

INTRODUCTION



'Dulcie' Telephoned from Alice Springs

Disrupting the calm of my suburban home in Australia's 'bush capital', Canberra, in the 1990s, were occasional phone calls from my Aboriginal friend, 'Dulcie', a middle-aged Warlpiri woman who lived 2000 km away in Alice Springs in the centre of Australia.¹ With her news of her family, our friends in common and enquiries about my family, these phone calls were a fragile thread to my other life as a legal aid and land council lawyer in Alice Springs in the 1980s. That was a big, intense and varied experience, not least for the revelation of my identity as a 'whitefella' and a 'settler'. Having a job representing Aboriginal clients on criminal charges or in pursuing their land claims did not necessarily entail friendship with the clientele. But 'Dulcie' and, even more so, her Warlpiri husband of the time, specialised in befriending the new legal aid lawyers. I readily responded to these overtures and our families developed an ongoing relationship which included trips to their remote Aboriginal settlement of Yuendumu 350 km north-west of Alice Springs and to their outstation a further hundred kilometres from Yuendumu. When in Alice Springs they stayed at our house, usually camping in a line of makeshift bedding in the backyard (San Roque 2011 describes a similar situation of hosting remote settlement visitors). Such friendships were not unusual during that time of optimism about the possibilities of the new Aboriginal-controlled NGOs pursuing a new deal for Aboriginal people in the policy era of self-determination. Through 'Dulcie's' family I came to know many Warlpiri people, worked on their land claims and attended their funerals. After nearly a decade of intense work and the birth of my

two children in Alice Springs, a scary misadventure being washed away in a Toyota in a flash flood and a particularly sad Warlpiri funeral, I retreated with my young family to a less intense existence in Canberra. There I set about turning myself into an anthropologist to explore all the interesting questions that the professional practice of law tends to foreclose. ‘Dulcie’s’ telephone calls caught me in the middle of that transition and they usually ended with mutual invitations to visit, although I thought the difficulties of unfamiliar travel and the cost would make ‘Dulcie’s’ appearance in Canberra unlikely. Then there was the global financial crisis of 2007. One aspect of the Australian Government’s response was a financial stimulus which put a one-off lump sum in the bank accounts of welfare recipients, including ‘Dulcie’s’, and thus she did appear in Canberra for the long-promised holiday. We became for a short time a distant Warlpiri outpost.

I did not realise it at the time, but ‘Dulcie’s’ skill and conscientiousness in extending her personal networks and overcoming constraints to long-distance travel were years later to become some of the central themes of my Warlpiri diaspora research. My doctoral research had been a sedentary project about anthropologists as expert witnesses in native title claims (Burke 2011) and following that I was looking for an original project that would take me back to my Warlpiri friends and acquaintances. I had heard about a more permanent Warlpiri outpost in the 1990s at the unlikely site of the small South Australian town of Murray Bridge, over 1,500 kilometres from Alice Springs. I wondered how it came about, how it was sustained and how common such outposts were. The significance of these questions can only be understood fully if something is known about Aboriginal people in the cultural geography of Australia and where the Warlpiri fit in.

The Warlpiri in Aboriginal Australia

At the time of the first white settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788 the continent of Australia was entirely occupied by Aboriginal people. Although there were cultural differences among Aboriginal groups across the continent (see, for example, the seven case studies in Keen 2004), there were common features that tended to emphasise the relatively small-scale affiliation to a locale and to networks of kin. Large gatherings for ceremonies did take place and local groups were typically connected to neighbouring groups through shared mythology which in desert areas included segmented ownership of long-distance Dreaming tracks or song lines recounting the creative exploits of ancestral beings over vast distances. But their economy, principally hunting and gathering, was on a relatively small scale and social organisation was relatively loose, there being nothing on the scale of ongoing tribal organisation

like the chiefdoms of Africa. There was no large-scale, standing Aboriginal army and nothing approaching the scale of the militaristic clubs of the Plains Native Americans or the Maori warriors of New Zealand. Among Aboriginal people punishment for the breach of laws was mostly a question of self-help and the mobilisation of kin for relatively small-scale raids or revenge expeditions. This meant that, for the most part, the dispossession of Aboriginal people happened in a piecemeal and localised fashion along an expanding frontier as white settlement spread from a few colonial towns on the eastern and southern coasts of Australia often preceded by alien diseases and brutal violence sometimes described by historians as frontier wars.² One comparative constitutional historian has found the origins of the peculiar absence of treaties in Australian colonial history in the relative absence of large-scale warfare in the colonisation of Australia (Russell 2005).

