

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

THE BACKGROUND AND THE PROBLEM

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#### The Background

European settlement in Australia led to the rapid decline of the indigenous Aboriginal population estimated by Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin to have been no more than 300,000 in 1788 for the whole of the Continent.<sup>1</sup> It is also estimated that in 1788 the Aboriginal population of New South Wales, the State in which the study reported in this thesis is set, numbered about 40,000, a figure today reduced to less than 200 full-blood Aborigines.<sup>2</sup> Another effect that European settlement had on the Aborigines was the appearance of a part-Aboriginal population, that is, a people with an admixture of both Aboriginal and European blood. Part-Aboriginal numbers in New South Wales have increased over the years from an estimated 2,400 in 1882,<sup>3</sup> the year of the first reliable estimate, to over 14,000 today.<sup>4</sup> There is every indication that their numbers will continue to increase.

Despite their European blood, and largely because of their rejection by the European community, the part-Aborigines have always been identified as Aborigines, an appellation which many of them do

not disclaim and freely use. This appellation, however, is a misnomer, not only because of their European blood, but also because traditional Aboriginal culture in New South Wales disappeared as rapidly as its full-blood carriers. Rejected by European society and having no traditional culture the part-Aborigines gradually developed a way of life of their own, a structure and a culture,<sup>5</sup> which today does much to mark them off as a distinct social element within the total Australian society. This thesis is concerned with one aspect of this way of life. Writing in 1957 Elkin<sup>6</sup> described this way of life as follows:

The Aborigines exist with no conveniences in shacks . . . moving around a lot . . . doing odd jobs, spending lavishly what they earn on taxis and extras, changing de facto spouses quite often and neglecting their children's education. In doing so, the majority are content. It is their own untrammelled existence . . . They are different from the 'whites' and seldom express any desire to be, or to live like them. Indeed, when the part-Aborigines began . . . to realise their position as a peripheral group . . . they strengthened their group solidarity over against the general community . . . The trend is towards this solidarity of groups of Aboriginal descent, constituting in aggregate a minority group distributed in lesser groups . . . It is social, not political in significance. It is a result of race relations: of European and Aboriginal miscegenation, and of prejudice towards the offspring on the part of the former, so that a new 'race', a temporary biological and social group, is being evolved . . . At least for many generations to come they will be assimilated into only part of Australian culture, principally

economic, and will remain a distinct social group, symbolized and kept apart by their very colour, enjoying their own . . . custom, value system, attitudes and belief.

Although written thirteen years ago, and despite its generalizing tone, this quotation still holds for many part-Aborigines in New South Wales country towns.

Living as they have for so long in isolated groups of a couple of hundred or less on official Aboriginal Reserves, in camps on the fringes of country towns, and in the poorer sections of towns and cities, the part-Aborigines have experienced the temporal and spatial factors necessary for the development of a distinctive way of life. Past official policies towards the Aborigines of New South Wales help to account for their isolation and for the development of their group life.<sup>7</sup> Because of public rejection of the Aborigines, their detribalization, and their rapidly declining numbers, early government policy stressed the protection of the Aborigines. Protection was largely to be effected by controlling their relations with Europeans through a system of isolated Reserves. Believing that the Aborigines would in time die out, the first "responsible government" established in New South Wales in 1855 set up two officially-supervised Reserves on the Murray River and set aside other areas for Aboriginal use.<sup>8</sup> The policy of isolated Reserves was continued and accelerated by

the Aborigines' Protection Board from its inception in 1883 to its abolition in 1939,<sup>9</sup> when in that year some 30 per cent of the part-Aborigines in New South Wales were living on 90 Reserves.<sup>10</sup> The Protection Board's policy is neatly illustrated by the following extract<sup>11</sup> from one of its annual reports:

We are of the opinion that the establishment of asylums . . . for the Aborigines in many districts would be an advantage by thus providing them with retreats. We desire to draw attention to the experiment which is being made in Victoria to enforce the absorption of half-castes into the general population, and to express our belief that at present such an attempt here would be impracticable.

The policy was that the Reserves should become self-contained communities in which the Aborigines could live independently of European society. Industries similar to those in the surrounding countryside were to be established on the Reserves to provide employment and to make the Reserves economically self-supporting. When this economic policy failed the Protection Board maintained the Aborigines by issuing rations.

Although the policy of protection gave way in 1940 to one of assimilation and welfare with the establishment of the Aborigines' Welfare Board,<sup>12</sup> the preceding policy of protection, with its long history, had been so effective in its isolationist aspect, that the new Welfare Board achieved little by way of

assimilation in its almost thirty years of existence. It abolished a few Reserves but for the most part the part-Aborigines continued to live their isolated group lives on Reserves or in camps throughout the State. Walther<sup>13</sup> sums up the difficulties that the members of the Welfare Board had to contend with:

It was hard going for them. Their task was momentous and there was not enough money, especially in the early years. The white community did not support them with encouragement and enough funds. Aborigines were also little help. Many of them only seemed interested in getting as much out of the government as possible, in return for as little real involvement and co-operation as possible. The Board was caught in between. On top of this, it had to do its work through a system of administration which, rightly or wrongly, was considered paternalistic by Aborigines.

In June 1969 the Aborigines' Welfare Board was abolished, the Aborigines' Protection Act 1909 (as Amended) repealed, and Aboriginal affairs in New South Wales (apart from housing) came under the control of the Department of Child Welfare and Social Welfare in which a Directorate of Aboriginal Welfare was established. The new policy accents welfare but the ultimate aim remains one of assimilation.<sup>14</sup> The policy is that part-Aborigines be encouraged to leave Reserves, but realising that many Aborigines regard them as home and that "they could not just be 'dumped' on the community, to fend for themselves, in the name of equality",<sup>15</sup> no action is to be taken to do away with Reserves until the Aborigines' Advisory Council, yet to be elected, makes suggestions along these lines.<sup>16</sup>

The present study was carried out in 1969 and was, for the most part, completed before the abolition of the Aborigines' Welfare Board. Even after June 1969 when Aboriginal affairs were taken over by the Department of Child Welfare and Social Welfare there was no noticeable change in the Aboriginal situation in Armidale. The new Aboriginal Directorate was not inaugurated until August 1969 and the Aborigines' Welfare Officers were not transferred to the Department of Child Welfare and Social Welfare until October of that year.

### The Problem

#### Matrifocality: The General Literature

Matrifocality, as the etymology of the word suggests, literally means "mother in focus". Sociologically, the concept is that of the mother or some woman identified with her as the focal point or pivot around which relationships in a particular social system, such as a family or a household, are organized. Matrifocality implies much more than the mother's unique biological role as bearer of children and perpetuator of society. Despite their peculiar and important biological role, women in all societies, whether primitive or modern, as a general principle seem to be unequal in status to men in the important spheres of social life; economic, religious and political activities normally tend to be "patrifocal" or male-dominated. Social systems which are matricentred, by contrast, elevate the mother to a position of social significance seldom achieved in normal

circumstances. She assumes headship of the family or the household, takes responsibility for its economic welfare and, importantly, has final authority over its children who may or may not be her own but who usually will be related to her. This status, as we will see, is achieved largely by default in that adult males are either absent from the system for varying periods of time and, because of this, are marginal to the organization, or have deserted it entirely. In the literature matrifocality is frequently associated with instability of the marital relationship. Matrifocal systems, then, are usually regarded as abnormal forms of social living in that they imply a distortion of "the ideal mother-role" brought about by atypical family structures.<sup>17</sup>

Matrifocal-type societies have long interested social anthropologists and sociologists. In the second half of the nineteenth century the "matriarchate" or mother-right theory, an idea independently developed by both Bachofen and McLennan, was one of the three principle theories of social evolution which exercised the minds of thinking men.<sup>18</sup> Briefly, this theory postulated that the origin of human society had been a state of promiscuity out of which the matriarchate gradually developed to give way in its turn to the institutions of father-right and monogamy. These long-past matriarchal societies were supposedly characterised by political authority exercised by women.<sup>19</sup> Fantastic pictures of Amazon-life societies were conjured up by

writers on the basis of no evidence at all, and although the theory withered away in the early years of the new century it is interesting to note that it was revived as late as 1927 by Robert Briffault in The Mothers. The existence of non-literate societies which practise matrilineal descent and matrilocal and forms of uxorilocal residence cannot be legitimately interpreted as survivals of a past matriarchate.

Matricentred social systems, however, were not the wild fictions of over-imaginative minds as might be supposed. Matricentric forms of social life were eventually to be found by social anthropologists and sociologists. They are not archaic societies or contemporary primitive societies; rather, they are found secreted in the interstices of modern societies. As such these mother-dominated systems are, strictly speaking, sub-systems or sub-cultures and are often associated with, but certainly not characteristic of, certain socio-economic strata and/or ethnic groups. We know of no modern society which is given over totally to matrifocality.

Social anthropologists and sociologists have identified two types of matrifocused systems which are associated with different socio-economic strata. One type has been found associated with what "subjective" stratification theorists have termed the "upper middle class", and the other type has been

found associated with the "lower class".<sup>20</sup> For want of better terms we will designate these systems as "momism" and "mumism" respectively. The volume of literature on the two systems is imbalanced in favour of the second.

Studies of "momism", which centre upon upper middle class families, seem to be confined to the United States. In the upper middle class American family the mother has achieved a position of control which surpasses that exercised by the father.<sup>21</sup> The factors contributing to the development of this situation are summed up by Broom and Selznick:<sup>22</sup>

Conditions of suburban life in the United States have given rise to a matricentric family pattern within a formal patriarchy. Because commuting keeps the husband out of touch with the family during daylight hours, because the wife controls day-to-day expenditures, and because she is the family 'social secretary', she makes most decisions about the domestic and social life of the family, and the children look to her as the effective authority.

On the basis of the American material it seems reasonable to assume that sociologists will find further evidence of "momism" among middle class families in other industrialized Western societies.

The existence of "mumism" as a life style is supported by a large number of studies which have been carried out in different parts of the world including the West Indies, the rural

South of the United States, Latin America, detribalised Africa, and England. Although it shares obvious similarities with "momism", "mumism" is nevertheless to be distinguished from it. As stated above and as the evidence clearly indicates, "mumism" is associated with a lower socio-economic stratum of society: the lower class. It is also sometimes found among ethnic or coloured minority groups which stratificationists have distinguished as occupying lower class positions on socio-economic based scales.

Although the numerous studies of "mumism" from different parts of the world display some unique ethnographic features with regard to social organization, a general structural pattern of matrifocality can be discerned. This takes the form of a woman, "the mum", usually the mother or someone identified with her such as maternal grandmother, aunt or elder sister, who is accepted by members of her family as the family or household head. This recognition of her position by the members legitimizes her authority within the domestic group. Her authority extends over all areas of the family's life and all relationships within the family revolve about her. It is not unusual for her authority to extend beyond her own family or household into those of near relatives. A "mum's" influence may be felt in her daughters', granddaughters', sisters' and sometimes her sons' families, and

she herself is the vital link which holds the several families together. Sometimes if such a network is large enough to form a neighbourhood or local group, it may happen that, in the permanent or temporary absence of menfolk, decisions will be taken by "the mum" and supported by other "mums" (her female relatives) of the group; that is, decision-making powers are assumed by the women of the group.

Most of the published material on matrifocality in different societies is of an ethnographic, descriptive nature. Few writers on the subject have attempted to give the concept any precision or definitiveness. Solien writes:<sup>23</sup>

The matrifocal family is a subject which has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years, and as a classificatory device has been utilized so indiscriminately that many might wonder whether the concept has any utility at all.

In an attempt to give some clarity and precision to the concept, Solien<sup>24</sup> examined the relevant literature and extracted a number of criteria which she regards as the significant features of, and contributive factors in, mother-dominated households. These criteria are:

- (1) The mother-wife who is usually the most stable member of the group is dominant and plays the leading psychological role;

- (2) The mother-wife may or may not be the economic mainstay of the group, but she probably exercises authority over incoming and outgoing income;
- (3) The mother-wife probably exerts the greatest influence upon the development of the children;
- (4) The husband-father may or may not be present. If absent for long periods he cannot fulfil the husband-father role expectation; if present, he does not fulfil it adequately.

Solien emphasises the necessity of distinguishing the matrifocal family or household from the consanguineal type. The two are not synonymous as writers like Kunstadter have maintained.<sup>25</sup> Solien indicates that she has been misunderstood by Kunstadter in this regard when he uses her definition of the consanguineal household to denote the matrifocal household. Of the former she writes:<sup>26</sup>

The consanguineal household is a co-residential kinship group which includes no regularly present male in the role of husband-father. Rather, the effective enduring relationships within the group are those existing between consanguineal kin.

By comparing this definition of the consanguineal family with the essential criteria for the matrifocal family listed above we can see Solien's point that the definition does not include all the

necessary properties of matrifocality. The point that Solien is making is simply that the consanguineal and matrifocal families are different types and that although a consanguineal family may be matrifocal - indeed, in most cases it will be - it does not follow that it will always be so.<sup>27</sup>

How are mother-oriented systems, families or households, to be explained?

After examining a selection of matrifocal studies, Kunstatter<sup>28</sup> critically appraises four suggested explanations for matrifocal systems. Briefly, these explanations are:

(1) Demographic

Demographic factors such as late marriage by males, a higher death rate among men and the migration of males will mean that a population has fewer males of marriageable age than is normally the case;

(2) Historical

Historical patterns of slavery or an institutionalized polygynous form of marriage will lead to female dominance in the marriage relationship;

(3) Valuational

Value systems which accept illegitimacy as normal, enhance wife-dominated consensual unions;<sup>29</sup>

(4) Functional

Matrifocal families exist where men fail to fulfil their normal social and economic roles within the family. Functional explanations correlate role systems and socio-economic variables.

Kunstadter<sup>30</sup> rejects demographic, historical and valuational explanations of matrifocality. As he sees it these are pseudo-explanations at best and, in reality, are merely accidental features of matrifocality and not causes of it. For Kunstadter functional explanations are the only valid explanations of matrifocality and, as he sees it, some of these need modification.

Blake<sup>31</sup> supports Kunstadter's functional analysis. She indicates that in lower class Jamaican families the mother is the dominant figure, not because of any superior or legitimized powers accorded to women in Jamaican society as a whole, but rather because she, as a parent, has acquired the status of a pseudo-father by default through the absence of the father. A comparative study of Jamaican village and estate families conducted by Cumper<sup>32</sup> illus-

trates the relative ineffectiveness of the adult male in his economic role, particularly in village families. Because of this the mother is frequently obliged to take over the chief economic and social roles within the family. In a review of the major Jamaican family types, Schlesinger<sup>33</sup> claims that the maternal type of family occurs most regularly, and suggests that its presence is to be explained in economic terms. Clarke<sup>34</sup> clarifies the picture somewhat by indicating that the Jamaican husband-father frequently has limited economic opportunities in his immediate residential area and, because of this, is obliged to absent himself from his family in order to obtain employment. Because of such absences the mother-dominated familial pattern develops.

Functional explanations have been applied to West Indian studies other than those carried out in Jamaica. Simpson,<sup>35</sup> for example, comments upon the growing authority of women in Haiti as a consequence of the placage mating system and attributes their increased authority to their power over "the purse". Smith,<sup>36</sup> whose fields of study include Carriacou, Grenada, Guatemala and Jamaica, describes a mating system that has enabled unmarried women and their children to become economically independent. On the basis of field work among the Andros Islanders, Otterbein<sup>37</sup> believes that the high percentage of adult male absenteeism coupled with the delicate nature

of consensual unions encourages the development of matrifocal family life.

Speaking more generally, Smith<sup>38</sup> suggests that the very nature of plantation agriculture in the Caribbean produces unstable consensual unions, a consequence of which is a decline in the father-husband's authority and an increase in the number of wife-mother dominated families. Goode<sup>39</sup> makes much the same point when he writes:

The matrifocal Caribbean family is a product of an unstable family pattern in which the mother or grandmother is often in power because no father is there.

Many lower class Negro women, Rainwater<sup>40</sup> reports, refuse to be faithful to an unemployed man and as a consequence take upon themselves a pivotal role in the social and economic organisation of the family.

From her study of the Guatemalan Black Caribs, Solien<sup>41</sup> suggests the following general functional and demographic explanations of matrifocality in the West Indian region:

- (1) The phenomenon occurs when a society's traditional culture has been forcibly dissolved or changed by the intervention of Western forces;
- (2) The phenomenon is probably associated with the entrance of migrant wage labour into the Western economic system;

- (3) The phenomenon is associated with male absenteeism which causes an imbalance in the sex ratio and which results in a preponderance of women of child-bearing age.

Kunstadter<sup>42</sup> summarizes the functional approach as follows:

The proportion of matrifocal families in the community appears to be a function (in the mathematical and social sense) of the degree of physical separation of adult males and adult females involved in the division of labour. In order for the physical separation to take place the group in question must be part of a larger economic system and that system, as a concomitant of its complexity, will use money as its medium of exchange.

The historical and valuational explanations dismissed by Kunstadter as accidental rather than essential to an understanding of matrifocality nevertheless have their supporters. Henriques,<sup>43</sup> for example, supports the historical approach and sees the West Indian matrifocal family as a result of the peculiar conditions of slavery. Frazier<sup>44</sup> agrees and writes of the matrifocal Negro family in the United States:

Because of the condition imposed by the slave system, the mother was the most dependable and the most important member of the Negro family.

Similarly, Herskovits<sup>45</sup> examines Negro matrifocal family life almost totally in terms of its historical origin in West Africa. Although he admits that historical explanations of matricentrality may be

partially valid, Kunstadter<sup>46</sup> maintains that they are too specific to have general application.

Krieselman<sup>47</sup> has attempted to explain matrifocality in Martinique in terms of a value system which accepts illegitimacy as a normative pattern of behaviour. In such a system unmarried women who bear children simply take social and economic responsibility for them. Kunstadter<sup>48</sup> refutes Krieselman's theory by observing that although illegitimacy appears to be accepted in Martinique, it is not in fact the ideal behaviour pattern in that society.

Be that as it may, King<sup>49</sup> in his study of the Negro maternal family maintains that the social acceptability of the unwed mother is a crucial determinant of matrifocality.

Studies of matrifocality among lower class Englishmen demonstrate that the phenomenon, at least in England, cannot be explained solely in functional terms. A number of students of the English scene have stressed psychological factors as productive of mother-centred households. This brings to mind Solien's point made above that one of the significant features of, and contributive factors in, mother-dominated households is the leading psychological role of the mother-wife who is usually the most stable member of the group.

Kerr's<sup>50</sup> study of dockworker families in Liverpool revealed that "the mum" is the important figure in the household and that all

relationships revolve around her. She not only has economic power over other members of her family but dominates them psychologically. As Kerr sees it, the relationship with "the mum" is the strongest kin tie in this system and that it generates in the members of her family a reliance upon her and a lack of independence and responsibility on their part. The result is a matrilocal mother-dominated sub-culture. Firth and Djamour<sup>51</sup> in a study of kinship in London's South Borough found that the matricentred or "matral" family, to use their term, is the normal type. The mother's central role in the family is determined partly by her "emotional relationship" with members of her family and not only by her economic control over them. The close emotional tie existing between mother and daughter is commented on by Shaw<sup>52</sup> in his study of working-class Londoners. This quotation illustrates the intensity of the tie:

We had the impression that many of the married women were very closely attached to their own mothers, and this was the reason why it was 'mum's mum' who was the important member of the older generation in so many families.

Finally, Young and Willmott<sup>53</sup> in their study of "mother-centred extended families" in the inner London suburb of Bethnal Green support other lower-class London findings. Although no direct comment is offered for the cause of such mother-dominated family organisation, it is clear from their discussion that it is partly the result of

close emotional attachments existing between a mother and her children, both sons and daughters. In a later paper, "There's Nobody Like Mum", Willmott<sup>54</sup> makes clear the close emotional ties between mothers and daughters in working-class London families.

Having reviewed the major causative and continuative factors of matrifocality in the West Indies, the Southern United States and England, an hypothesis formulated by Winch<sup>55</sup> is worthy of consideration. From his study of the American family Winch draws together observations previously made by Goode<sup>56</sup> on the one hand, and by Blood and Wolfe<sup>57</sup> on the other that (1) the greater the economic advantage of a particular stratum, the greater stability within a marital union, and (2) the higher the occupational level and thus the socio-economic stratum, the more dominant is the role that the male plays in the family organisation. Winch further suggests that research indicates that the converse is also true : the lower a family is positioned on a scale of socio-economic based classes, the greater is the probability that the marital union will be less stable and that the wife-mother will play a more dominant role in family organisation. This hypothesis appears valid in the West Indian and Southern United States situations, but because of the apparent cohesiveness of lower class matrifocal English families its validity in the English setting would be more limited.

As a result of this discussion we can say that it appears from the empirical evidence available that certain lower class families in the West Indies, the Southern United States and England clearly reveal matrifocal tendencies within a consanguineal family organisation. We have also seen that despite a large number of studies the conception of matrifocality remains imprecise. Furthermore, it has been indicated that causative factors of matricentral family organisation are not as yet agreed upon although the most recent discussions suggest that this type of organisation is to be explained in functional and psychological terms. This is not to say that demographic, historical and valuational explanations are without value.

To conclude this section let us refer again to Solien's<sup>58</sup> work in which she claims that the consanguineal household exists as a normative functioning unit. She indicates that this type of family is frequently associated with matrifocality especially in "mixed-blood" societies in which the traditional culture has been disrupted or dissolved by the impact of Western civilization or in which a people find themselves between the two cultures from which they are derived. Solien suggests that more conclusive claims could be made, and the concept of matrifocality clarified, if the studies of "mixed-blood" societies were aimed specifically at exploring the role of women.

Matrifocality: The Part-Aborigines of New South Wales

This is an intensive study of matrifocality among the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve in the New England region of New South Wales. These are a people whom "subjective" stratificationists would distinguish as occupying a lower class position on a socio-economic based scale.

Australian social anthropologists and sociologists have referred both directly and indirectly to matrifocal tendencies among the part-Aborigines. At the 1961 Research Conference which set up the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, reference was made in discussion to "the matri-central family". A quotation from the "Discussion on Social Organisation"<sup>59</sup> reads:

Reference had been made in discussion . . . to the matri-central family, which in Jamaica is found to be closely linked with the social and economic position of the Negroes in the community who cannot afford marriage, and amongst whom, therefore, children born are forced back into the mother's family. Connected features of the disintegration of Aboriginal social organisation could usefully be studied here. We needed to know much more about the recent historical emergence of the Aborigines as a low socio-economic status group.

In a recent paper on Aboriginal education in New South Wales, Bell<sup>60</sup> mentions matrifocality as an important factor in the lives of part-Aboriginal children. He writes:

This matrifocal nature of part-Aboriginal group life with its concomitant lack of male authority is part of the explanation for the maladjustment of many of the children.

