

UNUSUAL COUPLES: RELATIONSHIPS AND RESEARCH ON THE KNOWLEDGE FRONTIER

Peter Sutton
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In this lecture I make some observations about various pairs of research collaborators who have figured in the history of indigenous studies in this country. This is in no way meant to be a Who's Who of that history, and the people I want to talk about are not a rigorously defined sample, more an intuitive one. In the written version I will cover eleven of these historically unusual couples, more than can be discussed in any detail in a lecture.¹ Although I will mention them all, today I will concentrate on just four: Biraban and Lancelot Threlkeld, Mahkarolla and Lloyd Warner, Billy Mammus and Ursula McConnel, and Smiler Durmugam and William Stanner.

My main purpose here is to pay tribute to these and other similar intellectual partnerships, in the positive spirit associated with the occasion – not I hope uncritically, but in recognition of the fact that the development of similar relationships is an object-lesson in the futility of forever racialising, demonising, romanticising and in other ways rendering the rough grain of the personal into the smoothness of the collective, when considering the history of the last 200 years in Australia. It is of practical importance, I would argue, that the future of relationships between us achieves a better balance between the collective and the personal than we have achieved in recent decades. We are struggling badly with the relationship between the corporate and the individual on many fronts.

AIATSIS itself, and the field of indigenous studies in this country generally, are primarily built on the intersection of two originally very different traditions of knowledge. I say 'intersection' because the role of those imparting knowledge in these cases is not on the whole revealed to us as that of passive subjects of research. Researchers frequently make it clear how dependent their own work has been on the engagement, intelligence and commitment of the key people from whom they learned, and also, at times, on the systematising capacity of their teachers.

My focus here is not on these individuals as representatives of large collectivities such as coloniser and colonised, or black and white, but as pairs of individuals

¹ Acknowledgements: Diane Hosking, David Jeffery, Ian Keen, Howard Morphy [INCOMPLETE]

whose relationships were usually complex, may have been at times emotionally intense, and often had an impact on both individuals over a long period. In recent decades the old division of labour between indigenous subject and non-indigenous investigator has begun to fade. Nevertheless it is more or less inevitable that differences of power, of culture and, at times, of gender are woven into these stories in ways that will become apparent, and relevant perhaps to any social research situation between individuals.

Biraban (John McGill) and Lancelot Threlkeld (1830s/40s)

Lancelot Threlkeld (1788-1859) was a Congregational missionary at Lake Macquarie in New South Wales in the early nineteenth century. He is remembered partly for his courageous opposition to the colonial 'war of extirpation' then being carried on against the original inhabitants of his region.² As early as 1824 he began learning the Awabakal language of the Lake Macquarie area, principally with Biraban, also known as John McGill (born c.1800, died before 1850).³ Threlkeld's aim was to use a local translation of the Gospels and other literature, and his own ability to speak the local language, as a means to converting the people to Christianity. This piece of research, as it was in part, resulted in the first biblical translation into any Australian indigenous language.⁴ But it also left us with an early example of what appears to have been an enthusiastic intellectual partnership.

Biraban or 'Eaglehawk', as his name translates,⁵ was in a number of ways like many of the indigenous people I discuss here. He had control of both of the main languages used in the research, having been at least partly brought up in the Military Barracks in Sydney, where he was an officer's servant.⁶ That he was more bicultural than culturally 'assimilated' to European ways is emphasised by Threlkeld in an affectionate memoir which appeared in print alongside a portrait of Biraban.⁷ But he was an exceptional person, with an exceptional intellect.

Biraban and Threlkeld had been 'almost daily companion[s] for many years', said Threlkeld, who wrote in admiration of Biraban's intelligence, his knowledge, his language teaching skills, his leadership role in ceremonies and other assemblies, his attachment to the customs of his own people, and also the fact that 'he was much attached to us, and faithful to a chivalrous extreme' – although first he mostly wrote in admiration of what he considered Biraban's good looks.⁸ This mention of Biraban's 'faithfulness' mirrors observations made at many points during frontier times, not just among anthropologists, that once a strong one-on-one relationship had developed between them, the Aboriginal person's devotion to looking after the needs and wellbeing of the newcomer often followed. This

² Harris (1994:57).

³ In early life he was known as We-pohng, and probably assumed the name Biraban upon going through the higher male initiation ceremonies (Gunson (ed.) 1974:317).

⁴ Harris (1994:806).

⁵ Threlkeld (1892:88).

⁶ Threlkeld (1892:88), Gunson (ed) (1974:317).

⁷ Threlkeld (1892).

⁸ Threlkeld (1892:88).

protective and, as Threlkeld says, ‘chivalrous’ response, which I and many others have enjoyed, is utterly at odds with the opposite kind of reportage from the frontier, which could tediously repeat stereotypical descriptions of Aboriginal people as ‘treacherous’. That the same people could engage in sneak attacks during guerilla-type conflicts and also manifest the devoted loyalty of a Wylie or a Jacky Jacky should not be surprising. These opposites are measures of relationship.

Biraban is one of the first cases, historically, of the so-called ‘main informant’ also being a person of local or regional political eminence. Perhaps, as in some other cases, this eminence was a particular kind of frontier-generated eminence, the sort of high profile conferred not only by having traditional forms of standing but by combining older kinds of eminence with expertise in dealing with outsiders, in particular the Europeans. Biraban was, after all, honoured by Governor Darling as the king of the tribe at Lake Macquarie, and Thomas Chester referred to him as ‘chief of the Black Tribe at Newcastle’ in 1838.⁹ We shall find this pattern repeated a number of times, but by no means consistently, through the other examples. In some cases it is likely that a person’s eminence was not only reflected in their teaching role but also something pursued through it.¹⁰

Tulaba and A.W. Howitt (late 19th C)

[incomplete]

Mahkarolla and W. Lloyd Warner (1920s)

Mahkarolla (Makarrwala, c1881-c1957)¹¹ was born in north-east Arnhem Land. In 1926 when he was around 45 he appears to have been selected by a group of senior men to act as primary mentor to anthropologist Lloyd Warner (1898-1970). Warner, then aged 28, carried out PhD research in the Milingimbi area and elsewhere 1926-1929. The title of his resulting ethnography, *A Black Civilization*, provides an indication, one designed to shock perhaps, as to Warner’s attitude of deep admiration for the people with whom he worked. He acknowledged that his deepest obligation in producing the book, which has long been regarded as an

⁹ Gunson (ed) (1974:317). Biraban was also ?chief guide to at least one exploration party (ref details??). Biraban’s name has been conferred on a Canberra street, in the suburb of Aranda. Refer here to Barak Street, Port Melbourne also. Dates of conferral?

