The journeys before the journey:
An analysis of ‘hithering and thithering’ or, what takes place before you can go on a trip in Yuendumu, a remote Aboriginal settlement

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Abstract:
Based on research with Warlpiri people from the remote central Australian Aboriginal settlement of Yuendumu (N.T.), this paper describes and analyses an often observed but seldom discussed practice: the immediate pre-journey movements undertaken by Warlpiri people (and other Aboriginal people elsewhere) before leaving the settlement (to go hunting, shopping at Alice Springs, visiting other settlements, etc). It presents one detailed case study of this social practice, outlining the actual workings of it in order to achieve three aims. (1) To explain this practice and remedy certain (common) misconceptions about it, (2) to link it to the understanding of everyday Aboriginal sociality, and (3) to create awareness that the study of intra-settlement mobility (in distinction to the much more prominent inter-community mobility studies) is a worthwhile undertaking.

In this paper, I ethnographically explore an often commented upon, much puzzled over, but never academically analysed phenomenon: the practice in remote Aboriginal Australia, of spending considerable time driving around the settlement before eventually setting off on any planned trip away from the settlement. The paper itself takes three journeys: Firstly, it follows and illustrates my own path as I travelled from incomprehension of this practice (as well as being frequently frustrated by it) via developing an on the ground comprehension of its significances and values to an analytic understanding of it as an integral element of remote settlement everyday social practice.
Secondly, through the ethnographic case study presented here, it follows the journeys I and a number of Warlpiri people took before we set off on a hunting trip. And thirdly, this paper ventures out from the ethnographic case study of a particular instance to situating this practice within a wider framework linking mobility to sociality, identifying their interaction as constitutive of any academic understanding of contemporary everyday remote settlement life.

Data for this paper derives from a total of almost three years worth of participant-observation based fieldwork, conducted over the past 12 years at Yuendumu, a remote Aboriginal settlement in central Australia, located about 300 kilometres northwest of the town of Alice Springs. Set up in 1946 as a government ration station, today, it has a fluctuating population of up to 800 Aboriginal people, mainly Warlpiri speakers, as well as about one hundred non-Indigenous Australians (mostly service providers in government agencies). As the main focus of my work has been on ‘everyday life’, I always lived ‘in camp’ with Warlpiri people when at Yuendumu. Residents generally speak Warlpiri in my presence, which I understand well even if I don’t speak it very fluently. Living with my ‘informants’ meant that the insights I gained into everyday life often are not interview or explanation-based so much but rather ‘learned’ through doing. Apart from the actual ethnography of and argument about the ‘journeys before the journey’, this paper also is a call to more consultative ways of doing (and understanding) social interaction. In this regard, it is an example of how doing and experiencing social action teaches us about things/issues that might have been overlooked in a more goal-directed approach. If, say, we focus research on hunting, and pursue the issue through interviews and so forth, in all likelihood we would never find out about what happens before people leave the settlement on a hunting trip, simply because it would not occur to us to ask. In this sense, the paper is a call toward more embodied research practices.

Before going on a trip, no matter whether heading out on a hunting trip for a few hours or going on a week-long trip to a place 500 kilometres away, the car (or cars) to take the travellers drive(s) around Yuendumu, from one camp to the shop, to another camp, back to the first one, and so on usually at least for half an hour, often much longer. Although every anthropologist (as well as many of the non-Indigenous service providers situated in remote settlements) I know who has worked in central Australia is aware of this practice,
and often impatient with it, I could find neither a name for it nor anthropological or sociological discussions of it. In my notebooks I called this practice ‘hithering & thithering’, which I abbreviated in entries to ‘h & t’, so that there are daily entries such as “2 hours of h&t before we got out”.

Initially, ‘h&t’ used to drive me crazy. I failed to understand its internal reasoning and its purpose, interpreting it instead as ‘disorganised’ behaviour. All that is needed for a hunting trip, I thought, is a car, people, crowbars, water, and some food (just in case). Considering that logistically this should be quite easy to organise, initially I used to despair about the amount of time it took from having the first woman hop into the car to finally being out on the road. It took me a while to get used to ‘h & t’, and even longer to fully comprehend its meanings.

