

Paintings at Emily Gap, east of Alice Springs.

JOSEPHINE FLOOD

AN ARANDA CEREMONY

R. G. KIMBER AND M. A. SMITH

IN THE COUNTRY of the southern Aranda, where the sandhills of the Simpson Desert spill on to the gibber plains, the people had gathered at Ilbora, their major rain centre. There was great excitement as the ceremonies came to an end. Men and women imitated the call of the spur-winged plover, the bird that had travelled with the rain in the *Altjira*, the Dreaming, and was marked with the storm colours—black cloud, white hail and gold lightning.

Because it was humid, the rain makers knew that rain was likely, and the signs also indicated that the time had come to burn the country in a very controlled way. The travellers had reached Oolarinna waterhole and the firestick farming began, with local groups assisting each other. An Aranda elder, Walter Smith Purula, recently recalled this activity, which used to take place every year,

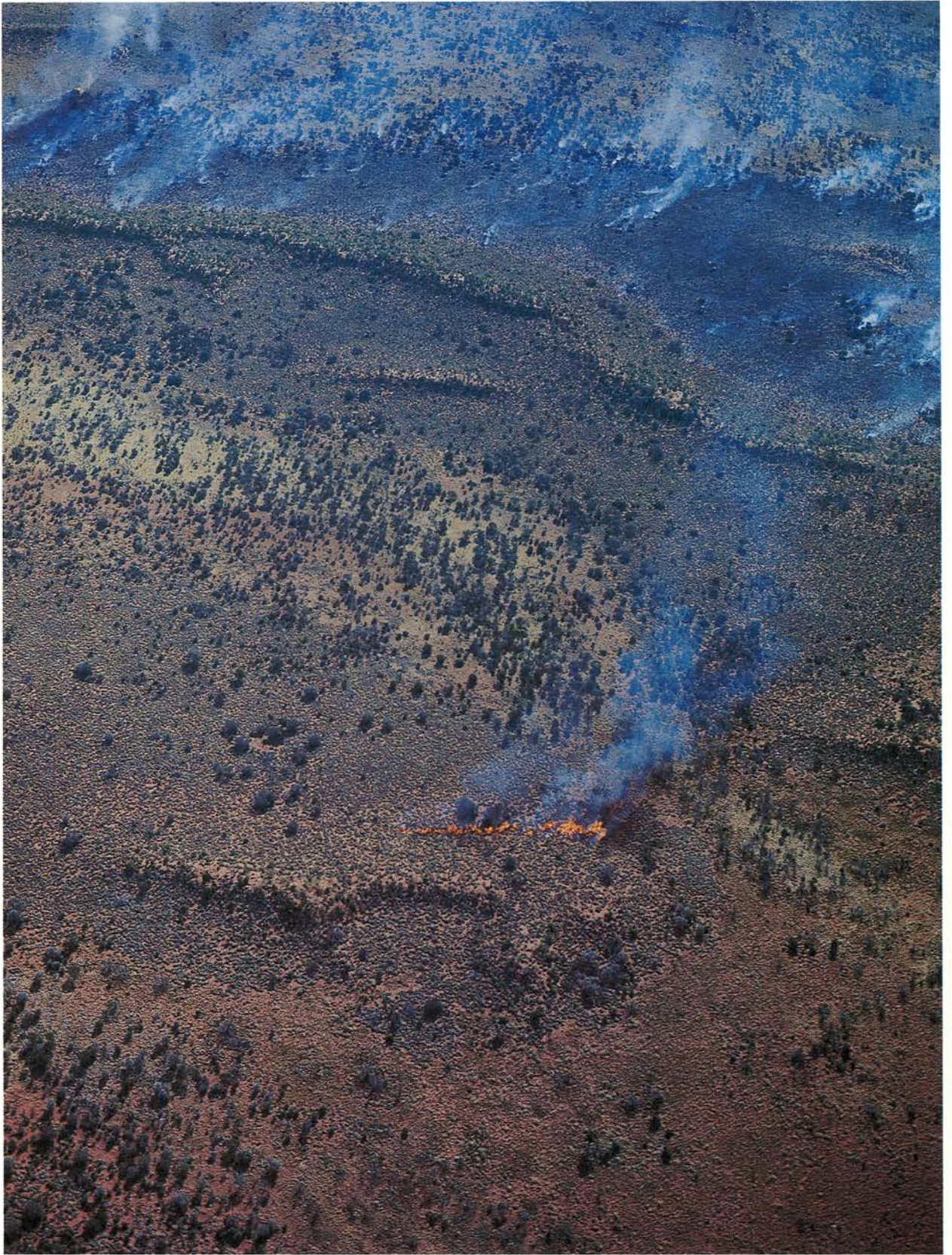


They watch the white ants—when they start carrying their eggs out of the creek and put them on a high place, then they know it's going to rain. They start burning again. They generally burn a little patch first . . . close to the rockhole or soakage. It's got to be cleared off there ready for them so they can get their drink of water . . . and they make for that burnt patch if the main fire gets out of control.

