

CHAPTER 2

The Way It Was: Customary Camps and Houses in the Southern Gulf of Carpentaria

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Introduction

This contribution is historically set in the period 1880–1915 and concerns the Tangkic language group comprising the Lardil, Yangkaal and Kaiadilt ‘tribes’ of the Wellesley Islands in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria and the Ganggalida of the adjacent mainland (Figure 2.1). Although the colonists began settling in the wider region in the late 1860s, the Islanders experienced minimal contact with them until well after the turn of the century.¹

The Lardil tribe occupied Gununa or Mornington Island (which is by far the largest of the islands), as well as Langunganji (Sydney Island) and Lingunganji (Wallaby Island). During the study period it is estimated that the Lardil population fluctuated between about 280 and 320, with an average patriclan size of ten, although actual clan size varied between one and thirty-six. The Yangkaal were a much smaller group occupying several islands between Kununa and the mainland, whilst the Ganggalida resided on the mainland coastal areas. The Kaiadilt territory was in the South Wellesley Islands.

This case study is a reconstruction of aspects of customary lifestyle, mainly from the perspective of Lardil people living on Mornington Island. It aims to place the ethno-architecture of this group in the context of its traditional lifestyle pattern of mobility, hunting-gathering, trade, ceremony and social life. Various dimensions of domiciliary behaviour are explored, including culturally distinctive aspects of spatial and sensory behaviour. As is the case for most Australian Aboriginal groups, a repertoire of shelter types (often eight or more) was used under varying circumstances, mainly seasonal and climatic, but also dependent on length of planned stay, size of residential group, available material resources and range of technologies.

Coastal portions of Mornington Island were (and are) divided into segments, each of which had many of its natural resources, for example, dugongs, turtle, water lilies and pandanus nuts, presided over by a patriclan leader. Despite the territorial division into patriclan ‘countries’, widespread movement occurred around the island for both social

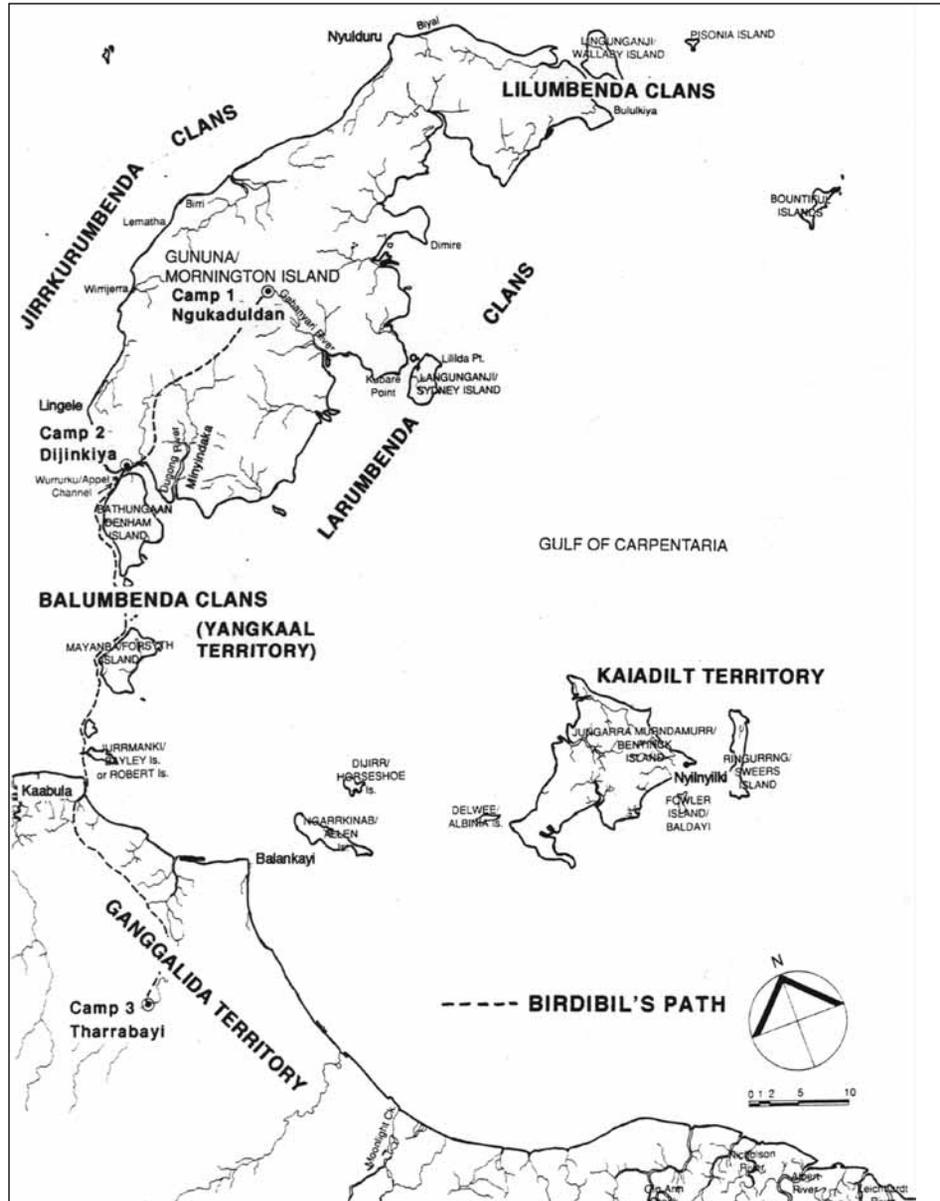


Figure 2.1 Map of Wellesley Islands and mainland coast, showing tribal and clan areas and Birdibil's travel route between these camps. (Maps and diagrams in this chapter courtesy Paul Memmott.)

and economic reasons. The population size of camping groups therefore varied, with the well-resourced camps hosting fifty or more people quite regularly. For most of the year coastal resources were exploited, with hunting oriented to the sea.

At another level of social structure, the Mornington Island coastline was divided into four segments by direction, each consisting of a number of the coastal patriclan countries (see Figure 2.2). The aggregates of patriclans occupying each of these divisions referred to themselves as the Larumbenda (south-east), the Lilumbenda (north-east), the Jirrkurumbenda (north-west) and Balumbenda (south-west). These various divisions were reflected in the socio-spatial structure of Lardil camps.

