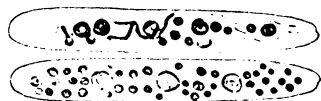


THE POLITICS OF FEMALE IDENTITY: WARLPIRI WIDOWS AT YUENDUMU¹



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In an attempt to analyze how Australian Aboriginal women have reorganized their lives since sedentarization, I consider here how colonial and postcolonial political economies have affected the roles and status of an important segment of the population, mature widows. The anthropological discourse on remarriage² and sustained widowhood, particularly in the work of Bell (1980, 1983), provides the stimulus for the present paper.³ Like Bell, I studied the transformation of women's identity in contemporary Aboriginal culture because it offered complex responses to the question: What happens to pre-state social systems dominated by a capitalist society? Bell, following Leacock (1978), suggests that women enjoyed relative autonomy in precontact situation and that their roles had been undermined by the rise of the state. Colonization and sedentarization, Bell (1980, 1983) argues, left women with no alternative but to recreate their solidarity and power away from men. Such a perspective, comparing as it does the nature of women's power with that of men in precontact and postcontact situations, overvalues certain gender imperatives among the Australian Aboriginal societies. I differ with Bell in that I focus my analysis on individuals as social actors (Keen 1978; Von Sturmer 1978; Sutton 1978; Myers 1986 Anderson 1988; Dussart 1988a). This avoids a normative and rule-bound perspective that would depict women categorically and dichotomously vis-a-vis men. Seeing the Warlpiri as social actors enables us to scrutinize the dynamic restructuring of social relations between men and women, men and men, and women and women (Tonkinson 1990; Giddens 1979:56-57).

In the literature on precontact social relations, widows are often described as unempowered and obliged to remarry. My data, collected over seven years of fieldwork with the Warlpiri people, compel different conclusions. Far from being denied status, widows played a vital role in the social economy of the Central Australian Desert. I do not mean to imply that widowhood was tremendously valorized prior to settlement; however, even then, as life stories suggest, there were instances when widows would choose not to remarry and still remain integrated in the social life of the group.

Sedentarization and its consequences have modified traditional remarriage practices. But these modifications have done little to increase the frequency of remarriage. Quite the contrary, today, almost all mature widows remain single. This transformation sheds light on many of the tensions (and responses to these tensions) existing in contemporary Aboriginal society.

YUENDUMU FIELDWORK: AN OVERVIEW

My research on widows was conducted at Yuendumu, a settlement located in the Central Australian Desert. Some one thousand people live at Yuendumu, most of them members of the Warlpiri linguistic group. The Aboriginal population was brought to Yuendumu by the Australian government in 1946. The area remained a governmental reserve until 1978, when land rights legislation returned approximately 100,000 square kilometers that included Yuendumu to the Warlpiri. Nonetheless, the people of Yuendumu have remained dependent on governmental funding and transfer payments to survive. By the end of the 1980s about 90 per cent of the residents were unemployed, and like all other unemployed Australians they had access to governmental social security benefits. In short, Yuendumu is a welfare economy. The Warlpiri receive varying amounts of financial support from the government depending on their employment status, their age, and their marital circumstances. This last factor, as I will show, has changed the role of widows at Yuendumu.

I concentrated my research on 55 widows over the age of 35. This group represents roughly a third of the overall female population of women in that age category. All but nineteen of the widows interviewed lost their husbands before reaching menopause. Very few of them lived with their married children, and most settled in one of the large *jilimi*, living quarters populated by women temporarily separated, divorced, unmarried, or widowed, or who wish to escape domestic violence.

In addition to life stories about widowhood in contemporary Yuendumu, the Aboriginal women provided their views about the status of widows prior to settlement in 1946. It was these views that necessitated the revision of some of the classic interpretations of widowhood before sedentarization.

SPOUSAL SELECTION PRIOR TO SETTLEMENT

Anthropological literature addressing the status of women before governmental settlement often considered widowhood as a liminal position; that is, a brief moment in the life cycle, a hiatus between one marriage and the next. The most vigorous exposition of this theory appears in Meggitt's (1962) ethnography of Central Desert Aborigines. While Meggitt's research offered an ideological template for understanding Warlpiri social relations, my Warlpiri women's life stories suggest circumstances of remarriage and widowhood that were far more complicated.

