Going it Alone

Prospects for Aboriginal Autonomy

Robert Tonkinson

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Fleur Hobson of Mantaka Village, Kuranda near Cairns. Photograph by Maureen MacKenzie courtesy of the *After 200 Years* Bicentennial Photographic Project, AIATSIS Photographic Archive

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# Table of Contents

Title Page  
Copyright Page  
CONTRIBUTORS  

**PART ONE - THE BERNDTS**  
THE BERNDTS: - an overview  
THE BERNDTS: - an appreciation  
THE BERNDTS: - a biographical sketch  
THE BERNDTS: - a select bibliography  

**PART TWO - PROSPECTS FOR ABORIGINAL AUTONOMY**  
1 - ABORIGINAL AUTONOMY IN POLICY AND PRACTICE: an introduction  
2 - EUROPEAN DOMINATION AND CULTURAL CONFUSION: forced change among the Pitjantjatjara  
3 - DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICS IN AN INTERETHNIC FIELD: Aboriginal interest associations  
4 - THE CHANGING STATUS OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN: ‘free agents’ at Jigalong  
5 - ABORIGINAL DEVELOPMENT IN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: from the heavens down or the ground up  
6 - GOVERNMENT POLICY AND ABORIGINAL ASPIRATIONS: self-management at Yalata  
7 - AUTONOMY IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION: a quest at Carnarvon  
8 - WELFARE COLONIALISM: developing divisions at Wiluna  
9 - AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCY: the experience at Mount Margaret  
10 - GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND RELIGIOUS STRATEGIES: fighting with myth at Noonkanbah
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RAYMOND FIRTH

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A New Zealander by birth, Sir Raymond trained as an economist before entering anthropology and has been an influential figure in British, and world, anthropology for decades. As a student of Malinowski and an heir to structural-functionalism, he worked successfully to refine and deepen this approach. In an important general work, *Elements of Social Organization* (1951), his separation of social structure and social organisation prefigured major recent trends in anthropology. He is best-known for his outstanding corpus of writings on Tikopia, of which the first volume, *We the Tikopia* (1936), has become an anthropological classic. He has also published on
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A former student of the Berndts, he completed a Master’s degree in anthropology at the University of Western Australia and an MPH and PhD at the University of Hawaii. He has done fieldwork in Australia, among Aborigines and non-Aborigines, and in Southeast Asia. His research interests include the political economy of health and illness and the application of qualitative techniques in epidemiological research. His publications include numerous articles and contributions to two edited volumes, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia* (Charlesworth et al 1984) and *Aborigines of the West* (Berndt and Berndt 1979).

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He came to Australia in 1969 after completing his PhD at Vienna University. He did extensive fieldwork in the north of Western Australia, and also worked there as a government anthropologist. In addition to his Australian research, he has done archival research in Austria and New Zealand, and fieldwork in India, Afghanistan and Vanuatu. He is the author of a large number of articles and three books, *The Silent Revolution* (1981), *The Noonkanbah Story* (1987) and *Dreamtime Politics* (1989).

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Recently described as ‘the last uncontested giant’ among French intellectuals, he is the best-known anthropologist in the world and was elevated to the Académie Française in 1973. As the central figure of modern French structuralism, he has had a significant influence on Western contemporary thought. His first structuralist work was *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). His literary and anthropological classic, *Tristes Tropiques*, appeared in 1955, followed by *Totemism* (1962), the forerunner of what was to become his major project—a series of books constituting an introduction to a science of mythology.

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A PhD graduate of the University of Western Australia in 1982, Kingsley Palmer did his doctoral fieldwork at an Aboriginal community in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. While a Visiting Research Fellow at Flinders University, he did research at Yalata in western South Australia, and later worked on behalf of the traditional Aboriginal owners of the
Maralinga lands, in connection with the Royal Commission Into British Nuclear Testing in Australia (1985). From 1982-85 he was Senior Anthropologist with the Northern Land Council in Darwin. His publications include *Somewhere Between Black and White* (with C McKenna 1978) and *Alcohol in the Outback* with M Brady 1984).

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He first undertook fieldwork in the Wiluna area of Western Australia while a doctoral student at the University of Oregon, and has since continued his research at Wiluna. His current research and teaching interests centre on responses of Aboriginal people to government sponsored development initiatives. He has written numerous articles on a wide variety of topics related to Aboriginal Australia and contributed to two edited volumes, *Aborigines and Change* (Berndt 1977) and ‘*Whitefella Business*’ (Howard 1978).

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She took anthropology as part of her undergraduate degree at the University of Western Australia, then did an MA at the University of Hawaii, and her doctorate at Brown University. Currently, she teaches general anthropology and women’s studies and her present research interests focus on issues in Aboriginal health. Her publications include articles on stone working technology and human-plant relationships in Australia (with Dennis Gray).

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A New Zealander, John Stanton received an MA(Hons) from the University of Auckland for his research among Aborigines in southwestern New South Wales. He did his PhD, based on fieldwork at Mount Margaret Mission, under the Berndts at the University of Western Australia. More recently he has worked in the Kimberleys. His publications include a book co-authored with the Berndts, entitled Aboriginal Australian Art (1982) and Painting the Country (1989).

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He began his anthropological career under Ronald and Catherine Berndt at the University of Western Australia in 1957. After graduating with an MA, he took his doctorate at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Prior to his return to Perth in 1984, he taught at the University of Oregon and the Australian National University. He has done extensive fieldwork in the Western Desert region of Western Australia, and in Melanesia (Vanuatu), from which has come three monographs and numerous articles. With Ronald Berndt, he recently co-edited Social Anthropology and Australian Aboriginal Studies (1988).

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He has done extensive fieldwork in northern Australia, mostly on Groote Eylandt, and his interests include Australian Aborigines, Canadian Indians and Biblical exegesis. His publications include: a monograph, Tradition and
Transformation (1986); two general works, Australian Aboriginal Social Organization (1980) and Life Before Genesis (1985); and a major report on Aboriginal community organisation for the Northern Territory Government. He has also written Return To Eden (1989), and co-edited a critical introduction to social-cultural anthropology, entitled Challenging Anthropology (1979).

NOEL M WALLACE

Independent scholar.

He has done several years of fieldwork among Pitjantjatjara Aborigines in the northwest of South Australia in partnership with his wife, Phyl. The Wallaces are longtime students of Aboriginal affairs, and Noel is active in the Victorian chapter of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, in addition to making regular appearances as a guest lecturer at several tertiary institutions in Victoria. The Wallaces have written a book, Killing Me Softly (1977) and Noel is the author of many articles on Aboriginal topics.
   Photograph by T Young.
THE BERNDTS:  

an overview

RAYMOND FIRTH

I have accepted with pleasure the invitation to write this overview to the festchrift for Ronald and Catherine Berndt; not that I feel I have any particular competence to evaluate the work of the Berndts. However, now that so many of the founders of modern social anthropology in Australia are no longer with us—AR Radcliffe-Brown, AP Elkin, Donald Thomson, WLloyd Warner, Phyllis Kaberry and William Stanner—it is perhaps appropriate for someone of the older generation from outside Australia to express appreciation for the ethnographical and theoretical communications of the Berndts over the last forty-five years.

My own acquaintance with Catherine and Ronald goes back many years, particularly to the period they spent with us at the London School of Economics. They came to the Department of Anthropology after considerable field research and teaching experience to undertake their doctoral work, which they completed in 1955. Ronald worked on social control in New Guinea Highland society with Isaac Schapera; while Catherine worked with me on problems of myth; and both were active members of our various seminars. They also contributed to meetings of the Association of Social Anthropologists and other professional gatherings, and were very much part of the British anthropological scene. What particularly impressed their contemporaries, as I remember, was their
already extensive first-hand field knowledge, their wide command of the scholarly literature of anthropological theory, and their intense focus upon the discipline of anthropology as a joint activity.

Husband-and-wife teams have been no novelty in anthropological field research, and cases where each marriage partner has made an independent professional contribution are not rare—in the British field alone, to mention only Monica and Godfrey Wilson, Scarlett and AL (Bill) Epstein, Shirley and Edwin Ardener, and even Rosemary Firth and myself. Yet in this spouse-linked field, with its subtle problems of assumption of roles, mutual stimulus and support, agreement upon authorship, division of labour and inevitable compromise with the demands of individual personality, the Berndts have been a notable model.

At times in those London years, they seemed to operate almost as a single personality, but it soon became apparent that they developed the skill of pursuing conjoint and independent interests. The pattern that they had established thirty years ago has been maintained up to the present. In the field, in organisation of professional gatherings and in publication, they have an extensive record of joint and separate contributions. And if in sheer volume of publication, Ronald may have borne the brunt of preparation, he has been the first to acknowledge the constant help received from Catherine, including her unique material from her studies of the ‘inside life’ of Aboriginal women, quite unavailable to a male anthropologist.

It is not for me to try to set in perspective here the massive output of the Berndts since the results of their field research in Ooldea, South Australia, in 1941. It is enough to say that not only have they enriched greatly the corpus of Australian Aboriginal ethnography, with attention to the New Guinea Highlands almost as an interlude; they have also contributed significantly to general anthropological theory. Genealogies and kinship, the roles of women, social control, sorcery and magic, religion and ritual, myth, eschatology, poetry and visual art have all been given stimulating treatment. So here, I will confine myself to a few themes or issues which come most readily to my mind when thinking about their work.

The first point that has impressed me about their work, whether published jointly or singly, is their conscientiousness in trying to make the ethnographic record as precise and as complete as possible. This has meant
unremitting attention to detail, being prepared for many arduous field trips, learning the vernacular when they could, and not being satisfied with first impressions or easy answers. Their approach embodies pertinacious pursuit of accuracy and constant checking, which are the hallmark of sound anthropological field research. This perhaps needs stressing more than ever now, when ‘empiricism’ has become a pejorative word in some quarters, and the often unexamined ‘structural-functionalism’ has come to be regarded as an old-fashioned final scheme rather than as a useful initial approach.

Another feature of the work of the Berndts which became apparent soon after they began to publish was the range of their scientific curiosity. They explored, in theoretical as well as descriptive terms, themes which had tended to be overlooked or treated as marginal by most other researchers in the field. The orientation of Ronald’s treatment of social control in New Guinea society, in terms of ‘excess and restraint’, was novel for its time, with its emphasis on aggression and dissension, and should dispose of the notion that ‘functionalists’ study only communities which they assume to be in equilibrium. Catherine’s studies of Aboriginal women built upon Phyllis Kaberry’s general analysis of previous years, but deepened that analysis and greatly enlarged its cultural range.

Sex in its sociological bearings was not a new theme in anthropology. Malinowski’s *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) had already attracted much attention, though it was as much about kinship as about erotic topics. And the study of sex concepts had a history in the Australian field, as witness the arguments about Aboriginal ‘group marriage’ and the alleged ignorance of physiological paternity. The contribution of the Berndts in this area was not just to add to the existing piquant ethnographic descriptions of Aboriginal sexual attitudes and sexual behaviour. They pursued statements about the significance of sexual intercourse from the secular into the sacred field in a detail hitherto unknown. They explored sexual symbolism in rite, myth and art, and by analysis of a great range of songs, demonstrated the close linkage between the erotic and the religious in Aboriginal thought and action. The study of Arnhem Land love songs, which Ronald finally published in 1976, is a remarkable interpretation of great delicacy and sophistication.
A further striking element in the contribution of the Berndts has been their care for the human factor in their analysis, as well as in their field encounters. Nowadays, ‘reflexive anthropology’ is much in vogue, but few of us might be as frank as was Ronald Berndt a quarter of a century ago in his lively introduction to *Excess and Restraint* (1962:vii):

At times we did not like these people, but just so frequently we did; and this fluctuation is mirrored to some extent in their own response to life—aggressive and violent excitement contrasted with extreme and sometimes tearful sentimentality are expressed, for example, in love songs. Inevitably, we made enemies as well as friends; but we like to think the latter were more numerous.

At a more theoretical level, the Berndts have considered, with illuminating exemplification, how men and women react as personalities to the complex pressures of their individual drives and interests and the conventions which provide patterns for so many of their actions.

As Australian anthropologists will know, the idiom of discussion of Aboriginal affairs has changed radically over the last decades. When I was at the University of Sydney from 1930 to 1932, despite the earlier work of Fison, Howitt, Gillen and Spencer, and the contemporary efforts of Radcliffe-Brown, Elkin and others to inform the public, it was hard to arouse more than a polite curiosity about the existing situation and probable future of Aboriginal people. With other anthropologists, I had visited the settlement at La Perouse near Sydney and talked with the ‘dark people’, as they then described themselves, about their problems of poverty and social restriction. And I still remember vividly seeing an elderly Aboriginal man, walking rather uncertainly down the street after the pubs had closed, and muttering loudly, ‘White Australia! White Australia! Here’s your white Australia!’ and pointing to his own white hair! At this period, Aborigines were regarded as users of land, whether they were hunters and foragers, workers on cattle stations or residents of missions or townships. Yet, any suggestion of Aboriginal ownership or priority rights in land was unheard of in all public contexts.
This situation seemed to me, as an anthropologist from New Zealand—where Maori rights in land were at least acknowledged—shot through with ambiguity, as of course it did also to my Australian colleagues. In 1932, as Acting Editor of *Oceania*,\(^1\) I wrote rather ironically (1932:10-11):\(^2\)

One great difficulty seems to be at the present time in all native affairs that we are suffering from a mixture of motives which we are unable or unwilling to separate: humanitarianism and ideals of justice on the one hand are tempered by purely practical economic considerations on the other. We are genuinely concerned for the welfare of the native, but at not too great cost to ourselves.... We give the aborigine today reserves, but not too large reserves, since we need the land for stock, and a pastoral lease by courtesy serves for both. And we must also be allowed to see if there is gold lying useless there since gold cannot be extracted by the native. And so our policy goes on, of *nihil maxim*, and the willingness of administration to act is hindered by the pressure of competing interests and clogged by the apathy of public opinion.

Over the last half-century, since I was first in Australia, I have been able to note, with some admiration, the radical if long overdue changes in public attitudes to Aboriginal matters. No longer does the anthropologist share only with the missionary, a few government officials and other public-spirited citizens, the role of standard-bearer for a more moral attitude and a more practical concern for the position of Aborigines in Australian society. Many other people, with pragmatic as well as research concerns, have become involved in Aboriginal studies and the promotion of Aboriginal interests. And as a welcome development (if sometimes a little disconcerting to their white interpreters), representatives of the Aboriginal communities have come at long last to take an active part, often the lead, in defining their wants and asserting their rights as citizens.

The most marked transformation has been the public recognition, with legal effect, of Aboriginal rights to land. Seen as hopelessly idealistic fifty years ago, and still showing some of the ambiguity to which I have just
referred, this recognition has still to work out many of the implications of what at one level may have been primarily a philanthropic gesture. Certainly there has been as yet nothing like a full transfer of power to Aboriginal communities—granted the great variation they present. However, the emergence of articulate members of the communities at many stages of the process of consultation, establishment of claims and administrative procedures is surely a pointer to directions in which a resolution of the power problem may go. All this, so familiar to our Australian colleagues, is not yet well-known to the anthropological profession at large, which hardly realises the opportunities, and problems, now being faced by anthropologists in Australia.

In these developments on the Australian anthropological front, the Berndts have played a notable part. From the outset of their anthropological endeavour, they have demonstrated an urge not only to understand Aboriginal society, but also to communicate this understanding to the general body of Australian citizens. They have worked hard and consistently towards an enlightened climate of opinion, and more effective action to improve the social, economic and political position of Aborigines. They have done more than describe and analyse Aboriginal ‘traditional’ society; they have tackled the difficult problems of interpreting continuity and change in Aboriginal communities. From the outset of their work they paid careful attention to the historical dimension, documenting processes of change whether internally generated or resulting from external pressure or attraction. Of particular interest to them has been the ways in which ‘traditional’ or ‘traditionally-oriented’ themes have been utilised by the people themselves in their attempts to maintain a viable community life. The interpretations of the Berndts, naturally, have not always won complete acceptance, but the range and precision of the ethnographic detail they have produced have commanded respect.

Throughout their entire anthropological enquiry has been manifest a real sympathy with the people they have studied. In this they have not been unique, but perhaps they have expressed this sympathy more openly than have some other anthropologists. Quite recently, Ronald has stated their position in general terms. As custodians of a great amount of information of a special order, relevant to the sacred as well as the secular life of
Aboriginal communities, anthropologists have a particular obligation to the people they have studied. Ronald writes (1984-85:276):

Written into our frame of anthropological reference is either an overt or a covert commitment to Aborigines. That kind of relationship should exist between an anthropologist and any people with whom he or she works. In my view, this approach does not detract from our social scientific aspirations, but it should enhance our sensitivity to human problems.

Now sympathy of itself may not lead to much, and is sometimes derided by ‘activists’ from various directions, demanding commitment of a more aggressive political order. The attitude of the Berndts may have been described at times as conservative, but this must be taken in a fairly literal sense, that is, a recognition of the value of patterns and concepts of the past in providing avenues for action and giving meaning to the present. Their commitment to Aboriginal causes has certainly not stopped at a broad moral stance or championship of tradition. They have implemented their support for Aboriginal land rights and other claims to control of resources, in organising conferences and volumes of essays with contributions from Aboriginal people, and in helping to promote ways of enabling Aboriginal communities to attain greater self-management. They have not done these things blindly, content with slogans; they have tried to foresee some of the implications of present-day circumstances. Ronald Berndt has already in effect posed the question: After the granting of land rights, what?’ He has pointed out that with legal admission of the principle of Aboriginal land ownership, important decisions must be faced about exactly how such rights are to be determined and exercised. Issues as yet unforeseen will arise, as between economic and ritual use of land, between self-development by a community or use of the land for investment.

Despite the complex structure of changing patterns and developing institutions, the Berndts have helped to lay solid foundations for the continuing understanding of Aboriginal ways of life and thought. Through their rich exploration of Aboriginal ethnography, their wide-ranging theoretical interests, the stimulus of their teaching, the international journal
which they founded, and because of their practical concern for the welfare of the peoples they have studied, the Berndts have established an enduring place in Australian anthropology and the anthropological discipline as a whole.

Notes

1 Following the departure of AR Radcliffe-Brown from Sydney, I took over the editorship of *Oceania* from 1931 to 1932.

2 In this quote of mine from *Oceania*, I use the term ‘native’. In those days it had not attained its present derogatory sense. In the same quote, I refer to ‘gold’, where later I would have used the term ‘minerals’.

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There is an apt French saying, ‘All things have their time’; and old age, alas, is a time when one feels out of place in a festschrift. One associates this genre with students or followers desirous of proclaiming their debt to the person who was once, or continues to be, their mentor. Theirs is a pious gesture, a recognition of the importance of their mentor’s work and the role that this will henceforth play in their own scholarship. But won’t an ‘elder’ cut an intrusive figure in this chorus of praise? He will feel ill at ease among the juniors or contemporaries of the scholar so honoured. Not without reason, he will seem less to be paying homage than bestowing his approval with the false authority provided by the weight of his years.

Nevertheless, be it only in the discreet form of a personal tribute rather than a paper, it would be unthinkable for me not to join with all those wanting to declare their admiration for the Berndts, as well as to express a friendship which, for my part, now dates back almost forty years.

Founded in 1950, the Cahiers de L’Homme devoted its first issue to the work of a young anthropologist, Catherine Berndt, then little known outside her own country. In my preface to Women’s Changing Ceremonies in
Northern Australia—this was the title of the work—I justified this choice on grounds that I would like to recall here (1950:5):

We have, for a long time already, collected rare and singular objects, and curious and unusual customs. Without slackening for a moment this indispensable effort, we now have the means of showing the ends it serves: to understand, and, if governments wish it, to alleviate the shocking crises that a better heeded anthropology could have enabled them to avoid, and through which, in tears, in misery and sometimes in blood, industrial civilisation encapsulates societies that had hitherto sought an equilibrium other than in technological power and the pursuit of profit.

In this respect, the work of Mrs Berndt appears to us to offer a perfect model for all those—administrators or missionaries—desirous of putting to good use their time spent in distant lands in order to serve the causes of science and humanity. This precise study, which is focused on a narrowly defined subject and aims to provide us with an accurate description of an indigenous society, or at least of certain of its preoccupations at a critical moment in its history, is of incontestable theoretical value. In showing how a religious cult is transformed to give birth to practices that fall within the province of magic, Mrs Berndt makes an important contribution to the sociology of religion. She dispels evolutionist illusions that would see in magic an earlier stage to that of religion, and she is at the same time critical of the over-systematic classifications of those theoreticians inclined to dichotomise magic and religion as stemming from heterogeneous mental dispositions. The Australian facts agree with those gathered in other parts of the world, notably in South America, which reveal in magic and in religion two modalities of communication with the supernatural, without doubt distinct, but encompassing all avenues and admitting of a great variety of intermediate forms.
At the conclusion of her introduction, Catherine Berndt herself outlined the research program that she intended to undertake in collaboration with her husband. Twelve years later, the *Cahiers de L’Homme* paid homage to Ronald Berndt in publishing a monograph, *An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), which was awarded the Wellcome Medal by the Royal Anthropological Institute. It is easy to understand, then, why the names of the Berndts remain intimately associated in my memory with the initial steps that preceded the establishment of the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale, and with its early years.

What, then, was the significance for us, in France, of the work of these two anthropologists? And what were, independent of its intrinsic qualities, the reasons for the importance that we attributed to it? We had been deeply conscious of the seminal contribution made by Australian research to the founders of the French sociological school, but it had a disadvantage: we continued to see the Australian Aborigine through the documentary sources—already a century or half-century old—to which Durkheim had recourse in writing *Les Formes Elémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*. The image that we had formed of Australia was as if frozen in a past which we were unsure whether to take as ended or whether—but to what extent and in what form—to view as continuing into the present.

Without doubt, Australian research had not ended with Spencer and Gillen, nor even with Radcliffe-Brown. On the contrary, since about 1930, Elkin had provided a fresh impetus. Yet Elkin’s monumental work, comprising essentially articles scattered in journals that were not always accessible to French readers, was not well-known to us; and the publication of his book *The Australian Aborigines* preceded the outbreak of World War II by such a short time that it reached us only after several years. Essentially, because of an error of perspective that is frequent in the history of ideas, we at first read Elkin in the light of his great predecessors, without really perceiving that he was bringing us something new. It was only with the first works of the Berndts that we received a jolt. They were putting us in direct contact with a real, vibrant, present-day Australia; no longer simply an index of religious beliefs, of marriage rules and of kinship systems. We now became convinced that those old studies which had engendered an enormous literature, to the point where we had thought their content was exhausted, could be followed up, deepened and renewed.
As I wrote in my preface (1950:6), far from depicting Aboriginal Australian institutions as rigid forms enclosed in abstract frameworks, the Berndts were able to reveal them, right from their first writings:

as embodying feelings and attitudes of particular individuals, each of whom is presented and described to us, and whose experiences, because of their individuality and concreteness, are more accessible to the reader. Dependent on a different civilisation, the latter finds in the communicability of individual experiences, the means of overcoming the heterogeneity and irreducibility that are attached to institutions when they are viewed from without, and not, as here, from within.

Indeed, forty years ago, one could only begin to sense the richness and originality of the Berndts’ work. Without losing sight of the demands of an objective anthropology, they have remained in the forefront in the description and analysis of institutions independently of those who perpetuate them, and in research into the way in which these institutions, studied in themselves and for themselves, are embodied in the consciousness of individuals, in which form they become immediately accessible to the consciousness of others—ourselves. In wishing Ronald and Catherine Berndt many more years’ continuance of their exceptionally rich and productive scholarship, I would like to emphasise what gives it its dual character: an honesty, rigour and accuracy of ethnographic description on the one hand; and on the other, the demonstration of a humane sensitivity from which contemporary society can and must draw lessons.

Note
1 For their kind assistance with this translation, I thank Beverley Ormerod and Alain Otto.

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Emeritus Professor Ronald M Berndt and Dr Catherine H Berndt are the longest-serving and best-known scholars of Australian Aboriginal societies in the world today. Their anthropological research has been undertaken in a great number and variety of Aboriginal communities, as well as the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, in careers that span a half-century. No other scholars in the field of Australian Aboriginal studies have been as conscientious about making their corpus of data available to a wide audience, through an abundance of high quality publications. In Western Australia, they introduced the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology to the State at the University of Western Australia (UWA), and have guided countless students and a generation of budding anthropologists towards a greater understanding of other cultures, particularly those of the first Australians. On the national scene, they have been active in the affairs of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (formerly AIAS) since its establishment in 1964, and as Fellows of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, they have promoted Aboriginal studies among leading scholars in the nation. However, their endeavours have not been limited to the scholarly realm. Their research has been aimed at a general as well as anthropological audience and they are well-known and respected for their unfailing support of Aboriginal causes,
and their preparedness to do battle with powerful interests antipathetic to them.

We write of them and their distinguished careers from the perspective of former pupils-become-colleagues, and can therefore tell at first-hand of the unswerving and strong support that both Ronald and Catherine, better known as ‘Prof’ and ‘Dr Catherine’, have always given their students. Most of the contributors to this volume are former students of the Berndts, or are linked to them through ties of friendship and shared anthropological commitment. Many others wished to offer essays in honour of the Berndts, but were precluded from doing so because their particular interests lay outside the proposed theme of this volume. They would no doubt wish to join us in congratulating Ronald and Catherine on their magnificent accomplishments. The Berndts remain as active as ever, and neither admits to any knowledge of what the word ‘retirement’ might mean. At any given time, they have several major projects moving towards successful fruition, and their productivity remains the envy of all.

The Berndts have been pre-eminent on the Western Australian anthropological scene ever since their arrival in Perth. Ronald retired as Emeritus Professor in 1981, and in 1983, Catherine ‘retired’ informally—in formal because she had never been a permanent staff member. Both became Honorary Research Fellows in Anthropology and have continued to work part of the time in the Department. Both were made Honorary Fellows of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain in 1982, and Ronald became a Fellow of ANZAAS in that year. Of particular gratification to Ronald was the invitation of the Anthropology Society of Western Australia to give its Silver Jubilee Address in May 1983. At that large gathering, the President of the society presented him with its specially struck and inscribed silver medallion. This was a fitting tribute to the man who, together with Catherine, had founded the association and put anthropology and Aboriginal studies on the map in Western Australia. Their superlative efforts at UWA and in the service of Aboriginal studies generally were recognised when the University conferred the Honorary Degree of D Litt on both Catherine (1983) and Ronald (1987). And in 1987, national recognition came to each of them in the award of general membership of the Order of Australia.
Ronald Berndt has always averred that a person’s career has a lot to do with both family background and the opportunities provided to pursue particular interests. Ronald was born in Adelaide in 1916. His father’s father was born at Halle in Germany and was trained in industrial chemistry at the University of Leipzig. His father’s mother came from Eisleben. Deteriorating conditions in Germany in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, led them to emigrate to Australia in 1884 in search of a new life. His mother’s father was a botanist of German and Huguenot ancestry, who had lived in Minden in Germany and later, in South Australia, where he married a woman of Irish-Scots descent. Ronald grew up in what he describes as a ‘happy, liberal environment’, with a small but closely-knit circle of kin. Although he has always thought of himself as an Australian, he is proud of his German background, albeit tempered somewhat by the aftermath of both world wars.

The Berndt family severed its ties with the Lutheran church at the beginning of World War I, and Ronald was sent to Anglican church schools, then Pulteney Grammar School. His German surname was a disadvantage at a time when anti-German feelings still ran high, and this was one reason why he did not find the school environment particularly congenial. Also, he arrived at school already steeped in European history and tradition, thanks to the tuition of his parents and his father’s mother, and found the subject matter at school uninteresting. He did not like mathematics, and remembers the school environment as formal and restrictive, since it did not allow him to pursue his own interests, which were probably precocious for his age and for the period. As a reaction to the Depression, Ronald’s father insisted that he gain some practical training, so he embarked on an accountancy course. However, about this time some very different career possibilities, far closer to his own enthusiasms, began to appear on the horizon.
3. Ronald outside the entrance to the Department of Anthropology in 1974. 
   Photograph by JE Stanton.
One of Ronald’s father’s passions was football, and he tried very hard to interest his son in the game. In this endeavour he failed badly for whenever they attended matches, the boy would carry a book in his pocket and would engross himself in Gibbon or Herodotus instead of watching the games. Another of his father’s passions was the study of other cultures, and in this he had much greater success in cultivating his son’s interest. Together they regularly visited the library and the South Australian Museum. Ronald was enthusiastic about his father’s collection of Aboriginal artefacts and also became an avid reader of ethnological works.
Ronald began subscribing to *Oceania* and in 1938 he became a member of the Anthropological Society and the Royal Society of South Australia, with the encouragement of CP Mountford. In 1939, he was appointed an Honorary Assistant Ethnologist at the South Australian Museum, and published his first ethnographic papers the same year. This position gave him the opportunity to familiarise himself with Aboriginal and Melanesian cultural materials and to meet Aborigines, who were among the Museum’s regular visitors. There he first met Albert Karloan, a Yaraldi man, who invited him to his home at Murray Bridge, where Ronald did his first ‘live’ research. Karloan was a remarkable man, who opened the door to his traditional background and to the problems that were besetting Aborigines in that area, and became the aspiring anthropologist’s first teacher in Aboriginal culture. Ronald met many other Aborigines; for instance, Barney Waria, a Ngadjuri man from the mid-north of South Australia; and Andrew Dibana, a Dieri man, to whom he was introduced by Ted Vogelsang, who had been born on the Lutheran mission at Boocaltaninna (Lake Eyre).
These early associations with large numbers of Aborigines had a marked impact on his future career in anthropology. In August 1939, he was invited, as a ‘social anthropologist’, to accompany an expedition to Ooldea mounted by the University of Adelaide Board for Anthropological Research. As a result of the encouragement of Professor (later Sir) JB Cleland and especially Professor T Harvey Johnston, he realised the need to obtain formal anthropological training. This was a crucial turning point in his life. At that time the University of Sydney was the only place in Australia where anthropology was taught, so with the help of Professor AP Elkin, Ronald completed his enrolment and went to Sydney in 1940 to begin his studies.

On the other side of the Tasman, Catherine Helen Webb, born in 1918, had been growing up in Auckland. Her mother had been informally adopted as a child by her father’s sister (and her husband). When her parents separated, her father moved to Australia and the rest of the family went to live in the large, comfortable house where her mother had grown up. There was no lack of father surrogates, among them an uncle who had been an undergraduate friend of Reo Fortune and a friend of a brother of Raymond Firth. This uncle, Dr Dick Campbell, encouraged Catherine to read more widely in anthropology and related subjects, and it was through him that she came to know Margaret Mead.

Catherine’s mother’s parents were born in Nova Scotia, where a group of ships had taken religious and economic ‘exiles’ from the west of Scotland. In the 1850s they left Canada and settled in the north of New Zealand. Catherine’s ancestry on her mother’s side was entirely Scots; and on her father’s side, English, Irish, Scots and Maori. However, she and her siblings and cousins did not know about the Maori connection until late in 1986, when some cousins came across a marriage certificate, dated 18 November 1839, and a large assortment of documents and other material. Why that information was withheld—as was the existence of her father’s father, who spent some time in the Auckland area, and lived until 1935—has not been explained. Her great-grandfather’s mother was Wehi (Tomo) Pokai, only sister of Hori Rakena Pokai, and their ancestors were said to have reached New Zealand in the Tainui canoe.¹

From a coeducational state primary school, Catherine went to a Presbyterian girls’ secondary school. From there she matriculated in only three years. On the death of her great-aunt, she moved to Wellington, where
her mother and siblings had rejoined her father; there she attended Hutt Valley High School and obtained her Higher Leaving Certificate. At sixteen, with a University Bursary, she entered Victoria University College, now the Victoria University of Wellington. No anthropology courses were available, so she majored in Latin, with French as a second subject. She completed her BA in 1939, working for a while in various libraries.

When her parents separated a second time, she went with her mother, brother and two sisters to Dunedin, so that she could take a one-year undergraduate unit in anthropology, in preference to doing an MA in Latin. Under Dr HD Skinner, Director of the Otago Museum, she obtained a ‘Certificate of Proficiency in Anthropology’. Skinner, well-known for his research on the Moriori of the Chatham Islands, had a broad vision of anthropology that Catherine found exciting and stimulating. Although he was unable to offer her financial support to further her studies, Dr Skinner wrote to Professor Elkin seeking assistance.

The genesis of Catherine Webb’s single-mindedness in pursuing a career in anthropology is not very easily unravelled. Her uncle had initially encouraged her, as did Skinner and her mother. She attended church regularly in early childhood, and there she often heard visiting missionaries preach. What they had to say about far-off places and the people who lived there set her to wonder about their intentions and about cultural differences in general. This interest, plus her reading and her preoccupation with Maori versus Pakeha and Scots versus English identity, linked up with her personal experiences and university studies. Among her friends were students of Maori descent who talked freely about their problems in a country that had, then, a reputation for harmony in race relations. The library books brought home by Catherine’s father, a civil engineer and draughtsman, were mostly about anthropology, as she recalls, and most concerned African and Pacific peoples. These influences all contributed to her interests in anthropology. And finally, Catherine’s mother, prior to her death early in 1940, had urged her to go on with her plans to become an anthropologist. A few weeks later, she was in Professor Elkin’s study at the University of Sydney, and face-to-face with her husband-to-be.

It did not take long for the budding anthropologists to realise the extent of their common interests and ambitions, and to begin to plan a life together. The entry of the Japanese into the war made the future for both of
them relatively uncertain. Ronald had to report for a medical inspection at the Marrickville Army Depot, and although it was successful, he was never called up. He was not opposed to military activities per se, but resented the likelihood that being drafted would have interrupted his future plans. Elkin said to him, ‘Wait and see, and if they want you, we can probably get you to New Guinea’, but nothing happened.

The Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney in 1940 was small but active. Elkin, Hogbin and Capell were the main lecturers, but Ronald found the academic pace too slow and was impatient to get into the field. Stanner, newly returned from Africa, was also there at the time, and encouraged him. Towards the end of 1940, Elkin obtained a small Australian National Research Council grant to enable both Ronald and Catherine to do research at Ooldea. They married in Adelaide and honeymooned in the Adelaide Hills, during which time Ronald was able to focus his anthropological mind to write a paper on death, burial and associated ritual at Ooldea (co-authored by Harvey Johnston), while Catherine completed an essay on Durkheim. After finishing their fieldwork at Ooldea, they went to New Zealand and began writing up their ‘Ooldea Report’, which was published in *Oceania* between 1942 and 1945.

After their return to the University of Sydney in 1942, Elkin obtained another Australian National Research Council grant for them to undertake a survey of Aboriginal-European relations in South Australia. The Berndts continued their studies and both obtained Diplomas of Anthropology (1943); Catherine an MA degree with first class honours (1949); Ronald a BA (1950) and then an MA with first class honours plus the University Medal (1951). In 1950, each was awarded the Edgeworth David Medal in Anthropology by the Royal Society of New South Wales; Catherine received the Percy Smith Medal from the University of Otago that year and Ronald a Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Silver Medal in 1953.

The Ooldea research among Western Desert people marked the beginning of a decade of fieldwork in Aboriginal Australia, which was interrupted only by short intervals of writing in Adelaide or Sydney while they held various research and teaching appointments. At Ooldea the Berndts’ experience of desert Aborigines, strongly tradition-oriented but adversely affected by much of their experience in contact with Europeans, sensitised them to the importance of social welfare issues. It also confirmed their view
that anthropologists had a responsibility to Aborigines in attempting to right the great many wrongs that had been perpetrated upon them, and in this regard Elkin’s approach sharpened their awareness of shortcomings in policies towards Aborigines.

At that time, it should be recalled, the ‘smooth the dying pillow’ syndrome had not yet been laid to rest. Daisy Bates was at Wynbring when the Berndts were at Ooldea, but they did not seek a meeting with her, since they disliked her book *The Passing of the Aborigines*. The old protectionist policies still held sway, and the war was an excuse for governmental inactivity in many areas, including Aboriginal affairs. When the Berndts did their South Australian survey, between 1942 and 1944, they noted a steady deterioration in the social conditions of people of Aboriginal descent. Aborigines were not voicing their feelings, partly because they knew that they would not be heard, given the climate of public opinion at the time. It was inevitable that the Berndts, in the course of their research, would be embroiled in frequent skirmishes with mission and governmental authorities responsible for Aboriginal affairs. Mostly it was a case of beating their heads against a stone wall, but they had a few successes.

Their survey work in South Australia involved intensive research on the lower River Murray, in Adelaide, and in many country towns as well as in the northern sector of that State. They gathered a great deal of information about the Aboriginal past, and much of it was to disappear from Aboriginal memory in certain areas within the following decade. Their book, *From Black to White in South Australia* (1951), a pioneering work in the field of social change and race relations in Aboriginal Australia, also attempted to convey the pressing need for administrative reform. In offering concrete suggestions for ameliorating Aboriginal living conditions, the Berndts also underlined the contribution to be made by systematic anthropological research in revealing the true dimensions of the Aboriginal situation.

A switch of regional focus to northern Australia came about because of persistent reports about poor living and working conditions for Aborigines on pastoral stations in the Northern Territory. Elkin arranged for the Berndts to be employed as anthropologists and welfare officers to the Australian Investment Agency (headed by Lord Vestey and generally called Vesteys). No fieldwork had been done in the central-western part of the Territory; in fact, little was known of the traditional background of the Aborigines living
there, let alone their social conditions. The Berndts’ research, aimed at advising Vesteys on labour problems, was carried out between 1944 and 1946 and constituted the first applied anthropological research of its kind to be done in Australia. They encountered great difficulties, largely in the form of obstruction from Vesteys themselves, and their original report (1946) was kept under wraps by the government of the day and by Vesteys. Fortunately a revised version, together with enlightening detail about what happened during the course of the fieldwork, has recently been published as *End of an Era* (1987).

Eventually, to escape the constant hectoring of Vesteys General Manager, the Berndts went to the Daly River, where they were cut off from the outside world by floodwaters. This proved to be a godsend, enabling them to carry out a piece of sustained research at the invitation of the local people. Their appointments with Vesteys were terminated after they left that area. During this period of employment, the Berndts were able to combine their study of living conditions and social change with enquiries into the traditional past, especially in the realm of religion. From this work came Catherine’s *Women’s Changing Ceremonies in North Australia* (1950), the first relatively detailed study of women’s secret-sacred ritual.²
By the time the labour survey was completed, the Japanese part of the war was over, and a new spirit pervaded the continent. Both the Berndts and Elkin confidently expected that, henceforth, there would be a steady improvement in Aboriginal conditions. Despite the dismantling of many of the old worn-out policies towards Aborigines, the reformulation and implementation of new ones, especially that of assimilation, were in their view intolerably slow.

Late in 1946, Elkin appointed Ronald and Catherine to research positions in the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney. They headed for northeastern Arnhem Land, attracted to this area by W Lloyd Warner’s classic study and Donald Thomson’s reports of 1936 and 1939, but also because of the long and somewhat turbulent history of Aboriginal contact with outsiders, dating from the ‘Macassan’ era, and more recently with Japanese and Europeans. The advice and encouragement of EWP Chinnery, then Director of Aboriginal Welfare for the Northern Territory, and the fact that Arnhem Land was regarded as an exotic place, also attracted them to the region. The strong tradition-orientation of the people of Yirrkala and the community’s relative isolation were a far cry from the Vesteys’ stations and a welcome change.

The local people, who struck the Berndts as exuberant and extrovert, proved congenial and cooperative hosts, but doing research there was far from easy. Very little English was spoken, so the Berndts had to set about the task of language learning—something they had always regarded as a *sine qua non* for obtaining reliable and valid data. Among the men who became close friends to Ronald were Maluwan and his son Wandjuk, and Munggerauai (father of Galarrwuy Yunupingu). Although the local women were more mobile and less accustomed to intensive interviewing sessions than the men, Catherine built up a core of teachers from whom she obtained data on genealogical and territorial relationships. It was here that Ronald came to appreciate the strong appeal and beauty of song-poetry, with its complex imagery and symbolism. He later wrote two books, *Kunapipi* (1951) and *Djangawul* (1952), several articles, and much later, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land* (1976). The Berndts were to return to Yirrkala on several
occasions, and also worked at Milingimbi and Elcho Island. The monograph An *Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land* (1962), for which Ronald was awarded the Wellcome Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, stemmed from research done in 1958 and 1961—work that was later to prove invaluable when the Berndts became involved in the Gove dispute.³

The Berndts were urged by western Arnhem Landers to visit Oenpelli, where the dominant Gunwinggu culture differed considerably from that in the northeast. The Berndts spent some time in the Oenpelli and South Goulburn Island areas in 1946 and 1947, and then went to live at Oenpelli in 1949-50. *Sexual Behaviour in Western Arnhem Land* (1951) was written prior to their in-depth study (1970, below). Catherine’s interest was in oral literature and women’s perspectives on marriage and family. These topics provided the substance of a number of publications, and a major study remains in manuscript form. The Oenpelli women proved to be articulate and proud exponents of their culture, and Catherine’s favourite Aboriginal language remains Gunwinggu. Ronald worked mainly on religion, secular songs and dreams. He was also very interested in the ‘old’ cultures west of the East Alligator River because they had been affected by the advent of the buffalo industry and by the encroachment of Gunwinggu groups. One of the publications that resulted from this research was *Man, Land and Myth in North Australia: The Gunwinggu People* (1970). Some of their later visits to Oenpelli and Goulburn Island were made in connection with the Ranger Enquiry (1976-77) and the AIAS project on the social impact of uranium mining (1984).

The year 1950 marked a suspension of field research by the Berndts in Aboriginal Australia, and though they continued to write up material and remain involved in Aboriginal affairs, they were unable to resume their research until 1957. They experienced this hiatus as an unfortunate wrench, having to suspend the strong personal relationships they had with so many Aborigines but the demands of their professional careers could not be escaped. Ronald was appointed as Temporary Lecturer at the University of Sydney in 1951, and Catherine as a Research Fellow. They were aware of the need to obtain doctorates if they were to become professional anthropologists, and notable figures in the field, such as Raymond Firth and Margaret Mead, urged them to go overseas to complete their training. No
doctrinal studies were available at the University of Sydney, and they declined offers of postgraduate scholarships to the Australian National University made by Professor SG Nadel. The Berndts felt that they had become too closely identified with Aboriginal studies and therefore needed to do research in a different field.

Catherine was awarded an Ohio State Fellowship from the International Federation of University Women to do field research in New Guinea, and Ronald obtained research funds from the Anthropology Department at Sydney University. They wanted to work in an area of minimal European contact, so on the advice of Elkin, Arthur Capell, KE (Mick) Read and Camilla Wedgwood, they chose a location to the south of Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands, which in 1951 was gradually being brought under Australian administrative control. Following on the heels of Read, the Berndts were only the second anthropologists to work in the Highlands when the region was ‘re-opened’ after the Japanese invasion of Papua New Guinea.

They did the research in two periods from 1951 to 1953, and found it decidedly very different from the Aboriginal Australian setting. Just how different is revealed in the revised version of Ronald’s doctoral thesis, published as Excess and Restraint: Social Control Among a New Guinea Mountain People (1962). This book caused a stir in anthropological circles, with some of the more outspoken reviewers hinting that much of the data presented were so incredible that perhaps it had been made up. (It was ‘all excess and no restraint’ as one colleague remarked at the time.) However, an enormous amount of detailed research conducted in the same area since then has consistently verified the major conclusions reached by the Berndts in their pioneering study.

Catherine also chose to do her doctoral thesis on her Highlands material, but the revised version of her ‘Myth in Action’ has not yet been published. They have jointly published articles, for example on social change, local ‘cargo cult’ movements, and kuru sorcery, and recently each has written a chapter for a forthcoming book on the reminiscences of early Highlands fieldworkers entitled Ethnographic Presents, edited by T Hays. This book will, we trust, throw much light on their experiences in a true frontier situation.

They decided to do their doctoral work at the London School of Economics, which in their view had the advantage of being less closed and provincial than Oxford and Cambridge and because both Raymond Firth and Phyllis Kaberry were based in London. Armed with a variety of supporting grants, they set off for London soon after their return to Sydney from the Highlands. This was their first foray to Europe, and they both had misgivings, but also were excited about the prospect of being involved in what Firth described to them as the ‘high level stuff of his postgraduate seminars, which would, he said, provide an opportunity for ‘the lions to roar’. By the time they experienced such phenomena for themselves, the roar was somewhat muted. Talcott Parsons’ Structure of Social Action (1937) and Parsons and Shils’ Toward a General Theory of Action (1951) were at that time the ‘in’ books. Consequently, the Berndts felt impelled to spend some of their time on board the old P & O steamer Strathnaver familiarising themselves while en route to London with what appear to them now to be rather pompous and boring works.
London proved to be a most enjoyable and rewarding experience, and because the number of social anthropologists was relatively small in those days, the Berndts were able to meet almost all who were in England. Phyllis Kaberry, Max Gluckman and Meyer Fortes, plus their supervisors Raymond Firth (Catherine) and Isaac Shapera (Ronald), were all friendly, but the legendary figure of Radcliffe-Brown failed to rouse them to deference; on meeting them for the first time, he remarked, ‘Oh, two of Elkin’s pupils!’ Rather than becoming strongly influenced by a particular senior anthropologist, the Berndts felt that there was a more general permeation of ideas and approaches. Elkin’s advice to them was heeded; paraphrased, it went: “Take advantage of what others have to offer, but carve out a field of research and enquiry for yourselves. The innovative concentrations of one generation are the flotsam and jetsam of the next; the threads of basic anthropological knowledge and interpretation are the constant elements.’ In England, Firth and Gluckman reinforced this view for them, and in their intellectual approach to anthropological issues, it is clear that Ronald and Catherine have influenced each other more than others have influenced them.

Displaying their characteristic single-mindedness, both of them completed their PhDs within the minimum two years; Catherine’s external examiners were Edmund Leach and Phyllis Kaberry and Ronald’s were Gluckman and Kaberry. The day after the second of their orals, which they recall as ordeals, they set out for the Continent. They made contact with various anthropologists, Levi-Strauss and van Baal among them, and visited institutions such as the Anthropos Institute, whose former head, Pater Wilhelm Schmidt, had expressed great interest in their work. They also played the role of tourist-anthropologists as their travels took them as far as the Golden Horn, the meeting point of Europe and Asia. Despite the upheaval of World War II, Europe struck them as small-scale and conservative, and therefore not as different from Aboriginal Australia, in its status as an object of their anthropological scrutiny, as they had imagined it would be. Later, North America impressed them as very different from Europe, and more reminiscent of their experiences in the Eastern Highlands.

Their first trip to North America was undertaken in 1955-56, after Ronald had been awarded a travelling scholarship by the Carnegie
Corporation of New York to visit anthropology and sociology departments in the United States and Canada, en route to Australia. They still remember having their fingerprinted visas examined on arrival in New York, an experience that was part of the heightened momentum they felt as they set foot in the New World. They visited many universities and met countless colleagues in the United States, where the climate of anthropology seemed far more dynamic and eclectic than in the United Kingdom. They felt an enormous contrast between the staid meetings of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the British Commonwealth, which reflected the small scale of the membership and the narrowness of focus of its interests, and the frenetic pace of the American Anthropological Association meetings they attended in Boston. Anthropology in Canada seemed more like the British pattern, but was clearly influenced by the intensity of interaction across the border.