The part-Aborigines of La Perouse, a Sydney suburb, which Bell<sup>61</sup> studied in the late 1950s showed signs that their households were evolving towards matrifocality. Bell writes:

The frequent absence of many men from La Perouse is increasing the authority and responsibility that some women have over the household.

Calley<sup>62</sup> in his study of the economic life of part-Aborigines on the North Coast of New South Wales describes two family types : one "headed by a man", the other by a woman. On one Aboriginal Reserve he found that one-third of the families were led by women. He writes:

Just over half of these women have never had permanent spouses (legal or de facto) and the remainder have been deserted by their husbands. Very few of these women can hope for a permanent union in the future, and many families which now fall into the first family type will ultimately belong to the second.

Similarly, Beckett<sup>63</sup> refers to the important role of "the mum" among the part-Aborigines of Western New South Wales. He writes:

The mother is most usually the central figure in the home. The father is absent at work for long periods . . . . Marriage is unstable and breadwinners come and go, or there may be none at all, with the family depending upon government assistance. It is extremely

rare, however, for a mother to desert her children. It is she who prepares their food and goes borrowing when supplies are short, spending little of the family income on herself. In a questionnaire I gave to twenty-seven aboriginal children in one district, seventeen answered 'Mother' to the question 'Who is the most important person in a home?' Only five answered 'Father', the remainder answering 'Father and Mother'. The majority of white children in the same district answered 'Father'.

In her studies of part-Aborigines in North-Western New South Wales, Reay<sup>64</sup> refers to matricentral tendencies among different groups. The women of Walgett, Reay writes, "are the acknowledged authorities in their own homes". She adds:

The maternal grandmother is the person with the greatest authority over the children, and the woman who has the most grandchildren is the person with the greatest power and prestige in the community . . . . The married women, particularly those older ones who have grandchildren, are the focal centre of the family and clan community life. Their prestige is great . . . . The grandmother's position, as well as being a responsible one, entails a great deal of work. On her rests the burden of caring for all her grandchildren, for if the maternal grandmother is living, the mother does not exercise much authority.

Of the part-Aborigines of Moree, Reay<sup>65</sup> writes:

There is a tendency for a matriarch to develop with authority over a well-defined group, consisting largely or entirely of her sons and daughters together with their families. There are two powerful matriarchs on the Aboriginal Reserve . . . . Mrs. D. is a lesser matriarch at the Middle Camp, whose influence overlaps slightly the influence of Mrs. P (Aboriginal Reserve). Mrs. C. is the matriarch of the Steel Bridge Camp, influencing all her own and her husband's offspring and having absolute authority over their children. At

the Top Camp, there are five women who have some characteristics of a matriarch . . . . At Thompson's Row, there is one chief matriarch . . . . The Big River Group comprises a matriarch and her immediate descendants. One woman in the Town Group . . . has some characteristics of a matriarch . . . . The matriarch is always a woman who is industrious and generous and has gathered about her a constellation of descendants and other relatives who are dependent on her . . . . Her influence extends rarely beyond those individuals who are directly related to her by blood.

In her study of the part-Aborigines of Brewarrina in North-Western New South Wales, Fink<sup>66</sup> makes reference to matrifocal household situations. She writes:

The household units are usually a large group with the family and distant relatives and sometimes married daughters and their husbands all living together. There seems to be a definite tendency for daughters to live with or next door to their parents, especially their mothers. This is quite marked in town where there are many instances of daughters and mothers living together or as neighbours.

The North-Western region of New South Wales is traditionally a matrilineal and matrilocal area.<sup>67</sup> Of the part-Aborigines of Walgett, Reay writes that "marriage is still matrilocal",<sup>68</sup> the implication being that present-day matricentral tendencies are to be explained in terms of the traditional past or remnants of it. This is an historical explanation. It is clear, however, from Reay's work that she would also explain part-Aboriginal matrifocality by drawing on additional factors of a demographic, valuational, functional and psychological nature. Similarly, Fink<sup>69</sup> adopts an

historical explanation when she suggests that matrifocal aspects of life in Brewarrina "may be a survival of matrilocal marriage". However, she also explains matricentrality among the part-Aborigines of Brewarrina partly in valuational terms when she refers to "the high illegitimacy rate among the Mission (Reserve) and lower town groups".<sup>70</sup> She writes:

There is no stigma attached to a girl 'getting into trouble' in the lower group. In fact, it is the normal occurrence for a girl when she is about 16 to become pregnant. In that case, the child is brought up with the rest of the children in the household . . . . However, it is desirable for such a girl eventually to get a husband or some man to support her, otherwise she is a drain on the household. So, when she finally finds a husband or de facto husband she often continues to live there, the husband joining his in-laws or building a house next door. Thus social disapproval is only directed towards a woman who has no man to support her and keeps on having children. No one cares very much whether she marries or just lives with a man. It is often years before people formally decide to get married.

Like Reay, Fink's work also indicates that she would explain matrifocality by calling in factors of a demographic, functional and psychological nature.

It is clear from these several studies of part-Aborigines in New South Wales that matrifocality is an important aspect of their lives and, consequently, is a subject worthy of further investigation. These studies also suggest that part-Aboriginal matrifocality calls for a multifactored explanation drawing on

demographic, historical, valuational and functional as well as psychological concepts. Let us now turn to the part-Aborigines of Armidale.

Notes and References

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2. Radcliffe-Brown, op.cit., p.687; Bell, 1964, p.60.
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4. This is the 1966 Census figure. Commonwealth Year Book, 1968, p.150.
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45. Herskovits, 1941, p.169; 1947, pp.15-16.
46. Kunstadter, op.cit., p.58.
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55. Winch, 1970, p.9.
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CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY, THE SETTING, THE PEOPLE  
AND FIELD TECHNIQUES

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HISTORY, THE SETTING, THE PEOPLE

#### AND FIELD TECHNIQUES

#### History of the New England Aborigines

Little is known about the original Aboriginal people of the New England Tablelands. It is known, however, that the region was a boundary area in which the Anewan, Narbul, and Kwianbal tribes were hemmed in between the coastal Daingatti and Kumbainggiri tribes and the Kamilaroi tribe to the west.<sup>1</sup> Of the three local tribes Walker<sup>2</sup> writes:

When Commissioner Macdonald reported on the condition of the local aborigines in 1842 he stated their numbers to be only five or six hundred. Although this may be an underestimate it is at least consistent with our knowledge of their even smaller numbers later, and it would appear that the aboriginal population of about one person to 22 square miles was much sparser than their proportion in the colony as a whole. The suggestion may be made that their more powerful and populous neighbours on coast and western slopes had driven the small tribes into this unfavourable district.

The local tribes, each with no more than a hundred members, were smaller than the average Australian tribe which is estimated to have been about five or six hundred.<sup>3</sup> The local group of fifteen or more members inhabiting a particular territory was the

important group for social, economic, political and religious purposes. This group was patrilocal, patrilineal, and exogamous. Authority was exercised by the male elders. The bora grounds found in New England today are evidence of the Aborigines' former ceremonial and religious life. From evidence available it appears that the Aborigines moved off the mountains twice a year: in winter "to avoid the rigours of a New England winter" and in high summer to avoid the March fly!<sup>4</sup>

John Oxley, the explorer, had first contact with the New England natives in 1818 and European settlement in the region began with pastoral expansion in the 1830s. By 1839 New England through to Tenterfield and Inverell had been settled.<sup>5</sup> The period 1830 to 1860 was marked by "bad relations" between the settlers and the Aborigines.<sup>6</sup> By nature an hospitable people the New England natives reacted to the settlers' "gun-shot" welcome by killing sheep and murdering shepherds.<sup>7</sup> Extracts from The Sydney Herald of the time illustrate this:

Two men (shepherds) belonging to Messrs. John and Francis Allman were murdered at New England and their sheep taken away (3rd January, 1838).

Mr. Cruickshanks, at New England, had a shepherd murdered in the bush, and some sixty or seventy sheep stolen (10th December, 1838).

We have been informed that the blacks at New England drove off 1,400 sheep (1st June, 1840).

A poor fellow at New England narrowly escaped with his life, a short time ago, whilst tending a flock of sheep. The blacks surrounded him and threw several spears at him, one of which penetrated his body some inches. He shot the nearest and the others drew off a short distance, which enabled the poor fellow to get behind a tree and break the end of the spear off . . . . By the help of his dogs, he was able to head his sheep up to the station (a distance of 6 miles from his hut, which was plundered) where the point of the spear was extracted (25th October, 1844).

The result of this violence and European settlement was a reduction in Aboriginal numbers and the emergence of a part-Aboriginal population. Duloy and Williams<sup>8</sup> write that

(In) the late 1880s . . . (of) an estimated 600 or more Aborigines who had been living in the New England region at the time of the first arrival of the whites some 300 or less remained, and of these only 50 per cent were full-blood. This disastrous drop in numbers, (was) caused by violent death, disease, alienation of tribal land and disruption of their culture.

It is assumed that the original Aboriginal inhabitants of the Armidale district either died out or were driven away as European settlement was firmly established.<sup>9</sup> None of the part-Aborigines in Armidale today claim descent from the former tribes of the immediate vicinity.

### The Setting

Armidale (Map 1), the setting for this study, is a city of over 16,000 inhabitants situated in the New England Tableland region of New South Wales. Some 360 miles from Sydney, Armidale



is on the main northern railway line and is also connected with the metropolitan area by the New England and Pacific Highways. The City of Armidale is known as an educational and religious centre. It contains the University of New England, the Armidale Teachers' College, five public and private secondary schools, and a number of primary and infants' schools. Armidale is the seat of both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishoprics and the centre of their respective dioceses. With regard to business and commerce, the city is a service-centre for a large rural hinterland and a railhead for the import of goods and for the export of sheep and wool.

Within its population in 1969 Armidale had approximately 300 people (including visitors) of part-Aboriginal descent. There were no full-blood Aborigines. As stated above none of these part-Aborigines could trace his origin back to the original New England tribes. Rather, they are all immigrants and have their origins elsewhere. Duloy and Williams<sup>10</sup> write:

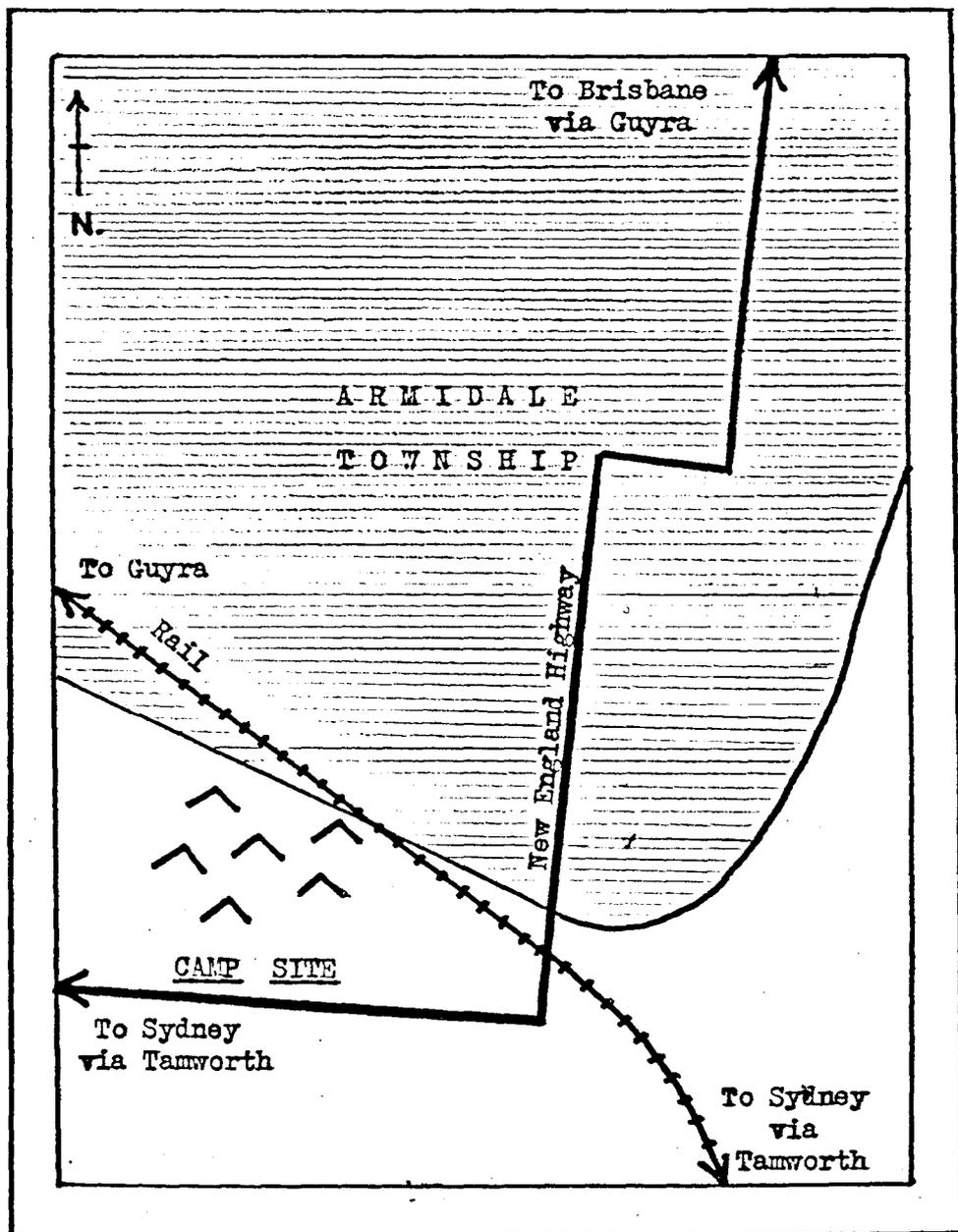
There is some evidence that there was a migration in the 1880s of a group of Aborigines from a tribe in the Macleay Valley to the Armidale district, and one group of Armidale Aborigines still retains close ties of marriage and general friendship with people of the Macleay district. From the late part of the last century another group of Armidale Aborigines is descended from a . . . half-caste girl, possibly related to a tribe from further west.

No permanent camp, however, was established in Armidale by

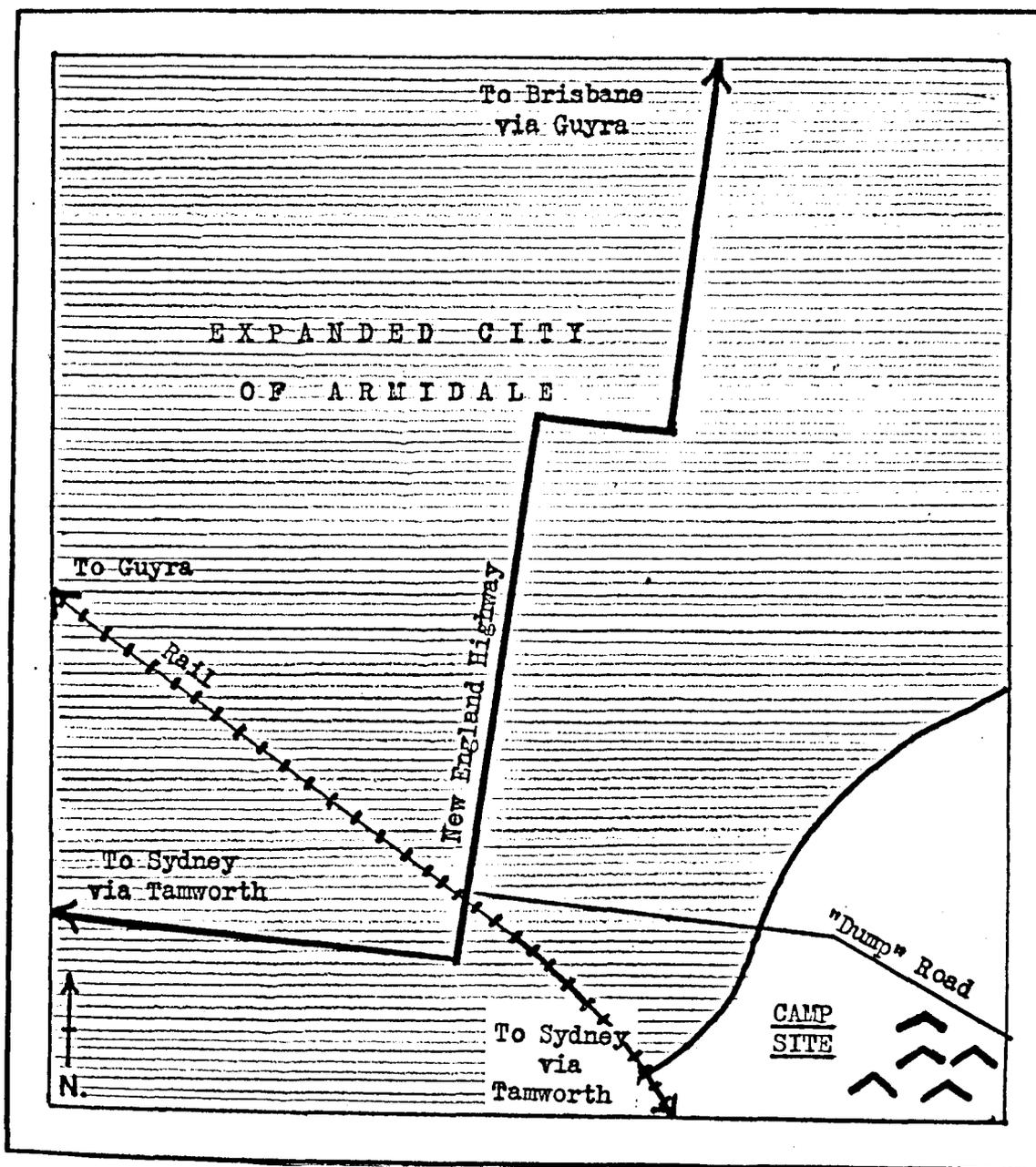
these Aborigines. They came and went as the mood took them<sup>11</sup> or as the police, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were designated Protectors of Aborigines and in conformity with the then current protection policy,<sup>12</sup> moved them on. Nevertheless, Armidale continued to attract Aborigines intermittently.

The site of the first permanent Aboriginal camp was located south of the railway line (Map 2), but as the city expanded this camp was abandoned and the part-Aborigines moved to East Armidale (Map 3). Here they built a number of shacks on the Armidale Garbage Tip, which is known locally as "The Dump", and where they scrounged food, clothing and building materials.

In the mid-1950s there was an influx of part-Aborigines into Armidale from both the coast and the Western Slopes, and by 1957 the Aboriginal population was 230.<sup>13</sup> Of this number over 120 coastal people lived on "The Dump" in conditions "so deplorable" that a group of academic and other professional people formed the Armidale Aboriginal Association and campaigned for the establishment of an Aboriginal Reserve on the outskirts of the city.<sup>14</sup> This campaign was aided by the death from gastro-enteritis of a number of Aboriginal children living on "The Dump", and the result was that the Aborigines' Welfare Board decided to establish a Reserve in East Armidale (Map 1). In the meantime the part-Aborigines from "The Dump" were housed in a "tent city".<sup>15</sup> Fourteen houses were



Map 2. Part-Aboriginal Camp Site,  
Armidale, Early This Century.



Map 3. Part-Aboriginal Camp Site,  
Armidale Garbage Tip ("The Dump"),  
1959.

constructed on the Reserve and the inhabitants moved into them late in 1959. About the same time an Aborigines' Welfare Officer was stationed permanently in Armidale. In 1963 The Save the Children Fund established a pre-school kindergarten on the Reserve. Later, two other houses close to the Reserve and owned by the Roman Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist Churches were handed over to and occupied by other people from "The Dump" who could not be accommodated in the houses on the Reserve.

The remaining part-Aborigines (approximately 100) living in Armidale at this time consisted of a few families of coastal origin who were related to the Reserve people but who were aspiring towards assimilation, and a number of part-Aborigines who migrated backwards and forwards from the Western Slopes and Plains region. The latter at this time clearly had not come to recognize Armidale as their home and were ignored by the Aboriginal authorities.

Because sections of Armidale's Aboriginal population are particularly mobile,<sup>16</sup> a feature noted by others who have studied part-Aborigines elsewhere in the State,<sup>17</sup> the number of Aborigines in the city fluctuates continuously. It is impossible to be anything but approximate concerning the total number. If we disregard the fluctuations it is clear that Armidale's Aboriginal population is increasing. Favourable seasonal employment in hinterland rural industries and the fact that Armidale is regarded by the part-

Aborigines as a "good town" relative to nearby towns like Moree and Walgett where prejudice is said by the Aborigines to be most marked, together with a general decrease in Aboriginal infant mortality and a rising Aboriginal birthrate help to explain this increase. Be this as it may, when this study was carried out in 1969 the part-Aborigines constituted less than 2 per cent (and at times, because of fluctuations in their numbers, even less) of the city's population. Because some Aborigines have the habit of "hanging around the main street" they tend to be more noticeable than their total numbers might suggest. At any time of the day part-Aborigines can be found in the Court House park, on the post office steps or in front of the hotels.

It is true that Armidale, relatively speaking, is a "good town" for Aborigines although this has not always been the case, and even at present the situation is artificial. Some townspeople, mainly academics and other professional people and their wives, together with university students, have taken an interest in Aboriginal welfare through such organizations as the Armidale Aboriginal Association and the Aboriginal Home Work Centre. Certainly the image of the Aborigines has improved and prejudice toward them has eased. Overt discrimination toward the part-Aboriginal population would not be tolerated in the city today. The presence of considerable numbers of African, Indian, Fijian, New Guinean,

Chinese, Tongan and Maori students at the university, the Teachers' College and private secondary schools in the city has helped Armidalians to learn to live with colour. The artificiality of the present situation is that the part-Aborigines of the city have more to do with academic and professional people through the welfare agencies noted above than they do with townspeople lower down the socio-economic ladder. They meet the latter in shops, at the pictures, at work, at Bingo and Housie nights at the Ambulance Station and Returned Servicemen's League, and in the host of other day-to-day activities shared when people occupy the same territorial locality. But these relationships are superficial.

In 1969 Armidale's part-Aboriginal population fell into two residential categories: those on the Aboriginal Reserve and those in the city itself. If visitors are excluded, 127 of the city's Aborigines were living on the Reserve in 1969. The remainder lived in the city. The few families which are aspiring towards assimilation and which are trying to cut themselves off from all contact with people of Aboriginal descent, are scattered throughout the city. The Reserve people related to these families try to keep up the relationship and are critical when they encounter rebuffs. These rebuffs strike at the heart of the part-Aboriginal value system that relatives should "stick together". At the same time it gives the Reserve people some satisfaction that they have

relatives "living like whites" in the city proper. The women of the Reserve make no secret of their aspirations "to live like whites" in the city. The other part-Aborigines in the city tend to concentrate on the fringe of the industrialized, low-income and generally depressed western sector of Armidale where they live in dilapidated or squat in deserted houses. Coming generally from "out west", in contrast to the Reserve people who are coastal in origin, these people are far less united among themselves than the Reserve people and are far more mobile.