Meggitt (1962:323) noted that with the death of her spouse, a widow was put under a speech taboo for a period ranging from one to three years, and expected to live in the single women's quarter, until she was given a new spouse. Meggitt (1962:264-265) determined that the ideal rule for remarriage was levirate; the widow would be required to marry one of her deceased husbands' junior close or classificatory brothers. The new husband would be chosen by the widow's male matrikin. It must be noted that while Meggitt describes Aboriginal traditional culture, his data were gathered during the early days of sedentarization, so that it was difficult at times to distinguish what elements of conjugality he documented had been already altered by the intrusion of European culture.

Meggitt did not note whether the matrikin consulted the widows, though he indicated that there was a pool of appropriate spouses from which to choose. Some of these potential spouses were already married, but many were young bachelors. Meggitt emphasized that the widow's matrikin were likely to select a young bachelor who pressed for a widow. One reason these bachelors sought the older women was that such unions broadened their access to land and the rituals tied to that land. Such unions, Meggitt (1962:265) argued, carried a price:

As the widow may well be nearing middle-age, sexually unattractive, unable to bear children; and of doubtful economic assistance, the young man in effect acquires a dependent rather than a wife.

Meggitt's assessment must be modified in numerous ways. Life stories and genealogies reveal that remarriages before sedentarization took into account the politics of the different intermarrying groups and individuals involved (Rose 1968:201). Widows could pressure members of their matrikin and patrikin, who both contributed to the choice of a new consort, to choose one man over the other acceptable junior classificatory brothers. Furthermore, the future husbands themselves often voiced preferences. Several anthropologists who worked with other Aboriginal societies in Australia have also pointed out that there was room for expression of individual choices for a second, third, or fourth consort (Sutherland-Davidson 1949:60, 174-187; Goodale 1971:335; White 1975:139-140; Bell 1980:261, 1983:162; Merlan 1988:45; Glowczweski 1988:154).

Of course, not all widows could impose their choice and overcome the pressures of their relatives. For example, Marie⁴ remembered that, prior to sedentarization, as a young widow she had been ordered by her mother's brother to attend a *jardiwarnpa*⁵, an important ritual during which a new spouse would be selected and officially presented to her. Marie did not want the husband her relatives had chosen, and said so repeatedly to members of her matrikin not directly involved in the negotiations. She hoped that her mother's brother would help her either to remarry another man or to remain a widow. She expected her mother's brother to reopen the negotiations, but he did not. The remarriage would have to take place. Marie tried to run away from the camp, but was caught by relatives, whom she did not want to identify, and received a severe beating.⁶ She remembered that her mother's brothers did not show any sympathy and instead enjoined her to go and live with her new husband. However, the remarriage did not last and some time later she eloped with a lover from outside the acceptable pool of junior brothers.

Prior to sedentarization, a mother's brother had vested interests in his niece's marriages. As a member of her matriline, he was responsible for protecting his niece's rights in marriages (Meggitt 1962:140). Following the betrothal, a Warlpiri man who circumcised another male was obliged to find him a spouse. As a circumciser, a mother's brother arranged for one of his sisters' daughters to become the wife of the man he circumcised. The niece's husband could then repay his wife's mother's brother "for the gift of the latter's niece only by inducing a [classificatory] 'wife's brother' to provide a daughter as wife for the W.M.B., or by giving his own sister's daughter to a [classificatory, not his actual circumciser] 'W.M.B.'" (Meggitt 1962:198). Members of a widow's patriline consulted her mother's brother about her remarriage. A widow expected her mother's brother to influence the choice of a new spouse, taking into account her preferences. If he failed, a widow could refuse to speak to him. Several life stories mentioned

women successfully avoiding their mother's brothers for lengthy periods, as they felt their mother's brothers did not represent them during remarriage negotiations.

Meggitt's assessment that a middle-age widow was "a dependent rather than a wife" has since been challenged. Goodale (1971), in particular, suggests that a mature woman remarried to a younger man plays a crucial role because she introduces her husband to sex. My research also shows that, prior to settlement, marriage to a mature widow by a younger man prompted an additional marriage to a younger non-widow. I have been unable to establish whether this pattern was encouraged by the widow who wished assistance, or the young woman who found the arrangement attractive.

