

Aboriginal people of Darwin: the Longgrass People

By

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Introduction

Although the Larrakia people are recognised as the traditional owners of the Darwin region, they are no longer the majority Aboriginal population of what is now a thriving and modern capital city of the Northern Territory of Australia. From the earliest times, Aboriginal people from the hinterland have chosen to migrate to the growing settlement. As the anthropologist, W. E. Stanner (1979:48) wrote, 'For every Aborigine who had Europeans thrust upon them, at least one other had sought them out.' Having migrated to Darwin, Aboriginal people from many language groups have lived side by side with the Larrakia people as Wards of the State on Government Reserves, combining in ceremonies and sharing the resources of the land and sea.

As a result of this shared history, the Larrakia people cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead, the immigrant Aboriginal population must be accommodated in any study of new industries and their impact on the lifestyle of Aboriginal and Islander people. Certainly in recent years the Larrakia have attempted to reassert their authority as traditional owners, as this chapter will discuss. However, as Brandl (1983:1) points out: '[Since 1869 Port Darwin has] been an assembly point for Aboriginal people of different linguistic groupings who have come there for a number of reasons. Such people have never disputed Larrakia ownership over the generations, but both they and the Larrakia would agree that their access to areas of Darwin is now based substantially on well-established rights.'

Considering the above, for the purpose of this study it is useful to divide the Aboriginal population of Darwin into four main groups. They are: (i) Larrakia families; (ii) Urban Aboriginal people; (iii) Town Camps; (iv) 'Longgrass' people. Of these four groups, the second shares a similar lifestyle to the wider community in integrated housing, while maintaining a distinctively Aboriginal identity. The third live in exclusively Aboriginal bounded communities within the metropolitan area and the fourth group, better described as 'homeless', sleep in public places or hidden bush and foreshore camps.

'Long grass' is a regional term, referring to the speargrass that grows more than two metres tall on vacant land around Darwin in the monsoon months from October to April. Cleared patches in the grass could be used for hidden or illegal drinking sessions or as places to sleep for people threatened by race or vagrancy laws. Since drinking rights were granted to NT Aboriginal people, drunkenness decriminalised and vagrancy laws abolished, the 'long grassers' have moved into the parks, beaches, scrub thickets and neglected buildings around the town (Day 2006:14). Langton et al (1998:24)

suggest another level of meaning: ‘The so-called “long grass” people, resident along the beaches and on the edges of the town in Darwin [are] a reminder of Australia’s hidden “black” history.’

The presence of the ‘longgrass’ people in Darwin has been the subject of continuing debate by civic authorities, politicians and the media (see Betts 2010a, 2010b; Calacouras 2010b; Day 1983, 1997a, 1997c, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2008a; Goldie 2003a, 2003b, 2008, Holmes 2007, Holmes et al 2007; Howse 2001; Langton et al 1998; Rothwell 2003; Scambarry 2007; Shulz 1996; Tamiano 2003; Ween 1997). In the media, the homeless are more usually referred to as ‘itinerants’ or ‘transients’, although many have lived in Darwin longer than those settlers who label them.¹ Rothwell (2003:3) argues, ‘The itinerants are not merely homeless, they are displaced...’ Or, as Paul Toohey (1999) writes: ‘They are homeless only in the sense that they do not have roofs over their heads. Many of them have lived outside for years and consider themselves residents of Darwin, not vagrants.’

As Spencer (2006:154) suggests, the word ‘itinerant ... clearly reflects judgements about lifestyle as well as origins and length of habitation’. One man described as an ‘itinerant’ in the media recorded a long and detailed Darwin work history in his life story (Day 2008c). In the booklet and on film he expressed his relationship to the place where he camped:

This is not for a White man country, because this is the country for the Blackfella country. They born here and I born here - true story. My son, my brother, my cousin, they born here ... I don’t like that Balanda way, no. I want to look after myself Blackfella way, that’s the really one’ Most of my life I have lived in Darwin, this is my home. I have lived all over Darwin in many different camps.²

The ‘longgrassers’ value their closeness to the soil, on which most of them sleep, as confirmation of their Aboriginality. Their lifestyle demonstrates that they belong to the land. As one man told me, ‘My mother put me on the ground. My mattress [was] paperbark - not bed like Whiteman’. In response to authorities that claim that the campers do not belong in the city, the campers assert their identity as indigenous people. Others spoke of how they enjoyed sleeping in the fresh air, under the stars, as being part of a truly Yolngu way of life (Maypilama et al 2007). However, being harassed from place to place ‘like dingo, like wallaby’, as they say, suggests to fringe dwellers that they are not regarded as human. On the other hand, it is the lifestyle of ‘bush people’, as fringe dwellers sometimes call themselves, that is used by opponents as a reason for excluding them from the town.

¹ Betts (2010a:7) writes of: ‘The Territory’s highest profile long-grasser – David Gulpilil’

² Day 2008c. Also see Youtube video ‘Johnny Balaiya, long grass legend’.

