

## Kura, Yeye, Mila and Boorda Noongar people Katitjin Wangininy

### Noongar people Knowledge Stories from the Past to the Present And For Tomorrow and the Future

Before the nyittiyung (white people) or white settlement Noongar people lived in harmony with the land. They recognised six seasons in their year, Bunuru, Djeran, Makuru, Djilba, Kambarang and Birak, and managed the budjar accordingly. Each Noongar moort or family had their own land for hunting and gathering purposes and regarded the incursion of others onto it as trespass, although resources were shared freely with others.<sup>1</sup>

There were between thirty and forty distinct roots, nuts and vegetables eaten by Noongar people and which were gathered nearly all year round. The flowers of three or four trees and shrubs afforded them honey, either by suction or steeping in water. There was hardly any shortage of food throughout the six-season cycle, katitjin or knowledge was given to the Noongar people by the Waakal to manage our land according to the seasons and Noongar people harvested only the food for their immediate use.<sup>2</sup> The Noongar people of the south west of Western Australia had a veritable supermarket of food from which to choose, depending on the food chain. As Whadjuck/Balardong Fred Collard states, “They used to. . . move around with the seasons in the early days [and] the season was all about where the food line was”<sup>3</sup>. And according to Noongar historian, Dr Rosemary van den Berg:

... they hunted kangaroo (yongka), emu, (waitj), possums (coomarl), snakes, (land snakes, not water snakes), lizards (caarda, and yoorna), turtles and their eggs, honey, birds like rosellas, bronze-wing pigeons and ducks and their eggs and the bardi grubs, which could be eaten raw or cooked in the coals. Their vegetable and fruit intake included edible tubers, quandong, berries and nuts and a type of grain which could be crushed and made into a damper. The boyoo or toxic zamia palm had special treatment before it could be eaten.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Tilbrook 1983, pp.105, 556).

<sup>2</sup> (Swan River Trust 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Fred Collard, Oral Interview 2002

<sup>4</sup> (van den Berg 2001, p.96).

The late Balardong Noongar Tom Bennell says one Noongar man or woman would have said to his/her moort when they were around their karla, “*Do you want to dartcha koorliny? That means do you want to go hunting for meat or merinj koorl buranginy – go looking for vegetables.*”<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of sources which holds a vast collection of information about traditional Noongar peoples food resources and species names. This information can be found in Meagher<sup>6</sup> (1974) and Abbott<sup>7</sup> (1983). Noongar people utilised flora and fauna according to their laws and customs. These resources were not only eaten as part of their diet, but Noongar people used these for clothing. Traditional clothing consisted of bookas - cloaks and bags – chootas made from kangaroo skins and fastened with bone. The ceremonial headdresses were adorned with emu or cockatoo feathers, and fur items from animals such as the possum. Ochre was used for decorating the body for ceremonial or other occasions.

The dress of the Noongar consists of the kangaroo cloak, fastened at the right shoulder by a bone or rush, a head-dress of emu feathers, or the brush of the wild dog, and a fur band round the waist, head and arm... A bone stuck through the septum... a throwing stick and spears in his right hand, and a torch in his left... in addition to the Kangaroo cloak of the men, [the women] carry two bags, one for roots or a stray delicacy, the other for an infant.<sup>8</sup>

Shelters were constructed out of various plant resources including the balga and melaleucas. Some resources, such as the balga, were particularly valuable in the Noongar economy. Black Boy or *Xanthorrhoea preissii* is a well known and used plant by Noongar people.

Donna Rioli is a Whadjuck/Balardong Noongar people and gives an insight to the value of this resource and says “the balga bush is something I like to paint because it is an important plant that the Noongar people use”<sup>9</sup>.

