

Threatened Mine Closure

The late 1990s were a tumultuous time at Argyle. Community Relations policy and practice were changing and the mine was scheduled to be closed in 1998, therefore Argyle management had to develop a mine closure plan. At the same time Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley were asserting their native title rights to areas near the Argyle lease area. The Miriuwung Gajerrong native title claim to these areas had not been resolved through mediation, and the claim was due to be heard by the Federal Court.

Throughout this period, Kija men and women had been conducting cross-cultural training with the Argyle miners. They taught miners about kin terms, skin groups, culturally appropriate forms of behaviour towards local Aboriginal people, bush medicine and local Aboriginal history (Plate 8). During these cross-cultural courses, Argyle miners and others were ceremonially welcomed to country by Aboriginal people. Mona Ramsay once explained to me how the senior men and women conducting the cross-cultural course had talked amongst themselves about using the welcome manthe ceremony as a way to increase the cultural awareness of the miners. Mona said that they had decided 'to give it a try', and that the ceremony had 'worked' in that they felt that the miners were more receptive to learning about Aboriginal culture and more able to respond to people appropriately. She said it 'made them think about culture'. From that time on Aboriginal men and women became increasingly confident that their performative cultural practices worked on Miners in a way that wirnan had not.

Gunness Breaks the News

It was within this context that Aboriginal people learned of the planned closure of the mine. The newly arrived General Manager