The term 'itinerant' to describe unhoused Aboriginal people in Darwin may originate from a parliamentary report on Aboriginal homelessness in towns, describing Aboriginal itinerancy as a natural condition of people who were 'itinerant in this country prior to British colonisation' (HRSCATSIA 1992:151-2). The report referred to anthropological descriptions of Aboriginal mobility patterns as a 'complex and purposeful' itinerancy that fulfils obligations and maintains links between people along a 'beat' (HRSCATSIA 1992:153; Beckett 1965; Sansom 1982b). Kerin Coulehan (1995a) also documents how Aboriginal systems of governance that extend from Arnhem Land to women and children who live in Darwin.

**Don't cage me in,
says itinerant, 70**

NT News Tuesday June 5, 2001 p.4

By CAMDEN SMITH
Bush camp dweller Johnny Balaiya is preparing to move again, six months after relocating his bush camp to make way for development.

Mr. Balaiya, 70, a Darwin resident since about 1945, is preparing to move from Pipeline Camp in industrial Palmerston to Yarrowonga. The relocation will coincide with the Territory Government's push to introduce legislation to strengthen police powers to deal with itinerants and anti-social behaviour.

Humbug
 The Public Order and Anti-Social Conduct Bill, aimed at increasing police powers to enable them to deal with anti-social behaviour, will be introduced into the Assembly this week. He decided years ago that he did not want to live in Darwin's suburbs, opting instead for life in the bush around Palmerston. He said: "I do not want to live in a unit like Kurringal. I do not want a unit because I am a black man and I do not live like that. "If I live in a unit I know that I will be moved out within a month. There will be too much humbug with people coming from all over town who are drunk and who will not go away."



On the move ... Johnny Balaiya is preparing to move from Pipeline Camp in industrial Palmerston to a new location

Figure 1: Article referring to a homeless man as an 'itinerant'. *NT News* Tuesday June 5th, 2001.

Contrary to the good intentions of the Parliamentary inquiry, describing homeless Aboriginal people in towns as 'itinerant' could imply a pathological condition of individuals rather than a result of a structural problem within society (Mackie 1998:17). In many cases 'itinerant' people are living in unsanitary sites not of their choosing, are constantly threatened with eviction and are not free to select better sites with access to water and services since the establishment of the town. However, in the Darwin media, the term 'itinerant' avoids an association with dispossession or the specific needs of homeless Aboriginal people and is justified by a supposed desire not to appear to single out any particular racial group (Day 1997a).

More recently, Memmott (2001:73) recommends against a ‘blaming the victim’ ideology that can ‘constitute a formidable barrier to the instigation of social change, in that those people who are considered ‘deficient’ than become the focus of change, rather than the focus being on the systems that perpetuate power inequalities and discrimination.’ Similarly, reports by Catherine Holmes and Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation have advanced the cause of the homeless (Holmes 2006, 2007; Holmes et al 2007; Holmes and Eldridge 2008; Homes and McRae 2008) as this chapter discusses.

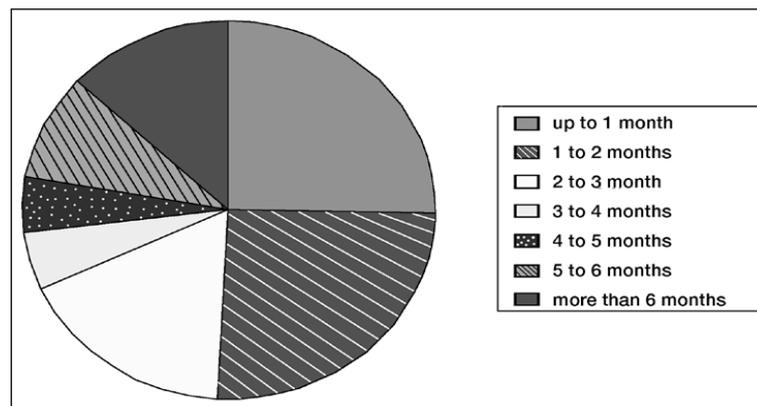


Figure 2: Length of stay in the Long Grass in Darwin (from Holmes 2008:28).

According to Catherine Holmes (2006:45) homelessness rates in the Northern Territory remain the highest in Australia with more than 5000 people in a total population of 200,000. Media reports cite LNAC estimates of up to 2000 longgrassers looking for a place to sleep each night (Hainke 2008). Holmes (p.45) reports:

In Darwin, more than 2000 homeless people were counted in a total population of 100,000, with more than 1000 experiencing primary homelessness. Indigenous Australians accounted for half of the primary homeless, that is, 500 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2005).³

Holmes (2008:67) adds that a significant proportion had entered into a condition of ‘chronic homelessness’, whereby individuals had taken on a homeless identity, often described in Darwin as ‘living in the long grass’ (see Langton 1998; Day 1999, 2007, 2008c; Kowal 2006; Scambarry 2007; Holmes 2006, 2008).

³ Paul Memmott suggests a much lower figure of ‘150-200 itinerants who were sleeping out overnight’ in 2001 (Memmott 2003:19).

