11

In the Tracks of the *Munga-Munga*

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Rites and Rights: Radical and Unrepentant[1]

It is, I know, extremely unfashionable in these postmodern times to suggest that macro-narratives may underwrite the activities of women who live under different conditions, in different places, and speak different languages. However, this totally unrepentant, radical feminist remains convinced that her earlier speculation regarding the structure and thematic emphases of women's ceremonies exhibiting continuities, rather than marked discontinuities, holds promise for a more subtle, dynamic appreciation of the politics of religion and gender relations in Aboriginal societies (Bell 1993a; 1993d). If, indeed, religion is the forum within which not only men but also women negotiate authority, power, and meaning, articulate relationships to land, the law and access to resources, then we may look to changes in religious practice as a way of understanding the shifting terrain of gender relations. Colonisation of desert lands, missionary activities, pastoral pursuits, and more recently the growth of institutions of self-determination, and concomitant proclamation of new laws and emergence of regional, national and interna-

tional indigenous identities constitute gendered fields within which women and men give form to and explore their worlds (Bell and Ditton 1984[1980]; Bell 1984/5; 1988; 1992; 1993a). A women's ceremony I attended in 1981 in the Northern Territory provides the ethnographic focus for these speculations. Fieldwork, spanning some eighteen years, provides the context.

In the seventies, on the basis of intensive participant-observation fieldwork in Central Australia, I traced the contours of Aboriginal women's religious beliefs and practices and proposed that our understanding of Aboriginal religion was not only impoverished by the privileging of male experience, but flawed (Bell 1993a; 1993d). Further, one of the consequences of not acknowledging the scope of women's rites was that women were not being consulted on critical issues (Bell 1983a; 1984/5; 1994; Bell and Ditton 1984[1980]; Bell and Nelson 1989). Their views were recorded as those of sisters, wives, and daughters, rather than as gendered persons with distinctive rights and responsibilities in land, marriage arrangements, and resource allocation. It was clear to me that simply reporting on women's activities was not the answer: feminist empiricism can take us just so far. In the relationship between feminism and anthropology I saw invigorating tensions, not irreconcilable differences, but if the relationship was to flourish, there was a pressing need to explore feminist epistemologies (Strathern 1985; Caplan 1988; Bell 1993c). Subsequent work in the courts and with government agencies only further entrenched this view (Bell 1993d; 1994). Too often, with strong appeals to cultural relativism, abuse of women was found to be "custom", while exploitation of men was punished under Anglo law (Bell 1991; 1992). In the context of self-determination, claiming our rites as spiritually empowered agents translates into a claim of rights at law and both are contestable and contested.[2]

Drawing attention to modes of muting women's voices and the political consequences of deeming their activities personal, inevitably draws attention to the situatedness of the ethnographic voice. When that voice is feminist, the 1990s backlash against women is compounded (Faludi 1991). The litany of denials, often replete with contradictions, is familiar to most feminists (Spender 1980; Russ 1983; Bell 1993b). *This ethnography is bad science, subjective, tainted, a matter of interpretation, not fact. It didn't happen, but if it did, it isn't important. It happened and it's important, but there are more pressing issues; the time is not right. It is none of your business, whether it happened or not. It will go away if ignored and if not, it can be contained in an apologetic/patronising footnote.* It is a profoundly political act to decentre man ethnographically as subject and authority

and much more congenial to turn issues such as rape into a text, than to deal with the rage of those who would prefer not to speak directly of such sensitive matters (Bell and Nelson 1989; Bell 1991; Huggins *et al.* 1991).

Now, writing from the perspective of the nineties, I am looking to feminist standpoint theories (Harstock 1983; Haraway 1988; Hawksworth 1989; Jaggar 1989) as a more satisfying and sophisticated approach to the politics of difference than the postmodern preference for plurivocality, textual analyses and stylistic experimentations (Mascia-Lees *et al.* 1989; Bell 1993c). Beginning with the proposition that women's distinctive experiences generate distinctive knowledge, feminist ethnography can address these issues locally and globally (Bell 1993a; 1993b; 1993c). The move away from macro-models and destabilisation of ethnographic authority has done little to empower women. In cleverly crafted, pseudo-democratic collages that purport to address the crisis of representation (which reflexive anthropologists have only recently seen fit to name and explore), women's voices have no particular place (Bell 1993b). While having long ago acknowledged that the Archimedean point has vanished, I am not yet ready to allow multiple subject positions and fragmented selves to drown out substantive discussion of violence, human rights and political representation. I am not suggesting that these issues which I have been pondering in print and railing against in private are in any way resolved for me or my field colleagues, nor am I giving up on the task of articulating an ethnography that is feminist, engaged, ethically grounded, collaborative, relational and enmeshed in ever-expanding political contexts (Bell 1993a).

My feminist ethnography of a particular women's ceremony that I attended at Nutwood Downs, a cattle station in the Hodgson-Cox River area of the Northern Territory, in July 1981, grounds these musings.[3] Over the period of a week, fifty women from far flung communities in the Roper River region, retraced the travels of the ancestral women known as the *munga-munga* in a *jarrarda* ceremony.[4] Although the ritual energy of the ceremony was concentrated on one site, the ceremony forged, mapped, consolidated, created, and activated links amongst women from as far south as Alice Springs, north into Arnhem Land and east to the Gulf of Carpentaria. It provided a forum in which differences could be honoured and similarities asserted. Large-scale ceremonies require co-ordination, access to resources, and for women, whose strategies may undermine men's political aspirations, an impeccable rationale. Not surprisingly, men are often ambivalent about women's ceremonies, especially if they suspect that women's activities might pre-empt their ability to make key decisions (Bell 1993a:182-226; Kaberry 1939:254ff).

In looking back over my fieldnotes of the past fifteen years, and in conversation with colleagues, I realise I know of many ceremonial gatherings where women worked to extend their ritual repertoire, rights in land, knowledge of sites, and to establish relationships across language boundaries.[5] Why have these not been the subject of scholarly enquiry? I suspect because each has been neatly filed under the impeccable rationale: a school excursion, a land claim, a re-enactment for a film maker, a health conference, a sports day celebration, a mission centenary. In short, we were not looking for them. Certainly I was chipping away at characterisations of women's ceremonies as personal, divisive, localised and intra-generational (Bell 1993a; 1993d), but I was more concerned to demonstrate the scope and range of the themes and structure, than the size: small could be beautiful and culturally meaningful.[6]

But if these ceremonial gatherings are taken as a group, as constituting fora within which women engage in religious politics, fascinating questions arise: Are we witnessing the emergence of a new ceremonial forum, i.e., a women's supra-regional religious celebration? Have the conditions under which such gatherings might flourish only recently come into play? If so, what are these factors? We know that historically men's cults diffused across the continent and were elaborated differently in different locations. Could women have been similarly engaged in melding, to their own ends, those cults that swept through their country? If so, what would constitute evidence of their existence? How might we read the historical record, given that it is one that privileges male activities, in order to locate women as players? Have women been doing these ceremonies all the time, or, as some would have it, is this all just a feminist in[ter]vention?

Although the content of Aboriginal narratives reflects local conditions, the concept of a creative era (Dreamtime) when the world was given form, shape and meaning by the activities of mythological pioneering ancestors (Dreamings) is a basic tenet of Aboriginal religion. Through ritual re-enactment of the ancestral travels, the present generation celebrate their spiritual heritage and interests in the "founding drama". There is men's business and women's business; ceremonies where each sex has a limited presence in the activities of the other; and ones where knowledge is shared and meanings negotiated (Bell 1993a; Berndt 1950:24-25; Kaberry 1939:276-277). Men and women assume distinctive responsibilities in respect of the maintenance of this heritage, but at the structural level of rights in land, men and women evoke similar principles and relationships (Bell 1993a). In song, gesture, dance and design, they articulate their models of social reality, demonstrate their

relationship to the ancestors and the land, and transmit this knowledge to successive generations.

