4. Camels and the Transformation of Indigenous Economic Landscapes

Petronella Vaarzon-Morel

Introduction

Over the past hundred or more years camels (*Camelus dromedarius*)—at once symbols of mobility and of domestication—have figured prominently in Indigenous socioeconomic landscapes. As ‘animal powered transport’ (Kennedy 2005), they have played a pivotal role in the colonisation of desert Australia and in the development of the settler economy (Blainey 1966; Kennedy 2005). They have also had a part to play in the incorporation of Indigenous people into the encapsulating society. Due to the suitability of camels to the arid conditions of Central Australia, European explorers, Muslim cameleers, pastoralists, missionaries, doggers, police, anthropologists and miners, among others, used camels to variously penetrate, transport goods across, survey and expand the settler frontier. Often Indigenous people were involved in these ventures. Reflecting on the role of camels in Australia from a Western economic perspective, McKnight wrote that ‘in no other extensive portion of the world, except where there was landward dispersal into adjacent and contiguous regions, have large numbers of exotic cameloids become sufficiently adapted to play a major role in economic development’ (1969:130).

Yet, as McKnight notes, their contribution to development was ‘short-run’. In the 1920s motor vehicles began to replace camels in the transport industry, and thousands of camels were progressively released to range free in the bush (Edwards et al. 2008; McKnight 1969). Gradually, camels were incorporated into the domestic economy of the Pitjantjatjara and some neighbouring groups in the eastern Western Desert. Commenting on this phenomenon in the 1960s, McKnight wrote that ‘some natives of central Australia have, apparently with a minimum of cultural dislocation, assimilated the camel into their way of life’ (1969:131; see also Rose 1965). Less than a decade later, however, Indigenous people were to gain access to cars and abandoned the use of camels for transport (Layton 1986:80; Peterson 2009). Since that period some Indigenous people have taken up new economic opportunities afforded by the growth of the feral camel population and camel tourism.
While there has been renewed interest in the role of Muslim cameleers in the settler economy (for example, Jones and Kenny 2007; Rajkowski 1987; Stevens 1989), surprisingly, with the exception of the sources mentioned earlier, information on Aboriginal people’s interactions with camels is scant. Yet camels are bound up with transformations in Indigenous socioeconomic, moral and ecological landscapes in significant and complex ways. Moreover, these multi-layered linkages have ramifications for the economic utilisation and management of feral camels today. It is thus important to have a better understanding of Aboriginal relations to and with camels on the settler frontier than has been the case to date.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the changing nature of Indigenous people’s engagements with camels in Central Australian economies. My primary focus is the eastern Western Desert. Combining anthropological and historical perspectives, I draw on recent research (Edwards et al. 2008; Vaarzon-Morel 2008) as well as secondary and archival sources to show that the socioeconomic history of Indigenous people’s engagements with camels is more varied and complex than has been documented to date. In doing so, I seek to problematise approaches that neglect or oversimplify the role played by introduced animals in Indigenous–settler relations in Australia.

Following a brief overview of relevant research, I examine Western Desert people’s responses to camels during the early contact period. I then consider Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people’s use of camels during the transition to mission and pastoral stations, before discussing incipient engagements with the camel market economy during the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, I briefly address recent proposals to facilitate Indigenous economic involvement in the management of feral camels today. The chapter is exploratory in character and suggests further avenues for research.

History of Research

Inspired by Murphy and Steward’s 1955 paper on cultural change among Mundurucu Indians in Brazil and Algonquians in Canada,1 Gould et al. published a paper in 1972 comparing the history of the Western Desert Indigenous economy in Australia with that of Indians in the Great Basin of North America. They argue that, since contact, both of these hunting-and-gathering desert societies had ‘followed a pattern of economic acculturation characterised by increasing dependence on European food and goods’ (1972:265). In the case

---

1 The paper followed a line of anthropological inquiry into human interactions with fur-bearing animals and the relationship of these to territorial organisation, property and economy (see, for example, Leacoc 1954, 1955; Nadasdy 2002; Snow 1968).
of Australia, they conclude that, unlike the Mundurucu and Algonquians, who, respectively, sold or bartered rubber and beaver pelts (1972:266), Western Desert people did not establish a viable relationship to the world economy because they lacked goods to sell or exchange (1972:265, 278). As part of their supporting evidence, they discuss ‘Pitjantjatjara-speaking’ (1972:266) people’s reactions to introduced camels. Ignoring the earlier work of Rose (1965), they claim that these Aborigines simply hunted camels as they did native species. In their view, hunting camels involved nothing more than the ‘application of new materials to traditional methods of exploiting available resources’ and could not be considered a genuine adaptation (Gould et al. 1972: 265, 278).

