



Devil's Marbles, Tennant Creek, NT.

Photograph by Reg Morrison.

WELDON TRANNIES

GATHERED FROM KAYTEJ WOMEN

DIANE BELL

NUNGARRAYI, a woman in her late forties, scanned the horizon for a shimmer of smoke that would indicate where her old mother, Nakamarra, had rested with one of the toddlers in the party. Behind her rose the awesome boulders of Karlukarlu, which Europeans call Devil's Marbles. 'Karlukarlu is the best country,' she said. 'It is rich in vegetable foods, meat, red ochre, firewood, plenty of soakages, rockholes, creeks, really important from the old people, stories you know, from the *Jukurpa* [Dreaming], dangerous too, you can't go near that special place.'

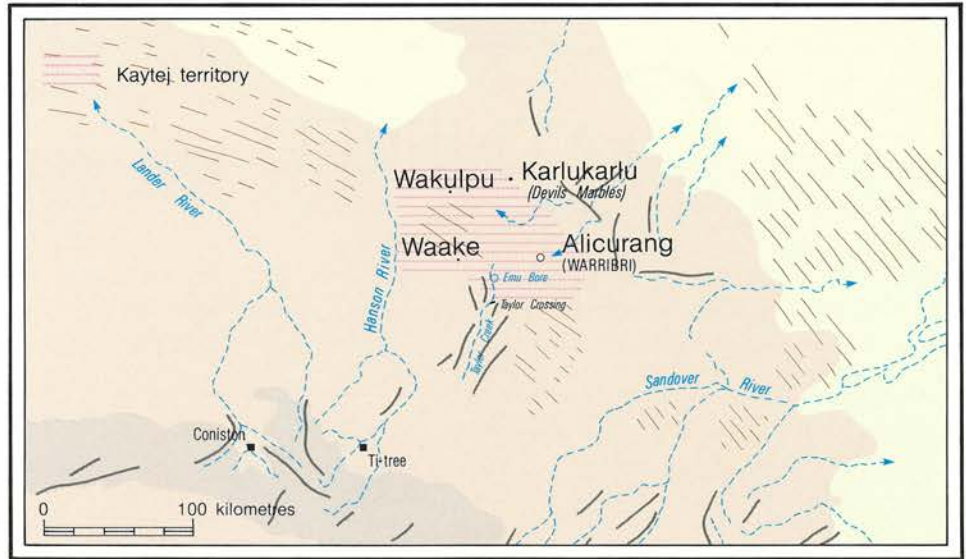
From crevices in the Devil's Marbles hung wild fig, a much-prized food. At their base grew the pungent-smelling *manyani* from which are prepared medicines for the treatment of upper respiratory tract illnesses. Nungarrayi knew where to gather many other herbal remedies that women use during childbirth, to promote lactation, to alleviate pain and swelling and to treat diarrhoea, sore eyes or gastro-intestinal disorders. Women also value other items such as clays, ochres, anthill material and charcoal for health-related activities.

It was not of the richness of the physical resources that Nungarrayi wished to speak on this occasion, but rather of the area's spiritual significance. In the *Jukurpa*, she explained, important ancestors including *ngapa* (rain) and *yawakiyi* (bush berry), had wandered through this country. They had marked out the creeks, and at those places where they paused to camp, their essence had infused the landscape with a power and a significance that are still celebrated in ceremonies. Karlukarlu, Wakulpu to the west, and Waake to the south are such places. The rules imposed by these ancestors pervade present social practice. The flash of lightning overhead, the thundering of rain, the swift streams and prolific growth after storms all testify that the activities of the ancestral rain heroes and the actions of their descendants form one integrated world.

Nungarrayi turned slightly, caught my gaze and said, 'You know, many things have changed, but my father taught me about this country, which he knew from the old people; that doesn't change. It was his through his mother and her father's



Kaytej country, showing places mentioned in the text.
J. GOODRUM



Women's utensils for daily tasks: modern, but in traditional form.
PENNY TWEEDIE

side, like we call *kurdungurlu*. His own country is Jarrajarra [a range to the south] but we left there during the killing time [the Coniston Massacres of 1928]. I'm still *kirda* for that place, following my father; I can still do the business [ceremonies] for that *wawirri* [kangaroo] at Jarrajarra, but we live here now.'

