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## THE AUSTRALIAN

### Nomad's Land

By Richard Guillatt

**IN the back seat of a four-wheel-drive shuddering along a red-dirt track on the southern edge of the Great Sandy Desert, Yukultji Napangati and her older sister Yalti gaze out of the window and remember an earlier time when they roamed this arid landscape naked and barefoot.**

On our left, spread across the desert floor like pale heather, they point to the woollybutt grass whose seeds they once painstakingly collected in wooden gourds, later pulverising them with grinding stones to make a damper they cooked in the coals of an open fire. "Sweet seeds from that plant – sweet damper," says Yukultji in the rapid cadences of her native Pintupi, as her older sister murmurs agreement. The grinding stones they used in their childhood are still scattered around this landscape in the far north-east of Western Australia, as Yukultji will prove later when she fossicks under a mulga tree to retrieve an egg-shaped ochre rock and sandstone bowl – stone-age implements crafted by "the people who were here before us", as she puts it.

"We used to live over there," says Yukultji. "The other side, where there's living water."

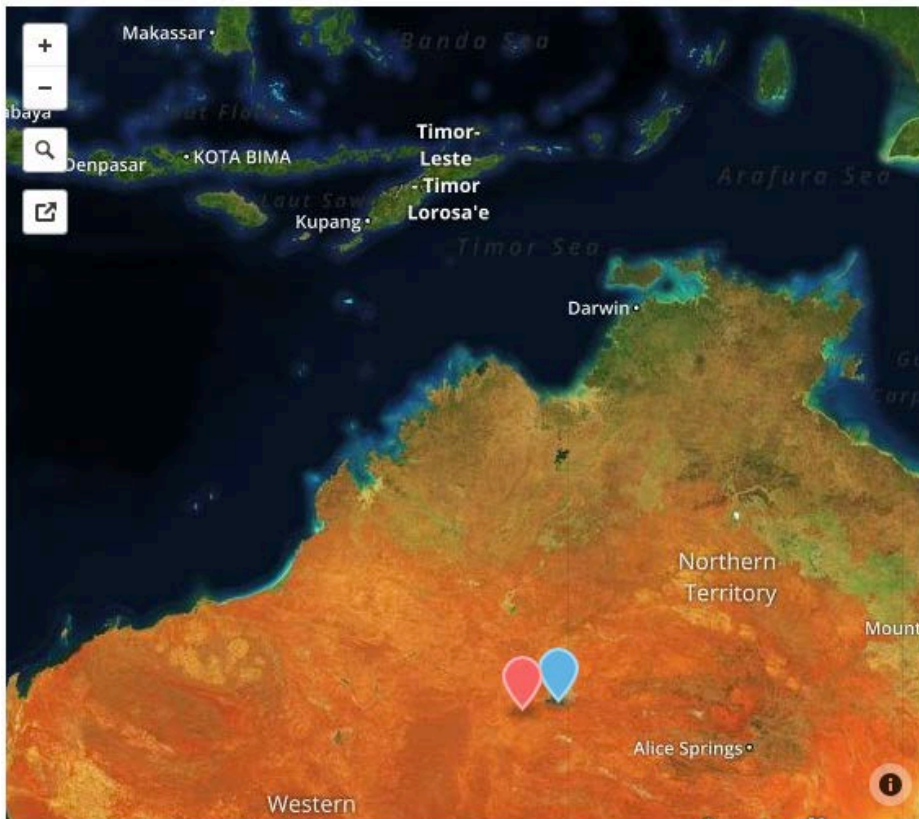
We are rattling our way north to a place the sisters know well, with the desert's winter landscape shapeshifting against a blazing pale blue sky. Spindly black mulgas and red earth give way to a carpet of white-flowering desert snow, then to clusters of yellow sand grevilleas. A silver shimmer in the distance proves to be the freshwater pool known as Murrurr, near where Yalti was born around 1969. Fifteen minutes further on we crest a sandy ridge and are blinded by a dazzling white void – the reflected glare of Lake Mackay, a 4700 sq km salt-encrusted plain that stretches to the horizon and envelops our field of vision. "We used to live over there," says Yukultji, pointing east to some distant spot in that whiteness. "The other side, where there's living water."

