Ancient pecked design, near Yalgoo, WA.
JOSEPHINE FLOOD

CHAPTER 10

MARDUJARRA KINSHIP

R. TONKINSON

THE ABORIGINES WHOSE HOMELANDS lie on the western side of the vast Gibson Desert in Western Australia have as their central reference point a giant salt lake, known to them as Gumbubindil and to Europeans as Lake Disappointment. This striking landform covers about 2000 square kilometres and straddles the Tropic of Capricorn some 600 kilometres southeast of the Indian Ocean. The people whose territories surround the lake and extend eastwards are members of several distinct dialect groups: the Gardujarra, Budijarra, Giyajarra, Gurajarra and, the largest and most easterly, the Manjilyjarra. Collectively, these groups can be called the Mardujarra, a name coined by adding to the word *mardu*, 'Aboriginal person', the suffix *-jarra*, 'having', as the desert people themselves would do. They all speak closely related dialects of the same basic western desert language and culturally all are very similar.

Today the groups making up the Mardujarra number about eight hundred people and live in settlements, having long since migrated from their desert homelands. It is impossible to offer an accurate estimate of their population before European intrusion, but it was probably fewer than one thousand. The desert homelands of the Mardujarra are now empty, so the use here of the present tense pretends that the situation described is one in which no Europeans have yet arrived. It is a time when the horizons around Gumbubindil are always smudged with smoke and small bands of Mardujarra hunters and gatherers are on the move.

This is an account of how the Mardujarra organise and conduct their social relationships. Much of it applies to other parts of Aboriginal Australia. The system of relatedness known as kinship plays a vital role in the social life of all Aborigines; it is important to understand why this should be so. The nature of the landscape and the amount of available food resources are important, because to some extent they limit the range of choices human beings have in deciding how to organise their society. In the Gibson Desert, one of the world's harshest environments, fresh water and food are almost always in short supply. The Aborigines are forced to spend most of their time in small groups spaced far apart and to move over long

Above.
Low hilly country with spinifex cover.
R. TONKINSON

Right.
Landscape near Gumbubindil (Lake Disappointment). Ridges of red sandhills are separated by spinifex-covered plains.
R. TONKINSON

distances in their search for food and water. Prolonged droughts at times force some groups to migrate temporarily into the territories of their neighbours until an adequate rainfall replenishes the resources of their homelands.

Under these circumstances, the survival of the Mardujarra depends on their ability to gain access to the land and resources of others. This depends in turn on their maintaining arrangements that guarantee a cohesive society, the members of which can agree about the very fundamentals of existence. Relatively few people are scattered over a large area, yet they need to have a sense of community based on shared values, behaviour and rules for living. Their bonds of unity must be strong enough to overcome local differences and minor conflicts in the interests of the survival of the society at large. How are these requirements satisfied in the Gibson Desert? And what binds together these small and scattered bands into a coherent society? The bonds of shared kinship are central, as are friendships and alliances founded on marriage, religion and common notions about what is fundamentally important in life. Aborigines view the world in deeply spiritual terms, and believe that every major facet of life and culture has a religious basis.

Long-lasting pools in rocky gorges provide a base for summertime occupation.
R. TONKINSON

Territories of the Mardujarra.
J. GOODRUM

THE DESERT LANDSCAPE

Although marked on maps as a lake, Lake Disappointment is often dry. It fills only when there is sufficient runoff from rainfall in the catchment area. Wet or dry, the salty lake surface never attracts Aborigines, who carefully avoid even its margins. This largest single landform on the western side of the Gibson Desert remains

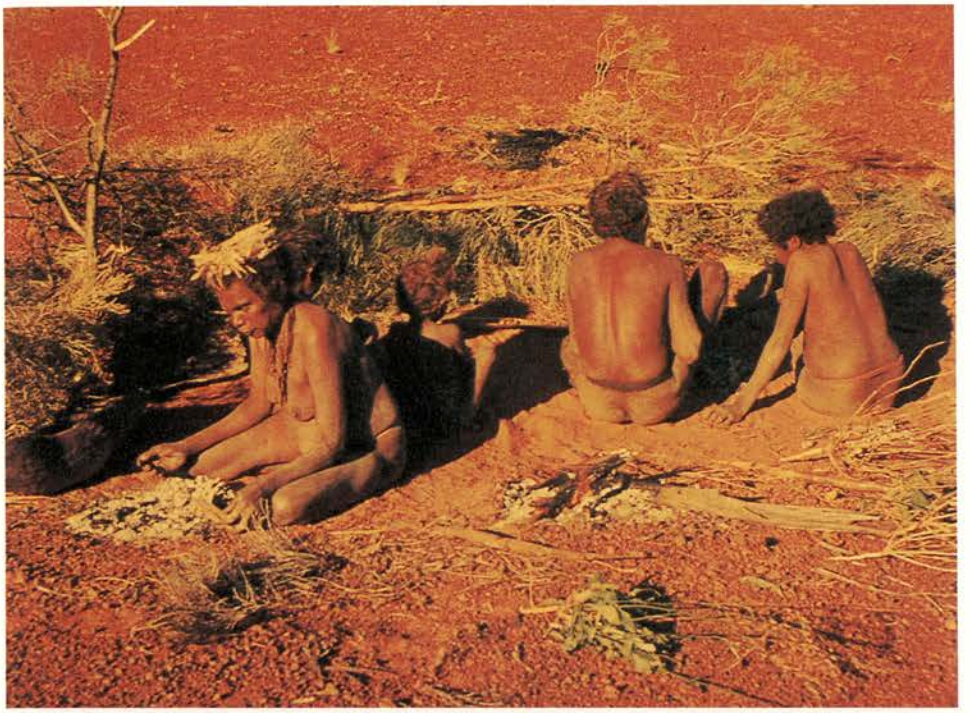
undisturbed by humans because beneath its surface, say the Aborigines, lies another world with its own sun and heavenly bodies. The inhabitants are the Ngayunangalgu, fierce cannibal beings who will kill and devour any Aborigine who strays too close. The lake, Gumbubindil, has an important place in the myths and rituals of neighbouring Aborigines, but it is not an economic resource.

Vivid red sandhills are the most common landform in the Gibson Desert. Lightly covered with shrubs, grasses and a few trees, these long, parallel ridges stand fifteen to twenty metres high and a few hundred metres apart. Between them are flat sand plains, grassed with spinifex and supporting scattered trees of several different species. The red of the sandhills is intensified in stony outcrops and ridges as well as rugged, stepped 'breakaway' formations that stand out above the dunes. In some areas, these uplands are surrounded by mulga thickets or flat gibber plains. The dry watercourses radiating out from higher areas are marked by large river gums, acacia shrubs and grasses. Shallow claypans are widespread and valuable because after rain they fill, attracting both wildlife and hunters. Rugged, narrow gorges can be found in most hilly areas and some are important to Aborigines because they have sheltered, long-lasting pools. Most also mark the site of some mythological event that occurred in the Dreaming. Some of the deeper gorges have distinctive vegetation and wildlife and their environs are favoured as summer camping spots when the searing heat dries up other surface waters and forces groups of people to retreat to their most reliable waterholes.

