Dick Japanangka Riley,
at Ngurrantiji, September 1977.

FOR OUR FAMILIES: THE KURUNDI WALK-OFF AND THE NGURRANTJI VENTURE*

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On 11 January 1977, Aboriginal stockmen and their families who had lived and worked at Kurundi for most of their lives walked off this cattle station in northern Alyawarra country.¹ Unless they were protected by 'proper' work contracts they vowed, they said, never to work for Kurundi again. They claimed they had not been paid proper wages for years and that they were unhappy about the method of payment of their Social Security benefits. The largest of the family groups said they would 'go it alone', at a place called Ngurrantiji some sixty kilometres north of Kurundi. Subsequently, they initiated a claim under the provisions of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* for this area, a portion of unalienated Crown land that includes important dreaming sites. Ngurrantiji is, in their view, a suitable area in which to establish a 'horse plant', where they will run and break the horses they have collected during their working life on the station, as well as working gardens and tending their goats.

The priorities of the cattle industry and the programmes of government have until recently restricted the free choice of residence by

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Unless otherwise stated, I have used the standard Warlpiri (Walbiri) orthography used in the Yuendumu Bilingual Programme and, with minor variations, at the Hooker Creek school. Although this does not entirely meet the requirements of some of my material, I have chosen this orthography as it is the one which literate Warlpiri of the future will use, and as yet Warlpiri is the only language of this area being taught in the schools.

¹ Kurundi is a cattle station located some thirty miles east of Bonney Well on the Stuart Highway and fifty miles south of Tennant Creek.

Northern Territory Aborigines. Large tribally mixed populations were collected at government settlements where medical, educational and administrative facilities could be conveniently centralised. Smaller numbers of Aborigines remained as employees, with their dependents, on pastoral properties, more or less subject to protective legislation governing their wages or rations, their housing and general welfare. The decentralisation movement of the 1970s has decreased the population of many settlements as former residents dispersed to 'outstations' or 'homeland centres' on areas to which they had traditional claims and ties. Similar Aboriginal efforts at self-determination have led to 'walk-offs' from cattle stations in various parts of Australia since the second world war.²

The establishment of the new camp at Ngurrantiji required not only initiative and commitment, but also the endurance of frustration and hardship by the participants. Officers of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (D.A.A.), the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (C.A.A.L.A.S.) and the Central Land Council (C.L.C.) offered advice and support, but the idea of Ngurrantiji originated with one of the several families who camped at Kurundi. Its organisation has been in the hands of Dick Riley (about 66 years old), his brothers Murphy (about 56) and Nelson (51) and their sister Myrtle (about 58), who with their children form the core of the Ngurrantiji mob. Members of the other families who, together with the Ngurrantiji mob, comprise the Kurundi mob, have established a less permanent camp on the McLaren Creek. Still others have drifted onto nearby stations, to Warrabri or to Tennant Creek. All are free to visit at Ngurrantiji.

This account was written because they wanted their story told. I have drawn upon oral accounts by participants, discussions with Europeans who have longstanding relationships with the Kurundi people, contemporary records made while a participant in many of the events during my anthropological fieldwork in this area, and the published ethnographic material on Alyawarra and Warramunga speakers and the general literature on Aborigines in the cattle industry. The experience of the Kurundi workers and the Ngurrantiji mob is not unique. The literature on Aborigines in the cattle industry, spanning some forty years, clearly shows that certain interests have always prevented or delayed the extension to Aborigines of rights and privileges accorded to other Northern Territory workers.³

The published literature includes few references to the cattle stations south of Tennant Creek and east of the Stuart Highway ('the Bitumen'), such as Elkedra, Epenarra, Murray Downs and Kurundi, which are inaccessible for many months of the year. Unlike McDonald Downs,

² Rowley (1971:292-293) gives a brief outline of previous strikes and actions by Aborigines at Berrimah, Bagot and Port Hedland.

³ Stanner 1935, 1967; Berndt and Berndt 1946, 1948; Kelly 1966-67; Sharp and Tatz 1966; Rowley 1970, 1971; Stevens 1974; Stanley 1976.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

Else Station or the Durack holdings, these stations have been ignored by both novelist and historian.⁴ Nor do detailed studies of their Aboriginal employees' working conditions exist, such as the 1965 wage case reportage of Victoria River Downs or the economist's, journalist's and anthropologist's studies of Rosewood, Wave Hill, and Angas Downs.⁵ Kurundi is small (some seven thousand cattle graze on 2,600 square miles), and it was apparently easy to overlook the twenty to sixty Aborigines who made their home there. After 1960 Welfare Branch officers began to lodge inspection reports, but as they usually interviewed only the manager and accepted his assessment of conditions, the reports provide few clues about Aborigines' perceptions.

Kurundi Station is located in the extreme north of Alyawarra country, which extends from the Sandover River north to the Davenport Ranges. Warramunga also have an interest in this area. As one travels further north to Ngurrantiji, the country is jointly used by Warramunga and Alyawarra speakers who have worked and lived together in this area since the mid-1920s.⁶ Today, the Aboriginal population is small and relatively scattered.⁷ Aboriginal reminiscences and my own hunting and foraging experience with them confirm that game and vegetable food continue to be plentiful in this country. According to Hale, the Alyawarra speakers are a northern branch of the Aranda linguistic group.⁸ To the north they merge with the Warramunga. Indeed, the families at Kurundi and the family at Ngurrantiji are equally at home in either language. 'We are Alyawarra and Warramunga mixed', they state. Today, the Alyawarra are highly mobile, maintaining close contact with relatives on other cattle stations, at Warrabri (a government settlement housing some eight hundred persons in 1977), and with their Warramunga relatives in Tennant Creek. The alteration of their economy from semi-nomadic foraging to employment on cattle stations has meant some disruption of ritual life and an alteration of subsistence strategies, but hunting and gathering are not merely weekend picnic activities: they are important teaching experiences for children who thus acquire their parents' know-

⁴ Groom 1955; Gunn 1906; Durack 1961.

⁵ Kelly 1966-67; Hardy 1968; Rose 1965.

⁶ The mixing of these two groups is partly a result of their contact histories and partly a reflection of traditional ownership patterns in the area.

⁷ Yallop (1969:186-188) offers a tentative summary of boundaries for Alyawarra speakers and notes that the largest population concentrations are outside their traditional country. This is basically a result of employment possibilities and the location of government settlements. The best country of the Alyawarra was quickly alienated by pastoralists. Although the Ngurrantiji mob includes both Warramunga and Alyawarra speakers, I have referred to Alyawarra ethnography, as it is more appropriate to emphasize this aspect of the mob's heritage when speaking of their foraging and ritual activities, since they have not suffered such severe disruption as their northern Warramunga relatives.

⁸ Hale 1962; see also Yallop 1969:187 and 1977.

ledge of their country and its bounty.⁹ The Alyawarra are still closely connected with their traditional 'country' and organize their major rituals to coincide with the pastoral 'stand down' over the Christmas vacation, which is also the holiday period for some two hundred Alyawarra at Warrabri. Other religious duties, such as attendance at mourning ceremonies, have been difficult for station employees, and the Ngurrantiji mob specifically say that now they are their 'own bosses', they are free to attend these important rites.

Changed pastoral technology has ended the droving days, but nostalgia for the adventure and independence of that period is apparent in much of Dick Riley's reminiscence, and that of other Alyawarra and Warramunga men who recall with great pride their competence in stock camps and droving on the roads, away from the eyes of white supervisors. Indeed, Barker¹⁰ has suggested that in southeastern Australia cattle station employment has sometimes provided the best option for Aborigines whose traditional hunting grounds have been despoiled by cattle. Unlike the life of chronic unemployment on many large modern settlements, pastoral employees engage in work which they find enjoyable and where they can exercise initiative and considerable autonomy in the organisation of their daily routine. It is not yet possible to make precise comparisons of 'contact histories', but I believe that interference with the social and ritual life of the Alyawarra, and this particular group of Alyawarra-Warramunga, has not been as destructive as it has in other groups in areas with different histories.¹¹ It appears that conditions on stations in Alyawarra country have favoured the persistence of Alyawarra culture during a relatively short period of contact.¹² A spirit of independence and a desire for autonomy of action have also survived. This is not to say that the move onto the stations has not been disruptive and involved injustice and hardship, but it may help explain why some groups of Aborigines are seeking alternatives to their present life style, which involves a crippling dependence on white institutions, and others are not.

