

TARAMAGUTI TODAY: CHANGING ROLES OF
SENIOR TIWI WIVES AS HOUSEHOLD MANAGERS

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Among the Tiwi of North Australia, before the arrival of the missionaries and Australian “protectors,” all female Tiwi were considered married to their mother’s son-in-law, selected at the time of the mother’s puberty ceremony. A woman was born a wife and died a wife, having been inherited by a succession of men throughout her lifetime. Although all women were wives, some were designated in one of two particular categories of wife, the *ningyka* (chosen one) and the *taramaguti* (first one). This article discusses these two categories of wife and their transformations throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. I show that the economic “household” of the earlier period is still a socially important institution. A successful contemporary household is often headed by a senior woman (married or widowed) and comprises several nuclear family units. This article will explore how the contemporary household operates under the senior woman’s direction in order to utilize the talents and skills of all age groups and provide a satisfactory subsistence and support basis for all.

IN PRECOLONIAL ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY, men and women acquired knowledge and wisdom throughout their lifetimes. Those in the oldest cohort were the most respected and revered members of the society. They were always consulted by younger dependents on important issues and rarely if ever contradicted. In return it was the elders’ responsibility to pass their knowledge and wisdom on to the next generation. They were also responsible for the health and welfare of all members, until finally they were replaced as elders. On my last visit to Melville Island in 1995 my Aboriginal “sisters” remarked to me that we had grown old together, and we reflected on a time forty years earlier when we were all young and carefree at the

beginning of our respective careers (as junior wives or, in my case, as a Ph.D. candidate). Now, we carried many responsibilities and worries for our dependents (children and grandchildren and/or students) as we sought to share our knowledge with them and to keep them from harm's way. Today my own role is significantly more complex as I simultaneously try to pass on to the next Tiwi generations valued information on the "good old days" and gather information from them about the challenges they now face in the last decade of the twentieth century. While I have grown old in a gradually evolving Western society over the past decades, my Aboriginal sisters have aged during five decades of radical change.¹

In this article I shall focus on the life course of Tiwi women, outlining the changes in their roles over the last half-century. Unlike some of the people discussed in articles in this volume, Tiwi women's power comes from two sources: age and the gender-assigned life responsibilities that coordinate, rather than compete, with roles assigned to males. As women age, they gain influence over younger women, in the same way they had control of younger co-wives in the polygynous past. They take increasingly important roles in the two major rituals, as in the past, working in coordination with their male kin. In order to understand the present situation it is necessary to outline women's life course in the past as well as the external cultural forces that have influenced the changes we see today.

European missionaries settled on the southeast corner of Bathurst Island in 1911 and over the decades following attracted a large number of converts among the native population from Bathurst and the western areas of neighboring Melville Island. The Snake Bay community (on which my discussion is based) is on the north coast of Melville Island and began as a government-run Aboriginal settlement only after the conclusion of World War II. Snake Bay (later known as Milikapiti) drew its population from the northern and eastern areas of Melville Island--people who were never attracted to the mission or who left it at this time. This early period (1946-1954), however, was for the most part a period of government neglect. There was a single European in charge of the settlement, who did little more than oversee distribution of food, tobacco, blankets, calico, steel axes, and limited medical aid. The European aim was to counter the trade of Malaysian and Japanese pearl and trepang fishers with Tiwi men, which consisted largely of exchange of food and axes for sexual favors with the Tiwi men's wives. During World War II many of the Tiwi men served as auxiliaries to the Australian forces in maintaining coastal patrols.

The first school was established at Snake Bay in mid-1954, during my first visit. Its students were my younger sibling cohort. In the succeeding twenty years, between 1955 and the mid-1970s the community experienced

considerable and intensive physical and personal development as the government sought to transform the attitudes and behavior of people they considered dependent “wards” into those of independent “citizens.” The government policy of training-for-assimilation into the greater (white) Australian society allowed those in charge almost complete control of every aspect of life of all residents.²

The training-for-assimilation period came to a close in 1976 with the passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976 by the federal government. This legislation gave all the lands of Melville and Bathurst Islands back to the traditional owners--the Tiwi. The Tiwi Land Council, made up of representatives from all traditional land divisions, was formed to manage further development and use of these islands.

In 1981 Snake Bay incorporated as the Milikapiti Township. Pularumpi Township, also on Melville Island, and Nguiu Township (which supplanted the physical space of the Sacred Heart Mission on Bathurst Island) followed. In the 1980s and 1990s the respective local government councils restored considerable personal and community autonomy, no more or less than enjoyed by other citizens of the Commonwealth. There is considerable variation among the communities: The former mission, now known as Nguiu, on Bathurst Island has always been the largest community, numbering close to one thousand Tiwi in 1987. Pularumpi and Milikapiti each average between three and four hundred Tiwi residents. The following discussion concerns only the population at Milikapiti.

Against this background of rapid and significant change affecting the very fabric of their lives, my sibling cohort spent their childhood, matured into adulthood and parenthood, and are now the active senior generation. In this discussion I draw on the full range of my study dating from 1954 through 1995. I have divided my discussion of the nearly one hundred years from 1900 to the present into two parts, each of approximately fifty years' duration.

Tiwi Life, 1900-1950

The Aboriginal inhabitants of Melville and Bathurst Islands have been isolated from the Aboriginal life on the mainland by dangerous ocean currents in the intervening straits. Their social and political organization is in some respects similar to that of Arnhem Land in having a matrilineal basis, but differs in lacking the social categories of moiety and subsection distinctions. The matrilineal (clan) categories, called in Tiwi *pukwi*, or “skins,” were variable in number and name over the period for which we have records and were grouped into exogamous phratries (*aramipi*). Phratries also varied from three to four in number. While the living members of the “skins” were

not strictly localized, the unborn members (**pitapitui**) were to be found in clan-specific spirit-children sites--most of them in tidal shallows within the bounds of localized "country" groups (**tungarima**).