In terms of regional ceremonies and cults, we know a great deal about the dimensions of male ritual (Bern 1979; Berndt 1951; 1953; Elkin 1961), but we know rather less about women's ceremonial life. In fact, for most ethnographers, "women's religion" is an oxymoron.[7] At one level, the problem is that it is extremely difficult to undertake participant-observation fieldwork with members of the opposite sex and much information about religion is only accessible through participation. At another level, models of Aboriginal religion have juxtaposed the sacred male against women's profanity. There is little a woman can say of her religious life when the data are framed by Durkheimian dichotomies and Freudian fantasies regarding women's profane, hearth-bound, untrustworthy self. The ethnographic soil in which generalisations regarding gender relations and religion grew was not female friendly.[8]

Fieldwork in the well-watered north, where men are the macro-owners of the symbolic domain, and women micro-managers of food gathering, became the standard against which all other ethnographic portraits were judged. This contrasts with the central desert regions where the "problem of women" was solved quite simply: they were invisible. Had the early ethnographers begun with the dramatic sex division of labour of desert peoples as problematic, rather than assuming that by working with men they could speak for all, understanding Aboriginal religious life would have involved research with men and women. Rather than a gendered opposition of sacred/profane, we would have been struggling with notions of complementarity, men as "other" in women's ceremonies, and gendered negotiations regarding symbolic meanings in different ecological niches. But the fieldworker who thanked his wife for typing his manuscript was unlikely to credit women with key roles in Aboriginal religious life.

While a marked division of labour remains a salient feature of Aboriginal life in central and northern Australia, the shift from hunting and gathering to a more sedentary life-style has radically altered the resource base. Freed from the need to constantly gather food, Aboriginal women may now contemplate large ceremonial gatherings on settlements, missions and stations, but these population intensive centres also exacerbate male/female jealous fights. In nuclear families with nominal male heads, women are no longer producers but consumers within a cash economy that offers her little. Whereas once the existence of separate resource bases ensured women a role in decision-making, now impoverished and dependent, she is locked out of the emerging structures of

self-determination. It is men who have been consulted, mentored, and groomed as spokespersons. However, if I am right, that in regional ceremonies women are finding ways of reasserting their rites, we may well find women reinserting themselves as selves with rights within the politics of self-determination.[9] In the Nutwood Downs *jarrarda* the women were stating their rights, as of tradition, over a vast area of northern Australia.

People and Place: The Socio-Political Scene

Nutwood Downs, a relatively isolated cattle station, home to thirty to forty Aboriginals and approximately ten non-Aboriginal people was in many ways typical of cattle stations in the region. A striking feature was the residential layout. Within the fenced station paddock, school caravan, homestead, characteristic red and white single quarters and associated buildings, garage, Toyotas, orchard, water tank and bore pumps were located. Some hundred metres to the north, two rows of one-room tin huts on concrete slabs, one tap and two pan toilets formed the camp. The differences in life style, values, access to facilities were dramatic. However, the mutual dependence of the one on the other had created some common ground and given rise to the distinctive life style of cattle station people.

Because the population was small, individual personalities loomed large. The manager was approachable, but was not always in residence at the station. His wife, a trained nurse, provided some medical attention for those who lived in the camp. Their children were educated by a private governess. The Education Department teacher and her family lived in one caravan, she conducted classes in a second caravan, and supervised use of the ablution block (two showers, two flush toilets, troughs and a washing machine) which serviced the school population and frequently the entire camp. The duties of the bookkeeper/store manager included opening the store twice weekly, receiving telegrams and doing the wages sheets. Also employed within the home paddock, but not necessarily resident there, were the "house girls" and station hands. While residents of the camp might drive through the neatly raked home paddock, where peacocks strutted and tea was taken, to visit the store, receive mail and request medical assistance, for all intents and purposes the area was the domain of the privileged ten non-Aboriginals.

The nearby camp, screened from the view, was often noisy, often bustling, an entanglement of people, dogs, dwellings and passions. Not all of the eighteen concrete slab huts were occupied; many were dilapidated;

all were ovens in summer and chilly in winter. Mostly the Nutwood Downs residents and their visitors camped around the huts in areas which were cleared of the debris which the wind redistributed daily. For the purpose of providing shelter or a pleasant living environment, the huts were grossly inadequate. They had neither power, water, nor insulation. They let in the rain in the wet and provided a haven for cockroach communities. Those camp-dwellers who chose to sleep indoors, preferred to raise themselves above ground level on a wire bed base - often the only furniture in the camp. The huts did, however, provide a lock-up area for their owners and a shaded area in which to sit, cook and socialise. Outside each hut in current use, there was a multi-purpose fire over which tea, damper and stews were cooked; around which families clustered for warmth and light; beside which in the evening, the swags of pensioners, married couples and children were unrolled. Wood had to be gathered regularly and although people exercised restraint in its use, it was always in short supply.

Numerous hoses criss-crossed the camp from the one tap but water pressure was poor and the water might be turned off at the bore without consultation with camp residents. The water was discoloured by rust from the exposed pipes and blamed by many as a contributory factor in the ill health of the children. There were no showers in the camp and, even if one was prepared to venture into the station domain to use the school showers, the pressure was so low that only one could be used at any given time. There were no flush toilets in the camp and those in the school block were overworked and often malfunctioned. In common with other station communities in the Roper River area and elsewhere, the Nutwood people have had to devise ways in which to cope with a station policy whereby social security cheques were not cashed by the management and credit in the store was not given. At the time of our visit in 1981, the Yolngu Association, the Aboriginal umbrella organisation of the Katherine service area, operated a Trust Fund for the benefit of twelve recipients of social security.[10]

All this sounds as if the Aboriginal experience is one characterised by an absence of facilities. But spend time within the Aboriginal camp, participate in the daily round of visiting, conversing, planning, or go out hunting for bush tucker, and the creative aspects of the life style are apparent. For instance, road and tele-communications with major centres were extremely difficult, but the Aboriginal population was able to remain in close contact with the comings and goings of kin though their own radio network.[11] This facility, albeit limited in range, was not subject to station monitoring and could relay information in their own lan-

guages. When "broadcast" on the radio telephone, news invariably included names and, in the case of the deceased, this was inappropriate. On their own networks, Aborigines could use kin or special terms of reference and present "the news" in a manner cognizant of their cultural code.

The sedentary life style was no boon to health but did support extended visiting and gatherings of kin and countrymen on a scale which would have been impossible for mobile hunters and gatherers in earlier times. People were well informed about their relations, had much to discuss, visited and received visitors from Hodgson Downs, Hodgson River, Roper Valley, Ngukurr, Bringham, Duck Creek, and the nearby Cox River community. In spite of the difficulties, the Nutwood Downs community was remarkably coherent: the families were held together by common affiliations to land and language (predominantly Alawa), by intermarriage, enduring patterns of co-residence and ceremonial responsibilities. Some families spanned up to four generations. Although items such as money and alcohol, disruptions to family life and alienation of land have taken their toll, station people such as those at Nutwood Downs were striving to achieve a balance between the old law of their forebears, the codes of conduct dictated by the pastoral life style, and the newly formulated rights of indigenous peoples.

A *Jarrarda* and Land Affiliations

An impending land claim and a desire to register as sacred sites two areas which together constituted the women's ceremonial grounds provided the impeccable rationale for the *jarrarda* I am documenting here. Protecting sacred sites has always been a matter of walking a fine line between disclosure and secrecy. In the past, Aborigines were able to protect their sites under their law: the sanctions for violation were strict and swift. However, most Anglos were unable to read the landscape as sacred geography and thus, as alternate land development intensified, the security of sites became increasingly imperiled. When the site concerned women's business, the gendered politics of protection became intense.

Women's ceremonies unleash potentially harmful powers and access to ritual spaces is closely monitored. In central Australia, the women's ceremonial ground, known in English as the "ring place" is usually located behind the *jilimi* (women's residential area) and hence inaccessable to men and outsiders. In the Roper River region, the "ring place" may be located near to residential camps and thereby readily accessible to women with other pressing domestic duties. The proximity to the camp

does state, in a fairly strong and even provocative manner, the women's rights to a separate and independent ritual life. On the other hand, it places their security at risk from outsiders who may not be familiar with the location and the restrictions which apply.

