

21st Century Maja (Law Man)



24 April 1966 – 26 February 2014

I

When a father dies, a great symbolic mountain falls into the sea. Bearings are gone. Life can never be the same. When a son dies there is inconsolable grief. Yet when the mountain is gone an awareness grows of its strength and majesty. Adjustments must be made. New challenges emerge. Family, sons and daughters grow to new heights. Feelings of loss give way to feelings of what has been achieved and what must be done now. Fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, grandmothers and grandfathers of the future are born. The cycle continues.

In all of this, traditional law does not change. The land is the parliament. The spirit beings of Bugarregarre created all life. They made the law in which all things live in harmony. This law encoded in the Song Cycle was passed down unbroken since creation. It is the Law-keepers, Law-people, and Custodian's job to keep passing Bugarregarre ceremonies and stories from one generation to the next.

In the period since the colonization and Federation of Australia it has been the greatest of challenges to uphold traditional law and to ensure the newcomers to this land understood its significance. In a

thousand generations there was never such challenges. Through the greatest tribulations, traditional people have succeeded in imparting the majesty of the Australian environment into the unconscious of all Australian people. Great warriors and statesmen and women Peumulwuy, Windrayne, Bennelong, Truganini, Yagan, Jandamurra, Kangushot, Wonggu, Arimi, Broger, Broughton, Mr. Tigan, and countless others who we are only now discovering, fought for their law, their land to be understood and respected. Only in 2014 is the special detail and quality of traditional law being understood. Far from being archaic or lost, the law, the song lines are a dynamic salvation – a cause of hope for the new millennium.

In the precious coastline around Broome in the North West of Australia we owe a great debt to the great mountains of men, we may call in customary and respectful terms, grandfather and grandson. It was the special genius of the old man, grandfather, to record in mainstream terms the significance of the coastline from Minuyarr to Minarriny and to place it into the European consciousness in a way that even scientists from another world could appreciate. It was the courage and strength of grandson to build and grow this knowledge and to stand up to the corruption of morals and law and to mindless greed and to uphold the song lines in the face of a proposed \$40 billion industrial development. Few have faced greater challenges of life, intellect and cross-societal justice and won.

II

Grandson the world knows you through the song and your words “I’m going to fight for my country but they don’t believe me”. “I will win this fight”. These words reverberate through us all now and we all know you. We know you through the eyes and strength of your brothers Phillip and Ronnie, and Richard Hunter, who now take on your mantle... We know you through the hearts of so many quiet, hard men of the Kimberley and Broome who became mellow like children when they spoke of you, protected you and stood alongside you. We know you through the women of your family and of all families whose instincts are simple and sure. We know you through the stories of those who opposed you and just made you bigger and stronger. We know you through the sacred mission of your mother. We know you because you were a very big man born to a very big job. We know you because your vision of Bugarregarre was made real to us. We know you because you made us understand that the possessions and money are nothing against the forces of life and love that are visible and accessible on the sacred camp sites of the 85 kilometre Lurrujarri trail. We know you because you showed us how the world would end if Walmadany was disturbed and if the flows of life stopped.

We know you as the grandchild of the sting ray who lies placidly, wisely in the sand, meditating, watching with wisdom but whose barb is deadly and painful. We know you as *maja* because we know that the truth of the land came to us in whatever language we spoke, whatever religion we followed, whatever political views we expressed. It was undeniable and it was your special gift to us to let us know these things.

