

Culture, Economy and Governance
in
Aboriginal Australia



Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
and the
Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney

Culture, Economy and Governance
in
Aboriginal Australia

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edited by

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INTRODUCTION

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Background

Australia's Indigenous citizens live in a wide variety of circumstances across both rural and urban Australia. Increasingly, their location is an urban and peri-urban one. Nonetheless, rural and remote Aborigines comprise a sizable number, around 120,000 in an Indigenous population of 460,000. Many reside on their countries and many have received land rights in the past 25 years. For most, engagement with a cash economy has been quite recent and brought with it expanding institutional links beyond an immediate locale. Made 'remote' because their regions lack interest for the national economy, or because previous rural industries have waned, these Australian citizens are confronted with the dual challenge of cultural difference and rapid change¹. These changes include population growth within communities that have relatively little net out-migration.

This circumstance embodies an explosive situation in which young people pass from youth to adulthood in increasingly large cohorts with little education and few job prospects. Employment growth in remote communities has been mainly in areas of administration and other service jobs. This circumstance advantages the better educated, including Indigenous people drawn from cities and regional towns. It has impact especially on unskilled youth in remote communities. Despite some variation between the positions of women and men, the overall situation fuels tense family and gender relations. Domestic and community violence is common. Poor health is widespread and perennial. For most young adults, 'make work' and welfare policies have been unable to support desired levels of well-being. Moreover, this circumstance can also obscure the relevance of literate education when avenues for using education and trade skills are reduced in a limited labour market. As a consequence, both children and parents struggle to maintain education a priority.

These conditions became the topic of debate in a range of mainstream publications that began with Dr. Noel Pearson's *Our Right to Take Responsibility* (2000). His work and that of others has focused on the issues of welfare, demoralisation in communities and extreme poverty. Pearson has pointed to the need and desire for more enterprise in communities where the current policies of government welfare transfers have not produced the types of results that many hoped for.

These issues have been interpreted in terms of the relative merits of economic development and land rights. Yet the particular cast that the Federal Government placed on this – as an issue of 'practical' versus 'symbolic' reconciliation – is not the only one. Another and more popular view is that both are integral to Indigenous well-being in rural and remote communities. Equally, if land rights have promoted living remote, it is crucial that the resource and human capital implications of this circumstance be addressed. While economists often lack the knowledge of culture that would allow them to factor in relevant costs of lifestyle change among Aborigines, anthropologists familiar with Indigenous culture often overlook the resource issues that are central to community life.

These limitations among professionals point to a more general feature of this public debate: the relative lack of information concerning rural and remote Aborigines: their histories, past and present engagements with the Australian economy, along with the cultural commitments they retain. Too often churchmen have attributed Indigenous poverty and demoralization to individual weakness, while some policy advisors are unwilling to grant that migration has enormous costs for many Aborigines. At the same time, some anthropologists and philosophers have treated these issues as lacking relevance to a politics of difference. Their emphasis on the reproduction of culture has meant

that often little attention is paid to the concomitant costs. Yet life-long welfare dependency affects Indigenous Australians just as much as it does non-Indigenous Australians. It undermines local authority, material well being and social-moral coherence. No modern society and culture can flourish in conditions of declining literacy, unemployment, poor health, poor housing, and community and domestic violence.

The workshop from which this collection comes was devised with these issues in mind. It brought together 22 participants in five panels scheduled across two days. It was sponsored jointly by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, and the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney. The participants convened at Sydney University on 3-4 December 2004 but planning had commenced almost a year before.

