

CHAPTER 5 – SECURITY AND BELONGING: RE-CONCEPTUALISING ABORIGINAL MOBILITIES

5.1 Introduction

By focussing on Aboriginal people's experiences of mobility in Yamatji country, Western Australia, previous chapters have circuitously identified the absence in both policy and practice, of a comprehensive framework for understanding and interpreting the range of contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices. Chapter One identified a paucity of academic literature which builds social theory around Aboriginal spatial interactions. Particularly in recent years, the literature has been sparse and largely cobbled together from broader studies across a range of disciplines and methodological frameworks (Taylor and Bell, 2004c).

Following the discussion of research methods in Chapter Two, Chapter Three described a variety of Aboriginal spatial practices taking place within Yamatji country, ranging from people who are more or less permanent residents of one town or community, to people who have highly mobile lifestyles. The overarching and, in many ways, problematic conceptualisation within public discourse of 'core' and 'transient' Aboriginal populations, at the very least confirmed the existence of multiple Aboriginal spatial practices within the region. Chapter Three also argued that this multiplicity of Aboriginal spatial practices cannot simply be explained as a matter of those who have assimilated into non-Aboriginal society and those who remain somehow 'essentially nomadic.' The range of interpretations offered to explain these mobility processes allude to a complex subsurface machination of motivations, restrictions, and facilitating factors.

Chapter Four described a dialectical relationship between Aboriginal mobility processes and government service provision, noting considerable 'disruption' and contestation within conventional service delivery models for Aboriginal people who continue to engage in highly mobile lifestyles. Such Aboriginal people generally live life on the misunderstood margins of society.

The culmination of these conditions is a discursive agitation toward the abandonment of simplistic generalisations and fragmented interpretations of Aboriginal mobility practices. There is a clear need to re-conceptualise Aboriginal spatiality in ways which make sense of the variety of spatial practices and engagements with basic services, without reducing them or erasing their complexity. This re-conceptualisation must be a more holistic approach which is able to incorporate the complex and dynamic social, cultural, economic and spatial practices of Aboriginal peoples, and accommodate the many explanations which have so far been explored.

5.1.1 A Foundation for Re-conceptualisation

None of the explanations or interpretations of Aboriginal spatial practices presented in Chapter Three could singularly provide a satisfactory foundation for understanding the complex range of mobilities in which Aboriginal people engage. However, almost all of them point to a common underlying process from which a more comprehensive interpretive framework might be drawn. That is, that both historical and contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices can be understood as being based upon the procurement, cultivation and contestation of cultural and economic security, and social belonging and identity. Conceptualising Aboriginal spatiality in this way creates the reflective space to develop a more nuanced and holistic understanding of Aboriginal spatial practices. This understanding is not constricted to the notions of 'core' and 'transients,' and engages in more depth with concepts of spontaneity and contingency that are commonly associated with the mobility practices of the 'transients.'

Aboriginal security and belonging were traditionally derived from relationships to kin and country. Prior to European settlement of Australia, Aboriginal people had occupied the continent for thousands of years (Langton, 1998; Tonkinson, 1978). Country and culture were closely enmeshed and identity was deeply embedded in this relationship (Rose, 1996). Intricate systems of caring for country had been established and upheld for generations through story and practice. In addition, complex kinship and relatedness systems formed the basis of social organisation, and affirmed identity (Elkin, 1979). Indeed, relationships to kin and country were inextricably linked and were integral components of Aboriginal society (Elkin, 1979; von Sturmer, 1984). The significance of kinship and country as sources of belonging and security were expressed through movements to obtain and maintain food

sources, trade, and attend ceremonies and cultural activities. All of these processes provided an economy, an identity and a social fabric woven of people and country.

However, rather than interpreting contemporary mobility processes that do not conform to these traditional forms and rationales as some sort of shift away from or loss and/or betrayal of traditions, as public discourse commonly does⁶², they can be understood as ongoing processes of procuring, cultivating and contesting security and belonging. When placed within a geographically-specific historical context, unique Aboriginal responses and adaptations to colonial circumstances become apparent, as does the need to respond to these specificities.

This chapter therefore develops the notion of security and belonging as fundamental to Aboriginal spatial practices by exploring the geographically-specific historical context of these practices in Yamatji country. It considers Aboriginal lifestyles before and after colonisation, examining in particular the role of colonial encounters in altering the sources from which Aboriginal people derive their security and belonging. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the legacies of colonial intervention in Yamatji country, particularly as they relate to the role of country as a source of contemporary security and belonging for Yamatji people. This section begins a discussion developed further in Chapters Six and Seven, which describe the shifting and fluid sources from which Aboriginal people derive their security and belonging in the contemporary context.

5.2 The Colonial Project: Disconnecting Security and Belonging

Young and Doohan (1989) aptly titled their study of Aboriginal mobility practices in Central Australia "*Mobility for Survival*." Indeed, across many generations, the capacity of Aboriginal people to be spatially mobile has been essential to their survival. Such movements reinforced geographical and relational spaces of social belonging and identity, as well as economic and cultural security. Within the colonial imaginary though, it was assumed by British administrators that with the introduction of new ways to survive, this relationship between mobility and survival would become obsolete and unnecessary, even unacceptable. However, as the introductory chapter explained, European settlement did not render mobility processes obsolete,

⁶² See Chapter Three section 3.3.1.2.

unnecessary, or unacceptable to many Aboriginal people. Rather, mobility remained in many ways essential to survival, albeit adapted and reconfigured as a response to colonial intervention.

Hamilton (1987), for example, argued that contemporary Aboriginal mobility practices are not merely the reflection of some nomadic pre-disposition to wander, but rather the result of post-settlement adaptations and adjustments to the marginalising forces of the new colonial economic order. Following her qualitative study of Aboriginal mobility practices on a remote cattle station in northern South Australia in the early 1970s, Hamilton explained that for two reasons, sedentarised lifestyles had not been viable options for Aboriginal people in the face of the ever expanding colonial frontier. First, traditional hunter-gatherer economies had been decimated by the encroachment of European settlement, forcing most Aboriginal people into either employment of some kind, or welfare dependency. However, the nature of work available to them was seasonal, varying both temporally and spatially. Therefore, any sustained engagement with the mainstream economy required frequent movement. Second, essential services for which sedentarisation were a requirement (i.e. health, housing, education), were not available to Aboriginal people. Without erasing the role of pre-settlement mobility practices in contemporary lifestyles, Hamilton (1987) suggested that this new spatial adjustment was encouraged and sustained by the fact that Aboriginal cultural and social obligations required a similar pattern of movement to those necessitated by their marginalised position within the dominating landscape of European 'progress' and 'development.' In the face of limited options for integration into the mainstream society, Hamilton (1987) explained that networks of resources, reciprocity and responsibility amongst and between kinship groups became pivotal structures of socio-economic survival which fundamentally informed mobility practices.

