

Continuity of Mobility: Canvas Selling by Aborigines in the Central Desert of Australia

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The purpose of this paper was to consider the mobility of indigenous Aboriginal people in the Central Desert of Australia through the case study of people “selling canvases” for subsistence. Aboriginal people in the Central Desert have experienced rapid social change following contact with the West, especially since the 1967 referendum. As the monetary economy penetrated the Aboriginal society, hunting and gathering as a form of subsistence decreased, and settling in certain aboriginal communities became occurred. However, despite fewer opportunities for hunting and gathering, the mobility of Aboriginal people did not decline. In particular, people selling canvases continued to move as frequently as they had previously. In this paper, the everyday life of the people selling canvases is explored. Furthermore, what supports their mobility is clarified. By examining the process of selling canvases, three factors that supported their nomadic lives emerged: development of means of transportation, introduction of income systems, and sharing between families. Vehicles and income systems have been newly introduced to Aboriginal society as a result of social change in recent years. Meanwhile, sharing within the family, referred to as “demand sharing” is a unique economic system of Aboriginal society. It can be said that Aboriginal mobility is sustained by the interaction between the newly brought on elements of social change as well as the classic way of living handed down by families.

Keywords: Aboriginal people, hunter-gatherer, mobility, subsistence, social change

INTRODUCTION

In this study, Aboriginal mobility, which has undergone radical social change since the 20th century, is examined through the case study of Aboriginal people selling canvases in the Central Desert of Australia.

Aboriginal people used to live a nomadic life in which they hunted and gathered food; it was based on the fundamental structure of the Aboriginal society, kinship, rules of marriage and subsistence system. However, their lifestyle has changed rapidly since their contact with white people and the large amount of varied western products that have become part of their lifestyle since the development of monetary economy. When welfare services and social security for Aborigines improved in the 1970s, many became dependent on government welfare and began to buy food and goods at stores and/or supermarkets. These changes also affected the Aboriginal nomadic life, which had been functioning in a regular cycle over a defined territory, following seasonal food sources. However, the number of people, settled in the Aboriginal communities set up by the Australian government, has been increasing. Furthermore, hunting and gathering for subsistence has decreased and is now a leisure activity.

However, this has not affected their mobility. Even though people have settled in Aboriginal communities, many still like to move about for various reasons. Those who sell canvases move the most frequently. Selling canvases is a new form of subsistence in contrast to hunting and gathering in the Central Desert. Accordingly, in this study the life of people selling canvases and how they maintain their mobility is explored.

SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE CENTRAL DESERT

Aboriginal People

The term, Aboriginal people was coined by Europeans after they began colonizing Australia in 1788. Aboriginal people do not belong to any one particular group. Over 400 distinct groups of Aborigines have been identified and distinguished by names as well as their ancestral languages, dialects and/or distinctive speech patterns.

The groups in the central area developed hunting and gathering skills for their livelihood. To generalize, they were mostly limited to the range of foods that was in their area naturally. In addition, they knew exactly when, where and how to find everything that was edible. In arid areas such as the Central Desert they became nomadic; they scanned wide areas in search of scarce food resources. Furthermore, in the central area, where European settlements have been sparse, the Aborigines maintained their traditions and persisted in comparison to the communities in the south or east coast where their cultures were destroyed by European settlers.

The life of the Aborigines in the central area changed dramatically after the 1967 referendum, which afforded Aboriginal people citizenship; this was the result of international pressure. The Australian political landscape of Aboriginal affairs started to change to redress certain wrongs that had been done to indigenous people for 200 years. The Australian government returned the land tenure to Aboriginal people and supported the development of Aboriginal communities in autonomous living areas.

Ironically, these Aboriginal rights movements have brought radical changes to Aboriginal society, which have had a negative effect on them. In scenarios where gambling, alcohol, drug abuse, neglect, and/or domestic violence prevailed, public opinion to “protect Aboriginal children” from these influences increased; in 2007, in the Northern Territory, the national intervention policy for the Aboriginal society was implemented. Without consultation, Aboriginal peoples’ lives became heavily regulated. The result thereof was that many felt ashamed and angry, and strongly resisted this compulsive national intervention. However, despite widespread protests, the intervention has been extended until 2022.

