AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES: AN ADOLESCENT MOTHER AND HER FAMILY

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In what follows I present a very detailed description of a day in the life of an adolescent mother and her family. I have two purposes in presenting this description in such detail. First, I want to convey something of the actual field experience; I want, insofar as this is possible, for you to hear and see what I heard and saw. In presenting such a finely detailed description I also hope to encourage you to imagine what I might not have heard and seen, or to which I did not pay attention. This description is based on extensive field notes. As soon as possible after any conversation or observation I wrote down what I had heard or seen, consciously attempting to note only the actual words that had fallen on my ears or the actual position, postures, and movements that had come before my eyes. But we must always acknowledge that hearing and seeing are more active than passive experiences. And no doubt I have structured the sights and sounds that I report in these pages. You are also challenged to think about the possible effects of this selectivity on any conclusions we might draw about life in an Australian Aboriginal community from reading this description.

An important step in understanding the specificity of my vision is to explain what I was doing in an Australian Aboriginal community in the first place. The description to be presented here is based on materials collected during nine months in 1981. In that year I returned to the community that I call Mangrove as a post-doctoral fellow on the Harvard Adolescence Project. Directed by Beatrice and John Whiting and Irven DeVore, this coordinated cross-cultural project has produced descriptions of adolescence in seven societies. My contribution is to be found in the book *Aboriginal Adolescence: Maidenhood in an Australian Community* and a series of related papers.

Because anthropologists had paid relatively little attention to adolescence since Margaret Mead’s 1928 work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, those of us on the project were encouraged to look at a broad array of topics related to this human life stage. We prepared to look at adolescent cognition, emotions, and social interactions with adults and peers. But people are not passive objects of research. They too have theories about human development, and in the case of Mangrove, concerns about their adolescent daughters. It was a series of these theories and concerns that focused my interest in adolescence in Aboriginal Australia: the causes and consequences of changing marriage practices and their effects on adolescent lives.

The adolescents of Mangrove are the descendants of nomadic hunters and gatherers who lived in a part of southeast Arnhem Land where this settlement is located today. Although some
Europeans have been present in the general area since the early 1900s, the history of Mangrove’s people, unlike the vast majority of Australian Aborigines, does not include the same degree of ecological and social disruption associated with colonization. Even today their land is far from the centers of white population. It has also been part of the Arnhem Land Reserve since 1931.

This is not to say, however, that violence has not been done to the way of life of this Aboriginal population. Mangrove was established as a Protestant mission in the early 1950s. Today most, if not all, aspects of settlement life bear the imprint of these founders and their culture; marriage is one of these. According to journals, reports, and interviews, early mission goals were primarily evangelical. But the mission also had a charter from the Commonwealth to prepare Aboriginal people for “assimilation” into the larger society. As a part of this program the missionaries discouraged or forbade three practices central to Aboriginal marriage politics: infant or child bestowal, polygyny, and a premenarcheal marriage age for girls. From the perspective of adults today, early marriage for girls once facilitated the arranged unions of partners defined as correct or “straight,” for the younger girls didn’t resist the plans of their elders as they might at a later age. At the same time that this practice was discouraged, Western ideas about “love” and “choice” were introduced by missionaries, schoolteachers, and forms of popular culture like the movies and country western music that have become so popular in recent years.

The messages about “love” and “choice” have tended to be received differently by adults and adolescents. Adults, still regarded by many as responsible for adolescent marriages, do not necessarily embrace these changes; adolescents, who in the past were the objects of adult transactions, generally do. Hence an intergenerational contest over arranged marriage has developed. In this contest, or so I have argued, premarital pregnancy and single motherhood are, in large part, consequences of adolescent resistance to arranged marriage.

Since the late 1970s Mangrove has been governed by elected Aboriginal officials assisted and supervised by various agencies of the larger Australian society. Today the settlement’s education, health, housing, and work programs are supported almost exclusively by funds from the Australian government. People still hunt, fish, and gather, but wage labor and welfare provide necessary income.
In 1981 this small community, located on a half-mile expanse of sand dunes just yards from the sea, was composed of two neighborhoods. One, known as “the village,” was occupied predominantly by the 420 or so Aborigines on the settlement; the other, known as “the mission area,” was occupied predominantly by “Europeans.” This latter group, numbering around forty-five people, consisted largely of missionaries and schoolteachers. It also included one or two electricians, plumbers, mechanics, pilots, nurses, and accountants—workers who tended to stay but a year or two. The houses on the settlement ranged from one-room shacks to larger dwellings with multiple rooms, baths, and kitchens. At the settlement’s center were a school, health clinic, office, meeting hall, church, garage, and shop.

It is down the sand hill from the settlement’s center, in front of a cluster of three small houses, each consisting of one or two small rooms not much more than eight feet to a side, that this description of an adolescent mother and her family begins. The first of these is the house of Rosalind and her husband Guwagiyn, sometimes called Greenleaf. This is also the home of their ten-year-old son Teddy, their fifteen-year-old daughter Nora, and their fourteen-month-old granddaughter Leni, Nora’s child. Just a few steps across the sand is the house of Nora’s elder sister, Rosalind’s twenty-four-year-old daughter Dory, her husband, and their three-year-old daughter Ramona. Another few steps to one side of Rosalind’s house is the third of these small residences, the home of Nora’s elder brother, a man of thirty years, his twenty-two-year-old wife, their three-year-old son Donny, and their baby boy.

