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Places, performative kinship and networking in the Western Desert. A contemporary perspective

Sylvie Poirier

- 1 The title suggested for this morning's session is: The State and recognition of Aboriginal rights, land, and history. I will retain here one aspect of this title that I consider more encompassing and that is: the State and the recognition of Aboriginal differences?
- 2 I must say first that my understanding and reading of Aboriginal contemporary realities and lifeworlds, my understanding and reading of the nature of Aboriginal relations with the State are based predominantly on my experiences and observations at Balgo, a place I have known since 1980; my last visit was in 2006. Balgo is an Aboriginal community of about 500 people, situated at the northern fringe of the Gibson Desert, in Western Australia. Its geographical position places it at the cross-roads between the Tanami, the Western Desert and the Kimberley regions. In this paper, I will focus on the extent and the vitality of the manifold social networks in which Balgo people have been engaged in since the 1970s – as expressions of their recent history, on the one hand, but also of their mobility and nomadic ethos and of their relational way of being-in-the-world. Considering the extent and the vitality of such networking, the expression used by the State to designate Aboriginal settlements like Balgo as being a “remote” community becomes quite irrelevant. The so-called remoteness of it makes sense only from the bureaucratic perspective of Canberra. Anyhow and like any other place, a place like Balgo, is necessarily plurilocal and plurivocal.
- 3 I'll start with some overall observations. A community like Balgo offers a most potent example of what some observers have qualified as the «failure » of the policies of self-determination (or self-management). Indeed, the Aborigines in Balgo do not meet any of the criteria and expectations of the Australian State in terms of good governance, of health, housing, schooling and employment. For example, and as far as governance is

concerned, Balgo has been without a proper local council since the early nineties. One can still sense a clear hesitation and uneasiness on the part of the Aborigines to adopt and adapt a political structure imposed by the State (Poirier 2010). We should not downplay the fact that chairmanship and council as representative and elective modes and processes are antinomic to Aboriginal own political mode and decision making process which ones are based on reciprocity. (Unfortunately, this “parody” of governance leaves ample room to unethical *Kartiya* (Whites) who seem to take advantage of this situation).

- 4 Furthermore, a community like Balgo is most representative of the public discourses and the figures of “statistical inequality” which keep stressing the so-called cultural deficit, mal-adaptation and incapacity of Aboriginal people to deal with modernity and to behave “properly”, presenting them as a class of citizens in the waiting room of modernity. In other words, the Balgo people never respond to State policies and programmes the way the State and its representatives would have expected. But where the State chooses to see “deficit”, “incapacity” and “irresponsibility”, and in times when public and institutional discourses chose to focus on the “distress” of Aboriginal so-called remote communities, I choose rather to see the resistance of a people who refuse to adopt the forms of subjectivity, sociality and responsibility expected and sanctioned by the State. People who fight hard, in spite of increasing constraints, hardships and sufferings, to remain true to their own regime of values, to their own forms of subjectivity, sociality and responsibility (isn't indeed their most basic rights?), while adapting these to their new conditions of living. Such perspective allows in turn a clearer view into the transformative and adaptive potential of these former nomadic hunters and gatherers, into their creativity and their agency. I am not saying that there are not any distresses and sufferings in a place like Balgo. Over the decades, I have seen too many Aboriginal people, mostly young adults (men and women), died of a violent death or of ill-health to remain insensitive or indifferent. But on the other hand, I remain convinced that their reality cannot be reduced to that – unless, as anthropologists, we want to be the spokespersons of the neocolonial discourses and strategies of the State which aims and duties are to “domesticate” and “normalise” Aboriginal people. Basically, I am just trying to understand how the Balgo people are working hard to reproduce and create a lifeworld in which they can recognise themselves – even though their lifeworld is far from the one expected by the State and is, in many ways, antinomic/anathema to the regime of values of modernity and to being “modern subjects”.
- 5 I wish to address now some of the Aboriginal differences I have mentioned already - these very differences which are antinomic to the State's programs and expectations - namely their relational way-of-being in the world and their nomadic ethos. The anthropological literature on Aboriginal kin-based forms of subjectivity and sociality, of solidarity and responsibility is abundant and very explicit. Starting with Fred Myers' work on the paramount values of autonomy and relatedness (and reciprocity) (Myers 1991); then Basil Sansom's concept of “performative kinship”, as extended kin networks and relations which are constantly tested, negotiated, reaffirm through actions and a “grammar of exchange” (Sansom 1991); and then Peterson's concept of demand sharing. Other authors, like Austin-Broos (2003), have demonstrated the articulation of Aboriginal kinship with welfare and work and how kin-based forms of sociality and solidarity continue to be reproduced and performed in relation with the circulation of money and objects. Even though the literature has put great emphasis on