“In the past Noongar people used the long green parts of the bush for their mia mia (huts) to shelter them from the weather. Noongar people also laid them on the ground in their mia mia to rest or sleep on. Inside the trunk part of the balga bush you can find its sticky sap which is a resin like substance. The

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Bennell, 1978b

<sup>6</sup> Maher

<sup>7</sup> Abbott

<sup>8</sup> Dale, 1834

<sup>9</sup> Rioli, D 2007 (personal communication)

resin could be combined with yonga (kangaroo) droppings and other substances and heated over the fire to make a type of glue. This glue was used when it was still fairly warm to fix a sharpened stone to a piece of boorn (stick or wood) to make a koitj (axe), or the resin was attached to a piece of boorn and used for lighting fires. Another use for the resin was for tanning yonga skins to make a booka (clothing garment). Noongar people also used the balga bush for merenj (food), they used to dig down to the white shoots which can be found at the bottom of the grass. Even today the balga bush is important to Noongar people for lighting fires whether it is in their homes or when they go out to the bush for nourishment, katitjin (knowledge) and spiritual rebirth or to simply participate in cultural activities. As you can see the balga bush provides many uses for the Noongar people and this is why I like to paint them<sup>10</sup>”.

Let’s stop right here and fast forward to the present because by now we might be asking ourselves what has happened to our cultural practices such as managing the land according to the seasons, utilizing the resources from the flora and fauna, hunting and collecting our bush foods? What has happened to the “veritable supermarket of food from which to choose, depending on the food chain”. Well, here are some of our stories.

My name is Doolan (Leisha May Garlett) Eatts and I was born at Badjalling in 1934:

My name means “strong hands” – when my grandfather died my grandmother Doolan was left a widow – three boys and three girls – and there was no benefits then and they lived on a farm in Quairading (Scotts farm). They were told they could stay and hunt and gather all their food from the farm ... my grandmother when she went hunting she had big kangaroo dogs ... they would chase and hold the kangaroos down and then grandmother would come with a koorndie (rock) and knock it in the head – now she would skin it – cut the stomach open and throw it away in the bush and she would carry the yonga back on her shoulder that is how strong she was. She would hang it on a tree and skin the yonga and cut the yonga meat up to feed the children. She would take the kids walkabout in the bush picking their berries and their quardiny, their jam off the jam trees, wild potato and the like. The quardiny is like a wild carrot they dig it up and they took it home and they would cook and eat it. It was very good in vitamins it gave them good health.

I remember I use to go out with my grandmother and aunty and we used to walk for miles and they used to sit down at the rabbit warren and dig out a rabbit and they would put their hand in, they would get a stick and check and if fur was on the end of the stick they would put their hand in and pull the rabbit out. They would skin it and kill it and pull the stomach out and make a little fire and cook it if we were hungry. If we saw the bardi trees we would

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<sup>10</sup> Rioli, D 2007

dig around the roots and get the bardie and cook them too. If we saw a karda, my Auntie Florrie used to chase the karda around and hit it on the head, they would climb trees and she would chase after them and hit it on the head then we would put it on the fire and cook it and eat it.

We also bought a lot of bush food home too like yonga, the bardies, we used to dig for the carrot and wild potato. The wild potato was a funny looking thing, it had a vine sticking up out of the ground and we would follow the vine and if we broke the vine we would never find the potato. We would go right down into the ground and dig them out. We never went without the bush food. I remember always going out with my grandma and auntie Florrie even when we moved to Tammin we still went out and got our bush food. When we saw bees we used to follow them to the beehive and then we would get the honey well, we knew where the honey was and we would go home and tell mum and dad and they would come back and get the honey. We only took some of the honey not all of it. It was left for the bees to rebuild.

Things have gone wrong now because the land was cleared up. It was cleared by our people, they needed to work the land for income because the land was being taken by the European farmers. Back in the olden days my dad said the police and the welfare used to come around and told them [the old Noongar people] they weren't allowed to go on this land or they wasn't allowed to go on that land. The farmers would put up fences and then later they would ask the Noongar people to come and chop them all down and then a year or two later ask them to clear it all up again. When they was doing this we used to go and get the bardies, the wild carrot, jam gums or whatever we could get and that. What has gone wrong is they cleared all the land, what they haven't cleared they have sprayed all over the land, killing the bugs for the fruit tress but they killed the land for all our fruit and vegetables that we used to get off the land.

The cattle and sheep was bought in and wheat was sown on the land, they fenced the yonga (kangaroo) and weitch (emu) out.

