

## Chapter 9

# A long walk home to the warddewardde

*Peter Cooke*

Wamud Namok<sup>1</sup> was born in 1926 on that vast region of dissected sandstone landscape marked on maps as the West Arnhem Land Plateau. The country is referred to in the language of the land as the *warddewardde*, a name which is reasonably translated into the commonly used non-Indigenous descriptive appellation of ‘the stone country’.

Wamud Namok lived through many periods of change in the ways governments have glossed Indigenous policy. He was born in the era of protection by segregation, which was followed by assimilation, Whitlam’s heady promises of self-determination, the subtle linguistic down-shifting to self-management and the glimmer of reconciliation later buffed back to a matt surface of practical reconciliation. A populist spin embedded in ‘mutual responsibility’, ‘shared responsibility’, ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘normalisation’ have emerged in more recent times.

Sadly, the common theme of all these, including the internationally approved reference to ‘self-determination’, involved non-Aboriginal Australians talking about (and at) Aboriginal people, rather than talking with them.

Meanwhile, at the frontier Wamud Namok and his peers made what they could of changing circumstance, engaging not with policy makers but with buffalo shooters, miners, missionaries and soldiers.

As a teenager Wamud walked to Maranboy and worked in tin mines, carrying drums of ore on his shoulders, walking the hills as a prospector searching for signs of new ore bodies for his employers. In later years he spoke proudly of having been a miner, appreciating the link between mineral production and desirable material goods. Many desirable things at Maranboy were made of tin or packed in tins – billycans, pannikins, corned beef, waxed matches and, most desirably, tobacco.

Wamud and other elders agreed that people of their generation had left their lands where they ‘lived on kangaroos and honey’ because they had tasted tobacco, quickly became addicted and went to pursue that addiction, and to follow earlier migrations to buffalo camps and the mission.

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1 Wamud Namok is used throughout as the appropriate term of reference to the late Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek AO.

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