

YIWARRA KUJU THE CANNING STOCK ROUTE

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**NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
AUSTRALIA
CANBERRA**

Walyja: Family Movement of people



Before Canning made those lines of wells, it was all family groups — tribes and language groups that were related ... Nowadays we are living [in different places], everybody moved, separated to different part of the Western Desert, to different towns: Fitzroy Crossing, Newman, Jigalong, Balgo, Broome, Bidiyadanga. And that connection is still alive today in the heart of the desert ... We all one mob. All one people. Canning Stock Route is another history. It's the European version. But now what we're talking about is how ... daily lives were all connected back through song and dance and Dreaming and the desert.

Murungkurr Terry Murray, 2009

Before the surveying of the Canning Stock Route every aspect of the Country had been mapped. Around 15 different language groups or 'tribes' lived in the area transected by the stock route and other groups were linked to the area through the Dreaming tracks which crossed the Country, forming the basis of ceremonial interactions. The Canning Stock Route is the road that many Aboriginal people followed out of their desert world. Over many years people at different times and for different reasons moved out of their home Country and onto the fringes of a new world that is called Australia.

People moved to places on the edges of the desert. They moved to the outskirts of towns like Halls Creek and Meekatharra, stations such as Ullulla and Billiluna, settlements such as Jigalong and missions such as Warburton and Balgo. People from across the Western Desert, speaking many languages, arrived at these places and established communities. Because of the similarities in language, and because most people spoke several languages, communication was not difficult. Cultural similarities, including the kinship and Dreaming networks as well as a strong tradition of cooperation, meant that people congregating in these communities were able to forge new cultural identities without letting go of the beliefs and understanding which had been their way of life for thousands of years.

People who travelled north to Bidiyadanga from their home in the Great Sandy Desert became known by and identified with the name Yulparija, which means 'southerner'. People who travelled east to places such as Papunya became the Pintupi, 'people from the west', and people from the southern stock route collectively became the Martu which means Aboriginal person or 'one of us'.

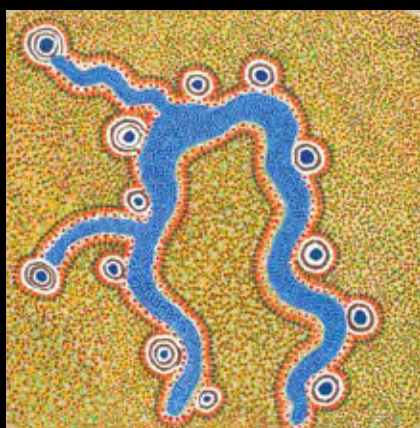
- 1 *We all go together like one big family, from one area. Even though we come from different language groups, we're all one. And from that 'one' is that one history of all the whole road.*

Putuparri Tom Lawford, 2009

The concept of Walyja or family is at the heart of Western Desert society. It is a far broader idea of relatedness than is commonly associated with family in non-Aboriginal societies. Kinship has always been the basis of Aboriginal social relations. It includes all relationships, not only those of blood or marriage. From the outside, kinship systems seem very complex but children learn from a very early age how they are connected to this meaningful network. The system of relationships is referred to as the 'skin system' and was created by the Jukurrpa ancestors. Skin groups dictate the appropriate behaviour between people and their obligations and responsibilities toward one another. Brothers belong to the same skin group, therefore for a child, a father's brother is also 'father' rather than uncle. Children of brothers belong to their own skin group and refer to each other as brother and sister, not cousin. These relationships were impacted upon but not really changed when communities consisting of various language groups were formed as people travelled along the stock route away from their own Country.

It's good for whitefellas and young people like us to know the connection ... To know that we all just connected no matter what different language we speak, but we just one family ... We all just connected through our skin colours.

Hayley Atkins, 2009



1 **Paruku and Walmajarri People,** 2007, by Veronica Lulu, Warlayirti Artists, National Museum of Australia

Aboriginal people often moved in times of drought, especially during the late 1920s, the early 1940s and mid-1950s to places where food was easier to get. Sometimes people moved for cultural or family reasons. Not all followed the stock route. Some strategically avoided it. However, it was the existence of the Canning Stock Route, and the people that it brought into their world, that acted as a catalyst for Aboriginal people to move. The stock route transformed the social and cultural landscape of the desert forever.