The Aborigines of the Reserve and those of the western section of the city are antagonistic to each other. Living at different extremes of the city helps to minimize contacts between them. They are, however, likely to have some passing contact in the employment field, in shops, in hotels and at the Bingo and Housie evenings sponsored by two city institutions. Their children meet at school and some of them at the Home Work Centre.

There are a few formal occasions during the year when representatives of the two groups have face-to-face contact. These occasions are organized by the Roman Catholic Church, the Armidale Aboriginal Association and the Rural Youth Club and include the annual Aboriginal Ball, the Aboriginal Sports' Day, and any civic welcome to visitors concerned with Aboriginal welfare. These occasions tend to provoke more hostility between the two groups

than harmony. At the Aboriginal Ball the choice of the belle-of-the-ball inevitably results in bad feelings between the groups. In 1969 a girl from the Reserve was selected and Aboriginal women from the city were so incensed that they attempted to provoke a fight by challenging the winner "to come outside". Jealousies also run high at the Aboriginal Sports' Day when charges of favouritism and cheating are hurled about. At a civic welcome held in the Town Hall the city Aborigines complained that the Reserve people were "trying to take over".

It is not unusual for men from the two groups to become involved in brawls when drinking in city hotels. The women of the Reserve have strongly resisted attempts to enrol Aboriginal children from outside the Reserve in the pre-school kindergarten sponsored by Save the Children Fund and housed on the Reserve; the Reserve women erroneously believe that the kindergarten is for the use of their own children. The city Aborigines are jealous of the housing standards on the Reserve and also of the interest taken by certain townspeople in the welfare of the Reserve residents. They complain that all the clothing jumble sales are held on the Reserve and that the residents get "the pick of everything". One city woman stated that "the triple A" (as the Armidale Aboriginal Association is known locally) could only think in terms of the Reserve people and remarked that "if you don't live at the Reserve you

git nothin'". The Reserve people regard the city Aborigines as cheats and thieves; they criticize them as aggressive ("always ready for a fight", as one put it) and as immoral (the reference here being to the claim by Reserve women that the Aboriginal women of the city try to steal their menfolk and that city men try to corrupt their girls).

It seems that this antipathy and its accompanying behaviour pattern is typical when part-Aborigines from different geographical regions are thrown together by the necessity of modern life. Similar descriptions to that given above are found in the literature on part-Aboriginal studies in New South Wales.<sup>18</sup> In their studies of part-Aboriginal groups in north-western New South Wales, Reay and Sitlington<sup>19</sup> refer to this phenomenon. Similarly, the part-Aboriginal residents of the La Perouse Reserve display hostility towards other Aboriginal people who are required to reside on the Reserve when they come to Sydney for medical treatment.<sup>20</sup> This antipathy is a many-factored phenomenon and, as Reay and Sitlington say, one of the primary factors is "fear of harm from strangers".<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that historians<sup>22</sup> have shown that in pre-European times the Aboriginal people of the Western Slopes and Plains remained socially separate from the Aboriginal tribes of New England and the coast. This thesis, as explained below, is directly concerned with the part-Aborigines of the Reserve and only incidentally with the city Aborigines.

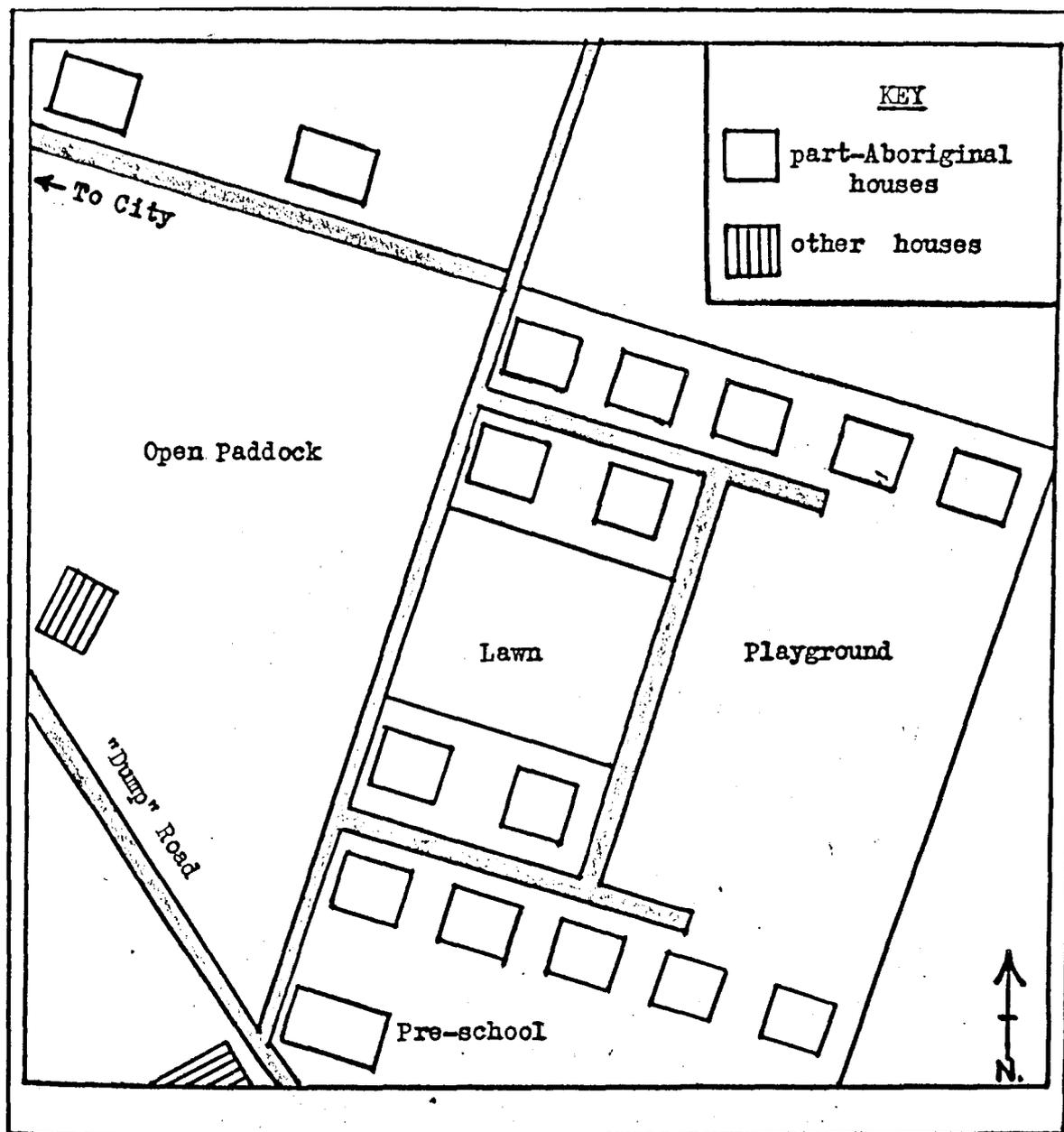
The Armidale Aboriginal Reserve

As already stated the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve has a short history dating from 1959. The Reserve is a small tract of Crown Land on the eastern fringe of the city and is officially notified as an Aboriginal Reserve. When this study was carried out the Reserve was controlled by the Aborigines' Welfare Board and was supervised in its name by an Aborigines' Welfare Officer stationed permanently in Armidale. Unlike some Aboriginal Reserves and Stations in other parts of the State, the Armidale Reserve has no resident manager or matron and the inhabitants are left much to their own devices. In 1969 the Aborigines' Welfare Officer visited the Reserve several times a week to collect rents and in response to requests by residents either to inspect deficiencies in their houses, to settle quarrels, or to deal with drunkenness. On a number of occasions the residents themselves called in the police to deal with drunken and recalcitrant people.

The Reserve is located in undulating country with open-wooded landscape to the north and the east. The southern aspect is blocked by treed hills and the city dominates the western view. There are two road links with the city; one is unsealed and generally in poor condition but is a shorter distance to the city than the sealed road which is known locally as "The Dump Road".

The layout of the Reserve is shown in Map 4. There are 14 houses on the Reserve itself. They were built by and are owned by the Aborigines' Welfare Board and rents are collected by the Aborigines' Welfare Officer. The Reserve has two streets, a lawned area, a children's playground, and a Save the Children Fund Aboriginal Pre-School Kindergarten. Adjacent to the Reserve are two houses occupied by part-Aborigines and which for the purpose of this study will be treated as part of the Reserve; one house (16) is owned by the Roman Catholic Church and the other (15) by the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

As we have seen there were 127 permanent residents on the Reserve in 1969. These were people who claimed the Reserve to be their home. The total number of part-Aborigines on the Reserve, however, fluctuated continuously throughout the year. One reason for this fluctuation was visitors. A number of censuses were conducted during the period of field work and the number of visitors counted was never less than five. On one occasion (1st June) about 50 visitors were counted; these people were visiting Armidale to attend the Aboriginal Ball. Visitors stayed on the Reserve for varying periods ranging from a day to a month. A car load of visitors from the coast would descend on the Reserve for the day, leave some of their number behind for longer visits, and the others would take off for home in the evening. With houses already crowded



Map 4. The Armidale Aboriginal Reserve and Immediate Environs.

it was intriguing to discover where visitors were accommodated for overnight and longer visits. Visitors were "spread around" among relatives and friends, and in one house it was the practice on such occasions for children to sleep in the ceiling while adults slept in the available beds and on the floor.

The sex and age distributions of the permanent residents of the Reserve are given in Table 1. From this table it will be seen that of the 127 residents 62 were males and 65 were females. Of the sexes, 44 were males under the age of 15 and 37 were females

TABLE 1

SEX AND AGE DISTRIBUTIONS OF RESERVE RESIDENTS  
AT 1ST JUNE, 1969

Age	Male	Female	Total
0-4	15	21	36
5-14	29	16	45
15-24	2	10	12
25-39	10	12	22
40-54	2	4	6
55-69	3	2	5
70+	1	-	1
Total	62	65	127

under 15. There were only 18 males over the age of 14 compared with 28 females over this age. It will be seen that the Reserve population is a young one; 81 of the total residents (over 63 per cent) were under 15 years of age and 115 of the residents (over 90 per cent) were under 40 years of age. There were only 12 residents (6 males and 6 females) over the age of 40. There was only one person over 70. Although the sexes by total numbers appear to be roughly equal the picture is misleading to some extent because the mobility of adult males invariably results in there being more females on the Reserve at any one time than males. The reasons for adult male mobility will be discussed in a later chapter.

The Reserve population is miscegenetic and most members would be less than half-caste. Some, however, are dark and distinctively Aboriginal in appearance. Distinctive Aboriginal physical features such as skin colour, nose form and supraorbital ridge are minimal among the children. Four adult males are trihybrid being the offspring of a part-Aboriginal mother and a Chinese father. Two adult females are direct descendants of Torres Strait Islanders and exhibit the concomitant distinctive skin, hair and nose features. Because they are essentially outdoor workers and spend much of their leisure time sitting in the sun, the skin colour of many Reserve people is darker than it would normally be. No attempt is made by either sex to avoid suntan. This situation is different from that in north-western New South



Plate 2. Informants of Torres Strait  
Island Descent.

Wales as reported by Reay.<sup>23</sup> Reay found many of her part-Aboriginal female informants extremely conscious of the sun's tanning effects and says that because of this they were "always careful to wear stockings and a hat".<sup>24</sup>

A "caste classification" of the Reserve people is impossible because the "castes" of their forebears are not known. The admixture of European and Aboriginal blood goes back to the first contacts with Europeans on the North Coast well over a century ago. Back-crossings and recombinations of "castes" have obscured both European and Aboriginal ancestry and have added to the great variety and complexity of crossings.<sup>25</sup>

TABLE 2  
BIRTHPLACES OF THE 46 PERMANENT ADULT MEMBERS OF  
THE ARMIDALE RESERVE

Region	Locality	Males	Females	Total
North Coast	Kempsey	7	5	12
	Bellbrook	2	4	6
	Wauchope	-	1	1
	Cabbage Tree Is.	-	1	1
Northern Tablelands	Woolbrook	-	3	3
	Walcha	1	5	6
	Armidale	1	5	6
	Guyra	-	1	1
	Ebor	-	1	1
Central Coast	Newcastle	1	-	1
	Sydney	5	2	7
Western Slopes	Walgett	1	-	1
Total		18	28	46

From Table 2, which is given over to the birthplaces of 46 of the permanent adult members of the Reserve, it will be seen that 20 (9 males and 11 females) gave localities on the North Coast as their respective birthplaces, 17 (2 males and 15 females) gave localities on the Northern Tablelands, 6 males and 2 females claimed to have been on the Central Coast, and only one claimed to have been born in western New South Wales. Those born on the Northern Tablelands tend to be younger adults whose parents themselves emanate from the North Coast Region of the State.

It is clear from material gathered during the course of the study that the residents of the Reserve are orientated to the coast. Mobility patterns highlight the coast firstly and other localities on the Northern Tablelands secondly. There is virtually no contact between the Reserve people and Aboriginal centres on the Western Slopes and Plains regions. The antipathy between the Reserve people and the city Aborigines, who emanate from the western part of the State, has already been noted.

Because the Reserve Aborigines are originally a coastal people it is fitting to conclude this section of the chapter with a "thumb-nail" sketch of the general traditional social organisation of the North and Central Coast tribes. It is clear from the literature on these tribes that the coastal strip, wedged in between the Great Dividing Range and the Pacific Ocean, was well-

watered and that because of this tribal grounds and the hunting and food-gathering territories of the local groups were comparatively small.<sup>26</sup>

The tribes of the North and Central Coast regions were the Yukumbil of the Richmond and Clarence Rivers, the Yegeera and Yuungai tribes of the Clarence, the Kumbainggiri, south of the Clarence to the Bellingen, the Ngambar of the Nambucca River, the Ngaku, the Daingatti, and the Burgadi of the Macleay River, and the Birpai and Kattang of the Hastings River.<sup>27</sup>

All these tribes were patrilineal in descent and patrilocal in residence with the local group the most important unit in the social organisation. Each local group had its own food-gathering and hunting territory. The tribes of the Richmond, Clarence, Bellingen, Nambucca and Macleay Rivers were each divided into moieties and four sections. The section system had the following arrangement.<sup>28</sup>

Marung - Wirung
   
 Karbung - Wambung

The local group was exogamous. Marriage was with a classificatory mother's brother's daughter, own matrilineal cross-cousin being prohibited. Because strict mother-in-law avoidance was practised a man would be wise to select his wife from a long distance.

Totemism was the local variety with a number of totemic centres in each local territory. Each centre was associated with a myth which recorded the travels of the mythical ancestors and was the site for ceremonies which were held periodically so that natural species would continue to appear in the hunting territory.<sup>29</sup>

The tribes of the Hastings River had neither moieties nor sections although there is evidence that these were spreading down from the northern tribes.<sup>30</sup> The local group was the important social unit and patrilineal totemic clans were important in reckoning kinship and in regulating marriage. Their kinship system was of the Aluridja type named and described by Elkin.<sup>31</sup>

#### Field Techniques

Field data in this study were collected over a period of ten months in 1969. The principal techniques employed in data collecting were observation and interviewing and these were supplemented by other aids. These aids were largely of a documentary nature and included newspapers, theses, files of the Aborigines' Welfare Officer, and essays written by part-Aboriginal children. The Aborigines' Welfare Officer stationed in Armidale was a mine of information, made his files available and elaborated on them.

Observational Technique

Observation, as Nadel indicates,<sup>32</sup> is the social anthropologist's chief data-gathering technique; no technique can replace the investigator's trained observational powers. An attempt was made to observe directly as many aspects as possible of the life of the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve, their relationships with outsiders, and special attention was given, as Solien<sup>33</sup> has suggested, to the role of women.

The observational technique employed was what Junker<sup>34</sup> has termed "Observer as Participant" and, more specifically, what Fink<sup>35</sup> has called "incomplete participation", the technique usually employed by social anthropologists. In using this technique the fieldworker plays a certain role in the social situation that he is studying. It is a limited role of participation and theoretically falls between what Hare<sup>36</sup> calls "complete participant observation" on the one hand, and "complete non-participant observation" on the other.<sup>37</sup> Fink<sup>38</sup> sees the technique as one of four "ideal types of observation", the other three being "genuine participation" and "pseudo-participation" (both of which are subsumed by Hare's "complete participant observation"), and "non-participation" (which is Hare's "complete non-participant observation"). "Incomplete participation" has decided advantages for the fieldworker over other observational techniques. It

enables the observer to join in the activities of the people he is studying but does not require him to play any role set by them. Because of this the fieldworker is able to gather data without resorting to subterfuge. The technique permits direct observation, the interviewing of informants and notetaking to be made openly.

In the role of "incomplete participant" the research aims of this particular study were openly pursued and no deception regarding the purpose of the enquiry was used. It is necessary to indicate that because of obvious physical differences between myself and the subjects it would not have been possible to use a "complete participant" observational technique. Furthermore, such a role was prevented by the fact that I had lived in Armidale for a number of years and was known to the Aborigines through my participation in the Aboriginal Home Work Centre and by the fact that I had been a teacher at two schools in Armidale where I had come into contact with part-Aboriginal children and their parents. The role of "incomplete participant" enabled me to take part in most daily activities on the Reserve including "gossip sessions", housekeeping, card games, baby sitting, shopping, hospital visiting and so on. It also enabled me to participate in formal activities both on and off the Reserve such as meetings of The Save the Children Fund Aboriginal Pre-School

Mothers' Club, the Aboriginal Youth Club, the Rural Youth Club, the Aboriginal Advancement League, the Aboriginal Women's Progress Association, the Aboriginal Ball, the Aboriginal Sports' Day, other organized outings, as well as parties, weddings and funerals. This technique enabled a wide range of information to be obtained.

### Interviewing Technique

Because all facets of life on the Reserve could not be directly observed, and in order to elicit attitudinal material from the subjects, direct observation was coupled with "indirect observation" in the form of interviewing.<sup>39</sup>

Some months after starting work on the Reserve an interview schedule in the form of a questionnaire was drawn up (Appendix 1) on the basis of my observations up to that point in time and my reading of other part-Aboriginal studies and relevant literature from different parts of the world. The schedule was tested and modifications were made; some questions were eliminated, others were recast and additional ones were incorporated. The aims of the schedule were, firstly, to elicit information of a factual and an attitudinal nature concerning the role of women in the life of the Reserve and beyond, secondly, to check my own observations and to test hypotheses that I had formulated, and, thirdly, to have comparable data for all households

on the Reserve. Questions were subsumed under rubrics relating to the social, economic, political and religious aspects of life on the Reserve and beyond and female participation in them. The questions themselves were either "open" or "fixed-alternative" types.<sup>40</sup>

Years of official prying into their private lives has made the part-Aborigines a suspicious people. Students of part-Aboriginal studies have repeatedly made this point<sup>41</sup> and the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve are no exception. For this reason the questionnaire schedule itself was never produced. Rather, I familiarised myself with its contents and completed the schedule, or parts of it, as soon as possible after obtaining the relevant information. In point of fact the only notes taken in their presence related to kinship genealogies which they themselves realised were often so involved that I could not possibly remember all the details.

No formal interviews as such were conducted. Rather, after a few months on the Reserve and when I felt that a sufficient degree of rapport had been established with the subjects I began to ask direct questions during my conversations with them. Here I was guided by the questionnaire, but more often than not I had to explain my questions or recast them into the local idiom to facilitate understanding. My interviewing

technique is best described as a semi-directed or semi-structured type. Blake<sup>42</sup> used this technique in her Jamaican study. She writes<sup>43</sup>

In obtaining our data, we sought to combine the systematic coverage of a questionnaire with the flexibility and spontaneity of an informal conversation. The research instrument that comes closest to fulfilling these requirements is the semi-structured interview schedule . . . . This device gives maximum spontaneity and yet assures a fairly high degree of comparability between one interview and another. It assures that the same substantive material will be covered in all interviews, and that the phrasing of questions will be roughly standardized. It was this type of schedule that we used.

In the course of conversations in the subjects' homes, in my home when informants visited me, while sitting in the sun on the Reserve, or in my car, I deliberately asked questions on predetermined topics but allowed informants latitude in answering them. I always gave informants a sympathetic hearing and discussed any topics which they chose to initiate. I subscribe to the point of view that interviewing of this type should be a two-way process. This procedure meant that schedules took varying lengths of time to complete and none was completed under several hours. Whenever possible - and this was sometimes difficult to achieve - I got informants by themselves so that they could freely answer my questions. My primary aim was to complete a schedule for the head of every household on the Reserve, and once this was accomplished I interviewed other members of each household.

My reading of part-Aboriginal and West Indian studies<sup>44</sup> made me conscious of the need to check material obtained. Informants occasionally gave incorrect information either consciously or unconsciously and checks of different types were employed to identify and to correct mistakes. My own observations were valuable in this regard as were follow-up interviews and interviews with other informants. Reserve life is closely integrated and care had to be exercised to avoid the suspicion that checks were being made. Nadel's "bully technique" in which one informant is deliberately provoked to criticise another would not have worked in this situation.<sup>45</sup>

#### Other Aids

As stated above a number of supplementary aids were employed to fill out material obtained by direct observation and interviewing. These aids were primarily of a documentary nature. Newspaper files were consulted for information relating to local Aborigines and their history. Theses written by students at the University of New England in which reference to local Aborigines is made were consulted. The files of the Armidale Aborigines' Welfare Officer were worked through. These files were an invaluable cross-check for information gleaned from the Aboriginal informants and frequently cast new light on and allowed better interpretations to be made of material previously gathered. The

Aborigines' Welfare Officer who had been permanently resident in Armidale for over a decade when the study was made, had an intimate and inexhaustible knowledge of the people of the Reserve and supplied information which opened up new avenues for investigation. It was also possible to check much factual material with him. Important information was also obtained from essays on different aspects of their lives written by older children attending the Aboriginal Home Work Centre. These essays occasionally and fortuitously provided checks for information obtained by other techniques.

#### Establishing Rapport

Barriers of both an ethnic and socio-economic nature existed between myself and the part-Aboriginal subjects. Informants continually used the colour labels of "black" and "white" to identify themselves and the European community respectively. I was "white" and they frequently used the term in reference to me (e.g., "But you are a white woman," etc.). Regardless of the degree of rapport achieved the racial difference persists and, as Fink<sup>46</sup> points out, the fieldworker must not mislead himself into believing that it can be forgotten. It has been stated above that even had I wished to use a complete participant approach this would have been precluded by my physical appearance.

