

CHAPTER 7 – THE TIES THAT BIND: NEGOTIATING SECURITY AND BELONGING THROUGH FAMILY

7.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have highlighted the diversity of Aboriginal spatialities within Yamatji country and in Meekatharra more specifically. A complex machination of responses to historical policies, events and interactions has resulted in pronounced contemporary variation amongst Aboriginal people in Yamatji country with regard to spatialisation, cultural expression, and degrees of engagement with basic government services and the mainstream economy. An unmistakable thread however runs through this rich tapestry of Aboriginal existences in the fieldwork region: the paramount role of family. The significance of family transcends individual and varied connections with country, and engagement with the economic and service institutions of mainstream society, although all these factors mediate how it was expressed and acted upon. Family connections function as cultural currency, integral to people's sense of belonging, and in some cases, central sources of economic and social security. Familial associations are therefore usually significant determinants of Aboriginal spatial practices, particularly for those not engaged in the mainstream economy.

AT: *I think family ties are still fairly strong. And responsibility to family is still very strong as well. And there have been occasions where people have moved away but they have gone back for whatever reason. Might have stayed there a month, two months then they come back home so-to-speak. Back to Gero, Carnarvon, wherever. Couple of weeks and they're off again.*

SP: *So, it's those family ties that cause kind of transiency?*

AT: *Yeh, I think so. I mean, that's my understanding of it all. [pause] Obligation to family. [pause] I can't think of any other reason other than family (Ashley Taylor 14 September 2004).*

The significance of this relationship between family and mobility practices is expressed in many ways in Yamatji country. There are countless stories of Aboriginal people relocating to be closer to family, following family to new places,

and visiting family. For many Aboriginal people, a precondition of any movement is that there will be family at the intended destination. As one interviewee suggested, irrespective of whether they are 'tribal' or not, "*You'll find that the Aboriginal culture will always stick together as a family* (Anonymous 12, 1st March 2005)." This desire to 'be around family'⁷⁸ is rooted in the support that family networks provide and the security and belonging that exists in having a place within the social structure. In many cases, the security derived from this support network out-weighs the potential opportunities that may exist beyond the extent of it.

In contrast to the often more generalised references to country, most interviewees directly and articulately described the role of family in shaping a sense of belonging and informing Aboriginal mobility practices in Meekatharra and throughout the region. In fact, most interviewees expressed a belief that Aboriginal mobilities within the region were 'all about family.' This initially seemed like a lazy generalisation but as the research process unfolded, it became apparent that instead of being a dismissive explanation, it was an astute summary.

This chapter considers the ways in which security and belonging are negotiated through familial networks and structures, and how these relationships work together to influence Aboriginal spatial practices. It describes the different ways that Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region procure, cultivate and contest a sense of security and belonging from their familial relationships. In so doing, it demonstrates that the spontaneity and variability which characterise short-term, circular Aboriginal mobilities are largely a function of the inherent contingency, and expressions of cultural maintenance and breakdown, that characterise interactions within familial networks. This chapter also explores the significance of family as a source of security and belonging for Aboriginal people who have active engagements with government service agencies and the mainstream economy. Even here, familial considerations impact Aboriginal spatiality.

⁷⁸ One interviewee suggested that all Aboriginal people needed to 'be around family.' See section 7.2.1.2 for the contextualised interview excerpt.

7.2 Procuring and Cultivating Security and Belonging

SP: *And you talked about the mob in Wiluna and their sense of ownership of the land that keeps drawing them back, and I'm just wondering, do Aboriginal people in Meekatharra have that same sense of ownership of the land that Meekatharra's on that draws them back. Or is it different to what the mob in Wiluna experiences?*

DR: *Well with us mob in Meeka I think it's more of family origins. This is where we originated from. That's what brings us back, and the family that are still there. But Wiluna, they treated - the land was theirs. That's what sustained them, that's where they lived. That's where they were able to maintain their culture and everything ... and they've got a lot of sacred sites up there, so that's what draws them back. That's what keeps them. And (?) family ties as well. 'This is who I belong to. This is where I originate from.' So therefore, I'll go back there ...*

SP: *OK, so there's not that same sense of ownership of the land?*

DR: *No, I think it's more origins, family connections (Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004).*

Family networks and the social structures they entail are the chief source from which many Aboriginal people in Meekatharra derive their cultural identity, and cultivate a deep sense of belonging:

And that was always – the pull is the family and the family support and the family environment. That's what always draw Aboriginals back to their home environment where they grew up. Because they know they got that, they grew up with that support around them (Michelle Riley, 29 November 2004).