Rather than painting Aboriginal people as helpless victims of colonial process, Hamilton positioned them as active agents within the narrative, describing not only the impacts of colonisation, but also Aboriginal responses to it. Following Hamilton (1987), the following discussion demonstrates that colonisation also brought significant changes to the sources from which Aboriginal people in Yamatji country were able to derive their security and belonging, thus altering their spatial practices.

And, as Hamilton (1987) suggested, engagement with the pastoral industry and the mainstream economy were significant in this process of re-shaping Aboriginal spatial practices⁶³. In Yamatji country however, Hamilton's exclusive focus on economic considerations is too narrow for two reasons. Firstly, it fails to adequately acknowledge the central role of government policies in affecting mobility practices and informing contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices. Secondly, at least in Yamatji country, security and belonging were derived not only economically, but also socio-culturally. An examination of adaptive and responsive Aboriginal spatial practices must therefore also be concerned with the ways in which colonisation impacted Aboriginal social and cultural expression.

This section presents a narrative of historical circumstances that have been pivotal in shaping contemporary Aboriginal spatial practices in Yamatji country, and the sources of security and belonging which undergird them. In so doing, it compares Aboriginal socio-spatial organisation and land custodianship prior to and since British settlement. It would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that European invasion was the only significant marker of change to what had otherwise, for many thousands of years, been a uniform and static period of socio-spatial organisation and environmental interaction for Aboriginal people (Kohen, 1995; Langton, 1998; von Sturmer, 1984). However, the focus of this historical overview and the chief purpose of presenting it here, is to provide an important gauge for understanding the changes to Aboriginal sources of security and belonging (and thus mobility processes) that have occurred in Yamatji country since British settlement. What becomes apparent through this analysis is the ways in which the colonial project has repeatedly, systematically and often intentionally sought to disconnect Aboriginal people from the sources from which they derive security and belonging.

⁶³ Chapter Six provides a more detailed discussion of Aboriginal engagement with the mainstream economy.

5.2.1 Before the Whitefella ^{64 65}

There are varying contemporary accounts about Aboriginal presence in the area now known as Meekatharra, and the region which surrounds it, prior to colonisation. One interviewee asserted that the area had traditionally been a war ground. Another explained that it had been a healing place. Some interviewees described the area as having been a meeting place of sorts:

Traditionally, in the tribal structure, this [Meekatharra] is a neutral ground for surrounding tribes. No matter where you are [gets out a piece of cardboard and begins drawing the following diagram on it (Figure 5.1)] or anywhere, you always got, your neighbouring tribes around. Now you could have four or five. Depends. But it's normally four. And, for them, these mob here, to pass over and go and see these mob, or whatever (they got their reasons, want to trade or whatever), they've got to have a neutral ground where they can meet to ask those questions. Whether they got permission to go on other tribes tribal area. And it's just a small gazetted area where those neighbouring tribes share a lot of things in common. And that's what Meeka is ... It's no-ones traditional country. They [the three tribes surrounding Meekatharra] the custodians, all of them (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

In a variation of this understanding, some research participants described Meekatharra as having been a 'passing through point' for neighbouring tribes.

These accounts of Aboriginal presence in Meekatharra and the surrounding region make various claims about historical association to 'country' by Aboriginal people and therefore speak to the notion of identity and belonging. Many of these contemporary popular accounts suggest that historically, there was no permanent Aboriginal presence in the Meekatharra area. The corollary of this assumption is that no Aboriginal person in Meekatharra can claim a traditional ownership or

⁶⁴ This section presents a range of accounts of Aboriginal presence in the Meekatharra area prior to colonisation in order to demonstrate the significant role of mobility in Aboriginal socio-spatial organisation. It was not the purpose of this study to undertake a detailed ethnography of Aboriginal occupation of the Meekatharra area prior to colonisation. Therefore, this discussion should not be read as an authoritative ethnography which seeks to clarify questions of traditional ownership or Native Title.

⁶⁵ Most of the written accounts of Aboriginal socio-spatial organisation prior to colonisation are derived from early anthropological research and settler observations. The narrative presented in this section is therefore largely devoid of Aboriginal voices and is necessarily directed by non-Aboriginal insight.

custodianship of that particular country. This was a fairly common perspective amongst interviewees:

I mean Meekatharra is rather unique because in terms of a cultural perspective, there is no sense of belonging to Meekatharra. And I'll just explain that a bit further. In places such as Wiluna or Hedland or even Geraldton, an Aboriginal person can say 'I'm from that particular area' and their association would be by their skin groups ... you can't say you're from Meekatharra (Nicole Adams, 15 July 2004).

This is not a traditional land area because it's been too hard, so we don't have traditional owners so-to-speak in their own right because they've only, people that have sort of come here in probably the 50s, might be a little bit before that, and so we don't have a local ownership group. We've got probably 3 or 4 different groups vying for their position in the structure. And that creates its own problems for the town because it's - the jealousy amongst them of - stirs up local tensions (Tom Hutchison, 4 September 2004).