That "living water" place – a freshwater soak known as Marruwa – was the location, 30 years ago, of an encounter that would be difficult to believe were these women not living witnesses to it. On the southeastern corner of the lake in late October 1984, they and seven others from their extended family of nomadic Aborigines became the last large group to - abandon traditional desert life after a search party located the camp where they were hiding. Teenagers at the time, Yukultji and Yalti recall running in fear from a smoke-belching creature they now know to be a Toyota LandCruiser, then coming face-to-face with a white-skinned human for the first time, unsure whether he was ghost, man or mamu (evil spirit).

In the decades since, the group has been called the "lost tribe" of the western desert and "the last of the nomads". What's indisputable is that they're among the very last indigenous Australians with a direct memory of pre-contact Aboriginal culture. Yukultji Napangati is believed to be only 44, possibly the youngest indigenous person alive who can give a direct account of the social structures, spiritual beliefs and survival techniques of a desert people who have lived here for more than 40,000 years. "People used to cross this lake carrying fire-sticks," she says, and pads across the sand mimicking her younger self, cupping a hand to guard an imaginary flame.

We have driven here from Kiwirrkurra, the remote community where the two sisters and most of their surviving relatives have largely been based for the past three decades. About 1200km inland from Port Hedland, Kiwirrkurra's floating population of 100-odd Pintupi occupies a cluster of cinder-block houses on a raw, immutable landscape where the Gibson Desert morphs into the Great Sandy Desert to the north. The community has a newly built administration block, a well-equipped medical centre, a well-stocked shop and a retinue of enthusiastic government staff, none of which quite dispels its air of lassitude and disrepair.

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Yukultji seems to exude that melancholia on first meeting, with her downcast eyes and air of heavy resignation. Photographs of her taken on the day of first contact in 1984 show an extraordinarily lean pubescent girl, her head shorn to a stubble to make a belt of hair in the Pintupi tradition. Today she and Yalti are heavy-set, as are most of Kivirrkurra's indigenous inhabitants after a lifetime of sweet tea, soft drinks and packaged carbohydrates. Yet their mood has lightened with every kilometre we drive closer to Lake Mackay – or Wilkinkarra, as the Pintupi call it – and as they settle into the sand at the edge of the salt lake, the stories begin to spill out of their earliest experiences in the alien whitefella world.

"I was given a watermelon," recalls Yukultji, laughing. "I thought, 'It's a raw one', so I made a fire, and waited a while [for it to cook]. Then I pulled it out. Nothing there – it had disappeared!" Her older sister recalls the shock of sugar on the tongue, the sweetest thing she had ever tasted. "I ate it like this," Yalti says, picking up a 1 kg supermarket container of sugar we've brought along and tipping it to her mouth.

The two women giggle, although the story has a sting in its tail. Diabetes haunts the western desert like a spectre these days, and Kivirrkurra's most gaily painted building is its dialysis clinic, where the staff struggle to cope with their caseload. The migration "back to country" that was supposed to revive the spirits of indigenous Australians has instead brought a raft of new and intractable problems. Watching these two women cooking kangaroo tails in a pit-fire as they share stories of the old ways of the desert one is reminded that, in the timeline of their culture, the wrenching changes forced upon them have occurred in the blink of an eye.

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## Yukultji Napangati

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Kiwirrkurra was more an idea than a community in October 1984: a collection of steel-mesh humpies and crude timber- and-corrugated-iron buildings clustered around a windmill water-bore 80km southwest of Lake Mackay. Its only permanent white resident was its government co-ordinator, Charlie McMahon, a didgeridoo-playing jack-of-all trades whose left hand, blown off when he was a teenager messing about with rockets, has been replaced by a mechanical steel hook. The sinking of that bore a year earlier had been a major event for the Pintupi, drawing them back to their home country after a long exile. Many were themselves first-contact nomads who had left the desert during the great droughts of the 1950s and early '60s, ending up scattered to distant locales such as the Catholic mission in Balgo, 300km north, or across the Northern Territory border in Papunya, 450km east. In the intervening years whitefella diseases had exacted a heavy toll and the sadness of watjilpa (homesickness) had been sharpened by the stigma of being the last mob to give up the old customs of the time "before trousers".

