

KUNINJKU PEOPLE, BUFFALO, AND CONSERVATION  
IN ARNHEM LAND:  
'IT'S A CONTRADICTION THAT FRUSTRATES US'

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On Tuesday 20 May 2014 I was escorting two philanthropists to rock art galleries at Dukaladjarranj on the edge of the Arnhem Land escarpment. I was there in a corporate capacity, as a director of the Karrkad-Kanjdi Trust, seeking to raise funds to assist the Djelk and Warddeken Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) in their work tackling the conservation challenges of maintaining the environmental and cultural values of 20,000 square kilometres of western Arnhem Land. We were flying low in a Robinson R44 helicopter over the Tomkinson River flood plains – Bulkay – wetlands renowned for their biodiversity. The experienced pilot, nicknamed 'Batman', flew very low, pointing out to my guests herds of wild buffalo and their highly visible criss-cross tracks etched in the landscape. He remarked over the intercom: 'This is supposed to be an IPA but those feral buffalo are trashing this country, they should be eliminated, shot out like up at Warddeken'. His remarks were hardly helpful to me, but he had a point that I could not easily challenge mid-air; buffalo damage in an iconic wetland within an IPA looked bad. Later I tried to explain to the guests in a quieter setting that this was precisely why the Djelk Rangers needed the extra philanthropic support that the Karrkad-Kanjdi Trust was seeking to raise.

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This opening vignette highlights a contradiction that I want to explore from a variety of perspectives in this chapter – abundant populations of environmentally destructive wild buffalo roam widely in an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) declared for its natural and cultural values of global significance, according to International Union for the Conservation of Nature criteria. The buffalo has been very effectively incorporated into the transforming domestic economy of the Kuninjku-speaking people with whom I work, and yet it is also causing environmental damage and impacting significantly on biodiversity.<sup>1</sup> I set out here to explore the tensions created by this contradiction for a number of key stakeholders in the Djelk IPA, which covers much of the Maningrida region in Arnhem Land: land owners (including conservation rangers who are also land owners), regional organisations, the Australian government and environmental philanthropies.

I begin by providing some background and an historical account of the rapid growth in the number of buffalo in the IPA. I then share my observations of conservation planning meetings, aimed to develop a strategy to deal with this environmental threat, held in early 2015. Using the idiom of ‘unstable relations’, I then analyse some of the political contestations that emerge in competing proposals to cull buffalo numbers at the regional scale; and, at a broader scale, consider some of the emerging tensions in north Australia in attempting to reconcile sustainable use of resources with conservation objectives in an IPA. I end with some broader reflections about livelihood opportunity for Indigenous people seeking to negotiate a pathway through the complexities generated by entanglements with the customary, the market and the state in remote Australia.

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### Kuninjku Country and the Beginning of the Djelk Rangers

I have worked in the Maningrida region as an academic researcher since 1979 and using the analytic lenses of economics and anthropology I have documented economic transformations in the region, especially among members of the Kuninjku community. I have also politically championed the rights of Kuninjku people to pursue their chosen way of life, one which has evolved into a hybrid form of economy informed by a complex mix of Kuninjku and *Balanda* (their term for European or Western) values.<sup>2</sup> This championing has involved representing Kuninjku perspectives, as I understand them, to politicians and officials as well as wider publics.

In more recent times, I have become conscious of my deep emotional entanglements both with my Kuninjku friends – who actively adopted me into their relational world decades ago – and with particular meaningful places on Kuninjku country that I have frequently visited, with Bulkay being one. I am also conscious of my changing perspectives on buffalo, who I once viewed simply as game to be hunted and consumed when I lived with Kuninjku people. Now I see buffalo more sympathetically as a majestic animal that has adapted very successfully to the tropical savanna of northern Australia.

Reading Hage's *Alter-Politics* has assisted me to recognise and come to terms with the tensions of being an academic researcher and a political advocate for both *Bininj* (the Kuninjku term for themselves as black people in contrast to *Balanda*) and the environment.<sup>3</sup> As a personal friend of many Kuninjku people, I have been deeply moved by their current precarious circumstances which, as I argue elsewhere, have resulted from thoughtless policy shifts and changes in global circumstances.<sup>4</sup> By my observations, Kuninjku

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people are currently more impoverished and, at times, hungrier than at any other time over the last 37 years. I sense a growing nostalgia amongst Kuninjku people for earlier, better times that I also share. These emotional entanglements extend, as will become apparent, to the buffalo; like my interlocutors, I have a growing antipathy towards culling due to its wastefulness.

When, in the 1980s, I first camped out on the Bulkay flood plains with Kuninjku at a seasonal camp called Mankodbe Kayo – or, the place where the bush potato rests – there were few buffalo. There were also no feral pigs or cane toads on these resource-rich wetlands where Kuninjku people gathered regularly to feast on seasonal surpluses of game, aquatic birdlife, barramundi, catfish, goannas and wallabies. We drank fresh water from the clear billabongs and waded in creeks relatively free of estuarine crocodiles to fish with spears for barramundi. When I flew low over Bulkay in a light plane for the first time in May 1980 there were no herds of buffalo to be seen, no wallows in billabongs, no pugmarks in the black soil plains, no criss-crossing trails etched into the landscape.

In 1979 and 1980, when I resided at Mumeka outstation (see Figure 3.1 for location) and a number of related seasonal camps, I described Kuninjku as ‘hunter-gatherers today’.<sup>5</sup> I did not think of them as environmentalists or conservationists, but rather as people who hunted and fished and gathered, managed the landscape with fire, and produced art for sale, while belatedly, from 1980, gaining access to their welfare entitlements as Australian citizens. At that time the relatively sparse buffalo population on Kuninjku country was eagerly exploited as a source of protein super-abundance. Buffalo did not then constitute what is now regarded as an environmental threat.



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considerations than the rights of Aboriginal people to buffalo as hunted game. Nevertheless, parts of my submission remain apposite today. I noted that Aboriginal people in western Arnhem Land were unconcerned about the environmental impact of buffalo regarded by them as posing a low-grade environmental threat mainly to bush roads; they believed that their utilisation of buffalo as a source of food kept numbers under control and constituted an effective land management strategy. I recommended that if an eradication program was needed in Arnhem Land, then the people living at outstations could be mobilised to participate more actively in culling, including as professional shooters on their own lands. Owing to the significance of buffalo as a source of meat in the contemporary economy, I was sceptical that an eradication program would be acceptable to land owners.

It eventuated that the BTEC did not extend into Arnhem Land for a variety of reasons, but mainly because some early culling and testing indicated that the herds there were almost entirely disease-free. Hence, there was no need to undertake the expensive and politically complex task of buffalo eradication throughout this region.

A decade later, in 1993, 'conservation' in a Western sense emerged with the formal establishment of a community-based conservation group called the Djelk Rangers. In the 1980s, a missionary in Maningrida had released some domesticated pigs into Barlparrarra swamp to the east of the township. At about the same time, a renowned Kuninjku man – the late Jerry Jirriminmin – released some pigs brought from the township of Gunbalanya to the west. A decade later, Aboriginal people living at outstations in the region were concerned at the very visible damage from rapidly growing populations of pig evident on flood plains like Bulkay and billabong and riparian margins. As such, the Djelk Rangers

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started as a feral pig control program with funding assistance from the Commonwealth government's Contract Employment for Aboriginals in Natural and Cultural Resource Management program with a Gurrgoni-speaking man Dean Yibarbuk as their founding father.<sup>7</sup> Djelk is a Gurrgoni word for 'land' and 'caring for land'. The Djelk Rangers were supported by the regional outstation resource agency, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, and aimed to eradicate the pigs. This proved an impossible task. Not long afterwards, in 1995, the rangers broadened their conservation efforts to deal with mimosa (*Mimosa pigra*), a voracious and wetlands-choking exotic plant. John Mawurndjul, the internationally renowned artist and senior manager for Bulkay, spotted an outbreak on the Bulkay flood plains, and his deep Indigenous environmental knowledge told him this was a foreign species.<sup>8</sup>

The Djelk Rangers worked closely with the Kuninjku from the outset, in part because of the close kinship and geographic relations between Dean Yibarbuk and themselves, but also because Kuninjku were among the most committed group in the region to live on their country at about ten outstations. During the 1990s, the Djelk Rangers rapidly grew as a natural and cultural resource management arm of Bawinanga, funded under the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme and the Natural Heritage Trust.

### Emergence of the Buffalo 'Problem'

The buffalo...tendency to increase is so great, that their numbers may eventually prove a nuisance – G. W. Earl, 1839, 'Enterprises, Discoveries and Adventures in Australia'.<sup>9</sup>

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During the 1990s the numbers of buffalo and pig in the region expanded exponentially, something that people living on country were well aware of, and also partially welcomed as a ready source of meat. Possibly because pigs and weeds were seen as higher ecological priorities, Kuninjku people paid less attention to buffalo. As in the boiled frog parable, no-one seemed to notice the buffalo's population growth owing to its creeping incrementalism and other priorities.

In the late 1990s Bawinanga and the Djelk Rangers were increasingly collaborating with Western scientists at the Australian Research Council Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management and the Tropical Savannas Management Cooperative Research Centre based at Charles Darwin University in Darwin. The goal of the Djelk Rangers was 'to develop herd management plans to minimise ecological impacts [of buffalo and pig] whilst maintaining food and trophy hunting benefits'.<sup>10</sup> As an element of these growing collaborations with Western scientists there were some aerial counts of buffalo, with a figure of between 4,000 and 6,000 estimated in the Maningrida region at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Not long afterwards, in 2002 and 2003, I coordinated a field project as a part of these collaborations that saw a number of biologists camp with Kuninjku in various locations to monitor wildlife utilisation. This research was associated with a project to assess the sustainable use of wildlife with an eye to possible commercialisation of key species via wild harvest or capture. The project's main scientific finding, under-reported over a decade later, was that the range of flora and fauna utilised by Kuninjku had declined since 1979–80, but key bush resources remained readily available.<sup>12</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, the alarm bells about buffalo and pig should have sounded more loudly, but even then people



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were camping on the flood plains and evidence of environmental degradation and species decline was limited. The greatest concern, expressed by all, was about the sudden arrival of the poisonous cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) or ‘rubbish frog’, as Kuningku call them, in 2002. Almost overnight, goannas and monitors, important species both as food and totemically, were wiped out almost to extinction.<sup>13</sup> One important indicator that we missed was that people were sourcing their drinking water from a groundwater tap at Mumeka outstation, some 15 kilometres away, rather than from the Bulkay billabongs which they assessed as unsavoury.



*Figure 3.2: Kuningku people butchering buffalo at Bulkay, 2002.  
Photo: Tony Griffiths.*

### Formalising Conservation in the Djelk IPA

In 1997 the Howard government established the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program as a vehicle to support Indigenous land management and to increase the size of the National Reserve

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System, Australia's terrestrial network of protected areas and to improve its comprehensiveness, adequacy, and representativeness.<sup>14</sup> In the years that followed, the well-established Djelk Rangers carefully considered whether they wanted to participate in this program, as it required all local land owners to commit to managing their lands for the maintenance of biological diversity according to one of six internationally recognised land management categories, as defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. In the Djelk case, this meant Category VI: 'protected area with sustainable use of natural resources'.<sup>15</sup>

There was a degree of regional ambivalence to this embrace of environmental management according to externally stipulated conservation criteria.<sup>16</sup> There was also the practical challenge of negotiating with 102 regional land-owning corporate groups (patri-clan members) to commit their lands to a conservation commons. The political complexity of this process saw a prolonged consultation phase, funded by the Commonwealth, extend over seven years before the requisite consensus was achieved among all land owners. The minister for the environment Peter Garrett officially declared the Djelk IPA on 25 September 2009, a day after the abutting and jurisdictionally overlapping 'sister' Warddeken IPA was declared.

Members of the Kuninjku clans were key players in the formation of the Djelk IPA because their estates extended from the Arnhem Land Plateau to the flood plains and tidal river margins, including key parts of the catchments of the Tomkinson, Mann and Liverpool rivers. These were among the most biodiversity-complex sub-regions in the IPA quite similar to the World Heritage listed Kakadu National Park in the Alligator Rivers region.

While Kuninjku might not see it quite this way, committing their ten estates covering well over 1,000 square kilometres to the

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IPA fundamentally altered their relationship with the Australian state and the conservation movement. They were now variously required to deliver environmental ‘outcomes’, especially when employed as salaried rangers under the federally funded Working on Country program or engaged as ‘custodial consultants’ to assist rangers with advice about environmental management around sites of cultural significance and with traditional ecological knowledge. I, too, became more conservation-minded in my regional collaborations, working on two major projects with the Djelk Rangers between 2002 and 2012.<sup>17</sup> In 2009 I was nominated by Bawinanga as a foundation director and secretary of Karrkad-Kanjdi Limited, a company established to raise funds for environmental purposes and manage a charitable trust with goals to protect, restore and enhance the natural environment of the West Arnhem region including the Djelk and Warddeken IPAs.<sup>18</sup> It was this role that put me in the helicopter with ‘Batman’ and the potential donors.

### Planning to Manage Wild Buffalo

Indigenous Protected Areas are required to develop 5-year plans with the first one for the Djelk IPA being completed in 2008. Throughout 2014, Bawinanga and the Djelk Rangers commissioned some external conservation consultants with well-established regional associations to assist them with their next plan, for the period 2015 to 2025, using an emerging conservation planning instrument called ‘Healthy Country Planning’, sponsored by the conservation NGO Bush Heritage Australia.<sup>19</sup>

Also, in June 2014, the first aerial survey in 16 years was conducted to determine the distribution and abundance of buffalo (and other large ‘feral’ vertebrates) in Arnhem Land.<sup>20</sup> This survey

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estimated that there were now 97,823 buffalo in Arnhem Land (plus or minus 9,327), at a density of one per square kilometre overall. There were about 20,000 buffalo in the Djelk IPA, at a density of about two per square kilometre, with enormous variations across ecological zones. In some wetlands such as Bulkay, herds like those seen from the helicopter in May 2014 could push the seasonal density to more than forty buffalo per square kilometres. The Western science experts seem to be in agreement that the buffalo population has quadrupled since the last comprehensive regional survey in 1998 and that it could be currently growing at a rate of 15 to 20 per cent per annum.<sup>21</sup>

The Healthy Country Planning meetings provided an ideal forum for the planning team and traditional land owners to consider how this population explosion had come about and what should be done about it. In February 2015, the planning team invited Murray Garde and me to participate in and help facilitate two meetings with Kuninjku land owners, in part because of our long associations with these people and in part because Murray's exceptional linguistic skills were invaluable in ensuring clear communications.

Two meetings with land owners, opposite moiety land managers, rangers and members of the planning team were interspersed with a number of other discussions Murray and I conducted with our Kuninjku interlocutors exploring the meaning of 'the good life' for them in the precarious present.<sup>22</sup>

Kuninjku clearly and unequivocally recognised the environmental problems and biodiversity threats posed by the buffalo population explosion, alongside the pig population explosion that is less evident in aerial population counts, but more visible in terms of damage to billabongs. The problems caused by growing

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populations of estuarine crocodiles and cane toads were also universally acknowledged, with somewhat lesser concern about the impact of feral cats on small mammal populations.

Kuninjku were well aware that their country was being ‘trashed’, as Batman the chopper pilot put it. Buffalo have become highly visible in the landscape and they were identified as destructive not just of the wetlands environment, but also of freshwater supplies. As Mawurndjul noted:

...when buffalo go into our drinking water, it makes the water dangerous and we cannot drink it anymore. Buffalo have different toilet! They make the billabong yellow and they put sickness in the water.

Buffalo were also damaging rock art sites, riparian vegetation, a long list of edible plants and animals and sacred sites as Obed, a Kuninjku ranger and the Djelk’s deadliest platform marksman, noted:

When travelling in the chopper around Mankorlod I have seen a lot of buffalo track. At Kolbbe, which is a really sacred site, a lot of buffalo there in that swamp. We can’t see the red lilies there anymore. Long time, pigs eat them, buffaloes wreck them.

Terrah Guymala, a senior ranger and renowned Nabarlek band lead singer, put it this way:

Buffalo are a big problem, they are ruining our land, they are doing a lot of damage to rivers, creeks, billabongs and springs; they are causing erosion and changing

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our waterholes so that we cannot fish and cannot get freshwater mussels anymore. I remember when I was young and we moved up from Table Hill to Manmoyi, we would walk everywhere, the country was lovely, there were wallabies and kangaroos everywhere and we drank as we walked from springs with good water. We only used to see the occasional buffalo or *bulukki* [wild cattle]. Today buffalo are everywhere, yesterday I drove to Maningrida to shop early in the morning and there were buffalo at every creek crossing. When you drive at night they are all over the road. Recently I went up in a helicopter near Manbulkardi [on the Liverpool River not far from Bulkay] and from the air we saw mobs of buffalo, it was like they were having a big meeting, a corroboree.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time Kuninjku have become increasingly dependent on buffalo, and to a lesser extent on pig, as a source of meat. Indeed over the past fifteen years buffalo meat has become a staple food; Kuninjku people like eating it and value it highly. This can be contrasted with the sentiments expressed by Commandant McArthur from Victoria Settlement on the Cobourg Peninsula, who wrote in 1843 that 'buffalo meat is not only inferior, but absolutely injurious to some...we have a few men who can never eat it'.<sup>24</sup> This is a sentiment that only some Kuninjku with no teeth would share.

In 1981, I estimated that 25 per cent of bush protein came from buffalo and that the community at Mumeka where I lived exploited about one buffalo a month.<sup>25</sup> Today, I estimate that this percentage might be as high as 75 per cent.<sup>26</sup> This growth is partly linked to abundance and, if one has access to a rifle, ease in

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killing. But there are other factors at work, foremost the related decline in the availability of other bush foods that buffalo and pig either destroy or eat or compete with for edible vegetation.<sup>27</sup> As buffalo come to out-compete other species the more significant they become in Kuninjku dietary intake.

Let me briefly crunch some more numbers. To put buffalo numbers in the Maningrida regional context, the Aboriginal population (inclusive of the township of Maningrida) to buffalo population ratio is about 1:7 whereas out in the bush the ratio is more like 1:40. In both cases, buffalo greatly outnumber people. Given that swamp buffalo weigh an estimated 300 to 550 kilograms each – with older males sometimes weighing as much as 1,200 kilograms and females 800 kilograms – the regional herd represents a likely minimum 8.5 million kilograms of buffalo. With an estimated dressing percentage (amount of useful meat) of just over 50 per cent per animal, this represents a massive ‘protein capital’ of 4.25 million kilograms of meat. Given the way that megafauna is generously shared when successfully hunted, buffalo also represent a massive stock of ‘cultural capital’ as it allows Kuninjku and others in the region to maintain key aspects of their customary kin-based relations of production.

Like the Western-trained non-Aboriginal scientists that I interviewed in September 2015, Kuninjku interlocutors are far from sure how this population explosion came about. One theory is that the relative absence of *Bininj* (Kuninjku people) in the landscape has allowed *nganabbarru* (or buffalo) to become the dominant species. As Namunjda noted, ‘we have been in Maningrida [township] and these things have arrived while we have been away’. When Mawurndjul stated that ‘Before at Bulkay *Bininj* were camping all the time, but not now’, his son-in-law Larry responded only half-jokingly: ‘The buffaloes are now the land owners’.<sup>28</sup>

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Others attributed the population explosion to growing difficulties in accessing guns owing to enhanced policing and stricter controls after the 1996 Port Arthur massacre, at the southern extremity of Australia, and in accessing both guns and vehicles after the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (or ‘Intervention’); the latter, in particular, has seen an escalated and increasingly vigilant police presence in remote Indigenous lives. What is clear is that the absence of *Bininj* living on country has been associated with rising numbers of *nganabbaru* and rising numbers of *nganabbaru* are correlated with less *Bininj* living in the landscape, but whether there is a direct causality between these two developments is unclear. The whole issue of why outstations today are less populated than in the past is a complex one which I cannot explore in detail here, except to note that the tension between living in the bush and living in the town is what my key interlocutor and close friend Mawurndjul refers to as a ‘contradiction’ as I will explain below.

When it comes to what to do about the *nganabbaru* boom Kuninjku land owners are far from certain, bearing in mind that our discussions were largely framed by the IPA management planning process. There is nonetheless a clear recognition by all that something needed to be done and done urgently as the population is estimated to be rapidly increasing by 4,000 per annum despite the site-specific culling by the rangers in recent years.<sup>29</sup> Mawurndjul was adamant: ‘Pigs and buffalo, kill them. Well three, and crocodiles’. But he also noted affectionately that ‘I like the buffalo’, and indeed when I visited him in 2014 he had one called *Wamud* (the same subsection or kinship term as his father) living as a domesticated pet in his unfenced yard in Maningrida. He then instructed the rangers and planners sternly: ‘Pigs start on them first before you do the buffalo’, and ‘Just promise me you’ll



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kill all the pigs first. Pigs I want you to finish them up’, revealing his own ranking of species.



*Figure 3.3: A juvenile buffalo called Wamud in John Mawurndjul's yard, Maningrida. Photo: Jon Altman.*

Namunjdja wanted to know from the *Balandas* at the planning meeting if Kuningku would be paid compensation for culled buffalo, being aware that some payments had been made under the BTEC for the limited shooting for disease-testing in Arnhem Land. He was deeply concerned that a Kuningku safari hunting joint venture nearby at Namokardabu would suffer, saying: ‘I don’t know what they are going to say if we tell them we are killing all the buffalo’. When confronted with the prospect of aerial shooting of buffalo to waste, which would take out large numbers in a single day, people were uncomfortable, despite assurances that meat would be shared with land owners and that some could be stored for local consumption in the chilling facility at the ranger shed. When Namirrki said to the rangers, ‘If you shoot buffalo,

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then let us know so we can have some of the meat', everyone responded enthusiastically, 'yo yo! [yes yes!]'.

The upshot of the meetings was that permission was granted by traditional owners of the land to cull 5,000 buffalo in the Djelk IPA, but in the wet season when the flood plains were inundated and the carcasses would rot away quickly so that *Bininj* would not be confronted by all the wasted meat and rotten stench. I, too, as someone who had both shared the thrill of hunting buffalo with Kuninjku in the past and had seen the carnage from aerial shooting, found myself deeply disturbed and saddened by the prospect of shooting to waste. I am reminded of anthropologist Basil Sansom writing about 'the Holocaust of the buffalo' he had seen at Wagait and his evocative reference to aerial militarised massacre of buffalo from 'helicopter gunships', when some of the professional platform shooters in that locality were Vietnam veterans.<sup>30</sup>

## Intra-Cultural, Intercultural and Regional Contestations over Buffalo

I want to move now to further complicate this unfolding story of contradictions by exploring some of the 'unstable relations' that have emerged around what appears from a modernist resource management perspective as a fairly straightforward task: the radical cull of an out-of-control exotic population. In saying this I am aware that animal welfare and animal rights interest groups might argue that such culling is unnecessary or unethical or cruel,<sup>31</sup> the last two sentiments that I share in some measure.

The outcome of the planning consultations outlined above, the Djelk Healthy Country Plan, ranks buffalo as the fourth highest of twelve identified threats to healthy country – behind empty country, loss of knowledge, and pigs – and as a high threat

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to rivers and wetlands and cultural places.<sup>32</sup> Goals have been set: to ensure no increase in buffalo numbers from the 2014 estimate of 20,000 in year one; to reduce the population to 10,000 in five years; and, to reduce the population to 5,000 in ten years, back where it was in the late twentieth century.

In the context of the Healthy Country Planning exercise many of the tensions around the killing of large numbers of *nganabbarru* were bubbling away subliminally, below the surface in side conversations both during and after the formal meetings concluded. As Bowman and Robinson asked over a decade ago, noting conflicting views about controlling buffalo in cross-cultural settings, there is no simple answer to the question: ‘What is the *nganabbarru*?’<sup>33</sup>

To begin, Kuninjku are unsure if *nganabbarru* is *Bininj* and endemic or *Balanda* and introduced. Western colonial history documents unequivocally that buffalo were imported to Fort Dundas (Melville Island) from Timor for food in 1826 and transferred to the mainland (Cobourg Peninsula) in 1828. More buffalo were then imported to Victoria settlement (Cobourg Peninsula) in 1838; and abandoned along with the settlement in 1849.<sup>34</sup>

*Bininj* see things more ambiguously or ‘two-way’; buffalo might be *Bininj* or might be *Balanda* or might be both, depending on how the question is framed and the context.<sup>35</sup> This is similar to making a living where there is some tension between engaging with the market or the customary or both; or the tension between Kuninjku religion and ritual and *Yiwarrudj* (Christian fellowship) or both; or between outstation and township living or both; or between seeing buffalo like a ranger or as a Kuninjku hunter or both; or between the perceptions about buffalo of the old people and the ‘new’ generation or both. I won’t explore all these potential contradictions and ambiguities here but merely note that,

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in the past, Kuninjku used to say that buffalo had moiety and skin (kin) name and the older generations still do. *Nganabbarru* also has associated myths and an ongoing role in secret male regional ceremonies.

When discussion is framed in the formal land management register these days, the English word ‘feral’ creeps into the lexicon, a term that is rarely used by Kuninjku in relation to buffalo, as my linguistic collaborator Murray Garde confirmed. He notes that:

...animals like buffalo have an Indigenous name whereas most others don't, e.g. pigs are ‘bik’, feral cats ‘budjiket’ etc. I always have this problem when I'm interpreting and we come to the feral topic. Things like ‘weeds’ are literally ‘bad grasses/plants from *Balanda*’ or ‘*Balanda* animals that wreck the country’, but buffalo are easy because they have a name *nganabbarru*.<sup>36</sup>

This name is shared across all the *Bininj Gunwok* dialects and beyond, but its origin is unknown.

The endemic/introduced question has legal and biological implications. Even if the buffalo is not endemic, Kuninjku (and others) may have special native title property rights in this species that wandered into western Arnhem Land before *Balandas*. The important section 211 of the Commonwealth *Native Title Act 1993* guarantees the right of land owners to harvest species for domestic or non-commercial use, a right that overrides state wildlife regulatory powers. And if *nganabbarru* has links to myth and ceremony then the recent population explosion might have a non-biological explanation from a Kuninjku perspective, an issue I need to explore further. I personally find it increasingly difficult to think of *nganabbarru* as a feral or exotic presence. It is a mega-herbivore

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that has proven itself extraordinarily adaptable and resilient within a difficult environment. Borrowing a phrase attributed to Bruce Rose, Bowman and Robinson note that buffalo fit in so well that they ‘belong to country’.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, in terms of physical visibility, this is increasingly the case, as is clear to anyone driving the bush roads around Arnhem Land. In my own mind I increasingly consider *nganabbarru* not as some long-ago undomesticated wild *Bubalus bubalis*, but as ‘*Bubalus arnhemica*’. *Bubalus arnhemica*: a buffalo species that has adapted over two centuries to the west Arnhem Land flood plains where it is of the *Dua* moiety, as well as to the perched wetlands of the Arnhem Land Plateau,<sup>38</sup> where it is of *Yirritja* moiety, as still classified by the old people today.

Intra-Kuninjku tensions are palpable for Kuninjku rangers like Obed and Dickson. As conservation rangers they are of the younger generation and have ‘two tool-box knowledge’<sup>39</sup> about the ecological problems caused by buffalo but also respect the views of the old people about buffalo. They need to constantly mediate these two perspectives while being suitably deferential to more senior land owners, their parents and immediate family. At the same time, they have been bestowed with a great deal of power through the Working on Country program. Unlike most in their community, especially those living at outstations where there is no labour market, rangers are some of the lucky few on wages. And as rangers they enjoy access to high-quality work vehicles, high-powered rifles and training as marksmen, including in platform shooting. All this both empowers and lumbers them with more and more relational responsibility to deliver meat to their families in Maningrida and at outstations. But simultaneously those living at Maningrida and outstations without guns and vehicles are disempowered and can be disgruntled by the fortunes of the few. These tensions between being a ranger and

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being Kuninjku are poorly recognised, even by their employer the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation and can at times erupt in work absenteeism.

Intercultural and intergovernmental contradictions can also arise in regional and national contexts generating cross-cutting cleavages, tensions and unusual alliances. For example, the plan to cull 5,000 buffalo was thwarted in 2015 from an unexpected quarter, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation itself, whose *Balanda* senior management were working on a business plan to turn 'pests into profit'.<sup>40</sup> Attracted by talk of an exciting new live export trade to Vietnam, promoted by the Northern Territory Chief Minister Adam Giles,<sup>41</sup> and by the experience of the Gulin Gulin Buffalo Company in nearby southern Arnhem Land, which has regularly caught and on-sold about 2,000 buffalo per annum, there was a view prevalent among key members of Bawinanga's senior management that the conservation threat of buffalo could be dealt with profitably via commercial contracting. In the aftermath of its recent financial difficulties, which saw the organisation in special administration between 2012 and 2014, income is a pressing priority for Bawinanga.

Consequently, there was a disjunct between the Djelk plan to shoot an agreed number of buffalo and the Bawinanga management's desire for live export. The outcome was that culling was administratively undermined by the latter and only 2,400 buffalo were killed in the late wet season of 2015, 400 to 500 on the Bulkay wetlands.<sup>42</sup> This level of culling will result in a buffalo population increase but, according to livestock experts I have talked to, live export from the Djelk IPA is neither commercially or politically viable. In any case, although some may be swayed by the promise of royalty payments, such an approach is counter to the wishes of most traditional owners. Meanwhile, the live export

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enterprise stalled, the main local proponents at Bawinanga were sacked; their inability to listen to traditional owners being one of their alleged indiscretions.

The cross-cutting contradictions around buffalo abound, with the Australian government keen to develop northern Australia, while simultaneously keen to support a growing number of IPAs to demonstrate environmental credentials domestically and internationally. I am sure that the wild husbandry of environmentally damaging buffalo contravenes the IUCN definition of Category VI 'sustainable use' protected areas. Hence a live buffalo export trade might potentially harm international conservation standings. On the one hand, the Northern Land Council is committed to supporting traditional owners wishes and to simultaneously show openness to sustainable enterprise on Aboriginal-owned land and, thereby, the live export possibility.<sup>43</sup> On the other, environmental philanthropies and NGOs such as Bush Heritage Australia and The Nature Conservancy with influence in the environmental governance of western Arnhem Land have conservation as a priority.

At the same time those who are looking to manage buffalo numbers in IPAs, like the Djelk Rangers, are adamant that if they cull and others wild farm (which generally means focusing on the live export of young bulls leaving cows to breed) the required rapid decline in numbers will never occur. The ranger groups thus face a moral dilemma: why cull if this will merely result in the in-migration of buffalo from elsewhere? And the commercial operators, mainly *Balanda* contractors, also face profit-motivated moral hazard. Why cull females, the reproductive means to regenerate stock and future profit? A major moral dilemma all face is when to cull buffalo and by how much given that there is ample

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evidence from the nearby Alligator Rivers region and local exclusion fencing experiments set up by rangers that wetlands recover once buffalo numbers are drastically reduced.<sup>44</sup>

### Being Black and Green: Emerging Tensions

In this chapter I have used buffalo as one indicator of the difficult challenges of engaging with a conservation framework, such as the relatively new IPA framework, in Arnhem Land; the difficulties of trying to be, if you like, simultaneously black and green, Aboriginal and conservationist. I hope I have demonstrated unequivocally that living in an IUCN Category VI IPA is not as straightforward as some might think or idealise; it is a form of being that is riven with contradictions, tensions, political conflicts and difficult decisions.

In February 2015, responding to a discussion we were conducting about the trade-offs for Kuninjku in aspiring to live on their ancestral lands and the counter-pressures to reside in the township of Maningrida, John Mawurndjul captured this existential tension poetically. Murray Garde translates Mawurndjul's dilemma in the following terms:

Balang [Mawurndjul] describes a situation that would be a 'contradiction' in English, but for which there is no word in Kuninjku. Effectively he is saying, 'We want to live out on our country but then we want to come back in to Maningrida and then we want to go back out again, but what can we do, we are tied up'. The English word 'contradiction' conveys the same meaning as this phrasal translation. To be 'tying up ourselves' can be translated as 'we are frustrated'.



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A similar frustration is evident in relation to *Bining dja nganabarru* (Aboriginal people and buffalo) in the Djelk IPA that I interpret as: ‘We want the buffalo to eat, but we also want to look after our country, it’s a contradiction that frustrates us’.

Buffalo are only one of many ecological threats. As noted above, the Djelk Healthy Country Plan lists twelve: empty country, loss of knowledge, pigs, buffalo, weeds, unhealthy fire, problem animals, visitors, mining, climate change, commercial and illegal fishing and coastal pollution.<sup>45</sup> Most of these threats are interlinked, as, for example, buffalo spread weeds and denude vegetation and therefore are associated with other threats such as unhealthy fires, emptied (unoccupied) country, and loss of knowledge owing to a decline in biodiversity. And as ungulates, great emitters of methane, a greenhouse gas, buffalo even contribute to climate change with negative biodiversity consequences.

In a 2012 Boyer Lecture ‘The conceit of wilderness ideology’ – later retitled ‘The First Australians Gift to the World: 30 Million Hectares of Protected Areas to Conserve Environments and Biodiversity’ – Langton notes that Aboriginal people like other humans have an economic life, are caught up in the transforming encounter with modernity and have economic rights.<sup>46</sup> This is indisputable. To concretise from this abstraction to the case material presented here, buffalo are a big part of Kuninjku people’s economic life as hunted meat. Kuninjku are caught up with the transforming encounter with modernity as they face relentless pressure from state-normalising policies such as the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and Closing the Gap to change their norms and values to comply with those of mainstream Australians. One possibility currently available to comply with this state-promoted project of improvement is to gain ‘real’ employment as a ranger.

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But Kuninjku also hold economic rights, supported by Australian law; in this case to hunt buffalo for livelihood and to live in a different way from mainstream Australians. This is what the hybrid economy framework that I have developed across my career seeks to convey: how Aboriginal people like the Kuninjku are reconfiguring their transforming economy to engage with the customary, the market and the state simultaneously and interdependently. In earlier research I argued, with reference to the Djelk IPA, that rangers work is evolving into an exemplar of intercultural production; rangers work simultaneously in the customary, state and market sectors, in an intersecting production space that I refer to as a 'bliss point'.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, though, this is not an unproblematic 'bliss point'. This is because there is growing potential for conflict between Aboriginal land owners and members of environmental NGOs and philanthropists, who are political and financial supporters of IPAs. These 'greenies' might question whether the explosion of buffalo populations in areas of Aboriginal land vested in the National Reserve System constitute a conservation 'gift', as per Langton's phrase. They might instead ask if Aboriginal people like the Kuninjku are, to use Langton's evocative language, 'the enemies of nature'? In any case, can this vesting really be described as a gift in the sense of prestation, or is it an exchange, a strategic decision to manage lands in a particular ecologically sound manner in return for support from the Australian government, and a range of environmental interest groups?

There are certainly some who highlight the neoliberalisation of nature in Australia and the bureaucratic requirements imposed by the Australian state on Indigenous ranger groups.<sup>48</sup> As Nancy Peluso noted some time ago, conservation can be used by governments and others to control remote places and peoples.<sup>49</sup> Arguably,

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the decision to declare an IPA is less of a ‘gift’ and more of a Hobson’s choice: if land owners want to retain the natural and cultural values of their estates, faced with diverse threatening processes while also looking to make a livelihood from both wages and hunting for meat, then they need financial support. Given the vastness of most IPA jurisdictions, the Australian state is clearly the most affluent and likely potential benefactor for a number of compounding and compelling reasons including opportunity cost, public good, national interest and social justice. But despite these compelling reasons the state has proven to be a perennial under-investor in conservation. To avoid both over-reliance on the state and to provide additional support other environmental interests have to be recruited to the cause of Indigenous conservation alongside sustainable use. It is for this reason that the environmental damage that we saw from the helicopter over Bulkay needs to be actively managed.

An important and more straightforward example of regional cooperation and sound governance is evident in the management of wild fires in Arnhem Land. While the management of fire is less contentious than the management of buffalo, the case of the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) scheme could be instructive for the challenge of managing buffalo especially as the Djelk Rangers are partners in this project. A coalition of five Aboriginal ranger groups in western Arnhem Land (including the Warddeken Rangers) has established this highly innovative savanna burning carbon abatement scheme.<sup>50</sup> Since 2006, the WALFA project has been paid under a long-term contract between Darwin Liquefied Natural Gas and the Northern Territory government to abate a remotely-verified 100,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents per annum. As with the management of IPAs generally, WALFA has been a highly intercultural institutional arrangement dependent

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on close collaboration between Aboriginal traditional owners and their families, collaborating scientists, researchers and long-term advocates for Indigenous rights to live on their country.

Despite concern expressed by some that fire management regimes are dominated by Western scientific ideas and outsiders,<sup>51</sup> in my experience this is not the case in Arnhem Land. Here, land owners play a crucial role not only in lighting ground fires in accord with customary practice, but also in directing aerial burning from helicopters. Unlike contentious proposals to cull buffalo, there is a widespread view that early burning is beneficial for the environment and in reducing the intensity of late dry season hot fires that emit far greater quantities of greenhouse gases. Also, unlike with buffalo, there has been a high level of regional cooperation among the five partners in WALFA operating over a large area of 28,000 square kilometres.