¹⁰ Silas Maralngurra acted as a main linguistic informant for Lynette Oates at Oenpelli Mission (now Gunbalanya) in 1952 (Oates 1964:4). I believe he was also a major informant for Ronald Berndt (but can’t find the evidence; main relevant publication is Berndt and Berndt (1970). In 1981 he was appointed, by a mass meeting of traditional owners and others, called by the Northern Land Council, as my co-consultant while carrying out field work on the Jabiluka negotiations. [expand into another section?]

¹¹ Warner spelled the name Mahkarolla. For name respelling in current orthography see Zorc (1986:167); for dates see Warner (1958:566-567).

excellent example of the anthropology of its time, was to the *Murngin* (now *Yolngu*) people who gave him 'a fine, whole-hearted hospitality'. He particularly thanked Makarrwaḷa, of whom he said that he was 'one of the finest men I have had the good luck to count among my friends. I sometimes wonder at the futility of so-called progress when I think of him'.¹²

Warner is one of the earliest of the social researchers in indigenous Australia to publicly espouse a sentiment that combines admiration for an aboriginal society, and especially for its High Culture manifestations, with self-doubting or even plainly critical comments about the author's own Western society. In the period from after the First World War to the 1950s we see this strain of thinking appear in variable ways in the writings of Donald Thomson, Ursula McConnel, C.P. Mountford, and Olive Pink, perhaps among others.¹³ I doubt it would be easy to fully disentangle their kind of love affair with Aboriginal culture from their, at times, uneasy relationship with the world in which they had grown up. That two world wars and a Great Depression occurred in the first half of the twentieth century may have formed some of the background to the role of repulsion in creating the conditions of attraction towards the people and cultures anthropologists and others studied in that era. Naturally not all of these scholars were attracted to indigenous societies for the same reasons.

The second edition of Warner's book, published over twenty years later than the first, contained a new section, 'Mahkarolla and Murngin Society'. This is another first, as far as I know, being the earliest even reasonably intimate written portrait of the life and character of an individual Aboriginal person.¹⁴ In it Warner assumes two voices, first that of the anthropologist reporting on other people, then he writes as if he were Makarrwaḷa himself, and then he reverts to being himself as author.¹⁵

Warner tells us how his relationship with Makarrwaḷa came about.

When I arrived in the Murngin country the men who had been on board the sailing vessel with me quickly spread the news of my arrival among all the people. A number of the older men came to see me. Among them was a man who, I discovered, could speak a fair amount of English ... although he spoke English his thinking was native; and he considered himself, and

¹² Warner (1958:xi).

¹³ Insert cross-reference to discussion in my Donald Thomson at Flinders Island 1935 paper.

¹⁴ I would be interested to learn of any earlier comparable works.

¹⁵ Here he all too unsettlingly reminds us of those many books written by non-indigenous authors and which employ pronouns of the 'first person Aboriginal' kind in their titles: *I, the Aboriginal*; *We, the Aborigines*; *Your Land is Our Land*; *But now we want the Land Back*; *Our Place, Our Music*; *That's my Country Belonging to me*; *Country of my Spirit*; *Dingo Makes us Human*; *My Dark Brother* – and there are many more.

was looked upon, as a person of consequence and authority among the people.¹⁶

Here, as in so many similar moments in the first fieldwork experiences of other researchers, it is clear that the local people regarded the forthcoming relationship as of such importance as to warrant involvement of elders, and the emergence of a person of consequence to act as the one who would mostly work with the newcomer.¹⁷

Makarrwala remained a man of consequence in the region till his death.

... Magarawala was not just any man. He was the Nurudawalangu, the headman of the whole area. In his time Magarawala had been treated as an equal by white scientists and educated men, and had been mentioned in books both learned and unlearned. His was a personality that could have met princes with courtesy and dignity and without servility, for though he could neither read nor write his knowledge of his people was far-reaching and his understanding of human nature was profound.¹⁸

The role of social broker and teacher of cultural knowledge to a long-term researcher has in many cases in the past been considered of real political significance within the community concerned, but there has also been recognition of the fact that ultimately there will be a duo of significance, not a many-to-one relationship, at the core of the researcher's links to the wider population or host community. In some cases there has even been overt conflict between local people of prominence, who have competed either on their own behalves or on those of others, to control the role of so-called 'main informant' to a researcher. On one occasion I recall personally, spears were brought out. And I am also reminded of the territorial contests and sensitivities carried on between some researchers, such as when Olive Pink and T.G.H. Strehlow in the 1930s were both trying to secure the services of Mick Dow Dow in Central Australia, at about the time that Ursula McConnel was almost tiptoeing around groups with whom Donald Thomson had already established some research relationship in Cape York Peninsula.¹⁹

The researcher who was the object of competition had to be seen as, among other things, at least a potential source of something highly desired. What was desired, it seems to me, could be to do with a range of things, from prospects of rations or wages to prestige or even tapping into a new form of political go-betweening with the wider polity –all of these have played roles at times.

¹⁶ Warner (1958:567).

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¹⁸ Wells (1963:45).

¹⁹ Marcus (2001:71), and [McConnel letters to R-B].

But an additional if not central factor, at least in the remoter frontier cases, was a desire for a 'boss'. Makarrwala addressed Warner as *'bunggawa'*, a Macassarese and Buginese word glossed as 'boss' and long absorbed into languages of northern Arnhem Land.²⁰ W.E.H. Stanner similarly was addressed as *marluka* by his much admired and also considerably older collaborator Durmugam.²¹ Again, *marluka* was not a local word but one borne into the Daly River area on the tide of colonisation. When I worked in the Daly Waters area fifty years later some local people, including senior men a generation older than me, called me *marluka* also, again using an imported word for a kind of relationship that had some strong classical roots and a strong dose of innovation as well.

