Nolan Hunter

BARDI, JAWI AND YARUWU, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

NOLAN HUNTER'S JAPANESE AND ENGLISH great-grandfathers came to the north-west Kimberley region, in Western Australia, to work in the pearling industry. His Japanese great-grandfather was a pearl shell diver. His English great-grandfather was a 'black birdie', who kidnapped Aboriginal people to dive for pearl. Both men settled down with Aboriginal women. His Aboriginality on his mother's side is Bardi, the people on the northern tip of Cape Leveque, and Jawi, neighbouring the Bardi on the western islands of the Bonaparte Archipelago. On his father's side, Nolan is Yaruwu, the people from the region north of Broome up to Cape Leveque.

Nolan now lives in Broome, but he had an interesting upbringing in a lepersarium in Derby, a small town to the east of Broome at the bottom of King Sound. Like most people from the coast around Broome, Nolan identifies himself as a 'saltwater' person. He told me that 'Everything we do revolves around the sea'. He also told me he loves hunting, fishing, and diving. When I interviewed him, he was getting ready to go spearfishing at the Broome jetty.

He was excited to tell me about his diving experiences. 'I started when I was young and I still dive today and do a lot of spear fishing. I've had a lot of close calls with different sharks... so many times!'

'You were saying you're going to the Broome jetty. Wasn't there a crocodile caught there not long ago?' I asked.

Without a hint of concern, Nolan replied, 'Yeah, yeah, well, they did shoot one up here only a couple weeks ago. He was a four-meter crocodile, hanging around near the jetty, getting too friendly with people. He was eyeing them off to eat them, I think.'
He went on, now with concern, but for the crocodile that was sizing up humans for a feel. "The rangers shot him, poor thing. I don't like it when they shoot the poor things, because that's their country, the sea, and they could either move away or shoot them. But they do need to think about people's safety. I can understand that."

He said, I've died there when there's been crocs there, and my brother's seen some underwater up the coast and I've seen them in the water here. We just look at each other and we just come to an understanding. Nolan explained that some of his people aren't afraid of crocodiles. He told me how the old people would speak to the crocodile, telling them not to attack.

Nolan's Aboriginal ancestors peacefully occupied the Dampier Peninsula region and adjacent islands, north of Broome, for more than 40,000 years. I say peacefully with confidence. As Palawa author Bruce Pascoe has pointed out in his book Dark Laws, the complex social structures and the development of Aboriginal languages – in addition to an oral history that precedes the Ice Age – tell us of a continuous culture unaffected by large-scale warfare and genocidal conquest. First Nations have a model of harmonious coexistence that all humanity can learn from. A model that was only disrupted when the British arrived.

Makassan fishermen came before the British. They began seasonal visits to Nolan's ancestral home in the seventeenth century to harvest sea-cucumber, also known as trepang. Trepang was a highly valued commodity in Makassar on the island of Sulawesi, which is modern-day Indonesia. Relations between the Makassans and the Aboriginal people of the north-west coast of the Kimberley were mostly peaceful. They traded, worked together, shared technology and learnt and absorbed language. There was also intermarriage. There was a markedly different impact on the Bararl, Jawa, and Yawuru people when the British people arrived.

One of the earliest recorded encounters was on 17 September 1869. British explorer Phillip Parker King observed Balanggara Aboriginal people harvesting turtle eggs and burning vegetation on Lizard Island. The explorers must have thought little of the happy people they observed. The British colonisers assessed the inhabitants as hunters and gatherers; mere savages who lived from day to day; a people who did not have the capacity for agriculture. They had a Eurocentric measure of humankind, and their assessment was wilfully wrong. Today we know from many academic works and from the descendants of those Balanggara people that they were harvesting yam on the islands of the archipelago. This was a practice that existed throughout the entire continent and its adjacent islands. Also, Aboriginal people burned the vegetation in a controlled way in accordance with their laws and customs, ensuring that the burning was beneficial, not destructive. The fire was used as a form of agriculture, and today this fact is becoming harder to ignore.

The explorers were soon followed to the Kimberley by settlers seeking their fortunes as the British colonies expanded in the late nineteenth century. According to Aboriginal oral history, they perpetrated massacres on Nolan's ancestral homelands almost immediately upon their arrival. Journal entries and official government records tell us that the massacres continued across the Kimberley into the late 1920s, and there are examples of terrible brutality in the decades beyond.

With the arrival of settlers and industry, came the enslavement of Aboriginal people. I think it's fair to call work for rations 'slavery'. Aboriginal people were slaves on the land, working for the cattle barons, and they became slaves on the sea when the valuable pearl shell oyster, prevalent in the pristine shallow tropical waters that belonged to Nolan's people, brought a new wave of fortune seekers. The pearl shell was in great demand before plastics; it is a hard material with pretty lustre, suitable for decorative buttons and handles. Black lives did not matter to the invading colonists in their pursuit of fortune.

