3.17 Motor Vehicles in Central Australian Aboriginal Society: Some Preliminary Notes

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Abstract
This paper presents a collection of observations made at the workshop about the growing Aboriginal use of motor vehicles in central Australia (outside the large towns). These tend to show that Aboriginal people have adapted and incorporated the motor vehicle to the greatest degree of any piece of introduced technology. Observations are included about vehicle acquisition, repair and maintenance, its social incorporation, transfer of ownership, and Aboriginal style of road-building.

Introduction
Aboriginal-initiated uses and adaptations of introduced technology surely provide some of the best insight into Aboriginal priorities. Our starting point is the observation that the durable product of western society most sought after by Aboriginal people in general is the motor vehicle, and that they use vehicles in ways non-Aboriginals do not.

Acquisition and Maintenance
With the increasing availability of ABITA (which might stand for Aboriginal Benefit Toyota Account) funding in the 1980s, numerous small Aboriginal residential groups have incorporated with the main aim of getting a vehicle. This is in contrast to the early 1970s and before, when Aboriginal driven or owned vehicles were a rarity.

The other way in which Aboriginal vehicles are acquired and owned is intertwined with the redistribution of money through gambling. It is often observed that gambling on pay day is pursued until someone who wishes to buy a vehicle has acquired the thousand or so dollars necessary. It seems that the buyer is not the sole owner, but has duties to the community whose resources went into the purchase. These vehicles are sometimes bought for the purpose of a particular trip: a visit to the nearest town, or a special football match, and seem thereafter to be regarded as disposable. Sometimes an owner will disable his vehicle when it becomes a nuisance in terms of various pressures on him for access to it.

A distinction is made between a vehicle's owner and its usual driver. This may arise for a vehicle acquired in the name of a residential group, or in the name of a senior man or woman who lacks a driver's licence. It is a recognised duty of a driver to remain sober, and an owner may enlist the services of another for this purpose.

Part of the folklore about Aboriginal use of vehicles is their ability to keep going where others get bogged, either in mud or sand. This is partly related to it being common for a vehicle to have very light luggage loading and a large number of passengers, a marked advantage when all passengers get out to push. Superior knowledge of the characteristics of the particular stretch of road is also relevant. Consider the group of men who got their sedan across a flooded creek by travelling in reverse, thus keeping the engine dry (and, as the account has it, chugging by the Police Toyota stranded midstream).

Repairs
Aboriginal vehicle repairs are the greatest source for anecdotal accounts of Aboriginal ingenuity and initiative, from tyres stuffed with spinifex to mulga stick gear changers. Bruce Walker has observed that there is a calculated risk-taking seen in the use of motor vehicles which we would do well to bear in mind when designing other machines for Aboriginal use. He cites an Aboriginal vehicle being driven with a jerry-can balanced on the roof serving as a makeshift gravity-feed fuel tank, while the occupants smoke a lighted cigarette. Another example (seen by Lee Cataldi) is the application of a match to petrol poured into the top of a carburettor so as to get an engine started.

Items are put to uses non-Aborigines generally avoid. European mechanical training biases one to think that there is a tool specialised for each task. For instance, one is taught to not use a shifting spanner as a hammer, or a screw-driver as a probe. In Aboriginal hands, tools are notably multi-functional. For instance, a jerry-can doubles as a vehicle stand. To remove a wheel in the absence of a jack, or even in preference to some of the small fiddly screw jacks, a crowbar (or tyre lever, or whatever is handy) is used to dig away the dirt underneath the wheel.

Women's Vehicles
Just as in Australia generally, only a small minority of vehicles are owned by individual women or groups of women. The women in the bush with driving licences are usually fairly young, whereas many middle-aged men have licences. Hence women often have to negotiate access to transport through men.

