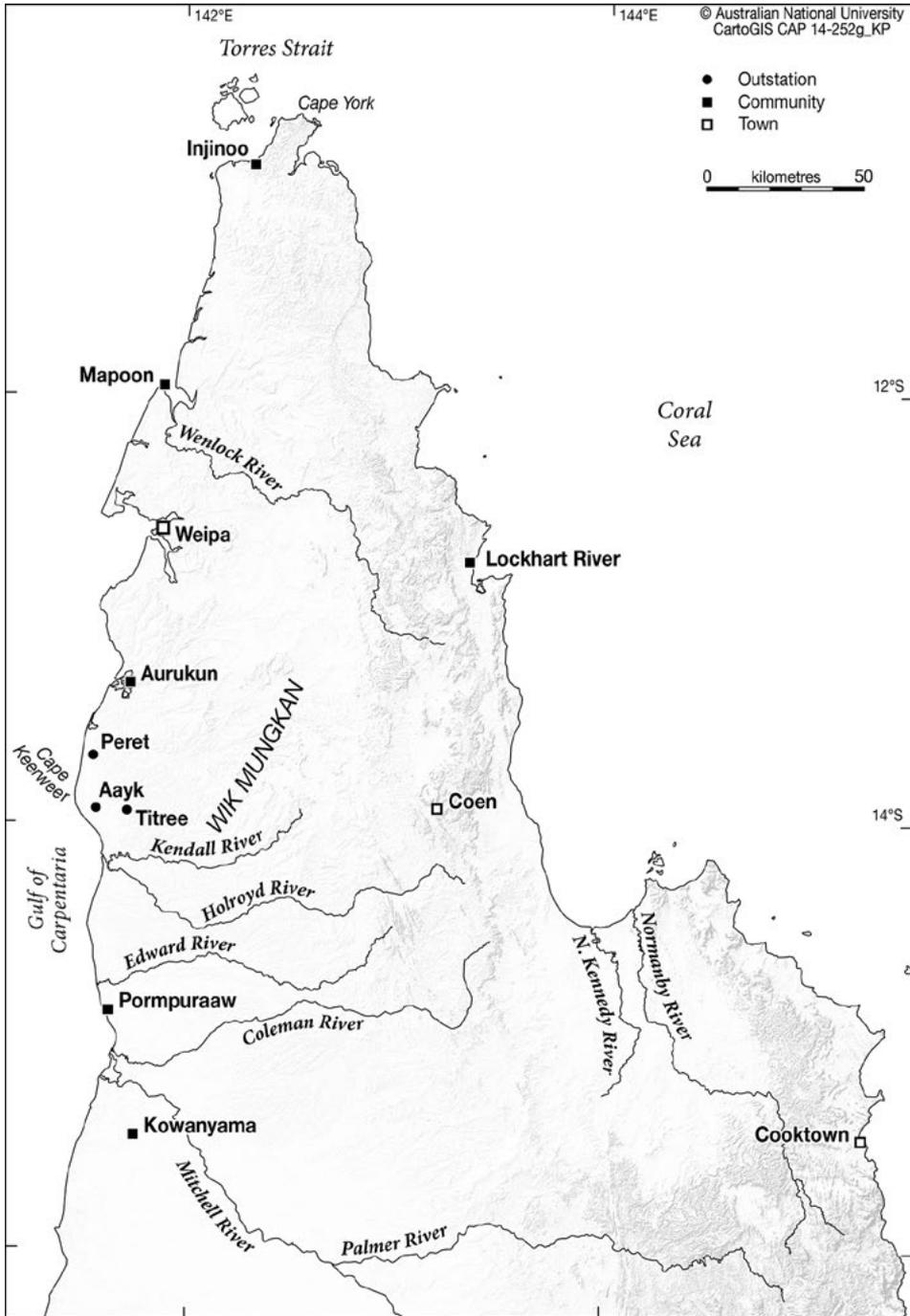


# 12

## Peret: A Cape York Peninsula outstation, 1976–1978

Peter Sutton

Leaning on memoir, and extensive photographic and written records, this chapter presents an eyewitness account of just one of many Aboriginal outstations that broke away from population centres in remote Australia in the 1970s and later. The context is western Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. The event was the re-establishment in 1976 of Peret Outstation, named after the well Pooerreth near a cattle yard, as a homeland centre rather than the mission pastoral operation for which it had been created. It was, in part, a staged return to the countries of origin of Cape Keerweer people, who had in recent decades become settled in the Presbyterian Mission township of Aurukun to its north (Map 12.1). It was also a time of hope, adrenalin, politicking and pre-eminence, desperate shortages, bogged vehicles—Land Rovers, tractors, small planes—the luck, feasting and starving of hunting, happy children dancing by firelight, old people singing now forgotten song verses, the strains of camp life, and yet also a curiously sedate existence, as yet largely without media, alcohol, drugs or crispy fried chicken wings. Each character seemed larger than life. Perhaps they were.



Map 12.1 Cape York Peninsula and Peret Outstation.

Source: Karina Pelling, CartoGIS, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific

## Pre-land rights era outstations of Cape York Peninsula

Several mission ‘outstations’ (rarely ‘mission extensions’) had been established in western Cape York Peninsula by the 1920s. For example, the Aurukun Mission records mention an ‘outstation’ of Weipa Mission, which lay north of Aurukun, called Myngump.<sup>1</sup> This place on the Embley River is more latterly known as Moyngom (Hey Point), a key estate site for members of the Flying Fish clan of Lenford Matthew and kin.