In describing and interpreting events that are the subject of this paper,

⁹ Denham (1977) and O'Connell (1977) have both worked with Southern Alyawarra whose country centres around the Sandover River. Like the Northern people they also enjoy a rich ceremonial life and food-getting strategies are still an integral part of their daily lives. Indeed, O'Connell (1977:48) estimates that hunting provided 60 per cent of the meat in the diet of the McDonald Downs residents.

¹⁰ Barker 1960:140. Although Barker's judgement is based on a rather romantic notion of the life of a drover, the observation is sound.

¹¹ The Warramunga have suffered enormous disruption of ritual and social life. This is especially true of the people around Tennant Creek.

¹² In the 1880s, the Willowie Pastoral Company took up the lease at Elkedra. The station was abandoned after an incident with the local Aborigines which convinced the manager that he was not welcome within their country (Groom 1955:59). Although there were other individual whites in the area from time to time, it was not until the 1920s that contact became regular and sustained.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

I have relied not only on the sources already mentioned, but also on my observations at many of the relevant meetings between C.A.A.L.A.S., C.L.C. and officers of the Department of Social Security with the Kurundi mob, while I was participating in the everyday activities of these people. The background of my role in the events of January 1977 and onward, therefore, requires some comment. It begins some four months earlier. My first real contact with Kurundi Station and with Myrtle Kennedy, who became one of my closest friends during my stay in the Northern Territory, occurred in October 1976. At the request of several Warrabri women, I travelled to Kurundi to provide transport for Myrtle, whose presence was necessary at Warrabri for a women's ceremony. I camped that night with the women of Kurundi, and I was struck by the gentle but firm manner in which Myrtle supervised children, saw to the performance of chores, and maintained orderliness in the camp. As we sat around a small fire, Myrtle began to sing of her country at Kurundi. After about half an hour, she turned to me to explain her obvious pride and contentment: 'Here we are together. All our families we'. This emphasis on family became a dominant theme at Ngurrantiji. It was Myrtle who taught me, laughed with me and worried for me. Her brothers talked with me and were particularly fond of my two children, especially my son, who was 'claimed' during the 1976-77 initiation ceremonies as an Alyawarra boy who would always return to the country. Many of the reminiscences which I present here were told to me during 1977 in the camp at Ngurrantiji when, typically, one of the adults was sitting in the shade of a brush shelter while dogs and children played nearby. Dick was the acknowledged 'boss' of the country, and the most prolific story teller. Nelson, the articulate political spokesman for the group, always referred me to Dick if I wanted information about traditional matters concerning land and dreamings. Nelson knew the answers, but it was Dick who had the right to tell me. Murphy would always join in once Dick had started. Murphy would speak with dry humour and throw-away lines; Dick with twinkling eyes and a laugh; Nelson with a more cynical edge; and Myrtle with her own gentle humanity. All were masters of understatement, and this is reflected in their stories. The concern for detail in these stories was brought home to me when I was talking with Nelson and Murphy in April 1977 about droving in the Northern Territory before the second world war:

Nelson said: "We would drove from here to Queensland and from here to Alice Springs. It could take months if the rains came. I remember droving Elkedra cattle once. They belonged to Johnny Driver".

"How many cattle?", I asked.

"Oh, somewhere between five hundred and seven hundred", Nelson replied.

"705", interrupted Murphy, "I counted them; Nelson only tailed them".

I did not use a tape recorder in these sessions, for there was no power at Ngurrantiji and batteries were unreliable. I took notes and wrote the complete accounts as soon as possible afterwards — on occasion, not until evening, when all the chores were done. I was later able to check details of these accounts with the storytellers. When I read their stories to them they responded with immediate pleasure and an exclamation such as: 'That is my story. I told it to you here'.

During most of November and December 1976, various members of the Kurundi mob were at Warrabri in order to participate in ceremonies or simply to visit relatives. On the day of the walk-off in January, Myrtle had asked me to drive her to Kurundi so that she could 'talk straight' with the manager about her Social Security payments. In another vehicle, Neil Westbury, D.A.A. Community Advisor at Tennant Creek, accompanied the men, who planned to discuss their wage problems with the manager. I attended meetings on 18 January at Tennant Creek and on 2 February at Warrabri between the stockmen who had walked off Kurundi and representatives of C.A.A.L.A.S., C.L.C. and the Department of Social Security. I accompanied the extended family who first moved to Ngurrantiji. Whenever any of them was in Warrabri or Tennant Creek during periods when I was working at those places, they visited me and we discussed their progress and their problems. Throughout 1977, I was never out of contact with at least one member of the group for more than two weeks.

Although the Kurundi workers have been 'covered' by various awards and regulations, the results for them have been much the same: rations but little cash in hand. Since 1911, when the Commonwealth government assumed control of the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal Ordinances have, in principle, regulated conditions of employment and the fixing of wages. But as Rowley demonstrates, the first *Northern Territory Aboriginals' Ordinance 1911*, the revised *Northern Territory Aboriginals' Ordinance 1918* and the *Wards' Employment Ordinance 1953* all assumed that Aborigines are people to be managed.¹³ Throughout his discussion of wages and conditions, Rowley is at pains to stress that although protectors may have had the power to set wages with the work permits they issued, enforcement was another thing in the frontier conditions of the Northern Territory.¹⁴ Indeed, it was even in their interest not to enforce regulations as the likely result, mass stand-downs by employers, would have overtaxed government resources.

Documentation for earlier decades is scanty, but the report of Bleakley, the Queensland Protector of Aborigines who toured the Northern Territory in 1928 (about the time that Dick Riley as a man of seventeen would have been entitled to wages), reported that the town employees

¹³ Rowley 1970:239.

¹⁴ Rowley 1970:233ff.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

were best off as they were entitled to five shillings a week.¹⁵ Three shillings was held in trust by the Department of Native Affairs and two shillings, plus clothing and food, was given to the individual worker.¹⁶ Eighteen years later, the Berndts¹⁷ reported that the better-off cattle station employees received the same wage. The Kurundi workers today speak with dry humour of the 'five shillings a week days'. Many employers maintained workers and their dependents in lieu of cash wages.¹⁸ Whether or not Aboriginal workers received provisions depended on the particular manager, his relationship with his workers and the accessibility of the station to inspection by government bodies. Writing of conditions in the 1930s, Stanner¹⁹ comments that 'In the deep bush, on the smaller, more isolated properties, almost anything went and did'. In 1935, he had protested in *The Aborigines' Protector* that rations were a right, not a privilege, for those whose country and food resources had been destroyed by cattle.²⁰ Other contributors to *The Aborigines' Protector* — Duguid, Elkin, Morley and the Berndts — wrote detailed submissions deploring the inhuman conditions under which Aborigines were forced to live on pastoral properties. The Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Association for the Protection of Native Races in the October 1936 issue of *The Aborigines' Protector* declared there was 'no cause for celebration' because 'The status and conditions under which the Australian natives have to live remain substantially what they were a hundred years ago'.²¹ In 1974, Stevens²² could still write of stations on which rations were substantially below standard. Rowley²³ speaks of the gazettal in June 1949 of the draft regulations of 1947 stating that an adult male Aboriginal pastoral worker with three years experience was to receive £1/0/0 per week. By 1957, this had been increased to £2/8/3 plus a clothing allowance of 15/0 a week. Kelly²⁴ notes that this amounted to one fifth of the wage of a white stockman. In 1948, the attempt of the North Australian Workers' Union (N.A.W.U.) to bring Aborigines under the Cattle Station Industry Award was rejected by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission on the ground that the Wards Employment Ordinance was considered sufficient protection.

The provisions of the ordinances were complex, and where book-keeping was minimal, as it was on many stations, it was difficult to bring

¹⁵ Rowley 1970:260-270.

¹⁶ Stanner (1967:41) and Berndt and Berndt (1946:11) also speak of the five shillings a week wage. This was set by the *Northern Territory Aborigines' Ordinance* of 1933 and stayed in force until the 1949 increases. See also Anonymous 1936:9-11; Elkin 1937:6-8.

¹⁷ Berndt and Berndt 1946:10-11.