III

Hard men of the lands now weep. But they will not weep long. Loving daughters, mothers, granddaughters now weep. But they will not weep long. There is much to lament of a life cut too short but soon the pain will turn to energy and your legacy will grow immeasurably. More will hear you. Only two years shy of 50. Yet every year worth ten. We hear your words grandson. They were meant to stand. Your new fathers and grandfathers yet to be born will hear them and take inspiration from them. We too hear what you say. Over the millennia the cycle continued and there was always a contingency plan. The times require innovation and imagination. This is not a time for plodding or

rules or regulations. It is a time for swift action, deft movement and disobedient, respectful resistance. Now those who could not see your reason and your purpose see. You taught us these things. We cannot ignore the torturous pain and cost that every Aboriginal family endured. They must be acknowledged, reflected upon, felt, carried, held and sweated out like a fever. Like every great man and woman, like every leader who breaks through, you bore this pain and turned it around. Tough became gentle, bad became good, hopeless became hopeful, weak became strong, pain became feeling, death became life.

IV

Like the discovery of open tuning on a guitar, the melody from Broome is something to savor and love. Behind the closed gate was a hot-house diaspora of knowledge and life that could not possibly be known by the starch white administrators and mainstream bosses. There are precious few places such majic evolves. New Orleans, Harlem, Paris, and in congregations of the dispossessed at odd times and odd places. Little did the stuffy, pith-helmeted veranda-dwelling tea-drinkers know that their fence created an academy of the highest learning, an academy of life and land, a place of romance and wildness, fun and creativity. The Anne St mob, the Guy St mob were living, learning, sharing, understanding, playing together, surviving, thriving, grieving, dreaming, hurting, growing and adapting. In the Native Hospital neighbourhood knowledge grew. In the pearling precincts respect and cooperation blossomed. When you kiss the dirt enough times you get up stronger, harder and with a passion that knows no bounds. None of the small children who grew up here could possibly know that their community was what Australia craved to be: a place of great learning unfettered by racial stupidity. None of these children could know that they would lead the world. In this hot house on Yawuru land the dreams of other nations were nurtured and kept alive and in so doing Yawuru and Kimberley-wide law was protected as well. For here in the frontlines, in the heart of the colonisers hq and out-post, were many camp fires, a sand dune, a sacred keeping place, a great academy of learning for all. When ceremony faltered it was protected here. It found new witnesses, apostles and advocates, peoples who were dispossessed and victimized from shores far across the seas. The purest law of the land survived. Words and books and writing mean nothing. You must work, live, taste, dance, breathe the land and here behind the closed gate all this precious living and communicating took place. Old men and women tutored not in classrooms but in a living oasis where the azure ocean meets the red sands, in the mangroves, on the ocean, in the desert, in the flood plains, in the crocodile patches, swamps and rivers. New merchants and traders lived with the greatest guardians of land and sea. Here so many grandsons were nurtured and you too, maja, emerged. It was here that grandfather evolved his brilliant philosophy: come all, share in the top soil, share our precious places, and we the custodians and keepers of the law below the top soil, we will preserve you and all of the precious gifts of life and earth through our ceremony, our knowledge, our songs, our law. But it was never going to be easy. Lord Vesty, Lord Mc Alpine, Lords of machinery, Lords of money, Lords of the South, each one more troublesome than the last would come. It would take a child of great strength and fortitude to resist and to never compromise on the fundamental, deep law. As one administrative solution rolled out into another even the great law men would become confused. Hold this piece of paper and you will have title to the land. Become like us and you will have rights and privileges. And so the great wild resistance and creative spirits fought back. So arose a young boy whose spirit was so pure and so hard nurtured in the streets of Broome, nurtured on the quests through deserts and along the coastal treks, nurtured by grandfather. You became the greatest man, the greatest of heros, a prince, a knight, a warrior in thongs on the Walmadany sands.

V

Sweet, loving, care can come as a roughness in a man. To those who dwell on the surface of things, the depths of the ocean are invisible. In your work trousers, with your sweat, your furrowed brow and your tousled hair you were so irregularly fitted to courts and yet you were the greatest counsel, advocate and fighter for justice. You made the learned men work for you because they knew they must. There had to be times like this, times of sacrifice and darkness for the truly ignorant to see. Drip, drip, drip they go. It is enough to drive you insane. You cannot do it this way. You must put your hands up and vote and have your say. You must prove your bloodlines on a piece of paper. You must participate in a great farce. To hell with that! They build tension in your veins and arteries. You just want to retreat into the dimension beyond time and space. It draws you there before your time. So many young ones are lost too early. But your quest above all else was to make this world a place to stay and dwell and to have joy. Your mission was for all of us - a never-ending job. You never retreated. You fought on until your nerve endings were frayed and worn, until your heart pumped for a whole land, a whole country, a whole people.