The highlights of their trip included meetings with W Lloyd Warner, David Riesman and Fred and Dorothy Eggan at Chicago; George Peter Murdock at Yale, and Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn at Harvard. They also met two of the great father figures in North American anthropology: Robert Lowie and Alfred Kroeber. Through arrangements made by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they were able to visit various Navaho, Hopi and Pueblo communities in New Mexico, which they greatly enjoyed. This North American trip had a considerable influence on their subsequent teaching and research. The varying perspectives they became acquainted with offered models that could be applied to the Australian scene, and developed as a counterbalance to the hegemony of the British anthropology then dominant in Australia.
8. Ronald holding a representation of a female spirit-being and a bark painting from Oenpelli in preparation for an exhibition of Arnhem Land materials in 1957. Photograph courtesy of the West Australian.

The Berndts had severed their formal links with the University of Sydney when they left for England, although Elkin had obtained a lectureship for Ronald in 1955, so as to ensure that one of the Berndts would have an academic position to go to on their return. Nadel, who was in England at the time, felt that they had an obligation to return to Sydney, even though Ronald was interested in a lectureship that had been advertised at the University of Western Australia. With the support of Elkin, Ronald nevertheless applied for the position in Perth, but subsequently declined to accept it. Elkin’s Chair had become vacant on his retirement in 1956, and both Stanner and Ronald were encouraged by Elkin to apply for it. Ronald felt diffident about doing so because of his inexperience and was relieved when John Barnes was appointed. While the Berndts were in New York, Ronald resigned from the Sydney position after the University of Western Australia offered him an appointment at the level of Senior Lecturer. They would have preferred to return to Sydney, but were excited by the prospect
of being able to develop a new anthropology department, which would be only the third in Australia, so they headed for Perth, arriving early in 1956.

Daisy Bates had drawn the attention of the University of Western Australia to the desirability of establishing teaching and research in anthropology as early as the 1920s. In 1952, Professors Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn made a survey of the social sciences in Australia (under the auspices of the Carnegie Corporation) and recommended that Western Australia should be the site of a new anthropology department. With the academic support of KF Walker, Professor of Psychology (who had a Diploma in anthropology from Sydney), the Carnegie Corporation provided funding for a senior lectureship in anthropology for three years. Initially attached to the Department of Psychology, the anthropology section grew rapidly under the Berndts’ enthusiastic leadership and soon gained sub-departmental status and relative independence.

Six students were enrolled at second year level for the first classes held in 1956, and a third year unit was added in 1957, with Honours and Master’s preliminary courses and research beginning the following year. This scale of development was made possible only by the full-time involvement of Catherine, who was designated a Visiting Tutor (1956-63). In those days, the climate of opinion in the university was against the appointment of a staff member’s wife in any permanent capacity, especially in the same department as her husband—a fact that had not been apparent when Ronald was appointed. Initially the Berndts did not intend to remain in Perth, but would move on after they had established a healthy, independent department, in which they could foster a regional concentration on Australia, Papua New Guinea, and South and Southeast Asia.
Ronald was promoted to Reader in 1959, and made his first appointment in 1960 (Peter Lawrence, later Professor at Sydney). In 1961 the anthropology section achieved separate status as a department, and the Foundation Chair in Anthropology was advertised in 1962. Ronald applied for the post, but the long delay in deciding it prompted him to think seriously about accepting a Headship at the University of California, Davis. However, in May 1963 he was offered the Chair at UWA, which he accepted. From this date Catherine was employed as either a Visiting Lecturer or a Par-time Lecturer. They graduated their first MA in
Anthropology in 1960 i a n c first PhD in 1970—a gap explained by Ronald’s insistence that all students take the Master’s degree in order to gain sufficient research experience to tackle the doctorate. A first year unit was mounted in 1966 and a separate unit in Aboriginal studies in 1974. By 1978, the Department had grown to sixteen full-time members plus part-time staff, and enrolments totalled some 1,000 students at all levels. A second Chair, in Urban Anthropology, was established and Professor Basil Sansom was appointed to it in 1977.


Once in Perth and committed to the development of the discipline in Western Australia, the Berndts were forced, reluctantly, to reduce the time they spent in the field. For fifteen of the twenty-five years of their formal association with the Department, they were able to spend only a few weeks of each of those years in Arnhem Land, the Western Desert and the Kimberleys—mainly at Balgo Mission, where they first began work early in 1958. For the remainder, it was impossible to escape the Department, although on a few occasions they spent study leave overseas. Administrative duties were time-consuming and striking some kind of
balance between competing demands had to be at the expense of their social lives. Research and writing were a *sine qua non* and they were determined that nothing should diminish their productivity in that direction. However, there were also other important commitments, including committee memberships, especially those pertaining to Aboriginal affairs. For example, from 1962, when discussions began, until the formal establishment of the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee of the Western Australian Museum under The Aboriginal Heritage Act (WA) 1972, Ronald played an active role, and became a leading member of the Committee until his resignation in 1985.

From the perspective of the Berndts, one of the most significant events they participated in was the 1961 Conference on Australian Aboriginal Studies, convened in Canberra by WEH Stanner. At the time, they were doing fieldwork in Arnhem Land and at first declined Stanner’s invitation to attend, but were later persuaded to go—a decision neither has regretted, since the Conference turned out to have a significant bearing on the development of Aboriginal studies in anthropology. It was not until 1962 that Ronald, John Barnes and Bill Geddes, representatives of the three major teaching departments of anthropology in Australia at the time, were appointed to an interim council that planned the establishment of the AIAS. Ronald was elected to its formally constituted Council in 1964 and has been an important influence in it ever since.

When the first Australian branch of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth was formed, Ronald was the only Australian among its members and became the first President (1962-64). Later, in 1972, that body was absorbed into the newly formed Australian Anthropological Society. On the local scene, in 1959 the Berndts established the Anthropological Society of Western Australia, which has continued to flourish. The first issue of *Anthropological Forum*, founded by the Berndts, appeared in 1963. *Oceania* and *Mankind* were then the only two Australian-based anthropological journals, and it seemed to the Berndts that there was a need for an international journal covering social and cultural anthropological and sociological materials, and reflecting Australian research interests.

In setting up the department at UWA, the Berndts originally intended to combine anthropology and sociology, which they saw as being
complementary, but there was some opposition to the inclusion of sociology. Later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, moves were again made to create a Faculty of Social Sciences which would have involved the inclusion of sociology. Again the matter was shelved after considerable discussion. The Berndts’ interest in sociology stemmed from their Sydney days and Elkin’s efforts in the same direction, and was reinforced when they visited both anthropology and sociology departments in North America and discussed at length the pros and cons of having the two disciplines coexist within a single departmental structure.

The Berndts remained close friends of AP Elkin until his death in 1979. Writing to them not long before he died, Elkin disclosed that he had always considered them to be his ‘spiritual children’. Without doubt, this feeling was reciprocated by the Berndts, in a relationship that at times expressed impatience and latent disagreement, mostly on their part, as might have been expected in such a relationship. After Elkin’s retirement, they organised and co-edited a festschrift, and the volume, *Aboriginal Man in Australia*, was presented to him in 1965.

It goes almost without saying that one of the activities the Berndts have found most absorbing and enjoyable, and the one that has occupied most of their time and energy, is writing. In their view it was imperative that their data contribute to a fuller understanding of Aboriginal social and cultural phenomena. Also, prior to the mid-1960s, the literature available on Aborigines was by no means prolific, and large gaps in anthropological knowledge were evident. Their book, *The World of the First Australians*, first published in 1964 and since then revised and republished several times, quickly became the standard text and general reference on Aboriginal Australia. In this work, the Berndts capitalised on their wealth of research experience in many different parts of the continent to produce an invaluable synthesis, reflecting both the significance of regional variation and the underlying thematic homogeneity of basic aspects of Aboriginal Australian traditional life.

Ronald and Catherine have felt it essential to tailor some of their writings to a non-specialist audience, in an effort to make the lay public much more informed about Aboriginal societies and cultures. To this end, they wrote *The First Australians* (1952, 1954, revised in 1974), an excellent general introduction to Aboriginal societies, which was later expanded into *The*
World of the First Australians (1964). Then followed Pioneers and Settlers: The Aboriginal Australians (1978) which was revised and enlarged and published in 1983 as The Aboriginal Australians: The First Pioneers. They also contributed to Pitman’s social issues series for secondary schools, with Aborigines in Australian Society (1985). Soon after their move to Western Australia, the Berndts became involved in educational concerns relating to Aboriginal studies: schooling, teacher education and curriculum planning; and remained active in this field until the late 1970s. One of Catherine’s special interests has been children’s literature. She has published several books of translations of Aboriginal stories, originally told to children and suitable for young Australians (eg Land of the Rainbow Snake, 1978; Pheasant and Kingfisher, 1987; and This is Still Rainbow Snake Country, 1988).

Throughout their careers the Berndts have displayed concern for Aboriginal people—their experiences of profound and unprecedented change that drastically affected their lives, and against which they were powerless to react. Welfare issues of many different kinds have occupied their attention throughout their working lives. The true extent of the influence of the Berndts, particularly Ronald, on public administration in the field of Aboriginal affairs throughout Australia, will never be known. What is certain, however, is that he has written literally hundreds of reports, requested by both State and Federal bodies, pertaining to matters of Aboriginal welfare and relevant policies, and his opinions have been frequently heeded at high levels. After the move to Western Australia in particular, he enjoyed a very close working relationship with senior bureaucrats charged with the administration of Aboriginal matters, and he was in almost continual communication in an advisory capacity.

In addition to the issues already noted, Ronald acted as an adviser to the Australian Law Reform Commission in 1978, and both the Berndts were among the original signatories to the proposal to set up an Aboriginal Treaty Committee in 1979. They have been active in their support for land rights, both generally, and specifically in relation to Western Australia, where they organised a major workshop on the issues (later published as a special issue of Anthropological Forum). In fact, Ronald received a great deal of press coverage for his outspoken opposition to biased and racist campaigns directed against Aborigines and their land rights aspirations. The
Berndts have been concerned also about the question of resource
development and were active in the 1981 symposium on the topic organised
by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, from which came the
important volume, *Aboriginal Sites, Rights and Resource Development*
(1982), edited by Ronald.

The Berndts have maintained a great interest in Aboriginal heritage, and
their writings give ample evidence of this appreciation and concern. In
addition, they have assembled a large collection of cultural materials from
their fieldwork areas. This magnificent collection, among the finest of its
kind in the world, was originally intended as an extension of their field
research data. When the original department at UWA was shifted to its
present location in the Social Science Building, Ronald was successful in
persuading the University Senate to include an Anthropology Research
Museum as an integral part of the new facility. The Berndts’ collection now
forms a magnificent nucleus for the development of this museum, under the
able curatorship of Dr John Stanton, a former student of the Berndts and a
contributor to this *festschrift*.

Ronald and Catherine have remained largely aloof from the changing
fashions and fads of anthropological theory, and have resisted any kind of
pigeonholing. Recently, for example, in an overview of Aboriginal religion,
Morphy (1988) characterised their approach as belonging within the
‘ethnographic exegetical tradition’, but Ronald rejects this, citing his
important 1974 monograph, *Australian Aboriginal Religion*, as an example
of his unique approach. Contra Eliade and Stanner, he focused on the
pragmatic nature of Aboriginal religion, or religions as Ronald would
stress, and on content and belief analysed within the framework of the life
cycle. As to the place of women in Aboriginal societies, the influence of
feminism on writings published in the last decade has been considerable,
and this is one development which Catherine has followed closely.

Catherine’s upbringing, in common with that of her husband’s,
emphasised the basic equality of both sexes along with the need for reform,
and also the part played by personal differences as well as social and
economic factors. She found working with Aboriginal women increasingly
congenial and absorbing as she came to know them better. Being part of a
husband-and-wife team was dearly advantageous, in that it was the norm in
Aboriginal society and she was able to identify very closely with women
without having to feel, as Phyllis Kaberry did, that she needed to study men’s activities and perspectives as well. The same was the case with Ronald, who during their long field experience together has never worked with women. As a team, then, they were able to come to terms with a whole society rather than only one part of it. Once their collaboration had begun, the only time that one of them was in the field alone was on a trip to Oenpelli, undertaken by Ronald in connection with the AIAS study of the social impact of uranium mining.

Catherine likens their together-but-separate research approach to what she argues is the theme of women’s role in Aboriginal Australia: ‘independence within a framework of interdependence’. This division of labour has been carried through in their joint writings. Not only are their own themes apparent, but they have tended to specialise in differing but usually linked subjects, within a commonality of broad interests. They have influenced each other perceptibly, and it is difficult to discern differences in their individual styles. Certainly, they have shared a real eclecticism of interests in the Aboriginal studies field, and their writings embrace a continuum of situations ranging from highly ‘tradition-oriented’ to the urban scene. The fact that they have written more on the ‘traditional’ dimensions has led them to emphasise the social value of the past in the present, especially as a way of understanding both the genesis and the nature of contemporary conditions in Aboriginal Australia.

The Berndts, despite their unparalleled publishing record, nevertheless consider that their writing programs have hardly begun, and that they owe it to future generations, including Aborigines and Papua New Guinea peoples, to provide legible and detailed records of the data they have obtained over such a long period of intermittent fieldwork. However, even with the best of intentions, and recognising the vast amount of unpublished material they jointly hold, they realise that completion of their plans will not be possible, since this would require another lifetime for each, or longer. We know that their many friends and colleagues within the discipline, and beyond, will join with the contributors to this volume in wishing them continued good health. As to their enthusiasm and commitment, these qualities remain as strong today as they ever were. They have done a great deal for the discipline of anthropology, which has certainly been a huge and central part of their lives, and they have always believed firmly in its great potential for
enriching and improving cross-cultural, international and human relations generally. Their optimism remains undiminished, as does their view that the potential of anthropology has still barely been realised, let alone put into practice. The contribution made by Ronald and Catherine Berndt to Aboriginal studies and to the promotion of Aboriginal concerns has been, and continues to be, enormous. It will stand as a monument to their humanity and their tireless dedication.

Notes

1 Their home area was around Thames, but in the Ngapuhi attack on Te Totara Pa in 1821 a number of them were killed and others were taken north as captives to the Bay of Islands. Later, Wehi and her husband Thomas Webb (Tami Wepu in some of the records) went to live at Waiheke. By the end of 1855 both were dead, leaving three sons, the youngest being Thomas, sometimes called Tami Wepu II.

2 Phyllis Kaberry had been introduced to the same ritual in the Kimberleys and discussed it, though not in great detail, in her 1939 book Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane, Routledge, London.

3 The now famous Gove dispute was occasioned by legal attempts on the part of Yirrkala Aborigines in northeast Arnhem Land to prevent bauxite mining on their traditional lands. The case, heard in Darwin in 1969 and Canberra in 1970, was lost; Mr Justice Blackburn upheld the terra nullius concept in ruling that the Aborigines concerned had no legal right to the land.

4 One of the scholarships offered was in the field of linguistics, to Catherine. In addition, the Berndts were not at all convinced that they would be able to establish a good working relationship with Nadel.

5 One regret about this trip was that Géza Róheim had died not long before, so they never got to meet him. Róheim, who had worked at Hermannsburg, first wrote to them in 1945 and expressed his enthusiasm about their ‘Ooldea Report’. Despite marked differences in approach to their Aboriginal data, they kept up a lively correspondence. The Berndts
remember with fondness the deluge of offprints, many on what would then have been regarded as ‘off-beat’ subjects, that came from Rõheim.

6 For a fuller account of this important conference, see Berndt and Tonkinson 1988, 3-4.

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It is with deep regret that we report the death of Ronald M Berndt on 2 May. He died peacefully in his sleep after a protracted illness. Unfortunately this volume was still in its final production phase at that time, but we are pleased that it stands as a tribute to the man and his work. All contributors to this volume join us in expressing our sympathy to Catherine Berndt.
THE BERNDTS:

*a select bibliography*

COMPiled BY RONALD BERNDT AND CATHERINE BERNDT

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PART TWO

PROSPECTS FOR ABORIGINAL AUTONOMY
The central theme of this volume in honour of Ronald and Catherine Berndt is Aboriginal autonomy, addressed through a focus on government policies of ‘self-management’. \(^1\) Contributors were asked to examine the relationship between these policies (and their attendant ideology) and what actually happens in Aboriginal communities, whose members are the intended beneficiaries of government measures aimed at providing them with greater control over their own affairs. In this introductory essay, we first discuss some of the salient issues in policy and practice that have emerged since the self-management policies came into being, but we do not attempt to deal exhaustively with what is a huge field of enquiry. We conclude with a brief introduction to the chapters themselves.

As the following quotation indicates, the general aims of self-management policies are clearly stated (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1983:1):

The Australian Government sees self-management as the key to the implementation of policies for Aboriginal development. Self-management requires that Aborigines, as individuals and as
communities, be able to make the kinds of decisions about their future as other Australians make and to accept responsibility for the results. In advancing the concept of self-management, the Government has sought to open the way to Aborigines, as individuals or in co-operation with others and in some cases with government support, to make choices as to their lifestyle, to have a say in their community affairs, to provide services for themselves, to conduct businesses, and, within the law, to make their own decisions.

When the new policies were implemented, following the advent of a Federal Labor Government in 1972, they were generally hailed, by Aborigines and interested non-Aborigines, as a step in the right direction, away from the paternalism and implicit racism of the assimilationist policies that preceded them. They were initially labelled ‘self-determination’, but this term offended conservatives because it smacked too much of real autonomy, and so was softened to ‘self-management’ after the Liberal-Country Party Coalition regained power in 1975. More recently, though, the term ‘self-determination’ has reappeared as a basic element in Federal Labor Government policy. A major policy statement, entitled Foundations for the Future, promulgated late in 1987 by Aboriginal Affairs Minister, the Honourable Gerry Hand, speaks of the need ‘to address seriously the vital issue of self-determination for Aboriginal and [Torres Strait] Islander people’ (1987:1), and outlines its broad objectives (1987:1-2):

We must ensure that Aboriginal and Islander people are properly involved at all levels of the decision-making process in order that the right decisions are taken about their lives.

Until all Australians recognize this need for self-determination, recognize the Aboriginal and Islanders’ pride and dignity as a people and until Aboriginal and Islander people can take their rightful place as full and equal participants in the richness and diversity of this nation, our claims to being a civilised, mature and humane society sound hollow.
A comparison of these statements with those quoted above, from the early 1980s, reveals no substantial differences, although the 1987 document envisages Aboriginal involvement at all levels of the decision-making process, which could be taken to include the highest levels of policy-making and administration. (See Gray and Saggers, in this volume, for a discussion of self-management and self-determination concepts.) The lack of detail in the 1987 statement suggests that a large part of the problem lies in grasping what is meant by ‘self-determination’. As Maddock (1985:50) observes, the notion is ‘opaque and fluctuating’ and as indeterminate as the notion of Aboriginality, though the two often go together in discourse by, and about, Aborigines.

It is perhaps significant that the term ‘autonomy’ appears nowhere in the official statements quoted above. While the most common dictionary definition of ‘autonomy’ is ‘self-government’, others also include ‘independence’, ‘self-sufficiency’ and ‘self-regulation’ (eg The Macquarie Dictionary, first edition, Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, Dee Why, 1981:155). All these connotations are relevant to the way in which the word is used in this volume, in reference to individuals, groups and the Aboriginal collectivity. These definitions, like official policy statements, have nothing to say about the parameters within which autonomy or self-determination, at any of these levels, is to occur. In other words, they stand as absolutes, when in social reality such a status is impossible.

Viewed contextually, autonomy is always constrained and it is variably realised, among individuals or groups, in differing times, places and situations. This was as much a fact of life in Aboriginal societies prior to 1788 as it is in present-day Australia. Traditionally, kinship rules and the operation of Aboriginal Law acted as powerful constraints, and today Aborigines, like other Australians, are everywhere subject to the rule of law as well as the countless other constraints. For Aborigines, a long history of oppression and exclusion and the operation of racism are experienced as added burdens. Even so, there are numerous examples of Aborigines operating with considerable autonomy in situations of contact with Europeans (see the chapters by Kolig, Palmer and Tonkinson in this volume). More than three decades ago, Stanner (1979:46) drew attention to some clear instances of Aboriginal autonomy and called for a better
understanding of ‘the process by which the modern Aborigines are, to some extent at least, transforming themselves as well as being transformed by things beyond their control’.

In a recent paper on the lives of Aboriginal station workers in the Kimberleys, Rowse (1987) provides convincing evidence for personal autonomy among those male Aborigines who became trusted intermediaries between their white bosses and other Aborigines, both within and beyond the station camp. This autonomy, operating within the almost feudal domain of the Kimberley pastoralists, is obviously constrained, but it is dear that certain Aborigines enjoyed far greater freedom and privilege in such colonial situations than did their fellows.

The complexities inherent in the notion of autonomy are not addressed comprehensively by the contributors to this volume, many of whom use the term, or an equivalent, merely to contrast the ‘traditional’ situation, where an undifferentiated Aboriginal collectivity enjoyed independence from European intrusion and interference, with the aftermath. A fuller treatment would demand close examination of the variations within Aboriginal society and their relations to the economic and political structures of the nation as a whole. Most of the contributors are nevertheless mindful of the importance of internal differentiation in their treatment of the way in which Aboriginal communities have acted and reacted to government policies and practice.

In all human societies social process implies a dynamic of negotiation in which strains towards autonomy on the part of constituent units are balanced by strains towards maintenance of what is typically described as the ‘common good’—defined for Aborigines by their Law traditionally, and by the institutions of the wider Australian society today. Autonomy, then, must necessarily be conditional. Where those seeking it are a relatively small and politically weak minority, as in the case of Australian Aborigines, strivings for increased autonomy must contend with powerful pressures towards national unity (which are opposed to anything redolent of separatism, or what politically conservative white Australians often refer to as ‘apartheid’). Rhetoric employing the term Aboriginal nation‘ is thus viewed as threatening the notion of ‘a united, homogeneous Australia’ and as taking autonomy too far. For instance, the conservative agenda, as adumbrated in Liberal Party policy, stresses notions of ‘one land, one law’.
It is therefore opposed not only to Aboriginal land rights, but also to all legislation that either separates or accords special advantages to Aborigines, on the assumption that Australia is currently ‘one nation’ and that such compensatory legislation would be unduly divisive.

Many white Australian attitudes reflect a deep ambivalence concerning the extent to which Aboriginal aspirations can be safely met, and self-determination realised, without threatening the interests of ‘one Australia’ or entailing patent inequalities that favour Aborigines. These attitudes persist, despite the fact that all major socioeconomic indicators continue to show that Aborigines, as a whole, are severely disadvantaged when compared to the great majority of other Australians. It is not surprising that official government policies carry with them a major unstated premise: that self-determination for Aborigines is not openended, and will occur within limits imposed by the wider society. These constraints impinge upon Aboriginal communities with considerable force, particularly in the form of Treasury regulations and other rules relating to financial matters.

As most of the following chapters show, the vagueness of the limits within which Aboriginal autonomy can be exercised is a major factor influencing strained relationships between Aboriginal individuals, communities and organisations and State and Federal bureaucracies. The unstated nature of major constraints also presents difficulties for those public servants, particularly field officers and community workers, who are charged with the implementation of policy at the grassroots level. If these government employees cannot know fully the parameters in which they should be operating, then confusion and frustration must periodically be an outcome of relationships between them and Aborigines, as well as between field staff and their colleagues located more centrally in the bureaucracies.

In the period since 1972, anthropologists and others have commented on the shortcomings of these policies in their outcomes at the grassroots level (see, for example, the volume edited by Howard, 1978). What has become dear is that official policy statements ‘must be balanced against political and financial realities which dictate in large measure the priorities of both State and Federal governments of the day’ (Tonkinson and von Sturmer 1983:1). Critical examination of the broader implications of self-management policies has taken place much more recently. For example, Thiele (1984, 1985), in a critique of self-determination policies, notes that
they seemingly were framed in a theoretical vacuum. Thiele’s thesis is that, as in the case of earlier policies concerning Aborigines, particular ideologies and moral stances have overwhelmed description and explanation and thus have hindered a more dispassionate assessment of the self-determination approach. He suggests that there was inadequate prior enquiry into the nature of Aboriginality, and into the extent — and significance of differentiation, not only within the Aboriginal population but also within the broader Australian society. Thiele (1984: 177) concludes his critique with the suggestion that ‘what is in the interests of Aborigines and what different Aborigines are interested in, are problematical matters deserving of more open enquiry’.

Self-management policies have been characterised by von Sturmer (1985:48) as ‘vague but high-sounding...strong on ideology and rhetoric, but undecided and erratic in technique, and... [almost] totally lacking assessment criteria’. Despite the expenditure of large sums of money, aimed ostensibly at securing for Aborigines an economic foothold while raising their standards of living and enabling them to enjoy greater autonomy, there is little hard evidence of success. This is probably why the Federal Labor Government decided on a ‘new deal’ and planned a major reorganisation of the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. Minister Hand consulted with Aboriginal groups throughout the country. Legislation was passed in November 1989 to establish a new national body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), having executive functions similar to those formerly carried out by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Development Commission.

Unfortunately, however, the new deal policies and concomitant moral judgements apparently will be no more firmly grounded in solid research and closely examined assumptions than were all the earlier ones. Although the heterogeneity of Aboriginal situations is acknowledged in proposals to establish regional councils, with powers to determine priorities for the expenditure of commission funds in each region, a suspicion remains that inadequate heed will be paid to the degree of differentiation existing within the Aboriginal population. It is, of course, impossible for any Federal policy to accommodate the full extent of divergent Aboriginal values and aspirations, but much more can be done in this direction without these policies losing their coherence. Trends to date suggest a continuity of covert
Von Sturmer (1985:48) has drawn attention to the covert dimension thus:

If the language of assimilation actually concealed a discourse aimed at the ‘proletarianism’ of Aborigines, the language of ‘self-determination’ may be discovered as concealing a discourse aimed at drawing them inexorably into the corporate State—either directly by recruiting Aborigines *qua* Aborigines into the bureaucracy, or by means of a more indirect process, namely by the creation of ‘Aboriginal’ organizations which are required or demand or are invited to participate in government decision-making.

The ‘capture and encapsulation’ aspects of Aboriginalisation policies certainly have been evident during the era of self-management. Aborigines in many cases have been willing participants, because government agencies have provided the only sources of a secure power base for those aspiring to regional or national prominence as brokers and spokespersons. The Federal Government has promised that the new commission will give significant control and decision-making rights to the Aboriginal commissioners. However, the extent to which Aboriginal-administered bureaucracies will equate with Aboriginal-controlled bureaucracies has been aptly queried by an Aboriginal leader who recently asked: ‘Are we talking about Aboriginal-managed organisations or “managed Aborigines”?’, clearly indicating his conviction that the latter situation is the likely outcome of current developments (K Colbung, personal communication). Aboriginal fears of scapegoating in the event of policy failures reveal the other side of the self-management coin: Aboriginal responsibility can translate easily to Aboriginal culpability when things do not go right and government witch-hunts begin.

Conflicts concerning Aboriginal representation and representativeness in dealings with the nation-state have beset Aborigines and governments since the advent of the new policies, and remain a major problem in the forging of strong regional and national Aboriginal bodies, as well as a potent factor
in race relations. A national Aboriginal advisory body, the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (later the National Aboriginal Conference or NAC), was set up by the Federal Government in 1972 and had a highly controversial life until it was dissolved in mid-1985. It was a perfect example of the gulf separating Aboriginal and governmental expectations concerning representation and power (cf Commonwealth of Australia 1976; Rowley 1978:225-33). The Federal Government’s proposed replacement body is still not in existence at the time of writing (1989) but meanwhile, an Aboriginal-initiated and independent body, the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations (NCAO), was established in 1986 (Wright 1988:42). According to Coombs (1988:45), the NCAO has the potential to become ‘the primary political agent of the Aboriginal people in its dealings with white Australians’. Its future would appear to be extremely uncertain, however, given its limited access to resources and the possibility that it may be viewed by the Federal Government as competing with their proposed new national body.

What also remains is the huge unresolved issue of policy differences and jurisdictional conflicts between the Federal Government and State and Territory Governments. The successful 1967 Referendum was widely misunderstood by Aborigines and non-Aborigines as guaranteeing civil rights, when all it did was give the Commonwealth powers concurrent with those of the States in matters of Aboriginal affairs, plus the power to include Aborigines in any national census counts (cf Bennett 1988). The strains and conflicts in Australia between centralism and federalism, or States’ rights, have been clearly in evidence in the arena of Aboriginal affairs. The Commonwealth has frequently chosen not to use the powers given to it by the 1967 Referendum to legislate for Aborigines and override State or Territory legislation, especially when it was seen to be incompatible with Federal policies. As Bennett (1988:19) notes, in his recent overview of federalism and Aboriginal affairs:

By the end of the seventies, the Whitlam and Fraser experiences had well and truly demonstrated to Aborigines that the delivery of Commonwealth Government promises was by no means guaranteed due largely to the frustrations of federalism....
Bennett’s thesis (1988:18) is that Australia remains to a significant degree ‘a confederation of convenience between seven countries’. That the Commonwealth should take the lead and set an example for the States to follow is not in doubt, but as Bennett (1988:26) observes, defenders of States’ rights may question whether or not there should be uniformity of legislation regarding Aborigines. These critics of centralism can draw attention to obvious Aboriginal heterogeneity in calling for regional solutions, more finely attuned to disparate situations, and in questioning whether there should be uniform national land rights, housing or education policies for Aboriginal people. The powers that States have may well function to provide checks and balances to Federal powers. However, in the period since 1972, the need in relation to Aboriginal matters has been the reverse; that is for the Commonwealth to intervene in those States, most notably but not exclusively Queensland, that have created barriers to Aboriginal aspirations. The centralism versus States’ rights issue is complex, and the continuing failure of States, Territories and the Commonwealth to agree over much of the detail relating to Aboriginal affairs remains a major source of bitterness and frustration among Aboriginal people.

A major related issue, which is addressed most directly in Turner’s chapter in this volume, concerns the double problem of articulation between communities and the Federal Government and communities and the States. As Dillon (1986:89) has noted:

The major political question now facing the Australian polity in respect of Aboriginal Affairs relates to the terms upon which Aboriginal interests are mediated and integrated (not assimilated) into mainstream social, political and economic structures.

The question of which form of local government best allows for Aboriginal self-determination, and of how to balance the often competing and conflicting interests of Aborigines, white Australians, and State, Territory and Federal Governments, goes to the heart of the problem of translating policy into practice. Turner’s report (1986) and the Northern Territory
Government’s motives in vigorously espousing Community Government (under its Local Government Act 1985) have been subject to severe criticism and heated debate (cf Dillon 1986; Mowbray 1986, 1987; Turner 1987).

Some of the issues raised go beyond the Northern Territory situation and the particular ideological and political agendas involved. For example, the establishment and growth of ‘parallel’ Aboriginal institutions, at all levels from community councils to national health services, have been a central feature of self-management policy initiatives since the early 1970s. Turner’s report questions whether or not Aboriginal interests, and Australian society at large, are better served by such parallel institutions rather than by their incorporation into the mainstream. He also advances the interesting proposition that peace and order vary inversely with economic development, though in his review of Turner’s report, Dillon (1986:91) does not find this argument to be ‘ultimately persuasive’.

Mowbray (1986), in his article on the political economy of Local Government in remote Aboriginal townships, puts the question: State control or self-regulation? He concludes that in the Northern Territory case there is no contest. Aboriginal community councils ensure greater self-regulation than Community Government as set up under the 1985 Act, whose seemingly progressive and flexible provisions mask other motives. According to Mowbray (1986:38), ‘It simply does not suit the conservative political interests of the Northern Territory Government to foster effective self-determination of Aboriginal people at the local level’. Mowbray (1986:39) also raises issues of great importance to the question of self-determination in practice: ‘The major channel for government control...is not in the legislation itself, but in the financial arrangements that determine the scope and impact of council activities’. As indicated earlier, constraints of a financial nature continue to be a major barrier to the realisation of a significant degree of Aboriginal autonomy.

The essays presented here do not pretend to cover either the full range of Aboriginal sociocultural adaptations (the urban setting being a particular omission), or the full ramifications of issues raised by Thiele and other
scholars who later contributed to the debate engendered by his article (cf Anderson et al 1985), or by the Turner-Mowbray exchanges. Although most of the chapters are focused on rural-remote Aboriginal communities, they are nevertheless mindful of the urban realm and the influence of power centres over peripherally located Aborigines. Also, most of them share a focus on the consequences, both intended and unintended, of the application of self-management policies at the level of the Aboriginal community. Despite evidence of positive change, of increased autonomy in some arenas by some individuals, and of greater local control in many instances, most contributors sound a more pessimistic than hopeful note. The fact remains that after more than a decade of self-management, Australia’s Aborigines, who now number some 230,000, are still a marginalised minority, denied the political clout needed to achieve its goals. Even such relatively modest goals as the achievement of community self-management unfettered by excessive bureaucratic controls seem well beyond the reach of Aborigines at this stage.

The chapter by Noel Wallace, examines Aboriginal autonomy and decision-making in a remote, tradition-oriented context. Wallace, together with his wife Phyl, first became acquainted with the Pitjantjatjara people of northern South Australia more than two decades ago and he discusses the changes that have occurred since that time. The picture he paints is a depressingly familiar one, wherein the vitality of the traditional culture, and particularly its centrally important religious life, is sapped progressively by rapidly increasing Westernisation pressures and attendant social problems. He contrasts the level of Aboriginal control that is evident in the organisation and performance of traditional rituals with the loss of Aboriginal control in the contemporary situation, wherein large numbers of white advisers have become an inevitable concomitant of the operation of self-management policies. For Wallace, the consequence of alien pressures, including government policies aimed at Aboriginal self-management, is the irreversible erosion of the independence that Aboriginal people had enjoyed for millennia.

The chapter by Hans Dagmar, provides a most useful overview of the nature and functioning of Aboriginal bodies he refers to as ‘interest associations’, which are the principal avenues for the expression of Aboriginal autonomy, within the limits imposed by governmental
bureaucracies and the Australian society which encapsulates them. Dagmar also canvasses most of the major problems associated with the effective functioning of such organisations—problems that are addressed more specifically in the community-based studies that follow. His analysis of shortcomings in the current situation of Aboriginal local organisations is supplemented by suggestions for improved approaches aimed at the attainment of more effective and genuine control by Aborigines over their affairs.

The next chapter, which concerns a remote desert community, provides many examples of how tradition is being transformed in the community context. Bob Tonkinson’s particular focus is the status of Aboriginal women of Jigalong in the Western Desert. While this chapter is concerned less with the impact of self-management policies, it does examine the concept of ‘autonomy’ in relation to Aboriginal women’s status and in terms of historical change from a reconstructed ‘traditional’ baseline through to the present. Changing government policies towards Aborigines cannot be identified as ‘prime movers’ in the processes of change documented for the Jigalong community, yet the trend towards greater female autonomy can be linked clearly to certain aspects of policy; for example, the payment of Social Security monies to single mothers. The discussion also includes a critique of recent studies, particularly Bell’s claims for a diminution in Aboriginal women’s status since the European invasion.

Two main themes are evident in David Turner’s thought-provoking chapter. The first relates to his notion of Community Government, which was advanced previously in his report. Turner reviews the existing structures of relationships among Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments, and opts for a form of the latter that would ‘build from the ground up’ while at the same time repairing damage to the national fabric caused by a widening Aboriginal-white divide. Turner proposes that his solution would lessen the kinds of ethnic separation that conservative critics (in the Northern Territory Government and elsewhere) allege have been exacerbated by the granting of Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory. Turner’s second theme, which is equally controversial, concerns his view that there is a congruency between aspects of Christian theology and themes in Aboriginal development. He concludes by considering the
kind of representative democracy he advocates in relation both to Aboriginal traditional world views and the Christian Trinity.

Kingsley Palmer’s chapter concerns the Aboriginal community at Yalata in South Australia, many of whose forebears were desert immigrants living at Ooldea when the Berndts conducted their first intensive fieldwork in this southeastern corner of the Western Desert cultural bloc. Palmer examines both internal and external constraints on the possibilities for Aboriginal self-management at Yalata, and uses the establishment of an outstation to illustrate the contradictions involved in the application of self-management policies to remote communities. He exposes clearly the fallacy of ‘community democracy’, which is untenable as long as the locus of significant power over resources and policy lies elsewhere. In the Australian social formation it is found in distant bureaucracies, safely insulated from the grassroots and therefore well beyond the capacity of marginalised Aborigines to influence it. The lack of effective Aboriginal control over resources vital to the attainment or maintenance of meaningful autonomy is a major theme running through this volume.

In their chapter, Dennis Gray and Sherry Saggers analyse attempts made by Aborigines in the Western Australian town of Carnarvon to improve both opportunities and content in their children’s education. This case study is used to highlight some of the difficulties entailed in attempts to operationalise self-management policies. The failure of the efforts of Carnarvon Reserve Aborigines to establish their own school is accounted for convincingly by Gray and Saggers in terms of a basic failure of policy, caused by a radical disjunction between its underlying ideology and the social structural realities of the dominant society. At the heart of these realities, in example after example, is an insufficiency of support, typically financial but also moral. As Gray and Saggers show, policy application does not involve only sins of commission; acts of omission, too, can signal the exercise of a paternalism more akin to the era of assimilation than that of self-determination.

The Western Desert is also the setting for Lee Sackett’s chapter, but in this case the community is at Wiluna, on the western margin of the cultural bloc. Sackett focuses on one of what he identifies as three broad criticisms levelled by social scientists at self-management policies; namely, that the nature of policy implementation generates serious repercussions at the level
of social relationships in Aboriginal communities, among Aborigines and between them and non-Aborigines. In the Wiluna case, it is not a matter of the creation of Aboriginal elites, but rather the emergence of competing factions whose battles serve only to benefit interested non-Aborigines. Wiluna has been the setting for some large-scale, well-publicised development projects, all aimed at furthering Aboriginal self-management objectives. Sackett’s analysis of these developments exposes the full range of possibilities for conflict, cultural brokerage and factionalism inherent in the local social field. He also demonstrates how the divisive outcomes make the goal of self-management appear actually to be receding into the distance rather than becoming a working reality for the Wiluna people.

The Mount Margaret community is the focus for John Stanton’s investigation of the notions of ‘autonomy’ and ‘dependency’ in relation to government self-management policies. Stanton points to many of the same processes of illusory Aboriginal control, increased reliance on non-Aboriginal advisers, perpetuation of patterns of dependency and clientship, and so on, that have been the actual outcomes of self-management policies applied to remote communities elsewhere. An added element, and one which links Stanton’s paper to that by Sackett, is the enhancement in power and influence of certain segments of the resident Aboriginal population at the expense of other community members. Stanton shows that Mount Margaret’s prior status as a mission community is a major factor in its internal differentiation, while he identifies a continuing commitment to ‘the Law’ on the part of some Mount Margaret Aborigines as another key element. He also reports a noticeable broadening of local horizons as the Aborigines’ consciousness concerning wider issues has been raised steadily, with the result that their reactions are framed increasingly in terms of these non-local issues, or at least with a heightened appreciation of such external influences.

The chapter by Erich Kolig, which concludes the volume, highlights the ways in which Aboriginal people attempt to ‘manage’, on their own terms, alien incursions into their world. A notorious case in which the might of a State Government was brought to bear against an Aboriginal community, Noonkanbah in the Kimberleys, is the centrepiece of his study. (Also noted is the important part played by Ronald Berndt in championing the community’s cause against the power of multinational mining companies
and State politics.) Kolig’s interest is in the interaction of Aboriginal responses indicative of self-management or autonomy, and those of the nation-state. During the course of the Noonkanbah crisis a whole panoply of responses on the part of government bodies ensued, varying from positive support to the application of brute force. Kolig describes the contrasting fortunes of a number of different Aboriginal strategies, from the use of myth-making as a political tool, to religiously-based approaches that ultimately cut little ice with a determined, antipathetic and conservative State Government. Kolig presents a convincing analysis of a set of events that brought a small Aboriginal community into the full glare of nationwide media coverage (see Kolig 1987). In the Aborigines’ loss of this particular battle he reveals the narrowness of Aboriginal self-management policies in practice when these are construed as being in opposition to ‘the national interest’. Although he ends on a pessimistic note, Kolig underlines the creativity inherent in Aboriginal responses, and by so doing provides some grounds for optimism.

Throughout the world, the exposure of people in small-scale societies to sudden and massive alien influences has led to the actual disintegration of such societies only when the populace itself was extinguished. In sometimes remarkable displays of human adaptability, such peoples immediately set in train processes of reintegration that enable them to cope with unprecedented traumas and continue to make sense of their often radically changed existences. Virtually all the contributions in this volume at some stage raise the same centrally important, and as yet unanswerable, questions. Can these processes of social and cultural reintegration prevail in Aboriginal Australia? Or, is this level of resistance and resilience possible, in the midst of much apparent turmoil and in the face of enormous and intensifying pressures towards the cultural absorption of Aboriginal people into the dominant society? These reintegrative processes will need to be sufficiently powerful to convert Aboriginal self-management policies into outcomes that do in fact guarantee the retention of a distinctive cultural orientation, along with the exercise by Aborigines of genuine power in controlling major facets of their lives. Government policies to date have in practice not given Aboriginal people cause for optimism, but it is sincerely hoped that the current reformulations can, by avoiding the mistakes of the past, offer the descendants of the first Australians a genuine and workable form of autonomy.
Note

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12 A traditional shelter or wiltja with added canvas at Amata in 1966. Photographs by NM Wallace.
This chapter examines the changes resulting from European domination of the Pitjantjatjara people. The baseline of the study is 1966, when the traditional hunting and gathering way of life had virtually ceased, owing to the removal of the Pitjantjatjara from their land by the government to accommodate the testing of atomic weapons and because of the gradual introduction of missions and government settlements. In spite of their changed lifestyle, the Pitjantjatjara maintained spiritual fulfilment from their totemic lands which were relatively close, and religious ceremonies continued with little interference. However, with further changes in government policy to permit Aboriginal land ownership and increasing pressure towards European-defined self-determination, the traditional culture and ceremonial life have been disrupted and replaced by a new style of management, with distressing results.

Any discourse concerning Western Desert Aborigines living within their tribal territories, as most are today, should contain not just an account of how they are attempting to cope with their newly enforced lifestyle, but a comparison with the old ways. Therefore, this chapter contains a discussion
of past practices, an analysis of the change, how that change developed and how it is subsequently affecting the people. The research on which this account is based was carried out during several months each year between 1966 and 1977, and the descriptions of ceremonial life are derived from participation and observation.¹

**THE SETTLEMENT AND MISSION ERA**

By 1966, the Pitjantjatjara people were experiencing significant modifications to their traditional way of life. Ernabella Mission, established in 1937, had introduced a church, a school and a store, and in 1966 a money economy was established.

The Aboriginal camp (*ngurra*), situated well away from mission buildings, consisted of traditional shelters (*wiltja*). No Aborigines lived in houses, so communication within the community was in accordance with tradition.² The school was run along ‘compassionate’ lines, including the fact that children were not compelled to wear clothes and, though some pressure was applied, attendance was not considered compulsory. During times of ceremony, it was the norm that children would not attend school, but would take their traditional place in the continuing ceremonial life of the community. A few men worked for wages in the sheep and cattle industries while some of the women were employed in craft work at Ernabella. There were pension and child endowment cheques to be shared and the cash economy of the community was augmented by hunting and foraging.³ Amata, formerly Musgrave Park, was sponsored by Ernabella to service country to the west, and was administered by the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs to serve Pitjantjatjara whose homelands are in the Mann and Tomkinson Ranges. In Amata, as in Ernabella, all Aboriginal people lived in traditional shelters, built with branches and spinifex and often augmented with squares of canvas for waterproofing the roofs. Their lives were divided into two contrasting arenas—the European-controlled settlement and the camp.

Amata was subject to autocratic rule by the State Department of Aboriginal Affairs, headed by the local superintendent. The staff at that time (1966—67) consisted of a stockman, a mechanic, a storeman, a building handyman, a resident nursing sister and a travelling sister, who covered all outlying camps. White rule was absolute and Aborigines not on
the workers’ payroll were not permitted to ride in settlement vehicles, or even in privately-owned ones. Further, travellers in a vehicle who passed a family walking from say, Warburton in Western Australia to Amata, with 150 kilometres still to go, were obliged to leave them after checking that they had food and water. There were no such restrictions at Ernabella, and even though the Aborigines had no say in the running of the mission, there was more freedom.

The Aboriginal people of the area had no option but to settle in communities. For, well after the cessation of atomic tests, the patrol officers still had to keep the range dear of Aborigines for the testing of Black Knight, Blue Streak and other rockets, and to prevent Aboriginal people from returning to radioactive areas where bombs had been tested. In addition, hunting grounds and waterholes were despoiled by feral animals. Yet, beyond the influence of the bureaucratic confines of the settlements, the people were able to pursue their ceremonial activities. All the traditional ceremonies were held, with the necessary time being available to ensure that the full depth of ceremony was observed.

At Amata everyone attended, including the children, who were brought up with the age-old knowledge of the importance of ceremony. The exceptions were the segregated boys, called nyiinka, who had their own ceremonial duties elsewhere. All adults attended, with the six or so men employed at the Amata settlement being sacked from their jobs to be replaced by six others who would be sacked next time! So the situation was that they had no rights at all in the operation of the settlement or management of the reserve, but they did have control over their religious pursuits, carried out often without the knowledge of the white personnel, and certainly without their understanding. The Ernabella administration was more tolerant, expecting that all Aborigines would be engaged in ceremonies. It was the custom to leave them alone at times of ceremonies, except that such activities were forbidden on Sundays. Naturally this instruction was not always obeyed, as many ceremonies were held at some distance from the mission.

**ORGANISATION OF CEREMONY**

Many people still regard the Aboriginal lifestyle as being mainly devoted to food gathering and hunting, with visits to sacred places and the conduct of
ceremonies being coincidental (see Gould 1969:103). This is certainly not so, as the ceremonial side of their lives was sufficiently complex to require meticulous organisation, within a sophisticated society well able to accommodate detailed advance planning and management. In other words, movement over their homelands had to coordinate the never-ending search for physical sustenance with their deep spiritual need to visit the sacred places, care for them and perform the all-important ceremonies in company with their widely scattered, totemically affiliated relatives. A high degree of self-determination was essential, particularly in the planning and execution of ceremonial life.

Many kinds of ceremonies had to be held, each with its differing purpose. There were the initiation ceremonies, so vital to the continuation of society; the so-called ‘increase’ ceremonies, the true nature of which is the perpetuation of the species; the ceremonies conveniently called ‘red ochre’ or Law ceremonies, as the true title may only be spoken by mature men; and a variety of others for purposes such as rainmaking, acts of magic and sorcery, and so on. Each had its own separate influence on the lives of the people. The Aboriginal people unquestioningly believe that all aspects of these ceremonies (and all aspects of their lives) were taught by the Spirit Ancestors in the ‘beginning’. And so it was in accordance with their spiritual beliefs that their lifestyle developed and was maintained.

