

Traditional Owner Comment

Mervyn Murlady, Chair, Karajarri Traditional Lands Association, West Kimberley, Western Australia

Interview with Jessica Weir, 14 October 2008

The PBC [Prescribed Body Corporate] is the foundation to look after our land, our culture, socially and economically. For years we've been getting government agencies coming in and out. A lot of mining companies wanting to deal with us didn't know how to get in contact with us, or how to set up a meeting. We want to develop our PBC in a Karajarri way. We want to see our PBC run just for Karajarri, to develop in a way to administer and direct us, not only for now, but for the future.

We set up the PBC before we won native title. We didn't know about PBCs until after we won native title, but our PBC was already set up. I was elected chairman from the old people. We achieved winning our land and going to the next step. Nobody in the Kimberley had gone to the next step. Even high people in the KLC [Kimberley Land Council] and government did not know how a PBC should run. No one in their wildest dreams could imagine getting beyond winning native title. Even KLC

wasn't prepared. All was focused on winning native title and getting the land, there was never a plan for after native title. And the government said the KLC can only do native title and not PBCs. I think that goes for all of the native title bodies. So there was no structure for us. No way for us to go to the next level.

For us Karajarri people we knew how we wanted to run our land. It was pretty hard for the old people, that after we got the land back we had to manage the Gadiya way. It's frustrating for them. We've got to keep explaining it to them, the administration and all that. They managed the land culturally. But we didn't want to leave culture behind, because culture has to play a very important role in our PBC. Not only developing the PBC, but to keep our culture going. The chairperson of our organisation has to know law business and public business. So if we are doing site clearance, the chair person with the

cultural backing can feed back to the rest of the group. It is very important for our PBC to develop culturally, because culture was the foundation of winning our native title. We want to administer it culturally. If you have workers there, they have a cultural awareness program so they can work both ways, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We can also set up a meeting culturally, like out in the bush. Our meetings are a bit funny. Usually we tell each other off, talk and laugh, that's our culture. That's how

we've been doing it for years.

It was a happy feeling and a sad feeling when we got out native title. It was a joy for us to win our land back, but it was sad for us young blokes to see our Elders cry. Our



*Top: Mervyn Murlady with John Hopiga (Head Karajarri Ranger) at La Grange Bay
Bottom: Mervyn Murlady burning near Bidyadanga.
Photos by Tom Vigilante*



Elders have seen how it was before, how our land was held. They have seen all our ancestors fighting for the land. This was the one day when the land was handed back. Our leader was very fragile. When the judge gave it back to him, he passed away two weeks after. He won it not just for himself, but for all Karajarri and Karajarri into the future. The old people, they are the foundation. They put in this position now to continue on, developing, fighting, and continuing on our culture for our future.

The KLC were trying since 1978, since Noonkanbah, trying for land. They could see something coming. After all those years of fighting, they could see something that was winnable. They never thought they could win that land back. They fought so hard for us. They never let us down. The people we had working with us from KLC, they stuck with us, through all the field trips. Driving us around, recording information, we covered some 40,000 square kilometres of country. We had 30 to 40 flat tires. Different parts of the country had different information from our Elders. Some of our Elders were arguing with the KLC staff, because there was so much pressure and stress. Some KLC staff got emotional, and started crying. We had to bring it all back together, to hold this group of people, not only keeping the Elders together, but keeping all Karajarri together. If you don't have all family groups together, you might not win native title. The strongest thing about Karajarri was all family groups are all together. There are some small arguments, but we stick together. After native title, we still keep the family groups together. One thing I am really happy about is that no matter what family group, we don't take sides with each other. We all listen to each other.

They have put all this trust in me, to take to the next step. It's been hard, hard to run. You only get support from your own family, and your own tribe, but not from anywhere else, to try and get something very important running. I've got to look at every little thing. In the last couple of years our committee has been struggling a little. Our AGM [Annual General Meeting] has been falling a bit. I have got to look at every little avenue to manage our country. How can we manage our country without government funding? We set up lots of Karajarri projects with project funding. They help with managing certain things, like the cultural management plan. Project grants for managing bush medicines. They all fall under PBC work. The government says 'we will give you

money for the project, but we won't give you money for the PBC.' Even the Yirriman project, which we are the founders of, which runs cultural projects with young kids, maintaining culture. The downfall for our PBC is trying to administrate and manage our country. We have no fax, no phone, and no place where people can come. People who play an important role could come to our office.

We need to have a plan, and achieve our plan year by year. There is day to day management work, and we need someone to do paperwork, bills, set up meetings, and the filing. We had Jarrod Coote.* He walked into the KLC office, thought he was coming into something small. But he was blown away by something so big.

At the end of the day we want to be able to do things independently. Break away from the KLC. My aim and dream is to see my Karajarri office. I had this picture in my mind a long time ago, before native title, about how it would look like. Leaders can do so much, but the pressure is on them, and they get worn down too quick.

'Getting the Djabugay back in town': Djabugay Native Title Corporation Planning Workshop

By Toni Bauman, Research Fellow, NTRU

A three day planning workshop was held with the Djabugay PBC in Kuranda from 24th to 26th September 2008 as part of the NTRU's PBC Project. The workshop was facilitated by Ross Johnston and Ian Kirkby of

* Jarrod Coote worked for Karajarri between February and July 2005, in a full-time and then part-time capacity