

Barddabardda Wodjenangorddee: We're Telling All of You

by Donny Woolagoodja and Janet Oobagooma, compiled
and written in collaboration with the Dambeemangaddee
people and Valda Blundell, Kim Doochan, Daniel Vachon,
Malcolm Allbrook, Mary Anne Jebb and Joh Bornman

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Barddabardda Wodjenangorddee: We're Telling All of You is essentially Dambeemangaddee people's deep history. In their closing words, oral historians Donny Woolagoodja and Janet Oobagooma reiterate the catalyst for having their history and culture documented:

Since aalmara (white people) came here they thought that they owned our country but we know from old people that this is our country and cultural place. We know from old people how to live in our country. Other people should respect that like we respect other Traditional Owners and their country (Donny Woolagoodja, p. 403).

Janet Oomagooma tells us:

we old people are getting tired and we just want to make sure our younger generation knows the right ways for our country and feels strong to keep the culture and country healthy like it has been from the day it was created (p. 404).

As respected senior holders of Dambeemangaddee knowledge and wisdom, both are well-qualified contributors to this book.

As a Nigena (Nyikina) woman from the West Kimberley, I am familiar with people's names and places, and I was aware of the important work by Ngarinyin cultural and spiritual educator David Mowaljarlai in *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive*; and by Kwini man Ambrose Mungala Chalarimeri in *The Man from the Sunrise Side*.

I was delighted, then, to be in a position to learn about more of the belief systems from the north-west Kimberley, this time from the perspectives of Woddordda (Worora or Worrorra), and I have not been disappointed.

Barddabardda Wodjenangorddee is a thoughtfully constructed book that is comprehensive, detailed and user-friendly, thus accessible to a wide audience. Its 25 chapters are organised into six parts. The first two revisit long-established stories about Lalai (creation) and *dambeema* (land and sea) and encounters with Europeans. Notably, the Wandjina etchings and paintings are affirmed. Parts three to six, convey the essence of *dambeena*, its people and the deep events of Lalai.

The name ‘Dambeemangaddee people’ emerged in 2011 following a determination of their native title claim that is made up of Woddordda, Yawjabai, Oomeday and Oonggarddangoowai peoples. Oral historians, cited verbatim throughout the book, are presented in italicised Arial font, while sitting alongside them are academic descriptions presented in peach-coloured boxes. In collaboration with the traditional owners, Valda Blundell, Kim Doohan, Daniel Vachon, Malcolm Allbrook, Mary Anne Jebb and Joh Bornman explain place and space and shifts in culture. Janet Oobagooma with Leah Umbagi, meantime, point out that the pronunciation of Woddordda words are being lost under orthographical spellings, so they devised their own system for this work that will allow their youth to more easily recognise and pronounce Woddordda words correctly (p. 18). Beautifully depicted throughout the book are impressive colour and black-and-white images of people, landscapes, rock engravings and traditional seafaring life. Provided, too, are useful maps of the region, though a map with the many Dambeemangaddee placenames would have been helpful.

The researchers emphasise that, despite being forced to move away from their country, Dambeemangaddee’s history has continued to be powerfully expressed. Forced onto missions and stations, their knowledge of country survives in their oral traditions. Even among the mixed-languages at Mowanjum, close to Derby, where they live away from country, histories of saltwater and maritime identities are embedded in poems, paintings, songs and stories. This book complements the research already done in the region by missionaries like Rev. J.R.B. Love and Howard Coate and the anthropologist A.P. Elkin. Their work, however, has often been inaccessible to Dambeemangaddee and other non-academic peoples.

Barddabardda Wodjenangorddee, then, brings to life the events that shaped the lives of the old people who looked after country. Dambeemangaddee people’s rich archive of oral traditions is a reminder that Lalai did not begin when white people arrived. I was pleased to learn that Lalai is the Dambeemangaddee name for creation. Like Tjukurpa in Central Australia, Lalai is not called ‘The Dreaming’, the title bestowed on Australia’s first peoples’ belief systems by Westerners. The very word ‘dream’ implies something that can be easily dismissed. Lalai is linked to beliefs

about Woongudd (conception), the life force that is the entire Wandjina-Woongudd worldviews. Lalai stories include Indonesian fishermen, before *aalmara*, and details about conflicts with their neighbours over land. Stories provide useful connections for families like the beautifully related Woongudd story of conception in Chapter 2; and, in Chapter 12, the profoundly worded (and highlight of the book for me) Duloogu – the realm of the dead.

As handed down by the traditional owners, Dambeemangaddee history and their worldview reaches far beyond written historical accounts. It goes deep into the country itself and the events that shaped land formations together with the longstanding relationships between people, animals, the land and the sea. The 200-year Western documentation is but a pinprick in the long history of the Dambeemangaddee lands and culture. In this book, they tell all of us, it is crucial that their areas are cared for by the traditional owners. Too much has already been disregarded since the intrusion by Westerners into Aboriginal societies. Too many accounts of the region's history and culture are from Western perspectives, and too many writers have not named the Dambeemangaddee elders and people. They tell all of us that their ancestors led rich and complex lives, and that they were not all affected in the same way by past events.

Dambeemangaddee's continued connections to country, connections that have never been lost, are now affirmed in this book that brings them to life along with the events that shaped the lives of the old people who looked after country. Dambeemangaddee seem satisfied with this collaborative work, which will prove to be an essential and timely resource not only for countrimin (local Aboriginal peoples), but for scholars and researchers alike.

References

Chalarimeri, Mungala 2001, *The Man from the Sunrise Side*, Magabala Books, Broome, WA.

Mowaljarlai, David 1993, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive*, Magabala Books, Broome, WA.

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