

KINGANNA AND OTHER KIMBERLEY COASTAL SETTLEMENTS, 1920–1944

On 5 May 2004, Dr Ian Crawford spoke to the Kimberley Society about a little known part of our coast. Ian is an anthropologist and archaeologist who, despite having retired some years ago, retains a professional and personal interest in the Kimberley and its people. This summary is a précis of the notes he used to present an illustrated talk that answered questions posed by fellow members who had visited or expressed curiosity about Kinganna.

The importance of Kinganna is that it was a key settlement on the northern Kimberley coast between approximately 1924 and 1944. A lot of Aboriginal people first made contact with industrial society there—some of them preferring it to the missions in the vicinity. Forrest River and Pago/Kalumburu were to the east; Kunmunya was to the west. The few other establishments in the locality included Jack Cleverley's place in Admiralty Gulf, which Ian had been told was the setting for a slide in which Willy Reid could be seen with Helmut Petrie and Fred Merry during the Frobenius expedition of 1938.

Willy Reid was an unusual character who first turned up in Western Australia on the Presbyterian mission's lugger *W.S. Park* in 1911. Described in Maisie McKenzie's book (*The Road to Mowanjum*) as the lugger boy, he is said by some to have been the son of a policeman at Yeppoon. Yet, Albert Barunga, who knew him very well, was evasive when Ian once asked about Reid's ancestry. His answer, as Ian recalled, was 'some sort of half-caste chinaman'. Albert admired Reid and, by speaking with Maisie McKenzie and Hugh Edwards, indirectly provided Ian with some of the information for his talk. That information related mostly to the years during which Reid, who was 'a hero of all the small boys on the Worora coast', taught Albert, as a boy, to sail a lugger.

Christine Halse, writing in *A Terribly Wild Man* about the life of Ernest Gribble, the one-time Forrest River missionary, mentioned that the Church of England trained Willy (or rather Horace) Reid and James Noble, another Aboriginal man. Ian understood, without being able to prove it, that James Noble's wife Angelina was Reid's sister. In 1908, Reid and Noble went as missionaries from Yarrabah to Roper River. Bishop Frodsham had refused to ordain Noble, and perhaps also Reid. In the light of Halse's information, Ian noted that Reid was more than a boy when he arrived at Kunmunya. His was the first Christian marriage celebrated at Kunmunya but he seems to have broken away from the church soon afterwards. His promiscuous nature caused his dismissal from the mission's lugger and, while he retained a propensity to preach, his message in later life was one of free rather than Christian love.

In describing life on the northern Kimberley coast, Ian cited a book by Vic Hall who, with ex-lieutenant Darkie Deutchman and several other men, set out to grow cotton on one of the islands. They looked first at Augustus Island but shifted to Sir Graham Moore Island. After that short-lived venture failed, Deutchman and Willy Reid went beachcombing on Long Island in the Eclipse Group. Ian did not know of any Aborigines working for them but he discovered that they soon abandoned their settlement. Deutchman disappeared from the scene, and Reid, after trying sites near the Prince Regent River and Coronation Island—and perhaps elsewhere as well—established his Kinganna settlement, possibly in about 1924. Ian has collected a number of Aboriginal accounts relating to Kinganna. Some depict an interesting place, with relatively good conditions; others describe poor conditions, hard work, and little food. There was, of course, no pay. What is clear is that it was a big settlement based around the Gambera people, in whose territory it had been established. In the mission accounts, the Gambera were depicted as trouble-makers. When they visited, fights broke out. Reid and the Benedictines were therefore not competing for the attention of the same Aborigines. The nearest settlement was Pago, later to be transferred to Kalumburu. In describing the settlements as major contact points for Aborigines with the culture of the western world, Ian commented on their fundamental differences in philosophies:

At Pago, the monks and nuns practised strict celibacy. The Presbyterians at Kunmunya practised strict monogamy. In between Willy Reid practised and taught free-love. Indeed, he used to assemble all his Aboriginal workers each morning and preach his message to them, from the upstairs room in his house. Mary Pandilow remembered him comparing their genitalia with the shapes of beche-de-mer, and telling them to go down to the mangroves and use them. I am not here using Willy's words. She was just out of the mission, and shocked at hearing the things Willy said. In addition, Ginger D'Antoine had his eye on her, so her mother quickly took her and hid her in the bush. Kinganna was not an environment for a young girl.

