

SHIRLEY PURDIE AND GORDON BARNEY ON MABEL DOWNS STATION

Photographer: Darren Clark

The recognition of the importance of the spiritual connection that indigenous Australians have with the land allows white Australians to feel secure in their national identity and with their connection. How many times have you been told that Australia has no culture when in-fact it has the oldest living culture on Earth. Scientists say that Aboriginal people occupied the Kimberley region for at least 70,000 years before the arrival of European Australian settlers and the Aboriginal people themselves believe that they were created here at the beginning of time. A period which the Gija people of the Warmun area refer to as “Ngarranggarni”.

IMAGE No.	FORMAT	DATE	COMMENTS
BA2840/832	Digital	September 2018	Shirley Purdie searching for honey bag bees in the countryside, just out of Warmun in the East Kimberley.
BA2840/833	Digital	September 2018	A portrait of Shirley Purdie with her trusty axe she uses to chop hollow branches down when searching for the honey of native black bees.
BA2840/834	Digital	September 2018	There are many types of native bees. A careful eye and great tracking skills enable indigenous Australians to follow native bees back to their nests high in hollow trees. The tree is usually chopped down and the contents of the hive is removed and placed in a cup. The contents include honey, wax, yellow pollen balls and dead bees.

			Honey is seen as a much prized bush food and is often given as a gift. A large quantity of honey and pollen mixed with water is used to clean the gut.
BA2840/835	Digital	September 2018	When the car stopped Shirley got out and pointed to two hills in the distance and said that for thousands of years her elders remains had been placed in-between the rocks at the base of each hill. Over time the remains have broken down and are now part of the foundations of this country. When the indigenous say that they are the country, they mean it literally.
BA2840/836	Digital	September 2018	Shirley Purdie and her granddaughter Lola Purdie making their way to the riverbed so Shirley can show Lola the place that Shirley was born. A child's identity is derived from a particular place marked by a spiritual and totemic ancestry. So important is this tie of indigenous people to a specific place, they perceive the land around them filled with marks of individual and ancestral origins as it is dense with story and myth.
BA2840/837	Digital	September 2018	As we walked up the dried riverbed I was overcome with a strong sense of belonging. This land has been part of Shirley's family for thousands of years and she was doing her best to make sure that the next generation understands the significance of Mabel Downs.
BA2840/838	Digital	September 2018	Lola standing on the rock where her grandmother Shirley Purdie was born so long ago. Shirley said that the rock comes out of the riverbed at different times of the year, so what we were looking at is just the tip of a huge river rock buried in sand. Over the years I have been to a number of birth sites like this one with different indigenous friends, it never fails to amaze me just how strong the connection to country is felt when I am standing in these locations.
BA2840/839	Digital	September 2018	Shirley's granddaughter Lola trying her best to take everything in. It must be an amazing feeling to walk with your Grandparents around

			this countryside knowing that your family has always lived and died here.
BA2840/840	Digital	September 2018	I found it really interesting to listen as Shirley talked about the old days living and working on Mabel Downs Station. She and her extended family were so happy back then, they had meaning in their lives.
BA2840/841	Digital	September 2018	When Shirley showed me the old concrete house where she lived with her mother and father and two other siblings I was blown away. It was such a small space but as Shirley said they were more than happy living here.
BA2840/842	Digital	September 2018	Salley Purdie and Lola Purdie in one of the old rooms used by their relatives back in the early 1950's. The children had drawn wild flowers over the walls in chalk to brighten up the space.
BA2840/843	Digital		Over 30 people lived in this block of concrete units. Shirley said they were always busy doing something around the property and most of the time everyone was happy to be living and working out here. The ration was a measured portion of food handed out to Aboriginal employees and their dependents from the station store. It comprised a quantity of flour, tea and sugar together with a stick of tobacco, called 'nigi-nigi'. In addition, salt beef and damper or bread may have been given to those who were working at the station homestead during the day. Those who were not 'workers' living in the camp would be fortunate to receive the hooves, bones and intestines of a 'killer'. Although this did depend on the generosity of the current station owners and managers. In these early years staple foods were often common to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal station workers, particularly where there was no access to a homestead garden. As a generalisation, the differences between the ration provided to the Aboriginal workers and the diet provided to the non-Aboriginal station employees was the quality and quantity of the beef provided, the

			quantities of flour, tea and sugar, and the variety of foods used in addition to the staples. For example, dried foods such as rice and dried vegetables such as blue boiler peas were added to stews.
BA2840/844	Digital	September 2018	Portrait of Shirley Purdie and Gordon Barney with their two granddaughters Lola and Salley Purdie, seated out the front of the old Mabel Downs indigenous community where Shirley lived as a young girl.
BA2840/845	Digital	September 2018	A colour portrait, of Shirley Purdie and Gordon Barney with their two granddaughters Lola and Salley Purdie.
BA2840/846	Digital	September 2018	This was Shirley's home where she lived with her mother and father and two younger siblings. The room was split into two, Shirley's family on one side and her uncle and aunty on the other.
BA2840/847	Digital	September 2018	Shirley seated out the front of her old family home on Mabel Downs Station in the East Kimberley.
BA2840/848	Digital	September 2018	Shirley Purdie walking towards the old Mabel Downs mess hall. It was here that Shirley was taught how to be a domestic servant on the station. From the early days Aboriginal people were forced to work on the stations. The police issued the station managers with permits to work the Aboriginal people and to take charge of their welfare. This happened right across the Kimberley. All the stations came to depend upon cheap Aboriginal labour. The Aboriginal people knew they were being exploited but they didn't have any choice. Then, during the fifties and sixties Aboriginal stockmen started pushing for better wages. They didn't realize the drastic effect it would have on their lives.
BA2840/849	Digital	September 2018	Shirley walking the two granddaughters though the old mess hall on Mabel Downs Station. The elders use every opportunity to educate the children about the way of life of their people. Stories are told while walking down to the creek beds or grinding up seeds to make