X Community

X community, which was established in 1978, is one of the Aboriginal communities in the Central Desert where the 10-month study conducted by the researcher started in 2014. There were 185¹ residents. The community is situated halfway between two tourist cities. It takes three hours to access each city; thus, it is a convenient location for remote communities. X community has a store, primary school, college, clinic, and government office; western products and ideas are evident. Sometimes people go hunting, but for leisure and not for subsistence. In X community, Aborigines are involved in certain jobs such as road work, cemetery maintenance, and rubbish collection. However, for various reasons,² most do not keep their jobs. Approximately, 80–90% of residents depend on welfare from the federal government. Some are also addicted to drugs, alcohol, and/or gambling. This has become a serious social problem for not just X community, but the Aboriginal society as a whole. Many have started to find solutions to these problems and have also started voicing their concerns. Selling canvases is an Aboriginal activity that helps them to carry their culture into the future.

Selling Canvases

“Canvas” usually means Aboriginal art. However, the researcher has employed the term in this paper because the Aboriginal people usually refer to their paintings as

¹ 2011 Census of Australian Bureau of Statistics; in fact, the population change is quite large, with a large number of people moving in and out of the community, depending on the situation.

² The Aboriginal people’s low employment rate and welfare dependency is becoming a social problem. Aboriginal “laziness” and “dishonesty” tends to be emphasized as a factor of the problem, but its essence is said to be found in the attitude of the mainstream society pressing Aboriginal people towards a Western way of labor.

canvases and not Aboriginal art. Their canvas style is commonly referred to as “dot painting.” Dot painting is a way of painting by using brushes and sticks, and overlapping points with acrylic paint. The simple dot style as well as cross hatching may be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, but it has a concealed meaning and deeper purpose: to disguise the sacred meanings inherent in the stories in the paintings. The designs have meanings that are connected to their sacred rituals.

The history of dot painting is recent and started in the late 1970s in the Western Desert. Geoffrey Bardon, an art teacher for the Aboriginal children in Papunya in Western Desert, noticed that while the Aboriginal people told stories, they would draw symbols in the sand. This encouraged them to paint the stories onto canvas and board. Soon, many of them began painting. Bardon helped the Aboriginal artists to transfer their stories from the desert sand onto canvas by using paints. Thus began the famous Papunya Tula Art Movement. This art movement also spread to Aboriginal people who were living in other regions.

At that time, these paintings were regarded as primitive art and ignored by museums and markets. However, since the mid-1980s they have garnered national and international attention. Simultaneously, the value of the paintings and the prices thereof has been increasing, especially for the works of award-winning artists. Some of the paintings are worth millions of dollars³. Not only has Aboriginal art increased in value in

³ Emily Kame Kngwarreye (or Emily Kam Ngwarray) (1910–1996) is one of the most prominent and successful artists in the history of contemporary indigenous Australian art. She was from the Utopia community in the Northern Territory. On May 23, 2007, her 1994 painting, *Earth’s Creation*, was purchased by Tim Jennings of Mbantua Gallery & Cultural Museum for

recent years, but has become well known, globally, as a representation of indigenous people.

However, the development of Aboriginal art varies from region to region. Furthermore, there are areas where the art is not worth much. The X community is one of those areas. A gallery was opened in 2005 in X community, under the influence of the art movement. Although works were produced enthusiastically mainly by middle-aged women, X community has had no notable artists until recently. Canvases that are about 20 cm × 40 cm in size normally sell for 30–40 Australian dollars. They are affordable, popular souvenirs for tourists, but are sometimes ironically referred to “quick art.” Canvas sellers make about 100 Australian dollars per day on average, but also sometimes sell nothing.

CASE STUDY

Sarah

In this section, the story of a woman, who lives on the move by selling canvases, is described. Sarah (pseudonym) is one of my aboriginal sisters⁴. She is a single woman in her 40s, is divorced and has three adult children. She survives because of the welfare she receives every two weeks and through canvas sales. She usually lives in her sister’s

1,056,000 Australian dollars at a Deutscher-Menzies’ Sydney auction, setting a new record for an Aboriginal artwork.