In 1980 the ASSPA (Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority) was one mode, albeit problematic, of protection under Australian law (Bell 1983b). Balancing competing notions of who should know what and for what purpose was one of its most difficult tasks, but it was assumed the parties to the dispute were male. Then, in the confrontation over the proposed flooding of a sacred site near Alice Springs, it emerged, late in the process, that it was a women's site. All parties needed to find ways of consulting with women and as the then anthropologist to the ASSPA (Bell 1983b), I found custodians who would cheerfully explain the sacredness of a site to me and then bind me to woman-only secrecy. Ironically at that stage the Authority was all male. Merely consulting with women was not enough, and there were too few women anthropologists and lawyers to cope with both women's rites and rights (Bell and Ditton 1984[1980]; Bell 1984/5; Rowell 1983). At the request of local women, in my capacity as the ASSPA anthropologist, I visited Nutwood Downs in early May 1981 and, with the assistance of Toni Bauman of Mimi Aboriginal Arts and Crafts, a wing of Yolngu in Katherine (N.T.), documented the sites which were duly registered by late May. The recognition of the importance of these sites, which registration represented to the women, prompted discussion about the staging of a full *jarrarda*.

Opportunities for women to stage large ceremonies are limited and participants take full advantage of the situation. In the Nutwood Downs *jarrarda*, older women sorted out matters of Dreaming affiliations to country, ritual relations and leadership ties through kin and country. Having "straightened" their existing knowledge of country, they then confirmed and extended the complex of people-land relations, as well as conferred on the up-and-coming generation of ritual experts the right to learn and the responsibility to "hold up" the country – both literally in terms of holding up sacred objects on which are painted designs encoding information about the land and in the sense of taking responsibility for the land. In song and dance, through gesture and design, they evoked the power and presence of the mythological pioneering women who travelled through the country from Tennant Creek, from Roper River, from McArthur River to a site known as Kalabirina on Brunette Downs. They incorporated younger girls into the law and introduced them to the depths of women's responsibility to nurture country and relationships.

Aboriginal rights and responsibilities in land are multifaceted: a complex web of interlocking and cross-cutting relationships which allow the system to be maintained through time and across space. In the Roper/Hodgson Rivers region,[12] women distinguish their interests in land by references to language affiliation (e.g., Alawa, Mara, Ngandji, Ngalakan), but when precision was required it was the estates of the four semi-patrimoieties (i.e., Budal, Guyal, Mambali, Murungun) to which they referred and to countries within these estates (usually named after their principal site or sites). When specifying the rights and responsibilities of the *jarrarda* participants, women cited the descent-based roles of *miniringki* (father and father's father), *jungkayi* (mother and mother's father) and *dalyen* (mother's mother).

While people may speak of the roles, rights and responsibilities of categories of persons to land, the actual exercise of responsibility, the assertion of rights, and the playing out of particular roles, are qualified by the pragmatics of one's personal life history. Dreaming affiliations, place of conception, marriage, residence, work histories, and ceremonial expertise have a bearing on what one actually knows of a country. For women, who frequently leave their parental country at marriage and go to live in the country of their husband, such factors become important considerations in reckoning one's rights and responsibilities. Women often state that you should marry *jungkayi* for your country and thus have pre-existing rights in his country. Nonetheless, given that the wife resides on the husband's country, she most often will find herself in foreign country. In collecting life history material from the women we were struck by their high mobility and their accounts of how they participated in the ceremonies of the places at which they were resident (Bell and Bauman 1982). As we shall see, the diffuseness of women's relationships to land and the all-pervasiveness of *munga-munga* activity, permit women to learn of and to participate in the ceremonies of the land on which they are resident. We find that groups may divide and merge; run country in company; adopt persons into the group; trace the *jungkayi* relationships to the second generation (i.e., father's mother's father as well as mother's father).

Munga-munga sanctions all *jarrarda* and, through its performance on Alawa land, rights in the *jarrarda* business were conferred on the *miniringki* and *jungkayi* for the Nutwood Downs site. By celebrating a *jarrarda* and following the tracks of the *munga-munga*, the women gave form to the essence of their relationship to land. It was their responsibility to bring groups together, to demonstrate the integrity of each country and to teach the next generation. Of particular interest to me here are the various aspects of the ceremony, its rationale and context, the nature

of the preparation, structure of the performance, and aftermath, all of which illustrate the subtle relationship of rites to rights.

The Structure of *Jarrarda*

The Message Goes Out

The timing and staging of a lengthy ceremony in which many visitors will need to be fed and housed requires forethought and is subject to a variety of factors not all of which are generated by dictates of the Dreamtime. The host community is expected to feed the guests, but visitors, unless they are really destitute, usually bring the basics. Weather, school holidays, the arrival of the Yolngu truck, pay week and pension day are further constraints on timetabling. Close to towns no one would plan to begin a ceremony on pay day when money often is splurged on alcohol. On the other hand, there must be sufficient money to purchase food rations, or stocks of bush tucker on which to draw. In the past, ceremonies could only take place in times of relative plenty: today plenty is a fortnightly cycle of social security cheques.

Not only who should attend, but also how they will travel to the ceremony is the subject of endless debate and politicking. There are never enough vehicles to transport the number who may lay claims to attend. The sorting and sifting of claims depends very much on who is the prime mover of the ceremony: whoever is within her networks of kin, country and ceremony is likely to be promoted or to promote herself as essential to the proceedings and then, through participation, be considered as a leader. We left the invitations to Namija, a senior woman who was anxious to have the *jarrarda* at Nutwood Downs. This, as it happened, was an excellent ploy for a number of reasons. On the one hand, because she is not *miniringki* or *jungkayi* for Alawa country (her country is McArthur River), but rather derives her position in the community from ceremonial expertise, long residence, and affinal ties, she was able to invite members of all interested family groups without being accused of favouring her own. Each group was then free to refine her list within her own organisational framework. Namija helped us draft the telegrams which she felt would achieve her goal. One read, "Need you badly."

It was necessary that women of each four estate groups and from each of the countries traversed by the *munga-munga* be present. It was also necessary that experienced *miniringki* and *jungkayi* for the Dreamings and for Alawa country at Nutwood be present. The assembled teachers needed young women to be their pupils. Numbers are important for, in this way, the leader validates her authoritative status as the widely recruited group may verify the proceedings, carry the message back to

home communities, learn, and be able to continue the "business". Once the women had settled on a date and list of persons, we worked out a system of collecting people which required maximum use of local transport and minimum intervention from us. One problem was that few women hold licenses or they have limited access to vehicles.[13] Further, younger men are often unwilling to drive women to a women's ceremony, not only because it is inappropriate, but also because of the sexual politics entailed in the staging of sex-specific ceremonies. When men are involved in the transporting of participants, the nature of the ceremony is transformed.

How these sex dynamics played out in pre-contact times is impossible to know with any certainty, but we do know that all major ceremonial gatherings required women, and not only for their labour: women had a presence at male ceremonies, mysterious though it was to male ethnographers such as Spencer and Gillen (Bell 1993d:68). From my own fieldwork I know that when men and women gather for initiation ceremonies, while the men are making boys into men, the women are also engaged in rituals which determine future marriage lines for the young man and thereby the country affiliations of his children. Is it too outrageous to ask what in the past would have prevented women from staging their own separate ceremonies? They were safe to do so while being "excluded" from the men's sacred ground and an ethnographer, intent on following "men's business", was unlikely to inquire into the dimensions of "women's business".

The Coming-In

A *jarrarda*, like other large ceremonies, does not begin with the performance. It builds gradually and at each stage information regarding land and people relations is being negotiated. As we drove from community to community to collect particular women, we found men and women were excited about the forthcoming *jarrarda* and eager to discuss details of the participants and the business. Women discussed the bases of particular women's rights to attend and thereby delineated their rights and responsibilities in land and the country to be celebrated in the *jarrarda*. The necessity for the presence of both *jungkayi* and *miniringki* and the interdependence of their roles was emphasised. Actual kin relations were stressed by statements such as, "I'm *miniringki*, follow father"; "That country from my mother; Like *jungkayi*"; "My sister is boss with me"; "We [Mambali] run all that Murungun company; Call him granny". The persons who eventually assembled at Nutwood Downs were those who had been considered essential in the first place. What was being demon-

strated at each port of call were the rights of other persons and family groups to review and to confirm who should attend. Ian Keen (1981) has aptly termed such persons the "jural public" and in this instance it was a widely dispersed constituency.

