

Life and Death in Baniyala

Jenness Warin and Liyawaday Kathy Marawili, the wife of Djambawa Minyawainy Marawili, visited The Centre for Independent Studies when they became aware, through the Centre's work, of the similarity of living conditions and social deprivation in the Laynhapuy Homelands and the least developed Pacific Islands. Djambawa Marawili is a painter and leader of the Madarrpa Baniyala community in the Blue Mud Bay area of East Arnhem Land. His work has been widely exhibited in Australia and abroad since the 1980s. Djambawa Marawili is Chairman of the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists and a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australian Arts Council.

Jenness Warin RN, MPHIC subsequently came to the Centre as a Visiting Fellow. She works in health and education in remote Australia. She won a Commonwealth Department of Science, Education and Training award for her work in adult education in the Laynhapuy Homelands. Djambawa Marawili took part in her seminar on the problems of East Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities.

The Laynhapuy Homelands, however, are not in distant lands, but here, in Australia, a mere 100 kilometres from highly productive bauxite and manganese mines and the modern Nhulunbuy township. Djambawa Marawili is deeply concerned with the lack of productive work opportunities for his people and their resulting economic and social difficulties. He sees the decline of education in the basic three 'Rs' from the low levels of the missionary era and increased health problems as the critical barriers to work and a decent life for his people.

Jenness Warin spoke to Djambawa Marawili for *Policy*.



Jenness Warin and Djambawa Marawili

Jeness Warin: Djambawa, tell me about your people.

Djambawa Minyawainy Marawili: We are the Yithuwa Madarrpa people of Blue Mud Bay. We are the people of the mud, leaving footprints in the mud where the mangroves meet the sea. Blue Mud Bay is about three hours drive south of Nhulunbuy, the bauxite mining town. Groote Eylandt, with its manganese mine is just to the east.

We are the largest Laynhapuy Homeland, with about 130 people. There are about 35 children up to 11 years old. From 11 to 25 years there are about 50 young people. There are about 45 people over 25 years of age. And we have maybe two old people over the age of 55. My community, Banyala, is small, but about half are children and young people. These are my concern.

Education and work

JW: What concerns you about your young people, Djambawa?

DMM: Our young people have even less education than those of my generation. We went to missionary schools. We have a school at Banyala with two classrooms, and four teachers—two have good English and two are learning and a *balanda* (white) teacher visits almost once a week. The teachers have been training for five or six years, but only one is qualified. He teaches the older kids. But the children and young people have not been taught to speak, read and write English or to do arithmetic. Not one of our children goes on to a proper high school. So our young people can't get jobs. And without jobs they cannot get a decent life.

JW: Are any of your people working?

DMM: Men do rubbish runs and drive the tractor and trailer. They also drive the tractor to do other work in the community like getting firewood for cooking and picking up boxes from the airstrip. They check the water bore and mow the grass.

The men's principal work is fishing for fish, oysters, turtles and dugong. In the dry season we shoot magpie geese and sometimes kangaroos. The women look after their families and old people. But there are no real paid jobs apart from one of the teachers.

Last year some of the young men went to Nhulunbuy to train in heavy machinery, but because they did not have a proper foundation in English, reading, writing and arithmetic they were struggling and having a hard time. I pulled them back because they were getting into trouble with alcohol and drugs. They left their wives and kids behind because there was nowhere for the families to live in Nhulunbuy. They did not get jobs in the mine because they were not skilled enough for the huge machines used in the mine. There was no work for the wives. Our community was very unhappy about this. And they were not getting the training we need in our community which is for electricians, plumbers, builders and bookkeepers to fix the generators that families use for power, the water supply which is always failing, to build new houses and to check accounts. People are always going away for training but it is of no use to them or to our community. My people have been training for all these years but they have not learnt any skills. There is nothing happening here.

For many years people have asked us whether we want training. We give them the answers to their questions; they take our names and the information they want. This has



been happening since 1974, when Baniyala was first begun as a community. They are still asking the same questions. If instead they gave us proper tools and built a secure building to lock the tools away, we would get on with the work that has to be done.