The stated cultural norm was that one should marry into one's father's matrilineal group (a group known as one's **dreaming**)³ and within one's **tungarima**, or country group. These preferred (and statistically significant) marriages have resulted in a skewed distribution of matrilineal group members among the countries and in the resident population of the three contemporary townships (see Goodale 1994).

Before moving to the permanent settlements (which evolved into the contemporary townships), individuals were affiliated with and preferred to reside in the country in which their father and grandfather were buried, then married within the country, and eventually died and were buried there as well. The coaffiliate members of a country resided in one of many **tabuda**, or camps, forming what Hart and Pilling called "households" (1960), a term I shall use here. A household or camp might consist of a single male or as many as fifty-odd individuals (a Tiwi estimate): a man, his many wives, their children and sons-in-law, and others who were dependent residents. The household was a single economic unit with a division of labor in which the young "worked" for their elders. Able-bodied men **and** women hunted for land- and shore-based protein (for example, wallaby, goana, possum, and shellfish), men (only) exploited the air (birds and bats) and the sea (fish, turtles, and so forth), and women (only) dug roots or collected other rooted vegetables and fruits. In large households, the senior male and the senior female heads of the household had the power to influence and direct the available labor force on a daily or occasional basis. On a conceptual level, the gendered division of labor was predicated on the assumption that all women were primarily responsible for the well-being of their households, and by extension, the society, while all men were primarily responsible for effecting the transference of individuals members of the household (and tribe) through the major stages of existence.

Men were solely responsible for conception by directing each of their predestined children (**imerani** [S], **imeraninga** [D]) to its own mother (a wife of the appropriate matrilineal group) while **dreaming** of separate encounters with the individual spirit children (**pitapitui**).

Men were also primarily responsible for the physiological transformation of young, sexually immature girls (**alinga**) to menstruating woman (**muringa-leta**) (see below). Men were responsible, but not solely, for carrying out the annual **kulama** (yam) ritual, in which knowledge of the underlying order of the universe (world view) was acknowledged by the initiated and transferred

to younger **married** and mature men and women. According to my 1954 informants, women as well as men were initiated in this complex ceremony. The ritual continues to be organized and carried out by fully initiated men, and takes place in the presence of and with the assistance of women and children (see Goodale 1982). The final transformation from living Tiwi to deceased ancestor (**mobuditi**) was also led by males, although assisted in appropriate roles by ritually adept women.

In the Tiwi system of marriage all women were married to their first husband before their birth, and most men inherited a first wife around the age of thirty. Whereas a woman's first husband was categorically older than she, a man's first wife was most certainly an inherited widow of an older brother and might well be considerably older than he. Later in life a man might negotiate with other men to obtain a potential **promised** wife (or wives), through prior investment in her mother at the time she was given to him as a mother-in-law (by her father at the time of her puberty rituals). For the son-in-law the investment involved living in his mother-in-law's household, hunting for her, and giving her gifts until she died. In return, his mother-in-law promised to give him all of her female children as promised wives. The two referred to each other as "my **ambrinua**."

Among Tiwi men acquisition of multiple wives was the ambition of many, as described by Hart and Pilling (1960; also Hart, Pilling, and Goodale 1988). Men competed and negotiated with other men to acquire widows and young virgin (promised) wives. Some few men succeeded, late in life, in acquiring a large number of wives ("a hundred," according to informants), but some males never succeeded in acquiring the prestigious virgin or "promised" type of wife. In contrast, a woman was born a wife and died a wife, often having serially married nearly as many husbands as most men acquired wives in polygamous households.

The Life Course of Tiwi Women

A Tiwi female was born into a household consisting at a minimum of her parents, and at a maximum of her father and (in the past) all of his other wives, a maternal grandmother, siblings (children of all of father's wives), and her future husband. Often there were a number of other dependents. In this household, the **kitjinga** (small child) was nourished and trained in resource management by her parents and other resident adults for the first decade or so of her life.

Significantly, a few years before puberty, the young girl (now termed **alinga**) was taken by her father to her husband's fire, located within the

same household, and told that that was where she would now sleep, always by her husband's side. Her residence in any given household was dictated by his obligations.

Her first husband took over her education, including gradual introduction to sexual intercourse, which was considered essential for her sexual maturation. In earlier days, menarche was reached in the mid-teens and marked the most significant life change for the young girl, now called a *muringaleta*. In 1954 a woman related these events in her life to me.

When I saw that I was bleeding I was frightened. I told my aunti [FZ] and she was very happy. I stayed in a new camp with my mothers and auntis until there was no longer blood. Then I went to where my father, my husband and his brothers, and my *ambrinua* (son-in-law) waited. My father took a "woman-spear" (a carved double-sided wooden spear) and after he put it between my legs, he gave it to my son-in-law. My son-in-law hugged it as a wife and danced with it. Then I ran until my husband and his brothers caught me and, taking turns, struck my shoulder with a feathered ornament.⁴

In the week that these events took place, the young girl ritually became a woman, a mother-in-law, and had her first marriage ritually validated as well as all subsequent marriages to her husbands younger brothers. As each husband died and left her a widow, she was inherited by the next younger brother as his wife without further ritual. The young wife was now termed a *murukubara*, until she became pregnant (a *poperinganta*), and became a mother: *pernamberdi*, mother of a girl, or *awriawri*, mother of a boy. If she never became a mother, she was termed a *badamoringa*, while a postmenopausal woman was termed *intula*.

It is in the enduring *ambrinua* and cross-sex sibling relationships that the Tiwi concepts of codependency of cross-sex relationships are most clearly expressed. A woman's son-in-law was frequently close to her own age, and this *ambrinua* relationship was likely to last considerably longer than any particular husband-wife relationship she had. There was (and is) an ideology of equality and cooperative mutual support between *ambrinua* that also existed between close siblings of the opposite sex. Both types of kin relationships prohibit directed speech between the pairs, marking the importance of these relationships. This prohibition did not preclude physical proximity, and communication was easily achieved by using a third person to receive and repeat the message. Both relationships required the parties to support

each other throughout life. While there was a certain amount of division of labor by sex, there were few other restrictions based on gender, and responsibilities were shared.

