

CHAPTER 3 – A WALKABOUT RACE? : CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL MOBILITIES IN YAMATJI COUNTRY

3.1 Introduction

The introductory chapter considered the historical precedent of colonial misunderstanding regarding Aboriginal mobility practices in Australia. It suggested that the colonial imaginary produced various images of Aboriginal mobility practices as indulgent, irresponsible, and even romantically mysterious as observed in the notion of ‘walkabout’ - a reductionist descriptor of a perceived Aboriginal propensity to wander. These colonial and colonising interpretations formed the basis for oppressive and marginalising government policies that intended to civilise and settle ‘the native’ – to exercise control both socially and spatially. Although often with more subtle articulation and more subconscious expression, many of these interpretations have persisted through time in the Anglo-Australian consciousness and continue to inform cross-cultural interactions on the ground as well as contemporary policy development. It seems appropriate then to begin an engagement with the empirical data by examining contemporary conceptualisations and interpretations of Aboriginal mobility practices in the fieldwork region - a discussion which serves as an important precursor to subsequent chapters that describe the contemporary relationship between service delivery, policy development, and Aboriginal mobility practices.

This chapter is therefore concerned with developing a picture of contemporary Aboriginal spatiality in the fieldwork region generally, and in Meekatharra more specifically. It does so, however, not through the framework of a particular demographic or migration model, but through the interpretive lenses of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research participants. Following Chapman (1991) and Wilson and Peters (2005), who have advocated ‘ground-level’ approaches to interpreting mobility practices, it re-constructs an account of Aboriginal mobility practices based upon the experiences and perspectives of both those who engage in such movements, and those who are in some way affected by them. It begins by examining two categories of Aboriginal spatial actors identified within the

fieldwork region: the 'core' and the 'transients.' Whilst these categories ultimately presage the diversity of Aboriginal spatial expression in the region and provide a useful framework for describing particular mobility practices, the discussion also problematises the local inclination to position them as discrete and binarised entities. In so doing, it challenges the reductionist notion of 'walkabout' or a singular Aboriginal mobility to which all Aboriginal people conform. Instead, the picture of Aboriginal spatiality portrayed here is one of complexity, multiplicity and overlap – a theme engaged with in each subsequent chapter.

The chapter then progresses into an analysis of the dominant discourses that are used to explain these mobility practices. It frames this discussion around an interrogation of an authenticity discourse that positions some Aboriginal mobilities as natural and legitimate and others as indulgent or deviant. This dominant discourse in many ways reinforces the notion of 'walkabout' where mobility is understood as the result of a nomadic pre-disposition. In addition to this discourse, a range of alternate interpretations were also offered to explain the mobility practices of Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region and these are also discussed.

Finally, the relationship between Aboriginal mobilities and the dominant discourses that circulate to explain them is grounded by examining the practice of funeral attendance. This example illustrates the ways in which public discourse influences and is influenced by Aboriginal mobility practice and processes.

3.2 The 'Core' and the 'Transients'

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research participants generally assigned Aboriginal people to one of two broad categories of spatial practices in Yamatji country, identifying a permanently resident Aboriginal population and those of a more mobile or transient population:

Certainly from my view, what I've seen is that there is strong bases here [Meekatharra]. There's about four or five main, major family groups, who are here all the time ... we have strong family groups for whom this is their town and this is their home and this is where they stay. But then each of those family groups will have amongst them a number of people (and not a huge number) but a

number of people who are highly transient. And that may be for a number of reasons (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).

3.2.1 The 'Core'

In Meekatharra, many interviewees referred to the permanently residing Aboriginal population as the 'core.' As the above interview excerpt indicates, this 'core' population was described as comprising representative members of several family groups within the town. Each of these family groups have associations with one (or more) of several Aboriginal organisations operating within or nearby Meekatharra. These include:

- Belele Station – the closest pastoral station to Meekatharra. Belele is owned and operated by an Aboriginal family who have lived in the area for many generations.
- Yulella Corporation – a local Aboriginal organisation concerned with economic development. Yulella run a nationally recognised Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP) program³⁹ and also manage several businesses within and beyond Meekatharra.
- Buttawindi Corporation – A small community of several houses located approximately 1.5km West of the Meekatharra township.
- Yulga Jinna Corporation – the governing body of the Yulga Jinna Aboriginal community located some 260km North of Meekatharra.

