

5. Exchange and appropriation: the *Wurnan* economy and Aboriginal land and labour at Karunjie Station, north-western Australia

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The traditional *Wurnan* trade network spans a number of socio-cultural regions in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and beyond, operating at both small-scale interpersonal and larger-scale inter-group levels, channelling ritual and simple economic objects of desire through predetermined but flexible trading routes (see also Blundell and Layton 1978; Redmond 2001a). This chapter examines *Wurnan* as practised by Ngarinyin people at Karunjie Station in the East Kimberley and the way in which successive generations of Ngarinyin participants have maintained and adapted the two very different systems of *Wurnan* and the pastoral station economy within their social worlds. The pastoral station owners, connected to local Ngarinyin people through geography, coercive labour relations and to a certain extent kinship ties, were largely unaware of the operation of *Wurnan* yet were influential players in this economic interdependency. Twenty years ago, Basil Sansom (1988) pointed to a high degree of ‘incommensurability’ between the traditional Aboriginal ‘service economy’ and a now thoroughly encapsulating market economy. Rather than being focused on an exchange of objects, the paradigmatic exchanges between northern Australian Aborigines were described by Sansom (1988:173) as ‘gifts of service’ for which objects simply provided vehicles for producing relatedness.¹ Far from being about the balanced reciprocity that Mauss (1954) and later Lévi-Strauss (1969) saw as the basis of all social contracts, Aboriginal gifts of service tend to constitute hierarchical relationships, because gifts of ‘signal services’ have a capacity to produce lifelong indebtedness even if the

¹ Sansom’s conceptualisation was consistent with Mauss’s notion of *The Gift* (1954), in which the French word ‘*prestation*’ denoted both objects and services.

roles between 'actor and patient' will transform over time. Where there is an equalising reciprocity involved, it is one that emerges only with the passage of time and the history of particular relationships.²

Gifts between trading partners in the inter-clan and inter-regional *Wurnan* in the Kimberley region move in a network that is locally perceived as being isomorphic with marriage exchange and the obligations between in-laws. These gifts engender formal expectations and obligations. *Wurnan*, though, may take place at multiple levels around the same object. As Gregory (1982) has shown, at the far end of the scale of formalised exchanges, objects have a capacity to enter and exit the commodity economy, so that its status as gift or commodity may alter in the course of its transmission between different social contexts (see also Appadurai 1986; Godelier 1999:14).

In the north-eastern Kimberley by the 1930s, a range of Western commodities had entered into the traditional *Wurnan* economy (see also Redmond 2001a, 2001b) where they became gifts or 'present', to use the Kimberley Kriol term. Some older Ngarinyin people described how Western commodities quickly became associated with the powerful aura that has long characterised objects obtained from afar in their traditional trade networks. By assimilating the perceived power of newly arrived commodities to the force of ancestral Dreamings (see also Munn 1970; Myers 1988) these people were able to offer a 'view from afar' on the effects of inducting Western goods into *Wurnan* trade and the impact this had on regional social relationships.

Some of my Ngarinyin co-workers also explicitly compared the *Wurnan* with European trading principles of demand and supply.

Donald Campbell: Old Johnny from Dodnan he cart em from Gibb River, he used to tell me, he got big mob red material to get for naga, wool and cotton to make em hairbelt and everything, in return saltwater side mob send jaguli, shell, Port Keats and them send em milinggin bamboo.

Whatever they gonna send gotta happen the same way...keep em clear, like when we go to ngarranggarni place [Dreaming sites] just like that... like people used to be trading on the ship, go to one island, then another place island, that mob got no anything, this mob can send spice to them to get food or whatever, it's all similar in a sense. Trade with other mob who haven't got that thing, like spice and silk, nother mob sell

2 The indeterminacy that Sansom saw as characterising Aboriginal social/economic life precluded dealing in the dependable expectations of recovering a return gift, which Western economism links with the concept of reciprocity.

em something else that they didn't have...same thing...If you sit down long time and look at things from the outside you see from gardiya [whitefella] to Blackfella side everything fall into place...

Gordon Smith: It's a governing system. (Redmond fieldwork notes, 2007)

In this discussion of the workings of the *Wurnan*, we can see a strong emphasis on material objects per se and the seeking out of objects which, through being locally unavailable, gain an aura of power from being traded from afar, creating new needs and ties between trading partners.