A further dimension of social grouping was provided by the eight 'subsection' or 'class' system. This system structured many forms of everyday behavioural interaction between people, such as marriage, obligations to share food, choice of conversation partners and, in some cases, socio-spatial behaviour. The Lardil names for these subsections (or 'skins') are *burrarangi*, *kamarrangi*, *kangala*, *yakimarrri* in one patri-moiety; and *ngarjibilangi*, *buranyi*, *bangaranyi* and *balyarrinyi* in the other.

The case study is structured around three specific camp events which are set at different times of the seasonal year to reflect different usages of shelter. It is presented in a narrative form based on ethnographic reconstruction by the author which is derived from first-hand accounts of the period.²

The Timber-cutting Camp at Ngukaduldan

Birdibil was sitting on the bank of a long waterhole, manufacturing with his grandfather (his father's father), Buyal. The pair were cutting the limbs of *kurpurru* trees

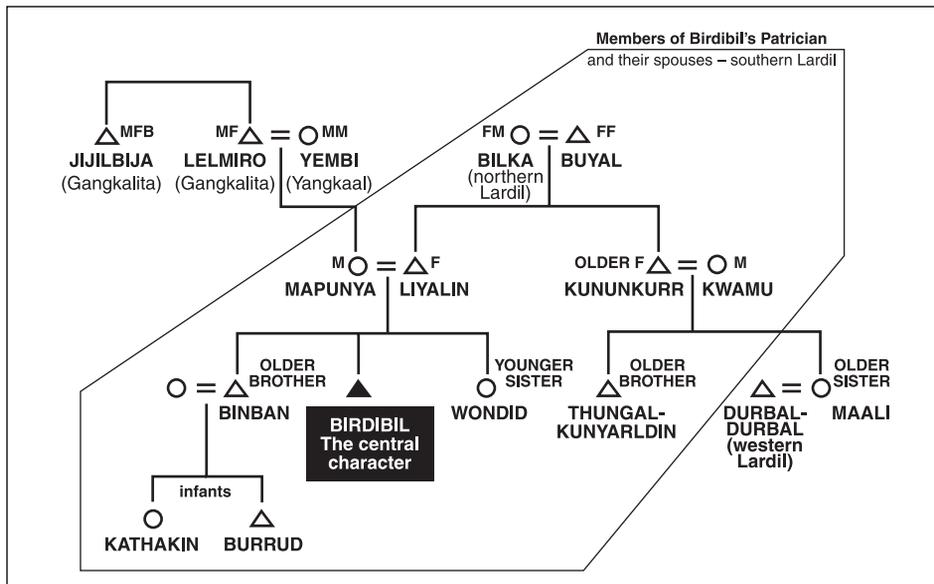


Figure 2.2 Characters mentioned in the chapter are all Lardil names for persons unless otherwise indicated. Note the distinctive Aboriginal kinship categories seen from the viewpoint of the central character, Birdibil (F = father, M = mother, B = brother).

(*Acacia alleniana*) into short segments, then splitting these segments into flat slabs. Their tools were a fire for cutting, a stone axe and a billet of timber for splitting. A bailer-shell knife was used for cleaning and scraping charcoal off the ends of the slabs. Birdibil's (paternal) grandmother, Bilka, was sitting inside her windbreak playing with the infants, Burrud and Kathabin, the children of Birdibil's older brother, Binban (or 'Lightning').

Birdibil momentarily stared to the end of the waterhole where he could see in the distance his mother, Mapunya, and the other women catching *maali*, the fresh-water turtle. But his mind was on other matters. He was worried about the forthcoming initiation and the pain he would suffer, and whether he would be brave enough to resist flinching or crying. He did not wish to bring shame on his family. His day-dreaming was interrupted by his grandfather commenting on the *larumben wanngal*, the south-east wind, which he predicted would soon end, making way for the warm dusty season of the year and the first rains.

The cold wind had been blowing strong since the last new moon ('new moon' was in fact the meaning of Birdibil's name). These cold winter wind cycles chopped up the sea, making it dirty and resulting in poor off-shore hunting. Birdibil's clan had to leave their regular beach camps and their diet of dugong, rock cod, crab, oysters and many other seafood delicacies, and retreat to the 'inside bush', to the waterholes of the Gabanyari River. Their inland camp was at Ngukaduldan, regularly used for the collection of hard and durable acacia timber. The camp comprised four windbreaks with their back walls facing into the wind. As the sun dropped and the cloudless sky turned cold, Buyal instructed Birdibil to gather dead *kurrpurru* limbs for the windbreak fires that would be kept burning throughout the night.

It was turning dark when Birdibil heard the women returning laden with their *thumurr* or bark coolamons. His mother Mapunya had the largest coolamon full of red and white ochre which she placed in the fork of a tree. His sister-in-law and younger sister carried coolamons of fresh-water fish, whilst his older (second) mother, Kwamu, carried two coolamons, one with cooked turtle meat and the other with 'sugarbag' (bee honey). The food was being distributed on to paperbark mats in the four windbreaks, as an outburst of shouting signalled the return of the men from the acacia groves. Birdibil's elder brothers, Binban and Thungalkun-yaldin, were led by their father, Liyalin, and Birdibil's second (older) father, Kununkurr. The four men each carried a curved limb of *kurrpurru* which would be split into slabs for making boomerangs on the following day.

Birdibil's family were preparing for sleep, when a bobbing paperbark torch was seen approaching from upstream. Shouts revealed that the visitor was a tribal messenger from Dijinkiya, the trading camp situated on the west end of Gununa Island beside Wurrurku, the Shark Channel. As he entered the camp, the messenger's status was confirmed by the ochred design on his chest and the painted and feathered stick in his string belt. The messenger conversed quietly with Liyalin, then departed downstream on his way to the country of the adjoining Larumbenda clan.

Liyalin informed his wife and children of the good news that three dugong had been caught in the Shark Channel, and that many clans were being invited to the feast and public dance on the following day. They would depart at dawn. All the food in the camp would be left behind for the elderly Buyal and Bilka who would remain in their clan country along with the two infants.

Although Birdibil was warm in his family *wungkurr* or windbreak that night, lying next to a crackling fire and covered with some paperbark blankets (*kawan*), he had little sleep. His anxiety about his forthcoming ordeal was increased.