Aboriginal migration to Darwin

Brandl (1983:150) cites a report by Baldwin Spencer in 1912: 'The natives have for many years past, been decided into various camps located in and about the township. These camps are occupied by natives of different tribes, the larger number belonging to the "Larrakia" which is the local tribe, others to the Alligator River, Daly River, Borroloola tribes, Worgait, etc.' As Brandl emphasises, the non-Aboriginal presence had brought Aboriginal groups in the Darwin area into close contact with one another. Brandl (1983:16) adds, 'This fact obscures another, equally important fact only recently established and that is that these groups have many ties and interconnections which the non-Aboriginal presence has only intensified.'

Following increased opportunities and expectations after the Second World War, a welfare officer described a population of 400 'homogeneous people from all tribes' living in Darwin bushland camps. In the camps Harney (1957) observed the adaptation of Aboriginal traditions to the urban landscape, where localities had become the domain of distinct language groups. Despite the need for labour, in 1957 he recounted an early morning 'muster' of the camps to remove the 'down and outs' to a waiting ship where their names were recorded 'so that the Director of Native Affairs could commit them to an Aboriginal reserve.'

The movement into Darwin seemed unstoppable. As Schulz (1996:28) notes, 'It is a problem as old as Darwin itself.' An old man living in a camp on Crown land in Darwin related how he walked from Arnhem Land in the 1950s. He said:

When I was at Maningrida, one of our family came around and told me about Darwin. He told me that he had just been to Darwin and that there was a big mob of tucker there, and shelter. A lot of people had been taken from all over Arnhem Land to Darwin by the Army for shelter. I took five or six family. We were all from different clan and we walked from Maningrida to Darwin where many of my relatives were already. We swam across the East Alligator River. We walked all day for about a month to get to Darwin (Day 2008c:1).

In 1951 a southern newspaper carried a series of reports on strikes by Aboriginal workers in Darwin. The articles described Darwin's Aboriginal population as 'hewers and drawers'. In the first of four reports from Darwin, headed 'Darwin's dark harvest', Gordon Williams interviewed 'natives living in conditions of such squalor, filth and abasement as defy open description.' After meeting 'the irreclaimable, the illiterate, and the hopeless' amongst 'Darwin's lost generation of aborigines', [sic] the reporter wrote (*The Argus*, March 13, 1951):

[Employers] would resent any suggestion that all Darwin's town natives should be sent to bush settlements away from the doubtful benefits of white civilization. 'I can imagine the shriek that would go up from senior public servants and business men if that became policy,' one Territorian said.

Although Aborigines came from many parts of the Territory, those living in Darwin were generally referred to simply as 'town natives'. Until the 1970s, their urban Aboriginal camps were tolerated as part of the Darwin scene. Day (1994) describes visits to camps on vacant Crown land around the city in the early 1970s. In the same decade, the anthropologist, Basil Sansom, conducted fieldwork amongst out-of-work stockmen and their families on the fringes of Darwin at Berrimah (Sansom 1980). Rather than the stereotype of a broken people who had 'lost their culture', Sansom described a rule-governed community at 'Wallaby Cross', better known as Knuckeyes Lagoon.

The rapid spread of the Darwin suburbs in the 1970s economic boom, coincided with an increasing assertiveness by homeless Aborigines in Darwin, in conjunction with Larrakia who shared the urban bushland camps. In 1971, on three occasions, protestors from the camps held a series of well-publicised demonstrations, including 'sit-downs' across arterial Bagot Road to stop peak hour traffic and culminating in the raising of a flag outside the Darwin Supreme Court to 'claim back Darwin' (Day 1994:25). The following year, on Australia Day, 1972, the Aboriginal Embassy was erected outside federal Parliament in Canberra. By making their Embassy an impoverished, self-built structure on disputed land, the activists also projected the fringe camp into a symbol of national Aboriginal resistance to dispossession. As Rowley later commented:

When they looked at the Embassy, some of our legislators were stirred with that same indignation that has moved generations of country town councillors, contemplating Aboriginal shanties unlawfully built from materials acquired from the town tip, and unlawfully placed on the town common (Rowley 1978:1).



Plate 1: Aboriginal camp on Darwin's Mindil Beach in 1904 (NT Library Service).

Relationship with the Larrakia

During the early years of the struggle for land in Darwin, the Larrakia people who claimed the area 'stood together' with people from other Aboriginal language groups with which they had traditional and historical association (see Povinelli 1995c:327). In the camps and on reserves, the Larrakia shared ceremonies and life in the 'illegal' camps with groups who had moved onto vacant land on the Cox Peninsula and in Darwin (Brandl et al:187). With the passing of the generation who had known each other in the cattle and army camps, workplaces, ceremony grounds and on tightly controlled Aboriginal Reserves, there has been a lessening of personal contacts between previously close Aboriginal groups, and in particular between Larrakia and those now referred to by the derogatory 'longgrass' and 'itinerant' labels.

In the past, Larrakia people also recruited men and women from other language groups to ensure continuity as their own elders passed away (Brandl et al 1979:194). Similarly, Walsh (1989b:3) documents instances where 'the transfer of knowledge across generations is going from non-Larrakia to Larrakia'. These processes were aided by the socio-cultural links which facilitate 'mixing' amongst Aboriginal campers in Darwin (see Brandl et al 1979:32; Brandl 1983; Brandl and Walsh 1983:154).