If it's hilly country, they only burn about . . . 12 miles [18 kilometres] . . . right along the hill, perhaps to promote feed for wallabies or kangaroos or something. In flat country they got to wait for the wind . . . When it is blowing hard enough, they light it, watch it, stand right around, and put it out if need be.

They burn in little patches first, and then they put them out. They start on this other . . . fire then. Some fallen trees might be burning. They got to bury that. Might be ironwood, might be corkwood, and if wind gets hold of that, it chucks that coal a long way. Instead of that, they bury it.

They burn him early, before that weather gets too hot . . . But in the middle of the day a fire is dangerous. That whirlwind comes too, and . . . carries the fire along. No good. That's the whirlwind time then. You got to wait till nearly sundown, and then you can start burning again.





Opposite.
Aerial view of spinifex country fired during September 1982 to ensure a patchy mosaic of burnt land. The lower right was fired in 1976; it is regenerating and will not burn in this fire. The centre lower left did not burn in 1976 and most of it remained intact in the 1982 blaze because the fire was set to burn downwind. The upper area is blackened and the fire continues, although patches remain unburnt.

G. ALLEN



'Firestick farming' or firing of spinifex country in central Australia. A line of fire set in spinifex tussocks in a planned burn. In the foreground of the left-hand lower photograph is a patch burned in a previous fire, while behind it is an area of regrowth not to be burned during this firing.

R.G. KIMBER

Certain time of the year though, they, got to do that. You can't burn wrong time, like, summer time it's got to be burnt, but no good winter time. They die. All them tucker trees . . . But if they burn them summer time and a storm comes, it grows lovely.

That's all the desert country, all the same.

Everyone understood this fire technology, but they still needed to talk about it. The women debated matters with their husbands, telling them which vegetables and fruits they favoured for the next season. Different patches of country were chosen for the firing, sometimes to protect certain trees, such as the quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*) with its plentiful fruit, or to promote those plants that increased their productivity after fire, such as 'bush raisin' (*Solanum*); sometimes to clear in order to find goannas and small game or to promote green shoots favoured by kangaroos and wallabies. The hunters were chiefly concerned to ensure a suitable pattern and temperature of firing. The senior men also decided when it was time to protect sacred sites by using fire to burn breaks.

The old men directed operations, carefully choosing the time of day and assessing the wind before ordering younger men to stand downwind, around the edge of the sacred area. The elders fired the grass; the others used green branches and small wooden shovels to beat out or to smother the flames whenever the fire looked in danger of flaring out of control. Intermittent firing left a patchy mosaic of country in different stages of regeneration, producing a landscape across which destructive fires could not rage.

This 1977 painting by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, a member of the Papunya Tula Artists' Company, depicts the flashpoint where a mythological fire started. The fire covered the country of the Anmatjera people in ash. Contrasting with this blackened landscape is the area that did not burn. The paths of mythological beings are indicated by sinuous lines or tracks, and the vegetation mosaic of different species and of areas regenerating after other fires is shown. Photographed by R.G. Kimber.

CLIFFORD POSSUM
TJAPALTJARRI



Fifty kilometres to the north another fire was sending up smoke. The southern Aranda people knew that whoever made it was responding to their smokes. They discussed its meaning. When two more clouds arose immediately afterwards, they knew that it was the signal arranged two seasons previously, when the eastern Aranda people from the MacDonnell Ranges and Allambi Springs had visited the southern Aranda for Wedge-tailed Eagle ceremonies. The groups were linked by this and other Dreaming trails.

The adults talked excitedly and explained to the children the meaning of the smokes. Rain had fallen far to the north and the far country would soon be rich with food sufficient to support major ceremonial gatherings. The mature men and women who had travelled various northern routes speculated on the site for the coming ceremonies. There were only a few possibilities and selection depended on local falls of rain.

The messenger arrived two days later. He was accompanied by another man from the adjoining northern estate, for a person must always have company. They had managed to cross more than one hundred kilometres of waterless country by using kangaroo skin waterbags and travelling long distances in the cool of early evening and by moonlight.

This messenger was one of the specially elected great travellers, chosen by the old men for his endurance and dedication. He had travelled five hundred kilometres from his Aruabara rain centre home. All along his route he had been greeted with respect and given food, water, fire at night and a travelling companion. The southern Aranda women had prepared seed cakes and had water for both travellers, while the men provided meat. The messenger handed over an emu feather bundle, and a senior man unwrapped it, revealing an incised piece of wood. This message-stick was both a guarantee of the messenger's honest intent and, by its incisions, a summary that the messenger was able to explain in detail. After the men approved its meaning, the message was passed on to the women. As soon as possible after the rains had fallen, everyone would travel to the Native Cat centre, the place to which the Urumbulla, the Dreaming creation beings, had come.



Another painting of Anmatjera territory by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, depicting the vegetation mosaic and ancestral pathways. Photographed by R.G. Kimber.

CLIFFORD POSSUM
TJAPALTJARRI

There a creation ritual would be repeated by young men in the stage of instruction in the men's law that followed their initiation.