The combination of localised, small-scale Aboriginal economy and society with the vast distances in Australia meant that those Aboriginal people who lived on land that was remote from the main cities and towns were not dispossessed of their lands or did not have their traditional lives disrupted until much later in the colonising process. This was even more the case for those who occupied land that was difficult for the colonisers to exploit economically because of the relative harshness of the terrain. The end result has been a much shorter contact period for Aboriginal people of the interior of the continent and in the remote north. The Warlpiri, whose traditional country was in the Tanami Desert of central Australia, were one of these groups whose intermittent contact with white people only began in earnest in the early decades of the twentieth century.

This particular combination of localised culture and protracted, piecemeal colonisation had a number of profound consequences both on Australian society and on anthropology. The most obvious consequence is that the Indigenous people of Australia are now a small minority of the broader population, although in many remote places in northern Australia, including the Warlpiri settlements, they form a local majority. In 2011 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia was estimated to be 669, 881 which is 3 per cent of the total population of Australia.³ Of this total, about 6 per cent identified as Torres Strait Islanders. About a third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live in capital cities; one quarter live in remote or very remote regions (calculated on the basis of distance from service centres); and the remainder (around 44 per cent) live in regional towns and cities.

The Indigenous population is not only geographically dispersed, it is also culturally diverse. This is partly due to the distinctively undifferentiated Australian legal definition of who is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Up to the late 1960s official government policy and laws reflected a high degree of differentiation, usually in terms of the dilution of 'blood'

(imagined degrees of racial dilution) and the terminology of ‘full-blood’ as opposed to ‘half caste’. Then, in a more liberal policy era, official definitions eventually landed upon a threefold cumulative test: any degree of biological descent plus self-identification plus community acceptance. This definition encompassed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who suffered widely differing impacts over the course of colonisation; who looked very different, in the old terminology incorporating both ‘full-blood’ and ‘half caste’ and those who looked similar to European people; with widely differing degrees of continuity and attenuation of use of traditional languages and traditional high culture (rituals, song, dance, arts); and with differing degrees of social mobility within the broader society. This inclusive approach tends to bedevil national policy discourse, producing a continual tension between nationwide uniformity, at the level of policy principle, and local diversity of Indigenous lifeworlds (as to Indigenous heterogeneity, see Rowse 2014 and 2017: 334–401).

This inclusive definition, combined with the lack of recognition of indigenous self-government in Australia, means that some of the legal racial distinctions made in North America, for example, are not officially sanctioned in Australia. Thus, ideas of there being a legally recognised group of Metis, or of women losing their status as an indigenous person if they marry a non-indigenous person, or of native American Indians losing their rights as indigenous persons if they are disenfranchised by their tribe, are all foreign to current Australian circumstances. Challenges to Aboriginality tend to happen in other forums, in personal encounters and in private spheres such as corridor talk or sceptical private commentary on the European appearance of some Aboriginal people who appear on television. Sometimes this private commentary spills over into contentious rants by conservative shock jocks about ‘light-skinned Aborigines’, and the even more incendiary tag ‘White Aborigines’. For a compelling dissection of the issue by an Indigenous intellectual, see Paradies (2006).