Jigalong

Jigalong is located 165 kilometres east of the town of Newman. It was established in 1907 as the location for a maintenance and rations store for workmen constructing the rabbit-proof fence. In the 1930s it was used as a camel-breeding site and in 1947 the land was granted to the Apostolic Church to set up a Christian mission for the Aboriginal community which had grown up around the site. In the 1920s an extensive drought in the Western Desert caused people to move in search of food and water. Some made their way to Jigalong where they replenished themselves. They returned to their communities and informed others that food was available at the depot. People began to migrate to be near the rations store. These migrations



2 **Paruku**, 2007, by Veronica Lulu, Anna Johns, Shirley Brown, Lyn Manson, Wendy Wise, Bessie Doonday, Chamia Sammuels, Daisy Kungah and Kim Mahood, collection of Paruku Indigenous Protected Area



3 **Kapitu Kapitu**, 2008, Norma Giles, Kayili Artists

increased in the 1930s with the establishment of the camel-breeding site so that by the time the mission was established there was a ready made congregation.

The land was returned to the Australian government in 1969. Jigalong became an incorporated body in 1973 and in 1974 the land was returned to the Martu people.

Dadda Samson's family moved to old Jigalong, the ration station established on the rabbit proof fence. Dadda was born by the windmill there.

2 **Billiluna station**

Many Aboriginal people left their country to work on cattle stations. In the late 1800s settlers sought to establish cattle stations in north-west Australia. The township of Halls Creek was established in 1885 after gold was found there. After the gold petered out, the few Europeans who remained once again turned to the idea of establishing cattle stations. The first cattle station was established at Gordon Downs in 1887. Others followed at Billiluna and Sturt Creek. Aboriginal people were employed to work on the stations. The development of the Canning Stock Route was to provide a path for these cattle to be transported south to Wiluna. It also meant Aboriginal people found their way to the cattle stations where employment as drovers and stockmen was available. Billiluna was a large cattle station where many Aboriginal men found work as stockmen.

3 **Warburton mission**

In 1933 William Wade from the United Aboriginal Mission journeyed into the Warburton Ranges. He observed several waterholes in the bed of Elder Creek where groups of Aboriginal people congregated. As a result he decided to establish a mission station and returned with his wife and children the following year. The missionaries took orphans into their care and in times of drought and hardship other parents also left their children in the missionaries' care, although they regularly visited, bringing game to trade for tea and sugar. A great number of children attended the school run by the missionaries until the Education Department took over the responsibility. More and more people began to reside at the mission and parents decided to care for children in their own homes. In 1961 the mission dormitories were closed. In the 1960s the government forced people out of the area around the Woomera Rocket range and many moved to Warburton. This, coupled with a severe drought, meant that between 400 and 500 people resided at the mission.

In 1973 an Aboriginal Council was formed. It incorporated and took over the administration of the community from the mission.

Balgo mission

In 1934 the Pallotines or Society of Catholic Apostolate bought Rockhole Station south-west of Halls Creek and established a mission and sheep run. They applied to the Western Australian Department of Health to set up a hospital and leprosarium, but a medical clinic was set up at the Moola Bulla station instead. During the next few years expeditions were made into the country south of Halls Creek looking for a new mission site. Several sites were tried but found to be unsuitable. In 1942, after success in finding bore water, it was decided the mission would be established at Balgo Hills. Over the next few years a mission house and out-buildings were completed, an airstrip built and a vegetable garden established. In 1947 when visits by the Royal Flying Doctor Service commenced about 150 Aboriginal people were living on the mission.

From Natawalu I went to Tiru. No kartiya didn't take me, I went on my own, walking. To Kulyayi then to Katajilkarr, Jimpirinykarr then Jintijinti. Kujuwarrri, Kartalapuru, then on to Kuninarra, Kaningarra, Lampu, Jikarn, Kilangkilang, to the old station, then Balgo. I stayed there for a while then [Father] Alphonse told me 'You go back and bring your family back here.' I went back looking for my mob through the same road I came on, following the wells.

Brandy Tjungurrayi, 2008

Many came to the mission as a result of the priests sending people into the bush with flour, sugar and tea to attract Aboriginal people. These in turn invited other groups to join them. Others walked into the mission during drought times and stayed because food was more easily accessible. The interactions however were not always harmonious.

The Aborigines considered us intruders in their country and considered our sheep their property ... The land was their property and they wanted us to give them food and supplies in return for its use.