In addition to formal or informal associations with these Aboriginal organisations, many of the 'core' population are perceived to be securely woven into the social infrastructure of the town through participation in community activities or involvement in local committees and volunteer teams. Many of these individuals own houses within Meekatharra and are either employed within the mainstream economy or retired.

³⁹ The CDEP program encourages Aboriginal people to become involved in community development projects in exchange for the social welfare payments (also known as 'the dole'). As interviewee Ron Bradfield points out though, the equivalent scheme for non-Aboriginal participants, known as the work-for-the-dole program, receives twice the funding of the CDEP and has fewer outcomes expected of it.

3.2.2 The 'Transients'

The more itinerant portion of the Aboriginal population engage in frequent mobilities within and beyond Yamatji country and are often referred to as 'transients.'

You have a stable core of people that stay put. But you've got other members that are quite transient ... And they could be here one week, and in Mt Magnet the next week and stay there for three months and then two months they could be in Mullewa or Geraldton or whatever. Or they could come back here for another two weeks or three months and then they just go somewhere else. They could go to like Newman, Port Hedland, out to communities and Jigalong and Yulga Jinna. The movement of people is - if you actually plotted them, would be phenomenal. (Bill Atyeo, Environmental Health Officer, 10 September 2004).

There was significant variation amongst interviewees regarding their perceptions of the prevalence of transiency amongst the Indigenous population in the town / region. Ultimately, neither this study nor any currently available data is able to accurately quantify the extent of this type of movement in comparison to any other. However, Bell and Hugo (2000 p. 66) have suggested that whilst census data cannot quantify the movements of this 'transient' population, it can make some estimates about its probable prevalence. The 1996 Census, for example, revealed that the percentage of Indigenous people reporting multiple moves over a one year interval was 60% higher than that of the non-Indigenous population. They argued that this statistical finding indicates that repeat or 'chronic' mobility is a common feature of Indigenous population movement (Bell and Hugo, 2000 p. 66). Complementing this quantitative estimation, the movements of this more transient portion of the population dominated interview discussions in the present study. Three characteristics or dimensions of this 'transiency' are highlighted in the interview excerpt above and bear further exploration here: the spatial dimension, the temporal dimension, and the demographic dimension.

3.2.2.1 The Spatial Dimension

The spatial dimension of 'transient' movements in the fieldwork region encompasses both the process and spatial extent of these movements. Three processes of transient movement were identified:

1. Perpetual movement of the 'homeless.'

2. Circulation.
3. Multi-locale living.

The first of these processes involves the continual movement of 'transient' individuals between a series of places dictated by the spatial extent of family connections. Such individuals may not have their own physical 'home-base.'

... like the two we picked up this morning. They've got family in Magnet. So 'hey, there's a ride going. Let's jump in and go' ... They don't really have nowhere to live. They just go to family. Wherever – like Aunty Mary's just come back from Port Lincoln [in South Australia]. She's got family in Meeka and she's got family in Magnet. She's got family in Geraldton. So those places are – she can move freely between those places (Deborah Robinson, 30th November, 2004).

In her study of the relationship between mobility and kinship organisation amongst the Nyungar people of Western Australia's southwest, Birdsall (1988) identified a similar type of mobility process. She described a group of individuals who travelled more or less continually and, having no home of their own, were equally at home with family members within a network of towns throughout the region. Amongst her research participants, these individuals were described as 'wanderers' or 'ramblers.' In Kuranda, Queensland, Finlayson (1991) identified a similar, permanently transient Aboriginal population. According to Finlayson, these individuals move between two or three households in a 'kinship run' between Cairns, Kuranda and Mareeba.

The second and more common process of 'transient' movement in Yamatji country involves continual returns to a 'home-base' after frequent journeys away. In Melanesia, Bedford (1981) and Chapman and Prothero (1985a; 1985b) referred similar to processes as 'circulation.' Chapman and Prothero expanded earlier definitions of circulation, which had been deeply rooted in processes of African wage-labour migrations between employment locales and tribal hinterlands, to include 'all reciprocal flows of population between places, irrespective of their purpose or duration' (Chapman and Prothero, 1985b p. 17). As discussed in Chapter One, circulation processes are often characterised as short-term, frequent, cyclical, and differing most significantly from classically defined 'migration' in that they do not involve permanent population re-distributions (Zelinsky, 1971). Where migration

involves a definite move from one permanent residence to another, circulation involves frequent and fluid movement between a series of points with no actual change in permanent residence. In the present research context, Meekatharra acts as a home-base from which 'transient' individuals continually engage in journeys away and subsequent returns:

... they're homebodies but then also go out to Wiluna or Leonora to see this one because they're family and they need to, they can't stay in one place. They have to go but they always come back to the base. Depending on where their home is. They might be away for a couple of months but, so, but they tend to always drift back (Anonymous Interviewee 3, 26 July 2004).