Aboriginal Internal Differentiation, its Preoccupations, its Reflection in Anthropology

It is the one quarter of Indigenous people who live in remote or very remote regions that were originally of interest to the newly professionalised social anthropology of the early twentieth century. The stage had already been set for this remote-area orientation by the worldwide enthusiastic reception of Spencer and Gillen’s *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) which directly influenced Durkheim, Freud and others (Kuklick 2006). The richness of that account and the rapidly deteriorating circumstances of Aboriginal

people helped to reinforce the orientation of anthropology towards remote areas 'before it was too late' to obtain ethnographic accounts of a living culture. This orientation led to an early scientific expedition to make contact with Warlpiri people, among other remote groups, and eventually to fully fledged, long-term participant observation among Warlpiri people commencing in the 1950s. Within worldwide anthropology the Warlpiri and other remote Aboriginal peoples became renowned for their hunter and gatherer economy, the complexity of their kinship systems and formal social organisation, their ritual life, and their distinctive cosmology encapsulated in the phrase 'the Dreaming'. In short, they were a people socially embedded in their kinship networks and spiritually emplaced in their traditional country.

The focus on the remote, traditional Aborigines did not go unchallenged. Some Aboriginal people in less remote 'settled' Australia came to the view that anthropology's valorising of the high culture of remote Aboriginal people was making their own struggles for political recognition and independence more difficult. From this perspective, remote-area ethnography can be seen as supplying material for the 'repressive authenticity' of the state.⁴ Although such dichotomies between remote-area and 'settled' Australia tend to be overlaid, they continue to provide rhetorical resources for contemporary debates within Australianist anthropology (see, for example, Cowlshaw and Gibson 2012). Suffice it to say, I am committed to revising traditionalist ethnography by placing experience-near accounts of Aboriginal people within the broader context of intercultural history. This orientation arises out of historical anthropology and earlier internal critiques that insisted upon the relevance of economic and cultural interconnections with the nations and global systems that encapsulated tribal societies (Fabian 1983; Wolf 1982). In Australianist anthropology, Francesca Merlan has made significant ethnographic and theoretical contributions to exploring the idea of the intercultural (Merlan 1998, 2005, 2007). To be clear, I also see the intercultural as a critique of the continuation of radical domain separation (Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal) in anthropological accounts of contemporary Aboriginal people. This applies to the study of Aboriginal people in both 'settled' and 'remote' areas.

The Warlpiri in Aboriginal Australia

Outside anthropological circles I doubt whether the Warlpiri ever impinge upon the consciousness of the mass of non-Indigenous people in the cities of Australia. Although they are a relatively large language group, the Warlpiri, at about 3,500 strong, are a small minority within the small Indigenous minority of Australia. Most non-Indigenous Australians never have any direct

experience of any Aboriginal people let alone Warlpiri people. Occasionally there is a Warlpiri football star in the national competition, or a famous Warlpiri artist who might break through in the national media, or a quirky news item about the Yuendumu sports weekend inevitably described as ‘the Aboriginal Olympics’. But Indigenous issues more generally are always in the national media in what some see as the distinctively Australian high profile of Indigenous concerns. In media coverage of Indigenous issues the Warlpiri tend to get homogenised to the broader grouping of the remote, traditional Aboriginal people who retain their language and high culture traditions. Thus, when the search began for Aboriginal women who could perform traditional dances in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000, they eventually found hundreds of Aboriginal women from central Australia, some of whom were Warlpiri. The Warlpiri and remote Aboriginal people have also become the object of concern in relation to their deteriorating social conditions including widespread alcohol abuse, endemic cardiovascular disease and kidney failure, chronic unemployment, child sexual abuse and youth suicide, and government plans to ameliorate them. Most recently these plans have included a controversial, neo-liberal inspired intervention to quarantine a percentage of welfare income for wholesome purposes and other measures (explained in more detail in Chapter 1).