Further, these networks serve as a powerful source of security and support, particularly for those who live on the fringes of mainstream society (see also Smith, 2000c). In the absence of strong ties with country, or wholesale engagement with government services and the mainstream economy, the familiarity of having relatives scattered throughout a geographical region positions Aboriginal people within a spatialised social structure, and fosters a sense of security and comfort which many non-Aboriginal people derive solely from more individually-oriented measures such as employment and income. The more collectively-oriented socio-cultural norms with which many Aboriginal people identify reinforce a sense of security and

belonging that is embedded within family structures. They also reinforce the practices and processes of reciprocal exchanges which characterise these family structures:

It's very, a collective, is that the right word ... the, dichotomy between an individualistic society as opposed to a communal or collective. My observation is that Aboriginal people belong over here [gestures to the communal/collective end of the spectrum]. Western society is very individualistic; look after number one. Aboriginal people, you have - the emphasis goes onto their kinship and how they fit within their family structure. Whereas Western people don't tend to focus on that as much (Nicole Adams, 15 July 2004).

As the above quotation suggests, there is a distinct sense of interconnectedness and collective responsibility amongst Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region that contrasts in many ways with the more individualistic norms of mainstream Australian society. Characteristic of this more collective orientation is the notion of shared belonging: 'what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine.' Here a person's individual identity is found in their position within their broader social and familial structure.

It is this combination of a widely assumed and embraced family orientation and collective responsibility, as well as the significance of family networks in procuring, cultivating and contesting a sense of belonging, which facilitate frequent Aboriginal mobilities in Yamatji country. The following interview excerpt summarises one research participant's observation in both Mt Magnet and Meekatharra which seems to capture one of the tangible expressions of this collective orientation and its spatial implications:

They tend to have the days that the bus comes in, they all wait for it, and see who comes in on the bus. Not that they're waiting for anyone particularly, they're just seeing who comes on the bus. Which is quite interesting. Because they did that in Magnet too and I found it quite strange. Like wait for the bus. And I'm like 'what are you waiting for the bus for?' 'Oh just to see who comes off' 'Oh, OK.' Like because it's just they're not knowing whose gonna rock up I suppose (Pete Turnbull, 4 August 2004).

Extensive family connections throughout the region form a network of potential resources which can be utilised when needed. This network in turn creates a safe and

supportive environment in which unplanned mobilities are feasible. Below, Aunt Mavis Curley reflects on how family networks influence the characteristics of her spatial practices. Of her mobilities, she clarifies:

... no I don't make sure that I've got enough to get there and back. I've got enough to start out with. But I rely on, I don't know, that everyone is gonna see me right. And I think that's the main aim of rellies. You know, you're gonna be right when you get there. Even if you go and - when we go and stay with [my son], I know that they're not gonna be on the bone forever. Next payday, they'll give me enough to get home again. Or they'll go and book up petrol and give me a couple of dollars for the road, and things like that. So that's my, probably my safeguard, my safety net. Go to rellies instead of getting there and being stranded (Aunt Mavis Curley, 18 August 2004).

In this interview excerpt, Aunt Mavis explains that her need to plan her travels is alleviated by the knowledge of two things. Firstly, her destination will be familiar because there will be relatives there. Secondly, those relatives will provide the necessary resources to look after her needs. They will provide her with somewhere to stay, something to eat, and some way to get to her next destination. In this example, the sense of security derived from family networks of responsibility and reciprocity enables greater spontaneity in mobility practices. The role of family networks in facilitating spontaneous or 'unplanned' mobilities is a common characteristic of many Aboriginal communities in Australia, across both time and space. Hamilton (1987) for example, made similar observations of Aboriginal mobilities in remote South Australia during the 1970s:

Traveling from place to place can only be undertaken in this apparently haphazard way precisely because an elaborate network of reciprocal exchanges underpins it, whereby relatives accept unannounced visits from one another and provide the wherewithal for the visitor's survival if necessary ... (Hamilton, 1987 p. 49).