The rains fell a week later, and the people moved from Oolarinna waterhole to the sandhill country. They obtained water from the claypans and made their wet-weather shelters on or near the crests of sandhills, where the rain quickly soaked away and they had a good view across the land. Their method of constructing these shelters originated in the messenger's country. Walter Smith Purula commented:

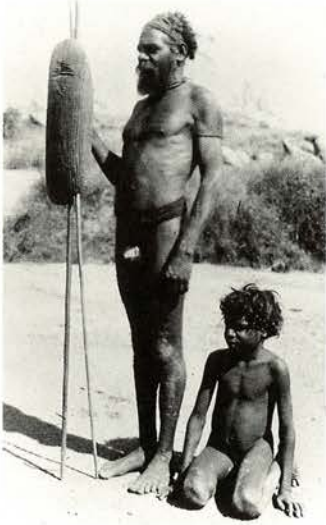
In the *Aljira*, the Dreaming, no-one knew how to make shelters. The men of Aruabara held a meeting. They decided to visit a man of great wisdom who lived a short distance to the east, for they thought he would know how to keep warm and dry when the storms came. The middle-aged men of authority decided that a boy should travel with them, even though the journey was strictly for initiated men, for the law would have to be passed on for generation after generation. Thus it was that they chose an intelligent youth to travel with them, and they set out.

They found the wise man at his home upon a mountain peak, and he was indeed the keeper of the law of the storm shelter. He showed them how to erect a framework then, most important of all, indicated how the branches must be placed over it so that leaf fingers overlapped leaf fingers. Now, when it rained, the water could not penetrate the shelter.

The men then returned to their great eastern Aranda rain centre and taught the women the necessary skills. That is how the law of the rainproof shelters was established. From that time on men were obliged to perform the rain ceremonies correctly and to keep secret from women certain dangerous knowledge connected with the learning about shelter construction. In return the women reciprocated by assisting to build the shelters and were obliged to collect the firewood needed to keep the families warm.

People kept to their shelters when it rained, but in breaks and immediately after

Aranda man and boy. The grooves on the softwood bean tree shield are the result of its having been used to produce fire. Two men sit facing each other, using a spearthrower in a sawlike action across the shield. The fine powder from the groove smoulders within a minute and when blown on tinders, ignites. Artefacts need to be light and versatile. Photographed by F.J. Gillen.
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM



Aranda family at Alice Springs in 1896 in a traditional context. The man, his wives and children are grouped outside their shelter, displaying their tools. One woman is grinding grass seeds. The clarity of this photograph, taken by the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, is surprising, given the problems of dust, heat and transport.
MUSEUM OF VICTORIA

the storm had passed, they hunted the game of the desert country. There were hare wallabies, several varieties of bandicoot, other small marsupials, the large and easily caught pythons and carpet snakes, goannas and other lizards. Men, women and children hunted this game, although the children needed guidance. Everybody had a digging-stick and a small wooden scoop shovel and the men also carried spears. Although they carried both barbed and plain spears they used the plain ones here, as barbs would have hindered a thrust into a spinifex tussock to secure a marsupial or prevented the use of the spear as digging-stick to extract a goanna. Tame dingoes helped the hunters by locating certain animals and either harassing them in the open or hunting them to their burrows or lairs.

To make their artefacts, the desert Aborigines had to know about materials and their location. They could assess the qualities of different timbers and stones, and were able to work with bone, fur, hair, hides, sinews, bark, feathers, grasses, natural earths and spinifex resin. Their tools included elaborate ritual paraphernalia, three kinds of non-returning boomerang, softwood and hardwood dishes of different shapes and sizes, digging-sticks, edge-ground axes, several kinds of stone knives, stone-tipped adzes and gouges, string bags and containers fashioned from skin, bark or feathers. The men's hunting spears were from two to four metres long, some unbarbed, others with various barbed heads, and all with a socket at the butt end into which the spearthrower peg could fit. Barbed spears were favoured when hunting larger game such as kangaroos, rock wallabies, euros (hill kangaroos) and emus. The barbs held the spear in the animal and produced a more severe wound than an unbarbed weapon. The men also made heavy jabbing spears, used during close fighting to wound an opponent's thighs, and shields of both softwood and hardwood. Different kinds of clubs had been developed for the special needs of hunting, fighting and sport. Millstones and other grinding or pounding stones were essential women's utensils, normally left on campsites because they were so heavy. Spinifex (*Triodia*) resin was a basic raw material for bonding stone tools to wooden handles.



During their hunting and foraging in wet weather, the people carried few artefacts, leaving most in camp or stored in trees or rock crevices. But while gathering food they also began to collect items for gift exchange at the coming meetings. They paid close attention to the growth of plants, for they needed to arrive at the Native Cat site when the seed foods were ripe and ready for harvesting.

There were 140 species of plant food available to the Aranda people, of which 75 were exploited for their seeds. The men spoke of an early, bright, yellow-flowering acacia as the 'pretty women's plant' and seed-bearing plants were referred to as 'women's plants', because the women generally collected and prepared the seed foods. There were also several clusters of trees in the southern



Women's equipment (left to right): a wooden pitchi for carrying; a large mortar and pestle for grinding and in front of it a pad of hair and feathers for placing on the head when carrying heavy loads; a digging-stick; and a millstone and muller for grinding.