⁴ Sarah is a woman the researcher met on the street when doing fieldwork in the city. When invited to X community, Sarah introduced the researcher as her “younger sister” to everyone. Since then, the researcher have been incorporated into her family and treated as one of the family members.

house in X community and produces canvases with her relatives, but often travels to the city, tourist sites, or other Aboriginal communities for several days or at times for a few months during the ceremony season.

Why Does She Travel So Often?

The reasons for traveling are many and varied; they include shopping, visiting people in hospital or jail, participating in a ceremony and gathering firewood. However, these reasons change easily and are not always achieved. Not only Sarah, but most people in X community love to go cruising without any particular purpose and given the opportunity, attempt to join it. It is often said that X community is a safe and good place, but is boring. During the period the researcher lived in X community, a number of people asked to drive the researcher's *mutuka* often; translated as "car" in the Pitjantjara/Yankunytjatjara dictionary. As soon as the researcher returned from one trip, more people arrived or were already waiting to ask for a ride. On average, the researcher drove approximately 1,000 kilometers a week. A substantial part of this distance was taken up by just driving in and around X community, but they also went further afield frequently. Having the *mutuka* in the community allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive insider's view of their mobility.

How Does She Travel?

Sarah usually travels with a few relatives, but never alone. She only carries a few belongings during the trip: just a wallet, canvas, and some painting materials. She is virtually empty-handed before her departure. Her means of transportation is a car or bus. If there place in her relatives' car, she travels with them; however, if there is no place,

she uses the Bush Bus that provides a twice-weekly passenger bus service to remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia.

When Sarah arrives in a city, she first goes to the “same place,” as her family calls it; it is a form of a gathering place for them. The same place is not one fixed place. Depending on the situation, it changes. However, they know where it is because they always share information with each other beforehand. When Sarah paints her canvas, she utilizes shared painting materials and colors, and paints alongside her relatives at the same place.

Before dark, they try to sell their canvases to tourists. It is not difficult for Sarah and her relatives to sell their canvases on the street because the sight of Aboriginal people selling canvases attracts tourists’ attention. After selling canvases, they buy new canvases and painting materials from their profits and spend almost all of the remaining money on meals, alcohol, gambling and so forth. They say, “Money is from white people, so it is not good to keep it,” and seldom make any attempt to save it.

At night, they usually travel to one of the Aboriginal camps located in the suburbs of the city. They stay in their relatives’ houses and sleep on mattresses in the backyard⁵. In turn, they help the residents to prepare meals, clean and take care of children during their stay. After breakfast each day, Sarah and her relatives leave the Aboriginal camp, travel to the city center and start producing canvases at the same place as the previous day.

⁵ This is not limited to people in X community only; many aboriginal people in remote communities prefer to sleep outside than inside. Their life is oriented outward rather than inward. Most activities including sleeping, cooking, eating, and socializing take place in the yard.

Each day appears to be the same, but is actually different. The situation at the same place is extremely fluid. The members often change, and sometimes numerous people gather around and appear to flourish; however, at other times, everyone suddenly disappears. Subsequently, they travel to another place.

DISCUSSION

The primary question in this paper is considered in this section. Furthermore, what maintains Sarah's mobility is explored. An examination of Sarah's journey reveals that vehicles, funds for mobility, and sharing among families are essential to continue a journey. Consequently, the manner in which Sarah's mobility is maintained is thus explored from three aspects.

Firstly, vehicles for mobility are considered. When Aboriginal people in X community sell their canvases, they need to go to places where people may buy them such as Aboriginal art galleries or tourist sites. They cannot sell canvases in X community as it is on private Aboriginal land; tourists are not allowed to visit without permission.

The Aboriginal people used to travel on foot everywhere in the vast desert, but currently they usually take a car or bus if they have money for transportation. In the Aboriginal society in the Central Desert, the use of cars increased in the 1970s after the circulation of cheap and durable Toyota cars in the market. This coincides with when the Aborigines were allowed citizenship and became involved in the monetary economy.

