

# GROOTE EYLANDT

## Two sides of paradise

Nearly 30 years after the establishment of a manganese mine on their island home, Groote Eylandters are meeting the challenge – and paying the price – of their new world.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD STOKES





**G**ULA LALARA and Murabuda Wurramarrba braced themselves against our boat's rolls as they scanned the Gulf of Carpentaria's wind-lashed water. Groote Eylandt, their island home, lay astern. "Angry wind," Murabuda shouted, ducking a sheet of spray. The wind strangled my reply.

Gula and Murabuda were escorting me to Bickerton Island, 20 kilometres west of Groote, to introduce me to the smaller island's Aboriginal community. As young men they had often made the crossing – but in dugout canoes, not powerboats.

They had intended to return to Groote on the boat later that day, but changed their plans after we landed. "The sea's too rough!" Murabuda exclaimed, sipping billy tea beside me on welcome terra firma, a sandy coastline fringed with casuarinas. "Gula and I been talking. We'll fly back to Groote on a charter plane."

I was learning. Flexible and adaptable, Groote Eylandters don't bind themselves to prearranged plans. Gula, Murabuda and I hiked 8 km through a hot noon to Bickerton's small Aboriginal community. Grey-bearded Nadj Wurramara – at about 80, Groote's oldest man – trudged with us. All three revelled in Bickerton's untouched, stringy-bark woodland. Gula and Murabuda described Bickerton's plants and animals to me while Nadj, bare-

footed and limping slightly, mimicked bird calls.

The wind rustled the treetops, a twig snapped underfoot. "People of the world are worrying too much for the love of money," Gula reflected as we paused to wait for Nadj. I agreed, feeling very alive and caught up in my companions' uncomplicated joy. Bickerton, I realised, reminded them of how life on Groote once was, ruled by tribal customs, not by European ways.

I had flown to Groote Eylandt three weeks earlier, passing over Bickerton on the 640 km east-south-east flight from Darwin. My aunt, Judith Stokes, had been sending me occasional letters from Groote since she went to live there more than 30 years ago, so I knew a bit about it: a 2260 sq. km tropical island 50 km east of Arnhem Land, home to some 1000 Aborigines, slightly more white Australians – and a manganese mine. But Groote, remote and little known, remained mysterious. What was life there really like?

*Paradise found. A fresh southeasterly trade wind brings whitecaps to the turquoise waters of a wide bay on Bickerton Island, a tropical wonderland like neighbouring Groote Eylandt. Both islands are cloaked in pristine stringy-bark woodland cut by clear streams and fringed by sandy beaches.*



**▶ Navigating rough seas, Ian Colpoys ferries Murabuda Wurramarrba, right, Gula Lalara and author Ed Stokes (behind camera) to Bickerton Island, 20 km west of Groote. Most Groote Eylandters accept white Australian ways, but not all – Ed and his companions are going to visit a community where some 150 Eylandters strive to live according to tribal customs.**



**◀ In a shimmering sea (previous page), Gula Lalara stalks fish as countless generations have done before him. Behind him, his wife Geraldine pulls their outboard runabout, a symbol of the new world that is drawing the Eylandters away from their timeless existence.**



**◀ On Bickerton Island's sandy shore, Aboriginal elder Nadj Wurramara points out to author Ed Stokes features that mark the island's clan territories. During his stay Ed became friends with Nadj, appreciating the older man's good humour and kindness. "Nadj grew up in the bush and had a deep affinity with the land," said Ed. "He relished our excursions to Bickerton and around Groote." Sadly Nadj, about 80 and Groote's oldest man at the time of Ed's visit, died while this article was being prepared.**



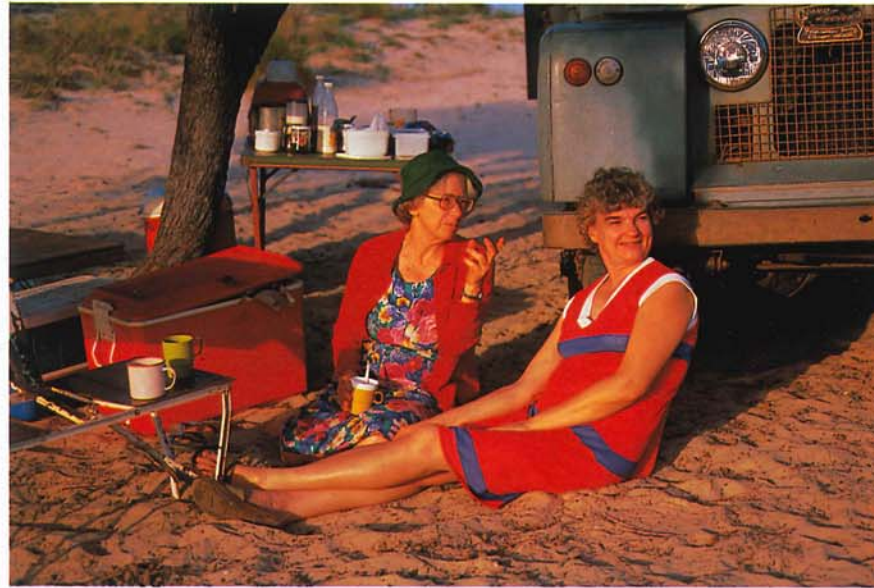
**T**HE SIGN at Groote's airport was unequivocal. "The adjoining land is Aboriginal. Any person wishing to enter will require a permit." My permit had been delayed, but Judith was my passport and the introductions began before I'd even claimed my bags. "This is Edward, my brother's son," she announced. Then, laughing beneath her broad-brimmed sunhat:

"Yes, my father's grandson!" The Aborigines greeted me warmly. In a society where strangers are rare and relationships are of the utmost importance, I was immediately accepted.

