SESSION E: The Place of the Life History in Anthropological Analysis

PAPER: "And I was a stockman myself..." Interpreting Aboriginal Women's Work.

Ann McGrath
Department of Liberal Studies,
Darwin Community College.
Social historians concerned with race relations studies are confronted by enormous gaps in evidence when their research relates to non-literate peoples. Consequently, interviews, oral histories, and most valuably, life histories, are becoming increasingly recognized as essential forms of historical evidence. Cultural and linguistic barriers are confronted in the collection of such personal oral evidence. The most serious obstacles, however, might be overcome by resorting to an interdisciplinary approach involving the collaboration of linguists, anthropologists, and historians. This is already beginning and should greatly enrich the study of race relations in Australia.

To my knowledge there has not yet appeared a substantial socio-historical analysis of post-contact Aboriginal history which utilizes oral evidence as a major source. My research into the role of Aborigines in the Northern Territory cattle industry 1911 to 1939 presents an opportunity to do so, as there are numerous older people living on northern settlements who worked on stations during the latter half of the period under focus. Several have already been willing to co-operate and share their pre-war reminiscences.

The brief paper below, entitled "Daily Routine" is an extract from a larger working paper on Aboriginal women's experience on cattle stations. It is essentially descriptive, and for this reason is a relatively straightforward illustration of the utilization of oral evidence in conjunction with a variety of other sources. The content of this extract necessitated a heavy reliance on oral evidence, and in this sense it is not the most representative piece which could have been selected. Without the aid of Aboriginal women's testimonies, however, it is difficult to envisage how these daily routines could otherwise have been sketched.
Several points relating to the paper, "Daily Routine", warrant some discussion. Some of these are noted below to invite any comments or suggestions.

1. The use of Aboriginal English in quotations as opposed to translations from an indigenous language.

2. The significance of terminology, e.g. "smoko", "sit down", "gadia"; see p 5.

3. Underlying importance of statements must be elucidated, e.g. p 6 paragraph 2. - "Only we girls that's all, no man..."

4. Reliability. Selectiveness in revealing stories reflects informant's priorities - past and present. What is omitted, exaggerated or otherwise distorted can be revealing. In other words, the motives of bias constitute useful evidence if these are explored.

5. Disparities in black/white testimony. Aboriginal women claimed they worked hard and long. The employer predictably argued otherwise, but other written records do not substantially contradict the Aborigines' stories. See pp 6-7. Serious conflicts in evidence require lengthy consideration which necessitates separate complementary papers.

6. Attitudes are more easily detected in oral testimony, e.g. pride in cookery skills, p 8, paragraph 2. A woman who worked with horses reflected with an unmistakable sense of self-worth, "And I was a stockman myself..." The-participant's attitude to his/her own work is of crucial relevance to analyzing status structures.

7. Conflicting myths. White stereotypes emphasize that blacks needed constant supervision. Contradictory Aboriginal evidence is unwittingly supported by other white evidence, and also by station journals and diaries. See pp 12-13.
The availability of life histories means that at last the story of non-literate, so often oppressed peoples may be written into contact history. The immediacy of the personal narrative adds greater realism and vibrancy, 'humanizing' the analysis, and permitting deeper insights into people's experience. Selected individual's histories may be followed through and used as case studies. When employed conjointly with a variety of other historical sources, life histories may uniquely enhance the historian's attempts to reconstruct patterns of white/black interaction.
DAILY ROUTINE

Blan Barney provided an apt summary of daily routine, and it closely resembles the everyday pattern of work which a number of other Aboriginal women have related. The pattern at Newry for household workers was much the same as at Willeroo, Tipperary and Ivanhoe. The women would get up early in the morning, before sunrise, light the kitchen fire for the gadia, while another girl set the table. Then they returned to the blacks camp, prepared their own breakfast and sat down to eat. Work would begin early, preparing the whites' "smoko", followed by another "sit down", and then the washing up. Dinner was then cooked for whites and employees; the women left it ready, and dinner would be eaten in the 'Black's kitchen'. After this they returned to their camp, and washed their own clothes. Then, in Blan's words:

Mrs would ring a bell in house. We go back work again. Watering garden, wash 'em plates, cook 'em tucker for supper, ready feller. Make up dinner, stoves, early feller tucker... beef. Leave em long freezer, cool 'em, beef we leave 'em longa stove...we sit down wait for supper. We go back make 'em supper for gadia.... Cut bread... Night-time go back, wash em plates.