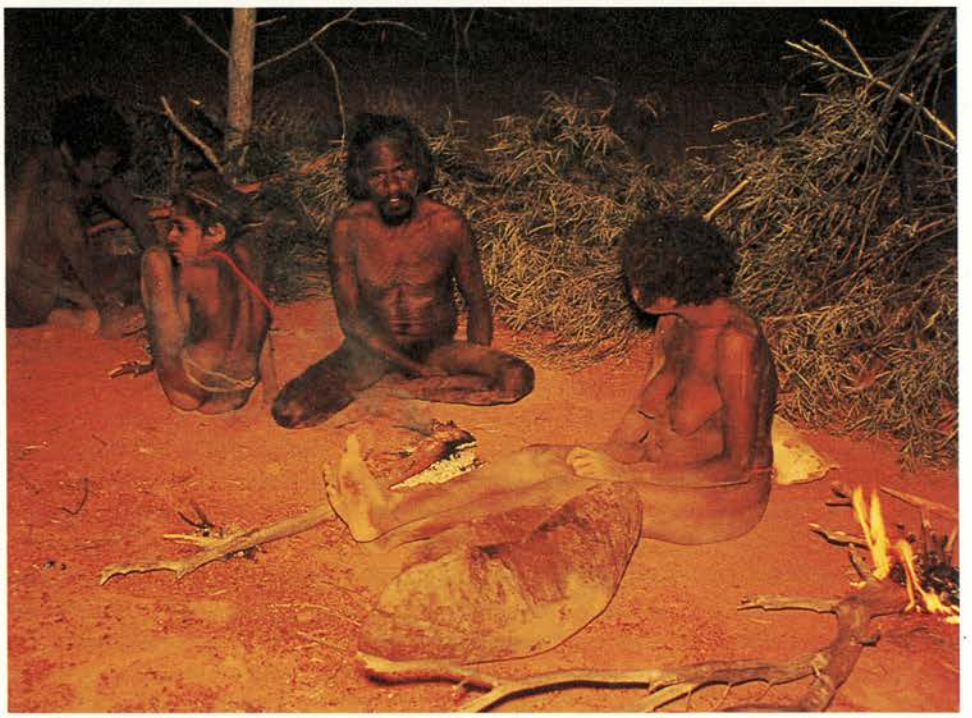
The Gibson Desert is a world of extremes, ranging from midsummer days when shade temperatures soar into the high forties to freezing winter dawns that turn drinking water in wooden containers to ice. Rainfall is uncommon and erratic, so it is essential that everyone knows well the location of established water sources such as rockholes, creek bed soaks, wells and the occasional spring. These are generally better protected than surface waters from an extreme rate of evaporation during the summer months. Water is indeed the most critical resource, so the desert people plan their movements according to its availability. They frequently follow well-defined waterhole routes, which are often said to mark the paths of ancestral beings who created the water sources in the course of their Dreaming adventures. Only after widespread, soaking rains can people move out to the margins of their territories and exploit the replenished food and water resources. As the surface catchments dry up, the Aborigines retreat towards longer-lasting waterholes.

Despite its difficulties for human life, the Gibson Desert is home to a variety of plants and animals that are exploited for food. Lizards, small marsupials, grass seeds, bush tomatoes (*Solanum* sp), berries, fruits such as the quandong and wild fig, and yams (*Dioscorea* sp) are among the most important food sources. The Mardujarra know exactly when and where foods are available. The likely location of abundant supplies of a staple food influences their itineraries. The desert environment keeps the density of population and the size of groups much lower than in more fertile parts of the continent. But cultural factors are also important in determining the size and composition of the travelling groups and influencing decisions about when and where to go next.

To the outsider, the desert seems overpowering in its immensity. Seemingly stretching forever, it dwarfs humanity. Yet the Mardujarra who call it home can read in its landforms the mythological origins of their society as well as the sources of their own being, and are thus strongly attached, spiritually and emotionally, to the land. Because their understanding of their country is at the same time both practical and spiritual, they grow up with a strong sense of familiarity and security. They have an acute awareness not only of what can be seen but of what can be sensed; somewhere out there are other groups of kin and friends whose hunting



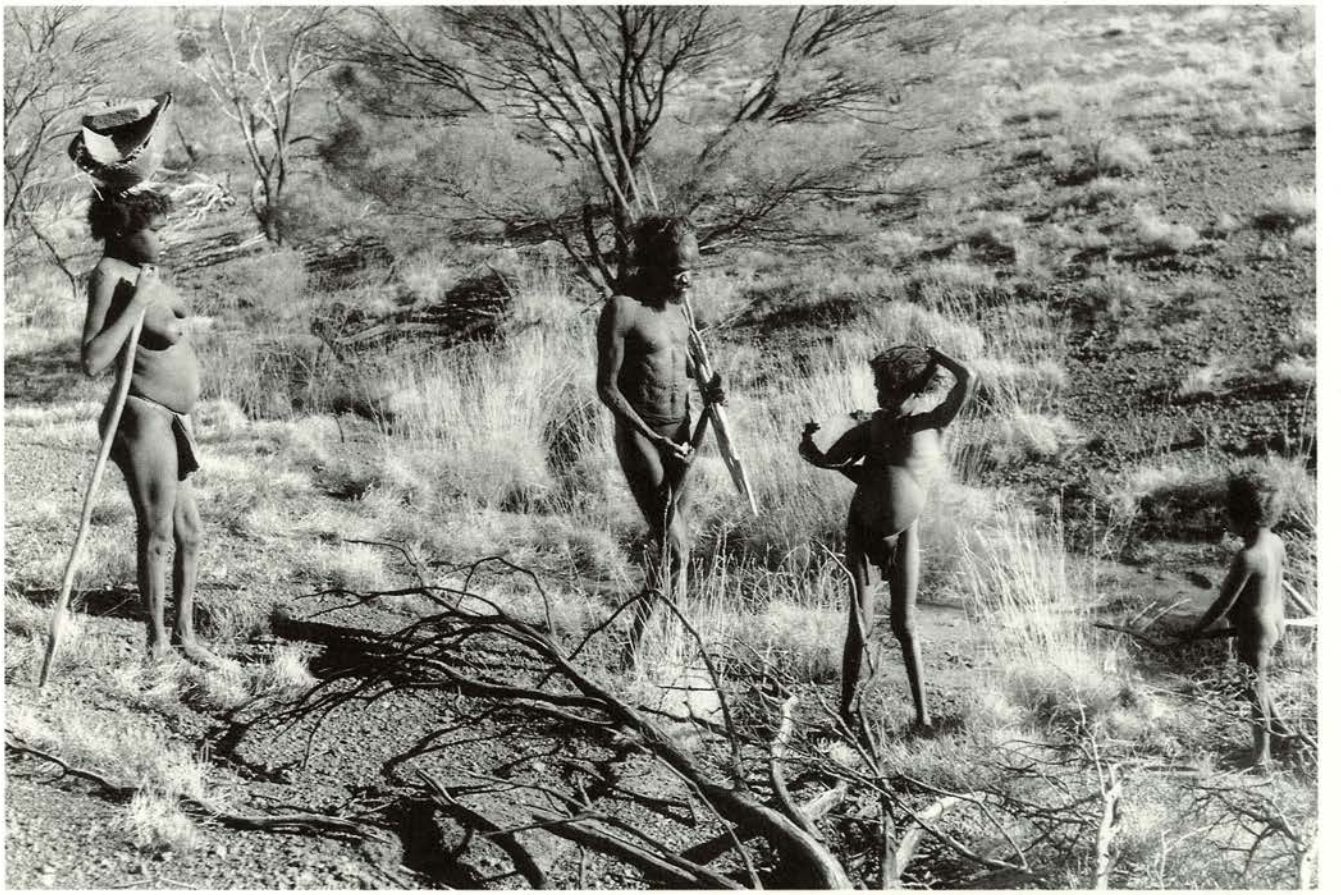
Family camp in the sandhill country. Similar camps of other members of the band are not far away.
R. TONKINSON



Camp scene at night. The family is protected by a brush windbreak and a small sleeping fire.
R. TONKINSON

or campfire smokes are welcome signs that all the desert's vastness is not empty.