¹⁸ Berndt and Berndt 1946:11.

¹⁹ Stanner 1967:42.

²⁰ Stanner 1935:16.

²¹ Morley 1936:1; see also Duguid 1936:14, Elkin 1937:6-8.

²² Stevens 1974:84-91.

²³ Rowley 1971:286-287.

²⁴ Kelly 1969:62.

charges against employers suspected of not observing the ordinances.²⁵ The patrol officer who first inspected Kurundi in 1960 refused to certify a return because he was not satisfied that the book-keeping was accurate, but no action followed.²⁶ Even in the late 1970s, Aboriginal workers on cattle stations in the Centre told me that if they were too insistent on correct pay and conditions, they might be taken to 'the Bitumen' and left to walk into town. Accurate figures relating to wages and rations received by the Kurundi workers in the past are difficult to determine from available sources. The Kurundi employees do, however, appear to have enjoyed reasonably good work relationships with most of the managers. Presumably, when the men first began working at Kurundi, they were covered by the *Northern Territory Aboriginals' Ordinance 1918-1953*, then by the *Wards' Employment Ordinance 1953*. In the report of the first Welfare Branch inspection of Kurundi, the quality of worker-management relationships was the subject of favourable comment. In subsequent reports of 1962 and 1966, similar comments were made. It was not until 1972 that wages were reported as becoming an issue.²⁷

Kurundi workers remember that 'in the 1950s' the manager would eat with them when not accompanied by other Europeans. The present manager was by all accounts reasonably well liked. Managers have always been able to blame a distant owner if promises could not be fulfilled, and it was possible for an owner to exploit the manager's good relationship with the men to keep them on Kurundi. As a manager necessarily had a financial interest in the success of the station, his popularity would also protect his own interests. About 1966, there began a contract system which operated for the mutual benefit of worker and management: a fifty-fifty sharing of the profits from the cleanskins branded and the ownership of horses broken. This scheme allowed the enterprising worker to earn more than the fixed wage of £2 established by the *Wards' Employment Regulation* of 1959. The management of Kurundi, operating in terms of the local contract system, considered themselves exempt from the conditions of the Regulation; they declared that equal wages (to come into force in 1968) need not be paid at Kurundi because the men were already receiving wages exceeding the Regulation rate. It was claimed that during the period 11-26 April 1966, eight men had each earned \$54.00 (on the basis of \$1.20 per head of cattle branded and trucked to Tennant Creek).²⁸

²⁵ As Rowley (1971:285ff) amply demonstrated, it was the station managers and owners who controlled conditions, and as the employees were illiterate and subject to restrictive legislation, protest was unlikely. Further, 'the government was in a weak position to enforce minimum conditions which it does not itself observe' (Rowley 1971:307).

²⁶ Westbury 1977 (pers. comm.).

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

FOR OUR FAMILIES

Meanwhile, the N.A.W.U., on the initiative of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council, had in 1965 made application to the A.C.T.U. to press for equal wages for Aborigines employed in the cattle industry. Opposition from the Vesteys-dominated Northern Territory Cattle Producers Council was not sufficient to prevent the inclusion of Aborigines within the award.²⁹ It did, however, delay application of the award for three years.

Presumably some version of a 'contract system' operated between 1966 and 1972, but no official inspections were made, and it is difficult to determine its effects from oral accounts. In 1972, when Aboriginal opinion was first actively sought by the Welfare Branch, workers voiced dissatisfaction. In 1973, following several extended visits, the patrol officer found that the men were claiming that there were substantial arrears in cash payments.³⁰ Why there were arrears, if there were, is uncertain. They could have resulted from a temporary shortage of funds, a directive from the owner, or an initiative of the manager. As the men are now insisting that they will not work without written and clearly set-out work contracts, it seems likely that a contract system had operated to everyone's satisfaction for a period and then lapsed. The men said they were always given money when they went into Tennant Creek and were never short of rations, but were always given some reason for not being paid in full. The only records, if any, of payments made were kept by the management.

During the 1970s, officers of the Welfare Branch felt frustrated by the manager or owner in attempting to establish direct communication with the people at Kurundi, to understand the local political structure, and to provide support for the initiatives of the people. Determining Aboriginal opinion on such matters as the contract scheme, as well as health, education or housing needs, was not made easier by the brevity of officers' visits, by the insistence of the manager or his wife on accompanying the visitor into the camp, by the absence of many men in stock camps, and the problems of a male officer approaching Aboriginal women. Many of these issues became clear after the move to Ngurrantiji, when people felt free to discuss their 'felt needs'.³¹ Both health and education officials had experienced difficulties in consulting directly with Aborigines at Kurundi. In the 1960s, the manager declared that Aborigines had no interest in setting up a school at Kurundi. In 1973, Department of Health nursing sisters were asked to leave the camp. Aboriginal women today recall this visit: after the sisters had tried unsuccessfully to rouse

²⁹ Kelly 1969:62.

³⁰ Westbury 1977 (pers. comm.).

³¹ Gray (1977:117) states that the D.A.A. in its liaison with and support for decentralized communities focusses on (a) commitment, (b) felt needs, and (c) response. However, as Hardy's (1966) account of the Kurintji walk-off and my experience of the Kurundi walk-off indicate, (b) may not be apparent or be articulated clearly in terms appreciated by European advisors until after the move has occurred.

somebody in the station house, they accepted the Aborigines' invitation to the camp and began examining the children. According to the Aboriginal women, there was a 'big row' when the manager's wife appeared, saying: 'You shouldn't be here. This is the camp', but the sisters continued their work. Kurundi women told me in 1976 that 'We want a sister to come and look at us once a month', expressing dissatisfaction with medical treatment then available. Nelson or Murphy drove any seriously ill patient to the hospital at Warrabri. Today, the people are well disposed to visits from Rural Health personnel, and one of the first requests Myrtle made after the move to Ngurrantiji was for a proper first aid kit, so that she could care for the simpler problems herself.

Education, including basic literacy for children, is now actively sought by the people at Ngurrantiji. But until they contacted parents of the potential students directly, officials of the Welfare Branch and the Department of Education were persuaded that children would run away if a school was established at Kurundi, that the children were scattered in inaccessible bush camps, and that parents actively discouraged their children from attending the 'nearby' school at Warrabri.³² In 1967, when the school-age population resident at Kurundi was estimated at fourteen, parents expressed a preference for a local school.³³ In 1976, the school-age population at Ngurrantiji was more than twenty and during the first week Myrtle began speculating about the best location for a school. At the same time, the men began worrying about access roads for teachers' caravans and the necessary water supply. Since February 1977, the Education Department has been in close contact with the Ngurrantiji people, but until the problem of a sufficient water supply for caravans is overcome, Ngurrantiji cannot have an Education Department school.

Kurundi, as with many other cattle stations in the Northern Territory, never reached the standards set in accommodation provisions of the *Wards' Employment Ordinance* of 1953.³⁴ Each inspection report echoed the same promises of improvement to the criticism that accommodation was inadequate, showing awareness that something better must be provided for the valued workers of Kurundi. But each also offered a managerial excuse for not taking action: they were waiting until after the muster, or there had been a death in the camp with subsequent problems in finding another suitable location. It was true that following a death in 1963, the people moved to Mosquito Creek, but they returned

³² Rowley (1971:305) comments on the widespread reluctance by pastoralists to establish schools.

³³ Westbury (pers. comm.). No school was established.

³⁴ Rowley (1971:309) quotes from a *Sydney Morning Herald* report that the administration had 'no intention of prosecuting pastoralists who did not comply with the housing regulations; that "policy" was to "encourage" the lessees to comply, but not to compel'. See also Lockwood 1965.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

to Kurundi within the year.³⁵ After fifteen years of criticism by Welfare Branch and D.A.A. officials, and proposals by the Aborigines about the location and type of shelter required, little had been achieved. The make-shift dwellings in the small fenced camp at Kurundi were constructed of wood frames and corrugated iron sheeting; the camp itself was distinguished only by its high standard of cleanliness and efficient organisation. This also characterises the camp at Ngurrantiji, where the shelters are now mainly constructed of bush materials which provide warmth in winter and the possibility of ventilation in summer. The camp occupies a larger area than the one at Kurundi, thus enhancing privacy and requiring one to 'visit' to talk with a relative in a nearby shelter.

