

DEALING WITH DISORDER:  
STRATEGIES OF ACCOMMODATION AMONG THE  
SOUTHERN PITJANTJATJARA, AUSTRALIA

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## DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis  
is my own work.

Margaret Ann Brady

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I became engaged in research at Yalata Community, South Australia, initially as a member of a small multi-disciplinary research team based at the School of Medicine at the Flinders University of South Australia between 1978 and 1982. Together with other members of the research staff, I investigated aspects of the social and psychological health of the community, and undertook studies of adolescent offending and subsequent court appearances, and of substance abuse. The team, known as the Western Desert Project, received funding from the Criminology Research Council of the Australian Institute of Criminology, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and was supported financially and institutionally by the Flinders University. The project was initiated by Dr. Rodney Morice, then senior lecturer in Psychiatry at the School of Medicine. I am grateful to Dr. Morice who encouraged me to become involved in the research project and to study anthropology. Other members of that Department were enthusiastic about my research interests, and provided me with valuable support, particularly Professor Ross Kalucy, and Dr Rene Pols.

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## A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

I have utilised the orthography favoured by teachers and organisations associated with the Pitjantjatjara; my first lessons in the language were taught by Nancy Sheppard, previously of Ernabella who used this system (cf. Sheppard, 1975). Pitjantjatjara uses seventeen consonants, and six vowels. The plosives **p**, **k**, **t** and **tj** are unaspirated. The language has two sounds indicated by **r**; a rolled **r**, symbolised as **rr**; and a retroflexed **r**. I have not indicated these retroflexes in the text, but point out here that the two words containing retroflexed **r** sounds I use most frequently in the thesis are **malu** (red kangaroo), a retroflexed lateral; and **anangu** (Aboriginal person), a retroflexed nasal. There are three long vowel sounds, symbolised as **ii**, **aa** and **uu**; short vowels are **i** as in 'hit'; **a** as in 'cut' and **u** as in 'put'. Consonants are pronounced as follows: **tj** as an unaspirated English 'j'; **ng** as in 'long'; **ny** as in 'canyon'; **ly** has no English equivalent; **w**, **y** and **m** are pronounced as in English.

FIG. 1.1

MAP TO SHOW LOCATION OF YALATA AND OAK VALLEY  
OUTSTATION, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

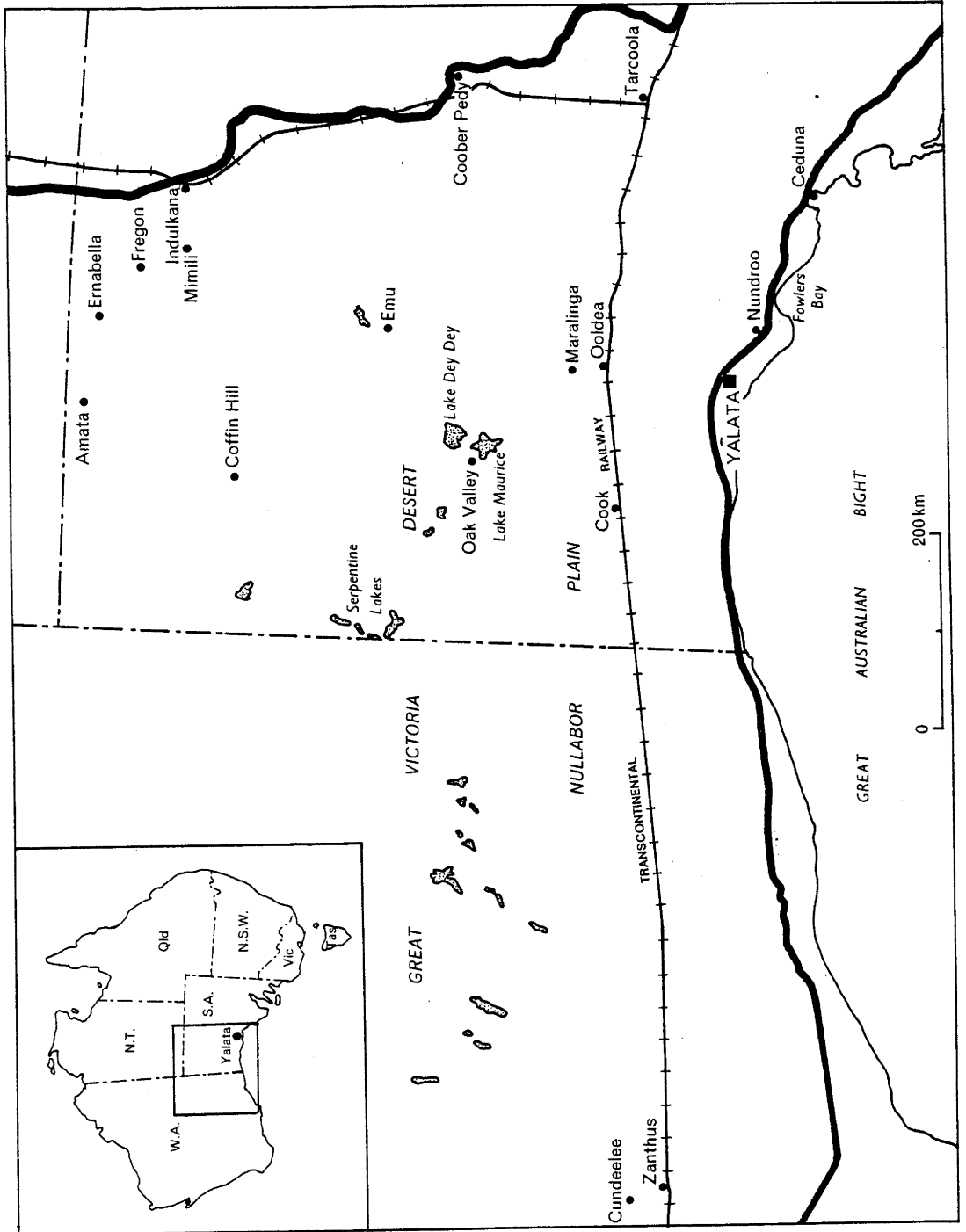
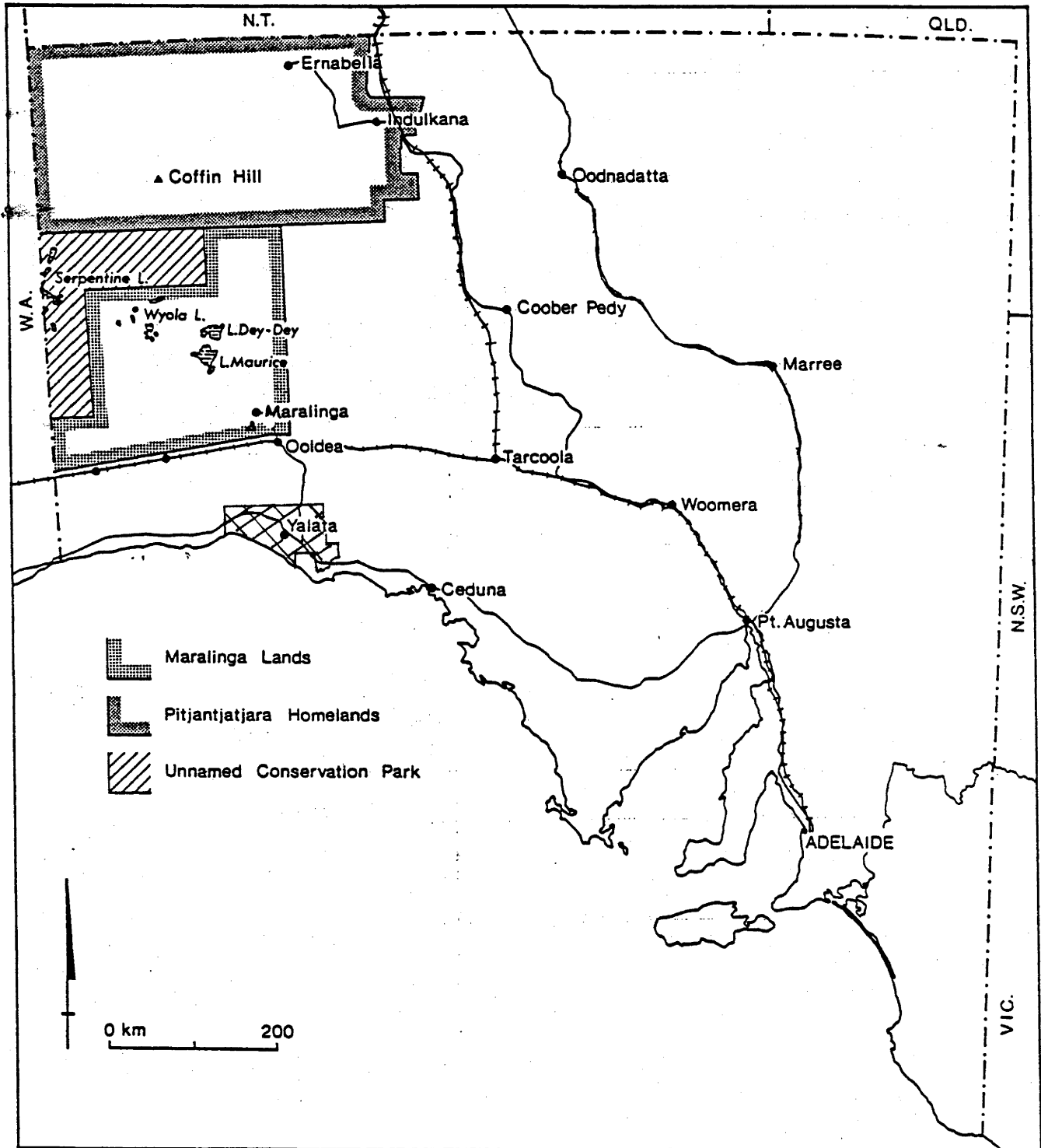


FIG. 1.2

MAP TO SHOW PITJANTJATJARA AND MARALINGA FREEHOLD LANDS



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE REDEFINITION OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

**We are trying to account, as it were, for  
social life not as a form, but as a process.**  
(Holy & Stuchlik, 1983:111)

The objective behind the initial research visits to Yalata by the multi-disciplinary team of which I was a part, was a specific one. The research was to be 'active' or applied research, which involved the Aboriginal community itself and incorporated the feedback of findings to that community as part of its methodology. The issues to be investigated by the research team were the high adolescent crime rate, and the growing incidence of substance abuse (petrol sniffing). By the mid-1970s Aboriginal communities, together with their counterparts elsewhere, had become suspicious of researchers who entered their boundaries, conducted their studies and departed, never to be seen again (Davidson, 1976; Brady 1981; cf. Huizer & Mannheim, 1979). In an attempt to avoid this exploitative mode of research, between 1978 and 1981 the Flinders team met with community members, worked with Aboriginal research assistants selected by the Council, and conducted feedback meetings at which research findings were presented. Additionally and for the purpose of this explication, more significantly, the research methodology was to be based on the work of Paolo Freire, the Brazilian

educationalist. Freire, working with illiterate Brazilian peasants, had stated that underdeveloped societies would only come to understand and act upon issues defined by them as 'problems':

The important thing is to help men (and nations) help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation.

(Freire, 1974:16)

Through this 'problematizing' approach, which Freire applied to literacy and other educational aims, the people themselves articulated the problems they experienced in everyday life and the educator assisted the learner through dialogue, to act upon the problems (Freire, 1972). The research group had adapted this methodology, so that the Aboriginal community was to be encouraged to define problems and the researchers would assist by collecting and analysing relevant data, and presenting it back to the community, who would then ideally formulate solutions. In this way, the researchers would not impose their own answers and intervention would be minimised.

In the event, the research carried out between 1978 and 1982 and later published, has probably been of more assistance to health and welfare personnel, the legal profession and the judiciary than to the Aboriginal community itself (Morice, Swift & Brady, 1981; Brady & Morice, 1982; Brady & Palmer, 1984; Brady, 1985), even though the researchers undertook several feedback sessions to the community late in 1980 presenting our findings, in Pitjantjatjara. We held meetings with different

age-groups within the community, and made good use of simple diagrammatic charts. The main thrust of the methodology, which was for the community members to utilise our research findings as a basis for an intra-community and community-researcher dialogue, and then to act upon their 'problems', was a failure. 1 The Aboriginal population did not seem to be able to come to terms with the sort of problems the team investigated. Even when events occurred which were considered to be irregular, or which if not irregular were patently disruptive, community members did not seem to want to intervene to solve the 'problem'. Indeed, during my later work at Yalata (1981 onwards) I found myself collecting data from Aboriginal informants which provided a wide range of explanations and what seemed to be rationalisations which, through their content, served to provide reasons why no one could do anything about them anyway.

In addition, the 'troubles' consistently experienced by the community and which disrupted their lives frequently (young people stealing cars, breaking into buildings, sniffing petrol, adults being noisily and sometimes violently drunk) did not seem to be perceived by Aborigines to be problematic enough to warrant collective action. These activities appeared to be largely accepted and tolerated by others, and onlookers seemed to tailor their daily lives so as to diminish the likelihood of involvement. Children with multiple court appearances to their names (and not all for minor infringements) were absolved of blame; drinking adults who kept

the whole camp awake and demanded food in the middle of the night were fed uncomplainingly. Motives and reasons were provided which explained why others could not intervene in the activities of the individual concerned. Yalata people seemed anxious to explain that the perpetrator of the disorder was not really responsible for his or her own actions. When it eventuated, as was often the case, that the European welfare or judicial system came to be involved - either by invitation or by imposition - Aboriginal community members willingly accepted, even encouraged, this state of affairs. At times, they demanded a permanent police presence, and complained that it was the 'job' of the European staff on the settlement or the police, 110 kms away, to deal with disorder. All this was far removed from the notion that the community would, as a result of the research process, be galvanised into insightful analysis of its daily routine and that radical solutions to daily problems would emerge. This state of affairs became the object of my study.

Due, in part, to the demise of the most ambitious, interactive aspect of the earlier research project, I became interested in Aboriginal definitions of the problems we had been investigating, and of non-conformity. How did they perceive others who were disagreeable or who acted strangely? Did Aboriginal definitions of problematic events differ from those of the surrounding European bureaucracies? What did it mean that people in the community consistently avoided taking

collective action to intervene in the adolescents' petrol sniffing, stealing, and the adults' nightly disruptions after drinking sessions? Why did they provide numerous excuses which explained the activities of others? What was the meaning of the self-exculpating statements proffered by the 'disorderly' themselves? If those engaging in violent or self-destructive activities were unrestrained by others, were there any constraints in existence? This thesis attempts to answer these questions.

In the process of finding answers I came to appreciate why it was that the mutual 'problematizing' proposed by Freire was not appropriate in this context. There were several reasons for this. Perhaps the most obvious was that Aborigines did not share others' definitions of 'problem' behaviour, or if they did, they were determinedly avoiding any confrontation or action on the issue. To white staff, on the other hand, the acts of theft and disorder were threatening, stressful and alienating. They were (on the whole) shocked at the substance abuse (petrol) by young people, concerned for their health and at the social disorder they caused. For Aborigines, the property offences did not much affect them, and interpersonal violence was, for large sections of the population, a normal social process (cf. Marx, 1976). The actions of their fellows were often disruptive but still did not provoke collective action. Youngsters were rarely punished for their petrol sniffing activities. The fact of the discrepancy between the Aboriginal notion of what constituted problematic behaviour,



and the white Australian one, meant that the Freire approach was unlikely be successful, for it assumed a mutuality, a dialogue and an impetus for action which did not exist at Yalata.

A second, important factor, was that the people with whom Freire worked were the peasant masses of Brazil and Chile, agricultural labourers within a society decisively split between rich, almost feudal landlords and landless rural workers. Rapid technological change was affecting the patterns of rural production and distribution (Freire,1974:34). It is not surprising that there were difficulties in adapting his approach to a situation in which the people have not been actively and independently involved in production for over thirty years. Instead, Aborigines at Yalata, apart from a minority who are employed, live on social assistance provided by the state. Freire terms this 'assistencialism', saying that it is,

an especially pernicious method of trying to vitiate popular participation in the historical process .. by imposing silence and passivity (it) denies men conditions likely to develop or to 'open' their consciousness.

(Freire,1974:15)

The approach failed thirdly because, although Yalata people have lived together for over thirty years, they do not comprise a homogenous community. Their social organisation enables - indeed encourages - independence of action, and the so-called 'community' is to a large extent composed of small, labile, autonomous collections of people who rarely come together for a

shared purpose. A fourth factor to emerge from my research was that Yalata people had particular understandings of motivation and causation which meant that instances of social or psychological disorder were not objectified and labelled, but **lived with** and accommodated. In order to live from day to day with problematic events (and there had been many in their lives for historical reasons too), and with problematic individuals, blame was deflected and diffused in a variety of ways, so that collective enactment of disapproval was not generated. The primary strategy for dealing with disorder was to 'neutralise', indeed to 'euphemise' it. Fifthly, it became apparent that the nature of interpersonal authority was such that although older people, especially men, were treated with respect, they did not wield authority over others who were disorderly or unsociable in their actions. They were not empowered to deal with youthful offenders who disregarded the white Australian legal system.

### **The approach of the thesis**

In this thesis I examine the means by which the Aboriginal people of Yalata organise their social affairs and develop their cognitive understandings in order to accommodate actions, and events, which are disruptive to the social order. In order to do so I draw in part upon the theoretical understanding elucidated by Paul Rock (1973). This approach suggests that there is an imperative in social knowledge in which the strange, problematic, or marginal is accommodated by reducing

it to the level of the taken-for-granted and explainable reality. As Rock said,

If one can 'make sense' of an event, it will tend to provoke less discomfort. The sense which is made can be inaccurate or misleading, but triviality has been restored and life can be resumed.

(Rock,1973:28)

Not only do Yalata people seek to make sense of the disconcerting activities of certain individuals and groups in their midst, they exhibit a pervasive desire to explain, and thus to order, individual subjective experiences. Social and physical disorder then, are approached much in the same way as is an individually disturbing experience. Indeed, Yalata people seek explanations and meanings for a wide range of incidents. Phenomena, both natural and social, are 'read' and analysed avidly by means of discussion and gossip, and by the utilisation of interpretations based on mythology (cf.Lienhardt,1961) and customary beliefs of causation.

In gaining an understanding of the way in which the people at Yalata constructed and interpreted the actions of their fellows I found the work of F.R. Myers to be particularly helpful. Myers worked with the Pintupi, who although of a different language group are themselves desert people and cultural neighbours of the Pitjantjatjara (cf. Myers,1976,1979,1986).

Initially, it seemed to me that my interpretation of Yalata people and their dealings with social disorder would focus on the age-old problem of the differences between ideal norms and actual behaviour (Moore,1983:36; Leach,1961; Fox,1982). In a

sense, the (sometimes extraordinary) reasons and explanations for actions and events offered by Yalata people conform to the 'complicated fictions' which are suggested by Leach as being the means whereby this difference, or discrepancy, is explained. Fox terms them 'fantasies', saying,

Some profound questions are raised about human nature by our tendency to be so firm in our announcements of general principles and then so devious in our avoiding of them, and even more by our verbose attempts to make sense of all this ... Indeed ... most of 'culture' consists ... in the fantasies that we weave to explain our inability to keep even the simplest of our self-made rules, to say nothing of those handed down from heaven.

(Fox, 1982:121)

However, rather than focus on the existence or nature of rules and their infraction, which would mean interpreting the 'complicated fictions' in a somewhat negative way - as verbal cover-ups or synthetic excuses - I have tried to understand actions, and statements about those actions by Yalata people, in another way. I have found Bourdieu's (1977) notion of the **habitus** of value in this endeavour. Bourdieu states that the habitus is composed of dispositions which provide individuals with a 'template' of a range of possible actions, perceptions and appreciations. This range of possibilities is integral to the culture of the individual, and changes as it changes. The habitus generates and produces individual and collective practices and **strategies** which allow individuals and groups to deal with the flux of daily life. Bourdieu states that some of these strategies are regularising, that is when people use them then regular action results. The concept of regulating strategies provides a more flexible framework from which to

appreciate the situation of fluid accommodations I encountered among Yalata people, and avoids the pitfalls of assuming that there is a definite set of rules that constitute normative behaviour. For example, I discuss how Yalata people subscribe to what they call the 'proper way' (**tjukururu**) of doing things, and the formulae produced by those who infringe the proper way as they attempt to negotiate their way past criticism.

By analysing social differences and how Yalata people cope with them, I suggest that the resultant excuses, neutralisations, self exculpations and minimising formulations (cf. Sykes & Matza, 1957; Stanner, 1979:87) offered by Yalata people are in fact strategies utilised by them, which people derive out of the range of possibilities engendered by their habitus. Yalata people offer these formulations to each other, as well as to outsiders, as a part of the strategic negotiating of which their daily lives are composed. From this perspective, there are few events occurring which could be called infractions. The formulations which are offered and accepted by Yalata people contribute to the construction of a fluid, accommodating system, in which there is an answer for everything. Later in the thesis, I suggest that in this way, Yalata people deal in what could be called 'negotiable absolutes'. I illustrate these points by examining the social interpretations applied to drinking and drunkenness, (activities which made up the content of many peoples' lives at Yalata), and the non-conforming acts of the young. Drinkers and non-drinkers alike understood those

who were inebriated to be not responsible for their actions. This notion has been discussed at length by MacAndrew & Edgerton (1969) and by Marshall (1979) who have noted similar perceptions in a variety of different cultures.

Yalata Aborigines do not, however, live out their interactions and exchanges in a social and political vacuum, and despite the fact that many actions are dealt with in a non-punitive way and are tolerated by their Aboriginal co-residents, this is not always the case with European Australians. The presence of Europeans, both situationally in the settlement, and structurally in the implementation of the justice system, introduces an entirely different paradigm. The Australian justice system - unlike the system of accommodating strategies I have just described - operates within a rule-governed paradigm. Within this paradigm, law can be defined as a legalised social norm whose infraction is regularly met with sanctions of one kind or another (cf. Comaroff & Roberts, 1981:6). The Australian justice system is based upon the notion that there is a reasonably stable and enforceable consensus on what are considered to be acceptable and unacceptable actions, which can in turn be transformed into a clearly-defined set of applied rules and sanctions. According to this view, any disruption to this rule-governed order is defined as being disorganised and pathological (cf. Mills, 1980:71).

In contrast to this ordered view of rules and their infraction,

is the notion of process (Moore,1983:42-28; Comaroff & Roberts,1981). Comaroff and Roberts suggest that cooperation between people exists only for the purpose of enlightened self-interest. Rules are only utilised insofar as they assist in this self-interest, and are relinquished on other occasions. Malinowski, they suggest, was one of the first anthropologists to observe the hiatus between rules as ideals, and their everyday and less ideal enactments(cf. Malinowski,1926). More recently, Sahlins has noted that in small scale societies,

... norms are characteristically relative and situational rather than absolute and universal. A given act, that is to say, is not so much in itself good or bad, it depends on who the Actor is.

(Sahlins,1965:153)

This approach perceives of conflict as a normal feature of social life, instead of interpreting it to be pathological, as does the rule-governed system. In accordance with Sahlins view, Moore points out that individuals

arrange their immediate situations (and/or express their feelings and conceptions) by exploiting the indeterminacies in the situation, or by generating such indeterminacies, or by reinterpreting and redefining the rules or relationships. They use whatever areas there are of inconsistency, contradiction, conflict, ambiguity or open areas that are normatively indeterminate to achieve immediate situational ends.

(Moore,1983:50)

Moore calls these 'processes of situational adjustment'. I suggest that a process of situational adjustment is similar in conception to Bourdieu's strategies, which he stated people derive from their habitus. Since, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, the Yalata Pitjantjatjara frequently use

'situational adjustments' it is more appropriate for me to approach the lived reality of Yalata from this perspective, than from a rule-based framework.

In order to assess the misunderstandings that can occur when the rule-governed Australian justice and welfare system confronts the situational standards of the Yalata people, I examine in the last chapter of the thesis, the nature of proceedings against Aboriginal juveniles in the court. In this context, the welfare bureaucracy engages in a search for the origins of the acts it has designated as 'pathological' (cf. Cicourel, 1972; Donzelot, 1979; Foucault, 1979). Contrary to the focus of the court, which is directed to consideration of whether the actions brought to its attention constitute infractions of Australian law, I direct attention to the acts and the meanings attributed to them by individuals. By doing so, I follow a suggestion made by Holy & Stuchlik, that

instead of focusing analytical attention on the problem of whether an action is norm-conforming or norm-breaking, as inevitably follows if the assumption of isomorphism between norms and actions informs the analysis, attention should be focused on which norms, ideas and reasons were invoked by the actors for the performance of the action.

(Holy & Stuchlik, 1983:110)

Like Bourdieu, these writers alert the anthropological researcher to the danger of treating,

description in terms of norms as if it were at the same time descriptions in terms of actual social processes ... (and conceiving of norms) as somehow having an internal compelling force to summon behaviour.

(Holy & Stuchlik, 1983:81-2)

In order to avoid this pitfall, I have endeavoured to present



Aboriginal statements about the expected modes of behaviour (the 'proper way') whilst also developing an understanding of the immensely flexible negotiations wherein they constantly **transform** the proper way. Thus I examine the ideas and reasons invoked by Yalata people as they construe their own and others' actions.

### **The Setting**

The setting for this account is Yalata settlement and its associated outstation on the Maralinga lands (see Fig. 1.1). At these locations reside approximately three hundred Aboriginal people whose primary cultural and language affiliation is that of the Pitjantjatjara of the Great Victoria Desert. Yalata, once a Lutheran Mission, and now an incorporated Aboriginal community, lies on the eastern edge of the Nullarbor Plain, on what is known to South Australians as the 'far west coast'. It is 1,000 kms north-west of Adelaide, to which it is linked by the Eyre Highway, a bitumenised main road stretching from Port Augusta, South Australia to Western Australia. The settlement lies 3 kms north of the Eyre Highway, and the community owns and operates a roadhouse on the highway. The land upon which the settlement is built comprises 4,650 square kilometres which extends to the north of the highway, and south to the coast of the Great Australian Bight. It is owned by the S.A. Aboriginal Lands Trust and is leased to the Yalata Community Incorporated. An outstation or homeland centre, at a location named by its residents 'Oak Valley', has been in existence since May 1982, and is situated 230 kms north-west of Yalata, in the southern

Great Victoria Desert, in the region of Lake Dey Dey. The area is generally referred to by government officers and bureaucrats as the 'Maralinga lands', being lands alienated during the period of the British atomic tests in Australia at Emu and Maralinga and subsequently (see Fig.1.2). There were two nuclear shots and five experimental tests at Emu in 1953, and seven nuclear shots and over five hundred 'minor trials' at Maralinga between 1955 and 1963. In December 1984 the Yalata community received freehold title to the Maralinga lands under the **Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act (1984)**. Yalata people generally refer to this area as 'the spinifex', a reference to the spinifex grass, **Trioda** sp. which grows in the area.

To reach Yalata by road from Adelaide (a drive of ten hours) the visitor travels north to Port Augusta and then west on the Eyre Highway. The far west coast of South Australia is sparsely populated and the cultivated land becomes increasingly marginal as it extends westwards. The region's chief product is cereal grain, and vast areas have been cleared of vegetation for this purpose. The last major town before the highway crosses the Nullarbor is Ceduna (pop.2794), a regional centre with a partly sealed airstrip, hospital, police station and court house, supermarkets licensed premises, and regional offices of the Department for Community Welfare and Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Ceduna has an official Aboriginal population of 312 (11% of the population), composed of people who live in the town itself, and those living in a so-called fringe camp known as Halfway Camp a kilometre from the town.

However, this population fluctuates as Aborigines from Yalata often visit Halfway Camp and stay there for long periods of time. Just outside the town is a small Aboriginal settlement, Koonibba (pop.113) once a Lutheran mission. The Aborigines of Ceduna and Koonibba are primarily of Kokatha descent.

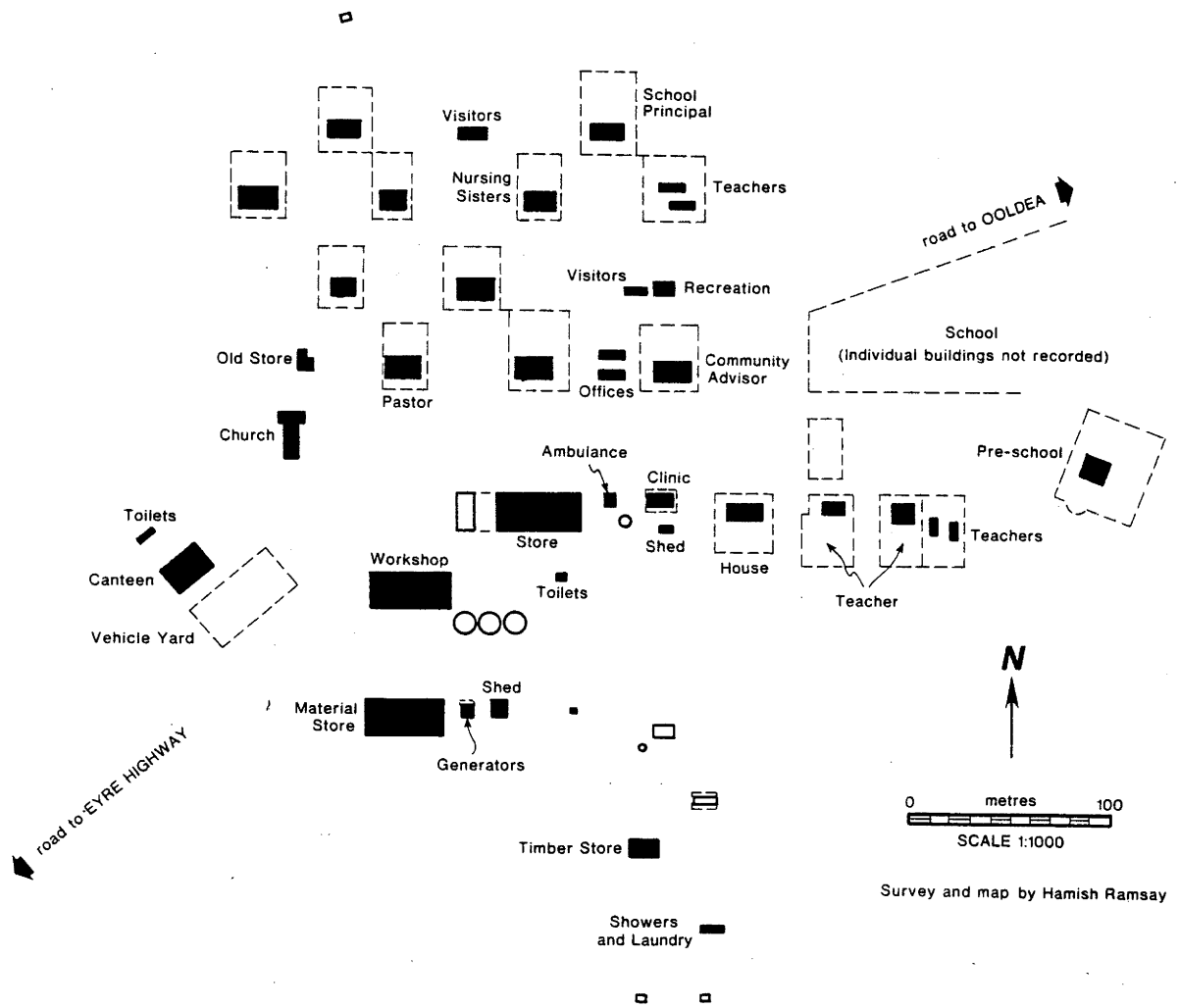
West of Ceduna, is the small settlement of Penong (population below 200), which is the location of the nearest police station to Yalata, 110 kms away. Closer to Yalata, only 55 kms away, there is a roadhouse with a bar and take-away licence, at Nundroo. This is the nearest source of alcohol for the people at Yalata, and also supplies local farmers and passing motorists. Yalata receives its provisions from Ceduna, and a mail van makes a twice-weekly run to Yalata and the pastoral properties **en route** to deliver mail, foodstuffs and other goods ordered from Ceduna stores. Between Yalata and Penong, and south of them, is Fowler's Bay, a tiny coastal settlement and the last cultivated land before the vast expanses of the Nullarbor and the associated coastal region. Yalata people visit Fowler's Bay only occasionally and then usually on trips organised by the school. Fowler's Bay is also the site of the original Yalata station homestead after which the Aboriginal settlement was named. 'Yalata' then, is a name transferred from this early coastal homestead. The site for the Lutheran mission was a windmill and water tank named Tallowan, and the name Tallowan has survived, being used by many Aborigines to this day in preference to Yalata. The land around Yalata settlement is gently undulating and characterised by a grey

powdery limestone soil. There is no surface water and that below the surface is saline and unpotable. The water at Yalata itself must be desalinated and mixed with rainwater to make a drinkable concoction. The vegetation of the area is primarily dense mallee scrub (**Eucalyptus oleosa**), Western Myall **Acacia sowdenii**), blue bush (**Koekia sedifolia**), and salt bush (**Atriplex vesicaria**).

The Yalata roadhouse on the Eyre Highway, is four kilometres away from the settlement itself. It is a petrol station, restaurant and artefact shop, managed by European Australians with a staff of between six and eight Europeans and a varying number of Aborigines. The access road from the Eyre Highway to Yalata is a graded dirt track. The first impression of the settlement is not appealing, for the surrounding bush is largely denuded, criss-crossed with numerous tracks and dotted with rubbish. The central area of the settlement is a barren and dusty yard around which the houses and administrative buildings are arranged (see Fig. 1.3). Workshops, a garage, vehicle enclosure, the clinic and store lie on the southern side of the yard, with the school and preschool to the west. Houses for European staff are arranged roughly in streets on the northern side. Houses are of fibro-cement or brick, and some are of the transportable type. There is also a transportable house used as visitors' quarters. In the early periods of my fieldwork, Aboriginal dwellings in the vicinity of the settlement were almost invariably **wiltja** ('shade'), humpies made of corrugated iron, wire mesh or branches, with a

FIG. 1.3

### Yalata Settlement, 1984



tarpaulin or blue plastic sheet thrown over them. In warm still weather, many people slept out in the shelter of windbreaks (**yuu**) made of branches. At that time (before 1982) there were three houses and several sheds allocated to Aboriginal people, which were used by them primarily as wet weather shelters. There were two toilet blocks and four showers (usually defunct) for Aboriginal people to use, and a solitary washing machine. There were no clothes lines. The only reticulated water supply available to Aborigines was a tap situated near the administrative office. Because the area near the tap has a little shade and provides an excellent vantage point from which to view the activities of the day, happenings in the office and arriving vehicles, Aborigines sit in the area during the day.

When I lived with Yalata people in 1981-82, most residents did not live at Yalata settlement at all, but at Big Camp. Big Camp (**ngura pulka**) was the name used by Yalata people for what was in fact a conglomeration of smaller camps, usually located some distance away from the settlement of Yalata. At times Big Camp was up to 30 kms away, and was almost invariably situated on the northern side of the highway, and north of the settlement. I know of only one occasion when people from Yalata made camp on the southern side of the main road. The whole camp moved several times a year to a new location which was often some kilometres away, with the aid of community trucks and private vehicles. The mobile clinic and store,

which were both stationed centrally for their periodic openings, would also be towed to the new location, along with one or two large water tanks. However, there were numerous minor readjustments and smaller moves made by individuals or family groups, in which their shelters would be reconstructed a few yards away. Dwellings at Big Camp were the **wiltja** already described, although occasionally someone might use an old car body as a sleeping place, or a tent. From Big Camp, children were collected by the school bus each day during termtime, and the community truck would carry adults into the settlement if they wished to shop at the store, attend clinic or collect cheques. Most people travelled into Yalata each day. Elderly people sometimes remained at Big Camp with their dogs and each other for company.

This pattern of life has changed dramatically since 1982. An outstation movement began, Big Camp came to an end, and European-style housing has been provided for Aborigines at Yalata. In May 1982 a sympathetic community advisor responded to Aboriginal requests for a vehicle and a water tank, so that they could make camp in the Great Victoria Desert. Sixty-six men, women and children made the move and a site was chosen 230 kms north of Yalata, near Lake Dey Dey, a place of mythological importance to Yalata people, and to other Pitjantjatjara people. This new camp moved location several times over the following two years, on occasions in order to accommodate the visits of politicians and government officials during the negotiations for the granting of title to their

land.

The established rhythm of movement from Big Camp to Yalata had faltered first when the nursing sisters ceased their thrice-weekly opening of the on-site mobile clinic. The community truck, for various reasons, became unavailable to transport people to and fro, and people at Big Camp moved in closer to Yalata in order to have easier access to such facilities. In addition, long-awaited funds became available and housing construction began in 1984 on a grand scale in the settlement itself. Some Europeans moved into new houses while Aboriginal families occupied their old ones. Several Aboriginal families moved into new brick houses. By this time, with approximately 80-100 people (one-third of the population) living at the outstation, and others taking up residence at the settlement, only a few Aborigines remained camped in several locations close to Yalata. People visiting Yalata from the outstation set up camp temporarily in, or on the fringes of the settlement.

The settlement is now composed of a population of Aborigines and Europeans living in a variety of styles of house, interspersed with makeshift humpies of corrugated iron and tarpaulins. This is in marked contrast to the composition of the place six years ago when the settlement was, in effect, a white town with modern conveniences only at the disposal of whites, around which Aboriginal people camped, having access only to primitive water supplies. Big Camp at Yalata no longer



exists. In the minds of some Aboriginal people however, Big Camp has moved to the 'spinifex', the Great Victoria Desert, and has become transformed into the new outstation.

The population as a whole is fluctuating and ever-mobile. The constant, 'creeping' movement of peoples' **wiltja** represents on a small scale an overall orientation towards mobility among these southern Pitjantjatjara people. There are frequent visits away from the settlement and the outstation. People travel long distances for ceremonial purposes, in order to visit relatives, and to attend meetings of both Aboriginal and government organisations. For major medical operations Yalata people must stay in hospital in Adelaide. Shorter trips are made locally to Ceduna for court or hospital, to Smoky Bay for occasional work, and to Fowler's Bay for school camps. The nearest significant Aboriginal communities with strong kinship and cultural links to the Yalata people, are Indulkana in the north, and Cundeelee near Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. Both are hundreds of kilometres away and visits to these communities require intensive organisation, roadworthy vehicles and plentiful cash. Yalata people often drive to Cundeelee, but also travel there by train, embarking at Ooldea or Watson sidings on the Transcontinental line and disembarking at Zanthus, Western Australia. They have travelled by train both east and west for many decades since the line was completed in 1919. Access to the railway line is by a graded track which leads north from Yalata, past Pidinga salt lake and rockhole

(80 kms north), a popular hunting and 'holiday' camp for Yalata people, to Ooldea (140 kms), now an abandoned siding on the line. There is a freshwater soakage six kms north of the siding amid sanddunes, which was once the site of a United Aborigines' Mission at which many older Yalata people were housed as children. There was also a substantial Aboriginal camp a kilometre from the mission. Water supplies for the Aboriginal population, the railway line and the mission were all drawn from the Ooldea Soak (cf. Bolam, 1927:14). The track to the outstation passes through the Ooldea siding (now demolished), and travels alongside the railway line west to Watson, a still extant siding of six railway workers' cottages. From Watson the route turns north and follows a sealed road which leads ultimately to the deserted Maralinga village, headquarters for the atomic testing programme of the 1950s. An unsealed track, constructed by a mining company, extends northwest from this road, and the outstation is situated 160 kms along this track.

The area around the present outstation is part of the homeland of the southern Pitjantjatjara. Older members of the community hunted and foraged in this desert country, were born there and the mythological sites and sparse water sources are intimately known to them. The Great Victoria Desert is a complex system of sanddunes of red sand, with drainage channels, salt and clay lakes with flat interdunal corridors of up to 40 kms in length. The vegetation is in fact rich, belying the term 'desert', with

spinifex (**trioda** sp.), eucalypt and mulga woodlands, and stands of desert oak (**Casuarina cristata**) (Douglas,1980:35,101).

Aborigines living at the outstation view the country as being plentiful and refer to their outstation as **ngura kanpi**

(beautiful camp). The desert is a rich source of bush foods, many of which are unavailable at Yalata itself, such as edible grubs, echidna, mallee fowl and goannas.

By contrast, Yalata settlement is not a place of spiritual or cultural significance to those who have resided there since its inception in 1952. It was not built on land owned by the Pitjantjatjara. It is far to the south of the birthplaces of older members of the community, and Yalata is actively disliked by many. Aboriginal people refer to it as **pana tjilpi** ('grey' or 'old ground') and believe that it turns their hair prematurely grey (Palmer,1982:61). In this sense, age is not associated with desired qualities such as wisdom and respect, but with loss of vitality and of life itself. Above all, Yalata is a place with '**tjukurr wiya**', a place with no stories, no association with the Dreaming (**tjukurrpa**). These sentiments were expressed by an elderly woman on our return from a bush trip into the Great Victoria Desert. As we caught sight of Yalata settlement she said,

**tjuni kura** ('my stomach feels bad'), this one make me **tjilpi** (old). I want to life (live)! I want to go back life first, **panya** (remember), (i.e. go back to the spinifex). I can sit down and finish (die) then. That's the way I been worrying. True. I don't like em that rubbish, you know, that rubbishy place.