Windbreaks and Winter Camps

The customary Lardil structure used for protection throughout the dry, cold, windy time of the year (May to August or September), in both coastal and inland camps, is the windbreak or *wungkurr* (Figures 2.3 and 2.4). The windbreak is in fact a universal form used right across Aboriginal Australia. The most common Lardil type is a low circular wall. Each domiciliary group occupied such a circular unit at night, each group comprising (a) a nuclear family, (b) a small group of single initiated men, or (c) a small group of widows and single or unattached women. The number of windbreaks in such a camp varied from a few to twenty or more. A warming fire was in the middle of the entry space of each shelter and the occupants were spaced around the fire with their feet pointing towards it. Larger groups of Lardil single men slept in parallel between two straight windbreaks.

Materials for Lardil windbreaks were drawn from any convenient flora (leaves, grass, vines, branches). The 'floors' of windbreaks were excavated to a shallow depth in

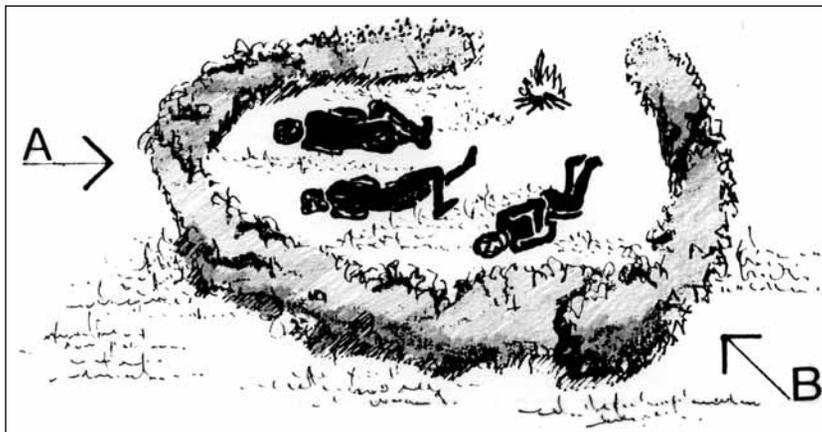


Figure 2.3 A *wungkurr* or windbreak with an extension added after a change of wind direction. (A) = original wind direction. (B) = new wind direction.

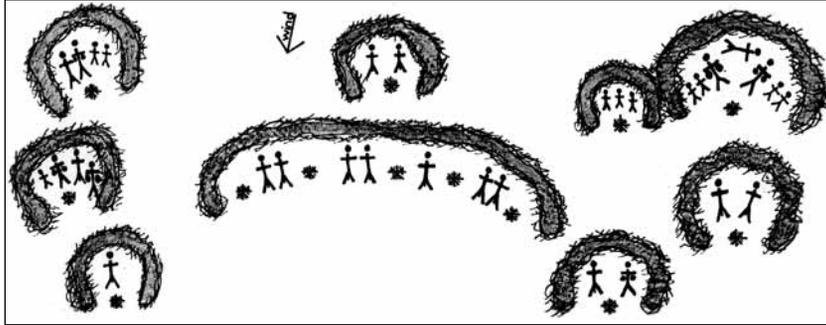


Figure 2.4 Cold weather camp showing sleeping arrangements of domiciliary groups in windbreaks.

order to clean and slope the floor correctly for sleeping, as well as to provide an extra weather barrier of sand at the base of the wind-break. This perimeter mound of sand was used for burying important artefacts for safekeeping. Other artefacts were stored under the windbreak walls, in the limbs of trees or on top of daytime shade structures.

All windbreaks were oriented in the same direction, and were situated within several metres of each other, forming an aggregate of repeated forms at six to nine metre centres. The walls of the structure were usually low enough to see over and maintain a view of neighbours and entry paths to the camp. This facilitated ease of visual, verbal and auditory communication between domiciliary groups, and a style of 'broadcasting' occurred in larger camps whereby news events and grievances were transmitted across groups in the evening and early mornings.

Daytime windbreaks were often built separate to nocturnal shelters, because daytime activity was usually focused at a different part of the camp site (such as in a shaded area or at a dance ground) and involved a different composition of social groups to that used for sleeping. Separate diurnal men's shelters and women's shelters were common in Indigenous camps across many parts of the continent.

The Dijinkiya Trading Camp

Birdibil and his sister Wondid were shown Yerrbarrkan Creek by their parents and were told how it had been created by the rolling Full Moon. Walking along a narrow path through mangroves, they then passed the Bluefish Story spring and emerged at the Barracuda Story Place situated on the end of a beach in the Shark Channel. The smoke of numerous camp fires was now visible on the sand beach ahead. (As predicted by Buyal, the wind had changed to the north.) Liyalin's clan had reached Dijinkiya, the trading camp owned by the western Lardil. To the south lay a string of small islands stretching to the mainland coast. These islands were the homelands of the Yangkaal people. The Yangkaal were intermarried with the Lardil and brought the trading goods from the mainland.

Along the beach front could now be seen numerous *wika* or shade structures, occupied by either men or women. Each group shouted welcomes, and Birdibil could see many manufacturing technologies in progress under these shades. Women were rolling tufts of human hair and wallaby fur into string. Men were shaping acacia boomerangs with scrapers and attaching spear heads and prongs to hibiscus shafts. These men exclaimed with a craftsman's enthusiasm upon sighting the many slabs of timber that Liyalin and his party were carrying, and Birdibil realised the value of this resource which had given him an aching back during the morning's march.

Now they ascended the sand platform to see some thirty or more nocturnal windbreaks distributed through the shady trees. The smell of roasting dugong meat wafting from many bark-covered ground ovens exacerbated Birdibil's hunger. Bands of small children ran noisily through the camp with their toy spears, chasing and hiding from one another. Women passed by carrying piles of *lulmurr* grass on their heads in preparation for twine manufacture. Not only was the camp defined by windbreaks and fires but by other 'lean-to' structures on top of which were stored many bark containers of red and white ochres, spears and other weapons, roasted mud crabs and soaking mangrove fruits. From every quarter came calls of greetings, jesting and news for the incoming party.