If we had tools to do the work and good education in English and arithmetic then we would also be able to run our own budget. We would have proper hours of work and be able to give people who work proper wages. When this happens, then my people will be able to look ahead. They will compete with each other to do well, knowing and feeling that we own our sweat and work. Then we can be honest with ourselves.

JW: Why do you think that basic education in English, reading, writing and arithmetic has failed?

DMM: I don't know the best way to teach English and other basics, but I do know that the present bilingual or bicultural system does not work. I think the *balanda* who come to our communities learn

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more of *Yolŋu matha* than our children learn of English. We teach our children our language, our stories and our dances and we teach them to fish and hunt. They do not need to go to school for that. I meet people from many countries who speak much better English, read it and write it better, than our people here in Arnhem Land.

Housing in Baniyala

JW: As a nurse, I know that housing is a major factor in health. Can you tell me about housing in Baniyala?

DMM: We have two two-bedroom houses and twelve newer houses we had built in the last few years that have three bedrooms. The bedrooms are small. The bedroom doors open onto a verandah about eight feet wide where we can sit. Down the steps from the verandah is a concrete slab and a lean-to kitchen on the corner side of the verandah with a sink and bench. There is a tap over the sink. In front of the verandah there is a concrete slab. On this our wives have to cook on an open fire. Some houses have a wood stove on the verandah but this is too hot to use most of the time and dangerous for small children. We also have a shower/laundry shed with cold water. Most houses have this. It's hard to get clean, wash clothes and dishes without hot water.

Dry pit toilets are away from the houses. When they get full we have to wait for the backhoe to come from Nhulunbuy to make a new place to move the toilet shed. This is a problem in the wet season when the rains come. We often have to use hand shovels to dig new toilets.

But our real problem is overcrowding. Each bedroom has a family living in it. A few have only a married couple, but most bedrooms have a married couple with children, so it is very crowded in the bedrooms and on the verandahs. There is barely room for foam mattresses on the floor and there is no room for wardrobes, cupboards, tables and chairs. There is nowhere to keep clothes, toys or other personal belongings. When relatives visit, they camp on the verandah or in tents outside the house as you had to when you came to teach the adults to read and write. I don't think that many other Australians have such houses.

JW: Do people own their houses or do they pay rent?

DMM: We do not own our houses. We pay rent. I think the rent for a two-bedroom house is about \$60 a week and for the three bedroom house it is about \$90 a week.

JW: What about power and water in Baniyala?

DMM: We use a small generator between two to three houses. These is diesel or petrol. One man might own the generator. We run power cords to

the houses and turn the generators on when we are doing washing, watching videos or at night for lights and small fans. Because of the harsh weather conditions, the generators are always breaking down. Sometimes we can fix them. Otherwise we put them on the plane to send to Nhulunbuy. Often the easiest thing to do is to buy a new one because otherwise we would not have any power.

Five or six years ago we managed to get a large generator for the community, but there was not enough money to put in power lines or a shed to protect it from the weather. This year we have some funding to build the shed and put in the power lines.

Water comes from a bore with a solar pump that fills a tank for the community. In the mornings we do not have water. It comes on at maybe ten in the morning. This has been happening for a few years now and we are trying to work out the reasons for the water shortage. I think it is that we have more people and the bore was not properly planned. We had lawns and a good vegetable garden of bananas, cassava and sweet potato, but there isn't enough water for this. We had to stop watering to have water for the washing and showers.

Links to the outside world

JW: How do you communicate with the outside world?

DMM: Several houses have telephones and there are three public phones which are working well. We can order food, fuel or spare parts. Some houses have videos and some have DVDs. It takes three hours to drive to Nhulunbuy. There are one or two cars. The track to the main Arnhem Highway is not very good, particularly in the wet, but the rest of the road is OK. We mostly use the plane, but it costs \$600 to charter a return flight to Nhulunbuy. The planes are mostly 5 seaters piloted by Missionary Aviation Fellowship pilots contracted to Laynhapuy Aviation. They take out seafood and our artwork and bring in supplies as well as passengers.