Categories of Wives

Although all women were wives for all their lives, some were also designated in one of two particular categories of wife, the ***ningyka*** (selected one) and the ***taramaguti*** (first or oldest one).

A successful household was usually headed by a married (or today, a widowed) senior woman and her husband. The unit comprised several nuclear family units but operated on a daily basis under the senior woman's direction. It was her responsibility to provide a satisfactory subsistence and support basis for all residents dependent on her. In order to utilize the talents and skills of all age groups resident in the unit, it was her prerogative to assign daily tasks to younger men and women alike. Her husband might be considerably younger than she, but if of a senior age, he would have responsibilities that were more political and religious than economic.

One category of wife, the ***ningyka*** (selected one), was an option a man could impose on a virgin (and prepubescent) girl when she was first brought to his fire as a promised wife. This man was no stranger to his young wife, for he resided in the same household or camp as his wife's mother. A ***ningyka***, according to my informants in 1954, had to follow her husband everywhere. With her hand on his shoulder and her head cast downward, she was led by him to the water to bathe, to the bush to defecate, or even to hunt! She could eat only food given to her by her husband. She could not "look at" (have sex with) other men. The only local example of a ***ningyka*** they could point to was a mentally disturbed woman whose husband had died in the recent past. This former ***ningyka*** wandered the bush hunting and gathering food still believing herself in the company of her deceased husband, with whom she carried on a running conversation.

Not all virgin promised wives were designated as ***ningyka***, but all were expected to begin their sexual lives with this "old man" who undertook the responsibility of "making her a woman"-- a transformative act for which he alone was responsible.

My informants (resident in 1954 in the government settlement at Snake Bay) told me that, while none of them were or would want to be a ***ningyka***, everyone at the Catholic mission at Nguiu was "like ***ningyka***" in that they were expected never to "look at" more than one man--their husband. I have no way of knowing whether a ***ningyka*** could have survived for long in

such a restricted existence as described; it hardly seems possible. Should a *ningyka* take a lover, she was no longer considered a *ningyka*. Perhaps the category existed in the eyes of the men only as an ideal type.

Young and middle-aged wives often took young lovers--a pattern of extramarital affairs set in place by Bima, the wife of the culture hero Purukupali. Bima and her lover Tjapara (the moon) arranged to meet in the bush. She left her young infant son in the camp sleeping under a shade. However, she and her lover dallied too long and the sun shifted, and when Purukupali returned from hunting he found his son had died in the hot noonday sun. Tjapara, the moon, offered to take the dead boy and return with him alive in three days. Purukupali refused this offer even as he battled with and killed the moon. He then walked with the body of his son into the sea and declared that from then on all Tiwi would die and never return.

This episode, however, did not make love affairs between young people against the law of the ancestral beings. Women would refer me to Bima for justification of extramarital love affairs, while acknowledging that in following her they were risking their husbands' anger. When a woman became pregnant, the child was automatically considered to be her current husband's child (of his conception *dreaming*), regardless of which sexual partner had "made it" (as they distinguished). There were no illegitimate births in precolonial days.⁵

The Taramaguti

As I have discussed elsewhere (Goodale 1994), the practice of arranging in-laws (*ambrinua*) instead of marriages resulted in a significant age difference between a girl and her first husband, often as much as thirty to forty years, but averaging around a twenty-year difference. The first husband would usually die before his younger wife. No woman remained a widow after her deceased husband's funeral rituals were concluded, as immediately she became a wife of the designated inheritor. Each successive husband became progressively younger until, as a mature and elderly wife, she was inherited by a man quite a bit younger than she and assumed the position of his first wife (*taramaguti*).⁶ The older wife (and her younger co-wives and sisters) moved into her new husband's camp along with any attached dependents she had already acquired, including her daughters and son-in-law. If a daughter had reached puberty herself, she moved together with her own son-in-law into the camp of her new father (her mother's husband). This is the nucleus of what Hart and Pilling call a "household" (1960) (Figure 1).

In the normal development of this household, the husband would acquire future wives. Some, like his first wife, came as widows of his older

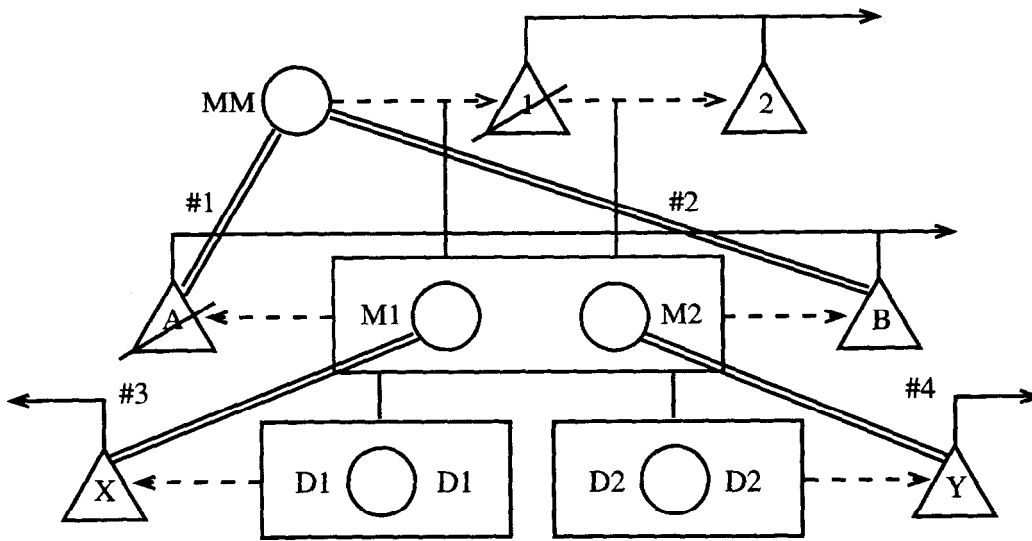


FIGURE 1. In this figure, we see that the *taramaguti* (MM) has been married (- - -) to two husbands (1 and 2) in sequence. At her (MM) puberty, she acquired a son-in-law (A), forming *ambrinua* relationship #1 (=), and when he died his brother (B) inherited her, forming *ambrinua* relationship #2 (=). Meanwhile, as each of her daughters (M1 and M2) reached puberty, MM's current husband (1 then 2) arranged for each to have separate *ambrinua* relationships (#3 and #4) with sons-in-law X and Y.

brothers and entered the household establishment with their own dependent unmarried sons, daughters, sons-in-law, and daughters' children. Should he have a "good" mother-in-law, he could expect that she would take all of her daughters to his fire (as *alinga*), where they would join their older sisters as co-wives of their husband. An ambitious man would continue to negotiate for wives (including those unborn) throughout his lifetime. A man with ten coresident wives might have had, in the past, seventy-five to one hundred people in his household.