The past of Nungarrayi's people lives so strongly in the present generation that her experience and wisdom let us glimpse the universe of Aboriginal women in central Australia before the Europeans arrived. Underscoring her allusion to her knowledge of several different territories and their associated Dreamings, ceremonies and resources is the multiplicity of ways in which Aboriginal people refer to 'country'. For the country of their father and their father's father, they will be *kirda*, a role that entails a set of rights and responsibilities in the maintenance of their forebears' land. These complement and support those of the *kurdungurlu*, the people who trace their relationship to the land through their mother and her father or sometimes through their father's mother's father. People who stand in the relationship of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* must be present at ceremonies and visits to important sites. They must be consulted about the use of particular resources. Before an area of land is fired, for example, permission is necessary from both.

To explain the different rights and responsibilities of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*, Aborigines often use a modern analogy. *Kirda*, the Aborigines say, are the 'owners', while *kurdungurlu* are the 'managers'. At other times the *kurdungurlu* are likened to 'workers' or 'policemen'. During ceremonies *kurdungurlu* must paint the ritual designs on the *kirda* and ensure that the activities of the ancestors are faithfully represented. Both *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* know the content and structure of the designs, songs and mythology for a particular country, but each has a distinctive role to play in upholding the *jukurpa* heritage.

There are many other ways in which people claim affiliation to land: through mother's mother, place of birth, conception or burial of relatives; through shared ceremonial responsibilities and extended kinship networks. The travels of the ancestors form a network of activity across and through which women may trace relationships, rights and responsibilities in other 'countries'. Much of the ebb and flow of Aboriginal practice has been obscured by unduly rigid academic models of local and social organisation. In desert lands where population density is low, people need access to a number of countries.

Several important consequences flow from these complex relationships. Because many women have access to the knowledge of several tracts of land, if one group suffers disaster or demographic imbalance, other women know enough to maintain the ceremonies for that country. Continuity is asserted even in the face of drastic change. And because women do not spend all their lives within the one territory, they need to know about the resources and the rituals of others. At marriage, a husband normally spends some time in his wife's country, but this may be the country of his wife's mother, of his wife's father, or even the country of her maternal grandmother. From her mother she will have learned of several different countries and later, when she lives in her husband's country, she will learn something of its resources. The country to which she accompanies her husband may be that of his father, his mother or his maternal grandmother.

Through this web, women not only learn something of the other countries celebrated in ceremony but also gain rights to the resources of such distant places. Most women can name various plants and animals in three or four different languages. If asked how they learned of such things they laugh and say, 'Oh, from mother-in-law', or 'From my sister-in-law', or 'That's when I visited my husband's country'. They also use a form of social classification by which every member of society is given a name at birth. In Warlpiri society there are eight names, each with a male and a female form. The latter begins with 'N' and the male form with 'J'. These names are called 'skins' in Aboriginal English, or subsections by anthropologists. They provide a shorthand means of referring to kin.

The strength of the bond between sisters and that between mothers and daughters is often strong enough to retain a new husband within his wife's country for many years. Many anthropologists assume that the core of a group consists of a husband, wife and their unmarried daughters and sons. The comments of women make it evident, however, that the manner in which people get along with each other is as important as descent-based rules. Often the parents, with their married daughters and unmarried sons, form the core of residential groups.

Hunting parties reflect the balance between various ways of speaking of country and the importance of personal preferences. Nungarrayi uses the Warlpiri term *wirlinyi* to describe the women's activities. Although the women use digging-sticks, dilly-bags, wooden dishes and axes while the men have spears, boomerangs, woomeras and axes, in Warlpiri the same term, *wirlinyi*, is used for the food-getting activities of both sexes.

Usually hunting parties include *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* for the particular country, although the actual choice of individuals depends on shared experience, friendship, marriage alliances and the like. The composition of such groups is a pointer to Aboriginal politics because the person with whom one hunts is the one who shares the benefits of the activity. Nungarrayi and the other women move with confidence through the landscape, name important sites and discuss the significance of the country. Statements of attachment to country, such as Nungarrayi's, were repeated by other women when speaking of their own country. This inculcation of a sense of place and its spiritual essence is basic to Aboriginal education.