Distant smoke means more than the mere presence of others. It promises singing and perhaps dancing; certainly talking, with animated discussion of the big meeting somewhere soon that will bring together perhaps two hundred people in many bands for a brief period of intense social activity that will be the high point of the Mardujarra year.



Western desert family about to move off through spinifex grass and mulga scrub country. The man travels light with spears and spearthrower, but the woman carries a digging-stick and on her head, balanced on a pad of emu feathers, is a valued grindstone. Usually, she would leave the stone behind.
R. TONKINSON

LOCAL ORGANISATION

In the Gibson Desert, as elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia, the basic social unit is the family. Many Mardujarra families are polygynous; that is, their male head has more than one wife at a time. This man is usually middle-aged or older. Few men have more than three wives at any given time and most younger husbands have only one. Women, however, commonly expect a succession of husbands; they are married for the first time in early adolescence, often as second or third wives of quite old men. Widowhood is rarely permanent and women expect to remarry within a few years of their husbands' deaths. As they get older they have more say in the choice of their next husband.

Infant betrothal is common and most marriages are arranged by senior members of the two families or groups of kin involved. The man who is chosen to perform the rite of circumcision on a youth must promise him a wife who is one of the man's daughters. After the youth has completed a long period of initiation into the secret religious life of his group, he will be permitted to claim the girl as his wife. She will normally be a distant relative, coming from a territory quite some distance away from that of her husband. People related as in-laws are expected to enter into a long-term relationship, involving the exchange of visits and gifts. For this reason, marriage is an important basis for the formation of strong alliances between groups living in different parts of the desert. In times of severe drought and food shortages in their territory, people can always go and visit their in-laws and be sure of a good reception as well as access to food supplies.

The Aboriginal group most easily discerned by an outside observer is the band, because it is the unit that travels and lives together. Among the Mardujarra the band consists most often of two to four families and seldom numbers more than about thirty people. Like other Aborigines, the Mardujarra prefer to travel in bands because this grouping, larger than the family, offers greater potential for sharing and sociability. Even so, each family generally camps a little apart from the others and has its own cooking and sleeping fires. This allows for a measure of privacy at night, especially since older boys tend to camp together away from their parents. All camps are within shouting distance, however, and many are the nights when the campsite is alive with the sounds of shouted conversations, debates or arguments before people fall asleep between the small sleeping fires behind their windbreaks.

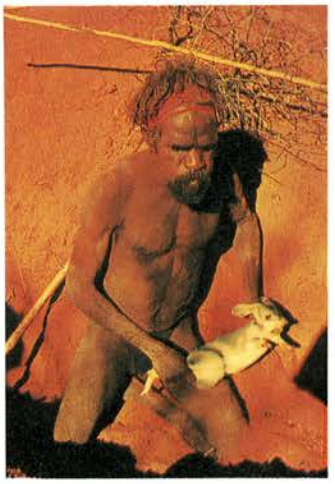
The male adults of the band sometimes co-operate in hunting large game such as kangaroos or emus. If they are lucky in the hunt, they cook the animal near where they killed it, then butcher it and carry large chunks back to camp, where it will be distributed to all members of the band according to customary rules. If there is only one lucky hunter, he will deny himself a choice part of the animal, in keeping with Mardujarra society's strong emphasis on unselfishness in all things, especially food. To be labelled greedy is extremely shameful. In their food-gathering activities, women do not need to co-operate or to divide up the day's yield, since luck plays little or no part in their productive endeavours. They prefer to go out in groups so that they can chat while working and their younger children can play together. While boys and small girls do not have to contribute to the quest for food, they often amuse themselves by hunting small game and gathering fruit or berries, to nibble as snacks; in fact, people of all ages often snack during the day. By late afternoon—much earlier in midsummer—the family groups have reassembled in the camp. They eat their main meal of the day in the early evening.

Children are not expected to contribute to family food supplies, but they collect snacks for themselves, such as these witchetty grubs.
R. TONKINSON

A band varies in size and membership from time to time as social and environmental circumstances change. It achieves a measure of stability despite these fluctuations because its male heads are often related in the male line (for example, an older man, two of his married sons and a brother's son and family). At any given time, however, some in-laws or others not related in the male line may also be travelling in the band. Stability is also afforded by the fact that every band under normal circumstances spends a great deal of time in its home territory or estate. The Mardujarra like to have their children born and raised in their father's home estate area and prefer that women eventually join the bands of their husbands after marrying. Since all fully initiated men share important responsibilities as guardians of sacred sites and associated ceremonial objects in their home estates, they endeavour to spend as much time as possible in or near these areas. From time to time they must organise and perform important rituals at specific sites in their homelands, so they try to remain within reasonable distance of them for most of their lives.

Bands may occasionally split into single-family units in very good or extremely bad times. Yet favourable and unfavourable environmental conditions can also encourage larger groupings, involving members of several neighbouring bands. This may be caused either by an abundance of food in a given area or by severe shortages of water that force two or more bands to retreat to a single reliable water source, usually during the late summer.

Individual bands also lose their identity once or twice a year when big meetings are held. The site and approximate time are known in advance; in fact, if there are boys to be initiated, they and older guardians are sent out to contact as many bands as possible and to summon them to the meeting. Such large gatherings may be held



In the desert country it may take much effort digging in the sand to capture game. After following the burrow to a considerable depth, this man has caught a rabbit-eared bandicoot. It will be shared according to kinship conventions.
R. TONKINSON

at any time of the year, as long as the chosen venue offers a good scource of water and enough food to supply one to undred people for a couple of weeks. Most venues are at or near sites of religious significance, and one motive for the meetings is to conduct ritual activities. After an initial tense period in which all outstanding disputes must be brought to settlement, ritual activities begin amid great excitement. People take the opportunity to exchange gifts with their kin, to socialise and to catch up with news and gossip, as well as to plan their future movements and discuss arrangements for the next big meeting. In the desert, such meetings are the only occasions when the society at large is visible and its vital concerns are dramatised and thus reinforced in the eyes of its members.

Estate groups play an important role in Aboriginal culture but, unlike the band, the estate group cannot easily be discerned. Its members never assemble as a group and to the exclusion of members of other estate groups, nor is its membership rigidly defined. Most men maintain strong allegiance to just one estate group but have interests in others. Women, on the other hand, often live far from their home estates after marriage and become more involved in the estates of their husbands. Every linguistic unit (see chapter 7), such as the Giyajarra or Budijarra, is made up of a number of estate groups, the members of which are normally scattered in bands throughout or even beyond their home territories. The core of the estate group is men, women and children who are related through the male line. They share strongly felt bonds to a number of sites and tracts of country that together make up the home estate. Its boundaries may be vague, because no two people share an identical constellation of places which in sum comprises their *manda*, or country. However, many people will name the same major site as their *yinda*, 'main place' within the home estate.

People can claim affiliation with an estate group through several avenues. One is descent from the father. They may also claim membership in their mother's estate, although among the Mardujarra this link is considered secondary. Totemic links are also important. Every person is thought to have lived before as a kind of spirit essence left behind by a particular creative being or group of beings during their travels in the Dreaming. Both the place where they were left behind and the identity of the creative beings involved are always known and are important components in individual identity. Estate membership may also be claimed by those who have grown up in and around the estate.

A further avenue of estate affiliation is active involvement in rituals performed periodically by estate members. Middle-aged and older men, especially, affirm membership by demonstrating responsibility towards the care and guardianship of sites and objects that form the secret and sacred core of the estate. Indeed, religious ties to the estate are more important than ties of shared descent; strong religious bonds may be forged with men who are not close relatives in the male line. The Mardujarra show no interest in tracing their ancestry back through many generations. It matters more to know how and where each person came to be left behind in the Dreaming, a time well beyond all generational counting and yet one to which every person feels strongly connected by spiritual descent.