When an emaciated Mandildjara couple were found on the western edge of the Gibson Desert in 1977, they were widely assumed to be – as a book about them was entitled – the last of the nomads. But rumours persisted that a handful of remnant Pintupi still roamed the desert near the NT border, and at Kiwirrkurra some even claimed to know their identities. On the night of October 13, 1984, McMahon was roused from his sleep by a commotion: a Toyota LandCruiser with a flat tyre had limped into the community bearing two local men – Pinta Pinta Tjapanangka and his son Matthew – who had returned, breathless with news, from a water-bore 45km away. McMahon summed it up in his journal under the headline "Two Naked Men":

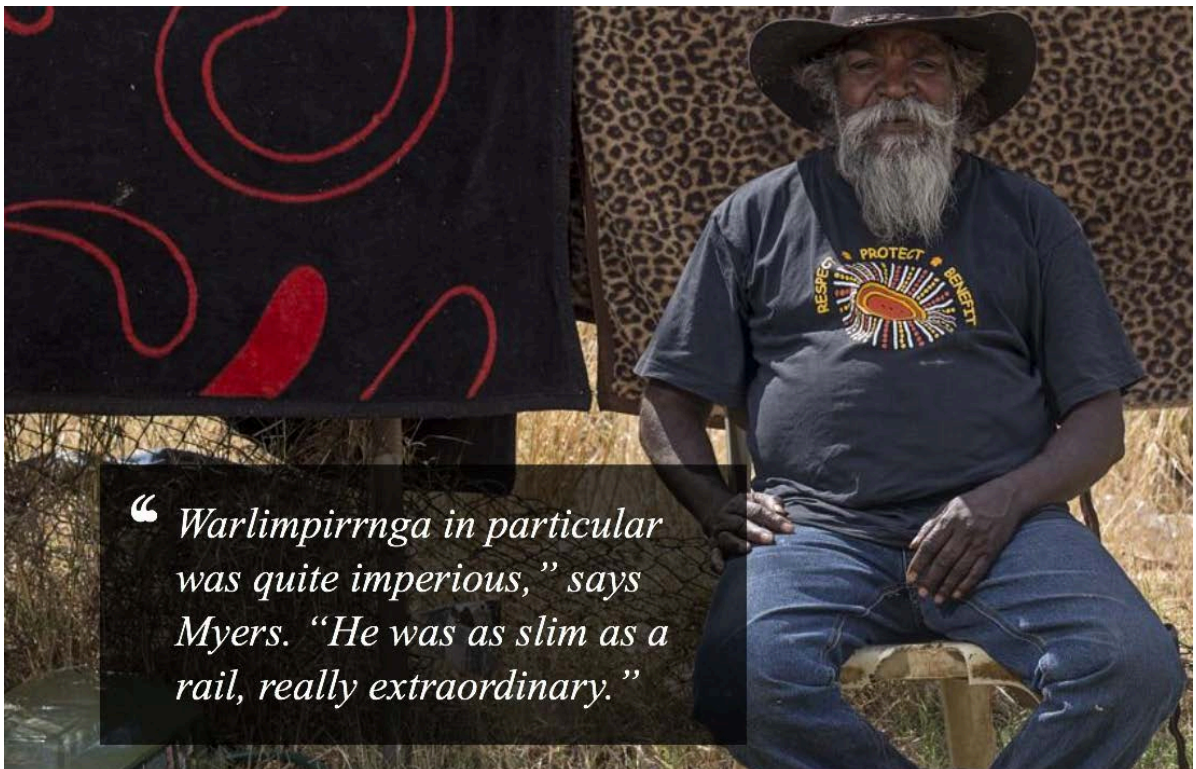
Pinta Pinta and many others came to my camp late at night very excited. They related the story of meeting two "naked" men... He said one of the men (the tall one) came towards him at the hand-pump, laying his spears on the ground as he approached, and asked Pinta Pinta for water. Pinta Pinta work[ed] the cantilever hand pump to fill a billy, then his son Matthew fire[d] a shotgun blast... Both men took off in fright running."

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Matthew Tjapanangka had fired his shotgun in a panic when one of the Aborigines reached out to grip his father's arm, and Kiwirrkurra was soon swept with rumours that these naked figures were kurdaitcha – the feared “featherfoot” whose spiritual powers could bring death. Pinta Pinta, however, believed he knew the identity of the one who had approached him, and the following day he led a two-vehicle convoy back out to locate their tracks. The search party took along a bag of hand-me-down clothes in order, as McMahon drolly noted, to “give ‘em trousers”.