Winnie Chapman describes her daily routine at Ivanhoe: At sunrise, she got up and milked the goats with Dot, and prepared the milk. She carted water from the bore to clean the kitchen. She corned the beef, cut the bread and meat to serve for the employees' lunch; when the bell was rung, everyone came for lunch. Tea was poured into individual billy cans, and taken back to the blacks' camp. When lunch break was over, they'd return to the homestead. Four girls worked in the kitchen, and four in the manager's house - two wiping up and two washing up. When finished, they carried water
a long way, then had a rest... This was followed by -

Play around in billabong, big lagoon, gather some yams
after lunch. After that water the garden, collect the eggs.

Afterwards, the kitchen was cleaned up again - the sound of the bell
beckoning them to the homestead. Then the 'girls' worked with the
goats, collected rubbish and did other odd jobs when the housework was
finished. Supper was prepared, after which the women returned to the
kitchen to wash the dishes: "Carry away water, sweep floor, kitchen.
Go home then."98

Relating her working days at Ningbing, Daisy Djunduin said she stayed
"at the house" working. A black woman who was in charge gave them
instructions:

"Right you feller go out killem nanny goat, bin allabout
girl go out gettem nanny goat" - Got a rope, bring 'em up
longa meathouse. Cut 'em, hang 'em up, skin 'em up, salt
'em, put 'em longa meathouse, takem somefeller, roast em longa
stove. Only we girls that's all, no man, that's all we bin
only taught.

After this work was complete, they had a lunchbreak, where they went
hunting goanna and searching for wild honey. Then they returned to the
house and had a rest before they started work again, cleaning the house,
filling up a dray with firewood.99

The Aboriginal women's testimony depicts a long and fairly arduous
day, where they were required to perform many and varied duties. The day
went by according to a disciplined and fixed routine. Not surprisingly,
the evidence of most white women does not suggest such a long and varied
work output. Details such as the use of a bell to beckon workers, the
post-lunch siesta, and the strict routine of work are collaborated by white
evidence. Helen Skardon mentioned the evening washing up, and the ritual
of saying goodnight to her when all the work had been completed: "Finished
now, Missus. Goodnight Missus" the women would say one by one. She
elaborated on the hygiene rituals imposed upon them.

Every morning they had to wash, change their dresses, and comb their hair in the wash-house before starting work. Before lunch the dresses were changed again for the dirty ones, and as they were always filthy after the morning's work, were washed before they went away to play in the afternoons. 100

The long midday break or siesta was a widespread part of station routine. This was sensible because little work could be done during the hot hours of the day, but it did make each working day longer. Henrietta Pearce wrote of an almost identical routine for her female employees; she mentioned the early rising to prepare the wood stove, and elucidated a similar pattern of varied activities during the day. 101 The black women's entire day revolved around catering for the white family's needs, values and life-style. Station routine was remarkably similar from one property to another.

There was also a weekly routine or schedule, with specific washing days and baking days. Domestics were permitted a Sunday excursion or 'walkabout', where they collected bush foods as a change from the monotony of the station diet. On most stations, the women went on an annual long holiday with the men and children. Several stations, however, did not allow the domestics such a holiday. Djunduin described a holiday she once had with Mrs Weaber and her children, but this was more in the capacity of a servant and babysitter. She was not usually permitted to go on a long holiday, for she had to look after the homestead when Mrs Weaber was on her annual wet season break. 102 Sullivan never had a long 'walkabout' from Tipperary, nor did Moore from Dunham River. 103 Key workers were considered indispensable by the employers, and many - especially part-Aborigines - were discouraged from mingling with the other Aborigines altogether. At Newry, the women were allowed to go on extended 'walkabouts' on a rotational basis -
one group being allowed to go at intervals so there would always be some domestic workers available. 104

Certain jobs held more status and responsibility, but accompanying this was often greater limitations on personal freedom. 'Kitchen Girls' helped the white, Chinese or Aboriginal cook, who was their main boss. Sometimes such workers worked in the 'Kitchen' which catered for the black employees' meals only. 'Cook' and 'main Cook' were positions of status. Elsey of Willeroo and Chapman were proud of their cookery skills. 105 After all, cook was a position which a white or Chinese person usually filled.