Once Ngarinyin people and their neighbours in the north-eastern Kimberley began to be inducted into the pastoral economy in large numbers from about 1920 or so, some serious challenges were raised to this 'governing system' that accompanied *Wurnan* exchanges. One of the most direct challenges was to Aborigines' control over the value of their own land, labour and mobility. A further serious challenge emerged with the disruption of the local sexual economy when Aboriginal women became the sexual partners of strangers: white stockmen 'bosses' and the 'Afghan' cameleers who provided the transport system for goods across the region's cattle stations. The importance of Aboriginal women in the appropriation of land by the strangers who travelled 'over the ranges' in the Kimberley has already been canvassed (Jebb 2002). The settlers needed, in addition to land, people to work the land to make it profitable. When the white men abducted or induced local Aboriginal women to stay with them, the women's relatives were also drawn into the colonising process so that it was from these initial relationships that the station workforce was established.

Two northern Indian cameleers, Sahanna and his brother, Sultan, moved into transport contracting in the Kimberley. They could have been among the first group of Afghans to migrate to the area after leaving Port Hedland following the cameleers' strike of 1908 (Bottrill and Sahanna 1991:1). Though Sahanna, at least, had served in the British Army in India, his civil and political rights and those of his fellow Indian and Afghan cameleers were restricted by racially discriminatory legislation. Classified under the law as an 'Asiatic' in Western Australia, he could not, for instance, legally employ Aboriginal people, who were the main labour force in Western Australia at the time. In the north-west and the Kimberley, Aboriginal workers were the only labour force. In the 1940s, Sahanna was targeted by the authorities, who were going to prosecute him for his illegal employment of Aboriginal people.³

Sahanna and Sultan sought to establish their own cattle station at Moonlight Valley on the Salmond River, as an adjunct to their cartage business. By 1920, this rugged and inaccessible area of the north-eastern Kimberley had been

3 Commissioner Bray, 26 October 1943, in Aborigines Department file, SROWA, 1943/1044.

virtually untouched by the bigger pastoral interests, such as the Durack family, who had earlier settled the better cattle country along the Ord River Valley. The Afghans' only neighbours were at Durack River Station, Karunjie, which was being established by a small group of Scots-born veterans of the AIF 10th Light Horse. These were the former comrades-in-arms, Dave Rust and Scotty Salmond, as well as Scotty Saddler (later convicted of the murder of a fellow stockman) and Scotty Menmuir. All of these men seem to have sought out alliances with local Aboriginal groups, underwritten by relationships with local Aboriginal women, which had to be concealed from the authorities because under the 1905 *Aborigines Act* in Western Australia, these relationships were prohibited. This law remained in force until 1963. While white men's relationships with Aboriginal women were central to the operation of the frontier economy and to the effective appropriation of land, the actions of the police and other government authorities and the men themselves ensured that there was no official acknowledgment of them. Although it was an offence for all non-Aboriginal men to have relationships with Aboriginal women, prosecution and arrest were usually reserved for 'Asiatic' men who formed such liaisons. This was illustrated in the difference between the experience of Sahanna and that of Rust and Salmond. Sahanna's wife, and the mother of his two children, was a local Aboriginal woman, and this attracted the attention of the Commissioner for Native Affairs, who threatened to charge Sahanna with breach of the *Aborigines Act*.⁴ Sahanna's neighbours, Rust and Salmond, who also had Aboriginal wives, never received any such warnings. The selective policing of the offence of 'cohabiting' and having sexual intercourse with Aboriginal women—and these were the words used in the legislation—reinforced white men's access to Aboriginal women as a sexual resource.

Despite the differences in the policing of sexual relationships in the north-eastern Kimberley, their function in connecting the outsiders with local Aboriginal clans was the same. Sahanna took up with the daughter of a man from the Galiyamba clan on which Moonlight Valley was situated. His brother, Sultan, took up with her sister. Scotty Salmond, by all accounts a very violent returned soldier, took a woman from the Liyarr clan, on whose country Karunjie Station was established. Dave Rust took another woman (who also seems to have been from Liyarr clan country) after her father had been shot and killed by one of the roving Karunjie stockmen, Jack Carey. Donald Campbell was the son of another Liyarr woman, Eva Balandu, and a mixed-race Aboriginal man from Queensland, Jack Campbell, the head stockman for Rust and Salmond (see Figure 5.1).