In nearby Angurugu, Judith's home and, with 800 people, Groote's largest Aboriginal community, tamarinds and flame trees provided welcome shade. Stilt houses, some cared for, many

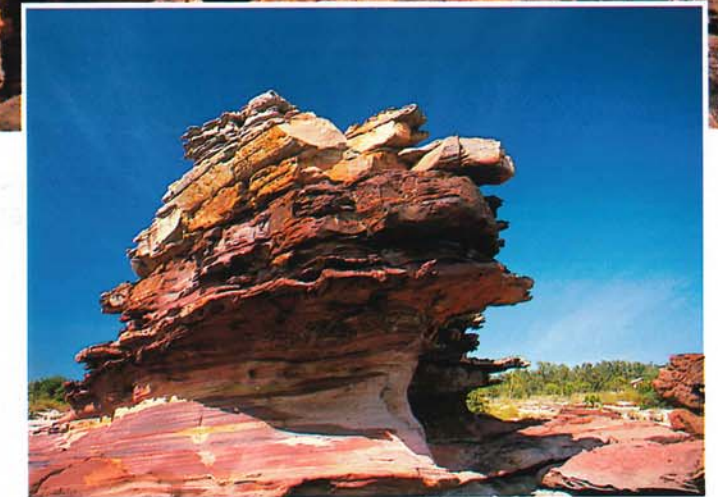
tatty, stood in regimented, European order along dusty streets. But the mood was full-blood Aboriginal: bright-eyed kids ("Hello mister!"), shy women in brightly coloured dresses and men gunning four-wheel-drive vehicles.

At dusk, families gathered around flickering camp fires. Voices, music, laughter and heated exchanges drifted through the twilight and blended with



◀ **Tea time!** Judith Stokes, left, the author's aunt, enjoys an island-style cuppa with Gladys Kirkland, whose husband Don works in the store at Angurugu. Judith arrived to teach at the Church Missionary Society school in 1952. Her 4WD vehicle came over a decade later, brought ashore by barge because there was no port. Nor were there many tracks – the mining company Gemco blazed most of them in the 1970s.

**A lounge under the stars.** Groote Eylandters have always socialised outdoors and most, like Gayangwa Lalara, left, daughter Susanne and grandson Shaun, still do, despite now living in European-style homes.



**Groote's northern coastline** (above) features headlands of jumbled pink sandstone (right) that enclose idyllic bays and coves. The 1800-million-year-old sandstone is the same as that found in Arnhem Land, 50 km to the west, and the island was probably part of the mainland until separated by rising seas at the end of the ice age some 6000 years ago. Some of the rocky islets dotting the nearby sea, such as Chasm Island, are sacred burial sites.

the plaintive melodies of amplified gospel singing echoing up from the tamarind grove. Then staccato prayers: "Ningkungwanyungwa yirrilangwa abalkaya ningk-ambilyama," Our Father who art in Heaven...

I tossed and turned that night, my mind culture-shocked with conflicting impressions. The day before I had been in a Sydney rush-hour train, its anonymous crowds a stark contrast to Angurugu's intimacy.

The next morning I sought the familiar at Groote's white-Australian town, Alyangula, 15 km north of Angurugu on Groote's west coast. The

two towns lie at either end of the Rowell Highway, Groote's only major bitumen road and the artery for the island's lifeblood, the manganese ore that flows from the mine near Angurugu to the port by Alyangula.

Groote, I discovered as I drove north, is a tropical paradise. Its pristine eucalypt woodland stretches across it uninterrupted except for a few 4WD tracks and streams running to the blue-green sea. The coast, fringed by casuarinas and pandanus, is a wonderland of long beaches, intimate coves and jagged headlands of pink sandstone.

In Alyangula tropical splendours – bougainvillea, frangipani, hibiscus – hid large, almost identical elevated homes. I knew that some 1200 people, almost all mine workers and their families, lived here, and there were boats and 4WDs everywhere – but the streets were empty. Almost everyone was indoors, air-conditioning and TV more tempting than Alyangula's beauty. As the sun dipped over Bickerton across the gulf I recalled a Leunig cartoon: mesmerised, a man watches a televised sunset, while outside – the sun sets! Alyangula was beguiling but strangely soulless.





HERE ARE two worlds running on this island, the Aborigine people and the European people with their different ways of life," 56-year-old Jambana Lalara told me with quiet authority soon after I arrived. We were sitting outside the Angurugu Council's weatherboard offices. Jambana, once a bulldozer driver at the mine, is now the council's president. Nearby, bare-bottomed toddlers romped with scruffy dogs, but inside, computers and faxes carried out the council's business.

Jambana was right. Within a week I watched Murabuda, who later accompanied me to Bickerton, disembowel a live turtle with a fine disregard for animal liberation niceties. But his boat was an aluminium runabout; not a single dugout remains on Groote today. On another beach I met a younger Aborigine, his three-pronged spear beside him, roasting a crab on a sliver of corrugated iron. "Hey, when you getting those taxation forms?" he asked my white companion, a council accountant. Light aircraft fly Groote Eylandters around the gulf like airborne taxis, but not always on white-

fella errands: secret business, payback spearings and sorcery still occur.