Also, Meggitt offered no data to support his assertion that "sexual attractiveness" (to use his phrase) diminished with age for Warlpiri. Both now and prior to settlement, my research suggests, sexual attractiveness and desire do not decline (see also Hart, Pilling, and Goodale 1988:13,19). As one of the widows explained, "Maybe I am an old woman [*wurlkumanu*], but I meet men."⁷ Men engage in sexual liaisons with both young and mature women. Young women told me they have more sexual liaisons with men of their own age than older ones, data analysis on liaisons reveals that the large majority of men and women had love affairs with people in their own age group. This included widows.

Meggitt's assumption that a woman's inability to bear children was linked in some way to the diminution of her economic vitality also must be questioned. Anthropological works, especially those of Goodale (1971), Rosaldo (1980), and Fishburne-Collier (1988) have shown that in simple societies experience made mature women, unencumbered by infants, capable providers. This position was supported by Long's (1971) data from Aboriginal societies in central Australia. On the Pintupi, an Aboriginal people whose country is adjacent to the Warlpiri's, Long (1971:265) concluded that mature women were good hunters and gatherers. Meehan's (1982:131) work in Arnhem Land showed that women over 31-years-old had the highest gathering performance.

It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that mature widows with uninitiated male children, generated much spousal interest in presettlement contexts. These uninitiated offspring could expand a new husband's patrilodge. It was quite common for such children to receive access to knowledge, land, and rituals held by both the father and the mother's new husband. This was possible because the former widows could join the husband's kin group.⁸ Life stories reveal that many bachelors realized the importance of such unions. In one account, a woman explained that a brother had been selected by members of a widow's patriline and matriline as a second husband. While the widow could have no more children, she still had two uncircumcised sons. Members of the deceased husband's patriline strongly objected to the remarriage because they wanted to secure their rights over the uncircumcised boys. The remarriage did not take place, and the widow eloped with one of her lovers without the permission of her kin group.

In short, Meggitt's assessments notwithstanding, widows prior to sedentarization were valued in the social dynamics of the group. Though their remarriage carried important political implications, widows were able to rebuff their relatives and reject expected unions in favor of elopement with lovers who usually belonged to a marriageable category (see Berndt and Berndt 1970:201). A small number, 5 to 10 per cent, chose not to remarry. This pattern intensified later, when Warlpiri were forced to abandon their hunting and gathering way of life.

THE CHOICE OF WIDOWHOOD PRIOR TO SETTLEMENT

To clarify the possibility of avoiding remarriage before sedentarization, I would like to offer two portraits of presettlement widowhood. These examples highlight the fact that widows in hunting and gathering societies did not have to remarry to gain access to men's services and goods, nor were they ostracized from the community (Collier & Rosaldo 1981; Fishburne-Collier 1988). The first comes from the photographic ethnography of Baldwin Spencer, who at the turn of the century documented Aboriginal culture throughout Australia. In the course of his 1902 expedition, Spencer photographed an unnamed woman of the Warramunga linguistic group. The Warramunga and Warlpiri share many cultural characteristics including the one described in the caption that accompanied Spencer's (1982:102) image:

. . .this morning down in the *lubras*⁹ camp we came across one old lady who has not spoken for more than twenty years! When she became a widow she was of course put under the ban of silence, and even when released from this two or three years later, she chose not to speak and had actually remained silent ever since—no one knows why.

When I showed Spencer's photograph and translated the caption to several Warlpiri widows, they displayed none of the ethnographer's perplexity; they considered the woman's behavior unextraordinary. Widows under speech taboo use sign language to communicate until they are relieved by one of their elder brothers, thus ending the period of mourning (Kendon 1988:88-90). By refusing to speak, the Warramunga woman prolonged the length of her liminal position. Her silence, my informants explained, meant that she still felt sorrow for her deceased husband, and was therefore unable to remarry another man (see also Bell 1980:252).

The second example comes from a life story provided by a widow I shall call Eleanor. She offered a description of her mother's mother's widowhood prior to the 1946 sedentarization at Yuendumu. What follows is a free translation from the Warlpiri:

My mother and my mother's mother went hunting together. My mother's mother taught me how to hunt and to gather. She was a good hunter, my mother's mother. She was a good provider [*kuyu-pungu*]. She spent a lot of time with me, she told me sacred stories. She was a widow. She lived with us for a long time. She lived also with my mother's sisters. She died when she was an old woman. She lived with us then [at Yuendumu].

