



Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

Promoting the Social Sciences

Aborigines, culture and economy

A report from the Academy sponsored workshop, '*Aborigines, culture and economy*', held at the University of Sydney, 2-3 December 2004.

Convened by Diane Austin-Broos and Gaynor Macdonald.

The project was to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, anthropologists and other social scientists in the discussion of rural and remote Aboriginal communities. The focus was on culture and economy, on both the ways in which Indigenous innovation has contributed to economy, and also the ways in which social and locational disadvantage, and issues of cultural conflict, contribute to a serious decline in living conditions and life chances in most remote communities. The Workshop was run over two days on the 2nd and 3rd of December, 2004. There were five panels and twenty-one participants. A small number of observers attended. An e-publication of the Workshop proceedings - Culture and Economy in Aboriginal Australia - will be issued by University of Sydney Press (www.sup.usyd.edu.au).

Introduction

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 140,000 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 industries have waned with rural recession, these Australian citizens are confronted with the dual challenge of cultural difference and rapid change. Among the latter, is marked population growth within remote 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. Notwithstanding some variation between the positions of women and men, the overall situation is distressing and fuels tense gender and family relations. 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 skill

are reduced in a limited labour market. As a consequence, both children and parents struggle to make education a priority.

Recently, these conditions have been the topic of debate in a range of popular publications that began with Dr. Noel Pearson's *Our Right to Take Responsibility*. His work and others have focused on the issues of welfare, demoralisation in communities and extreme poverty. Pearson and others point to the need and desire for industry in remote communities where the current policies of government welfare transfers have not produced the types of result that many hoped for.

In this debate, a striking feature is the relative lack of information that most people have concerning rural and remote Aborigines: their histories, past and present engagements with the Australian economy, along with the cultural commitments that they retain. Too often churchmen have attributed Indigenous poverty and demoralisation to individual weakness. On the other hand, some anthropologists and other social scientists have treated these issues as lacking relevance to a politics of difference. 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. None of these can flourish in conditions of declining literacy, unemployment, poor health, poor housing, and community and domestic violence.

Therefore the Workshop had three aims: (1) to stipulate the circumstances of remote Aborigines in some detail and (2) to provide some analyses of economic and administrative futures. A third aim of the Workshop was (3) to isolate some central themes relevant to future anthropological research and, where appropriate, to make some general recommendations bearing on critical debate and policy formation. The convenors' view has been that, notwithstanding the work of CAEPR (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research) at the ANU, a focus on land rights has drawn the attention of anthropologists in universities away from these other, equally pressing concerns. If land rights for a time promoted living remote, the resource and human capital implications of this need to be addressed. The following report references the aims of the Workshop.

(1) Conditions among Remote Indigenous Australians: Workshop Panels 1, 2, and 4

Three panels directly addressed Indigenous contexts, past and present (Aim 1). 'A History of Initiatives' reviewed Indigenous engagements with the Australian economy. 'Indigenous Disadvantage' addressed dimensions of inequity imposed by remoteness, economic circumstance and various discriminations, while 'Education and Community Governance' looked at issues of households, education and community among remote groups.

Professor Nic Peterson (ANU) provided an overview of Indigenous transitions from small hunter-gatherer groups, through missions and pastoral stations, to the payment of award wages and full inclusion in a modern cash economy. He noted the marked difference between forms of work, labour organisation, and distribution that obtained between a cash economy and the former domestic economies. The magnitude of change involved in the relatively recent transition to full cash economy

has meant, in Peterson's view, a divergence between 'life projects' and 'development projects.' These value conflicts are likely to abate only when remote Aborigines become more engaged with commodity consumption, extended employment and saving. At the same time this will mean quite extensive change in forms of Indigenous sociality. It is therefore not surprising that residents of remote Indigenous communities hesitate. *Every route that presents itself has a significant cost.*

