

# The Pursuit of Prominence: Hunting in an Australian Aboriginal Community<sup>1</sup>

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de la chasse chez des groupes centrés sur la tradition. Après avoir revu différentes manières dont des cas semblables ont été traités, l'auteur présente une description détaillée d'une expédition de chasse et de sa situation ethnographique. On soutient que pour bien apprécier l'importance de la poursuite et de la consommation du gibier, ces activités doivent être placées dans leur contexte socio-culturel. Leurs associations avec le système de croyance et de rites d'une part et leur utilisation par des gens qui veulent acquérir de l'influence dans la communauté d'autre part, ont une signification particulière dans ce contexte.

Traditionally the Aborigines of Australia's great Western Desert were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers. Over the years since contact they have become increasingly (though not totally) sedentary and have abandoned virtually all gathering practices. Interestingly, however, the pursuit of game remains a continuing concern in many communities (e.g. see Silberbauer 1971; Hamilton 1972; White 1972; Tonkinson 1974). At Wiluna, Western Australia, for example, it is, at least for some men during particular times of the annual cycle, an extremely frequently engaged in activity. Not too long ago this

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persistence would have been attributed to economic factors. And it is quite possible such hunting once did have an element of the necessary about it. Rations, whether provided by government or missions, usually consisted largely of commodities such as flour, sugar, and tea, with meat seldom being included. On top of this 'wages' were generally 'in kind', i.e. in the form of clothing, utensils and ration substitutes. Hence it could have been that (because even at the best of times Aborigines had little or no money in hand with which to purchase meat) hunting had to be pursued as it was about the only avenue of more regularly acquiring animal protein. But regardless of the merits or shortcomings of this type of argument for the past, it completely lacks credence for the contemporary situation. Now Aboriginal employees are by law entitled to the standard award wage. And if job opportunities for tradition-oriented peoples are uniformly poor, members of most groups have access to a modicum of seasonal and full-time positions. Additionally, those who are unable to find work or who, owing to age, health, or the like, are unemployable, are supposed to receive the same social service benefits as Whites (see Peterson 1977).

If the proceeds of the hunt are not now necessary to survival (as they were traditionally) or to physical well-being (as they may have been earlier in the contact scene), why is hunting still practiced? To answer this question I would begin by following Sharp's (1975; 1977) argument regarding the situation among the Caribou-Eater Chipe-wyan. Just as for these people hunting (of caribou) was and remains "the proper activity for a man" (1977: 35), so hunting (game) was and remains the proper activity for a Wiluna man. In part it continues to be important because it bridges the span between the present and the pre-contact period. As it does this, it provides an avenue by which a man may ground and make clearly understandable certain of his actions at a time when change is rampant in all domains of the socio-cultural system. In hunting, men — and at Wiluna hunting is almost solely the province of males — exercise elements of their traditional role and practice at least some traditional skills. And when game is killed, cooked, and butchered, hunters demonstrate generosity and promote reciprocity by distributing portions to members of the wider community. In so doing, they simultaneously place themselves in the position of giver (cf. Paine 1971) and, perhaps of even greater importance, exhibit their ability to maintain families and willingness to support friends.

But hunting is much more than simply a way in which traditional practices and values are called to mind, reaffirmed, and carried forward. It is also a course by which aspects of the cosmological system are actually worked out, acted upon, and shown to be efficacious. This facet closely parallels what appears to be the case among the Waswanipi Cree; who, it is reported, believe game gives itself up to the hunter. As Feit observes:

In the culturally constructed world of the Waswanipi the animals, the winds, and many other phenomena are thought of as being "like persons" in that they act intelligently and have wills and idiosyncracies, and understand and are understood by men... The body of the animals the hunter receives nourish him, but the soul returns to be reborn again, so that when men and animals are in balance, the animals are killed but not diminished and both men and animals survive. The balance is reciprocal, and in return for the gifts the hunter has obligations to the animals... to act responsibly; to use what he is given completely, and to act respectfully towards the bodies and souls of the animals... It is also... the responsibility of the hunter not to kill more than he is given, not to "play" with animals by killing them for fun or self-aggrandizement.

This last stricture is critical in the Waswanipi ethno-ecology, because it means that, in their view, the hunter has a considerable influence over his hunting. While formally men only catch what is given to them, in practice what is given to them is a function of what they have done before (1973: 116-117).

For the Waswanipi, then, hunting is not some discrete or isolatable activity. On the contrary, the pursuit of game and success or failure in the endeavour fits tightly within and relates directly to an overarching view of man and beast, the relations between the two, and the places of both in the scheme of things.