The two naked men were Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri and his half-brother, Piyiti, the principal hunters in a nine-strong nomadic group that roamed a relatively small area south of Lake Mackay. The others in the group were Warlimpirrnga's mother, Papalya Nangala, his sister Takariya, his aunt Nanu and her three adolescent children – Yalti, Yukultji and their brother Tamayinya – along with a 14-year-old male cousin, Walala Tjapaltjarri. Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti must surely have been a fearsome sight in the desert in 1984, as photographs later attested – two lean, bearded hunters in their mid-20s, their long hair tied back, clutching perfectly straightened, four-metre-long spears.

Today Warlimpirrnga is a grizzled, grey-bearded 50-something with a generous pot-belly who lives in one of Kiwirrkurra's unprepossessing houses, surrounded by his extended family of children, grandchildren and great-grand-children. A wily storyteller whose recollections are not always to be taken literally, his story first became widely known via the 2000 television series *Australia: Beyond The Fatal Shore*, presented by Robert Hughes. An inveterate traveller and artist of some stature, he was sitting on a kitchen chair in his front yard one recent morning, clutching a two-litre bottle of Diet Coke and recalling younger days when he could launch a spear from his lankurru (woomera) with such deadly force that it would bring down a camel. “Yes, I speared a camel – young one,” he says through an interpreter. “Cut off that meat with an axe made from stone. Good feed – all my family ate that camel.”



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In his youth Warlimpirrnga's extended clan had numbered more than a dozen but his father, Waku Tjungurray, died around 1964 and a sister, Topsy, left the desert in the early 1960s with her husband. Warlimpirrnga assumed leadership of the remaining nine after his uncle Lanti – father of Yukultji and Yalti – died from poisoning in the early 1980s, possibly from a bait deliberately left in a mining camp. As a younger man, Lanti had lived in the Balgo mission, returning to the desert after being shot at for stealing sheep, so the group was familiar with stories of men with pale skin. But the desert was a supernatural environment to the Pintupi, a place in which malign spirits known as mamu were ever-present and every sandhill, claypan and craggy red granite formation was evidence of the workings of the ancient beings of the djukurrpa (dreaming). Having never seen a white man, Warlimpirrnga's group was at a loss as to whether these creatures were mamu, ghost or human. A common story among the Pintupi, according to the anthropologist Fred Myers, described a white-skinned figure named Kuunki who chased the desert-dwellers on a camel before killing and eating them.

For Warlimpirrnga's group, such stories coloured the more foreboding mystery of why so many families had disappeared from the desert. "Some of my family had gone east, but we stayed," he recalls. "They were all disappearing; no one was coming back to tell us what was happening. We were afraid."

Warlimpirrnga and his older half-brother Piyiti had been sent out to find other Pintupi when they encountered Pinta Pinta Tjapanangka and his son, whose vehicle had broken down at a newly sunk bore 80km south of Lake Mackay. Mystified by the vehicle and the clothes Pinta Pinta wore, they approached tentatively, only to be terrified by the discharge of Matthew Tjapanangka's shotgun. When Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti ran back to their family group after fleeing the scene, Yukultji recalls, they reported the shocking news of encountering "a man with a fire-stick that goes bang. We had never heard or seen anything like that before. We kept travelling back to where the water was. Everyone was nervous. Warlimpirrnga told us there was a mamu coming to cook us."

Back at Kiwirrkurra, there was intense discussion about whether to pursue the group, until consensus was reached that the desert-dwellers should be offered a choice to come in or stay in the desert. The searchers, seven Pintupi men and McMahon, drove in two LandCruisers to the spot where the encounter had occurred and picked up a trail that led to the shores of the salt lake. McMahon was forced to drive back to the community, but another vehicle bearing his friend Geoff Toll and an indigenous field officer, Speedy McGuinness, joined the search. On the night of October 17 they spotted a fire Yukultji and Yalti had lit in the women's camp, and the next day the seven Pintupi men stripped off their clothes to approach. But what followed was no less terrifying for Yukultji and her sister.

"We were frightened," she recalls. "We went onwards round the bend – 'Hey, there's a lot of people there – Aboriginal people, there they are!' ... We left them and I bolted. I tricked the car on the sand dunes – as the car was coming we were running back on the sand dune, tricky way. They grabbed us. Walala and Warlimpirrnga didn't know they had grabbed us. They took us four." Alerted to the drama, Warlimpirrnga hurled a spear at the Kiwirrkurra mob but was persuaded to put down his weapons by Freddy West, a fully initiated elder who had known Warlimpirrnga's father when he himself lived in the desert 20 years earlier. The stand-off dissipated when the desert group realised they were not being kidnapped but offered a chance to be reunited with their extended clan.