Any examination of Aboriginal social organisation and mode of travel to designated ceremonial areas reveals the operation of sound psychological principles and management skills. These are best illustrated by empirical description, so I will give as an example below the preliminaries and conduct of an initiation ceremony for boys, prior to Aboriginal ownership of motor vehicles. Their travel then was on foot, with the use of a few camels, horses and donkeys.⁶

*Nyiinka*, segregated from the rest of the community at puberty, camped several kilometres from the main camp. There they learned the Spirit Ancestors’ teachings and the associated dance and song cycles. During the three or four years of segregation, they had to learn to be self-sufficient in providing their own food and shelter. Their main instructors were not the ‘elders’, but two or three of the young men who had recently achieved manhood, and who lived with them in the camp. The only contact the segregated boys had with the main camp was through their younger
brothers, who were permitted to visit them and to act as messengers. These younger ones were envious of the pride so obviously felt by their older brothers and were anxious for the time to come when they would commence the path to manhood. There is a lifetime bond between a man and his next younger brother which is evident even among old men by reference to another man as *ngayulu pinintja* (‘my shoulder’ or ‘the one I carried’).

Even though the day-to-day instruction was carried out by their peers, the overall supervision was the duty of the older men, who assessed the progress made by the boys. When they judged that some of them, aged about sixteen, were ready to take on the responsibilities of manhood, they commenced the complicated arrangements for the ceremonies leading up to the first major step of initiation. By mutual agreement among the older men, one boy of superior character and ability was selected to be messenger or *ulpuru* (‘dust’). Two or three mature men were selected to accompany and guide the boy on the coming long journey. These men were called *tjilykatja*, and accompanied the boy, who wore a hair belt provided by his sisters and carried a staff (*tjutinpa*) as they set out to alert other groups that they were soon to hold initiation ceremonies. They called on them to join in, bringing their *nyinka* who were judged ready for initiation at the same ceremony as their own initiates. The boy and his guardians continued their journey over quite long distances, in strict accordance with what had been planned before they left. If it was necessary to contact groups located in different directions, small parties of men (usually two) called *wikaru* would go out to contact them.

When they had contacted all groups within a reasonable travelling distance, the return journey commenced. All those able to travel the long distance were expected to obey the call to visit the originating people, bringing with them their own *nyinka* candidates. All those travelling to the host camp also became *tjilykatja*, so the travelling group became larger and larger as more and more groups were revisited who then joined them, becoming *tjilykatja* also. The rules were strict and the path taken on the return journey was exactly the same as the outward journey. The slow progress, as they walked from rockhole to rockhole, allowed sufficient time for hunters to obtain meat, while the women foraged for available food. The group of postulants was in the care of women called *minyma manngiri*,
selected for their totemic knowledge and high standing. Around midday, they were passed to the men by the women with the entreaty to look after them as well as they had. As soon as the women retreated, the men made it known to the postulants that they were about to join the company of men, and it was now the men’s law that they must observe. A ceremony relating to the travels of a Spirit Ancestor was performed, which the postulants heard but did not see. This was the daily pattern, and each of these ceremonies was designed to further the initiates’ knowledge of the Spirit Ancestors’ teachings.

During the slow progress, ceremonies were held daily around midday and in the evenings. The postulants were not present at the evening ceremonies as these were for initiated men only, so the boys made a camp back in the care of the minyma manngiri. No communication was permitted between the advancing party and the host camp, where tension would mount daily as the expected arrival time neared. Ceremonies were held at night in both the visitors’ and host’s camps, and these performances were complementary. Eventually, the host camp was alerted to the impending arrival by sighting smoke from fires lit by the visitors, and the people all gathered for the ceremony of the entry of the visitors into the host camp.

The advancing men prepared themselves by body painting and the making and wearing of pintiyalpa. They then ran towards the camp, each man bearing a spear over his shoulder, the point in the palm of his hand, which is the peace attitude. The visiting men then stopped in sight of the host camp, and one of their number advanced towards a sole armed man guarding the host camp. This guard threw a spear, aimed to miss, to the audible relief of the assembled women. Another man advanced, with a similar result. They then sat, and a gift of food and water was brought to them by two women of the host camp. The symbolism was clear: no grudges were held and no unresolved disputes would mar the ceremonies to follow. All the visiting men then ran into the host camp, where the local men were standing with spears reversed, around the women and children who were prone under blankets, and then continued to a ceremonial area beyond. The segregated boys did not appear. The visiting women and children made their way without formality closer to the host women and children, and made camp nearby. Later there were reunions as relatives met.
Two or three nights later, after further ceremony involving everyone, the postulants appeared briefly at the edge of the firelight. This was the signal for all the women and children to run away, crying, to a pre-arranged camp. The circumcisions began. It was then that the significance of all that had gone before became clear. The host camp’s postulants were circumcised by visiting men, and the visiting postulants were circumcised by local men. The man who performed the circumcision had the relationship of *waputju*, or classificatory father-in-law, who is related as mother’s brother to the novice. Classificatory brothers-in-law, *marutju*, were also actively involved in the rite. The actual and classificatory brothers of the postulant had a short but important part to play in the protection of the postulant. The father and grandfathers were not present but an uncle (actual mother’s brother) was beside the initiate all the time to give strength and comfort.\(^{11}\)

The postulant was now a man, *Wati Wankarpa* (‘Man, Awakening’), a man at the first stage of manhood. He then went into seclusion for more ceremony, care and healing after the physical ordeal, emerging as *Wati Minu* (‘small man’) two or three weeks later. This is in accordance with the religious belief that the boy ‘dies’ at circumcision and is reborn after further ceremony. Several different myths and ceremonies describe this; the one most frequently performed is that of *Yaratjiti*, a myth concerning two boys and their travels between Mount Connor and the western end of the Mann Range.\(^{12}\)

The practical purposes of ceremony include those that directly concern the survival of the people. It was the circumciser’s responsibility, for example, to provide a wife for the man he created. Since his own country was far away, the match was made between distant families. The wife for the young man was any of the daughters of the circumciser, his brothers or classificatory brothers, all of whom had the potential relationship of *waputju* to the young man.\(^{13}\) In the period between the arrival of the visitors and the circumcision rites, a ceremony was held by the women, who danced, accompanied by the men singing. This was the ceremony where wives were chosen, not by the *waputju* at the moment of circumcision. Increasingly, the selected wife was replaced by another of personal mutual choice, but usually within the correct relationship.

The assessment of the postulants’ progress in learning, and the selection of all parties in the ceremonies described, show an intimate knowledge of
their characters and capabilities. The Aborigines’ capacity to deal with complex organisational requirements, including the coordination of large numbers of people (some 600 in the example described) in the most exacting of ceremonial sequences, is convincing proof of abilities that have often been unrecognised. The many other ceremonies that comprised their religious life were performed with the same meticulous organisation and detail, with all the decisions being made by those in charge of the ceremonies, the older, mature and knowledgeable men (elders), through consensus reached during discussions held in the traditional manner. This must be an object lesson in self-determination as it used to be.

During ceremonies discipline of the children was absolute. The otherwise rowdy and free-spirited children would be aware of the importance of the ancient rites and would develop an awe of the Spirit Ancestors’ teachings, which is the basic disciplinary force in the Aboriginal community. They were attentive, quiet and still, making any form of punishment unnecessary. Therefore it is obvious that any diminishing of ceremony would be accompanied by loss of discipline.

**APPROACH TO THE PRESENT**

To comprehend the enormity of the task before the Aboriginal people in trying to come to terms with the situation caused by the imposition of a foreign culture, it must be emphasised that they were living in a complex society with an all-encompassing religion, and obtained spiritual and aesthetic gratification through song, dance, narrative and graphic art. Far from the old concept of ‘corroboree’ being some inconsequential song and dance routine, the ritual of song and dance they call inma describes the Spirit Ancestors’ journeys, and is a vehicle for the instruction of each succeeding generation in the teachings of those Spirit Ancestors. It encompasses religious beliefs that guided them not only through customary values, attitudes and behaviour, but through the mundane aspects of everyday life.

Primarily, the saga of the Spirit Ancestors’ travels during which the Law was taught is perpetuated by the inma song words, ensuring a minimum of change as the teachings are passed from generation to generation. Song words are learned by all whose status allows them to attend. The words are a mixture of archaic, modern and ceremonial language, which is a
sophisticated means of ensuring that the instructions from long ago are accurately passed on to subsequent generations. The song words are not in narrative form, but are a mnemonic means of ensuring the accuracy of narrative.

The example below, recorded by the author, consists of four verses from a non-secret episode of the *Wati Papa*, a Spirit Ancestor Dingo mythic line which is associated with the area south of Blackstone Range in Western Australia.

