

Aboriginal Economy & Society

Australia at the Threshold of Colonisation

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Introduction

To what extent did Aboriginal economy and society vary across Australia at the time of British colonisation, and in what ways? This book attempts to answer these questions by comparing the economy and society of seven very different regions of the continent as they were at the threshold of colonisation. A comparison of this kind is long overdue. Previous studies have concentrated on single topics, such as kinship, social organisation, religion, or ecology, or made somewhat broader-based comparisons but of only two or three areas. Overviews of Aboriginal culture and society have sampled variation in several institutions—kinship, religion, local groups, and so on—in a piecemeal way. This book reconstructs the economy and society of seven regions at the threshold of colonisation, and systematically compares them in order to bring out their similarities and differences.¹

There are several reasons for undertaking this exercise. First, the comparison will illuminate the character of each region, as well as bringing out differences between them. Second, it will counter certain prevalent stereotypes: people tend to assume that Aboriginal cosmologies conformed everywhere to the concept of 'Dreamtime' or 'the Dreaming', and assume that Aboriginal people everywhere organised themselves into 'clans' if not 'tribes'. A third reason is that a reinterpretation of regional ethnographies, especially the rather fragmentary sources on the southeast and southwest, will assist other studies, such as histories of colonisation and analyses of social change. Finally, the book will serve as an introduction to and overview of Aboriginal economy, society, and culture before they were altered by colonisation.

At the threshold of colonisation

The much used category of 'traditional' culture or society is problematic. Contrasted with 'modern' it places contemporary ways of life in the past, and it implies there was

a period before European colonisation when people lived unchanging 'traditional' lives—aspects of which continue in the present—and were somehow outside history.²

'The threshold of colonisation' does not imply an unchanging 'traditional' past, for it is likely that the invention and diffusion of technologies and social forms were on-going processes. Recent developments in archaeology and linguistics have opened the way to a much more dynamic picture of Australia before 1788. They make it possible to think of reconstructions of modes of Aboriginal social life and culture as historically located, rather than implying a timeless domain of a people 'without history'.³

Australia was not divided into a mosaic of separate societies before 1788, as the maps of Aboriginal 'tribes' imply. People engaged in *networks* of interaction both within the continent and across its boundaries in the north. For 300 years before European exploration Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land had regular contact with Macassan trepanners, and for millennia the Torres Strait had formed a corridor for relations between Aboriginal people and Melanesians.⁴ Thus Aboriginal forms of social life were not static but dynamic. Nevertheless, the British colonisation of Australia began a much more radical process of social change than did contact with the Macassans, and, importantly, had very different kinds of effects in different places. For the purposes of this book, it would not make sense to compare, say, Arnhem Land in the 1920s with Gippsland in the 1920s, for by this point the latter had been changed very radically by white colonisation, while the former had not. It makes more sense to compare Arnhem Land in the 1920s with Gippsland in the 1820s (as reconstructed by Howitt). The British colonisation of Australia, as well as the later internal colonisation of the continent, effectively occurred at different times in different places, and with varying degrees and kinds of impact; so the 'threshold of colonisation' is not a specific period, but is relative to place.

In some regions colonisation had quick and devastating effects, radically transforming the lives of Aboriginal people within a few decades. This was the case in Gippsland, the home of Kūnai people, from the 1830s onwards. In areas remote from European centres of population, such as the Western Desert and northeast Arnhem Land, the impact occurred much later, with a more gradual and less radical effect. The nature of the colonisation process also affected the conditions for subsequent knowledge of the modes of social life that existed at the time of colonisation. Later in this chapter I shall briefly introduce the main ethnographers of each region and their approaches to anthropology, as well as the historical circumstances of their research.

The approach to economy and society

A work such as this cannot include everything; it has to be limited in scope yet full enough to be meaningful. To this end the book focuses on the economy, because just about all aspects of Aboriginal culture and society had a bearing on this aspect of social life. This will make it possible to be broad yet concise, and will allow me to explore the relationships between environments, technologies, economy, and society. But there is room for a systematic treatment of Aboriginal economy in its own right. A few excellent monographs on community economies that interact with the wider

market economy have been complemented by many smaller-scale studies and broad overviews. Reconstructions of pre-colonial economies, however, have been confined to a few general works by geographers and economists.⁵

As well as describing the environmental conditions under which people lived their lives and the resources upon which they drew, this book will use two main analytical frameworks. The first is the analysis of 'institutional' forms and practices, including such topics as identity, cosmology, totemism, kinship, marriage, and governance. The second is the analysis of economic relations and processes, including the control of the means of production, the organisation of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. I shall examine how the various domains or institutional fields in terms of which people organised their lives were implicated in the economy: for example, the involvement of cosmology in the ownership and control of access to land and technology, and the implications of kinship relations for the organisation of production and exchange.

Environmental conditions and constraints

Part I of the book surveys the environment, resources, technology, population density, and pattern of settlement and mobility of each of the seven regions. Anthropologists have usually discussed such matters as aspects of 'ecology', a long-standing topic of research in Australia. Intensive studies began with the ecological research of Donald Thomson in Cape York Peninsula and Norman Tindale in the Western Desert. Studies have looked at various aspects of relations between people and the environment, such as the seasonality of resource availability and patterns of movement, modes of subsistence in relation to the environment, and the control of access to land, water, and resources. I shall treat these 'ecological' aspects as integral to economy: environments constitute arenas of human action and being, they yield resources to be exploited, and they impose constraints and provide enabling conditions for practices.⁶