It was not the problems related to accommodation, health or education which set in action the chain of events leading to the establishment of Ngurrantiji, although these problems certainly produced discontent. I believe that land was the central issue. In 1972-73, Kurundi was offered for sale. At this time, the Aboriginal stockmen began to seek assistance in implementing alternatives to living at Kurundi. All the plans involved access to a portion of land which they could control. Their first firm suggestion was to establish a horse plant at Fat Bullock Bore. They discussed the possibility of an excision from the Kurundi lease with officers of the D.A.A. However, the owner of the Kurundi lease stated that the Fat Bullock Bore was indispensable to his pastoral operation, and offered instead a square mile at the Ten-Mile Bore. There is some evidence to suggest that Nelson was persuaded by the owner and/or the manager to change his mind in favour of the Ten-Mile Bore site, a change he diplomatically expressed as a willingness to look elsewhere.³⁶ Discussion between the D.A.A. and the Kurundi people lapsed during 1974. Mainly because of the slowness of the administrative process, it was not until April 1975 that further discussions began: Albert Murphy, Kurundi Bill and Murphy Japanangka approached the D.A.A. Community Advisor resident at Warrabri to discuss the possibility of making a claim for a portion of Crown land north of Kurundi. They hoped to extend the horse mustering activities already carried out by Nelson, Sandy Nabba and Johnny Jungarrayi on Kurundi.

Although the establishment of a horse breaking plant independent of the station had been mooted before, its location had always presented a

³⁵ A popular justification for not providing permanent housing for Aborigines is that dwellings must be abandoned if an occupant dies. Although this practice is still observed, desert Aborigines are finding ways in which to overcome the problem. Houses may be vacated for a limited period, exorcised and then reoccupied by a different family. More flexible designs developed in conjunction with Aborigines will also minimize this problem. The death of Blind Annie in February 1978 did not lead to the abandonment of Ngurrantiji — the camp was merely shifted to the other side of the creek.

³⁶ Westbury 1977 (pers. comm.); D.A.A. involvement began in early 1973, after the new Labor government established the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

problem. In discussions initiated in 1975, the manager of Kurundi indicated that the owner might agree to sell the station to the government, and he offered to see the station through the change-over. The D.A.A. officer contacted the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission (A.L.F.C.) in September 1975.³⁷ Tentative negotiations were begun by the A.L.F.C. and the owner's response was to name a price of one million dollars 'walk in, walk off'. As the property was underdeveloped and in a run-down condition, this response was seen as a refusal to sell. Previous to this negotiation, the owner had displayed little apparent interest in the station and had visited it infrequently. In 1976 there were changes. The owner's son arrived to assist with the muster. The manager informed D.A.A. officials that the owner intended to pay the Aboriginal stockmen wages from the proceeds of the 1,400 cattle he expected to muster. But in mid-December 1976, the stockmen claimed that they had received only \$45.00 cash each for four months' work plus the rations they had consumed. They said they had received no holiday pay, although they knew they could receive rations if they remained on Kurundi during the stand-down period. What I have referred to as a walk-off strictly speaking began as a stand-down with the usual stand-down distribution of rations.³⁸ But the Ngurrantiji mob did not return to work, asserting that they had not been paid correctly in the past and had been given no assurance they would be paid correctly now. They are willing to do contract mustering on Kurundi or any other station in the area. Their skills are prized as they know the countryside and are talented stockmen, but, they assert, they will not work for nothing.

Sandy Nabba, the head stockman, and Johnny Jungarrayi announced that they would never again work on Kurundi, and in December 1976 moved to a bush camp on vacant Crown land nearby.³⁹ At the same time, Dick Riley and Murphy put through a road further north to the site of the present camp at Ngurrantiji, created temporary yards for their horses, and moved some of their tools and equipment there. There was no really suitable bore in the Ngurrantiji area, and the possibility of one been sunk quickly was remote, but there was water in the Ngurrantiji

³⁷ The Aboriginal Land Fund Commission is an independent body whose function is to purchase land for dispossessed Aborigines throughout Australia. Government land rights policy to 1977 has been described by the Commission chairman (Rowley 1978).

³⁸ From December to March pastoral workers in Central Australia are often stood down because the excessive rainfall of that period makes work impossible. At Kurundi, workers and their families were always provisioned during the wet, but the station did not apply for 'Pasdown', a government payment equal to the rate of unemployment benefit for employees during the wet season. Stanley (1976: 163) noted the underutilization of this scheme. In many cases, it would result in workers receiving more than they earned in wages!

³⁹ See above (page 34). While the Ngurrantiji mob went north of the McLaren Creek, Sandy and Johnny established a camp on the McLaren. Both sites had been in use, on and off, before the walk-off.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

water hole, which had been a favourite camping site in the past and a watering place for cattle travelling overland to Elkedra or Murray Downs. Ngurrantiji was also close to important sacred sites which the Japanangka and Japaljarri/Japangardi men own and maintain. Even if Ngurrantiji did not prove to be the best site in the long run for a permanent settlement, it was on their land and a place they were responsible for looking after. It would be a base, if not a permanent camp.⁴⁰

During January 1977, many of the Kurundi mob were obliged to spend time at Warrabri for a period of intense ritual and could not, therefore, attend to the organization of new camps. They were, however, able to hold many discussions with officers of the D.A.A. The stockmen and their families were concerned about their Social Security entitlements; this and their desire to 'talk straight' with the manager about wages led to the visit to the station on 11 January. The manager's wife told the D.A.A. officer who accompanied the stockmen that Social Security was not the business of the D.A.A.; following that, leading stockmen told the manager they would not work for Kurundi. The stockmen left laden with rations and some cash which could have been construed as part payment of arrears in wages. The stockmen returned to Warrabri, and a series of meetings between officers of C.A.A.L.A.S., C.L.C., Department of Social Security and the Kurundi mob were arranged. The entire Kurundi mob travelled to Tennant Creek on 18 January to meet with Jim Moore of Social Security, who explained what pension each person was receiving, the amounts involved, and to whom it was payable. The manager had previously handled all payments and, as it is possible to bank an unendorsed cheque, it was not remarkable to find that people did not know the nature of their benefit. Most of the older recipients of Social Security are illiterate; although some may be able to sign their names, some of those present did not even know to whom the entitlement was payable.

The men who had been stood down without holiday pay, and had subsequently walked off, lodged claims for unemployment benefits on 18 January 1977. Although the usual waiting period is six weeks, members of the Kurundi mob did not receive any payments until early April. Legal officers of the C.A.A.L.A.S. advised the Kurundi people not to accept any more 'handouts' from Kurundi as that could jeopardise any back wage claims which might be lodged. Since they had no resources to fall back on, and since the only other income was child endowment and old age pensions, the financial situation was grim. Furthermore, since most of the relatives they normally relied upon for support in lean times were among those who had walked off, little help was to be expected from the kinship network. D.A.A. assisted by providing Emer-

⁴⁰ One of the 'communication problems' between D.A.A. and Aborigines on outstations is whether the decentralized communities should be mini-settlements or not. The people of Ngurrantiji do not see themselves duplicating existing structures.

gency Purchase Orders (E.P.O.) for food at Warrabri and Tennant Creek, but the E.P.O.s were subject to cash repayment when the Social Security cheques arrived. This method of survival required individuals to approach D.A.A. each time they needed an order for food; it also meant there was no extra cash for tobacco, petrol, clothes or minimal luxuries. The activities of the Kurundi folk were severely limited. For example, Nelson had decided, in consultation with the others, that their first objective was to get the horses off Kurundi; but without money for petrol for their Toyota 4x4 or for extra saddles and equipment this was difficult.⁴¹

On 18 January, the day of the meeting with officers of the Department of Social Security, Phillip Toyne (of C.A.A.L.A.S.) discussed their options and future with the men at Tennant Creek. Old Albert Japaljarri, Young Johnny, Old Ned, Dick Riley, Sandy Jampijinpa, Murphy, Jerry, Henry Barnes, Robert Jungarrayi and Old Friday McLaren and Leslie Foster were there from Kurundi. D.A.A. representatives and I also participated. The men reiterated that they 'didn't know what they were working for'. Conditions and wages were too vague. They asked for legal work contracts to be drawn up by C.A.A.L.A.S. They discussed who was to blame at Kurundi: none really blamed the manager — he was 'straight', they said; it was the owner who was to blame, since he was in control. Phillip Toyne discussed the possibility of a back wage claim, the Water Resource Branch report indicating that Ngurrantiji was not an ideal bore site, and the problem of 'scab' labour. The Kurundi stockmen asserted again that they would not work at Kurundi without contracts, but they were concerned that perhaps other stockmen could be drawn from nearby stations or the Warrabri settlement to work at Kurundi.