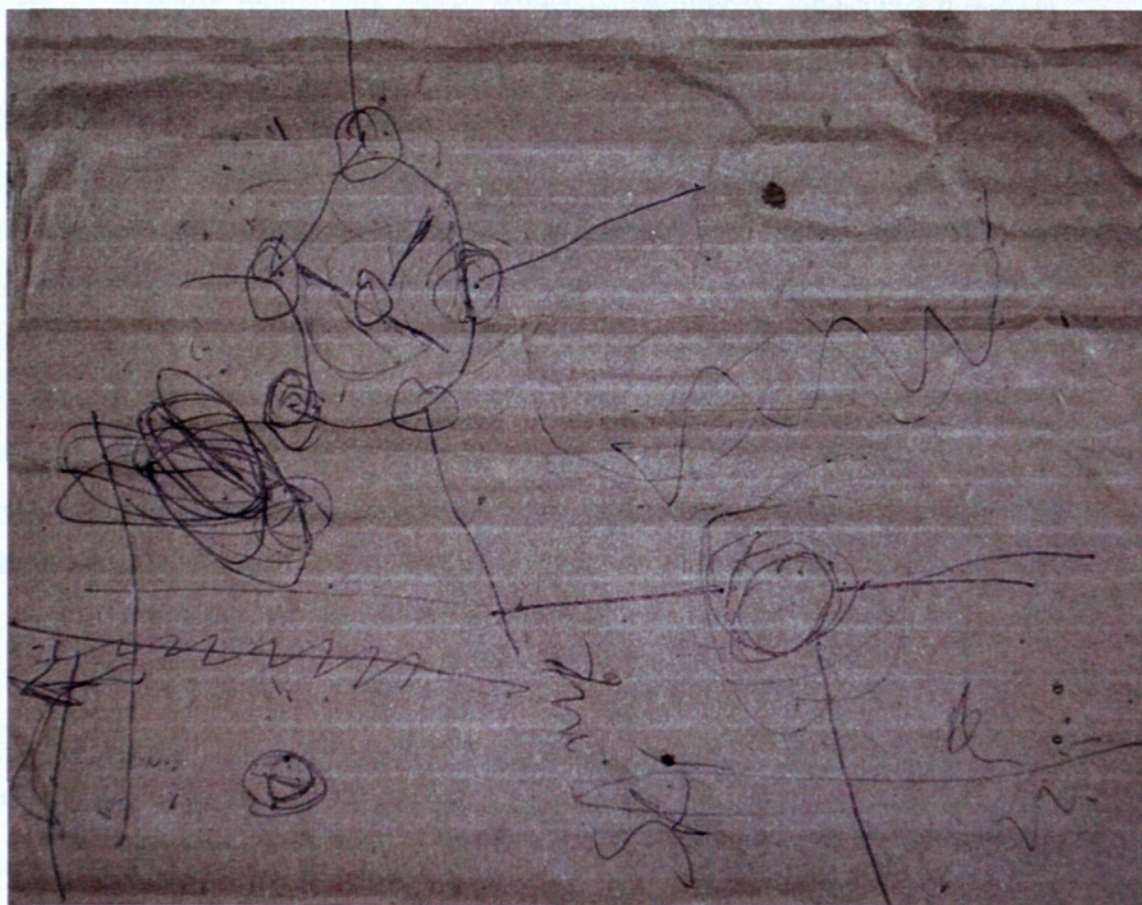


Figure 5.1 Michelle Riley Interview Diagram: Tribal Structure around Meekatharra (29 November, 2004)

In part, these various, and in some cases ambiguous or even contradictory, explanations of Aboriginal presence in the Meekatharra area continue to circulate as a result of the sparse written record and few subsequent Aboriginal voices describing the nature of Aboriginal presence in the area prior to colonisation.

In Western Australia generally, records describe Aboriginal people as having lived in small family groups of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers (Fink, 1960; Toussaint, 1995). Berndt (1979 p. 9) suggests that economics was one of the 'great driving forces of traditional Aboriginal life' and the practices of hunting, gathering and exchanging goods with nearby kinship groups prompted frequent mobility, generally contained within a small region. However, beyond these general observations at the State level, written accounts from the Meekatharra area are limited. Tindale (1974), for example, declared that the area around Meekatharra was one of the least understood tribal areas in Western Australia. Dr Ruth Fink, who undertook her doctoral fieldwork in the Murchison region in the 1950s, also noted a paucity of available sources and the consequent difficulty in reconstructing historical accounts of Aboriginal presence in the region:

In this particular area, the task of making such reconstructions is not easy since the groups that remain today are so detribalised. It is very unlikely that anyone could produce a detailed and accurate ethnology of the Wadjari tribe from the remembrances of older Aborigines. The written accounts – and there are not many of them – are little better (Fink, 1960 p. 52-53).

More recently, Tonkinson (pers. comm. 2006) confirmed that very little anthropological work had been undertaken in the area.

Fink (1960) placed Meekatharra as historically part of Wanmalla country, on the eastern border of the Murchison, and the western border of the Western Desert. She suggested that although they gathered for particular ceremonies, there was significant hostility between the Wanmalla and the Wadjari peoples. Tindale (1974) placed Meekatharra just to the east of the Wadjari tribal border. According to Tindale, Meekatharra lay just within the western border of what he called the Ngaiawongga tribe. Other accounts, including Edwards (1994) and Shaw (2006 pers. comm.), maintain that Meekatharra lies within the traditional country of the Wadjari people,

albeit on the eastern edge. Edwards (1994) suggested that the inland border of the Wadjari language group was to the east of the township. He explained that the mobility patterns of Wadjari people were contained within a large portion of the Murchison region and significantly dictated by environmental conditions. After large rains, there was greater penetration inland and eastward. In dry seasons, Wadjari people would retreat to the more permanent water sources in the Murchison, Gascoyne and Greenough River catchments (see Figure 2.3).

One of the earliest anthropological accounts of Aboriginal presence in the Meekatharra area comes from Daisy Bates, who undertook extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Western Australia from 1904-1912. Bates' accounts describe significant amounts of mobility within the region (Bates, 1985). She described encountering Wadjari speakers across a vast portion of the Midwest from Geraldton all the way east along the railway line towards north of Nannine (now a ghost town just south of Meekatharra) and north as far as Frederick River (3C Figure 2.3). Bates (1985) also suggested that the tribes in the Midwest had fairly frequent interactions with neighbouring tribes. Through inter-marriages they were adopted into other tribes and adopted members of other tribes into their own. Additionally, Bates described extensive and well traversed trading 'highways' (or trading routes) amongst the various tribes within the region. Her detailed depiction of the groups involved, the exact routes travelled, and the various camp grounds and water sources along the way, paints a picture of local Aboriginal tribes or clan groups who possessed an intimate understanding and knowledge of their country.

