

LAND, LANGUAGE, FAMILY, STORIES: THAT'S CULTURE

By Bradley Saunders with Bhiemie Williamson

I am a Gunggari fellow, born in Mitchell back in 1958. My parents and grand-parents are all Gunggari and we are one of the major families of the Gunggari people. The Gunggari people have a number of family totems including the snake, the kangaroo and the emu. We've always called the Maranoa River home; it's the centre of our country. Our country starts up in the Chesterton Ranges around Mt Moffat, near the Carnarvon Gorge. We follow the river down until the Balonne River, which comes off the Condamine and all waters join the Maranoa. We go west quite a way from the Maranoa River, out across the Wallam Creek towards a little town called Morven. Then east across Amby Creek and towards a little place called Muckadilla, which is renowned for its hot springs.

It's good old outback western Queensland country. Around the rivers



Banner: Gunggari Aboriginal Property Association: <http://gunggari.org.au/>
Image: Bradley Saunders
Credit: Bradley Saunders

it's really sandy, you can find a lot of Booggley (crayfish) to eat, Buddbudda (Echidna), binke (kangaroo tail), and of course all the yellowbelly. You've got the rocky ridges where women used to meet, and there are all the old Yumbas, old fringe dwelling camps that were set up back in the 1800s and 1900s on the east side of the river. The council bulldozed those back in 1961 and that caused a lot of sadness because a lot of our people grew up there. There are wonderful stories about the women going down, sitting underneath the chicken wire lean to and playing cards down at the Yumba. We also had a lot of sadness when our children were being taken away, taken to places like Cherbourg, Woorabinda and Purga.

We are river people and have a long and rich history living on and around the Maranoa. These days a lot of us have taken up roles in other places throughout Queensland and Australia. We are a proud people; we have a wonderful capacity to reach a decision without a lot of hoo-ha. Even when we are vehemently opposed to things, Gunggari people can reach consensus. That has been one of our real strengths as we've gone through the native title journey, which can be quite heated as people come together and try to make sure that their interests are heard and acknowledged. I live at Laidley these days for work, it's about 8 hours east, and every time I go home and we do business, we can always get to a stage where we can get consensus. So that's a really good thing.

Back in June 2012, Justice Reeves handed down a determination by consent recognising us as the native title holders. Again, I think it shows the strength of the Gunggari people to get all of those parties to consent

to determination. We have non-exclusive rights, which obviously limit our capacity to pursue economic independence. I was involved in the last eight years of the claim, after a dear cousin of mine succumbed to cancer. So we had to go back and authorise new claimants to continue the work that he and the other old people had started. It was a fifteen year battle, and we lost many elders along the way whose knowledge and counsel are sorely missed. We've had two expert reports, saw three changes to the *Native Title Act* (Cth), and re-negotiated with bodies to represent us until Queensland South Native Title Services (QSNTS) took up the mantle. Those people helped us magnificently and we got across the line. We also negotiated two Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) with the Queensland Government, one for free-hold title for land at Dunkeld and another one for Aboriginal Freehold Title which is through the *Aboriginal Lands Act* here in Queensland. As we were negotiating all of these agreements it required us to establish new organisations. We have the Gunggari Native Title Corporation, which is the Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC); the Gunggari Lands Trust which holds the Aboriginal freehold land; and a lands trust, Gunggari Aboriginal Property Assoc Inc. We also have a cultural heritage body which is part of the Association. We need these to manage all the different pieces of legislation that the Gunggari people must now comply with. Each of these organisations needs a committee and so you've got to have volunteers, people who are willing to give up a lot of their time to help you manage those organisations. Eventually it takes a toll on people as you try and bring things together. So it

has been a really complex process but we are thankful that our wishes were listened to. Obviously we would have preferred that it didn't take fifteen years, but I guess that is how the law operates.

