

A REPORT ON TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL CAMP LAYOUT  
IN RELATION TO TOWN PLANNING APRIL 1974\*

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Traditional camp layout - the placement of wiltjas (wind-breaks or wurlies) - catered for extended family and totemic groupings. The past practice of European authorities in designing towns for Aboriginal communities along the lines of European type suburbs seemed to ignore this completely. ("European" is used throughout to indicate White authorities or White society as distinct from Aboriginal.)

It seemed in fact that many of the designs were so unimaginative, and the placement of Aboriginal families so arbitrary, as to constitute a serious factor in community fragmentation and breakdown.

In May of 1971, having observed many camp settings over a period of six years, and having spent long periods sitting in camps talking with people, I sought to find out the nature and significance of camp layout for the Pitjantjatjara people of Central Australia.

Using as an informant a man at Amata Reserve in South Australia, Henry Tjamalyi, I drew from memory a typical camp layout (see diagram 1). Making clear my ignorance and the fact that I was seeking information, I asked Henry if perhaps the different groupings were related to "dreamings" or totemic groups (for example, kangaroo dreaming, fig dreaming, dingo, goanna, and so on).

Henry became very excited as we discussed in the language the implications of this for housing layout, and proper community representation on European-stimulated Aboriginal councils. He asked for time off work so that he could "learn more about this". I insisted that I was the pupil and he the teacher, but he asserted that he was learning. What I imagine he was referring to was the

fact that I was bringing these concepts and the reasons behind them into his conscious thought for the first time. He got time off and we established certain facts.

Later I showed the diagram to three leading younger men (but fully tribal, one being well up in the law, and the mayatja or "boss" of an important sacred area) and their wives. Albert Lennon, in full conference with the others, and with much cross-reference, wrote in the names of the dreaming groups and showed their relationship to each other.

They were greatly excited by the exercise, and said that this was the way it should be, but that White people had come and forced some changes in their patterns of living.

We established that the "dreaming", or extended family groups, were always in that particular spatial relationship with each other; also that spatial relationship reflected the geographical location and inter-relationship of the most important sacred site for each dreaming.

In fact then, the very layout of Pitjantjatjara camps was an unconscious and constant reminder to people of their law, and the whole proper order of things. A man got up in the morning, rubbed his eyes and gazed around, and was immediately reminded who he was - for example, a person of the malu or papa dreaming - of the location of his sacred country, of the nature of his relationships and his proper behaviour towards the people immediately around him, and to the other groups scattered around. Camp layout in fact under-girded and strengthened the whole fabric of his society.

We Europeans entered the historical scene, and with varying degrees of ignorance or arrogance proceeded in most situations to shatter this structure. In its place we put barren and unimaginative town plans, and often arbitrarily relocated families. The results of this were the loss of the re-inforcement of law, and of social structure, the breaking up of extended family groupings, an increase in social pressures and a consequent worsening of community health.

This paper is an account of the results of stimulating the thinking of Aboriginal groups in relation to the meaning of traditional camp layout and the possibilities of its application to town planning.

*Watty Creek Town Plan for the Gurintji People.* (Diagram B)

Early in the period of the Gurintji's move from Wave Hill to Watty Creek, their sacred land, Mr. Stan Barker, Lecturer in Architecture at Melbourne, came through Alice Springs. He showed the town plan which ABSCHOL had asked him to draw up for Watty Creek. It had straight streets and houses side by side.

When I queried the relevance of such a plan for an Aboriginal community he said, "But that is exactly what the people said they wanted." "How did you ask them?" I asked, "Because unless you make it very clear that they can have something relevant to their own patterns of camp layout, they will think they must have straight streets. Houses are 'Whitefeller' things, and probably the only ones they have seen are in Katherine in straight lines."

Having studied their camp layout and questioned them more deeply as suggested, Mr. Barker produced a model with curved roads and groups of houses (see diagram B: the drawing is from memory, and therefore not accurate. It could do an injustice to Mr. Barker's plan, and should be taken as only a very rough representation of it.)

When Mr. Barker showed the model to the people, there was a lot of discussion and interest. Next morning a group of elders waited to see him. "It's all fixed" they said, "Major will live in that house; that means that (so and so) will live there, and (so and so) there, and (so and so) there," - indicating the other houses in that group. They did likewise with the other groups of houses, allocating them according to their system of family groupings.