In 1962 Fred Rose conducted research among Pitjantjatjara people at Angas Downs cattle station to the south of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. He found that Pitjantjatjara people used camels extensively for their own transport. Employing a Marxist materialist perspective, he argued that the use of white flour and the utilisation of camels for transport had ‘completely changed the relations of production between the sexes inside the family’ (Rose 1965:99). Furthermore, he speculated that the use of camels had contributed to the demise of polygyny because men no longer required women to carry food, children and belongings. Unlike Gould et al. (1972), Rose regarded Pitjantjatjara society as dynamic and adaptive, but thought that the traditional economy was undermined by the appropriation of new techniques.

Shortly after Rose’s book appeared, the geographer McKnight (1969) briefly addressed the topic of Indigenous people’s use of camels in his landmark history of camels in Australia. On the basis of a survey of European pastoralists, he concluded that while Indigenous people primarily used camels for their own travel they also employed camels in other enterprises such as sandalwood gathering (in Western Australia) and tourism activities (for example, at Uluru). Camels, he said, were ‘valuable chattels’ that ‘greatly enhanced their owner’s mobility’ (McKnight 1969:99). In fact, as I indicate later, from the Pitjantjatjara perspective, camels were not merely moveable possessions but actors with whom the Pitjantjatjara formed sentimental relationships. Sandall and Peterson captured some aspects of the Pitjantjatjara people’s use of camels in their 1969 film, Camels and the Pitjantjara. The film documents the catching and domestication of a wild camel in the sandhills near Wallara Ranch north of Angas Downs. It then follows a group of people, who had independently hired camels from a Pitjantjatjara man known as Captain, as they travel with the camels from Areyonga to Papunya.² Layton (1986) also documented aspects of Indigenous people’s use of camels. In doing so, he criticised Gould et al.

---

² I thank Nicolas Peterson for this synopsis.
for failing to acknowledge that not only had people mastered camel husbandry techniques and used camels for their own purposes but they had also worked as camel guides for the anthropologist Mountford and others (Layton 1986:80). Apart from these sources, however, information on Indigenous people’s engagements with camels in the settler economy is fragmentary. The general impression given is that while Muslim cameleers played a crucial role in the development of the economy, Indigenous people’s use of camels in the process was unimportant (see, for example, McKnight 1969). The historian Bulliet, for instance, claimed in *The Camel and the Wheel* that ‘[i]n Australia the Aborigines took to using camels very slowly and played a relatively small role in their history’. ‘What the American Indians would have done with the animal’, had it become established in America, he surmised, would be ‘another matter entirely’ (1990:254).

I now want to explore Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people’s interactions with the animal, focusing primarily on the period prior to the 1970s, when Indigenous people generally ceased using camels for transport. First, however, I situate Indigenous and settler use of camels in the context of the Western Desert environment. For the sake of brevity, in what follows when I refer to Pitjantjatjara people I also include Yankunytjatjara.

**The Western Desert: A country for nomads**

**The Pitjantjatjara and their Environment**

The Western Desert is characterised by low and unpredictable rainfall, with often extensive periods of drought. At the onset of European colonisation Aboriginal hunters and gatherers moved from place to place in search of water and food (Gould et al. 1972; Keen 2004). During summer people gathered at more reliable waterholes, then, following summer rains, people dispersed into small groups. As people had no domesticated animals that could be used for transport, they travelled on foot (Keen 2004:84, 88). The availability of food varied according to rainfall and, to some extent, the season, and production was organised on the basis of a division of labour according to gender (see Keen 2004).

Reflecting the pressures of the environment, Western Desert local territorial organisation was flexible and people’s kin networks were extensive and dispersed (Keen 2004; Peterson 1976; Strehlow 1965). People married partners from countries distant to their own, which meant that they were able to

---

3 See Keen (2004) for a detailed description of Pitjantjatjara economy and practices.
establish ‘relations of production and access to land within a larger ecological region’ (Myers 1986:71; see also Hamilton 1979:47). This was critical in a region where people could not subsist for long in one place. In relation to the Pintupi, Myers (1986:71) pointed out that ‘mobility of individuals is a primary feature of the social structure’. Furthermore, he stated that it is important to recognise ‘the spatial component of production in hunting and gathering societies, rather than envisioning the organisation of productive roles as reflecting only the division of labour by sex’ (Myers 1986:71). These observations broadly apply to the Pitjantjatjara people in the eastern Western Desert. While their patterns of movement and exploitation of land changed following colonisation, mobility remained an important feature of their economy, with camels playing a significant role.