VI

“These luggers sails are moving too slowly” sang the poet-philosopher-brothers. That moment of impatience to return to the town by the bay, that moment of incredulity as the desert women dived to the bottom of the sea as true and straight as a spear, that first meal of fish soup and rice and chili crab, that time when the land became home, in these times of adoption and mergence, knowledge evolved in the minds of the diaspora. Just as the Macassans and Garray had been adopted in the North East, so too Irish Nuns and Chinese, Malaysian and Japanese sons and daughters were admitted into the families and introduced to the ancient law and lands of the Bugarregarre. This was the genius of grandfather following the lead of Walmadany and the old men and women. It was the lived experience of you, grandson. Woe be to those who held up diagrams, family charts, lines and maps and talked of the purity of skin and blood. Woe be to the petty-minded legal bureaucrats, representatives of real estate agents, who evolved a doctrine of traditional ownership based on a barbaric concept of continuous physical occupation. The eugenic horror that stole children from families had its ongoing effects in the narrow imaginary of judges and legal advocates and native title law and state governments. How can families be counted, cut-out and corralled like cattle without regard to the fundamental law? This was the tyranny of the vote of hands of the chosen few. This was the terrible legacy of *Milirripum v Nabalco* still yet to be truly understood for its utter injustice and ignorance. Like fences on the landscape built with no knowledge or wisdom it was a nuisance and a torment. This was your fight grandson, and *wha* how you fought for the spirit and how you mobilized the world to come to understand. This was not something done through words. It was your very being grandson, your presence, your annoyance, your stress, your body and your face that expressed these things. You just had to appear. Thus the grief and depression and weeping of so many even beyond those immediate loved ones, your town, your childhood gang, your country. Your physical presence, your instincts guided by more than just the logic of European courts and politics, is an immeasurable loss. Personal grief wells and grows in a thousand hearts. Now a whole population, a whole movement support the enduring presence of your brothers, mother, wife and daughters and through them the unchanging law of the land. The Roe family spirit and strength grows wide, beyond the lands and the seas. Greedy merchants, Rudolf Diesel engine and Whittle-Ohain gas turbine driven capitalists and visitors slip past the law of the land. It is their loss whatever gold they may possess. They miss the greatest gift. For a new philosophy open to all, tempered by grandfather, advocated by grandson, arises: respect the land and it will respect you. Come with

grace, gentility, respect, humility and quiet to the North West and you will understand what true wealth is. Having won a great battle this is the challenge that you leave us with. Lurrujarri is a model for all of us. It is not a place to cordon off, not a national park, it is a place of spirit, culture, education, knowledge, discipline, intelligence, ceremony, life and family. Learn here and go back home and practice what you have learned; not only in the North West, but across this great land and well beyond its shores. Here at Lurrujarri we may truly ponder the narrow-minded, plundering gallop of industrialization, the clumsy management of land and sea, the boring plain-same-ness of cities, buildings, hotel rooms and resorts, laws made with votes of hands not the collective beats of hearts and so many places without spirit or heart. Our eyes are opened to the beauty of this land, to museums more wonderful than any made by man, to monuments a thousand times older than the ancient pyramids, to the great draw of the moon and the greatest tidal movements on earth, to the primordial patterns of land and sea creatures – these are the greatest classrooms and learning chambers, more precious than any tangible product the human brain can imagine or realize. *The challenge of those who have lost these things is to regain them, the challenge for those who still have them is to protect them at all costs. Thank you so much for this awareness grandson.*