Another pertinent comment on Yalata came from a man who was on

this same trip into the desert. He remarked that we had gone to the spinifex with dirty blankets, and returned with clean ones. Despite these statements in which Yalata is symbolically associated with ageing, alienated death, rubbish (a term usually referring to people rather than debris) and uncleanliness, even those who live primarily at Oak Valley are still inextricably linked to Yalata in an ambivalent relationship.

### **Outline of the thesis**

Chapter Two provides a brief history of the Yalata people, and a more detailed description of life at Yalata. I also examine some of the misunderstandings that occur between the white Australian staff and the Aboriginal residents of Yalata, many of which are associated with the mistaken perception on the part of the whites, that Yalata is a 'community' of people, with an overarching system of authority. In Chapter Three, before going on to discuss definitions of disorder, I describe the collective normative notions of correct, orderly action held by Yalata people while illustrating these with examples of the flexibility and adaptability of these mechanisms. I suggest that these designated ways of acting are in fact negotiable strategies produced by Yalata people in the absence of a systematically rule-governed system. These strategies assist them to accommodate the inevitable deviations from agreed-upon customs,

while achieving a variety of ends.

Those who are socially or physically atypical are often not in a position to conform to the 'proper way' and in Chapter Four I show how these individuals are dealt with and their peculiarities are made sense of by Yalata people. I show that people who are 'different' are not shunned or criticised, but tolerated. Yalata people are shown to have a pervasive need to account for individuals, incidents and circumstances which could otherwise prove to be socially or psychologically disturbing, and have a varied repertoire of sense-making explanations for such phenomena. These sense-making stories provide a cultural resource which assist people to deal with unusual or abnormal behaviours, but which seem to avoid stigmatising labels.

In Chapter Five I analyse the extraordinary tolerance shown to those who become inebriated with alcoholic beverages and the means whereby Yalata people explain their own, and others', drunken comportment. By conceiving of the inebriated as being qualitatively 'different' and by accepting the obvious difficulties of rational intercourse with them, Yalata people absolve drinkers of responsibility for their actions. Those who are sober attempt in a variety of ways to avoid direct dealings with those who are not. I show that drinkers are **accommodated** by the provision of explanations and sense-making statements so noticeable among Yalata people.

In Chapter Six I describe how a similar set of socially-constructed understandings are applied to adolescent Aborigines, who offend against the European system of rules by inhaling petrol and by delinquent acts. I examine the role of the Department for Community Welfare (whose officers are closely involved with Yalata adolescents and who appear on their behalf at court) as well as the attitudes of magistrates before whom the children appear. The welfare officers play a significant role in the presentation of contextual material about each child to the court. I show that these officers mistake the neutralisations elicited from Yalata adults (usually about the aetiology of an offence), for literal truths, which are incorporated into their official welfare reports and into their presentations to the court.

Overall, my aim is to explain how a series of disparate groupings of Aboriginal people, drawn together for a variety of historical and cultural reasons, are dealing with the individual and social differences evident among them.

## NOTES

1. Other members of the research team were more optimistic and felt that later developments such as the outstation movement might have been influenced - albeit indirectly - by the 'dialogue' set up between the researchers and the Aborigines at Yalata. My understanding of the move to the outstation is that the idea had been growing for some time (aided by developments in the north), and that with the demise of the older style of control exerted by the Lutheran manager and ex-superintendent, Yalata people began to express some initiative over the direction of their lives. In my view, it is problematic to attempt to draw conclusions about the influence of the research project in the midst of so many other influential variables.
2. Between October 1978 and December 1980 I made ten one-week visits to Yalata with other members of the Western Desert Project. From April 1981 to August 1982 I undertook sustained periods of fieldwork there - seven months in all. For much of this time I was accompanied in the field by Dr. Kingsley Palmer, who joined the Project in April 1981. In January, February and March 1985 I undertook further research with Yalata people, some of whom were by then living at the outstation on the Maralinga lands. This research was in order to compile supporting anthropological and historical data for the legal representation of Aborigines appearing before the Royal Commission on British Nuclear Tests in Australia. The Royal Commission sat for hearings at Maralinga in April 1985.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PAST AND PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE YALATA PEOPLE

The responses of the remote 'tribal' groups to those Europeans working among them today, must be seen as part of their continuing relationship with white society ... Inasmuch as their experiences formed the basis of their understanding of what white society is all about, it is essential to understand ... how they perceived what was happening.  
(Hamilton, 1972:39)

#### A brief history

The antecedents of the people who now live at Yalata were people with affiliations to the Great Victoria Desert, the 'spinifex country' in the far north and north-west of South Australia, extending into Western Australia. Of central importance to their history is Ooldea Soak, known by Yalata people today as Yuultul, a natural and permanent source of potable water, lying a few feet below the surface on a clay bed.

Ooldea Soak lies six kilometres north of the Ooldea siding on the Transcontinental Railway line, on the north-eastern edge of the Nullarbor Plain, and on the southern edge of the Great Victoria Desert which stretches north and west. The soak, because of its permanency, was evidently known to Aboriginal people of many different language groups. In the early part of



the century people from the Mann, Musgrave, Everard and McDonnell ranges in Central Australia, Tarcoola (on the railway line to the east), Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, and coastal groups were known to frequent the soak (Berndt, 1959:84). The Aboriginal owners of the soak were probably Wirangu people (R. & C. Berndt, 1942a:323) although it lay within the range of Kokatha people whose territory extended north and east. The name Ooldea, then, probably derives from a Wirangu or Kokatha word. Tindale placed the soak as a four-way meeting point for the Kokatha and Ngalea language groups to the north-east and north-west, and the Wirangu and Mirning people to the south-east and south-west (Tindale, 1974). Considerable population movement had probably been in process before Europeans arrived in the region (R. & C. Berndt, 1942a:326). In 1941 R.M. Berndt noted the expansion of the 'culture of the Western Desert peoples' which had 'spread fanwise from the north-west, driving back or incorporating the different elements of the more southern region' (Berndt, 1941:4). The Pitjantjatjara and other north-western groups moved eastwards, and the Yankunytatjara and Antakirinja moved south. In 1930 Elkin noted a population of two hundred people of mixed European and Aboriginal descent who were Kokatha, at Koonibba, and some forty Wirangu living in the Iron Knob ration depot area at the top of the Eyre Peninsula (Elkin, 1931:62-3). Despite, or even as a result of, these patterns of movement, several researchers have noted the remarkable unity of language and social organisation of Aboriginal groups from as far west as

Kalgoorlie and across the area north of the Nullarbor as far as the Northern Territory border (Elkin,1931; Berndt,1959:44).

In 1875 Ernest Giles used Ooldea as the starting-point for his inland crossing of the Nullarbor (Bolam,1927:11; Giles,1880:7). In 1901 the soak was earmarked to supply water during the construction of the Trans-Australian Railway. Construction took five years and the line was completed in 1917. The soak was bored for water and up to 70,000 gallons (320,000 litres) per week were drawn from it (Berkery,1944:33). Construction and maintenance workers lived in camps along the line, and a growing number of Aboriginal people, attracted by the activity, camped in the vicinity. When Mrs. Daisy Bates arrived at Ooldea in 1919, hundreds of Aborigines were in contact with Europeans. Mrs. Bates had travelled to Australia in 1899 in order to investigate allegations of cruelty to Aborigines for a London newspaper. After considerable periods of time spent among Western Australian Aborigines, she selected the Ooldea area as a suitable site for her continuing work among Aborigines, and took up residence between the soak and the railway line in a tent. She justified her presence to the S.A. Government and the railway authorities in terms of her caring role for natives. In addition, she argued that the presence of a European woman acted as a deterrent to the 'moral degradation' that ensued from contact between Aboriginal women and railway workers. She had the field to herself for fourteen years, until the United Aborigines' Mission (UAM) became established at Ooldea in 1933. Bates documented local

mythology (including that for Ooldea Soak), details of daily life, social organisation, language, and often noted when large groups of Aboriginal visitors arrived (Bates, 1938:172). She also observed that the Aborigines utilised the trains **en masse** as transport to attend ceremonies (1938:191,195). The Commonwealth Railways fought a losing battle in their attempts to deter Aborigines from travelling in open cattle trucks, free of charge on most occasions, or on the train which called at all the sidings along the line with provisions for railway employees, known as the 'Tea and Sugar'. Railway officers resorted to forcible removal, collaborating with the police to transport Aborigines away from sidings, and urged the South Australian Protector of Aborigines to consider relocating them some distance from the line.

The United Aborigines' Mission sent a missionary, Miss Annie Lock, to Ooldea in 1933 and she began to issue regular rations to Aborigines. Yalata people remember Mrs. Bates ('Mrs. Biddy') and Annie Lock ('Miss Locks') and the food. Many Aboriginal visitors to Ooldea mission carried rations back out to the desert so that others could 'taste' them. Indeed, Aboriginal reports of this period which I collected from older Yalata people are remarkable in that they emphasise the considerable traffic in and out of Ooldea (rather than the formation of a stable population)<sup>1</sup> and the deliberate dissemination by Aborigines, of information about the availability of food at Ooldea.

The mission rapidly expanded to include boys' and girls' dormitories. Aboriginal parents were encouraged to place their children in these 'homes' where they were subjected to Christian indoctrination, physical drill and daily prayers. By the mid-1940s, those who had 'sat down' in the vicinity of the mission were 'hooked'. They were, in a sense, addicted to European food, caught up in a new rhythm of life and a set of new social relationships. When the UAM arrived in 1933 the Aboriginal population at the soak was seventy adults and thirty children. By February 1949 there were two hundred Aborigines receiving rations (UAM **Messenger**, 1949). At ritual gatherings up to five hundred people camped around Ooldea (R. & C. Berndt, 1942a:312).

The missionaries made vigorous attempts to undermine Aboriginal religious practices, and focused particular attention on the young men. Despite this assault on Aboriginal belief systems, ceremonies continued to be performed undisturbed (R. & C. Berndt, 1942b:56). Indeed the Berndts' voluminous ethnography of Ooldea provides compelling evidence of the ability of the Ooldea Aborigines to withstand the missionaries' message. Stressing the fluidity and flexibility of Aboriginal religious life, R. & C. Berndt wrote:

They have the right to interpret for themselves their mythological dogma and blend it with the changing conditions of life. When they are detribalized, a myth may be extended; alien myths incorporated; new sites sacralised and modifications in certain rites because of white contact, obtained. But its structure and original intent is unaltered.  
(R. & C. Berndt, 1942a:329)

Precisely this process occurred when people moved south from the desert country north and north-west of Ooldea - the intervening regions are now firmly incorporated into the 'country' of those now living at Yalata, and their kin in the north. Even the country south of the railway line, previously Wirangu country, was incorporated, according to R. & C. Berndt (1942b:65).

Conditions at Ooldea became increasingly primitive and uncomfortable for the missionaries, and difficult for the Aborigines camped there. Dust storms were frequent, and firewood became scarce. As far back as 1938 there had been plans to move the Mission - at that stage, to Pidinga, seventy kilometres south of the railway line. In 1949 the Aborigines' Protection Board Annual Report declared that Ooldea was unsuitable as a Mission site, and a new site was promised. There were additional pressures for a move, though, which were unknown to the missionaries. The Native Patrol Officer Walter MacDougall was becoming concerned that the presence of Ooldea as a rations centre meant that travelling Aborigines placed themselves in the vicinity of the Woomera Long-Range Weapons Establishment for whom he worked. When the Aborigines' Protection Board noted in their Annual Report of 1950 that a pastoral property to the south was under consideration as a new location for the Ooldea people, he enthusiastically supported the proposal (MacDougall, 1950).

The Yalata pastoral property was purchased by the S.A. Government in 1951 for the sum of 64,000 pounds. However an internal dispute split the UAM: the South Australian branch

formed a breakaway mission, and staff were forced to declare their loyalties. The Ooldea staff decided to remain allied with the Federal body in Melbourne and to leave South Australia. Five days before the Ooldea missionaries were to leave, the South Australian UAM announced that it had insufficient staff to take over the Ooldea people. This meant that the mission had to be closed, and the move to Yalata made sooner than had been intended. It thus eventuated that the Lutherans from Koonibba were asked at short notice to intercede, and take over the establishment and running of Yalata, which they did at the closure of Ooldea on 24 June 1952 (Hampel, 1977:5). Initially, the Aborigines were given the choice as to which mission they could move to (i.e. Yalata, Ernabella, Cundeelee, or elsewhere):

the missionary tried to draft us out, which way we wanted to go. We didn't want to go bush way, too hard. (KQ)

South mob, west mob, all the groups were ready to go each way. I went with Tarcoola mob and by truck up to Bulgunnia. We stopped there for one week, then they sent two trucks up. We never said nothing. We wanted to go north really, but thinking of rations. (SY)

The Cundeelee group opted to wait the next train going west; and the Pitjantjatjara group decided to go north, to join kin at Ernabella. The Lutherans succeeded in taking only sixty-seven people down to the Yalata property, and these were all Kokatha people (Hans Gaden, Pers.Comm; Hampel, 1977:8).

As described by my informants, and also by White (1985:222),

the Pitjantjatjara group set off on their journey northwards, disembarking from the train at Tarcoola and reaching Bulgunnia Station. They were turned back by Walter MacDougall, who halted their progress, and arranged for their transport back to Ooldea and thence south to the new Yalata property. It is highly probable that he intervened in their attempt to travel north because of the possibility that the Woomera area would soon be used for the testing of atomic weapons. The public announcement that there were to be atomic tests **somewhere** in Australia had already been made in February 1952. Exactly a year after the abandonment of the Ooldea Mission, on 24 June 1953 it was publicly announced that atomic weapons were to be tested in the long-range weapons area. In October 1953, after the first test Totem 1 had occurred at Emu Field, another location was discovered which was to be a permanent proving ground. This was at a site which came to be named 'Maralinga', 53 kilometres north of Ooldea, directly in line with the Aboriginal routes which followed rockholes north<sup>2</sup>. From 1953 onwards onwards the ex-Ooldea people were prevented from gaining access to the land north of the railway line. The area was declared a prohibited zone, and several attempts made by ex-Ooldea people to leave Yalata and to walk back north were intercepted by military personnel. Lutheran missionaries were forced to make several journeys to Ooldea to retrieve Aborigines who were unwilling to stay at Yalata (Hans Gaden, pers.comm.) Many Yalata people recall that the closure of Ooldea was very upsetting to them because it was so sudden.

'It looked like we were lost' one man recounted. The Lutheran account of the circumstances surrounding the demise of the Ooldea mission echoes these sentiments:

What did the future hold in store for them? They had been deserted by their former guardians. Would these new, strange white men be true friends to them or would they take advantage of their helplessness? They were now strangers in a strange land. The writer of this account said to them as the party was about to leave (Ooldea) 'We will look after you'. They looked at us and apparently reassured they replied, 'Good, you look after us!'

(Hampel, 1977:9)

### **Identity**

There is no evidence today that ritual life has decreased among the ex-Ooldea people at Yalata, despite the efforts of a second batch of missionaries (the Lutherans). Nevertheless the population at Yalata is in some senses debilitated. Older people have continued to feel alienated and ill at ease there, and speak of the spinifex country, their desert homeland, as **pana ngaltutjara** (poor fellow ground). However, the shared experiences over the years, and the coming-together of people from a variety of areas of the Great Victoria Desert has brought about a new sense of identity for the ex-Ooldea people. This new identity which has realigned them with Pitjantjatjara-speaking kin in the north, has also been of considerable value in their dealings with state and federal Australian governments. Yalata people now, with only a few exceptions, describe themselves as being Pitjantjatjara. The exceptions are those who identify themselves as Yankunytjatjara.

Although he was writing of groups in the north-west of South



Australia, Brokensha writing in 1975, had commented that the people we now refer to as Pitjantjatjara 'seldom refer to their language or to themselves as Pitjantjatjara' (1975:5). He suggested that that Europeans had constructed an identity for the Pitjantjatjara because they have used the term to identify both the people and language over a large area of the Great Victoria Desert. This may have been true in the 1970s, but an active identification has occurred among Yalata people since that time. As with their kin in the north, Yalata people now use the term **anangu** to describe themselves. In view of the fact that their predecessors at Ooldea Soak were drawn from so many different groups, it is remarkable that Yalata people apart from the Yankunytjatjara mentioned, now identify themselves **en bloc** as being Pitjantjatjara. I discuss some possible reasons for this below.

When R. & C. Berndt worked at Ooldea Soak in 1941 they noted the variety of different groups of whom the Pitjantjatjara were but one. However, distinctions between groups were not always made, even in the 1940s, and R. Berndt gives an example of an Antakirinja man who 'might at times identify himself as Bidjandjara' (Berndt, 1959:90). It is also likely that inter-group distinctions and dialects have gradually been relinquished as a result of the mixing of the Ooldea people. The process had already begun at Ooldea and R. & C. Berndt had observed that intense contact between dialect groups led to 'fluidity and carelessness of speech' (R. & C.

Berndt, 1944b:49). However the linguist W.H. Douglas interpreted this in a more positive light, saying that 'informants modified their speech according to their temporary associations with members of other dialect areas (Douglas, 1954-5:216). The Kokatha language was a dialect very similar to Pitjatjantjara, although Wirangu and Kokatha shared vocabulary items not found in other Western Desert dialects (Platt, 1967:61). Platt identified two distinct dialects which he terms Kukatja and Kukata. Some Yalata informants criticised their fellows, saying that they did not speak 'properly' - which perhaps supports the Berndts' contention that language use at Ooldea had become 'careless'. A woman born near Coffin Hill in the north assured me that 'they speak **proper** way up there, not like this this mob'.

A 'new' identity has emerged since 1982, associated with the outstation. Although all outstation inhabitants were Yalata residents up until that time, they now call themselves 'Oak Valley mob' after the name of the location. Yalata residents are called 'mission mob' by Oak Valley people; and in turn Yalata residents call them 'Oak Valley', 'outstation' or even 'spinifex' mob. The verbal devices, apart from having a practical use, also point to a growing split between the two groups, and minor irritations and complaints are raised one against the other. Notwithstanding this comparatively minor conflict, for the first time since these southern Pitjatjantjara-speaking people came together at Ooldea, they now have a **choice** of residence and of associates.

Nearly everyone at Yalata speaks some English with varying degrees of facility. Fluency depends to a large extent on individual life experiences, and those with long working associations with Europeans (for example on stations) show a markedly improved facility over and above those who had attended school and who had been brought up at either Ooldea or Yalata. The use of a variety of Aboriginal non-standard English, now usually termed 'Aboriginal English' is universal among adults. Nash (1979) comments that in Aboriginal English, English words are often utilised with a different meaning. I noted such expressions as 'stealing the train' (travelling free on the train), 'skin' (blanket), and 'wild dish' (a dish made of wood, a **piti**). Aboriginal English is not spoken with the consciously adopted 'style' of Sansom's Darwin hinterland mobs (Sansom, 1981:258-9).

The 'west' and 'north' dialects found at Yalata are used by those groups in the population associated with those geographical areas. Thus Yalata people can be divided into two main groupings, which they themselves recognise: those associated with the north, and those associated with the west. Several Yalata people have kin residing in Port Augusta, and a few have associations with Gerard, on the River Murray. Significantly, there is very little contact with Koonibba, despite its close proximity: the population there is predominantly of mixed descent Kokatha people. As a result of this far-flung network (which is not surprising considering

their history), Yalata people travel frequently and in return receive visitors, which means that the population fluctuates a great deal. People stay away for a week or so, or live elsewhere for months or even years. Troublesome youths are sometimes sent elsewhere to stay with kin who can 'look after them properly'. One woman whose son had been in trouble with the police at Yalata decided to send him to relatives in Indulkana because she said, 'they gotta strong Law up there'. By speaking of the northern Pitjantjatjara in this way, the speaker conflated two interpretations of the term 'the law': one Aboriginal, the other European Australian.

The term 'Law' is used, as in other parts of Aboriginal Australia, to describe ways of doing things which were laid down or ordained during the Dreaming (**tjukurrpa**). The term is also used to refer to the ritual induction of boys into manhood, as in the expression 'put through the Law', and it can also mean sacred ritual objects, the paraphernalia used and seen only by mature men. The Dreaming was a historical creative period during which mythological beings wandered over the country, transforming themselves and creating physical geographical features of the landscape as they went. As well as being a time in the past, Yalata people understand the Dreaming as an ongoing lived reality, in which the essence (both spiritual and physical) of Dreaming characters live on at particular sites across the country, or in objects such as sacred rocks or stones.

'They gotta strong Law up there' is a statement which epitomises the attitude of the Yalata people to the north. 'The north' is imbued with a certain mystique by Yalata people, partly as a result of the long geographical separation which had been unwittingly initiated by Aborigines leaving the spinifex, and was finalised by the declaration of the Maralinga prohibited area which cut off direct links between north and south. Yalata is very isolated by comparison with communities such as Ernabella and Amata, which are within comparatively short driving time of each other, and are in radio contact daily through the Pitjantjatjara frequency which links Pitjantjatjara-speaking settlements and outstations throughout Central Australia. In addition the northern Pitjantjatjara, dispersed as they are, collaborate on political matters, fused together by the Pitjantjatjara Council formed in July 1976. To some extent, then, it is likely that the fact that Yalata people now identify themselves as being Pitjantjatjara (rather than any other Western Desert dialect group), is political. They wish to be identified with their kin and associates in the north - from whom they were temporarily estranged - and wish to be accorded the same rights under Australian law as the northern Pitjantjatjara.

The reference to a 'strong law' also alludes to the European-Australian 'law' by which the northern Pitjantjatjara hold the country, a freehold title won through negotiation with the Government. In this respect the northerners have provided an ideal towards which the Yalata people have striven over the

last few years. During the discussions over the future of the Maralinga lands (1981-1984) it was commonly asserted that Yalata should have freehold title to the lands 'like in the north'. This position differed markedly from an earlier one promulgated by the Yalata Manager, which was for a leaseback arrangement with the Aboriginal Lands Trust (an Adelaide-based organisation) holding title. The northerners' push for freehold land tenure from 1976 onwards had been portrayed to Yalata people as being inspired by left-wing sympathisers. The Yalata Pitjantjatjara had been left out of this significant move for title for reasons discussed by Toyne and Vachon (1984:59-63). External relations between Yalata and the north were somewhat strained in the 1970s as a result of conflicting pressures exerted by the growing political awareness of the northerners. It is hard to assess to what extent these arguments over title to land (and access to land) affected the relationship between Yalata people and their northern kin. It is likely that the antipathy existed largely between polarised European advisers and the Aboriginal spokespeople and organisations who held allegiance to them.

#### **The relationship between Aborigines and white Australian staff**

In July 1954 the Yalata land was transferred officially to the Lutheran Church, reinforcing the dominance of that Church (as opposed to any other denomination) on South Australia's far west coast: they had established Koonibba near Ceduna, in

1898. More than fifteen Lutheran missionaries have worked at Yalata since its inception, and in addition nursing sisters, teachers, mechanics, storekeepers, and works overseers belonging to the Lutheran Church have been employed there. Although the Mission became an incorporated Aboriginal Community in 1975, many positions including that of Manager continued to be held by Lutherans for some years after this. The South Australian Education Department took over responsibility for the school in 1962, but until the early 1980s positions at the school were still advertised in a Lutheran magazine. Several Lutheran teachers continued to be employed as a result of this. A Lutheran missionary/pastor still works at Yalata. In the early days of the Lutheran mission, shortages of staff and the exigencies of life in a relatively remote bush location meant that the mission staff had to turn their hand to many areas of work. A Lutheran who arrived in 1961 became Acting Superintendent that year and after filling a position as lay missionary, became Superintendent four years later (Hampel, 1977:54). He remained in the position (renamed Community Manager in 1975, now known as Community Advisor) for nineteen years, until 1980. There is an on-going joke among staff that if you stay at Yalata long enough, you can become Community Advisor one day. This piece of conventional wisdom was borne out during my research period, when a man who was initially the electrician, became Advisor two years later.

In addition to the occasional pastoral duties and the extra

practical tasks necessary in an isolated location, the Superintendent was in a position to assume a wide range of responsibilities of an organisational nature and exerted considerable influence on both European staff and Aboriginal residents. Despite the supposed self-management of the community by its Aboriginal members from 1975 onwards, the Manager continued to select and appoint European staff at the settlement (DAA,1978:11). Aboriginal people were unable to draw unemployment benefits at Yalata, and the Manager sought to prevent them from seeking to register for unemployment benefits outside the community on the grounds that there was 'plenty' of work available at Yalata (making artefacts etc.). A further example of the influence and control exerted by the Superintendent/Manager at Yalata was his role in the location of the Aboriginal Big Camp. Big Camp was first described by I.M. White in 1977. White observed that Big Camp was an unusual phenomenon in that it moved location throughout the year and was often situated some distance from the Yalata settlement. She noted that each new site was chosen 'in consultation with the Mission Superintendent' (1977:101). He controlled access to the water tanker (a mobile truck), and the small water tanks located at the camps. In addition to his involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the settlement the Manager became involved in political matters, particularly during the debate over the rights of Yalata people with respect to the Maralinga lands. He also liaised with mining companies who held exploration licenses over land north of Yalata.



Questions were asked in the S.A. House of Assembly in August 1980 about claims that after his resignation from Yalata, the Manager had accepted a position with the Department of Mines and Energy. Yalata people viewed this as a betrayal of trust, as he had been on visits to many sites of mythological importance and held maps of these site locations.

The all-embracing nature and the degree of the control exercised by the Manager, which I have briefly documented, did not pass unnoticed by the Aboriginal residents of Yalata community. It was a contributing factor to the uneasy quality in the relationship between Europeans and Aborigines. There were other factors, however, including Aboriginal uncertainty and powerlessness with respect to the many financial enterprises engaged in by the Lutherans. There was an on-site beer canteen begun in 1969, and the salvage operation at Maralinga in which Yalata men worked on the demolition of the deserted buildings there. Retrieved items were sold, at some considerable profit. Sheep from the station property were sold, and there was an artefact business in which Yalata craftspeople sold their carvings. The Yalata Community owns and operates a roadhouse on the Eyre Highway which has been a profitable enterprise. Aborigines at Yalata realise that large amounts of money have accrued from these various enterprises, but because they involve complex financial transactions, and Aborigines lack the economic and organisational power to fully participate in these undertakings, there is often grumbling and complaint among Aboriginal people about the distribution and

management of these monies, over which Aborigines perceive themselves (correctly) to have no control. Rumours circulate occasionally that European staff (past and present) make 'big money' out of **anangu** (Aborigines).

Aboriginal resentment of the apparent wealth of the growing number of Europeans in their midst, together with their perception of daily injustices meted out by staff (often the result of lack of communication and misunderstanding on both sides), was manifested by attacks on office buildings and staff houses at the settlement, usually with rocks. On occasions there were physical assaults on staff. These incidents were usually, though not always, associated with alcohol, and indeed drinking enabled people to 'get strong enough to say what we really think' as one informant explained. There has been a large increase in the European population at Yalata, and Aboriginal complaints about it had some justification. Council minutes reveal that there was concern expressed by Aborigines over the numbers of Europeans being employed at the settlement; for example the appointment of a Deputy Headmaster at the school was opposed at first by Aborigines, because they thought that it would mean an additional staff member. In the 1950s and 1960s the Lutheran Mission employed no more than half a dozen Europeans. Between 1971 and 1977, (which includes the time of the incorporation of the Aboriginal Community as an 'independent' body) the staff increased from 8 to 20 (250%) and the total European presence (including families) rose from

16 to 49 (306%) (DAA,1978). An astute DAA observer noted,

When there were only three or four white people on settlements and missions there were strong pressures for them to closely associate with Aborigines. When there are twenty or more ... then social apartheid is effectively introduced by the strong group pressures on the whites to associate mainly with each other.

(DAA,1978:4)

Social contact between the groups is indeed minimal, with many Europeans retreating to the coast or Ceduna motels at weekends. Schoolteachers, who constitute a substantial proportion of the non-Aborigines, desert the settlement entirely during holidays and while resident, tend to form a social enclave of their own. However the school staff, being younger, more idealistic and 'interested' in Aboriginal matters are among the few who endeavour to organise joint activities, and acquire some facility with the Pitjantjatjara language.

The majority of Aborigines lived at Big Camp, an entirely separate social arena rarely visited by Europeans. Therefore virtually all interactions and exchanges between the two groups took place at the settlement - on European 'territory'. The mechanically sound vehicles, comfortable homes and fresh vegetable supplies, the enjoyment of which, until recently, seemed to be the prerogative of the European staff, served to reinforce the belief among Aborigines that they were badly done by. There was often good cause behind such thinking: tasks achieved in the settlement seemed to be for the benefit of Europeans. Paths were concreted, fences erected and telephones installed for Europeans, while the Aboriginal camps were still

dependent for drinking water on open-topped water tanks into which children threw rubbish. Europeans had showers and toilets in their homes, while there was only one tap with running water for Aborigines in the centre of the settlement. Goods at the store were marked-up once they were received from the Ceduna supplier, but Europeans were able to buy their own goods direct from the town with no mark-up.

Aboriginal people responded to this unequal state of affairs by a form of exaggerated logic. They emphasised the fact that the European staff were there at Yalata, employed by DAA and by the community, to 'help' and (more recently) to work for Aborigines. This meant, so the argument went, that staff were supposed to comply with Aboriginal requests and demands for a variety of goods and services at any time of the day or night. It was common, for example, for Aborigines to waken a staff member at night to ask for a lift back to Big Camp (maybe 10 or 20 kms away), for a cigarette, 'a feed', or for help with a broken down vehicle. Nursing sisters were woken on occasions in the early hours with requests for 'pain tablets' for a headache. European staff were placed under considerable stress by such encounters, for non-compliance was sometimes met with verbal or physical abuse either on the spot, or at a later date. Inexperienced staff found these encounters frightening and threatening. Even staff of long standing could not easily understand the nature of the communication that takes place when an Aboriginal person demands that he 'help' him at two

o'clock in the morning. They perceive these incidents to be yet more invasions of their personal and family space, and an interruption to their well-earned rest.

There were many 'reciprocal misunderstandings' (as Myers terms them, 1976:539) occurring on a daily basis at Yalata. For example, at one time after a period of administrative disruption and turnover, many Yalata people stated that all the money in the office 'belonged' to the community, and similarly that the goods in the store were also theirs (because it was called Yalata Community Store). Indeed, as I describe in Chapter Six, goods from the store were regularly 'liberated' by being stolen during break-ins. Although the younger, more cynical Yalata residents expressed the belief that the white staff were only there 'for the money', there was a common perception among Yalata people that the job of the Europeans, and of the European-instigated Community Council, was to 'look after' them. In much the same way as the Pintupi described by Myers, Yalata people equated 'looking after' with the notion of 'helping' and 'holding'. For example, when discussing the status of the Maralinga lands, Yalata people said that they had to look after their country so that it could be 'held tight'. Amid the more mundane environment of daily life at Yalata, the stated belief by Aborigines that the European staff had to 'help' and 'look after' them was interpreted by them to mean that European staff (and Aboriginal Councillors) should unquestioningly comply with Aboriginal demands. Myers discusses the difficulties of this notion at some length,

saying that problems arise,

... when there is no agreement about what constitutes appropriate action, the common good, or even the 'society' itself. ... by Pintupi definition of the role, a councillor should help the people. Consequently, he cannot deny anyone the use of the corporately owned truck without accusations that he is not helping **them**.

(Myers, 1982:102)

A series of Europeans - Daisy Bates, the UAM and the Lutherans - had depicted themselves as being there to 'help'. The Lutherans were reported to have stated explicitly that they would 'look after' the ex-Ooldea people, as I stated early in this chapter. Additionally, as Myers explains, the past behaviour of the government had also communicated the appropriateness of this role. The government gave Aborigines food, gave pensions to the old and sick, and now repeatedly states that it wants to 'help' Aborigines. The antecedents of the Yalata people felt that they had entered into reciprocal relationships with certain Europeans in which they exchanged food items, and activities such as the attendance by Aborigines at Christian prayers were 'reciprocated' by the distribution of rations. Currently, with the assistance of Aboriginal-controlled organisations, such as land councils and resource centres, and access to trained lawyers and other advisors, Aborigines are now saying that the government does not help enough (Myers, 1982:105). At Yalata however, the rebuke 'but you're supposed to **help** us!' which often followed European refusals, carried with it multiple meanings. Aboriginal people at Yalata certainly repeated this formula with unflinching

regularity. In view of the level of resentment felt by Yalata people against European staff, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, (and expressed verbally and physically by the inebriated and sometimes by the sober), it is hard to put aside the possibility that, on some occasions at least, late-night harrassment of Europeans was indulged in as a conscious technique of intimidation. Despite the asymmetrical power relationships between the two groups - in which Europeans controlled the distribution of goods and services and access to the bureaucracy - Aborigines had one substantial advantage. It was they who could intrude into the Europeans' social and familial arena, their off-duty hours, their sleep, and impose upon them for ostensibly very good reason ('it is your job to help us'). Whilst I do not wish to deny the reality of the Aboriginal perception of the 'role' of Europeans which has been suggested by Myers, and is confirmed by my own data, I maintain that the demanding actions of Yalata people bore, for them, a symbolic 'rightness'. By asserting to a European in the middle of the night that it was his job to drive someone twenty or thirty kilometres to their camp (simply because the individual had missed the truck back), was to harrass and disturb that individual, while achieving a kind of moral victory. Big Camp was visited by Europeans only under specific circumstances - so the situation was never reversed. Aborigines had no control over the increasing number of Europeans who came to live there, but many sought to make life difficult for those who did so. In this respect, their actions can be interpreted as a form of

resistance, and in the way that Robertson has suggested for American Indian reservations, are actions 'instinctively geared to alienating white people' (Robertson,1970:8).

### **The Council**

The agreement between the Lutheran Church and the South Australian Government over the administration of the mission expired on 30 June 1975, and Yalata Community Incorporated then became responsible for the hiring of staff, and for administering business at Yalata (Hampel,1977:35). An Aboriginal 'Council' had been loosely formed before that time, and now, in keeping with Aboriginal settlements throughout Australia, the Council is the official decision-making body of Yalata Community. Aboriginal Councils were recognised in 1976 under Commonwealth legislation in the form of the **Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976**. This enabled Councils to become legal entities and to receive government funds (Thiele,1982:22). At the time of its formal inception, Council members were,

chosen from kinship groups within the community with representatives being proportionate according to the size of each kinship group. ... The Council is expected to respect the majority opinion of the elders and act accordingly.

(Hampel,1977:36)

It is hard to understand just what the Manager had in mind by 'kinship groups' being represented on the Council and it is likely that the notion arose from a mistaken understanding of Aboriginal social organisation. In addition, it is not clear what would eventuate if the 'elders' are not in the majority.



The members of the Council were, on the whole, older men, although in recent years men in their twenties and thirties have become Councillors. Since 1976 there have been nine chairmen, and all members were male until 1980 when two women were elected. It is indicative of the current atmosphere of change at the settlement, that the Council in 1986 was composed of five women and five men, all of whom are under the age of forty. Yalata people said that they thought those on the Council should be able to 'speak up' and in my experience had no particular preference for the **tjilpi** (old, mature men). Indeed the **tjilpi** were often accused of not speaking up. The Council usually has ten members. There have been periods when it failed to meet at all, and because of this has occasionally ceased to exist.

It is clear that the Community Manager assumed that the Council would be largely composed of 'elders'. The original intention for the Council (on the part of the Community Manager who helped establish it, backed up by DAA) was that the 'elders' would voice opinions, and that the non-elders would respect their views. In reality the Council did not operate in this way. The European Community Manager acted as Council Secretary. He kept the minutes of meetings and brought forward items for discussion. Particularly in the early days of its operation, the Council was a convenient form of instant consultation for the European management, rather than a decision-making body. In 1978 it was reported that the Manager did not know which Aborigines were actually on the Council, but 'his practice, he

said, was to ensure that representatives of the four main family groups were consulted on any major decision' (DAA,1978:10). The minutes of Council meetings show that issues discussed regularly and apparently without resolution, were petrol sniffing and misbehaviour among the young, (first mentioned in 1976) and drinking. Later, in the early 1980s, important matters relating to access to the land by mining companies were raised. The Council also discussed many mundane issues. It was usually a Council member who represented Yalata on the S.A. Aboriginal Lands Trust which owned the Yalata property. Of the two or three men selected for this role, representatives have been chosen by Yalata people for their ability to speak English rather than for any detailed knowledge of matters related to the land.

Overall, the Council was plagued by deep-seated problems of jurisdiction and control, which were matters related to the absence of overarching authority figures in the secular realm. There were also conflicts which existed on another level, associated with the wider political arena and the government policy of self management. These conflicts arose when the decisions which Councillors felt strongly about were found to be beyond their jurisdiction, while they were frequently asked to make judgements on issues which did not interest them. Some of these conflicts have been discussed elsewhere, notably by Tonkinson (1982:121-126), Palmer (1986), and by Brody (1975) writing of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic. Brody

explains the dilemma succinctly:

The administrators thus find themselves in a curious position. On the one hand, they urge the Eskimo community to believe that every effort is being made to give them responsibility for their own affairs. On the other hand, they insist that many of the affairs that the Eskimos regard as important cannot be included within their sphere of responsibility. They soon realize that all fundamental decisions are still to be made by Whites.

(Brody, 1975:120)

Perhaps it was the underlying realisation of the difficulties associated with this latter point, that gave many of the Council meetings an air of hopelessness and frustration. Perhaps this also explains why so many of the 'decisions' made by the Council were in fact purely rhetorical in character.

### **Big Camp**

I have stated that for much of my fieldwork at Yalata, the majority of the population lived at Big Camp, a separate sphere of activity to that of the Settlement. European Australians were responsible for the inauguration of this long-lasting Yalata phenomenon. It was instigated initially to achieve an overtly political end, but served eventually as a means by which Yalata people could maintain an existence at camp away from surveillance by Europeans.

The proposal for a series of camps at variable locations on the Yalata property was made by Walter MacDougall, a Native Patrol Officer employed by the Federal Government and based at Woomera. His job was to ensure that Aborigines remained clear of the Long Range Weapons testing area and later the Emu and

Maralinga atomic testing sites established by the British government. MacDougall's concern in the mid-1950s was to restrict Aboriginal access to Ooldea and the country north of the railway line. After the closure of Ooldea in 1952 and the subsequent move to Yalata, it became clear to the missionaries and to MacDougall himself, that the people did not want to stay on the alien territory. In fact, the ex-Ooldea people communicated their displeasure at their new 'home' by making persistent attempts to travel north, in order to return to more familiar country. These Aboriginal parties had to be retrieved over the following two years by the Lutherans (Hans Gaden, Pers. comm.). The Long Range Weapons Establishment received the news that ex-Ooldea Aborigines were still on the move with some consternation. They urged that strict measures be taken to 'force these people to remain on their new country' (MacDougall, 1955). In response to this MacDougall hit upon an idea establishing the lifestyle which persisted at Yalata for twenty-five years: the notion of Big Camp. In November 1955, MacDougall wrote to the Superintendent of the Range:

The Yalata property was thoroughly investigated as country suitable for semi-tribal natives ... Several old shed tanks were visited and it was decided to establish them as periodic ration depots thus **forcing the older natives to resume their wandering way of life and lessening the tendency to travel north towards their old hunting grounds.**

(MacDougall, 1955)  
(Emphasis added)

Thus evolved what White (1977) refers to as the 'unusual' situation of Big Camp. The Big Camps allowed the Aborigines to be 'nomadic' within a closely supervised range of locations.

It is probably for this reason that the plan was so successful - that is, because it utilised an existing proclivity on the part of Aborigines. Indeed, as I show shortly, the camps at Ooldea had constantly changed and rearranged themselves, whilst remaining within range of the mission, a matter of a few kilometres. The Big Camp lifestyle tied people to an approved area, because of lack of water and dependence upon European rations. In addition the plan enabled the Lutheran Mission to exert and maintain control over the movement and location of Aborigines. This suited their own purposes and demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with the weapons testing authorities. The shed tanks are now mostly in disrepair and have been replaced by mobile water trucks which in turn fill smaller containers for individual camps. The 'Big Camp' was in reality a series of smaller camp clusters which shifted position frequently. The original plan for Big Camp was maintained in essence until the move to the outstation in 1982.

