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## The wrecking of the Murrinh Patha Social Club: A case study

During the 1950s and 1960s, many of the mature-aged Aboriginal men from Port Keats, or Wadeye as it is now known, worked on cattle stations between Timber Creek and Kununurra. When they were away from home, Aboriginal people drank freely in towns; however, such drinking was not permitted in their home communities. Aboriginal reserves had remained 'dry' since their formation, even though in 1964, the right to drink had been granted to individuals off reserves in the Northern Territory. By the late 1970s, it was clear that men from missions and other communities were travelling elsewhere to buy alcohol; this prompted some women from Wadeye to support the idea of local availability to 'keep the men at home' (HRSCAA 1976: 669). Wadeye, the site of the Catholic Mission of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, became one of the first Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory to experiment with a licensed 'social club'.

### The development of the club

The decision to apply for a licence to establish a club at the mission was based on the idea that Aboriginal people would learn to drink 'properly' if the amount of alcohol was controlled and the physical environment was appropriate. It was not a contradictory notion that a Catholic mission in charge of an Aboriginal settlement should allow drinking; the Catholic

Church and its missions were largely liberal-minded in their approach to the use of alcohol (Sournia 1990). The Catholic priests and brothers at Wadeye drank alcohol themselves in the Presbytery.



Fig. 12 Statue of Virgin Mary at the old Mission site, Wadeye

Source: M Brady

Apart from the desire of some community members to have a club, the decision was influenced by a report, published in 1975, that was written by a team of researchers who were all Catholic. Three of the authors, Father John Leary, Father Patrick Dodson and Luke Bunduk, were intimately associated with the Sacred Heart mission at Wadeye: Leary was the mission superintendent over two periods; Dodson, recently ordained, was posted to Wadeye to become Leary's curate (Keeffe 2003); and Bunduk<sup>1</sup> was an Aboriginal man of the landowning Kardu Diminin clan at Wadeye who later became president of the Kardu Numida Council.<sup>2</sup> Another team member, Bernie Tipiloura, a Tiwi Islander, was also a Catholic.

1 Bunduk took the place of an earlier team member, Bernie Tipiloura.

2 The Kardu Numida (meaning 'one people' in Murrinh Patha) Council was incorporated in 1978 to be the administrative body for the community once the Catholic mission ceased to perform this role. Between 1992 and 2000, the Kardu Numida Council entered a phase of administrative and financial restructuring to resolve the mixture of inappropriate governance arrangements and inadequate financial support that had developed in the context of a rapidly growing population (Desmarchelier 2001: 41).

The research was commissioned by an intergovernmental committee and the research team was tasked with investigating the causes, effects and amelioration of alcohol problems among Aboriginal Australians. The first inquiry of its kind in Australia, the team toured the country in a kombivan, visiting rehabilitation centres and interviewing people in parks and bars. Their report was decisively anti-prohibitionist:

History has shown that prohibition does not work. Isolation does not safeguard prohibition, it simply puts off the day. We must face reality and human nature and the fact that sooner or later alcohol will come into the lives of these people. Aborigines (and everyone else) if they want to drink and retain their dignity and identity must acquire the ability of being able to control their drinking, otherwise it will be their destruction. To help gain this control there must be:

- a. a realistic educational programme on alcohol.
- b. provision of proper facilities that help towards the formation of good drinking habits. (Leary et al. 1975: 5)

The authors proposed that in tribal areas and 'self-contained' communities, licensed clubs would suit residents, and they made suggestions for the type of licensed premises they had in mind: it should have pleasant surroundings, music and entertainment, good food, soft drinks, provision for families, and rules and encouragements for good behaviour on open display—all designed to 'create pride in something good'. The authors envisaged that such a club might also be a place where people with drinking problems could be detected and helped: an optimistic suggestion that reflects something of the idealism of the era. The emphasis given to the idea of *learning moderation* suggests that some members of the team were aware of the thinking of the time about social-learning models:

Much attention must be given to the formation of proper facilities for drinking. The learning process for drinking among Aborigines has been a sad one. Prohibition taught them to drink as much as possible, in the shortest possible time, in the worst possible surroundings. Lack of funds got them on to cheap fortified wines, the quickest way to achieve results. They so frequently continued [sic] their education in drinking with destitute alcoholic Europeans, or being encouraged to drink to excess by Europeans with ulterior motives. Drinking, we have been told, is a learnt process. Let us change the teachers. (Leary et al. 1975: 27)

The Leary report provided momentum for the mission at Wadeye to make a successful application for a liquor licence. In the late 1970s, what became known as the Murrinh Patha Social Club was inaugurated.

It aimed to provide a safe drinking environment where people could learn to drink responsibly, and to ensure that they spent their money within the community. Building on the Leary report's recommendations, three members of the Catholic clergy at Wadeye were instrumental in getting the club started: Father John Shallvey, Brother Andy Howley and Brother Kinnane.<sup>3</sup> Leary, interviewed many years later, explained the decision:

In their society they never had alcohol and because of this they never developed ways and means of handling it. So when we had Port Keats we started the first club there. In the beginning I had the idea you could teach them civilised drinking, two or three cans—enough. But mostly if you had a big supply, the whole lot went.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, alcohol was available elsewhere in the region. At the Peppimenarti store,<sup>5</sup> 91 km away, Aboriginal people could buy a case of beer at any time, provided it was not consumed near the town during working hours (Stanley 1985: 80). Wadeye people could also obtain alcohol at the Fairweather Hotel on the northern side of the Daly River crossing, 189 km north of Wadeye; in the wet season, they often swam across the crocodile-infested waters to reach the pub.

## The drinkers

Once the mission gained a liquor licence, the initial arrangement was simply to enable people to buy two cans of takeaway beer from a store: several outstations were also permitted to sell alcohol to residents.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the club was established in a recreation hall at Wadeye. In the early years, the club seems to have worked well; there was music and entertainment, and grassy shaded areas and outside tables, as envisaged. Behaviour at the club was governed by a complex series of rules set by the (Aboriginal) management committee, and misbehaviour was promptly dealt with according to the committee's cultural guidelines. There was

3 Xavier Desmarchelier, pers comm, 11 January 2013. In the early 1980s, Brother Howley also applied for a liquor licence for Nguui on Bathurst Island, which was also a Catholic mission (Walsh 2005: 68).

4 John Leary, pers comm, 16 August 2004.

5 Peppimenarti, a cattle station of about 200 Aboriginal people associated with Daly River mission, was run by Harry Wilson. Daly River Mission also had its own Nauiyu Nambiyu Beer Club, which had two drinking sessions a day, rationed at three cans for men and two for women. Profits were directed to a social development fund (Stanley 1985: 68).

6 Bill Ivory (pers comm, 6 May 2015) recalls drinking with John Chula and family at Yeddairt in 1978 at a bush bar they had constructed on the outstation. The beer was supplied by the Catholic mission and was consumed in a 'convivial and friendly' environment.

a four- or six-can limit on full-strength beers, and drinkers bought the requisite number of tokens to exchange for beer.<sup>7</sup> Women sat on the grass and quietly played cards for beer tokens. The club was a social hub: it was open six days a week, Monday to Friday between 5 and 7 pm, and on Saturdays between 4.30 and 7 pm. Takeaways were available to permit holders from 3–4 pm. It was said to be ‘a good place, the whole community, black and white went there. [The first manager] was good, no humbugging’.<sup>8</sup> Another Aboriginal patron commented:

Phil S was the first manager, a good one. It was well run with snacks and music in the early 80s. At first it was all cash, then Phil S had the idea of tokens [four tokens each person] ... They tried light beer ... no-one liked it.<sup>9</sup>

There were many responsible drinkers at Wadeye; older people arrived dressed in their best and people enjoyed being able to have a few beers without having to leave the community.