Aborigines have lived on Groote for thousands of years. They were traditionally semi-nomadic, moving around within well-recognised clan territories and living hard lives dictated by the seasons. Then, as now, the dry southeasterly winds blew from about May to December, and from about January to April the north-west monsoon dumped some 1300 mm of rain. Almost overnight sluggish streams turned to raging torrents. The Aborigines, the Dreamtime and the land formed an interconnected whole, an intricate web of practical knowledge and ancient beliefs. Land and sea provided their few possessions and wholesome food: fish, turtle, dugong, wallabies, other small animals and bush tucker.

Indonesian fishermen made annual voyages to Groote in search of trepang (sea-cucumbers) from about 1700 until 1907. They introduced material improvements – metal implements, tamarind trees, tobacco, cloth – and the art of dugout building, which enabled the isolated Eylandters to start

**Open government.** Jambana Lalara, centre, president of the Angurugu Council when the author visited, chairs a meeting. The council has governed Angurugu, Groote's largest Aboriginal community with some 800 people, since 1982 when nearly four decades of management by the Church Missionary Society came to an end. Jambana once worked as a plant operator for Gemco, but he quit to work for the council and promote his people's welfare.

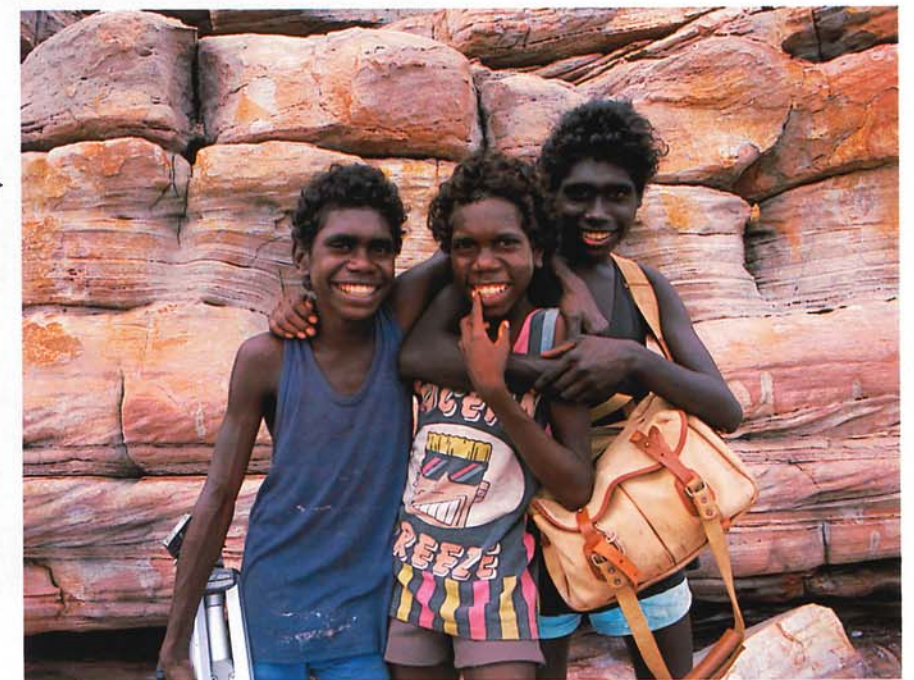
travelling for war, ceremonies, marriages and trade.

The Dutch navigator Abel Tasman named Groote Eylandt ("great island") in 1644 and Matthew Flinders charted it in 1803, but Europeans didn't disrupt the Groote Eylandters' timeless existence until 1921, when the Church Missionary Society (CMS) built a settlement at Emerald River. In 1938, an independent white-run community was established at Umbakumba – today Groote's second largest Aboriginal community, with 300 people – on the ragged north-eastern coast.



◀ **Cultural confluence.** At the mouth of the Angurugu River on Groote's western coast, Bernard Lalara stalks fish. His spear, skilfully made from a stringy-bark sapling, reflects generations of bush lore, as do his keen eyes and quick reflexes, but his clothing speaks of Western pop culture – staple fare for Groote's youth today.

▶ **The shy smiles and helping hands** of young Groote Eylandters greeted Ed at every turn. Umbakumba teenager Lance Mamarika, right, and his mates Nilton Wanambi and Kevin Mamarika volunteered to carry Ed's camera bag during an excursion along the island's northern coast. Umbakumba, Groote's second largest community (pop. 300), was established by Fred Gray, a former sea-cucumber fisherman, after Qantas started using nearby Port Langdon as a flying boat base in 1938.



◀ "You never know where you'll be from day to day," says Bruce Cook, a charter pilot based on Groote. The mobility of Groote's traditionally nomadic Aborigines has been enhanced by light aircraft, a key element of life on the island today. Groote Eylandters are constantly on the move and often fly to other communities scattered around the gulf. Bruce, 25, averages 20 hours' flying a week, which leaves him with "chicken feed" wages after he pays his overheads, but he is glad of the opportunity to build up his hours.





PHOTOS: JUDITH STOKES

A bark hut was Judith Stokes' home (left) in the 1950s. Since burnt down, it was a far cry from the air-conditioned flat she occupied in later years. Nevertheless, she described her early years on Groote as being completely satisfying. Judith, a linguist, devoted nearly 40 years to studying the Groote Eylandters' language, Anindilyakwa, one of the most complex Aboriginal languages, and spent countless hours translating and recording it, as shown in this 1958 photograph (below) of her and her assistant, Danambana Wurramarra.