Further north from Weipa was Mapoon Mission, which Presbyterian Mission chronicler of the interwar period George Kirke referred to as ‘the station’. It had at least two ‘outstations’ in 1919:

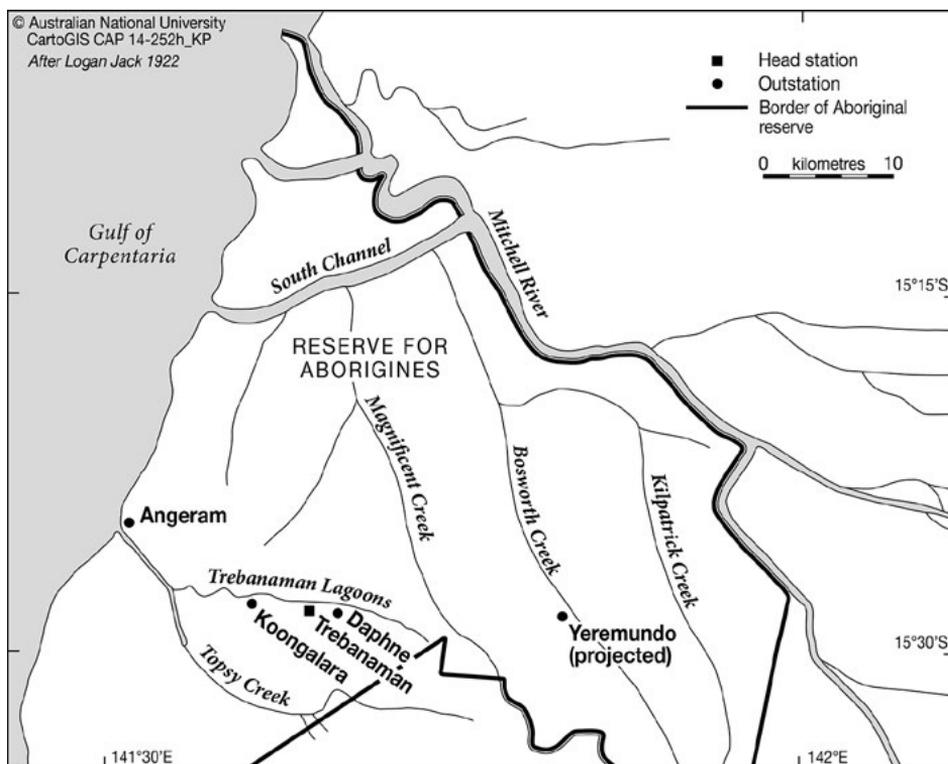
Along the Batavia River frontage is found the out-station, where the majority of the married people live. (Kirke 1919: 6)

About 14 miles up the Batavia River is another out-station, where there are about a dozen families wrestling with the forest and bringing the land into subjection by the gardener. (p. 7)

Twelve years later, Kirke also reported the visit of Mr and Mrs Miller of Mapoon to ‘the outstation on the Batavia River, where several sick people were attended to and helped’ (Kirke 1931; see also Anon. 1932).

The vast Mitchell River Delta is south of Aurukun on the same Gulf of Carpentaria coast. By the time Robert Logan Jack published a map of the lower Mitchell River in his 1922 book *Northmost Australia*, the ‘head station’ of Trebanaman Anglican Mission had three ‘outstations’, Angeram, Koongalara and Daphne, and a fourth, Yeremundo, was projected (Map 12.2). The settlement was later known as Mitchell River Mission and is now a town called Kowanyama.

1 ‘Saul Mammus, Wusarangot H[usband] of Big Archiewald, from Weipa Outstation, Myngump.’ Data card for Saul Mammus, c. 1896–1942, Aurukun Papers, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Library.



Map 12.2 Lower Mitchell River, Cape York Peninsula.

Source: Karina Pelling, CartoGIS, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, after Jack (1922: Map F [detail])

This language of ‘head station’ and ‘dependent outstation’ was the language of pastoral properties (sheep and cattle ranches). It was a language established long before the outstation movement of the 1970s. In the Cape York Peninsula cases I have looked at, these older mission outstations were ostensibly based not on the traditional home countries of inhabitants, but on function. There was a division of labour. There were outstations for married couples, for horticultural projects, for stock operations, for isolation of the sick or for the isolation of the well from the sick. In the pastoral industry, outstations were similarly set up for particular functions—mostly mustering points with yards and pens for drafting, castrating, dipping and branding during the season. I saw and stayed at a number of these industrial outstations in the 1970s while carrying out linguistic salvage work in far north Queensland.

Before ever reaching Aurukun, I had worked recording Gugu-Badhun with Old Harry Gertz at a mustering camp on Valley of Lagoons Station on the upper Burdekin River, in the time the boss allowed him between a day in the saddle, food and hitting his swag. In 1970, I had recorded the languages of Doomadgee stockman Big Arthur on Seaward Outstation of Iffley Station, out west on the

Gulf of Carpentaria, again between mustering and dinner. It was run on the old lines. The ‘ringers’<sup>2</sup> (stockmen) slept on the ground on canvas swags—whites and blacks apart—with their saddles as pillows, dining by the light of infernally dangerous carbide lamps, and eating beef, beef and beef, Burdekin Duck (salt beef fried in batter), damper (unleavened bread) and brownies, a traditional bush cake. The only entertainment was talk.

By 1928 the ‘Kendall River Extension’ of Aurukun Mission, staffed by Uki and Archiewald Otomorathin, husband and wife Christian converts from further north, was being maintained remotely from the mission’s head station at Archer River. This was a difficult sailing journey through shoaly water off the Gulf of Carpentaria coast. Links were improved when the mission bought a launch for the Kendall run in 1935. Still, Uki and Archiewald had to walk back and forth at times (it is more than 100 km to Aurukun, as the crow flies, including multiple river-mouth crossings in notorious crocodile country). On one of these walks, Uki was killed by a taipan bite at Munpunng in 1948. His grave lies there today. His widow, Archie, as she was known, continued to manage the Kendall River Extension for about another decade after this, largely on her own, administratively. I knew her and worked with her in her old age. She was without doubt a strong personality and might under other circumstances have been an original Boadicea (Brown 1940). At Kendall she organised buildings, food gardens and Christian services, and gathered people for the mission visits when Superintendent Bill MacKenzie came to treat eye disease and other illnesses. All of the ‘settlement’ she and Uki set up disappeared after she left. When the location was reoccupied in the 1970s under the new secular dispensation, with David Martin (see this volume) as outstation adviser, nothing of Archie’s work remained in a tangible sense.