The initiated men who are the estate's guardians not only look after the caches of sacred objects hidden at every 'main place' throughout the Gibson Desert, but also organise the performance of rituals that belong to the estate and derive from the activities of the Dreaming beings who first created the territory. One important ritual, the *mirdayidi*, is held at every estate to induct young initiates, brought together from neighbouring estates, into the secrets of the collection of secret objects. These symbolise the unity of humans with land, spiritual powers and the Dreaming. By partaking in the ceremonial feast that is central to the proceedings,

*Plant foods supply the bulk of diet in the desert, and harvesting woollybutt grass (*Eragrostis eriopoda*) into a wooden dish is a frequent task. A digging-stick and pad of emu feathers lie on the ground.* R. TONKINSON

the initiates have the estate opened up to them. Having consumed the spirit of the land, they gain future access to the estate and its resources. Once they have hunted meat to pay for the honour of witnessing the sacred core of the estate and learning its powerful secrets, they also have the right to take part in ritual activities there.

The collective identity implied by the name 'Mardujarra' is not shared by individual Aborigines, who identify themselves as members of a particular linguistic unit, such as Gardujarra or some smaller grouping. They often use dialect group labels when talking of their neighbours in adjoining territories and beyond. Yet, when asked to identify themselves, people most often use the name of their 'main place'. This is generally the major site within their home estate which will be known far and wide because of its religious significance. Each dialect group is associated with a stretch of territory. Commonly agreed boundary zones separate the various dialect units, but these are not always precisely defined.

Members of each unit recognise a common identity because of their shared dialect and neighbouring territories. They claim a measure of distinctiveness because of their particular dialect and some minor elements of belief or behaviour not shared with their neighbours. But there is plenty of overlap, both physically, where hunting–gathering ranges extend into the countries of their neighbours who speak different dialects, and socially. The links of kinship, marriage, religion, economics and shared values embrace all the dialect units and extend beyond the Gibson Desert to cover the entire western desert area, which occupies about one-sixth of the continent. Thus the Mardujarra constitute only one small part of a huge cultural system, and in some respects are indivisible from the rest because boundaries (even dialectal ones) do little to impede the free flow of people, objects and ideas across the sparsely occupied desert.

The sandy country contains a plant valued for its narcotic properties—Nicotiana gossei—*whose leaves are chewed and mixed with ash. It is an item of gift exchange, but not as celebrated as* pituri *(*Duboisia hopwoodii*) in the Simpson Desert.*
R. TONKINSON

Members of a single dialect unit never congregate as a wholly exclusive group. Even the periodic big meetings attract members of several adjoining dialect units and vary in size and composition from one meeting to the next. However, members of the same dialect unit inevitably see more of one another and are more closely related than they are to members of other dialect units because of the territorial anchorage of each unit. But given the nature of marriage arrangements, kin networks, ritual responsibilities and the many other cultural elements that favour wider unities, it would be difficult for any one group to remain separated in such a way that dialect and social boundaries coincided. Indeed, it would be suicidal for any group to attempt to close its boundaries and resources to non-members, given the vagaries of rainfall. A certain degree of exclusiveness is essential for human social groups to maintain their sense of distinctiveness, but in areas as harsh as the western desert the need to assert a particular identity has to be balanced against the need to remain on good terms with neighbours.

The western desert is the largest culture area in the continent over which there is a free flow of news, ideas, objects and rituals. Although the settlements of Jigalong and Ooldea are about 1500 kilometres apart on opposite sides of the desert, songs recently recorded in Jigalong are almost identical in words and tune to those recorded by R.M. and C.H. Berndt 22 years earlier at Ooldea. The continued vitality of desert culture depends on these open lines of communication.

THE ROLE OF KINSHIP

It has been said that the Australian Aborigines, perhaps more than any other people, live in a universe of kin. Social relationships in which people refer to each other using terms of biological relatedness such as 'mother', 'son', 'cousin' are called kinship systems. In Aboriginal society everybody with whom a person comes into contact is called by a kinship term, and social interaction is guided by patterns of behaviour considered appropriate to particular kin relationships. Although a person's sex and age are important in determining social status, the system of kin relatedness largely dictates the way people behave towards one another, prescribing dominance, deference, obligation or equality as the basis of the relationship.

Aborigines employ what is known as a 'classificatory' kinship system; that is, the terms used among blood relatives are also used to classify or group more distantly related and unrelated people. Classificatory systems are based on two principles. First, siblings of the same sex (a group of brothers or a group of sisters) are classed as equivalent in the reckoning of kin relationships. Thus my father's brothers are classed as one with my father and are called 'father' by me; likewise, all women my mother calls 'sister' are my 'mothers'. Following this logic, the children of all people I call 'father' or 'mother' will be classed as my 'brothers' and 'sisters'. Secondly, in theory this social web can be extended to embrace all other people with whom one comes into contact in a lifetime. Strangers are rarely encountered in the desert but when they are, particularly at the time of big meetings, it is the job of knowledgeable elders to decide their kinship status. A single kin relationship between a stranger and a member of the encountering group is all that needs to be found, then all others present can work out their relationship to the stranger. If the stranger turns out to be a 'brother' of my 'mother's brother' then, following the first classifying principle, I will call him 'mother's brother'. In the etiquette of desert encounters, incoming stranger groups always camp at first some distance from the host group, until representative elders have met to work out their kin relationship. A formal introduction is then held before any mingling can take place between members of the two groups. Once all the correct kin relationships are established, people can adopt the appropriate behaviour—avoidance, joking, restraint—towards their new-found relatives.

Because kinship underlies virtually all social interaction, the Mardujarra frequently use kinship terms rather than names in addressing or referring to someone. The kinship system eliminates the need to negotiate or test how they will interact when they meet. The use of a kinship term carries with it the obligation to observe certain behavioural rules known to all, and this makes it easy for interaction to proceed along well-defined lines, regardless of whether the person encountered is loved or hated, admired or feared.

Education in kinship begins early in life, although children are not expected to obey the behavioural rules until they reach their teens and become self-conscious about them. Despite the great freedom small children enjoy, they are constantly being instructed about how to behave correctly towards their kin. They are born into a world of kinship and they hear kin terms being applied to themselves and

others all the time. Without effort they learn both ideal and actual patterns of social relationships in preparation for the time when, unbidden by their elders, they will begin to conform to the behavioural codes.

