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MOBILITY AND MODERNITY IN ARNHEM LAND
The Social Universe of Kuninjku Trucks

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Abstract
This article explores the central role played by vehicles in a contradictory set of social processes that have unfolded in western Arnhem Land, north Australia, over the last five decades. Motor vehicles have mediated much of humanity's experience of the world over the past century. Kuninjku people's interaction with motor vehicles, we argue, provides one revealing lens through which to explore a distinctive and ambiguous experience of modernity. This article explores the role vehicles play in mediating Kuninjku interaction across diverse arenas – their customary lands, an expanding regional social universe occupied by kin, the Australian nation-state, and finally an increasingly globalized world. Briefly exploring the process by which vehicles were introduced into Kuninjku country, we then track key transformations in Kuninjku life through a series of historical phases. The distinctive Kuninjku values that govern use of vehicles are explored. In conclusion the article reflects on the paradoxical nature of Kuninjku experience of late modernity and the fragility of their apparent success in realizing their aspirations.

Key Words ◆ Aboriginal Australia ◆ Arnhem Land ◆ outstations ◆ modernity ◆ vehicles
This article explores the role of vehicles in the shifting circumstances of a small community of hunter-gatherers, the Kuninjku of western Arnhem Land over the past three decades. Conceptually, we seek to engage with debates around the specificity or otherwise of indigenous people’s experience of modernity, and, more specifically, commodities (Appadurai, 1986, 1996; Miller, 1995; van Binsbergen, 2005). A number of anthropologists working in Australia have observed that where Aboriginal people have taken up motor vehicles, they have done so in support of a highly distinctive, non-market oriented set of social values (see for example Myers, 1988; Gerrard, 1989; Young, 2001). While on one level the ethnographic evidence collected among the Kuninjku might be read as straightforwardly supporting this perspective, we argue that a consideration of the wider social context of Kuninjku vehicle use points towards emergent cultural transformations that might be read in terms of a distinctive structural adjustment to the experience of modernity. In what follows we explore the role that vehicles play in mediating...
Kuninjku interaction across diverse arenas – their customary lands, an expanding regional social universe occupied by kin, the Australian nation-state, and finally an increasingly globalized world. We begin with a brief social history of the arrival of vehicles, then chart key transformations of Kuninjku life through a series of historical phases. We explore some of the distinctive Kuninjku values that govern use of vehicles. We conclude with some reflections on the paradoxical nature of Kuninjku experience of late modernity and the fragility of their apparent success in realizing their aspirations.

The Kuninjku community of about 300 persons, whose lands are located in the lower Mann-Liverpool Rivers region in western Arnhem Land, north Australia, (see Figure 1) have had a relatively short historical engagement with the colonizing state. The beginnings of this engagement were signalled with the noisy arrival on Kuninjku customary lands of motorized transport: tractors, cars and more recently four-wheel drive vehicles, the latter collectively known locally as motor cars or mutika, troopys (after Toyota’s troop carrier) or trucks (and hereafter referred to simply as trucks). In the last four decades vehicles have fully penetrated the Kuninjku social universe. They have been drawn into and now influence economic, social and domestic relations in distinctive and profound ways. Ownership of vehicles has become a high priority for Kuninjku and a prime motivator of production of bark paintings, for which they have become world renowned (Perkins, 2004; Kaufmann, 2005). Due to their central place in contemporary Kuninjku life, vehicles provide an ideal prism through which to consider Kuninjku experience of modernity – an experience that can be approached in terms of a series of distinct historical phases.

BEFORE THE COLONIZING STATE: THE ARRIVAL OF TRUCKS

Surveys by government patrol officers in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s all located considerable numbers of Kuninjku people living as nomadic hunter-gatherers in the Mann-Liverpool Rivers region (Sweeney, 1939, 1955; Kyle-Little, 1957). Historically, the Kuninjku were among the last to experience colonialism directly, primarily because of their geographic isolation from distant colonial and mission outposts. In the period immediately after the Second World War a number of Kuninjku resided with their western relatives at the Oenpelli Mission (known today as Gunbalanya) some 150 km away from Kuninjku territory. It was here that many first saw motorized vehicles. Over the next decade most had returned to live in the Mann-Liverpool Rivers region where they remained when Maningrida was established, first as a trading post in 1949 (abandoned in 1950), and then as a government settlement in 1957. As recently
As 1960, there were only a few Kuninjku enumerated as residents of the township (Long, 1960; Hiatt, 1965: 12).

As with remote communities everywhere in the world, the opening up of western Arnhem Land to modern transport intensified contact between Kuninjku and people from elsewhere. Prior to 1963, excursions into Kuninjku country had been by foot or on horseback. In 1963 a patrol from the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration blazed a track from Gunbalanya to Maningrida through Kuninjku territory (Evans, 1963). The arrival of this convoy of two trucks signalled a major transformative event in Kuninjku society, it foreshadowed the end of isolated bush living.

