

## Wadeye: The NT bush town at war with itself



*Brothers Patrick, left, Cassima and Gregory Narndu with Patrick's burnt-out truck outside his ransacked house in Wadeye.*

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Outside the shop at the heart of Wadeye, there is a sign proclaiming “no violence”. Four hands reach skywards behind a blood-red cross as if imploring everyone to stop fighting. You could be forgiven for thinking no one reads it.

This year alone, more than a hundred houses have been damaged or destroyed in the community, 420km southwest of Darwin. Cars have been burned, people injured and a young man is dead after weeks of violence. He was the third member of one family group to die in similar circumstances since 2002.

The catalyst for the worst eruptions was the death over the Easter long weekend of a 32-year-old man known as Mr Tchernia.

Up to 300 people embarked on armed rampages causing significant injuries and property damage. Police have made at least 25 arrests and about 500 residents were displaced.

The Weekend Australian travelled to Wadeye at the invitation of Kardu Diminin traditional owners, the first media to visit the town since the unrest broke out in March.

More than four months after Mr Tchernia's death, scores of those on the other side of the conflict remain sheltering out bush, their homes in ruins. Many are missing work,

blocked from moving around town or visiting the shop. They say they are miserable, short of supplies and their children aren't attending school.

Elders scrambling to calm the situation have had some success. But although there is now an uneasy calm in Wadeye, relatives anticipate the dead man's funeral in August could rekindle animosities.

The latest violence has been variously described as clan feuding, tribal fighting and gang warfare. According to locals, all of those are wrong. "This is family fighting. We call it mum versus dad," says traditional owner Stephen Bunduck.

"We are fighting with our own family, with our relations."

Wadeye has a long history of social strife and secrecy. In 2006, then Indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough made headlines when he visited Wadeye and likened it to Soweto. He lamented in an interview with this newspaper last weekend that little seemed to have changed.

There are often competing versions of what happened when something goes wrong in the bush. According to an account checked with leaders from rival groups, this strife began when Mr Tchernia, a young man from the Kinthari family, got drunk and smashed up a car belonging to a cousin-brother from the Thchinburur family.

The cousin-brother took offence and gave the young man "a good hiding". Both families were upset. A "fair-go fight" (think bare-knuckle boxing) was convened to settle the problem, but the young man, now sober, unexpectedly knocked his relative down.

The cousin-brother's family was angry and confronted the young man's family. It's not entirely clear what happened next, but soon Wadeye's notorious gangs were involved.

Mr Tchernia was a relative of Ezekiel Narndu, 19, who has been charged with manslaughter over Mr Tchernia's death.

Ezekiel's dad, Patrick Narndu, grew up with one of Mr Tchernia's older brothers, Romolo Tchernia. The two spoke after the tragedy and attempted to broker peace. But Romolo got locked up for his own misdeeds, so anguish and fears of retribution linger on even though the Tchernias and Narndus are descended from siblings.

Mr Tchernia's grieving partner, Rebecca Bunduck, warns there may be no peace until another young man is hurt as payback – a form of revenge. "My son was talking about his dad," she says. "He was saying, 'I want a payback for what they've done'. He's just eight years old, and he already knows that ... if (the alleged assailant) goes to jail for a long time, maybe things will settle down. But if my family or my partner's family see him walking around in Wadeye, they will do the same to him."



*The largely ignored sign on the fence outside the community store in Wadeye.*

### **In the grip of gangs**

Wadeye, a coastal township of up to 3000 people is one of the Northern Territory's largest Aboriginal communities. It began as a mission settlement bringing associated but competitive clan groups together. It is today a tapestry of ceremonial, tribal, language and family affiliations overprinted with Christianity and the modern adjunct of gang identity.

Most of Wadeye's gangs are named after heavy metal bands: the Manowar Boys, the Metallica Boys, the Iron Maiden Girls. Two of the most prominent are the Judas Priests and the Evil Warriors. Children are born into a gang identity but may change it through marriage. Each gang occupies turf ranging from a few houses to a small suburb. Some people associate the gangs with crime and violence, while others say they are a social construct underscoring family loyalties and giving kids a further sense of belonging.

