

Global Research Centrum, Chicago
Social Methods School
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Oombulgurri, Australia Social Demonstration Report

On St. Michael's Day, September 24, 1919, a group of Anglican missionaries journeyed up the Forest River and established a mission on the only bit of flat land in the district. They camped and met aboriginals in that area. The group received permission to set up a mission for the purpose of teaching Christianity to the aboriginals. The aboriginals did not take much notice at first, and perhaps thought the missionaries were a bit mad.

Eventually, however, the aboriginals began to bring their children to the mission, since white people could teach the children how to deal with the outside world in ways that the aboriginals could not. Soon a dormitory was constructed. Most of the children from tribes in the area would stay in the mission while their parents would remain in the bush. Some children, who became fond of the taste of flour and sugar and tobacco, came into the mission, and were paid for the work they did there.

In 1926, I think in June, a white man riding along on a horse went by an old black man with his wives and dogs. They were all out hunting. Suddenly, the white man shot the black man's dogs and took his younger wife. Now, it offends me that the old man became very angry about the shooting of his dogs. They were his only hunting animals. The old man was angry about that, and because the white man had dishonoured him. So one day the black man speared the white man, and killed him, starting a massacre the likes of which you have never seen.

The Oombulgurri people lived on 3 1/2 million acres of reserve country. Every single black man, woman and child in that vast territory, except the people in the Mission, were killed. They were taken away, chained around Boab trees, shot, and their bodies were burned. The Mission Superintendent, J.J. Gribble, saved several groups of people. He went out on horseback and simply collected chains of people from the policemen. He brought them back to the mission. An old woman who taught me some songs was the child of someone in that chain, saved by the Mission.

So, the Church was the only thing that gave people life out there. The only people alive today are descendants of aboriginals who lived in the Mission, and people who are within the Mission. Their culture disintegrated because in those days, the Church did not preserve the culture of the people. The children were brought up in dormitories. Now that they are grown, they have no idea how to be parents. That is the background against which Oombulgurri was born.

In 1968, because of financial difficulties, the Anglican Church pulled out of Forest River. Of the aboriginals at the station, about 250 went into Wyndham, a town 40 miles away, across the water. Once they went into Wyndham, there was absolutely no reason for them to live. They became completely and thoroughly debauched, drinking to excess and killing each other in fights on the Reserve. There was just no hope for them. So, a couple of old people, Louise and Robert Roberts who had been at Forest River before, decided to return and to agitate for the return of the people to Forest River. Sam Bailey, one of our colleagues in Australia, helped them to do that. They spent five years agitating through political and local circles for the return to Forest River. Finally, on September 24, 1973, St. Michael's Day, the exodus from Wyndham to Forest River began. The area was renamed Oombulgurri for the clan that lived, owned and hunted on the old Mission land.

Mimi Shinn and I were in one of the advance parties on September 24. We had all the packing boxes on a boat 23 feet long and piston powered. It goes pretty fast but the tides up there are awful. There is a 26 foot difference between low tide and high tide. If you do not get on top of the tide, you get stuck. So, we were dumped unceremoniously out on the side of a mudbank with all the boxes while the boat went back for others. We really did wonder if the boat would get back to us. We eventually arrived at the settlement after walking three miles. We began by using all the old equipment and buildings of the old Mission.

Now I am going to put up a few maps and grids so you can see the geographic relationship.

You can see Australia and Oombulgurri, and the reserve land, about 3 1/2 million acres that is claimed by the Oombulgurri people. You see the coastline, the Cambridge Gulf, Wyndham, and how Forest River curls around--Oombulgurri is right there. The unofficial grid includes the school, the church, the workshop and the kitchen. The housing, built around 1920, is fairly solid, but not satisfactory in that climate. We expected about 40 people and ended up with 225. The people who came have lived in tents under trees or anything they could build until a new housing settlement and village can be developed.

The Boab tree under which all the old Jarups, or meetings, were held, still stands. On one side, there is a hill called the "Jump-Up." On the other side is the Forest River, and the air strip. I do not think you have ever seen an air strip like this. It is bumpy and grassy. I used to go out every week on the motor bike to check it for dust holes. The dust is very fine and gets very deep, so you have to be careful not to fall in.

There is a large, beautiful dam in which we used to do our washing. Over the hill six miles is a beautiful pool of water for drinking. Six miles of rusted out pipe carry the water, and every time you want to start the pump, you have to walk six miles in the heat, over sharp stones.

The weather is beautiful from April to November; 80 to 90 degrees but never a drop of rain. It is very dry. It gets very hot around Christmas-120 degrees and raining. Last year we had 80 inches of rain in two months--enough to allow the waterfalls to flow. We used to clean our teeth in the waterfalls. Ever since I was a little girl and saw Dorothy Lamour movies, I wanted to clean my teeth under a waterfall.