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ngarwiri tjakupungu yarawangkarakara
tjanku tjulanu wumuwumunu
yulangu yulangu papa ngaliya yulara tawungkatingu
papa ngaliya yulangu
around running hit life spirit
mouth caught (song rhythm)
cried cried dog we two cry cut (injured)
dog we two cried.
```

The full narrative tells the story of Nyukali, the mother dingo, who is chasing a kangaroo to feed to her puppies. The kangaroo jumps over a dry tree branch, and as Nyukali pursues it, she becomes impaled on the branch. She cries. The male dingo tries to free her from the branch, but cannot, and as the puppies need to be fed, he goes after the kangaroo. In reply to my comment, ‘So Nyukali died there’, I was told, ‘No. She is still there...still crying...’, which illustrates the continuing nature of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs. All mythic stories are perpetuated in this way, by song words that are learned and sung by all whose totemic knowledge entitles them to be present. Of course other verses refer to laws that must be taught, in a form that may be likened to parables.

Over thousands of years, Aboriginal people have evolved immensely competent processes which perpetuate their system of control over their destinies. The only experience not allowed for was the intrusion of white people which caused the destruction of their traditional processes of law and order and self-determination, by subjugating them and substituting an alien set of rules. Today there is little time for ceremony and decisions are
no longer made by consensus. Aboriginal people have learned that their usual decision-making processes—discussions held morning and evening for many days until a unanimous and acceptable agreement was reached—are now considered too slow. They know now that the white man arrives, holds a meeting in a foreign language, demands an immediate decision and then leaves. Decision-making is now a rapid process and not unexpectedly, the decisions often leave much to be desired. Decision-making is now done at meetings, conducted white man’s style, with white people present as advisers, minute secretaries and so on. After thought and further informal discussion subsequent to the meetings, many Aboriginal people want to change their stated agreements, but it is often too late.

The traditional lifestyle, including religious ceremony and hence religious teaching, is in the process of being destroyed. The older people cannot understand this new decision-making process and retire, taking no part in it. And so a widening gulf has been created between those whose authority was once passed on to the next generation in logical succession, and the younger ones who are trying to understand these new processes. Two elements accelerating the destruction of traditional values are schools and housing. Both these innovations are regarded by Europeans as essential to the changes that Aboriginal people must accept if they are to live in harmony with their European neighbours and achieve so-called self-determination.

Schooling is necessary, but my wife and I have observed it to be destructive of traditional culture and hence of traditional discipline, which has its origins in the laws of the Spirit Ancestors. In place of the rich preliminaries to ceremony, the children go to school and in the process, the responsibility for their behaviour has passed from the parents to the school teachers. With the introduction of school at Amata came the virtual cessation of the children’s involvement in ceremony, owing to the teachers’ demands that they attend school. Now organised sport occupies much of the time, both during school hours and holidays, with football matches being played as far away as Papunya and Yuendumu. Not only are the children involved, but the young adults too have their football teams, supporters and organised competitions.
Among the people now living in European-style houses, the kind of traditional communication that once occurred among people at their camp shelters has ceased, so more and more reliance has been placed on meetings conducted in a European-style. These meetings occupy an inordinate amount of the people’s time and there are often several meetings on most days. They are no substitute for the old style of communication, as the older people are not present and matters of traditional importance cannot be discussed except in the traditional way.

When the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act became law on 19 March 1981, so began the Aborigines’ journey on the road to the new form of self-determination. Each major settlement now has its elected council, with the central point being the Pitjantjatjara Land Council headquarters in Alice Springs. In addition, the health of the people is in the care of their Nganampa Health Service, with resident doctors in the larger communities and a light aircraft stationed at Pukatja (formerly Ernabella). The doctors and nurses are all European and the introduction of Aboriginal aides has met with limited success.

European people find great difficulties in administration and in finding the right administrative staff in situations less complex than those described. White staff with proven knowledge and the ability to pass their expertise on to the Aboriginal people are difficult to find. There are many worthy people employed by Aboriginal communities in advisory positions, but in too many instances the adviser initiates, organises and acts, rather than advises. The councils have the right to appoint various people as community advisers, clerks, accountants and to other positions where Aborigines need help and advice. In no society would it be expected that expert decisions could be reached by inexperienced people who have not been given sufficient time to learn. In the meantime, Aboriginal people must make many doubtful decisions. They are aware that their knowledge of European ways is limited, so they know that they must seek help from whites to advise and communicate for them. As our friend Tjamumalyinya said to us, ‘We’ve got more whitefellas here now than ever before.’

It must be remembered that few of the older Aborigines can understand English and even fewer can read or write. This applies to the local communities and their councils at Amata, Pukatja, Fregon, Indulkana and the many decentralised communities. People in these communities have
little knowledge or interest in the existence and working of the central council, the Pitjantjatjara Land Council, which has grown into a formidable bureaucracy beyond the understanding of most of the Aboriginal people it exists to serve. On 7 June 1986, Pitjantjatjara Land Council lawyer Phillip Toyne and the chairman of the council, Yami Lester, were interviewed on the ABC national network program ‘Changes’. Yami Lester made the valid point that, ‘The white people use lawyers, they use advisers. Members of Parliament, they always use advisers. So we have learned to use them.’ Phillip Toyne stated that the council has:

advisers who advise them about power and water supply, heavy earth moving equipment for road maintenance, bore programmes, agricultural programmes throughout the land; they run their own air service, it’s got four or five aeroplanes, they’ve got a legal service; they’ve got an anthropological division—there must be—maybe—sixty employees just in the regional advice [sic] plus each of the communities has resident advisers too.

There is no doubt that competent advisers are necessary at this stage of the Aborigines’ struggle to self-manage, but the reality that all advisers are not competent to advise must be faced. Fewer still are able to teach, so that in due course their services may be performed by Aborigines.

CONCLUSION

Some ceremonies, such as the man-making and Law ceremonies, are still conducted, but people arrive in trucks and cars. No preliminary ceremonies are held on the way and there is no longer the ancient and necessary psychological preparation of the boy initiates. Instead of the ceremony being a glorious step to manhood, it is now regarded as a punishment. Last year a Pitjantjatjara man said to me, ‘We’ve got no nyiinkas now—we’ve only got big boys’, meaning that there is no long period of segregation for training to manhood. The physical ordeal is all that is left. This diminishing quality of ceremonial life is evident in the few ceremonies that are still performed, but in a curtailed way.
The most tragic result of this imposition of European lifestyle is manifest among the young people in their addiction to petrol sniffing and alcohol consumption. The cause is not difficult to determine—the new activities of whistyle school and government are no substitute for the rich culture of the past. The pattern of instruction in the old ways has been broken, and modern music, sport, substance abuse and hours of idle time are substituted, with no prospect of any change in the future. There is no viable industry in the area, and employment opportunities are limited to a few jobs for girls in the store or as aides in the hospital or school.

The Pitjantjatjara people have lived under white domination for 200 years, with little attempt made to provide appropriate education for them to assume responsibility for the management of their affairs in the contemporary setting. With Aboriginal self-management as government policy and the people in many remote areas ill-prepared for it, more and more reliance is being placed on white staff. The people can employ clerks, bookkeepers, accountants and so on, but lack the ability to assess and supervise them. So until their children learn these skills from suitable school curricula, the present situation of complete reliance on white people will continue.\textsuperscript{20} The Pitjantjatjara people had self-determination for thousands of years and have been robbed of it. They are attempting to adapt creatively to the demands of the ‘new’ self-determination policies, but they need to be able to determine their own way to, what is to them, a new society.

Notes

1 My wife, Phyl Wallace, and I worked together on this research—a factor which opened up avenues of knowledge not available to the single, male researcher. Our involvement with the Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara people in the far northwest of South Australia was as researchers with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS), whose assistance we acknowledge with thanks. We also thank Ronald and Catherine Berndt for their support, advice and friendship; and the late CP Mountford and the late WEH Stanner for the hours of friendly discussions. Of primary importance in our acknowledgements are our Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara teachers, who inducted us into their ceremonies, showed us
their sacred country, and taught us much of their Law in the forty-two months we spent with them.

2 In a previous article ‘Pitjantjatjara Wiltja or White Man’s House?’ (Wallace 1979), I show how the transition from wiltja to house by part of the community destroys the traditional means of communication. The traditional camp, for example, is usually nowhere near the houses and is of course shifted from place to place.

3 Hilliard (1968) describes in detail the daily life at Ernabella Mission.

4 I was supposed to abide by these regulations too. I was once admonished for agreeing to include the parents of a sick child as passengers in the AIAS Landrover. These parents implored me to take them to visit their child in the Alice Springs Hospital, on our next visit to the town. Eventually permission was granted when I declared that all Aborigines riding with me were part of my studies and hence were working for me.

5 Two patrol officers were appointed to cover all Aborigines who might have been affected. One, the late Walter Macdougall, was responsible for the area of our research, including the Maralinga and Emu areas, and for much of the area stretching into Western Australia and the Northern Territory. This is described by Milliken (1986:94—97).

6 No information of a secret nature is given in my description of ceremony. For more detail on man-making rituals in Pitjantjatjara society see Wallace (1977).

7 There is little ceremony in the rite of tooth evulsion even though it is part of the ritual taught by Wati Marlu, the Spirit Ancestor Kangaroo, at the spiritually important site named Mintili in the Marlu ‘dreaming line’, north of the Mann Range (see Berndt and Berndt 1977:170).

8 For one ceremony at Amata in 1971, in which I travelled as tjilykatja over the last eighty kilometres or so, the camps at Ernabella, Fregon and Betty’s Well were visited and the people called to Amata, a distance of about 250 kilometres each way from the furthest point.
9 Since the well-publicised Chamberlain case involving the alleged taking of a baby by a dingo, much attention has been given to a ‘devil dingo’ myth relating to Ayers Rock (Uluru). In this myth, which describes the preliminaries to initiation ceremonies to be carried out by the Mulga Seed (Wintalyka) totem people, the Mulga Seed people’s tjilykatja called the Hare Wallaby (Mala) people to attend their ceremonies. This equates with the actual preliminaries of the ceremony I have described. In the myth, the Mala people refused to attend, so the Mulga Seed people punished them by constructing an evil spirit, a mamu that they called Kurrpannga, to follow and punish them wherever they went (see Mountford 1950:92-94 and Layton 1986:5-6). When I learned this story from my Mala totem informants as we followed the mythic line south of Uluru to Ulkiyanya in 1967, in describing Kurrpannga they told me that, ‘He is big. He runs on four legs like a dingo, not on two legs like a kangaroo—he is mamu not a dingo.’ Since journalists and writers have given so much attention to this myth at Ayers Rock, calling Kurrpannga a ‘devil dingo’, the Aboriginal people now have adopted this description.

10 Pintiyalpa are made by paring softwood sticks about thirty centimetres long so that curled shavings are produced adhering to the stick, giving it a feather-like appearance. They are worn in the yakirri headband, one behind each ear, but wearing pintiyalpa is not confined to this ceremony.

11 Ceremonies for initiation and for other purposes have been described from other areas and from different points of view by Berndt and Berndt (1977), Gould (1969), Mountford (1976), Meggitt (1962), Tonkinson (1978) and others, all relating to areas of the Western Desert.

12 I have been fortunate in seeing this ceremony several times, twice as a participant—firstly as a member of the group who prepared the Wati Wankarpa for emergence as Wati Minu, then as Tjamu*, grandfather’ to the Wati Minu.

13 Tonkinson (1974:51) notes that at Jigalong, where cross-cousin marriage is the norm, marriage between consanguineal cross-cousins is rare. A similar situation exists among the Pitjantjatjara people with whom I worked.
This decision-making process is described in more detail in Wallace (1979).

For example, I understand that the Australian Law Reform Commission’s investigation party on customary law spent only half a day in the Northwest Aboriginal Reserve, an area whose large Aboriginal population warranted more consultation time than this (personal communication from a European resident of Amata at the time).

My wife, Phyl Wallace, makes this comment after acting as the minute secretary at the Aboriginal people’s request, at meetings concerning the formation of outstations from Amata in 1970.

Schooling commenced at Amata in 1969, three years after our research commenced. My wife and I have witnessed the changing pattern over the following nine years and we saw it again during our visit in 1984.

The Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981 gives inalienable ownership and control of the land contained in what was the South Australian Northwest Reserve, plus Ernabella (included voluntarily by the Uniting Church) and other neighbouring leasehold properties, namely Kenmore Park, Everard Park and part of Granite Downs. The land is to be managed by a council of nine, elected annually. Anyone wanting to visit must apply to the council for a permit. At present there is no mining on the land but there is exploration under the control of the Pitjantjatjara Council, whose representatives accompany the prospecting parties, ensuring that no sacred sites are endangered. This is in accordance with contracts signed by the prospecting companies. Should oil or minerals be found, the Pitjantjatjara people will receive one-third of the royalties, a further one-third will go to Aboriginal welfare in South Australia, and the remainder to the State Government. Toyne and Vachon (1984) describe the negotiations with the Government relating to the passing of the Act.

Physician Trevor Cutter and consultant John Tragenza were commissioned by the Pitjantjatjara Council in 1982 to prepare a report on present and future health needs of the Pitjantjatjara communities. This report (1982) has become the basis of the Nganampa Health Service. The service does not seem to be performing as successfully as expected, as
general health in the communities continues to be poor. Nganampa Health Service has moved its headquarters from Pipalyatjara, central to Amata outstations, to Alice Springs. The Aboriginal people have become sceptical of its management and value to them, some of them changing the title ‘Nganampa’ (‘our’) with irony to ‘Tjanampa’ (‘their’) Health Service.

For a cross-cultural view of the impossibility of establishing so-called self-determination under foreign rule, as experienced by the Canadian Indians, see Little Bear, Boldt and Long (1984).

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13. Grant Nelson, Chairman of the Western Australian Aboriginal Housing Committee, interviewing Pauline Kelly and Angus Windie during a housing survey in Carnarvon in 1980.

14. Victor Hughes, Don Lewis, Jimmie Tittums and Charlie Snowball, leaders of Mungullah Aboriginal community, discussing the community’s land claim with the Western Australian Minister for Lands, Kenneth McIver, in 1984. Photographs by H Dagmar.
At the end of their overview of Australian Aboriginal studies in *The World of the First Australians* (1977:531), Ronald and Catherine Berndt point out a dilemma involved in projects aimed at strengthening the socioeconomic position of Aborigines in Australian society. Such projects and the people who implement them are often faced with the task of finding a balance between ‘outside’ and Aboriginal components. More specifically, Ronald Berndt (1977a:ix—x) draws attention to the enormous, and perhaps inevitable and well-meaning, bureaucratisation which swamps Aboriginal communities and leads him to ask what options Aborigines really have to exert values and maintain lifestyles of their own. In this chapter, I consider the role of local interest associations in formulating an Aboriginal answer to the incorporation of Aboriginal communities and society into the wider Australian sociopolitical and economic system.¹

It is incorrect to regard all contemporary Aboriginal social formations as products of a foreign socioeconomic system. There is ample historical
evidence of, at best, marginal room for Aborigines to exert influence on the wider Australian society and to choose a course of action of their own. Without underestimating the importance of previous efforts by Aboriginal groups to take an active part in shaping their own way of life, one can argue that it is mainly since the 1970s that Aborigines have established formal organisations aimed at self-management. Aborigines live in a wide range of situations and consequently the nature of Aboriginal organisations for self-management varies. Some operate in a small town or municipal area; while others function in a larger regional or even nationwide context. Some organisations cover only specialised fields such as health, education and legal aid; while others, usually classed as voluntary associations, have a more inclusive task of promoting and representing Aboriginal interests (see Kerri 1976, 1977; Pierson 1977, 1982).

Kerri (1976:23) sees a major role of voluntary associations as helping members cope with social, cultural, ecological and technological change. Where the emphasis is not exclusively on volition as a criterion for membership, these organisations can be termed common interest associations. Kerri (1976:24) notes that these associations are distinguished from ethnic associations because they involve mutual assistance in adapting to a changing environment as their *raison d’être*; while the latter promote ethnic considerations.

In the Aboriginal situation, these two aspects seem almost impossible to separate. The process in which specific socioeconomic and other interests are increasingly linked with an emphasis on a unique historically and culturally founded ethnic identity can be observed in many more Aboriginal formal organisations. As such they are, in Kerri’s terms (1976:24), not ethnic associations in the sense of groups ‘formed solely for the purpose of promoting ethnic considerations...ie the diacritics that account for the formation, persistence and distinctiveness of the group’. For, as I shall argue more fully below, while promoting socioeconomic and political interests, these associations also derive power from the conscious promotion of a belief in Aboriginal ethnic honour. From this viewpoint, they can best be called Aboriginal common interest associations.

An example of this process was evident in the early 1970s in the small town of Carnarvon, Western Australia, where the people of the Aboriginal reserve formed a club, partly under the stimulus of non-Aboriginal
sympathisers. Its purpose was to improve living conditions on the reserve. It was not until some years later, after the club had come under the influence of Aborigines who were more fully integrated into town life, that the association took a more pronounced ethnic stance. This stance developed as a result of several factors, including: the influence of wider regional Aboriginal bodies, such as the then National Aboriginal Consultative Committee and the Aboriginal Legal Service; the growing interest in Aboriginal land rights; and the involvement of officers of government departments dealing with Aboriginal welfare.

In this chapter, I consider aspects of those Aboriginal interest associations that operate in the local context of towns, settlements and cities and serve a multitude of interests, not just those pertaining to one societal sector, like health or housing. No attempt will be made to deal exhaustively with the full range of their internal structures, functions, activities, or operating conditions. Rather, I concentrate on a few broad aspects which they have in common, and which merit a full-scale comparative study in order to yield deeper theoretical understanding and useful practical knowledge of these associations.

INTEREST GROUPS AND GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Aboriginal interest associations are organised to gain better access to goods and services provided by the market and government administration, or to provide those goods and services themselves. These functions have come to be subsumed under the broad heading of self-management. In the process of improving their self-management capacity, Aboriginal interest associations truly entered the orbit of government administration. Undoubtedly, many associations arose from an existing demand among Aborigines to exert more influence over their lives and to achieve better satisfaction of their many interests. However, the prolific growth of local interest associations in the 1970s also arose because of the need of administrators to deal with more responsive Aboriginal groups.

The policy of assimilation had failed—Aborigines lagged behind in all Australian social indicators (except imprisonment)—so in the 1970s there was a growing political awareness of the need for more organised involvement of Aborigines in action aimed at their socioeconomic
advancement. Interest associations received bureaucratic support because they could ‘assist Government agencies in caring for the welfare needs of Aborigines’ (Howard 1978:27). From this angle, the new policies could be seen as a continuation of assimilation, with a concession to the need of Aborigines to retain the protection and support of their own social group. Generally speaking, this was the thinking behind the trend towards a more integrationist approach.

The policy of self-management, stimulated initially by the Whitlam Government of the early 1970s, promoted the foundation of local Aboriginal organisations. The new corporate bodies were also seen by some as instruments for a much more radical Aboriginal autonomy and as a breeding ground for representative and effective leadership. Acknowledging that greater autonomy must be based on greater independence in the economic arena, the responsible Aboriginal department sought to establish ‘groups and communities as legally incorporated societies having authority to own property, to employ persons, including professional experts, with the right to borrow, to raise money from their members, to spend and to enter into contracts’ (Coombs 1972:143).

Local associations have two general functions: representing Aboriginal interests to the outside world and helping Aborigines to accommodate to processes of change; and reorganising and strengthening an internal Aboriginal social and political order. Howard (1978) has drawn attention to these dimensions in terms of interest associations functioning in both an interethnic and intra-Aboriginal field. These dimensions are interwoven in an intricate manner; indeed, one of the most salient factors in the interethnic political field is that of a distinct Aboriginal cultural tradition.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Many studies of the development of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations have emphasised cultural differences. Opposition to this emphasis arose among social scientists who favour Marxist analysis, in terms of economic and political conflict and domination. For instance, Morris (1983:500) criticises historical studies which stress the ‘cultural unpreparedness of Aborigines...to come to terms with “modern” society’. According to Morris, the focus on widely divergent cultures neutralises the
impact of colonial occupation; instead, the focus of analysis ought to be political and economic factors.

Yet today, even in the most heavily urbanised areas of Australia, where Aboriginal traditions appear to be of negligible importance, interest associations emphasise and seek to revive cultural traditions. Thus, Crick (1981:68) writes of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency’s ‘Cultural Rescue Project’, that ‘it tries to locate as much information as possible about traditional Victorian Aboriginal culture and to make it accessible to the Aboriginal community’. Likewise, the Victorian Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group sets great value on Aboriginal cultural survival. The group sees the education system as a major factor in the destruction of Aboriginal cultural heritage and, consequently, as failing to provide Aboriginal children with a positive sense of Aboriginality. Similarly, informants in the Pilbara district of Western Australia expressed to me their belief that schools were alienating their children from their cultural traditions. In particular, they felt that young people who had been sent away to large urban centres for their education had become imbued with ideas and attitudes that contradicted the very values on which Aboriginal community life was based. Admittedly, Aboriginal culture is not an unproblematic concept, even to Aboriginal people themselves. Interest associations in urban areas, for instance, face a great deal of confusion in their support of a distinct cultural identity. However it is defined, culture is nevertheless a factor of great importance in understanding the Aboriginal situation. Cultural traditions and meanings are not just important as a way of life for Aborigines, they are also inherently significant in the political context.

According to Wild (1978), race relations should be studied from a broad perspective that includes both class and cultural analysis. Yet, Wild does not make much use of the concept of culture; rather, he juxtaposes class with ‘the racial factor’, or at other times with ‘status groups’. He does follow van den Berghe (1975:72), who states that racial and ethnic groups ‘are defined both by the objective cultural modalities of their behaviour...and by their subjective views of themselves and each other’. According to Wild (1978:128), the development of race relations must be seen in a context of group formation in which ‘common economic interests, shared styles of life, common relationships to authority and power, and an exclusion of
outsiders’ all play a part. Basically, this is a Weberian model in which the concept of status group is useful in the characterisation of ethnicity. The concept of status group emphasises a style of life, a culture in other words, and the honour or prestige accorded to it. Status groups compete for privileges, including material ones, and in this sense they are closely related to the concept of class. Weber (1970:191) adds that ‘material monopolies provide the most effective motives for the exclusiveness of status groups; although in themselves they are rarely sufficient, almost always they come into play to some extent’. Class and status action are seen by Weber in terms of community formation.

Following Weber, Neuwirth (1969) regards community formation as the product of a process of social closure in which groups competing for resources and opportunities in the social, economic or political arena attempt to exclude others and, in doing so, can use almost any identifiable social or physical characteristic as a criterion for exclusion. Social closure is by definition a power game that manifests two major strategies. The strategy of exclusion is primarily used by privileged groups and exerts power in a downward direction. The response to exclusion is the strategy of solidarism, referring to social mobilisation and cooperation of groups which have been successfully labelled as inferior (cf Parkin 1974). Processes of closure are usually accompanied by the formation of interest associations through which members of a negatively privileged group will try ‘to influence the imposition and application of rules which define their participation within the larger society’ (Neuwirth 1969:153).

To achieve community closure and to establish successful interest associations, however, it is not enough that the members of an excluded group live under similar conditions, or perceive their situation in a similar way. The perception of living in a common situation must lead to mutual feelings of belonging together, and thus to true communal relationships. Referring to urban Black Americans, Neuwirth (1969:154) notes the paradox of their having mutual feelings of belonging together, but not being able to ‘engage in concerted action on a community wide basis’ and thus achieve community closure. Neuwirth introduces the concept of ethnic honour, defined by Weber as the belief in the superiority of one’s own customs. Only when a group shares this sense of ethnic honour can it
achieve community closure and compete successfully for a fair share in economic and political opportunities.²

In the theoretical discussion above, the importance of ‘Aboriginality’ in the development of common interest associations has been established. However, Aboriginality’ should not be seen as locking Aborigines into their past, nor should it be seen purely in a cultural dimension. Aboriginal cultural traditions, as noted earlier, are not confined to establishing a way of life for Aboriginal people, but are critical in the pursuit of social, economic and political equality.

Analysing the concept of Aboriginality, Keeffe (1988) distinguishes Aboriginality-as-persistence from Aboriginality-as-resistance. Despite his admission that these two are not total opposites, Keeffe regards Aboriginality-as-persistence as static and conservative, contrasting with the active and dynamic concept of Aboriginality-as-resistance. However, there are strong indications that the contrast between these two notions is far less pronounced than Keeffe would allow. Both can be equally dynamic and politically active, as the impact of land rights ideology on contemporary Aboriginal communities and interest associations has shown. In effect, Aboriginality-as-resistance without Aboriginality-as-persistence is an empty shell. In the theoretical framework described above, one finds a view that does not reduce group identity (under the label of ethnicity) to particular primordial ties. On the contrary, it explains ethnicity as a consequence of economic, social and political competition. The role of culture, whether it is a fully-lived reality or used purely as an emblem, is considered to be that of helping Aboriginal groups to compete in social, political and economic arenas.

Thus, Aboriginal culture cannot be seen independently from the total network of direct and indirect relationships between Aboriginal groups and organisations which has developed in recent years. In this network a pan-Aboriginal identity has grown which has brought aspects of Aboriginal culture to totally new levels of consciousness (cf RM Berndt 1977b). Certainly, the concepts of community closure and ethnic honour are still less relevant to strongly tradition-oriented Aboriginal groups. Yet the successful claims of these groups to territorial and cultural autonomy have greatly stimulated the self-confidence of less tradition-oriented groups. Land rights symbolise Aboriginal ethnic honour and express the need for
Aborigines to contest European-Australian dominance through complete absorption of the latter’s meanings and values. Conversely, the realisation of land rights legislation in the Northern Territory owes much to political pressure exercised on public opinion and government by urban Aboriginal groups working from an oppositional, ethnically-based stance.

This ethnically-based stance is indeed the only position from which to deal with external pressures according to Weberian theory. In the case of Aboriginal political leaders (and by extension, Aboriginal common interest associations), one must reject Keeffe’s view (1988:75), that by taking an ethnic stance they form a socially conservative group. This is only so if they accept a view of Aboriginality as laid down by government officials or other outsiders. At the same time, it is true that enormous ideological pressures exist which can steer the views of Aboriginality held by these leaders and associations. Aboriginal cultural traditions not only function as a vehicle for political competition, they also determine the outcome of political and economic development in a more direct way. From this point of view, it is useful to consider the question of the congruence between ideology and power relationships in traditional Aboriginal culture and the changes demanded by the incorporation of Aborigines in Australian society.

IDEOLOGY, POWER AND LEADERSHIP

Many writers have stressed a certain static quality of the Aboriginal world view. For instance, Kolig (1981:3) says of Aboriginal cosmology that it ‘did not so much emphasize the necessity of external stasis as implicitly discount such a possibility. The Aborigines continued to believe that the immutability of their society was the natural condition: According to this view, the world was ruled by the laws laid down in the Dreamtime, a period in which ‘the universe as Aboriginal man traditionally knows it became ordered into everlasting, unchanging forms’ (Kolig 1982:19). It was not that Aborigines did not have any awareness of changes, but as Kolig suggests (1982:19), ‘these were seen as trivial, non-essential in comparison with the basically unchanging ground pattern of the universe’.

Kolig’s description bears remarkable resemblance to the characterisation of the world view of contemporary Pintupi in Central Australia as given by Myers (1982:108):
[they] do not, as yet, recognize an autonomous political order.... In the Pintupi view, consensus is maintained by common adherence to a shared, external and autonomous code, a cosmological datum...the Pintupi seem constantly to try to make of each important event an objectification similar to that constituted by the Dreaming, to view relationships as essentially unchanging, to find a ‘once and for all’ to which things may conform....

The implications of such an ideology are particularly relevant to Aboriginal self-management and interethnic political competition. As Myers (1982:109) writes, the Pintupi do not see transaction ‘as capable of altering the basic structure of things. With such a view they seem unable to comprehend that they can alter the structure of their relationships with Whites.’

Views like these are not cited to declare Aborigines incapable of change. Indeed, Kolig (1981:178) shows that Aborigines in the Kimberley region were able to transcend the ‘traditional confinements of conceptual order and interaction’. Two further examples of creative accommodation are apposite here. In the early 1970s in the Gascoyne district, where most Aborigines had become ‘urbanised’, an Aboriginal interest association formulated community projects around a core notion of reviving the order and stability that Aboriginal Law was seen to provide. And Tonkinson (1978:98), who emphatically rejects the view that Aborigines are incapable of adapting to ‘things alien’, nevertheless shows the Jigalong mob carefully shielding their traditional conceptual framework by compartmentalising their experiences into distinct ‘whitefella’ and ‘blackfella’ domains. It remains to be determined in empirical research to what extent distinct Aboriginal conceptions and values influence the outcome of community organisation and development projects.

Further empirical consideration of Aboriginal leadership and power is also necessary. There is the need to establish whether Aboriginal society harbours any form of inequality and leadership, or is basically an egalitarian society. Sackett (1978:40—44) and Howard (1982:2) briefly discuss both viewpoints. Sackett (1978:43) then tries to reconcile the two essentially
incompatible opinions by suggesting that ‘the interpretation of the society as egalitarian arises from the Aboriginal ideal of interpersonal relations, while that which claims the existence of leaders derives from observations of actual behaviour’. Yet Sackett attributes the failure of an Aboriginal community council, set up to foster self-determination among the Wiluna people, to the conviction of a large number of adult men that they should all be on the council, not just some of them! Hiatt (1986:10), an earlier proponent of the egalitarian view, reasserts in his recent overview that ‘traditional Aboriginal communities lack enduring hierarchies of authority for the administration of public affairs’. Taking into account other ethnographic evidence, he extends his view by saying that it does not contradict the occurrence of competition among senior men for greater control of natural and metaphysical resources, or of inequalities based on age and gender, especially in control of the Law.

Another aspect of Aboriginal political organisation is raised by Turner (1986), who pays special attention to Aboriginal principles of membership and representation. Turner is a strong advocate of locally-based Aboriginal community government councils which, in his view, can combine political and jurisdictional rights. In strong contrast to this is the work of Myers (1986:280) on the Pintupi, for whom the ‘concepts of “representation” and of “community” [are] of themselves elements of a different cultural tradition’. Myers (1986:278-80) shows that interpersonal obligations, together with an emphasis on flexibility and personal autonomy, interfere with the ability of the Pintupi to run a strictly organised community health service. In line with a reliance on the Law as an ‘external’ system for the regulation of social relationships, the Papunya village council saw the health service as ‘different business’, a form of organisation outside the framework of interpersonal obligations.

As the studies cited above show, there is still considerable uncertainty about the most effective ways for Aborigines to organise themselves in order to safeguard their own cultural and socioeconomic priorities. Undoubtedly, as Mowbray (1986) argues convincingly, the legislative and financial constraints imposed by the State on local Aboriginal interest associations are factors of great importance. But on the Aboriginal side, there are questions of representative leadership, delegation of authority, effectiveness of control of activities, responsibility for community services
and enterprises, and so on. To the extent that Aborigines have to, and wish to, rely on traditional forms of politics, the question must be asked as to whether and how traditional concepts of Aboriginal decision-making can be made to fit with European-Australian administrative and political structures (cf Coombs 1972).

While there is much disagreement over the question of structures of dominance, power differentials and leadership in a traditional setting, explanation of the basis of Aboriginal power finds anthropologists in greater agreement. Meggitt (1962:250), while rejecting the existence of forms of permanent leadership, acknowledges the importance of the Law as a source of power. People were bound to follow the advice of elders ‘only when it was couched as a statement of dreamtime rules’. This theme dominates views of Aboriginal power. Religious knowledge, access to the life-giving and life-maintaining forces of the spiritual realm, performance of the rituals prescribed by the Dreamtime mythology—these are seen as major sources of Aboriginal power and authority (cf Anderson 1983; Kolig 1982; Myers 1982). It is dear that such a form of power does not accord with a European-Australian type, which is based principally on the possession and control of material resources. The much more relaxed attitude of Aborigines in influencing the material environment is another factor to be considered in assessing Aboriginal competitive potential in Australian society.

THE ECONOMIC BASIS OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

One of the most pressing questions for Aboriginal interest associations is that of greater economic independence. As Vaszolyi (1978:54) notes, ‘there is no political independence based on economic dependence’. Realising that the term ‘economic independence’ cannot be taken too literally, the manner in which a person or group takes part in the Australian economic system also determines their chances in other societal sectors.

Studies of the distribution of sources of Aboriginal income show an extremely high dependence on Social Security payments in many communities, which is probably the clearest indication of widespread poverty (see Table 1). Considering such figures, it must be remembered that most wage incomes are earned in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs requiring no formal education. The number of self-employed Aborigines is very low, as
is that of Aborigines occupying managerial positions. The figures in Table 1 are drawn from rural or small town communities, but there are indications that Aborigines in cities fare little better. In an Adelaide survey carried out in 1980 (Gale and Wundersitz 1982:126), only 24.5 per cent of adult male Aborigines were in employment, a decrease of 43.4 per cent since 1966. For the whole of Australia in 1981, Fisk (1985:83) calculated that 53 per cent of all Aboriginal incomes came from Social Security payments. Fisk (1985:81) states that Aboriginal adults received only 57 per cent of the average income for all Australians in 1981. According to residential area, Fisk shows that levels of income are highest in both cities and outstations, and lowest in small non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal towns. If, for convenience sake, one applied a ‘scale of assimilation’, then at both ends of that scale Aborigines fare relatively well (see Fisk 1985:61—63).

**TABLE 1. Distribution of wage and Social Security income from a sample of Aboriginal communities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Wage Income (%)</th>
<th>Social Security Income (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NEW SOUTH WALES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various towns</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinvale</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NORTHERN TERRITORY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Springs town camps</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maningrida outstations</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbulwar</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willowra</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuendumu</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUEENSLAND</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wujalwujal</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WESTERN AUSTRALIA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnarvon</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Margaret</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prospects for an improvement in the employment situation are not good. Young (1982:23) notes a rise in welfare-derived income among Aborigines in New South Wales towns. In the Gascoyne region in Western Australia, in spite of a slight increase in town employment in the late 1970s (Dagmar 1982:136–41), there is little hope for a substantial drop in Aboriginal dependency on social welfare in the near future (Steve Bell, personal communication). Peterson (1982:60) comes to similar conclusions with regard to remote Aboriginal communities, for which he predicts ‘a dramatic rise in individual dependency created by consumerism and the costs associated with the improvement in the range and delivery of services’. In his view, rising economic expectations in these communities will not be matched by increasing incomes, and hence a sense of relative deprivation seems inevitable.

In outstations, subsistence resources, together with Social Security payments, seem to provide a comparatively good level of living. The problem is that such areas can support only relatively small groups of people in a subsistence manner. Where groups have been given land rights, as in the Northern Territory, land can be a source of greater independence through the payment of mining royalties. Kesteven (1983) shows that there are problems in finding suitable ways to invest this money so that it will be productive and employment-generating. Aboriginal business enterprises in remote areas face many obstacles, like poor access to markets, high transport costs and competition from well-established non-Aboriginal companies. Altman’s (1983) study of royalties paid to Aborigines in the Northern Territory indicates that the so-called royalty associations make local investments in the productive and income and employment-generating spheres. He also notes that there is continual pressure on the associations to transfer money more directly, either to communities or to individual households. The associations face a dilemma in their investment policy, having to choose between what Altman calls ‘conservative’ and ‘imaginative’ or ‘radical’ types of investments. At the time of Altman’s study, most associations had followed a conservative policy, having placed funds in government debentures or in short-term bills with banks (Altman 1983:138).

It is still too early to assess the results of the Northern Territory Aborigines’ integration into the Australian economy through their use of
land rights-related sources of income. Yet, whatever the practical difficulties involved, there are indications that the royalty associations attempt to improve the economic status of their members while at the same time guarding Aboriginal consensus decision-making and maintaining Aboriginal priorities in the formulation of policies (Altman 1983:155).

Problems relating to Aboriginal attempts to gain a more secure and independent foothold in the Australian economy also stem from differences in interpretation of economic matters by Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Young (1981), while acknowledging variations in Aboriginal cultural and environmental circumstances, outlines some characteristic Aboriginal economic attitudes. She notes that although Aborigines are involved in a money economy, they do not regard money primarily as a means of investment. Instead, Aborigines ‘regard social relationships maintained through exchange of resources derived from both monetary and non-monetary systems, as their main form of investment’ (1981:6).

Palmer (1982) draws attention to this same phenomenon in a case study of an Aboriginal cattle station community. Investment and profit-making, via a community economic development program, were not considered in material terms, but ‘commodities [were] appropriated by community members to be utilised in another sphere. They [were] then used in ways which Aborigines consider important, that is for the ordering of their social relations’ (1982:51). Stanton (1982) found two systems of exchange—cash and ritual knowledge—operating in the economy of the Mount Margaret community. Mediation between these two opposing value systems rests on ‘the conversion of particular tangible assets into culturally relevant commodities such as prestige, authority and leadership’ (1982:84).

Similarly, Silberbauer (1971) notes that participation in the economic arena among the Pitjantjatjara was totally subordinate to participation in ritual activities, which was the primary source of status and prestige. Such values have retained their relevance not only in remote communities with a distinct traditional orientation. For instance, Silberbauer’s observation of a strong motivation among the Pitjantjatjara to own vehicles in order to facilitate social interaction, particularly in the religious-ritual domain, strongly resembles my own findings in the early 1970s among a group of Aborigines in the Gascoyne district (Dagmar 1978). The most prized possession of the interest association set up by this group was an old truck,
which was not put to use in earning money—as non-Aboriginal advisers had visualised—but for carrying people to ceremonies and for social visits and outings. Sansom (1988), in explaining Darwin fringe-dwellers’ views of the use and purpose of cash, not only notes a very different ‘economic culture’, but one which expresses a traditional Aboriginal modality for exchange as well as a resistance to the dominant European-Australian economic system.

An important difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attitudes towards economic matters is centred around land. In a capitalist economic context, land is seen principally as a resource having productive and exchange value. The food-producing value of land has always been recognised by Aborigines and the success of some Aboriginal cattle and sheep stations shows that they are also able and willing to use land in a modern, commercially productive way. But the use of land for these purposes ‘is normally acceptable only if it does not substantially interfere with its spiritual value’ (Young 1981:9).

The differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views of land, labour, commodities, cash and so on noted above lead one to conclude, as Coombs (1972:10) did, that it is ‘hard to imagine another society whose values were as inappropriate to the demands of the industrialised economy’ as that of Australia’s Aborigines. Yet, in spite of their own distinct economic values, Aborigines have shown themselves capable of change and adaptation. In the Gascoyne district, for instance, the vital role of Aboriginal labour in the origin and survival of the pastoral industry has been demonstrated (Dagmar 1978). Generally, Australian society has shown little regard for the difficulties inherent in this adaptation; instead, Aboriginal advancement in this field has often been actively obstructed. In the 1970s and early 1980s, I found little use for concepts such as capital, savings, profit, capital accumulation, entrepreneurship and the like among people of the Gascoyne area. Particularly glaring was the lack of ownership of any substantial resources, other than human resources as wage labour, and Aborigines appeared to operate mainly on a subsistence level within a welfare capitalistic subsystem.

For a comprehensive understanding of the cultural ramifications of Aboriginal adaptations to the Western economy, a comparative and historical perspective is essential. Anderson (1983) provides a detailed
analysis of interrelated changes in Kuku-Nyungkul society under the influence of a particular form of capitalist enterprise. He describes the sociocultural dynamics of this group and the circumstances which prevented it from reproducing itself as a distinct entity. As Anderson points out, before the 1930s Kuku-Nyungkul communities were able to maintain ties with their clan estates, and although drastic changes took place, they were at least able to handle the European socioeconomic system without complete loss of their cultural identity. But the maintenance of cultural identity, often through control of land, is a different matter from use of land specifically for Aboriginal economic development, in the sense of giving Aborigines a more equal and competitive position in the European-Australian economic system. Use of land for this purpose will necessitate completely new forms of Aboriginal organisation. Altman (1983:158), for example, recommends that royalty associations ‘should make every effort to maintain independence from existing community councils and Outstation Resources Centres’. Aboriginal economic interests, it seems, are not necessarily best protected by locally-based associations.

The discussion above presents only a cursory examination of the array of economic issues confronting Aborigines. These economic issues, combined with others from the political arena, mean that interest associations must incorporate elements of behaviour patterns that are more or less foreign to their members. Internally, the associations meet with different levels of deprivation; different economic aspirations; different degrees of attachment to distinct Aboriginal patterns of thinking and behaviour; different levels of knowledge of and skills for functioning within a market economy; and different levels and forms of skills for organising the promotion of common interests. External factors include: variations in levels of access to resources and the market; differences in competition from outsiders and non-Aboriginal businesses; differences in adequacy or organisational support on the part of government; and differences in legal and political structures with which the associations have to operate.

With such an array of determinants, I shall not attempt here to generalise about the best strategies for interest associations to secure better economic positions for their members. Fisk (1985:106-9) argues that the level of employment is a major factor in the economic status of Aborigines, particularly in the urban setting, and that it is virtually impossible for them
to influence it. However, with levels of unemployment so disproportionately high among Aborigines, interest associations simply cannot sit back; they must try to improve, even if only fractionally, the economic status of their members. The capitalist market system is a very aggressive and only seemingly rational one that does not really accommodate ways of life not in accord with its central tenets. As a seemingly rational system, it presents matters of choice and value as unavoidable ‘law’. In such a system, Aborigines can only survive as a people by behaving as a people, that is, by holding together and making a common front. For interest associations, this calls for larger regional and national networks through which they can consult and advise, and solicit help in opening up and exploiting resources. As previously suggested, traditional groups in remote Australia and urban political pressure groups have (sometimes unknowingly) reinforced each other’s position. It does not seem outlandish, therefore, to advocate forms of economic cooperation between these and other Aboriginal groups. For instance, the use of resources and wealth tapped through mining on Aboriginal land to support economic projects among groups with few or no resources may be economically as well as politically sound (cf Fisk 1985:100).

ORGANISATIONS IN AN INTERETHNIC FIELD

No matter how strong their pursuit of autonomous Aboriginal interests, local interest associations still have to function in an interethnic field. Even such a distinctly Aboriginal action as the outstation movement is highly dependent on government administrative support. Young (1981) writes that Aboriginal organization and control of communities...has resulted in people assuming leadership roles within an essentially non-Aboriginal framework’ where community councils are seen as points of contact between the non-Aboriginal world and the Aboriginal community. Coburn (1982:13) notes an even more onesided aspect and calls community councils in the Northern Territory ‘a European-type organisation created specifically to assist in the delivery of European-type services to cater for the European-type section of the lives of community residents’.

To view interest associations as mediators between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society demands consideration of a multitude of factors, only a few of which can be dealt with here. Broadly, we are looking at the social and political pressures within Aboriginal groups consequential to the
associations’ task of representing Aboriginal interests to the non-Aboriginal world. There are also questions of organisational development, related to service delivery, that flow from government policies.

Self-management demands that Aborigines formulate public goals and set up structures to control and manage the activities necessary to achieve these goals. However, if they are to hold their own against an overpowering European-Australian majority, they will have to choose goals and organisational procedures that go beyond a desire to retreat into their own world. Instead, they must be prepared to ‘fight’ the European-Australians on their own ground and with their own weapons. It was shown earlier that this may present difficulties with regard to traditional Aboriginal cultural orientations, forms of decision-making and leadership. But even where traditional attitudes are less important, or are not brought into consideration, it will be difficult for Aboriginal groups to formulate and believe in ‘grand schemes’ of social, political and economic development.

Tonkinson (1978:97) wrote of the Jigalong people that they were interested ‘in community development and other things having to do with Whites only when the issue affects them in well-defined and immediate ways’. Palmer (1982:43-44) found that Aborigines draw a sharp distinction between pastoral and community development activities, which they see as controlled and directed by D.A.A. and the day-to-day business of running the community which they consider they control themselves’. In Carnarvon the local interest association was only assured of the interest and participation of people as long as it dealt with matters that were considered to be of immediate domestic concern. A trucking business, a nursery garden and a garage-workshop project were not regarded as such and consequently failed. All this indicates that tasks undertaken by interest associations—certainly in the initial stage of their development—must be concrete and of immediate relevance to daily life. Drakakis-Smith (1982:113) describes the success of an Alice Springs ‘campers’ council’, which attended primarily to small-scale improvements of fringe-dwellers’ camps, ’ranging from rubbish collection to the construction of multi-purpose sheds’, and generally took care of the welfare needs of this urban population.

It is clear, however, that working on tangible improvements to the quality of life in a community is not enough for the success of an interest association, certainly not if we wish to measure success in terms of active
involvement in the association’s activities by members of the community. Participation will depend on people’s perception of the feasibility and relevance of the organisation’s aims and the time span needed for their achievement. Other factors of importance are the scale of social cooperation that is required and the question as to who, in the eyes of community members, is responsible for the choice of goals. There are indications that tasks chosen should not as a rule necessitate direct cooperation of groups larger than extended families (cf Kamien 1978: 306—7). Certainly, for an association to be assured of continued participation, its projects must show a pay-off within a foreseeable period of time. Bryant (1982) gives an example of difficulties experienced by an Aboriginal cooperative set up to carry out community services. Internal differences, jealousies and disagreements within the community concerned impeded its smooth functioning. Its inability to attend immediately and successfully to all the needs of community members turned the cooperative into a scapegoat to relieve frustrations of which it was not the cause.

Representativeness, feelings of common identity and community solidarity are important matters for any interest association. Howard (1978) draws attention to the need for treating with some scepticism claims to the ‘grassroots’ character of interest associations. His reasoning is that, just as early colonial administrations sought the help of so-called ‘Aboriginal Kings’ in establishing a system of indirect rule, certain elements in contemporary administration may also use Aboriginal councils, centres or interest associations as instruments for continued control of Aborigines. Or, in a less malicious vein, administrators are misled about the concreteness, efficiency and representativeness of such bodies. Howard does not deny the usefulness of such bodies or their leaders, but warns against a priori acceptance of their representativeness.

Howard (1978) sees room for Aboriginal ‘cultural brokers’—entrepreneurially-oriented Aborigines who act as mediators between Aborigines and the wider society, and who use the support of white patrons to strengthen their position. Howard notes that such brokers are not necessarily leaders, and he distinguishes between two analytical categories—leadership on the one hand, and patronage and brokerage on the other. Since 1972, the importance and attractiveness of brokerage roles have been given new impetus by increased government funding of interest
associations which has included the creation of salaried positions for Aborigines. Professionalisation and growing interest in the associations on the part of government have led them to become important arenas for intra-Aboriginal political activity. In this context, questions of change in Aboriginal leadership and the role of Aboriginal factions demand further research, such as determining the extent to which traditional leadership, or an influential position in the intra-Aboriginal field, coincides with positions of importance in the interethnic field. Howard (1978:29) indicates that the role of a modern leader or broker had tended ‘to entail disassociation from other Aborigines and the acceptance of values that isolated the leader from members of his or her ethnic unit’. The tenor of his article is that often such situations continue, even after the recent changes in policy.

Gerritsen (1982) addresses similar issues in a study of Aboriginal community politics in relation to service delivery to remote Aboriginal communities. Compared with Howard, Gerritsen (1982:21) sees more congruence between positions of influence in a traditional or internal Aboriginal setting and those derived from access to the non-Aboriginal world: ‘The “modern” ...leaders’ power is rooted as much in their traditional background and family position as it is in their expertise in “Whitefella business”.’ Also contrasting with that of Howard is his view that the leaders, and through them Aboriginal communities, ‘are not mere pawns in the bureaucracy’s organisational games’ (1982:16).

Given the quality and plausibility of their analyses, one must assume that the differences between the views of Gerritsen and Howard can be traced back to differences in the history and contemporary circumstances of the communities under study. In the Nyoongah society of southwestern Australia, Howard found pervasive influence of European-Australian institutions. In that setting, Aboriginal interest associations and the people who assumed leadership roles in them had virtually no alternative but to operate largely within the socioeconomic framework and rules set by a welfare-capitalist system. On the other hand, in the remote Northern Territory communities studied by Gerritsen, Aborigines had much more opportunity to steer a course of their own. ‘Whitefella business’ in such communities was heavily tinged with Aboriginal values, so it is not surprising that there was much more congruence between traditional and modern leadership and more opportunity to manipulate the bureaucracy.
What these two studies, among others, show is that there are many varieties of ‘whitefella business’ and that a model of Aboriginal communities in terms of a dichotomy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal business is inaccurate and may be only useful analytically. As has been argued here, self-management makes it increasingly impossible to separate the two. Certainly, Gerritsen has a case in criticising the view that Aborigines are powerless in dealing with the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, comparing the situation of Aborigines in the remote Northern Territory communities with that of the Nyoongah in southwestern Australia, one cannot escape the conclusion that it is still the European-Australian political and economic system that sets the limits for the operation of contemporary Aboriginal leadership and interest associations.

Indirectly related to the interethnic action of interest associations is the subject of factionalism. Clearly, social characteristics such as egalitarianism, consensus decision-making and an emphasis on personal autonomy are all relevant to the absence or presence of factions. Discussion of these topics need not be repeated here. The important point is that, even if ‘traditional’ Aboriginal local social units did not know forms of internal competition for scarce resources (and resulting hierarchy and factional interests), modern forms of Aboriginal settlement have created new conditions cross-cutting older local jurisdictional rights. Also, population movements have brought together individuals and groups with very different sociocultural histories. These circumstances are conducive to factionalism and may make it difficult to detect a convergence of common interests. In the town of Carnarvon, for instance, the families whose livelihood still very much depended on employment in the pastoral industry had very different aspirations from those who had a considerable stake in town life and town employment. The interest association set up by the former group almost collapsed, and certainly lost much of its attraction for the former, when members of the latter group took control of it.

In considering interaction between the dominant society and Aboriginal interest associations, the role of government merits examination. Many associations still need financial and organisational support from this quarter (cf Young 1981:234; Sackett 1978:47). I do not dismiss lightly the idea that government agencies can be instrumental in the perpetuation of dependency among Aborigines; however, it may be more fruitful to search for
appropriate forms of government administrative and financial support than to reject this help altogether.

It is a truism, but an important one, to say that policies for helping Aborigines to realise greater self-determination require a thorough knowledge of Aboriginal communities. Good communication and consultative procedures are necessary, and this is where interest associations are seen by government to play a major role. Policies of support must be based on knowledge thus acquired. Then again, even if a government agency designs a sound policy and plan of action, its implementation may become the subject of local community power struggles. Careful monitoring of implementation is therefore needed, but this form of control is a very delicate one, leading easily and perhaps justly to accusations of paternalism and continuation of dependency. Thus monitoring and evaluation should entail the close involvement of regional Aboriginal ‘umbrella organisations’.

Knowing what goes on in a community and, in particular, responding efficiently to local Aboriginal attempts to become more self-supporting and achieve self-control, is not congruent with an over-centralised administration of Aboriginal affairs. This is not to deny the usefulness of a special government agency dealing with Aboriginal matters. Drakakis-Smith (1982:131—32) praises the very positive support given by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to a community development project set up by an essentially Aboriginal association in Alice Springs. He argues in favour of a ‘continued strong role’ for the department in counterbalancing a potential white backlash against local Aboriginal advancement. This is very much in line with what I found in the Gascoyne district of Western Australia, where the absence of an influential representative of a well-coordinated and alert government agency dealing with Aboriginal affairs severely thwarted local Aboriginal moves for greater social and economic independence (Dagmar 1983; see also Dagmar 1983-84).

An advantage of having a single agency carrying special responsibility for Aboriginal affairs is the greater likelihood of an integrated approach. Douglas (1978:118-19) gives an example of the confusing multiplication of administrative bodies represented at Warburton settlement, causing council members of Warburton Community Inc to be ‘sent from one departmental representative or advisor to another when they wished to have some action
carried out’. Therefore, rather than a seemingly endless fragmentation of responsibilities, a much more comprehensive approach is needed which retains a sufficient degree of regional and local flexibility. Snowdon (1982) describes an ambitious scheme for such an organisational form in which the core position is taken by regional Aboriginal councils overseeing the administrative services of particular regions. Apart from bringing more central forms of policy-making and implementation under Aboriginal control, this plan should also promote administrative accessibility, accountability and feedback of information, local participation, a comprehensive view of problems, and rapid administrative action. Such a scheme coincides with the view taken in this chapter that local common interest associations are well advised to set up networks of support from among their own ranks. Regional councils, as proposed by Snowdon, can fulfil the function of ‘umbrella’ or ‘shield’ organisations, coordinating both political pressure on the outside world and the reinforcement of the capacity of the associations to meet specific local needs in the arena of Aboriginal advancement.

CONCLUSION

Through examination of Aboriginal common interest associations and the dynamics of Aboriginal culture, this study highlights a prominent issue in interethnic relations—the paradox of people striving for a more equal status within a nation-state by way of emphasising their uniqueness and the characteristics of a corporate group. Although some Aboriginal common interest associations may have originated at the suggestion of, or with assistance from, outsiders, they ultimately owe their strength to forms of identification and action that are independent of European-Australian concerns. From this point of view, no outsider should be allowed to interfere with the final control of such associations. This does not mean that interest associations cannot profit from outside help. Such outside support is found in the areas of financial resources, levels of skill among local people in political, administrative and communication matters, and the quality of support personnel (Mowbray 1986:34).

Undoubtedly, local Aboriginal common interest associations must respond to existing social and cultural circumstances. In order to promote effectively their social and economic interests in the interethnic field, however, they must meet new (non-traditional) organisational requirements.
Such forms of organisation must solve the paradox of having to transcend narrow personal, family and other social organisational interests, while at the same time satisfying the needs of their members. Helping to build up the organisational capacity of Aboriginal common interest associations could well be one of the priorities of applied anthropological research in Australia. More generally, the comparative study of these associations offers opportunities for anthropologists and other social scientists to deal with practical questions of economic development and policy formulation and implementation.8

Notes

1 My decision to choose Western Australia for my first fieldwork exercise in the early 1970s was due mainly to Ronald and Catherine Berndt’s offer of support for my research plan. Even though I did not go to work in the region that they thought most promising, the Berndts have continued to be a source of advice and help, which is indicative of their openness towards other researchers and of their commitment to Aboriginal studies in general.

2 The outcome of the process indicated by Neuwirth resembles what CH Berndt (1962) has called ‘community through necessity’. For Aborigines, the model of social closure implies that they will have to rely on their own purposive communal action to improve their living conditions.

3 Of course, Christian missionaries also recognise supernatural phenomena as an ultimate source of power. Yet the Protestant ethic also has great affinity with material progress.

4 Figures given in Table 1 are drawn from a variety of sources: NSW towns (Young 1982), Robinvale (Bryant 1982), Alice Springs (Drakakis-Smith 1982), Maningrida (Altman 1982), Numbulwar, Willowra and Yuendumu (Young 1981), Wujalwujal (Anderson 1982), Carnarvon (Dagmar 1982) and Mount Margaret (Stanton 1982). It should be noted that these data were collected at differing time periods and by differing methodologies (eg some researchers based calculations on total community incomes while others used heads of household incomes).