Institutional fields

Part II of the book compares variants in the forms of 'institutional fields'. Institutions are domains of coordinated ideas, actions, events, organisation, and roles that Anthony Giddens refers to as 'the more enduring features of social life'.⁷ Examples in English-speaking countries are family, religion, education, economy, law, and government. Structural-functionalist anthropologists took these and related institutions to have universal application, but the sensitivity of cultural anthropology to the categories and descriptions employed by the people themselves (so-called 'emic' categories) highlighted problems of translation arising out of the application of these institutional categories to the cultures of non-English-speaking peoples. The rather more flexible concept of 'social field', with its focus on discourse as well as fields of social relations, has displaced the concept of institution somewhat—I shall put them together.⁸

The categories of institutional field used in this book probably overlap only partially with Aboriginal ones. A concept such as 'cosmology' certainly does not capture all the meaning of *rom* in Yolngu languages or *tjukurrpa* in Western Desert

languages, but it does enable me to describe aspects of them. The word 'kinship' as construed here closely coincides with the range of senses of the Yolngu term *gurrutu*. The ideal would be to describe such fields according to Aboriginal categories, then compare them through the use of these analytical concepts. However, few of the ethnographic writings drawn on for this book record just how people labelled the broad domains of social life. Nevertheless, similarities between ethnographic descriptions such as kin relations in the seven regions are sufficient to make the domains proposed here workable.

Aspects of economy

'Economy' refers to the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of the material means of life, how they articulate with other valued items, particularly through exchange, and the organisation of these processes. This is what has been called a 'substantivist' approach to economy, in contrast with a 'formalist' approach. According to formalist definitions the economy is about the choices people make in the allocation of scarce resources to desired ends. The formalist definition makes sense in the context of market economies, in which the flow of money largely defines the boundaries of the economy. It reflects liberal ideologies that emphasise individual freedom and the capacity to make choices, rather than the constraints of social and political structures, which are emphasised by a political economy approach. In societies or sectors in which the economy is not defined by the market but is 'embedded' in other institutions, a formalist definition in terms of choice takes in too much and a substantivist approach is more useful. The approach of this book is substantivist in that it takes the subsistence sector as its focus. It works out from that focus to include other valued items linked to subsistence production, distribution, and exchange, and assesses the implications of institutional forms and processes for the organisation of various aspects of economy.

What kind of economies did Aboriginal people practice? In one view they were the antithesis of capitalism because they limited demand. In his article 'The original affluent society' (reprinted in his book *Stone Age Economics*), Marshall Sahlins sought to counter the picture of the hunter-gatherer economy as a struggle for existence in marginal environments by depicting it as an economy of limited 'wants'—in contrast with the unlimited wants of capitalist societies depicted in J. K. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*. For Sahlins, hunters and gatherers lived in the 'original affluent society' just because they were not struggling to satisfy endlessly expanding desires. In the face of limited means they followed the 'Zen road' to affluence of limited wants. Productive capacity met relatively stable wants more than adequately, making available very generous amounts of leisure time. This analysis rests in part on Sahlins's equation of 'economy' with subsistence; the unlimited 'wants' in market economies, however, include far more than subsistence needs.⁹

Sahlins wrote from an avowedly substantivist point of view. Noel Butlin, an economist, argues from a formalist perspective that Aborigines allocated time and

resources to all sorts of things, including education and religious life. If we include such values, then Aboriginal 'wants' were not as restricted as Sahlins suggests, and included religious knowledge as well as the sexual and productive services of spouses and children's spouses.

From another perspective, economies like those of Aboriginal people stand as the antithesis of capitalism in being 'gift economies' as opposed to 'commodity economies'. Goods in gift economies do not become commodities when exchanged, and possessions are not private property; instead, transfers take the form of 'inalienable gifts' that retain their links with the donor even after being given. Discussions of gift exchange in the works of Chris Gregory, Annette Weiner, and Maurice Godelier do much to clarify relations of exchange in Australia as well as New Guinea. These writers understand the realm of inalienable possessions and the sacred to be a source of social order and of the value of inalienable gifts, which connect in turn to the more mundane items of everyday distribution. I shall discuss inalienable gifts and possessions in detail in Chapter 12.

This, in brief outline, is the analytical framework I shall bring to bear on the each case study, but how should the comparisons be approached?

Why compare?

In comparing the economy and society of the seven regions my purpose is mainly descriptive and analytical—to map and describe variation in the seven regions in order to shed light on the character of each region, and to bring out their similarities and differences. But some aspects of the resulting patterns demand explanation. In anthropology comparative methods have been recruited to explain connections within and between social or cultural systems.

Comparative analysis has a long history in social and cultural anthropology; indeed, some see it as the essence of the discipline. Nineteenth-century scholars such as E. B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan used comparison and classification of cultural traits to assign them to stages in hypothetical evolutionary sequences. Studies in North America by Franz Boas and his students, including A. L. Kroeber, examined the distribution of cultural traits, related cultural areas to environmental variation, and sought to trace historical connections between cultural areas.¹⁰

Another broad approach to comparison involves the selection of a number of 'variables' or traits, the systematic analysis of similarities, differences, and correlations between them, and the construction of explanations to account for the correlations. Using a strong system model of society, variation can be construed as resulting from 'transformations' of a prototype or a set of common principles. Lévi-Strauss's analysis of Aboriginal and other kinship systems is an example of this approach. Structural comparisons of societies or regions, such as Marshall Sahlins's study of stratification in Polynesia, can be combined with the construction of long-term historical trajectories drawing on archaeological and linguistic data. A recent exercise of this latter kind is P. V. Kirch and R. C. Green's *Hawaiiki*, which reconstructs a prototypical society from

the diversity of languages and societies. This method would be difficult to apply to Australia because of the web of cross-cutting connections over many millennia. However, archaeologists and linguists are constructing more limited histories.¹¹

I employ a limited comparative analysis to explain some aspects of economy and society that appear to have been linked (Chapter 13). The examination of systemic connections between different aspects of economy and society will suggest some of the conditions under which certain social and cultural forms were able to develop, will reveal some important differences, and will bring out some of the dynamics of these systems. However, because of the small sample the conclusions can only be tentative, although they could be tested against a wider sample and if necessary modified or rejected.