Bates (1985) described Meekatharra as one of the camping grounds on an alternate trading route between the Peak Hill (4C Figure 2.3) and Lake-Way areas (5D Figure 2.3)⁶⁶. Shaw (pers. comm. 2006), who undertook an ethnographic survey of the Meekatharra area in 1992, recounted discussions with several senior Aboriginal people from the Meekatharra area, about Aboriginal presence in the area prior to European settlement⁶⁷. According to his recollection of their knowledge, there were several sites of ceremonial significance in the area, and two historical Aboriginal

⁶⁶ Bates explained that by the time of her fieldwork, the establishment of stations, fences, and townships had rendered some traditional trading routes impassable, so that new routes had to be established.

⁶⁷ Numerous attempts to obtain a copy of Shaw's original 1992 report were unsuccessful.

living areas at Meekatharra: 'Mikidah' and 'Bamba.' Both were areas which held water during dry times, and were reportedly of great significance to the Wadjari people. Indeed Memmott (2002) explains that in semi-arid and desert regions of Australia, permanent water sources had significant settlement implications: they provided ceremonial venues and could sustain food sources for several months, making them particularly important in times of drought. Shaw (pers. comm. 2006) explained that at least one of his informants was clearly of the view that Meekatharra belonged to the Wadjari, and the Wanmallas had visiting/usage rights to the soaks to the east of the area.

Even where there are inconsistencies and contrasts, both local Aboriginal knowledge and the patchy anthropological record regarding historical Aboriginal socio-spatial organisation in the Meekatharra area describe mobility processes that reflect security and belonging derived from country and kin. Economic survival was derived from the land through practices of hunting and gathering, and trading. These practices dictated a significant portion of mobility processes as the location of available food and water sources changed with the seasons (Edwards, 1994). Further, these accounts describe particular social structures, derived from kinship associations, which were central to social belonging and identity. Bates (1985) for example, provided intricate explanations of various clans and subgroups or tribes within broader language groups, which were based on complex kinship structures. Through these structures, marriage alliances could be negotiated and identity and belonging were defined and affirmed (Berndt, 1979). Country and kin therefore, were the primary sources through which security and belonging were negotiated and fostered. Mobility practices assisted in re-affirming these associations through trading, hunting and gathering, ceremonial attendance, and facilitating appropriate marriage alliances. The arrival of British settlers engendered dramatic change to these spatial arrangements.

5.2.2 Since the Whitefella

Chapter One described four broad phases of government policy, administered successively by the British Colonial Office, the Western Australian Government, and the Australian Federal Government. Aboriginal responses to these various policy shifts over the decades, and the subsequent impact on their various spatial practices, is dependent on a number of geographical, temporal, and socio-cultural factors which

fundamentally informed colonial interactions with different Aboriginal groups (Davies and Young, 1995; Fink, 1960; Keesing and Stathern, 1998; Toussaint, 1995).

For example, because Yamatji country was located further from Western Australia's first settlement and in 'inhospitable' environs, the experiences of colonisation in the Midwest were markedly different than in the State's southwest. The southwest had been easily accessible to early settlers and the landscape was read as suitable for intensive agriculture (Fink, 1965). Aboriginal inhabitants of this region were quickly outnumbered by settlers who began clearing the land for farming, with little or no regard for the destruction and displacement they were causing. Disease and conflict rapidly decimated Aboriginal populations in the southwest (DIA, 2003; Green, 1984). Many of those who remained were physically dispossessed of their lands. Traditional food sources depleted rapidly. Whilst some Aboriginal people were able to find seasonal labour to supplement their economy, many others were left to beg, or attempt to secure a portion of the limited available government rations (Tilbrook, 1983).

By the time settlers expanded northward into Yamatji country, they had observed many of the devastating impacts of their aggressive annexation of Aboriginal homelands in the State's southwest. Further, land in Yamatji country was not considered suitable for intensive agriculture. It was instead reserved for pastoralism. There was therefore comparatively less disturbance to the landscape than in more southern regions where intensive agriculture had decimated the natural environment and comprehensively destroyed traditional Aboriginal natural resource economies (Elkin, 1951; Fink, 1960). Experiences of colonisation in Yamatji country can also be contrasted with the Western Desert (Tonkinson, 1974). Viewed as an inaccessible and unproductive wasteland, the desert areas remained even less 'disturbed' by the footprint of colonisation.

Understanding the distinctiveness of these experiences is essential to understanding the nuanced contemporary processes of procuring, cultivating and contesting security and belonging. The following discussion therefore returns to a selective account of the historical context (outlined in Chapter One) and its impact on Aboriginal spatiality in the more specific context of Yamatji country. By situating a localised

narrative within that historical overview, it demonstrates that the policies employed to confine and reform Aboriginal mobilities effectively attempted to orchestrate disconnection from country and kin: the primary sources from which Yamatji people had traditionally derived their security and belonging. Following Elkin (1951), who proposed several generalised phases of Aboriginal reaction to European contact, this section also emphasises Aboriginal responses to colonisation processes and policies. It describes a range of Aboriginal adaptations to colonial processes in Yamatji country, and how these influence contemporary practices of negotiating security and belonging.

5.2.2.1 Colonial Expansion

Colonial expansion north and eastward into Yamatji country began some thirty years after the first British settlement in Western Australia was established in 1829 along the banks of the Swan River in the State's southwest. At that time, the Crown provided incentives, such as the promise of free land in the outlying 'wilderness,' in order to lure settlers to Western Australia and stimulate the State's young economy (DIA, 2003; Fink, 1960). They placed conditions upon land title though, stipulating that settlers would need to improve and cultivate the land in order for title to be secured down through family generations (Toussaint, 1995). During the next two decades, pastoral leases were established along the length of the Murchison River and in other fertile parts of the Midwest (Boyd, 1988).

Despite an 1851 Order of Council which declared that pastoral practices should not prevent Aboriginal people from accessing and using their lands according to their need and wish, co-existence was a relative and apparently exploitable concept:

... being under the protection of English law had one set of meanings for white colonists and another for Aboriginal people: acquisition as opposed to dispossession; licence as opposed to restriction; entrenchment as opposed to displacement (DIA, 2003 p. 10).

By the 1890s, a Gold Rush had begun. Towns sprung up all over the Midwest in what would become one of the most productive gold mining regions in Australia. Along with the establishments of towns such as Day Dawn, Mt Magnet, Cue, Peak Hill, Nannine, and Big Bell, (3D Figure 2.3) gold was found in Meekatharra (Plate 5.1) in 1894 and it was declared a town in 1903 (Boyd, 1988).