The results from managing fire to abate greenhouse gas emissions in Arnhem Land are verified by Western science and settler government. In 2014, the short-lived Abbott government negotiated the passage of the *Carbon Farming Initiative Amendment Act*, making the management of fires in savanna grasslands eligible for payments from the \$2.55 billion Emissions Reduction Fund under the Coalition government's Direct Action Plan. WALFA has expanded into central Arnhem Land and into south-east Arnhem Land and a new business entity, Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (NT) Ltd, has recently been formed to operate as an Eligible Offsets Project within this Plan. ALFA (NT) Ltd now covers 69,000 square kilometres of Arnhem Land and could potentially include virtually the entire region. It is early days, but this entity has contracted to deliver nearly 300,000 Australian Carbon Credit Units (equivalent to a tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent each) every year for ten years through abatement; it could potentially deliver three

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times this amount if new methodology to measure sequestered carbon is approved.<sup>52</sup>

Managing the landscape with fire and abating carbon is currently a more straightforward intercultural enterprise than the management of buffalo that remains tense, contested and contradictory: there is global concern about climate change and multinational corporations, such as ConocoPhillips, are keen to purchase the emissions reduction offsets which abatement projects such as WALFA and other projects on Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) savanna grasslands deliver to market.<sup>53</sup> Importantly, the collaborative governance model developed by ALFA (NT) Ltd might prove instructive for the management of wild buffalo and other environmental threats. And profits earned by ALFA might be earmarked for buffalo management, as has occurred already with the underwriting of the limited aerial culling undertaken by the Djelk Rangers in 2015.

### Conclusion: Contradictions and Livelihoods

In this chapter I have explored one species, the wild buffalo, in one jurisdiction to highlight 'contradictions' that generate unstable and emerging conflict-ridden relations between diverse interest groups including Aboriginal land owners, the Australian state and conservation interests. I give priority to the interests of the Kuninjku land owners to show how making strategic decisions comparing the value of buffalo as food and the biodiversity and cultural values of land is difficult, especially when residing in a regional conservation commons. And yet difficult decisions are being negotiated and action, even if currently too limited, is being taken.

In truth any production, either for mere livelihood or for massive super profits, faces trade-offs and contradictions, and this

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is surely something that many now recognise in the Anthropocene as the sustainability of late capitalism is increasingly questioned. In much of my writings about livelihood alternatives for remote-living Indigenous people I have emphasised the need for both flexibility and diversity of production, deploying the notion of 'economic hybridity'.<sup>54</sup> In marked contrast, much of the focus in policy discourse on developing northern Australia emphasises resource extraction of one form or another. And yet recent history shows that major resource extraction projects such as the Ranger uranium mine at Jabiru and the Alcan bauxite and alumina processing plant at Gove have failed to deliver livelihood benefits to most of the 14,000 Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land. Both mines now appear to have no financially viable futures.

There will be elements of an alternate hybrid economy that are less contradictory and frustrating than others. One possibility that might assist to transform prospects in Arnhem Land is carbon farming, what Russell-Smith et al. refer to as 'rekindling the *Wurrk* [managed fire] tradition'.<sup>55</sup> Optimistically, managing the landscape with fire might prove less contradictory and frustrating for Kuninjku and other Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land than other options, be they engagement with market capitalism or dealing with a number of conservation threats like buffalo. Carbon farming might provide an important plank for the building of an alternate Arnhem Land economy for the rest of the twenty-first century. But, as with the buffalo, emerging and currently unimagined contradictions and contestations will likely arise. Fire may appear less contradictory, but the main site of contradiction is actually the intersecting and culture-specific attitudes to resource use more generally. Risky interdependencies occur in all forms of resource use; unstable relations are inevitable and are more manageable if recognised as such.

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Managing and utilising buffalo for livelihood demonstrates the difficult decisions that people living on the ground face as they seek to balance competing obligations and viewpoints. I empathise for I, too, am frustrated in my academic and advocacy work by the tensions between retaining resources for their use and exchange values and supporting conservation that prioritises environmental values. Without doubt, Kuniñjku decision-making is influenced by neoliberal governmentality, state dependence and conservation interests. But the particular internal dynamics of their agency as land owners with resource rights and a desire to retain the integrity of their ancestral lands intergenerationally should not be understated. Today, under Australian settler law they have final, even if compromised and highly contested, authority. This will result in relations whose instability and tensions need to be marshalled to ensure challenges, like the buffalo now deeply embedded in the local economy, can be managed in a manner that does not jeopardise the environmental and cultural values of lands of global environmental and cultural significance.

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## Notes

- 1 Kuninjku is one of six dialects of the pan-dialectical *Bininj Gunwok* language, see: M. Garde, *Culture, Interaction and Person Reference in an Australian Language: An Ethnography of Bininj Gunwok Communication*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2013.
- 2 J. C. Altman, 'What Future for Remote Indigenous Australia? Economic Hybridity and the Neoliberal Turn', in J. C. Altman & M. Hinkson (eds), *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010, pp. 259–80.
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- 8 M. Cochrane, *The Djelk Ranger Program: An Outsider's Perspective*, CAEPR Working Paper 27/2005, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Canberra, 2005; Johnson, *Bawinanga Annual Report 1999–2000*.
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- 12 I should declare my professional entanglements in much of this work; I was a member of the Scientific Program Advisory Group of the Cooperative Research Centre from 1994–2008 and a member of the Board of the Key Centre 1999–2005 as well as an active research collaborator.
- 13 J. C. Altman, A. D. Griffiths & P. J. Whitehead, 'Invasion of the rubbish frogs', *Nature Australia*, vol. Spring, 2003, pp. 44–51.
- 14 ANAO, *Indigenous Protected Areas, ANAO Audit Report No. 14 2011–12*, Australian National Audit Office, Canberra, 2012.
- 15 More specifically: 'Protected areas that conserve ecosystems and habitats, together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems. They are generally large, with most of the area in a natural condition, where a proportion is under sustainable natural resource management and where low-level, non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims of the area' (IUCN, *IUCN: Protected Area Category IV*, International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2012, viewed 28 March 2016 <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories/category-iv-habitatspecies-management-area>).
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  - 21 According to a number of experts consulted in September 2015 including Keith Saalfeld, Peter Whitehead, Shaun Ansell, Alys Stevens and Pat Carrick.
  - 22 Altman, *Living the Good Life in Precarious Times*. All quotes are from interviews and meetings during the week 2–6 February 2015 recorded and transcribed from Kuninjku to English by Murray Garde.
  - 23 Discussion with Terrah Guymala, senior ranger at Manmoyi on 4 September 2015 conducted in a mix of Kuninjku/Kunwinjku dialects and English, translated by me into English.
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  - 25 J. C. Altman, 'Hunting Buffalo in North-Central Arnhem Land: A Case of Rapid Adaptation among Aborigines', *Oceania*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1982, pp. 280–3.
  - 26 This estimate is based on random observations made during visits and discussions with Djelk rangers and not as in earlier work on rigorous quantification. And it is only for Kuninjku who exploit more buffalo than other groups in the region. That said people still hunt wallabies, magpie geese and ducks and fish for barramundi and catfish that are seasonally consumed at high rates. But the sheer size of buffalo accounts for its high dietary contributions, especially of protein.
  - 27 At uplands Manmoyi, an outstation with fifty to sixty people, Guymala estimates that as many as two to three buffalo are exploited weekly: 'We feed everyone and the dogs too, we have healthy dogs' (Terrah Guymala, personal communication, 4 September 2015). Buffalo can consume 30 kilograms of vegetable matter a day (P. Jesser, A. Markula & S. Csurhes, *Pest Animal Risk Assessment, Water buffalo, Bubalus bubalis*, Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, Brisbane, 2008).
  - 28 Interview with author, 3 February 2015.
  - 29 For example, 662 in 2009–10 and over 1,000 in 2013–14 (see: J. Ansell, *Djelk Rangers Annual Report 2013–2014*, Djelk Rangers and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, Maningrida, 2014, p. 21; K. May, S. Ansell & J. Koenig, *Djelk Annual Report 2009–2010*, Djelk Rangers and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, Maningrida, 2010, p. 14).
  - 30 B. Sansom, 'Irruptions of the Dreamings in Post-Colonial Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2001, pp. 26–7. Similar semi-automatic .308 calibre rifles are used by the military and buffalo shooters, in part because .308 ammunition is relatively cheap. But this calibre is far more effective in killing soft-skinned humans than tough-skinned buffalo resulting in

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- buffalo often being wounded and requiring several shots to kill.
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  - 32 J. Ansell, *Djelk Rangers Annual Report 2014–2015*, Djelk Rangers and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, Maningrida, 2015, p. 43.
  - 33 D. M. Bowman & C. J. Robinson, ‘The getting of the *Nganabbarru*: Observations and reflections on Aboriginal buffalo hunting in northern Australia’, *Australian Geographer*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2002, pp. 191–206. There are some similarities and some differences in our analyses, but bear in mind their research was undertaken over a decade ago before the population explosion was quantified and before the declaration of the Djelk IPA and the escalation of conservation discourse and priorities in regional resource management.
  - 34 Letts et al., *Feral Animals in the Northern Territory*, p. 211.
  - 35 Goffman’s notion of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ and performativity is highly apposite to how such tensions are framed and discussed (E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Harvard University Press, 1974).
  - 36 Murray Garde, personal communication, 7 September 2015.
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# 7

## Bawinanga and CDEP: The vibrant life, and near death, of a major Aboriginal corporation in Arnhem Land

Jon Altman

### Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (also referred to as Bawinanga or BAC) located at Maningrida in Arnhem Land. Bawinanga is an Aboriginal corporation and for over 20 years it was also a Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) organisation. It was established in 1979 and, during the first decade of the 21st century, it became one of the largest and most financially successful Indigenous corporations in Australia. For a number of years between 2004–05 and 2010–11, Bawinanga was ranked as the second-largest Indigenous corporation in Australia by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations.

Bawinanga succeeded in remote and difficult circumstances largely devoid of market opportunity where others, including the Australian colonial state from 1957, have failed. Its only serious competitor in the Maningrida region is the Maningrida Progress Association, a community-owned organisation that focuses on retail trade in the

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township of Maningrida. Much of Bawinanga's success can be linked historically to its productive deployment and reconfiguring of CDEP funding support from the Australian government.

I focus here on the relationship between CDEP and Bawinanga, as their life cycles are closely related; Bawinanga was established as a small community-based outstation resource agency in 1979 two years after CDEP began. Both were new and innovative institutions of what Tim Rowse (2002) has termed 'the Indigenous sector'.

Despite an early application for CDEP funding in 1980, it was not until 1989 that access to CDEP was provided to Bawinanga to be delivered initially to 'unemployed' (in a formal Western labour market sense) residents of the outstations in its 10,000-square-kilometre-sphere of geographic influence.

From then, Bawinanga gradually changed into a successful regional development corporation. Its growth, highly contingent on the entrepreneurial zeal and political acumen of its senior management, was largely underwritten by access to CDEP.

From 1989 to 2009 Bawinanga grew quickly. This period can be roughly divided by the period between 1989 and 1996, when CDEP was incrementally integrated into Bawinanga's operations, and the time after 1996 when the corporation became increasingly involved in small business development and the delivery of diverse services with associated normalisation and developmental undercurrents.

From 2009 the corporation's fortunes declined, reflecting in some measure significant changes to CDEP. These changes had been signalled for some time, at least since the transfer of the program on 1 July 2004 from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) when the former was effectively abolished. Much of this policy history has been told in early chapters of this monograph (see also Sanders 2012; and Appendix 1, this volume). A key element of this administrative change saw CDEP shift from operating as a grant-in-aid program to being defined as a contracted service. This change reflected the new public management or managerialism infusing Indigenous policy at the time (Sullivan 2011: 67–83).



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From 2005 CDEP was slowly dismantled as the effective means to underwrite community development, and abolished a decade later. This 'reform' coincided with a rapid decline in Bawinanga's fortunes that was also greatly influenced by changes in its management and operating style and enhanced instability in political relations with the Australian Government.

In October 2012 Bawinanga went into special administration, what I term 'near death', owing to short-term insolvency, a situation from which it has recovered from July 2014, much reduced and deeply indebted. During the period of special administration, CDEP was replaced by the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) and Bawinanga was selected as the regional provider despite its financial troubles.

In this chapter, I provide an account of the consequences of the demise of CDEP for Bawinanga, its members and the regional population more generally. My focus is on the multiple somewhat contradictory roles of Bawinanga as an economic development agency (Altman & Johnson 2000) as well as a political institution (Rowse 2001a) and community development institution (Martin 2001). This is counter to an increasingly dominant narrative that irrationally emphasises CDEP as a labour market program only and hence measures success or failure in terms of 'real' jobs—a euphemism for forms of regular employment that are very limited in number in the Maningrida region. This shift is linked to a wider discourse that seeks to blame the policy of self-determination and ATSIC for disappointing outcomes in Indigenous affairs generally. This same discourse proposes to Close the Gap through mainstreaming or normalisation, even in remote Arnhem Land.

The CDEP reform agenda has been deeply influenced by a discourse brought to national prominence by Noel Pearson around 'welfare poison', the need for Aboriginal engagement in 'real' jobs in the 'real' economy, and the overarching need for Aboriginal individuals to be 'responsibilised' (Kowal 2012). The use of the term 'real' is a trope that not only requires imagination in the unreal circumstances of remote Indigenous Australia, but is also contingent on a certain settler belief and value system. In this increasingly dominant narrative, CDEP has been depicted as a form of welfare and as a form of exceptionalism that has operated as a barrier to the engagement of Aboriginal people with the labour market.

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In this chapter, I begin by outlining my entanglements as a policy anthropologist with Bawinanga. This is mainly because I use a particular voice in this chapter; not the voice of the dispassionate, analytic and detached academic, but rather, the voice of someone who has worked closely with this organisation for much of my academic life: I have had an entanglement with Bawinanga for a long time and I lament its decline.

Next I describe the shifting nature of Bawinanga according to a selection of the many texts produced by the corporation itself. Then I say something about what Bawinanga did, focusing my attention on a decade-long period of relative growth and stability when it had a 'vibrant life' to 2009 when it went into decline. I explore and look to critically theorise the reasons for Bawinanga's success according to both internal and external at arms-length assessments, including my own.

In this analysis, I highlight one short period 2005–06 when, after CDEP administration was transferred from ATSIC to DEWR, Bawinanga and DEWR engaged in a bitter political struggle that I refer to metaphorically as 'the CDEP wars'. Bawinanga struggled to gain acceptance for its approach to running CDEP, something that it had been doing with growing efficiency and confidence for 16 years before what I have termed 'metropolitan managerialism' (Altman 2005) bore down on the organisation from distant Canberra, as far away bureaucrats sought to impose a particular interpretation of the imagined failings of CDEP on Bawinanga. Evidence of this dispute is on the parliamentary record that I visit to ask: Why it is that expert and local knowledge have been disqualified or discarded as legitimate forms of knowing about CDEP?

I then provide a brief account of the rapid decline of Bawinanga from 2009 until 2012 when it went into special administration. I end by assessing what has been lost and by speculating whether the belated attempts to revive CDEP from late 2015 as the Community Development Program (CDP), linguistic similarities aside, might revive the fortunes of Bawinanga.

## Entanglements: Bawinanga and me

Over the years I have written a great deal about Bawinanga. I have also worked for Bawinanga as a consultant and advocated hard for Bawinanga including by assisting the corporation as the joint plaintiff in a High Court case *Wurridjal v Commonwealth* over the compulsory leasing of Aboriginal land during the Northern Territory (NT) Intervention and in submissions to and as an expert witness in parliamentary inquiries.

I have repeatedly visited the Maningrida region since 1979. My research has been heavily divided between working with a regional community of Kuninjku-speaking people first and foremost (many of whom are also members of Bawinanga) and working with Bawinanga.

The history of my intellectual and formal engagement with Bawinanga over the past 37 years is lengthy and complex. Suffice to say, I have personally known every chair of Bawinanga since 1979, most board members and most members of the senior management team, some of whom are friends with whom I have co-resided on many occasions when visiting. Over the years, I have also got to know many Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of the region, which currently has a population of over 3,000.

I relate this to be quite transparent and disclose my abiding interests. I am sure there are some who view my close allegiances to Bawinanga with suspicion and as a weakness because it might foreclose openness to alternate viewpoints from other actors in the region. This may well be a valid criticism; I note though that I have worked with other organisations and have enjoyed cordial relations with their Aboriginal boards and staff despite shifting institutional rivalries and alliances typical of small-town politics and clearly evident over time in Maningrida.<sup>1</sup> All these associations with Bawinanga have not stopped me from being a critical—sometimes highly critical—friend of Bawinanga and the operations of some of its business units, and being unpopular at times with board and management for providing frank advice.

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<sup>1</sup> I have worked in a voluntary capacity for the Maningrida Progress Association whose board I have also advised; and with the Maningrida Council until absorbed into the West Arnhem Shire in 2008.

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I highlight these entanglements for two reasons. I want to write this chapter in a slightly different register, delving into a considerable archive of transcripts of Bawinanga's achievements, challenges and problems, especially focusing here on issues related to CDEP without replicating earlier writing on this subject (Altman & Johnson 2000). I do this in particular by focusing on material contained in Bawinanga's narrative annual reports published 1999 to 2011 and its financial records. I am keen to bring material from this grey literature, Bawinanga's and my own archives, into the public domain highly conscious that there is a great deal more that can be said about Bawinanga's life cycle and circumstances. This particular contribution is very much intended as an economic history of Bawinanga's dialectical engagement with the CDEP scheme, how at once CDEP contributed to the making of Bawinanga and, conversely, how Bawinanga has demonstrated what could be done with CDEP and how paradoxically CDEP was instrumental in what I term here Bawinanga's 'near death' experience when it went into special administration.

On the final page of the postscript to a volume, *The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the CDEP Scheme*,<sup>2</sup> that reported the proceedings of a large and mixed academic, bureaucratic and Indigenous community conference on CDEP, Rowse (2001b: 233) noted that there was urgent need for the articulation of an independent community-based conception of what CDEP is all about. This was especially important, he suggested, as a counter to the government's dominant representation, as I have noted already, of CDEP as an employment scheme only. Rowse urged academics to play a role in formulating political and cultural rationales that CDEP managers could present to government. There has been considerable representation by Bawinanga and myself both before and after the 2001 volume, although its lack of influence is telling. Rowse also suggested in his postscript that CAEPR has a close proximity to the central agencies of government—perhaps geographically as both are based in Canberra, but not, as this chapter will demonstrate, in terms of ameliorating the destructive reform of CDEP.

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2 To which the Bawinanga accountant Rupert Manners (2001) contributed a chapter on catering for mobility and diversity.

## Bawinanga's objects and vision

In his book *Indigenous futures: Choice and development for Aboriginal and Islander Australia*, which summarised and critically analysed CAEPR research 1990–2000, Rowse (2002) devotes a chapter to Indigenous institutions and the labour market. Rowse (2002: 67) highlights the many difficulties in defining the objects of CDEP because of its multiple rationales. At the time of his writing there were 270 CDEP organisations with over 30,000 participants nationally (Sanders 2004: 4).

A similar observation can be made of Bawinanga as a CDEP institution. Over its life, and in the words of its annual reports and constitution (now Rule Book), there have been changes over time. In its first narrative annual report for 1999–2000, an attempt is made to provide a brief overview of the corporation's history over the preceding 20 years (Johnson 2000: 1): 'initially Bawinanga was incorporated under the federal *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* as an outstation resource centre incorporating an earlier manifestation set up in 1974 as a branch of the Maningrida community council.' Johnson notes how in the 20 years since 1979 the corporation had expanded and diversified, not just providing support for up to 800 people residing at 32 outstations in the hinterland, but also administering CDEP with 512 participants and shifting to operate as a regional development agency establishing small commercial enterprises to promote economic development options for outstation residents and members. Johnson (2000: 1) further notes that the central tenet of all decisions made by the corporation is the maintenance of land, language and culture.

This statement of organisational philosophy was clearly stated after Bawinanga developed its first strategic plan 2004–06, a process facilitated by Dan Gillespie of Tallegalla Consultants (2003) with parts published in the corporation's annual report for 2003–04 (Johnson 2004: 6) in the following terms:

### **Our Mission Statement**

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation's mission is derived from its constitution and is twofold:

- At the regional level we act as a force for the political integration and representation of the interests of over 100 regional land owning groups of our members

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- As a service delivery agency BAC provides cultural and natural resource management programs, essential municipal and social services and labour market and economic development opportunities to its members in Maningrida and surrounding outstation communities.

The maintenance of language and traditions and the management of and sustainable use of customary lands and resources underpin our work.

**Our Vision**

Our vision is to be:

- A successful agency for the representation and mediation of the interests of our members to other regional stakeholders, private enterprise and Government; and
- A leading Indigenous service delivery and business organisation managed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people and renowned for our innovation and best practice.

More recently, in the current Rule Book<sup>3</sup> the objectives of the corporation are defined in the following terms:

The objectives of the corporation are to provide services [to] the communities and lands set out in the map in Schedule 4:

- a. to promote the maintenance of language, culture and traditional practice;
- b. to promote the sustainable use of traditional lands;
- c. to promote community development;
- d. to promote the welfare of residents;
- e. to provide or assist in the provision and maintenance of education, employment, housing, health, communications and other services;
- f. to foster business opportunities and to promote economic independence;
- g. to operate and maintain a gift fund to be known as — The Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation Gift Fund in accordance with the requirements of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997; and
- h. to promote, in all its endeavours, the common good and mutual benefit of its members through fair, equitable and representative action and enterprise.

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<sup>3</sup> Available like much documentation about Bawinanga back to 2006 when the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* was replaced by the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) Act 2006* at [register.oric.gov.au/document.aspx?concernID=100029](http://register.oric.gov.au/document.aspx?concernID=100029), accessed 21 September 2015.

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The map referred to is a version of the following Fig. 7.1.

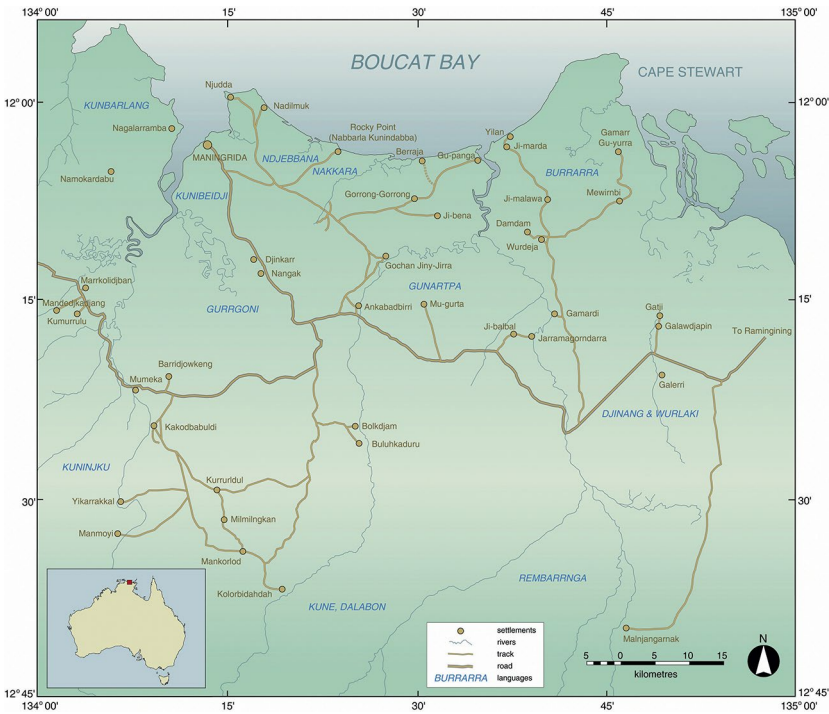


Fig. 7.1 A version of the map in Schedule 4 of BACs ‘rule book’

Source: Map drawn for author with material provided by Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation.

Such fine aspirational statements are not unusual, but in Bawinanga’s case they have some important implications. First, given that the region of about 10,000 sq km is all Aboriginal-owned land,<sup>4</sup> the corporation clearly has a major political role to play in mediating land owner interests, although in formal and legal terms this is the statutory responsibility of the Northern Land Council. Second, the objectives of Bawinanga extend beyond its membership (which numbers about 200 registered adults aged over 18 years) to include other non-member residents of the region. This reflects how Bawinanga has increasingly operated.

4 Barring a few special purpose leases and public lands in Maningrida that predated passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.

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## Bawinanga 1999–2010

In 2000, I undertook a detailed review with Victoria Johnson of the Bawinanga CDEP as part of a wide-ranging study that included the above-mentioned conference, ‘The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme: Autonomy, Dependence, Self Determination and Mutual Obligation’ with proceedings subsequently published (Morphy & Sanders 2001). Johnson had been employed by Bawinanga between 1998 and 2000 and the corporation was a financial and in-kind contributor to the review that ended with a set of recommendations, including that there is need for quarantined resourcing for more effective outcomes monitoring (Altman & Johnson 2000: xi, 33).

On completion of the review, senior management at Bawinanga engaged Johnson to produce the corporation’s first narrative annual report. Subsequently, as shown in Table 7.1, 11 further reports were prepared with 10 published. The 2000–01 annual report included the recommendations from the CDEP review. From 2003–04, after early resistance from senior management, the annual report included some summary financial statements from the corporation’s audited accounts. From 2005–06 the annual reports became more political as transcripts with a Chairman’s message and CEO’s report that engaged with current policy settings and challenges.

Table 7.1 Bawinanga annual reporting 1999–2011

BAC annual report	Author/compiler	Published	Pages
1999–2000	V Johnson	2000	28
2000–2001	V Johnson	2001	18
2001–2002	A McCall	Incomplete	23
2002–2003	V Johnson	2003	28
2003–2004	V Johnson	2004	28
2004–2005	C McAuliffe	2005	32
2005–2006	W Manners	2006	34
2006–2007	W Manners	2007	32
2007–2008	W Manners	2008	32
2008–2009	W Manners	2009	32
2009–2010	C Summers	2010	57
2010–2011	C Summers	2011	65

Source: Prepared by the author.



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All the authors of annual reports had worked for Bawinanga and so were able to compile information provided by the heads of business units. I was recently informed by Ian Munro, the Bawinanga instigator of such annual reporting, that in general 500 copies of the report were printed with a copy sent to every federal and Northern Territory politician.<sup>5</sup>

It is hard to know how to capture the wide range of activities reported in nearly 400 pages over this 12-year period, including vividly descriptive colour photographs that illustrate the degree of local people's pride in the corporation.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, these annual reports, as valuable a record as they are, only represent a series of snapshots of what ended up being a decade-long cumulative and incremental growth of the corporation and its social, physical and developmental capitals.<sup>7</sup>

In an attempt to capture the complexity of Bawinanga, I have prepared a synoptic table of its range of activities that fall into three categories: activities that have ended; activities that have begun at some point during the period; and those that are core activities that continued throughout the period. To some extent, this approach has introduced some room for error as some activities are not reported even though undertaken. And it has also resulted in under-reporting because some smaller, but still important, activities are not separately reported.

An example of such a small but symbolically important activity is the mud-brick factory that is an iconic CDEP enterprise that began in 1989. In a comprehensive feasibility study report, Dan Gillespie of Tallegalla Consultants (2009: 1, 9) notes that the enterprise has provided employment continuously for up to 15 Indigenous people for almost 20 years. To date, over 130 buildings have been constructed from mud-brick, including a range of housing types and other

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5 Ian Munro pers. comm. June 2015. Munro also related to me how on one occasion a staff member spotted Claire Martin, then Chief Minister of the NT, reading a Bawinanga annual report on a flight from Alice Springs to Darwin.

6 Obviously the annual reports were largely produced for external audiences and reflect what might be thought of as 'whitefella' accountability. But there has also been a degree of pride expressed especially by members of the Bawinanga board about the reports.

7 A spreadsheet assets register prepared in 2008 as part of the *Wurridjal v Commonwealth* case that I have lists all Bawinanga's fixed and non-fixed assets, which totalled nearly 600 items and were valued at over \$24 million—the main fixed assets include 100 outstation buildings and numerous houses and business premises in Maningrida.

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facilities at outstations, housing for Bawinanga and other agency staff, commercial and office buildings for Bawinanga and the Maningrida Progress Association, and major buildings such as the Maningrida Motel and Aged Care facility operated by the Malabam Health Board.

Furthermore, a lot of activity has been subsumed in one category. For example, under financial and related services, the 2006–07 annual report shows that Bawinanga assisted members and staff with online banking, internet banking, truck accounts (of which there were 200, or one-third of the CDEP payroll saving for vehicles), bill saving authorised deductions from CDEP, ceremonial support, again via payroll deductions, assistance to borrow money and assistance to access services (Manners 2007; Fogarty & Paterson 2007).

The message from this table is that over the decade covered, community services and businesses were established that provided CDEP participants with meaningful activity destinations and the means to earn additional income. While during these years there were some variations, on average Bawinanga had 600 participants who fell into four categories: those employed by Bawinanga (about 200); those hosted by other Maningrida agencies and organisations like the school and health board (about 50); about 300 getting income support at outstations (who generally supplemented their CDEP payments with art sales to Maningrida Arts and Culture); and the balance of about 50 who received basic income support while on CDEP.

Rupert Manners (2001: 211–13) explains how this worked, although there have been many adaptive variations over the years approved by the board, particularly of the ‘no work no pay’ rule that was a critical element of attempts to manage labour. In general, there were three pay rates: one for participants who were supervisors; one for those who were working or training; and another for those at outstations. And then there were variations in hours: those at the highest two award plus pay rates could work for up to 4.6 hours a day for three days on CDEP and then get additional top up, including for extra days of work; those at outstations but also at funerals, ceremonies, sick, on maternity leave or working as a medical escort were paid for 3.6 hours a day; and, those referred to as on ‘sit down’ would get only 2 hours a day and would only be eligible for such payments under CDEP for a short time before being redirected to Centrelink for welfare.

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Table 7.2 Range of BAC activities by headings reported in narrative annual reports 1999–2000 to 2010–11

Service/business activities	'99-'00	'00-'01	'02-'03	'03-'04	'04-'05	'05-'06	'06-'07	'07-'08	'08-'09	'09-'10	'10-'11
Housing and essential services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
BAC constructions						x		x			
Education outstation	x	x									
Health outstations	x	x									
Road party	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
BAC workshop	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
BAC fuel	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	#			
Tucker run/bush deliveries	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Balmarrk Supermarket						x	x	x	x	x	x
Good Food Kitchen					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Environmental work (Maningrida)	x										
BAC nursery	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	
Babbarra Women's Centre	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Maningrida Arts and Culture	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
MAC Darwin						x	x	x	x	x	x
Djilk rangers	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Djilk women rangers			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Djilk sea rangers			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Wildlife centre					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Crab harvesting						x	##				
Maningrida municipal (Ye`Ya)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		

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Service/business activities	'99-'00	'00-'01	'02-'03	'03-'04	'04-'05	'05-'06	'06-'07	'07-'08	'08-'09	'09-'10	'10-'11
Safari hunting		x									
Human services			x	x	x	x					
Doctors###			x	x							
Aged care			x	x	x	x		x	x		x
Disability support			x	x	x						
Substance misuse				x	x						
Child safety							x	x	x		x
Youth development					x						
BAC tourism###			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
BAC training				x	x	x			x	x	x
BAC Outdoor supplies					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
BAC Freight services								x	x		
Financial services						x	x	x	x		
Expanded money management service									x	x	x
Maningrida Employment Services										x	x
Maningrida Crèche										x	x
BAC Air Services											x

# amalgamated with Balmarrk supermarket  
 ## amalgamated with Djelk Wildlife Centre  
 ### Arnhem Land Eco-cultural tours  
 #### transferred to Malabm Health Board Aboriginal Corporation  
 Source: Prepared by the author from Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation annual reports.

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Managing the tension between the corporation's rules around CDEP payments and the diverse aspirations of its members should not be understated. There was continual negotiation between the board, management and membership over the years and some minor changes, but as a general rule some version of the three-tiered arrangement was maintained.

These guidelines were discussed by supervisors and management and approved by the board. In the mid-2000s, Bawinanga businesses were paying CDEP participants extra wages of \$1–2 million per annum, while by 2007–08 Maningrida Arts and Culture was purchasing art from several hundred artists for well over \$1 million per annum, although not all were on CDEP.

Under the Bawinanga umbrella were some of remote Indigenous Australia's most successful cultural and land management entities, each developed and underwritten by CDEP. Some of these entities produced their own discrete annual reports for a number of years as a marker of institutional maturity. These include Maningrida Arts and Culture, which provided arts market brokerage to hundreds of artists from Maningrida and the region (e.g. see Kohen 2007; Kohen & Summers 2008), and the Djelk Rangers. The Djelk Rangers were sustained by CDEP for over 10 years before they were moved onto Working on Country program wages in 2007; they began managing the Djelk Indigenous Protected Area when declared in 2009 (see Pascal & Ansell 2009; May, Ansell & Koenig 2010).

The complexity of Bawinanga is also reflected in financial transcripts—its annual audited financial statements. In 2005–06 and 2006–07, these audits were undertaken by Chartered Accountant Frank Redpath, with information provided by Bawinanga's accounting and bookkeeping team. I use these two years as an illustrative example because audits were prepared in a particularly comprehensive and detailed manner at the time, covering over 100 pages that gave a sense of both the scale and financial complexity of the corporation. In 2006–07, Bawinanga was managing 56 grants and contracts, the most significant by far being CDEP wages at \$6.7 million (for 600

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participants) and CDEP operational at \$2.5 million.<sup>8</sup> It also had 21 trading accounts, 17 that were profit-making and three that were loss-making.

The four big profit-makers that year were the supermarket (\$750,000 profit), Maningrida Arts and Culture (\$487,000), road contracting (\$467,000) and the fuel store (\$138,000). The loss-makers were small, only bush deliveries (\$82,000), BAC tourism (\$27,000) and MAC Darwin (\$21,000) stand out. Clearly the profits outweighed the losses that year and, indeed, for most years (see Table 7.3).

There are two crucially important features of Table 7.3. In almost every year Bawinanga's trading and other income exceeded its grants income, quite a remarkable achievement in the context of remote Indigenous Australia. This meant that at the very least it was able to capture a significant proportion of the funding coming into the region and generate profit for regional benefit. While exact figures are not readily available for all financial years, during most years CDEP funding accounted for almost 80 per cent of non-trading income—this was the big, core funding fundamental to Bawinanga's success, mainly made up of notional equivalents of welfare and its administration.<sup>9</sup>

And during most of what I term 'the period of vibrancy', Bawinanga increased its turnover in both real and monetary terms and until 2011–12 generally ran small profits after accounting for depreciation. Tallegalla Consultants (2009: 4) notes that the corporation's turnover exceeded \$30 million for the first time in 2007–08. It has been noted that the corporation's turnover was more than half of the revenue of the Darwin City Council and 50 per cent more than the revenue of the Alice Springs Town Council (ACIL Tasman 2007: 12).

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8 As noted earlier, once CDEP was transferred from ATSIC it was not a grant per se, but rather a contract awarded after competitive tender.

9 Ian Munro (pers. comm. 11 July 2015) notes that while CDEP income was a big number, from the mid-2000s BAC actually had to use discretionary resources to cover some administration of the program as government formula-based funding was inadequate. CDEP in and of itself was not inherently 'profitable'.

Table 7.3 BAC grants, trading and other income, and total income  
2000–01 to 2013–14

Year	Grants (\$ million)	%	Trading and other income (\$ million)	%	Total income (\$ million)##	Surplus (deficit) (\$ million)###
2000–01	8.2	48	7.9	52	17.1	n/a
2001–02	9.6	56	7.4	44	17.0	(0.19)
2002–03	9.2	47	10.6	53	19.7	0.12
2003–04	10.5	46	12.1	54	22.6	(0.11)
2004–05	11.6	44	14.7	56	26.3	0.95
2005–06	11.7	45	14.5	55	26.2	(0.3)
2006–07	12.2	45	15.1	55	27.3	1.1
2007–08	13.6	44	17.0	56	30.6	0.2
2008–09	15.8	47	18.0	53	33.8	0.5
2009–10	14.2	39	21.6	51	36.6	1.4
2010–11	18.1	47	19.9	53	38.6	2.7
2011–12	15.2	43	20.1	57	35.3	(4.0)
2012–13	15.6	51	14.5	49	30.3	(7.6)
2013–14#	10.3	32	21.5	68	31.8	0.5

# Inclusive of \$3.5 million loan from MPA and grant balance write-off and audit reversal of \$6 million.

## The consumer price index increased between June 2001 and June 2014 by 42 per cent, see [www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/Consumer+Price+Index+Inflation+Calculator](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/Consumer+Price+Index+Inflation+Calculator), so 2000–01 turnover of \$17.1 million was worth \$24.2 million in June 2014.

### Net of depreciation.

Source: Prepared by the author from Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation annual reports.

## The Bawinanga approach to CDEP success

In 1985, the Miller Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs (Miller 1985) was commissioned to undertake the first comprehensive review of the labour market situation of Aboriginal people Australia-wide. As noted in Chapter 4, Miller recommendations laid the foundations for the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy and the late 1980s expansion of CDEP. It was conducted during the self-determination era and during the progressive Hawke Government years and was sympathetic to the fundamentally different needs of remote-living Aboriginal people.

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The Miller Review made numerous recommendations that I summarise as follows. First, it differentiated settled from remote Australia. Second, it was sympathetic to the aspirations of Aboriginal people to live on the land that they owned and to pursue diverse strategies for livelihood, including in the non-market sector. Third, it saw the issue of work in remote Australia holistically, understanding that the economic base needed to be built slowly and employment generation integrated with community development, especially in situations where there were no mainstream labour markets and limited commercial opportunity. Along with the Blanchard Report, *Return to Country*, some two years later, which examined the homelands movement in Australia (Blanchard 1987), these two national inquiries greatly influenced the developmental approach taken by Bawinanga.