4 Commissioner Bray, 1 December 1943, in *ibid*.



Figure 5.1 Camel ride at Karunjie Station ca. 1950, with Jack Campbell in hat

Courtesy State Library of Western Australia image number 007846D.

Thus, both the Afghans at Moonlight Valley and the Scots-born returned soldiers at Karunjie had taken up with women who were nearly all from the same two local clans—Liyarr and Galiyamba, already related as wife-giving and wife-receiving clans in the traditional marriage system. In addition to this monopolisation of the women of these clans, it appears that Sultan had ‘grabbed out of the bush’ a young Liyarr boy and ‘grown him up’ (Campbell Allanbra cited in Munro 1996:39–40). According to Allanbra (Munro 1996), Sultan later took up with this man’s wife, taking her to work on his sandalwood collecting expeditions. Later, when the boy had grown into a young man, he was murdered by a white stockman, Peter Reynolds, in order to take his wife.

It is not always easy to tell how much agency was involved on the part of these Aboriginal women and their male kin in establishing the sometimes quite long-lasting relationship with whites and the people they called Afghans. Sometimes the violent abduction is explicit, as when Aboriginal people told how Dave Rust’s Aboriginal partner’s father had been shot and killed before she became Rust’s wife. In other cases, the formation of relationships with the white male settlers was more complex and it is worth noting here that traditionally there was an already established capacity for women’s sexual resources to be deployed for securing alliances and building ritual bonds. New factors introduced by white settlement included the depletion of the mature male population through violent encounters with the white settlers, high rates of removal and

imprisonment of men for cattle-spearing offences and intensified inter-group conflict resulting from violent appropriations of Aboriginal women, waterholes and hunting grounds. Given that white men had demonstrated a ready capacity to inflict terror and destruction, it would not be surprising if Aboriginal men sought to gain leverage with the strangers by acquiescing to the strangers' need for local women, or if women themselves sometimes made such initiatives. Some of these women now speak with considerable affection for the autonomy and/or relative safety amid the frontier violence that they were able to achieve through being a white man's or Afghan's partner. Travelling with these men, collecting sandalwood, camp cooking, doing stockwork or collecting dingo scalps for cash availed some women of considerable opportunities amid the everyday drudgery of working for whites.