Planning the Workshop

When we first planned the workshop our aim was to bring together anthropologists and economists. We thought that this would promote acknowledgment, on the one hand, of the specificity of Aboriginal people and, on the other, of the intractability of modern society that makes labour, capital and commodity markets central to all populations – even those still engaged partly in hunter-gather life. In short, our focus was on culture and economy and this was intended to signal two significant shifts. The first was a shift away from land rights as the overarching theme in university research. Land rights and its legal process have dominated a range of disciplinary concerns for at least two decades. With the conclusion of claims under the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, and a slower pace for Native Title, it seemed right to take up other pressing and related issues. A second shift concerned a recent prominence in academic and policy debate on issues of governance. This prominence has been influenced by two factors. One is that government transfers now constitute a large part of the local economies of Aboriginal people. The other is that the development of an Indigenous administrative sector has been seen as the centrepiece in struggles for Indigenous rights. A common view has been that cultural reproduction and self-management go together. Built into this position has been the assumption that this will be self-management mainly of government transfers supporting Aboriginal milieux.

Such research tends to take as given that most remote Indigenous Australians will stay welfare dependent, that their chief source of income will remain government transfers. Notwithstanding current rhetoric in the political domain, this assumption is well founded. The economic outlook for rural and remote Indigenous communities is bleak. Yet a focus on governance alone cannot address what should be the central issue: namely, that many Indigenous Australians wish to remain remote even though governments, state and federal, do not favor job creation in these areas. The consensus of the Australian majority seems to be that, notwithstanding their historical dispossession, rural and remote Indigenous Australians do not warrant special treatment in the area of industry support for jobs. The consequence is that many Aborigines continue to live remote, but in demoralised and disadvantaged conditions. If in fact government transfers are not enough, if life-long welfare is inherently disabling even on the margins of the nation state, improving governance can only have a limited impact.

The implications of this fact are often placed in stark relief: either Aboriginal people will favor culture and remain remote and impoverished, *or* they will need to migrate and forego that culture. A variety of views seek ways out of this dilemma. Some writers propose that traditional culture can meet the demands of current community life – by re-locating in small outstation groups, or by fostering various forms of land care economy. Others envisage community-funded enterprise based on government transfers and modest private investment. Still others advocate migration with the assumption that the cultural adjustments involved could not be worse than the current disabling impact of violence, poor education and health in remote communities.

It was debate around these issues that we hoped the workshop would produce. In particular, we aimed to provide some economists with a better understanding of how attachments to country and kin can create daunting costs that inhibit the desire to migrate. We also hoped that the workshop would reveal some significant gaps in anthropology's research. Can a focus on governance alone address the

issues of violence, poor health and deteriorating literacy? What is the impact of marginality on culture and in what ways is culture disarranged? Can it be the case that communitarian commitments actually violate individual rights? Two related factors dampened our ambitions. First, we found it very difficult to recruit economists to the workshop who had any experience of or sustained interest in remote Indigenous communities. In areas of economics relevant to policy it seemed to matter that Aborigines are a small and little known sector of the electorate. In addition, we found a polarised professional community in which it was commonly assumed that economics and anthropology simply could not communicate. Second, among anthropologists not focused on traditional culture and fine art, many worked on governance and seemed to accept the status quo of communities resourced mainly through government transfers. Not to adopt their position was construed by some as tantamount to the betrayal of self-management and even Aboriginal culture itself. Sometimes the assumption was that suffering in communities is exaggerated in order to undermine Indigenous governance. In short, bounded fields and gaps in research reflected a society in which Aboriginal issues have been allowed to slide on and off the agenda for generations. As this situation persists, Aborigines suffer like no other Australians.

Our original intention had been a workshop on 'Economy and Culture in Aboriginal Australia'. This collection is entitled 'Economy, Culture and Governance'. It reflects the fact that governance and self-management are critical to Indigenous Australians just because their fates are so directly tied to government administration. Because this is the case, and because they are also a tiny electoral minority, Indigenous Australians do need a peak policy body properly funded and independent of political party ideology. Whether or not Indigenous services are administered through mainstream departments, the need for this policy body remains. At the same time, it is our contention that this analytical focus, although important, does not strike at the critical heart of rural and remote Indigenous conditions in Australia. The desire of the continent's original owners to be different if they wish should be canvassed more vigorously. The economic implications of this in a modern society need to be understood. The implications of living in the twilight of life-long welfare, or migration by default, also need to be teased out. Once addressed, these issues should inform the types of options canvassed for Indigenous Australians and the judgments about whether or not they are acceptable ones in a liberal democracy. The papers in this collection make a start on this task.