Twenty years later, in 2005, the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA) was asked to inquire into positive factors and examples among Indigenous individuals and communities that improved employment outcomes (HRSCATSIA 2007: xiii). This inquiry began just after the abolition of ATSIC and ended some two years later just before the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Intervention (the NT Intervention). I will return to this inquiry later, I bring it up here because Ian Munro, then General Manager of BAC, made a submission (no. 20) in April 2005 and subsequently members of the inquiry committee visited Maningrida to take verbal evidence in July 2006 from board members and Munro, who was by then CEO.<sup>10</sup>

In seven pages of submission (Munro & Manners 2005) and evidence delivered to the committee in Maningrida on 17 July 2006,<sup>11</sup> elements of the Bawinanga CDEP model were outlined. To briefly paraphrase, the evidence tendered highlighted how Bawinanga had achieved employment outcomes by creating a job market where one did not formerly exist. A short document prepared for DEWR by Munro

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10 To be transparent I also made a submission (no. 88) to the committee in May 2005 (some 20 years after I had made a submission to the Miller Inquiry) and gave verbal evidence in Canberra on 13 February 2006. My written submission focused on official statistics demonstrating the success of CDEP generally, my oral evidence was more specific and used much material about Bawinanga—see [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_committees?url=atsia/indigenousemployment/hearings.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_committees?url=atsia/indigenousemployment/hearings.htm).

11 Available at [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_committees?url=atsia/indigenousemployment/hearings.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_committees?url=atsia/indigenousemployment/hearings.htm), accessed 21 August 2015.



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and Rupert Manners—BAC’s financial controller—emphasised that the development of commercial enterprises is a cornerstone of the Bawinanga model. Munro and Manners (2005) note:

[o]ur operations provide training and employment opportunities, deliver efficient services to the community, address consumer demand, and generate profits which can be reinvested in local economic growth. Managers are required to demonstrate a commitment to economic growth constrained only by cultural considerations, the shortage of development capital, and the need to avoid disproportionate levels of non-Aboriginal employment.

Later they note:

[c]ultivation of the regional economy is somewhat challenging, requiring a degree of anthropological knowledge, an intimacy with the funding matrix and a willingness to speculate scarce capital on untested ventures remote from markets. We have had our share of business failure. It will always be so.

At the heart of the model were three components: responsiveness to local aspirations and realism about cultural priorities of its members; the skilful deployment of CDEP labour; and the prudent investment of corporation profits in commercial and social enterprises.

In 2009, as he was planning to move on, CEO Ian Munro approached the NT Government’s Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services, suggesting that a consultant be commissioned to document Bawinanga’s success and transportability to other communities. Peter Anderson Consulting Pty Ltd was commissioned and provided a report with the Jonathan Swift-like title,<sup>12</sup> *Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation Achievements Review in order to identify practices which might productively be pursued elsewhere in remote areas of the Northern Territory*, dated May 2010 (Anderson 2010).

Peter Anderson was an interesting choice of consultant. He had lived in Maningrida as a child, had undertaken a number of business planning assignments in Maningrida for BAC and other agencies and was an

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12 *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick* (1729).

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associate of ACIL Tasman, who had undertaken a report *Business Opportunities in the Maningrida Area* commissioned by Bawinanga in 2007.<sup>13</sup>

Anderson's report is not widely available but provides an arms-length perspective based on a critical engagement with a selection of the literature about Bawinanga and interviews with a diverse range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders, including me.

Focusing on employment, Anderson notes that there are three ways to increase this, excluding outmigration that is not a local preference: the replacement of *balanda* (non-Indigenous) employees, but this will be slow at best due to a local skills deficit; increased subvention by government, something that happened during the Intervention but at insufficient levels; and/or through the creation and operation of sustainable enterprises. Anderson notes that in 2010 there were 600 CDEP participants and 200 non-CDEP Maningrida jobs, further noting that the conversion rate does not add up (Anderson 2010: 19). In 2010, when CDEP was already in rapid decline, Anderson notes that Bawinanga was highly vulnerable because of its high dependence on the scheme. This observation was hardly insightful as the corporation had already experienced this vulnerability some five years earlier.

## The CDEP wars: Metropolitan rationalism versus remote realism

The greatest challenge in the coming year will undoubtedly be the need to maintain the trajectory of our CDEP success. The demise of ATSIC has seen CDEP move to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Regrettably, DEWR's inexperience and lack of understanding of Aboriginal people and communities threatens to destabilise the successes of our CDEP. We need to work with DEWR and other Government departments to ensure that continued support results in outcomes which are realistic, achievable and appropriate. (Otto Campion, Chairman's message prefacing the BAC annual report 2004–05 in McAuliffe 2005: 2)

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13 Peter Anderson had also worked for me as a sub-consultant when I undertook the MAC Business Development Plan in 1999 and was the CEO appointed by KordaMentha for a short time between July and October 2013 when Bawinanga was still in special administration. He is also a friend of David Bond who had been CEO for 24 years from late 1980 to 2005.

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There has been major conflict between BAC and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) over the operations of the CDEP program, resulting in their decision in June this year to discontinue our CDEP funding. Following strong representations by BAC, funding has been reinstated but tensions continue. The gulf between us relates principally to the question of 'real jobs'. It is the stated objective of BAC to attain unsubsidised employment for all CDEP participants. The means by which this can be achieved forms the basis of the entrenched dispute with DEWR. (Ian Munro, CEO Report, BAC Annual report 2005–06 in *Manners* 2006: 8–9)

Much of the employment policy debate in the post-ATSIC era has focused on whether CDEP jobs are 'real' jobs; and whether such jobs result in government agencies and others renegeing on their obligations to Indigenous Australians as citizens by utilising CDEP labour paid for with notional welfare equivalents (for a discussion of the former issue see Chapter 5).

In a review of research on CDEP undertaken by researchers at CAEPR, Rowse (2002: 65–78) argues that a policy focus on 'the individual' and individual welfare has obscured the non-labour market outcomes of the CDEP scheme. I concur. The material provided in this chapter demonstrates the range of these non-labour market outcomes in relation to Bawinanga, including social externalities, community development and social and cultural outcomes. Rowse suggests that a CDEP scheme is a form of Indigenous authority: as CDEP organisations mediate between government and participants, they exercise authority over workers and become players in the regional political field. In short, they are a form of local or regional political authority whose relationship with government is open to negotiation. That is the way it was in 2002, although I would add that CDEP organisations, like Bawinanga in their regional development manifestation, are also political economy institutions.

In his postscript to the *Indigenous Welfare Economy* volume already mentioned, Rowse (2001b) made three points that seem especially pertinent now with the benefit of hindsight observing developments over the following 15 years.

Even back then, Rowse noted the emerging use of what he termed the jargon of the 'real' economy as employed by Noel Pearson (2000). Rowse warned that this jargon needed to be critically challenged lest a view emerged that CDEP work was less 'real' than other forms

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of employment. This warning, as I will show, was prescient because the language of the ‘real’ economy and ‘real’ jobs has become ubiquitous, even naturalised, in Indigenous policy over the last decade and a half—in Canberra it is hard to come across a politician or bureaucrat who does not use the term. As Rowse notes, and again I concur, there is nothing necessarily ‘second-best’ about CDEP work.

A related point that Rowse (2001a, 2001b, 2002) highlights is that the CDEP scheme was never just about employment and must be recognised as having multiple objectives. Yet the scheme has always struggled for recognition of this difference, not just because it does not fit neatly into bureaucratic boxes as Sanders (2001) suggests, but also because it challenges the new ‘normalisation’ direction of Indigenous policy (Altman 2014).

Finally, Rowse (2001b) notes that CDEP was in a strong position because if government decided to abolish the scheme (which it has now done) then what would replace it? Rowse suggested that CDEP was doing so many necessary jobs in so many different ways in so many places that it was quite entrenched in the Australian system of government. It may not have been getting the recognition it deserved but it was going to be hard to get rid of. But get rid of it government did.

The process of abolition began in earnest on 1 July 2004, but took over a decade to complete. Sanders (2004) noted the danger of these new administrative arrangements and predicted that CDEP would sit uncomfortably in the employment portfolio, warning that because DEWR had a strong employment and labour market focus it would lose patience and interest in the community development and income support aspects of CDEP.

In my view, Sanders’ analysis was a little too benign because he interpreted the prospects for CDEP within DEWR in terms of bureaucratic politics only, somewhat detached from the broader political context and the new managerialism identified by Sullivan (2011).

This became very clear to me late in 2004 when, in my one and only formal meeting with then secretary of DEWR Peter Boxall (and Bob Harvey, his lieutenant charged with CDEP reform), he defended his economic rationalist view that CDEP participants could be forced by market signals into mainstream employment either in community or

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through labour migration.<sup>14</sup> This reflected the emerging domination that Rowse (2001b) had identified, a shift in policy thinking for remote Australia from a focus on community-building to a focus on the individual, as if the two are somehow separable. But this heightened focus on the individual and agency has increasingly ignored the politico-structural circumstances in remote Indigenous Australia, as well as in parts of more settled Australia (as argued in Chapter 4). Those advocating for engagement in the 'real' economy have been careful to never precisely define what this constitutes in its actually existing form, choosing to ignore the views of local experts about local economic realities. Here was a clear triumph of ideology.

Just how this attempted reform played out in remote Australia can be demonstrated with reference to a bitter and complex political conflict that emerged in 2005 and 2006 between DEWR and Bawinanga. As Otto Campion noted in his Chairman's message at the start of this section, this conflict not only had the potential to destabilise growth and success to date but also to erode relations of trust and cooperation with key funding agencies. Locally, this conflict was referred to as 'the CDEP wars' (Altman 2005, 2008). While Rowse (2001a: 232) had previously noted a plea from CDEP organisations for respectful engagement from government agencies, there was nothing respectful in this exercise of raw fiscal and political power over a relatively small and successful Indigenous organisation.

At the heart of this dispute were conflicting views on how CDEP should be delivered in the Maningrida region. In correspondence to the Commonwealth Ombudsman dated 8 July 2006, Ian Munro, then CEO, noted that:

BAC feel that they have been dealt with unfairly by DEWR and we can cite instances of decisions apparently being influenced by malice within the ranks of DEWR staff. We believe that this stems from two things. First BAC has promoted our model of CDEP quite forcefully and DEWR resents the challenge to their policy. Secondly, the BAC model is inconsistent with the DEWR doctrine, and our obvious success diminishes the credibility of the DEWR preferred model (Munro 2006).

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14 University of Chicago-trained Boxall has described himself as 'an unabashed rationalist' (Boxall 2012). Bob Harvey received a Public Service Medal 'for outstanding public service in implementing reforms to the Community Development Employment Projects program for Indigenous Australians [www.gg.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/honours/ad/ad2007/medianotesPSM.pdf](http://www.gg.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/honours/ad/ad2007/medianotesPSM.pdf).

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I cannot dwell in too much detail on this complex conflict. At its heart were divergent views about what constituted 'real jobs' and how many of its 600 CDEP workers Bawinanga should be exiting to unsubsidised and sustained mainstream work in Maningrida. The dispute flared on two occasions as Performance Funding Agreements had to be negotiated for the 2005–06 and 2006–07 financial years, and DEWR refused to approve these unless Bawinanga guaranteed to exit 30 and then 60 CDEP participants into mainstream employment. This was something that the board and senior management were unwilling to do with their knowledge of the severely limited Maningrida labour market and the aspirations of their CDEP participants and members. It was a clear case of realistic local knowledge about remote circumstances versus disconnected 'metropolitan managerialism' that looked to apply crude percentage formulas to funding agreements without proper assessment of local circumstances. This is a fundamental structural failing of the dominant economic system that cannot deliver despite the rhetoric of politicians and officials. And so the dominant then reconstrue this systemic failing as the personal shortcoming of the people who are the policy targets.

I use the term 'metropolitan' here because there was clearly a disconnect not just between DEWR and Bawinanga, but also between the Canberra headquarters and Darwin regional office of DEWR, and between DEWR and the highly unstable series of Commonwealth agencies in the immediate post-ATSIC era purportedly representing the interests of remote-living Indigenous people.

The low point in this dispute occurred in April 2006 around the time that Cyclone Monica, the most intense tropical cyclone on record to impact Australia, crossed the coastline near Maningrida. At this time, while Bawinanga was deploying CDEP labour to assist in the clean-up of a severely damaged Maningrida, DEWR was negotiating with the CEO of the Maningrida Council about the possible transfer of a proportion of CDEP participants from Bawinanga to the council, counter to the directions of elected councillors.

In correspondence dated 16 June 2006, the Maningrida Council wrote to Peter Boxall and made it quite clear that they did not support the unauthorised action of their CEO in his endeavours to see the council win back CDEP allocations that it had lost a decade earlier. DEWR was delving into community politics as a means to break the resistance of Bawinanga to its demands.

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A political highpoint of sorts occurred when Bawinanga Board members and senior management were afforded democratic opportunity to explain their successful approach and to place the dispute with DEWR on the public record as evidence to a parliamentary inquiry on Indigenous employment. Thirty pages of evidence provide rare insights, from a community perspective, on how local success can be jeopardised as part of a broader national agenda of imagined improvement.<sup>15</sup>

The visit to Maningrida clearly had an impact on one member of this parliamentary inquiry, Danna Vale, Liberal Party MP for the electorate of Hughes in New South Wales. In a second reading speech on the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Bill 2006 on 11 October 2006, she referred in some detail to Bawinanga and made the following summary comment:

The Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation at Maningrida is an excellent example of a well-organised and well-managed Indigenous corporation that provides essential services to its people and initiates activities that create economic development, training and job creation. Its work is invaluable to the people of the Maningrida community. Reading through its recent annual report [2004–05], one sees that this corporation deals with income in the tens of millions of dollars, almost half of which is in the form of government grants. In his message, the chairman states that the success of these projects will rely on our commitment, vision and effort, supported by increased levels of government support.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, these observations were not reflected in the final report *Indigenous Australians at Work* (HRSCATSIA 2007), where the considerable input of Bawinanga was given no attention and the issue of CDEP was largely overlooked. However, in a minority report by four members of the Australian Labor Party, Bawinanga was mentioned directly in relation to the importance of CDEP to its developmental work:

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15 Available at [www.aph.gov.au/binaries/hansard/reps/commttee/r9499.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/hansard/reps/commttee/r9499.pdf), accessed 21 September 2015.

16 See [parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/2006-10-11/toc\\_pdf/5017-3.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansardr/2006-10-11/0016%22](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/2006-10-11/toc_pdf/5017-3.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansardr/2006-10-11/0016%22), accessed 2 July 2015.

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CDEP plays a critical role in this process [regional development] because it has had 'the flexibility necessary for the difficult tasks of growing the regional economy' in an area where there is no mining, manufacturing or agricultural activity and where the challenge of 'accommodating a willing workforce in relevant and productive employment requires creative and clever solutions.' The corporation, frustrated in finding other sources of funding, have used profits from their successful trading enterprises set up under CDEP to provide seed capital for business development and to top up wages. This may well represent a legitimate future direction for CDEP in communities with limited opportunities for conventional employment (HRSCATSIA 2007: 216–7).

These competing discourses raise a lot of questions not just about the turbulence of the Indigenous policy cycle, but also about the ability of politicians and bureaucrats to 'disqualify' (Foucault 1980) local and expert knowledge. The views expressed in the minority report did not, unfortunately, translate into policy change when the ALP was elected to government five months later, a reflection of the growing consensus in the neoliberal governmentality of remote Indigenous communities (Altman 2014).

## The Great Crash: Bawinanga's 'near death' experience

There have been too many policy changes over the last few years, first as part of the Intervention and now with the reformed CDEP. We are overwhelmed, and find it difficult to keep up with the detail and understand how the policies will be implemented. Our members are unsettled and worry about the future. How will the reformed CDEP affect them and their families? What will happen after the program is phased out in 2011? (Jimmy Pascoe, Chairman's message prefacing the BAC annual report 2008–09 in Manners 2009: 3)

After 'the CDEP wars' policy changes occurred rapidly (as outlined in Chapter 2 and the annotated timeline in this volume). Three weeks after the parliamentary report was completed, the NT Intervention was announced and Bawinanga entered into other political battles with the Australian Government particularly in its organisational opposition to the Intervention. In July 2007, as an additional Intervention measure, Minister Brough announced that CDEP was to be abolished after he



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discovered that participants on wages could not be income managed. But then in November 2007 CDEP got some temporary reprieve with a change of federal government that then embarked on a reform agenda of its own, which saw CDEP fundamentally altered from July 2009 and then abolished from 1 July 2013 with the establishment of RJCP.<sup>17</sup>

In June 2009, Ian Munro, the manager who had overseen Bawinanga's rapid growth over the previous decade, left Maningrida worn down by 'the CDEP wars' and overseeing organisational opposition to the Intervention and in need of a break after 18 years at Maningrida. Unfortunately, he left without an appointed or suitably inducted successor and so for 12 months Bawinanga had a series of acting CEOs before Luke Morrish was appointed in mid-2010.

Munro's departure coincided with implementation of a new version of CDEP introduced by Jenny Macklin that signalled, in my view, the beginning of the end of Bawinanga's earlier success because it could not accommodate the flexibility it required.

This new approach divided participants into two streams—those engaged in community development and those engaged in job search. This division was imposed by the Rudd Government and so drastically reduced the autonomy of CDEP organisations to make their own decisions.

And, more significantly, two categories of CDEP participants within these two streams were created with a stroke of policy unilateralism. Those already on CDEP were 'grandfathered' as employed and as wage earners, while new CDEP entrants were limited to receive Newstart from Centrelink, classified as unemployed and not afforded the option to earn additional income without the disincentive of the social security taper—deprived of a significant benefit of CDEP participation locally referred to as 'top up'.<sup>18</sup>

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17 As Thomas Michel reminded me in reviewing this chapter, in the midst of all this CDEP reform upheaval, the NT Government also introduced reform of local government with the amalgamation of 53 councils with predominantly Indigenous populations into eight regional shires with its own set of intended and unintended consequences (see Michel & Taylor 2014).

18 See [www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05\\_2012/cdep\\_program\\_guide.pdf](http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/cdep_program_guide.pdf).

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These changes not only affected the well-being of the many individuals who could no longer earn top up without losing some income support but also undermined their incentive to work. This resulted in Bawinanga struggling to recruit CDEP participants to its enterprises as they could not earn income above Newstart.

The modus operandi of Bawinanga shifted quite dramatically even though a number of CDEP participants, particularly those associated with outstations were grandfathered. Being grandfathered had a small added bonus as these participants were categorised as wage earners, and were thus not subject to compulsory income management, one of the purported reasons CDEP was to be abolished in July 2007 as an Intervention measure.

All the dire warnings that Bawinanga would become a fundamentally different organisation without CDEP came to fruition—the organisation went into fiscal decline. This decline can be explained by a combination of factors including the recruitment of a revolving door of new staff, some of whom did not live in community but commuted from Darwin; financial pressure on some of Bawinanga's iconic businesses, especially MAC, which after the Global Financial Crisis went from being a surplus-generating entity into a loss-making liability (as analysed by Munro 2010); and the adoption of a fundamentally new approach by management to enterprise development that included establishing enterprises without rigorous business planning or a realistic assessment of risk.

The last factor represented a critical change in management approach from one based on organisational expansion and business development based on a stated vision, cultural understanding, client focus, sound risk assessment and risk management techniques—good business practice—to poor business practice that lacked the personal commitment of management (except self-interest) or interest in the aspirations of the membership. It was, at its heart, based on either a genuine or cosmetic adherence to the neoliberal logic of the Intervention.

The most obvious departures from sound past practice were twofold. First, government funds allocated to specific purposes, especially CDEP wages, were carried over and allocated to non-CDEP purposes. These carryovers were reported in audited financial reports, but they

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did not trigger timely intervention either by the funding body—the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs—or by the regulator—the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations—with whom reports were lodged.

Second, even as businesses like Maningrida Arts and Culture were failing (Munro 2010), new ventures including BAC Air Services and the expansion of outstations services provision, first to the Ramingining region to the east and then to the Oenpelli region to the west, were established. Not only was such expansion over-ambitious, it was debt financed rather than being prudentially financed as in the past from organisational surpluses.

This new direction was signalled in BAC's last two published annual reports for 2009–10 and 2010–11, which indicated that Bawinanga was embarking on a new expansionary phase (see Sommers 2010, 2011). Arguably this new, somewhat reckless approach was forced on the corporation owing to external policy changes. Information in Table 7.3 shows financial details of Bawinanga's financial decline. In 2011–12 and 2012–13, the corporation was in unprecedented debt and in October 2012 it went into special administration because its cash flow situation had deteriorated to such an extent that it could not pay its staff, including CDEP workers. Not long before then, in July 2012, the board had terminated the contract of CEO Luke Morrish after only two years, during which time he had turned the corporation from one making profit to one that was deeply indebted.

I cannot analyse what has happened at Bawinanga since it went into special administration in October 2012 here in any detail, in part because these issues still (in August 2016) remain sensitive and inaccessible. Suffice to say that for a period Bawinanga became an organisation marred by opaque processes, deep uncertainty, high staff turnover, struggling businesses and an inability to effectively meet its diverse objectives. There have also been periodic tensions between the board—which, since 2014 has included two non-member directors appointed by the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations—senior management, staff and the members themselves over the direction the corporation should take and its key priorities.

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Under such circumstances it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been no annual reports published since 2010–11, a historical series that began in 1999–2000 and ended abruptly. Peter Anderson, when CEO in September 2013, told me Bawinanga had no resources to expend on such glossy documents.<sup>19</sup>

In the short term, Bawinanga has been rescued from winding up by the Australian Government ‘shelving’ a debt of over \$6 million and its main local ‘competitor’, the Maningrida Progress Association, providing a loan of \$3.5 million over five years to pay off private creditors.

Much information on Bawinanga’s period of special administration (October 2012 to July 2014) is available at the website of the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations so this detail will not be recited here.<sup>20</sup> The most recent audited financial statement for 2014–15, also on the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations website, shows that Bawinanga might be slowly recovering. To what extent it was changes in CDEP, as distinct from changes in Indigenous policy more generally, that had been responsible for Bawinanga’s rapid decline is what I now turn to in conclusion.

## Challenging ‘Regimes of Truth’: Where to now for Bawinanga?

When MPA time, we left Maningrida and went home to the bush. Then BAC came and all that time it was good with BAC. We worked with BAC but then the government rules changed and BAC started to change too. Then the government came and they made BAC do what the government wanted and then they didn’t want to work with us anymore. They got tired of us Bininj [Aboriginal people]. They weren’t interested in us anymore. That was after Ian Munro time. BAC used to make roads for us and so on, but the government policies changed, BAC’s policies changed and they didn’t want to support us anymore. (Bulanj Nakardbam, February 2015 quoted in Altman 2015)

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<sup>19</sup> Bawinanga management had initially resisted my recommendation that a narrative annual report be produced, but subsequently Ian Munro (pers. comm. 31 July 2015) informed me that he estimated that a \$10,000 investment in the report annually probably generated \$250,000 per annum for the corporation in additional grant support.

<sup>20</sup> See [register.oric.gov.au/document.aspx?concernID=100029](http://register.oric.gov.au/document.aspx?concernID=100029), accessed 3 July 2015.

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Now that CDEP has been abolished, it is useful to reflect on what this program was and did, how this abolition was justified, why expert local knowledge about the local labour market was ignored, what has been lost following the reform process and how might any loss be recovered? While Bawinanga provides just one case study, the wealth of historical information about it provides a sound basis for such reflections.

CDEP was a program with multiple objectives that was established in recognition of the reality that there are limited mainstream employment opportunities in remote Australia and an escalating problem of surplus labour. And so the program empowered communities participating in the scheme to find creative ways to generate activity, pay wages and engage in community and enterprise development. While CDEP was an institution of the self-determination era, it nevertheless became increasingly governmental. This transition was a consequence of the Australian Government delegating authority to Aboriginal organisations to decide on the methods for the payment of income in accord with the rules governing boards of these organisations set. This is one aspect of CDEP that stands out most today: while it was always an Indigenous-specific program and never welfare, the cost of the program was largely offset by welfare—the notional entitlements of participants to income support and the cost of its delivery that government has to bear in remote places.

In the case of Bawinanga, as this chapter shows, a great deal was achieved with CDEP in a number of areas. Initially, CDEP provided an appropriate form of income support to outstations and generated operational funds to allow better service delivery to over 30 outstations scattered over a large remote region. Then, as CDEP expanded, it allowed for enterprise development, expanded community services and the provision of employment and training opportunity for up to 600 participants. It is interesting in this regard that while CDEP has been criticised for allowing cost shifting from government onto a government-funded community organisation in a situation of labour surplus, such service delivery work was an important avenue for job creation in aged care support, night patrol and other services more usually associated with government.

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While all these different elements of CDEP developed incrementally over time, they operated symbiotically and constituted a virtuous cycle: CDEP labour could be deployed in community services provision and enterprise development and the financial surpluses generated—especially when supported by complementary government grants—could be rolled back into job creation and associated income generation for individuals, households and the community. While Bawinanga’s initial focus was on outstations, its expanded role as a regional organisation from 1989 saw its activities increasingly focused on the township of Maningrida where a growing proportion of its membership lived.

Using the lenses of formal performance evaluation and outcomes monitoring, it is difficult to fault Bawinanga as a CDEP organisation; indeed it was often lauded, including as a case study of governance success in a report, *The top 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporations 2009–2010* (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations 2011: 9–10). With access to CDEP, Bawinanga became one of the largest and most robust Indigenous corporations in Australia, regularly ranking between second- and fourth-largest of several thousand in the first decade of the 21st century.

While Bawinanga was a successful CDEP performer there were many other CDEP organisations that, in their own ways, achieved a great deal in very difficult circumstances. So how was the Australian Government able to mount a plausible case to reform this program to extinction?

It is worth recalling here a growing policy debate about and mounting discursive assault on CDEP that began some 20 years ago and escalated rapidly during the post-ATSIC era. In rapid succession, a review of the scheme by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) questioned whether it was delivering income support equitably, the Spicer Review (1997) challenged the efficacy of the scheme as an employment program, and a combination of Pearson (2000) and McClure (2000) questioned whether CDEP jobs were ‘real’ and how CDEP fitted into a ‘mutual obligation’ framework (Altman 2001). Sanders (2001) captured these emerging challenges by noting that CDEP was being reshaped in two directions at once: a greater

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focus on integration into the social security system for unemployed participants and a greater focus on mainstream employment for those seeking exit.

Rowse (2001a) noted astutely at that time that CDEP was practically strong but ideologically weak as it struggled to escape the government's negative representations of CDEP. Rowse believed that while CDEP was not getting all the recognition it deserved for all the things that it did, it was still going to be hard to get rid of. But the government did get rid of CDEP, the scheme being eliminated by a pincer combination of the new managerialism and an increasingly shrill narrative of negativity.

In her recently completed doctoral research, Juliet Checketts (2016) analysed the federal parliamentary record to show how four dominant discourses combined to create what Foucault termed 'A Regime of Truth' (Foucault 1980) in the Australian Indigenous policy cycle. Regimes of Truth are established forms of knowledge and speech acts that frame social problems in a particular way, imagine government-directed interventions and envision the characteristics of desirable citizens that such interventions will create. The discourses Checketts identified were: highlighting of past failure, focused especially on ATSIC and the self-determination era; an ongoing concern with statistical gaps; a focus on Aboriginal culture and community as a barrier to progress; and a proposed solution to deliver the 'good life' enjoyed by mainstream settler Australians based on altering Indigenous subjectivities in remote Australia to embrace dominant norms and values. I cannot go into detail here analysing policy statements that encapsulated this emerging Regime of Truth, but two that stand out for me were Amanda Vanstone's (2007) speech on 'conspicuous compassion'<sup>21</sup> and Malcolm Brough's (2006) speech, 'Blueprint for action on Indigenous affairs'. Both were powerful narratives of sameness and individualism for Indigenous Australia dressed up as tolerance of community and cultural difference.

These broader shifts in the Indigenous policy cycle can be transposed onto what was supposedly happening with CDEP according to the dominant narrative: the program was ATSIC's largest, and so could

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21 A term probably borrowed, without acknowledgement, from West's book *Conspicuous Compassion: Why Sometimes it Really is Cruel to be Kind* (2004).

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be linked to ATSI's perceived failure; redefined as an employment program it could be held responsible in part for the government's inability to close the employment gap;<sup>22</sup> CDEP's emphasis on flexibility, including to accommodate cultural prerogatives like ceremony, explained participants' lack of regimentation for mainstream work; and the only way to enjoy the good life was through mainstream so-called 'real' jobs.

This Regime of Truth became so 'naturalised' that it was difficult to challenge. Have the supposed millions, sometimes billions, spent delivered acceptable outcomes? Can rich Australia tolerate such employment gaps? Can Australia really condone custom that precludes regular work or work readiness? And surely everyone deserves a decent livelihood based on full-time employment? Indigenous Australians should not be expected to tolerate second-class forms of employment and second-rate employment and training services. This is despite capitalism's core structural problem of low employment creation around its peripheries, especially where there are no markets to create.

In its attempts to counter such a dominant narrative in 'the CDEP Wars' and through evidence of its performance to parliamentary inquiries, Bawinanga, powerful as it was in regional political terms, could not counter this groundswell of critique. It was fighting a local battle for CDEP based on evidence of performance in a national ideological war in Australian Indigenous affairs in which inevitably Bawinanga ended up as the loser—its community-based developmental approach, even if successful, was out of broader policy fashion. Here was a classic case of social injustice, to invert Nancy Fraser's (2009) scales of justice framework to the negative: Bawinanga's efforts were poorly recognised, the organisation and its membership were poorly represented, and the redistribution of resources for Bawinanga was always inadequate to allow it to break its high dependence on the state and associated vulnerability.

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22 Rowse (2001a: 232) highlighted the dominant message from Peter Shergold, then head of the powerful Employment portfolio, at the Indigenous Welfare Economy and CDEP conference: that CDEP is all about employment and as an employment program it is failing. But Shergold, of course, failed to specify what would work better.



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In their submission to the parliamentary inquiry into Indigenous employment, Munro and Manners (2005) ask: What would a post-CDEP environment look like for Bawinanga, its members and the Maningrida region?

First and foremost, they predicted a depopulation of outstations in the region because of lack of services support and a means to make a livelihood through CDEP and top up in cash from art, or in-kind from hunting and fishing. This prediction has come to fruition and is reflected in the statement above from Bulanj Nakardbam in an interview conducted in February 2015 in Maningrida (Altman 2015).

Next, they noted the importance of CDEP for regional natural resource management and the associated maintenance of Indigenous environmental knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

They then suggested that without CDEP individuals will be deprived of self-esteem, there will be heightened social dysfunction and associated health and incarceration costs for the state. They also predicted that the service delivery undertaken by Bawinanga, including in delivering income support entitlements, will fall on a less locally attuned state apparatus. This prediction has seen rapid escalation of breaching by Centrelink for non-compliance since the establishment of RJCP (recently renamed CDP).

And finally they predicted that the quest for 'real jobs' will see Aboriginal people move from CDEP work to welfare while non-Indigenous people from outside Maningrida will increasingly take on the real or salaried jobs owing to superior qualifications and higher labour productivity in a market sense. Analysis comparing 2006 and 2011 census information supports this view, with non-Indigenous local employment increasing significantly during this period.<sup>24</sup>

The rhetoric of recent Australian governments highlights the need to empower communities and close the gap and to focus the policy effort of its Indigenous Advancement Strategy on remote Australia.

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23 Some of this loss might have been offset by the introduction of the Working on Country program in 2007, but such 'working on country' without people living on country will prove far less effective.

24 From 126 in 2006 to 178 in 2011, according to ABS community profiles with median individual incomes for non-Indigenous employees nearly five times higher than for Indigenous people. Since 2011 this level of outsider employment has increased further.

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But the Bawinanga case indicates quite clearly that these goals are only considered if on the government's terms, irrespective of organisational performance. To some extent, Bawinanga has become too preoccupied with its own corporate survival and now risks meeting none of its objectives properly—in the support of outstations, in delivering community services, in developing viable small businesses and in providing locally realistic and flexible forms of training and work. When it successfully tendered for the role of regional RJCP provider as a financial survival strategy in 2013, the organisation acquiesced in large measure to the government's vision for the region rather than its own.

Bawinanga's symbiotic engagement with CDEP, carefully configured and nurtured over many years, is now broken. Without CDEP there is little incentive for individuals to work, as top up is not payable, and the organisation itself faces constrained incentive to perform as operating surpluses need to be earmarked for debt repayment rather than innovative enterprise development. Having created this terrible mess, the Australian Government is now belatedly looking for a semantic solution—renaming RJCP as the Community Development Programme—to a deeply entrenched structural problem that CDEP once empowered Bawinanga to address in a relatively successful way.

In the essay 'What is Living and What is Dead', historian Tony Judt (2015: 336) reminds us, as does Tim Rowse (2001a: 233), that social democrats need to speak more assertively of past gains. According to Judt it is those from the Right, those that espouse neoliberal ideology, that look to destroy and innovate in the name of a universal project of sameness. But this grand project would certainly not accord with the aspirations of many remote-living Indigenous Australians. CDEP may have been far from perfect and its contributions to ameliorate development challenges partial. But, as Judt (2015: 336) suggests in a broader global context that has strong resonances with the Maningrida local, 'Imperfect improvements upon unsatisfactory circumstances are the best that we can hope for, and probably all we should seek'.

Unfortunately, circumstances today are more unsatisfactory than at any time during the era of CDEP administered by Bawinanga: people are moving from outstations, more are engaging in unproductive make work under CDP just earning the Newstart Allowances, and livelihoods are more precarious (Altman 2015).

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This chapter does not seek to provide an uncritical idealisation of the past under CDEP, even though there is little question in the Maningrida region that those participating in the scheme were better off than those on welfare, with the overall numbers of adults pretty evenly divided between the two categories of CDEP participation and welfare. It is difficult to argue that a return to some halcyon period when CDEP was operating strongly is 'the' development solution; the regional challenges are too great to be solved by one organisation and one program. But there is no doubt that with CDEP Bawinanga delivered a great deal to its members and to the region, something that one would hope to see replicated in the future.

It is for this reason that in my view the current 'Regimes of Truth' about CDEP need to be sternly challenged with a counter-narrative built around three facts.

First, CDEP was never welfare; it was an innovative program with a notional financial nexus to welfare entitlements that empowered Aboriginal organisations like Bawinanga.

Second, Bawinanga did some very productive things with CDEP resources that are proving extremely difficult to emulate today without CDEP.

And finally, whatever its shortcomings, CDEP as administered by Bawinanga was better than welfare, for individuals, the Maningrida community and its network of outstations, for the region, and ultimately for the Australian nation.

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When I write about Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation it is proper that I disclose that I am a foundation director of Karrkad-Kanjdji Ltd, a company that has been established to assist the Djelk Rangers (and adjoining Warrdeken Rangers) in their land and resource management activities in Western Arnhem Land. Directors of Karrkad-Kanjdji Ltd are trustees for the Karrkad-Kanjdji Trust, established with deductible gift recipient status to financially assist the Djelk Rangers. The Djelk Rangers are in turn one of the most significant business units of BAC. The views that are expressed in this chapter are mine as an academic researcher and do not reflect the views of anyone else including other directors of Karrkad-Kanjdji Ltd.

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# 8

## ‘The Main Thing Is to Have Enough Food’: Kuninjku Precarity and Neoliberal Reason

Jon Altman

Being able to get to your country and being able to live here too, that’s the good life. Sometimes going bush, sometimes living here; the main thing is to have enough food. When you have enough food to eat, that’s good.

These opening lines are drawn from a series of interviews conducted in Kuninjku, a dialect of the pan-dialectal language Bininj Kunwok (Garde, 2013) during a week in February 2015.<sup>1</sup> The focus of my questioning was on what constitutes the ‘good life’ today, in the immediate past and, potentially, in the future. The question was posed to John, my friend of nearly 40 years, in his language by Murray Garde, expert linguist and accredited translator. I asked the question sitting on the ground outside John’s decrepit government-supplied home at the remote township of Maningrida in Australia’s Northern Territory.

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1 I made this methodological decision because my Kuninjku is too limited to be immune from potential misrepresentation or error and I was keen to have Murray Garde’s expert assistance. Interviews were conducted with a cross-section of Kuninjku speakers, mainly old and middle-aged, but including some young people, mainly male, but also females. The interviews were conducted in the township of Maningrida during the wet season when most Kuninjku are living there rather than at their small homelands in the hinterland.

THE QUEST FOR THE GOOD LIFE IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

John's response can be multiply interpreted, but there are two key messages. One is about mobility and maintaining connection to one's country. John continues:

What makes me happy is when I go back to my home out bush and I can go out hunting and I can live like the old people from olden times. That makes me happy when I am in my camp, I can paint, I can drink tea and walk around my camp and the sun goes down. Good, happy. In Maningrida, sometimes happy, sometimes not. I only think about my country. I get sad when I think about my home out bush and I can't get out there. This place here is for white people, but it gives us access to Balanda [Western] food and to health services at the clinic. We can go out bush but the problem is when we get sick or when we have no [Western] food out there. So it pushes us to come and live here to get Balanda food and health services, but we still want to live out bush. It is a contradiction that frustrates us.

The other key message indexed by John's reflections is about what might be referred to in Australian English as 'getting a good feed', or what we might think of as 'food sovereignty' (Li, 2015). John talks about food in two ways: Balanda (or Western) food, which is purchased from the store; and bush tucker, which is hunted, fished or gathered:

I am worried about my country and those old people buried there or when they used to go collecting food ... [he lists all kinds of bush food]. I think about those old people and the food we used to eat.

In the middle of this interview, Peter, a white man (or Balanda) who lives in Maningrida and has worked for years with the Maningrida Progress Association, which runs a local store selling Balanda food, arrives with a large fish (a barramundi) he has caught for John.

'Why did he give you that fish?' I ask.

'For supper, because we have no food,' says Kay, John's wife.

'He must have caught it on my country,' says John.

Ngarritj, John's grandson, says, 'Peter goes hunting at Bulkay and he gives them fish.'