By participating in hunting parties, boys and girls learn from women the depth of attachment to country, its resources and its abiding spiritual significance. Up to the age of about seven or eight years, children of both sexes accompany women. From then on, the paths of boys and girls diverge, as boys form single-sex peer groups and spend more time with men. Their break with the world of women is marked dramatically at initiation (at about the age of fourteen to sixteen) when they are withdrawn from community life, given ritual instruction by older men and undertake long journeys to other countries. Girls continue in the company of



*Kaytej woman wearing a human hair headband and fur string necker, photographed by Baldwin Spencer in 1901. The cicatrices are both ritual and ornamental—they are assessed for their beauty—and convey information about stages in the religious life. The flower-like centre piece is made by splitting the tail of the rabbit-eared bandicoot *Macrotis logotis*, known in Kaytej as *artnangke*. The decoration and the tail tips of the bandicoot are both referred to as *alpeyte*.*

MUSEUM OF VICTORIA

Overleaf: Karlukarlu (Devil's Marbles) is a focal locality for Kaytej people. Photograph by Reg Morrison.

WELDON TRANNIES



Contemporary sources of traditional knowledge. Bell lived with Kaytej people for whom traditional ways still control daily routine, despite the surface trappings of modern dress or bandaids. These photographs show the people who assisted her as informants.



Napurrula digging *yarla* (yams) with a steel bar.

D. BELL



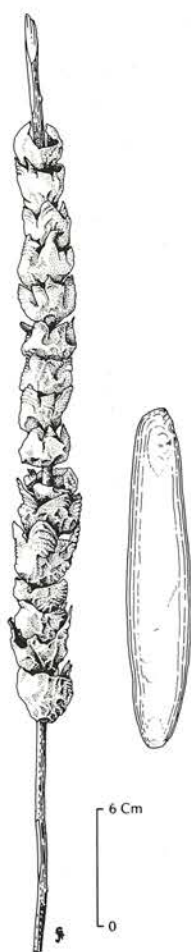
Nungarrayi breaking a branch of *wakirlpirri* (bush bean).

D. BELL



Solanum carried on a spit by a child.

D. BELL



Blended and sun-dried fruit of *Solanum chippendalei* strung on a stick for storage. The small wooden blade is used to remove the seeds and bitter mucilage.

N. PETERSON,
ILLUSTRATOR, J. GOODRUM

older women but their education is also carefully structured. They begin to assume more responsibility for the care of children, first those of close relatives, then co-wives and finally as mothers themselves. They are gradually permitted to witness and learn more of women's ceremonies and thereby to learn of women's rights and responsibilities in land. In their middle and later years, as mothers of adult children and well versed in the ways of the *Jukurrpa*, older women (like older men) are respected as the repositories of knowledge and deferred to as decision-makers in their communities.

Let us spend several days in the country of these women, Kaytej country, to listen while they explain the nature of the changes and the traditions of their society, and recognise the living significance of Nungarrayi's words about change and continuity in the lives of desert people. Certainly Nungarrayi carried a metal crowbar, not a wooden digging-stick; a metal billycan, not a wooden coolamon; and important items were wrapped in a blanket or carried in a bag instead of in a paperbark wrapper. Yet the manner in which she used these items demonstrated that she had brought them within her world and they were under her control. They were merely sophisticated and convenient substitutes for items in her traditional repertoire.

Napurrula, Nungarrayi's cousin, dug rhythmically, scooping out the soft red sand, piling it to the side and then driving the digging-stick along the side of the hole she was creating. She was following the 'strings' of the *yarla* (yam), from the surface to the tuber. She located it by lightly turning over the sprawling surface vines in search of the telltale cracks made by the swelling tuber deep in the hard sand. With immense care she followed the roots of the vine, because to hit the yam would not only bring instant scorn from the other women in the party, but the yam would bruise and not last till the following day. After an hour's labour she had dug a shelf about twenty-five centimetres below the surface on which to sit comfortably, and felt sure of success. She called to her sister-in-law, Napanangka, for help with bailing out the dirt.