M. SMITH

ABORIGINAL FOOD PLANTS IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

HABITAT	SEEDS	ROOTS AND TUBERS	FRUITS	OTHER*
Spinifex sand plain	32	3(1)	9(3)	31
Watercourse communities	5(1)	4(2)	3(1)	10
Spinifex hills	16	1	4(2)	16
Woodland	9	3(2)	7	7
Mulga communities	4(1)	2	3(1)	3
Other (6 habitats)	12	2(1)	4(1)	12
Widespread species (occupying many habitats)	12(3)	2	7(1)	18(1)

The numbers in brackets refer to staple food plants.
 *Includes edible gums, lerp scales and insect galls.

Desert men digging for yelka bulbs during a brief pause while on a kangaroo hunting expedition.

R.G. KIMBER





Aerial view of the Simpson Desert, showing the linear dune system.

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Aranda country that represented the young Urumbulla men, who had journeyed from the sea at Port Augusta, 'singing sweet songs' of love magic, to tell the young women left 900 kilometres to the south that they were still loved.

A group of Wongkonguru people came from their Carpet Snake Dreaming country to the east, their route announced by travelling smokes along the Macumba River, then northeasterly through the sandy flood-flats. Their arrival was a time of great enjoyment, for the men brought with them carefully wrapped *kultjera* throwing clubs, a clear sign that they came in friendship and that games would be played. These hardwood clubs were some seventy centimetres long and their carefully shaped handles were long and narrow, ending in egg-shaped heads. Having been smoothed with stones and highly polished with sand, they were oiled with kangaroo fat. Walter Smith Purula said:

All the ... people in the Desert ... had a *kultjera* stick ... They used to throw it ... Well, they'd meet one another and have a game. The Aranda people might win and the Wongkonguru might win, or it might be Arabana ... They had to throw the stick through the bush on a claypan. Get it through the bush and it might only go couple of yards [two metres] ... Next one he might go long way. [The winner was the man who threw his club the greatest distance.] Each one got three throws ...

Everybody was allowed to watch, though only men were permitted to throw the *kultjera*. It was a time of friendly rivalry and barracking, which set the mood for later gift exchange. This preliminary meeting and gift exchange established cordial relationships and a positive outlook towards the coming major ceremonial meetings. Gifts were a tangible expression of goodwill and, as the following account by an Aranda elder illustrates, they reflected the variety of desert resources.

This Aranda mob would bring boomerangs and spears ... Their boomerangs and spears are little bit different to these Wongkonguru boomerangs and their spears.

They also used to have red ochre ... yellow ochre and ... black paint. The Alyawara and Aranda had red paint ... and yellow ones ... and the southern Aranda used to swap it [the black manganese paint] for a red one then.

That old people from south ... got grey whiskers ... used to get that black paint and rub it over the grey, be like a young fellow. Black whiskers. All the old women, grey headed ones too, used to rub their grey hair with the black colouring.