A further meeting with representatives of C.A.A.L.A.S. was held at Warrabri on 2 February 1977. Discussion at this meeting centred on back wage claims, but the men requested that nothing be done until they got their horses off the station: they feared that someone might 'get nasty' and they would lose their horses and belongings still on Kurundi. Fifteen men expressed a desire to lodge a claim for wages against Kurundi. Of these, seven were married (six of whom have large families), six were single and two are now old age pensioners. Their claims for duration of work on Kurundi varied from sixteen years to several months. The C.A.A.L.A.S. stated its intention, if these claims were not satisfactorily met by the station, to issue a summons on behalf of the Aboriginal workers.⁴² The day after the Warrabri meeting, the men got into their Toyota, and the women and children into mine, and we drove to Alice

⁴¹ This Toyota was bought with an Aboriginal Benefit Trust Fund (A.B.T.F.) grant received in September 1976.

⁴² If the issue is resolved by judicial decision it is likely to form an important precedent. Other Aboriginal stockmen in the Northern Territory may choose to initiate legal action on similar grounds.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

Top: Frederick Michael Kennedy.

Bottom: Philip Muldoon, Mrs Muldoon, Harry Bathern, Fred Harris, Frederick Kennedy, George Hayes, George Birchmore (first manager of Kurundi).

— Courtesy of Hugh and Anita Kennedy

Top left: Myrtle Napanangka Kennedy   Top right: Nelson Japanangka
Bottom: Murphy Japanangka and the Ngurrantiji Toyota
— Photographs by Diane Bell

FOR OUR FAMILIES

Springs to attend C.L.C. meetings on 3 and 4 February. These were general meetings attended by traditional land owners from a large area of Central Australia. The Kurundi men discussed their problems with members of other groups, exchanges which they valued highly. They also heard the Aboriginal Lands Bill explained in language they could comprehend and arranged a further meeting with C.L.C. at Ngurrantiji in order to discuss details of their land claim.

In this brief summary of conditions in the cattle industry and my account of the efforts of the Kurundi workers to obtain their due, it is obvious that before the 1970s Aborigines were rarely consulted on matters affecting their lives. The brutality and injustice which Central Australian Aborigines such as Dick, Murphy, Nelson and Myrtle recount in a matter-of-fact way during casual conversation about 'the old days' were confirmed by Hugh Kennedy (the son of Frederick Kennedy, who founded Elkedra in the 1930s), who lived as a child at Elkedra. The homestead had a dirt floor, a high gable roof with no ceiling and flywire all round the house, but in spite of these conditions white table cloths and silver were used daily while his mother, Monica Theresa Kennedy, was there. In describing the freedom he enjoyed as a child (when his playmate was Donald, Old Fanny's brother), Hugh Kennedy recalled the horror he had felt at the harsh treatment of Aboriginal workers, some of whom were only a few years older than he. Beatings such as those described by Nelson (below) are still fresh in his memory. Like many of their generation, Dick, Murphy, Nelson, and Myrtle have seen cattle stations grow from nothing, and feel their contribution to the development of the cattle industry in the Northern Territory has not been recognised. They see their future in the establishment of independent communities like Ngurrantiji. Here they speak of the past and the future.

Dick Japanangka Riley:

When I was a boy I worked at Elkedra. I grew up there. We were taught the hard way. My father put me in the saddle and I just kept going until I was used to it. Bosses were different in those days; they wanted it their way and we worked from sunrise to sunset. There was no room for mistakes. Bill Riley, who gave me my name of Riley, and old man Kennedy were partners out at Powell Creek, before we moved to Elkedra.⁴³ I remember shifting all the gear along the road from the Telegraph Station, north of Tennant Creek. We then found good water at Elkedra. We walked the bullocks and had a buggy.

⁴³ According to Frederick Kennedy's son Hugh (who left Elkedra in 1939 when he was eight years old and now lives in Melbourne), Riley was a maintenance man for the Overland Telegraph Company and Kennedy, his father, was a technician who, amongst other things, maintained the radio at Hatches Creek.

When Kennedy was ill, Riley took him to Alice in an old V8. He died later in Adelaide. My sister Myrtle married the son of old man Kennedy by a part-Aboriginal woman at Elkedra. They didn't have any children, but my mother had a son by one white man, Jim Donahue. They took the boy away to The Bungalow when he was little, before the war.⁴⁴ My mother [Blind Annie] missed him. She is blind and he used to ride on her shoulders to show her the way. That's the way things were then – families were broken up. People finished up in the wrong country. We want all our family here together now in their own country.

Riley was a fair boss but hard. You always knew where you stood with him. It was the same with Birchmore at Kurundi. When we were doing stockwork we'd get 5/0 a week. Once we drove about 500 bullocks from Kurundi to Alice Springs. There was me, Peter Dixon boss man, old man Alphonso (he was young then), Johnny Kurundi, Murphy (my brother) and Derby (he's at Yuendumu now). I remember old Birchmore saying: "You fellas drove cattle from here, you'll get £1.5.0. I'll pay extra". That trip took three to four weeks, so we were given an extra week's pay. We always knew what we were working for. It's not like that now. They always keep us in the dark. We won't go back to Kurundi. We were missing out on wages, we didn't get many. I once got \$100.00. That was the highest. Poor buggers, you just got your saddle and bridle and go away. It might be two or three months before you get something. Now I'm waiting for a pension. I've worked all my life but have not been able to save up any money because we were never paid proper wages, just \$20.00 when we went into town. I reckon I'm old enough⁴⁵ to get a pension because other blokes who were boys in the bush with me are getting pensions. But they say I'll be sixty-five on July 1st, 1977, so I'll have to wait until then.

I'd like my big sons to join me and my wife, Alice, here. One of my sons and my eldest daughter and her children are already living here. My family are happy to sit down here for a while and get on with our own business. We are away from the fights and drunks at Tennant Creek; we can grow our own vegetables and live by ourselves.

⁴⁴ The operation of official policy which sanctioned the forceful removal of part-Aboriginal children from their families has left many Aboriginal adults of today with no knowledge of the identity of their actual parents and siblings. Many children were taken to The Bungalow (the Telegraph Station near Alice Springs), others to Tennant Creek and Darwin.

⁴⁵ Dick's birthday may be July 1st, 1912, but it may not. Once a birthdate is entered on Welfare cards, it is extremely difficult to change it. He may well be eligible for a pension now, but in order to challenge the records, he would need a doctor's certificate and Statutory Declarations from age mates whose ages can be verified. This is an extremely difficult, if not impossible, procedure for an Aboriginal resident of a cattle station.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

Myrtle Napanangka Kennedy:

During the war, I was married in church in Tennant Creek to Dan Kennedy, but he left me after the war. We didn't have any children, but I've 'grown-up' the children and grandchildren of my brothers.⁴⁶ All my life, I have worked in someone else's house, washing, ironing and cleaning. Sometimes I got \$30.00 for a month. I always got rations. In 1976, I began getting a 'pension' of some sort, but I didn't really know what it was for, or how much it was. The manager's wife looked after all our cheques and gave us maybe \$20.00 cash a fortnight. My old blind mother [Blind Annie] needed me to help her get around and I was tired of always doing other people's work. I wanted to sit down quietly for a while. I wanted to be able to dance for my Dreamings.⁴⁷ But my pension stopped. The manager's wife said I was running around too much. She said I would have to work for my mother's pension to make it 'a little bit easy'. I was not able to go to school because I was always working. The children here still have no school. If I had learnt to read and write, I could ask the Social Security mob about my cheques. It is too late for me to learn now, unless we had a special teacher for grown-ups. I can speak a couple of Aboriginal languages and 'hear' [i.e. understand] a few others, but I can't write letters or read papers.