Throughout 1979 and 1980 there was a 'core' Big Camp comprising the majority of the population, with several other groups of **wiltja** at various locations between Big Camp and the settlement, ('Halfway Camp')<sup>3</sup> and between the settlement and the road ('Close-up Camp'). Some groups chose to locate themselves in close proximity to the settlement, within sight of staff houses. The number of Aboriginal dwellings at Yalata in May and July 1979 is as shown in Table 2.1 below.

TABLE 2.1

## YALATA CAMPS IN MAY 1979

Location	Dwellings	Individuals
Big Camp, site a	23	58
Big Camp, site b	14	36
Halfway Camp	5	18
Settlement (houses)	3	11
Close-up camp	6	14
	<hr/>	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>137</b>
	<hr/>	

Two months later, in July 1979, there was a marked increase in the number of people who had moved to Close-up camp, as shown in Table 2.2 below.

TABLE 2.2

## YALATA CAMPS IN JULY 1979

Location	Dwellings	Individuals
Big Camp	42	115
10 km from Big Camp	1	6
Close-up camp	24	60
	<hr/>	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>181</b>
	<hr/>	

In 1981 Big Camp became more dispersed, with an increased number of family groups choosing to locate themselves separately. There were several reasons for this. The regular servicing of Big Camp by the sisters and the store had ceased, and people camped closer to the settlement in order to have access to goods and services there. In addition there were more Aboriginal owned private cars, so that family groups could organise their own transport and were not dependent on the

community truck. White suggests that camp movement and dispersal is a form of stress management, and although there was clear evidence of this at times, it is hard to assess whether this was a further reason for camp dispersal in 1981 (White, 1977). There were also considerable limitations in this form of stress management, for even if individuals or groups moved their camps away from others, it was likely that they would encounter those whose company they wished to avoid, in the settlement - at the store, clinic or office.

It was some time after my initial contact with Yalata that I felt able to move to Big Camp, having first established regular contacts and friendships with several groups. I joined a camp known to be a non-drinking one - or one which discouraged drinkers - under the jurisdiction of a middle-aged man, Jim<sup>4</sup>. There were two male members of the camp (one of whom was his son-in-law) who were drinkers, but it was, on the whole, a non-drinking camp. The few drinkers made little disturbance out of deference to the rest of the camp. Perhaps partly as a result of the absence of rowdy drinking at Jim's camp, there was usually a collection of people (including myself and a colleague) around him who needed 'looking after', in his words. Apart from his immediate family made up of his wife, his three unmarried children, married son and his wife, married daughter and her husband and children, he 'looked after' his elderly MZ and sister (the latter visiting from Cundeelee), along with another widowed woman also from Cundeelee. In addition there were three elderly single men (one of whom was senile).

Jim also had a twelve-year old boy, his 'nephew' (his MZDS), officially in his care after the boy had been in trouble with the police. Altogether those who chose, or were recruited to join Jim's camp totalled between twenty and twenty-five people. It was common for young couples to live in close proximity to one set of parents and grandparents, and there seemed a slight tendency towards residence with the wife's parents. Elderly widows often camped together in twos or threes, as did male youths, but there were no large women's camps as described by Bell for other desert groups (Bell,1983:110). Although it was common for the same group of people consistently to locate their **wiltja** together, this was not always the case and groups would join in or break off from time to time. This provided, as White suggests, the social advantages of a regular change of neighbours (1977:103). Those camped together were usually related to one another, but as Silberbauer noted at Ernabella, friendship and activity were also important influences:

Members of a cluster of **wiltja** are mostly kin; but friendship rather than kinship, is the nucleating characteristic. The groupings of **wiltja** in a cluster is an expression of the frequency of interaction between inhabitants and is an expedient of convenience interaction at the domestic level as well as of sentiment. When the needs of convenience or affection diminish to an undetermined level the cluster breaks up and the households are re-arranged in other, differently composed clusters.

(Silberbauer,1971:28)

Despite the northern or western origins of many older people discussed earlier, I was not able to find a pattern in the orientation of camps (to the north side or the west side) as is found in groups who wish to emphasise their disparateness



(Bell,1983:75). Similarly, Silberbauer noted that at Ernabella, 'origin-orientated divisions' were not as extensive as, for example, those noted by Meggitt for Hooker Creek Walbiri (Silberbauer,1971:27). This is not to suggest that Big Camp was a homogeneous collectivity of people, and the frequency of camp movements does suggest that people wanted to remove themselves from certain others, irrespective of their proffered array of reasons for movement. Big Camp and its satellite camps regularly changed location during my fieldwork and these changes were considerably more frequent than in the 1960s as reported by White (1977). White notes that Big Camp moved 'several' times a year, a frequency undoubtedly influenced by the mission Superintendent. In my experience (in the years after the retirement of the previous mission Superintendent), camps relocated on average every two to three weeks, a flexibility of movement made possible also by the increase of Aboriginal-owned vehicles, and by the convenience of small transportable water tanks.

R.M. and C.H. Berndt camped with Ooldea people in 1941 and noted the difficulties they had in accompanying people, so often did they move. They counted thirteen moves over a six-month period (June-November 1940), that is a move approximately every fourteen days. The distances involved in these moves ranged from between 'a little further back' (presumably a few metres) and a new location one and a half miles (2.4 kms) away. Unfortunately they did not document the number of people and estimated frequency with which they walked back into the desert

country, although they did occasionally note movements out of Ooldea after good rains. For example in June 1941, out of a population of approximately two hundred at the soak, 120 people left for the spinifex (R. & C. Berndt, 1942a:312; see also 1942c:161; 1943a:371; 1944a:221).

R. & C. Berndt documented the stated reasons for camp movements in the vicinity of Ooldea as follows:

- Lack of firewood (6 moves)
- Sanitation/general untidiness (2 moves)
- Too many people (1 move)
- Ceremonies (1 move)
- Death (1 move)
- Stress (regarding sacred storehouse) (1 move)
- Temporary camp (1 move)

(R. & C. Berndt, 1942a:310)

I estimated that over one year Jim and his camp cluster moved at least twenty times, that is, approximately every eighteen days. The distances involved were much greater than those noted for Ooldea, and ranged between two and thirty kms. Nevertheless, the frequency of movement noted at Ooldea in 1940 and at Yalata in 1981 is remarkably similar. I documented the reasons for moving camp provided by Jim and others in his camp:

- lack of firewood
- for access to artefact wood
- too much dust
- too much wind (trees give you 'flu)
- too much noise
- too many drunks
- too many kids
- mice in camp
- death
- ceremonies

The first seven reasons were those given most frequently, and sometimes several of these reasons were given together.

Individuals often provided their own interpretation of the reasons for moving camp. An additional reason, which was never stated but which nevertheless seemed obvious to the observer, was that they simply enjoyed moving. Moving camp punctuated the daily regularity with a series of decisive tasks and a change of scene. Deciding on the move, selecting the new site (now that the old Manager was gone), loading up mattresses and blankets, dogs, billies, tools and the paraphernalia of the camp and rearranging it all again, burning the new site if there were snakes around, breaking branches for windbreaks and building new **wiltja** - all these tasks had to be undertaken. On some occasions I found the 'reasons' unconvincing, and the numbers of moves, some very slight, rather puzzling. It seems reasonable to hypothesise, as did Briggs for the peripatetic Inuit people with whom she worked, that rearranging the environment in this way was a form of play (Briggs, 1978a:33).

Abandoned **wiltja** are still known to be the property of their former inhabitants and are not tampered with without permission. In the process of moving camp, possessions are often left behind (notably clothing in profusion). Individuals often revisit the old site in order to retrieve or search for a forgotten tool, or to dismantle parts of their former shelter, now found to be needed (cf. Silberbauer, 1981:235). In mild, calm weather people do not bother to build shelters, but sleep out in the open protected by windbreaks of acacia and eucalyptus leaves. If rain threatened, rapid construction

would take place. Most people use blue plastic sheets as the 'walls' and 'roof' of their **wiltja** over the framework of branches, although some **wiltja** are constructed entirely of branches and leaves and appear to be indistinguishable from the structures seen by R. & C. Berndt forty years ago <sup>5</sup>. Several fires, dogs and blankets provide warmth, with people carefully choosing long-lasting dense mallee roots to maintain heat throughout the cold winter nights. Continual fires were said to be necessary to frighten away snakes, scorpions and centipedes (all common in the area). People sleep on scooped out sand beds, or foam mattresses. Food is stored in trees out of the reach of dogs, and people use a variety of containers as storage - plastic dustbins, suitcases, tin trunks, or just cardboard boxes from the store. Adults own billies and many have a large frying pan or roasting tray for cooking meat. Cooking directly in the hot coals is very common. Knives and spoons are the only eating implements. Other implements are improvised: axes open tins, egg cartons make plates, empty tins are used as mugs, and twigs serve to spear meatballs from a tin. Artefact-makers work at their hearths or a little to one side surrounded by half-completed production line items, wood chippings and rasps.

In the early morning at camp, I observed that people were usually quiet and respectful of each other's sleep - although I was occasionally woken by loud car radios at 5 a.m. People walked around discovering that they needed tea or had run out of sugar, and would obtain these items from others.

The school bus used to call at 8.30 to collect children from the camps; the community truck would arrive later to take adults into Yalata. Those with their own vehicles could take their time. Fires were extinguished carefully, and those staying behind would be asked to 'watch out' for them. This was because rapid wind changes occur in the Yalata area, and **wiltja** and blankets sometimes caught fire. Some people spent the days at camp, making artefacts, talking, or sleeping. Sleeping during the day is not considered to be lazy and anyone wishing to remain undisturbed simply covers himself with a blanket. Those going into the settlement set up 'camps' at specific locations in town, taking firewood in with them in the winter. In the late afternoon the school bus returned children to the camps, the truck brought back the adults and those with vehicles either returned to camp, or went hunting for meat or for alcohol.

People made the evening meal early, using goods bought from the store, or leftover meat from previous hunting trips, or tea and damper left at camp. After tea, young children would generally play among their peer group, chasing birds with shanghais (which are single elastic catapults, fired without the aid of a stick), playing marbles or 'driving' their rollers. Rollers are improvised miniature 'cars', made usually from a golden syrup tin filled with earth, or sometimes the air filter of a vehicle. These are threaded with a wire which becomes the means by which to steer the tin. Toys are

ingeniously improvised, and children use water containers, string, tin cans, car tyres, wheel rims and wire. Some children have pushbikes. Youngsters go to bed when they are tired, and parents do not mind children playing out of sight in the surrounding bush. At night adults sit around their fires talking or playing cassette tapes - several people have recordings of country and western music or Christian songs in Pitjantjatjara. People usually go to bed early, particularly in the winter, at about 8.30 p.m. Those who had been to Nundroo obtaining alcohol usually returned at night, noisily, waking up the camp and stumbling around in the dark. Those who wished to discourage drinkers would quietly extinguish the embers of their fires so the inebriates could not find their way to that camp. Noise carries easily over the flat countryside and wives and others in camp would usually try to pacify the shouters by giving them tea. 'No sleep!' would be the complaint next morning with the last part of the sentence '... because of drunks' left unsaid. In an attempt to avoid this loss of sleep, Jim resolutely kept his camp separate from the main body of Big Camp. There was often no sleep in the settlement either when drinkers were about, for making a noise in the settlement was **de rigueur** for the inebriated: shouting and banging on corrugated iron were the usual actions of those demonstrating their drunkenness. The teenagers were often about the settlement at night, although their presence was usually quieter and more stealthy for they were engaged in the attempted - and often successful - theft of vehicles and sniffing of petrol.

Big Camp allows everyone visual and aural access to others, and daily life is an open affair. People observe each other's comings and goings from their hearths and from vantage points in the settlement - so that someone will always know where a sought-after individual is to be found. Some privacy is afforded at new camps from the low salt and blue bush, which comes to about waist-height. Anyone sitting down is then out of sight. However the bush rapidly becomes denuded leaving a clear expanse of vision. Demonstrable actions then, are visible anyway, although participants in a harangue or argument make special effort to display themselves. Actions at camp, though public, are also 'private' in that they take place away from Europeans, away from telephones and the police. The ritual life at Yalata is conducted in the bush away from the settlement, often quite close to the camps. When ritual is underway, staff are informed and keep away. Occasionally, public performances of traditional dancing (*inma*) are held and Europeans are invited to attend. However, some Europeans having contact with Yalata seem to be unaware of the vitality of the ritual life there (cf. Tonkinson, 1974:111); Yalata is often referred to as a 'tribally disintegrated' community. A pamphlet produced by the Lutheran Mission and sold to passing tourists from the Roadhouse stated:

Corroborees are quite common, although the influence of these rites is gradually diminishing as the effects of education and Christian conviction supply satisfying answers to many things previously classed as mystical.

## **Economic activity**

Yalata people had minimal involvement with the cash economy until 1964 when ration distribution ended. Up until that time people had earned small amounts of money by making artefacts, a practice begun at Ooldea, and encouraged and developed by the Lutherans. Ooldea people had begged for coins from the passengers on the railway as it paused at Ooldea siding; a practice discouraged by the railway authorities. Because food, blankets and clothing were provided free in the ration era, extra cash could be used to purchase other items which were available from the store established at Yalata in 1954. At Ooldea, men and women worked for the missionaries and received rations in return:

We used to work hard with horses to scoop out sand, keep sand out. No pay, free days. We used to work for bread and tucker, clothes. We used to make bread .. grind wheat in old machine to get out flour. Grind, that's the one. Workers did this in early days. (HW)

Some of the men worked away from Ooldea on properties at Tarcoola, Bulgunnia and Bookabie and others were employed casually on the wharf at Thevenard in Ceduna. There is some nostalgia associated with the ration days, and despite the substantial amounts of cash which circulate now at Yalata, Aboriginal people - especially women - feel that items such as second-hand clothes should be supplied free, as they were in the old days.

No individual unemployment benefits were paid at Yalata at the time of my fieldwork, but the community received the bulk CDEP<sup>6</sup>



grant to be paid as wages to workers. Overall, employment prospects were poor at Yalata despite idealistic plans in 1954 to train younger men to look after the property in order to 'take over the station in the years ahead' (Hampel,1977:22). There was not an overwhelming demand for work on the part of Yalata people. In mid-1981 the number of regularly employed Aborigines was as follows:

TABLE 2.3

ABORIGINES IN REGULAR EMPLOYMENT AT YALATA

Work	No.employed	Approx.wage
Teacher	1	\$300 p.w.
Teachers' aides	4	\$150 p.w.
Health workers	2	\$150 p.w.
DFE trainees *	8	\$110 p.w.
Roadhouse	7	\$110 p.w.
Community (Council, pay clerk etc.)	7	\$180 p.w.
DCW Liaison officer **	1	\$150 p.w.
	30	

\* Department of Further Education

\*\* Department for Community Welfare

These positions were consistently filled by the same people on average. Teachers' aides, health workers and the DCW liaison officer were the most long-lasting positions for the same people, whereas the Council Chairman, roadhouse workers and DFE trainees (called 'workers' by Yalata people), were jobs which had a high turnover. Despite a certain glamour associated with the roadhouse (contact with interstate travellers, access to showers and toilets, takeaway food), Aboriginal interest in roadhouse work has always been minimal. Work at the pumps has

been taken by men; at one stage the only Aborigines working there came from Koonibba. Young women were once employed in the snack bar, but the management insisted that they wear shoes, which the girls were not prepared to do. The roadhouse is understood pragmatically by Yalata people to be a source of food when the store is closed at weekends. The DFE programme with eight trainees lasted for two years, and is no longer in operation. The number of people in regular employment in 1986 is estimated to be much lower than these 1981 figures, with the demise of the DFE scheme, only one person working at the roadhouse and considerable numbers of people living at the outstation. Casual work was available on a daily hiring basis or for a few hours a week. The jobs included truck and grader driving, the mobile water tank, road and rubbish clearance, watering trees, cleaning jobs at the office and work in the store. The average weekly number of casual workers was fourteen. People worked when they needed the money, and consequently some days there might be eight workers, and on others none at all. A sample month shows Aboriginal income from all sources as follows:

**TABLE 2.4**

<b>OCTOBER 1981 ABORIGINAL INCOME</b>	
<b>Wages (CDEP etc)</b>	<b>\$14,840.00</b>
<b>Pensions, endowment etc.</b>	<b>\$22,516.00</b>
<b>Other sources (artefacts)</b>	<b>\$ 2,205.00</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b><u>\$39,561.00</u></b>

Using these figures it can be estimated that the average

monthly income for, say the population aged 15 years and over (179 individuals) was \$221.00 per head. Pensions and other social security benefits were received by a large proportion of the population to a total of \$22,516.00 as shown. The major recipients of social security were the old age, invalid and widows' pensioners. In 1981 pensions were \$139.40 per fortnight and child endowment was \$114.90 per month for a family with four children. Child endowment was also paid to those with custody of children not their own - this served as an incentive for fostering the children of others. School leavers had no independent source of income unless in receipt of a special benefit, unlike European youth in similar circumstances, who may draw unemployment benefits. Many young males gained access to desired goods by breaking into the store or other settlement buildings and stealing.

The estimated income and expenditure for Yalata people in a sample month, is shown below in Table 2.5.

**TABLE 2.5**  
**ABORIGINAL INCOME AND EXPENDITURE, OCTOBER 1981**

Income, all known sources	39,561.00 (100%)
Expenditure: Store	26,308.00 (66.5%)
: Beer	4,582.00 (11.6%)
 Total:	 30,890.00 (78.1%)
 Balance unspent:	 \$ 8,671.00 (21.9%)

As this table shows, the majority of income (66.5%) was expended at the store, while the beer ration (three times each week) accounted for 11.6%. After these expenses, Yalata people

were left with approximately \$8,671.00 in that month. By estimating the amount of fortified wine purchased from Nundroo (with the help of the publican), it is possible to assume that much of this was spent on alcoholic beverages at Nundroo roadhouse, that is, approximately 20% of their income (Brady & Palmer, 1984:34). Major expenses which did not involve the settlement store included vehicle purchases, petrol and car maintenance, and takeaway food from the roadhouse.

Artefact-making is a major source of income for Yalata people and many engage in the enterprise in order to gain quick access to cash. A determined artefact-maker can produce a remarkable number of items in a short time, if wood and tools are to hand. A wide range of carved items is made by Yalata people: snakes, birds, kangaroos and wombats, spears, spear-throwers, digging sticks, fighting sticks, boomerangs, didgeridoos and carrying dishes. These are sometimes decorated by blackening the wood by burning it and carving out shapes. Women also make necklaces from gumnuts and seeds. Artefacts are sold for cash to an artefact store at the settlement, and the prices paid vary according to size and quality. From time to time there were complaints from artefact-makers that the prices offered at the store were not high enough; persistent grumbles of this kind resulted in a better pricing arrangement. The store marks-up the price and the items are resold through the roadhouse (which attracts passing tourists) and to outlets in Adelaide and Sydney. Approximately one hundred and fifty adults per month received

cash payments for their artefacts over the time of my research. Over a six month period the income for individual craftspeople ranged from \$12 per month to \$1,000 per month. A good quality boomerang would take two hours to make, and fetch approximately \$4 - \$6. Artefact-making provides a source of income to adults only, as those engaging in it are predominantly middle aged to elderly people. As many women as men make artefacts, and they are equally adept with axes. Some individuals devote considerable time and energy to earning money from artefact-making, and purchase good quality tools. Artefact-makers must finance their own tools, which become worn and lost, (specifically small axes, rasps, gouges, knives). They must also organise and finance wood-gathering expeditions. The preferred wood for artefacts (usually myall, **Acacia sowdenii**) is to be found some distance from the settlement, and is chosen with care. Income from an artefact may be divided between contributors to it, for several people may contribute varying skills to the manufacture of one object.

Although Yalata people frequently complained that they had no money ('nothing! **we** got nothing') cash circulated freely and was redistributed by means of gambling at cards (mainly among women), gifts and loans between kin and European staff, and through the re-purchase of beercans won and lost through betting on Two Up games which were convened after the beer ration. Demands for money among close kin were not always responded to obligingly. There were often grumbles, and I heard one man tell his wife, 'money doesn't grow on trees you know!'.

Men also chastised their wives for losing money at cards. Cash was treated in the same practical way as any other item (there was a high rate of circulation of material goods), and remained with individuals for the length of time they could avoid having to give it to others. If an individual needed cash urgently he or she would ask kin, or sit down for a morning and make artefacts.

Cheques were distributed from the administration office, where Yalata people could 'bank' their money. Previously, continuing a tradition started by the mission, pension pay-outs were divided up and distributed in small portions throughout the fortnight. This system, perceived by recent Community Advisors to be paternalistic, ceased in the early 1980s. This means that those who are less adept at talking their way out of giving away their cash to importunate kin, are often relieved of a fortnight's pay within the first few days. The office was frequently the target for drunken attacks when misunderstandings over cheques occurred. The European staff, were perceived (accurately in some senses) to control the outflow of money and thus they too were the subject of abuse from time to time. For many Aborigines at Yalata, and for a variety of reasons, the administration office symbolised the power of Europeans over innumerable aspects of their lives.

Yalata people devised other ways of obtaining cash. They can earn money by agricultural labouring on properties at Smoky Bay (between Ceduna and Streaky Bay). People are paid for

fulfilling occasional official roles. For example, the Yalata representative on the S.A. Aboriginal Lands Trust earns \$160.00 per month in this capacity. Other opportunities to earn cash present themselves from time to time. One man, sitting with a group of people near the roadhouse demanded that a tourist who was taking photographs of the Aborigines hand over \$10. The surprised European promptly complied. On another occasion a woman made some cash by collecting wood ash, and selling it for \$10 a tin. Older adults mix their tobacco with wood ash for chewing and the mallee (**Eucalyptus oleosa**) around Yalata provides the most sought-after ash. With many old people living away from Yalata on the outstation, their access to good quality ash became limited. The woman cashed in on a desire for a consumer item not carried by the visiting store truck.

The diet of relatively expensive store-purchased food is supplemented whenever possible by hunted meat (**kuka**) and to a lesser extent by gathered vegetable foods (**mai**). Although it was rare in the past, a few younger Yalata people now fish in the sea, and the store keep a supply of nylon fishing lines. The most common animal meat hunted by Yalata people is grey kangaroo (**Macropus fuliginosus**, Pitj. **kulpirrpa**); red kangaroo (**Macropus rufus**, Pitj. **malu**), wombat (**Lasiorchinus latifrons**, Pitj. **watu**), and rabbit (**Oryctolagus cuniculus**, Pitj. **rapita**). Rabbits have frequented the coastal and eastern Nullarbor region since 1891 (Rolls, 1961:64). Also hunted are bush turkey (**Ardeotis australis**, Pitj. **kipara**); feral cat (called simply 'purtikat'), goanna (**Varanus sp.**, Pitj. **milpali**, **ngintaka**);

and sleepy lizard (Pitj. **kalta**). Locally gathered foods include quandong (**Santalum acuminatum**, Pitj. **wayanu**), wild fig (**Ficus platypoda**, Pitj. **ili**), and a succulent root (Pitj. **tjungu-tjungu**). From the outstation at Oak Valley, in the Great Victoria Desert, Yalata people have access to bush foods not found further south. These include edible grubs (**Xyleutes leucomochla**, Pitj. **maku**), mallee fowl (**Leipoa ocellata**, Pitj. **nganamara**), and their eggs; emu (**Dromaius novaehollandie**, Pitj. **kalaya**) and echidna (**Tachyglossus aculeatus**, Pitj. **tjilkamata**). Nectar-bearing flowers (Pitj. **woma**) and a variety of seed-bearing grasses as well as other vegetable foods such as **Solanum** sp. (Pitj. **kampurarpa**) are to be found in the spinifex, and can still be identified by older people, but which are not now collected. Yalata women say that they stopped collecting and grinding seeds (**mai rungkupai**) to make seedcake (**nyuma**) once they had access to flour in their rations at Ooldea.

Hunting is undertaken with rifles and with the aid of hunting dogs, which bring down wounded animals (cf White 1972). People who have access to vehicles sometimes hunt for rabbit and kangaroo at night, using spotlights - large numbers of rabbits are caught using this method. Women dig wombat, rabbit and goanna from their burrows with the use of crowbars, and with the assistance of their dogs. Fire is not used as a hunting technique, although Gould (1971) provides evidence of its use in earlier years among Western Desert Aborigines.

Yalata people who engaged in hunting, and those who were the



recipients of hunted food, ate large amounts of meat. Indeed, people often complained that they got sick, or weak, from eating too much, especially wombat. Although I never observed the distribution of **parts** of a large animal to prescribed individuals (cf Gould, 1967; White, 1972), kangaroo and other game brought back were distributed whole to kin or to people with an investment in the expedition (i.e. loan of a gun, bullets etc.) A day trip with a group of six adults would provide perhaps six kangaroos, and up to a dozen rabbits if the women found good burrows. The Oak Valley outstation provides access to 'spinifex' foods as well as staples such as rabbits, which are available if people drive south to the Nullarbor Plain fringes. In one week at the outstation (January 1985) I made a conservative estimate that approximately 35 rabbits, 10 red kangaroo, 10 mallee fowl eggs, and numerous witchetty grubs were hunted and collected. This was in a camp of approximately fifty people. Another trip west of Ooldea and south of the outstation, specifically to hunt rabbits, produced a total of 13 rabbits, and 3 red kangaroo obtained by four women and two men. Several of these rabbits were sent down to Yalata with a travelling group, because, it was said, the people down there 'haven't got anything'. By so doing, the outstation residents demonstrated their largesse and the plenitude within which they lived, by comparison with Yalata residents.

The relationships between Aborigines and white Australians at Yalata are thus characterised by unease, which sometimes flare into outright resentment. It is, on the whole, an ambivalent relationship, wherein Aborigines are both resentful in their dealings with staff, while also perceiving them to be there to 'help' and 'look after' Aborigines. Ambivalence is also manifested in attitudes to the Aboriginal Council, which is invested with some powers and not others, and is composed of people who (in their own eyes) have no capacity or right to impose their will upon others, and is thus largely ineffectual. Notwithstanding this, Yalata people verbally state that the Council is supposed to fulfil various functions and they complain when its members fail in these tasks.

Big Camp, a specifically Yalata phenomenon, has allowed Aborigines a limited amount of freedom of movement and action in recent years, despite the fact that it was inaugurated in order to control the movements of the refugees from Ooldea. Within the boundaries of the Yalata property, the people utilise the mechanism of constant changes of location and removal from the vicinity of certain others for a variety of stated reasons, and so are perpetually rearranging their physical and social environment. However, until recently, they have been prevented from having access to their country, which was taken over for atomic weapons testing, and parts of which still remain contaminated by radioactive debris. While they were living at Ooldea, the desert people had the option of

walking back north or north-west in order to hunt, visit sites, or to be separate from the growing numbers of Aborigines around the mission. Once the move to Yalata was made, and the area became prohibited, such free-ranging movements were impossible.

Cash and material goods circulate freely at Yalata, and although the average individual income level is low, some resourceful individuals can make large sums of money by a variety of means. For many people, particularly those with access to vehicles, or those who live at the outstation in the Great Victoria Desert, hunted and collected foods form an important supplement to the diet of store-bought foods.

Yalata, it must be said, was misplaced in its conception and in its location. The historical circumstances surrounding the arrival of Western Desert people at an unattractive, virtually coastal location were unfortunate, if not overtly politically expedient. Despite this history, which includes the considerable mixing of dialect groups of Western Desert people, those living at Yalata now assert that their identity lies with the Pitjantjatjara. This has been formalised by their renewed contact with their northern kin, affiliation with the political organisations of the northern Pitjantjatjara, and their own successful bid to gain freehold title to the Maralinga lands.

## NOTES

1. For example, the UAM **Messenger** (1 June 1949) noted that a party of eighteen Aborigines decided to return to 'their people in the spinifex'. They took with them a boy who had been working at the mission. The **Messenger** also noted incoming groups. For example in April 1945 'sixteen bush natives' came in; in December 1945 ten women and eleven men arrived from Ernabella; in May 1949 'seven souls' came in from the spinifex (two women, two men and three children).
2. A full account of this history, which directs particular attention to the role played by rations in the movement of Aborigines from the spinifex towards Ooldea, is forthcoming (Brady, 1987).
3. This Halfway Camp at Yalata is not to be confused with the 'Halfway Camp' located on the outskirts of Ceduna.
4. In order to protect the anonymity of my informants, I have given people pseudonyms throughout this thesis.
5. These **wiltja** are also virtually indistinguishable (apart from the species of bush used) from the G/wi 'late summer shelter' photographed by Silberbauer in the Kalahari (Silberbauer, 1981:279).
6. The Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP) is a government initiative whereby bulk payments are made to a community in lieu of individual unemployment benefits, in order that local employment can be offered.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DOING THINGS PROPERLY :

#### SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, THE LAW AND CUSTOMARY MODES OF ACTION

...despite all the attempts to crystallize the rules, there invariably remains a certain range of maneuver, of openness, of choice, of interpretation, of alteration, of tampering, of reversing, of transforming ... the people involved exploit the rules and indeterminacies as it suits their immediate purposes, sometimes using one resource, sometimes the other.

(Moore, 1983:41)

In the following pages I examine the understandings held by Yalata people of how to do things properly, how to live and comport oneself as **anangu** (Aborigines). Despite their stated allegiance to these notions (which are often depicted as being immutable, I show that Yalata people are, in reality, constantly negotiating and re-interpreting them, often for reasons of self-interest. In addition, I establish in the next three chapters that Yalata people tolerate an extremely wide range of actions on the part of their co-residents, including actions which are defined by them as being irregular and disruptive.

As the previous chapter shows, the Aboriginal people who make up the so-called Yalata 'community' are together as a group for

a variety of reasons. Although linked as a totality by a common language, a shared body of myth and associated practice, shared history and association over time, and homogeneity of social organisation, the present-day Yalata 'community' is composed of autonomous small-scale groups. They act together as a whole on rare occasions. People do not act together only, or necessarily, as kin, but within groupings which come together for the purposes of initiating a particular action - what Mayer has termed an action set (1978:98) - a concept which has been adapted by Sansom in his analysis of fringe-dwelling Aborigines in Northern Australia (Sansom,1981:269). Holy & Stuchlik refer to 'task groups' (1983:115). The members of the groups which constitute the 'community' share commonly accepted and taken-for-granted understandings. Yalata people cite these agreed understandings in order to explain and justify their actions. These agreed upon understandings are nevertheless negotiable. They are composed of received wisdom and notions of customary behaviour, and the accumulated weight of history. Bourdieu states that these understandings, shared principles and schemes of thinking and acting constitute what he terms the **habitus**. He defines the habitus as:

a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a **matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions** and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks.

(Bourdieu,1977:82-3. Emphasis added)

The concept of the habitus enables us to understand the actions and the accompanying commentaries provided by these

social actors.

Yalata people execute many actions which have no specific or articulated 'reason' behind them, whereas other actions are justified and legitimized by means of a specific referent. Bourdieu explains that the nature of habitus enables individuals' actions to be accepted by their fellows as reasonable without explicit reason being required (1977:79). Other writers (such as the ethnomethodologists) have noted this taken-for-granted principle; for example Holy & Stuchlik cite Kaplan, and Garfinkel, who observed that people are not ordinarily capable of formulating their knowledge in use, and rarely make explicit the 'intersubjectively shared background expectancies' which are taken-for-granted (Holy & Stuchlik, 1983:78, 68). As Bourdieu succinctly writes: 'subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing' (1977:79). Similarly in the ethnographic context with which this thesis is concerned, the Aboriginal actors often say that they do something because 'that's the way it is'.

The system of dispositions shared by a group of people is acquired through their common history. It is 'durably inculcated by objective conditions' (1977:77), and 'laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing' (1977:81). The common practices of daily life, including religious Law, which have been consistently enacted by Yalata people, serve to reinforce the appearance of homogeneity of the habitus among that group. For this reason, the habitus shared by a particular

group of Yalata people is not shared by the white Australian staff who administer them (who amongst themselves are the bearers of different orders of habitus, as a result of class, for example). The **process** by which things come to be taken-for-granted, is that of ordinary practice, which is 'automatic and impersonal' (Bourdieu, 1977:80). Practices become objectively harmonised as a result of the common social experiences of social actors. Bourdieu is critical of the ethnomethodologists and interactionists who focus on the physical space of the individual-to-individual relationships in experimental interactions, while neglecting their 'social space'. He emphasises that actors carry with them always their present and past positions in the social structure, which are apparent in the form of dispositions (1977:82).

I have discussed the role of 'habitus' in understanding why it is that actors may not necessarily be able to make explicit the reasons why they act or think in a certain way. However, Yalata people are also strongly disposed to make more explicit reference to various legitimating principles which, they say, guide their actions. Indeed, as I discuss later in the thesis, there is a strong desire on the part of Yalata people to make the meaning of actions and circumstances explicit - both to each other and to the anthropologist (although there may be different reasons for wanting to explain action to these different audiences).

One example of the legitimating principles derived from the



habitus of Yalata people is the shared notion of the Law, Aboriginal Law, used as a regularising strategy. In keeping with the definition of habitus in which Bourdieu emphasises the taken-for-granted nature of the practices and attitudes that it generates, the Law too, is taken-for-granted, and is an agreed upon 'natural' part of the lives of Yalata people. The Law, and the practice of the Law has, from their point of view, 'always' existed, or is so unimaginably old that it is automatically accepted to be 'true'. The Law is known in Pitjantjatjara as **tjukurrpa**, 'Dreaming', said by them to be immutable. From their point of view the Law 'works' and needs no further elaboration. However, although the Law may specify the social order, it cannot guarantee order or adherence to its edicts amongst people (Sutton & Rigsby, 1982:157). That is left to the members of a society, who may utilise adherence to the Law (among other things) as a **strategy** whereby they might achieve some practical end. I discuss this practical utilisation of the Law shortly.

Associated with the use of the Law as an explicit referent provided by Yalata people, is their use of the notion of 'being **anangu**' (Aborigines). The two are linked, because **anangu** by definition share and subscribe to the Law. Yalata people sometimes provide a circular argument when explaining their actions (to the European questioner and in some circumstances to each other). They say : we do things this way, because it is the proper way; the proper way is the way **anangu** do things; we are **anangu** and so we do things the proper way. The

'really **anangu**' way of doing things is known at Yalata as the 'proper way', or the 'straight way', which is in Pitjantjatjara **tjukururu**.<sup>1</sup> The proper way has not necessarily been 'chosen' as being better than other ways (although this may occur), rather, it is a scheme of thinking and acting which is regarded as being right because it is the 'only' way, the 'natural' (i.e. taken-for-granted) way to act (Acciaioli,1981:28). There are other referents cited by Yalata people (or groups of them). For example some claim that they do things in a certain way because they are Christians. Like 'the Law', 'being a Christian' is a legitimating principle that does not require further explication.

Strategies are the practical realisation over time of the dispositions (or tendencies) making up the habitus. Bourdieu states that strategies enable individuals or groups to achieve varying sets of tasks and cope with everchanging and unforeseen circumstances (Bourdieu,1977:72). Strategies are generated out of the dispositions that constitute the habitus, and they change over time and are subject to the alterations brought about by objective conditions, such as historical or political factors. (For example, it is no longer feasible for Aborigines to visit regularly all their sites of significance on the land in order to fulfil custodial duties which are a requirement as part of 'the Law'. People visit their sites and clean and tidy them as and when possible). The strategies available to a group of individuals are manipulable, but nevertheless do not arise

from an unbounded or chaotic system within which 'anything goes'. Bourdieu describes the strategies as arising from a matrix or field of possible actions, for the habitus is a 'generative principle of **regulated** improvisations' (1977:78, emphasis added). Strategies are used by individuals not simply, or only, to manipulate the established order, but constantly to reinvent and redefine that order. Individuals constitute the field of what is possible within the scope of their manipulations (Acciaioli,1981:28). Those sharing habitus then, are responsible for adjusting and expanding the range of acceptable strategies. They are constrained in this, both by the 'field' of what is possible, as well as by the limits imposed by objective conditions.

Strategies which are aimed at producing 'regular' practices are, Bourdieu states, one of several categories of 'officializing strategies' (1977:40). They are part of the 'official', or outward definition of social reality, such as that supplied by informants who see themselves as spokespersons with a mandate from the group to present its 'official account of itself' (Bourdieu,1977:37). **Accounts** given by Yalata people of the 'proper way' of doing things were, then, part of this 'official' discourse. The object of officializing strategies, according to Bourdieu, is to transform self-interest, '"egoistic", private, particular interests ... into disinterested, collective, publicly avowable, legitimate interests' (Bourdieu,1977:40). As I show in this chapter, this is often the case with Yalata people, who pursue their private

interests while officializing their actions by making reference to 'the Law'. Despite assertions that 'the Law' and other regularising principles (the proper way, Christian way etc) are strict and specific in their prescriptions, in reality there are numerous avenues whereby 'properness' may be achieved.

Adherence to the stated principles is not uniform.

Individuals may invent and improvise, within limits, in order to act out a wide range of actions and desires, while still invoking principles which may legitimate what they do. In this way, Yalata people can and do utilise,

whatever areas there are of inconsistency, contradiction, conflict, ambiguity, or open areas what are normatively indeterminate to achieve immediate situational ends.

(Moore, 1983:50)

Although I have stated that Yalata is not composed of a homogeneous group of people, they do share principles in common (such as the Law), and smaller sub-sections of the population share concepts too, such as Christian beliefs. So while individuals each bear their own series of dispositions, there is a general acceptance of the Law, and people engage in practices which, over time, tend to generate similar dispositions (e.g. the customary expectations of kin). In some respects, perhaps in relation to the structures of the wider Australian society, they share a 'class habitus' in which,

it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for members of that class.

(Bourdieu, 1977:85)

In this chapter I describe the 'official' discourse of the proper way, and show that, by adherence to, and manipulation of, that discourse, individuals may achieve their personal goals. I also set out the explicitly 'straight' ways of doing things (as offered by Yalata informants) in order to explore in later chapters the definitions of irregular ways and actions.

### **Affiliations with country**

Yalata people hold affiliations with country from which they were separated in 1952 and which until 1982 they rarely visited (small groups of men were taken on trips into the desert from time to time by the Lutheran Superintendent in order to visit sites and locate areas of interest to mining exploration.) Nevertheless, most adults can name the country which they say is 'my country' (**nyayuku ngura**)<sup>2</sup> and can name rockholes and other significant locations within it. Yalata people and others who share affiliations with country are known as **ngura walytja** ('countrymen', or 'those related through country'). Rights in country are conferred through a variety of channels as documented by Palmer (1984), R. & C. Berndt (1943a:371) and Berndt (1959:96-7). Berndt particularly stresses the role played by the birth place of an individual within a constellation of sites on the country, which confers rights to that country, and thus enables the individual to inherit all the totemic aspects linked with the birth place (1959:97). In fact, the country and those with rights in it, are often

referred to by Yalata people in terms of 'lines' (e.g. 'Tommy's line runs through Emu'). This is a verbal acknowledgement of the significance of dreaming tracks, mythological linkages, over and above that of a static site on the land for these desert people. Yalata people today say that they obtain rights in country through both parents and both sets of grandparents; through place of birth; through consanguineous links to an individual believed to be specially linked with a mythological character; and (in one particular case) through affinal links to a significant spokesman for an area. The fact that Yalata people are **ngura walytja** and are people who formerly hunted and foraged over land in which they and their kin had spiritual ties and exploitation rights, provides Yalata people with a degree of cohesion.

Since 1981, when Yalata people began negotiating for legal rights over their land, local politics with respect to the right to speak authoritatively about the Maralinga lands have been highlighted. For example, since the gaining of freehold title to the Maralinga lands, a series of complaints has been raised by a senior woman at Yalata. She asserts that the senior man who claimed to be the owner of the Maralinga lands was not as important a man as was his brother, her deceased husband, who was the legitimate owner of the country. She justified her complaints by reference to the 'proper way' and claimed that the man she criticises had not fulfilled his obligation to teach younger people properly about the country. She utilised

the officializing strategy of the 'proper way' in order to discredit whatever knowledge the other man had transmitted to his sons (by suggesting it was inadequate), and does this in order to promote her cause, which is that her **own** sons should rightfully 'take over' responsibility for the land. The complaints and grumbles have not, as yet, brought about an overt split between groups. Perhaps in order to ward off a major dispute, and to distance themselves from the argument, many people dismiss the woman's complaints saying that she is **minyma wangkala** ('woman who is always talking', or 'big mouth'). The man she criticises has maintained his position, and his interpretation of the land and its' sites remains the accepted version. However, the example illustrates the notion that even matters of land-holding Law are open to the possibility of the mobilization of opinion one way or another, and purely for the purposes of self-interest.

Certain sites on the country north and north-west of Ooldea are accessible only to mature men, and the prohibitions on women and uninitiated boys are strictly adhered to. I know of no instance of an unauthorised person attempting to visit such a site. People comply, and the reason they do so is said to be 'the Law', or 'it's not allowed'. This simple expression provides a good example of the way in which the habitus produces a sense of the taken-for-granted. Ritually mature men are themselves anxious and uncomfortable in areas which are unknown to them, over which they suspect others have authority.

