, which may have been due to yaws or syphilis. But short of keeping them in a bubble, there was no way of avoiding disease.

Kiwirrkurra's people decided the best thing was to just get it over with and expose them. None of them did drop dead.



There was little infrastructure in Kiwirrkura in the 1980s, and many people lived in makeshift humpies like this one (Photo by Fred Myers, 1988).

Police briefly attempted to investigate the group's claims that Joshua had been shot or poisoned. But they refused to reveal the location of his body so the matter went nowhere. That only the second white person the group met was McMahon, who has a steel hook for a hand, must have been strange enough. It has also been said that the first western music the group ever heard was Midnight Oil, with whom McMahon was developing a musical relationship. "But it could just as easily have been Devo," McMahon says. "I was pretty big on them at the time."

"I wanted them to have their own tap," he says. "I'd neglected to put a gate valve on the main pipe and had to cut the pipe to give them this tap. I'm in this pipe and this water burst under pressure. They'd never seen anything like it and the laughter was amazing. They cracked up."

Despite moments like these, Piyiti was not handling the new life. One day, possibly several months after the group came in, he got up and walked back into the desert. Why? Either no one knows or no one's saying. Surviving members of the group never refer to him by name. "They don't want to," says Bobby West. "Because he's gone back. They don't want to tell. They know him, I know him. He was here. He was walking from that art shed over there and he sneak away. I followed his track, all the way. Along the side of the airport, I followed him right up the

side of that hill over there. I was lookin'. He give me tricks – I don't know where he gone. We lost him. He was a clever man."

McMahon recalls Piyiti well. "He had a really lovely smile. I'll never forget his laugh. But he didn't like the contact. What struck me, apart from some small-scale initiation markings on the men, there was no scars from fights and stuff – unlike the others who had been in Papunya. They were very peaceful." As a gesture between the Kiwirrkurra people and the newcomers, Takaria was in a matter of days "married" to Freddy West. But she fancied another man, which led to some very public spear-brandishing. "This is the stuff Piyiti would have seen," McMahon says. "I don't think he knew how to cope with conflict after being in such a harmonious group."

There is still talk in Kiwirrkurra of fires seen now and then out to the north, suggesting someone is still wandering free or, as the case may be, caged in the vast desert by a sense of fear. But asked what had come of Piyiti, Warlimpirrnga has a different story. "I seen him in Alice Springs," he says. Really? "A few years ago. He's living in Warrabri [now Ali Curing, just south of Tennant Creek]." What happened when you saw him? "He gave me too much [lots] of money. He told me he's got two boys and two girls and a tall Walpiri wife." Warlimpirrnga says Piyiti nowadays goes by the name of Yarri Yarri.

In 1998, Papalya died of renal failure. Mike Harper, until recently Kiwirrkurra town clerk, was close to the old woman. He recalls scrubbing her back at bath-time and was shocked by the manner of her death. "I once visited Papalya in hospital in Alice. She was terrified. The staff used to throw her a plastic cup of coffee, something she had never ever drunk, and sandwiches wrapped in plastic which totally fooled her."

Harper says this woman, who survived the worst conditions Australia can throw up, was "perished and starving when I called in to see her. The ward orderly said she was like a 'dog'. They had her on a mattress on the floor in a room all by herself. It was a really pathetic sight."

In March 2001, Kiwirrkurra was hit by heavy floods and stayed flooded for two years. It led to a new tragedy for the Pintupi. Evacuated to Alice Springs, then to Morapoi station, north of Kalgoorlie, they spent two years devastated by alcohol, which is banned in Kiwirrkurra. There were jailings and bashings and eventually, the group broke into families and fled – to Balgo, Tjukurla, Wiluna, Kalgoorlie, Warburton or Alice Springs.

Nanu, perhaps fortunately, saw none of this. She took ill on the morning the emergency services flew to Kiwirrkurra to assess the flood damage. "I remember it well," Harper says. "We were all at the school and suddenly Nanu was ill; the nurse and I had to break the ambulance window to get to the oxygen bottle as we had dropped the keys in the mud. She later died on a trolley in a corridor of the Alice Springs hospital. There was to be an inquiry into her death, as malpractice was suspected, but it never took place. Because of the floods she had to be buried in Kintore. Her family were and still are very sad about that. They really wanted her buried next to Papalya, in Kiwirrkurra."

Yukultji's mesmirsing artworks on display at Salon 94 Bowery in New York. Beyoncé and Jay-Z famously bought two of her paintings from this show (Photo courtesy of Salon 94 Bowery).

They call the Pintupi lands the desert, which seems imprecise. As southern Australia suffered drought over the past two years, these central plains were awash. Some even call it the Dead Heart, but the Pintupi know it to be otherwise. Now, Kiwirrkurra, population about 150, has pieced itself back together. It has been a battle but the story of the Pintupi people will one day be recognised as one of Australia's greatest triumphs of survival.

Removing the mysterious Piyiti from the equation, five of the six surviving Pintupi nine still live in Kiwirrkurra. Walala was seduced by the shonky art dealers of Alice Springs, who've had him churning out paintings in their backyard operations. He lives in a town camp, on the wrong side of the grog. Warlimpirrnga and Thomas, as busy artists, divide their time between Alice Springs and Kiwirrkurra. They are all hard people to pin down – the nomadic streak remains strong and they are forever hitting the long desert roads in their shabby cars.

Kiwirrkurra is home to five of the top 10 exponents of Western Desert art, Warlimpirrnga's two-colour, almost psychedelic waves of dots taking him to near top of the list. Yalti and Yukultji, both mothers now, also paint statements of country – Yalti's is the more precise work. She is a teacher's assistant at the Kiwirrkurra school. Warlimpirrnga, the cousin whom she grew up with in the desert and later married, drives across the community to pick her up when the school siren sounds in the afternoon.

Yukultji at her sold-out show at Salon 94 Bowery in New York (Photo courtesy of the Sydney Morning Herald).

Takaria lives between Kintore and Kiwirrkurra. She remembers her desert life as a hard one, “walking all day. But it was a good life”. She is content, she says, glad she came in. Asked if she is happy at how things turned out, Yukultji glowers and says sharply: “No.” Then bursts into laughter. She remembers singing and dancing every night to the sound of boomerang clapsticks – but she always knew it would end. The quiet Thomas? “He’s a bit of a sad one,” says Bobby West. “He needs a wife.” Harper says it took him years to get to know Thomas but, when he finally did, he found him to be one of the most endearing people he’s met. “I don’t see him as a sad bloke,” he says. “Out of all of them, he remains different. The others came around to our way. Thomas always stayed out there on the edge. I’ve never seen him angry, ever. I always felt his mind was back there, in the desert.”

Warlimpirrnga, described as having a numb and expressionless face when he first came in, says he too is content. “I am glad I came in. It was a happy life, chasing the clouds to the soak country. But I’ve found my family. Now, I stay with them.” And now he hunts with a rifle. “Too much beer, too much sugar – a spear takes my energy,” he smiles.

The Pintupi people have won back their land on both sides of the NT-WA border – and Warlimpirrnga is in the process of reclaiming exactly who he is. Last year, he made an appearance at the Yuendumu sports festival, where he entered the fire-making contest. A queue of traditional Aboriginal men attempted to make fire using only sticks of wood. Warlimpirrnga’s spark struck first.

Rumiya (sand goanna), a major source of protein for the Pintupi Nine, is still hunted today (Photo by Gretel Bull).