Meekatharra, Main Street 1933

Photo Courtesy of Nel Bosenburg

Plate 5.1 Main St, Meekatharra in 1933

(Source: Meekatharra Telecentre Calender, 2005).

As settler pastoralism and mining flourished, increasing numbers of non-Aboriginal prospectors and drovers settled in the region. In a period of 40 years, white settlers had expanded into the entire Midwest and Aboriginal people had witnessed widespread changes to their country. Introduced livestock began to decimate traditional food sources, while fences, townships and other physical barriers dislocated common trading routes, access to sacred sites, and traditional migratory patterns (Fink, 1960). Most Aboriginal people in the Midwest became increasingly restricted to smaller parts of their country and pre-contact mobility practices became progressively difficult to maintain. In this short space of time, many Aboriginal people were forced to seek new sources from which to derive economic security, taking up work on emerging stations to secure a food supply.

There were also considerable territorial battles between Aboriginal people, who were witnessing an invasion into their country, and settlers, who were chasing the promise of a new beginning and unattained fortunes (Toussaint, 1995). Elkin (1951) referred to this 'phase' of contact as 'clash.' Conflicts often centred around the theft of introduced livestock by Aboriginal people who killed the animals for food,

particularly as their traditional food sources diminished. Aboriginal 'offenders' who were captured were bound in lines by chains around their necks, walked over 400km under police escort from Mt Gould Police Station (3C Figure 2.3) to Carnarvon (Pilmer, 1998 p. 14-19). There, they were convicted and exiled from their country to imprisonment on Rottnest Island (2F Figure 2.3) (Edwards, 1994; Toussaint, 1995).

5.2.2.2 Protection and Separation

Policies of protection and separation were implemented by the new Western Australian Government for three primary reasons. First, the popular discourse of Social Darwinism dictated that the inferior Aboriginal race would eventually die out. Protection and separation of these populations was then asserted as the most humane course of action – to 'smooth the dying pillow.' Second, separating and confining Aboriginal populations would assist in 'opening' up the 'wilderness' to European settlement. Third, as Chapter One discussed, policies of protection and separation were a response to the offensive nomadic tendencies of the 'natives':

... Aboriginal mobility was attributed to uncontrollable impulses preventing them from being 'settled'; this in turn implied that they were not able to live within 'normal' Australian society and provided a justification for the various policies of segregation and 'protection' which were devised by successive administrations (Hamilton, 1987 p. 47).

Through controlling their movement, the government attempted to 'civilise' and subdue the nomadic 'natives,' providing those who survived the process of natural selection with an opportunity to one day enter into the new colonial society. There were two chief spatial components of the 'protectionist/separationist' policy era. First, in one of the more potent geographical imaginings of the colonial project, the government designated separate non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal places of existing. Aboriginal people were excluded from either living or finding employment within cities or towns. These were considered non-Aboriginal places of existing. Instead Aboriginal people were to be relegated to the spatial domains of reserves, working stations, settlements, or missions established specifically for them. The exact functions and purposes of these settlements and institutions varied depending on their ideological foundation, but ranged from 'protection' and 'freedom' for cultural expression, to 'civilisation' and subjugation.

In addition to this imposed spatial ordering, the second pivotal spatial component of the 'protection / separation' policy era was that the government gave the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, the power to forcibly remove Aboriginal adults and children from their families and country and relocate them to one of these established Aboriginal reserves or settlements. *The Aborigines Act* of 1905 gave form to these policy directions. It paved the way for the Western Australian Government to usurp the autonomy of Aboriginal people. In addition to prohibiting the sale of alcohol to Aboriginal people and giving the Chief Protector of Aborigines the power to approve or deny all potential inter-racial marriages, it also placed specific restrictions on the conduct and geographical bounds of Aboriginal spatial interaction, any transgression of which could result in arrest, removal and confinement to any Aboriginal reserve named within the Act. The reverberations of *The Aborigines Act* were felt deeply in Yamatji country. It had a profound influence on spatial practices in the region as it altered the iterative processes through which Aboriginal people procured, cultivated and contested their identity, belonging, and security.

Aboriginal people in Yamatji country responded in various ways to the extraordinary spatial controls inherent in the Act. Despite an expanding and prescriptive non-Aboriginal presence in the region, which made the persistence of pre-colonial economies increasingly difficult, some Aboriginal people adapted their traditional migratory routes and hunting patterns, and remained distant from the sphere of non-Aboriginal influence (Bates, 1985). Others became increasingly engaged in the pastoral industry. Aboriginal men who were initially employed as shepherds in exchange for food became stockmen on stations. Aboriginal women commonly worked as housemaids on homesteads (DIA, 2003; Fink, 1960). White bosses had begun to undermine the role of Aboriginal elders as sources of social control within their families (Fink, 1960), but by working on stations, Aboriginal people were able to remain connected to their country and maintain important cultural practices and ceremonies (Savage and Dennison, 2006). In addition, station life afforded them the opportunity to remain living in community with extended family members. In this environment, resources could be pooled and family networks could be maintained as important sources of security and belonging. Elkin (1951) referred to these processes of adapting to the new colonial environment whilst maintaining specific cultural

connections as *intelligent parasitism*. Despite government ploys to attract Aboriginal people to newly established government stations and settlements, most Aboriginal people in Yamatji country preferred to receive little or no wage for working on pastoral stations on their land, than to relocate to a government settlement where they might receive rations and assistance.