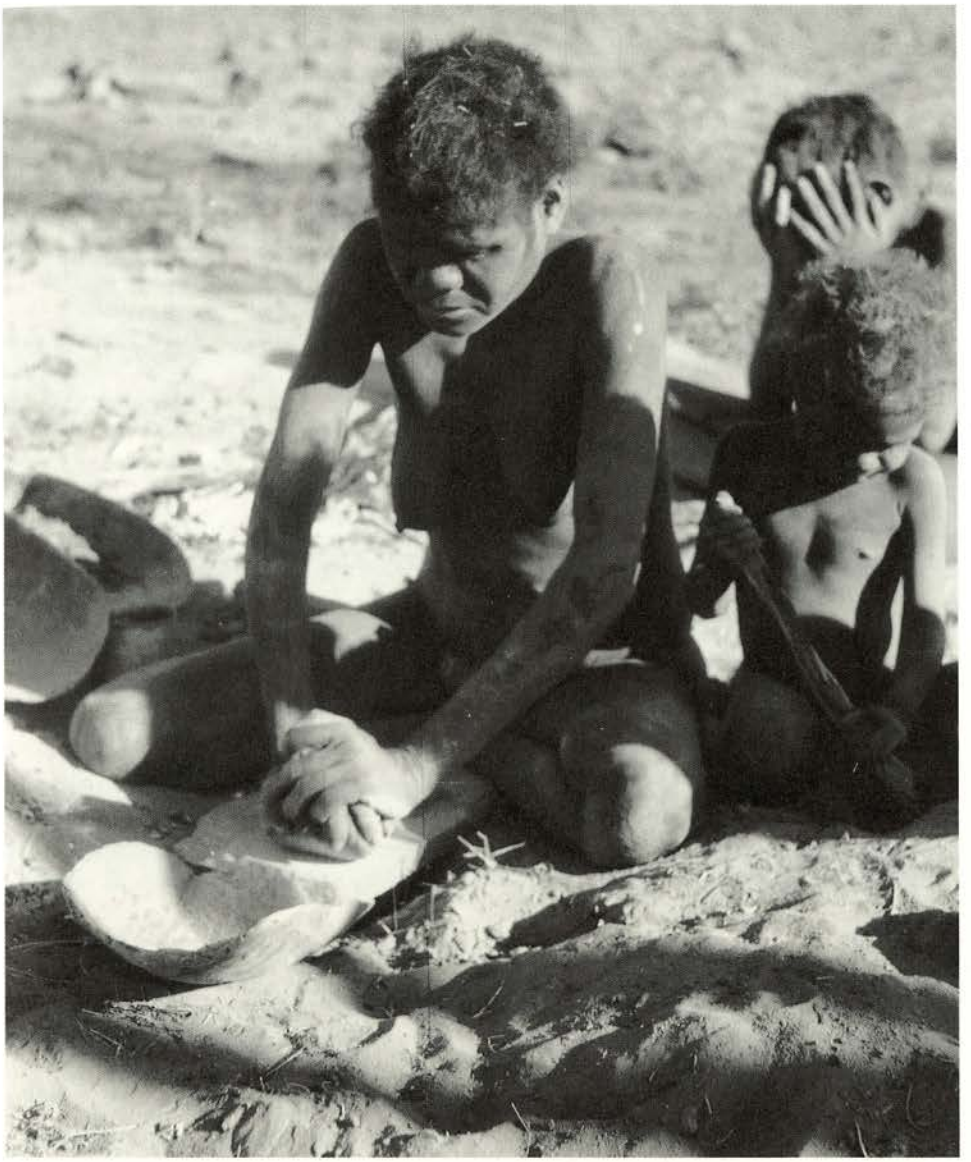
All Mardujarra groups share the same basic system of kinship, despite some differences in the names for particular terms. Many of the terms are commonly used throughout the entire western desert region. The table gives by way of example the terminology used by members of the Gardujarra linguistic group.

MAN SPEAKING			WOMAN SPEAKING		
English	Gardujarra	Reciprocal	English	Gardujarra	Reciprocal
spouse	*mardungu*	*mardungu*	spouse	*mardungu*	*mardungu*
EB;FBS;MZS	*gurda*	*marlangu*	EB;FBS;MZS	*gurda*	*marlangu*
EZ;FBD;MZD	*jurdu*	*marlangu*	EZ;FBD;MZD	*jurdu*	*marlangu*
F;FB	*mama*	*gaja*	F;FB	*mama*	*yurndal*
M;MZ;WFZ	*yagurdi*	*gaja*	M;MZ	*yagurdi*	*yurndal*
S;DH;ZS;ZDH;BS	*gaja*	*mama;gaga*	S;BS;ZS	*gaja*	*yagurdi;gurndili*
D;ZSW;BD	*yurndal*	*mama*	D;BD;ZD	*yurndal*	*yagurdi;gurndili*
FZ	*gurndili*	*gaja*	FZ;HM	*gurndili; ngunyarri*	*yurndal;ngunyarri*
MB;WF;MMBS	*gaga*	*gaja*	MB	*gaga*	*yurndal;ngunyarri*
WM and some FZ;MBW	*umari*	*umari*	DH	*umari*	*umari*
WB;ZH;MBS;FZS	*yungguri*	*yungguri*	BW;ZH;MBD;FZD	*juwari*	*juwari*
some MBS;FZS	*wajirra*	*wajirra*	some MBD;FZD	*wajirra*	*wajirra*
some MBD;FZD	*yingarni*	*yingarni*	some MBS;FZS	*yingarni*	*yingarni*
ZD	*ngunyarri*	*gaga*			
FF;MF;SS;DS and ZDS;FMB;MMB	*nyamu*	*nyamu*	FF;MF;SS;DS and BDS;FMB;MMB	*nyamu*	*nyami*
FM;MM;SD;DD and ZDD;FMZ;MFZ some MBDS;FZDS and MBDD;FZDD	*nyami* / *bunyayi*	*nyamu* / *bunyayi*	FM;MM;SD;DD and BDD;FMZ;MFZ some MMBS;MMBD and MFZS;MFZD	*nyami* / *bunyayi*	*nyami* / *bunyayi*

Gardujarra terms of address; kin categories to which each term refers; reciprocal terms used by whoever is being addressed. The shorthand kinterm designations mean the following: F=father; M=mother; B=brother; Z=sister; D=daughter; S=son, W=wife; H=husband; E=elder. Thus FZD means 'father's sister's daughter'; MMBS means 'mother's mother's brother's son'; HM means 'husband's mother', and so on.

Males and females often share the same terms. Members of each sex use seventeen kin terms; only the term *umari* is not used in address, because men and women so related must completely avoid one another most of the time. Several different categories of kin are normally lumped together under the one term. For example, all one's grandparent and grandchildren generations are condensed to two terms, which differ only for the sex of the person being addressed. Thus one's father's mother, mother's mother, daughter's daughter and son's daughter are all called *nyami*, and all male relatives in those two generations are called *nyamu*.

Likely behaviour patterns are suggested by whether or not pairs of individuals use identical reciprocal kin terms to address each other (for example, 'spouse'–'spouse' or 'cousin'–'cousin' are identical whereas 'father'–'daughter' or 'nephew'–'uncle' are not). Identical reciprocal terms, such as those used between most members of the same generation and their grandparents, indicate that there will be a fair degree of equality in expected behaviour. But when reciprocal terms are not identical, as between parents and children or older and younger siblings, this



Woman grinds woollybutt grass seeds into flour while children wait for the cooked unleavened bread to be baked in the ashes.
R. TONKINSON

suggests status differences, with one member of the pair being expected to defer to the other. Older siblings share an obligation to discipline younger ones who misbehave, but they should also nurture them and defend them against unwarranted verbal or physical attack.

Kinship behaviour varies from complete avoidance at one extreme to special joking relationships at the other. These extremes are easy for an outsider to detect. With joking relationships for example, the two people are expected to engage in uninhibited horseplay and loud verbal jousting, much of it rude and designed to delight the audience. A range of variation in actual behaviour is tolerated by the society at large, so people have more latitude in their relationships than any formal description of kin relationships could cover. Women enjoy a greater number of relatively uninhibited relationships with one another than do men. They may talk and interact freely with most other female kin, perhaps because they spend more time than men together in groups.

In relationships involving restraint of some kind, there is an underlying element

of shame or embarrassment. Restrained behaviour suggests an inequality of status in which one of the pair should show deference, obedience, respect or submission to the other. Such unequal relationships are marked by restrictions of various kinds which prohibit touching, joking, calling by name, direct eye contact, the passing of objects from hand to hand, visiting the other person's camp, argument, sexual innuendo or physical assault. Among the Mardujarra, a man's behaviour towards most of his close adult blood relatives is characterised by various degrees of restraint. With fairly unrestrained behaviour, as between spouses, it is up to the pairs of individuals concerned to decide on a mutually satisfying level of familiarity and intimacy. Relative age, personality, individual inclination and emotional state play larger roles in these more open relationships.

