

Self-Determination
Aborigines and the State in Australia



Self-Determination

Aborigines and the state in Australia

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Bachelor of Social Studies

Associate Diploma in Community Work

Master of Development Studies

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Frontispiece: Ganma.

Painted in 1989 by Yalmay Yunupingu, Gumatj Clan, Yirritja Moiety.

Reproduced from H. Watson and D. W. Chambers (1989) *Singing the*

Land, Signing the Land: A Portfolio of Exhibits, Geelong: Deakin

University, page 39.

Candidate's Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled *Self-Determination: Aborigines and the State in Australia* has not been submitted for any other degree to any other university or institution of higher education. The source of the information herein is original and is solely the work of the author.

Ian Hughes

Supervisor's Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled *Self-Determination: Aborigines and the State in Australia* is ready for examination.

Dr Cherry Russell

Abstract

This thesis is an inquiry into the possibility of Aboriginal autonomy under the regime of a state policy which commands self determination. Debate about policy has been dominated by Western scientific, political and professional knowledge, which is challenged by indigenous paradigms grounded in the Dreaming. A recognition of the role of paradox leads me to an attempt at reconciliation between the old and the new Australian intellectual traditions.

The thesis advances the theory of internal colonialism by identifying self-determination as its current phase. During more than 200 years of colonial history the relationship between Aborigines and the state has been increasingly contradictory. The current policy of self-determination is a political paradox. Aboriginal people must either conform to the policy by disobeying it, or reject the policy in obedience to it. Through the policy of self-determination the state constructs a relationship of dependent autonomy with Aboriginal people.

In a two-year (1994-95) action research project Kitya Aboriginal Health Action Group was set up to empower a local community to establish an Aboriginal health service despite opposition from the Government Health Service. In collaboration with local general practitioners and volunteers the action group opened a health centre. After the end of formal field work government funding and support for the health service was granted.

The project illustrated the paradox of dependent autonomy. What appeared as successful community development was not development, and what appeared as destructive factionalism was empowering. Strategies for change made use of contradictions and paradoxes within the state. As an innovation in the practice of social change, the thesis begins the construction of a model for indigenous community action for self-determination in health.

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Preface

In 1992 I enrolled in the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Deakin University and at the start of 1994 transferred my enrolment to the Faculty of Health Sciences in The University of Sydney. The research was unfunded and payment to participants was not possible. Some out of pocket expenses incurred by Aboriginal participants was reimbursed from a small University grant, and the Faculty of Health Sciences donated a computer to the Aboriginal health service which was set up. I received no personal remuneration from the project.

This thesis and the project it reports complies with the NHMRC Statement on Scientific Practice, NH&MRC Guidelines on Ethics in Aboriginal Research and the Statement of Principles and Procedures for the Conduct of Research issued by the Sydney University Koori Centre. The project was approved by the Deakin University Ethics Committee in June 1993, The University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee in May 1994, and endorsed by The University of Sydney Koori Research Committee in March 1993.

Acknowledgments

I welcome the opportunity to record my thanks to many people. A major contribution was made by members of Kitya Aboriginal Health Action Group, and other members of the Aboriginal community of Kitya, some of whom are known by pseudonyms in this thesis. I am grateful for their support, tolerance and willingness to teach. I deeply appreciate the spiritual, intellectual and other insights I have received from Aboriginal teachers in NSW and Northern Territory. I especially record my debt to Jackie Kalakala, as well as Les Bursill, George Gunjibala, Chris King, Trish King, Manduwuy Yunupingu and others.

I gained much from three people who provided supervision. Dr Michael Muetzelfeldt, of the Department of Politics at Deakin University helped develop my critical thinking and theoretical position; Dr Cherry Russell of the School of Community Health at The University of Sydney helped especially with research method and writing the thesis; and Dr Friedoon Khavarpour, also of the School of Community Health, joined me in the field.

I maintained virtual contact with the action research community through two email lists, *AR-students* moderated by Paul Inglis and *Arlist*, conducted by Bob Dick. I am grateful to both. I thank Roderic Pitty and Tim Rowse for comments which helped me to think through the idea of dependent autonomy, Trish King for nurturing my appreciation of spiritual aspects of ganma thinking, and Cherry Russell for her careful supervision, especially while I was writing up the thesis. The off campus library service at Deakin University provided excellent support during the literature survey. The skill of my chiropractor, Guy Murray, enabled me to spend too much time at the computer keyboard.

My wife, Dee Hughes, has assisted in every possible way during the six years I have been working on this project, has been my constant support and companion. I cannot overstate my debt of gratitude to Dee. She and other members of my families have shared the burden of this project in many ways.

Originality

I first thought of the idea of dependent autonomy while writing a case study of development in north Australia as part of a Master of Development Studies program at Deakin University (Hughes 1991: 28). A paper on self-determination to the 1993 Australasian Political Studies Association Conference (Hughes 1993) was based on work undertaken towards the Doctor of Philosophy degree. With revision this was published in Australian Journal of Social Issues in November 1995 (Hughes 1995), and with minor changes this became Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.** in this thesis.

All research activity, including literature review, fieldwork, data collection, analysis and reporting was my own. The notion of dependent autonomy, which is tested in this thesis, is an original contribution to the theory of internal colonialism. The model of indigenous community action presented in Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.** is an original contribution to practice knowledge.

Being White

This thesis is in part a record of my thinking about being white in black Australia. As a non-indigenous person it is hard to write an academic thesis about self-determination in a way which empowers people who have been oppressed by my mob for 200 years. I hope the action research project reported here and the thesis itself, in a small way, helps Aboriginal empowerment and self-determination. But there is a risk that retaining the traditional thesis form may contribute to the continuing intellectual colonisation of Aboriginal Australia. The inclusion of elements of indigenous thought may help intellectual decolonisation, and may also be part of the domestication of Aboriginal thinking. The final chapter of the thesis attempts to suggest some implications of this study for action to empower Aborigines. The first thing we whitefellas have to do sort out what is happening inside our heads. One sub-text that I am aware of is that the liberation of white Australia is irreversibly and intimately bound up with the liberation and empowerment of indigenous people.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AIDS	auto-immune deficiency syndrome
ALP	Australian Labour Party
AMS	Aboriginal Medical Service
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
CDP	community development planning
GP	general practitioner
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
NAIHO	National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council