This experience had by then long become familiar from my years in Cape York Peninsula since 1970. The defining moment of reaching a significant degree of integration with the people one had come to learn from was typically being taken as a junior close kinsperson (mostly as a son of a man, in my own experience) by a prominent person. Since prominent persons are now usually much more occupied with the political and bureaucratic conduct of Aboriginal affairs, and even formerly quiet remote settlements have in many cases entered the revolving door of consultations, inquiries, surveys and meetings, and since so many communities have now experienced having a researcher in their midst, it may be less likely that proposals to carry out long term research projects with indigenous people, mediated by these intensive partnerships, will in future be met with the same keenness of the past. What does have rising importance for many indigenous people is the status of records created by such partnerships in the past. These play an increasing role in research carried out by indigenous scholars on their own people.

When I began work in the Wik region of Cape York Peninsula in 1976, the senior Cape Keerweer people had more or less worked out who would play which roles in their planned outstation once it was firmly established. They would move out, but they overruled my plan to remain in the mission and visit them on bush trips, and so I and my family moved to Watha-nhiin. My main brother in law told me that his wife, whose father had taken me as a son, would be 'boss' of the outstation, one man would be in charge of the cattle, one in charge of fencing, another the carpentry, and another the church services. These were all clan brothers of his wife and myself, of one country, language and Story. The occupations these men had learned, I was told, were part of a deliberate mission policy to engender a wide spread of different kinds of skills of the kind relevant to their time and place.

Anxious to see where I might belong, I asked 'Where do I fit in? 'You [will] be our boss-help-us', he replied – saying it twice. They wanted me to stay, he added,

²⁰ Warner (1958:588), and see Zorc (1986:41), Urry and Walsh (1981), Walker and Zorc (1981).

²¹ Stanner (1979 (1959):76). Durmugam was about 10 years older than Stanner (1979 (1959):vi,81), and Makarrwala about 17 years older than Warner (Warner 1958:xi,567), Barnard and Spencer (1996:592).

'forever'.²² For some time thereafter I resisted being called the boss, because I had failed to see how the people themselves understood the relationship. I was initially taken aback to be greeted each morning at Watha-nhiin outstation by all the senior men, usually in bright mood at least at the start, who assembled before me to find out what 'we' were doing that day. I was, as a sound left-leaning baby-boomer, in fact repeatedly embarrassed at having what I saw as this kind of Somerset Maugham rubber plantation plot thrown upon me.

But I needed to grasp hold of the fact that no ethnographic visitor was viewed as a 'boss' in the ordinary or cruder English senses. Although the term implies seniority, which can be a structural seniority that disregards actual age and knowledgability, it has overtones more of nurturance than of coercion. Much has been written about the relationship between authority and looking after others, and between autonomy and dependency, in the literature on Aboriginal Australia. I was having to learn that my own naïve idea that I could unilaterally determine the nature of my relationships with Wik people was inevitably going to be a failure. Perhaps more so than most Aboriginal people I have known, Wik traditions have long placed considerable emphasis on bosses. But not all bosses are equal.²³

The anthropologist Jeff Collmann was told by some Aboriginal men in Central Australia in the 1970s that a good cattle station boss was one who looked after his workers and left them to do their work unsupervised. A bad boss was one who only paid the minimum wage and supervised the work at all times.²⁴ Yet, as he once told me himself, the same term 'boss' was also applied to Collmann himself by the fringe-dwelling Aboriginal people with whom he worked in Alice Springs, thus suggesting another dimension existed for their range of meanings of 'boss' – or does it? If nurturance combined with the taking of some responsibility for collective affairs is the common factor, the anthropological 'boss' is not perhaps too far from the pastoral 'boss'. But this kind of nurturance usually has to envisage being responsive to requests as much as being open-handed or taking the initiative in providing for others. It is not a role one can take to oneself unilaterally, so much as a requirement generated by the way Aboriginal societies in this country have, especially in the past, dealt with the opening up of what were formerly extremely localised perspectives to a new and largely independent and dominant other society.

The long term researcher, more than any other kind of outsider, has played a critical role in destroying older false and damaging stereotypes about indigenous people, and in providing the positive factual base on which significant degrees of recognition have been accorded to indigenous cultural achievements and rights, especially land rights. Most motivations for integrating anthropologists, linguists and others into indigenous social fields have probably been largely local ones. But the job of being ambassador, agent, personal patron, badge of group superiority,

²² PS field book 20:64-65 11/8/76.

²³ Add refs to Anderson on bosses.

²⁴ Collmann (1988:144).

etc., worked also in relation to the 'other' world of power and economics that lay behind the individual who were sent by it to carry out research. Relationships with the 'outside', as the wider world was still sometimes described during the 1970s at Aurukun, were typically mediated by elite pairs of individuals who felt they could trust each other. This can be read as people looking outward, but seeming to prefer to do so via a proxy on whom one could be somewhat dependent – that is, someone both dependable and supportive. The reciprocity of this conception becomes more apparent when considering the typical dependency of the researcher on the local person for their safety and wellbeing in field conditions, and on local knowledge alone for the main rationale of their being present at all.

These positive relationships with the researchers have at times been strangely at odds with relationships to other Europeans, most of whom have not been regarded as kin unless 'married in'. It is understandable that the researcher may be proud to belong, when so many other outsiders don't, won't or can't, in the same way. But this belonging, which can be a lot more than merely tolerated social integration, never removes the outsider origins of the person who has been taken in.

We are sometimes still reminded that the fight against racial stereotyping is for everyone, not just those who historically had the power to impose theirs on the conquered. Makarrwala, to return to Arnhem Land in the 1920s, told Warner that when he was a teenager the Macassans had told his people, at Elcho Island, that the white men were getting very dangerous and were going to bring the annual Macassan visits to an end. The white men were portrayed to the Arnhem Landers as being just like animals, big and hairy, and very fierce. They 'killed people just because they liked to kill', and always stole the women of people they visited. Makarrwala's old men believed the Macassans, he told Warner, and were afraid.