European Settlers

From a pastoral perspective, the eastern Western Desert and fringing area are marginal. Lack of water and fertile land and remoteness from the main transport routes meant that the region was not taken up for cattle stations until the railway was extended from Oodnadatta in South Australia to Alice Springs in 1929. The main economic enterprises that Europeans carried out in the area were sheep farming and dogging, which, as Rowse (1998) points out, were also both somewhat nomadic. The use of camels was pivotal to European developments in the region (Rose 1965). Camels are able to survive in arid conditions where horses and donkeys perish (Kennedy 2005). Not only can they go for a considerably longer period without access to surface water but they are also able to eat most of the native plant food that is available, including plants that will poison cattle and horses (Edwards et al. 2008). Moreover, pack camels are able to haul twice the weight of goods per day that horses are, and in draught work fewer camels are needed than horses to haul loads (Kennedy 2005:28).

Early Indigenous Encounters with Camels

Camels were not the first animals associated with Europeans to leave their imprint upon the Western Desert cultural landscape. Once the advantages of camels became known, however, many early explorers of Central Australia such as Warburton (1872–73), Gosse (1873), Giles (1875–76) and Lindsay (1885–86 and 1891–92) (see Jones and Kenny 2007:48; McKnight 1969:27–30; McLaren 1996) used camels to travel through the region, as did the stream of surveyors and prospectors who followed in their wake. In 1844 Cawthorne recorded the reaction of Aboriginal people in the Flinders Ranges to their first sighting of a camel. He noted: ‘They saw a huge monster, to them it was an incomprehensible
monster, it was at last concluded to be “white fellow’s Emu” (Cawthorne 1844, quoted in Foster 1991:59). What, then, was the initial effect of camels on Western Desert people?

Western Desert stories of first encounters with camels and horses tell of the fear people felt at the sight of the strange animals and how, gradually, they came to grips with their bizarre form (see, for example, Richards et al. 2002:56–7, 71–5). After their initial shock, people sought the measure of the animals by observing how they moved through country and interacted with others. For example, Andy Tjilari, a Pitjantjatjara man, saw his first camels and a horse when a European came in search of dingo scalps. At the time Andy was a child camping with his family. He recalled: ‘While we were camping there we saw them arriving and we ran away in fear thinking...“What is this that has arrived?” We were very frightened and ran away’ (Tjilari 2009). After being given gifts of food, Andy ‘followed them and became familiar with the camels and the horse. We were all the time talking to the horse as though it was human but we were unable to talk to it so that it would talk back to us. We were saying: “This horse is ignorant.”’

Although many Western Desert people adopted the European term for ‘camel’, they also coined new names that referred to the animal’s unique physical attributes and behaviour. For example, a Kukatja word for camel is murtitikilpa, which means literally ‘knees bump together’ (Valiquette 1993:123). As the diaries of explorers and prospectors attest, camels had a profound impact on the water supplies of the local people, and the camel’s capacity to drink enormous quantities of water at one sitting instilled apprehension in people. According to Hilliard (1976:57), by the 1880s Pitjantjatjara people knew that camels emptied waterholes, and people frequently avoided contact with European travelling parties or attacked them with spears (see also Basedow 2008:95). On occasion, local people were run down, captured and forced to lead the strangers to water (Gould 1969:45; Hilliard 1976). Lacking guns, and not having the advantages of height and speed afforded to a pursuer on camelback, the Pitjantjatjara soon accommodated the strangers’ presence. When Basedow travelled through the region in 1903, he noted that ‘the deadly effect of firearms was generally known’ (Basedow 2008:41). People’s reactions to camels clearly varied, however, depending on the circumstances. For example, Basedow (2008) described people fleeing from camels and pestering them as they grazed. Yet he also wrote that the camel was an ‘object of admiration and respect’ and that it was ‘the ambition

---

4 Interestingly, Aboriginal people’s reactions to the camel—interpreting the unknown in terms of the known—resonate with those of the Romans when Julius Caesar first introduced the giraffe to Rome. In trying to understand the radical otherness of the giraffe, the Romans concluded that it resembled ‘a mixture of camel and leopard’ and they called it a ‘camelopard’ (Belozerskaya 2006:108), which is the origin of the scientific name used today: *Giraffa camelopardalis*.

5 I thank Peter Sutton for alerting me to this example as well as the Flinders Ranges example mentioned earlier.

6 See Kennedy (2005:71–6) for a discussion of the role of the horse in European settlement of Australia.
of the native youth to have the privilege of a short ride upon the hump of a camel, although he is quite unaccustomed to that kind of locomotion' (Basedow 2008:41–2).