Socio-economic differences are easier to minimize but even here it is easy to mislead oneself into believing that their effects have been overcome.<sup>47</sup> As pointed out above I had lived in Armidale for a number of years and was known to local part-Aborigines because of my activities at the Aboriginal Home Work Centre and as a teacher at schools in the city. Because of this it would have been foolish of me to have attempted to assume a socio-economic status which the Aborigines themselves would know I did not possess. Even so, where possible I tried to reduce socio-economic differences and tried not to appear "flash". At the Reserve and when informants visited me at home I dressed as simply as possible, and on their visits I deliberately entertained them in the kitchen (where they entertained me in their homes), went about my housework, and used everyday crockery when we ate. Despite my efforts to minimize their effects, I was made conscious of socio-economic differences and their importance when a girl who had been visiting me with her mother remarked as they were leaving, "Why do white people have such lovely homes and we have such terrible ones?".

My fieldwork began not at the Reserve but at the Aboriginal Home Work Centre which is run by a group of students from the University of New England and held three times a week in a church hall in the city. The sessions are of two hours' duration

and are given over to extra tuition for part-Aboriginal children. A total of 45 children from the Reserve voluntarily attended the Centre on a fairly regular basis, the daily average being 32. Some of them I knew from my teaching days. There was less reservation, however, between us at the Centre than there had been in the school situation. They all knew that I was no longer a teacher and that I was "working at the university" as they used to say. I participated in the Home Work Centre's activities during the entire period of fieldwork until I left Armidale to live in Adelaide. I believe that I achieved the maximum rapport with the children and these relationships proved invaluable in gaining entree to the Reserve. Fink<sup>48</sup> tells how she, too, in her study of the part-Aborigines of Brewarrina started her fieldwork with the children. The parents of some of the children knew me from my teaching days and all had come to hear about my participation at the Home Work Centre. Those who did not know me personally saw me when I took children home to the Reserve in my car. I found that I was able to use the Home Work Centre as an unofficial sponsor. A favourable image of the Centre had been created among the inhabitants of the Reserve and our common interest in their children provided a natural and unforced topic of conversation.

I explained and openly discussed the purpose of my visiting the Reserve. They knew that I was at the university and I



Plate 3. Author with Children at the Aboriginal Homework Centre.  
(By courtesy of The Armidale Express, N.S.W.)

explained that I was going to write a thesis, but not a book, about them. Knowing my background as they did there was never any problem of my being identified with the Aborigines' Welfare Board or with "the govmt" as Fink<sup>49</sup> and Bell<sup>50</sup> were. Even so I made certain that I did not become identified with organisations other than the Home Work Centre and the university. None of this is to say that there were no difficulties in establishing rapport. Anyone who has worked with part-Aborigines knows how suspicious they are of Europeans and how it takes time to gain acceptance. Establishing rapport with my informants was a process in time, a process involving months, and stages in the process are not easy to pinpoint. Because there was no suitable housing available I was unable to live on the Reserve; there was no manager's house and all the houses were fully occupied. My home, however, was only a few minutes from the Reserve and I visited it day after day for several months and many of the Aborigines visited me. I put myself out to show that I was not "flash"; I lent them clothes, put my car at their disposal, took them to shop and visited relatives in hospital. I attended all their functions, demonstrated my reliability and offered no criticism.

Fink<sup>51</sup> remarks that the sign of her acceptance in Brewarrina was to be invited into the Aborigines' homes. The

same was true in my experience. Furthermore, the exchange of personal names indicated that rapport had been established. I always introduced myself by my first name and asked the subjects to use it, but I addressed them as "Mr." or "Mrs.". One day after several weeks on the Reserve, Mrs. Nelly Thomas, the matriarch of the Reserve, called out to me as I passed to come into her house. When I went inside I found two other women present. Mrs. Thomas said, "Hello Jennie! I'm Nelly. This is Daisy and this is Janie". Most of my problems of rapport disappeared from that moment. Significantly, once I had been accepted by Mrs. Thomas and personal names had been exchanged I was generally accepted.

One further point needs to be made. My fieldwork was essentially among the Reserve people and my association with the part-Aborigines of the city itself was limited. This weakness, however, is not peculiar to this study. Fink<sup>52</sup> states that most of her work was with the Mission (Reserve) Aborigines in Brewarrina rather than with the town Aborigines and gives as the reason for this the antipathy effected by the difference in class status between the two groups of Aborigines. There is also an antipathy in Armidale between the Reserve and the city Aborigines but not on the basis of class as in Brewarrina. The antipathy in Armidale is based in part on the fact that the two Aboriginal

groups emanate from different geographical regions. The Reserve people claimed me as their own and for this very reason the city people generally rejected me. Overt fraternization with the part-Aborigines of the city would have certainly destroyed my relationship with the Reserve people. Although both groups of Aborigines are mobile, the part-Aborigines of the city are the more mobile of the two and this was an added reason for my choosing to study the Reserve. The houses of the Reserve tend to anchor the women of the Reserve to Armidale.

Those few part-Aborigines scattered throughout the city and who are trying to cut themselves off from contact with other people of Aboriginal descent were only peripherally involved in this study. These people, who are bent on assimilation, prefer not to be regarded as Aborigines, and their deliberate inclusion in this study would have embarrassed them. By all accounts it is doubtful that they would have participated in a study concerned primarily with people of Aboriginal extraction.

Information was obtained from many Europeans in the city. Living in the city, my work at the university, and my participation at the Aboriginal Home Work Centre brought me into continuous contact with European residents, and it was a relatively easy matter to ascertain their attitudes and get information on their relationships with the part-Aborigines.

Notes and References

1. Walker, 1966, p.3.
2. Ibid., pp.2-3.
3. Ibid., p.3; Elkin, 1948, p.10.
4. Walker, op.cit., pp.3-5.
5. Campbell, 1969, p.20.
6. Duloy and Williams, 1963, p.28.
7. Walker, 1962, pp.1-18; Campbell, op.cit., p.22; City of Armidale Diamond Jubilee Souvenir 1863-1923, 1923, p.10.
8. Duloy and Williams, op.cit., p.28.
9. Walker, 1966, p.172.
10. Duloy and Williams, op.cit., p.28.
11. Walker, op.cit., p.172.
12. Bell, 1959b, p.347.
13. Duloy and Williams, op.cit., p.29.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p.28; Walker, op.cit., p.172.
17. Bell, 1956, pp.181-182; Bell, 1959a, pp.101-102; Elkin, 1957, pp.278-280.
18. Reay and Sitlington, 1948, pp.183, 187; Bell, 1959a, p.143.
19. Reay and Sitlington, op.cit., pp.183, 187.
20. Bell, op.cit., p.143.

21. Reay and Sitlington, op.cit., p.187, cf. Elkin, 1964, p.69, who writes of tribal Australia, "A . . . striking manifestation of the tribal sentiment is seen in the attribution of 'evil' practices to other tribes, an attribution which increases with distance".
22. Walker, 1962, pp.1-18; Walker, 1966, pp.2-3, 172; Campbell, op.cit., p.20; Duloy and Williams, op.cit., p.28.
23. Reay, 1947, pp.22-23.
24. Ibid.
25. Cf. Colson, 1953, pp.56-60, who for the same reasons found it impossible to draw up a detailed classification for the "mixed-blood" Makah Indians of Washington State. She was only able to classify people as "pure-blood" and "mixed-blood".
26. Mathews, 1898, p.66.
27. Radcliffe-Brown, 1929, p.400; Radcliffe-Brown, 1930-1931, pp.235-238.
28. Ibid.
29. Radcliffe-Brown, 1929, p.400.
30. Radcliffe-Brown, 1930-1931, p.238.
31. Elkin, 1964, pp.103-106.
32. Nadel, 1951, p.35.
33. Solien, op.cit., p.1548.
34. Junker, 1962, p.37.
35. Fink, 1955b, p.60.
36. Hare, 1962, p.397.
37. Cf. Junker, op.cit., p.36.
38. Fink, op.cit., p.61.

39. Nadel, op.cit., p.35.
40. Selltiz et al., 1959, pp.256-257.
41. E.g., Fink, 1955a, pp.19-20; Bell, 1959a, p.34.
42. Blake, op.cit., p.24.
43. Ibid., p.36.
44. Bell, 1959a, p.46; Blake, op.cit., pp.41-42.
45. Nadel, 1939, p.323.
46. Fink, op.cit., p.22.
47. Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p.173.
48. Fink, op.cit., p.18.
49. Ibid., pp.18-19.
50. Bell, op.cit., p.34.
51. Fink, op.cit., p.19.
52. Ibid., p.22.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

#### Introduction

Before embarking on a detailed study of matrifocality among the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve an outline of their social structure will be given. This "bird's eye view" of their social life will be useful not only in demonstrating how the different groups interrelate but also as a backdrop to the chapters that follow.

The framework for this chapter will be Barnes' "three fields theory", the conceptual apparatus that he employed in his study of Bremnes, a Norwegian island parish.<sup>1</sup> The opening paragraph<sup>2</sup> of Barnes' paper, although long, is worth quoting.

When we study . . . a simple society, we aim at comprehending all the various ways in which the members of the society systematically interact with one another. For purposes of analysis we treat the political system, the pattern of village life, the system of kinship and affinity, and other similar areas of interaction as parts of the same universe of discourse, as though they were of equal analytical status, and we strive to show how the same external factors, principles of organization, and common values influence these different divisions of social life. This task, though always difficult, has been accomplished for a growing number of simple

societies, about which we can feel confident that we have an appreciation of what the society as a whole is like. When we turn to the enormously complex societies of Western civilization our task becomes much more difficult. Fieldwork in a Western community can lead directly to knowledge of only a very small sector in the social life of a large-scale society. This limited area of detailed knowledge has then to be related, as best we can, to experience and information derived from other parts of the society.

In his Bremnes fieldwork Barnes did not try to study Norwegian society as a whole, which would not have been possible, but instead isolated aspects of social life in which he was interested and which were relatively easy to deal with.<sup>3</sup>

The Armidale Aboriginal Reserve, like Bremnes, is in itself not a whole society but rather a "part-society", a concept introduced by Redfield<sup>4</sup> and suggested to him by Barnes' Norwegian work. If we limit our attention to the social life of the Aboriginal Reserve we cannot claim to study the social structure of these part-Aborigines because, and here we agree with Redfield,<sup>5</sup> the concept of social structure is inapplicable to an "incomplete system". In studying the social structure of these people we are led beyond the Reserve into the Armidale community and in turn beyond its boundaries to other centres along the Northern Tablelands and along the coastal strip. In other words, the Armidale Reserve is not only part of Armidale but part of Australia as well. The part-Aboriginal residents share the culture of the

nation at large as well as the local culture of the Armidale community. Traditional Aboriginal culture, as we have seen, has evaporated although some very attenuated features may still be found. There are no legal restrictions of any kind applied to the Aboriginal people of New South Wales. Schooling is compulsory for their children. They pay State and Commonwealth taxes, vote in local State and Federal elections, and can sue and be sued. They all profess Christianity and like the majority of Armidalians and Australians claim some nominal denominations. In other words, the residents of the Reserve belong with other Armidalians and Australians to the same economic, social, religious and political system. If we attempt to describe this part-Aboriginal society as social structure we must study not only the local Reserve but also, to use Redfield's words, "the growth outward from the local community",<sup>6</sup> that is, the relationships that spread beyond the Reserve itself.

Probably no concept has been the subject of more discussion and controversy than social structure. Even among the so-called British Structuralists, that school of social anthropologists who have earned the title because of their concentration on the concept of social structure, there is no agreement as to what social structure is. Some see it to mean the framework of social relationships as they actually exist between all persons within a

society;<sup>7</sup> others would limit the meaning to relationships between groups in perpetuity;<sup>8</sup> and still others would see the concept as meaning ideal relationships between persons and groups.<sup>9</sup> Although there are other meanings given to social structure these three will suffice. Each of these meanings has its critics. For some the first meaning is too broad, the second too narrow, and the third too aloof. Firth,<sup>10</sup> one of the critics, sees social structure composed of relationships of a "critical" nature, presumably those relationships which if interfered with will produce changes in the structure. But one might comment that this, too, is a narrow meaning. Finally, but by no means the last to write on the concept, Lévi-Strauss<sup>11</sup> sees social structure as a model divorced from empirical reality, built up from social relationships but at the same time not reducible to them. His models of social structure are four in number: conscious and unconscious models, mechanical and statistical models. Again, one might comment that Lévi-Strauss' concept is too aloof.

It is not our purpose to enter into this controversy but rather from the virtual plethora of meanings to find a conceptual apparatus which will prove operationally useful for this particular study. This apparatus is found in Barnes' "three fields theory".<sup>12</sup> Barnes classified Bremnes' social structure into its constituent groups according to the particular social field to which they

belonged. His classification consisted of three social fields: the hierarchy of territorially-based groups, the economic field of activity, and, the country-wide network.

The first of these social fields, the hierarchy of territorially-based groups, subsumes in hierarchical order, firstly, localized groups such as hamlet, neighbourhood and ward which are all parts of the parish of Bremnes itself, and secondly, beyond the parish those groups of which Bremnes itself constitutes but a part. These latter are larger units of an administrative, judicial or ecclesiastical nature. The economic field of activity, the second social field, pulls the inhabitants of Bremnes out of their small hamlets and neighbourhoods and throws them into economic situations that are independent of the local life. The third social field, the country-wide network, is as the appellation implies, based on Barnes' concept of network. All the relationships of all kinds that the Bremnes people have with one another and with other people beyond the parish are conceived of as a network in which people are the knots and the relationships between them are represented by lines joining the knots. But this third social field is not the total network just described but only the residual part of the network that is left over when those relationships subsumed by the territorial and economic fields are subtracted. Every person in Bremnes sees himself at

the centre of a collection of friends, relatives, acquaintances or people with some common interest. With some of these people he is directly in contact but with others he is only indirectly in touch. This network is country-wide in that it passes beyond the parish boundary into other parts of the country. The network itself is not a group with members nor has it boundaries; but, of course, groups are formed within this boundless network.<sup>13</sup>

Let us now turn to the social structure of the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve.

#### Social Structure of the Part-Aborigines

##### The Hierarchy of Territorially-Based Groups

For the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve this social field is not primarily concerned with administrative groups as is the case in the Bremnes study (although some administrative groups enter into the picture) but rather with other kinds of social groups. As in the Bremnes study the groups are territorially-based and in some cases, but not all, hierarchized in that each group is to be seen not only as a system in its own right but also as part of other groups which are sometimes ascending, that is, the groups "fit one inside the other".<sup>14</sup> In this way the social structure of the part-Aborigines of the Reserve is built up and the Reserve itself connected with other groups in the society at large.

The part-Aborigines of the Reserve belong to different kinds of social groups and these are variously related to each other. A "bird's eye view" of this social field reveals a four-level structure (Diagram 1). The relationships between the different levels are sometimes complex in that groups within the Reserve level are connected with groups in other levels with the relationships cutting across adjacent levels. Because this thesis is not concerned with a detailed examination of social structure no attempt will be made to give a full description either of all the groups and institutions involving the part-Aborigines or of the complex network of relationships connecting these groups and institutions. Such a description would require a thesis in its own right. In Diagram 1 an attempt has been made to illustrate some of the relationships existing between social groups on the Reserve and groups and institutions at other levels. Not all relationships are depicted because the diagram would become too complex and would lose its illustrative significance. The diagram, however, does illustrate "the growth outward from the local community"<sup>15</sup> and the articulation of the structural levels.

The important groups that constitute the Reserve or first level are, briefly, the domestic groups: the household and the households linked together by kinship, neighbourly and friendship ties; cliques, which although informal groups based on kinship,

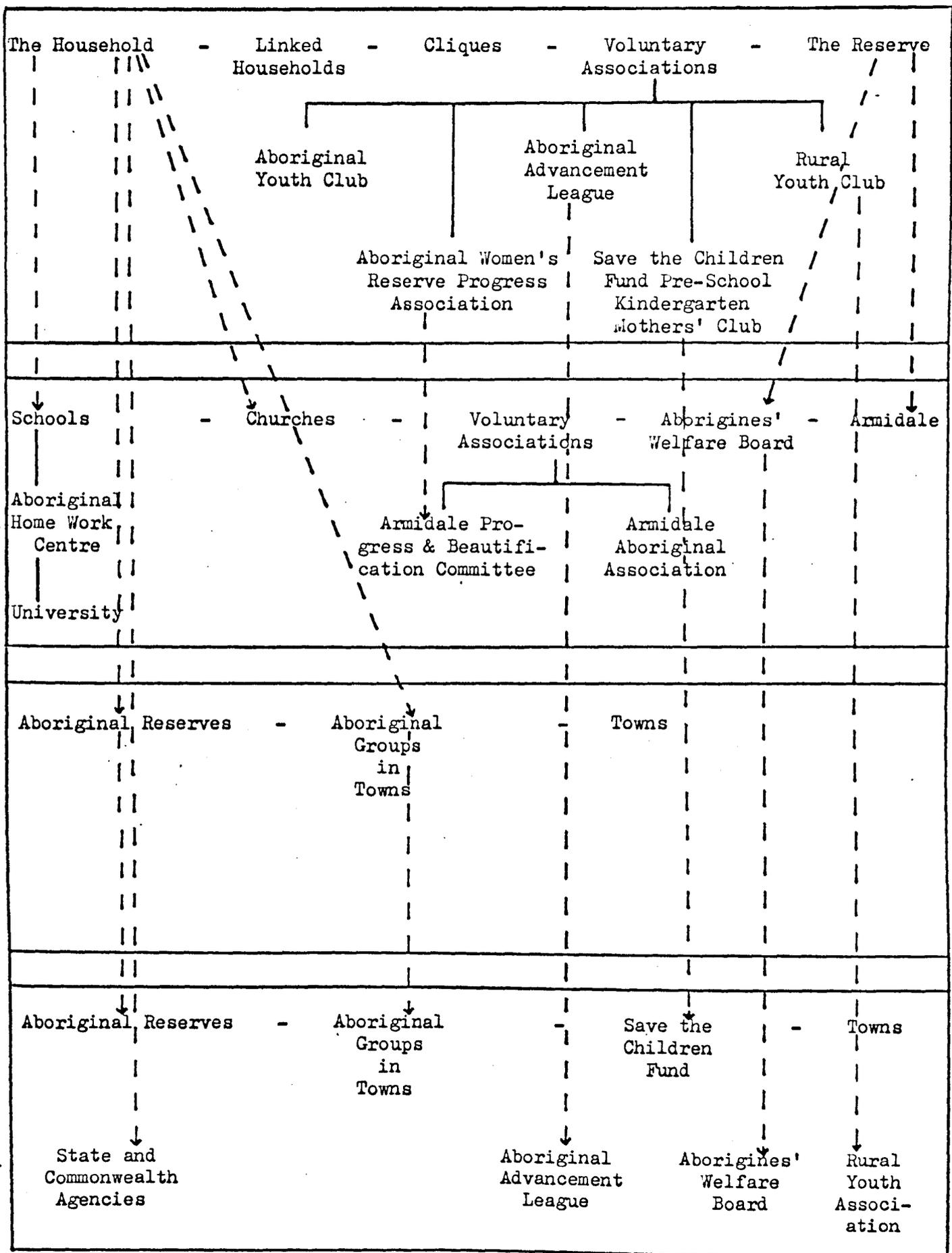


Diagram I. Four Levels of Armidale Part-Aborigines' Social Structure Showing Relationships Between Levels and Interlevel Relationships

friendship and common interest (e.g., gambling) ties, are nevertheless structural units of considerable importance for the Reserve people; voluntary but formally-organized associations which are organized and run almost exclusively by the women of the Reserve: The Save the Children Fund Pre-School Kindergarten Mothers' Club, the Aboriginal Advancement League, the Aboriginal Women's Progress Association, the Rural Youth Club, and the Aboriginal Youth Club; and finally, the Reserve itself which in sociological language constitutes the neighbourhood, and which for a few purposes is used as an administrative unit by the Aborigines' Welfare Board.

But as we have seen the social life of the part-Aborigines spills out beyond the Reserve into the second level, the City of Armidale; the part-Aborigines participate in the city's social, economic, political and religious spheres of activity. At this level the Reserve households are connected to the local schools because the Aboriginal children attend the State or Roman Catholic schools, the churches (although the residents of the Reserve are nominal Christians, the churches are important for weddings and funerals), the Aboriginal Home Work Centre organized by university students, and the Aborigines' Welfare Board through its local representative. The Aboriginal Women's Progress Association has relationships with the Armidale City Council, the Armidale Aborig-

inal Association (which occasionally makes monetary contributions for the maintenance of certain Reserve equipment), and the Armidale Progress and Beautification Committee.

The Reserve, as the neighbourhood group, has relationships with the Aborigines' Welfare Board through its resident officer and with the Armidale City Council. The Reserve as a group will organize petitions and deputations to wait on the Aborigines' Welfare Officer or officers of the Armidale City Council. These are important avenues for communication and protest when the residents of the Reserve decide to take a formal line.

Beyond the second level of Armidale itself, structural relationships can be traced to groups at other levels. At the third level, the Northern Tablelands and Coastal regions, the most important relationships are with other Aboriginal Reserves (e.g., Greenhills at Kempsey, Bellbrook, Guyra, etc.) and with part-Aboriginal groups living in towns. These relationships are preserved by an institutionalized system of visiting back and forth and constitute one of the part-Aborigines' most important structural relationships.

At the fourth level, the State and the Commonwealth, the Reserve residents have relationships with part-Aboriginal groups and Reserves scattered throughout the State. These relationships are kept intact by visiting and also by more-politically minded

Aborigines especially from Sydney. The Save the Children Fund Pre-School Kindergarten Mothers' Club is connected with The Save the Children Fund organization in Sydney which finances the kindergarten on the Reserve. Once a year delegates from the Mothers' Club attend the Fund's meetings in Sydney and officials from Sydney visit the Reserve kindergarten two or three times a year. The Aboriginal Advancement League and the Rural Youth Club are affiliated with the State and Federal parent-bodies. The Reserve itself as a group is, as we have seen, associated with the Aborigines' Welfare Board in Sydney and its officials visit the Reserve several times a year. One woman on the Reserve stood for election to the Aborigines' Welfare Board and, although defeated, intends to stand for election to the Council planned by the new Aboriginal Welfare Directorate. We have seen that the part-Aborigines of the Reserve are subject to State and Federal laws, that they pay taxes and vote. Like other Australians they have relationships with various State and Commonwealth departments and agencies.