Aboriginal people who were not working on stations or living on country generally resorted to camping around the fringes of established townships from which they were excluded. In these more visible locales, Aboriginal people were acutely aware of the restrictions they faced. They lived with the constant threat of removal to government settlements for any number of 'inappropriate behaviours,' breach of imposed curfews, or because of the colour of their skin. Michelle Riley told the story of her father, from Katanning in the State's southwest:

MR: *My father, he got a young lady pregnant and in those days, they both was sentenced to come here to Meeka and work on stations. And for the young lady, she hated it up here because she didn't have her family. So, they was on different stations, not on the one station. They wasn't sentenced on the one station. Dad was sentenced out on Mt Clere [3C Figure 2.3], and she was sentenced out at Cue on Milly Milly Station [3D Figure 2.3].*

SP: *She was an Aboriginal lady as well?*

MR: *Yeh, she was only 16. And because she got pregnant, in those days, half castes, quarter quadroons, you weren't allowed to anything wrong ... It was against the law to do anything ... Aboriginals was constantly monitored. It wasn't like they could sit down in their own environment and make their own decisions like we do today. They had the Welfare there (it was called the Welfare back then) always on their backs. They had the police there. The police could walk in and do anything to them. It was just horrible, living back then. There was no way you could do anything wrong. You couldn't even walk in to town after six. You had to be in your camp. My parents, they lived in camps with a tent. They ate off wood heaps when they wanted tucker. White man didn't give them money, wages. They pay them their wages, they claim it as food. They'll only give them a certain amount, 50 pence so they can come in town and buy lollies or whatever. And back then it was a bit more money to share around, but they didn't get a full wage. Nothing like that ...*

SP: *So he was sent up to Mt Clere and she was sent to –*

MR: *She was sent to Milly Milly over here. She run away from there. You know like in Rabbit Proof Fence⁶⁸? There's hundreds of stories like that.*

Although many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country had been able to remain on stations and had therefore not experienced the wholesale displacement from their country as Michelle's father did, the 1905 Act also ushered in a new threat. In addition to assuming the right to authorise and control the spatial practices of Aboriginal people, *The Aborigines Act* also pronounced the Chief Protector of Aborigines the legal guardian of all 'half-caste' children under the age of 16 (Haebich and Delroy, 1999). It was these children who were deemed to have the greatest chance of success and integration into Western civilisation given the proper training and environment. This provision within the Act became the basis for the widespread removal of 'half-caste' children from their families and communities and their placement in government custody (DIA, 2003; HREOC, 1997a). They would later become known as the Stolen Generations. Chief Protector Neville established several government-controlled settlements, to which 'half-caste' children who had been removed from their families were relocated. In these institutions, children were schooled and trained in western culture and trades.

After more than 40 years of interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on stations in Yamatji country, many children of mixed descent had been born⁶⁹. Travelling inspectors would seek out 'half-caste' children on pastoral stations and communities and issue warrants for their forced removal, usually to the infamous Moore River Native Settlement located in the States south-west (2F Figure 2.3 and Plates 5.2-5.4) (HREOC, 1997a).

68 Here, Michelle is referring to the recent motion picture called 'Rabbit Proof Fence,' based on the book called *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (Pilkington, 1996). Written by Doris (Nugi Garimara) Pilkington, the book tells the story of Doris's mother and two other Aboriginal girls who were forcibly removed from their families at Jigalong in 1931 and sent to the Moore River Native Settlement. The movie is about the girls' escape from that institution and their incredible journey of over 1000 miles along the Rabbit Proof Fence, back to their family.

69 For a discussion of the complex issues of power and consent surrounding sexual relationships between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men during the early decades of colonisation, and the repercussions of these relationships see McGrath (1987 Chapter 4) and Rose (1991 Chapter 19).

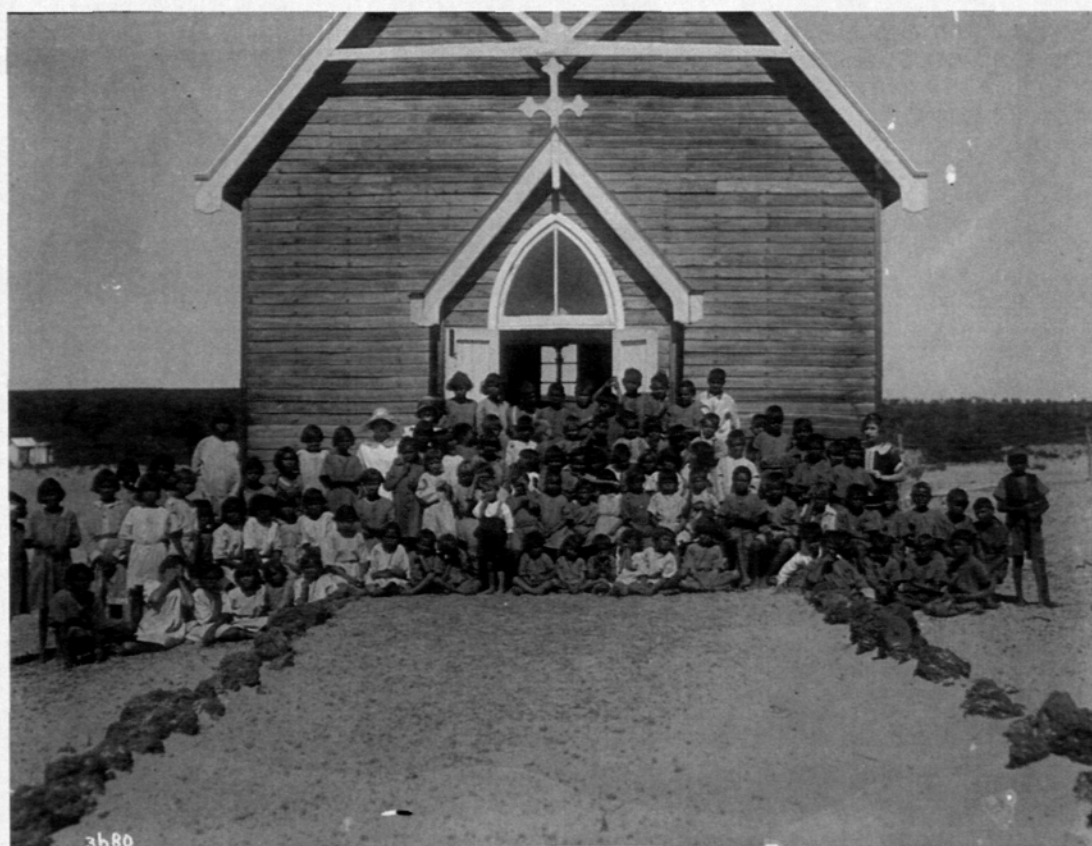


Plate 5.2 The church at the Moore River Native Settlement
Courtesy Battye Library Cat. No. 816B/A/3680



Plate 5.3 The Moore River Native Settlement
Courtesy Battye Library Cat. No. BA 368/32



Plate 5.4 Foreground of the Moore River Native Settlement

Courtesy Battye Library Cat. No. 816B/A/3684

As well as causing unimaginable grief, pain and brokenness for the families affected by it (Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, 1995), the policy of removing ‘half-caste’ children or ‘delinquent’ Aboriginal adults from their homes and relocating them to distant government settlements influenced Aboriginal belonging and security in Yamatji country in two profound ways. Firstly, it resulted in widespread dislocation of Aboriginal people from their family, country and cultural connections. The policy of forcibly removing children from their places of belonging within their families and country, was intentionally instituted in order to break those links and create new ones. Physical removal meant that Aboriginal children could not learn their languages, social place or cultural responsibilities and were simultaneously encouraged to purge themselves of their Aboriginal identity:

One principal effect of the forcible removal policies was the destruction of cultural links. This was of course their declared aim ... Culture, language, land and identity were to be stripped from the children in the hope that the traditional law and culture would die by losing their claim on them and sustenance of them (HREOC, 1997a Section 3, Chapter 11: The effects of separation from the Indigenous community, Cultural Knowledge, para. 1).