Later, though, Makarrwala came to the view that white men had 'fathers and mothers and wives just as much as black men', here stressing the cultural universal of kin relatedness as evidence of a common condition. Makarrwala then joined his brother in braving contact with a boat that carried a European man, an Aboriginal man, and some Malays. He even stayed behind to work as a cabin boy for its Malay crew. On being reunited with his people they were enraged and wanted to kill this European boat person. According to Makarrwala's account reported by Warner:

I said no, that it was no good. I said, "The white men talk very hard and sometimes they swear at you, but inside they are all right. Sometimes when they swear, they mean good."²⁵

Here we see the so-called illiterate informant, coming from a tradition in which out-group enmities could be vigorously naturalised, rather than the anthropologist from a liberal-democratic political tradition, advancing himself as a destroyer of

²⁵ Warner (1958:573-578).

negative racial stereotypes. But unlike several anthropologists of the same era, Makarrwala seems to have been rather more generous in looking past the stereotype of the European as a foul-mouthed frontier oaf, the kind of colonial bumpkin figure who received such a bad press from Stanner, Thomson, Mountford and others of high aesthetic sensibility who found themselves living among the farthest outposts of poor whites during the Great Depression. Some shared even a certain vocabulary for their revulsion, words like 'foul' and 'oaf' being typical. It is not surprising that the refinement of manners, dignity and grace of their Aboriginal hosts made them stand out as attractive people on a rough frontier.

But in the ordinary sense of the word we would not say that the couples I discuss here have also been lovers. Nevertheless, some of their relationships have been of such intensity as to bring out at least expressions of platonic love, as when Lloyd Warner told us that his friendship with Makarrwala was as strong and enduring as any he had experienced with his own people. Close to the end of his life Warner considered he knew Makarrwala as well as he had known anyone, and hoped the last section of the 1958 memoir would express Warner's 'love, respect, and admiration for him'.²⁶ It is the openness of the account, not its glowing terms, that marks it as modern.

That Makarrwala also felt deeply and strongly about their relationship is suggested by his tears of fear for Warner's safety during a dangerous sea journey by canoe, and the fact that he was also crying during his final parting from Warner on Darwin pier in 1929. Unlike many more recent pairs of this kind, who have been able to maintain lifetime contact, the two never saw each other again.²⁷

Billy Mammus and Ursula McConnel (1920s/30s):

Bambegan,²⁸ known in English as Billy Mammus, was in 1927 the most senior man of the Bonefish clan whose country is in the Small Archer River area of western Cape York Peninsula, part of the area now known as Wik country.²⁹ People of this group played an important role in relations with the new authority structures of church and state from at least the 1920s to the recent present. These included his brother Arthur Pambegan Senior, the latter's daughter Geraldine and his son Arthur Pambegan Junior. It was their language, Wik-Mungkan, that McConnel studied most thoroughly, and which evolved into the mission lingua

²⁶ Warner (1958:566). ²⁶ In rather different vein and lighter mood, Marie Reay in 1970 published a rare account of the passionate infatuation of a Borroloola woman for herself in 1959-60. One gets the impression that Reay was glad to escape her attentions at the end of her field work (Reay 1970:169-170, 172).

²⁷ Warner (1958:588-589).

²⁸ Also spelled Bambeigan by McConnel, which I would render *Pam-piikenh*. *Pam* = man, *piikenh* = hits, beats.

²⁹ 'I am indebted to Bambeigan, the leading man of the bonefish clan for the myth and ritual of the bonefish and the *moiya* and *pakapaka* [bullroarer] totems which belong to his clan' (McConnel 1935:68).

franca. It was primarily through the personal link forged between Billy Mammus and Ursula McConnel that the idea of Wik-Mungkan as a people – misleading as it is – became reified in the global anthropological literature.

After Ursula McConnel arrived at Aurukun in 1927 she camped a while with people who were mainly from north of Aurukun.³⁰ She wanted to work with bush people outside the mission, both to reduce the effects of culture contact and, it seems clear, to get away from her nemesis, the mission superintendent William MacKenzie. She was warned off travelling up the Archer because an ‘outlaw’, said to have been a rapist who had murdered his wife and supposedly eaten his mother, was at large in the area. Her plan was to go south and work with people whose language was Wik-Ngatharr, but no one, as she put it, ‘seemed free’ to go with her. The fact that the wider area was in a state of tension and conflict may have been responsible. She told her supervisor: ‘There have been a lot of rows here, very serious & several districts are impossible to go into in which certain outlaws are hiding from the police’.³¹

My first step was to try and find a reliable man who could use my gun, would act as interpreter, and take care of me generally, and whose wife could look after me personally.

It was whilst watching [a mission corroboree] that my problem was happily solved for me. I found a woman with a shy but winning smile sitting beside me, *determined to make friends*.³²

The woman who was so determined, and in that sense took the first step, was Jinny, one of two wives of Billy Mammus. The three of them made their first hunting trip together the next morning.

Writing to Radcliffe-Brown she said:

... I began to pick up new threads at the mission & found Billy (& Jinny) who not being a mission working man is free to come about with me. Also he was intelligent & ready to help. He therefore drew me inevitably into the Wik munkän group & I got onto the kinship system & language with him.

McConnel told a little more about him in the Sydney *Sun*:

³⁰ McConnel to Radcliffe-Brown 12/5/27.

³¹ McConnel to Radcliffe-Brown 12/5/27.

³² McConel (1928[]). Emphasis added, PS.

Billy had worked on Thursday Island and elsewhere, and was therefore conversant with the “white man’s” ways. He had refused to go to school as a small boy, preferring to remain an unlettered bushman. He retained an interest in his native lore, which, coupled with a certain aloofness from it, made him a valuable go-between and interpreter.³³

Here once again we encounter a familiar combination of qualities: local political eminence; an ability to move at some level between the two cultures and act as an interpreter, and an interest in his own traditions. The ‘aloofness’ McConnell describes may be an attempt to convey his capacity for objectifying his own cultural practices, for which there is evidence elsewhere.

Billy Mammus was probably also something of a risk-taker. His mission card read in part:

Gentleman with a hectic past by all accounts. Now a very dependable person. Guide to Miss McConnell, ethnologist, April to Nov. 1927. Has been known to spear a bullock.³⁴

There is probably a certain amount of code here. Being ‘known to spear a bullock’ in those days could bring the attention of the police and years of exile to far distant Palm Island. Earlier it could be far worse. A ‘hectic past’ probably refers to spear fighting. [ADD section here on Moravian records 1912 re his change after initial uncooperativeness]

In June 1927 McConnell wrote to her supervisor, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown:

I have been out camping for 3 weeks with Billy Mammus, his two wives & son [and a number of other relations]. These people were mostly from the bush, just come in to see the family...³⁵

Billy took her to see what she called ‘his bonefish spot’, the main totemic centre of his estate, after which she said ‘I think I will stick to Billy for a while & try to get up to the Archer River.’³⁶ Stick to him she did, and he and his family were her close companions for months.