As they worked together they heard calls from other women in their hunting party. Their long 'yo' echoed across the spinifex plains. The two women answered the call and continued digging. As they worked, Napurrula hummed softly and intoned the words of a song which told of the travels of *yarla*, the yam ancestors. She took care to explain to Napanangka, who was some years younger than herself, that they might not be successful, that if the ground was too damp the yam could be waterlogged, black and useless. However, the sand was only slightly moist and it crumbled easily. Gently Napurrula scraped away the sand with her fingers and

exposed the top of the yam. Laughingly she showed her companion how the yams were located next to each other, 'just like a mother and father', she said. 'We'd better leave them, that's the parents. We'll follow this next string.' After another hour or so, the women had collected numerous yams. They gathered their produce and started back to the shade tree where the old women waited for them.

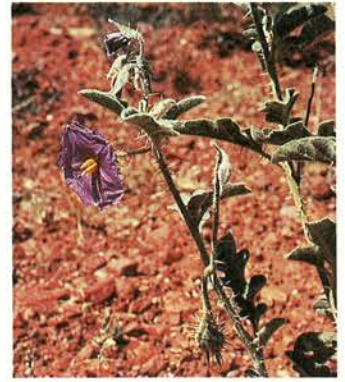
As they walked they looked carefully at the bush tomatoes (*Solanaceae*) that grew among the spinifex. There are many species of this plant, not all edible. *Yakajiri*, often called the 'bush raisin', is picked yellow and sweet, when it is said to be good for colds. Usually it is gathered and eaten while walking through country, but some, perhaps a handful, are taken back to camp for those who have not participated in the day's activities. If the fruit has not been culled while it is yellow, it may be picked when it is dry and wizened. Older women explain how they used to crush the dried berry, mix it with water and red ochre and form it into little cakes for other members of their group to eat, or for ceremonial exchange with other groups later. The cakes were stored in paperbark packages high in the forks of trees. Because neither the preparation nor the storage stops the seeds from germinating, they were scattered over wide areas, wherever the cakes were prepared, exchanged and eaten.

That day, little Nampijinpa, Nungarrayi's daughter, carefully turned over the leaves of the *nganjawarli* and with a deft twist of her thumb and forefinger removed the yellowing fruit known as the bush tomato. She proceeded to thread the whole fruit onto a stick she had broken off from a nearby bush. Napurrula took the fruit from her hand and showed her the correct way. 'You must learn to do it according to the law', said her aunt. 'Now watch.' Napurrula broke the fruit in two and with her thumbnail scraped out the bitter black seeds. When the flesh was completely cleaned she handed it to Nampijinpa. 'Now you may taste it', she said. 'It is too bitter and will make you sick if you eat it with the seeds in.' She then picked, cleaned and broke more fruits before threading them on to a stick collected for the purpose.

In this form they are dried and are kept for future consumption. Sometimes the fruits are soaked to restore them to their original shape; sometimes they are lightly cooked in coals on the fire. 'How did you know to come here?' I asked. 'Well, see that mulga stand?' said Napurrula. 'That's where this food grows. Last year there was too much long grass here, too much spinifex, it was choking the *nganjawarli*. We burnt this piece of country, me and my *kurdungurlu*. We burnt it in the cool time [winter months] and then after the rain we come back.'

The bulk of the diet in the desert consists of vegetable matter, although this varies according to seasonal factors, particularly rainfall. Women recall that in their grandmothers' time much of the day was spent in preparing seeds for damper, an unleavened bread. As there was little meat to be had in much of the desert country, the occasional kangaroo or wallaby brought to the camp by the men was more of a treat than a staple. Women's hunting of small game such as goannas, snakes, frogs, wild cats, possums, echidna and mice provided a more reliable source of animal protein than did the activities of the men. Goannas are still regularly hunted and are considered to be a meat for which one hungers, unlike beef, for which one is merely 'greedy'.