Brother Frank Nissl, in Z Dé Ishtar, *Holding Yawulyu*, p. 84



4 **Natawalu**, 2007, by Helicopter Tjungurrayi, Warlayirti Artists, National Museum of Australia

Questions and activities to share with your students

1. Why do you think Aboriginal people may have moved away from their Country to live on the fringes of the desert?
2. Have students watch the movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. What does this movie tell you about life in these settlements? What does it tell you about attitudes of that time to Aboriginal people living in these settlements?
3. Think about the story of 'Helicopter'. What does this story tell you about some relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people?
4. Why do you think it was (is) necessary for Aboriginal people living in small groups in the desert to understand their 'kinship' to everyone else in the group?
5. Think of people in your family. How are these relationships important to you?

(front image) Kids painted up and ready to dance Kurtal at the Ngumpan workshop, near Fitzroy Crossing, photo by Tim Acker, 2008

In 1947 the Daughters of Mary Queen of the Apostles, Australia's first Indigenous nuns, arrived at Balgo. However, as most of them were urban Aboriginal women who were given no preparation for the life at Balgo, they were withdrawn 14 months later. Sisters of St John of God took up residence at Balgo in 1954 and served as nurses and teachers. In 1955 it was discovered that Balgo was actually built on Billiluna land. After much negotiation the government agreed to help the mission move to a new location. In 1965 the mission was reopened as Balgo Hills mission.

From the 1970s into the 1980s Balgo was the centre of a number of disputes between the Catholic Church and the Australian Government. In a new era of self-determination, the government was keen to move communities towards self-management; yet the church was not keen to relinquish control of the community. Eventually in the early 1980s Balgo mission became an Aboriginal community, and the church stayed on to help run the school.

An adult education centre was also developing at Balgo at this time to assist people with literacy and numeracy skills. This was also used to help people who were interested in developing their artistic skills and in 1986 an exhibition of Balgo art was held at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth. In 1987, Warlayirti Artists was established and in 1999 a purpose-built centre was constructed to house the facilities, including a studio and gallery. Since 2002 Warlayirti has been fully self-funded, a success achieved through the continuing commitment and ability of the artists combined with strategic business development. Warlayirti Artists contributes significantly to the social, cultural and economic well being of the Aboriginal community in the area.

4 Helicopter's story

Not all people were enticed or chose to walk out of the desert to Balgo. This is the story of Joey 'Helicopter' Tjungurrayi.

In 1957 a mining survey party came across a group of people living near Natawalu (Well 40 on the Canning Stock Route). Some of these people had never seen white men before, none had seen a helicopter. The initial contact was marked by fear and confusion on both sides.

It landed. We said, 'Mannurkunurrku [wasp] sat down'. We didn't call it helicopter then. We called it mannurkunurrku. 'Well, let's go look for it' we said ... That's when we came down from the sandhill carrying spears.

Patrick Olodoodi (Alatuti) Tjungurrayi, 2007

Jim Ferguson, the helicopter pilot recalls:

Suddenly about half a dozen men appeared from behind these bushes dragging their spears in the sand. Matman [the team surveyor] grabbed the .303 and I pulled out my revolver, but all was OK. They stuck their spears in the ground.

Charlie Wallabi (Walapayi) Tjungurrayi approached the men:

My young brother [Helicopter] was so sick; he had sores everywhere and he was helpless, a little boy. I grabbed my little brother and showed them. So kartiya [white people] looked at his sores and said 'OK, we'll take him' because he was so sick.

I waited, waited, waited for long and I wondered 'they're not bringing him back!' Nothing. It was getting a bit longer, and I said to myself, I think I will go after him north. From there I kept walking right, long way, all the way to Balgo.

Helicopter recalls his journey:

They took us to the old [Balgo] mission. It was the first time they saw a helicopter too; even me, first time they seen me too. They were asking who my parents were. I told them ... then they knew me through my parents. Then I went to Derby [hospital]. After I got better they took me back to Balgo and I'm still here today.

Over 50 years later an article in the *Weekend Australian* about the Canning Stock Route recounted the story of respected artist 'Helicopter' Tjungurrayi. For 79-year-old retired helicopter pilot Jim Ferguson it was a mystery solved.

I assumed the boy had died. I'm absolutely thrilled that after all these years, he's still alive and I played a small part in that.

Mr Ferguson contacted Warlayirti Artists and was told Helicopter wanted to talk to him. Helicopter told Jim:

Thank you very much for taking me to Balgo, [I'm] happy now.

Today Helicopter is a very respected Western Desert artist dedicated to painting his Country.