



Photo: Penny Tweedle/Panos Pictures

Educating Virgil

Tom Parry visits an Aborigine reserve in northern Australia

Your boy's done good down there," said Alan, the white schoolteacher from South Australia.

He was speaking to the Walpiri parents of nine-year-old Virgil, in the Northern Territory Aboriginal community of Ali Curang. We were about two hours south of Tennant Creek, my intended destination, when I started thumbing for a lift that morning. What I presumed was a thick grey heat haze smudged the horizon.

Virgil's father bowed his head sheepishly towards the litter-strewn red earth, a trait I had often witnessed among Aborigines. The boy's mother ambled languidly from a decrepit iron-sheet shack – her home since her semi-nomadic family were forcibly relocated by missionaries to government reserves, I was later told. Her legs were matchstick-thin, covered in the blotches of malnutrition and anaemia.

"Now this is a letter from the headmistress in Adelaide," Alan continued. "She says, 'Virgil is doing very well in the special needs department. He has been a model pupil. We would like him to

continue his education here.' So what do you reckon? You should be proud."

Neither parent spoke up. They had not seen their son for over a year. Apart from offering Virgil a brief show of affection on our arrival there was no visible emotion. For them it was a simple equation: their offspring had been taken away and now he was back. They only revealed fleeting joy when Virgil handed over a McDonalds Happy Meal, which he had secreted under his blanket throughout the long drive from Alice Springs.

Virgil was the latest in a long line of Ali Curang children to return to his ancestral homeland after sampling an education in one of Australia's main towns. Alan, who had given me a lift in his rattling camper van on one of his regular forays into the desert, is a zealous vigilante who runs his own unofficial scholarship scheme. Having worked at Aboriginal schools in Arnhem Land and Tennant Creek, he devotes himself to escorting promising youngsters down to Adelaide for a trial year at school.

Ever since white pioneers first traversed the sand-hills of the Tanami Desert on Afghan camels, 'welfare patrols' have escorted the Walpiri people out of their clan territory. At first they were herded into missionary camps, then, in 1945, Ali Curang was created. Dependent on white man's food, weakened by alcohol and imported diseases like tuberculosis, the Walpiri were effectively marooned there, co-habiting unhappily with the Alyawarra, an entirely separate nation with its own language, upon whose



Photo: Penny Tweedle/Panos Pictures

traditional land the reserve is situated. The Walpiri's own sacred sites are days away.

Today the community is held up as an example of self-sufficient land ownership. It is officially alcohol-free and, without Alan's presence, I would have needed a permit to enter. A local Aboriginal council administers its affairs. On paper, with a youth centre, domestic violence unit and independent night patrol, all is harmonious in Ali Curang. The reality I saw could not have been more different.

Unable to elicit a response from his audience, Alan started filling some bin bags with rusty cans and wine casks that had been chucked on the ground by the 600-strong population. Settees lay rotting under shrivelled trees. Along the corrugated-dirt perimeter track were abandoned station wagons, left where they had broken down.

The gathering consisted mainly of barefoot women in badly fitting flower print dresses. I asked a man with a station hand's mullet haircut where the other men were.

"Most of our mob are out hunting during the day," he replied casually, eyes fixed to the ground. "I suppose they'll be looking for kangaroos," I said, thinking of it as a recreational outing, like fox hunting in Britain.

"No, mate," he replied with a hoarse whisper, "it's goannas they're after. They've gone out with spears in the back of a ute. That's why they're burning the spinifex: it makes the little bastards come out of the bush."

So the foggy pall surrounding us was not due

to the scorching heat, but to Aborigines managing the land in the manner of their fathers.

Alan planned to return to Ali Curang in two days, once Virgil's parents had decided whether their son should continue his formal education. Before leaving, he resignedly repeated: "Virgil could do good for your mob. He could stay at the whitefellas' school." But they were more interested in the Happy Meal.

Ali Curang has its own primary school, where Virgil's friends were. From there, a minority go on to the blacks-only Yirra College in Alice Springs. The syllabus includes courses on 'learning to live in a house' and 'learning the European'.

I asked the man if he thought Virgil would go back to Adelaide. "I don't reckon, mate," he replied. He said some families had left Ali Curang to establish a camp further into the bush. After two generations of involuntary civilisation, the Walpiri were retreating. Virgil's father intended to join them, the man said, probably before his son's ritual initiation *corroboree*.

Before returning south, our host intended to track down some former protégés in Tennant Creek. One, Esme, spent 10 years working for the civil service in Adelaide after taking a university degree, before inexplicably going walkabout.

"Do any of you blokes know where I'll find old Esme?" Alan asked. "Most mornings you can find her in front of the bottle shop," came the reply.

"Sometimes these people just go bad," Alan said as we left, "and it's our bloody fault. What have they got to live for?" ■

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