Nolan Hunter is an Elder in his late fifties. When we sat down to talk, he had just returned to Broome after a year of leave without pay from his position as CEO of the Kimberley Land Council. He spent this time at Westpac in Sydney, learning agri-business and discovering how financing works. His intention was to learn what he could, so that he could return and improve the economic opportunities for the people of the Kimberley.
Although he swims with crocodiles, Nolan comes across as a very practical, sensible person. In all my dealings with him since we met at the Melbourne triad constitutional dialogue in late 2016, Nolan has always been kind and helpful to me. He began the interview by telling me, with a sense of utter calm and his usual gentle demeanour, about his childhood in a leprosarium.

"We were one of the first families to go to the Aboriginal reserve in Derby. When they built housing at the Derby Aboriginal reserve, the houses were just tin boxes. There was no insulation, just tiny tin boxes. Nobody lived inside of them much, because everybody was outside on the verandah. It was too bloody hot and crowded. You did all your living and sitting outside in the cool during the day in the hot times. There were lots of health problems.

"My mother was taken off me when I was very young. They quarantined her in a leprosarium. So, in my earlier years I was brought up between grandmothers. When mum came out, I got put in the leprosarium with my brother. I was only about four or five years old. So, I was put in a leprosarium, though I had tuberculosis."

There were many leprosanias – institutions for people with leprosy – built across the north of Australia. The Derby leprosarium, called Bunganun, was established in 1936 in response to rising numbers of Indigenous people who were becoming afflicted with health issues. Displaced from their land, they were losing their way of life, and the impact on their physical well-being was enormous and long-lasting.

At that time, little was known about leprosy, also called Hansen’s disease. Today, we know that it mainly affects the skin and nerves and is mildly infectious. It has varying effects on the body, from disfigurement, blindness and sores, to benign effects that cause little hindrance to a long and healthy life.

Bunganun had approximately 1200 Aboriginal inmates throughout its fifty years of operation. Many were misdiagnosed, found and taken by what were known as ‘leper patrols’, manned by police and Black trackers. The patrols would terrorise families, sometimes making surprise raids on camps to steal victims away, often in heavy linked neck chains. Many of those Aboriginal people spent their entire lives at the Derby leprosarium – 350 Indigenous people died there, and most were buried in unmarked graves. Only three white people were ever quarantined at the Derby leprosarium.

Before Bunganun was built, the Western Australian government shipped the Kimberley Aboriginal people, who were to be quarantined, to the Northern Territory, where the Commonwealth government had established a leprosarium on Channel Island. I fish around this island in Darwin Harbour and know it well. It is rocky and barren. The island is surrounded by mangroves and is swarming with midges. Those people who went to the leprosarium near Darwin first had to endure a long trip by sea on a small vessel. They were compelled to stay below deck in cramped, unhygienic conditions. Once they arrived in the Northern Territory, they were far from their families and unsure if they would ever see them again.

"I met a lot of old people at the leprosarium that had been there since they were young, they'd been there forever," Nolan said of Bunganun. "Then, later on, I heard that when they finally closed the
leprosarium down in 1986, they said to these people, "You can go home now." They were like, "Well, this was my home all my life." There were lots of sad stories like this. Them old people were like, "I've been here since I've been a little girl," like that. Now they're an old woman, it was really sad because that's the only home they knew. They'd been so long in quarantine.

As Nolan spoke about the old people he'd loved, his voice was heavy with sadness and affection. A lot of the old people have passed away now, but when I was a kid in the leprosarium, they looked after me because there weren't many kids. They'd been taken from their kids, or their baby was taken away, sent to different places. There was so much love there from the old people, because lots of them didn't have children. We got special treatment. Christmases, things like that were great. So much love.

When Nolan left the leprosarium he went to schools in Broome and Perth. He finished school in year 10, moving on as a young man to 'aimlessly seek experiences' in various jobs. When I asked him about that time, he laughed, and then said thoughtfully, 'My reflection about that is that you know, I guess many of us start off on a similar kind of journey until you find your purpose... it's harder for kids these days in that, well, we didn't have the influence of drugs and alcohol.'

Nolan's working life began on Burrup country at the tip of Cape Leveque in a community named One Arm Point. The community is named after a spearman who had an accident fishing with dynamite. One Arm Point was established when the nearby Sunday Island Mission closed down. When everybody left the mission on Sunday Island in the 1960s, many of the Aboriginal people ended up in the scrub and on Joluga Beach at One Arm Point there. They were digging fresh water out of the sand dunes to survive, just carting water... There was nothing there. People were just living in their little tents and akubras, makeshift sheltering. I was there to build housing. The houses we were building were with those old panels - took ten men to lift one panel and we'd use a rivet gun to secure them in place.

Nolan resisted working in the painting and cattle industries where most of his family found employment. Instead, he did odd jobs, such as driving a tip truck in the Broome town centre, but he soon found his calling.