In their introduction to a recent volume on comparison in anthropology, Fox and Gingrich raise the issue of globalisation; they contend that it is inappropriate in a globalising world to treat 'societies' as unconnected case studies. In relation to a reconstruction of modes of social life as they were before the changes brought about by colonisation this objection has less relevance. Nevertheless, we should not assume that the regions compared were discrete, bounded 'societies', for they partook in a continent-wide social network.¹²

The case studies

Each case study draws on the earliest substantial ethnography to be written for the region, illuminated by more recent research. All ethnographic research necessarily took place after British colonisation and settlement had brought about change in Aboriginal societies, so in all cases inferences have to be made about the period prior to colonisation. The ethnographies were shaped not only by the particular social circumstances of the research but by the theoretical and analytical frameworks that inform them. The ethnographic writings on which this book draws reveal the influence of a variety of anthropological paradigms, for the most part evolutionist and functionalist, though in some cases no specific theory at all. But recent research helps us to assess and if necessary reinterpret such work.

Much fuller details of Aboriginal economy and social life exist for some regions than others, and there is little quantitative data on production and consumption or even on the ecology of resources. Information about Gippsland and the southwest is the most fragmentary among the regions studied here. Nevertheless, while there are gaps, sufficient information has been recorded about the southeast and southwest for meaningful comparisons to be made.

What are to be the geographical units of analysis? Since the literature on Aboriginal social life and culture tends to be cast in terms of discrete 'tribes' or peoples such as 'the Kurnai', 'the Aranda' and 'the Walbiri', there is little choice but to begin with such categories. However, several critiques have cast doubt on the validity of a cellular model of Aboriginal sociality. It should not be assumed that these names refer to societies or localised 'social systems', especially given the degree of heterogeneity of both ecologies and cultural forms documented for some regions.¹³

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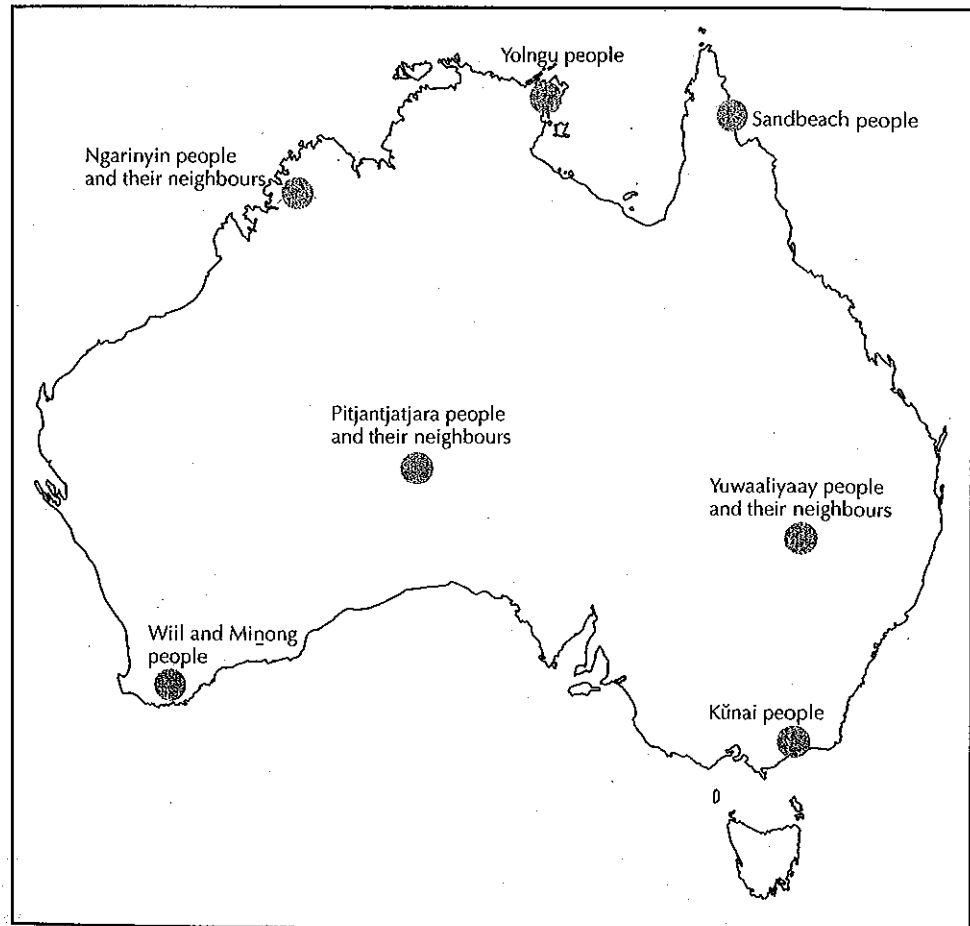
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The peoples and regions (see Map 1.1) are as follows:

- Kūnai people of Gippsland, eastern Victoria¹⁴
- Yuwaaliyaay people, and their neighbours, of the Darling/Barwon River in northern New South Wales
- Pitjantjatjara people, and their neighbours, of the Western Desert
- Wiil and Minong people of the south coast and hinterland of the southwest region of Western Australia
- 'Sandbeach' people of eastern Cape York Peninsula—the case will focus on northern Sandbeach people (speakers of Umpila and related languages)
- Ngarinyin people, and their neighbours, of the northwest Kimberley; and
- Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land.

