

## Alyawarra Ethnographic Project: A Status Report

Woodrow W. Denham

First published *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter* 7:43-45, 1977.

Reformatted 16 October 2001

In 1971-72, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies supported my ethnographic fieldwork with the Alyawarra Tribe, whose territory is located in the vicinity of the Sandover and Bunday Rivers about 300 km northeast of Alice Springs. In 1975-76, the Institute provided additional funding for the computerization of the data that I recorded in 1971-72, and for support of my analysis of those data. This is a report on the current status of the research.

The project was conceived as an experiment in research design, field methodology, data system integration and quantitative data analysis, and the fieldwork was focused primarily on demographic, relational and non-verbal behavioural characteristics of the Alyawarra Tribe. The primary objective in the field was to use various kinds of quantitatively oriented data recording procedures - not as a collection of unrelated techniques, but as a single integrated data acquisition system - to make systematic records of selected aspects of Alyawarra life which then could be examined by diverse specialists who would never be able to work with the Alyawarra as they were in the early 1970s (see O'Connell, pp. 47-49). In other words, the goal was to generate a multi-purpose database for subsequent analysis with regard to many different substantive problems, but not to investigate one or a few narrowly defined substantive problems while in the field.

In keeping with this broad objective, I recorded the following eight sets of data: 13 kinds of vital statistics for all 264 members of the research population; genealogies as much as five generations deep for all of those people; kinship reference terms used by 104 people for referring to 225 members of the population (23,400 kinship term applications); complete censuses of the population showing the camp and residence in which each person resided on 16 census days distributed throughout the field session; 18 maps of camps occupied by the research population, including a series of 11 maps of the camp in which I lived and in which a large portion of the research was conducted; systematic descriptions of the compositions, locations, times of observations, and activities of about 3,000 casual groups of people; 42,000 records of ordinary daily activities which were witnessed during 200 hours of rigidly controlled, systematic observation of behaviour in the camp where I lived; and 6 items of meteorological data for each of the last 146 days in the field.

All of these data are in numerical form, and all 8 sets are tied directly to each other by structural and coding schemes that yield a fully integrated ethnographic data base. All together, there are just under 440,000 numerically coded items of information in the data base, and all of them have been placed on a fully documented magnetic tape for computer analysis. The initial version of the tape is now undergoing preliminary analysis, and a second version will be produced - hopefully in the near future - to correct the errors that are being detected in the first version. It must be noted, however, that the data quality control procedures that were used in compiling the initial version were quite effective, and the residual error rate appears to be well under one-tenth of one percent.

A copy of the tape is available at the Institute library, and revised versions will be deposited there as they are completed. Also, the Institute library has a listing of the contents of the tape, and a copy of a manual that fully describes the contents, structure, and operation of the database, and contains full technical information concerning the tape itself.

The tape is available, on a restricted basis, to other scientists who have a legitimate scientific need to analyze its contents. When the first revision is completed, it will be made available with lesser restrictions as a teaching and research tool. Because of the nature of the coding schemes used, it is possible to relate all of the data files to each other, but it is impossible to relate any single item in the entire data base to a specific, named human being; hence, total confidentiality is built into the system.

Because of the methods used and the topics investigated, the database has both strengths and weaknesses that are atypical of ethnographic field records. Its strengths include its perfect legibility, and its accessibility as a very large and tightly interconnected public body of raw data that can be analyzed from many different perspectives and with a great many different analytical procedures. Since the eight files can be analyzed individually or in more than 200 different combinations, the number of relationships that can be investigated within the database is astronomically large, and all of them can be analyzed by anyone who has the technical skill and fortitude required for the undertaking. Furthermore, I have made every attempt in designing the project as a whole, in compiling the data tape, and in writing the operations manual, to state my assumptions and biases as explicitly as possible; i.e. I have done all that I can to make it unnecessary for others to have to guess at what I was doing when I was recording the data. Hence, if two people analyze the data base independently but ask the same questions, they should arrive at exactly the same conclusions, insofar as their conclusions derive from the data rather than from theoretical positions.

On the other hand, the database does indeed contain major biases and limitations, as do all bodies of field data. If we accept the so-called emic-etic distinction as a useful concept, then my fieldwork with the Alyawarra was unambiguously etic; i.e., I was an external observer and recorder of what occurred. The data base contains no information at all on meanings or interpretations of actions from the Alyawarra viewpoint, an exclusion that is based on my assumption that it is somewhat unproductive to search for meanings of specific behavioural and cultural items until we first have a clear understanding of the demographic, relational, and behavioural contexts in which they occur. Furthermore, since it was impossible for me to record everything that I observed, the records reflect selectivity that is inherent in all research - but I have attempted to make my selection criteria as explicit as possible, rather than leaving them implicit. In contrast with much ethnographic research, I consciously selected in favor of the ordinary, the day-to-day, the unexceptional, rather than focusing on the distinctive, the unique, the 'eye-catching'.

Since the fieldwork ended, I have been especially concerned with placing all of the data onto tape so that proper analysis could begin, but I have written several items that are based on the research. I conclude this report with the following list which provides a limited and superficial view of the diverse topics that can and will be investigated in the data base over the coming years.

1972 Alyawarra field journal. Unpublished typescript on deposit with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra. 320 pp., 150 color slides, 225 black-and-white photographs.

1973 The detection of patterns in Alyawarra non-verbal behavior. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Seattle: University of Washington. Copy on deposit with the Institute.

1974a Infant transport among the Alyawarra tribe, Central Australia. *Oceania* 44(4):253-77.

1974b Population structure, infant transport, and infanticide among modern and Pleistocene hunter-gatherers. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 30(3): 191-98.

1975a Response to L. R. Hiatt concerning infant transport among the Alyawarra tribe. *Oceania* 45(3):240-42.

1975b BEVRECS: A general purpose system for making and analyzing behavior stream protocols. *Social Science Information* 14(3-4):161-82.

1975c Population properties of physical groups among the Alyawarra tribe of Central Australia. *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania* 10(2): 114-51.

1976a The Alyawarra Ethnographic Data Base: A guide to its contents, structure and analysis. Typescript on deposit with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra. 116 pp. tables, figures, appendices. (Submitted for publication.)

1976b The Alyawarra Ethnographic Data Base. Magnetic tape on deposit with the Institute.

1976c Quantitative analysis of kinship terminology, descent, and marriage among the Alyawarra tribe. (In preparation.)

Support of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies has been vital to the entire project, and for it I am most grateful.