Other older women confirmed that Eleanor's mother's mother was a good provider (*kuyu-pungu*), and such praise is offered sparingly in a community that values humility.

Eleanor's account was not unique. A sixth of the widows mentioned in the biographies I collected remained widows, living and travelling with their married children until they died. These women hunted, gathered various roots, grains, and fruits, looked after their grandchildren, and transmitted religious knowledge to younger women. In return, these widows received support from their children and their children's spouses. In economic, ritual, and social terms, their lives were not radically different from the lives of married women. None of the women with whom I spoke recalled widows who were ostracized from the community because they refused to remarry. In fact, the life stories suggest that in a society where

experience and ritual knowledge are strengths, a mature woman, even when she lacked a husband, was more of an asset than a dependent.

REMARRIAGE AFTER SETTLEMENT

While between 5 to 10 per cent of women did not remarry in presettlement times, today only about six per cent of widows do remarry. Most anthropologists agree that sedentarization and its repercussions have increased a widow's options and changed the very nature of marriages (Burbank 1988). None of the 55 women I interviewed remarried within the two or three years following the death of their husband, as was the norm prior to settlement practices. However, eight ultimately remarried.

It is important to scrutinize their motivations to remarry and to whom. It took as long as ten years for some women to remarry. In short, remarriage today rarely follows the levirate template described by Meggitt. Between 1983 and 1987, only one woman married one of her deceased husband's classificatory junior brothers chosen for her by members of her matriline and patriline. The other seven rejected the pressures to marry men imposed by members of their kin group. These seven women entered into what is called in Aboriginal English "kangaroo (re)marriages."¹⁰

Kangaroo (re)marriage has increased with sedentarization, but does follow certain rules. For such a relationship to be tolerated by the community, the couple must satisfy at least one of the rules governing first marriages. This means that an older widow should choose from the pool of preferred spouses (a mother's mother's brothers' daughter's son), close and classificatory cross-cousins, or from close and classificatory mother's mother's brothers. The couple generally leaves the settlement secretly and stays away from two days to several weeks. This time away may be spent in the bush, in other settlements, or in Alice Springs, the nearest town. During the couple's travel, family members of the widow express anger at being deprived involvement in the conjugal destiny of a relative. Also effected by the elopement is the "chosen" husband who has been spurned. When learning of the widow's departure, he may use the event to negotiate marriage to a younger woman as compensation, though such requests are rarely granted.

One especially eloquent case that characterizes the impact of the kangaroo (re)marriage concerns Eleanor. Eleanor was ordered by her mother's older brother to attend a *ngajikula*, a ceremonial cycle similar to the *jardiwarnpa* mentioned earlier. During the ceremony, her mother's brother was going to inform her who had been chosen for her second husband. Eleanor refused to acknowledge the summons and decided not to participate in the ritual. Three days before the ceremonies were to take place, Eleanor fled to Alice Springs with her lover to avoid the proposed remarriage. She and her lover avoided Yuendumu for three weeks. Upon her return, Eleanor heard that her mother's brother was extremely upset at her behavior. She managed to avoid him and approached her five sons. (She had no daughters.) Eleanor asked each separately whether he would object if she lived with her lover. Each son gave his consent. The sons' approval was reported to Eleanor's mother's brother by his wife, one of Eleanor's close father's sisters. Eleanor's father's sister, by informing her husband, was openly supporting Eleanor's choice. But nothing appeased Eleanor's mother's brother. Eleanor spent

months trying to appease him, but he died before they could settle their differences.

Mother's brothers generally object to kangaroo marriages because such unions erode their role in spousal negotiations. It was for this reason that Eleanor's mother's brother refused to support and look after his niece's interests when she entered into a kangaroo union. This left her with no one to protect her rights. So, in an attempt to find such protection, Eleanor sought her children's approval to remarry the man of her choice (see Hart, Pilling, & Goodale 1988:24).¹¹ Thus, children are asked to assume a role customarily played by a woman's mother's brother, a member of her matriline. The children look after their mothers' interests and protect them, not only in the negotiation of marriage but also after it is established. The ties between mother and children are intensified and serve as a buffer against the maintenance of gerontocracy. If a widow cannot get her children's consent to her kangaroo union, she may choose to leave the settlement to live with her partner or to remain a widow.