Professor Howard Morphy (ANU) and Dr. Robert Levitus (ANU) presented two perspectives on this tension in values. Howard Morphy noted that the industry of Aboriginal fine art brings wealth and standing not only to members of remote communities but also, through its contribution to tourism, to Australia and the national economy. He underlined that the wellspring of this genre is customary law, the radical modification of which will also change the nature of its art. In short, the reproduction of traditional culture is here central to value creation that, among other things, constitutes economy. Robert Levitus, on the other hand, discussed the history of the Gagudju Association in northern Arnhem Land. An innovative initiative in self-management of royalties that enjoyed a decade of success, the organisation eventually collapsed under the burden of variable income, and conflicting individual and institutional demands. Worse, administrators of Aboriginal affairs seemed to learn little from this dramatic rise and fall. Professor David Trigger (UWA) presented the final paper in this panel. He provided an assessment of mining industry initiatives to develop more consistent participation by young Indigenous workers at industrial sites. He observed that the relevant anthropological literature holds insights that can facilitate this process. The panel show-cased the involvement of remote Aborigines in a variety of sites linked with the national economy. It underlined that *market values and other social values often lack integration in remote communities with limited waged employment.*

Dr. Alan Cass (USyd) opened the panel on 'Indigenous Disadvantage' with a discussion of Indigenous health that took renal disease as its focus. He underlined the interactions between kidney disease and diabetes and cardiovascular complaints not to mention other forms of chronic disease that feed into extremely high rates of premature adult mortality. Alan Carr noted that chronic disease epidemiology tends to focus only on individual attributes. He discussed ways in which the extreme conditions of Indigenous health are driving advances in an alternative 'life-course' approach that identifies *'pathways between disadvantage and the human biological processes which culminate' in disease.* Dr. Janet Mooney (USyd) followed with a discussion of Indigenous educational disadvantage nationwide. She stressed the close link between ill-health and poor education. She also underlined that improving the learning environment for Aboriginal children needs to be a priority especially where children are learning alongside non-Indigenous classmates and teachers. Like Alan Cass, she noted the importance of effective communication between service providers and Aboriginal people that will support a confident desire for better outcomes. *Both papers raised issues concerning effective service delivery to Indigenous Australians.*

Dr. Boyd Hunter (ANU) discussed the knotty issue of measuring discrimination against Indigenous people in the Australian labour force. He adopted Nielsen's approach that measures the average differential in employment for a population not explained by differences in that population's characteristics. This differential can be called 'potential discrimination.' Boyd Hunter located potential discrimination in inhibited Indigenous ability to find a job, rather than in depressed Indigenous wages. Notwithstanding some variation, he found also that *potential discrimination is high for both the private and public sectors*. Like Alan Cass and Janet Mooney, he noted the inter-related dimensions of Indigenous disadvantage: 'social alienation feeds into substance abuse, which leads to crime, which affects education and hence employment.'

Professor Bettina Cass (USyd) concluded this panel discussion on disadvantage with a consideration of *whether or not the tenets of liberal citizenship actually have been realised for Indigenous Australians*. She contested the view that a Marshallian tradition of citizens' rights excludes issues of obligation among citizens. However, the definition of these obligations for Indigenous citizens has shifted over time. Prior to 1966 when most exclusions were repealed, pension rights had rested on criteria of civilization that 'nomadic or primitive' people were deemed unable to meet. This shift from difference to equity took another turn with the introduction of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) specifically designed for capacity-building and community development in Indigenous locales (see also Sanders, below). Bettina Cass contested the view that this initiative, addressing past exclusions, has involved a transgression of mutual obligation.

The final panel to address remote conditions, 'Education and Community Governance,' turned specifically to issues of contemporary culture and remote communities. Dr. Tess Lea (NTU) provided a retrospective comment on *Learning Lessons*, a review of Indigenous education for the Northern Territory government that she co-authored with Bob Collins. Her focus was on the interface between the education bureaucracy and communities. Tess Lea traced the reluctance in departmental circles to define issues of educational delivery in direct and assessable ways thereby frustrating sustained, effective action. Dr. Jerry Schwab (ANU) discussed recent policy initiatives by the current federal government for remote Indigenous youth who reach secondary level. However, his focus was on the more numerous early school leavers unlikely to qualify for these programs. With regard to this group, he discussed two recent policy developments, 'communities of practice' and 'Indigenous learning communities.' Like Janet Mooney's, these papers underlined that *effective delivery of educational skills rests on locating their significance for all the participants involved*.