Fisk’s figures for outstation inhabitants are based on Altman’s work in Maningrida outstations. These figures account both for monetary income and non-monetary subsistence income (see Altman 1982; Fisk 1985:61-63).

Kolig (1987:21—22) attributes the almost total neglect of Aboriginal interests by whites to ‘the traditional Western fervour for planning a comprehensively new environment. This entails not only introducing new plant and animal forms and superimposing a totally new way of life, but also stamping out and eliminating everything indigenous that is not needed, or that is unknown and therefore has no place in the new scheme of things. In this way a land is literally made, i.e. re-organized in the image of utilitarian desirability.’

Kolig (1987:94-105) gives a detailed analysis of the difficulties involved in the fusion (for political and socioeconomic reasons) of two local Aboriginal groups differing in kinship bonds, traditional land affiliations, shared history, religious observances, and so on. This example serves as a warning against overly optimistic expectations of the ability of such groups to work together.

In doing this, they can follow the lead taken by Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who have convincingly shown that the study of Aboriginal history, culture and society can and must be combined with that of Aboriginal administration (cf RM Berndt 1983-84).

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The work of the Berndts concerning male-female relationships in Aboriginal Australia, in both ‘traditional’ and post-contact milieus, provides the impetus for this chapter, which examines changes in the status of Aboriginal women at Jigalong, a remote settlement in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The baseline for the assessment of change is the pre-contact culture of Western Desert Aborigines I refer to as the Mardujarra, who lived in the area surrounding Lake Disappointment in the Gibson Desert. Their traditional situation is reconstructed via statements concerning their lives prior to first contact with Europeans. Most members of the oldest generation now living at Jigalong were born in the desert and spent their early lives away from any direct contact with Europeans. Although their ‘traditional’ existence had already been disturbed by the influx of alien materials and by ecological changes wrought via the introduction of non-indigenous animals, these had a negligible effect on such core cultural elements as kinship, values and religious life.
The earliest contact experiences of many Jigalong people were with pastoralists on the fringes of the desert. Others had brief encounters with European drovers on the Canning Stock Route—a chain of wells which traversed the home territories of the Aborigines now at Jigalong and became an important locus for their movement and access to water after its establishment in 1906—7. Despite ill-treatment of Aborigines during the making of the stock route and some isolated acts of violence in the early years of its use, later contacts between drovers and desert Aborigines are remembered by old people now at Jigalong as generally peaceful (cf Tonkinson 1974:28—29; M Tonkinson 1985:165—66). Some Aborigines first met Europeans at Jigalong itself during the time when it was a maintenance depot (1907—45) and later a ration station on the No 1 Rabbit Proof Fence; while some of the later arrivals from the desert came during the period when Jigalong was a Christian mission (1946-69).

The mission ceased operations in 1969, and in 1973 Jigalong became an incorporated Aboriginal community with an all-Aboriginal council elected by community members. The pace of change has quickened and self-management policies have had a dear effect on certain aspects of women’s status, but as will be shown in this chapter, significant transformations were beginning to occur long before, in the frontier situation. As most of the Europeans in the area were bachelor males, significant changes occurred in Aboriginal male-female relationships. A triad of male-female-European male interactions developed which generated new behaviours and new situations. At the settlement, the missionaries attempted to combat some aspects of these changes, but at the same time they were supportive of other aspects that were equally significant in their eventual outcomes.

At the outset it has to be acknowledged that there are difficulties entailed in assessing comparative status through the use of such concepts as ‘independence’ and ‘autonomy’ in a given social system (cf C Berndt 1980, 1981; Hamilton 1981; Merlan 1988). With these difficulties in mind, the argument advanced in this chapter nevertheless points to a transformation in the position of Mardujarra women vis-à-vis adult men. The transformation is from one of inequality in the pre-contact situation, to one more closely equal in terms of women’s capacity for independent action and their successful (but not uncontested) assertion of this degree of autonomy. This changed situation is summed up by some of the women in the assertion, ‘we
free agent now’. Their choice of this English term aptly conveys a major self-perception that is verifiable independently through the observation of male-female interaction at Jigalong. When middle-aged and older women contrast their ‘traditional’ past with the settlement present, nostalgia for the desert and its food resources and peace and quiet remains strong. Yet, in other respects, most seem to favour settlement life, and I suggest that one reason for this is that the women are now less firmly under the control of men.

The discussion that follows is largely chronological in its ordering:
1. a summarised reconstruction of women’s status in desert society prior to the arrival of Europeans;
2. early frontier contacts and the implications of women’s insinuation into the European domestic context;
3. the mission era, which saw a ration-based subsistence giving rise to the first signs of successful female autonomy, combined with missionary attempts to undermine the institution of betrothal and to turn children against their parents; and
4. the era of self-management, with an increasing incidence of women rejecting not only betrothal and arranged marriage to much older men, but marriage to any men. The paper concludes with an attempt to place the situation at Jigalong in a broader context by contrasting it with what has been reported by Bell and Ditton (1980) and Bell (1983) for parts of Central and Northern Aboriginal Australia.

PRE-CONTACT SOCIETY
The following summary statements attempt to locate the place of Mardujarra women in ‘traditional’ society (see Tonkinson 1978a, 1988a, 1988b for a fuller discussion). A strong egalitarian ethos predominated in everyday mundane life, with interpersonal asymmetries visible in most cases as concomitants of the operation of kinship, modified mainly by factors such as age. Children were excluded from the demands and strictures imposed by kinship, but this did not preclude constant reminders about what the correct behaviours were. When the routines of everyday life were disturbed by conflict, or when the arena switched to that of religious
activities, clear status differentiation emerged. It favoured men over women, and senior men over their not yet fully-initiated juniors, and once invoked it remained in force for as long as the conflict or religious activities endured. Also, women clearly had fewer rights in marriage than their spouses, and major decisions concerning their futures were made for them by older relatives, most often males. Widowhood was a temporary status, so women were obliged to remarry, and the decision as to whom they would marry was often taken by male relatives.

Women’s independence in the food quest and their usually greater contribution to the family’s diet did not accord them social advantage in their dealings with men; hunting was more highly valued and received greater cultural emphasis. As Bern (1979:125) notes, men’s assertions of hegemony included claims that women only gathered what men’s world-maintaining religious acts made possible. This view of religion as ‘economy’, the dominant ideology and one that appears to have been endorsed by all society’s members, separated women from the products of their labours (cf Hamilton 1982:90-92; Tonkinson 1983). Religion, manifest as the basis of the Law—the culture writ large—also guaranteed initiated males a commanding role in the reproduction of the society, by excluding women from the secret-sacred core of most major rituals and by validating customs that accorded women a secondary status. They could not divorce their husbands, they could not engage in polyandry, they could not dictate their choice of marriage partners, and they were usually the losers in domestic violence. Also, if they wanted to hold exclusively female ritual activities during periodic ‘big meetings’, these had to fit within schedules dictated by men, rather than vice versa. In these and many other aspects of the culture, gender-based differences in status invariably favoured initiated males.

There were, of course, contexts and circumstances in which women could be seen to be operating separately (eg in the case of exclusively female rituals, activities surrounding childbirth, certain subsistence activities, and so on), and ‘equally’ in the arenas of male-female interaction. Yet, taking the social system as a whole, it would be a distortion to characterise women as either ‘separate’ or ‘equal’. As in other Aboriginal societies, the community of several families that made up the band was not structured in terms of segregated sexes. The exception was in certain
aspects of the religious life, and even there, a great deal of ritual activity involved both men and women, and in fact all members of the society. There was a sexual division of labour, but the getting of food occupied a few hours a day at most. For most of the time then, families and bands were mixed-sex groups engaging in sustained interaction. Initiated men at times did segregate themselves for discussion and planning of secret-sacred business, but the hearth was home and as such, it was the locus of relaxed interaction among all a family’s members, and among the families that constituted a band.

THE PASTORAL FRONTIER
The generalisations that follow are based on statements by Aboriginal people and my observations of relationships on pastoral stations leased and run by European bachelors along the desert fringes. Conditions were primitive and extremely difficult for those Europeans who struggled to establish operations in these marginal areas. Aboriginal labour was relied upon and trading in valued items such as axes and knives for dingo scalps or the exchange of labour for rations was common. Local Aborigines, some newly arrived from the desert, were encouraged by Europeans to camp near the station homestead, using tea, tobacco, sugar, flour and other rations as powerful attractions. Aborigines came and went, and in the early stages of contact those who remained mobile between desert homeland and stations were probably not strongly attracted to the sedentary life and the routines associated with working for Europeans. However, in times of prolonged drought, and as their taste for alien products grew, more and more stayed on and forsook ‘traditional’ life.

While the Aboriginal men worked ‘outside’, their young wives and daughters were recruited to the domain of the *maya* (house), which was in most cases forbidden to the menfolk. They were trained in cooking and other domestic chores, and in most cases where there was a lone European male, they also entered into a form of concubinage. It is impossible to know whether or not Aboriginal and European men colluded in the extension of male Aboriginal sexual rights over female relatives to the European men, or whether women alone took such decisions. It may have been, as Hamilton (1972) suggests, that Aborigines as a group agreed to such arrangements as a gesture aimed at the incorporation of Europeans into ‘traditional’ networks of reciprocity and obligation.5 The question of control over
Aboriginal women’s sexuality is a complex and vexed one, but there is no doubt in the Mardujarra case that men traditionally claimed strong rights to the appropriation of female sexuality. These rights were sometimes exercised in cementing ties with, discharging debts to, or atoning for crimes against, other men.

On the desert-fringe stations northeast of Jigalong, relationships between Aboriginal women and European men, although invariably remaining de facto, sometimes became long-term. Many women bore their employers’ children, who were not always publicly acknowledged as such by their genitors. These women had the run of the house and the tenor of their relationships with the pastoralists was normally relaxed and open. As a result, the women who were housegirls tended to become much better speakers of English than their menfolk because they spent more time in informal interaction with the pastoralists than did the men. Housegirls whose husbands were not employed on the stations became the sole conduit to the highly desired alien goods, the reason for the family being able to remain on the property, and the mediators in relationships between house and camp. As Berndt and Berndt (1977:511-12) have suggested in relation to the frontier station milieu:

Aboriginal women were regarded as ideal go-betweens for mediating between their menfolk and the settlers. ....Aboriginal women, in this situation, had more avenues open to them than their menfolk did to enhance their status.... .

This situation put the Aboriginal housegirls in a very different, and in some respects more favourable, position than in desert society. Being young, they did not enjoy senior ritual status in their own society and if they were junior wives in a polygynous marriage, they were under the authority of both their older co-wives and their husbands. Traditionally, if wives aroused their husbands’ ire, no-one outside the family interposed in domestic contexts unless a woman was being seriously wounded (and even within the household, co-wives did not always side with one another against their husband). In their new situation as valued workers and sexual partners of the European boss, housegirls could flee to the sanctuary of the
homestead and generally be assured of the boss’s protection in the event of physical attack by their husbands or other senior male or female relatives.

A very important factor in the isolated frontier settlement was the drastically changed economic importance of women in terms of traditional subsistence activities. Their skills as producers of food via gathering became less vital in the contact situation because of the provision of rations. On the stations both men and women were in a position to earn rations of meat, vegetable foods, tea or tobacco, so the old system of interdependence was transformed. This must have resulted in changed perceptions of mutuality and of the nature and role of the family, and thus would have affected attitudes and interaction. Hunting and gathering activities of course continued, and no doubt remained highly valued despite their diminished importance to subsistence. The situation is far too complex to draw conclusions relating the reduced need for women as producers to changes in their status in the eyes of men, or vice versa for that matter, although periodic hunting activities for the discharge of religious responsibilities remained very important to the men.

As housegirls and providers of rations, women were furnishing their men not only with food but also with needed and desired knowledge. Clear advantages accrued to the housegirls because of their greater control over the flow of information across the cultural divide. Much of what frontier Europeans learned of the desert culture and its complexities was conveyed to them by women, and much of what the station camp came to understand of the alien culture emanated from the women of the house. If men not directly employed by the boss wanted something, they generally relied on their women as go-betweens, and even those who were employed turned to these women, whose better English and closer relationship with the boss gave them a greater chance of success. While in some cases ‘joking’ relationships existed between Aboriginal males and Europeans, the limits were very differently defined, and male workers had to be careful not to overstep the mark, lest they be branded ‘cheeky’ or ‘uppity’.

Sexual jealousy may have been a factor in the situation, either on the part of the Aboriginal husbands or among the housegirls seeking the attention of their bosses, but this issue was not raised by Aborigines in talking about station life. Likewise, there was always the possibility of coercion on the part of the pastoralist, but persistent harshness in the treatment of
Aborigines could easily result in their disappearance into the bush. In talking about their station experiences in the early days, Aboriginal women most often phrased their relationships with the European bachelors in terms of compassion and nurturance: ‘poor old bugger, on his own, too lonely, got no relations with him, somebody got to look out for him or he might perish’, and so on. In more recent decades, however, if women had relationships with European stockmen and station workers, these were in the main quite transitory and are talked about with an absence of any such sentiments.

Of course, personality factors were significant, and there was plenty of hypocrisy on the part of those Europeans who expressed strong anti-Aboriginal sentiments yet frequently made sexual use of Aboriginal women. In areas like Jigalong where the frontier was largely peaceful, the dominant situation on the stations was one of accommodation and mutual benefit. Pastoralism was unsustainable without Aborigines, and once they became sedentary, their intensifying needs for certain goods tied them ever more irrevocably into the frontier economy while undermining their old cultural autonomy. Central to this increased dependence was their migration far away from, or loss of control over, their land and its resources. For the women, or at least for those who entered the domain of the station houses, their importance to the males in the triad increased. The significant change in their orientation to their menfolk—seen most clearly in their roles as mediators—marked the first step along the path to increased assertiveness and greater independence in their own culture.

**THE MISSION ERA**

Most Jigalong Aborigines had had prior experience of Europeans, invariably males, before the arrival of the missionaries in the late 1940s. Why they came to view these newcomers as a separate category of person (Christian) is described elsewhere (Tonkinson 1974:118-19). Their perception of missionaries and pastoralists as opposed categories was reinforced by the contrasting behaviour and attitudes of the two groups. The pastoralists resented alleged attempts by the missionaries to interfere with the engagement of male and female labour and were uneasy about the sudden proximity and watchfulness of those claiming the high moral ground. The missionaries objected greatly to what they saw as lax morals and sexual depravity in the mingling of the races on the stations. For this
reason they were strongly opposed to the recruitment of young women as station housegirls, preferring to keep them at Jigalong as major targets of their evangelising activities. Young men, on the other hand, were strongly encouraged to go and work on stations; the missionaries constantly suspected most of them of having sexual designs on the teenage girls, so their absence made supervision of these girls a lot easier.

Mission efforts were focused on the attempted conversion of the children and young women. To this end, a dormitory system was introduced with the aim of partially segregating the young from the allegedly polluting and sinful influences of camp life. This system placed the children firmly under missionary surveillance, primarily to ensure that no sexual activities occurred. Physical separation was partially achieved, though the children and young women had daily access to the camp. As a result, cultural transmission continued virtually unabated for a long time and the young eventually became full participants in camp life and the Law instead of Christianity. The missionaries had a dear bias in their attitudes and behaviours towards their Aboriginal charges. They viewed all but the oldest men as callous and unredeemable, whereas Aboriginal women were ill-treated victims, who had been denied the basic rights that a good Christian society would demand. Moral depravity, however, was a vice of both sexes and the missionaries were firmly convinced that at the core of the secret-sacred life were barbarous and sexually depraved ritual practices.

The mission was charged with continuing the operation of Jigalong as a ration depot, and in exchange for their weekly rations as many of the able-bodied Aborigines as possible were given chores. They worked as firewood getters and woodchoppers, launderers, cleaners, cooks, housegirls, and so on. The schoolchildren were also allotted tasks on a roster basis and the teenage girls were trained in domestic duties in the houses of the missionaries. Gone was the exclusively European male part of the contact triad, since about half the mission staff was female, mostly wives of male staff.

All the older Aboriginal women received weekly rations, so they were no longer dependent on the gathering activities of younger co-wives or on the hunting prowess of their husbands. Following migration from the desert, gathering activities had declined in importance as the subsistence base, whereas the more highly valued hunting activities had continued and were
especially important when associated with major ritual activities and the induction of young novices. Whenever game was brought back to camp, customary distribution procedures generally meant that the older women were assured of getting some of the meat.

When I first began research at Jigalong in 1963, there were already in existence widows’ camps whose occupants, although long since eligible for remarriage, had decided not to remarry. These older women, who were able to subsist to their satisfaction, enjoyed the companionship and banter of their all-female camps and saw no need or advantage in remarriage. This transition from what traditionally had been a temporary status to a permanent one was unprecedented, and therefore not yulubirdi (Lawful), yet these women successfully resisted the Law. In talking about the possibility of remarriage, they saw only disadvantages such as having to serve men and obey their wishes and run the risk of physical punishment. All were senior women in the religious life, and their status as widows was irrelevant to this, since as wives and mothers they already had been inducted into responsible roles as nindibuga (knowledgeable ones).

The fact that the men allowed these women to remain widows is best explained in terms of changed circumstances consequent upon contact, the adoption of a sedentary lifestyle and an altered economy. Many men had younger wives and at least the promise of more via the operation of the betrothal system. They may therefore have felt that they could afford to leave the older and assertive women to their own devices, safe in the knowledge that the widows would not be the locus of any generalised female rebellion. In fact, the older women were fervent and unyielding in their support of the kinship and marriage systems and most severe in their physical punishment of young female transgressors.

As had been the case on frontier stations, the only arena at the mission for sustained informal interaction between black and European was in the houses of the Europeans, but this time it was between housegirls and female missionaries. The biggest contrast to the frontier situation was in European male-Aboriginal female interaction. The familiarity and closeness of sexually charged relationships between European males and Aboriginal females was replaced in the mission situation by quite restrained relationships between male missionaries and women, except in the case of old women with whom some of the male missionaries had a kind of
‘joking’ relationship. Miscegenation, or any extramarital sex for that matter, was probably viewed as ‘mortal sin’ in the eyes of these fundamentalists. Similarly, the relationships between the missionary women and Aboriginal males, while running the gamut from quite formal to jovial, were typically devoid of any sexual overtones and usually restricted to brief encounters. Communication between the missionaries and older Aborigines of both sexes was characteristically superficial, in large part because neither knew the other’s language.

As on the stations, interaction between male Aborigines and male missionaries in work situations was characteristically hierarchical and more formal than that involving women. The missionaries spent much less time in close working relationships with Aboriginal men than did station bosses and there was much less mutual trust, since there was a greater awareness of deeply opposed interests. The language barrier was formidable for a start, but so too was the antipathy generated by the Aboriginal men’s knowledge that the missionaries, unlike the frontier Europeans, wanted to destroy the Law. Yet friendships between female missionaries and some women, particularly their domestics, allowed for a degree of intimacy and exchange of information that had parallels in the station milieu with European male-Aboriginal female relationships. If this observation is correct, it suggests that in both station and mission settings, Aboriginal women were more privileged than their menfolk in their access to, and control of, important new information and in their potential to act as mediators between the two groups.

The missionaries attempted to bring the teenage girls to their side by exploiting the latters’ growing resistance to being given in marriage to much older men to whom they had been betrothed as babies or small girls. Aboriginal men and women sometimes attempted the forcible removal of these girls from the dormitory and into the camp of their bilyurr (betrothed one). Each time, the missionaries would go and retrieve them and threaten to bring in the greatly feared police, who it was said would take the offender away and jail him for cohabiting with an under-age person. The girls recognised the allies they had in this matter, although in the related matter of their sexual activities with boyfriends they could not expect support from the missionaries, who were strongly opposed to premarital sex.
Communication between the younger housegirls and the wives of the missionaries was aided by the fact that the girls had been schooled and spoke some English, and also because each party was useful to the other. The girls had become well-versed in the nature and extent of missionary objections to Aboriginal culture, and particularly to their perceived stereotypes of the men as wifebeaters and participants in barbaric rituals. The teenage girls frequently told the missionaries what they wanted to hear about alleged goings-on in camp, which, although only a short distance from the main mission settlement, was virtually terra incognita for the missionaries. The missionaries believed that all this information was true, especially when, as in most cases, it confirmed their negative stereotypes of Aboriginal culture. They also seemed flattered that the girls sometimes divulged ‘secrets’ about the men and about ritual matters. This collusion was possibly seen by the missionary women as female solidarity in opposition to the male Aboriginal elders, a common enemy in the matter of betrothal marriage.

By supporting the teenage girls and actively attempting to turn them against their male elders in particular, the missionaries were helping to exacerbate a rift that was bound to become more prominent as knowledge of Western customs and other alien influences increased. A major aspect of culture contact is its presentation of new possibilities for perceiving the world. Resistance to arranged marriages on the part of some women undoubtedly predated contact with Europeans, but it had been much harder to do anything about it in traditional society. At Jigalong, once the idea was established that young women, graduates of the dormitory system with its obsessions about cleanliness and godliness, did not have to go and live with unwashed old men, the seeds of later resistance were well and truly sown. At the time, however, all the efforts of the missionaries seemed to have failed, since most girls eventually fell pregnant to their boyfriends and were expelled from the dormitory and their housegirl tasks in disgrace, only to resume life in camp. Once back in camp, some would eventually acquiesce to marriage with the older men they had reviled.

THE ERA OF SELF-MANAGEMENT
Important changes in the direction of greater Aboriginal control had taken place at Jigalong before the mission ceased operations at the end of 1969. Staff problems had forced the abandonment of the dormitory system, so that
children and teenage girls once again lived permanently with their families in the camp; and control of Social Security money was surrendered to the Aboriginal recipients. The status of the Aborigines as mission wards in a paternalistic colonial system was thus being eroded. In addition, the application of minimum wage regulations to Aboriginal station workers in 1968 significantly reduced employment opportunities on stations, so that the able-bodied men were becoming part of the stable settlement core of women and children. By the end of the mission era, the population at Jigalong had increased to about 350 and the community had evolved into a single ‘mob’ forged from diverse but culturally homogeneous Western Desert groups, now closely intermarried and deeply enmeshed in kinship networks, reciprocity and shared religious and political concerns.

There was a period of stagnation, neglect and uncertainty in the few years between the end of the mission and Jigalong’s incorporation as an Aboriginal community in October 1973, but then the pace of change quickened appreciably. A large infusion of government funds into Aboriginal affairs and the new federal Labor policies concerning self-determination began to affect the situation at the settlement. Since many of these changes have been discussed elsewhere, particularly the implications of the gap between policy and its outcomes at the community level, I will restrict my comments here to the topic at issue (see Tonkinson 1977, 1978b, 1980, 1981).

It is difficult to isolate all the factors relevant to the changes taking place at Jigalong in the status of women vis-à-vis men, but some historical continuities are evident, in terms both of ‘tradition’ and changes set in train by the presence of whites. Polygyny, for example, continued to be valued by men as an intrinsic part of the old Law, as were the related institutions of infant betrothal and arranged marriages. Yet the incidence of successful outcomes in all three institutions declined steadily. The adoption of a sedentary lifestyle and greater reliance on whites for subsistence needs virtually eradicated the economic rationale underlying polygyny. Thus the important role of junior wives as food providers lost its force during the settlement era, although there were still useful domestic tasks to be performed. Many senior wives nevertheless enjoyed being mothers to the children of their younger ‘sisters’, but in the larger and settled community,
they faced the daunting task of policing junior wives’ extramarital activities.6

The desire to marry girls and young women, for reasons relating to social status, tradition and sexual desire, had lost none of its appeal for most men. Proof of this was its persistence in the face of objections by the missionaries and the refusal of governments to recognise more than one wife as legal spouse. Nevertheless, polygyny has declined markedly in the last two decades, largely as a result of the assertiveness of women in opposing the addition of a junior wife with all the passion and aggression they could muster. Their strategies have in most cases been a two-pronged attack: at first verbally, on their husbands for attempting to take a young wife; and then physically, on the new arrival and frequently on the husband as well. Despite being abused and beaten by their husbands who were angered at their wives’ un-Lawful attitude, many of these women persisted in their opposition and repeatedly drove the younger women from their camp. Usually the newcomers offered little or no resistance, since such conflicts are considered to be a matter between a man and the older wife. Also, perhaps, many of these younger women were not enthusiastic about the marriage in the first place, but were acceding to parental pressure.

In such cases of conflict, attempts to bring community pressure to bear on the objecting wives have been increasingly unsuccessful. Heavy doses of abuse heaped on the offenders by both senior men and women, and couched in terms of obedience to the Law and to the dictates of husbands, have generally fallen on deaf ears, despite the embarrassment of being chastised at public meetings. Some middle-aged men of strong personality and resolve have prevailed, and thus keep the practice of polygyny alive at Jigalong but most men, especially the older ones, have been unable to sustain polygynous marriages in the face of opposition from women. Increasingly then, girls betrothed in infancy or promised in marriage during childhood have not eventually married their designated partners. Geography is sometimes a factor. When betrothals arranged as part of the reciprocity between the family of a novice and his initiator involve principals from distant communities, the girls concerned may neither know the young man nor want to go and live among ‘strangers’ away from their families and friends.
The most obvious source of the decline, however, is women’s refusal to accede to community pressures, and the rise of jealousy on the part of extant wives. The younger women have also contributed to this decline, because of their opposition to coming under the surveillance of an older wife and their reluctance to marry older men. They now engage in relationships based on mutual attraction and choice, with less likelihood of punishment as severe as that meted out in the past. It is impossible to assess the extent to which sexual jealousy was an element in relationships among co-wives in pre-contact times, but personality and temperament must have been important. However, older women say that in most cases problems were short-lived, and largely disappeared once the family adjusted to the new arrangement.

For older women in Jigalong society, the transfer of control over pension and other welfare income to individuals, and the granting of such benefits to women who had been second or third wives, have facilitated their increasing independence and the continuance of the widows’ camp. The provision of cooked midday meals to pensioners, financed via deductions from their pensions, has helped to ensure their adequate nutrition. At times, there have been reports of increasing neglect of older women, combined with their exploitation by younger relatives who use kinship obligations to get food and cash, in a reversal of the traditional situation where the young have strong obligations to care for and feed their aged relatives. From my observations, it appears that most of the elderly have learned to resist excessive demands from certain junior kin while still retaining the support of their network of relatives.

Claims to ‘free agent’ status are most often made by young women. The rise of a group of unmarried mothers has been aided by government policies that provide welfare benefits for single parents. Given the nature of the kinship system and attendant reciprocity, it cannot be argued that this financial assistance is the ‘cause’ of this phenomenon. However, their regular income guarantees financial independence and thus precludes the possibility of any successful withholding of reciprocity on the part of relatives angry at these women’s rebelliousness and refusal to conform to the Law. Gambling at cards provides another very important locus for distribution, and many women, especially the younger educated ones, have proved especially adept as gamblers (cf Goodale 1987). Even if they did not
make much money from gambling, however, the nature and continuing strength of kinship obligations are such that young women who refuse to enter into marriage could no doubt survive at Jigalong without welfare income, but having it strengthens their claims to an independent social status.

There has always been strong commitment to the Law and its maintenance at Jigalong, and there is no question that the community has continued to view marriage as basic and essential to the proper operation of society. Aboriginal parents were happy to allow the missionaries to exert strong control over boys and girls if this could prevent sexual intermingling. Elders of both sexes have maintained their very strong opposition to unbridled sexuality on the part of the young—most particularly females, who continue to take most of the blame and physical abuse when transgressions with boyfriends become publicly known. The prevailing attitude of the elders has been to deal with sexually active young females by marrying them off so that they are under the control and responsibility of older men (and the wives of such men if the marriage is polygynous). The notion of uncontrolled women running around is anathema to the upholders of the Law, who see it as a major social problem and a clear sign of breakdown in the old social order where females were daughters then wives then mothers, always under the authority of males and older women. Of course, elopement existed as a testimony to rebellion against male domination, but this recourse was almost always dangerous, and possibly fatal, for the eloping pair. In any case, elopement, if successful, merely took a woman from one man to another; whatever the outcome, she remained ‘married’ and therefore disadvantaged with respect to her rights as ‘wife’ vis-à-vis those of her husband.

Just how far things have changed since pre-contact times is demonstrated by two unprecedented phases of female assertion of independence that have occurred over the past decade or so. The first, beginning in the mission era, was their refusal to enter into marriage with much older men, which set them on the path towards free choice of marriage partner, but only within the bounds of the kinship system. Attempts by young couples, related incestuously according to the rules of classificatory kinship, to set up domestic units had always been rigorously suppressed in the Jigalong community. By the 1970s, however, there were a few young couples who
eloped to distant communities, sometimes on the coast or in towns. A few have since returned to Jigalong and have resisted all efforts to end their marriages. Children are involved, and as in all cases of ‘wrong marriage’ there are embarrassing complications concerning the correct designation of the offspring in kinship and section membership terms. In such cases, the assertions of independence and of the right to no longer obey the dictates of the Law in this matter are made by both sexes. It is both partners who feel disadvantaged under the Law, who suffer the community’s opprobrium, and generally both have been beaten and speared with equal severity.

The second phase has been the refusal of young women to marry any men, regardless of age difference. In Jigalong in the 1960s, the status of ‘unmarried mother’ was a temporary one, with all such women soon marrying. Since about the mid-1970s, a self-proclaimed and increasing minority of ‘free agents’ in the community have steadfastly resisted attempts by their parents, older relatives, intending husbands and the community at large to ‘settle them down’ (ie to get them to marry and by so doing come under male authority in accordance with the dictates of the Law). I witnessed many bitter and protracted wranglings over this matter, and heard, during the course of family arguments and public meetings, all kinds of approaches employed. In most cases neither pleading nor threat had the desired effect. The young women concerned would sit in public meetings with their heads down, remaining silent as they were harangued by a succession of older men and women about obeying the Law and going to live with their husbands. At one such night meeting, when the gathering was trying to get a young woman to go as *bilyurr* (betrothed one) to a middle-aged man with one wife already, the girl’s mother spoke sharply to her about obeying her parents. The young woman turned to her mother and hissed with as much venom as she could muster, ‘You like im? You fuckin marry im then!’

When asked about their *girrij* (single, unattached) status, most of the unmarried mothers say that they do not need husbands; they can look after themselves, they have plenty of relatives and friends, and if they want meat they can buy it in the store. Their frequent use of the term ‘free agent’ suggests that what these younger women value most is their perceived independence of action. They are constrained by the tenets of the Law in many respects, but having won the battle to remain single, they value their
freedom to choose their boyfriends and to sustain relationships with men—
on their own terms. There does not appear to be any shared ‘sisterhood’
consciousness among these women vis-à-vis men in general, and most say
that they might one day decide to ‘settle down’ with a man.

There is no indication whatsoever that these women are endeavouring to
segregate themselves from men; rather, their aim appears to be to distance
themselves from the direct authority of particular males, as husbands.
Although some older women complain about the young women’s lack of
interest and involvement in the women’s ceremonial life (cf M Tonkinson
1985:174), most young women do participate in the large communal rituals,
and during ‘big meetings’ and large-scale rituals they submit to the
collective authority of the senior males and females. In other words, their
rebellion has not been against the society in general, which perhaps helps
explain why they have been successful in their opposition to one part of it.
Another reason is that older men and women continue to view the status of
unmarried mother as a transitory one and to express the conviction that
these young women will sooner or later ‘settle down’ in a stable marriage.

CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY POLITICS
Mardujarra women’s voices have always been heard in public arenas, and
no-one who has worked with these people could claim that women’s
secondary status in the society precluded them from speaking their minds
on whatever issues claimed their attention. Personality factors are germane,
and certain very strong characters are legendary for their dogged
persistence in sustaining arguments in the face of a strong conviction on the
part of community members that these women are in the wrong. This is
particularly true of some women who defend their wayward daughters’ un-
Lawful behaviour. I suspect that such defences would not have been
successfully sustained in the ‘traditional’ society, since they ran counter to
community mores and the Law itself. Women were certainly subject to
physical punishment, and some of the older ones will readily display the
many spearwound scars on their thighs in answer to questions about what
used to happen in the desert when they ‘played up’.

Women show themselves to be as interested and concerned as their
menfolk in community affairs and in whatever planning is in progress.
Again, their statements about the past provide no reason to believe that they
were any less so in desert society. Yet dramatically changed circumstances resulting from culture contact have given rise to whole new arenas in which women are involved and interested, so the scope for women’s political activity has broadened in an unprecedented way. Some of them are now wage-earners employed in a variety of jobs ranging from teacher’s aide to bookkeeper, and thus closely involved in the workings of Jigalong as an incorporated community. In these jobs their status is recognised and rewarded by the larger society of which Jigalong is a part, and while most are servants of the local community, they have security of tenure as long as they perform their duties. Fewer men are in similar stable jobs, despite the fact that many of the younger ones have sufficient education and facility in English to work in them. This could relate to a dislike of ‘inside’ work on the part of men, for they remain dominant in ‘outside’ work, from pump maintenance and other mechanical repairs to seasonal stockwork.

When the Jigalong people were first asked to nominate councillors in 1973, at the time the community was incorporated, there was no discussion among the white advisers and Aboriginal men about the possible nomination of women, and eight men were subsequently elected from an all-male field of candidates. By 1976 the community had increased the number of councillors to twenty, and these included four women. Later, Jigalong was to become the first Aboriginal community in Western Australia to elect a woman as chairman of its council. She was elected with the support of elders of both sexes and of members of both major ‘linguistic’ groups at the settlement, but as Myrna Tonkinson notes, participation of women on the council is constrained by the observance of avoidance behaviours, most particularly with ‘sons-in-law’ (M Tonkinson 1985:174).

Women have always been in a minority on the council, and they do not perceive themselves, or act, as a bloc in the course of its deliberations. Nevertheless, their presence indicates that the community is content to allow women a say in its formal structures of government. The range of concerns expressed by women inside and outside the council is similar in most respects to that of men, and focuses on certain pressing problems that in essence affect the entire community—social control, violence related to drinking, vandalism, threats by mining companies to the integrity of homeland territories, quality and continuity of white staff, service delivery,
and so on. In reacting to these problems women and men have not as a rule expressed opposing interests, but I cannot say whether this is because community members see themselves as similarly affected, or whether it reflects a degree of reluctance on the part of women to press their views in opposition to men.

**CONCLUSION**

In concluding her overview of anthropological literature on women’s place in Australian Aboriginal societies, Catherine Berndt (1981) stresses cooperation rather than hierarchy in the relations between men and women. At the same time, Berndt underlines her strong objection to the term autonomy being applied to Aboriginal societies in reference to the behaviours of either sex. I share Berndt’s doubts about the applicability to the Aboriginal case of the generalisations made by Leacock (1978:247—48), whose argument runs as follows: band societies were traditionally egalitarian and women were autonomous, but as a result of powerful external influences these societies are now part of world economic and political systems; these systems oppress women and restrict them to a devalued ‘familial’ domain, while giving men pre-eminence in the more politically important public domain.

As I have endeavoured to show in this chapter, the argument that in traditional Aboriginal society women were separate and equal is not sustainable. Even among the Tiwi, where Goodale (1971, 1982) posits a ‘basic equality of the two sexes’, she also notes men’s greater opportunity for prestige and selfexpression. It is true that Hamilton (1980) has argued for the notion of a gender-based ‘dual social system’, and in a recent article (1986:18) speaks of women’s ‘separateness and power and self-assertion, built into the institutions of pre-colonial society (and assented to, or perhaps ensured by, Aboriginal men)’. However, she too has reached clear conclusions as to gender inequality in Aboriginal Australia; for example, Hamilton (1981: 69) speaks of the failure of most writers on this topic:

> to recognize the existence of a fundamental form of sociality which renders each sex powerful to itself but is premised on the ability of one to dominate the other by force when their interests are in irreconcilable conflict.
In her subsequent discussion of power differentials, Hamilton (1981:74—75) states that:

the power of men-as-a-group over women-as-a-group interpenetrates all the realms of interaction between the sexes. Women’s power is greatest when they have least to do with men, and is least when they enter the fields that men dominate explicitly, most clearly in the men’s ritual life.

In fact, Bell (1983) appears to be alone among Australianists in accepting wholeheartedly Leacock’s thesis as applicable to the Aboriginal case. A number of serious deficiencies can be detected in Bell’s work: its tangled mix of feminist and anthropological strands; its silence on the centrally important subject of male-female interaction and the host of cultural commonalities that bridge the gender divide; its depiction of the sexes as virtually segregated, which ignores the fact that Aboriginal women were part of a social system in which men’s rights predominated; its failure to take adequate account of the extent and nature of change when it ‘reads back’ into the pre-colonial situation and when it addresses the nature and significance of contemporary women’s ritual life, and so on. The shortcomings of Bell’s perspective have been expertly addressed elsewhere (cf. Merlan 1985, 1988; Hamilton 1986), so I will confine this discussion to her data on aspects of women’s status in contemporary Aboriginal society, and will contrast her conclusions to those reached in this chapter concerning Jigalong.

Following Leacock’s feminist-anthropological prescription, Bell reconstructs a pre-colonial Aboriginal society in which women are autonomous and independent ritual actors. This is a necessary first step towards her analysis of contemporary society, in which a loss of female status is blamed on the debilitative influence of the very powerful and patriarchal institutions of white Australia. Necessarily, then, Bell’s analysis of what is going on in Central and Northern Australia is negatively framed, in terms of loss of autonomy and increasing male personal and political dominance of women’s lives (cf. Hamilton 1986:15). Thus Bell (1983:231)
justifies her conclusion that, ‘It is the settlement lifestyle which is the greatest impediment to the consolidation of women’s power’ by positing a clear-cut scenario concerning post-contact developments (1983:250):

Women were disadvantaged from the outset because of the white male perception of them as domestic workers and sex objects....[and]...seen by whites as peripheral to the political process. Aboriginal women have thus lost valuable ground as negotiators with equal rights....I am suggesting that women’s status was not enhanced within this [frontier society’s] domestic and sexual context. On the contrary, in white society, women lost the bargaining power they enjoyed in desert society.

In an earlier co-authored report (Bell and Ditton 1980:114), this view is spelled out more fully, but with the same starting point—a traditional society in which the roles of Aboriginal women and men were ‘essentially interdependent and complementary’. Bell’s claim to have avoided discussion of sexual equality or inequality is contradicted in the quotation above, when she speaks of women’s ‘equal rights’ as negotiators in the traditional society. More significantly, by avoiding an holistic view of Aboriginal society as a social system, she has skirted fundamental questions concerning power relations. It is not difficult to understand why Bell avoids this central issue. To confront it would be to acknowledge overwhelming evidence, for traditional Aboriginal societies, of the generally successful dominance of male interests over female. As I have suggested, this successful assertion of greater rights is seen most clearly when things go wrong, and in the organisation and conduct of the community’s religious life (cf Tonkinson 1988b).

The argument advanced in this chapter stems from a pre-colonial baseline, in which my reconstruction points to the same kinds of interdependence between men and women that are reported throughout Aboriginal Australia (cf Berndt and Berndt 1977). However, it posits only a limited ‘autonomy’ for women and despite a prevailing egalitarian ethos in Western Desert society, suggests the ascendancy of men’s interests and rights over those of women. My approach is in line with Bern’s (1979)
depiction of the traditional Aboriginal social formation, though there are significant differences in some respects between his model and the situation as I have interpreted it for the Mardujarra people (Tonkinson 1988a). This baseline leads to a view that Mardujarra women have, in and by virtue of the post-contact milieu, increased their degree of independence and strengthened their status vis-à-vis their menfolk. I have been guided heavily by the statements of Aboriginal women, both the younger ones who profess the newly-won status of ‘free agent’ and the older women who generally disapprove of this development. In many cases these older women, as widows, have made a similar but less drastic leap in the direction of ‘liberation’ from constraints imposed on their lives by the decisions of men.

As to women’s political voice, the Jigalong data reveal a very different situation from that outlined in Bell and Ditton (1980:116), who suggest that women are unrepresented in settlement political structures in Central Australia: ‘What they lack is the forum to make [their]...opinions and decisions known’. Perhaps the authors meant this comment to apply only to communities ‘which had no uniting ties apart from imposed co-residence’ (1980:115). However, in communities with considerable group identity such as Jigalong, the forum of the ‘camp meeting’ remains vital for the airing, debate and (sometimes) resolution of major concerns, as well as the taking of important decisions. In this forum, women are always present and play an active, but rarely front-stage, role in the proceedings. At these public meetings, many of the issues raised in council are placed on the agenda of the community at large, and these and other concerns may be relayed back to the council for action in that forum. So while some women councillors may feel reluctant to take the floor in the more alien structure of the council meeting, they and other women generally show no inhibitions about making their opinions known to all in camp meetings, especially when the topic under discussion arouses their attention and concern.

Bell and Ditton’s claim that whites regarded Aboriginal women as peripheral to the political process is well taken. At Jigalong, for example, in the mission era the superintendent conveyed directives or other information to male Aboriginal ‘camp bosses’ and the missionaries certainly never pushed for the nomination of female ‘camp bosses’. And in 1973, the visiting government officials who advised the community on the setting up of its council must have assumed that the councillors would be male, since
they made no mention of the possibility of including female nominees. Yet, once the council was set up and in Aboriginal hands, it did not take long for the community to nominate and elect women as councillors. What Bell and Ditton do not note, apropos the colonial period, is that the level of paternalism was such that whites regarded Aboriginal men, too, as peripheral, or in fact irrelevant, to the political process inasmuch as it concerned the planning and administration of government policies towards the Aboriginal population.

Federal government policies of self-management have, since their inception in the early 1970s, affected Jigalong in a great variety of ways: positively, in the greatly increased degree of Aboriginal input into decision-making affecting the community; and negatively, in governmental refusal or inability to provide a level of funding necessary to enable the Aborigines to develop self-management skills through projects that they could devise and run (Tonkinson 1978b). In terms of the relationship between self-management policy and practice, it is impossible to posit a unilineal causal relationship between policies concerning Social Security payments to unmarried mothers, for example, and the emergence of a successfully asserted ‘free agent’ status among women in this category.

As I have endeavoured to show, a range of historical circumstances and changes consequent upon contact with whites and the abandonment of nomadism for a settled existence must also be taken into account. Yet the combined effect of policies favouring the individualisation of welfare payments, plus these other changes, has been a greater degree of independence being sought and won by women at Jigalong. That this gain appears to have been at the expense of ‘traditional’ values and the structures of the Law, in that it is symptomatic of a diminution of male control over female, likewise cannot be attributed to any single factor. What I have argued (contra Bell, Bell and Ditton and Leacock), is that the women of Jigalong have gained greater independence of action in relation to their menfolk since migration from the desert ended forever the ‘autonomy’ of traditional Aboriginal culture as a whole.

Notes
1 This chapter is based on research conducted intermittently at Jigalong and in the Western Desert proper between 1963 and 1988. For their comments on an earlier draft, I thank Myrna Tonkinson and David Trigger.

2 ‘Mardujarra’, previously spelled ‘Mardudjara’ is a collective term I have coined to describe several self-identified groups—Gardujarra, Manjilyjarra, Gurajarra, Giyajarra and Budijarra—whose territories surround, and extend east of, Lake Disappointment in the Gibson Desert of Western Australia.

3 Cf White (1970) who characterises women’s status as that of the ‘junior partner’ to men; Cowlishaw (1979, 1982) who argues for a structural inequality between the sexes favouring men; and Hamilton (1986:8) who speaks of ‘institutionalized male domination’ in Aboriginal society.

4 Bell (1983) has objected to this view because in some areas women, too, have increase rituals. To assess whether or not this disproves Bern’s thesis would require data from both men and women on the relative importance of the women’s increase rituals within the total framework of the society’s religious life, but Bell does not provide the necessary data.

5 In her recent article, Hamilton (1986:9) suggests that ‘the voluntaristic and essentially autonomous choice of Aboriginal women to form sexual relationships with whites in the early frontier period does not...hold up well considering the direct and indirect pressures exerted by both Aboriginal and European men in this period’. Hamilton does not specify these pressures, so it is difficult to address her contention in the light of data from the Jigalong area. Also, I take her reference to the ‘early’ frontier period to mean a time well before the frontier affected the Aborigines at Jigalong.

6 Merlan (1988) in her excellent overview of the literature relating to gender in the anthropology of Aboriginal Australia, discusses this issue of the decline of polygyny and its relationship to the changed economic circumstances of women. Merlan notes, contra Rose (1965) and Altman (1987), that there is no compelling evidence that the two are causally linked, and calls for a more precise specification of the complex changes in social relations that accompany the rupture of the nexus between marriage and female production. I suggest that close attention must be paid to the changing nature and content of relationships among co-wives; and in the
economic arena the distributory functions of kinship and gambling must be considered.

7 The eventual partner had to be related to the girl as ‘spouse’ or, at worst, as nyagaji, a wrongly related (ego-‘MB’ or eg-‘ZD’) but not incestuous pairing.

8 Pamela Peterson, an even-tempered and extremely articulate woman, is one of two Jigalong women whose lives are sketched in M Tonkinson (1985).

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17. Meeting between the Northern Land Council and the Central Land Council at Borroloola, Northern Territory, in 1977. Photograph by B Butler.
The Trinitarian debate in Christian theology may seem an odd place to begin a discussion of Aboriginal development in a book on Aboriginal autonomy, but nothing could be further from the truth. Take these remarks by one theologian (MacKenzie 1987:144):

The new divinized humanity exhibits a joyous freedom in God. It demonstrates that justice is actualized in obedience to God’s holy will. The new humanity expresses the just, self-giving love of the Triune God. It becomes a prototype of eternal life in God’s presence. It enables Christians to become truly autonomous and self-determinative in God and frees them from the oppressive heteronomous forces in life.

If one substitutes the concept of ‘the state’ for ‘God’ in this passage, you could be talking about the future of Aboriginal political development. Thus the rephrasing of the theologian’s remarks becomes: ‘The new liberated
humanity exhibits a joyous freedom in the pluralist-democratic state. It demonstrates that justice is actualized in obedience to the state’s democratic will. The new humanity expresses the just, self-giving benevolence of the pluralist-democratic state. It becomes a prototype of peace and order within and between states. It enables citizens to become truly autonomous and self-determinative in the state and frees them from the oppressive heteronomous forces in life.’

The critical question is what exactly do ‘Triune God’/‘pluralist-democratic state’ and the ‘autonomy and self-determination’ of ‘Christians’/‘citizens’ mean? We are helped somewhat by MacKenzie (1987:144-45) in the following paragraph:

As believers act in culture, they constantly should be considering ways to stimulate reconciliation of persons with God and with each other as well as to stimulate their growth in free, loving community. They ought

should be? Sharing a set of rules which requires us to compete with each other is hardly going to promote togetherness.

With the latter kind of sameness goes hierarchy—a regulatory force to control the potential anarchy that lies below the surface of the undifferentiated, competing mass. Judging by the experience of Latin America, the Philippines and elsewhere, this regulatory force can soon take on a life of its own. This is also true of Communist states which have eradicated competition by appropriating the authoritarian apparatus, ostensibly to employ it in the interests of the masses. Fortunately, Australians live in neither of these situations.

It has been said that colonial Australia began its life as a collective authority in the service of individual rights. In the British tradition of which it was an offshoot, states or provinces, not to mention municipalities, were seen as barriers to the effective use of central government powers. To what end these powers would be put, of course, was left to the discretion of the voters and the parties which competed for their support. The fact of separate colonies, however, was a force to be reckoned with when it came to
considering the formation of the Australian state. This fact impressed itself on, and moderated, the Britons’ preferred option. The tension between centralisation and States’ rights has always been a feature of Australian politics and today the pendulum seems to be swinging, not so much in the direction of States’ rights, as in the direction of political pluralism in general, though not without resistance.

In February 1986, an issue of The Bulletin headlined its cover story, ‘How the Bloated Ethnic Industry is Dividing Australia’. The article, written by David Barnett, deplored the nine million dollars of federal monies ‘being spent on giving people a vested interest in retaining a separate national identity’. It complained of cuts to British immigration and the importing of people from Black Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. It lamented that immigrants do not undergo indoctrination in Australian goals and aspirations (1986:62):

There is no short course on the meaning of the flag, the significance of the monarchy, the ANZAC tradition, mateship and egalitarianism, family life in Australia, the British heritage, the Common Law or parliamentary democracy.

This lament is part of an extremely conservatively-biased article which fails to note the widespread ignorance of these same institutions on the part of so-called ‘dinky di’ Anglo-Celtic Australians. The implication is that somehow this influx of diversity is responsible for Australia’s decline from one of the world’s highest living standards to about thirteenth on the list.

Perhaps there is some truth in the observation that people who have brought with them a sense of community and identity and have implanted it in their new home are far less likely to pursue the goals of acquisitiveness and mobility than those who have come for the ‘main chance’, or those already here who are pursuing just that. This perhaps gets us back to the issue of local government and begs the question, is it to be local government or government for the locals? Are Australians to be given the option of settling existing differences, such as ethnicity, securely in place or of being able to develop such differences by staying in place over time? Are they to have the choice of building a country from the bottom up rather than
the top down? Therefore, to apply the blueprint I have suggested for the Northern Territory is to apply to everyone a sameness whose consequence is difference. Such was the genius of Australian Aboriginal culture.

As Bowman (1976:3) has observed, Australian local government has never been local self-government: rather it is State government writ small’. In most Australian states, local government by-laws require authorisation by the State Government. Not all local authorities even have elected councils. Furthermore, There is no Australian local government: there is local government in each of the Australian states’ (Bowman 1976:16). There are some 900 local government authorities in Australia but they are not organised in any systematic fashion. Holmes and Sharman (1977:23) write of ‘the lack of regional differentiation in the political process. Australian politics has been seen for example as the politics of class and religion’. Australia, or any country, I think, is the poorer for it. What is happening in the area of local government in the Northern Territory today, then, can enrich the country as a whole.

With municipalities (wards and boroughs) as the units of representation in the States and (in some combination) in the nation, interdependence is enhanced and the chance of any one jurisdiction or the citizens within it acting unilaterally, or independently of the rest, is diminished. The tendency is also reduced by stronger yet more concurrent and overlapping jurisdiction at each level. This is the idea that each jurisdiction should control more or less what goes on within its own bounds, qualified by participation in the next level of government. Federal-State powers in Australia can, in fact, be classified as concurrent and parallel as well as exclusive or separate—a more primitive form of interdependence.

Federal, State and Municipal jurisdictions all have the right to tax citizens within their bounds. The Federal Government does so through personal and corporate income tax, customs and excise duties and wholesale taxes. States can raise revenue through stamp duties, payroll, motor and land taxes, and liquor and licensing fees. The Constitution had intended that States would have greater powers of taxation, but events and judicial decisions have seen the bulk of revenue-raising powers located at the Federal level. Through specific purpose grants, the Commonwealth is also able to involve itself in the theoretically Statecontrolled areas of education, health, housing and transport. The Federal Government,
however, cannot involve itself directly in local government affairs. The 1974 Referendum, in effect, prohibited direct Federal Government financial assistance to local authorities. However, monies can be channelled to local government bodies through the States. As Holmes and Sharman (1977:169) point out:

The history of our referenda voting patterns also runs counter to the proposal that political power be concentrated in a single political institution, and there appears to be little support for constitutional reform proposals which seek to end the territorial division of political power that lies at the core of our federal system.

Had that 1974 Referendum been won, Australia might well have been on the road to removing the need for States at all. Even with them, local State authorities would have been brought into competition for funds, to the advantage of the central government. As Sawer (1975:135) suggests, it could have produced ‘a system so integrated under central policy leadership as to deserve the title of “organic federalism”’. Consolidating local government in the States along the lines discussed here and in my report, further diminishes the possibility of overarching central government (and for that matter, State Government) power (see Turner 1986).

The Federal Government now seems to be moving in a more plural direction of its own accord, as is witnessed in the rapid devolution of programs to the one ‘State’ jurisdiction over which it has constitutional authority—the Northern Territory. Territory ‘self-government’ derives from the Northern Territory (Self-Government) Act 1978, which like all Northern Territory legislation can be revoked or overridden by Commonwealth legislation. The Federal Government seems to be moving toward a more policy-making and watchdog role in relation to its State and local government authorities. Grants commissions at the inter-State and inter-Municipal levels have been a step in the direction of institutionalising overlap, concurrence and interdependence among the three levels.

This said, there is nevertheless a countervailing tendency in a seemingly unrelated area, namely the economy. This tendency was built into the nature
of the Australian state through the constitutional guarantee of free trade and mobility between the States. One way of looking at it is that every Australian has the freedom to move and trade where he or she wants; another is that every Australian has the guaranteed right to move in on another’s jurisdiction. He or she does not have the complementary guaranteed right to remain in place. This bias is reflected in present Federal Government attempts to end State preferment policies favouring local over interstate and even international business enterprises in the awarding of government contracts.

All Australian states have now agreed to the abolition of monetary or percentage preferences and the Northern Territory seems set to follow suit. To do otherwise would only invite retaliation. The five per cent preference the Northern Territory does apply is minimal in any event. The Federal Government has, as an alternative to State preferences, proposed that the States award a twenty per cent preference to Australian companies. This, the Northern Territory seems set to reject unless compensation is forthcoming. These moves do not, however, imply abolition of non-monetary preferences. Some of the measures investigated by the Northern Territory include the following:

1. public awareness and promotional campaigns in favour of local products;
2. specification requirements drawn up with regard to the kinds of products and services available locally;
3. contract packaging which would include local servicing and training;
4. local subcontracting and employment requirements; and
5. counter trade

Pressure is also on, however, to abolish these kinds of preferences. In Aboriginal affairs even more overt preferment policies will prevail.

We thus begin to move into the emotionally charged arena of ‘free enterprise’ versus ‘government interference’, and ‘nationalism’ versus ‘internationalism’. Here I reiterate one of the arguments put forward in my report, that peace and order vary inversely with economic development. This argument applies to the Northern Territory as a whole, not only to its Aboriginal communities. In my view, economic development requires that individual freedom and competitive market forces be released. Under such
circumstances, people come to have less concern for each other and their property. Preferments, like marketing boards, are part of the mainstream economy and ought to be used by Community Governments, because they strike a balance between the two extremes. To proceed blindly along ideological lines, as many economists do, to remove all impediments to free market competition is to act both irrationally and in an uncivilised manner, given knowledge of this association.

Apart from this consideration are the implications for the Northern Territory’s quest for Statehood. Preferments make it advantageous for people not only to go to live there but also to want to stay on. Local-local preferments would make it advantageous for people to stay in a particular community. I am not talking about absolute prescriptions or about preference to the point of fostering monopoly and privilege. I am talking about the business going to a local who can provide the service. In my view, membership in the jurisdiction should entitle one to a preferment of this nature, whether in the public or private sector and whether we are talking about a municipality, a state or a nation. This does not preclude ‘foreigners’ at any level (inter-Municipal, inter-State or international) from coming in, doing a job and then going home. Nor does it preclude ‘foreigners’ from setting up a business there. What it does do is preclude them from enjoying the same rights and security as citizens (at each level). This is ‘discrimination’ in the best sense of the word. Given that others enjoy the same rights elsewhere, this is reciprocal discrimination of a mutually respectful nature.