The Mardujarra draw their marriage partners from the kin categories of cross-cousin; that is, people classed as mother's brother's children or father's sister's children. But some cross-cousins—some mother's brother's children and some father's sister's children—are classed as if they are siblings, and are not marriageable. People enjoy warm, close relationships with 'sibling' cross-cousins of the same sex (*wajirra*), but must show great restraint in their behaviour towards those of the opposite sex (*yingarni*). The Mardujarra prefer to select their actual spouses from other more distant and remotely related groups. So, although most people related by blood as cross-cousins call each other 'spouse', they do not often marry.

Because second cross-cousins (those whose parents are related as cross-cousins) are also classed as people whom one may marry, a wide selection of spouses is available. This is perhaps a major reason why there are so few incorrect marriages; that is, unions between pairs of people not related to each other as 'spouse'. The classificatory system defines all such wrong unions as incestuous, regardless of whether or not any blood relatedness is involved. A 'daughter' is a daughter, whether by blood link or classification and must therefore be treated with a restraint devoid of sexual overtones; the same applies to all 'mothers' and 'sisters'.

THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL

All over Australia, kinship is undeniably the most important single factor in structuring Aboriginal social relationships. It sets ideal or broad limits within which people are encouraged to behave. Harmony and order are maintained in this way, but what actually happens when people meet is more complicated than any ideal system. Within the varying limits set by kinship rules, there is much flexibility. Nobody is so imprisoned by the kinship system that he or she feels unable to give vent to feelings and emotions when the urge comes on. There is room for differences in individual temperament and personality, and allowances are made for the distorting effects of emotional outbursts and extreme anger.

In some respects, kin categories are imprecise. They make no distinction between distant kin and close blood relatives, nor do they offer clues about the emotional content of relationships. Although a person treats all women whom he or she calls 'mother' in much the same general way, the emotional component in the behaviour will vary according to whether the 'mother' is a close or distant relative. Apart from the few terms that distinguish older from younger siblings, the classificatory system ignores relative age, and in every kinship category there are people of all ages. Obviously, a person's behaviour towards an infant 'daughter' will differ markedly from that towards a 'daughter' who is an old woman.

Kinship is also modified by friendship. During childhood, friendships are made with many others of about the same age; so when the time comes to observe the rules of kinship behaviour, some people will bend them towards a more relaxed

A little water is still available in the small rockhole catchment. Seed carrying and winnowing dishes serve as baler and basin in a society where utensils have many uses.

R. TONKINSON

relationship, even if the system calls for restraint. Those who modify their behaviour in this way do so without fear of retribution. The system is not policed, but relies on inbuilt feelings of shame and embarrassment to inhibit people from breaking its rules.

Viewed as a community, the Mardujarra are a small population whose members encounter one another periodically throughout their lives. Even when they are not in actual contact, people hear news and gossip about others every time two bands meet. Despite their isolation for most of the year, people maintain a lively interest in the affairs of others. Everyone builds up a mental dossier on the personalities and behaviour of other members of the community. This gives them a fairly reliable guide to the likely actions and responses of many of their fellows in particular contexts—regardless, in some cases, of the kin relationships involved. As in all human societies, the decision to initiate or avoid contact is partly based on personal likes and dislikes. The physical setting, the weather and many other factors can influence a person's emotional state, general disposition and needs. People thus sometimes act with scant regard for the rules of kinship. An outsider, knowing only the kin categories involved, should have some success in predicting the kind of behaviour that results when two people meet. But unless the rules of behaviour demand complete avoidance, many other factors would have to be taken into account in order to be sure what will happen.

When life is proceeding normally for the Mardujarra, the gap between the ideal and reality in terms of kinship patterning and social interaction is small. But when things go wrong and emotions run high, people at times lose their normal

inhibitions and ignore the rules governing proper conduct towards kin. What seems at first to be a minor upset can suddenly inflame tempers and erupt into angry confrontations, with threats or acts of violence resulting. Fortunately for law and order, the passions that can be aroused so quickly tend to die down rapidly, and people do not as a rule hold grudges.

Madujarra adults are usually pleasantly disposed, have a keen sense of humour and are not egotistical. When excessive or antisocial behaviour occurs, as it must do at times in all societies, the culprit is said to have become *ngagumba*, which translates variously as 'mad', 'unknowing' or 'forgetful', and others try to restore equilibrium. Those who overstep the mark and ignore the restraints of correct kin behaviour are accused by others of being *gurndabarni*, 'without shame', and are exhorted to act *yurlubidingga*, 'according to the law'.

There are acceptable means of drawing attention to one's grievances without resort to disapproved behaviour. One such strategy is *yurndiri*, 'aggressive sulking', which involves drawing the attention of others to one's unhappiness. This forces them to enquire about the problem and thus enables the person to air his or her grievance in response, spared the embarrassment of having to initiate such action. Most people find it difficult to assert themselves forcefully in front of an audience of their peers. As confident oratory suggests egotism, the appropriate Mardujarra public speaking style is self-effacing and apologetic. This is why disputes are so often aired under cover of darkness, when families are sitting by their campfires. People in this situation are less inhibited about speaking their minds, and in the dark strong words are unlikely to lead to weapon-throwing.

The eruption of violent conflict within the band would cause severe damage to the fabric of everyday life, so there are strong sanctions against it. Within the family, however, wife-beating is treated as a private affair and other band members interfere only in protracted fights where serious injury seems likely. Conflicts among men are hedged about with conventions that permit them to give full rein to their anger in an atmosphere of drama and menace, but with a minimum of physical violence. Usually words rather than blows are exchanged and in such a way that honour is seen to be satisfied. Afterwards both parties may claim victory.

When the equilibrium of daily life is upset, people are likely to ignore the rules of kinship; yet the kinship system then comes into full play to control the situation and to restore order. Aboriginal society has no chiefs or law enforcement specialists. Apart from generalised status distinctions that favour older people over younger ones and men over women, social life is based on broadly egalitarian values. Conformity is maintained through individual self-regulation rather than through fear of external authority or the wrath of gods. There are no leaders of the kind who stand above their fellows and direct their activities or admonish offenders, regardless of circumstance or content. Leadership among the Mardujarra depends upon the particular situation. It is most often exercised in the realm of religious activity, but the leaders change according to the ritual that is being organised and performed. As the basic social unit is the band, leadership of the directorial kind is not needed, since most decisions are taken by family heads in consultation with other adult members of the group. People who disagree strongly with such decisions are free to leave the band and join another.

When disputes do break out, at whatever level, a group needs effective ways to resolve them, or at least to restore order. Kinship comes to the fore at such times as the means by which people decide what action is required. Depending on their kin relationship to those who are in conflict, other individuals will adopt one of several roles: to restrain, chastise, defend, substitute for, inflame and condemn, appeal to reason, disarm or weep and inflict injury on oneself, and so on. When

conflict occurs within the band, close kin are generally involved, so most effort is directed towards resolving the problem as quickly as possible and with a minimum of bloodshed. The guiding structure is that of the kinship system.

The norms of kinship are indispensable guides in a wide variety of situations when decisions must be taken and action initiated by groups of people. This is particularly so in the organisation and execution of many different religious activities. Middle-aged and older men make most of the decisions. They operate on the basis of consultation and consensus, but even in the complex organisation of rituals, kinship considerations are never ignored or overridden by other factors. Even when men are called upon to direct, perhaps in the mounting of a major ritual, they never give commands to others whose kin relationship to them precludes such behaviour; instead, they use intermediaries or frame their commands as polite requests.

