

Encountering the Horse: Initial Reactions of Aboriginal Australians to a Domesticated Animal

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The Global to the Local

WITHIN AN ANGLO-SAXON MINDSET, THERE IS THE TENDENCY TO THINK AND SPEAK of animals, such as the horse, as distinct entities. In the following narrative, however, the horse is crucially inter-linked with humans and the guns they carried; the strange and unknown humans they encountered; the buffalo the horse assisted to hunt down; and the diseases and parasites horses carried within them. Encounters with the horse provide an entry point into a cross-cultural and cross-species landscape on the colonial frontier of northern Australia.¹

From an Aboriginal perspective first encounters with the horse would have brought a suite of alien beings that tipped their known world, which existed according to Aboriginal Law, suddenly into an alien one. The account is place-based, as for Aboriginal people everything is related to an extended kinship with the land. The focus is on West Arnhem Land, where the population is largely Aboriginal and where they have retained a deep connection with the land of their

¹ This research is part of a growing humanities literature that addresses not only the human but other beings in the mix as multispecies communities (see Cassidy and Mullin; Haraway). This includes a reappraisal of the classic Cartesian dichotomies between domestic and wild, nature and culture, and extending to native and feral (Descola; Plumwood).

ancestors, whereby generation upon generation may have inhabited the same lands for over 65,000 years.²

The domestication of animals has been viewed as an evolutionary, teleological process where humans moved from a state of hunting and gathering to the domestication of animals and plants (Childe and Clark 1946). In the past, Aboriginal Australia was thought of as a baseline example of the classic hunter-gatherer existence with an absence of domestication. What if, however, Aboriginal Australians knew about agricultural practices but through their philosophical worldview and a different underlying ecological framework they chose not to adopt these practices? Is the process of animal domestication inevitable in human relations with particular species of animal, such as the horse? What if the First Australians preferred to allow animals the freedom to roam and not to breed other beings for future consumption? This paper proposes that the First Australians adopted another kind of co-existence with animals that did *not* include retaining them within a domestic sphere over successive generations through control, capture and containment.

In contrast, the Plains Indians of North America are an example of a people that quickly and readily adopted domestic animals. The horse became an inherent part of the structure of society. The classic portrayal of the Native American is on horseback, hunting a buffalo (or bison) with a bow and arrow **[Figure 1]**. Peter Mitchell emphasises both functional and ecological reasons as to why 'horse nations', such as those found in the Americas, were more likely to develop: they had enough time, ample space, sufficient pasture and water, disease-free environments and lastly, a cultural precondition (Mitchell). This last factor has been under-examined in relation to the adoption of animal domesticates.

² The response toward settlers and domestic animals varied depending upon different tribal groups and the timing of first contact. In many parts of Australia the onslaught of pastoralism, driven by settlers on horseback, resulted in bloody massacres decimating many Aboriginal tribes (see Reynolds; Rolls).



Figure 1: The classic portrayal of the Native American buffalo hunt.
Source: Historical Image, George Catlin, Library and Archives Canada,
ref. no. 1989-292-5.

In the popular book, *Guns Germs and Steel* (1997), Jared Diamond asks how, with the close contact with Macassans from islands in Indonesia and trade networks in the Torres Strait through to New Guinea, Aboriginal people did not adopt domestic animals. Diamond assumes that Aborigines would have ultimately adopted domestic animals and agriculture if the options were there: 'Aborigines in the climatically most favorable areas of Australia were *evolving* in a direction that might have eventuated in food production' (309, emphasis in italics added). His answer is that it was a matter of geography, environmental conditions and the lack of large mammalian ungulates (or hooved animals) amenable to domestication that prevented farming (see also Flannery 1994). From a zoological standpoint, when animal domestication does not occur, the reasons given for its absence are thought to be due to environmental and geographic conditions. This notion of environmentally adaptive causation, feeds into a Eurocentric philosophical framework accentuating a dichotomy between nature and culture (see Descola 1996).

Bill Gammage writes that the continent was without farms but that the first Australians *were* 'farmers', through the planting of crops, such as yams, the construction of large dams and weirs for obtaining fish, the establishment of long-term settlements and above all 'firestick farming': the management of the land through fire. As Douglas Yen states, however, in relation to plants:

That the operational results of foraging techniques can offer striking parallels to agriculture ('the agronomy of hunter-gatherers') is really no argument for Aborigines being on some pathway towards cultivation, for domestication of plant species through control of breeding systems and adaptation through modification of the environment, both artificial processes in the human manipulation of the nature-culture equation, are missing in Australia. (Yen 844)

The use of the term 'artificial' is crucial here, as this view of artificially selecting domestic animals and plants in order to breed from them, to ultimately suit human needs, entails a particular dichotomous mindset between nature and culture. The Aboriginal way of life, which included strategic management of animals, plants and the land, stemmed from a different ontological framework from farming, or pastoralism. The focus of this paper, however, is not on whether the First Australians were hunters and gatherers, or were in fact farmers, but how Aboriginal people in Australia's north responded to the invasion of Europeans with unknown, large domestic animals in their midst. Why didn't Aboriginal Australians adopt horses for their own purposes within camps, as was evident with the Plains Indians in North America? ³

An anecdote from a Yolngu woman in the 1930s at the Yirrkala mission in Arnhem Land provides a potential answer. When seeing Fijian missionaries going to the trouble of carefully tending and watering gardens, a Yolngu woman remarked with disdain 'You people go to all that trouble, working and planting seeds, but we don't have to do that. All these things are there for us, the Ancestral Beings left them for us. In the end, you depend on the sun and the rain just as we do, but the difference is that we just have to go and collect the food when it is ripe' (Berndt and Berndt 108). Here, my premise is that this perception extends to domestic animals as well.