At last they reached the windbreak of Maali (meaning 'freshwater turtle'), Birdibil's elder sister. Her husband Durbal-Durbal emerged to welcome them. Maali placed roasted dugong ribs on pine needles as well as a large bailer shell of honey-sweetened water in front of the tired party. They dropped their load of coolamons and wood bundles to partake of a meal and to rest. Liyalin and his elder brother Kununkurr then went to confer with the other Lardil elders, whilst the two senior women, Mapunya and Kwamu, supervised the construction of three more windbreaks beside that of Maali. Birdibil was taken by his two older brothers to an interior swamp to obtain branches of foliage, forked limbs and sheets of paperbark. For not only were they going to construct windbreaks but also a bark 'lean-to' inside each windbreak, in anticipation of the seasonal weather change. Heavy dews were expected as well as a possible shower as the northerly and easterly wind-influences supplanted the winter south-east wind. The clan's domiciliary spaces were carefully sited in that sector of the camp reserved for the Larumben or windward division of the Lardil. The eastern, northern and western divisions were in the other designated sectors.

Several days later, Birdibil was with a group of men on the beach, repairing nets under a *barabar* (a shade shelter with a horizontal roof) and watching for the schools of *dulnul* fish. He was reflecting on the new dances he had seen at the corroboree on the previous night, when he noticed a number of families paddling rafts (*walba*) across the channel towards the camp. As they beached their *walba* nearby, he noted that the adults bore ritual designs. They formed into a tight huddle and, using their boomerangs for percussion, commenced ritual singing and walked towards Birdibil's *barabar*. One man, wearing a bone nose-piece, whom Birdibil had never seen before, placed his hands over Birdibil's eyes and said in a Yangkaal accent, 'Do not carry fear;

I am your father-in-law; it is time for you to prepare for your manhood.' He then tied a string hair-belt around Birdibil's waist as a symbol of Birdibil's initiate status.

Durbal-Durbal then appeared, took him by the hand and said, 'I am your closest brother-in-law, and I will dance, work and care for you. Come to the *thamurr* (dance) ground now, to begin your Law lessons.' Following an afternoon of listening to ritual songs about the ancestral dingoes, Birdibil was taken to the initiates' shelter on the inland side of the camp behind the communal wells, where he joined some nine other youths, all wearing hair-belts. He was paired off with an eastern Lardil lad, Kulkij, whom he had met before and had the same 'skin' (subsection), *kamarrangi*, as himself. They all slept under *kubul* or grass blankets between two high parallel, but straight windbreaks, separated by small fires.

Shade Structures

In the hotter periods of the year, shade was a prerequisite in any camp. If shady trees were not available, sunshades were constructed. The Lardil word for both shade and shade structure is *wika*. Several Lardil types were built, but only one shade structure had a special name: *barabar*, a flat-roofed shade (Figure 2.5). A rectangular or square plan was formed using four forked posts. These carried cross-beams and a series of rafters obtained from bloodwood or other saplings, all covered with foliage. This roof structure was most suited for use in the middle of the day when the sun was vertically overhead.

For early or late in the day, two other forms of shade were used. The 'lean-to' or sloping-roofed shade consisted of only two forked posts supporting a cross-beam, and with rafter members leaning up against this beam and covered with foliage. Vertical shades were made by inserting a bushy limb in a foundation hole. This type of *wika* was often repeated, forming a line of vertical shade branches (Figures 2.6 and 2.7).

Transitional Shelter Forms

A number of supplementary shelter forms were used during transition periods between seasons when weather conditions were changing and unpredictable. If intermittent or unexpected rain occurred in the southern Gulf, a 'lean-to' structure similar to that above, but employing paperbark to provide a degree of waterproofing, may have been constructed inside a wind-break (Figure 2.8).

During the transition periods to the wet season, occasional storms or showers were likely to catch people without a waterproof shelter. A quick way to keep dry was to lie or sit under a large piece of paperbark. Such a make-shift shelter was called *kawan* in Lardil, meaning 'bark blanket'. Bark was used in the same way to protect fires from rain.

CUSTOMARY CAMPS AND HOUSES



Figure 2.5 A flat-roof shade *barabar*, constructed of four forked posts and cross-rails.

An alternative device was a *kubul* which consisted of a quantity of grass as long as could be conveniently found, perhaps up to 1.6 m long, tied together at one end to make an 'instant' shelter that was used to sleep under, one per person normally. Although it caused perspiration in humid weather, it provided protection from dew or cold winds, being a combined blanket and windbreak (Figure 2.9).

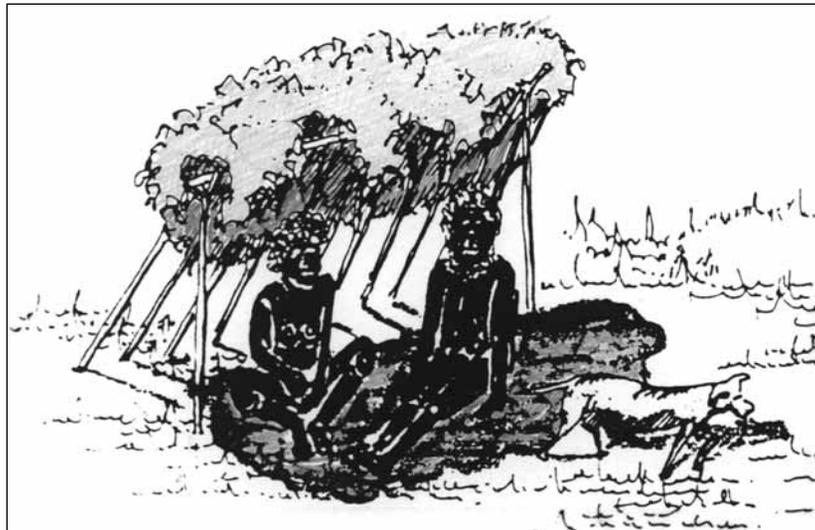


Figure 2.6 A mid afternoon *wika* using two forked posts and foliage.



Figure 2.7 A late afternoon shade or *wika* made by inserting a leafy limb into a hole.

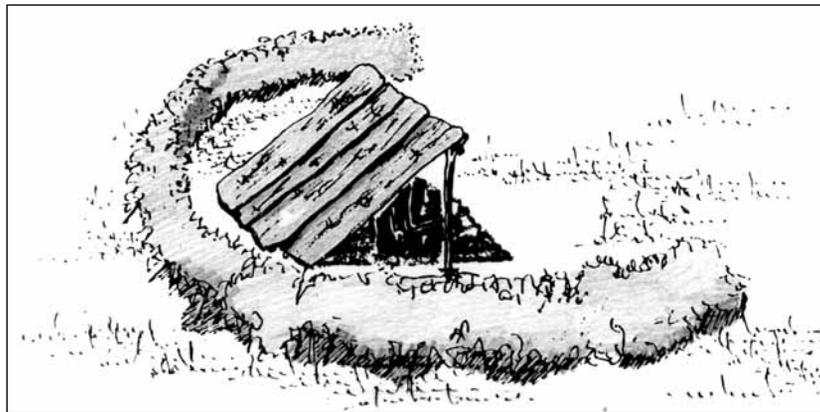


Figure 2.8 A combined windbreak and bark-roofed shelter for fluctuating wind and rain conditions (May or November).