Largely, this impatience was due to me, as the driver, having a different idea about the purpose of driving than any of my Warlpiri passengers in the car. Focussing on the destination of the trip, ‘h&t’ became a chore, something that invariably and inevitably happened before we ‘hit the road’. While driving around Yuendumu impatient for getting to where we were heading, I did not for quite a while realise that ‘h&t’ was as much part of the trip as was driving from Yuendumu to X. The first time I realised this, significantly, was when I was a passenger myself in a car driven by another non-Indigenous person in preparation for a trip to some site west of Yuendumu. As the person understanding both sides, that is the requests and comments made in Warlpiri on the one hand and the non-Indigenous driver’s incomprehension on the other—all of a sudden, I was the one giving instructions to the driver as to which camp we needed to drive to next, that another stop at the shop had become necessary, and so forth. Because of my role as translator (instead of my role as driver, focussed on driving and ‘getting on the road’) and because of my awareness of the actual driver’s impatience I not only translated the requests (“drive to shop”) but added explanations of my own (“we do need to drive to the shop because M. wants to withdraw some money which she hopes she’ll be able to give to her grandson, should we pass through settlement X on our way”). After this experience, I began paying more attention to ‘h & t’, and started seeing it as an end in itself, not only as part of the exasperating preliminaries to a trip. In the following, I describe one particular instance of ‘h&t’ which happened before a number of us (myself
and some Warlpiri people) went on a hunting trip. It is important to note that while I here focus on a particular hunting trip, that any kind of trip away from Yuendumu requires ‘h & t’; and that the general points I make here hold independently of destination and purpose.

A hunting trip often is ‘planned’ in advance by people suggesting “we might go hunting, maybe tomorrow?” hoping that something will develop out of it. Planning to go hunting first of all will pose the problem of where to go hunting. Even if the initial suggestion is “we might go hunting at Wayililinypa [an outstation and the country surrounding it about 60 kilometres south of Yuendumu], full up with yam” this needs to be confirmed, okayed, and verified. Povinelli (1993) has described the ‘language of indeterminacy’ that permeates the decision making of Belyuen women as they ‘decide’ where to go hunting and for what in any given instance. She notes that an “important dimension to the sociality of hunting is the relationship among knowledge claims, responsibility – culpability, and authority – status” (1993:685), drawing out the fields underlying women’s hesitancy in determining the cause of action. The situation at Yuendumu is identical. The decision of where to hunt is not one easily made and partly underlies the ‘hithering and thithering’ illustrated by the following case study.

Yams were in season at Wayililinypa, and a few days earlier Leah from South Camp had suggested to me that we could go hunting “might be anytime”, meaning whenever it suited if I felt like it. Note that Yuendumu has a number of ‘suburb-like entities’, four of which are named after the cardinal directions, i.e. North Camp, South Camp, and so forth. These are not to be confused with individual camps (spelled here with a small letter ‘c’), which are the residences in which Warlpiri people live. In short: a Camp (capital letter) contains many camps (small letter) (for more detail see Musharbash, 2003).

A few days later, as I was having breakfast in the camp I was living in at the time, I repeated her invitation to my co-residents and announced my plan to take her up on it that day. Polly and Celeste asked if they could come along, marlpa-ku, for company. “Sure”, I said, and they and Celeste’s son Neil hopped into the Toyota. The four of us drove over to South Camp to pick up Leah. She suggested that we also take her daughter Rita and her sister Eva, as well as Rita’s nephew Marcel. From Leah’s camp, now eight of us in
the car, we drove over to East Camp, to the place where a number of women holding custodianship over Wayililinypa at that time lived. As Wayililinypa is their country, we wanted to let them know that we were going there.

Most of them had already left to go hunting themselves earlier that day, but Lina and Celia did not get a lift then and were very keen on going, too. Polly said in that case she would stay behind so there would be enough room for them. We drove back from East Camp to our home in Inner West Camp to drop off Polly and then returned to East Camp to pick up Lina. Celia in the meantime had gone to her camp to pack. Lina’s crowbar was at her husband’s camp in South Camp, so we drove there from East Camp to pick it up, and then on to North Camp to fetch Celia and when we got there, two of her little granddaughters hopped in as well. While at Celia’s camp in North Camp, Neil chatted to one of the boys there and heard that his older sister Camilla had bought a new video, so he asked to be dropped off at her place in East Camp where they were watching it. Also, the car by now was not only very full, but full exclusively with females. Neil chose a polite way of opting out of the trip. After dropping him off at his sister’s place in East Camp, we went to the shop so everybody could buy drinks and oranges, and ran into Moira who asked whether she could come along.

