

ASPECTS OF KIMBERLEY ANTHROPOLOGY

On 6 November 2002, Pat Vinnicombe spoke to Kimberley Society about work conducted on Moola Bulla Station over three successive visits in 1989, 1991 and 1993. Her emphasis was on Aboriginal oral history and, being chiefly interested in recording the recollections of Aboriginal people who lived and worked on the station, she has not tried to cross-reference her work with European history.

Pat started by giving a brief background to events leading up to the formation of Moola Bulla. In the mid-1880s the traditional way of life for Aboriginal people in the eastern Kimberley was severely disrupted by the influx of European settlers. Pastoralists came into the region with mobs of cattle in 1884/1885 and then thousands of prospectors went to and from the Halls Creek gold rush in 1886.

The introduction of cattle severely affected the traditional food collecting patterns of the Aboriginal people and complaints arose from pastoralists about hunters killing livestock. At the same time the pastoralists recognised that Aboriginal people could fulfil their need for station labour.

In 1901 a progressive government official suggested that some Kimberley land be set aside for a station on which indigenous people could live and raise stock to feed themselves, but it was not until 1910 that the government purchased Greenvale, Mt Barrett and Nicholson Plains Stations to create a reserve for the use of Aboriginal people. It was a very large area, some 1.3 million hectares, and was renamed Moola Bulla.

Two brothers, known by their European names as Whisker and Captain, lived with their families in that area. Captain and his family had their camps on the Upper Panton and Margaret River not far from the present day homestead, while Whisker and his family were centred in the very rough country up in the ranges around the O'Donnell River.

Aboriginal people from all over the Kimberley region were moved, some forcibly, on to Moola Bulla, which meant that Whisker and Captain faced not only a European invasion but also an Aboriginal invasion of their lands. A system of authority was eventually worked out between the indigenous people themselves resulting in Whisker being in charge of allotting camp areas for people coming onto the station. He was also acknowledged as the ritual expert and led all the ceremonies. Whisker was much liked and respected. Captain, on the other hand, effected all law and order and was in charge of administering punishments for crimes, usually in the form of spearings. He was much feared and was generally regarded as a much tougher individual than his brother. Both men had two wives who each had three children and it was their grandchildren from whom Pat obtained their family history.

In fact it was a granddaughter, Josie Farrer, who initially contacted Pat with this idea in mind.

Moola Bulla had many changes of pattern over the years including a period when it was used as a penitentiary for Aborigines. Then, for reasons unknown, the Government sold Moola Bulla to a Mr Goldman. He was reputed to have a violent temper and the people on the station at the time remember a dreadful argument between Goldman and a government representative, which resulted in the Aboriginal people being given 24 hours notice to quit the station. Approximately 280 people were forced to move and they had to leave a lot of their possessions behind, including their dogs, which was particularly upsetting for them. Halls Creek was unable to cope with the influx of refugees and, when the overflow was packed off to Fitzroy Crossing, many of the families were split up. Old Whisker, for instance, died in Fitzroy without ever returning to his own country.

In the period leading up to Pat's anthropological work with the traditional custodians of the land, the white owners of Moola Bulla would not permit any Aboriginal presence on the station. It was only after much negotiation that Pat was able to gain permission for the first of her three visits with the descendants of Whisker and Captain. Strict guidelines were issued which included a ban on taking alcohol and guns onto the property. In turn, the owner allowed them to move freely about the station where they camped out at the old sites without having their every move monitored.

Pat illustrated her talk with slides and transparencies including some wonderful photos taken during the early years. The photographs depicting large gatherings for ceremonies on Moola Bulla showed some of the men wearing no covering at all, while the women were in European dress.

During the course of the visits, the descendants relocated Whisker's old camp - easily identified by a young baobab tree grown from a seed and the humpy made out of paraffin tins - and found much evidence of former usage by the family. Memories of the creek lines and waterholes of their grandfathers' time bore little resemblance to the current state of those landmarks. In the old days, bamboo and palms had surrounded most of the waterholes, which were refreshed by running water and filled with waterlilies. Unfortunately the destruction of the habitat caused by the continued presence of cattle had resulted in virtually no bamboo or palms remaining and, in one case, the spring was no longer evident at ground level. The construction of turkey nest dams on the water holes and the use of pumps had lowered water levels, while the harvesting of the palms for building the stockyard had resulted in their disappearance. The timber railings had been replaced with metal, and the palm trunks lay decomposing on a dump.

Pat and the traditional owners discovered the area where the Aboriginal men used to sit and make implements from porcellanite (quartz), a procedure that was well documented and published by Tindale in the 1950s. Photos were also shown of gravesites, which, with the exception of one belonging to a European who was a bookkeeper on the station, were all of Aboriginal people known to the party. One of these was old Whisker's wife, who pined sorely for her country and indeed managed to return there after her husband died. Her daughter (Josie Farrer's mother) had also wanted to be buried in the Moola Bulla cemetery, but this was not permitted by the Halls Creek authorities.

Many of the old station buildings are still in existence. At one time there had been saddlery, tannery and butchery workshops together with a school all set up to teach Aboriginal people the basics of a western education. There had also been an extensive vegetable garden but all that could be found of that area on their visits was an old hoe in the grass!

Pat was keen to end on a positive note and mentioned that recently Moola Bulla station, together with 34,000 cattle, had been sold for the record sum of 18 million dollars. On 1 July 2002, the new owners had held an Open Day for all Aboriginal people who had an association with Moola Bulla. The new owners have also indicated they are interested in employing Aboriginal people and in holding discussions about native title issues. It is early days yet but the feeling is positive. The Aboriginal people are no longer shut out from their traditional land.

Susan Clarkson