From this outline we can see the transition from Reserve life to national life and how, through relationships with a variety of local and national groups and institutions, the division between Reserve life and national life has blurred. This is not to say that the personal life of the Reserve has disappeared



Plate 4. Pre-school Children at The Save the Children Fund Kindergarten.

(indeed, this social life is very important as we will see in later chapters) but it is to say that the Reserve residents do not live an isolated social life but are part of the national social and cultural life. To express the situation in Barnes' and Redfield's terminology, we can say that the social life of the Reserve is linked or hinged to that of the City of Armidale, the State, and the nation as a whole. On the Reserve there is a "series of units . . . of people in personal and traditional relationship to one another; their kinship and neighbourhood are the prevailing connections",<sup>16</sup> while at the other extreme there "are people in more impersonal and formal institutional relationship to one another".<sup>17</sup> The links or hinges between the Reserve, the local Armidale life, and the national life are many and varied and consist of administrative officials (the Aborigines' Welfare Officer, Armidale Council officers, State and Federal officials), school teachers, clergymen, shop-keepers, and professional and academic people. Avenues for the dissemination of national culture on the Reserve are the various mass media of radio, television and press.

#### The Economic Field of Activity

The part-Aborigines of the Reserve participate in both the economic life of Armidale and the nation. No employment is available on the Reserve itself and those wanting employment have

to seek it elsewhere. The lack of occupational opportunity on the Reserve draws people out of the Reserve and, in Redfield's words,<sup>18</sup> puts them "into fields of economic activity that are . . . independent of the rest of what goes on in the local life". Some find work in Armidale and its rural hinterland while others go further afield to other centres on the Northern Tablelands or on the coast.

Table 3 shows the occupations of 22 gainfully employed adult members of the Reserve which were recorded on one occasion during field work. It will be seen that of the 22, 16 were males and 6 were females. This reflects the real situation on the Reserve: the adult males are the prime breadwinners. Adult females are gainfully employed to a much lesser extent. The women's occupation was confined to domestic-cleaning work. The men's occupations were limited to four categories: rural work,

TABLE 3  
OCCUPATIONS OF 22 ADULTS ON THE ARMIDALE  
ABORIGINAL RESERVE, 1969

Occupation	Males	Females	Total
Rural Work	6	-	6
Labourer	5	-	5
Railway Work	2	-	2
Domestic- Cleaner	3	6	9
Total	16	6	22

labouring, railway fettling, and cleaning. Outdoor work accounted for 13 of the men and only 3 worked indoors as cleaners. It is clear from the table that the part-Aborigines were confined to the more menial tasks. By occupational status all 22 were employees and none was an employer or self-employed.

But the table does not reflect the true employment situation of the residents of the Reserve and, as it stands, is misleading. It fails, firstly, to indicate that the employment recorded is not necessarily of a permanent nature. Indeed, 6 of the 22 people reported in the table were engaged in part-time domestic-cleaning work. Again, the 6 men engaged in rural work were only casually employed in seasonal harvesting, timber-getting and farm labouring. In other words, over half of those working were found to be on part-time and casual jobs. Secondly, the table cannot record the fact that there is a great deal of mobility associated with male employment. This mobility is of both a job-nature and a geographical kind. A man might work as a cleaner at the university for a few weeks, leave and remain unemployed for a time, then go labouring on the roads for the Armidale City Council and after a few weeks give that up to go crop picking or farm labouring. Basically, the men regard themselves as rural workers and any other type of employment accepted by them is seen as only stop-gaps between bouts of rural work. The men also move around a lot seeking rural work.

They will go up to Guyra or across to Dorrigo to dig potatoes, then down to Kempsey to seek general farm labouring, then back to Armidale to work for a time at the log impregnation plant, then go collecting scrap metal from rubbish dumps, and then off again to other localities to seek rural employment. Of the 16 men in the table, 10 had jobs which took them away from the Reserve for periods of time varying from a week to a couple of months. By contrast, women who want to work either find it in Armidale or remain unemployed. Although the women visit other centres these visits are of short duration compared with the periods that the men are absent from the Reserve for employment and other reasons. The women are much concerned that they should not absent themselves from the Reserve for long periods lest they lose occupancy of their houses.

The part-Aborigines of the Reserve are thrown onto the labour market with only their unskilled labour to sell. Generally speaking, the men have a poor reputation with employers who complain not about their ability to work but about their unreliability and transitoriness. Partly for these reasons they find it difficult to obtain anything outside rural work other than part-time and casual jobs. Their mobility puts them into a social field, to use Redfield's terms,<sup>19</sup> which "is composed of unstable relations with many kinds of men in many different places . . . with whom

they have happened to become linked". The social field of economic activity in which the part-Aborigines participate, then, is not localized: "it is a set of activities, attitudes, and relationships that belong together"<sup>20</sup> wherever and whenever the part-Aboriginal worker enters upon some particular line of employment.

#### The Country-Wide Network

The Reserve Aborigines have a network of relationships with people beyond this neighbourhood grouping, relationships which are based on kinship, friendship, acquaintanceship or common interests. Some of these relationships involve direct contacts and others indirect contacts. Each resident of the Reserve has his own personal country-wide network of relationships which inevitably cuts across those of other residents. When visiting other areas as individuals or in family parties or when seeking employment, members of the Reserve renew former relationships and create new ones. Messages to friends and relatives are carried backwards and forwards from centre to centre by visitors. Sometimes relationships are not activated for periods of time (in Barnes' image<sup>21</sup> of the network the points representing these inactive people would not be joined by lines) and some will wither away, but others will lie in a state of suspended animation as it were to be reactivated later.

It is impossible to place any boundary upon this network of relationships. From interviews with informants the towns of Guyra, Uralla, Walcha, Tenterfield, Bellbrook and Kempsey were regularly mentioned as places where they had relatives, friends and acquaintances. The cities of Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong were also mentioned as having been visited or as places from which their visitors had come. Despite care and effort in interviewing it can be assumed that the interviews did not pick up every locality where residents of the Reserve have contacts of a direct or an indirect nature. Many of their contacts remain unknown to us. This reflects the nature of their social life. Their social life is not compact and confined to the Reserve but spreads beyond the Reserve to distant places. Because of this spread the links do not "go right back to the man with whom you started"<sup>22</sup> and the mesh of the network<sup>23</sup> is consequently wider and looser than it would be if social life were confined to the Reserve.

The image of the country-wide network enables us to see how the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve through their relationships beyond the local community fuse into the social life of the nation. With our "bird's eye" we can see these relationships spreading out from the Reserve into the City of Armidale, to towns beyond in northerly, easterly and southerly

directions and all the time adding to "the web of social relations".<sup>24</sup> This country-wide network of relationships is an important aspect of the social structure of the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve.

With Redfield,<sup>25</sup> we are conscious of having "perhaps extended and generalized the three kinds of sets of social relations which Barnes notes in rural Norway beyond his meaning and intention". Redfield employed the Barnesian notions in his studies of peasant societies but maintains that their use is not confined to societies of this type. Rather, he sees these three social fields as exemplars for those who wish to study complex societies of different kinds.<sup>26</sup> Barnes' framework, we believe, has served our need in presenting a "thumb-nail" sketch of the social life of the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve as social structure.

#### Notes and References

1. Barnes, 1954, pp.39-58.
2. Ibid., p.39.
3. Ibid., p.40.
4. Redfield, 1961, pp.23-39.
5. Ibid., p.24.
6. Ibid., p.25.
7. Radcliffe-Brown, 1961, p.191.
8. Evans-Pritchard, 1940.

9. Leach, 1964, pp.4-17.
10. Firth, 1952, p.32.
11. Lévi-Strauss, 1968, pp.279-285.
12. Barnes, op.cit., pp.40-44.
13. Ibid., pp.43-44.
14. Ibid., p.42.
15. Redfield, op.cit., p.25.
16. Ibid., p.27.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p.28.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p.30.
21. Barnes, op.cit., p.43.
22. Redfield, op.cit., p.32.
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26. Ibid., pp.34-35.

CHAPTER 4

BACKGROUND TO THE MOTHER-DOMINATED

HOUSEHOLD

## CHAPTER 4

### BACKGROUND TO THE MOTHER-DOMINATED

#### HOUSEHOLD

Having briefly observed the overall social structure of the part-Aborigines of the Armidale Reserve attention will now be given to particular aspects of it. In this chapter and the next our concern is with the basic unit of the social structure, the household, and especially with its maternal bias. Before focusing on the matricentral tendency of the household, however, it is necessary to examine its composition and to refer to other relevant background and demographic features that will better enable us to understand its matrifocal aspect.

#### The Household - Definition and Composition

According to the regulations of the Aborigines' Protection Act houses on officially-notified Reserves are each supposed to be occupied solely by a nuclear family consisting of a man, his wife and their children. This regulation is in line with the overall policy of assimilation in that it is intended to encourage Aboriginal residents of Reserves to conform to what is supposed to be the normal Australian residential style.<sup>1</sup> Designed to dis-

courage Aborigines from "camping" in Reserve houses, the regulation is supervised throughout the State by officers of the Aborigines' Welfare Board. However, despite supervision the regulation is often breached. This is true of the Armidale Reserve where, in spite of the Aborigines' Welfare Officer's oversight, the number of occupants of each house varies considerably with "visitors" (the term used by residents to overcome the restrictions of the relevant regulation) coming and going continuously. By various means, and despite official oversight, some "visitors" have managed "to stay on" and become permanent members of the host household.

Each of the 16 houses on the Reserve constitutes a household. The members of each household share a common residence and common housekeeping arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Each household is both a domestic unit and a social group with members sharing a dwelling, food and supplies. Be this as it may its adult members often have separate occupations, individual incomes and expenditures. As might be expected the members of a household may sometimes eat or sleep in other houses, especially those of close relatives, but their main domestic contribution is nevertheless to their own households.

If visitors are ignored and only permanent residents considered the 16 houses on the Reserve vary both in composition and

structure. In other words, there is no one predominating household type. Rather, the households can be classified into three types: "nuclear family households", "denuded family households" and "enlarged family households". The "nuclear family household" will be taken to mean a man, his wife and their immature children own and/or adopted.<sup>3</sup> This household is structurally identified by its peculiar kinship and marital relationship. The "denuded family household" differs from the nuclear family type in that one of the marital partners is permanently absent because of death, desertion or divorce.<sup>4</sup> With the absence of one of the pivotal members the structure of this household is different from that of the nuclear family type. The term "enlarged family" is used here for want of a better term. The term "extended family", which is taken to mean "two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of the parent-child relationship",<sup>5</sup> is not appropriate to this study. As used here an "enlarged family household" means either a nuclear or denuded family with one or more additional members. There are no "single-person households" on the Reserve. The Aborigines' Welfare Board would not sanction a Reserve house being "wasted" in this way. Consequently, unless a single-person can attach himself to one of the household types mentioned here he has no chance of living permanently on the Reserve. The additional members in the enlarged family household are invariably related to the host family either

consanguineally, affinally or both. These households are usually recruited omnidirectionally. This type of household, therefore, may or may not be a patrnominal group, that is, its members may or may not have the same surname. Enlarged family households may exhibit a variety of different structures.

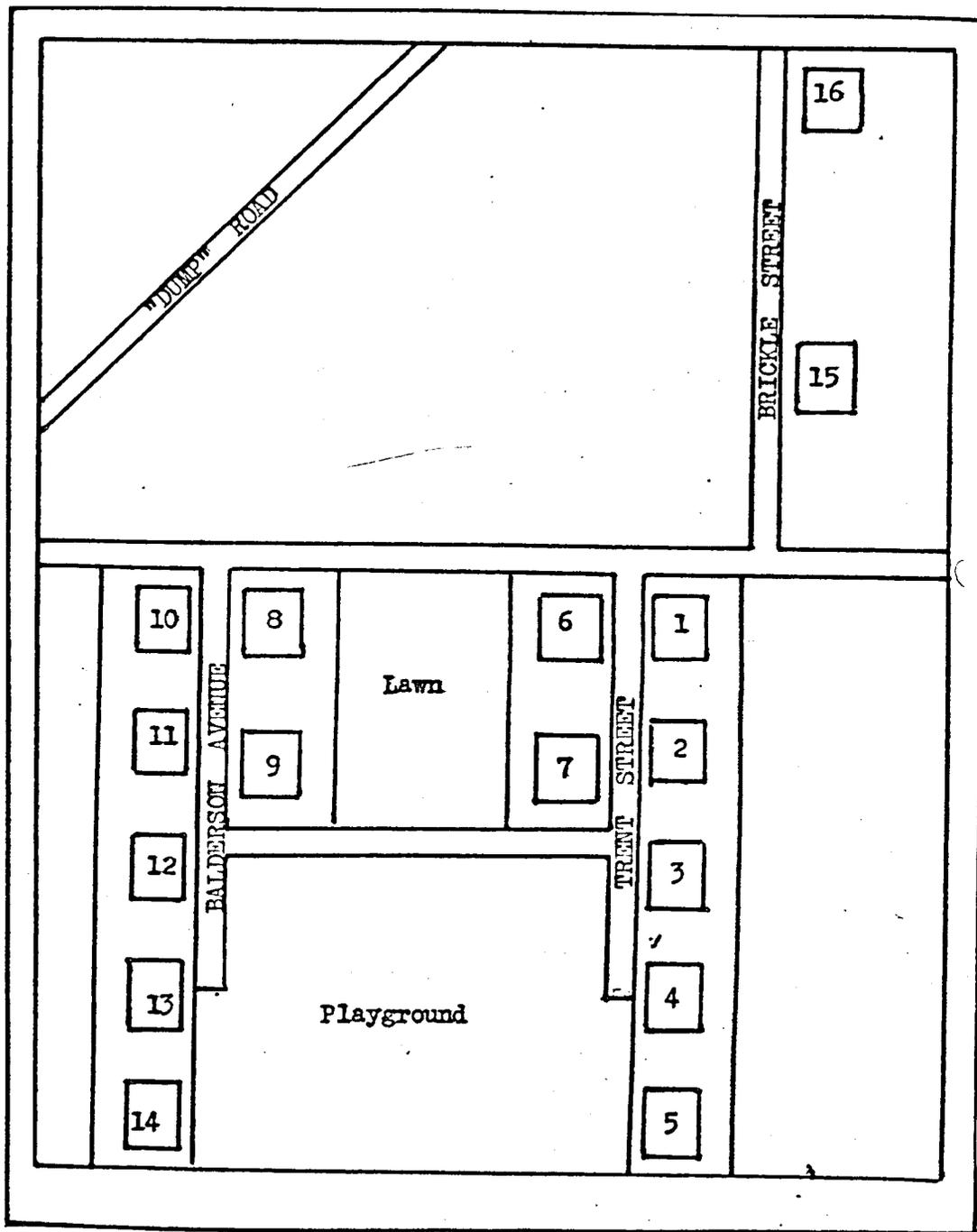
Map 5 shows the spatial arrangement of the 16 houses on the Reserve. Each house is numbered on the map and these markers will be used consistently throughout the text.

Having defined the three types of households currently found on the Reserve we now turn to the frequency of their occurrence. From Table 4 it will be seen that of the 16 households on the Reserve 6 (houses 2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12) are nuclear family types, 2 (houses 7, 14) are denuded family types and 8 (houses 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16) are enlarged family households. In other

TABLE 4

CLASSIFICATION OF THE 16 HOUSEHOLDS ON THE  
ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE INTO HOUSEHOLD  
TYPES

Types of Households			Total
Nuclear Family	Denuded Family	Enlarged Family	
6	2	8	16



Map 5. Location of Houses on the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve.

words, half of the houses on the Reserve each contains more than a nuclear family. This fact, however, should not be misconstrued as an examination of the composition of these houses illustrates.

Table 5 is given over to the composition of these 8 enlarged family households. It will be seen that in seven cases

TABLE 5  
COMPOSITION OF THE 8 ENLARGED FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS  
ON THE ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE

House Number	Core Unit Family	Number of Additional Members	Relationship of Additional Members to Core Unit
1	Denuded	1	Wife's brother
3	Nuclear	1	Husband's brother
6	Nuclear	2	Unmarried daughter's children
8	Nuclear	1	Wife's Grandmother
10	Nuclear	1	Wife's sister
13	Nuclear	1	Wife's sister
15	Nuclear	8	(a) Wife's brother, wife and child (3) (b) Deserted daughter and three children (4) (c) Unmarried daughter's child (1)
16	Nuclear	1	Wife's father

the core unit in each household is a nuclear family and in the remaining one it is a denuded family. Six of the households have only one additional member, one has 2 additional members, and one



Plate 5. Members of an Enlarged Family Household  
Extending over Three Generations.

has 8 additional members. On examination it is seen that only 4 (houses 6, 8, 15, 16) of these 8 households are extended to three generations and that only 5 (houses 1, 3, 10, 13, 15) are extended laterally. In other words, with this one exception these so-called enlarged family households are not as large as the label might imply. Indeed, it may be said that the official policy concerning the occupancy of houses on Aboriginal Reserves, that is, one nuclear family per house, has had some degree of success at Armidale.<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of this thesis it is important to note that the additional permanent members of these 8 enlarged family households are all related to the core unit and that with one exception the relationship is through the wife-mother. In the exceptional case the additional member is related through the husband-father (Table 5). This suggests the general propositions, firstly, that if supernumeraries are recruited to a household they will be relatives, and secondly, that supernumeraries will be related to the host family almost invariably through the wife-mother.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, with regard to the theme of this study, it is of interest that in the two demuded family households referred to in Table 4 it is the husband-father who is permanently absent. In both cases the wife-mother has been deserted.

Table 6 shows the number of permanent occupants per house

TABLE 6

NUMBER OF PERMANENT OCCUPANTS PER HOUSE  
 ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE

House Number	Number of Occupants
1	7
2	9
3	13
4	8
5	4
6	6
7	7
8	5
9	8
10	6
11	9
12	9
13	9
14	5
15	13
16	9
Total Occupants	127

on the Armidale Reserve. It is seen that household membership ranges from 4 (house 5) to 13 (houses 3, 15). The mean number of permanent occupants per house is 7.9 which means that 9 (houses 2, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16) of the 16 houses have membership exceeding the mean.<sup>8</sup>

When the occupants of the 16 houses are classified according to our three-type household scheme it is seen (Table 7) that nuclear family household membership ranges from 4 to 9

TABLE 7

NUMBER OF OCCUPANTS PER HOUSE CLASSIFIED INTO  
NUCLEAR FAMILY, DENUDED FAMILY AND ENLARGED  
FAMILY HOUSEHOLD TYPES, ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL  
RESERVE

Household Type					
Nuclear Family		Denuded Family		Enlarged Family	
House Number	Number of Occupants	House Number	Number of Occupants	House Number	Number of Occupants
2	9	7	7	1	7
4	8	14	5	3	13
5	4			6	6
9	8			8	5
11	9			10	6
12	9			13	9
				15	13
				16	9
Total	47	Total	12	Total	68

persons, denuded family household membership from 5 to 7 persons, and enlarged family household membership from 5 to 13 persons.

According to this breakdown the mean number of permanent occupants per household is 7.8 per nuclear family type, 6.0 per denuded family type and 8.5 per enlarged family household (Table 8).

When house occupancy is looked at in this way we see that although half the houses on the Reserve contain only a nuclear family or a denuded form of it, and that the nuclear family

TABLE 8

MEAN NUMBER OF OCCUPANTS PER HOUSEHOLD TYPE,  
ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE

Household Type	Mean Number of Occupants Per Household Type
Nuclear Family	7.8
Denuded Family	6.0
Enlarged Family	8.5
All Types	7.9

figures prominently as the core unit in the enlarged family households, the fact is now established that 68 of the 127 permanent residents of the Reserve (some 54%) live in enlarged family-type households. To keep this finding in perspective, however, it must be remembered that these so-called enlarged family households are not as large as the label might suggest. Table 6 again confirms this.

It is tempting to point out that Table 7 suggests that the reason why the nuclear family households do not include additional numbers is because, with respect to the size of their houses, they are too large in their own right to do so. Of these 6 households 5 (houses 2, 4, 9, 11, 12) contain a larger number of occupants than the mean for this type of household as they also do for the mean for all household types. On the other hand, 6 (houses 1, 6, 8, 10, 13, 16) of the 8 enlarged family

households including their additional members are somewhat similar to the 5 nuclear family households as far as the number of occupants are concerned. Paradoxically, 4 (houses 1, 6, 8, 10) of the enlarged family households are smaller than the nuclear family households referred to. Once again this fact suggests the inadequacy of the term "enlarged family household".

It is evident from Diagram 2, which shows the floor-plan of the Reserve houses, the houses are not large. Area-wise they are approximately eight squares. In all they consist of four rooms and a combined laundry-bathroom. If the combined laundry-bathroom is excluded, as it is in Australian census reports, and the number of people permanently living in the house is divided by the number of rooms, we obtain an index of accommodation pressure.<sup>9</sup> Table 9 shows the indices of accommodation pressure for the 16 Reserve houses.

It will be seen that only one (house 5) of these houses had an accommodation pressure of 1, that 9 (houses 2, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16) had a pressure of 2 or more and that 2 (houses 3 and 15) had a pressure of over 3. In other words, it is clear that all but one of the houses accommodated more people than they had been designed for.

