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3. Burning the truck and holding the country: property, time, and the negotiation identity among Pintupi Aborigines

Fred Myers

If they are not given their shares, this denies their kinship. . . . A man's variegated relationships with others run through his chattels as well as his land; and the measure of how far he feels the correct sentiments in those relationships is the way he deals with his property and his produce (Gluckman 1965: 45).

The social life of objects

This chapter is concerned with the indigenous meanings attributed to a variety of 'objects' among Pintupi-speaking Aborigines of the Australian Western Desert.¹ My argument is that, for the Pintupi, 'things' (objects, ritual, land, prerogatives, duties) have meaning (that is, significance or social value) largely as expressions of both autonomy and what I have elsewhere defined as 'relatedness' or shared identity (Myers 1986). In this regard, land-ownership is not a special kind of property: it is not a special set of rights defining relationships to an ecologically necessary 'living space'.² Instead, it is one more form of objectifying social relationships of shared identity. This is to say that, among the Pintupi, as among many hunter-gatherers, the use-value of rights to 'things' is not at all obvious. Rather than being organised, as

1. Fieldwork with the Pintupi has been funded by NSF, NIMH, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies at Yayayi, NT (1973-5), Yayayi and Yinyilingki (1979), New Bore (1980-1), and the Central Land Council at Kintore and Kiwirrkura (1984). The present chapter is an abridged version of a longer paper, with the same title, that will appear in a volume edited by Ed Wilmsen entitled *We are here*. I am grateful to Ed and to the organizers of the Fourth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies for permitting this double publication. I would like to thank Annette Weiner and Faye Ginsburg for their helpful comments in organizing and editing this chapter. They are not, of course, responsible for whatever flaws remain.

2. The focus of this chapter stresses the logic of relatedness. This is not to deny entirely the ecological significance of land-ownership, but rather to point out that the uses to which land is put for the Pintupi are equally cultural. For more detailed discussion of the relationship to foraging uses, see Myers (1982; 1986).

Radcliffe-Brown once thought, in terms of corporate groups formed around some valued property or estate, Pintupi seem to constitute social aggregations (see also Sansom 1980) and give them identity through time by projecting them into shared relationships to objects.

My essay begins, then, not so much in disagreement with Gluckman's (1965) views on property, but in my discomfort with the notion of property itself: it is too concrete and specific a notion for the meanings that Pintupi give to 'objects'. Legal language may be useful for characterizing certain similarities in the relationship between persons and things, but it does not make for entirely adequate translation. To explore this theoretical problem and to search for deeper understanding of the social significance of things among hunters-gatherers, I want to focus on similarities and differences between land and other forms of property. I shall be drawing on a distinction not unlike the French contrast between *propriété* (personal property) and *immeubles* (real property), a contrast enshrined in Mauss (1954) and recently resurrected in Weiner's (1985) paper on 'Inalienable wealth'.

Two basic issues arise in this chapter. First, I ask if land tenure is different from relationships between (and among) people and other objects. Second, I address the question of the people's concerns over temporal continuity — according to Woodburn (1980) and Meillassoux (1973), a matter central to the understanding of hunter-gatherer society. Woodburn attempts to locate the source of Aboriginal concerns over enduring relationships in the 'farming' of women (in bestowal), but I see the basis of temporal continuity in the process of objectification. In articulating this process, some sorts of 'objects' have different capacities than others. I shall show that it is of critical importance that a Pintupi can 'give away' (or share) some rights to named places without losing his or her own intrinsic identity with these places. This inalienability of land — land cannot really be lost — differs from the way most other objects enter into processes of exchange.

These issues cannot be fully resolved in a short essay, but I would like to make a start by exploring the different ways in which personal identification with objects occurs in Pintupi social life. How is identity extended in the negotiation of shared rights to objects and processes of exchange? And why (for example) are 'personal effects' destroyed, effaced and given away at death — in contrast to what happens with country? What, if anything, is inherited — or what does inheritance accomplish?

Ownership and identification

A basic issue at all levels of Pintupi social organization is the fact of transaction in shared identity. What is most impressive to me about the

Pintupi conception of objects is that there is a continual negotiation about relationships to them and a willingness to include others as (for the want of a better heuristic term) 'co-owners'. Such ambiguity is deep-seated in the negotiated quality of much of Pintupi social life. Relationships among people are not totally given in the rules of a defining structure relating, say, to land-ownership, kinship or residence (Myers 1986). Instead, the relationships must be worked out in a variety of social processes. But the politics of Pintupi life should not be confused as an aim to dominate others. The roots of Pintupi politics in fact lie in the emphasis placed on shared identity with others being a basis for social interaction taking place at all.

This framework suggests a simple and obvious conclusion, namely that 'property' be viewed as a sign. The immediate material use-value of most forms of propertied objects among the Pintupi (tools, clothing, food, and so on) is not great. Such objects are clearly useful, but those that are necessary for simple production are rather easily obtained, constructed or replaced. The rapidity and ease with which things move through a network of relatives and friends shows that objects are important as opportunities to say something about oneself, to give to others, or to share. Like any signs, objects are tokens that represent an opportunity not so much to sustain exclusive use, but rather to constitute other sorts of value defined by a larger system of exchange. That these values are ultimately convertible to labor or political support, far from subtracting from the significance of a semiotic analysis, suggests that such analysis should be based on a temporal perspective that focuses on value as being constituted in the process of *reproducing* social life.

Analysis of the cultural relationships between persons and objects begins, appropriately, with Pintupi ideas of 'ownership' — a conception better translated as one of 'identification'. The Pintupi words most closely approximating 'property' are *walytja* or *yulytja*. The former may be translated as 'relative(s)' or as 'one's own personal effects' (Hansen and Hansen 1977: 152) and the latter as 'baggage and personal effects' (ibid.: 190), but the significance of identification is clearer when one understands the entire semantic range of *walytja*. In addition to objects associated with a person, it can refer to a relative, to the possessive notion of 'one's own' (such as 'my own camp' — *ngayuku ngurra walytja* — or 'my own father' — *ngayuku mama walytja*) or to reflexive conceptions like 'oneself' (such as 'I saw it myself' — *ngayulu nyangu walytjalu* — or 'he sat there by himself' — *nyinama walytja*).