the ongoing and central importance of kinship and kin networks and relations, and their performative dimension, I am not sure we have sufficiently addressed the notion of the person in Aboriginal Australia, as well as the relational dimension of the self at the ontological level, and the embodied character of relationality. Considering seriously such Aboriginal differences would mean placing at an equal level and in dialogue the relational way of being in the world of the Aborigines with the sovereign self of the modern subject. These different ways of being-in-the-world should be addressed each from their own ontological principles. It is in that sense that I have contrasted elsewhere what has come to be called “relational ontologies” with the naturalist and dualist ontology of Western modern thought (Poirier 2008; Poirier, in press). While all forms of being are indisputably relational, various ontological traditions conceive, value and experience the reality of relationality differently. In relational ontologies, relations take on a reality on their own; they are not only a construct of the mind or mere representations within a symbolic system. As we know, for the Aborigines, relatedness and relationality refer not only to kin and kin networks, but also to places, to country, to the ancestral realm and the non-humans in general.

- 6 Some of the questions I would ask at this point are the following: At the experiential, ontological, phenomenological levels, who is this I, this self who embodies relatedness, who acts and interacts in a conscious and knowledgeable relational way? What does it imply to, not only conceive, but live and experience the world in such a relational way? What is the nature of such embodied relationality? I will mention two ethnographic examples from the literature which I consider give the beginning of an answer to these questions. The first one is drawn from Françoise Dussart’s work among Warlpiri suffering from diabetes, in which she underlies the ontological obstacles between Aboriginal forms of subjectivity and sociality and those that are expected from the biomedical system. She writes: “The biomedical establishment systematically presses for those affected with diabetes to stay close to the clinic and limit travel. But this kind of restriction is anathema to contemporary Warlpiri people, erstwhile hunters and gatherers whose identity is still very much rooted in nomadism” (2010, 80). She explains how they need to remain mobile to attend to kin (living in other communities) and country, and to partake in distant rituals or sport events; in other words, in order to maintain and nourish their social and cosmological networks of relationships and remain full social beings. The second example is drawn from Austin-Broos’ analysis of the articulation of Arrernte (Central Desert) kinship with a welfare economy and the State. Among the many examples given by the author, I have selected the following one. The author accompanies an Arrernte friend on a visit to an old people’s home in Alice Springs. She explains how a cousin of her friend, rendered paraplegic in an accident, “was fighting hard not to be socially dead” and deprived of relatedness (2003, 127). In order to engage in relatedness and “nourish” her relational self, the paraplegic woman gave to her cousin the very few objects she had (among these, a deodorant, a few sweets, and a dress that the staff had just given to her) – to the great dismay of the staff. These examples portray the phenomenological and performative dimensions of relationality, as an embodied value and as an integral part of one’s relational self, and show how the activation, validation and maintenance of such relatedness may guide and orient one’s agency, one’s choices and actions. Not being in a position, for various reasons, to act in such a relational way, is a form of ontological violence for the Aboriginal person (Macdonald 2010).