The club was financially viable and contributed socially and financially to the community. As was the case in other communities, the revenue from the club was the only untied income available in Wadeye; it provided funds that could be spent on local needs free from government control. To utilise the club’s ‘facilities’ (a euphemism for purchasing beer, as there were no other facilities, such as food, water or security, until later), a person had to become a ‘member’ (at no cost). Young people turning 18 were often coerced by family members to sign up for membership (even though most 18 year olds did not drink), as a way of providing more beer to family members, usually their fathers. The club became ‘the epicentre of everyone’s lives’, as one observer put it. However, it soon varied between being a great asset and being a great problem. The drinking adversely affected the singing and performance of ceremony, which was of great concern to many senior men.<sup>10</sup> Over time, there were changes in management and management policies, resulting in a decline in the

7 The limits changed from time to time. By 1987, the limit was six cans per person. One informant remembered one resourceful young man who made counterfeit tokens by punching holes in a saucepan: ‘We had to have a meeting about that’, commented Anthony Dooling.

8 Mark Crocombe, pers comm, 14 July 2009.

9 Bill Ivory, pers comm, 14 July 2009.

10 Kim Barber, pers comm, 5 March 2014. Thanks to Kim Barber and Xavier Desmarchelier for these descriptions of the club and its patrons.

scrutiny of alcohol distribution and undermining of the various rationing systems; drinkers started swapping cans and some non-drinking women gave their allowance to their husbands, leading to violence.

The club was controlled by a management committee or board (all men, all drinkers, some of them dependent drinkers), who instructed the manager in the rules of engaging with local people. The manager and management committee were thus enmeshed in a close reciprocal alliance, aspects of which probably did not always comply with the Liquor Act. One Aboriginal community member recalled later that:

The board of six or seven drinking people and the club manager—they were confused, 'brainwashed' people. They were supposed to have a four-can limit but used to bring wives, grandmothers [to use their allowance]. Aboriginal people worked there.<sup>11</sup>

The committee was responsible for selecting six local men (not women) to fill the highly desirable jobs at the club; selection was based on family and cultural preferences. Once everyone had gone home after the club closed at 7 pm, these men could stay on and consume their six cans of beer without being importuned by family members. Other perks for employees included cash advances, charter flights to Darwin and attendance (all expenses paid) at the annual Northern Territory Football League grand finals.

Meanwhile, the customers played cards and gambled with beer tokens.<sup>12</sup> As anthropologists have observed in relation to other settings, alcohol at Wadeye became a form of legal tender, and the club was the place where business was conducted (cf. Sansom 1980, Brady & Palmer 1984, Collmann 1988).<sup>13</sup> Groups of men reached agreements about who would accumulate more beers through what were known as 'sixpack clubs'; members took turns to drink three cans only, giving the rest to another person to enable that person to get 'full drunk'.<sup>14</sup> These arrangements became part of a 'hidden world' in which social, cultural and financial debts were accrued and repaid. If nothing else, these strategies demonstrate how determined many individuals were to drink to inebriation. At the

11 WP; interview, 14 July 2009.

12 Carol Watson, pers comm, 16 August 2009. Watson was in Wadeye conducting interviews for a major Northern Territory drug and alcohol use survey (Watson et al. 1988).

13 Xavier Desmarchelier, pers comm, 11 January 2013.

14 This was documented in a letter from Kardu Numida Council to the Liquor Commission written in September 1995.

time, apart from drinking on premises at the club, hundreds of people at Wadeye also held liquor permits that allowed them to drink alcohol at home (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies 1984: 214).<sup>15</sup>

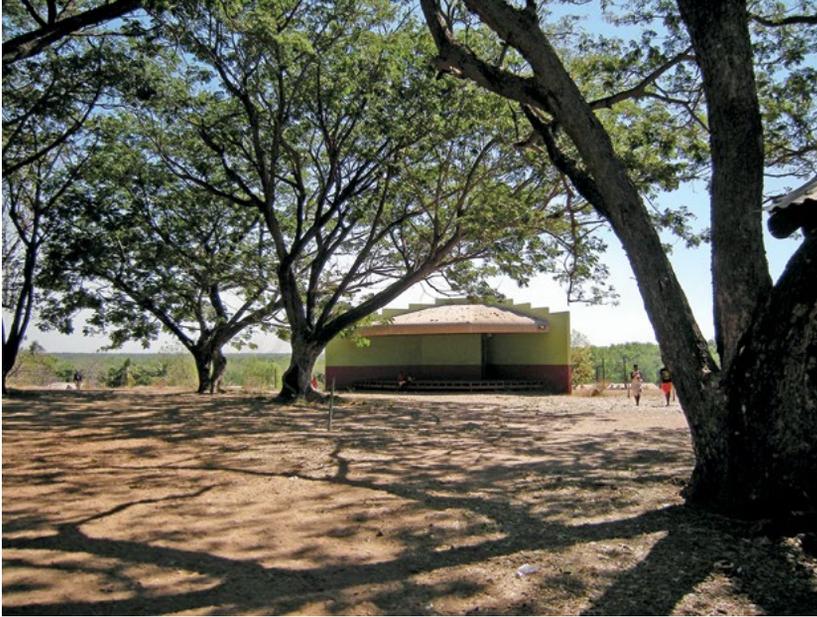


Fig. 13 Sound shell at Murrinh Patha Social Club, Wadeye, 2009

Source: M Brady

## The non-drinkers

While the club was always well attended, Wadeye also had a significant non-drinking population, which included individuals who had given up alcohol after having been heavy drinkers. These people were encouraged and supported by an active AA-style group that had been set up by one of the mission brothers, Andrew Howley (who had also applied for the liquor licence). Howley had received a travelling scholarship to the United States to investigate sobriety groups and American Indian approaches to alcohol abuse. On his return, he visited the Holyoake Institute in Perth and was impressed by its approach to counselling and training using

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15 In 1984, the number was 374 permits at Wadeye: some of these permits were held by white staff.

a 'family disease' treatment model for addiction.<sup>16</sup> He subsequently initiated Alcohol Awareness and Family Recovery (AAFR) programs in Darwin and Wadeye, the principles of which were based on the Holyoake model. This model promoted the idea that the families of alcoholics were 'co-dependents' whose actions inadvertently enabled drinkers to keep drinking: for example, by sending money to support drinkers, taking over essential roles neglected by drinkers and by making excuses for them.<sup>17</sup> According to the Holyoake model, welfare and other agencies were 'enablers'; they provided money that enabled families to survive while breadwinners drank away the primary income. Aboriginal legal services were implicated too, for by providing legal advice in alcohol-related cases, they protected drinkers from experiencing the full consequences of their actions (d'Abbs 1990: 21). The Holyoake model advised that, to counter what amounted to tacit support for drinkers, families needed to show 'tough love' to dependent drinkers, and not 'cover up' for them by lying on their behalf, paying their bills or providing for them, since all of these things allowed alcoholics to deny and escape from their problems.

Apart from the AAFR group at Wadeye, the Catholic brothers and nuns and committed local Aboriginal men, George Cumaiyi and Cyril Ninnal, also ran a residential rehabilitation program near Daly River at Five Mile.<sup>18</sup> This supported families dealing with alcohol abuse and provided a referral service and a focus for local self-help groups using the AA and Al-Anon Family Group models. An evaluation of the program at Five Mile found that attendance had a modest but real effect on drinking behaviour (d'Abbs 1990: 5). Between 1987 and 1989, more than 100 Wadeye family members attended the alcohol awareness courses at Five Mile or Darwin (d'Abbs 1990: 40). In fact, more than half of all admissions to the Five Mile AAFR program were drawn from either Wadeye or Nguuiu on Bathurst Island. Notably, both communities had licensed clubs. The AAFR program at Wadeye was incorporated later as Makura

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16 Holyoake, in turn, was influenced by the United States Minnesota-based Hazelden Institute's philosophy and methods, using the idea of addiction as a chemical dependency. Howley took Wadeye men Cyril Ninnal and William Parmbuk to the United States to attend the 55th AA-Al Anon International Convention (Williams 1990). See Chenhall (2007) for a detailed ethnography of the operation of an AA-based Aboriginal residential treatment program.