To actually go to one of the four Warlpiri settlements to meet them would be a major logistical undertaking from any capital city; for example, from Sydney it would involve a three-and-a-half-hour plane trip to Alice Springs in the parched centre of Australia (2000 km) and then a three-and-a-half-hour four-wheel-drive trip to Yuendumu (300 km). In recent years most of that road has been sealed, but to press on to Nyirrpri (another 150 km) or to Willowra (another 160 km) or to Lajamanu (another 600 km) definitely requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle to negotiate the corrugated dirt roads. In the scheme of things, these settlements are small (Yuendumu 800 people, Nyirrpri 200 people, Willowra 250 people, Lajamanu 700). As one would expect in the desert, they are dusty places. Their appearance reveals something of the context. The substantial and relatively well-maintained school, police station, health clinic, the grocery store and the number of vehicles (usually less well maintained) reveal that these settlements are not located in a third world country, despite the dilapidated appearance of some (but not all) of the housing stock. But it is still a place where hunters and gatherers have been settled and are, generally speaking, yet to internalise the bourgeois manners of the house proud, the fenced garden and concern for neatness and tidiness. Instead, there is a seeming unconcern about the dilapidation, the ramshackle additions to houses, the improvised beds placed outside to catch the breeze on stifling summer nights, the improvised pathways, the large amount of discarded rubbish and the roaming mangy

dogs. But, perhaps the most shocking thing for the imagined metropolitan visitor who may never have encountered an Aboriginal person in their everyday suburban life, here the vast majority (80 to 90 per cent) are Aboriginal people who speak their own distinctive language and continue to perform their initiation ceremonies. White people are a minority, consisting of most of the service providers, the teachers, nurses, police, administrative staff and shopkeepers.

The Warlpiri people living on the fringes of their traditional country are, in anthropological theory, all tightly bound to each other in overlapping networks of kin and bound very tightly to their traditional country. So how is it that some of them make a life for themselves in distant towns and cities? This is the central question of this book. Part of the answer lies in the processes of stratification and differentiation within the Warlpiri population that have been set in train by various government projects over their relatively short contact period. Another part of the answer lies in the prized personal autonomy of individuals in hunter and gatherer societies and traditional life-cycle developments that see women gain authority and personal autonomy as they grow older. These 'internal' developments link up with particular projects and the changing valuation of tradition in the broader and encapsulating society to produce what I have called in this book the matriarchs of the Warlpiri diaspora. As I hope to demonstrate in this book, especially in Chapter 3, 'Dulcie' was exemplary of the bold networking that enabled her and the other Warlpiri matriarchs to take advantage of this unique juncture.

Notes

1. Since both pseudonyms and real personal names are used in this book, I indicate pseudonyms with single quotes. For convenience I sometimes use the word 'Aboriginal' when referring to the indigenous peoples of continental Australia rather than the more compendious 'Indigenous' which seems to be a shorthand word to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. The use of 'Aboriginal' instead of 'Indigenous' also reflects the usage of my older informants. The switch to 'Indigenous' in government nomenclature and also vernacular usage occurred in the 1990s. The rapidity of the switch and the elusive rationale for it were confounding at the time. It was not clear whether it was simply a pragmatic solution to the cumbersome repetition of the phrase 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' or whether there was some positive preferment of the term 'indigenous' that had gained prominence in international fora, particularly in the drafting of an international convention on the rights of indigenous peoples. For whatever reason, 'Indigenous' has now become firmly entrenched as correct usage in Australia. The capitalisation of Indigenous alerts the reader that it is a reference to the

particular indigenous people of Australia rather than the global category of indigenous peoples.

2. See, for example, Clements (2014), Connor (2002), Reynolds (2013) and Richards (2008). The degree of frontier violence was the subject of conflictual academic debate in the 1990s and this debate became more widely politicised as a struggle over what version of history was appropriate for contemporary expressions of national Australian identity. This struggle became known in Australia as 'the history wars' (see Macintyre and Clark 2003; Veracini 2006).
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011, via ABS website (www.abs.gov.au), accessed 22 March 2016.
4. The phrase 'repressive authenticity' is the rhetorical crescendo of Patrick Wolfe's structuralist history of Australia and critique of the role of anthropology in Indigenous-settler relations in his *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (1999). For a convincing dissection of Wolfe's approach, see Morton (1998).