Subsequent to this road being formed through their land, bush-based Kuninjku moved en masse to the recently established Maningrida settlement. They were motivated to migrate by a number of factors. The 1963 patrol had diagnosed a number of Kuninjku people camping along the Liverpool River as suffering from leprosy. A few months later, a motorized medical patrol returned back along the same track and persuaded two Kuninjku men to allow their sons to be treated in a small bush leprosarium established near Maningrida settlement (Kettle, 1967). Previous medical treatment of leprosy had seen some Kuninjku transported to the East Arm leprosarium near Darwin, often never to be seen again by their kin. With the establishment of the new treatment centre near Maningrida, Kuninjku people were tentatively willing to put themselves and their children forward as patients, and to follow them into the settlement. It is also likely that senior members of the small Kuninjku community had observed that with the widespread migration of other neighbouring Aboriginal communities into the settlement, remaining isolated in the bush was no longer socially viable. A mixture of curiosity and desire to access highly prized western consumer goods finally saw the highly social Kuninjku move in (Altman, 1987).

LIFE IN MANINGRIDA: CENTRALIZED, SEDENTARIZED, MARGINALIZED

Arriving at Maningrida the nomadic Kuninjku had their first comprehensive experience with what James Scott (1998) has argued is the oldest state project, sedentarization. At this time the modernization paradigm ruled supreme, and its manifestation in Australian Aboriginal affairs policy was assimilation, which had superseded the earlier policy of protection and preservation [Altman and Nieuwenhuysen, 2006 [1979]]. In Aboriginal settlements such as Maningrida, centralization and sedentarization were to be augmented with ‘civilization’ and ‘westernization’ (see also Rowse, 1998).

For many reasons, early attempts by Kuninjku people to adjust to life in Maningrida were desperately unsuccessful. They adapted badly...
to the colonial regime and sedentary living at the settlement. This was partly due to their active refusal to take on assimilationist imperatives. Their continuing use of their own language (rather than English or the language of the Aboriginal owners of the land upon which the settlement was established) and ongoing commitment to customary activities, including ceremonial and harvesting practices and utilization of fire as part of their environmental management (which placed them in direct conflict with the interests of a major state forestry project), were actively discouraged and sometimes scorned. Regional politics, Aboriginal and White, also conspired against them: as the last group into Maningrida and the least sophisticated in western terms, they were marginalized in the township both physically and politically. As one patrol officer noted:

Adult members of other tribes have been heard to refer to the Gunwinggu [Kuninjku] as ‘myalls’ and ‘like animals because they eat bush tucker’. This strange disparagement by sophisticated and semi-sophisticated Aborigines of those who continue to exploit the economy of the traditional life is quite common . . . There is evidence that the Gunwinggu [Kuninjku] do, in fact, lean heavily towards traditional patterns, not of necessity but, I suspect, because of an innate pride in a continued proficiency in the traditional skills. (Evans, 1971: 9)

Once they had relocated to Maningrida, Kuninjku people were effectively cut off from their customary lands some 40–100 km away because they lacked transport. Some flaunted settlement authorities by walking back out to their estates, especially to the adjacent Tomkinson River flood plains, Bulkay, for the gluttonous feasting on seasonally abundant fish species, especially barramundi. Life at Maningrida provided Kuninjku with strong motivation to gain access to vehicles and to learn to drive. One Kuninjku man had learnt to drive while working on a forestry project near Cobourg Peninsula. In 1969, when training allowances were introduced by the state, the astute superintendent of Maningrida settlement saw the possibility of providing the cohesive, but marginalized, Kuninjku with a group employment project collecting rubbish. One Maningrida resident and community advisor provides an evocative description of the work team in action:

When I got to Maningrida, the Kuninjku mob had an old blue tractor (an old Fordson would fit my memory of it). It towed a trailer and picked up the rubbish around the community and from the Welfare kitchen and dumped it off a little jetty into Gudjerama Creek, which was a popular fishing spot. The fish seemed to like the spaghetti and potatoes, combined with the habitat opportunities in the odd dead bicycle. There was always a large but variable number of Kuninjku guys on the tractor, I used to muse that they were riding shotgun on the precious cargo. (Dan Gillespie email to authors, 4 May 2005)

This work gave Kuninjku an early experience of the power of vehicles and also some opportunity to learn to drive. They collectively pooled the
moneys they received from training allowances and early sales of art and craft and purchased two vehicles in 1971, with the expressed objective of returning to their customary lands, or 'country' as described in Aboriginal English. Patrol Officer Evans (1971: 10) observed this process in action:

There is a strong move among the Gunwinggu [Kuninjku] to move back to the upper reaches of the Liverpool and settle at a place called Mormega [Mumeka]. To facilitate this [realistically realizing that continued communication with Maningrida will be essential] they have purchased and driven to Maningrida a Fordson tractor and a diesel Landrover. The status of the Gunwinggu [Kuninjku] on their acquiring these vehicles rose astronomically within the Maningrida community, and now other groups are endeavouring to save money with a view to restoring the status quo by the purchase of similar equipment.