Most Groote Eylandters still lived tribal lives in the 1930s, a time remembered fondly by elders today. "I loved our old life in the bush," Murabuda told me, his eyes joyful with memories. "We had a very hard life, and a lot to learn about the ceremonies, but we did it."

By the time Aunt Judith arrived in 1952, though, things had begun to change. In the comfort of her air-conditioned flat, she recalled the rigours of her early years on Groote. "A bark hut was home for nine years. There wasn't any electricity, and stores arrived three times a year by boat," she said. By then most of the Aborigines were living either at Angurugu, where the CMS mission had been relocated in 1943, or at Umbakumba. White-fella temptations – education, health services and rations – had proved too powerful, but tensions simmered between traditionally hostile clans now living cheek by jowl.

Judith had been posted to Groote as a 28-year-old CMS primary-school teacher, but her aim was always to record the Groote Eylandters' language, Anindilyakwa. "In the holidays we went camping with the girls, and then they taught us," she recalled. "They were long, happy days. I always had a pencil and paper, and I'd constantly be recording phrases and vocabulary as we tramped through the bush and along the beaches."

The complexities of Anindilyakwa lie stored beneath the impressive shock of white hair on Gula Lalara, Judith's



long-time linguistic collaborator. "What was told us way back is written in our mind, we can't forget," Gula explained above the lapping of an incoming tide at the Angurugu River's mangrove-lined mouth.

He told me a Dreamtime story about a sawfish that swam to Groote from Bickerton Island. We were sitting precisely where it arrived: "Sawfish came out of the sea, started cutting his way through the island. He made the river channel, throwing the earth aside – opening a way for him to cross the island."

Groote's ancestral storytellers could never have guessed the prophetic nature of this story. Today, 3 km upriver,

monstrous mechanical jaws mimic the Dreamtime sawfish.

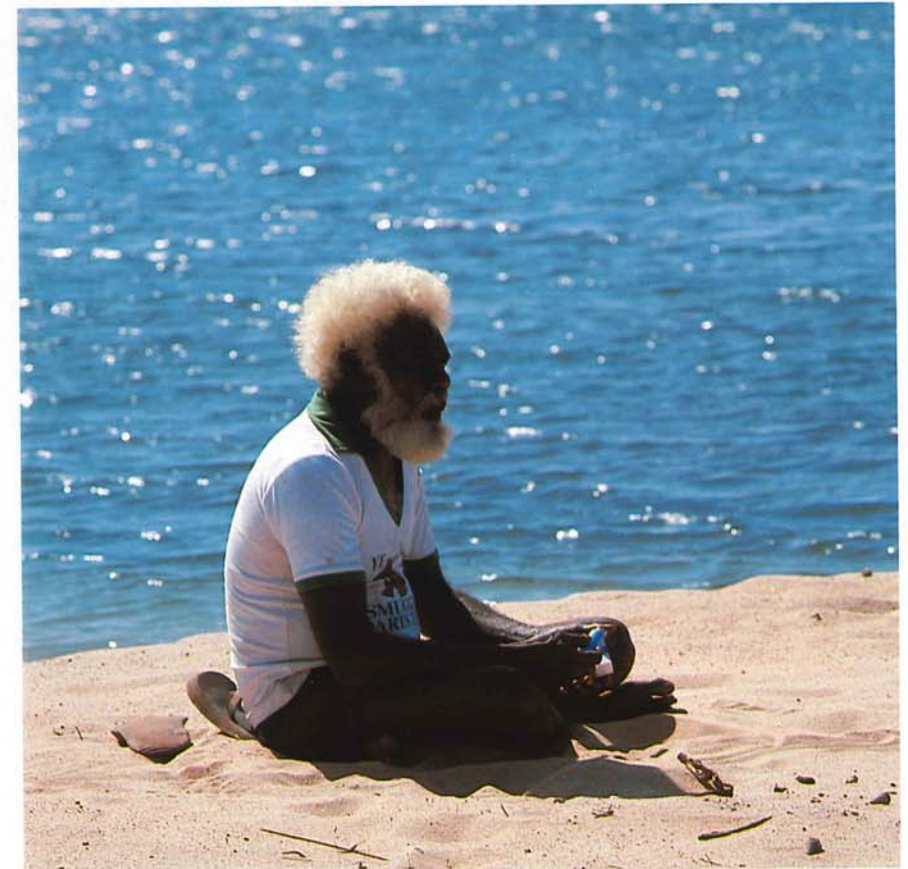
In the mine's production headquarters, graphs, flow charts and quarry diagrams plaster the walls. Whirring computers disgorge critical data about ore quantity, manganese content, trace minerals and unwanted impurities. "This is where the mine's day-to-day operation is driven from," enthused 31-year-old Steve Wilcock, Groote Eylandt Mining Company (Gemco) geologist. "It's really dynamic. You've got masses of information coming in and you're constantly assessing the ore's quality. Getting the right manganese grades up to the port is the crux of the whole operation."



Gula Lalara, a storyteller, has a deep sense of his language's cultural importance. He spent many years working with Judith Stokes, well aware that the next generation of Groote Eylandters may be unwilling or unable to maintain their oral traditions.