The tracks camels made were also an object of fascination: while a single camel has a light footprint, a string of camels leaves a distinctive trail on the ground. Over time, as explorers and others followed camel pads in search of water, the trails became travel routes connecting the outside world with the people of the region. The early integration of the camel and its tracks into Pitjantjatjara artforms such as paintings in rock shelters, as observed by Mountford and others, illustrates that camels made a lasting impression on people and their country. Mountford recorded cave paintings with images of camels at Waliny (Cave Hill) during his camel trip to the Musgrave and Mann ranges in 1940. The camels are depicted in various poses, some with riders, some in strings and one with waterbags (Mountford 1976:67–9, 74). Intriguingly, a drawing made by an elderly Pitjantjatjara woman depicting the Seven Sisters Dreaming track at rockholes in the Musgrave Ranges also depicts the track of Mountford’s camel string through the area (Mountford 1976:477, 480).7

Camels were not, however, merely a matter for inscription. Contemporary Indigenous oral histories of early encounters with stray camels describe the camel being killed for its meat and eaten. Killing a camel was not easy: unlike native animals, camels are extremely large and can be aggressive, particularly a bull camel in the mating season or one under attack. As a Ngaanyatjarra man explained, the method of killing required an adjustment to customary methods and involved a combination of spearing and clubbing: ‘They speared it in the leg first. When it sat down they would come and hit it with a stick on the neck and the head—many times until it died. Then they would skin it, cut it and cook it’ (D. Brooks, Personal communication, 24 August 2008).

Being a newcomer to the Western Desert cultural landscape, camels had no local Dreaming or associated food taboos.8 Although, depending on context, particular cuts of meat may be shared with particular kin, the sheer abundance of meat on a camel means that it can sustain many people beyond the set of relatives normally taken into account in the customary distribution of smaller native game such as kangaroo. While there were few stray camels in the early part of the century (see Basedow 2008:106), they increased over time. This was particularly the case when they were replaced with motor vehicles and released

---

7 Kenny (2007:174) has pointed out the importance of attending to how Aborigines symbolically perceived European animals during the early contact period. This is a complex topic that I can only partly address in this chapter.

8 Interestingly, Altman (1982:280) found ‘no taboo restrictions’ on buffalo meat in north-central Arnhem Land. His informants attributed this to the fact that there was ‘no business’ associated with buffalo and to its large size.
into the bush. Once Indigenous people began using camels as pack animals, however, camels tended to be eaten only if people were exceptionally hungry or if a camel became hopelessly bogged in a claypan following rain. In addition to the flesh being consumed, other parts of the camel were also utilised. For example, the fat from the hump of the camel was mixed with bush plants such as *irmangka irmangka* (an *Eremophila*) to make a bush medicine for the treatment of aches, pains and coughs, and camel hair was spun into string to be used in ritual. As I discuss later, people are increasingly eating camels today.

**Working with Camels**

Contrary to Gould et al.’s claims (1972), Western Desert people did not simply hunt camels. From the beginning of European exploration until the extension of the railway, both Muslim cameleers (hereinafter referred to by the historically commonly used term ‘Afghans’) and Europeans used Indigenous people in camel work. Invariably, the work did not just involve camel handling, but also other services. Camel work included unloading, hobbling and searching for stray camels, as well as guiding people through country, locating water and acting as go-betweens and translators with local people. Station lessees, doggers, police, missionaries and anthropologists all employed Indigenous people as cameleers. While at first Indigenous people worked with camels owned by Afghans or Europeans, over time—especially from the 1930s onwards (McKnight 1969:27)—a small but significant number of men acquired their own camels, which they sometimes hired out for transport along with their own services as guides.

Some Indigenous cameleers were of mixed descent and had been recruited by Afghans and Europeans at settlements such as Oodnadatta and the Alice Springs Telegraph Station.9 For example, Dick Gillen was ‘camel boy’ for Plowman and Partridge of the Australian Inland Mission between 1914 and 1919 (Grant 1989; Plowman 1933a, 1933b). In this role, he acted as camel handler and guide for the travelling padres who ministered to white settlers at mining fields, cattle stations and towns along the Overland Telegraph Line between Oodnadatta and Tennant Creek (Grant 1989).

It is difficult to estimate the numbers of Indigenous people engaged in camel work at any one time. Most activity occurred on the margin of European settlement, and the names of Indigenous people who worked with camels were often not recorded; explorers’ journals and books written about the colonial period tend to refer to them simply as ‘Aboriginal boys’. While cattle stations and missions did record employees’ names, work such as camel shepherding

---

9 See also Ford (1975) and Kimber (1986).
was often subsumed under the generic terms ‘stockwork’ or ‘labour’. The task of estimating numbers is also complicated by the fact that much camel work was multi-locale and sometimes resulted in the migration of a person to a distant region. I will now briefly consider the varieties of camel work in which people were engaged.