Ms. Diane Smith (ANU) discussed the organisation of Indigenous households in remote communities. She stressed factors of 'distributed parenting and shared child-care,' crucial for managing income difficulties in households with a heavy burden of childhood dependency. Whilst this extended family form can work effectively, Diane Smith noted that it also has a capacity to marginalise care and disadvantage affected children. Her analysis of this household and family form was especially illuminating in the context of discussions of why it is that (individual) parents do not necessarily

'own' formal education as a project for their children. *Successful schooling needs to be considered in the context of household adaptation.*

Finally, in this panel, Dr. David Martin (ANU) discussed community organisations as sites of intercultural engagement. His central point was that *organisations that address internal, local and often informal forms of accountability also address more ably issues of external accountability.* In short, organisations that work well do so because those involved have learnt to integrate different forms of value. These papers moved across a number of different sites - government agencies, community schooling, households and community organisations. They showed that remote community life today involves a range of different engagements with state and federal structures. Although these encounters often produce conflicting procedures, there is also scope for effective change.

(2) Economic Futures and National Institutions: Workshop Panels 3 and 5

The final panel on each day of the Workshop contained papers which addressed economic prospects for remote communities and economically relevant institutions at the national level (Aim 2). 'Economic Futures' (day one) presented three different analyses of Indigenous remote economy while 'Institutions and Economy' (day two) addressed the role of public policy and national governance in Indigenous lives.

Dr. John Taylor (ANU) presented a case study of the East Kimberley region and the impacts of some possible trajectories for the Argyle Diamond Mine (ADM) and the Ord River Scheme Stage II proposal. Owing to the importance of mining and irrigated agriculture in the area, a decision not to extend these projects would have major effects. In his preliminary remarks, John Taylor noted that many remote communities were established 'without a formal economic base.' Moreover, currently most of these communities are not demonstrating the demographic transition that would lead to migration and extensive engagement with market economy. At the same time, between 1996 and 2001, the only growth in remote Indigenous employment came through the CDEP. Within the same period, Indigenous mainstream employment actually fell, as did the rate of Indigenous labour force participation. John Taylor noted the successes in Indigenous employment recorded by Rio Tinto through ADM. On the other hand, likely trajectories for ADM and Ord Stage II involve job loss without replacement for the non-Indigenous population with knock-on effects for local Aborigines. John Taylor calculated the large number of additional jobs required in the region by the year 2016 to maintain current Indigenous employment/population ratios (inclusive and exclusive of CDEP). To raise the Indigenous mainstream ratio to a level that equals that of non-Indigenous residents would be a further, mammoth, task. Concluding, Taylor drew attention to two additional factors, the poor levels of enrolment among the East Kimberley school-age population and the need to encourage, where possible, 'customary economic activity.' He observed *'A serious economic development problem has emerged whereby a large section of the Indigenous adult population [is] overly-dependent on transfer payments, structurally detached from the labour market, and ill-equipped to engage it.'*

Professor Jon Altman (ANU) focused his remarks on a model of 'hybrid economy.' He noted that in many policy recommendations flowing from federal agencies, *a commitment to equity and education is not supported by policy detail* concerning either the expansion of remote employment, or the cultural and communal implications of large scale Indigenous migration to cities. Owing to factors outlined by Taylor, Jon Altman observed that the future for many remote communities would continue to involve heavy reliance on government transfers. This circumstance in turn suggests that remote communities will need to forge their own local articulations between federal agencies with their transfers, customary activity and viable market activities. These 'three sector economies' or 'hybrid' economies reflect both the strengths of local communities and their externally imposed constraints. As an example of hybrid economy, Jon Altman cited Maningrida's Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC), 'a complex organization that operates simultaneously as a community-governed outstation resource agency, a CDEP organization, a social services delivery agency and a regional development agency.' Altman noted that a thriving local fine art industry is integral to BAC's success, as is the quality of its senior management.