The people of Wiluna also believe game is in a sense given to them. But as they see it, the game does not so much yield itself up as it is put into the environment for the taking. It is placed there by various Creative or Dreamtime Beings who occasionally release spirits which in turn impregnate animals. Within this framework, the man-to-animal balance is not maintained by, on the one hand, man taking only that which he needs or is given and, on the other hand, animals withholding themselves from hunters. Rather, it is maintained through men periodically performing rituals aimed at gaining the attention of the Ancestral Heroes and coaxing or cajoling them into releasing more life essence — thereby replacing that which has been diminished through hunting (Sackett 1977a). This means Aboriginal hunters take animals they in a very real fashion have been instrumental in bringing into being. Needless to say, this is a factor of

extreme significance. It makes evident the integral link between hunting and the belief and ritual system. Further, it gives rise to a situation wherein heavy involvement in one sphere is automatically an expression of deep interest in the other. As I shall show, some men exploit this in their moves to achieve and maintain prominence within the group.

Seen in this light, hunting becomes an activity laden with meaning. It persists for a number of important reasons. At one level, to engage in it is to emulate, defend, and advocate what are seen as the tried, proven, and proper ways — the ways of the early people and the Beings of the Creative Period. In doing so hunters, whether successful or not, make statements about themselves, their position in the group, and the nature of the community of which they are a part. At another level, through hunting men — at a time when the traditional and tradition-oriented forms and beliefs are experiencing ever increasing scrutiny (both from outsiders and members of the group) — make pronouncements about the truth and power of their social-cultural system.

#### HUNTING IN AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

In recent years the fringe settlement of Wiluna has become the focus for a relatively large community of ex-desert people and their dependents. It is a 'focus' in that it is a core site and gathering place; not because it serves as a centre of continual common residence. Indeed, only rarely, at the staging of the annual gymkhana and during the hot summer months of December and January, are most of the group's approximately 350 members found living together. For the remainder of the time the population is fragmented and scattered across a wide area. While just over one half (52 per cent) of the total number normally reside on either a small camping reserve or nearby mission, about 11 per cent are away attending a church-run boarding school and a further 37 per cent are distributed throughout the region's eighteen to twenty pastoral properties. But if the population as a whole is usually dispersed, its component individuals and families are in almost constant contact and communication. This is owing to the fact that there is a great deal of movement between (1) the reserve and the mission, and — as people return to the township vicinity and others leave to take their place — (2) Wiluna proper and the more remote stations.

Much of this apparent instability relates directly to the requirements and vicissitudes of gaining a livelihood. Just as traditionally the Aborigines had to be on the move in order to subsist in a harsh environment, now they, or at least a portion of their number, must be mobile enough to take advantage of a highly seasonal job situation. For whereas in the past, survival depended largely upon the availability of surface or immediate sub-surface waters, vegetable matter, and game, today cash is the crucial factor. This change derives partially from altered environmental parameters and partially from volition on the part of the actors themselves. Take, for example, the introduced windmills. These "super-water-holes", as L. Hiatt (1968: 100) has so aptly termed them, were a prime element in facilitating the Aborigines' adoption of a more sedentary life-style. Concurrently, they allowed and encouraged the formation of greatly expanded social groupings. Interestingly, they have had, at least around Wiluna, an equally profound impact on the native fauna, particularly kangaroos. Formerly, these animals were limited in number, as were humans, in the first instance by the supplies of naturally occurring water. But now 'artificial' sources, dotted across the landscape to provide for the requirements of livestock, are used by game as well, contributing to actual increases in totals and densities (cf. Newsome 1962: 105-106). The mills' effects on gatherable flora is, however, a different story. Rather than enhancing the never especially abundant supply, they have, if only indirectly, led to sharp reductions. For one thing, the large, somewhat stable human population the water sources now support places of heavy burden on the local plant resources. An indication of this is evident in Meggitt's description of another group of desert people. He notes the camp is:

almost devoid of vegetation for a radius of several hundred yards. The spinifex-grass has been burned off and the ash trampled into the hard-packed red soil. Few trees have survived the constant demand for firewood and building materials (1962: 75).

I would add only that if wood is scarce, edible seeds, tubers, and the like, are non-existent. Even if the people desired to, they could not subsist through gathering in areas adjacent to camp. Unlike game, which fills depleted niches through mobility, plants rejuvenate to all intents and purposes *in situ*. And this is something they have little chance of doing. The heavy traffic, both pedestrian and vehicular, the destructive play of children, the scrounging of pets, etc., mediate against it. And even away from the habitation site, prospects of

finding edible plant produce are uncertain and low. This is so because not only are there now more native faunae, there are also large numbers of introduced stock. All these run wild and (the rapacious sheep in particular) consume or mutilate flora which might otherwise be used by humans.