17 The term 'co-dependency' has been contested, with one professor of psychology stating that it had been expanded way beyond its useful role to encompass virtually the entire population (Lisansky-Gomberg 1989: 120).

18 Five Mile ran from the late 1980s to early 2000s. Its program was based on the family disease concept linked to the 12-step model that is used by many Canadian First Nations treatment programs, as well as Holyoake in Perth.

Wunthay,<sup>19</sup> a support and alcohol-education group that drew together a strong core of non-drinkers, women and other community members concerned about alcohol. It was this group at Wadeye, combined with ideas about ‘tough love’, that triggered the action that was taken against the club.

The group met at the Presbytery; a key figure was Freddie Cumaiyi, a senior man who had lived through his own personal struggles with alcohol as well as those of his family. William Parmbuk, a key player in the demise of the club, was also in the group. He spoke of his perceptions of drinking:<sup>20</sup>

I never drank. My mum was an influence: she told me, ‘it will kill you’. I grew up where I saw different areas like Darwin, Katherine, Kununurra, where I saw my people affected by grog, in the long grass. I never tasted it. Straight from school I was a health worker. A teacher and her partner worked in the health clinic and I learned from there how alcohol affect your life—I see people with domestic violence, family being sad. The club was operating while I grew up. In the 80s men would go up to the club and there was some violence, family around, break-in, smashing church window because of the last night [the night before]. Next morning a fight would be on. I saw that for 12 months or more and I felt sad and I joined AA, I wanted to learn from other men how it affected. I listened to them all. There were six or seven men in the group started by Brother Andy Howley and Freddie ... I was only teenager. It started with two men sitting under a tree, talking about their life as a sober person.<sup>21</sup>

Membership of Makura Wunthay was made up of people drawn from across the many different clans at Wadeye. As was (and is) the case in many Aboriginal communities, there was a major split between the drinkers and the non-drinkers: Wadeye was polarised. As it grew, Makura Wunthay came to represent the only alternative (and wholly Indigenous) perspective on alcohol that could pose any kind of challenge to the dominance of the club committee, which was composed entirely of drinkers. Non-drinkers did not consider it appropriate to sit on the committee; for example, when

19 Makura Wunthay (Murrinh Patha language): *makura* = ‘no water (beer)’; *wunthay* = ‘restriction’ (‘don’t drink’ or ‘good water’).

20 The non-standard, vernacular style of Aboriginal English has not been edited or corrected throughout the book.

21 William Parmbuk, interview, 14 July 2009.

two committee members decided to stop drinking, they resigned from their positions. As a result, there were no non-drinking representatives on the committee.<sup>22</sup>

## Social unrest and the club

Notwithstanding the efforts of the non-drinkers, the late 1980s saw increased alcohol consumption associated with the club and a build-up of social unrest. The club's licence was suspended on 26 occasions over a nine-year period—signalling what turned out to be a tumultuous history.<sup>23</sup>

Misbehaviour *at* the club was dealt with swiftly and according to the cultural guidelines established by the management committee; however, once the club closed at 7 pm, the committee's authority ended and its members had no desire to take responsibility for antisocial behaviour enacted beyond the club's boundary. This job fell to the two police officers stationed at Wadeye. The high incidence of crime at Wadeye was almost exclusively related to the consumption of alcohol at the club (Tangentyere Council 1991: 91, note 2). In July 1988, five months before the wrecking of the club, there was a fatal stabbing (both the perpetrator and victim had been drinking at the club and the victim was unarmed). The Supreme Court judge who presided over this manslaughter case characterised the community as being in a state of domestic conflict; he referred to clan conflict, general social upheaval, widespread aimlessness, drunkenness, unemployment and a lack of effective leadership and governance.<sup>24</sup> Hostilities were so strong after the stabbing that the perpetrator had to be flown out of Wadeye for his own safety.

There was increasingly vocal opposition to grog in the wake of this incident: Aboriginal residents recalled, 'we felt like its killing our people. A lot of medical evacuations then'; and, '[it's] killing our culture'. Several community members reported that, late in 1988, the community was 'on a knife edge'; 'things got worse and worse'. When the council tried to ban a number of young troublemakers from the club, their family

22 Xavier Desmarchelier, pers comm, 11 January 2013.

23 Colin McDonald, interview, ABC Radio 6 December 1989.

24 Angel J, Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, *The Queen v Phillip Daniel Berida*, 5 April 1990; see also Madigan 1988: 1.

#### 4. THE WRECKING OF THE MURRINH PATHA SOCIAL CLUB

members, instead of supporting such a ban in the interests of the community, confronted the council and demanded to know why their sons had been banned. In October, the *Northern Territory News* (1988) reported rioting at Wadeye: gunshots were fired in the main street and brawls took place involving 200 people. Police reinforcements were sent in and 12 men were arrested. The club was closed for a week. In the six months between July and December, monthly police returns showed that there were 56 arrests or summonses for offences at Wadeye (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 1991: 167). People were afraid to venture out at night, as many youths were armed with knives; health workers were frightened to go to the clinic without an escort. At times, up to 30 women and children sought overnight refuge at the Presbytery and convent.<sup>25</sup> School attendance was low, and there were numerous break-ins and property damage to the school, clinic, store, private houses and vehicles. The unrest culminated in an act of unprecedented civil disobedience:

a group of young men broke the windows of the church.<sup>26</sup> This act served as the trigger, finally, for decisive community action.



Fig. 14 Carrie Nation Lecture Poster, c. 1901

Source: Kansas State Historical Society

25 Xavier Desmarchelier, pers comm.

26 Several interviewees stated: 'There was trouble with drink! They knocked all the louvres out of the church!'; 'Young fellas smashed and stole cars, breaking windows in church'.

## Smashing the club

On the afternoon of Saturday 3 December 1988—in a scene that rivalled the activities of the saloon-smashing activist, Carrie Nation, whose Anti-Saloon League campaigners 'hatcheted' bars and liquor stores in the United States<sup>27</sup>—a group of Aboriginal non-drinkers assembled outside the club, wielding axes and star pickets. They stormed onto the club premises and proceeded to demolish its interior. The Wadeye club smashers were led by Freddie Cumaiyi of the Rak Kubiyrri clan,<sup>28</sup> who wore a ceremonial red *naga*<sup>29</sup> and carried a shovel-nosed spear and a woomera. The group was soon joined by a large number of other participants who smashed the fittings and equipment inside the club, while 200 people reportedly stood outside cheering. The club's attackers asked the attending police to keep away while the destruction took place, and they agreed; no one was injured. It was an unprecedented, dramatic and well-orchestrated intervention.

In 2009, I collected accounts of the incident from many participants or observers who, while they agreed on the overall sequence of events, varied on some of the detail. William Parmbuk, aged 22 at the time of the attack, was one of the protagonists. He gave the following account:<sup>30</sup>

In 1988 we destroyed the club. We had a meeting; at the meeting [were] seven men and some women. Old Freddie Cumaiyi—an ex-drinker and part of the AA group [said]: 'This thing's killing us, separating families, everyone sad'. We decided on Saturday afternoon, when the club open. We stopped in front of the club. I had a fighting stick. Club manager came to open the gate. I stopped him and said 'We're gonna bash your club'. He didn't believe! Inside my body was boiling anger, outside I was happy. Old Freddie [was] painted up, with a spear, wearing a red naga. He said, 'smash it!' I fired a 303 into the lock of the steel door and then we started to destroy whatever the club owned. We used axes. I had an axe as

27 In the early twentieth century, Carrie Nation famously carried a small axe (a hatchet) with which she and her followers smashed up liquor supplies and saloons in actions she called 'hatchetations'; they often stormed into bars singing hymns (Cook 2007). Nation was particularly outraged by the effect of drunkenness on women and children.