Stan Barker thought, "There must be something wrong. Downing told me the people might take weeks to reach consensus on an important decision." So he said, "You don't have to have it like that. That is just to show you another way you might have it if you want. You can have them in straight streets like Whitefellers if you want." "No, that's right!" they said.

Shortly after this I showed the model to Finke people (the Aputula community) who were about to build their own houses. Though restricted by town building blocks, I felt that the model might stimulate them to move the houses around on the blocks a little in order to get some kind of grouping.

For three days people came and discussed the model. On the fourth day some of the men said, "It's all fixed. Fred will live there, and that means (so and so) will live there, and (so and so) there." Then indicating another group of houses, "Tommy will live there, and that means that Joe will live there and (so and so) there and (so and so) there."

I said, "This is not a plan for Finke. I told you it was for the Watty Creek people, and I brought it to show you another way people could have houses if they want. You can have them any way you like - straight streets like White fellows if you wish." "No," they said, "that's right!" (Exactly the same reaction as the Gurintji people).

*Fregon "Dog-foot" Town Plan.* (Diagram C)

When Albert Lennon and the people from Ernabella Mission confirmed for me the meaning of the traditional camp layout, we discussed the implications of this for housing and council representation, and I showed them a representation of the Watty Creek plan.

Albert Lennon had previously designed a town layout for Fregon, which was a circular kind of road with houses side by side. He immediately returned to Fregon and drew up what has become known as "Albert's dog-foot plan."

The plan, in the shape of a dog's paw has groups of houses in the positions of the four toes and clinic and school in the pad, with other service buildings outside the "paw".

The significance of this plan is that Fregon is an important area in the dingo "dreaming" or story.

*Aileron Town Plan.* (Diagram D)

In November 1973 we took participants in a Community Development workshop to visit the Anmatjara speaking community at Aileron, eighty miles north of Alice Springs. The Aileron people had agreed to teach the Workshop people something about their community and their thinking about the future.

They told of their desire to get a parcel of land which they could fence and on which they would build a small town. When asked how they would set out the town they said it would have three straight streets with houses side by side.

Drawing in the dust I discussed with them the traditional Pitjantjatjara camp layouts and noted that their camp had three main groupings of wurlies. They said these were three different groups of people (extended families?). Then I drew and explained the Watty Creek plan and the Fregon plan. I said that Aboriginal people could have any kind of plan that had meaning and importance for their people.

At this, a lot of discussion took place in the language. The men kept referring to one old man who had not joined in the previous discussion, but was obviously some kind of authority. Eric, the main spokesman, then drew "tjuringas" in the dust. "We have lots of boards here," he said. "This one is very important for this place, it means a lot for us. What about if we have a road right round here and one down the middle, and we can put the houses around these curves with the clinic and school and store on the middle curves." I said "That's good. You can have any plan that means a lot to you people." Eric said "Well, that's very strong for us. That's what we want." The others all agreed and seemed very excited about the plan.

*Docker River Town Plan.* (Diagram E).

On March 17th, 1974 I spoke with the Pitjantjatjara men at Docker River, about 320 miles west of Alice Springs.

The Superintendent, Mr. Neville Jones, who seems to have very good relationships with the people said, "I have tried to find out from the Housing Association and the Council what sort of town plan the people want. They keep coming up with a typical suburban plan with straight streets and houses side by side. They say that they want all the white staff to live together with them and the Ngaatjatjarra people who belong to Giles area. They say we have to be all one people from now on, and live differently. I feel in my bones that it's wrong, but someone seems to have got at them strongly, and I can't shake them on it."

Explaining that I could show the people how other communities had reacted and that this might stimulate their thinking, I asked if he would mind if I tried this. Neville said "You go ahead. I'll be only too happy if you can find out what they want."

Mr. Peter Cohne, the community's architectural adviser was present at the meeting. When we reached the Fregon "dog foot"

plan the people got very excited. "That's right for Fregon," they said, "that's just right."

I drew the architect's attention to Mr. Max Brumby, the council chairman, who was drawing a design in the dust. There was a storm of discussion. The people gathered around the design in the dust. "We are 'Wintalyka' (mulga) dreaming," they told us. "That's our drawing. Our sacred place is over there, (pointing) and that drawing is just right for us." When asked about European staff the people indicated an area away from their town, and said "They can live down here and we will run a road down to join up with them."