- 7 This takes me to the other difference I wish to address here and that is how the relational self and extended kin networks of sociality and solidarity continue to inform a high level of mobility among the people of Balgo, an Aboriginal nomadic ethos. This aspect of high mobility to attend to kin, to country, ritual, but also to Church and sport events (but not so much to attend to work or school – which belong to the White man's domain) has also been addressed in the anthropological literature. One of the points I wish to stress here is the way the people of Balgo are constantly engaged in reproducing, strengthening and expanding their social networks through a high degree of mobility and through performative kinship. As a whole, the people of Balgo are thus connecting with places and settlements over a wide area: to settlements further south into the desert, starting with Kiwirrkura (and beyond); to the south-east along the Tanami, all the way to Yuendumu; north to Lajamanu (but also as far as Kununarra), and to the north-west, all across the Kimberley, even now as far as Broome.
- 8 While the networks themselves do vary for each local group (and for each member of a local group), they also intersect and intermingle. So, if we want to understand the reality and the dynamic of a place like Balgo, I suggest that we adopt the perspective of the Aborigines who view the settlement not as being enclosed on itself but as one within a complex entanglement of social, ritual and cosmological networks of places and settlements that expand far beyond the community of Balgo. I will now try to portray the patterns and the forms of such mobility and networking.
- 9 Bits and parcels of recent history, from an Aboriginal perspective, are necessary here. In the seventies, the implementation of the policies of self-determination has meant, for the desert people, the possibility of a greater mobility and the opportunity to reconnect with country and to reconnect with kin living in other settlements. In the region, both, the outstation and the acrylic movements, as Aboriginal initiatives, were creative expressions of such "reconnection". It has meant also an increase in ritual activities. In the 1970s and 1980s, most people in Balgo were deeply engaged and involved in ritual exchanges. As I said already, being at the cross-roads of desert and Kimberley routes, Balgo became a strong center for ritual activities, a kind of turning point. I'll mention just a few here to give an overall idea. The *Tjulurru*, the travelling cult (also known as the Balgo Business), that they received from West coast and Kimberley groups and then gave to the Pintupi further south and to the Warlpiri of Lajamanu and Yuendumu. In exchange of the *Tjulurru*, the Balgo mob received from the Lajamanu and Yuendumu people, the rights to perform the *Jardiwampa* ceremony linked to *Puluwanti* Dreaming (a ceremony analysed in great details by Peterson at Yuendumu). The Balgo women also engaged in some ritual exchanges with Kiwirrkura women, among others, and participated actively in various Law women meeting organised in Balgo and across the Kimberley. I understand these travelling rituals and practices of exchange as expressions of Aboriginal cosmopolitics, a way to establish long lasting alliances with various groups and settlements from Broome all the way to Yuendumu. These ritual activities decrease through the nineties and I would be unable to say if the knowledge, rights to perform and custody pertaining to these particular rituals are still being claimed, enacted and transmitted. The younger generations, though they are not as versed and interested in ritual matters as were their elders, continue nevertheless to build on the relations and the networks established by the elders through these ritual exchanges.

- 10 In Balgo, initiation ceremonies and mourning rites are still very important and they are one of the means to maintain connection and networking with various groups over a wide area, but also, obviously, to maintain, affirm and enact knowledge and rights pertaining to country. Held every year between November and March, initiation ceremonies are performed at different places, either Balgo, Kiwirrkura or elsewhere, and continue to mobilise and gather together a whole range of people from different places over a wide area. As for mourning rites, people don't hesitate to travel long distances to participate in them. The Aborigines in Balgo continue to talk of initiatory and mourning rites as "very hard work", in the sense first that these practices mobilise tremendous organisational, human and material resources; and second, in the sense that looking after and sustaining these manifold relations is indeed "very hard work". However, the kind of "work" (or labour) involved in perpetuating initiatory and funerary rituals (the reproduction of their socio-cosmic order) has no value and legitimacy from the point of view of neoliberal economic rationality and within the regime of values of modernity.
- 11 Aside these rituals activities and networks, and the mobility they necessitate, there are also other forms of mobility as people travel to and fro the settlements for varying periods of time, mostly to visit relatives. In a place like Balgo, the high degree of mobility and the unpredictability of it are a major source of puzzlement and misunderstanding on the part of the *Kartiya*. You never know when someone will decide to leave, and even less when they will be back. This, in turn, raises the whole question of Aboriginal relations to *Kartiya* time and temporality, and thus to work and school (Tonkinson & Tonkinson 2010). Such mobility, unpredictability and spontaneity are, more often than not, interpreted as "irresponsibility" by the *Kartiya*; while they are, in Aboriginal perspective, a fulfilment of their forms of subjectivity, sociality and responsibility, an expression of their relational self, of their nomadic ethos, but also of their "spatial ontology". Such mobility is a way of life. Furthermore, and as we know, the travelling itself is as important as the destination; as people move across the land, they meet with significant Dreaming places, they recall stories, events and anecdotes linked with such and such places; according to the season, they might decide to stop to hunt a goanna or gather some bush tomatoes, and then to establish camp, and so on. Through these travelling practices, they constantly reaffirm the Aboriginal identity of the land.
- 12 One of the main reasons for moving about is to visit relatives in other settlements. For example, a young mother from Kiwirrkura married to a Balgo man might decide to visit her close relatives in Kiwirrkura for a few months (her husband might or might not join her) and from there the young woman may decide to join a group of relatives visiting another settlement further south; an older couple will visit their son in Lajamanu, who is married to a Lajamanu woman, for a few weeks and on their way back they might stop another few weeks at an outstation where live some of their kin; an unmarried woman will go to live with her married sister in Fitzroy Crossing or Broome for a few months and see what happens from there; a young man from Balgo might travel to another community with his football team and decide to stay there "for a while" with his relatives; and so on. Such mobility happens in both ways. People from different communities do come also to live in Balgo for more or less extended periods of time. For example, a woman from Yuendumu whose daughter is married to a Balgo man may

come to look after her grand-children for a while; she may take one of her grand-children back with her to Yuendumu for a few weeks or months.