³ Aboriginal men were known for their expertise as stockmen on pastoral stations and as drovers (see Rose, *Reports*), but this was mainly within the structures of an agricultural framework and was often under the conditions of slave labour. The focus of this article is on the engagement with horses on Aboriginal terms within a pre-existing social structure that continued to exist beyond European settlements in the north of Australia.



Figure 2: Depiction of female Antipoline kangaroo in the X-ray style, Karndakidj, Arnhem Plateau. Photo courtesy of Murray Garde.

Connections with Animals

On rock walls and shelters of the Arnhem Plateau kangaroos have been depicted by Aboriginal artists for thousands of years. The more recent style of x-ray art was only developed around 2000 BC, which is relatively recent considering Aborigines have been living in the tropical north for over 65,000 years. The x-ray form illustrates the internal composition of the animal in realistic detail, including the eye-sockets, stomach contents and sinews in the tail **[Figure 2]**. Prey animals are often drawn larger and in more detail than accompanying human figures: in a hunt it is the prey that is important, not the hunter (Chaloupka). Images of large game, such as kangaroos, can be indicative of ancestral beings that have the ability to morph into both kangaroo and human form. A multitude of ancestral beings, are incorporated into sacred songlines, or Dreaming tracks.

An animal's connections within a totemic framework can be explained through a form of extended kinship. The anthropologist and natural historian Donald Thomson stated that 'the bond between members of a clan is of the same kind and only a little less intense than the bond between members of the same family, and this bond extends, but with diminishing intensity, to all members of neighbouring clans, and to all those people whom a [person] normally encounters during a

lifetime' (Thomson, *Kinship and Behaviour* 4). In this instance, Thomson was writing of obligations to human relatives but this also extended to other beings. This form of kinship does not draw a definitive line at humans but extends to all living and moving beings in relation to their connection with clan land, including water currents, fire, the stars, or maggots and mosquitoes. There are expectations of protection and custodianship through a mutual, shared ancestry. In Fiona Magowan's terms, a sharing of 'cosubstantive essences', between humans and other beings that mutually belong to the same clan land (Magowan). This metaphysical way of structuring the world was inevitably challenged with the appearance of new beings in their midst, with the arrival of previously unknown Europeans, who became intent on staying. The unknown humans were often preceded by previously unknown domestic animals, all of whom had no prior place or belonging within the complex social structure relating to hereditary ties with the land.

In order to illustrate the Aboriginal perspective in relation to the domestic and wild, the connection with the dingo in comparison to the European dog is a good example. The canine that existed on the continent when European settlers arrived on Australian shores was not what would be classically described as 'domesticated'. A maritime hunter-gatherer culture from the Indonesian archipelago visited, possibly from south Sulawesi, bringing the canine to Australia (approximately 3500-5000 years ago, according to Fillios and Taçon). Once adapted to the Australian continental environment, the canine developed the distinctive behavioural and physical characteristics of the dingo (Fijn). Aboriginal peoples developed their own connections with the dingo, often linked with Macassans in ceremony. When the dingo features as an ancestral being within songlines, individuals aligned with the clan's country regard the dingo as a totemic species, just as they would any other ancestral being that belongs to the land. This means that certain clans have a special affinity with dingoes: they believe they are derived from the dingo and have a heightened concern for their wellbeing (Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*).

In 1970 the archaeologist Rhys Jones, wrote an article providing a case study of how, within ten years from 1803-1804, the Aboriginal population of Tasmania quickly adopted dogs. Prior to the arrival of the dingo, Tasmania was cut off from the rest of the Australian continent for over 12,000 years from a post-glacial rise in sea level. This meant that Tasmanian Aborigines had never encountered the dingo, or any other canine previously. The first Tasmanians are perhaps one of the only cases in the world where there was an absence of a human-canine relationship. After the introduction of European breeds of hunting dogs by the first settlers, however, the Tasmanians quickly recognised the benefits and began living with them. Within a few years of seeing their first dogs they had formed close bonds with free-roaming dogs and had incorporated them fully within their

social structure. In some instances, the number of dogs far outnumbered the dwindling numbers of Tasmanians. Rhys Jones describes how, 'they adapted their hunting methods, and managed to make the profound social and psychological adjustments necessary in setting up an affectionate relationship with the new animal, a relationship radically different from any that they had had with other animals'... yet, 'the adoption of the dog required no alteration to man's dietary habits nor his seasonal movements, whereas to have done the same with sheep [or other hooved animals] would have involved a radical change in the structure of society' (270).

In Arnhem Land, Aborigines did not engage with the dingo in the same way settler Australians related to domestic dogs. Dingo puppies would be obtained from dens in the bush and were brought back to camp for children to play with. They functioned as guard dogs; they had the ability to fend off evil spirits; they were effective bed-warmers; and were useful in flushing out game when they joined hunting and foraging parties, often accompanying women and children (Meehan et al.). When the canines reached breeding age they were discouraged from remaining within the camp and were expected to survive on their own. This meant that dingoes remained tame as adults and came in and out of camps to scavenge and socialise. Unlike European breeds of domestic dog, they were not chained in one place, they were not fed regularly and they maintained their own territories and social organization (Fijn).⁴

Barrikerrnge: 'The New Lot'

The Macassans and earlier seafarers (known as Baijini) traded with Aborigines in the north of Australia for centuries. These seasonal visitors planted rice, coconuts and tamarind trees and, like the peoples migrating all over the Pacific, they brought dogs (dingoes), chickens and possibly even pigs with them. Yolngu adopted useful material objects, such as axes, tobacco pipes and outrigger canoes from Macassan seafarers (Thomson, *Economic Structure*). There is what is known as Contact Art on the Arnhem Plateau, the equivalent of the Kunjeyhmi word *Barrikerrnge*, meaning 'The new lot' (Chaloupka). The visits of these itinerant seafarers were incorporated into some ritual and ceremony, while their boats and technology were painted onto rock walls, represented in bark paintings and stone sculptures (Thomson, *Economic Structure*).