This points to an interesting development in Warlpiri social relations. Hiatt (1965) and Goodale (1971:335) and others have argued that promised unions, polygyny, and gerontocracy practices provided "a locus of attempted control by social actors over others" (Merlan 1988:45). It appears now that, with the advent of kangaroo unions, matri- and patrikin who traditionally negotiated a remarriage lose control and status. The real effect is not so clear cut. Kangaroo unions follow certain norms, and provide members of the woman's matriline and patriline the chance to widen their network of support with members of the kangaroo spouse's kin group. Furthermore, in most cases, members of a woman's patriline and matriline can strengthen ritual and political ties with her husband and his relatives. Only during drunken fights, did I hear individuals denying any obligations to their kangaroo affines (see also Collmann 1979:392-393).

Kangaroo spouses usually belong to the pool of customary preferred spouses, thus providing the possibility to increase ties with a larger number of matriline from which to choose an acceptable spouse. In 1989, three of Eleanor's youngest female relatives explained that they could marry men from Eleanor's husband kin group because they were customary preferred spouses for them. Their claim showed, as Burbank (1988:52-56) pointed out in her study on contemporary marriages at Mangrove, that ideal marriage patterns "still informed the thought and behavior" of Aboriginal people in a post-colonial context.

Eleanor's lover was not a promised husband, but he was of a preferred status, being a classificatory brother of the sons' father. Eleanor moved in with her lover and his first wife. Some months later, the new couple went through a ritual to cleanse themselves of the sexual transgression. By submitting to this ritual, they accepted the fact that they should be punished, and agreed to respect the obligations owed to their relatives and new in-laws.

At the onset of her involvement with her new consort, Eleanor worried that remarriage would undermine the economic power she enjoyed as a widow. Government pension payments are more substantial for widows than for women who are married or remarried. As a result of her remarriage, Eleanor's individual economic power was diminished by a third. At first, she took comfort in the fact that her new husband had a "high-paying" job as a tractor driver. Yet, when Eleanor's husband lost his job a few months after their marriage, she had to find new ways to generate the funds needed and expected by her relatives. She started

gambling (having never gambled before), painting acrylic canvases for the burgeoning art market (Dussart 1988b; Anderson and Dussart 1988), and shopping for older and often infirm male and female relatives who would pay for the service. Eleanor was criticized in the early period of her marriage because she did not have time anymore to be an active ritual participant and provider of goods, services, and knowledge. Some of her relatives said she was too busy taking care of her husband and fighting with his first wife. Once settled in a monogamous relationship, Eleanor again became an active ritual participant.

Eleanor's marriage also diminished the economic power of her new spouse's first wife, since money now had to be given to Eleanor and her married children. The first wife took a job at a local store, but after several fights with Eleanor fled to Alice Springs. There she took a lover from another Aboriginal group. This eventuality is not uncommon. When the kangaroo remarriage is polygynous, the most recent wife often pressures her new husband to reject his other wives, and pressures the other wives to leave the husband, and so kangaroo remarriages tend to become monogamous. But kangaroo husbands generally live where their wife has established strong networks of support. Women's attachment to their home (country, village) therefore has far-reaching consequences for residency of kangaroo marriages and maintaining their coresidential kin group's identity.

Just how powerful this attachment can be is illustrated in the case of a union between one of Eleanor's sisters, Frances, and a Warlpiri man who was already married and living 600 kilometers away in the settlement of Lajamanu. Frances began her new union by moving to Lajamanu, where she resided with her co-wife. During the five months she was gone from Yuendumu, Frances lost her ritual, economic, and political status, as well as status among her kin whom she abandoned. Frances's relatives, in particular her sisters, wanted her to return, so they would not lose her economic, emotional, and ritual support.

The pressure put on Frances to return took the form of "singing." Six of her sisters "sang" her at dusk, so that her *pirlirra*, (the spirit located in the stomach) would feel an irresistible desire to return from Lajamanu. Frances learned of the "singing" and felt she had to return to avoid accusations of selfishness and the even greater risk that sorcery could be employed to kill her. It was unclear whether someone would use sorcery against her because she entered a kangaroo marriage or because, living in another village, she was unable to provide care and assistance for her Yuendumu relatives. Ultimately, with the help of her sisters and her Yuendumu brothers-in-law, she convinced her new husband to live at Yuendumu. The couple established their camp next to Eleanor's. In so doing, Frances and Eleanor attempted to replicate the intimacy and support they enjoyed when they lived in the same *jilimi*.