The Essays

The essays fall into five sections that match the sessions of the workshop. The first, *A History of Initiatives*, reviews Aboriginal engagements with the Australian economy. Peterson provides an overview of Indigenous transitions from small hunter-gatherer groups, to missions and pastoral stations, to the payment of award wages and inclusion in the cash economy. Morphy, Levitus and Trigger in turn discuss art as economy, royalty management, and engagements with the mining sector. The second section, *Indigenous Disadvantage*, provides three overviews of systemic discrimination in education (Mooney), the labour market (Hunter), and in welfare services (Cass). These two sections set the scene: As their lives have changed with incorporation in the Australian nation state, Aboriginal people have sought to engage and have constantly been marginalised.

Section three, *Economic Futures*, is the pivot of the collection. Taylor's essay is a case study of the East Kimberley region and the impacts of possible trajectories for the Argyle Diamond Mine and the Ord River Scheme Stage II proposal. His analysis shows that even with the constructive efforts of Rio Tinto, likely trajectories involve non-Indigenous job loss with major knock-on effects for local Aborigines. Many will be 'structurally detached from the labour market, and ill-equipped to engage it'. Altman's remarks revolve around his model of 'hybrid economy', one in which transfers, and customary and market activity can interact in various ways. A central point for Altman is that stated commitments of government to education and equity are not matched by policy detail. As a consequence, these small, local, managed economies must be addressed as a principal option. Gregory stresses the particularity of remote Indigenous communities: where most people who are marginal

to market activity migrate to other locales, remote Aboriginal people seem to resist this course. In contrast to Altman, he emphasizes that well-being will require increased out-migration because Aborigines, like other Australians, face an 'economy-wide movement' away from demand for full-time, unskilled male labour. Gregory notes the current policy vacuum in areas concerning Indigenous transitions from income support to mainstream employment. Moreover, he is sceptical that remote communities as 'isolated enclaves' dependent mainly on government transfers can provide health and living standards comparable to those of other Australians.

Sections four and five contain papers that discuss community and governance at the local and national levels respectively. *Education and Community Governance* contains four essays. The first two, by Lea and Schwab, in turn consider policy-making in Northern Territory education, and new strategies for integrating schooling into local community life. Smith discusses 'distributed parenting and shared child-care' in the organisation of households. Her discussion underlines that successful schooling needs to be considered in the context of household adaptation. Martin's paper addresses local Indigenous governance. He underlines the intercultural nature of local organisations and proposes that those that address internal accountability also address their external responsibilities more ably.

The final section, *Institutions and Economy*, considers governance nationwide. Sanders discusses the role of difference and different treatment in social security policies. Unlike Gregory, he sees considerable value in the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), a specifically Indigenous scheme that has brought payments to individuals via community councils that manage work projects. Rowse stresses the importance of an 'Indigenous Sector' comprising several thousand organizations. These organizations, he suggests, are important for their service and political role rather than their maintenance of customary practice. Behrendt takes these ideas further when she argues that rural and urban divides should not detract from a comprehensive commitment to Indigenous good governance. Each of these contributors places an emphasis on Indigenous governance as a crucial pre-condition of well-being.

Some Pivotal Issues

The following seven issues were among the more important that emerged from the workshop. They provide a guide for the reader of the collection, a useful reference point for assessing the essays.