⁴ The Aboriginal relationship with dingoes would have been quite different from the kinds of relations the first settlers would have had with hounds for hunting, or sheep dogs, where specific breeds had a particular purpose and were controlled through restraint and containment.



Figure 3: Yolngu ceremonial sculpture depicting a Macassan prau with mast and sails, Northeast Arnhem Land. Photo: Natasha Fijn.

In 2009, Aboriginal elders spiritually connected with country on the Arnhem Plateau chose to reveal to archaeologists some remarkable rock art depicting an encounter with the first European expedition to venture overland through the tropical north of Australia: the Leichhardt expedition from late 1845-1846. It is likely that the Aboriginal artist who drew on the rock face would have never seen a large ungulate in the form of a horse, nor a white man riding a steed, and felt compelled to convey this strange sight to others. The horse is depicted in detail with chest and knee guards to protect against the thick scrub. The horse is also portrayed as a gelding, as the artist has drawn the horse urinating, yet with anatomy more in alignment with the more familiar kangaroo. The artist has also noted the distinctive brush-like tail that does not occur in marsupials.



Figure 4: Contact rock art: one of Leichhardt's expedition party riding a gelding, 1845. Source: <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-03-08/traditional-owners-unveil-leichhardt-rock-art/1612708>>, accessed 29 March 2016.

A comparative being to the horse is the larger species of kangaroo, yet they are very different kinds of animal, as the horse has very different body conformation, a different reproductive system from a marsupial, does not stand upright but on four legs instead of two shorter front legs that can be manipulated for scratching, and the horse has very different behavioural traits, including kicking backwards instead of forwards as a means of defense.⁵ The appearance of a tame adult horse, readily submitting to being ridden for long distances until the point of starvation and even death (a state that many of the horses were in at this stage of the Leichhardt expedition) would have been a strange sight, one that would have been hard for the local Aborigines to comprehend.

Perhaps the response was similar to those peoples in Eurasia who had never encountered Scythian invaders from the East on horseback before, whereby the horse and rider were perceived as one being, as a centaur. From the image, it is hard to tell whether the artist interpreted the encounter as a meeting with supernatural beings. The feet of the rider seem to be separated from the body and could be viewed as part of the horse, perhaps indicating that the artist did indeed

⁵ Horses were initially referred to by many Aboriginal groups as the 'European kangaroo', corresponding with a combination of physical characteristics found in both the horse and kangaroo (Reynolds).

perceive the horse and rider as one strange being. Henry Reynolds provides numerous early settler accounts where 'whites' were thought to be reincarnations of the dead because of their white skin. The dead are often represented with white ochre, as the figure in this image is. Ceremonies often refer to ancestral beings coming from the sea and entering onto the land, probably through previous contact with Macassans over hundreds of years. The artist could have perceived the rider as living and human, through prior contact with Macassans, yet the horse would have seemed a very strange creature indeed. As Robert Kenny points out, it was not so much the human intruders that disrupted and caused a rupture in local Aboriginal peoples' worldview, it was the alien, monstrous animals that they brought with them (Kenny).⁶

Leichhardt's Journal

Some further insights into the Aboriginal response to such a strange animal can be gained from accounts from the first overland expedition through Arnhem Land in *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia (1844-1845)*. The expedition party relied heavily upon the horses, bullocks and cattle they brought with them for survival.

On a number occasions, the men in Leichhardt's expedition cantered toward a group of Aborigines as a means of protection against perceived animosity and the startled group would retreat into the scrub. In other accounts when Aboriginal people first came across the horse they would tremble in fear at the sound of the hooves and snorts, their size and their speed and were particularly concerned about such a large mammal biting them (Reynolds). At the Roper River, Ludwig Leichhardt noted when coming upon a group of Aborigines: 'They had doubtless seen or heard of white people before [via ships on the coast]; but of our horses and bullocks they were very much afraid, and asked me whether they could bite: they accompanied me, however, pretty near the camp; but they kept their arms round my waist, to be sure of not being bitten' (Leichhardt 447).

When the expedition party was in need of directions or water, they discovered that they could more readily approach and communicate with people with less animosity and fear if they dismounted from their horses and sat down on the ground. Sitting on the ground was part of the expected Aboriginal etiquette with strangers but getting off the horse would have also allowed for more equal engagement. In one instance, when entering the boggy swamps of Arnhem Land, Leichhardt writes, 'several times I wished to communicate with the natives who

⁶ According to James Dawson, in relation to the western district of Victoria, when Aboriginal people first encountered the horse they would not go near them, as they resembled stories of the bunyip, a creature that lived in waterholes and lakes (Dawson).

followed us [in order to gain directions], but every time I turned my horse's head, they ran away, however, finding my difficulties increased, whilst attempting to cross the swamp, I dismounted and walked up to one of them, and, taking his hand, gave him a sheet of paper...' (494). Such instances are telling in that the explorers were better able to communicate with their horses than they were with the strange and unknown people.

In Victorian England at the time, horses were described as 'noble' by natural history writers and were viewed by the nobility as hierarchically superior to the servants who were bound to their care (Ritvo 19). Leichhardt would have grown up around horses, which would have resulted in a familiarity with the animal's behavioural responses and how to effectively convey what he meant to the horse while riding, yet the Aborigines Leichhardt's party encountered had unfamiliar modes of communication and behaved unpredictably. In the European mindset, the horse was domesticated and a part of culture, while the Aborigine was categorised as a part of nature, or part of the wild flora and fauna.

