

RONNY JAKAMARRA

My name is Ronny Jakamarra and I'm going to tell you about the way my people used to live before we came to settlements and missions. It was a hard but a good life. This is how we used to live:

The old people used to stay home, sitting in the shade, while the younger people would go out and hunt to get food for the old people. I mean the really old people who couldn't hunt themselves. We, the young ones, used to hunt for them. We hunted wild cats, kangaroos, goanna, blue-tongue, red bandicoots, red-tail bandicoots, possum and so on. And the old people sat in the shadow and told the old stories to the young and they told them how they should hunt. It was the



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single men who hunted for the old ones. If the meat they brought back was well cooked the old people would eat it straight away, but if it was not cooked properly they would leave it until the next day or cook it again because their teeth were not so good any more.

This is what would happen when an old person would die; the people would shift from the waterhole where they were to another, and they cut themselves with stone knives, stones and sticks. This was going on long before the white man came to Australia and it didn't matter what tribe they belonged to: Warlpiri, Pintubi, Pitjantjatjarra, Janmajirri — everywhere they did the same. They would stay at the new waterhole for a few months and hunt from there.

They didn't have clothes, no trousers, shirts or boots. There was only one type of clothing we used to have: whenever we caught a kangaroo or possum we took the hair and wore it in front from a belt. We called it "wirripakarnu" or "majardi". We would wear that and go hunting carrying a small fire and cook some food in that place and eat it there; the rest we would bring back to the old people.

This is how it was in the old time — this is how we lived. The single men's camp was about a kilometre away from the camp of the married people and the single men could never go there. They were not even allowed to look in the direction where the married people stayed. Their brothers and stepbrothers would think, when he looked towards their camp, that he was looking for their wives.

The brother would think that he was in love with his wife and the single man wouldn't have a chance to say, "No, that isn't true; I am just looking at the country". The married man would not believe him and say: "I've seen you — you better get out of here", and chase him away.

If a child would take food from a single man, then the father would think that man would take the child, his wife and everything away from him. So that is why that single man had to stay away from the married people.

If a single man would come near a woman, following goanna tracks or something like that, then the same thing would happen — the husband would think straight away that he was after his wife.

A mother would bring food, "pirdijirri", a kind of damper made from ground grass seed, to her son. The grass seed was named "lukarrara". She would put the food about 10 metres away from him on the ground while he turned his back to her. He would pick it up when she had moved away. All mothers would do this at the same time. The son would give the meat that he had hunted to his mother. There was another kind of food, "jarlparrpa" and "wanakiji" — wild fruits of the desert, and yams.

In the old days the fighting among the men was really terrible. They would fight over people breaking tribal law, or a man wanting the younger sister of his wife as a second wife: or a man would fight his younger brother if that younger brother would be friendly with the family or his wife (he would think that the younger brother would like his wife's sister for a wife). They would fight and cut each other with stone knives. There used to be big, terrible fights in the bush, not like today when we can go to the hospital and get bandages.

My family was very strong. We didn't like strangers to enter our area. If a stranger who made trouble came into our area my family would go out and spear the fellow like a kangaroo. They would come back with only their woomera — no spear — and they lit a bushfire when they were coming back.

In the old days a man could have as much as seven or eight wives. It is better now — a man has only one or two wives. A man could go away with a girl of about 8 years old and disappear into the bush. When she was about 25 years old he could bring her back. He would live on his own with her, hunt and eat meat only. Supper would be meat and water. Breakfast — meat and water, that's all. He would go and find tracks of wild cats. He would follow them and see they were going into the bush. He would then light a fire and wait on the windside where the smoke and the fire were heading. The cats would then come out of the bush in the smoke and he would hit them and take some of the dead cats back to his camp.

A hunter would never talk when he came back with his catch. He was proud, being a great hunter and would come into the camp and put his catch on a boughshelter, not giving it to anybody. He wouldn't even smile. Later, at night, he would give it to the others. Today life is easier, and people smile and laugh, but not in the old days. We didn't have billycans in those days, only pieces of bark that could hold some water, and wooden coolimons. These were our refrigerators; the water stayed very cold in those things — just like in a waterbag. You know, this was our bush life. Now we've got billycans.

We didn't have knives but the men used to stick a piece of sharp stone to the woomera-handle with spinifex wax. When they had speared a kangaroo they would cut the meat with that stone knife and cook it.

A man would carry a piece of bush-tobacco in his hairdressing and when that was nearly finished he would go out to a place where it could be found, cut it and put it out in the sun. After a few days he would go back to that place and take the dried tobacco back to the people.

Sometimes the old people who were too weak to walk were carried from waterhole to waterhole. They didn't hunt but stayed at home and told stories. They sometimes kept yams hidden in their windbreak. They would tell the younger people to go and hunt and when they were gone the old ones would eat their yams. Their teeth were bad — that's why they would sometimes eat yams only.

There were a lot of people in those days; some have gone to settlements and missions and others have died.

Now we have a new generation but we haven't got many people anymore.

I was born in the bush. When I was still a boy my family was moving around in the country near Tanami. We came through Karntawarranyingu, a sacred place. When we were still a few hundred kilometres from Tanami we had made a bushfire. A white fellow in Tanami said to one of the Aborigines there: "You go and get those people who are making that bushfire over there and bring them here." That man went out to the place where we were — Warlukurlangu. He brought tobacco, cigarettes, tea and flour to use and asked us if we would come to that mining place, Tanami, where there would be a lot of Europeans and Aborigines. But my father said: "We are not going — we will stay right here." The man who was sent out to us said, "No, no, the white man wants you there", and my father said, "Oh, well, we'll go".

We left and spent two or three nights out before we came to Tanami. We were surprised when we saw all those houses, Europeans and Aborigines wearing clothes. I didn't have any clothes, I just was wearing "wirripakarnu" or "majardi" in front and the whites were staring and laughing at me. But I didn't mind that — I was just a boy. The white people looked red to me but they were good and kind to me and they gave me some tea. That was the first time we had a taste of tea. A few minutes after I had drunk the tea I had to vomit and the other people were vomiting too — we first had to get used to it.

We stayed at Tanami and it was there that I learned to speak Warlpiri. I was Pintubi and could only speak Pintubi when I came there. But now I've lost my Pintubi language.

I remember that during the war a plane crashed near Granites. In those days some people, who were a kind of witchdoctor, had a "ngangkaya", a magic stone inside their body, that was very strong and powerful when they would get it out. Those people saw that plane and thought that it was a big monster that was going to catch them. They got their woomeras and threw these "ngangkaya" stones towards the plane. The pilot got blind and the plane crashed.

Now you will not find many people with those strong "ngangkaya" stones inside their bodies any more. We have become weak from sweet food and drinking cordial.

From Tanami I was taken to Yuendumu and from there to Haasts Bluff. There I found other Pintubi people again. Then I went back to Yuendumu where I was initiated. From Yuendumu I came here to Lajamanu and I have stayed here for good.