These names are of varying kinds: *Kūnai* and *Yolngu* are from the word meaning 'human being', *Pitjantjatjara* distinguishes people by the word they use for 'come/go', and *Yuwaaliyaay* distinguishes people by their particular word for 'no'. *Wiil* means 'northerners' while *Minong* is a regional identity. *Ngarinyin* is the proper name of a language and *Sandbeach* refers to coastal people.

Map 1.1 The seven case studies



Why have I chosen to study these particular regions? First, the ethnographic record needed to include information on ecology, technology, and resources; the work of Donald Thomson, Norman Tindale, Richard Gould, and Nicolas Peterson pointed me in certain directions. Second, I wanted to include case studies in the southeast and southwest as well as the tropical north and the centre; the work of A. W. Howitt on Kūnai culture, K. Langloh Parker on Yuwaaliyaay speakers, and the several studies of Wiil and Minong people appeared to present the richest material on these regions. Third, the case studies needed to encompass broad variation in environments and resources, and needed to sample the known variation in language families and institutional forms; the cases chosen do this. Where possible I also chose regions whose ethnography I was already familiar with, notably northeast Arnhem Land (Yolngu) and Gippsland (Kūnai).

The seven regions contrast in a number of ways. First, they have very different environments, from the temperate regions with uniform rainfall, through the arid interior, to the tropical zone with a seasonal, monsoon climate. Second, they have contrasting resource bases, from rich estuarine and lacustrine resources of the southeast, through riverine and grassland resources, to the scarcity of water in the arid zone and the rich marine and terrestrial products of the tropical coasts. Third, they represent different language families, both of the very widespread family of languages that linguists call Pama-Nyungan and the very varied non-Pama-Nyungan language families of the northwest of the continent. Fourth, they sample contrasting social-organisational features, from patri-moieties and patri-groups to gender and generation moieties.

Kūnai people

The people A. W. Howitt called 'Kūrnai' (Kūnai, Ganai, or Gunnai) inhabited the major part of what is now known as Gippsland, in eastern Victoria. They exploited the rich resources of the rivers, forests, grass-plains, and lakes, and of the dunes and beaches of the long coastal barrier. Their country formed a crescent between mountains to the north and sea to the south, from Cape Liptrap in the west to Cape Howe in the east, including the lower Snowy River. Westward lay the country of speakers of the Boonwurong language, and to the east, Bidawal (or Maap) people. To the north, in the mountains and on the tableland, lived speakers of Yaitmathang and Ngarigu languages (see Maps 1.1, 2.1, 5.1, and 5.2). The plentiful resources made it possible for Kūnai to live at quite high population densities by Aboriginal standards.

Geographical barriers isolated Kūnai people from their neighbours, hemmed in as they were by the mountains to the north, which are snowy in winter, and by swamps and dense scrub to the west. They also differed in language and social organisation from their northerly and westerly neighbours, being culturally closer to Bidawal people along the coast to the east, with whom they had most contact. We shall see that they had quite distinctive institutions—especially their forms of kinship, marriage, and cosmology.¹⁵

Of the seven peoples in the case studies, Kūnai experienced the most devastating onslaught from white colonisation, beginning in 1828 with the establishment of whaling stations on Wilsons Promontory, followed by farms throughout the region

from the 1830s. By the 1860s, when anthropological research began, the colonial infrastructure was fully in place in Gippsland, with Sale as the regional centre. The Kūnai population had been decimated by killings and disease, reduced from more than 2000 to less than 200, the majority living at the Lake Tyers Mission (established 1861) and Ramahyuck Mission (1863).

Much of the written evidence regarding the Kūnai way of life comes from two sources: the published and unpublished writings of the magistrate, administrator, and self-taught geologist and anthropologist A. W. Howitt, and those of the missionary John Bulmer. As well as teaching himself geology, Howitt became an amateur anthropologist and a correspondent of the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, whom he furnished with information about Australian Aboriginal cultures of the southeast, drawing in turn on his own correspondents. Howitt derived his analytical framework primarily from Morgan's evolutionist scheme. Howitt and Bulmer based their understanding of Kūnai custom on information from Kūnai men and women who were living and working on the missions and stations of Gippsland. They included Tulaba Billy McLeod, Mary McLeod, Long Harry Turlburn, Bobby Brown Bundawal, and Big Joe Tankowillin.¹⁶ This book draws on more recent botanical, linguistic, archaeological, and historical research to complement and reinterpret the work of Howitt and Bulmer.

Pitjantjatjara people and their neighbours

The Western Desert is a vast region with a sparse Aboriginal population. It forms part of the arid zone of Australia, with very low and very variable rainfall. We shall see that the search for water dominated Aboriginal relations with the environment, and enforced great mobility. Nevertheless, people were able to exploit a wide variety of terrestrial resources.

Western Desert people identified themselves by local ways of speaking labelled by a characteristic dialect word. These languages formed a chain of dialects of a single Western Desert language, and the related language identities were rather open and overlapped. Indeed, Western Desert cultures were quite similar across the region. The country of Pitjantjatjara and their immediate neighbours included the Rawlinson, Petermann, Warburton, Tomkinson, Mann, Musgrave, and the Everard Ranges and adjacent plains (see Maps 1.1, 2.2, and 5.3).

