PINTUPI COUNTRY, PINTUPI SELF

Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines

FRED R. MYERS

If mere survival, mere continuance, is of interest, then the harder sorts of rocks, such as granite, have to be put near the top of the list as most successful among macroscopic entities. . . . But the rock's way of staying in the game is different from the way of living things. The rock, we may say, resists *change; it stays put, unchanging. The living thing escapes change either by correcting change or changing itself to meet the change or by incorporating continual change into its own being.*

—Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*
(New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979)

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Fred R. Myers

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Frontispiece: Freddy West Tjakamarra makes a painting of the mythological geography of his own country. *(Yayayi, 1975)*

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ORTHOGRAPHY

The following orthography (after Hansen and Hansen 1969) has been used in transcribing Pintupi phonemes:

Point of Articulation	*Stops*	*Nasals*	*Laterals*
Bilabial	p	m	
Apico-Alveolar	t	n	l
Apico-Domal	rt	rn	rl
Lamino-Alveolar	tj	ny	ly
Velar	k	ng	

	Vibrants	*Semiconsonants*
Apico-Alveolar	rr	
Bilabial		w
Lamino-Palatal		y
Apico-Domal		r

	Vowels	
	Short	Long
High front unrounded	i	ii
High back rounded	u	uu
Low central unrounded	a	aa

Preface

My field research with the Pintupi has always been both joyous and exhausting—and for the same reason, namely that the Pintupi have expected me to take on the obligations appropriate to community membership. This has been true from the beginning.

I arrived in Australia's Northern Territory in June 1973 to ask the Pintupi for permission to conduct my study in Yayayi, a small breakaway community they had just established twenty-six miles west of Papunya. These people from the Gibson Desert had been coming east to Northern Territory settlements for the past forty years. That they had at last set up their own community, largely isolated from government supervision, provided a novice anthropologist with an opportune situation. I hoped to learn how the Pintupi organized themselves and their own destiny, in terms of their concerns and values.

Even with this aim, I must confess that a long time passed before I began to comprehend what my Pintupi friends were telling me. Once I understood that they were indeed trying to explain themselves to me in a Pintupi fashion—and that there *was* a Pintupi fashion—my confusion and struggles became more directed. None of this would have been possible without the friendliness and warmth of the Pintupi and their acceptance of me into the community as a member, as a "one-countryman" with my own responsibilities to them. This interaction and the difficult but rewarding emotional awareness I gradually gained of a Pintupi way of life inform the explanations and interpretations I offer in this book. I came to see that the "feel" of Pintupi life was central to any understanding.

Throughout my field stays I have struggled with the problem of imposing my ideals and expectations on the people I studied. I felt this all the more deeply because the Pintupi remain in a semicolonial situation that still emphasizes the values and expectations of the white Australian majority. This conflict and its anthropological significance forced me to come to grips with the continuity and persistence of Pintupi cultural concepts.

Since my initial twenty-one months at Yayayi, I have lived for intervals with Pintupi people as they have shifted their residence further and further west toward their own country. These stays—at Yayayi and Yinyilingki for two months in 1979, at New Bore and Papunya for eight months in 1980–81, and short visits to Balgo in

1982, Balgo and Kintore in 1983, and Kintore and Kiwirrkura in 1984—have renewed the personal relationships that define my status as a "relative" and have maintained a sense of the moral basis for the ongoing conversation that is ethnography. Once "back from the field," it is all too easy for anthropologists to forget their accountability to local mores. In returning to the Pintupi, I have sought not only to justify their trust and acceptance but also to retain contact with what matters to them. My own life has been deeply affected by their awareness of people as persons, and I hope that their enduring respect for persons in the *concrete*, as Kierkegaard once wrote, will be matched by my respect for them.

Pintupi sociality is anything but anonymous. In fact, the presence of particular individuals defines Pintupi society itself, yet the properties of one's identity are quite personal. Thus, I have tried to represent individuals in their concrete identities, only substituting pseudonyms to protect their privacy and also to avoid using names that might become taboo through death. The Pintupi themselves will know the characters I describe. Likewise, photographs help to maintain the immediate reality of Pintupi life, but readers should be aware that pictures of deceased relatives can cause great pain to Aboriginal people. Out of politeness and consideration, it would be appropriate to request permission from some knowledgeable member of the Pintupi communities before showing these photographs.

Finally, in Aboriginal society, access to some kinds of information is restricted. This limitation holds especially true for religious matters, including men's and women's rituals. As a male, I was taught a great deal about men's religious life with the understanding that I would not make it public. In accordance with this restriction, I have written only of matters that were considered public knowledge in the community.

In no sense does an anthropologist work alone. Many people took part in the ongoing conversation that has worked itself out in this study. The degree to which I have made sense of the experience should be seen as testimony to the friendship and patience of the Pintupi—to whom I here express my enormous debt and my gratitude. For their continuing help throughout the years, I am particularly grateful to Shorty Lungkarta, Freddy West, George Yapa Yapa, Ginger Tjakamarra, Kanya Tjapangarti, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, Yanyatjarri Tjakamarra, and Yumpurlurru Tjungurrayi. These people made me their kinsman and their friend.

I am indebted also to a number of others, especially to Jane Goodale, who first interested me in Aboriginal culture and taught me how to be a fieldworker. In Australia, Nicolas Peterson initially helped me choose a field location; throughout the years, he and his wife Roz have kept me in touch with Aboriginal studies through letters, hours of discussion, and the warm hospitality of their home. My fellow Western Desert researchers, Robert and Myrna Tonkinson, have generously provided me with support, much-needed conversation, and rest and recreation on my way into and out of the field. The list of others in Australia is extensive and, although I cannot name them all, I would like to thank Diane Barwick, Jeremy Beckett, Jeremy Long, and Judith Wilson.

In the Centre, my gratitude to Ken and Leslie Hansen is great, extending beyond my use of their grammar of Pintupi before it was published. I would like to thank particularly Jeff Stead, who has provided understanding, insight, and moral support first as community adviser to the Pintupi and now as research officer at the Central Land Council. David and Lyn Bond and Carolyn and David Cann have helped me in every imaginable way at Papunya.

My research in the field was supported by NSF Dissertation Improvement Grant No. GS 37122, NIMH Fellowship No. 3FOIMH7275-01, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. I am particularly grateful to the Institute for its graciousness and support through the years. By providing me with a Presidential Fellowship to complete this book, New York University made it possible to bring a long project to fruition.

I would also like to thank the following people who provided comments and constructive criticism on various parts of the manuscript: Tom Beidelman, Don Brenneis, Dan Goodwin, Ivan Karp, Terry Turner, Annette Weiner, and Randy White. Finally, my gratitude to Bette Clark, who has shared not only in the struggle to clarify the subtleties of Pintupi life but also in the difficult times of fieldwork and self-doubt.

I gratefully acknowledge the permission of the editor of *Mankind* to use material from my articles "The Cultural Basis Politics in Pintupi Life" (*Mankind* 12 [1980]: 197–213) and "A Broken Code: Pintupi Political Theory and Contemporary Social Life" (*Mankind* 12 [1980]: 311–26). The University of Queensland Press has given permission to draw on my paper "Ideology and Experience: The Cultural Basis of Pintupi Politics," published in M. Howard, ed., *Aboriginal Power in Australian Society* (1982), and Westview Press has done so for "Always Ask: Resource Use and Landownership among the Pintupi of Central Australia," published in N. Williams and E. Hunn, eds., *Resource Managers* (1982). Thanks are also due to Heidi Knecht for preparing maps and charts.

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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 reproduce 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

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