			damper, sitting around open fire places at night or walking through old cattle stations. As children grow older more information is passed on about their culture. Once a person becomes an adult they are responsible for passing on the information they have learnt to the younger people. This is how Dreaming stories have been passed down for thousands of years and continue to be passed on today.
BA2840/850	Digital	September 2018	Shirley Purdie and her partner Gordon Barney reflecting on the good old days of station life. What indigenous people in the Kimberley region now refer to as the 'station times' lasted for seventy to eighty years and was a time when most indigenous people learned to share their traditional country with the pastoralists. It is also a time that many now reflect on with considerable nostalgia.
BA2840/851	Digital	September 2018	Shirley and Gordon showing their granddaughter around Mabel Downs Station. Lola had to be carried by Salley because she had left her shoes in the car and the ground was covered in doublegees.
BA2840/852	Digital	September 2018	A reminder of the past at Mabel Downs Station in the East Kimberley. Most Aboriginal people lived for 9-10 months of the year at the station camps and those who were able to work were incorporated into the hierarchical structure of the pastoral industry and worked in return for rations. Despite this, they were able to maintain a high degree of cultural continuity and continue religious and social relationships, which were reinforced during the wet season. Whilst pastoralists later claimed they supported a large and dependent Aboriginal population, the Aboriginal people perceived themselves as sharing their country with the pastoralists and their cattle, whilst adapting their culture to the changing circumstances.
BA2840/853	Digital	September 2018	The main gate to Mabel Downs. The seasonal cycles and the nature of cattle work involved a mobile existence not entirely alien to traditional land use patterns and Aboriginal stockmen. They were able to maintain a greater degree of continuity with their culture than

			<p>their counterparts living in towns or on missions. They supplemented their diet with bush food and sustained a fragmented relationship with their country until the wet season. The routine of station life dictated that no rations were supplied during the wet season and for about three months of the year the people were free to leave.</p>
BA2840/854	Digital	September 2018	<p>Shirley reflecting on the good times at Mabel Downs. White women relied heavily on indigenous women's skills. They performed most of the domestic work and also acted as midwives during labour. The remoteness of cattle stations and their husbands' frequent absences created a trusting reliance and often strong bonds. White women had to learn the roles expected of them, including an understanding of Aboriginal beliefs, customs and ceremonies. Shirley is the only Indigenous woman that I have met who has never drunk alcohol or smoked cigarettes. She is true to her world and a solid role model. I just wish there were more like her up her in the Kimberley.</p>
BA2840/855	Digital	September 2018	<p>A portrait of Gordon Barney who was a Stockman in the early 1950s on Mabel Downs. Aboriginal men used cattle work to regain or maintain their pride as men in a colonial context. Their use of this work to continue ritual ties with land challenged colonial ownership and the domination of white Australia culture. I love spending time with Gordon or as he is known around Warmun - 'Old Man'. He is going deaf so you have to shout to him, which at times can be quite funny. Gordon has a wicked sense of humour and is always laughing. He loves it when I took him back out in the country on day trips so that he could show me the places where he grew up and worked as a northern Australian Stockman.</p>
BA2840/856	Digital	September 2018	<p>During my last trip up to the East Kimberley I had the privilege of working with Shirley Purdie and Gordon Barney, both of whom have been painting for more than twenty years and are artists of increasing significance and seniority. Their cultural knowledge and artistic skill</p>

			complement each other to produce a practice that holds great strength. Shirley is also a prominent leader in Warmun community and an incisive cross-cultural communicator.
BA2840/857	Digital	September 2018	Shirley told me that it's good to learn from the old people. They keep telling me when I paint that I can remember the country just like when you take a photograph. "You can feel the Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) when you paint and it's good. I put it into my painting so that the kids know and understand. When the old people die, the young people can read the stories from the painting, they can learn from the painting and maybe they want to start painting too."
BA2840/858	Digital	September 2018	Gordon Barney was born and grew up on Alice Downs Station, just down the road from Mabel Downs Station where Shirley lived. His father taught him to be stock worker and he became known as a skilled horse breaker and buckjumper. He started painting in 1998 when the Warmun Art Centre commenced operation, often painting various hill lines located in his traditional country.
BA2840/859	Digital	September 2018	When Gordon worked as a stockman, he would often carry a saddlebag specially to collect ochre. At the end of his mustering stint, he would have a bagful of different coloured ochres to work with that he sourced from riding through his country.
BA2840/860	Digital	September 2018	Whilst working on Mabel Downs Station Gordon met Shirley Purdie who later became his wife. Shirley encouraged Gordon to paint his country. Gordon is well known in the Warmun Community as a strong law and culture man and as an important ceremonial dancer.