For example, in 1981, visiting an area west of Tjintakara in the Great Victoria Desert (over the border with Western Australia), Yalata men became increasingly uncomfortable as we ventured into regions containing sites known to Cundeelee men. The men declared the area out-of-bounds to women as a matter of course, and then decided to go no further themselves. The explanation under these circumstances was that it was considered to be 'too dangerous' to proceed. In this way, the men imposed their 'official' definition of the 'danger' immanent in the Law, and although not in possession of the full details of the area themselves, imposed an injunction which served to exclude women.

#### **Kinship and Social organisation**

Detailed accounts of kinship terminologies, marriage rules and social structure relevant to Western Desert people are to be found in the literature (R. & C. Berndt, 1977:69-70; Berndt, 1941; Elkin, 1931; White, 1981). There is also an account of kinship terms utilised at Ooldea, mainly in Antakarinja dialect (R. & C. Berndt, 1942c:148-9) which are relevant to the Yalata people today.

The Pitjantjatjara at Yalata recognise consanguineous and classificatory kin similar to those recognised by other Western Desert groups. Ego calls his M and MZ (and all other women whom father calls wife) **nyuntju**, and his F and FB (and all other men whom mother calls husband) **mama**; his FF and MF **tjamu**,



and FM and MM **kapali**. Grandparent and grandchild terminology is interchangeable. Ego calls his MB (and all other men whom she calls brother) **kameru**, and his FZ (and all other women whom he calls sister) **kuntili**. Older brother is called **kuta** and older sister **kangkuru**, while **malanypa** is used for ego's younger B and younger Z. Ego's S is known as **kata** and D as **untalpa**. These terms for son and daughter are also commonly used for those in the first descending generation. Husband or wife is called **tjungutja**, although people also use the term **kuri**. Sister-in-law is called **tjuwari**, and brother-in-law, **marutju**. When referring to kin Yalata people frequently use English terminology too, referring to 'that youngest father' (i.e. ego's father's youngest brother), 'auntie' (i.e. FZ), and 'granny' (i.e. either grandparent or grandchild). Section terms are not used at Yalata, but some informants know of them.

While the Yalata people have neither matrilineal nor patrilineal moieties, they do have what have been termed generation moieties which group together members of alternate generation levels (cf White, 1981; see also Berndt, 1941:6). These are socio-centric. An individual distinguishes himself, his siblings and parallel and cross cousins as one division or generation level, and his parents and their siblings and cousins in another, and so on in alternate generation levels. People at Yalata gave me the names of the two generation moieties as **nganantarka** or **nganamiri** (meaning 'us lot') and **tjarputa**, (meaning 'the other lot'). An alternative term used at Yalata for 'the other lot' is **tjanamiltjan** 3 which is the

term used among Pitjantjatjara and Yangkuntjatjara in the north. **Tjarputa** is a term noted for those using north-westerly dialects, such as the Ngatatjara at Warburton, and was used by the Wirangu at Ooldea (White,1981:22-23).

It was said at Yalata that marriage (**tjunguringanyi**) is now conducted '**anangu** way' (Aboriginal way) - a reference both to choice of partners and the legitimizing ceremony. Christian weddings had been forcefully promulgated by the UAM at Ooldea, (c Turner,1950:104), and later by the Lutherans at Yalata, but they have declined in recent years. The UAM had celebrated the first Christian weddings of two Aboriginal couples in 1945. However, several uninitiated young men who married soon left Ooldea; one such couple went to live at Gerard Reserve, on the River Murray (**Messenger**,1 September 1948). A compromise solution for Aborigines of Christian inclination was for customarily joined couples to seek a second, Christian wedding. The UAM reported three such couples requested Christian marriage in 1951. In recent years at Yalata four couples who were married '**anangu** way' have also undergone a Christian ceremony. In this way their unions are legitimized by reference to two systems of law.

Marriage is endogamous within the moieties so that a male and female who both call themselves **nganamiri** are considered legitimately marriageable, and their offspring are called **tjarputa** by the parents. A person at Yalata uses the term

**inyurpa** to refer to the opposite moiety , a term which also means 'wrong way' or 'forbidden'. Thus a man says he is **inyurpa** to a woman of the other moiety (cf. White,1981:18). Marriage in the correct moiety is, however, strongly disapproved of if the two are deemed to be 'too close-up'. The definition by Yalata people of 'close-up' is not precise. The Pintupi for example, distinguish close kin from distant kin 'on the basis of frequent coresidence and/or genealogical proximity' (Myers,1982:85). Silberbauer noted that Pitjantjatjara and Yangkuntjatjara people at Ernabella defined the prohibition as being between those who are **walytja**, which he translates as 'close relatives' (Silberbauer,1971:30). Yalata people however, use **walytja** in a much broader sense than this, much as that described by Hamilton for Mimili people (Hamilton,1979:304): '**walydja** are all those persons who can be brought into the framework of a kinship terminology'. I was told that two 'close-up cousins' who marry were called **nyarumparara**, which in earlier times was a punishable offence. White notes this term to refer to first cross-cousins of the opposite sex (White,1981:10). It was said that the wife's brothers would spear the offending man. In order to avoid marriages which would be deemed to be 'close up', preferred partners come from other communities, particularly Cundeelee and Indulkana. As White explains, 'distance used to be not only genealogical but geographical' (1981:11).

Having told me the 'proper way' in which marriages should be undertaken, and emphasising that **inyurpa** marriages were

forbidden, my informants could nevertheless list those in the population who were in **inyurpa** marriages - at least half-a dozen. Several of these were said to be men who had married their 'auntie', (someone of the incorrect moiety - ego's first ascending generation level). In other words, **inyurpa** is 'forbidden', but it still occurs. **Inyurpa** marriages, are then, a good example of the failure of this particular regularising strategy inevitably to produce 'regular' marriages.

Marriage partners are arranged at Yalata in accordance with traditional practice, but in reality it is now common for people to marry partners of their choice. As Palmer has documented, promising of daughters occurs at the time of circumcision of a youth (Palmer, 1982; cf. White, 1981). Women at Yalata said that the man should give gifts, such as spears and hair-belts to his prospective mother-in-law and father-in-law. But I was told that these days young people avoid taking up with the promised partner and take a wife or husband of their choice. Even if a man has fulfilled all his obligations, then, the woman does not necessarily marry the promised partner.

Polygyny is not now practiced - at least not openly. Yalata people recall instances of polygyny in the past with embarrassed amusement, especially those instances where men had five or six wives. This embarrassment is probably a result of mission influence, and is similar to the attitude taken by Yalata people to their former nakedness in the desert. If a spouse dies, a 'decent' interval is expected before remarriage.

There is no fixed period of time laid down, but there were complaints expressed at Yalata (to me, not to the offending individual), that a man who obtained another woman within six months of the death of his wife, had not behaved properly. 'Can't marry 'em too short' (i.e. too short a time) was the accompanying comment from the man who gave me this information.

There were several extra-marital affairs in progress at Yalata, but it appeared that unless community opinion became mobilized against these affairs they were tolerated, as was observed by Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski, 1926:79).

I was alerted to the underlying concern (mostly on the part of men) about fidelity, by a number of incidents in which men declined the opportunity to travel away from the settlement without their wives. On one occasion a man was willing to relinquish his place on a long-awaited bush trip because of fears for his wife's fidelity. Another man resigned his position as an Aboriginal Health Worker because the Health Commission insisted that he attend courses in other settlements, which meant leaving his wife behind.

Most extra-marital arrangements were conducted discreetly and seemed to cause little communal disturbance. However, one young couple conducted a highly visible and evidently disapproved extra-marital liaison over a period of about eight months. As a result there was considerable derogatory gossip, and the public spectacle of weekly brawls and arguments among the main

protagonists. The relationship involved Kim and Liz, both in their early twenties, each married to another partner and with young children. The affair started while Liz's husband was in gaol. When he returned there were a series of public disputes (sometimes violent) between the parties. Sometimes Aboriginal onlookers were attacked. On one occasion, Liz wounded a woman's head with a boomerang, on the grounds that she was talking about her. (Another woman sitting nearby muttered that there **was** something to talk about, wasn't there?) The rejected (and newly released) husband arrived at camp one afternoon unexpectedly and hit his wife's head with an axe before anyone could intervene. Onlookers hurriedly hid their crowbars and axes in case he lunged for further weapons, and he was eventually disarmed.

Community disapproval was expressed by the couple being driven out from the camps into the bush. Kim's mother 'growled' (verbally abused) the couple, and burnt their blankets and cassette tapes, and Kim's MM also 'growled' him. It seemed that members of the community disapproved of the liaison for a variety of stated reasons. To my bewilderment, opinion was divided as to whether their relationship was 'wrong way' or not, although it was generally accepted that they were 'close-up cousins' (Kim's MF and Liz's FF were full brothers). Those of a Christian inclination perceived the relationship to be adultery and therefore shameful (**kunta pulka**). Others disapproved because the adulterous woman was the mother of a small child. An

additional element which obscured any clear-cut assessment of the affair was that a reconciliation between Kim and his rejected wife Rose was discouraged. His mother wanted to send him away to Cundeelee to 'get promise' (to take up a betrothed wife). It seemed that the original marriage between Kim and Rose had not been wholeheartedly approved (both were from Yalata), and this was a good opportunity to make appropriate new arrangements. The incident highlights the fluidity of the definition of 'wrongness' in marriage at Yalata, as well as the social controls that can be brought to bear on individuals if opinion becomes mobilized against their union.

### **The Law**

Ritual performances associated with religious belief and practices are conducted at least once a year at Yalata, and parties of men and women also travel elsewhere to attend ceremonies. Apart from the induction of novices, Yalata adults take part periodically in the cyclic travelling rituals which are brought to Yalata from the west and from Indulkana in the north, such as Kurungura (cf. White, 1979). Within the generally heightened level of awareness of correct and incorrect behaviour evident during ritual, there was simultaneously a marked tolerance for a range of potential (and actual) acts of disruption to the proceedings.

Yalata people use the term **inma** to describe certain categories of performance involving singing and movement. R. & C. Berndt document varieties of **inma** performed at Ooldea, saying that the

term was used for sacred and non-sacred ceremonies, including men's secret performances, childrens' 'play-about' ceremonies, and rain-making ceremonies (1942a:329; 1942c:165;1943b:133; cf.White, 1979; Kartomi,1970). At Yalata, men's ritual is more commonly referred to as 'business' rather than **inma**. Women, however, refer to their religious rituals as **inma**; the term is also used to describe particular forms of Christian singing, particularly the singing associated with recent (since 1981) Aboriginal Christian movement. Women at Yalata engage in their own ritual as well as having a prescribed role within predominantly male ritual associated with, for example, the circumcision of boys. On these occasions the separation between the sexes is most noticeable, and the rules of behaviour are non-negotiable. I had the opportunity to observe and participate in the ritual activities of Yalata women on several occasions, particularly in October 1981 when preliminary ritual took place for the circumcision of two boys.

With the advent of ritual activities, virtually the entire population was galvanised into a state of expectancy and excitement which impinged upon many normal activities. People became purposive and organised as a group. Life took on, for the duration of the ritual, a qualitatively different order. Preparations were made to receive a large number of visitors from the north (Indulkana), with several whole sheep carcasses being ordered from the nearby sheep station to provide food. Water tanks were filled and repositioned. A special Big Camp



was convened some three kilometres north of the settlement, and all outlying camps were relinquished for this purpose. All these arrangements were undertaken by Yalata people without the assistance of the European staff: there were no demands that staff should 'help' **anangu** on this occasion. Meanwhile, the novices, known as 'special boys' had already been taken by road to Indulkana, where the party would collect men required for specific ritual roles. The preparatory rituals at Yalata were performed by the men only at a ground twenty-five metres away from the Big Camp. Women and children were sent out of the camp in the early mornings. They all left quietly and rapidly to sit at a special women's camp (**ilkapri**) throughout the day. Here a small water tank had been left and the women and younger children spent their time sitting in the shade, boiling billies, playing cards or making artefacts, awaiting the call back to the big camp. When a call was received from the men later in the day, the women packed their belongings and made a ritual return to the camp, on foot and in silence. The mother of one novice led the column of women. Later at the camp itself, the men walked among the **wiltja** for a short secret rite, while all women and children hid under blankets. On several evenings, in ceremonies involving both men and women, the Z and close patri- and matri- parallel and cross female cousins of the boy (together known as **nyanpinyi**) danced (**pintjila inma**), and the M and MM cried for the boys.

During the weeks of the novices' absence at Indulkana, there was constant speculation and anxiety expressed by the men as to

the expected date of their return to Yalata. Their concern over conforming to the required 'proper' behaviour was acute. At one stage, any headlights appearing after dark from the expected direction were believed to presage the imminent arrival of the party. After the party had been gone for ten days, radio contact with Indulkana was made by the men to discover their whereabouts. This was the last permitted contact, for after this, a ban was placed by the men on the use of the radio to **any** community in the north, for any reason, until the party returned. To use the radio for this purpose, it was said, was 'not allowed'. A white Australian male however, was asked by the men to make a further call in order to find out whether the party had reached Tarcoola yet.

This incident may be understood as follows. Yalata men and women are always extremely anxious to do things 'properly' whenever they are involved in ritual or matters associated with ritual in conjunction with the northern Pitjantjatjara. For example, when attending a Pitjantjatjara Council meeting in the north at Coffin Hill (an important site for Pitjantjatjara people) Yalata people were highly agitated and anxious upon their arrival at the designated place. They created a sense of occasion among themselves by stating that a party would come to meet them and give them instructions as to where they should camp. (In fact this did not happen). They continued to exhibit an exaggerated sense of propriety and remained silent and restrained throughout the meeting with a large contingent of

**anangu**. Constructing a ban on the use of the radio (and then making an exception to the ban) were strategies wherein Yalata men called upon the notion of the proper way, and ostentatiously honoured a traditional rule which discouraged the sending of scouts or making deliberate contact with an incoming ritual party. In order to be **seen** to be maintaining the official representation of propriety, (in the eyes of others at Yalata, and of those in the north who might criticise them), the men exaggerated the rule and expanded it to include the use of the radio. In order to avoid the unwelcome ignorance that came about as a result of this action, they made an exception to the new 'rule' and allowed someone who was not **anangu** to make a call. 4 From the point of view of Bourdieu's analysis, the group of actors evolved strategies which manipulated and adapted the established order, strategies which also served to perpetuate this order by honouring the long-established 'spirit' of the rule.

Women at Yalata have their own ritual life quite apart from that of the men, and over the period of the preparatory men's ritual for the novices I witnessed two **yamiwara** performances by senior women. **Yamiwara** is the name for a lake near Port Augusta, and the ritual reenacts the travels of two mythological women who began their journey there (cf. White, 1975:133 for a brief description of the myth). The performance was led on each occasion by two different women. Each was in her late 50s or early 60s, with children and grandchildren. Only **minyma pulka** ('big women', i.e. with many

children) may perform the ritual. Young children (up to six or seven years old) may attend, but pubescent or pre-pubescent girls are excluded because of the sexual power of the performances. One eleven year old girl attempted to accompany us, but she was prevented from doing so. The women said that it would be 'too strong' for her, for a girl might 'get love' from a man if she attended the performance. The enactment of the **Yamiwara** was deemed to evoke considerable power which could affect those present, and the women controlled this power by excluding those who would be too vulnerable to it. Similarly, they exerted control in order to contain any negative influences which might affect men. For example the ritual ground was potentially dangerous and steps were taken to ensure that men did not accidentally enter into its field of influence. For this reason, both performances were carried out some distance from the camp. On two occasions vehicles became visible, and the women admonished the children not to wave, and threw sand into the air to nullify the effects of the performance (cf. White, 1975:133; Bell, 1983:173). At times throughout, and at the end of the performance, footprints were erased from the sand, and as we left, one woman tied a plastic bag to a tree to mark the place. The ceremonial leader said this was because it was 'dangerous' if a man saw the place (cf. Kaberry, 1939:255), and the bag was to warn men to keep away, or else they might 'get love' for any woman there.

The purpose of the ritual was explicitly stated to be **kuri**

**mantjini** ('obtaining a lover'). 5 The women also referred to the ritual as **inma kula-kula**. **Kula-kula** is an expression noted by R.M. & C.H. Berndt at Ooldea to mean going 'after men', or 'looking for men ... with erotic intent' (1943b:145; cf. Roheim, 1933:218-9). The **Yamiwara**, then, is a ritual of what is sometimes referred to as love magic (cf R. & C. Berndt, 1943b: 134-149; Kaberry, 1939:255). Roheim terms it 'love charm' (Roheim, 1933:214). Bell has quite rightly rejected the use of terms such as love magic and charm as pejorative, and has urged a reconsideration of the conceptualization of such womens' ceremonies (Bell, 1983:162, 176-179). She observes that these ceremonies also celebrate country by tracing the movements of mythological beings across the landscape (1983:163). At Yalata on this occasion, the focus on managing relationships between men and women was paramount. Munn points out that the Warlpiri women's **Jawalyu**, although performed for love magic purposes, was also enacted in association with men's initiation ceremonies (Munn, 1970:161). This was the case at Yalata, for the rituals were performed when the two novices were being prepared for circumcision, when they would be promised wives. The first of the two **Yamiwara** performances was held the morning after the opening ritual by the men for the two boys. The women were thus contributing their ritual power to the on-going management of male-female relationships.

### **Bending the rules**

Both sets of ritual performances - those of the men and those

of the women - were enacted ostensibly according to the correct procedures to which all those at Yalata subscribe. I was able to observe the absolute obedience of the women and children when the orders to leave the camp were given, and their quickness to hide under blankets at the required time. Similarly the men did not approach the women's *inma*, and the excluded child agreed to be sent away from the women's performance. The fact that the various parties to these agreed-upon sets of actions complied without question, served to further legitimate the power of the Law. Without the willing compliance of the women, for example, the men would be unable to fulfill their ritual obligations in the weeks preceding the circumcision of the two novices. The presence and absence of the women at specified times was itself a crucial aspect of the men's attention to secrecy. At this time, Yalata men and women paid great attention to the details of the proper ways of doing things, to the extent of creating 'new' forms out of old prohibitions, such as banning the use of the radio, which was an adaptation of the traditional prohibition on contact on such occasions. Adaptations to formal practices also occurred. For example, an innovation has occurred in which the men now dismantle their secret ritual headgear after use, whereas formerly these were hidden intact in the bush. The men explained that this change was made because of an incident - at some time within living memory - when a child accidentally discovered such an item and was found playing with it. The child's mother had been speared to death. 6 What was once an 'absolute' of the Law (retaining

intact headgear), was drastically amended, and the amendment is now supported by the active compliance of the men.

The Law is not absolute, but remains **apparently** so, unless there is sufficient reason to change it. Action, in these instances, determined the rules - not the reverse. Maddock (1984) raises some of these issues, asking whether any norm can bind if all are optional. He provides further examples of Aboriginal people 'grafting new kinds of transaction onto their inherited stock', thus 'defining the manner in which transactions must be executed, and by whom' (Maddock, 1984:237).

Notwithstanding the apparently strict adherence to the principles by which they were bound during the ritual period, Yalata people who were drinkers, continued to drink alcohol unhindered for the duration of the rituals. 7 The Big Camp specially convened for the rituals became a noisy drinker's camp at night, and sleep was disturbed virtually every night when those who were inebriated returned to their camps, shouting and arguing. The formalised necessity to camp together meant that the disturbances affected everyone, for all were within earshot. The beer ration, far from being suspended throughout this period was, by special request, given out early, to give people time to collect their cans, participate in ritual, and return to camp. An adult male, who kept his vehicle in good working order for the importation of alcohol, who was also a participant in ritual, continued to import port wine from Nundroo roadhouse and distribute it to those who

had given him orders. My male colleague, who attended the mens' performances, reported that several men were visibly inebriated during the day's ritual. On at least one occasion singing was cancelled because the required men were drunk. Some groups of people signalled their disapproval of this state of affairs by moving out to smaller camps away from the ritual Big Camp. By so doing they were forced to transgress the commonly accepted practice for all to camp together on these occasions. Their departure was the only immediate and overt expression of disapproval apparent from non-drinkers.

There was an opportunity for communal disapproval to be expressed about alcohol use at this time, for European staff in conjunction with non-drinking Aborigines, organized a meeting to discuss alcohol. The majority of those present however, declined to participate in the discussion. One man refused to act as translator from English into Pitjantjatjara on the grounds that he was a drinker and wanted no 'official' role in the meeting. (A translator was needed because the Community Advisor was to address the meeting.) Although the women publicly berated men for their drinking and their failure to conduct ritual properly (and indeed this view was held in private by many at Yalata), the amount of public pressure was not concerted enough for drinkers to desist during the ritual period. People fitted in ritual activities with their drinking business (performing while inebriated), and the drinking business was adapted to ritual activity (the beer ration given out early). Self-interest, then, (getting drunk, making money



by running in alcohol) was not regulated by the mechanism of the Law, (by the necessity to perform ritual), but was freely achieved by those who chose to pursue it. There was no perceived (or acknowledged) contradiction for those who chose to participate in both the drinking enterprise and the Law. This accepted blend of drinking with the Law is similar to that described at Wiluna, Western Australia by Sackett:

... the failure to check excessive drinking ... is partially a product of the Law itself. For while the use and abuse of alcohol is having harmful influences on the Law, in both its social and ritual manifestations, the latter contains no sanctions regarding the former. People may persist in drinking and drunkenness because of the Law, not in spite of it.

(Sackett, 1977:97-8)

However at Yalata individuals adapted the Law and 'created' a new sanction against radio contact with the north, and radios were not ordained in the Dreaming. The secret headgear are now unravelled because of a wandering child, whereas before they were hidden intact. The Law was negotiated and innovation occurred on these occasions and the negotiations were successful because a consensus prevailed, because the changes 'fitted in', because no-one had any strong objections (cf. Myers, 1982:103). Partly because enough people wanted to participate in drinking, they avoided implementing any strategies that would hinder this activity. Some of these men were the so-called 'elders'. Additionally, there was simply no strongly organised public or corporate opinion against alcohol, which had the support of a significant number of individuals,

which could be mobilised to enact new arrangements with respect to alcohol and ritual. Drinkers continued to drink, not because 'the Law' provides no sanction, but because people **chose not** to make the Law work in this way. Because many ritually mature men were also drinkers, it was simply not in their interest to arouse opinion in order to attempt a ban on drinking at ritual time.

The women, for their part, did not indulge in alcohol in conjunction with their ritual performance - although some of them did join evening drinking groups. Within the numbers of women who performed **yamiwara** at this time were those who criticised each other for alleged impropriety. This was, however, associated with the proper conduct of the performance, and not for any after-hours activities (cf. Bern, 1979, for an account of personal politics in male ritual).

There were two senior women who each organized and led a performance, Pearlle and Ruby. Ruby organized the first performance, and Pearlle initiated a second a week later. Ruby was inconvenienced on this second occasion, as she had (without telling me) planned to go out for artefact wood that day, hoping to use my vehicle. She declined to attend the ritual. Pearlle persisted with her plans and together we drove to various camps to collect her chosen singers. The performance she organized took place within two kilometres of Big Camp, and close to a much-used track. In contrast, a week earlier the **inma** had taken place in an isolated area 15 kms away from the

nearest camp. As a result of the proximity of the second **inma** to the road, camp vehicles were visible twice during the performance. These incidents were evidently communicated by someone present to Ruby (who had stayed behind). She chose to focus on this critically, and used it in an attempt to mobilise opinion against Pearlie. She took the opportunity to assert that the ritual had not been conducted in a 'proper' way. She stated that it was performed too close to the road, and that this was 'dangerous'. She also asserted that there were not enough women to do it 'properly' (in fact there were twelve women on this occasion, and only eight the previous week). These grumbles (expressed to me, and to others afterwards) by Ruby, arose in part from her non-participation and her inability to procure the use of the vehicle for her planned woodgathering. She wished to recruit a group of her own for a practical purpose (collecting wood) and instead Pearlie had succeeded in recruiting a 'rival' group. Ruby was also an assertive and authoritative woman, who liked to be in charge, and to be seen to be a boss for **inma**.

The suggestion that Pearlie had not behaved 'properly' was a convenient strategy whereby she could satisfy her resentment at the way things had developed, whilst throwing doubt onto Pearlie's competence in ritual. In order to criticise Pearlie, then, Ruby's strategy was to call upon an interpretation of 'properness' : the **inma** should be out of sight and hearing of teenagers and men; and it should be undertaken by a sizeable

group of women. I suggest that these general definitions of 'properness' are commonly held and agreed upon by Yalata women (i.e. Ruby has not plucked them from a void.) However, because the definition of what constitutes a 'proper' **inma** is, to a large extent normatively indeterminate (cf. Moore, 1983:50) and ambiguous (i.e. there is no stated minimum distance from the nearest camp, nor an absolute quorum required) Ruby was able to extemporize on a possible infringement. However, this was not easy, because the very indeterminacy which Ruby exploited in order to criticise Pearlie, also served to sustain the correctness of Pearlie's performance. Additionally, Pearlie was able to take advantage of the vagueness of the definition of the perfect Yamiwara performance because of her status. She is known to be the 'boss' of this **inma**. She led its performance on virtually every occasion witnessed by I.M. White in the 1960s (White, Pers. comm.) In addition, she holds in her possession secret religious objects used by the women in their performance of related myth. These factors enabled Pearlie to retain her position as a woman who has the right to lead **yamiwara** performance, and to interpret the 'correct' procedures with a degree of freedom which is, perhaps, not extended to others.

### **Secrecy : an agreed fiction**

At Yalata, as in other parts of Aboriginal Australia, access to certain categories of myth and ritual is restricted according to sex and status. The most obvious of these restrictions is that existing between the sexes, in which case women and men

may not witness what takes place during the other's rituals and only men are privy to the details of particular myths. Additionally, there exists a state of 'suspension of disbelief' whereby women who are not, by tradition or custom to know or speak of certain things, know a great deal. What they know is out of context, though, in that they never witness male ritual; there is a qualitative difference between knowing the form of something (such as a mythological narrative), and witnessing its ritual enactment. However, men seriously maintain an outward show which denies that the women know **anything**; privately, the men realise that the older women have extensive knowledge, but all (men and women) agree to maintain the fiction that they do not know.

There are restrictions on women knowing and telling of myths associated with the Two Men or **Wati Kutjara**, one of the secret-sacred men's myths. Senior Yalata women, though, know some of these stories, and tell them in whispers to mature women when they are assured of privacy (cf. White, 1975:125). By so doing, they have created a new order of secrecy over which they have control, for in the telling, they may embellish and extemporise. No narrative can be identical word-for-word. However, such whispered exchanges were not made known to men, for this would undermine the pretense that women did not know the stories. When women were worried that men might discover the extent of their knowledge, they expressed the fear that 'they might report 'em'. It was never made clear who might 'report' them to whom.

There are also restrictions on the use of certain words. For example, people at Yalata use the term **milmilpa** to refer to things forbidden which have a secret-sacred connotation. <sup>8</sup> In fact, at Yalata, even the word **milmilpa** was not normally spoken by women, although in the northern Pitjantjatjara communities it is used openly at meetings and public discussions. At a Yalata public meeting to discuss land matters, a senior woman used the word **milmilpa** with reference to sacred sites. Later, a male colleague questioned a Yalata man about her use of the term. 'Women don't know it', he replied, 'they can't use it'. When presented with the information that indeed a woman had used it at the meeting, he replied, 'Then she's a liar'. By calling her a liar, he utilised the Aboriginal English meaning of the term, suggesting that she had broken a promise (cf. Sansom, 1980:162; Nash, 1979:106). In other words, women 'agree' not to say this word. If a woman used the word, then she broke that promise. Women **comply** then, under normal circumstances, with the prohibition on saying the words that they know (but which the men would prefer to believe that they do not know). As Catherine Berndt pointed out, women fall in with mens' demands (sometimes) but 'in their own way, not strictly according to mens' instructions' (C. Berndt, 1965:227). In this case the woman who uttered the forbidden word for 'forbidden', pronounced that she was eligible to use it, and by so doing, she drew upon the weight of its symbolic value as a restricted word. She denied the exclusiveness of that value to men alone, and demonstrated that her status (and

her northern origins) were such that she could treat the local notions of what was 'allowed', with some license. This incident highlights the fluidity in the criteria of permissible and forbidden deeds and words - or rather that these categories in themselves exist only as a shifting inventory.

As a result of the agreed fiction that each sex is not privy to the other's secrets, there were on occasions mildly humorous exchanges between men and women in which each subtly communicated that they did, after all, 'know'. I illustrate this with two examples:

Camping south-west of Ooldea, Ruby's daughter finds a small yellow lizard (**milpali**) which Ruby takes and buries in hot ashes for cooking where we sit. As my male colleague approaches, Ruby whispers to me that she will have a game with him, and proceeds to make him what we have buried in the fire. With much winking and many knowing looks, she finally whisks out the lizard and waggles its tail at him. As she did so, she whispered '**wati milpali**' and giggled.

The significance of the lizard is that **milpali** is one of the Two Men of Pitjantjatjara mythology. Ruby thus demonstrated not only her knowledge of what the goanna 'really' was, but also demonstrated her superior status, within which she may take liberties with the Law. She indicated to a man who was privy to Aboriginal men's knowledge, that she too knew of these things. The second example is rather different.

I am driving a married couple, Jim and Margaret, and another adult woman, Annie, out for artefact wood in the region of a camp we had lived at two years previously. I realize that it is the camp from which we had a Yamiwara **inma**, and that both women in the car participated. As we drive along

the track, Jim indicates trees in the direction of our **inma** place and tells me to turn in because the wood looks promising. Annie quickly interjects, 'Wiya!' (no!) women's place that one'. As I drive on Jim chuckles to himself and remarks aside to me that unlike many other men, **he**, knows all about women's business.

Jim may have committed a **faux pas** and been slightly embarrassed as a result, or he may have deliberately tried to alter our course in order to tease the women. Whatever the true explanation, Jim recovered by announcing that it was all known to him anyway, for he was a knowledgeable man. In summary, the domain of the secret is maintained by agreed-upon action whereby one group (male or female) asserts that knowledge is restricted, while declining to acknowledge the exceptions.

New prohibitions and definitions of secrecy are instituted at times and are enforced by mutual agreement and compliance. An example of this concerns the Lake Dey-Dey area, which is known to all at Yalata to contain a significant series of sites of which the lake is one. The name Dey-Dey is an anglicised version of the Pitjantjatjara name **tii-tii** (Magpie lark). The lake is associated with the mythological **minyma tii-tii**, the Magpie Lark Woman. The mythology associated the lake also concerns the Two Men myth and the inauguration of the practice of circumcision, and thus the sites are prohibited to women and boys. The area had been referred to for at least twenty years as, simply, 'Dey-Dey'. In May 1982 when the embryonic outstation camp was set up south of the lake, substantial numbers of people began to live there. Two years later it became known that the name Dey-Dey had become forbidden



(**milmilpa**), and a new name was found for the outstation, which was called Oak Valley from then on. In this case a new Law (as part of the overall Law) was created. The instigation of the new, decisively secular name Oak Valley, was a strategic decision which heightened the closed, sacred nature of the geographical Lake Dey-Dey, and firmly separated it from the mundane world of the outstation (containing both women and children). If the name for the outstation had remained the same, the two locations may have become conflated in peoples' minds. The strategy of creating a 'new' unspeakable word also served to reinforce the superiority of the older, ritually mature men - whose position had recently received a fillip as a result of the grant of land title (and the numerous 'consultations' which had taken place before that time, which had focussed largely on them).

### **Sharing and politeness**

There are social conventions which are observed by Yalata people, and these are deemed to be 'proper' modes of conduct - some are articulated as being the Law, others are explained as 'that's our way, **anangu** way'. However, within the conventions of 'proper' behaviour, were examples of evasions, deflections and manipulations.

Aspects of hunting are subject to the rules of the Law; but despite the official presentation of certain prescribed actions

as being 'absolute', there was nevertheless evidence of adaptations which had been introduced for reasons of expediency. Red kangaroo (**malu**) is associated with ritual and mythology and there are rules covering the disembowelling and carrying of the animals. Women may hunt **malu**, although as they do not use rifles, they must rely on their dogs if they wish to hunt. Disembowelling must be accomplished according to Law, and is usually - though not always - undertaken by men. The contents of the stomach and lower intestine are cleaned out, the stomach carefully replaced and the slit sutured with a stick bound in a figure of eight with the intestine. No-one at Yalata will eat **malu** unless it has been gutted and tied up in this way. Once a truck driver left a bag containing a red kangaroo which had been hit by a truck close to an Aboriginal camp. No-one partook in his well-meaning gift because the kangaroo had not been gutted properly. Red kangaroo blood may not be washed off the hands; the blood is considered to be 'too dangerous' as one woman told me. The hind legs must be broken, so that the hunter may carry the animal in the required manner on his shoulders, back to camp. It was said that a man who did not carry the **malu** in the proper way was ridiculed, and others would ask if he had a rabbit on his head. A man carrying the animal into camp on his shoulders is a notable event which produces cries of approval from others. Although Yalata people still observe the procedures for gutting and tying up, nowadays large animals are transported back to camp on the bullbar or roofrack of a Toyota, and their blood spills out everywhere. 9

Hunting for both animal and vegetable food was hard work, especially the laborious digging out of rabbit and wombat from their burrows, and the hacking at roots in order to obtain witchetty grubs. People frequently worked in teams to undertake such economic activity; on several occasions I watched a husband and wife work together. There was no strict sexual division of the labour of hunting on the one hand and foraging on the other. Men sometimes spent whole afternoons digging out witchetty grubs, and women as noted already hunted kangaroo. Women frequently worked together on a maze of rabbit holes, guessing at their tunnels underground by poking with crowbars, and blocking up entrances. Animals caught were distributed between those who had participated. However, generosity in distributing hunted foods was not indiscriminate. After one morning's witchetty grub collecting with an older woman I noticed that she hid her billycan full of grubs so that the children who had accompanied us in the vehicle would not see the large number she had collected. This meant that she avoided having to respond to their inevitable requests. When we returned to camp, she gave the grubs out to chosen kin. We sat at her camp fire and lightly roasted a few. Her husband and I were allowed to help ourselves to those which were cooking and she called over her FBDS and then two of her DSs and gave them handfuls. A deaf man, not closely related, but whom she 'looked after' had waited patiently while the grubs were given out. He was given some damper and one grub (cf. Hamilton, 1979:222).

Co-operative pursuits such as hunting and collecting artefact wood were undertaken by groups recruited for the purpose. People shared their equipment, labour and food. Getting a special cut of wood out of a tree often required individuals to work together chopping and levering. Digging up long roots also required group effort. However, people kept a tally of how many pieces were theirs, and collected them up at the end of the day.

Preparing artefacts for sale was also a co-operative effort, with different people carving and then decorating and finishing objects. Each participant received a share in the final price. Generosity in the sharing of possessions and food are highly valued qualities, and qualities which are instilled in Yalata people as children. It was common to see children emerge from the store with a pie or sweet, and then wordlessly allow other children to take a share. Indeed refusal to share was one of the few disvalued actions by children likely to provoke a smack, together with the admonition **nampura!** (greedy). It was high praise to refer to someone as a **minyma** or **wati kanpi**. **Kanpi** means literally 'fat' but is understood to mean kind, good, compassionate and generous. Yalata people also use the term when they speak appreciatively of Europeans they have known who, they say, 'looked after' them properly. The concept of 'looking after' includes with it generosity, and when recalling gifts of money or goods from Europeans, people would often comment that the giver was **kanpi**. The opposite,

disvalued quality in an individual is to be 'hard', or **witu witu**. Someone who is **witu witu** is ungenerous, selfish, uncaring, uncompassionate and who fails in their obligations to others. European staff who overtly refused Aboriginal requests, who became angry or berated people were designated as **witu witu**.

In order to avoid being designated as **witu witu**, whilst attempting to retain possession of some of their goods, Yalata people utilise mechanisms whereby they may deflect unwanted requests or even deceive the requestor. For example, the usual place to store chewed tobacco is behind the ear - a position which is usually visible to others. I was shown how it is possible to hide a wad of chewed tobacco at the side of the mouth, while pretending not to have any at all. The woman who showed me this then assumed an air of exaggerated innocence: 'Bacca? nah, I got nothing! no-thing!'. If I brought a small gift for someone (for example some sewing needles, or a crochet hook) or handed over money, it was tucked rapidly away under a blouse in the hope that no-one else had seen it (cf. Myers, 1979:357). I also learned that there were acceptable ways of saying no (cf. Draper, 1978:45). Some elderly people at Yalata were persistent in their requests of Europeans (including anthropologists) for goods and services. However some people politely phrased their requests in the negative: 'you take me for wood today, or maybe **wiya?** (no)'. Delay, promoted by the assiduous use of the term **tjinguru** (maybe) was a useful technique employed by many people to avoid doing

something altogether. People avoided going for meat when they felt lazy by saying it was 'too hot'; they persuaded others to carry water or firewood for them, claiming backache. One man avoided having to be hospitable to drunks who disturbed him in the night by saying that he had taken a sleeping tablet. People pretended to be asleep and so avoided a host of unwanted involvements. When drunks were arriving at camp late at night, people doused their camp fires so the inebriates would not find their way to that camp. In this way people avoided the inevitable demands for food and blankets made by drunks, as well as their interminable ramblings and noise. Elaborate detours on side tracks were made by those who wished to avoid encounters with drinkers who might demand lifts or food. The problem with dealing with those who were inebriated, which was well known to Yalata people, was that drunks were less alert to subtleties of this kind. Those who were sober had difficulty in refusing them using subtle means. Drinkers had arguments among themselves as a result of instances of outright refusal to share alcohol.

There are certain customary modes of behaviour at Yalata which are not codified as such in the exaggerated, formalised way which developed for example, in Western societies (cf. Elias, 1978). The non-observation of these 'manners' is likely to bring little more than mild gossip. It is, for example, polite to approach another's camp circuitously, with a cough or low singing to announce a visitor's imminent arrival.

With no doors to knock on and no fences to mark out private from public space, this is an accepted ritual of approach. Similarly, visitors to camps do not drive and park their vehicles hard up alongside a **wiltja**. Visiting police did this on several occasions - a rudeness which did not pass unnoticed. There were grumbles (but no direct complaints) if vehicles did 'wheelies' or drove fast, churning up heavy dust clouds near camps. When an individual joined a group sitting at a hearth, it was common to see someone smooth away prickles from the ground, and reposition a blanket or sheet for them to sit on, while saying '**nyinama**' ('sit!' imperative). It was courteous to take a firestick to the camp of someone without fire. Yalata people usually ate together as hearth groups, but with their backs to one another. Spitting is accepted behaviour, although the more polite turn to one side to do so. People attended to their bodily functions in the bush away from camp, and again it was common when on such an expedition to hum softly or cough so as to announce your presence to anyone else similarly occupied. When I was alone at my camp, those with **wiltja** in my immediate vicinity showed extra concern. This was because camping alone, or 'sitting down self' was considered undesirable and worthy of compassion. On these occasions I was called **ngaltutjara** (poor fellow) and women offered their dogs and their children to camp with me. If I stayed at camp alone during the day, someone would bring an elderly person to sit down with me, adding the simple explanation: 'company'.

## Negotiable absolutes?

I have shown that social and religious conventions which are often depicted by Yalata people (and by Aboriginal people in general) as being absolute and unchangeable are negotiated, adapted, and subject to innovation. Yalata's inhabitants are generally agreed on the overarching dispositions of the Law. However, social actors have ensured that the context is always fluid, and it is only in 'officializing' discourse that 'the Law' and other conventions are presented as if they were non-negotiable. For example, although the 'official' discourse holds that women cannot know or say certain things, in reality **some** women can and do use certain words without fear of punishment. Similarly, initiated mature men are 'required' to participate in the preparatory singing for ritual, but in fact on occasions the numbers are few, and the singing is cancelled because men opted to drink. **Inyurpa** marriages are not allowed, but they still occur from time to time.

Although at first glance there appears to be a hierarchy of rules in which some are held to be stricter or more absolute than others (because some appear to be adjusted less than others), this may in fact be an artefact of something else. It is more likely that, for a variety of reasons, the practical interests of groups of individuals are best satisfied by the use of (or by reference to) certain orders of 'officializing' discourse rather than others. For example, there were good reasons why the name 'Dey Dey' became designated as a



restricted word, and the outstation was consequently renamed. Men chose to amend an existing practice, for reasons associated with ritual and mythology. In the process, certain men reinforced their status with regard to the land. However, in another case I have mentioned, there was no reason why the practical group would wish to adapt or negotiate the Law. When a party of Yalata people encroached on to unfamiliar land in the Great Victoria Desert, the men designated it to be 'dangerous' to proceed. They wished to avoid making any mistakes (and were genuinely anxious about doing so); it was simply not in the interests of anyone, male or female, in the party to precipitate any change of procedure.