Pressure to tear down so-called barriers is happening not only in Australia but throughout the Western world—perhaps more so in Canada in relation to the United States than elsewhere. It is a pressure to dissolve local economies into multinational ones. Once beyond the limit of the nation, as economists well know, this process takes on a life of its own, with foreign debt and balance of payment problems dictating that ever more of the local product be channelled to export markets. Of course, people regroup at the base in their ‘underground’ economies, but they constantly fight a rearguard action against the larger, official trend. They then become merely the custodians of the possibility of a community of communities rather than a community of communities itself, which requires an institutional framework of local government to effect it.
A balance struck between peace and order and economic progress is a balance struck between coherence and fragmentation, between pluralism and homogeneity, between apartheid and assimilation. The principal means of achieving this balance is through municipal institutions properly constituted and elaborated at the foundations of the nation-state. Australian Aboriginal societies are not so far apart in this regard. They can be seen as variants of the ward principle, albeit wards invested with the power to grant citizenship. So-called Aboriginal clans are in reality bounded jurisdictions in the same way that wards are bounded jurisdictions. ‘Language groups’ are collections of people belonging to normally contiguous wards, linked by placing a part of one in the other and vice versa (eg through intermarriage). ‘Skin groups’ are people belonging to non-contiguous wards linked by spiritual bonds (ignoring here the aspect of crossgenerational ties).

What makes Aboriginal institutions seem different is that they have been translated from a foreign language by explorers, settlers and anthropologists into that sector of English reserved for our own primitive forebears; hence ‘band’, ‘clan’, ‘tribe’ and even ‘nation’. We simply could not conceive of people less technologically advanced than ourselves being more advanced on some other scale. It never occurred to us that the two scales in question (economic development and peaceful coexistence) were anything other than positively interrelated, in that the more you have of one the more you have of the other.

MODELS OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT
I here summarise some of the alternatives being posed in the area of Aboriginal political development. The model of Aboriginal political development most frequently proposed by the land councils is the ‘parallel institutions’ model. This is the model put forward by the National Aboriginal Conference and by Coombs (1984), who conducted an enquiry into the role of that organisation for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra. The proposal was for a National Aboriginal Congress made up of delegates from regional assemblies, in turn composed of delegates from incorporated Aboriginal community groups and associations (of which there are some 900 in the country). The congress would eventually evolve into a national Aboriginal parliament with State and local branches. (The Federal Government’s recent change to a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is really a step in the direction of consolidating the
basis for this parliament.) The whole apparatus would operate, in effect, as a State within a State. In justifying this proposal, Coombs (1984:2) cites the United Nations resolution on the universal right to self-determination which states that, All people have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.’ What a ‘people’ refers to here is not entirely clear. And how far can self-determination go without impinging on others?

The person most frequently cited in support of the ‘ghost country’ idea in reference to Aboriginal people in Australia is political scientist Colin Tatz (1982:207), who says that, ‘the Australian political system has nothing to offer Aborigines...they will remain largely ignored and unheeded (even if heard) so long as they abide by the formal rules of our political life.’ It is certainly true that Aborigines are not effectively represented in government at any level above the local. On the other hand, it was a bipartisan decision of successive Federal Governments to implement land rights for Aborigines. Is rejection of the Australian mainstream not, then, somewhat premature?

Granted, a national Aboriginal parliament is a viable option which lies between apartheid and assimilation—apartheid being the separation of difference for purposes of exploitation—but is it a desirable option from the point of view of Australia as a whole? In the Northern Territory at least, the issue of land rights has produced a separation, indeed a balkanisation, of indigenous and more recently arrived people. Given that the policy of land rights remains in place—and despite modifications, present Federal Government moves seem to indicate that it will—surely the aim should be to reconnect Aborigines with other Territorians at some other level. With Aborigines in the minority and subject to control from the majority no matter what form of representation is instituted at Territory and Federal levels, surely the aim should be to locate primary decision-making powers in the hands of local government. The Whitlam Government of 1972 pledged itself to the development and consolidation of a third tier of government below that of the nation and the state, and this commitment has been continued by subsequent governments, irrespective of political persuasion. Is not this the cause behind which Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal sympathisers should throw their weight? Secure in their local
Community Government areas, Aborigines could then connect into the wider Australian society through regional, State, and national legislatures.

Were Australia twice its present size and its governments remote from the people, an alternative might be possible (though again, not desirable if the unity of a single nation is the aim). This could lie in dividing the country in two and rebuilding each from the ground up into more manageable proportions. Then there might be some justification for a separate Aboriginal government, even a separate State. However, Australia is not oversized and out of proportion; for example, the Northern Territory itself contains just over 140,000 people. In the Northern Territory, constituents have direct access not only to their Member but also to the Minister. It is somewhat ironic, then, that the Northern Territory should be the author of Part VIII of the Local Government Act 1978, Community Government, which will give considerably more powers to people at the base. Part VIII not only locates the middle ground between separation and assimilation, it also provides a point of transition for the translation of Australian Aboriginal culture onto a wider plane. By this I mean that it provides the opportunity for Aboriginal culture to express itself on the same plane as municipality, state, and perhaps, even nation.

On further reflection, I am now willing to concede that Part VIII of the Local Government Act 1978 does not locate the middle ground between separation and assimilation. Nevertheless, to gain some perspective on where the Northern Territory initiative sits on this scale of things it is well to turn to Berndt and Berndt (1983), who recommend greater Aboriginal representation in State and Federal Parliaments as a means of political development. Such a suggestion would seem to lean more towards the assimilationist side than Community Government, even with representation on an Aboriginal basis guaranteed.

Another critical question that needs more thought is the degree to which representation on an Aboriginal basis should be guaranteed. Would this not create and perpetuate an ethnic basis for representation and lay the foundations for future conflict between ethnic groups? Does this not contradict the very basis on which my claims rest concerning the superiority of Aboriginal institutional arrangements when compared to our own? My claims are namely that relations in Aboriginal society were predicated on affiliation with a differentiated sector of abstract eternal jurisdiction and not
on the physical makeup of those belonging to that jurisdiction, hence the so-called denial of physiological paternity and even maternity in Aboriginal thought. These are undeniable problems which remain to be satisfactorily sorted out.

We seem to be faced with a paradox: by constituting jurisdictions on an Aboriginal basis we create an Aboriginal ethnicity that Aboriginal culture would deny. By recreating Australia in the image of Aboriginal culture without reference to ethnicity, we acquiesce to assimilationist forces. Perhaps the beginnings of a way out were suggested by the current Prime Minister, Robert Hawke, in his 1979 Boyer Lecture. It is close to an alternative I seemed to reject for practical reasons in commenting on the Australian state. Hawke (1979:18-19) stated that:

I believe the logical implication of this analysis is that Australians would be better served by the elimination of the second tier of government—that is the States—which no longer serve their original purpose and act as a positive impediment to achieving good government in our current community. This would give us, like the great majority of other countries, one Parliament with powers available to the government to match the responsibilities upon it or protecting the advancing interests of Australian citizens.

My scepticism was based on the presupposition that such an arrangement would be a blueprint for hegemony. Indeed, there is evidence of this possibility in another paragraph from Hawke’s lecture (1979:18):

If our society is to have any chance of dealing with the problems of growing unemployment, high inflation, depressed levels of economic activity, dramatic changes in technology and the pressure of developing countries for greater access to our markets—the elements of crisis—then we must have one government with the unquestioned powers to match the dimension of those elements.
Local government, then, would have to be consolidated and greatly strengthened in its powers to withstand the centralising pressures of the larger State, something Hawke alludes to in his remarks. Would such powers extend to the granting of local ‘citizenship’ everywhere in the form in which we allowed it to enter into our Community Government schemes in the Northern Territory? Could national citizenship be predicated on prior local citizenship in one of a number of new regional constituent units?

The practical advantage of such an arrangement is that it would suit the aspirations of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and build on the Community Government initiative without further balkanising relations between blacks and whites. In other words, in the Northern Territory for example, the boundaries around one of the, say, three regional governments to which the Territory would be entitled in a national reconstitution could be drawn around Aboriginal Lands Trust areas. Certainly the three would risk domination within an Australian Parliament of some 300 regional units as a whole, but then the risks could be offset by ‘local citizenship’ and constitutional guarantees protecting their minority status. However, what this also represents is the entrenchment of Aboriginal ethnicity on a regional basis. One justification for allowing this is that Aboriginality may well be a difference that just will not be assimilated, whether traditional Aboriginal culture allowed for differentiation along ethnic lines or not. As I have argued (Turner 1987:81), ‘Far from being apartheid, the kind of equality in interdependence this would achieve—respecting differences that just won’t be assimilated—could be a model for a state in the 21st century.’

Another justification for such an allowance might be to preserve some direct manifestation of the traditional Aboriginal accomplishment, the basis on which the Australian state has been transformed. In any event, a perfect transformation of the political culture would see local differences of concrete content develop within the various regional jurisdictions. So why not begin with one (or more) of these already in place? Nevertheless, the paradox stands, unless Aborigines and other Australians are to move afresh into a newly constituted pluralist political culture devoid of previous occupation.

The fact remains that no matter what variation on this theme we deem most appropriate, at this stage it is just not practical—Australian states are a fact of life. The September 1988 Referendum, which voted not to afford
local government constitutional status—a move which could have paved the way for Federal Government involvement at that level independently of the States, reconfirmed this. As I have noted (Turner 1987:81):

So unless you...can afford to dream, you are forced to...settle for what’s possible at the moment. Within the constitutional framework of Australia, Community Government...perhaps offers Aborigines the best chance for development as they understand it. That is, if it all does not become bogged down in the politics of Left and Right, Land Councils and Territory Government.

The politics of Left and Right is another opposition we would do well to transcend. This brings us back to the theological dimension of my argument.

CONCLUSION
Paradoxically, a society constructed from the heavens/the pluralist-democratic state down is people-controlled from the ground up. This is because primary jurisdiction is subdivided and located there, close to where people really are. In a global context, the same would be true in a world of pluralist-democratic states. The difficulty is that this situation might not last for very long. The form of representative democracy I have been discussing, even as an ideal, has an inherent tendency towards consolidation at, and appropriation by, an apex. This is because control is exercised in a form (an all-inclusive parliament) that stands not just mid-way between, but over and above, constituent units. The agent of such an appropriation might be a political party representing a particular class interest.

On the other hand, a brake on such appropriation is the party system, in which the representatives of such interests are subject to electoral review, plus the fact that parliaments do contain a wide range of representatives on a constituency basis. In other words, local and class interests are in a significant way accommodated and moderated before becoming extreme—a very Aboriginal accomplishment.
In Aboriginal Australia, the segments into which their culture was differentiated lived side-by-side on the same plane, each enfolded or permeated by a part of the presence of ‘God’ or the ‘Gods’—the Dreaming. These Gods were not directly active in human affairs; rather, they manifested themselves in the Law. Aboriginal society, like Aboriginal religion, seems to have lived without the encumbrance of hierarchy in the sense of authority pyramiding to an apex, though there was stratification, as is evident in relations between young men and old, and between men and women. However, even here, institutional means, in the form of the section or ‘skin’ system, were invented to accommodate the conflict potential in these relations.

This system of social categories confounded the connections between the generations, both within the same local jurisdiction and between one and another, to render unilateral action on the part of any one generation untenable, indeed unthinkable. It did this by combining those in alternate generations in the same jurisdiction and, in theory, those in other local jurisdictions in the same Songstream or Dreaming track into the same category. It is thus predictable that the ‘gerontocratic tendency’ for older men to monopolise young women was only realised in societies such as the Tiwi, and on Groote Eylandt, where the ‘skin’ system was absent. Yet, even in these cases, jurisdictional identities were sufficiently strong, in and of themselves, to prevent the development of cross-cutting classes based on age difference.

With the possible exception of parts of the Western Desert, there was no need for an all-encompassing unity to enclose the diversity extant within. Instead, paths or lines of dots of differentiated Dreamtime ‘stuff’ stretched simultaneously east and west into infinity, while others moved simultaneously north and south, some parallel and some intersecting from time to time, but never losing their ‘separateness’ of identity.

Such, however, is not the Christian Trinity or the pluralist-democratic state as discussed above in apparently utopian terms. The Christian Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is compelled to confound its parts into a whole that borders on unity in order to guarantee relationship among them. As MacKenzie (1987:65) puts it, in the Trinity there is ‘a convergence toward togetherness, toward oneness’. The Christian Trinity, I would put it,
reflects the society it is trying to transcend. MacKenzie (1987:65) goes on to say:

Man, the paradox of the ages, stands in a world of vast diversity, variety, fragmentation, and alienation. Yet a powerful counter force endeavours to drive things toward each other. Even the smallest and most delicate of organisms, the mitochondria (cells within cells), demonstrate a primal urge to form linkages and relationships which support all life. A centripetal power prompts all things toward togetherness, toward unity, toward oneness.

The pluralist-democratic state, even in the form I have envisaged here, is still a state. Internally, it still has an inclusive national parliament which could supercede its constituent units if misappropriated.

If it had been an Australian Aborigine issuing the above quotation, he or she would have stopped short at ‘interrelatedness’ and gone on to examine the forms of interconnectedness possible before eventually settling on one type or another. However the Christian—or liberal or Marxist, or almost any commentator with our historical tradition as such—feels compelled to go on, to realise some great synthesis, some enclosure, within which the diversity can be contained.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not only conceived within a unity (albeit one which can be deconstructed into its component parts), but this Trinitarian view is still to some extent a ‘ground up’ exercise in which the heavens remain a reflection of material reality. That is, God is still a ‘Father and Son’—a personified projection. The break that would reverse the order of the Trinity, eliminate anthropomorphism and androcentrism and move beyond the overlap and concurrence of difference to the Aboriginal conception of ‘part of one in the other’, is not in fact possible until the ‘centripetal force’ noted by MacKenzie is eliminated from thought and from society—and not necessarily in that order. We need to avoid condemning Aboriginal people to a retrogressive future, in their view, by recommending any accommodation with even the best of our institutional traditions. 1
The research on which this chapter is based was undertaken as part of a consultancy to the Northern Territory Government. My thanks go to the former Minister of Community Development, Barry Coulter, who invited me to undertake the consultancy, and to Hugh Richardson, Assistant Director, Community Government, my travelling companion on many field trips. I received much encouragement and assistance from John McLaren, Assistant Director of Local Government, Peter Nichols, Director of Local Government, Frank McKewan of the Northern Lands Council and Neil Bell, the ALP Member for the Red Centre. I am also indebted to David Mearns of the Anthropology Department at the Darwin Institute of Technology and Bill Gray of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Most importantly, my research could not have been carried out without the support of the Aboriginal communities at Barunga, Angurugu, Yuendumu and Milikapiti.

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As a newly independent Commonwealth country, Australia inherited a colonial legacy, resulting from the alienation of a whole continent that had been formerly the property of others. The indigenous population remained a focus for political concern in the new country because they were visible and because they were living proof that those first imperial steps had been taken. Government policy was developed in this historical context: first to ‘protect’ the natives or make their passing less painful (to those who watched as well as those who suffered); and then to furnish welfare, to lessen the obvious symptoms of dispossession. Subsequently, policy was aimed at assimilating the Aborigines into the wider Australian population.

Self-determination and then self-management are more recent terms used to characterise government policy. These new policies were innovative in that they sought, at least nominally, to provide Aborigines with a measure of independence from European Australians. Tied up in the word ‘self’ was the ideal that people had the right to determine their own future and style of living. It was an ideology which accorded with the principles of Western democratic government that were thought to be at the roots of the
Australian system. It was assertively non-colonial, and self-determination in particular was initiated at a time when some politicians had resolved to rid the country of its colonial legacy forever. There is little doubt that the more optimistic of those involved with developing the new policies believed that they would help undo the damage done by the years of paternalistic missionary and government control, where Aborigines had no more rights than children, and the state cast a paternal but not necessarily caring eye over the impoverished and landless Aborigines.

The beginnings of self-determination go back well before the time of Prime Minister Whitlam, who generally is credited with its introduction in the early 1970s. A major step towards achieving this goal was the granting of citizenship and voting rights to Aborigines. The situation varied from State to State, but by December 1965 all States and Territories had awarded Aborigines the right to vote (Rowley 1972:401, 415). Although the granting of citizenship rights was part of the assimilationist endeavour, it also provided rights which subsequently enabled Aborigines to take firmer control of their own affairs. The Federal Referendum of 1967 allowed Aborigines to be counted in the census and determined that the Commonwealth should have concurrent power with the States in Aboriginal affairs. This paved the way for a more consistent approach and for the uniform implementation of policy across the Commonwealth, and eventually resulted in the establishment of the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA).

It was not until the Whitlam Government was elected to office in 1972 that self-determination was introduced as official government policy. In order to implement the new policy, Whitlam did four related things. He legislated to enable Aboriginal communities to incorporate and so run their own affairs; initiated an all-Aboriginal national council, the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC); increased spending on Aboriginal projects of all sorts; and commissioned an inquiry into land rights in the Northern Territory (Sanders 1982:5). In remote communities the consequences of this were, in part, that a community could become incorporated with an elected council, adopting an Aboriginal rather than a European name, have an adviser not a manager or superintendent, and its members could be involved in decisions relating to their own affairs (cf Tonkinson 1982:117).
When the Whitlam Government was removed from office in November 1975 and replaced by the Liberal-National Country Party Coalition, self-determination became self-management. The issue of land rights and the policies of both governments were closely related. Ian Viner (1978:3443), who became the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, made it clear why the two went hand-in-hand:

[Self-management] requires that Aboriginals, as individuals and communities, be in a position to make the same kinds of decisions about their future as other Australians customarily make, and to accept responsibility for the results following from those decisions.

The other side of the equation was self-sufficiency, which had to be defined in ‘terms of money incomes’, the provision of which posed a greater problem. The Minister (Viner 1978:3445) continued, ‘The only dramatic breakthrough may come from mining and the organized distribution of royalties. There are, therefore limitations on what it is possible to do...’. Viner perceived self-sufficiency as a necessary condition for self-management, presumably adopting the view that non-reliance on others would result in the freedom to control the use of resources. He apparently considered that the provision of mining royalties could furnish economic independence by providing proprietorial rights in goods or services that would give recipients the power to determine outcomes.

This point of view invites further comment because it raises some issues relevant to this chapter. The provision of mining royalties in the Northern Territory has provided income to only a relatively small group and the effectiveness of the system has been shown to have serious shortcomings (see Altman 1983). Further, the social cost of deriving such incomes from mining may be high and has not furthered the cause of self-management for Aborigines in the region (AIAS 1984). In many parts of Australia, Aborigines at present have no land rights and therefore no chance of receiving royalties. Even in areas outside the mining regions of the Northern Territory and in other States where land rights legislation
subsequently was passed, the possibility of viable commercial returns on Aboriginal land remains remote.

Other writers note that Aboriginal control of resources and money is a key issue in any program designed to develop self-management in Aboriginal communities in Australia (eg Tonkinson 1978; Vaszolyi 1978:153-54; AIAS 1984:278). There is no logical reason why Aborigines cannot be given control over their income regardless of its origin and certainly without the necessity of actually having to derive that income from their own land. It is not then self-sufficiency (in Viner’s terms) which is the essential complementary ingredient for the successful establishment of a system in which Aborigines can determine their own affairs, but rather the provision of the opportunity for them to control and direct resources according to their own priorities. The essential unwillingness of successive governments to give these communities real control over goods, services and cash has resulted in the perpetuation of a dependency legacy rather than its transformation. Despite the absence of necessary conditions for self-management, government policies in the 1970s dictated that Aboriginal communities would self-manage.

I have outlined briefly the historical background to the development of the policy of self-management because its origins are significant. It grew as a political response to a post-colonial era that many people felt was in need of being exorcised. Like so much ‘policy’ which is politically inspired, it relied more on rhetoric than on a sound understanding of the structural relations of its component parts. In this chapter I explore the confusions and the failures that have accompanied the implementation of a policy that grew from a limited understanding of systemic relations.

I set out below an Aboriginal response to self-management, in which Aborigines living on a remote community in South Australia saw that self-management initiatives might provide an answer to some of their problems. Their attempt to realise their ambitions was frustrated by the evident contradictions of the policy as it was presented to them. However, by opportunistically presenting the government bureaucracies with a fait accompli and with great perseverance, they achieved something which they really did want, even if the fundamental issues of the control of economic resources remained unresolved, and perhaps always will.
SELF-MANAGEMENT AT YALATA

Yalata is a Pitjantjatjara community of some 300 people situated on the far west coast of South Australia. Formerly these Aborigines had assembled at Ooldea during the time of the construction of the Australian Transcontinental Railway Line (1912—17) and were ‘looked after’ by Daisy Bates, who lived there between 1919 and 1936. Ronald and Catherine Berndt undertook pioneering fieldwork at Ooldea in 1941. The United Aborigines Mission took over administration of the settlement in 1933, and remained at Ooldea until they withdrew in 1952. The Lutheran Mission then immediately assumed responsibility for the people and supervised their removal to Yalata. The Yalata Pitjantjatjara have social, cultural and kinship links with other Pitjantjatjara people who live on settlements to the north, which include Mimili, Ernabella, Fregon, Amata and Indulkana, and with Aborigines in Western Australia living at Cundeelee. Their homeland areas are regions of the southern Great Victoria Desert to which they retain substantial traditional attachment.

The government policy of self-management had direct implications for the Yalata community. Under the policy, Aborigines were encouraged to run the settlement according to the sort of system European Australians felt was appropriate. That meant giving everyone the opportunity to make decisions and ideally, bear the responsibility for them (see Sanders 1982:8; Holding 1985:12). At Yalata, this was done by the institution of a community council with its membership of elected councillors (sometimes called ‘elders’ in other communities), who deliberated over issues of importance, rather as in the local government council system. This was complemented by community meetings where all were free to express a point of view. I call this system of Community Government, ‘community democracy’.

This style of consensus government brought with it many problems for the Yalata people. From my observations of council and community meetings over several months, it was dear that it was very difficult for most residents to comprehend fully many of the complex and diverse issues that they were required to consider, and in relation to which they were asked to make decisions. In consenting to proposed action, a predominantly Pitjantjatjara-speaking population was being asked to make informed decisions about twentieth century issues, invariably explained in English,
which were largely the concern of European Australians. Community advisers and Aboriginal leaders faced the problem of how to overcome disinterest, competing Aboriginal priorities, ignorance, vested interests and so on. Indeed, the administration at Yalata was slow to tackle even the most basic issue of language translation, since during the early stages of my fieldwork all meetings were conducted in English.

Corporate decision-making and joint responsibility for community action are difficult to implement when community members are a community in name only. The Yalata people, while all identifying as Pitjantjatjara, are made up of labile social groups whose members identify by virtue of their camping together or having an activity in common. Thus, a group at Yalata is a group for action and association and, as alliances change with activity over time, so does the composition of groups (see Sansom 1981). Moreover, people identify with different territorial regions and associate with separate mythological cycles. Within the one community, then, are several subsets of people (Palmer 1984:130). Even close kin ties are no guarantee of the assumption of responsibility which may be deflected onto others, or frequently onto the European Australians. Given this social structure, there is no reason why any individual should take responsibility for another person or group. It was as ridiculous to ask the Yalata people to take responsibility for a drunken and violent man in the settlement as it would be to ask a resident of a Perth suburb to go out and perform a citizen’s arrest on a homicidal inebriate. That, it would be asserted, was a job for the police, and the Yalata people offered the same excuse in declining to act. Yet over the months, they were constantly being asked to take responsibility for things that were beyond their control, given the structure of their society (cf Tonkinson 1982).

The use of the term ‘community’ in this context is thus a misnomer. The word has become a convenient label used by those involved in the administration of Aboriginal affairs to refer to a complex and heterogeneous group of people. Fundamental to the concept of Aboriginal community self-management is the assumption that the people concerned form a cohesive and integrated group. The perpetuation of the fiction that a group of Aboriginal people is also a ‘community’ serves to establish the existence of the right environment for the implementation of the policy of self-
management. In the absence of this precondition for self-management the outcome of the implementation of the policy is perhaps predictable.

One example which illustrates the internal constraints on effective self-management concerns the community truck. The truck had ‘Yalata Community Inc.’ painted on the doors and it generally was assumed that it was indeed a ‘community’ vehicle, as the insignia testified. Yet its use was limited to taking people back and forth to the camps, and it was returned to the settlement every night. Justification for these arrangements was that the truck had to be looked after’ and some European Australians, as well as Aborigines, agreed that the vehicle would deteriorate if its use was not limited and controlled. Moreover, the truck had been bought from DAA funds, specifically provided for town development. The truck could officially be used only for projects related to the settlement, such as carrying goods, supplies or people to do with the maintenance or development of Yalata. At a council meeting, one young and well-educated member demanded of a visiting DAA official an explanation of the uses to which the truck might be put. Following an answer consistent with the uses noted above, the Aboriginal man angrily responded that if the truck had ‘Yalata Community Inc.’ on its doors, then it belonged to the community and could be used as the community determined. There the matter rested for a time.

After a few days, the community adviser, seeing there was logic in the council member’s arguments, gave over control of the truck to the man in question. In the next few days other councillors complained bitterly at the alleged abuses of the vehicle that had ensued. After a stormy public meeting, the truck was restored to its original functions and there was a reaffirmation of the limits previously placed on the use of the vehicle. Not only was the provision of the truck circumscribed by a series of official constraints and conditions, but Aboriginal political systems militated against progressive management of a resource for common benefit because of intra-community factional strife. There were also external constraints, however, which restricted the council’s ability to successfully self-manage.

The Community Council, elected at a community meeting by informal discussion, met once a week or sometimes less frequently. The membership included two women out of the dozen or so who regularly attended. Over an eight month period the following issues, among others, were discussed:
debts to be paid for a truck;
debts to be paid for the school meals scheme;
sale of mutton at the store;
purchase of an adding machine for the office;
profits from the community roadhouse;
renewal of a contract for the roadhouse manager;
pay rise for the storekeeper;
holiday pay for the community workers;
problems with the medical service;
control and eradication of camp dogs;
staff changes and announcements of forthcoming visitors;
use of community vehicles;
mining and land rights issues;
film shows; and
control of violence and drunks.

Self-management at Yalata meant that Aborigines had the opportunity to make decisions about dog control or the sale of mutton at their store. Such community democracy is not to be lightly dismissed; it is a vast improvement on the old days when the mission superintendent ruled with a rod of iron, shot the dogs when he felt it was necessary, and issued orders that were obeyed. However, in practice, self-management gave the Yalata Aborigines very little real power, although they were instructed otherwise. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the policy of self-management and the implementation of community democracy typically involved raising expectations with respect to their ability to control outcomes. For the Aborigines at Yalata, these expectations were not matched by their experiences.

A further example illustrates both the external constraints placed on self-management and the frustrations experienced by the Aborigines in attempting to run their community. During my stay at Yalata, the Aborigines consistently responded to the frequent and sometimes violent outbreaks resulting from drinking bouts by requesting a police presence (Brady and Palmer 1984). The nearest police station was 110 kilometres away, and it took the police over an hour to reach the settlement, by which
time the trouble was often over or the damage done. It also required that someone actually call the police, something the Aboriginal residents of Yalata were unable to do since they had no direct access to telephones.

A series of reasons was cited by government officials to explain why it was not possible to provide a police presence. These included the expense, the number of police required and the undesirability of introducing police onto an Aboriginal settlement. Yet, the Aboriginal perception was that, in the running of their community, an initiative supported by most of them had been ignored by European Australians. It was not until 1984, when the school teachers left the settlement after a particularly violent period and refused to return until security had been improved, that police were stationed at Yalata. Even then, they were resident for only three days over the weekend periods. However, in so doing they proved that it was, after all, possible for police to be stationed at Yalata.

Despite the self-management policy and the implementation of community democracy, the reality at Yalata was that it was a community run by European Australians, largely from outside and according to predetermined priorities and ideals. In 1981-82, Yalata had an annual budget of approximately $600,000. Subsequently, major water, sewerage and power programs have been developed and several dozen houses were built for both Aborigines and European Australian staff. Implementation of these projects was legitimated by ‘consultation’, whereby Aborigines were asked if they wanted a particular development. Aborigines might have been able to change plans in some particulars, such as the shape of a verandah on a house or the location of a standpipe, but at no stage were they presented with a real choice. The money was not available for them to spend as they wished; rather, it was there for them to ‘manage’ according to the priorities and policies of the authorities that controlled the resources. At Yalata, Aborigines were effectively excluded from decisions involving large sums of money because expenditure was determined by budget priorities that earmarked money for particular projects.

These projects were also essentially European Australian projects. The ‘town plan’, as it was called, was designed to produce a modern twentieth century village. Moreover the power, water and sewerage schemes did more to benefit the European Australian staff (on average numbering forty-five, including children). The Aboriginal houses have been neglected or abused,
or have remained as useful but expensive storehouses, whose owners prefer
to camp outside while paying rent for their new acquisitions. Simply stated
then, self-management was developed according to priorities that were
those of the European Australians, not of the Aborigines, and Aborigines
had little power to control development, which was to some extent
predetermined and seemingly inexorable. In addition, they were required to
take responsibility for the actions of those over whom they had no authority
and were provided with no means to exercise such authority.

There was another problem that beset self-management at Yalata. When
the southern Pitjantjatjara had lived at Ooldea, they were on the very edge
of their traditional lands, which extended north and west and to which they
had enduring spiritual ties. The Pitjantjatjara continued to return to their
country from Ooldea as the years went by, albeit less and less often. The
removal to Yalata changed all this. Moreover, the establishment of the
atomic testing ground at Emu and later at Maralinga, in the same year as the
move to Yalata, made any access to the traditional lands impossible
(Symonds 1985; McClelland, Fitch and Jonas 1985:300). Entry was barred
from the south by soldiers and road blocks. The southern Pitjantjatjara were
compelled to live on country that was not their own and with which they
had no affinity, and were excluded from their homelands which were
blasted by a series of atomic bomb tests.

The Yalata people evoke a powerful symbol when describing Yalata in
relation to their homelands to the north. The settlement lies on the fringes of
the Nullarbor Plain and is characterised by bare stony ground which is a
product of the arid climate, thin soils and limestone that underlies this
region. The limestone powders to a fine grey dust which permeates clothes,
swags and hair. In Pitjantjatjara the word for grey is *tjilpi*, a word also used
to describe mature or grey-haired people. *Tjilpi* is ascribed to those whose
seniority makes them worthy of respect. However, there is an ambiguity
about the connotations of the word, for with grey hair comes eventual old
age, perhaps senility, and finally death. Some Yalata people, in my hearing,
deplore their greying hair, stating that it indicates that they are growing old.
Yalata ground is termed *parna tjilpi* (*parna*, ‘ground, earth’) and the
Aborigines assert that the grey earth has caused them to turn prematurely
grey. They believe that the worry and the alienation which are consequences
of living at the settlement have caused early ageing. The grey earth is both
the symbol and the declared cause of that process.

In contrast, the country of their homelands in the Great Victoria Desert
has red sand (parna wiru, ‘fine, good, ground’). It provides good soft
camping ground, has plenty of firewood and yields no grey dust. The Yalata
people assert that this desert country did not turn one’s hair prematurely
grey, or make you old before your time. Most of the Yalata people,
therefore, had little interest in the settlement and they attached negative
attributes to it. While certain of the younger residents felt committed to a
future at Yalata, since some had been born there after the move from
Ooldea, it was not a place that they called home.

The sense of alienation that most Yalata people felt for the community
was constantly ignored by government officials, who did not see the
implications of this attitude. The Aborigines saw the place as something
that European Australians had created and it was maintained according to
values and priorities which were clearly not Aboriginal. The development
of Yalata as an ‘Aboriginal community’ represented an attempt to
encourage Aborigines to take part in an enterprise in which they had no
interest. At least some Aborigines would have left if a suitable alternative
were to have presented itself. Self-management is not a viable proposition
when people are not only disinterested in the activity but are alienated from
the very community which is the subject of the enterprise.

RETURN TO THE HOMELANDS

The ritual life of the southern Pitjantjatjara had remained strong while they
were living at Yalata, despite missionary opposition and Christian
indoctrination. Concomitant mythological associations with their
homelands had therefore also remained strong. In 1966, it became possible
for the Yalata people to visit the Maralinga lands on annual ‘bush trips’ of
one or two weeks’ duration, initiated by the then mission superintendent.
During these trips, Aboriginal people began to revisit sites which in some
cases they had not seen for several decades. Consequently, the Yalata
people were able to re-establish their links with their country and renew
their relationship with it both physically and spiritually.

In 1962, the Premier of South Australia had promised that the Maralinga
lands, as they had become known, would eventually be handed back to the
original Aboriginal owners. The promise set in train a long series of negotiations and discussions over the future of the lands, the sort of title and who should hold it. Eventually, as a result of the passing of the Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1984, most of the land was handed back in fee simple to the owners who were to be known as Maralinga Tjarutja.

While this long process of negotiation with lawyers, politicians and government officials was continuing, there were a great many meetings at Yalata during which issues of self-management, control and ownership of the lands and related issues were discussed. In contrast to discussions about the settlement itself, the Aborigines understood what ownership of the lands was all about, for they felt themselves to be the true owners since time immemorial and from their point of view nothing the government had done had changed that fact.

When I arrived at Yalata in April 1981, some of the men with whom I worked were already talking of ‘going back’ to the land, not merely for a bush trip, but for good. As I became more familiar with the people, I realised that this ambition was shared by many, male and female alike, and that it was no mere passing fancy. This period also saw considerable changes in the management of Yalata itself. The former mission superintendent of two decades’ standing had finally left, and a series of younger and more progressive community advisers took his place. This meant that, for the first time, Aborigines at Yalata were exposed to the full force of self-management policies. Their response was to lobby for those projects which they regarded as priorities, including the setting up of an outstation. This was a sharp contrast to those priorities that the government officials were stressing—the development of Yalata by the provision of modern services of the sort already described (cf Tonkinson 1978:100).

Initial reaction from the European Australians at Yalata was guarded. The practical difficulties involved in such a venture were enormous. The area favoured by the Aborigines lay to the northwest of Maralinga and dose to Lake Deydey. The area lacked any drinkable water, and north of Maralinga and the Transcontinental Railway Line there were no settlements. Access to the desert was by way of a single sandy track made in 1980 by a mining company. The road had made a large area of land relatively accessible by vehicle for the first time. However, it was an eight hour drive from Yalata and water, stores, medical help and other necessities would have to be
transported over 350 kilometres of rough roads to an arid and remote spot with no airstrip. So while many were prepared to support the idea in principle, admitting that perhaps one day it might be a possibility, no-one was prepared to initiate action that would facilitate the establishment of the outstation.

On 26 May 1982, after a large community meeting, a new community adviser was asked by the Aboriginal council if they could use the truck to take a large group of people to the desert to start an outstation. The adviser, no newcomer to the area or to Aboriginal affairs, agreed, since that was what the people seemed to want to do. The Yalata people, having made an important managerial decision over an issue they understood and which concerned them greatly, were able to implement it. The Aborigines were permitted to borrow the community truck, along with another vehicle. With two private cars and a water tank in tow, sixty-six men, women and children along with their dogs, swags and stores set out for the long drive to the site for the new outstation, which everyone called Oak Valley.

The Aborigines had for once been given the opportunity to do what they desired, and had done it. No European-Australian adviser went up to the desert with them; they were all on their own, and that was how things remained for some time. The truck had to be returned to Yalata so initially there was no community vehicle available for the new enterprise. Water was carted from Yalata in an old tank chained onto the back of an even older truck, and there were frequent breakdowns as the rough track took its toll. On one occasion I encountered the truck on the desert track with three of its four rear double tyres flat. We mended one with great difficulty and discarded another two which were useless. Next morning the truck, with only two rear tyres, ran on to make the camp just as one of the tyres again became completely flat. One baby died on the track and many cars broke down with no water and had to wait a day or so before being picked up. At the start there were no visits by nurses to Oak Valley but the group had one vehicle which was called ‘the ambulance’, a large Flying Doctor first aid kit and a Codan transceiver that lived on the ground in the sand. Stores came once a week—a two day trip for the reluctant but sympathetic storeman. Life at Oak Valley was, to say the least, tenuous.

Because of these practical difficulties and the impending summer heat, the outstation group moved in August 1982 to a new location close to the
old mission site at Ooldea. The new area was only 140 kilometres from Yalata. During 1983, the Aborigines tenaciously maintained their camps at various locations in the area while the protracted negotiations over the return of the Maralinga lands continued. By the second half of 1984, they had moved to camping sites on the sand dunes on the north of the Nullarbor Plain and thirty kilometres south of the old Maralinga village. In December 1984, following the granting of freehold title to their lands by the South Australian Government, they moved twenty kilometres up the access track to Oak Valley. Finally, in March 1985, they returned to Oak Valley itself.

Official reaction to the establishment of the outstation was both guarded and sceptical. At first, DAA officials insisted that the Oak Valley settlement was not an outstation, but a ‘holiday camp’, and predicted its imminent demise. By refusing to recognise it as an outstation, DAA were not obliged to fund the project, something they wished to avoid since it presented a threat to the singularity of their intentions to develop Yalata. They were unwilling to fund a project which could fold up, since they claimed that experience elsewhere in Australia had taught them expensive lessons. Later the argument over the doubtful status of the Maralinga lands was used as an excuse. Despite government promises to return the lands to the Pitjantjatjara, DAA officials indicated that no money could be spent on the new settlement until title to the land had been finalised.

With the passing of the Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1984, which conferred title on the southern Pitjantjatjara, went an obligation by both State and Federal Governments to fund the infrastructure of an Aboriginal Land Council. This meant that for the first time there was a requirement on the part of government to finance the management of the lands by the newly-created council known as Maralinga Tjarutja. For the first time funds were provided for an administrator to help arrange stores, water and spare parts. Two water catchment tanks were built, capable of supporting a small group for several months, provided it rained. The council was thus able to give official recognition to the occupation of the lands and demand provision of goods and services for the outstation. However, services were still obtained from Yalata, causing many problems and complaints from staff there who objected to the considerably increased workload.

Nevertheless, there was at least some funding made available to the outstation. Thus, three years after the first move away from Yalata, the
Federal Government funded a significant development, enabling the outstation to have a chance of viability. However, lack of capital equipment and personnel seriously hampered the project, which continues to operate on a shoestring. In February 1988, there was no radio at the outstation, although the visiting health sister had one that worked. A series of vehicles upon which the outstation relied for transport continually broke down. The supplies of stores from Yalata had been a continuing problem and at the time of writing, a system of issuing stores from Yalata by the box had been implemented because of problems over credit. However, an airstrip was completed in 1987, two additional watershed tanks were constructed and a reliable water truck purchased.

Over the period described here the population of the outstation had been as low as nine and as high as 120, with an average of about eighty. Detailed census data collected over a one year period in 1987-88 indicate that over 300 people visited the outstation at some time, most of them coming from Yalata. Thus, the majority of the Yalata residents had visited the outstation and stayed there for short periods. Many stated that if there was proper health care and schooling at the outstation, they too would move there. Despite the obvious statements of interest in Oak Valley and a preference for desert living as opposed to the grey earth at Yalata, the government organisations continually resisted spending money on the new settlement or diverting it from Yalata. While the outstation lacked even a basic radio, Yalata was having a push-button telephone service installed in all houses that requested it. Yet the outstation group was actively pursuing self-determination and even self-reliance in many specific ways. There was no comparable self-determination possible at Yalata, because it was circumscribed by so many government restrictions and such Aboriginal disinterest as to be little more than tokenism.

The problem which demands attention, then, is why there was a discrepancy between Aboriginal aspirations and resultant action and the allocation of government support in the form of goods, services and money which was supposed to be guided (if not directed) by Aboriginal wishes. Some of the Yalata people at least made their wishes clear by their action in moving away from the settlement to their desert homelands to the north. Their alienation from Yalata was apparent to all but the most unperceptive observer. Yet paradoxically, that which the Aborigines wanted failed to
receive government support, while that which many did not want was generously funded. The explanation for this paradox lies in an analysis of the policy of self-management and a revelation of its hidden agenda.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the policy of self-management with respect to Aboriginal settlements has resulted in the development of what I have called ‘community democracy’. As described above, this system requires Aborigines to make decisions about their community as if the affairs of the place are their own. The official line is that, as co-owners, community members can choose the way in which things will come about but this stated policy involves an essential fallacy. Effective community democracy is conditional upon participants having the power to determine outcomes; otherwise the process is a sham, having no end product. In order to determine action the Aborigines require power to effect the same and this is not realisable, given present government policies which in their implementation deny self-determination. Aborigines are provided with the opportunity to talk to bureaucrats or listen to them in so-called ‘consultation’ processes and thereby perhaps to influence outcomes. However, they are never given control over funds, goods or services; rather, they manage these resources according to predetermined priorities. Aboriginal managers of the sort I describe here are thus powerless to determine outcomes, and this powerlessness can be explained by reference to the system within which community members are located.

The verb ‘to manage’ is used to denote the action of a person with respect to property or affairs. The term does not imply proprietorial interests on their part, and indeed, in common business usage, it can imply a lack of ownership on the part of the individual. Thus the sentence, ‘He managed the station for Vesteys’, states that a man looked after something owned by another. Even the sense, ‘She managed her affairs well’ does not rely on the verb ‘manage’ to convey ownership, for one could as well say, ‘She managed his affairs well’.

Weber (1970:221) described the growth of bureaucracy within a fully developed money economy; that is, one supported by stable income (e.g. taxation) with centralised authority. He characterised the bureaucracy as one in which specialists are employed for administrative functions which can be
called management functions, a term Weber (1970:196, 215) reserves for
the private economic sector. On Aboriginal settlements the administrative
functions were carried out by a manager who conducted the business of the
place within the broader framework of government administration of
Aboriginal affairs. Thus, the manager arranged affairs with respect to the
settlement and its finances which were owned in effect by the State or
Commonwealth. In this bureaucratic arrangement, the manager has no
proprietal interest in the settlement, and indeed private property is always
clearly differentiated from the property administered by the bureaucracy

The addition of the prefix ‘self merely changes the person or persons
responsible for the management function; it does not alter the proprietoral
relationship between management and property. At Yalata, despite the land
being vested in an Aboriginal organisation, economic control over the
community is still vested in the Commonwealth through government
bureaucracies. Those who manage the community (be they Aborigines or
non-Aborigines) are managers, not owners, and are subject to the
limitations placed on all managers to be accountable to the owners (in this
case the State or Commonwealth). They are subject to their direction and
obliged to implement their policies, not those of the community itself. The
Yalata managers can then be described as ‘powerless’ in relation to their
ability to effect action. This powerlessness has both obligation and
dependency as a corollary.

Blau defined power as ‘all kinds of influence between persons or groups,
including those exercised in exchange transactions, where one induces
others to accede to his wishes by rewarding him for doing so’ (Blau
1964:115). If one person accedes to the wishes of another because he or she
requires a reward for so doing and cannot obtain such a reward elsewhere,
then that person enters into a state of dependency upon the other. Blau
(1964:118) continues:

By supplying services in demand to others, a person establishes
power over them. If he regularly renders needed services they
cannot readily obtain elsewhere, others become dependent on
and obligated to him for these services, and unless they can
furnish other benefits to him that produce independence by making him equally dependent on them, their unilateral dependence obligates them to comply with his requests lest he cease to continue to meet their needs.

The Aborigines of whom I write have no independent source of income, lack cohesive force and have developed no ideology that might lessen their need to rely on European-Australians. The goods, services and cash which flow into Yalata are items for which the Aborigines are indebted to the European-Australians. The control of these items is ultimately vested in the European-Australians, who hedge community demands by reference to a whole set of rationales which will legitimize their maintenance of this control.

At Yalata, the power to effect action is conspicuous in its absence because generally the Aborigines do not exercise control over the resources within their community except in minor particulars, a condition noted for other Aboriginal communities in Australia (Howard 1982:1). Even in those communities where there is real control, other bureaucratic regulations are an impediment to the proper exercise of that control (Tonkinson 1978). The lack of ability to determine outcomes is also limited by the matrix of community authority in which individual jurisdiction is group bounded, so there is community segmentation and factionalism. At Yalata, effective community democracy is then a fallacy and its advertised existence a fiction. Aborigines are not owners but managers, and like all managers are subject to the control of those under whose jurisdiction the assets of the community fall. The implementation of government policy through the use and conflation of terms like self-management and self-determination and the much promoted ideal of community democracy is a bureaucratic fiction. It is used to disguise the limitations of what management truly entails by presenting it as a system that incorporates community control.

For Aborigines at Yalata, then, there was a daily contradiction. They were told one thing (determine your own future and be responsible for it) but were constantly instructed to do another (you cannot use this piece of property in that way). These frustrations were resolved, in part at least, by the development of an alternative course of action over which the
Aborigines were able to exercise control, albeit in a very limited way because of lack of funds and equipment. The outstation project was ‘out of range’ of the bureaucracies because they had not initiated it and had no vested interest in it. Ironically, the very factor that permitted the success of the outstation venture as an act of self-determination controlled by the Aborigines themselves was also its chief weakness. Lack of government support meant that the physical support for the venture was tenuous and the project was often close to failure, particularly in its early stages. However, the lack of material investment on the part of the government meant that control of the project rested firmly with the Aborigines, who had the power to both direct and control its course within the physical limitations that circumscribed the whole affair.

Lack of effective Aboriginal control is not limited to communities in South Australia. In those communities in the Northern Territory where Aborigines have received royalties from mining on their land there is a similar lack of control over income and as a consequence there has been little opportunity for Aborigines to achieve self-management in the region (AIAS 1984:278). There, as at Yalata and Oak Valley, the powerlessness and its concomitant dependency are the very reverse of that which Australian governments strove to achieve during the last decade. Instead of expunging the colonial legacy of dependency, the process of self-management and fictional community democracy has in fact nourished it.

The central difficulty is that government policy seeks to give Aborigines the freedom to determine their own affairs without providing the wherewithal to do so. In broader terms, policy seeks to liberate Aborigines from a colonial legacy through a process that perpetuates the controls and dependency that are a part of the legacy. The political costs of relinquishing that legacy are no doubt too high for any government to risk. Some might argue that it was an impracticable task in any case, claiming that Aborigines have a bad track record when it comes to community development; that it would result in the development of separate states and that Aboriginal society was too factionalised to permit stable and even-handed governance. However, despite those internal constraints, some of which I have noted in this chapter, while Aborigines lack effective control of their goods, services and cash income, the use of the term self-management is as illegitimate as it is misleading. In seeking to redress past wrongs by the implementation of a
policy constrained by political expediency, State and Federal Governments have added to the rhetoric of governance. They have done little to deliver to Aboriginal people the self-management that they seemingly promised to give to them.

Notes

1 See Sanders (1982) for a review of government policies and the shift from self-determination to self-management. The change in emphasis from self-determination to self-management suited a Liberal-National Country Party Coalition and was less radical than the policy of their predecessor.

2 For a critique of the self-management policy, see Thiele (1984).

3 The initial fieldwork reported in this paper was conducted during an eighteen month period from 1981 to 1982. Subsequent fieldwork took place at Yalata and Oak Valley up to the time of writing. Work was funded in part by a grant from DAA and in part by a grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. I am grateful to Flinders University of South Australia and Professor RS Kalucy of the Flinders Medical Centre in whose department I was based from 1981 to 1982. I also acknowledge the help and support in the field given by Maggie Brady. Jon Altman and Maggie Brady also provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

4 In 1941, Ronald and Catherine Berndt set out for a period of fieldwork at Ooldea Soak, the location of a mission on the Transcontinental Railway Line some 1,000 kilometres from Adelaide in South Australia. There they camped for seven months in the sand dunes with several hundred desert people (1945:312). The monograph and other papers that resulted from their work constituted one of the first scientific accounts of a single Aboriginal community and its culture to be provided by Australian researchers (Berndt 1940, 1941). See also Berndt and Johnston (1942), which resulted from an earlier period of fieldwork in the region. The monograph on the Ooldea fieldwork was first published as a series of separate articles in the journal Oceania between 1942 and 1945.
For details of the history of this move, see Brady (1987).

The figures are from DAA in Adelaide and include Community Management and Services, Legal Aid, Community Development Employment Programme and Alcohol Programme, but exclude Secondary Education, Technical and Further Education, Community Welfare and Health Services.

For a detailed account of the incidents that culminated in the granting of land rights to the southern Pitjantjatjara, see Toyne and Vachon (1984:122-33).

Freehold title to the Yalata lands is vested in the Aboriginal Lands Trust, situated in Adelaide. The Lands Trust is made up of representatives from Aboriginal organisations across the State with one representative from Yalata. Most Yalata people did not recognise the Lands Trust as an appropriate body to hold their traditional lands, and rejected their involvement as title holders when making a decision over the vesting of the Maralinga lands under the Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1984.

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Since 1972, successive Federal Governments have pursued policies which address self-determination or self-management in Aboriginal affairs. Implicit in these policies has been an ideological commitment to the notion of increased Aboriginal autonomy—an outcome which has long been sought by Aboriginal communities. However, the implementation of these policies neglects ideological differences within the non-Aboriginal bureaucratic structures governing Aboriginal affairs, and within and between Aboriginal groups themselves. To the extent they influence action, such ideological differences have implications for the establishment of sustainable autonomous Aboriginal institutions. Ideologies are often in conflict with social and structural realities so that policy and its implementation fail to converge. In the present case, the policy of self-management disregards the dependence of Aboriginal groups on wider, non-Aboriginal socioeconomic structures.

Theorists have widely divergent opinions about the role of ideology in society, ranging from those who view it as the primary integrating feature of human life to those who regard ideological components of culture as largely epiphenomenal (Keesing 1974; Harris 1979). However, many agree that
whatever its ontological status, ideology and social behaviour have an essentially dialectical relationship. Ideology does not remain static and there is much descriptive literature on ideological change, yet the complex processes underlying it remain imperfectly known.

It is possible to identify different ideological levels within a society. These span a continuum from formalised systems of abstract and universal ideas and symbols, to diffuse but widely-held beliefs and values. Within traditional Aboriginal societies, this is exemplified by the Dreaming myths, which range from the creation of the universe and the differentiation of living things to the establishment of rules for social life and general but rarely articulated values (Stanner 1979). For example, among the Pintupi there is a complex of beliefs and values concerned with ‘looking after’ the country (Myers 1980a, 1980b). This implies both individual and corporate responsibility and has some correspondence with European notions of self-management. However, these implied values are not seen as ends in themselves nor elevated to the level of formal principles.

The literature on Aborigines has highlighted a continuity of traditional values and ideologies in contemporary life (Kolig 1977; Tonkinson 1970, 1974). In addition, non-Aboriginal elements have been incorporated into the traditional ideological domain (Tonkinson 1974). Despite this syncretism, however, there is evidence from many communities of a clear separation of ‘blackfella’ and ‘whitefella’ domains, with the former being largely concerned with the maintenance and revival of Aboriginal Law (Akerman 1979; Gray 1977; Sackett 1978; Tonkinson 1978, 1982). On the other hand, there has been a perceived reluctance by Aborigines to assume responsibility for the ‘whitefella’ domain. This has been presented as a major difficulty for the implementation of self-management policies.

For bureaucrats in Aboriginal affairs, ‘self-management’ is a formalised ideology, albeit one which has proved difficult to operationalise. While they may speak to Aborigines of self-management, what the term implies for each group may not be congruent. Furthermore, neither has articulated how self-management is to be realistically achieved.

While there has been confusion in the operationalisation of Aboriginal autonomy, for those working in the field of Aboriginal studies, whether academic or applied, the general outline of the emergence of self-
determination or self-management policies is well-known. Following the election of a Federal Labor Government in 1972, previous policies of integration were discarded and a policy of self-determination was adopted which stressed the right of Aborigines to make their own decisions about the direction of their social and cultural development, within the context of the wider Australian society. Under the name of self-management, a succeeding Liberal-Country Party Government modified the policy to include greater emphasis on Aboriginal accountability.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in its Departmental Guidelines (1985:7) states that:

The Government’s policy of self-determination has as its objective that Aboriginal people regain control over their own lives within the law of the land and that they are in a position to enjoy fully their civil and political rights. They should be in the same position as other Australians to take decisions about their future and to accept responsibility for those decisions.

Although Aborigines were not excluded from deliberations on self-management, these policies were essentially articulated by non-Aboriginal people who believed that greater Aboriginal autonomy was necessary for any improvement in the position of Aborigines (Green 1986). There was little systematic canvassing of support for these policies in the wider community and there still remain conflicting views. Aboriginal communities have a less formal ideological commitment to self-management and their behavioural response to their situation is largely pragmatic. They ‘manage’ their own lives but in ways that may not correspond to non-Aboriginal perceptions of self-management. At the bureaucratic level, policies of self-management have been indifferently implemented. This chapter examines some of these issues in the context of an attempt by a fringe-dwelling Aboriginal community in Carnarvon, Western Australia, to improve educational opportunities for their children and to make the issue of their Aboriginality more relevant in that education.¹
EDUCATION ON THE CARNARVON RESERVE

The town of Carnarvon is located on the coast of Western Australia, 1,000 kilometres north of Perth. It has a population of approximately 7,500 people, of whom 1,500 are Aborigines. The wider Aboriginal population of Carnarvon and the distinct groupings within it are described by Dagmar (1978a, 1978b, 1983-84). Until 1981, the Carnarvon Aboriginal Reserve was located about three kilometres to the east of the town on the banks of the Gascoyne river. The population of the Carnarvon Reserve comprised about 300 individuals, of whom approximately 150 were in residence on the Reserve itself at any one time. The remainder could be found either working on pastoral stations to the north and east or visiting relatives in towns such as Onslow and Meekatharra.

The people of the Reserve (or ‘the mob’) were the most culturally conservative of the Aborigines residing in Carnarvon. Many had moved permanently to the town from the stations following the awarding of equal wages in the pastoral industry in the late 1960s. Although their ancestors had been in contact with Europeans for about 100 years, and economically they had been dependent upon the pastoral industry, the mob retained some key elements of Aboriginal traditions (Gray 1976, 1978, 1979). As a community they struggled to maintain a more or less separate Aboriginal identity and to improve their standard of living.