On 21st March, 1974 the foregoing material was shown to the community at Areyonga settlement, about 150 miles west of Alice Springs. They too were excited by the Fregon "dog foot" plan. When shown the Docker River plan they said, "We are Wintalyka people too; that plan is just right for us. We are related to the Docker River people. We are living in Aranta country, but we don't want to leave because many of our children were born here. If we have that wintalyka town plan we will feel at home here and confident; and when our relations come from Docker River they will feel at home too."

*Indulkana Town Plan.* (Diagram F)

On March 28th, 1974, at a meeting with Indulkana people the various diagrams were shown and discussed. The usual excited discussion followed. The people had chosen the Family Education Centre as the venue for the meeting and after seeing the diagrams an old man drew on the blackboard the tracks of a kangaroo (marlu). I suggested that one set of tracks mightn't be enough, and drew a couple more at different angles, but separate from one another.

Several men, both young and old, gathered around the board talking excitedly and drawing different plan designs incorporating the kangaroo tracks. Finally, and in a surprisingly short time, they came up with the formalized and imaginative design shown in Diagram F. There was firm agreement by the large gathering, and the people asked for the design to be drawn on a large sheet of paper and left with them.

*Ernabella Mission Town Plan suggestions.* (Diagram G)

On March 29th, 1974 a meeting of men at Ernabella Mission showed the same excited reaction to the camp and town plan diagrams.

The material was completely presented by Albert Lennon. After sending the very young men out then, an Ernabella man with considerable authority and leadership discussed sacred things in relation to the town plans. In the course of this, speaking in Pitjantjatjara, Albert said "I drew a circle for Fregon (town plan) the first time, and I was wrong. Then after we had talked more about these things I went back to draw the "dog foot" plan. That is right for Fregon." Albert then showed the various plans and said, "The Government is now asking us to think for ourselves. These plans are according to Aboriginal ways. Tjilpi here just puts ideas and shows us things. He doesn't push us or talk strongly, but just asks us to think for ourselves. All right, what sort of plan do you people want?" They then asked for large sheets of paper and texta colours and divided into two groups and worked on designs.

The first design was produced by the more sophisticated group of men. They produced the grid design, which relates to a ceremonial design, the houses being placed in the form of foot prints. The second and older group, which is directly related to the immediate area, produced a less sophisticated design related to the seven sisters dreaming (a star formation).

#### *Some Implications for Aboriginal Town Plans.*

It is easy to put pressure on Aboriginal Communities to accept European type town plans and social forms and structures, at least on the face of it. Because of a long history of being the powerless group in the wider society and having to submit to European power and authority or go under, as well as Aboriginal structures and concepts inhibiting the people from open opposition to such pressures, the people submit. The result is not a real acceptance of such structures or forms, but a superficial acceptance. Underlying this is either passive rejection or powerless resignation, loss of interest and hope and very real damage to that community in terms of its social health and well being.

It is very easy for architectural and other advisers to move in with enthusiasm and with imaginative ideas. However, we are not dealing with communities which have the patterns of behaviour which will enable them to assess, and if necessary to reject, such suggestions. For instance, it is traditional not to oppose another man's idea, because that is peculiarly his and one has no right to question this. However, it may well be ignored or gone around.

Hence the danger of new ideas introduced with enthusiasm and without the kind of carefully built up relationships within which the Aboriginal people feel free to express their true ideas or feelings.

The foregoing approach to the question of town planning offers a method of liberating Aboriginal thinking from imprisonment in white structures. It offers a method of stimulating the thinking of Aboriginal communities towards the possibility of finding patterns of living which strengthen, rather than weaken, Aboriginal traditions and their sense of community.

Architects and other advisers have a responsibility to seek from Aboriginal communities, by such methods, their own strong wishes. Only they know their own social patterns, their own sacred areas, their own designs which will give meaning to their communities. Then the advisers can help the Aboriginal communities to develop what they want. Anything else in the semi-tribal situation, and indeed in some fringe dwelling communities, however imaginative, can only contribute to the weakening of Aboriginal social structures, and to social breakdown. Only Aboriginal communities know what they need and can express it when their thinking is so liberated. The resultant town designs are likely to be exciting and imaginative, as can be seen.