Until recent times, Aboriginal campers in Darwin believed they maintained an Aboriginal presence on vacant urban land by agreement with Larrakia elders. The campers daily assert the Aboriginal entitlement to forage and move across the land. Although they do not claim ownership in Aboriginal law, campers and others explicitly connect their use of the landscape and closeness to the soil to their special relationship with the land as indigenous people. Similarly, Povinelli (1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1995a, 1995b) illustrates how Aborigines on the Cox Peninsula 'use hunting, fishing, collecting, and just plain sitting in the countryside as methods to position their rights vis-a-vis sites' (Povinelli 1993a:31).

Aboriginal campers in the Darwin area regularly supplement their diet by line, set net and cast net fishing, crabbing, spearing stingrays, gathering many varieties of shellfish, digging yams, gathering grubs, mangrove worms and wild honey, picking bush berries, killing and eating various reptiles and digging turtle eggs from the beach. Other bush foods, like kangaroo tails, geese, and fresh and saltwater turtles are purchased from shops or traders who visit the camps. All are usually cooked on open fires at the camp or on hunting and gathering excursions.

Coulehan (1995a:193) also notes how North East Arnhem Land Yolngu groups regularly hunt and fish in the Darwin environs, to the extent that Coulehan (1990:7) suggests: 'Traditional Aboriginal usage ought to be a major consideration in foreshore and parkland management and in Darwin urban and immediate rural-area planning'. She claims that the urban Yolngu, 'have cultural-specific needs in

relation to economic and recreational use of foreshore and parkland and of mangroves and bushland in Darwin's environs' (p.7).

Layton (1986:30) states: 'In contrast to Alice Springs, Darwin [fringe camps have] almost no resident Aborigines with traditional rights to the land'. Indeed by the 1990s, perhaps because of the apparent absence of traditional owners, campers from Arnhem Land who had committed themselves to the Darwin region for much of their lives often claimed that they were Larrakia (Day 2001). Although they may not know the Larrakia dreaming stories or use the Larrakia language to the same extent as the people of the Cox Peninsula described by Povinelli (1991, 1993a, 1993b), the 'long grass' people often call themselves 'Larrakia' to emphasise their claim to close historical ties to Darwin and knowledge of the land. Claiming to be a Larrakia person may signify familiarity with the land on which the campers live. Maypilama et al (2007) quote a camper from NE Arnhem Land as saying, 'I'm staying back in Darwin because my relatives are not generous, they don't help me, but the Malakmalak, Larrakia and Brinkin people help me. I'm not Yolngu any more, I'm Larrakia now.' In the 1990s, several of the older people in the camps told me that they could speak some Larrakia, including expressions they translated as, 'We all one family' and 'You mob all welcome'.

In 1997, one man from Arnhem Land told me:

My ancestors they were here, there were a lot of tribes ... all this area of Darwin was roamed, including my tribe was here too. Now we [are] in Fish Camp. This used to be a sacred ceremony area before, but I don't know, maybe the Larrakia don't use it this time. And we had songs, also concerns for Darwin. This has been going on for ages and ages, from ancestor to ancestor. This is Darwin, we can sing [to] every coastal areas, every beaches.

It is true, as Layton (1986:30) suggests, that the fringe dwellers do not have the same attachment to Darwin places as the 'localised, enduring clans' of the homelands, but the ties which they have constructed serve to make them feel at home on Larrakia land. Aboriginal visitors to Darwin also continue to compose songs in their own languages that tell of their experiences and their place in the society and landscape. One woman sang to the accompaniment of a guitar, of a frightening night with her sister in an urban bush camp as a cyclone passed near Darwin. Her nephew sang a more traditional song about gathering shellfish at Lee Point, while dancers enacted the scene, in memory of the singer's wife who died at their Lee Point camp.

Images of turtles and water lilies in paintings by the fringe dwellers are glossed over by Sansom (1995:295) as 'cheeky ... snatching and grabbing appropriation of the lagoon by ... fringe dwellers who have now used the lagoon for decades. As things used to be, native title in the lagoon is vested in

the Larrakiiya, Darwin's original inhabitants'. However, the mob's long attachment to the nearby lagoon cannot be dismissed as 'cheeky appropriation'. Layton (1986:24) says that Sansom told him there is evidence of the fringe dwellers claiming secondary rights to local [Larrakia] sites on the grounds that these had links to sites in the Daly River area. Layton (1986:25) also reports that Sansom said: 'In one instance men claimed legitimately to have succeeded to custodianship of a local [Larrakia] dreaming'

During my fieldwork, several of the campers told me they wanted to be buried in Darwin. One woman and her husband said they would request this in their wills. As she stated in a television report: 'I grew up here and I will die here' (ABC TV 'Stateline' 24 May 1997). However, due to the influence of relatives in the homelands, the lack of land tenure in Darwin and the regulations for burials in towns, the wishes of the deceased are rarely enacted.