Although white incursions into the country of Pitjantjatjara people and their neighbours began in the 1870s, the number of cattle in the centre of the continent increased rapidly between 1930 and 1950. Aboriginal people began to settle on stations and government settlements from the 1930s, encouraged by prolonged drought starting in 1926. But many groups, the subject of censuses by Jeremy Long in the mid 1960s, continued to live away from stations and settlements. Thus the 'threshold of colonisation' came late in this region.¹⁷

The relatively slow pace of social and cultural change enabled anthropologists to carry out research up until the 1970s among people living in the bush as well as on stations and settlements. No one researcher dominates the ethnography of Pitjantjatjara people and their immediate neighbours; after surveys by Spencer and

Gillen, the early work (in the 1930s) of Norman Tindale included studies of ecology, while the Berndts' research at Ooldea in the early 1940s provides the closest to a general ethnography of the region. This book draws on more recent research, such as the work on ecology and economy by Richard Gould and Annette Hamilton, as well as the rich corpus of ethnography of other regions in the Western Desert.

Yuwaaliyaay people and their neighbours

Yuwaaliyaay belonged to a cluster of closely related languages spoken in the region of the Darling/Barwon River and its tributaries. (The Barwon River is the upper extension of the Darling River.) Yuwaaliyaay speakers and other Darling River peoples had access to the resources of rivers and swamps as well as those of the grasslands and woodland, in an environment in which floods alternated with droughts. Darling/Barwon River peoples combined a riverine economy with cereal exploitation on a substantial scale, unlike people of the Murray River to the southwest, for whom seeds were not so important. This semi-arid region allowed only a low population density, higher along the major rivers.

The country associated with the Yuwaaliyaay language lay on the north and northwest side of the Darling/Barwon River, near what is now the border between New South Wales and Queensland, from Brewarrina in the west, probably to what is now the town of Mungindi in the east. The country associated with the closely related Yuwaalaraay language seems to have lain to the north of the Yuwaaliyaay area, including what is now the town of Nindigully on the Moonie River, north of the Queensland border. Gamilaraay country lay on the east side of the Barwon River, and Wayilwan country lay to the south. On the Bokhara River to the west lived speakers of Murruwarri and Barranbinya languages (see Maps 1.1, 2.3, and 5.4). Yuwaaliyaay people participated in the extensive and rather unbounded social network of the Darling River basin.

White incursions into the grasslands to the west of the Great Dividing Range began in the 1820s. Aboriginal people of the Barwon River region faced a massive onslaught in the late 1830s, having already been devastated by smallpox, which spread ahead of the frontier. Nevertheless, as a result of living and working on cattle and sheep stations, the Yuwaaliyaay and their neighbours were evidently able to reproduce many aspects of their way of life into the twentieth century. At Bangate Station, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Catherine Parker (who wrote as K. Langloh Parker) recorded customs and myths, accompanied women on their foraging activities, and documented methods of food production. Aboriginal people living at Bangate Station who provided Catherine Parker with information included Boodtha, an elderly woman who became a *wirreenun* (healer) after the loss of a grandchild; Beemunny, an elderly blind woman who told her stories about ancestors; and Yudtha Dulleebah, an old man who instructed her about the significance of the Bora initiation ceremony, fearing it would die with him. I have drawn on Parker's work in this book.

Also useful was the research of R. H. Mathews and others of the same period on the language and rituals of other peoples of the broad region, as well as anthropological,

archaeological, and linguistic research carried out in the twentieth century, including that of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Harry Allen's PhD thesis on Darling River ecology complements Parker's ethnography to make a rounded case study possible.¹⁸ I also draw on the biography of Jimmy Barker, a Murruwarri man.

Wiil and Minong people

Ethel Hassell gave the name 'Wheelman' to the people whose country was occupied by Jerramungup Station on the upper Gairdner River, near the south coast of the southwest. Wiil or Wiil means 'north' in some dialects of the southwest, and Wiilman apparently means 'northerners'. Their coastal neighbours to the south, including what is now Albany, were Minong people (see Maps 1.1, 2.4, 5.5, and 5.6). Because of the fragmentary quality of the research on this region, I draw on the ethnographic sources for both peoples; taken together they make possible a coherent if generalised picture.

The southwest has a unique environment for Australia. The westerlies bring winter rains that water the fertile corner, which is backed by the arid zone to the east. Wiil and Minong people lived toward the more arid side of this fertile region in country of heath and mallee, estuaries and beaches and rugged cliffs, near the eastern extremity of the forest. The population density was probably quite high on the coast, but sparser inland. The southwest forms a distinct culture-area, with closely related dialects and cultural forms.

Of the peoples studied in this book, Minong people probably experienced the earliest prolonged contact with white people, with the establishment of the King George Sound settlement in 1826. Intensive farming of wheat, fruit, market-garden produce and dairy cattle grew rapidly around the main centres, including Albany, and the pastoral industry expanded from the 1840s. The gold rushes of the 1890s further stimulated the influx of population. Aboriginal people in the areas of pastoral settlement fared better than those on whose country intensive cultivation and urban settlement occurred (such as Kūnai people). Like Yuwaaliyaay people, Minong people were able in the third quarter of the nineteenth century to adapt their social structures to accommodate their relationships with the invading farmers.¹⁹

The earliest ethnography of the region dates from the first few years of the King George Sound settlement. It takes the form of journals, including those by Captain Collett Barker, commander of the settlement, as well as published observations, such as the excellent ethnographic sketch by Scott Nind. Ethel Hassell's research among Wiil people took place during the two decades from 1870 when she lived on the sheep station at Jerramungup under similar circumstances to Catherine Parker. Her ethnographic writing remained unpublished until it was revised for publication in 1934 and 1936 by the American anthropologist D. S. Davidson. Daisy Bates's travels through Western Australia came at a later date. Her first period of research was 1904–10. An immigrant from Ireland, she worked as a journalist and then for the West Australian Government documenting Aboriginal languages and customs across the state. Her manuscript remained unpublished until 1985, when an abridged version appeared as a book edited by Isobel (Sallie) White. The work includes

fragmentary but essential ethnographic information about the southwest, including the Albany region.