³³ McConel (1928[]).

³⁴ Mission card for Billy Mammus, which appears to have been filled in during January 1929. This part of the card also noted: ‘Hookworm [treatments given]: 22/6/29, 13/8/29, 4/11/29, 18/8/30, 20/10/32. Blankets: 18/6/27, 2.’

³⁵ McConnell to Radcliffe-Brown 10/6/27.

³⁶ McConnell to Radcliffe-Brown 10/6/27

Discovering Billy had a second wife Rosie, McConnel said she

set about making her acquaintance, and found her a stalwart ally. To these three friends I owe any success I may have achieved whilst working among the bush people.³⁷

This statement may sound extravagant, but Billy Mammus himself, with or without his wives, dominates McConnel's references to individual Aboriginal people both in her published and unpublished material.³⁸ His is one of the few Wik genealogies recorded by McConnel that remains available. It is the only one to survive in manuscript form, copied into a letter to Radcliffe-Brown.³⁹ Tragically her field notes appear lost. She also published his photograph in one of her first publications, although without providing his name.⁴⁰

The apparent reason why Billy did not accompany her on her ground-breaking packhorse trip to Kendall River in 1928 [check date, letter ref] was that he was either unable or unwilling, more likely unwilling in my view, to join her. It was, after all, well to the south of Billy's country, on the coast, and even though he had a grandmother [check details] from the area he may have had good reason to want to avoid it.

McConnel's focus was not entirely on Billy Mammus or indeed on men generally, but she was shown aspects of ceremonies normally privy to men only, and collected sacred sculptures which were highly restricted to men at the time. Of Billy's wives Jinny and Rosie McConnel said early in her field experience that she was 'trying to get at Jinny's & Rosie's minds - & thru' theirs to the other womens'. [letter ref] But McConnel, unlike her near contemporary Phyllis Kaberry, was not aiming specifically at a study focused on women. Her pursuit of gender equality as an anthropologist was not framed in terms of concentrating her work on women, but in terms of tackling most of the same topics normally covered by the men who dominated the professional scene of her day. These were principally social and local organisation, and religion. Less conventionally, she also took a considerable interest in the interpretation of dreams.⁴¹

I would not go so far as to say this was a case of today's progressivism being tomorrow's lost opportunity, because the evidence is not clear that McConnel was

³⁷ McConnel (1928 []).

³⁸ See eg. McConnel (1930:193; 1935:68; 1936:472; 1937:351; 1940: 446,447,454; 1957:39-43, 48-49, 74, 119-124).

³⁹ McConnel to Radcliffe-Brown 12/5/27. The relevant letter page was reproduced in O'Gorman (1993:97)

⁴⁰ McConnel (1930:plate V(A); Billy Mammus on the left, Charley Doctor on the right, concluded from her shot list and correspondence [details?]).

⁴¹ Refs

actually a progressive in regard to gender roles generally.⁴² Anne O’Gorman even noted that, ‘[l]ike Olive Pink, [McConnel had a tendency to elevate men’.⁴³ Pink’s biographer Julie Marcus did say that Pink wanted equality with men: she ‘wanted to study precisely what the men studied and did not want to be caught up in work which everyone else thought was of minor significance’. Unlike McConnel, Marcus tells us that Pink saw women’s lives as trivial compared with the men’s, on top of which ‘she liked very few women at all, whether Aboriginal or European’.⁴⁴ Pink said the men with whom she worked in Central Australia ‘treated me as sexless as far as their secret life is concerned (or like ‘an old man’)’.⁴⁵ This neutralisation is akin to what happens partially, at least, when Aboriginal women and men become so senior in ‘the Law’ that gender recedes as a factor in determining who may know what. Relevantly, perhaps, in the Wik languages it has been customary to refer to Europeans of any age, including infants, by the local words for ‘old woman’ and ‘old man’.

McConnel seemed somewhat surprised that at the second stage male initiations of the area, which were ‘very much more prolonged, secretive & drastic’ than the first stage, ‘nothing really takes place which the women might not see, with one exception as far as I could fathom from Mr MacKenzie [the Superintendent]’.⁴⁶

According to McConnel he once asked her: “‘What about this flour, Mum, torri (totem) bin make him?’”⁴⁷ & then he told me that yams were plentiful at Yonke [Cape Keerweer] because there was a yam torri there = “torri bin make’im”.⁴⁸ Actually Billy addressed Ursula not only as ‘Mum’ but also as ‘Sir’, and sometimes, ‘with a non-committal and puzzled air, as “Mum-Sir”’. McConnel tells us this after observing that ‘Billy was amused at the idea of a woman boss’.⁴⁹

[incomplete]

Billy Mammus died in April 1937.⁵⁰

Raiwalla and Donald Thomson (1930s)

[incomplete]

⁴² Like several of her anthropological contemporaries she enjoyed her upper-class connections (pedigree, Mayo connections etc).

⁴³ O’Gorman (1993:94).

⁴⁴ Marcus (2001:77-78, 115).

⁴⁵ Marcus (2001:203).

⁴⁶ McConnel to Radcliffe-Brown 1/7/27.

⁴⁷ *Torri* is the English word ‘Story’, which is the common Cape York Peninsula translation for what are more widely known as Dreamings, totems or Ancestral Beings.

⁴⁸ I comment here only on the fact that Billy called Ursula Mum, although much could be said also about Billy’s question, which suggests the kind of inquiry into European culture that every now and then belies the often repeated generalisation that Aboriginal people of remote places have shown little interest in the workings, as opposed to the products, of the West.

⁴⁹ McConnel (1928[]).

⁵⁰ Aurukun Mission card for Billy Mammus.

Durmugam (Smiler) and W.E.H. Stanner (1930s-1950s)

W.E.H. Stanner acknowledged long term relationships with a number of Aboriginal people, including Pandak of what was then Port Keats, whom he described as ‘close friend’ for over forty years between the 1930s and 1970s.⁵¹ The relationship of which he has left us the most detailed published record however, and one that is justly famous, is that between himself and Durmugam, or Smiler as he was also known.