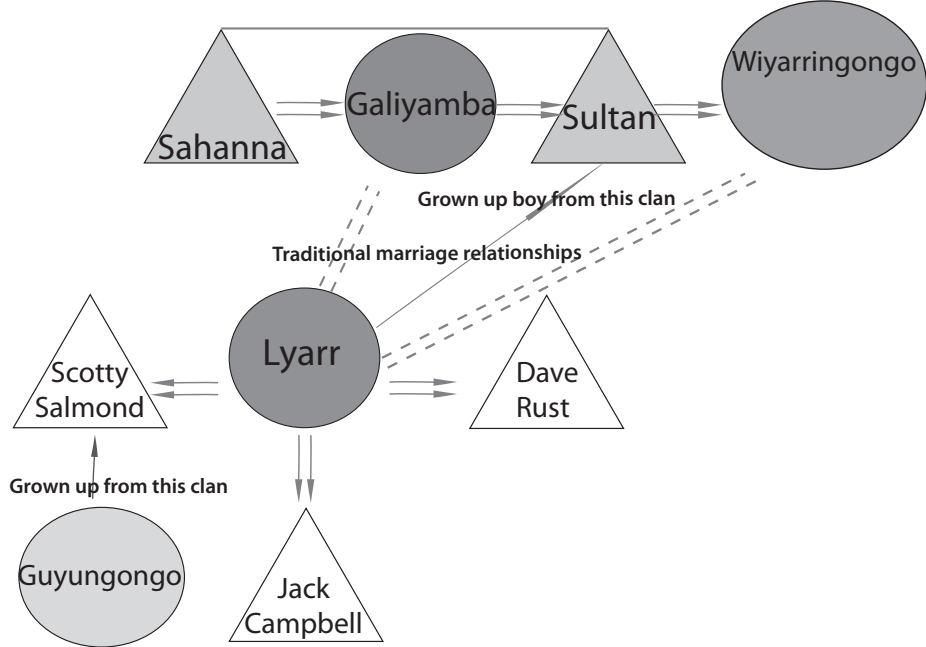


Figure 5.2 Relationships between local clans and non-local men at Karunjie

The Kimberley frontier was a violent place. Five white men were speared and killed in the first wave of invasion in the eastern Kimberley in the 1880s and Aboriginal casualties were much higher. What were called 'dispersals' were attacks on Aboriginal camps by police, in retaliation for allegations of cattle spearing (Owen 2003:105–10), but the removal of Aboriginal people from cattle-grazing country was the central motive. Police rarely recorded how many Aboriginal people they shot in 'dispersals', but in 1895 one Wyndham police sergeant described in his personal diary that the police patrol of which he was a member killed 20 men in one raid. The police patrol continued raiding camps in the area of Ivanhoe Station, eventually returning to Wyndham more than a month later with 14 prisoners who had been marched around the bush in chains. Thirteen of the prisoners were charged with 'being in the unlawful possession of beef' and sentenced to two years' hard labour plus 15 lashes of the cat-o'-nine-tails (Owen 2003:120–1).

Local station owners and white stockworkers were also participants in the killing of Aboriginal people. Evidence from police journals suggests that the Duracks, who appropriated the first and largest pastoral leases along the Ord River, had a 'gentlemen's agreement' with the Police Commissioner, whereby white men on Durack-owned stations would not be investigated or prosecuted for murdering Aboriginal people. There were several such murders and Patsy Durack told one constable that 'the police who put away a man for doing in the blacks always got the chuck out of the police' (Owen 2003:126–7). During the 1901 trial of two Aboriginal youths for the murder of another Durack, Jeremiah, young Patsy Durack agreed that they 'generally used Winchester rifles to shoot natives' (Skyring 2001:23–4).

Salmond's own recollections suggest that the threat of murderous violence was a strategy used at Karunjie as well, and that this could coexist with relatively stable relationships. Salmond recounted to a journalist in 1970 how he had formed a partnership with Dave Rust after World War I, and Salmond went into 'unknown country' to establish the station. He described the early years of Karunjie as 'lively' when 'natives constantly tried to spear the cattle and kill the whites', presumably including him. Salmond contended that the only thing 'natives' understood was 'savagery and strength', and he trained dogs to defend the homestead against 'blacks'. He recalled 'we had just come back from a war in which we were taught to kill. And when it came to a showdown we were the strongest.' Salmond seemed comfortable with his nickname, 'debbil-debbil' (Moroney 1970).

In addition to this violence perhaps one of the most profound changes of circumstances for local Aborigines was the profusion of new needs that emerged in the Aboriginal economy as populations became relatively sedentary in station out-camps dependant on rations that stimulated new appetites and capacities

for work such as the rapidly addictive substances tobacco, tea and sugar. The diet for Aboriginal station workers provided by their employers until the late 1960s was usually well below the standards set by government, and people had to hunt and fish to supplement the meagre rations they received in return for their labour. It meant, however, that goods such as tobacco, tea and sugar were available only from whites or the Afghans, and quickly became highly prized items. Campbell Allanbra told Mary Anne Jebb (2002:40), 'Oh Afghans had really good tobacco too. One little bit in that bottle with a pipe used to make us work all day. Really good tobacco.' Rations were the basis of exchange between the whitefellas at the outposts of settlement and the Aboriginal people on whose labour and local knowledge of the land they relied. If pastoralists had paid the full exchange value for Aboriginal labour in a labour-scarce market, the whole pastoral economy would have collapsed. This new desire for introduced goods built on an existing social reality in which there were always degrees of interdependency to be negotiated:

Jilgi Edwards: No money that time on sandalwood, only rations the Afghans gave us...only now we see the money...Working for the damper and meat, tobacco, everyday Tuesday we got it at Moonlight Valley, we helped Afghans find that sandalwood, two tonne on each camel...big mob of camel. I learnt how to handle them camel too...they good those camel. (Redmond fieldwork notes, 2007)