BACK ON TO COUNTRY

Just as vehicles arguably saved some members of the Kuninjku community suffering leprosy 'out bush' (out in the bush) in 1963, a decade later they saved them again, in their new guise as the most marginalized sector of the Maningrida population. The Kuninjku were among the first Aborigines at Maningrida to realize the goal of returning to their customary lands. This resettlement was dependent on trucks; privately owned trucks and tractors and publicly accessible trucks: the former were used mainly for bush communications and links to seasonal landings for supplies during the wet seasons, the latter were provided by the authorities and the Maningrida Progress Association township store to supply bush communities from Maningrida with market commodities.

Yet it would be too simplistic to suggest that the rejuvenation of the Kuninjku community was simply facilitated by access to vehicles – vehicles first came under Aboriginal control as part of a much broader set of circumstances. In 1972, a new national government was elected with commitments to Aboriginal land rights and self-determination, primarily in recognition of the failure and injustice of assimilation. In the context of this new sympathetic environment and with the active assistance of the enlightened superintendent, Kuninjku people boarded their tractor and Land-Rover, and returned to the bush. While this decentralization was a clear response to the miserable experience of settlement life, Kuninjku were also anxious to relocate to protect their sacred places from mining exploration that was occurring in the region without consultation. In 1976, land rights legislation was passed for the Northern Territory and Kuninjku were granted legal ownership of their ancestral lands. At that time too, a resource agency was established to assist remote living at tiny outstation communities with basic facilities, communications, provision of stores, and collection of art for sale (Gillespie et al., 1977).
From the early 1970s, advised and influenced by the Council for Aboriginal Affairs (1976), the federal government assisted what became known as ‘the outstations movement’ with establishment [more accurately perhaps, repatriation] grants of some $A10,000 to groups that ‘demonstrated commitment’ to decentralization. By then, the worn out, privately owned Kuninjku vehicles were replaced by two publicly-funded vehicles, a tractor and trailer each for Mumeka and Marrkolidjian outstations. Initially, Kuninjku found saving funds to purchase vehicles more difficult at outstations than had been the case at Maningrida. As people reactivated their customary practices and once again worked to sustain themselves predominantly on bush foods, there were no opportunities for paid work and only limited access to social security. Outstation living was hard, even in resource rich Arnhem Land. Kuninjku had to readapt to living off the land while simultaneously recalibrating their economy to generate enough money to purchase the highly prized western goods (flour, sugar, tea and tobacco, fishing lines, guns and ammunition) to which they had become accustomed. In this context the production of art for sale flourished, but market demand was limited and prices paid to Kuninjku artists remained low.

LIVING ON COUNTRY AND IN MANINGRIDA: 1979–2006

This brief historical narrative provides the backdrop for the anthropological fieldwork undertaken with the Kuninjku community since 1979 by Altman and, more recently, since 2003, jointly by Altman and Hinkson. Given the nature of early interactions of Kuninjku with the Australian state and society, it is hardly surprising that trucks have become their most prized market commodity. When Altman first lived with Kuninjku at Mumeka outstation in 1979 and 1980, truck use was limited. Kuninjku gained access to trucks in a haphazard way, at times primarily via government grants, at other times via provision of mining moneys (from affected areas moneys from the nearby Nabarlek uranium mine or from mining royalties more generally, see Altman, 1983), at other times again through hard graft and saving.

Over the past 25 years, the financial basis of Kuninjku truck ownership has changed markedly. From the early 1980s, unemployment benefits (welfare) were increasingly paid to outstation residents as Australian citizens. And from the early 1990s, many outstation people have received Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme – work-for-the-dole – income support. Simultaneously, a new outstation resource agency, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC), first established in 1979, has become a highly effective regional organization (see Altman and Johnson, 2000). Over that same period Australian and international market demand for art from the region (represented by the
Kuninjku artists mobilized their artistic skills, customary and ceremonial knowledge, and intensive engagement with sacred sites within their customary estates to become the dominant force in the burgeoning export of art from the Maningrida region (Altman, 2004a). Paradoxically perhaps, the same Kuninjku community that was so maladapted to market engagement in the 1960s has, since the 1980s, become the most economically engaged via the arts. As we will discuss later, the high premium placed on ownership of trucks is a crucial motivating force in Kuninjku production of art for sale.