Later, I ask the same question of Peter, who tells me that he delivered the fish to John's camp because Kay had asked for it. She had told him they were hungry; it was caught near Maningrida in salt water, not in the fresh water at Bulkay.

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Just prior to Peter's arrival, I had been showing John my book *Hunter-Gatherers Today: An Aboriginal Economy in North Australia* (Altman, 1987), based on my anthropological fieldwork in 1979 and 1980 at Mumeka outstation on John's country. The book features a photograph of a young John on the front cover holding bush food—a goanna, magpie geese, a barramundi and a catfish—from a hunt he and I undertook at Bulkay. I had asked John:

'If I was to write a book about what people do every day [today] in Maningrida, what would I write?'

He replied: 'I don't know. I am going to try to tell everyone to go back to our outstation.'

'What about bush tucker?'

'Before bush tucker.'

Earlier, Japhat, another Kuninjku man, had commented:

We have a lot of bush tucker out bush. Before, a long time, the old people thought a lot about bush tucker, but the new generation they think about the foods that white people have brought, sugar, bakky [tobacco]. The white people's food has changed our thinking. We don't think about our bush foods as much.

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In this chapter, I want to ask why the struggle 'to get a feed' (in colloquial Australian) and remain connected to one's country can be so difficult for someone like John Mawurndjul, who is among Australia's foremost contemporary artists, living in one of the richest countries in the world.

On several occasions recently, and with increasing frequency in the last decade, I have known Kuninjku people to be hungry and without food in Maningrida. Sometimes, prior to sitting down for a meeting or social gathering, they have asked me to buy them food, an unusual request in my nearly four decades of acquaintance. Such requests have been made reluctantly and with a degree of shame; they are in marked contrast to the high visibility and ready availability of food out bush and offers of bush tucker made to me on my visits to outstations.

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There are two issues here I seek to analyse. Living in Maningrida today, mainly on welfare, what people are short of is food sourced from the store. This is because their income is low and this food is expensive. When they live in the hinterland they have access to abundant bush food, although they often lack access to Western foods. However, they increasingly find it difficult to live at their outstations, even though this is the stated preference of many of their senior people, like John, who recognise, with some sadness and frustration, that this is not an aspiration necessarily shared by young people, the so-called new generation.

My introduction so far has focused on Kuninjku perspectives and agency, something that Kuninjku themselves emphasise. However, this is only a small part of a bigger story in a context in which the role of the Australian settler state and its ever-changing policy approaches to Aboriginal development looms large in the structuring and restructuring of people's livelihood options.

I wish to deploy the historical technique of the *longue durée* to give a degree of priority to historical structures over events. John came in from the bush, where he was being reared as a member of a hunter-gatherer group, to Maningrida in 1963. I first met him 16 years later in 1979. During the following 37 years, 1979–2016, I have visited him in Arnhem Land regularly, and he in turn has visited me in Canberra on several occasions. In that time, the livelihood fortunes of Kuninjku people have fluctuated quite dramatically, always heavily structured by relations with the state. What I aim to do here, then, is to trace a series of social experiments that have been conducted on Aboriginal people residing in remote Australia and examine their effects, as experienced by the subjects of those experiments.

I begin by providing a contextualising background on the Maningrida region. I then give a brief account of two historical periods that preceded my initial engagement in this region, which I term 'precolonial' and 'colonial'. I then focus on two periods, the first underway by the 1970s, which I term 'postcolonial', and the second, clearly manifest from about 2005 to the present, which I term 'neo-colonial', the latter being my priority.

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Each of these phases has greatly influenced the nature of the Kuninjku livelihood and domestic economy and their transformation in ways that have not necessarily followed the Western development pathways imagined and promised by state officials. While the materialist and structural nature of my analysis dovetails with Wolfe's theorisation (1999, 2015)—that the logic of settler society and late capitalism is to have unimpeded access to the land and its resources—for a time, in the postcolonial period, it appeared that Kuninjku might be able to resist the destruction and elimination of their native society. In the contemporary neo-colonial context, this process of elimination, proposed to occur through beneficial integration of Kuninjku into the mainstream, has re-emerged. It is my contention that, for people like the Kuninjku, any form of forced integration constitutes a form of structural (Farmer, 2005) and economic violence (Peck, 2010).

This chapter is written at a moment when the democratically elected Australian Government is unwilling to support the rights of Indigenous Australians to live differently—indeed, in which there is a dogged and bipartisan national policy focus on 'Aboriginal advancement to integration' (Schapper, 1970). In this context, the complex politics of constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples has stalled; there are policy proposals to defund and close down small Indigenous communities, usually with populations of less than 100, even where land rights or native title have been legally recognised; ongoing debates about the possible amendment of racial discrimination law to allow racial vilification as a libertarian right to free speech; and ongoing special discriminatory laws that target Indigenous people.

The dominant policy framework, agreed upon by all Australian governments since 2008, is the supposedly humane but ultimately developmental and modernist Closing the Gap strategy, which has clear aims to eliminate statistical disparities between Indigenous and other Australians. The Australian Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy is quite explicit in its aim to alter the norms and values of Indigenous peoples to match those of mainstream Australians, and to deliver supposedly equalising outcomes to Indigenous people, including the Kuninjku, measured by Western statistics (Council of Australian Governments, 2011).

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## The Maningrida Region: Synoptic Background

The township of Maningrida looms large in the lives of Kuninjku people today and so I want to provide a brief summary of its establishment, its peoples and the region. Maningrida was originally called Manayingkarirra (from the phrase *Mane djang karirra*, meaning ‘the place where the Dreaming changed shape’), a camping place on a river, now called the Liverpool River, on the lands of the Dekurridji clan. In 1949, a trading post was established by what was then the Native Affairs Branch of the Northern Territory Administration as a policy experiment to repatriate ‘tribal’ people who had walked to Darwin, 500 kilometres away. It was abandoned in 1950.

In 1957, Maningrida was re-occupied by state officials and established as a Welfare Branch government settlement to create a regional colonial presence deep within what was then the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, and, again, to help to keep Aboriginal people out of Darwin. Government policy at that time embraced assimilation—the quest to transform Aboriginal people into mainstream subjects. Maningrida slowly developed over the 1960s into a township where Aboriginal people, still wards of the state, could be trained for assimilation through education and work and the adoption of Western ways of living.

Since 1957, Maningrida has had both Balanda (non-Indigenous) and Bininj (Aboriginal) populations. It is a place of dual ethnicity, with power legally vested with Balanda as agents of the colonial state. In the early 1970s, policy shifted dramatically from imposed assimilation, which had failed, to decolonising self-determination, which was initially viewed by all with great optimism as a means to empower Aboriginal people and to overcome earlier development failures. However, this was a constrained self-determination, with state authority still reigning supreme, as symbolised by the coat of arms fixed to the wall of ‘Her Majesty’s’ Maningrida police station and the flags of Australia and the Northern Territory flying outside the West Arnhem Shire office.

The Maningrida region covers about 10,000 square kilometres of tropical savannah. It has a current Aboriginal population of about 3,000 and a non-Aboriginal population of about 300, although the accuracy of available statistics, even from the five-yearly official census, are of dubious veracity. I conceptualise this region geopolitically as comprising two spaces:



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a township or service centre of about 300 houses, shops, a school, a police station and other service facilities; and a hinterland where 100 houses are scattered across about 35 locations called outstations. I try to avoid using the term 'community' when talking about Maningrida because it is made up of diverse residential clusterings (or 'communities') defined by languages, lineages, political alliances, land ownership in the hinterland and territorial orientations. Occupational affiliations mainly define the Balanda groupings—teachers, nurses, those employed in various Aboriginal organisations and so on—and their residential clustering.

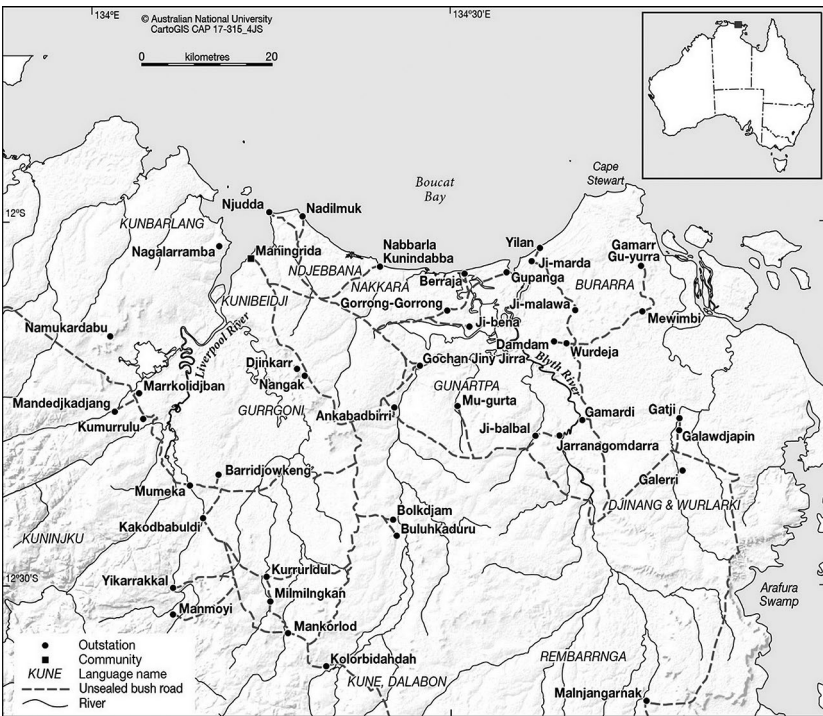


Figure 8.1: Map of the Maningrida Region

Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

Figure 8.1 summarises the location of the region in tropical north Australia; the spatial relationship between Maningrida and far smaller outstations averaging populations rarely over 25 persons; and the main geographic distribution of regional languages (shown capitalised in the map), of which the Kuninjku dialect is just one. Maningrida today is a multilingual township, with speakers of all regional languages resident since its establishment. Associated with language diversity, there is

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also political diversity and contestation; Maningrida is located on the land of the Dekurridji, whose ownership was only legally recognised after the passage of land rights law in 1976. Historically, other more demographically powerful groups with superior cross-cultural skills had been politically dominant at Maningrida. Today, the Dekurridji and their affines and close allies have recouped some local authority, which remains very much subordinate to that of the state. No social field in this region is either typical or static; they vary in size, regional mobility, adherence to customary law and place of residence. The main integrating regional institutions are Aboriginal ritual cult, mortuary and social exchange ceremonies, Christian fellowship (for those who participate) and Australian Rules football.

My focus on the Kuninjku in this chapter mainly reflects my long-term research relationship with this group. I have been working with them since 1979; yet, attempting to define even them as a community or social field is challenging. There are about 300 Kuninjku, so defined because they speak a dialect of the pan-dialectical Bininj Kunwok language, whose speakers reside in the Kakadu–West Arnhem region (Evans, 2003; Garde, 2013). The Kuninjku community I work with is located at the eastern extremity of this language bloc and is mainly composed of members of six intermarrying clans defined by patrilineal descent. Kuninjku in general ‘marry’ each other in accord with customary marriage rules, which emphasise clan and moiety exogamy as a core principle. They also sometimes marry their immediate neighbours, especially members of other Bininj Kunwok dialect groups to the west. They are associated with 10 outstations and use territories they own under land rights law for livelihood and spiritual sustenance.

Key distinguishing features of this ‘community’ include Kuninjku people’s relatively recent contact with the colonial state, remnants of the community only moving to Maningrida in 1963; their eagerness to decentralise in the 1970s—Kuninjku were among the first in north Australia to do so; their poor adaptation to settlement life; and their practice, like other groups but more so, of moving continually between township and hinterland, and between outstations. However, in the last decade or so, a number of Kuninjku families have been settled in Maningrida almost continuously for employment, children’s education and access to health services. The future permanence of such residential choice is difficult to assess given historical shifts from outstations to town and vice versa.

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When Kuninjku are in Maningrida they reside in four residential clusters they call 'bottom camp', 'side camp', 'shelter' and 'new sub', the last a recent 'suburban' addition to the township, consisting of 100 houses constructed for Aboriginal residents since 2009. In total, the Kuninjku camps consist of 10 houses in various states of disrepair and four 'temporary' tin sheds (in use for over a decade), which they refer to as 'chicken houses'. These residential clusters are spread across the township but are oriented towards Kuninjku country to the south-west. The defining sociological feature of these clusters is that residents predominantly share hunted game and store-purchased foods, as well as cash, with each other on the basis of kinship ties. There is also an emerging Kuninjku camp at a place called 'the Fifteen Mile' just outside Darwin, where Kuninjku rent two very basic shelters from the Department of Housing and Community Development. The main emerging reason for visiting Darwin is access to kidney dialysis treatment, another being access to alcohol, which is hard to find in Maningrida. The interviews recorded for this chapter were conducted at or near each of these camps.

## Hunter-Gatherers Primed for Developmental Assimilation

Until the late 1950s, and even into the early 1960s, Kuninjku people lived as hunter-gatherers in what was effectively an un-colonised part of the Arnhem Land Reserve, policed at the border by the Australian state to prohibit entry by Europeans. Some of my research collaborators today were born in the bush between the 1920s and 1950s and spent their early life intentionally at a distance from colonial authority and other Balandas at the frontier.

Given the focus here on access to food as an idiomatic expression of the good life, it is of interest that Kuninjku are related to people to the west who had migrated to the mission at Oenpelli, and who had participated in a research experiment of hunter-gatherer living conducted by the 1948 Arnhem Land expedition (see Thomas & Neale, 2011). Without rehearsing too much detail, information collected by McCarthy and McArthur (1960) at Fish Creek (or Kunnanj) in October 1948 provided the ethnographic evidence for Sahlins's (1972) theorisation of the 'original affluent society' in his *Stone Age Economics*. This theorisation continues to have some influence today (Gammage, 2011). Sahlins (1972) also

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theorised that people like the Kuninjku engaged in a particular form of domestic moral economy—‘a domestic mode of production’ that was largely self-sufficient, sustainable and based on the moral imperative to share in a generalised manner with kin and co-residents.

I have taken issue with elements of Sahlins’s depiction of ‘original affluence’, mainly because my fieldwork experience and primary data collection suggest that while there was seasonal surplus, there was also a degree of seasonal precarity involved in living off the land. Even today, with access to bought food and modern technology, making a living out in the bush during the wet seasons is difficult because of seasonal flooding and inaccessibility of wildlife (Altman, 1987, 2011). Moreover, some forms of bush food collection were, and continue to be, arduous in terms of work effort. However, there is no doubt that as hunter-gatherers, Kuninjku people had a sustainable mode of production. As Hamish, one of my Kuninjku interlocutors, put it: ‘The old people had the true power to be self-sufficient. They worked hard producing food to survive, yams, all kinds of food they carried and shared ... with others’.

While Kuninjku had occasional contact with the colonial state, explorers, pastoralists and missionaries in the period prior to World War II, patrol reports document populations still living in the bush as hunter-gatherers from the 1930s to the 1960s (Altman, 2016). All this changed in 1957 with the establishment of a government settlement at Maningrida, followed by the blazing of a bush vehicular track from Oenpelli mission to Maningrida through Kuninjku country in 1963. After 1963, most Kuninjku moved to live in Maningrida although many continued seasonal visitations back to their country for hunting and ceremonies.

The Kuninjku hunting economy more or less disappeared when they lived in Maningrida. State colonial domination sought to centralise and sedentarise these mobile hunter-gatherers to prepare and equip them for integration as citizens into the settler society. This initial social engineering project of improvement was grounded in an explicit policy of assimilation, articulated in 1961:

All aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1961)

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Economic thinking was deeply influenced by the post-war modernisation paradigm of the time. For many reasons, that grand project of socio-economic convergence between Indigenous and other Australians failed at Maningrida, as it failed more broadly, especially in remote Australia.

Life at Maningrida represented a radical change from bush living. For a start, Kuninjku were living on other people's country, that of the Dekurridji. They were also living with many other Aboriginal people from the region, as well as Europeans, in a sedentary small township setting. Most importantly, even though Kuninjku, like other Aboriginal people in Australia, were granted voting rights in 1962, at Maningrida they were categorised as wards of the state and subject to the supreme colonial authority of a superintendent sanctioned by Australian law. A radical shift in livelihoods saw people becoming waged labourers on below-award training allowances, or else engaged in one form or another of training for late modernity, including 'domestic duties'. Kuninjku, like others, had access to very rudimentary housing, primary education and basic health services in Maningrida; for a time, they ate in the settlement's communal dining hall as it was deemed the best way to deliver Western food.

Kuninjku adapted very badly to settlement life and the state project of assimilation mainly because they remained strongly committed to their own values regime and notions of autonomy and authority. Consequently, their lot at the settlement, which was notionally established for their betterment and to prepare them for integration into modernity, was precarious. State officials were quick to identify what was then termed 'the Gunwinggu problem', which simply reflected Kuninjku unwillingness to respond to the official solution: *imagined* assimilation. I say 'imagined' because, as history has subsequently demonstrated, settlements like Maningrida lacked the economic base to engage viably with market capitalism. Part of the solution envisioned by the authorities was for Kuninjku minors to attend school and for their parents to actively engage in make-work or commercially fraught projects heavily subsidised by the state. For many reasons, including bullying by other Aboriginal kids and unimaginative curricula and teaching methods, Kuninjku kids avoided school more than others, while their parents engaged in poorly paid employment reluctantly and sporadically (Altman, 2016).

Maningrida failed as a project of assimilation for two main reasons. First, counter to capitalist logic, the settlement was established as a coastal trading post and then, later, as an *entrepôt* without any assessment of

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the commodities that might flow from the hinterland. As it turned out, there were very few of any commercial value. Second, and again counter to capitalist logic, a series of state-subsidised projects were established, including forestry, cattle and buffalo raising, dairy, market gardens, orchards, flower propagation, fishing and fish processing, a piggery and chicken raising, without any realistic appraisal of commercial viability or comparative advantage. All failed. Interestingly, the production and marketing of Aboriginal art, which was not supported back then as a state enterprise, has subsequently proven to be the only sustainable commodity export from the region.

Unsurprisingly, as a group regarded by other Aboriginal people at Maningrida as myall (or wild and primitive), living marginalised and impoverished in the township did not suit Kuninjku. They experienced ‘structural violence’ (Farmer, 2005) and economic deprivation. As John put it: ‘Sometimes we Kuninjku kids were hungry and sick, so we didn’t like being here [in Maningrida]’. Many yearned to return to live on their ancestral lands. By the late 1960s, they had taken steps to achieve this aim by purchasing two second-hand cheap vehicles; and there was a growing administrative sympathy on the part of some enlightened local non-Indigenous officials for this aspiration given the evident failure of Kuninjku to adapt to urbanised and sedentarised life.

## Decentralisation and Postcolonial Economic Hybridity

Kuninjku were able to reconstitute a significantly transformed hunter-gatherer economy in the early 1970s after decentralisation back to their land. This transformation was underpinned by access to welfare and to domestic and global art markets for which Kuninjku art was adapted and commoditised for sale. Out of the failure of the assimilation experiment and a form of precarity living in Maningrida came a period of postcolonial possibility supported by a policy explicitly termed self-determination—that is, ‘Aboriginal communities deciding the pace and nature of their future development as significant components within a diverse Australia’ (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008).

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A new set of government programs was established that supported plural forms of livelihood. Kuninjku people were able to engage productively with these new institutional arrangements and establish what I have termed a hybrid or plural form of livelihood that matched their priorities to remain interconnected to their immediate social community, connected to their ancestral lands and engaged ceremonially with that land in accordance with tradition. All this required a highly flexible mode of living and of making a living—a hybrid economy, which was created and maintained with the crucial assistance of a regional resource agency, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC).

Two transformative policy shifts facilitated the Kuninjku reconnection to their community lands in the early 1970s. First, belated recognition of Kuninjku as Australian citizens saw them empowered to find their own solution. Their emerging rights included access to welfare paid to individuals, initially as family allowances and pensions. Deploying their enduring kin-based relations of production allowed the pooling of funds to underwrite their livelihoods as hunters, fishers and harvesters with store-purchased, everyday commodities and important Western equipment, such as vehicles and guns. Second, the progressive Whitlam Government committed to land rights law that legally recognised land ownership by Aboriginal people living on gazetted reserves like Arnhem Land. Recognising an associated escalation in movement back onto country, the government supported the establishment and funding of specially incorporated outstation resource agencies. It also incrementally introduced full entitlement to welfare to 'unemployed' outstation residents, which, because people were rarely work- or income-tested, meant payments effectively operated as a basic income scheme. Added to this was a rapid expansion, from the late 1980s, of funded participation in the community-controlled Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme. This was a crucially important institution because it allowed earning of extra cash without income testing and accommodated highly flexible living arrangements.

The 30-year period from about 1975–2005 saw a remarkable transformation in the Kuninjku economy and ways of living. Engaging with the new institutions born of an increased tolerance of difference, Kuninjku crafted an unusual hybrid form of economy based on a relatively high harvesting of wildlife for sustenance, successful engagement with market capitalism through the production and sale of art, and creative use of state income support. This form of economy was based on a virtuous

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cycle: unconditional income support at outstations underwrote hunting activity, arts production generated discretionary income that could be invested in vehicles that enhanced access to game on country, which, in turn, generated considerable bush tucker that offset the need for store-purchased foods and also provided greater access to the natural products needed for arts production.

This economic system had many elements that suited Kuninjku. It was flexible and so could accommodate their extraordinarily high levels of residential mobility, often associated with intensified ceremonial participation and sociality, and it was anarchic, so eliminated relations of domination in the workplace, which are anathema to Kuninjku values. It was an economy predicated on an arguably serendipitous understanding of what Westerners might define as the Ricardian (after David Ricardo) principle of comparative advantage and a growing division of labour by specialisation (rather than just by gender). The customary skills that Kuninjku had managed to retain during their time in Maningrida in the 1960s could now be deployed to self-provision and to produce commodities in the form of fine art for export. Over time, new specialisations emerged, for example, in the production of textile art, land and resource management and the performance of ritual services in the Aboriginal domain.

By 2005, the Kuninjku, who had been the most marginalised and impoverished 'community' in the 1960s, were the most successful regionally; Kuninjku artists were travelling internationally for exhibitions and fêted as Australian cultural ambassadors. They produced the majority by value of exports from the region in the form of art. Their enhanced regional status saw them increasingly take up residence in Maningrida, where their ownership of high-status four-wheel drive vehicles not only made their economic success highly visible, but also allowed a high degree of movement between Maningrida and outstations in the hinterland. Some Kuninjku lived and sought to make a living and get food mainly in Maningrida; others lived mainly at outstations; many lived across the two.

From the early 1970s, Kuninjku had found their own solution to what the authorities had dubbed 'the Gunwinggu problem' and to what Kuninjku had found an utterly unacceptable way of living, regimented by white authority (Altman, 2016). However, this form of apparent economic justice was not the product of Kuninjku agency or serendipity alone. It was also highly dependent on funded programs that supported Kuninjku



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desires to live differently. Of crucial importance was BAC, established in 1979 as an outstation resource agency, and Maningrida Arts and Culture (MAC), established in 1973 to assist with the marketing of art, which became a business unit within the far larger BAC.

I cannot describe here in any detail the evolution and life cycles of these two organisations that played an instrumental role in the emergence of Kuninjku success. I just note that BAC was incorporated as a special institution of the self-determination era to provide services and support to its members, including those Kuninjku who were mainly outstation residents in its early years. BAC grew rapidly from humble beginnings to become a significant regional organisation. It transformed into a major employer from 1989, when it became host of the nation's largest CDEP scheme of some 600 participants. It used access to this multimillion dollar program to develop into a profitable regional development agency. Politically, BAC developed a reputation as a progressive organisation that advocated for land rights, appropriate forms of economic development, outstations support and regional self-determination for its members and their families. From the Kuninjku perspective, and very concretely, BAC assisted with income support and services out bush, the latter including delivery of Western food supplies; access to guns and gun licences; access to vehicles (via assistance to saved money in 'truck' accounts) and assistance with their purchase; and assistance with vehicle registration, repair and servicing.

MAC, as a business arm of BAC, became very effective in marketing art, and especially Kuninjku art. By 2004, there were about 100 Kuninjku artists (out of an estimated population of 300) selling art via MAC and responsible for nearly 60 per cent of turnover; by 2007–08, as MAC's turnover peaked, close to AUD1 million per annum was being paid to Kuninjku artists.

In terms of an overarching framework, one can analyse the postcolonial transformation of the Kuninjku way of life by deploying Fraser's (2009) three dimensions of social justice: recognition, redistribution and representation. BAC advocated for recognition of Kuninjku difference through political representation; it administered CDEP scheme income support effectively and provided other important services, such as managed savings accounts for the purchase of vehicles as member-tailored forms of redistribution.

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The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), a democratically elected institution established by the Australian Government in 1990 (and abolished in 2004), advocated strongly at the national political level, and at international forums, for recognition of the right of Indigenous people like the Kuninjku to live on their traditional lands and to live differently (ATSIC, 1995). Coincidentally, ATSIC also administered and championed the CDEP scheme, its largest program; ran the Community Housing and Infrastructure program, which provided limited financial support to outstation resource agencies for housing and infrastructure; and, under its cultural policy, assisted art centres like MAC.

For a period of over 30 years, these institutional arrangements delivered helpful support that allowed Kuninjku to actively pursue meaningful livelihood opportunities. However, this tolerance of difference came at a cost, as they missed out on some citizenship entitlements when residing at outstations or Maningrida; housing was overcrowded and rudimentary; medical services were limited; and educational opportunities were extremely narrow, delivered only in English and often totally absent at outstations. Yet, by the early twenty-first century, Kuninjku had found their own form of hybrid livelihood, increasingly living between town and country and benefiting from the political representation for this mode of living provided by BAC. Nevertheless, Kuninjku were highly dependent on both the state and their regional organisation, which left them vulnerable to dramatic policy shifts.

## Neo-Colonial Intervention for Neoliberal Assimilation

Over the past decade, the Kuninjku community has become entangled in national welfare and Indigenous policy-reform processes and a global economic downturn that clearly demonstrate this vulnerability and underline their inability to influence state power and policy unilateralism. This powerlessness has seen the rapid erosion of the transformative gains of the previous 30 years. Today, Kuninjku are caught up in a broader reconceptualisation of the 'Aboriginal problem' that has gained considerable following among the political, bureaucratic and corporate elites, and increasingly in public perception as well.

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A second wave of colonisation and new forms of state experimentation has emerged once again in the name of improvement. Underpinning this second wave of domination, which appears unaware of the disasters of the past, has been a generalised view that the nature of the transformation of remote-living Aboriginal people has been a development failure. This failure is blamed on excess dependence on welfare, permissiveness allowed from the advent of the self-determination era and subsequent associated social and community dysfunction (Pearson, 2000; Sutton, 2009).

This dominant view has justified a paternalistic and discriminatory intervention in the Northern Territory since 2007 that has quite explicitly sought to alter the norms and values of Indigenous people to accord with Western ones. A policy discourse has emerged that seeks a fundamental shift of Aboriginal world views away from a relational focus on family, community and attachment to land, to those of the imagined neoliberal subject focused on individualism and material accumulation, and on heightened engagement with the free market.

This recolonising project imposes centralisation in Maningrida, once again, in line with state-enforced engagement with standard forms of Western education, employment and enterprise, irrespective of the absence of conventional labour markets or market opportunity. Despite the developmental rhetoric and neoliberal reasoning of governments in their seeking to 'develop the north' (Australian Government, 2015), this new project to deliver 'advancement' for Aboriginal people through integration is occurring at a time of great global uncertainty about the future of late capitalism in general, and conventional forms of paid work in particular. It is also influenced by a mood of selective austerity, as evident in welfare reform arguments that hold that the (rich) Australian state cannot afford the cost of servicing small, dispersed Aboriginal communities as it must repay high national debt (largely generated by excessive middle-class welfare and tax concessions for the rich).

Consequently, in the present, we see a process of recolonisation with associated radically altered institutional arrangements. The social contract that had emerged to underwrite the Kuninjku hybrid economy has been shattered, and a new Kuninjku precarity has re-emerged, reminiscent of the 1960s.

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I choose 2004 as the starting point for this latest project of improvement inspired by neoliberal values (although I realise that this shift has earlier origins in a longstanding conservative ambivalence towards land rights and notions of Indigenous difference), as it was in 2004 that ATSIC was abolished and a new form of mainstreaming was introduced. ATSIC's suite of programs, including those beneficial to groups like the Kuninjku, were dispersed to mainstream agencies, and with them the political apparatus that had promoted difference and diversity was dismantled.

I will not recount this recent complex history of policy change and associated political disputation here in detail; this has been done elsewhere (e.g. Altman, 2014; Rowse, 2012; Sullivan, 2011). My synoptic analysis instead looks to summarise features of relevance to the Kuninjku, who have been inadvertently caught up in these dramatic policy shifts and the abolition of the institutions that underpinned their livelihood.

In her research on Indigenous people and crime, Anthony (2013) described the ruse of recognition:

The Janus-face of sentencers shows a face of leniency that basks in its humanity and morality in recognising a wronged group and its cultural peculiarities *and* a face of penalty that glares at difference with condemnation to rationalise its exclusion of a risk group. (p. 27)

Since 2004, this Janus-face has been very evident in what I term 'the ruse of tolerance' as policy has shifted to eliminate the right to be different, with disastrous consequences for groups like the Kuninjku and their own transformative project.

The new governmental approach has three elements. First, there has been a broad discursive shift away from viewing remote Indigenous communities as disadvantaged to viewing them as dysfunctional. This shift has been most clearly seen in the Northern Territory with the National Emergency Response, known as the 'Intervention', first instigated in June 2007, a project that refers to failed states, laments disorder and seeks to recolonise remote Indigenous communities and spaces to reconnect Indigenous citizens to the mainstream (Dillon & Westbury, 2007). This project was implemented unilaterally, punitively and paternalistically by the Australian Government, aided and abetted by right-wing think tanks, opportunistic bureaucrats and some influential Indigenous actors.

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Second, in line with trends in other rich Western countries, Australia has embarked on a project of welfare reform that has redefined citizenship not just in terms of rights, but also in terms of 'balancing' responsibilities, including the responsibility of individuals to use welfare in a manner that enhances productive engagement with mainstream education and the labour market (see Bielefeld, 2014, pp. 722–23). Such views have been given moral authority by the influential writings of Indigenous political actors like Noel Pearson (2000, 2009). At the same time, there has been a shift in welfare policy influenced by neoliberal thinking, which sees marginalisation as a product of individual failing rather than of politico-structural factors, including discrimination and racism (see Bourgois, 2003; Standing, 2014).

Third, there has been the promotion of a utopian myth that a market capitalist solution is possible in remote Indigenous Australia—all that is needed is the promotion in Arnhem Land of the free market ideas of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and Hernando de Soto and all economic and social problems will be solved! Wiegratz (2010) referred to this as the promotion of 'fake capitalism'. Alternatively, following Cahill (2014), one might interpret this emerging state project, in close alliance with the capitalist plutocracy, as seeking to embed neoliberalism throughout Indigenous Australia in class, ideological and institutional forms. However, this is not a neoliberalism based on the free market but, rather, one that is ideologically conflicted and dependent on state intervention to first morally restructure Indigenous subjects using behavioural carrots and sticks.

The problem with the 'new' approach is that it is based on blind faith and continues to ignore any inconvenient evidence that it might not work. Nowhere is this clearer than in Arnhem Land, where major resource extraction projects like the Ranger uranium mine and Gove bauxite mine are facing either closure—the Ranger mine in 2020—or major downgrading, as happened at Gove, after 45 years of operation, with the closure of a massive alumina processing plant. Despite the evidence that mining is not sustainable, developmental ideology encapsulating current policy rhetoric to 'develop the north' (Australian Government, 2015) persists.

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From the Kuninjku perspective, this radical shift in policy is bewildering—an imposed, imagined new solution to deep structural challenges that were being slowly and productively addressed in collaboration with BAC. Suddenly, Kuninjku, like other Indigenous peoples in remote Australia, are reclassified as undeserving poor who need to be managed with new technologies of surveillance (especially to manage individual expenditures via electronic debit cards), and their behaviour punished and rewarded as subjects of experiments deploying Western behavioural economics.

When in Maningrida, Kuninjku are vulnerable to charges of child neglect, especially with heightened surveillance by roving social workers; they are liable to lose welfare income or be fined for high levels of school absenteeism; they live in overcrowded housing that appears disorderly; and are disengaged from mainstream forms of paid employment because their preferred alternative life way, developed over the last few decades, has prepared them poorly for the few regimented jobs that might be available. What is most concerning is that with such paternalistic governmentality, the postcolonial possibilities of the previous three decades have been demolished in the name of improvement.

Structurally, this has occurred because local political and economic institutions that were of fundamental importance to the operation of the Kuninjku hybrid economy have either disappeared or been drastically weakened. In the name of creating so-called real jobs, which are neither regionally available nor desired, the CDEP scheme has been abolished and replaced by a work for the dole program that requires Kuninjku to work 25 hours a week for their welfare entitlement, week in, week out, year in, year out. The new institution, first called the Remote Jobs and Communities Program and then renamed the Community Development Programme, has proven more successful in penalising participants for non-compliance—largely a result of its demanding requirements—than in finding employment for the 950 people registered as unemployed in the region.

For Kuninjku, this new scheme, having replaced the income security provided by the CDEP scheme, means less income and comes with the constant risk of being in breach of activity requirements (like attending scheduled meetings, training or some designated activity). There is also the risk that extra earnings will see the application of the social security income taper, as more earned income results simultaneously in less welfare income. While the program is administered by BAC, there are now

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multiple external, rather than just one, community forms of accountability and much time wasting and bureaucratic engagement—meta work that interferes with productive work in the hybrid economy. Moreover, Kuninjku occupations such as hunter, fisher, artist and ceremony specialist are not recognised as legitimate forms of 'employment' or 'activity'.

The story of BAC's declining fortunes is complex, and politically fraught. From 2004, BAC opposed destructive reform of the CDEP scheme. In 2007, it vigorously opposed the Northern Territory Intervention, including a unilateral Australian Government decision to transfer responsibility for outstations to the Northern Territory Government. BAC then underwrote a High Court challenge by key Maningrida traditional owners to the compulsory leasing of their land by the Australian Government for five years. The High Court found against the plaintiffs and BAC had to wear costs (since forgiven) of AUD1 million. Up until 2009, BAC robustly managed to represent the livelihood interests of its members. However, in 2010, new senior management attempted to comply with the government's developmental agenda without proper business planning, with dire consequences. Two years later, BAC went into special administration, insolvent and AUD10 million in debt. Only in July 2014 did BAC emerge, much diminished, from special administration, with debts of AUD3.5 million, to be repaid over five years, and a 'threatening shelved' liability to government of AUD6.5 million.

Unsurprisingly, since 2010, BAC's capacity to deliver a distinctive mix of social, cultural and commercial enterprises to its members has been largely curtailed and reoriented to the commercial. One wonders whether it will ever be able to deliver again on its diverse aims to promote the interests of its members. Some might argue that this diminished role suits the agenda of recent and current federal governments.

From a Kuninjku perspective, the decline of BAC's fortunes has been disastrous, in part because BAC's capacity to service the outstations and their vehicles has all but disappeared. A rapid change in management personnel at BAC has also seen a loss of corporate capacity to locally understand the intricate workings of the hybrid economy. Since the change in the corporation's senior management, social relations between management and Kuninjku have not settled; indeed, they have become severely strained.

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MAC represents the clearest point of articulation between the regional economy and market capitalism. Its financial viability, of great relevance to Kuninjku incomes, has declined markedly in recent years. After the global financial crisis, sales of Aboriginal art nationally are estimated to have plummeted by 50 per cent (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, 2012). Combined with the negligence of the special administrators that saw no application submitted for government cultural support when most needed, artists' incomes have declined markedly; in 2014, the gross earnings of Kuninjku artists were around 20 per cent of what they were five years earlier. In this respect, it is instructive to note the differential treatment in Australia of those vulnerable to global economic shocks; there have been no industry rescue packages for struggling Kuninjku artists, unlike for many other Australians experiencing technological unemployment. Today, MAC is slowly recovering but it will be some time before it can reach its peak turnover, in 2008–09, of over AUD2.6 million.

Let me summarise this livelihood disaster, which can be largely attributed to institutional changes driven by the Australian Government, as well as to risky engagement with market capitalism, using two frameworks. First, in terms of the hybrid economy (Altman, 2010), each of its three interlinked sectors—the market, the state and the customary—has shrunk; people earn less arts income from the market and, with the demise of CDEP scheme income support, Kuninjku receive less in transfer payments from the state. There is also a decline in the contributions to their diet from hunting, fishing and wild food gathering. This is partly because people have less access to vehicles to get onto country and less services support to live on country. There are other factors too, including acute difficulty in gaining access to vehicles and firearms, processes that were once facilitated by BAC. Conversely, with a heightened police presence in Maningrida in the wake of the Northern Territory Intervention, unlicensed guns and unregistered vehicles are being confiscated at unprecedented rates; people are losing their very means of hunting and arts production, and their ability to inhabit their traditional country.

Second, in terms of Fraser's (2009) social justice framework, an earlier 'recognition' or tolerance of difference has been replaced by intolerance, even at times by some BAC staff who lack local cultural understandings or corporate history, and increasingly prioritise the financial performance of the organisation. The prospects for the recognition of difference have declined as national and regional representative organisations (i.e. ATSIC and BAC) have been abolished or fundamentally altered and depoliticised.



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The bottom line is that, in 2017, after a decade of progressively intensified state intervention to improve livelihoods, the Kuninjku are living more precariously than at any time since I started working with them in 1979, and probably since they moved out of Maningrida in the early 1970s. The structural and economic violence (Farmer, 2005; Peck, 2010) experienced at that time—a result of the exercise of colonial authority and stigma from other Aboriginal groups in Maningrida—is now not only being repeated, but also supplemented by forms of 'bureaucratic torture' (Lavie, 2014) unimagined in the past. All this is occurring in the name of improvement based on neoliberal reason and the elusive promise of forms of conventional development that the state and market capitalism, despite all the rhetoric, are incapable of delivering.