In the 1980s, Beckett (1988), Birdsall (1988), Young and Doohan (1989), and most recently Smith (2004) also described the significance of family networks in informing the characteristics and spatial extent of Aboriginal mobility processes in rural NSW, the south-west of Western Australia, Central Australia, and north Queensland respectively. In each of these settings, family networks were integral to survival for the Aboriginal people who engaged in them, particularly in the absence

of desire or opportunity to become more integrated into the mainstream economy. The centrality of kinship networks is consistent despite geographical, temporal and cultural distinctions. Most of these studies make two important points about the function of family networks in relation to mobility practices. First, they suggest that because family networks are a source from which identity, belonging and security are variously affirmed and rooted, their preservation is vital. Further, these networks are preserved by their utilisation (see also Musharbash, 2003). Hamilton (1987) follows directly on from the above quotation:

... And an important purpose of such journeys, even in the absence of ritual, marital or other commitments, is to maintain this structure of reciprocal interdependence by calling upon it (Hamilton, 1987, p. 49).

That is, not only do family networks facilitate mobility but their maintenance also demands it. Mobility is therefore a key act of social and cultural maintenance for many Aboriginal people. Second, these studies suggest that the spatial extent of familial networks basically serves in an integral capacity as a boundary to Aboriginal mobilities. These two aspects of the relationship between mobility, family and identity provide a key lens for considering the nature of contemporary mobility processes in Meekatharra and the broader fieldwork region.

7.2.1 Maintaining Family Networks

Also because they have much more family around the place because they're(?) extended family, the ties with them are being maintained all the time ... So you catch up with everyone every now and then and you drink and that serves to give you a way out if you're situation becomes a little bit too hard to stay in one place. You've got several options usually to go here or there (Jan Van de Schaar, July 2004).

In the fieldwork region, the maintenance of family networks is a privileged practice for most Aboriginal people, particularly those who derive very little security or belonging from engaging with mainstream social or economic institutions. Maintaining these networks is in a very tangible sense, a form of cultural maintenance. It is an expression of the lived experience of culture, and the constant weaving and re-weaving of the social fabric. A range of practices strengthen and

reaffirm the sense of security and belonging that is derived from familial bonds.

These include visiting, gathering together at funerals and family celebrations such as birthdays and weddings. Major social and sporting events also provide opportunities for dispersed extended family networks to reunite and reinforce the social structures from which individual identities are derived. All of these practices significantly impact Aboriginal mobility processes in the fieldwork region.

7.2.1.1 Visiting

One of the most tangible and common expressions of exercising and simultaneously strengthening family networks in the fieldwork region is simply visiting⁷⁹. The expectation of hospitality amongst and between families allows Aboriginal people to 'drift in and out'⁸⁰ of places with relative frequency and acceptance. In contrast to non-Aboriginal society, these fluid spatial practices are quite normal for many Aboriginal families. The following interview excerpt explains the spatial significance of this distinction:

And like, all of us [non-Aboriginal people] can go and bunk with a relative but in fact there's, you know we sort of, well you know we sort of say relatives are like fish – they're fine for two days but after three days they smell. So you tend - if you go and stay with relatives, you tend to be aware that there is a time at which you don't stay any longer or you go out for a couple of days and provide privacy. There's not that in the Aboriginal culture. You just come and bunk and if you're there six weeks later, well, you're there six weeks later. And even if that person is a bit ticked off by that, and they might go, you know they might say to the staff here 'Oh relatives staying, and oh, they been there so long! I don't know when they're gonna home!' But they would not go home and say 'you've been here long enough. It's time for you to go.' That wouldn't be polite. So that also encourages transiency because there's that 'We can drop in and there's a feed and whatever we need there's gonna be there.' So, it's not viewed as the problem (Murchison Health Director 23 July 2004).

Indeed, as Chapter Three noted, family networks allow some Aboriginal people to become 'perpetual visitors' whose sense of belonging and 'home' is rooted entirely in their family relationships rather than any fixed locale:

79 One or two interviewees suggested that they rarely visited or enjoyed visiting family in other places but these were exceptions.

80 These were the words of interviewee Pete Turnbull (4 August 2004) in describing the movement of Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region. She explained that such movements were possible because of the established networks of family that Aboriginal people have in the region.

They go hop skip and jump from one community to the next. And it's only because, 'oh, old Pop so-and-so's over there' or 'old Auntie whatever is over in that community, let's go and see her.' Go there and stay for a week or two ... A lot of visiting with friends and family. Lots (Anonymous Interviewee 12, 1 March 2005).

In a cyclical fashion, the regularity of visiting reinforces its normality for both visitor and host. Further, accommodating responses by the host perpetuates the practice.