To Aborigines who were encountering large domestic animals for the first time, the social behaviour of the animals was also confusing and unpredictable. Gammage provides a telling example from an account by pastoralist Joseph Hawdon on the Murray River in 1938:

It was quite evident that the Natives looked upon the oxen as rational beings, for they gravely saluted them with their usual friendly salutation of 'Bo-Bo-marurood' (go! go! we are friendly) and waved green boughs at them in token of peace. The cattle not at all appreciating these marks of respect continued to move onwards, when the poor fellows were obliged to run off, not daring to wait the nearer approach of visitors so rude and unceremonious. (126-7)

Six days travel away from their final destination of Victoria Settlement on the coast, Leichhardt's party encountered a man called Bilge who knew a little English and called Leichhardt 'Commandant', evidently from having experience with the Commandant at the settlement.

Bilge himself took me by the hand and went to the different horses, and to the bullock and asked their names and who rode them. The natives had always been very curious to know the names of our horses and repeated 'Jim Crow', 'Flourbag', 'Caleb', 'Irongrey', as well as they could, with the greatest merriment. Bilge frequently mentioned 'Devil devil' in referring to the bullock, and I think he alluded to the wild buffaloes, the tracks of which we soon afterwards saw (519).

There were three settlements established in the region with the intention to stake a claim to the north coast of Australia ahead of other potential colonising nations. The first was Fort Dundas on Melville Island, which lasted from 1824 to 1828. The settlers brought in water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*) as food, resulting in a free-ranging population of buffalo remaining on Melville Island when the settlement was abandoned (Parsonson). Two successive settlements were established on the Coburg Peninsula: Fort Wellington in Raffles Bay from 1827 to 1829, then Victoria Settlement at Port Essington from 1838 to 1850.

Leichhardt's party traveled towards Port Essington in 1845, five years before the failed settlement was abandoned. Each military settlement imported European livestock but added domestic animals from the nearby island of Timor to the north, which ultimately fared a lot better than European breeds. Timorese horses, buffalo, Asiatic cattle and pigs initially struggled but, once released to fend for themselves, managed to survive and breed. Many goats and sheep died from consuming poisonous grasses and vegetation (Mulvaney and Green). This is probably why these species were initially unsuccessful in establishing in the tropical north. Early colonists realised through trial-and-error and a lot of animal deaths that the most successful way for livestock to survive was to let them range freely, allowing them to choose the best feed for themselves, rather than the usual conditions of containment within fencing.

Later in the Leichhardt expedition, one of their Aboriginal trackers shot a buffalo from horseback. Leichhardt writes how 'our meat bags were almost empty, and, as we did not wish to kill Redmond [their lone surviving bullock], our good companion, we had the prospect of some days of starvation before us. We could now share freely with our black friends, and they had not the slightest objection to eat the fresh meat, after baking it in their usual manner. They called the buffalo "Anaborro"; and stated that the country before us was full of them' (521). Leichhardt writes that the buffalo and their tracks were from stock that had strayed from the failed Raffles Bay settlement when everyone deserted the area in 1829, sixteen years earlier.

Domestic animals had clearly made a big impression on the individual Aborigines the expedition party met. 'They imitated with surprising accuracy the noises of the various domesticated animals they had seen at the settlement; and it was amusing to hear the crowing of a cock, the cackling of the hens, quacking of ducks, grunting of pigs, mewing of the cat, &c. Evident proofs that these natives had been in Victoria' (Leichhardt 523). The Timorese ponies (*landol*), banteng cattle (*buluki*), buffalo (*nganaparru*), pigs (*bigi bigi*) and goats (*nenigud*) were left behind to roam beyond the abandoned settlement. Escaped domestic animals often preceded the European invasion of settlers who were searching for new pastures to establish pastoral stations. Leichhardt relates how they saw horses on the Dawson River in

1844, which was several hundred miles beyond the nearest station. McKinlay also comments on horses roaming freely near Coopers Creek in 1861.

The domestic animals would have brought diseases detrimental to the Aboriginal population. They had no immunity to temperate-climate diseases and foreign illnesses from either Europeans or the livestock that associated with them. This combination of domestic animals, the technology of guns, and disease was influential in the European ability to invade and colonise nations who did not have these three weapons (Diamond). The first recorded influenza epidemic on the Arnhem Peninsula occurred amongst the Aboriginal population near Port Essington, causing over sixty deaths in one bay alone. On the other hand, the reason for the abandonment of all three colonial settlements was that many officers succumbed to fever from tropical diseases, such as malaria, that Europeans had no immunity to (Reid).

McKinlay's Horses

Nineteen years later in 1866, John McKinlay's expedition explored the Arnhem Plateau, including the Alligator River region, in search of potential pasture for the introduction of large herds of cattle or sheep and in the hope of locating a site for permanent settlement in the north of Australia. As was usual for an expedition of the time, they started out with forty-five horses, sixty sheep and seven dogs. During five months they met only two parties of Aborigines but were observed carefully and out of sight, as is evident from a frieze of eight horses and riders at Djirrinbal (located and documented in detail by rock art historian George Chaloupka). The animals have a strong resemblance to kangaroos with characteristic hindquarters and shortened front limbs but they are evidently horses from the expedition, with bushy tails, hooves and bells around their necks **[Figure 5]**. Chaloupka suggests it is the bells that would have drawn attention to the party as they passed through country (Chaloupka).