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*\*This article was also published in - Aboriginal News, Vol.1. No.8, August 1974.*



DIAGRAM C - FREGON 'DOG FOOT' PLAN (BELOW)

NOTE THE GROUPS OF HOUSES IN THE FOUR "PAWS", AND THE CLINIC AND SCHOOL IN THE "PAD", WITH OTHER SERVICE BUILDINGS ELSEWHERE.

DIRECTLY STIMULATED BY DISCUSSION OF CAMP LAYOUT, THIS PLAN REPLACED ALBERT LENNON'S PREVIOUS PLAN, WHICH WAS LIKE SO -

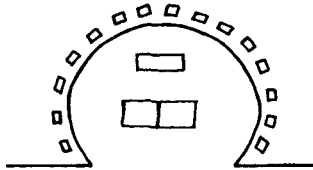
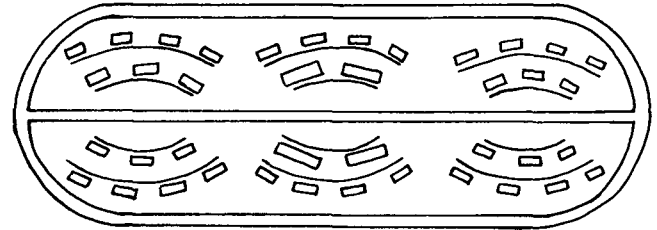


DIAGRAM D - AILERON TOWN PLAN



RELATED TO DRAWINGS ASSOCIATED WITH A SACRED AREA

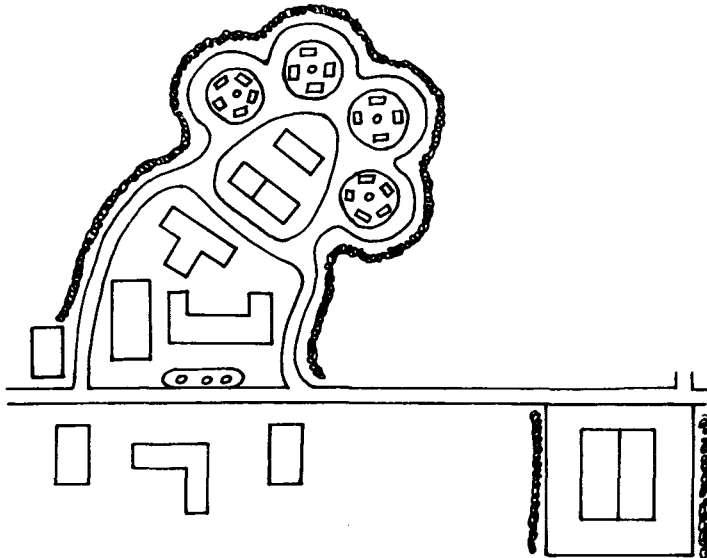
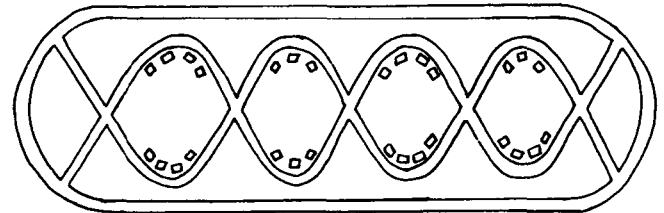