After the car incident in early March, things spiralled. By Easter, when Mr Tchernia died, mobs of tens or hundreds of armed youths fought pitched street battles. The violence seems to have been about everything and nothing. No one is sure why it got so out of hand.

Jake Clark, a self-described "bush kid" who manages Kardu Diminin Corporation and the Murrinhpatha Nimmipa Store on behalf of Wadeye's traditional owners, speaks of a pressure-cooker atmosphere fed by unemployment, overcrowding and Covid-19 lockdowns. He says government agencies were warned long before the violence started.

"I've never seen it so tense here," he says. Clark says pandemic welfare payments increased the supply of alcohol, even though most pubs and clubs were closed. "What

they ended up doing was forming a black market where you could buy a bottle of rum for \$500. That never really went away.”

### **Mystery death**

Wadeye’s dusty main street advertises a bakery, a butcher’s shop and a takeaway – all closed. There is a “T house” (also closed), a weedy skatepark, a barren pool and a gloomy sports and recreation hall. Fighting that used to happen on the main street moved to the suburbs (closer to the houses) after security cameras were installed.

At one end of the town’s potholed thoroughfare, there is a neat street where service staff live a mercenary existence behind locked gates, their cars in cages and bins ranked along the kerb. Some barely visit the shop; their food gets barged from Darwin.

Mobile phone footage of the fatal Easter incident shows two large groups of armed youngsters facing off in Kolumboort Street. Other people watching appear to be there partly for entertainment. The atmosphere seems redolent of bravado and showmanship as much as of genuine intent to commit violence.

Locals say the groups divided loosely into those from an area of town known as Chicken Oval (there was once a chicken farm there), where the Judas Priests dominate, and others from an area known as Creek Camp, where the Evil Warriors dominate.

Handfuls of youngsters advance and retreat, shouting and throwing things towards each other. Two police officers and a paddywagon stand between the groups. Mr Tchernia loiters unsteadily with some other men, talking to the police. Leaders from both sides agree he was trying to stop the violence but was also very drunk. Then a young man emerges from the “Chicken Oval mob” brandishing axes. Attempts to contain him fail, and he looks set on hurling the axes at the opposing side. The police officers dash to their ute and drive away.

Just as the two groups lunge at each other, Mr Tchernia, standing off to one side, falls heavily to the ground. The circumstances of his injuries will be the subject of a court case, but it is understood he was allegedly wounded by a piece of stiff wire that entered his head through or close to his nose. He was hospitalised but could not be saved. Leaders from both sides say his death was unintentional.

Much of the violence that followed was in retribution for Mr Tchernia’s death, locals say. Houses in Mollinjin Street (part of Creek Camp) appear to have been systematically ransacked. An enclave of Kinthari homes in the Chicken Oval area has also been damaged. The roof of the home of a gang loyalist is plastered with weapons, while a neighbouring house belonging to a sickly lady looks untouched.

Patrick Narndu, whose son Ezekiel is in jail, kicks mournfully through the ashes of his vehicles and the wreckage of his home as he reflects on what happened. He calls himself a bush mechanic but says his entire workshop went up in flames. “There’s the funeral coming up, and there’s going to be payback, more trouble,” he says. “We just want to go home.”





Kardu Diminin traditional owner Stephen Bunduck.

### **Cycle of trauma**

Many Narndus are among those now sheltering out bush. In an irony of the conflict, he and three brothers are on the Creek Camp side, while a fourth brother joined the Chicken Oval mob after moving to escape “women trouble”.

“We are victims in this,” says Cassima Narndu, one of Patrick’s brothers. “They are saying we’re troublemakers, but we’re not.”

Clare Jongmin, a senior figure on the Chicken Oval side, doesn’t see it that way. In 2002, an 18-year-old Jongmin boy was fatally shot by a policeman who, a coroner found, acted “in a blind panic” on seeing the boy struggling with another teenager over a shotgun.