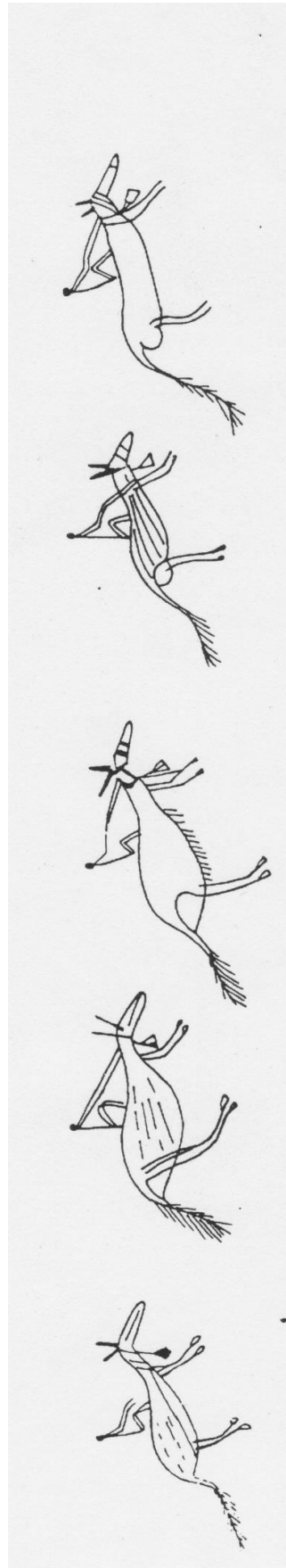


Figure 5: Contact rock art depicting horses with bells around their necks, McKinley expedition, Alligator Rivers region, 1866. Image used with permission from Pina Guiliani. Location: Kingwardelirrhmeng [Kingwardelirrhmeng]. Length: 38cm.

Horses were used by the invading colonists as a means of overpowering Aborigines they encountered, by taking advantage of the size and speed of the horse to run people down, or to force them to retreat into the bushes in fear. John McKinlay gives an account of coming across a woman with her child and being intent on 'pulling her up'. When she spies him she tries to rapidly retreat:

She screamed and cooed [sic], and set fire to the grass all around us to endeavour to get rid of us, but all to no purpose. I held out to her a fish-hook, but she would not take them to look at even, but busied herself screaming and firing the grass; upon which I got off the horse and approached her. She immediately lifted up her yam stick in a position the men throw their spears, and prepared to defend herself, until at last she quieted down on observing the fish-hook...' (Davis 333)

It is only when McKinlay dismounts from the height of the horse that the woman is not as panicked and frightened by the encounter. When the party finally reached the East Alligator River they killed the horses that remained and made a punt from saplings and horse hide to raft back to the point where they had begun. He essentially failed his mission because he found no promising farmland or a potential site for settlement.

On the Coburg Peninsula region Aborigines would spear the free-ranging animals (released from the deserted settlements) for food, which initially meant the Timorese ponies and Asiatic cattle were small in number but the larger and more dangerous buffalo less so. Spears made from traded pieces of metal were adopted, rather than stone flakes, as the hide of the large ungulates was a lot tougher than the skin of marsupials. In a newspaper article, Paddy Cahill writes about exploring for gold near the ruins of the Victoria Settlement in 1898-1899. He gives an account of coming across some small and weedy cattle and around 250 Timorese ponies: 'Had it not been for the blacks killing the ponies for food the country by this time would be carrying thousands of them. As it is they are not at all numerous' (Mulvaney 149). Unlike horses, the buffaloes proliferated in the ideal boggy, swampy habitat.

The ponies, cattle and buffalo were left here by the first settlers, and are claimed by an old blackfellow named Jack Davis... Jack says that 'big fellow boss been gib it me all about pony, bullock and buffalo; and suppose white fellow shoot him buffalo, him gib it me tobacco me no more growl'. If old Jack had had one stick of tobacco only for each buffalo shot he would have had over forty thousand sticks to his credit, for there has been fully that number of animals shot, since buffalo shooting started. (An anonymous newspaper article by Paddy Cahill, quoted in Mulvaney 147).

Buffalo Hunting

A new phase of Aboriginal engagement with the invading animals was through buffalo (*nganaparru*). Buffalo hunting in the swamps brought people from different clans together to work for white hunters on horseback, in exchange for tobacco, flour, sugar and other goods. With reference to the drawing below, copied from local rock art, George Chaloupka describes how 'the most admired and loved of all the introduced animals, at least by those who worked for the buffalo shooters and learned to ride them, were the *landol* (horses), which are also featured in rock paintings' (201). As Kenny points out in relation to the Wotjobaluk's response to sheep further south in Victoria, the local Aborigines would have interpreted domestic animals as white man's totemic beings, as they were associated with the coming of the white man, with the bible and were therefore perceived as intimately connected with white man's dreaming (Kenny). The buffalo had a separate status from other domestic animals in northern Australia, as it did not have the same close connection with the settler population. After its initial introduction it was left to roam around freely, yet the horse remained closely connected with any explorer or settler who ventured onto their country.