Aboriginal camps around Darwin remain a valuable repository of Aboriginal cultural values and centres of Aboriginal resistance. For example, smoking ceremonies conducted by campers are frequently held by request after the death of people in town camps and houses in Darwin. Dance groups have also been organised from amongst the 'longgrass people'. Day (2001) describes how campers were asked to perform as the 'Larrakeyah Dancers', on stage at a multicultural dance festival. On another occasion the newspaper reported that 'elders of the Larrakia people danced in NT Parliament House for the first time as a welcome gesture for a group of federal politicians' (*NT News* March 3, 1999). The accompanying photograph suggests that the dancers were recruited from another language group for the event.

Changing relationships

Urban Larrakia people began to reclaim their heritage in the 1980s; however, unlike earlier generations, unhoused fringe dwellers and the urbanised Larrakia people are 'on different sides of the fence', or as Merlan (1998:140) documents in Katherine, Aboriginal identity is being shaped by 'the nature of differentiated relationship to the town'. Merlan (1998:147) also notes: 'Reified understandings of Aboriginal organization also now enter into the way socio-territorial designations are used among Aboriginal people'. Although no Aboriginal people in Darwin dispute the Larrakia as traditional owners, customary law amongst fringe dwellers now conflicts sharply with the claims of the 'neo-classic' Larrakia 'new tribe' as defined by Sutton (1998). In addition, the process of 'mixing' and cultural sharing noted by Walsh (1989b:3) and (Brandl et al 1979:) in the camps of the 1970s and

1980s has been severely limited by the differing life styles and aspirations of the urban Larrakia people and ‘bush people’ or ‘longgrass’ Aboriginal campers.⁴

As suggested above, the growing recognition of the Darwin traditional owners, supported by anthropological literature, has contributed to the marginalisation of fringe dwellers in Darwin. In 2003, Kelvin Costello, CEO of the Larrakia nation, told *Koori Mail*, ‘There is an assumption that all itinerants are Larrakia – this is a real issue for us’ (Moncrieff 2003; Memmott 2001:63). As Rowley (1978:77) has written, ‘There is urgent need for support of Aboriginal movement into towns. This [Land Rights] Act leaves them on the fringe where their attempts at urbanisation have been frustrated for generations’. Young (1981:14) suggests one reason why traditional Aboriginal people may be marginalised:

[M]ost Aborigines in urban and metropolitan communities aspire closely to equality of living standards and employment opportunities with non-Aborigines while those in rural areas, particularly where the tribal background remains strong, do not necessarily value these material needs as highly.

In addition, Spencer (2006:159) notes that in Darwin: ‘There are effectively two competing groups: one defined by homelessness, poverty, dispossession and anti-social behaviour, the other [the Larrakia] with official approval and recognition, that has bargaining power, a successful land claim and relative affluence, but a less traditional lifestyle.’ Or, as Langton (1998:24) puts it, ‘While the greater proportion of the indigenous population in Darwin live in circumstances comparable with their non-indigenous neighbours, there is a proportion who are permanently resident in the long grass and in the beach camps in Darwin.’

Spencer (2006:163), who was critical of the role of Larrakia Nation, contrasts their aspirations with the disadvantage of the long grassers. Spencer described one group as forging allegiances with the state government, while the other group [the long grassers] ‘has a relationship to the state characterised by purposeful resistance’. Spencer describes the first group [Larrakia Nation] as having ‘aspirations to some of the material rewards of white Australian culture and hence having to relinquish or modify practices’. He claims the past Larrakia Nation CEO, Kelvin Costello, informed him that the Larrakia are only a tiny minority in town camps - ‘instead they have been dispersed into public housing’ (Spencer 2006:154). Spencer concludes (p.154) that the long grassers ‘appear to

⁴ In 2010 a spokesperson for Mission Australia NT gave an explanation for changes in attitude towards Aboriginal campers. He said, ‘Darwin has changed over the years with the increasing influx of people from the south’ (Betts 2010b:12). Rothwell (2003:3) makes a similar observation.

maintain some vestiges of traditional lifestyle resistant to the model of citizenship offered by the representatives of the Larrakia Nation’.

In the 1970s, fringe dweller protests were endorsed by the traditional owners - the Arrernte in Alice Springs (see Eames 1983; Layton 1986; Rubuntja 1998), and the Larrakia in Darwin. Since the 1990s, the Larrakia Nation in Darwin has been reluctant to support fringe dwellers’ claims. According to Ben Scambary (2007:158):

[T]he Larrakia through their involvement in the native title process were increasingly gaining legitimacy through the advocacy of the NLC, but more critically through the corporatisation of the Larrakia polity in the form of the Larrakia Nation. The fringe dwellers, however, were excluded from the consideration of native title, and as they came under increasing pressure from the Northern Territory government and the media, they were not supported by the NLC, ATSIC, North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, or the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation.