'Housegirl' was a position of greater authority and responsibility. This woman was expected to organize the household work amongst the other Aboriginal women, and she also trained the young girls. Housegirls were reputedly loyal and dependable women, often making great sacrifices for their bosses, as exemplified by Frichard's Coonardoo and Porteus' character, Biddy. 106 In real life they took their position seriously indeed and had to behave quite differently from the other women, who were able to fool amongst themselves. The 'Kitchen Girls' could make light of their frequently monotonous chores by singing, chatting or joking while they worked. 'Housegirls' had to display deference to their bosses, but they frequently won the respect and admiration of the missus, and formed close and affectionate bonds. In many instances, these women were forced into a closer dependence on the white master because they either lacked natural parents, or had been 'adopted' by whites since childhood. They consequently knew no other life. Sometimes they were women who were also out of their own country, and were not accepted by other station Aborigines. Such women as Helen Sullivan of Tipperary, Biddy of Louisa Downs, and Maudie Moore admitted they knew very little of their traditional culture because the greater part of their lives was spent with white families. Moore was not
even permitted to go out at night, and had to sleep in a bedroom with the manager's children. She was not allowed any socializing with Aborigines, and 'marriage' was forbidden. As Beverley Kingston noted, such a situation could perpetually bind a domestic into a state of "dependence, devotion and gratitude". Moore married when she was middle-aged, and was not able to bear children.

White domestic servants in early twentieth century Australia worked an eleven hour day, and there were often no guaranteed holidays, not even on Sundays. Aboriginal women seem to have worked slightly fewer hours, and the majority still had the opportunity for leisure time in their own environment. They collected native foods during the lunch-break and on weekends, and could fit in the occasional swim or other recreation. They were able to live relatively normal family lives, at least when the men were not out at stockcamps. Their work was certainly more strenuous than the average white domestic's, due to frontier conditions, which meant often-distant water supplies, no gas or electricity. Though rural living did not necessarily imply any lack of finesse: on some stations, waitresses had to wear special serving caps and uniforms, maintain a silver service, and lacey tablecloths, and serve from fine English china. A girl often had to pump furiously at a punkah fan in the midday heat while the white family ate in the cool. Few white domestics would have had to wash and iron their uniforms every lunch hour, let alone slaughter and butcher the meat to be eaten. There were more hands on stations than in the ordinary city kitchen, but there were many more mouths to feed - the manager's family, white employees and dozens of Aboriginal workers. Sometimes the work was on quite a grandiose scale for rural conditions. For example, on Victoria River Downs in the 1910's the yard was neatly swept for fifty yards around the entire homestead. On Nutwood Downs, Aboriginal women established and
maintained grand-scale pawpaw groves, tropical and vegetable gardens. At larger stations, some of the women's duties were more specialized; for example the tasks of milking and cooking would be the responsibility of specific individuals. But there were other women who performed varied duties, categorized as 'General Domestics' or 'Assistants'. Many Aboriginal women performed more generalized duties than the average white domestic. W.T. Pearce, a storekeeper at remote Daly Waters and husband of Henrietta, underlined this when he explained that he had employed white labour time and again, but it was always a failure, as he could not afford to pay "Cook, Kitchen Maid, Waitress, Yardman etc." Nancy, one of Pearce's employees, testified that she did this type of work during the day and the laundry at night. It appears that she also rendered 'sexual services' as she claims to have had a child to Bill Pearce.

White employers often complained of the Aboriginal women's need for constant supervision. In 1914, Mrs Gilruth, wife of the Northern Territory Administrator, wrote in a newspaper article:

The lubra can be made a good domestic and is perfectly willing to learn, and tractable, but black women are not self-reliant. They could not be left in charge of the house or of children, but if anyone is over them they are alright.

In a similar vein, Ernestine Hill wrote of black domestics:

One survey of the washing up, a little dalliance with the broom and bucket, and unless watched with lynx eyes, mysteriously they disappear into the garden.