Much of the way of life at Kendall in Archie’s time was superficially the same in the Aurukun outstations of the 1970s. But the political economy that underlay it was now radically different. Carbohydrates were bought with small pensions from my tiny store at Peret, where I ran a line of credit with the Pacific Ocean victualling company Burns Philp. These supplies—mainly of tea, sugar, flour, powdered milk, tobacco, matches and ammunition—were shipped from Cairns via Torres Strait to Aurukun, reloaded into dinghies and hauled upriver to Bamboo Landing, then re-hauled into my Land Rover and driven south to Peret. All the protein, however, was hunted.

In the Aurukun Mission case, during the interwar period, temporary camps were set up north of Archer River and mostly within a day’s walk from Aurukun for children’s holidays, for isolation during times of epidemics, and for working

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2 That is, ‘shit-wringers’, men who wrung the shit out of bulls, cows, calves, mickeys, heifers and bullocks as they pushed them to movement and production.

the mission dairy herd, coconut plantation or food gardens. Waterfall, Ikalath, Cowplace, Wutan and Possum Creek were the main ones, and all were on the northern side of the Archer River, where Aurukun lay.

A further set of mission-inspired outstations was set up for the mission cattle operations, which were in full swing by the 1960s—this time largely south of the Archer River. Access here was far more difficult as Aurukun lay north of the vast and intricate Archer system. The most substantial of these south-of-Archer establishments, at Peret, Ti-tree and Bamboo, had worksheds and stockmen's quarters, yards, bush airstrips, radio aerials, generators and concrete-lined wells with windmills to supply water. There were also a number of other, more temporary, cattle-related outstations south of the Archer, such as Hagen Lagoon, Donny Yard, Moonpoon, Kencherung, Wayang, Big Lake and Dish Yard, where cattle were yarded, drafted, castrated and branded seasonally. This work was carried out by Wik stockmen under supervision of a part-Aboriginal head stockman Jerry Hudson, or, later, other mission staff, but no outside stock workers were employed. Stock were annually turned off for market by being walked south roughly 300 km to Mungana railhead, and later, by being loaded on shallow draught boats from the coast (MacKenzie 1981: 174). In the wet season, Aurukun stockmen did maintenance jobs, and made useful things like belts from greenhide.

On first arriving at Peret Outstation in 1976, I found such a belt abandoned and hanging on a tree next to the cattle outstation manager's house. Pecked into the belt was a poignant statement of a stockman starved of company: 'ASLONE [sic] WHY WORRY ME GORDON HOLROYD.' Gordon Holroyd, a man from Pormpuraaw, was in a relationship with Jinny Gothachalkenin of Aurukun in that period.<sup>3</sup>

The old life and the new overlapped in the Aurukun cattle outstations in the 1960s, when two, and finally one, of the last of the mobile bands of bush Wik were recorded as visiting the cattle camps south of Aurukun asking for food. They were regarded as a bit of a nuisance by at least one staff member. In 1966 mission staffer Ken Cobden reported seeing 'two children about three years old down there [in the Peret area] amongst the nomads. We know of no such children. The youngest woman is over 55 and is almost certainly barren' (Gillanders 1966). These were the last Wik children known to have lived in a foraging band.

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<sup>3</sup> He was the father of Jinny's daughter Donna May Gothachalkenin, born in 1978. Jinny was killed by her later de facto Ken Wolmby in 1989. See Sutton (2009: 87–8).

## Aurukun outstations in the land rights era

The first of the modern Wik outstations, in the 1970s sense, was established at Aayk on the Kirke River estuary by Victor Wolmby in 1971 (see Figure 12.1). This date is before the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972, from which the shift of policy to self-determination is often reckoned, so it is not part of the Whitlam era strictly speaking. However, 1971 is the same year as the initiation of the federal policy shift towards self-determination as expounded in Prime Minister William McMahon's Cairns address written by H. C. Coombs (Rowse 2000: 53–5). Still, that level of policy shift was not likely to have been felt on the ground at a place like Aurukun, where federal involvement was as yet minimal. More importantly, 1971 belongs to the period in which the Presbyterian Church (which became from 1977 part of the Uniting Church) was moving towards local self-administration as mission policy, and the very liberal Reverend Robert Bos was an Aurukun staffer. The influence of anthropologist John von Sturmer on the Aurukun outstation movement is undoubtedly relevant, though hard to quantify. He had worked at Aurukun beginning in 1969.

The earlier Cape York outstations lay squarely within the era when the churches and their missions, with the maritime and pastoral industries and State Governments in the background, dominated the political economies of settled Aboriginal people in Cape York Peninsula and the Australian outback generally. The missions acted as employment brokers for the labour needs of the lugger and cattle industries. Economics was soon to shift radically to unemployment, government transfer payments and the spending and gambling of unearned incomes.

In January 1976, I was visiting Aurukun with colleagues Peter Ucko, Athol Chase and John von Sturmer. During this time, von Sturmer introduced me to Victor Wolmby, also known as Victor Coconut (1905–76). The latter was no ridiculing nickname. One of his clan totemic titles as a man was Thiinethengaycheyn ('[He] Saw a Coconut'). 'Wolmby' was the mission rendering of Waalempay—that is, he was from an estate-owning group whose Shark men could be named after the parallel ripples (*waalempay*) of a shark's fin slicing the estuarine waters of the Kirke River where his country of Aayk lay. He was *Pam Aweyn* (a 'Big Man') ritually and politically. He was the top man for the Apelech regional ceremonial group and also the top man for the Cape Keerweer regional political sphere—a sector of the Aurukun population that was at that time dominant politically and demographically.