Among the adults on the Reserve there existed a variety of attitudes to formal education which cut across all sections of the mob. Many of the older people—who themselves had no formal education—were often the most vocal in enjoining the children to attend school. Although they believed that education could lead to material rewards and improved status, their awareness of formal educational processes and the mechanisms of social mobility was rather limited. Among some of these older people and the middle-aged initiated men, there was also the view that the schools should impart some knowledge of Aboriginal culture. In fact, two of the men had taught traditional artefact making to students in a special projects class at Carnarvon High School, and this was seen as a positive step. However, the way in which other cultural elements would be integrated into the curriculum had not been thought out, except in the vaguest of terms. People partisan to the teaching of culture had censured some of the younger
people because they had accepted the values and beliefs acquired through the education system, with the result that they had drifted away from the mob and its cultural values.

Others within the mob acknowledged the importance of education within the wider society, but also recognised that there were factors other than education involved in ‘getting on’ in the world. These people, having gained few material benefits from their own education, believed that formal schooling was largely a waste of time. Their attitudes were reinforced by two factors: the general lack of employment opportunities in the region; and the minimal educational requirements for station work, which was regarded as the most prestigious form of employment. Therefore, the attitude that they themselves had survived with no more than a minimum of education was often passed on to the children.

Another set of attitudes cuts across those described above. Some of the children had committed minor acts of vandalism and theft, which usually occurred while they were playing truant. For the parents, or those responsible for the children, these behaviours occasioned negative interactions with the police and officers of the education and welfare departments. To the Reserve people, the children’s behaviour in itself was of little more than nuisance value as, for example, when the public telephone on the Reserve was broken. Given that such behaviour was regarded negatively by the wider society, the mob concluded that school was the most appropriate setting in which to discipline the children. Thus the people attempted to ensure the children’s regular attendance at school to minimise pressures from officialdom. (See Tonkinson 1982, for parallels with the situation at Jigalong.)

As for the children, there was generally initial enthusiasm for the new experience of school, but as they grew older this enthusiasm waned. The stress on punctuality and the standard of discipline enforced by schooling stood in stark contrast to the permissive attitudes of their parents. The curriculum also had little relevance to the children’s everyday life. Additionally, the Aboriginal children, particularly those on the Reserve, were much less divorced from the life of adults than were the non-Aboriginal children. Consequently, while not generally as advanced academically as their classmates, they were more socially mature. To some extent this alienated them from the other children and from the school itself.
This trend was exacerbated by the racism exhibited by non-Aboriginal children. In the lower grades, it was common to see Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children playing together but as they grew older the non-Aboriginal children adopted the racist attitudes common in the town and increasingly shunned their Aboriginal classmates.

These factors manifested themselves in a high truancy rate among the Reserve children. This is not to say, however, that they were averse to school and education per se. While playing truant, many of the children attended the kindergarten classes which were held in the Reserve hall and were keen to participate in the activities in that less formally structured setting. This placed the kindergarten staff in an awkward position because they did not wish to appear to be encouraging such attendance but nevertheless felt that they should attempt to cater for the truants’ needs.

Despite the ambivalence and diversity of attitudes towards education, it is possible to state that generally, the mob believed that an elementary education was necessary for their children. They saw some value in achieving qualifications in mainstream society and they viewed the school as a vehicle of social control for unacceptable behaviours. In addition, some felt that schools should impart some knowledge of Aboriginal culture to the children, though few had attempted to clarify the means by which this could be achieved. The children generally appreciated some form of schooling but were restricted and alienated by the formal school structure. Furthermore, in conversation with government officials, many people expressed more positive attitudes towards formal education than they actually held. Some told officials what they knew they wanted to hear, while others, believing that generally non-Aborigines value education, expressed similar views to maintain friendly relations with those people.

**AN ABORIGINAL SCHOOL ON THE RESERVE**

The establishment of an Aboriginal school on the Carnarvon Reserve in 1977 did not occur in an historical vacuum. In the preceding ten years or so, a succession of Aboriginal organisations had concerned themselves with the education of the Reserve children. The activities of these organisations included homework classes and, in 1966, the establishment of the kindergarten which was extremely successful. By the mid-1970s, the kindergarten had expanded to cater for non-Reserve children, obtained
funds for a new building off the Reserve, and was maintaining an annexe (attached administratively to the kindergarten) on the Reserve. During this same period, an organisation formed by the mob also concerned itself with matters pertaining to education. At its meetings, discussion often centred on the problem of truancy and some minor actions were taken at various times to alleviate this.

Also pertinent to the establishment of the school was a sporadic debate among some older members of the mob about broader educational concerns. This centred on the maintenance of Aboriginal traditions—the Law. Despite conflicting opinions, both sides in this debate started from the premise that the Law was important. On one side were those who believed that the young people were ‘cheeky’ and unworthy, and should be left to go their own way. On the other were those who believed that the people must take positive action to teach and guide the young and saw schooling as a potential vehicle for this.

In late 1976, truancy was becoming an increasing problem for both the staff at East Carnarvon Primary School and the children’s parents. The headmaster at the school was aware that the education system was not relevant to the daily lives of Aboriginal children. Consequently, he sought aid from the Disadvantaged Schools Commission to develop a program which would attract the children to the school. The headmaster put his proposal to the Koorda Club—an organisation purporting to represent all Aborigines in Carnarvon, but in the mid-1970s largely dominated by the mob. However, some members of the Koorda Club’s Executive Committee had reservations about the development of such a program. They feared that it might be used to take Aboriginal children who were considered to be ‘a problem’ out of the mainstream of education but provide them with no viable alternative. These committee members and a European female teacher, who had had a long association with the mob, expressed their concern publicly. Over several weeks, the proposal and some alternatives were freely discussed. One option, a vague idea for the establishment of a separate school along the lines of the kindergarten, had been around for some years but at this time gained wide acceptance.

In November 1976, a meeting was held to discuss the headmaster’s proposal for a special program. This meeting was attended by approximately forty adults. On the day of the meeting a small party of
visitors from Strelley arrived at the Reserve. Two of these visitors addressed the meeting and extolled the virtues of the Aboriginal school at Strelley. This helped to sway the meeting, which came out in favour of establishing an independent school on the Reserve. The members of the Executive Committee and the female teacher were then asked to take the matter up on the mob’s behalf.

Initially, those organising the school hoped that rather than ‘going it alone’ they could work with the East Carnarvon school. To this end they proposed that the school establish an annexe on the Reserve. They believed this would more readily meet the needs of the children and that the project could be funded by the Disadvantaged Schools Commission. However, they were told by the Superintendent of Aboriginal Education that, as a matter of policy, the Department of Education would not set up an annexe. He suggested that instead the Koorda Club write to the Minister of Education with their request and said that if the Minister refused, it would be possible for the Koorda Club to establish an independent school.

At the beginning of the 1977 academic year, the Koorda Club forwarded a letter, signed by approximately 100 people, to the Minister of Education requesting that a school be established. On 16 March, the Minister acknowledged receipt of the letter and promised to look into the matter, but no further correspondence from him was forthcoming. In the meantime, a new headmaster had been appointed to the East Carnarvon Primary School and he briefly visited the Reserve and spoke to some of the parents. He believed that something should be done for their children but that it should be done by the Department of Education, and warned the Koorda Club Secretary of the difficulties of establishing an independent school. The matter remained unresolved until the end of April when the Executive Committee, the European teacher and some of the parents decided to go ahead and open an independent school on the first day of the second term. The school opened on 30 May in a bough shed which had been constructed by the children and some of the men. The opening was auspicious and the response of the children enthusiastic, even among those who had been previously described as ‘hard-core truants’.

Once the decision to establish an independent school was taken, most of the organisational details were left to the European teacher. From the outset the scheme faced great difficulties, not the least of which were financial.
When an independent school is established and classified by the State Education Department as ‘efficient’, it is eligible for recurrent grants from the Federal Government’s Schools Commission. However, such funding is not available to establish a school. Consequently, the school was totally dependent upon a small cash payment made to it by the Koorda Club and miscellaneous donations of stationery and equipment. As there was no money available for staff salaries the European teacher, a second teacher and one of the Reserve men agreed to work without pay until funds were available. The Reserve man taught ceremonial activities and artefact making, and generally acted as an Aboriginal mediator.

Another important handicap was the short period of time available between the decision to establish the school and its opening. As a result the teachers primarily had to concern themselves with administrative matters. Limited time was available to be spent with the mob on a mutual clarification of aims for the school, teaching methods to be employed, or the development of a comprehensive curriculum. For their part, the teachers aimed at providing a primary school education which would equip the children to compete on equal terms with non-Aboriginal children when they reached high school. This involved the provision of skills in reading, writing and mathematics but using the children’s everyday experience and cultural background as a basis. The teachers also recognised ‘the importance of knowledge of the wider community within which... [the children] will need to be able to operate’ (Koorda Club 1977) and they planned to organise regular excursions for that purpose. The emphasis in the school was to be on ‘open learning’ in the children’s own ‘non-threatening environment’. As the children had not experienced this type of education before, the teachers thought that it would probably take them at least one term to settle into the new system.

The fact that the teachers did not have the time to develop a comprehensive curriculum in advance or to discuss their aims with the people led to a falling away of support for the project as it progressed. In addition, the demand of the older people that traditional cultural values be emphasised was not really achieved. As the members of the mob had no experience in formal education, they were not in a position to articulate their general goals as specific learning objectives to the teachers. The result of this was that one of the men taught the children traditional dancing and
the making of artefacts but in a manner largely divorced of cultural context, thus falling far short of what the older people had envisioned.

An important area of disagreement which developed between the teachers and the people was with respect to the interrelated areas of the context of learning and discipline. The teachers believed that conventional approaches to education were unsuitable for teaching Aboriginal children in particular, and intellectually stifling in general. The teachers attempted to provide an ‘open learning’ situation and one in which the children could ‘learn through play’. The Reserve people, on the other hand, did not possess the same degree of disillusion with the education system per se. Those older people who were disillusioned, were so because the education system did not emphasise Aboriginal values. In fact the people were more concerned that school should act as a disciplinary institution and many parents thought that a school run by their own community would be more effective in this regard. Parents wanted their children to be in school, seated at a desk for six hours each day, working at the ‘three Rs’. However, this was not what they got. What the teachers saw as learning through play’ the parents saw only as play.

In addition to not being prepared for the problems of actually running a school, the people were not aware of the controversial nature of what they were doing. They were ill-prepared for the opposition they encountered, which was both swift and vehement. The new headmaster at East Carnarvon Primary School, who was still attempting to provide alternatives within his school, told the parents he considered the move ill-advised. Officers from the Department of Community Welfare refused to recognise the school and advised the parents and guardians of some of the children who were State wards, that these children were not permitted to attend the school. This reduced the number of pupils and decreased the level of support for the school. The official opposition was joined by criticism from some of the more acculturated Aborigines in the town who saw the school as a return to the days of Aboriginal segregation. It appears that these people, who had struggled hard for acceptance in the wider community and had accepted the ideology of assimilation, saw overt expressions of self-determination by other Aboriginal groups as compromising their own position.
Under these circumstances, the people’s enthusiasm for the project was not sustained and by August it had almost completely waned. In that brief period the attitudes of the adults changed from unconditional support to bewilderment and uneasiness, and finally to abandonment of the scheme. Thus, when the headmaster from East Carnarvon Primary School addressed a meeting and presented a proposal to conduct a special class for some of the Reserve children at his school, a majority of the people accepted. At the end of its first term of operation the Reserve school closed and the children returned to East Carnarvon Primary School.

CONCLUSION
Aborigines on the Carnarvon Reserve had managed their own affairs for many years within the context of their dependent position within the wider society. Such self-management was largely pragmatic, not wrought into a formal ideology, and did not often coincide with the ideals of non-Aboriginal Australians. However, the people had their own priorities and brought to bear their limited resources to achieve goals they deemed desirable. This was manifest in, among other things, a revival of traditional religion among them, a struggle over many years to have their living conditions improved and in the establishment of the Reserve school (Gray 1977, 1978).

Aboriginal communities are often portrayed as being ideologically homogeneous. However, the situation described here illustrates a diversity of beliefs with respect to the issue of education. The Reserve school did not grow out of a formal ideology of self-management held by the community as a whole. There were some who saw schooling as a potential vehicle for the reinforcement of traditional Aboriginal values. Others saw it as a means of disciplining children, keeping them out of trouble and hence minimising unwelcome contacts with non-Aboriginal bureaucrats. As well as this, there were people—mainly single, young adults—who were not committed to any position but were prepared to go along with decisions made by those most directly affected. Despite the diversity, however, the people did decide upon a common course of action to manage the educational problems confronting them.

Having made the decision to act themselves, the people needed support for their decision. Like most Aboriginal communities, they were
economically dependent on the non-Aboriginal community, especially the public sector. Unlike some more affluent religious or ethnic minorities, they had neither the material resources nor the political power to establish a school independently. Under these circumstances, to bring the school to fruition the mob needed the backing of governmental bureaucracy, but this was not forthcoming. On one hand, the State Education Department had no policy of allowing Aborigines to determine their own educational needs. On the other, DAA took no action on the issue. As a department, DAA maintained minimal involvement in the education sphere, regarding it as the province of the Commonwealth and State Departments of Education. Despite the sympathy of their local community development officer, DAA considered the issue as a matter between the mob and the State Education Department. Thus we see a situation where, for the previous three or four years, DAA had been officially encouraging Aborigines to take responsibility for their own affairs but in this case, when they did, provided them with no support.

The actions of the local officers of the Departments of Education and Community Welfare, which effectively undercut the mob’s initiative, highlight a major difficulty with the policy of self-management. This is that Federal Government policy is not binding upon State Governments and their various departments. The officers involved acted in accordance with the policies of their own agencies but in disregard for the expressed wishes of the Aboriginal people they were purporting to serve.

Lack of resources to effectively implement the decision to establish a school and the absence of government support took their toll on the attitudes of the people towards their school. When people talked about having their own school, they generally imagined having a conventional school situated on the Reserve for the exclusive use of their children. However, the financial aspects of the scheme were not really discussed or comprehended, although there was a general feeling, given the rhetoric about self-management, that some form of government assistance would be forthcoming. As the school did not have the financial resources with which to obtain a building and equipment, it lacked the tangible facilities which symbolise a school. Therefore, the school did not appear to be a ‘real’ school and the children were obviously materially disadvantaged when compared to their previous situation. The people had wanted something
which other Aboriginal groups in the town did not have but they also wanted something which would be looked upon with admiration by outsiders. In this respect, the school in a bough shed became a source of embarrassment rather than a source of pride. The erosion of mob support for the school was exacerbated because of the variance in approach by the people and the teachers with regard to the aims of the school.

The variance in approach is reflected by the attitudes of the two non-Aborigines involved. For example, the European female teacher believed that once Aboriginal support for the school was won, it would continue. When the school began to run into difficulties, the teacher was prepared to stand on principle and confront the critics. However, the principle for which she stood was no longer that of the mob and she continued to press for a school the Reserve people no longer wanted. For his part, the headmaster appeared to believe the Reserve people had never really wanted a separate school. He believed the teacher had established the school without the people’s support and inexplicably, the people had allowed their children to attend. The fact that the teacher did not have the support of the mob at the end was, for the headmaster, proof that she never had it. This reflects an implicitly racist view of relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Certainly, Aborigines are influenced by the ideas of others with whom they come in contact. However, the criticism suggests that Aborigines do not have the faculties to evaluate ideas and options and that they are sheep to be led by any opportunist who so desires.

Both these people, in fact, failed to recognise that the Reserve people, like people anywhere, may change their minds according to their evaluation of a particular situation. For those working among Aborigines there is an important lesson to be learned from this. Rather than getting involved in personal recriminations about who is ‘right’ about what the people want, non-Aboriginal advisers need to be much more in tune with the continual changes of opinion which occur in any community. Instead of attempting to force the people into the restrictive framework of opinions, once or currently-held, community workers have to be as flexible as the people themselves.

Subsequent to the events chronicled in this chapter, a series of Aboriginal Committees on Education was established with funding provided for a period of three years by the Schools Commission. However, the Beazley
Report (1984:324) noted that there was no committee at a State level which could:

provide a more direct and influential link with the Government and with educational systems and authorities. The lack of such a committee has created a serious vacuum in decision-making arrangements and has heightened anxiety, frustration and suspicion in Aboriginal communities.

The Beazley Report went on to state that, still, ‘one of the most urgent needs is to increase the amount of self-determination in Aboriginal education’ (1984:327). As a consequence of this and various other pressures, the State Government created the Western Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. While it is too early yet to judge the efficacy of this body, there is little room for optimism. Governmental bureaucracies have been designed to implement decisions and policies from the top down and no amount of tinkering is likely to enable them to respond quickly and effectively to Aboriginal initiatives in community development. At local, State and Federal levels, Aboriginal advisory bodies on a wide range of issues have proved largely ineffective, having no real power to initiate change.

No-one would seriously suggest that in pre-contact times Aborigines had problems in managing their own affairs; it is only in the context of colonisation and dependence that this has become an issue. Even in their present situation, Aborigines have not abandoned a desire to control their own affairs. Many writers, for example Tonkinson (1978), noting the dichotomy that Aborigines have made between ‘blackfella’ and ‘whitefella’ business, have indicated that Aborigines continue to effectively manage the former. It has often been assumed, however, that they have little or no interest in ‘whitefella’ business. This is an oversimplification, so it would be more instructive to make a distinction between issues in which Aborigines have no interest, and those in which they have interest but little opportunity for influence. This case study and the recent upsurge in the establishment of Aboriginal community schools (Blanchard 1985) indicate that education clearly falls into the latter category of ‘whitefella’ business.
Self-management as formulated by politicians and bureaucrats is an imposed ideology. It is concerned with those issues falling into the domain of ‘whitelena’ business and which are of concern to non-Aborigines. It downplays or disregards Aboriginal initiatives in other areas of their lives and is divorced from that reality. Furthermore, it is a high level abstract ideology which takes little or no account of the dependence of Aborigines on the wider community. Responsibility for the implementation of this policy rests largely with DAA. The policy has not been systematically applied in areas outside the purview of DAA, and the department lacks the power to influence other Federal and State government bodies to implement the policy. All of these factors compromise the effectiveness of self-management.

The attempt by the people of Carnarvon Reserve to establish their own school failed largely because they did not have the resources to implement their decision. When they proceeded with the scheme in the face of this difficulty, they received no support from those whose role was ostensibly to help them to become independent—despite the official policy of encouraging Aboriginal initiatives. This case study and the continuing plight of Aborigines, after almost twenty years of self-management, demonstrate that policy based on an ideology which fails to take account of social structural realities is bound to have only a marginal effect.

Note
1 As undergraduates both Dennis Gray and Sherry Saggers studied Aboriginal anthropology under Ronald and Catherine Berndt. The material upon which this paper is based was gathered while Dennis Gray was employed as an anthropologist with the Western Australian Public Health Department, a position which he took at the suggestion of Ronald Berndt.

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The past fifty years of Aboriginal-European relations are frequently presented and accepted as narratives of advancement. According to these accounts, the protectionist strategy and total institutions of the settlement and mission era gave way to efforts aimed at assimilation which were then modified in an attempt to achieve a state of integration. More recently, the thrust has been to hand the management of Aboriginal affairs back to the people themselves. This recent movement is depicted as being from paternalistic control to self-determination; from dependence and subordination to independence and democratic equality. Indeed, a succession of Federal and State Governments, both Liberal and Labor, have touted repeatedly the notion that self-management and the injection of money into communities are at last operating to ‘set Aborigines free’—free of manipulation by interlopers and therefore free to move in the directions they choose. In this view, self-management and economic development are portrayed as two sides of the same coin, where development is heralded as furthering more confident and able self-management, and self-management is said to spur development.
While politicians and their bureaucratic functionaries promote their initiatives as progressive and liberating, a growing number of social scientists have begun pointing to worrisome defects inherent in present policy and practice. The criticisms strike at three broad but interrelated aspects of the self-management program. The first criticism, addressed by Beckett (1985), Howard (1982a) and Jennett (1987), among others, queries why governments are expending vast sums on what is objectively a relatively powerless minority. The responses range from suggestions that the program is nothing more than an enormous public relations exercise designed to sway overseas audiences, through to claims that it is the product of a conspiracy to subsidise ‘capital’ by maintaining a ‘lumpenproletariat’ at the taxpayers’ expense. There is, however, general agreement that the new policy has not resulted in a swing towards emancipation.

The second avenue of attack suggests that the entire enterprise has occasioned only a shift in the specifics of dependence and hence, the agents of control. It is argued that this shift has been from charity, rations and wages to government grants, loans and social service payments and consequently from domination by ‘bosses’ to regulation by advisers and administrators. As Cowlishaw (1983), Thiele (1982) and von Sturmer (1982) indicate, this in turn means that self-management and economic development actually are not supportive of each another. Too often, Aborigines are unable to determine their own destinies precisely because it is whites who provide or withhold vital finance, and thereby decide not only the dominant trajectory of development but much of the day-to-day running of community business as well.

Thirdly, researchers have noted how such circumstances generate serious repercussions at the level of social relationships. Cowlishaw (1983), Jennett (1987), Thiele (1982) and Tonkinson (1982) discuss the manner in which structural arrangements function not to facilitate harmonious multiculturalism, but rather to set whites and Aborigines against each other in new ways. Howard (1978, 1979, 1981, 1982b), focusing on intra-community reverberations, examines the way external forces created what might be said to be horizontal splits among Aborigines. As he reports it, a few men and women, owing to their close association with influential or pivotal white patrons, have come to constitute an Aboriginal elite—
attributed with representing their fellows, yet largely cut off from them and sometimes unwittingly helping to suppress them.

In this chapter I amplify this latter concern through the examination of a comparable phenomenon emergent at Wiluna, Western Australia. People there are subject to the direct authority of a throng of whites who compete with one another to win favour and funds from Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) officials in Perth and Canberra. By way of enhancing and bolstering their claims and counter-claims they have recruited community members as supporters. However, this has not resulted in an elevation of some Aborigines at the expense of others, so much as it has served to engender competing factions that pit themselves in contests from which only the whites can profit.

DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE
By the early 1970s, the Aborigines of the Wiluna region had endured an extended history of discrimination and exploitation. The Seventh Day Adventist missionaries, with a view towards separating younger Aboriginal people both socially and culturally from their non-Christian parents, seized children for the dormitory and educational system run by the church. Aboriginal employees were grossly underpaid by certain employers, who for the most part hired and laid-off labour on a seasonal basis, while the unemployed, of which there were always a significant number, were denied access to Social Security benefits. In addition, Aborigines were over fifteen times more likely than whites to be arrested. Initial steps supposedly aimed at redressing this situation were taken neither as responses to community agitation nor as outgrowths of recommendations made by welfare agents. Rather, they stemmed from two completely extraneous sources—one was the head of the Department of Agriculture’s Wiluna Ground Water Research Station and the other was a Queensland-based businessman.

The first change arose because operations at the research station were to be shut down in 1973, and the staff transferred to schemes in other parts of the State. The manager, through his supervisors, approached representatives of the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority (AAPA) in the latter months of 1972 to see if they might be interested in acquiring the holdings on behalf of the Wiluna Aboriginal community. It was noted that the facilities included a hotel that had been divided into apartment units and a 405-
hectare block containing sheds, irrigation pumps, flourishing fruit tree groves and lucerne fields. The idea was that if the Aborigines took over the land they would have a place of their own on which they could grow almost all the provisions they required. Beyond this, the apartments could be used to house any European advisers they might hire.

The second thrust arose when the Queensland entrepreneur, a millionaire fruitgrower, wrote to the government outlining an ambitious and costly proposition. He had been attracted to Wiluna in 1969 by the promising outcomes of fruit cultivation trials conducted at the research station. Foreseeing additional profits for himself, he leased an 810-hectare tract adjacent to the Department of Agriculture’s land and invested a reported $250,000 to $300,000 in setting up the plant necessary for the cultivation of rockmelons and oranges. However, he spurned the assistance and advice of the agronomists from the research station on how best to proceed and endeavoured to do things as he had in the more tropical conditions of Queensland. The ripened fruit was highly praised and brought excellent prices, but the total yield fell far below expected levels. At the end of his third year, in late 1972, the owner was experiencing major financial difficulties and proceeded to cut or recoup his losses. He notified the press and the AAPA that he was placing his Desert Farms holdings up for sale at a price of $1,000,000 (The West Australian 6 October 1972:5). Further, he indicated that he would like to see the government become the purchaser as this would give the Wiluna Aborigines an enterprise of their own and guarantee the continuance of the many jobs he had created. Despite his lack of success with the venture, he also offered to make himself available as an adviser to the Aboriginal community if this course were taken.

In response to these offers, the AAPA dispatched a team to Wiluna to explore the conditions and assess the potential contributions of the research station and Desert Farms as well as the Aboriginal community’s suitability for development. The team’s report (‘Wiluna Development Investigations, suggested that the research station was ideal and should be taken over without delay. The research station was everything the Department of Agriculture claimed and the Aborigines were said to be excited by the prospect of relocating there. Its distance from the town and the hotel (sixteen kilometres) meant that there could be a reduction in the deleterious impact that liquor was having on the well-being of the people (see Sackett
It was observed that the nearby Desert Farms could be renovated to become not simply a workplace, but a training centre. However, this statement was tempered by the recommendation that if the concern was procured, it be maintained and managed separately from the research station, owing to its scale and complexity. The report also indicated that the previously ignored and disadvantaged Wiluna Aborigines would make excellent candidates for an ameliorative program. The group was perceived as being ‘tradition-oriented’ and therefore tightly integrated. It was believed that just as the people were in accord in considering it vital that certain beliefs and practices stemming from the Dreaming be continued, so they would work in unison towards other goals. The report stated that by assisting the community in implementing such a development program, the government would be promoting self-determination.

Early in 1973, interdepartmental negotiations were begun to gain title to the Department of Agriculture’s holdings. The AAPA expressed interest in purchasing Desert Farms but requested the owner to nominate a more reasonable price. Another team of AAPA personnel was sent to Wiluna to form a council and start the process of incorporating the community so that it might obtain grants and hold property (see Sackett 1978a:44-46). In July, the group became known as the Ngangganawili Community and learned that the research station was theirs; with this, a few families shifted their camps to the new acquisition. A local European was hired to instruct people in the intricacies of irrigation and the operation of the more complicated pieces of machinery. The AAPA appointed a project officer to advise community members on agricultural possibilities, who was introduced to the people in September, at the same time as Desert Farms (which the government had acquired for $250,000) was handed over. In line with the earlier advice, Desert Farms was run as a distinct venture. The former owner was engaged as overseer and when he departed, the man who had been his manager was appointed permanently in his place.

Meanwhile, yet another string of events was unravelling. In early 1973, the missionaries approached the AAPA regarding the possibility of the government buying them out. By this time they undoubtedly had concluded that the mission had a limited future, and were seeking to extricate themselves. The likelihood of the Aborigines getting an adviser not affiliated with the church and becoming the subject of a program of
economic development meant the missionaries’ longstanding hegemony would be challenged. More than this, the Federal Government had let it be known that, while it was not opposed to Christian proselytisation among Aboriginal people, it was no longer in favour of actually assisting missions and missionary activity (The West Australian 14 February 1973:1).

In accordance with this, the AAPA had let the Adventists know that their subsidy had been frozen, and would remain so until the dormitory system was abolished and certain other administrative modifications were introduced (The West Australian 4 May 1974:15, 15 May 1974:31). The AAPA also indicated that to ensure the proper disbursement of child endowment and pension monies, it was going to call for payments to be sent straight to claimants. In the past, the mission received the endowments for students enrolled in its schools as a contribution towards boarding and educational expenses. Likewise, the mission received the cheques of its resident pensioners, who were supplied with provisions and five dollars each per fortnight. Any credit remaining at the end of the pay period (and it appears there often was some) was transferred to the mission’s accounts. Finding their finances constrained and their authority threatened, the Adventists quietly handed the property over to the Aborigines and left the area at the end of 1974.

Thus, by the mid-1970s, members of the Ngangganawili Community appeared to have experienced considerable gains. They had gone from occupying a small reserve of 26 hectares to having the research station, Desert Farms and the old mission—a total of approximately 1,435 hectares. As well, they effectively had two employees—the project officer and the manager of the melon and citrus scheme. The property, however, was held by the State’s Aboriginal Lands Trust and leased from that body by the community and in reality, the employer status of the Aborigines was something of an illusion. While in theory such agents were hired by the Aborigines, in practice the employees were retained following AAPA deliberations. Consequently, the two appointees had an abundant measure of autonomy. They also operated in relatively distinct arenas within the community and this compartmentalisation ultimately gave rise to difficulties.

Initially, the two men enjoyed a harmonious personal and professional relationship but as they committed themselves to carrying out what they
regarded as their respective responsibilities, points of conflict began emerging. The project officer desired to follow the report’s recommendation and alter Desert Farms so that it encompassed a training facility. As he saw it, this would be a logical extension of the attempts he was making to secure a broad-based pastoral and agricultural scheme on the research station to feed the population. Those attaining new and more advanced skills in irrigation techniques, machinery maintenance, management and so on not only would be a boon to the community, but they would qualify for a wider range of positions, both in the Wiluna district and further afield. However, such ideas ran counter to the wishes of the farm manager. It seems he considered them a threat to the potential prosperity of his sphere of accountability. He was of the opinion that equipment and buildings in his charge must be maintained exclusively for farm use; otherwise, he alleged, costly and destructive delays could eventuate.

What began as an apparent minor difference rapidly escalated into a loggerhead, with fierce charges and counter-charges of uncooperativeness, shortsightedness and empire-building. The project officer claimed that the manager wanted his job, while the manager contended that the project officer was seeking to run the entire operation himself. Not surprisingly, the personal and ideological exceptions each took to the other spilled into the community. In an effort to break the deadlock, the men on various occasions lobbied the AAPA to do something, but to no avail. In the government’s view both were accomplishing a great deal. For example, the Wiluna people had become at least minimally involved in the day-to-day running of the farm and they were producing enough fruit and vegetables on the station to enable them to sell certain items outside the community.

The two men turned to the Aborigines, reasoning that if they could get community feeling on their side then the authorities would be forced to intervene. Their approaches were essentially identical. They sought to convince those they were closest to, principally people working under their direction, that the dealings of their opponent were jeopardising jobs, and by extension, the future of the development. As it eventuated, neither the project officer nor the manager was able to garner anything like a majority backing. On the contrary, their contest simply served to spark new points of debate within the community and provided people with an additional set of elements to grumble and gossip about. Discussions concerning the merits
and shortcomings of the two Europeans did not breed division or conflict within the community. Rather, the Wiluna Aborigines placed these two men in the broad category of white bosses they had known and laboured under. While these early machinations by those supposedly on hand to assist the Ngangganawili people caused no deep rifts, they certainly constituted a portent of cleavages to come.

**CONSEQUENCES OF DEVELOPMENT**

By the summer of 1983-84 the shape of things had changed, yet remained the same (cf Frank 1967:12, who adopts this notion of stability within change in his discussion of capitalism). In the wake of the departure of the Adventists the mission had been renamed ‘the Village’ and most of the old huts had been replaced by twenty concrete-block houses, each having electrical outlets and running water. On the reserve, rechristened ‘Bondini’ after a former owner of the block, the dilapidated corrugated iron ‘Wiluna wurlies’ dating from the 1950s and 1960s had been razed to make way for five duplexes, with a further five on the drawing board. At Desert Farms the growing of melons had all but ceased in favour of an exclusive concentration on the orange crop. And on the research station, now called ‘Emu Farm’, the production of fruit, vegetables, and stock had been largely foregone to make way for the raising of emus for their eggs and skins.⁵

Members of the group are still involved in station work (ie mustering, fencing, and the like), but at nothing approaching the extent to which they had been in the past. There are two reasons for this: the pastoralists require fewer labourers and the Aborigines have less need to work as stockmen. Over the course of the preceding fifteen to twenty years the sheep and cattle properties of the area, like Australian industry as a whole, shifted away from using high numbers of workers towards more mechanised operations. So whereas mustering, for example, was once done with a large body of men on horseback, it is now completed with a spotter in an aeroplane and two or three motorcyclists. Concurrently, as the government-sponsored development program flowered, new prospects of employment opened up around Wiluna. By and large this happened because it is project policy to employ as many people as seek work, and successive advisers endeavoured to preserve and even increase the number of labour intensive positions extant on community-run ventures. Thus, while a modicum of machinery is in evidence, there are a lot of labourers with hand tools.
Desert Farms has gone from being a part-time employer to sustaining an average of between twenty and twenty-five workers on a year-round basis. These people are involved in a variety of tasks, from planting and grafting through to weeding, picking and pruning. Emu Farm employs ten to twelve Aborigines, mostly in feeding, tending, killing and skinning the birds. Another twenty to twenty-five community members work on the Village and Bondini Reserve, maintaining equipment, building new units, collecting rubbish, gardening and the like. Four to five other people serve as stockers and clerks in the community-owned stores, one of which is situated at the Village and the second in town. However, these employment figures are deceiving because they conceal the enormous fluctuations that can and do occur in the short-term. Depending upon the financial condition and ritual commitments of community members, an enterprise may struggle along with a minimum number of labourers one day and the next have a surfeit far in excess of the optimum. This seemingly peculiar set of arrangements proves permissible because of a rather unique agreement the group has with government. Instead of its members asking for and receiving Social Security benefits during periods when they are unable to find employment, the community as a whole gets a lump sum allocation, calculated on the number of eligible unemployment benefit recipients. These Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) funds, which in 1983 at Wiluna amounted to over $1,000,000, are used solely to pay people to work on and for the community’s development. 

The upshot of this refashioned occupational situation is that the vast preponderance of the group’s members spend virtually the entire year (barring holiday excursions and trips to neighbouring centres for religious observances) in the immediate Wiluna area. People now live at Desert Farms (twenty), Emu Farm (twenty), the Village (200), Bondini Reserve (eighty), or in town (160), leaving just some twenty on stations. (The figures represent approximate numbers.) This is essentially the reverse of the pattern in the early 1970s, wherein for much of the time about 200 of the then total population of 355 were away at work or school. Moreover, the Ngangganawili people have become heavily reliant upon the money flowing from the development program. More particularly, individual workers regard themselves as being associated with specific European staff and their endeavours.
There are nine white personnel (one adviser, three project officers, two assistant managers, two storekeepers and an accountant), but not all of these are directly involved in the employment arena. That is, not all of them engage in assigning duties, controlling jobs, and in general, acting like bosses. These roles devolve mainly on the project officers and managers, who have responsibility for the smooth running of the various enterprises. Each of them appears to regard their counterparts at the very least as incompetent, and at worst as manifest threats to the venture’s prosperity. About the only area of agreement among them is the view that Aborigines are deserving of development, and outsiders like themselves can help them in achieving this. The finer points of exactly what the ultimate goals of such efforts should be and how these might best be attained are subject to bitter dispute. It must not be thought this situation is simply the outcome of a small number of whites being brought together in an isolated situation (cf Koster 1977; Riches 1977). As was the case in the initial phases of the development at Wiluna, the conflicts of opinion arise because of the incompatible and often conflicting interests and duties of the protagonists.

These divisions become clearly visible through looking at something as fundamental as self-management. From the moment of his arrival the current adviser has encouraged people to assume greater control over their development program. He says the high point of his efforts in this respect occurred when community members decided to set aside Tuesdays as occasions when they would run the various enterprises completely on their own. The adviser, project officers and other European staff were asked to take the time off and leave things to the Aborigines. The plan was that as the Aboriginal people came to understand the operations more fully they would increase the single day to two, then to three, and so on, until they eventually were managing all the undertakings without the aid of outsiders.

While this proposal delighted the adviser, it severely distressed the project officers and assistant managers—not because they were opposed to the idea of self-management per se, but because they feared that its practice on Desert Farms, Emu Farm, the Village and Bondini Reserve inevitably would generate ‘diabolical’ mistakes. Correcting these would prove expensive and time-consuming; indeed, one officer suggested it was conceivable that all his supervisory days could be spent setting right that which had gone awry during the period he was away. He and his fellow officers were extremely worried because they felt they had been entrusted
with the responsible management of their respective fields. They expressed concern that the potential redirection of money and labour would be interpreted by visiting government officials as reflecting irresponsibility on their part. If this happened, they believed, with some justification, that their future job prospects as employees in other communities would be severely jeopardised.

In a similar manner and for much the same reasons that the project officers and managers are set against the adviser, they are at odds with one another. None of the ventures is self-supporting. At Desert Farms the sale of oranges returns but a fraction of the overall production costs; the disposal of carved eggs and untanned skins by Emu Farm hardly makes a dent in even the workers’ wages bill; and the Village and Reserve project yields no income at all. Consequently the three enterprises must be heavily subsidised. As the officers are unable to demonstrate differences in their managerial prowess in the pages of their ledger books, they seek to introduce distinctions by other means and thereby capture the plumpest portion of the community’s development funds. Through applying for and winning relatively more money than their fellows, supervisors assert their respective ranking in the eyes of Aboriginal affairs bureaucrats.

As might be imagined, such competition and conflict among the significant European staff has heavy import for the community. As noted above, group members can work as frequently or as infrequently as they desire but when they do work they tend always to labour at the same venue. Thus when asked, people will say they work at either Desert Farms, Emu Farm, or the Village, never at a mixture of the three, and this identification is promoted by the overseers. On the one hand, it results in pools of people being intensely familiar with the functioning of each project, meaning basic training and supervision can be kept at a low level. On the other hand, it increases the chances that there will be a relatively high proportion of carry-over in workers from one day to the next, making the ongoing operation more consistent. However, just as all workers in the community have affiliations with a particular workplace, so they have special relationships with their bosses. In the same way the officers and managers have come to trust workers to perform tasks in an established manner, so labourers look towards their ‘boss’ with certain expectations. Importantly, they frequently call upon them for assistance of one type or another. For instance, if
employees want to obtain positions for visiting kin, they will not, if they work at Emu Farm, go to the project officer or manager of Desert Farms, but rather they will approach their own ‘boss’. Likewise, if they need a salary advance, they will speak to the officer who heads the scheme where they work.

Needless to say, project officers and managers can and do use their patronage positions in attempting to influence things to their own advantage, in the same way that the first Desert Farms manager and project officer did (cf Paine 1977:93). For example, they frequently hint to their clients that jobs or equipment are at risk owing to conspiracies between other supervisors and their workers. Today, because of the altered employment field, these manipulations have a telling impact. Not only do Wiluna people now pass judgement on the attributes and qualities of the various managers, but they also make remarks about their fellows employed on the rival schemes, commenting especially on perceived special privileges and perquisites one or another coterie supposedly receives to the exclusion of others.

In saying people are sniping at one another in this way, I do not imply that pre-development intra-community relations were harmonious, for nothing could be further from the truth. No doubt the Wiluna group has always had its share of whispering, bickering and even outright physical violence. Indeed, in the early 1970s I witnessed a great number of fights between Aborigines. Most of these involved individuals, usually inebriated, taking umbrage with others who also were drunk (see Sackett 1977). While there were some disputes of longstanding, involving the ‘stealing’ of spouses or cycles of payback for major injuries, in the majority of cases the context of the particular occasion was the prominent factor in determining who fought whom. That is, for the most part quarrels were attributed to such things as real or imagined sexual escapades and the alleged theft of liquor, with the identities of the belligerents subject to almost constant change. A drinking partner of one afternoon could be a sparring partner on the next, and vice versa. The point is, all this still occurs at Wiluna. In fact, the improved monetary and changed demographic conditions have caused it to intensify.

At the same time a new arena of disputation has erupted, that of development and the resources accompanying it. So far at least, most of the
combatants are sober and throw verbal rather than physical punches. They contend for control of various windfall benefits rather than dispute over perceived slights or affronts. Instead of pairing off as individual against individual, they line up as clients of particular patrons and participants in relatively stable work units. For example, when I asked a man where he was living he replied, ‘the Village’, then speedily went on to note that he was not actually part of ‘that rubbish mob’, but worked at Desert Farms. That is, while he resided in the Village, he was at pains to make clear that he was in no way connected to its employment scheme, which he regarded as staffed by people who thought only of their own needs and wants. Another man, talking to his workmates on Emu Farm, announced that he was fed up with the people working on the Village and Reserve enterprise. He told how he had not been allowed to ‘book’ more food when he had tried to make some purchases at the Village store, only to observe a Village and Reserve employee obtain a credit extension. Additionally, the Emu Farm worker claimed, the staff of the Village and Reserve project dominate and control the weekly community meetings and try to tell the ‘Emu Farm people’ what they ought to be doing. He suggested that ‘the lot of them are not worth’ (ie unworthy of consideration) and he for one was going to tell them to mind their own business.

The nature and depth of this splintering can be clearly discerned in a linked series of occurrences in late December 1983 and early January 1984. This opened with some of the Desert Farms workers complaining to their project officer that group members employed on other schemes enjoyed more bonuses than they did. They remarked that while Desert Farms people seasonally had access to a few oranges, the Emu Farm workers constantly had a hefty portion of their meat requirements met through getting the choicest cuts of the butchered birds for free. Also, the Village and Reserve labourers seemed to have first call on such things as the community-owned movie projector and four-wheel drive vehicle. This seemingly idle and innocuous bellyaching apparently struck a tender nerve with the supervisor.

Meanwhile, the community adviser had announced he was resigning his post and the Desert Farms project officer and his counterpart at Emu Farm had indicated that they intended applying for the position. Therefore the inference that the Desert Farms supervisor was not delivering the goods as effectively as his competitor, was untimely. Not surprisingly, he agreed that
there did appear to be major inconsistencies in the distribution of community property and resources. He even hinted that this stemmed from favouritism on the part of the adviser, who lived and worked at the Village and looked after Village and Reserve workers before turning to those from other ventures. The project officer proposed that Desert Farms people withdraw their contributions to the community-wide amenities fund and use these to begin their own separate account. They would then be in a position to purchase for themselves such things as off-road transport, television sets and video recorders. This idea found immediate favour with the Desert Farms crew, particularly those who lived on or planned to move to the estate. They discussed how they would raise the issue at the next community meeting, and looked forward to accruing an array of emoluments of their own.

The decision of the Desert Farms faction rapidly became a prime talking point. Many Emu Farm people saw merit in following their example, while most of the Village and Reserve employees expressed contempt for the proposal, regarding it as a plot on the part of a few to get something that was not theirs. When the adviser learned of the proposition, he let it be known that he was against the move. He then visited the three work settings, offering the same message at each. He pointed out that the Wiluna Aborigines had come a long way in a comparatively short time. He reminded people that a mere ten or so years earlier they had virtually nothing—they had laboured for whites, lived in humpies and tumbledown shacks, and possessed few material articles. They now worked for themselves, occupied well-appointed houses and owned such things as cars, televisions, stereos and bicycles. These changes, the adviser averred, had come to the people because they were one and had all toiled together. If they opted to initiate separate facilities for each group’s venture, it would not be long before the hard won gains were dissipated. He warned that the conflict among Desert Farms, Emu Farm and the Village and Reserve would degenerate further until it reached the stage where family contested family.

Predictably, this issue commanded the agenda at the following assembly, held on 4 January. A man who lived and worked at Desert Farms spoke in support of creating separate repositories. He stressed that in advocating this course of action he was not being pro-Desert Farms and counter-Emu Farm
or the Village; rather, he was in favour of simply allowing each body of workers to determine what it as a sub-population wanted to do with its accumulated savings. The Village and Reserve mob could get a video machine, the Emu Farm people a freezer, and so forth. There would be fewer reasons for arguments and everyone would be happier.

When this speaker sat down the woman next to me informed me that he was a troublemaker and sought the alterations so that he could get a video set for his camp. As it eventuated many of those present maintained a similar assessment, and a number of them began declaring their views and concerns. One man noted that having a number of smaller funds would make it extremely difficult to buy higher priced items such as trucks, which are vital for travel to neighbouring communities. Another wondered what would happen if someone from Desert Farms wanted to borrow a vehicle belonging to the Emu Farm workers.

In the end it became obvious that almost everyone was opposed to the proposal. Even the majority of the Desert Farms employees, seeing the writing on the wall or having been swayed by the debate, were in favour of the status quo. With this a man from the Village workforce stood and asked, ‘All together then?’ The answer was much affirmative murmuring and nodding. There was one strident dissenting vote as the Desert Farms man who had begun the discussion loudly proclaimed his objection to the decision. Further, he suggested that many people had elected to go against their better judgement and adopt a conservative stance because they had been pressured and threatened with physical harm. Now, he said, it was he who was going to be beating up a few people, specifically those who had most strongly opposed his motion. However, he had no sooner voiced this threat when one of the Village and Reserve employees stood and quickly marched towards him, announcing as he did, ‘I would like nothing more than for you to try.’ With the two men standing face-to-face and squaring off to fight, the father of the second yelled at the Desert Farms worker, ‘Why don’t you roll your swag and piss off.’ This call was instantly taken up by others, and the would-be dissident was left with no manifest support and little option other than to capitulate. He strode from the arena to the pay office, collected the money owing him, and departed that afternoon for points west.
For the first time in community history an individual was expelled from the group. It is unlikely his absence will be a permanent one as he will probably return as soon as feelings have cooled. Nonetheless, his departure occasioned relief among a number of Aborigines and white staff, who saw the outcome as a solution to a major crisis. Allocating blame and castigating a culprit were interpreted as discovering and implementing a resolution. Yet the motion to have the man quit Wiluna generated little in the way of real change. The structure of arrangements remained unaffected. Consequently, as far as the adviser was concerned he and his philosophy had triumphed. The people, recognising and acting upon sound advice, had faced the discord and decided to remain together. The Emu Farm project officer was also pleased because his most obvious rival had suffered an embarrassing setback. However, the Desert Farms project officer, smarting at what he viewed as a defeat at the hands of a cabal, was firmly convinced the adviser and Emu Farm supervisor were allied against him. Within a few days Aboriginal workers were once again deriding those engaged on other enterprises. Thus in a fundamental sense the Desert Farms man was merely another casualty in the internecine jockeying among all the community’s employees, though perhaps the most serious. To put an end to this competition would necessitate more than the ejection of other so-called ‘troublemakers’ (be they black or white); it would require a remodelling of the development program itself.

CONCLUSION

It has been said that the welfare state tries to compensate for problems that are the by-product of growth in the private economic sector, but this intervention tends to generate as many problems as it solves, because it entails no structural change (Offe 1972:481). Clearly these interrelated factors are evident at Wiluna. From the first days of contact, government has played some part in sustaining the Aboriginal community. Through time it moved almost deterministically from supplying rations and subsidising the mission to completely underwriting and all but totally controlling the situation.

The rhetoric of this shift claims that the heightened involvement is aimed at helping the community attain self-management. Furthermore, there are a number of people, both direct participants and watchers from the sidelines, who avow that rapid and significant progress has been made. However, the
goal of self-management seems to be receding into the distance at least as fast as it is approached. Early on, outsiders determined what economic activities group members would be able to practise and who would advise them in development. Although the community now makes many decisions, these are informed and constrained by analyses presented to it by its European adviser, project officers and managers. In effect, people who were formerly dominated by white pastoralists and missionaries have come to be regulated by white public servants and employees (cf Cowlishaw 1983:65).

Equally important is that while Wiluna Aborigines today have relatively more money and a much greater variety of consumer goods, they control no economic base which could be exploited to gain self-determination. What passes for the imposing edifice of development is really not unlike a house of cards. From the start it has been underpinned by public funds, and there is little promise of any of the sub-programs even approaching self-supporting status. On the contrary, a more haunting spectre looms—that of a hopelessly fragmented Ngangganawili community, the victim of the operation of machinery allegedly put in place to rescue and serve it.

Notes

1 The fieldwork on which this chapter is based was carried out with the aid of a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship, a number of grants from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and funds from the Department of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, and the Department of Anthropology, University of Adelaide. Some of the ideas and data presented here were first aired during a session on ‘Aborigines and the State’ at the 1984 meetings of the Australian Anthropological Society. I would like to thank those who were present, particularly Jeremy Beckett, Barry Morris, John Bern, Nic Peterson, Gill Cowlishaw, Bob Tonkinson, Jon Altman and Steven Thiele, for their helpful comments. The argument also benefitted from fleeting but fruitful discussions with Ken Colbung. I also wish to thank Ronald and Catherine Berndt for their ready assistance and strong encouragement over the years.

2 For more detailed discussion of a range of topics relating to society, culture and change among the Aborigines of Wiluna see Sackett (1975,

3 At this time the Federal Government was involved in buying various kinds of properties for Aborigines, often at handsome dividends to their former white owners.

4 Although in later years, the Wiluna people succeeded in having more of a say in appointments, they have always worked from a shortlist prepared by outsiders. Likewise, dismissals have been achieved only with the consent of the government. In fact, AAPA intervention has led to the sacking of people with whom the Aborigines had been content and the retention of individuals they desired to dismiss.

5 Some of the eggs are hatched to restock the flock and others are blown, carved and sold. At the time, the skins had no corresponding ready use or market. The primary reason for this is that tanneries will accept for processing only thousands of hides at a time, whereas Emu Farm can supply but a few dozen annually.

6 CDEP is a major program delivered by DAA and has been expanded greatly in recent years. Communities which utilise the scheme receive a twenty per cent on-costs component over and above the unemployment benefit equivalents, which is intended to cover the capital costs of running the scheme.

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23. The visit of the Commissioner of the Western Australian Aboriginal Land Inquiry, Paul Seaman, to Mount Margaret in 1984.
The past decade or so, has seen the implementation of Federal policies of self-management in many Aboriginal communities. In the case of Western Australia, these settlements were primarily operated as mission stations and, less commonly, as government settlements. ‘Self-management’ was an incisive response to enduring ‘assimilationist’ attitudes held by administrators, both State and Federal, who were responsible for the execution of policy directives at the State and regional levels. The revised policy was couched in terms of the planned ‘integration’ of Aborigines within the broader Australian society, whether they wanted this or not. However, this new policy was inadequately differentiated from its precursor in the minds of many public servants. Their application of the notion was inadequate and highly varied, reflecting something of the conceptual problems they encountered with it. For the North-Eastern Goldfields region of Western Australia, this change of policy coincided to some extent with the withdrawal of mission control from Mount Margaret—a process which was simultaneously taking place at Warburton Range, Wiluna, Jigalong and (somewhat later) Cundeelee.
The United Aborigines Mission withdrew from Mount Margaret in 1976, transferring management and ownership to a group of former mission residents who had formed an incorporated body named the Aboriginal Movement for Outback Survival Inc (AMOS). The settlement subsequently received substantial Federal Government funding to provide basic amenities and services such as continuous power, regular water supplies, improved drainage and some new housing. Not all residents came to share access to these facilities equally and the reasons for this provide the focus for this chapter.

Notions of self-management enunciated by Federal politicians, despite their overt intentions, have led to the creation and imposition of alien decision-making structures and a perpetuation of patterns of dependency and clientship established during the earlier protectionist and assimilationist periods of Aboriginal administration. Inadequacies in the orientation and coordination of project developments have strengthened reliance on external technicians and advisers, at the same time as they have enhanced the influence of particular segments of the Aboriginal population over others.

MISSION DAYS
Mount Margaret is situated 1,000 kilometres northeast of Perth on the edge of the Great Victoria Desert, some thirty kilometres southwest of the mining town of Laverton. The former mission station, still known today by all Aborigines living in the region as ‘the mitjini’ (‘mission’), contains a relatively stable population of approximately sixty adults, most of whom are old-age pensioners, plus a similar number of schoolchildren. The people living here identify strongly with Mount Margaret, although all maintain kin-based relations with other communities on the fringe and in the centre of the Western Desert cultural bloc. The positioning of the settlement, between the Central Reserve and the Eastern Goldfields towns, had strategic significance in the past (Berndt and Berndt 1970:57) and this factor continues to be of importance today.

The mission station provided a refuge for Aboriginal people living at the edge of nearby mining settlements such as Mount Morgans and Laverton (cf Morgan 1986). The mission was established in 1921 by Rodolphe Schenk, a missionary associated with the Melbourne-based organisation
later known as the United Aborigines Mission (UAM). Most of the Aborigines who came to Mount Margaret belonged to small local groups who had experienced severe dislocation and considerable change in their social organisation as a result of early depopulation and displacement following the discovery of gold in 1893. Schenk firmly believed that the best future for Aboriginal people lay in their education and vocational training, and ultimately in their conversion to Christianity (Schenk 1935). He and his colleagues encouraged some of the more permanent residents to build their own European-style cottages within the mission. The children of fringe-dwellers were removed from direct parental influence and raised in dormitories with the expectation that they would participate more fully in the innovative educational techniques being developed by Mary Bennett and her staff (Bennett 1935).

For a time, Mount Margaret was viewed by many persons concerned with Aboriginal welfare as a model mission settlement. By the mid-1940s, however, some staff members began to question the relevance of the mission program in the light of changing conditions which were accentuated by the new range of influences and aspirations experienced during World War II. In the 1950s, people started to move from the mission in search of improved employment opportunities and living conditions. At the same time large numbers of Aborigines from the Central Reserves, who had earlier congregated at the Warburton Range Mission and experienced overcrowding and tension there, began to travel to the North-Eastern Goldfields, primarily for ritual exchanges and other ceremonial activities. Many of them chose to remain on the desert fringe where social pressures appeared to be less and where the immigrants saw opportunities for obtaining sought-after European goods, principally food and clothing.

Since this period the population of the settlement has been slowly transformed and the significance of particular territorial affiliations has been masked by diversity, promoted by the migration of people from the desert. More and more of the earlier mission inhabitants (who call themselves the ‘Old Mob’), left to live elsewhere in the Eastern Goldfields, attracted by the presence of kin already there. Opposition to the newcomers from the Central Reserves (the ‘Easterners’, as they came to be called) slowly weakened, and with the passing of senior guardians of the ritual life (termed here ‘the Law’), it became possible for the newcomers