It seems from both documentary and oral history sources that Aborigines got a better deal from the camel drivers than they did from their white bosses, so preferred to work for them. Since the introduction of the 1905 *Aborigines Act*, authorities rigorously policed the prohibition on 'Asiatics' employing Aboriginal people. A circular sent out by the Chief Protector in 1907 sought responses on the issue of employment of Aboriginal people by 'Afghans'. While some local police and protectors in the north-west and the Kimberley condemned any interaction with camel drivers as 'contaminating' and 'inducing drunkenness and immorality', others argued that 'Afghans' treated their Aboriginal employees better than did white employers.⁵ As with the official obsession with policing the trade between coastal Aboriginal people and indentured pearling workers from East and South-East Asia, it seems that the primary reason for the objections to economic exchange between Afghans and Aboriginal people was that it challenged the exclusivity of white control over the Aboriginal workforce. In a labour-scarce market such as the Kimberley, authorities and station owners would not tolerate competition for Aboriginal labour and implemented laws and police practices to prohibit them from working for anyone else (Skyring 2003:32–43). Records suggested that one of the objections to camel drivers' employment of Aboriginal people was that they sometimes paid them in cash,

⁵ Aborigines Department file, SROWA, 1907/0406.

rather than in food rations, which was the standard practice on the stations. One respondent speculated that the preference of Aboriginal workers for Afghan bosses prompted white employers to react with 'uneasiness' and 'jealousy'.⁶

Nevertheless, the department introduced measures to prevent camel drivers from employing Aboriginal people—and did so by expressly including them in the definition of 'Asians' who were already prohibited under the *Aborigines Act* from entering into work contracts with Aboriginal people. When the issue was raised again in 1915 in the eastern Kimberley, in relation to camel drivers who carted stores between Halls Creek and Wyndham, the response of the authorities was the same. Chief Protector Neville wanted to shut down the Afghan camp outside Wyndham (a camp known as 3 Mile) as a way of preventing 'sly grogging' and 'immorality' with Aboriginal women. As a local experienced policeman contended, however, the camel drivers were teetotallers and could attract women 'without resorting to the drink business', because they provided them with trinkets and dresses and generally better goods than women received from white men.⁷

While the settlers' often violent demands for their labour and lands created a massive upset in Kimberley Aboriginal social worlds, one of the more interesting aspects of the Karunjie research has been that some of the now senior men who were most involved in *Wurnan* exchange and the ritual ceremonial knowledge that accompanied it were some of those who worked most closely, and had some of the most intimate relationships, with white and 'Afghan' bosses. The tenor of these relationships is often described by Aborigines using idioms of emotional interdependency—very much in the vein of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. These idioms display how Aborigines thought of themselves as successfully making a boss into a 'good boss' who was compelled to acknowledge, in the end, his own need for his 'boy'. The white men involved expressed no such loyalties, reserving these for their former comrades-in-arms.

Paul Chapman and Campbell Allanbra, brothers from the main clan on which Karunjie was situated, both became prominent men in *Wurnan* exchanges and ritual life in the area. Their mother, Maggie, had been in a relationship with Sultan, who had also 'grown up' their father, before their father was shot by the whitefella Peter Reynolds in a fight over Maggie. Their mother and father had both, it seems, been able to accompany Sultan to Wyndham—where goods that became highly prized in the *Wurnan* could be obtained—to deliver loads of sandalwood. Sultan's brother, Sahanna, had as his wife a woman whom Chapman and Allanbra called a 'close mother'.

6 Officer in Charge, Port Hedland, 22 August 1907, in Aborigines Department file, 1907/0406.

7 Sergeant Buckland, in Police Department file, SROWA, 1915/4335.

The now senior man Nugget Tataya described what to all accounts sounds like a tender relationship with the white boss at Karunjie, Scotty Salmond, even though Salmond was renowned for his violent and abusive behaviour. Like the relationship of Left Hand Wundij and of his son Campbell to Sultan, Nugget described his ward-type relationship to Salmond as one in which he was Salmond's 'private boy'. This was a type of possessory human relationship that had been previously available only in the intimate (but also ambivalent) interactions between a boy and his initiatory 'boss', who would often become the initiate's father-in-law, and in husband–wife relationships in which 'jealousing', sometimes involving lethal conflict, seems to have been a strong feature. Salmond had taken a local Aboriginal woman, Dolly Nyamang, as his wife—someone whom Gudurr already called 'mother', thus entrenching the potential father–son relationship between these two men:

Gudurr Tataya: Salmond—he cheeky old bloke, bad bloke, he had hearing aid, Orugudi [deaf one] we called him, policeman couldn't tell him anything, he grew me up and put me on a horse and he took me everywhere...this man bin grow me, I called him like my Dad, *idje*. When he was drunk he tell me 'come on' and I lay down on his guts,⁸ he tell me you can lay down on my swag. When he go talking to other mob, drinking, he never hunt me out, he treat me like I was his son, my mother and father already passed away...