One of our biggest challenges with so many organisations is communication, especially as many families don't live on Country. We rely heavily on the internet to keep that communication flow. We have established a social media presence through a Facebook page; Proud to be Gunggari, and our property association has recently established its own webpage; Gunggari.org.au. We've got a couple of deadly young Gunggari people who have helped to set up our webpages and Facebook which is a magnificent communication tool. We've got another young lady who is an IT guru and she set up the Gunggari webpage so we've got a lot of good young people around and they are all contributing in their own little ways.

In the early days after the determination, establishing our organisations was all about compliance. We operate across five different legislative regimes and it's just so different for each of them. Getting yourself compliant is the most critical thing. Now that they are established though, we are trying really hard to get our initiatives off the ground. We've got a wonderful museum in Mitchell, which is at the old school house. We call it Yumba, after our old camps. Back in the 20's and 30's, Murri kids weren't allowed to go to school so we had our own little school at the Yumba and that little school was brought back to the Yumba many years ago. We've got an interpretive trail that tells stories, so if you visit Mitchell, you can get a tour and people take you for a walk from the caravan park to the Yumba and tell you some of the stories of the Yumba and the families that used to live there. We have some young Gunggari entrepreneurs making beauty and medicine products using traditional bushes and lotions. We've also got our own language laboratory that a few of our old Aunties have spent years working on. The Council looks after the language laboratory,



Top: Gunggari native title, June 2012. Credit: Bradley Saunders

and both the public and private schools have been learning our language for years. I think we were one of the first schools in Queensland to have it part of the curriculum. I remember at a photographic exhibition that was opened about eighteen months ago, kids from the catholic school with Gunggari and other Murri kids sung the Hoki-Poki in Gunggari. It was just the greatest thing to see. At the moment our language resources are a big collection of nouns and verbs and we want to get back conversational Gunggari. With the help of our old Aunties and some recordings made back in the 60's, we are hoping to get back to conversational language in the next five to ten years.

The hard thing with native title now is that it really is a secondary legislation when it comes to importance. You've got petroleum, mining and farming acts that have precedence over you. So you're always dealing with pieces of legislation that have precedence over native title and trying to find a way around those is where we have to rely on those with legal knowledge.

Native title is the most complex thing that I have ever been involved in. When you think you've got everything done you find out that you have to provide more and more evidence to be able to show ongoing attachment to land. You've got to deal with the different types of legislation with accessing land, and the only time you find out a lot of this is when you try to do something and you find out you can't. How do I teach that to somebody? We've got a couple of young people on the Gunggari #3 and #4 claims which are currently ongoing, in the hope that by experience they will pick up that knowledge. But gosh, I wish I could teach that to everybody, so that's the tough part.

The good things? Well, for Gunggari

people it was the greatest day of our lives to hear the judge say we had native title. The euphoria in the room is something that we are still riding on. We battled with some neighbors that didn't seem to think that we belonged in the land. To be recognised irrefutably that we are the custodians of the land and always have been, that recognition alone makes everything worth it.

I still say culture is four things: Land, Language, Family and Stories. It's the stories of Uncles and Aunties cooking binke, hugging the doctor tree, eating snotty gobbles with Auntie Irene, we tell those stories. Those old fellas might be gone, but the stories about them keep going on for generations. For our young ones', it gives them more strength and cements their culture and connection to the land. It makes everybody stronger. To let people know you're Gunggari, you come from the Maranoa. No matter where you are in Australia, that's where you come from. And when you visit people in Australia, in the Northern Territory, Western Australia or Tasmania, you can say 'I'm from the Maranoa', and you can talk in detail about your land, that's what our people do. We want everybody to come home, that's why we share our language so willingly. For someone to come back and say my grandmother was Gunggari, we say, 'Oh yeah, we know her, that's where you ended up. Do you know about our website? Do you know about our Facebook page? What else do you need? If we can find it, we'll get it to you'. That's why we are so big, we welcome those people. We want all the Gunggari people to come home and know that they have a place here; they are all welcome to come home and leave their footprint in the sand and make sure that the spirits recognise them and know who they are.