Victor's fellow patriclan members actually formed the best-organised and most coherent entity within the social field in which I found myself. This stood them in good stead for the struggle ahead. Their structural unity was mirrored in realpolitik. Not all Wik clans' members enjoyed this state. It was a target, not a commonwealth. Its varied achievement struck hard at less organised subgroups.

Victor recruited me as his son, as a fellow Wolmby clan member, and as what was known in remote Australia then as an outstation adviser. He wanted to lead his people back to the country from which they had gradually gravitated to Aurukun since about the 1920s. Peret Outstation was not his first choice—that had been Aayk, south of Peret, in his own clan estate, where he had paid young men out of his pension to cut trees for an airstrip, where he had in the early 1970s put in a wet season with his wife, Isobel, being thrown tobacco from the mission plane as it reconnoitred his lonely and perhaps stubborn isolation on occasions. But there were existing facilities at Peret: two airstrips, a house for the cattle manager, sheds, workers' accommodation, yards, a well with a windmill—all of them in poor condition or actually broken, but in theory (rarely in practice) capable of being rescued. No electric power, no running water, house wood rotting, fleas infesting the outside dwelling area, the house masterfully commandeered by cockroaches, the odd taipan in the (non-functioning) toilet waiting for a green tree frog to arrive—but a certain order of settled proxemics and understood responsibilities formed quickly among us in the first weeks. We were a manageable number so long as that number was smallish—about the same as the band level. Twenty-five to 50 was okay. Above that population sociality became exponentially more difficult and, ultimately, a nightmare at 125. Even in a post-conquest, hunter-gatherer context, demography can be destiny.

Peret was a politically workable alternative to Aayk partly because it lay in Victor's mother's clan estate, that of deceased Wikatukkin, whose estate was Small Lake, including Peret, and who was buried at Aayk. This now gave his widow, Isobel, a link to it as her mother-in-law's country. Wikatukkin was also the mother of several of Victor's siblings. Two of Victor's living siblings, sister Oothekna and brother Frank, and several of the adult children of their other siblings born from the union of Wikatukkin and Peter Pumpkin Wolmby, were in a position of successional claims on the deceased estate in which Peret lay.

On her first night back at Peret after many years, Oothekna (*Uthikeng*, 'Catfish') sang and keened for her mother and the mother's country in which she was now resident again. So although Peret was planned by Victor and later participants as a jumping-off platform for the reinvestment of the patriclan estates south of it, especially Aayk, it was also, in a clear sense, a prize of its own. In a sense, its whiteness underpinned its newness as an Aboriginal possession in the post-nomadic world of settlement. On classical lines, it also rapidly became the eye

of a storm over who had rights to claim it, since its own patriclan had died out. Succession to the Uthuk Eelen (Small Lake) estate in which Peret lay was suddenly everybody's business.

I accepted both of the roles Victor had chosen for me. The Presbyterian Board of Ecumenical Mission and Relations accordingly made me a voluntary member of Aurukun Mission staff, under the title of 'Outstation Advisor, Peret' (Coombs 1976). My post-belief secular position was not, apparently, an obstacle to mission status. Actually, I didn't notice much demand for Christianity at Peret, unless the Reverend Silas Wolmby was there to act as a part-time catalyst of the MacKenzie paradigm that had also been the Uki and Archie paradigm at Kendall in the 1930s to 1950s, where Christianity, school, work and foraging blended.

Victor died in May 1976 before I could return. I got to Aurukun in time for his house-opening ceremony in July, bringing my wife, Anne, and baby son, Thomas. I intended to be based at the mission where my nuclear family would be living, and to help those moving out to the bush on a part-time basis. I had a Land Rover utility truck, a two-way radio, a .222 sporting rifle good enough for pigs and a Flying Doctor kit. I would do bush fieldwork and return to Aurukun to write up and rest up. But Victor's close kin had other ideas. I was to move out with them. Family had been augmented and redefined. And Victor's widow, Isobel, emerged from her silent mourning period as an elemental force, and as my chief mentor, in her late husband's stead.



Figure 12.1 Isobel Wolmby loading native bamboo spear shafts in her clan country south of Cape Keerweer, 1977.

Photo: Peter Sutton

## Moving to Peret<sup>4</sup>

On 9 September 1976, we were preparing to leave en masse for Peret the next day. People were saying ‘we gotta pull together’—an early indication that this was going to be an exercise in the reinvention of collective action under a new dispensation. It looked like it might be a tough call. It was.

We were nearly ready to leave the next morning when the manager (acting superintendent) of Aurukun, Syd Thomas, called me to a meeting in the main mission building. Also present were the mission liaison officer, Gordon Coutts, school principal, Alan Bailey, council chairwoman, Geraldine Kawangka, councillor Rex Walmbeng, and Bruce Yunkaporta, who was there as a parent of numerous schoolchildren. He was also my pseudo-actual brother-in-law, married to Victor’s daughter Marjorie.

The problem was Alan Bailey’s worry about the schoolchildren going out to Peret and failing to get an education. Argument ensued, words between Gordon and Bruce being the most heated. Then Geraldine had a ‘tongue-bash’ with me. Propositions flew. Bruce stressed the necessity of burning Victor’s clothes and other possessions at his home country of Aayk, and of showing children the country; most had lived their lives thus far in the mission. In reply, Alan stressed the need for educated Aurukun people to take on the mining companies and other modern forces. Geraldine made some vitriolic remarks about ‘these white dictators coming in and dragging people out’. David Martin and myself were the dictators. My journal comments here say:

I stood up to her as well as I could, but must admit she knows the ropes of conflict a lot better than I do. (Sutton Field Book 22: 3)

[I later that day] had a second confrontation with Geraldine (in public this time) with a little invective from both sides, BY [Bruce Yunkaporta] trying to soothe the flames. Afterwards, BY told me not to argue with her, and that I’d been mistaken in saying that C Keerweer [Bruce’s and my group] and Tea Tree [Geraldine’s husband’s group] didn’t get on together, the latter being a dangerous statement which could cause fights (!! Clearly proving the statement, and the extreme foolishness of anyone making it in a *public* context). i.e. the conflict ‘officially’ doesn’t exist (unlike the Kendall–CK [Cape Keerweer] conflict which is open and results in actual fighting), though in private people say nasty things about the other group.