progressively to assert stronger claims to occupational rights (see Stanton 1983). They brought with them their own dialects, religious lore and forms of social organisation. They also assumed custodianship of local sites and mythological associations from the guardians of the Old Mob.

REVIVAL
The 1969 Annual Evangelical Convention was the first of the mission anniversaries to be organised and run solely by Aboriginal Christians. This set a precedent for the continued use of the mission as an evangelical centre for the Mount Margaret people and others living elsewhere in the Eastern Goldfields. Those attending the convention re-emphasised their claim to the right of association for persons born and raised at the settlement, even though virtually none of them remained at Mount Margaret at that time. Since the population essentially comprised schoolchildren and pensioners, nearly all the families living there received some financial assistance from the government. Few were involved in encouraging conversions to Christianity but all residents willingly attended church services, which were viewed as important social occasions. Prayer meetings were held at the camp on the fringe of the mission but participation was minimal. The children continued to receive Christian teaching both in and out of school but for the most part ritual life at the camp and the attractions of Laverton offset Christian influences.

Meanwhile the annual convention maintained the spirit of Mount Margaret’s early days. During the late 1960s, the meetings were organised by members of a convention committee, comprising persons raised at the mission who had achieved some prominence in the Eastern Goldfields. In the weeks preceding the August school holidays, when the conventions were customarily held, the committee encouraged those still living at the mission to clean up the place in order to convey to visitors an impression of what the settlement looked like in the old days. Local residents, however, were not always so interested in these activities. Although a handful attended the conventions, former residents who had rejected Christianity in favour of the Law often deliberately scheduled ‘Law business’ to coincide with them. The grounds for conflict were laid, and over time these served to provoke further quarrels over the rights of the two groups to claim Mount Margaret as their own.
At the 1971 Jubilee Convention, a proposal was made that former residents should incorporate a group with the express intention of assuming responsibility from the UAM for running the settlement and appointing an Aboriginal superintendent. Although over 1,000 persons attended the convention that year, including several former missionaries and their families, the speed with which the UAM accepted the proposal took everybody by surprise. No Aboriginal person wished to become the new superintendent, however. Even though there had been more than one Aboriginal person who had acted as superintendent in the past, the responsibility of the post and the complexity of the mission’s operation was something nobody had been prepared for. This factor was later to become a major barrier to the successful operation of the settlement.

Difficulties emerged in obtaining the approval of all those persons interested in developing Mount Margaret and the support of government departments which would ultimately be asked to finance the proposal. Problems of securing stable leadership for the new group soon appeared and led to a conflict of interests. There was a delay of five years before the constitution of the group was finally approved. This was linked to the desire of the group to preclude any alteration to the Christian principles on which the settlement had been founded. They sought to include in the constitution an affirmation of Christian faith along the same lines as that required by the UAM of its officers and members. However, this was unacceptable to both the Registrar of Companies and several government departments, who made it clear that they would be unsympathetic to funding an organisation which maintained such a closed viewpoint.

Nevertheless, in July 1976 the property at Mount Margaret was transferred to the newly incorporated AMOS group and interim government funding was approved. A committee was elected by members of AMOS as laid down in the constitution (that is, all Aboriginal residents past and present, their descendants and others having an emotional or spiritual tie with the site), and a manager was appointed.

**RESTORATION**
The departure of the UAM staff and the appointment of a new management answerable to the Mount Margaret people and the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) resulted in significant changes in social
interaction and community relations. Since the transfer of ownership had been sponsored by DAA as a community development program, shifts in the structure of authority emerged, influencing day-to-day operations. No longer were decisions to be made by an absentee landlord (ie the UAM operating through its administrative hierarchy in Kalgoorlie, Perth and Melbourne respectively). The overt intent of Federal Government policy was to ensure that all decisions regarding the management of the community and the promulgation of by-laws should be taken by members of the community, albeit with the advice of officers of DAA and related bodies. The notion that there was a commonality of self-interest maintained by members of the community in order to minimise internal dissension reflected contemporary academic notions of group solidarity and homogeneity among Aboriginal groups (Tatz 1979:87; cf Howard 1982:96). On the contrary, the activities of local ‘bosses’ and government officials had a significant impact on the articulation of social relations at the intra-community level and further afield. (See Stanton 1982 for a more detailed treatment of the politics of economic distribution within the Mount Margaret community.)

Similarly, rehousing and employment programs were funded to provide a source of income for local residents wishing to adopt some of the material amenities taken for granted by members of the wider Australian society. Such features of community development were viewed by both officers of the DAA and local residents as intrinsic to the policy of self-determination, despite the imposition of external controls in the areas of fiscal and managerial decision-making and the vagaries of government funding. Nevertheless, opportunities for some local employment did eventuate and the prospect of improved housing and other services attracted former residents back from neighbouring towns and pastoral stations. For the first time in nearly three decades these people saw some tangible advantages in making a home at Mount Margaret.

The return of several ex-Mount Margaret families threatened the stability of the existing patterns of social relations. While there was general agreement that these persons had a right to return to the mission, their presence revived old but not forgotten rivalries and threatened the pattern of authority and leadership established during the previous two decades. In view of the restricted funds available from government sources, elements of
competition entered into the question of priorities for development projects in the same way that, from its inception, the serial nature of migration to Mount Margaret confused issues of territorial and religious affiliation (see Stanton 1983). Such confusion continues to exist and, for many Aboriginal persons living at Mount Margaret, it appears that Christian perspectives and ‘traditional’ Aboriginal religious beliefs can no longer coexist as they have done in the past.

For example, for a long time the missionaries tried to prevent or discourage any Law activities at Mount Margaret. Usually, small ritual gatherings took place in one of the secluded creekbeds adjacent to the mission, but for more important meetings the missionaries insisted that the ritual ground be prepared on the far side of the boundary between the mission reserve and the neighbouring pastoral stations. This attitude was reiterated in 1972, when the Department of Aboriginal Sites at the Western Australian Museum, operating under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972, applied for permission to erect a storehouse for sacred objects similar to those already built on the reserves at Laverton and Leonora. The mission refused to permit such a building to be erected on what they viewed as ‘Christian land’, although legally the reserve was no different from any other land reserved ‘for the use and benefit of Aborigines’ and had been vested in the Aboriginal Lands Trust under the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972. The Department of Aboriginal Sites therefore had to obtain permission from the leaseholder of the adjacent property for the storehouse to be erected there. Its location has long been a source of concern for the senior men who feared that the shed would be endangered if the pastoral lease changed hands. Since the theft of a number of sacred objects from the storehouse in 1976, ritual custodians have refused to use it.

The antagonistic attitude of the Christians towards the Law has hardened since AMOS assumed control. The construction of a dancing ground immediately to the north of the settlement attracted considerable opposition from AMOS members, who attempted to prevent its use. The Easterners wanted the dancing ground close to the settlement so that water and food supplies were nearby. Relations between the two groups became extremely strained. The community administrator appealed directly to the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Peter Baume, for assistance in settling the dispute. In early 1982 the Minister’s staff arranged a meeting between the
two parties involved which was attended by DAA officers from Perth and Kalgoorlie, with myself observing as a witness at the request of the Easterners. The outcome was inconclusive, since the department supported the activities (though not the attitudes) of AMOS at Mount Margaret on the condition that they improved their relations with local residents and involved them more directly in decision-making processes. Failing this, the department undertook to direct funds through another body called Wiltjinit Community Inc, which had previously been set up by some residents so that they too could bid for funding, should AMOS continue to neglect local interests and perspectives.

Old distinctions were being reasserted along the lines of a differentiation between the two religious perspectives. This was less apparent among traditionally-oriented persons, who appeared to be much more willing to accommodate aspects of Christian beliefs within their own religious system. Most mission-raised Christians, however, saw themselves more as part of an exclusive rather than an inclusive category, undoubtedly reflecting the fundamentalist approach of the UAM.

Recent events, such as the Seaman Inquiry into Western Australian Aboriginal Land Rights (cf Stanton 1984-85), have done little to reduce the concern of some residents that their interests are not being adequately safeguarded. The unofficial involvement of the UAM and the conciliatory attitude of DAA towards the AMOS group have until very recently strengthened local Aboriginal opinion that there has been no fundamental change to the administrative structure since the program of community development was inaugurated in 1976.

Such competition for resources concerns, for example, rehousing, the nature of house design and the placement and allocation of these facilities to particular families (cf Stanton 1981). It also reflects the provision of jobs within the settlement and the contrasting religious orientations of community members. Ultimately, it concerns control over determining the purpose and direction of community development. Social pressures will increase unless the present divisive issues can be diffused and an alternative managerial structure is established.

CONFLICT IN SELF-DETERMINATION
With the transfer of Mount Margaret to AMOS, the pattern of community development within this settlement took a path somewhat different from that observed in other parts of the Western Desert. Mount Margaret residents travel frequently to places such as Warburton Range, Docker River, Amata, Wiluna, Jigalong and even as far as Strelley for ritual activities, making them aware of the differing kinds of administrative structures being developed at these centres. At meetings held between government officers and members of the community in 1975 and 1976, residents expressed the opinion that Mount Margaret should be administered in a similar manner to these other incorporated Aboriginal settlements, through a council elected by those living on the mission. It was proposed that the council should employ whatever staff it required to fulfill the aims and aspirations of the community (cf Tonkinson 1978:96-97).

Until recently this has not happened at Mount Margaret. The intentions of residents have often been pre-empted by the strong political influence of former residents who have chosen to live elsewhere in the Goldfields. In discussing events which have taken place over the span of more than a decade, it is important not to underestimate the significance of changes to the pattern of local influence in the affairs of the community. Considerable shifts have occurred during the 1980s in particular. As more and more descendants of the Old Mob are attracted back to Mount Margaret, so too does this demographic change tip the balance in favour of this particular group. No longer are the Easterners in the majority; no longer are their demands as influential in pricking the collective consciences of regional officers from government departments responsible for the equitable distribution of economic and other resources.

Today the former residents of the mission are still exercising executive powers within the incorporated title-holding body. In the past this was frequently done without adequate consultation with those actually living at Mount Margaret. On some occasions, they failed even to consult the settlement’s manager, who they themselves employed, which placed that person in an even more tenuous position vis-à-vis the local community. Such actions not only created confusion and ill-feeling between the divergent factions, but encouraged the emergence of patterns of administration inappropriate to this particular context. More than anything else, such developments have alienated many of those residents who in
1975 had the most to gain by participating directly in policy-making decisions.

Despite continuing tensions, the situation has greatly improved over the past two years. At the time of the transfer of the property from the UAM, the AMOS Committee comprised residents (members of the Old Mob and the Easterners) who were nominated and appointed to the various positions by community members. Within two months, managerial ineptitude gave a handful of non-resident members an excuse to reappoint the committee from among their own number at the first Annual General Meeting of AMOS. Without regard to the constitution of the association they established a subcommittee, termed the ‘Local Committee’, which was to serve the interests of mission residents. Despite complaints by several residents to the then local officer of DAA in Laverton and his supervisor in Kalgoorlie, nothing was done to ensure that the community participated in the development program framed and funded by the department. It appeared to the residents that DAA local administration was more preoccupied with the difficulties of establishing Mount Margaret on a viable economic footing than with meeting local Aboriginal aspirations.

This situation derives in part from the attitudes of certain members of AMOS, who staunchly maintain a fundamentalist approach to Christianity, which is what AMOS was set up to do. These views are derived from their collective experience of having been socialised within the dormitory system during the earlier mission period—a model of belief and behaviour which was sufficiently pervasive that it is shared by some descendants of the Easterners. Such attitudes are maintained by AMOS members in the face of serious threats to the stability of their own world view. Few have successfully maintained their Christian beliefs without a lapse and what they subsequently term a ‘fall from Grace’. Several leaders of the AMOS group are uneasy in the company of ‘Law keepers’ because of their lack of ritual knowledge and frequent lack of fluency in their parents’ language. They continue, in the rhetoric of Schenk, to denounce the *tjurkurpa* (Dreaming) as ‘the work of the Devil’. Some of these ex-Mount Margaret people have achieved greater professional success and influence within the Eastern Goldfields than many others in the region. Nevertheless, the majority express a feeling of alienation from traditional forms of knowledge
which have been denied to them by the same missionaries whose memories they revere.

Not all of the ex-Mount Margaret people share these attitudes, however. Some, through well-established kin-based links, have maintained close relationships with the Easterners. Others actively support attempts at community development in towns like Laverton, Leonora and Menzies, as well as at Mount Margaret. Many others, though, feel some resentment for the changes that have taken place with the gradual winding down of the mission and feel that they have lost part of their own heritage. In this context, it is not surprising that they have been loath to acknowledge the legitimacy of claims by those living at Mount Margaret during the 1960s and 1970s. For those raised at the mission, the decay of the old buildings erected by the UAM was seen as a reflection of their own disenchantment. The security they perceived as being offered during the earlier period was gone forever. The replacement of the old buildings with modern facilities seemed to confirm the permanence of those persons whom they regarded as interlopers.

The dispute now extends beyond Mount Margaret. It has created dissension among most who have at one time or another lived at the mission and now feel that they have a special emotional relationship with the settlement. This may well be part of the heritage of the last days of the missionary presence at Mount Margaret. While it was no doubt reasonable at the time to consider the feelings and opinions of the members of those families who had been part of the mission in the early days, the UAM chose to disregard the rights of the Easterners who had occupied the settlement during the two previous decades. Instead, the settlement was offered *in toto* to the AMOS group, most members of which had long since left Mount Margaret.

This decision did not appear to have been made according to any distinction between the past and present religious orientations. It was not made on the grounds of Old Mob versus Easterners, or on the basis of age; rather, it was a distinction between those who were labelled as ‘Christians’ and ‘Law keepers’. Although many of the Christians express contempt for those who are ‘agents of the Devil’, persons who maintain the Law also distrust those who have ‘given the Law away’. This is a serious polarisation, though not a new one. The assumption by AMOS of
responsibility for management of the community has merely resurrected past animosities, and those with the appropriate political strengths will no doubt win the dispute in the long-term.

Both groups rely on invoking external pressures in order to resolve the debate. Members of the Old Mob reaffirm their Christian belief and call for support from local officers of the UAM as well as from members of the Schenk family, whose influence among the ex-Mount Margaret people is still considerable. For their part, the Easterners rely on support from other Aboriginal communities in the Western Desert in the hope of achieving a more equitable representation on the AMOS Committee. Despite the recent appointment of a member of the Old Mob as manager, the administrative experience and business acumen he brings to the position are not always sufficient to overcome divergent points of view. On the other hand, ritual leaders at both Wiluna and Warburton Range have been anxious to maintain the presence of the Law at Mount Margaret, in order to provide local support for ritual exchange and hospitality during the large-scale movements of people which seasonally take place for religious purposes. The long-term implications of the evangelical spread of the so-called ‘Desert crusade’ since the early 1980s are not yet clear; it is sufficient to note that this has further weakened the position of ritual custodians at Mount Margaret, as it has at Warburton Range and Wiluna, for example.

AUTONOMY FOR WHOM?
A great deal of time has elapsed since members of the Old Mob first started to leave the mission but they still fully expect to retain control over its future development. They do not admit that the Aboriginal reserve on which Mount Margaret stands would have long been resumed if it had not been for its continued use by the Easterners, just as the unused Mulga Queen Ration Depot was quietly reincorporated into an adjacent pastoral lease in the late 1960s. While the active members of AMOS may wish to preserve the Christian orientation of the settlement by implementing a plan to develop it as an evangelical centre, it is clear that they do not always have the full support of the wider Aboriginal community of the Eastern Goldfields. The government retains an option to refuse funding for such a project and the presence of this threat has important implications for the practice, in contrast to the ideology, of self-management.
For example, control of the Aboriginal reserve on which Mount Margaret is located has been passed from the Aboriginal Lands Trust to AMOS for the purposes of developing the community, but this arrangement could be revoked on any number of grounds if the government or its officers viewed this as absolutely necessary. Although AMOS technically owns all the buildings passed to it by the UAM, few of these remain today, as most have been bulldozed to make way for more modern facilities. All capital developments that have taken place since then fall outside this category of ownership and consequently AMOS is not really in a position to refuse to cooperate with the wishes of the funding authorities. It is ironic that the missionaries were constantly concerned that they would lose control of the settlement if they accepted any government funding. This has occurred precisely in the way they feared, although in quite different circumstances.

In contrast, the Easterners have always recognised the prior territorial rights of Mount Margaret’s earlier inhabitants and the strength of their continuing links with the locality. Their knowledge of contemporary events elsewhere on the fringe of the Western Desert has made many of them aware that a growing number of Aboriginal people fall outside the ambit of the Law, however distasteful such recognition may be to them. Although such perceived realities may not make the situation any more congenial, these do permit some latitude for the involvement of individuals in what they regard as traditional religious activities. The continued presence of Christianity is not of itself seen as a threat to their own religious beliefs, and as I have already noted, many Easterners choose to attend church services on occasions. Other events indicate something of the syncretic nature of their religious beliefs (cf Tonkinson 1974:113). Likewise, the attitudes of many members of the Old Mob residing at Mount Margaret have been largely respected by the Easterners. This situation will probably continue, even though a significant number of ex-Mount Margaret people are now returning to live at the mission.

CONCLUSION

Policies propounding notions of Aboriginal autonomy reflect the shift from ‘assimilationist’ to ‘integrationist’ perspectives. Tatz (1979:5) has suggested forcefully that:
Integration, their [Aboriginal] ultimate goal, requires voluntary separatism first: the development of group cohesion, an awareness of the need for political and economic strength, a feeling of power arising out of knowing who they are; followed then by free participation in society at large, on their own terms.

This kind of argument begs the question of whether there is such a social formation of Aboriginal homogeneity or whether local perspectives are a dominant factor. If group cohesion is defined, and in turn refined, by notions of a broader pan-Aboriginality, this will induce the belief that socioeconomic strength is sufficient to permit a free and voluntary participation in the activities of the broader Australian society. Such a perspective takes little account of the expressed desire of some Aboriginal groups not to elaborate their involvement in the wider society, and has recently received much closer scrutiny (eg Thiele 1984).

Aboriginality is not a concept that necessarily implies similarity. Rather, it is based on the recognition of a shared range of common experience which unites all Aborigines and identifies them as such in contrast to all other persons. Beckett (1988) has already commented on the differing levels of significance which may be attached to an individual’s perception of identity, in contrast with the external constructs imposed by others. Dissonance may occur between the nature of local particularist loyalties and broader themes of common identification (cf Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982:215-16), particularly when the patterns of local diversity are ignored or overwhelmed by the imposition of government policies (Tatz 1977:390-91; cf RM Berndt (1977:7-8).

By contrast, the 1970s saw the emergence of a number of broadly-based Aboriginal organisations across Australia, many of which have been primarily focused on political, economic, legal and medical issues. Of special interest here is the National Aboriginal Conference or NAC (formerly the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee) which provided the first national forum for the articulation of Aboriginal viewpoints on government policy. Although the organisation was initially established by Clyde Holding, the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, with the intention of institutionalising the advisory relationship between Aborigines and the
Federal Government (Weaver 1983:5), the delegates’ consistently critical appraisal of government policies ultimately led to its disbanding. It appears that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs could not tolerate the kind of independent body that the NAC had become, and used the Coombs Report (1984) confirming ‘financial mismanagement’ as an excuse for winding the organisation up—a claim often heard by those charged with bringing Aboriginal organisations into line with government policy.

In the community I have been discussing, there are indications that local perspectives are being supplanted by wider concerns. As Anderson (1985:41) notes, the particularist perspective within which most social anthropologists conduct field research encourages a heightened awareness of local concerns; sometimes these seem to outweigh the consideration of broader issues. Those living within such a small-scale Aboriginal community are increasingly aware of events in the world outside the Eastern Goldfields, and greatly improved access to forms of communication and transport are accentuating this (cf Michaels 1986).

For many urban and rural Aborigines, contemporary political aspirations may be seen as part of a conscious attempt to meet the challenge of subsuming what is conceived to be ‘Aboriginal’ in both local and general terms. Aboriginality has as much to do with issues of social and personal Aboriginal identification as it has to do with issues of power and economics. Yet, as Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982:219) comment:

While the Aborigines constitute a problem for the government, defined in terms of a set of economic, social and health issues, the government constitutes a problem for Aborigines, defined in terms of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation.

For Beckett (1988), however, the persistence of non-Aboriginal notions of Aboriginality lies essentially in the experience of the past; particularly how European-Australian concepts of history, progress or heredity, serve to create an image of a sequence of events that take a natural progression through time.
In the Mount Margaret situation people have chosen to meet this challenge differently. They have tried to use the Law for this purpose—even though, as I have indicated, the Law has become a concept which incorporates not only traditional religious beliefs but also elements of European religions. For Aborigines the strength of the Law lies in its internal consistency and flexibility, its propensity to incorporate aspects which are relevant to contemporary conditions, and in its ability to reassemble alien components within the context of its own cultural configuration. The Mount Margaret experience of community autonomy has been a contradictory one. Patterns of continuity from past administrative practices have been superimposed upon a context vastly different from that of the missionary period. The seeds of this experience lie in the distant past.

Notes

1 The material under discussion was collected during a period of intensive fieldwork during 1974-76, and subsequent visits during 1977-84, under the supervision of Emeritus Professor RM Berndt, as part of my PhD program.

2 Since the ‘big meeting’ of 1982 between AMOS and the Easterners, many of the latter have shifted elsewhere; as they put it, ‘forced out’ by what they perceive as neglect and, at times, overt discrimination in the allocation of employment and housing. Policy guidelines have inhibited the direct intervention by funding authorities that would have taken place in the past. One DAA officer (who is of Aboriginal descent) said to me at that time, ‘What do you do when it’s Wongai [local Aboriginal people] at each other’s throats. We’ve no brief for that! It’s an embarrassment’.

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24. The sacred site of Pea-Hill or Pi-Hill, threatened by drilling operations on the Noonkanbah lease in 1978.
Aborigines have at times been gently rocked and at others mercilessly buffeted by the tide of ever-changing governmental policies. The spectrum reaches from relentless persecution, forcible pacification and assimilation to integration and finally self-determination and self-management. The ebb and flow of these policies washing over Aborigines has, in more recent years, been cross-cut by the eddies of the Pastoral Award, the outstation movement, the land rights movement and land rights legislation, mining legislation and the like. In this chapter, I am concerned not with policies per se, but with Aboriginal reaction to, and use of them; or rather a particular section of this unceasing flow, namely the incipient stage of self-determination and of the land rights movement as experienced by the Aboriginal community of Noonkanbah.¹

Generally, policies of self-determination and self-management have not been hailed by anthropologists as the panacea for Aborigines. Years ago such writers as Tonkinson (1978), Howard (1982) and von Sturmer (1982),
to name only a few, expressed some scepticism in assessing the workings of these policies. More recently, Sullivan (1986) and Rose (1986) are also very critical, not as far as the spirit of the policies is concerned, but of their practical implementation and their effects. In pointing out the deficiencies of these policies, both authors seem to agree that bureaucratic agencies involved in the implementation process gain more than the Aboriginal communities for whose benefit the policies are designed. In the end it is just a new face on the old evil of domination. Sullivan distinguishes the procedures entailed in the implementation of the policies from the results, and argues that while procedures may be correct in terms of the policies, the results they achieve may go abysmally awry. ‘In practice self-management becomes simply a procedural device in Aboriginal administration’, Sullivan writes (1986:14).

On the basis of my experience I have to agree, and some of the episodes described in this chapter bear this out. However, my main aim here is to explore another aspect relevant to these policies. How and in what form do Aborigines express their ambitions and what response does this expression elicit from the political process in the wider society? Noonkanbah is a good case in point to explore how in various situations, ranging from peaceful and genial to crisis conditions, expressions of self-determination and self-management on the part of the Aborigines meet with varying responses from the bureaucratic and political structure of the nation. From benign assistance to brutal pressuring, a whole kaleidoscope of responses unfolds.

The Aboriginal people of Noonkanbah, in the Shire of West Kimberley of Western Australia, have viewed self-determination as contingent on the recovery of their land and a territorially-based cultural autonomy. In the attempt to regain their land, and once this had been achieved, to protect it against perceived threats, this community employed rational strategies. At first it made use of mechanisms and procedures offered by official bodies such as the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority, and later used litigation, court procedures, public protest, representation to Parliament, media campaigns, and so on. It derived much of its inspiration from traditional religious belief by harnessing religious myth to the cart of political opportunity and necessity. In response to the liberalisation in policies and a more sympathetic political climate in the early 1970s, the community began to forge some of its myths into a political tool. Subsequently, the use of
these myths vis-à-vis governmental authorities, as well as among themselves, had some success. However, when the community later responded to another government policy, in relation to impending mining, by drawing on its religious resources, this ended in spectacular failure. The ensuing controversy captured the attention of the nation in 1980.

The larger context of the fate of the Noonkanbah community is instructive in more than one sense. It throws a characteristic light on the workings and failings of the policies of self-determination and self-management. Also, it provides a glimpse of the full range of their implications when Aboriginal wishes, formulated in the course of these policies, transgress the narrow corridor permitted for their expression and confront powerful economic and political interests.

Some of the consequences of these policies and the reactions of Aborigines to them may be difficult for members of the wider society to understand and appreciate. The policies, if they are indeed sincere, seem to promise that the self-realisation, self-definition and aspirations that Aborigines seek may be couched in a distinctly Aboriginal idiom of thought, and accorded official or quasi-official status. This involves the admittance of this idiom in courts of law, giving it status as a respectable form of legal evidence in jurisprudential processes; admitting it as basis in claims to recover Aboriginal land and as a medium to protect land against mining; and recognising it as a tangible sign of communal viability and stability.

Moreover, the mainspring of Aboriginal political action may be found to be at least partially rooted in a mythical and religious matrix, and political ambitions may sometimes be couched in the religious language of mythical metaphors and configurations. The official policies, to be true to themselves, would have to credit such expressions with the respect due to them and concede the space for them to unfold within the political arena. The reality seems to be that all goes well as long as the good intentions manifested in the policies are not put to the test, and conformity between Aboriginal interests and the political and economic intent of the wider society is easily maintained. However, when this is no longer so, the threadbare nature of the policies is quickly revealed. Aboriginal expression of self-determination turns out to be tightly circumscribed and, if it is to
succeed somehow, must manoeuvre between the Scylla of the Australian economy and the Charybdis of Federal or State politics.

MYTH AND POLITICAL ACTION

In September 1976, after a political odyssey that had lasted five years, the Aboriginal community of Noonkanbah was granted leasehold title to a substantial tract of land in the Shire of West Kimberley. About 150 persons, through sheer stamina, persistence and a good deal of luck, had won a long fight for their ‘tribal’ land, which had started on the day in 1971 when they had left the Noonkanbah pastoral station. On that day, a long-simmering controversy with a callous management finally came to a head, resulting in a complete walkout. While today this would not be unusual, at that time, it was a rarity (see Doolan 1977).

After having spent agonising years in self-imposed exile, the community was granted a leasehold title, vested in the Aboriginal Lands Trust, and the way became free for repatriation. The total area handed over to Aborigines, comprising the Noonkanbah lease and the Waratea lease adjoining in the south, is over one million acres. Although Noonkanbah is one of the more fortunate properties in the Kimberleys, insofar as it partakes in the somewhat greater fertility of the river area, it is by no means prime grazing land. The southern part in particular leaves much to be desired, as it borders on the desert. To Aborigines this land is their home country, beautified by memories and replete with spiritual meaning.

In unravelling the recent history of the Noonkanbah community, one comes to realise how modern political economy and Aboriginal myth are intertwined in the community’s fate and how important the role of traditional myth has been. A consideration of myth reveals the skeins of thought and action of the community in its struggle to regain and hold control of the land. This should not come as a surprise. For some time now anthropology has been fully aware, thanks to the work of the Berndts and others, that the traditional Aboriginal mode of land attachment is distinctly rationalised in religious and mythological terms. Their classic study (Berndt and Berndt 1970) of the Gunwinggu, their land and their myths is a fine example in a steadily growing literature on the subject.

Insofar as humans try to be the actors in the historical scenario, myth may become a quasi-agens movens in history, although in the actual
interplay of humans and events that composes the structure of history, the power of myth may not amount to much. As people use myth in the attempt to act upon history, to try and steer the course of events, these events in turn cause them to revamp or reinterpret their myths, in response to the world and its vicissitudes. Thus, myth is continuously modified according to changing needs, perceptions and interests, sometimes unwittingly and sometimes deliberately, in order to forge a political weapon. The political instrumentality of myth and its purposeful use by people has already been stressed by Voltaire, who tried to discredit myth together with the scriptures as deliberate fictions foisted upon the multitude by crafty priests. Very much the same thing was said some time later by Marx, to whom myths were contrivances of the ruling class to hold in bondage the gullible masses. Both, in overstating the case, have left an indelible stigma on the political manipulation of myth, which makes it now difficult for many to view it with even a modicum of sympathy.

There is a curious ambiguity contained in the ‘conspiracy theory’, and it is this which is of interest here. The mythopoets, or exegetes, are ‘conspirators’, which implies the conscious use of myth for consciously designated ends. And yet, obviously, they themselves come under the spell of the very ‘concoctions’ they peddle. Leaving aside the partisan axioms of Voltaire and Marx, I think that Aborigines demonstrate this kind of ambiguity. This is not to say that Aborigines deliberately and opportunistically concoct myth to prove a point or to deceive. Myth to Aborigines is still too sacred to be blatantly tampered with and to do so would be sheer blasphemy.

Myth is also meant to provide a structure of meaning and purpose. When a situation arises in which guidance and reassurance is needed, humans tend to look to myth. The body of myth, biblical or otherwise, is a source susceptible to infinite discovery of new truths, all of which are contained in the myth at all times. Yet different questions bring forward different answers. Not unlike crystal ball gazing, or questioning an oracle, people look to myth for guidance or validation of goals, or for post-hoc rationalisations. The answers are eternally ambiguous, needing interpretations, which objectively are tinged by social or individual needs and interests. Subjectively, if it were not for the perceived property of myth to encode the truth, Aborigines would hardly bother labouring through their
myths, trying to tease out the truth in relation to a particular problem. In this sense, they use and interpret myth to suit particular goals as they arise and to underscore whatever their intentions or interests might be at the time. They do this with neither more nor less justification than a Bible-bashing politician might draw on his homemade exegesis of biblical myth to press a point. This is not a simple game of facile deception. The point alleged to be expounded in myth may be contrived, and yet is taken to be truth, not deception, as long as it genuinely is believed to be exegetically contained in the myth.

MYTH AND ABORIGINAL LAND OWNERSHIP
Modes of land ownership and use have partially changed in the Kimberleys in post-contact times.\(^3\) The insistence on clan territories and other pre-European modes of holding and using land would make little sense under present socioeconomic conditions. The pastoral economy, which Aborigines had adopted and now see as almost traditional, enforces the use of large parcels of land and this has cast the whole of Aboriginal existence into a new mould. Clan groupings and traditionally attendant socioeconomic activities based on extracting a subsistence living from the bush have become almost obsolete. Now, locally co-residential communities collectively, and for all practical purposes, consider themselves owners of the land on which they live and work. Such local communities, though corporate bodies in terms of the claims laid to land ownership, are often of highly mixed composition, containing persons of widely divergent geographic and linguistic origin.\(^4\)

What has remained traditional is that myth still forms the major bond between people and land and epitomises a person’s land affiliation. Myth is now no longer owned by clans, but has become the collective property of communities, or rather of fully initiated adult males. The men act as repositories for the relevant myths, keep up the memory of mythologically relevant sites and teach adolescents. Because new community members are conceived by means of the land’s spiritual powers, the dead returned to the land, sacred objects carved and stored on the land, ritual grounds maintained and the like, the whole community assumes intense spiritual trusteeship and ownership of the land. Finer distinctions are of course still being made. Persons feel a close affinity with the particular place and area of their conception, and the clan estate also remains of some emotional
importance. Apart from such individually significant considerations, however, the community is now of overarching importance for all practical purposes. Claims to ‘tribal’ lands are now made in terms of communal ownership that telescopes ownership and usufruct into one; relatively amorphous, but legally incorporated, communities act as claimants.

The Noonkanbah group conforms to the standard type of a composite, heterogeneous community. Some community members were born and raised on the property, while others came in from the desert in their early childhood. The group’s composition is mixed, forming an amalgam of three major linguistic (or ‘tribal’) elements: a residual component of river Aborigines, the Nyigina, who had suffered badly in the early days of colonisation and had almost been wiped out; Wolmadjeri (or Walmatjari) from Noonkanbah’s mountainous region and adjoining areas south of the Fitzroy River; and desert and desert-fringe Aborigines from farther south, variously called half-Wolmadjeri, Mangala, Wolmadjeri-Mangala, Djualin or Yulbaridja. The latter component was generally latest to arrive at the station and came of its own volition, unlike the others whose habitat had been taken over by pastoralists and who had to find a new modus vivendi. Over the years of co-residence, community members have intermarried, gradually forming a tight-knit affinal and later partly consanguinal fabric.

In collective communal claims, Aborigines often rely predominantly on conception filiation, as did the Noonkanbah community. In principle the Aboriginal concept of human conception means that a person is believed to arise out of Dreamtime powers invested in the land. (For a detailed description of the relevant ideas, see Strehlow 1947:86ff and Maddock 1972:30-31.) Such powers can be transmitted by food, water or dream visions and these can become a person’s djarrin (conception origin). Another conception form is through spirit children, rai or murrunggur. The site and the tract of land from which rai or djarrin is thought to have come remain inalienably linked with the person. He or she retains a special relationship to the locus and the surrounding area and traditionally was assured access to and use of the land even though it may not have been the father’s or mother’s clan estate. Whether djarrin or rai, these are personified manifestations of spiritual essences with which the land is imbued.
By emphasising these concepts, a powerful political mechanism is set in motion that may lead to a religiously-based annexation of land within one generation (see Kolig 1981a:33ff). So the offspring of immigrant parents, having been conceived on the property (together, of course, with some of the older indigenous persons), can trace their affinity with Noonkanbah land through their particular mode and site of conception. Through their community membership, these persons confer their individual rights to other members who, in a traditional sense, would not be affiliated to the land through either descent or conception.

FORMULATING THE CLAIM
Shortly after its voluntary evacuation of Noonkanbah in 1971, the community, in order to consolidate itself vis-à-vis other Aboriginal groups, assumed the name Kadjina Community, which was to remain its formal name for all official purposes. The community also became legally incorporated under this name and the label became commonly accepted among Aborigines. The name was taken from the traditional myth repertoire, Kadjina being a mythical figure. He was chosen from among a number of potential candidates, namely mythical beings associated with Noonkanbah land. In the Dreamtime, several such beings are believed to have travelled over the land which is today covered by the Noonkanbah lease, and their deeds and mythical shapes are manifested in topographical features of Noonkanbah’s landscape. Thus, the Kadjina and his myth were elevated to central importance from a status previously neither more nor less distinguished than a number of other myths and mythic heroes.

Central to the understanding of how myth was forged into a tool to fight for land is a cluster of interconnected myths. It is appropriate now to relate briefly the main mythic plot. In the Dreamtime, an important rain-being by the name of Balyarra wandered about in the area that adjoins Noonkanbah in the west. Balyarra, appropriate to his status, had sacred paraphernalia, mainly of the kind which Aborigines traditionally regard as potent, rain-inducing objects. Some of these were stolen by Gudal, a man of Balyarra’s following, who took them south into the desert. Balyarra, incensed by the theft, set his two dogs Yangurra and Djidimbil on Gudal’s trail. The dogs, however, failed to track down and punish the culprit. Instead, they harassed and savaged innocent mythic beings they encountered along the way.
Among others, they chanced across Kadjina, a dwarfish, left-handed man, as he wandered about in the St George Ranges area. Today, he is reputed to be an important producer of spirit-children and the mentor of wild honey, but then he was of dubious status as an uninitiated boy. According to one interpretation, the encounter was no accident as Kadjina was not entirely without guilt. He had stolen sacred shell objects, which are also used for rain magic, from Balyarra, who later found his tracks and chased him with his dogs. In other myth versions, however, this charge is denied. Be that as it may, Kadjina, barely eluding the pursuing dogs and after a long chase, jumped onto a high cliff in the St George Ranges. There he still stands, visible as a huge black image against the brownish rock surface, menacingly brandishing his stone axe to smash his pursuers. The two dogs Yangurra and Djidimbil, eventually abandoning their abortive mission, turned north, crossed the Fitzroy River and entered the billabong Gulgarindja, not far from the Noonkanbah homestead.

From this cluster of intertwined myths, outlined here at the point where they intersect, Noonkanbah Aborigines accentuated the figure and fate of Kadjina. Most probably, Kadjina was originally selected simply for the reason that vague prospects had arisen for a piece of land to be excised or bought from the Noonkanbah lease. This land was situated south of the St George Ranges, with an existing outstation as the centre. The Kadjina manifestation site is situated in this area and thus established a convenient spiritual link between the community and the area hoped for. Later, as prospects for this particular piece of land faded and the community set its sights on the acquisition of the entire leasehold, the applicability of this symbol was extended further, onto the whole of the Noonkanbah land.

Kadjina became hypostatised as the main hero, the ‘king’ of the whole area, as Aborigines said, differentiated from other mythic beings. Elevating the loser was clearly a matter of arbitrary myth interpretation, which is easily accomplished since myth lends itself readily to varying and often conflicting exegesis. In most cases, conflicting interpretations are neither coincidental nor meaningless, but represent symbolic weapons of sorts. In this sense, the adoption of Kadjina as a salient symbol for the whole Noonkanbah community was quite sincere and did not serve only as a convenient label vis-à-vis official authorities. The myth of Kadjina rationalised the community’s inner solidarity; all members embraced
Kadjina as their leading symbol, despite the fact that few had actual dose affinity to the myth in a strictly traditional sense.

The myth and its main manifestation site contained a number of essential, if highly symbolic, advantages. First, the main body of the Kadjina myth relates to places and events within the Noonkanbah property. Second, the main site, Kadjina’s manifestation, though geographically not centrally located on the property, could yet be mystically seen as radiating its power equally to all areas of Noonkanbah. Situated on a high cliff, Kadjina’s image is poised as though surveying the surrounding land. And, notwithstanding the empirical fact that the cliff faces north and is by no means higher than surrounding ridges, Kadjina was said to overlook the whole of the Noonkanbah property, his vision reaching north to, and across, the river and south into the desert. Third, despite the main site’s location within the St George Ranges and its association with one particular clan-estate of the Wolmadjeri, it lent itself to a wider interpretation, thus embracing all components of the heterogeneous community. With the appropriate interpretation having been applied, Kadjina could legitimately serve as a symbol forcefully signifying the united community, its essential coherence and combined claim to the property. The myth having become a rallying point, its main figure and manifestation, though arduous to reach, were frequently shown to visiting officials (see Kolig 1974).

EXILE
After leaving the property and with nowhere else to turn, the Noonkanbah community moved to Fitzroy Crossing, a small country town. There they settled on the bank of the Fitzroy River, on a spot officially called Loanban but more commonly known as Bottom Reserve, as it formed the southernmost extension of the town’s Aboriginal Reserve. By law, Loanban was part of the cattle droving corridor along the river, but the community was permitted to remain there. The older people made their permanent, if makeshift, camp there while younger ones sought employment on neighbouring pastoral properties, returning to Loanban for holidays. In its new abode the community suffered a severe sense of discomfort. Although only about 100 kilometres away from Noonkanbah, the area was seen by the community as totally alien and inherently hostile.
Only the river was a familiar element representing the well-known mythical figure of Wunyumbu, the eaglehawk, with whom a few of the community’s Nyigina descendants cherished a special relationship. However, in this section of the river the perceived mythic presence was not of Noonkanbah’s Wunyumbu any more; it was another group’s myth and eaglehawk hero. (This is evidenced by the change of name that Wunyumbu undergoes in the various sections along the river.) On the whole, the Noonkanbah people remained highly uncomfortable. This expressed itself in paranoid fear of the river rising and drowning them in their sleep and in the belief that if they swam in it they would drown. Only a few who could trace their direct spiritual origin to Wunyumbu felt they could safely bathe in the river, while the others kept a cautious distance.

Living conditions in the new camp were abysmal, and owing to the proximity of the town’s public bar, drinking and fighting became grave problems. Moreover, the community was drawn into the vortex of group friction with other displaced Aborigines, of whom there were many from other properties around Fitzroy Crossing. These groups of émigrés eagerly clamoured and competed for government handouts and benevolent attention, which were fairly limited. Most of all, these groups, uprooted and unhappy as they were, beseeched the authorities to intervene on their behalf so that they could return to their respective home countries. Led by a very able man of acumen and independent spirit, the Kadjina community was relatively successful in attracting government funds. A number of grants and projects were bequeathed it, but a market garden project and later a contract trucking business failed. (cf Dagmar Chapter 3). These were the days of policies akin to integration, and the panacea of all ills was seen to lie in fully incorporating Aborigines in the economic structure of the wider society. The time for the community’s repatriation was not yet ripe and had to wait for a change in policies.

During the time of government-funded experimentation, the Kadjina community forged an alliance with another group of displaced Aborigines camping nearby. The driving force behind this unlikely marriage of convenience was white officialdom, acting in the well-intentioned but misguided belief that by streamlining the prevailing particularistic conditions, more social planning and development could be achieved, with better results. By creating fewer and larger Aboriginal groups, chances for
successful repatriation programs were seen to increase. However, existing social realities were not congenial to this plan. Beneath the mantle of the unifying name of Kadjina—the other group now benefitting from the established name of the Noonkanbah community—differences between the two groups proved insurmountable in the long run. Under a thin veneer of cordiality, controversies continued to smoulder. While the Noonkanbah community longed fervently to return to their home country and never ceased to see any other suggested move as more than a trivial intermezzo, the newly aligned group was mainly seeking economic promotion wherever it should offer itself. This group was led by younger men who placed less emphasis on traditional land affiliation and followed a more opportunistic, or perhaps realistic, approach. Communally, the majority of group members claimed traditional ties with land to the east and south of Noonkanbah. But this was apparently not the prime issue of their self-styled development program.

In February 1975, the enlarged Kadjina community was on the move again. Prospects had tentatively arisen for a small pastoral property adjoining Noonkanbah in the east to be purchased by the government for the community. Acting on the advice of white officials who wished to accentuate the community’s claim to the land, and perhaps in the belief that the authorities could be pressured into faster action, the community moved to squat on the property. This was not unwelcome to the leaseholder and owner of the station, who was eager to sell, and anything facilitating a rapid transaction met with his approval.

Although the move was white-inspired and conceived as a rational manoeuvre, to Aborigines the mythical angle was of additional significance. The sub-communities camped on the bank of the Fitzroy River at two different spots where each respectively felt an affinity. In particular, Ligil, the place where the Noonkanbah group had pitched camp, was replete with mythical happenings which were joyously related by the people. Ligil, apparently a rather deep section of the river, was the abode of the water serpent Nginin and his mate, and many legends about Nginin and his deeds were related (Kolig 1981b). The place was also consecrated as the spot where the father of the Noonkanbah group’s leader had died.

Some months later, the squatters were asked by their official adviser to leave, since acquisition of the property had become unfeasible. The
Noonkanbah group, incensed about the fickleness of the advice they had received, at first resisted, but eventually left with few regrets, in so far as the struggle could once again concentrate on their real goal. They had never ceased to see this move, even a possible acquisition, as only a first step taking them politically and geographically nearer to what they really wanted—return to Noonkanbah. Under the strain of disappointment and undermined by continuing disagreements, the alliance, artificially forged by whites and shaky at the best of times, broke up. As the rift became unbridgeable, the total break was initiated by the Noonkanbah group. As they were the ones wishing to leave an officially and legally incorporated unit, they found themselves unable to withdraw the name ‘Kadjina Community’ from the others. The name that had originally been theirs and had been extended to embrace the others turned out to be theirs no longer. In this dilemma, the community chose the name Yangurra (the official spelling is usually Yangugura), thus elevating the male part of the two mythical dogs to focal importance. The community leader now claimed his spiritual origin rai to have derived from the mythic dog and his rai’s site of origin to be Gulgarindja. This claim apparently was somewhat far-fetched, as it was denied even by members of his own group.

The main reason for selecting the new name was again a symbolic one, to express bitter opposition to the former allies: Yangurra, the mythic dog, had chased the dwarf Kadjina in the myth. By changing the emphasis, Yangurra was now interpreted to have been the dominant element in the mythical encounter. Kadjina no longer was the hero who had successfully foiled his pursuers. Instead, the dogs, and in particular huge Yangurra, were declared the victors. Though admittedly they had not succeeded in killing Kadjina, they had hunted him down and won the day. An implied challenge was thus unmistakably issued by the community leader to the other group, which in turn not only clung to the name Kadjina, but also adhered to the version of the myth which portrays him as dominant.

SUCCESS AT LAST
The rift between the two groups was still glaring when the Noonkanbah property and the Waratea lease were acquired in 1976 for both groups. In fact, as may have been predicted, the new development reinforced the schism. While the Noonkanbah community was directed to take possession of the northern part of the lease—all land north of the river including the
Noonkanbah homestead—the other group took over Waratea plus the southern section of the Noonkanbah property. This distribution appeared necessary to officials in order to accommodate both groups on the available land and to make their respective economic enterprises viable. As could have been expected, this did not please several members of the Noonkanbah community, who felt deprived of their land. In particular, their leader did not take kindly to this division. All the more did he emphasise the symbolism connoted in the names of Yangurra and Kadjina. Allegations of inefficiency in handling the cattle, branding, mustering, fencing and windmill maintenance were traded between the groups. When I visited in 1978-79, remarks were commonly heard to the effect that the land of the other group was badly managed and run-down.

Understandably, the quarrel, if allowed to continue and perhaps escalate, was feared by officials to threaten the economic viability of both groups, and if given unsympathetic publicity, to do damage to the cause of Aboriginal land rights. The main stumbling block to appeasement lay in the person of the Noonkanbah community’s leader, who remained intransigent in his rejection of those he plainly saw as intruders. Not even pacifying intervention by eminent Aboriginal experts of traditional law and lore, who sought to convince him of the legality of the other group’s presence on Noonkanbah, could allay his wrath. It was finally deemed necessary by officials to intervene and remove him from power. By skilfully exploiting discontent and an existing generation gap within the community, they eventually succeeded in having the troublesome leader deposed by his own people. Removing from power a long-serving, accomplished leader and spokesman was surely achieved at the cost of a further demolition of traditional authority structures.

Since then the community has been run by a management committee, consisting mostly of younger men who can appreciate somewhat better the need for rational pragmatism and utilitarianism. The new deal of appeasement, ushered in by the change in leadership, was to be reflected in assuming the name Gulgaria (or Gulgareya) for the community. (The name refers to the creek at whose bank the Noonkanbah homestead site lies and from which drinking water is drawn.) The adoption of a neutral name, untangled by mythological and symbolic connotations, was to signal the
end of antagonism to the other group. Somehow, however, the name change did not happen after all.

While one must applaud modern Australian policies which concede an unprecedented degree of self-management to Aborigines, there is no reason for exuberance. The sacrificial removal of the Noonkanbah leader was a poignant case in point. To be sure, ham-fisted absolutist control has given way to what is now called consultation. If one remains undeceived by outer appearances, however, it turns out that little had changed. The role of the white boss had simply been altered in favour of more clandestine, but no less effective, means of control. The advisers and officials, although they could not openly coerce, still were able to bring to bear the full authority vested in their position by the government. (For a telling analysis see Tonkinson 1978.) In a sense, Aborigines were still effectively told what to do—although now the philosophy was one of ‘for their own good’. (A variant of the powerful adviser is what Howard called Aboriginal power brokerage; see Howard 1982.)

**CONCLUSION**

A new threat arose shortly afterwards, challenging the community to consolidate its hold on the land. And once again myth was rallied to the cause. In 1978 mineral prospectors chanced across diamond fields in the area, and the search for oil was also reactivated, having been abandoned some two decades before. The moloch of large-scale mining moved in, with heavy equipment, the might of mining legislation and a good deal of callousness, to crush Aboriginal opposition. Within a few weeks, the Noonkanbah lease north of the Fitzroy River was thoroughly pegged out into about 500 mining tenements. Several multinational companies had been waiting eagerly for the go-ahead to start drilling for oil, gas, diamonds and other mineral deposits. In the course of exploratory work on Noonkanbah, several sites, sacred and inviolable to the community, were either desecrated or destroyed. Responding to the tragedy, the community, aided by Western Australian Museum authorities and the Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, rallied behind their mythology to use it as a bulwark against the impending devastation of their land.

According to existing laws, the community was not to receive royalties or be entitled to monetary compensation. However, the problem lay much
deeper than this. The bitter irony of the matter was that mining threatened exactly what had previously motivated the community to a large extent in their fight for the land—burial places, ceremonial grounds and many sites of mythological relevance. Despite their eminent importance to the fundamentals of religious belief, such sites have always been vulnerable. Traditionally, if a site was desecrated, the damage could be atoned for by putting the offender to death. But there is little or no possibility of exacting redress from offenders equipped with bulldozers and backed by mining legislation.

Objections to pegging and mineral exploitation of Noonkanbah land were lodged with the mining warden, mainly on the grounds that such activity would severely infringe the spirituality of the land and threaten the community’s spiritual well-being. This was perhaps not quite as bold and novel a juridical move as may appear, for legal precedence of sorts was already at that time given through Justice Woodward’s Aboriginal Land Rights Commission report (1974:2) and Justice Blackburn’s ruling (1971), both of which explicitly recognised in their findings the spiritual significance of land for Aborigines. In the resultant court hearing later in 1978, the objectors sought to demonstrate this very significance by drawing extensively on anthropological evidence of mythology and its connectedness with the land. They did so with little success.

As myth proved a pitifully ineffective weapon against powerful economic interests, what else was there left to the community but to appeal to the government for clemency? In May 1979, the community’s spokesman presented to the Western Australian Parliament a petition carved on a slab of wood in the traditional manner of sacred objects and begging in Wolmadjeri language to stop the bulldozers. Aborigines were beginning to suspect, rightly so as it turned out, that land grants were no more than a very volatile governmental largesse, easily overridden by mining legislation at the first prospect of big revenue.

To a considerable extent these fears and suspicions were borne out by subsequent events, such as the enforced drilling on Noonkanbah, the police actions on an unprecedented scale surrounding it, the spectacle of ‘the convoy’ (the government supervised transfer of drilling equipment across the State to Noonkanbah) and the Pea-Hill dispute, named after the sacred site allegedly threatened by the drilling operation. Again the community
sought to make their point through myth and, aided by museum authorities, to demonstrate the sanctity and traditional inviolability of the prospective drilling site. As is well-known, the attempt failed and myth once again proved ineffective, unaided as it was by a rationally-based power. The drilling operation went ahead in August 1980. Subsequently, the oil well was found to be dry and the site abandoned.

In this final phase of the saga, myth was again a rationale behind political action—to protect a site which turned out to be of strategic importance to the impending oil exploration work. The cause of the Noonkanbah community found an ally in Ronald Berndt, who as an anthropologist was prepared to vigorously take the side of religious strategies against the might of State politics and economics. As a longtime supporter of heritage legislation and a member of the Aboriginal Cultural Materials Committee of the Western Australian Museum, Ronald Berndt spoke out strongly and publicly in support of the Aboriginal Heritage Act, which is virtually the only piece of Western Australian legislation in which Aboriginal mythical considerations find some kind of official recognition.6

Indicative of the State’s serious lack of appreciation of the validity of a religiously-based approach was the pamphlet entitled ‘Noonkanbah: The Facts’ (Western Australian Government 1980). It was issued by the State Government to set out the reasons and justifications for the stance it had taken in the matter. It did so mainly by seeking to denigrate the legitimacy of the Noonkanbah people’s religious beliefs. Ronald Berndt, probably speaking on behalf of most Australianists, decried it as a concoction of ‘half-truths and distortions’ which seriously misrepresented ‘anthropological facts and Aboriginal evidence’ (The West Australian, 24 and 25 September 1980).

Here is not the place to review in detail the events of the so-called Pea-Hill controversy. This bare sketch may suffice to call to mind the circumstances that served as an impressive demonstration of the political will and courage of a group of Aborigines relying on their religious resources, to which they ought to have been entitled. This may be seen as a test case which helped to explore the parameters of then current Federal policies. Little further mining activity has taken place on Noonkanbah. However, this brief and partially violent interlude was sufficient to highlight the very narrow delineations within which officially condoned strategies of
Aboriginal self-determination and self-management may unfold in actual cases.

What the Federal Government euphemistically perceives as a ‘balancing process’ (Baume 1982:139), facilitating the coexistence of the cultural and economic needs of both Aborigines and the wider nation, may in actual case and in the short run, make Aborigines the losers. In the long run, so it may be argued, Aborigines could stand to benefit in two ways from mineral exploitation: directly through royalties, provided the necessary statutory rights to receive royalties were granted them; and indirectly, as only a nation that is affluent enough (through its mineral wealth or otherwise) can afford to be culturally tolerant and allow minorities self-realisation of the kind sought by Aborigines. This may be so, but from the Aboriginal point of view, there is little cause for euphoria as earlier hints of optimism were quickly replaced by a more sober appraisal of the policies’ obvious limitations.

Notes

1 My initial acquaintance with the Noonkanbah community dates back to 1970 and was renewed periodically over the following ten years. I feel privileged to have known the late Friday Mulu-Mulu Muller, for many years the community’s leader and spokesman of considerable political stature. In my capacity as a regional anthropologist for the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority, I observed and assisted in the first steps taken by Muller to lay claim to Noonkanbah, or rather a small part of it, on behalf of his community. At a later time Nipper Tabagee, one of the community’s revered elders, was my main tutor in matters concerning Noonkanbah. The guidance and friendship of both men is gratefully acknowledged. A fuller account of the Noonkanbah saga is given in my book (Kolig 1987). As a Research Fellow sponsored by the then AIAS, I was attached to the Anthropology Department at the University of Western Australia in Perth from 1969 to 1972, and during this time my research in the Kimberleys benefitted much from the advice of Ronald and Catherine Berndt.
For what follows, it is well to keep in mind what Stanner (1966:148) has called the plasticity of myth, as opposed to the constancy of ritual—an idea which goes back to Robertson-Smith (1899:23-31), who in his lectures on the Semites propounded the view that rituals are much more stable historically than beliefs. Oral traditions and the beliefs they enshrine are by their very nature a pliable stuff, changing over time through individual and collective interpretations, and lending themselves \textit{ad infinitum} to all kinds of modifications and extrapolations, ideological or otherwise. Not surprisingly, the way myth is being interpreted by the believer has a strong bearing on many matters of a practical kind.

For a thorough treatment of the subject, see Maddock 1980 and 1983.

My use of the word ‘claims’ to tribal land in the Western Australian context refers to assertions of traditional ownership by Aboriginal individuals or groups, since in that State there is no statutory claiming procedure akin to that existing in the Northern Territory.

Gudal is an important Rain Dreaming centre in the desert, and the myth, as related by Noonkanbah Aborigines, implies that the desert rain magic is a derivative of the river magic acquired stealthily through misappropriation. This seems to be a mythic stratagem to claim religious superiority.

See \textit{The West Australian}, 18 March and 2 April 1980, where the dramatic headline reads, ‘Call a Halt, Professor Tells Government’. In defending the Western Australian Museum’s concept of ‘sphere of influence’ around sacred sites, Ronald Berndt spoke of ‘buffer zones’ (\textit{The West Australian}, 2 April 1980). This became a crucial concept in the ensuing confrontation, but failed to convince the State government. Attempts by Ronald at direct mediation, apparently also involving the question of compensatory payments to the Noonkanbah community, proved fruitless (\textit{The West Australian}, 3 April and 2 September 1980). See also R Berndt 1982.

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