## Kuninjku Push Back

Kuninjku responses to these circumstances have been mixed: some Kuninjku have retreated from engagement with capitalism, others are using enhanced ceremonial participation as a symbol of defiance and as a means to maintain a semblance of their regional status, itself based on difference. A handful have found work: two as rangers, a few as screen printers, one in night patrol, one at the school. It is a turbulent time for Kuninjku and the institutions that championed their difference; the Australian state and its agents are determined to recalibrate Kuninjku, their norms and values, and their institutions, away from the support of difference towards the promotion of sameness.

Kuninjku see all this very clearly; they lament the fact that today they are more impoverished than in the past, as I noted at the start, barely having enough welfare to purchase expensive store-sourced food, increasingly stuck in town and unsupported when at outstations in the bush. To some extent, their analysis, which I will report briefly, is similar to mine and rendered in terms of the social sciences binary of structure and agency. However, Kuninjku give more self-critical attention to their role in creating this situation over external structuring forces than I might, although there are some variations in interpretations about causes among my interlocutors.

On structure, Kuninjku see that both government policy and BAC have changed. As Kuninjku have few Western negotiating skills, especially an absence of English literacy beyond the most basic level, they had become

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heavily dependent on BAC to mediate on their behalf with the Australian state. Consequently, the distinction between government and BAC and the effect of changes of government policy on BAC become entangled and, at times, a little confused. For example, Ivan said:

[In 1979] BAC came and all that time it was good with BAC. We worked with BAC, but then the government rules changed and BAC started to change too. Then the government came and they made BAC do what the government wanted and then they didn't want to work with us anymore. This was after Ian Munro time [after 2009]. BAC used to make roads for us and so on, but the government policies changed. BAC's policies changed and they didn't want to support us anymore. Why the government rules changed ... and why the government came and made Bawinanga do what the government wanted and then they didn't want to work with us anymore. They got tired of us Bininj. They weren't interested in us anymore?

There has been a process of a loss of enthusiasm from BAC. In the beginning the Balanda were enthusiastic about helping people out bush. Then BAC got very big, more Balanda, and their thinking changed and they lost interest in Bininj. Today there are different Balanda and they are not interested in us and delivering the services to us in the bush. They are interested in their own affairs and they have their own ideas. BAC are supposed to follow our instructions and wishes, but they follow their own agenda. They don't take an interest in what we are saying.

John put things more succinctly: 'I have still got the same law, but the government keeps changing their rules'.

Kuninjku people are feeling acutely what Povinelli (2011) has termed 'the economies of abandonment'. They are deeply concerned about the 'new generation' stuck in Maningrida, developing a taste for Western foods from the store. As Hamish said: 'Today people of this generation are not really standing properly on the ground. They don't tread upon the ground with the same confidence'. Likewise, Samuel said:

[BAC] have changed. They are only concerned about Maningrida. I don't know if they will ever do a tucker run again. Some of us are used to eating bush tucker. We are the last generation to eat bush tucker but the children today they are not used to eating bush food.

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Samuel's sister, Kay, put it this way: 'The young people are tired. The Balanda food has spoilt them'. John added: 'If you stay here in Maningrida you don't learn anything about your country and how to gather food from it. You only think about chicken and Balanda food'.

What worries people most is the constant pressure for the new generation to move to Maningrida, transform into Balandas and forego Kuninjku ways. As John said:

The government wants us to stay here in Maningrida. They want us to come and live in houses here. They make the houses here to attract us ... When people are themselves free to be Bininj they are happy, happy! When they come to Maningrida to live they become like Balanda. 'Hey you blackfella, you have got everything you need in Maningrida, come in here and live here.' But we have got our own country, our outstations too. So I am still pulled between the two.

Kuninjku are pushing back against this latest state assault in two interlinked ways: by maintaining a moral code of sharing with family and by escalating their participation in a transforming ceremonial life. These are big topics that I can only address briefly here.

Sharing remains a fundamental feature of life for Kuninjku people. They continue to participate in such practices, mainly with their kin, and they value sharing behaviour highly. As one of my interlocutors, Hamish, put it: 'We must never refuse any request from family. We must give to them every time'. Sharing game and cash unsolicited, and asking for game properly, especially in ceremonial contexts, are forms of behaviour that are regarded as demonstrating the very best of Kuninjku relational norms and values.

However, even here there is concern about transformational changes associated with living in town. John drew out the differences:

Balanda values are different in relation to sharing. The old people who lived out bush ate bush tucker, yams and all kinds of tubers and plant foods ... [he names them] and you can be an Aboriginal person there sharing it freely. But sometimes Bininj change their thinking and move towards Balanda law or Balanda thinking. They become different; some are living out bush and some are living in Maningrida worried about food. You change when you come to live in Maningrida.

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Hamish elaborated:

In the old days it was very hard to deny a request for food. They had to put the food they hunted out in the open. You couldn't hide your resources. Now you can hide food and money and get away with not sharing. We like people to initiate the sharing but if they don't then we go and ask. We feel they should offer. Some people don't offer. Everyone is different. Some people are more generous than others.

It is in this context that ceremony has taken on added value because it is usually performed away from Maningrida and people can still gain some access to transport from BAC to go to outstations for ceremonial purposes, where Bininj values and hunting for bush tucker dominate. Ceremony in turn has changed and diversified. There are still the old rituals, like Kunabibi, used to discipline initiates through seclusion in bush camps over many months. However, there are also new ceremonies like Yiwarrudj, or Christian fellowship, and funerals that increasingly mix Kuninjku song cycles with English gospel; these ceremonies, which are replacing earlier mortuary ones, can last for weeks on end.

All of these ceremonies constitute work for Kuninjku, as articulated in their language. Such work, though, is inseparable from sociality. It includes work at ceremonies performing song and dance, paid with both Western food and bush tucker; organising and managing ceremonies; garnering resources by soliciting anywhere and from anyone, but especially kin, for assistance to sustain people at ceremonies; and at ceremony-linked hunting, as opportunities arise and are intensified, often using vehicles provided for ceremonial transportation. Conversely, ceremony provides an opportunity to escape Maningrida and Balanda surveillance and supervision, provided one can persuade employers or government officials at Centrelink that this is all legitimate 'cultural practice' in accordance with bureaucratic guidelines.

Ceremonies also have a strong integrative function. They link Kuninjku and other regional groups together to celebrate tradition and to mourn the dead and bury them with proper decorum on their country. Moreover, ceremony allows Kuninjku to assert their difference and their identity, and to make strong public statements about their exclusive spatial domains; increasingly, signs are posted on access roads warning that ceremony is in progress and that any trespassing, even by state authorities like the police, will not be tolerated.

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Yiwarrudj, or Christian fellowship, is especially important in bringing the young together with the old, dancing in front of ghetto-blasters for hours on end. These constitute important ceremonies of hope. Fundamentalism is creeping in, too, as Glenn told us: 'Jesus is coming back and will take the Christians up to the sky and the non-believers will be left behind'. Many Kuninjku traditionalists worry about the emerging tensions between new Christian fellowship and their authentic ceremonies. However, beyond praying to Jesus, what hope is there for the future, for the 'good life' that all my interlocutors increasingly see as something in the past?

## Reviving Postcolonial Possibilities

'How can things be made better?' I ask. John and Kay answer:

It won't get better, can't fix it. Might be change is needed. Country is there, the country is good, but the people are the problem. I don't know what is wrong with them. People want to move around, I'm telling you the right way. Sometimes people want to live here [Maningrida] sometimes they want to go back. Maybe things will get better and change or maybe not. I don't think so.

I would like to finish this chapter on a hopeful note but, like my interlocutors John and Kay, I find it difficult at this moment to be optimistic. It is not that long ago that when I visited we had shared a life way that allowed Kuninjku to move productively, with a high degree of fluidity and assuredness, between capitalist and non-capitalist economic forms. Indeed, through their active agency, Kuninjku people had creatively refigured a form of moral economy that, while heavily transformed, was still dominated by relationships of reciprocity within the Kuninjku community (and beyond) and displayed a high degree of egalitarianism and a sharing ethic characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies (Sahlins, 1972). Using dichotomies that are familiar to anthropologists, one might depict the Kuninjku as having creatively combined gift and commodity economies (Gregory, 1982), maintaining forms of gift exchange with family to push back against white domination while engaging with forms of commodity and labour exchange. When able to do this, life was far better for Kuninjku—people were not hungry and they could access the bush foods they value.

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This fluid form of economy was based on a combination of distinct Kuninjku cultural logic alongside limited market capitalist opportunity. However, in recent years it has clashed with a dominant neoliberal logic that is looking to transform Kuninjku norms and values and preferences to those of mainstream Australians. This state project looks to effectively eliminate people like the Kuninjku by deploying subtle forms of what Lavie (2014) has termed bureaucratic torture and what Peck (2010) has referred to as economic violence. The high dependence of Kuninjku people on basic state support to activate the customary and market sectors of the hybrid economy make them extremely vulnerable to the project to impose a new form of moral economy on them. This raises important questions about the morality of a state apparatus that is willing to crush any resistance to this project of improvement with harsh financial penalties. Market capitalism imposes a moral logic that undermines any semblance of Kuninjku economic autonomy: when demand for art declines Kuninjku suffer, and when incomes decline there is no commensurate decline in the price of basic commodities. Indeed, it seems that as income decreases, people purchase cheaper foods that are less nutritious and do them physical harm.

This pessimistic assessment is not made lightly; it is based on observation of the extraordinary bureaucratic hurdles that Kuninjku need to negotiate on an almost daily basis to bridge cultural and linguistic divides in the absence of effective mediation. I have watched as Kuninjku have gone to the police to try and negotiate the complex processes of getting a gun licence or renewing a driving licence; I have seen vehicles impounded in the remote bush by police for being unregistered and their drivers, responding to requests from kin to go shopping or hunting, fined exorbitant amounts or face imprisonment.

Kuninjku people enjoy land rights and resource rights in remote Arnhem Land but these do not readily translate into the economic right to make a reasonable living on their country. In particular, having failed to reform land rights law to individualise communal lands, the Australian Government is now looking to individualise what is often communal labour through a new work for the dole regime under which Kuninjku people regularly lose access to welfare because they fail to meet some official deadline, often unaware of its existence or of other requirements, which change regularly.

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In an uneven contest of values, the state champions individualism and ways of living calibrated to the standards of the Australian mainstream only, while Kuninjku prioritise relational ideals and ways of being. Kuninjku refuse to acquiesce meekly to the domination of the powerful irrespective of the suffering inflicted in the process. From their perspective, the state is losing legitimacy as it fails to deliver any improvement. Under such circumstances, the economic right of Kuninjku people to a livelihood encompassing a diversity of values is surely worth considering, especially at a time when there is global uncertainty about the future prospects of late capitalism.

The recent policy shift, which I have called neo-colonial, and which constitutes a second wave of colonisation 60 years after the first, is exposing Kuninjku people to welfare reform based on a fictitious notion of free market opportunity in remote Arnhem Land. It is unjust. This can be demonstrated very clearly with the three tests that Standing (2014, pp. 123–24) proposed for assessing whether reforms are socially just. The 'security difference principle' requires a reform to improve the security of the most insecure in society; the 'paternalism test principle' requires that any new controls not be imposed on some groups that are not imposed on others; and the 'dignified work principle' requires all types of productive work to be recognised and respected, not just labour in subordinated make-work activity. Each of these principles is broken in the Kuninjku case: people's income is highly insecure and declining; Kuninjku are subjected to paternalistic controls over welfare and expenditure that other Australians rarely experience; and their forms of work in the customary realm are neither recognised nor respected, even when they contribute to Kuninjku wellbeing.

At the international level, Australia has conjoined the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which specifically calls for the recognition and respect of Indigenous rights of self-determination, yet pluralism in Australia is presently at a dead end. How to improve the prospects of the Kuninjku, a very insecure group in Australian society, so that they might be positioned to resist the tyranny of a new social engineering experiment doing them economic harm is a pressing question.

Fraser (2009) suggests that intractable issues of social justice will increasingly need to defer to a higher supranational power or 'inter-mestic' politics. Ultimately, judicial activism at the international, rather than domestic, level might provide the only means to ensure difference

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recognition for groups like the Kuninjku. How the Kuninjku might garner the political means to appeal to domestic and international publics is, at present, an almost insurmountable challenge. Perhaps the starting point is a politics of embarrassment. How can postcolonial possibilities enjoyed just a decade ago be revived to put an end to the economic violence currently being wrought? How is it that in rich Australia, first peoples like the Kuninjku, with property rights in vast tracts of land and natural resources, struggle to enjoy the fundamental human right to have enough food to eat?

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C H A P T E R 9

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Basic Income for Remote Indigenous  
Australians: Prospects for a  
Livelihoods Approach in  
Neoliberal Times

*Jon Altman*

INTRODUCTION

In early 2015, the prime minister of Australia delivered the seventh annual Closing the Gap Prime Minister's report (Australian Government, 2015). In it he reported that the government's goal to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018 was not on track, a euphemism for failing, and that there was a decline in employment outcomes since the target was set in 2008. The report notes:

It is clear that since 2008, no progress has been made against the target to halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade (by 2018). The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15–64 years who are employed fell from 53.8 per cent in 2008 to 47.5 per cent in 2012–13. In addition to the fall in Indigenous employment, the proportion of non-Indigenous Australians who are employed rose from 75.0 per cent to 75.6 per cent. Consequently, between 2008 and 2012–13 there has been an increase of 6.9 percentage points in the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working age people (up from 21.2 to 28.1 percentage points). (Australian Government, 2015, p. 18)

The report highlights variation in employment outcomes by remoteness declining from an employment/population ratio of nearly 50 percent in major cities to just 30 percent in very remote regions.

This situation reflects an ongoing failure in the Australian government's project of socioeconomic convergence as measured by social statistics, but it is not new. Comparative information from the five-yearly census, going back to 1971, indicate that the Indigenous unemployment rate has always been high and that the ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous employment outcomes, however measured, have remained obstinately divergent (Altman, 2014). A recent review of employment and training programs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, p. 180) highlights a gradient in private sector employment rates for Indigenous people from 41 percent in major cities to 19 percent in very remote Australia. Not surprisingly, this means that transfer payments are also very high for those in remote and very remote Australia<sup>1</sup> representing the main source of personal income for well over 50 percent of adults (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, p. 127).

In this chapter, I focus on remote and very remote Australia combined and referred to as "remote" as distinct from non-remote Australia. I do this in part because standard employment outcomes in remote Australia are worse than anywhere else, the Indigenous labor surplus "problem" is acute, and policy failure has been enduring. But the policy vision for remote Indigenous Australia has constantly aimed to replicate the market capitalist model dominant in non-remote Australia despite fundamental cultural, structural, and climatic differences. The inability to consider alternative approaches as conventional ones fail has represented an escalating bipartisan myopia on the part of successive Australian governments.

I say "escalating" intentionally because this has not always been the case. In the past there has been an alternative, the Community Development Employment Programs scheme (henceforth CDEP) that was piloted and then expanded and supported for 30 years before being judged a failure and dismantled. CDEP was established in 1977 and combined the provision of basic income with support for community and commercial enterprises and associated employment creation; this was coincidentally the year that I began researching Indigenous economic development as a junior academic. CDEP was based on a realization that orthodox welfare and employment creation institutions were unsuitable for the exceptional economic and cultural circumstances of remote living Aboriginal people, and that an institution that recognized this difference was needed.

I begin this chapter with some historical contextualizing, a brief backstory of the colonization and decolonization of remote Australia and the livelihood challenges that people faced. Even in 1977 I could see the potential for CDEP as a form of universal basic income, especially in the most remote and challenging situations, at outstations and homelands,<sup>2</sup> where there was no formal labor market. From 1978, I changed my disciplinary focus to anthropology and undertook extended field research at one of these remote outstations, a place called Mumeka in western Arnhem Land, living with a small group of Kuninjku-speaking people. From 1985, I was provided with a rare opportunity as a postdoctoral researcher to influence CDEP policy development, and in 1987, to advocate for a basic income scheme for these smallest and most remote of communities. While this proposal for a Guaranteed Minimum Income for Outstations (GMIO) was never seriously considered, CDEP was creatively reconfigured by some community-based organizations to effectively operate in this way. I demonstrate the benefits of such adaptive management with a case study of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation's (BAC) administration of CDEP and the virtuous livelihoods cycle, what I have termed "economic hybridity," that this created for Kuninjku people for nearly 20 years.

CDEP started as a universal program for members of those communities who participated voluntarily; it had attractive design features with no formal income or work testing, and it grew rapidly in popularity—by 2004 there were over 35,000 Indigenous people participating, 70 percent living in remote Australia. But over time, design problems in the scheme were harbingers of its demise. In my view, state parsimony, federal/state strategic fiscal behavior, and an inability to envision CDEP as productive basic income were all major reasons for its demise. So was a broad shift in national policy thinking about welfare from Keynesian social democracy to the current mix of neoliberalism and austerity—and an emerging narrative about the undeserving (black and white) poor who merely need to grasp opportunity, even when living in places with no labor markets.

From 2004, with a shift in Indigenous policy from a form of self-determination back to a new form of assimilation, CDEP has been systematically dismantled. It is to be replaced by a remote Work-for-the-Dole scheme that will impoverish remote living Indigenous people more deeply. I attempt to decipher the intent of this conflicted policy unilateralism at a time when the Australian government espouses goals to Close the Gap in employment disadvantage between Indigenous and other Australians. I address the following question:



Why has CDEP been demonized and demolished in Australia just at the very time when basic income schemes are garnering greater support globally (Ackerman, & Alstott, 2006; Standing, 2014). I end by putting forward a progressive agenda for the establishment of a basic income scheme for remote Australia, a scheme that can provide a modicum of economic security, autonomy, and dignity for marginalized communities.

## A SYNOPTIC HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS UNEMPLOYMENT

When looking to explain Indigenous disadvantage, it is hard to know how far back to go in Australia's colonial history. One can go back to 1788, as Patrick Wolfe (2006) does, to convincingly argue that invasion is not some historical moment or act that can be dated back to first contact. Instead settler colonialism can be understood as an ongoing process that has the ultimate goal of eliminating native societies and creating new Indigenous subjectivities that will result in the integration of Indigenous peoples into mainstream settler society.

If we go back just 50 years to the time of Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (1964), it was even predicted then that Aboriginal societies would indeed disappear through assimilation. Back then, Aboriginal people had just been granted the franchise in federal elections in 1962, but in some jurisdictions they were still wards of the state, ineligible for award wages or social security benefits. In remote Australia most were corralled in government settlements and missions, regarded as wards of the state and deemed subjects of the official Australian project of enforced assimilation. In the 1960s, under the assimilation policy, those Indigenous people living remotely were required to engage in a range of community enterprises and training programs. As a general rule, people were paid in kind and only received a small amount of cash as pocket money (see Kidd, 2006). Then from 1968 there was a change, and those living at settlements and missions were paid below-award wages called "training allowances." The assumption of policy then was that Indigenous people would either be assisted to establish viable enterprise in difficult circumstances, or else that they would adopt individualistic Western norms and skills and migrate for employment elsewhere.

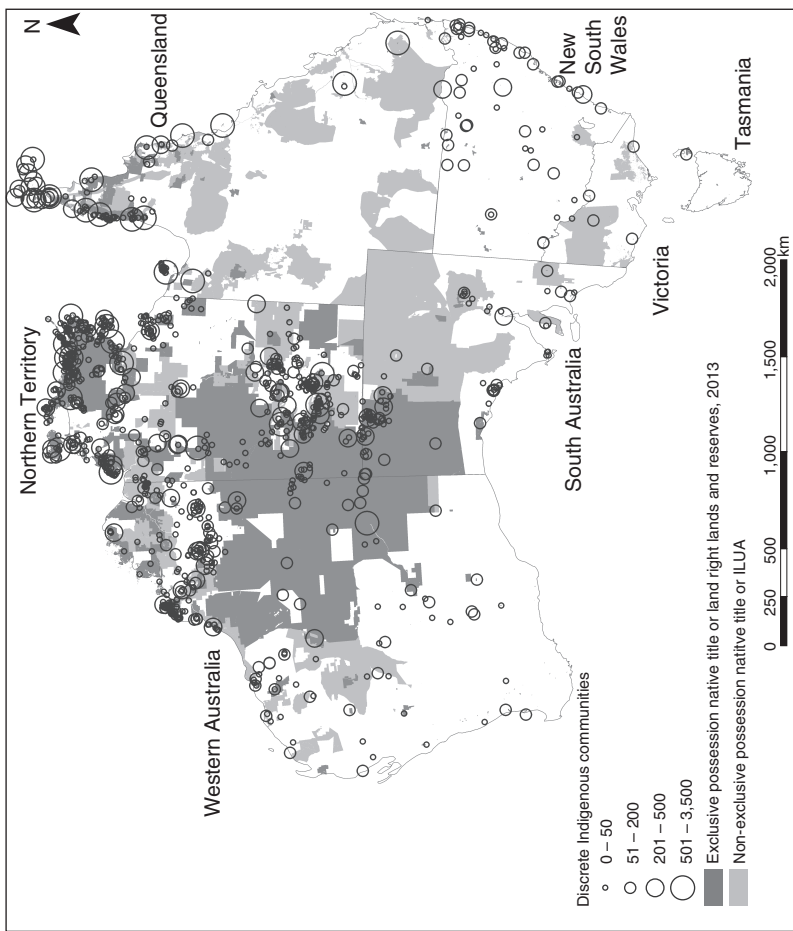
By the early 1970s, it was clear that this approach was failing: remote places were neither magically developing into nodes of state- or mission-supported capitalism, nor were local people migrating for jobs. At the same time, the status quo of below-award wages was not

just morally challenged but also legally indefensible after the pastoral award decision by the Industrial Relations Commission in 1966. In 1974, award wages were introduced for those living at what were increasingly referred to as townships or discrete Indigenous communities, although almost all had non-indigenous management and professional and technical staff. Indeed, as Indigenous people were belatedly recognized as full Australian citizens from the early 1970s, they became entitled both to award wages and to welfare benefits, even though public funding was never sufficient to employ everyone; Keynesian-style social security institutions designed to provide support during short periods of unemployment in southern Australia were poorly tailored to circumstances where there were few jobs.

Rapid change in policy and practice followed the election of the progressive Whitlam government when self-determination became the dominant term of policy. Aboriginal people suddenly had post-colonial choice that expanded first with land rights and then after 1992 with native title. People could now choose to live even more remotely than at townships on their ancestral lands at outstations and homelands.<sup>3</sup>

There were important differences between townships and homelands. Homelands were smaller and more remote than townships; the former generally numbered less than 50 people, the latter rarely more than 1000. At homelands people had greater access to alternate forms of livelihood from production for use; but until the 1980s, they were not eligible for unemployment benefits as these places lacked labor markets, and so it was impossible to pass the work test. At the same time, to get a modicum of capital support from the government to re-establish homelands people had to demonstrate a commitment to live at these places. At townships, on the other hand, there were many more able-bodied people than award positions and so unemployment was endemic.

Back in 1977, with my colleague John Nieuwenhuysen (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen, 1979), I looked at these two situations, and it was clear that they faced extraordinary challenges. The challenge in townships was to deliver capitalist development where the state and missionaries had failed and where there was chronic state underinvestment. The challenge at homelands was that precolonial production regimes generated inadequate mixed livelihoods for late modernity, despite opportunity for some non-standard productive activity in cultural industries and various degrees of self-provisioning from hunting, fishing, and collecting for domestic use. There was still a need, however, for some income subvention to purchase market commodities.



**Figure 9.1** Discrete Indigenous communities and land held under Indigenous title  
*Source:* Altman and Markham (2015).

The extent of the challenge has hardly changed in the last 40 years, except now the conceptual distinction between larger discrete communities and smaller outstations is difficult to make as there is more and more movement between them—the commitment needed to live at homelands permanently has eroded intergenerationally.

Demographic statistics about remote-living Indigenous peoples have always been difficult to source and remain so in the present. The map (Figure 9.1) looks to provide the latest information showing land held under Indigenous title in 2014, almost all in very remote Australia, and the 1200 “discrete” Indigenous communities dotted around these lands from the last Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey of 2006. These data indicate that nearly one-third of Australia is held under some form of Indigenous title, and that of discrete communities, nearly 1000 had less than 100 people and 200 had more than 100, with an estimated usual Indigenous population of less than 100,000 people on Indigenous-titled lands. In the 2011 Census it was estimated that 143,000 Indigenous people lived in remote and very remote Australia that covers 86 percent of Australia, although not all lived in discrete communities; they represented 21.4 percent of the total estimated Indigenous population of 670,000 (Altman & Markham, 2015; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

## THE INVENTION OF CDEP

Noel Pearson (2000) in *Our Right to Take Responsibility* is credited in popular and policy discourse as being the first to highlight the debilitating effects of welfare dependency, award wages, and the right to drink alcohol at remote Aboriginal communities, especially in Cape York. However, nearly 30 years earlier, the Department of Social Security articulated similar concerns about the impact of legislated equality in the face of chronic jobs shortages in remote Indigenous communities and the prospects of entrenched idleness, lack of motivation, and social dysfunction (see Sanders, 1988; Altman, Gray, & Levitus, 2005, p. 26). An innovative alternative was proposed at that time that can be sheeted home intellectually to an exceptional policy innovator, the late Dr H. C. Coombs as an element of “the Coombs experiment” (Rowse, 2012; Sanders, 2012). In collaboration with progressive bureaucrats and with the concurrence of remote Aboriginal leaders, mainly in desert Australia, Coombs proposed CDEP. Under this scheme communities would receive a grant equivalent to their welfare entitlements and the estimated costs of its administration and

some funds to underwrite establishment of community commercial and social enterprises.

Key early and enduring features of CDEP were that it was an Indigenous-specific program originally administered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, with its cost mainly offset by notional links to the unemployment benefit entitlements of participants. Important features of the CDEP scheme were that it was voluntary, at the collective not individual level, and it was community-controlled. In essence an elected community council was allocated the lump sum of the entitlements of all individuals to unemployment benefits, plus some administrative and capital resourcing on a quarterly basis. It was expected that the elected council would allocate these pooled funds to individuals based on their active participation in part-time work paid at award wages. In design, if not in practice, it was assumed that participants had to work to be paid, so the scheme was essentially designed as a form of workfare. CDEP was often referred to as an Indigenous work-for-the-dole scheme, except it was only notionally “the dole” and the bosses were not state officials but community leaders with varying degrees of authority.

In 1977, John Nieuwenhuysen and I were highly supportive of this new scheme and developed a totally abstract indifference curve analysis and hypothetical labor offer curves to demonstrate its potential utility benefits for those who do not wish to work full time (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen, 1979, pp. 201–204). Nieuwenhuysen and I were supportive of CDEP as a mechanism to introduce flexible work arrangements. The problems with the scheme from the outset were twofold. First, for those who wanted to work a standard week, CDEP funding was inadequate. And for those who did not want to work at all, or to work too few hours to sustain themselves and their families, there were issues of discriminatory denial of access to welfare.

In 1985, the Hawke government commissioned the first major national review in Australia of Aboriginal employment and training programs. The review chaired by the late Mick Miller (1985) articulated strong support for CDEP; there were recommendations to expand the scheme to outstations. These recommendations were echoed in a subsequent parliamentary inquiry into the homelands movement that deliberated between 1985 and 1987 and produced an influential report *Return to Country: The Homelands Movement in Australia* (Blanchard, 1987). The government responded to the Miller Review with the multi-year Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) that saw enhanced investment in labor market programs, but also provided support for what were referred to as “traditional”

activities like “artefact production, the cultural teaching of the young and other traditional economic and cultural activities” (Australian Government, 1987, p. 8). Mainly because of high demand for CDEP, the AEDP also increased its flexibility so that it was now possible to have both access to welfare and CDEP participation in remote communities. With the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1990 there was growing pressure for the scheme to expand geographically, which it did—even to suburbs like Redfern in central Sydney.

There is limited reliable statistical information about CDEP; the five-yearly census designers have struggled to differentiate CDEP from other forms of labor market participation except in the remotest places where census information is collected by interview. There are numerous case studies about the successes and challenges faced by the scheme, many collected in an edited volume *The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the CDEP Scheme* (Morphy & Sanders, 2001). In remote Australia, from the 1990s, CDEP rapidly became an omnibus development program. The scheme proved extremely popular. By 2004, when at its peak, it was estimated that over 35,000 Indigenous people participated in the scheme administered by 265 Indigenous organizations.

The best information on CDEP comes from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1994, 2002, and 2008. Statistics from the 2002 survey, when the scheme was at its peak, show that CDEP was effective in meeting its multiple objectives. Altman, Gray, and Levitus (2005) show that, on average, people on CDEP earned AUD\$100 a week more than those on welfare, and they were far less likely to be arrested. In very remote Australia, 90 percent of those on CDEP worked more than the minimum 15 hours a week and one in five worked over 35 hours. At the same time, CDEP participants in remote regions were able to participate in more hunting and fishing, in more ceremonial activities, and in more recreational or cultural group activities than both the employed and the unemployed. CDEP participants were also far more likely to speak an Indigenous language, although it is unclear why this was the case.

## GUARANTEED MINIMUM INCOME FOR OUTSTATIONS

The Blanchard Report (1987) *Return to Country* is the only official review to date that has thoroughly examined the outstations situation and made concrete recommendations for government policy. This is

extraordinary given the considerable debate in Australia at present about the economic viability of remote communities, especially in remote Western Australia, and their affordability. And yet this is an issue that is greatly under-researched and has not been the focus of serious policy attention for 30 years.

The Blanchard Report examined all available evidence and was strongly supportive of the Aboriginal homelands movement. Despite lacking access to most services, people at outstations were regarded as more economically engaged and less dependent than at major communities, a conclusion not dissimilar to that made in research by economist Fred Fisk (1985) and in my own work (Altman, 1987). Blanchard made strong recommendations for the expansion of CDEP to all homelands that wished to participate in the scheme; the Committee emphasized that the flexibility of CDEP and community decision-making about expenditure of funds should be emphasized in the administration of programs at outstations (Blanchard, 1987, p. 159).

The Blanchard Committee had been influenced in its assessment of employment and economic development prospects at homelands by the Miller Report. The key genealogical link between CDEP and the Miller Inquiry was H. C. Coombs who was a key member of the Miller Committee. I, too, had some links to these policy development processes; I had made submission and representation to the Miller Inquiry and two submissions to the Blanchard Inquiry in 2005 and 2007 and had also been a witness in its proceedings: the chapter on the economies of homeland centers relied heavily on my evidence (see Blanchard, 1987, pp. 130–162). I was also a colleague of H. C. Coombs at the Australian National University.

A decade after the establishment of CDEP, I was engaged by an organization called the Australian Council for Employment and Training (ACET) to explore options for providing guaranteed cash income to outstations. ACET was responding opportunistically to the Blanchard Report. I undertook this consultancy assisted by Luke Taylor (Altman & Taylor, 1989). In the work for ACET, I was asked to canvass options for government to provide cash to outstations, including by way of a guaranteed cash income drawing on available research in Australia and overseas and to assess whether CDEP might be adapted for such purposes (Altman & Taylor, 1989, p. iii). The major international example that we reported was the Cree Income Security Program (ISP) from Quebec, Canada, that was negotiated as a part of the James Bay Agreement in 1978. Our report recommended that a new program of GMIO be established.

Much of the rationale for a GMIO drew on a comprehensive time allocation study that I had undertaken at Mumeka outstation over 253 days in 1979–1980 as an element of my doctoral research (Altman, 1987; Altman & Taylor, 1989, pp. 67–68). The study showed that Kuninjku adults spent an average of 3.6 hours per day in productive work in what I termed then the subsistence and market exchange sectors. Analysis of standard deviations indicates that there was little variability in work effort over the year. While these daily figures appear low, when taking into account culture-specific continuous work patterns, they translate to 25 hours per week. And when culture-specific participation rates were factored in—all adults over 15 years worked—this converted to full-time work according to the norms of the wider society at that time—40 hour week, 60 percent participation. My main points were, first, that Kuninjku were already fully engaged but had inadequate cash income. and second, that formal employment would divert them from the “food sovereignty” that they were exercising on their own lands. There is little comparative time allocation work in Australia that supports or contradicts this finding, despite much popular and policy narratives about Aboriginal passivity and dysfunction.

Our report *The Economic Viability of Outstations and Homelands* (Altman & Taylor, 1989) recommended that GMIO be established as a new program without income or work testing, and that it provide income support to those who demonstrate a commitment to outstation living in recognition of both their work in the informal sector and the absence of other cash-earning options. It was also recommended that a nexus be maintained between GMIO and welfare so that the proposed scheme would be cost neutral to the Australian government; while a Capital Fund for Subsistence, what today would be termed “stakeholder grants” (Ackerman & Alstott, 2006), be established to assist to underwrite non-market activities.

The GMIO proposal looked to blend the best of Australia’s CDEP and Canada’s ISP, after assessing their positive and negative features. But our recommendations were never seriously considered, let alone implemented, mainly I suspect because bureaucratic attention was focused on the bigger national implementation of the AEDP and the expansion of CDEP.

The GMIO was a basic income proposal, but it had a major shortcoming that I now recognize with the benefit of hindsight. Our report was responding to a bureaucratic view that homelands are a special case that requires special treatment. But in reality and over time, I have come to realize that homelands and larger townships are



just places between which people increasingly move. Drawing on the ISP model, it was recommended that a residential conditionality be introduced to access GMIO, but such conditionality would have been impossible to monitor without an unacceptable level of surveillance. A workable basic income scheme needs to be unconditional.

### CDEP AS BASIC INCOME: A CASE STUDY FROM ARNHEM LAND

While my proposal for a basic income scheme made in the late 1980s failed, from the 1990s I had the opportunity to research how CDEP could be reconfigured to serve such an end.

From 1979 I have undertaken research in Arnhem Land with a group of Kuninjku-speaking people who live between a cluster of outstations and a township called Maningrida established as a government settlement in 1957. Kuninjku have a complex colonial and postcolonial history that does not need detailed exposition in this chapter; suffice to say that up until the early 1960s, many lived as hunter-gatherers before centralizing at Maningrida. A decade later, in the early 1970s, they decentralized to outstations because state attempts to transform Kuninjku to centralized and sedentarized living failed. On returning to live at outstations, Kuninjku reconstituted a form of economy that mixed revitalized production for domestic use, mainly in the form of hunting and fishing; new forms of production for market exchange, mainly of arts and crafts; and a more limited degree of dependence on state transfer payments that included access to unemployment benefits from the 1980s.

The remote living of Kuninjku people and other groups in the 10,000 square kilometers of the Maningrida hinterland has been facilitated since 1979 by a community-controlled regional resource agency called the BAC. BAC assisted outstations with housing and infrastructure support, communications and access to Maningrida, delivery of Western supplies, and welfare entitlements and arts marketing. From 1989, BAC became a CDEP organization. In the 1990s, BAC evolved into Australia's largest CDEP organization in remote Australia with over 600 participants; it also grew into a very successful development corporation mainly through the clever strategic deployment of CDEP workers as subsidized labor in commercial enterprises.

BAC strategically allocated its allocation of CDEP funding in a three-tiered system: people living at outstations were paid for 3.6 hours a day; people who worked in Maningrida were paid 4.6 hours

for a morning's work and had potential to earn extra income from extra employment; and people who were inactive in Maningrida were provided very basic income calculated at two hours work a day just to keep them going. If people were at ceremony they would get 3.6 hours a day; there was a degree of mobility between these three categories (Manners, 2001, p. 211).

In the 1990s most Kuninjku adults living at outstations moved onto CDEP. For a decade and a half, until Indigenous policy changed dramatically from 2007, Kuninjku, through their agency and with the assistance of BAC's advocacy, developed an unusual form of economy that I have termed "hybrid"—it was an economy based on articulations between the state, market, and customary sectors. CDEP operated as a basic income when Kuninjku lived at outstations. While there was a notional requirement dictated by state officials that 18 hours a week were spent on outstation "village" maintenance, in reality, CDEP was paid unconditionally. During this period, Kuninjku were able to maximize their access to cash through productive hunting mainly for meat and fish, as a replacement for store-purchased foods. They were also prolific producers of art, and as CDEP was not income tested (although it did have an income threshold that some exceeded and so exited CDEP to "self-employment"), they were able to successfully engage with global arts markets, an engagement brokered by Maningrida Arts and Culture, a business arm of BAC.

Kuninjku used CDEP entitlements (for 3.6 hours of work per day at minimum award rates of about AUD\$14/hour) strategically and in what could be described as a "virtuous cycle of economic hybridity." They saved surplus cash from CDEP and arts income to purchase vehicles that facilitated more hunting, more arts work, and the maintenance of communications between Maningrida and outstations. With the freedom that CDEP as basic income provided, some Kuninjku also chose to live and work in Maningrida as community rangers working in natural resource management or as textile designers and printers getting CDEP and earning top-up.

The period 1990 to 2009 was probably the least precarious for Kuninjku since precolonial times, although it was always at risk from changes in CDEP policy, or a downturn in the global arts market, or organizational instability at BAC. In fact, Kuninjku experienced all three. From 2007, the government began to "reform" remote CDEP as part of the Northern Territory Intervention, a purported national emergency responding to reported excessive child abuse (Hinkson, 2007). While some Kuninjku were "grandfathered" on the scheme, a new Remote Jobs and Community Development (RJCP) program

from 2013 had embedded in it the staged abolition of the scheme irrespective of performance. From 2008, with a change in senior personnel at Maningrida Arts and Culture and the Global Financial Crisis sales of Kuninjku, fine art nosedived. And finally, in 2012, BAC went into special administration as new personnel mismanaged the corporation and ran it into debt. While BAC has survived, it now carries a debt burden and its capacity to provide services to its membership, especially at outstations, is greatly reduced.