Kangaroo unions such as Frances's illustrate the erosion of polygyny and a reduction in the virilocal residence pattern that often characterized presettlement remarriages. My research shows that most of the women who remarried men not living at Yuendumu returned with their husbands. Subsequently, their husbands tried to participate in the ritual life of Yuendumu. Frances's husband, already an important ritual leader, was readily accepted, and in 1989 he was one of the main Yuendumu ritual leaders. Husbands who have not yet established their reputation as ritual leaders before moving to Yuendumu, may struggle to gain ritual prestige and economic status.

There are certain types of unions that have not gained acceptance at Yuendumu. These include liaisons that bring women together with men from taboo subsections (sons, fathers, sons-in-law, brothers) and relationships with non-Warlpiri men not accepted by the women's relatives. Those widows who live with a man from a taboo category or from another Aboriginal group generally leave the settlement. They lose the vital economic, political, and ritual support of their Yuendumu relatives. The latter say quite publicly that they do not care for those relatives who choose to enter such relationships. To regain their assistance, women must live at Yuendumu in a *jilimi* or with a man accepted by members of their coresidential kin group. Most widows, however, avoid the problems altogether, by choosing not to remarry.

WIDOWHOOD AFTER SETTLEMENT

Widows started to live in single households after sedentarization (Hamilton 1981:75-76; Bell 1980; Peterson 1986:139). Peterson (1986:139) notes that the size and number of widow's camps in contemporary Central Desert settlements were prompted by sedentarization. This suggests that there were single women who were able to organize themselves within large female single households. Today, at Yuendumu, there are six principal *jilimi* (women's single quarters) mostly inhabited by widows. There are between three to twenty widows living in the *jilimi* in shelters between five and fifteen meters long. The *jilimi* are generally located some hundred yards from married people's camps and houses, or single men's quarters.

Today, a Warlpiri widow has two options in the matter of residence. She can live with her married children or stay in a *jilimi*, the geographic locus of identity for mature women. The choice carries many economic and emotional implications.

Widows who decide to live with married children generally do so to provide care to their children and grandchildren. For example, when violence and alcohol abuse are present in a marriage, or when children marry "too young" and have children, the widowed mother of one of the spouses may temporarily reside in the troubled household. By living with her married child, the widow distributes a substantial part of her pension (generally three-quarters of the fortnightly payment) to her children and grandchildren. When the tensions or problems diminish or go away, the widow generally returns to the *jilimi*. Once installed there, she enjoys a measure of flexibility that is impossible to maintain while living with her married children. The *jilimi* enables widows to minimize pressures from relatives, but does not diminish their role as nurturer.

Bell (1983:110) argues that the *jilimi* allows women to form a united and autonomous group from which other Aboriginal people "drew not only economic support but also a sense of purpose, strength and knowledge." At Yuendumu, widows also receive help from one another and the households of nearby married couples. Widows provide a crucial benefit to their children, grandchildren, and siblings; a support that their remarriage can erode. The widow who seeks a new husband is often considered by other *jilimi* women, and often her own children, to be derelict in her responsibilities to family members. Even if children, grandchildren, and siblings live in another settlement, a widow is said "to be free of a husband," and can travel more frequently than a married woman to care and provide for them.

Widowhood allows a woman to distribute her pension to her children, grandchildren, and siblings without the burden of supporting in-laws. Furthermore, by staying single, a mature widow has more time to devote to the few cash-producing activities that the settlement offers. These include the production of batik cloth, acrylic paintings and artifacts, and various school activities. (Card games can also figure into the redistribution of cash, albeit in an unpredictable manner.) Toward the end of her life, or when she is prematurely handicapped, a widow will pass along much of her pension to her care-givers, who are usually children, younger siblings, and deceased-husband's sisters.

This process was clearly displayed in the circumstances surrounding the redistribution of Martha's widow pension. In 1988 it had been over ten years since she had lost her husband. She was living in a *jilimi* with two of her sisters, three close daughters, five close mothers, and three fathers' sisters. She shared her food with these women, played cards with her close relatives, and sold paintings to art galleries and museums with her sisters and daughters.