As gathered commodities traditionally constituted approximately 70% of the peoples' diets (Lee 1968; B. Hiatt 1970), changes in the environment and man's relationship to it have had telling consequences. Most immediately apparent is the almost complete replacement of gathering by wage labour. This is paralleled by a shift from consuming natural grains, wild fruits, etc., to relying upon processed flour (from which the well-known damper is made), jam, sweet biscuits, syrupy tinned fruit and the like. But these substitutions must not be viewed as wholly deterministic. The Aborigines did not simply find themselves in a position where food collecting was no longer a viable proposition and take up employment in order to avoid starvation. On the contrary, although early in the contact scene availability of foodstuffs undoubtedly operated as an incentive behind Aborigines working for whites, access to clothing, steel, leather, and so forth, was also important. Indeed, it appears it was the attractions of these material items, not food, which was chiefly responsible for people taking up residence on a station or near town. That is, while they most likely would not and could not have worked had they not been (paid or) supplied with food, neither is it likely they would have worked *only* for food. As it was, such residences as were established were rarely permanent. Individuals and families frequently returned to their home countries after seeing what was happening and accumulating what they could. Thus, the shift from purely desert living, to movement between the desert and stations/town, to the current pattern of movement between Wiluna and its surrounding stations, was gradual. It also involved a choice: continuation of a semi-nomadic life-style, at least for part of the time, versus the abandonment of gathering in favour of reliance on the Western economic system. A few opted to remain in the desert, scorning Whites and their fellows who, no matter how minimally, adopted White ways. The vast majority, however, have over the years given up their subsistence-based economy for that centred on money.

A number of avenues are now used, singly and in combination, in acquiring cash for the purchase of packaged foods and a range of

manufactured gadgetry. Quite a substantial segment (22 per cent) of the adult population, but principally the old, the widowed, and the invalided, rely on that deriving from social service benefits. The unemployed are also entitled to such payments, but owing to lack of information, obstacles erected by the bureaucracy, and links between welfare agents and employers, few receive or retain them for long. It usually happens that if and when someone does apply they find that they are almost immediately offered a job. This must be accepted or any claims for assistance are forfeited. To avoid such a 'Catch-22' situation, people who are out of work simply make do as best they can and fall back upon their own and the group's resources while searching out further employment. Perhaps the most sought after openings are those involving road maintenance and 'town beautification' with the shire council. While this work is steady and comparatively well-paying, there are generally positions for only five or six men. Thus, most job seekers must look further afield, to the more abundant (if also more seasonal) prospects of station labour. Paying approximately the same as council work, this includes such duties as fencing, mill repair, and mustering. For some twenty to twenty-five men, who have been associated with particular properties for a decade or more, this can provide upwards of ten months work per annum. For most, however, it serves for a more limited stint, lasting only through the three to six month peak period. During the remainder of the year these latter join those who because of training or age are barred from either station or shire employment. In the spring and part of the summer they may hire on as labourers in the planting, weeding and harvesting of rockmelons at a nearby farm. Alternately, they earn money in carrying out miscellaneous gardening and cleaning chores or in making and selling traditional and quasi-traditional artifacts.

Despite the fact that the Aborigines of Wiluna now work for wages and shop for food instead of subsisting through gathering, the hunting of game is still practiced. This is not to say all men hunt and meat is never purchased. As I have indicated already, there is variation between individuals in the steps taken to acquire game. At one end of the spectrum are men who never hunt and, as a consequence, rely heavily upon that which they are given to get from the store. At the other extreme are those who rarely buy meat — even when their larders are empty. For these men, hunting is, during certain times of the year, a frequently pursued pastime. In July 1972,

for example, a number of the men then residing on the reserve made eighteen separate forays, for an average of about one every two days. Of these eleven proved 'successful', i.e. game was dispatched and brought back to camp, yielding a total of seventeen kangaroos and euros (*Macropus sp.*) and one emu (*Dromaius novae-hollandiae*). At that time the reserve population consisted of about fifty-five people, divided into some fifteen or sixteen families. If we grant that each animal weighed 18 kilograms (40 pounds), a very conservative estimate (see Hamilton 1972: 291), it means approximately fifty-five people consumed 324 kilograms (720 pounds) of meat, for an average of 5.8 kilograms (13 pounds) per person during the month, or .18 kilograms (.40 pounds) per person, per day. The figure remains impressive even if reduced somewhat to allow for sharing with visitors. But to concentrate exclusively on its size would be a mistake. It would lead to emphasizing hunting's periodic contribution towards material well-being over its wider and deeper significance as a rewarding activity in its own right. Hunting would then become more of an economic reality than it actually is. What is impressive is not what the hunters returned with, but what they passed by and left lying in the bush. The kills discussed above represent only the choice of the game and the pick of the animals brought down. They are in no way indicative of the limits of the hunters' capacities to secure meat or the potentials of the environment to provide it. This differential between the actual (material) returns of hunting, and its potentialities, is best demonstrated through a brief description of a not atypical hunt which occurred during the period under consideration.

