

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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The Gurindji people of the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory are best known throughout Australia for the Gurindji Walk-Off, the landmark event of 1966 which precipitated the equal wages case in the pastoral industry and the establishment of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. Gurindji history before the 1960s is less well known and is the subject of this book. For the Gurindji people, history is divided into *Puwarraja*, the Dreamtime, and *Yijarni*, true stories. A number of accounts of *Yijarni* come from historians,¹ political activists,² police journals,³ and (auto)biographies of cattlemen and other local identities.⁴ Yet Gurindji voices are often understated in these versions of events, if they are present at all. Other anthropological descriptions⁵ and Gurindji-told stories⁶ capture the Gurindji perspective, but these first-hand accounts are often rendered in broken English and are limited in their scope of expression. As a result, these stories are often halting and fragmented, and require intense interrogation to understand.

This book presents the history of the southern Victoria River District from the perspective of Gurindji people in their own language. It contains detailed oral accounts of events that Gurindji elders either witnessed or heard from their parents and grandparents. For each of these stories, the author given is the teller of the story, but they are recounting shared knowledge, and in the recording process another elder will be



present as a ‘witness’ to the story. This person confirms details before the recording starts (called ‘straightening it up’) and monitors the telling to make sure that there are no mistakes or omissions. For Dandy Danbayarri’s stories, Ronnie Wavehill was the witness, and vice versa. For each of the stories from Violet Wadrill, Topsy Dodd and Bidy Wavehill, at least one other of these female elders was present as a witness.

These histories are augmented with archival material from police records, newspapers, biographies of early settlers and other published oral histories of

Recording information about a massacre which occurred Wirrilu on Wave Hill Station (Photo: Brenda L Croft 2010)

the Victoria River District. Archival photographs of people, places and events described in these histories are also reproduced to illustrate the texts, as well as contemporary photographs of locations relevant to the stories, and paintings which are responses by Gurindji artists to the stories. As such, the book is the result of an extensive collaboration between Gurindji knowledge holders, artists of Karungkarni Arts at Kalkaringi, the Murnkurrumurnkurru rangers from the Central Land Council, photographers and linguists.

This book is structured according to the Gurindji division of history. For Gurindji people, history starts long before the arrival of Europeans, or *kartiya* in Gurindji. Stories of this time are told in Chapter 2. They describe a world where humans and beings such as the Rainbow Serpent and mermaids co-existed as they do to this day, and intertribal warfare was not uncommon.

Gurindji historians consider the second main period of history as the time since European

occupation. This began after 1882 when Nat Buchanan took up the first pastoral lease on Gurindji country and established the original Wave Hill Station on the banks of the Victoria River at Malyalyimalyalyi and Lipanangku. During this time Gurindji country was gradually stocked with cattle. The new arrivals were sometimes met with violent resistance from the Gurindji and then responded with even greater force. This resulted in mass deaths in the region, not only of Gurindji, but also Malngin, Bilinarra, Mudburra, Karrangpurru and Ngarinyman people. This dark period of history is described in Chapter 3.

Around the early 1900s, Gurindji numbers had diminished and so too had active resistance. This marked the start of the cattle station time where many Gurindji ceased living in the bush and settled in the 'blacks camps' on the stations, only returning to the bush during the Wet Season, which was the station lay-off period. The story of how Gurindji people came to live on Wave Hill

Remains of an old yard at
r 17 Bore on Wave Hill
(Photo: Brenda L Croft)





Warrijkuny or Sambo Rock on the Victoria River. (Photo by Brenda L Croft 2014)

Station is given in Chapter 4. The first station, located on the banks of the Victoria River near Kalkaringi, flooded in 1924, which precipitated the move to a new site at Jinparrak. The cause of the flood is described in 'Rainmaker Destroys the Homestead' in Chapter 4, and eye-witness accounts of the events are given in 'Flood Events at Rifle Hole' and 'Picking Up After the Flood and Finding Jinparrak' in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

Chapter 5 starts with the move to Jinparrak, and how Gurindji and other local Aboriginal people continued to provide the bulk of the labour for the cattle enterprise. They were treated badly by the station owners and lived in appalling conditions. This was the period when Lord Vestey owned the station and is referred to by Gurindji people as 'Vestey time'.⁷ Early accounts of station life include stories about the removal of the children who came to be known as the Stolen Generations, and the harsh treatment of Gurindji stock workers in life and death. Nonetheless, Gurindji people managed to maintain their culture and connection to country during station lay-off times, and stories

about these times conclude Chapter 5. This chapter also includes stories about the arrival of the first aircraft and the 1929 search for the aeroplane, the *Kookaburra*.

During Vestey time, other Gurindji people shared the Wave Hill Welfare Settlement, now known as Kalkaringi, with two Afghans who ran a store, and a number of drovers. Other people lived in camps near the Wave Hill Police Station and the Welfare Compound. These times are discussed in Chapter 6.

The overall picture painted by these stories is heartbreaking, and the police, who might have brokered peace between the pastoralists and the Gurindji, were instigators of much of the violence. Chapter 7 describes the relationship between the Gurindji and the police through the period since colonisation. This chapter also discusses the actions and fate of the many Gurindji who helped the police as trackers.

It is here the book's account of Gurindji country ends. The current period of Gurindji history is well documented.⁸ On 23 August 1966, Gurindji workers and their families left Wave Hill Station

because of their discontentment with the Vestey operation of the station. This event is now known as the Gurindji Walk-Off and it marked the start of a new era of community living at Daguragu and Kalkaringi. Vincent Lingiari describes the motivations for the Walk-Off and how the events unfolded at the end of Chapter 5. Gurindji people achieved a place in Australian history as the result of several landmark achievements. They organised a successful workers' strike over the poor employment and living conditions on the cattle stations (1967), secured a pastoral lease (1975), won a claim for their traditional land under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, and were granted Native Title over the Kalkaringi township area (2015). The workers' strike and subsequent campaigning in the late 1960s (that continued into the early 1970s) also contributed to the high 'yes' vote in the 1967 Referendum that removed discriminatory references to Aboriginal people in the Constitution. It heralded a fresh wave of Aboriginal activism and non-Indigenous interest in the plight of Aboriginal people.