**MORNING**

By 8:00 A.M. in this near-equatorial realm the sun is already high in the sky. In its warmth, three women sit together around their breakfast fire. The women are arguing in low but emphatic tones. Rosalind, who is sitting in a turquoise-colored plastic chair, addresses her two daughters. They sit in the sand within three or four feet of her. “You two never work for me. You never get
wood or water or cook tucker [food]. Only me, I do all the work. When you get up early don’t look to me for your tucker.”

“You two blame me,” says Nora. “It’s not me to blame.”

“Well, you live here,” retorts her elder sister, the twenty-four-year-old Dory.

Rosalind continues, “You two are going to work for me and when I say fillem up wood you are gonna fillem up my wood and…. ”

But Nora and Dory have ceased to pay attention to their mother. Soon afterward, Nora says, “Rosalind, look at the young girl [adolescent],” pointing to her daughter Leni, who is standing and swaying her hips from side to side.

“Rock and roll,” responds Rosalind.

The three women have breakfasted on tea and damper, a kind of bread made from white flour, baking powder, and water. Rosalind had cooked it the night before, setting one loaf aside wrapped in a clean diaper when she made damper for the evening meal. The billy tea, brewed when they awoke, now sits by the dying fire. Sitting on the porch about eight feet away from the women is Greenleaf. With him are Donny, Ramona, and Leni. Greenleaf has been singing to the children. Now he calls, “Rosalind, tea. I want tea.”

“I’m not your mother,” Rosalind replies, but tells Nora what Greenleaf wants. Standing, Nora bends to pour some of the tepid liquid out of the billy can into an enamel cup. This she takes to her father. Then she picks up her daughter and returns to sit with her mother and sister. Ramona follows behind her and joins the group of women. When Leni fumbles at her zipper, Nora removes a breast from the cotton fabric and feeds the child for about a minute. As Leni nurses, Nora holds one of the child’s little legs and waves it so that it repeatedly hits Ramona, who is now lying in front of the two young women. After Leni stops nursing, Nora explores her mouth with her finger. “Another tooth, maybe?” Face to face with her daughter she opens her own mouth wide as though to encourage Leni to do the same. After continuing this for a minute or so she announces, “Two more.”

At this moment Nora’s younger brother Teddy appears from around the corner of the house and takes a seat on the porch. Rosalind looks at him and says, “You go to school; the police are gonna come.”

“Why police?” Greenleaf asks.

Rosalind replies, “Because my family aren’t helping me. I am
by myself,” perhaps alluding to the fact or her feeling that no one else ever sends Teddy to school. Teddy remains in his seat. With Leni in her arms, Nora gets up and moves to the shade of the porch where she sits within three or four feet of her father and brother. With a metal stick that he has found in the sand, Donny begins to poke at the holes in a broken wall board and bang on the side of the house. Greenleaf grumbles but Donny continues his play. Greenleaf now says loudly that it’s “too noisy” and Rosalind, still in her chair by the fire says, “Dhan-gara”—Nora’s Aboriginal name—“stop Donny.” Nora looks at Donny, who is about a foot out of her reach. She does nothing. Teddy, who can reach Donny, takes him by the upper arm and guides him over to Nora, but Donny pulls away and resumes his poking and beating.

It is close to nine o’clock now. Rosalind looks at the sun and asks of no one in particular if the “hospital” is still open. Dory says it is. Rosalind rises and, picking up Leni, sets off in the direction of Mangrove’s health clinic, just a few hundred yards up a sand hill from the small house.

**THE ETHNOGRAPHER’S CRAFT**

This account will continue, taking Nora throughout most of a day. But before I proceed, I want you to understand that it is best regarded as a fabrication. Its coherence is an artifact created, among other things, by the way I have ordered disparate observations and accounts, condensing the events of many days into one. It is also important for you to understand that this description is an artifice of selection. Encountering Nora on the settlement, I made observations of her companions, locations, and activities. I also noted her interactions with her mother, daughter, and others on the many occasions that she visited me. Nora and I conversed both during formal interviews and in informal conversations. Rosalind and I spoke together, often at great length, on countless occasions both formal and informal. On what basis then, you must ask, have I selected material to profile this adolescent and her family? My answer must be on artistic or intuitive grounds. If I had coded the content of all my observations and other notes, I could have calculated which of Nora’s locations, companions, activities, and actions were most frequent and based a description on these. But for a variety of reasons my observations were never made at random,
and so even this analytical strategy could be questioned. Most importantly, would such a description tell us much about who Nora is, or was, at the age of fifteen?

Instead, I have presented fragments of what I have observed or been told that strike me as interesting. And these fragments are interesting to me because I think that they provide clues to the questions that I have about adolescent girls at Mangrove, especially about those who become mothers at what strikes me as an early age. Often these questions were provoked by the theories and concerns of Aboriginal women. As often they arose from an amalgam of my own theories and concerns about teenage sexuality, parenting, and the importance of childhood experience. What, I asked myself, was it like to be an unmarried mother at the age of fifteen? What would the early experiences of a child of such a mother be? And how might these affect a child? What are the particular difficulties and advantages of early child rearing at Mangrove, and what factors might exacerbate or ameliorate these? I also want you to know that, with respect to my selection of observations, statements, and events, I have attempted to paint both a balanced and complex picture. Thus I include, among other things, acts that I think exemplify both defiance and compliance, sloth and energy, kindness and cruelty, love and indifference.