### THE DESTRUCTION OF CDEP

I use the case study from Arnhem Land to show that, while a basic income scheme may have represented a step too far for the Australian government in 1987, CDEP was sufficiently flexible to operate productively in this way. Kuninjku people were liberated by CDEP to pursue a range of productive activities in their own way beyond mainstream employment, while also enjoying the freedom to participate in their time-intensive religious practices: this was arguably liberal multiculturalism at its best.

But such evidence of regional success was not enough to forestall the abolition of the CDEP institution from July 1, 2015. This abolition occurred despite a considerable body of research that showed that CDEP was far better than welfare, and that it was popular with Aboriginal organizations and scheme participants Australia-wide.

As already noted, CDEP was problematic from establishment because of two core tensions. First, welfare rights advocates did not like its early compulsory universalism in communities that decided to participate in the scheme. And so with time CDEP guidelines were altered so that the scheme could sit alongside welfare. The initial goal of CDEP to get people to work part-time for wages changed; now people could either access CDEP as basic income as in the outstations case above; or they could access welfare and not work; or they could access CDEP and choose to only work part-time.

Second, CDEP was never meant to substitute for normal entitlements of participating communities to needs-based funding from governments, but it invariably did. This generated prolonged critique of CDEP from influential players like Indigenous academic Marcia Langton (2002) and Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute (2007) who erroneously, in my view, criticized the scheme for allowing cost shifting rather than focusing their critiques on governments that chronically underfunded service provision at remote communities.

The beginning of the end of CDEP came with the abolition of ATSIIC in 2004, paradoxically just as the commission was developing new guidelines to more clearly differentiate employment creation from community development, the latter to incorporate the operation of the scheme as basic income. As Sanders (2004) predicted, the move of CDEP to the employment portfolio signaled its death knell. This was particularly because in a robust national labor market there was a view that CDEP represented a comfort zone: participants needed to have their benefits reduced so as to be forced into “real” employment.<sup>4</sup> From 2004, the CDEP scheme was incrementally shrunk by successive governments, in urban Australia, then in regional Australia, and finally in remote.

The most coherent logic espoused for this “reform” agenda was that the intermediate position between unemployment and full-time employment that CDEP participants occupied was unacceptable, and that CDEP was so popular with participants that it constituted a barrier to exit into imagined “real” jobs that were generally unavailable in remote Australia. There was also ongoing contestation about what constituted work for community-based organizations and the Australian government especially in relation to “culture” work at ceremonies.

A powerful alliance emerged between the influential Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), a conservative think tank in Sydney, and influential Indigenous political actors Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, and the Cape York Institute think tank in Cairns they control, with both having direct links to federal politicians and senior bureaucrats in Canberra. This alliance is clearly documented in publications that cross-reference and echo each other—most notably the Cape York Institute’s (2007) report *From Hand Out to Hand Up*, Helen Hughes’ (2007) book *Lands of Shame*, and Sara Hudson’s (2008) policy monograph *CDEP: Help or Hindrance?* published by the CIS.

While elements of their critiques, like Hughes’ (2007, p. 72) claim that “In dysfunctional settlements, CDEP becomes a tool of corruption,” is populist hyperbole, other aspects of the report deploy a conventional neoclassical labor economics perspective on deep unemployment. Their arguments, to summarize briefly, are that CDEP represents a secondary labor market in remote communities that constitutes a “comfort zone” for participants. To force people into “real” jobs, the inequity between welfare and CDEP, which favors CDEP participants, needs to be broken so that people are confronted by the stark choice between mainstream employment and life on welfare. In abstract economic terms, such an argument has validity, especially

if mainstream employment opportunities abound, and policy is calibrated to deny CDEP participants the option of part-time work. But despite all the rhetoric about the “real” economy and “real” jobs, there is no evidence that forcing people onto welfare will in fact increase mainstream employment especially in situations such as outstations, where there are no jobs. This concerted advocacy for the abolition of CDEP was based on an assumption that, if faced with the prospect of welfare, people would migrate for employment, but there is again no evidence that employment increases dramatically when one migrates up the settlement hierarchy nor that people living on the land they own will move for employment.

The concerted campaign to abolish CDEP yielded results. In July 2013, the Gillard government effectively ended the scheme in remote Australia by incorporating it as an element of the Remote Jobs and Communities Program that proposed to pay the unemployed welfare benefits while they were required to undertake training for mainstream work and labor migration, or else engage in Work for the Dole activities often in meaningless make work.

In September 2013, a new conservative government sought to give Indigenous affairs a high policy profile and Prime Minister Tony Abbott anointed himself the prime minister for Indigenous Affairs. A major review of employment and training headed by mining magnate Andrew Forrest and assisted by Indigenous academic Marcia Langton was immediately commissioned (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

The Forrest Review *Creating Parity* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014) recognized that people remaining on CDEP who were being paid “wages” and defined as employed rather than unemployed<sup>5</sup> were getting a better deal than those on welfare. On three occasions it was recommended that CDEP be abolished immediately on equity grounds rather than making a case for improving the appalling prospects for those trying to subsist on welfare in deep poverty. The pivotal link between this review and earlier similar critique was Marcia Langton, who was Forrest’s key adviser. But the review did not canvass any innovative options for employment creation or livelihood improvement and was thoroughly critiqued by a number of academics (Klein, 2014).

As this chapter is being completed the policy landscape seems very conflicted and unclear. In December 2014, the Abbott government announced a set of draconian measures to reform RJCP just 18 months after its establishment in the name of an imagined utopian vision of employment parity and free market capitalism for remote Australia.

From July 1, 2015, it was proposed that the remaining sliver of CDEP be abolished. Instead it is proposed that all the unemployed will be required to work five hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year for welfare payments in a “new” remote Work for the Dole scheme. This amount of work would be higher than for those in non-remote regions where the unemployed (black or white) are only required to work up to 20 hours a week for up to six months in the year. And there was no anticipated sunset clause on these requirements, so that those on remote Work for the Dole could work year-in year-out in often pointless activities for below-award wages of less than \$AUD10 per hour (Scullion, 2014).

And then, just six months later, there is a new announcement by Minister Scullion that RJCP is to be renamed the Community Development Programme or CDP and that there is to be a softening of the tough measures that were never implemented. Instead the government is committing to allow paid leave and to allow providers to negotiate with the unemployed if they engage in meaningful community activities or take the pathway to so-called real jobs (Scullion, 2015). In an unpublished address to a Remote Jobs and Communities Programme Business Meeting in Darwin on June 3, 2015, Minister Scullion indicated a commitment to greater flexibility especially at outstations, where he conceded there are few job-seekers and difficulty in delivering meaningful, supervised activities.

And so there seems to be a sudden and unexpected possibility for the emergence of political space for renegotiating and refining what will now be called CDP (which is phonetically difficult to differentiate from CDEP) to better suit the particular circumstances of remote-living Indigenous people. Recent discussions with senior bureaucrats in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet suggest that the precise form that this new approach will take will emerge after further discussions with providers over the next 12 months.

While CDEP was not perfect, it was voluntary, productive, had legitimacy, resulted in far better outcomes than welfare, and empowered community organizations and their constituents to utilize the scheme as basic income. At the end of his account of the life and death of CDEP that focuses on bureaucratic politics, Sanders (2012, p. 388) quotes a story from Rowse (2012) writing on “the Coombs experiment.” I retell it here. Rowse recounts how at a dinner with Coombs in Darwin in 1994 there were two others critical of CDEP. Coombs acknowledged the criticism and even agreed with some. But he then asked the critics if they had better options, which they did not. I think that the politicians and bureaucrats who oversaw the

destruction of CDEP, including highly influential Indigenous political actors like Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton who have actively lobbied for its elimination, should be asked a similar question.

### BASIC INCOME FOR REMOTE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

Unlike the critical guests at Coombs's dinner I want to advocate from the perspective of action anthropology for a better alternative to CDEP—a guaranteed basic income scheme, and some form of associated stakeholder grant, to open up livelihood opportunities for poverty-stricken Indigenous people and to alter the power imbalance that arises from excess dependence on the state. This sees Indigenous people needing to cope with increasingly frequent and destabilizing policy changes unilaterally imposed by one Australian government after another. I regret that in the past I was blindsided by the apparent operations of CDEP as basic income and that I did not advocate more vigorously not just for GMIO, but for a universal and constitutionally recognized basic income scheme; Indigenous peoples' livelihood and well-being need to be protected beyond short-term political expediency.

How might such progressive change be implemented in the current political climate when all governments appear unsympathetic to forms of Indigenous alterity that include non-capitalist forms of production? How might the dominant discourse here (as elsewhere in the Western world, see Standing, 2014) be changed so that the Indigenous unemployed are not demeaned as undeserving and personally responsible for their marginal circumstances, even as it is clear that in the places where they reside there are limited opportunities in mainstream labor markets? And how might deeply entrenched politico-structural and cultural explanations for inequality be addressed, so that gaps in well-being as well as statistical gaps in social indicators can be addressed?

There are two broad approaches that might be taken by Indigenous political actors who want to pursue a radically different policy approach focusing more on actually existing everyday livelihoods rather than imagined utopian employment solutions: the first is to engage in domestic politics, the second with what Nancy Fraser (2009) terms inter-mestic politics. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive but might deploy different logics and tactics. The former uses cogent argument and empirical evidence to confront the Australian government with the potential benefits of basic income and stakeholder grants compared to its approach based on a mix of

reconstituted colonial paternalism and neoliberalism that is failing; the latter highlights social justice and human rights arguments, especially apposite in the case of colonized remote-living Aboriginal people in Australia.

The current Indigenous policy approach, the Indigenous Advancement Strategy as well as the ongoing project to close the gaps in life expectancy, health, and schooling outcomes, and employment are riddled with contradictions:

1. Australian governments are looking to half close the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but at the same time a high proportion of the 35,000 people once on CDEP, 60 percent by the government's estimates, have been moved from work to welfare in the last decade (Australian Government, 2015).
2. The Australian political and legal systems have overseen the return of vast tracts of remote Australia to their traditional owners, but without any compensatory "stakeholder grants" to restore the condition of land, which is always degraded or facing introduced environmental threats. Nor has there been adequate consideration of what development might look like on these lands that are generally of low value to global capitalism but of high value to forms of customary production. Or for that matter what development might mean to Indigenous land owners, especially in situations where their aspirations might favor a relational ontology with links to kin and family, country, and its ancestral connections being paramount values. As more land is titled (Altman & Markham, 2015) it is likely that there will be greater aspiration articulated for non-standard forms of land-linked development.
3. The current government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy has a clear focus on remote Australia and a rhetorical commitment to flexibility, and government and communities working together to create tailored solutions to local community needs and "real" outcomes, but this approach could well be at odds with the current approach to place 37,000 unemployed on welfare.
4. At the same time, the government highlights that welfare is associated with passivity and dysfunction and using the ubiquitous language of Pearson (2000) promotes the view that "real" jobs will provide the answers, even as a recent survey of its funded RJCP providers informs government that lack of jobs



- is the greatest cause of joblessness (Fowkes & Sanders, 2015, p. 7).
5. The Australian government made an election pledge to “empower” communities but instead has overseen escalating levels of direct government intervention in community affairs and the rapid decline in community representative institutions.

This set of contradictions needs to be politically leveraged to create an alternate approach to empower local communities to mold forms of hybrid economy that recognize the distinct norms and values that matter to allow accommodation between capitalist and non-capitalist forms of economy where so desired. A voluntary basic income scheme based on the historical architecture of CDEP and its key features, notional welfare offsets, community management to defer expensive state surveillance, and forms of annual stakeholder grants tailored to local prerogatives and possibilities will be cost neutral to government. Using historical statistical information at the remote regional level and case studies from communities, the evidence base already exists to make the cogent argument that such a new approach has to be better than the status quo. This is not the place to lay down a detailed manifesto for such a basic income scheme except to note with just a degree of optimism that where policy is so fractured there is possible space for creative and innovative change.

The domestic argument is a public good argument with potential positive spinoffs. Indigenous people in remote Australia who are active and empowered are likely to be healthier, happier, have a lower engagement with the criminal justice system. In addition, they are in more of a position to generate national benefits through their engagements in a diversity of productive activity, including natural and cultural resource management, the arts and cultural economies, and in self-provisioning as well as commercial enterprises: research by Dochery (2012) clearly shows that self-assessed well-being is higher when people are living on and working on their lands.

The broader argument is linked to human rights and social justice. On the former, Guy Standing (2014, pp. 5–6; see also Wright, 2006; Van Parijs, 2006) makes the argument that a full citizen has access to five types of rights—civil, political, cultural, social, and economic. Arguably despite nominal full citizenship, Indigenous people have missed out on the last two. Social rights include the right to an adequate standard of living, including housing, health care, and education, all areas where significant gaps are evident today according to census data (Altman, 2014). Economic rights include the right

to practice one's occupation, share in the economic resources of the commons, enjoy a fair share of economic growth, and access all forms of income. Indigenous Australians do not enjoy such rights now. If, as Standing and Van Parijs suggest, economic rights will be the defining achievement of the twenty-first century, basic income may provide a means to facilitate access to such rights. While a basic income is only one of 29 articles in Standing's (2014, pp. 316–338) "Precariat Charter," it is the one he addresses with most detail arguing that the precariat can only face the future with optimism if guaranteed a basic income provided by the state. Of particular pertinence in his proposal to Indigenous Australians who had a taste of CDEP as basic income, is the excess moralistic surveillance by the state and its agents, the liberation of time, and the relief of uncertainty associated with ever-changing programs and the new risks of losing access to any welfare from being breached.

In *Scales of Justice*, Nancy Fraser (2009, p. 144) uses the notion of "misframing" to refer to a type of injustice that arises when first-order questions of justice are framed in a way that excludes some key questions or issues from consideration. In remote Australia, in my view, thinking about Indigenous livelihood has been misframed because of a preoccupation with convergence and statistical equality that forecloses the claims of Indigenous people who may want something different. I advocate for one possible reframing of Indigenous economy with the concept of economic hybridity (Altman, 2014) that draws on empirical evidence to show that articulations *between* market, state, and customary sectors are most likely to deliver a viable livelihood. In particular, economic hybridity theory proposes that, especially where people have new found rights in land based on custom, it is likely that custom deeply influences livelihood. The hybrid economy model is not prescriptive, but coupled with basic income and appropriate stakeholder grants it will open up economic possibilities beyond those currently available.

Fraser (2009) also advocates that the political space for social justice requires a framework that reflects three dimensions, recognition, redistribution, and representation. She highlights that issues of social justice are not just played out within nation-states but increasingly need to defer to higher supra-national powers, or what she calls inter-mestic politics. This is certainly the case in global Indigenous politics, with Australia a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). There are numerous articles in UNDRIP (United Nations, 2008) including 20, 26, 28, and 30 that refer to the rights of Indigenous peoples to determine

their own means of subsistence and development, and to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands and resources. Article 28 also refers to the right of redress when lands and resources have been damaged. It is feasible that Indigenous Australians will use UNDRIP to advocate for their right to live off their lands and for redistribution, including from basic income, to facilitate the exercise of that right. Such advocacy might make links with the emerging global food sovereignty rights movement (Li, 2015) and the compensation that might be due when lands and resources have been degraded, a sound basis for compensatory stakeholder grants.

Reframed thinking about Indigenous livelihood will require recognition of difference; this the Australian government seems reluctant to countenance, preferring instead to develop coercive policies that look to construct a particular form of Indigenous subjectivity, the individualized, hard-working, responsible, and compliant citizen. Redistribution of resources will be needed to reflect past neglect and injustice; and representation to ensure institutional means are established to provide voice to minority Indigenous perspectives. Such attitude to fostering economic plurality should be encouraged given uncertainty about the future of late capitalism.

## CONCLUSION: SEIZE THE MOMENT

Indigenous employment policy, much of which constitutes paternalistic welfare, is in disarray. The Australian government wants to close employment gaps but has shifted people from productive work to welfare; it wants to empower remote communities and also micromanage the personal affairs of their Indigenous members; it is overseeing a process where more and more land is returned to its original owners in remote places where market capitalism is largely absent; and it is concerned about closing a series of gaps as its policies further impoverish and marginalize many in remote Australia.

James Ferguson (2009) suggests that out of this disarray an opportunity might emerge to refashion something innovative that looks to appropriate key elements of neoliberal reasoning for different ends (Ferguson, 2009, p. 174). As he argues:

But invention in the domain of governmental technique is rarely something worked out of whole cloth. More often it involves a kind of bricolage... a piecing together of something new out of scavenged parts originally intended for some other purpose. (Ferguson, 2009, p. 183)

Referring to southern Africa where he works, Ferguson (2009) argues that markets are not working for the poor because they are too poor to participate in them, and that government programs are not working because the state is inefficient. The challenges in remote Australia are different: production markets are not working because they are largely absent and government programs are not working because they are erroneously looking to replicate a form of engagement with market capitalism in remote Australia that replicates a model from non-remote Australia and that pursues ideologically constructed utopian ideals of employment parity.

Under such unstable circumstances Indigenous forms of representation in all their diversity and including social movements should “seize the moment” and advocate for basic income and stakeholder grants as an alternative to the status quo goal of employment convergence that continues to fail them. Basic income support should be provided directly to the 37,000 adults in remote Australia who are currently unemployed so that they are empowered to have choice in how they solve their own problems on a voluntary basis. At the very least, such an option should be trialed and a comparative analysis undertaken of the net benefits, negative or positive, of such a progressive approach.

Over the last decade, a series of social engineering measures especially around managing expenditures, school attendance, and work and training patterns have been trialled on remote living Aboriginal people with the behavioral goal of turning them into complicit neoliberal subjects (Altman, 2014; Bielefeld, 2014). While there is no conclusive evidence that any of these costly measures have worked, some have been extended to non-Indigenous Australians in non-remote regions mainly to demonstrate for political purposes compliance with laws barring racial discrimination. Perhaps as a fundamentally different approach, the Australian government could trial a positive and progressive basic income in remote Indigenous Australia and then expand it to the rest of the nation, if it proves a success: the first Australians could be privileged to the first trial of this new experiment.

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NOTES

1. The Australian Bureau of Statistics census geography divided the continent into five categories, major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote. The last two jurisdictions cover 86 percent of the continent.
2. Outstations and homelands are the smallest “discrete” Indigenous communities mainly in remote Australia. The two terms can be used interchangeably and merely reflect different regional preferences.
3. The two terms can be used interchangeably and merely reflect different regional preferences.
4. This view was expressed to me by the then secretary of the federal Department of Employment and Work Place Relations, Dr Peter Boxall, at a meeting in December 2004.
5. There were about 4000 CDEP participants who, on July 1, 2013, were “grandfathered” on the scheme until June 30, 2017.

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# 12

## **Of Pizza Ovens in Arnhem Land: The State Quest to Restructure Aboriginal Labour in Remotest Australia**

Jon Altman

### Preamble

In contemporary Australian policy, and especially Indigenous policy, little distinction is made between labour, work, employment and jobs. In fact, most of the focus is on formal or paid employment. Consequently, in the last decade, we have seen the emergence of employment policy with the overarching goal to ‘close’, or at least reduce, the gap in formal employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As the 10th annual Closing the Gap report recently tabled in the Australian Parliament clearly demonstrates, this goal—first articulated by Kevin Rudd in 2008 as an element of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations and then adopted by the Council of Australian Governments that year—has failed. The goal was to halve the gap at the national level in what is technically termed the ‘employment to population ratio’ between 2008 and 2018.<sup>1</sup> This goal has not only failed nationally, but also, and most spectacularly, in the 86 per cent of the Australian continent that is defined officially as remote and very remote; the latest census of 2016 indicates

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1 Commonwealth of Australia, *Closing the Gap*.

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that, in very remote Australia, only three in 10 Indigenous adults are in some form of paid employment compared to eight in 10 non-Indigenous adults. This is not a gap, it is a gulf.

In a 30-year period from the early 1970s, the unusual circumstances of remote Indigenous Australia were recognised by policymakers and, consequently, some programs were designed to accommodate the absence of formal commercial and employment opportunity. However, in the twenty-first century, as neoliberal thinking and associated valorisation of the free market became ascendant, policy discourse and practice changed. There is a growing expectation that remote-living Indigenous people will find mainstream employment and that the welfare dependency and social dysfunction attributed to such dependency will decline and disappear. This expectation accelerated rapidly after the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (the ‘Intervention’) in 2007 and governmental insistence that the norms and values of remote-living Aboriginal people should alter to embrace mainstream values of neoliberal individualism. It was never made clear how such an embrace of Western norms would generate paid employment in remote places, but the logical options are threefold: local Aboriginal people would take the jobs held by non-local, non-Aboriginal people; remote economies would grow and so generate more paid employment; jobless people would move to places where there are more jobs (see Prout Quicke and Haslam McKenzie, and Neale, in this volume).

In this chapter, I home in on the last issue of anticipated labour mobility for employment as the least likely option for the Aboriginal people with whom I have worked over the past four decades in very remote localities where there are few or no paid jobs. I know one place, an outstation in western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory called Mumeka, extremely well. I lived there in 1979 and 1980 and have visited almost every year since. Much of my work as an anthropologist has been with people who constitute a community defined, in part, by their traditional ownership of the area around Mumeka and, in part, by their shared use of Kuninjku, a dialect of a regional pan-dialectal language called Bininj Kunwok.<sup>2</sup> The only paid employment at Mumeka for a long time now has been for a teaching assistant. To get paid employment, Mumeka residents

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2 Garde, *Culture, Language and Person Reference*.

have either to migrate to the nearby township of Maningrida, where there are few available jobs, or further afield, or somehow economically develop their outstation and surrounds to generate jobs.

I begin this chapter by revisiting some observations on a brief visit to Mumeka in July 2012 that, six years on, I interpret as a pivotal moment when I saw a particular form of economic development being introduced. I have made several presentations between 2012 and 2014 using this ethnographic material but, for a variety of reasons that will become apparent as the narrative unfolds, including disbelief at what I was observing, I have not published this material until now.<sup>3</sup>

I commence with an observation about remote development for employment and then try to make some analytic sense of this. I look to provide some historical and regional contexts for what I saw. I then explore Kuniñjku regimes of work under colonial conditions and in the postcolonial present, and examine some possible explanatory theories for interpreting a form of recolonisation that is occurring in the name of modernising development and employment creation. I end with a postscript that provides a brief update of the consequences that have unfolded since that pivotal moment to which I now turn.

## Mumeka, July 2012

As I thundered along the bone-jarring dirt road officially classified as a 'flat-bladed track' (that had clearly not seen a blade for some time) towards the Aboriginal township of Maningrida in west Arnhem Land, I pondered what issues might await me in this region where I had worked since 1979. As usual, my head was full of ideas and too many projects.

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3 I have circled around these issues elsewhere in Altman, 'Bawinanga and CDEP'; Altman, 'Basic Income for Remote'; Altman, "The Main Thing". This chapter builds on collaborations with the UK Economic and Social Research Council funded 'Domestic Moral Economy' project based at the University of Manchester, from 2011 to 2015. I would like to foremost thank many Kuniñjku people in the Maningrida region for their collaborations over many years; Elisabeth Yarbarksh for research assistance; Jörg Wiegratz and Chris Gregory for stimulating interactions; and Murray Garde, Chris Haynes, Tim Rowse and especially Melinda Hinkson, as well as many others for stimulating comments and challenges during various presentations made in Cairns, Canberra, Brisbane, Tokyo and Wellington.

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This was my 48th visit to the region in 33 years (1979–2012). Increasingly, my so-called ‘field work’ involved catching up with old friends and their families, commiserating about departed relatives, and just talking in very concrete ways, as is local custom, about family (theirs and mine), ceremony, places and hunting, and the latest manifestation of settler colonial incursion into the Kuninjku community. I was undertaking what I increasingly think of as random ‘spot check’ field work reminiscent of some of the time allocation techniques I used when I was a doctoral student residing at Mumeka.

I pulled into Mumeka and parked my vehicle where I always stop, a safe and courteous distance from the house of senior traditional owner Iyuna (now deceased) and was warmly greeted as always. I looked around. There is always something happening at Mumeka, and I saw that the outstation surrounds had been drastically cleared, not by fire as is the usual practice in the dry season, but by some flat-bladed instrument attached to a tractor.

I asked my friends what was going on here. There were numerous flat packed cardboard boxes neatly stacked, mudbricks, a brand-new ride-on lawnmower, rakes, brooms, plastic wheelie bins, a generator and manifestations of construction. ‘We are all on “new CDEP”’ my friends cheerily told me, referring to the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme that many had engaged with for over a decade and that was currently being unilaterally and radically reformed by the Australian state. ‘We are making vege [vegetable] gardens and barbeques, [a] pizza oven and chicken houses [coops]’. ‘To eat?’ I asked, for these are extraordinary meat-eating hunters. ‘*Kayakki, dabuno* [no way, for eggs!],’ they answered. ‘We are getting five new houses’ (to supplement two modern houses at Mumeka shared by about 30 people), added Jimarr, ‘and a service station to provide diesel for overland travellers’ (as a new enterprise). ‘Really’, I said, ‘*waybukki*, true story?’ ‘*Yó, waybukki*’, was the reply. Development, it seemed, was coming to Mumeka.

I drove on to Maningrida, the regional township and services centre, with some trepidation. While I know many people there, this larger township is never as serene as Mumeka and can often be politically turbulent. My point of articulation with Maningrida is the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) that I have worked with since its establishment as an outstation resource agency in 1979. BAC has been extremely successful as an Aboriginal organisation. It is the largest in the Northern Territory; however, since the Intervention, it has struggled, experiencing four changes

of CEO, with the latest having just been sacked by the all-Aboriginal board, and an unprecedented turnover of staff. In an organisational and historical sense, I probably knew more about BAC than any of its current staff or board. Whatever was happening at Mumeka would be driven by BAC and I braced myself to explore the thinking behind this latest development—the notion that highly mobile people could be transformed to tend gardens, raise chickens and even run service stations, all forms of labouring that required sedentary living and labouring.

## Policy and Regional Contexts

My visit to Mumeka coincided with the completion of the five-year Intervention that sought to morally restructure the norms and values of remote-living Aboriginal people. In June 2012, when this project neared its end date without having achieved its aims, it was extended for a further 10 years and rebadged as Stronger Futures for the Northern Territory.<sup>4</sup> This is an ongoing paternalistic effort to align Aboriginal ways of living with those of the dominant mainstream. The public discourse around Aboriginal dysfunction and subsequent associated policy settings were the culmination of a fundamental policy shift that effectively declared self-determination dead and mainstreaming or assimilation as the way ahead for Aboriginal people.<sup>5</sup>

This project of moral restructuring was also encapsulated from 2008 in a policy framework called Closing the Gap. Although promulgated as a national project, the policy was poorly conceptualised for remote circumstances and took little account of history or possible Aboriginal responses and resistance to it. It was the latest in a long line of visionary social engineering exercises that looked to discipline the behaviour of Aboriginal workers, parents and welfare recipients to ensure greater employment participation, higher school attendance, better parenting and more responsible spending patterns.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, in such impositions,

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4 The *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012* is available at [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2012A00100](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2012A00100) (accessed 15 March 2019). In 2015, with a change of federal government, anew National Partnership Agreement on Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment (NTRAI) from 2015–16 to 2021–22 replaced the National Partnership Agreement on Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory.

5 Strakosch, *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy*.

6 Hinkson, 'Introduction: In the Name'.

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there are deeply embedded contests about ways of living and being, with the powerful state machinery discursively asserting the superiority of Western norms and values over Aboriginal ones.

I focus here on the Maningrida regional setting in west Arnhem Land and deploy my points of regional articulation with the Kuninjku community of about 300 people and with BAC to say something about transformations and political contestation with a focus on contested regimes of working. In situations of economic plurality or hybridity—entangled relations between Kuninjku people who strive to maintain elements of their customary hunting and gathering economy and a neoliberal state and market capitalism—different regimes of labouring—characterised as Balanda (non-Aboriginal) and Bininj (Aboriginal) or formal and informal/paid and unpaid—have been evident since state colonisation. What is distinctive and at stake in the latest transformation is an increasing gulf between Bininj and Balanda perspectives even as the state is determined to close the employment gap.

One reason for this, in my view, is that, in looking to transform the labour relations of people like the Kuninjku, the state and its agents are oblivious to the extraordinary transformations that have already occurred as a result of Kuninjku adaptations to regional manifestations of state colonisation and capitalism. Further, in looking to statistically ‘close the gap’ between Indigenous and other Australians, there has been little attention paid to the actual nature of the local economy or its long-standing ethnic duality, or to the risk that, in aiming to close statistical gaps, local livelihoods and wellbeing might, in fact, be put at risk and decline.

The overarching observation that I develop below focuses on the growing incommensurability between the state’s goal for remote-living Aboriginal people like the Kuninjku and what is desired by them and might be regionally possible. There is an intensifying political struggle underway about values and ways of living that I examine by focusing on the quest to transform residents of places like Mumeka into employed labour. In the context of this volume’s focus on labour mobility (see especially Chapters 10 and 11), there is an ongoing struggle between the state and its agents looking to convert flexible and highly regionally mobile Kuninjku into regimented and sedentary workers, and Kuninjku responses to this imposition.





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where none had previously existed. Government policy at that time was shifting from protection within a closed-off gazetted reserve to a quest to transform Aboriginal people to mainstream subjects via assimilation. Maningrida slowly developed into a township where Aboriginal people, as wards of the state, were to be trained for such assimilation through education, training and jobs, and the adoption of Western ways of living.

Historically, Maningrida failed as a project of assimilation for two main reasons. First, counter to capitalist logic, the settlement was established without any assessment of commodities that might flow from the hinterland. As it turned out, there were very few of any commercial value. Second, and again counter to capitalist logic, a series of development projects were established including forestry, cattle and buffalo raising, dairy, market gardens, orchards, flower propagation, fishing and fish processing, a piggery and chicken raising without any realistic appraisal of commercial viability or comparative advantage. All failed.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1957, Maningrida has had both Balanda and Bininj populations; it is a place of dual ethnicity but multiple language communities (see Figure 12.1). Up until the early 1970s, power was legally vested with Balanda officials as agents of the colonial state. In 1972, policy shifted dramatically from imposed assimilation to decolonising self-determination, which was initially viewed with great optimism by government as a way to empower Aboriginal people and to overcome earlier development failures. This history is important given that what I observed at Mumeka in July 2012 was arguably a microscopic simulacrum of what had occurred at Maningrida in the 1960s.

My focus on the Kuninjku mainly reflects my long-term research relationship with this group. Key distinguishing features of the Kuninjku community are that many of its members had late contact with the colonial state with some not moving to Maningrida until 1963. Kuninjku adapted poorly to settlement life and so, from the early 1970s, were among the first to decentralise and move to live on ancestral lands at tiny communities called outstations. Over time, their forms of residence have become more complicated and increasingly many live between the township and hinterland on a seasonal basis. In the last two decades, a number of Kuninjku people have settled at Maningrida on a more permanent basis for a range of reasons, such as employment, education for

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8 Much of this history is available in expanded form in Altman, *Hunter-Gatherers Today*.

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children and access to health services; however, the permanence of such residential choice is difficult to assess given historic residential mobility—bush to town and vice versa.

Prior to their contact with the Australian colonial state, Kuninjku people mainly survived by highly mobile hunting, fishing and gathering, utilising what has been termed a kin-based domestic mode of production.<sup>9</sup> Kuninjku adapted badly to Maningrida in part because they resisted, more actively than other groups, the expected transformation to Western forms of sedentary labouring for training allowances. Colonial officials frequently complained about their hyper-mobility back and forth from their traditional lands for ceremony and wildlife harvesting, sometimes instigated because of hunger in the government settlement. Their only notable employment success in those colonial times occurred when a perceptive superintendent realised that sociable group work was important to Kuninjku. Provided with a blue tractor and trailer, a work crew productively collected rubbish from the communal kitchen and dumped it into a nearby creek.

In the early 1970s, with the change of policy from assimilation to self-determination (as defined by the state) and land rights, most Kuninjku people moved back to live and work on their country. When I lived with a small group averaging just 32 people at Mumeka in 1979 and 1980, they clearly differentiated their own work from Balanda forms. Their work was highly flexible, unsupervised and pleasurable; the latter was supervised, subject to relations of white domination and generally to be avoided on an ongoing basis. Indeed, Kuninjku were, and remain, happy for Balanda to undertake certain forms of work that require skills that they do not possess and that require hierarchical forms of organisation and the exercise of workplace authority.

I collected information over one annual seasonal cycle about work effort (using time allocation techniques), the organisation of labour, dietary intake, sources of market and non-market income and expenditure patterns.<sup>10</sup> This research greatly augmented earlier experimental research undertaken by Fred McCarthy and Margaret McArthur in 1948 at nearby Fish Creek (or Kunnanj) with a group of related Aboriginal people. These earlier data were used by Marshall Sahlins to make his influential argument

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9 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*; Altman, *Hunter-Gatherers Today*.

10 Altman, *Hunter-Gatherers Today*.

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that the hunter-gatherer domestic mode of production was the original affluent society.<sup>11</sup> While, like McCarthy and McArthur, I documented that all adults worked three to four hours per day, I also showed that this work extended over seven days a week and was an average across all adults. Hence, I made the case that, as a group, Kuninjku labouring effort was the equivalent of full-time by broader societal standards.

I cannot explore in any detail the Kuninjku mode of production here; however, as an aside, I note the following features that are immediately salient to the issues raised in this chapter. When at Mumeka, I quantified that hunting and gathering was the mainstay of the economy, hence the title of my book *Hunter-Gatherers Today*. This form of production in turn required people to live in a highly mobile manner, and I documented regular seasonal residential shifts between resource bases. It also required periods of extraordinary hard labouring—work density in hunting, fishing and gathering in hot tropical conditions could be very arduous, as I discovered quickly through participant observation. As I have documented elsewhere, over time, the overall contribution of hunting to livelihood has declined as other sources of cash income from art sales and transfer payments from the state have increased.<sup>12</sup> Yet, self-provisioning dependent on mobility has remained a crucial aspect of Kuninjku subjectivity. Access to vehicles for mobility for economic, social and cultural reasons is of the highest priority for Kuninjku after meeting immediate survival needs, and earning cash and saving for vehicles is a major motivation for engagement with market capitalism via arts manufacture.<sup>13</sup>

I also examined the organisation of work and showed that it was undertaken in two broad but highly interchangeable forms: individually or with kin, with the latter more common. Everyday work was, and remains, organised by negotiated consensus. Only in ceremonial work was there a willing acceptance of the domination of ‘managers’ (*djunkkay*) who organised ritual workers and still do; people work at ceremony for the ceremonial boss and also today, at Christian Fellowship, people work hard with song and dance for a new additional boss ‘Jesus’.

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11 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

12 Altman, ‘From Kunnanj’.

13 Altman and Hinkson, ‘Mobility and Modernity’.

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In the last 30 years, labour arrangements have changed in many ways; however, for Kuninjku, effective work is still organised either on one's own or with one's immediate family or in small groups, preferably of other Kuninjku. The former is especially evident in arts practice; in the last three decades, arts production has grown rapidly, with Kuninjku being the most prolific and successful artists in the region. The latter is evident in hunting for food in the bush, but also in Maningrida. For example, a group of Kuninjku women dominate at the local Babbarra Women's Centre and form a sociable team of closely related and successful textile screen printers. At outstations, there are almost no formal jobs beyond a handful of part-time teaching assistants.

My focus in this chapter is on materially productive forms of labour, mainly because this is the point of articulation with policy concerns about formal employment. Yet, from the emic Kuninjku perspective, such labour is little differentiated from spiritual work at ceremonies and reproductive and nurturing labour. What is important is that acceptable labour for Kuninjku has some prerequisites if it is to be sustainable: it must be flexible, allowing high rates of residential mobility; negotiated (with supervisors, Bininj or Balanda); and secondary to family and ceremonial obligations. This could be termed the Kuninjku work values regime. It is a regime that is based on positive reciprocity with kin and 'balanced' exchange with the market (i.e. art for cash, which is often influenced by the soundness of social relations with the arts manager), and seeks to avoid negative reciprocity and exploitative relations. To deploy David Graeber's schema explaining the moral grounds of economic relations, Kuninjku labouring is based on everyday sharing and avoids hierarchy and domination.<sup>14</sup>

From 1979, this flexible Kuninjku labouring regime has been strongly supported by BAC, especially since 1989 with its application of rules for managing the CDEP scheme in a suitably flexible manner. BAC's goals include the maintenance of language, culture and traditional practice; community development; promoting the welfare of its members; and services provision. BAC deployed its corporate capacity to assist Kuninjku mainly by using the CDEP scheme to provide a form of unconditional income support when people were at outstations, and by effectively marketing Kuninjku art via Maningrida Arts and Culture, the main

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14 Graeber, *Debt*.

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regional institution for productive (rather than consumptive) engagement with global capitalism. Coincidentally, it also provided considerable logistical support for ceremonial work.<sup>15</sup>

Following the Intervention in 2007, BAC's capacity to support flexible labouring declined markedly—the CDEP scheme came under discursive attack and unhelpful reform, and BAC's main export enterprise, the globally renowned Maningrida Arts and Culture, declined in profitability in the wake of the global financial crisis. Simultaneously, local forms of political representation were systematically diluted—an Australian Government official was installed as the supreme regional political authority and agent of surveillance for Canberra.