- **Poverty versus Cultural Conundrum:** Are the poor living conditions and often poor administration of remote communities due mainly to economic marginality and poverty or to specific dimensions of Indigenous lives? Some anthropologists argue that Indigenous responses to marginality that involve widespread sharing through networks, rather than individual accumulation, conflict with the values required for small business or for regular workforce participation. Yet is this conundrum different from comparable ones faced by marginalised populations in other parts of the world? Some Indigenous individuals and families do resolve these issues, and in a variety of ways. Understanding that both conflicts and forms of resolution fall within a range provides a more nuanced grasp of Indigenous experience.
- **Customary versus Modern Remoteness:** While it is clear that ritual attachments to country and regional social relations have encouraged many Indigenous Australians to remain remote, it is also the case that resource distribution away from communities and towards outstations has discouraged literate education, employment and out-migration. Lack of social connections and fear of racism in large population centres are further contemporary rather than customary factors bearing on reluctance to migrate either for education or work.
- **Out-migration versus Local Economy:** Though future policy responses to remote Indigenous communities perforce will involve a policy mix – the need for major government transfers will not end soon – different analyses provide different emphases. Altman underlines that a lack of alternatives places the onus on local economies with a major centralised, administrative component (community council, CDEP and so on). On the other hand, Gregory argues that this form of local economy is unlikely to provide levels of health, education and general well-being acceptable for citizens of the nation state. There are numerous dimensions to this focal issue

including the following three:

- i) Are local economies sustainable without a major growth in local small business involving incentives both for employers and employees?
 - ii) Will remote Aboriginal people become savers and consumers without changes in the status of Aboriginal lands that allow long term leases for small businesses and home ownership?
 - iii) Is out-migration inevitably only one-way? Other marginalised groups elsewhere sustain combinations of one-way and circular migration accompanied by remittances to the home community.
- **Human Capital versus Governance:** It is notable that a majority of participants in the Workshop accepted that the economies of remote communities would be administered or command economies. Therefore there were more reflections on good governance than on effective routes to increased human capital for individuals. If the mid- to long-term future for these communities involves government transfers and attention to governance this should not be at the expense of research on and instigation of best-practice strategies in local education. Notwithstanding recent initiatives on the part of Federal and Northern Territory Governments, the hiatus in educational policy and practice remains.
 - **Education versus Jobs:** A central issue is whether or not there can be significant improvements in Indigenous education, and the housing, health and family commitment that education requires, without more employment for remote Indigenous people. Continuous employment and the possibilities it opens give schooling meaning, and *vice versa*. While Gregory suggests that more jobs are required for remote Aborigines, he is sceptical that any federal government would be prepared to acknowledge Indigenous difference in this way. Policies that promote remote small business initiatives and contract employment outside communities should be an integral part of achieving better educational outcomes. In these terms, there cannot be a communitarian future without individual futures as well.
 - **Local versus National Strategies:** Are the current Federal Government's aspirations to localise Indigenous affairs viable or is a peak policy body required in order to integrate a set of appropriate regional strategies? Does the existence of effective peak Indigenous organisations entail an Indigenous Sector in Rowse's sense? Calls for Indigenous integration rather than assimilation by Aboriginal leaders suggest a properly resourced peak policy group without the cultural and political 'pillarisation'² that Rowse seems to favour.
 - **Economy versus Culture:** Debates about the relevance or irrelevance of issues of cultural specificity in development are common. Often overlooked in these debates is the issue of the way in which populations *become* specific through the intersection of their regional/cultural circumstance and economic marginality. People draw on their immediate institutional repertoire in order to find viable responses to new conditions. Some of these responses ameliorate emerging pathologies while others exacerbate them. In either case, understanding these responses is crucial to effective Indigenous policy formation in remote communities in Australia.

Endnote

- 1 Our focus on remote Australia is not to suggest that conditions are worse there than elsewhere in rural or even urban Australia. Indeed, direct comparison between communities is difficult due to their divergent histories and varieties of cultural resource. Nonetheless, Indigenous people who live remote face very specific challenges regarding infrastructure and economic development. Not least among these are the levels and types of support that governments are prepared to provide to small but growing communities.
- 2 The term 'pillarization' describes plural societies with multiple forms of vertical or parallel integration. Rowse's description of an 'Indigenous sector' suggests this form of institutional integration. Coined initially by economists to describe the Dutch East Indies, the term is now used to describe a variety of plural societies including the Netherlands itself. In anthropology, there are both strong supporters and critics of plural society theory.