One Aboriginal interviewee referred to such individuals as the 'boomerang brand' while another described them as analogous to 'homing pigeons' who, regardless of where they were in the world, would always find their home to come back to. For such individuals, frequent movement may be the norm, but they do have a home place to which they keep returning. Within the fieldwork region therefore, Meekatharra, like other towns, serves as both a source place and a destination place. Movement through the town is perpetuated by both locally originated processes of circulation, and what one interviewee described as 'blow-ins' who stay for anywhere between several days and several years before eventually moving on to the next destination or returning to their 'home-base'⁴⁰.

A third form of mobility process identified in the fieldwork region was 'multi-locale living' (Young, 1990). Multi-locale living, a concept developed from wage-labour migration theory, involves the production of multiple 'home places' when individuals migrate to one place for part of the year (usually to pursue necessary employment in larger urban centers) and return to another place for the other part of the year (usually to return to family in their local community). Through these migration processes, traditional 'home' places remain significant, whilst new home places are also established. To some extent, multi-locale living takes place between Wiluna and smaller Western Desert communities, and between Carnarvon and Burringurrah. Between these places however, such migration processes are primarily the product of seasonal migrations and the service availability in larger towns, rather

⁴⁰ Chapter Seven provides a more detailed description and explanation of this process of circulation in Yamatji country.

than employment availability. Further, since this type of mobility process was not common in Meekatharra and therefore not a focus of interview discussions, it is not a primary consideration in this thesis.

Describing the spatial extent of the movement of 'transients' in Yamatji country requires a cautious adoption of conventional categorisations. Literature exploring the spatial extent of Aboriginal mobility processes in Australia has conceptualised these movements in a variety of ways, including beats (Beckett, 1988), runs, lines (Birdsall, 1988), and mobility regions (Young, 1990; Young and Doohan, 1989). Despite somewhat divergent definitions in different research contexts, these conceptualisations fall into two broad categories: confined circular movements and more expansive linear circulations.

Birdsall (1988) for example employed the concepts of 'runs' and 'lines.' She described a 'run' as a set of towns where kin are located. Each run is unique to a particular family and situated within a geographical region where that family has had a long generational association. A 'line' however described a migration path of relatives that has developed over many years as family groups have migrated back toward their ancestral homelands from where they had been taken in previous generations of government policies. A line may be spatially expansive and not necessarily contained within the region over which that family may have ancestral ties. Research participants travelled up and down their line, but around their run.

Young (1990) employed the concept of 'mobility regions' to define the spatial extent of mobility processes amongst Aboriginal people in Central Australia. She asked research participants what places they usually visited. Collectively, these places comprised a person's 'mobility region.' Similarly to Birdsall's (1988) 'run,' Young suggested that in general, these regions closely mirrored the bounds of a person's traditional country⁴¹ and extent of their familial connections (see also Henry and Daly, 2001). In a variation of Birdsall's concept of a 'line,' Young and Doohan (1989) described a process of chain migration where individuals move along a particular route between outlying destinations and more central or coastal urban

⁴¹ According to Young (1990 p. 191) a person's 'country' was a physical region determined by the extent of responsibility for or custodianship of traditional land, common language and natural resources.

centres. Young and Doohan described this process as the movement of kin along a chain, visiting friends and family who may have previously undertaken more permanent labour migrations to larger centres.

In exploring the mobility practices of Aboriginal groups in rural New South Wales, Beckett (1988) employed the concept of a 'beat':

All Aboriginal people have 'beats;' areas which are defined by the situation of kin who will give them hospitality, within which they can travel as much or as little as they please, and where they are most likely to find spouses. Proximity is only a minor factor (p. 131).