When I was already grown up, this old fella, Scotty, chase the horse and tip over, he had a bridle and saddle and he fell on him and break his back and I had to tell Jack Campbell to come back, too bad...he [Scotty] told me to lay down on his guts and I cry for him...He was proper hard man when policeman tell him anything. One time Reggie Carbin [Wyndham police officer] bin come and ask for me to come with him, but he didn't know I was under Scotty, he wanted to make me a police-boy. I rolled my swag and getting ready to go with policeman but Scotty ask, 'Where you going? You not fucking police-boy, he my private boy you can't take him, he under me', he told im, I take my swag back and go back with Scotty. He never take me...finish, Dave wanted to put me on police job, but nothing...he said 'that my boy you not having him' [laughter]. (Redmond fieldwork notes, 2007)

⁸ In Ngarinyin correlations of bodily schemata, emotion and kin categories, the 'guts' (stomach) is the bodily site at which maternal feeling is said to be centrally located.



Figure 5.3 Gudurr with photo of Rust and Salmond 2008

Courtesy State Library of Western Australia image number 007852D.

In contrast with this description of these complex relationships provided by Aboriginal people such as Gudurr, in Salmond's and Rust's diaries of station life, their relationships with Aboriginal people seem strictly functional. While they hardly refer to the world outside Karunjie in these records, Aboriginal people are almost invisible. Some of the male workers such as Nugget, Campbell and Pompey are named, and Rust and Salmond seem to interact with the Euri-Aboriginal man, Jack Campbell, on a fairly equal basis. The other Aboriginal workers who made up their entire workforce are, however, referred to simply as 'boys' or 'blacks'. Women are mentioned only occasionally, as recipients of dresses. When Salmond was interviewed for a newspaper article in 1970, he presented Karunjie as a 'bachelor station', deleting his and Rust's Aboriginal wives from the picture. Indeed, except when Rust and Salmon got older and needed to rely on the help of neighbours and friends, women hardly figure at all in the written record of the lives of these returned soldiers. They saw their significant relationships as being with their 'cobbers' from the 10th Light Horse Regiment. Salmond made a list of the old regiment in one of his diaries, and when Rust started to recount his life story to Kandy Jane Henderson in Wyndham Hospital, she commented that 'he only wants to talk about the war' (Rust 1936–81).

Relationships with their station bosses appear to have had a very different meaning for Ngarinyin men such as Gudurr, however, who had lost both his

parents as a young child. Allanbra and his brother, Chapman, developed strong capacities to form relationships with outsiders through whom they attained status and power in both the *Wurnan* and the pastoral economies. Allanbra became a head stockman on a number of regional stations and Chapman is still renowned as a ritual boss. Both were able to transfer objects between the *Wurnan* and the world of *almara* (whitefellas) in which they readily accepted their co-dependency on certain bosses, and through this their careers gained a prestige that eclipsed that of many of their countrymen, who preferred to stay in the bush rather than become attached to station bosses.

The country around Karunjie had long been a major centre of the *Wurnan* trade routes across the Kimberley, attracting large ceremonial gatherings during the early dry season when resources were abundant. The central roles that younger and middle-aged Aboriginal stockmen began to play in the *Wurnan* now depended heavily on their access to things that were obtainable only through their relationships with white patrons—relationships that gave them access to a range of desirable goods at the Wyndham stores when they drove cattle to market:

Gudurr Tataya: They got red cloth from Wyndham, from Carleton, Ivanhoe, Rosewood, all the *Wurnan* mob, more further they come from Koolibah and Timber Creek, right through, they sell that bamboo, just like white man one but different...when I went droving some old people bin get em and bring em up here, they get wool and stuff from Chinaman shop. (Redmond fieldwork notes, 2007)