For the sake of the narrative flow, its interest, and for the protection of this family’s privacy, I have modified some of the particulars in this description. For example, Nora examined Leni’s mouth for new teeth on a beach some miles from Mangrove, and Rosalind harangued her daughters about work one afternoon when we were all visiting an outstation. Throughout this description I use quotation marks to indicate dialogue that I either heard or heard about. Though I have attempted to reproduce the words that people used as far as possible, keep in mind the selectivity of recall and note that much of this dialogue has been translated and edited. In filling out the details of reported behavior, I have relied on my knowledge of Aboriginal etiquette and highly stereotyped actions like asking for cigarettes and making tea. All dates, ages, temperatures, substances, objects, and colors are accurate to the best of my knowledge. Distances are usually estimates. Any emotion or sensation attributed to an actor in this narrative is one they reported having. In the pages that follow I shall also attribute certain “thoughts” to Nora and some of her family members. Clearly, no one can really know what another is thinking.
My presentation of statements made by or about a character as their thoughts is merely a stylistic device to aid the flow of this description.

Some of this narrative is based on accounts of events that I did not witness; some occurred when I was not present at Mangrove. Clearly a report of an event, like a marriage or a fight, can present only one version of many possibilities. In some cases I have been able to compare accounts of the same event from different people, abstracting the common components of their texts for these pages. In other cases, however, only one person told me of an event, or element of an event, that I deem important for this description. I have only included such information when it came from a source likely to know “the facts of the case” and who had at least no discernible reason to misrepresent them. At a minimum we can assume that these are the stories that the people of Mangrove tell about themselves and these, at least in their forms and issues, if not in their precise details, tell us something about their conceptual structuring of human interaction.

The experience of a people is not just an acquaintance with their thoughts and actions, but also with their physical environment of light and temperature, sound and movement. Here, I have attempted to reflesh the skeleton of my notes with memories of my own sensations, providing further hints of what it is like to live on the edge of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the middle of the dry season.

These remarks on the ethnographer’s craft now come to an end and I return to a day in the life of an adolescent mother and her family.

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**MORNING TEA**

Rosalind returns home from the clinic. Nora’s elder brother sits by the now-rekindled fire, eating damper and drinking tea. He will go back to work at the end of the morning tea break. His wife, Donny’s mother, sits on the porch, her year-old son on her lap. She faces a group of card players, eight or nine young men and women, sitting together in the shade of a tree. Dory is by the side of her own house, washing clothes under a water tap. Greenleaf has gone to the beach and Teddy has disappeared.
Spotting Nora among the group of young men and women playing cards, Rosalind walks up to the game. She puts Leni down and tells Nora to take her. But Leni ignores Nora and whimpers, tugging at Rosalind’s dress as though she wants to be picked up again. Rosalind tells Nora to come. Nora indicates that she won’t, or perhaps she will, but later. Her mother tells her to take a sheet and a billy can down to the beach. But Nora remains seated within the circle of card players and Rosalind with Leni again in her arms returns back over the fifty or sixty feet of sand to her house. Rosalind is sitting with Leni in the shade of the porch when Nora returns some fifteen minutes later.

Rosalind and Nora likely see Marguerite, another adolescent girl, walking toward them. But they are careful not to look in her direction as convention demands. They continue with their conversation as she approaches. Speaking now in the Australian language of Mangrove, now in Kriol (an English-based Creole), and now in an Aboriginal version of English, Rosalind is telling Nora a story of her days at a settlement about one hundred miles southwest, where many of Mangrove’s adult population spent their early years. Rosalind lived there from early childhood until her marriage to Guwagijn at the age of fourteen. “If you get a needle in your vein it is going to be just like blood and go into your heart and then you are going to die.” Thus begins her story of getting a sewing needle in her hand and being sent to the Katherine Hospital to have it removed.

Nora seems to be listening intently. “Can’t you go like this and stop that needle?” she asks, placing her fingers around her upper forearm like a tourniquet.

“Wari [no],” replies Rosalind. The two now look up as Marguerite arrives at the porch, announcing that she has been to the shop. She sits down. “Any smoke?” inquires Rosalind. Marguerite takes a pack of cigarettes from her pocket, extracts two and hands one to Rosalind. The other she lights for herself.

The women sit, smoke, and talk. Marguerite and Nora discuss the “wrong side” affairs that several “young girls” have recently begun. Next they turn to the subject of money. Rosalind observes that maybe checks are coming today. It is Tuesday and one of Tillair’s biweekly flights from Darwin, the Northern Territory’s capital, is due shortly after eleven. Since she and her husband were permanently separated some months ago, Nora has begun to receive around $165.00 of welfare benefits every fortnight.
Guwagiyn receives an invalid’s pension and as the wife of a pensioned invalid, Rosalind receives a fortnightly check of $106.80. She also receives a monthly check of $36.90 for the two of her seven children, Teddy and his thirteen-year-old brother, who are still regarded by the government as dependents. Nora says that if her money comes perhaps she’ll buy an electric fan she has been talking about.

Rosalind now wonders aloud whether or not the office will cash the checks. Several people have passed along the news that it is closed and will remain so until the person who smashed a Council Toyota’s windscreen and several louvers in an office window “owns up” and pays for the damage.

Rosalind returns to her story of life at the other settlement, telling the girls about her work in the communal dining hall. “We got up, maybe at seven, before it was light, and had our breakfast and started working, maybe at eight, just when the sun was coming up.” Rosalind goes on to say how she and her co-workers made between “nine hundred” and “one thousand” dampers every morning.

“How many people were cooking?” asks Nora.

“Maybe twelve or ten,” answers her mother, adding that they didn’t get paid for the work they did.