Gemco's vital statistics are impressive, the product of a highly technical operation employing about 520 people. Each week the mine's huge open-cut quarries yield up to 100,000 tonnes of ore. The manganese content – about 50 per cent – is extracted by round-the-clock crushing and processing, then transported to stockpiles near the port at Alyangula. Annual manganese production averages about 1.5 million tonnes, some 15 per cent of the world's total. Already more than 25 million tonnes have been exported around the globe and the mine's estimated remaining life is about 50 years.

Broken Hill Proprietary Limited (BHP) began to evaluate the island's

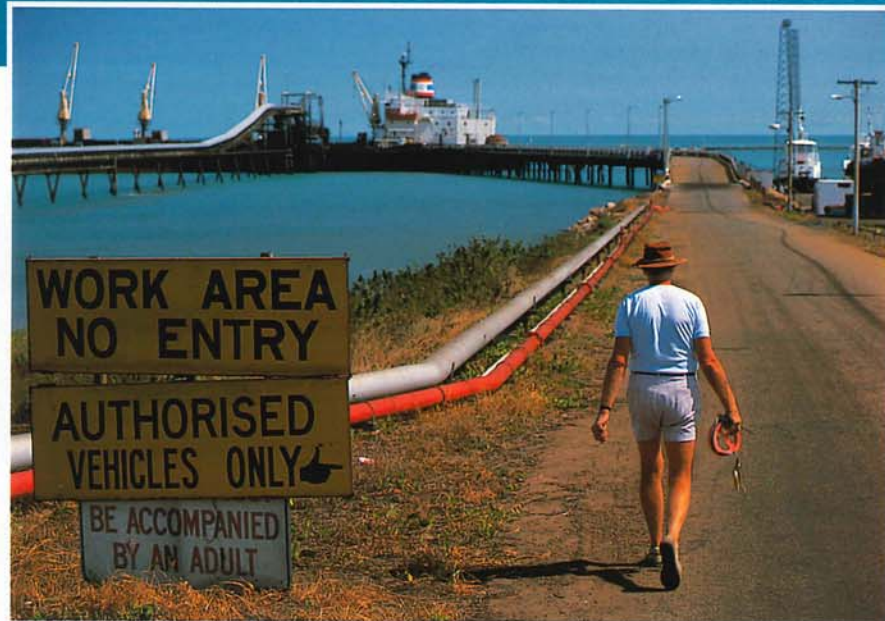






DICK SMITH

The Groote Eylandt Mining Company (Gemco), a BHP subsidiary, ships an average of 1.5 million tonnes – some 15 per cent of world production – of manganese a year from its port at Alyangula (above). Gemco has exported more than 25 million tonnes of manganese around the globe since 1966, and the mine has a life expectancy of another 50 years. Despite the forbidding signs (right), Alyangula has the typically relaxed atmosphere of the tropics, as South Australian angler Bill Ralph found while visiting his son.

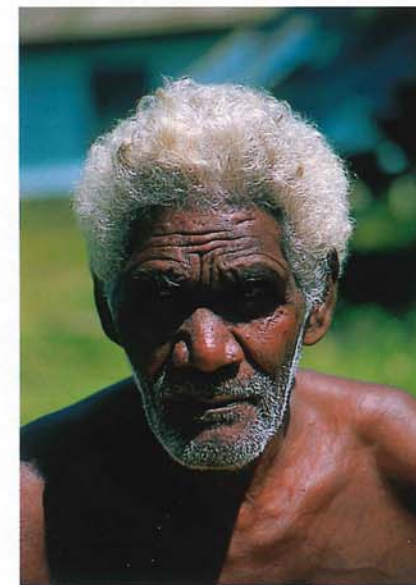


LEE BRIGGS

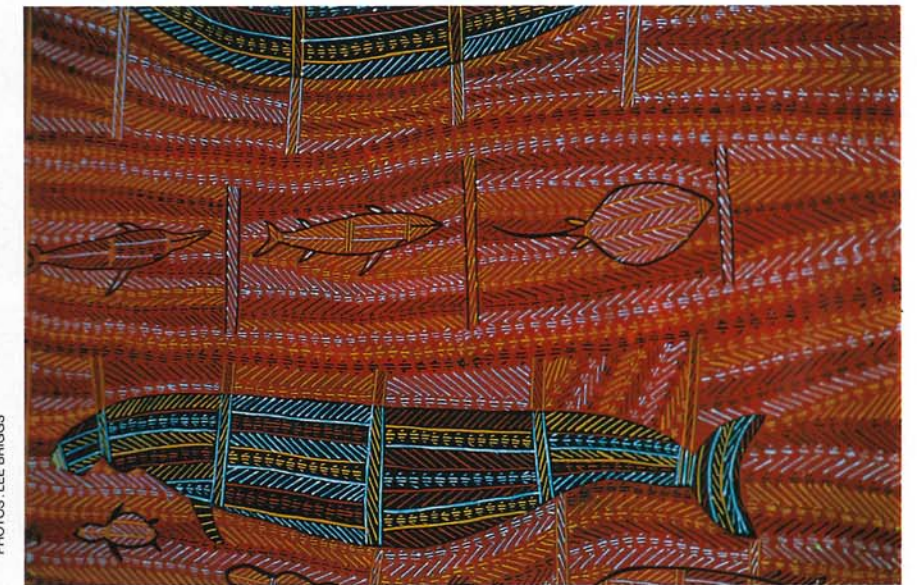
◀ **Life imitates art.** This mural by the late Nandjiwarra Amagula, MBE, at the Angurugu School represents a Groote Eylandt Dreamtime story about a sawfish that swam from Bickerton Island to Groote and cut its way inland to form the Angurugu River. The story was strangely prophetic – today at the mine, 3 km upriver, mechanical jaws mimic the Dreamtime sawfish.