Seen from a broader perspective, Kuninjku have developed astute strategies over the last 25 years to accumulate the financial resources needed to purchase trucks: they have done this by combining income from the state and earnings from art production with a robust harvesting economy. Through this eclectic hybrid economy (Altman, 2005) Kuninjku pursue their determination to live a primarily bush-based life, but not at the expense of rejecting the facilities, resources and commodities which can be accessed via Maningrida. Trucks provide the essential mediation between these two domains. Nowadays each Kuninjku outstation has at least one vehicle and some have several. The capacity to acquire sufficient income to enable the regular replacement of vehicles has played a central role in the process by which Kuninjku people have re-established themselves as a viable community in late modernity.

**KUNINJKU WAYS WITH TRUCKS**

Kuninjku use trucks for much intensive yet mundane social activity – to shop, collect firewood, travel to the health clinic, to hunt and fish and transport game, to deliver art to Maningrida for sale, to attend community film nights, discos and football matches and to visit kin across the Kuninjku estate. They also use trucks to attend local and regional religious ceremonies and funerals.

Choice of type of truck is an important factor. While the bush track that was blazed in 1963 has now been realigned and improved immeasurably, the ubiquitous Toyota Troop Carrier remains the preferred vehicle; for good reason, as the roads are still often just formed and rough and the seasonal monsoonal wet means that four-wheel drive is a necessity. Yet Kuninjku drivers are not constrained by roads. Trucks are frequently driven through thick bush, through deep water courses, and boggy mangrove swamps. There is also a distinct category of Kuninjku vehicle: the bush truck, unregistered and often unroadworthy (lacking windscreens, lights, seats and other basic features) that only travels within Kuninjku territory [in a manner akin to the unregistered on-farm vehicles of commercial farmers].
Even though Kuninjku are more truck affluent than ever before, this community of 300 still only shares between 10 and 20 functioning trucks at one time, a ratio of one truck to up to 30 Kuninjku. Kuninjku trucks rarely travel without a full complement of passengers and competition for places tends to be a highly politicized process. Trucks are used in accord with Kuninjku values, influencing such factors as who sits where in the vehicle [see also Stotz, 2001; Young, 2001], with these seating arrangements reflecting a conjunction of vehicle ownership, kinship, seniority, gender and avoidance relations. Trucks are invariably very crowded, something that non-Aboriginal people, or Balandas, frequently comment on without recognizing the cause of relative vehicle shortage and the premium placed on mobility. Large numbers of passengers invariably ensure there is little correlation between the articulated aim of an excursion and the activity that eventuates. While a trip might be explained in advance as being for a specific purpose, or anticipated as a simple journey from A to B, it is common for car rides to turn into multi-factorial adventures, as passengers attempt to harness control of the vehicle to execute all manner of tasks. Such attempts to maximize the utility of a car ride can lead to particularly bewildering and stressful experiences for Bandal drivers [see also Gerrard, 1989].

The arrival or departure of a truck at an outstation or bush camp is cause for considerable excitement and tension. Domestic arrangements are invariably reconfigured as a result; it is rare for a visiting vehicle to leave without some change in the size or composition of the population. The dynamic constitution of Kuninjku social groups is reflected in observations made during two fortnightly periods 5–18 January, exactly 23 years apart, selected because they occurred during the lowest mobility wet season. During 14 days in 1980, Mumeka’s population (counted at dusk) changed eight times as a result of truck visitation and six times because individuals or families walked to nearby outstations. In 2003, the Mumeka population changed seven times because of truck visitation and three times as a result of light plane visitation (there was no functioning airstrip in 1980).²

TRUCKS AND SOCIAL INTERACTION ACROSS AN EXPANDING SOCIAL FIELD

Paradoxically perhaps, given the Kuninjku exodus from Maningrida in the early 1970s, much of the contemporary mobility facilitated by trucks is between outstations and Maningrida, where a sizeable Kuninjku community now resides. The exodus was by no means the end of the story. The ready availability of private trucks makes Kuninjku far more relaxed about residing at Maningrida on the customary lands of the Dekurridji: rapid redeployment onto Kuninjku country can be facilitated.
by truck-owning kin. Over time, intermarriage between Kuninjku and other groups at Maningrida has also increased motivation to reside at the township. Today people are reluctant to reside at outstations without vehicles, while residence in Maningrida is often associated with truck repair which can take months. Access to motor vehicles is a critical factor in the way members of the Kuninjku community enact their still ambivalent relationship to the township.