When wishing to emphasise the 'official' nature of prohibitions, Yalata people speak of 'danger' and of certain categories of action being 'not allowed'. Breaches of 'not allowed' prohibitions were once enforced by spearing, and Yalata people can relate incidents in the past in which individuals were speared for breaching the Law. It is difficult to assess the currency of this sanction now. Spearings as punishment have occurred in recent years, but under duress from the European-Australian justice system in cases of manslaughter. 10 Despite the apparent absence of spearing as punishment now, the threat of the sanction still carries considerable force. When the women worry that they might be 'reported', it is this that they fear. Community disapproval in the form of a 'growl' or harangue at public meetings or at camp are utilised to berate those who are

perceived to have breached conventions: but these have been singularly ineffective, for example in curbing alcohol use at ritual time and at other times. Additionally, harangues (which I discuss in more detail later) are rarely aimed overtly at an individual, but are directed on a generalised level in which the irregularity of certain forms of behaviour is criticised. Disapproval in the form of gossip is widespread, but has failed to prevent certain liaisons and marriages from taking place. While maintaining then, that some things are 'not allowed' or not 'proper way', people at Yalata nevertheless allow breaches to occur.

The enduring principles of the Law and of the multitudinous ways of doing things at Yalata are subject to change, adaptation and deflection by people according to the exigencies of daily life. The habitus that is the principle of action for people at Yalata, is thus socially created, perpetuated and transformed, producing fluid and situationally-specific strategies, which form a rich repertoire used as the referent for action by Yalata people. Some adjustments to agreed principles occur as a result of situational factors, local politics and consensual tolerance. Others come about as a result of mobilised opinion. Success or failure in this endeavour in turn depends to a large extent on whether people choose to make an issue of others' actions. Not only do Yalata people co-operate for the purpose of what Comaroff and Roberts call 'enlightened self-interest' (1981), but adjustments to the principles of 'proper' action are also

largely made to this end.

## NOTES

1. Meggitt (1962:251) describes the term **djugaruru** among the Walbiri to mean the Law, 'a term that may be translated also as "the line" or "the straight or true way" '. (See also Munn, 1970:151). Yalata people also use the expression 'true' (**mulapa**).
2. Myers (1976) lists the meanings of the term **ngura** and these are identical to the uses of the term at Yalata: **ngura** as country; **ngura** as a group of camps; **ngura** as the camp of an individual or a couple. He comments that the term 'incorporates sociocentric images of immovable place and stability with those of camps and shifting affiliations' (1976:318; cf. Hamilton, 1979:70-72).
3. The meaning of these terms is as follows:  
**tjana** = they      **miltjan** = flesh  
**nganana** = we      **tarka** = bones  
i.e. 'our bone' and 'their flesh'
4. Among the northern Pitjantjatjara the use of radios is now ubiquitous as a means of discovering if any ritual objects are in transit from one community to another, so that people know that they should avoid a certain route (Pers. comm. Kim Doohan).
5. R. & C. Berndt suggest that **mandjir** meaning 'get' (as in **kuri mantjini**) is, in some instances a synonym for **ma'rani**, meaning 'coitus' (1944a:229).
6. I should like to thank Kingsley Palmer for obtaining this information.
7. White reports (Pers. comm.) that during her fieldwork at Yalata in the 1960s, the special Big Camp was quiet and free from alcohol.
8. I learned recently that the term has been injected with a new meaning, which is not related to religious matters. The contaminated land around the Maralinga bomb sites is referred to as **ngura milmil** (forbidden country).
9. I.M. White reports that Yalata people were unwilling to wash **malu** blood off her vehicle which had been used for hunting. The women refused to clean the blood off, and a man finally did so (White, Pers. comm.)

10. There have been two such cases, both associated with alcohol, in 1976 and 1981. The judge in the first case released the accused from custody on condition that he should submit himself to the Tribal Elders' (R v Williams, 1976). This meant that he was, cursorily, speared. The case produced a dilemma for both Australian and Aboriginal Law, for the assailant claimed that his murderous assault on the deceased woman was justified under Aboriginal Law because she spoke words which women were not supposed to utter. If the European justice system had not intervened, it would have been left to Yalata people to decide whether his claim was justified. The fact remains that the spearings were undertaken somewhat unwillingly by Yalata men. The case touches upon human rights issues, of the sort alluded to by Maddock (1984:235), for in a sense, the Australian justice system was accepting in principle that the assailant had a 'right' to physically assault a woman for reasons of customary law. It gave tacit recognition of this 'right' by declining to punish the assailant under Australian law, and by 'sentencing' that individual to whatever penalty the so-called Tribal Elders could devise. (The case is discussed by Ward, 1976; Ligertwood, 1976; Eames, 1976.)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 'IT MUST BE SOMETHING':

#### ACCOMMODATING THE STRANGE AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE

A cosmology that contains a concept of order must also include a concept and accommodation of disorder. Without at least the hypothetical possibility of disorder there would be no antithesis in terms of which order could be conceived and no contrast against which it could be discerned.

The potential for conflict within the band is minimised by a number of factors. G/wi cosmology encourages a stoical acceptance of much misfortune as coming from a capricious and largely indifferent deity.

(Silberbauer, 1981:117 & 174)

There are at Yalata, as elsewhere, individuals who are 'different', those who are mentally or physically atypical in one way or another, whose disability, actions or behaviour mark them out from their fellows. They may not as individuals be necessarily disruptive to the flow of everyday life, but are nevertheless potentially disturbing to the social order. The natural world also produces events which are potentially disordering, bizarre and unusual. Within the extremely negotiable set of notions of customary action recognised at Yalata, were understandings of such atypical or 'deviant' events and individuals. These understandings, although clearly discerning those who were thought to be unusual, did not attribute blame or negativity to the individual concerned.

Just as Yalata people have actively evolved strategies whereby they adapt aspects of the Law and of social convention in order to achieve self or group interest of an external nature, so too have they developed strategies for explaining and accommodating circumstances which are subjectively disturbing, incomprehensible or even threatening. These strategies serve to order the potentially dis-ordering into an overall view of the world. As Rock explains:

In their joint efforts to understand and sustain social life, men designate certain phenomena as deviant and endow them with special properties. These designations serve to explain, separate and justify particular activities. They impose an order on what might otherwise be an inchoate world.  
(Rock, 1973:26).

Higginbotham proposes that distinct explanatory models derived from cultural folk theories about health, are 'conceptual resources' employed by communities in order to meet effectively the disruptive impact of illness and disability (Higginbotham, 1984:234). Western society has its own ordering mechanisms such as psychiatry, psychology and medical science which provide us with the comfort of labels and explanations. 1 These explanatory models tend to locate the cause (for example, of mental disorder) in the individual psyche. Aborigines at Yalata, in keeping with other non-Western peoples, give a greater weight to spiritual, supernatural and somatic causes which are interdependent (cf. Reid, 1983; White & Marsella, 1982:23). People at Yalata have a varied repertoire of sense-making explanations which form the 'stories' surrounding events or people who are somehow distinct from others. Other sense-

making strategies are improvisations formulated by individuals who may interpret an event or an occurrence by infusing it with a particular significance and an appropriate explanation. In some cases, individuals inject meaning into apparently insignificant occurrences.

The various strategies discussed here make sense to Yalata people because the suffering or ailment which is explained, is often understood to be a natural consequence of failure to comply with the normative obligations of the 'proper way'. They are perceived to be the result of breaches of social or spiritual norms. This is notwithstanding the fact that the proper way is itself in process and is constantly being reinvented by the people themselves. Individuals who have suffered the mental or physical consequences of such breaches are usually excused of the responsibility to fulfil the normative obligations expected of others, on the grounds that their infirmity or condition relieves them of these requirements. These explanatory models have in common an important factor: they provide a framework within which the causal agents are understood to lie outside the individual concerned, and to be therefore not of his responsibility. Although in terms of the 'story' which explains an individual's misfortune, he or she may be implicated in having 'brought it upon themselves' (in the case of a breach of the Law, for example), this becomes, in the thinking of Yalata people, a subsidiary issue. The forces which acted to bring about the subsequent mental or physical disorder are still understood to



be beyond the control of individuals. This 'decentring' of aetiology has significant ramifications in terms of stigma and blame, as White and Marsella point out:

Beliefs about supernatural forces and beings have important implications for the attribution of responsibility in cultural explanations of mental disorder ... Such beliefs as these may function to alleviate culpability or 'stigma' from the disordered individual, possibly shifting it to others.

(White & Marsella, 1982:23)

Specifically, the 'decentring' of blame and responsibility away from the sufferer, together with the absence of overt sorcery accusations at Yalata (in which sickness or death could be attributed to the malicious work of another individual), served to minimise conflict. As Silberbauer points out in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, a stoical acceptance of misfortune which is perceived to be brought about by forces greater than the individual human being, can diminish the potential for conflict.

Through an awareness of this differential attribution of responsibility, I began to gain an understanding of the problems encountered in the earlier, Freire-based research study. People are unlikely to actively intervene in the social manifestations of 'disorders' which are perceived to be prompted from outside the individual.

There were some people at Yalata with mental or physical ailments which were not attributed to a breach of the Law or of social norms. In these cases, an explanatory model was

constructed which incorporated collectively known views of the possible influential circumstances. Unlike Reid (1983), who was able to present a step by step account of the social construction of the aetiology of serious disorders among the Yolngu, I have not sought to render an account of this process. Rather I examine the socially agreed upon 'causes' of social and mental disorders, and of unusual phenomena, as they were understood by Yalata people. These were relatively firm notions of causation, and were constructed retrospectively (cf Reid, 1983:111).

The strategies employed by Yalata people in order to comprehend these disorders or unusual phenomena, fall into two broad categories. The first category is that of spiritual beliefs, which include Aboriginal Law and mythology, sacred sites and dangerous places, and beliefs associated with Christianity. The second broad category includes primarily 'natural' causes including beliefs about emotional states, about the physical body (particularly the head, brain and ears), 'paralysis', and other factors such as sun, dust and 'poison'.

### **Humour and compassion**

Individuals who are mentally or physically different are constant presences in the daily life of a population. They are not concentrated into one social or physical area of the community, but are scattered throughout it, living with kin who

ensure their survival and see to their needs. Unlike Western society which, at least in the past, has kept those who are different at bay behind physical and social barriers, people at Yalata are in full visual, tactile and interpersonal contact with them. Those whose disabilities make them incapable are washed, fed, warmed and transported by those kin who have assumed the task.

People with minor physical defects were given nicknames accordingly, and these were used directly to the individual concerned. For example one member of the community was known to all as **tjuni pulka** (big stomach); another man was called **pupululu** (stooped back, from the Pitjantjatjara **pupanyi** meaning 'bending' or 'leaning'). One man was called **mara tjukutjuku** (small hand), and Walter MacDougall, the Patrol Officer known to older Yalata people was called **mara pika** (hurt, injured hand) as a result of a shooting accident. Other nicknames included the unflattering focus on a European staff member's bald head: **kata pina**. This means literally 'lake head', a reference to the salt lakes which are common in the region north of Yalata, which are devoid of growth and shine in the sun. <sup>2</sup> A deaf man, who was also unusually short, was referred to by a hand gesture indicating a bent thumb.

Overall, Yalata people perceived those among them who were mentally or physically disabled to be people who aroused compassion, sorrow and pity, all of which were expressed by the term **ngaltutjara** ('poor fellow'). The term has been noted

among other Pitjantjatjara speakers by Hamilton (1982:64) and Snowdon (1980:18), and among Pintupi speakers (Myers,1979:355). I heard the term **ngaltutjara** used in many contexts: it was used to express sympathy for a man who was in gaol on a drink-driving charge, and for myself when I camped alone. When we visited the spinifex country, which had not been seen by Yalata women for years, one woman greeted the trees and the country and said that she 'felt sorry': **Pana ngaltutjara, tjuni kakungarinyi** ('Poor fellow ground/country, my stomach feels sorry, aching'). This use of the term **ngaltutjara** with respect to country, reinforces Myers' suggestion that,

underlying the concept of compassion is a recognition of 'relatedness' or 'closeness' - a recognition of shared identity (**walytja**) or empathy between the person who is compassionate and another. This is the source of the other's legitimate claim on one's compassion (Myers,1979:355).

Yalata people feel 'related' to their country as they do to their kin and countrymen and women (the latter being aptly referred to as **ngura walytja**, 'countrymen') so they feel the same compassion for country which has been uninhabited and 'lonely' as they do for people who are alone, or who are metaphorically 'separated' by virtue of their difference from others.

#### **Aetiological strategies associated with spiritual beliefs**

It became apparent to me that for virtually all the individuals who suffered some on-going ailment or disorder, such as a physical disability, or psychological disturbance, there was a story (**tjukurr**), which served to explain how that particular

misfortune had come about, and which 'explained' their otherwise inexplicable actions. R. & C. Berndt observed that this occurred among Aboriginal people in western Arnhem Land and commented,

Observation of physical deformities and overt behaviour is accompanied by subjective interpretations of thoughts and emotions, and the whole 'explained' in the light of an outside influence acting upon an initially 'normal' child or adult.

(R. & C. Berndt, 1951b:88)

Most of these 'stories' I collected from passing comments and spontaneous explanations offered by Yalata people in the course of daily life, rather than explicitly seeking them. It was as if, as a member of the community, I too needed to know the background details which 'explained' particular individuals or incidents.

Breaches of the Law were said to be the explanation for some instances of physical disablement among Yalata people. For example, one woman had suffered from being deaf and mute since childhood, when she had seriously breached the Law. It was said that she had uttered forbidden words and talked 'silly way about men's business'. As a result of this breach, the details of which I could not ascertain, her mother had punished her by making her eat poisonous bush foods and had put breast milk (*mimi*) and sand into her ears. Her mouth (and thus her speech) had been stopped because she was saying 'wrong' things, and her ears were 'punished' because they had heard these things. She was made to suffer a physical disability for committing a social error.

The Law also contains prohibitions and restrictions on the eating of certain foods, particularly by pregnant women. At Yalata, pregnant women are not allowed to eat wombat, emu or echidna for reasons of maternal impression. That is, there is the belief that sensory contact by a pregnant woman with environmental objects will produce 'corresponding stigmata' in the infant (Pearn & Pavlin, 1971:1123). For example, wombat is a large animal and has bent legs. These factors are believed to influence the development of the child, as in the case of a Yalata woman who gave birth to a child with deformed legs (so that the child was called **tjina kuli kuli** 'crooked foot'). The explanation was that she had eaten wombat during her pregnancy. An emu is large, and large animals are frequently the subject of this type of prohibition (cf. Pearn & Sweet, 1977:149). <sup>3</sup> The spines of the echidna are believed to make birth difficult.

The prohibition on wombat is probably an example of the incorporation of beliefs held by the original inhabitants of the Plain region, as wombat, although known of by those who travelled south from the desert regions, was not a regular part of their diet. Apart from the effect of wombat on unborn children, wombat is also associated with weakness of the limbs in adults. Yalata people often ate large amounts of wombat and would just as often complain afterwards that it made their arms 'weak', and also gave them stomach-ache (**tjuni kura**).

An interesting variation of the belief that eating a particular food brings about an 'imprinting' associated with that food was

recounted to me by a Yalata man during a visit to the desert. Seeing a species of daisy which grows in sandy soil in the spinifex country, the 'poached egg' daisy (**Myriocephalus stuartii**), he told me that the mallee hen (**nganamara**) eats this daisy and so produces many eggs (**ngampu tjuta**). The daisy flower has an orange centre surrounded by white petals, hence its colloquial English name.

Sacrilege against Christian beliefs was utilised by Yalata people as an explanatory device that made sense of the distress and paralysis of one old man who lived there. Dennis was incapable of speech and normal movement. He was referred to as being 'paralysed' (**puwulpa**), and he was said to have 'bad ears' (**pina kura**). 'Paralysed' was used (in English) to refer to a variety of physical and mental states, including the state of mental retardation. Dennis's physical movements were severely curtailed and his medical diagnosis was that he had suffered a stroke. He was a heavy burden on any camp, for he was completely unable to look after himself, was incontinent, and moved only by shuffling along awkwardly. Those looking after him were required to cook for him, provide water, keep him warm, collect firewood, ensure he stayed in the shade, construct his shelter. During much of my stay at Yalata he was in the care of those at my camp. He inadvertently provoked discord, for it was said that his brother (who was a heavy drinker) was 'really' supposed to be caring for him, and had failed in these responsibilities. There was some ill-feeling as a result. As well as his physical disabilities, Dennis

had 'bad ears'. This was the explanation for his occasional outbursts, when he would shout out incomprehensible words and shuffle himself into the broad sun. This was not a reference to deafness, which is termed by Yalata people **pina pati** (closed ears), but indicated that his understanding, his sense, was poor or inadequate. As discussed later in more detail, the ears, the mechanism by which people hear and thus understand or comprehend (**kulinyi**) are crucial to an understanding of how Yalata people perceive those who are unreachable or unsocialised. Dennis was referred to by those in his camp as being **ngaltutjara** (poor fellow).

The extremity of Dennis' condition and the disturbing nature of his presence demanded special explanation. It was believed by everyone at Yalata that he had committed an act of sacrilege and that his infirmity was a terrible punishment wrought upon him by God. He had, it was said, once burnt a pile of bibles - presumably as an act of defiance aimed at the Christian missionaries. The fact that his action was interpreted by Yalata Aborigines as a sacrilege punished by God is not surprising. The Christianity espoused by the missionaries depicted a vengeful God, and Aboriginal beliefs in **mamu** (spirits) were often accentuated and conflated with notions of the devil by missionaries (cf. Turner, 1950:77,162). There is no doubt in the minds of people at Yalata that Dennis's paralysis was brought about as a result of his bible-burning some thirty years ago. 4



### **Somatic strategies : the head, brain and ears**

There were several individuals at Yalata who suffered from psychological states in which it was said that they 'lose 'em brains' or went 'silly in the head' (cf. R. & C. Berndt, 1951b:78-80). One of the definitions of going 'silly' or of having no brains, was that the individual camped alone, away from others. This was considered to be irrational behaviour because of the dangers of spirits at night (variously called **mamu** or **arkari** at Yalata). All sensible people slept in company with others in order to protect themselves from these spirits, or as Yalata people say, the 'something' that might be there in the dark. One elderly woman was deemed 'silly' because she camped alone (expressed at Yalata as 'sitting down self'), and she also talked and gestured to imaginary companions. I did not discover any explanation for her state of mind. Although the head and the 'brains' are body parts which belong to (or are inside) the individual, there was still little attribution of responsibility to that person for the actions performed while under the influence (as it were) of his or her 'brains'.

A respected middle-aged man, Jim, who 'looked after' me for considerable periods of time, was subject to periods in which he said he 'lose 'em brains'. He was unusual at Yalata in that he managed, overall, to maintain an alcohol-free camp, and often moved camp in order to avoid drinkers. He was also a man of enterprise, who constantly created schemes and committed

himself to many different activities at once, so that he could often not fulfil them all. As a result of his prolific output of artefacts, he constantly engaged in transactions with European staff, and earned substantial amounts of cash as a result. He was rarely seen idly chatting, and invariably sat at his hearth chipping away at a pile of boomerangs. In addition, he fostered children who were in trouble, and looked after an entourage of elderly relatives, mostly female. He also had some special skills. He knew songs that had power: he 'sang' and apparently healed a cut sustained by his MB. He recalled that once a snake had wound itself around his foot, and he had kicked it away and then sung and killed it. He did not call himself **nangkari** (clever man or 'doctor') and in fact sought help from **nangkari** for his own disorders.

At times he would over-extend himself, and began to sleep badly, suffering from disturbing dreams. Many of these dreams he would interpret prophetically. Jim recounted one of these occasions in the past:

I bin lose 'em brains. Sick all the time, three months no sleep! Worrying too much, got **pika** (sick). I hit one old man and chase the nurse, I don't know why (he laughs), I broke windows in a car. Sister give me needle (injection), policeman come and took me away madhouse. After, I went to Indulka (Indulkana), **nangkari** mob and finish (illness stopped). He pull out round one, something, white one, pull 'em out heavy thing, plain one.

Although he said that he was better after the 'madhouse', he had sought a confirmatory cure from the '**nangkari** mob', for which he paid the healer \$20. However his symptoms returned

from time to time, and 1985 he again went to hospital with the same complaints, acute anxiety and lack of sleep. He returned a few weeks later rested and quiet and slowly resumed his normal life. He also described experiences of a mystical nature which occurred at the time. He had previously been a drinking man and said he had nearly died as a result of drinking too much. He had gone down to the vermin-proof fence (south-east of Yalata), known as the 'dog fence':

I camp self dog fence way. Then I hear angels going home and one man's voice, **wangka pulka** (big talk), church music. I climb up one **tali** (sandhill) but never see any man, **anangu**. I hear boom! boom! boom! like drum beating, and I look around to find that one. Later on, still playing cards (i.e. gambling and drinking) and I see nail right through my hand holding cards, foot too. Finish then (i.e. drinking). God saved me.

Camping alone is the marker of an individual who is 'different'. His hallucinatory experiences of voices, music, drums and stigmata are rendered comprehensible by Christian symbolism. Giving up drinking was notoriously difficult among Yalata people, for those who made up the action groups of drinkers devoted considerable energy to the maintenance of the enterprise (see next chapter). In addition there were compelling reasons to remain part of the drinking group. Becoming seriously ill or Christianised were two socially acceptable ways in which individuals might extract themselves from the way of life of a drinker. Jim was able to draw on both rationales, in his decision to give up drinking, although the latter was evidently pivotal: 'God saved me'. In his narrative, Jim was able to make sense not only of his

experiences of madness, but of the fact that henceforth, he embraced the life of a non-drinker.

He described these incidents without embarrassment, as though the explanation 'I been lose 'em brains' was sufficient. The disturbances were perceived by him merely to be circumstances which overwhelmed him occasionally, and there was no suggestion by others that Jim was generally 'silly in the head', paralysed, or even without brains, in marked contrast to others who were so designated.

Apart from the fact that his disorder occurred infrequently, he was considered to be a generous and responsible man who was kind, and looked after others. In short, he was a **wati kanpi** (good man). His actions on most occasions were 'straight' and 'proper' (**tjukururu**), in fact he was a keen proponent of correct behaviour, and noted others' failings in this area. For these reasons he was not typified as someone who was troublesome or who evoked wariness in others. Despite the obviously psychological nature of his disorder, and the fact that it appeared to be precipitated by his restlessness and worry, his own understanding of his problem was that it was to do with a bodily part: his brain. He was the victim of a physical circumstance and was therefore not responsible for the affliction that came upon him. Thus he had no reason to feel any stigma or shame - in effect, it was nothing to do with **him**, but with a tangible part of his body, inside his head.

There was an elderly and now deceased man who was believed to have 'gone silly', whose story was known to everyone at Yalata. He was one of a party of four Aboriginal people who walked into a contaminated area in the Maralinga prohibited zone in May 1957. However, despite the knowledge at the time and subsequently, of the fact that he and his family had been in a 'poison' place, this was not the reason understood to have caused him to go 'silly in the head' at a later date. His story was recounted to me by two informants as follows:

The old man called M- went cranky afterwards. (i.e. after he was brought to Yalata by Maralinga soldiers). He made three children, but R- (his last child) made him silly. After R- he went silly. He camp self, he finish with wife and talk silly. A- (woman's name) look after him. He sat down in the shade and A- gave him tea. He come visiting but sit down. He talk silly way about R-.

(RS)

Old M- was strange, he sat down self and he send his wife away. One day, I go up to give him wombat and he thought I was growling him. He said 'I'll take my trousers down if you want to spear me' (Narrator laughed at this). Everyone reckon he must be too old to have R- his last son. After he had R- he went silly in the head. He used to talk silly way about R-. Might be he strain himself, too old to have young baby.

(JM)

Both speakers were agreed that it was 'silly' behaviour to camp alone ('sit down self') and to break off contact with his wife ('finish with wife'). This meant that someone else had to take on the burden of caring for him. The second informant had further evidence of the old man's strange behaviour for he mistook the offer of food (wombat, which he said later the old man did not 'know') for a 'growl', an aggressive approach, in this case

accompanied so he thought by an attempted spearing. The second informant also offered his own theory about why the old man became strange after the birth of his last son: 'might be he strain himself'. In this instance, the previously normal individual became 'silly' in later years because of a perceived external cause which was not thought to be supernatural. He was called **ngaltutjara**, but so indeed were the other members of his 'lost' party, because they had travelled down through the spinifex and had found nobody. Their kin had left five years before, when Ooldea closed down.. The four were **ngaltutjara** because they were alone and without the support of kin throughout the whole disturbing experience with the soldiers at Maralinga. In some versions of their story related by Yalata people, the four were locked up in 'gaol' at Maralinga, and in others, it was said that the party was going to be shot by the soldiers.

There were locally constructed stories provided to explain physical disabilities: one man was said to be blind because he had eaten damper mixed in a tin which had contained sheep dip. Another became increasingly poorly sighted, and finally lost his sight altogether because, it was said, he had walked around every afternoon at Ooldea when it was too hot, looking for rabbit and goanna. The dust and wind around the camps at Yalata were commonly believed to 'cause' flu, a belief which provided good reason for moving camp. The attribution of the causation of sickness to the weather conditions at Yalata is a further example of the negativity with which many

people view the location; in contrast, the spinifex country is thought to be **panya, pika wiya** (good, healthy).

Some of those who behaved in unsociable ways at Yalata were said to have 'no-good brains' or to be 'bad in the head' (**kata kuramata**). These included several drinkers, and I discuss the specific means by which drinking was understood in the next Chapter. There were a few individuals who were considered to have 'no-good brains' who hit and wounded themselves, sometimes when drunk. There was one adult man who was described to be 'proper cranky' who very rarely, if ever, drank. The actions attributed to him over time were strongly criticised by others, but these expressions of concern were not made directly to him. He was the man who imported alcohol throughout the ritual, causing considerable disruption to the proceedings. He was reputed to have a fierce temper, and people were wary and frightened of him; one man when describing him gave a mimed imitation of his shaking anger. He was never referred to as being **ngaltutjara**, as someone for whom others felt sorry; indeed he inspired fear in others, rather than compassion. He lacked 'relatedness', the existence of which was necessary, as Myers points out, to underlie the concept of compassion. Unlike those others designated as **ngaltutjara**, he was aggressively (rather than passively) 'different'. His unpredictable temper, lack of concern and aggressive personality meant that he was known as a 'hard' man, **wati witu witu**. These atypical qualities were explained by the fact that

he was called **kata uru** (hair head). It was said that he had been hit severely on the head at some earlier time, and as a result he had 'hair in the brains'. The hair on his head was thought to have grown into his brain, and this was understood by Yalata people to be the cause of his behaviour.

A recent phenomenon (over the last ten years) which has required sense-making and explanatory strategies, is that of the inhalation of petrol fumes, usually by teenagers, as a means of achieving an elated or intoxicated state. Children who sniff petrol - or, as Yalata people say, 'smell' petrol (**petrol puntilpai**) - become high on the volatile hydrocarbons emitted by the fumes (cf. Morice, Swift & Brady, 1981). As a result of sniffing petrol the sniffer may experience auditory or visual hallucinations, some of which are frightening to them. Yalata children told their school Principal that they saw moving heads, people having intercourse, pop singers and huge holes in the ground when they sniffed the fumes (cf. Eastwell, 1979:222). When high on petrol, the young people involved often ran around the settlement at night in groups, screamed and cried, broke into the store and school searching for food, and behaved in a manner that Aboriginal adults (as well as Europeans) found disconcerting.

Sniffing petrol was understood by Yalata people to be an activity associated with childishness and lack of shame (**kunta**). One female informant told me that her son had sniffed



when he had been about fifteen years old, but that she had given him a hiding. When he had persisted into his late teenage years, she had chastised him, telling him that he was now old enough to drink. Adults were aware that sniffers experienced psychological effects when they sniffed, and referred to these as 'seeing pictures'. Some adults imputed extraordinary powers to sniffers, saying that the sniffers had the ability to see through the backs of their heads. Others observed that sniffing was an attention-seeking behaviour, and saw it as a method whereby children compelled adults to comply with their demands. One man, the DCW employee commented:

They want to make parents remember them. 'If you won't buy anything for me I can do anything' (they say). If parents won't buy them clothes or food, tucker, if no food after school, no biscuits or chips cool drink, mother say **wiya** (no), 'my parents don't worry about me' (thinks the sniffer). They can talk back then. They feel sorry afterwards ...same thing wine. I growl at my missus, then after ...

Perhaps because he works for the Department for Community Welfare, he chooses to interpret the sniffing of the children as a reaction to parental refusals to provide for them. He highlights the pervasive belief at Yalata that 'worrying' for someone, (that is caring about them and looking after them) is demonstrated by generosity, by responding to demands. He also refers to children who 'talk back'. Children are thought cheeky if they 'back answer' all the time, however, he absolves them of responsibility by saying that the children 'feel sorry afterwards'. His comparison with wine is significant. Both drinking wine and sniffing petrol are depicted as activities in which one becomes 'not oneself' and does things one would not

normally do. Because of this both drinkers and sniffers are absolved of responsibility for their actions. Additionally, a petrol sniffer is described as being without ears, (**pina wiya**), meaning that he or she is unable to listen (**putu kulinyi**). As I have already stated, Yalata people conceive of those who behave unusually as being afflicted either in their brain (those who have 'bad heads' or 'no good brains'), or in their ears, the centre of hearing and thus of understanding. In contrast with the physically deaf who are called **pina pati** ('closed ears'), sniffers are conceived of as having no ears at all. They lack the means whereby they might have comprehension of what they are doing, and what others are saying to them. Several researchers have noted that the ears are metaphorically the location of understanding (C.H. Berndt, 1982:133; Myers, 1986:107; Berndt & Berndt, 1970:157). As Myers explains, 'In the Pintupi view, the concepts 'thinking', 'understanding', and 'hearing' are expressed by a single term... which means literally 'to hear'. The organ of thought is the ear, but emotions take place in the stomach' (Myers, 1986:107). In Pitjantjatjara thought 'hearing' or 'listening' (**kulinyi**) are associated with concern and worry, and also with remembering. For example an individual might speak of worrying for her country, while cupping a hand to her ear as if trying to hear. Conversely, a gesture for 'forget' is to cover the ear with the hand, to make it deaf. An individual who has no ears and therefore no understanding is conceived of as being beyond control and being unable to 'worry' or care.

The verbal device 'no ears' provides some insight into the unwillingness with which Yalata people face the prospect of punishing young people who sniff petrol and commit minor misdemeanours. Someone who is **pina wiya** and **putu kulinyi** is unable to comprehend verbal communications. They may 'receive' the message (in the English sense of 'hear') but cannot make sense of it (in the Pitjantjatjara sense of 'hear'). If a child is **pina wiya**, who has no comprehension of his actions, it is pointless (from this perspective) to continue attempts to influence that child. There are obvious links in this conceptual framework, with the way in which Yalata people perceive those who have 'no brains', or who 'lose' their brains. One important association is that the attribution of responsibility is, once more, 'decentred' and moved away from the individual. If a child has no ears, then he cannot listen and comprehend the concern expressed by relatives, and for their part, they can do nothing more. There is a certain resignation expressed by Yalata adults about petrol sniffers, which is partly associated with the belief that in general children have 'no shame' and little understanding anyway, so how can they be held responsible? Myers writes,

Pintupi apply the term **ramarama** ('deaf', 'oblivious') to those whom they consider insane and to drunks. Such an individual does not hear or take note of relatives, possibly injuring close kin or failing to recognize them. In other words, such a person is not in touch with the reality upon which everyone else agrees. One who is unable to 'think' in this way is, like a child, not held accountable for his or her actions.

(Myers, 1986:108)

Another anthropologist who examines concepts of the emotions is Briggs (1978a;1978b) who worked with Inuit people near Gjoa Haven in the Canadian Arctic. Among those she studied, the concept of reason (**ihuma**) refers to all cerebral functions: mind, thought, memory, reason, sense, ideas and will. The possession of **ihuma** defines adulthood, and children are thought to be born without it. Briggs explains,

It is the possession of **ihuma** that makes it possible for a person to respond to his surroundings, physical and social, and to conform to social expectations... adults who show little evidence of possessing **ihuma** are spoken of as 'childish'... In the absence of **ihuma** no instruction is possible, and this is a major reason why parents do not discipline small children. Why bother? They will not remember.

(Briggs, 1978a:359)

(Emphasis added)

The Pitjantjatjara **kulinyi** incorporates these concepts too, and it may be that some of the unwillingness on the part of adults to discipline petrol sniffers is that they are perceived to be childlike (even if they are eighteen or nineteen years old), because they 'can't listen'.

In keeping with the compassion felt for others who are 'disordered' mentally or physically, sniffers are also known as 'poor things' (**ngaltutjara**). This appears to be a widespread sentiment among Pitjantjatjara-speaking people. This pervasive sense of compassion for them also militated against any overt expression of anger, outrage or disapproval of their activities. In summary, Yalata people found it difficult to make sense of petrol sniffing, but a few hypothesised that it was a reaction

to parental neglect, a means whereby children exerted pressure upon adults. The strategy whereby they understood the young people to have 'no ears' served simultaneously to absolve them of culpability for engaging in the activity (because children 'can't' listen or 'worry' anyway), as well as absolving the **adults** of the responsibility of intervening (because the children 'can't hear' admonishing words). There were a number of sense-making explanations and suggested 'causes' proffered by Yalata people with respect to petrol sniffers and juvenile offenders which I consider in Chapter Six.

### **Strategies for dealing with unusual events**

In their desire to give meaning to every aspect of daily life, Yalata people not only provided interpretations and improvisations for overtly unusual events and individual eccentricities, but injected meaning even into apparently unimportant events. In this way, the world around them, animate and inanimate, became charged with significance. In order to articulate appropriate explanations, people extrapolated from their existing knowledge and collective conventional wisdom, and provided themselves and others with apposite statements of cause and effect, of the power of portents, and of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Yalata people were prone to what I call 'pathologising': that is they frequently imputed an outcome of a negative or pathological nature when they interpreted events as 'clues' to

future outcomes. They lived in a state of anticipatory anxiety. Rumours of death and injury circulated rapidly and soon became the conventional wisdom. Once, within a couple of hours, I heard that a petrol sniffer had died in Adelaide and that a senior woman had been bitten by a snake and was near death. The first rumour was entirely untrue, and the second only indirectly true, as the woman concerned had had a vivid dream of being bitten by a snake. If a car arrived unexpectedly at camp in the middle of the night, people would immediately assume that it was 'bad news'. When people felt uneasy, they noticed birds singing, and sought interpretations of this portent, such as the imminent arrival of strangers, or, again, bad news. Once when a red kangaroo was killed on a hunting trip, someone noted that its tail kept moving, and interpreted this to mean that some Aboriginal person 'might get killed'. When driving from a weekend camp into Yalata one day, the man in the vehicle with me said that someone had hurt their finger while carving a wooden crucifix, and that something, therefore 'must be wrong' at Yalata. On another occasion, this man dreamed of a recently widowed relative, who was crying and embracing him. The widower was at the time staying in Port Augusta, and the dreamer concluded that something must be wrong 'over there'.

Scarlett, White & Reid (1982:165) discuss this 'expecting the worst' behaviour which they observed among Yolngu in north-east Arnhem Land. They suggest that such exaggerations indicate the

level of anxiety in the community. Although the circumstance they describe was associated with sorcery, which is not in evidence at Yalata, Yalata people do exist in a state of on-going social tension, which is manifested in the frequent angry exchanges associated with alcohol use and, I suggest, in these 'pathological' expectations. When no immediately obvious explanatory device could be called upon, Yalata people pronounced that 'it must be something'. In an environment so charged with meaning, the absence of a ready explanation did not mean that such an explanation did not exist. It **must** be something, the 'something' would eventually come to light, and be placed in the rationalising context.

#### **Explanations arising from spiritual powers in the land**

The landscape is perceived by Yalata people to be imbued with potent spiritual forces, which if disturbed - by accident or design - can become dangerous or harmful. In some cases specific areas are designated as dangerous places, such as the **wanampi** (mythological snake) sites I discuss here. Most **wanampi** sites are avoided by those who know of their location. The landscape also contains sites which are considered dangerous to the uninitiated, which are places called **milmilpa**, and some locations are treated with caution even by mature men if they are uncertain about the nature of existence of 'danger'. Biernoff's (1978) paper on safe and dangerous places in north-east Arnhem Land is perhaps the most comprehensive examination of this phenomenon. In it, he draws attention to

the regularising or social control function associated with the notion of danger,

... the knowledge of the results of trespass is supported and reinforced by reported instances of the disappearance, death or illness attributed to contact with dangerous places and objects.  
(Biernoff, 1978:95)

At Yalata, spiritually potent sites or objects were indeed said to provoke physical ailments and disappearances, and there were stories to support these assertions. As with other notions of aetiology, the attributions of 'causes' for various happenings were made retrospectively. They nevertheless provided satisfactory 'explanations' for real or imagined disturbances to the social order.

Some individuals were deemed to have a special relationship with the Dreaming or with particular places in the landscape. Usually by reason of birth at or near a significant site, an individual would come to be seen as the embodiment of the mythological being associated with it. As Myers explains,

... individuals come to identify places and ancestors as part of themselves, referring to them in the first person (Myers, 1979:351).

Munn also noted this phenomenon (Munn, 1973:93). The most notable instance of this transformation at Yalata is in the person of an elderly woman, Marjie, who is believed to be the Dreaming character of the Willy-wagtail Woman (**tjindirr-tjindirr**) specifically associated with the Willy-wagtail site. Marjie's physical ailments were not thought to be 'her's' at all, but were wholly explained as being a part of her connection to the Dreaming. The location is in fact a



collection of sites in the vicinity of a large rockhole Tjintakara, west of Serpentine Lakes, some three hundred kilometres north of the railway line. 5 A rocky outcrop is the transformed body of the Willy wagtail Woman, who was hit by a storm of giant hailstones while she was carrying wild honey. As Munn explains, the living person and the transformed dreaming character can share physical characteristics:

Through his identification with a particular locality at birth an individual may be imprinted with ancestral markings which on the one hand are aspects of the ancestor's own body, and on the other, parts of the countryside. In this way, a person's own body may be identified with the ancestor's body through the mediation of the object world of ancestral transformations.

(Munn, 1970:147)

In keeping with these comments by Munn, the mythological and the human characters were, in this instance, intertwined. The mythological Willy wagtail Woman had a 'bad back', and so did Marjie. When Marjie experienced physical pains, Yalata people interpreted and explained them by reasoning that some damage had occurred to the **tjindirr-tjindirr** site. For example, there is one story about the site told at Yalata which concerns some 'soldiers'. They were were said to have taken some stones from the large outcrop, the 'body' of the woman. As a result, Marjie became sick. More recently, a man who was a custodian of the site visited Tjintakara, and while fulfilling his obligations to 'clean up' the place by weeding and sweeping it, attempted to chop down a small tree that had started to grow on the 'body' of the Willy wagtail Woman. The blows of his axe 'caused' Marjie to experience back pain.

Although in this instance the site was hit with an axe for a positive, not an ill-meant, purpose, Yalata people interpreted the event to mean that the Dreaming woman was injured, and so, in turn, was the human personification of that woman.

There are stories which are often related at Yalata which tell of the disappearance of various parties of Europeans in the desert. The most common strategy for understanding these disappearances was to relate them to **wanampi** (water snake or rainbow serpent) beliefs. **Wanampi** are believed to have travelled over and beneath the ground and created landscape formations over a wide area of the Great Victoria Desert (cf. Layton, 1986:25). A snake created the salt lake at Pidinga (Ifould Lake) which was his camp (**ngura**), and his faeces and blood made the deposits of coloured ochre there. Snakes are also associated with the blowholes in the limestone of the Nullarbor, and with deep wells and rockholes. In short, there are believed to be many mythological snakes still in existence, living in waterholes and underground; some are dangerous others 'quiet', and they are variously described as being shiny, prettily coloured, rainbow coloured. They often make a loud noise 'like rain' or 'like thunder', and have large mouths which can consume objects and people. There are male and female snakes; some have names, and are known to frequent particular locations. People expressed fear of these mythological snakes and described how Aborigines would set fire to large trees so that the smoke would frighten the snakes away. However some individuals were believed to have the

power to quieten the **wanampi** snake and the FF of a Yalata man was said to be a **nangkari** (clever man) who could transform himself into a butterfly at night. He would fly up to the snake, block up his mouth and send him away.

One of the stories surrounding a disappearance was told to me by a woman as follows:

One **piranpa** (white man) was travelling with camels. They only found the saddles. He never came back. **Wanampi** must have got him.