A Tillair twin-engine Fokker flies overhead. The women pause in their talk to look. Yes, it is Tillair, not a plane chartered for some private purpose. Soon they can see several trucks leaving the area of the office and heading out the road toward the airstrip. Marguerite says that she is going up to the office and leaves. Just then Rosalind’s nineteen-year-old son and another young man walk over. The young man comes up on the porch where Rosalind and Nora are sitting, and drops several bills, at least one of which is twenty dollars, on the floor in front of Rosalind. She picks up the money and puts it in her pocket, murmuring in a way that sounds positive to my ears. He also hands Nora some bills. She smiles at him as she puts them in her pocket. Another teenage girl who has joined the group says to him, “Give me ten dollars.” He ignores her. The little group talks for a few minutes. People are saying that a boy broke the Toyota windscreen with a shanghigh—a slingshot—in the act of trying to bring down a crow. No one has yet owned up to breaking the office window and the “Office Mob” has shut the office. The teenage girl tries again. “Give me five dollars.”

“You can’t ask him,” advises Rosalind. “He has to give it
himself.” Soon afterwards, the two young men depart. They sleep elsewhere but take their meals at Rosalind’s fire.

Rosalind now prepares to join her husband at the beach. She collects her things: a sheet, two billy cans, a water bottle, a package of tea, and a bag of sugar. As she sets off, Donny follows. His mother has joined the group of card players. The two of them, grandmother and grandson, walk slowly down the road in the direction of the beach. After they have walked about forty yards and are just in front of the church, Donny begins to whimper to be carried. Rosalind tells him that she is not going to carry him, but he whimpers more and plucks at her dress. After a few seconds of this she shifts her load, picks him up, and places him on her hip. Then just a few yards farther down the road she exclaims, “I forgot my tucker!” She puts the child down and turns in the direction of the house. Donny sits down in the road and begins to cry. Rosalind takes a step toward the house, then looks at the crying child. At this moment Nora appears by the side of the house. Rosalind calls to her to bring the “box.” About a minute later Nora appears with a 215-gram box of Vesta Beef Curry and Rice, which she hands to her mother. Rosalind takes it, picks up Donny, and continues on her way. Nora returns to the house, picks up Leni, and walks up to the office.

Up at the office a number of people have gathered. On the lawn between the office and council house men are standing and talking in groups. On the other side of the office a dozen or so women have collected. Many have babies in their arms or toddlers on their hips. A group of three older women sit in the sand, four younger women lean against the fence rail, facing the activity in front of the office. Between the men and women is the siren tower. At its base a dozen of Mangrove’s “European” residents exchange greetings as they wait for the mail and supplies that the plane has brought. A red pickup truck, a yellow Toyota, and an orange Land Rover have pulled up in front of the office; Aboriginal and European members of the Office Mob begin to unload today’s air cargo from the vehicles.

As Nora moves toward the group of women she is joined by Gerry, an adolescent girl of seventeen. Gerry is wearing a Hawaiian-style shirt over the standard sleeveless cotton dress of Mangrove’s female population. Gerry walks up and kisses Leni,
who begins to cry but breaks off almost as soon as she starts. Gerry
begins to say, “Leni, Leni, Leni,” and, first with her left hand and
then with her right, makes a V with her first two fingers, jerking
them back toward her shoulder. It is one of several hand signs that
mean “fuck” or “fucking.” Leni mimics her, and both Gerry and
Nora laugh.

When they were “little girls,” Gerry was one of Nora’s best
friends. They used to hang around together, swim at the beach,
play hide-and-seek in a tree house, pick up cashews, and tease the
security patrols, running and hiding when the patrols came to
chase them. Now Nora’s very best friend is Vera, because they
used to sleep in the same house and go places together. “Vera
doesn’t leave me. When I go she comes and follows me. That’s why
we are best friends.” Friends like Nora and Vera walk together,
talk about other people, share books, and read together. They carry
messages to one another’s boyfriends, and take each other’s pho-
tos. Nora’s friends also help her with Leni by carrying the child.

Dory and her daughter Ramona stroll over to the two girls
just as a council official comes out of the office and announces to
the group of waiting women, “No checks for you, Mother Mob.”
Following this announcement, Nora, with Gerry at her side,
walks over to the shop. The two go to the tobacco counter, where
Nora spends part of her money on peanuts, processed cheese
sticks, and candy. She then enters the main section of the store
and selects several cans of Coke, a bag of oranges, a bag of cook-
ies, a tin of corned beef, and some potato chips. Gerry also buys
candy at the tobacco counter and selects three or four cans of soft
drink. The two girls stand in line, Nora with Leni on her right hip,
her groceries in a basket in her left hand. Twice Gerry takes a
piece of candy from her pocket and places it in Nora’s mouth. At
the register, as the price of her drinks is totaled, Gerry asks Nora
for money and Nora puts a ten-cent piece into her hand.

Not long ago one of the shop workers had quit. The manager
had asked Nora if she would like a job, but she had refused, saying,
“I don’t like to work.” Nora had worked at the shop briefly when
Leni was very small, but her husband had been “too jealous.” So
she had quit.

_MIDDAY_
Shortly before noon, Nora leaves the shop, parts from Gerry, and with Leni on her right hip and her grocery bag in her left hand, returns home. Teddy is there. She sets Leni and the bag on the porch, then unpacks the food, giving her daughter some peanuts, a cheese stick, and a can of Coke. She gives Teddy a can of Coca Cola and a bag of potato chips. He says he wants more. “That’s enough for you,” she responds.

When Leni has eaten, Nora gathers up her daughter and the groceries and starts off for the beach. There she finds her family gathered under one of the tall coconut palms planted in the early years of the settlement. Rosalind and Dory are sitting together. As Nora joins them, Rosalind looks up and says, “Here’s Leni.” About twenty yards away Ramona and Donny are playing in the shallow water of the gulf, which, even at high tide, is no more than two or three feet deep for at least a quarter-mile from shore. Nora sits. Taking the can of corned beef from the bag she hands it to her father. He moves to a spot a dozen feet away from the women. Nora puts her head in her mother’s lap. “Delouse me,” she says, and Rosalind begins to search through her hair for lice using her fingers and a short wooden stick, each end of which is carved to a dull point especially for this purpose.