Table 10 shows the accommodation pressure of all 16 houses taken together as well as the pressures for houses occupied by

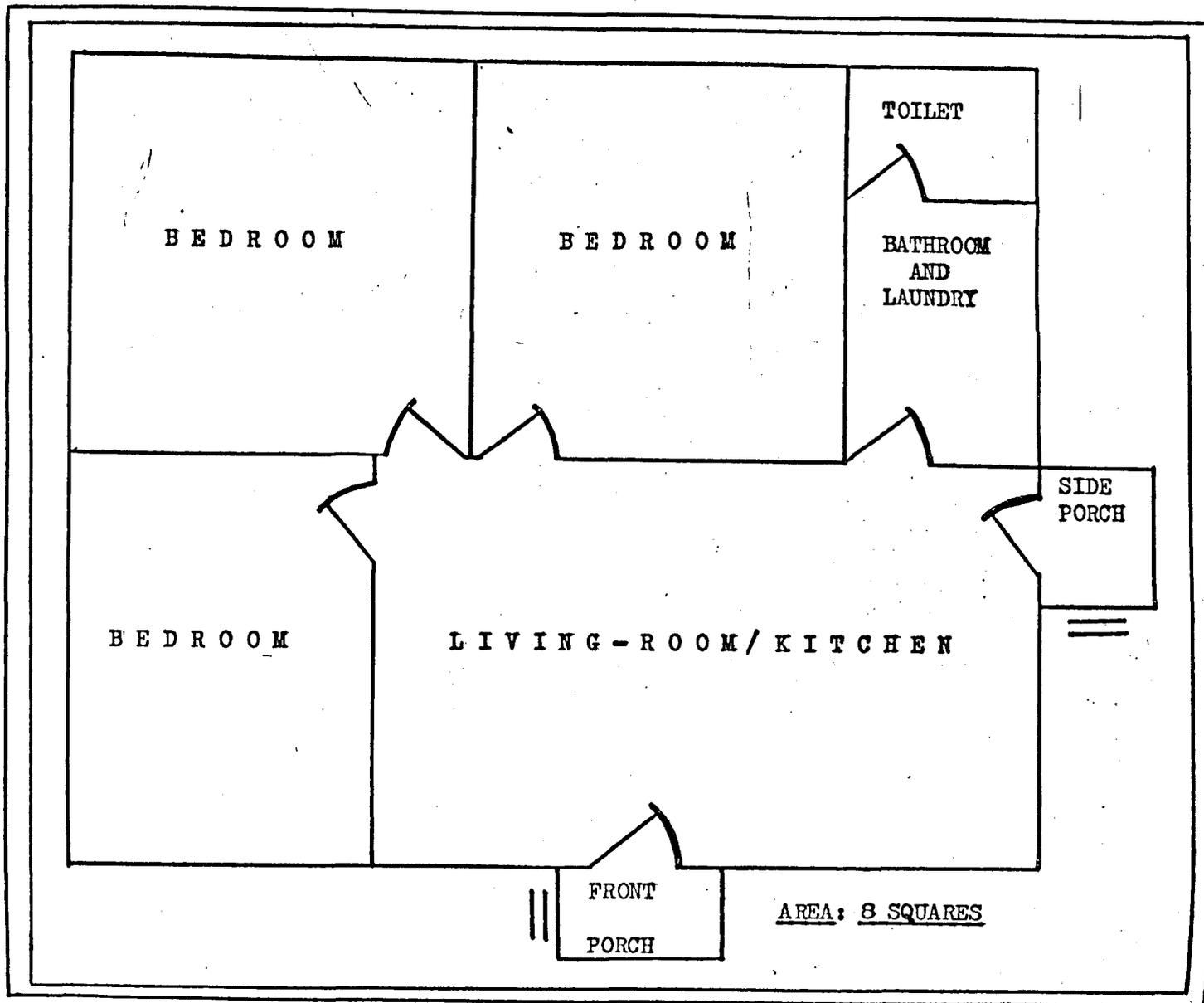


Diagram 2. Floor Plan, Standard House, Armidale Aboriginal Reserve

nuclear families, denuded families and enlarged families respectively. It will be seen that there was less accommodation pressure

TABLE 9

INDICES OF ACCOMMODATION PRESSURE FOR 16  
HOUSES ON ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE

House	Index of Accommodation Pressure
1	1.75
2	2.25
3	3.25
4	2.00
5	1.00
6	1.50
7	1.75
8	1.25
9	2.00
10	1.50
11	2.25
12	2.25
13	2.25
14	1.25
15	3.25
16	2.25

in houses occupied by denuded families than in other houses. Enlarged family households, as might be suspected, had the heaviest accommodation pressure with 2.13.

To give these figures a comparative basis it should be pointed out that for the general Australian population the mean accommodation pressure is 0.67 persons per room.<sup>10</sup> This comparison

TABLE 10

INDICES OF ACCOMMODATION PRESSURE FOR ALL 16  
HOUSES TAKEN TOGETHER, AND FOR HOUSES OCCUPIED  
BY NUCLEAR, DENUDED AND ENLARGED FAMILIES

House Occupancy	Index of Accommodation Pressure
All 16 Houses	1.98
Nuclear Family Houses	1.95
Denuded Family Houses	1.50
Enlarged Family Houses	2.13

shows that the Aboriginal household on the Armidale Reserve was not equivalent to the standard of accommodation to be found in the general Australian community.

If the matter of accommodation is taken further and reduced to the number of enclosed bedrooms per house we get an even better indication of the extent of overcrowding in the houses on the Armidale Reserve. As seen from Diagram 2 the Reserve houses each have three enclosed bedrooms. When this figure is related to the mean number of occupants per house (7.9, Table 8) we see the very small number of bedrooms at the disposal of the occupants. If one bedroom is allowed for the household head and spouse, there are two bedrooms left for the remaining 5.9 occupants.<sup>11</sup>

Because of the pressure on the limited amount of space available in the Reserve houses much of life is spent outdoors. Apart from eating and sleeping men are noticeably absent from the houses and although this behaviour pattern requires a multifactorial explanation as will be seen later, limited space in the houses helps to account for it. Children are encouraged to play outdoors and mothers are often heard ordering them to "get outside" when they get underfoot. Women also spend much of their time out of doors gossiping, sitting in the sun or shade, or gambling.

Theoretically at least the mean number of persons per household could be reduced if the permanent population remained stationary and if additional houses were built on the Reserve. No houses have been built since the Reserve was opened. Briefly, the main arguments against additional houses are that they would attract an influx of Aborigines from other regions and that they would hinder the policy of assimilation which aims to encourage people to live off Reserves.

There is no evidence to suggest that the residents of the Reserve prefer to live in enlarged family households rather than in nuclear family households. On the contrary, evidence collected from the women of the Reserve strongly demonstrates their keen wish to have houses to themselves and their nuclear

families and gives lie to the so-called "tribal complex" that popular opinion has of Aboriginal living habits. Although it is true that half of the houses on the Reserve are enlarged family households this should not be taken to mean that the occupants necessarily favour this style of living. More often than not it is necessity and not design that produces this situation. A woman might look after her widowed father, her motherless younger brother or sister, or her unmarried daughter's children because she feels an obligation to do so, but this does not mean that she prefers this enlarged family household arrangement to the nuclear type.

The coming and going of visitors might give the erroneous impression that the membership of some households at least are in a constant state of flux. During the period of fieldwork, however, the turnover of permanent members of the 16 households was virtually non-existent. Adult males frequently absented themselves for varying periods for purposes of employment and a family, or some members of it, might make a short trip to the Coast to visit relatives, but in both cases they always returned to their respective households. This is not to say that household membership has not changed over the years but it is significant that 11 (houses 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16) of the 16 houses are still occupied by their original occupants.

Before concluding this section on household composition a note must be added concerning casual, temporary visitors to the Reserve. Passing reference has been made to the coming and going of these visitors and to their effect on the limited and already overtaxed accommodation resources.<sup>12</sup> Visitors stay with relatives or friends for varying periods of time depending on how long a host household is prepared to put them up or for how long the authorities are prepared to let them stay. Providing relatives with temporary accommodation is an obligation that the residents of the Reserve acknowledge and share with part-Aborigines elsewhere. There are, however, signs that some women are beginning to renege in providing hospitality for all comers and are becoming selective with regard to whom hospitality is extended. Generally speaking, close relatives take precedence over more distant relatives, and relatives generally take precedence over non-relatives. It appears that hospitality is less likely to be extended to non-relatives today than it was a few years ago, and some women complain about distant relatives who come uninvited and unannounced and who expect to be accommodated and fed during their stay.

Apart from the few figures given in Chapter 1 no attempt was made to keep a detailed check on the number of casual visitors to the households.<sup>13</sup> Despite early intentions to do so two main

reasons made this impossible. Firstly, some visitors came and went so quickly, perhaps spending no more than a night in a house, that it was frequently impossible to keep track of such visits. Secondly, some informants concealed the presence of visitors, avoided questions concerning them and provided inaccurate information about the time their visitors stayed or intended to stay. From the few informal censuses conducted and from observations it can be said that adult males far outnumbered females as visitors. Given the general Aboriginal employment pattern this is not surprising as will be seen below.

Men were less critical of uninvited visitors than their womenfolk and justified the practice in terms of reciprocity: the free accommodation and food that they themselves receive when they make visits to other areas. When away from home, men, without the knowledge of their womenfolk, often issue carte blanche invitations to relatives, friends and acquaintances to visit them at Armidale. These visitors are sometimes the cause of conflict between a man and his wife and women have sometimes reported unwanted visitors to the authorities in order to get rid of them.

If visitors were included in a count of house occupants at any time their presence would increase the mean number of persons per household given above. Reference has been made to one case where children were bedded down in the ceiling of the house when there was nowhere else to accommodate them,<sup>14</sup> and there are other

cases where visitors have had to sleep in their hosts' cars. One might go so far as to say that a car is often regarded as an additional room for sleeping and other purposes. To ignore the ever-present visitors to the Reserve would give an artificial picture of household composition.

#### The Time Factor and the Household

The three household types found on the Armidale Reserve and described above do not constitute a rigid and immutable classification. Households can and, as the histories of particular households show, do change. One type can change into another and additional types can emerge if the necessary demographic changes occur. On the other hand, a household can maintain its classification as a certain type despite quite marked changes in its membership. Here we have one aspect of the field of study that American sociologists like Loomis and Glick<sup>15</sup> have termed "family life cycle analysis" and that the British social anthropologists like Fortes and Smith<sup>16</sup> have called "the developmental cycle in domestic groups".

It is not our purpose here to embark on a detailed discussion of the time factor in relation to the structure of the 16 household groups on the Armidale Reserve. Suffice it will be to show that the structures of some of the households have changed from one type to another with the passage of time while

others, with extensive membership changes, have maintained their status. Three examples have been chosen to illustrate these points.

Case No. 1

Mr. and Mrs. John Chambers moved into their house in 1960. At that time they had three children. Two other children were born in 1961 and 1963 respectively. The household, apart from temporary visitors, then consisted of seven people and was of the nuclear family type. Mr. Chambers began to drink heavily and by 1966 his wife found the situation intolerable and "kicked" her husband out of the house. With the permanent absence of Mr. Chambers the household changed to the denuded family type. Later Mrs. Chambers took in her younger brother as a permanent boarder. His inclusion in the household changed its structure from the denuded family type to the enlarged family type.

Case No. 2

In 1960 Mrs. Nelly Thomas and her de facto husband took up residence on the Reserve and provided shelter for several of Mrs. Thomas' children (by a former union) including a married daughter, her husband and her two children. From the beginning of occupying this house the household was an enlarged family type. Under official pressure the married daughter and her family moved into another house. All the other children, with the exception of the youngest daughter, Wendy, and an "adopted" son, Ringo, eventually moved elsewhere and this reduced the household to the nuclear family type. In 1966 Wendy had an illegitimate child and gave birth to others in 1967 and 1969. These children are now permanent members of the household and their presence has altered the structure. The household must now be classified again as an enlarged family type.

Case No. 3

Mr. and Mrs. Grant Ridgley and their three children, together with Mrs. Ridgley's brother, his wife and their

one child (the Murray family) moved into their house in 1966. From the beginning of their occupancy this household was an enlarged family type and it has remained so since this time despite changes in the number of people occupying the house. Shortly after moving in Mrs. Ridgley's daughter, Lillian, gave birth to an illegitimate child. About the same time Mrs. Ridgley's deserted daughter, Mrs. Jean Kent, and her three children were taken into the house. Towards the end of the period of fieldwork the Murray family was making plans to move out. It can be seen that despite the changes and the proposed changes in household membership between 1966 and 1969 the household type remained unchanged.

#### Mating and Reproduction

Two important factors that help to throw light on the mother-dominated household on the Armidale Reserve are the mating and reproductive practices of the residents.

As Table 11 indicates, of the 24 women 17 years of age and over and who are permanently resident on the Reserve 9 are married, 5 are living in de facto unions, 4 have been deserted by their husbands, one is widowed and 5 are single.

Up to and including 1969 21 of these 24 women had produced 118 living children of whom 7 died in childhood. Three of the women had no children. Because 19 of the 24 women are under 45 years of age and, therefore, have varying degrees of their child-bearing potential left, it can be assumed that they will produce additional children. Three of these women were pregnant when the fieldwork was carried out. Three of the women have been medically

TABLE 11

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF 24 WOMEN 17-YEARS OF  
AGE AND OVER, ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE

Marital Status	
Type	Number
Married	9
<u>De facto</u> Union	5
Deserted	4
Widowed	1
Single	5
Total	24

Age		Children by Age
Age Range	Number	Number of Children
17 - 45	19	84
46 - 64	4	27
65 +	1	7
Total	24	118

sterilized; one is 35, married and has 12 children, another is 29, married with 7 children, and the third is 21, single with 3 children. One married woman of 32 with 5 children maintained that her family was complete and practised contraception. She was the only woman who used contraceptives consistently and effectively. Recurring illness would probably prevent three other women from having additional children.

The average number of children per woman is 5.6 and the actual number of children ranges from one to 13.<sup>17</sup> The ages of the women at the time of the birth of their first child ranged from 16 to 38 years; the mean age was 21 years 3 months. The mean age at marriage was slightly over 24 years and the age range was 17 to 41 years. The discrepancy between the ages at the birth of the first child and at marriage is significant and demonstrates that the women began to engage in sexual intercourse before marriage. On the basis of the overall statistical evidence it can be said that sexual intercourse for these women began early, was pre-marital and that marriage came much later.<sup>18</sup>

Nineteen of the 21 women who have had children have had some of them out of wedlock. The average number of children born to these women before marriage was 2.4 per woman. Of the 118 children produced 53 of them were illegitimate. Furthermore, 7 of these 21 women have had children by more than one man; 6 have had children by two men and one by three men. One of the single women has had children by three different men.

Although the average number of children per woman is high this should not be taken to mean either that there is a general conscious desire on the part of women to have large families or that they have a general "don't care" attitude as to the number of children they have. It is true that two in-

formants wanted large families believing them to be the ideal. Mrs. Lily Murray, for example, who after some years of marriage had only one child said that she would like more. She believes that 6 or 7 children would be ideal. Similarly, Mrs. Selma Burrell, who has 6 children, believes 8 is the ideal family size. The sentiment expressed by these women, however, is not shared by others. All the women want to have children but not necessarily in large numbers. Mrs. Elsie Murray, for example, has 7 children which she believes is "too many" and to prevent further births has been sterilized. Again, Mrs. Laura Burrell, who has 12 children, has also been sterilized because she believes her family is too large. Mrs. Daphne Cross has 5 children and to prevent further births practises effective contraception. Mrs. Marlene Thomas, the mother of 6 children, shares this feeling and admitted that she is interested in practising contraception and was reading about it.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that once a woman is pregnant she goes through with the birth regardless of the number of children she has. Induced abortion is unheard of. Generally, it is the men who have a "don't care" attitude to the number of children they have. Contraceptive knowledge is not widespread among either the men or the women and the cost involved would certainly militate against the continual use of devices, chemical or

mechanical or the procuring of "the pill". There has been no pressure brought to bear by the Aboriginal or Child Welfare authorities for these people to limit family size. The women seem to have acquired their meagre knowledge of contraception from "the doctor" or "the hospital". The three women sterilized acted on medical advice.

The main reason given by the women against large families is economic. Every child born means another mouth to feed and another person to accommodate, and although the child will be loved and fitted in somewhere, even if it or some older child has to be "adopted out", this should not be taken to mean that every birth is welcomed. Another reason given by women against large families is the problem of disciplining and controlling numbers of children.

But whether they want them or not the women all seem to end up with large families and for most women childbirth is virtually an annual event. Mrs. Hilda Taylor, for example, had children in 1960, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1966 and 1968; Mrs. Elsie Murray had children in 1959, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1965, 1966 and 1967; Mrs. Laura Burrell had children in 1954, 1955, 1957, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1965, 1967, 1968 and 1969. These examples could be easily added to.<sup>20</sup>

These part-Aborigines, like those elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> have a system of "adopting" children. This is not legal adoption and could be more meaningfully termed "looking after a child" or "lending a child". There are 18 "adopted" children on the Reserve distributed among six households. Some of these children are illegitimate and have been "adopted" by close relatives when their mothers marry or establish de facto unions with men who are not the children's fathers. Others are "adopted" by relatives because their parents cannot accommodate or provide for them economically. The figure 18, however, does not reflect the true number of Reserve children who have been "adopted" in that some have gone to relatives outside Armidale. The most common relatives to "adopt" children are maternal grandmothers and aunts in that order. Mrs. Nelly Thomas, for example, has "adopted" her daughters' three illegitimate children; one of Mrs. Selma Burrell's children has been "adopted" by her mother at Bellbrook; two of Mrs. Laura Burrell's children have been "adopted" by their aunt who also lives on the Reserve. These examples could be multiplied.

Even from this brief survey it is clear that life on the Reserve exhibits definite signs of disorganization. Deserted wives, de facto unions and illegitimate children are classic signs of such disorganization. Be this as it may it is sometimes

claimed<sup>22</sup> that these patterns of behaviour are socially acceptable to the Aborigines themselves: that de facto unions are regarded as being as good as marriage, that temporary conjugal relationships provoke no public censure, and that illegitimacy carries no stigma for either mother or child. It is true that one's observations might prompt this view but when the women of the Reserve were questioned on the matter another picture emerged. Let us examine the situation more closely.

Although it is true that only 9 of the 21 women who have had children are currently married, we must add to this those 4 married women who have been deserted by their husbands, the widow and one of the women living in a de facto relationship and who is still married to the man who deserted her. In other words, 15 of these 21 women are or have been married. Of the 6 remaining women the two single ones may yet marry while 2 of the 5 living in de facto relationships are prevented from marrying their menfolk because they are already married to women elsewhere whom they have deserted. Another woman living in a de facto relationship is prevented from marrying the father of her children because she is already related to him consanguineally. Few part-Aborigines get divorced. The costs involved and the mysteries of the procedure are sufficient to daunt them.<sup>23</sup>

It is not correct to say that the residents of the Reserve at least do not value marriage and that de facto unions and casual conjugal relationships are regarded as being as good as legalized unions. Furthermore, it is incorrect to say that those residents who have married have done so under pressure from the Aboriginal authorities.<sup>24</sup> Those who have married have done so voluntarily and any pressure for them to marry has come from their relatives, especially female relatives. Nor can their interest in marriage be dismissed as a meaningless subscription to European values. It must be remembered in this context that marriage was a fundamental social institution in the traditional Aboriginal way of life and not something peculiar to European society. Admittedly with the collapse of traditional Aboriginal society through contact with European settlement indigenous marriage patterns broke down but it cannot be assumed, as those who advocate an historical explanation do, that the part-Aborigines built up a normative preference for irregular unions which they have come to regard as equivalent to marriage. It is clear from data collected that many residents recognize and disapprove of the disorganized features of Reserve life. This disapproval does not support the historical argument mentioned above. That some residents do live in de facto unions and reproduce outside wedlock must not be taken to mean that such behaviour is valued and encouraged. This

behaviour is at variance with the social and moral ideals held by these people.<sup>25</sup>

There is plenty of evidence that both legitimacy of birth and marriage are valued. Thirteen women, who have been married and who were questioned on these matters, were all critical of pre-marital pregnancy and de facto unions. Six of these women stated that they had married immediately after the birth of their first child and had been under pressure from their mothers to do so. One of the informants said that she married the man responsible as soon as she discovered her pregnancy. The 6 remaining women had not been able to marry the fathers of their first child because of legal impediments or because the men had left the district. All believed in marriage and had married as soon as they could although some had had to wait until after the births of their second, third, fourth and seventh child. It is clear that women more so than men are eager for marriage, a phenomenon not confined to this small part-Aboriginal group.

The women living in de facto unions all favoured marriage but are usually prevented from marrying their menfolk because of legal obstacles: either these women or their menfolk are married to someone else. Hilda Taylor, for example, "would like to marry Alf", her de facto husband, but is unable to do so. Similarly, Jane Balderson who has six children to her de facto husband, Dan

Jeffries, would like to marry him because "marriage is the right thing", but there is little likelihood of this coming about.

Both sexes regard marriage as being more binding on a couple than a de facto union and as giving stability to a conjugal relationship. Certainly marriage does not prevent a man from deserting his wife as Table 11 indicates, but it does prevent him from marrying again unless he obtains a divorce.

Women are very conscious that marriage gives a woman an economic claim on her husband not only for her children but also for herself, a claim that she has for her children but not for herself in a de facto union.

But it is not for economic reasons alone that women value marriage above de facto unions. Marriage receives the full weight of informal positive and negative sanctions from the Aboriginal group itself as well as the weight of formal positive and negative sanctions from the society at large. There is a definite feeling among Aboriginal women that those who have married have achieved a higher status than those who have not.

Mothers, female relatives and women generally (often in order to protect their own homes)<sup>26</sup> try to keep a close watch on teenage girls and they are constantly warned about associating

with men. If a girl ignores this advice her mother or female guardian will scold, threaten and sometimes beat her. "Haven't I told you to keep away from him? You'll get into trouble!" and similar statements are often thrown at teenage daughters by their mothers.<sup>27</sup> Women threaten their daughters in this way partly out of anger and to drive home their point and also so that neighbours will appreciate that they are doing the job expected of them as mothers. Observations of this nature can be taken to mean that pre-marital pregnancy is not valued.

This oversight seems to have succeeded as far as younger teenage girls are concerned because the youngest mother among the 19 women who have had children out of wedlock was 16 years old.<sup>28</sup> At the birth of their first child the mean age of these 19 women was 25 years. There were, then, no women on the Reserve below the legal age of consent who had given birth to children.

The oversight, so successful with young teenage girls, breaks down with older teenagers.<sup>29</sup> Of the 19 women who had illegitimate children 10 had had their first child by the age of 19. There are certainly more occasions for older teenage girls to meet men and arrange trysts. Mothers regard many casual male visitors to the Reserve as threats to their daughters and they sometimes invoke the law to warn these men off the Reserve. Because a knowledge of contraception is not widespread it is not

surprising that mothers do not enlighten their daughters in this regard. Again, the cost involved in contraception is beyond the means of teenage girls. As mothers see it the only way to prevent their daughters from becoming pregnant is to keep them away from men but as girls get older, and because mothers have younger children to look after, this becomes increasingly difficult. There is no professional prostitution on the Reserve but some girls, when impecunious, do accept money from male visitors for sexual favours.<sup>30</sup>

A pregnant girl draws gossip and criticism not only to herself but also to her mother or female guardian whose duty, group opinion has it, is to guard the girl against such an occurrence. When the fact becomes known there is usually an argument between mother and daughter and the girl receives insults and threats. The mother may threaten to throw the girl out, may accuse her of bringing discredit on her mother, and will demand to know who the father is. Although the mother often keeps things simmering for a time calm is eventually restored and the mother's concern is then to get the girl married.<sup>31</sup>

This is not always easy: the man responsible might not be local, might be already married or living in a de facto relationship with another woman. The general feeling among both men and women is that if a man "gets a girl into trouble" he "should do the

right thing" if it is possible. Nobody seems concerned whether the couple are romantically interested in each other. The important thing is that they get married to avoid the shame of the matter. This lack of romantic love helps to explain why men forced into "shot-gun" marriages often desert their wives in favour of women to whom they later find themselves attracted. Some of the women living in de facto relationships, as we have seen, are living with other women's husbands.