In Meekatharra, elements of each of these spatial categorisations can be observed. Circular movements defined in different contexts as 'runs,' 'mobility regions' and 'beats' occur amongst family groups in the fieldwork region. Like Beckett's definition, the spatial extent of these mobility practices are dictated most commonly by the spatial distribution of extended family members, and less distinctively by connections to ancestral homelands. These kinship associations may or may not be in close geographic approximation to one another. However, while precise geographic circuits of movement are not easily identifiable, there is clearly some sense of association with traditional country informing mobility choices. Most interviewees suggested that the majority of movement amongst Aboriginal people took place within and just beyond Yamatji country:

People will travel and stay. They stay longer rather than relocate. They still come from one place, but they might be somewhere else for six months. Which makes it a bit awkward. But generally we find them in our area [Yamatji country]. Like, because we cover such a broad area, we really, we don't probably have much leakage of our core customers outside of our area. Just a lot of movement within the area (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).

In addition to these 'beats' however, circular movement also occurs in the more linear, expansive forms described by Birdsall (1988) as 'lines' and Young and Doohan (1989) as 'chain migrations.' For a variety of reasons, some kinship networks extending from Meekatharra now span the entire length of Western

Australia and into other States altogether⁴². In comparing the movement of Aboriginal people in Meekatharra with those in two nearby towns, the following interview excerpt describes how migration chains facilitate mobilities:

They don't really move anywhere. Don't ask me why, but that's just how they been. Whereas the mob in Meeka seem to be able to move out. Whether it's family connections, or where they came from in the first place; they've left family behind and they can go back. I think that's what it is (Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004).

These 'lines' commonly include movement westward to Geraldton and north to Port Hedland:

I suppose what probably surprised me (and this is going back to Meekatharra when I was out there), was the strong links people have with Geraldton, and it's obviously through family members who have are living down here, have gone to school down here, married and relocated (Anonymous Interviewee 2, 18 September 2004).

Perhaps the most unambiguous example of this type of movement in the region, however, is in Mullewa where almost all movement takes place up and down the coast of the State, as far North as Broome, and as far South as Bunbury and other southwest towns. Although an older study described several 'runs' extending east from Mullewa including Mullewa-Yalgoo-Mt Magnet-Cue-Meekatharra and Mullewa-Mingenew-Carnamah-Moora-Perth (Palmer, 1982 p. 37), interview data suggested that today, people in Mullewa rarely engage in regular inland movements.

Some of the more common 'beats' and 'lines' within and around Yamatji country are outlined in Figure 3.1. In particular, there are strong associations between both Carnarvon and Burringurrah, and Meekatharra and Wiluna. Movement between the two points respectively is so common that they are almost considered extensions of one another:

I mean Meeka and Wiluna are more or less in kinship with each other. There's family here, there's family there. So they don't really see it as separate places. It sort of merges as one (Deborah Robinson, 9 September 2004).

⁴² Chapters Five and Seven include more detailed discussions of the circumstances that have produced these extended kinship networks.

Similarly, Burringurrah is considered by some local residents as an extension of Carnarvon because of the strong family connections between the two places (Prout, 2002 p. 26).



Figure 3.1 Common Mobility Networks Emanating from Yamatji country

Aboriginal residents of Burringurrah often refer to the four hour dirt-road trip to Carnarvon as ‘going into town’ and such trips may serve the sole purpose of picking

someone or something up only to return again on the same day. In Meekatharra, the most frequent movement is westward toward the coast, extending no further east than Wiluna and Laverton. Conversely, most movement out of Wiluna is eastward within and beyond the Western Desert and North into the Kimberley.

Whilst these categorisations of circulation are helpful in defining the spatial dimensions of 'transient' Aboriginal mobility processes, their very employment can mask the complexity and fluidity which so often characterises these spatial practices. Any categorisation, whilst helpful for clarification, obscures the processes and practices which disrupt them. For the purposes of this present discussion then, it is sufficient to conclude that geographically contained 'beats' of family members in nearby towns and more linear and expansive 'lines' of kin in more distant places, comprise a person's mobility network within which their circular or 'wandering' (Birdsall, 1988) mobilities are enacted.

3.2.2.2 The Temporal Dimension

The second noteworthy dimension of 'transient' mobility processes is time. Of specific significance is both the timeframes within which these movements occur and the planning processes which inform them. It has already been noted that what distinguishes circulation from classically defined migration is that circulation does not involve a permanent population re-distribution. For example, someone might travel 'along their run' or up and down a line, but always return to their 'home-base.' What remains highly subjective in this distinction between migration and circulation is the temporal construction of 'permanent' (see for example Stillwell and Congdon, 1991). It is therefore temporal qualifiers which generally distinguish the extensive variety of operational definitions for various forms of circulation from migration.