Suddenly, Dory says, “Dhangara, Leni guna.” Leni is squatting by Dory, just about to defecate. Nora remains as she is. Dory calls her name again. A few seconds later Nora gets up and leads Leni about ten feet away from the group and sits in the sand with her. Nothing happens for a minute or two. “Good girl, I’m waiting for you,” she says. Rosalind and Dory laugh. After another minute or two, Leni defecates, then takes a step or two away from Nora and waves. Nora waves back. Leni makes her way down to the water’s edge where the other children are playing. Nora returns to her mother and Dory, saying to her sister as she returns her head to her mother’s lap, “Your daughter shits, too.”

“But a long way,” Dory replies. With her head in her mother’s lap Nora cannot see Leni. Rosalind appears to be watching the child, however.

The three women sit like this for some time, long enough for Nora to seem to sleep. Suddenly Rosalind says, “Dhangara, you look!” Nora jerks up, looks at the children, and goes over to them. They have all been examining something at the water’s edge and
now Leni has a cluster of seaweed in her hands. Nora takes the seaweed from Leni and hits her. The child begins to cry. Rosalind calls out, “Catchem.” Nora picks up the crying child, carries her up the beach, and hands her to her mother. Rosalind holds Leni on her lap and talks to her, and soon the child’s crying stops. Nora lies down on her back about two feet from her mother and daughter. Leni remains with her grandmother for a few minutes more then moves over to Nora. She sits on her mother’s chest, pulls at her front zipper, and hits at her head and face. “You are hurting me,” says Nora, pushing the child away with her hand. Leni turns away and plays with Ramona, who has now joined the group. Five minutes later, however, Leni turns back to her mother, crying. Rosalind says, “Dhangara, she’s crying.” Leni stops crying on her own. A moment after she stops, Nora says to her, “You go to bijaja [mother’s father], you run,” indicating her father, who is still sitting apart from the women. But Leni just begins to cry again. “I wanta sleep,” says Nora. “You sleep,” she says to Leni, who now, still crying, comes and lies by her mother’s side. Nora gives the child her breast and lets her suck as she wants.

It angers Rosalind and other family members when Nora doesn’t respond quickly to Leni’s crying. Rosalind understands that some of Nora’s treatment of her daughter is due to what people regard as the normal lack of “sense” of a young mother. She also thinks that Nora has been treating Leni more harshly since her husband left her and withdrew his interest and support from their child.

However, her mother’s understanding has not always saved Nora from the consequences of such socially unacceptable behavior. Just recently she had left Leni at the tiny house in Rosalind’s care and had gone off to talk and play cards with some other adolescent girls. Leni had begun to cry and Rosalind had sent Teddy to get Nora. She returned, but as she did she was swearing, perhaps frustrated at being interrupted in her leisure. Upon hearing this, her older brother, who was at the house, armed himself with an ax and a rock.11 Nora grabbed Leni and Rosalind intervened, telling her son not to throw the rock because Leni could be hit. Nora was able to barricade herself in the house until the young man could be restrained by someone who took hold of his arms. This gave Rosalind a chance to tell her daughter, “You run away to save your life.” Taking Leni, Nora did, hiding somewhere away from home during the night. She arrived at my door at quarter past six the
next morning, limping from a fall she had sustained while running away.

As the morning passes the tide retreats, leaving stretches of the sand dry. At low tide it is easy to walk the eighth of a mile or so to the deep channel the river has cut into the gulf’s bottom, which is an excellent fishing spot. Two women in their fifties and sixties walk out to the channel, buckets and fishing lines in their hands. Rosalind has not brought her fishing line. “Get a line,” she says to Nora, but Nora doesn’t move.

Rosalind asks Dory to get wood so that she can “boil tea.” Dory complies and soon brings a small load of dry wood that she has collected in the tall grass adjacent to where they are sitting. Rosalind piles this in a seemingly careless heap, stuffs a bit of dry beach grass amongst it, and with one match soon has a good fire going in spite of a stiff breeze coming off the water. She fills the billy with three or four inches of water from the bottle that she has brought with her, throws in a handful of dry tea, and sets it on the fire. It comes to a boil quickly and she removes it, fills the rest of the billy with water and pours in a cup or more of sugar. Now the tea is ready. She puts the Vesta Beef Curry and Rice in the other billy, adds water and puts it on the fire to cook. Rosalind didn’t bring cups, but Dory did. As Rosalind, Dory, and Nora eat, Rosalind feeds Donny and Dory feeds Ramona from her portion. As they are eating, Nora’s thirteen-year-old brother and his fourteen-year-old male companion, with whom he lives, appear from out of the tall grass. The boys have been hunting birds on their lunch break from school. With bows and arrows (recently introduced by European schoolteachers) in their hands, they come up to the women sitting in the sand around the fire. Nora’s brother stands directly behind her and loudly says, “Beef, beef, beef.” Nora thrusts the piece she is holding up at him. “Here, take beef,” she says in a voice that sounds loud and angry to my ears. He takes it and shortly afterward the boys leave, walking along the beach in the direction of the village.

Greenleaf is asleep. The rest of the family will soon join him in this activity, stretched out in the sand by the cooling fire in the shade of the coconut tree. Rosalind tells Nora to take her washing to Vicky’s machine. With Leni on her hip, Nora returns to the little house to get her dirty sheets and clothes, then walks the quarter-mile or so to the anthropologist’s house.