There were now ten people in the car, including three children, and some discussion ensued about what to do. Moira is a very good hunter and she would be fun to take along, so it was decided that Eva might as well stay behind, as she is partly paralysed in one of her legs and thus not a hunter, but a person who stokes the fire, waiting for the hunters to return to share their yams with her. We drove back to South Camp to drop off Eva, back to the shop to pick up Moira and then to West Camp where she was living to pick up her crowbar. On the way back we stopped at my home camp in Inner West Camp to get our own crowbars and the big jerry can for water, only to discover that somebody had borrowed it. Lina said she had one in South Camp so we went there and got her jerry can, then returned to the shop to fill up the Toyota with diesel and then were on our way to Wayililinypa. Figure 1 shows the paths we took during this ‘h&t’ for a short hunting trip.
Figure 1: Map of ‘hithering and thithering’ before going hunting at Wayililinypa (from Musharbash 2003:184).

Drawing a map of the paths a car follows during the ‘h&t’ before any one (hunting or other kind of) trip, one inevitably comes up with something very similar to Figure 1, namely, a representation of a finely spun web connecting a number of camps and other places distributed over several of Yuendumu’s ‘suburbs’, and often spanning over the whole geography of the settlement. The Oxford English Dictionary translates the
expression ‘to hither and thither’ as ‘to go to and fro; to move about in various directions’. And rather than disorganisation being the root of this practice (as I sometimes erroneously thought when I first arrived at Yuendumu), it is the purposeful moving about in various directions, the tying of connections that underlies it.

It is not just the paths and their connecting feature that are significant, but what actually takes place at each stop. Usually, a stop, for example, at a camp so crowbars can be picked up, involves intense discursive activity between the people in the car and the people in the camp. During these brief (and sometimes not so brief) periods all sorts of ‘essential’ information is exchanged and if need be, new decisions pertaining to the planned trip are made. The people in the car broadcast their intentions, the anticipated itinerary the trip will take, the intended composition of people going, ideas about the time of return and so on. From the people at the camp they receive similar information about other trips in preparation, as well as any other news and gossip people in the camp have received from others, passing by or briefly stopping. In turn, at the next stop information about other hunting parties as well as the gossip is ‘exchanged’ and up-dated so that within the one hour or so that ‘h&t’ usually takes, both the people in the car as well as most people in camps at Yuendumu will be updated on anything that there is to know. This is also why ‘h&t’ often includes quick stops at any of Yuendumu’s organisations and institutions, to quickly inform those who are at work of something just found out that may concern them.

“What do you need to go on a hunting trip?”, I used to think. “People, crowbars, matches, water, and off we go”. Originally, ‘h&t’ struck me as an indicator of some kind of disorganisation (focussed as I was on the aim of the journey). To believe ‘hithering and thithering’ is caused by lack of organisation is to utterly fail to understand this practice, which fulfils a range of vital purposes. It is a crucial activity underlying sociality. Approval needs to be sought for most actions, however implicitly, e.g. in the case study approval needed to be sought for the purpose and destination from those people responsible for the country the trip was going to be made to. The ‘h&t’ in the first instance thus informs all people with a right to know of the intended trip and gauges its acceptability in terms of destination, itinerary and composition of people going. A point underscoring the importance of this approval seeking is the fact that regularly after a bit
of ‘h&t’ the planned destination and/or itinerary and/or the composition of people in the
car change. It is not uncommon at all to start off with four people in a car planning to go
hunting out east and end up with seven other people going west instead.

‘Hithering and thithering’ is exactly about connecting people and places. The map in
Figure 1 outlines the paths taken, and presents a visual image of the web thus spun during
one particular episode of ‘h & t’. Realistically, what needs to also be taken into account is
the fact that simultaneously to us driving around, other cars with other people in them
were occupied in the same activity, as well as the numerous paths taken by people
involved in walking around, a practice locally called cruising. If one were to draw a map
of the entire extent of ‘h&t’ and cruising taking place at Yuendumu during one hour, the
illustration would be black with the quantity of lines needed to draw this, underscoring
the intensity of lived sociality and the multitude of social interconnections interweaving
with each other at Yuendumu during the day.

One of the most salient features of everyday life in remote Aboriginal settlements is
immediacy (see also Musharbash n.d.). This immediacy is created by people privileging
interaction and communication over anything else. Mobility, as I have described here, is
the ‘glue’ that holds the webs of interaction together, and it is also, excuse the pun,
driving it. There is quite an extensive literature on inter-community mobility in
Aboriginal Australia (see amongst many others Beckett 1988; Peterson 2000; Taylor
1996; Taylor and Bell 1996; Young n.d.; Young and Doohan 1989). Yet, inter-settlement
mobility, has largely been ignored. I hope to have shown, however, that it is not only a
crucial element of the lived everyday in remote settlements, but that paying attention to it
and analyzing it academically is a worthy undertaking: not only does this correct some of
our potential misconceptions about everyday social practices, but it enhances our
understanding of Indigenous sociality.
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