The incident happened during police-sanctioned fair-go fighting between Judas Priests and Evil Warriors members. The Priests blamed the Warriors because their boy apparently brought the gun. About 10 years later, another Jongmin man died in a dispute over land rights. Old rivalries and gang ties were once again ignited.

“All the family were there again, worrying for the young ones and crying for the blood on Kardu Diminin land. Now, this is number three,” she says.

“We don’t know how to stop it. It’s going to take a long time.”

Clark maintains close relationships with community members who regularly visit his shop. Every group has its grievances. He believes trauma is a big part of what lies behind the violence: people have moved past tragedies without moving on from them.

“People haven’t let it (trauma) go – they haven’t been shown how,” Clark says. “I think what we’re seeing is the expressions of a lot of frustrated, angry people.”

Wadeye has a large youth population but few jobs and little for the young people to do.

### **Economy in trouble**

The pandemic became an excuse for providers to cut services, locals say. The region's main Aboriginal corporation, Thamarrurr Development Corporation, and the West Daly Regional Council are both headquartered in Darwin.

Stephen Bunduck is related to Mr Tcherna but moves easily between the groups and devotes significant energy to trying to calm things down. "It's always the same fight," he says. "I'm always the one talking to people saying, 'I want you mob to let it go'."

Bunduck wants to convene a meeting of elders after the funeral to try to hash out some lasting peace. He knows it won't tackle Wadeye's economic decline or problems with service delivery.

A government taskforce was established in May to "co-ordinate resources ... build community resilience ... develop a longer-term strategic vision ... and a high-level implementation plan". The taskforce has no local Aboriginal members.

The Labor government in Darwin claims to be working with all parties. But none of the Wadeye traditional owners or other local leaders The Weekend Australian met was attending taskforce meetings. A handful who once tried were asked to wait outside.

Wadeye is on Kardu Diminin land, but Kardu Diminin leaders say they have had great difficulty getting attention from government ministers.

The NT government says all agencies and organisations are invited to attend emergency co-ordination meetings and "provide input into decisions and actions".

"Out of respect, the Kardu Diminin traditional owners were the first group to be met with by Deputy Chief Minister Nicole Manison on her last visit," a spokeswoman says. "The minister also met with other traditional owners of the region, locals including displaced families and government agencies. We know local decisions are the best decisions; this is why a government taskforce was established in May 2022."

TDC boss Scott McIntyre declined to comment.

Locals have hashed out their own plan for transforming Wadeye, in meetings of up to 100 people in Clark's tea room. It includes fixing the houses before the wet season, a major works program, measures to improve productivity and accountability of services, a town plan and improvements to work-for-the-dole.

### **Desperate for solutions**

One of the more counterintuitive ideas is a licensed club. Locals say it would reduce dangerous drinking, keep money in the community, provide entertainment and give traditional owners something to threaten to remove if things get out of hand. "We are still trying to get our foot in the door with the Chief Minister," Clark says.

In a hotel in Darwin, a group of Wadeye traditional owners is working to make a better future. They are going to see the Office of Township Leasing about a possible new deal for Wadeye. Township leasing was one of Brough's ideas to help streamline land tenure and economic development, and tackle the perennial problem of remote Aboriginal people being land rich but dirt poor.

Margaret Perdjert and Anne Marie Nudjulu want to stop the violence, fix up their town and create more opportunities for young people. "We want to get everyone together and talk among ourselves, fix the problems," Nudjulu says. "But I'm not sure they (the people who fight) will listen to us."

Perdjert's father, a Catholic deacon and cultural leader, was one of Wadeye's most recognisable and respected leaders. In recent years the town has lost a string of elders. Middle-aged people such as Perdjert, thrust into senior roles, struggle to fill their forebears' shoes. "I don't know how to fix it. How can you put a broken glass back together? That's how I feel. I'm trying my best to get to grips with this problem, with the fighting on my land."

The Weekend Australian travelled to Wadeye by invitation and spoke to people after appropriate introductions. In an effort to minimise the risk of adverse reaction, a draft of this story was read to several leaders and community members, who did not express concern.

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