With Leni on her hip, a bundle of dirty laundry under her arm,
and her brother Teddy by her side, Nora arrives at my door. Upon knocking and hearing my invitation to enter, she comes in to the main room of the house. With yellow walls, orange cabinets, and maroon doors, it is twice the size of Rosalind’s house. With its refrigerator, stove, sink, table, five purple plastic chairs, two coral-colored plastic chairs, and a bed covered with a blue and green plaid blanket, it is luxurious in comparison. The ceiling fan is turning, but it is still hotter than in the shade of the coconut tree. Nora tells me she has come to do “washing” and upon my acknowledgment of her intention, proceeds into the utility room of the house. Emerging several minutes later she takes a five-dollar bill from her pocket and asks me to keep it for her. I take the money and put it in an envelope. She then tells me there was a good picture last night, *Brave Eagle*.

“What tribe was he?” I ask.

“Maybe Apache.” As the washing machine sloshes in the other room and I return to my notebook, Nora colors in a coloring book lying on the table, plays a music cassette or two on my tape recorder, nurses Leni, then sleeps with her daughter by her side.

Soon, however, she awakens and goes to her washing. She wrings it through the electric wringer, then takes it to the line outside the house. When she returns to lie once again beside her sleeping daughter, Teddy, who has been in and out, doing a bit of this and a bit of that during the visit, exits. As he walks down the stairs, he calls, “Dhangara!” and holds up a five-dollar bill.

“He stole my money!” Nora exclaims as she leaps from the bed and runs down the stairs after her brother. She catches him and hits him. “Where is it?” He has dropped it under the stair. I come back inside and seconds later so does Nora, running. As she slams the door, a rock hits it. “He stole my money!” She has the bill in her hand. Teddy throws a few rocks at the house. Then he cries for one or two minutes. When he returns to stand outside the door, I tell him to go to school so that his mother and father won’t have to pay a fine. He leaves, as does Nora soon afterwards, taking Leni back to the family at the beach.

**AFTERNOON**

Just a few yards away from the spot where Nora and her family have spent much of the day is the basketball court. Nora may well have been able to hear the shouts and laughter of the post-
primary girls and boys playing there earlier in the day, as well as
the instructions shouted by the teacher who had escorted them
for their afternoon sport. Basketball was Nora’s favorite part of
school. But she has been out of school now for nearly two years,
having left in 1979. That year, when Nora was thirteen, Rosalind
watched her daughter lose weight in spite of all the meat she was
eating, then noted a change in her complexion and finally asked,
“You pregnant?”
“Uwai [yes],” responded Nora.
“For who?”
“Tyler” was the reply. Rosalind had then sent word to the
school that Nora was leaving because she was pregnant.
Rosalind felt “shame” for her daughter, but nevertheless talked
to her about caring for herself. She explained to Nora that she
should not eat or drink “hot” things; tea, beef, damper should all
be eaten “cold” or she would kill the baby inside of her. Nora knew
that another girl had killed her baby by drinking hot water. Other
older women, her “aunties” (her father’s sisters) and her maternal
grandmother’s half-sister, also talked to Nora. They told her not to
carry heavy things and to rest. Once Leni was born, Rosalind and
the others continued to give advice. They explained how she
should change the baby’s diapers, and wash and dry the child.
They told her about baby food and, as Leni grew, not to let her eat
sand or run into the road.
After sleeping for about an hour after the noon meal, the fami-
ly awakens. They continue to sit in the shade of the coconut tree,
moving only as the shade shifts with the sun’s movement across
the sky. They talk some more, delouse each other some more, and
again watch the children squabble and play.
Just before 4:00 P.M. Rosalind’s mother’s half-brother, a man of
forty or so, walks by the group on the beach. He has a three-
pronged fish spear in his hand. As he passes by, he calls out,
informing the family that the office is open and cashing checks.
From her pocket Rosalind takes the money she was given this
morning and the check that Dory collected for her when the mail
arrived in the morning. Addressing Dory, Nora, Teddy, and her
thirteen-year-old son who rejoined the family upon leaving school
for the day, she says, “You can each have ten dollars and twenty
dollars is for me.” Then she hands the check to Nora, tells her to
cash it, and lists several things that she needs from the shop. “Some
young girls,” she thinks, “don’t bring back change and show it to
their mother. They keep it. But Dhangara, when she goes to the
shop, she gets what I tell her and brings back the change.” Nora receives the check, pockets it, and, leaving Leni in her mother’s care, sets out for the office and shop. She cashes her mother’s check, does the shopping, carries the groceries to the house, stores them inside, and returns to the beach in time to join her family before they walk back to the village.

Around 6:00 P.M. the sun begins to set. I encounter Nora standing and talking with a young woman at the intersection of the road and the beach. Leni is standing on the road about twenty feet away from her mother, as though she has wandered there while Nora was talking. As I walk by, Nora breaks off her conversation and tells me she is coming with me to get her clothes. She tells Leni to walk, but as the child whimpers, Nora picks her up and puts her on her shoulders. Leni clings to Nora’s hair. As we walk Nora tells me that she is going to eat supper with me. I tell her that I’ll cook her a pancake. As we walk, we meet Vera, another adolescent girl named Kay, and her younger sister. They also come with us for pancakes. While I cook, the girls talk about a recent fight between a young married couple. After eating, Nora goes out to the clothesline. One of the girls goes after Leni when she tries to follow her mother. Before Nora leaves with the other adolescents, she takes a shower and bathes her daughter. All the girls leave by 7:00 P.M.