The best country in which to seek goanna is the burnt-out plain shortly after a fire has gone through. In such country one need not fear snakes and the tracks of the goanna are easily found. Goanna hunting occurs in the mid-morning or late afternoon for, as women point out, goannas rest in the middle of the day when it is too hot to walk around. Once a goanna trail has been picked up, the women follow it until they find a fresh track into a hole in the ground. Then they begin to sound around the hole at a radius of a metre or so. They lightly bounce a



Solanum chippendalei, the bush tomato, which forms a desert food staple. The fruit is dried and stored; it is soaked before use.

R. PURDIE AND THE NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDENS



Cooking a goanna, Papunya, NT. Photograph by Reg Morrison.

WELDON TRANNIES

digging-stick into the ground in order to find out the direction of the tunnel the goanna has dug. They must be careful not to drive the stick so sharply into the ground as to damage the goanna, should one actually strike it. Once the women have located the goanna, they dig it out with a rapid jab of the digging-stick, combined with a scooping of the hand.

The goanna is pulled out, tail first, and swung rapidly against the stick which has been jabbed into the ground beside the hole. The body of the animal is then tucked into the belt of the hunter, who proudly displays the catch on returning to camp. Large yellow water goannas (*kalawurru*) may be brought back to camp alive, their back legs broken. As they cannot escape, their meat remains fresh until it is needed.

There are rules for cooking, distributing and eating goanna which are similar to those applying to larger animals. As soon as the animal is killed, its back legs are broken and it is gutted. The contents of the lower bowel are emptied and the stomach contents are removed by making a small incision under the front leg. Sometimes the stomach is hooked through the throat and pulled out by means of a small, strong stick. Once cleaned in this way, the meat will keep until it is cooked later in the day.

When the women return to the halfway camp, they prepare a fire hot enough to seal the juices of the goanna or other small game. The body of the animal is turned over in the flames for several minutes and then removed. A depression is dug underneath where the fire has been burning and the animal is placed in this shallow earth oven and covered with hot sand. Hot coals are placed on top and the women wait until the smell indicates that the meat is cooked. The meat is then removed, dusted down and distributed according to rules of kinship and political alliance. Any meat left over may be brought back to base camp, along with a few choice fruits, grubs and yams.

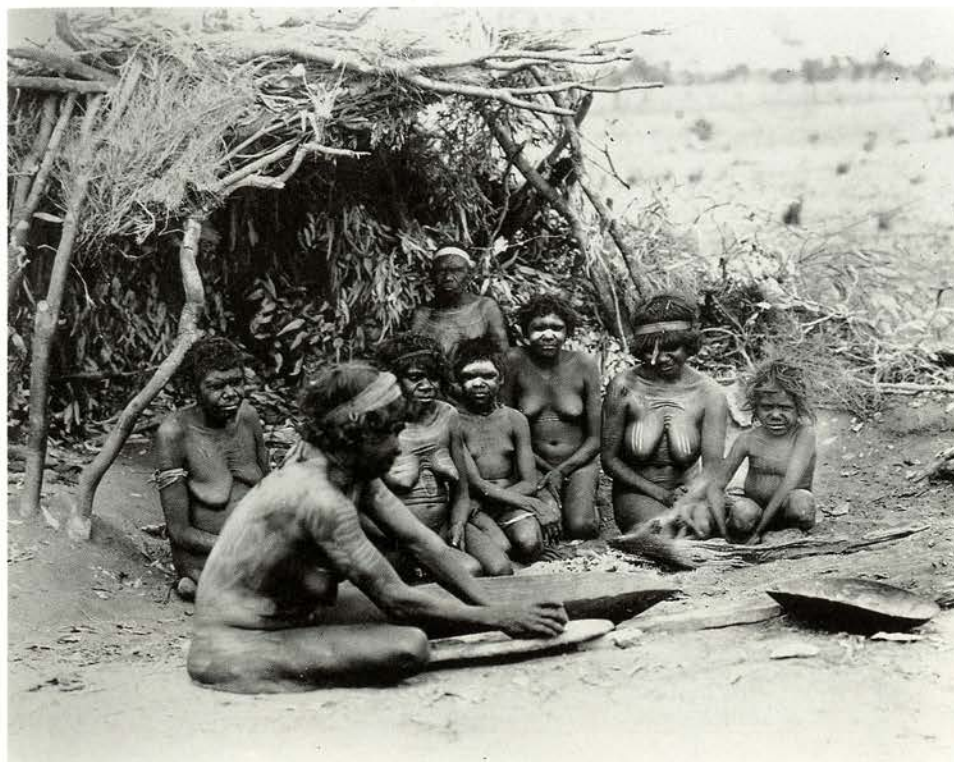
On this particular day while eating her fill of yams and goanna, Nungarrayi looked wistfully across to the boulders at Devil's Marbles. 'We need more *yulpu* [red ochre] for our women's ceremonies and designs,' she said. Near Devil's Marbles there is a rich quarry, but in order to extract the red ochre, permission must be sought from specific people, and certain relatives must be present during the mining process. Some days later, after much discussion and preparation, Nungarrayi, her sisters and daughters visited the quarry. When they arrived at the place the women called out to the spiritual essence of the country to warn of their approach and of their purpose. As they dug the red ochre, they tested its strength by wiping a forefinger dipped in the ochre across the back of their wrists. The women sang softly of the Dreaming that had created this country and of how it had specified the rules for handling *yulpu*. Mother and daughter worked side by side. When asked why mothers and daughters quarried this resource together, the mother explained that it was not because her helper was her daughter, but because she was her *kurdungurlu*. 'I can't visit this country without my *kurdungurlu*. She's like my policeman. She watches me and makes sure I do it the right way.'

