

Introduction

The true locus of culture is in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meanings which each one of these individuals may unconsciously abstract for himself from his participation in these interactions. (Sapir 1970: 151)

The Pintupi were among the last Aboriginal people in Australia to abandon an autonomous hunting-and-gathering way of life, a last family moving in from the remote stretches of the Gibson Desert in 1984. Had we the "double vision" of poets, we could—perhaps—read their history in the landscape itself, in the Gibson Desert of Western Australia and the adjacent plateau of central Australia to the east, at the edge of the magnificent Macdonnell Ranges.

The sight of these ranges—hills of quartzite that change color from red to blue to purple as the sun moves through the sky—suggests the haunting unreality of a watercolor that remains in a viewer's mind longer than the original subject. It is a stark country, known to Europeans as an arid and dangerous place, but its red sand, flat scrubby plains covered with a sparse pale greenery, and craggy, long-eroded hills lie in muted beauty beneath an awesomely blue sky. One cannot escape its immensity and its calm. The paleness of its colors seems always to be a kind of ghostly habitation of color, barely corporeal. White gum trees (the "ghost gums" of the early settlers) line the dry creeks, and the vast stretches of desert have been bleached to an austere beauty under the searing sun. In the enduringness of this landscape, Aborigines see a model of the continuity they aim to attain in social life, a structure more abiding and real than their transitory movements on its surface.

In Aboriginal Australia the relation of past with present poses an unusual problem for an ethnography. A brief trip to the tin shanties of today's Aborigines in central Australia invites the unaccustomed visitor to interpret their lives as irrevocably dominated, if not destroyed, by Western civilization. Ironically, the eyes of the concerned see mainly poverty and deprivation, rather than the structured social world Aboriginal people continue to maintain. With a view to the imposing, apparently unchanging landscape, the

nostalgic may reflect sadly on the intervention of history in a timeless world. But these reactions would be mistaken.

For all its trappings of worldliness and hard knowledge of history's inexorable laws, such a dichotomous "before and after" view reflects a rather shallow grasp of society as human action. Focusing on outward form alone makes it impossible to see the past in the present. Hunting-and-gathering bands, it is true, no longer exist for observation. Yet their substance, if not their material form, remains here: as part of the structure with which the present encounters the future.

When I first came to work with the Pintupi in 1973, my intention was to study the individual and territorial organization. The problem of local organization remained central to my research, but what I encountered in the field expanded my sense of the issue. I came to understand that the organization of people in space is itself a manifestation of what is called by some a "deeper structure" or an "inner logic" and by others a "total system." To treat this dimension of organization as an autonomous institution, however hallowed by the history of anthropological inquiry, would be mistaken.

The Problem of Ethnography

At the heart of the anthropological enterprise lies the idea that what is learned in fieldwork at a particular time and place has meaning that transcends the immediate moment. This notion, after all, is what underlay the Boasian concept of culture. The difficulty ethnographers face is in deciding how to apply this intuition. Although the narrative convention of the continuous ethnographic present simplifies the difficulty, it does so by obscuring the process through which one constructs a "society" from data. For better or worse, the current situation in Aboriginal Australia makes this impossible. The moment of observation cannot be simply generalized into a description of a set of social arrangements enduring through time.

Instead, the current politics surrounding the movement for land rights and the Aboriginal control of local institutions make us aware of people struggling to maintain an order of being and action that they value. What moves through time can be found in our data, but it cannot be located simply in outward behavior itself. However distressing the consequences of time, an awareness of this dimension of action draws our attention to the inner logic of social systems. Persisting despite apparent transformations of societal form, the internal contradictions of this structure continue to set the limits of social life. Recognizing the past in the present forces upon us the realization that these small-scale societies exist in time and repro-

duce themselves through it. *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* represents my attempt to articulate this view.

Ethnography is a product of a special sort of dialectic. An ethnographer with a past and cultural background that focuses his or her attention on particular issues encounters the reality of other human subjects. Part of this background, inevitably, are the problems that anthropology currently defines as its subject matter. These issues make up the culture we share with our audience. Thus, for example, Malinowski's justly famous ethnography was drawn to the issue of whether or not the "family" was universal. One of the enduring anthropological issues concerning hunter-gatherers has been the question of territoriality. My own analyses of these issues are defined in relation to those of my predecessors.