The Community Harmony Strategy

In 2003 the Northern Territory Government launched the 5.25 million dollar Community Harmony Strategy in partnership with Larrakia Nation (Spencer 2006:159), succinctly described by Emma Kowal (2006:15) in her doctoral thesis:

The Larrakia Nation was funded to employ teams of ‘Larrakia Hosts’ in Community Harmony Project T-shirts who would operate in the city and suburban markets popular with tourists, negotiating with longgrassers to cease their anti-social behaviour and access services or return to their home communities (with the cost of their flight deducted from future welfare payments), and providing information to tourists, perhaps explaining that the display before them was merely corrupted Aboriginal culture on show.

Similarly, commenting on the ‘Community Harmony Project’, Scambary (2007:162) writes: ‘Despite opposing prior Larrakia claims to the Darwin area the Northern Territory Government utilised opportunistically the corporate identity of Larrakia as the “traditional owners” of Darwin as a way of ridding the city of homeless Indigenous people.’

As a result, there was a reaction from some Larrakia. Tamiano (2003:6) describes how a Larrakia woman, June Mills, formed the Longgrass Association (see Spencer 2006:158; Scambary 2007:158). June Mills is a musician, songwriter, poet, actor, graphic artist, aspiring politician and a past president

of the Larrakia Association (Mills 1995:45).⁵ Tamiano (2003:6) quotes June: ‘At that time it was a direct response from myself and my family (who are Larrakia) to the statement issued on 8th February (2001) by the Larrakia Nation’s office saying that “Larrakia are sick and tired of long-grass”. As Larrakia people we felt very ashamed and offended by that statement...’



Figure 3: Excerpt of poster - 10 protocols for Larrakia country.

In an attempt to control the behaviour of homeless people from the remote areas, a confronting list of cultural protocols was issued by Larrakia Nation in pamphlet form and on notices through Darwin. The ten rules of behaviour included: ‘1. The Larrakia people are the Aboriginal traditional owners of all land and waters of the greater Darwin area including identified Aboriginal living areas. 2. Aboriginal law requires respect for the cultural authority of the traditional owners.’ The final point states: ‘10. Inappropriate behaviour reflects badly on Larrakia people and we do not accept it.’

Homeless People fight back

June Mills made the point, ‘living out in the open, in country, is a cultural right for our people’ (Tamiano 2003:6). To assert this perceived right, from 1997 to 2003 there were petitions, sit-ins and protest marches by homeless Aboriginal people. Supporters launched two magazines and a website defending ‘longgrass’ rights and a CD, ‘Longgrass Live!’ containing songs by longgrass people and supporters (see Day 2001; Courtenay and Fellows 2001; Longgrass Association 2003).⁶

Meanwhile, other homeless Aboriginal people in Darwin were defending their rights through legal processes (see Day 2001; Day 2008b; Simmering 2008). In 2002 a formal complaint of race discrimination was made to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HEROC) on the grounds that the Darwin City Council By-laws disproportionately abused the human rights of indigenous people. The complaint stated: ‘public housing models in Darwin do not accommodate the special needs of indigenous people to live in the ways of their culture’ (Simmering 2008:15).

⁵ See Day 2001 for a more detailed account of June Mills’ involvement with long grass protests.

⁶ Longgrass Association website <http://longgrass.tripod.com>. The magazines were *Longgrass* and *Kujuk*. See Youtube videos ‘Forgive us our trespasses’, ‘Bob Bunduwabi, a martyr for his people’, ‘Bob Bunba speaks’, ‘Gnargara means nothing!’, ‘Homeless Aborigines protest outside NT Parliament’, ‘Lee Point Aboriginal protest camp’.

Examples given were: to live outside; to make fires and cook bush tucker; to welcome extended family and have family stay for shorter and longer periods as required.⁷

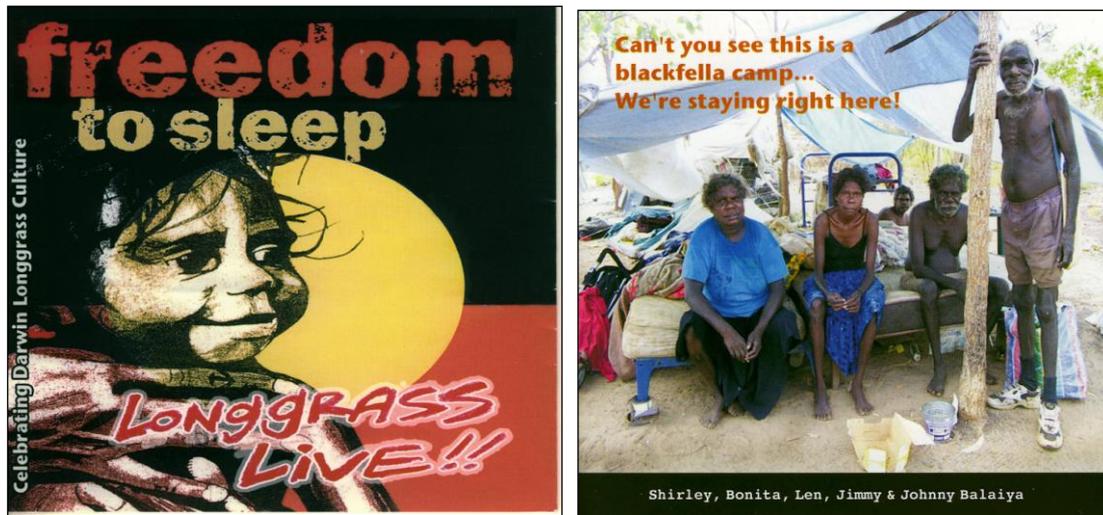


Plate 2: Cover of CD issued in support of homeless Aboriginal people in Darwin.