Early one Saturday morning a number of men sat huddled in conversation around a breakfast fire. As they warmed themselves a few worked on artifacts while others ate the remains of the previous evening's damper and a bit of kangaroo. Talk proceeded through a variety of topics, including: comments and advice regarding the implements being made; gossip about a fight which had taken place the night before; and ideas as to what they, either individually or as a group, might do over the weekend. When this last subject was raised, one of the men announced that as far as he was concerned it was too wet and cold to do anything other than walk to the hotel and spend the day getting drunk. With this he stood and turned to leave. As he did so, about half those remaining indicated the plan sounded appealing and also prepared to depart. While they signalled their



intentions to their families, the five men still sitting attempted to dissuade them and requested they sit down and consider alternative proposals. But this was to no avail. The failure to halt the exodus quickly brought the discussion around to what those present regarded as the problems of liquor and the damage its use was doing to the socio-cultural system (Sackett 1977b). It was generally agreed that although having an occasional drink was permissible, perhaps even useful, frequent drunkenness was harmful to all concerned. Instead of focussing so intently on inebriation, people must be attentive to and involved in all aspects of life. With this attention returned to a deliberation of what they might do. During the course of what followed the suggestion was made that as there was no meat in camp, they might all go hunting. In fact, meat was available. Just the preceding Thursday the fortnightly pension cheques had arrived and on Friday men working in town and on a nearby station had received their weekly pay. Some of this money had gone towards the purchase of meat. Additionally, the previous afternoon, two men had gone hunting and returned with a large kangaroo. But no one raised any of these points and the recommendation received unanimous support.

The first priority was arranging transportation and securing rifles and ammunition. Not all hunting is done with vehicles, nor are introduced weapons always used. In a minority of cases men, singly or (less often) in pairs, set off to hunt on foot. Usually when this occurs rifles are left behind in favour of dogs. These are employed to search out and run down the quarry. While they are sometimes also taken out in automobiles; in the preponderance of cases, cars and weapons go together. This allows the hunter to move rapidly away from populated locations to areas where game is likely to be encountered. Further, the use of firearms instead of dogs permits more participants to join the party. Room is not taken up by animals. It turned out that on this occasion one of the group volunteered his vehicle, one of the two then in operation. After patching a flat tyre and obtaining two .22's (one of which was fairly new and the other sightless and held together by sinew), the five departed.

No sooner were they out of ear-shot of camp, than they began singing the secret-sacred song-line associated with the Dreamtime Kangaroo-Man. These verses, which describe the Hero's exploits and adventures, were sung primarily to attract kangaroos to the area to

which the men were heading. Such singing invariably is undertaken when men only hunt as a party. Owing to the material's esoteric nature it cannot be used when women and the uninitiated are along. Interestingly, however, many more times than not, men hunt either alone or in the company of other men (see Table 1). And even when women and children do accompany their husbands or fathers, it is only as far as to a picnic spot. There they remain while the men go off by themselves, on foot or in a car. In only one instance was a female directly involved in a kill, and this was treated, at least by the men, as something of an accident. It took place as she was returning alone with her three dogs from the rockmelon venture. As she walked along the dogs flushed out, chased down, and dispatched a kangaroo. Upon her eventual arrival in camp she related what had happened to a rather stunned audience. Men hunt, not women. Once the latter gathered, but now that that is past, they cook, tend children and work when possible. The apparent indiscretion was still being talked about that evening when her husband returned from work. He quickly defused the situation by giving his dogs, which he claimed to have trained, full merit for the kill. In so doing, he simultaneously deflected attention away from his wife and reflected credit back onto himself.

To return to the description: some twenty kilometres out of camp the car was turned off the main road on to one of the small tracks which run between windmills. From here on, speed was

TABLE 1  
Ratio of animals brought back to trips undertaken —  
over a six month period

<i>Type of hunting party</i>	<i>Number of animals brought back to camp</i>	<i>Number of hunting trips undertaken</i>
Men only	59 (-10)	61 (-9)
Men accompanied by the uninitiated	11	8
Women only	1	1
Totals	71 (-10)	70 (-9)

NOTE: The numbers in parentheses indicate the animals returned to camp and expeditions made in conjunction with ritual obligations.

reduced and singing stopped, full attention was given over to spotting game. This proved almost immediately rewarding as a bush turkey or bustard (*Eupodotis australia*) was seen standing under a tree. But rather than stalk it, the men barely slowed down. Commenting on the bird's find taste and the fact that whites may not hunt it (it is a protected species) while Aborigines can, they continued on. It was not long, though, before greater excitement was generated — over the sighting of three kangaroos. These were moving at a leisurely pace in a direction parallel to the track and not thirty metres away. In the event the animals might stop, both weapons were readied. But as this was in process, the game veered off deeper into the surrounding bush. Unable to follow because the car's tyres would not withstand the demands of off-the-road use (indeed, punctures are a common event even under more ideal conditions), the hunters continued on. Rounding a bend, they found more kangaroos, this time in a group numbering at least a dozen. The animals were simply lying or sitting, looking (curiously) in the direction of the approaching vehicle. Clearly, they were alerted to the men's presence, but the shot was considered too distant for accuracy and any attempt to drive nearer could spook them. Thus two of the men took the weapons and stealthily moved closer. When they finally got into position and opened fire, however, they merely succeeded in wounding one of the animals. Although it managed to hop away with its fellows, it was obviously — as evidence by its erratic movements and the amount of blood it was losing — soon to die. Despite this fact the men decided against tracking it. Instead they chose to travel on in hopes of encountering easier prey.