Learning from Afghans

Although I cannot develop the matter here, there was frequent social interaction between Indigenous people and Afghans along the telegraph line from Alice Springs to Oodnadatta. Jones and Kenny note that exchanges ‘occurred at every level’ and included material objects such as sugar, tea and pituri, as well as knowledge of country and, importantly, camel husbandry skills (2007:111). Intermarriage and sexual relations were also common (see, for example, Hercus 1981; Rajkowski 1995; Stevens 1989). As Simpson (2000) has shown, Afghan–Aboriginal interaction around camels also resulted in ‘the spread of features which became markers of Aboriginal pidgins and creoles’.

By the 1930s some Indigenous people had taken up work with Afghan cameleers in the freight-hauling industry, using pack and draught camels. For example, John Kemp from Finke told me how his grandmother was working with Afghans, carting loads to Hermannsburg, Tempe Downs, starting off from Marree, Oodnadatta and Finke. Then my mother joined in—hard work. Follow the feed, water; long way between bores. I used to muster up the camels. We had five camels and they pulled a cart...I grew up with them. (Quoted in Vaarzon-Morel 2008)

To take another example, Pompey Douglas, who was affiliated with the Uluru area, learnt to drive camels for Afghans when his family moved to the railhead at Oodnadatta (Layton 1986:63). There, his father, Paddy Muruntu, worked as a ‘camel boy’, initially for Afghans then for Europeans. Interestingly, Paddy was an informant for anthropologist A. P. Elkin in Oodnadatta in 1930, and later, when Paddy returned to the Pitjantjatjara lands, for Tindale (Sutton and Vaarzon-Morel 2003:26). As I show elsewhere in this chapter, the mobility of Indigenous cameleers was not merely physical but also cultural, and the range of activities involved in ‘camel work’ included translation and other intercultural practices.10

10 I draw on Greenblatt (2009) in thinking about this issue.
Camels, Dogging and Other Use of Camels

As well as work with Afghan cameleers, Pitjantjatjara people’s early use of camels developed in the context of dogging. In the period from 1908 to the 1930s, sheep runs were established to the south of Tempe Downs across to the Musgrave Ranges (Sutton and Vaarzon-Morel 2003:56). This drew Europeans to the area to kill dingoes, for which they collected a government bounty. Known as ‘doggers’, these men used camels when trading with local Aborigines, exchanging dingo scalps for flour, tea and sugar (Gee 2003:45; Hilliard 1976:81; Layton 1986:63, 69). Many had relationships with Pitjantjatjara women, who bore their children and worked with them in the dingo trade (Hilliard 1976:81). By the mid-1930s there were between 15 and 20 doggers trading with local people (Gee 2003:45). One dogger was Tommy Dodd, a man of Pitjantjatjara–Afghan descent who had driven camel teams from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs and was later cameleer and interpreter for patrol officers and anthropologists including Norman Tindale (Edwards n.d.).

Gee has noted that during this period the dogging trade was critical for local people, as a severe drought led to the decline of native fauna and other food resources on which people depended, including introduced species such as rabbits (2003:45; see also Finlayson 1935; Frith 1978). Finlayson commented at the time that the scalps were ‘a sort of currency, filling the same place in the intercourse of the two peoples as the beaver skin formerly did in the territories of the Hudson Bay Company’ (1935:116; see also Layton 1986:63–5, 78–9). As Gould et al. (1972) note, however, dingoes were not ‘saleable’ so, unlike furs, were not part of an international trade. Nor did dogging activities result in the profound social dislocation, warfare and displacement of populations occasioned by the fur trade (Wolf 1982:161). As Sutton has pointed out, there is little evidence of any full-scale, uniform ‘tribal migration’ involving Pitjantjatjara peoples during this era; rather, there were ‘multiple small-scale movements of individuals and families’ to the east, south and west (Sutton and Vaarzon-Morel 2003:52). Hilliard noted that for Pitjantjatjara people during this period ‘working with the doggers as “camel boys” were means of obtaining the prized flour, tea and sugar’ (1976:82). In a relatively short time, camels became the means for people to travel widely and access and transport large quantities of dingo scalps.