Malinowski, however, not only brought his special sense of problem to the Trobriand Islanders; his experience made him aware of issues salient to *them*. The sexuality of these Melanesians, for example, was not simply his preoccupation. No less has the Pintupi definition of human relations in terms of compassion, sympathy, and sorrow shaped my own conception of what analytic frameworks are viable.

Ethnographic accounts reflect the working out of this process of assimilation, these dialogues between concept and evidence (Thompson 1979: 31). Beyond the author, however, are the people he or she has known, and anyone trained in ethnography soon learns that one reads an account to look *through* the construction to a reality it attempts to represent.

The Question of Meaning

My ethnography is informed by a general theoretical interest in the relationships between cultural meaning and the processes of social life—the very old problem of consciousness and society. Understanding the significance of cultural form itself seems inevitably to bring us face to face with the idealism/materialism controversy, and it is only appropriate that I should own up to how I have been influenced.

On the whole, literary approaches and sociological approaches to meaning have opposed each other. The former, especially as exemplified in the Anglo-American New Criticism and the Continental emphasis on hermeneutics, emphasizes the freedom of the individual subject to find or construe meaning in his or her world. A classic example is the continual reinterpretation of the Bible to find meaning for the present, and the Boasian commitment to the autonomy of cultural meaning takes its place in this range of cultural theory. The sociology of knowledge, contrastingly, focuses

on the superindividual processes and structures that constrain or elicit the individual's activities. This approach suggests that the concrete realities that human beings confront shape the interpretations they produce. The problem of the individual is, to some extent, our own, but it is also an issue for the Pintupi.

One of the main themes of most current anthropological theories of meaning is to resolve this long-standing opposition between creativity and constraint. It is the earmark of the influential trend represented by Bourdieu (1976), Giddens (1979), and R. Williams (1977). For my own part, the influence of the Boasian tradition of Boas, Radin, and Sapir has proven as significant as my reading of recent phenomenologically inspired work. When Sapir (1938) pointed out the implications of one informant's (Two Crows) denial of another man's account, he suggested that individuals have the capacity to drastically transform and reinterpret cultural tradition. This analysis was part of Sapir's own brilliant and prescient attack on the reification of culture; it has been taken up again by Geertz (1973), Frake (1974), and others in the past decade.

The solution I adopt to the opposition between constructive activity and determination is to analyze the relationship between cultural meaning and social action by placing social life in a temporal perspective, similar to that embodied in the concept of "social reproduction" (cf. Bourdieu 1976, Comaroff and Roberts 1981, Giddens 1979, Sahlins 1981, T. Turner 1979a, Weiner 1976, R. Williams 1977). This perspective establishes a mediation of the individual/society opposition by granting to social actors an awareness or intuition of some properties of the sociocultural systems on which they draw in acting and which they reproduce in their activities.

If cultural constructs are, as R. Williams (1977) maintains, forms of "practical consciousness," the problem becomes locating them in relationship to domains of experience. Therefore, cultural analysis consists of properly situating people's cultural constructs in relationship to their social reality. Ethnography becomes the premier instrument for the investigation of social reality thus conceived, a means through which to situate culture within the processes of social activity.

At the same time, one must recognize that cultural constructs are not "transparent" to their use. As an instrument of intersubjectivity, culture is necessarily a "false consciousness" or "alienation" in a technical sense. T. Turner (1984b) captures this dimension of cultural form when he writes that cultural symbols not only represent, they also misrepresent. Culture cannot simply embody an individual's intentions or consciousness; it also creates him or

her. This was Marx's great insight. Only a systemic analysis can come to terms with this quality of culture that escapes the individual's control.

My choice of these issues is not simply a theoretical one. It represents, rather, a result of the movement back and forth between concept and evidence. The ethnography of hunters and gatherers raises three particular theoretical questions.

Negotiation: Rules and Processes

My own connection has never been to the Pintupi as a group, but instead to various individuals who have considered me to be a "relative." To say so is to indulge neither in self-promotion nor in self-revelation. The concrete qualities of being are as central to my learning as to Pintupi lives.