28 Freddie Cumaiyi (1926–89). The Rak Kubiyrri clan owns land adjoining the area of Wadeye.

29 *Naga* = loin cloth or waist cloth usually of red cotton. In the early twentieth century, a fabric known as 'turkey-red' was often distributed to Aboriginal people in payment for work (cf. Searcy [1909] 1984: 81).

30 Like Freddie Cumaiyi, William Parmbuk was not a member of the landowning clan. I interviewed Parmbuk and others at Wadeye in July 2009. He was then 43 years old and a member of NORFORCE (an Australian Army Reserve regiment engaged in surveillance and reconnaissance). He ran the army cadet unit.

well. I was saying ‘I’m going to smash you’. I made a hundred holes in the club-owned boat! The police came and I stopped them. I said, ‘We want to destroy this club—come back and arrest me later’. We destroyed everything: TV, boat, big TV screen, smashed VB cans with star picket. I drove a tractor! Big crowd came around. Word went round quick, then whole community got involved, helped to smash it. All the women and kids, young men.

The following accounts come from various Aboriginal community members:

Young fellas smashed and stole cars, breaking windows in church. They [other, non-drinkers] thought the problem might be coming from the club. So G with a 6.5 rifle shot the lock [of the club], smashed the fence with Hilux [Toyota]. Some women were involved. When they entered the club everyone stood back and the AA people came rushing in. Freddie had an axe and a shovel nose spear and a naga. The old man had got wild with drinkers who belt their wives and kids.<sup>31</sup>

I was there when Freddie smashed the club. I was still at home, but people were lining up for ticket [beer token]. That old man, Freddie, was in a red naga and a shovel spear. People had been drinking and getting violent. Men with tickets were already inside the club, they pulled back against the fence and everyone, kids and women too, everybody was there [attacking the club]. Freddie said [he was] feeling sorry for women and children, kids were hungry, women get family payment for food and husbands take that money for themselves, kids went to school hungry. Freddie spoke in language.<sup>32</sup>

There was trouble with drink, they knocked all the louvres out of the church. Old Freddie got wild. He got all the non-drinkers. I was still drinking [in 1988], I gave up early June 1989, but I was in there. I didn’t see what was happening. In the afternoon we were waiting for 5 pm to open, soon as we got back we see big mob all round club. We thought it was fighting going on, but it was all getting beers. They knocked all the fence out. Nobody got angry; they helped themselves to beer. Opened the door where the beer locked in, got fence out, threw beer out.<sup>33</sup>

They had a meeting before all this [the wrecking of the club] to discuss it, because women wanted the non-drinkers to be safe. The club wasn’t quite open; people were waiting to go in. Freddie [was] worried that women

31 RC, son of Freddie Cumaiyi.

32 SB, previously a Makura Wunthay worker.

33 AD, of Wentek Nganayi outstation.

were frightened of their husbands. Every night women get frightened of their husband. When we saw Freddie painted up, he was very angry, 'mad'. With rocks and axes they all smashed the cans. 'Come and get your last drink!' they called out. They drove a Hilux into the fence, and pulled the beer down.<sup>34</sup>

Non-Aboriginal residents also witnessed the event. One recalled:

I heard two shots of a rifle and blokes racing past. People flashing past! Straight to the club! The manager turned up and the non-drinkers said 'no, mate. We won't hurt you' ... George Cumaiyi fired the shots. They damaged the office, broke into the walls; there was a grader running around. It was a *community* statement.<sup>35</sup>

Leary's associate, Xavier Desmarchelier,<sup>36</sup> was also there that day. He remembered how:

After months of increasing violence, at about 4.30 pm on December 3 there was a shotgun blast that came from the club area. At that time such blasts were not unusual within the community however they normally occurred after club hours. I went down to the club. There were about 20 people outside the club fence. On the inside of the fence facing the club doors stood Freddie Cumaiyi in ceremonial attire—nagga, body paint and wommerra [sic]. Freddie was directing the group of people outside the fence who proceeded to break down the fence with chains, ropes and vehicles. Once inside the fence these people went to the main door of the club and smashed it open with crow bars and axes. Meanwhile a crowd outside the club was growing. I spoke with Freddie indicating that perhaps there was another way. He said: 'This is our way, this is the only way left to us' ... [T]he main door to the club had been smashed open and access to the coolrooms had been obtained. Cartons of beer were being brought outside where non-drinkers (men, women and children) broke open the cartons and begun smashing cans of beer on the concrete and against the brick wall. There was cheering from people outside the fence as cans were smashed ... However not only cartons of beer were targeted. Those inside the club began smashing the interior—pool tables, fans, chairs, counters etc. Nothing was left standing. Meanwhile outside the club members were focused on the cartons of beer that were being piled on the concrete. They

34 Group discussion with ND, GJ and JJ.

35 Mark Crocombe, historian at the Wadeye Knowledge Centre, 14 July 2009.

36 Xavier Desmarchelier, 11 January 2013. In 1988, Desmarchelier was helping Leary to establish an Indigenous leadership centre at Daly River; he now works with Jesuit Social Services.

entered the club and began breaking them open to drink. This was the beginning of the free for all and then the behaviour that has been referred to often as 'the riot'.

According to a Catholic Sister who was also there that day:

They were sick and tired of trouble from grog, bringing in non-drinkers to the club who got grog. Once it closed, there was chaos and noise until midnight. The community was in a big split between drinkers and non-drinkers. The lead-up to the 1988 smashing was the clinic ... and the church was perpetually getting smashed. The club had been badly managed. [On the day], the drinkers were at the club at 5 pm. The non-drinkers were having their AA group. 'We will smash everything' Freddie said, 'We won't hurt anyone'. They told the police they were going to do it.<sup>37</sup>

Dr Elizabeth Moore, District Medical Officer, recalled that: 'Freddie had said at a council meeting that "any more trouble at the club, we'll smash it down". And they did! Pushed fences, knocked out walls, poured out grog. They did \$300,000 worth of damage'.<sup>38</sup>

Press reports were accompanied by sensational headlines: 'Aftermath of a rampage. Families flee riot' (Jackson 1988: 1); 'Port Keats in alcoholic turmoil'; 'Beer at centre of NT riot' (Cooke 1988: 1). However, all eyewitness accounts concur that it was a well-planned, premeditated action that involved no violence against people, only property; that the police were informed; and that key people peacefully gave themselves up to police afterwards. Desmarchelier stated that:

As an eyewitness to the actual event the one word I would *not* use to describe [it] would be a riot. Freddie provided directions to his people as to what actions to do; they looked to Freddie for direction; at all times Freddie was in control of what was happening. No person was hurt. The target was the club premises and the beer.

Another commentator described the atmosphere as being like a midnight feast at boarding school, with people helping themselves to the cartons of beer liberated from the club. The 'free grog' was taken by drinkers to the community living areas and there was heavy drinking over the next few days; however, according to witnesses, there were no inter-group fights or injuries.

37 Catholic sister, Yvonne, 14 July 2009.

38 Dr Elizabeth Moore, District Medical Officer, 12 October 2009.

**NORTHERN TERRITORY**  
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## Aftermath of a rampage



Overturned pool tables and other debris is strewn around the floor inside the Port Keats Club after it was destroyed by rioters.

# FAMILIES FLEE RIOT

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(Rear Rock Oyster)

by PAUL JACKSON, GENNY O'LOUGHLIN and DEBBIE GARIBOLDI

Police with batons are patrolling the remote settlement of Port Keats today after a weekend of rioting.

Five white women and 11 children were evacuated to Darwin yesterday.

Nearly 300 people were involved in the riots which began on Friday night after a mob rampaged through the settlement smashing the church, hospital, police station and vehicles with rocks.