DIAGRAM E - DOCKER RIVER AND AREYONGA TOWN PLAN



RELATED TO 'WINTALYKA' OR MULGA DREAMING

DIAGRAM A - TRADITIONAL TYPE OF PITJANTJATJARA CAMP LAYOUT

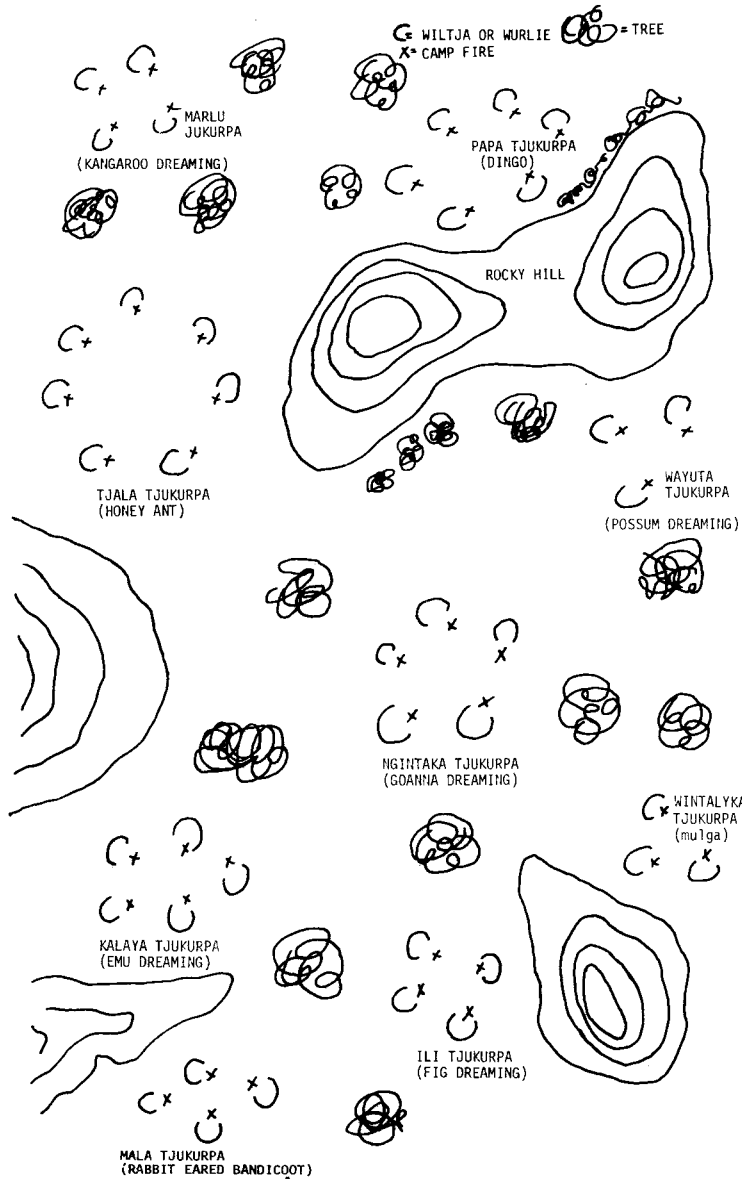


DIAGRAM B - GURINDJI TOWN PLAN (WATTY CREEK)

