

## Jabukanji (Port Douglas)



Bennett Walker and Ray Pierce in conversation with Peter Botsman

Jabukanji (Port Douglas) was like the High Court, a cathedral, a war memorial and an embassy all in one for the combined Bama (Indigenous) nations of the lower Cape York and Cairns region. Bama camped in the area for the duration of their ceremonial or law or diplomatic business but it was not a permanent residential settlement - just as Londoners do not live in Westminster Abbey. Western and Eastern Yalanji Aboriginal Nations used Jabukanji to resolve internal and external issues and to conduct ceremonies and burials.

All these things are known in the memory of local Bama. Children were taken by their mothers to camp alongside the ceremonies which would often go through the night, for nights on end. Young men would feel the excitement, hear the cries and see the dances. As they grew up they too would become more and more deeply involved in the ceremonies. There is a great deal of knowledge about all this but sometimes mainstream people don't seem to know how to ask or who to ask.

People without any traditional knowledge can feel something of the nature of the place. When you are coming from parts of the world and parts of Australia where urban ugliness has taken hold of the minutiae of nature and life, Jabukanji (Port Douglas) seems like a paradise. But beyond that there is something artificial and hollow. There is a sense that the place is not at peace. A feeling of emptiness and superficiality often overtakes the rest or relaxation of staying in a high end resort or apartment.

This article is about the possibility of restoring deep knowledge, peace and goodwill to the place and ensuring that Jabukanji becomes a revered and wonderful sacred place known throughout the world.

The European and foreign developers of Jabukanji (Port Douglas) since the gold rush of the late nineteenth century have never acknowledged or understood the traditional nature of the place. They have never asked the Elders about Place. Jabukanji has been for mainstream Queenslanders a means to an end. It has been a port town for the gold rushes, the depot for the sugar industry, a transit route to the reef and over the past twenty five years - a high end tourist destination in its own right. Only the local Bama understand the traditional significance of the place. They feel a forlorn, world weariness when it comes to dealing with the latest wave of government officials, planners, developers and even community representatives. But the Bama know that the cycle has to come around to them because it is in the nature of the spirit of place. Eventually all the talking and developing, eventually even the concrete trucks and steel will all make way for the spirit of place that all Bama know and understand. It is just a matter of waiting. The question is: who will have the savvy to see a good way forward?

David Marriner is currently seeking \$40m from the Federal and State government to develop the Sheraton Mirage Resort at Jabukanji (Port Douglas). As a traditional custodian and representative Bennett Walker attended the presentation of his concept. There was much to agree with but the fundamental reality is that if Mr. Marriner wants to have success he needs to politely and humbly talk to the local Elders. It is important that he understands the Indigenous heritage of Jabukanji and particularly the nature of the actual site of the Sheraton Mirage complex.

David Marriner's vision of a major international meeting and arts and cultural place is in many ways in accord with the traditional nature of Jabukanji (Port Douglas). Previously tourism was just about using the area as a sort of luxury playground with no respect or knowledge of local culture. Great damage was done to the Indigenous heritage of the area.

Christopher Skase first developed the Sheraton Mirage resort. Because of the way he built his business and established the resort many Elders predicted and were not surprised by his demise, which according to traditional lore related to the way the original building was planned and built. To this day Elders and the Bama community as a whole feel uncomfortable in or around the building. Local Bama children feel uneasy about attending school presentations because they know the feelings of their parents, grandparents and ancestors. The downturn in tourism in the area is also related to the superficial understanding of the traditional culture of the area and also the failure to atone for a significant massacre of Indigenous people just to the north of the Mowbray Bridge in the mangrove areas along the river.

Christopher Skase made big mistakes. The first was he just left the design of his dream resort to professional architects and hotel industry experts. He did not consult with the Elders of the area about the site of the building. The building was constructed

in 1988, well before the creation of the Burra Charter in 1999 and Far North Queensland does not have a good record for understanding the importance of Indigenous cultural and environmental factors for high quality architecture and people centred development.

In 1988 the entire Bama community were horrified that the resort was constructed in close proximity to a known ceremonial and burial site. During construction human remains were unearthed and disturbed. There was no attempt to reconcile or re-navigate the building process or to ensure that the human remains were reburied with any respect. A huge crack appeared in the foundations of the building. As far as the local Aboriginal people are concerned a great dark cloud hangs over the whole complex. The building has needed to undergo a very significant healing process for twenty three years.

The second architectural mistake that was made by Christopher Skase and his team was the construction of a water pipeline which ran for over fifteen kilometres from the Four Mile Beach area to the upper reaches of the Mossman River. This too disturbs the lines of energy between the Mossman River and the Port Douglas area. In addition in laying the pipe and the footings for it, a sacred overhanging rock was disturbed at the Mossman Gorge. This also deeply disturbed local Aboriginal people. But in anybody's terms the giant water pipeline created an eyesore which runs up the road to Mossman Gorge – that is also an area of importance for Indigenous people and is also of great interest to the local tourism industry.

But the point of this article is not to bemoan the past no matter how painful it is to local Aboriginal people, it is to suggest to David Marriner and the major tourism developers of the area that they have everything to gain and nothing to lose from developing a very close relationship with local Aboriginal Elders. This does not mean tokenistic gestures or committee like consultations with Indigenous political representatives. It means making an effort to engage with Elders and local Aboriginal people to harness the spirit of Jabukanji.

In their Guide to Consultation with Elders of the Eastern Yalanji peoples, Yalanjiwarra Jalunji Marrjanga Aboriginal Corporation (YJMACO) which has representation from all of the Eastern Yalanji family groups, notes that the site of the Sheraton Mirage was a designated meeting place for the discussion and resolution of important matters of law, religion and state. All of the Bama nations that actively used Jabukanji have a right to re-establish this place for their own business, ceremonies and culture. They also have a right to do business in their own way and to make decisions not by shows of hands or token consultations but through true consensus with Elders and through them the whole community. By illuminating this, by acting to sincerely resolve past mistakes and by building on the ancient spirit of the place, David Marriner's team at Fullmarr Pty Ltd could bring a priceless quality to his new development. If he does there is no doubt that a new level of sophistication of Far North Queensland tourism will emerge. This is what every survey of visitors says must occur if Far North Queensland is going to compete with strong and emerging international tourism competitors like Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand.

We implore Mr. Marriner and other major tourism operators not to be afraid to consult with Elders and the Indigenous community. There is only good that can come

from it. The current obstacles that Mr Marriner faces in seeking support from the Federal and State governments will fade away if he and his consortium enlist the Bama community as their social and cultural partners. This is an ongoing process. There can be no easy simple approval. But it just might be that with good will on all sides the spirit of Jabukanji will return and once again children come to the area to delight and learn the art of performance, ceremony and culture.