From the late 1990s, the Australian Government has increasingly represented remote-living Aboriginal people like the Kuninjku as welfare dependent, passive and in social and moral decline. These people have been framed in national discourse and the popular media as savage and primitive and as problematic parents. This was part of the rationale for the 'national emergency'. Hence, they needed strict policing and disciplining in work, education, expenditure of welfare income, ordered housing and so on if they were to be human in the same way as other citizens within Australia's late liberal order.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously, the language of rights and responsibilities has emerged; however, it is applied to people who regard the rich Australian state as responsible for their wellbeing and have no notion of reciprocity as being a part of any regionally recognised social compact.

Subsequently, a neoliberal trope has emerged that emphasises the need for greater exposure to market capitalism, individualism, entrepreneurship and private accumulation. Places like Maningrida have been identified for special attention because of their relative size and associated visibility. Maningrida, with just over 3,000 residents, is one of the largest Aboriginal townships in the Northern Territory. In early 2009, it was defined for a short time as a 'Territory Growth Town' by the Northern Territory Government.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Altman, 'Bawinanga and CDEP'.

16 Macoun, 'Aboriginality and the Northern Territory Intervention'; Anthony, *Indigenous People, Crime*; Checketts, 'The Pulse of Policy'.

17 Sanders, 'Working Futures'.

To qualify for development assistance, BAC has increasingly been required to actively participate in this project of improvement. This requirement was resisted for a time; however, more recently, with a change of CEO in 2010, there has been acquiescence.<sup>18</sup> Like the Australian Government, BAC does not currently recognise or strongly advocate for Kuninjku notions of labour; instead, it mainly subscribes to the state requirement to assist in closing the gaps, and the rhetoric that people on ‘sit down’ money (i.e. welfare) need to learn to ‘stand up’, as one BAC manager explained it to me in July 2012.

In the post-Intervention environment, we have seen a twin perspective that is increasingly shared by political and bureaucratic elites residing far away in Canberra and Darwin, and recent powerful Balanda arrivals at Maningrida who occupy managerial and professional positions. First, the promulgation of the myth that there just might be sufficient paid jobs for all to be employed within the region if it were rapidly developed. Second, and alternatively, that there are prospects for people to be trained for employment elsewhere, for example in mines (see Prout Quicke and Haslam McKenzie, this volume). Such perspectives fly in the face of both commissioned consultancy research and census data that document the excess supply of labour in the region.

Therefore, in July 2012, because of a loss of corporate memory and an ignoring of documented history, there was a return to a version of the developmental approach of the 1960s, with a host of small speculative ventures (that failed then) to be revisited—like the chicken and egg farming and vegetable gardens that I observed being developed at Mumeka (as well as other outstations). In the quest to demonstrate that formal labour is being undertaken, workers at Mumeka were all issued with high-visibility work wear, boots and safety sunglasses, illustrative, perhaps, of hard industrial work and a demonstration of modern compliance with occupational health and safety standards, and worn by Kuninjku so that they could be *seen* labouring. What is more, these new ‘development’ projects were being incubated on a highly speculative basis without any commercial business planning or assurance that state support would continue. Yet, BAC managers presented these as enterprises with mixed objectives, including training hunter-gatherers in horticulture and

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18 This change can be linked in part to the appointment of a developmental CEO who had been actively involved as a government business manager during the Intervention and was a senior member of the Australian Federal Police; he is the CEO who was sacked in July 2012.

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animal husbandry to ensure the ‘food security’ (a new buzz term) that seasonal hunting and fishing predicated on high labour mobility could not deliver, according to BAC staff. Then there was environmental health improvement, another buzz term in Canberra, hence funding for the pizza ovens and mudbrick barbecues for cooking to replace ‘unhygienic’ open fires and ground ovens, as explained to me by another Balanda manager.



Figure 12.2: The Mumeka work crew, July 2012.

Source: Photograph by Jon Altman.

I visited Mumeka several times during my regional field work in July 2012 to observe and discuss progress. As some members of the Mumeka work crew (and a Balanda tradesman) needed to daily commute an hour each way from Maningrida, only two or three hours a day were devoted to actual labouring in these new ventures. Kuninjku people at Mumeka were thrilled by the largesse that was provided with public funds but were not convinced about the likely sustainability of any of the projects; they were just going with the flow. I observed on several occasions that as soon as formal labouring was completed, people headed off to hunt and fish, which they did with success—long-necked turtles, barramundi, pig, buffalo, file snakes and ibis were evident—while the work crew that had driven out rushed back to Maningrida to their families and to shop, participating

in speculative hunting and fishing on the way. Paradoxically, and likely unintentionally, in looking to ‘develop’ Mumeka and impose Western forms of labouring on Kuninjku, both the state and BAC were facilitating hyper-mobility funded by a government program. Members of the work crew who lived at Mumeka assured me that the high-visibility clothing was removed for after-hours hunting, not a bad idea with dangerous feral water buffalo and pigs a common target as a food source.

## Interpretative Frames for Understanding Recolonisation

The Australian state is deploying a mix of old colonial and new market mentalities as it looks to recolonise remote Aboriginal spaces, sponsor ‘new’ development projects, and attempt new ways to immobilise people and their labour. Yet again, a pathway to late modernity for remote-living Aboriginal people is being charted by distant political and bureaucratic players using local agents to implement somewhat fanciful employment-creation projects. These untrustworthy trustees who always promise, but rarely deliver, seek to render deep development problems technical, to paraphrase James Ferguson,<sup>19</sup> choosing to turn a blind eye to past and present failures as the ideological rationales for improvement schemes become entangled with a messy world.

I have used the prism of labouring here to examine the political struggle to reshape norms and values away from what is perceived as the unstable, communal Aboriginal fix, to the stable, Western market fix, as Tania Murray Li might say,<sup>20</sup> except that no one seems to know what the market fix might look like in this region, and no one who exercises power really seems to know what people actually do. For Kuninjku, occupationally flexible labouring in hunting and fishing and arts production—activity that is unrecognised as ‘real’ work—greatly improves the quality of people’s lives and livelihoods. However, official employment statistics are constructed in a manner incapable of reflecting such regional realities and thus reflect instead the urgent discursive goal to close employment gaps.

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19 Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

20 Li, *The Will to Improve*.



## Neoliberal Governmentality

Loic Wacquant has argued, persuasively in my view, that neoliberalism is not an economic but a political and cultural project.<sup>21</sup> In Arnhem Land we see the political rationality of governmentality looking to improve social conditions by seeking to alter Kuninjku conduct and habits, deploying new technologies, institutions and forms of knowledge seeking to create self-interested subjects with a progressive desire for industry (be it chicken eggs or market gardens); stable formal employment and regular work patterns; and individual, not group, accomplishment. It is no coincidence in this reading that there are many more police deployed in Maningrida and that regulatory barriers are placed in the way of those who wish to pursue other ways of being; getting a gun licence or getting a driving licence or registering a vehicle essential for hunting are all bureaucratic nightmares in remote outposts like Maningrida.

Wacquant sees neoliberal governmentality as the art of shaping populations and the self to conform to the market, even if the market might be miniscule as in 'Territory Growth Towns' like Maningrida or even more so at Mumeka: its institutional core consists of an articulation of state, market and citizenship that harnesses the first to stamp the second on the third. I do not explore Wacquant in any detail here, but there is much in his framework that resonates strongly with what the state is looking to implement in remotest Australia: liberty for those at the top, punitive paternalism for those at the bottom; idleness as a perceived social problem for the unworthy unemployed; ethnic disciplining; and the communicative mission of projecting asserted sovereignty into previously under-governed geographic spaces.

James Ferguson also interprets neoliberalism as a political project, but he challenges progressive anthropologists (such as myself) to turn neoliberal logic to progressive practical use.<sup>22</sup> In urban southern Africa, Ferguson suggests that black populations are not, and are unlikely to become, formal wage labourers; local livelihoods are being decimated owing to the valorisation of formal work and the conditional provision of supervised workfare and endless training sponsored by the state that clings to the

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21 Wacquant, 'Three Steps'.

22 Ferguson, 'The Uses of Neoliberalism'.

false hope that trained people will somehow magically find suitable employment irrespective of politico-economic structural constraints. His observations resonate with the Arnhem Land case examined here.

What is especially revealing in the Maningrida situation is how the powerful Australian state based in Canberra, the national capital, wields authoritarian managerialism to directly influence development in remote regions. Yet, the responsibility for implementing this impossibly difficult governmental policy is devolved to local organisations like BAC.

From its formation in 1979 to 2007, BAC occupied a difficult position, trying to constantly mediate between the state and its Aboriginal members over the delivery of contested forms of development and labouring. This tension was managed relatively successfully for a variety of reasons including an ability to attract committed senior staff who stayed for long periods of time and were sympathetic to the priorities of local people. However, in the post-Intervention era, the culture of the organisation has shifted as it has increasingly adopted a bureaucratic rationality that locally mirrors the policies of the state. In recent years, it has attracted a revolving door of staff, many of whom lack a commitment to local control and are far more self-interested than they were in the past; most only last a short time and some even fly-in and fly-out from Darwin, where BAC established an ancillary office for a time. In general, most people working for BAC today are more interested in the jobs package and less interested in local histories, complexities and cultures. This has resulted in considerable conflict, with the sacking of the CEO by the all-Aboriginal board in July 2012 being just one example. As the state promulgates 'false capitalist' solutions to deeply entrenched development challenges, it is complicit in attracting (and aiding and abetting) managers who seek to riskily mimic state ideology and put forward proposals for risky projects like vegetable gardens, chicken coops and pizza ovens.

## Moral Economy

The concept of moral economy, as Chris Hann reminds us, has been applied to criticise economism and highlight the values that have provoked sections of society to resort to political action and behaviour that puts the long-term values of community before the short-term value of individual

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utility.<sup>23</sup> In his early work, James Scott argues that peasants have a strong conservative ethic that prioritises the subsistence needs of all members of local communities. Scott suggests that peasants in South-East Asia are risk averse and driven by a safety-first principle, and that they have strongly held beliefs in the moral right to subsistence and equitable access to land; yet, he is at pains not to romanticise such economic relations.<sup>24</sup> Initially, Scott argued that, in situations in which this moral economy was threatened, peasants were likely to rebel; however, in later work, he demonstrated that more subtle forms of resistance might be deployed.<sup>25</sup> More recently, Scott has argued that some groups maintain a high degree of mobility and move to ungoverned spaces when their 'subsistence ethic' ideology is threatened by authority.<sup>26</sup>

Following Scott, I deploy the concept of moral economy as one analytical means to explain the historic transformation of Kuninjku labouring and what is occurring in the present. I do this in part by using a model of hybrid economy that illustrates how Kuninjku people have simultaneously balanced their domestic mode of production based on subsistence with the requirements of market capitalism and the state. My local theorisation looks to transcend what I see as the false dichotomy between customary economy and market economy, the former embedded and ruled by consensual social norms, the latter disembedded and ruled by impersonal market forces in a distinction reminiscent of that made by Karl Polanyi.<sup>27</sup> The contemporary Kuninjku economy is thoroughly transformed from any 'traditional' or 'pre-colonial' form. Yet, this economy remains fundamentally organised by normative rules that emphasise mobile forms of labour that allow hunting, sharing with kin and responsiveness to ceremonial obligations. The everyday application of such rules is not free of tensions and conflict.

Returning to the central issue of labouring; the state is looking to impose individual forms of regulated work on Kuninjku people even as its own statistical collections demonstrate that there is insufficient work for everyone, and even as Kuninjku (and others) engage in formal employment in very particular and highly flexible ways. The attempted imposition by the state and its local agents of formal Western work

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23 Hann, 'Moral Economy'.

24 Scott, *The Moral Economy*, 5, 33.

25 Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts*.

26 Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

27 Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*.

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patterns and rigidity threaten the moral foundations of Kuninjku notions of community and proper behaviour based on a valorisation of family, sharing and participation in ceremony—all actions associated with unpredictable availability for work and residential fluidity. It also threatens the foundations of the hybrid economy that is predicated on the maintenance of customary links to the land for sustenance, and a high degree of continual occupational mobility between formal and informal work activities rather than the expected commitment to sustained employment and occupational specialisation.

As I noted earlier, there is an underlying dominant assumption by the state and its agents of imagined inactivity, whereas Kuninjku life is teeming with economic and social activity and ceremonial life, all being inseparable in the Kuninjku world view. There is also an underlying assumption that Kuninjku and other people in Maningrida are unaware of the global and local manifestations of market capitalism, even though Kuninjku have been acutely observing the comings and goings of Balanda and their demanding labouring regimes for a long time. Increasingly, Kuninjku people watch television, engage with social media and, occasionally, travel, both domestically and internationally, and so they have an acute awareness of different forms of work and which forms they desire and do not.

In Maningrida, Kuninjku see a dual economy demarcated mainly by ethnicity with a growing number of Balandas holding professional and managerial jobs, living in small family units, earning a lot of money, enjoying an endless supply of cash, fully (if not over-) employed and living in a hyper-mobile manner; in recent years, some, especially contractors, fly-in and fly-out like mine workers (see Prout Quicke and Haslam McKenzie, this volume). All this has a different logic to the priorities of Kuninjku. Census data in recent years show that the median Balanda income is over four times that of local Aboriginal people.<sup>28</sup> Yet, almost without exception, Balanda today do not stay for long—government officials come and go, as do most employees of Aboriginal organisations, some of whom are even foreign backpackers and holders of temporary 457 work visas. Unsurprisingly, such transient visitors lack understanding of local economic history or regional cultural practices, and do not

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28 At that time, median individual income for Indigenous adults was \$268 per week and for non-Indigenous adults \$1,167 per week. See '2011 Census, Community Profile', Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 31 March 2018, [www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/IARE704003?opendocument](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/IARE704003?opendocument).

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have any deep local social relationships. While local information on remittances out of Maningrida is not available, one suspects much wealth is transferred out of the region by Balanda even as they participate in the project to fix ‘the Aboriginal development problem’. When I asked Kuninjku if they desired to live and work in this way, the response was invariably ‘no’—such work represents an unacceptable regulation of life. As one (now deceased) friend, Joshua Jununwangga, put it to me: ‘I am far too busy for a full-time Balanda job.’

## Conclusion

A moral panic, the reported abuse of children, accompanied the Northern Territory Intervention; consequently, issues of morality now permeate all aspects of policy, including an emerging intolerance of culturally different ways of labouring. There is much here that is reminiscent of Charles Fourier’s nineteenth-century critique of the resistance by wage labourers to the boring, repetitive work of early capitalism versus the flexible, attractive labour that could provide greater freedom if accompanied by a guaranteed income (that the CDEP scheme at outstations used to provide). Fourier insisted that only free work can be pleasurable.<sup>29</sup> Kuninjku would agree. What is clear today is that the state is looking to construct subjectivity for Kuninjku by deploying the tropes of rigid paid work and responsibility. Implementation of this paternalistic project is being devolved in large measure to local organisations, like BAC. In the process, a historically successful Aboriginal organisation is being coopted and depoliticised because of its financial dependence on the state.

The growing space that is being created (rather than reduced) between Bininj and Balanda views on labouring in remote places like Maningrida is concerning, as it inadvertently allows for what can be termed reckless use of public funds; more harshly, it enables a form of petty corruption and waste that is state sanctioned. Pursuit of the state’s quest to close the employment gap leaves much room for the promotion of false capitalist endeavours. Those who quietly acquiesce to the state project can be rewarded with largesse, while those who challenge its validity are punished—a form of moral hazard that resonates with what some have observed in weak states, not in supposed ‘strong’ states like Australia.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Spencer, ‘Work in Utopia’.

30 Weigartz, ‘Fake Capitalism’; Ferguson, ‘The Uses of Neoliberalism’.

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Maningrida is becoming a more permissive place, with more and more outsiders coming and going and fewer checks and balances today than during the 'self-determination' era when a legally enforced permit system could be deployed to monitor the movements of outsiders. Kuninjku are, at times, bewildered when in Maningrida by the comings and goings of unknown people with unknown purposes and sometimes are keen to escape for a sojourn at outstations, just for some welcome bush order; when in town, they are becoming less visible, often working indoors on arts production to avoid recruitment for some well-intentioned training program to equip them for forms of labour for which they have no desire.

What is missing in much of this debate is recognition that groups like the Kuninjku have made extraordinary transformations in a very short time. For over a decade, they were responsible for the bulk of the region's only commodity exports: art. As such, they were the ones most engaged with global capitalism. However, they did this in their own way and with a degree of sensible caution, ensuring that the other key sector of their domestic economy, self-provisioning, remained intact.

In July 2012, Kuninjku were willing to don high-visibility safety clothing symbolic of hard work, hoping, perhaps, that they might be sighted from the nearby flat-bladed vehicular track by visiting officials. They struggle to retain key elements of their plural economy even when facing requirements to engage in monochromic forms of Western labour; their early response to the 'new' development approach and its labouring requirements is highly pragmatic and adaptive, even humorous. Yet, it also demonstrates a resignation that enhanced engagement with the dominant state is currently required.

In the longer term, if one is to see a regional *développement durable*, a form of development that is beneficial and lasts,<sup>31</sup> local political institutions will need to be reactivated to challenge destructive forms of neoliberal state-sponsored economism. One interpretation of my analysis is that it provides some semblance of hope because, even after 55 years of colonisation, decolonisation and, since 2007, attempted recolonisation (to 2012), Kuninjku people have managed through their agency and alliances to mould forms of hybrid economy and associated flexible labour relations that accord with their desires to remain at home and near, or on, ancestral lands. The Kuninjku case that I present here is not intended as

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31 Hart and Padayachee, 'Development', 61.

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some heroic tale of the destruction of the hegemony of neoliberal ideas as recently described by David Graeber.<sup>32</sup> To the contrary, what I have described as governmental overreach can have, as has subsequently become apparent, deeply destructive consequences with human casualties.

## Postscript: March 2018

I have been back to the Maningrida region nine times since July 2012, the visit during which I observed what I now interpret as a tipping point in the absurd neoliberal governance of remote places like Mumeka. There have been two federal elections and the policy landscape has worsened quite significantly in my view. BAC has been in and out of special administration; it ran into financial difficulties owing to developmental overreach and wasteful projects that meant it could not meet its obligations to creditors.

It is difficult to explain why the Australian Government, with all its surveillance apparatus, would have allowed the situation at BAC—one of the largest and most successful Indigenous corporations in remote Australia—to eventuate. It seems to me that there is a brutal political conflict underway, driven by the deployment of excessive state power, that is looking to escalate the project of behavioural modification on people like the Kuninjku using community-based organisations like BAC as the local blunt instrument to oversee the transformation of what is perceived as unproductive welfare-dependent labour into imagined paid employment or, at the very least, to discipline the jobless.

From 1 July 2013, the CDEP scheme was incorporated into the new Remote Jobs and Communities Program launched by the Gillard Government in its dying days. Then, with a conservative government elected in September 2013, the remnants of the scheme that had been ‘grandfathered’ were swept away. First, there was a review of Indigenous employment and training programs headed by a mining magnate, Andrew Forrest, to plough the turf for reform.<sup>33</sup> Next, there was implementation of his recommendations, which included the end of the flexible CDEP

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32 Graeber, ‘The Shock of Victory’.

33 Forrest, *Creating Parity*.

scheme for all on 1 July 2015 and its replacement by the cynically renamed Community Development Program (CDP) that has little similarity to the old scheme.<sup>34</sup>

A combination of special administration and policy reform has seen BAC become more and more an ‘employment and training’ provider selected by competitive tender, and less an outstation resource agency that delivered forms of appropriate development to support flexible ways of living and labouring to its membership. BAC’s financial rehabilitation appears successful. However, as with all structural adjustment and financial bailouts, this has come at a cost: loss of organisational autonomy, new externally imposed modes of operation and requirements to comply with CDP guidelines that focus on paid employment and the omnipresent Closing the Gap paradigm.

CDP is a ‘work for the dole’ scheme that requires able-bodied people aged 15–49 years to work five hours a day, five days a week in a range of work-like activities with Newstart Allowance (the dole) as remuneration. Such stringent work requirements eliminate other livelihood possibilities, especially self-provisioning on country away from Maningrida. BAC is paid a bonus if it places jobless participants in sustainable mainstream employment (defined as 13- and 26-week outcomes). BAC is also paid for alerting Centrelink if participants fail to turn up for make-work, training or designated appointments—welfare payments are docked one day’s pay for each ‘no-show’ occurrence. To date, BAC, like other providers distributed across regional and remote Australia, has been more effective in alerting Centrelink about no-shows than in delivering jobs to a massive caseload of nearly 1,000 jobless adults in a regional economy that has few jobs.<sup>35</sup>

The old colonial logic of the 1960s has re-emerged in a punitive and impoverishing manifestation. Using a stick-and-carrot<sup>36</sup> behavioural approach, it is assumed that surplus Aboriginal labour can be disciplined and trained to make it job ready. Alternatively, it is assumed that people will migrate for employment even if only to escape this paternalistic regime. In a highly contradictory and destructive manner, politicians and their

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<sup>34</sup> These recommendations were implemented despite a robust critique of the review process and its recommendations, see Klein, ‘Academic Perspectives on the Forrest Review’.

<sup>35</sup> See Jordan and Fowkes, ‘Job Creation and Income Support’.

<sup>36</sup> The normal order of this phrase has been intentionally reversed to indicate that there is currently plenty of stick and little carrot.



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officials in Canberra are promoting an employment pathway for jobless Aboriginal people like the Kuninjku that recent official information from the 2016 Census clearly informs them does not exist.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the mainstream media and policy discourse laments the destructive effects of inactivity and the consequences for wellbeing of deepening poverty. Again and again the assumption is made that the relational norms and values adhered to by people like the Kuninjku will be broken and will dissipate when confronted by a powerful discursive trope that promises much and delivers little other than punishment in the form of ‘no-show’ penalties. There is currently no basis for the belief that market capitalism will blossom in the Maningrida region with employment for all and associated wealth creation. This is just an imagined procedural fix based on ideological blind faith that has no basis in regional reality.

The modern state and its bureaucratic apparatus might look to depoliticise and control local organisations like BAC and people like the Kuninjku but, as Tania Murray Li has illustrated with her work in Indonesia, local groups remain deeply political and capable of subverting imposed plans.<sup>38</sup>

This raises two important questions: How might maladapted Western institutions, like punitive welfare to move people to rigid formal employment, be refigured to facilitate more effective flexible forms of livelihood? The CDEP scheme, which was replete with postcolonial possibility, has now been eliminated by the settler colonial state.<sup>39</sup> The second question is, to paraphrase Erik Olin Wright, how might ‘real utopias be envisioned’ for people like the Kuninjku? My research for the last three decades has focused on the deployment of local Kuninjku labour for livelihoods that accord with their aspirations. I end by pondering how a livelihoods approach might be restored for the Kuninjku community and other Aboriginal people living in very remote parts of Australia.

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37 A summary of employment data for the three census, 2006, 2011 and 2016, shows that the Indigenous employment/population ratio declined from 26 per cent in 2006 to 18.4 per cent in 2016, having risen slightly to 34 per cent in 2011. The comparative non-Indigenous figures are 95.5 per cent, 91.4 per cent and 88.9 per cent. The Indigenous unemployment rate rose from 17.2 per cent in 2006 to 34 per cent in 2016, even as the labour force participation rate declined from 31.4 per cent to 22.6 per cent. All figures from ‘Community Profiles’, Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 15 March 2019, [www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/communityprofiles?opendocument&navpos=230](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/communityprofiles?opendocument&navpos=230).

38 Li, *The Will to Improve*.

39 Jordan, *Better than Welfare?*

12. OF PIZZA OVENS IN ARNHEM LAND

A first requirement is for outsiders to recognise local economic realities and the political imperative to restore social power to community organisations. A second might be to recognise the sociological reality that locally dominant non-capitalist imperatives, so evident in flexible labour arrangements, persist—they cannot just be wished or assumed away, as inconvenient as this may be to the state project of disciplining and neoliberalising labour.

My latest visits to Mumeka were in July 2017 and July 2018. The pizza oven was still there, in sound condition and still unused, a fixture embedded in the landscape. The market gardens are overgrown and the trickle irrigation irreparable. The wooden chicken coops, reputed to have been made in Denmark, are in fragments. There were no people at Mumeka; the residents were scattered, some living in Maningrida, some elsewhere at ceremony. Mumeka was a small flourishing place when I first went there in 1979; in 2012 it was abuzz with developmental excitement. It is now just seasonally occupied.



Figure 12.3: The pizza oven at Mumeka, July 2017.

Source: Photograph by Jon Altman.

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In the present, the disjunctures between Kuninjku and Western notions of what constitutes acceptable forms of labour, and the roles that labour mobility and migration might play, are wider than ever. The Australian state is looking to close statistical employment gaps and reduce welfare dependency. This goal requires that people like the Kuninjku either reduce their regional mobility (especially between the township of Maningrida and outstations) and participate in Western forms of formal employment when it is available or migrate for employment. Neither option is currently acceptable to Kuninjku. Paradoxically, it is Balanda and, to a far lesser extent, non-local Indigenous people who migrate to Maningrida to take up employment, but then demonstrate their mobility by only staying for a short time before leaving.

Tragically, the recolonisation project has been highly destructive of the regional forms of plural economy that were evolving. Kuninjku people today are more welfare dependent and impoverished than at any time since the colonial state came to stay in central Arnhem Land in 1957, despite state investment in development paraphernalia like pizza ovens, chicken coops and market gardens. The state's agents and personnel come and go, like its policies, which, arguably, have had more adverse effects than ever on people like the Kuninjku who have stayed.

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## 9. The Indigenous hybrid economy: Can the NATSISS adequately recognise difference?

Jon Altman, Nicholas Biddle and Geoff Buchanan

In today's Australia, hunting is an unusual form of productive activity, but for many Indigenous Australians it represents one continuity with the pre-colonial hunter-gatherer mode of production. The settler and state colonisation of Australia has generated a remarkable diversity of available livelihood options and hunting remains one form.

**Fig. 9.1 Butchered remains of a feral water buffalo near Mumeka outstation, Arnhem Land**



Photo: Jon Altman

We begin with two graphic illustrations of difference because part of the rationale for the NATSISS is to document Indigenous difference as well as diversity. The butchered carcass of a feral water buffalo shown in Fig. 9.1 was located on the side of the main road between Maningrida and Darwin near an outstation called Mumeka, in remote western Arnhem Land at about the time the 2008 NATSISS was in the field. The skilful butchering indicated that the Kuninjku hunters had taken several hundred kilograms of meat for domestic consumption. They had



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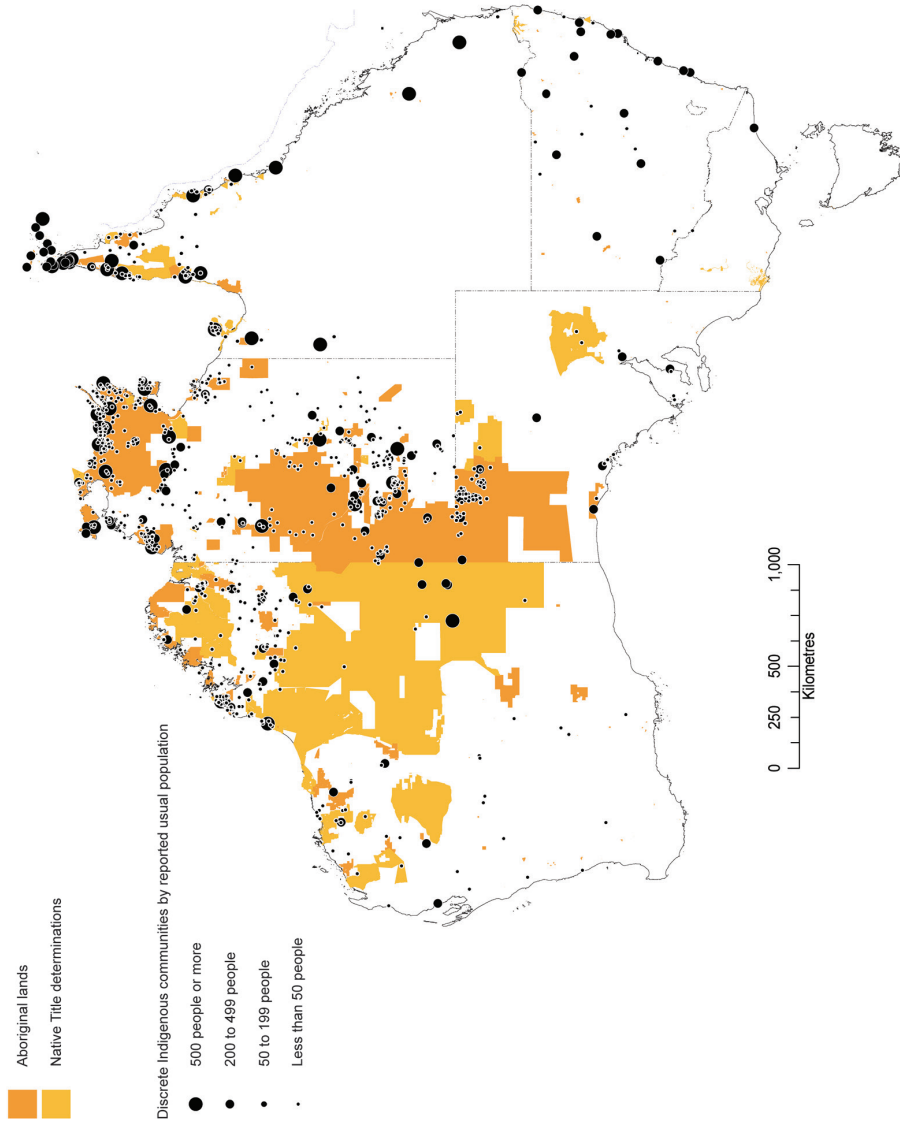
also removed one individual of an introduced species that poses a significant ecological threat to Arnhem Land. The water buffalo (*Bubalis bubalis*) is a feral animal responsible for much damage of wetlands in the surrounding Indigenous Protected Area, which is of high conservation value. Feral buffalo also contribute to global carbon emissions – the removal of this buffalo reduced CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent greenhouse gases by an estimated one tonne per annum (Garnett 2010). So we ask rhetorically, can the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) statistically capture and adequately interpret this hunting event and its productive outcomes? Can NATSISS record distinctive Indigenous activity such as hunting, fishing or gathering of wildlife or cultural production and thus document its economic significance Australia wide?

The map shown in Fig. 9.2 uses information from a number of sources to summarise Indigenous land holdings today and the distribution of what the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) terms discrete Indigenous communities, although most of the larger communities also have non-Indigenous residents. This Indigenous estate covered about 1.7 million square kilometres (in 2010), 99 per cent of which is in very remote Australia. The over 1000 depicted communities have a total population estimated in 2006 of less than 100 000 – about 20 per cent of the estimated national Indigenous resident population. One would not expect people living in these small communities – especially when located on Indigenous-owned land remote from centres of industry and commerce – to live like other Australians. So the question is raised, how do people in such circumstances live and what can the NATSISS tell us about their livelihoods?

In this chapter we begin by defining what we mean by the customary sector and how we see it as part of contemporary Indigenous hybrid economies. We then present a critical discussion of the effectiveness of the NATSISS as a survey instrument to collect information on the customary sector. This includes a brief historical discussion going back nearly 20 years to when a national survey of Indigenous Australians was first mooted; followed by a description and analysis of how data on customary activity were conceptualised, categorised and collected in NATSISS 2008. We especially focus here on why some forms of productive activity are categorised as cultural rather than economic; and why information on the customary has such poor visibility in standard NATSISS 2008 outputs.

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**Fig. 9.2 Map of the Indigenous estate and discrete Indigenous communities, 2010**



Source: Courtesy of Altman and Hughes, CAEPR

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Next we look at the data available in NATSISS 2008 and provide some estimate of the significance of these activities. In accord with a recommendation we made in 2006 (Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006: 150) information on wildlife harvesting<sup>1</sup> was collected for all Indigenous Australians in 2008 and not just for those in Community Areas. We are now able to investigate how harvesting and cultural production vary according to place of residence, age, gender, employment status, use of Aboriginal languages, and other variables. We are also able to statistically link available information to some very pertinent policy questions about the factors and motivations that might influence participation in the customary sector.

In the final section we discuss some significant policy and political implications of our findings in two senses: for Indigenous affairs policy making in general and for statistical collection policy making in particular. We ponder the dialectical relationship between the two at a time when policy making is supposedly influenced by evidence and yet the policy community and public discourse largely ignores the evidence. We lament the moral hazard that this presents both to those within the ABS and social scientists who are actually committed to improved data collection and analysis to inform policy making. We conclude by returning to our prefacing vignettes and asking how helpful NATSISS 2008 has been in answering our opening questions.

## **The customary sector of Indigenous hybrid economies**

We are interested in what we term here the ‘customary sector’ of the Indigenous hybrid economy. By this we mean forms of productive activity, whether for domestic use or for market exchange, that are dependent on Aboriginal custom. In using the term ‘customary’ we are not suggesting that there are forms of productive activity today that are either pre-colonial or magically divorced from neoliberal globalisation. What we seek to highlight is that there are forms of production that do not fit neatly into the categories of public or private sector or state or market sector because they might be informal or un-marketed. In previous work (see Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006) we have depicted the customary sector as a part of hybrid economies, with the customary sector articulating with the state and market sectors. In the example above of the feral buffalo – it was shot with a gun, butchered with a knife, and transported with

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years it has become increasingly common to use the term ‘harvesting’ as a gloss for hunting, fishing and gathering while overlooking its agricultural connotations. So we would like to emphasise, cognisant of Nadasdy’s (2011) critique of such practice, that we are continuing this practice here for comparative purposes only and not to infer anything agricultural in hunting, fishing and gathering practices recorded in NATSISS. Likewise we could include the term ‘wildlife’ every time we refer to harvesting, but have chosen not to.

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a vehicle all of which were bought from the market sector by the hunters using cash income from the state sector and guided primarily by social relations of production, distribution and consumption based on custom and unique to the customary sector (Altman 2005). Arguably, just as there is no 'pure' market or state sector in the hybrid economy, there is no 'pure' customary sector, but rather sectoral overlaps between customary, state and market sectors represented diagrammatically in a three-circle Venn diagram in the hybrid economy model (Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006).

Our earlier analysis of the 2002 NATSISS focused on the customary sector in remote Australia. This was not because we did not expect it to occur in non-remote Australia, but rather because wildlife harvesting data then were only collected for Community Areas that replicated by-and-large the discrete Indigenous communities in Fig. 9.2. Intuitively though, one would expect the customary sector to be more significant in remote regions because Aboriginal land ownership and access to natural resources are predominantly in very remote Australia. Indigenous residence on this remote land also reduces opportunity for standard commercial or labour market engagement and so potentially makes the customary more important. We will exploit wider coverage of the customary sector in the 2008 NATSISS to test whether this is empirically the case.

We should emphasise that our focus on the customary is not driven by some academic interest in the esoteric. In our view, a more inclusive and realistic representation of Aboriginal life worlds and wellbeing includes the customary sector of what are unusual hybrid economies in many contexts. It should not be overlooked that activities like harvesting or the production of elements of high or popular culture require effort, might be remunerated, and are often productive in tangible as well as intangible ways.

## **The national survey and the customary sector**

For just on 20 years now scholars from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) have engaged with the ABS and regularly published research findings highlighting the need for the national survey of Indigenous Australians to collect information about difference as well as similarities in Indigenous economic forms. In 1992, before the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) 1994, Altman and Allen (1992: 138) highlighted the need for the survey to broaden the notion of employment to include productive activity in what was then termed the informal economy and what we now call the customary sector. This recommendation was responding to the policy imperative of the time to deliver employment and income equality between Aboriginal and other Australians by the year 2000. Altman and

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Allen emphasised that work in the informal economy generated employment and income that should not be discounted just because official measures of employment and income status relied on standard social indicators. The ABS responded by positively categorising such work as 'employment and income' but then rather perversely relegated it to the sub-category 'voluntary work'. Researchers were critical of this (see Smith and Roach 1996).

In the 2002 NATSISS, the ABS changed tack and included questions about harvesting, cultural production and the ability to meet cultural obligations while in employment, under the broad category 'Culture'. It is far from clear why this is the case except that some Aboriginal people today do use the term 'cultural economy'. We were critical of this classification but principally for practical reasons: it is likely that responses to economic questions subsumed under the category 'culture' might understate their economic significance (Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006). Unfortunately, our views were ignored and in the 2008 NATSISS such materially productive activity continues to be categorised as cultural rather than economic.

Theoretically, we are not averse to the argument made famous by the economic historian Karl Polanyi (1944) that the economy is, as a rule, embedded in social relationships. Carrier (1997: 25) notes that Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mauss and Polanyi each viewed the economy (in particular the capitalist/market economy) as a social and cultural construction. Along similar theoretical lines, Escobar (1995) analyses economics as culture based on the view that the economy is 'above all a cultural production' (Escobar 1995: 59). But if the ABS shares this view, then all economic questions should be couched as cultural for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Instead this differential treatment appears to suggest the opposite: that the dominant ideology of the western market mentality – as outlined and critiqued by Polanyi (1944) and Escobar (1995, 2008) (and others, e.g. Block 1990; Carrier 1997; Foucault 1994, 2008; Gibson-Graham 2006a 2006b; Rose 1999; Scott 1998; Throsby 2001) – is acquiesced to by the ABS as if it is unproblematic to those with differing world views. As Waring (1988: 3) notes in relation to the official collection of economic statistics, 'the question of what entails "economic activity" revolves around the question of value'. In its acquiescence to the dominant ideology, the ABS adheres to a value system within which a non-capitalist economic reality such as the customary sector is either ignored or is 'seen as opposite, subordinate, or complementary to capitalism, never as economic practices in their own right or as sources of difference' (Escobar 2008: 74).<sup>2</sup> And so an Indigenous form

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2 An example of such market-centred ideology is provided by Johns (2011: 206) who states that '[t]he Aboriginal economy is an internal, redistributive economy that creates no value'. For Johns 'the (regulated) market economy is the principal determinant of opportunities' (2011: 41) and 'culture, where it conflicts with adjustment to the market economy, [is] a problem' (2011: 53).