On 12th March, 2003, after extensive investigation and attempts to conciliate, HREOC terminated the complaint under s 46P(1)(i) of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act 1986 so that the case could proceed to the Federal Court. Unfortunately, a lack of funds meant that the complaint in the Federal Court was discontinued by order on 6th May 2003 (ibid). Day (2001) relates two similar cases (see Day 1997c, 1997d, 1998; 2000; 2001).

Johnny Balaiya was forced from his bush camp near Palmerston by bush clearing for a forty-three lot subdivision. Stella Simmering (2008:11) recorded his version of the events:

One afternoon as Johnny was walking back from the shops he saw his bush land was on fire. Subcontractors had lit the dry long grass without notifying Johnny or helping him protect his camp. Johnny spent all night with a rake defending his camp from the bush fire. Following the fire the bulldozer started work near Johnny's camp.

While Johnny and his family group watched and waited as the bulldozer cleared the trees around their camp, nobody came to talk to Johnny about what was going to happen. Family and friends helped to move the caravan, water-tank, two old vans used for sleeping, cooking gear and mattresses. This is the second time in six months Johnny and his family group has been forced to move further away from water, shops and the medical clinic. Johnny says, 'I

⁷ E.g. DCC By-law 103 camping or sleeping in a public place 1. a person who a) camps; b) parks a motor vehicle or erects a tent or other shelter or places equipment for the purpose of camping or sleeping ; or c) being an adult, sleeps at any time between sunset and sunrise, in a public place otherwise than – d) a caravan park or camping area within the meaning of Caravan Parks Act or e) in accordance with a permit, **commits and offence.**

am an old man. I am tired of being moved by Balanda from place to place like the kangaroo, hiding in the bushes, being hunted from place to place. I am tired of being told by Balanda that they will give me a house or a place where me and my family can stay, when nothing happens.’⁸

As Johnny’s story shows, an analysis by Heppell and Wigley (1981:11) remains applicable to many campers:

Many of the older people in the camps have watched the town grow and found themselves inexorably pushed from campsite to campsite, each time further away from the centre. Moreover, there have been many occasions when camps have been dismantled by the authorities and their members forcibly evicted. These movements might have given the camps an air of impermanence, but it needs emphasising that the core populations of town camps do not consist of itinerants; only, until very recently, of landless and dispossessed people.

In an extensive study of Darwin Aboriginal homelessness, Catherine Holmes (2008) found the activities of the police and council were a key factor in ‘the forced localised mobility of study participants’. The study added:

...data gathered during the second stage of fieldwork identified the Territory Government’s First Response Patrol as an additional cause of mobility. The government’s First Response Patrol operates in partnership with the NT Police and others to patrol anti-social behaviour hot-spots during the day. The government purports that this patrol will tackle anti-social behaviour through the gathering of intelligence, early intervention and referrals to other services and, at the same time, through the building of relationships with those deemed to be anti-social (Holmes 2008:31).

Calacouras (2008b) adds, ‘The \$2.2 million First Response Patrol members will operate from 7am until 3pm in long-grass camps and public parks.’

A new approach

The study by Paul Memmott and Shaneen Fantin (2001:73), “‘The Longgrassers’”: a strategic report on Indigenous “Itinerants” in the Darwin and Palmerston area’, was a turning point in attitudes to the homeless. The report suggested seven principles for a self-determination approach to community development for itinerants:

⁸ See also Ritchie 2004; Kleinert 2005).

- Assist groups to clearly identify their problems and needs.
- Inform groups about the relevant resources available to them.
- Encourage groups to draw on their collective resources.
- Create an environment where groups can work out what to do about their problems.
- Encourage groups to take their own initiatives.
- Assist groups to have a 'voice' eg through incorporations, meetings, workshops, representation on agency committee for itinerants.
- Recognise the citizen entitlements (public space access) of long-term itinerants.

Regarding the conduct of 'Night Patrol' in Darwin, Memmott et al (2001:74) recommend:

- The resolution of behavioural problems through the use of culturally appropriate procedures;
- The assertion of a community-based authority which is not the product of an external agenda (such as police or Government);
- The observation of cultural protocols when deciding who talks to whom in terms of status and position in Aboriginal structure.

The Larrakia Nation-sponsored study by Holmes (2008:19) described advances in attitudes to homelessness. For example, Holmes lists the Larrakia Intervention Transport Service (LITS) as an outreach program focussing on identified needs of homeless families and offering practical social and other supports such as assistance with Centrelink, housing agencies and transport to medical appointments and the airport. In addition, by August, 2008, the LNAC had commenced a new program called Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass (HEAL) (Holmes 2008:20).