Their optimism in this regard was quickly vindicated when within a couple of kilometres they came upon and easily killed a large male kangaroo. With renewed spirits that yet more game would be taken they gutted the animal and returned to the hunt. Soon they found themselves in the midst of a small herd of emus. As so often happens with these large bodied but small brained birds, the appearance and sound of the car sent them running directly down the road. The driver excitedly accelerated after them, hoping to run over one or, alternatively, get into a position from which one might be shot from a window. In the end, neither prospect eventuated as the jarring pursuit jiggled loose a section of the car's ignition wiring, causing it to suddenly lose power and coast to a halt. The fault was promptly repaired and the party again on its way. Taking a new

direction in order to return to the main road, they passed by a large goanna (*Varanus sp.*) basking in the sun. As with the turkey they noted its excellent flavour but made no attempt to capture it. The last game of the trip, another substantial group of kangaroos, was met soon after this. Again, an easy shot brought one down while the others hopped off. When the men assembled around the kill, one of them reached down, felt the animal in the area of the base of its tail, and pronounced it "too skinny", i.e. lacking in fat. This said, he and the others turned and walked away, leaving the marsupial where it lay.

On the return journey, the men halted for the last time. This was to cook, butcher and have a small bit of the meat of the animal they had retained. The bulk of the beast was then taken into camp where all present received a portion; the ideal being that everyone should "have a taste" of any kill.

While the hunt was successful, there was plainly a marked disparity between what was available and that which was brought into camp. Wounded game was not tracked down, kills were left to rot, and some species were ignored entirely.<sup>2</sup> On occasion such practices result in hunters returning empty-handed. Granted, it does happen that lack of success stems from absence of opportunities — no game of any kind being sighted. But such situations are rare. More often hunters arrive back without meat after having disregarded chances or killed animals and made decisions against their suitability. Admittedly, this latter is a relative judgement. In the case I described, for example, the second kangaroo the men took was considered inferior in the light of the larger and fatter one they already had. If the first had been missed it is more likely the other would have been kept, especially as it was taken during the closing stages of the trip. However, the men may have left it anyway, trusting better fare would eventually be found. For although there is a greater chance of kills being left early in the hunt, they are also not retrieved towards the end.

If hunters were concerned simply and solely with bringing in game they would undoubtedly be less discriminating. They might

<sup>2</sup> Clearly, such practices would not sit well with the Waswanipi (see Feit 1973). As will become evident, however, "wastage" in the sense of over-kill is not really an issue or problem in Aboriginal eyes.

also take advantage of any of a number of methods which would lead to more productive returns. They could, for instance, hunt at night when kangaroos congregate in large herds and make easy prey for spot-light shooting.<sup>3</sup> But the Wiluna men are attentive to quality, not quantity. They are after only the best the environment has to offer. Moreover, they are deeply concerned with hunting as an activity in itself — with what it is and means. This facet emerges more fully when hunting is viewed in wider perspective. I have noted how in July hunted meat constituted a substantial portion of the camping reserve population's diet. The winter months, as a whole, might be typified as a time of intensive hunting and game consumption (see Tables 2 and 3). But this is not the continual state of affairs. Summer finds a marked reduction in both features. During December 1972, for example, just six animals were brought into camp. Even this total is a misleading overstatement, for four of the number represent kills associated with and resulting from ritual performances. They constituted 'payments' of meat by younger to older men and were eaten solely by the latter group; the women and children receiving no share

TABLE 2

Type and amount of game brought back —  
over a six month period

Month	Type of Game				Monthly Totals
	Kangaroo/Euro	Emu	Goanna	Turkey	
July	17	1	0	0	18
August	15	0	0	0	15
September	12	2	1	0	15
October	8 (-2)	0	2 (-2)	1	11 (-4)
November	6 (-2)	0	0	0	6 (-2)
December	3 (-3)	3 (-1)	0	0	6 (-4)
Totals	61 (-7)	6 (-1)	3 (-2)	1	71 (-10)

NOTE: The numbers in parentheses indicate animals returned to camp in conjunction with ritual obligation.

<sup>3</sup> Professional kangaroo shooters, for example, use this method to provide a constant supply of meat for Australia's multitudinous cat and dog population.

TABLE 3

Number of 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' hunting trips  
over a six month period

Month	'Successful', i.e. brought back game	'Unsuccessful', i.e. did not bring back game	Monthly Totals
July	11	7	18
August	9	8	17
September	10	4	14
October	7 (-3)	2	9 (-3)
November	5 (-2)	2	7 (-2)
December	5 (-4)	0	5 (-4)
Totals	47 (-9)	23	70 (-9)

NOTE: The numbers in parentheses indicate the trips undertaken in conjunction with ritual obligations.

at all. Interestingly, during this same period, the reserve population rose from its annual low of about 55 to — including visitors — well over 350 by Christmas time. Thus, the amount of game meat available in camp varies inversely with the population. It and hunting as an activity also, and more significantly, are inversely related to the staging of major rituals. In July there were — owing to cold, wet conditions and the demands of work (this is part of the peak employment season) — only five religious type occasions. In each case these were relatively uncomplicated and of short duration, involving men adjourning to their secret area for an evening of singing songs associated with Dreamtime Heroes. Summer, by contrast, when the majority of people were unemployed and living in town, witnessed lengthy and complex enactments. In December religious and religious-associated affairs took place on at least twenty separate occasions. While four of these were simply morning men's meetings at which plans were laid and agreements made, five consisted of either all day (3) or all night (2) operations, and eleven were combined day and night events.