In my growing up days we used to go out as kids with mum and dad hunting when we wanted yonga and dartj. We went to Kokerbin Rock, it was a significant place for us. We used to go and sit on the rock and have something to eat. Dad would tell us then that he was going out to shoot a yonga. We had to shout, sing songs so we would be driving the kangaroo towards him. If we didn't have anything to eat we had to go hungry but we would chase a kangaroo and then dad would shoot it. He would let us know where he was and then he would get the kangaroo and bring it back to Kokerbin Rock.

We even did this at Mount Stirling. We would make a fire, skin the kangaroo and cook it in the coals. Put the tail in the ashes and cook it. We used to get a lot of quandong nuts and pick them and take them home and cook it for jam and we would make jam tarts with it as well. Out in the bush we used to eat it like that and we would play marbles with the seed. The karda, we used to cook a karda too at Kokerine Rock and when it was fat it was beautiful it was

so lovely. We would have a feed in the bush and when we got home we didn't need a feed.

Interview with Aunty Winnie McHenry – conducted by Sandra Harben

My name is Winnie McHenry and I was born at Badjalling. I was born at Badjaling Mission, it was run by the old missionaries from the Uniting Church. My family were living on the mission at the time because Mr Neville, Chief Protector of Natives (1905 Act) could keep an eye on the Noongar people. I went to school but they didn't teach us much about our culture at school. My father used to take us kids hunting sometimes, where he taught us to respect the land and the animals. He used to say, 'don't break a tree, that is there to protect you. You can make a fire and camp from that tree but they are also there to protect you. And with rocks, you don't move rocks because they are put there for a reason too'. When my father used to go out hunting, he used to come back with mallee hen eggs, found down the side of the lakes, but there is nothing around there at all now. No mallee hen, no swans, nothing. Like the white owl for instance, you don't see it much at all either.

I loved our bush tucker and loved it when we used to go and dig for wild potatoes. You put them in the ashes to cook them and they taste like sweet potato. You have to go further out in the bush now days to get them.

Now the land is cleared, you sometimes find them on the sides of the road. When my grandkids come to visit they say "Nanna, tell us a story. Nanna let's go to the bush and have a walk. What is this track? What is that track? It makes me feel very happy because they are truly taking an interest in the things that I'm trying to teach them about Noongar people culture. I have a pet racehorse goanna out the back of my house ... my grannies was trying to catch it. I told him to leave it alone, as he wasn't hungry we so we don't touch him. There is a gnamma hole that was used around this area, it might be covered now because the white people did not believe in them. This happened to ngamma holes at a meeting place near Wave Rock. There is supposed to be one at Quairading.

It is said that a lot of the Noongar people from all over the place used to gather at Wave Rock. Noongar people, Yamaji's, and Wongi's as it was their meeting place. They would hold a lot of corroborees there.

I'm back living at Badjaling now. I lived in Perth for fourteen or fifteen years. Here at the mission site it's so peaceful. You can hear the birds in the morning and see the kangaroos in the evening. We have students come here and we show them the different bush tucker and teach them about bush life. I will stay at Badjaling until I die.

Interview with Basil Winmar (Badjaling 2008) - conducted by Sandra Harben.

If you're in the bush and you had to find water what would you do?

I would check the gum leaves you know put a petal under my tongue it will keep your mouth moist and then also I'd look for the low spot, you know

where the water, the runs off the hillside then I think that's where you might find water ... another thing you look for too is animal tracks, they'll find water the kangaroo and wildlife, they always do that because when I was up in Leonora we went way out in the bush and I see all these tracks going into the rocky country and I thinking I should follow them and that's where the kangaroo and the goat were getting all their water under the rock yeah out from Leonora and they were way out.

... Dad ... he was always shy and kept things to himself but he knew because out here where we used go hunting out in the bush the water used to run out of the rocks out in the bush where he used to go hunting and he knew the spot ....

So what about what sort of certain trees you might look at and say now that's where you'll find water?

Well I think that the greener the tree that you know that's where the most water you have because that's where the roots go down and find water see you look I think that's where the water mostly are. That's what I'd be looking at anyway.