The amount of supervision required for domestic servants may have varied from one station to another, but there were Aboriginal women on most stations who taught and supervised the young girls. They took much responsibility, and sometimes virtually ran the household. These House-girls or head women were older, authoritative figures who had a high degree of control over their subordinates. Daisy exemplified this respect
when she testified that Flora Ningbing, who taught her cooking, was always obeyed when she gave orders. The girls and older women were never givin cheek, no. Now we bin longa Ningbing station me allabout girl - good, no row, only just the work. That's all we bin only do... No fighting, nothing.

European claims of their need for white supervision were thus sharply contradicted by the presence of this internal organization. Gunn, who portrayed her female staff as irresponsible and disorganized, mentioned her appreciation of a lubra called Nellie because she 'rounded up' the other women when shirking.\textsuperscript{118} Prichard noted that Coonardoo, the Housemaid, was authoritative in the camp, yet quiet and submissive in the house.\textsuperscript{119} Only when the white woman was not supervising would an Aboriginal woman feel comfortable to assert her powers. Possibly this is the reason some mistresses did not recognize Aboriginal head-women, whose presence enabled the staff to function effectively for periods without any white supervision.\textsuperscript{120} Nevertheless, it was very common for trusted women to take over the care of white children for whole days or longer. They took them far from the homestead on bush hunting and gathering expeditions, without any supervision by the station 'missus'. Prichard sensitively portrays the all-encompassing reliance upon her 'untiring Servant'.

She played with the girls as usual, took the baby away down the creek so that Mollie [the missus] might rest in the afternoon, told the children stories, mended their frocks and knickers while they hunted for bards, climbed trees, dug for water...

Chapman claimed that Mrs Miller would check on the things cooking in the kitchen. She would tell them what to do, but did not work with them. In the kitchen, Sheba and Winnie worked independently. As Chapman explained, the missus was "allatime longa house. He never used to tell em us what to do, 'cause me and Sheba do it myself".\textsuperscript{121} When Djunduin was left in charge of the Ningbing homestead, the boss gave her a key to the store, and the
Aborigines were instructed to take what they needed unsupervised by whites. At Newry, Hector Fuller left the Aboriginal women in charge of the house and did not come back, being replaced by another manager. Since work went by such a set routine, it followed that once an employee had learnt the necessary skills, she would be quite capable of carrying on unsupervised. And even before workers were expert, the Aboriginal supervisors were able to take charge of the situation. There were fewer white bosses in the work associated with the house than in stockwork, where there was sometimes a white overseer, a head stockman and contractors. The manager's wife, if there was one, and sometimes a cook were the houseworkers' only non-Aboriginal supervisors. They were, however, in closer and more constant contact with them as their work was more localized.

References

97. Interview * with Blan Barney, Moongoong Darwung, 7 August 1978.
101. E. George, Two at Daly Waters, Georgian House, Melbourne, p. 28.
102. Interview with D. Djunduin, Mirima Village, 26 July 1978.
104. Interview with Blan Barney, Moongoong Darwung, 7 August 1978.
105. Interview with Kaiser and Elsey, Katherine, 2 September 1978.
109. Ibid.

* All interviews were conducted by author unless otherwise stated.
110. George, *op. cit.*, Illustration, pp. 64-5.

111. Interview with Noel Hall, Pine Creek, 28 August 1978.

112. George, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-5.

113. W.T. Pearce to Administrator, 21 March 1940, in A.A.D., Fl item 40/478.

114. Interview with group of Aborigines at old women's home, Katherine, 30 August 1978; George, *op. cit.* Mrs. Pearce took an unusual interest in her boy, Lesley, but he was taken away by police prior to W.W.11, because he was part-Aboriginal. See Chapter 22 of George for description of this incident and its effects on Nancy.


117. Interview with D. Djunduin, 26 July 1978.


Rosy, the housemaid was head of staff.


120. Contemporary whites often argued that Aborigines had no boss in their own tribes, yet would obey a white man. This was an argument used conveniently to justify their exploitation by white employers.

121. Interview with W. Chapman, Kununurra, 28 July 1978. In Aboriginal English "he" refers to either male or female.