Take as one example the following case from fieldwork in July 2002. At a seasonal camp at Nandel, in the Bulkay region, 875 kg of fish and game were harvested over 13 days. This was the highly productive yekkeh or early dry season when Kuninjku annually congregate on the Tomkinson River flood plains. Of this harvest, nearly half was shared with Kuninjku residing elsewhere, with some 272 kg being transported by truck to Maningrida households and 146 kg to other bush communities (Altman et al., 2002).

In a second case from the same period of fieldwork, a Kuninjku vehicle was travelling between two outstations visiting kin when a buffalo was spotted and killed by a skilled driver who successfully rammed the animal with the vehicle. After some meat had been butchered another truck from faraway Gunbalanya coincidentally arrived at the scene and most of the meat was given to the passengers who were affinal kin. In both cases, trucks played a key role in the distribution of hunted game as part of the process of intensifying highly valued kin relations.

Distribution to kin at Maningrida tends to occur in the context of wider, relatively mundane, social activity, as trucks from seasonal bush camps travel daily to the town, transporting people to shop, to visit the health clinic, to collect welfare cheques and fresh water as billabongs become brackish. Yet such distribution is by no means incidental or a low order priority. In distributing portions of the bounty procured in successful harvesting trips, bush-living Kuninjku actively enter into a performative dialogue with their town-based kin about the robustness of their customary harvesting practices and associated superior livelihood.

Over the past three decades small numbers of Kuninjku have spent increasing periods of time in Maningrida. The draw of town can be multi-dimensional, offering entertainment, various resources and facilities, the sociality of larger congregations of people, marriage opportunities, access to alcohol on fortnightly 'barge days', and, for a small number of people, various forms of employment. At the beginning of the 21st century, members of the Kuninjku community by no means share an undifferentiated aspiration to live in isolation in the bush. But the most successful members of the community (putting to one side for a moment questions over how we might define ‘success’ in this context) are those with a strong outstation base to which they regularly return. Town-based living tends to be associated with drinking, drug-use, and inactive, unhealthy
living. As they drive into town and distribute the bounty of their harvest, Kuninjku not only remind their town-based kin of the benefits of being ‘out bush’, they also make symbolic statements to other Aboriginal residents, to Balandas, and by extension to the Australian state which has been growing increasingly sceptical about the significance and viability of their contemporary harvesting economy.

Trucks play an integral role in Kuninjku livelihood practices. There are two sectors of the Kuninjku hybrid economy where people can influence their level of income as state welfare payments are fixed: the customary or harvesting sector and the market or arts sector. In the former, trucks can open up possibilities like never before as seasonal resource bases can be exploited, with harvested game transported back to camp unlike in an earlier era when people had to travel by foot, at times temporarily relocating camp, in order to consume the harvested game. As noted, trucks can be used as weapons, but they can also be used to transport and share scarce equipment, especially guns and ammunition, and as a means to share harvested game with absent relatives. Trucks enable a fuller utilization of harvested game than was previously possible, as when a whole buffalo is dragged back to camp (Figure 2). And transformations in the landscape associated with vehicle use can facilitate harvesting practices – during the wet season roads provide a firm base from which to transverse flooded country, or platforms from which to fish and hunt (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 2** Using a truck to drag a feral water buffalo carcass back to camp, Nandel, 2002.  
*Photograph: Joe Morrison*
The relationship between Kuninjku art production and trucks is important (Figure 4). There is considerable evidence to support the proposition that people who reside out bush, or continue to regularly participate in customary activities, are the most productive artists. Recent research among Kuninjku people shows that both access to trucks and residence at outstations increases arts production (Koenig, 2007). At outstations Kuninjku reside near the ancestral places that provide the primary source of artistic inspiration. And they have easy access to the resources required to produce art, the stringybark eucalyptus trees from which barks and hardwood are cut for painting and carvings, as well as ochre and pigment quarries that provide paint.

Trucks can become expertly manoeuvred ladders from which trees are ring-barked (Figure 5). They enable the transportation of stems for carvings, and the delivery of completed works to Maningrida to be exchanged for cash. As suggested earlier, the desire to purchase trucks is a primary motivating force in Kuninjku production of art for the market, and there is considerable evidence that successful artists are the most effective in accumulating cash to purchase vehicles, with the internationally renowned artist John Mawurndjul owning several trucks.
simultaneously. During a recent visit to Mawurndjal’s outstation at Milmilngkan, he identified three vehicles currently in working order that he had assigned to specific tasks - a troop carrier for transporting family, a tray back for hunting and a second tray back for collecting barks. Mawurndjal had also assisted in the recent purchase of a troop carrier for the children of his deceased older brother (his ‘children’) who reside at nearby Kurrurludul outstation (Jon Altman, field diary June 2005).