Further Properties of Camps

Aboriginal camps were not only places to sleep, eat and perform other body functions, but were also places of major social interaction and the base for economic activity. Their properties were multiple and varied. The association of behavioural traits and artefacts with the natural properties of campsites and their environs leads one into differentiating between seasonal shelters, forms of seasonal food exploitation, specialised food process-

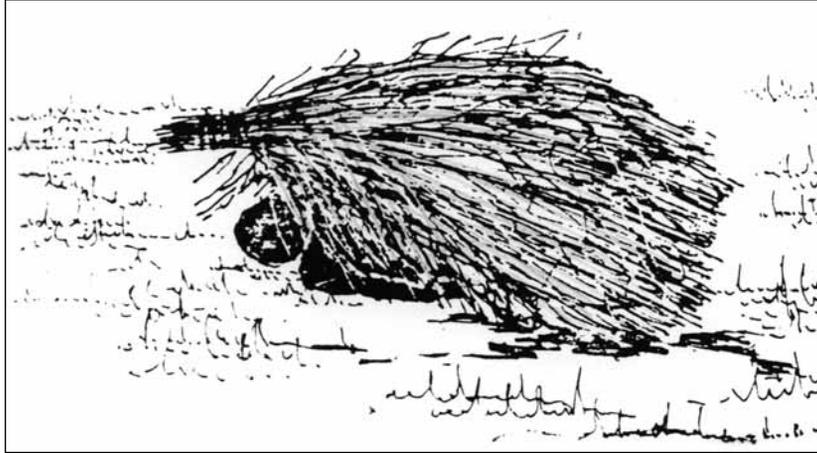


Figure 2.9 A grass blanket, *kubul*, providing protection from cold, wind and light showers.

ing methods, specialised tools for carrying out economic tasks, and the capacity to sustain large groups for a substantial time. This in turn leads to the differentiation between types of camps used for particular economic, social and ceremonial functions. The artefactual contents of camps, including shelters, were also adjustable and changing. Distinctive physical components included raw materials waiting use or processing, food waiting to be cooked, or stored if it was surplus, water, bundles of firewood, and hearths. Dogs were another ever-present feature.

Camps were all fixed places but the time, frequency and purpose of use, and the number of occupants varied. The decisions about when and where to shift were made many times by each Aboriginal family throughout the seasonal year, under varying social and personal circumstances. Given a choice of campsites, two properties were always considered as criteria of fundamental importance to the Wellesley Islanders: to camp on the beach and to camp where there was a freshwater supply. Nevertheless, some camps were more popular than others due to richer resources in the locale. At such camps it was likely to find stored artefacts that were not normally carried about, such as extra supplies of weapons, pounding stones and magical items.

The Mainland Initiation Camp of Tharrabayi

The group of Lardil and Yangkaal *Luruku* (initiates) had been travelling from their homelands for four days when at dusk they reached the mainland camp of Tharrabayi in the heart of Gangkalida country. The last day's travel had been through the wide band of sand ridges and long salt pans on the mainland coast which were already muddy from the first rains and showing crocodile tracks. The mud had worn out the young *Luruku* men who had been carrying the group's trading items

(Melo shells, fish spears, fish nets and ochre pigments). The families of the initiates followed behind and established a circular nocturnal mosquito camp layout by creating a ring of fires and a thick cloud of smoke. The *Luruku* were then positioned in the centre. This sub-camp was at a distance of 800 metres from the main camp proper, for there was to be no contact until the morning when proper *mirndi* or 'square-up' rituals could occur.

In the dawn light, Birdibil awoke to see some thirty or more grass-clad domes, on the open plain beside a freshwater stream. Birdibil had never seen such an architectural type before. Each dome had a small low entrance, which was emitting smoke from internal fires used to repel the swarms of nocturnal biting insects. He could hear women pounding cycad nuts on stones to prepare cakes for the morning meal. The stream was not yet running but contained a string of still pools separated by stone weirs and walls for trapping fish.

Birdibil remained with the *Luruku* under the supervision of their brothers-in-law (including Durbal-Durbal), whilst the older folks underwent 'square-up' or mourning with Gangkalida families to mark respect for the recently deceased. Two Jirrkurumben Lardil brothers and some Gangkalida men then duelled with boomerangs and fighting sticks to settle some past grievance. This was followed by two more similar duels between various individuals but nobody was physically hurt.

The older Lardil and Yangkaal adults and women were then allocated a new sleeping area on the coastal side of the camp near the shelter of the Gangkalida Elder, Lelmiru, who was married to Birdibil's *nyerre* ('granny' or mother's mother), Yembi. The Islanders spent the day constructing their *ngambirr* or cubic-shaped wet-weather shelters, clad with paperbark cut from nearby swamps. Water was drawn from the stream in bailer shells and stored on the rooftops along with weapons and utensils. Lightning flashes on several horizons signified the necessity for the early seasonal use of these shelters.

Birdibil was particularly happy to know his granny was in the camp. It had been a full year since Lelmiru and Yembi had visited them at home on Gununa. His granny belonged to that social category with whom Birdibil had a joking and teasing relation and she was always playing tricks on him. However, the initiates were separated from their close kin and taken to a secluded part of the camp where they joined some half-dozen Gangkalida youths also wearing hair-belts in preparation for initiation. Now they realised that the purpose of their journey had been not only to learn of the ancestral travel routes, sacred sites, camps and resource places right across to the coast, but also to meet up for a large-scale inter-tribal initiation ceremony.

The initiates were sat down and addressed by one who seemed a most fearsome warrior, named Jijilbija, who informed them that he was one of their new bosses and told them in no uncertain terms of their 'prisoner' status for the remainder of their stay. They were then lectured at length on the customary significance of Saltwater Law and the severity of penalty for misdemeanours. Jijilbija wore a black and red

cockatoo feather in his pierced nasal septum, emu-feather arm and pubic tassles and a pearl-shell pendant, items of apparel which were associated with the mainland culture, and exotic in Birdibil's eyes. He also carried a pair of hooked and fluted boomerangs, and displayed a pattern of cicatrices on his chest that were also foreign to Lardil eyes.