A woman at the township today said people had feared for their lives as the club was ransacked and people's homes were raided. Damage to the club was said to total more than \$100,000.

Police said the rioting had been quiet and the situation was quiet. • **Continued Page 2**



Women and children arrive at Darwin Airport after fleeing Port Keats. Picture: CHERYLYN GAINES

Fig. 15 'Aftermath of a rampage'

Source: Northern Territory News Monday 5 December 1988

## The aftermath

A few days later, a group of 10 Aboriginal health workers at the local health centre clarified their position in relation to the wrecking of the club in two letters to the Liquor Commission. In the first letter, they explained why they supported the actions of the protestors:

To the NT Liquor Commissioner, 6/12/88

Dear Sir

Our reasons are

People causing trouble at our Health Centre

Always damaging our Hospital vehicles and windows

Childrens get sick from hunger because of the father and some mother's are spending money on grog. The childs 'Road to Health' chart always on the red line. Because there's not enough food.

When someone is hurt and taken down to the Health Centre, people come around here and starting getting mad at the Clinic and at the health workers, and swearing and all that. Every night they come around here for medicine when its not the right time.

Some mothers don't bring their babies at the right time, [but] wait for their husbands to come out of the club, and bring the sick baby to the clinic. And husband starts to get mad at us and cause of troubles. When they enter the clinic door husband starts to talk rough talk. So we the health workers [get frightened], shaking and dropping everything. Sometimes we in a hurry we might give them wrong medicine and we might kill someone and get into big trouble. Drunk people write dirty words on our health centre and vehicles.

If the club reopens again we'll do the same thing again smash up everything, and that's our promise. Because of the grog lots of our people are getting sicker and sicker, high blood pressure, diabetes and liver damage.

Signed: Aboriginal health workers

Phillipine Parmbuk, Stephanie Berida, Annunciata Dartinga, Lillian Tchernia, Ethelreda Dartinga, Sabina Parmbuk, Philomena Crocombe, Therese Nemarluk, Agnes Tchemjairi, Lucia Ngarri.<sup>39</sup>

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39 I have photocopies of these letters in my possession.

The health workers who signed the letter were all Aboriginal women with close connections to the Catholic nuns; they had been brought up in the dormitory system at the mission and had worked for many years in the old mission hospital. All became senior spokespersons in their groups as they grew older.<sup>40</sup> Disturbed by talk of reopening the club, the women wrote a further letter on 20 December. The second letter stated that, following the club's closure, illegal grog had been flown into one of the outstations and, as a result, a Wadeye truck had rolled, injuring eight people, two of whom had had to go to hospital. The women wrote:

Some people say they want the club open at Port Keats because they don't want the men to go away to Darwin or Kununurra drinking because they might get killed. Well there has been more men killed at Port Keats from the grog than away from Port Keats ... We think grog should be stopped forever. From the health workers at Port Keats.

Two of the club's attackers, William Parmbuk (aged 23) and Maurice Mullumbuk (aged 25), were charged with illegal entry and criminal damage. The case was heard in Darwin by Senior Magistrate Alistair McGregor in October 1989. Parmbuk and Mullumbuk were defended by solicitor Colin McDonald.<sup>41</sup> By then, Freddie Cumaiyi, the senior man who had led the action against the club had died. Freddie's son, George Cumaiyi, told the court that his father had warned the community: 'If the church, school and hospital keep getting damaged, then we will damage your place [the club]. That was the warning the old man made'.<sup>42</sup> The District Medical Officer gave evidence that health conditions, including alcohol-related injuries and child malnutrition, had improved significantly in the months since the club had closed. The magistrate drily observed that the social club at Wadeye could more accurately be described as the 'antisocial club', as it had contributed to a drastic deterioration in the quality of life at Wadeye, which now endured alcohol-related trauma and chronic bad health due to considerable and sustained high alcohol intake. McGregor heard evidence that the club took around \$72,000 a month: money, he observed, that was probably derived from social security payments.

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40 Three of the signatories were of the same clan (Rak Kubiyirr) as Freddie Cumaiyi (Bill Ivory, pers comm).

41 McDonald is now a QC.

42 The following quotations are drawn from transcripts of ABC radio broadcasts at the time (tape supplied by Colin McDonald and Jonathan Hunyor, 8 September 2010).

The magistrate dismissed the charges against Parmbuk and Mullumbuk. He dealt with the element of riot by stating that the men had right of entry to the premises, and found only the damages charge to be proved. McGregor had no doubt that both men were guilty of this offence, but he accepted that their motives were honourable. Rather than a case of violence, it was a case of restoring peace. Despite acknowledging the risk of precedent that might extend to other communities, McGregor ordered that no convictions be recorded and the men were released. This unprecedented decision provoked a welter of media coverage.<sup>43</sup> McDonald, Parmbuk and Mullumbuk's lawyer, told ABC radio that:

It was a social revolution in the true sense of the word, however it was a disciplined revolution where the ground rules were no-one was to get hurt and in fact no-one was hurt. And it's interesting in this case that the two charges dealing with the element of riot were withdrawn because the Crown could not find, amongst 500 persons present, one person who was afraid. The evidence was that people were cheering and celebrating the destruction of this source of evil in their midst.<sup>44</sup>

Twenty years later, Parmbuk described the court hearing and the dismissal of the charges:

I had a good lawyer, Colin McDonald. We had back-up from doctor, visiting doctor. In the magistrate [court] Alistair McGregor—I was a bit nervous—he said, 'Stand up William! William! You are like Rajiv Gandhi! I will accept what you have done for the sake of the community. I now drop this charge. You may go'. Before that he asked me: 'If the Club reopen again, would you do it again?' and I said 'Yes. It's not for me it's for the sake of the community'.

Perhaps inevitably, the closure of the club meant that those who wanted to drink alcohol, including some senior men, left Wadeye, sometimes for extended periods. One consequence of this was that council meetings no longer had the ratification of several key people. Another consequence was an increase in the number of intoxicated people on the road, which resulted in several deaths.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately and coincidentally, the road from Wadeye to Daly River had been upgraded that year, meaning that

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43 'Club wreckers who "saved people from alcohol" freed', *The Australian* 7 December 1989: 4; 'Port Keats: charges proved, no conviction', *Northern Territory News* 24 October 1989: 5; ABC Darwin radio news broadcasts December 1989.

44 ABC News Radio Darwin 6 December 1989.

45 However, as the second letter from the health workers stated, there had been deaths at Wadeye itself because of alcohol-related violence.

vehicles could travel faster than previously. Sly grogging increased as men grouped together to charter planes from Kununurra to fly alcohol into some of the outstations. 'Family money' was also depleted. These side effects of the club's closure naturally led to grumblings, with some in the community questioning Freddie Cumaiyi's 'right' to have brought about the club's demise.



Fig. 16 Remains of the Murrinh Patha Social Club, 2009

Source: M Brady

## Reopening the club

Only three days after the wrecking of the club, Liquor Commission representatives from Darwin visited Wadeye and held meetings with the community about whether the club should be reopened. Clearly, there was pressure to do so (as evidenced by the follow-up letter from the health workers): in fact, there was so much pressure that the secretary of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services wrote to the Commission advising it to take a 'hands-off' approach—rather than continually asking the community when it wanted the licence to be recommenced (Tangentyere Council 1991: 93, note 5).