The young Minong man Mokaré provided information to both Barker and Nind. Ethel Hassell names many of the men and women with whom she was acquainted; they include Winmar, Yilgar, Gimluck, Tupin, and the 'magician' Buckerup. Bates drew on information from Ngalbaitch, a Jerramungup woman, and from Wandinyilmernong and Nebinyan, both Albany men.

The writings of Nind, Barker, Hassell, and Bates make it possible to construct quite a full picture of Wil and Minong economy and society. This task is assisted by some excellent recent reconstructions by archaeologists and historians based on the early sources.²⁰

Sandbeach people

'Sandbeach people' is a broad expression used by people of eastern Cape York Peninsula, between Temple Bay in the north and Princess Charlotte Bay in the south, to contrast themselves with the 'on top' people of the hinterland. People of this area spoke (and speak) a number of distinct languages, but shared a common orientation towards the sea, as well as technology centred around the hunting of dugong and turtle (see Maps 1.1, 2.5, and 5.7).

This region has a tropical, monsoon climate, with very high summer rainfall and some winter rains. A distinguishing feature of the environment is the shallow coastal water between the mainland and the reefs and cays, exploited for turtle and dugong hunting in outrigger canoes. People of this region also drew on the rich flora and fauna of the coast, estuaries, rivers, and forests of a rather narrow strip between the coast and the ranges. This environment supported a relatively dense population.

The people of the northern two thirds of the region, between Temple Bay and the Stewart River, spoke a cluster of closely related dialects, similar also to the Kaantju language of the hinterland. Most of the available ethnographic information concerns speakers of Kuuku Ya'u and Umpila languages. People to the south of the Stewart River spoke several languages that differed from the northerly ones. This book concerns the more northerly people who shared *kaapay* and *kuyan* patri-moieties and common initiation ceremonies, and who spoke closely related languages. Donald Thomson and others depict the culture of these peoples as somewhat homogeneous.

Sandbeach people formed regular relations with Europeans from the 1870s, when they provided crews for luggers, but it was not until 1925 that they began to be settled on missions, mainly at Lockhart River.²¹ Thomson carried out research on a small community living at the mouth of the Stewart River in the late 1920s and at Lockhart River mission. People who gave information to Donald Thomson include Charlie 'Bamboo' Johnson, Big Johnny, Old Charlie Koiyan, and Old Fred Pur'wa. This book also draws on Athol Chase's study of Lockhart in the late 1970s, which in part draws on the memories of old people to reconstruct pre-mission life; I also draw on recent linguistic research by David Thompson and Bruce Rigsby.

Ngarinyin people and their neighbours

The peoples focused on in this case study are speakers of Worrorra, Wunambal, Gamberre, and Ngarinyin languages of the northwest Kimberley. Their languages belong to a very diverse collection of non-Pama-Nyungan languages spoken in the north and northwest of the continent. These peoples form part of what anthropologists have recently identified as the *wanjina-wunggurr* bloc, whose people subscribe to doctrines about these ancestral beings, associated with distinctive rock paintings throughout the region. People of the region also join in the *wurnan* exchange network, linking marriage to the exchange of goods and sacred objects.

Their country in the northwest Kimberley lies within the tropics, with a monsoon climate of high summer rains and rather dry winters. For the most part this country has a very rugged topography of sandstone uplands, cut by rivers and without extensive coastal plains but with a rugged coast (see Maps 1.1, 2.6, and 5.8).

Captain Grey's party had a hostile encounter with Aboriginal people in 1837, and in the early 1880s sheep stations spread in the west Kimberley, later encroaching on Ngarinyin country, while mineral prospecting continued. Hostilities and punitive raids, as well as introduced diseases, took their toll on the Aboriginal population. Missions in the regions began in 1912, and the Ngarinyin and their neighbours also moved to cattle stations and reserves.²²

The early anthropological research on which this case study is primarily based dates from the 1920s and 1930s, conducted by the missionaries J. R. B. Love and Theodore Hernandez. Research by the anthropologist A. P. Elkin and members of the Frobenius expedition, including Helmut Petri and Theodore Lommel, dates from the same period. I also draw on research conducted from the 1960s up to the present that, because of the degree of cultural continuity, illuminates and fills out aspects of the earlier ethnography. It includes reconstructions of plant use and ecology and technology by Valda Blundell and Ian Crawford, as well as studies of art, cosmology, kinship, language, and relations to land by Alan Rumsey and Tony Redmond. Writings by Aboriginal people from the region include works by the late David Mowaljarlai.

Yolngu people

Northeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory comprises a large triangle of land that forms the northwest corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria. It is the home of people formerly known as 'Murngin' in the anthropological literature, and now as 'Yolngu', the word for 'person'. The region has a distinctive culture and group of languages, markedly different grammatically from neighbouring ones. Yolngu languages are of the Pama-Nyungan family (mainly suffixing languages), but they are surrounded by non-Pama-Nyungan families of languages (mainly prefixing). To the west live speakers of Gijingarli and Dangbon languages, to the southwest speakers of Rembarrnga and Ngalkbon languages, and to the south of Ngandi and Nunggubuyu languages. (see Maps 1.1, 2.7, and 5.9)

Northeast Arnhem Land experiences a tropical monsoon climate, with high summer rainfall and a dry winter. The many islands, headlands, bays, and estuaries contain a rich environment of beaches, mangroves, and, in some places, rocky cliffs. Mainland habitats include plains and swamps, rivers and forested upland, while the shallow coastal waters are ideal hunting grounds for marine reptiles as well as dugong. This environment has supported a relatively dense population, especially along the coast and estuaries.