Professor Bob Gregory (ANU) underlined the particularity of remote Indigenous communities: Where most people rendered marginal to market activity migrate to more favourable locales, remote Aboriginal people seem to resist this course. In contrast to Altman, Bob Gregory emphasized that *improving Indigenous well-being requires that 'the rate of successful out-migration should increase.'* In turn, this requires that the '*increasing* inability to access higher levels of mainstream employment' needs to be addressed. Bob Gregory noted that remote Aboriginal people face an 'economy-wide movement of labour demand away from the full-time employment of unskilled' males. Moreover, this circumstance has been magnified by the failure of previous policy, including CDEP, Intensive Assistance and Job Network to make an impact on Indigenous levels of transition to mainstream employment. The rapid growth of an Indigenous economic elite places in sharp relief the circumstance of the unskilled and semi-skilled who live remote.

Bob Gregory noted *the current policy vacuum in areas concerning Indigenous transitions from income support to mainstream employment* and, like John Taylor, observed that the outlook for remote Indigenous Australians is bleak. Measures that could have some impact were also unpopular with governments including the creation of 'more jobs for the unskilled' and employment quotas tied to Indigenous population growth. Nonetheless, he underlined that the emphasis should be on mainstream employment and out-migration and not simply on continuing government transfers. Bob Gregory wrote 'I don't believe . . . that remote communities, as an isolated enclave depending largely on welfare payments and [a] few links to mainstream employment outside the community, will be able to provide health outcomes and living standards closely approximating that of the Australian community.'

The final panel on day two of the Workshop addressed economically relevant institutions and policy-making at the national level. Dr. Will Sanders (ANU) discussed *the role of difference and different treatment, as opposed to equality and 'sameness of treatment' in social security policies* affecting Indigenous Australians. He noted that, initially, difference had been deployed to exclude Aboriginal people from

unemployment benefits. Many (but not all) remote Aborigines did not have work histories. Many (but not all) remote Indigenous people could not be available for work in circumstances where there was no labour market. In time, the exceptions to these rules led to the uniform extension of unemployment benefits to remote Aborigines (see also Bettina Cass above). In turn, the fact that the majority of adults in these communities would require these benefits - another difference to non-Indigenous communities - led to the fashioning of CDEP. Its payments were made not directly to individuals but rather to individuals via community councils that managed local work projects. These and other features of the CDEP scheme led to it being administered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs rather than the Department of Social Security.

Dr. Tim Rowse (ANU) discussed the rise of Indigenous corporations more generally including their various functions and powers. He argued that this complex of several thousand organisations is appropriately described as an '*Indigenous Sector*.' Tim Rowse noted that 'the emergence of a professional-managerial cadre of workers' within the Indigenous Sector is an important component in Indigenous critiques of the terms in which their citizenship has been conferred. Referencing David Martin, he suggested that the legitimacy of these organizations now rests not so much on customary appropriateness, but rather reflects the 'cultural mission' of an Indigenous administrative class with an 'ethic of service.' Tim Rowse proposed that *even with the demise of ATSIC, an Indigenous Sector will endure and have impact in the policy domain.*

The last two speakers were representatives of this Indigenous Sector. Professor Larissa Behrendt (UTS) questioned an approach to Indigenous affairs based on a 'measure of need' that prioritizes rural remote communities over urban ones. Alternatively, she proposed that the focus should be on '*socio-economic issues in urban and rural centres [that lead to] increased social problems.*' She noted the rapid increase in incarceration of Indigenous women from both rural and urban communities, and the cycles of poverty and violence in which these women and their children are often involved. At the same time, Larissa Behrendt cautioned against a return to 'old style mainstreaming,' noting its inability to target specific issues that arise in Aboriginal communities. She therefore rejected the 'either/or' dichotomy of practical reconciliation and rights. She noted current popular references to the Harvard Project on American Economic Development. Although the Native American status of 'domestic dependent nations' allowed forms of development and tax-exemptions not available in Australia, some aspects of the Harvard Project pertaining to good governance were relevant.