In the early 1990s, the club reopened and closed on several occasions. In March 1995, the reopened club was attacked, culminating in a large brawl; the Licensing Commission became involved and the club was closed and the manager sacked. In September 1995, Kardu Numida Council at Wadeye made a determined effort to reform the way the club operated. They approached the Liquor Commission to reopen it, this time under a new name: the Kardu Numida Social Club. Changing the name of the club was significant. Its former name, Murrinh Patha, represented only one of the many different language groups living at Wadeye and in the surrounding area, and other groups felt disenfranchised—‘living in their shadow’. Renaming the club Kardu Numida, meaning ‘one people’, appealed those who sought unity in the community. A letter to the Liquor Commission, signed by the council’s president and executive officer, laid out a new policy that contained a number of changes and a more formal code of discipline than previously.<sup>46</sup> The club committee was to be composed of members of the Kardu Numida Council, and the manager or licensee was to be employed by the council (rather than the club being a separate entity, as previously).

The council’s plan for the ‘new’ club made no allusion to the notion of learning to drink in moderation, as had been the case in the 1970s. However, it did suggest that light beer should cost less at the club, to make it more attractive to drinkers, and that a proper cafe be opened, rather than a ‘greasy spoon’. The council and elders stressed their intention to eradicate the ‘sixpack clubs’ that allowed chosen individuals to drink large numbers of cans. In terms of policing the club, the plan stated that council members and elders would take an active role, and that a group of respected persons from different tribal groups wearing armbands would police the discipline of members during trading hours. The proposal also explicitly addressed the issue of revenue from the sale of alcohol. Whereas in previous years, club profits had been ploughed back into the club itself, ignoring the interests of the ‘large number of teetotal members of the community’ and providing benefit only to its patrons (the drinking population), the council stated that under its new plan, the club would be valuable as a means of directing thousands of dollars into the local economy. Specifically, under the new policy, the council planned: ‘to use

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46 Letter to the Liquor Commission signed by the Kardu Numida Council executive officer (Boniface Perdjert, a senior member of the landowning Diminin clan) and president (Leon Melpi) reporting on a council meeting at Wadeye on 8 September 1995.

the earning power of all commercial ventures at Wadeye to construct an Olympic size swimming pool, upgrade housing and allocate funds to government initiated work training schemes'.

In September 1995, the Liquor Commission agreed that the club could reopen. It gave Aboriginal women at Wadeye 10 days to look at the new rules and make changes, if desired. Presumably they did not object, because a licence was issued to the newly incorporated Kardu Numida Social Club Ltd. that allowed for opening hours from 5 to 7 pm Monday to Friday, and from 4 to 7 pm on Saturday (or 8 pm, depending on the football season).<sup>47</sup> The licence specified that four 375 mL cans could be sold per person, and that any proposal to change the limit would require a full report on social behaviour. Purchasing on behalf of another person was prohibited. The licence listed the rules of behaviour that had been drawn up by the council, including that anyone apprehended for an alcohol-related offence in Wadeye would be automatically suspended from the club for six months; women were not allowed to buy beer during pregnancy and for three months after giving birth; and there was to be a women-only area, designed to prevent men from taking beer from their wives or girlfriends.

These strategies constituted a determined attempt by all involved to make the club into the sort of drinking environment originally envisaged by Leary and his co-authors in 1975. The proposal coincided with the Northern Territory's Living with Alcohol (LWA) program, an ambitious prevention and education scheme funded by a small levy on alcoholic beverages that (as its title suggests) stressed the need for Territorians to accept and manage alcohol with moderation. The LWA program offered to help at Wadeye by training club staff and by giving the council ideas on safe management of clubs, drawn from a handbook then in preparation (Hunter & Clarence 1996). The Northern Territory's Chief Minister, who took a personal interest in the program, and the program's director were both supportive of sensible drinking policies for Aboriginal social clubs.<sup>48</sup>

The optimism accompanying these planned safeguards to governance and social control was short-lived. As it turned out, the Kardu Numida Council collapsed around this time—a result of its inability to respond to

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47 Licence Number 80801358, Kardu Numida Social Club Ltd., 21 September 1995, Nominee Stanley Robert Gibson.

48 Dr Shirley Hendy, pers comm, 13 August 2009.

the needs of the rapidly growing town (Desmarchelier 2001)—ushering in a long search for a more appropriate community governing structure. Soon after its rebranding and reopening in September 1995, the club closed again due to drunken brawls; customers had been receiving more than their four-can limit. In December, only three weeks after yet another reopening, young men broke into the club in the early hours of the morning and stole between 800 and 1,200 cartons of beer. A violent brawl erupted involving spears, boomerangs and firearms (Alcorn 1995): health clinic staff were evacuated and other community service providers were nervous. The chair of the Liquor Commission, John Maley, suspended the social club licence indefinitely and, despite sporadic calls for it to be reopened, the club remained closed.<sup>49</sup> Following this final closure, police reported a surge of public drunkenness in Darwin, which they attributed to Wadeye drinkers away from home.<sup>50</sup> In an extraordinary reaction to this development, the Assistant Commissioner of Police suggested that an Aboriginal licensed club should be developed in Darwin (Bane 1996).

## Analysing the events

Numerous historical, social and cultural factors contributed to the difficulties faced by the people of Wadeye as they tried to inaugurate and sustain a social club that was based, ostensibly, on the idea of ‘learning to drink’ in a manageable way. ‘Learning to drink’ might have been the goal articulated by the Leary team, and by the Catholic brothers who applied for the licence, but it was not (necessarily) the goal of the bulk of Wadeye drinkers. Learning new ways to drink was always going to be challenging at Wadeye.

## Social and demographic factors

The Port Keats–Wadeye region was known to be socially volatile. Although the Indigenous inhabitants had had friendly encounters with Macassan trepang fishermen in the eighteenth century (Hercus & Sutton 1986: 47), early European commentators, such as Alfred Searcy and WEH Stanner,

49 In April 1998, Wadeye council proposed yet another new liquor licence of some kind, a plan supported by the Liquor Commission registrar, David Rice. However, this never eventuated (*Northern Territory News* 1998).

50 It is difficult to establish the reliability of the claim that the ‘surge’ of public drunkenness in Darwin was caused by Wadeye people rather than drinkers from anywhere else.

described them as fearless, 'ferocious' and hostile to interlopers.<sup>51</sup> With six Indigenous language groups and 20 different clan estates in a region rich in natural food resources, battles and raids between the various language groups were not uncommon (Taylor 2004). The original Port Keats mission was founded in 1935. In 1939, it moved to Wadeye, a few kilometres away on the land of a Murrinh Patha-speaking people, the Yek Diminin. As happened elsewhere, the mission attracted Aboriginal people from a wide region, concentrating them, over a relatively short-time span (around 70 years), into one densely settled area. Although ceremonially allied, these groups had always been spatially dispersed.<sup>52</sup> Hence, relations between the different groups were often fraught. To lessen conflict and keep the peace, the first missionary introduced a rotation system in which only half the 'outside' groups could be in the community at any one time (Falkenberg 1962: 18). This demonstrates the extent to which Wadeye was, and still is, a complex community. Composed of a mixture of large and small clan groups, all of whom have affiliations requiring them to make compromises and to negotiate social arrangement and interactions with each other (Ivory 2009: 79), there were fractious social relationships to be managed at Wadeye long before the arrival of alcohol.

A dramatic expansion in the population complicated matters. There was a steady rise in population in the post-mission, self-management era. During the 1980s, there were an average of 50 births per annum. In 1985, when the community made its rather sudden transition from governance by the Catholic mission to self-management under the Kardu Numida Council, the population was estimated to be 1,156. By the mid-1990s, when the council collapsed, the population was estimated to be nearly 2,000 people (Taylor 2004). Not only had the population grown, but the ratio of young to old people had increased dramatically.<sup>53</sup> Stanner had warned of the implications of the growth of a youthful population for social disadvantage at Wadeye back in the 1960s; however, as John Taylor (2008: 217) observed, his prescient advice about increasing disadvantage went unheeded by government.

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51 The coastal area is dotted with tamarind trees planted by these visitors from Sulawesi.

52 In 2010, Wadeye had an estimated population of up to 2,500 people (Taylor 2010: 3).

53 This shift to a youthful population has continued due to improvements in child survival, a high fertility rate and high adult mortality: around half the population is now aged less than 18 (Taylor 2010: 10).