**EVENING**

The sun has now completed its rapid descent. Only its glow can be seen behind the sand hills to the west; in less than an hour it will be dark. In the fading light women begin preparations for supper. Fires are already flickering in the sand by some of the houses, and people are gathering around them for food and conversation. As the darkness thickens, the shadowy streets are dotted with circles of weak light from the electric light poles that line the village roads. Light shines from house interiors, for even the smallest and shabbiest of the village residences are connected to the oil-generated electricity supply. Dinner fires, rekindled for the night, brighten the surrounding darkness.

Perhaps hoping to parlay the ten dollars Rosalind has given her into a bit more, Nora is looking for a card game. With Leni on her hip, she joins a group of young people that includes her ex-sis-
ter-in-law and Marguerite. Maybe, she thinks, her Supporting
Parent’s Benefits check will come in the next mail. She wants to
buy herself a tape recorder and some cassettes. As she told
Marguerite earlier, she has been thinking about buying an electric
fan. She might also buy herself a dress or two and some clothes for
Leni, like the little shorts and T-shirts they have in the shop.

At a pause in the group’s conversation, Marguerite turns to
Leni, who is sitting in her mother’s lap, and chants three questions:
“Your name is Marnba? Your country is Rijbar? You are Mangayang
[clan name]?” She punctuates each question with the positive
answer, “Eeee!” The adult talk resumes and Marguerite turns her
attention back to her peers. Leni squirms out of Nora’s lap and
runs back and forth along the length of the porch. Then she begins
to climb through the porch rails. “Leni, no,” says Nora. Leni contin-
ues to climb. “I’m gonna kill you,” says Nora, rising to retrieve the
child. As she reaches for her daughter, Leni leaves the railing and
runs away giggling. “She is a mad one,” remarks Nora. Nora
thinks that Leni’s madness resulted from a blow she received
before birth, when in the form of a dugong her paternal grandfa-
ther tried to kill her.12 It was he who gave Leni the name Marnba of
the Mangayang clan. But now the old man is dead, and his son
married to another adolescent, Claire.

Claire had given birth to a baby boy, Dean, just two months
before Leni was born. Some people in the village said Tyler was not
Dean’s father. Indeed, when Dean was first born, Tyler denied that
he was his son. “Dean isn’t for Tyler,” thinks Nora. “If you look at
Leni and you look at Dean, you can see that he has a really differ-
ent face.” But as Dean grew, Tyler decided that the boy’s face was
like his own.13 He claimed Dean as his son and ran off with Claire at
least twice. Once she had refused to go with him, because (said
Marguerite, who was monitoring the affair) her father’s sisters had
given her a hiding for doing so on an earlier occasion. Tyler had
then stolen a truck, and while racing around in it struck and killed
a dog, an incident that led to further trouble. Although Nora and
Tyler had separated when his interest in Claire and Dean began,
Claire’s guardian was worried about his marriage to Nora. Finally,
however, she and her brother, Claire’s father, consented to the
match. Their consent made Tyler and Claire’s marriage official, and
the community worker noted it in her records.

Now Nora is single again. Tyler never helps her with Leni. He
isn’t even giving her money. Sometimes his sisters help, carrying
the little girl for Nora, but really it is her own family—Rosalind, Greenleaf, Dory, and even Dory’s husband—who mind Leni. Sometimes when doodling, Nora even writes “Leni Arnbana,” Dory’s husband’s clan name, rather than “Leni Mangayang.”

Nora collects Leni, places her on her hip, and sets off back down the road toward home. She is going to take the little girl to Rosalind before she joins the game. As her mother says, it’s “hard labor” to carry a baby. From the road Nora can see, lit by the rising moon, the skeleton of the new house being built for a recently married young couple. The bride is Nora’s “full sister,” the daughter of Greenleaf’s younger brother and Rosalind’s half-sister. Although about four months younger than Nora, this girl bore her first child nearly a year before Leni was born. Following the birth of the child, she and a “young boy,” the acknowledged father of the baby, were allowed to marry, though again, like so many others, they are not really correct marriage partners.

Nora’s marital history has not been as simple as that of her “sister.” In 1976, when Nora was a “little girl” of eleven, her elder brother sought to marry his present wife. Because the couple had not been bestowed upon each other, during the negotiations Rosalind and her family promised that Nora would marry Nora’s brother’s wife’s younger brother Aaron when she was of the age to do so. In making this promise Rosalind was likely governed by the principle of “square back,” that is, of exchanging women as marriage partners between family groups.

Nora, however, apparently had other ideas. Around age thirteen she began seeing other men, including Aaron’s clan brother, Tyler. At this time Rosalind took Nora to the outstation and gave her to the twenty-six-year-old Aaron who was living there, in an attempt to forestall the “mess” Nora was making. Her behavior had already contributed to a “big fight” that involved at least ten people, not to mention the hurling of insults and spears. Nora joined her husband on the outstation, but not for long. Shortly afterwards, several “young girls” were sent to the outstation as “punishment” for running around with men. When the girls ran away from the outstation, Nora joined them. Back at Mangrove, Nora began to see Tyler. She was staying with Claire at her aunt’s house, and although it was just a few houses away, Rosalind didn’t always know when she was off with the twenty-year-old Tyler. When she did, Rosalind or another senior family member would give Nora a “hiding.” Aaron had also been known to “belt” her for
running off with Tyler, but at some point during this period, Aaron released Nora from the marriage, saying, after such a fight, “All right, you go.” He remained unmarried. It was also during this period that Nora’s pregnancy was discovered. Even knowing of her daughter’s condition, Rosalind advised her to “stay single,” but Nora ignored this advice and her marriage to Tyler was consented to and recognized.