Once they had obtained sufficient ochre they carried it back to camp where it was ground into a fine powder and shaped into hard cakes. These varied in size from about ten centimetres in diameter to large ones approximately twenty-two centimetres long, seven centimetres deep and ten centimetres wide. Not only is this a convenient method of storage, but it also produces a form in which the material may be carried and exchanged with other women during ceremonial business. When women choose to show something of their ritual repertoire to women of a neighbouring country, exchanges of goods and knowledge occur. Items that are traded include hairstring, red ochre, bush foods such as the *Solanum* cakes, and ritual paraphernalia.



Alyawarra woman removing from the ashes a loaf of unleavened bread (damper), made with grass-seed flour. Photographed by H.M. Hale, early 1900s.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM



Kaytej woman grinding grass seed in the women's camp. The flat slabs are used for grinding and the wooden pitchi containers for collecting and winnowing the seeds. Ritual body scars and painted designs convey information about the travels of the ancestral bush berry. Photographed by Baldwin Spencer in 1901.

MUSEUM OF VICTORIA

Hunting parties usually seek a particular resource. On this day in Kaytej country, Napurrula said, 'If we go down to Taylor Crossing we might get some bush tobacco. I'm hungry for bush tobacco.' The women knew that if they visited a particular creek after rain they would find this highly prized plant. However, the visit had to be planned, for they could not go until Nampijinpa and her younger sister were able to accompany them, because it was their country through their father, and they were responsible for its major sites. In the ritual celebration of the travels of the mythological ancestors of rain and bush berry, these two women played a major role. Whenever the group visited a particular country, especially after a long absence, a delicate round of negotiations occurred; the *kurdungurlu* had to be consulted and their presence was necessary to ensure that correct ritual procedures were observed. On approaching sites of religious significance, people had to call out and announce their purpose. Others had to be present to bear witness that the correct procedure had been followed. The area today called Taylor Crossing is both extremely rich in resources and imbued with enormous spiritual significance. Not only was it necessary for visitors to announce their presence, but it was also essential to sweep clear the path along which they walked.