This Pintupi range of meanings offers some perspective on the way legal conceptions of rights and duties are almost naturally reified in the common Western usage of 'property'. Indeed, a similar foundation of property, in rights deriving from some concept of personal identification, is suggested by the shared root of 'proper' (my proper father)

and 'property' in the Latin word *proprius*, 'private or peculiar to oneself' (Partridge 1983: 529).

There is a certain ambivalence or ambiguity about Pintupi relationships to objects. In the first place, there is clearly a sense that objects might 'belong to' someone; the idea that X is the *walytja* of a person contrasts directly with the idea that X is *yapunta*, a word whose literal meaning is 'orphan' — without parents. To follow the latter linguistic usage further, one's parents are said to *kanyininpa* one, meaning 'to have', 'to hold' or, more loosely, 'to look after' one. Accordingly, an object that is *yapunta* does not belong to anyone. Yet it appears that this might also mean that it has no one holding or looking after it. This points up the question of what it means for something to 'belong to' — to be *walytja* of — someone. An object becomes *yapunta* when it is no longer 'held' but instead has been 'lost' or 'relinquished', that is, released from an active association with a subject. For objects to belong to someone, then, means that they are expressive of that person's identity as much as that they are simply identified with or related to that person. To say that something is 'one's own' implies for the Pintupi that one doesn't have to ask (or defer to) anyone about its use. Leaving aside for a moment the issue of co-owners, the right to use an object without asking — indeed, even the claim that it is 'my own' — expresses one's autonomy. By 'autonomy' I refer to self-direction, although this, we will have occasion to see, is not necessarily self-created.

Yet, for all this, rights to objects that might be regarded as personal effects still seem less exclusive among the Pintupi than, say, among Americans. The very notion of ownership as identification also provides a sense that rights to objects can and should be more widely distributed, in other words a willingness — not always ungrudging, of course — to include others with oneself, as 'co-owners'. (As I will show with motor vehicles, this can be a complex matter.) Rights to objects enter into a system of exchange that constantly negotiates the relationships of shared identity.

In the following examples, I want to show how the negotiation of the meaning of ownership rights moves within a dialectic of autonomy (as in the right to be asked) and relatedness (exemplified in the tendency to include others and to share rights with others whom one recognizes as identified). This sense of property as potentially providing a temporally extended objectification of shared identity has much in common with Basil Sansom's (1980) treatment of fringe-dwelling Aborigines in Darwin as 'people without property'.

To share, perchance to give

Let me begin with a simple and striking example of how Pintupi regard

personal possessions. Cigarettes, purchased through the cash economy, are a popular item among Western Desert Aboriginal men. Men cadge each other's tobacco and cigarettes almost without thought. I was not by any means the only smoker and although my Pintupi comrades were generous with me I often found my supply all-too-quickly depleted. Being cadged myself more often than the reverse, I was sometimes rather cross when I ran out of cigarettes. On just such a dyspeptic occasion, a young man came to my camp and asked if I had any cigarettes. Aggrieved, I replied with some anger that people had taken all of mine, more or less including him as one of those who had taken advantage of me. Instead of taking offense (the Pintupi were usually more tolerant of me than I of them), the young man sympathized with the fact that I had been taken advantage of, and offered me some of his cigarettes! Further, he took it upon himself to explain that I should not give my things away so easily. Instead, I should hide what I had — he showed me how he hid a packet of cigarettes in his socks under his trousers — and then I could simply tell people that, unfortunately, I had no cigarettes (but would surely give them some if I had). Giving me a whole packet, Jimmy told me he had several buried near his camp.

This example speaks of some common themes in Pintupi action about sharing, owning, and asking. I interpreted Jimmy to mean, in his way, that I did not have to refuse anyone overtly. To refuse openly, it is clear, is something very difficult for Pintupi either to do themselves or to accept in others. Sympathy and compassion are the appropriate and moral response to co-residents or to relatives. Outright refusal thus constitutes an open rejection of the other's claim to having a relationship with one (see Myers 1979): in Pintupi social life, to 'say no to someone's face' is to do something very unusual and dangerous. Those so denied may respond with anger and violence.

Now if Jimmy's buried cigarettes were taken by others, he would certainly be angry — in similar cases people talk of 'theft'. Jimmy would then say: 'Someone has taken my cigarettes, *mulyartalu*' ('stealing' — ergative case), by which he would imply that his cigarettes had been taken 'without asking' (*tjapintja wiya*), without a recognition that he had rights to them. Though on the basis of their relationship he might have been obligated to give the thief some cigarettes, he would regard the cigarettes being taken without asking as a violation of his personal rights to them. In support of such a view, people would often argue that the owner of an object got it with his own money. This is to say that the cigarettes were not a product of cooperative or joint activity through which others could claim identification with the product.

No one else would be much exercised about such an event, as long as *their* ox was not gored. Indeed, it might be claimed — in counter — that Jimmy should not have hidden (*yarkatjunu*) his cigarettes. Or, as I

have heard it said about 'thefts' of popular radios and cassette players, that the owner should have hidden them better (so that the thief was not tempted). Jimmy's claim would be that he should have been asked. Under the latter circumstance — in which refusal is impossible — the only way to maintain one's possessions is to place them out of immediate reach. On the other hand, to give one's cigarettes in response to a request is to build one's own right to ask others because reciprocity in these matters is expected. Correspondingly, it would appear that by taking without asking one is doing more than simply taking an object; one is denying to the 'proprietor' the opportunity to give it and thus to be generous or to build thereby a debt. 'Theft', defined as taking without asking, is a serious interruption to one's ability to express the self, albeit through a gift, and to build through exchange an expanded shared identity with the other.

Finally, it is illuminating to reverse the conception offered here for a moment. Consider that one might claim a right to *be given* some object, in this way claiming either co-ownership or else a relationship with the proprietor that obligated him or her to give. While the proprietor might choose to give, for propriety's sake or to be diplomatic, he or she might still claim that the other was really 'nothing to do' (*mungutja*) — that is, had no basis for shared identity — either with the object or with the proprietor.