In describing the temporal characteristics of transient mobilities in the fieldwork region, interviewees used only two basic temporal qualifiers: movements were frequent and short-term. Within this broad frame of reference, widespread temporal variation and unpredictability were the dominant themes. Interviewees reflected upon the temporal characteristics of these frequent, short-term mobilities with varying degrees of understanding and bewilderment, acceptance and judgement, envy and scorn. However, these divergent reflections ultimately combined to produce a

coherent analysis of 'transient' mobility processes as regularly spontaneous and unpredictable in their duration:

... the white population seems to be - a move is a very considered thing. There's planning and a lot of things. Whereas my experience is that Aboriginal people can just get up and go one morning and even leave their closest belongings. Inevitably they will return, but it seems [a] spur of the moment type sort of thing. That's not all Aboriginal people but that's a thing that I have seen (Roy Seery, 21 July 2004).

The circular nature of most of these trips means that if a person leaves from a place which they consider 'home,' then they will eventually return. However, they may be gone for a week, a month, a year, or 20 years. During that time, they may live in or visit a number of other places. Few interviewees felt it was productive, or even possible to attempt to plot and predict the duration of these journeys given the highly contingent nature of their inception.

3.2.2.3 The Demographic Dimension

The third significant dimension of these frequent mobilities is age and life-circumstances. Migration theorists demonstrate that demographic variables are significant determinants of an individuals' migration career. Lee (1966) for example, argued that migration is often significantly retarded or facilitated in the passages between different stages of the life-cycle. Although the mobility practices of Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region cannot be fully captured by the models these theorists propose, qualitative data from this study are generally consistent with these specific theoretical observations about the 'demographic dimension.'

Spatial mobility in the fieldwork region is greatest amongst young adults and youth. Many interviewees described older generations as relatively stationary and their younger family members as engaging in more frequent mobilities. The following excerpt recounts a recent discussion between the participant and her neighbours, and her reflections on other people's travel:

They said when they was younger they used to go. Just wait for their social security cheque, whatever, and just - so, the movement around here is, they have all seen, been around ... Whereas the oldies, the parents, was more or less just lived around - never really went - ventured out. They did, some of them, but they always come home. But I suppose they did ... well, listening to the old people talk, some

of them surprised me. Like Rhonda's dad, Uncle Bill. I thought he was just here. But he told me when he was young, he went up, did rodeos up North, Kununurra and all through that country and he was only very young. But he come back here to home and met Auntie Adeline and stayed and had their family. But me as a kid growing up, I thought all the old people lived here forever. Do you know what I mean? But then when you talk to them, oh no, they've been around. But some of them have been stuck here at their choice. They're not interested, not really interested (Annette Alison, 25 October 2004).

Many Aboriginal interviewees who now form part of 'the core' also told their stories of moving and travelling when they were younger. Interviewees described this process as 'just cruising around,' 'seeing what was happening' and 'visiting.' For many of these research participants, their mobility was greatest in the period between finishing school or studies and beginning a family of their own. The exact age range varied based on the person's life experience, but in general, this more mobile period occurred between mid-teens and early twenties.

Finlayson (1991 p. 216) identified a similar group of "young, restless travellers" in Kuranda, Queensland. According to Finlayson, these 'floaters' moved about for excitement and adventure, and to seek out partners. This trend is consistent with the findings of Taylor (2006a) and Taylor and Bell (1996b). Their analyses of census data demonstrated that like non-Aboriginal populations, the mobility practices of the Aboriginal populations peak in the age range of 20-35, after which they decline steadily.

Importantly though, older age and parenthood are not necessarily barriers to frequent Aboriginal mobility in Yamatji country. One interviewee suggested that he observed the greatest amount of itinerancy amongst single parent families. In some instances, children accompany their 'itinerant' parents. In other cases, children remain behind with other relatives, particularly if pressure is being applied, externally or within the family, for that child to remain in one place during their schooling. A number of older people are also highly transient, attending important meetings or ceremonial activities and funerals within and across the region. Health considerations often prompt increased mobility amongst older people as they frequently travel between medical appointments in larger centres and their home town or community. They may also have children or grandchildren in other towns or urban centres whom they desire, or feel obligated to visit regularly. These findings are also consistent with Taylor (2006a) and Taylor and Bell (1996). They found that the age profile