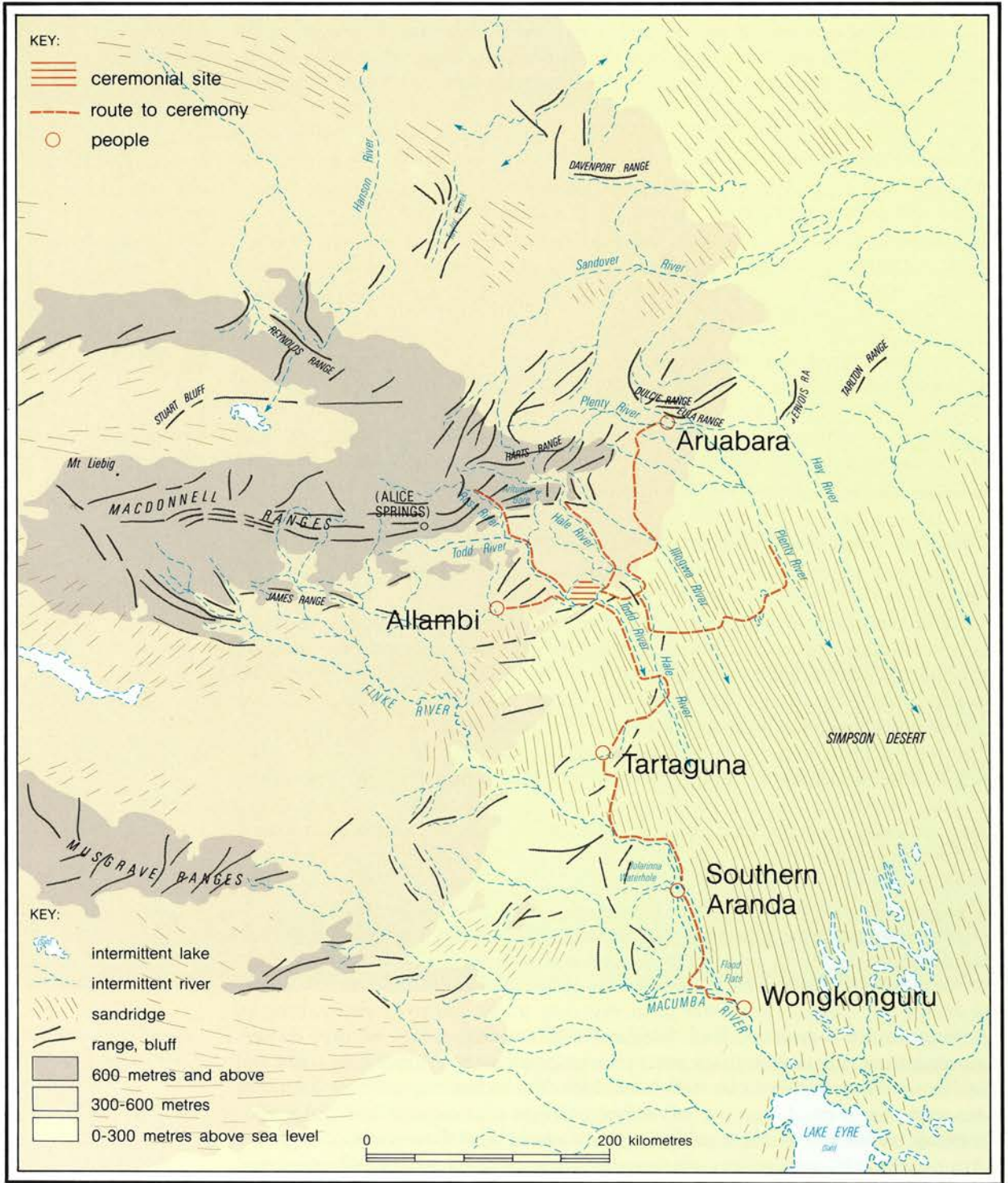
When the senior women, who had been closely watching the local plants, told their husbands that the seed plants farther north must be nearing maturity, a decision was made to travel to the Native Cat site. The Wongkonguru and southern Aranda travelled as a group over the well-watered southern country to Tartaguna claypan, near the great fallen tree of the Wedge-tailed Eagle Dreaming. They fired patches of country as they passed from waterhole to waterhole, hunted small game, gathered the early maturing yams and the highly prized native truffles, and talked about the landscape. All hills, claypans, distinctive stands of trees and other key natural features were linked to Dreaming trails, so as they travelled the people sang the appropriate songs of the country. Carpet Snake, Rabbit-eared Bandicoot, Warrior Band, Fossil Animal, Urumbulla youths, Wedge-tailed Eagle—the songs drew the sites closer, the time passing easily as the people moved northwards.

While the southern people were travelling through the sandhills, the north-eastern Alyawara and Aranda were coming from their river bed and sand plain country, and the more centrally located Aranda travelled from their range country and mulga tree plains. There was great diversity in the entire territory, both in topography and vegetation. Each localised land owning group of fifty to one hundred people was linked to all others by language and by Dreaming trails, and often by marriage and other social relationships. Yet each group perceived itself to have territory with distinctive advantages. While the range-based Caterpillar Dreaming totem group of Alice Springs estate held dear their rockholes, gorges and mountain-rimmed valleys, the southernmost Aranda of the Wedge-tailed Eagle totem loved their gibber plain land, felt hemmed in by the ranges and were happiest when they had a clear view to a distant horizon. Aranda-affiliated people had clearly defined local group boundaries. Under the law, trespassing without permission was punishable by death, but there were many ways of gaining permission to travel, provided that an open approach was heralded in advance by smoke signals.



Ancient rock engraving in the Simpson Desert, depicting a man with spears, woomera (spearthrower) and boomerangs. The same equipment was used after 1788.

R.G. KIMBER



Aranda country and surrounding areas, showing places mentioned in the text.

J. GOODRUM

The people of the Native Cat estate waited eagerly, all holding back twenty kilometres or more from the site to ensure that the waters, plant foods and game would be reserved for the time of ceremonies. Messengers were sent out by the senior landowning men to meet the approaching groups and ensure that they waited on secondary waters until all groups arrived. These messengers also gave permission for the use of water and food resources at these secondary places.

When all groups were within one or two days' walk from the site, the senior men raised a great pall of black smoke by lighting a highly resinous variety of spinifex. All groups then began moving towards the ceremonial ground. First to arrive, nearly a day ahead, was the local group, whose members then waited and watched the smokes of the approaching visitors. It was apparent that the people from the west would arrive next, so two young men were sent to act as lookouts from a low hill. The rest waited quietly as the excitement mounted. The senior men arranged several false alarms about the arrival, raising expectations even higher. Then suddenly the two young men appeared at a run and the ceremonial leaders issued commands. The women and children knelt in a huddled group, faces to the ground. Fifteen metres away the men stood in ranks, most of them unarmed, a few senior men with spears and woomeras but held in the non-combat position, and all with their backs to the approaching group. Faintly at first, then louder, came a deep chant:

'Wah! Wah! Wah!'