In 1932 at Daly River, after seeing Durmugam perform superbly as a combatant in a major spear-fight involving more than a hundred men and over a hundred onlookers, Stanner was ‘much taken with him’ on meeting him personally. He was also immediately invited by Durmugam to make his camp near his own, at the Daly River crossing. Once again the forces at play in the two being drawn together were in some ways shared, but it was probably Durmugam who in a sense claimed Stanner first. This impression is compounded when we learn that, at a circumcision ceremony some time later, Stanner was joined by Durmugam who sat with him.

I soon began to feel that we could become friends. I could not fault his manner and found him to be quick to see the drift of questions. When he pointed out some of the ceremony’s features which I had missed, I began to see him as a new main informant, always one of the most exciting moments of fieldwork.⁵²

The two men were to work together intensively in 1935, and also spent time together in 1952, 1954 and 1958, the year before Durmugam passed away. As is usually the case, we have only the researcher’s record of the relationship, so that when the author said that he did not believe Durmugam ‘ever formed a deep attachment to any European, myself included’,⁵³ we have to remind ourselves that this comes from only half, though perhaps more than half, of an ideally dual picture of the relationship. We also need to recall that from around the age of thirty Durmugam met an ‘energetic, vital European, who gave him work at a variety of jobs ... At the end of the [1920s] this man went to the Daly River to try his fortune as a farmer. Durmugam joined forces with him and, apart from a few interruptions, remained in permanent association with him.’⁵⁴

Stanner’s account of Durmugam has elements we see elsewhere in records of such relationships, though probably none of these is present in each account: at the

⁵¹ Stanner (1979:26).

⁵² Stanner (1979 (1959):71).

⁵³ Stanner (1979 (1959):98).

⁵⁴ Stanner (1979 (1959):82-83).

outset Durmugam chose Stanner as his anthropologist more than Stanner chose him as 'main informant'; Durmugam showed enormous solicitude, courtesy, loyalty and generosity towards Stanner, shepherding him through the bush, breaking off or holding back foliage that might impede Stanner, even plunging into crocodile-infested waters to retrieve wildfowl; Durmugam took Stanner as a 'boss' (*marluka*); Durmugam had great mental stamina and had a gift for explaining things by the use of visual demonstrations; he had a constant temper, and was prudent and judicious about making observations.

Perhaps above all, Stanner praises Durmugam for his truthfulness. That is not to say anything about the truth in an objectified sense, but merely to address the extent to which Stanner felt confident that Durmugam was being straight with him. This is a difficult subject to discuss when the focus is on the meeting of two so profoundly foreign approaches to the problem of knowledge, with their odd mixture of commonalities – such as the appeal to empirical observation as evidence for propositions, and a basically identical approach to deductive logic – alongside some deep differences such as the role of publication and secrecy, the acceptability of questioning, and the nexus between religious power and the privilege of being right. Like all field workers Stanner wanted knowledge, and like all who have proceeded broadly within the Western scientific tradition he needed to feel that the person mainly giving him so much instruction was 'reliable'.

In the essay, Stanner actually draws two contrasting portraits, one of the truthful Durmugam, the other of another man called Tjimari or Wagin (probably 'wagon').⁵⁵ Of Durmugam he said:

I never proved that he misled me, and found him correct on innumerable occasions. He had a feeling for the truth, whereas Tjimari had none. Durmugam would be very open if he made mistakes and offer the correction candidly.⁵⁶

The two men 'made an interesting comparison', part of which included the following:

Tjimari was at least Durmugam's equal with fighting weapons, though only half his size. ...I found [Tjimari] to be a fascinating mixture – a liar, a thief, an inveterate trickster, a tireless intriguer, an artist of high ability, and a man of much if inaccurate knowledge. ... I thought him an arch-manipulator, with wit and charm but no principles, and ready for any villainy that paid.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Tjimari was the first Aboriginal person Stanner met (Stanner (1979 (1959):72).

⁵⁶ Stanner (1979 (1959):90).

⁵⁷ Stanner (1979 (1959):72,74).

Stanner was clearly not interested in homogenising or idealising personality along lines marked out by race or culture. He was critical of Roland Robinson for, while greatly admiring Tjimari's 'intelligence, knowledge, and imaginative gifts', at the same time taking 'a somewhat sentimental view of other aspects of his character'.⁵⁸ Stanner also took what in more recent times, at least, would be regarded as considerable political risks by pursuing his own truthfulness and capacity for self-questioning. Even where the language of these passages remains crafted with poise, they can also be quite raw. What is remarkable is the broadly high esteem in which Stanner has continued to be held, and rightly so, in spite of his often brutal honesty, over the decades.

But truthfulness is not necessarily a good uniter of people. Fictions, or mere simplicitudes, so often better bind us – at least for a time. The end of political consensus on Australian indigenous policy, which has been taking place over the last several years, has been a casualty less of the standard Left-Right tensions of 'race politics' than of a battle to get vested interests to acknowledge and deal squarely with the various profound failures of policy and practice rather than to re-emphasise alleged solutions that will magically materialise after further changes in stratospheric rights. Even people who support a treaty, formal reconciliation and reparations, for example, can no longer be counted on to believe the myth that these things will put food in the bellies of toddlers in the bush. Some of them, who might be identified as the southern urban soft Left, have now become targets of criticism and rejection even by those for whom they have long formed a key supportive audience (Langton 2002 in Overland, Manne in *The Age* 27/5/02). There is a sense around that the old political alignments have been thrown up in the air. No one yet knows where the pieces will fall. Are we in an interregnum between illusions? I hope not. My feeling is that the current wave of unusual honesty and self-examination in indigenous affairs needs to proceed a while longer before the future becomes any clearer.

What anthropologist of the last three decades has written so freely and openly, as Stanner did in this single memoir dedicated to an admired friend, of things such as the details of Durmugam's 'record of blood' - his admitted killings of four other men in the region. While all could be interpreted as being in accordance with customary law, in one case Stanner did comment: 'If [his] duty coincided too neatly with his personal interest, the same might be said of many honoured men in history' (88). The absence of moral judgement here by Stanner is, I think, genuine.