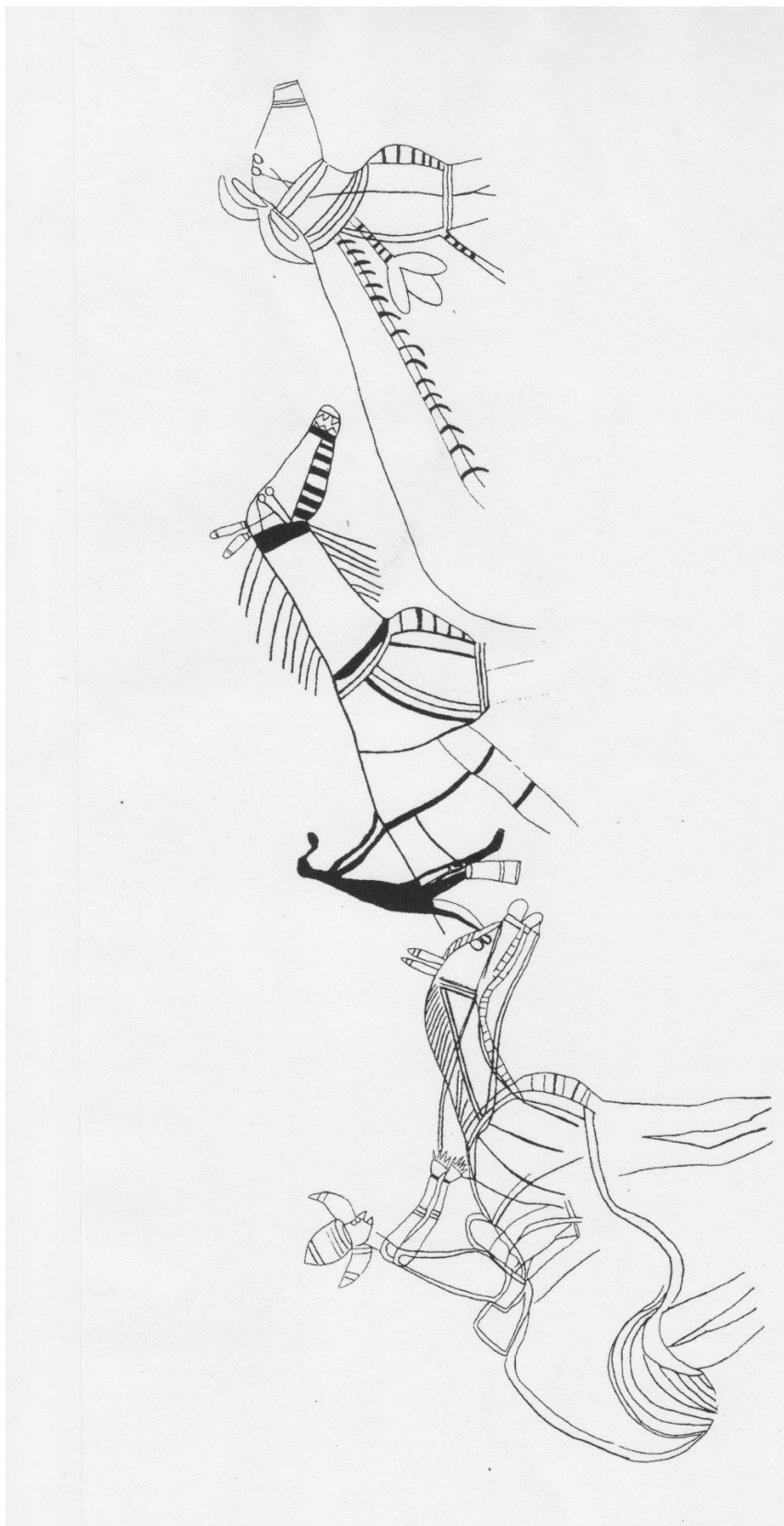


Figure 6: Contact rock etching of buffalo hunting, Paddy Cahill era (circa 1898-99). Image used with permission from Pina Guilian. Location: Mikkinj. Horse at left 240cm.

The artist depicts a large, life-sized buffalo being chased on horseback with details of a saddle, bridle and high-crowned hat. The buffalo and the first horse have been drawn in the x-ray tradition, showing the internal organs and even the eye stalks. In x-ray rock art, animals are often painted larger and in more detail than the less significant human figures (Chaloupka). The rock art could be recording the presence of Paddy Cahill, the first and most infamous buffalo hunter in the region. By the time Paddy Cahill was hunting in the area in 1890, buffalo numbered in the tens of thousands, from less than one hundred when the Victoria Settlement was abandoned only forty years before.