They were the most healthy people I have ever seen," David Scrimgeour recalls. "They were literally glowing with health – not an ounce of superfluous fat. They were extremely fit."

The nine Pintupi were given clothes almost immediately, an offering intended to ameliorate any embarrassment they might later feel. At Marruwa, they posed awkwardly for their first photograph, and for a brief snatch of 16mm movie footage shot by Geoff Toll. Yukultji peers quizzically at the camera as her big sister Yalti pulls the unfamiliar skirt she's wearing away from her skin. Their faces somehow transmit fear, uncertainty and amusement all at once.

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David Scrimgeour had only recently started work as the founding doctor of the Pintupi Homelands Health Service when he got a call alerting him to the arrival of nine fully nomadic Pintupi in Kiwirrkurra. Scrimgeour, who was based 180km east in Kintore, drove to the community the next day and retains a vivid memory of his first encounter with the group. “They were the most healthy people I have ever seen,” he recalls. “They were literally glowing with health – not an ounce of superfluous fat. They were extremely fit.”

As word spread, visitors from as far away as Balgo began converging on Kiwirrkurra, sparking emotional scenes and flashes of conflict. West announced almost immediately that Warlimpirrnga’s sister Takariya was to be his wife, an arrangement the young woman clearly wasn’t happy with. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra, meanwhile, dispatched a doctor from Darwin by light aircraft, but upon landing at the community airstrip he was confronted by an Aboriginal delegation who barred him entry, fearful that outsiders would bring with them the germs that had killed so many first-contact Pintupi in the past.



The next arrival at the community was a light aircraft carrying a reporter and photographer from the Melbourne Herald newspaper, which had been tipped off by the Hawke Government. The Herald’s front-page scoop on October 23 bore a headline – “We find the lost tribe” – that has been the butt of many jokes since, but it set off a media frenzy that prompted Kiwirrkurra’s residents to block the airstrip with oil drums and vehicles. McMahon, now 63 and best known as founder of the band Gondwanaland, recalls planes buzzing the community and one almost crashing when the pilot decided to land anyway.

US anthropologist Fred Myers arrived from New York shortly after The Herald left and experienced a reaction similar to Scrimgeour’s when he first encountered Warlimpirrnga and Piyiti. “They were very, very handsome,” says Myers, who had lived among the Pintupi off and on since the early 1970s and is fluent in their language. “They were both young, very slim; they had red ochre in their hair, which was pulled back in a chignon. Warlimpirrnga in particular was quite imperious. He was slim as a rail, really extraordinary. He looked like a photo you would see from the 1920s.”

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Myers recalls that the brothers seemed ambivalent about whether to stay in Kiwirrkurra but the realisation that no other families remained in the desert made returning there almost impossible. Warlimpirrnga had already raised eyebrows by marrying Yalti, his first cousin in whitefella terms but closer to a sister according to traditional law. Yet Kiwirrkurra was surely a bewilderingly alien environment. The car journey alone had terrified Yukultji so much that she initially leapt from the LandCruiser because she didn't realise the vehicle was moving, believing the trees were rushing past in a frenzy. Later at Kiwirrkurra, she was horrified when she came across an infant lying abandoned in the dirt, only to be told the child was not human, merely a plastic doll. Given some soap powder to wash herself, she mixed it in her tea thinking it was sugar and became ill. Another of the group was perplexed when shown a photograph for the first time, unable to grasp what this lifelike two-dimensional image was.

Warlimpirrnga – who had at first believed Toll's LandCruiser was on fire because of its exhaust smoke – can laugh today about such misapprehensions. But his more gentle-natured brother Piyiti struggled to adjust to Kiwirrkurra, which was a chaotic place in the weeks after the group's arrival. When Warlimpirrnga's sister, Topsy Gibson Napaltjarri, arrived from Balgo, the desert group greeted her with fisticuffs and abuse, furious that she had lived among whitefellas for 20 years without coming back to look for them. Another violent incident erupted when Freddy West threatened to spear a younger man taking an interest in his putative wife Takariya.