AW’s [Alan Wolmby’s] advice was to play it very quiet & cool in my 3rd talk with GK (which she had requested ‘this evening’, with the concerned people present—i.e. Paul [Peemuggina], Johnny [Lak Lak], Clifford [Toikalkin],

4 This section is based on my field notes (Sutton Book 22: 1–29).

JA [John Adams] (*et al?*). I approached her straight away, a full 15 minutes after our [second] tongue-bash, and she was conciliatory, flattering, and shook my hand several times. BY apologised for not having introduced us before, and she & he both stressed the fact that if she'd known I was her classificatory father the argument would not have developed. There may be *something* to that. In any case I learned how rapidly changeable she can be, and how unrelated to reality are her arguments as statements of opinion. (Book 22: 3–5)

Rather pompous at the end, but I was trying hard to overcome what had been a fairly crippling shyness of youth during the 1960s in the cauldron of Aurukun in the 1970s. I could not afford to be a walkover.

I learned later how Bruce was able to act as conciliator between Geraldine and myself. They had been childhood school friends—a modern and innovative tie that bound them across something of a gulf of ancient structure: she was an inlander; he was a sand-beach man. Furthermore, her family was an established elite long at ease in the mission structure, and indeed she was named after missionary Geraldine MacKenzie and had been partly raised in the Mission House by the MacKenzies. Bruce was born in the bush among myalls, and his father, Charlie, had fought Bill MacKenzie in hand-to-hand combat over the issue of Charlie permitting his children to go to school in Aurukun.

But the mission agenda had been one of deliberate homogenisation of the children, and the children did a fair bit of homogenising themselves—rapidly adopting a single village lingua franca for regular interaction, for example, and engaging in these school friend pairings.

That night Alan Bailey got so drunk he could not get up the next morning to talk with Bruce, who went to see him. Bruce then saw Syd and Gordon, who agreed that the children could go out to Peret for two to four weeks. So on that day, 11 September 1976, we assembled at Aurukun Landing, got ourselves and swags and food into dinghies, and took them about 40 minutes upstream to Bamboo Landing. At Bamboo cattle outstation, we left Isobel, her mother, Yukwainten, and Isobel's siblings Rupert and Eembinpawn for the night, to be picked up and taken to Peret the next morning. The rest of us somehow fitted into and on to my Land Rover ute. My journal recoded that '[t]he trip to Peret was arduous and worrisome, and mostly done in pitch darkness'—because the young men were sitting on the bonnet and front mudguards as well as the caving roof. Oothekna, Victor's aged sister, 'was car-sick all the way, and vomited all over herself (and Marjorie)' (Sutton Book 22: 10). Apparently, Oothekna had never been in a motor vehicle before. By my calculations, we were 25 people on that Land Rover that night, inching along for more than 30 km in the gloom on a rough bush track. Alan took the ute back and picked up Isobel's group from

Bamboo the next morning. So ,by the afternoon of the next day, those who had arrived to inaugurate Peret Outstation in its new incarnation were as follows, numbering 28 plus myself:

Alan Wolmby and his son Rex.

Adrian Wolmby, son of Alan's brother Morrison and close classificatory brother and age-mate of Rex.

Kornomnayah, Alan and Morrison's mother. She was also a sister of Isobel Wolmby and Billy Landis.

Isobel Wolmby, widow of Victor, with her ancient mother Yukwainten (born c. 1899), her brother Rupert Gothachalkenin and sister Eembinpawm Yantumba and Eembinpawm's son Munroe.

Marjorie Yunkaporta, Isobel and Victor's only child, with her husband Bruce Yunkaporta and most of their children: Vicki, Iris, Cynthia, Perry, Ursula, Bruce Jr, and Charlie Victor. Bruce's (and thus his children's) patriclan country was Um-Thunth, widely known as 'Moving Stone', immediately south of Cape Keerweer on the coast.

Isobel and Kornomnayah's brother Billy Landis, with his Lamalama wife Lily Chookie (they met at Palm Island), and most of their children: Marjorie, Margaret, Gladys, Billy Jr and Janet.

Kornomnayah, Isobel, Billy Snr, Rupert and Eembinpawm were among the numerous offspring of Billy Wildfellow who had had eight wives. His estate, Thaangkunh-nhiin, abutted Bruce Yunkaporta's on its south.

Three apparently floating young men were also present: Roger Kalkeeyort, Roderick Coconut, and Derek Yunkaporta.

This skewing towards Isobel's clan, whose country lay south of Cape Keerweer on the same coast, was soon to be counterbalanced. Victor, Oothekna and Alan and Morrison's father, Colin, were children of Peter Pumpkin. He was the still-remembered root of the Wolmby clan with its estate, Aayk, lodged in prime country just inland of Cape Keerweer itself, on the banks of the Kirke River estuary (*Man-Yelk*, 'Neck-Road'). The estate within which Peret lay had belonged to Pumpkin's wife, Wikatukkin, and her patriclan. Pumpkin and Wikatukkin were the parents of Colin, Victor, Oothekna and their youngest son, Frank Wolmby. Frank arrived at Peret with his wife, Topsy, and two children on 25 September. Within the year, other Wolmby clan siblings of Alan and Morrison arrived, offspring also of the late Colin but by a different mother: Silas, Caleb and Ray Wolmby. Alan and Morrison thus consolidated their position at the core of the power spectrum. The Wolmby brothers were solid as a wall.



Figure 12.2 Marjorie Yunkaporta and some of her children cleaning up Peret airstrip, 1976.