We had a store running a year ago and then there were some arguments between the owner in Darwin and the *balanda* in Baniyala. As this went on, the

store got worse and then stopped selling food all together. We asked for help to get it running again with our own people and this did not happen. So we ourselves funded a new shop. It is run by a *balanda*. We have talked with the *balanda* about selling healthier food. We know that all the sugar he sells in the food will make our children's teeth rotten and later on we will have diabetes and other bad diseases. He is waiting for new fridges to sell fruit and vegetables.

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Sickness and health

JW: Tell me about the health of your people.

DMM: We have many young and old people with heart problems. This year I had a big shock. I was taking my son to Adelaide because he had a bad throat that turned into rheumatic fever that damaged his heart so that he had to have a heart operation. When I came to visit him in hospital the first day after his operation, I had a chest pain. I went into casualty. At first they could not work out what was happening, but then they found that I had blocked arteries. So I also had open heart surgery—my son and I together. So many of my people have heart disease that they are going back and forth to hospital all the time. After my son and I had the operation, my daughter also had an open heart operation this year. She has been very sick for two years now.

In the middle of this year another family member died. She was only 30 years old and she had heart problems and another illness. But there is not even one machine in Baniyala to monitor blood pressure. Some people have the sugar sickness (diabetes). My second wife cannot live in Baniyala with her children. She is on needles (insulin) and

so the health people asked her to stay in town. About 20 people in Baniyala have this sickness, but not one person has one of those little blood sugar measuring machines (glucometers) to measure their blood sugar and work out their diet changes for themselves. So people become blind, lose limbs, get kidney disease and die.

There have been many deaths in the last few years. The people that died are my age (50-55). Six died of cancer and one older man had cancer of the face. In the other communities some young men have hanged themselves or died in car accidents. These sorts of things have not happened at Baniyala but we have to help organise funerals. My third wife is going to have her ears fixed (tympanoplasty). Many children have holes in their eardrums and can't learn properly in school because they do not hear.

Nurses visit every four weeks or so. They come to give needles to the babies and the people. For things like flu I think. We can have a check up, blood pressure, weight and sugar level when they visit. They might tell us that we need to see a

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doctor, or change our medicine or maybe tell us we are healthy. In the meantime they send our medicines down in a box on the plane. They put a list of people with the dates for appointments in town. Sometimes nutritionists and health teachers come and people sit together to speak about health matters. But we do not own our own health. That is the main problem.

The future

JW: Djambawa we have been working together for nearly four years now. You have seen me teach your people to read and write and install a computer in the 'office' shed in Baniyala so that your people

can reach out to the world on the internet. I know that you are a renowned artist because I see you working on your verandah painting and mixing paints. You have told me many stories of your life. I know that you travel, to represent your work and aboriginal art. What would you like to see happen for Baniyala?

DMM: These are the things I would like to see happen. We need an economic base for our community. For that we have to have a better education for everyone. We need to have a teacher all the time here helping to get education going properly for children and for adults. We do not need bilingual teaching. We have spent years telling our culture to anthropologists, linguists, writers and film crews who have come here in droves. One man lived here for a year to record our culture. We have told our stories to the judges to get land rights and sea rights. Now we need English, maths, world history and geography and science. We want to have sport, but better than what we do ourselves with our young people now. We are able to teach our culture to our children, but we need help to live like other Australians.

We would like to have a community centre involving both young and old people. I would like an art centre where I could teach people to paint. We would like a mechanic's workshop where a mechanic could work and teach other young people. We want an office where we could run our own finances and business. Every family should be able to see on paper how much it earns and how much it spends. We need a health room so that we could be monitoring our health and ringing the doctor or nurse to ask for help when we need to before sickness becomes chronic.

We would like to have some rooms with shower facilities for overnight visitors—like a very simple motel block so that they do not have to stay in tents. We would like a social centre with decent furniture and refrigeration for cold drinks where we could screen educational and family videos, DVDs and when it comes, TV.

We would like to have our own people to help design and build the centre. We have some good people here; they have some experience from the missionary days.

We want to work with our hands and minds.