- 13 Children are also quite mobile – not only the parents take them with them to their prolonged visits to other settlements, but it is quite common that paternal or maternal grand-mothers living in other communities ask to “look after” their grand-children for a while. Over their childhood, it is not uncommon for children to live in different settlements. As the children grow up, they are already familiar with other settlements and have a good knowledge of their extended social and kin networks.
- 14 Obviously, such mobility tells us also a lot about contemporary marriage and residential patterns. Today’s marriage and residential patterns in the area would certainly be a relevant topic for future researches and could be revealing on the ways families and local groups strengthen, transform, and extend existing networks. Quite a few of the young couples I know in Balgo are composed of one partner coming from another community; it is hard to evaluate the steadiness of married couples (Musharbash 2010). On the other hand, more and more young women decide to go without a steady partner, but still have children. One woman in her mid-twenties (in 2006), though her case is maybe unusual, had four children from four different fathers. She explained to me how she would every now and then leave one or more of her children, for indeterminate periods of time, in the care of their respective paternal grand-mother living in other settlements.
- 15 All what I have said up to here on mobility and on the way each person is engaged in reproducing his or her social and kin networks would be incomplete without a mention of the relations with one’s country. Mobility and networking do not erode one’s sense of belonging to country. Relationships to one’s country remain very strong. Beside the ritual domain, one of the contemporary ways through which such relationships are affirmed, reinforced and transmitted is through acrylic paintings. As a medium introduced and appropriated quite recently, which is in the eighties, acrylic painting has been readily articulated within the regime of values and the sociality of these Western Desert people (Myers 2002). John Carty’s recent and in depth analysis of the acrylic movement in Balgo is most revealing at that level. He has analysed a tremendous amount of acrylic paintings produced in Balgo since the eighties by members of different families and local groups, and demonstrated that painting, as praxis and object, is not the sole representation of country, it is “country”. The “spatial ontology” of these Western Desert people appears clearly in the way the act of painting, as a social, cosmopolitical and economic practice, not only allows to confirm and to affirm one’s relationships to country, but it allows the very reproduction of country, as well as the inter-generational transmission of knowledge pertaining to country. Acrylic painting, as action, as object, and as a source of income, has thus become an integral part of the networks of social relations of exchange.
- 16 To conclude, I’ll say a few words about the State’s recognition of land rights and Native Title in the Balgo area. As Balgo is situated in Western Australia, its people did not benefit from the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory, 1976); only a couple of families living in Balgo, who are recognised as “traditional owners” of some land across the Northern Territory border, benefit from mining royalties. In most cases, the traditional lands of the local groups and extended families living in Balgo since its establishment in the 1940s lie further south. In 2007, they had their Native Title recognised (the Ngururrpa Determination Area) for a stretch of land that covers 30,000

square kilometers, in the Great Sandy Desert, and part of it (to the south-east) touches the Northern Territory border and Lake MacKay. It could certainly be relevant to inquire eventually into the social, political and economic impacts of such Native Title recognition.

- 17 Paradoxically, in the early 2000s, the Federal Government closed and dismantled the outstation of Yagga Yagga, situated hundred kilometers south of Balgo. The founding families of Yagga Yagga were the same families who lodged the Ngururrpa Native Title claim. Yagga Yagga had been established in 1984; in the nineties, it had become a community of about 200 people; it had a store, a school and an office. Following the deaths of a few elders and the suicide of a young man, the people deserted the place, planning to come back after a year or so. The government took advantage of the situation to dismantle the place (in 2003).
- 18 The Ngururrpa Determination Area is surrounded by other areas for which Native Title has also been determined and recognised: Kiwirrkura to the south; Tjurabalan to the north (Mulan and Lake Gregory area) and Martu to the West. Considering the extent of Western Desert lands covered by these Native Titles and the “bundles of rights” that come with it, it is going to be most interesting to see, in the years to come, the outcomes of this new reality. A few questions come to mind: Are the novel forms of borders and rights implemented through the Native Titles going to contribute to divide the groups concerned and create frictions and conflicts between the Aboriginal corporations responsible to “manage” these Native Titles? To which extent and in which forms are the implementation of the Native Titles going to contribute to the reformulation and the transformation of kin and social networks across these portions of the Western Desert?

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