If a marriage for a pregnant girl cannot be arranged the girl has the child and continues to live at home with her mother who, to give the girl a second chance, may "adopt" the child and rear it as her own.<sup>32</sup> If the girl becomes pregnant again the mother, loath as she is to do so, will accept a de facto union for the girl if a marriage cannot be arranged. There is plenty of evidence to show that de facto unions are regarded as only second best to marriage. Women clearly want marriage and marital births for their daughters. Mrs. Luvvie Trent, who has never been married herself and who has two illegitimate children, emphasized that she expected her daughter to get married and have legitimate children. Mrs. Daisy Norton, all of whose 13 children were born in wedlock, expects her daughters to meet her own moral standard. Mrs. Jane Ridgley whose own children were all legitimate stated that she was "disgusted" with her three daughters all

of whom have had illegitimate children. Married women certainly regard themselves as "better" than women in de facto unions and are ever ready, except perhaps when their daughters are involved, to indicate those women who are not married and will throw it up to them when arguments and fights occur.<sup>33</sup>

Having set the scene for the mother-dominated household on the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve we now turn to a closer examination of this fundamental social grouping.

#### Notes and References

1. Government agencies responsible for housing adopt the general policy of one nuclear family per house whether the occupants be of European or Aboriginal descent. Beasley, 1970, in discussing the part-Aboriginal household in Sydney refers to this policy. She writes that "the Housing Commission actively discourages the addition of extra adults as occupants of their dwellings" (p.148) but adds that there were some supernumeraries living in houses "without the knowledge of the Housing Commission" (p.148).
2. Mead, 1932, p.32, defines the household as "a group of persons habitually living together under one roof, sharing living expenses and eating common meals". Most writers agree with this definition whether writing generally about the household as a social group or more specifically about its operation among a particular people, cf. Smith, 1956, p.51; Solien, 1960, pp.101-102; Hajnal, 1964, pp.259-260; Ashcroft, 1966, p.266.
3. Murdock, 1949, p.1; Mitchell, 1968, p.77.
4. Clarke, 1957, p.100; Djamour, 1959, p.54; Otterbein, 1963, p.81. Freedman's term "broken" elementary family used in his study of the chinese family in Singapore is equivalent to denuded family (1957, p.34).

5. Murdock, op.cit., p.2. Freedman's term "small-scale" extended family contains the lineal element that made the term extended family inappropriate to this study.
6. This can be seen by comparing these figures with those reported by Bell, 1959a, p.240, for the Aboriginal Reserve at La Perouse. Whereas 8 of the 16 houses on the Armidale Reserve conformed to the official policy only 8 out of 41 houses on the La Perouse Reserve did so.
7. In her study of the Aboriginal household in Sydney, Beasley, op.cit., p.175, indicates that if supernumeraries are found in households they are "most likely" to be "the wife's relatives".
8. This mean number of 7.9 permanent residents per house on the Armidale Reserve is greater than the 7.04 Aboriginal persons per house that Rowley, 1967, p.9, found to be the average in his New South Wales sample of rural Aboriginal households. In her 1961 study of part-Aborigines in Melbourne Barwick, 1964, p.29, found that there were 237 persons living in 25 households "which had the highest standard of living"; this gives a mean of 9.48 persons per household which is much higher than the Armidale Reserve figure.
9. Rowley, op.cit., p.3.
10. Commonwealth of Australia Census, 1961.
11. This is better than the Aboriginal accommodation position in Sydney where, after a bedroom is allocated to the household head and spouse, there are only 1.7 bedrooms remaining for 5.03 occupants; Beasley, op.cit., p.158.
12. Most writers on part-Aboriginal groups refer to presence of temporary visitors and refer to the Aboriginal value system which, among other things, emphasizes hospitality to visiting relatives and friends. Bell, op.cit., pp.107-108; Beasley, op.cit., pp.163, 173.
13. Beasley, ibid., p.146, in her study of the Aboriginal household in Sydney, comments that it was "virtually impossible to keep track of . . . the numbers of casual, temporary visitors to the households . . . or to acquire accurate figures on visitors per month or year".

14. Chapter 1.
15. Loomis, 1945; Glick, 1957.
16. Fortes, 1958; Smith, 1956. See also, Otterbein, op.cit., p.78.
17. Beasley, op.cit., p.178 indicates the difficulties in calculating the number of children per Aboriginal family. It is for these reasons that the figures given here are confined to the number of children per woman.
18. Reay, 1947, p.13, in her study of part-Aborigines in north-western New South Wales, found that girls began sexual intercourse early - many before leaving school.
19. Reay and Sitlington, 1948, p.201, in reference to part-Aboriginal groups in north-western New South Wales, write that contraception is confined to "upper class" women "most of whom limit the size of their families for economic reasons". Calley, 1956, p.204, in discussing part-Aboriginal groups on the North Coast of New South Wales, writes that the women have "no interest . . . in methods of birth control".
20. Calley, ibid., in his study of part-Aborigines on the North Coast of New South Wales, writes of Aboriginal births that "their more or less regular arrival is taken for granted . . . The bearing . . . of children continues until the menopause; pregnancy is more or less a regular occurrence, not something experienced once or twice in a life time".
21. Calley, ibid., p.203, refers to the system of "adoption" practised by part-Aborigines and sees it as "an important corollary of the kinship system".
22. Students who have studied part-Aboriginal groups have sometimes made this claim, e.g., Beasley, op.cit., p.176, states that her subjects "considered [de facto unions] to be marriages" and she treated them as such. Fink, 1955a, p.35, modifies this and makes a distinction between the attitudes to marriage of "upper class" and "lower class" Aborigines in Brewarrina. Of the "lower class" attitudes she writes, "There is no stigma attached to a girl 'getting into trouble' in the lower group. In fact, it is the normal occurrence

for a girl, when she is about 16, to become pregnant  
 . . . . Social disapproval is only directed towards a woman who has no man to support her and keeps on having children - no one cares very much whether she marries or just lives with a man".

23. Beasley, ibid., in her study of part-Aborigines in Sydney observed that there were no divorced persons in her sample.
24. A 1941 Minute of Aborigines' Welfare Board states "that it is very desirable that the marital conditions of Aborigines on Reserves should be legalized" (Minutes Aborigines' Welfare Board, 13.5.1941, p.3). The justification for this directive was "to enhance the position of women and to give them a legal hold over their spouses" (ibid.). This directive was never effected. See, Bell, op.cit., pp.212-213.
25. The argument pursued here is to be compared with that put forward by Blake, 1961, in her study of family life in Jamaica, cf. the opposite view put forward by Krieselman and referred to in Chapter 1 of this thesis. As stated in that chapter Kunstadter, 1963, p.59, criticises Krieselman's thesis and in so doing supports Blake and the argument pursued here.
26. Reay, op.cit., p.8 indicates that unattached nubile girls can be the cause of domestic strife on Reserves.
27. Reay and Sitlington, op.cit., p.203, write of a similar situation among the part-Aborigines of north-western New South Wales. "Admonishing a fifteen year old daughter who wanted to meet her friends in the town at night, an upper class woman said 'What would people think of you roaming the streets at night? You'd get what you're looking for all right (assault or rape), and they'd say it was my fault'". They also write that "upper class" mothers "deliberately" teach "young girls . . . to value modesty".
28. The possibility that younger girls were not nubile is not ruled out.
29. Calley, op.cit., p.205, refers to the "affairs" of "late adolescent girls" on Reserves in northern New South Wales.

30. Reay, op.cit., pp.8, 17, 18 and Calley, op.cit., p.205, both refer to "casual" and "amateur" prostitution in their respective areas of study.
31. Reay, op.cit., p.66, refers to marriages being arranged by the mothers of Aboriginal girls in north-western New South Wales.
32. This is a common arrangement in most part-Aboriginal groups. See Reay, ibid., p.8.
33. The normative pattern is for women living in de facto relationships to retain their maiden names but to add the marital prefix "Mrs". Their use of this prefix is sometimes scoffed at when tempers flare.

CHAPTER 5

THE MOTHER-DOMINATED HOUSEHOLD

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MOTHER-DOMINATED HOUSEHOLD

The household on the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve is mother-dominated. Evidence was collected to support this contention and aspects of this data are presented in this chapter. Before this, however, it is necessary to identify explicitly the woman who dominates the household.

#### The Mother-Figure

So far we have referred to this woman as "the mother" and her control of the household as "mother-domination" thereby implying that invariably this woman stands in the position of biological mother to certain members of the household. In point of fact, our use of the term "mother" has been loose because in some households the word in its biological meaning is inapplicable to the woman directing the affairs of their members. For convenience we have used the term "mother" as shorthand for "mother-figure" and, after this explanation, we will continue to do so. What must be borne in mind is that although the mother-figure is usually the biological mother she need not necessarily be so. As we will see the mother-

figure may be some other woman - grandmother, aunt or sister - who is identified with the mother by performing the role associated with that particular status. Because we are dealing with household groups as distinct from nuclear families there is no blanket term which simply describes the mother-figure in her capacity of mother to some members of the household and, perhaps, grandmother, aunt or sister to others. This complication can be overcome by the term "mother" which though inadequate and artificial in some cases, nevertheless contains the idea of "social" motherhood.

What is the position with respect to the 16 households of concern to us here? Table 12 lists the 16 women who are heads of their households together with their relationships to the respective members. In five cases the household head is wife/mother, in two she is mother only, in one mother/sister, in one wife/mother/sister-in-law, in two wife/mother/aunt, in one case wife/mother/grandmother, in one grandmother/great-grandmother, in two wife/mother/sister, and in one wife/mother/sister/sister-in-law/aunt/grandmother.

The female household head is usually both addressed and referred to by the term "mum" (or the diminutive "mummy") not only by her own children but also by any grandchildren, nephews and nieces whom she may have "adopted". It is also not uncommon for this woman's husband to use the term "mum" when addressing

TABLE 12

HOUSEHOLD HEADS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO  
OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLDS

Household Head	Relationships to other Household Members
Mrs. Fay Chambers	Mother/sister
Mrs. Elsie Murray	Wife/mother
Mrs. Laura Burrell	Wife/mother/sister-in-law
Mrs. Selma Burrell	Wife/mother
Mrs. Luvvie Trent	Wife/mother/aunt
Mrs. Nelly Thomas	Wife/mother/grandmother
Mrs. Wilma Trent	Mother
Mrs. Hamie Perry	Grandmother/great-grandmother
Mrs. Hilda Taylor	Wife/mother
Mrs. Daphne Cross	Wife/mother/sister
Mrs. Daisy Norton	Wife/mother
Mrs. Margaret Burrell	Wife/mother/aunt
Mrs. Marlene Thomas	Wife/mother/sister
Mrs. Ellen Trent	Mother
Mrs. Jane Ridgley	Wife/mother/grandmother/sister/ aunt/sister-in-law
Mrs. Jane Balderson	Wife/mother

and referring to her. Thus, the household head is often called mother by people to whom she actually stands in different relationships. These people may be encouraged to call her mother or may pick up the term (as with the woman's husband) from

others in the household. The second most commonly used term to address and to refer to the household head is "granny". It is used by children and adults though the person referred to is more likely the latter's mother or some other relative. As with the term "mum", "granny" is employed widely by household members because they become conditioned to hearing children use the term. The third most commonly used term for the household head is "aunty". Although the term is used by some people to whom the woman is not actually "aunty" its use is more restricted than the terms "mum" and "granny". It is important, then, to keep in mind whenever the term "mother" is used in the following pages that the statements more often than not are equally applicable to household heads who are referred to by household members as "granny" or "aunty". These women are for all intents and purposes "social mothers".

#### Household Headship

The statement that the Aboriginal household is mother-dominated suggests either the permanent or temporary absence of the husband-father or the presence of a weak husband-father figure. In our discussion we will find that both situations exist and are interrelated. Both situations are informative with respect to household management and administration and also to the marital relationship itself.



Plate 6. Off to Visit "Granny".

The most important factor making for the mother-dominated household and the weak husband-father figure is the general absence of menfolk from the household scene. Indeed, the absence of adult males is one of the most noticeable features of Reserve life; Table 1 indicates that there are only 18 males over 14 years of age compared with 28 females. Here for the moment we are not referring to absences of a few hours a day during which the male attends to his occupation, as is common in most groups in which the male is the breadwinner, but rather to more frequent and prolonged absences. These absences may be permanent or temporary.

The most common reason why the husband-father is permanently absent from the household is because he has deserted his wife and children and has more than likely established a de facto union elsewhere. Table 11 shows that there were four women who had been deserted by their husbands. This figure, however, does not give a true picture of husband desertion because there are other women on the Reserve who at different times have also been deserted but who have established new unions with other men. In other words, the deserted wife is a more common phenomenon than Table 11 indicates. For a variety of reasons some husbands may desert their wives temporarily but return when they "cool off", and there are cases where some men have deserted several times before making the final break.

There are several reasons why men desert their wives. One is the incompatibility of a couple which can sometimes be traced back to the fact that the unions were of the "shot-gun" variety and that no affection either originally existed between the pair or developed subsequently. Again, if a married man meets a woman to whom he is emotionally attracted, and if this woman refuses "to play second fiddle", he will desert his wife in her favour. Some men complain that their wives "nag all the time" about money, their absences, their failure to get work, and their drinking, and that given time it becomes so intolerable that they desert to escape it. Men are sometimes critical of the relationship that the wife has with her mother or some woman identified with her and which they realise takes precedence over the marital relationship and places them at a disadvantage in the household. This is the structural conflict that often develops in many societies between a man and his mother-in-law for the control of the wife-daughter figure. In the Aboriginal group the husband can be at a decided disadvantage because of the strength of the wife-mother relationship and this can be a reason for the husband's desertion.

Although we talk about deserted wives implying that the husband has deserted voluntarily it sometimes happens that the husband has been "kicked out" by other household members primarily

because of his drunkenness or laziness. It is claimed that some men are alcoholics and because of this condition cannot provide satisfactorily for their families with the result that the responsibility falls onto the wife.

The permanent absence of the husband-father can, of course, come about as a result of his death. However, as Table 11 shows there is only one woman who is widowed. Actually, she has "gorn through two old fellas". Her first husband died of alcoholism and her second of "a bad 'art".

It is characteristic of Reserve life that men are temporarily absent for varying periods of time. Employment is the chief reason for this. Although the Armidale region is better than some others for work opportunities for Aborigines, the work that they are primarily interested in is mainly of a casual part-time and seasonal nature. It is also largely rural and as such is located in the Armidale hinterland. For this reason the work takes the males away from home overnight or for longer periods. They are usually accommodated on the farms and stations where they work because distance or lack of transport precludes them returning home each evening. Johnny Norris rarely spends more than one night a week at home when he is working locally as a fencing hand on properties. Tom Burrell works at potato-digging and pea-picking during the local season and usually

"lives on the job" for as long as it lasts. Sonny Thomas does some part-time work for the Dumeresq Shire Council which takes him away from home for several nights a week and on these occasions he lives in the camps set up by the Council for road-maintenance and scrub-clearing gangs.

When local seasonal work gives out the men have to seek jobs elsewhere and invariably they move to the coast and take whatever work is available. Again, this work is casual and temporary and of the labouring, odd-job type such as fencing, brush-cutting and bush work.

One might well ask why the men do not seek more stable jobs around Armidale and stay put. One reason is historical. Historians who have studied the Aborigines of the Armidale region say that after the breakdown of their traditional society the remnants "travelled a lot in search of work" and that they were disinclined "to labour for a long period at one place" and had "the habit of decamping suddenly".<sup>1</sup> The present practice of moving around for employment is partly a habit that has been learned over time and one might go so far to say that it has become an aspect of part-Aboriginal culture. In other words, this custom of moving about is not biologically based; it is not a "walkabout urge". The Aborigines are traditionalists as far as employment is concerned and are prepared to return year

after year to the same casual, part-time, seasonal jobs even though some of them are able to obtain more permanent work as we have seen in Table 3. But as we saw in discussing that table they regard themselves first and foremost as itinerant rural workers and will readily give up what could be permanent work in other occupational spheres. But history only partly explains male mobility. There is also a functional explanation. As long as Aboriginal men prefer casual seasonal jobs they will be forced by necessity to move around in search of work and their mobility will continue. An understanding of male mobility would not be complete without mention of the valuational aspect. Adult males also move around for social reasons. There is no doubt that they like the social life generated at the centres of seasonal work and in the work camps and they like to visit relatives and friends scattered around the countryside. They value the opportunity to renew these contacts. A husband-father's mobility, then, is not solely designed to meet his economic obligations to his wife and children. It is a multi-factored phenomenon.

Even when at home men are conspicuous by their absence. They spend little time in the house or on the Reserve. They go to town, visit hotels, gossip for hours in the Court House Park, scavenge at the rubbish dump for scrap metals like copper, brass and aluminium and other things that they might be able to sell,

and go rabbiting in the bush. At weekends they are away gambling or watching cricket, football or some other sport. Lack of space and crowded conditions are also reasons why men are seldom seen in the house and it is clear that many seem to want to escape the hubbub of the domestic scene. But the pull of their leisure-time interests is also an explanation for their absences and must not be underestimated.

Another factor making for a mother-dominated household and a weak father-figure is the different attitudes adopted by the authorities with respect to Aboriginal women and men. The women on the Reserve have, and know that they have, the full backing of the authorities including the Aborigines' Welfare Board and the police. The men also acknowledge this. The authorities regard the women as generally more responsible than the men. This attitude is based on the woman's assumption of responsibility for the children, the woman's immobility because of her childcaring activities in contrast to the man's mobility, and the woman's dislike and disapproval of alcohol to which the man is often addicted.

It has been claimed that an important criterion in determining who is the household head is to discover "who has the rent book".<sup>2</sup> On the Armidale Reserve it is the mother-figure. The 14 houses on the Reserve are now rented in the names of women

although when first occupied five houses were in the names of men and two were in the names of both partners. Likewise, the two houses which are owned by the Seventh Day Adventist and the Roman Catholic Churches are rented in women's names.

The Aboriginal authorities and the churches recognize the responsibility of the women with regard to the payment of rent and the maintenance of the house. They believe that it is more realistic to give the mother-figure these responsibilities because, in her need to provide shelter for her children, she is more likely to make some attempt to meet these obligations. Deserted wives, of course, have no alternative but to accept responsibility for the house but it is now the practice officially to record all houses in women's names whether men are present or not. This is not to say that all the women are regular payers but it is to say that they are prepared to make some effort to pay the rent in order to keep the house. One woman said that with a husband who only worked intermittently and who was rarely at home she had "to scratch around" in order to be able to pay something off the rent when it was due. Like other women on the Reserve she has come to value a settled existence. The knowledge that the tenancy of a house left unoccupied for any length of time will lapse and the acknowledged difficulties of moving numbers of children around and providing shelter for them have helped to curtail the mobility

of women. Then again, the house offers the woman a feeling of security because if deserted she knows that she at least has "a roof over me 'ead".

The fact that the mother is responsible for the house and the rent and the fact that she considers it her house is reflected in the way in which she refers to it as "my house". Her claim to the house is acknowledged by other members of the household as well as by outsiders who consider that the mother "owns" the house. Informants of both sexes demonstrated this in their references to "Aunty Nelly's place", "Wilma's house" and "Gran's home". No occasion was recorded when a male was credited with house "ownership" by the residents.

Official recognition of the mother's immobility and responsibility goes further than charging her with the physical maintenance of the house and the payment of rent. The authorities support her as head of the household with control over its members and will come to her aid if required should her control be challenged and the peaceful running of the household disturbed by any recalcitrants. In doing this they protect State investment in housing but at the same time help to maintain order in the household. Although the mother, because of the absences of the men, would be in control of the household irrespective of the support she receives from the authorities their backing does

strengthen the mother's position and contributes to a weakening of that of the husband-father. How the authorities back mother-control of the household is seen in the following case. Mrs. Hamie Perry provided accommodation in her house for her daughter, her de facto "husband" and the daughter's children. Almost immediately the daughter's "husband" challenged Mrs. Perry's control of the household. When she resisted he resorted to abuse, physical violence and the destruction of some furniture. Mrs. Perry complained to the police and the recalcitrant was warned. He and his family left the household and returned to the coast. Their place was quickly taken by a granddaughter and her de facto "husband" who willingly accepted that "Gran is boss".

We have seen that the mother is responsible for the rent; she is also responsible for paying for the food consumed in the house, for much of the clothing worn by them, and for such things as electricity and household furniture and equipment. To meet these commitments she has to have money and she requires all working adult members to subscribe to the household purse. The money that finds its way into the mother's purse comes from several sources.

One source is wages. Adult males are the major source of wages; they are the chief breadwinners. The mother-figure expects to receive her husband's wages in toto and by all

accounts her expectation is largely met. She returns a part of these wages to her husband to cover his tobacco, drinking and gambling expenses. It is said to be a brave man who returns home broke having spent all his wages on drinking or gambling. One case of this occurred during the fieldwork. The man drank all his wages and his wife subjected him to an interminable verbal lashing and threatened to throw him out of the house. News of the husband's action soon spread throughout the Reserve and the wife got great sympathy. From data gathered it seems that the adult male wages varies from \$40 to \$60 a week when the men take permanent jobs such as cleaners or work at the impregnation plant. But because most prefer casual, seasonal-type, rural work their wages are usually much less than this. Indeed, at times when work is scarce or the men are between jobs no wages are drawn. Unmarried adult sons, even if not living at home, are expected to give the mother financial support. If living at home the son, like the husband, will give his wages to his mother and will receive "pocket money". The mother demands this and is supported by group values. If living away from home the son is expected to send his mother a portion of his wages. Both Mrs. Laura Burrell and Mrs. Daisy Norton regularly receive money from their sons who work away from Armidale. In households where the husband-father has deserted or is an unreliable provider unmarried

sons are often the chief source of money. A "good" son like a "good" husband is one who gives his money to the mother-figure. Although it is not the custom for women and teenage girls to work it is sometimes necessary for them to do so if the male breadwinners are absent and there is some particular crisis or if they wish to buy some particular item. However, they work for short periods only and give up when the crisis has passed or when the particular article has been purchased. On these occasions they work as domestics in the city's hotels and motels. Five married and two single women claimed to have worked on and off as domestics and Mrs. Hilda Taylor said that she had recently "done a bit of pea pickin' ter 'elp out".

The second important source of money for the mother's purse is social service payments which although never as large as wages are more regular and sometimes the only source of money for household expenditure. Child endowment is paid directly to mothers (never to fathers) once a month at the rate of 50 cents a week for the first child and \$1.00 a week for the second. A woman who has in her care 12 children under 16 years of age will draw \$6.50 a week in endowment. Pensions of different types and for varying amounts are paid to a number of people on the Reserve. Two receive old-age pensions, one a war-service pension, four invalid pensions and three the deserted-wife's pension. During

the fieldwork two people received unemployment benefits for short periods and a number of women received maternity allowances at the rate of \$30 for the first child, \$32 for the second and \$35 for the third.