Stanner also wrote in this essay of the 'endless, bloody fights between the river and the back-country tribes, and numbers of drink-sodden Aborigines lying out in the rain' (82) recalled from Durmugam's youth. He described the eagerness of local women for associations with Europeans and Chinese men in the 1930s, their own men 'often push[ing] them to such service'. He put forward his view that what was left of the religious tradition of the area 'amounted to a Low Culture', as

⁵⁸ Stanner (1979 (1959):72,74).

opposed to the High Culture then still extant in some other regions (83-84). He said that the people's economic condition 'bound them to parasitism on a settlement where the farmers themselves barely had enough to eat' (85). He reported that 'what the women thought' about Sunday Business 'did not matter' from the men's point of view (85). And so on. All this in the midst of a passionate admiration not only for Aboriginal High Culture and for the society's high elaboration of social rules, forms and norms (101), but also in the midst of a celebration of Durmugam's apparently resolved, mature and vigorous reflection of traditional Daly River ideas about what it was to be a fully initiated and accomplished man. The fire in his belly was not characterised as a 'social problem', but as a dimension of his manliness.⁵⁹

One of the things Stanner most seems to have liked about Durmugam was his rock-like commitment to his own people's view of the world. He had a self-contained dignity in the midst of the lower Daly peanut croppers of the time who were consistently portrayed by Stanner as a kind of bad-joke version of Saltbush Bill.⁶⁰ Durmugam had, he tells us, 'found a way of living with duality, an oafish Europeanism and an Aboriginal idealism' (101), not by allowing the fact that in some sense both occupied a common space, or dwelt in an intersection of social fields or domains, but because *psychologically* he was able to dissociate the two realms. While he preferred one, he could live with two (102). Durmugam switched between these two incommensurate worlds rather than attempting any integration of them.⁶¹ Stanner's portrait here, as at many points, is decidedly modern, with its searching of individual personality and character.

I wonder if the decline of such sharp dualisms of individual thinking, resting on a decline in the necessity to alternate between one clearly marked domain and the other, which in turn has been attendant on advancing cultural convergence and social integration over much of Australia, has itself influenced social models which may now seek to account for inter-ethnic relations in terms of a single shared domain.⁶²

⁵⁹ Add ref to 'hot bellied' etc from Stanner.

⁶⁰ Contrast this with the 'European of sensibility' who knew Durmugam in his later life and who remarked on his 'dignity, patience, courtesy to Europeans and readiness to meet any requests for help' (Stanner 1979 (1959):102).

⁶¹ Of John Mathew's Kabi Kabi informant Kagariu (Johnny Campbell, 1846-1880), Mathew's biographer has written: 'Mathew was clearly fascinated by Campbell – he did not fit an Aboriginal stereotype. After all, Mathew did not come to anthropology via the study of 'scientific specimens', but through the accidents of personal acquaintance. / It is easy enough to see Johnny Campbell as an incomprehensible victim. It is also easy to paint him as a black Robin Hood. He was typical and not typical, a black man who welcomed much of the white world without leaving his kin, traditional life and skills behind. He was in, not between two cultures, impatient with one, unhappy in the other. . . . He had personal demons, not just racial ones. His relationships with women were generally short and unstable. He lost his father as an infant. There was no general crusade against all Europeans: he was used well by some whites and badly by others, and reacted accordingly. He was a bushranger like other bushrangers, but his use of bushcraft and kinship links to remain at large were also Aboriginal. He was an individualist, though one who used kinship when he needed to' (Prentis 1998:66-67).

⁶² See Merlan (), ?Cowlshaw, Morris?, Lattas?, Wolf?

Lazarus Lamilami and Ronald Berndt (1947-1970s).

[incomplete]

Mick McLean (Irinanyi) and Luise Hercus (1960s)

[incomplete]

Ellen Campbell Atkinson and Diane Barwick (1960s)

[incomplete]

Peret Arkwookerum and John von Sturmer (1970s)

[incomplete]

John has recently written to me:

I'm working towards a point - which I suspect you yourself are considering: namely, that such relationships do develop in particular contexts, that they are counter-relationships to what is otherwise on offer (seen clearest here in relation to McConnell and the mission regime), and that, far from supported, they may be seen as actively threatening. What is crucial to these relationships is that they create their own order - in which blackness/[versus]whiteness and the rest of the categorical baggage simply go out the window. It is this possibility which is so fiercely resisted by people on both sides of the black/white divide - which they so busily re-create and insist on in order to maintain the sorts of interests which arise only in [those] circumstances in which the divide may be maintained.

Topsy Nelson Napurrula and Diane Bell (1970s-1990s)

[incomplete]

While reflecting on that observation of John's, I was reminded that Napurrula once said:

Since 1975 Diane and I have been working together. I didn't have anyone to write my stories, I asked Diane to. She really close to me.

I had no Aborigine to write this. Diane is like a sister; best friend. She wrote all this down for me. That's OK - women to women; it doesn't matter black or white.⁶³

Some years later Diane herself said this:

...if we think of race as a given, all we can do is react. In such situations our modes of interaction are circumscribed by the construct "race" and the boundaries of the person become fixed. Before we can engage in dialogue, we have to breach these socially constructed boundaries. ...

In my view, a feminism drawing on female friendship bespeaks a more robust feminist future than one cringing before socially constructed categories. If the cross-cultural politic is to be co-operative, the exchanges have to be two-way...⁶⁴

Conclusion

Why my title, 'Unusual Couples'? I meant it in two ways. Yes, it has been historically unusual for two people to commit themselves in such a demanding way to the creation of knowledge and understanding across what has often been a vast cultural divide, and over such long periods. There have been other such pairs than those created by research, but it is those associated with research and publication that arguably have had the widest impact on the rest of us.

Not only have these relationships been rather unusual in Australia's history, they have also had few consistent parallels anywhere outside the geographic spread of European colonialism, or in any earlier time than the nineteenth century. As a model of how to 'grow up' an ignorant newcomer to one's place, and of how to be 'grown up' as an anthropologist, linguist or other researcher whose job is to in turn educate a wider audience, the 'unusual couple' in the mode I have discussed here should not be assumed to be a permanent fixture. Its short and interesting past, however, has arguably underpinned many milestones in the overcoming of ignorance and prejudice. These milestones tend to be written works, widely available in a largely open globally spread society, one that has many secrets but also a cultural commitment to freedom of information, one whose people would, if they thought about it, probably see things like medical, technological, political and economic advances as dependent on the free circulation of publicly testable knowledge.

⁶³ Nelson (1991).

⁶⁴ Bell (1996:251).