Murphy Japanangka:

When I was a child I worked at Elkedra. We worked like men. There was lots of tucker but no money. We worked all day and had to do jobs properly. I remember running away several times. Once the policeman caught me and gave me a hiding with a piece of rope. I had run away from the stock camp. I learnt if I wanted to really get away I should take a horse. That way I could move faster. We used to drove from here to Alice Springs. Once when we got to Alice Springs with the cattle, the train was held up so we had to wait about five weeks for the train. We kept the horses on the flat near Jay Creek. Other cattle came in from the Top End. It was a long trip. We'd drove in the cold weather time. I still see some of the old blokes from that time around now. My father used to drove all the way to Oodnadatta. He used to tell Dick and me about how they started from Elkedra with Kennedy and Riley's cattle and went all the way South.

⁴⁶ Myrtle has taken much of the responsibility for rearing these children. In this sense, she has grown them up. Such fostering is common in large families in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.

⁴⁷ Myrtle is ritually a very important lady and certain *yawalyu* (women's ceremonies) cannot be staged without her. The pension payments ceased because certain forms were not returned to Social Security, and Myrtle did not discover the actual nature of the benefit until January 1977.

I remember the old managers at Kurundi — Birchmore, Cronin, George Crombie, Jim Matthew, Tom Barker and Richter. It was during their time I went to work at the coal mine for Kurinelli. Jack Foul was the boss then. I can remember the Army chucking away bread and apples at Barrow Creek and Muldoon, the policeman who gave Nelson and me our names.

All my life, I've worked for other people and now I want this piece of land to live on and break horses for ourselves. I'm not working for Kurundi again without a contract. We should be paid holiday money, but we got nothing. We need to look around to find a really good place to make a permanent camp where we can build proper houses. Ngurrantiji is good for now, but I don't know whether we will always camp here. We will always look after it. Until we have our horses and things off Kurundi and at Ngurrantiji, we really can't think about what to do next. We need to find out if the government will help us. We will never work for Kurundi until we have work contracts and know where we stand. We are not working for nothing.

Nelson Japanangka:

I grew up around Hatches Creek and worked for Riley as a house-boy, cutting wood and gardening when I was small. When I got older, there was plenty of work mustering, droving and breaking. I used to tail the horses and was quick as a flash. One horse fell on me and I broke my collar bone. It just healed and now I have a bump there. If I sit in one place, like driving a car, I get very stiff and sore.

Old Kennedy was 'proper cheeky'. He'd tie us to a tree with a chain or rope. One night I tried to run away from the station. I went with Mickey's brother, Two Bob, Johnny Nothing, Walter and Tommy. Henry Lalfret, the policeman from Hatches Creek, came after us. They sent two blokes on horseback to catch us. We were tied overnight to a tree. Talk about mosquitoes! Riley came up in the morning with bullock rope used to catch bullocks with. Only Walter and me got a hiding. He really laid into me. I tried to defend myself by grabbing at him, but I was too small. I reckon I was about eight. I was too busy crying to know how many times I was hit. Another time, Riley came on horseback to chase us. He had a stock-whip. He really used to get into Walter for fighting all the time. Riley was a big man. He worked at Elkedra nearly all his life.

I've worked for Kurundi with no proper wages for sixteen years. I reckon I've helped grow this place up, but we don't know where we stand with wages. We hear that there is no money from cattle, but then the owner's son comes here and uses a helicopter to muster. We want to know from the start what we are getting. He doesn't even make us sign for it. It is not the manager's fault. The owner is the

FOR OUR FAMILIES

toughest bloke. He doesn't tell you what he is going to give you. We know this country. I walked through here as a boy. It belongs to us through our fathers and grandfathers. We are not asking for handouts of rations. We want to get a horse plant going with some help like maybe a bank loan. The horses are good and we know how to work them. Our children will really have something to be proud of.

Establishment of the Ngurrantiji camp

Once they had decided to move, the family had to sort out priorities. These were discussed by men and women separately and together. They needed an economic base, as horse-breaking would not be sufficient. Some mining of local minerals could supplement their incomes. Social Security payments would be the mainstay for some time, but these had not yet arrived. The camp at Ngurrantiji could be serviced out of Tennant Creek — so close that its lights could be seen at night from the camp. It was 55 km., at least two hours' travel, to 'the Bitumen', then a further 80 km. to Tennant Creek, but a road could possibly be cut through to the north. Water was also a problem: the creek at Ngurrantiji was good, but could easily be polluted by dogs and children. They would have to look around for a permanent camp site but, for the time being, Ngurrantiji was a sensible base. A survey of water resources had indicated likely sites for bores, but the men felt they knew the country better and wanted a further survey. Schooling for their children would be a problem at Ngurrantiji: to get a teacher they needed to have an adequate water supply, but that would take at least a year. They wanted to establish gardens, but without money for seed or water, it was difficult. They wanted adequate shelter, but without money, they could not buy materials and could not afford the petrol to transport their existing shelters from Kurundi. Schooling, water, access, shelter, as well as economic base — how to allocate priorities? Where to start? Finally, they decided the only way to achieve independence was to move to the Ngurrantiji site and work out priorities from there.

On 9 February 1977, Nelson and Dorrie and their seven children, Margaret and Murphy and their seven children, Dick and Alice and their four children, with Myrtle, Johnny Kurundi, and Sandy received \$230.00 worth of E.P.O.s from D.A.A. at Warrabri, purchased food, packed and prepared to leave Warrabri. I was with them as they set out for Ngurrantiji. After dark that evening, we made camp at the half-way camp on McLaren Creek, drank tea, and then slept. The next morning, Murphy returned to Warrabri to collect more people and goods. The women cooked and washed, while Nelson and I inspected the road north and talked about the country and the future.

Murphy returned late in the afternoon, and we set off again along the new road north from McLaren to Ngurrantiji. There was rain about but not enough to affect the condition of the road. We camped that evening

at Ngurrantiji. Two shades were already erected there: one belonged to Dick and one to Murphy. Nelson slept near his vehicle. The women had a wind-break and shelter constructed the previous December, since improved and extended. Ngurrantiji is a beautiful site: a good creek, a rocky rise with caves, plenty of firewood, a high flat place to camp. That night we slept on the ground. In the morning, Myrtle woke and stretched. 'How do you feel?' I asked. 'Beautiful', she replied. That day, we explored the surrounding country, gathered some bush tucker and organised the women's camp. The men went out hunting and shot an emu. Some people remained in the camp; they discussed the problem of access roads and their financial situation. The mood of the camp was hopeful and enthusiastic.

During the week following their arrival at Ngurrantiji, Myrtle, with Nelson and Dorrie and their seven children and her mother, Old Fanny, plus Dick and Alice and her mother Minnie and her brothers Adam, Jackal, Syd and William and his wife Margaret, together with Murphy and Margaret and their six children and Old Friday McLaren camped at Ngurrantiji. They planned to have others join them. By the end of the week, a fine misty rain was soaking the camp, and more elaborate shelters were built. The men were still discussing their plans. They wanted to muster their horses, but petrol was low and they had no money to purchase more, so I suggested that we drive into Tennant Creek and request an E.P.O. for petrol. Nelson in his vehicle led the way across country which he knew on horseback but not by car, and I followed in my Toyota. This was the track they hoped to develop as an access road. It entailed crossing two wide sandy creeks and much winding between ant hills, and it came onto a network of roads on the Seismic Station controlled by the Australian National University, a restricted area. Clearly this was not an ideal access road. Permission could be granted for use on certain occasions, but it was not a road for regular use. In January 1978, the people at Ngurrantiji were still using the road which follows McLaren Creek and then heads north to Ngurrantiji.