The exchange of food

In a short space, it is obviously not possible to circumscribe the entirety of Pintupi relationships to things. None the less, a consideration of rights in gathered or hunted food can inform us more deeply about what is at issue in the establishing of one's primary identity with 'things'.

While women frequently forage in a group for vegetable foods and for small animals, each woman has exclusive rights to what she produces — supposing that the actual productive activity is not a cooperative one. Much of the food is brought back to the residential camp for final preparation and consumption, each woman normally preparing her own produce. In camp, the product is: shared with the immediate family; given to those who looked after the children while the mother (for example) was away (B. Clark, personal communication); and/or distributed to co-residents who had not fared well. Now while all these people have claims on the producer's services, they have no special claim to the product itself. Therefore, what the woman gives is conceptualized as exchange. Co-residents in this situation are expected to share with each other, but the sharing often takes place only on request, giving the distribution a character of 'mutual taking'.

Among Pintupi men, given their technology and resources, cooperation in production is unnecessary, though often beneficial. When men engage in cooperative drives (as they once did, hunting hare wallabies, and occasionally still do, hunting hill kangaroos), the kill is distributed among all who participate. Most hunting, however, takes place alone or in small groups, and large game is distributed interdomestically to members of the residential group who have shared with the hunter in the past. Gifts of meat could satisfy other exchange obligations as well, namely those to one's in-laws or parents.

Anthropologists have frequently pointed out the practical economic benefits of such interdomestic distribution, so I need not emphasize that point here. In any event, the preparation of large game is such as to treat it as a social product. A hunter is supposed to give the kangaroo he kills to others for preparation, but his part in the hunt provides him with both the right and the responsibility to direct the disposition of the cooked animal in exchange (if someone else's spear or rifle was used, the actual owner of the hunting implement has this privilege). For his services, the cook gets the tail, prized for its fat; however, the hunter tells the cook how to distribute the parts of the cooked animal and keeps the head (and possibly other parts) for himself. In short, success in the hunt provides food for the hunter but this does not exhaust its significance. Success secures a particular set of rights to the animal, providing an opportunity to give — to engage in interdomestic exchange, which establishes or promotes a kind of moral identity with the recipients.

In Mauss's analysis of the Eskimo winter redistribution of sexual rights (1979: 68–70) sexuality's 'use-value' is seen as a sign for exchange. Similarly, among the Pintupi, the social value of the exchange of meat is not simply that of calorific satisfactions. Rather, such exchange provides a moral basis for continued and ongoing co-residence and cooperation among members of a band. It constitutes a moment in the reproduction of the shared identity (people who 'help each other') that is the foundation of band organization. There are many advantages in living with others, including the support of nonproducers, the greater chance of band members being able to make contact with a game animal, and the securing of protection from attack. Failure to share or (as I would prefer to describe the activity) to exchange within such groups has predictable consequences. The idiom of shared identity that is sustained through exchange provides the very basis of the criticism which may ensue: conflict arises as those who feel neglected make accusations that they have been rejected or disregarded as 'relatives' (*walytja*). Such neglect is understood as 'not loving' — not regarding people as related.

The distribution of foraging produce within a large group does present a problem. Frequently, the conflicts that develop in such

aggregations concern sharing and are brought on by the difficulty of allocating products and services among a large group of co-resident 'kin'. Since all such co-residents have claims on each other, at least to some extent, large groups place a considerable strain on individuals, producing conflicts of loyalty as well as a continuous imposition on people's generosity (not to say diminishing the incentive on people to overproduce).

Thus, the rights to the kangaroo as property are immediately involved with an exchange that is used to maintain one's relatedness to others. It is possible, of course, for a person to assert his (or her) autonomy, in other words his right to decide who gets a kangaroo. He has such rights, but what do they mean? To exercise such a 'choice' may be to defy other people's claims about their relationship with him or about his obligations, and so is likely to create a threat. Herein lies the tension between a valued autonomy and the claims and necessity of shared identity.

How Pintupi manage this tension is clear from the following 'case of the hidden meat'. In 1979, I lived at the small outstation community of Yayayi, then with a population of fifteen. Having successfully hunted kangaroos and bush bustards the previous day, we were enjoying the cooked fruits of our labor on a cold mid-morning when we heard the approaching sounds of the tractor from the nearby community of Yinyilingki. Long-time and frequent co-residents with the Yayayi people, the Yinyilingki people were close and often generous relatives who indeed were only temporarily separate. To my surprise, the male leader of Yayayi decided we should hide our cooked meat — which we did, inside the many flour drums sitting around the camp. When the Yinyilingki people arrived, they of course asked whether we had any meat, to which Tony — sitting on top of some drums — replied that unfortunately we were empty-handed. However, Ginger, his good friend from Yinyilingki, was not fooled for a minute since he could plainly see the evidence of recent cooking as well as the feathers we had plucked from the birds. Laughing and without any rancour, he opened a few flour drums until he found what he was looking for. Now, what transpired in this case is that, by identifying with the cooked meat Tony had truly spoken to the world, communicating his identity. The case is instructive about the cultural meaning of 'property' as an expression of identity — as a node of personal identity caught at once in webs of shared identity.

Materially, Tony's strategy of 'polite rejection through hiding' was a failure, although it did not lead to the conflict or antagonism that would shatter the sense of shared identity. I believe this is so because often enough he was generous. Indeed, the strategy of hiding one's property in order to avoid having either to give it away or to refuse someone overtly is a common enough practice. Ginger recognized Tony's rights

to the meat, but these did not really sustain exclusive use. What Tony did with the meat was necessarily and unavoidably meaningful; it was a sign of their relationship, just as Ginger's jocular but insistent demand highlighted his sense that they were sufficiently close that he might be allowed to intrude. However, the potential dangers of such selfishness are clearly outlined in Pintupi myths, where long cycles of vengeance follow a failure to share. And conflict over food has altered the relationships in many a Pintupi camp, so it could be said that the continued identity of a community — what the Pintupi call 'the people with one camp' (*ngurra kutjungurrara*) — is essentially a temporary objectification of these relationships of exchange.