At the head of this very large establishment was the *taramaguti*, the oldest or first wife. She could and did direct (and instruct) all the women regarding what tasks they should perform and what variety of food they should hunt and gather each day, where, and when. She also directed (through her husband, since direct speech was tabu between *ambrinua*) what choice foods her sons and sons-in-law (at the peak of their hunting skills) should go and seek, whether meat, fish, turtles, geese, or flying foxes. She instructed the mothers in the care of their children and the youngest adolescent wives when to draw water, collect firewood, and baby-sit for the younger children.

In 1954, some *taramaguti* were spoken of (by younger co-wives) as powerful and “hard” women, almost dictators (who would sit all day in the camp while the younger wives and children went to gather food for the household). Other *taramaguti* were spoken of as “kind” women who always “looked after” (provided food for) everyone in the camp. Clearly the position entailed great respect, due to all senior women (*intula*), and carried the potential of great power--the right to direct others to do one’s will--but always balanced by the Aboriginal expectation that along with respect granted to those senior goes the responsibility of seniors to care for all dependents.⁷

In the household of old, the power of the coresident *ambrinua* (mother-in-law) over her son-in-law was of a different order from the power of a husband’s oldest wife (*taramaguti*) over the other household members. *Ambrinua* power only involved two individuals and was characterized by fulfilling the personal interests of mother-in-law and son-in-law. The power of the *taramaguti* was over all household members. It was, however, restricted to concerns generally assigned to women--care, health, and welfare of living dependents--the male head of household was ritually responsible for his dependents’ orderly course through life.

In summary, all women began their married life, before reaching puberty, with a first husband universally described as “that nice old man who grew me up and made me a woman.” In their early married life they were under control of older wives, as described above, but they also found plenty of time for sexual liaisons with unattached men. As long as they didn’t flaunt their affairs and bring embarrassment to their husbands, they could have, as they told me, “a lot of men.” Later on, the elderly first husband would die and, through the prior arrangement at her mothers puberty rituals, there was an ideal pattern of a woman’s inheritance by the deceased husband’s next younger brother. It is important to note, however, that the women expressed to me the great freedom they felt they had--to choose anyone they wanted as lover, and indeed as a husband, throughout their lifetimes. I interpret their statements to mean that with increasing age they had a greater voice in choosing from among those eligible who would become their next husband, as indeed they always had in choosing a lover.

Households among the Tiwi varied greatly in size and composition in precolonial times. Only a few in any given generation would eventually come to count “one hundred’ wives. But it was a woman’s expectation that if she lived long enough she could become the oldest wife (*taramaguti*) even if her establishment consisted only of her husband and perhaps one or two children, and if one of the children was a daughter, there would be a son-in-law to hunt for her. If a woman was childless (*badamorunga*), she could adopt a sister’s young daughter, who came with an attached and promised

husband to “feed” his new mother-in-law. Men worked for their mothers-in-law for as long as the women lived.

Co-wives were sisters (older or younger) to each other, some with the same mother, others with the same “granny” (MM). Both categories of sisters required close cooperation throughout a woman’s lifetime. Ideally, they moved together into successive marriages. They cared for each others children as their own, making no terminological distinction. Relative age was the only basis for any differential power.

When the Order of the Sacred Heart Missionaries arrived to stay at Nguiu (Bathurst Island) in 1911, they viewed the acquisition of infant wives by men in their fifties and sixties as rampant lechery and set about to put an instant stop to this practice. In the view of the first missionary, Father Gzell (1955), elderly men appeared to be paying other men for sexual access to present and future (infant) wives. He decided to “buy up” all the young wives he could for the mission and proceeded to offer riches beyond comprehension to the elderly husbands and fathers of the very young girls. I do not believe that he or the missionaries following ever really understood the key importance of the girl’s puberty (*muringaleta*) ritual to the orderly working of the Tiwi marriage system (see Goodale 1994). Hart, working at Nguiu in 1930, and Pilling, also based there in 1953-1954, do not mention the *muringaleta* rituals (see Hart and Pilling 1960). In 1954 Arnold Pilling and I both knew a man who still had ten wives, typically counting some who were then dead and some yet unborn. There was no doubt that he was a powerful man in the precontact scheme of things. He lived midway between the mission at Nguiu and the government settlement at Snake Bay (Milikapiti) because both had asked him to leave “for causing trouble.” The trouble had to do with his continued negotiations for wives and related business. I met him when he visited the government settlement with his household for a funeral ritual, but Pilling had an opportunity of visiting him in the bush. Pilling told me that once he had entered the camp, there was no doubt in his mind who was the boss of the household--it was the old woman, his first wife. This woman had no children of her own, and therefore no sons-in-law, but she was still a powerful woman and completely in charge of the household, including all dependents both male and female.

Contemporary Life, 1950-1995

Changes in Tiwi women’s lives at Snake Bay (Milikapiti) have come about by a combination of greater Christian influence and, perhaps more important, an intensification of “development” involving Western education, job training, and eventually achievement of citizenship for all. All of these resulted

from Commonwealth-funded education and development schemes during the 1950s, 1960s, and into the mid-1970s, and the passing of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act of 1976. Development has continued into the last quarter of the century with greater involvement in planning by the local population through the Tiwi Land Council and the local government (township) councils.