The previous gender bias of arts production has also shifted over the past three decades as women have started to engage in more financially lucrative bark painting and carving (rather
than less well-paid basket weaving). One of the motivations for women moving into bark painting is to assist their men-folk in earning cash to purchase trucks. It is noteworthy that to this day there are no Kunijinjku women who drive, although some women are now publicly recognized as co-owners of trucks with their husbands. In 2003 at Mumeka outstation one recently purchased truck had 'David’s Troopy' professionally painted by the Darwin supplier on the right-hand door (Figure 5) and ‘Debra’s Troopy’ on the left-hand door in a public statement of this co-ownership by husband and wife.

Vehicles are frequently caught up in public demonstrations of authority. Often such demonstrations are simply reflected in the capacity to commandeer a truck when one possesses neither a vehicle nor a driver’s licence. At times such assertions of authority intersect with the demonstration of other forms of seniority. So for instance, access to a truck provides an opportunity to demonstrate expert ecological knowledge. This is the way in which senior Kunijinjku women exert their influence. In January 2003, a senior woman, Marabamba, directed some younger kin to drive to the Liverpool River to fish for nakkoro, river shark, a species that Kunijinjku fish during the early wet season. Marabamba did not accompany the fishing party. At the end of the day they returned empty handed, as had been the trend of most fishing expeditions undertaken in the preceding week. The following morning, Marabamba commandeered the truck and, on her instruction, was driven to Plamono on the tidal Liverpool River some 10 km from Mumeka. In the evening she returned triumphant, having caught two river sharks with highly prized abundant fat. Beyond the satisfaction of having secured a good meal for the outstation’s residents, Marabamba had shown the younger generations the superiority of her knowledge and harvesting skills (Hinkson, 2003).

Less commonly, declining to participate in vehicle use provides opportunity for some, often older people, to demonstrate that they retain the remarkable capacity to walk considerable distance and successfully procure a livelihood from the bush. Such endeavour allows individuals to demonstrate their autonomy and expert bush skills, and to challenge technological dependency and the new ways. Such demonstrations however, tend to be sporadic and follow heated disputes over use; when order is restored, truck use recurs. For example, in January 2003, a senior man who did not own a truck lobbied for transport to Kurrurlul, an outstation some 17 km from Mumeka to collect his elder daughter. However there was a local shortage of fuel and assistance from truck owners was not forthcoming. With much fanfare, the man set off on foot with his teenage son accompanying him on his BMX bike, as well as his younger daughter whom he dropped off en route at another nearby outstation – Kakodbabuldi (see Figure 1). After nightfall, local residents
were concerned that the man had not returned, and one of the local vehicle owners set out to look for him, but ran out of fuel not far from Mumeka. The man returned to the outstation by foot late that night. The next day he displayed his displeasure at the lack of assistance that had been offered to him very publicly, sitting on his verandah, sharpening spears and muttering loudly about how people had lost the old foot-walking skills, unlike himself. Later that day, a truck delivered some jerry cans of fuel and two of Mumeka’s trucks departed for Maningrida. Space was found in the front seat of one of the vehicles for the aggrieved man who cheerfully farewelled us as the truck sped off [Jon Altman, field diary, 9–11 January 2003].

Like so much of Kuninjku experience of late modernity, the presence of trucks has generated a contradictory set of circumstances. The very fact that trucks provide a means to intensify social interaction across an expanding social field means that there is much stress and emotion associated with access and use. While vehicles may be the most highly prized western good, the pressure around truck use means that it is not unusual for a vehicle to survive just a few months of Kuninjku treatment before it is written off beyond repair. Nor is it unusual for owners to deliberately write their vehicles off as a way of resolving the stress that can quickly accumulate in conflicting demands for access [see Altman, 1987: 185–6]. At times, social pressures result in people using trucks in ways that are destructive and thoroughly bewildering to Balandas, such as when they are driven through swollen rivers or into deep mud and badly bogged. Kuninjku do not react with frustration to such events. And bogging episodes can themselves have positive outcomes, as the work of unbogging or repairing trucks brings people together in new alliances and the camaraderie of shared experience [Figure 6]. At other times, social pressure and age grade bonding results in trucks being used in very risky ways, as when they are co-opted to illegally transport alcohol or kava or marijuana, running the gauntlet of police detection and the risk of truck confiscation by the state authorities. The use of trucks by drunken or stoned Kuninjku results in tragic accidents and death. Simultaneously, trucks provide a ready means to avoid ‘barge weekend’ when some Kuninjku families head out of Maningrida to outstations, often after heated inter-generational debate over the merits of staying or leaving town to gain access to alcohol.