Jijilbija then dispersed the initiates to perform further allocated tasks under the supervision of their older brothers-in-law. Birdibil was sent with a small group upstream to an emu hide and trap, a strange but exciting experience as he had never seen an emu before. There were none living on the Wellesley Islands (although Lardil sacred histories recounted how emus had visited Gununa in the Dreaming). Birdibil's party hid some distance from a number of timber stake yards or fences surrounding small waterholes, each with a narrow gate. As dusk fell, several emus approached and entered the races leading to the gates. Once inside, the young men took turns in spearing them and were shown how to pluck the best feathers for decorative apparel, sear off the remaining down and butcher the animals. In performing these tasks Birdibil was paired off with an older youth, Jamu, whom he later found had as his 'promised' one for marriage, Birdibil's younger sister, Wondid. Jamu told him that Jijilbija was Lelmiru's full brother and therefore a 'grandfather' for Birdibil and that he controlled one of the four principal song cycles used for 'making young men'.

Upon their return to the *Luruku* men's area, Birdibil saw that the larger party of initiates had been constructing four domes with frames of sturdy gum limbs and grass cladding, one each for the *kamarrangi* and *burrarangi*, the *kangala* and *yakimari*, the *ngaribilangi* and *buranyi*, and the *bangaranyi* and *balyarrinyi* youths. In this manner, Birdibil found himself assigned to a dome that contained a mix of Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangkalida youths, all of whom were in a classificatory relation of either 'brothers' or 'fathers' and 'sons'. This division of the initiates into residential groups by class, also reflected the four different Dreamings and song cycles which each respective group would be taught during their ritual training. The youths were told that tomorrow they would be shown how to 'plaster' the grass-clad domes with a layer of mud and then cover the whole with sheets of paperbark.

It was fully dark as Birdibil and the other youths were brought coolamons of roasted mudcrabs, cycad nut cakes and water by a group of women, including his granny who told him he would be held in this camp for several months while he was made into a 'man' and that she would be dancing for him to give him strength. The youths were then taken to the public dancing ground on the opposite side of the camp where a corroboree was in progress. They were sat down in their four subgroups with their own fires, noting that the Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangkalida all formed further separate sub-groups of audience in a circle. The Lardil elders then lit central fires on the dance ground to reveal a wet-weather shelter with two parallel windbreaks leading away. A dance of Thuwathu followed, portraying the famous Lardil sacred history of how Thuwathu as a man was burnt alive in his shelter by his

sister, then metamorphosed into a Rainbow Serpent and dug the Minyandaka riverbed trying to extinguish his body. As part of the performance, the shelter was symbolically burnt on the ground and the dancers then writhed in feigned agony between the windbreaks which symbolised the mangrove-clad banks of the river, all to the rhythm of Liyalin's singing and boomerang percussion.

That night Birdibil fell asleep exhausted with a mixture of security and fear, knowing his family was close by and guided by his grandparents, but knowing also that many unknown tests and tribulations lay before him in his path through the Saltwater Law of his people, before his final 'smoking' when he would at last be a 'man'.

Wet-weather Shelters³ and Camps⁴

The Lardil and Yangkaal wet-weather shelter was cubic or rectilinear in form and was called *ngambirr*. It was constructed of four forked posts, horizontal side rails (two or three for each wall surface), roof beams, and a variety of claddings—long lengths of grass, paperbark, leaves—woven between the rails. Long sheets of paperbark usually were laid over the closely spaced rafter members to form a roof lining and covered with a layer of leaves or hummock grass, then a layer of sand. The sand served a double purpose of absorbing water and providing dead load to resist movement of the roof by cyclonic winds. Vines or bush string often were tied between structural members to keep the cladding firmly in place. As the rain became more intense, the open front side

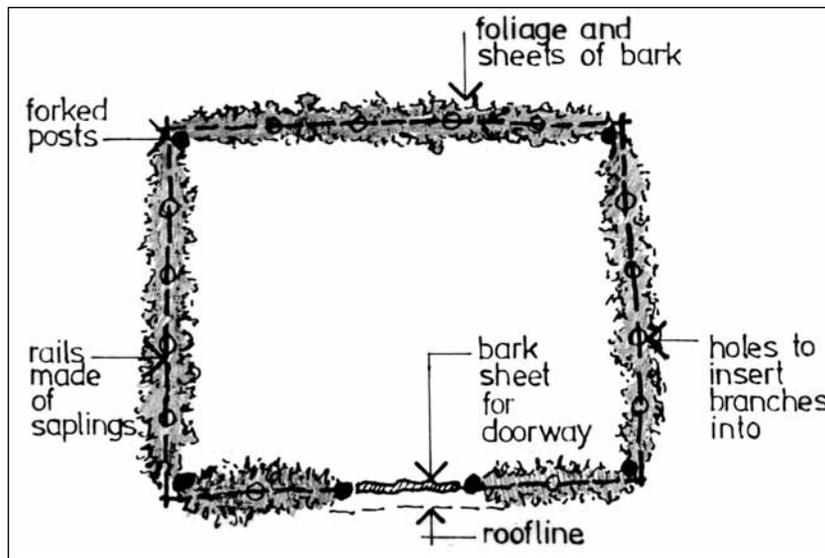


Figure 2.10 Plan of a wet-weather shelter, *ngambirr*.

CUSTOMARY CAMPS AND HOUSES

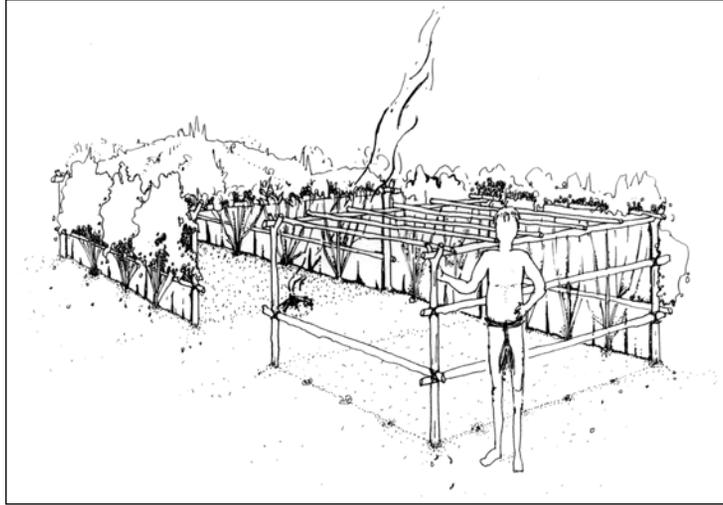


Figure 2.11 An alternative wet-weather space for a large domiciliary group, made by placing two *ngambirr* opposite each other, and sealing off with a limb between two side walls.

was enclosed leaving a narrow entry, opening in the centre or to one side (Figures 2.10 and 2.11).