A second significant impact of the policy of forced removal on belonging and security in Yamatji country was that when released from these government

settlements, many Aboriginal people were left to establish a new sense of belonging and identity often not primarily derived from connections to country or kin. Children from all over the State had been sent to the Moore River Native Settlement and were then cast out during their mid-teens to work on stations throughout the Midwest. Many consequently remained in the region. The story of one interviewee's mother⁷⁰ illustrates this reality.

Box 5.1 Betty's Story

Born in Wyndham in Western Australia's far northeast, Betty was the child of an Aboriginal woman and a Chinese Naval Officer who had come to Australia as part of his tour of duty. Between the ages of three and five, Betty and her two sisters were taken from their family and sent to the Moore River Native Settlement while some of her brothers were sent to Hong Kong. Betty and her sisters were kept at the Moore River Settlement until their mid-teens at which point they were sent out to do station work in a number of places in the southern parts of the State. They tried to stay in contact and follow each other during this time. Betty's sisters eventually settled in Perth and she lived there for a period too before journeying North, perhaps trying to make her way back to Wyndham. On her journey, Betty visited Meekatharra and settled there. She worked at the hospital for 20 years. She had six children, two girls and four boys. Two of the boys, whom she gave birth to whilst living in Perth, were taken away from her. One of these boys grew up believing that Betty had given him away voluntarily. He died before ever learning the truth⁷¹. Her two other sons both went to Moore River as well, although by that time, the institution had been closed down and handed back to the Methodist Mission to be a school for Aboriginal children who were sent there voluntarily.⁷² Today, Betty's remaining children live in Meekatharra, Perth, and Kalgoorlie.

Such stories of fractured families, displacement and a resulting spatial dispersal are not uncommon for Aboriginal people in Meekatharra. Every Aboriginal interviewee was affected by the policy of forced removal, either directly or indirectly. Below, Deborah Robinson tells her father's story:

DR: With Dad, [his movement] was from Carnarvon, to Moore River Settlement. From there at 14 he came this way and that was it. This was where he stayed ... Dad was a Stolen Generation child. The entire family was just plucked from

⁷⁰ During our discussion, the interviewee's mother's name was not disclosed. To avoid confusion however, she is here referred to as Betty.

⁷¹ The other boy has only recently been reconnected with his siblings.

⁷² The interview recalls the vastly different memories this one place held for her brothers and her mother. For her mother, the Moore River Settlement had been a place of such pain, and yet her brother recalls his years at Mogumber (as it became named) as some of the best of his life.

the Grandmother and went off a boat and was shipped off to Perth. And then got on a bus up to board the train from there to Moore River. So Nanna moved from Carnarvon down to Moora because she knew where they were taken to, just so that she could let the kids know that she wasn't far.

SP: Was she ever allowed to see them?

DR: I think so yeh.

SP: And so when he was 14, was he shipped back out to work on a station somewhere?

DR: Yeh because, as soon as they turned of age (14, or whatever it was, 15) 'OK, we can't - governments aren't giving money for you anymore. This mission can't get money for you anymore because you're old enough to go out and earn your own keep', so they just chucked them off. Or they found them work on the stations and they were sent off. And that was it. No 'where your family is?' or anything else. So Dad left there and came up to this area. Started work up here, all around these stations. Met mum, and that was it. They lived in Cue and then come here to Meeka. Been here all their lives (Deborah Robinson, 30 November, 2004).

These stories, just two examples of many, exemplify the shifting sense of belonging and security that occurred for many Aboriginal people as a consequence of the policy and practice of forced removal. In the first story, Betty was never returned to her country or family in Wyndham and instead established herself in Meekatharra where she had no country-based connections. Her children were born and raised away from their extended kin and country. They in turn now live spread out in various parts of the State. In the second story, Deborah's grandmother moved her whole family from Carnarvon (Yamatji country) to Moora (Noongar country), to be closer to her children who had been taken from her. Deborah's father was then displaced again when he was sent out from the Moore River Native Settlement to work on stations.

Both stories tell of the removal of children (by government policy) from family and country which resulted in dislocation and alienation from family and country. Then, as young teenagers, having been raised in a distant and alien environment, they were relocated to various stations to work rather than being returned home. While in some cases, removed children eventually found their way back to their families and country, others, as in the above stories, were left to etch out new spaces of belonging not necessarily based on traditional connections to kin or country. A recent Inquiry into the consequences of this era of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families described its fracturing impact:

The inquiry found that many forcibly removed children and their children have lost their cultures, their languages, their heritage and their lands, as well as their families and communities ... The inquiry found forcible removal has left many people with nowhere to belong, no sense of identity (HREOC, 1997b p. 20 and 21).

Under the policy of forced removal, whole generations of Aboriginal children were raised away from their sources of belonging and security. The practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families alienated many Yamatji people from their connections to family and country by preventing them from learning and practicing their cultural responsibilities, particularly in relation to country, and by denying them the opportunity to foster culturally appropriate kinship links (HREOC, 1997a). It also led a number of Aboriginal people not from the region to make new homes in Yamatji country.