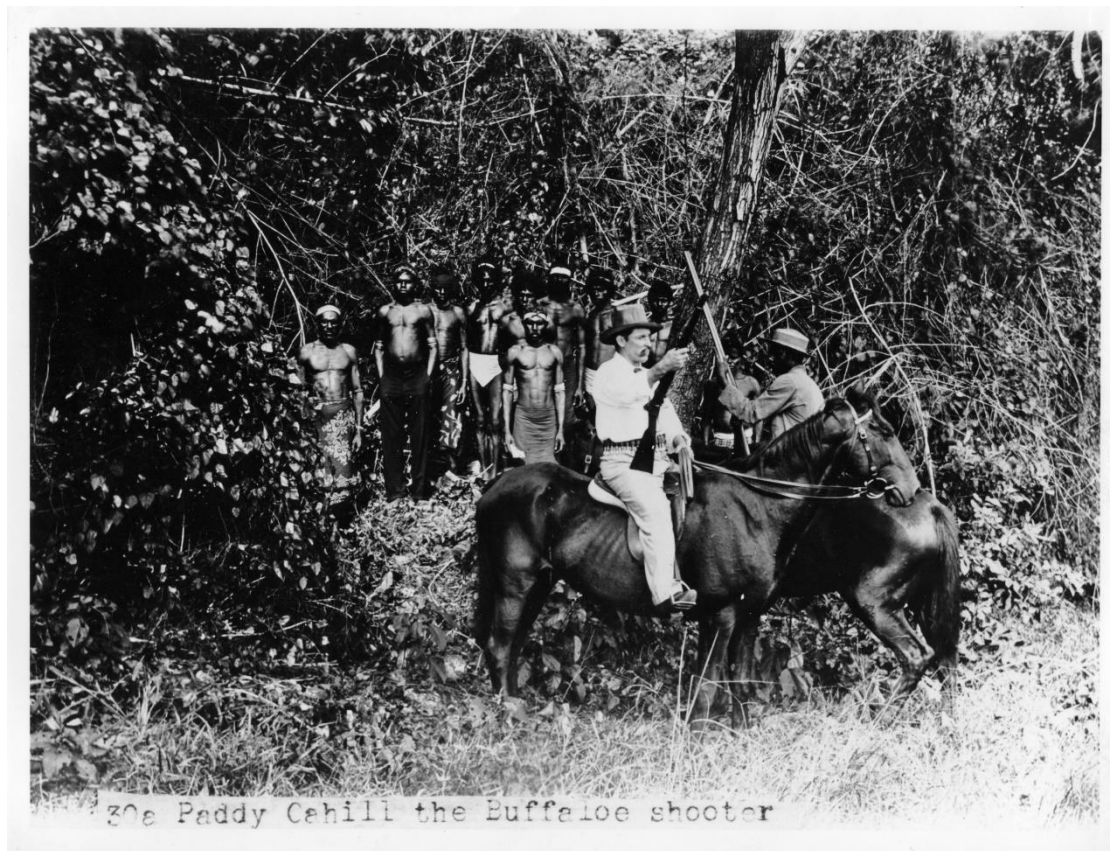


Figure 7: Paddy Cahill with Quilp on horseback with Aboriginal team on foot behind, buffalo hunting, 1901. Source: Peter Spillet Collection, Northern Territory Library PH0238/0707.

The Aboriginal man on horseback is likely to be Quilp,⁷ who grew up with Paddy Cahill and the ways of the white hunter. The photograph is from Cahill's early buffalo hunting days, which means the horse is probably the renowned buffalo hunting and racing horse, St Lawrence. In a newspaper article there is no mention of the hard-working Aboriginal teams who were camped with them (standing behind the horses in the photograph) but St Lawrence is named and given

⁷ According to Paddy Cahill he rescued Quilp when he was three or four after the rest of Quilp's family had been massacred by Cahill's fellow stockmen in revenge for the killing of a white man (Mulvaney).

recognition, in that the horse ‘requires no bridle rein to guide him to the beast... he runs alongside a few feet off until the rifle is discharged and the buffalo drops. Then, if others are near, he heads for one without the slightest hesitation, and so the game goes on... St Lawrence appears to enter into the sport with as much zest as his master...’ (*Northern Territory Times* 25 May 1894, quoted in Mulvaney 13).

The newspaper wrote of Cahill as the ‘Buffalo Bill of the North’, referencing the colonial buffalo hunts of North America, while the dangerous hunting is referred to as a ‘game’ and as ‘sport’. Unlike the buffalo (or bison) sacred to the Native Americans, this beast had only recently invaded and was an outsider, like the white hunters and the horses. To the Aboriginal people from different clans who gathered in the area, hunting buffalo rapidly became a seasonal part of life.

Cahill developed the technique of shooting buffalo on horseback, often only wounding the huge beast in the spine, then rapidly retreating to avoid being gored and moving on to the next quarry. Initially few Aboriginal men rode the horses, or had access to guns (but mastered both over time). Instead it was usually the job of teams of Aboriginal men to track the buffalo down on foot and finish the job off at close proximity, then to dismember, skin and de-horn the carcasses. This was more dangerous than the initial dramatic shooting of the buffalo by the white hunters on horseback, as the huge beast with massive horns would become panicked and defensive from its injuries. Cahill’s newspaper article gives an account of one instance: ‘I had dropped a buffalo with a ball in the shoulder. The blacks, following up the tracks, came upon the beast suddenly, when it set them, and in a few seconds the boys had dropped knives and axes, and all other impedimenta, and were safely stowed up trees’ (Mulvaney 153).⁸

This work suited the Aboriginal hunters because they could remain on the land, expertly tracking down the buffalo as they would other game. Families could travel together for the buffalo season and the women worked to scrape off the skin, wash and salt the hides to be shipped down river. The buffalo camps would generally consist of from ten to sixty people. In 1901 Cahill had as many as 194 Aboriginal people working with him while hunting on the East Alligator River but he wrote later that, of this number, sixty-six died within a few years. There were Aboriginal deaths from enraged buffaloes but many more died from diseases contracted from the white hunters, horses and particularly from the buffaloes.

As Robert Kenny writes of the impact of zoonotic disease ‘Human tuberculosis is an outcome of contact with cattle [and buffalo]. It is very much a farmer disease. Susceptible humans—first-contact humans—can contract bovine tuberculosis

⁸ Paddy Cahill is using the language of the time: ‘blacks’ as a general term and ‘boy’ for individuals, even though the ‘boys’ may have actually been older than Cahill himself.

from exposure to airborne and earth-deposited bacillus. As the decisive disease on the Australian frontier, tuberculosis has been underestimated' (Kenny 186). Processing the buffalo meat and hides meant immersing their arms in blood, mucus and innards at close quarters, containing diseases such as brucellosis and bovine tuberculosis, which none of the Aboriginal population would have had prior immunity to. Even their land that the buffalo now invaded had become contaminated with potential death. There would have been ongoing funeral ceremonies and mourning of the dead. John Mulvaney writes poignantly with regard to buffalo hunting, 'Aboriginal people receive less mention than is their due. Their country was littered with buffalo bones and their lives were fraught with danger from wounded beasts' (17).

The Success of the Buffalo (But Not the Horse)

Hunting of escaped and feral animals, such as the buffalo, has been included within the social structure of clan groups; yet the keeping and riding of horses has not been readily adopted within Aboriginal communities today. Ann McGrath writes how, although people working on pastoral stations developed a good knowledge of horses and a respect for both cattle and horses, as soon as they went back into the bush they would revert to walking on foot (McGrath). Horses were viewed as a liability while hunting, frightening off any game.