Concern over exploitation by doggers and the conditions of Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people led the Presbyterian Church to buy Ernabella Station in 1936 and establish a mission (Gee 2003:47; Hilliard 1976). In this same period stations were taken up to the south of Alice Springs, with owners of stations such as Curtin Springs and Mount Connor using Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara guides and camels to locate water, help them establish their properties and shepherd sheep (Layton 1986:67; Rose 1965; Rowse 1998:62). The introduction of livestock to the area had a further impact on the resources
Camels and the Transformation of Indigenous Economic Landscapes

on which the Indigenous subsistence economy was based (Layton 1986:61; see also Gee 2003) and contributed to increased movement to, and participation in, the cattle stations and missions (Layton 1986:59–60). Partly in an attempt to halt the flow of people to the settled areas, in 1940 the Hermannsburg Mission established the ration depot at Haasts Bluff and soon after another at Areyonga. Camels played a significant role in the domestic economy at this time.

During this period, many people pursued something of a hybrid economic existence, living off the land while supplementing their diet with food from Ernabella Mission and the depots. Rose (1965) noted that at Angas Downs in 1962 people used camels to travel between Areyonga, the Petermann Range, Ernabella Mission and cattle stations in the region. This is confirmed by my own research with the Pitjantjatjara and by McKnight, who observed that ‘there is particularly frequent movement between such places as Maryvale [Titjikala] and Hermannsburg [sic], Areyonga and Ernabella, and Musgrave Park [Mimili] and Ernabella’ (1969:100).

In this way people were able to maintain contact with their country (see also Kimber 2005), visit family, collect and trade dingo scalps and engage in seasonal stockwork as well as other irregular economic activities—for example, the sale of craft items to tourists, for which they received cash (Rose 1965). A few men were also employed as cameleers and trackers on police patrols (see, for example, Brown and Studdy-Clift 1990), and a select group in tourism. For instance, Tiger Tjalkalyiri and Mick Mitinkirri, who spent periods of time at Areyonga and occasionally undertook camel work for the Hermannsburg Mission, took European visitors on camel safaris (Scherer 1994; see also Henson 1992). In 1947 Tiger took Arthur Groom to Ayers Rock (Uluru) via Lake Amadeus (Groom 1977; Sutton and Vaarzon-Morel 2003). A feature of long camel treks was the bond of friendship and respect that developed between the Indigenous cameleers and their companions in the intimate and shared space of the journey.

Camel Ownership

According to Rose (1965:25), the Pitjantjatjara’s use of camels greatly increased after World War II when Europeans bought surplus army four-wheel-drive jeeps and sold or traded their camels to Pitjantjatjara people. In addition to the camels, saddles and conveyances (including old vehicle chassis) that were traded or found abandoned by Europeans were used for camel carting (Hamilton 1987; Rose 1965:25–6; Vaarzon-Morel 2008:101) (Figure 4.1). Rose has charted the decline in the price of a camel on the open market (1965:26), which facilitated

11 More famously, Albert Namatjira took Rex Battarbee and the Teague sisters on camel trips during which he observed their techniques of painting landscape (French 2002).
increased Indigenous ownership. In contrast, horses retained their value for Europeans and were rarely given or sold to Aborigines (1965:30). It tended to be married men with traditional seniority who owned camels (Edwards, Personal communication, 30 October 2009; Rose 1965:29–30). To give the reader an idea of the extent of camel ownership in the 1960s, Rose (1965:28–30) noted that of 18 ‘family units’ who visited Angas Downs during his period of fieldwork in 1962, eight possessed camels, some of whom owned up to five. McKnight estimated that in 1966 there were more than 297 ‘Aboriginal-owned camels’ in the north-west SA and lower NT region and some in Western Australia (1969:100). Significantly, camels were sold and traded for dingo scalps and other items, not only between Europeans and Aborigines but also among Pitjantjatjara people (Harney 1988:135–6; Vaarzon-Morel 2008). Some Indigenous people today recall that owners of camels were perceived as being ‘rich’ (Vaarzon-Morel 2008), which indicates the significance of camels to the domestic economy of that time.

Figure 4.1 Charlie Ilyatjarri uses an old camel wagon for his wood carting business, circa 1960

Image supplied by Bill Edwards.

12 Other non-camel groups were attached to these units.
Camels in the Mission Economy

When the Reverend Bill Edwards first arrived at Ernabella in 1958, he found that there were numerous camels belonging to Pitjantjatjara people (Figure 4.2). Following shearing in July, which was timed to end before the dingo pupping season, the mission closed the school and craft room, and most of the population returned to their traditional homelands on camels, donkeys and horses (see also Hilliard 1976:147, 150). They took goods purchased from the store with wages obtained through craft, construction and shepherding work and supplemented this food with traditional foods and foods exchanged with missionaries for dingo scalps. Before they left Ernabella, people would mend camel saddles and other equipment (Edwards, Personal communication, November 2009). Reverend Edwards recalled these country trips as follows: ’We arranged to meet them at given sites every couple of weeks and would drive out with supplies of flour, sugar, tea, baby foods, etc. to trade with them for the [dingo] scalps… The camels were the main load bearers for these trips.’ (See Figure 4.3.) This pattern of activity came to an end by the late 1960s as people gained access to motorcars. By that time, however, a strong connection between the mission
order, Christianity and camels had been established in people’s minds. This connection was also entangled with earlier events, some of which I will now briefly explore.