A key architectural aspect of this case study is the contrast between the Wellesley Islanders' cubic wet-weather shelter (*ngambirr*), and the northern mainland styles which included (a) the grass or paperbark clad dome type with a small entrance opening and a roof vent (Figure 2.12), and (b) vaulted platform shelters (Figure 2.13). These last two types are more commonly associated in the ethnographic literature with Arnhem Land and west Cape York, but were also used in the southern Gulf.

Both the Lardil *ngambirr* and the mainland domes were employed towards the end of December, when the seasonal rain of the north-west monsoons usually begins. Several cyclones may also occur in the wet season, when rain is likely to fall consistently for periods of several weeks. Local flooding and boggy ground may result in the

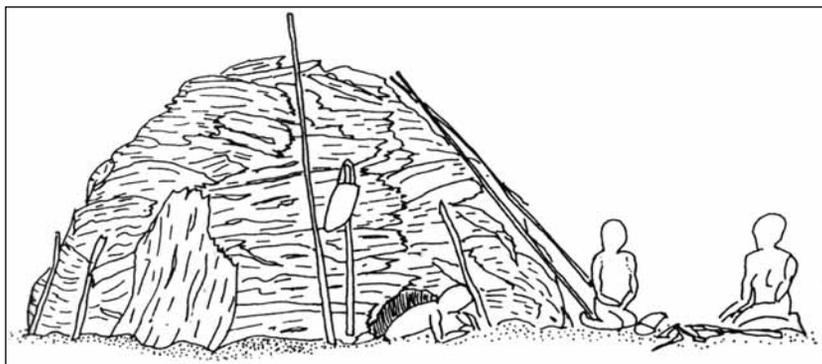


Figure 2.12 Wet-season mainland dome, clad with paperbark and with internal fire.

occupation of a single camp for up to six weeks. Shifting of camp occurred occasionally when the rain stopped for a day or two. The wet-weather shelters were the most elaborate structures of the seasonal repertoire and more energy was invested in their construction than in any of the other secular shelter forms.

The wet-weather shelters were designed to repel mosquitoes by combining an interior of smoke with minimal openings. However, during the transition periods prior to and following the wet season proper, the Lardil combined two alternative techniques to minimise this discomfort: choosing a campsite exposed to the wind, and the use of fires spatially arranged with respect to sleeping positions so as to form a thick smoke barrier around the camp (as in Figure 2.14). This was known as a 'mosquito camp'.

Continental Overview of Customary Houses and Camps⁵

Although there was a wide distribution of common structural principles and shelter forms across the continent, materials and construction details were subject to regional variations. In most areas, people either sat or lay inside shelters, so they were consistently low (height 1.2–1.5 m). More sedentary groups built taller shelters in which they could stand. These were used in circumstances of prolonged inclement weather such as that found in north-eastern rainforests, western Tasmania and western Victoria.

The two types of mainland wet-weather shelters mentioned above and used across the northern monsoonal areas of Australia exemplify the influence of materials on form. The most suitable claddings were bark sheets from *Melaleuca leucadendron* (paperbark) and *Eucalyptus tetradontra* (stringybark). Paperbark is very flexible and thus suitable for making a dome over a structure of limbs or saplings. In contrast to paperbark, stringybark can bend in only one direction. Some weeks after the wet season had set in, the stringybark could be prised off its trunk and used in a range of vaulted forms supported on single, double and triple ridge-poles. To avoid the boggy ground, a further elaboration was a sleeping platform under which fires could be burnt to repel mosquitoes (see Figure 2.13).

Domes covered either circular or elliptical ground-plans up to 3.6 m in diameter according to the size of the occupant group. A common type in the arid interior had a framework of rigid curved boughs. Cladding was of thatched grass, foliage or reeds, sometimes with a coating of mud or clay, possibly for insulation against extremes of temperature or to keep off rain (examples have been recorded in all conditions). In some parts of the south-east of the continent, domes appear to have been supported on low, circular stone walls. Conical and cubic forms were less common, but nevertheless widely distributed.

Stringybark and other rigid barks were also used for unsupported structures of both a folded plate and a barrel vault type. Other common seasonal shelters were windbreaks (linear, arced and circular), open sleeping platforms and tree platforms in flood-prone areas. Entry 'porches' were attached to some enclosed shelters. Shades were constructed