This is not to say, however, that opinions about visiting are standardised amongst all Aboriginal people or that the practice takes some prescribed form. The limits to how far familial hospitality extends, the degree of notice visitors give, the acceptable length of stay, and number of guests involved are at least to some degree individually negotiated⁸¹. Some Aboriginal people in Meekatharra are becoming more comfortable with expecting and requesting some kind of contribution after several days of hosting, although they acknowledge that this goes against the grain. More commonly, visitors might be unquestioningly supported for several weeks, particularly if the visit is in relation to a funeral. Usually after this point however, some financial assistance is either offered or requested. The underlying expectation that generally accompanies the communal orientation is that visitors will not simply 'bludge.' In situations where no reciprocation is forthcoming, conflict can arise. These points of social etiquette are quite malleable though and even in the most stringent cases, Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region are almost always far more accommodating of extended family than might be considered 'normal' in non-Aboriginal society.

In some cases individual preferences are sacrificed and concealed to uphold the social expectation of collective responsibility. For example, one interviewee clearly expressed her dislike of visitors but explained that she does not convey this attitude to her guests. Most of her visitors are her husband's family who are from the State's south-west. Because he isn't able to live closer to them and is always so happy to see them when they come, she wants to accept these visitors even though she feels very

⁸¹ By comparison, Musharbash (2003) explains that in Warlpiri hospitality, there is no concept of 'guest.' In the context of discussing visiting, or 'stopping,' practices in Yuendumu, she notes that the notions of being 'allowed' or 'refused' to stay do not make sense. Rather, 'stopping' is a normalised social and cultural process based upon personal networks and pre-existing relationships. 'Strangers' however, would be received with shyness, and perhaps some discomfort (see also Musharbash, 2000).

burdened by them. They often arrive unannounced in large numbers, having picked up more relatives on their journey north towards Meekatharra:

They just turn up out of the blue. I get home from work and there's this car load of people. And they can't just come one person or two people at a time. It's like 5 of them. One day I come home and there was three cars. 8 men and three cars. I couldn't believe it (Anonymous, 27 October 2004).

Just as perspectives about appropriate visiting etiquette differ amongst the Aboriginal population in Meekatharra, so too do the forms that visiting take. As Deborah's two visiting yarns (Box 7.1) illustrate, visiting can be part of the process of a larger journey between two points or the expressed aim of a movement. People visit relatives for refuge, for convenience on long journeys, to comfort in times of illness or bereavement, or purely for the purposes of maintaining their kinship networks. All of these practices though, are forms of cultural maintenance.

Box 7.1 Deborah's Two Visiting Yarns

1. The Northern Territory:

After her relationship with Chelsea's father broke down and Deb's brother had died, she and her children were living in Geraldton and life was hard. Deb felt she needed a change so she decided to go to Katherine, in the Northern Territory, where she had a cousin. Deb wasn't sure if her cousin was in Katherine at the time, but she counted on it anyway and planned on surprising her:

"I was just going. I hadn't made any plans. I was just going. It was very spontaneous. And I made the decision on a Monday and by the following Tuesday, a week later, we were gone. And I just said 'I'm going. And that's it.' But if I was to say, 'I want to go to Queensland' then that would be planned because there's no family over there. I would have to plan where I was going to stay, I had enough money to do it, and whatever. But I left Meeka with \$600 to go to the Territory. And I knew that we'd get a feed along the way because there's family all the way along."

Accompanying Deb were her five children (two of whom had partners), one grandchild, and one niece who was having difficulties in her relationship with her mum. In total there were 10 people and one dog.

"... we left on a Tuesday evening. So we drove right through the night and got to Port Hedland at daybreak, so we just kept going. And we said 'no we'll get to Broome and spend the night there.' But we had family there but I didn't know where they lived. So we just booked into the backpackers."

And from there we said 'OK, Halls Creek is our next stop. Ricky lives there, so we'll stop with him.' He was just so happy to see us. Put a big feed on. 'Yes, you can have this bed, you kids can have that room. Boys can camp in the car or whatever.' So for his one night, I went and bought him a carton of beer.



Figure 7.1 Deborah's Katherine Trip

He was quite happy with that. I mean thirty-five, forty dollars for whatever it is for one night feed and a bed for 10 people is pretty good ... Didn't even call them, just rocked up. But because you haven't seen them for a long time, they're that happy to see you, they don't give a shit where you sleep. [laughter] That's how it goes."