Social Incorporation
As with any product they use, Aboriginal people have adapted the available motor vehicles to their own needs. As Aboriginal people have gained access to motor vehicles over the last decade or so, so they have been able to resume a nomadism severely thwarted during the heyday of government settlements. An example quoted by Bruce Walker is the group that took a newly acquired sedan and knocked out the rear window, the better to use the rear parcel shelf to sit on with the roof forming a gun rest while hunting.
In general, Aboriginal people have goods vehicles and use them primarily as passenger vehicles. In some languages a word for “large coolamon” is used for vehicle. In Aboriginal English “mutukka” and “truck” are used interchangeably for “car, ute, light truck”; similarly taxi and bus are mutually substitutable in word avoidance situations. A term like “big truck” is used to unambiguously refer to standard English “truck”. There is a preference for the open, tray-back four-wheel drive over the enclosed models. Unlike southern states, it is not illegal for unrestrained passengers to travel in the cargo bays of goods vehicles. Goods uses are mainly firewood collection. Tractor-trailer combinations are common for hunting trips. In Warlpiri, a utility is jakakurlu “with buttocks”, and a tractor is mirririr “mountain devil”; the generalisation is that a term is chosen on the basis of the vehicle’s shape.

As well as functional adaptation, the motor vehicle has undergone social incorporation. ABTA Toyotas are seen in part as “Dreaming Toyotas”, that is, owned by a group constituted by their links to a particular Dreaming and area of land. This is reinforced when it is known that ABTA money flows from royalties from mining on Aboriginal land. Further, the payments to “communities affected” by particular development projects are often channelled into Toyotas which are then seen to belong to the particular country and the people associated with it.

Vehicles have a subsection, or “skin”. It is usually the subsection of the father of the principal owner or driver (though in one case I was told it was the father’s father, and it was mentioned that it carried the owner on its back). In this respect, vehicles are treated in the same way as dogs, though there is a wider range of kinship possibilities with respect to dogs. Similarly, in Warlpiri at least, a vehicle can be thought of as jarat-nyanu “companion, friend, pet; as spouse, own dog, own horse”. However, I have not heard of a vehicle acquiring an individual name. The notable modern Aboriginal childrens toy is the “tin truck” made from fencing wire and an old tin can.

Wrecked vehicles may still be owned, while they have useful parts still to be scavenged. There is considerable Aboriginal knowledge of which vehicles with which parts are to be found where, not unlike knowledge of the country’s natural resources. This aspect is tapped when appropriate technology uses parts in hand pumps, for instance, rather than expensive equivalent steel parts from the city. Old car bodies have been used for shelter. A wrecked vehicle is a physical mnemonic for a story, as Elspeth Young has pointed out. A travelling group will pass on to any of its members who do not know the story, the account of how the vehicle came to be where it is (who was in the group, what they did, whose vehicle it is, and so on). The site of a breakdown may be intentionally highlighted by a broken part or shredded tyre being hung on a tree branch near the road. In some ways this is similar to the way geographical features are linked with aspects of a Dreaming narrative. Mike Last warns against burying old car bodies, as the air pockets will provide a haven for the next mice plague.

**Transfer of Vehicles**

Those vehicles bought with ABTA funds are not individually owned, and under ABTA regulations cannot be sold or transferred, even to another Aboriginal group. Generally, the vehicle of a deceased person is not destroyed, and it is subject to the same rules of inheritance as other personal property. A vehicle involved in a fatality is subject to being disposed of (discarded, or passed on to another group), or perhaps repainted. Under the Liquor Act, vehicles implicated in breach of a restricted area are impounded, and subject to forfeiture. There has been much debate about the stringency of this law, especially as there is no consideration that the vehicle might be stolen or otherwise belong to an innocent third party.

**Communication and Roads**

Vehicles facilitate the desire to range over a number of communities, in what might be called “distributed residence” (see Young, 1983). With vehicles in Aboriginal control, we see the priorities of Aboriginal road making. A value governing the route selected for a trip is to “go around”, and return by a different route from the outbound trip. Thus “hunting roads” are often part of a circuit. Road-making is part of the outstation movement. Of course, old seismic lines or other pre-existing overgrown roads are used where possible to reduce effort, but deviations will be made where particularly necessary to avoid sites, or patches of potentially boggy ground. Recent development projects such as mineral exploration, the railway proposal, and the Amadeus Basin–Darwin gas pipeline, all provided roads in areas where there were none, though the connections conform to non-Aboriginal goals. Recent Aboriginal initiatives in road making include the Nyrripi–Kintore connection; the “ring road” emerging to the west of Yuendumu, encircling Mount Doreen pastoral lease and the Lajamanu–Warrego connection (involving 280km of new flat blade grading entirely under Lajamanu Warlpiri control, in September 1983).

**Bibliography**

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