VII

As we look across the world at this time, the warring tribes of Eastern Europe fight again, the tensions of East Asia and the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima are ominous, the great flows of people seeking refuge and peace, the creeping industrialization and worrying exploitation of the resources of the world – all these things - implore us to make things right in our own backyard. In 2014 the enduring will and testimony of you, Mr. Roe, *maja*, grandson is that we must recognize the Aboriginal ontology of land that is there like a shining light in every one of our communities. It can guide us and help us to live wisely and truly. It can help us to face up to the problems of the world. It shows us how we can live in this land with grace, light and dignity. There has been tragedy, injustice, exploitation and cruelty across all of the lands of this great southern continent. The sorrows and band-aids are not enough. There must be a determined effort to make things right as best as can be, not at a minimum, not in keeping with ignorance or what is politically possible, but as best as can be. Grandson you have been so humble and honest you implore us to make this effort. None of us mainstream Australians can know the torment of the wise Aboriginal men and women across the wide Kimberley and beyond. All faced the greatest tribulations, sadness, all faced pillage, disease, death and mercenary assault. All had to try to apply ancient concepts and ideas as miners, machines, towns, police, administrators and courts pressed. There were very few points of convergence. Our culture exploited the land and left little in return. The job of dealing with us newcomers was, with few exceptions, thankless, hopeless and absurd. That is why your victory, grandson and grandfather, is so profound. This is why your heroic legacy can only grow and become stronger. It is like an unstoppable force blowing through time to finally touch us and make us understand. There is still much to think about and question. This is understandable. For this was a time of innovation and magic. For some who knew Ghandi and Mandela as mortal men, their achievements were impossible to comprehend. It is perhaps only from afar that your great achievement, grandson, can be appreciated. As well as a challenge, you leave us with an obligation. For it shouldn't have been so hard. It should not have been so solitary. It should not have been so lonely. The ceremonial exchanges and points of contact have been so badly disrupted. In a wise country that did truly recognize the authority and knowledge of so-called "traditional owners", great resources would be placed in the hands of the *maja*, to make things right. The term traditional owner betrays our own ignorance. Elders who master and learn the ceremonies and songs and live what they mean are truly men and women of high degree. They are spiritual leaders and guides, they are statesmen and women, they are the keepers of law and order, they are protectors of land and the purveyors of

peace. It falls to all of us, who have made our livings and have settled our families and our children on these great lands, in the spirit of *Wirnin*, to make resources available to protect and revive the ancient rights of the people of the lands. If governments will not do it, then the responsibility falls to us as individuals and citizens. This is our responsibility, our debt which must be paid. We will know things have been made right when there are no more early deaths, no more stress to the bone and no more unnecessary suffering in the hearts of old men and women, no more ignorance about the laws and ceremonies which hold everything and everyone together. Without the ceremonies and the discipline of managing and learning about the land, without lives devoted to learning the song cycles, we are all lost and lose so much. In 2014 maja's tribulations implore us to establish a national endowment across this country that allows learned traditional elders, men and women, to pass on their law, conduct ceremonies and to teach the young as a learned profession. Secret law, public law, outside law, inside law – whatever it may be within the 300 Indigenous communities in Australia – we all need to understand that its practice is as vital to our future as any learned or political practice that takes place in our parliaments, universities, schools or market places.

VIII

Sweet, loving, caring Mr. Roe you now return to the ancestors to guard over the sacred lands. The power of the place is enhanced now. You will protect us with a power beyond life. You have built an awareness that now extends across the Australian nation and the world about your sacred protectorate. You have built a great army of supporters that will never subside. The spirits and the feeling of place are so strong. This is your immeasurable gift.