Motor vehicles as media of identification

Among the most valuable objects in contemporary Pintupi life are motor vehicles, especially the trucks and four-wheel-drive Toyotas able to carry large loads (and people) in difficult terrain. Vehicles are necessary and valuable for getting supplies from the store, for hunting expeditions and for visits near and far. Only a very small number of people have cars — few of which last beyond a month because of the hard conditions of the desert roads combined with constant use and poor maintenance. In the case of vehicles, the problem of ownership is compounded by the fact that Pintupi recognize two categories of 'property', which they call (in English) 'private' and 'community' (or 'company').

Vehicles that are 'private' are those purchased with money belonging to an individual (or, individuals — when, as occasionally, the car is bought jointly). The purchaser is understood to be the proprietor of the vehicle, and as such to have the right to decide on or determine its use and non-use. Demand, however, seems by far to exceed the supply. Also, the men or women who buy a car with the money they have saved from unemployment checks, pensions, the sale of paintings or winnings at cards often do not know how to drive. Young men (youth's love for automobiles in the Western Desert matching that in California) very commonly aggregate themselves around relatives who (temporarily) have cars, for the chance to drive or simply for the excitement of travel and visiting. It is unlikely that the proprietor will be the sole user of a vehicle but, as in the case of other personal effects, relatives and friends must ask permission to use it.

Pintupi seem to value the physical freedom of movement provided by having their own cars. Since game is often located at some distance from the settled areas of camps, the availability of transportation may be critical in getting the fresh meat that is desired and needed. Not so long ago, in their semi-nomadic past, 'footwalking' was sufficient to allow

Pintupi to hunt, but most people now regard cars as the necessary condition for this activity, which combines purpose, pleasure and freedom. Where 'movement' has always been valued, the possibility of being able to embark on a hunting expedition at will is, demonstrably, a token of people's autonomy.

Not surprisingly, such a token of possible autonomy is somewhat illusory because the possession of a car also makes one the target of requests, setting in motion a multitude of ties. Autonomy (the possibility of giving) is in itself the basis on which the extending of shared identity with others may be established. To have a car, one might say, is to find out how many relatives one has. Those without their own vehicles draw on kin relationships, especially when needing help, in this way placing those who have a car under an almost constant pressure to provide such help. Where the moral rubric of shared identity guides the relationships of those who live in the same camp, requests are difficult to refuse and open rejection is impossible. Those who refuse are said to be 'hard' or 'jealous' for the car. Anyone who has lived in a Pintupi community will recognize just how much conflict, how many fights, are occasioned by relationships to motor vehicles — conflict over misuse, and over requests for and refusals of use. Indeed, when cars break down, sometimes the owners are relieved — only then being free of demands. Disputes among kin about the use of a vehicle have, I understand, led 'proprietors' to set fire to and destroy their own cars as one desperate and angry resolution.

On the other hand, 'ownership' provides an opportunity for a person to 'give', and one who helps his relatives is not only understood to be generous but also gains a degree of respect and authority for having 'looked after' them. The demands on a proprietor are not entirely a bad thing, then, since they provide for an opportunity to 'be someone'. Proprietorship can make a person of central importance when the activities being planned require transportation.

Elders may well recognize that heavy use is detrimental to the car and, at the same time, that it is important for providing the material requirements of life in remote communities; but also they find it difficult to refuse their sons and nephews. Like us, I suspect, they take some pleasure in providing for those they love. More important is their general attitude towards personal possessions. It would appear that no matter what they cost Pintupi regard vehicles as replaceable, like spears or digging sticks. Thus, they say, even when a A\$4000 car is destroyed after only a few weeks of use: 'There are plenty more motorcars; no worries'. To be sure, this reflects an expectation of long-term reciprocity — that someone else will have a car, or that another relative will help to obtain the bare necessities. But it also reflects a willingness to be rather uncomfortable if need be; Pintupi can always walk or somehow make do.

To me, this attitude to 'property' underlies much of Pintupi social life. Put in familiar terms, if faced with a choice between caring for their property or for their relatives, they prefer to invest in people rather than things. Without granting this any special moral status (although I think it deserves one), let me just say that under traditional hunter-gatherer conditions of settlement, such 'investment priorities' may be a realistic appraisal of the resources. None the less, the conception of property as replaceable guides our attention to a conception of things as being relatively transparent signs of social relationships — as 'vehicles' for another sort of value. Many Pintupi recognize a difference between their conception of the relationship between persons and things and the conception of white men. I had a long discussion with a middle-aged man which resulted in him contemplating the difference thus: 'You white people are always worrying for money. You don't think about who will cry for you when you die.' The accumulation of private objects, while not entirely ignored (Pintupi do work and save to get cars), is not the means through which one's identity is transmitted through time. This is secured, it would seem, in part, through giving such things away.

It being difficult to refuse help, 'private' cars are the basis on which a sort of shared identity is constructed; sharing the use of a car reflects an ongoing exchange. Pintupi themselves regard particular vehicles as representing a cluster of associates who, often for the life of the car, travel together: a certain blue Holden is 'that Yinyilingki motor-car', identified with a group of young men. The car is the occasion for their relationships and obligations with each other being temporarily realized. When driving past an old wreck on the road, Pintupi habitually identify it with the persons, communities and events in which it was involved. In short, it becomes an objectification of a set of social relationships.

As far as I can tell, the 'proprietor' is not held liable if a vehicle causes damage while he or she is not the operator or not present. If a vehicle crashes and people in it are killed, Pintupi seem to hold the operator and other participants responsible. However, if the operator was drunk or known to be irresponsible when he asked for the vehicle, the proprietor might be deemed to have acted irresponsibly — though this claim would most likely be made by the operator and his kin, in order that the operator might be excused and his culpability denied.

The other category of motor vehicle is the 'community' one. This has been the cause of conflict and confusion in many settlements. Such 'objects' are usually the product of government or foundation grants and not the result of a community's joint, voluntary contributions to a collective enterprise. The problem with 'community vehicles' revolves around the problem of who can actually be said to own something which belongs to a 'community'.

