Despite their crushing High Court defeat ... Yorta Yorta will live on and on

By REKO RENNIE-GWAYBILLA

The struggle for justice was the theme of the Yorta Yorta Nations Survival weekend when more than 1000 people attended the two-day event in the Barkers Forest situated on Yorta Yorta land.

The celebration of survival included concerts, Yorta Yorta performers, speakers, forum stalls, the Sea of Hands and plenty of children’s activities.

Saturday, January 25, was the day of solidarity. A twilight concert was held in the evening with MCs Tony Briggs and Kyle Belling. The concert featured performances from Lou Bennett, the Briga Boys, Peter Rutomah, the Maze sisters and the Torch project featuring Indigenous children from throughout Victoria.

The evening included speeches by Wayne Atkinson of the Yorta Yorta Nation, Di Sisely of the Equal Opportunities Commission, and Peter Lewis of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR).

Dr Atkinson, a Yorta Yorta Elder, reflected on last year’s High Court decision denying native title for the Yorta Yorta.

He expressed disappointment and frustration with the decision, but believes there is a positive outcome.

“After nearly a decade of struggle, we now at least know where we stand with native title. I personally feel a great sense of freedom in that we are no longer gagged and oppressed by the way the native title process has been imposed. Our voices can no longer be curtailed and misrepresented. These are the decisive outcomes of native title,” Dr Atkinson said.

Dr Atkinson says he is committed to pass on the experiences that he and the Yorta Yorta community have gained, to help educate and create awareness in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

“We are no longer subject to those agents of the law, many of whom – as demonstrated in our case – are attempting to stretch the law in accordance with their own imported Anglo-centric and often prejudiced view systems,” he said.

“Having dealt with the adversarial nature of the process, I am looking forward with much enthusiasm to telling it as it is.”

Sunday’s Survival day saw 200 people attend a supporters’ workshop to develop a statement which recognises the Yorta Yorta culture is still strong and alive. The statement rejects any notion of a so-called ‘tide of history’ having eliminated their sovereignty and culture.

The supporters’ statement calls on State and Federal governments to recognise the sovereignty of the Yorta Yorta Nation and immediately return their land. It also expresses support for inviting us to their country.

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A section of the crowd listens to a speech at the Yorta Yorta survival weekend.

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“We refute any notion of a so-called ‘tide of history’ having eliminated their sovereignty and culture.

“The non-Indigenous people here particularly express our deep sorrow, shame and anger that our colonial and fragmented legal system has insulated and continues to attack the people of the Yorta Yorta Nation.”

“We recognises without qualification, the sovereignty of the Yorta Yorta people over their land and waters.

“We recognise that the Yorta Yorta people and their culture is strong and alive.

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“We reject as absurd the proposition that a ‘European’ court can meaningfully determine the extent and nature of the connection that Yorta Yorta people have to their land. The Barham-Millewa region was always and always will be Yorta Yorta land.

“We reject as a betrayal of truth and fairness that the written words of one pastoralist should be given precedence over the oral testimony of over 60 respected members of the Yorta Yorta Nation.

“We call upon governments – Federal and State – to acknowledge that the Amended Native Title Act works against the interests of Indigenous people, and, after genuine negotiation with Indigenous people, to amend or abandon it in favour of a system which produces just outcomes for the Yorta Yorta people and other Indigenous peoples in general.

“We call upon the State Labor governments of Victoria and New South Wales to recognise the sovereignty of the Yorta Yorta Nation, immediately return the Crown land they have taken, and properly resource the Yorta Yorta Nation to enable further negotiations.

“We express our solidarity with the Yorta Yorta nation and with all the Indigenous peoples of Australia in the fight for land rights and social justice and we commit ourselves to that fight.

“No so-called ‘tide of history’ will stop our tidal waves of resistance.”

Statement of support

This is the statement developed at the survival weekend:

“We express our solidarity with the Yorta Yorta Nation, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and give our thanks to the Yorta Yorta for inviting us to their country.

“We recognise, without qualification, the sovereignty of the Yorta Yorta people over their land and waters.

“We recognise that the Yorta Yorta people and their culture is strong and alive.

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