Groote's manganese, a narrow sedimentary layer laid down when the island was an ancient seabed, is mined open-cut (left) after the top-soil and overburden are removed. The versatile black mineral is used in the production of a host of goods including batteries, dyes, fertilisers, plastics, synthetic fibres and particularly steel, which it purifies and strengthens. Nanga Wurrabadalamba (below left) and other Groote Eylandt artists crush soft manganese to make the black paint that characterises their bark paintings. Traditional black backgrounds with red or yellow ochre figures outlined in white clay have given way to more intricate designs like this example of Nanga's work (below).



PHOTOS: LEE BRIGGS



manganese in 1962. The Aborigines used it as a background pigment on bark paintings, but "the Big Australian" was more interested in its industrial uses, which earned the company nearly \$41 million in 1988–89. The CMS negotiated with BHP on the Groote Eylandt's behalf, and in June 1963 a contract was signed.

Four per cent of Groote was leased for mining in return for royalty payments and the company's assurances that it would protect sacred sites, rehabilitate mined areas, prohibit interference with local women and provide Aboriginal employment at award wages – then virtually unknown. Gemco, a wholly owned subsidiary of BHP, was formed the following year

and in March 1966 the first shipment of manganese steamed out to BHP's electroplating plant in Tasmania.

A little harassed near the end of a taxing day, Steve muttered, "Groote's a paradise, but we don't get much time to enjoy it!" Gemco's inevitable obsession with time is at odds with the Aborigines' laid-back attitude. Most dislike time-dominated regimes and detest shift-work. Despite Gemco's desires and initiatives, in September 1989 the mine employed only 21 Aborigines, about 4 per cent of its workforce. "These Groote Eylandt's are just cruising; they won't get ulcers from the nine-to-five syndrome," a white acquaintance observed somewhat enviously.

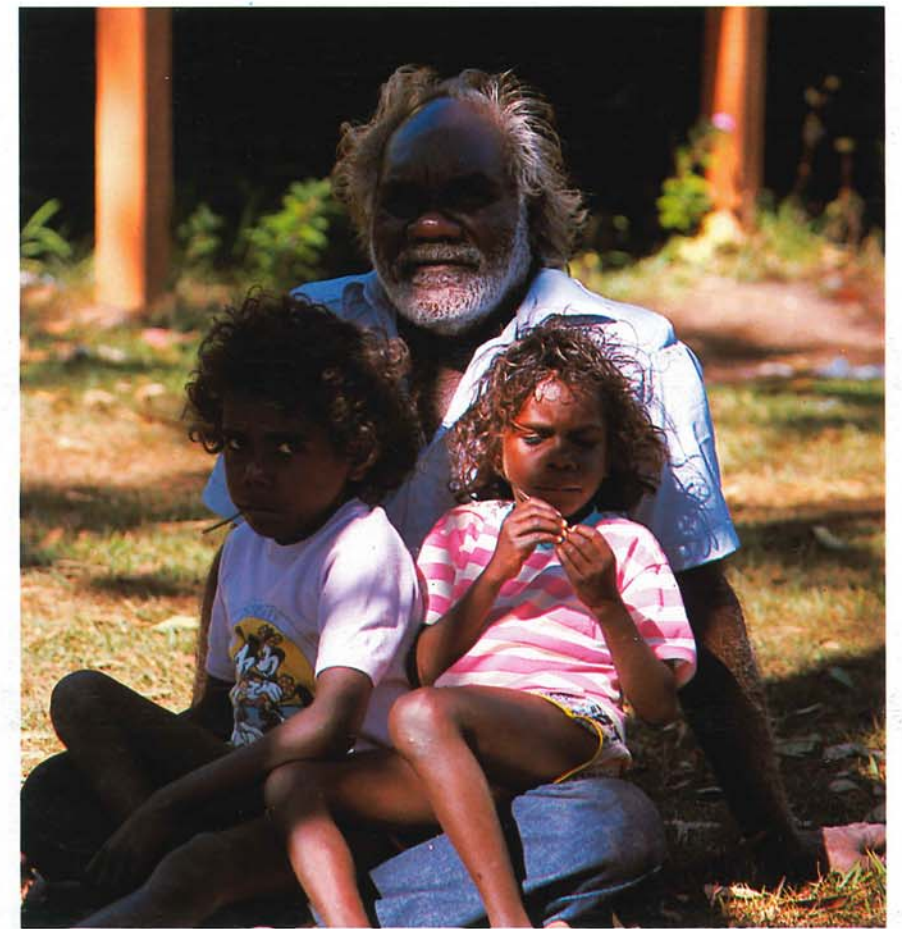
Most Aborigines seeking work look first to the Angurugu and Umbakumba councils, where clan differences and absenteeism on family business are readily accepted. Angurugu Council employs over 40 Aborigines as office workers and tradesmen, but with little other non-Gemco work, Groote Eylandt's suffer high unemployment.