Professor Mick Dodson (ANU) underlined *the need for appropriate integration rather than assimilation of Indigenous peoples within Australian society.* Inevitably this would involve the development of forms of governance within communities that could support sustainable development. Mick Dodson queried the degree of attention to detailed policy-making in current proposals for 'practical reconciliation.' How does one construct an economy, especially in remote regions? Where the current emphasis of federal government was on local engagements and avoidance of debate at the national level, Mick Dodson underlined the importance of genuinely effective dialogue between industry, government and Indigenous leaders. Given the daunting

future in many communities, the responsibilities of Indigenous people are emphasised. However government bureaucracies also need to reflect on their own, enduring responsibilities and the quality of their interactions with Indigenous people.

(3) Discussion

In the course of panel presentations and the subsequent roundtable discussion, a set of related issues emerged. The issues can be described in terms of a number of tensions between the various analyses and proposals for remote communities.

(a) 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 wide distribution of resources through networks, rather than individual accumulation, conflict with values required for small business or for regular participation in the labour market. Yet is this conundrum different from comparable ones faced by marginalised populations in other regions of the world? Some Indigenous individuals and families 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 understanding of Indigenous experience.

(b) 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.

(c) 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 (in the absence of migration), and desire for cultural continuity, place the onus on local economies with a major centralised, administrative component (community council, CDEP etc.). On the other hand, Gregory argues that this form of contemporary 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 - ie. allowing long term leases for small businesses and home ownership?

(iii) Is out-migration inevitably one-way? Other marginalised groups sustain combinations of one-way and circular migration accompanied by remittances to the home community.

(d) Human Capital Development 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. A new initiative from the Federal and Northern Territory governments on educational and other service deliveries should see funding for remote education increase (*Australian Financial Review*, 31/3/2005, p. 3). However, the hiatus in educational policy and practice remains.

(e) Education versus Jobs and Families: 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 to children *and* their parents. While Gregory suggests that more jobs are required for remote Aborigines, he is sceptical that either federal party in power would be prepared to acknowledge Indigenous difference in this way. Policies that provide initiatives to remote small business and for contract employment outside communities are an integral part of addressing the relations between families and educational outcomes.

(f) 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? Mick Dodson's call for integration rather than assimilation seems to suggest a properly resourced peak Indigenous policy group without the cultural and political sectionalism that Rowse seems to favour. With a peak body for policy instigation and co-ordination, Indigenous service delivery can be realised appropriately through regular departments.

(g) 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.

Ultimately, all of the above are false dichotomies and yet they highlight the intractable issues that rural and remote Indigenous communities face along with those who formulate policy for them. A central fact that emerged from the Workshop

was the degree of polarisation around central issues, a counterpart to different views in Australian society at large. This polarisation may reflect most the fact that easy solutions are not available. The following general comments pertain to research and critique as much as they do to general issues underpinning policy.

Comment I: Like a sector of the larger population, anthropologists need to acknowledge that the outstation movement in particular has resource implications that act against remote Indigenous Australians acquiring the human capital they need for engagement with market society. Economists, on the other hand, need to address the fact that remote Indigenous reluctance to migrate can involve factors of a customary and contemporary nature over and above recent patterns of resource distribution.

Comment II: Given the immediate to mid-term futures of most remote communities, the focus must be on policy mix. The level, forms and combinations of government transfers, employment and human capital development will need to be adjusted across different regions and communities.

Comment III: Proposals to discontinue CDEP and other comparable schemes that acknowledge the high life-long levels of unemployment in remote Indigenous communities should be confronted with the demand to furnish alternative effective policies. If strategies for local managed economies are curtailed, this process should be accompanied by more ambitious initiatives regarding employment incentives and the acquisition of relevant human capital. A policy vacuum should not be the outcome of curtailing CDEP or other like strategies.

Comment IV: Given a history of exclusion, neglect and ineffective policies in the past, the need for a properly resourced peak Indigenous policy group is clear.

Failure to furnish and activate more effective Indigenous policy at the state, territory and federal levels in its effects currently involves the denial of fundamental human rights for rural and remote Indigenous Australians.

Submitted by Diane Austin-Broos

April, 2005

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