Now as she walks, Nora sees her former husband also walking on the road. They stop, talk briefly, then walk together in the direction of the seemingly deserted school buildings. Minutes later, cries of “Fight, fight!” and “Wungari” reach the ears of the card players and other villagers. People walk out into the road to see what is happening. Some climb up the sand hill for a better view, but nothing is to be seen. Soon, however, information passes through the village that Tyler and Nora have been fighting at the school. Tyler has thrown rocks and Nora has been hit in the knee and the palms of her hands. Leni has fallen, but has been picked up by some young girls watching the altercation. Says another teenage girl of Nora as she hears details of the incident, “I am happy to see her living alone with her little girl, not with a rough man.”

But as Nora limps away from the school she thinks, “If I had a boyfriend maybe he’d give me money and clothes and some fish, maybe dugong. Maybe his mother would tell him to marry me. Maybe we would be married and go somewhere and stay for years, forever and ever. Maybe I would have a child for him. Maybe he would work and earn money, perhaps as a mechanic.”

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**DISCUSSION**

When I returned to Mangrove in 1988 Rosalind’s little house had been replaced with a structure of several rooms, including a bathroom and a kitchen complete with sink and stove. Guwagiyn had died, as had Dory’s husband. Dory had remarried, twice in fact, but Rosalind remained a widow, living with Dory, Nora, their children, as well as her son, Donny’s father, and his family. Teddy also lived there when he was not away at school. Nora had also remarried and had borne two more children, both boys. She continued to live with Rosalind, however, as her husband was often absent from Mangrove. Leni was a seemingly robust and cheerful eight-year-old who spent less time with the adult women of the family, as she
was now a schoolgirl and a member of the “kid mob.”

What strikes me about this narrative profile of one adolescent mother and her family—originally written for but not, for the most part, included in my book on *Aboriginal Adolescence*—is how much of life at Mangrove it predicts almost a decade later. By 1988 single motherhood had increased over five hundred percent from my last visit. Unmarried parenting, whether as a permanent state of affairs or as a stage before marriage, was becoming a common experience for adolescent girls. Yet the very negative outcomes (like low birth weight) associated with single parenthood in Western society are not apparent, at least through age five. This can currently be explained with reference to specific cultural constructions such as the value of children and motherhood, and related social arrangements, perhaps especially the presence and involvement of mothers’ mothers, like Rosalind. This description has, I hope, provided you with an example of the ways in which an understanding of the individual in context can lead to an understanding of extra-individual, extra-local, general sociocultural processes. As Lila Abu-Lughod has said, these are “only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words.”

**NOTES**

1. Many ethnographies include discussions of these issues in their introductory chapters.

2. This is a pseudonym, as are names used for Aboriginal people in this paper. While undertaking research for my Ph.D. dissertation, I had lived at Mangrove for 18 months between 1977 and 1978.


4. In our conversations about the ideal marriage age of the past, women pointed to girls between the ages of nine and fourteen as examples. They were probably noting the fact that none of the girls had reached the stage of breast development associated by Aboriginal women with menarche (first menstruation). Due to changes in such factors as health, diet, and activity level, a contemporary child might look older than an age-mate from the past. Please also note that I use the word “girl” because Aboriginal people do, because I want to distinguish between older and younger females, and because I want to emphasize my belief that adolescents are children.

5. During my stays at Mangrove I have always judged the kinds of behavior required by random sampling to be too intrusive. For example, I could have drawn the name of an adolescent girl out of a hat and set out to find her to make an observation of her activities, setting, companions, etc. Unless, however, I happened to find her in a public venue, I would have had to ask where she was. This, I think, would have usually been considered bizarre, and unacceptable, behavior. Random sampling would also probably mean missing (or not attending to) infrequent, but interesting events.

6. Katherine is a small town about 250 miles from Mangrove.

7. All amounts are given in Australian dollars which were worth approximately 1.2 United States dollars during 1981.

8. People at Mangrove do not normally use clocks to note the passing of time. What I think matters is the statement that the sun was not yet up.

9. People at Mangrove use the word “mob” to indicate a group or category of people. “Office Mob” refers to people working in the office.

10. Because adults usually do not approve of adolescent courtship, dating must be pursued covertly. In this small community where people can easily see or hear what others are doing, the assistance of a “mailman” can be indispensable. Friends can relay information about when and where a couple might meet. They can also escort lovers to a meeting place in the bush surrounding Mangrove. Should adults see a girl leaving the settlement by herself they would probably suspect that she was going to meet a boyfriend.

Children may exist before they are born as Dreamtime animals. If they are struck by a hunter they may subsequently bear the physical marks. In this case, Nora explains Leni’s personality with reference to the idea that her paternal grandfather had unknowingly hunted her when she was a dugong.

People at Mangrove say that children’s faces and feet resemble those of their father. In 1988, for example, a woman remarked, in my husband’s presence, that our four-year-old son had feet just like his father’s. The tone of voice in which this remark was made suggested that it was intended as a compliment.

I assume this was done by a government housing program.

Until about the age of five, children spend most of their time in the vicinity and under the supervision of adult family members. After this age, children spend more time in school and with other children. I have adopted the term “kid mob” from Annette Hamilton, *Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-Rearing in North-Central Arnhem Land* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981).

Statistical tests demonstrated that newborn children of married and single mothers do not differ significantly on birth weight, length at birth, head circumference, or a measure of body mass. In addition, there are no significant differences in one-minute and five-minute APGAR scores (a standardized assessment of newborn health). A comparison of children’s weight-for-height, height-for-age, and weight-for-age similarly showed no significant differences when child age, number of siblings (alive and dead), birth spacing, and length of gestation were taken into account. For details see Burbank and Chisholm, “Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood.”

SUGGESTED READINGS