This meant that, at the time of the last concerted effort to open a viable social club in 1995, the older generation in the community were confronted by a crisis of authority and leadership. As Taylor's (2004, 2010) work on the demography of the region has shown, the considerable population momentum and rise in the number of youths and young adults overwhelmed community institutions such as the Kardu Numida Council. The weakening of customary means of community control, usually enacted by senior men and women, further complicating the situation (Desmarchelier 2001). From around 1987 onwards, youth gangs, or 'mobs', who named themselves after heavy metal bands and adopted their iconography, proliferated at Wadeye (cf. Brady 1992, Mansfield 2013: 154).<sup>54</sup> These pressures, and the demographic imbalance between young and old, created two colliding forces: a burgeoning youth sub-culture that included young men whose behaviour was antisocial (e.g. smashing the church windows), and who frequented the club and were unresponsive to adult remonstrations; and older people, such as Freddie Cumaiyi, who were able to invoke the necessary authority to recruit and direct participants in the risky plan to wreck the club.

### Legitimising intervention

It is neither common nor culturally acceptable for Aboriginal people (even senior people) to intervene as directly in the affairs of others as did Freddie Cumaiyi and his companions on the occasion of the club-wrecking. Numerous social scientists working in Aboriginal communities, including myself, have documented a distinct reluctance to interfere in other people's business, criticise their behaviour or attempt to persuade them to do something they do not wish to do—such as stop drinking or sniffing petrol (Myers 1979, Sansom 1980, Brady 1992, 2004). People resist being bossed around and have a strong sense of personal autonomy. The prevailing feeling, as David McKnight (2002: 206) observed, is that if someone wants to get drunk, they have the right to do so, and no one can stop them. This makes the action taken by Freddie Cumaiyi and the 'AA people' even more extraordinary.

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54 At Wadeye, the upsurge in metal 'mobs' coincided with the arrival of television and broadcasts of the music video program *Rage* (Mansfield 2013).

Although he was a senior man, Cumaiyi was not a member of the Kardu Diminin clan that owned the land on which the community, and the club, was located.<sup>55</sup> Arguably, in orchestrating the wrecking of the club, he was acting beyond the limits of his authority. Therefore, he had to strategically demonstrate that his actions had legitimacy. There were several events that provided him with sufficient justification for his action, but these still had to be socially and culturally sanctioned and legitimised. Cumaiyi had repeatedly and publicly expressed anxiety about the safety of women and children in the community: these were incontestable concerns that provided him with a socially acceptable justification for the action that he and others took. Expressing concern about the health and safety of children, especially, was unchallengeable, even by the drinkers or those in opposition to Cumaiyi's position. It is significant that the health workers' letters to the Liquor Commission also focused primarily on the effect of drinking on children.

As mentioned, the breaking of the church windows by drunks seems to have been the decisive insult that provided the final trigger for action to be taken. The assault on the church building was both actual and symbolic: it constituted a physical assault on a building that had been constructed by community members and it also represented an attack on the (Catholic) spiritual practice and values that permeated the lives of the older generation. For these reasons, it was a critical incident. Coming after a downward spiral of violence, unrest and homicide, it provided Cumaiyi and the non-drinkers with a recognisable excuse for action. In attacking the club, Cumaiyi and the members of the alcohol awareness group were inspired by the 'tough love' they had learned about in meetings: they were literally performing tough love through their actions, which demonstrated that they would no longer play the role of 'enablers' or 'co-dependents' in their relationships with drinkers.

Further legitimising his right to intervene in other people's business in this way, Cumaiyi reminded onlookers that he was a ceremonial man: a senior Law man held in high regard for his ceremonial involvement. He deliberately arrayed his body with signifiers of seniority and ceremonial significance: he wore body paint and a red loincloth (the *naga*) and he carried traditional weapons. In short, he created a performance. At Wadeye, the red *naga* is worn primarily for men's ceremonies, although

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55 However, Freddie's mother's country was located at a site called Wentek Nganayi, now an outstation, which was the location of the original Port Keats mission in 1935.

it is also worn at public dance performances.<sup>56</sup> Some observers recalled that Cumaiyi carried an axe and a woomera—the latter signified that he was a senior leader of a clan group. Significantly, the main weapon he carried was a shovel-nosed spear. The shovel spear, as opposed to the lighter, three-pronged ‘wire’ spear, is a serious weapon. Sometimes as ‘much as ten feet long’, it was the main hunting and fighting weapon:

It is bamboo-shafted and has a lanceolate blade laboriously rubbed down from iron fence-droppers or heavy-gauge roofing ... its efficacy is a function of the strength of the thrower’s arm, aided of course by his skill. (Stanner 1979: 75)

It was the spear with which Wadeye people had settled their differences in the past, and it still carries authority today. In wielding this spear, Cumaiyi effectively communicated his intention to fight, or at least to make a very strong statement. The spear demonstrated that he meant business.

The wrecking of the club showed that the community had reached a tipping point. The behaviour of young men had pushed others in the population beyond their customary level of tolerance. Like many other Aboriginal communities with alcohol in their midst, Wadeye residents had long tolerated high levels of disruption, sleeplessness, violence and abuse, dealing with it through unfrontational and indirect means. Thus, intra- and inter-community factors (which included the long history of disparate and fractious groups, the rapid population rise, the number of young people and their unrestrained behaviour, and the fragile local government) contributed to the decline in standards at the club and to high levels of social unrest and fearfulness in the community.

## Management and regulation issues

Apart from social volatility, there were other, proximate influences on the club’s fortunes and stability that led to its demise, such as the quality of various managers. In conversations about the club, Wadeye people often referred to the role of club managers; many volunteered the names of managers who they thought did a ‘good job’ as opposed to poor managers who put profits before people—‘more grog, more profit’. The wrecking of the club in 1988 occurred during the time of a profit-oriented manager.

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<sup>56</sup> The red *naga*, or loincloth, is worn by Aboriginal people in many top end NT communities for ceremonial and public dance performances. The term ‘*naga*’ was documented in 1879 as being the Woolner language term for ‘clothing, covering’.

In 1995, at the time of the attempted rearrangement of the club's governance structure, several interviewees recalled a well-liked manager, referred to here as 'GD':

[We] had pool tables when it was GD. He used to make sure boys only came once for their 4 cans. GD was best manager, he made a stage for band, had funds to go to the church and school, he helped them. When I used to work for GD, if people tried to get a second round, it wasn't fair, they would ban them and put their name on the board. There was a committee [the speaker was a member] met every fortnight to see how much money in there, how much they paid for barge [bringing supplies]. [It was] his own idea. He reckon, 'it's all your money, from the people'.

Other than undertaking the necessary checks required under the Liquor Act to ensure that a candidate was a 'fit and proper person' for the job, it seems that neither the Liquor Commission nor any other agency assisted the community to hire appropriate managers by advising them of the qualities to look for. The job of managing the club at Wadeye—indeed, managing any club in a remote Aboriginal community—arguably required much more than simply being a fit and proper person.

Clubs in Aboriginal communities are unusually demanding liquor licences to manage. They are often located in geographically isolated areas, which makes normal monitoring and inspections by authorised bodies more difficult. Wadeye is situated on the edge of coastal mangroves, 320 km southwest of Darwin, and is accessible by rough roads for only six months of the year. The club manager at Wadeye had to navigate competing pressures and interest groups within the community, and liaise with the local Aboriginal council (his employers) and the management committee of the club, while dealing firmly with a highly contentious and volatile commodity: alcohol. Making decisions about the revenue from alcohol sales, including the extent to which revenue could be sacrificed to minimise alcohol-related harms—matters that required a high degree of integrity and nerve—gave the club manager considerable power and influence. Liquor Commission policy and outreach did not extend to giving 'troubleshooting' advice on how to negotiate these local, social and cultural aspects of licensing in an Aboriginal setting. As far as the day-to-day matters of club management and operation went, the community was on its own. It did not always choose wisely.

