

REPLY TO NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TIMES

Although the Pilbara region of North Western Australia is pocked with open cut mines and criss-crossed with the infrastructure of pipelines, conveyor belts, power lines and railways, the news can take some time to get through. Even the *National Indigenous Times* can take weeks to reach us. So it was that I belatedly acquired the February 9, 2006, edition from our local supermarket. (Actually, I thought was a subscriber, but there has been nothing in the mail – maybe NIT is being delivered by camel train). To my shock and horror, the front page, in colour, featured a headline, ‘Labor’s new IR laws - it doesn’t get any more offensive than this.’ Underneath was a crude cartoon with two stick-figures that took up most of the page. I thought, ‘This is real tabloid stuff.’ The accompanying sketch showed one brown-skinned and barefooted man obviously very unhappy and wearing only red shorts. He was labelled, ‘Blackfella – value of cultural knowledge: \$300 a day.’ The other smiling male figure was wearing a tie and academic headdress and carrying a briefcase. He was labelled, ‘Anthropologist – value of cultural knowledge: \$1,200 a day.’

Before reading the article, my immediate reaction as an anthropologist having just returned from conducting an ethnographic heritage survey at Pilbara Iron’s Yandi mine, was that NIT indeed, ‘doesn’t get any more offensive than this.’ On top of my general dissatisfaction with the conditions of my employment and wages, I was suffering from dehydration, sunburn and multiple March fly bites. The NIT cartoon was the final straw, made more hurtful because I occasionally write for this award-winning publication.

For a start, Aboriginal people around here do not speak Kriol and object to being called ‘Blackfellas,’ which they associate with the old days of being subservient to a feudal system on pastoral stations. In the Pilbara region, Aboriginal people prefer regional terms like, ‘Marlpa,’ ‘Martu’ or ‘Yamatji.’ Secondly, neither I nor the Indigenous consultants would get a job dressed as was depicted in the cartoon. On heritage surveys the anthropologist and the marlpa consultants will be dressed in steel capped boots, hats or safety helmets and perhaps safety glasses if required. Neither do I ever wear academic gear or a tie, nor can my fellow workers be shirtless on the job.

Together with the Innawonga people, members of the Banyjima and Nyiyaparli language groups signed the Yandi Land Use Agreement in 1996 with Hamersley Iron Pty Ltd (HI), now known as Pilbara Iron, which is a subsidiary of the giant multinational Rio Tinto company. The independent Gumala Aboriginal Corporation, administered by a committee from the three tribes, was then set up to manage the agreement. Just prior to this historical agreement, traditional owners had resisted the opening up of HI’s Marandoo mine, which at the time required a railway through the Karijini National Park. Although the State intervened to ensure that Marandoo was mined, Rio Tinto resolved thereafter to negotiate mutual agreements with Aborigines, as they did at Yandi.

Today, kilometre long trains cart ore to the coast to satisfy China’s steel mills and a huge open wound is opening in the rugged and remote area, from which water is pumped from the deep pits and released into the Marillana, Yandicoogina and Weeli Wolli Creeks. Remember those names, for they are bound to become better known

when the equally huge adjoining Hope Downs pit begins sucking the water table dry for a radius of twelve kilometres.

On this particular job, I accompanied six elders who were each paid \$400 a day for three days work. Two of those days were for travel to and from the Yandi mining village which is more like a tourist resort than the dongas of earlier days. To the fly-in-fly out workers who live in these closed villages, the Aboriginal men and women on the heritage surveys may be their only contact with genuine Pilbara inhabitants, apart from what they may see from the windows of the aeroplane flying workers to their homes in Perth.

At smoko time in the dry bed of the Weeli Wolli Creek, old Wobby yarned to me about the days he worked for Lang Hancock, along with other Aboriginal stockmen turning the Hancock's run-down Mulga Downs property into a profitable sheep station. Aboriginal women also played an important role as workers on the station. The records indicate that Mulga Downs women produced many a descendant of white officials, managers, visitors and workers. Other black workers died prematurely from the asbestos dust they clobbered from the rock in the gorges where young Lang began acquiring his fortune. When sickness required a trip to the Roebourne Hospital, the workers were transported on the back of the asbestos truck going to the coast.

As the past playmates of Lang's daughter, Gina, the Mulga Downs workers earning their measly share from the mining boom through the odd survey, read cynically of the fortune that Gina and the descendants of Lang's business partner have inherited from iron ore royalties, simply because the railways crossed the vast leases he held over the land of the Banyjima, Gurama and Indjibandi people. These trusting people do not quibble at the hard-earned fees of archaeologists and anthropologists who work alongside them at Yandi and elsewhere. I have handed in my resignation several times, but my workmates (who are also my employers) demand me back. On the other hand, over two years ago my employment in the relevant land council was terminated by the 'whitefellas' in their 14th floor head office.

The traditional owners know that the fees earned by anthropologists are peanuts compared to the profits being made from their land. They want a fairer share of each trainload of their land being transported overseas. They fear that they will be left with holes in the ground and very little to show for it. Although mining towns have bought the marlpa people of the Pilbara many benefits, housing is still inadequate, unemployment rates high, services poor and native title claims unresolved, leaving Aborigines as second class citizens in their own country.

If it is true that the unequal rates of pay discussed in the NIT article are for 'much the same work,' then this is wrong. If Jagera Daran has 'successfully completed cultural heritage work for organizations [that] considered Jagera's negotiated fees to be reasonable', then they deserve to be recognised. On the other side of the continent, I only know that after we complete an ethnographic survey in a single day, the elders' job is done. As the anthropologist, I must use my notes, GPS readings, tapes and videos to produce a report that will satisfy my employers, the mining company and possibly the State Government through the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee, if the survey is a case where a site is to be disturbed under Section 18 of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act, 1972*. Anthropologist who work for land councils do not get

more pay per day than the Indigenous consultants with whom they work, although it may be cheaper for the organizations to employ an anthropological consultant for \$1,200 a day when needed.

The crux of NIT's timely article is Ms Bonner's statement: 'Native title has delivered very little to Aboriginal people, but the Aboriginal cultural heritage management industry was a chance for Aboriginal people to develop an economy and create jobs for our people.' Under native title laws, mining cannot be stopped – Gumala's Indigenous consultants have had that reality drummed into them in an endless round of meetings with the land council and miners. In this manner, the consultant's fees are paid simply to give agreement for their land to be desecrated. Can it be that the best the traditional owners can expect under native title is to earn their casual consultant's fee, with the hope the extra income will not affect their pensions? In addition, for the older members of Gumala there may be a bonus at Christmas and the chance to buy a second hand car and some white goods. Meanwhile, white managers, lawyers and financiers assure them that the majority of the benefits from mining are being held in trust 'for future generations.'

To return to the offensive cartoon - I do not advocate that angry mobs of anthropologists and archaeologists gather in the streets and burn copies of the paper and effigies of the editor, then trash the NIT office. However, by simplistically generalising 'academic anthropologists' as exploiters of 'poor blackfellas' the paper does disservice to its readers of any colour.