There are also various erratic sources of money which in whole or in part finds its way into the mother's hands. Scavenging at the garbage dump sometimes pays off in the sale of metals and if a man or woman wins at gambling it is usual for the money to be used for household purchases. Money comes into a few household purses from maintenance orders against deserting husbands and fathers but only one woman, Mrs. Fay Chambers, received money regularly from this source. Most deserting husbands are behind in these payments. Sometimes a woman minds another's children while their mother works and will receive some payment for this. Mrs. Jane Ridgley and Mrs. Laura Burrell said they had taken in boarders for short periods when money was short and Mrs. Ridgley claimed she received up to \$8 a week from this source. The last but not the least important source of money for the household purse comes from the mother's borrowing from relatives outside her own household during times of financial crises.

In Table 13 we are given some idea of the amount of money that may come into the 16 households each week and which for the most part will find its way into the mother's purse. Because the

TABLE 13

SAMPLE WEEKLY INCOMES FOR 16 HOUSEHOLDS ON  
THE ARMIDALE ABORIGINAL RESERVE

Household Head	Amount	Contributors	Sources
Mrs. Jane Balderson	\$48	2	Wages; old-age and war-service pensions; child-endowment.
Mrs. Margaret Burrell	\$60	1	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Jane Ridgley	\$164	6	Wages; child-endowment; deserted-wife's and invalid pensions; unemployment benefits.
Mrs. Marlene Thomas	\$66	2	Wages; child-endowment; invalid pension.
Mrs. Ellen Trent	\$41	1	Deserted-wife's pension; child-endowment.
Mrs. Daphne Cross	\$132	2	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Daisy Norton	\$62	2	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Hilda Taylor	\$48	1	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Hamie Perry	\$62	2	Wages; old-age pension; child-endowment.
Mrs. Wilma Trent	\$36	1	Deserted-wife's pension; child-endowment.
Mrs. Nelly Thomas	\$23	2	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Luvvie Trent	\$83	2	Wages; child-endowment; invalid pension; unemployment benefits.

TABLE 13--Continued

Household Head	Amount	Contributors	Sources
Mrs. Selma Burrell	\$34	1	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Elsie Murray	\$65	1	Wages; child-endowment.
Mrs. Laura Burrell	\$100	2	Wages; child-endowment; invalid pension.
Mrs. Fay Chambers	\$39	1	Wages; maintenance; child-endowment.

mother does not keep records of money going into her purse and because the amount coming in fluctuates from week to week especially with regard to wages it has not been possible to calculate the mean weekly income for each household. Rather, we have to be content with a sample week's income for each household.<sup>3</sup>

The mother-figure has full control over the finances of the household and although she regards the money that goes into her purse from the several sources as her own, she actually holds the money in trust for the household and is expected to expend it for the common good. Sometimes the money the mother receives is insufficient to meet all the household's commitments and she will have to manipulate the finances as best she can. Most household heads have credit accounts with the local corner store and this

is a boon in times of financial crises. If any money is left after meeting the household expenses the mother will spend it on her children (usually sweets, ice creams and drinks from the corner store) or on herself (usually tobacco, gambling and clothes). The women are not frugal and have no system of routine saving. Money is to be spent and no thought is given to the possibility - indeed, the probability - that next week's income might be greatly reduced.

The mother makes all decisions with regard to purchasing extra items for the household. Every household head has at some time bought goods on hire purchase. Refrigerators, television sets, washing machines, electric stoves, deep-freezers and second-hand cars are acquired in this way. From time to time items are repossessed because the women have been unable to meet the regular payments. Before entering into a hire purchase agreement the woman is likely to consult her mother, aunt or sister but rarely, if ever, her husband who, more than likely, will be absent. When asked about the husband's part in household decision-making the women generally seemed surprised by the naivety of the question. They seemed convinced that they handled money more wisely than their menfolk and some said that their menfolk could not be trusted with money.

### Relationships Within the Household

There is no better way of illustrating mother-domination in the household than by examining the relationships that the mother-figure has with other members. The pertinent relationships in this context are those between wife and husband, mother and daughter, mother and son, grandmother and granddaughter, sister and sister, aunt and niece, and father and children.

### Wife-Husband Relationship

Aspects of the wife-husband relationship have already been mentioned and these will not be reiterated except where necessary. The marital relationship, whether a legal or a de facto one, tends to be brittle although some marital unions do last. Probably the main reason for this brittleness is that the marital relationship takes second place to the relationship that a woman has with her mother. The marital relationship takes precedence over this relationship only when the couple are first married or begin to live together. In many cases the marital union is established only because the woman is pregnant and there is a flurry by her mother to get her settled. More than one woman told how they were "hurriedly married off" when they became pregnant.

When first married, girls seem happy enough to leave their mothers and wander about with their husbands as they seek employ-

ment. Pregnancy occurs for most girls in their late teens at the age when they seem to rebel against mother-domination. The young wife's willingness to accompany her husband when first married might not be because of any deep affection between them but rather to taste some freedom from mother-control.

But as children are born and the wife finds herself less mobile and has difficulty coping with her children, and as the marital relationship begins to show the first signs of strain because of the husband's neglect or some other reason, the wife's thoughts turn more and more to her mother. In time the wife and her children invariably return to her mother's home. She may or may not be accompanied by her husband. From then on the woman becomes increasingly dependent on her mother and as the mother-daughter relationship develops a new intensity the husband is pushed more and more into the background. Some husbands resent this and try to get their wives to live with them again away from Armidale but most women refuse and the men either accept the inevitable and take up residence in the mother-in-law's house and accept her control or desert their wives. The case of Mrs. Nelly Thomas is typical of these women. After returning with her children to live with her mother her husband tried unsuccessfully to encourage her to take up residence with him again. After threats to leave her failed to influence her the husband deserted

and established a de facto union with another woman. Women deserted for this reason sooner or later establish de facto unions with men who are prepared to accept their wives' relationships with their mothers.

Women are frank that they value their mothers more than their husbands. One said that her husband took "second place" to her mother and another said that her husband "is nothin'" compared to her mother. She said that her mother did everything for her and her children whereas her husband did nothing. Clearly, marital disharmony often springs from the wife's disenchantment with the husband's non-acceptance or abdication of his responsibility. This is summed up in one woman's statement that "men make yer promises but never keep 'em". Some women bitterly criticised their husbands' drunkenness and laziness. Mrs. Fay Chambers said her husband was an alcoholic and a "no-'oper". She put up with him as long as she could and finally "kicked 'im out". "I can do without 'im. 'E's gorn and 'e can do what 'e likes. I've 'ad 'im", she said. Another woman declared that her husband had been an excessive drinker and had finally died from alcoholic poisoning. "I was not sad when 'e died", she said. Mrs. Wilma Trent said that she had had "a drunken, lazy" husband and that she was "glad" when he finally deserted her. "It was a relief when 'e went", she said. This woman also expressed the opinion that "yer better off without 'em [husbands]".

It is clear that some mothers have influenced their daughters in their relations with their husbands and have been the cause of marital ruptures. One woman said that her mother had made her realise what a "no-'oper" her husband was. "Mum 'ad the same trouble with 'er first and got rid of 'im", she said.

Even if the couple have their own home the wife's mother is still a dominating influence because she usually lives next door, across the street or a few doors away. There is a pattern of continual visiting between a woman and her mother. If the wife has no mother her place will be taken by another woman closely related to her who becomes the wife's mother-figure. Women seem to need a female back-stop.

The wife dominates the marital relationship just as she does the household and the husband has little say. The husband's position is weak because he does not fulfill the role adequately. Conscious of this the husband is placed at a disadvantage and has to accept the wife's domination. A wife's tongue is an effective weapon in keeping the husband under control and any protest from him can trigger off a very detailed list of his inadequacies for all to hear. A husband knows that things are stacked against him in the woman's favour. We have already seen how officialdom supports the woman and this is a threat constantly hanging over

the husband. A drunken husband who musters up "Dutch courage" and questions his wife's position will quickly find himself in trouble with the authorities. If a man finds the marital relationship intolerable his only escape is to desert but even then his wife's wrath can pursue him in the guise of maintenance orders. Deserted wives are particularly conscious of the punitive effects of these orders.

Women are ambivalent in their attitudes to the passive role that men play. They criticise them for failing to meet their marital and domestic responsibilities but at the same time they are critical whenever men attempt to assert themselves. Wives tend to see any assertion on the men's part as interference and resist it.

Yet the wife's control of things is not as uncomfortable for the husband as it may seem because his marginal position frees him from domestic responsibility and affords him a virtually free existence. What the husband may lose in ego satisfaction he gains in independence. Husbands seem to accept the wives' control of the household and when questioned about decisions the women had made said that they agreed with them. More than one husband referred to their wives as "the boss". When pushed to justify mother-domination the men invariably referred to their own frequent absences and to the mother's

immobility. They seemed to think it "right" that the mother-figure took charge of household management and administration.

### Mother-Child Relationship

Firstly, we will make a few general remarks about the mother-child relationship. This relationship is a strong one. In infancy and childhood children are totally dependent on the mother or some woman who fills in for her. The permanent or frequent absences of the father is a prime factor in explaining the child's dependence on the mother-figure as well as the child's noticeably cold attitude towards the father. The mother cares for, protects and disciplines her children. The mother-child relationship is characterised by deep affection and it is the most affective relationship that either party will probably ever participate in. There is no question that the mother-child relationship far surpasses the wife-husband relationship in affection.

The mother is the centre of the child's social universe. Discussions with children showed that much of what they saw and thought was conditioned by the mother's attitude, and this was true not only of small children but also of adolescents. When questioned children invariably responded in terms of "mum says" and there seemed no doubt in their minds that "mum is right".

It is clear that the mother sets the values of the household and that the children successfully assimilate them.

An interesting source of evidence for the mother-child relationship came from material gathered by the author at the Aboriginal Homework Centre. In a written questionnaire administered to 15 teenagers of both sexes 13 answered that whenever they wanted anything they always went to "mum", "aunty" or "gran". When questioned on their replies it was clear that these children would not think of going to anyone other than the mother-figure. The remaining 2 children chose to go to friends. None said that he or she would go to their father or any other male. On another occasion when asked who should be invited to the Centre's Christmas Party mothers, grandmothers and aunts were immediately suggested but no males were mentioned. In essays written by senior children of both sexes there were continual references to their mothers but none to their fathers. One teenage girl wrote

I like My Mother becuas she favour me the most. and every time I get some thing New My sister allway get jelous and Mum have to get her one to . . . I wish I could be like her mother when I grow up becuas she so good to us. but she like me the most becuas I allway do every thing for her.

A twelve year old boy wrote

A sad day will be when something happen me. I will have to go to the hospital and have a operation which will worry

me. The accident may be serious. It would be awful to worry mum, she would get a bad shock and she may have to go to the hospital also. I don't want mum to worry.

These extracts are typical of the essays written and show that the mother is the key figure in the children's minds. Invariably the mother was the only person in the children's households singled out for comment.

The child looks to the mother-figure as the effective authority with regard to its own actions. This is not surprising in a group whose menfolk are permanently or temporarily absent for long periods and in a group which regards children as woman's work. Children refer all requests to their mothers even if their fathers are present. If permission is refused the children will pester their mother rather than try to have her decision countermanded by the father. Interference by the father would lead to an argument with the mother.

Mothers are not strict disciplinarians and tolerate a lot of "cheek" and disobedience from their children. The mother's chief means of correcting children is her tongue. She rarely punishes them physically although she threatens to "belt" or "flog" them and on occasions will chase them "to frighten them". If a child puts on a violent tantrum the mother's tactics are either to ignore it or to lock the child in a room or outside the house. When a mother hits a child it is because he is rude

to another woman or has "played up" at school. When Abbie Brown "played up" at school his "mum" (actually his grandmother) "belted" him. She regarded the offence as serious because it "showed up the Aboriginal people". When a child is hit any offence he takes against his mother is shortlived. One effective form of punishment that mothers employ is to withhold "pocket money". Children are well aware that the mother controls the household purse. Finally, some mothers keep control by frightening children with the spirits of deceased relatives. For a people who believe in spirits and ghosts and who are particularly superstitious a remark such as "Gran is watching you" is very effective in restoring order. Children are quite explicit that "mum is the boss".

We have said that men take no responsibility for the disciplining of children. Children are woman's work and mothers keep this activity to themselves. Asked to justify why fathers should not discipline children women said "they don't know their own strength", "they'd be cruel", "they're never 'ere" and "they're my kids". Here again, then, we find that the men are freed from another field of responsibility.

Although mothers object to fathers chastising children they are prepared to share this activity with other close female relatives. Grandmothers and aunts are in this category. Mrs.

Hilda Taylor admitted that her children are "a 'andful sometimes" and she is grateful that her aunt (her mother-figure), who lives across the street, can put "the fear of God into the kids - even the big ones" when they get out of hand.

Having discussed the mother-child relationship generally we now turn to brief discussions of the mother-daughter and mother-son relationships specifically.

#### Mother-Daughter Relationship

This is the strongest relationship found within the household and overshadows all others. The relationship is a close, intimate one. The young daughter accompanies her mother everywhere and, as we have seen, grows up very much within the mother's shadow. By late teens girls sometimes begin to resent the mother's dominating influence. At this age girls are often critical of their position and feel that they are being imposed upon. Teenage girls rarely work outside the household. As soon as a girl leaves school she begins to help in the house and to mind younger siblings. One mother said she did not think girls should work but should stay at home and help their mothers. She said that it was helpful to have her daughter at home "to do the messages". One girl complained that she did all the housework. Another girl criticised her lack of freedom and her mother's playing "pups [cards] all day" while she did "all the work" and

"never went anywhere".

At this age girls lie to their mothers and in reaction against their cloistered existence form assignations with men and often become pregnant. The suggestion that girls may become pregnant to escape their mothers cannot be supported from evidence collected. Girls become pregnant because they have no knowledge of birth-control techniques. They may, however, take advantage of "shot-gun" marriages to escape their mothers' households. As we have seen, newly-married girls willingly accompany their husbands in search of work.

However, as we have also seen the wife soon finds that this itinerant way of life begins to pall. Burdened with children and, perhaps, an erring husband she returns to the security of her mother's home. From then on the marital relationship is secondary to the mother-daughter relationship which becomes stronger than ever. Many of these women are solely dependent on their mothers for accommodation, for help with their children and for financial support.

Case after case can be cited of women who after a year or so of married life have come scurrying back to their mothers. Mrs. Elsie Murray, who in her early married life accompanied her husband "all over the place" in search of bush work, returned to her mother and grandmother when she could not provide for her

children. Mrs. Laura Burrell lived with her husband in unofficial work camps on the coast until she had "too many kids to look after" and returned to live with her mother. Mrs. Wilma Trent after having four children came back to her mother because her husband could not provide for his dependents. Mrs. Selma Burrell, Mrs. Nelly Thomas, Mrs. Daisy Norton, Mrs. Lily Murray and Mrs. Jean Kent all told similar stories.

A mother never turns her daughter and family away and will make some provision to accommodate them. If she cannot provide this herself she will arrange for it with some other relative. As soon as one daughter and her family move out of her mother's house another daughter and her family inevitably move in. Asked why her daughter and family did not seek help from the husband's mother, a mother's reply was always in terms of "but she's my daughter. 'Is mother can't 'elp them anyway. 'Er 'ouse is full up". This neatly states the position. Residence is matrilocal and a mother sees it as her duty to house her daughter. A husband's mother "can't 'elp . . . anyway" because she, too, is housing her married daughters.

When a daughter cannot be accommodated by her mother she will be accommodated nearby because she is anxious to live close to her mother. After a few years it often happens that the daughter acquires so many children that conditions become too

crowded in the mother's house and, with the mother's help, she moves into another house next door or across the street. But the distance separating them is never great and they are never more than a minute or so away from each other. Mrs. Elsie Murray moved out of her mother's house when it became too crowded but continued to live close to her. Mrs. Laura Burrell, Mrs. Selma Burrell, Mrs. Nelly Thomas, Mrs. Daisy Norton and Mrs. Ellen Trent all told the same type of story and in each case their places in their mothers' houses were taken by their sisters and their families. In this way a woman usually manages to house all her daughters and their families at some time or other.

When a daughter and her family live with her mother they accept the mother's control of the household. They defer to her in all matters and gradually grandchildren come to realise that their requests must be made to their grandmother. When made to their own mother she asks the grandmother's opinion and acts accordingly.

The influence that a woman acquires over a daughter and her family because of their dependence on her continues after they have a house of their own. To begin with there is continual, almost compulsive visiting, between the women. They visit on the slightest pretext and daughters seem to spend more time in their mothers' houses than in their own. Indeed, a woman's

house is often only an extension of her mother's with the mother taking charge whenever she visits. A crisis in a woman's household brings her mother immediately. After a woman has lived in her mother's house and has had relatively little responsibility, it takes time when she moves into her own house to learn to control it. Because of this she is happy to have her mother close by to give help and advice in everyday affairs.

The mother-daughter relationship is a reciprocal affair. The daughter derives obvious advantages from the relationship but the mother also derives advantages. These may be economic in that just as her daughter borrows from her, she too can borrow from her daughter. Then, again, it is always comforting for a woman to have her daughters close by in times of crises and to have their help and moral support.

When a woman dies her daughters find it very hard to cope. Mrs. Laura Burrell said that her whole world collapsed when her mother died. And Mrs. Jane Balderson said that "it was a big blow when mum died". The shock of the mother's death is one thing but the realisation that she is thereby thrown largely onto her own resources often causes the daughter to panic. But the daughter usually closes the gap left by her mother's death by turning to her grandmother, aunt or sister and making her into a mother-figure. Although she turns to this woman for advice

and help the daughter finds that she must now take more control of her own household and in doing so she gradually assumes the mother-figure role with regard to her own daughters. Women pattern themselves on their mothers and this is one way the system perpetuates itself.

#### Mother-Son Relationship

The mother-son relationship is a close one up to adolescence when boys begin to work and come under the influence of their peer group and later enter into the adult male world. When a man marries his relationship with his mother is considerably weakened because he is inevitably absorbed into his wife's maternal system.

A mother influences her son as to his first job and she has an interest in it because until he marries he is expected to contribute to the mother's purse even if he lives away from home. Most boys honour this economic obligation to their mothers until they marry. Because the son's contribution to her purse ceases when he marries women are not always happy when a son marries. Although women pay lip-service to the importance of education economic conditions in the household are usually so pressing that they encourage their sons to leave school as soon as legally qualified and to take jobs. Mrs. Wilma Trent and Mrs. Hilda Taylor say that their sons will have to go into bush work as soon

as they leave school. The jobs the boys take, then, are the typical casual and seasonal ones. In this way mothers, perhaps unwittingly, eject their sons into the established adult male pattern of things which the women themselves do not value. As boys wander from centre to centre looking for casual work they learn the adult male attitudes to employment, marriage, alcohol and gambling. They frequently end up getting girls "into trouble" and having to marry them. Mrs. Jane Ridgley bemoaned that she lost control of her sons when they went away to work. "I'm disgusted with them now", she said in reference to their drinking, gambling and de facto relationships.

#### Grandmother-Granddaughter, Sister-Sister and Aunt-Niece Relationships

Because these three relationships have much in common they can be discussed together. Invariably they are close relationships and are patterned on the mother-daughter relationship and have a similar content. A grandmother, an elder sister or an aunt often takes the place of a woman's mother if the latter is dead, absent or has forgone her responsibility with respect to her children.

As we have seen there are three households in which the grandmother is the household head and is the mother-figure for her grandchildren. Mrs. Hamie Perry, Mrs. Jane Ridgley and

Mrs. Nelly Thomas have all reared their daughters' illegitimate children as their own. For all purposes the children regard these women as their mothers and call them "mum". If their biological mothers are present the children regard them as elder sisters. Mrs. Lily Murray, Mrs. Hamie Perry, Mrs. Hilda Taylor and Mrs. Margaret Burrell reported that they had been reared by their grandmothers.

Mrs. Daisy Norton reared seven nieces and nephews when their own mother died. These children "knew no other mother but me", she said and they "call me mum". One niece, Mrs. Marlene Thomas, said that Mrs. Norton "is mum to me". The two women "live" in each other's houses and Mrs. Thomas seeks advice from her aunt and abides by it. For all purposes theirs is a mother-daughter relationship. Likewise, since her grandmother's death Mrs. Hilda Taylor has turned to her maternal aunt, Mrs. Nelly Thomas, as her mother-figure.

Sisters also stick together and if their mother is dead or absent an elder or dominating sister takes her place. Mrs. Daphne Cross is mother-figure to her sister, Lena Bolton, who lives in her household. Mrs. Wilma Trent has always provided accommodation, help and advice for her sister, Wendy Bracken, when needed, and although the sister and her husband have occasionally let Mrs. Trent down she still takes them back

whenever they are "hard up". Mrs. Marlene Thomas has provided a home for her sister, Rene Sumers, for whom she feels responsible now that their mother has died. When her mother died Mrs. Jane Balderson turned to her elder sister, Mrs. Laura Burrell, for the help and advice that she used to get from her mother. Mrs. Elsie Murray has provided accommodation and other forms of help for her sister, Pat Denton, and her family. Whenever Pat gets into any trouble she makes for the Armidale Reserve and her sister's household.

#### Father-Child Relationship

Sufficient has been said and implied about the father-child relationship for us to say that it is a weak relationship. Children are woman's work and fathers take their cue from there. On the whole, fathers have little to do with them. Absent from home permanently or temporarily fathers to their children are distant and sometimes shadowy figures. For children fathers are ineffectual and children are often cheeky and disrespectful to them or just ignore their presence. In domestic arguments children invariably support their mother against the father. It sometimes happens that women actively turn their children against their fathers, but even if they do not go this far their continual complaints leave little doubt in the children's minds

that all their mothers' troubles and worries are to be laid at their fathers' feet.

In this chapter we have been concerned to present some of the material collected in the course of fieldwork to illustrate the mother-controlled household on the Armidale Aboriginal Reserve. Maternal influence, however, does not end with household management but spills over into the Reserve itself and even beyond. We now turn to investigate the extension of mother-dominance in these spheres.

#### Notes and References

1. Walker, 1966, pp.173-174.
2. Kerr, 1958, p.12.
3. Beasley, 1970, p.167 refers to the difficulty she experienced in trying to acquire information about household income from informants in her study of part-Aborigines in Sydney. Bell, 1959a, pp.310-325 discusses similar difficulties in relation to the part-Aborigines of La Perouse.

CHAPTER 6

THE MOTHER-DOMINATED RESERVE

AND

MOTHER-INFLUENCE BEYOND THE RESERVE