Although the kinship system may appear to constrain Aborigines unduly, they do not chafe under it. Its crucial role as a guide to behaviour and its law-like status, derived from the Dreaming, ensure that it is accepted without question. Kinship provides a useful yardstick both for one's own behaviour and for predicting the likely behaviour of others. People derive a strong sense of well-being from living within a network of kin that extends to the outer limits of their social world. The knowledge that everyone is related through kinship is a source of comfort and security, especially when people travel beyond their home territories.

The system of kin relatedness is bolstered by strongly held values that have their basis in religion. People are judged as worthy by others largely in terms of modesty, generosity and the willing fulfilment of kinship and ritual obligations. People are strongly obliged to care for and support those whose kin relationship demands it. When people grow old, they in turn can demand and expect to receive the same support from their younger kin. Young people are also obliged to reciprocate because of the store of knowledge that is entrusted to them by the older generation of men and women.

After the family move out, the brush shelter and hearths will soon disappear, leaving little except grindstones for archaeologists to recover.
R. TONKINSON

SOCIAL CATEGORIES

All Mardujarra are born into one of four named categories, or sections. These sections are never seen as actual gatherings, although there are times when members of paired sections congregate in one group; rather, they locate people within the social structure and have their greatest use among the Mardujarra as labels of address or reference. Personal names are not commonly used and people never refer by name to anyone with whom they have a relationship of restraint or avoidance. Within families and bands, kinship terms are commonly used, but beyond the range of close kin people make frequent use of section names when speaking to or about others. They do this despite there being only four terms, with the same term in use for male and female members of a section. This is not a very precise way of identifying others, yet people never seem to be in doubt as to who is being spoken to or referred to.

The section system is based on a few simple principles. The diagram gives the Mardujarra terminology, shared by all groups in this part of the western desert:

BANAGA = GARIMARRA
BURUNGU = MILANGGA

The equal signs indicate intermarrying pairs of sections, and each pair connects a generation. Thus a Banaga man marries a Garimarra woman he calls 'spouse', and their children are all members of the Milangga section; a Milangga man marries a Burunga 'spouse', and their children are all Banaga, and so on. A man, his wife and their children are always members of three different sections. This system cuts across not only the family, but also local groups such as the band and the estate group, as well as the kinship system.

Sections are of a different order from kinship, which is a network of relationships that spreads out from each individual in such a way that no two people share precisely the same kin relationships to all others in their social field. Sections are sociocentrically ordered; that is, they exist 'out there' to be seen from a similar perspective by everyone and referred to in the same way, by name. In daily life the section system matters much less than kinship, yet there are important parallels between the two ways of ordering relationships in Mardujarra society. The sections lump together sets of kin (for example, in any person's section are his or her actual and classificatory brothers, sisters, parallel cousins, father's father, mother's mother, mother's mother's brother, father's father's sister, son's son, son's daughter, and so on). The sections give people clues to the general kind of behaviour they should observe towards others. For example, when a band encounters a small group of strangers, it may occasionally happen that no connecting kinship link can be established. The strangers then identify themselves by their section name, which immediately reduces the range of possible kin relationships. A member of the band may then decide that one of the stranger elders whose section is the same as his should be designated as 'brother' or, if the stranger is a very old man, as 'father's father'. As soon as this one link is decided on, all the kin relationships of members of both groups can quickly be worked out.

It is impossible to change categories, because membership is ascribed by birth.

Although they do indicate both intermarrying categories and those categories between whose members marriage is forbidden, sections do not regulate marriage. As sections are too broad a method of classifying people, the kinship system provides the necessary precision in designating who can marry whom. For example, a woman's intermarrying section contains not only men she calls by the term for 'spouse', but also certain cross-cousin 'brothers' as well as 'mother's fathers' and 'son's sons', none of whom is marriageable.

Groups sometimes form on the basis of pairs of combined sections. At big meetings, for instance, the Mardujarra group their camps into two sides, with the sections of fathers and sons combining on each. The same kind of division is seen also in the seating arrangements for certain male rituals and during ceremonial gift exchanges between groups. The most common division, however, is formed by intermarrying pairs of sections; it figures prominently in many rituals and is seen not only in seating arrangements but in the entire organisation of activities.

Both the father–son pairs and the intermarrying pairs are useful divisions. They separate into opposite groups many kin categories whose members must observe restraint or avoidance behaviour in their everyday interaction. In rituals involving such dual division of the participants, members of both groups commonly exchange mild insults and engage in verbal jousts. The targets for such light-hearted attacks are members of particular kin categories, especially those related as wife-givers or wife-receivers, who dwell on alleged shortcomings in reciprocity. People offer or demand gifts of vegetable foods (owed by wife-givers) or meat (expected from wife-receivers), or of women as wives or infants in betrothal. These shouted exchanges of offers, insults and accusations of stinginess generate a great deal of humour among all present.

The expression of ritual opposition between the assembled sides allows for a harmless easing of tensions in the society. Some rituals even include mild physical aggression between certain kin who in everyday life would never normally engage in such activity. As the rules of ritual conduct demand that such exchanges never become acrimonious, the aggression remains good-natured. It adds zest to an already exciting and dramatic atmosphere, which is the mark of large ritual gatherings. The ritual context thus provides a controlled arena for the relaxation of conventions. In being able to say the normally unsayable, people forcibly remind each other that kinship is about obligations and responsibilities fundamental to an orderly existence.

Another kind of dual division, similar to the sides formed by intermarrying pairs of sections, features prominently in certain religious activities. It occurs particularly during male initation and during death and burial ceremonies. When novices are seized—according to prescribed ritual—before the initiation rite of circumcision, hostile accusations may erupt between members of the two groups, usually centring on claims that there has been insufficient prior consultation and that things are being rushed. Even though these protests are ritualised and expected, men are sometimes carried away and must be forcibly prevented from hurling boomerangs and spears.

Most of the time, no matter what kind of division is operating, there is a strong and overriding emphasis on unity. The Mardujarra frequently stress that they all share the one 'law', originating in the same Dreaming. They are convinced that rituals can succeed only when conflict is absent and all participants have good feelings in their stomachs; according to Mardujarra belief, the stomach is the seat of the emotions. This is why, when big meetings are held, the first order of business is always the public settlement of disputes. These must all be resolved to the satisfaction of the assembly before any religious activity can begin.

In the everyday life of the band, kinship rather than social categories dominates as the mechanism through which people conduct their social relationships. But whenever larger groupings occur in desert society, and especially in the organisation of the all-important religious life, social categories and dual groupings play a major role in structuring the proceedings.

When compared to other hunter–gatherer peoples of the world, Australian Aborigines stand out because of the complexity of their social organisation. Their lives seem to be burdened by a bewildering number of classifying and ordering systems or principles, which group people for certain purposes and differentiate them for others. Why is Aboriginal culture in this respect so complex? Of course, the Aborigines who live enmeshed in these webs of belonging and relatedness do not consider them to be a burden. They regard them as natural and vital aspects of their social identity. Some scholars have suggested that this complexity, especially in the elaboration of social categories, is a kind of game, but there is more to it than that. These multiple sets of memberships and conventions clearly contribute to the integration of societies that lack centralised institutions of authority and control.