And another:

Wild horses disappeared at Puntja (north of Maralinga) - might be snake too.

Another story in which a disappearance is attributed to the mythological snake concerns four soldiers and a landrover. They were believed to have disappeared, having never returned from a journey along a particular track which was known to be a **wanampi ngura** (the camping place or home or a snake). People at Yalata now say that the track is 'closed' - by general agreement, no-one is willing to pass along it.

The preponderance of stories involving soldiers is indicative of the unease aroused among people at Yalata by the activities that took place during the atomic bomb tests between 1953 and 1957. It is certainly the most significant recent event of a historical nature to demand sense-making responses. Throughout those years, Aboriginal people saw truck-loads of soldiers driving through the Yalata property as well as aeroplanes and helicopters overhead. The country north of the railway line

was declared a part of the prohibited zone. More disturbingly, large numbers of people at Yalata, although south and upwind of the tests, felt the ground shake and saw 'smoke' when the bombs were exploded. Despite some verbal explanations and warnings of the tests given by Yalata missionaries at the time, people at Yalata have said that they were frightened and confused. Many people can remember no warnings at all.

In the face of this extremely unsettling and anxiety-producing series of events, many of the older people understood the explosions and the shaking ground to be the activities of **wanampi** (cf. Eames & Collett, 1985:138). This explanation was reinforced by the existence of a location believed to be inhabited by a snake north of the bomb sites. Walter MacDougall had himself attempted to frighten Yangkuntjajara people he encountered on his patrols further north, by using their indigenous beliefs, as a means of preventing them from entering the area. His April/May 1953 report ('Detailed survey of the Jangkuntjara Tribe') noted that 'by using their own beliefs and fears of invisible spirits and invisible avengers (this will) convince them that the area is no safe place for them'. In other words, it is possible that MacDougall's attempt to frighten people away from the prohibited zone had later become incorporated into the understandings held by Aboriginal people of the dangers at Maralinga.

Today people have some understanding of the nature of atomic

bomb tests, and laugh at themselves for thinking it was **wanampi** or **mamu** (spirits) which caused the ground to shake. However, Yalata people perpetuate stories of the dangers associated with the Maralinga area, partly through the mechanism of the stories of the disappearing soldiers, and partly through an understanding that the region has 'poison' in the ground. This is, of course, an accurate assessment, for several areas are highly contaminated with radioactive debris. However, they believe for example, that the heat of the sun draws the poison out of the ground, making it more dangerous - and provided this as an explanation for a shift of camp from near Lake Maurice closer to Ooldea, in August 1982. Interpretations of the workings of the 'poison' varied widely between individuals, and have existed over many years. For example, a 1956 Patrol Report noted that a Cundeelee man who had recently returned there from Yalata, had had several injections which he believed were to protect him from the effects of the bomb which was shortly to be detonated at Maralinga (District office, E. Goldfields, Sept. 1956, Ab. Coll, AIAS).

More recently, a Yalata man who had worked on the salvage operation demolishing Maralinga buildings in the mid-1970s later contracted a severe skin disorder. Notwithstanding a firm diagnosis provided by the medical specialist in Adelaide, theories at Yalata about the origins of his complaint were diverse. The sufferer himself believed it 'must be something' at Maralinga; another man thought he might have eaten radioactive **maku** (witchetty grub). The Aboriginal Health

Worker at the clinic wondered if he had touched 'a wire' at Maralinga, while another man thought that a poisonous caterpillar web (**wangka**) had fallen on him while he had been picking wild pear. The webs cause irritation and itchiness to the skin, and are prolific in the Maralinga area. In this instance, the aetiology has not yet become fixed into a generally-accepted 'story' about the skin complaint - but despite the variety of suggested causes, all are agreed that there is 'poison' at Maralinga as a result of the atomic tests.

Another account of the dangers in the Maralinga area was given to me as follows:

Two white people from overseas wanted to go and have a look at Maralinga. They told them, 'don't touch anything. Don't break sticks'. But they said 'I can't die', and they broke sticks then their arms went numb (narrator mimes something moving up his arms). And they said 'we want to go home to our families because we might die'. And they went back overseas and they died. (JM)

By merging more recent worrisome events with existing beliefs in dangerous places, spirits and **wanampi**, Yalata people construct a means by which the 'unknown' events may be appropriated. In this way the problematic is rendered into an acceptable framework.

I have shown that for these southern Pitjantjatjara people the search for the meaning of peculiar or worrying events, and for the causes of individual disorders, is an ongoing and dynamic one. Aetiological statements are a construct, made up of extrapolations from a body of cultural resources composed of shared knowledge and experience, and spiritual belief. For this reason, the range of suggested aetiologies is bound, although there is a rich variety of possible constructs, as the development of explanations associated with atomic tests, soldiers and 'poisons' affirm. By this means, 'causes' are created and made meaningful. They become the established accounts whereby people make sense of what would be otherwise incomprehensible. Perceived causes of misfortune are generally attributed to non-human agencies (even if the human subject has unwittingly brought mishap upon themselves), which serve to diminish the likelihood of interpersonal conflict.

## NOTES

1. Psychiatric interpretations of Aboriginal deviance and mental health can be found in the work of Jones (1971); Cawte (1972); Eastwell (1977) and Morice (1978,1979) among others. A critique of the psychiatric approach is offered by Biernoff (1982). Webber (1980) documents the prevalence of mental health problems among Northern Territory Aboriginal children.
2. The northern Pitjantjatjara refer to a bald head as **kata tali** 'sandhill head' - a common feature of their landscape (Hilliard,1968:238). W.H. Douglas noted that an Ooldea woman had named her child, born with a club foot, **tjinatjiwa** 'grindstone foot' (Douglas,1979:109).
3. Food prohibitions in pregnancy among other Aboriginal groups are documented by Kaberry (1939:241); R. & C. Berndt (1977:155); Pearn & Sweet (1977); Smith (1980: 55-57); and Reid (1983:53). Among European Australian women beliefs about maternal impression are documented by Pearn & Pavlin (1971).
4. In Meggitt's ranking of Walbiri offences, he notes that the offence of sacrilege (defined as the unauthorized possession of sacred knowledge and objects and the unauthorized observation of sacred rituals), was believed to be punished by insanity - caused by a non-human agency (1962:256,258). It is interesting in the case of the man who burned the bibles, that God (representing another system of Law) was seen to be capable of punishing sacrilege by inflicting on the man a state very similar to total insanity. Hilliard notes that among Ernabella people 'there is a firm belief that if a woman were to happen onto men's secret ceremonies she would go mad' (Hilliard,1968:123).
5. I visited this site with nine Yalata people in 1981. It was recorded by Rowlands, along with stone arrangements in the area (Rowlands,1966:6).



## CHAPTER FIVE

### 'THEY CAN'T LISTEN' : ABORIGINAL PERCEPTIONS OF DRINKERS AND THEIR ACTIONS.

What people do after they have consumed alcoholic beverages has been rather conclusively shown to be largely a matter of what their culture teaches them they can and cannot do.

(Marshall, 1979:115)

In the previous chapter I examined the understandings held by Yalata people of those who were socially 'different'. These understandings, I suggested, incorporate socially and culturally accepted ways of making sense of atypicalities in individuals and in the natural world. In this chapter I turn to a consideration of the strategies used by Yalata people to deal with the disorder often wrought by drinkers and drunkenness. The actions of the inebriated are made sense of, not by constructing aetiological theories as is done for the mentally or physically infirm, but by a series of strategies which 'neutralise' their actions. The drunken actor is rarely held responsible (by himself or by others) for his drunken actions. Yalata people construct a series of explanations and exculpations which serve to locate the inebriated within an acceptable social context, while avoiding the awkward issue of intervention in their more extreme displays. These strategies are above all practical,

for they enable Yalata people to live with each other with some degree of fragile cohesion.

This chapter describes the business of drinking at Yalata, its benefits and detriments, and the 'rules' associated with drinking. 1 However, as suggested by Holy & Stuchlik, rather than focus attention solely on whether these rules were kept or broken (they were, in fact, usually broken), I present the 'norms, ideas and reasons invoked by the actors for the performance of their action' (1983:110). Their actions did not pass unremarked however, and I seek also in this chapter, to describe the strategies employed by others with respect to the drinkers - strategies both of avoidance and sanction - and the corresponding defensive reactions of the drinkers in the form of the minimising formulations they offered about their own actions.

### **Organising alcohol**

Drinking alcohol is an activity indulged in with considerable vigour and some enterprise by a substantial proportion of Yalata's adult population. Drinking is rarely undertaken by men or women under 18 years of age, and by those over 60. Out of an over-18 population of approximately 165 people (1981 census figures) I estimate that approximately 80 men and 20 women drink alcohol regularly. This number fluctuates widely with the considerable population movement and the availability of

ready cash and serviceable vehicles. More recently the number of drinkers has decreased, with the departure on a semi-permanent basis of approximately one-third of the population to live at the outstation. However, a number of these outstation residents take the opportunity to join drinking groups on the occasions when they visit Yalata. They then resume a period of abstinence on their return to the Maralinga lands.

There are two major sources of alcohol for Yalata drinkers: a beer canteen within the settlement itself, the source of a regulated ration of beer; and the licensed roadhouse at Nundroo, 55 kms east of Yalata on the Eyre Highway. At Nundroo Yalata people purchase cheap fortified wine (port) by the carton (twelve bottles) to take away for consumption; they only rarely consume alcohol in the public bar at Nundroo. Yalata drinkers call this cheap port, 'wine'. Nundroo has had a license to sell alcoholic beverages since 1976; before then it was, by all accounts, a rather 'tacky roadhouse' (White, 1973).

The beer canteen began at Yalata in 1969, four years after the end of prohibition for Aborigines (Millar & Leung, 1974:94) and was instigated by the Lutheran Church in an attempt to curtail the importation of port from Ceduna. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on the alcohol problems of Aborigines was informed that in the 1970s up to 170 flagons of fortified wine a day had been purchased and

was imported to Yalata (Commonwealth of Australia, 1977:12). The Church had additional aims, one of which was (by providing limited amounts of alcohol) to 'teach' the Aborigines how to drink in an appropriate manner. Although the number of cans in the ration per person varied over the years, at the time of research the ration was three cans of beer per person, three times each week. Cans were sold for \$1.00 each. Probably since the time of its inception, the beer ration has been used as a form of currency by Yalata people, although for a short period the cans were opened as they were sold, in order to avoid such accumulation (I.M. White, Pers.Comm.). It was reported by a team from Adelaide University who had made an attempt to study the effects of the canteen, that non-drinkers exchanged their cans with drinkers, for artefacts which they then sold to the mission for cash. Other non-drinkers sold their cans directly to drinkers who wished to have more alcohol. <sup>2</sup> The major venue for the exchange and accumulation of cans was a regular game of Two Up which customarily took place after the beer ration had been distributed, and behind the canteen building - somewhat out of sight of the casual observer, and certainly beyond the range of the settlement staff. Players, mostly men, tossed coins from a piece of broken ruler, watched carefully by a large circle of participants who placed their bets: pairs of beer cans (cf Brady & Palmer, 1984 for a full account of the Two Up school). Women drinkers preferred to play cards, sitting in groups a short

distance away; some took their cans back to camp in amongst their purchases from the store. The atmosphere on the whole on these occasions was convivial, with children playing nearby, perhaps making hats out of the cardboard beer packages, or wheedling soft drinks out of their mothers' shopping bags. The games did not last much more than an hour - the currency being somewhat finite as cans were constantly consumed, as well as gambled.

After the Two Up, many people returned to camp to get on with the evenings' chores - collecting firewood, organising the meal. Others, their appetites whetted, had to make further arrangements if they wished to continue to drink alcohol: the canteen's supplies were wholly distributed. Several vehicles owned by Yalata people were used primarily for importing alcohol, usually referred to by Yalata people as 'carting wine'. Other vehicles were utilised from time to time by persuading their drivers (with cash) to drive to Nundroo. Drivers on these occasions (not necessarily the owners of the vehicles) carried paying passengers at \$20 a head into Nundroo to purchase grog. For this reason, these vehicles were known to Yalata people as 'taxis'.

### **Getting Drunk**

When supplies of wine were brought into Yalata from Nundroo, drinking could begin in earnest. A few drinkers camped near Nundroo from time to time, but this was discouraged by the

licensee, who had his tourist customers to think of. Other drinkers were forced to spend the night alongside the highway when their cars broke down (as they often did); they would sometimes stagger onto the road and attempt to hail passing motorists. Those who made it back to Yalata usually drank at specially convened camps, away from their 'home' camps. Drinkers returned noisily to their camps often in the early hours of the morning waking others, demanding food, and sometimes picking fights. At the drinking camps the wine was shared, with people drinking straight from the bottle. It was said that a man needed more than one bottle of port to become drunk, and flagons were preferred when available: two could get 'full drunk' on a flagon. Alcohol was rarely kept aside for later use and was usually fully consumed at the drinking camps. Ex-drinkers described this style saying it was in order to get 'full drunk' as quickly as possible. One man contrasted it with the method of drinking at Gerard, on the Murray River in South Australia:

This mob they drink it straight down like this... you need three bottles of port for two people. Gerard way, they might have one flagon, everyone sit down. Each one he has fruit tin, and they share em out little bit, little bit. They drink all day that way, real slow. They might put em to one side, save em for tomorrow. (JM)

By drinking out of tins a little at a time, Gerard people were depicted as 'quiet drinkers'; Yalata drinkers, by contrast were often demonstrative and noisy:

There is constant movement between drinking groups, discussion and debate, shouting and complaint. Drinkers embrace each other freely, hold each other up ...Drinkers often declare they are hungry and set out to demand food from non-

drinking members of their family ... a drinking camp has a quality of noise, disruption and hurried movement and altered state of mind and body that mark it off as different from any other camp.

(Brady & Palmer, 1984:25)

Carousing often went on late into the night and could be heard from the camps, as noise carried easily on still nights across the scrubby plains. Drinkers whose camps were close to the settlement sometimes walked into it in order to waken residents or to communicate annoyance at a particular staff member. It was common for the storekeeper to be disturbed in the evenings by inebriated people who asked him to open up the store for cigarettes or food; sometimes they just wanted to talk. When he declined to open the store after hours, his refusal was often greeted with anger, and the accusation that he was, after all, at Yalata to 'help **anangu**'. The refusal by a white staff member, of a request for a lift back to Big Camp often brought the same retort. If a drinker had a grievance against a member of staff, he would berate the person, in English, standing outside their house, or bang on doors and walls. Like those at camp who doused their fires and pretended to be asleep in order to deter drunks, the white staff remained silently indoors during such displays, making sure their lights were off, and hoped that the trouble would go away.

Grievances against white staff were not only expressed at night in a semi-anonymous way, but verbal tirades and occasionally physical assaults were directed at staff in

full view of others during the day. On these occasions, there were usually sober Aboriginal kinsmen and women in the vicinity to restrain such individuals. Many such incidents ended up as shouted interchanges, grandiose displays of anger accompanied by the ostentatious picking up of rocks, wobbling of knees, and mimed thrusts. Yalata staff have been known to lock themselves into the office when besieged by a particularly belligerent individual. A few staff have been injured, many have resigned over the years, as a result, and have demanded police protection. Twice over the last five years virtually the entire staff have walked out.

Yalata people have, in the past, explained their drinking (although not their drunkenness) as being in order to 'get strong enough to say what we really think' to white staff. This is only one aspect of what takes place when Yalata people become intoxicated. People also 'get strong enough' to pursue arguments, resentments and aggressive feelings among their fellows. Indeed, drinking at Yalata is virtually always associated with inter-Aboriginal dispute and often with physical violence.

The advantage of the inevitably group nature of drinking at Yalata was that if a brawl developed, there were others present to intervene. However, if other people were too drunk, or if disputants had wandered away from others, weapons would be freely picked up and used and intervention could not occur. An inebriate wielded any handy item, when



moved by anger to strike another, and rocks (abundant at Yalata) were perhaps the most common weapons. Many people owned rifles, however these were rarely, if ever, used in drunken disputes. Axes, crowbars and bottles were used and these weapons could, and did, inflict considerable physical damage. In conjunction with Dr K. Palmer, I undertook a detailed study of alcohol-related illness and injuries in 1982, which is documented in Brady & Palmer (1984). With the help of the nursing sisters it was possible to detail the nature of alcohol-related injuries for which individuals sought attention at the Clinic. The Clinic treated the outcome of drinking bouts usually two days later, when people had recovered their senses and examined the damage. In a sample month, there were in all 672 consultations for all reasons at the Clinic, 99 of which were alcohol-related. By far the most common alcohol-related injury to present at the Clinic was laceration (constituting 45% of all injuries), followed by burn (32%). Drunks often rolled into fires when stupefied, or trod on hot embers by mistake. Perhaps the most significant item to emerge from the study was the high proportion of head injuries sustained by women. For women, head injuries constituted 25% of all their injuries, whereas head injuries made up only 7.47% of all male injuries. It is not surprising then, that slightly more women than men died as a result of alcohol-related violence over a ten-year period at Yalata (see Table 5.1).

TABLE 5.1

Causes of alcohol-related death 1972-82

	Males	Females	Total
Neglect (child)	-	2	2
Violence	4	5	9
Burns	1	-	1
Vehicle accident	5	-	5
Illness	6	2	8
Overdose	1	-	1
Not known	3	-	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>29</b>

Over a ten year period, then, in the estimation of the nursing sisters and their Clinic records, 29 Yalata people had died as a result of alcohol-related causes, and there were a total of 99 deaths from all causes in that period. Alcohol was therefore associated with 30% of all deaths among Aborigines at Yalata during that period. Apart from violence, deaths occurred as a result of motor vehicle accidents (usually on the Eyre Highway), illness such as cirrhosis and pancreatitis, and two children had died after failing to thrive. The medical staff attributed these deaths to alcohol use by the parents. In 1986 according to the clinic records, there were 15 deaths in the population of which 6 were specifically attributed to alcohol-related causes (3 motor vehicle accidents, 2 from violence and 1 from illness).

Although not familiar with these specific figures, Yalata people were aware that deaths, injury and illness followed alcohol use in certain individuals; they even attributed the cause of death to alcohol on some occasions when it was not.

This is in marked contrast to the Yolngu studied by Reid. Although deaths were often attributed by them to alcohol, people held many reservations about this hypothesis, and tended to associate sudden, unexpected deaths, even of drinkers, with sorcery (Reid, 1983:136-139). Several people at Yalata had been advised to stop drinking by the visiting doctor and warned that they would kill themselves if they continued. For some individuals this information was sufficient for them to give it up; others took no notice. The collective pressure to continue to be part of the drinking group was extremely strong. <sup>3</sup> After all, the Lutheran Church itself had initiated the provision of on-site alcohol for Yalata people, and the fact that Aborigines were full citizens with drinking rights was often alluded to by Yalata people, as by others (cf Sansom, 1980:49; Beckett, 1965; Bain, 1974:44). Drinking was primarily a pleasurable and sociable activity in an environment largely bereft of intrinsic enjoyment, and which was, for most of the year, thirstily hot. In an environment where all the major decisions about the development and administration of Yalata and its residents were made elsewhere, and the day to day running of the settlement was planned and executed by white staff (generally without consultation with Aborigines), the Two Up - and indeed the rest of the drinking business - was a field of action in which Aborigines could be active, free from restraint, and which acted simultaneously to alienate the whites. However, the Two Up games were deliberately staged away from the prying

eyes of staff, and served determinedly to undermine attempts by whites to limit and control Aboriginal intake. The notion of a beer 'ration' continued as a fiction in the minds of whites, when in fact the three-can limit had for years provided a general 'pool' of alcohol shared, through gambling, amongst drinkers. The running of taxis, maintaining a vehicle's roadworthiness, collecting passengers and grog, not to mention the economic exchanges, were all enterprising acts engaged in by specially mobilised groups.

Drunkenness made possible the expression of bold outbursts against white staff. Those who had a grudge against a staff member would wait until they were drunk before venting their feelings. For example, a new builder would pay his Aboriginal helper only for hours worked, whereas his predecessor had paid the man for a forty-hour week whether or not he worked. Two days after this, the Aboriginal worker, when inebriated, abused the builder and the mechanic and physically assaulted them. The builder resigned the following day. During these outbursts, people often spoke in English, and indeed the use of English swear words was common in inter-Aboriginal disputes as well. The use of English by drunks has been mentioned by Marshall (1979:71,81) writing of Micronesians. Stanner (1979:91) notes the use of English by Daly River Aborigines in crisis situations. By using English, when most normal interchanges took place in Pitjantjatjara, Yalata people asserted their

equality with whites. It is also probable, as suggested by Sutton, that the emotional connotations of Aboriginal terms of abuse, are more powerful and dangerous than those of English (Sutton,1978:189-90). In addition, the state of drunkenness allowed scores to be settled, wives to be beaten for real or imagined slights, and generalised aggression and frustration to be expressed. Drunken people publicly demonstrated their anger or displeasure at a particular person by throwing rocks at their house, office or vehicle (cf. Marshall,1979:119). These events frequently took place in the settlement (with a large audience), for as Sansom points out, no-one can go wild in private (Sansom,1980:101). As I shall show, all these ends could be achieved with very little retribution, for the actions of the intoxicated were tolerated and forgiven; drunken people were not held responsible for their deeds or words.

### **Staying Sober**

Although some pursued wine whenever cash and transport allowed, and others were content with a few cans from the canteen, there were those at Yalata who did not drink alcohol at all. Some non-drinkers were those who had been warned to stop for medical reasons. Others had just 'given it away' - a term which Yalata people used as an explanation in itself. From time to time, Yalata drinkers were sent (usually by a Magistrate) to Baruta, an alcohol

rehabilitation 'farm' south of Port Augusta run by Woma, an Aboriginal organisation. Woma<sup>4</sup> began in South Australia in 1976 to promote alcohol rehabilitation programmes among Aborigines . Its methodology is simply that Aboriginal fieldworkers, preferably ex-alcoholics, should work among Aboriginal people to rehabilitate them 'on their own cultural terms' (**Advertiser**,23/7/75:5). Remaining 'dry' for a spell at Baruta provided no difficulties, but returning to the drinking climate of Yalata usually did, and Baruta had few long-term successes. As Skowron & Smith (1986) found among Port Hedland Aborigines, Yalata people were able spontaneously to give up alcohol if they chose to do so, irrespective of the provision of so-called rehabilitation or detoxification services. Some non-drinkers were self-confessed Christians, in that this was the reason they cited for their sobriety. Perhaps more importantly, this reason was accepted by others as a fair explanation for giving up alcohol and for avoiding the company of the drinking groups.

Late in 1981 a Christian revival movement occurred among large sections of the Yalata population, as a result of a visit from Aboriginal evangelists from Indulkana. The initial impetus was maintained by later visits from members of the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship, an all-Aboriginal church (cf Gale & Wundersitz,1982:5); the following year, some Cundeelee visitors brought an evangelist with them, and again the movement gained momentum. This wholly Aboriginal-organised religious movement involved a good deal of gospel

singing and the giving of personal testimonials. A rough wooden platform was constructed in the centre of the settlement, adorned with a hand-painted religious tract, and loud communal singing was broadcast over the surrounding area with the help of amplifiers. The new movement took possession of the Church building for much of its activities, and the Lutheran pastor was, for the time being, somewhat displaced and certainly outshone.

Although the evils of drink were not specifically addressed during the gospel sessions (called **inma** by their adherents), the act of 'giving your heart to Jesus' which was the catchphrase of the movement, was not thought to be compatible with the life of a drinker.<sup>5</sup> The general feeling was summed up by one woman (who had not been a drinker anyway) who said 'People got to think about heaven and God, not grog'. Another explained that people gave up drinking because they 'got shame' and became more aware that they only had 'one life'. Others said of Christians 'they can't drink'. This expression was meant to signify that Christians were **unable** to drink. This was not as a result of a prohibition, but because the two modes of existence - being a Christian and being a drinker - were entirely at odds with one another. Adherents also asserted that the 'gospel makes you feel good inside', which was expressed in Pitjantjatjara as **tjuni kanpi** ('stomach/belly fat'). For approximately nine months (with some lapses) the revival continued, with

regular communal gospel singing, accompanied by two young men on electric guitars, and a women's choir. Popular gospel songs in Pitjantjatjara and English were sung with enthusiasm, and there was much joining of hands and rhythmic swaying. Christian cassette tapes were played at camp late into the night - a practice that was most unusual, for in the winter months, people usually went to sleep early, not long after dark. The tapes contained recordings of gospel songs in Pitjantjatjara and other Aboriginal languages, and exhortatory speeches by preachers telling of the dangers of 'turning away from God'. Racial unity was preached despite the Aboriginal basis of the movement. On one cassette recording of a gospel convention, calls were made for 'half caste people, tribal Aborigines and any whites too ... come forward for God'.

Like the drinking business, the revival provided Yalata people with the opportunities not available to them in the normal course of daily life. A Pentecostal movement among Aborigines on the north coast of New South Wales had a similar effect, as Calley documented. He wrote:

Within the pentecostal sect an aborigine can achieve status and authority and make decisions without reference to white outsiders. Over his religious life the administration can exercise only very limited control. In the sect he finds a new social solidarity as well as a new self-respect. Pentecostalism, the 'church' provides a loyalty wider than that of the interlocking, but often mutually hostile, kin groups of which the station communities are composed.

(Calley, 1964:56)



Apart from the local logistics involved in running the Christian movement (obtaining the community truck keys, collecting people from camp, returning them after the meeting, arranging loudspeakers, instruments, rehearsing the choir), Yalata people also organised group trips to Koonibba and Port Augusta to attend conventions. The movement provided the chance for those who had previously been nonentities to forge a role for themselves - and it also gave women an active, though not leading, role. Those involved in the movement developed - somewhat selfconsciously - a 'loving' style of interaction, which meant that when people returned to camp late at night after the gospel meetings, they loudly called out 'goodnight' and 'God bless' to one another. The most popular song sung at the gospel meetings and perpetually hummed by those involved was a repetitious ditty with the words 'we all one big happy family'

During this time, substantial numbers of people stopped drinking, although a hardy few maintained their trips to Nundroo. The revival movement, then, replaced drinking for many people, who exchanged the camaraderie and excitement of carting wine and the altered state of inebriation, for feeling **tjuni kanpi**. One of the chief wine carters became the leading electric guitar player at the gospel meetings. Significantly, the revival also provided those who were anti-alcohol (some of whom had always professed to be

Christians) with an opportunity to cajole the drinkers into a less flamboyant mode. However this was usually done indirectly, and often involved urging the the white Community Advisor to take drastic action. For example they suggested he keep a 'waddie' (a fighting club) behind his office door with which to hit drinkers; that the drinkers should be rounded up and dumped in the bush away from anywhere; and that he should 'make' the police come and stay in order to arrest drinkers. There were some signs of tension between the drinkers and the Christians, for although the Christian revivalists did not actively intervene, their disapproval was almost palpable. Christians referred to alcohol as **mamu kapi** (spirit - i.e. devil - water), **6** or **kapi kuramata** (bad water). Although the drinkers were not quite on the defensive, the Christians certainly had a psychological advantage at this time.

#### **Moves to curtail alcohol**

It was at the peak of the revival movement that several community meetings were convened by the Community Advisor, and a visiting Aboriginal spokesperson from the north, in an attempt to mobilise support for a ban on alcohol. Drinkers reacted angrily to these attempts. Despite an overall majority who were opposed to drinking at this time, and the support of community staff, the meetings failed to gain a firm statement of resolve on the issue. The carting of alcohol continued.

Community and Council meetings had over many years debated the 'grog problem' and the 'young fellers' (who sniffed petrol and stole cars ) at the instigation of the Superintendent, and later the Community Advisor. These meetings inevitably failed to produce decisions, or failed to act upon the ambitious decisions that were made. Attempts were made by the Community Advisor to get Council members to speak to the drinkers (and to the relatives of those in trouble with the police). These attempts were in vain, despite the fact that the Council members, and other Aboriginal people at Yalata, all were quick to voice complaints about the drinkers and their behaviour, and the urgent need to do something about them. The Chairmen of the Council (over a matter of years) were often drinkers themselves, and so were the Council members; they often spent time in gaol for a number of offences; they had sons who broke into the store and the school, who stole cars, and sniffed petrol. These factors did not prevent Council members from voicing outrage at drinkers, store-breakers and petrol sniffers, who were conveniently depicted as 'them lot'. Council members resisted well-meaning attempts by white staff to implement Aboriginal decision-making on these occasions, and while voicing somewhat muted agreement that they would 'speak to drinkers', they simultaneously complained that the police did not help enough, that they were too far away, and that there should be a police station at the settlement.

The minutes of Council meetings reveal the ambivalence of Councillors when asked to intervene with drinkers on a personal level:

**Alcohol problem** . Mr. S- (White staff) reminded the Council that at the last meeting the Councillors had agreed to talk to other people in the community about the grog problem. He then asked 'who had done this?' Most Councillors said that they had not. A discussion then took place about why this had not been done. Answers ranged from 'not enough time' to 'too busy chasing grog', to 'too frightened to talk'. The point was then discussed that perhaps we all need to learn how to talk to other people about this problem. There was a general feeling that those who are talked to say 'yes' and then go off looking for a bottle again ...People don't want to be preached at ...

It is clear from these minutes that the Councillors were unwilling to confront their fellows about drinking. The secretary misinterprets this (perhaps deliberately) as being the result of a lack of counselling skills ('we all need to learn how to talk'). In fact, being a Councillor does not confer the right to undertake such an action, despite the unshakeable conviction on the part of Community Advisors that it does. Indeed, in much the same way as for the Pintupi described by Myers (1976,1979,1986), no individual at Yalata including older, ritually important men and women, possessed the authority to 'create that which others must follow'. Decisions made by the Pintupi Village Council studied by Myers lacked a 'binding moral force' (Myers,1979:367). As Myers explains,

no one has the right to order anyone else around, outside of specific kinship-related domains. The Councillors are free to talk to the Government ...

but they have no real power of sanction or refusal, no one feels much obligation to follow their rulings. Repeated decisions to ban liquor from the camp area have been, thus, to no avail.

(Myers, 1976:533)

Likewise, people at Yalata simply did not subscribe to the view that a man or woman could 'boss' their fellows, or dictate to them how to comport themselves. How was it then, that the Christian revival movement managed to gain a large number of adherents, when it was composed entirely of Aborigines from Yalata, and indeed created its own style of behaviour, one of which was that if you were a Christian, you were not a drinker. If it was the case that an individual could not impose his or her will upon others, or create 'that which others must follow', as Myers suggests, why were the instigators of the revival able to claim a number of new members?

Myers provides an answer to these questions. He contrasts the absence of individual authority with the overwhelmingly impersonal authority of the Law which is not, from the Aboriginal viewpoint, the product of human action. The 'proper ways' of behaving, together with the principles ordained in the Dreaming (**tjukurrpa**) are ordered guidelines; rules and decisions that do not emanate from the Law, then, are perceived to be merely arbitrary. This was certainly the case at Yalata, where 'rules' about the control and consumption of liquor were made by the Council and broken with impunity. The authority of the Councillors

was not ordained in the **tjukurrpa**, but by the vague notions held by government that a group of elected Aborigines would somehow have jurisdiction over their fellows, and that their fellows would abide by their decisions. The Christian revival, however, had an impersonal and 'higher' origin, based on the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. The individuals who, at Yalata, became the short-lived 'leaders' among the Christians were able to do so only because they were understood to be the bearers of another form of 'Law'. Those who were evangelised did not follow the Aboriginal spokespeople, they followed Jesus and gave their hearts to him. I can illustrate this with the example of a visiting Aboriginal man whom I call Kenny.

Kenny was sent to Yalata by Pitjantjatjara kinsmen in the north, on the understanding that he would 'help' Yalata, primarily by working with some of the petrol sniffing youth of the community. Kenny had himself been an inhaler in his youth, and had successfully rehabilitated other inhalers in the Pitjantjatjara lands. Kenny although only a young man, soon became a self-appointed leader, and utilised the Christian revival as his platform. It was he who introduced the revolutionary idea of addressing public meetings through megaphones and - even better - microphones and amplifiers. He stole this idea from the evangelists, who had been broadcasting their hymn-singing to the community on a nightly basis. Kenny addressed a community meeting (held to consider a variety of issues) in which he aroused support

for the revival: 'this is an Aboriginalku church; not Chineseku church, Africanku church, its Yalataku' (the Pitjantjatjara suffix **ku** denotes possession, i.e. this is a church of/belonging to Aborigines, not the Chinese ...). That was fine, noone demurred from this view, in fact this local, grassroots quality was a strong attraction of the revival. However, Kenny then attempted to harangue the audience through his megaphone about their alcohol use. Although young, he accused them of making the Law weak, and made the pronouncement that no-one would be allowed to bring alcohol into the settlement any more : 'we put the rule - no grog at Yalata'. He told them that if they did not like this, they could leave. But the rule was not 'put' at all, and no-one took any notice; the drinkers, although by now very much in the minority, sustained their activities. While Kenny confined himself to urging participation in the revival movement, his somewhat demagogic manner was acceptable, for he was merely acting as an intermediary: he was taking his orders from God, as it were. However, when he attempted to berate the community and arbitrarily to create rules which he expected others to follow, he infringed one of the fundamental beliefs held by Yalata people: no ordinary individual may boss his kinsmen and women. Another fundamental belief held by Yalata people was that people did have the right to drink if they wanted to. Yalata people were not surprised if the white staff, the Community Advisor, or visiting welfare bureaucrats chastised

them about drinking; but they did not accept (and certainly they took no notice of) the public castigation meted out by young Kenny from the north.

### **Attempts to control drinking**

Despite the overall unwillingness of Yalata people (Councillors or not) to confront their fellows on the issue of drinking, there were some attempts made to restrict and control the entry of alcohol, the location of drinkers and to keep drinkers quiet once they were drunk. These attempts were, however, often prompted by the Community Advisor and other staff, and were undertaken in order to keep the white management happy. Many were pseudo-remedies that were unworkable and short-lived. The making of certain 'rules', appointing watchmen, and setting up drinking camps were moves which communicated a pretense that something was being done, while leaving intact the basic right to drink and get drunk. Nightwatchmen were appointed on several occasions and provided with a vehicle with which they patrolled the access tracks to Yalata at night, in an attempt to deter drinkers from bringing their spoils back into the settlement. On occasions, these individuals would themselves get drunk, or allowed their vehicles to be used for carting wine. The men chosen did not last long in the job - it was a cold and lonely task on a winter night and one that was likely to end in unpleasantness. The job contravened a common strategy for avoiding problems - that one should, where at



all possible, not seek direct confrontation with drinkers. This fact was highlighted when one particularly enthusiastic anti-grog night watchman intercepted a carload of drinkers. He proceeded to pour out the contents of their bottles and administer a few beatings. The reaction from some sections of the Yalata population, far from endorsing his bold actions, was to complain that he was **too hard** on the drinkers. On another occasion, a plan to force drinkers to drink at a special camp away from the main body of the Big Camp came to grief. One night a drunk rolled into the fire and badly burned his back; no-one was in a position to help him because all were inebriated. After this many people thought that separate drinkers' camps were 'too dangerous', so once more the peace and safety of all at camp were put at risk as drinkers returned at night. This meant, however, that the wives and families of drinkers could 'look after' them. Compassion was indeed the over-riding ethic which guided the behaviour of Yalata people towards drunks.

There was an active member of the Woma organisation at Yalata, although Woma has never been a particularly successful endeavour at Yalata. At times the 'Woma Committee' was reduced to the activities of a single man, known as the 'Woma man' who was paid for his work. The only other tangible evidence of Woma at Yalata was the Woma house, located on the south side of the settlement which, before housing became available for the Aboriginal

population in general, was one of the few homes available for a family to live in. Once it had been made habitable again after some months of disuse, the Woma man and his family moved into one half of the house. The other half was intended to function as a drop-in centre within which drinkers could be 'rehabilitated'. Previously the Woma man, his wife, four children and three foster children had lived at Big Camp in a **wiltja**. His wife looked forward to the perceived comforts and considerable prestige of having a house. However, she found that living in the Woma house had distinct disadvantages. Drunks came to the house, usually late at night, to gain access to food and shelter. The Woma man and his wife were woken up, they got up and boiled a billy, sometimes prepared food. He would talk quietly to the drinkers and try to ensure there was no fighting or trouble. Sometimes the drinkers spent the night in the house. However, Nyarpi, the Woma man's wife found this way of life very difficult at times. She complained that she got no sleep and suffered from headaches as a result. On occasions she acted as she would have done were they camping out: she carried her swag and her children into the bush away from the settlement and slept there to get some peace.

Nyarpi told me that her husband never 'growled' at drunks, as others did, because he was the Woma man: 'he feel sorry for them, he give them blanket, keep them quiet ..."you lie down here" '. This was his job, to keep the drunks quiet.

The Woma man also made nightly 'rounds' of the camps as part of his job. Far from intervening in the drinking enterprise, or even counselling its adherents, the solitary representative of an alcohol rehabilitation programme had adapted his role in keeping with the prevailing view at Yalata. The role he created for himself (and which was endorsed by others at Yalata) was one which conformed to the non-confrontational and non-interventionist ethic which prevailed in the community with respect to drinkers. His role was understood to be that of a provider of goods and services for drunks, encapsulated in the expression to 'look after' drunks. It was not to prevent drinkers from obtaining or consuming alcohol, or to rebuke them for doing so. If drinkers made a lot of noise at camp and kept people awake, the Woma man was often blamed, not the drinkers themselves. People claimed that he was 'supposed' to keep the drunks quiet by looking after them, and if there was noise, it was therefore concluded (by a perverse form of logic), that he was not doing his job properly.

These duties were an extension of the expected role of non-drinking wives and families of drunks - it was not possible to turn away a drunk relative from a camp or to deny him assistance or food. This was not necessarily because of the supposed responsibility of kin to respond to demands from other relatives, but also for the common sense reason that refusal often caused trouble, and it was advisable to avoid trouble with drunks. In effect, people 'bribed' drunks to

keep quiet by giving them what they asked for. Marshall describes a similar attitude towards drunks on Truk, in the Marshall Islands, where women play the role of 'guardian' to drunks, and others attempt to avoid them:

The normal way sober persons of any age and either sex deal with drunks is not to deal with them - that is avoidance is considered the best strategy ... If one cannot avoid a drunk, then one must be careful not to annoy him. Speaking softly and soothingly, agreeing with whatever inanity he may utter, providing him with whatever he may demand (e.g. food and cigarettes) and getting away as quickly as possible without appearing to flee are considered the best ways to avoid antagonizing a drunk.

(Marshall, 1979:93-4).

The usual methods of saying no, of avoiding and deflecting unwanted demands, were of no use in a drunken interchange. For this reason, even those camp members who went to considerable trouble to locate themselves away from drinking groups, found themselves forced to acquiesce to the demands of drunks who occasionally discovered their whereabouts.

### **Indigenous sanctions**

Notwithstanding the absence of forceful action by the Council to curb the flow of alcohol or 'talk' to the drinkers, and the tempering of the role of the Woma worker to that of a purely caring nature, individuals in the Yalata population did express criticism, and occasionally outrage, at the behaviour of their fellows. This was most frequently done in the form of a ritualised public monologue known to

Yalata people as a 'growl' <sup>7</sup>or in Pitjantjatjara **tjunparni**.

If a man or woman performed a growl, it was usually done at night, after dark, and took place at camp. A nighttime growl, or an early morning one just before dawn, enabled others to participate. The instigator of the growl sometimes took his or her shirt off in a gesture of anger (to demonstrate that they were 'hot') and spoke from their camp, or sometimes as they walked up and down between others' hearths. When the main monologue was over, others would call out contributions of their own ; the tirade would rise and fall for up to an hour. At times of heavy drinking, growls were frequent at the camp where I lived. Over a six week period, a senior man performed six growls (five by night, and one in broad daylight in the centre of the Yalata settlement). On these occasions the growler used the Law as the main theme of his monologues: the need to keep it strong and the fact that drinkers made the Law 'weak'. The precise connection between the two was not explained, although he intimated that drink distracted **anangu** from paying proper attention to the Law, and that if they were 'worrying' for wine, they could not 'hear' the Law.

On one occasion his growl was precipitated by the actions of a young woman, who had drunkenly (and presumably accidentally) struck an elderly and very frail man. Although she was not named, it was clear that the growl

(which took place the same evening) was directed at her. Similarly when the growler wished to berate his son-in-law for his drinking , he woke everyone in the middle of the night in order to do so. In his speech he specifically criticised people for spending money on wine and not on their children who needed blankets and clothing. The next morning the man who had growled came and told me that his words had been directed at his daughter's husband, who was camped only 30 metres away. By criticising the younger man in this way the growler achieved two purposes: he publicly shamed and berated his son-in-law, while avoiding the indelicacy of overtly naming him as the culprit - although the audience would have been in little doubt as to whom the growl was directed. Secondly, he protected himself with the aura of neutrality provided by the darkness. He achieved neutrality also by moving into a ritual mode of action which served to separate him from the mundane, and thus personalised, realm. He thus avoided the difficulties inherent in a direct confrontation.