While social divisions in Aboriginal society determined who associated with whom, another factor also existed. When Aborigines were in trouble, either with the missionaries for transgressing the mission laws, or because of things they had done against the white criminal laws, they often went to Kinganna. The place thus acquired a reputation as the most remote outpost of western culture, where most of the troublemakers could be found, or if they were further out, from which they might be found. Examples included Mogu, who killed Bob Anderson, and Charlie Pandibra, who had his wife murdered because he could not obtain a separation. Ian had some amusing stories to tell about the differences of opinion between Reid

and the mission. He also noted that, although their contact continued, the missionaries were clearly opposed to Reid and his way of life. Father Sanz told Ian one of the famous stories about Reid. It involved parties from Kinganna and the mission encountering one another on Sir Graham Moore Island as they collected goods landed for them by the State ships. A Father (unnamed) confronted Reid along the following lines:

“Willy, you’re leading a terrible life, you ought to follow the bible.”

“Yes Father.”

“What, you mean you are going to follow the bible?”

“Yes Father.”

“Well, all these women you are taking – that’s very wrong.”

“Well, King Solomon had seven hundred wives.”

“That’s the wrong bit of the bible.”

“But that’s the bit I’m trying to follow!”

A man named Augustin told another story about some missionaries walking all the way from Pago to learn how Willy Reid managed to grow such good paw paws, bananas, coconuts, sorghum, and even oranges. The distance meant that they had to camp one night on the way but, on arriving at Kinganna, they left before they saw the gardens. Somebody, probably Bullocky, had painted and put up over the door to Reid’s house a message that read, “There is no god”. In describing the fuss that the message created, Augustin said:

They wanted to see the gardens, but when they saw the message, they turned around and walked straight back to Pago.

They didn’t stop at Kinganna, and they didn’t come inside. No cup of tea, nothing. They wouldn’t go past that message.

The missionaries were also incensed when Reid, in conjunction with Jack Cleverley, tried to claim Kinganna as a mission and said that he had to cope with many Aborigines who had left Pago. “Harem more like”, they recorded in their daily journal. Ian speculated that the incident might have prompted a trip involving Dr Rogers and Bob Love. Love, from Kunmunya, was impressed with the progress that Reid had made. Rogers, however, issued a summons for Reid to appear in the Derby court for employing Aborigines without a licence.

Ian’s slides, taken during one of his visits, enhanced the stories. He showed Reid’s house, the message over the door, the workshop, and a plough. Images from other places showed a smoke house that Reid had used at Vansittart Bay, and some hearths and campsites that he and others had used. Indonesian fishing parties had occupied some of those sites.

After Reid established Kinganna, other people started stations and floated ideas for schemes such as fish canning and groups settlement that would grow tobacco. The Haldane family established their settlement near the western coast off Scott Strait. It was called Lungunda. They were Bill Haldane (a returned soldier), his wife Charlotte, children Bob, Barbara, Dora, Jim and Peggy, but after Peggy's birth, Charlotte became very ill. She died shortly after the Haldanes left, in about 1936. Aboriginal accounts depict Charlotte as a kind, likable woman and Bill Haldane as 'a bit rough'. Their settlement was in the midst of the Wunambal people, and those with whom Ian spoke said that, had the Haldanes stayed, they would have kept working for them.

The Haldanes grew peanuts, did some beachcombing, and ran a schooner, the *Colami*, in which they carried adventurous tourists. Ian thinks that their passengers including the author Ernestine Hill, who later recorded the most detailed description available for the Haldane's remote existence, and that of the Drysdales at Yampi. She also wrote a description of Marigui, probably from the same trip. Photographs owned by the Haldane family were among those that Ian showed. Those images, added to Ian's photographs and others taken from published works, provided rare glimpses of the people who lived at Lungunda, Kinganna, and other Kimberley coastal settlements of the 1920s, '30s and early '40s. The audience, as might be expected, greatly appreciated the slide show and Ian's intriguing narrative.

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