Ordinarily, Pintupi assimilate this problem of property to their ambiguous notion of *kanyininpa* ('to have', 'to hold', 'to look after') and recognize that Pintupi village councillors 'look after' such vehicles. Indeed, in all the cases I have seen, a particular councillor assumes responsibility for a vehicle: 'John', they might say, 'is looking after that Bedford truck'. They do not mean, of course, that he is its 'owner'. If members of the community at Yayayi (where the truck belongs) want to use it, they ask John to take them somewhere or give it to someone to drive. Should he refuse or otherwise put them off, people usually complain that the truck is not his 'private' (*walytja*) truck but that it is 'community'. They will complain that he is 'jealous' for that motor-car and that he is not 'looking after the people properly'. Their conception, as I understand it, is that John must be asked, but that as a village councillor he *must* help them. Although he might try to explain that there are other uses for the truck and try to relate these to everyone's benefit, he cannot really refuse. Or perhaps he will explain that it is out of his hands and that he had no choice other than to allow it to be used for something else, but that as soon as it is free he will help them.

An illuminating conflict occurred when this particular councillor took the truck in his care to a distant settlement so that he could pursue one of his wives who had run away. He was gone for a few weeks, during which time Yayayi was without transport for medical or food supplies. The community was able, somewhat uncomfortably, to make do with help from government vehicles. People complained that the councillor was not looking after people properly and that he should be removed from his position. Furthermore, the truck was not 'his own' (*palumpa walytja*) — that is, his to do with as he wished. He was only looking after the truck and he should have asked the other councillors about taking it away.

Such conflicts have been frequent. When a councillor has tried to be responsible about the use of vehicles and to preserve them from abuse, members of the community have argued that the vehicle was 'for everyone' and 'to help people', and that the councillor was not helping them. Being aware that the councillor was quite willing to allow the vehicle to be used when his close relatives wanted it, they interpreted his refusal as a denial of relationship or as 'selfishness'. To avoid this conundrum one strategy was to give the keys to a white person (such as me) who, it was believed, could say 'no' to people. The councillor would be able to say that he would have given the vehicle to people, but that he did not have the keys. He was not, then, refusing.

These 'community vehicles' are equally interesting from another point of view. To those Pintupi who are granted them, they seem to embody a recognized 'community' identity. When Pintupi refer to the Yayayi Toyota or the New Bore Toyota, they are saying more than that the vehicle belongs to that place. In a particular Pintupi sense, such

objects represent the community's collective identity as an autonomous social entity. However, they do not do so legally. If the vehicle crashes, the community is not held liable collectively, and individual members will undoubtedly claim that they were 'nothing to do' (*mungutja*) with the action.

For historical reasons, Pintupi associate the founding of past outstation communities with the granting of four-wheel-drive Toyotas by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs or the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund. As a result of this historical association, it appears, they believe that a community's autonomy will be recognized in the granting of such a vehicle. Men often say that they are the 'boss' of an outstation at such and such a place, but they are waiting to go there because the government has not given them their Toyota yet! The attraction of gaining control over such a vehicle is possibly the very reason that people have been eager to establish outstations. The combination of a vehicle and a separate community certainly provides the men who are the 'bosses' of the outstation with a material basis to assert their capacity for self-direction and generosity.

Correspondingly, a number of outstations have split up so that men who were not 'bosses' might affiliate themselves with communities where they had more authority. A great deal of the politics of autonomy, which matters so much to men, gets worked out around the control of the motor vehicles of the community. At the first Yayayi community where I worked in 1973, there were two community vehicles, each associated with historically and geographically distinctive segments of the camp, one for the people 'from the east' and the other controlled by those whose traditional country had been further 'from the west'. The controllers of these resources became the nodes of community organization.

The ambivalence about 'proprietorship' of community vehicles is clear in the case of the death of the person who controlled the vehicle. When the 'boss' of the community at Alumbra Bore died in 1981, members had a problem of what to do with the orange Toyota that was 'theirs' from a community grant. The personal property of a deceased is always destroyed or given away to the person's 'mothers' brothers' from far away — the deceased's effects are identified with him or her, so they make close relatives sad. The Alumbra community planned initially to swap vehicles with another community, in order to remove the truck from sight — because it reminded them of the dead man. The head of the other community was rather eager, and pleased with the good deal this promised him (his truck was old), but the Alumbra people thought better of it, realizing that they would still have to see the truck quite often since it would be in the area. They planned to burn it and thus efface sad memories.

Owning the country

If the objects considered so far are recognizable as personal effects, in that they can be extended to others, land-ownership is not a special kind of property. Among Pintupi, shared identity is readily extended to others in the form of recognizing an identity with named places — this being formulated through a particular cultural logic.

Pintupi land-ownership should be understood as the negotiated outcome of individual claims and assertions (Myers 1982). An emphasis on sociability and negotiation underlies the variety of claims that individuals make in order to be affiliated not with one but with *multiple* land-owning groups. Through allowing others to become joint custodians of one's own estate, people maintain important ties with each other throughout the region. Thus, land-ownership is not primarily an ecological institution but rather a political arena in which Pintupi organize relations of autonomy and shared identity.

Ownership consists primarily in control over the stories, objects and ritual associated with the mythological ancestors of the Dreaming (*tjukurrpa*) at a particular place. Access to the knowledge of these esoterica and to the creative essence they contain is restricted, and one can acquire it only through instruction from those who have previously acquired it. Important ceremonies are conducted at some sacred sites, and other sites are associated with ceremonies in which men (particularly) give instruction on what happened during that important period in which all things took on their form (the Dreaming). Because such knowledge is highly valued and vital to social reproduction, men seek to gain it and to be associated with its display and transmission.

'Holding a country' (*kanyininpa ngurra*) — that is, ownership, as the Pintupi understand it — provides opportunities for a person to be the organizer of a significant event and to be the focus of attention, albeit in limited contexts. Owners are in a position to exercise equality with other fully adult persons, to offer ceremonial roles to others (as part of an exchange), and to share rights in ritual paraphernalia. At the same time, people view 'country' (*ngurra*) as the embodiment of kin networks and as a record of social ties that can be carried forward in time.

Various means exist by which individuals may make claims of identification with the 'country' and assert it as their 'own'. But the fundamental notion of 'identification with country', rooted in the fact that places always bear the imprint of persons, refers to the whole range of relationships which a person can claim or assert as being between him or herself and a place. These provide the cultural basis for the country's ownership,³ and individuals have claims to more than one country. But

3. The multiple pathways of individual claims are based on a logic. If the place is called A, the following constitute bases for such a claim: (a) conception at the place A; (b) conception at a place B made by and/or identified with the same Dreaming ancestors as A; (c)

it is through political process that *claims* of identification are converted into *rights* over aspects of a country and *knowledge* of its esoteric qualities.