D.A.A. did provide an order for petrol, Nelson undertaking to repay it when his Social Security benefit arrived. He returned to Ngurrantiji, while Myrtle and I went to Warrabri to collect more bedding and belongings and to discuss education needs with the head teacher there. On 14 February, we met D.A.A. personnel who had arranged with C.L.C. to join us at Warrabri and then travel to Ngurrantiji. In my vehicle, Myrtle and I took large quantities of food and the medicines we had obtained for the Community Health Centre in Tennant Creek three days earlier. As soon as we arrived at Ngurrantiji, Myrtle began treating the 'bung eyes', cutting and shampooing the children's hair and treating them for head lice, and drying and cleaning out their ears. We sat down and discussed the contents of the roughly improvised medical kit. I drew pictures on the labels to indicate dosage and purpose. Myrtle continued her

eye, ear and hair programme with the children after I left; it was so successful that when we next met in Tennant Creek in early March, all the children were free of lice as well as eye and ear infections.⁴⁸

Next day heavy rain threatened. The men showed Freddie Pepperel and John Chudleigh from D.A.A., and an old friend of the Kurundi mob, Peter Dixon, around the camp and discussed the problems of Ngurrantiji. As the storm clouds mounted, the D.A.A. party decided to leave, although the C.L.C. party had not yet arrived. Regretfully, I packed and left with the D.A.A. party. I had hoped to return next day, when my vehicle was repaired, but was isolated at Warrabri during a fortnight of rain. The Ngurrantiji mob were cut off in their camp and the D.A.A. officers could not leave Tennant Creek. We found the C.L.C. officers waiting when we returned to Warrabri, but the Ngurrantiji road would be impassable for some time. We were all stranded.

On Friday, 18 February, the Ngurrantiji mob ran out of food and began to walk into Tennant Creek. They slept five nights and walked five days in wet uncomfortable conditions. Jeffrey, aged sixteen months, was the only person carried. All the others walked, even Old Fanny, aged over seventy. Before deciding to walk into Tennant Creek, the people at Ngurrantiji assessed their situation. Myrtle told me later that she would have stayed, but they worried about the children starving. Their camp was still new and not adequately provisioned to withstand weeks of isolation from the provisions of Tennant Creek and McLaren Creek station, and it was impossible to support so large a group by hunting in such wet conditions in country long ravaged by cattle. Now they realise it would have been feasible to send a messenger for help, but in February 1977, they felt too insecure to rely on an unknown response. If they had had radio contact with Tennant Creek, this trek might not have been necessary.⁴⁹ Dick Riley gave me this detailed account of their march:

We were low on tucker. The rain was really hard on Tuesday and just kept going all week. We couldn't do much hunting. We were cold and wet and knew we'd be hungry in a couple of days. On Saturday, old Mickey decided to set out for Tennant Creek. We needed food. He was going for help. There were thirty-one of us left in the camp. Nelson, Dorrie and their seven kids; me, Alice and Bruce; Murphy, Margaret and their six kids; Minnie (Alice's mother), Alice's brothers Syd, Jackal, Adam and William and his wife; Old Friday, Mollie (Alice's sister), Amos (Fanny's nephew), Myrtle and Fanny (Dorrie's mother). [*Sunday (20 February):*] We loaded the Toyota and moved half mile down creek to higher ground. We bogged the Toyota two times. We had it loaded with our remaining food — some flour, tea, sugar, milk

⁴⁸ Health at Ngurrantiji has remained good. Myrtle excludes any visitors with scabies until their blankets have been boiled and treatment begun.

⁴⁹ The rainfall of February 1977 isolated many other communities in Central Australia, but they were able to receive food drops.

and Weetbix. We wrapped our matches and ammunition in our swags. Nelson brought his rifle, but the ammunition got wet in the end. We also had a tomahawk... We slept on a ridge, but it was cold and wet. Nelson built a bit of a humpy with a ground sheet. I had a calico, Myrtle and Fanny had a rubber sheet, Murphy had a calico.

[Monday 21 February:] It rained really hard and we only got about one and a half miles. We left the Toyota and decided to foot walk. We had tea, sugar and flour, but it was a little hard to make a good fire. We just put hot water onto the flour and ate it that way. We ran into another storm. Alice and I went a different way to dodge the water. Myrtle said: "Let them go, we'll walk this way". She was walking with old Fanny all the way. When we camped, Nelson came across to find us before dark. We were on the other side of the water. We followed the Yilariji Creek to where it joins another creek. From there on we only had to cross a big creek to get to Tennant. That part took us two days.

[Tuesday 22 February:] It didn't rain so much on Tuesday and we were able to camp on the flat. We managed to travel about seven or eight miles. We were following the creek and looking for a good place to cross. We still had a little bit of tea, flour and sugar. We began crossing the flooded creek. It was four feet deep in places and fifty yards across. One of Nelson's dogs was swept downstream and he chased it for 150 yards. Murphy and Nelson worked with a stick to get everyone across the water. It was running fast. It was up to my waist. We tied everyone up to pull them across. The children went first. Bruce carried little Jeffrey, Dorrie and Nelson's baby. The water was strong and some of us were weak ones. Especially Old Fanny. We crossed Morgan Creek too, but it wasn't so wide, but we still had to help the little ones across. Nelson lost one boot that day and Alice lost the other one for him later. Jonah had lost his hat on Tuesday. We ate some Weetbix and milk, when we got across. I was chewing tobacco all the way and Old Fanny reckons she got drunk on it. Nelson says he ran out.

[Wednesday 23 February:] We made it to Murtalki Bore this day. Some of us left our swags there. Nelson came back for his but I think mine is still there. Murphy kept his till the next day. They were all wet and not much use. We were getting tired. We started getting bush berry and sugar bag [honey from tree trunk], once we crossed the creek. It was okay for us. We would keep going but we worried for the children. We saved some flour and milk for them. Minnie's boys, my brothers-in-law, decided to push on ahead of us. They didn't know this country but they had seen the lights of Tennant Creek from Ngurrantiji and headed for that. They took a short-cut through the bush. They camped at Nobles Nob on Thursday and got into Tennant on Friday. Some people at Nobles Nob helped them out with food.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

[*Thursday 24 February:*] We camped the night in Warramunga country. We got up really early in the morning and Nelson and Old Friday went on the two miles to the house at the Seismic Station. They hoped to get some tobacco or food. No one was there. We felt we have to keep walking. Bruce was sick that day. Myrtle had brought some of the medicine she and Diane got in Tennant Creek so we rested and gave him some medicine. He had been vomiting but got better. We ate sugar bag and felt better. We were not sick, just weak. Myrtle said the men travelled harder than the women because they are usually on horseback. Nelson had a limp for a while.

[*Friday 25 February:*] In the morning about nine o'clock, we met Old Mickey. He had tucker with him. We just sat on the side of the road and ate it. We kept going and got past Nobles Nob almost to Pekko Mine. D.A.A. arrived with mobs of tucker — fish, meat, bread, tea and sugar. They went back to get another car and took two trips for us all to get into Tennant Creek. Me, Murphy and Nelson waited until last. We just sat down in Tennant Creek for a while after that. First at the Village and then we moved camp to the east side.

Of the consequences of the trek and their stay in Tennant Creek Dick Riley said:

We were without our vehicle for some time and still had to get E.P.O.s for food. Freddy Pepperel from D.A.A. tried to help us get the car out [the car became bogged the day after the group left Ngurrantiji for Tennant Creek], but the road was too boggy. Warrabri was also cut off all this time. We tried lots of times to get that car. We wanted to get back. D.A.A. helped us. In March, we finally managed to get the Toyota out of the bog at Ngurrantiji. We brought back some of our gear to Tennant Creek. We were still waiting for our money. We want to live again at Ngurrantiji, but the D.A.A. say maybe it is not such a good place.

The heavy rain of February 1977 and the delay in receiving unemployment benefits were disruptive. The people stuck, nevertheless, to their plan to get their horses to Ngurrantiji. I visited the Ngurrantiji mob on 11 March 1977 in Tennant Creek and suggested to Myrtle that she act as Health Worker for the trachoma programme to begin the next week.⁵⁰ Myrtle and I spent several days in Alice Springs at a training course and Myrtle earned \$100.00 a week for the three-week programme. This was the first cash that a member of the group had received. While in Alice Springs, we discussed the problems facing the Ngurrantiji mob with

⁵⁰ During 1976 and 1977 teams led by Professor Fred Hollows, an ophthalmologist of the University of New South Wales Medical School, treated large numbers of Aboriginal and white people in the Northern Territory. Their three-week trachoma treatment scheme in this area offered employment and training for local Aboriginal people as Health Workers.

officers of the C.L.C., C.A.A.L.A.S. and certain other people sympathetic to the problems of the Ngurrantiji people. Several members of the Quaker Race Relations Committee⁵¹ were taking part in the trachoma programme, and they suggested that we ask for financial assistance from their organisation. I wrote a brief history of the walk-off and sent it to their office, and two weeks later, a cheque for \$100.00 with promises of further support came from Sydney. The Quaker response delighted the people of Ngurrantiji. Officers of the C.L.C. visited the Ngurrantiji mob on 28 March 1977 in Tennant Creek; they discussed with them plans for the future, and arranged to visit Ngurrantiji after the people returned to their camp. In late March 1977, the Ngurrantiji people returned to the task of establishing their settlement.