There were less ritualised growls which were nevertheless public simply because of the absence of privacy at camp. These became something other than an interpersonal disagreement largely because they were witnessed and reported by observers. Growls were not always on the subject of drinking, however, in fact one young man was growled vigorously by his grandmother for his sexual

misdemeanours, while the fact that he was at the time the chief carter of wine passed unmentioned. The presence of Europeans at camp provided an excuse (or at least a good opportunity) to complain about drinking, as it was always assumed that Europeans did not approve of Aboriginal drinking. On one occasion when we were all camping not far from Ooldea, some cartons of wine arrived - astonishingly, considering the distance of 170 kms from Nundroo. Virtually everyone became very drunk that night, and the next morning a mature woman (who had remained sober) growled the whole camp (which was still recovering) using the presence of the two anthropologists as her rationale. She accused everyone of having no shame and of not thinking of us: 'you not thinking about boss. Boss camping, sleeping close up!' By means of her reference to us, she was able to justify her growl and so pre-empt any potential accusations that it was none of her business whether everyone else got drunk.

On rare occasions there was direct punishment of those involved in the drinking enterprise, but not, however, for the mere act of drinking or carting wine. A vivid example of such a punishment occurred when a car that had imported some alcohol from Nundroo had come to grief, and slightly injured a young boy who had been taken on the trip. The boy's parents were in Port Augusta at the time and he was under the care of another relative, who happened to be a fearless campaigner against alcohol. When this man discovered that the boy had been involved, he promptly drove out to the

abandoned car, and set it alight. The boy was packed off to Port Augusta; the car was put out of action permanently. The significance of his action rested with the involvement of the boy: it was generally agreed that the drinking enterprise should not involve underage youths. Again, as in the case of the man who berated his son-in-law, the irate foster father expressed his anger by burning the car, but without precipitating an unfortunate direct physical confrontation with the perpetrators of the offence.

### **Perceptions of drinkers and drunkenness**

I have said that, at Yalata, people were not, on the whole, held accountable for the actions performed when drunk. 8 People often expressed compassion (saying 'ngaltutjara') for those languishing in gaols at Port Lincoln or Port Augusta for criminal offences committed while under the influence.

In order to understand this contention that people did not know what they did when they were drunk, it is necessary to examine how Yalata people conceived of the state of drunkenness, and its accompaniments. MacAndrew and Edgerton suggested that if people are brought up to believe that one is not really oneself when drunk, then acts of drunken aggression are construed as being purely episodic happenings, rather than intended acts emanating from the moral character of the individual (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969:169). Certainly Yalata people did not typify



individuals who were drinkers (and fighters) as having intrinsically aggressive characters, but they did seek to explain what got into them to make them behave in a particular manner. Hence it was suggested that a man who often became drunk, stole vehicles and got into trouble with the police, 'must have a **mamu** in his head' telling him to do these things. A man with a son who was often violent when drunk commented that the boy was only a bully when he was drunk, that his spirit was all mixed up and that 'something else in him does those bully things'. The belief that an alien factor somehow 'caused' aggressive or nonconforming acts is also expressed in the term used to describe drunken fighting. Yalata people call this **pika punganyi**, which means literally 'sick/angry hitting'. **Pika** is a general term for sickness or illness, but also can refer to anger: it is understood to be something inside an individual which is the cause of a headache, or of anger.<sup>9</sup> **Kata pika** (head sick) can mean headache, but also bad mood. It is not surprising then, that Aboriginal healers are understood by Yalata people (and others in Australia) to **remove** objects in order to cure people.

Not everyone reacted to alcohol in the same way however, and Yalata people were aware of individual differences. Some were good, quiet drinkers (**palya tjikinyi**) while others were bad, nuisance drinkers (**kuramata tjikinyi**). One man was said to get 'full drunk' on only one can of beer. A wildly

aggressive drinker was said to be 'mad' or **kata karinki**<sup>10</sup> 'really wild'. They were also called **pikarti** a term which was also used to refer to snakes and dogs which bite, children who answer back, and one woman used it to describe her grandmother, evidently a rather prickly old lady. People who were drunk were perceived to have moved into an uncaring and unaware state, a state which was qualitatively different from the norm. This meant that they were not reasonable; they were depicted as being unwilling to listen to reason in the expression 'they can't listen' (**kulintja wiya**). Drunks, like children who were 'inebriated' with petrol fumes, were 'unable to hear' (**putu kulinyi**) and therefore were unable to 'worry'. The Pintupi state that one cannot reason with a drunk because his 'ears are closed' with alcohol (Myers, 1976:68). Similarly, on Truk drunks are believed to be dangerous and 'beyond reason because they cannot "hear" anything that is said to them' (Marshall, 1979:113).

There is also a series of beliefs about the role of the brain, beliefs which are allied to the concepts of hearing, listening and reasoning. Drinking was understood by Yalata people to affect peoples' brains in a deleterious way. They often referred to people who were long-term drinkers as having 'no good brains', or 'no brains' (**nukunypa wiya**). They were said to be **ngalya pati** which means literally 'forehead closed'. The forehead was perceived to be associated with the brains; someone might say 'I got brains, **ngalya!**', while tapping their forehead. This range of

linguistic devices all reinforces the principle that inebriates are seen to be affected, acted upon, and incapable of controlling their actions and speech.

### **The self exculpations of drinkers**

I have shown that there was public and private criticism and some retaliation against drinkers, albeit somewhat deflected in nature. There were staff-instigated alcohol meetings, threatened and actual staff walk-outs, the Christian revival with its implicit anti-drinking message, ritualised growls, intra-family complaints and generalised grumblings which all focussed on the use of alcohol by some sections of the community. In short, although there were at times considerable numbers of drinkers, and despite the ethos that generally tolerated drinking as the right of those who chose to pursue it, drinkers (at times) found themselves to be on the defensive. The pronouncements drinkers made about themselves and others sought to minimise their intake and downplay their actions, usually through the technique of directing attention onto others who were deemed to be the 'real' troublemakers. <sup>11</sup> I also argue, however, that these explanations (which almost always emerge in the form of self exculpations) are also a part of a strategic process of seeking reasoned 'causes' for various phenomena, as discussed in Chapter Four.

Drinkers utilised what Sykes and Matza have called

'techniques of neutralisation' (1957) whereby they explained and rationalised their actions. By providing neutralisations, Yalata people were, in part, acknowledging that their actions on occasions did stretch the limits of tolerance in the community. These neutralisations emerged in the course of casual conversation (rather than direct questioning about alcohol use), or in throw-away comments. For this reason I do not believe them to be simply justifications offered to the researcher - a European and therefore probably anti-alcohol - but to be representations of something else. After Sykes and Matza (1957) I have arranged these neutralisations into four broad categories as follows:

#### **1. Denial of responsibility.**

Drinkers denied that they were responsible for their actions performed when drunk, and indeed this was the accepted view of drunken behaviour among Yalata people. Many subscribed to the belief that a variety of internal promptings over which the individual had no control, caused people to do silly or violent things when drunk. These were commonly typified as being a **pika** (sickness) or a mixed-up **kulti** (spirit).

Outside forces such as a **mamu** (spirit/devil) also 'made' people behave uncontrollably. Drinkers also sometimes denied that they were responsible for getting drunk in the first place, saying that 'the others' had egged them on. The driver of a 'taxi' excused himself saying that 'they'

persuaded him to drive to Nundroo by showing him their money; a mother said this of her son who allowed his car to be used in this way.

## **2. Denial of victim.**

This neutralisation is associated with the damage or injury brought about by the drinker. It involves the transformation of the victim into someone who deserved what they got, the injury being seen as a form of rightful retaliation or punishment. As Sykes and Matza point out, 'by a subtle alchemy ... (he) moves himself into the position of an avenger and the victim is transformed into a wrong-doer' (1957:669). Two men convicted of manslaughter at Yalata for killing their wives defended their actions in court by claiming provocation **12** (cf. Daunton-Fear & Freiberg, 1977:52; Eggleston, 1976:293-296). The first asserted that the woman used insulting language and 'forbidden' words to abuse him; the second complained that his wife had been drinking with young men. Of course these defences were argued on their behalf by their legal representatives, but the content of the arguments referred to customary matters, and were derived by the lawyers from their Aboriginal clients. Both Aboriginal men depicted themselves as the rightful upholders of 'the Law' on the one hand, and local 'rules' on the other. These neutralisations were then made use of by the Australian justice system in arguing in their defence. In this respect

the statements became part of an 'officialising discourse' in Bourdieu's terms.

Drinkers referred to local drinking 'rules' as well as to matters of customary action in order to explain violent assaults. For example, a man who attacked another with an axe severely injuring the other's thigh, explained to the police afterwards that he did this because the victim had refused him a drink of wine. In turn, the man who was injured by the axe claimed that his assailant was 'too young' to drink, and that was why he had refused him (quoted in Brady & Palmer, 1984:78). As well as claiming that his assailant was 'too young', he called upon the Australian justice system to support him by saying that it was thus 'against the law'. Another opinion was offered by an adult woman who commented that the parents of the assailant had 'not been strict enough with him'.

Several drunken attacks on white staff or their property were justified in terms of perceived slights or refusals. One man threatened 'I'll break all your windows!' because the Community Advisor would not lend him the community's vehicle for a trip to Cundeelee. On another occasion, after a public meeting to discuss drinking, a drunken man abused the Community Advisor (and threw a rock through the front window of his house) saying that he had been 'shamed' at the meeting. The two had a physical altercation. Later the first man's brother appeared, inebriated, outside the Advisor's

home and, taking his brother's part, also abused the Advisor. In these related incidents, those who were drunk asserted that their violence (or threatened violence) was 'rightful' and justified.

### 3. Minimisation.

Several people whom I knew to be determined drinkers attempted verbally to minimise the amount they drank and the activities they indulged in when they were drunk. One man for example, told me that he only drank **tjukutjuku** (little bit) and that when people got drunk they merely 'laugh, and talk and then **kunkun** (sleep)'. Having attempted to sleep within earshot of drinkers I knew indisputably that this was a somewhat romanticised view of the drinking sessions. Another man, a close friend, said of his son-in-law's drinking that he went 'to one side, quiet one'. That this man should attempt to minimise the others' drinking was perplexing, for he had 'growled' him for his behaviour and evidently did not approve of it. Obviously, people were ambivalent about the drinking of their kin and associates, sometimes criticising, while on other occasions making excuses for them. Another method of minimisation often indulged in by drinkers, was to point with outrage to the petrol sniffers and proclaim how much more dangerous it was to sniff petrol. The petrol sniffers were also used in order to divert attention from drinkers.

#### **4. Diverting attention.**

Another very common attempt by a drinker to neutralise his or her activities was to direct attention elsewhere. Drinkers were among the most vociferous in their condemnation of the activities of young people, self righteously complaining of 'underage' drinkers, and the activities of the petrol sniffers. One drinker informed me that petrol sniffing was really dangerous because the doctors could not remove lead from the brain (the nursing sisters had been 'educating' the community about the effects of sniffing). However, if he, a drinker became sick, the doctors would be able to fix him up. Drinkers also frequently asserted (often when inebriated) that drinkers - presumably **other** drinkers - made too much noise, spent too much money on alcohol and did not know how to bring up their children.

#### **Drunken Comportment**

The rich and varied ways in which different individuals and different cultural groups comport themselves while under the influence of alcohol has led several informed observers to the conclusion that drunken comportment is, to a large extent, learned. For example, Heath, reviewing nearly five hundred ethnographic studies of alcohol use concludes:



Drunkenness not only has different meanings and values in different cultures, but also involves significantly different kinds of behaviour; drunken behaviour is patterned to such a degree that it appears to be, in large part, the resultant of a learning process.

(Heath, 1975:56)

MacAndrew and Edgerton, whose work undermined the conventional wisdoms about what were thought to be the 'inevitable' effects of alcohol, stated:

It seems evident that in and of itself, the presence of alcohol in the body does not necessarily even conduce to disinhibition, much less inevitably produce such an effect ... we must conclude that drunken comportment is an essentially **learned** affair.

(MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969:88)

Marshall (1979) argues that the 'belligerent carousing' so characteristic of the society he studied in Micronesia, is a pattern of drunken comportment facilitated by that society's social organization. Although it does not explain the whole process of drinking and drunkenness, he asserts that the 'absence of heavy-handed leaders' who could quickly quell disturbances has contributed to the 'obstreperous fashion' in which young Trukese get drunk (1979:128-9). Similarly, MacAndrew and Edgerton comment that societies 'get the sort of drunken comportment that they allow' (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969:173).

The comportment of Yalata drinkers - although varying between individuals to some extent - is usually belligerent, with frequent outbreaks of expressed anger and argumentativeness leading to fighting between drinkers.

There is also verbal and sometimes physical abuse of white staff. The outcome of this comportment is considerable physical suffering (in the form of alcohol-related morbidity) and mental suffering (as a result of grief, tension, loss of sleep and social disruption). Women who drink are particularly vulnerable to violence. Why, then, do Yalata people allow this distressful and troublesome state of affairs to persist? I suggest that there are two associated social factors which explain this situation.

The first factor is similar to that mentioned by Marshall - an absence of what he terms 'heavy-handed leaders' who could intervene when (or before) drunken actions got out of hand. I have described the over-riding ethic at Yalata that drinkers, like any other individual or action group, had the right to get on with their own business without the interference of others. It may be that there is an absence of authoritative and interventionist individuals (who could have been prepared to exert control over obstreperous drinkers) because, as hunter-gatherers, people were used to putting distance between the parties in conflict, rather than relying on firm peace-makers within their number. The construction by the Pitjantjatjara of personal and interpersonal authority is such that overt assertiveness over others is not a valued quality. I have described how the attempts by a young man (who was from outside the community) to instruct Yalata people to stop drinking, were

ignored. Like the Pintupi, Yalata people are not communal, and they stress individual autonomy. Collective sanctions against individuals are few. The preferred sanction against drinkers, the 'growl', contains its own safeguards. It is enacted by an individual, usually at night or in the early morning (i.e. in the dark or twilight), at camp (i.e. surrounded by others as 'witnesses'), and the content is usually diffused so that charges against a particular individual are couched within the generalised complaint.

The second social factor which facilitates the drunken comportment I have described is the shared set of attitudes towards, and conceptions of, drinkers and drunkenness. This holds that they are incapable of listening and understanding, that their brains are no good, or that their actions are provoked by some alien internal prompting which means that 'they' are not responsible for their actions. This means that others maintain an attitude of resigned tolerance for drinkers who, from time to time, make their lives miserable. The cultural understandings of what it means to be drunk, and the collectively sustained and created strategies called upon by Yalata people, all militate against blaming drinkers for what they do. These understandings are typified by the role of the Woma worker, whose job has been redefined by Yalata people in keeping with their expectations of how drunks should be treated. Onto him has devolved the task of keeping drunks quiet and of 'looking after' them by supplying them with food and

warmth. 13 In addition, people at Yalata express their acceptance of drunkenness by means of the techniques of neutralisation which deflect blame and culpability.

Together, these two sets of social understandings (the autonomous nature of groups and individuals, and the view that drinkers are not responsible for their actions), militate against any **collective** definition that drinking is 'bad' or 'undesirable' (although individuals may express this view in private). Consequently, drinking itself is allowed to continue; so too is the type of drunken comportment common at Yalata.

## NOTES

1. A detailed account of the use of alcohol at Yalata, as well as alcohol-related morbidity and mortality, are provided in Brady & Palmer (1984).
2. Ronald Penny, University of Adelaide, Personal communication.
3. O'Connor (1984) notes that in Alice Springs 'fringe camps' the social pressure to drink is so intense that alcohol use amounts to group dependence. Abstinence means remaining outside the social groups of the camps.
4. **Woma** is a Pitjantjatjara word meaning 'sweet' and is commonly used at Yalata for sugar, and for alcohol.
5. It is interesting that many aspects of the Christianity offered by the evangelical revival, were similar in style to the Christianity espoused by the missionaries of the United Aborigines Mission at Ooldea, who had evangelised the older residents of Yalata between 1933 and 1952. It bore very little relation to the teachings of the Lutherans to which they had been subjected from 1952 onwards. The UAM had emphasised the role of Jesus, and despite its belief in Satan, also taught of Christian love, of 'stirring the hearts of the Lord's people' and of 'giving your heart to Jesus' (cf Turner, 1950:59,62).
6. The UAM had transformed the Aboriginal belief in **mamu** into an 'evil' spirit, 'Marmoo' (Turner, 1950:83). R. & C. Berndt translate the term as 'devil' (R. & C. Berndt, 1944c:338-345). **Mamu** are believed to be seen at night, and in bad dreams, and are often found in particular locations. They are thought to enter human beings and lead men astray.
7. Olive Pink refers to the use of the term 'rowling' or to 'rowl' which among her Aranda informants meant to scold or quarrel. She comments that the word was 'coined from our word used for the noise made by an angry dog, to growl, and the expression 'to have a row' (Pink, 1936:277). See also Williams (1987:88). Sansom (1980:82) states that the metaphor (growl) 'is drawn from the camp dogs who defend their own private space from incursion'.
8. J. Stead reported that among Pintupi people at Yayayi offences committed by drunken people were excused (Stead, 1980:69). MacAndrew & Edgerton (1969) provide a number of ethnographic sources showing this to be the case cross-culturally. See also Marshall (1979:113) and Williams (1987:74). Lee (1979:420) reports a Kalahari

!Kung man, who having misbehaved when drunk on home-brewed beer 'disclaimed all responsibility saying that **he** would never do such a thing; it was entirely the fault of the beer'.

9. I am grateful to Nancy Sheppard for her comments on these linguistic points.
10. At first I thought people were using a version of the English 'cranky', however R. & C. Berndt note **ga:ringgi** from their Ooldea fieldwork as 'mad' or 'angry' (R. & C. Berndt, 1944c:355). I assume that my hearing of **karinki** for 'mad' or 'wild' is therefore correct.
11. Statements such as this were not unlike Merton's notion of in-group virtues and outgroup vices, paraphrased by Matza & Sykes as 'I am daring, you are reckless, he is delinquent' (Matza & Sykes, 1961:715).
12. The Law Reform Commission has recommended that a partial Aboriginal customary law defence be created, reducing charges of murder to manslaughter (this in fact occurred in the two cases I have mentioned here). Their final Report states:

... where the defendant is found to have done the act that caused the death of the victim in the well-founded belief that the customary laws of the Aboriginal community to which the defendant belonged required the act to be done, the defendant should be convicted of manslaughter rather than murder (The Law Reform Commission, 1986, Vol 2:214).
13. It is ironic that the Aboriginal view of compassion and care for drinkers is entirely at odds with current thinking among rehabilitation workers (in Australia and elsewhere), in which families and friends are encouraged to **relinquish** their support for the alcohol-dependent member, in order to force him or her to take responsibility for themselves.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE OFFICIAL SEARCH FOR AETIOLOGY: SOCIAL WELFARE AND ABORIGINAL SOCIAL PROCESSES

Juvenile court puts one more in mind of a psychiatric synopsis, or of a presentation of patients in the good old days of Charcot's Salpetriere, than of proceedings leading to a judicial decision.

(Donzelot, 1979:106)

This chapter addresses the processes to which Yalata Aborigines are subjected when they commit acts of nonconformity which become labelled as such and adjudicated upon by the wider Australian justice system. When Aboriginal perceptions and understandings of certain actions are confronted with the Australian justice system, both the offenders and those associated with the judicial process find themselves in a situation which is often characterised by misunderstanding. These misunderstandings arise from two areas of disjunction which separate Aboriginal from white Australian understandings of the notions of blame, culpability and responsibility.

The first of these disjunctions arises because while Yalata people have one set of perceptions of non-conformity, the court (presumably reflecting the wider Australian society), has another. Yalata people remain relatively phlegmatic about certain types of nonconformity, particularly those associated

with theft of or damage to property, and including acts associated with physical violence. Virtually all property offences are committed against the possessions of Europeans or involve so-called 'community' property. Inter-personal violence between Aborigines and theft at camp is considered by them, to be their own business and is usually not reported. On the whole, the committing of acts designated as criminal in Australian law, the subsequent court hearing and even detention are considered to be neither remarkable nor stigma-laden among Yalata people. For example, when juveniles attend court on various charges their parents and kin largely ignore the proceedings. Adults come and go to and from gaol without comment. As I have shown, Yalata people operate within a negotiable system whereby some unwanted actions are subjected to negative sanction, becoming the subject of a strategic mobilisation of social disapproval, while other actions pass unremarked, or are rationalised away utilising a wealth of minimising formulations. This system of adaptable and changing norms is in marked contrast to the supposedly firm standards which are institutionalised in the Australian justice system. The presence of Europeans may provoke a chain of events which lead to a certain act becoming officially labelled as an 'offence' by the Australian justice system. Naturally, the actions selected for attention in this way tend to be those involving European property or individuals, for the Europeans who report incidents to the police are less willing to make official 'incidents' out of inter-Aboriginal matters.



There is a second disjunction. This occurs when Aborigines, particularly juveniles, attend court. I argue in this chapter, that the welfare, legal and judicial professionals who have dealings with juveniles and the court, misconstrue in a variety of ways the social world of the Aboriginal clients or defendants (as the case may be) before them. The court (in the form of the magistrate or presiding judge) receives submissions which offer information on the 'mitigating' factors associated with the particular offence under consideration. In the case of the juvenile, these mitigating factors are presented by a representative of the Department for Community Welfare, and have been compiled - in the form of a social background report - by the social workers on the staff of that Department. Much of the information is collected when social workers visit Yalata and obtain the views of Yalata people themselves. The social background reports contain information on the children, their familial and social milieu, the activities of their parents or caretakers and their socio-economic circumstances. The general thrust of the arguments in mitigation of offences as presented to the court, is that the combined detrimental impact of poverty, alcohol use, social and 'tribal' disorganisation and poor parenting upon the young person, all - in an undisclosed manner - combine to create a fertile environment from which delinquency and non-conformity is 'produced'. The validity or otherwise of this contention is not of concern in this present discussion, but rather the adequacy of the perspective on life at Yalata which

is presented to the court. Although attempting to illuminate the social context of an offence, the reports contain many misunderstandings about the nature of Aboriginal society.

Attempts by members of the judiciary and the legal profession to come to terms with the interface between Aboriginal criminality and European law, have been characterised by the search for an indigenous authority structure. In this endeavour, much emphasis has been placed on the role of the 'elders' in Aboriginal society. Associated with this focus on elders, the judiciary has frequently assumed that Aboriginal Councils are in a position to make binding decisions, and that the Aboriginal 'community' itself constitutes a tangible entity when it comes to administering justice. In reality, these assumptions are often proved wrong, and many misunderstandings have occurred, largely because of the failure of the justice system to make the distinction suggested by Maddock, between binding, 'public' norms, and non-binding, 'private' ones (Maddock, 1984:232). The acceptance of this distinction would help to clarify (for the judiciary) the role of authority figures and the difficulties associated with the expectation that Councils can, or will, administer justice. The official interest in what is often termed 'community opinion' has been encouraged by those judges and magistrates who may deal regularly with criminal matters involving Aborigines. These members of the judiciary are often anxious to formulate acceptable compromises between their own judicial responsibilities and the Aboriginal community's opinion.

Indeed, this process has been formalised through the mechanism of the brief to examine Aboriginal Customary Laws by the Australian Law Reform Commission (cf. The Law Reform Commission, 1986).

I illustrate these dilemmas by describing the acts indulged in by Yalata adolescents, which are deemed offences by the Australian justice system, but which are not stigmatised or labelled as such by Aborigines at Yalata. Additionally, I explore what eventuates when those assisting the courts in their deliberations attempt to elicit comment from the Aboriginal 'community' itself. The responses and stated opinions gleaned from community members are in fact composed of neutralisations and notions of causation which usually deflect blame from the actor. As has been shown in Chapter Five, these are some of the processual strategies used by Yalata people to deal with the problems of daily life, and particularly with the problem of accommodating those whose actions are in one way or another, a-social, or socially different. <sup>1</sup> I also examine the misunderstandings, on the part of some members of the judiciary, of Aboriginal conceptions of authority, and of the notion of the Aboriginal 'community'.

### **Kids smelling petrol, breaking and entering**

Yalata community members have appeared in the Ceduna court on a variety of charges for many years. Juveniles aged between 10 and 18 have also appeared at the Ceduna court or at the

Adelaide Children's Court, in large numbers. 2 In fact, the absence of court appearances for boys of the 14 - 18 year age group is the exception rather than the rule. This high percentage reflects the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal children in the juvenile justice system in South Australia as a whole, and indeed in many other States (Commonwealth of Australia, 1980:61; Gale & Wundersitz, 1985b). Before discussing the interactions which take place in the context of the court itself, I first describe the activities of Aboriginal young people which bring them ultimately to the attention of the police and the courts, and the perceptions of these events by others at Yalata.

Although inhaling petrol fumes is not in itself a punishable offence anywhere in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 1985:261), the children who engage in this activity often subsequently perform acts which are against the law (cf. Worrall, 1982). If these acts involve the property of European staff at Yalata - as they usually do - then the individual involved is almost invariably reported to the police. They are then charged with the subsequent offence, not with inhaling petrol fumes. It was easy to obtain petrol for sniffing, and it was taken from the tanks of abandoned cars, from the petrol bowsers at the settlement and the Roadhouse, or was milked from the tanks of vehicles parked outside houses. Petrol was inhaled from soft drink cans held to the nose; by sniffing regularly throughout the day an intoxicated state could be maintained.

The social organisation of the sniffing enterprise usually involved groups rather than individuals, with older boys in their late teenage years recruiting younger ones to participate. Girls as well as boys sniffed petrol at Yalata, although it was predominantly a male activity. The age breakdown of the population shows that overall, there were fewer girls between the ages of 12 and 18 than boys (see Table 6.1 below).

**TABLE 6.1**

**Adolescent population of Yalata in 1981**

Age	Males	Females	Total
12	7	2	9
13	4	-	4
14	7	2	9
15	1	5	6
16	4	5	9
17	6	3	9
18	8	3	11
<b>Totals</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>57</b>

Between 1976 and 1982, petrol sniffing groups at Yalata engaged in their pastime at night and usually in a clandestine manner in out of the way corners of the settlement. If surprised, the group would scatter. More recently, and in keeping with the activities of sniffers in other Pitjantjatjara settlements such as Amata, Yalata children have inhaled fumes openly. As I have shown, confrontational methods of criticism were rare at Yalata. Sniffers and their families were not the subject of 'growls' of disapproval or rebuke; neither were they the subject of Aboriginal-initiated community meetings. The

overwhelming response of adults was to shrug their shoulders in bewilderment and to do nothing.

It was quite normal to be an offender if you were male and adolescent at Yalata: 59 per cent of 11-17 year old males appeared at court or before a Children's Aid Panel at least once in 1980. <sup>3</sup> Eighty-three per cent of 16-17 year old males offended (Brady & Morice, 1982:76). The most common offence for which Yalata adolescents were charged was for the illegal use of motor vehicles (32 charges in 1980), followed by break enter and steal, or with intent to steal (18 charges). Other offences included larceny, wilful damage, and common assault. Overall however, adolescents were charged with offences against property, while their elders were usually charged with offences against the person.

When property was stolen it was almost invariably property belonging to Europeans, particularly their vehicles which were usually in good working order. Teachers homes and vehicles were particular targets. Community buildings, although designated as 'Yalata Community School' or 'Yalata Community Store' were, however, managed by Europeans, were evidently perceived to 'belong' to Europeans, and were frequently broken. There were two stores for Yalata people: one in the centre of the settlement, and another mobile store located at Big Camp. Both employed several Aborigines and were managed by the white store manager under a similar regime. The mobile store opened on three mornings each week at Big Camp, and meant that

residents of the camp did not have to make the trip into Yalata settlement just in order to shop. The store was on their doorstep, as it were. The store in the settlement was frequently broken into and was relieved of large quantities of goods (both foodstuffs and hardware). In contrast, the mobile store parked at Big Camp was only tampered with once during my fieldwork period. The young man concerned did not take anything, and apologised to the store manager afterwards. There was, then, a psychological separation between the settlement and Big Camp which meant that the settlement was 'fair game'.

Thefts did occur from time to time at camp, with items such as blankets, an axe, or food being taken from someone's *wiltja*. These thefts were not reported to the police. On one occasion, a caravan used by the travelling adult educator and his wife, (both white Australians) and parked at Big Camp, was tampered with. The offender was 'growled' by a middle-aged man who had taken it upon himself to 'look after' the educator, but the offence was taken no further than this. Responses to thefts at camp were usually low key; however theft seemed to be rare, perhaps partly because there was usually someone in the vicinity. In contrast, thefts and breakins at the settlement were almost always reported by staff to the police, who would call in on their next patrol to the Western Australian border, or who would make an extra trip when called upon to do so. Offenders were easily identified by their footprints, and staff

or police had no trouble finding Aboriginal adults who were willing to interpret these prints. Many staff, the education department and the store manager installed burglar alarms on their premises (which went off accidentally so regularly that it was hard to know when a real break-in had occurred). Single teachers (often young women) were provided with alarm bells which would ring in the principal's house. The school itself was a favourite target, and the senior girls' domestic science unit was used by the burglars, who often cooked up stolen food on the stoves there. Mesh was installed on all windows and doors throughout the settlement from 1981 onwards. This contributed to the siege mentality of the staff at Yalata, particularly those who were young and inexperienced. The administrative office, in which the Advisor sat, and from which the pension and other cheques were disbursed, was so pockmarked with holes made by hurled rocks, that the outside wall at one end had to be replaced. Its windows were broken so regularly that all windows are now made of perspex. It was clear, then, that the settlement presented would-be burglars and rock-throwers with a choice number of targets, whereas Big Camp did not.

### **The role of the social workers**

Strictly speaking, the Children's Court in South Australia is a specialist jurisdiction, with its own judge and staff, but because of the distance to Ceduna (800kms), the circuit magistrate who presides at Ceduna adjudicates on juvenile as



well as adult cases. He sits at Ceduna court once a month, setting aside one or more of his four-day visits for this purpose. Recently, beginning in 1985, the visiting Magistrate has held the court hearings at Yalata itself, in an attempt to make the proceedings more relevant to those before it. My data on court appearances was collected before this development, and is based on court appearances which took place in Ceduna court.

Aboriginal children appearing at court were never (in my experience) accompanied by their adult relatives. This was not because they were ashamed of their children, but because of a lack of interest, or of any motivation to attend the proceedings. The offences did not affect them materially (for their own property was not involved). There was no sense in which adult relatives felt compelled to go and 'speak up' for the adolescents before the magistrate, and neither did adults express any reflected guilt for the activities of their children. It was left to the Aboriginal Legal Rights solicitor, 4 and the representative of the Department for Community Welfare (DCW) to present contextual information to the magistrate, and to engage in dialogue with him. This presentation was in the form of oral submissions by the lawyer and a social background report presented by DCW. This report is intended to provide the magistrate with information that will assist him or her in making a decision. These reports may, in fact, have considerable influence on such decisions, as the Chairman of a federal government enquiry points out (Commonwealth of

Australia, 1980:71). It is thus important that the reports provide an accurate representation of the child's family situation and community environment. The aim of the reports, in the case of juvenile offenders, is ostensibly to seek to clarify the circumstances under which the offence was committed and to ascertain any other factors which may have contributed to the child's behaviour (**loc.cit.**).

The report continues:

It is important that welfare reports on Aboriginal juvenile offenders and neglected children appearing before children's courts ... be prepared and presented by a social worker who is able to provide comprehensive background on a child's family situation and his social and cultural background ... This is not possible unless the social worker is familiar with the Aboriginal people and their culture.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 1980:111)

Reports are compiled by social workers, resident in Ceduna, who make short but regular visits to Yalata. The social workers' visits (usually lasting one day and never overnight) are made in order to organise work programmes (whereby offenders 'work off' their penalties), check on reported cases of neglect, and gather information on particular offenders. Such data-gathering was, naturally, not easy and opinions were normally sought from key Aboriginal adults who, either officially or unofficially, made it their business to act as 'brokers' to the DCW. One Aboriginal man was retained on a salary by DCW for this purpose until 1985 when he resigned in order to live at the outstation on the Maralinga lands.

Few juvenile 'crimes' pass undetected at Yalata, as footprints are easily read by adults, and because of the often public

nature of the acts. Within a day, everyone, Aboriginal and white at the settlement, would be aware of who was responsible for the previous nights' activities. Nevertheless, defendants of course have the right to plead not guilty before the court. However, all the children from Yalata who appeared in court pleaded guilty to the charges, despite being legally represented in the majority of cases (Brady & Morice, 1982:65; Gale & Wundersitz, 1985a:4). It is difficult to judge whether this is because the young people apprehended made no attempt to conceal their actions and therefore saw no reason why they should not acknowledge that they committed the acts, or whether they volunteered their guilt under the pressure of the real and symbolic authority exercised by the presence of the police. Parker suggests that, as a result of a variety of factors, the adult Aborigines she studied were prevented from knowing, asserting and defending their rights, as a result of which they tended to plead guilty (Parker, 1977:344). In court, the children remained generally impassive and silent as their cases were discussed. The role of the antagonist in the court setting was taken by the local police prosecutor; those appearing for the child were his lawyer and a DCW officer. In response to the list of charges and the description of the circumstances of the alleged offence, it was usual for the DCW representative to draw the magistrate's attention to the child's social background report.

## The social background reports

The reports in essence conformed to a central theme which has long characterised theories of delinquency. That is, they subscribed to the view that developmental factors produce 'later behavioural displays that are termed deviant' (Cicourel, 1972:145). Cicourel, in his work on the attribution of responsibility, describes the environmental contexts which are deemed to influence a child's emergence into a delinquent career:

... the child should have been exposed to a 'better' neighbourhood, 'better' or more 'understanding' parents, a home life where the parents were 'stable' and 'happily' married, a community where the child was 'accepted' ... or a community where a child can perceive his future as being hopeful and justly rewarded, all of which means that the juvenile's problems stem from a lack of responsibility or competence and the causes can be found in environmental or genetic factors emergent from some developmental sequence.

(Cicourel, 1972:145)

It is clear from the social background reports, that welfare officers sought and found developmental or contributory elements amid the social context of Yalata. I shall describe these shortly. Their focus was placed upon the individual offender and his or her milieu, to the virtual exclusion - surprisingly - of the offending act itself. As Donzelot points out, the act itself disappears altogether from the welfare perspective. That perspective is concerned only to search for clues from the past,

The juvenile court does not really pronounce judgement on crimes; it examines individuals. There is a dematerialisation of the offence which places the minor in a mechanism of interminable investigation, of perpetual judgment (**sic.**) The spirit of the laws ... requires that more

consideration be given to the symptomal value of the actions of which the minor is accused, to what they reveal concerning his temperament and the value of his native milieu, than to their materiality.

(Donzelot, 1979:110)

The welfare perspective understands the offending acts only as **symptoms**, which, once diagnosed, will reveal the pathology of the child. The actual investigation becomes (as Donzelot points out) an 'evaluation of the minor and his milieu (Donzelot, 1979:111). The social workers' submissions were informed by this 'developmental' perspective, and were composed of several inappropriate assumptions.

Firstly, they misinterpreted the impact of the socio-economic deprivation prevalent at Yalata, and secondly they misrepresented the nature of Aboriginal parenting and socialisation practices. Thirdly, the reports revealed that welfare officers misconstrued the nature of the opinions they elicited from adults in the community about certain offenders, by taking at face value what were in fact socially constructed understandings. The social background reports were received by members of the judiciary who often promoted their own theories about Aboriginal culture and contemporary solutions to deviance. In keeping with the overall political impetus of the times, magistrates often espoused the desirability of communities themselves - through their Aboriginal Councils and 'elders' - providing their opinions, and in some cases their own sanctions, with respect to juvenile offenders. In so doing, the magistrates as well as the welfare officers

misunderstood social life at Yalata.

### **A particular view of social and physical deprivation**

To a visitor's eye, Yalata appeared overwhelmingly dirty and poverty-stricken. A short walk from the administration office in the centre of the settlement revealed unsanitary and uncomfortable living conditions, mangy dogs, broken port bottles and the ubiquitous discarded 'kimbies' (disposable nappies). It was certainly true that life at camp was often uncomfortable for Aborigines, with the poor water supply presenting a constant problem. Many Aborigines suffered from respiratory problems in the winter months and gastro-intestinal infections in the dusty summers. Passing Europeans and government officials found it hard to ignore the outward appearance of the settlement and its residents, and sometimes witnessed overt acts of violence or disorder. Investigative journalists, who have found in Yalata a rich source of material over the years, have also made brief visits (usually at times of serious disorder), and have contributed further to this view. 5

However it is easy to be misled by these appearances. As Hamilton (1971) pointed out, poverty in Aboriginal camps has as much to do with the uses and distribution of resources as with their limited availability because of low income. For example, if people had just been shopping for meat from the store, and a

hunting party simultaneously returned with hunted meat, everyone gorged themselves, because of the difficulties of storage. Purchases were seen to be replaceable, and valuable items were left behind when Big Camp moved, and they were lost or damaged by children. Conditions at camp (dust and dogs) meant that electronic equipment such as cassette recorders for example, had a short lifespan; cars too did not last long.

The net result of this is that although people are constantly spending money on goods which Europeans assume would last more or less indefinitely, at any one time the contents of their camp reveal a condition of 'poverty'.

(Hamilton, 1971:17)

Nevertheless, despite the physical discomforts of the Yalata climate, and the depressed atmosphere of the settlement, there were co-operative and indigenously organised activities, and men particularly had a lively ritual life. Although housing became available for large numbers of Yalata people in 1984, many have chosen deliberately to live in **wiltja** at the outstation, selecting for themselves a more gruelling and materially impoverished lifestyle in the Great Victoria Desert. Some of those who now live with no running water, electricity, houses or videos have consciously chosen not to have these facilities because they prefer to live on their homelands.

The theories of the aetiology of delinquency implicit in the reports, also included notions of cultural disintegration, deficient parenting and disorganised families. Considerable attention was paid in the reports to the 'tribal breakdown' that had supposedly occurred at Yalata, which

was associated (in an undefined manner) with the activities of young Aborigines who broke the law. Mention was made frequently of the declining powers of the 'elders' and of the lack of influence exerted by them over young miscreants. Associated with the depicted demise of traditional society was the 'breakdown' of family responsibility and a subsequent deficiency in the family which was perceived to have adversely affected some adolescents. A 'broken home' aetiology was brought to bear on the offences committed by those adolescents appearing before the court whose parents did not live together.

As I have already stated, my purpose here is not to debate the usefulness or validity of the theoretical notion that non-conforming acts have their genesis in deprived social circumstances. I wish to highlight the fact that the DCW officers thought it appropriate to apply such notions to another cultural group, taking no cognizance of the values and understandings held by that group. DCW notions of disorganised families ignored altogether the classificatory kinship system which diffuses the focus on biological parenthood so that an individual may have several 'mothers' and 'fathers'. They also took no notice of Aboriginal socialisation methods in which children were allowed to deal independently with the emergencies of daily life, and from which they learned independence and survival skills. The reports interpreted this non-interventionist and non-manipulative socialisation process to be a breakdown of family responsibilities on the part of Yalata people. People **were** usually responsible and caring in



their interactions with children and young people, attitudes that were expressed by compliance with the demands made by children, and by being indulgent and generous with them (cf. Hamilton, 1982:57). Children wandered freely in the bush around camps in groups of their peers with no adults to monitor their activities. Their games were sometimes dangerous (to European eyes), for example they often lit huge fires and played near them; they jumped and played on small water tanks at camp, and on the roofs of large 'shed tanks' used to collect valuable rainwater. They climbed in and on vehicles, tampering with their controls and tools; and some boys of 12 and 13 were often seen driving vehicles loaded with children on the tracks around the settlement. These activities brought amusement and shrugs of mock helplessness from adults. Occasionally someone might call out '**wanti!**' ('leave it! stop!') which might momentarily serve to interrupt the noise or destruction in process. Such admonitions were rarely followed up. The 'criminal' activities of older adolescents were treated with similar tolerance - perhaps they were viewed merely as extensions of the natural proclivities of the young to explore, and to get what they wanted. In short, the DCW workers were assuming the disappearance of something that was never there anyway in the non-religious sphere - an environment within which children and adolescents were monitored, admonished and guided in a directive and conscious way. I present an example from one social background report below.

The report on a 12 year old boy who had, with others, stolen a car from Yalata, stated that he had had a

'disjointed upbringing'. The report noted that he was 'independent, and moves around to relatives' camps almost at will ... he appears to need some controls put on his freedom of movement'.