As Margaret Mead once said, anthropology has informants, not objects of study. People teach us. The condition of my living in Pintupi communities has always been my participation as a "relative." Their acceptance has never been based on my research, which they have never been much interested in once they decided I was a friend (despite my sincere and lengthy attempts to explain my work). Rather, what they expect from me is my human commitment to them as fellow people. This condition has set the tone of my whole research. Since the Australian government's policy of "self-determination" began, the Pintupi have insisted that those who live in their communities must "help Aboriginal people."

Their willingness to provide me instruction in Pintupi culture has followed a similar course in making me part of their lives. The Pintupi I know have emphasized my learning through participation and have been reluctant to submit to the sort of "white room" formal sessions of inquiry of which, in frustration, I have occasionally dreamed. It is neither polite nor productive to ask a lot of questions. When individuals have sponsored me with their help, we have worked by my spending the day in participant-observation, waiting for opportune moments to ask questions. In this way I learned gradually to identify certain Pintupi symbolic constructs with realms of action, not just as objects of analysis, but also in making myself understood. My experience of Pintupi culture, then, conforms to Wittgenstein's dictum not to ask what a thing means, but to look to its use.

The foundation of my analytic approach to sociocultural phenomena lies here. In this study, I start with the key symbols (Ortner 1973) of Pintupi daily life, and work out their "problematics"—that is, the relation between their meanings and the social contexts of

their application. On the one hand, this procedure allows for some autonomy between the domain of cultural forms and the objective circumstances of their use. Certain cultural forms are employed in what, to me, seem differing domains. This perception is hardly my unique discovery and, like V. Turner (1975) and Silverstein (1976), I locate the meanings of symbolic forms in the intersection of form and function.

On the other hand, with this approach I have used the Pintupi understandings of their world to guide me in analyzing the structure of the system in which they act. It is by working through Pintupi notions that I have arrived, gradually, at an appreciation of the deeper cultural potentials that I discuss as broader and more abstract structural themes of autonomy, relatedness, and freedom.

I do not claim that Pintupi talk or think directly in these terms. It is fundamental to my argument, in fact, that they are not given to abstract formulations out of context. Often Pintupi informants have been unwilling to go much beyond discussing how one uses a concept, inevitably leaving a good deal of information incoherent to me. While this has left substantive gaps in my field notebooks, acceding to their practice has increased my empathy for the Pintupi ideas of what is important. I have taken their form of instruction to be itself informative about the individual's responsibility to formulate his own broader system of coherence.

For quite a long time in the field, I did not think I knew anything about the usual issues anthropologists discuss: descent groups, kinship roles, territory. Only gradually did I come to realize that I had been learning about what mattered to the Pintupi: the importance of "the other." For the Pintupi, contact with others and the necessity of response, of visibility and negotiability in all forms of action, yield little room for privacy. It struck me repeatedly that, despite the strain of limited resources and physical hardship, the Aboriginal people I lived with were much better at getting along with each other than most people I knew in my own country. The relations a Pintupi maintains with coresidents have a powerful impact on everything said and done.

This situation has both positive and negative consequences. Individuals enjoy a considerable degree of freedom and choice and a wide range of relatives to call on, but the emphasis on the individual's autonomy creates an objective reality of its own. Pintupi must confront this reality as a condition of their lives. Autonomy is not cheap coin here; there is, in Pintupi life, both violence and enormous concern for the welfare of others. I did not appreciate the importance of violence and conflict until I experienced the protective aura of a man willing to stand up and defend his kin against the

threat of others. Conversely, conflict and violence are avoided only through the action of individuals and their willingness to recognize the importance of their relationships to others.

The Pintupi are dominated by immediacy. Nothing seems settled unconditionally. Thus, a man who deeply desired that a particular girl be married to him could, through intimidation, force her relatives to break a promise of bestowal to another.

A similar context-dependence may underlie their relations with outsiders. This made me wary of the significance of agreements between myself and the Pintupi. Though a number of men, in private conversations, offered to tape songs or stories that were secret, I refused because I knew other individuals might oppose this action. Relatively isolated on the remote outstation, neither I nor my informants had special protection from the sanctions of Aboriginal Law. In time I had occasion to congratulate myself when I saw how agreements made in good faith, for the sale of paintings or performance in films, might be reinterpreted in light of a future change in context.

