

Our country is our mother

*This is really my country, Karupur. This is on the other side of the De Grey River. This all belong to my family, all around. It's my place. We're all one family, like my **karluji**'s, my grandfather's, country — Marntarinya — is just here, next door. That area all around Watarra and Jinpinya Hill and the river comin' right through it all, that's my country. We call [say] this place **yinti** — just like everybody now fightin' for all this country now, and we call it yinti. There is a cave at Karupur. Inside it sounds like really strong wind, like it's sucking in. Really loud wind inside, but I don't know where it come from ...*

My country, Karupur, has sort of spirits there. That's where you come from, and that's my country right there now. I am standing there in that picture by that cave. It's got a story there, but it's a little bit in man's side, so I can't say. There's red stuff in that cave. I used to get in there and I used to rub that stuff to crush him up, the red ochre. Men use it for the ngulu, people use that one. In the early days, they used to go to get that one, long time, when I was a kid, I know that.

Port Hedland or **Marapikurrinya** (meaning 'hand pointing straight'), was named after the mariner Captain Peter Hedland, who for many years shuttled his 16-tonne schooner, *Mystery*, between Fremantle and the northwest 'acting as a lifeline for the settlers who had put civilisation behind them to forge new lives for themselves in an unknown land'.¹

To the local Aboriginal population, the harbour was known as Marapikurrinya and

because of three reliable freshwater soaks in the area, it was a popular meeting place for them, especially in times of drought inland. Meat for their slow trench fires could always be found: kangaroos, emus, bustards and goannas abounded in the open **warrarn** [Nyangumarta word for country] plains nearby. In the clear jade and turquoise waters of the harbour, fish of all varieties were teeming and along the banks of the mangrove creeks, where the beautiful jabiru stalked, they found crabs and oysters.

The deep pool in the huge landlocked area of water was called Jalkawarrinya. In their dreamtime this pool was the home of a blind water snake that headed out to sea when the first big ship entered the port. Although it was unable to remain in the pool, the blind snake's part in the Dreamtime legend is still told and re-told by the remaining tribe, the Nyamals. Peter Coppin, BEM [sic] leader of the Mugarinya group, in talking about the old people's song emphasises one aspect of it. Always the song describes the churning of the propeller ... and the frothy wake that the ship left behind ...²

The snake story could be part of our Nyamal story — but snake everywhere in the early days, there were big snake everywhere. Water snake, big water snake. We call them **katakatarra**. That's the Nyamal word. And they lived in all the water. They started from the rock python, that one. It started from there and got big and bigger and was katakatara then. Plenty of that in my country, Yarrie, plenty of water snake. You know that one place, Pukan, the water pool there — that hole is supposed to be right through down right up to the river and that was where the snake was comin'. Come out there and come back again, to his place. In that place there now — Watarra Hill. And here's some silly bugger putting some bloody drill down to try and get iron ore. Well part of it, not right in the place — that's a special place — never to be touched. It's a big hill, bloody miles and miles, and I stopped them [BHP], see. I let them go in one part of it, but nothin' was there. They put the drill, but there was no iron ore there. Nothin'! That's funny, isn't it.

BHP Iron Ore began shipping Pilbara iron ore to Japan in 1966. The first shipment of 60,000 tonnes left from Finucane Island, near Port Hedland, in June on the *Harvey S Mudd*. Each year since, tonnages have increased, and are now enormous, making the company Australia's second largest iron ore producer behind Rio Tinto. In 1996–97, it broke new records by extracting and exporting more than 62 million tonnes from the Pilbara region.

Each day for close to 20 years, up until February 2014 when operations were suspended to cut costs, the long trains continued to pass Jinparinya in the heat-hazy distance carrying thousands of tonnes each of iron ore from the Yarrie mine for export. They snaked across the plains into Port Hedland every six hours, 24 hours a day, carrying Kangku's country. Peter Coppin saw and heard thousands go by in past years and knew they were a sign of the times.

He knows, too, that after more than half a century from those first extraordinarily brave and strident steps taken by 800 Aboriginal strikers, his life had done a full circle. He had seen first hand, through traumatic and turbulent times, the wheels of change turn gradually to the point where the rights of Australia's original inhabitants are recognised. From being an alien in his own country, he now has equal citizenship status under Australian law. Originally having no rights to his traditional lands, he saw the Mabo case and federal native title legislation come to pass, and made his own history by gaining perpetual leases for his Jinparinya property — the first for the 510,335 square kilometre Pilbara region. From

having no say in the matters of his people or his own rights, he came to be honoured for his work among the Pilbara Aboriginal community. A plaque, awarded to him by the state government in 1990 for his 'leadership and contribution to the Aboriginal community of the Pilbara', hung in pride of place on the wall of his home. Another, from the Western Australian police force, given on his retirement from Yandeyarra by Commissioner Brian Bull, honours his service and assistance to the Pilbara police.