MODERNITY AND KUNINJLU SOCIAL VALUES

The socio-cultural dimensions of modernity are broadly recognized as turning on the dual processes of mobility and mediation [Anderson, 1983; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Appadurai, 1996]. The origins of modernity lie in the invention of the printing press and subsequent spread of print
literacy through Europe in the 16th century, in conjunction with the radical social transformations that accompanied the birth of the Industrial Revolution and the mass migration of people from rural locales to metropolitan centres (Williams, 1973; Eisenstein, 1979). The history of modernity is simultaneously the history of capitalism, associated with the demise of community as a form of social relationship inextricably tied to place; the gradual fragmentation of religious authority; and the rise of science and rationality as the new frame through which people would comprehend the world and their place within it. In describing the key social features of modernity theorists refer to the time–space compression born of the new modes of communication and transport, and an emergent form of individualism as capitalist work processes called out the autonomous worker, eroding those forms of labour that had once been organized within extended families. The mobile and flexible consuming individual, nurtured within the nuclear family, is a key product of this complex set of social processes.

The contemporary Kuninjku social world conjured up here seems a long way from evoking these principles. And indeed, most writing on Aboriginal Australia has historically seen the social values objectified in vehicle use as antithetical to the values of western consumer culture. Over the past three decades a number of anthropologists have written about the distinctive forms of interaction between Aboriginal people and vehicles. In his influential paper, ‘Burning the Truck and Holding the Country’, Myers (1988) writes of the Western Desert Pintupi that their use of vehicles reflects a radical distinction between Pintupi conceptions
of the inalienability of land and forms of commodity exchange. Myers argues that Pintupi treatment of vehicles and other western goods reflects a form of value associated with a different set of aspirations to those associated with the commodity market, a set of values in which people’s relations to each other and the country that grounds their identity will always, and unambiguously, take precedence over western things. Similarly, Gerrard (1989), writing of vehicle use by township-based people in Maningrida in 1988, sees the practice of humbugging, a distinctive Aboriginal mechanism for gaining access to resources such as vehicles, as reflecting a similar non-commodifying logic in local Aboriginal engagements with vehicles. Reporting on research undertaken at an outstation near Tennant Creek, central Australia, Stotz (2001) describes the influence of vehicles very differently. In her account cars are regarded as a colonizing force, their presence associated with considerable social transformation, and particularly shifts in gender relations.

In approaching the question of what implications we might draw from Kuninjku use of trucks, we are in agreement with van Binsbergen, who insists that in comprehending the relations between persons and things some primacy must be given to structural form over objects themselves:

Formulating an anthropological approach to consumption may start from a focus on things and their social life, but it inevitably touches on the protracted anthropological debate about culturally determined versions of personhood and agency. (van Binsbergen, 2005: 19)

As the social history rehearsed earlier illustrates, trucks have come into the Kuninjku world as part of a profound life-changing set of circumstances. Their use is geared towards a thoroughly contemporary Kuninjku set of aspirations – to live ‘on country’ while simultaneously having access to services, commodities and forms of social engagement accessible only in Maningrida and further afield. But do these aspirations point to an emergent set of social values that might be described in terms of the principles of modernity? As suggested earlier, access to trucks facilitates social intensification, not the individualization most commonly associated with modernity. We would suggest however that there are distinctively modern aspects to the kind of social intensification that is occurring. Trucks allow Kuninjku to pursue customary practices on country, but with the peculiar time–space compression associated with this form of transportation. En route to a particular location, features of interest and changes in the landscape are noted visually and at speed, through the truck window. This ensures a markedly different form of engagement with country than that enabled by ‘foot walking’ (see Young, 2001). Likewise, the possibility of residence in Maningrida – either permanently or for short periods – and the availability of shop-bought foods, attenuates the highly intensive knowledge of and relationship to country that was
a matter of life or death for these hunter-gatherers in the pre-colonial era. ‘Country’ is also a phenomenon that today gets rendered in abstract form by Kuninjku painters, in pigment on bark, for the discerning national and international art market. In this process country does not lose its specificity or its particularity for those producing it, but the very process of objectifying identity in this form for non-local consumption encourages Kuninjku to think reflexively about country and identity in new ways. One of the dominant discourses of identity to have emerged as Kuninjku have ventured into the global art world has been John Mawurndjul’s insistence on recognizing an intergenerational rupture in the art practices of his contemporaries – underscored by the claim that he and his kin are ‘new people [who] have changed things’ (Mawurndjul, 2004: 136).

However, as the ethnographic evidence considered in this article makes clear, we are not suggesting that western Arnhem Land is undergoing some kind of inevitable march towards Progress. The features conventionally associated with modernity that can be identified in contemporary Kuninjku sociality remain emergent, fragmentary, and very much in tension with principles that continue to point towards the valuing of localist, non-market ways of doing things. In this regard our analysis shares common ground with Hamilton (1987), who argues that Pitjantjantjara people’s use of vehicles should not be interpreted simply in terms of continuity with pre-colonial forms of mobility. Rather, she observes that Pitjantjantjara vehicle use reflects a complex process of adaptation to modernity, tied up with their distinctive experience of working in the cattle industry, but not necessarily entailing a reduction of social value to the terms of the market.