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of productive economic activity is reclassified in accord with the dominant discourse of Australian capitalism to marginalise what may be non-mainstream forms of Indigenous comparative advantage, speciality and distinctiveness – not to mention identity.

The problem here is far from just semantic. Part of the project of scholars has been to emphasise to the ABS that the NATSISS currently provides the only official survey instrument that could capture economic reality across Indigenous Australia. That reality includes Indigenous participation not just in the customary non-market sector, but also in productive activities that occur where the customary inter-links with the market and state sectors of local economies. These recommendations for accurate measurement of non-standard forms of Indigenous productive activity have been implemented in a fashion that has reduced the possibilities for time series comparison and/or leaves the logical basis for change unexplained.

Let us demonstrate this with changes that occurred between the 2002 and 2008 NATSISS concretely. We criticised the capacity of the 2002 NATSISS to generate useful data on the customary sector on the following grounds which we summarise here:

- coverage was incomplete, focusing exclusively on Community Areas in remote Australia
- gathering of bush foods was not included as an activity
- land and sea management using Indigenous ecological knowledge was ignored as a customary activity
- the focus was on group activity rather than individual activity, suggesting perhaps that real jobs were viewed as individual and economic and customary work as collective and cultural
- coverage was seasonally limited to activities conducted over the previous three months
- there was lack of comparability with the 1994 NATSIS
- participation in the customary sector was not integrated with other economic activities.

In 2008 a number of questions were asked under ‘Cultural Participation.’ Importantly, coverage was expanded to include all Indigenous people surveyed regardless of whether they lived in remote or non-remote Australia. Although we don’t make use of the data in this paper, the questions were also included in the new child component of the survey (for those over the age of three years at least). The following are summaries of the key 2008 NATSISS questions that we turn to in the next section:

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- Q01CULP: 'In the last 12 months have you or your child been involved in any of the following Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural activities or ceremonies? (from a prompt list)
- Q03CULP: 'Including activities done as part of your job, have you or your child done any of the following activities in the last 12 months? (from a prompt list including gathered wild plants/berries which was missing in 2002)
- Q04CULP: 'In the last 12 months for what reason did you...? (from answers to Q03 from a prompt list).<sup>3</sup>

Other questions asked if activities were undertaken with children; about the source of teaching of activities; the self-assessed importance of participating in such activity; about the frequency of activity; and about respondents' ability to participate and barriers to participation.

Arguably the ABS picked up many of our specific recommendations, but then – as predicted – because of the changes, the possibility for comparison with the 2002 NATSISS was lost. And some questions changed from recording outcomes in 2002 ('Were you paid for cultural production?) to motivation (from a prompt list of possible reasons for participating, with 'Get money as income' as the fourth option).

Our most strident criticism remains though. The ABS in the 2008 NATSISS (as in previous surveys) has consciously or unconsciously ignored the potential economic importance of participating in the customary economy, reducing our national capacity to document what we have previously termed the real 'real' economy in remote Australia (Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006) in contrast to the 'real' market economy as depicted by Pearson (2009) and Johns (2011).<sup>4</sup> As noted above, this was identified as problematic nearly 20 years ago and it is even more so now. This is partly because with Commonwealth native title legislation passed in 1993 the Indigenous estate has grown significantly, now covering a much larger part of the Australian continent as shown in Fig. 9.2. This is land held invariably under various forms of limited or restricted common property regimes where one might expect a different form of economy from the individuated leasehold or private property regimes that cover much of the balance of Australia (reserved public lands aside).

In our view there is great potential for a special survey like the NATSISS, to inform the Australian public and policy makers about the diverse forms of the

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3 The potential reasons coded by the ABS are: Food; Own enjoyment/fun; Enjoyment/fun with others; Cultural learning or ceremony; Get money as income; Medicinal; School activity; and Other.

4 A key difference between Johns (2011) and Pearson (2000, 2009) is that Pearson explicitly recognises what he calls the 'traditional subsistence economy' as a real economy producing significant value in terms of Aboriginal wellbeing. As footnoted above, Johns (2011) sees no value as being created from what he variously terms a 'mock', 'faux', or 'pretend' Aboriginal economy based on cultural difference.

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economy on the Indigenous estate. It is paradoxical that as the Indigenous land base and alternate forms of economy are expanding, the ABS is publishing less and less data about such diversity. Instead the ABS has focused on the dominant policy approach and rhetoric of the day be it 'Employment Equity by the Year 2000', practical reconciliation or Closing the Gap – all approaches that privilege sameness over diversity and difference.

## 2008 NATSISS results

As social scientists we are disappointed that the national survey of Indigenous Australians conceived and intended to explore Indigenous difference and diversity has design faults. We are interested here in economic difference both between Indigenous Australians and between Indigenous Australians and other Australians, but find little that assists us directly. So we are forced to a second best, and examine the data collected under the rubric of 'Culture'.

Despite our reservations about what is available, we find we can interrogate NATSISS 2008 information on aspects of the customary sector of the hybrid economy in both remote and non-remote Australia. We focus on two areas, wildlife harvesting activities and cultural production. Here we use both description and more sophisticated forms of regression analysis from customised calculations from the 2008 NATSISS to search for relationships between variables in a manner that has never been attempted before. This analysis generates both predictable and surprising findings.

Cross-tabulated information on the proportion of the Indigenous population that participated in harvesting and cultural production activities by demographic, geographic and employment characteristics in 2008 is provided in Table 9.1. Across Australia, it is estimated that 60 per cent of the population aged 15 years and over participated in such activities in the past 12 months. Of the harvesting activities, fishing is more prevalent than hunting which in turn is more prevalent than gathering wild plants/berries. With regards to forms of cultural production, art and craft manufacture seems more prevalent than writing or telling a story which is more prevalent than performing any music, dance or theatre. Note that only an unspecified proportion of this cultural production is marketed commercially.



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**Table 9.1 Indigenous population (%) who participated in selected activities: By demographic, geographic and employment characteristics, Australia, 2008**

Population group	Observations	Any activity				Harvesting activities				Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high and popular cultural activities			
		Fished	Hunted	Gathered wild plants/berries	Any activity	Made arts or crafts	Performed any music, dance or theatre	Wrote or told any stories	Any activity	Made arts or crafts	Performed any music, dance or theatre	Wrote or told any stories	Any activity
Total population aged 15 plus	8 976	44.8	22.1	15.8	51.3	17.3	10.8	15.4	28.1				
Males	3 992	55.7	30.2	16.3	62.9	14.1	12.2	14.1	25.7				
Females	4 984	34.8*	14.8*	15.3	40.7*	20.2*	9.6*	16.6*	30.2*				
Aged 15-19	1 086	41.9*	18.6*	8.8*	48.1*	16.4	11.4	7.7*	23.7				
Aged 20-34	2 677	48.6	24.4	15.3	55.5	16.3	10.5	13.5	27.0				
Aged 35-54	2 793	45.6	23.0	18.8*	51.9	19.8*	11.8*	19.5	31.3*				
Aged 55 plus	1 267	36.3*	18.6*	19.1*	42.7*	14.8	8.5	20.9*	28.8				
Lives in non-remote Australia	5 960	40.7	12.0	9.8	44.5	15.9	9.0	13.5	24.9				
Lives in remote Australia	3 016	57.1*	52.7*	33.9*	71.7*	21.7*	16.4*	21.4*	37.6*				
Not employed	3 843	38.9	19.0	14.2	45.2	16.6	9.2	13.3	26.3				
Employed	3 980	50.3*	25.0*	17.3*	57.0*	18.0	12.4*	17.4*	29.7*				
Employed in non-CDEP employment only	3 478	48.1	20.0	14.4	53.6	16.5	11.3	17.0	27.9				
Employed in the CDEP scheme	502	69.0*	67.8*	42.3*	85.9*	30.9*	21.6*	20.9*	45.0*				

\* These values are significantly different from the corresponding category at the 5% level of significance. Base case age group is 20-34 year olds.

Source: Customised calculations from the 2008 NATSISS

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Focusing just on results that are significant at the 5% level of significance (marked with a single asterisk (\*) in Table 9.1) we make the following observations:

- Indigenous people who live in remote Australia are significantly more likely to take part in wildlife harvesting and cultural production
- the employed (inclusive of those employed through the Commonwealth Government's Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program that had been phased out in urban Australia at the time of the 2008 NATSISS and is being radically reformed in remote Australia) are more likely to participate in all activities than those not employed (except in art and craft manufacture)
- those in CDEP employment, which is often part-time, are more likely to participate in all activities than those in non-CDEP employment
- the age-grade data are somewhat inconclusive but predictable – that is, the old do less harvesting but more story telling than the young
- fewer females participate in harvesting than males, but more females participate in cultural production than males.

Overall, over 76 per cent of those in remote Australia aged 15 years and over do some harvesting or cultural production, 72 per cent participate in harvesting and 38 per cent participate in cultural production. It is hard to compare wildlife harvesting in 2002 with 2008 because in the former the question was only asked in Community Areas where the number (hunted or fished in a group) appears higher but cannot be validly compared. The figures for cultural production which can be compared appear higher in both remote and non-remote areas in 2008. The important question that cannot be answered using NATSISS is how productive were these activities.

Results for the regression analysis using the probability of participating in harvesting activities are presented in Table 9.2. For the analysis presented in Table 9.2 and Table 9.3, the probability of the base case person is given in the second last row of the table and the characteristics in the notes under the table. For example, the predicted probability for those living in remote Australia is compared to an otherwise identical person living in non-remote Australia. Four separate estimates are given in each of the tables. The first two are based on estimations for all of Australia with Model 1 including mainly demographic, geographic and education attainment variables. The second model also includes these variables but, in addition, has variables for education participation, employment and income. The reason for estimating two separate models is that there is a strong possibility that current participation in harvesting activities determines education participation, employment or income, rather than vice versa. It is important to test whether the results for the other variables differ with and without the inclusion of these potentially endogenous variables. Results are

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presented as marginal effects or the difference in the probability of participating compared to the base case person (whilst holding all else constant). Marginal effects are presented for all variables regardless of their significance; however, variables that were significant at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels of significance are differentiated with asterisks.

Focusing only on statistically significant findings we find that:

- those who live in remote Australia were significantly more likely to participate in harvesting (as in Table 9.1)
- females were significantly less likely to participate in wildlife harvesting, with the difference greatest in non-remote Australia (or alternately, men are more likely to be harvesters)
- those aged 55 years and over were less likely to participate in harvesting activities. However, this was mainly in non-remote as opposed to remote Australia. In remote Australia, those aged 15–19 years were significantly more likely to participate than the base case (i.e. those aged 20–34 years)
- recognising homelands was positively associated with harvesting activities and currently living in a homeland had an extra positive association
- differences in high school education were not associated with participation in harvesting activities. However, those who had completed post-school qualifications had a significantly higher level of participation
- those who spoke an Indigenous language were more likely to harvest than those who did not
- those employed in the CDEP program were significantly and substantially more likely to participate in harvesting activities. It is important to note that this result holds after controlling for remoteness, age and whether or not the person was employed part-time (which by itself, was not significant).

Apart from the findings for education (which were difficult to predict *a priori*) these results are all predictable and to be expected bearing in mind the usual proviso that we are measuring relationships based on theorised not measured causality (see Ziliak and McCloskey 2007). Issues of subjective motivation aside (these will be explored below) we know that people are more likely to harvest because they have access to lands and seas and resources, but they may also harvest because they have to when living in such situations for food security. People are more likely to hunt when they live on homelands, but they may also live on homelands so that they can hunt.

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**Table 9.2 Factors associated with the probability of participating in harvesting activities in the last 12 months, by remoteness classification, Australia, 2008**

Explanatory variables	Australia		Non-remote	Remote
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 2	Model 2
Lives in remote Australia	0.178***	0.158***		
Female	-0.215***	-0.216***	-0.238***	-0.141***
Aged 15–19	0.029	0.032	0.024	0.138*
Aged 35–54	-0.050**	-0.047*	-0.045	-0.039
Aged 55 plus	-0.110***	-0.084*	-0.110**	0.007
Parent or guardian of child aged 0–14 years	0.038	0.063**	0.071*	0.099***
Married	0.040*	0.016	0.023	0.000
Additional person living in the household	0.001	-0.003	-0.016	0.021***
Speaks an Indigenous language	0.224***]	0.229***	0.209***	0.241***
Recognises an area as homelands or traditional country	0.111***	0.102***	0.083**	0.190***
Currently lives in homelands or traditional country	0.101***	0.108***	0.152***	-0.010
Has a profound or severe core-activity limitation	-0.013	0.018	0.023	-0.028
Completed Year 10 or 11	0.008	-0.003	-0.011	0.037
Completed Year 9 or less	-0.026	-0.007	-0.013	0.026
Has a degree or higher	0.096**	0.108**	0.104**	0.187
Has an other non-school qualification	0.061**	0.058**	0.058**	0.072
Cannot access a motor vehicle whenever needed	-0.045*	-0.047	-0.046	-0.065
Is currently a student		0.000	0.027	-0.176**
Is currently a part-time (as opposed to full-time) student		0.013	-0.007	0.147
Not in the labour force		-0.028	-0.034	0.034
Unemployed		0.031	0.025	0.104
Employed in the CDEP scheme		0.169**	0.277**	0.172**
Employed part-time		0.031	0.039	-0.015
Receives a government pension		0.000	0.014	-0.101**
Household equivalised income in the bottom decile		-0.064	-0.057	-0.094
Household equivalised income in the 2nd-3rd decile		-0.028	-0.052	0.044
Household equivalised income in the 7th-10th decile		-0.018	-0.030	0.023
Probability of the base case	0.446	0.466	0.480	0.490
Pseudo R-Squared	0.1320	0.1312	0.0814	0.1366
Number of observations	7 562	6 169	4 159	2 010

Notes: The base case person: lives in non-remote Australia; is aged 20–34; is not a parent or guardian and is not married; lives in a four-person household; does not speak an Indigenous language; does not recognise an area as a homeland or traditional country; does not have a profound or severe core-activity restriction; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-school qualification; can access a motor vehicle whenever needed; is not a student; is employed full-time but not in the CDEP program; does not receive a government pension; and has a household equivalised income in the 4th to 6th decile (based on the non-Indigenous income distribution).

\*\*\* Marginal effect for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 1% level of significance.

\*\* Marginal effect for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 5% level of significance.

\* Marginal effect for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 10% level of significance.

Source: Customised calculations using the 2008 NATSISS

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**Table 9.3 Factors associated with the probability of participating in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural activities in the last 12 months, by remoteness classification, Australia, 2008**

Explanatory variables	Australia		Non-remote	Remote
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 2	Model 2
Lives in remote Australia	-0.003	-0.006		
Female	0.024***	0.025***	0.024***	0.033**
Aged 15–19	0.030**	0.009	0.008	0.006
Aged 35–54	0.012	0.009	0.006	0.019
Aged 55 plus	0.009	0.022*	0.012	0.066***
Parent or guardian of child aged 0–14 years	0.011	0.012	0.014	-0.003
Married	-0.009	-0.007	-0.006	-0.008
Additional person living in the household	0.004**	0.003	0.003	0.007***
Speaks an Indigenous language	0.121***	0.110***	0.145***	0.098***
Recognises an area as homelands or traditional country	0.156***	0.135***	0.141***	0.087***
Currently lives in homelands or traditional country	0.000	0.000	-0.005	0.024*
Has a profound or severe core-activity limitation	0.029**	0.035**	0.040**	0.012
Completed Year 10 or 11	-0.017**	-0.013*	-0.014*	-0.003
Completed Year 9 or less	-0.010	-0.010	-0.007	-0.014
Has a degree or higher	0.139***	0.125***	0.121***	0.134**
Has an other non-school qualification	0.055***	0.044***	0.042***	0.051***
Cannot access a motor vehicle whenever needed	0.001	0.000	0.006	-0.016
Is currently a student		0.077***	0.085***	0.055
Is currently a part-time (as opposed to full-time) student		-0.017	-0.017	-0.009
Not in the labour force		-0.023***	-0.023**	-0.030
Unemployed		-0.005	-0.009	0.001
Employed in the CDEP scheme		0.034**	0.144***	0.008
Employed part-time		-0.009	-0.015	0.013
Receives a government pension		0.010	0.010	0.010
Household equivalised income in the bottom decile		0.020	0.018	0.030
Household equivalised income in the 2nd–3rd decile		0.014	0.012	0.021
Household equivalised income in the 7th–10th decile		0.002	-0.001	0.023
Probability of the base case	0.061	0.051	0.046	0.077
Pseudo R-Squared	0.1093	0.1140	0.1297	0.0865
Number of observations	7 562	6 169	4 159	2 010

Notes: The base case person: lives in non-remote Australia; is aged 20–34; is not a parent or guardian and is not married; lives in a four-person household; does not speak an Indigenous language; does not recognise an area as a homeland or traditional country; does not have a profound or severe core-activity restriction; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-school qualification; can access a motor vehicle whenever needed; is not a student; is employed full-time but not in the CDEP program; does not receive a government pension; and has a household equivalised income in the 4th to 6th decile (based on the non-Indigenous income distribution).

\*\*\* Marginal effect for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 1% level of significance.

\*\* Marginal effect for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 5% level of significance.

\* Marginal effect for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 10% level of significance.

Source: Customised calculations using the 2008 NATSISS

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In Table 9.3 we repeat the above analysis using the probability of participating in cultural production in the last 12 months. It is noteworthy that here there was no significant difference in participating in cultural production between those who lived in remote Australia and those who lived in non-remote Australia. It would appear that it is other characteristics of individuals that were driving the significant differences found here. Key findings (again focusing on the statistically significant) include:

- females were more likely to participate in cultural production than males, which makes intuitive sense because males do more harvesting and time is limited
- in remote Australia, those aged 55 years and over were significantly and substantially more likely to participate than the base case
- there was a very large (and significant) difference between those who speak an Indigenous language and those who do not, suggesting that Indigenous language supports a person's capacity to make art, perform a dance, and/or tell a story
- those who recognise an area as a homeland were significantly more likely to participate in cultural production than those who did not. For those who do recognise a homeland, there was no significant difference between those who lived on their homeland compared to those who did not. This suggests that harvesting benefits more from more intimate connection to country than does cultural production
- having a disability or 'severe core-activity limitation' was associated with a higher level of participation
- having a post-school qualification and in particular having a degree or higher degree was associated with participation in cultural activities
- being a student was also associated with participating in cultural activities
- those who were not in the labour force were less likely to participate than those who were employed. There was no significant difference for those who were unemployed
- there was a small (but significant) difference for Australia as a whole for those who participated in the CDEP program compared to the rest of the employed population. However, this relationship only appears to hold in non-remote as opposed to remote Australia.

In Table 9.4 we explore the particular reasons respondents gave for participating in each of the wildlife harvesting or cultural production activities. Respondents were able to list more than one activity and hence the columns sum to more than 100. In order to help understand the results presented in Table 9.4, it is useful to look at a particular column in detail. Focusing on the first ('any activity') column, the first line shows that 57.8 per cent of those who participated in a

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harvesting or cultural activity did so for food. Reading down, 63.3 per cent reported that they did so for their own enjoyment/fun, 57.3 per cent said they participated in an activity for enjoyment/fun with others and so on.

Key findings from Table 9.4 highlight some significant differences between remote and non-remote Australia:

- people mainly harvest for food, rarely for cash, although harvesting activity is also a source of enjoyment, and social interaction; people are significantly more likely to harvest for food in remote than non-remote Australia
- people in remote regions are significantly more likely to harvest for cultural learning or ceremony, to get money and for medicinal purposes and less likely to harvest for fun
- people engaged in cultural production mainly to learn or engage in ceremony, for their own enjoyment, and for social interaction
- people in remote Australia are significantly more likely to engage in cultural production for cultural learning and to make money and are less likely to do so as a school activity.

**Table 9.4 Reasons for participating in selected activities, by remoteness, Australia, 2008**

Activity	Any harvesting activity		Any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural activity	
	Non-remote	Remote	Non-remote	Remote
Food	60.8	90.9***	0.0	0.0
Own enjoyment/fun	67.8	57.2***	51.5	55.9
Enjoyment/fun with others	52.2	56.0	44.7	49.1
Cultural learning or ceremony	14.8	34.8***	53.9	73.0***
Get money as income	1.1	3.9***	9.4	21.7***
Medicinal	6.0	11.1**	1.2	1.5
School activity	2.9	3.3	25.3	12.1***
Other	2.1	1.0**	6.0	2.1***

\*\*\* Differences between remote and non-remote areas significant at the 1% level of significance.

\*\* Differences between remote and non-remote areas significant at the 5% level of significance.

\* Differences between remote and non-remote areas significant at the 10% level of significance.

Source: Customised calculations from the 2008 NATSISS

One surprising comparative result here is the apparent decline in people paid for cultural production since 2002 (see Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006: 146). Whether this decline is factual or illusory is impossible to tell because different questions were asked in 2002 and 2008: in the former year people were asked what the outcome of their cultural production was (i.e. whether or not

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they were (or would be) paid), in the latter the motivation for production was sought (i.e. the reason they participated). This illustrates well the problem when questions are changed from survey to survey.

In an exploratory vein we also sought to explore the relationship between participation in the customary sector and self reported measures of health and wellbeing (see Table 9.5). We do not report our results here in detail in part because causality is especially unclear: Was it participation in harvesting or cultural production activities that was influencing self-assessed health and wellbeing, or is causality in the opposite direction? We also found that there were few cells where results were significant, while differentiating remote from non-remote regions would have made the analysis overly complex. Having undertaken the analysis (that we will report in more detail elsewhere) we note the following statistically significant findings:

- those who had fair or poor health were significantly less likely to participate in at least one of the selected activities than those who had good health
- people with a lot of energy a little or none of the time are significantly less likely to fish, hunt or gather
- if people are full of energy they are more likely to hunt, but if they rarely felt full of life they were significantly less likely to fish, hunt or undertake any harvesting activity and are less likely to be a performer, story teller/author, or artist
- hunters are more likely to be happy, but if one is not calm or peaceful one is less likely to fish or hunt
- if one has high psychological distress as measured by a grouped Kessler (K5) score of psychological stress one is more likely to participate in arts and crafts manufacture or perform any music, dance or theatre
- if in fair or poor health one is significantly less likely to fish or participate in harvesting generally.



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**Table 9.5 Population (%) who participated in selected activities, by health and wellbeing, Australia, 2008**

Population group	Observations	Harvesting activities				Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural activities				
		Any activity	Fished	Hunted	Gathered wild plants/berries	Any activity	Made arts or crafts	Performed any music, dance or theatre	Wrote or told any stories	Any activity
Total population aged 15 plus	8 976	60.1	44.8	22.1	15.8	51.3	10.8	15.4	39.9	28.1
Self assessed health										
Excellent or very good	4 274	60.1	44.2	23.7	16.0	51.9	17.4	12.2	15.0	28.0
Good	2 785	61.9	47.5	21.6	15.0	53.4	17.8	10.2	15.2	28.1
Fair or poor	1 917	57.2*	41.7*	19.9	16.6	46.8*	16.4	9.1	16.8	28.2
Grouped Kessler (K5) score of psychological distress										
Low/moderate	5 205	59.2	44.6	21.9	15.1	50.7	16.2	9.6	14.8	26.3
High/very high	2 497	61.8	45.5	21.9	16.8	52.3	19.7*	13.1*	16.7	31.7*
How often felt calm and peaceful (last 4 weeks)										
All or most of the time	4 547	60.5	45.2	24.4*	15.5	51.7	16.8	10.3	14.8	27.7
Some of the time	1 919	61.3	47.6	20.0	15.3	53.3	17.4	11.4	15.8	28.2
A little or none of the time	1 248	56.3	39.8*	15.3*	16.5	46.1*	19.8	11.5	17.1	29.2
How often felt happy (last 4 weeks)										
All or most of the time	5 568	61.6	46.1	23.7*	16.1	52.7	17.5	11.1	15.5	28.6
Some of the time	1 452	58.3	43.6	18.4	14.0	49.3	17.5	10.1	15.6	27.9

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Population group	Observations	Harvesting activities				Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural activities				
		Any activity	Fished	Hunted	Gathered wild plants/berries	Any activity	Made arts or crafts	Performed any music, dance or theatre	Wrote or told any stories	Any activity
A little or none of the time	697	51.3	38.2	13.8	15.3	43.4	15.5	9.3	14.1	23.3
How often felt full of life (last 4 weeks)										
All or most of the time	4 225	62.6	47.5	25.0*	16.1	53.9	17.5	11.1	14.8	28.1
Some of the time	2 052	58.6	44.1	19.5	15.2	50.2	17.6	11.7	16.3	28.6
A little or none of the time	1 434	53.7	37.1*	15.1*	14.7	43.2*	16.5	7.9*	16.2	27.0
How often had a lot of energy (last 4 weeks)										
All or most of the time	3 641	63.0	48.2	26.0	16.4	54.6	17.8	11.9	15.1	28.6
Some of the time	2 358	59.7	44.1	20.4	14.9	50.7	18.0	11.1	16.3	28.8
A little or none of the time	1 715	53.2*	37.9*	13.6*	14.6	43.3*	15.2	7.1*	14.8	25.2

\* Significantly different from middle at the 5% level of significance.

Source: Customised calculations from the 2008 NATSISS

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## Survey, policy and political implications

For this volume we have been asked to consider how the data source utilised and analysis undertaken advance social science and inform Indigenous policy making. Turning to the implications of our analysis during an era that is supposed to have evidence-based policy making, not ideology, as its hallmark, clearly our analysis should make a difference to some of the most hotly-debated current issues in Indigenous affairs.

- What form should economic development take?
- What are the prospects for closing the employment gap, especially in remote regions?
- Does the stated aim of policy to standardise economic norms make sense?
- Will closure of education gaps assist people who harvest and engage in cultural production for a livelihood?
- Should the CDEP program be effectively abolished in all but name through radical reform?
- What evidence is there that the current Australian Government focus on larger 'priority communities' and the Northern Territory Government focus on Territory Growth Towns are rational policy approaches?

Further what is the role of the policy-engaged social scientist in making recommendations to the ABS? – realising of course that in the highly politically-charged environment of Indigenous affairs there will always be diverse and competing statistical interests. Should we, yet again, make constructive recommendations to the ABS and the wider policy community to gather more economic data that will generate a more robust evidence base to answer important questions such as the above, especially given the likely further growth of the Indigenous estate, the likely further strengthening of property rights on Aboriginal-owned land, and the prospects that the Indigenous population in remote Australia will continue to grow rapidly?

In the absence of other compelling official statistics gathered at the national level, our findings highlight first and foremost that there are statistically significant differences in wildlife harvesting and cultural production between remote and non-remote Australia. These of course are broad categories that combine the five-region Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) regional geography into just two, a limitation of the publicly available data that has been noted a number of times in this volume. Nevertheless, this finding vindicates our earlier focus on remote Australia and our policy suggestion that the real economy out there includes a robust customary sector. Just how economically significant this sector might be is difficult to say given available statistics.

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Arguably, these findings also suggest that a different broad policy approach might be needed in remote Australia. Putting aside for the moment the national level policy obsession with closing statistical gaps, our findings indicate that Indigenous wellbeing and livelihood could be improved through a combination of harvesting and cultural production to supplement available employment. These productive activities in the customary sector are likely to be significantly higher if participants are employed through CDEP and living at homelands/outstations and speaking an Indigenous language. These findings do not in themselves suggest that participation in harvesting and cultural production will provide a better outcome than formal employment; only that in the absence of enough mainstream opportunity where people live, it might make sense for policy to support such productive activity – to, in a sense, think outside the market square.

These findings fly in the face of the direction that policy has taken since at least 2005 when then Minister for Indigenous Affairs Amanda Vanstone (2005) traduced outstation residence as living in ‘cultural museums’ and the Minister for Employment Kevin Andrews began to dismantle the CDEP program; as well as more recent Northern Territory Government reform to prioritise Territory Growth Towns over outstations and to eliminate outstation learning and bilingual education as a viable schooling option. At a higher policy level, an Australian version of the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals was introduced without consultation in early 2008 by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd under the policy umbrella of Closing the Gap. This national approach was quickly adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) that in the economic domain has given priority to the goal to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade. In July 2009, much of this approach was cemented into the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) (COAG 2009). This is not the place to critique NIRA in any detail – this exercise has been undertaken elsewhere (see Altman 2010: 268–9). We just note here that NIRA principles and its policy approach are concerning for those in remote Australia whose livelihoods are strongly supported by or reliant upon the customary sector as it aims to:

- centralise people away from homelands
- focus effort on incorporating remote living people into mainstream employment and the market economy
- alter social norms
- skew available resources away from smaller places, and
- render extremely difficult development problems ‘technical’ and ‘statistical’ in an abstract manner that ignores the complexity of lived reality that is partially captured by the data we present here (cf. Ferguson 1990).

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In the world of evidence-based policy making is there no information to challenge the hegemonic state approach that promulgates a 21st century version of the modernisation paradigm as the development solution for all Indigenous Australians? Of course there is: there is the NATSISS. But there are ways in which the data are collected and released that has the potential to marginalise findings that may challenge dominant political and bureaucratic perspectives. These forces are evident in many forms, and we provide three illustrative examples.

First, the 2008 NATSISS was clearly designed and locked in before the change of Australian Government in November 2007 and the launch of the Closing the Gap approach. Its design was probably more influenced by the dominant agenda of 'practical reconciliation', a hallmark of the Howard years. But the way that outputs from the 2008 NATSISS have been made available have clearly conformed to the agenda of the government of the day with priority being given to meeting the needs of the Productivity Commission and its biennial Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report that by 2009 was already looking to address COAG targets and headline indicators (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) 2009). In assisting the Productivity Commission meet the directives of the government, the ABS was in no position to give high profile to the customary sector in its media releases or visibility in standard outputs.

Second, the Australian Government has invested in a Closing the Gap Clearinghouse to provide access to information about what works to overcome disadvantage (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)/Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) n.d.). This Clearinghouse has search functions but because it is marshalling evidence that 'relate to the COAG building blocks that underpin the Closing the Gap targets' research on the customary sector is not given high priority either in the general or assessed collections. We did manage to find references to our earlier paper on the 2002 NATSISS and the real 'real' economy. It stated:

### **The real 'real' economy in remote Australia**

The informal economy, or customary sector, is often ignored in measures of Indigenous employment and income equality. This paper provides an overview of the customary sector and the hybrid economy model and examines the extent to which the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey documents customary activity in remote areas. It focuses on three issues included in the NATSISS that relate to the customary sector: fishing or hunting as a group activity; participation in and payment for cultural activities; and the ability to

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meet cultural responsibilities while in employment. The paper then identifies shortcomings in the survey relating to key customary sector activities and makes recommendations for NATSISS 2008.

It is noteworthy that none of our findings on the significance or potential of the customary sector are reported. Nor does the Clearinghouse engage with our political point that the 'real' economy, a term that is bandied around in political and bureaucratic circles with gay abandon, might actually include the customary sector, especially in remote Australia.

Third, aware that information is not available to measure progress in Closing the Gap, the Australian Government is investing \$46.4 million over four years from 2009–10 to help build a better evidence base against which to measure progress, without entertaining the possibility that there may not be any progress to measure (Australian Government 2011: 17). There is clearly embarrassment that the annual Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report is unable to actually tell us whether gaps are closing. Even this is contestable, for two of us have actually found that the ABS publication *Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Estimates from the Labour Force Survey, 2009* (ABS 2010) did assist us with annual official information about whether the employment gap was closing. Applying rigorous significance testing to the data at the national level we found that the gap was actually widening (Altman and Biddle 2010). For making this unpopular evidence-based observation we were chided by the Minister for Employment Participation, Senator the Hon. Mark Arbib who erroneously suggested that the ABS survey we used was too unreliable to make assessments of progress at the national level because of 'high margins of error' (Altman and Biddle 2011). Fortunately the ABS publishes standard errors that we had taken into account in our testing for significance.

All this suggests two things to us. First, the Australian Government is keen on measures that show its gaps are closing, but is less than keen on any suggestion that its strategy is misplaced. Second, while ideology can challenge evidence, it can play a very significant role in influencing what evidence is collected. The historical development of links between government, economy, populations, and statistics outlined by Foucault (1994) under his hypotheses on governmentality highlights the political nature of the production of such statistical evidence. For Foucault:

It was through the development of the science of government that the notion of economy came to be recentered onto that different plane of reality we characterize today as the 'economic', and it was also through this science that it became possible to identify problems specific to

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populations ... And, further, that 'statistics' ... now becomes the major technical factor, or one of the major technical factors, of the unfreezing [deblocage] of the art of government (1994: 215).

For Rose (1999: 33), a scholar heavily influenced by Foucault's writings on governmentality, an abstract space such as 'the Indigenous economy' is not brought into existence by ideology or theory alone, but also through the construction of a statistical apparatus through which this space can be 'inscribed, visualised, tabulated, modeled, calculated ... and so forth'. Rose (1999: 212, 213) describes this as 'the fabrication of a "clearing" within which thought and action can occur' and notes that, while abstract, such spaces 'are very material: for they are [inter alia] utilized as a grid to "realize" the real in the form in which it may be thought'. Along these lines we observe that in the context of Closing the Gaps (and its recent predecessors) a massive bureaucratic machinery (including a significant 'statistical apparatus') has been deployed to lend support to the approach being taken by the government of the day – an approach where the economic form of the market is the principle grid of economic intelligibility.<sup>5</sup> As a statistical apparatus of government the NATSISS is being utilised as a grid to realise the real economy of Indigenous Australia, but we maintain our argument (Altman, Buchanan and Biddle 2006) that it fails to realise the real 'real' economy due to its economic neglect and statistical marginalisation of the customary sector.

This leaves the social scientist in a difficult place if the evidence available suggests that either the dominant policy approach is proving unsuccessful or if the somewhat narrow parameters being used to measure economic wellbeing (closing the employment gap) need to be challenged. We realise of course that in the highly politically-charged environment of Indigenous affairs there will always be diverse and competing statistical interests and perspectives, not to mention priorities as outlined above. Nevertheless, yet again we make constructive recommendations to the ABS and wider policy community in relation to gathering economic data that will generate a more robust evidence base to answer such important questions. This is especially important given the likely further growth of the Indigenous estate, the likely further strengthening of property rights on Aboriginal-owned land and the prospects that the Indigenous population in remote Australia will continue to grow.

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5 The terminology used here is borrowed from Foucault (2008). In his discussion of the nature of American neo-liberalism Foucault (2008: 243) notes that it involves 'the generalization of the economic form of the market' whereby it becomes 'a principle of intelligibility', an 'analytical schema', or a 'grid of intelligibility'.

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So what prospects for NATSISS 2014? Will the ABS heed our call by, for example:

- classifying customary activity as economic, not just cultural
- collecting data on people working on country in the provision of environmental services utilising Indigenous ecological knowledge as we suggested in 2006
- collecting better data on work density – how often people engaged in activities – so as to assess their significance,<sup>6</sup> and
- asking some more pertinent questions, not just about motivations but also about outcomes.

What are the prospects of asking some questions in a more open ended manner that might elicit Indigenous responses in accord with Indigenous aspirations and perceptions?

## Conclusion

The argument made in this chapter can be summarised as follows. The NATSISS is one survey instrument that just might allow collection of official statistics that capture Indigenous difference – in this instance, economic difference. But this possibility seems to be circumscribed by the ABS working only within the dominant paradigm of normalisation and Closing the Gap. Perhaps this is not surprising, after all the ABS is a mainstream institution and a part of what might be termed ‘the bureaucratic field’ (cf. Bourdieu, Wacquant and Farage 1994; also Wacquant 2007). We do not question that the collection of statistics is a highly political project, but we do wonder if the ABS may not be sufficiently open to exploring alternatives.

Despite this, some important data were collected in NATSISS 2008 that we are reporting for the first time. These data show that harvesting and cultural production are significant productive activities, especially in remote Australia. These findings are important as they challenge the wisdom of the current Closing the Gap approach and its attenuated policy reforms to abolish CDEP, refocus

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6 For example, Waring (1988: 254) argues that monetary or market value ‘is not the sole criterion for the assessment of work. Work can also be assessed by volume: in terms of the labour power involved in the process (the number of workers) or the work time absorbed (number of hours)’. Alternative conceptions of the economy offer ‘us the opportunity for assessing data by way of quality, and quantity, by way of hours and money invested. It invites us to consider interactions. It permits use of all advanced statistical mechanisms’ (1988: 254). In this chapter we have touched on the potential of NATSISS to explore correlations and causality between wellbeing (health, happiness, etc.) and Indigenous people’s participation in the customary sector. We acknowledge the suggestion by Professor Anne Daly at the NATSISS 2008 CAEPR conference regarding the potential of wellbeing data collected through the NATSISS to provide an outcome measure in the absence of a traditional economic or monetary measure of the contribution of people’s participation in the customary sector.



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development effort to larger places, and to incorporate Indigenous people into the mainstream. We believe opportunity exists to collect information to test the success or failure of the current policy framework, but there is also a need to collect data that will allow comparison with alternate possibilities like living on, working on, and painting on country. From a statistical sense, the relatively low amount of variation explained in our models highlights the lack of information in the NATSISS around the determinants of participation in harvesting and cultural production. We suspect that the paucity of geographic information in the available version of the NATSISS has contributed to this lack of statistical power. Surely the role of the NATSISS is to collect and disseminate statistics about sameness as well as difference and, surely, an independent ABS should ensure that such information is collected.

We return to where we began: why are data collected – for academic debates or to provide a glimpse into diverse Aboriginal life worlds? We asked at the outset what can the NATSISS tell us about those who pursue livelihood and wellbeing in a fundamentally different way from the mainstream? The answer, in our view, is not enough.

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