For members of a relatively closed society restrictions on knowledge may not lead to impoverishment but to the reverse, a retaining of things of highest value, a guarding of the sacred. After much thought I remain puzzled as to the generosity with which Aboriginal people have told so much, revealed so much, to anthropologists and others in the past, not only to make an urgent record of almost forgotten traditions, but even in cases where the religious systems have remained vigorous.

The ease with which female scholars have been made privy to the male secret religious life, at least in the past, remains a related puzzle. In some areas there are signs that the welcome mat for visiting scholars has been worn thin by regrettable experiences, and it has become generally unacceptable for researchers of one gender to seek out restricted knowledge belonging to the other. The days of female anthropologists being treated as honorary males may be over, although we now have a recent inversion of this: Aboriginal women being prepared to reveal secret business to male judges during land claim hearings, under appropriate restrictions.

The final puzzle I will mention here is that of our ability to connect across what in many cases seems a deep gulf, a gulf not just of manners and grammars but of understandings about what it means to be a person, a friend, a stranger, a relative, a 'boss', an 'informant', and so on.

'Friends', 'kin', 'colleagues' – why are all these one-off tags for these particular kinds of relationships so inadequate, masking as they do the complexity of the phenomena? Relationships may be emotionally or intellectually close or distant in quite different ways, depending on which of the pair of people one is thinking of. The visiting researcher has generally arrived 'in the field' with the baggage of a modern western conception of an emotionally positive, voluntary relationship of an already known kind, namely friendship. It is one that has parallels but no precise equivalent in classical Aboriginal thinking. Nor has the cultural relativism that has so often informed the mood of openness and acceptance among researchers any classical indigenous parallel.

Warner, McConnel, Thomson and Pink were among the strongest advocates of cultural relativism in the inter-war years, a point on which the last three, at least, clashed with mission authorities. But relativism's embracing of difference does not necessarily extend to conversion. Aboriginal people have often tested me by asking if I believed what they had told me about the creation of the landscape or about sorcery accusations, for example, or have asked if I too had seen a spirit-image of a recently deceased person during the ceremony for sending it home to its country. Like a church-going non-believer, I have given 'when in Rome' kinds of answers, and answers based on fellow feeling rather than unity of cosmology. This testing, I suspect, must almost always lead to disappointment. It reveals one of the irreducible differences between the people in the relationships I discuss

here. McConnel may have been ‘tested’ on her visit to the Bonefish Story Place on Small Archer River in 1927: ‘As we passed by in a canoe I was asked if I had heard the heart of the bone-fish beating’.⁶⁵ She did not tell us what her answer was.

But both kinship and friendship can survive cultural difference. Thirty years ago when carrying out linguistic survey work in far north Queensland, and many times later, I was struck by the translations people offered for the English word ‘friend’. The literal meanings of the answers ranged from cross-cousin, to lover (often in the sense of *bandji*),⁶⁶ to fellow initiation novice, to a term for ‘company’ (as in keeping a visitor company by sleeping at the same fire) – there were probably others – but the common factor was generally that no one-to-one equivalence was there. I am aware that in some languages there may be closer equivalents.⁶⁷ But one dimension of the asymmetry in the way these relationships were conceived of by the two parties is a cleavage between understandings of closeness. In particular, the scholars have tended to report their experiences in terms of a European tradition of ‘friendship’ without telling us much about how their opposite number experienced the encounter with the other party.

Typically, a relation of fictive or adoptive kinship is established between the two people, because of an Aboriginal initiative to do so. Not just any kind of relationship will do. People have generally structured the relationship in only a few of all possible ways. At the point of incorporation the researcher is typically made a son, a daughter or a sibling of the person first ‘claiming’ them as kin [CHECK].⁶⁸ There are other kinds of genealogical links established, and there are cases where no kin incorporation takes place, or a person is assigned a kin status on the basis of their relationship to another person, even to another non-indigenous person.

Kin incorporation can be of prime importance in granting members of the host community knowledge of how to behave towards the new kinsperson, given that familiarity, restraint, food-giving, joking and swearing, for example, are widely

⁶⁵ McConnel (1930:193).

⁶⁶ Sometimes regarded as an indigenous word, *bandji* is in my opinion short for *bandjiman*, a formerly more common version, which is an Aboriginal pronunciation of the English term ‘fancy-man’ or male lover, a man who fancies, and, one presumes, is fancied.

⁶⁷ It is likely, as one would expect on various grounds, that the higher the negotiability of genealogical distance in an Aboriginal subculture, the higher the salience of ‘friendships’ would be. I am thinking here of the Western Desert, where relationships described as *marlpa*, usually translated as ‘company, companion, friend, similar species, mates, boyfriend/girlfriend’ etc, seem to play a stronger role than similar kinds of relationships in north Australia in the places with which I have some familiarity. See eg. *malpa* or *marlpa* in Goddard (1996:67), Valiquette (1993:77), Marsh (1992:171; can refer to a weapon as well as a human being), and *yamatji* (Douglas 1988:113).

⁶⁸ McConnel’s status as ‘mother’ for Billy Mammus may have been derived from an earlier incorporation as kin to someone else. It is worth noting, however, that the mission superintendent and his wife were ‘father’ and ‘mother’ to everybody at Aurukun and McConnel’s role may have been identified to an extent with that of Geraldine MacKenzie.

subject to customary rules about how to behave with which particular kin. More importantly, perhaps, kin incorporation renders the researcher socially real, or at least socially present, in a way otherwise not very attainable, where people have maintained a system of classificatory kinship. Just as 'friendship' naturalises the newcomer's experience of their hosts, 'kinship' does something similar for the hosts' capacity to treat the researcher in a positive and realistic way. Both kinds of relationship impose their own forms of mutual demand. But their demands overlap, rather than coincide. For this reason, when one party experiences the relationship primarily in terms of 'friendship' and the other primarily in terms of 'kinship', each is likely to notice that the other sometimes fails to meet expectations.

One also has to consider the possibility that one or both halves of the equation experiences the other person through a mixture of knowledge and illusion, insight and fantasy. Of itself this would hardly be exceptional in the field of human relationships. But where deep cultural differences are involved, it can be a tribute to the humanity of both parties that their efforts to connect can actually work, and so often have worked, to contribute to the rich fabric of understanding and appreciation of Australia's cultures that we enjoy today.

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