The physical changes in the townships include changes in housing that were gradual, but by the 1990s all residents in all townships had permanent housing with electricity, inside kitchens, and plumbing. Although planned for nuclear families, this housing is always in short supply, and most units house extended families, often numbering over ten persons. Each township has an elementary school. Nguiu has in addition a middle school and a high school, all run by the Sacred Heart Church. There are medical clinics and health workers in each community, with an inpatient facility at Nguiu. The local government council handles local ordinances and maintains the physical plant of the township. All townships have a trade store (handling groceries and small hard goods) and from one to three small businesses, mostly producing carvings, bark paintings, silk-screened textiles, and clothing. The Tiwi Land Council meets monthly (rotating between the townships) to make decisions on islandwide affairs. A business wing of the Tiwi Land Council owns a number of fledgling tourist enterprises and a timber business inherited from the government. None of these enterprises employs more than a few members of the local communities. Some employ both men and women, but others only one or the other gender--a pattern that, I believe, reflects the gender ideas of the European advisors who have been instrumental in setting up the majority of the businesses.

Contemporary Marriages

At least as late as the 1960s some young women as they reached puberty were still being given sons-in-law--men to whom their as yet unborn daughters were promised wives. Although it was rare that their daughters actually married their promised husbands, it was surprising to me that some did. In most cases, a promised husband together with a girl's parents were all "consulted" about any proposed marriage and had therefore a say in the political correctness of that marriage. In spite of the general change from prior arrangement to personal selection of spouse, the "correctness" of both bride and groom marrying into their fathers matrilineal group (their ***dreaming***) was still important. An informal analysis of marriage data from the late 1980s indicates that it was still strongly preferred.

Also quite evident in the 1980s was that the mother-in-law/son-in-law

relationship was for many women of middle age still a very important and quite egalitarian cross-sex relationship. The precolonial tabu against directed speech between in-laws was still maintained by most *ambrinua* as was the support given by the son-in-law to his mother-in-law.

The most significant change in marriage patterns has been the almost complete suppression of polygamy as an acceptable form of household formation. Not all Tiwi are married in the church, but I know of no contemporary man who lives with more than one wife at a time. However, many in the younger generations live a life of what I call serial polygamy rather than permanent monogamy.

Younger women are frequently “marrying” one of their teenage lovers at an age between fifteen and twenty years old. Increasing numbers of eleven to fifteen year-olds are finding themselves pregnant. These pregnancies are occurring at approximately the same level of maturity that, in the past, women would have been brought to their promised husbands *before* sexual maturity. There has been a dramatic drop in the age of puberty from around fifteen to seventeen to about twelve or thirteen.⁸ One of my older informants said this earlier maturity and pregnancy was because girls today are promiscuous and have sex with many lovers when they are between ten and fifteen years old. In the old days, she said, girls of this age only had sex with one man, their quite elderly first husband, and because of this they would not get pregnant until they were about twenty years old.⁹ Today the young mother nearly always continues to live with her own mother in the traditional pattern of residence.

The great impact of early pregnancy (and often subsequent marriage) is not only felt by the teenage women, but by the equally premature young fathers. In pre-Mission times a man traditionally did not marry a wife of any age until at least thirty and did not become a socially responsible father for ten or more years. As impregnators, lovers in the past had no social responsibility for any child they “made,” as the distinction was then phrased. Today, for many young husbands, fatherhood (social as well as biological) is a challenge for which they have no role models, either as husband or father. In the earlier time, they owed responsibility to and were dependent on their own parents until they acquired a wife (and/or mother-in-law) and joined her household. In this household the young husband’s role as son-in-law, husband, and father was always under the eyes of his wife’s mother and father, and other in-laws.

The contemporary marriages of many (but not all) young couples are apt to be unstable. There is considerable domestic violence, and divorce and remarriage are frequent.¹⁰ Violence among the Tiwi is a topic requiring much more discussion than I have space for here. In the past, conflict was predom-

inantly over rights to women, and the accepted practice was for a husband to fight his wife's lover, while the jealous wife attacked her husband's lover. If a husband abused his wife, she could rely on the support of her own brothers and other male kin, and could leave her abusive husband if he continued his violence. One strategy young lovers took to escape a husband's revenge was to flee and live together either in the bush, forming an independent household, or in other communities where distant kin would afford protection.

As life has become more complex in the contemporary townships, so have the causes of conflict become more numerous. The availability of alcohol has the effect of increasing the number of arguments that escalate into physical violence. Old restraints against domestic violence (between husband and wife) have broken down. It is significant, however, that most of the abuse is at night and after nearly all male and female adults have bought their legal (and illegal) limit of beer.¹¹

Women in contemporary junior households have little influence, and some take frequent beatings from their intoxicated husbands. Such a woman may (as in the past) retreat to her mother's household. If the mother is a powerful woman, a modern *taramaguti*, she can provide protection for her daughter using whatever inherent influence she still has (as *ambrinua*) over her son-in-law.¹²

I would argue that in this contemporary marriage pattern (of frequently changing partners) there is a reflection of the precolonial pattern of serial marriages plus lovers for all women and love affairs followed by polygynous marriages for most men. I was impressed by the number of forty- to sixty-year-old men who, while married in serial monogamy, also took one lover after another. These were powerful men, one of whom was referred to by an older woman, saying, "Look at him. He is acting just like his famous grandfather who had 'one hundred' wives."

In 1980 and following, I heard no one at Milikapiti use the term *ningyka* to refer to a wife in a monogamous union. Nor did I hear the term *taramaguti* used to describe female heads of extended households. I was aware that there were some households in the township that were dominated by strong women in the senior generation that approximated the earlier form in structure, organization, and economic function. It is in reference to these that I use the term *taramaguti*, and to them I now turn.