Feet were pounding in time as the men from the west came at a stamping run towards the site owners. The chanting and the stamping grew louder. Now the local group was totally vulnerable—men unarmed and apparently unaware of the approach, women and children unprotected. The leaders of the western group reached the meeting place. They threw green branches on the women and children then, still chanting and stamping, passed between the waiting men and women. The rest of their tightly knit group repeated these actions, in their turn becoming entirely vulnerable. But the waiting ranks of men joined them and, in the chant of released tension and friendly excitement, ran some hundred metres from the women and children before turning and streaming back again. By now the women and children of the western group were beginning to arrive and people joined in animated discussion. After a short interval, the local group provided food and water and the western people walked to a clump of mulga, where for generations past they had made their camps.

By noon next day, all the visiting groups had arrived. Goodwill prevailed among the four hundred assembled people. The time for gift exchange was near and artefacts and food cakes were piled in separate heaps. Although the ancient Dreaming law had established social networks of obligation and rights, at the actual ceremonial exchange people held back until a gift-giving group had encouraged another group forward and gently urged individuals to select items of their choice. Because of the range of contacts open to the desert people, the gifts came from hundreds of kilometres beyond the territories of those present. There were neatly made net bags of *pituri* tobacco from 450 kilometres to the northeast, stone knives from celebrated quarries 550 kilometres northwest, red bean-seed necklaces, some from nearby and others from 300 kilometres north, and boomerangs from 500 kilometres to the south.

Women draped themselves with the bright red necklaces, using them as headbands, neckbands and crossed body necklaces that ran from right shoulder to left hip, left shoulder to right hip. They decorated their foreheads with ornaments of white feathers and wore forehead fringes and pubic aprons of possum fur string. Their breasts they covered with tassels taken from the white tail tips of bandicoots



Traditional Aranda welcoming dance on the approach of strangers to attend a ceremony. This dance was photographed at Alice Springs in 1901 by Baldwin Spencer.
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Dancing Women Dreaming, a site of deep significance to people attending the ceremony.

R.G. KIMBER



Women attending the ceremony decorated their bodies; this woman from the Eastern Aranda is wearing typical head and neck bands. Photographed by F.J. Gillen.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

and attached to strings fashioned from the fur of the rabbit-eared bandicoot. Several women soon began dancing, moving sideways in short jumps, keeping time to song rhythms and handclaps, their own hands and heads portraying the associated story. These women came from the west, where the Dancing Women Dreaming had travelled. In their land a mountain range held their dance, and at times they sat and looked at the distant lines of scarp faces that represented the ranked lines of the fringes and aprons, and they cried at the beauty of their country.

Other women joined the groups of singers and dancers, and children at times imitated their mothers. Men and women alike showed their appreciation of the re-enactments of myths. But the women celebrated only for a short time, for the men had to begin their ceremonies. Two kinds of ceremony were open to everyone. The one just beginning was of a type leading up to secret and sacred re-enactments at which only initiated men could be present and which recalled previous visits to this particular site and other major gatherings of these people. A second type of open ceremony represented shared experience, such as a successful emu hunt or an amusing incident in camp. The secret and sacred ceremonies were those laid down by the Dreaming creation beings to be performed and witnessed exclusively by appropriate groups of men or women. Such ceremonies were re-enactments of performances by the Dreaming ancestors, who were believed to be always present. Those events associated with manhood ceremonies were amongst the most secret and sacred of all. While men often provided support for women when they performed major ceremonies and the women normally reciprocated, sometimes the opposite sex had to be absent.

By mid-afternoon the women and children had walked from the gorge to rockholes and other waters, some as far as fifteen kilometres away. From then on they would be too tired for much dancing, for they had to travel daily to the gorge camp site, collecting plant and animal foods on the way, carrying enough water for their own needs and for the preparation of food cakes for themselves and the men, and returning to their distant camps by sunset.

Late in the afternoon of this first day, the men began a single-file walk up the gorge. Young initiated men had previously been instructed about the dangers of

the site on their first visit. No woman or child could pass beyond the entrance to the gorge. No man, not even the most senior ritual leader, dared visit the rockholes alone, for the Native Cat, sire of the Dreaming was too powerful, too ruthless in his vengeance if errors of judgment in protocol or ritual occurred. The men walked forward, senior men occasionally whispering, all looking intently ahead. Three hundred metres up the gorge, where a rock platform was surrounded by huge boulders, they grouped together again. The managers of the site left the group and filed between the boulders, senior men first. They were men from adjoining country, their totemic affiliations including the Emu, Wedge-tailed Eagle and Dingo. The men of the Native Cat Dreaming, whose site they were now visiting, had assisted them during their ceremonies, as social ties and the law had decreed. Now they reciprocated, for managers were essential on any visit. They ensured that the owners of the locality followed correct protocol, and it was they who painted the bodies of the owners with the correct body designs, constructed the elaborate headdresses and assisted with all other rituals. The waiting men, who were owners and others of directly linked association, picked sprays of soft-leaved bushes and remained silent.