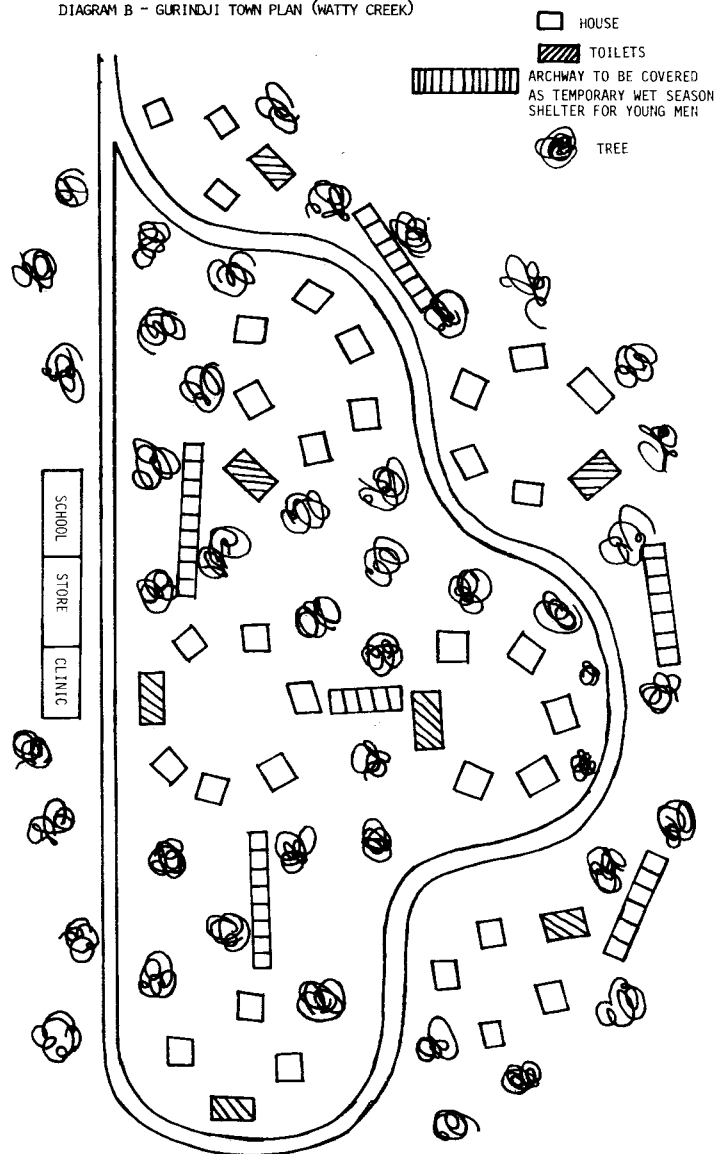
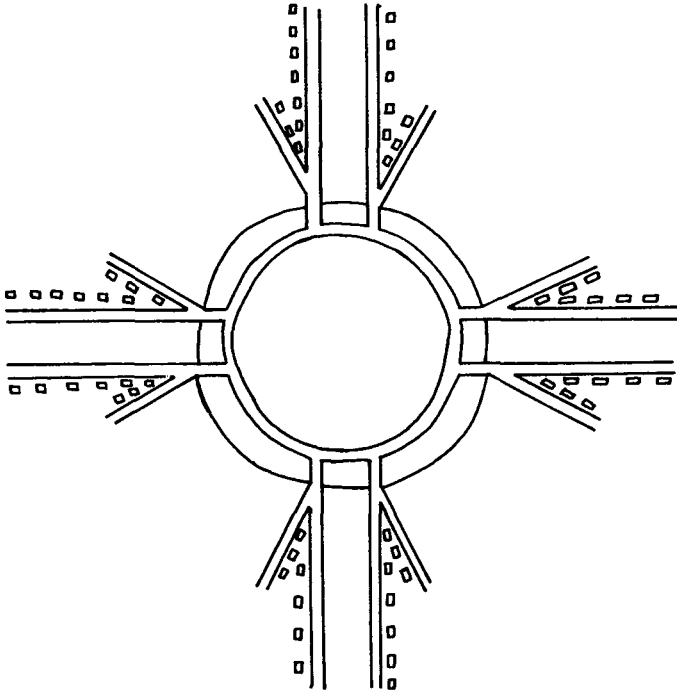


DIAGRAM F - INDULKANA TOWN PLAN



BASED ON MALU (KANGAROO) PAW PRINTS

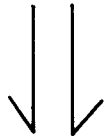
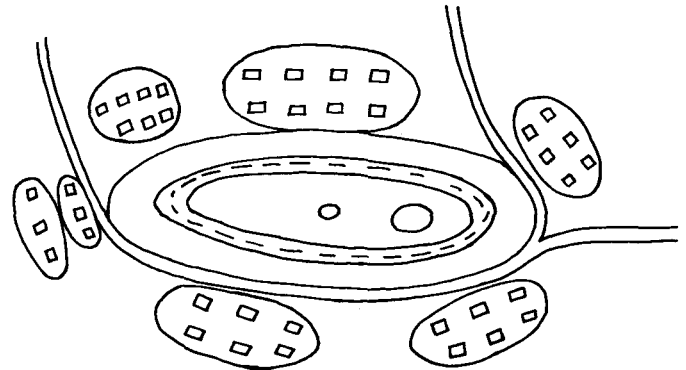
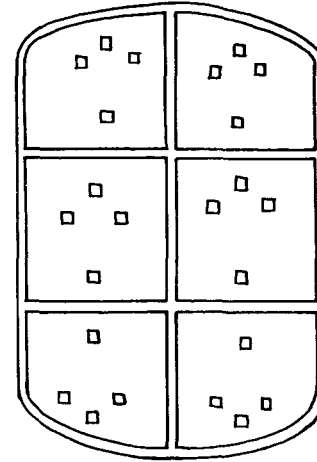


DIAGRAM G - ERNABELLA MISSION TOWN PLAN SUGGESTIONS



BASED ON SEVEN SISTERS DREAMING  
(A STAR CLUSTER)