Modern Households and the Taramaguti

In 1987 Milikapiti Township had a population of approximately three hundred people living in seventy-two single-family houses.¹³ Those who slept in these houses rarely formed an independent economic unit, a "household,"

by themselves. Five township subdivisions were themselves informally divided into two to five areas, each of which constituted what I call a single "household," made up of the occupants of two, three, or four houses usually located close by each other. I define household, as Hart and Pilling did (1960), as an economic unit containing a number of social units of married and widowed men and/or women, their married daughters (and sons-in-law and daughters' children), and unmarried sons and daughters. Many households had parental siblings, or another relative or two as dependents. Whereas a traditional household or camp might have as many as forty people constituting the economic unit, the modern aggregated household may number up to twenty or twenty-five but averages about ten.

In the modern community the economic viability of a household depends on having access to money from wages or from various kinds of government pensions (old age, disability, unemployment, child endowment, and so on). Money is necessary to purchase store food, clothes, fuel for trucks and boats, basic hunting equipment, cigarettes and beer, and airplane tickets to the mainland or beyond, and to pay rent and school fees, to mention only the most obvious and general areas of monetization of contemporary life.

There are a number of strategies in place by which some households even out the unequal access to money through wages and various pensions. One strategy is to gamble with cards for money (see Goodale 1987).¹⁴ Women of all ages gamble ("hunt for money," they say), beginning to learn the complexities and subtleties of the adult games in their early teens. Although men also gamble, their participation is sporadic, as was their hunting (in the sea and air) in precontact days. Women consider gambling to be essential to maintaining a healthy household by providing a means of obtaining store food and goods, including hunting and fishing equipment, and gasoline (and sometimes the car, truck, or boat) for modern motorized transportation to productive hunting and fishing areas well outside of the township. Both genders gamble to amass cash with which to pay traditional ceremonial expenses that are now fully monetized.

Senior women of fifty and older are considered to be the "best" players of cards. "Best" does not mean merely that they tend to win more often, but that they play with greater intensity and are more skilled in knowing when to continue and when to retreat. All the senior adult women admitted to me that they gambled for groceries most of the time. While younger women said this also, they frequently added "and for beer." It is not that senior women didn't like getting their beer, but I noticed they often asked a dependent junior to buy it for them and were not refused.

The economic viability of the large household also depends on having manpower available to exploit the many resources of bush, air, and sea. The

large households (with only one or two wage earners) have to contain a number of hunters/foragers so that the natural food resources of the region considered essential for the health and well-being of all dependents can be assured. All households take to the bush or shore on Sundays, but large households with many mouths to feed also tap these resources by sending ablebodied but dependent pensioners and unemployed youths out to hunt during the week.

Another strategy for economic viability, enabling a household to balance income and expenditures, is to rearrange dependents. Elderly widows and widowers, with no dependents but receiving old-age pensions, are distributed to households to help make an economic base that can support them. Naturally there is always some kin connection between the dependent and the head of household. One dependentless elderly couple benefited from the "child endowment" check they received for a brother's child sent to live with them. It is noteworthy that in this case both husband and wife were powerful ritual leaders.

The formation of a contemporary household is not based, as it was earlier, on extensive polygamous marriage in all its structural and political complexity. The result, nevertheless, is the same--an economically viable group composed of both men and women at various age levels who can be sent, according to their abilities, to collect necessary and diverse resources (from shop and bush) to support the household. The organization of such a work force takes skillful management on a daily basis, and this task falls to the senior woman or wife--the contemporary head of household, the *taramaguti* of old. My 1987 census at Milikapiti shows that there were approximately sixty-two married women in the following age groups:

<i>Year Born</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Age</i>
1920s	14	67+
1930s	12	57+
1940s	14	47+
1950s	17	37+
1960s	23	27+
1970s	12	17+

Only in the two oldest cohorts do we find women who are (in my view) equivalent in power, influence, and respect to the *taramaguti* of old. The prime criterion by which I judged a woman to be a modern-day *taramaguti* was the number of kin who were dependent on her and who considered her commands to be theirs to obey. Of the twenty-six women above fifty-seven years old in the two oldest cohorts, only nine still had husbands; each of the

others elected to remain a widow at the death of her last husband. In the age sixty-seven-plus cohort four of the fourteen women head large households. Of these four, three were widows, managing without the help or support of a husband. In the age fifty-seven-plus group three women managed considerably large households, but only one did so with her husband, the others being widows. I give a number of examples below.

Isobel (not her name) was nearly senile, but everyone referred to her establishment by her name, not that of her coresident forty-year-old daughter, son-in-law, or married sons. Food contributions were given to the household in her name. Card games located in or near her house were said to be "in her name." She sat on her porch throughout the many hours of card playing surrounded by her six dogs and possibly eighteen cats and greeted every newcomer with grace. Although I never heard her tell anyone to do anything, there was little doubt that she was "boss" of that household.

Nona (not her name) was a sixty-odd-year-old household head whose husband (her second) still lived. Together they managed a large establishment with from twelve to fifteen dependents. There were only one or sometimes two wage earners. There were three "unemployed" teenage grandsons and sometimes additional young male kin who were regularly sent forth to get turtle, geese, or fish using the motorboat bought by their mother, the wage earner. In this household lived four, sometimes five, pensioners (including the youngest co-wife widow of Nona's father), all still in good health, who were regularly sent out to collect various resources of the nearby mangroves and creeks. Nona always organized and sometimes accompanied these gathering expeditions, which were often held in combination with the smaller households of her husbands widowed sisters. Once in the bush or on the beach or even when riding in the back of the moving truck, Nona told everyone where to go and what to get. Although her eyesight was growing dim, she often spotted a honeybee's nest or a sleeping goana from the moving truck and would direct the driver to stop for her "crew" to collect. Nona was also an avid and good gambler who, together with her coresident and dependent elderly "mother" (MZ), successfully "hunted" for money in the township card games.

Nona's husband was a quiet yet forceful senior man. He rarely disagreed with his wife concerning daily affairs, but he strongly voiced his concerns on issues of land management, politics of marriage, ceremonial organization, and discipline of the young--all traditional areas of male responsibility. During a cyclone he refused to move his household into what the township officials designated as a shelter for pensioners. He declared that in this matter he alone was responsible for his household. As a pensioner, he also had time for and interest in daily gambling, often playing as a team with his wife.