Our travelling afforded other opportunities to learn, and it was apparent that information ritually encoded in song and symbol was readily recalled, even if places had not been visited for some time. In the past, as today, foraging usually occurred within a day's walk of camp. While groups remained small and followed resources according to seasonal and regional variations, women were able to teach their children of the economic and religious significance of country. Today, with larger, relatively settled groups, the food resources are quickly depleted around the camp and journeys to country further afield are undertaken on weekends and holidays so as not to disrupt school routines. As both boys and girls learn to name their worlds of kin and country at their mother's knee, school time represents a considerable erosion of the time available for such teaching and undermines women as experts. Children no longer see their mothers as knowledgeable in the ways of country: they sing of the adventures of Davey Crockett, not of the travels of the ancestors; they visit a limited range of neighbouring communities, not a multitude of sites.

Arrival and Greeting

On arrival at Nutwood Downs, we were all tired after a long day of driving, it was late at night, and it was tempting to throw down my swag and sleep. Instead, after taking direction regarding where we should park, we gathered in the area of the small *jarrarda* place, which had been newly cleared by the *jungkayi* for the occasion and sat singing softly. The atmosphere was one of anticipation and pleasure. News and greetings were exchanged. By the time the camp settled down, the *jarrarda* agenda was known to all present. It is only with people I've known over many years that I can follow the finer details of genealogy, personal history and social structure that are played out in these moments of apparent chaos, and for this *jarrarda* I was doing a crash course. Much of what was happening was only clarified later when we began doing oral histories with the women and learned something of their past employment, families and ceremonial experience (Bell and Bauman 1982).

In the light of morning, we saw the women had clustered in groups: at one end stood a shade for the *jungkayi*, with the remaining women grouped in terms of country/language affiliation. The songs sung that morning were those that gave the sanction of Law to our activities of the

past few weeks. The women sang of the "sending out" of the message and thus the telegrams became message sticks. They sang of "mustering up" the people and our trek in Toyotas was given continuity with the Law of the past when large numbers of people of different language groups would congregate. After these initial songs, the women danced a travelling sequence which was both an ancestral sanction and a re-enactment of the coming together of language groups, Dreamings and countries to one place where each may show the other something of "their business".

The Capture and Preparation

After this preliminary singing and dancing, the pace intensified. As the day wore on, the older women sat facing the main camp and singing of the power of the *munga-munga*. They waited for younger girls to answer their call to the ceremonial ground. By mid-afternoon, sufficient women had assembled and a group of elderly *miniringki*, and *jungkayi* for *munga-munga* Dreaming retreated to the larger ceremonial ground where they continued singing. From here, several women withdrew still further to a glade at the rear of the "ring place". As the young girls came to the "ring place", they were "captured" by the older women who signalled them through to the glade. This is reminiscent of the highly ritualised "surprise" capture of the boys in male initiation ceremonies (Bell 1993a:214-216).

The *jungkayi* gave the orders and generally took charge of organisational matters. Throughout the latter parts of the ceremony, the *miniringki* are unable to give orders themselves for they are under a speech tabu. Once in the glade, senior *jungkayi* began to grease and paint the bodies of *miniringki* with designs from which one's role in the ceremony would be known. The designs indicated that a *jarrarda* celebrated on Alawa land has the power to incorporate elements from elsewhere. Designs from further north were used, as were *awelye* designs from Aranda country. Although it is stated that *jungkayi* paint *miniringki*, it is a joint endeavour in which each may correct each other. The designs may not be viewed by men and great care was exercised in this respect.

The Dance – Participation and Exegesis

Senior *miniringki* for *munga-munga* supervised the painting and when satisfied, they moved back to the larger "ring place". There the *jungkayi* began to sing the dancers through. They waited for the *miniringki* to appear and to follow the tracks of which they sang. As the first line of painted dancers emerged and approached the watching *miniringki*, they

commented in sign on the quality of the designs and the skill of the dancers. A second line then emerged, danced forward, wove through the ranks of the first, and joined forces. The dancers were led by senior *miniringki* and the rear was taken up by another senior woman. In between, the dancers were ranked according to seniority for Alawa country. The lines of dancers were flanked by *jungkayi* who took care that the dancing followed the correct line. Here the parallel with *yawulyu* (see n. 4) and the division of labour between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* in *yawulyu* was particularly striking.[14]

The women danced in different formations: in pairs, in lines and circles and solo, back and forth to the now seated singers. Each change in formation and dance style produced different patterns in the cleared ground. Each new formation told of particular relationships between individuals and groups, and of relations between countries, estates and Dreamings. The dancers thus marked out graphically the inter-relations of people and land. By following in the steps of their elders, the younger women were incorporated within this *munga-munga* schema. In the interweaving, crossing and joining of lines, the dancers re-enacted the encounters of the *munga* ancestors with other Dreamings and gave form to the notion that the tracks of the *munga* women map out the lines of unity and differentiation of groups. It is in the style, the rhythm, the language of the song, the gestures, the patterns made by the dancing feet, and the Dreamings encountered, that the women know which country is being celebrated: it is the assurance that the *munga-munga* created this design that binds together women from far-flung communities and allows them to participate.

While dancing, the women employ gestures that cross language boundaries. These make the story line of the *munga-munga* adventures available to all present, paraphrase the song line and indicate emotional states. From the language of the song, one may know to which country it belongs, but by being danced on another country, that song and the associated action become part of the *munga-munga* repertoire that may be performed on that *jarrarda* ground. The *munga-munga* have the power to absorb and transform songs and activities from elsewhere. By displaying the travels on Alawa country, the *miniringki* and *jungkayi* for the estate with which the *munga-munga* is associated become those who must "hold up" the country for all to see. As they danced with hands cupped upwards, women answered the question, "What do women do for land?"

In this *jarrarda* Namija sang of the *munga-munga* from near Alice Springs and she sang in Alyawarra. As she drew nearer to the Warumungu country, the dancing style changed. The shift was subtle

and I would probably not have noticed, had I not been dancing myself at the time. Gently but firmly Namija directed a "sister" to teach me the correct step. From then on I was known as the "Warumungu girl", because that was the dancing style I brought to the Nutwood Downs ceremonial ground. Warumungu practice constitutes a focus for *jarrarda* as it is from and through this country that the *munga-munga* are said to travel to the Victoria River Downs and Roper River regions. From Warumungu country, Namija moved on to sing in Wombaya and Gurdanji as the travelling *munga-munga* entered her language country. It is worth noting here that language differences were being marked, but that by virtue of the songs being led by one singer, they were being drawn together and focussed on one site. In a way the singing mirrored the trek we had taken through different communities, where various languages were spoken, to the ceremonial ground where the rituals united us.

After the display of the dancers, the women sat and began to sing in a quite different manner. They moved into a tight group for a ritual sequence that focussed on health. This is an integral part of a *jarrarda* ceremony and the right to perform these nurturance rituals and their efficacy derives from the power the *munga-munga* deposited in their travels. By following in their footsteps, the women activate and may draw upon this power. Another segment built into the overall structure of the *jarrarda* was that which dealt with male-female emotional management. This theme was alluded to in the dancing and then made explicit in a final dancing and further painting sequence. At this time, extreme care was exercised in separating married women from single girls and widows. In central Australian *yawulyu*, these love and health rituals are played out within the context of women's celebration of land and in this *jarrarda* the participants were making the same connection between physical and emotional states of well being.