As the brief history explored here suggests, Kuninjku experience of colonization has occurred relatively recently, but it has nevertheless entailed profound changes in Kuninjku life. Some contradictory tendency in this historical process is reflected in the fact that at the same time as access to vehicles has been pivotal in Kuninjku re-establishing themselves on their customary lands, it has also enabled the establishment of a permanent Kuninjku presence at Maningrida, with much traffic and associated movement of people between the township and the bush. At the turn of the 21st century, trucks are of crucial importance for Kuninjku not in the continuation of a customary existence, but rather of a thoroughly modern hybrid one.

In economic terms, access to trucks allows Kuninjku to move relatively seamlessly between the customary, state and commercial sectors of a particular form of hybrid economy (Altman, 2005) from which they gain a livelihood in the present period. In socio-cultural terms, their engagement with trucks reveals much about contemporary Kuninjku aspirations that geographically can no longer be contained within Kuninjku country, but now also extend to Maningrida and increasingly
beyond north Australia. The trucks/arts nexus, in particular, highlights the fact that Kuninjku identity is increasingly defined and asserted in relational terms that extend beyond the regional to the global.

It is in the political realm that the links between the particularities of the Kuninjku case and wider Indigenous responses to various state projects, initially of sedentarization and assimilation, then of self determination and decentralization, and now of mainstreaming, mutual obligation and practical reconciliation (Altman, 2004b), can be most clearly seen. For the hyper-mobility essential to modern Kuninjku living is largely underwritten by the state. Simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, this mobility undermines the state project in its current manifestation. For example, basic income support has been provided to Kuninjku living at outstations and in the township and the marketing of art is partially supported by public patronage. And yet the very residential and occupational dynamism that are characteristic of Kuninjku make the mainstreaming goals of contemporary policy prescriptions unattainable. Residentially, Kuninjku live between crowded houses in town and outstations and in seasonal camps in the open air. Occupationallly, they shift between engagement in harvesting wildlife, arts production, working on CDEP, and participating in local or regional ceremonies. For some individuals, this occupational diversity can occur during the same week, if not the same day, producing an ongoing tension with the needs of mainstream employment. At the same time, a strong incentive for such occupational mobility and engagement in the hybrid economy is that it maximizes possibilities to save for trucks.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have explored the Kuninjku experience of modernity through their use of vehicles. Historically, in the period following the Second World War, the Kuninjku community was increasingly socially and geographically isolated in the bush. Their migration to Maningrida in the early 1960s was hastened by the blazing of a vehicular track through their customary lands. The centralization that followed was a desperately unhappy episode that marked the Kuninjku post-colonial nadir. Arguably, trucks saved the Kuninjku community, for they provided an opportunity to leave Maningrida and re-establish themselves on their customary lands. While the move to outstations was initially difficult, over time Kuninjku have been able to use trucks to expand their livelihood options. And in so doing they have also been able to skilfully traverse the different sectors of the regional economy, maintaining expertise in harvesting game, producing art for national and international sale, while benefiting from basic income support provided in recent years by the state.
Over time, this refigured mobility has also allowed Kuninjku to transform their status, from being the ‘myall’ blacks who were maladapted to colonization to those who are now revered for their global success as artists, and who have subsequently earned the respect of other Aboriginal people regionally. As Kuninjku have become more mobile, they have acquired a growing sense of themselves in relation to an expanding field of others. New forms of self-representation have followed. Paradoxically, while their resulting hyper-mobility is partially underwritten by the state, they remain maladapted to the state project of modernity. At the start of the 21st century Kuninjku have succeeded in realizing a form of life that is thoroughly geared towards their own emergent aspirations. However, owing to this paradox, this success remains fragile and contested.

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Notes

1. Although it must be noted that the market for indigenous or ‘tribal’ art has always attributed the highest value to works that could be shown to have been produced either before, or at greatest distance from, colonial influence (Geismar, 2001).
2. During this period there was also particularly heavy rainfall causing the outstation population to remain unchanged on four days.
3. Using vehicles as weapons is not always so unambiguously successful. A renowned artist and hunter used the same technique on another occasion on a large buffalo and caused $A7000 worth of damage to his truck (Apolline Kohen, email to authors from Maningrida, 11 May 2005).
4. It is notable that in more recent work on Pintupi art Myers (2005) concedes a more transformative potential to Pintupi interactions with western goods and processes.
5. See Peterson’s (1993) subsequent coining of the term demand sharing.
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