Much of my research involved quite technical traditional social organizational analysis: of land tenure, of travel histories, of kinship. I came to understand that *how* Pintupi did things was the most important element to study. Maintaining one's relationships with others seemed to be a primary goal in itself. I found that a good deal of politicking and negotiation surrounded almost every action, though Pintupi never discussed their actions in such terms. This was precisely the ethos of daily interaction that I was experiencing.

From this perspective, grounded in the level of individual action, I believe that the immediacy of *current* relations so dominates Pintupi social life that the production of an enduring structure that transcends the immediate and present is a cultural problem for the Pintupi and other Aboriginal people. In this phenomenological context, structure ought not to be taken for granted. The reification of Society, the existence of transcendental value itself, became for me a social process to be explained. I came to understand that hierarchy, positing an ontological order with a source outside human relations, provides a means of surmounting the constraints imposed by the need to sustain immediacy. This, I believe, is a problem of quite general order (cf. T. Turner 1984b), and one that continues for the Pintupi in the present as in the past.

Social Structure

Analyses of Aboriginal societies have frequently been mystified by turning the data of social action into reified systematic accounts of

a social structure. This reification has been especially true of the group-oriented models of local organization (Birdsell 1970, Radcliffe-Brown 1930, Stanner 1965, Tindale 1974). Pintupi cultural constructs suggest, however, a different structure of organization in which social boundaries are not prominent. In their lives, group formations seem to have little significance. Pintupi life is highly personalized, for people to abstract from the intimate and familiar is unusual. They place emphasis on individuals, their autonomy, and their capacity to choose courses of action.

What is "structure," then, and where is it located? The problem is both empirical and theoretical. Many analysts of hunter-gatherer organization have ignored the process by which structures are created and reproduced through time. In their accounts, the informality and immediacy of daily life—the personal quality of events that typifies the activities in a small-scale society—are lost. Yet the most salient aspect of living in Pintupi communities is its affective basis, the reliance on emotional criteria rather than on rules as the framework of sociality. The individual is central to the structure of Pintupi sociality as the starting point of all my considerations.

To probe the relationship between cultural and social processes and experience, I have focused on the relationships between the individual and his or her society, emphasizing the processes unfolding over time. I gathered data on individual social and geographical mobility through detailed life histories.¹ Through these I came to understand the processes that have underlain Pintupi social life and how individuals make their choices within the contexts defined by such processes. The human life cycle provides the key to the temporal dimension of many small-scale social systems, where the development of social persons is the basic form of social production. Pintupi cultural constructs presuppose this structure. Conversely, starting with the individual and his or her development leads directly to a model of social reproduction—of society as embodying time. Because such a model is inherently nonpositivistic, it is capable of treating the social value of spatiality for people as problematic, rather than simply as an objective "ecological" given.

The significance of claim and negotiation in landownership has forced me to come to terms with the particular political economy of Pintupi life and the larger system (as perceived, in fact, by the Pintupi) of which local groups are a manifestation. What the Pintupi aim to achieve in politicking is not a universal content such as power. Rather, the logic of their particular system has made personal autonomy the goal of their lives. The contexts that give value to Pintupi spatiality are the politics of selfhood and personal autonomy.

To recognize some autonomy in Pintupi cultural constructs

leads to an understanding of Pintupi society as manifesting itself in space, but not as identical to "territorial organization." This view of structure has significant implications for the analysis of foraging societies, where the organization of people in space is a basic dimension of social structure. The importance given to "bands" in the study of hunter-gatherers reflects this problem. Most writers, like Radcliffe-Brown, have recognized a spatial component in social organization among hunter-gatherers. This spatial component is especially obvious among Australian Aborigines, whose social aggregates are often identified with place names. Yet the fact of this relationship between groups and places has resulted in differing interpretations.