Identification is an ongoing process, subject to claim and counter-claim, dependent on validation and acceptance or invalidation and nonacceptance. The movement of the political process is along a graduated range of links or claims of increasing substantiality, from mere identification and residual interest in a place to the actual control of a place's sacred associations. The possession of such rights as recognized by others — called 'holding' a country — is the product of negotiation. Ultimately, ownership is not 'given' but an accomplishment, although this historicity is disguised by the fact that the cultural basis of claims is the ontological priority of the Dreaming. In the end, ownership of country, denoting close association among a set of individuals, is a projection into transhistorical time of the valued social relations of the present. But this occurs without drawing attention to the boundaries it draws.

From the Pintupi point of view, the emphasis is just as much on the social production of persons who can 'hold' the country, that is, on initiating young men and teaching them the ritual knowledge necessary to look after the country, as it is on getting the country. The Pintupi image of social continuity is effectively one in which 'country' as an object is passed down — 'given' (*yungu*) — from generation to generation. The Pintupi regard this 'giving' as a contribution to the substance and identity of the recipient, a kind of transmission of one generation's (or person's) identity to the next. By learning about the Dreaming and seeing the rituals, one's very being is altered: people become, Pintupi say, 'different' and stronger. One cannot become adult without the help of others; no one can become a man by himself. Certainly, while younger recipients are supposed to reciprocate the gift of knowledge — hunting meat for those who give the knowledge, and deferring to them — they cannot really repay what has been given. They have received more value than they can give back; they have, as it were, acquired an obligation that they can repay only by teaching the next generation. Pintupi stress that men must hold the Law and pass it on. In fact, men are enormously concerned to pass on their knowledge and their identification with places to their 'sons' and 'sister's sons'.

Ownership derives from such processes. Since knowledge and control of country are already in the hands of 'owners' (my gloss for the Pintupi term *ngurrakartu* which refers particularly to custodians of a

conception at a place B whose Dreaming is associated mythologically with the Dreaming at A (the story lines cross); (d) initiation at A (for a male); (e) birth at A; (f) father conceived at A, or conditions (a)–(e) true for father; (g) mother conceived at A or conditions (b), (c), (e) true for her; (h) grandparents conceived at A or conditions (b)–(e) true; (i) residence around A; (j) death of close relatives at or near A.

named place), the conversion of *claims* in a place to an actual interest in that place means convincing the owners that one should be included in knowledge and activity. One's identification with a country must be actualized and accepted by others through a process of negotiation. Only a portion of those who claim to identify with a named place are said to 'hold' it and to control its related rituals. These primary custodians are the people who must decide whether or not to 'teach' an individual; it is they who decide on the status of claims. Men are happy to teach close kin about their country, thereby granting them an interest in the place; but the claims of remote genealogical kin and of those who are not co-residents are less persuasive.

To each significant place, then, a group of individuals can affiliate. But the corporations forming around these sacred sites, differing from place to place, are not 'closed'. Instead, there are descending kindreds of persons who have or had *primary* claims to the respective sites. The fact that men seek rights to many 'countries' leads to extended associations of individuals surrounding cores of people with primary claims. Among the Pintupi, it is common for individuals to have extensive, far-reaching estate-rights and for different individuals to have distinct personal constellations of such rights. In this sense, one's identification with a named place is at once a definition of who one is and at the same time a statement of shared identity with others. In most cases of conflict, the agreement and disagreement about who should and should not be accepted closely follow current ties of cooperation among people, who are attempting to project their associations into the past, to embody their contemporary shared identity in some objective form.

From this account, it is clear that there are two aspects to the significance of 'country' or named place as a cultural entity, both given form in processes of exchange. With its origin in the Dreaming, 'country' constitutes a form of valued knowledge that is esoteric, transmitted (or, as the Pintupi say, 'given') to younger men, but restricted in access. At the same time, 'country' constitutes an object of exchange between equal men. (And the possibility of handling 'country' in this way stems from initiation, which also underpins the possibility of two other basic forms of autonomy through exchange: marriage and fighting.) A further critical point is that for the Pintupi 'country' provides a (perhaps *the*) embodiment of identity that allows for the performance of autonomy in exchange.

If we consider how people become 'members' of land-owning groups through the politics of persuasion and exchange, it is clear that these groups represent an objectification of shared identity. That is, people's joint relationship through time to a named place represents an aspect of an identity they share, however limited. The process through which membership is established is precisely one in which people attempt to convince others that they already *are* related, that they care. Each

convince others that they already *are* related, that they care. Each named place, then, commemorates, records or objectifies past and present achieved relations of shared identity among participants. Each place, however, represents a different node of relations.

The ultimate expression of this principle whereby shared identity among participants is projected out into the object world (and is seen as deriving from it) is the way Pintupi verbally extend an identification with a place, describing some important site as 'belonging to everybody, whole family' or, as they say alternatively, 'one country'. In reverse, one may and should read this as representing the Pintupi sense of themselves (they are a people with no distinctive organization as a political entity) as 'all related' (*walytja tjurta*) and as one group, although it must be noted that this is a context-dependent claim and is not to imply an identity for all time. For the Pintupi, land is a sign that can carry expressions of identity. It is critical to add that what Pintupi refer to in this fashion is not a 'community' in the sociological sense of people physically living together; rather, each place represents an aggregation of individuals from a wide area of the region in which they live. We have here a form of regional integration through individual ties.

A powerful example of the tendency towards inclusion and to the proffering of shared identity is evident in rights to 'sacred boards', the same sort of objects as the Aranda *churinga* (Strehlow 1947). As Lévi-Strauss (1966), among others, has noted, these objects may constitute title deeds for rights in land (although they are not reducible to this). Throughout central Australia, sacred boards represent (at least for men) the epitome of value; they are objects said to have been 'left by the Dreaming' (although fashioned by men) which men are permitted to know about and view only after initiation. Individual boards are always associated with particular Dreaming stories and usually with one or more named places created by that Dreaming, and rights to such objects, as with songs and stories, are part of the 'estate' associated with mythologically constituted places. I believe that a man has rights to manufacture and/or to possess the boards associated with his own conception place. Thus a number of men have described to me their conception in the following terms: such and such a Dreaming was traveling at a place, performing ceremonies, and they forgot or left behind one of their sacred objects, which (eventually) became the person.

