

BEETALOO BILL JUST KEEPS ON SAVING UP...

Even when he was earning £7,000 a year towards the end of his life Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira had little conception of the value of money says Darwin author, Douglas Lockwood, in a recent newspaper article.

Namatjira, says Mr. Lockwood, spent money like boomerangs on hunting days. In the tradition of the Aranda tribe, he shared everything with his relatives and friends and saved nothing.

But at Elliott, midway between Darwin and Alice Springs, lives a native who is an arch-capitalist by Aboriginal standards. He saves money, acquires property and equipment and intends to go on doing so.

His name is Beetaloo Bill Wangari, aged 50. He is a member of the Mudbra tribe and has lived in the New-castle Waters and Elliott districts all his life.

Beetaloo Bill has worked since the end of the war as a bore maintenance mechanic for the Department of Works. He earns the basic wage and saves all he can.

That is quite out of character among people who have always been nomad hunters and never static conservers.

Recently Beetaloo Bill bought a new utility truck.

"I had always wanted my own vehicle to carry my family around," he said.

When the dealer asked what arrangements he wanted to make about payment, Bill produced more than £1,000 in cash from his pocket.

"Will this stuff do?" he asked.

He had drawn the money from his bank account.

More

"There's more where that lot came from," he told me.

A short time ago Beetaloo Bill decided he needed better living quarters for his family.

He employed carpenters to build a house at the Elliott aboriginal settlement.

When the job was finished he owed them £500 and that, too, was paid in cash.

He speaks clear, concise English which he "picked up", is neatly dressed, insists on his children attending school so that they might have the chances he missed—and yet he is not a free citizen.



Namatjira the artist reading an Aranda translation of the New Testament

For Beetaloo Bill is a ward of the Federal Government.

"I haven't been asked whether I want citizenship nor have I applied for it," he said.

He is worried that if he accepted it he might lose the right to live on an aboriginal reserve, or to take part in his ceremonial corroborees.

"I would accept citizenship so long as I could continue to live as an aborigine," he said.

"If they want to take my corroborees from me and prevent me from living with my people I am not interested. The Kuna-pipi, through which we worship our creator, the Earth Mother, the Mundiwa, and other ceremonials are part of my life. I could not live without them. They are in my heart and will be there always."

I told Beetaloo Bill that I was sure no such restrictions would be placed in his way.

He went away determined to apply for his freedom—a freedom which would give him more scope to invest his money.

But if, one day, he owns tracts of real estate around here, he will remain true to his tribal culture.

That is something which citizenship and civilisation cannot alienate from his keeping, says Mr. Lockwood.