The significance of the ritual to-hunting relationship is even more evident at the level of individual participation. I have previous-

ly observed how some men hunt a great deal while others do not hunt at all. Similarly, there is gross variation in ritual attendance. Although no eligible man failed to take part in at least one of those held, certain men were invariably present while the absence of others was never surprising. Interestingly enough, when comparisons are made between participation in hunting and religious activities, involvement in the one becomes an indication of commitment to the other (see Table 4). For example, one man, ħurmi, was at all five of the July sings and seventeen of the twenty December events. At the same time he went on at least 35 hunts and was party to twenty-five successful kills over the six month period. Contrastingly, Garba attended none of the July religious activities and only five of those held in December. Of the latter, two were men's meetings and two of the remaining' three consisted of rituals he was at under duress. His frequent non-attendance was becoming increasingly noticeable and the men, collectively, threatened to impose sanctions if he did not

TABLE 4

Involvement in hunting and ritual —  
by men resident on the reserve during both July and December

Name	July hunting trips (out of 18)	December hunting trips (out of 5)	July rituals (out of 5)	December rituals (out of 20)
ħurmi	12	5	5	17
Bandjada	10	5	5	18
Gurgu	9	4	4	16
Djambidjin	8	3	5	15
Djađani	7	3	4	13
Biŗuwa	7	3	3	13
Gurbana	6	4	3	11
Biđa	4	1	2	7
Ngarga	3	2	2	8
Garba	0	0	0	5
Djinadiņa	2	1	5	15

take a more active role. It is hardly surprising, then, to discover he rarely hunted, going out not at all in the period under consideration.

These two men represent something of the extremes of involvement and non-involvement in ritual and hunting. But they indicate well the fact that although the activities are inversely related at various points in the year, they share a more direct connection at the individual level. Through time those men most involved in the ritual domain shift, in the off-season, their attention to hunting, only to switch back to ritual as summer commences.<sup>4</sup> So, if hunting and ritual appear to be fundamentally different and distinct, they are alike and linked in some respects.

### HUNTING, RITUAL AND THE LAW

Traditionally, the Aborigines led a way of life they believed had been created and set down by the great Magical Beings of the Dreamtime. Stanner (1965: 235) has suggested this reality was so all-embracingly evident, no alternatives were even recognized. At least none were seen "as really possible". If humans were to survive, if man and environment were to continue as they were meant to, people must follow the established, the only, way. As part of this, men periodically had to perform rituals emulating and honouring the Heroes. On these occasions they, through song, dance, and symbolism, came into contact with the Ancestral Beings and demonstrated a continuing concern for and adherence to the supposedly changeless pattern (Sackett 1977a). It was as if they were saying, 'look at us, we are following your lead; now keep showing a reciprocal interest in our welfare. Allow and assist us to maintain the system as you fashioned it'.

Contact, the adoption of a semi-sedentary existence, involvement in wage labour, and the rest have brought profound change, but the Wiluna people claim much of the old persists in that which they term "the Law". Some anthropologists would have it that this concept embodies and represents all former precepts and practices.

<sup>4</sup> The anomalous position of Djinadiḡa — with his below-average participation in hunting coupled with a relatively high rate of ritual attendance — is actually more apparent than real. He only infrequently took part in hunting owing to near blindness and other infirmities associated with advanced age. But these disabilities rarely halted his visits to the ritual grounds.



This is not the case. In claiming to be “Law carriers” or “members of a Law community” people at Wiluna are not suggesting they cling holus-bolus to the traditional. They freely admit that in some ways they are socially and culturally quite unlike their ancestors. What they do maintain, and what the Law points to, is that with regard to guiding or essential principles they are as Aborigines always have been and should be. Most importantly from their perspective, they perpetuate traditional rituals. In doing so, they, like the people of earlier days, manifest a continuing concern for the Dreamtime precedent and the relationship between the Creator Heroes and contemporary humans.