The value of such sacred objects is constituted by their imputed indexical relationship to the Dreaming, by the restrictions on knowledge about them, by the difficulty of acquiring them and by their historical associations with the subjectivity of people who once held them and have since died. Pintupi men often emphasize how such objects were 'held' by people who are now dead ('ancestors') and how

seeing the objects makes men 'sorrowful' and the objects 'dear'. In some sense, a sacred object is a powerful representation of one's identity, hidden from sight away from women and children and shown only to initiated men of one's choosing. A man keeps his sacred objects in several places, some of the objects being held jointly with other men in one place or another. Only authorized men can manufacture a sacred object — only a person who has passed through all the stages of initiation and has been granted ('has been given' — *yungu*) the right to make a board for a particular site by being taught the design by a legitimate custodian.

This is a province of Aboriginal life about which our understanding is unsatisfactory. Knowledge of such matters, as with much of religious life, is restricted in access; it is not only difficult to learn about but also problematic to publish. None the less, it is clear that, for men, the exchange and circulation of these objects is a matter of intense interest and concern. Indeed, while such boards come 'from the country' — as it were, more or less representing the country — they are detached from it and movable. In this lies part of their power. Their being exchanged among men who may live far apart constitutes a *distinctive level* of organization — a transformation of marriage exchange, ritual exchange and the like, through another medium — which has the capacity to constitute a common identity among those not in daily contact. While it is much like these other 'levels' of exchange, the negotiation of identity through sacred objects has its own properties.

Among the Pintupi, boards are frequently exchanged as a result of bestowals between a man and his male in-laws, and sometimes exchanged as a result of initiation and to settle long-standing disputes (such as murders). Access to sacred boards is obviously an important condition of autonomy and equality vis-à-vis other men. A young man must consequently rely on elder male relatives to supply him with sacred objects for marriage and so that he may begin fulfilling his obligations. But what is involved in such transactions needs further clarification. Basing his analysis on Strehlow's (1947) ethnography, Lévi-Strauss (1966) likened the exchange of such objects to loaning out one's basic identity to the care of another group — the ultimate sign of trust.

The first point to make is that a Pintupi man has rights to more than one sacred board; his total identity is not wrapped up in one alone. Second, I found it enormously difficult to discover the 'owners' of the sacred boards I was shown. This no doubt stemmed partly from the secrecy surrounding the boards, but it is also the case that boards are rarely owned by a single person. When I was shown boards, a man would tell me that this one belonged to him and also to such-and-such other men, another one belonged to him and X, and so on. Frequently, a group of 'brothers' (rarely genealogical, however) 'held' boards in common. The way I was told made me feel that, as in land-ownership, men have a

tendency to extend ownership of sacred objects to others with whom they were identified. This is consistent with the way Pintupi lay stress on the enormous dangers involved should a person try to make a sacred object by himself. To do so would inevitably arouse the jealousy of other men who would kill him. It would appear that to make a sacred object oneself is to assert one's total autonomy, denying other people's relationship to oneself and to the object. One should have *kunta*, that is, 'shame' or 'respect', for others.

Thus Pintupi are inclined to share out ownership of and responsibility for sacred objects with men they regard as close. Conversely, when they plan and participate in cycles of exchange with other men this always involves a set of men who cooperate as 'brothers' as a node in the exchange, just as a group of 'brothers' will stand as a party in arranging marriage bestowals. Joint participation in exchange, then, constitutes an identity among those involved, who jointly accept a responsibility: the boards they possess in common are an objectification of their shared activity and of their joint responsibility — in other words, an objectification of who they are. Whilst failure to fulfil one's obligations in a board exchange is described as 'having trouble' (*kuunkarrinpa*), or being under threat of revenge and retaliation, and whilst fulfilling one's obligations is described as 'clearing oneself' (*kilirrinpa*), or being free, joint participation may reduce the danger of failure.

What happens in the exchange itself is equally illuminating. Men often described how they had lived in other people's country for some time (as young novices or in bride-service) and how, when they made ready to return to their own country, 'owners' of the host country 'gave' them sacred boards. This meant that such 'owners' drew designs on a fashioned board, which a young man then carved, the finished object being taken by him on his return. Effectively, the young man had been taught the design and given the right to reproduce it — although not, it appears, the right to teach other people. His possessing the board from the host country was a recognition of his prolonged residence and shared identity with the people of that country, converting residence and cooperation through time into an identity projected into land ownership. It is important to recognize, too, that in 'giving' the board, the original owner had not actually lost anything. He recognized or granted to another both rights in the country and shared identity (as embodied in the object), but he retained his own identification with the place.

Death, memory and the social transmission of identity

I have argued that there is much similarity between the extension of rights to property through exchange and the extension of rights in

land. As objects, land and other forms of property have the capacity to embody the relationships among people in outward form. Proprietorship, then, provides a basis on which identity can be built through exchange, both by establishing one's autonomy through the possibility of taking part in an exchange and by creating the possibility of expanding that identity to include others. Both such possibilities are encoded in the meaning of *walytja*, as 'relative', 'oneself', and 'something owned'. None the less, these various objects have very different potentials as regards constituting identity through time. This becomes clear when we consider how the Pintupi deploy them in the case of a proprietor's death.

In death, the accumulation of personal effects throughout a lifetime is denied; they are transmitted neither as an estate nor as personal mementos to the heirs most closely identified with the deceased. In the Pintupi view, because things associated with the identity of a dead person make his or her relatives sad, such things are effaced. All of a person's *yulytja* (or *walytja*) are given away to distant relatives, preferably of the mother's brother kin category. Typically, these effects include a person's blankets and 'swag' (the bedroll in which he or she camped), his or her hair (which is cropped close at death), his or her tools and personal items — even including a motor-car if they own one. Objects are given away or destroyed. In the 'finishing up' ceremonies, as Pintupi call the distribution at death, the carefully rolled-up dead person's 'swag' seems to stand for the body, placed as it is out in front of the mourners as the silent and untouched focus of attention.