Regulation issues were the responsibility of the Territory's Liquor Commission. The fact that a significant segment of the community had to resort to 'self-help' to deal with the club, reflected badly on the Commission.<sup>57</sup> Despite the accumulation of warning signs at Wadeye (i.e. violence, social unrest, homicide and the selection of inappropriate club managers), in the years and months prior to the wrecking, the only strategy brought to bear by the Liquor Commission was the relatively crude mechanism of closing the club, which it did periodically. According to Tangentyere Council (1991), the actions of the Liquor Commission revealed its 'indifference to the community's alcohol problems'. With its narrow concentration on administrative detail, the Liquor Commission represented a 'regime that was really remote from the lives of [the] people' (91, 94). Media representatives covering the Darwin court hearings in 1989 asked pointed questions about the Liquor Commission's role in the decline in standards at the Wadeye club, suggesting that the court case would bring 'new attention' to the Commission. One reporter asked McDonald whether he thought the Commission had been 'a little bit too easy going in keeping the Wadeye licence going?'<sup>58</sup> The solicitor replied that, while it was easy to criticise the Liquor Commission, it faced a huge problem:

Over nine years there were 26 suspensions of the licence. And in that time a person's hoped that things would get better. The track record is that it didn't. There were homicides, there were brawls, huge ugly and violent incidents. Finally, a large group of people said we've had enough, we can't take this anymore and took it upon themselves to close the club peaceably but effectively and I think the Liquor Commission really has got to think, 'now what do we do? Is the social evil caused by this club so great that we should contemplate a different course, or simply as the people said, we want the club closed down for ever?'

Throughout much of the period in question, the relationship between the Liquor Commission and Aboriginal communities (in general) was characterised by a 'lack of effective communication and ongoing consultation' (Race Discrimination Commissioner 1995: 54). In the years between 1986 and 1989, the Commission made numerous controversial

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57 After the trial of the club wreckers, one of the acquitted men urged other communities to follow their example and destroy their drinking clubs, implying that the situation in other communities' licensed outlets was also less than ideal (transcripts of ABC radio broadcasts 6 December 1989, Tangentyere Council 1991: 92).

58 ABC News Radio Darwin 6 December 1989. Transcribed from taped interviews provided by Colin McDonald and Jonathan Hunyor.

decisions that were perceived as unduly favourable to the liquor industry (Race Discrimination Commissioner 1995: 49).<sup>59</sup> Adding to its poor image, the chair of the Liquor Commission resisted suggestions that there should be greater Aboriginal representation on the Commission (Race Discrimination Commissioner 1995: 51).<sup>60</sup>

Apart from highlighting the inadequate responses of the Liquor Commission, the rise and fall of the Murrinh Patha Social Club provides some salutary lessons for the well-meaning Catholic fathers, brothers and nuns of the Mission of the Sacred Heart at Wadeye, as well as for the various branches of government dealing with health, alcohol management and liquor regulation. The history of the club demonstrates that good intentions and agreed upon rules of behaviour are not enough to influence what happens outside club hours and beyond club boundaries, especially in a fractious community in which interpersonal violence has become normalised, and community members have limited powers of persuasion over the behaviour of fellow residents.

## Grassroots activism

Notwithstanding a culturally embedded ethic of non-interference in, and tolerance of, other people's activities and freedoms, an accumulation of traumatic incidents or 'spark factors' may serve as a catalyst, pushing people beyond their limits (May et al. 1993, Edwards et al. 2000). The orchestrated attack on the club at Wadeye is a vivid example.

The incident happened at the beginning of series of community mobilisations—mostly led by Aboriginal women—that took the form of public demonstrations outside liquor outlets, petitions and marches against grog. Beginning in the late 1980s as a truly grassroots movement, and gathering momentum in the 1990s, Aboriginal community

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59 Controversial decisions under Liquor Commission Chair KG Rae included the granting of a bottle shop licence to the Gap Hotel in Alice Springs in 1986, despite numerous objections from the community; in 1989, the Commission renewed the Curtin Springs takeaway licence (near Uluru), in the face of a barrage of objections. The hearing was later the subject of a Northern Territory Supreme Court appeal, after which the Commission's decision was reviewed (Race Discrimination Commissioner 1995: 45, note 181). In March 1989, the Commission, under Rae, granted a takeaway licence for Eraldunda roadhouse, despite evidence from numerous witnesses of the enormous alcohol-related problems faced by Aboriginal communities in that region of central Australia (*Centralian Advocate* 23 March 1989).

60 Tangentyere Council suggested that the Liquor Commission should appoint one person with Aboriginal health expertise and have some Aboriginal advisory committees (Westman 1989).

activism around alcohol abuse can be likened to an Aboriginal women's temperance movement (see Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion). Women's participation in the attack on the Murrinh Patha Club served to embolden Aboriginal women elsewhere. On Bathurst (one of the Tiwi Islands), Aboriginal women began to agitate against drunken behaviour in December 1988. At the request of the mother's club there and the Nguiu Council, the Liquor Commission cancelled all personal permits to possess alcohol on Bathurst Island, making it illegal to drink anywhere other than at the Nguiu Club (O'Loughlin 1988). When it became apparent that this strategy was not working, Aboriginal women on Bathurst Island threatened to close down the club, citing 'big trouble' there, fighting, drunkenness and the continued service of intoxicated people (Bonner 1989: 3). Bathurst Island and Wadeye shared close associations and communication networks: both were (former) Catholic missions and Aboriginal residents and Catholic brothers frequently moved between the two locations.<sup>61</sup> The diffusion of direct action ideas against drinkers was, therefore, not surprising.

Eighteen months after the Wadeye club attack, in July 1990, several hundred women from Pitjantjatjara communities on the South Australia – Northern Territory border, marched on a remote roadhouse at Curtin Springs, made speeches in opposition to its liquor licence and presented a letter to the Liquor Commission calling for restrictions on sales of takeaway alcohol. Their activism continued for several years until restrictions were eventually achieved. The three Aboriginal women leading the action were aware of what had happened at Wadeye, and were inspired by the active role taken by female health workers and members of the AA group there.<sup>62</sup> In March 1993, Aboriginal women from Hermannsburg travelled to Alice Springs to demonstrate against the granting of a liquor licence at a delicatessen. This relatively small action was followed by a highly publicised and much bigger 'march against grog' in Alice Springs, which involved hundreds of Aboriginal men, women and children from five remote communities (*Northern Territory News* 1993: 6, Brady 2004: 84). Like Freddie Cumaiyi, these women expressed fears about the future of their children and grandchildren, thereby deploying culturally acceptable reasons to justify their interventionist stance. These events are explored more fully in the next chapter.

61 Brother Howley and Father Leary spent time at both missions.

62 These leaders were Tjikalyi Colin, Nora Ward and Mantatjara Wilson (Maggie Kavanagh, pers comm, 26 September 2014).

The ruins of the Murrinh Patha Social Club still stand today, inscribed with identifying tags and graffiti of the different gangs that are prevalent in the community, primarily the Judas Priests and the Evil Warriors. Many Wadeye residents travel to the club at Peppimenarti to drink: others travel further afield to obtain grog; some drinkers have road accidents, and some die as a result. People at Wadeye continue to debate whether to have a club again. In 2009, one of Freddie Cumaiyi's descendants observed:

Don't reckon we'll have a club again. Lot of trouble. It's better this way. Young boys—trouble. Bonnie [Boniface Perdjert] was talking about getting the club back but we said 'no club'. [We] might as well just go to Darwin.

This text is taken from *Teaching 'Proper' Drinking?: Clubs and pubs in Indigenous Australia*, by Maggie Brady, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.