One night, about two months after arriving at Kiwirrkurra, Piyiti Tjapaltjarri crept away from his camp and walked naked back into the desert with his spear. His fate is the enduring mystery of the Pintupi Nine story. Warlimpirrnga swears he once encountered his half-brother in Alice Springs, and rumours persist that Piyiti has been moving back and forth between the western desert and its scattered communities over the past three decades. Yet Warlimpirrnga seems to dismiss this. "He's gone," he says, sweeping his hand to indicate that his brother has died.



The Pintupi Nine pose awkwardly shortly after their arrival in Kiwirrkurra in 1984. Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri is holding the spear; Yukultji Napangati is third from the right.

By most measures, first contact was a far less traumatic experience for this group than their predecessors. One of them, Walala Tjapaltjarri, left Kiwirrkurra permanently and today is “on the grog” in Alice Springs, as one relative puts it. Others lived briefly in Kintore or Alice Springs but returned to their country. Warlumpirnga’s mother Papalya was an elderly woman when she passed away in 1998, and Yukultji and Yalti mother’s Nanu died three years later. “In the old days, half of these first-contact people died in the first two weeks,” says Charlie McMahon. “This group are still alive, and they’re celebrity artists.”

That’s only a half-jest, for the western desert art boom has been fruitful for Warlumpirnga, whose work is sold internationally and has been bought by major galleries, including the National Gallery in Canberra. Yukultji, too, has been acclaimed for her large-scale canvases, with their intricate layers of earth-toned wave patterns that evoke the sand-ridges of Marruwa. In 2009, her Alice Springs dealer flew her to New York for an exhibition of her work. Myers, who met her - during the visit, was struck by the way Yukultji took the city in her stride – a woman with a direct memory of stone-age culture thrust into the heart of a 21st century metropolis. “They’re the world’s great cosmopolitans,” Myers says of the Pintupi, noting that it was during her New York sojourn that Yukultji developed a taste for eel sushi.

Whether the Pintupi Nine were “the last of the nomads” is debatable; according to anthropologist David Brooks, an indigenous family numbering four or five walked out of the Great Victoria Desert and into the community of Blackstone, several hundred kilometres south of Kiwirrkurra, in 1985. “I don’t think any researcher ever worked with them to tease out their story,” says Brooks, who remains uncertain where that group eventually settled. The Pintupi Nine were certainly

the last major group to come in, and enjoy a certain celebrity status in Kiwirrkurra that Warlumpirnga in particular seems happy to trade on. During our interview in his front yard he told a fanciful story of going to New York and hunting rabbits with a boomerang; I was later assured he has never travelled outside Australia.

The old hunter has had his run-ins with authority on his travels away from grog-free Kiwirrkurra, including convictions for assault in recent years. One wonders how a man who once enjoyed the reputation of a mystic healer has adjusted to the more prosaic life of this government-administered outpost, where status is conferred by ownership of a new-model four-wheel-drive. Like most desert communities, Kiwirrkurra was gutted by the withdrawal of the CDEP employment scheme during the Howard government “intervention”, adding to the damage already inflicted by years of bad diet.

Scrimgeour, who still works in indigenous health, laments the failures of government policy over the past 30 years. “There should have been more emphasis on making sure the food available in these community stores was healthy,” he says. “But deeper than that, there’s a sort of loss of spirit that has occurred in Aboriginal communities. Thirty years ago that community was extremely strong – they had gone to reoccupy their land, and the fact that they were so determined to protect this group indicated how much control they felt they had over their own lives. I don’t think they have that feeling of control today, and that’s an extremely important determinant of health. That’s a big area where we have failed.”

Whether Yukultji and her relatives miss the old ways is a question they often answer obliquely. Desert life for the Pintupi, as Myers makes clear in his anthropological studies, was no arcadian dream; these people were tough survivors accustomed to using violence to settle a personal dispute, enforce a marriage or avenge the suspected sorcery behind an unexpected death. Yalti Napangati has said in the past that she prefers Kiwirrkurra to the desert life she led in her youth, and Yukultji seems puzzled by the suggestion that the old ways have been lost at all. In their adaptable way, the Pintupi have retained many of their old beliefs and modified old practices for a new world.

Driving to Lake Mackay, Yukultji had pointed to a patch of scrubland charred by fire – an area she and other elders had burnt recently, using traditional methods to regenerate the land. Yukultji still displays formidable hunting skills on these trips, I was told, tracking and killing feral cats with remarkable speed. These days she wears clothes, however, and employs a new technique for killing her prey. She uses a crowbar.