For one such ceremony at least, it was the dead man's wife who oversaw the 'swag', while it was women mourners who carried it about preparatory to each performance of 'finishing up' (that is, upon each arrival of groups of kin from other places, whose willingness to take part shows they are not guilty of ill-will). Invoking the identity of the dead, the 'swag' occasions elaborate expressions of grief and anger at loss. The camp or house the deceased inhabited is abandoned; relatives in other communities may move their own camps as well if they remind them of the dead person. (In semi-nomadic, traditional times, the places of death and burial were avoided for years until all traces of the dead were gone.) For similar reason, the personal name(s) of the dead person — and anything sounding like it — are avoided, and substituted for in everyday speech by synonyms or the avoidance term *kunmarnu*. The deceased is referred to subsequently by the name of the place where he or she died. As an example of the degree to which such effacement may be extended, when L died his relatives proposed burning the nearly-new truck that had been granted to the outstation community which he led. The sight of the truck, even if it were given to distant relatives, would cause them grief.

Despite the dramatically enacted grief at the loss of a relative, the symbolic effect of these practices is quite the opposite of commemorating the dead through inheritance. Relatives of the deceased's own generation (not parents or children but, as in the case with which I was best acquainted, the deceased's close younger brothers) are responsible for collecting his or her goods and for seeing to their dispersal among other distant relatives. As far as I could tell from the activity surrounding L's death, the sending off of the *yulytja* is the primary responsibility and activity for close relatives; the funeral, albeit a Christian one now, could not take place until this had been completed. L's brothers collected his 'bag' (which I presume contained some of his personal ritual paraphernalia — hair string, arm bands, small sacred objects), and his close mother's brothers (who in fact had been living with him) seem to have overseen the planning and organization of the 'sorry business' distribution of goods. During such occasions, the sense of obligation is pressing. It was important, L's mother's brothers told me, to send this bag off to the mother's brothers in Yuendumu quickly, lest people begin to talk about them (*wangkakuturripayingka*, 'to avoid moving towards talk').

In a sense, these goods are not allowed to carry the deceased's identity forward in time. A person's identity is instead carried forward in the grief and in the lives of those whom he or she 'held' (or looked after), especially those whom he or she 'grew up'. The Pintupi man who criticized the concerns of white men with money and accumulation, by asking: 'Who will cry for you when you die?' was pointing to this alternative form of accumulation — of investing identity in and increasing the social value of people through caring for them as a relative. This is the focus of Pintupi social reproduction which so much emphasizes the role of seniors as 'nurturing' those who come after. Pintupi often explain their grief at loss by referring to the way the person 'held' them; further, the people who have been looked after by the same person consider themselves related as if they share substance by that contribution. It is through such links to some predecessor, as well, that groups of people formulate their shared identity, referring to themselves as 'real siblings', for example, because 'we have one father' or 'one grandmother'.

Unlike the personal effects (related to a transient historical identity) that are dispersed at death, men particularly strive to pass on to their successors an identity formulated through ties to named places. Maantja Tjungurrayi, as a case in point, constantly put pressure on his son, Ray, to attend his ceremonies, and to learn, so that he could 'pass on' his country. As Maantja and a number of other Pintupi explained to me, the process they desire is one in which '*Mamalu wantintja, katjapirtilulpi witininpa*', that is, 'the fathers having lost (relinquished) it, the group of sons grab it'. What they pass on, or transmit, in this way is not

a personal property that they have created or accumulated themselves, but an identity that is already objectified in the land. Recipients acquire rights to a named place that has pre-existing relationships with other named places on its Dreaming track; through rightful possession of this knowledge inheritors gain the possibility of taking part in equal exchange with other men and the capacity to nurture the coming generation of men with the gift of their knowledge.

This knowledge of country, and the rights to place represented in knowledge, is a form of 'inalienable wealth', as Weiner (1985) describes it. Unlike the spear one has made or the kangaroo one has hunted and cooked, one can 'give' one's country to others — take part in exchanges — without really losing it. Thus, as represented in a shared relationship to an object, others are accepted as sharing identity; but one does not thereby lose the ability to give the object away again. Indeed, by including more people as 'co-owners' one to some extent increases the value and importance of a place, as long as recognition as principal custodian continues. As Munn (1970) has clearly realized, Western Desert Aborigines perceive the country as symbolically bearing an identity which those who take it on (or 'hold' it) come to possess as their identity. When one dies, these special 'objects', with which one has come to be associated in the course of one's life, remain in the landscape, and the people to whom one contributed by 'growing' them up and by teaching, are those able — even obligated — to carry on the responsibility for this country. This is the identity that endures and is reproduced through time in the social production of persons, an identity that is taken on by each generation from its forebears, mediated through the 'inheritance' of place.

I believe that the freedom with which Pintupi are willing to part with their personal possessions owes something to this enduring dimension of identity. Spears, rifles, clothing, food, even the costly motor-car — these are all, in the Pintupi view, replaceable. There are always 'plenty more motor-cars'. So long as such objects provide a basis through which identity can be created and extended, the Pintupi take part in such exchanges with an assured foundation. Everyone, according to their conception beliefs, comes into the world with an association with the Dreaming at a place. In some critical way, Pintupi regard themselves as having an assured identity no matter what happens to personal possessions. This is different indeed from a world in which accumulated personal property constitutes the only medium in which identity can be realized. Several years ago the Native American activist, Vine DeLoria, spoke to a class I was teaching, and a student with a beginner's ethnocentric background in psychology tried to question him about the way in which some Indian religious concepts provided for them a sense of self. 'The Self', DeLoria snorted, 'is not an Indian problem. That's something white people worry about.'

A hierarchy in the organization of relationships to objects takes us away from the simple notion of 'property rights' as legal problems and suggests that objects, as property or not, have meanings for people that cannot be limited to the analytic domains in which Western notions too often restrict us. For the Pintupi, I would maintain, one's identification with place as an object assures an identity in the world on which the more transient exchanges of daily life can take place without threatening to reduce participants to the emptiness of pure despair that economic failure too often brings to people in the Western world.