

Symposium Presentation No. 5

Barringgi Gadyin – The Wimmera River and Wotjobaluk Connection to Country

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Transcript edited by Dr Peter Mitchell, Biolinks Alliance

Note: this transcript is best read together with the powerpoint.

Darren Griffin

I'd like to start off by acknowledging and paying my respects to the Traditional Owners of this area, the *Jadawadjali* and the *Djab Wurrung*. My name's Darren Griffin, I'm an archaeologist and I work for the *Barengi Gadjin* Land Council. I'll talk a little bit more about that and the other groups in a minute. I'll also introduce Ben Muir. He is actually a *Wotjobaluk* Traditional Owner and a Cultural Water Officer working for the Wimmera CMA.

Barringgi Gadyin is the *Wergaia* name for the whole entire system of the Wimmera River. As you probably know, traditionally the river in dry times went down to a series of waterholes and then, when it flooded, it flooded across the whole landscape into all those waterholes, through all those systems, and it was all connected.

We've already talked about connections today. What I wanted to talk about is traditional Aboriginal society. Jon Fawcett mentioned waterholes. There was a whole range of everything in the landscape and it was connected. Land has been separated from water. This symposium is about the water and the connections. In a traditional society everything was connected - land, water, people, the past, those kinds of things.

I wanted to go through a quick history of the Wimmera River. But I don't think we really have time for that, so I'll skip through things quite quickly, just pull out a few major points and then I'll hand over to Ben and he can talk about one of the projects that we've been doing. We've got a lot of projects on the go, a lot of stuff that's been sponsored by the

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Cultural Flows program. I'll let Ben talk about just one example of the projects that we're looking at.

Barengi Gadjin's mission statement is "Traditional Owners working together as custodians of culture, country, heritage, law and language". They're all part of Aboriginal cultural heritage. Traditional Owners have a cultural, ethical and legal responsibility to manage their cultural heritage on country. Land and water are fundamental to the cultural heritage and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. It's the core of all spirituality and this relationship to the spirit of country is what needs to be protected and celebrated. That's our main role as part of the Land Council, and all Land Councils that you'll come across in Victoria and across Australia have a role to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage. The new legislation that's come in in the past 20 years or so has caught up with what Traditional Owners have been culturally and ethically doing on country anyway.

One of the groups that we represent is the *Wergaia* to the north. Another language group I talked about before is the *Jadawadjali* from here across to the Grampians all the way to the border and up to Lake Buloke. We've also got the *Wotjobaluk*, *Jaadwa* and *Yupagulk* people. The whole area includes the Grampians, the Wimmera and southern Mallee area.

We have legal authority for the *Wotjobaluk* claim area under the Native Title Act. The *Wotjobaluk* Native Title claim was the first in southeast Australia, in 2005. And we're a registered Aboriginal party under the Aboriginal Heritage Act that came in in 2006. So we're talking about fairly recent legislation, 2005/2006, and that's when Aboriginal peoples' rights to manage their cultural heritage, to manage their country came back, were given back to them basically. The Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) in Victoria at the moment closely follow the native titles. So people have been given the native title for these areas, and this kind of matches the state cultural heritage legislation. *Barengi Gadjin* is one of the RAPs. Others are *Martang* and *Eastern Maar* that represent the *Djab Wurrung*. I mention this along the border of *Djab Wurrung* and *Jadawadjali* country. *Gunditj Murring* and *Dja Dja Wurrung* were mentioned in previous talks.

We've got a membership of about 250 Traditional Owners, people who can prove their links to apical ancestors on the native title claim. If you work in this area, you'll probably recognise some of the surnames. And they're all descendants of the people listed. In anthropology, when they talk about apical ancestors, it's the furthest we can go back in historical records. So Ben for example has apical ancestors Thomas Marks born in 1844 and Captain Harrison.

I'll skip quickly through the history of the Wimmera River and Aboriginal peoples' connection to it. It's a long history. Recent archaeological and genetic evidence suggests that Aboriginal people were pretty much over the whole of Australia 50,000 years ago. 50,000 years - that's pretty mind blowing kind of time to think about. And when you think about how we as humans think about such deep time, it's usually in religious ways. For Aboriginal people, that moment of creation is when human beings became conscious and

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we had language and we started naming things. This is what's all encapsulated in what we call the Dreamtime.