If not calculated in terms of wages for labour—something that became available to the majority of Kimberley Aboriginal station workers only in the 1960s—what gains became available within the pastoral economy to people such as Gudurr? While fear of police and settler violence against those living beyond the station homesteads, and access to desirable foodstuffs (particularly tea, tobacco and sugar) at those homesteads, must account for some of the motivation to become resident there, it does not seem sufficient to explain why up to 300 Aboriginal people were induced by a few white men to live and work around Karunjie Station from the late 1920s through to the early 1960s. The security and access to consumables provide an even less satisfactory explanation when we consider the narratives of the Aboriginal residents, which recount the constant movements of sectors of the station population, seemingly at will, back and forth between other settlements and the bush hinterland.



Figure 5.4 Roping cattle at Karunji Station ca. 1940-60

There were some positive aspects for Aboriginal people within the system of rations for labour, even when that system was underpinned by coercive practices, including racially discriminatory legislation that made it an offence for them to ‘abscond’ from their employment. Droving cattle to Wyndham meant that stockmen were constantly travelling over and ‘look’em country’ and could meet up with neighbours for ceremony, since it seemed cattlemen and police did not try to suppress the operation of *Wurnan* ceremonies. There are references in the records to people regularly going ‘walkabout’ and this was an accepted part of the station routine. For some Aboriginal men and women their relationships with violent whitefellas such as Salmond, and with marginal men such as Sahanna, provided a conduit to a set of goods (particularly red cloth), which replicated some of the ritual power associated with the red ochre that had been traded from this direction since time immemorial. Allanbra also noted that the sandalwood root they carted to Wyndham wharf had a strong red colour when it was cleaned, and that it returned as ‘medicine’, which seemed to avail it of the kinds of power associated with ritual healers.

Wurnan in the Kimberley was more formal than simple ‘demand sharing’ and partially shaped the way Ngarinyin people interacted with violent intruders. When people worked for white bosses, they gained very little materially but fairly quickly established ordered kin networks with the boss through local Aboriginal women and the kind of adoption Gudurr talks about—forms of

exchange that were already familiar. Through their bosses, Aboriginal men also had access to prestige goods that were then incorporated into the *Wurnan* system, further consolidating the intersection between the two types of trade.

When they sell all that thing from here from Derby, shell from saltwater come, they bin draw em, jaguli, they bin draw, like a wanjina, some from One Arm Point and some from Sunday island all that shell come from there, from [pearling] boat. *Wurnan* give me back to Kununurra mob... we gotta pass it on to nother bloke, if he hold em some fella might talk about you, growl you...

GT: I come here for *Wurnan*...when we had *Wurnan* it start from, Pantijan country come to Gibb River then to Karunjie, nother one start from Tableland come to Karunjie, that the *Wurnan* they bin sell em they have big place there besides aerodrome, leave em in that cave there. When they come from Oombulgurri they split em out, one to Oombi, one to Fork Creek, nother one to Moonlight Valley, then Speewar station then to Doon Doon and Invanhoe station, nother mob get em from Fork Creek all the Carleton mob come and get em Mirriwung Gajerong *Wurnan* over there now. They sell em naga, red cock rag, or wool, red ochre sell em from there; that lot send em back *Wurnan* again. When that *Wurnan* come they bin spread em out to Tablelands and nother one to Gibb R[iver] then to Mt House and some to Pantijan, over, Pantijan send em straight to Derby now, they send naga, wool, sell, split em out everywhere right through, go right up, biggest *Wurnan* they bin have em, send em in cool weather, then hot time they sell all the thing all that *Wurnan*...

Jigli Edwards: I started working there in Wyndham then came back Karunjie...up and down all the time, Oombi...My father carried *Wurnan*, went from this way, Mt House, straight through to Karunjie, then to Speewar...to Munja...we had all the people from Oombi going to Mt House...Dad was running it, biggest person now...then to Ellenbrae... We used to go to Mt House...Gibb River, Father Dad carried cloth and wool for present...