When they arrived in Katherine, Deb's cousin, who had a partner and child or her own, was there and welcomed them into her home. They stayed with her family for a few weeks before eventually moving into a rental house of their own and finding jobs. They remained in Katherine for about a year before returning to Meekatharra.

"... And then we planned our trip back because we were going the different way. We didn't have family in Tennant Creek. We didn't have family in Alice Springs. We didn't have family in Coober Pedy or Port Lincoln, I mean Port Augusta. So all those places we booked into Caravan Parks ... We planned the trip and our money. It's different when you're going on trips. Like, when we go to Geraldton, we don't ring and book into motels and things because there's that many family down there. We just lob up to the house 'Oh, here for a couple of nights.' 'Yeh, no worries.'"

2. Back Home in Meeka:

Just after she had moved into her Meekatharra house, Deb had a visit from a relative. Her cousin, who was living in Katherine (NT) had come down via the coast road to a funeral in Geraldton. On her return to Katherine, she travelled along the inland road visiting other family. Meekatharra was one of her stops.

"So she pulled up at home. Three daughters (and her) and I think there were four vehicles. May was driving one and the three daughters were driving a vehicle each. And I think there was 11 kids, four goats, a dog, and a kangaroo. And they all came ... [laughter] And people still spin out when I tell them. 'Oh, May stayed at your place.' I said 'Yeh. four adults, 11 kids, four goats, a kangaroo and a dog.' 'Where did you fit them all?' 'The goats went in the garage, the joey [baby kangaroo] was in a bag, the dog was carried around by the kid ... I said, 'there's the barbeque.' They brought all their own food. Meat that she picked up in Cue 'Ok, that will do in Meekatharra.' And if she picked up some more meat there, that would feed them in Mt Newman. She brought her own food, all her own milk, weetbix, all her own plates. Everything she had in boxes, tucker boxes. And they just set themselves up on the patio. They cooked. They feed all the kids. They made all the beds on the lounge room floor and out the back on the patio. Military style organisation."

Deborah's stories exemplify a number of themes not only about visiting, but also about the role of family networks in facilitating and shaping mobility practices. In the first story, visiting with family had multiple purposes. Deborah called upon her family networks as metaphorical stepping stones on her long journey through Western Australia to the Northern Territory. In so doing, she strengthened those associations. Deborah also called upon her family networks as a source of refuge from the troubles she was facing at home. The ability to pack-up on a moment's notice was facilitated by the knowledge of certain refuge at the end of her travels:

I mean there's no way that I would have went up to the Territory, into Katherine, if I didn't have at least one family member there. Because I knew I had somewhere to go, I had somewhere to take my kids. I had somewhere for them to sleep and eat until I could get on my own feet. If I had just rocked up there, I'd have been 'what the hell am I going to do now?' I would have been at a loss. Family makes life easier in a lot of ways (Deborah Robinson, 30 November 2004).

In contrast, on the eventual journey back to Western Australia, Deborah knew she would be travelling through unfamiliar territory where she had few family associations. She therefore planned her trip more carefully.

Deborah's second story provides an alternate perspective of visiting – that of the host rather than the traveller. It describes some of the impacts of stepping-stone visiting at destination locations. What it illustrates is that arrangements can be (and frequently are) made at a moment's notice to accommodate large numbers of extended family members. Both stories demonstrate the ways in which the understanding and utilisation of family networks of reciprocity and responsibility maintains a communal orientation and establishes a safe ground within which a range of mobilities are initiated and supported.

Deborah's stories also demonstrate that visiting exchanges are not singularly an exercise in 'core' individuals hosting, supporting, and catering to the needs of a 'transient' population. Rather reciprocation in hosting and visiting is a dialectical process. Depending on life circumstances, any individual may move between exhibiting the characteristics of either 'core' or 'transient.' Similarly, Aboriginal people in the fieldwork region move fluidly between being hosts and visitors. In the first story, Deborah, who by interviewee definitions outlined in Chapter Three, would be considered part of the 'core,' assumed the role of visitor and engaged in a long, spontaneous and unplanned journey to call upon family networks. In the second story, at a different stage in life, Deborah assumed the role of host to other family members. Reciprocity amongst family networks is a dynamic process and visiting exchanges are one of the primary mechanisms through which it is enacted.

Despite complex individual perspectives about etiquette and form, visiting is a widely practiced custom predicated on a collective conscience. It is the primary way in which family networks are called upon and strengthened amongst Aboriginal people in Meekatharra (and Yamatji country more generally), and it facilitates and enables frequent spontaneous mobilities.