5.2.2.3 Assimilation

As policy relating to Aboriginal people shifted from 'protection' and 'separation' to 'assimilation,' Aboriginal people in Yamatji country were simultaneously re-negotiating and adapting spaces of belonging that previous policies had sought to undermine and indeed erase. By the 1940s, the first generation of children who had been removed from their families were being sent out from government institutions such as the Moore River Native Settlement, which had been their home during childhood, to work on stations throughout Yamatji country. Family structures changed as many of these young men and women who had been displaced from their country and family, settled in the region and began families of their own. Aboriginal people in Yamatji country had become an integral workforce in the pastoral industry and since few, if any, unskilled labour positions were available to Aboriginal people in towns such as Meekatharra, station and transport infrastructure related work⁷³ became the only viable sources of economic security for many of these families. Road and rail work required significant movement. Station work was sporadic, often requiring Aboriginal people to move continually from property to property where work was available, in order to receive a wage or a ration:

⁷³ This includes track and road work for the developing road and rail networks.

All Aboriginal people worked on stations at that time because you didn't have social welfare then. If you wanted a feed you had to work. And there was no jobs for us in town. So everyone worked on stations and just followed the work around (Anonymous Interviewee 10, 17 February 2005).

This type of employment offered some kind of refuge from surveillance by the colonial gaze, which fell upon those whose lives were more closely associated with established townships – those non-Aboriginal places of existing. And for some, the life of station work was preferable since it allowed them to maintain mobile lifestyles and call upon family networks of support and security throughout Yamatji country. For others however, marginal status within the mainstream economy became increasingly oppressive under rising pressure and individual aspirations to seek provision for one's family when permanent station work was either unavailable, or not desired.

Despite the considerable oppression that Aboriginal people had experienced through previous government policies and practices, voices of Aboriginal discontent in Yamatji country were persistent and growing. In 1940 for example, Avy Curley, mother and grandmother of many Aboriginal residents in Meekatharra today, led a march through the streets of Cue, protesting the 6pm curfew that had been imposed on Aboriginal reserve-dwellers. As a response to the growing voices of protest agitating for the recognition of Aboriginal rights, the Western Australian Government introduced the *Natives Citizenship Rights Act* in 1944. According to this legislation, Aboriginal people were granted the opportunity to apply for a certificate of citizenship which entitled the holder to exemption from legislation regarding Aboriginal administration. Applications for Citizenship were approved on the basis of the individual applicant's ability to meet certain criteria such as good health, well ordered homes, an upstanding reputation within the community, and fluency in English; measures of the degree of absorption into Western 'civilised' culture (Attwood and Markus, 1997). Once granted, Aboriginal citizens were prevented from interacting with any friends or relatives who had not been granted citizenship, and any breach of conditions would see the citizenship revoked (Fink 1960). This legislation continued the legacy of attempting to fracture Aboriginal connections with their primary sources of security and belonging, particularly with kin. Because of the conditions of citizenship, many Aboriginal people did not apply for the

certificate. Assimilationist policies continued to attempt to produce new spaces of security and belonging by now inviting Aboriginal people into 'non-Aboriginal domains' on the condition that they demonstrate sufficient practical severing of ties with the expressions of their Aboriginality.

As part of this policy shift, which aimed to integrate Aboriginal people into non-Aboriginal society, many spatial restrictions on Aboriginal people were removed. As Chapter One explained, the 1954 *Native Welfare Act* repealed many of the spatially discriminatory provisions of the 1905 *Aborigines Act* and the 1936 *Native Administration Act* (DIA, 2003). Towns and cities would no longer be off limits to Aboriginal people, the sale of alcohol to Aboriginal people would no longer be prohibited, and the grounds on which the government could remove and confine Aboriginal people were limited. Increasing numbers of Aboriginal people in Yamatji country moved to town reserves around rural and urban centres to seek employment which had previously been unavailable to them (DIA, 2003). Others left stations more reluctantly so that their children could be closer to the basic services, such as health and education, to which they now had access.

However when the Federal Pastoral Industry Award was extended to Aboriginal pastoral workers in 1968, urbanisation occurred less voluntarily for many Aboriginal people. Although many Aboriginal station workers had agitated for equal rights and payments for some 20 years, the extension of the award wage ultimately led to the displacement of many station workers in the region. Many of these displaced station workers relocated to the reserves of towns such as Meekatharra. Meekatharra resident Norm Trenfield recalls this period in the town's history:

... when the unions came out in the 60s (or the late - no it was after the 60s) that sort of destroyed a lot of the bush people see, because they couldn't afford these people. They just couldn't afford to keep them on. Whereas once the whole family worked on the station, and it was the kids and everybody there. But once the unions come in and said it was, everybody was to be paid a set rate, well that closed that down and that's when the Aboriginal people come off the stations (Interviewee Norm Trenfield, 24 September 2004).

The government began to invest in providing infrastructure for Aboriginal people on town reserves. There were again mixed responses by Aboriginal people to these developments:

For some Aboriginal people the enforced change from a communal camping reserve lifestyle to life in Departmental housing, and the associated public expectation of more individualistic and materialistic expressions of social respectability, was clearly a difficult and sometimes traumatic experience. However, for others the move to accommodation in Departmental houses was, on the whole, a welcome one (DIA, 2003 p. 24).

Over the 100 year period from the 1860s to the 1960s, life for Yamatji people changed dramatically. The colonial project, and the government policies which were its handmaiden, vigorously sought to break and remake Aboriginal spaces of security and belonging. Finally in 1972, some five years after a national referendum had decided that administration of Aboriginal Affairs should be handed over from the States to the Federal Government, the Western Australian Department of Native Welfare, through which the policies of 'protection,' 'separation' and 'assimilation' had been administered, was abolished. In 1972 though, 3099 Aboriginal people were in institutions – almost 10% of the State's Aboriginal population (HREOC, 1997a). Most of these were children. In addition, although some Aboriginal people remained on stations, most Yamatji people had been physically displaced to rural towns and communities. Although subsequent 'eras' of government policy have also impacted Aboriginal spatiality, and in many ways perpetuate the colonising practices of the past (as highlighted in Chapter One), it was these earlier policies of separation and then assimilation that so profoundly sought to disconnect Yamatji people from the places and the people from which they derived their security and belonging.

5.3 Lingering Legacies of Disconnection and Reformation

This history of wide-scale physical dispossession and disconnection from country and kin, and Aboriginal responses to it, have left many lingering legacies. The painful social and cultural legacies have been the subject of biographies and autobiographies (Beresford, 2006; Fraser, 1998; Nannup, Marsh and Kinnane 1992; van den Berg, 1994), academic research (Haebich, 2000), and government reports