Yolngu people had regular contacts with Macassans, who visited their shores from the early eighteenth century to collect and process trepang in the wet season. After there had been unsuccessful attempts to establish cattle stations in the region, and violent encounters between Yolngu and Japanese pearlers, the Methodist Church established missions in the region starting in 1923. The isolation of the Yolngu people and their neighbours protected them from the worst onslaughts of colonisation, and the tolerant policies of the Methodist missions slowed the pace of social and cultural change.²³

The anthropological research of W. L. Warner from 1926 to 1929 and Donald Thomson's research in the following decade recorded a way of life apparently little changed from the period before British colonisation. Warner's monograph relies heavily on information from Harry Makarrwala, a leader of the Wan.gurri patri-group who Yolngu identify in their oral tradition as the 'first Aboriginal missionary'. Rraywala, a Mildjingi man from the Glyde River, was one of Donald Thomson's main Yolngu companions. In order to supplement, reinterpret, and contextualise these early findings, I have drawn on research from World War II to the present by a large number of anthropologists, linguists, and archaeologists. As in the northwest Kimberley, the anthropological research in northeast Arnhem Land has traced gradual social and cultural transformations.

The sources

It will already be apparent that this work draws on several kinds of ethnographic sources. First are ethnographies or ethnographic sketches written before the advent of professional anthropology, by interested observers such as Scott Nind and K. Langloh Parker. Second are those of early amateurs with academic connections—A. W. Howitt, for example, corresponded with the evolutionist theorist L. H. Morgan. Third is the work of professionals trained in the natural sciences, but with some training in anthropology, such as Donald Thomson and Norman Tindale. Fourth is work by professionally trained anthropologists like W. L. Warner, and, finally, I am drawing on the recent research of scholars in a variety of disciplines—archaeologists, anthropologists, ecologists, historians, and linguists—whose work can help us to interpret the earlier writings. Each category of sources has advantages, but also brings its own particular problems of interpretation.

We have seen that in the case of the Yuwaaliyaay people and their neighbours, and the Wiil and Minong peoples, Aboriginal modes of life displayed a marked continuity through the early pastoral era, with gradual changes in social practices, especially as the Aboriginal population declined and the density of white settlement increased.

The main ethnographies derive from early colonial contact, and then the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the era of professional anthropology. An advantage of early observers' reports is that they include details of life on the frontier, and reflect broad interests that would have been edited out of work from a narrower professional framework. The main interpretive problem for this project stems from the fragmentary and unsystematic nature of these reports. Writings of the later colonial observers resulted from informal research at Aboriginal camps on cattle and sheep stations, so I have to take into account the effects of colonial life. For example, there is little fighting in Parker's book, either because of the station context or her self-censorship.

Partly because of the intensive farming and the density of white settlement, Kūnai people suffered massive loss of life through violence and disease, reducing the population to less than 10% of its former size by 1870. The ethnography of Howitt was largely a reconstruction of past life-ways drawing on the memories of older people as well as on records of continuing practices such as marriage, and doctrines such as ancestral narratives. The evolutionist framework that informed Howitt's work encouraged systematic recording and analysis of institutions such as kinship and 'local organisation', and he kept his descriptions rather separate from his evolutionist interpretation. But his project of reconstruction led him to edit out what he thought were intrusions from mission life, and he relied heavily on people's memories of the past. Howitt's accounts of some institutions, especially 'local organisation', require reinterpretation both to deal with the internal inconsistencies and to take account of more recent understandings and analogies with other regions.

The advantage of work by people trained in the natural sciences is that it is a good source of ecological information, although it can incorporate anthropological frameworks rather uncritically. The main issues of interpretation arising from the work of professionally trained anthropologists are that they are late in colonial/post-colonial trajectories, and particular paradigms strongly shape (and limit) their interpretations. However, within their fields of interest these works tend to be the most thorough and systematic. Anthropological research has continued through to the present, especially in the Western Desert and the tropical north, documenting social and cultural change as well as continuing practices. Recent ethnographic inquiries therefore shed light on the past, as does historical, linguistic, and archaeological research in other regions.

The sources are very uneven, both in the range of topics covered and the thoroughness of that coverage. I have reinterpreted some descriptions and terminology in the light of more recent anthropological understanding of Aboriginal cultures and sociality. Quite often information on a certain aspect of economy and society is simply unavailable for a given region. There is no possibility of recovering the whole texture of Minong social life of the early nineteenth century—all we have are some oral traditions and the writings of Scott Nind, Collett Barker, Daisy Bates, and a few others. Their language provides the grid through which we can imagine Minong life, and the gaps remain unfillable, except by analogy and inference. This work is a compilation of those uncertain guides, each constructed in a distinctive language, each incomplete to a greater or lesser degree. The 'findings' then must be tentative, susceptible to revision

in the light of new evidence or a re-reading of the old, and in the light of criticism of the categories, conceptual schemes, and theories that inform them.

Outline of chapters

Part I of the book begins with Chapter 2 on environments and the resources on which people drew. Following chapters move on to the technologies used, the patterns of movement and settlement, and the human populations these environments supported.

The chapters of Part II outline institutional fields: the framing of broad identities in terms of language and totems, kinship and marriage, cosmologies and quasi-technologies ('sorcery', 'magic', and healing), and governance. They draw out the implications of practices within these fields for the organisation of economy, further explored in the third part of the book. Part III is about economic relations and processes. The chapters describe the variation in the control of the productive means, especially land, waters, and technology; the organisation of production; distribution and consumption; exchange, and what has been called 'trade'.