It is largely by way of participation in these activities that males are defined as men. Moreover, it is partially through them that certain men achieve and display prominence and influence (Sackett 1978). In the past, initiation transformed boys into men and advancement in the ritual sphere made them increasingly knowledgeable. Now, while initiation remains a prerequisite to manhood, not all initiated males are considered men in the total, Aboriginal sense. Certainly, not all are considered equally “good Law men”. This is because not all eligible males display what is thought to be appropriate interest in religious matters. Aside from three who have bowed out of the system completely by converting to Christianity (and who are treated with a ‘what can possibly be done about them’ attitude), there are others who are seen as failing to participate on a somewhat regular basis. Indeed, it is frequently the case that the minimal attention these men do pay to ritual affairs derives, as with Garba, from their attempts to avoid the imposition of sanctions. Not surprisingly, their blatant disregard for what the majority regards as vital and imperative brings them in for a fair amount of scornful abuse. For example, it is occasionally suggested they put on dresses so as to look pretty while sitting with the women when the men go off to the secret area. As dresses are equated with and a symbol of femaleness, this constitutes a direct impugning of the ritual avoider’s masculinity. For most men, however, the crucial distinction is not between attendance and non-attendance of rituals, but between being one of those who usually are present and one whose presence is and can be counted on. Put another way, between, on the one hand, simply being there and, on the other hand, playing a part in the planning and orchestrating of the proceedings. It is commonly asserted rituals are organized by the older men, i.e. those who, owing to vast

experience, know when and how things must be done. While this is to some extent true, it is also a fact that the elders consult with and delegate responsibilities to certain of their more active, middle-aged colleagues. Individuals singled out for this special consideration are those the older group recognize as the most promising. Their evaluation rests heavily on appraisals of the younger men's participation in past ritual performances and, at a more general level, adherence to the Law. Those who demonstrate a commitment to these concerns and evidence a willing eagerness to learn more are, then, given expanded responsibilities. This, in turn, leads to an even deeper commitment and further responsibilities. It also leads to a greater voice in community affairs. A man who knows the Law, who is active in the staging of rituals, is one to be listened to. He is knowledgeable in areas where many others are not.

But ritual is not and cannot be engaged in continually. The demands of wage labour have placed constraints upon the timing of an participation in rituals. I do not mean by this that individuals never absent themselves from work in order to join in these aspects of group life. They certainly do. Rather, overall the people have largely accommodated themselves and their cycle of activities to both the seasonal and five-day-a-week, eight-hour-a-day nature of employment. Thus, the major, involved ritual enactments are held during the summer months, when most or all of the group's members are unemployed or on holidays and available for participation. Correspondingly, the infrequent ritual associated events which take place in the winter are merely spur-of-the-moment evening sings, attended by but a fraction of the population.

This creates a problem for influential (and would be influential) Law men. How are they to demonstrate in a manifest manner, for all to see, their concern for and attention to traditional values during periods when rituals are neither a common occurrence nor planned? Here is where hunting enters the picture. It provides an alternate avenue for expressing adherence to the Law. In fact, the link between hunting and ritual derives from the Law itself. Because in the past the Aborigines' socio-cultural system was not in competition with other forms of belief and behaviour, there was no Law as such. That is, there was no term denoting what the word 'Law' now points to. People either followed societal norms or they did not. If these were broken varying forms of punishment might be imposed on the

offender(s). Today, however, new and different ways are recognized. So, if the Law has been shaped and defined with regards to traditional patterns, it is a direct outgrowth of, and response to the contact setting. The impact of the new and abandonment of aspects of the old have influenced the ways in which the essentials of traditional life are seen, combined, and carried forward in the form of the Law. Looking back from their present vantage point, the men view their former life-style as having revolved around two activities: the performance of ritual and the pursuit of game. Furthermore, they see these as having been closely related — as having constituted opposite sides of the same coin. It was by means of ritual that they initiated boys into manhood, made the Dreamtime real and present, and guaranteed the perpetuation of the natural and social orders. At another level, it was during initiation that males perfected their hunting skills, skills which would afterwards contribute to group survival. Ritual provided a means whereby new hunters were made and man and nature maintained in harmony, hunting acted upon this to provide for the material needs of the group. Without ritual there would have been no game to hunt or hunters to pursue it. Without hunting there would have been no reason to make hunters, be concerned with the (ritual) replenishment of game, etc.

Hunting and ritual are not linked because they were necessarily actually so closely joined in the past, rather because the two are now *seen* as having been mutually supporting activities. Each is conceived of as flowing from the other. Additionally, both are, as manifestations of the Law, considered the antithesis of drinking. Consumption of liquor is seen as leading to illicit sexual encounters, the uttering of secret words in the presence of the uninitiated, violent fights between kinsmen, and so forth. In short, just about everything that is contrary to 'correct' Aboriginal behaviour (Sackett 1977b). Not surprisingly, therefore, non-drinkers often give their concern for the Law as reason for their abstinence. Similarly, if a man plans to stop drinking, at least for a time, he usually indicates his intentions by announcing he is going to turn his full attentions to the Law. That is, he is going to spend his free time in looking after religious paraphernalia, attending rituals, and hunting. This is not to say drinkers cannot also be involved in these activities. When they do so, however, they should be sober. Within the ritual context, for example, it is feared inebriated participants may make mistakes in procedure; thereby jeopardizing the man-to-Dreamtime relationship