All religions had that same thing about trying to describe and connect with the moment of creation. Aboriginal people were here for a long time and, through ceremony and art and dance and all those kinds of things, we can connect with our ancestors and the Dreamtime.

6,000 years ago, the sea levels and the climate began to stabilise. This happened all over the world, and that's why you get the rise of more complex societies. That's what happened here in Australia. You have the more complex hunter gatherers. You've got a thing called intensification where people are more semi-sedentary, they start developing aquaculture and agriculture. Things like mounds. There's an increase in population and you get this really complex kinship system and land management system that was around at the time of contact with Europeans. In Ararat, we are on the border between the *Jadawadjali* and the *Djab Wurrung*, and further north are *Wergaia* and some of the other languages. This is what we had at the time of first contact.

I'll just skip through the contact stuff, but just talk about the Mission, which is very important. All of those apical ancestors were moved onto Ebenezer Mission from 1859. But the thing to realise is that Aboriginal people still kept that connection to the Wimmera River especially, but to all those other places on their country. The Wimmera River was the heart, where they could seek refuge back at times of violence and at hard times.

The Missions were set up as a response to stop the violence against Aboriginal people. The missions were a last ditch attempt and not everyone thought that the missions would work. Ebenezer Mission was the first one and it actually proved to be successful in the eyes of the people running the Victorian Parliament at the time. This is because someone converted to Christianity. His name was Nathaniel Pepper. Before that, people were saying there's no point having missions, Aboriginal people will never convert to Christianity, they're just going to die out. So Ebenezer was quite important in that history. A lot of the missions followed after that because of the success of Ebenezer.

There's a whole range of reasons why. Governor La Trobe was Moravian and he brought in Moravian missionaries and gave them a lot of support. So Ebenezer has quite a central part in the history of Victoria. And of course, it was important for all those groups that I talked about because they were moved onto Ebenezer and it became a kind of a refuge. And it's right on the Wimmera River.

There's a few pictures of the mission. One photograph from 1892 has all those people listed - the apical ancestors and their children. They are all the great grandparents and grandparents of the Traditional Owners who are around today and are members of BGLC. So you can see that continual connection to the river to the country. Ebenezer Mission is now owned and managed by *Barengi Gadjin*.

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I just want to quickly mention one of the pieces of legislation that came in after the missions were set up. It's become known as the Half Caste Act. Someone told me that when that was being debated in Parliament there was a Water Act, one of the first Water Acts and I think it was debated for three and a half days and the Half-Caste Act for a very short time.

End of recording. The history continues on the Powerpoint through to the first successful Native Title consent determination in south-eastern Australia on 13 December 2005.

Ben Muir

"The *Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia* and *Jupagalk* people have stories handed down through their generations about the importance and value of the Wimmera River. Wimmera CMA and *Barengi Gadjin* Land Council are supporting local Aboriginal communities in gathering this knowledge and sharing these stories as part of a new water project. The project aims to ensure local Traditional Owner values and uses of water are better incorporated in water resource planning and management in Victoria." Quoted from [*River Yarns – the Lower Wimmera River Aboriginal Water project. Celebrating the cultural stories of the Wimmera River.*](#)

Ben spoke about the Lower Wimmera River Aboriginal Water Project funded from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program and DELWP. The project includes cultural values recording for the Lower Wimmera River, and targeted archaeological survey along *Krumelak* (Outlet Creek) from *Gurru* (Lake Hindmarsh) to *Ngelbakutya* (Lake Albacutya).

The creek has large numbers and a diverse range of scarred trees, many in excellent condition. The majority were made on Black Box or Grey Box trees almost equally, with a small number on Red Gums. Bark was used for canoes, houses, possum skin stretching and curing boards (bunya boards) for clothing and boomerangs.

One of the indicators of intensification of land use here in Australia is the increase in the use of mounds. These included large mounds in wetland areas to provide habitation centres, garden beds for cultivated plants, burial sites for small groups and individuals, and the repeated use and accumulation of earth ovens. The ovens were used for cooking Murnong and other plants gathered by women, and shellfish from the local lakes and swamps. There is also evidence that Indigenous groups dug drains and built fish traps in lakes and swamps.

Editor's note: Ben Muir's talk was not recorded due to a technology fail. But the message is clear about the ways local Aborigines lived in their country. Aboriginal stories and archaeological research are expanding our knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and the ways we can work together to value and care for the country.