One tradition of interpretation has identified certain units of social organization, called them bands, and asked how these units matched to land. Radcliffe-Brown (1913, 1930), for example, described the typical Australian society as made up of patrilineal, patrilocal bands ("hordes"). Having discovered the existence of patrilineal descent groups with a relationship to named places, he maintained that these local groups owned and defended their territory, living largely within their group boundaries and thus conserving resources for their own use. In this view, the correspondence between stable and enduring social groups and tracts of land was straightforward and one-dimensional. It is now clear, however, that confusion results from simply equating territorial organization with descent group organization (cf. Hiatt 1962), and that it is wrong to assume that local groups have constant, impermeable boundaries. In other words, this approach ignores the contexts in which organization takes place and fails to relate cultural concepts to the multiple dimensions of social reality.

A second tradition, reacting to the inadequacy of the first, has argued that permanent organizational units do not exist, and has maintained that analysis of hunter-gatherer territorial organization must start with resources. This approach treats adaptation to resources as the principal structural feature of foraging societies. The culmination of this analysis (Lee and Devore 1968; Lee 1976, 1979) emphasizes the flexibility of actual residential groups and the openness of access to resources, focusing on behavior (land and resource use) rather than on the ideology so important to earlier theorists. Indeed, the contrast between actual residence patterns and patrilineal ideology is a bulwark of this position. While correctly pointing out that people did not in fact live within exclusive, bounded, and defended patrilineal territories, and highlighting the importance of regional systems among foragers (Lee 1976), this ecological model has assumed that territorial organization is to be

understood only in relationship to actual on-the-ground aggregates of people. It demonstrates no concern for the structures through time. Because it eschews ideology as epiphenomenal, this model fails to attend adequately to what a band is or to the connected question of how regional systems operate. Using the analysts' criteria for what the goals of social life are, such an approach misrepresents the nature of hunter-gatherer groups and their relationship to land by ignoring the dimension of temporality embedded in a people's own ideological constructs.

Both forms of analysis of spatial organization treat territory, in the form of "living space," as no more than a resource base among foraging people. Both also fail to situate localized groups within the larger structure of which they are but manifestations. Many Australianists have, to be sure, taken interest in social systems beyond the local level as well as in the actual composition of land-using groups (Hiatt 1965 and Meggitt 1962, for example). Indeed, in this regard, the ethnographic acuity of Hiatt's and Meggitt's studies has not been sufficiently appreciated. But while they show how local groups recruit residents from a wide category of people defined by broad principles of inclusion, and how bands vary regularly in composition, these studies do not explore the dialectical relationship between the organization of local groups and the larger structure of which they are part. In other words, they have accepted a view of territory not much different from those who ignored the larger structure altogether. They continue to view space as defined not by the totality of relations among people, but only by food-gathering activity.

It has been those anthropologists interested, following Lévi-Strauss (1949), in the constitutive social relations that might underlie localization in time and space, who have suggested that spatial organization may be motivated by relationships other than those of population to land. While Munn (1973) and van der Leeden (1975) have demonstrated that nonecological values may determine the definition of space, they have not linked their analysis to the practical relationships between land-using local groups and the larger social system.

To understand these small-scale societies in a way that makes them comparable with other forms of social life, one must reject the simplistic dichotomy between ideology and material/practical concerns. What human beings say and think about their social lives helps to reveal the structures that underlie organization, thus avoiding the *a priori* analytic assumptions of what constitutes the most "basic" level of a system. On the other hand, recognizing

Pintupi concepts as essential components of a structure of social life that is greater than the local group and reproduced through time does not mean we can ignore the consequences of material activity. My analysis suggests that the logic of practical activity is assimilated within the values that emerge from the internal structure of relations within Pintupi society.

As a regional system, the structure of this society materializes only over time. Because Pintupi culture incorporates this dimension, the indigenous models provide insight into the Pintupi system as a total structure. Here, the universe is not made up of "territory" or "land," nor society composed of "groups." Rather, the regional structure defines space in relation to its own temporal cycles.

Change and Temporality

Our data on Aboriginal social life are drawn from an ethnographic present that is not entirely the same life that people lived before contact with whites. But these data are no less meaningful for this. My return visits to the Pintupi represent the particular conditions of my learning; the importance of individual relationships and the historical changes I observed among the Pintupi themselves may well have made certain issues especially significant to me. This is not a source of falsity in my account, but rather a basis of what insight I have gained, teaching me to see what mattered to the Pintupi.