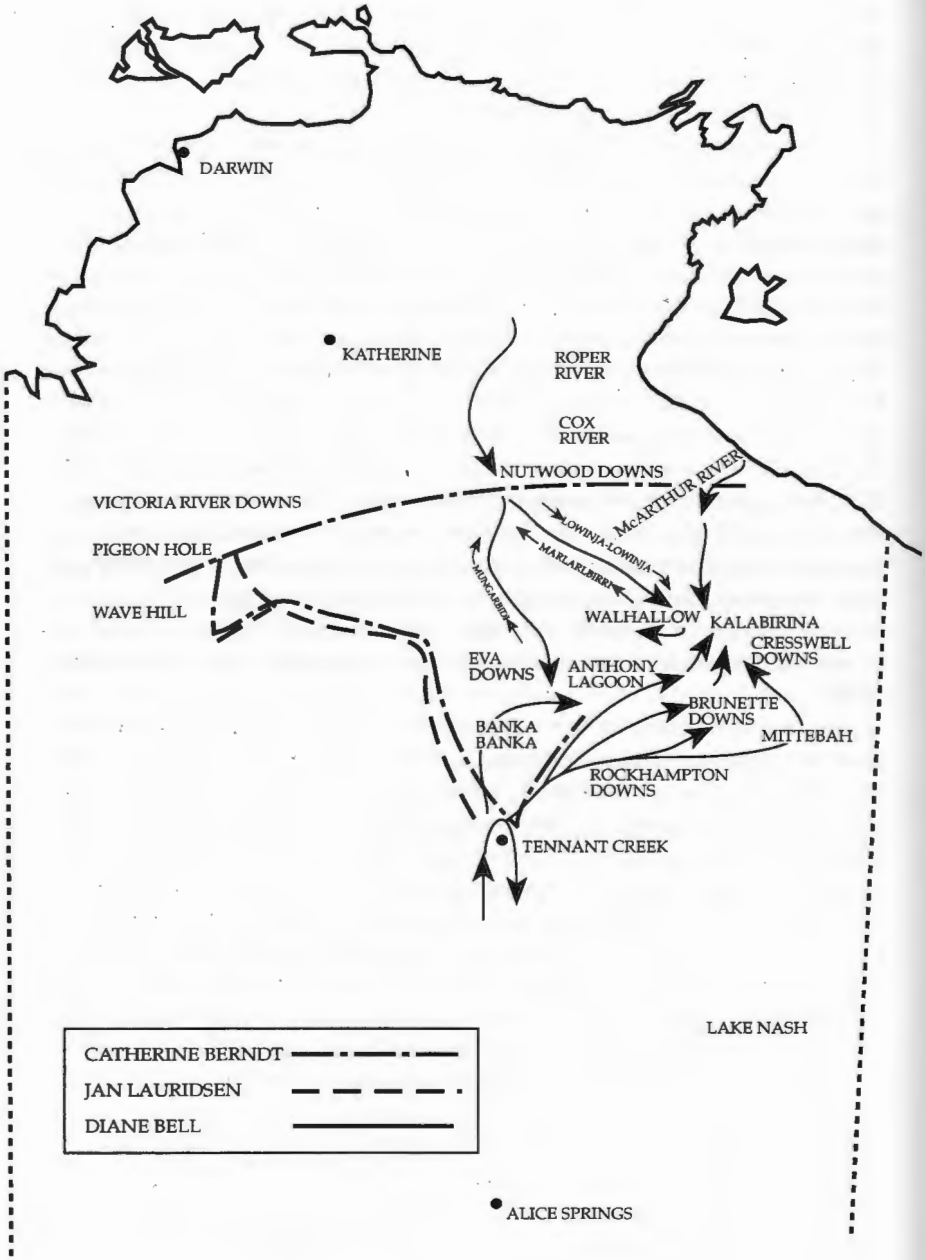
After this segment, the women moved back to the smaller *jarrarda* ground where they had begun their activities that morning and continued singing until dusk. Some of the younger women wandered back to camp for food and to attend to domestic duties: the senior women remained. After dinner the singing revived and the dancing recommenced. The themes of the afternoon were revised and consolidated. The section of the track traversed during the day was extended, thereby introducing other Dreamings which the *munga-munga* meet, travel alongside, absorb, and cross over in their travels. Throughout, young girls were cautioned not to sleep lest they miss an important song. They were encouraged and praised for their dancing: even toddlers were encouraged to participate. Those girls who had to attend school the next day were in

a quandary. They realised that there were few such opportunities, but they also wished to maintain their good attendance records. One older woman said to her child: "You can go to school, but you still got to go along ceremony, learn him along head".

Around midnight the dancing ceased and women slept on the ceremonial ground, all but Namija who kept singing until dawn. Having embarked on the travels, having unleashed the power, she was now responsible for its correct care and the containment of the potential wildness of the *munga-munga*. That day, Namija explained that she had learnt this *jarrarda* while working at Anthony's Lagoon, where there had been a large gathering of women from Banka Banka and Rockhampton Downs who had taught her the songs and the dancing which they knew and had rights in from Tennant Creek to a site on Old Cresswell Downs. They had also displayed the *jarrarda* business from a site near Alice Springs. These songs are in Alyawarra and had been taught to the Warumungu women of Tennant Creek by their southern Arandic neighbours. As with the Nutwood Downs *jarrarda*, the women at Anthony's Lagoon were able to sing these songs because of the links forged through their common interests in *munga-munga* Dreaming which could assume different forms (mermaids, the night, wild women, Pleiades) and associates with diverse other Dreamings (see also Berndt 1950:33; Bell 1981; 1986).

For the remainder of the week the women followed the pattern of assembling at the small *jarrarda* place in the morning to discuss and confirm the activities for the day. By afternoon, when sufficient women and young girls had assembled, they would retreat to the larger ground and glade for further singing, painting, dancing and the performance of associated rituals. Each day they commented they were getting closer to the main site. Namija began to speculate as to who should "hold up" the country, while Alawa, Mara and Ngalakan women began discussing the significance of the differences in the business carried by the *munga-munga* from the south. In this way we began to understand something of the structure and significance of the ceremony.[15]

While Namija made tentative statements concerning with whom the ongoing responsibility for the travels of the *munga-munga* should reside on Nutwood Downs country, and awaited the response from other participants, senior women explained to us the different "lines" or "roads" which the *munga-munga* followed to reach the main place, Kalabirina, a site that could be thought of as the Grand Central station of *munga-munga* tracks. The women were at great pains to emphasise that the *munga-munga* travels from the Roper and McArthur Rivers regions were those of the *kilyiring-kilyiring* women who taught them the *lowinja-lowinja* busi-



Map 1. Munga-Munga Tracks.

ness, but not this "woman turn out" (i.e., secret women's ceremony) which Namija was displaying. *Kilyiring-kilyiring* was translated as "salt water lady", or mermaids, a *munga-munga* ancestor with a fish-like tail and a woman's body.[16]

It was only months after the ceremony, when we took the recordings we'd made back to the women, that they were prepared to name the sites through which the *kilyiring-kilyiring* passed on their way to Kalabirina. Until Namija had completed her ritual retracing of the travels of the segment of *munga-munga* women that led to Kalabirina and carried with it the "women's business" for this *jarrarda*, it was inappropriate for other women to speak of theirs. On our return visit, we were told that the Dreaming from Roper River way travels from a site known as Warnji, near the junction of the Wilton and Hodgson Rivers, down the Hodgson River, past a site on Old St.Vidgeon's to a *munga-munga* site, Injirri, on Hodgson Downs. The special secret features of this site were explained and we were referred to the responsible woman for further details. The *kilyiring-kilyiring* also travelled from a site in the ocean known as Undala near Bing Bong, through McArthur River (i.e., Namija's country) to Kalabirina.

As the *kilyiring-kilyiring* enter Alawa country, different women assume responsibility for speaking of *munga-munga* travels. These women explained that after the Dreaming left Hodgson Downs, it came past Nutwood Downs to the five-mile swamp, to the Number Six bore and the red ochre site. From there the track divides: one line, which carries the business known as *mungardbidi*, travels out towards Dunmara, then back through Eva Downs country and thence to Alice Springs; the other line takes the "middle road" to Kalabirina where it shows the *lowinja-lowinja* business to the assembled *munga-munga*. In terms of following the tracks of this line, the women dance from Kalabirina to the site near Nutwood Downs where the track divides. The Dreaming turns around and heads back carrying the *marlarlbirri* business. Having done this, the women at either end of the track may use the business of the *lowinja* style and the *marlarlbirri* business. In explaining the track of the *munga-munga*, the women recalled for us the gestures, songs and dance steps and then bound us to secrecy regarding the content of the symbols.

It became clear that the *munga-munga* travels which the men follow in their ceremonies (Bern *et al.* 1980:39; Layton 1980:24-5; Toohey 1981:8) are allied to, but are not the same as those of the women. When I asked Namija about the incongruity of the men and women's tracks, she explained by saying that the *munga-munga* scattered across the Tablelands "like cattle" and had to be "mustered", and that at Kalabirina the Dreamings from different directions "team up" again. "*Munga-munga*",

she said, "are everywhere". A similar pattern is evident in *yawulyu* celebrating the meetings of *munga-munga* and rain Dreamings across the Tablelands and south into Aranda country. The diffuseness and mutability of women's accounts of *munga-munga* travels contrast with the specificity of men's and illustrates the different needs being addressed in the rituals of each. For women, portability and adaptability are critical, while for men the patrilineal transmission of cult lodge site-specific knowledge is central.