Those who remain on country living in homeland communities continue to hunt buffalo on their own terms. Buffalo are tracked and hunted in a similar manner to other large animals, like the kangaroo. The Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land are not resistant to material or technological change. They have adapted to hunting a large and dangerous mammal, the buffalo, but they are resistant to societal and structural change that threatens their way of life.

According to John Altman, unlike native animals, there are no taboo restrictions on eating buffalo, meaning that all ages and genders have a share in the meat (Altman). Buffalo meat is distributed according to a competitive share structure, where the successful hunter is able to retain the 'arm' (or front leg, analogous to the kangaroo), while other hunters receive the ribs. A competitive share structure becomes problematic with privately owned domestic animals. Individuals would be expected to share all parts of the animal with extended kin, or receive a share in the money gained from the sale of any animal. As David Trigger writes in relation to domestic livestock in the Gulf Country further east, 'The animals known to have established themselves in traditionally significant landscapes through the history of European settlement are understood to be sentient subjects standing in meaningful relationship with people in ways that overlap with, yet also remain in some respects different from, native animals' (Trigger 633).

Newcomers, such as the Macassans, explorers such as Captain James Cook, the dingo and the more recent buffalo have become part of ritual and ceremony. The introduction of domestic animals can be interpreted in terms of the Ancestors and the Dreaming as not new, but revealing themselves, or surfacing onto the land, from 'an ontologically prior set of events' (Myers 54). Domestic animals have not been incorporated into restricted ceremonial practices, such as male initiation or funeral ceremonies, but the imitation of movements and idiosyncratic behaviour of animals are included in songs and dances performed within public ceremonies (Trigger). Including domestic animals, such as the horse, in ceremony is a means of incorporating them, not as sacred totemic animals, but in order to convey understanding and knowledge of the animal and how they relate to the surrounding environment.

After a hunter killed an adult prey animal, accompanying young, such as a joey in a pouch, were not necessarily killed immediately but brought back to the community alive. The primary motivation for this was to allow children to play with and handle the animal and through this engagement, assist children to learn about an animal's behaviour and habits. In northeast Arnhem Land (where the author has conducted fieldwork) there were specific cases of individual animals still living within homeland communities: people had taken in young buffalo, long-necked turtles, young wild pigs, file snakes, emu and cassowary chicks, an injured jabaru or sea eagle, kangaroo and wallaby joeys and dingo puppies (also see Kolig). Whether I questioned children or adults about what ultimately happened to these tame individuals, they would invariably reply that the animals would sometimes die when young, or return to the bush of their own accord. It was always stressed that these animals preferred to go back into the bush as adults, 'to be free'. It is clear that Aboriginal communities are not opposed to taming and keeping young animals, but the retention of these animals as a future food source, or to breed from them to produce successive generations is counter to their ecological philosophy (Fijn).

Conclusion

Settlers and pastoralists irrevocably changed the country that Aboriginal people had been strategically managing according to their totemic framework. There were strict taboos on the kinds of animals and plants to eat during particular seasons. Keeping and feeding horses for long periods would have required groups to change their land management strategies, patterns of movement and the structure of their camps. Unlike Plains Indians in North America, Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land did not adopt horses to aid in the hunting of animals, as part of exchange networks, to increase status, or as a form of commodity, even though there were horses roaming freely on their country. They would have had the skills to track down the horses and capture them, as they did with other large

game, such as by putting up brush screens and corrals for the effective capture of wallabies and emus. Keeping domestic animals captive, while feeding and breeding from them in order to increase personal wealth, does not align with Aboriginal perspectives towards other beings. In practical terms, they would have greater trouble and work cut out for themselves in keeping domestic horses captive within fences and corrals, tending to them by feeding and watering them daily, when in fact they were thriving well by roaming freely within the bush in the tropical north. With an intimate knowledge of the land and seasons, it was (and still is) relatively easy to find and kill a large buffalo, or other large game for food to share within the community when needed without the aid of a horse.

For Aboriginal communities the adoption of farming practices was markedly divergent from their way of life and prior knowledge framework in relation to animals. Concepts relating to animals included seasonal management of populations through fire and selective harvesting, but did not include the containment, domination, control or selective breeding of individuals over successive generations (in other words they were not domesticating animals). The settler attitude toward domestic livestock, on the other hand, was bound up with societal ideas of individualism, hierarchy and private ownership. These factors were prevalent in the formation of Australia as a colony. Domestic animals were unknowing, yet crucial actors on the frontier, inextricably entwined with colonialism. Aboriginal ecological philosophy was largely subsumed under these different colonial ideals of how humans should engage with animals and the land. The adoption of pastoral practices within Aboriginal communities would have required a fundamental change in the way Aboriginal people lived their lives, accompanied by a dramatic shift in their knowledge system in terms of the way the living world was structured.

Ending the narrative here, within western Arnhem Land as a place, means that the story remains a positive one, unlike so many accounts of initial contact between settlers and the first Australians. Without the successful breeding and invasion of large numbers of domestic animals on their side, settlers were unsuccessful in the establishment of large settlements in Arnhem Land.⁹ In one pocket of the continent, those clans in Arnhem Land that managed to survive the initial onslaught of disease were able to successfully avoid the establishment of large pastoral properties and the running of thousands of cattle and sheep. The remaining 'remote' Aboriginal communities were able to integrate horses and

⁹ Arnhem Land was declared an Aboriginal reserve in 1931. West Arnhem Land encompasses 50,000 square kilometres with a population of approximately 7,500 people today, most of whom are Aboriginal. Much of the land is now managed through Indigenous Protected Areas, while being actively cared for by Indigenous 'Working on Country' ranger groups (see Altman and Kerins).

buffalo in their own way, as newcomers on the land, while retaining a strong connection to country.

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