Two weeks after I arrived, the annual clan money day – Aboriginal Christmas, as it's often called – was held at Angurugu. Clans clustered together excitedly outside the council offices in a buzz of anticipation as leaders collected their clans' cheques. Gemco pays a 1.25 per cent royalty for production above 100,000 tonnes. In 1989 the payout was \$1,049,000, about





*Murabuda Wurramarra (right) indulges in a favourite pastime – cuddling two of his many grandchildren. Eylandt children are “owned” by many close relatives and are so pampered that Ed rarely heard them crying. The extended family is still the basis of the Eylandters’ social organisation and families like the one below enjoy each other’s company, but decades of white influence – and money – are eroding that structure. Gemco pays a 1.25 per cent royalty on annual production above 100,000 tonnes and in 1989 the payout was \$870 per person including children. Half the money is invested but on the appointed day – Aboriginal Christmas, as it’s sometimes called – clan leaders gather at the council offices (opposite) to collect the other half. Serious crime is rare on Groote, but the ensuing gambling and spending spree can give rise to petty crime. David Murrungun (opposite below) and other Aboriginal police aides assist white police officers by acting as a bridge between the Aboriginal community and the law.*



\$870 per person, including children.

A joyful spending spree ensued. At Angurugu’s store women snapped up fridges, washing machines, mattresses. Teenage boys swaggered out in flash Rambo gear, girls flirted coyly in gaudy dresses. The kids, bloated on chocolates and soft drink, pulled wheelies on shiny new BMX bikes. Mainland dealers shamelessly flogged tarted-up utes and larrikin drivers turned the air golden with dust before thrashing their engines to silence. Charter planes departed in every direction – some towards Darwin’s casino – and that evening the fireside gambling began in earnest.

Despite the binge, Groote Eylandters care little for possessions. They’re fine when one has them, but if not, “mama” – no worries. Not all of them approve of clan money. “Life is too easy for us today, too easy,” said Murabuda, cuddling two grandchildren as we talked before the handout. “There’s too much money here, money flowing like a river.”

At Alyangula, Gemco dangles a similar carrot to attract workers. Excel-



lent sporting facilities, biannual leave flights, subsidised meals and supermarket prices, spacious homes – electricity, rates, the lot – for about \$100 per month, a balmy climate (apart from the Wet’s torrid miseries) and an environment with minimal pollution and no serious crime.

“The money you’re paid is basically yours to keep,” said Gemco employee Jim Wicks as he skewered another prawn for the barbecue at our weekend camp on Groote’s delightful northern coast. The wind had faded to a wafting breeze and the setting sun glowed beyond some idyllic islets.





"I wonder what the poor people are doing," he mused. A 27-year-old loader driver, he grosses over \$50,000 a year with long overtime and his wife also works for Gemco.

Gemco's workforce is remarkably stable. Few stay less than three years, many five to six years, and there are families and even single men who have lived 10 years or more on Groote.

Amidst a lifestyle half Somerset Maugham colonial, half ocker dreamland, Groote provides a rock-solid financial stepping stone to life and mortgages "off island".

Life isn't all frangipanis for the white Australians, though. Kay Wright has lived on Groote with her husband Alan, Gemco's public relations manager, almost continuously since 1967.

"There's always been plenty of money here, and plenty of broken marriages too," she said over dinner at their home one evening. Life moved indoors with air-conditioners and satellite TV (the former a union demand, the latter first beamed in 1981), and Alyangula wives without jobs or children can feel extremely isolated. Alcohol and affairs are the symptoms of lonely despair and marriages are often sacrificed on the altar of overtime.

"Heartbreak hotel," some Aborigines called Alyangula, dismayed by its seemingly rootless people and their obsession with money. Among Groote

*Pool patrol.* Bridget Steven (left), a policeman's wife, and her daughter Kitty cool off at Alyangula. Life is so comfortable for the 1200 or so white Australians living in the mining township that few venture beyond its carefully tended confines. Those who do, return again and again to idyllic spots along the coast like Makbumanja (below), where Steve Wilcock and Linda Denty share the joys of parenthood with bathers, from left, Paula Pearce, Debbie Goldfinch and Michelle Shipard.



*It's a bird, it's a plane, it's ... just kids (above) having fun at a picnic day. Many Alyangula parents believe that the relaxed and virtually crime-free town gives their children a flying start in life. The adults also benefit. Groote's golf course (right) is one of the benefits Gemco provides to attract workers like Harry Musgrave, right, Peter O'Loughlin and Wendy O'Connell.*

Eylandters, kin are everything. No-one is alone, everyone is part of a larger whole – the family, the clan, the land itself. "Why is Groote special to you?" I asked Murabuda in Angurugu. "Because I belong to the bush," he said with feeling, a touch bemused by my white-fella question. And, he might have added, his clan territory belongs to him. Gemco or no Gemco, Groote is indisputably Aboriginal land. The catch-cries of mainland Aborigines – land rights and sacred sites – are mere echoes on Groote, and there were no protests during the Bicentenary.



Aborigines and white Australians rarely mingle on Groote. Many Aborigines prefer it that way, but the gulf is deepened by most white Australians' assumed superiority. Despite seminars to introduce new employees to Aboriginal culture, there's an undercurrent of bigotry at Gemco.

Judith, deeply respected by the Eylandters, has bridged the racial gulf, carried across by a desire to learn rather than to teach – the common denominator of the few Europeans on Groote who mix with Aborigines.

She looked tired as I photographed her working in her office near the end





of my stay on Groote. It was Saturday afternoon, but she was approaching retirement and some translations demanded completion. Fireproof cabinets beside her desk held her life's work, invaluable tapes and documents. I asked if it had all been worthwhile. "Yes, tremendously," she said proudly. "Some Aboriginal people and I have translated large sections of both the Old and New Testaments. Anindilyakwa is an important language, separate from the other east Arnhem Land languages."