Photo: Anne Sutton

Pumpkin had a brother, Bob, who had two sons, Noel and Paul Peemuggina. On 14 September and in the days just afterwards, Noel arrived at Peret with his son Peter, Peter's three children (Peemugginas, but the same clan as Wolmbys) and four of Peter's sister Chrissie's eight children (Namponans). These were all people with abutting clan estates immediately inland in the peri-coastal country of Cape Keerweer. The father's mother of the Namponan children was Yewimuk, Noel and Paul's oldest sister, another Wolmby. After Yewimuk there had been her younger sister, Mabel. Mabel's widower, Jack Spear, who was Noel and Paul's brother-in-law, also came to live at Peret that year and stayed continuously many months. He was among the most senior exponents of Apelech ceremony. He taught me many things at Peret and while mapping the sites of his own clan estate on the middle of the Kirke River system. He figured significantly in the MacDougalls' film made at Cape Keerweer, *Familiar Places* (MacDougall 1980; and see Sutton 2014).

Noel's wife, Mikompa, was a Yunkaporta from Knox River, south of Cape Keerweer, hence a 'southern Yunkaporta'. Her siblings Jack Sleep and Eeng (a sister) were to come a little later and settle at Peret as well, followed by Reg Yunkaporta of the same clan, whose sister Diane had married Paul Peemuggina. Reg raised Victor's natural son, Ron Yunkaporta, born of an affair between Victor

and Reg's future wife, Moira. Ron visited Peret too about this time. The southern Yunkaportas were present but not influential in Peret's dynamics, even though they were so intertwined genealogically with the others.

Mikompa's sister Eeng and her husband, Johnny Lak Lak Ampeybegan, arrived on 25 September. Johnny rapidly took a formal frontline role as a senior man, though he, like other older men, tended to look to Alan Wolmby for ideas and positions. Alan stood behind the old men of this upper generation, but held much of the real power to determine outcomes.

## Clans and landscape as political agents

The Peret estate was closely linked to Johnny's: Peret lay in the Uthuk Eelen (lit. 'Small Milky Way') estate, which drained, during the wet, through Johnny's Uthuk Aweyn ('Big Milky Way') estate on its way to the Kirke River estuary. These paired and adjacent estates were named in English Small Lake and Big Lake. The estuary to which they drained debouched into the Gulf of Carpentaria at Cape Keerweer. The Big and Small lakes people were thus geopolitically part of the Cape Keerweer group. Drainage was alliance politics. Structure here was not merely something reproduced by action, because collective action also relied heavily on structure. A 'history of consociation' by itself could not account for the formations of Peret politics.

Soon Noel's younger brother Paul and his three children had arrived at Peret, along with Isobel's sister Telpoana and Telpoana's doggedly traditional bushman husband, Paddy Yantumba. These last two persisted in the foraging life more than most, often camping together in isolation for long periods, Telpoana in fact dying at Aayk with only Paddy's company one subsequent wet season.

Thus far, two main patrilineal clans dominated the demography of Peret: the descendants of Peter Pumpkin Wolmby and his brother Bob, and the descendants of Billy Wildfellow Gothachalkenin (such as Isobel), including people who were both (such as Marjorie and Alan, the two main contenders for boss-ship). The third part of the eventual upper mix, the northern Yunkaportas, was still building.

One northern Yunkaporta had been there at the start, on the first day. Bruce Yunkaporta was there by right as Marjorie's husband. His siblings could be there with him by right also. Soon, Bruce's full brother George Sydney Yunkaporta, and his half-siblings Clive, Francis, Mikompa and Annie and their spouses and sometimes their offspring were also living at Peret. These were all descendants of Charlie Yunkaporta. The two mothers of the senior sibling set were wives of Charlie, who were both called Arkpenya, and were Wolmby sisters. This marital alliance between Wolmbys and northern Yunkaportas had been going on for

generations. The two clans were referred to by shorthand at Aurukun as 'W and Y Families'. Bruce's siblings included many of the most bush-bred and knowledgeable and articulate people of Peret. They held numbers but generally refrained from being at the heart of the regular disputations and screaming matches erupting between the Wolmby and Gothachalkenin factions.

This dominant threesome was, however, to meet its match.

## The triumph of a late starter

By the end of September 1976, Marjorie and Bruce's oldest surviving son, Roy Yunkaporta, had moved to Peret with his wife, Sandra, and their new baby, Richard, and Sandra's brother, Trevor Bowenda. Little Richard was in the same camp as his father, father's mother, father's mother's mother and father's mother's mother's mother. This made my investigation of the perpetual cycling of kin terms rather easier than it might otherwise have been.

Sandra and Trevor were Bowendas, from their father, Denny Bowenda. Originating in the Nicholson River region of the Northern Territory when young, Denny was one of a tiny minority of Aurukun people recruited from outside the immediate region. His family had long been adopted into the same clan as Johnny Lak Lak's Uthuk Aweyn, so he was a Big Lake man. Denny was to come to Peret in later months, accompanying me as we mapped the Peret estate (Small Lake), and asking me for copies of the maps for his own use. 'The land *is* a map', he once told me. Indeed. And he kept his cards close to his chest.

What I did not see coming was that, to make short of a long and winding story too extensive for here, within just a few years Denny Bowenda managed to sideline both main contenders for leadership of the Peret outstation—Marjorie Yunkaporta and Alan Wolmby, both Wolmby clan members with Wik-Ngathan as their language—and wrest that leadership for himself. Succession to an abutting and linked estate of the same language as his own adoptive tongue (Wik-Ngatharr, not Wik-Ngathan), to an estate united to his own by a single drainage flow, and united by a neatly dyadic toponymy, together with Denny's adroitness, persistence, superior command of English and of the ways of Australian law and bureaucracy, all worked together to score a successful outcome for Denny.

## The achievement of collective action

Before Denny's late coup, in my 1978 report to Peter Ucko, principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (which was then funding my work at Peret), I addressed the question of 'Organisation of authority and work within the outstation' (Sutton 1978: 2–5). I will quote that section at length, as it was written within the period and has a certain freshness as a result:

Victor Wolmby was clearly both 'boss of Cape Keerweer' (a secular role) and 'boss of Apelech' (a ritual role). On his death, the ritual leadership passed without dispute (as known to me) to Clive Yunkaporta ... Many people told me that his secular leadership passed by tradition to his [Victor's] wife, who had waived it in favour of their daughter Marjorie (married to Clive Yunkaporta's brother Bruce). Victor had no [legitimate] sons. His wife and daughter have struggled with tremendous vigour to hold onto the role of secular leadership, but it has been effectively wrested from them by Alan Wolmby, Victor's older brother's son. He is not the oldest of the Wolmby brothers (there are two older than he), but he is clearly the most politically adept and has carried through his involvement with the outstation movement from the very start with dedication and great concentration. Conflict between Alan and his brothers on the one side, and Marjorie and her mother (Isobel) on the other, continues, and has resulted in public verbal battles involving the whole Peret population from time to time.

It will be seen from the data on population below [omitted here] that the Wolmbys, the northern Yunkaportas (Clive and Bruce's family) and the Gothachalkenins (Isobel's family) have between them accounted for a large proportion of the Peret community. The Wolmbys are not only numerically dominant, they are also politically unified and well-organised. The northern Yunkaportas, apart from Bruce, have not made any significant moves to assume any dominance in this community at Peret, and Bruce's moves have all been through his wife.<sup>5</sup> In conflicts, most of them try to cool the flames and often go away for a few days at a time afterwards. During one recent argument, Marjorie publicly renounced her status as a Wolmby, saying Aayk was 'a desert place, no water' and spoke only in her husband's language [Wik-Mungkan]. The third family, the Gothachalkenins, are completely fragmented politically, and their political thrust consists solely of the enormous and skilful efforts of Isobel.

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5 In December 1976, Bruce Yunkaporta dictated the following handwritten statement to Syd Thomas, manager of Aurukun (spellings as in original): 'After Victor Walamby died the land at Cape Keerweer that belong to him his daughter took charge of the place (her name Marjarie Yangaporta) Allen tried to assume the Area as his & his brother Morrison did also, but Majorie is the only boss for the whole Area & no notice should be taken of Allen & Morrison. The Area in question is approximately 10 sq. miles & Majorie is the only one to allow any orders or work or changes to be carried out. Also her husband is helping her.' (MS held by Peter Sutton.)

By late 1977, it was abundantly clear that Alan Wolmby was, in most people's eyes, the 'boss' of Peret. A number of matters came up for decision while Alan was in Cairns getting a Toyota utility, and the older men decided to wait for his return before anything was done.



Figure 12.3 Alan Wolmby, 1976, with the tree he inscribed in 1971 marking the first day of his work on Victor Wolmby's outstation at Aayk with Victor.

Photo: Peter Sutton

Decisions are not made, ostensibly, in camera, but the essential power lies among the mature Wolmby brothers. Alan usually consults with his older brother Silas and younger brothers Caleb and Ray, but they all have a different mother from himself and Morrison. Alan and Morrison have the same parents, and are married to two actual sisters. They are the centre of the power spectrum. They and their wives do more of the practical jobs at Peret than any other definable group.

Major decisions are made by informal (but highly structured) public meetings. Males sit in a circle, females sit in a group a short distance away. Males are frequently grouped by clan, though only approximately. Each speaker claims to speak 'only for myself'. One speaker may put two or more opposed views on the same subject, without committing himself to any one of them, particularly in the early stages of discussion before a consensus has emerged. If the matter is important this type of meeting will occur several times over a few days before resolution is reached. Unless the meeting develops into open conflict, it is not a debate but a forum where views are simply launched into space. Younger men, frequently those with the most influence on the course of events, publicly

renounce actual power and claim only to 'go by what you old fellows say'. The 'old fellows' usually make sure they know the mood of such younger men before coming out with a decision. The Wolmby brothers, for example, have made it explicit that they see themselves as 'standing behind' the older men. If government or other officials visit Peret, 'you old fellows march up to them and speak in language; then we come behind and explain it to them'. The use of older men in such cases amounts to making them figureheads and is only one of a number of instances where go-betweens, front-men and ombudsmen are used in political life in the area. The three older men who have signature rights over the Cape Keerweer bank account really wield very little primary influence in Peret affairs, and this is in accord with the norms of decision-making.

Collective work efforts, such as the clearing of airstrips by teams of up to 20 or 30 people, are generally initiated by one person (usually Alan) starting the job alone or with someone over whom their authority is not a matter of dispute (Alan takes his son Rex to help him). Others who wish to help do so. The giving of orders, or even the making of 'polite requests', is not normally how things are done among adults. Whether one is told or asked, the fact that someone else is trying to initiate one's own activity is not happily borne. Two statements most frequently heard above the din of squabbles in the camp are: 'You make yourself boss for me—you're not a boss, I'm boss for myself', and '*ngay ngay* (I am myself = I am different)'. These attitudes mean that collective work is possible, at least for short periods, but cannot be organised 'efficiently' along European lines, and does not need to be.

By general consensus, a rule emerged that no alcohol was to be brought in and drunk at Peret. This was broken in late 1976 when one person brought a number of bottles of rum from Coen. That evening a fight erupted (between Alan's brother Silas and Marjorie's son Roy) which resulted in a number of people sustaining bruises and cuts. This was the worst conflict that has occurred since the outstation began. I contacted the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Cairns for advice on the treatment of an infection [Silas's] resulting from this clash, and the radio message was overheard by DAIA [Queensland State Government Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement] personnel at Kowanyama, who notified Aurukun. The Aurukun manager (Syd Thomas) then arrived [at Peret] by plane with the community chairman [Geraldine Kawangka] and local policemen [that is, Aboriginal police aides; State police were not stationed at Aurukun until later], concerned to institute a structure which would maintain law and order. Virtually without consultation, he 'suggested' Peret have a community council of the Aurukun type, and also suggested who might be on such a council. The chairman was to be Francis Yunkaporta, because of his previous experience as chairman of Aurukun Council (a man who is definitely on the periphery of affairs at Peret). The other members of the Peret Council (some suggested by Thomas, some by local people) were Francis's brother Clive, Alan's brother Silas, and one of the older men ... Johnny [Lak Lak] Ampey began.

Thomas also suggested that there should be a policeman. By local decision two older men, Jack Spear Karntin and Paddy Yantumba (the latter renowned for his spearing and fighting ability in former years) were appointed.

This structure came to nothing almost immediately, since the new 'chairman' soon chaired the biggest showdown to date between Alan and Isobel, the result of which was Alan's assumption of control in Peret. The need for an outsider had been significantly lessened, and the 'council' disappeared. One of the 'policemen' was given the job of emptying the toilet tins.

In broad outline, the politics of Peret have gone from relative unity at the beginning [1976] to greater fragmentation more recently [1978]. As population increased, the different 'mobs' emerged more clearly, and people more peripheral to the group arrived. Fission began to take place more often. This represents the re-emergence of the groupings and pressure points that may be reconstructed for the pre-mission period of fifty years ago. The politics of these groups has not essentially changed but, while the settlement life of Aurukun demanded it, they could be rendered fairly invisible to European eyes. The camping arrangements at Peret and in bush camps reflect alliances and divisions very clearly, since these are fluid residential situations. In the Aurukun town plan, it is often difficult to reserve village areas to those groups that are most close-knit. (Sutton 1978: 2-5)

## The future in 1978

I closed that report with a section called 'Aspirations of Peret community'. I will reproduce that same coda here as my coda 36 years later. It is, as is inevitable, poignant. One needs to read this poignancy in light of the fact that Peret, renamed Watha-nhiin ('White-tailed Water Rat Sitting') after the humble bush well at its epicentre, never became a permanent outstation. It has been occupied, deserted, occupied and deserted again many times over the intervening years, and its purposes have altered with the times also. But that is another chapter.

### Aspirations of Peret community [1978]

The establishment of Peret was aimed at the future, not a 'return to tribal ways' as has sometimes been thought. The immediate concern was to establish independence for the group, without forgoing the ability to come to grips with the European or 'outside' world. This meant that economic considerations and the need for education were paramount.

The basis of the economy of Peret and other outstation communities was, and still is, intended to be cattle. The low prices for cattle and the extent to which voluntary labour based essentially on kinship obligations can meet the demands of a beef producing operation were both against them. There was hardly any

money available from the mission to pay to stockmen, and this was quickly used up. Fencing and odd jobs such as fixing windmills are done voluntarily, and several sheds have been built.

A Weipa barramundi fisherman [Neville Bagnall] has offered to continue to employ casual labour from the group, but on an increased scale, if they will make a deal over the location of a freezer within country 6 [Wolmby's Aayk estate], and if they will agree to exclude other fishermen from Kirke River. They have invited him to a point on the Kirke River to discuss the matter, but are wary. Some (notably close brothers of one of the erstwhile permanent employees [Peggy Kelinda, a Wolmby and daughter of Colin]) see a future in such work, while others see it as yet another case where they will be labouring for a European boss in their own country.

One enterprising individual [Billy Landis, sr, Isobel's brother] agreed to sell salt from the Kirke River salt pans to a cattle station on the Coen Road (Meripah Station [that is, to Bill Witherspoon]), since it is an expensive commodity on which freight is high. He collected the salt from another man's country [Johnny Lak Lak's, who later confronted Billy about stealing his salt]. On returning to camp that night, [Billy] collapsed apparently unconscious. Old ladies began to mourn. As he revived [that is, while I administered powerful Flying Doctor smelling salts that had a miraculous effect on his thespian torpor] they attempted to divine whether he had drunk from an increase centre. He suggested that the ancestors of the salt-place were getting at him. In any case, their principal living descendants tackled the salt-stealer the following day and, after a vigorous public dispute, the latter moved to Ti-Tree [another outstation]. One of the rightful claimants to the salt, however, collected more and took it up to Meripah [courtesy of my Land Rover]. This may be a minor source of income in the future.

I do not have any figures on incomes, but the principal source of money other than social services appears to be artefact making. If it were better organised, this could be more profitable, but would exclude the young since the principal makers of traditional bags, spears etc. are over 35 years old.

Gardens have been planted at Peret. Coconuts, bananas and watermelons are most commonly planted. The crops have been insignificant. By and large, the exercise is symbolic rather than pragmatic, and is aimed particularly at ensuring the maintenance of support from mission and other authorities. This is probably a legacy of earlier superintendents who stressed the importance of agriculture, and it has come to assume a kind of ritual importance. The kinds of things, which grow easily in the areas, are not considered basic food, except for the yams which were always there and which are still plentiful.

Some individuals have suggested that tourists be brought to Peret and sold artefacts, taken on a brief trip around the country, and generally told something of local culture. This would undoubtedly bring in money, but no great enthusiasm

has been shown for it. People like Alan Wolmby would rather run their own enterprise. His purchase of a Toyota utility represents a move in this direction, and he will undoubtedly make money out of it by providing transport.

To a significant extent, Victor Wolmby's plans have been realised. Six or seven years ago it was determined that Alan Wolmby would be head stockman, Morrison would be the carpenter, Silas would hold the church services, and Peter would build fences. By the end of 1976, Alan had organised a joint muster of cattle with Ti Tree and sent four Peret men there to take part in it (all outsiders to the core Cape Keerweer group), had done some fencing, and took charge of killing a beast once a month to supplement hunted meat. Morrison had, with Peter, built a shed at Aayk requiring more than 50 sheets of iron for the roof alone, and had done jobs of similar nature around Peret. Silas was holding a regular church service (in the Wolmby's dialect) on the sand at Peret, whose attendance was many times that of any similar events held in the great church at Aurukun. (Sutton 1978: 10–1)

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This text is taken from *Experiments in self-determination: Histories of the outstation movement in Australia*, edited by Nicolas Peterson and Fred Myers, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.