The structures in being at the moment center around the guild. In Mowanjum, the economic guild encompassed the entire economic sphere. We did the same thing in Oombulgurri. The first of the guilds, the husbandry guild, is trying to make money with cattle raising. Two thousand head of cattle were left in Oombulgurri by the Anglican church. They had become very wild. The difficulty was in finding the estimated 5000 cattle now roaming on 3-1/2 million acres. We had to buy horses, build yards, break in the horses, and so on.

We accepted a helicopter as a gift from a mining company that was interested in Oombulgurri because of the copper on the land. We used the helicopter to determine where most of the cattle were. The next day, we gathered twenty head but they broke out of the yard. We decided to take six cattle to market just to prove that it was possible to transport them safely on our barge. So we took the cattle to a portable yard in the community. The cattle jumped in, we roped them and lugged them to the barge. When the cattle were safely locked into the yard, we cut the ropes. The cattle went mad. The little boys watching outside all cheered. We had to wait until midnight for the high tide. We finally succeeded in lining up the yard and the barge. Someone cracked the whip from behind and got the cattle onto the barge. They had a good trip in about six hours. On the other side, we just shoved the cattle up a ramp and into the truck. We could see that it was possible to transport 500 cattle next year.

When we arrived in Oombulgurri, we decided that a miracle was needed in the form of a guild. We sold watermelons, and people ate watermelons, more than anything else. Then we decided to grow peanuts. The Kimball Research Station encouraged us to try, and donated some seeds. We hand-planted the peanuts, using a tractor to dig up the ground.

We planted in teams of three. One person dug a hole with a stick, one dropped the peanut in, and the person in back would stomp on it. The peanuts grew very well. We reaped the four acres by hand. Next year we are going to have 120 acres, but not planted by hand. The Research Station gave us a machine that with a lot of dust, noise and "chunka, chunka, chunka," produces peanuts at the other end. Ed Shinn worked on the peanut machine, oiling it and keeping it running--and we produced two tons of peanuts. We were going to use it for seed. but the kids ate the peanuts.

I was asked to teach 15 children, before I arrived. But when I reached Oombulgurri, there were already 45 children to be taught. Of course, I could not teach all these children on my own. So, I went around the community,

grabbing anyone who looked as if they liked kids. We ended up with a staff of four aboriginals and renovated the old school building until we were proud to take pictures of it.

We were invited to an interschool sports day, held annually in Wyndam. We held a raffle to raise plane fare, since the barge was not big enough to hold all the children. We raised the money the day before the event. All the children wore uniforms. We made a flag; an artist painted a beautiful green crocodile with a blue background. We made up a war cry. The children, wearing their orange shirts and black shorts, carrying their flag, looked beautiful. People who had previously known the children said they would not recognize them. The children used to swear. Now they were able to carry on conversations.

I think the school was our big miracle, but the first miracle was the water. We got a water pump that provides enough water for the whole village. The government offered to pay for a helicopter to move the pump and install it, but the people decided to use horses instead. Forty-four gallon drums of fuel were hauled down there, the pump installed, and water came through the cracked, dirty old pipes and poured out the other end. That was the signal for people to come from Wyndham to Oombulgurri. So many people came that we had to install a larger pump. Sometime in the future we will fix the pipe system. Now we have water every day, which is fantastic.

The other guilds are social development and the symbol guild, which sells bark paintings, bows and arrows. Anyone with black hair can always get a haircut at the guild store. The hair is thinned, teased out and rolled onto a bowl. The hair is then used for totems, with the hair wound around sticks, painted with Ochre. They also make bark, paintings and clapsticks for the store. The symbol guild has always existed in Oombulgurri.

A trained sister works with the health guild. The people have almost completely taken over care of the community. Several women check for sick kids every morning and dispense tablets and medication. We have healthy children now, although we didn't have any to start with.

The chickens arrived just as I left. We have had a coop waiting for a year. We also have a pig house waiting for pigs and one waiting for goats. We did have goats, but they ran away. The chicken house is better than most of the people's houses. It has been painted five times with loving care by the people in charge of the chickens before the chickens were there. Now that the chickens have arrived, these people are very happy.

I think I have gone over most of the community structures. There is a "beautification" group which consists of old ladies with brush brooms who go around sweeping all day. They plant trees and water them. They have created a little postage stamp park. They cultivated it with old wash water and lawn seed. It is a sign for what could come when water is more abundant. We cannot have lawns because we do not have the water. But everybody washes clothes at the base of the trees. We have quite a few trees, including four coconut trees from Darwin. We will have quite an orchard some day.

To close, here are the words of an Oombulgurri song, "Run to Meet the Sun."

Run, run, run, run, to meet the sun.
Our ancestors have wisdom we must share.
The people of the world will know we care

To run, run, run, run, to meet the sun.

For we are black and beautiful, And we have gifts to give, To all the future and to all.

--Julie McCauley
12/15/74