Her married sisters regularly gave her food and money. She also received money and tobacco from her brothers-in-law. (A brother-in-law cannot refuse tobacco to his sister-in-law or his wife, and vice versa). When she ran out of money and food and could not get assistance from women of her *jilimi*, Martha visited her children, her close sisters, and close mothers who lived in other *jilimi* or married camps. Occasionally, she received money from her lover.

Martha's own children and grandchildren come to her camp, four or five times a week, to receive a hot breakfast or lunch. Martha expects them to give her money if they win card games or when they receive their unemployment benefits. If women from the same *jilimi* fail to share with one another, the ongoing coresidence and co-operation among them may be jeopardized. For example, one of Martha's close daughters, Long Susy, from the same *jilimi*, refused several times to give her money. One day Martha and Long Susy had a verbal fight in which they swore and insulted each other. A few days later, Long Susy moved to another *jilimi*. Soon, Long Susy complained that women in her new *jilimi* did not share with her. Subsequently, she visited Martha and apologized so she could return and live in their *jilimi*. In short, the inhabitants of a *jilimi* must continuously use diplomatic skills to preserve their autonomy, recognize the autonomy of other women, and share goods, money, and ritual knowledge to maintain harmony (see Myers 1982, 1986).

Sedentarization and the welfare economy have intensified the widows' role as nurturer (Collmann 1979:394-396). Though it has limited their accumulation of wealth, it makes them crucial social agents in the production and reproduction of Warlpiri social values and kinship identity, which also increases the pressures they face. For example, Long Susy's family fought among themselves over her widowhood and the issue of remarriage. An older brother and a father's sister wished Long Susy to remarry since such a union would provide her older brother with a new younger spouse of his own. However, other relatives (brothers, sisters, mothers, mothers' mothers, and mothers' mothers' brothers) helped Long Susy to rebuff her potential suitor because they feared that the remarriage would force Long Susy to leave the settlement and they would lose an active care-giver and ritual leader. Relatives, who traditionally played a crucial role in marriage and remarriage arrangements, successfully supported Long Susy in maintaining her widowhood. Why and how widowhood may be considered a preferable alternative

than intergroup remarriages, helps us understand the importance of mature widows' role in valorizing the identity of their coresidential kin groups (Brock 1989).

The involvement of men, usually the fathers, older brothers, and mother's brothers, in the modification or maintenance of a widow's status has changed. Maintaining widowhood, by its very nature denies a once-crucial role that men played as achievers in the arrangement of remarriages. Exactly how men have responded to this shift is difficult to assess since they are reluctant to describe the formal remarriage negotiations that take place during ceremonies restricted to men. It is important to note that in several instances men advocated remarriages that they knew would be rejected out of hand.

WIDOWHOOD AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SEXUALITY

That a large number of widows remain single by no means denies the possibility of sexual liaisons. Mature Warlpiri men and women do not believe that old age limits one's sexual attraction (see also Bell 1983). Today, both men and women, married and widowed, engage in sexual liaisons well into their early seventies.

Widows usually announce sexual intention during ritual performances. It is here that sexual desires are aroused and declared. The widow can declare her interest by rubbing her body with animal fat or, in a modern update, Johnson's Baby Oil, just prior to ceremonies; the gleam on her skin is considered beautiful and sexually suggestive. Other methods used by widows to show their sexual attributes include dying hair blonde or light brown, and wearing tight skirts instead of loose-fitting dresses or skirts. Certain dress colors (black and red) suggest knowledge and bright, fluorescent hues suggest youthfulness, and in combination indicate that a widow seeks a lover. The efforts to find a lover can also take place in the *jilimi*, where widows ask their relatives to "sing" certain body parts (belly, thighs, and vagina) so that these parts will enlarge and thus make the widows more appealing. When a specific male lover is sought, the widow asks a knowledgeable woman to perform a *yilpinji*, a love-magic ritual. The Warlpiri believe that such rituals are so powerful that they can provoke the transgression of the most forbidden of sexual taboos. For example, women have provided accounts of mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, or brothers and sisters engaging in taboo liaisons as a direct result of the *yilpinji*.

A middle-age widow seeking a lover often demonstrates that she is a good hunter and gatherer (*kuyu-pungu*). The skills required for hunting and gathering carry crucial social and ritual significance. Even though these activities now constitute less than 5 per cent of the Warlpiri diet (Young 1981). To demonstrate that she is *kuyu-pungu*, a widow may give part of her hunting or her gathering to the wife of the man whom she desires.