Now what are some of the Noongar names and what sort of bush foods did Noongar people eat?

Well we had bardi's and also what they call it's like a yam but what they call a little ... a plant that grows up in the winter, you dig it down and it's like a potato but some get very tangy but in the white gum country and where the ground is rocky they get more cleaner then and they more sweeter than the other one. Down where my uncle used to stop out on Kokerbin Road that's where, but it's all mostly cleared now you know it's hard but along the road we find them.

So that was sort of like a corn or potato and bardi grubs, what else would they go and look for to bush foods?

The round nut we used to call them the schilling the flat one you know, you know how you can crack them and they like a, what do you call it, they like a almond or a peanut you know the flat ones. There is another one like a white carrot but he's very bitter when you eat that.

Well we used to cook it in ashes but it was a bit rubbery but it took the bitterness sort of out still a bit bitter but it was still good.

And so that was what a quondong?

Yeah that was the quondong but wadjelas call it a cherry tree, Noongar people call it quondong see.

And you find them out it the bush?

Yeah we found a lot of them because they come in every second year the tree.

So they don't fruit every year?

No, I think every second year or every third year.

What about the prickly pear?

That is the wild pear tree, my dad used to burn underneath and when the flames go up and burn this tree they sort of scorch all these green ones on top and a few days later or maybe a week or so they fall down and they get very dry and we used to belt the tree and they used to fall down and we used to use them for firewood. Dad used to have an oven like a stove and we used to use that for the firewood.

Now what about the tree, if old Dad used to scorch it, what would happen to the tree?

It dies and then you cut it all but when the rain come the new shoots come again.

So then you would cut it down?

We'd cut it yeah and we used a big lot of branches for wood fire.

So you just cut all the branches down or lop it off.

Yeah, yeah cut it off, you'd cut it with an axe and then the new shoots, from the root shoots up and grows again and in a couple of years time you got a full tree again.

Is that what Noongar people would have done in the old days?

Well I don't know but my Dad done it I don't know anyone else that done it but I think somebody did do it but I didn't take no notice of them see.

Now what about, you know when they used to have camp fires and they used to live in the bush, why did they have camp fires.

Well there was no stove in them days, some used to cook their damper in ashes, they'd cook in outside fires because no one had any stove them days.

Did the old Noongar people, a long time ago, light fires like as a signal to let other Noongar people know where they were?

Well he told me that they used to light a fire out on Corrigin Road, Noongar used to stop there and they used to light a big fire on top of the golf course and they used to you know go up there, when they see the camp fire, big fire, they could see it long way off.

And all the Noongar people used to go there and meet?

Yeah, I think there was nearly 400 Noongar people from around that area.

And what happened to them?

Well... well we don't know what happened to them but we don't know if there any graves there or what we never been taught them things see. There are a lot of Noongar people stayed around that area.

Do you know Kokerbin Rock?

Yeah, that's in Bruce Rock area and we didn't know much about that area. But we used to go hunting many years ago before the ... you know before they pegged it out as a nature reserve.

What did you do there when you were a kid?

We used to shoot kangaroos down.

Did you ever camp there?

No, no we never camped there.

Can you tell me something else about Kokerbin Rock.

That's the hill you can see to Kellerberrin. I know you can get up on the hill there and see Kellerberrin from that area on a clear day and you can see a bit of the buildings, maybe a wheat bin or something, something like that.

What about you know Sharks mouth?

Yeah that's in Kellerberrin that's in the Kellerberrin area.

Tell me what do you know about Sharks Mouth?

I don't know, I don't much about that a, but when I went there once with them, and up inside the shark mouth there is a hand print, you ever went there? The farmers they won't let no one go there now.

You tell me what else you saw when you went there.

Well that's as I said we went there cause we used to pay a visit and there was another rock there it's shaped like a coffin they call it a Coffin Rock.

Why was it called a coffin rock?