When Toni Bauman and I worked on a women's submission for the Cox River land claim (Bell and Bauman 1982; Layton 1980; Toohey 1981), the difficulties of translating rites into rights were painfully obvious. The model of tenure for the region was one that privileged male rights in land and did little to recognise women's wide ranging responsibilities in the maintenance of land based relations. In giving evidence, Aboriginal men are reasonably comfortable with the narrative accounts of site locations and land affiliations necessary to prove traditional ownership in a land claim, but for women this "evidence" is embedded in ceremonies (Bell 1979). A male-filled court is poorly equipped to accord women's ceremonial activities the status of evidence. The proceedings usually begin with men, then women are called to fill in any gaps and to add evidence of strength of attachment with stories of gathering food. In the Cox River claim, the women's evidence began with questions regarding their role in men's ceremonies, rather than questions about *jarrarda* (Transcript of Proceedings 1982:218). The counsel fumbled questions regarding where the women had learnt the ceremonies and the places to which they referred. A claim that began with men being asked about their roles in women's ceremonies is highly unlikely, although I suspect that if all the officers of the court were women, the men would be less forthcoming in their assertions of importance.

As we have seen, much is learnt through participation and the clues are subtle. When represented on a map, the information from the *jarrarda* indicates that, from women's ceremonies, one may learn of sites and tracks. Nonetheless, it is a struggle and women often emphasise different aspects of the landscape from those that men deem central. In the Cox River claim, the men were quick to point out that their activities were paramount and that they had taken over all the important aspects of *munga-munga* from the women (1982:248). Women, when asked what their ceremonies did for the men (they were not asked what it did for women or for their society as a whole), stressed the common purpose of their sex-specific tasks: "They all same together. The men's ceremony their self the same as us, and the woman same way by the *Munga-munga* song.... Men sing themselves; women sing themselves" (1982:242-243).

"FINISH-UP", PRESTATIONS AND COUNTER-PRESTATIONS

The staging of a *jarrarda* entails the maintenance of a delicate balance between the obligation of those with an interest in the country being celebrated or traversed to be present and to participate, and the power of the ceremonial leader to command their continued attendance and thereby confirm her status as leader. To give credence to claims of ceremonial importance, one must be able to control access to sites. Registration under the *Sacred Sites Act* achieved this for Namija. However, to organise and stage a *jarrarda*, one must have the authority to "muster" witnesses and knowledge of vast tracts of land. Having staged a ceremony, one's rights in such activities are confirmed and enhanced, but large gatherings are not without their tensions.

Namija would have cheerfully continued singing for several weeks, but other considerations became important. One key woman, the very woman being nominated to "hold up" the country at Nutwood Downs, had to attend a meeting of Yolngu, the Aboriginal service organisation in Katherine. But, more importantly, tensions in the camp were mounting. Ceremonies often entail accusations regarding the "dearness" of a Dreaming: should it be shown and for what consideration? We had made it plain that we would "pay" for the business we had seen in the way we knew to be appropriate, i.e., with gifts of tobacco, blankets, material (see also Kaberry 1939:258), and thereby not compromise the leaders who otherwise could be accused of "giving away" secrets. The gifts, we knew, would be distributed and in turn we would be paid for attending in a counter-prestation. Trying to keep ledgers even was always a problem when working with women who were less extravagant in their "requests" than men, but were more generous in reciprocation. Money has replaced many traditional items of exchange, but as yet there is no clear exchange rate from one system to another.[17] However, on this occasion there was a rumour that $1,000 had been promised to the women, and this became a hot topic. The men charged they must receive a share of any money that was forthcoming. This misunderstanding stemmed from a rumour being spread by several influential individuals, not resident in the community, but with a vested interest in disrupting site registrations, and particularly hostile to recognising women's sites.

The decision regarding when the ceremony was to be "finished up" was Namija's, but she took that decision in full knowledge of the constraints. With regret, she stated that we would conclude at the end of the week. This statement needed to be made three nights before the scheduled conclusion in order to allow the other essential segments of the *jarrarda* to be performed. In common with other ceremonies I have at-

tended, the climax of this *jarrarda* was spectacular and came after days of interrupted sleep, tabu observances and mounting tension. Unfortunately, the details must remain secret, but the forces unleashed on that occasion were extremely powerful and, as the ordered world marked out by the tracks of the *munga-munga* on the ceremonial ground were obliterated, chaos reigned. As in earlier segments, and consistent with Aboriginal ceremonial practice elsewhere, there were abrupt changes in mood from high drama to comic joking. For the twenty-four hours preceding the climax, women, men and children alike remained close to camp and little conversation was to be heard in the camp or on the ground. The *miniringki* were under a speech tabu and had to rely on the *jungkayi* to communicate for them.

On the following day, the women retreated to the large ground but painted only with red ochre - gone were the distinctions of the designs employed earlier. The payment of *jungkayi* and counter-prestation was accomplished. The nomination of Nabalaindi as the one to "hold up" the country was made public. The division of labour of the dancers from singers was emphasised in the groups in which the women danced; Nabalaindi held aloft the ritual items which symbolised her country; in a ritual sequence the dress materials, blankets, clothes, and so on were imbued with the power of the *munga-munga* Dreaming. Once Namija had been paid for showing the ceremony and had in turn paid the workers, the women walked in single file from the ceremonial ground to the main camp where the senior male *jungkayi* from Nutwood Downs country sat silently waiting. After a further ritual sequence between the women and the men, the men presented the woman nominated to succeed Namija and her *jungkayi* with gifts. The women settled down to sleep on the larger ceremonial ground. Voices were hushed, children were cautioned to be quiet but every now and then the soft tones of Namija's singing could be heard. Her work was not yet done.

In the morning, the ground was cleared, all constructions associated with the ceremony were burnt and the tension eased. The speech tabu was lifted in a finger-biting ritual, and women began to pack in preparation for return to their home communities. Talk turned to what would be done the next time they all gathered. In my experience of ceremonies, there are always aspects of the business left undone. In this way, one may always claim that another ceremony is required at some future date, but for now the *jarrarda* was done. Namija returned to her camp exhausted but exhilarated: Nabalaindi boarded a light aircraft for a meeting in Katherine. Life returned to "normal".

It was very much in the minds of the women that they should reassemble, but organising another *jarrarda*, under the control of lo-

cal women, proved difficult (Merlan 1989). After the completion of a ceremony, criticism of content is common, and usually comes from a rival leader or faction. In this case, we heard complaints that Namija had sung the two lines "cross and cross", that they should have been separated, and that it all needed to be done again. Each time we revisited the Nutwood Downs area women asked when the next ceremony would take place. This passing of the responsibility for initiating a *jarrarda* to an outsider is not solely because of problems with organisation. It is a convenient ploy to say that someone else initiated the ceremony (Reay 1970). I think this also, in part, explains why women always say *jarrarda* comes from elsewhere (Berndt 1950:30-31) and in part explains why we've missed the importance of these rites in the ethnographic literature and the contemporary political scene.

While watching a ritual performance and discussing its significance with the participants, it is easy to ignore the impact of the changes wrought by a century of colonisation of Aboriginal lands. In a ceremony like the July *jarrarda* women stated firmly the relevance of the old Law to their lives today. Much has been lost: the religious and economic values are no longer mutually reinforcing elements of the Aboriginal life style. However, new items and concepts are being incorporated and thereby brought under Aboriginal control. Ceremonial activity is one important way in which this is achieved. In the ceremony discussed above, the participants turned to "the telegram" as an effective and speedy message stick; cloth, tobacco, and store tucker became convenient items of exchange. The registration of the women's ceremonial grounds provided a measure of security and cause for celebration. In short, the women demonstrated their skills as hunter-gatherers: they could adapt to changing environments and still make out.

Whither? *Jarrarda* and Beyond

Following the tracks of the *munga-munga* is a story of claiming our rites that deserves to be told, but I am also claiming that power relations in Aboriginal communities continue to be played out in ceremonies (men's and women's); that this *jarrarda is* evidence of the existence of women's regional cults; and that the gendered politics of self-determination constitutes a critical context for any understanding of women's ritual and in particular women's regional ceremonies. By considering *munga-munga* travels as a woman's macro-narrative, we hear women speaking in active voice and may explore their distinctive ceremonial strategies as creative ways of coping with the dramatic changes of the past century. Can we take these conclusions beyond *jarrarda* and *munga-munga*? I think so, but in this section I shall be indicating possible lines of enquiry rather

than being exhaustive. What clues may be found in the ethnographic record? What can be read from the contemporary political scene?