A particular set of historical circumstances also governed my encounter with the Pintupi. Shortly before my arrival in Australia, the Labour Government had inaugurated a policy of Aboriginal "self-determination." This policy set two processes in motion. With the withdrawal of government authority over settlements, local conceptions of land tenure and land rights began to reassert themselves. Since, at Yayayi, the Pintupi were residing in a region for which they had little traditional claim, the problem of their rights to be there remained always close to the surface. The second process was the organization of local politics in Aboriginal terms. The Pintupi were, of course, sedentary, but in contrast to the paternalistic settlements of the past, they were now living in an autonomous community without government supervision. Control of local institutions came largely into their hands.

My experience of Pintupi self-determination in this context made it possible to observe organization in their terms. This condition, as much as anything else, taught me about politics and negotiation as an irreducible quality of Pintupi sociality, about their

sense of the community at Yayayi as just a manifestation of a desert-wide network that was "all family," and about the importance of the cultural terms in which social action was coordinated.

Permitted its own development, the temporal duration and structure of Pintupi sociality is a real, observable problem in contemporary life. The place where I began my research in 1973, Yayayi, exists no longer as a Pintupi community. Instead, I have encountered members of the Yayayi community at various stages of their poignant odyssey. At each location, similar scenarios of the process of aggregation and dispersal were acted out. No community represented, for any individual, the entirety of the social universe. Every individual stressed ties to other people in faraway places. They had gone out from the desert in all different directions, but their deepest aspiration was to somehow sustain these relations. Indeed, Yayayi itself lasted only a few years. A number of deaths, some of them violent, made the memory of the place sad. There have been new arrangements of people, changing communities, every time I have returned.

Though the Pintupi lived on other people's land, I learned at Yayayi that their hearts remained in the west, in their own country, and that they viewed their settlement in the east as temporary. Finally, they have moved back to their own country. The re-inhabiting of the Western Desert began in 1981, with Pintupi living at Warlungurru (Kintore Range) for the first time in twenty years. And in October 1984, astonishingly, Pintupi who had moved still further west met nine relatives who had never had contact with whites at all.

Through all these changes—or, as I would prefer to say, manifest in these developments—the inner logic of Pintupi sociality persists, despite apparent transformations of societal form. The internal contradictions of this structure continue to set the limits of social life.

Three related patterns I witnessed in my experience of Pintupi life provide the underpinnings of this book's account. The first pattern is an emphasis on "relatedness," on extending one's ties with others outward, on being open to claims by others, on showing sympathy and a willingness to negotiate. This pattern involves the difficulty of sustaining an authoritative center that excludes others from consideration. The second pattern is a reluctance to permit others to impose their authority over oneself, an unwillingness to accept constraints on one's autonomy. These two patterns are countered, or resolved, by a third—the cultural representation of hierarchy as nurturance, as "looking after." This third pattern plays an essential role in placing certain principles beyond individual

consideration, in constituting a transcendent realm of value. The three patterns relate in a way Bateson (1979) called "stochastic," limiting each other but having their own internal properties. Their relationship to each other gives these forms the meaning they have in my analysis.

The Plan of the Book

I have two broad goals in this book. On one hand, I aim to show that the salient characteristics of life in this "egalitarian" society make it sociologically necessary to emphasize the individual and the self. The high value placed on individual autonomy and the work and strategies required to achieve a polity when dominance must appear muted pose a problem for the society's participants, not one imported from outside. Collectivity is a problem for the Pintupi.

My second goal is to analyze this particular social order while retaining the ethnographic sense of active human participants working out the complexity of their social and political interactions with each other. By giving centrality to Aboriginal experience and practical understanding of what it is "really like" to be Pintupi, I show how one can combine the phenomenological attention to the "life world" of experience with an analytical grasp of the structures that underlie action. This study is intended as a contribution to our understanding of the emotions and the mind as reflexive products of social action, and to our comprehension of the logic and content of "politics" among hunter-gatherers as part of a larger totality of relations.