The introductions to the chapters and the glossary should make the book accessible to students and general readers as well as a specialist audience. The reader may approach the book in one of several ways. You could begin with the first and last chapters, which provide an overview of the argument and summarise the findings. Each chapter of Parts II and III begins with an introduction to a topic and a discussion of theoretical and analytical issues, before surveying that aspect in all seven regions. Each of these chapters can be read independently. The ethnography of a particular region can be traced through the relevant sections of the chapters of Parts II and III, and Table 13.10 summarises the key features of each region. The concluding chapter draws the comparisons together, suggests some explanations for the variation between regions, and reviews some of the issues that have arisen in the book. Note also that an Australian National University-supported web site for this book (at <http://arts.anu.edu.au/aeastc/>) provides a range of supplementary materials, including short regional ethnographies and detailed descriptions of the technology of several regions.

Further reading

For an overview of approaches to economy in Aboriginal societies, see Chris Anderson's chapter in *Social Anthropology and Australian Aboriginal Studies*, edited by R. M. Berndt and Bob Tonkinson (1988); and for an analysis of the economy of an Aboriginal 'outstation', see Jon Altman's *Hunter-Gatherers Today* (1987). Recent works in the anthropology of economy include *Observing the Economy* by Gregory and Altman (1989), *New Directions in Economic Anthropology* by Susan Narotzky, and *Cultural Economies: Past and Present* by Rhoda Halperin (1994). James Woodburn's elaboration of the distinction between immediate and delayed return systems has been influential

in studies of hunter-gatherer peoples; see, for example, his 'African hunter-gatherer social organization: Is it best understood as a product of encapsulation?' (1988).

On the place of the concepts of institution and field in social analysis, see, for example, Mary Le Cron Foster's and Simon Roberts's contributions to *The Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2002), Anthony Giddens's *The Constitution of Society* (1984), and Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1992). For further reading on comparison in anthropology, see the works cited in Chapter 13, which continues the discussion of this theme.

Notes

- 1 Examples of overviews of Aboriginal social life and culture include *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* by A. P. Elkin (1954), *The World of the First Australians* by Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1981), and Ken Maddock's *The Australian Aborigines: A Portrait of their Society* (1972, 1982). For comparisons between the north and the centre see Hamilton (1980, 1981a). Studies of Aboriginal kinship and social organisation include Radcliffe-Brown (1931), Elkin (1931b, 1932), Scheffler (1978), Shapiro (1979), and Turner (1980), and studies of Aboriginal religion include Berndt (1974). Chase and Sutton (1987) compare the ecologies of three regions of Cape York Peninsula.
- 2 Peter Sutton's recently coined contrast between 'classical' and 'post-classical' social formations (1986) avoids some of the problematic connotations of the category 'traditional', but it retains the dichotomy.
- 3 The expression 'people without history' is drawn from Eric Wolf (1982).
- 4 Norman Tindale published his tribal maps in 1974 (Tindale 1974).
- 5 General works on Aboriginal economy include Butlin (1993), Dingle (1988), and Lawrence (1968). Community studies include those by Altman (1987) and Anderson (1984).
- 6 See Anderson (1988) for a review of approaches to Aboriginal economy. For discussions of ecology and economy in anthropology, see Ellen (1982) and Narotzky (1997).
- 7 See Giddens (1979) on institutions; see also Bourdieu (1977).
- 8 On the concept of 'institution' in anthropology and sociology see Foster (2002: 367) and Giddens (1984); on social fields see Bourdieu (1992), Moore (1979: 55), and Roberts (2002).
- 9 See Sahlins's book *Stone Age Economics* (1972).
- 10 See, for example, Kroeber (1939) on natural and cultural areas of North America.
- 11 See Kirch and Green (2001) on Polynesia, and McConvell and Evans (1997) on Australia.
- 12 See Fox and Gingrich (2002) on comparison in anthropology.
- 13 For critiques of cellular models see, for example, Sutton (1978) and Keen (1995).
- 14 I have retained Howitt's orthography of Künai words for consistency, but deleted the 'r' in 'Kürnai', which Howitt seems to have used to lengthen the vowel (from *a* to *aa*). Howitt used a 'u' with a diacritic to denote the vowel sound in, for example, 'cut'; linguists usually represent this sound with the letter 'a'. Aboriginal people of the region spell the name 'Kurnai' or 'Gunnai'; Hercus's spelling is *ganai* (1986).
- 15 See Howitt (1880: 233) on Künai relations with Bidawal.
- 16 On Howitt's relations with Aboriginal people see Attwood (1986; 1989: 71–2). On the social history of the region see Attwood (1986, 1989), Harris (1988), and Pepper and D'Araugo (1985).
- 17 See Layton (1986: 51–118) on the history of this part of the Western Desert.
- 18 On the history of the Darling/Barwon region see Goodall (1996: 31–2). The most infamous incident was the Myall Creek massacre.
- 19 See Haebich (1985) on the social history of the southwest.
- 20 Reconstructions of the ecology and society of the region include those by Bird (1985), Bird and Beeck (1988), Ferguson (1987), Le Souëf (1993), Meagher (1974), and Meagher and Ride (1979).
- 21 On the social history of the Sandbeach region see Chase (1978, 1989) and Rigsby and Chase (1998).
- 22 On the social history of the northwest Kimberley see Blundell (1975 vol. I: 32–58).
- 23 See RM and CH Berndt (1954) on the social history of northeast Arnhem Land. See MacKnight (1976) on the Macassans in Arnhem Land.