Figure 4.3 Trading on the road at Yulpuriji, 22 August 1958

Image supplied by Bill Edwards and copied from Ara Iritja archive.

Camels and the Christian Imagination

From 1928 to 1933, the missionary Ernest Kramer undertook camel safaris in Central Australia with the aim of spreading the gospel. On most journeys, he employed Arrernte man Mickey Dow Dow\textsuperscript{13} as cameleer, guide and translator and sometimes a man called Barney (Metters and Schroeder 2008). The first of Kramer’s trips was to the Musgrave and Mann ranges, and was sponsored by the Aborigines Friends Association, which sought a report on Indigenous living conditions. According to Kramer’s biography, as the men travelled through the desert and encountered local people, they handed them boiled lollies, tea and sugar and played \textit{Jesus Loves Me} on the gramophone. At night, using a ‘magic lantern projector’, Kramer showed slides of Christmas and the life of Christ (Metters and Schroeder 2008:81–2, 94). For many people, this was their first experience of Christmas and the event picturesquely established an association

\textsuperscript{13} Initially, Mickey worked with Spencer and Gillen and later as cameleer, guide, translator and informant for T. G. H. Strehlow and Olive Pink (Marcus 2001).
between camels, gifts and Christianity that was not merely symbolic but had material reality. In the next decades, this association was to be strengthened in various ways among the Pitjantjatjara and neighbouring groups.

In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, nativity plays were performed at Ernabella Mission with Pitjantjatjara enacting the parts of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the Three Wise Men. Camels, donkeys and sheep were also actors in the pageants (Figure 4.4). Hilliard described the impressive spectacle created during a moonrise ‘over the horizon, as the Wise Men and the camels approached along a flame-lit path from the east’ (1976:187). Although these events were relatively infrequent, they were nevertheless powerful rituals that helped shape people’s emotional reactions to camels. Today many people still associate camels with the Three Wise Men and Jesus, and for this reason some are opposed to the killing of camels for meat or other purposes (Vaarzon-Morel 2008, 2010).
Camels and the Indigenous Landscape Post 1970s

By the 1970s the nature of Indigenous people’s engagements with camels had changed dramatically: people no longer used camels for transport, and the introduction of welfare as well as other factors such as the need to keep children in school meant that mobility was no longer such an important factor in the Pitjantjatjara domestic economy.

Over the past 20 years, a few individuals and groups have participated in sporadic economic activities involving camels. These activities include harvesting camels for community consumption, the commercial harvesting of camels for pet meat and human consumption, tourism, ranger work and land-management work (Vaarzon-Morel 2008). For example, in about 1989 the late Charlie Ilyatjari and his family ran a tourist venture on his traditional country at Angatja Homeland in South Australia (see Vaarzon-Morel 2008). To take another example, during the 1990s near Fregon in South Australia, a group of men supported by the State Government mustered and sold more than 50 camels (Vaarzon-Morel 2008:93–4). More recently at Docker River and Kintore, harvesting of camels was undertaken as a community youth group activity to help reduce substance abuse, to provide a free, healthy source of meat, and to maintain the integrity of country (Vaarzon-Morel 2008:28–9, 48).

Camels have long played a role in the Central Australian art economy. At Angas Downs camels were used to obtain wood for craft items such as woomeras and carved animals, which were sold to tourists en route to Uluru. While in those days the animals depicted in craft items were native species, today artists from the region incorporate images of the camel in their artworks. Bessie Liddle, a local Luritja woman who was married to the owner of Angas Downs, a man of Arrernte–European descent, is one such artist. As the subject matter of her paintings, she features people riding camels on picnics to Inindia waterhole, where men caught kangaroo and women gathered bush food. At Titjikala artists such as Johnny Young make wire sculptures of Pitjantjatjara cameleers and their camels, as well as of camel trains. Elsewhere artists make stuffed, baked, woven and block-printed camels using different materials. The artworks recall people’s fond memories of early times with camels and the significant role they played in their lives. The recent proliferation of camel images in Indigenous art also reflects the tourist demand for desert exotica as well as the growing presence of camels in the landscape.