Phyllis (not her name) was a sixty-odd-year-old woman, the widow of a locally powerful man. She managed a large household numbering over twenty persons, although she herself had no house in the community. In good weather she preferred to make her open camp near the three separate houses of her married son, daughter, and granddaughter, their spouses, and their children. Her daughter, granddaughter, and son (all married) were wage earners and would contribute money, but Phyllis spent a considerable number of hours each day gambling to get money to feed her extended family. The main meal during the week, when the children were in school and the wage earners working, was at noon or in the early afternoon. It fell to the household head to make sure there was food for this meal. On weekends she was the one who decided where the household should go together to hunt or fish, and she was a diligent and keen-eyed hunter herself.

Phyllis often combined her household with that of another widow with a large number of dependents. This generally occurred when they took their large households to the bush on Sundays or for longer periods of time during school holidays. As very skilled foragers, they were intent on training the younger women, men, and grandchildren in the necessary skills and techniques. The two households together were more effective in bush foraging, and each of the old women liked the company of the other as they stayed in the camp minding the youngest while they boiled the billy of tea and perhaps played a game of cards together.

Although sisters are equal managers of traditional country groups with their brothers and are consulted on important matters, no women has yet been elected as a representative of a land-managing group to sit on the Tiwi Land Council.¹⁵ Phyllis, however, frequently came to the Tiwi Land Council meetings and always loudly voiced her opinion on land issues that concerned the rights of her deceased husbands children. Phyllis's daughter Maria was frequently reelected to the local township council and unsuccessfully ran for president of that council during my stay. It is not irrelevant that during this time the president of the Milikapiti town council was Maria's *ambrinua*, who was promised her two-year-old daughter as a wife, although both Maria and the president knew that the still young daughter would eventually marry another man. Both the council president and Maria were very involved in the political life of the community. Although they strictly maintained the tabu on directed speech between mothers-in-law and their sons-in-law, they frequently consulted each other through intermediaries.

Other Contemporary Leadership Roles

I do not know whether the role of the modern *taramaguti* will continue to be expressed as other women reach fifty years of age and assume responsi-

bility for a large number of dependents. There are some women in the forty-plus age group who show potential as leaders of expanded households. Other women seem determined to make the smaller and economically independent European-style family work for them. It is significant that both types of households are headed by women who earn the highest wages in the community. The remaining married women are largely dependent on others for economic stability.

Two of the modern professions open to women, health worker and teacher, are the two most stable employment positions in the community, have little or no turnover, and are also the best paid. As employees of the Northern Territory Health and Education Departments, they are free of the politics faced by employees of the local township council.

The health workers at Milikapiti were collectively a highly trained team. The resident European nursing sister was experimentally withdrawn from Milikapiti in 1987 to test the capacity of the four women (and one temporary male health worker) to run the clinic without direct supervision. Their non-resident supervisor said to me, "They handle emergencies far better than any non-Aboriginal person, because they do not panic." They punched no time clock, but were always available when needed. As health minders, they were carrying on a traditional female role. As educated and wealthy women, they tried to influence men and women to drink and smoke less, to care for their children and their aged, and to run their own families according to a model more European than Aboriginal. In my view, they drew what they valued from both cultures.

The Aboriginal teachers did not have the opportunity to run their own school, although initially in the mid-1950s when the township school was first established, they were promised equality with their European "advisors and mentors." They were initially given considerable autonomy in the curriculum of the preschool, which was their domain. Unfortunately, three of the women with approximately thirty years in the employ of the Northern Territory Education Department are ranked today only as teacher's aids, for they have not completed the (now available) courses for an Aboriginal teacher's certificate. The opportunity for certification was offered to them years after they had begun their careers, at a time when they had already established families. To gain a certificate necessitated long absences from their families that they could not tolerate. Their influence in the community is a bit less than that of the health workers, and their families are more traditional in shape and form. As teacher's assistants, these women earn a relatively large salary for the community, and with this they have 'been able to provide cars, boats, motors, and relatively good furnishings for their households. But their influence is felt mainly within their own households. In the two modern roles of health and education workers, Tiwi

women are continuing in their culturally assigned female roles of caring and teaching.

Over the past two decades (the 1980s and 1990s), all of the health and education workers and many other women in the thirty-seven and older age groups have served on the local township council in almost equal numbers with men in the thirty-plus age group. At one point, when the council was all female except for the president, the council resigned as a group in an effort to coerce the men into sober behavior. I came to believe that some of these women view the township as one superhousehold for which they are responsible. They have no problem justifying their leadership position in this public domain, although their abilities are frequently ignored by European male heads of departments.

Periodically throughout the past thirty years, the women have formed a "women's club." The history of these organizations shows that most lasted no more than a few months to a year. One club, formed in 1986 and led by two politically dominant middle-aged women, had as its single goal to obtain a grant to buy a truck, boat, and motor that would be under *their* control, "since we do most of the hunting," they said. I was with them one day when they received a message of "urgent business of mutual concern to discuss" coming from the Nguiu Women's Club of Bathurst Island. The hour-and-a-half truck ride and boat crossing to Nguiu took most of the morning. When the Nguiu women were finally brought together, they said that they were worried about teenage pregnancies, underage drinking, and mothers gambling. The Milikapiti club women said that they had the same problems and therefore couldn't offer any solutions! The women of both clubs then spent the rest of the afternoon gambling. This women's club went out of business shortly after I left in 1987.

While men are culturally charged with the role of organizer and leader of the major life-cycle rituals--the funeral (*pukumani*) and the annual *kulama* yam ritual--women have coordinated the performance of dance and some of the singing. The funeral ritual is also the occasion for production of the major art form--carved and painted poles. Never restricted from such production, older women are increasingly being commissioned for this important ritual act. In 1987, the European adult educator encouraged the formation and independent management of Jilimara, a small clothing business, producing initially silk-screened T-shirts, skirts, shorts, and fabric lengths, all with distinctive Tiwi designs. Jilimara sold most of its production locally and was making a small profit when I left. One of its young female employees was sent away to learn bookkeeping and business economics, but she has subsequently decided that a career as a health worker is more challenging and lucrative.