CUSTOMARY CAMPS AND HOUSES

31

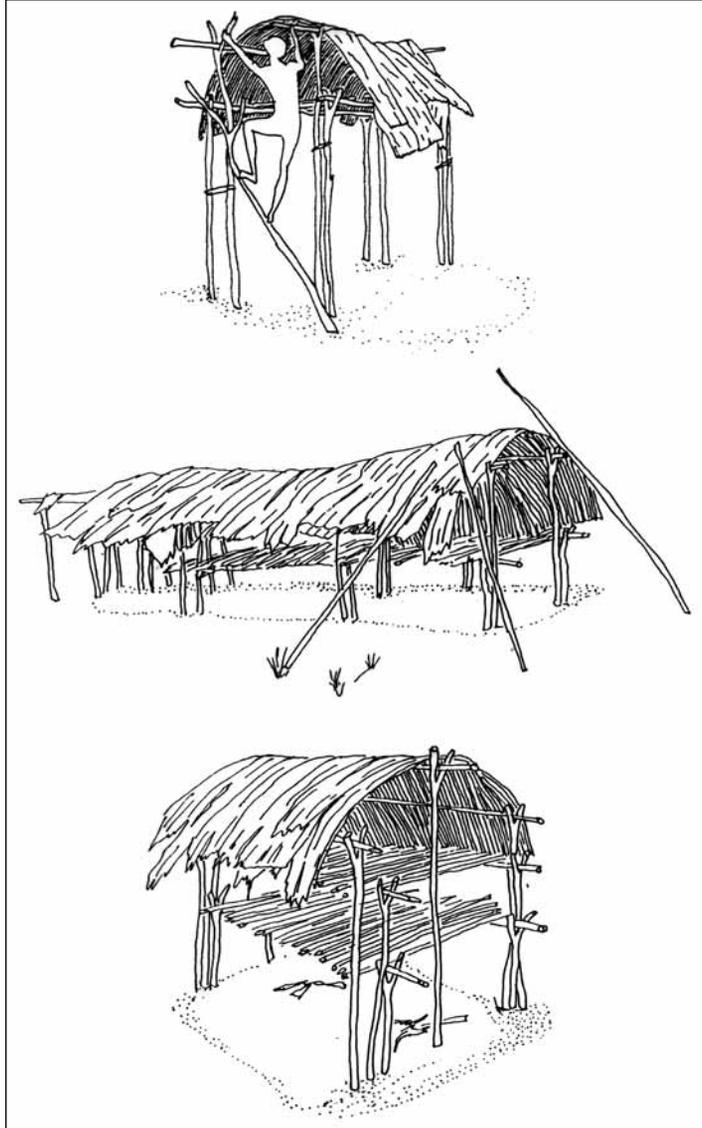


Figure 2.13 Vaulted platform shelter types used throughout northern Australia in the late wet season, using stringybark cladding.

using the range of techniques described for the Wellesley Islanders, but another arid-area type was a light-weight dome with an open lower wall structure.

Together with fires and other artefacts these shelter units were used seasonally, combined in different ways, according to the prevailing weather conditions and socio-spatial customs, to generate different types of seasonal and functional camp forms.

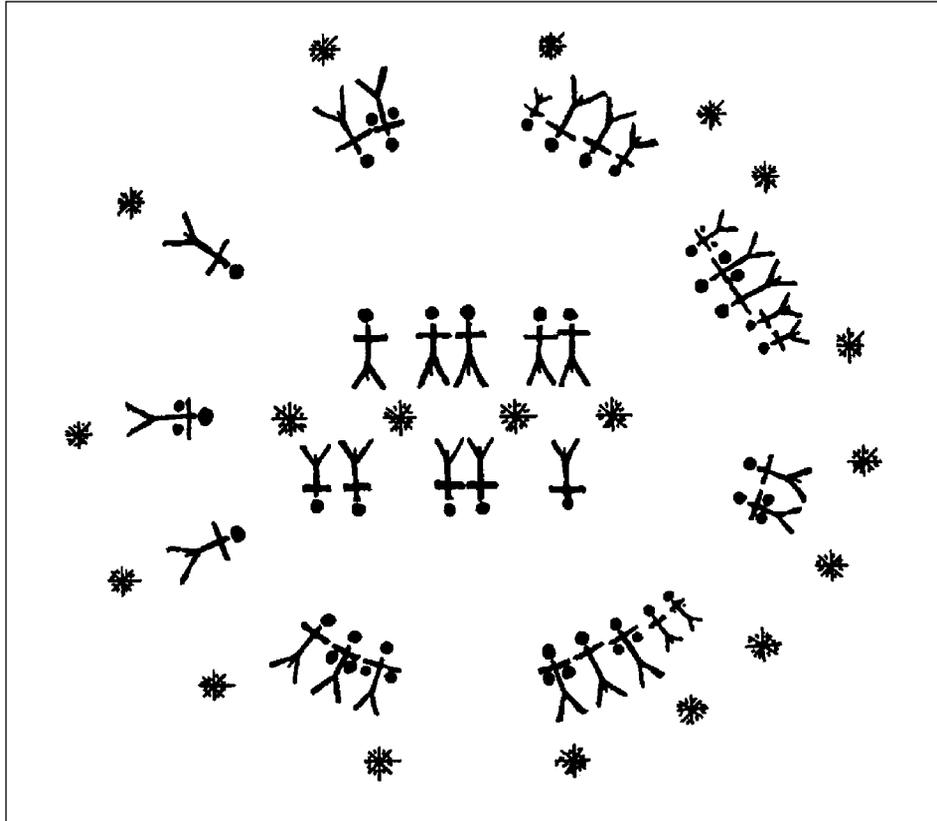


Figure 2.14 Lardil mosquito camp layout showing sleeping arrangements and the location of fires. Young single men (initiates) are positioned in the centre.

Due to their often impermanent nature, individual shelters were seldom imbued with symbolism (an exception being the vaulted barrel vaults of Arnhem Land (see Reser 1977, 1978). However, many groups associated a specific shelter type with a particular sacred history, as was seen in the Lardil story of Thuwathu's metamorphosis.⁶

The socio-spatial structure of camps and even sitting groups (for example, at a dance ground) could be generated by tribal and/or sub-tribal group identity. An alternate type of clustering involved grouping people based on their class identity as illustrated in the initiates' (*Luruku*) sub-camp. Subgroups also commonly positioned themselves in camps according to the direction of their homeland. Spatial and interactive behaviour between individuals was further structured in camps by kinship rules which influenced (a) sitting positions, orientations and appropriate distancing; (b) whose camp one could enter; (c) avoidance of particular individuals and their residences; and (d) degree of formality or informality required between certain kin (e.g. Birdibil's 'joking' relation with his granny).

CUSTOMARY CAMPS AND HOUSES

33

Customary houses or shelters were used like tools to make everyday life more comfortable from inclement weather. As such they were pleasurable and secure things for the time they were used. Their lifespan seldom exceeded a season and was more often several weeks or less. Although the timber frame structures may have endured through several seasons, they would ultimately collapse under white ant attack, or be reused as firewood or components in a new shelter.

They were not a 'home' in the Western sense of being a permanent structure for physical protection against climate and other physical hazards, to which is also attached personal decorations, colours and symbols. Perhaps even more important properties associated with the Western home are the multitude of memories of past experiences and daydreams in its spaces that stretch back through one's time of occupancy as far as childhood. For Aboriginal people, memories and experiences were associated with campsites and other places in the landscape, not with specific shelters which were too many, too similar and too impermanent to provide such a wealth of stable links with the past. The artefactual, behavioural and sensory properties of the Western construct 'house' are best construed in the Aboriginal context to be embedded in and between the domiciliary space and the camp rather than in the shelter per se.