14 Significantly, Charlie Ilyatjari was one of the people who used camels for dogging at Ernabella. Bill Edwards told me (Personal communication, 30 October 2009) that in the 1960s Charlie attempted to set up a business as a wood carter, using an old camel wagon. His venture was unsuccessful because people argued that as he was ‘waltja’, or close kin, he should give them wood. More prosaically, the wagon did not have good brakes and kept running into the camels’ legs when he tried to stop.
Today, apart from a small number of camel calves kept as pets, there are comparatively few domesticated camels on Aboriginal land. Feral camel numbers, however, have increased dramatically. Currently, there are an estimated one million feral camels in Australia. With a rate of increase of 8 per cent per year, the population would double every nine years (Edwards et al. 2008). The majority of these camels are on Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. In areas of high density (more than 0.3 camels per square kilometre), camels are having a significant impact on the ecosystem; they are damaging vegetation, wetlands and sites of biological and cultural significance (Edwards et al. 2008, 2010) and transforming parts of the desert landscape.

In 2006 I conducted research on Indigenous perceptions of feral camels for the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre. In areas of high camel density such as much of the Pitjantjatjara region, there is increasing concern over the negative impacts of feral camels on water places, animals, plants and other natural and cultural resources (Edwards et al. 2008). People can no longer hunt and gather native species or otherwise engage with the country as they wish and they avoid areas where camels are known to be present. Fatalities involving motor vehicles and camels on remote roads are also increasing. Whereas once camels facilitated people’s physical mobility, they now hinder it. Yet, although in general many people perceive a need to manage camel impacts, the majority of people are prepared to consider only limited management options (Vaarzon-Morel 2010). Significantly, as a result of Christian and personal historical associations, many people have sentimental attachments to camels that influence how they weigh up negative camel impacts in respect of management options and also their preparedness to eat camel meat (Vaarzon-Morel 2010). In general, the preferred camel management strategies are live removal, harvesting camels for meat and ranger activities. Where people’s main livelihood is the management of country for biodiversity as well as cultural outcomes, many are, however, prepared to consider a wide range of management strategies, including shooting for waste (Vaarzon-Morel 2010). Yet whatever occurs, I argue that a better understanding of past Indigenous uses of camels is essential in order to contextualise present views.

Under the Caring for Country, Indigenous Protected Areas and other sponsored land-management programs, Indigenous participation in the management of feral camel impacts and the utilisation of camels is likely to expand in the near future. If this were to happen it would provide significant economic benefits to Indigenous people. At the time of writing, commercial harvesting of camels for sale locally and overseas has recommenced on Aboriginal land. While the viability of the potential international trade in live camels is still being assessed, with the majority of feral camels being on Aboriginal-owned land, this means
that Indigenous communities are key players in what is a developing new camel economy. In the long run, it can be seen that Indigenous people have shown considerable ability to adapt to the introduction of camels to their landscape and that practices of using camels have been central to developing intra-cultural and economic relationships in the Western Desert.

Conclusion

To date, anthropological and historical studies of intercultural relations have tended to neglect or oversimplify the role of introduced animals in processes of intercultural formation and economic transformation. The conceptual framework I adopt here recognises the importance of understanding human, animal and environmental interrelationships in their historic specificity. In this chapter, I have reconsidered Indigenous people’s engagements with camels in the eastern Western Desert and adjacent region. In doing so, I have shown that rather than simply hunting camels, Indigenous people used camels in a range of ways that contributed to and helped sustain both the domestic and the frontier economies. I have further demonstrated that Indigenous people’s engagements with camels were and remain intrinsically bound up with transformations in Indigenous socioeconomic and ecological landscapes. Among other things, these complex connections have direct implications for social, intercultural and human/animal relations, as well as issues of ontology and power.

References


4. Camels and the Transformation of Indigenous Economic Landscapes


Sandall, R. (dir) 1969. *Camels and the Pitjantjara*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. (Film. Duration: 45 minutes.)


Acknowledgments

I thank Nicolas Peterson, Philip Jones and Alison French for generously participating in the panel ‘Exotic relations: camels and the articulation of Indigenous and settler social and economic forms’, which I organised for the conference Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies held at the National Museum of Australia. This chapter grew out of a paper I delivered as part of the panel. It benefited from comments by Nicolas Peterson, Ase Ottoson, Geoff Bagshaw, Margaret Bowman, Rev. Dr. W. H. (Bill) Edwards, Craig Elliott, David Nash, Noah Pleshet, Peter Sutton and James Wafer, and I thank them all.

I am particularly indebted to Rev. Dr. W. H. (Bill) Edwards who generously shared with me his memories, oral histories, and photographic images concerning Pitjantjatjara use of camels. Bill kindly copied the images from the Ara Irititja archive and provided descriptions of the photos.

Research for this chapter was supported in part by the Northern Territory through the NT History Grants Program of the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts.