

5

‘Looking at all the Country’

When you die, you're finished up. So when you're alive it's good to go walking around looking at all the Country.

Doug Campbell

Ranges

The lands that people travelled on foot are areas within which they know, with sufficient precision for survival, the waters, foods, seasons, medicines, technological items, Dreaming sites and tracks, locations of sacred and dangerous places, histories of past events, land tenure within the Aboriginal system of ownership, and land tenure and use by white settlers. If they do not hold this knowledge to begin with, they are guided and taught by those who do. Within the living areas to which people kept returning, all this knowledge was sustained at a very high degree of resolution.

Territoriality among Australian Aborigines has been subjected to excellent analysis. It is well documented, for example, that clan and tribal areas are larger in the more arid zones, and smaller in the coastal or well-watered zones. The factor is resources, and the matching of the group to a territory that will support that group. On average, group size at the ‘tribal’ or language level appears to have remained stable at about 300 people. A desert region with widely distributed resources would require territories that were much larger than a resource-rich territory that also supports 300 people (Birdsell 1953, 1968; Tindale 1974). There is also a good literature examining some of the social processes, such as clan fission or fusion, by which people sustain their numbers in relation to what Peterson calls their life-space (Peterson

and Long 1986). These studies go to show that relationships between people and territory are, as one would expect, ecologically informed and adaptive, and indicative of long-term stability. Maps of 'tribal' boundaries demonstrate this aspect of spacing.

In this chapter I look to the footwalk maps to gain another perspective on knowledge of and relationships to eco-place. The life histories discussed above are restricted to footwalking, and thus only show a portion of people's travel and a portion of their knowledge, so it is important to add that access to vehicles has enhanced mobility greatly (Kolig 1981). Most people have driven to nearby towns such as Katherine (373 km distant) and Kununurra (381 km distant), and many have been much further afield. Hobbles, for example, went on at least one long trip associated with men's business that took him to Ringer Soak and Balgo in Western Australia. Some of the women travelled to Turkey Creek in Western Australia for women's business. Kitty Lariyari spent some years in Darwin in the leprosarium and when Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin in 1974, she and others went bush. Her knowledge of Country includes the floodplains south-east of Darwin.

Even before motor vehicles, work on the stations required mobility. In the early years women like Kitty Lariyari worked as stockmen, but that practice was discontinued (the cut-off times vary, but certainly by the 1940s most women were confined to domestic work). While women worked alongside men, they had the opportunity to learn about much the same Country as men, bearing in mind that some sites and areas are gender-specific, but after their exclusion from stock work their opportunities for learning diminished. Many of the men went on droving trips that took them as far east as Queensland, and men who worked as police 'trackers' also travelled widely in the course of their duties.

I calculated footwalk ranges for each of the participants in the map interviews (see Table 5.1). My method was to calculate square kilometre areas where it was possible to do so, as with Snowy's travels along the watershed Country. Many of the stories were presented as roads more than areas—from Centre Camp to Coolibah Station, for example. No footwalk road is ever a geometric line; it always has width as well as length. I calculated an arbitrary five-kilometre width to these roads, and then determined the area by multiplying width by distance in a straight line. My calculations underestimate areas, minimally because one does not walk in an exact straight line. I also calculated the area (roughly) in which people had lived in the bush (away from white people). It is probable that these intensive living areas have also been underestimated. Boundaries of living areas are permeable and flexible, and shifted with time,

and thus are not knowable to a degree of perfect precision. I am not suggesting that the figures I produce have absolute values as footwalk ranges; they are approximations. They have all been produced by the same method, however, and thus are comparable to each other.

Table 5.1. Showing the year of birth, sex, footwalk area, intensive foraging area, extensive area, home County zone, number and type of zones visited, and the number of foods listed for each of the footwalkers discussed here.

| Year of birth | M/F | Total area (km ²) | Intensive (km ²) | Extensive (km ²) | Home zone | Number and type of zones | Foods (n) |
|----------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|
| 1. 1900 Big Mick Kangkinang | M | 6,960 | 5,040 | 1,920 | S | 3: S, R, C | 73 |
| 2. 1905 Old Jimmy Manngayarri | M | 9,744 | 3,744 | 6,000 | R | 3: S, R, D | 45 |
| 3. 1907 Old Tim Yilngayarri | M | 4,428 | 3,888 | 540 | R | 1: R | 40 |
| 4. 1912 Dora Jilpngarri | F | 5,400 | 3,600 | 1,800 | R | 2: S, R | 54 |
| 5. 1913 Jambo Muntiyari | M | 3,096 | 1,296 | 1,800 | D | 3: R, D, T | 39 |
| 6. 1913 Doug Campbell | M | 4,908 | 1,008 | 3,900 | R | 2: S, R | 37 |
| 7. 1917 Jessie Wirrpa | F | 2,172 | 1,872 | 300 | R | 1: R | 53 |
| 8. 1919 Kitty Lariyari | F | 6,480 | 2,160 | 4,320 | R | 2: R, D | 32 |
| 9. 1924 Daly Pulkara | M | 4,024 | 2,884 | 1,140 | R | 2: S, R | 43 |
| 10. 1926 Hobbles Danaiyarri | M | 6,564 | 5,184 | 1,380 | D | 2: R, D | 24 |
| 11. 1927 Snowy Kulmilya | M | 6,588 | 5,148 | 1,440 | R | 2: S, R | 60 |
| 12. 1928 Charcoal Winpara | M | 5,484 | 5,184 | 300 | D | 2: R, D, T | 38 |
| 13. 1939 Nancy Kurung | F | 2,364 | 1,584 | 780 | R | 2: S, R | 45 |
| 14. 1940 Jessie Kinyayi | F | 1,350 | 750 | 600 | R | 1: R | 11 |
| 15. 1942 Riley Young | M | 6,024 | 864 | 5,160 | R | 3: S, R, D | 37 |

Zones: S = saltwater side; R = riverine; D = desert; C = coastal; T = Tanami (sandy desert).

Source: Author's summary.

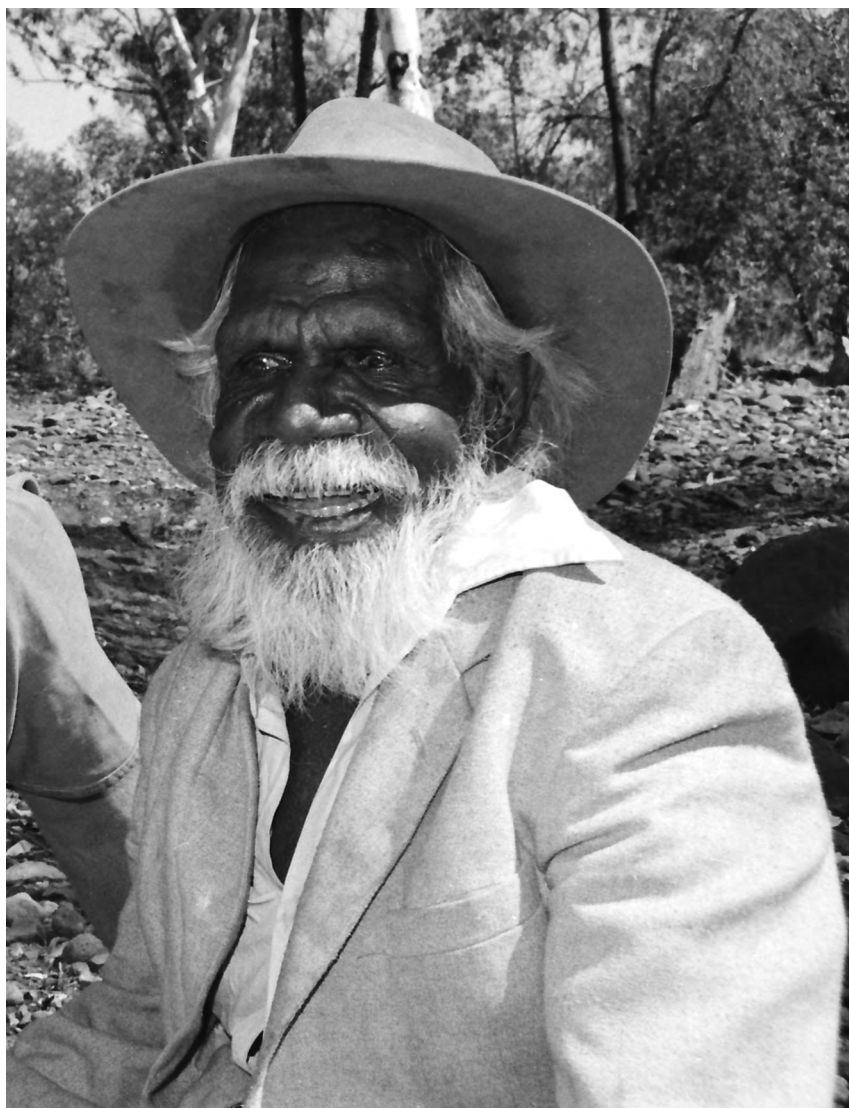


Figure 5.1. Old Jimmy Manngayarri, a great Law man and when younger a great walker, Daguragu, 1991.

Source: Photograph by Deborah Bird Rose.

The person with the greatest range is Old Jimmy. He is acknowledged throughout the region as a person of rare walking abilities—for speed and distance he was held to be without peer, and the map confirms this assessment. He loved walking, he said, and he used to walk around and look at the Country:

I was working man. When I'm [on] holiday, going foot. Every time, no mate, travel around all over the Country. That's why I know where the place and go through any way. My fathers, my *jawaji* [mother's fathers], all bin tell me what I know. Well I follow that Law, what he tell me, well I follow that, see.¹

Five others fall within a roughly similar scale (Big Mick, Kitty Lariyari, Hobbles, Snowy and Riley Young). Their figures show that men's travels are likely to be more extensive than women's, even without the influence of station life. The women's areas are spread from a high that is among the highest cohort to the lowest figure in Table 5.1 (Kitty Lariyari and Jessie Kinyayi). It is significant that the three smallest areal figures are women's and the three largest areal figures are men's. It is probable that this disproportion is due to the fact that in the course of making a little boy into a young man, the lad is taken travelling by men. The ceremony requires women, and women travel for young men's business, as Dora described. Ceremony is followed by travel in the company of men. I found that men did not discuss details of this aspect of their travels in mixed company, with very few exceptions. It seems most probable that some of the long trips men made when they were young were made while they were in a state of ritual seclusion. Perhaps the most telling comparison here is that between Jessie Kinyayi and Riley Young. They are brother and sister, and their areal ranges could hardly be more different. It must be noted, however, that Jessie found that she had little patience for this work, and the figures shown probably underestimate her actual travels and her actual knowledge. Within the group of participants with large footwalk areas, age is not a factor: the oldest man and youngest man had very similar areal ranges. The only woman in this cohort is neither the oldest nor the youngest participant.

The agglomerated range does not tell the whole story, however. I calculated living and travelling figures separately and have included the separate figures. It is notable that of the participants whose intensive areas are extremely high (Big Mick Kangkinang, Hobbles Danaiyarri, Snowy Kulmilya and Charcoal Winpara), all four spent substantial amounts of time living in the bush, and two have their home Countries in desert Country, where ranges are larger because resources are more widely distributed.

1 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 110, recorded at Yarralin, 13–14 August 1991.

The four oldest members of the large area group had ‘maps’ that combined intense travel in local areas with extensive travel. Only the youngest, Riley Young, produced a map that is far more extensive than intensive. The ratio of intensive to extensive varies across all ages, so there is not a significant pattern here. However, if we examine only those people whose home Country is riverine (thus excluding the disproportionate desert areas), one sees an uneven but general decline in intensive areas. The decline is indicative of people’s shift toward sedentarisation. As noted above, with access to motor vehicles, beginning in the 1960s and rapidly increasing in the 1980s, mobility has expanded while footwalking has diminished.

In Table 5.1, I also include the home zone of each participant, by which I mean the zone within which their home Country is located. I examine not only the number of zones within which a person travelled, but also exactly which zones. Almost every participant travelled by foot in at least two zones, and many travelled in three. It is significant that people’s footwalk travel only took them into zones adjacent to their home zones. Thus, Big Mick, whose home Country is the saltwater side, travelled into coastal and riverine zones. The home zone for Charcoal Winpara is located in desert, and he travelled into the Tanami (full desert) and riverine zones. Most of the participants have their home Country in the riverine zone and travelled into one or two adjacent zones. No participant travelled by foot into a zone that was not adjacent to their home zone.

In the areas to which people keep returning today (a diminished but not insignificant range), knowledge includes superbly detailed information about historical events and about environmental change. I will return to this point in Chapter 8 when I look at change and consider some of the implications of how one would know Country on a tree-by-tree basis and what the implications of that knowledge are for assessing environmental change.

Where to go?

Riley Young travelled a very long distance along a roughly western axis within a riverine/savanna *kaja* domain, and he noted the similarities that enabled him to survive. He noted the distinctiveness of the northern boundary when he defined one of the southern limits of *kakawuli*, saying that from

Bullita and Jasper Gorge north there is different tucker. He contrasted this distinction with the situation from Lingara to the south-west where, in his view, it's the same language (family) and the same tucker:

That time we been followem that creek for tucker, bush tucker. If you go away from river, you can't findem tucker. If you go followem river, you havem plenty tucker, or plenty fish, or plenty any kind, you know. Any sort of a feed.

Same tucker that one now. All the same fruit we used to live [on are found in] Gurindji, Ngarinmanpuru, [and] Kartangaruru [Country], all them same feed we been tuck out. Same tucker we used to eat, and same language we talking.

All the same seeds that Country. Can't make it different. All the same seed. Only this way road [to the north], he can change different-different tucker, this way longa gorge. We used to go down to Jasper Gorge way, we used to tuck out that *kakawuli*.

But this part of it right up to Inverway, Wave Hill, right up to Limbunya, Kirkimbi, all round there, that's the same feed we used to living [on]. Same fruit.

And, close up to Gordon Downs, just halfway to border. All the same food we been eat. Live with same fruit, *ngapin*. No different tucker. All the same fruit.

I'm thinking about when I'm looking at, you know, how many miles I been travelling, my father been carry up me. I had to walk so many miles, long way. Same fruit, same everything we been tuck out.²

Others also expressed the importance of being taught. Here is Daly:

Follow my father Country. Travel all the way down, footwalk. They been tell me story first. And next time I asked to went up there and find out myself what's going on and what sort of a Country.

2 Riley Young, tape 86, recorded at Yarralin, 24 July 1986.

Jimmy, as usual, emphasised both intergenerational learning and Dreaming Law:

My fathers, my *jawaji*, all bin tell me what I know. Well I follow that Law, what he tell me, well I follow that, see. Because not me, not my father, only by Dream. Everything got to be by Dream. See? Every people, they got to follow by Dream. Never make it [up] himself; by Dream, by Puwarraja. We talk Puwarraja [Dreaming]. That's why every people when you travel, you travel *kalu* [footwalk], that's the same thing [as done] by Dream. Walking all over the Country.³

Water and Country

Almost from my first day in Yarralin in 1980 people were explaining to me the directions of water flow. Yarralin is on the bank of the Wickham River. The water flows east into the Victoria River, and Victoria flows generally northward toward the sea, inscribing a large arc as it turns toward the west to find its outlet in the Bonaparte Gulf. Just as important as the big rivers are all the little creeks. Travelling upstream along the Wickham River you go past a number of junctions where smaller creeks flow out of the ranges and into the Wickham. Each of these is the home Country for a family group, sometimes referred to in the literature as a clan. As you go upstream, you pass through a magnificent sandstone gorge. This is the area to where the Barramundi travelled and stopped, and from where it tries to get back to its mate at Yanturi. From there, the track follows the watershed ranges between the creeks. This is Daly's Country, and Daly explained that on one side the water goes back to Gordon Creek, and on the other side the water goes back to Sanford Creek. Each creek belongs to a different mob of people, and they all come together at the junction of the Wickham and Victoria Rivers.

From my research at Yarralin, I developed an expectation that understanding the flow of water would facilitate understanding relationships between people and Country, and relationships among Countries. I have been privileged to work on many Aboriginal claims to land from the driest

3 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 110, recorded at Yarralin, 13–14 August 1991. Debbie had a note here saying, 'I wonder if I should put in here about what Old Jimmy and Earth tells you. And say that I may spend the rest of my life understanding the ramifications of his statement, but what interests me here is the absolute confidence with which he organises his action in response to Country's, or Earth's, call'—eds.

corners of the driest deserts to the coastal areas and offshore islands. In most of these places, gaining a sense of water flow and, if there is no flow, of the connections between waters, greatly enhances one's understanding of groups and Country.

This insight was foreshadowed by Nicolas Peterson's 1976 article on natural and cultural regions of Australia. Peterson shows that the Australian continent can be divided into a number of large cultural regions, and that these regions conform closely to natural regions defined by water catchment. The system of family group and creek catchment is recapitulated at larger scales, not only as creeks flow into rivers, but as rivers themselves join each other, or flow into the sea in close proximity to each other.

Peterson's analysis is extremely accurate with respect to the Victoria–Ord catchment. The map he produced, based on the very small amount of research that had been carried out in the region prior to the 1980s, describes a cultural region that includes all of the Country my teachers footwalked. This analysis goes a long way toward solving what for me was an interesting problem of range.

The zones I have analysed are far more extensive in an east–west direction than in a north–south direction. I had hypothesised that an analysis of ranges would show people travelling most extensively along an east–west axis. This hypothesis was not verified. Rather, most people's ranges were roughly equal along both axes, and some people's were most extensive along a north–south axis. As stated earlier, the sample is small, and the life histories are replete with a great number of variables, so it is not possible to draw firm conclusions here, but the evidence is suggestive.

My commonsense hypothesis was not proved, and so I had to ask if there are barriers to the east and west that limited footwalk? One would readily grant that there must be physical limits to the distances a person could walk, and still return home, or walk and expect to return home and resume their place in their own society. Setting aside the possibility of endless travel, there still appear to be limits that are not primarily ecological. These limits may, therefore, be cultural. Beyond one's own catchment area the languages are unknown or unfamiliar, and the further one goes from home the fewer kin or possibilities for classificatory kin are to be found. The concurrence of cultural and natural regions seems to be sustained through a system of return in which ecological and cultural discontinuities worked together to reinforce regionalism.

The counterbalance to the idea of limits is, of course, the fact that limits are regularly exceeded. Dreaming tracks are the best example, for while most Dreamings are localised, the big travelling Dreamings like the Black-Headed Python kept going.⁴ In addition to the tracks and ceremonies, contiguity has its own imperatives. The people whose Country lies on the central ridge between the east–west catchment areas of the Northern Territory include Mudbura and Jingkili people. Their Dreamings and Law are connected with those of people in both catchment areas. In recent years, with the greater mobility available to Aboriginal people through access to motor vehicles and other mechanised transport, they have facilitated contacts between people who formerly were largely, if not wholly, unknown to each other. I describe one such event in *Dingo Makes Us Human* (Rose 1992, 55–56; see also 145–49, dancing at Daguragu). Here I would add that once people organised marriages and started travelling back and forth between communities as widely separated as Yarralin and Borroloola, they commented with great interest on the environmental similarity between the two zones. Each is big river Country with much the same savanna plant communities. By foot you would have to traverse a lot of dangerous *kaja*, but by motorcar you fairly leap from one open savanna woodland to a nearly identical one in another catchment.

Storage

Amongst peoples classed as hunter-gatherers, a distinction is made between those societies in which people produce for local consumption and those in which people also produce for ceremonial feasting and exchange. Aboriginal Australians are situated within the latter category (Lourandos 1997, 18–19). The evidence for food storage is now excellent; reports from across the country, including the tropics, show that food was stored both for local consumption and for large intertribal ceremonial gatherings (49–50). Storage of grass seeds in Central Australia, for example, indicates that quantities as large as one tonne (1,000 kilograms) were stored for ceremony; ceremonies were held in periods of abundance, and the stored food helped extend the period during which people could remain together (56–57).

4 Debbie had a note saying that she wanted to discuss Roy Wagner's work here. This is likely to have been Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975—eds.

In this section I look at how food storage and food trade in the Victoria River District both undermine the old stereotype about not storing, and, more importantly, how they sustained connections amongst people across zones to produce a regional system of resource utilisation. I use the past tense here because storage is now part of living in houses with refrigerators and freezers, and the bush tucker trade is very much in decline, although it is not only a thing of the past. A number of the reasons for the decline are environmental, and I will turn to them in Chapter 8.

Formerly, the shelves or cavities within caves and rock shelters were the preferred storage sites. People kept their goods at home in their own Country, where the many modes of restricting access by strangers served also to protect one's stored goods, whether they be food, objects, bones or other material. That sense of security of home was expressed by Big Mick in his telling of the story of Walujapi, the Black-Headed Python. She gathered lily corms and had a large coolamon full. She was on top of the ranges, cooking the corms, and when she left, she left the remainder there, reckoning, 'Too heavy for me. I'll have to leave 'em here on top. Because this my Country.'⁵

A variety of foods lend themselves to storage. Some animal foods were obtained in abundance and stored, but this seems to have been rare. Few Australian animals are so large that they cannot be eaten on the spot, and of the two instances in my research only one seems to have been a pre-colonisation practice. The other, storage of beef, results from the size of the beast and the amount of food that could be eaten by a small group.

One type of animal food which often was produced in abundance was fish. The use of fish traps was one method: spinifex (probably *Triodia pungens*) was rolled and pushed along a shallow waterhole to herd fish to one end. Stone fish traps were also constructed. The use of poisons was another method. In addition, the first rains wash over hot soil and run into rivers that have shrunk back to isolated waterholes. These first rains produce hot anaerobic water that stuns the fish, and people rushed to the rivers to pick up fish by hand as they swam drunkenly in the hot and muddy water.

Snowy Kulmilya described the use of fish poison and fish storage:

Little one fish ... we call im *walpi*. *Walpi*, yeah. We got a big mob, that kind, oh big mob, about a hundred. Get the paperbark, paperbark—you put them there

5 Big Mick Kangkinang, notebook 21, 86.

inside, tie em up, takem bush. No matter how long man can stay, [the fish are] all right. [It's still] Good, dry inside there, when you openem up. Still he's good. They killem [crush them] gottem stone, makem stew.

Even that beef. Bullock ... cuttem, puttem la paperbark, you can takem for months or two months, three months, still he's good. No matter he go a bit bad inside, he's still good. He get dry now, still good.⁶

Old Jimmy offered another account of how to store fish, and also provided a term for dried fish powder—*niyampulu*. His words are extremely similar to Snowy's, but the interviews took place in different years and in different communities. The similarity seems to attest to the emotion people feel in talking about bush foods and their former practices:

And that *yawu* [fish], *yawu*, different, you know, when im bin cook im. Dry im out that *yawu*, all right, tie im up longa paperbark. All right, when you dry im now, finish, all right, put im in the paperbark. You can leave im there, might be put im in the cave. Might be you go next year, you going over there, he still good!⁷

Plant foods produced their own abundance seasonally and were harvested at their peak; some were then processed for storage. Sugarleaf is an important one. This substance forms on the leaves of two eucalypts, as Dora described (Chapter 3). The method of processing involved breaking off the branches, drying them on a cloth, threshing them, removing the branches and winnowing the remainder. The sugarleaf was then wetted and made into a flour that was shaped into cakes and wrapped in cloth or paperbark. According to Snowy, sugarleaf could be kept for years and years. Cakes were held in storage for ceremony times, as they were a staple for feeding the crowds who gathered for the 'business'. They constituted one of women's main contributions to the ceremony and have now been replaced by loaves of bread made in camp ovens.

6 Snowy Kulmilya, tape 90, recorded at Yarralin, 27 July 1986.

7 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 109, recorded at Yarralin, 13 August 1991.

According to Snowy and others, other foods for storage included lily corms, grass seeds, yams and a variety of berries and 'plums'. The method with berries and plums was to pack them into a ball, wrap the ball in paperbark, and tuck it away in a cave. The berries 'weld together' and were said to keep for years and years.

According to Old Jimmy, the yam known as *pikurta* which grows in his Country could be stored without processing:

Pikurta: You can take that *pikurta*, you take im, put im there, you come back next time, you got *pikurta* there. Put it in the cave. You can leave im there, cook im, leave im there when im get dry. Or, you can carry im long way, that *pikurta*.⁸

Jimmy's statement that *pikurta* can be carried for a long way suggests that *pikurta* was one of a number of foods that were traded across the region in an organised system of exchange.

Trade

Intertribal trade is known as *winan* in most of the languages of the region and is often spoken of as buying and selling in Aboriginal Pastoral English (see Rose 1991, 7–10f). *Winan* continues, but bush tucker is rarely part of it these days. Analysis of trade patterns shows that major trade routes once connected almost the whole of the continent. There is excellent evidence for trade in a few highly prized botanical resources such as the psychotropic tobacco known as *pituri* (*Duboisia hopwoodii*, Watson 1983). This highly desirable substance grew in a restricted area of south-west Queensland. It was harvested and processed by the people who owned that Country according to knowledge of the plant and the processing requirements that were the intellectual property of the groups and were not available to other groups. Other prized items with severely localised distribution include bamboo for spear shafts, confined to a few river systems in the north-west sector of the Northern Territory, and pearl shells and baler shells from the Kimberley coast.

8 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 109, recorded at Yarralin, 13 August 1991.

The distribution of resources through systems of trade responds to two subsistence imperatives: to move resources to people, and to move people to resources. In the context of moving resources to people, trade depends on two key factors: the production of surplus and the existence of scarcity. That is, one utilitarian impetus to trade is that other people have things that you want, and that you have things that they want. Regional and continental trade networks moved goods across the continent: plants, stones, shells, ochres and intellectual goods such as ceremonies. W.E.H. (Bill) Stanner (1933, 172) described the trade routes as high roads of cultural influence. The localisation of vital resources is an important factor, but the creation of scarcity through social means was also significant.

I have discussed Jirrikit's travels north into the saltwater side to get wood for spears. There is a myriad of other examples of trade in the Victoria River District, and all depend on distributing across zones and regions the technological and other items that are localised within zones or regions. Bamboo (*Bambusa arnhemica*) is traded south out of the floodplains around Darwin, which is the only region in which it grows. Hardwood spears come north out of the desert; stone tools are traded in from the east and the west where there are deposits of fine quality stone; pearl shells come from the west coast of the Kimberley region, and a fine red ochre comes from the south-east via Mudbura Country. Carrying bags, known as dilly bags, woven from palm and pandanus fibre, were traded in from both the north-east and the west. Given the necessity of many of the trade items, it is clear that trade must have been reliable and predictable.

A further aspect of trade, however, was the regional specialisation that enabled different groups to claim a unique item or range of items. People in the riverine zone made spears from a local 'bamboo' which is actually a reed (*Phragmites* sp.), and they still prized the different bamboo spears that were traded from the north. They made boomerangs from a variety of hard woods even while they traded with Mudbura people for the beautiful bullwaddy boomerangs. Regional specialisation depended on local resources as well as a variety of social conventions. Boomerangs from the desert Country were carved and decorated in ways that marked them as coming from the Tanami or beyond. Some items were (and are) sung to make them more powerful, thus enhancing their value in the trade system.



Figure 5.2. Little Mick Yinima with trade goods—bamboo spear shafts from the north and boomerangs from the south-east.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

Another side of trade, far less well documented in the existing literature, is the trade in bush foods. This trade enabled surpluses to be moved around the district. Bush tucker trade is not separate from trade in other items, and like trade generally, it is productive of social relations. Riley Young explained that people brought trade goods from Wave Hill, Mount Sanford and Newcastle Waters (among other places): ‘They bring and give it, we give it back tucker, spear; they bring tucker, boomerang. They call *mijelp* [themselves] relations now. In fight they go together.’⁹ He is showing the exchanges that underlie and articulate relationships that sustain allies and require them to back each other up in disputes and in warfare (see Rose 1991, 101–12 for ‘blackfella wars’).

The foods that can be traded across distance are those that can be stored. In addition, it seems that foods achieve value when they are traded out from their own places of Dreaming origin. Sugarleaf is one such food; it can be stored in the form of cakes or loaves, and thus it can be transported for trade. Jessie Wirrpa explained: ‘You can keep im months and months, sugarleaf. In a basket or anything. You keep it long time. No matter how far you take it.’¹⁰ Hobbles was even more emphatic: ‘Oh Christ, you can keep him hell of a long time.’¹¹ The sugarleaf that comes out of a particular Country belonging to Daly and Snowy (west of Humbert River along the watershed) is especially valued. Similarly, *miyaka*, the seeds of kurrajong (*Brachychiton*) that characterises Mudbura desert Country, was traded by the bagful and was one of several important foods that Mudbura people provided to trade partners across the region. *Miyaka* is emblematic of Mudbura Country, but also grows prolifically in the savanna *kaja* Country to the west belonging to Malngin people. According to Daly, bags of *miyaka* were sent up out of the Malngin *kaja* Country.

The seed-bearing grass of the Mudbura plains provided enormous surpluses. These areas could only ever support low population densities because of the limitations of water, but there were times and places where huge lakes formed and people could gather in large numbers. When the food in one place was far in excess of what the local group could consume it was harvested, stored for future use, and some of it was traded. Nugget Collins Ngurrartarlur said that his people used to take bags of *miyaka* and grass seeds (wild rice) to Pigeon Hole when they went footwalking there on holiday.

9 Riley Young, notebook 55, 97.

10 Jessie Wirrpa, tape 79, recorded at Yarralin, 15 July 1986.

11 Hobbles Danaiyarri, tape 91, recorded at Pigeon Hole, 27 July 1986.

Grass seeds flourish in different environments and ripen at different times. Lingara is the home of a Grass Seed Dreaming (and increase) site, and when the seeds became ripe there, Victoria River Downs (VRD) people who visited would bring home bags of seed.¹² Doug Campbell explained:

Plenty longa Lingara all round there grow there ... Early days they bin always get im. All them Humbert lubra [women] bin always get im. Sometimes that VRD mob bin always go down there for holiday, you know, for Christmas, they bin always bring a pack full, all round, that *mangorlu* [grass seed]. That's goodest tucker, everything, you know. I bin eat that. My mother bin always rollem up gotta [grind] stone.¹³

Medicine was exported from the plains to the south-west of the riverine Country (from Malngin and Djaru peoples). Their Country grows a spinifex called *purrita*, and they used to gather it and smash it up and pass back to Wave Hill bags of aromatic medicine. Hobbles described the stuff:

It doesn't grow at Yarralin, but from Daguragu Country west. It's like spinifex, only with more juice. Break it up into bits, boil it for tea, and it will bust up rubbish in the lungs. It's good for internal things. Cut it up and put it under the baby's pillow, the smell is good for him. Also, the wax from this spinifex can be boiled into tea with similar effects.¹⁴

Similarly, at one time the Pigeon Hole mob used to send bags of *wayita* and two different kinds of lily corms to the people at VRD Centre Camp. The lilies in the billabongs around Pigeon Hole (see Chapter 8) were there by Dreaming: some were deposited there by a Dreaming Goanna, and others were put there by the Nanganarri Women. There is an increase site there for lilies, and lilies once were extremely prolific. Their proximity to the source enhanced their value, while their abundance and storability made the trade possible.

12 An 'increase' site is a place dedicated to increase ceremonies, in this case for grass seed—eds.

13 Doug Campbell, tape 87, recorded at Yarralin, 25 July 1986.

14 Hobbles Danaiyarri, notebook 11, 10.

Riley Young offered a list of bush tucker trade items that includes grass seed, lily corms, bush tobacco, sugarbag, palm hearts and a berry called *tipil* (black currant), *muyin* (black plums), *martarku* (another berry, *Ziziphus quadrulocularis*) and *kumpulyu* (medicinal white currants).

The trade in bush foods was limited to the region, as far as I am able to determine. Undoubtedly distance correlates with the work of carrying bags of food or medicine, so that there are likely to be limits based on human effort. It seems also, however, that there were limits based on human knowledge. People traded in foods that they recognised and knew how to process. I asked Old Jimmy if foods came from different Countries, and he said they did not. His answer articulates a region within which bush tucker was traded:

No, him on this Country. That's why they make im, sell im, just like a flour you sell im. Sell im to nother people. They look, 'Ah yes. Good *mangari*.' Well they know. Im callem name, might be sellem this way, he knows. 'Ah, this one so-and-so *mangari*.' He knows. He remember. *Mangari*, same thing. He remember. Like that.¹⁵

With the greatly increased mobility now available to Aboriginal people, the possibilities for trade are also expanded, and it is no longer the case that bush tucker trade is confined to the region. Although the trade in bush tucker has declined considerably, the interest in exotic foods has, if anything, increased. When a group of girls from Daguragu went to Ali Curung, a community in the distant desert, they brought home a bag full of *pikurta* (yams) and a bag of bush plums called *yakajiri* that were described at Daguragu as being 'like conkerberries'. The bush plum was particularly interesting to the Daguragu women because it is a tucker that is in women's business.

There is a further aspect to trade that was alluded to by Riley Young: trade is constitutive of social relations, and thus facilitates the process of moving people to resources. We have seen this in the context of ceremony and the enjoyment of abundance, but it is also significant in the context of scarcity. Richard Gould's study of the ecology of sharing emphasises the mobility of people far more than the mobility of resources, and while the emphasis may be misplaced, the argument for human mobility is valid. According to Gould (1969, 273, 1982), social relations are sustained by trade relationships, and

15 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 111, recorded at Daguragu, 14 August 1991.

the need for social relations is linked to the unpredictability of Australian environments. Seasonal, annual and broader fluctuations create highly varied environments in which a resource-rich area may be ringed by areas of drought (or flood) and where this year's camp of plenty may be next year's hunger camp. Gould suggests that Aborigines stockpiled sets of social relationships based on sharing as a hedge against the uncertainties of any specific place. To quote Gould (1982, 73), 'Security in this case rests ... in the widest possible set of kin relations where sharing of food and access to resources is obligatory.' Victoria River people say that *winan* (trade) is 'to make a friend together'.¹⁶ Friends are trade partners, allies in war and refuge potentials in times of scarcity. They are bound together not only by the social interests that sustain trade, but also by the fact that trade is defined as Law. In speaking of trade, people would say: 'We run that Law right on through'. Like other forms of connectivity in motion, trading patterns crosscut, overlap and work toward mutual benefit.

Hobbles's family lived out on the grassy plains of Mudbura Country where groundwater was scarce. When the ephemeral waters dried up, and when the grass seeds were either unripe or past the point of being processed for nutrition, the families moved into other areas. Their habitation of the Country that Hobbles loved dearly was seasonal in two senses: it was contingent on water both annually and in the context of larger fluctuations. Like other people whose homelands were in the desert, they had access to several habitats, and moved in and out as the resources became available. Shortly before Hobbles was born, they left the plains Country and stayed away for a few years. In all probability, this was because of the severe droughts of the 1920s (now thought to be part of the El Niño, or southern oscillation fluctuation). The family's ability to move in and out of habitats was overtaken by European settlement. Where once they would have been with relations in known Country, conquest and the pastoralists' control of water meant that they became caught in cycles of dependency on government rations and cycles of labour on cattle stations.

These patterns of movement in and out of habitats depend on social relationships that connect people across habitats. It was almost certainly more important in the desert to be able to move in and out of eco-places, but the argument probably holds good in other zones as well, and for many of the same reasons: the unpredictability of Australian climates. The corollary

16 Notebook 15, 95. Debbie did not identify the person who made this statement—eds.

to leaving, of course, is the monumental abundance that occurs when the grass plains flourish with edible seeds, and every depression holds water, and the water birds arrive in the thousands.

In sum, connections across Countries and zones are sustained by travel and trade. The trade relationships make and sustain social relationships and accomplish three important ecological goals. People move themselves into areas of rich resources when reliance on their home Country resources proves inadequate, and they do this following social relations that are sustained through trade. Their presence as visitors will be reciprocated when their own periods of superabundance arrive. Second, items of limited natural distribution but wide social utility are distributed by trade. Third, local surpluses are distributed around the region by trade.

Differentiation

Zones are broader than home, but one's sense of being at home is also a sense of being in a particular kind of Country. This kind of identification is widespread across Australia and is part of a naming system in which some people are identified as sandhill people, stone Country people and the like. Home Country is associated with the specific species that distinguish it from other places. People's specific located knowledge belongs both to the people and to the Country. The desire to return home is often expressed as a longing for the specific plants or animals of home.

Along with love of home, many people also differentiate themselves from the places that are not home. This is to say that identification with place is both a positive force in its own right as well as a considered and deliberate disengagement from other places. Frequently, disengagement is expressed in relation to zones because at this level the markers of differentiation are unambiguous. Dora, characteristically, abjured any knowledge of saltwater species because of her identification as a freshwater person. We were discussing some of the saltwater species that swim the freshwater Country in the big floods:

Sawfish? I don't know. It's for sea country, that sawfish. We don't know the name. We don't know.

Debbie: Stingray?

Dora: Oh, that one, we call it blanket. That's all we call it. You know, sea country we don't know names. Fish, you know, we don't know.

Dora then enhanced her lack of knowledge by reversing it:

Dora: We know for sea country that *kampalngarnj*.

Debbie: What's that?

Dora: That fish. Belonging to the sea, where they always get him. They reckon he's got fat like a goanna, like that, this side, other side. That fish *kampalngarn*, they call it.

Debbie: Might be shark?

Dora: We don't know. That sea country fish, we don't know.¹⁷

As may be clear from Dora's account, what she did know, she did not like, and in her account of crabs she explained some of the differences to her granddaughter-in-law Ruth:

Debbie: What about that crab? Have you eaten that one?

Dora: No. Some folks eat it. They reckon it's beef [meat], good one. Crab. I never touched it yet, crab. It's too much of a cheeky one, you know. It always goes into a hole, like that, only it wants to frighten us. Cry! It made me cry! Cheeky one, crab. Olden time people always used to eat that crab. They reckoned it's good beef, crab.

Ruth: Saltwater country got a big big one crab, eh?

Dora: Saltwater, sea country, it's got a big one crab. Ordinary country, it's got a little one crab.¹⁸

17 Dora Jilpngarri, tape 82, recorded at Yarralin, 18 July 1986.

18 Dora Jilpngarri, tape 82, recorded at Yarralin, 18 July 1986.

Saltwater side people take a similarly dim view of the desert. Nancy Kurung, whose home Country was on the saltwater side, visited the savanna desert in the course of her working life as a camp cook. She described it as 'horrible country, no good, desert'. She didn't like the water, either. It was 'milky water, but it tastes ok'.¹⁹

Old Jimmy claimed and demonstrated a vast amount of knowledge, but he also disclaimed certain knowledge, particularly of sandhill Country. He told about Sandow, a long deceased Bilinara man, a brother to Jimmy, and like Jimmy a great walker:

We don't know much for different-different parts of the Country, you know, and how they live. When he went down this way, my brother, old Sandow, he went down [to] Gordon Downs, Sturt Creek all around. He was living on that frog in that time. He told me about it. And he slept on a paperbark, and just covered up and slept. And he scratched the ground. *Jiljat*—that's sandy country. He made a fire and covered it up [and slept on or in the warm sand]. He lived like that, that's my brother, biggest brother, old Sandow. He lived in that Country, and he came back, right back this way, and came back right back home to Mt Sanford.²⁰

Home is the place where one belongs and to which one returns, unless one's life has been subjected to great displacement. If one's life experience includes detailed knowledge of places which others do not know, a person may be somewhat stranded. Charcoal Winpara spent enough of his time in the sandhill desert Country to enable him to speak authoritatively on the different animals and plants that live there. Jambo Muntiyari also knew the sandhill desert Country, for it was his home Country. Together they spoke of many plants and animals known only to the two of them (in Yarralin). The thorny devil (a lizard, *Moloch horridus*) is a good example:

Jambo: And nother one is *miniyiri*. It's not tucker, that one. No beef. It's poison, that one. He's got a horn like a bullock. He's got a horn like a bullock. For desert country.

19 Nancy Kurung, notebook 18, 41–45; Nancy Kurung, tape 29, recorded at Yarralin, 12 April 1982.

20 Jimmy Manngayari, tape 111, recorded at Daguragu, 14 August 1991.

Charcoal: It's like a horn, he's got.

Jambo: You can't eat him.

Charcoal: He's poison.

Jambo: It's poison, that one. You only just pick him up. Anywhere in the bush they pick him up and carry him on their head. In their hair, on top, you know, they carry it into camp. And they let him go there in camp. And he's walking around, and he goes away.

Charcoal: It lives in the bush around Yuendumu country.

Jambo: All around to Hookers.

Charcoal: *Kaja* Country, all around to Hookers Creek.

Jambo: He's not for this Country. He's in my Country all around.²¹

Descriptions and lists such as Charcoal's and Jambo's demonstrate people's delight at displaying knowledge, but it is also the case that knowledge that is not shared experientially is actually of little social value. Unshared knowledge may also lead to a deep loneliness. It was no accident that Charcoal asked Jambo to come and share in the discussion of sandhill desert species. The two of them could have a conversation because they shared the life experience of that Country. For Jambo it was home Country, while for Charcoal it was Country he had lived in. Both felt at home in Country that to other people was not only strange but also from which they and their peers differentiated themselves.

21 Charcoal and Jambo, tape 92, recorded at Yarralin, 31 July 1986.



Figure 5.3. Jambo Muntiyari, Yarralin, 1982.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

Running into change

Riley was often critical of white fellows, and he enjoyed drawing contrasts and declaring his position. He was against dams, against what NRM (natural resource management) experts would call management through the regulation of rivers. In Riley's view, the ground (which one might gloss as 'nature' or 'Earth') was a non-negotiable force in the world:

Why that government reckon he gonna changem everything? Change him round? How you going to change him round? You can't change ... that big hill there. You can't change him this ground. How you going to change him? How you going to change that creek? ... Put that creek this side, he'll come back to flood this side. You can't! No way!

I know government say he can change him rule. But he'll never get out of this ground. (Quoted in Rose 1992, 57)

The idea that the ground does not change is one part of the story. Another part is that everything is in a state of flux—of life and death, of nurturance, care, hunting, dying.

Change is part of life; there is nothing static in the world view of my Aboriginal teachers. They emphasise continuity and endurance, and they see these processes to be set in time and to be worked toward. Continuity, if achieved at all, is achieved against the flux and change of life and death. Sometimes continuity is not achieved. There are a few examples of Dreaming stories which seem to speak to long-term changes in the land. One such example is *miyaka*. Dreaming stories of discontinuities and plant distributions also seem to hold environmental history. *Miyaka* (a kurrajong, or *Brachychiton* species²²) is said properly to be a desert tree. *Miyaka* Country is south of the big riverine zone and is intimately associated with groups of people for whom it is their matrilineal Dreaming and whose mothers came out of the desert (Chapter 2). And yet, a Dreaming site for *miyaka* is located in Bilinara Country, well out of the desert. Old Jimmy said that the name

22 Several *Brachychiton* species grow in the region, and the local Aboriginal terminologies have not adequately yet been linked to Linnaean terminologies which have recently been revised.

of this site is Miyakawurru (place for *miyaka*), and that 'Miyaka was human being before; he was walk there and turned over [into the tree]. But [there are] no *miyaka* that side'.²³

Such stories are by no means transparent, although I believe they are suggestive of environmental histories yet to be explored. Equally, they speak to landscapes in flux, and thus to a world in which broadly defined regularities are dynamic and are subject to the work of change and transformation. Other stories concern places where trees used to be, but it is possible also to consider that some Dreaming sites, like the *miyaka* site that is not now in the immediate vicinity of *miyaka* trees, may hold a memory of a time when there were *miyaka* trees there.

In spite of the evidence in Dreaming for changes that appear to be irreversible, the model of change in people's daily lives is replacement. People die, and new generations take over. A Dreaming tree dies, and a new tree takes over. A better term than replacement is 'return'. Things happen, and life returns. An example is the tree called *yirlirli* (*Syzygium eucalyptoides*, Wightman 1994, 50). This slender tree grows in the bed of the Victoria River and in other rivers in the district. It was abundant in the Daguragu area, and people there used to call the river Yirlirimawu. Old Jimmy remembers that he was told by old people that there was a huge flood, years and years ago, that took out all the *yirlirli*. When he was a child, he did not see *yirlirli*, and he did not learn the term until the trees started to grow again. In his view, they never came back to the full extent of their former glory. Other people do not remember the flood, and so do not compare *yirlirli* before and after. Rather, from the viewpoint of people whose memories postdate the flood, *yirlirli* is pretty much the way it has always been, bearing in mind that it fluctuates. Whether or not *yirlirli* came back to the levels it had been before the flood, it is the case that the trees have come back. Change happened, and living things reasserted their presence.

Other examples suggest that change is beneficial in establishing balance. In my travels across Humbert River Station in 1991, I saw a long strip of dead trees. On either side there were living trees, and only the one broad strip was dead. I took Riley Young up there and asked him if he had ever seen anything like that before, and what he thought of it. He said that he had seen things like that before, and that the old people said that the Rainbow Snake made that happen. The Rainbow Snake indexes underground water,

23 Jimmy Manngayarri, tape 110, recorded at Yarralin, 13–14 August 1991.

so this strip of dead trees was probably lying over some underground water formation. Riley's evaluation of the Rainbow Snake's action was that the trees were too crowded and too hot and so the Rainbow Snake burned them by withdrawing the water. I understand Riley's explanation to indicate self-regulation between parts of living Country: an excess of trees was curtailed by the action of the underground water.

Another type of change arises from the reflexivity between people and Country. I discussed this concept in *Dingo Makes Us Human*, focusing on the proposition that 'when old people die they kill the Country' (Rose 1992, 108). People who are Countrymen share their being with their Country, and when the Country suffers, so do people. Likewise, when people die, their Country suffers. People identify marks such as dead trees, scarred trees or scarred hills, for example, as having come into being because of the death of a person who was associated with that Country. It is the same with Dreamings: when Dreaming sites are damaged, people die; when people die their Dreamings are at risk.



Figure 5.4. Dead trees in Riley pocket, Humbert River Station, killed when the Rainbow Snake withdrew the underground water.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.



Figure 5.5. Big Mick Kangkinang and Daly Pulkara, men with tremendous knowledge of Country and Law, Yarralin, 1981.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

When the Black-Headed Python came travelling out of Jasper Gorge, she followed a creek downstream near to where it joins the Victoria River. At one place she stopped to urinate, and a massive boab tree there always used to have water inside it that was associatively her urine. The explorer Augustus Gregory camped beneath this tree in 1856, and his party included the African explorer Thomas Baines. Baines was an artist, and he drew a sketch of this tree (see Lewis 1996, 221–25). At that time, it was intact (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.6. Allan Young removing a small sorcery figure from the Walujapi Dreaming boab at Wangkangki, 1986.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

I was first introduced to the tree in 1982 when I worked with Big Mick Kangkinang and others to document sites along the track of the Black-Headed Python. We were preparing nominations for protection of these sites under the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act of the Northern Territory. (Later, the Act was amended and retitled 'Aboriginal Areas Protection Act'.) This tree became a registered sacred site under the legislation. The tree bears the initials of white people who passed by and were moved to record their presence, and it thus holds some of the history of white people in this region, as well as the history of the Black-Headed Python, and of the people for this Country. When Jessie and Allan's father died many years ago this boab tree was said to have split in half so that all the water ran out.

In 1986 Allan Young discovered a small human figure drawing on the tree which he interpreted as a sorcery design. As a man responsible for the tree and the Country, it was his duty to remove the sorcery and, he hoped, to stop whatever illness it was causing in the world. He scraped the drawing off, and rubbed the tree with animal fat, speaking to the Black-Headed Python and telling her not to harm anyone (see Rose 1992, 66–67).



Figure 5.7. An engraving of the Black-Headed Python Dreaming boab at Wangkangki, based on a sketch that explorer Thomas Baines made in 1856.

Source: Thomas Heawood, *The Boadab [i.e. Baobab] Tree* [Picture] / T. Baines; T. Heawood. National Library of Australia. U208 Hand Col.; S224.; Pic Solander Box A24 #S224.



Figure 5.8. The Black-Headed Python Dreaming boab at Wangkangki in 1985, broken down but still living.

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

The creek the boab was on was cutting into the roots of the tree and threatening to undermine it. Later, in about 1990, a local white man with an interest in history and conservation decided to help preserve the tree by putting in a channel to divert the creek (Lewis 1996, 221). His actions may or may not have helped the tree; they certainly violated the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority rules concerning work undertaken in the vicinity of a sacred site, and thus his actions were interpreted by the Aboriginal owners as hostile actions intended to harm the tree.

The tree will not live forever. It is growing out on the flats where erosion of topsoil has been extensive (Figure 5.8). People's expectation is that when the old tree dies, another tree will take its place. Given its situation in the midst of erosion, the future is uncertain.

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