Several weeks later, when all was ready for the hunting trip, the group left in search of the bush tobacco. Napurrula walked slowly along the wide dry creek bed. The creek flows irregularly but spectacularly, and when in flood, it flushes out the chain of dry-weather waterholes. 'We always come here for *yanurmpa*,' said Napurrula. 'It grows out at Emu Bore too. We took it there.' To harvest it they pulled up the whole plant, which was then taken back to the camp in large moist bundles, something like silverbeet. If shaken, the seeds fall from these bundles. Napurrula's reference to 'taking' the plant to another place indicates her awareness of the consequences of this practice. It is somewhat like the spreading of the *Solanum* cake seeds, although with bush tobacco it is a deliberate act because the



Winnowing grass seeds. Photographed by H.M. Hale. SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM



Cooked witchetty grubs.
 Photograph by Leo Meier.
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seeds will flourish only in a limited environmental range. Once in camp, the women spread out the leaves to dry on the roofs of the long, low shelters that form the single women's camp. When dried, the leaves are crushed in the palm of the hand and moistened to form a ball, which is then rolled in the ashes of a whitegum tree or various acacia species. These ashes must be perfectly white in order to produce the full narcotic effect of the bush tobacco.

Unlike the plant collected at Taylor Crossing, which is known as 'a quiet one', a hill tobacco that grows in the ranges south of Alice Springs is known as *jurnpurnpa*, 'a cheeky one' which is sharper-tasting and much sought after. In order to reach this species, it is necessary to climb high amongst the rocky crevices. Only the lower leaves are collected, for it is considered dangerous to break off the plant at the stem. Aboriginal lore decrees that only when a new shoot has grown from the root should one break the stem.

While Napurrula collected the bush tobacco from the banks of the creek, other women dug nearby for frogs. These were buried deep in the moist sand of the creek banks. In an hour or so they had produced a container full of small frogs, which were cooked whole in the embers of a fire and eaten with relish, including the bones.



The plant *Duboisia hopwoodii* is harvested by the Kaytej. It is often improperly termed pituri, which is quite a different plant.
 Photograph by I.R. McCann.
 ANT PICTURE LIBRARY

SOME PLANTS GATHERED BY KAYTEJ WOMEN

COMMON ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	WARLPIRI NAME
mulga	<i>Acacia aneura</i>	<i>manja, wardji</i>
bush bean	<i>Acacia coriacea</i>	<i>wakirpirri</i>
witchetty bush	<i>Acacia kempearia</i>	<i>ngalkirdi</i>
bush berry	<i>Canthium latifolium</i>	<i>yawakiyi</i>
bush orange	<i>Capparis loranthifolia</i>	<i>jukurru</i>
	<i>C. mitchellii</i>	<i>watakiyi</i>
	<i>C. lasiantha</i>	
	<i>C. Umbunata</i>	
bush medicine	<i>Eremophila willsii</i>	<i>manyani</i>
wild fig	<i>Ficus platypoda</i>	<i>wijirki</i>
bush potato (yam)	<i>Ipomoea costata</i>	<i>yarla</i>
bush tobacco	<i>Nicotiana ingulba</i>	<i>yarumpu</i>
	<i>N. gossei</i>	<i>jurnpurnpa</i>
bush raisin	<i>Solanum centrale</i>	<i>yakajirri</i>
bush tomato	<i>Solanum chippendalei</i>	<i>nganjarwarli</i>

Another group of women fanned out through the country to the north of the creek in search of witchetty grubs. They had heard from other women who had been through this country recently that large juicy grubs were to be found in the roots of the *ngalkirdi*, wattle trees. They sat around the base of a tree where they expected to locate the grubs. As in the yam search, they looked for cracks in the hard, dry sand as a sign that grubs might be swelling the roots below the surface, and they dug until they reached the telltale root. The section in which the grub was believed to be located was then cut out and split open. A small piece of grass was used to thread the grub out of the root, but they were careful not to remove too much of the root and thereby kill the tree. The witchetties were thrown into a container, along with other fruits gathered that day. 'Before, you know,' old Napanangka explained, 'we used to tuck them into our belts, the ones made of hairstrung that we put around our waists. Sometimes we put them on a stick.'



Capparis mitchellii, one of several species of edible bush orange. Photograph by J. Burt. ANT PICTURE LIBRARY

Several hundred metres away sat Napurrula's young sister-in-law, minding the children who were too young to walk around looking for food. They had built a small fire of dry acacia wood—two branches placed end-to-end to conserve the wood. To light a large fire would be dangerous because it could attract the attention of spirits in the country and offend them. We returned to the tree with our grubs and on the way stopped to pick *Solanum* fruit. 'Take care not to pick the poisonous ones,' said Napurrula. 'You know you can only eat them while they're yellow or while they're dry, but don't eat too many or you'll get a headache. Tomorrow we'll go further down the creek. We'll go down to where *jukurru*, the bush oranges grow, there are some really sweet ones there.' This shrub grows abundantly in a few scattered locations. It bears a large fruit about the size of an orange, with big seeds. Women travel long distances to gather it.