Jilimara was still in existence in 1995, occupying expanded quarters that also housed a small local art museum. The business helped market traditional crafts and artifacts, for which the Tiwi have long been famous, produced mainly by senior (and today the physically challenged) women and men. Both elderly men and women also spend some time carving spears, clubs, and poles, and painting them as well as bark baskets, all of which are important in the funeral ceremonies. Being a good carver and painter as well as a good ceremonial singer and dancer is still valued--although chiefly by and among the women and men over forty

Conclusion

If there is anything I have learned while engaged in long-term research among the Tiwi, it is to be cautious and to hesitate before drawing any firm conclusions and predictions. However, I foresee the resiliency of the traditional aggregated household, with powerful leadership roles for the senior woman. This arrangement depends only in part on the continuing pattern of "arranged" mother-in-law/son-in-law relationships and in part on the partial monetization of the contemporary household economy. Because everyone (including children) greatly prefers the bush "tucker" (food), considering it healthier and far tastier than what is available in the store, there is continued and concerted effort to educate all members of the household of all ages in hunting and foraging techniques. I can see, therefore, the continued viability and long stability of well-managed aggregates of families and dependents forming a large household and depending on size to give them a balance and diversity of resource foragers and consumers.

The position and influence of older women in other contemporary settings is less clear. They have held positions of power in the local council and perhaps they will gain similar positions of power in the Tiwi Land Council. The land council is extremely interested in helping individuals and communities to develop small-scale ventures. Such ventures in the recent past have included several tourist tours, buffalo meat export, and a forest and timber plantation scheme that they inherited from the government. Women have applied to the land council for small business grants, but have been less successful than men have been. Some business ventures have only lasted a few years, but there will be others and as always women have a voice in the planning. It is still early in this period of self-directed development, and it is possible that in the future women will have equal opportunities for employment, ownership, and management. This future would conform to the Aboriginal sense of gender cooperation and coordination of responsibilities in all matters, whereas the contemporary model has been, up to now,

strongly influenced by white Australia's sense of gender inequality in the workplace.

Certainly in areas of traditional control pertaining to community (household) health and economic stability, older women will continue to have significant influence over both younger women and younger men. In their roles in the schools and at home, women and men are overtly passing on traditional foraging knowledge, as well as language, ceremonial songs, and dances. Senior women are acknowledged by all to be the source of stability in the township as they were in the household or camp of the past. And, as in the past, as the next generation of women ages and supplants deceased elders, each should find her public as well as private voice.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to the National Geographic Society for funding in 1954 and 1980-1981, which allowed me to spend eleven and fifteen months at Milikapiti, respectively. The National Science Foundation financed in part my brief (three-week) visit in 1962 and my fifteen-month visit in 1980-1981. Additional funds were given by the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Bryn Mawr College, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. In 1986-1987, I financed my stay in part through employment at the Darwin Institute of Technology as Principal Lecturer. In 1995 I spent a month in Darwin and Melville Island as preparation for a continued visit, in 1996-1997.

2. My data on this period come from Milikapiti settlement records that I obtained in 1980.

3. The Australian Aboriginal people's concept of the *dreaming* pertains to their view of the origin of the world, all its physical features, and its life forms. It also includes their view of the laws by which all of these features and life forms should relate to each other. *Dreaming* is a multifaceted concept that is far more complex than is connoted by the English word *dreaming* with which the Aboriginal people translate their concept.

4. A twitch in one's shoulder indicates that a spouse is thinking of you. A widow dances with a club with which she strikes herself on her shoulder in the mortuary rituals.

5. This practice also took care of any mixed-race children that might result from men trading with Maccassans and Malays, exchanging their wives for sexual partners and receiving axes and other goods. The children were considered to have been conceived (*dreamed*) by their mother's husband.

6. An older man, while still alive, might also give one of his wives to a younger brother.

7. In the early 1950s, when the white employees of the Department of Welfare demanded that Tiwi give them respect and follow their orders, the Tiwi felt it was justified since the Europeans were feeding, clothing, and otherwise caring for them. When the government (Department of Welfare), in the mid-1970s withdrew from controlling

care for Aboriginal dependents and turned responsibility for daily care back to the Tiwi, they did not relinquish the power of the government over citizens' lives, and the Tiwi were confused. In their mind, power and responsibility went together.

8. This drop in age of menarche is probably related to the increased fat content in the diet. The Tiwi consider the diet they consume in the township not as healthy as what is available in the surrounding bush and sea. For this reason, when feeling ill, they still turn to a bush diet, and everyone considers leaving the community to hunt on Sundays as essential for maintaining general health and for transmission of important bush and health knowledge to the younger generation.

9. My informant believed that the first husband, as sole sexual partner, not only saw to it physically that she did not take on other lovers, but that because she had sex only with him she was somehow protected from becoming pregnant until her late teens. The Tiwi believed that pregnancy too soon after menarche was dangerous for the young wife. If it occurred then, abortion was a common solution (see Goodale 1994).

10. I write here of Milikapiti, for I suspect a greater stability among those marriages at Nguuu, where most couples are married in the Catholic Church.

11. The Milikapiti Township Council sets the limit and kind of alcoholic beverage that may be sold at the Social Club. Since 1980 the legal limit is six cans of beer per adult and no wine or spirits. When the limit is enforced, many Tiwi gamble using beer instead of money. Losers remain relatively sober, while the winners can get very drunk.

12. In the past, should a husband mistreat a wife, the wife's father and brothers were obligated to provide safe haven for her and to punish the husband with physical force if necessary.

13. The year 1987 is the collection date of the data analyzed here. In the short period in 1995 during which I visited the community, I was unable to gather the extensive data necessary to update this portion of the article.

14. The principal card games are a version of gin rummy called *kunkan*, and *kunti*, a version of a game played throughout Aboriginal Australia and in Papua New Guinea resembling baccarat.

15. The nonelection of women to the Tiwi Land Council has been a concern of all the European managers of the council from the beginning. As employees of the council, managers are in an advisory position only and have no vote.

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