Most widows actively engage in the ritual, political, and social life of Yuendumu. A minority of widows, roughly one in seven, however, do not fully participate in the different activities of these domains. This group is not ostracized from the settlement as a consequence.

These latter widows say that if they remarry they not only lose their financial autonomy, but expose themselves to husbands' violence. They do not engage in sexual pursuit. As one widow explained, "They [widows who have sexual liaisons] are looking for trouble. I want to stay single. Men steal your money and beat you

up when they are drunk." These widows restrict caring to their children and grandchildren. The only ceremony in which they participate is the circumcision of their male grandchildren, when the boy is betrothed to a preferential spouse. On the surface such participation contradicts their own denial of traditional Warlpiri arranged unions; that is, betrothing a grandson in just such a marriage (Tonkinson 1990). Their participation in the circumcision ceremonies indicates more their concern for the well-being of their grandchild, as a Warlpiri man still cannot achieve full personhood if he is not circumcised.¹²

CONCLUSION

Although widowhood has been perceived by some anthropologists as a temporary status before sedentarization, women did have a say in their subsequent unions. Some widows decided to remain single, cared for themselves and their close relatives, and enjoyed the support of their married children. They had access to men's goods and services even if they did not marry. Data from other prestate societies also demonstrate that marriage was not the sole economic institution within which women had access to men's services and products (Fishburne-Collier 1988:16-17).

Although anthropologists such as Bell (1980, 1983), suggest that sedentarization and the male-dominated colonial society weakened women's status, I have sought to show that Warlpiri contemporary life is not expressed only in terms of men's domains versus women's domains, but that the bases of both men's and women's identity primarily lie in their joint membership to a coresidential kin group. Men and women cannot be seen as independent (cf. Bell 1983) or equal when pursuing activities separately (cf. Hamilton 1980, 1981a) but rather as interdependent (Berndt 1965, 1974, 1980).

Focusing on widows' motivations to remain single or to remarry in the contemporary context helps us understand the restructuring of social relations between members of coresidential kin groups and the changing nature of conjugality. I have shown how men and women can adapt customary patterns of alliances by entering kangaroo marriages.

The role of a mature widow as provider of goods and knowledge has been strengthened by recent developments in the dynamics of sedentarization, the welfare economy that governs Yuendumu, and the problems that afflict young Warlpiri Aborigines. Mature widows, in remote settlement such as Yuendumu, are not as disrupted, for example, by alcohol, prison sentences, and unemployment as are their children. Mature widows have an important set of daily responsibilities around which to structure their lives. They are engaged in maintaining an ethos of sharing and self-reliance (Woodburn 1982:438-439; Myers 1986:253-255; Tonkinson 1988:545-556), the identity of their coresidential kin group, and in a fight for the survival of their world.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Columbia seminar, "Research and Method," in 1989 and at Chags 6 in 1990. Grants from the Department of Anthropology, Australian National University, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies supported my research. I thank Fred Myers, Nicolas Peterson, Harriet Rosenberg, Robert Tonkinson, Isobel White, and David Trigger for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts, and Allen Kurzweil

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2. I use the word remarriage here to denote a privileged union or a subsequent marriage as defined by Levi-Strauss (1969:120).
3. Two essay collections also provide stimulating discussions on matters of widowhood; Potash (1986) and Lopata (1987).
4. At the request of the Warlpiri, I have used fictitious first personal names.
5. *Jardiwarnpa* is a complex ceremonial cycle during which conflicts are staged and resolved, widows given new spouses, tabus lifted, etc.
6. Other women told me that such beatings were not common, but the threat was always present.
7. Meet, in Aboriginal English, refers to sexual intercourse.
8. Kaberry (1939) discusses how the greater frequency of residence with the husband's group than with the wife's group put women at a disadvantage.
9. Lubras is a term that used to designate Aboriginal women. Today, it has a pejorative connotation.
10. The origin of the term refers to the casualness of kangaroo choosing any other kangaroo to mate.
11. Their mother's remarriage has also direct implication in their participation the ritual life of the settlement. Eleanor's consort encouraged her sons to attend ceremonial activities with him and provided them with the necessary support they lacked without a "father."
12. Until recently, a marriage could not take place if a man was not subincised. Today, many men have sex and enter unions before being subincised.

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