Soon a ululating call came from further up the gorge. The waiting men left the rock platform and followed a pad that led them towards the rockholes. All about them the great boulders seemed to be crouching, menacing and ready to destroy intruders. The ululating call came again, closer at hand now, and the gorge rang with the call. As the men filed into a natural amphitheatre, the Native Cat suddenly seemed to leap at them. It was he who had led the Urumbulla youths on their long journey from the south coast, where seagulls lived, ever onwards to the north coast, the crocodile's home.

The older men had renewed their contact through songs. The young men were encouraged to join in and were instructed in the interpretation of the songs about the natural features of the gorge. Then they all climbed down to the rockholes at the head of the amphitheatre. All about them, in the boulders, the engravings, the rock ledges and the trees, was the evidence of the Dreaming Native Cat ancestor and the Urumbulla youths.

The women arrived back at the camping area near the gorge entrance late in the morning of the next day. They brought plentiful supplies of small game and also vast quantities of seed foods. This Simpson Desert locality was remarkable for the quantities of seed food that were available. Aborigines still remember how an earlier generation 'used to talk how they got their good tucker. They used to talk how easy it was to get . . . Must've been rain time . . . to grow the bush up, get that seed. They had a big garden there.'

This was not an entirely natural garden. Before the rains came, the local people used fire to promote the growth of some plants. They protected other patches, and seeded the fired patches and some other areas. The seeds, carried in emu feather containers called *apwas*, were exchanged as gifts at major gatherings. They were scattered near soakage waters or other sites favourable to the particular species.

Seed foods were the most dependable and predictable of the region's plant foods. Dependence on seed foods is typical of dwellers in arid areas, and the groups who met at the Native Cat area relied greatly on seed-gathering. On the first day of travel the women broke seed-laden branches from trees and stacked them at the bases of the trunks in tent-shaped piles, branch stems uppermost. This would allow the seeds and seed pods a period of drying, making collection easy in a few days' time. They knew it as a method of collection established by a Dreaming ancestor who had lived 400 kilometres to the west and who had created the northern slopes of Amunurknga (Mount Liebig) by stacking mulga branches for drying.

SEED FOODS IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Aboriginal people inhabiting the arid interior collected a wide range of seeds as food. Almost any plant that produced enough seed to be worth harvesting was exploited. In central Australia they used the seeds from 75 different plant species. These ranged from low ground hugging plants like pigface (*Portulaca oleracea*) to grasses, such as woollybutt (*Eragrostis eriopoda*) and native millet (*Panicum decompositum*), to trees or shrubs such as mulga (*Acacia aneura*), prickly wattle (*A. victoriae*) and kurrajong (*Brachychiton gregori*).

Although the widest variety of plant foods occurs on the spinifex sand plains, other habitats such as watercourses and soaks contain comparable numbers of staple food plants. The most important of the seed food plants are distributed widely through different habitats. Seeds were not sweet, and their preparation was time-consuming, so they were not favourite foods. But their reliability made them important. Seeds of one variety or another were available after the other more desirable bush foods had been depleted around a waterhole or campsite.

All seeds need some preparation before they can be eaten. This involves at least winnowing or yandying to remove twigs, leaf particles and sand before grinding into flour. Some grass seeds need husking before grinding and most varieties of acacia seed need to be roasted to parch and crack the hard outer coat. Yandying is used to separate charcoal and hot sand from acacia seeds after they have been roasted, and to remove sand from some grass seeds, such as *Panicum australiense*, which are often collected from heaps made by ants around the entrances of their nests. Very hard seeds such as those from prickly wattle require a long sequence of roasting, cleaning, pounding, cleaning, pounding again, dry grinding in a mortar, and finally wet grinding with water on a millstone into a paste before being eaten. Without the use of grindstones to prepare these varied food sources, it is doubtful whether the arid lands could have been occupied permanently.



Mt Liebig: mulga branches stacked by the Dreaming ancestor.

R.G. KIMBER

After yandying, a process of rocking, bumping and shaking a dish to remove twigs, leaf particles and sand, the women used grindstones in the final stages of preparation. Although here used to mill seeds for flour, various types of grindstone were also used to pulp fruits, crack nuts, prepare pastes from dried fruit, pulverise bones and small animals, grind ochre, prepare native tobacco, shape wood and sharpen certain stone tools.

At first the women collected the softer seeds from grasses and some acacias. As time passed, however, they had to use more and more of the harder acacia seeds, such as those of prickly wattle (*Acacia victoriae*) which, although plentiful, had to be pounded in a mortar, winnowed to remove rubbish, pounded and winnowed again, then pounded yet again before being ready for wet-milling and cooking.

All seeds were gathered on the way to the Native Cat camp. The mulga present there was not used, because the living trees were important for shade and the dead trees for firewood. The women sat in groups at separate camps, and while they worked they reviewed the morning's activities, discussed marriage arrangements and sang the songs of their country. Their millstones were always left at these camps near the gorge. Some had been carried in originally from their home territories, but the women had a readily available natural supply from the foothills adjoining the camping areas.