According to the anthropologist K.O.L. Burridge, who has proposed the most satisfying explanation to date, the strong elaboration of classificatory schemes relates to two major aspects of Aboriginal social organisation. First, each form of category or grouping brings together people who in other situations and other systems of categorisation will be differently combined. This cross-cutting is so thorough that no category grouping people for a particular purpose contains persons who belong only to that group and to no other. All are members of many other groupings and categories as well. Rivalry in some contexts is offset by co-operation in others, resulting in what Burridge calls 'a complete integration and union of the self with otherness'. In desert areas of Australia particularly, the unifying aspect of complex classifications assumes great social importance. Through them every individual can identify and use linkages with people who are located far beyond the limits of the band, estate group or dialect unit.

The second aspect of this cultural elaboration, Burridge suggests, is the way in which the classifying schemes enhance the personal identity of individual Aborigines, even while binding individuals into a wider social whole. No two people, even full siblings of the same sex, share exactly the same constellation of memberships. The individual thus assumes a unique position in relation to all the different groups within the society, and is thereby endowed with as strong a sense of individuality as of belonging.

Throughout the continent, different groups of Aborigines have evolved different mixtures of these two central tendencies, present in all societies: the centripetal kind the favours local, parochial interests and concerns at the expense of wider unities, and the centrifugal kind that opposes atomisation in favour of promoting the widest possible sense of community. The Mardujarra strongly favour the second kind, for good environmental and social reasons. The western desert, on the available evidence, shows a remarkable cultural continuity extending back in time at least 10 000 years. This strongly suggests that the desert Aborigines have long since solved the problem foreshadowed earlier; namely, how to maintain coherence in a society whose component parts are small groups which nearly all the time are widely dispersed.

This discussion has focused on kinship as a major component in binding together the Mardujarra and their desert neighbours into a larger social whole than that encompassed by the band, estate group or linguistic unit. The most important cohesive element, however, is religion. It links people, places, objects and past events (the creative marvels of the Dreaming) to both spiritual and natural realms

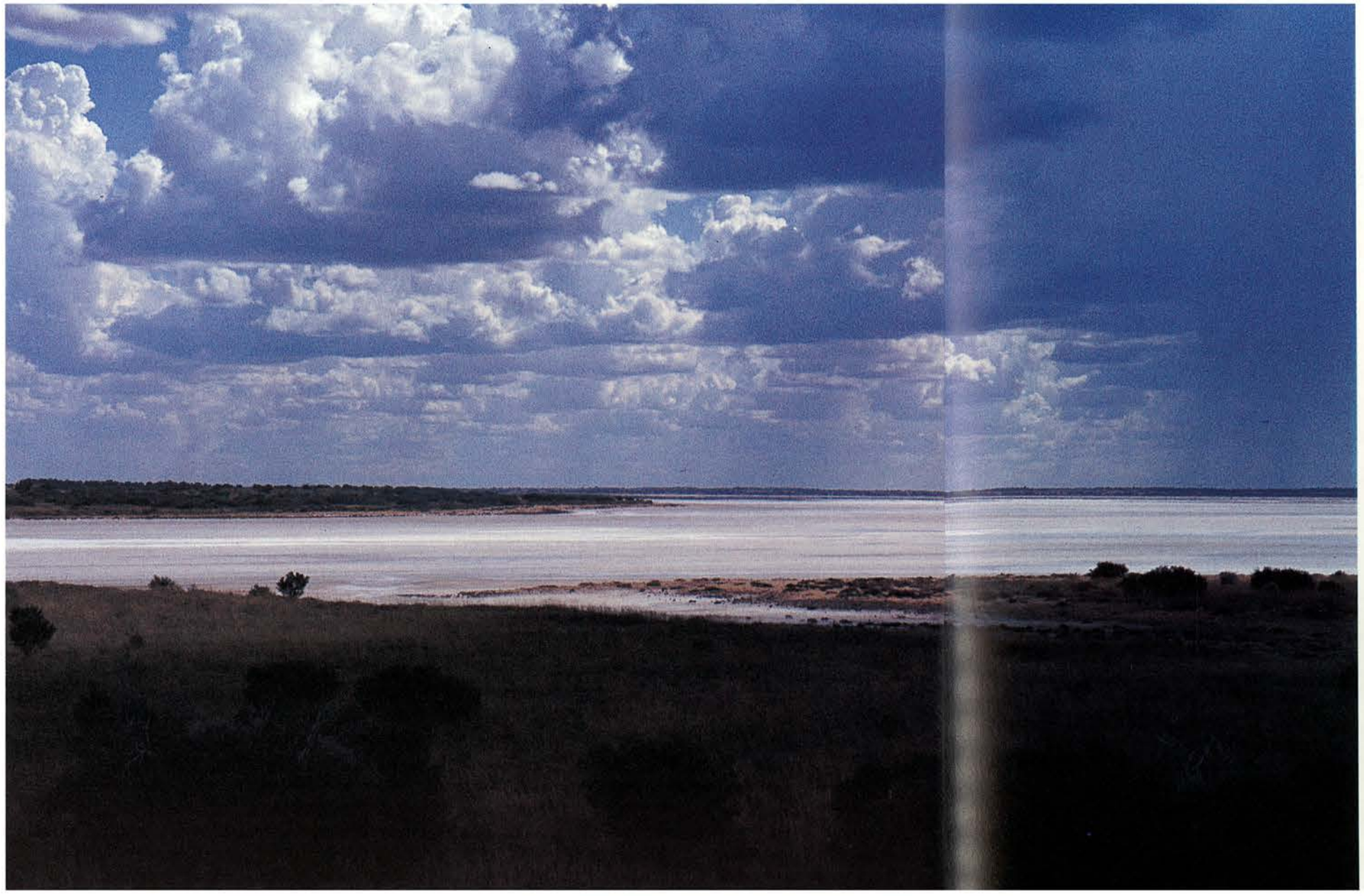
in such a way as to provide the widest cultural horizons experienced by the desert Aborigines. Through their religion, they come to know about places they will never physically see and feel spiritual kinship with groups far beyond the margins of their social universe.

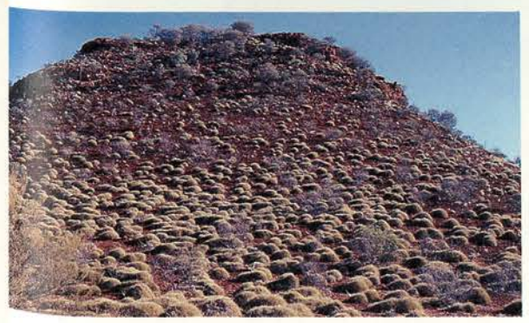
This expansive worldview derives from the extensive wanderings and creative activities of the many beings of the Dreaming, whose ancestral tracks crisscross vast stretches of the western desert. Cultural pressures to pass on to other groups the rituals that each group borrows or composes have resulted in a remarkable diffusion of religious lore throughout the entire region. Two groups more than one thousand kilometres apart may be performing the same ritual at the same time, singing the same songs and using some of the same types of objects that have been handed on as an integral part of the ritual concerned.

Even at the time of the big meeting, when the many component bands of Mardujarra society are integrated, people are linked so extensively and share so many of their basic values and understandings that little negotiation is necessary. An elaborate host–visitor etiquette dominates the initial proceedings, and usually allows for a smooth transition into the main business of the gathering. Thanks to the operation of kinship and many other systems of classification, different activities occur without prolonged debates over status or roles.

These brief periods of intense social activity demonstrate the immense practical value of such complex networks. The Mardujarra take for granted the skills needed to get a living from the land. What they work hard at and consider vital to the survival of their culture are their relationships with each other and with the spiritual forces of the Dreaming on which they believe their ultimate destiny depends.

View of the Western Desert.
M.A. SMITH





Above.
Throsell Range, Western Desert.
R. TONKINSON

Left.
Views of the Western Desert.
M.A. SMITH