As well, the 'Return to Country' (RTC) program provides travel assistance to individuals who want to return to their homelands (p.21). In an address to the Australian Institute of Criminology, Larrakia Nation CEO, Ilana Eldridge, summarised the social benefits of the HEAL program tackling poverty and social exclusion and the Larrakia Ranger Program helping Aboriginal people to re-enter the work force. Other services are the provision of Proof of Identification (POI) cards to Aboriginal visitors to Darwin through the LNAC (Holmes 2008:17) and the distribution of light weight portable swags by HEAL and several Darwin-based organisations (e.g. Mission Australia, St Vincent de Paul Society and LNAC) to people staying in the long grass.⁹

9. 150 swags came from national charity, Street Swags (Hainke 2008). Calacouras (2010:5) writes that MLA Dave Tollner accused the Labor government in the NT of treating the symptoms, not the cause by handing out swags and distributing meals on wheels.

In February 2008, Larrakia Nation CEO Ilana Eldridge welcomed the NT Government's announcement of a \$10 million three-year plan to tackle anti-social behaviour (Calacouras 2008a). Despite this more sympathetic approach towards the problems of homelessness in Darwin, the perceived problem of Aboriginal campers in Darwin remains a contentious issue in the media and for politicians and councillors. Although the camps have been broken up and the campers scattered they continue to assert their right to live in Darwin, where they can be seen hunting stingray in the shallow waters of Darwin beaches or fishing in the tidal creeks as their ancestors have done for centuries.

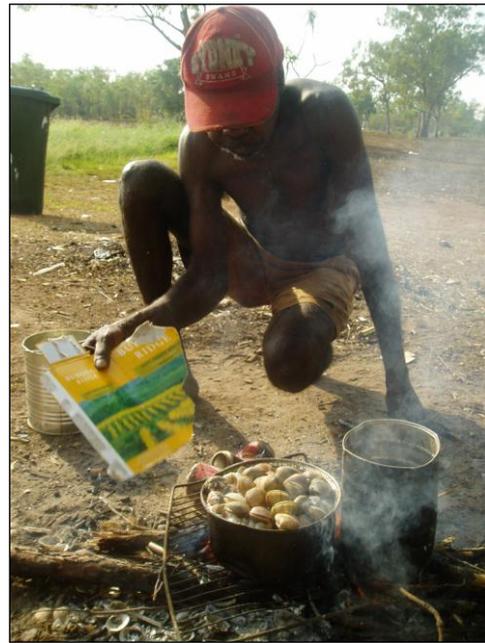


Plate 3: Itinerants told to go home (NT News). Plate 4: Meal time in a longgrass camp (Bill Day).

Conclusion

The protests by Aboriginal people camping on vacant Crown land in the 1970s were spurred on by a rising awareness of Aboriginal rights and the rapid spread of the city suburbs, threatening the bushland retreats where fringe camps had been tolerated. These protests were led by Larrakia elders who shared the same fate as those with whom they shared the camps (see Day 1994).

In the late 1990s up to 2003, the protests by an increasing number of homeless Aboriginal people were in response to harassment campaigns by the Darwin City Council. By this time the Larrakia elders had passed away or were living in Aboriginal communities at Kulaluk and at Bagot in Darwin, while the Larrakia incorporated bodies were cooperating with government agencies to return homeless people to their country.

All efforts have failed to reduce the number of Aboriginal people from remote communities migrating to Darwin where they continue to live as 'longgrassers' in urban bushland settings and public places.

Once in Darwin, they claim that they are not 'itinerants' but are asserting a traditional right to camp and use the natural resources as their ancestors have always done.

Any development that further reduces the areas of mangroves and bushland around Darwin will undoubtedly worsen the situation for longgrass people who will not be able to accept the compensation of job opportunities available to Larrakia and urban Aboriginal people. As well, the highly visible lifestyle and poverty of the homeless campers in Darwin will be a contradiction to the supposed benefits that industry will bring.

Research sponsored by Larrakia Nation has led to changes in policy towards homelessness amongst Aboriginal people but has not lessened the situation. Continued research is needed to propose positive outcomes for the longgrass people and their relationship to the Darwin community. This can partly be achieved through the recommendations in studies by Paul Memmott, Catherine Holmes and others, along with recognition of the 'citizen entitlements to public space access of long-term itinerants'.

Rather than contrasting longgrass people with the Larrakia traditional owners, the homeless should be understood in a traditional framework of exchange and reciprocity. This has been the case in the past, prior to the deaths of an older generation of Larrakia leaders. Hunting and gathering rights of all Aboriginal people in Darwin, not only the Larrakia people, should also be accommodated by developers and others.

Larrakia people themselves should also work to build a ceremonial relationship constructed on a traditional basis of reciprocity with Aboriginal visitors from remote regions living in Darwin. Aid to Larrakia organisation could incorporate this principle. The success of cultural and social programs will inevitably be assessed by the effect on the highly visible and increasingly militant longgrass people camping in Darwin's suburbs – the very people who will most feel the impact of the vast changes to the city. As Hayward-Ryan (1980:22) comments, it is only through tackling these issues that 'Darwin's claim to be a truly pluralistic community will be legitimised'.