There are about 10 cars that are roadworthy in X community. Because there are a limited number of cars, driving them depends on negotiations with the owner. Up to 10 people ride in a car that is driven on the bush road. This intense usage results in the car breaking down quickly and dozens of scrapped cars have been left behind in X

community. People use the bush bus if they cannot get a car ride. Since the inception of bush bus service in the 2000s, people have taken the bus on a daily basis.

In the Central Desert, road development is also in progress. At present, more and more roads have been constructed and the road network has been widely spread over remote areas in the Central Desert; however, some are fairly rough. The road network and development of transportation areas afford people the opportunity to travel far more easily and more frequently.

Secondly, the funds for mobility are studied. People need money for transportation; it is not difficult for them to obtain these funds. Many people in X community receive welfare from the Australian government every two weeks. If they run out of money, they simply wait for a fortnight when they will receive a grant from the government. While waiting for their next pay, they live quietly, at the mercy of their relatives. When payday arrives, it is the norm for some people to purchase many groceries and daily necessities at the store and for others to travel to the city. In essence, welfare benefits play a major role in supporting the Aborigines financially.

Furthermore, canvas sales are another source of income. People who sell canvases can make money easily because their art is popular with the tourists. They organize groups and draw pictures while sharing paints and brushes. As tourists are generally found everywhere, they do not have much trouble finding people to whom they can sell their canvases. They normally sell canvases at their destination and then continue to travel. Selling canvases suits their nomadic lifestyle and consequently, has been rapidly utilized among Aboriginal people in remote communities. Selling canvases has been established as a new form of subsistence. The process is passed on from the old generation to the young generation.

Thirdly, sharing among aboriginal families is explored. Food, clothing, and shelter are usually required for a trip. However, Aboriginal people such as Sarah do not carry such things because of their economic system. Demand sharing is a common characteristic associated with hunter-gatherer societies [Peterson 1993]. It is extremely common for Aboriginal people to ask or demand that others “share” with them. What is referred to as sharing is a response to a demand, which is initiated by the receiver. Demand sharing does not involve begging for money from those who have resources. People know who to request; fundamentally among relatives. Furthermore sharing is not limited to exchanging material items, but includes a host of values and activities.

These unique economic systems⁶ are the foundation of Aborigines’ lives. Therefore, if they spend all of their money on shopping, alcohol or gambling while on the journey, demand sharing makes it possible for them to continue their trip.

Consequently, the two new aspects, namely, transportation and monetary economy, which were brought about by social change, and the classic aspects of family relationship that are based on demand sharing, support their nomadic life. In the past, their nomadic life was one of hunting and gathering. At present, they have a different form of subsistence that was transformed by colonization and political activities. However, even though their subsistence has changed, their mobility is maintained by the interaction between the new elements of social change and the classic way of living, which is passed on by families.

⁶ There is now a significant increase in studies that focus on the social dimensions of sharing, which include addressing the cultural distinctiveness of Australian Aboriginal modes of sharing [Sansom 1980, Martin 1995, and Schwab 1995].

Sarah's case highlights only one aspect of aboriginal daily life. When Sarah travels, she always stays with her family and rarely ventures alone. While Sarah is only one person, she is, at the same time, part of a close knit group. In other words, Sarah's case is one example of the ways in which Aboriginal people in X community have maintained their mobility through selling canvases and have experienced significant social change.

CONCLUSION

One can see the continuity of mobility among Aboriginal people in Central Australia even if their form of subsistence has changed from hunting and gathering food to selling canvases. In Sarah's case, three factors mainly support her nomadic life: vehicles, funds for mobility, and demand sharing. This means that Aboriginal mobility has been able to thrive because of new influences that have occurred because of Aboriginal-European encounters and classical lifestyles so as to deal with social change.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS Core-to-Core Program (A. Advanced Research Networks), "Research on the Public Politics of Migration, Multiculturalization and Welfare for the Regeneration of Communities in European, Asian and Japanese Societies," by Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Research Fellow (Grant Number 14J05358) and Grant-in Aid for Graduate Students of Public Interest Trust Shibusawa Ethnology Promotion Fund.

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