People got cloth from *Wurnan* that red cloth, Father Dad carried it and hairbelt, *wanalan*, it went to Munja. After Father died, I worked on dog scalping with Edwards, help him, getting flour for damper...we used camels for carrying the things, helping in scalping dog...I met him in Wyndham that Edwards, camel bin carry tin to Munja from Wyndham, Afghans carried them to Mt House, Yulumbu, my sister rode camel, carting load. (Redmond fieldwork notes, 2008)

Through their client–patron relationship with station bosses, these Aboriginal men and women were able to travel away from the stations for long periods at the beginning of the wet season, meeting up with their bush-dwelling countrymen from neighbouring groups at the Fork Creek ceremony ground, 16 km south of Wyndham, where initiations and *Wurnan* exchanges were made. These ritual relationships appear to have quickly incorporated the Western goods that the travelling stockmen were able to purchase from Wyndham stores on the station account. This access to Western goods, and the right of safe passage they secured through their relationship to a known white boss, served to augment their power in local social and ritual worlds. Aboriginal people took what they could from an unfair exchange for their labour and funnelled the most desirable objects into their existing trade systems, injecting it with a new lease of life in the face of white domination in every other sphere. Because the *Wurnan* trade operated with some autonomy from the pastoral economy, Aboriginal people retained a control over it that they could not achieve within the labour-for-rations system.

The frontier economy's demand for Aboriginal labour provided an opportunity for some Aboriginal men and women to assert a degree of autonomy by gaining access to prized Western goods, which they then dispersed across the region as *Wurnan*. The power associated with ritual objects such as shells and hairbelts, the precursors of the new red cloth *naga*, which travelled through the Kimberley with performances of initiatory ceremonies, was seen to emanate particularly strongly from Western commodities with lustrous, colourful qualities bearing strong associations with women's sexual and reproductive power.

The emphasis in the *Wurnan* on fertility and ritual power seems to have played some role in the 'baby boom' in Aboriginal settlements across the region from 1960s onwards.⁹ Akerman (1980) reported a heightened level of *Wurnan* activity in the Kimberley in the 1970s when working Aboriginal men began to access cash wages. This seems to be an example of intensified exchange as a strategy for social reproduction in the colonial situation—a dynamic that Andrew Strathern has called 'efflorescence' (Gregory 1982:115, 166).¹⁰ By the mid-1980s, however, the *Wurnan* trade had again declined, suggesting that the ready availability of welfare and wages that had made Western commodities much easier to get eventually diminished the attraction of *Wurnan* as a means of gaining possession of highly prized objects such as cloth, dresses and *gardiya*

9 This was probably also an outcome of better diet afforded by cash wages and lower rates of leprosy, venereal disease and infant mortality as hospitals were gradually desegregated and Aboriginal people had access to better health care.

10 Here we can apply to colonial impacts on Aboriginal sharing practices a lesson from Gregory (1982:115), who, in analysing the efflorescence of the PNG gift economy under the influence of the colonial commodity economy, writes that 'the gift exchange of pre-colonial days...was very different from the gift exchange of today. Economic activity is not a natural form of activity. It is a social act and its meaning must be understood with reference to the social relationships between people in historically specific settings.'

(whitefella) tobacco. The *jaguli* continued to circulate but now in a sphere that became increasingly independent of the circulation of the desirable consumer items that accompanied them.

The operation of *Wurnan* helped sustain an uneasy accommodation between the original landholders and those who appropriated the country for cattle grazing. Even though the relationships between station bosses and Ngarinyin women sometimes started with violent kidnapping or the murder of male relatives, the networks that developed between the station bosses and local clans became assimilated to Ngarinyin expectations about the obligations of kinship. The expectations of reciprocity integral to marriage exchange helped to shape the tenor of these relationships, incorporating the alien behaviour of the intruders into a local social reality that contained its destructive effects to some extent. The exchange relationships that were an integral part of *Wurnan*, and the prestige of introduced goods that were obtainable only by working for station bosses, promoted some stability in the decades following the extreme violence of invasion. The station bosses were largely oblivious to the importance of *Wurnan*, allowing it to continue as a relatively autonomous form of governance.

While Aboriginal workers received a poor exchange materially for their labour in the north-eastern Kimberley (see also White, this volume), their access to the whitefella goods that became incorporated into *Wurnan* meant that the rations-for-work system had some positive incentives for Aborigines of which the station bosses seemed to be unaware. For decades after white settlement at Karunje, Aboriginal people maintained the prestige of a traditional system of trade, sustaining a parallel economy within a system designed to strip them of any economic power.

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