Annette Hamilton (1979; 1982) argues for gendered and shifting notions of land affiliations and ceremonial practice in the nineteenth century in the Western Desert. Phyllis Kaberry (1939:257) in the mid-thirties found that secret women's ceremonies, *yirlpinji*, diffusing eastwards through the Kimberleys, were identified as coming from Wave Hill and the Victoria River Downs (VRD). A decade later, Catherine Berndt (1950), working with women (Gurindji, Mudbara, Bilingjara, Warlpiri) in the VRD region, added another piece to the power of women's ceremonies to cope with migration, out-marriage and shifting residential patterns of the pastoral industry. More recently, based on field work at Daguragu, Jan Lauridsen (1990) has explored the history of a particular *jarata* (*jarrarda*). We find ceremonies migrating with women: they follow the shifting fortunes of marriage, employment, massacre, and land alienation. The process is ongoing.

If I were to pursue women's macro-narratives beyond the range of *munga-munga* authored *jarrarda*, I would certainly map with great detail the links through Central Australian *yawulyu* (Bell 1986; Berndt 1950), but I would also trace the linkages to the north through the Djanggawul, Kunapipi and Wawilak sisters ceremonial complex (Berndt 1950; 1953; Warner 1937) and pay attention to the sites the Nutwood women said had sadly fallen into disuse. I would follow the rhythmic clues of ethnomusicologists (Ellis 1970; Payne 1988) into South Australia, and subject Strehlow's (1971) meticulous transcriptions to a much overdue feminist reading. In Western Australia, women's meetings documented since the mid-1980s (see n. 5), involve *munga-munga* business and visitors from central and northern Australia. I suspect that from the fieldnotes of other researchers ethnographic clues regarding these women's gatherings could be culled, many more tracks could emerge, and that these may well constitute networks that extend across the continent. Jan Lauridsen's (1990) material on *jarrarda* is one excellent, untapped source.

In terms of the structure of transmission of *jarrarda* knowledge, we can find important continuities. I focussed on Namija, an outsider to the local community in terms of land-based affiliations, but through her ceremonial experience in distant places, she was an expert in travels of the *munga-munga*. I have seen similar situations in central Australia. According to Kaberry (1939:257) women learn through visits and "inter-tribal meetings". Here then is evidence of women taking advantage of large gatherings to further their own ends. I would suggest that we may also identify "focal sites" associated with these gatherings and individual "boss" women who bring hitherto unconnected tracks into dia-

logue. Berndt (1950:31) emphasises the role of a boss woman and that *jarrarda* is said to have been brought to the VRD from the Roper River region and from the Tennant Creek region (1950:12-13). For the women of Jurnkurakurr (north of Tennant Creek) *munga-munga* converges and spreads out across the Barkly Tablelands. In each region, the residential history of the "boss" women who host the *jarrarda* and link the tracks is critical. Rarely is she someone who would be recognised as a "traditional owner" under a strict reading of existing legislation, yet without her and her ability to call in others, the system of land-based relations would fragment and stagnate. Sustaining a system of land tenure that links people to place is not simply a matter of relatedness to a site, but requires flexibility in the interconnections of people and places.

In 1934, W.E.H. Stanner declared the Warumungu "decadent". The decline in ceremonial life that Catherine Berndt (1950:73) observed in the late forties led her to state that unless "some unforeseen revival takes place" she expected the trend to continue. The regional meetings and ceremonial energy of *jarrarda* and *yawulyu* augur well for a brighter outcome. I'd suggest that while the instruments of self-determination facilitated the forging of new male political identities at regional, national and international levels, women, as has always been the case, have turned to their ceremonies to forge political identities. This brings them into dialogue regarding these important resources: in this case institutional prestige, budgets, relationships and land negotiations. Men have been recognised as spiritually empowered politicians; women are now also asserting their identity. How well this strategy will play is not yet clear. Women's meetings are now being reported favourably in publications such as *Land Rights News* (1993) and I think we will see more of this. The media now carries reports of the critical importance of women in stopping the flooding of sacred sites near Alice Springs (Taylor 1992); women's role in resolution of conflict (O'Loughlin 1988; Bell 1993a:286), and the superiority of women's ceremonial performances on occasions such as the handing over of the title to Ayres Rock (Legge 1983). It is my guess that if Aboriginal organisations see merit in recognising women's rites, they will do so.

An Aboriginal woman friend once wryly observed, as we sat chatting about the vagaries of marriage, male/female relations and raising children in her culture and mine, "All the same but different". It is a formulation I have heard in other contexts and one that I find helpful in making sense of the women's ceremonies. Whether the rituals celebrated the seasonal round of the well-watered north or the treacherous ways of the parched centre, there is an assertion made by women that through their celebration of the heroic deeds of the founding ancestors, they could

shape their worlds in significant ways; that the sex division of labour and the power to exclude generates a negotiating structure; and that by maintaining harmony amongst people, land, past and present they ensure a future. The key participants in the Nutwood Downs *jarrarda* have passed away. Here I am honouring their dedication to the maintenance of their society. Like the travels of the *munga-munga*, women's contribution is powerful, serious and enduring.

This one you sing.
It doesn't matter where him singing.
Mean lift up that place.
Someone going to look from country and see you, because
munga-munga everywhere.

Notes

1 I thank Morny Joy (1989) for pioneering the path for "unrepentant feminists with pluralist tendencies". To be sure, feminist and postmodernist perspectives intersect in important ways. The deconstructionists' focus on language and modes of representation has shaped feminist approaches to cross-cultural work in important ways and feminists have long known that "woman" is not a unitary subject position: race, class, age, residence, marital status, sexual orientation, to name a few, all matter. But, like Teresa de Lauretis (1989), I am prepared to take the risk of essentialism seriously. I see the postmodern account of the crisis of representation in anthropology (Clifford 1988) as wilfully ignorant of feminist reflections of the past two decades and earlier ethnographic innovations (Bell 1993b). For me radical feminism is not a retreat into some ahistorical, colour blind essentialism, so popular as a straw woman for the fundamentalists, the conservatives and RSL, but rather a commitment to work at theorising our practice as social scientists concerned about such substantive issues (MacKinnon 1989; 1993). I am less concerned with labels (de Lauretis 1989) and more concerned with relationships that empower women and like Sandra Harding (1990), I think woman-centric research can enhance objectivity.

2 The patriarchal basis of Anglo law, the chauvinism of many officers of the court, and the macho neo-traditionalism of local leaders and advisors shape understandings of the "self" of self-determination policies. Under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* 1976, title to Aboriginal reserves was transferred to Aborigines and the conditions under which Aborigines could make claim to Vacant Crown Land (and land in which all interests were held by, or on behalf of Aborigines) were specified. As claimants, Aborigines must demonstrate that they satisfy the criteria of traditional ownership and this entails presenting evidence of spiritual re-

sponsibility and affiliations to the land and its sites. Claims are heard before a judge who sits as the Aboriginal Land Commissioner (Bell 1984/5; Rowell 1983). The Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority is a statutory body established under Northern Territory legislation, the *Sacred Sites Act*, 1978, which is reciprocal legislation to the federal Land Rights Act. 1976. This has been significantly amended and now includes women in the decision-making process (Bell 1983b).

3 The women were anxious that some record of the ceremony be made but were adamant that all material be restricted to women. With the consent of the women, Toni Bauman, Penny Tweedie and myself taped and photographed (stills). This record has been taken back to the women in various communities and the women have stated that the photographs remain completely closed, but agreed on the text of a submission for the Cox River Land Claim (Transcript of Proceedings 1982:233). The ethnography in this article is excerpted from that exhibit (Bell 1982b). I respect the women's desire to keep material secret but note that while their rites may be protected, their rights are not. When a conflict arises lawyers/researchers/bureaucrats go to men as informants and to an ethnographic record that is silent on women's interests (Bell and Ditton 1984[1980]; Bell 1984/5; 1993d).