'I knew a guy by the name of Jimmy Webb, he was working for the Commonwealth. He helped me get a field officer role with the Commonwealth government. Jimmy is now running a dance troupe that's quite popular, Wadawurrung Aboriginal Dance Group. He's a Noongar fella and still a good mate of mine. Though I probably only see him every five to ten years now.

'I worked for the Commonwealth government for around fourteen years. I had different jobs, I was running remote area operations with the old social service, the old DA (Department of Aboriginal Affairs). I was a project officer. I worked in the types of roles where you're out in the field visiting communities.'

As Nolan took me through the places he'd worked, he would occasionally laugh to himself. There were memories he didn't need to share and I could tell he enjoyed his work in many Aboriginal communities. I loved the communities in the Northern Territory; I loved the Western Desert area...
I came back ten and a half years ago to take up employment with the Kimberley Land Council as Deputy CEO. Since coming back from overseas I’ve really just put all of my focus on what I can give back to my community around all the things we deal with, whether it’s engaging with governments or industry, or different stakeholders. Hopefully to try and contribute to the social and socioeconomic circumstances of Kimberley Aboriginal people.

Now, Nolan is the CEO of the Kimberley Land Council. He said the establishment of the first ranger program is one of the great achievements of the KLC. The program employs Traditional Owners in remote communities to eradicate harmful weeds, monitor turtle and dugong stocks, and keep a watch on the coastal environment, as well as many other great initiatives to care for country. The rangers’ initiatives are valuable because they are developed from the ancient knowledge of the people who are so intimately connected to the sea and land.

Nolan explained how the celebrated outcomes of the programs came from hard work, determination, and many visits to Canberra. He also said that it can be frustrating work because government policy is inconsistent, changing from government to government, from election to election. He said it’s up to the whim of the politicians who, unlike the consistency of the tides of his coastal home, are irregular and unpredictable. Nolan acknowledged one certainty though – he said that the people of the Kimberley today have opportunity because his Elders fought for it. The Kimberley Land Council was established after the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley fought with the government and an ignorant mining company in the Noonkanbah Dispute more than forty years ago.

“When you think about how the KLC started, we started out of a protest,” Nolan reflected. “That old guard fought for our rights in the Noonkanbah Dispute, where there was a mining company who wanted to mine in a sacred land area. Everybody marched and protested and that’s how the organisation was born. The unions were important in that dispute. They’ve been front and centre with supporting Indigenous people over the years. Not only in the Noonkanbah Dispute. The Gurindji Walk Off Wall off as well.”

Great things happen when our people come together, which led me to ask Nolan what he thought about his experience at Uluru.

“I think when we completed the discussions in Uluru, and we all had the information, there might have been some of us with a difference of opinion, but I think the really good thing was that people were able to put aside their differing ideas, any disagreements, and we focused on what we could agree with. Something like 99 per cent of us agreed on a Voice in the Constitution.

‘Coming to that agreement was really special. We came together from this wide range of places and perspectives. It was the best we could possibly get, given the limitations on the resources to get people there and all that sort of stuff. You had a good distribution of types of key individuals, key organisations, Native Title groups – from a variety of perspectives. It’s not like you can bring 3 per cent of Australia – the whole Indigenous population – to one meeting. People need to be realistic about that.

‘Something that struck me as interesting was – and I realised this after Uluru – I came to the realisation that people weren’t talking about anything new in a sense, because a Voice to make our own decisions is something our mob have been calling for this whole time. Our leaders. People like Pat Dodson, Wayne Bergman, Peter Yu. People like John Watson, Joe Brown, all the old guys. Pearly Gordon, Irene Davie. Like in that old footage that Rachel Perkins worked on for us – we’ve been saying to governments that they must listen to us. And to do that, we need that structure with good governance. We need that mechanism in the constitution that governments must properly engage with. A Voice for us is a win – a win for all. Governments should have seen this as a best opportunity ever.”

I liked what Nolan had to say. He remained calm as he spoke of our collective frustrations, though his passion emphasised each word. I looked at my watch and realised we were well past the time I promised to end the interview. Nolan was eager to finish. The tide was almost right for a dive with his speargun, his favourite pastime. I said I wanted to ask him one more very important question.

As always, he was accommodating. I said, “On the matter of a First Nations Voice Referendum, what would you say to the Australian people?”

Nolan’s answer was ready and certain. “I think that we shouldn’t underestimate the Australian people. You can imagine people would’ve been uncertain leading up to the 1967 referendum. Yet it was a resounding result. We should give a First Nations Voice Referendum a real red hot go. We need to, because to win means there can be some improvement to the relationship between Australians and Indigenous people. With a Voice, we can improve the treatment of our people so that Australia can heal as a country. This country can’t keep doing business the same old way, because we keep getting the same result and that’s not good enough. Here in the Kimberley, we have one of the highest suicide rates in the world.

“The Uluru Statement was from the people, for the people. We shouldn’t be afraid of losing a referendum on this. It’s bullshit that we’ll never get a chance to embrace a First Nations Voice again. I don’t believe that. We must win, and if we don’t, we just try again.”