Peter came from being subject to the whims of pastoralists — virtually a slave in his own country — to building and running a thriving community at Yandeyarra, despite the knockers who believed Aboriginal people could not successfully run stations. He has come from camping on the sandy banks of the De Grey, dependent on the food handouts of the station owners, to enjoying a modern home in his retirement. He came from the days when he had no vote or say in the running of government — the views of Aboriginal people were ignored by those in high places — to being regularly called upon to adjudicate matters and contribute his opinions. In October 1995, he was appointed by Premier Richard Court to chair the region's Commission of Elders, established on the recommendation of the federal Aboriginal Social Justice Task Force to advise the government on Aboriginal issues.

Kangkushot remembered hearing about men walking on the moon back in 1969 — just two years after he was allowed to walk on his land as a legally recognised citizen of this country. As he looked towards the millennium, and his ninth decade, he hoped to see the success of a native title claim over his Nyamal country — something he never imagined, all those years ago, would happen in his lifetime.

Nobody could tell him what to do. Nobody could arrest him for talking to 'whitefellas'. Nobody could run him out of town. Nobody could treat him as a second-class citizen. Peter Coppin fought all his life for fairness and change and a better go for his people. The man they call Kangkushot held his Law strong, and held his people together.

I think this day is different than the early days. In the early days they were barring people all the time. But lately, a lot of white people married to black people now. It's good you know. A lot of new white people this day is pretty good people. Today, there is no colour barring at all — no colours, nothin' — because we are all human beings.

The land for us is just like our mother. We are born from our mother and we finish being buried in the land. See, it's just like we went from one mother to another mother, something like that.

In the land, there are a lot of things in Aboriginal Law side — it's real in every old people's heart because we are brought up that way. Like the tree comes from the ground and it grows up. That tree gives us our shade and you might be born in [under] that tree — not like nowadays when you're born in the hospital — and it grow up by the ground.

We call the land 'mother' because everything come from that.

EPILOGUE

Palangunya Mirtanyaku (for that old fella)

Life in retirement at Jinparinya was busy but satisfying for Peter and Winnie. The couple travelled his surrounding country and visited relatives at Yandeyarra, or visited Winnie's family and country at Bidyadanga, about 300 kilometres north on the Kimberley coast. Law time at the end of each year in the summer or 'wet' season were significant events. Kangku continued to supervise many young boys and his grandchildren when they went through the Law to 'become men' in the hot summer weeks around November and December. The Law ceremonies were held at Warralong and at Red Bank at Yandeyarra under his guidance; the top Nyamal man who had learnt and carried his Law for 70 years since his tutelage. Throughout his retirement Kangku continued to work for Aboriginal people of the region, offering support and advice when needed attending land and native title meetings. His views were often sought by local police on ways to tackle youth drug and alcohol problems in the towns of South and Port Hedland.

In July 2002, Kangku's lifelong commitment to the struggle for Indigenous rights was given national recognition. He won the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Male Elder of the Year Award jointly with land rights legend, Lyall Munro Senior. It was a fitting tribute to the two men, both senior elders of their people; one a Nyamal man from the Pilbara, the other a Kamilaroi man from Moree in northern New South Wales. They were from opposite sides of the country but united as activists in their decades-long fight for justice and equality for Aboriginal people everywhere.

Just two months later, on 2 September 2002, the West Australian Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, dedicated Leap Park in Port Hedland to the memory of the strike and all the people involved. This historic event is commemorated with a series of large, lifelike metal sculptures created by local artists Rozy Dann and Coral Lowrie which depict the strikers in various activities, including yandying for tin to earn enough money to feed themselves and their families. The dedication ceremony was attended by the former strikers and their families, including Peter and his family, as well as high profile figures such as the interim chairperson of the Pilbara Commission of Elders, Brian Samson; the Member for the Kimberley, Carol Martin; the Member of the Legislative Assembly for the Pilbara, Larry Graham, and many others. In his dedication, Dr Gallop described the strike as 'nationally significant' and the ceremony as one of his most important deeds as Premier. He said original leaders of the strike who were still alive, and their families, continued 'to play a significant role — not only at a community level, but also at regional, state and national levels'.