4 *Jarrarda* glosses a category of women's ceremonies in the Victoria River Downs (VRD) and Roper River (Berndt 1950:30-42; Laurisden 1990) as does *awelye/yawulyu/jawalju* in the central desert and VRD, but the term *jarrarda*, unlike *yawulyu*, also refers to a category of men's ceremonies. In central Australia and the VRD *yilpinji* is a shared term, whereas in the Kimberleys (Kaberry 1939:258ff) *yirbinji* is for women's secret ceremonies. Often *jarrarda* and *yilpinji* are translated as "love magic" but this misrepresents the scope of the ceremonies and their embeddedness in local Dreamtime narratives (Bell 1993a:162ff). It is convenient to be able to distance women's ceremonies as personal scheming and romantic fluff. I would also counsel caution with all ceremonial categories. They shift meaning through time and as local groups bring ceremonies from elsewhere within their systems of local and social organisation. In the well-watered north, it appears that women's sexuality is emphasised whereas as one moves into the desert regions ceremonies focus on harmonious relations between the living and the land. In both we have a focus on inter-personal and community well-being. In the 1980s, *jarrarda* in the Roper River region appeared to stand at the intersection of the two trends.

5 For example, for the Northern Territory-Tennant Creek 1976, Bell (1981; 1986); Willowra 1977 (Bell 1993a:157-9); Neutral Junction 1976-7, Hermannsburg 1978 (Bell 1993a:189-204); Nutwood Downs 1981 (Bell 1982b); Ayers Rock 1985 (Legge 1985); Alyawarr Land Trust 1993 (Land Rights News 1993:15); for Western Australia-Turkey Creek 1983 and Lake Gregory 1985 (Sawer 1990:132); Yukuwala 1992 (Lloyd 1992; Bell 1993a:296-297); Well 33, Canning Stock Route 1993 (Lloyd 1993); Central and Western Desert (Holcombe 1993).

6 I thank Ken Maddock (1982:138-40) for the challenge he provided (probably unwittingly) in his revisions of his earlier position regarding the scope of men's and women's ceremonies (1972:155). He conceded that women's ceremonies may address issues of social (rather than personal) import, and noted that the number of participants was not necessarily an indication of importance, but he was concerned that there were no records of large gatherings of women.

7 Scholars of religion were slow to accord Aboriginal beliefs and practices the status of religion. The task of documenting women's activities and arguing that women also are part of the religious life has fallen to women (Kaberry 1939; Berndt 1950; Goodale 1971; Hamilton 1979; 1980; 1982; Bell 1984).

8 Anthropological research has closely followed European colonisation and settlement patters and reflects intellectual concerns of the post-enlightenment West (Bell 1984; Spencer and Gillen 1899; Roheim 1933; Warner 1937; Hart and Pilling 1960) and in the late twentieth century appears set to take the postmodern turn into elitism and political immobilisation (Bell 1993b).

9 Women have always had important roles in health and education, i.e., the nurturing professions, but only recently have come to prominence on the national stage (Sawer 1990) and as Fay Gale (1990) indicates, the situation is complex: history, region, economy are all important (Daylight and Johnstone 1986), but in Land Councils and Legal Aid Services spokespersons are predominantly male and it is here that the self-determination agenda is forged. Maddock (1982:74) suggests that if women's status were to improve with return to the land, then the hypothesis that their present woes are due to the transformation of the traditional economy would be bolstered. I am arguing this is so, but I am also arguing that it is not as simple as return of land because there are intermediary structures that continue to be hostile to women's participation in political life.

10 This system, which began operation in December 1980, provided two thirds cash in hand and banked the balance in a Trust Account for the use of the whole community. On the basis of community consultation, the policy changed and cheques were divided into thirds – one for cash in hand, one to the Trust Account, and one for the rations bought and delivered monthly by the Yolngu truck. Food was also bought at the station store. While the Yolngu system overcame the immediate problems of Vestey's policy on handling of monies, there were other problems. Participation was not compulsory and several individuals and groups of persons opted out. The stockmen, who were paid wages during the season, preferred to spend their money individually while they had it. However, the whole community benefited from the projects initiated through the Trust Fund and seasonal workers looked to the accumulated resources of pensioners during the stand down period. Women, although recipients of meagre amounts, are the reliable staple for money in most camps.

11 Access to Nutwood Downs was by light aircraft or one of the several unsealed roads from the Stuart Highway. The main track, 60 kms of graded

road from Daly Waters, was quickly cut in the wet by two creeks close to the station. The other approach, 180 kms of bitumen and graded dirt road, turned off the Highway south of Mataranka, followed the Roper River road and then tracked south through Roper Valley, Hodgson Downs, Hodgson River to Nutwood Downs. A variation was to follow "the river road" after Hodgson River but it was exactly that, a river road. In wet weather these roads were impassable and contact with Mataranka, the nearest town, and Katherine, the service centre for the district, was by radio telephone, a highly unreliable piece of equipment at the best of times and one that afforded no real privacy. All messages transmitted and received by the radio telephone became the public property of the telephone network of the area. Further, as it was housed within the station home paddock complex, the local Aboriginal people did not enjoy easy access.

12 A considerable body of literature exists concerning neighbouring groups (Bern 1979; Bern *et al.* 1980; Heath 1980; Maddock 1974; 1979; Merlan 1980; Toohey 1981). It is not my intention here to analyse or compare Alawa, Mara or Ngandji social structure, but I would note that women's land relations encoded in ceremonial activity add a dimension to leadership struggles in the region that significantly modify notions of the politics as a male domain (Bell 1982a).

13 Women have had fewer opportunities to learn to drive than men who were engaged as drivers during World War Two and assisted in stock work: contexts not routinely available to women. It is inappropriate for them to take instruction from men and there are few trained women (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) available. An anecdote: I accompanied one Aboriginal woman to the police station to get her permit to learn to drive. She was not keen to go into the all-male police station. The Officer-in-Charge challenged her: "Why do you want a licence? Women don't need to drive? You'll just make trouble if you have a licence, run away, etc." Men are not subjected to these kinds of cross-examination.

14 The roles and responsibilities of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* are complex and beyond the scope of this paper (Bell 1993a:111-144). Suffice it to say that in ceremonial practice, *kirda* are those persons who trace a relationship to the Dreamings/sites through their father's line and *kurdungurlu* trace it through their mother's father's line. For purposes of comparison the *miniringki/jungkayi* relationship of the *jarrarda* may be considered to mark a similar division of labour.

15 The women's discussion indicated that the ritual reciprocity between *miniringki* and *jungkayi* was one strand of a complex interweaving of estates, patrimoieties and Dreamings. The Nutwood Downs *jarrarda* ground is located within a Guyal estate and thus the persons who "hold up" the country on the site should be of the Nampijina or Nangala subsections. The *munga-munga* women were Nanaku/Nangari (i.e., of the Murungun estate). Nanaku, as the daughter of Nampijina, is a first generation *jungkayi* for *munga-munga* Dreaming, while Nangala (i.e., Guyal estate) as the

daughter of Nangari (i.e., Murungun estate), is *jungkayi* for Guyal country. Namija could be *miniringki* for the *munga-munga* business because her estate Mambali and Murungun run the *munga-munga* "line" in company, but she was *jungkayi* for the country on which the ceremony was held. The women who were to bear the responsibility of "holding up" the country once Namija had passed it on, were *jungkayi* for the *munga-munga* line, but *miniringki* for the ceremonial ground. On the other hand, Namija was *miniringki* for the Dreaming but *jungkayi* for the ground. Although clues regarding the identity of the person who will "hold up" the country are evident in the order of dancing, body designs and songs, it is not until the final bestowal of the right by the custodian of the Dreaming, that the identity is confirmed and becomes public knowledge.

16 The dancing style *lowinja-lowinja*, which the *kilyiring-kilyiring* displayed at ceremonial sites in their travels is employed by women in this area whenever they dance. Because the *munga-munga* is the authorising ancestor for this style, when women dance in this fashion their action is associated with the *munga-munga*. The women stressed that they danced this way during men's ceremonies which they gloss "blackfellow business" as distinct from their own "women's turn out".

17 I have seen money placed on the payment pile at the conclusion of ceremonies and, as long as it only concerns local peoples, the amounts would be modest. It was when external sponsors visited rather than participated that the payment demands escalated. See Merlan (1989) and the amounts involved in the next documented regional ceremony women attended in the Roper River area.

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