7.2.1.2 Funerals

Funerals are regularly attended by Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. Along with visiting, they are widely regarded as one of the primary motivators of Aboriginal mobilities. Chapter Three discussed a range of perspectives that Aboriginal interviewees held regarding the significance and purpose of funeral attendance⁸². For

⁸² See specifically Box 3.2.

some, funeral attendance was an expression of a traditional or tribal cultural practice. For others, it represented an opportunity to reconnect with family and establish important kinship associations, particularly for children. For others, it was simply a matter of paying respect and representing family. Given the significance of funeral attendance, many Aboriginal people in Yamatji country will travel long distances for funerals. Some may stay for extensive periods of anywhere between two weeks and a year. Others, particularly those engaged in full-time employment, will return immediately following the funeral. Regardless of the precise reason why any particular individual attends a funeral, the practice serves either exclusively or additionally to foster family networks of inclusion and reciprocation.

We're all the same. We need to be around family. Unless something bad's happened in your family and you want to get right away from them. But you know, my family's in Port Hedland. I don't see that as far, but it's a 15 hour drive from here and a little bit more in a bus. But, we meet, funeral times; just recently, John's family in Wiluna, that's 7, 8 hours away. We don't see travel as an issue to get somewhere, to meet people for funerals, whatever. We get there. Because it's important for us. And that's a time when all the family gets together (Coordinator of Aboriginal Education: Midwest, 12 November 2004).

In her remarks above, the interviewee suggests that all Aboriginal people, regardless of whether they live traditionally or contemporarily (a distinction which she had previously made), need to 'be around family.' However, her remarks also suggest that 'being around family' does not necessarily equate to all living in close proximity. In her example, travel to attend funerals assists in maintaining a sense of 'being around family.' As well as providing opportunities to mourn and grieve collectively, funerals serve as occasions which prompt mobilities and simultaneously strengthen positions within the social fabric.

7.2.1.3 Celebrations and Events

Another way in which family networks are maintained and belonging cultivated, is through attendance at important events and celebrations. Since the early 20th Century when the pastoral and mining industries spread throughout Yamatji country, gathering together for special events and celebrations has formed a central part of the social and cultural lives of many Aboriginal people. As gathering for traditional ceremonial purposes became increasingly difficult, and Aboriginal people had dispersed to work on

various stations, the annual horse racing season, or 'race round,' became an important time in which wider family groups could be reunited and re-affirmed. The race round involved a number of meets in various towns and on large stations throughout the region. They became a focal point of social interaction for Aboriginal families:

Ya know, races where the horses are running around. We would be there until couple days after or we'd sorta hanged on. There was card games and rellies to see and, go to another station and have a look at them and. I think for each race meeting, we must have missed four extra days school. Because we was just catching up on rellies (Aunty Mavis Curley, 18th August 2004).

In the Yamatji country today, the annual horse racing round still exists and some events, such as the Landor Races (Plate 7.1) retain a high profile.



Plate 7.1 Landor Races 2004

(Photo: J. Unsworth, 2004)

However, as the expense of attending such events has risen, other celebrations have become more prominent occasions for gathering together⁸³. Birthdays and anniversaries in

83 At the Landor Races in 2004, there was an entry fee of \$40 per person. It was one of the most poorly attended years in recent history. There were very few Aboriginal people in attendance and most of those that were, hailed from the local Aboriginal community of Burringurrah. Because they lived nearby, they didn't have to pay for accommodation.

Meekatharra are usually held on weekends and many people who have ‘moved on’ from Meekatharra, perhaps to pursue employment opportunities, will travel considerable distances to attend.

In September 2004, the town celebrated its Centenary with some of the biggest celebrations in several decades. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike returned to Meekatharra to enjoy a weekend of festivities beginning on a Friday night with a street party and ending the following Monday with the last round of horse races.

In late November 2004, Meekatharra hosted its annual Aboriginal basketball tournament: ‘The Meeka Muster’ (Plate 7.2). The event saw close to 300 Aboriginal people converge on the town from surrounding townships and more outlying areas. Box 7.2 presents a collection of journal excerpts of observations about the ways in which this event fostered and reinforced family connections.



Plate 7.2 Meeka Muster 2005⁸⁴
Courtesy of the Meekatharra Shire 2006

⁸⁴ Photographs of the 2004 Meeka Muster were unavailable.