It's shaped like a coffin! But, there was another rock my uncle, showed us, Uncle Bill Humphries and some other Noongar people, I think they was messing around on a certain rock and they came home that night and they broke out in all sort of rash and my Uncle Cliff Humphries, said not that I was there, but somebody told me the story, don't know who now, I forget, I think Uncle Bill might have told me but he was messing around with this rock and Uncle Cliff told him, you boys been up there messing around at that rock there and sure enough they broke out in some sort of a rash. And it was a very sacred rock or something.

So there's a hand print on the top of the Sharks Mouth?

Yeah up in the roof of the mouth of the rock, Shark Rock

Did you climb through there or go down?

No, no, no you can just walk down and look up at it

So any of your old uncles and that or old grandfather and that tell you any old Wargyl (Noongar Rainbow Serpent) stories?

No, see my granddad that was dad's father he very shy and knew something but he like my dad they kept things to themselves.

Grandfather Fred Winmar, that's dad's father's brother he told like you know behave yourself and all that you know and when he told us to go hunting, don't take too many it will go to waste he said take what you need and you can always go back and get what you need next time. A lot of people just shoot for sport that's no good that is.

Were you allowed to play with fire at night as a kid?

Oh no, we would all go inside when it's dark.

Did they tell you why you shouldn't play with fire?

No they just said you know you got to go to bed when it's dark and we were always taught to sit down and eat never stand up and eat.

They never frightened you with any stories about the mummari or the little woodachi man?

My dad used to, when that bird come around, what do you call them the dewi you call like the frog mouth like the tawny frog mouth he just like a stick on the tree you couldn't tell the difference. See they camouflage themselves.

What were they called?

Well the old Noongar people name was dewi but the wadjelas call them the tawny frog mouth. He gets in a dry tree and you couldn't tell the difference.

Why didn't old uncle like the birds?

My dad didn't like them because they brought bad news. This bird used to come down into dad's wireless, and my dad used to shoo them. He reckon they bring bad news.

True, any other stories you can tell us about?

Well they reckon that a certain spot I don't know where it is but there was a certain spot where you go for a drink of water, if the water was very cloudy you might get very crook.

And that's what your old Dad used to tell you so if the water was murky, dirty did he say why?

They reckon something stirred it up, they reckon.

The Wargyl?

Probably.

And he said like if it's dirty don't drink it but what about if it was clean?

Yeah that's good that would be good sign yeah but that's just what a lot of people told me these things but I don't know if it's true or false.

Well I better go see my boy now.

End of interview.

Interview with Balardong Elder Iris Slater (Badjaling 2008) - conducted by Sandra Harben.

Now Aunty Iris when I was here at Badjaling last we stood over at the fence and we were talking about fire and you said "gee I would love to walk over there and just get a match, chuck it out there", why did you want to do that?

Burn the dead stuff that's laying around out there and let all the new growth come through and flowers will come back, but there's nothing.

Is that why the Noongar people used to burn the country?

They used to burn it, they knew when to burn it, they knew when to burn it so that new growth grow, new flowers come back. When they burnt that last time there was just beautiful flannel flowers, lovely, now nothing we never seen a flannel flower in fifty years I think.

What does a flannel flower look like?

It's a white flower, oh it's pretty, true, beautiful and when you burn they come up and they just all grow you know like Everlastings all in one big heap.

And so burning the budjar (land) how did it help the trees and animals?

Well the animals run away from the fire as soon as they smell the smoke they gone. Some poor fellas might get burnt, but I suppose that had to happen didn't it.

And did it bring back the new grass, the new feed for the animals?

New feed, new grass, new plants of all kinds.

So why was it important to have all the new re-growth and to look after the animals on the land?

Because if they didn't do that all then old stuff would kill it all and it would all die and there'd be nothing all the animals would go so we'd have nothing.

No feed for them?

No feed yeah. Talk about the ground we're on. All the old fellas cleared this ground for us, we didn't know that they cleared it for today. They all got down and dug out the trees the bushes and shrubs, they played football here, marbles and all other games. Just up the track up there, there used to be old missionary house they used to have sports there, Easter carnival there, used to race with eggs in spoons and all sorts of them old games which was great. It was good to see all the old fellas it was great.

Kura, Yeye, Mila and Boorda Noongar Katitjin Wangininy

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