Later that night, a ghostly crowd wandered aimlessly near her office, kicking cans, yahooing. They were petrol sniffers, teenagers caught between two contradictory cultures – and the despair of the elders. "I think they're saying they're bored," said Jambana as we sat chatting with Murabuda beneath the tamarinds. "Surely they've got plenty things to do here, but they don't listen, you know?" The anguish of parents across Australia, it's doubly poignant among people for whom traditional life held uncompromising



**Sister Jane Donaldson** (left) dispenses medicine to a patient at the Angurugu Medical Centre, a cultural middle ground on Groote. The centre is staffed by two visiting doctors, two permanent white Australian sisters and six Aboriginal health workers, including Sylvia Watts (below). Sylvia came to Groote from Mornington Island after she married Eric Amagula. Their neat, air-conditioned flat and garden reflect the relatively settled attitudes of many younger Aborigines.

◀ **Symbolising the problems** that cloud their future, a fire smoulders before these Angurugu youngsters (opposite above). "There's a lot of trouble with grog here, and some kids are addicted to petrol sniffing," says Trevor Wurraramara (opposite below), guitarist with Poison Whiskey, the Angurugu band that pounds out a message of hope for Groote's youngsters. The band, formed during the rock revival that swept the Northern Territory's Aboriginal communities in 1988, hopes to steer Aboriginal youth away from drug abuse and petty crime.



sanctions for even minor offences. But petrol sniffing wasn't banned by the Dreamtime lawmakers. Nor were drinking and gambling, and the petty crime they inspire sends many Aboriginal youngsters to Darwin's Berrimah Prison for short spells.

Groote Eylandters weren't used to telephones 15 years ago, but now some are using typewriters and computers. Certainly their adaptation and achievements are more striking than their problems, though the new skills have been acquired at a cost. "Family life is very hard for me today because my children are not with me," Murabuda said sadly. "They are thinking differ-

ently. They got another world to see."

"Most of the time Gemco are doing good things," said Jambana. "But a lot of people here," he added as he glanced towards a rowdy card game, "they lost their lifestyle. This is the new world. Aboriginal people can't carry out the old traditional business now, our ceremonies and beliefs, because the mining company's changed our island." Groote's elders had little comprehension of the mine's future size and impact in 1963, and that's the rub.

Gemco's senior managers have shown genuine concern for Groote's original people, and have gone far beyond the company's contractual obli-

gations to promote their welfare. But no amount of goodwill can compensate for Gemco's sheer size. Today more white Australians than Aborigines live on Groote, and although the Aborigines appreciate and enjoy Gemco's benefits, many yearn for their traditional life.

Groote's outstations reflect that desire, and a wish to escape Angurugu's often divisive clan bickering. Some 120 Aborigines now live on four permanent outstations, established with assistance from Gemco on traditional clan territories in the late 1970s. Milyakburra on Bickerton Island is the largest.





◀ **Nadj Wurramara rests outside his "donga", the galvanised iron shelter that holds his few simple possessions. Nadj was one of the first Groote Eylandters to live and work at Groote's Emerald River Mission, established in 1921 as part of the Government's policy of removing half-caste mainland children from the "degradations of the blacks' camps". The children attended school and were taught gardening and carpentry.**

**Wielding a machete with practised skill, Gulidja Durila transforms a piece of soft wood, known locally as mabanda, into the likeness of a bird. Traditional arts such as carving and weaving, once reserved mostly for the creation of ceremonial objects, are now devoted to producing tourist souvenirs.**



**At Angurugu's dusty meeting ground, a member of the Christian congregation rakes up leaves in preparation for an evening of open-air worship. Missionaries have been active on Groote for about 70 years, and today on most dry-season evenings about 40 Christian Aborigines meet for fellowship, sung and spoken in their native tongue.**

◀ **Under the fascinated gaze of his son Lennie and daughter Antea, Alan Lalara prepares a shell for decoration. Here on Bickerton Island, Aboriginal children still grow up in an integrated world of work and play, sharing with and learning from their parents, unlike on Groote where most parents – Aboriginal and white Australian – work away from their children.**

**I**T WAS hot when I visited Bickerton with Murabuda, Gula and old Nadj. Joe Wurramara, Bickerton's affable clan leader, appeared preoccupied, but he welcomed us and took time to tell me about his community's origins.

"When I was living on Groote, my father asked me, 'You build me a little humpy back on Bickerton?' I promised him I would." Joe paused, sweat trickling from beneath his jauntily perched cap. "But I was too busy working for Gemco. My father finished, passed away. Then I left Gemco, and came and settled here."

Joe left Angurugu in 1978. During the next 10 years he established a self-managing settlement for his clan, helped by government funding for small Aboriginal communities. Today it's a delightful place surrounded by a

wall of trees. Neat homes line a rust-red street, their sandy gardens carefully raked, young coconut palms lovingly watered.

Consensus comes easily with only one clan: alcohol and petrol are both banned. Time matters little. Living and working blend into a harmonious whole, lulled to peacefulness by the sighing stringy-barks and the dazzling tropical sea. As was once the case on Groote, everyone belongs, no-one is an outsider.

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**Joe Wurramara, Bickerton Island's amiable clan leader, negotiates a fare with charter pilot Daryl Smith. Bickerton's airstrip, built by local Aborigines with Gemco's help, is the only large development on the island and the key to the locals' independent but not isolated lifestyle.**