and endangering the group as a whole. So strong is this idea, the arrival of 'drunks' on the ritual grounds invariably results in a cessation of activities. In the same way, hunting should be undertaken, and the cooking and distribution of meat handled, only by sober men. (I saw this norm challenged only once, by an older boy who had yet to be initiated.) To avoid encountering people who are or who have been drinking, hunters make cautious detours around the town and known drinking spots. And if, as does occasionally happen, they are pursuing or cooking game and drinkers enter the vicinity, they conceal themselves. For one thing, there is concern the 'drunks' may begin fighting and attempt to draw in or involve the hunters. At another level, there is regard for what is "proper". Although hunting is in no way viewed as being a rite, its linkages — through the Law — to ritual, make it ritual-like. So, although drunken people may not be in a position to make the same type or magnitude of mistakes as those possible in ritual — it would nonetheless be a mistake to have them along. This is because hunters, are, by the very act of hunting, demonstrating, just as ritual participants do, their concern for and adherence to what they see as traditional values and principles — values and principles which are of a different order than any which might be found in drinking.

From this, the correlation between ritual attendance and participation in hunting should be understandable. Linked and subsumed under the Law, the two together provide a means whereby men may achieve and exercise prestige and prominence. This fact in turn sheds light on the apparent inefficiencies inherent in the way it is practiced. Hunters bypass small game in quest of the biggest and, by their definition, best animals as it is these which go farthest towards allowing everyone to "have a taste". This accomplishes a number of things. In distributing meat the men indicate what they believe should be occurring with cash incomes, particularly those accrued by young, single men. These moneys should be shared out among the members of the community. Concurrently, in having a taste people learn specific men have gone hunting, have been concerned with the welfare of others, have been paying attention to the Law. Unlike some, they have not been "wasting" their free time in drinking. They are sober individuals. Their heads are clear. Rather than sit idly, they spark action. Furthermore, the quality of the meat provided demonstrates the efficacy and power of the rituals they perform. It is hunters who, through contact with the Ancestral Beings, have

ensured that, for example, there is a sufficient supply of fat kangaroos available for the taking. 'Knowing' this, they are not troubled to track down wounded game. Nor do they, as a rule, bring in that which they consider sub-standard fare. There is "plenty" of good meat 'out there', meat they have been instrumental in 'producing'. This is what they aim to exploit. And should they return empty-handed their non-success is overshadowed by the fact that they at least tried. They are credited with having taken positive steps in promoting the Law.

But hunting does not stop at providing alternative or additional steps for climbing the ladder of influence. It also offers a means whereby men can make statements about their position *vis-à-vis* that of women. During the summer months the man-to-uninitiated distinction is repeatedly made evident through rituals. Men plan these and perform the bulk of all proceedings. When women (and the children) do join in it is in a subsidiary role, bordering on that of audience. In the wider framework, however, the male versus female division of labour and man's culturally based superiority over women is somewhat blurred. Both sexes gather firewood, drink liquor, buy food, drive cars, and so on. In the employment and income arena things are even more confused. Men may have a greater number of job opportunities open to them, but women also work and both men and women are paid in cash. That is, the rewards of their respective labours are undifferentiated. Moreover, women, on the whole, have easier and more embracing access to social service benefits than do men. While either may be eligible for age and invalid pensions, widows and women with dependent children also receive allowances. The upshot of this is that some men are financially reliant upon women during certain portions of the year. But if women are on somewhat of a monetary par with men, only the latter can hunt. Or, more appropriately, only men can take care of the community. Although the actual proceeds of hunting may no longer be vital necessities for physical survival, they, and the hunters' endeavours in general, serve to remind group members that it is men who work to ensure the society's continuance. It is they who see to it that the law is maintained and perpetuated.

At a more inclusive level, hunting and the consumption of meat (along with the Law in general) symbolize the people's divergence from and independence of other Australians. That is, they at once

serve to mark variance from Whites and indicate an ability to exist without White assistance. The Wiluna people firmly believe many Aboriginal groups have given up their ways to become dependent upon Whites for everything — up to and including their culture. They see themselves as being pressured, most noticeably by the local missionaries, to do the same. But while they recognize and admit they must look to outsiders for many things — including jobs, welfare payments, manufactured goods, etc. — they simultaneously assert that they still have and must maintain their own life-style. Because of this they regard themselves as largely autonomous. Through ritual they have access to environmental control. And the fact that they still hunt is pointed to as 'proof' they could get by (not that they desire to) without money and store-bought food.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have argued that in pursuing and eating kangaroos, emus, and the like, Wiluna Aborigines are engaging in acts of heavy significance. Hunting ties the past to the present, but is not simply a survival (if I may invoke so musty a concept) of some prior subsistence gambit. It is deeply meaningful within the context in which it is now located. Most importantly, it is an aspect of the Law. As such, it offers a venue through which certain men can and do display concern for the belief system at times when the most recognizable and appropriate method of doing so, i.e. involvement in ritual, is for the most part dormant. Just like ritual, hunting affords men the opportunity of making claims regarding their position and right to authority in the group. Beyond this it is also via hunting and the distribution of meat that men make statements about the nature of the society in which they are living. To hunt, then, is, as with ritual participation, to follow the Law, demonstrate its great potency, and guarantee its continuance.

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