When I went to Canberra in January 1978, they were still at Ngurrantiji. Officers of the C.L.C. had visited and begun the work of documenting their claim to the land there. Individual vegetable plots were well established; their shelters had been improved; the camp had been cleared and was swept regularly. The camp arrangement had become more complex: special areas were set aside for vehicle repairs (undertaken by Nelson, a skilful mechanic), gardens, meat storage, and goat and horse paddocks. Myrtle had walked goats across from McLaren Station. Goats, like gardens, required constant attention, and in August 1977 Dick and Murphy had brilliantly improvised a drip irrigation system using a 44-gallon drum, which allowed the gardeners some relief from watering their plots. Watermelons have been grown with great success, and tomatoes, sweet corn, pumpkins and beans were grown by individual families for their own consumption. There was no surplus. Some supplies are purchased in Tennant Creek, and meat is obtained from McLaren Station when kills are made, and from hunting: the proportion varies according to season, other commitments and availability of vehicles. Gardens, goats, hunting and gathering wild foods are all important components of the evolving life style at Ngurrantiji. Ngurrantiji has now become a permanent camp, but there is still the possibility of establishing other centres close by. At present, there is a 'halfway camp' on the McLaren River which is comparable to Ngurrantiji in its essential features and resources, but is closer to Kurundi and 'the Bitumen'. The people at Ngurrantiji hoped that other members of their families now living at Warrabri, Tennant Creek and nearby stations would join them. The men especially wanted Albert Murphy, Old Long Jack, Murphy's son Ronnie, Nelson's son Teddy, Albert's son Alfie, Old Ned, Leslie Foster, Young Johnny and Edward. The men have removed all their horses from Kurundi, placing them in well constructed yards at Ngurrantiji, but they had only one saddle of their own and one they had borrowed from Mr. Cluff at Epenarra.

⁵¹ This Sydney-based committee of the annual meeting of the Society of Friends represents the Society in race relations issues.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

When I was able to make a brief return visit in July 1978, I found much progress had been made. Current plans for development reflect their improved economic situation, since the Ngurrantiji mob had received a \$27,000 Relocation Grant which is managed through the Tennant Creek D.A.A. office. Nelson and John Chudleigh had made a trip to Alice Springs in March 1978 to price and inspect the kinds of equipment the community might purchase, and after a full discussion, the people had bought two fifteen cubic foot freezers, a tractor and trailer, two chain saws, two lighting plants, a three-point rotary hoe, a water tank, pump and motor, and various gardening tools. In addition to their Toyota, they now have a five-ton Dodge truck, financed by an A.B.T.F. grant.

The character of the camp had undergone a subtle change. Following the death of Blind Annie on 6 February 1978, the camp was moved to the west side of the waterhole, where new shelters were constructed. In deciding the uses of their grant, the Ngurrantiji mob used their own priorities, not those of white advisors. When I asked about the purposes of three concrete-block sheds being built to the Warramunga Housing Association design, the people told me they had always been able to provide shelter for themselves, but tractors, saddles and freezers needed the white man's kind of shelter: thus, one shed was for the tractor, one for equipment, and the third for food storage. With their new equipment, they have been able to cut and grade a new and shorter access road which meets the Stuart Highway a few miles north of Kelly's Well. Improvements to the water supply are under way: a tank is to be erected on the ridge above the creek (which still contained good drinking water when I visited). New gardens are planned, but instead of the individual plots of 1977, they intend to plough a larger area on the site of their old horse yards. They expect to expand their horse-breaking work and contract mustering.

The homeland movement in the Northern Territory is indeed the beginning of a new era of economic relationships between black and white Australians. In the 1930s and 1940s there were fears that a falling Aboriginal birth rate would mean a shortage of labour in the cattle industry.⁵² But the Aboriginal population is now young and rapidly increasing, and the problem today is that of massive unemployment, largely due to technological changes in the cattle industry. Distribution of rations has been replaced by payment of Social Security benefits directly to individuals. But groups such as the Ngurrantiji mob, and others as far apart as Papunya and Yirrkala, are expressing more than a desire to find economic security on outstations or homeland centres. In many cases, the cash income per head is lower on outstations than on

⁵² See Stanner 1935:17; Berndt and Berndt 1948:16.

settlements, where some paid work is available. Trends now emerging indicate that Aboriginal priorities, preferences, and approaches to planning their future may differ substantially from those articulated by white administrators. Both Doolan's⁵³ account of events on pastoral properties in the Victoria River District in 1972-73 and Gray's⁵⁴ analysis of trends in the decentralisation movement in Arnhem Land reveal similar motives in the establishment of independent communities: all of these groups desired opportunities to live on their own land and make their own decisions. Obviously, this movement requires some financial assistance just because few Aborigines have been able to accumulate cash savings during their working lives. A flexible approach to Social Security payments is also necessary. Rowley⁵⁵ has argued that contact with the cash economy has in fact limited economic choices for Aborigines. But the homeland movement, if given the kind of support advocated by Doolan and Gray, will expand their opportunities. The Kurundi walk-off and the establishment of Ngurrantiji obviously has much in common with the 1966 walk-off by the Kurintji (Gurindji) and the subsequent establishment of Dagaragu (Wattie Creek). In both it is evident that the Aboriginal participants established their own priorities and stated these clearly.

During the years of pastoral boom the false notion of the 'slow worker' was current, and it was claimed the Aborigines should not be paid a full wage because it took three to do the work of one European.⁵⁶ However, as the Berndts and Kelly⁵⁷ document, Aborigines have always been essential to the Northern Territory cattle industry. Their superior knowledge of the terrain and their ability to handle animals were prized work skills. What was often exploited was their attachment to a particular portion of land. It was generally assumed that if an Aboriginal stockman remained on a station, he was content. But Aborigines employed under conditions they find far from ideal will remain if they are in their own 'country'. To take work in another 'country', even if it is the only work available, is rarely viewed as a real option. Working on Kurundi meant that men and women were able to move about their country and look after it properly. This is the centre of dog dreaming country; a little to the north of the station is the pile of stones that shows where the dog had its pups; a red cliff nearby is the place where the dog's brains were splattered. Such sites are sign and symbol of the central truths of their religion; such knowledge is their heritage and its maintenance is their major obligation. Aboriginal workers' reluctance to leave a station or to agitate for improvement in conditions must be

⁵³ Doolan 1977:106ff.

⁵⁴ Gray 1977:114ff.

⁵⁵ Rowley 1971:217.

⁵⁶ Rowley 1971:313ff.

⁵⁷ Berndt and Berndt 1946:9; Kelly 1966-67:9.

FOR OUR FAMILIES

understood in terms of their religious beliefs and duties.

The economic downturn in the pastoral industry during the 1970s has encouraged employers to assert that economic viability depended on cheap labour. Negotiation for equal wages has been tedious and non-productive for most Aborigines, and years of unfulfilled promises have left most workers somewhat cynical about government, union and other interventions. They expect to be exploited by pastoralists, whether the industry can support equal wages or not. In forming homeland centres, Aborigines are expressing their frustration with the leisurely pace of legal action, and asserting their ties to their land and their desire for privacy, family unity and control of their own affairs. They have shown that they can and will utilise their own resources and initiative to form their own camps, where they can develop a new life style that embodies features of the cash economy but is governed by their own value system. The move from Kurundi expressed many of these considerations. It was in part an industrial action against one station, but it expressed the shared wish of the families there to establish themselves in an independent camp with some autonomy, a move which had been thwarted before. A number of camp sites on station land could have been chosen, but in view of their past failure to negotiate successfully with the management, they decided to move onto vacant Crown land a reasonable distance from Kurundi. The D.A.A. now considers Ngurrantiji a successful venture; the people themselves are proud of *their* new beginning.

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