Several other species of bush orange, called *watakiyi*, are sought after by women in this area. Many fruits are picked and eaten when ripe, but some are allowed to dry on the trees and are then carried to camp to be threaded on sticks and stored under the ground. Sometimes the dried fruit is ground up, mixed with water and made into a paste, formed into small cakes and baked in the ashes. Like the *Solanum* cakes, they may be stored and later reconstituted. Within this territory, *watakiyi* grows only at Taylor Crossing, where there are two trees that are watched carefully throughout the year. By November–December women begin to plan to visit there in order to harvest the fruit.

Another acacia bush whose seeds are harvested regularly is *wakirpirri*. This shrub is culled selectively and women warn their children not to damage a tree so severely that there will be nothing left when they have finished picking the seed pods. 'Go further, go to the next tree, don't be lazy,' say women to their children. When the pods are green and sticky, women reach up to the higher branches which they break off and carry to their halfway camp. There they split open the pods with a thumbnail and eat out the green sticky seeds. Sometimes the pods are lightly cooked in a fire, and the seeds eaten from the charred pod.

About six weeks after the first harvest, women return to the area to collect dry pods from the tree. Once more they break off branches, which are piled high on the ground. Today they spread out a tarpaulin, but in the past they would have



A creek meanders through central Australian country, with permanent rock pools.
M.A. SMITH



Rocky country in the Jervis-Sandover river region.
D. LEWIS



A clay pan in the Jervis-Sandover river region.
D. LEWIS

made a clean surface with crushed antbed. The pile of branches is beaten so that the pods and seeds fall to the bottom. The seeds are then winnowed from the husks and placed in a long wooden dish known as *mardu*. These seeds are ground down and mixed with water to make a sticky white milk for drinking. Women rub the residue of seeds in the wooden dish into their hair because it is said to dye it a desired reddish colour.

One of the most powerful Dreamings that traverses Kaytej country is that of *yawakiyi*, Bush Berry. Kaytej women are responsible for the travels of this ancestor from a place called Waake, to a site west of Devil's Marbles named Wakulpu. At this site *yawakiyi* enters the ground and is not seen again in Kaytej country. In the course of its travels this ancestral hero has taught how the berries should be handled. The berries may not be picked until after certain rituals, involving the active participation of both *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*. Even then, women warn their children not to pick too many. Indeed, they select only a few from each tree. Once picked, the berries are layered between leaves on a wide wooden dish and carried back to camp. The berries ooze a black juice that is drunk as they transport their load. These berries are sometimes dried and stored in the leaves high in the forked branches of trees. I asked, 'What would happen if somebody were not to observe the rules about this fruit?' 'That happened once,' said Napurrula; 'one old woman, she is deaf you know, picked that berry before we had done the business [ceremonies] for it and all the berries dried up on the trees.'

Such techniques of gathering, preparing and preserving food establish that women do not wander randomly around their estate but that they are engaged in the reflective and intelligent management of their environment. The effects of scattering seed, the deliberate introduction of new plants into environments similar to their place of origin, the preservation of food against lean times, selective cropping, the socialisation of children into the value system, and controlled burning, all indicate that the hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence in the desert is based on a precise knowledge of the environment. These techniques allow people to exploit resources in good times and to fall back on stored resources during poorer seasons.

In addition to careful plant management, there are ritual safeguards on culling, cooking and eating. Ritual reciprocity between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* ensures that no one group will overexploit the territory. Knowledge is transmitted to children by first-hand learning through the mythology which is made known in ceremony, and in the everyday manner in which people use and enjoy the country.



Ritual pole decorated with cockatoo feathers, used in a public women's ceremony concerning a Rain Dreaming. It is a symbolic representation of both person and place.

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