There were two types of grinding stones used at the Native Cat site. Long millstones were used for wet-grinding grass seeds and some acacia seeds, and mortars with circular indented surfaces were used for pounding hard acacia seeds in preparation for wet-milling. At a major rockhole used by the women the natural

flat rock surface around the edge of the water had been used for centuries and there were many shallow depressions. The art of milling was well developed.

They got a flat rock, and they got a round rock. They grind the seed up. They got a . . . coolamon [wooden dish] on the side. That coolamon is a little bit tipped. When that seed which has been ground to flour runs from the lower millstone, it stays in that . . . coolamon. That's their damper, they mix it up with water then cook it.

At each gathering both men and women performed maintenance ceremonies. The men cleared bushes away from heaps of stones which were then restacked or realigned, and key stones were rubbed to free the seed food essence and so ensure continuing bounty of seed foods. The women's ceremony involved digging at a pit site to retrieve, handle and sing over their sacred stones before burying them again. As the senior woman dug the earth she threw it high, allowing the light breeze to catch and carry the lighter soil, and spreading the seed food essence that had been left there in the Dreaming.

The men's ceremonies were more elaborate, and sometimes involved daylong preparation of sacred paraphernalia. They were held at sunset and in the evenings. The middle-aged and senior men generally stayed near the rockholes up the gorge during the day, making sacred objects, manufacturing spears and other artefacts, or resting. The young men, using boomerangs, spears and spearthrowers, had constantly to hunt euros and wallabies along the range, or kangaroos in the distant mulga scrub. They paid the older men in meat food for their instruction.

Throughout the two weeks spent at the Native Cat centre, the older men celebrated the Dreaming in ritual acts, while the young men received much instruction, often under harsh discipline. Sometimes they were kept awake for two days before a major ritual re-enactment so that brief dramatic presentation and contrived illusions would have maximum impact before they fell into deep sleep. Firelight, moonlight and the deep shadows were used with great effect. Actors and sacred objects were suddenly illuminated or obscured. Reality and illusion blended. Men were decorated and became mythological ancestors. Boulders became men and men were transformed into boulders. On and on continued the song-chants to the accompaniment of the clapping of boomerangs.

As the days passed the ceremonies became more elaborate, and were timed to conclude as the moonlight flooded over the gorge rim, unless cloud cover allowed some acceptable alteration. At the end of each ceremonial cycle the senior man of authority led the younger men back to the camps at the gorge entrance. The close detail of the men's songs, dances, sacred paraphernalia, headdresses, and body paint had to remain secret forever. All sacred objects were left in the gorge, out of sight of women and children; the headdresses were destroyed and the body paint smeared to render it imperfect and therefore without power. Although some of the women, through ancestral ties or by having been conceived in the area, had rights to knowledge of the Dreaming, it stopped well short of men's knowledge. They could listen to some songs of association, understood something of the relationship between the smeared body paint and the creation myths, and were able to witness some minor associated acts.

The designs on body paintings and decorations and patterns on spears, shields and other weapons originated in the Dreaming. Shield designs reflected either the physical form and mythology of a man's country, a pattern used by a Dreaming hero to deflect spears magically, or a design handed down from the Dreaming to signify that its owner was on a special mission associated with sacred ceremonies. The women also owned special designs of deep significance.



Abandoned camp. The heavy grindstones are left behind. After a few months practically no other trace of occupation will be visible.

R. TONKINSON

Body paintings and decorated items used during these ceremonies illustrated the totemic affiliations of individuals. In those earlier dances that were public or involved children, similar body paintings were applied, but they were modified or lacked some details. Deliberately incomplete or imperfect, they lacked power and were not considered dangerous.

As the days passed and the secondary seed foods—those requiring the greatest labour to collect and prepare—came into use, the senior and middle-aged women let their husbands know that the walking needed for seed gathering had become too much for them, and seed preparation was now a long and tiring process. The young men, too, were finding large game difficult to procure. These were only gentle pressures, but the men of authority knew that they must not delay any ceremonies. There was a legend of young men who had rebelled, to remind the older men not to demand too much. Although they were key figures at the site, playing dominant roles in the great ceremonies and re-enactments, and performing rituals necessary for the well-being of all, the older men depended on the support of the women and the young men.

The ceremonies came to a sudden end. Once arrangements had been made for future ceremonies to be held when next the seasons allowed them, the people began to disperse. Farewells were quickly completed. Less than an hour after the women's arrival at the Native Cat camp with the usual daily seed foods and small game, everyone had gone. Only old campfires, flattened branches on mulga trees that had been used to improve the shade, spinifex tussock windbreaks, a few bones and pieces of hide, the grinding stones, and human footprints remained. In a few weeks only the stone artefacts would be left—and the Dreaming.

The people returned to their home territories as they had come, firing the country as they went, and singing their landmarks closer.

In the gorges of Aranda territory there are life-sustaining rockpools around which people may congregate for ceremonies. This is a view of N'Dahla Gorge.

D. LEWIS

Opposite page.

There are many natural features in central Australia that are of major significance for Aboriginal people in their association with creation ancestors. Such a place is Chambers Pillar, a sandstone residual in southern Aranda territory.

D. LEWIS