Terry, the boy in question, lived at the camp of his grandmother, with which I was associated. I observed that indeed he did not live with his biological parents consistently, although he occasionally camped with his mother. The grandmother's camp comprised about fifteen people, forming several hearth groups, under the generalised authority of a non-drinking middle-aged man who was his MMZS. The comments in the social background report although 'true' in the literal sense, misinterpreted the boy's freedom of movement (which was common, indeed typical of Yalata adolescents) to be undesirable and atypical. From an early age, children were positively **encouraged** to exercise freedom of movement (Hamilton, 1982:57), including visiting and sleeping over at the hearths of relatives and receiving food from them. Although the living situation described in the report may have appeared to be chaotic, Terry in fact lived at a camp whose residents made up a relatively stable membership, including the relatives mentioned.

Writing of Inuit people in the Canadian north-west Territories, Brody remarked:

the southern observer will not find evidence of socialization in any careful and self conscious provision of what the parents hold to be the child's real needs. To such an observer, this absence of discipline might be taken as an absence of any socialization at all ...

(Brody, 1975:194)

His comments are pertinent, for the line between non-invasive

socialisation methods and 'neglect' is a fine one, and there were certainly some children at Yalata who were the casualties of this unobtrusive system. It is hard to identify the precise factors that contributed to a particular child being left so much to his or her own devices that they were virtually abandoned for anyone to nurture. At times a child's immediate family were absent from Yalata for various reasons, and they might fail to make adequate arrangements for the care of that child. Some individuals with whom such children were often lodged, were already overburdened with the care of aged relatives, visitors from elsewhere, and children they were fostering under formal arrangements. Although the ethic of care and 'looking after' was strong, some individuals abused the goodwill of others by expecting them to feed and keep an eye on their children for excessive periods of time, or too frequently. Some adults made no financial contribution to the surrogate family, which meant that financial resources were stretched. As a result of this negative reciprocity, there was often ill-feeling and resentment.

There were also a few children who were 'marginal' in the sense used by Smith (1980:303), in that they existed on the fringes of other family groups and were forced to seek sustenance from them in order to survive. For example, one boy at Yalata was born just after his father died. His mother remarried soon after, and with three new young children by her new husband, she rejected her first son. He was given to the care of a

childless couple related to his father, but he was evidently unhappy. He became a chronic petrol sniffer at the age of 11 saying that he wanted to die, and also committed several offences such as stealing money and vehicles. The DCW persistently tried to return him to the mother who had rejected him. In his case, there was no shortage of adults who tried to take care of the boy: by that stage he was simply unwilling to be looked after and rejected these attempts to do so. As this example shows, there **were** children who became petrol sniffers or who were apprehended for various offences, who may have been unhappy in their family milieu. The DCW however, failed to appreciate the subtlety of factors that could serve to influence a child or adolescent in a negative way. For example, the fact that a child did not live with his biological parents, or was orphaned, was not in itself as significant as whether that child had an available network of other close kin.

### **Opinions gleaned from adults**

I have shown in earlier chapters that Yalata people are keen to 'explain' unfortunate people and unfortunate occurrences, and that they utilise a variety of culturally appropriate strategies and meanings which serve as these explanations.

I have also shown that Yalata is not a homogeneous community but that direct criticism of others is considered to be inappropriate. Gossip and private complaints about other people are common. In this environment, individuals are quick to dissociate themselves from others who are out of favour for one

reason or another, and to complain about them to outsiders. Quite independently and arising from another set of values altogether, the social workers employed by DCW carry with them a collection of understandings and theories of the aetiology of deviance and delinquency, which include the role played by low socio-economic status and alcohol use in this 'development'. When Aboriginal adults offered comments about offenders and their families, and suggested 'causes' for the offending acts, these comments were understood by the welfare workers to be literal truths, rather than social constructions. The content of many socially constructed explanations offered by Aboriginal adults often fitted well with the views of the social workers. They became transformed into official 'facts' and formed the bulk of the background reports prepared for the court.

Reports noted whether the parents of an offending child were 'drinkers'. They did not attempt to quantify the degree or regularity of alcohol intake, or to ascertain associated factors, such as whether the parent made other arrangements for the child. Sustained drinking among adults was widespread and commonplace at Yalata throughout the period of my research, and was certainly not atypical. Although some adults actively pursued a drinking career, others were opportunistic in their drinking. Some Yalata people lived for periods of time at Halfway Camp on the outskirts of Ceduna, primarily in order to have easy access to alcohol. The vague depiction of an offenders' parents as being 'drinkers' then, in fact

communicated little of the complexities of the drinking activity of the community. Designations of 'drinkers' or 'non drinkers' were provided by other Aboriginal adults at Yalata - in fact people were quite willing to 'rubbish' others by describing them as drinkers to the DCW. These statements about **others'** drinking were volunteered by those who were drinkers, as well as those who were not. Ironically, the Aboriginal man employed by DCW drank alcohol on occasions himself and it helped to minimise his own activities if he deflected attention elsewhere. As noted in Chapter Five, diverting attention was a common technique of neutralisation. In addition, it was part of the repertoire of 'reasons' provided by Yalata adults for the misbehaviour of young people, to lay the blame on the drinking activities of their parents. Despite the ubiquity of alcohol use, saying that someone is a drinker (especially to a European government official) is a means whereby individuals attempt to discredit one another. It is quite possible that this derogatory labelling has been adopted in response to, and as an echo of, the attitudes of white Australians. It was stated in one report that the parents' 'involvement with alcohol may be a contributing factor' to an offence committed by a 13 year old boy. In keeping with many other older men at Yalata, the boy's father was indeed a participant in drinking groups, and his camp was located close to the road into Yalata, providing easy access to incoming supplies. Notwithstanding this, this man was also one of the most powerful ritual leaders in the community, and a senior and knowledgeable man for the land. His knowledge of sites and mythology was often called upon by

the various negotiators on behalf of the Yalata people in their attempts to gain title to the Maralinga lands. A few years after this report, the man stopped drinking altogether, moving into association with other elderly men of his generation.

None of these latter, and arguably influential, points were made in the report, which purported to document the various influences on the 13-year old. Indeed, DCW officers were probably unaware of the status of the boy's father, and the fact that his drinking style was not of the carousing, obstreperous fashion of younger men. There was no attempt to explain how the supposed influence of the father's drinking came to bear upon the activities of his son. There were several adolescent boys who appeared in court whose parents were neither 'unstable' nor drinkers. In such cases, the reports often stressed that Yalata itself was an environment which placed children 'at risk'. From time to time, the community would be described as going through a 'bad patch', and adolescent offending was perceived to be a response to this generalised malaise. It was clear that several DCW workers perceived Yalata to be a pathological environment in itself, which naturally enough, spawned 'pathological' children.

There were other apparent 'causes' for adolescent offending against European law which were noted in reports, based on information drawn directly from Aboriginal adults in the community. Like the social background reports which mimicked these explanations, these pieces of conventional wisdom were

sometimes incorrect. For example, the explanation for a youth's aggressive acts (he was charged with 'using a firearm to annoy' and illegal uses of motor vehicles) was said in the report to be that he was grieving for his deceased mother. 'He feel sorry', one informant said when I asked why **she** thought he had been in trouble with the police so many times. His offences had in fact pre-dated her death, but this explanation (evidently subscribed to by others at Yalata) had become incorporated into the social background report as a result of Aboriginal understandings of causation. Reports also noted that some offenders had been 'spoilt' - a judgement which had been solicited from Yalata adults, and is used derisively by them behind peoples' backs. One boy in particular, who became involved in petrol sniffing and appeared at court on several occasions, was said by way of explanation to be 'spoilt'. It was said that his mother had carried him around when he was old enough to walk. I was made aware of the currency of such a piece of conventional wisdom when speaking to the latest Community Advisor at Yalata, who had been provided with the same explanation, six years on. The notion of 'spoiling' seems a fine distinction to make in a society in which the acquiescent upbringing of children means that virtually all their whims are tolerated as a matter of course (cf. Berndt & Berndt, 1970:23; Hamilton, 1981:149).

### **The literalisation of social constructions**

As documented in Chapter Four, Yalata people have a wide



selection of theories of causation and aetiology for a range of circumstances and events which seem to warrant explanation. If there is no immediate or obvious explanation for something which requires one, people at Yalata say, doggedly, that it 'must be something'. When asked why a particular child was regularly ending up in court, or participated in petrol sniffing groups, an adult would provide the questioner with a range of statements. Children and adolescents were described as having 'no ears', as being 'spoilt' or 'worrying' about things; they were understood to be 'persuaded' by others to do wrong things ('he just joined in'). Children who were frequently in trouble with the police were often said to belong to 'that other mob' or 'them lot' (in order to distinguish them from the 'mob' with which the speaker identified). That 'other' lot, it was said, had parents who were 'worrying for grog all the time' or 'spending too much money on grog'. An expression used frequently by women was that 'their parents don't know how to look after them; they should grow them up properly'. A woman at one of the many Council meetings at which the juveniles were discussed, even suggested that the parents should be taught how to bring kids up 'properly'. In this way, the children are not held responsible for their actions and nor, inevitably, is the speaker. The explanations themselves constituted rationalisations which exempted individuals or the community from intervention. As it was uncommon for Yalata people to interfere with the activities of their fellows, and certainly unacceptable for

anyone to discipline the children of others, these self-effacing formulations were justifiable solutions to the problem.

When the social workers visited the settlement in order to accumulate relevant information for their social background reports, their Aboriginal helpers provided them with these typifications and rationalisations. In this way, socially constructed views, which were improvised strategies developed from the habitus of the Yalata people, became incorporated into official reports, as the perceived contributing factors to the manifestations of juvenile delinquency at the settlement. Ironically, the 'explanations' provided by Yalata Aborigines, and those subscribed to by the welfare workers, often dovetailed: both accounts contained commonly accepted stereotypes (cf. Handelman, 1976:251). Yalata people were more than willing for DCW to take control of youngsters who appeared in court, and as Tonkinson observed at Jigalong, they would be relieved if whites took on the task of disciplining children who got into trouble (Tonkinson, 1982:123). When DCW officers well-meaningly asked the community's 'opinion', or that of the parents of a particularly troublesome youth, the response was often that he should be sent away, as far away from Yalata as possible. This meant that someone else would have to face the responsibility for the youth concerned.

## The judiciary

Frequently at a loss as to their course of action, and unwilling to send Aboriginal youngsters to the secure juvenile institution in Adelaide, magistrates sought advice from those present in court. They relied heavily on the advice given by the DCW officers present.

During the court proceedings which I observed, magistrates laid much emphasis on the role of the biological father of the defendant. They also sought assistance from the Aboriginal 'community' and its 'elders'. One magistrate, with two young brothers before him, insisted that the boys' father be brought to the court in order to sign (and thus in the eyes of the court, to take responsibility for) their good behaviour bonds. The magistrate was adamant that he should 'be **made** to take his sons' offences seriously' and be put to some trouble in order for this to occur. The man complied with these demands, travelled to Ceduna and somewhat bewildered, signed with a cross on their bonds. He was himself in trouble with the police, for non-payment of fines. Earlier in the year the same man had been unwillingly involved, with other parents, in a publicly-staged physical punishment of petrol sniffers. It was said by Aboriginal observers afterwards that he was particularly 'soft' with his son. Nevertheless, it is probable that his unwillingness to beat his son, and his acquiescence in the non-conforming acts of the two boys were representative of many other Aboriginal adults at Yalata. One woman, for

example, told me that her husband could not prevent their son from offending, and was unable to give the boy a hiding because he (the father) had high blood pressure. On another occasion, a rumour spread around Yalata that you were 'not allowed' to punish petrol sniffers because they were weak and might die as a result.

These examples highlight the problems inherent in the notion that Aboriginal parents should be 'made' to take responsibility for their children - a notion frequently espoused by white Australians associated with the justice and welfare system. A committee composed of a judge, a police officer and an ex-welfare department superintendent, for example, has recently recommended that inhalation of toxic substances should be made an offence, but that the penalties should be exacted upon the offenders' **parents** (S.A. Customary Law Committee, 1984:84).

Magistrates frequently stressed the supposed efficacy of sanctions which could be imposed by the home community and attempted to discover suitable adults whom they could make responsible for a particular child. The community Council was sometimes asked to arrange this, but such efforts were rarely successful. **6** The Council minutes reveal that councillors were unable and unwilling to punish offenders or to take responsibility for them as these extracts show:

Judge W- had sent (4 boys) back again with orders that they stay in Big Camp and obey Council orders, especially those of the chairman. Council expressed general dismay at its lack of ability to do anything useful, or to know what to do ...

It was noted that the new Toyota truck has been badly abused, body dented, smashed headlights, broken window and mad driving. The 'young fellers' were blamed. The old men were encouraged to exercise their proper authority.

Council did not know what should or could be done with P- and T- due to the fact that the court system is doing nothing for them.

Youths on good behaviour bonds were allotted older men 'they had to take notice of and obey', but many continued to re-offend. Tonkinson observed this at Jigalong, saying that Aboriginal adults did not share the concern of local whites about offences against whites' property, but were 'primarily worried because the onus has been placed on them to apprehend and punish the offenders' (Tonkinson, 1982:121). When confronted by a worried Community Advisor and welfare workers, and an item on the Council agenda, adult Aborigines would willingly **agree** that it was 'bad' that young people were constantly appearing in court, and that 'something' should be done. But herein lies the crux of their dilemma. Their own explanations for such behaviour, and the nature of adult-child relationships, precluded intervention on their (the adults) part.

Magistrates urged in vain that the parents, or the Council or the community itself - or all three - should be more responsible for the activities of offending youths. In so doing, they misinterpreted the nature of interpersonal authority between adults (and indeed between adults and youths) at Yalata. They assumed that the 'elders' and the Council had authority over what were in fact considered to be 'private' affairs (cf. Maddock, 1984) within the community. As I

have discussed in Chapter Two, the Council was understood to be there to 'look after' people and to acquiesce in their requests. It had no corporate jurisdiction over others at Yalata, either young or old.

An additional problem was that the community itself was a heterogeneous entity: groups and individuals were autonomous in their actions and gossip, vituperation and complaints were common. Large sections of the 'community' were frequently elsewhere, visiting Cundeelee or Indulkana for ritual, or were dispersed at 'holiday camps' up to 50 kms away from Yalata settlement. The notion that these dispersed and disassociated clusters of people had 'an opinion' or could somehow endorse the decisions of a visiting magistrate sitting in Ceduna once a month was entirely misplaced.

Partly as a result of the content of DCW reports and partly as a result of their own constructions of Aboriginal society, the magistrates above all stressed the role of the 'tribal elders' with respect to young offenders. The conviction that 'elders' hold the authority to enforce obedience by the young in secular as well as religious domains, has been elaborated, indeed the role has been virtually created, by the Australian justice system. It is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding. This relates to a belief that throughout Aboriginal Australia, elders have rights over the young (as well as others) simply because of their age, and their 'traditional authority'. There is also some confusion over the meaning of the term 'customary

law'. Maddock provides one of the few useful discussions of these points (1984).

At Yalata, the old did not automatically have jurisdiction over the young merely by virtue of their age (cf Hamilton, 1981:149-50; but see also Williams, 1987:45-6); adults certainly did not have any rights over the children of others. Manhood in the Aboriginal sense of being a **wati** (ritually-inducted man) did not automatically confer law-abiding qualities upon Yalata people. I have already discussed the uses of alcohol and the outcome of this use among adult members of the community; adult and middle-aged men appeared at court in Ceduna and elsewhere on serious charges. Yalata adults merely attended court on more serious charges of assault against the person rather than assaults on property, which were the prerogative of the young. For example, a report on criminal offences in the Pitjantjatjara lands including Yalata in 1982-83, noted that the Yalata figures showed a trend to more serious offences committed by a greater number of **adults** (South Australian Customary Law Committee, 1984:26). These realities bely the assumption on the part of many Europeans associated with the judicial/welfare systems, that initiation into manhood would solve the problems of offending. Kolig (1974) has drawn attention to the futility of reintroducing 'tribal punishment' in a social vacuum.

Apart from their status in religious matters, Yalata men built up prestige and accumulated a reputation endowed with respect

by means of their social abilities - managing to keep a camp free of alcohol; recruiting groups for various enterprises; making goods and services available to others, to name a few. 7 This was very much an individual matter and some men and women who achieved good reputations in this respect, were not necessarily the elderly, but middle-aged. Such status **still** did not confer rights to 'boss' other people or their offspring. Daunton-Fear and Freiberg, in their useful overview of the two systems of 'law', noted that there was 'a wish, **probably a vain one** to reverse the trend and to strengthen the authority of traditional societies to deal with their own errant members' (Daunton-Fear & Freiberg, 1977:61, emphasis added).

There is no necessary association between present-day Aboriginal adolescents committing illegal acts against European laws (and stealing or damaging the property of white Australians) and a 'breakdown of traditional ways' or of customary laws, as is often suggested by those associated with the welfare and judicial systems. No juvenile offence which resulted in a court appearance during my research periods at Yalata was associated with so-called traditional matters. Additionally the involvement of adolescent boys in offending acts did not appear to influence decisions regarding their ritual incorporation into manhood.

### **Dematerialising the offence**

The behavioural/psychological/deprivation interpretations of the welfare agencies, together with the reification of the role



of Aboriginal elders, Council and community by members of the judiciary, in effect still failed to account for the nature of the offending acts themselves. Indeed they failed to direct attention to the context and the phenomenological reality of the offending acts. In this respect, Donzelot states that the 'social inquiry', the investigation which takes place at court,

... is meant to serve more as a means of access to the minor's personality than as a means of establishing the facts.

(Donzelot, 1979:111)

In this process, the material significance of the offences committed at Yalata is lost, so that the targets of wilful damage (usually particular buildings) and the targets of burglary and theft (non-Aborigines, often schoolteachers, the school, the settlement store) are glossed over. The offender is thus divorced from his victim, and is deprived of any intentionality or consciousness with respect to his offence (cf. Young, 1975:66).

The items stolen had utilitarian value: food, clothing, cigarettes, and above all, vehicles 8 - but the significance of the regular theft of vehicles from Yalata by groups of young people was not examined in court. In contrast with the psychological and social explanations offered by the welfare workers (and indeed by some Aboriginal adults), the offenders when questioned by police provided straightforward practical reasons for their actions. Seven different youths who stole vehicles, for example, stated where they had wanted to go (up

north, to Kingoonya, to W.A. or, simply, for a ride). Their expeditions were well-provisioned and usually fuel or food was stolen in conjunction with a vehicle. On one occasion thirteen adolescents together sequentially stole three vehicles. Yalata youngsters stole vehicles in order to get away from Yalata, to go north to other communities, and to have adventures. In short, they took the opportunity provided by mechanically sound and efficient machines owned by white staff, to retain contact with their network of friends and kin in other Pitjantjatjara-speaking communities. They did not, for example, attempt to drive to Adelaide. Significantly, there were more offences relating to motor vehicles occurring at Yalata than in other communities of the Pitjantjatjara lands who are in regular contact with one another as a matter of course (see Table 6.2 below).

**Table 6.2**

**Comparison between types of offences at northern  
Pitjantjatjara communities and Yalata  
July 1982-June 1983**

	Property	Behaviour	Person	Vehicle + traffic
Pitj.land*	79%	9.7%	11.2%	-
Yalata	26.5%	31.7%	19.6%	22.2%

\*Pitjantjatjara lands include Amata, Fregon, Indulkana  
Pipalyatjara, Mimili, Ernabella.

(S.A. Customary Law Committee,  
1984:98-99,109).

Adolescents broke into community premises at Yalata because,

they said, they wanted to obtain money and food (several said they were hungry) or car keys. As I have pointed out however, adolescents made choices as to which premises they would burgle; for example, they avoided stealing from the mobile store parked at Big Camp, but regularly broke into the settlement store. In a study of social organisation in inner-city slums in Chicago, Suttles describes a similar situation, which he terms mutual exploitation. A store was run by whites in the midst of the ghetto and its customers were all black. The received wisdom of the area was that to steal from a thief was not the same as theft, and so stealing from the ghetto store, perceived to be a locus of exploitation, took on an air of righteousness (Suttles, 1968:53). The store in the Yalata settlement, so frequently burgled, was evidently perceived quite differently from that at Big Camp. Wilful damage cases were often expressions of anger (as a result of family arguments) or frustration (one youth broke 41 windows because, he said, no one would give him a lift to Big Camp). The offences of adolescents were, then, probably impelled at least on some occasions, by a specific need or as a means to achieve a certain end, rather than necessarily being the despairing acts of detribalised or inadequately parented individuals. Although the approach taken by the welfare officers that the adolescent offences were symptoms of a deeper pathology may have been appropriate in some cases before the court, they failed to mention the sociological context of the offences and indeed the meaning of them for the offenders themselves. No reference was ever made in court to the fact that juvenile offences were

targetted specifically at the property of whites (or property perceived to be under the control of whites), and that this fact should in itself be treated as significant.

The relevance of the developmental factors, which were understood by welfare and judicial agents alike to 'produce' non-conforming acts, was taken for granted, rather than being raised for critical examination. Conclusions were reached retrospectively, and were based on the evidence of selected snippets of information about a child's family background. These were then interpreted cumulatively in what appears to be a self-fulfilling exercise, in order to achieve the desired outcome - the 'explanation' for the deviant acts. In this search for clues, the social constructions of Aboriginal adults which served a culturally-appropriate function for them (to deflect blame to others, to neutralise the offences, and to avoid confrontation and responsibility for non-conformity to white Australian mores) were seized upon and transformed into official 'facts' about individual offenders before the court. The welfare workers willingly accepted many of these Aboriginal verbalisations at face value, because (somewhat ironically) they mimicked in content the deprivation and family disorganisation theories adhered to by the social welfare profession. In the process of this focus on the individual who was believed to be acting out a deeper disorder, the non-conforming acts themselves became lost, 'dematerialised', so

that the structural and historical relationships apparent at Yalata itself, and between Yalata and other Aboriginal communities were obscured. Specifically, and most significantly, the offending acts of adolescents were primarily directed towards the property of non-Aborigines, and their elders were not moved to intervene, punish or otherwise involve themselves in these acts.

For their part, in seeking to provide enlightened and progressive judgements and sentences, members of the judiciary often misconstrued the nature of Aboriginal interpersonal authority, assuming that 'elders' and Aboriginal Councils had jurisdiction over others. They laid undue emphasis on the role of biological parents and thought that through the judicial process Aboriginal adults could be forced to adopt an authoritarian stance towards adolescents.

Clearly, there is a complex interplay in the situation I have described here, between a social-psychological issue, and a structural - indeed, literally a material - one. On the one hand there is the social desirability among Yalata people of neutralising and dampening potential sources of conflict and disorder (by diverting attention, minimising the seriousness of actions, and making excuses). They are **disposed** to react in this way. On the other hand is the fact that the offences of the juveniles involved only the white - not the Aboriginal - domain at Yalata. The minimising formulations which were

frequently voiced by Yalata adults (and which were taken up by the social workers) in a sense fulfilled both a social and a practical function. Socially, they conformed to the principle of accommodation by avoidance and by the deflection of blame and responsibility. In practical terms, the juveniles' offences were usually not of concern to Aboriginal adults because they were aimed at white property in which the adults had no investment. Neither had they any desire to protect that property. The socially constructed excuses and explanations thus served to **mask** (to the outsider and perhaps even to themselves) the fact that the Aboriginal adults at Yalata were not seriously affected either emotionally or materially, by the car stealing and breaking and entering indulged in by the youth of the community.

## NOTES

1. The ideas contained in this chapter have been reworked from an earlier version (Brady,1985).
2. The Children's Court has jurisdiction over offenders between the ages of 10 and 18 in South Australia. At the age of 18 offenders are considered to be adults.
3. Children's Aid Panels were introduced in South Australia in 1972 as a non-punitive screening mechanism for young and first offenders, as an alternative to court appearances (cf. Nichols,1985:221-235).
4. The Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement was incorporated in 1973 in South Australia, and provides a free legal service to Aboriginal adults and juveniles. The Movement has an office in Ceduna and retains a solicitor there who also deals with Yalata cases (Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement,1986). ALRM made a submission to the Harkins Inquiry and the report of that committee gives a full account of the operations of Aboriginal Legal Services in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia,1986).
5. For example, the Adelaide Advertiser, 19 November 1981: 'Whites at Yalata ask for police protection'; 29 October 1983: 'Yalata support services axed'; In July 1984 the same newspaper gave extensive coverage to reports by a Ceduna dentist that Yalata people lived in 'Third World conditions because of government inaction' (27 July 1984).
6. Eggleston too, had been hopeful that Aboriginal Councils would take on increasing responsibility for discipline (Eggleston,1976:270).
7. Many of these issues were discussed at the 1986 Biennial Meetings of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies under the topic 'Egalitarian and hierarchical tendencies in Aboriginal society'. Papers by Ian Keen ('Yolngu men of renown'), and Chris Anderson ('All bosses are not created equal') directed attention to the different Aboriginal definitions of 'bosses', focal individuals, successful and knowledgeable individuals. Notwithstanding that individuals at Yalata (and indeed throughout Aboriginal Australia) achieve status through a variety of means, there were no individuals at Yalata who could be said to represent the whole population (cf Myers,1980:314). Myers and Williams have each noted the absence of a concept of 'community welfare' - an absence which can give the social environment an ego-centric quality (Myers,1980: 314; Williams,1987:94).

8. For example, on one occasion two individuals (one juvenile, one adult) stole the following items at Yalata: rifle, tyre lever, two pairs side cutters, four jumpers, two jackets, fourteen rugs, five shirts, food, underpants, two pairs boots, one belt, four hundred cigarettes, two pairs of jeans, two knives, two pairs shoes, bullets. Electrical goods and furniture were available (in staff houses), but were not taken. This information was provided by the South Australian Police.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

I began this thesis by giving an account of my involvement with a failed attempt to implement a 'problematizing' research project based on the ideas of Paolo Freire. In contradiction to the aims of that research, which were that the Aboriginal community would articulate and define its problems (with the help of the researchers), and arrive at radical solutions to them, the people at Yalata did not choose to engage in interventionist solutions to their problems. Indeed, the Aboriginal Council, with whom the researchers held meetings, merely **agreed** that the social disorder experienced by the community constituted a problem. My research interests thus moved on to address the issue of Aboriginal definitions of 'proper' and 'deviant' actions and the means whereby they construed and made sense of these actions.

It appeared that notions of what was allowed or was not allowed in Aboriginal dealings, were situationally specific. Instead of subscribing to a rule-bound system, in which deeds or words were labelled regular or irregular, Aborigines at Yalata had a normative system which was constantly in process. It was partly because of the processual nature of these behavioural norms that the Freire model was unworkable. The depictions of 'deviance' or of wrongful action by Yalata people depended on who the commentators were, which social actors

were involved, and what were the circumstances surrounding actions. However, it was not only because Yalata people had a negotiable range of permissible actions that the Freire approach was not appropriate, but also because of the heterogeneity of the community and the autonomy of its component parts. This meant that consensus (about what **were** the problems at Yalata) and collective decision-making (about what could be done) were non-existent.

Despite the fact that Yalata people have lived together for over thirty years, and conceive of each other as being kin, they do not comprise a homogeneous community. Their origins lay widely dispersed across regions of the Great Victoria Desert and they originally spoke a variety of desert dialects. Their sense of being 'Pitjantjatjara' is a comparatively recent phenomenon, and even now the population has dual orientations and affiliations with the north and with the west. They comprise a 'community' only in the most fragile and tenuous sense.

The population is composed of clusters of households who camp together but who recombine into different collectivities in order to pursue particular ends (to live at the outstation, to hunt, to drink, to participate in Christian or Aboriginal religious ritual). Even camping together is not a permanent arrangement and camp locations and camp composition are constantly in a state of flux. Under these circumstances, independence of group action and decision is ubiquitous, and

clusters of individuals carry out their own affairs largely upon their own initiative. This is not to say, though, that 'anything goes' at Yalata. People share a sense of the 'proper way' in which **anangu** should comport themselves. They have a series of norms including religious Law, which they cite as guiding their actions, and which they refer to as the 'proper' or 'straight' way. However, I have argued that aspects of the Law and of other norms, as conceived of at Yalata, are merely guidelines which are perpetually in process. These norms are amenable to negotiation by social actors.

Initially, I thought I would explore the hiatus between the ideal forms of behaviour - encapsulated in the norms and principles cited by Yalata people - and the actual behaviour of social actors. I tried to understand the verbal explanations of social actors about their apparent inability to 'comply' with the norms, and interpreted these verbalisations as the fictions and fantasies composed by people in order to conceal and rationalise their deviations. However, my data contained many instances of social actors actively reinventing and reconstructing the 'norms' themselves, in order to gain various ends. The guiding principles which were (in a rule-governed system) supposed to summon compliance and should bear an internal consistency of their own, appeared to be in the process of continual renewal and flux. This meant that social actors were engaged not necessarily in covering up their misdemeanours, but were actively negotiating a flexible

normative system, in which they had every right to contextualise and justify their actions.

Instead of depicting this essentially negotiable situation as one of rule-creation and rule-infraction then, I sought another way of approaching the data. I did not want to abandon the notion of norms altogether, for Yalata people themselves subscribe to ideals such as the Law, for example. I introduced the goals of action as a motivating mechanism. The goals of action articulate between norms on the one hand, and action on the other. Once the notion of purposive action (and words) was introduced, I was able to understand the verbal negotiations of my informants as **strategies** whereby they sought to manipulate the social order in order to achieve their ends. However, not all actions are performed with intentionality, and social actors are not always able to supply 'reasons' for what they do. This I explained in terms of the habitus wherein sets of individuals share commonsense understandings of the social world in which they live. The habitus is the field of possibilities from which social actors derive the strategies they will use in order to achieve their ends. Yalata people improvise from a range of dispositions to reproduce the social world, by invoking its norms in order that they (as individuals or groups) may achieve a specific purpose. Indeed, as Bourdieu points out, people may, for a variety of reasons, deliberately misconstrue what is a flexible, negotiable normative system, and depict it as being a rigid and compelling system of rules. This flexible system allows for negotiation on all sides - and

makes it possible for individuals to redefine the situation. This negotiable framework within which individuals use the rules flexibly, is socially perpetuated. I illustrated this when I described the strategy engaged in by a woman who wished to discredit the performance of a ritual led by another. Her strategy was an invocation of supposedly fixed rules which both women, in fact, **knew** to be negotiable. The rules were invoked for reasons of self interest, but in practice, the outcome was that the social system in which rules may be manoeuvred and renegotiated, was perpetuated.

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The thesis has presented an analysis of the means whereby Yalata people make sense of and deal with individual and social disorders. In doing this, I first established the ideals of correct and straight action, said by them to be the 'proper' ways of doing things. However, I noted that people engaged in situational adjustments to these principles, adjustments which were made strategically, to enable individuals or groups to pursue their own ends.

Then I examined the understandings of the physically and mentally disordered held by Yalata people, understandings which, I argued, assist them to place such individuals within a coherent view of the world. In keeping with their understandings of those who are socially disruptive, these

'disabled' individuals are perceived to be affected in the head and brain. These afflictions are not thought to be of their making, and so the locus of responsibility and blame is decentred and shifted elsewhere. By attributing misfortune to the activities of mythological characters, or to aspects of the Law, Yalata people were reducing the possibility of conflict among themselves. To this end, explanatory and sense-making devices have been created - derived from the habitus - so that socially acceptable and meaningful stories serve to allocate the cause of individuals' afflictions.

Similarly, Yalata people make sense of the actions of the inebriated disorderly by 'blaming' the alcohol. An individual who is inebriated is not perceived to be propelled into certain actions of his own volition. This perception influences the type of sanction brought to bear on those who are inebriated and unruly. On most occasions, direct confrontations are avoided (except by the inebriated themselves) and social control occurs indirectly, obliquely. There are individuals who may intervene in the disorderly actions of others, but such interventions are circumscribed by an acute sense of autonomy. This means that there is a conviction that others have the right to pursue their affairs without interference (even if they themselves are interfering with their fellows). This non-interference extends into many spheres of endeavour, and means that even disagreeable actions on the part of others are, for the most part, accommodated and lived with, notwithstanding the exercise of vituperative comment in private. In addition,

there is a tendency for some people to minimise and downplay their own activities and those to whom they are closely related, while denouncing others' actions - a situation which exemplifies further the fragmented nature of the 'community'.

An early focus of the Freire-based research was the offending activities of adolescents against Australian law, and the self-destructive (but not criminal) activity of substance abuse in the form of petrol sniffing. Neither of these activities were treated as being problematic (on the whole) by Yalata adults. Indeed, as with the inebriated, petrol sniffers were understood through a series of culturally-derived beliefs. It was thought that like the inebriated, they were not amenable or receptive to expressions of disapproval or of intervention. Adults offered a series of blame-deflecting excuses for the actions of the adolescents which neutralised their offences. Social workers attempting to mitigate the offences of their clients in court, in turn repeated these socially-constructed explanations, believing them to be accurate accounts of the offenders' circumstances.

Overall, my research shows that Yalata people deal with the difficulties of living together by a process of accommodation - rather than confrontation - of these difficulties. They share a range of understandings which explain why the dis-ordered and the disorderly are the way that they are. The devices they use appear to downplay and diminish deviance, rather than to

emphasise and label it.

This account of how Yalata people deal with disorder - mental, physical and social - raises the question of why it is that they deal with the difficulties of living together in the way that they do. The overall outcome of the research at Yalata has been to describe a community which is not communal, and which seeks above all to minimise and dampen down the deviances and disorders it experiences. In this sense, the population has already formulated a 'solution' to its problems: it is already engaged in the 'problematizing' of which Freire writes.

However, by their accommodation of the disruptive and inebriated, Yalata people accept, rather than intercept, these activities. They may be dealing with the difficulties of living together, but they are not resolving or relieving those difficulties. The actions so accommodated are, in fact, being perpetuated. It is hard to ignore the obvious social distress in which the people of the community often seem to be plunged. The avoidable loss of human life has been high, with two deaths directly attributable to petrol inhalation in 1984 and 1986; and between five and ten deaths each year as a result of alcohol-related factors. In a population often below three hundred, these casualties are noticeable. In addition to this physical suffering, there is at Yalata a sense of collective depression, evidenced perhaps by the high level of 'expecting the worst' behaviour, in which people often attribute negative



meanings to minor events. There is a sense in which Yalata people still lack a meaningful place in the present system, having lost control over their country, over their previous economic base, and over their freedom of movement. They are now reliant on the availability of motorised transport, and on the provision of welfare payments from the state.

To some extent, the physical suffering and collective depression endemic at Yalata have been ameliorated by the instigation of the outstation - and perhaps this is the key to understanding the apparent ineffectualness of accommodation as a means of dealing with disorder. The establishment of the outstation, and the granting of freehold title to some of their homelands, provided large numbers of Yalata people with a project, a chance to leave the settlement and a chance to engage in meaningful action. Those living at the outstation are in a position to be responsible for aspects of their daily life that, at Yalata, they apportion to the white Australian staff, or - vainly - to the Aboriginal Council. The move to the outstation, 230 kms away from the settlement, and located in their desert homelands has, above all, provided Yalata people with a degree of mobility which has been lacking since the time of their sojourn at Ooldea. Between fifty and one hundred people choose to travel and live at the outstation, making only sporadic visits to Yalata. This outstation provides those who so desire, with the opportunity to remove themselves from the geographical and interpersonal milieu of Yalata: At Ooldea,

people who walked in from the desert were camped in the vicinity of the mission in a conglomeration of shelters not unlike Big Camp. However, people still had the option of returning to the desert country if they wished to do so. The historical documentation, as well as personal recollections, show that many people did travel back out to the desert. There was considerable movement in **and out** of Ooldea right up until the early 1950s when the mission finally closed.

In keeping with other hunter-gatherer groups, these southern Pitjantjatjara still value mobility as a means of dealing with stress and disagreement. Indeed the prodigious use of mobility was probably a major strategy for dealing with conflict - separation from those whose actions were intolerable. Big Camp at Yalata was arranged in such a way as to facilitate some degree of mobility, although within a bounded area. Residents could relocate and realign themselves with respect to their neighbours, but they did **not** have the option of just walking away into the Great Victoria Desert as in previous years. This was because complete independence of movement at Big Camp was restricted. Until recently, control was maintained by the mission, who were in charge of transport, food and water supplies. At Yalata Big Camp was perpetuated by the mission as a method of keeping control over the mobility of the ex-Ooldea people. The regular changes in the location of the camp, under the guidance of the mission provided the **illusion** of freedom of movement. In fact, the Yalata people were constrained by their need to have water, rations and transport, controlled by the

mission. People who attempted to leave Big Camp in the early days of the Lutheran mission in order to return to Ooldea and other locations to the north, were forcibly returned to the property because these areas were appropriated for weapons testing and were guarded by the military. In reality, people were denied the choice as to whether they could stay or leave in the early years of settlement at Yalata, because their homelands had been transformed into a prohibited zone for the testing of atomic bombs, and the mission controlled the goods and services upon which the Aborigines had become dependent. An additional constraint on their sense of freedom of movement (particularly in the first decade after the move from Ooldea), was the fact that Yalata and the coast was alien country, owned by Aborigines of another language group, and upon which the desert people did not feel at ease. There was virtually no naturally occurring water in the region. Yalata people did manage to maintain their contact with their kin and ceremonial associates in other Pitjantjatjara-speaking communities, and to attend ritual gatherings elsewhere. However, on several occasions, their planned attendance at gatherings was intercepted (by the military, and the Native Patrol Officer), and by 1978 relations with the northern Pitjantjatjara were very poor because of ideological differences concerning land rights, mainly inspired by the Lutheran mission. Yalata people could not visit the spinifex country over the intervening years, except on fleeting visits, and without the participation of women. It was not until 1982 that Yalata people for the

first time in thirty years set up a semi-permanent camp on their homelands.

The present option to move back onto the homelands is not equally attractive to all Yalata residents. Some younger Aborigines regard the outstation as too remote and prefer life at Yalata despite its disadvantages, where there is a school for their children, a proper store and modern homes. Moreover, although the origins of the Yalata people are dispersed, they have thirty years of shared experiences, close ties of kinship, and young people born at Yalata know no other environment. For these reasons, many people feel they have had little option but to come to terms with living with each other at Yalata and do not regard relocation to the outstation as a real alternative.

In short, the options for dealing with disorder and unpleasantness have been curtailed. People at Yalata have been unable simply to walk away from those whose company they wish to avoid. They have been unable to do this partly because access to their country was prohibited, and partly because Yalata became a social base and source of material goods. It is possible that, in the face of this attenuated mobility - a situation where disparate and labile groups of people were virtually forced to overcome the difficulties of having to live together - they have developed the strategies of the accommodation and the neutralisation of social differences that I have described here. It is possible only to speculate as to whether the mechanisms of avoidance and the downplaying of

individual responsibility were techniques used so intensively by desert people before their lives became irretrievably influenced by white society. Certainly members of hunter-gatherer groups needed to interact peaceably with one another and to minimise intragroup strains, for the physically active were required to contribute towards subsistence production. In this sense, current practice still bears an impetus from the past, for the dispositions engendered by the habitus reproduce themselves over time, while human actors also improvise changes in keeping with new circumstances. The strategies I have described, then, constitute an active response by Yalata people to the problems they face.

On the basis of the evidence presented in this thesis, it is clear that the avoidance of conflict which originally was achieved through mobility, has now been replaced by the assiduous use of techniques of neutralisation and by the minimisation of overtly dis-ordering actions. It is not possible to underestimate the significance for these southern Pitjantjatjara of the declaration of the Maralinga region as a prohibited zone for the testing of atomic devices. Although they had for the most part become semi-permanent residents at Ooldea, they were previously still free to return to the desert regions when they so desired. The weapons testing zone placed a physical and psychological barrier between the southern and northern Pitjantjatjara people, and between the southern Pitjantjatjara and the land that is spiritually and economically significant to them. It served to cut Yalata

people off decisively from familiar contact with their land.

Distance was an alternative to communal stress. In its absence, Yalata people rely upon the strategic use of dialogue and action which attempts to diminish and euphemise the very real disorders and disturbances they suffer. They are in fact, not always successful, for the intensities and exigencies of life imposed upon them by the settlement and other factors (alcohol use, juvenile substance abuse and offending, the abundance of material property) are too great for this tolerant and accommodating approach. Perhaps the opportunity for a proportion of the population to remove itself from the rest, and the diminished contact with the alienating environment of Yalata settlement will be the precursor to a more substantial sense of well-being in the future.

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Aerial view of Yalata, looking north-east.



Yalata's central area. The store is on the right, and the solitary drinking water tap in the foreground.



Wiltja and windbreaks at Big Camp, 15 kms north of Yalata settlement. The mobile store and clinic are shown behind the dwellings (top right).



Moving camp, the community truck.



Yalata men playing Two Up behind the canteen. Their beer ration forms the currency for gambling.



Yalata women walking into the settlement from a ritual Big Camp, 5 kms north.