IX

Sweet, loving, caring, gentle Mr. Roe you hover over us watching this place. Wuyunungu swim and dance at Minuyarr, ~~Ngunungurukun~~. Wirrkinymiria, Nuwarrar, Kardilkan, Walmadany. They come to guide you on your journey ensuring a safe passage. It is a joyous and lovely journey. You have endured the greatest tribulations and triumphed. You have planted the legacy, as grandfather and the old people intended, in the hearts of all peoples of the world. You have ensured that the Goolarabooloo asnd Jabirr Jabirr people of the land will prosper and live well on their country. In so doing you have preserved the world for all. Mission impossible, at least in the eyes of the mainstream, has been achieved. You grandson give succour to all the peoples of Australia who have seemingly lost their land, languages and culture. They have not. The land awaits them and talks to those who want to hear. The law of the land cannot be replaced. Knowledge will flow again. It is waiting to give up its secrets. Even land which is raped and scoured and scraped into giant trains will never lose its law. It is etched in the steel and in the machines. In the humming streets of the giant mega-pols, where the sun does not shine, where the stars never appear, where there are no clouds and the sky is grey, the land still sings. It cries: wealth is the natural land, wealth is the sea, wealth is the sooty oyster catcher and the blue-bone, wealth is the great earthly flow of tides and currents. Do not take us on your kamikaze ride! Do not take us into your chemical soup! Do not try to tell us that working in a box all day is life! Do not make poison taste sweet! The industry, the wealth of the future will come from true wealth embodied in the law of the land. Let us build upon your vision. Let us cherish and protect your daughters, like the sacred sisters of the north east. With them let us build a new future for Broome in which the diaspora comes together around the law that never changes. So many now have come to your lands and been touched by its beauty. Their eyes have been opened not only to the land of the north-west but to their own homelands. Grandfather and grandson, you have opened the world's eyes. The world will come to see the millennial wisdom of time and land on the coast of the sun. You will be there to oversee these things. You have built this movement of people across all cultures. It will never go away.

So let us come in great armies of good-will to the Lurrujarri trail. Let us come as a great army to meditate there and to celebrate the Goolarabooloo and Jabirr Jabirr. Let us be generous and forgive those who lost their way. Let us come with intentions of peace and good will. Let us close our eyes and contemplate the great ships that carry earth from one place to another. Let us meditate upon the temporal quality of miners and machines. Let us never allow traffic lights in Broome and truly understand what that means. Let us make Lurrujarri a symbol of peace and tranquility for the entire North West. They call it a wilderness but of course it's a cultural mecca for the world. Let us get into our psyche the horror of those who would explode harbours and mountains as if they were toys. Let us overcome the narrowness of geologists and anthropologists and writers who would box everything into cartons for supermarket shelves. Let us think on the emptiness of schools and universities and training colleges against the classroom of land, culture, animals and sea. Let us do the infiltrating now. Let us seduce the engineers and chemists and architects. Let us teach them how much they don't know. Let us learn about true wealth and power. Let us just walk along the shore line. Let the children play and explore. Let us make the pilgrimage to Lurrujarri - something that all parents revere, all children crave. Let us model Lurrujarri – a journey of learning that never ends. Let us renounce the motel and hotel rooms that all look the same and the holidays which leave us more weary than working. No parks, no gardens, just wild things living according to law. Let us use the stupidity, futility and arrogance of yet another cheap fuel, gas, to help us learn what is true and right in the new millennia. Let the custodians think well on these matters. Let us do what maja did. Let us do the impossible. Let us turn the tide.

X

Sweet, loving, caring Mr. Roe, maja, old, young man, there can be no greater triumph than yours. There can be no greater victory. Small tiny minds subside and give way to your majesty. You have eclipsed the fame of all those who were famous around you because of your simplicity, humility and passion. You have walked beyond the seeming wise men. You have taught those who would compromise, when to be true to their land and themselves. Return to mother earth to be devoured by the microbes and life forces. Merge with the spirit of the land. Guard us well and rest now! Your triumph is a universal triumph. It reverberates through time and space like a never ending comet. Songs will be written, stories will be told, you will fly on eternally.

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